

MANUSCRIPT AND MONUMENT: THE ETCHMIADZIN GOSPEL AT BGHENO NORAVANK՝

ANAHIT GASPARYAN

*MA in Art History
Tufts University
anahit@armenianmuseum.org*

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Abstract

This study recontextualizes the Etchmiadzin Gospel (Matenadaran, MS 2374) through its visual, spatial, and material relationships with its place of origin, the monastery of Bgheno Noravank՝ in Syunik՝, Armenia. Whereas previous scholarship has addressed the manuscript's complex history and debated the attribution of its components, this article situates the Gospel within the architectural and artistic environment of Bgheno Noravank՝. Building on Sedrak Barkhudaryan's identification of Bgheno Noravank՝ as the manuscript's site of origin, and Sirarpie Der Nersessian's attribution of its initial group of miniatures to 10th-century Syunik՝, as well as integrating approaches from Byzantine architectural studies, the article examines formal and iconographical parallels between the initial full-page miniatures of the Gospel and the surviving stone reliefs of the church. The visual similarities suggest that the manuscript was conceived in dialogue with the monumental space it inhabited, reflecting architectural features in its painted imagery. By approaching the manuscript as a monument itself, this analysis proposes that the Etchmiadzin Gospel functioned not only as a portable devotional object but also as an extension of the sacred environment of Bgheno Noravank՝, reflecting the visual, cultural, and artistic network of medieval Syunik՝.

Keywords: manuscript, church, gospel, Byzantine architecture, medieval Armenia, medieval iconography, Etchmiadzin Gospel, Bgheno Noravank՝, Syunik՝

Introduction

Medieval manuscripts offer glimpses into the history of their time, containing details that extend far beyond the texts and images they display¹. They carry invaluable information about the cultural, political, and social contexts that shaped their existence and the community within which they were created and used. The Etchmiadzin Gospel (Matenadaran MS 2374) is a remarkable example in this regard². Assembled from materials spanning different centuries—such as its 6th-century cover, 7th-century final miniatures, and 10th-century text—this manuscript's history is rich in physical transformations and shifting contextual interpretations. It is an ideal case study through which the relationship between manuscript production and sacred space can be examined, while taking into consideration the environment in which such objects were produced, used, and preserved.

The Gospel's place of origin has long been misattributed due to an incomplete examination of the manuscript's colophon³. Sedrak Barkhudaryan's detailed analysis corrected this error, reattributing the manuscript to its rightful origin at the monastery of Bgheno Noravank', in the province of Syunik', Armenia⁴. Through further research, Sirarpie Der Nersessian reclassified the initial miniatures—which were mistakenly assigned to 6th-century Syria—within the 10th-century Armenian painting tradition, suggesting their creation at Bgheno Noravank'⁵. This discovery repositions the Etchmiadzin Gospel within its proper cultural framework,

¹ This research was conducted under the guidance of Professor Alice Isabella Sullivan at Tufts University, with the support of Professor Kate Franklin, Arthur H. Dadian and Ara Oztemel Chair in Armenian Art and Architectural History at Tufts University, and Professor Christina Maranci, Mashtots Professor of Armenian Studies at Harvard University. It was generously funded by the Tisch Library Research Fellowship (Tufts University), and the Helen Evans Scholarship (AGBU). I am also grateful to the Department of History of Art and Architecture and the Tisch Library Special Collections at Tufts University.

² The Etchmiadzin Gospel is currently housed at the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (Matenadaran) in Yerevan, Armenia. This research was conducted using the facsimile of the Gospel at Tufts University's Special Collections.

³ The Etchmiadzin Gospel was initially misattributed to a 13th-century Noravank' due to the mention of "Noro Vans" (which means Noravank' in Armenian). However, the name of the founder documented in the colophon was disregarded, as it did not match this Noravank's founder. Soviet-Armenian historian, epigraphist Sedrak Barkhudaryan identified the founder of Bgheno-Noravank' after its discovery and matched it to the Etchmiadzin Gospel's Noro Vans. Bgheno-Noravank' is around 150 kilometers northwest from Noravank'. **Barkhudaryan S.**, *The Place of Writing of Etchmiadzin Gospel* [Էջմիածնի Ավետարանի Գրչության Վայրը], *Banber Matenadaran*, 1958, no 4, p. 43–59.

⁴ **Barkhudaryan S.**, *The Place of Writing...*, p. 43–59.

⁵ **Der Nersessian S.**, *The Date of the Initial Miniatures of the Etchmiadzin Gospel*, *The Art Bulletin* 15, 1933, no 4, p. 327–360; **Kotanjan N.**, *The Etchmiadzin Gospel* [Էջմիածնի Ավետարանը], Yerevan: Anahit Publication, 2000.

linking it directly to the visual and spiritual traditions of Bgheno Noravank'. As the monastery is a geographically remote and understudied site, its association with the Gospel underscores its broader importance in more fully reconstructing the medieval artistic landscape of Syunik'.

