

## The Combination of Christian and Islamic Architecture in New Julfa

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### ABSTRACT

New Julfa is an area located in south of Zayanderud (life giving) River in Isfahan City; Central Iran. At first, it seems like any other areas in Iranian cities but a meticulous eye can find numerous differences. The domes and campaniles of thirteen Armenian Apostolic churches with their eclectic and unique combinations are visible for walkers and they form the visual difference. One can hear people speaking in a different language (Armenian) and the sound of the bells and playing musical instruments from music schools are audible everywhere and this is a different urban sound in cities of Islamic Iran. Even the smell is different. The smell of coffee and *gata* (Armenian sweet bread) is present in the streets. There are combinations of Islamic and Christian culture in every corner of this area but the most valuable one is hidden in the architecture of the churches. In this essay, I will try to study these delicate and exclusive combinations which are rooted both in the cultural and regional (Old Julfa) differences.

**Keywords:** Campanile, Dome, Squinch, Pendentive, Safavid architecture, Pointed arch, Clustered piers

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### How to Cite This Article:

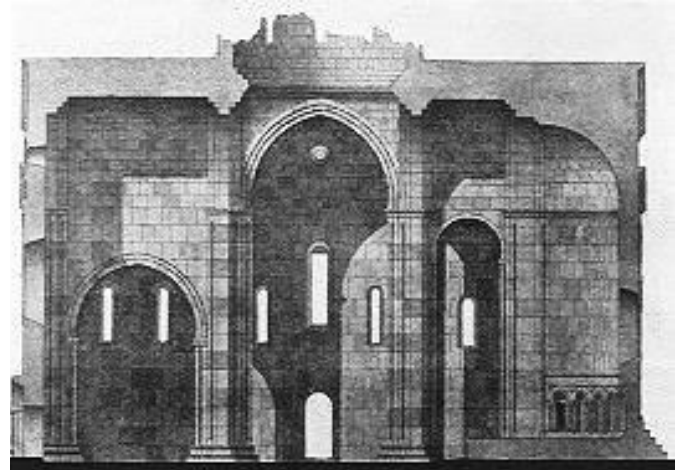
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### Introduction

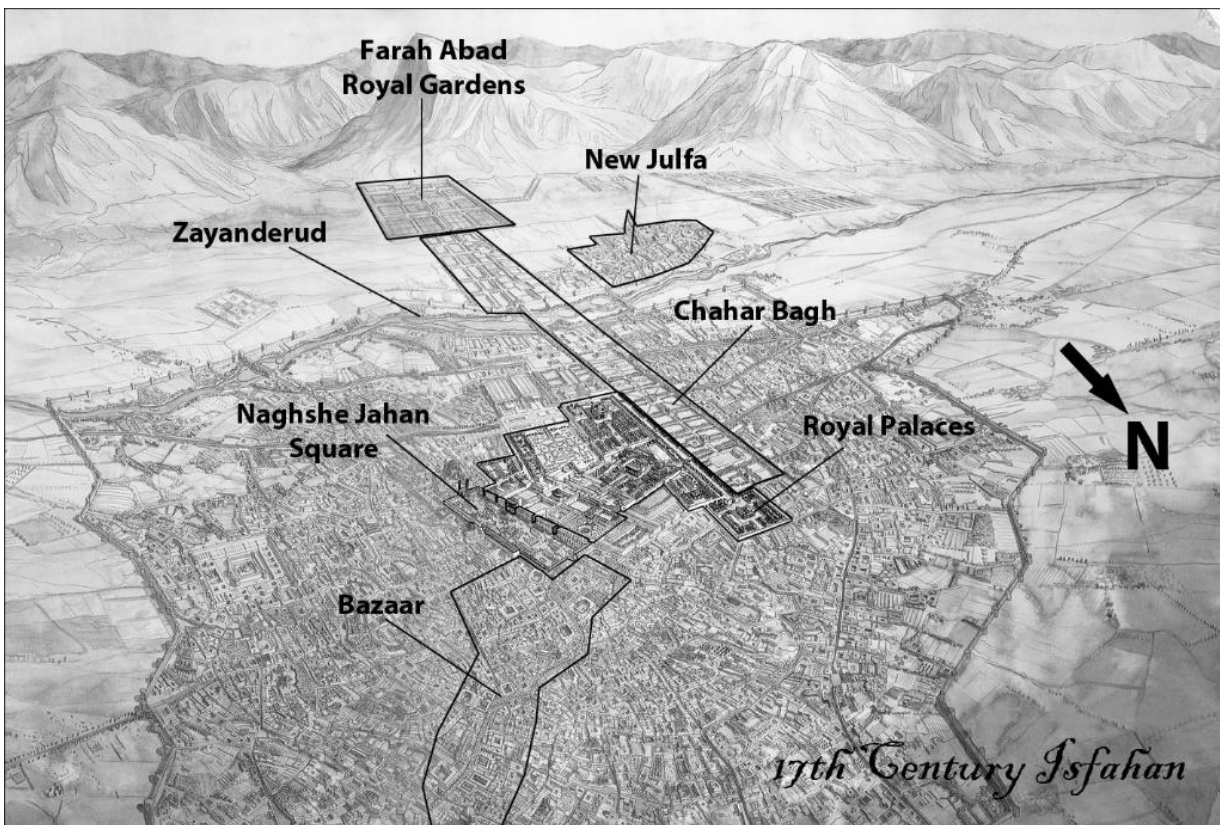
The architecture of the Armenian medieval churches in Armenia and Turkey was a heated controversy at the beginning of the twentieth century while Josef Strzygowski published *Orient oder Rom: Beiträge zur Geschichte der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst*(1901) (*The Orient or Rome: contributions to the history of late antique and early Christian art*) and *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa* (1918) (*The architecture of the Armenians and Europe*) and in those works he claimed that oriental architecture, specially Armenian early medieval churches are the origin of the western architecture style. The ruins of Ani Cathedral (completed in 1001 AD) in the border of Armenia and Turkey is an example of the early usage of pointed arches when the original style had not yet made its appearance in Europe (Fig. 1).

