

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
SACRED SPACES IN THIR-  
TEENTH-CENTURY ARMENIA:**

LIMINAL EXPERIENCE AND  
SPIRITUAL EXPECTATIONS  
WITHIN THE GAWIT<sup>1</sup>

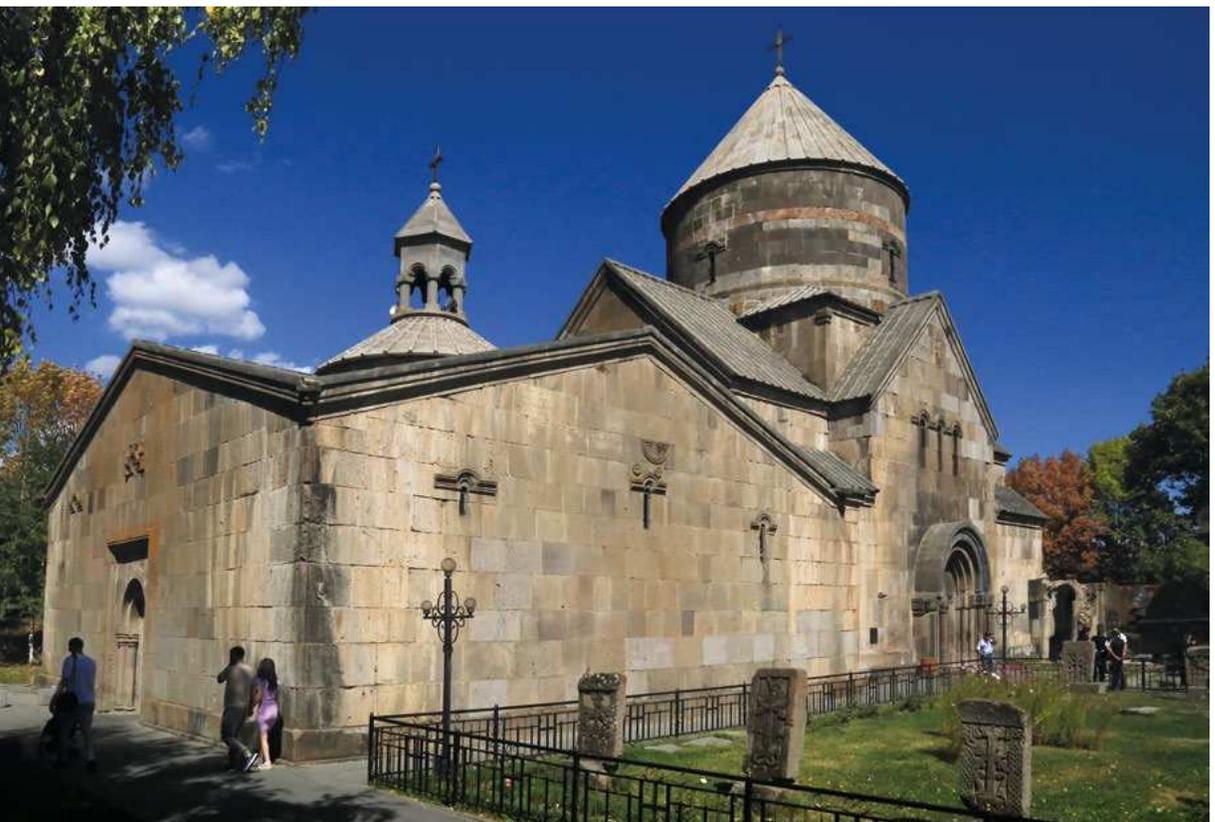
*Gohar Grigoryan*



- \* All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. I thank Thomas Kaffenberger for reading and commenting on this article, Julia Oswald for proof-reading it, and Hrair Hawk Khatcherian for sharing his photographs. This article is dedicated to Hrair for his passionate dedication to Armenian cultural heritage and as a token of our decade-long friendship and collaboration.
- 1 For the use of the terms *gawit'* and *zhamatun*, see Vardanyan 2015b, pp. 207–224; Garibian 2018. For earlier discussions, see Mnats'akanyan 1952, pp. 18–22; Mylonas 1990, p. 118.
  - 2 See below, n. 6.
  - 3 In this respect, Armenian *gawit's* have been compared with Byzantine and Western narthexes. See, e.g., Goss 1984, pp. 237–238; Mylonas 1990; Hamacher 2001, pp. 63, 69–70, 73–74; Kazaryan 2014, pp. 7–8 (draws comparisons also with the columned halls of eastern Iranian mosques); Kazaryan 2015, pp. 147–148; Foletti 2018, pp. 110–112. For comparisons with Georgian architecture, see Thomas Kaffenberger's contribution in this volume.
  - 4 T'oramanean 1911, pp. 11–22.
  - 5 As quoted in notes 3 and 6–9. See also Costa 1968; Hovhannisyán 1978, p. 139; Brentjes/Mnazakanjan/Stepanjan 1981, pp. 78–79; Harutyunyan 1992, pp. 263, 267–270; Maranci 2018, pp. 67–69, 133–144; Ousterhout 2019, pp. 587–590.
  - 6 Mnats'akanyan 1952. For typological classifications of *gawit's*, along with their ground plans, see also Thierry/Donabédian 1987, pp. 197–198; Cuneo 1988, II, pp. 734–741; Hamacher 2001, pp. 63–65.

In Armenian ecclesiastical architecture, a *gawit'* or *zhamatun* refers to the hall that is adjacent to the west side of the church [1–5, 14, 19, 31, 33–34].<sup>1</sup> In terms of its ground plan, the *gawit'* is a square or rectangular structure. The most common type has four massive columns that support the weight of the interconnected arches and occupy the central space, which is topped by a dome that is not necessarily round in shape.<sup>2</sup> Similar columned halls are widespread in medieval Armenian architecture, and as a result the definitions and interpretations of *gawit's* varied in early scholarship. It is by now well established that the *gawit'* was never a free-standing structure but was always connected to the church. Constructed at the same time or immediately after the church to which it corresponded, the *gawit'* formed an integral component of the entire church, for which it served as a forehall or antechamber.<sup>3</sup> While the size of the *gawit'* was comparable to or might even exceed that of the principal church, the latter appears – unsurprisingly enough – as the dominant edifice, having a much higher dome than that of the adjacent *gawit'*.

What was the purpose of these spacious *gawit's*? Since the beginning of the twentieth century, this question has sparked the curiosity of many scholars, who made significant contributions to our understanding of the forms and functions of this element of Armenian church architecture. In his pioneering article of 1911, T'oramanean called these halls *penitential gawit's* (սսպաշխարհութեան զահրթներ), referring to the catechumens and unrepentant who gathered there.<sup>4</sup> T'oramanean, however, left his argument speculative due to the lack of evidence regarding the actual performance of the Armenian rite of penance and because the etymology and simultaneous use of the terms *gawit'* and *zhamatun*, among other questions, required further research. In the following decades, many of T'oramanean's hypotheses were either confirmed or challenged – sometimes independently though – in studies by such scholars as Jean-Michel Thierry, Patrick Donabédian, Paolo Cuneo, Paul Mylonas, Elke Hamacher, and Armen Kazaryan.<sup>5</sup> The only monographic study, authored by Step'an Mnats'akanyan in 1952, remains to this day the most comprehensive guide to the architectural development and typological classification of *gawit's*.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Edda Vardanyan has approached the subject from architectural, epigraphical, and iconographic perspectives and highlighted the funerary function of *gawit's*, tying them to the dynastic interests



- [1] Church of John the Baptist (1240) and *gawit'*, northern view, Gandzasar
- [2] *Gawit'* (before 1214) and church of Grigor Lusaworich' (1033), south-eastern view, Kech'aris

of their commissioners and to the growing demand for individualized rituals.<sup>7</sup> Among newer studies are Michael Daniel Findikyan's and Gevorg Kazaryan's articles, in which the liturgical dimension of the question is examined, with consideration to textual sources that mention or hint at the dismissal of "unworthies", including especially the catechumens and penitents, from the liturgy to the *gawit'*.<sup>8</sup> The results brought forth by Vardanyan, Findikyan, and Kazaryan on the functional peculiarities of these ante-ecclesial structures are particularly useful for investigating the subject from an art-historical point of view, with which I am presently concerned.

Still unexplored are other functional aspects of *gawit'*s that pertain to social-civil and educational practices; indeed, some of the monasteries with distinctive *gawit'*s functioned also as *vardapetarans*, that is, monastic universities.<sup>9</sup> Consideration of these aspects – which falls beyond the scope of the present article – might draw a fuller picture of the multi-functionality of Armenian *gawit'*s not only during the time of their construction but also in the subsequent decades of their use. What I propose here is to treat the question art historically, namely, to examine the sculptural evidence available in churches with a *gawit'* and to explore the role of images in the construction of sacred spaces. The chronological focus of this inquiry will be on the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, which mark the heyday of the *gawit'*, including especially the monasteries of Hovanavank', Aghjots' Surb Step'anos, Khoranashat, and Noravank'. As we shall see, the biblical scenes carved on these monuments have eschatological and apocalyptic intentions, which reflect not only the theological knowledge available in medieval Armenia but also liturgical practices, funerary rites, celebrations of great feasts, and tendencies of personal spirituality. Based on this and other evidence, the article analyses how this multifaceted use of the *gawit'* or *zhamatun* motivated the incorporation of visual images that were universal in their nature and could be evoked on various occasions to enhance the eschatological and apocalyptic sentiments of the faithful – a permanent concern in high and late medieval Armenia. Before tackling the meanings and functions of these images in § III–v, the discussion will develop around the spatial organization as it would be experienced by the worshipper (§ II–III), whose progression into the sacred space was carefully planned, even controlled, by ritual-liturgical *ordos* and by the hierarchically ordered interiors of the church, including architectural and sculptural settings that required pauses as dictated by a certain rite or devotional practice.

- 7 Vardanyan 2015b; Eadem 2015c; Eadem 2020.
- 8 Findikyan 2010a, p. 294; *Idem* 2018, pp. 163, 168–178; Kazaryan 2022.
- 9 An exception is Eastmond 2014, p. 81, which, based on the example of Holy Apostles' Church in Ani, highlights how the taxation deals of the citizens were made public through inscriptions in the *gawit'*.

**II: LIMINAL EXPERIENCE AND SPIRITUAL EXPECTATIONS WITHIN THE GAWIT'**

Although the architectural evidence suggests that *gawit's* became commonplace for Armenian ecclesiastical architecture between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, earlier textual sources already mention the *gawit'* in reference to the space outside of the church where the catechumens and unrepentant, being barred from entering, would gather. This means that the *gawit'* existed as a term and function before its architectural appearance was shaped and standardized. In little-known early theological writings that have come down to us under the title *Mystery of the Church* (Խորհուրդ եկեղեցւոյ), we read, e.g., that:<sup>10</sup>

[The church is] the dwelling place of angels and those like holy persons, who come together in front of Christ's bema; whereas outside of the church, in the *gawit'*, the unclean unrepentant, the sinners, (gather) to only listen to the saying and to contemplate the honour of the righteous.