In examining the parallels between the initial miniatures' visual elements and the stylistic motifs found in the stone carvings at Bgheno–Noravank', this study argues that the manuscript can be understood as a monument itself, engaged in an active dialogue with the sacred space of the church, mirroring its physical and symbolic structures. Moreover, it shares a key characteristic with architectural monuments: the Gospel—much like Bgheno Noravank'—serves as a *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory),⁶ commemorating events, people, and ideas within its pages. These sites of memory, both tangible and symbolic, are created to preserve the cultural and historical identities of the communities that produced them, bridging the past and present. Within this framework, the manuscript also links the past and present together, embodying the cultural context of its time and place. This allows for a more complex exploration of cross-cultural interactions and aesthetic developments in both local and global contexts, facilitating a shift towards an interdisciplinary study of medieval visual cultures in Armenia and across a broader spectrum of contexts.

Building on this interdisciplinary framework, the methodological principles developed in the study of Byzantine architecture offer an additional lens through which the manuscript may be reinterpreted. Cyril Mango identifies four primary approaches to the study of Byzantine architecture: typological, symbolic, functional, and socio-economic⁷. However, he cautions that each, when applied in isolation, risks overlooking the broader cultural and historical conditions that shaped architectural production. Robert Ousterhout builds upon this framework, advocating for the contextualization of monuments through topographical, historical, and constructional analyses, situating churches within their physical landscape, social environment, and processes of craftsmanship⁸. Ousterhout introduces the notion of *human context* through constructional analysis, emphasizing the people who built the monuments, their decision-making

⁶ A concept developed by French historian Pierre Nora in his 3-volume work *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, discussing how the collective memory is constructed and preserved by societies. While his arguments are based on the example of France specifically, the term has been popularized and widely used in cultural heritage studies. See **Nora P.**, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, 3 vols, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997; Idem, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire, Representations*, 1989, no. 26, p. 8.

⁷ **Mango C.**, Approaches to Byzantine Architecture, *Muqarnas*, 1991, no 8, p. 41–43.

⁸ **Ousterhout R.**, Contextualizing the Later Churches of Constantinople: Suggested Methodologies and a Few Examples, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 2000, vol. 54, p. 241–250.

processes and workshop practices⁹. This concept connects the building with the environment that developed outside of it. The Etchmiadzin Gospel not only participates in this environment but also extends beyond its physical and conceptual walls, facilitating interactions with many people along its journeys. Created at the behest of a local bishop by scribes and artists who were all integral to the church's monastic community, the manuscript extends the sacred environment of the church outward, embodying the ideologies and identities of Armenia's medieval past. Similar to the architectural monument, the manuscript stands as a physical marker both inside and outside the landscape of its production, commemorating the community of Bgheno Noravank', its broader connections within Syunik' and neighboring regions, and ultimately, within the wider medieval world.

Medieval Armenia and the Kingdom of Syunik'

During the Middle Ages, Armenia developed at critical crossroads between the Byzantine Empire to the west, the Persian Empire to the east, and the expanding Islamic states to the south. These neighboring powers periodically carved out Armenian regions as vassal states or swayed internal leaders to establish separate, localized rule. Additionally, Armenia's mountainous terrain made centralized governance challenging, giving rise to regional dynasties that exercised significant autonomy. The Kingdom of Syunik', located in the southeastern part of Historical Armenia, had established semi-independent rule under the Bagratuni Kingdom of Armenia, which had risen to power in the late 9th century¹⁰. The princes of Syunik' supported Ashot Bagratuni, who was titled "Prince of Princes" upon his accession to the throne in 862¹¹. Following the death of Ashot, Prince of Syunik, around 909, the Kingdom of Syunik' was divided between his sons, Smbat and Sahak. Smbat declared Syunik' an independent kingdom, although he soon acknowledged vassalage to Bagratuni Armenia again. As a result of this division, Syunik' governing forces were weakened, and it was annexed into the Kingdom of Ani in the 990s¹².

Despite the unstable political atmosphere, the region witnessed an extraordinary flourishing of art, literature, and ecclesiastical architecture;

⁹ Ousterhout R., Contextualizing ..., p. 241.

¹⁰ Garsoïan N., The Independent Kingdom of Medieval Armenia, *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times. The Dynastic Periods: From Antiquity to the Fourteenth Century* (ed. Richard G. Hovannisian), vol. I, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997, p. 143–146.

¹¹ Garsoïan N., The Independent Kingdom ..., p. 146–158.

¹² Stepanos Orbelian, *History of Syunik'* [Սյունիքի Պատմություն], (ed. A. Abrahamyan), Yerevan: Soviet Writer, 1986, p. 290–300.

building on the foundations of enlightenment laid centuries earlier by Mesrop Mashtots, the creator of the Armenian alphabet, the region experienced a cultural renaissance in the late 9th and early 10th centuries¹³. The Seminary of Syunik', established in the late 8th century, was a distinguished institution fostering the region's Christian identity by serving as a spiritual center for theological education and community life. Tatev Monastery, constructed in the early 9th century with Ashot I's support, became the seat of the bishop of Syunik', emphasizing the rulers' commitment to promoting Christianity. In 895, the establishment of a higher education institution at Tatev Monastery elevated the region's prominence, making it a key cultural center that produced and housed manuscripts and other significant objects¹⁴. It is within this political and cultural setting that the Etchmiadzin Gospel was created.