In tracing the origins of the architectural forms, one cannot assert that a given type has originated in a given region simply because there happens to be an earlier example in that place. In this case, further investigations must be carried on in Armenia, as well as in the

neighboring countries, before full light can be thrown on this intricate problem. I wrote these passages to show that these people (Armenians) had a rich culture and history before the occupation of their country by Ottomans and their migration to Iran in order to seek asylum and keep their culture alive.



**Fig. 1.** A sectional drawing of Ani Cathedral by Toros Toramanian

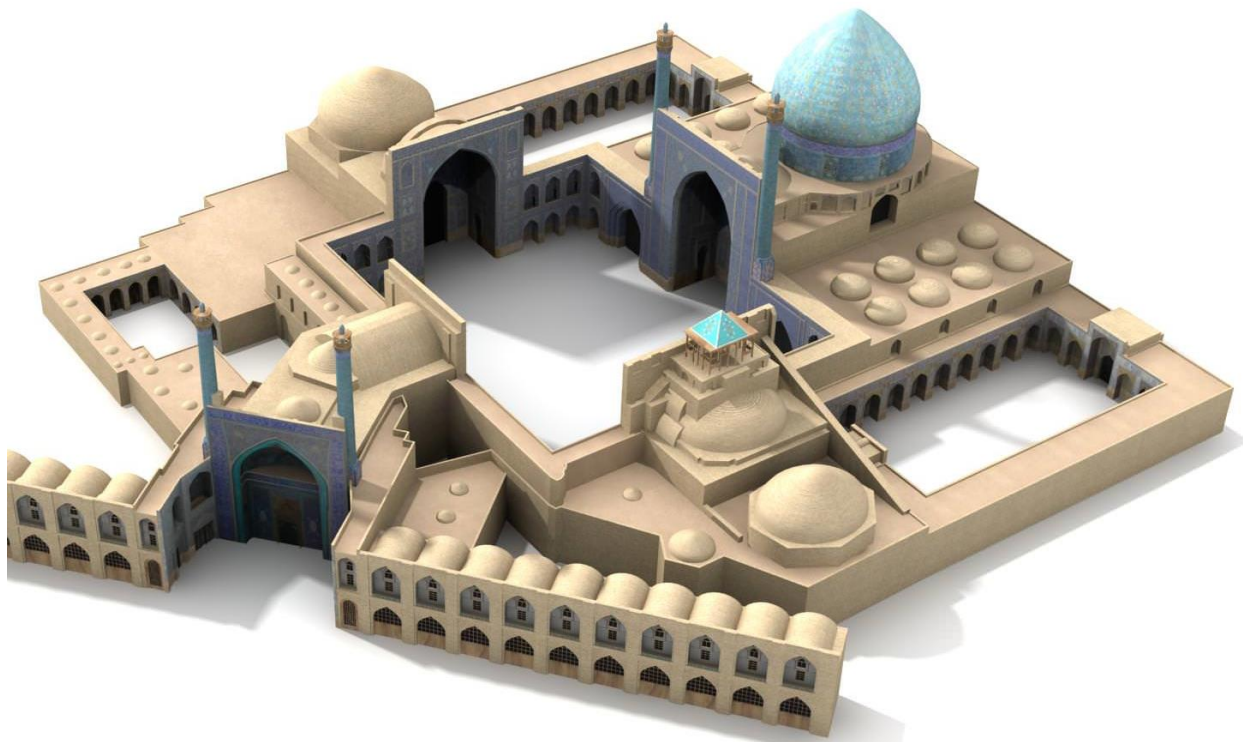


**Fig. 2.** 17th century Isfahan during Shah Abbas the Great. Armenian area is located in the south of Zayanderud.

On the other hand, the Safavid era in Iran is considered the Iranian renaissance in art and architecture. Shah Abbas I (1571-1629), one of the greatest kings of Safavid empire, changed the capital to Isfahan, a city in a more strategic region than previous capitals. The new capital was thus set up beside the ancient city, organized around a meydan (Naghsh-e Jahan square), a large place 512 m long by 159 m wide. On one side stands the Shah's mosque, on the other the Shah's oratory, called the mosque of Sheikh Lutfallah, while the pavilion Ali Qapu opens onto a large pleasure

walkway (Chahar Bagh) and the grand bazaar leads to the old congregational mosque. Two bridges cross Zayandeh River, leading to the Armenian section of New-Julfa (Fig. 2).

The Isfahan 's Jami Mosque, equal to the Christian cathedrals (Duomo) was already present with its splendid four-Iwan architecture which became Iran's architectural style in the Safavid era. The new Shah mosque was also built in the same style in Naghsh-e Jahan Square in 1629 (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Shah or Imam Mosque(Author).

The city of Isfahan was a big construction site at the beginning of 17th century when Armenians arrived and settled in the southern part of Zayanderud and began to build churches, schools, houses (more than 250 merchants' mansions), and other urban facilities. Unfortunately, there is not much left from the architecture of those days except for the churches. In this essay, first I will describe a brief history of Armenian community in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and then I will try to confront the original Armenian architecture with the churches built in New Julfa and highlight the unique and innovative forms which were the fruits of this fusion.