Another little-known treatise, the *Analysis of the Universal Church* (Վերլուծութիւն կաթողիկէ եկեղեցւոյ), authored by Yovhan Mayravanets'i in the seventh century, similarly deals with the theology of church architecture and mentions, in this respect, the reward of the righteous with the eternal kingdom as the ultimate fulfilment of the divine promise.<sup>11</sup> For those unworthies who remained outside of the church, Grigor Narekats'i wrote, three centuries later, that "spurning such persons from our midst, we expel them [...] and shut in their faces the door to life of the church *gawit'*".<sup>12</sup> In his intimate conversation with God, Narekats'i also addresses his own spiritual expectations to be fulfilled when the closed door is opened:

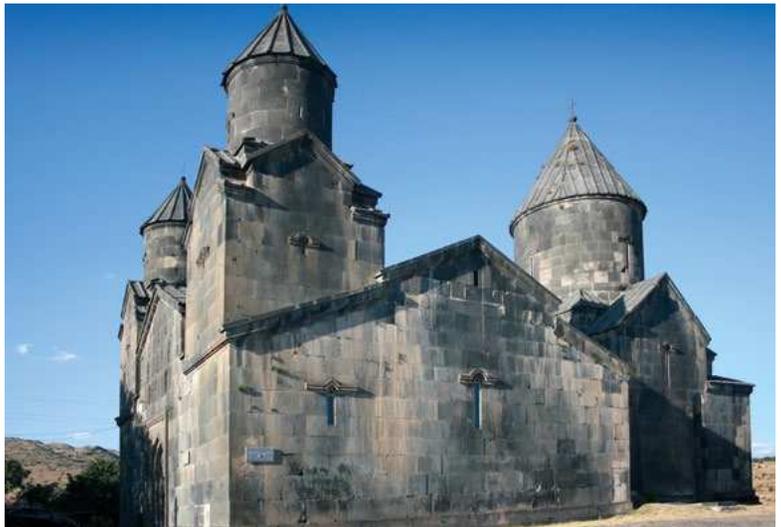
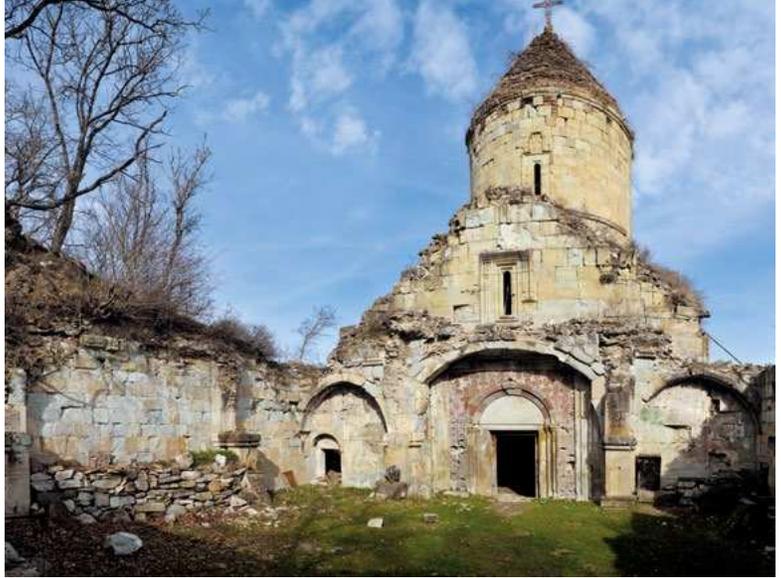
Your victory is exhibited when you open the shut door to life in anticipation of my breath. Your magnificent grace is there when you forget my evil and remember your goodness.<sup>13</sup>

Elsewhere, the same mystic writes in self-deprecation that, at the moment of the Judgement, "knocking at the door will have no effect then, for my share of mercy will have expired".<sup>14</sup>

If we admit that public penitence existed in thirteenth-century Armenia in the form in which it is described in the tenth/eleventh-century

- 10 *Mystery of the Church* [K'eosëean 2007], p. 496: Իսկ ի տաճարին բնակութիւն հրեշտակաց եւ սուրբ մարդկան նմանութիւն, որ ժողովին առաջի բեմին Քրիստոսի: Իսկ արտաքոյ տաճարին ի գալիթն, որք ոչ մաքրեալք են ապաշխարութեամբ, մեղաւորք, միայն լսեն զբարբառն եւ տեսանեն զպատիւ արժանաւորացն.
- 11 *Analysis of the Universal Church* [K'eosëean 2005], p. 351. The first English translation of this work, which came to my attention after the submission of the present article, is available in Terian 2020, pp. 229–238.
- 12 Findikyan 2010a, p. 294.
- 13 Gregory of Narek [Terian 2021], p. 331 (prayer 74.1).
- 14 *Ibidem*, pp. 367–368 (prayer 79.4).

- [3] Astuatsatsin church (consecrated in 1240) and (collapsed) *gawit*<sup>4</sup>, eastern view, Nor Varagavank<sup>4</sup>
- [4] Church and (collapsed) *gawit*<sup>4</sup>, eastern view, Khorakert, before 1251
- [5] *Gawit*<sup>4</sup> (1232, with two upper-storey chapels) and Astuatsatsin church (1213), south-eastern view, Tegher





[6] Doorway between *gawit'* (before 1224) and the old church, Makaravank'

*Grand mashtots'*<sup>15</sup> then the lengthy rite of penitence, composed of admission and reconciliation, would have mostly taken place at the door of the church, that is, in the *gawit'*.<sup>16</sup> The reconciliation ceremony, enacted at the end of the period of penance, entails that the penitent – or the group of penitents<sup>17</sup> – before being conducted to the church, shall turn to the west to renounce Satan (as during the rite of baptism) and shall turn to the east to face again the door of the church. The entry into the church culminates with Psalm 117(118):19, which is said to be sung in a tone of lamentation: “Open to me the doors of righteousness that I enter into (them and praise God).”<sup>18</sup>

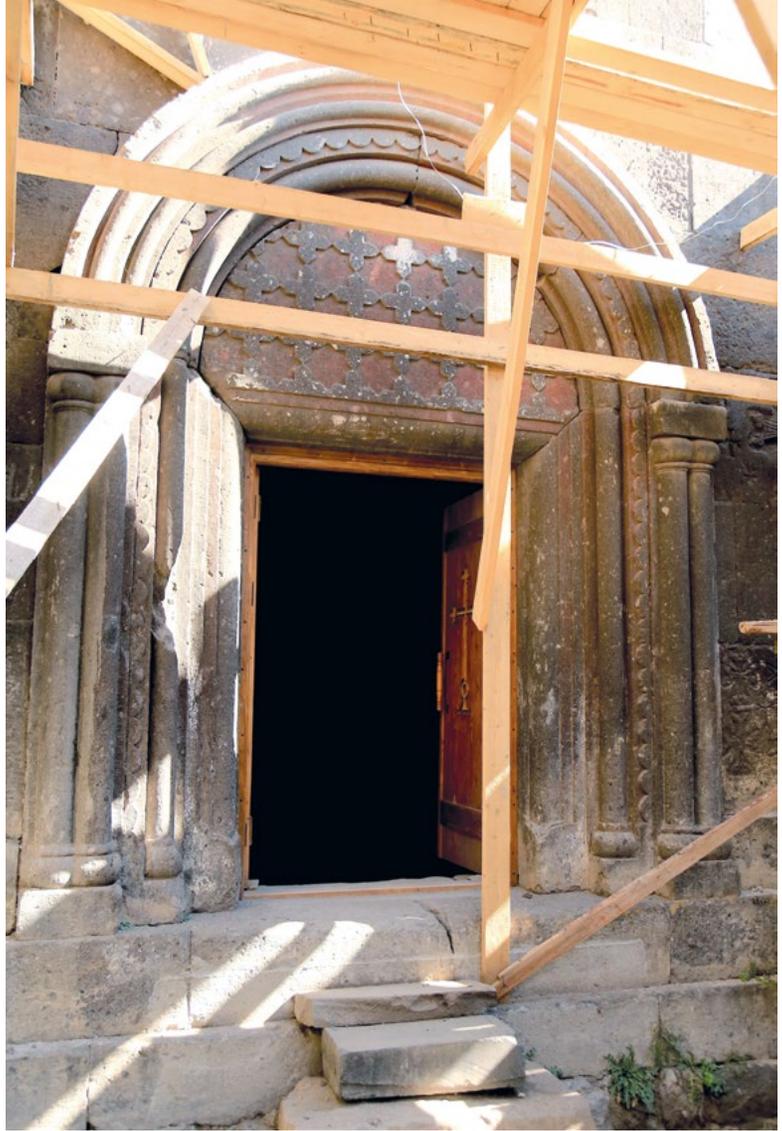
These and many other theological and liturgical writings clearly underscore the idea that the faithful gathered in front of the (shut) door – both in the ceremonial and metaphorical meanings of this word – was in hopeful anticipation of admission to the sacred and, ultimately, of being rewarded with the heavenly kingdom. With the emergence of the *gawit'* structures, the hierarchical organization of the ecclesiastical space became more distinct, increasing the meaning and importance of the church, which hosted the main altar.<sup>19</sup> “The front of Christ’s bema”, as the *Mystery of the Church* characterizes the place of the righteous inside the church, was the “phenomenological focus” – to borrow the term from the philosophy of religion – towards which the medieval worshipper’s mind, gaze, and body were directed.<sup>20</sup> Encompassing the principal entrance of its respective church, the *gawit'*

- 15 *Mashtots'* is the name of the principal ritual book of the Armenian Church, equivalent to Greek *euchologion*.
- 16 The critical text is available in *Grand mashtots'* [Tër-Vardanean 2012], pp. 361–380. For the rite of penitence among the Armenians, see Raes 1947, pp. 649–650; Carr 1976; Findikyan 2018.
- 17 For collective penitence, see Raes 1947, p. 654. For the twelfth century, the following observation is made in Carr 1976, p. 77: “Although the system of public penance was still in full vigour, the confession of sins was then by no means public”.
- 18 *Grand mashtots'* [Tër-Vardanean 2012], p. 367 (Բացէք ինձ դրունս արդարութեան, եւ մտից). See also Raes 1947, p. 650; Carr 1976, pp. 84, 90–91, which also states that the rites of public penance are preserved in manuscripts dating from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries – a sign of continuity of tradition.
- 19 A similar “spatial” organization can be discerned in several tenth-century Gospel manuscripts, classified within the group of the Eǰmiatsin Gospel and considered the closest extant specimens to the fourth-century Eusebian archetype. In these illustrated codices, when progressing down through the arched canons, the visual experience

[7] Doorway between *gawit'* and the Holy Sign church (1244), Astuats'enkal

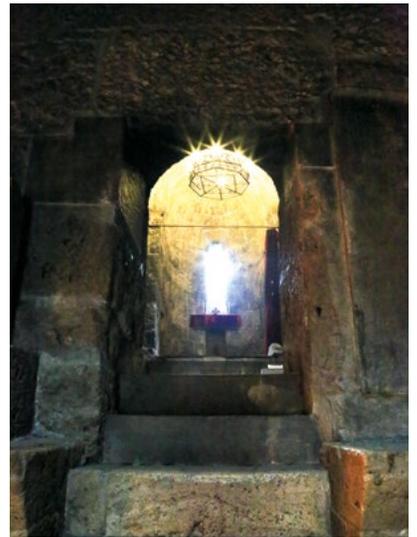
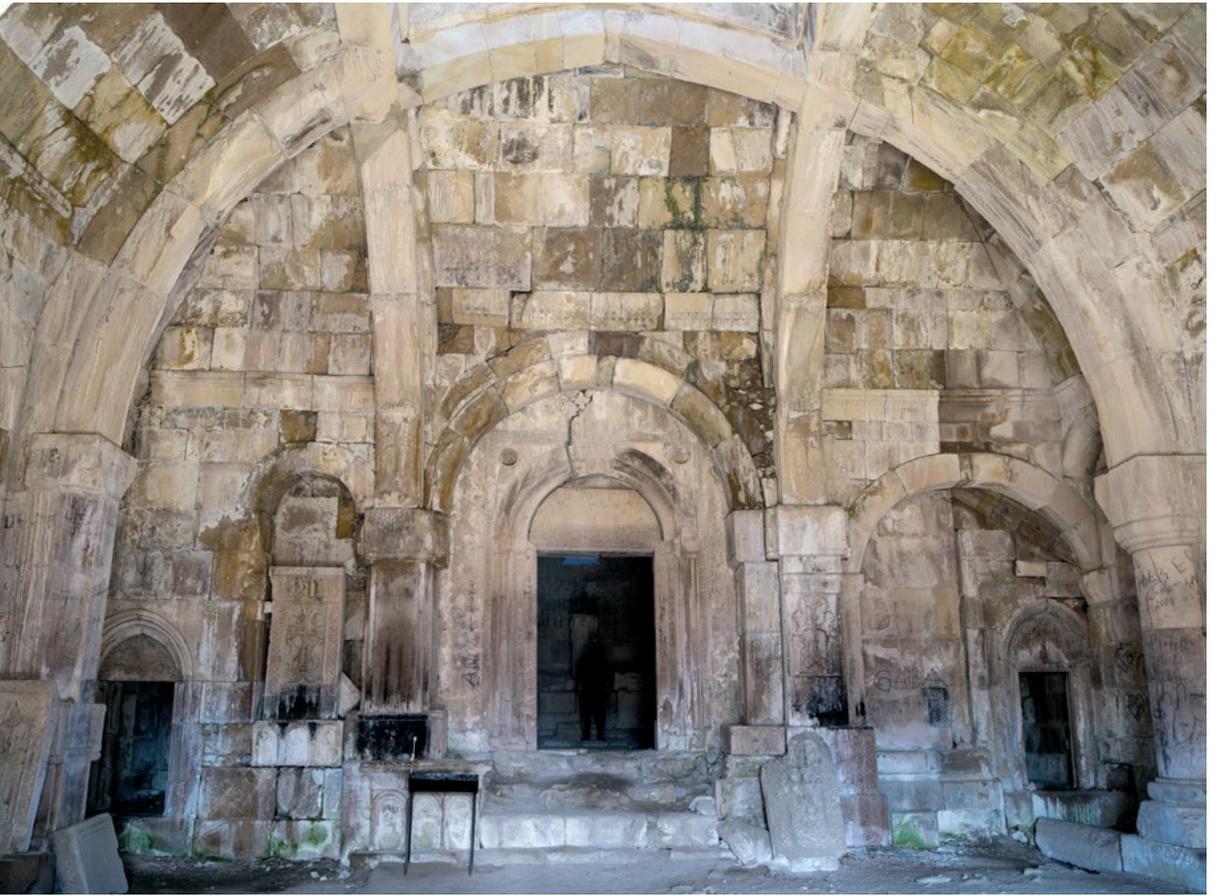
of the faithful concludes with the full-page image of a curtained tempietto, which bears eloquent allusions to the “Christianized” Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem Temple. See Grigoryan 2014. For the role of artistic images in the conception of the sacred space, see the contributions in Olovsdotter 2019, esp. the chapter authored by Cecilia Olovsdotter.