The Etchmiadzin Gospel

Copied in the Armenian uncial script (երկաթազիր) by scribe Hovhannes, the Etchmiadzin Gospel was commissioned by Bishop Stepanos in 989 at Bgheno Noravank', Syunik'¹⁵. The cover is a five-panel ivory carving, dating to the 6th century, showcasing the Virgin Mary on the front and Jesus Christ on the reverse, each flanked by depictions from their respective lives. The Virgin dominates the composition, seated on a throne with Christ Child on her lap. Her gaze confronts the viewer with an imposing presence, while the gaze of the Child is directed upwards to the side. The surrounding scenes are depicted in smaller scale, establishing the Virgin as the spiritual anchor of the cover. Although originally created at Bgheno Noravank', the manuscript was called the "Gospel of St. Nakhavka of Magharda"¹⁶. According to the colophon, someone named Gurji—who identified himself as Vahram's son—purchased and then donated the Gospel to Magharda Monastery (west of Julfa, in present-day Azerbaijan) in 1173, where it received its ivory cover¹⁷. In 1847, it was transferred to the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, becoming known as the Gospel of Etchmiadzin, and subsequently to the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (Matenadaran), where it is housed now (MS 2374).

¹³ Ibid, p. 97–99.

¹⁴ Ibid, , p. 193–199.

¹⁵ *Vollständige Faksimile-Ausgabe im Originalformat des Codex Etschmiadzin: Codex 2374 der Bibliothek Mashtots Matenadaran in Eriwan*, Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1999, fol. 230r; **Barkhudaryan S.**, *The Place of Writing...*, p. 43.

¹⁶ *General Catalogue of Armenian Manuscripts of the Mashtots* (ed. by G. Ter-Vardanyan), vol. VII, Yerevan: Nairi Publ. House, 2012, MS 2374.

¹⁷ *Vollständige Faksimile-Ausgabe im Originalformat des Codex Etschmiadzin: Codex 2374 der Bibliothek Mashtots Matenadaran in Eriwan*, fol. 8r.

The codex begins with the letter of Eusebius to Carpianus, followed by the canon tables, a representation of Tempietto, and four full-page miniatures: *Christ Enthroned Between Two Saints*, *Portraits of the Evangelists*, *Virgin and Child Enthroned* and *Sacrifice of Abraham*. Joseph Strzygowsky, Austrian art historian, published an article on these miniatures in 1891, stating that they were created by Syrian painters in the 6th century and inserted into the manuscript¹⁸. Later, in 1911, Strzygowsky expressed doubts about his initial argument, proposing instead that the miniatures might be 10th-century Armenian copies of similar Syrian miniatures¹⁹. In 1933 art historian Sirarpie Der Nersessian reattributed the initial miniatures to 10th-century Armenian painting, specifically classifying them as products of the Syunik²⁰ region. Thus, identifying manuscripts produced in Syunik²¹ in the 9th and 10th centuries provide a possible point of comparison, positioning the Etchmiadzin Gospel within the broader artistic network of the area.

The design of the Etchmiadzin Gospel's canon tables, their architectural characteristics and the color palette suggest that it may have been either based on the Gospel of Queen Mlk'e or shared a common source of inspiration. The Gospel of Queen Mlk'e, named after the wife of King Gagik I of Vaspurakan, who oversaw its restoration in the 10th century, was created around 862 AD²¹. It holds the distinction of being the earliest known manuscript from the period of Arab occupation (7th–9th centuries) and is the oldest Armenian manuscript to have survived in its entirety²². While it was previously believed to have been produced in Vaspurakan—a result of its close association with Queen Mlk'e—subsequent scholarship has reassessed its origins, placing its production within the Bagratuni domain of Shirak²³.

The canon tables of both gospels feature architectural elements that resemble classical columns supporting decorative arches, incorporating the use of stylized birds, floral motifs, and geometric patterns (Figs. 1–3). The balanced, symmetrical composition directs attention toward the central arches. The color palette is another point of commonality; both

¹⁸ **Strzygowski J.**, *Das Etschmiadzin-Evangeliar*, Vienna: Druck und Verlag, 1891 (quoted in Der Nersessian S., *The Date of the Initial Miniatures ...*, p. 327).

¹⁹ **Strzygowski J.**, *Ein zweites Etschmiadzin-Evangeliar*, *Huscharizan*. Festschrift aus Anlass des 100 Jährigen Bestandes der Mechitaristen-Kongregation in Wien (1811–1911) und des 25 Jahrganges der philologischen Monatsschrift 'Handes Amsorya' (1887–1911), 1911, p. 344–352 (quoted in Der Nersessian S., *The Date of the Initial Miniatures ...*, p. 327).

²⁰ **Der Nersessian S.**, *The Date of the Initial Miniatures...*, p. 328.

²¹ **Maranci Ch.**, *The Art of Armenia: An Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 81–83.

²² **Maranci Ch.**, *The Art of Armenia...*, p. 81.

²³ **Hakobian Z.**, *Miniatures of the Armenian Gospel of Queen Mlk'e and Georgian Gospel of Adishi: Comparative Studies on Artistic Style and Codicology*, *Bazmavep*, 180, 2022, no. 3–4, p. 265–266.

manuscripts utilize vivid reds, greens, blues, and yellows. The treatment of space is similar as well. Contrasting against the unpainted parchment, the architectural constructs are set on a groundline represented by a thick red line with black edges. Whereas the canon tables in the Gospel of Queen Mlke seem more elaborately designed, the softness of the lines and the quality of the brushstrokes are consistent across both. This indicates similar artistic training, with the painter likely adapting his design to reflect the architectural and natural characteristics of a different environment.