#### **A Brief Historical Outline**

The history of the Armenian community is closely linked with Iranian affairs. The subdivision of Armenian

regions between the Ottoman and Iranian Empires and the special role of the Armenians during the reign of Shah Abbas may be seen as the cardinal points in the intertwining of their histories. The Battle of Chaldiran had already marked the fates of the population in Armenian territories and the endeavor to seek refuge from the repressive yoke of the Turks generated a massive exodus toward Iran.

Shah Abbas fully supported the idea of concentrating the Armenians in the Iranian territory, ordering the inhabitants of the entire towns on the border between the Ottoman and Iranian empires to be deported. The reasons for this were mainly strategic, the objective being to create a belt of desolation between the empires so as to make it difficult to get supplies to the Ottoman army. Furthermore, it was rather advantageous in economic terms to

concentrate in Iranian territory the people with an age-old tradition of craftsmanship - capable, therefore, of passing on the skills and knowledge required to make articles of prestige- and the people with a great deal of experience in the regional and international commerce.

The attention of Shah Abbas was focused on the population of Julfa City of Armenia (Fig. 4). As early as the 16th century, it was a prosperous city and a commercial center with international importance. Situated on the Silk Route, with the surrounding towns and villages, it controlled the flow of goods both from the adjacent regions and from the Far East toward the south and Europe. In 1603, the inhabitants of Julfa and the entire region fell victim to the expansionist ambitions and strategic designs of Shah Abbas. The city and the Armenian regions were laid waste, burned, and sacked; the populations were deported to Iran, especially to Isfahan. The aims of this forced deportation of the whole population whose life had been trade and the production of semi-finished products in silk for centuries were to create a new trade route for the precious material, to make the Persian Gulf the new center of transit, and to deprive the Ottoman Empire of its primacy over trade between East and West. A further aim was to weaken that empire economically by snatching away part of the taxes and levies that poured into its coffers year after year.