- 20 For the focus of worship, see especially Smart 1972. Mayravanets'i's symbolic division of the church “orders” (as he describes the interior of the church) is thus not very different from how sacred spaces were constructed and perceived in late antique and early Christian societies, in the sense of a gradual increase in sacredness when approaching the sanctuary. Most useful in this context is the collection of interdisciplinary studies gathered in Gerstel 2006. For Mayravanets'i's sources, see Terian 2020, p. 227. For other Armenian authors writing about the symbolic (three-fold) division of the church, see Thomson 1979.
- 21 For the liminality in sacred spaces, including especially the role of doors, see the collective volumes Van Opstall 2018; Doležalová/Foletti 2019. The concept of liminality is implemented more broadly in Andrews/Roberts 2012.



came to control and regulate – in both architectural and ritual terms – the transitional state of the yet unperfected faithful, whose liminal experience was now shaped and defined by the thresholds, portals, and visual *mise-en-scènes* that prescribed a pause before advancing any further.

By enclosing a *gawit'*, the church's western entrance naturally turned into a liminal instrument *par excellence*, marking the dramatic passage from the transitional sphere of the *gawit'* to the more sacred area of the church itself.<sup>21</sup> Some physical efforts could even be required of the worshipper (and are still required today) in order to exercise



[8] Doorway between *gawit'* and church, Mshkavank', before 1247

[9a] Doorway between *gawit'* (late 12<sup>th</sup> century) and church of Grigor Lusavorich' (restored in 1184), Haghartsin

[9b] (detail) Doorway between *gawit'* (late 12<sup>th</sup> century) and church of Grigor Lusavorich' (restored in 1184), Haghartsin

his/her *rite de passage* – to apply the Van Gennepian concept – into the more sacred space. Indeed, the thresholds of the central doorways leading from the *gawit'* to the church are usually elevated such that the worshipper must bend his or her body and then bow the head to pass through it [6–8, 9a–b, 16, 24]. The involvement of bodily movements – to generalize the phenomenon – is a focal part of religious worship, affirming the presence of the divine and disposing the worshipper towards an efficacious communication with God.<sup>22</sup> Particular attention to the doors is also a feature of the Armenian divine liturgy, in which the deacon bids: “The doors, the doors! With all wisdom and good heed lift up your minds in the fear of God.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet, the way towards the altar was not straightforward, and, if we take some of the textual sources literally, some people could terminate their liturgical experience inside the *gawit'*, without being allowed to enter the church and to regain their worthiness for the eucharist.<sup>24</sup> Scholars of liturgical theology have studied numerous instances in which a person, in anticipation of remission of sins, could be prevented from entering the church. The list of these “unworthies” is long but to impart an idea of the severity and length of penitential practices in medieval Armenia, a few examples based on Ephrem Carr’s study shall suffice. Thus, a life-long penance would await voluntary murderers and married persons guilty of bestiality, whereas unmarried ones guilty of the same sin were “considered worthy of the grace of communion after fifteen years of penance, only the first three of which are spent outside the church in tears and mourning [...] thereafter they may participate in public prayer.”<sup>25</sup> For lighter transgressions as well, such as for rash swearing or for eating anything polluted, the penitential discipline would be fully considered, as attested in many penitential writings composed in Armenian.<sup>26</sup> The Jacobite patriarch Johannan x bar Shushan (1064–1073) famously criticized the Armenian clergy for going to extremes with their penitential practices and for excluding the faithful from the vitalizing mysteries of the Church.<sup>27</sup> One century later, Dionysius Bar Salibi (d. 1171) would write polemically that the Armenian faithful “are in a continual state of sin”, for their clergy withhold communion for long periods.<sup>28</sup> These polemical writings surely contain a certain degree of exaggeration, but the conditions of entering the church and receiving communion apparently remained severe also in subsequent centuries, as can be gleaned from other sources.<sup>29</sup>

Whether one was prevented from entering the church or was rewarded with such permission, the role of the doorway that both divided and connected the spaces between the *gawit'* and the church

22 Smart 1972, pp. 6–7; Hazony Levi 2022, pp. 493–494.

23 Findikyan 2018, p. 171, n. 51, which observes the similarity with the analogous rite in Byzantine liturgy.

24 Renoux 1973 shows that, in Armenian and other Eastern churches, the absolution of sins, even serious ones, could be obtained through the celebration of the eucharist.

25 This is preserved in the Armenian text of the canons of the Second Council of Nicea. See Carr 1976, pp. 72–73.

26 *Ibidem*, p. 88 (for the quoted examples).

27 This is preserved in the patriarch’s letter addressed to Catholicos Grigor. For the text, see Yovhannēs x Bar-Shushan [Vardanean 1923], pp. 85–89. The letter is discussed in Raes 1947, pp. 652–654; Renoux 1973, p. 212; Carr 1976, pp. 73, 87; Findikyan 2018, pp. 162–163.

28 Kazaryan 2022, p. 265. For the text, see Dionysius Baršalibi [Mingana 1931], p. 528.

29 Apart from Carr’s mentioned study, some important sources are discussed in Findikyan 2018; Kazaryan 2022.

was crucial to underscoring the promise that awaited the worshippers “in front of Christ’s bema” and thus to enhancing their spiritual capacities. Most of the doorways, if not all of them, are so meticulously carved and multiply framed that the altar space, visible from the rectangular opening of the *gawit’*, is rendered as a carefully framed screen. If we rely on the centuries-old explanation given in the *Mystery of the Church*, the door was left open during the liturgy so that the unrepentant who gathered inside the *gawit’* may “only listen to the saying and contemplate the honour of the righteous” (see above). The “unclean unrepentant”, though not allowed inside the church, were thus offered a glimpse of the focus of their worship. Through the heavily framed inner doors of the thirteenth/fourteenth-century *gawit’*s, the worshipper could have observed the altar space with the massive bema, the front of which was usually decorated to imitate the starry heavens [38, 25, 35].<sup>30</sup> Within the minimally adorned interiors of the Armenian churches that were erected in this period, the tympana and the doorframes, along with the ceilings and the front of the bema, absorbed the largest decorative concentration with their star-laden, stony surfaces.<sup>31</sup> The domes of several *gawit’*s and of some churches also take the form of a large star, as we see it at Neghuts’i vank’, Khoranashat, Khorakert, and, moving westwards to the Holy Land, at the Armenian monastery of Saints James in Jerusalem [10–13].<sup>32</sup> “Domed like heaven” – as several newly built churches were described by Armenian chroniclers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries<sup>33</sup> – these star-shaped domes all allude to the promise of the heavenly kingdom.

This promise was regularly renewed by liturgical services that were performed within the hierarchically ordered interiors of the church, beginning with the ritual-meditative experience inside the *gawit’* and culminating – for the perfected ones – in front of the bema with the consumption of the eucharist. For a society constantly concerned with eschatological glory, the acts of penance – such as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving – gained increasing importance, as is well attested, and even exhibited, in epigraphic, visual, and textual sources.<sup>34</sup> Coming to the concerns of the present article, it is noteworthy that a *khach’k’ar* inscription in the dome of the *gawit’* of Surb Sion Church in Saghmosavank’ (1215) refers to the *khach’k’ar* as “a place of expiation (քաւարան) for Vach’ē”.<sup>35</sup> This is the Vach’utean prince Vach’ē, who left another inscription with similar wording (“place of expiation”) on the northern wall of the Hovanavank’ Church. Dating to the year 1217 – by which point the *gawit’* had not yet been adjacent to the church – this second inscription is written in the first person but on behalf of

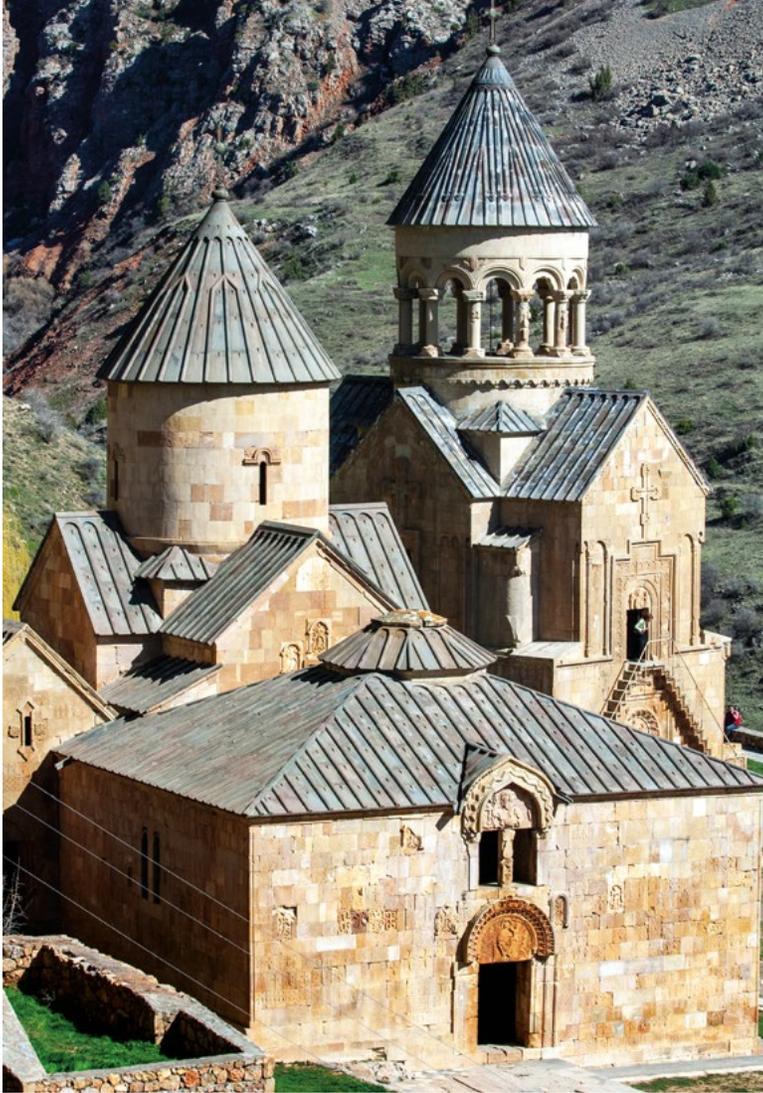
- 30 The front of the bema of the Asuatsatsin church in Khoranashat appears now undecorated but, according to a pre-restoration report published in 1987, it originally consisted of star-shaped plaques. For the restoration project, which has yet to be realized, see K’artashyan 1987.
- 31 More examples of portals and doorframes with star-like decorations can be found in Azatyan 1987, pp. 32–35 (plates 33–36), nos. 49, 60–61, 74, figs 84–86, 88–89, etc.
- 32 This group of Armenian churches with a distinctive star-shaped dome have been compared with similar-looking examples from the Holy Land and from the Spanish architecture, both Islamic and Christian. See Thierry/Donabédian 1987, pp. 589–590; Cuneo 1988, i, pp. 150, 323; Kanaan-Kedar 1998, pp. 81–83; Hamacher 2001, figs 22, 30–31; Kazaryan 2018. The ceilings of the listed Armenian churches and *gawit’*s are also discussed in Jakobson 1950. A preliminary study on the chronological and artistic issues regarding the star-like domes of the mentioned monuments has been presented in Gohar Grigoryan, “Vanakan Vardapet’s Monastery and the Holy Land”, *Artistic Networks in the Caucasian Space: New Researches and Perspectives*, Workshop, 10–11 May 2022, University of Fribourg.
- 33 For references to sources and discussion, see Thomson 1979, pp. 108–109.
- 34 For fasting practices, see Findikyan 2018, pp. 162–163. For almsgiving as an act of penance recognized by Armenian theologians, see Carr 1976, p. 78. It was widely practiced, not without socio-political interests, by Armenian sovereigns and ruling aristocracy. See, e.g., Grigoryan 2021, pp. 246–248.
- 35 Vardanyan 2015c, p. 299, fig. iv–35.