Following the canon tables is the most remarkable folio of the initial miniatures. In *Virgin and Child Enthroned* on folio 7v, the Virgin Mary sits on an ornately patterned throne, holding the Christ Child on her lap (Fig. 4). The Virgin's hands are raised, a gesture evoking the Orans pose, symbolizing prayer and intercession. The symmetrical positioning of her hands and the frontal presentation of both figures create a sense of stillness, emphasizing the sacred aura surrounding the figures. Moreover, the Virgin's gaze meets the viewer, establishing an intimate engagement. Christ, though depicted smaller in scale to emphasize the Virgin's prominence, also faces forward, blessing with his right hand. While emanating divine authority even in his youth, Christ's gaze is directed to the side. This lack of engagement with the viewer underscores the Virgin's more prominent role as a mediator in this depiction. The use of deep purple highlights the figure's holy and royal status, contrasting with the Christ Child's attire. The blue curtain motif, reminiscent of ceremonial veils, enhances the sense of sacred space, as if the viewer is being granted privileged access to this holy scene. The figures are contained within a red, brown, and orange triple border lined with black, which enhances the scene's sense of containment and formal structure.

On the reverse of *Virgin and Child Enthroned*, the *Sacrifice of Abraham* is depicted with similar formal simplicity and compositional clarity (Fig. 5). Abraham is central, dressed in robes and haloed. Around the cut-out of his face, the hair and beard contrast against a blue halo with a yellow rim, similar to the halos of the Virgin and Child on folio 7v. The use of bright colors is limited to the red of the fire at the top of the altar on the right, with plain beige and brown of the aged parchment dominating most of the composition. The rendering of the fabrics is the same in both miniatures. Abraham's pose is dynamic yet restrained, with his right arm raised, preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac, who stands to the right on an altar. Isaac's slight incline and gesture of resignation convey obedience, highlighting his role as a foreshadowing of Christ's sacrifice. A ram stands in the lower left, symbolizing the substitute offering, visually affirming the message of divine intervention. The elements of the scene lack naturalistic

detail, allowing for a focus on theological significance over physical reality. However, it is somewhat unusual to depict Abraham in direct sequence following the Virgin and Child, as these figures typically belong to distinct theological and iconographic traditions within Christianity. The Virgin and Child are central to the New Testament narrative and symbolize the fulfillment of divine prophecy, while Abraham is a foundational figure of the Old Testament, representing faith and the covenant with God²⁴. This pairing reflects the specific theological choices made by the painter in deciding to depict these scenes with this stylistic emphasis.

The miniature prioritizes linear clarity, a bold color palette, and formal symmetry in the composition. Simplified forms and minimal shading characterize the figures, as flat areas of color define their shapes. Sirarpie Der Nersessian points out these “flat attitudes”²⁵, further stating that the reason for the misattribution of the date might have been the “archaic character of these compositions”²⁶. Even after Der Nersessian’s attribution of the initial miniatures to 10th-century Syunik’, with the Gospel of Queen Mlk’e identified as a possible predecessor or inspiration, the initial miniatures of the Etchmiadzin Gospel remain stylistically isolated.

This can be explained by reviewing the broader history of Syunik’. The region gained independence after the fall of the Kingdom of Ani in 1045. However, in the mid-11th century, the Seljuk invasions began, following a broader conquest in Armenia. Initial raids targeted key strongholds, gradually expanding control. Kapan, the capital of Syunik’, was destroyed in 1103. The invasion of Baghaberd in 1170 marked the end of the Kingdom of Syunik’. Thousands of manuscripts and other precious objects brought there for safekeeping from Tatev and other nearby monasteries were destroyed²⁷.

This further prompts an examination of visual parallels at the church of Bgheno Noravank’, which might offer a clearer understanding of the manuscript’s artistic context and origin. Although the manuscript itself is a portable, intimate object, intended for close interaction, Bgheno Noravank’ represents a monumental, public expression of similar cultural and religious aesthetics. Exploring this relationship between manuscript and monument offers a layered perspective; the Gospel’s images resonate with the carved motifs, structural symbolism, and spatial configurations at Bgheno Noravank’. Together, these forms of art—one private, the other communal—can help reconstruct the manuscript’s broader visual and

²⁴ **Stone N.**, *Studies in Armenian Art: Collected Papers* (ed. Michael E. Stone and Asya Berezhnyak), Leiden: Brill, 2019, p. 131–132.

²⁵ **Der Nersessian S.**, *The Date of the Initial Miniatures ...*, p. 354.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 351.

²⁷ **Stepanos Orbelian**, *History of Syunik’...*, p. 279–281.

ideological frameworks, potentially situating it more firmly within the tradition of Syunik’s monastic art.