The emigres who were settled in Isfahan joined the already strong Armenian population of that Iranian city. Mostly merchants, the Armenian community of Isfahan had already obtained a number of concessions from Shah Abbas as early as 1592. In 1610, to strengthen the link of the community with the royal court, Shah Abbas gave permission to build a church in Isfahan, for the Christian community in general and the Armenian community in particular.

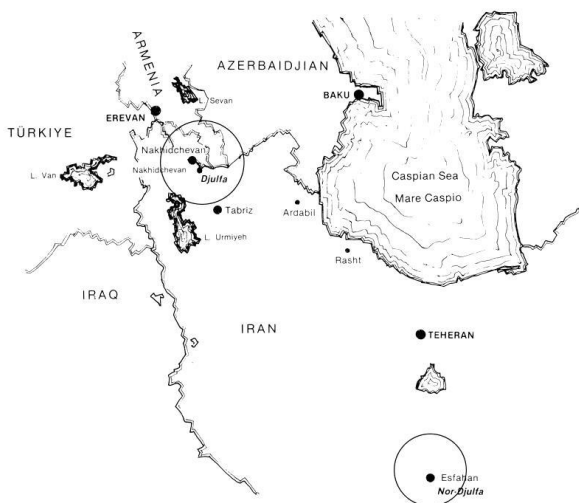


Fig. 4. Reference map of Old and New Julfa.

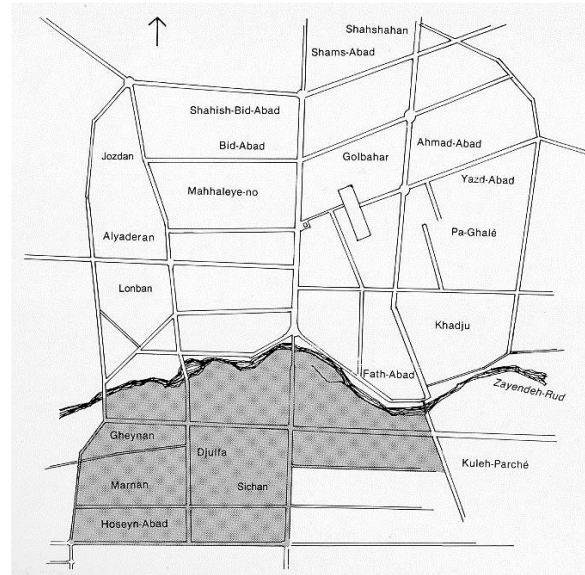


Fig. 5. Reference sketch map of the city of Isfahan and the location of the New Julfa district.

Later, in 1615, with a new edict, Shah Abbas donated to the community a vast stretch of land belonging to the royal court and located south of the River Zayendeh-Rud and the city of Isfahan. On this land, where non-Christians were not allowed to buy immovable goods or to obtain residence permits, the Armenian district of New-Julfa was to stand (Fig. 5).

The autonomy granted to New-Julfa in religious administration soon made it the cultural and spiritual center for the whole community. The cultural vocation of the New-Julfa community soon emerged: as early as 1630 the first high schools appeared in the district, along with the university- constituted by Khacatur Kesaratzi- which turned out polyglot graduates with solid backgrounds in economics ready to work in a community that carried on international trade as one of its main activities.

Shah Abbas lavished large sums of money in the form of interest-free financings and tax facilitations on Armenian companies operating in international trade. Later, he granted the New-Julfa merchants the right to concentrate and monopolize goods imported and exported into and from the empire. In 1617, he stripped the East India Company of its monopoly in the silk trade and granted it to the Armenians of New-Julfa.

Bestowing such favors on the Armenian merchant class was a sure way of securing expansion for Iranian commerce. Christians and sometimes Catholics, the Armenians represented a privileged key for opening and consolidating political, administrative and economic relations with a Europe which prohibited the entry and free circulation of Muslims. Furthermore, creating a

national network of merchants and granting them the monopoly of foreign trade made it possible to erect a protective shield around the fragile Iranian economy and defend it against the repeated endeavors of European colonialists to penetrate it politically.