[10] *Gawit'*, interior (northern view), [11] Dome of the *gawit'*,  
Neghuts'i vank', 13<sup>th</sup> century Khoranashat, 1220s

[12] Dome of the church,  
Khorakert, before 1251

[13] Dome of the main church, Sts James  
monastery, Jerusalem



- 36 One more similar inscription, written in 1229 by Vach'ē Vach'utean on behalf of himself and Mamakhat'un, was once extant in Hořomos. See Karapetyan/Mahé 2015, p. 475 (no. 70). The transcription of the above-translated inscription of Hovhanavank' is available in Ghafadaryan 1948, pp. 65, 82–83 (no. 15, fig. 32): Միաբանեցա հանդերձ զուզակցաւ իմով Մամախաթունիս (ուր)ք ուխտիս վանացս Յովհաննոս, բազում տրապ եւ ընծաիր ազնական եղաք շինութե(ան) մեծափառ նորակերտ քաւարանիս: Եւ առաջնորդք ս(ուր)ք ուխտիս հաստատեցին յամենայն ամի պատարագել զՔ(րիստո)ս յանուն իմ, գտան Ղազարու զամենայն եկեղեցիս՝ զհին եւ զնոր. եւ զար խաչգիտին՝ Մամախաթունիս պատարագել զՔ(րիստո)ս զհին եւ նոր եկեղեցիս անխափան, մինչեւ ի գարուստ Որդոյն Աստուծոյ: Եւ որք չառնեն՝ դատին ի Ք(րիստոս)ս և ամեն.

Another English translation of the Hovhanavank' inscription, considerably different from mine, is to be found in Franklin 2021, p. 76: "In union I am coupled together with my Mamaxatun for the holy oath of our St. Hovhannes, in laying a foundation with gifts and offerings and have built an illustrious new-built purgatorium. And may the leaders within the holy oath be sure in every month to say a Mass to Christ in my name, for the festival of Lazarus in every church, new and old. And for the pious Mamaxatun Mass shall be said to Christ in the old and new churches, until the coming of the Son of God. And he who shall not do so, let Christ judge him, Amen."

Vach'ē and his spouse, reflecting the donors' confident expectations of the Second Coming:<sup>36</sup>

[...] I [Vach'ē Vach'utean], together with my spouse Mamakhat'un, became affiliated to this holy congregation, the monastery of Yovhan. With many donations and presents, we contributed to the construction of this glorious, newly built place of expiation. And the prelates of this holy congregation established a yearly mass in Christ on the feast of Lazarus (to be celebrated) in my name in all the churches, old and new. And on the day of

- [14] *Gawit'* and the principal church (in the first plan), and Burt'elashen church (in the second plan), eastern view, Noravank', 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries
- [15] Tympana of the *gawit'* entrance, eastern view, Noravank', early 14<sup>th</sup> century



the Discovery of the Cross, a mass in Christ (shall be celebrated) for Mamakhat'un in the old and new churches without interruption until the Coming of the Son of God. And those who do not effectuate (this), may they be judged by Christ. Amen.

As we shall see further below, sin and salvation are intertwined inside the church and even more so inside the *gawit'*, a penitential place *par excellence*, where sculpted images constantly reminded the faithful about their forthcoming encounter with Christ. Before we explore these images in § IV - V, one more relevant aspect must be highlighted:

the functionality of the *gawit* as a funerary site and the related perception of time through the lens of the life-death paradigm.

### III: THE *GAWIT* AND THE ANTICIPATION OF “THE EVERLASTING DOMINION”

Anyone entering a medieval Armenian *gawit* would immediately notice the abundance of tombstones covering nearly the entire floor of the hall [9a, 10, 16, 24]. These tombstones are usually contemporaneous or near contemporaneous to the construction of the ecclesiastic complex, meaning that the intended usage of the space of the *gawit* included funeral practices. Leaving aside the class differences that were certainly decisive in who could be buried within the building,<sup>37</sup> I would like to focus here on the phenomenon that, inside the *gawit*, the faithful were regularly reunited with the deceased, not least through liturgical services and commemorative rites.<sup>38</sup> The liminal experience of these two categories of people – alive and dead – was defined by the anticipation of the Second Coming and of expected salvation. Contesting the notion of time, the past and present were thus mingled within the transitional sphere of the *gawit*, which was characterized by its own strong sense of temporality. The hierarchical division of the church relied not only on the level of sacredness of its various areas but also on their capacities for symbolically conveying temporality and eternity. This idea, omnipresent in Christian spirituality and inspired especially by patristic writings, is variously expressed in Mayravanets’i’s above-quoted treatise *Analysis of the Universal Church*.<sup>39</sup> The inner compartment of the church, it says, “resembles the heaven to come, where the Most Holy Trinity abides with the worthy ones”.<sup>40</sup>

Taking up the theme of the urgency of salvation, Vardan Aygekts’i (twelfth/thirteenth centuries) highlighted the imminent Coming of the Judge, advising proper preparation, for “what shall come is closer than the time that was before us”.<sup>41</sup> The constant presence of liturgical and cosmic time within the church – numerous sundials visible on medieval Armenian churches and *gawit*’s make a strong statement on this [2, 31, 33] – also underscored the divine promise for everlasting eternity fulfillable upon the Coming of the Son.<sup>42</sup>

This concept is perfectly visualized on the two sculpted tympana of the *gawit* of the principal church in Noravank’ [14–15].<sup>43</sup> The upper tympanum depicts the conception of Adam by God, the Crucifixion, and, no less remarkably, an inscribed image of Daniel, whose prophecy about the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man served as the source for this sculpted composition (Daniel 7:13–14).<sup>44</sup>

37 In the case of Khoranashat, e.g., we know that the poor were buried outside of the church, while the interior was normally reserved for clergy and donors. This is indirectly indicated by Kirakos Gandzakets’i who, when praising his teacher Vanakan’s humility, gives the following details on his burial in Khoranashat: “They took and buried him at the head of the monastery on the eastern side, close to the smaller church where the graves of the poor were located, for [Vanakan] himself had so ordered.” Robert Bedrosian’s translation, available online: <https://www.attalus.org/armenian/kg11.htm#53> (consulted 19.04.2023). The original text in Armenian, as published in Kirakos Gandzakets’i [Melik’-Ohanjanyan 1961], p. 348, reads as follows: Եւ տարեալ թաղեցին զնա ի գոլիս վանիցն յարևելից կոստ, մօտ ի փոքրագոյն եկեղեցին, ուր էին գերեզմանք աղքատացն, զի ինքն այսպէս հրամայեաց. This does not confirm the assumption expressed in Vardanyan 2015b, p. 212, n. 19, that Vanakan was buried in the *zhamatun* of Khornashat.

38 The frequent funerary and commemorative services in Armenian churches also became a subject of criticism, such that the archbishop Nersēs Lambronats’i of Tarsus (d. 1198) would write ironically that it is an “unbearable madness” to believe that the liturgies are foremost for the deceased rather than for the living. See Kazaryan 2022, pp. 263–264. The text is reproduced in Nersēs Lambronats’i 1847, pp. 430–431.

39 *Analysis of the Universal Church* [K’ēosēean 2005] and K’ēosēean 2021, pp. 153–155, for discussion. For English translation, see Terian 2020, pp. 230–231: “The lower (orders) point to past, present, and future orders that are temporal,

[16] Doorway between *gawit'* (1261) and the principal church (1216–1221), Noravank'

conveying to us the intelligible and heavenly things through sense-perceptible and earthly things, making readily perceptible the structure of the orders that are there and are to come.” And slightly later: “As for the church with its two compartments of the sanctuary, to me they seem to be (likewise connoting the past), the current (or present reality), and the things to come. History shows us the veracity of that which is from the beginning, and that which moves into the future.”

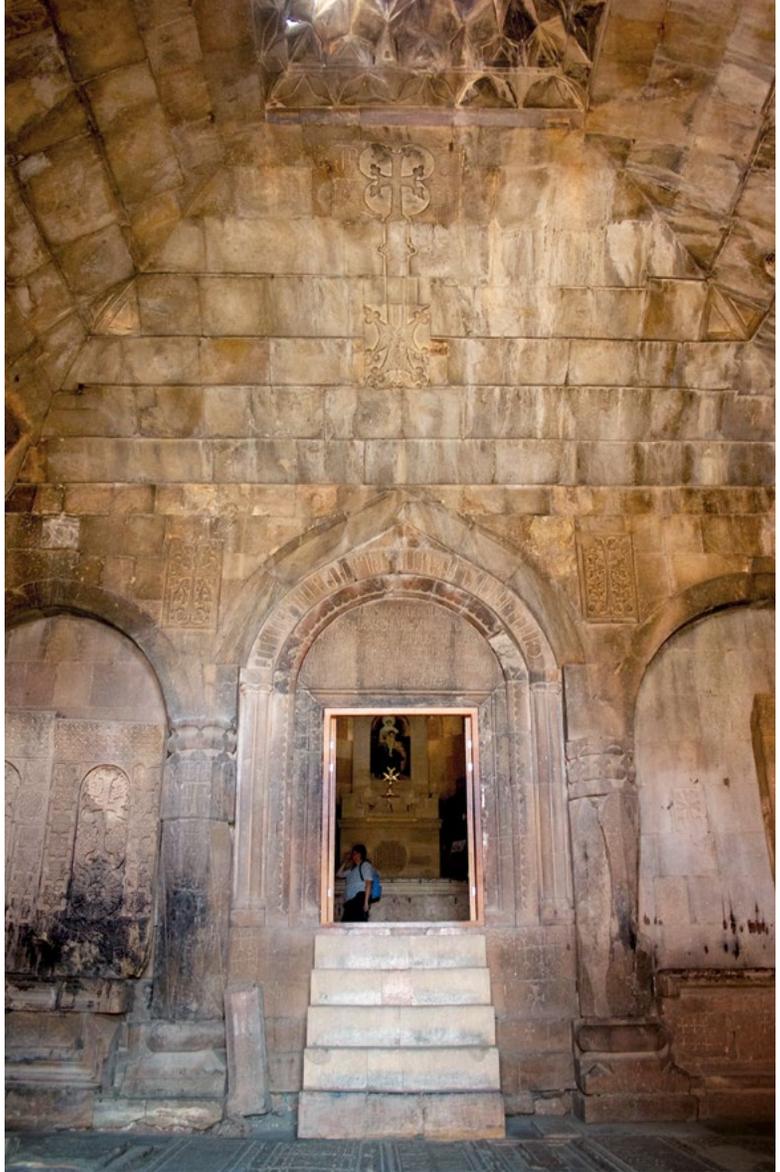
40 Terian 2020, pp. 232–233.