Bgheno Noravank’

According to its colophon, the Etchmiadzin Gospel was written at *Noro Vans*, which was founded as a martyrion in the name of the protomartyr Stepanos (“...զանուանեալ Նորո վանս՝ հիմնարկեալ ի սմա վկայարան նոյնանուն իոր սրբոյ նախապկային Ստեփանոսի”)²⁸. The handler of the manuscript was also named Stepanos, indicated to be the uncle of the founder. The handler Stepanos is referred to in a courtly manner—“Princely (Հայկազնեալ)”—while the founder Stepanos is noted to have had “abandoned his inherited wealth (Թողեալ զհայրենական շքեղաշքութիւնն)”²⁹. This indicates the royal status of both figures, or their affiliation with the royal family, pointing to the possibility of a royal commission or patronage.

To determine which Noravank’ was referenced in the Gospel’s colophon, Sedrak Barkhudaryan undertook a comparative investigation. In “The Place of Writing of the Etchmiadzin Gospel,” Barkhudaryan discusses four Noravank’ monasteries, built in different places and at different times³⁰. What complicates the issue is that, until the last seventy years, the location of only one of these four was known. In the 1920s, Axel Bakunts, a prominent Armenian prose writer, rediscovered the church while he was exploring the area as an agronomist³¹. Bakunts informed Barkhudaryan about his discovery, which led the latter to a detailed re-examination of Stepanos Orbelyan’s *History of Syunik*³². Orbelyan mentions a fortress of Bghen in his chronicles on the Seljuk invasions³³, while also detailing the construction of a Noravank’ in Bghen in the 10th century³⁴. The names of the founders and patrons of this Noravank’ corresponded with the ones mentioned in the colophon, thus revealing the correct “Noro Vans” to be Bgheno Noravank’. Barkhudaryan published his study in 1958, which, only several years later, led to a correction of the attribution mistake.

²⁸ Vollständige Faksimile-Ausgabe im Originalformat des Codex Etschmiadzin: Codex 2374 der Bibliothek Mashtots Matenadaran in Eriwan, fol. 230r.

²⁹ Ibid. .

³⁰ **Barkhudaryan S.**, The Place of Writing..., p. 44.

³¹ Ibid, p. 46.

³² Ibid, p. 43–45.

³³ **Stepanos Orbelyan**, *History of Syunik’*..., p. 279.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 221.

All that remains of Bgheno Noravank' today is a small church situated 3 kilometers east of the present-day village of Bardzraavan, bordered by forested ravines (Fig. 7). The church's secluded location and the natural overgrowth of the surroundings emphasize its isolation, requiring a significant effort to reach. What is particularly intriguing about this modest-sized church is its unusually small entrance. Several churches in the Syunik' Region that feature small entryways are often associated with royal patronage, commissioned either by a princely family or by a *vardapet* (*archimandrite*)—a highly educated priest of royal lineage or closely tied to the court. Such connections have led to the interpretation that these churches were intended exclusively for royal use³⁵. Applying a similar hypothesis to the Bgheno church suggests that it, too, might have been built for the royal family's private liturgical needs. The small entrance further supports this theory, implying that if the general population participated in worship, their involvement was likely limited to remaining outside the church during services.

Structurally, the Bgheno church follows a basilica plan with a vaulted ceiling, characteristic of Byzantine architecture. This underscores the impact of Byzantine architectural traditions, even in such a secluded and mountainous region, where the shared architectural language was adapted to meet specific local needs. The dark basalt stone of the church displays deep blue tones in certain areas, while in other lighting conditions—particularly when shaded—it takes on a rich black hue that starkly contrasts with the thick greenery surrounding the building.

The physical design and structure of the arches and columns of the Bgheno church bear a striking resemblance to the architectural motifs depicted in the canon tables of the Etchmiadzin Gospel (Fig. 8). The wide, round bases of both the physical and illustrated structures create a solid, grounded appearance, guiding the viewer's eye upward along the patterned columns. Furthermore, the details of the pilasters share significant similarities in form and decoration; the geometric patterns on both show knot-like motifs that form a rhythmic repetition. This similarity suggests that the church may have served as a direct source of inspiration for the painter, implying a practical, lived relationship between architectural ornamentation and miniature painting. It is possible that the painter replicated what he saw, adapting the stone carvings onto the parchment, and thereby bridging the sacred manuscript with the sacred space it occupied.

³⁵ Mnatsakanyan S., *Syunik' School of Armenian Architecture* [Հայկական Ճարտարապետության Սյունիքի դպրոցը], Yerevan: Academy of Sciences of the Armenian USSR, 1960, p. 142–152.

The Etchmiadzin Gospel at Bgheno–Noravank⁴

Further observations reveal a compelling stylistic and thematic correlation between the miniatures of the Etchmiadzin Gospel and the stone carvings of the Bgheno church, indicating a significant shared artistic heritage. Eight original stone reliefs have been preserved at the church; six of these depict scenes from the life of Christ, pointing to the main theme of the image cycle³⁶. Today only two of the eight remain in their original locations: the scene of the *Annunciation* on the south inner wall, and the *Ascension of Christ* on the northern one³⁷. The other six—*Christ Enthroned and a Saint*, *Christ Enthroned Between Two Apostles*, *Myrrh Bearing Women*, and separate depictions of an unidentified saint and an angel among them—are scattered around the church. Some have been inserted into the inner walls above eye level, while others lean against the walls by the church entrance.