41 Vardan Aygekts'i [Hayrapetyan 2008], p. 86. Aygekts'i's apocalyptic writing is discussed in La Porta 2014.

42 For medieval Armenian sundials as signalling liturgical and cosmic time and for their connotation with apocalyptic ideas, see Maranci 2014.

43 This *gawit'* was completed in 1261, but the two tympana were likely executed in the early fourteenth century by Momik. The most complete study on Noravank', with previous bibliography, is Matevosyan 2017.

44 For the Armenian text, see Armenian Version of Daniel [Cowe 1992], p. 197. For the theological background of the relationship between the “Ancient of Days” and the “Son of Man”, as mentioned in Daniel 7, see Bucur 2017, pp. 1–17.



I saw in the night visions, and, behold, [one] like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and [...] his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away.

Shifting our gaze to the lower tympanum of the *gawit'*, we notice that the Danielic vision of the eternal kingdom is further disclosed



[17] Doorway between *gawit* and church (1240), Gandzasar

- 45 ԱՅՍ Է ԱՌ ԻՍ: ԱՌԸՆԵԱԼ Է ԱԸԵՂ ԱՆՈՒՆՆ Ա(ԱՏՈՒԱ) Ծ Ի ԾԱԳԱՅ ՄԻՆՉ Ի ԾԱԳԱ ԾԱԳԻՆ, ՈՐ ՈՉ ՀԱՏ ԵՒ ՈՉ ՎՃ(ԱՐ)։ The last section (որ ոչ հատ եւ ոչ վճար) translates literally as follows: “which neither divides nor comes to an end”. Transcription from Matevosyan 2017, pp. 109–112, also pp. 57–58, which corrects several errors admitted in previous readings. For earlier reproductions and discussions of this tympanum, see *Corpus Inscriptionum* [Barkhudaryan 1967], p. 222 (no. 705); Der Nersessian 1976; Avagyan 1975; Rapti 2015a, pp. 194–195, which opts for a different translation than given above: “This is in my stead. Blessed is the fearful name of God from the ends to the ends (who is without seed and without compensation).”

through the sculptor’s explanatory inscription, which proceeds above and below the image of the Virgin and Child – an obvious hint at the Incarnation that would become a preferred scene in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This is what the Noravank’ master’s inscription reminds the visitors entering through the sculpted door of the *gawit* [15]:<sup>45</sup>

This is (what is depicted) in my (image): Blessed is the fearful name of God from one end to the end of ends, which neither interrupts nor passes away.

The anticipation of the Second Coming and of the “everlasting dominion” promised in Daniel 7 also inspired the iconographic programme of funeral *khach’k’ars* on which the apocalyptic Christ is shown surrounded by the four beasts. In these monuments, as Hamlet Petrosyan has shown based on epigraphic and theological evidence, the sign of the cross is implemented as symbolic of Christ’s Second Coming, with a double function to protect the deceased until the Coming and to intercede on their behalf during the Last Judgement.<sup>46</sup> From this eschatological perspective should also be understood the single monumental crosses carved on the ceilings of several *gawit’*s, usually aligned with the doorway [16–17]. These must be none other than the visualization of “the sign of the Son of Man that shall appear in heaven” shortly before Christ himself comes (Matthew 24:30). Some of these large crosses are accompanied by legends that indeed associate and identify the sign of the cross with Christ, as we find, e.g., in Noravank’. There, the following inscription is carved inside the aniconic central cross that is situated between the *gawit’* dome and the church door [16]: ՏԷՐ ԱՍՏՈՒԱԾ ՅԻՍՈՒՍ ՔՐԻՍՏՈՍ (“Lord God, Jesus Christ”).<sup>47</sup> Vardan Aygekts’i, when referring to the sign of the Son of Man mentioned in Matthew 24:30, took care that the faithful not misconstrue its meaning materially: “Not the stone nor the wood nor the other substances (of the Cross) will exalt, but the blessing and the glory, the light and the power, and the unspeakable mystery.”<sup>48</sup> Upon the appearance of the Cross, which Aygekts’i calls “the precursor and sign of the Coming”, Satan will be destroyed, and the light of the Cross – he continues to prophesize – will remain for three days, to the great fear of sinners and to the joy of the righteous.<sup>49</sup> An inscribed *khach’k’ar* to the right of the door of Aghjots’ Surb Step’anos Church summarizes the omnipresent hope for salvation by identifying Jesus Christ as saviour who is depicted above the monumental cross [18].

**IV: THE ESCHATOLOGICAL INTENTIONS AND CEREMONIAL  
MISE-EN-SCÈNES OF THE IMAGES IN THE GAWIT’: THE PA-  
RABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS AND THE SECOND COMING**

In high and late medieval Armenia, being stopped in front of the shut door of the church was not only an archaic practice for the unrepentant but could involve anyone who partook in the celebration of the great feasts. As a result, the ceremony of the Opening of the

- 46 Petrosyan 2008, pp. 358–360, also pp. 156–157 (figs 212–213), 175 (figs 241–242) for case studies. The importance of the sign of the cross for the Second Coming is also explored in Rapti 2015b, pp. 114–115, on the example of illustrated manuscripts.
- 47 For another example of an elevated single cross with this very inscription, see Grigoryan 2017, pp. 133–134.
- 48 Vardan Aygekts’i [Hayrapetyan 2008], p. 252.
- 49 *Ibidem*, pp. 252–254. This echoes Matthew 12:38–40, where the Pharisees ask Christ for a sign proving His being the Messiah, to which He replies: “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of the prophet Jonah, for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”



Door, celebrated on the evening of Palm Sunday, caused debates among several churchmen, who criticized the practice of leaving people outside the church during much of the liturgy.<sup>50</sup> The door was opened, a fourteenth-century source claims, only “when the Body of the Lord is elevated, [...] so that the people may see”.<sup>51</sup> This, however, referred likely to those who were allowed to partake in the Divine Liturgy inside the church. For others gathered in the *gawit’* – be it a walled edifice or simply the area outside of the church – the liturgical experience could be limited “to only listen to the saying and to contemplate the honour of the righteous”, as indirectly instructed in the above-quoted treatise *Mystery of the Church*.

Michael Daniel Findikyan has observed that the Armenian celebration of the Opening of the Door, like the West Syrian Rite of Lights, has “strong eschatological themes drawn from the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1–13) and Psalm 117 (118)”.<sup>52</sup> In this respect, one comes to understand why the principal portal of the thirteenth-century Hovanavank’ Church, to which a contemporaneous

[18] “Jesus Christ Savior”, *khach’k’ar* (fragment), Aghjots’ Surb Stepanos, *gawit’*, interior

50 For this ceremony, see Findikyan 2010b, pp. 22–26; *Idem* 2018, p. 163; Kazaryan 2022.

51 Findikyan 2010b, p. 24. See also Kazaryan 2022, p. 278.

52 Findikyan 2010b.



[19] Gawit' (completed in 1250) and church (1216–1221), southern view, Hovanavank'

53 Der Nersessian 1963, p. 40; Eadem 1973, p. 20; Eadem 1993, pp. 62–63, figs 221–223; Zakarian 1986–1987, pp. 421–424; Rapti 2015b, pp. 105–109; Mantas 2015.

54 Trumpeting angels accompanying the scene of the Second Coming are also depicted on the southern façade of the eleventh-century Church of Nikorcminda, in Georgia. See Iamanidzé 2015, p. 63, fig. 8.

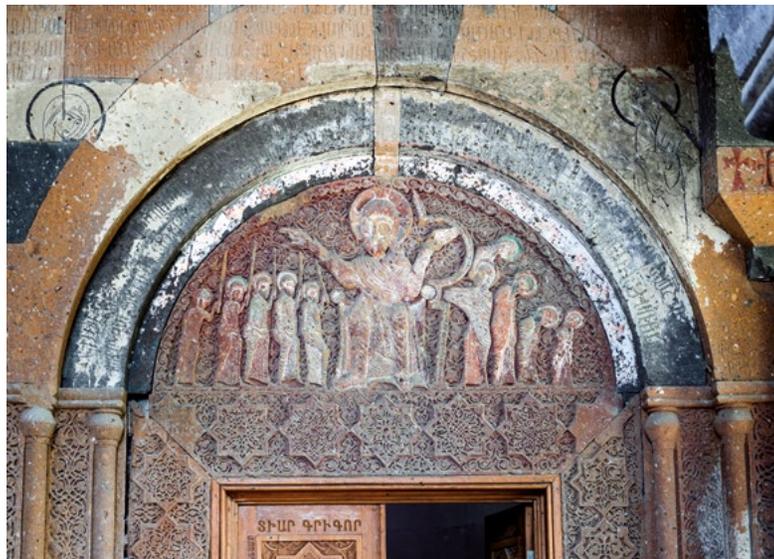
*gawit'* stands adjacent, is adorned with an impressive scene of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, thereby creating the visual *mise-en-scène* for the ceremony of the Opening of the Door [20–21]. This observation suits well the eschatological interpretations that art historians have proposed for the theme of the Ten Virgins – so widespread in Armenian art – and its correlation with the ideas of the Second Coming and the Last Judgement.<sup>53</sup> Among these images is a Cilician miniature of the Second Coming, created by T'oros ʔoslin in 1262, which depicts the Foolish Virgins standing outside of the closed door and, no less remarkably, of the miniature's frame [22]. Excluding the Foolish Virgins from the glory of Christ, ʔoslin's miniature delineates the promised paradise, where only the elect will be gathered by trumpeting angels (Matthew 24:31). Not only in this image but in others of the Just Judgement, such as in the *Malatya Gospels* (Matenadaran 10675, fol. 89v), the miniaturist implements the motif of the angel blowing a trumpet.<sup>54</sup> More relevant to our inquiry is the artist's application of the motif in yet another scene of the Ten Virgins (Gospel ms 1932.18, Freer Gallery

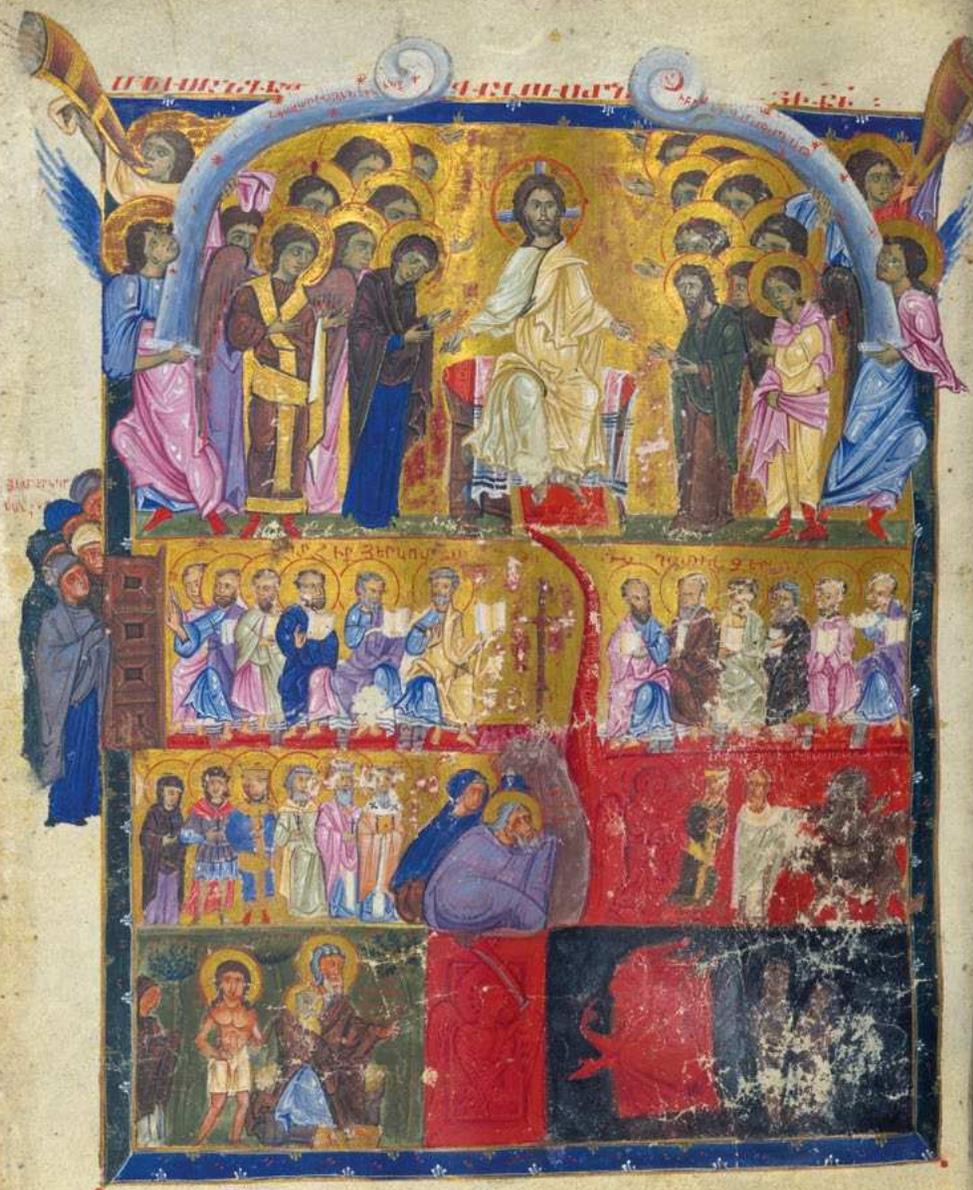


[20] Gawit', interior (eastern view), Hovnavank', completed in 1250

[21] Wise and Foolish Virgins, tympanum of the church door, Hovnavank', 1216-1221

[22] Second Coming with the Foolish Virgins (in the left margin), T'oros Roslin, Gospel manuscript, parchment, Hromklay (Cilicia), 1262 / Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Cod. 539, fol. 109v





of Art, fol. 159), clearly stressing the connection of the parable with the Last Judgement.<sup>55</sup>

An unusual feature of the Wise and Foolish Virgins on the Hovanavank' portal is their bearded appearance. Drawing attention to these bearded images, Lilit Zakarian has suggested that they echo theological writings in which the word "virgin" is used to indicate spiritual cleanliness in general.<sup>56</sup> This gender-bending approach evident on the portal was likely intended to underscore the universality of the topic in the context of the Second Coming, effacing thus the possibility of a solely female-oriented interpretation of the scene. An early fourteenth-century miniature shows the Wise and Foolish Virgins, some with beards and others without [23], affirming that neither men nor women are favoured before God (Galatians 3:28).<sup>57</sup> If one were to reconstruct the ritual *mise-en-scène* of the Opening of the Door in the architectural setting of Hovanavank', the sculpted images of the bearded virgins could be understood to have assisted the celebrating faithful – men and women alike – in their efficacious engagement with the rite. If so, Zakarian's view that the Hovanavank' scene served didactic purposes addressed to the local clergy can be reconsidered,<sup>58</sup> for this element may in actuality evoke performances of religious rituals that involved all members – and genders – of the community rather than merely the clergy.

Indeed, the eschatological messages conveyed by the story of the Ten Virgins are discernible in other ritual and devotional practices as well, such as funerals or penitential prayers. In the Armenian funerary rite of a lay person, the final prayer before the burial is constructed around the Second Coming, with particular reference to the episode of the Ten Virgins, grouped according to those who rejoice (positioned to Christ's right side) and those who lament (to His left). The prayer is addressed to Christ, upon whose "wonderful Coming the deceased will wake up by the sound of the trumpet and the dead will resurrect". The text vividly describes the Terrible Judgement (ահեղ դատաստան), which everyone, like the Wise and Foolish Virgins, will "receive according to his/her deeds".<sup>59</sup> Written in the same spirit is Grigor Narekats'i's penitential prayer 65.3, whereby "the keeper of the vigil" (as Narekats'i refers to himself in his prayer book), when imagining his departure from this life, hopes to meet the glorious Bridegroom, as did the Wise Virgins:<sup>60</sup>

When my miserable body is dissolved, may your anointing grace stay with me, that I might on the day of renewal meet you, O glorious Bridegroom; that by it I may be recognized as one of yours; [...] be pardoned with mercy.

55 For the mentioned three miniatures authored by or attributed to Թոսլին, see Der Nersessian 1963, p. 40, fig. 95; *Eadem* 1973, pp. 19–20, fig. 80; *Eadem* 1993, pp. 62–63, figs 221–223.

56 Zakarian 1986–1987, pp. 422–424; *Idem* 1973, pp. 294–296. It is indeed from this point of view that Vardan Aygekts'i defines the notion of 'virginity'. See Vardan Aygekts'i [Hayrapetyan 2008], pp. 133–135.

57 This idea is often expressed in patristic and Armenian exegesis. See, e.g., Vardan Aygekts'i [Hayrapetyan 2008], p. 233.

58 Zakarian 2007, p. 77; *Idem* 1973, p. 295. A similar opinion about the Hovanavank' scene being addressed to the monastic community was expressed by Lucy Der Manuelian, who, based on private communication with Fr. Krikor Maksoudian, added the following as a second option: "The scene may also be related to the present-day liturgical practice in Armenian churches of having young boys enact the story of the Wise and Foolish Virgins on Holy Thursday during the reading of the Gospel". See Der Manuelian 1984, pp. 99–100.

59 For the Armenian text of this pre-burial prayer and its German translation, see Schmidt 1994, pp. 201–205, 244–247.

60 Gregory of Narek [Terian 2021], pp. 286–287 (prayer 65.3)

[23] Wise and Foolish Virgins, Yovsian, Gospel manuscript, paper, Berdak in Tarberuni (Vaspurakan), 1308 / Matenadaran Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, Yerevan, Cod. 4806, fol. 9r.



Shifting again the focus of this discussion to the architectural frameworks, we notice that the idea of the Second Coming is visualized, in a most direct way, on the principal portal of another thirteenth-century church, that of Aghjots' Surb Step'anos [24–26].<sup>61</sup> As at Hovana-vank', a contemporaneous *gawit'* (now collapsed) was added to the west side of the church, rendering its portal a liminal zone between the *gawit'* and the church. Completed in 1217, the sculpted scene of the tympanum was executed with consideration to the soon-to-be adjacent *gawit'*, which materialized sometime before 1234. Though damaged by wind erosion, the scene is still recognizable, including especially the enthroned Christ, whose mandorla seems to be held by two angels. Two sets of four haloed figures, holding cross-staffs in their hands and symmetrically flanking the enthroned Christ, are portrayed across three horizontal registers. The scene is most likely inspired from the Book of Revelation, which makes several references to the twenty-four saintly elders who are first seated around the heavenly throne (Revelation 4:4, 9–10, and 5:8), before falling on their faces to worship God in preparation for His imminent judgement of the dead and rewarding of His servants (Revelation 11:16–18).<sup>62</sup> The images of the twenty-four elders would have reminded the worshippers gathered at Aghjots' of the apocalypse, inciting feelings of anticipation, fear, and warning – similar to those experienced by the young monk Adso in *The Name of the Rose*, when he recalls the doorway inscriptions of the labyrinth-like library and the figuration of

61 On this church, see Yovsēp'ean 1942, pp. 136–158; Zakarian 2007. See also Saghumyan 1986; Harutyunyan 1992, pp. 307–308.

62 According to Zakarian 2007, pp. 74–75, the representation of the righteous reflects an abbreviated combination of Revelation 4:1–4 and Matthew 25:34–35.



- [24] Doorway between (collapsed) *gawit'* (before 1234) and church (1217), south-eastern view, Aghjots' Surb Step'anos
- [25] Principal portal, Aghjots' Surb Step'anos, 1217
- [26] Second Coming, tympanum of the principal portal, Aghjots' Surb Step'anos, 1217

63 Eco 2014, p. 190, also pp. 184, 44–49.

64 On which see Thomson 2014; Vardanyan 2015c, pp. 295–296, 298. Thomson 2014, p. 248, also observes that there exist over one hundred extant manuscripts containing Lambronats'i's Commentary on the Book of Revelation – a telling fact of its popularity since the late twelfth century on.

65 An earlier scene of the Second Coming appears in the wall paintings of Aght'amar. See Der Nersessian 1965, pp. 47–48, fig. 70; Zakarian 2007, p. 75. The artistic evocations of the Second Coming, based on the Book of Revelation and other sources, would remain actual in Armenian art and funerary monuments up until the seventeenth century. See, e.g., Baltrušaitis/Kouymjian 1986, pp. 43–44, figs 23a–f; Petrosyan 2008, figs 326, 328–329; Vardanyan 2014; Merian 2014.

66 Vardanyan 2015c, p. 300. For the full transcription and translation of this inscription, see Karapetyan/Mahé 2015, pp. 421–422 (no. 21).

67 Similar wishes are expressed by donors in manuscript colophons as well. See Grigoryan forthcoming.

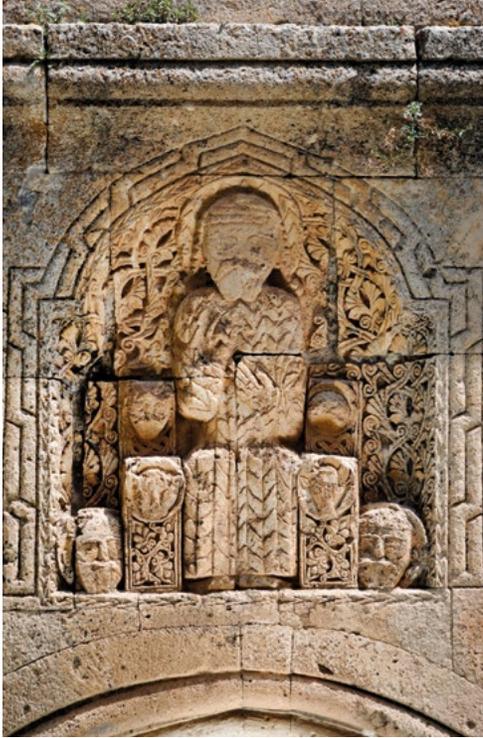
68 The inscription is damaged. The full transcription is available in Saghumyan 1986, pp. 199–200, and Zakarian 2007, pp. 131–132, 249–250, on which is based my English translation.

the Apocalyptic Elders (Revelation 4:4), which cause him to avert his gaze from the terrifying image of the Last Judgement sculpted on the tympanum of the church door.<sup>63</sup>

Although the Revelation of John is attested in Armenian historiographical writings as early as the fifth century, it was not until the twelfth century that the Armenian Church – with its catholicosate now situated in Cilicia – assigned it an authoritative status. It was the new translation of the Book of Revelation and an accompanying commentary – both prepared by Nersēs Lambronats'i (d. 1198), the erudite archbishop of Tarsus – that fostered the circulation of this text, the previous use of which had occasionally caused theological and political controversies.<sup>64</sup> Placed in this context, the sculpted scene of the Second Coming at Aghjots' Surb Step'anos seems to present an interpretation of the Revelation that is independent of the previous biases.