The manuscript miniature *Virgin and Child Enthroned* (fol. 7v) and the stone carving of *Christ Enthroned and a Saint* both adopt a frontal composition (Fig. 9). In the relief, Christ is seated directly facing the viewer, with his right hand raised in blessing and his left holding a book. The figures in both are highly stylized, with a focus on clear outlines and simplified forms. Similar treatment of texture is found in the rendering of robes, where vertical and horizontal patterns give the garments a woven appearance. The hair is depicted in the same manner, framing the heads of the Child Christ and Christ Enthroned, giving the appearance of a double halo that draws attention to their large eyes and emphasized eyebrows. The raised hands in both images evoke the traditional iconographic gesture of blessing. Additionally, both the miniature and the stone relief utilize a restricted set of visual elements, creating a sense of enclosure that enhances their sacred aura. The physical boundaries of the stone position the figures within a framed setting. This shared approach of framing within a defined space conveys a similar intention in both works: to create a focused, meditative image of divine figures set within the holy realm. Beyond just visual characteristics, similar themes and narratives are present in the gospel and in the church.

A similar scene of Christ seated on a throne flanked by two saints is depicted on folio 6r of the Gospel, titled *Christ Enthroned Between the Apostles Peter and Paul*, and on a stone carving found on the southwestern wall at the church (Figs. 6–10). This narrative parallel suggests that the painter might have intentionally replicated the iconography from the

³⁶ Mnatsakanyan S., *Syunik' School ...*, p. 225.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 225–226.

church's physical space into the book. Such a dynamic indicates that the manuscript was not merely an independent object, but rather an extension of the sacred space it referenced.

In addition to the comparison with the miniatures, the physical characteristics of the stone blocks offer valuable insights into the complexities of the church's landscape. Most of the carvings on the church premises—whether embedded in the walls or found on stone blocks scattered around the building—contrast with the overall structure of the church. The carved stone appears inserted into the tightly fitted cohesive structure, resting loosely within the wall with visible gaps and rough edges around it, implying that these stones were possibly transferred from a different site or relocated from elsewhere within the church, and subsequently integrated into their current positions.

The architectural characteristics of these carvings raise additional questions regarding this changing landscape and how it might have reflected the dynamics of the local community. The secondary placement of the reliefs could be interpreted as a deliberate effort to preserve them physically: positioning them above eye level makes them difficult to access, while also ensuring the preservation of their sacredness by embedding them within the holy space. This movement of sacred stone echoes the portability of the manuscript, each embodying holiness that can be repositioned to meet the devotional needs of the community. Just as the manuscript, an object meant to be read, touched, and possibly carried around within the church, the stone slabs suggest a similar fluidity in their purpose, adapting to the evolving space of the church. In this context, the church itself becomes a dynamic environment that accommodates and even sanctifies the movement of these objects. The physical space of the monument and the manuscript enter a direct dialogue, emphasizing a multilayered spirituality, where each object—whether carved in stone or inscribed on parchment—maintains its sanctity while adapting to the shifting contours of the sacred space, linking the monument, the manuscript and the community in a continuous narrative.

Furthermore, the repetitive imagery of the stones scattered around the church strongly suggests the presence of an active local workshop. The recurrence of similar scenes implies that the sculptors were practicing and refining their carving techniques by working on the same motifs. This highlights the community's active contribution to shaping the visual culture of the area, which links it to the renowned artistic and intellectual school of the Tatev Monastery, which not only stands as an earlier precedent but also serves as a major connecting point within the artistic network of the region.

In addition to sharing a similar floorplan with Tatev, Bgheno-Noravank' also reflects comparable architectural features such as building techniques, materials and types of decoration. Orbelyan's account of Tatev Monastery's construction reveals critical details about the adornments of both the exterior and interior of one of the churches that have not been preserved in the surviving structure³⁸. The church of Sts. Peter and Paul (whose relics were supposedly buried under it) was constructed by Bishop Hovhannes, who "asked the painters to decorate the walls and the ceiling with different colors"³⁹. Identified by Orbelyan, the frescoes included depictions of Christ enthroned, the apostles, and the Virgin Mary⁴⁰. In her extensive analysis, art historian and conservator Lidia Durnovo discusses the technique which was used to paint the murals: mineral pigments were applied on thin double-layered plaster, which was laid directly on top of the stone⁴¹. This method, along with the quality of the materials, made the frescoes too fragile; the surviving fragments were destroyed during two earthquakes in 1138 and 1931⁴². This suggests a broader regional trend in Syunik' which was not interrupted by the aftermath of the Seljuk destructions and may indicate that the churches at Bgheno Noravank' may also have been painted and decorated with murals.

In *Syunik' School of Armenian Architecture*, prominent Armenian architect Stepan Mnatsakanyan examines the remaining church at Bgheno, analyzing the residual shapes and rock pieces that could have been part of an external relief sculpture program⁴³. Mnatsakanyan identifies two different cycles of imagery from the Life of Christ, based on the two *Christ Enthroned* carvings, while also relating them to the same cycle found in the Tatev frescoes⁴⁴. He also comments on the quality of the stone surface within the church, noting the traces of plaster found throughout⁴⁵. Following the premise that the stone carvings were integrated into the visual sequence at Bgheno Noravank', contributing to the narrative of the church's imagery, it is possible to assume that these stones were also painted, strengthening their connection to the Etchmiadzin Gospel.