The artistic representation of the Second Coming was not new to Armenian art,<sup>65</sup> yet its manifestation in the *gawit'* of Aghjots' Monastery can be compared more favourably with the sculpted dome of the earliest extant *gawit'*, that at Hořomos, where the scene, similarly inspired by the Book of Revelation, encompasses the salvific expectations of those gathered below – whether alive or dead. Indeed, an inscription at the *zhamatun* of Hořomos dating from 1201 requests the priests to commemorate the donor “every year, until the Coming of Christ, [...] one quarantine of masses”.<sup>66</sup> Some of the inscriptions on the walls of Aghjots' Surb Step'anos Church, registering requests for individual masses endowed in the hopes of softening the divine will towards the donors and their relatives, refer similarly to the Second Coming and the Last Judgement.<sup>67</sup> The reminder of Judgement Day issued in these epigraphic texts often takes the form of an anathema – a not uncommon practice in Armenian spirituality – addressed to those who would dare to disrespect or oppose these stone-carved pacts to commemorate the donor. Their malicious intentions, it is specified, will be considered by Christ during His Second Coming, and the opposers will give account not only for their own sins but also for those of other individuals named in the text. Thus, the foundation inscription, written on the southern façade [31], after listing twenty-six donors who contributed to the construction of the church, concludes with the following threat:<sup>68</sup>

[...] If anyone, a prayer-sayer or a servant of this church, opposes the fulfilment of what is written (in this inscription), it will be him/her who will take responsibility for all our sins in front of Christ on the day of



Judgement. This (agreement) begins on the New Sunday<sup>69</sup> and is valid until the end of what is promised.

The iconographic details of the apocalyptic scene at Aghjots' do not, however, exclude the influence of sources beyond the Book of Revelation. On the left side of the enthroned Christ, a haloed eagle is visible, which, if we compare it with contemporaneous images of the tetramorph throne, can be interpreted as one of the four apocalyptic beasts that surround Christ [27–30]. Yet, the prominent position and the grandeur of the eagle discourage such an interpretation, for there is practically no space available for three other beasts to have been comparably depicted. It cannot, therefore, be ruled out that the eagle was initially the only beast carved inside Christ's mandorla - yet all the same echoing the Coming of the Son of Man as mentioned in Matthew 24:28 (cf. Luke 17:37): "[...] so the coming of the Son of Man will be, for wheresoever the carcass [the body] is, there will the eagles be gathered". Alexandria Frisch recently suggested a reading of this correlation between the eagles and the body in connection with imperial rule and thus as symbolic of the downfall of the Roman Empire. She explores the eschatological focus of Matthew 24:28 in the framework of Daniel 7, the allusions of which

[27] Christ with apocalyptic beasts, above the principal portal of the Astuatsasin church (1301), Monastery of John the Baptist, Urts, early 14<sup>th</sup> century

[28] Christ with apocalyptic beasts, Momik, *khach'k'ar*, 1304, Noravank', inside *gavit*', now in the Treasury of Eĵmciatsin

[29] Christ with apocalyptic beasts and the twelve apostles, Momik, *khach'k'ar* of T'amt'a khat'un, early 14<sup>th</sup> century, Noravank', now in the Regional Museum of Yeghegnadzor

[30] Christ with apocalyptic beasts, flanked by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist (Deesis), Momik, *khach'k'ar*, 14<sup>th</sup> century, Noravank', near Burt'elashen church

69 The second Sunday of Easter, called also Կրկնազատիկ (Second Easter) in Armenian tradition.





allow her to qualify the former as an apocalyptic text that foretells the downfall of an empire.<sup>70</sup> If we extend this secular interpretation to thirteenth-century Armenia – where we indeed find much apocalyptic speculation in theological and historiographical writings – possible political connotations emerge from the contemporaneous eschatological images, including the one at Aghjots'. Though the practice of explaining socio-political precarities in apocalyptic terms is a characteristic feature of Armenian historiography of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Mongol incursions into the Caucasus in the first decades of the thirteenth century reshaped Armenian apocalyptic discourse.<sup>71</sup> When describing the rise of the Mongols, Kirakos Gandzakets'i and other authors of his time dramatized that “the end of the world is near”, framing this as a sign of God's wrath on account of the multiple sins of the Armenians (or of the Christians – depending on the source).<sup>72</sup>

70 Frisch 2013.

71 The political dimension of the use and creation of apocalyptic literature in medieval Armenia is tackled in many studies. Most relevant to the present discussion are Zaroui Pogossian's studies focusing on the eschatological reflections of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. See Pogossian 2012; *Eadem* 2014.

72 *Eadem* 2012. A similar rhetoric is applied by other authors too witnessing the fall and rise of an empire or a kingdom. Compare, e.g., how the fall of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia in 1375 is described by contemporaries

[31] *Gawit*‘ (before 1234) and church (1217), southern view, Aghjots’ Surb Step’anos

[32] Daniel in the Lions’ Den, southern façade of the Aghjots’ Surb Step’anos church, 1217



in Armenian colophons see Grigoryan 2021–2022.

73 The early Armenian images of Daniel in the Lions’ Den are discussed in Mnats’akanyan 1977; Der Manuelian 1982 pp. 182–184; Donabédian 1990–1991, pp. 262–264; Grigoryan 2012, p. 68; Maranci 2018, p. 32. For the tenth-century example of Aght’amar, see Der Nersessian 1965, pp. 19–20; Jones 2007, pp. 89–91, fig. 4.28. But see also Hakobyan 2021, which argues that some of the early Armenian images identified as Daniel might in fact represent Saint Thecla with lions.

Most remarkable for the purposes of this article, however, is the iconographic evidence available at Aghjots’ Surb Step’anos, for it not only displays the promised Coming of Christ but also the end-time prophet Daniel. Best known for his miraculous salvation from the persecution of secular authorities and credited for foretelling Christ’s next arrival and everlasting dominion, the image of Daniel, widespread in the art of the first millennium, experienced a new revival in thirteenth-century Armenia, to which I shall turn next.

#### **V: THE STORY OF DANIEL IN THE LIONS’ DEN IN THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ARMENIA**

The eschatological and funerary connotations of the story of Daniel in the Lions’ Den are well known from early medieval art, and the Armenian evidence does not deviate from these general tendencies.<sup>73</sup> In the thirteenth century, the theme reappears in ecclesiastical art at least

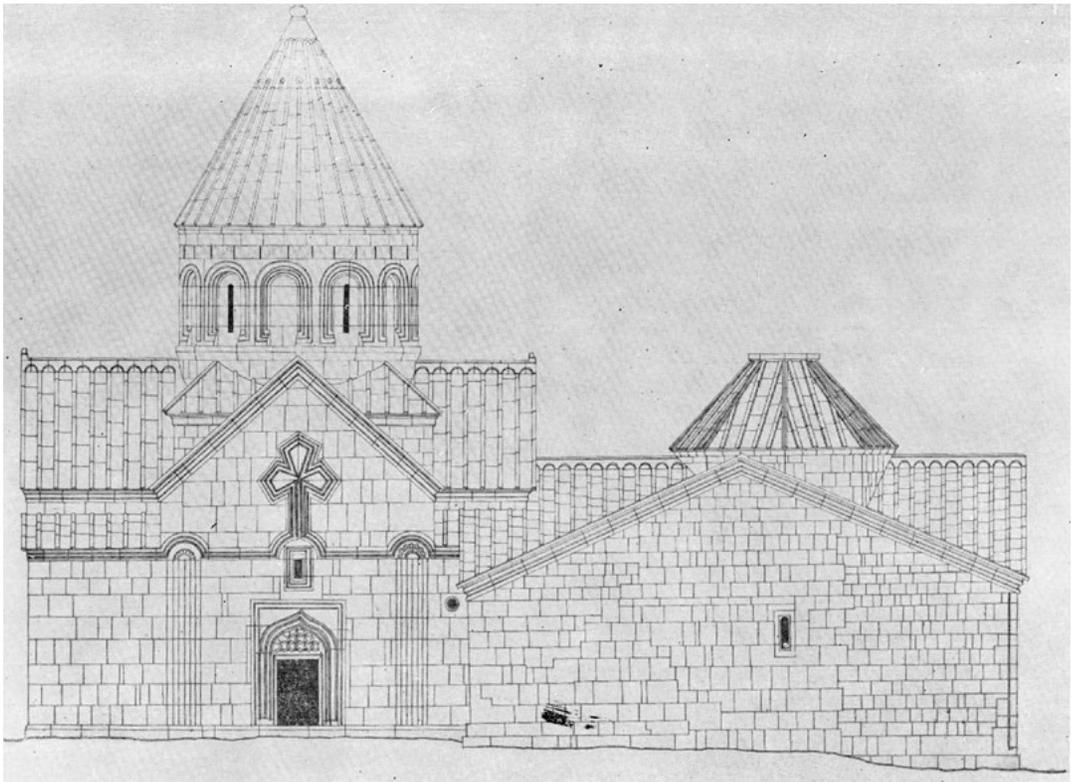


twice: above the small window in the southern façade of the Aghjots' Surb Step'anos Church [31–32], and inside the *gawit'* of Khoranashat, where it is positioned above the western entrance, directly facing the principal door of the church [36, 37a–b]. We have already seen in the previous sections that both the church exterior and the space within the *gawit'* could be used to host the faithful for penitential and other purposes. The two thirteenth-century images of Daniel were ostensibly executed with similar intentions, exemplifying the type of the suffering faithful whose patience and steadfastness would guarantee salvation and glory. In his penitential prayer 20.1, Grigor Narekats'i indeed recalls Daniel and “his dedicated pleas” in (futile) hope of validating his own entreaties before God.<sup>74</sup>

When I join Daniel, the blessed, holy, and great prophet from among your kin belonging to the lineage of Judah, in repeating his acceptable words and dedicated pleas, even then my punishable utterances reverberate with my sighing.

[33] *Gawit'* (1220s), Astuatsatsin church (ca 1206–1210) and Surb Kiraki chapel (on the right), southern view, Khoranashat

74 Gregory of Narek [Terian 2021], pp. 84–85 (prayer 20.1)



[34] Astuatsatsin church and gavit', Khoranashat, northern view as reconstructed in K'artashyan 1987, p. 17

The significant literary impact of the Book of Daniel on medieval Armenian authors and its constant inclusion in liturgical codices speak to the popularity of Daniel.<sup>75</sup> Peter S. Cowe has argued, moreover, that certain utilizations of Danielic episodes may be seen “not as a rhetorical embellishment, but as an essential prism through which to view and present the events”.<sup>76</sup> The choice of Daniel’s salvation story in the *gavit*’ of Khoranashat offers a particularly good occasion to verify the socio-political valences that theologians and historians traditionally ascribe to the use of the Book of Daniel.

In the eventful decades that marked the Mongol conquest of the Caucasus, we find Vanakan Vardapet, the founder of the Khoranashat Monastery and of its renowned *vardapetaran*, actively involved in various negotiations with local Mongol rulers, one of whom would actually take him captive. Kirakos Gandzakets’i, a pupil and companion of Vanakan, twice parallels him to Daniel when praising his teacher’s patience and virtuous qualities while in Mongol captivity.<sup>77</sup> Khoranashat was constructed – not without interruptions and regressions – in this politically unstable period, at times becoming the very centre of these

75 Cowe 2014; *Idem* 2020.

76 *Idem* 2014, p. 90. There is a vast scholarly literature on Daniel as a historical type; for the Armenian tradition, see also DiTommaso 2014, p. 131–132.