³⁸ **Durnovo L.**, *Brief History of Ancient Armenian Painting* [Краткая История Древнеармянской Живописи], Yerevan: Armenian National Publishing, 1957; **Manukyan S.**, Tatev's Frescoes, [Фрески Татева] *Genesis Forest: Collected articles in memory of Felix Ter-Martirosov* (eds. Zaruhi Hakobyan, Nazenie Gharibian, Arpine Asryan), Yerevan: YSU Press, 2015, p. 296–317.

³⁹ **Stepanos Orbelyan**, *History of Syunik'...*, p. 227.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 227.

⁴¹ **Durnovo L.**, *Brief History ...*, p. 13.

⁴² **Manukyan S.**, Tatev's Frescoes..., p. 297.

⁴³ **Mnatsakanyan S.**, *Syunik' School ...*, p. 225.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 226.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 226.

In this context, the space of the church echoes the Gospel not only in form and context but also through their shared medium of paint, bridging the two in both pictorial and material terms. The stones mimic the visual language of the manuscript pages, where the vibrant surfaces of each become extensions of the other. The tactile process of painting adds a multilayered aspect to the way the stone and the parchment were interacted with, blending the spiritual significance of the works with the physicality of the artist's touch. The artists likely used a similar range of pigments, applying them in the same manner, causing the texture of both surfaces to have a closer resemblance. This shared palette aligns the image on the parchment with that on the stone not only in terms of linear characteristics but also in texture and composition. This unified aesthetic reinforces the connection between the manuscript and the monument, linking them both spiritually and physically.

Conclusion

The parallels between the initial miniatures of the Etchmiadzin Gospel and the stylistic motifs found in the stone carvings at the church of Bgheno Noravank' reveal a profound relationship between the manuscript and the monument that surpasses mere visual similarity. The extensive analysis of Stepanos Orbelyan's account in the *History of Syunik'* situates the Etchmiadzin Gospel and Bgheno Noravank' within their historical and political contexts, providing the necessary framework for reassessing the manuscript's relationship to its architectural setting. In this context, their formal and iconographical features suggest a shared visual environment that has not been previously considered. Additionally, as a result of the Seljuk invasions, the stylistic isolation of the initial miniatures of the Etchmiadzin Gospel highlights the manuscript as a rare surviving example of this visual tradition, making its connection to Bgheno-Noravank' particularly important. This connection enables the study of the manuscript not as an isolated artifact, but rather as a monument itself, engaged in a dynamic dialogue with the sacred space of the church, then and now. The analysis of shared artistic and symbolic languages underscores the possibility that Bgheno-Noravank' functioned as an art production center, enriching the cultural landscape of medieval Syunik', repositioning the region from the periphery to a vital center of cultural and spiritual exchange in the Middle Ages.

ՁԵՌԱԳԻՐ ԵՎ ՀՈՒՇԱՐՁԱՆ. ԲՂԵՆՈ ՆՈՐԱՎԱՆՔԻ ԷԶՄԻԱԾՆԻ ԱՎԵՏԱՐԱՆԸ

ԱՆԱՀԻՏ ԳԱՍԴԱՐՅԱՆ

*արվեստի պատմության մագիստրոս
Թաֆթս համալսարան*

Անփոփագիր

Այս ուսումնասիրությունը անդրադառնում է Էջմիածնի Աավետարանին (Մատենադարան, (Հմր. 2374)՝ Բղենո Նորավանքի հետ առկա վիճուալ և նյութական փոխհարաբերությունների առնչության լույսի ներքո: Եթե նախորդ ուսումնասիրություններում հիմնական անդրադարձը եղել է ձեռագրի պատմությանը և նրա առանձին մասերի վերագրման խնդիրներին, ապա այժմ փորձ է արվում Ավետարանը դիտարկել Բղենո Նորավանքի ճարտարապետական և գեղարվեստական միջավայրի համալստումում: Հիմք ընդունելով Սեդրակ Բարխուդարյանի կողմից գրչության վայրի վերագրության հստակեցումը ու նաև Սիրարփի Տեր-Ներսեսյանի ձեռագրի մանրանկարների վերագրումը 10-րդ դ. Սյունիքի գեղանկարչական դպրոցին, սույն ուսումնասիրությունը քննության է առնում Ավետարանի մանրանկարների և եկեղեցու արտաքին հարդարանքում պահպանված քանդակների միջև կապը: Մանրանկարների և քանդակների միջև առկա նմանությունները խոսում են այն մասին, որ Էջմիածնի ավետարանը ստեղծվել է համալիրի ճարտարապետական միջավայրի հետ երկխոսության պայմաններում՝ արտացոլելով նաև առանձին ճարտարապետական հորինվածքների պատկերները մանրանկարներում: Ընդունելով Էջմիածնի ավետարանը որպես ինքնուրույն հուշարձան, միևնույն ժամանակ առաջ է քաշվում այն մոտեցումը, որ ձեռագիր մատյանը հանդես է եկել ինչպես պաշտամունքային առարկա, այնպես էլ արտացոլել է Բղենո Նորավանքի հոգևոր մթնոլորտը՝ լավագույնս բնութագրելով միջնադարյան Սյունիքի գեղարվեստական և մշակութային միջավայրը:

Բանալի բառեր. ձեռագիր/մատյան, եկեղեցի, ավետարան, բյուզանդական ճարտարապետություն, միջնադարյան Հայաստան, միջնադարյան պատկերագրություն, Էջմիածնի ավետարան, Բղենո Նորավանք, Սյունիք

РУКОПИСЬ И ПАМЯТНИК: ЭЧМИАДЗИНСКОЕ ЕВАНГЕЛИЕ ИЗ БХЕНО НОРАВАНКА

АНАИТ ГАСПАРЯН

Магистр истории искусств

Университет Тафтса

Аннотация

Настоящее исследование переосмысливает Эчмиадзинское Евангелие (Матенадаран, рук. 2374) через его визуальные, пространственные и материальные взаимосвязи с монастырем Бхено Нораванк. Если в предыдущих работах исследовали запутанную историю рукописи и проводили атрибуцию ее отдельных частей, то данная статья рассматривает Евангелие в архитектурно-художественном контексте Бхено Нораванка. Опираясь на идентификацию Седрака Бархударяна, определившего Бхено Нораванк как место создания рукописи, а также на атрибуцию Сирарпи Тер-Нерсисян, относящую основную группу миниатюр рукописи к Сюнику X века, статья анализирует формальные и иконографические параллели между миниатюрами Евангелия и сохранившимися рельефами церкви. Эти очевидные сходства позволяют предположить, что рукопись была задумана в диалоге с монументальным пространством, в котором она создавалась, запечатлевая архитектурные формы в живописных изображениях. Рассматривая рукопись как самостоятельную единицу, данное исследование предполагает, что Эчмиадзинское Евангелие функционировало не только как переносной объект почитания, но и как продолжение сакральной среды Бхено Нораванка, отражая визуальную, культурную и художественную среду средневекового Сюника.

Ключевые слова. Рукопись/манускрипт, церковь, Евангелие, византийская архитектура, средневековая Армения, средневековая иконография, Эчмиадзинское Евангелие, Бхено Нораванк, Сюник

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Figure Captions

1. Letter of Eusebius to Carpianus, fol. 1v, Etchmiadzin Gospel, MS 2374, 989, Bgheno Noravank', Syunik', Mesrop Mashtots' Institute-Museum of Ancient Manuscripts, Yerevan. Photo by Anahit Gasparyan, taken from the Etchmiadzin Gospel Facsimile, Tisch Library Special Collections, Tufts University
2. Canons 6–10, fol. 4v, Etchmiadzin Gospel, MS 2374, ca. 989, Bgheno-Noravank', Syunik' Mesrop Mashtots' Institute-Museum of Ancient Manuscripts, Yerevan. Photo by Anahit Gasparyan, taken from the Etchmiadzin Gospel Facsimile, Tisch Library Special Collections, Tufts University
3. Canon of Eusebius, fol. 3v, Queen Mlke Gospel, MS 1144, ca. 862, Vašpurakan, Armenia, San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Credit:
4. Virgin and Child Enthroned, fol. 7v, Etchmiadzin Gospel, MS 2374, ca. 989, Bgheno-Noravank', Syunik', Mesrop Mashtots' Institute-Museum of Ancient Manuscripts, Yerevan. Photo by Anahit Gasparyan, taken from the Etchmiadzin Gospel Facsimile, Tisch Library Special Collections, Tufts University
5. Sacrifice of Abraham, fol. 8r, Etchmiadzin Gospel, MS 2374, ca. 989, Bgheno-Noravank', Syunik', Mesrop Mashtots' Institute-Museum of Ancient Manuscripts, Yerevan. Photo by Anahit Gasparyan, taken from the Etchmiadzin Gospel Facsimile, Tisch Library Special Collections, Tufts University
6. Christ Enthroned Between the Apostles Paul and Peter, fol. 6r., Etchmiadzin Gospel, MS 2374, ca. 989, Bgheno-Noravank', Syunik', Mesrop Mashtots'

Institute-Museum of Ancient Manuscripts, Yerevan. Photo by Anahit Gasparian, taken from the Etchmiadzin Gospel Facsimile, Tisch Library Special Collections, Tufts University

7. Bgheno-Noravank', Syunik'. Photo: Anahit Gasparian, August 2024
8. Frontal View, Bgheno-Noravank', Syunik'. Photo: Anahit Gasparian, August 2024
9. Christ Enthroned and a Saint, Bgheno-Noravank', Syunik'. Photo: Anahit Gasparian, August 2024
10. Figures of Christ and Two Saints, Bgheno-Noravank', Syunik'. Photo: Anahit Gasparian, August 2024

Ընդունվել է՝ 25.02.2026

Գրախոսվել է՝ 01.04.2026

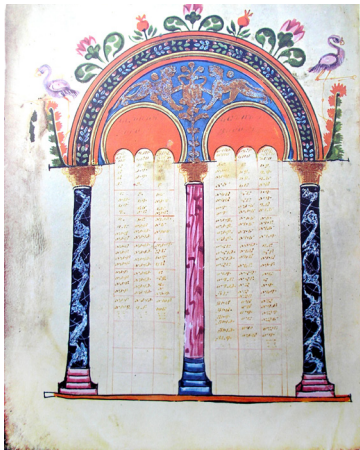
Հանձնվել է տպ.՝ 26.06.2026



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