77 Kirakos Gandzakets’i [Melik’Ohanjanyan 1961], pp. 250, 346.



[35] *Gawit'*, interior (eastern view), Khoranashat, 1220s

[36] *Gawit'*, interior (western view), Khoranashat, 1220s

[37a] Daniel in the Lions' Den, *gawit'* (interior), above the western portal, Khoranashat, 1220s

[37b] Daniel in the Lions' Den, *gawit'* (interior), above the western portal, Khoranashat, 1220s

78 “In the monastery – which he himself had built – named Khoranashat because of the numerous churches there – which is located opposite Ergevank' fortress and by the side of Gardman – he made a venerable structure, creating a *gawit'* out of polished stones at the door of the great church he himself had built. And he taught doctrine to those who came to him from all districts.” Adapted from Robert Bedrosian's translation, available online: <https://www.attalus.org/armenian/kg11.htm#53> (consulted 19.04.2023). The original text in Armenian, as published in Kirakos Gandzakets'i [Melik'-Ohanjanyan 1961], pp. 346–437, reads as follows: Ի վասնս՝ զոր իր իսկ շինեալ էր, որ կոչի Խորանաշատ, և վասն յորով եկեղեցեացն, որ ի նմա, ընկալաւ զանունն, որ կայ հանդէպ Երգեվանից բերդին և ի թիկանց Գարդմանայ, առնէր նա շինուածս երևելիս, զալիթ շինելով ի կոփածոյ վիմաց ի դուռն մեծ եկեղեցոյն, զոր իր իսկ շինեալ էր. և զբան վարդապետութեանն ուսուցանէր այնոցիկ, որ ժողովեալ էին առ նա յամենայն գաւառաց:

79 Zakarian 2007, pp. 65–73.

80 *Daniel the Prophet* [Stone 2021], p. 237: “Daniel was handsome to the eye, like Christ and thin-bearded and in appearance dry, full of the grace of God.”



tensions due to its energetic leader Vanakan. The latter's name is so bound to the site that Khoranashat is also referred to as the *Monastery of Vanakan Vardapet*. Gandzakets'i does not disclose the choice of the Danielic episode found in the *gawit'* of Khoranashat, but he makes particular reference to the construction of the “*gawit'* from polished stones at the door of the great church that Vanakan himself had built”<sup>78</sup>

To further appreciate the popularity of Daniel in the intellectual circles around Vanakan, one must note that Vardan Arewelts'i, another pupil of Vanakan, composed in Aghjots' Monastery a *Commentary on Daniel*.<sup>79</sup> This work was completed in 1268 when the two images of Daniel were already extant at Aghjots' and Khoranashat. The position and iconography of these two images call for art-historical analysis, which may further elucidate the intended meanings of artistic images in the construction of sacred spaces more broadly.

Despite the tradition claims that Daniel was a youthful man when thrown into the lions' den, the two thirteenth-century Armenian images depict him as an elderly, bearded man – an element that echoes an apocryphal writing.<sup>80</sup> This is, however, the most substantial similarity discernible between the Aghjots' and Khoranashat images. In Aghjots', the scene is positioned on an exterior wall, as are the



analogous examples extant in tenth-century Aght'amar and seventh-century Mren.<sup>81</sup> The haloed Daniel is shown praying in an *oranta* posture, while the two beasts move towards him with open mouths – perhaps “licking the dust of his feet,” as the same apocryphon says.<sup>82</sup> Contrary to this, the two lions of Khoranashat are depicted with firmly closed mouths and in a static pose as though submitting themselves to Daniel, whose raised left hand confidently touches the nearby lion. Unlike the other examples that emphasize Daniel’s hopeful praying, in the case of Khoranashat Daniel is presented as having superiority over the beasts and as already having been rewarded with victorious salvation. Moreover, the posture of these lions – seated on their hind legs with their forepaws on the ground – emphasizes their role as Daniel’s guardians and protectors [38b].<sup>83</sup>

Apart from the biblical account (Daniel 6:16–23), the story of Daniel in the Lions’ Den was known to Armenians through the apocryphal text *The Names, Works and Deaths of the Holy Prophets*, which, however, does not elucidate the iconographic peculiarities found at Khoranashat.<sup>84</sup>

81 For the Aght'amar image, see above, n. 73. The Mren example, depicted around the eastern window, can however be identified with Daniel with some reservations. I thank Christina Maranci for sending me a recent image for verification. The image is discussed in Donabédian 1990–1991, pp. 262, 264, fig. 25; *Idem* 2008, pp. 109–110, fig. 169.

82 *Daniel the Prophet* [Stone 2021], p. 236: “And the beasts, (though) hungry, did not approach the prophet, but were licking the dust of (his) feet”.

83 Another sculpted lion with a protective function is to be seen on the entrance of the Khornashat *gavit*. Here, the lion, together with a horned animal, each carved from a

[38a] The front of the bema  
of the principal church,  
Makaravank', 1205

single piece of stone, serve as capitals supporting the lintel of the pointed tympanum. The bodies of these guardian beasts are inscribed, naming Vanakan (on the lion) and Grigor (on the horned animal), and requesting Christ's mercy for both of them. For images and inscriptions, see Grigoryan 2023, p. 64, figs 3.2a–c.

84 This text is reproduced, translated, and discussed in Stone 1982, pp. 158–173, sp. pp. 164–165.

85 *Daniel the Prophet* [Stone 2021].

86 For its relation to the Armenian *Daniel the Prophet and the Three Young Men*, see Stone's study (n. supra). For bibliographical references about *Bel and the Dragon*, see DiTommaso 2005, p. 335. For the Armenian text, see Armenian Version of Daniel [Cowe 1992], pp. 221–227.

87 *Daniel the Prophet* [Stone 2021], p. 237, also n. 78.

88 *Ibidem*, pp. 227, 235–236.

89 *Ibidem*, p. 237.

90 Armenian Version of Daniel [Cowe 1992], p. 225: «Բայց դու, արքայ, տուր ինձ իշխանութիւն և սպանից զվիշապն առաջի քո առանց սրոյ և գաազանի» (Bel 26).

91 Wright 2014, pp. 16, 18 (n. 38). On these two mystic plays, accompanied with an extensive bibliography, see DiTommaso 2005, pp. 446–448.

Some of these idiosyncrasies can now be elucidated with reference to another apocryphal text available in Armenian: *Daniel the Prophet and the Three Young Man*, which recently saw its first publication thanks to Michael E. Stone.<sup>85</sup> The text includes the story of Daniel in the Lions' Den, interpolated with episodes from the *Bel and the Dragon*, which is an extension of the Book of Daniel.<sup>86</sup> The Armenian apocryphal account, which draws largely upon *Bel and the Dragon*, deviates from it in the number of lions (and of the days spent in the den). The text of *Bel and the Dragon* relays that there were seven lions, whereas the newly published apocryphon speaks of “two man-eating lions”, as reflected in all extant Armenian images of Daniel in the Lions' Den.<sup>87</sup> Shortly before this, Daniel's vision of the return and “terrible judgement of Christ” is mentioned, as well as how he continually prayed to God, openly mentioning His fearful name (զահեղ անունն Աստուծոյ, cf. the wording of the Noravank' inscription given above).<sup>88</sup> Next, the leonine episode unfolds, with Habakkuk bringing food for Daniel, who shares it with the “hungry beasts”. After coming out unharmed from the den of the two lions, Daniel is immediately said to have “killed the dragon to which the Chaldeans were sacrificing”.<sup>89</sup> Although the narrative of *Bel* states that Daniel wished to kill the dragon (venerated by the Babylonians!) with the use of neither sword and nor sceptre,<sup>90</sup> at Khoranashat the elongated object that appears in Daniel's right hand may be taken as an apotropaic weapon. I am aware of no Armenian source that mentions Daniel holding a beast-harming instrument, but a comparative view to non-Armenian evidence may offer an interpretative ground for the sword-like attribute, the power of which has humbled the colossal – “man-eating” – lions of Khoranashat. For example, two Latin liturgical dramas, *Historia de Daniel Representanda* and *Ludus Danielis*, composed respectively in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, speak of an angel armed with a sword, who suddenly appeared to Daniel “in order to shut the mouth of the lions”.<sup>91</sup> In the absence of corroborating evidence, it cannot be determined whether the Armenians would have been familiar with these mystic plays, but the knowledge of an apotropaic weapon capable of silencing and submitting lions is clearly demonstrated in the Khoranashat sculpture. It is also remarkable that both the Latin texts and the recently published Armenian apocryphon represent the episodes of Daniel in the Lions' Den and of *Bel and the Dragon* in a hybrid way and both place special emphasis on Christ's Coming.

Thus, the Khoranashat image of Daniel encapsulates the multifaceted yet increasingly interconnected meanings – pious, salvific, eschatological, apocalyptic, and apotropaic – that were regularly evoked during devotional and liturgical practices enacted inside the *gawit'*.

Directly facing the principal door of the church, the scene is positioned on the western wall [36] in such a way that it is only visible when turning one's back to the church door [35] – a position that could occur, e.g., when renouncing Satan and declaring one's faith, as prescribed in the Armenian rite of penitence before admitting the faithful to the church (§ II). Even if the choice of this scene may have had a personalized significance related to the captivity of the monastery's founder, Vanakan, its re-appearance in the contemporaneous Aghjots' Surb Step'anos speaks for a new revival of Daniel's leonine story – a tendency that is discernible in the artistic and liturgical practices of other Christian societies as well.

## VI: CONCLUSIONS

One may indeed question whether the liturgical services and the much-debated penitential practices preventing the faithful from entering the church were actualized with the same severity and archaism with which they are described in polemical writings and in official *mashtots'* books. Indeed, the textual and material documentation we have at hand expresses prescribed purposes rather than unquestionable matters of fact. It is from this point of view that I would like to conclude the present inquiry, which supports and expands the liturgical arguments raised thus far about the intended functionality of Armenian *gawit'*s.

The multiply framed and often elevated inner doors, the 'heaven-like' domes, and the sculptural *mise-en-scènes* installed inside the *gawit'* called for meditative contemplation and required, moreover, physical and aesthetic engagement. Preventing the faithful from entering the church and ceremonially rewarding with such permission was a sort of psychological device aimed at enhancing the worshippers' spiritual capacities and salvific aspirations, thereby highlighting the promise that awaited them "in front of Christ's bema". In this respect, it is noticeable that, in the early thirteenth-century church of Makaravank', the "front of Christ's bema" contains an image of Jonah expelled from the whale<sup>92</sup> – a salvation story that would likely have incited analogous associations for those righteous standing in front of the bema [38a–b].<sup>93</sup>

The dramatic passage from the *gawit'* allowed one to partake in the vitalizing mysteries of the Church; yet, the ultimate hope was to secure a place in the heavenly kingdom, as visual and epigraphic sources make clear. The search for eschatological glory was a permanent concern in medieval Armenian spirituality, and this concern was regularly formulated theologically, commented upon exegetically,

[38b] The salvation of Jonah, the front of the bema (fragment) of the principal church, Makaravank', 1205

92 Karakhanyan 1974, p. 106, misidentifies the Makaravank' image of Jonah as a female figure.

93 To be clear, the Makaravank' *gawit'* completed by 1224 was adjusted to the west façade of the oldest church dating from the tenth/eleventh centuries and not to the nearby church, which is often labelled "the principal church" owing to its remarkable size and sculptural decoration. Because of this, the spacious *gawit'* appears to be connected to both churches: to the small church from the west and to the principal church from the north. For the plan and construction of the monastic complex of Makaravank', see Thierry/Donabédian 1987, pp. 552–553; Cuneo 1988, I, p. 146 (no. 39); Harutyunyan 1992, pp. 316–318, 306, fig. 93/6.



enacted liturgically, experienced in private devotion, and continually visualized in artistic images. The biblical scenes found in Armenian *gawit*'s and their respective churches – all pertaining to salvific, eschatological, or apocalyptic dimensions – were nevertheless addressed to a prepared faithful, given that understanding the visual information demanded as much literacy and experience as was required to comprehend the verbal content. Rather than merely enchanting their beholders, these sculpted images were meant to take part in the worshipper's meditative and ritual experience, for they materialized concrete themes that were evoked parallelly in liturgical celebrations, penitential prayers, private devotion, and funerary rites. No wonder, therefore, that the careful selection of figurative images – extremely limited in number and in thematic repertoire – conveys eschatological and apocalyptic ideas that were universal in their nature and applicable to various occasions.



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Alpago Novello 1980, p. 440; [28.5], from Devdariani/Dvali/Vachnadze 2004, p. 117; [28.6], from Devdariani/Mgalobishvili 1990, p. 395; [28.7], from Djobadze 1992, p. 143; [28.8], from Alpago Novello 1980, p. 328; [28.9], from Alpago Novello 1980, pp. 282–283.

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