In compliance with the will of the royal court of Iran, the Armenian merchants of New-Julfa began to shape a veritable commercial diplomacy of their own. Connoisseurs of the political and economic affairs of Oriental and European countries, often well introduced in the most important courts, they put their good offices at the service of Shah Abbas. Their efforts were concentrated on the creation of a sea trade route based on the Persian Gulf and capable of polarizing the Iranian trade network. In addition, they stipulated many international trading contracts and military cooperation plans with anti-Ottoman overtones.

The trading network set up by the Armenians of New-Julfa was so important that the historical period of its maximum expansion was defined as the "reign of the Armenian merchants of NewJulfa".

The death of Shah Abbas and unfavorable developments in international politics marked the beginning of the gradual decline of New-Julfa. Shah Suleyman (1666-1694) and Shah Sultan Hoseyn (1694-1722) disavowed the politics of their predecessor, promoted repressive policies and issued decrees that imposed heavy taxes on the Armenian residents of New-Julfa. In addition, they often sacked the district and attacked the merchants' caravans as these went off toward Europe to gather funds for the coffers of the royal court. The negative economic situation and the weak Iranian army did the rest: the Armenian merchants gradually lost the prestige and importance they previously boasted on international markets, giving way to the capital of colonialist Europe.

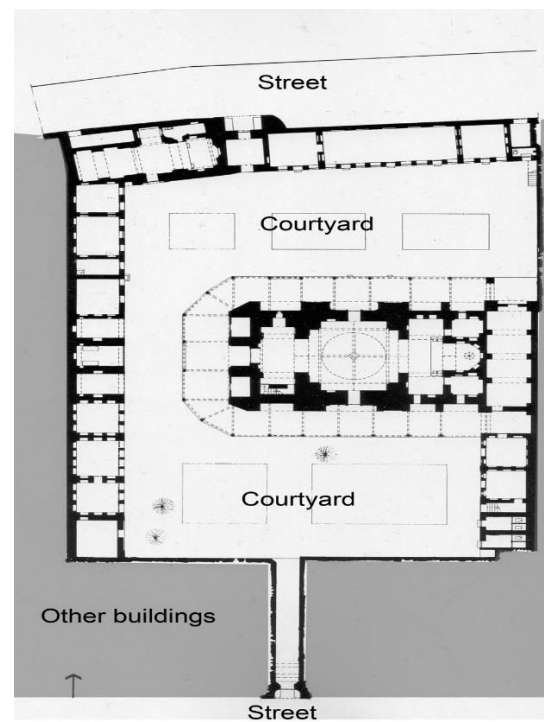
### Comparing Armenian Churches of Motherland with Those of New Julfa

#### Urban Design

One of the most important differences between Churches in Armenia and those of New Julfa lies in urban design rather than architecture itself. In Armenia, like other Christian cities, the church is a part of urban texture and usually is located in a square with direct connection and maintains its functional and volumetric clarity. In New Julfa, the churches are totally enclosed both to protect the building and to offer refuge to the people should the need arise. The complexes, built gradually but in a short period of time, were veritable

strongholds. They all had interior structures to meet the needs of the clergy in times of peace and to be used for public requirements in times of war. Each complex had its own well for fresh water, stores, kitchens, a bread oven and cells for accommodation (Fig. 6).

Knowing that these churches are mostly built during Shah Abbas I Reign, and that he was very tolerable toward Armenians, here raises a question that why Armenians abandon their original urban design and built their churches in courtyards and camouflaged among other buildings. This question needs further study and research.



**Fig. 6.** General plan of the complex of Holy Mother of God (1613). The church is completely surrounded by other buildings and is hardly visible from narrow streets.

Another question is whether they were forced to abandon it or they did it to adapt themselves to Muslims majority which they had to live with.

The architecture of religious monuments in New-Julfa, like Iranian Safavid architecture, revealed very high levels of expression and accomplishment. The influence exerted by the sensitivity and culture of Iranian architects on the process of revising traditional conceptions undertaken by the Armenian architects who had emigrated to Iran led to forms of expression that were outstanding in their eclecticism and syncretism.

Tradition had to come to terms with new requirements and adapt to new materials - bricks and not stones, the primary material of Armenian architecture - new climatic conditions and a non-Christian urban environment that demanded second thoughts about what

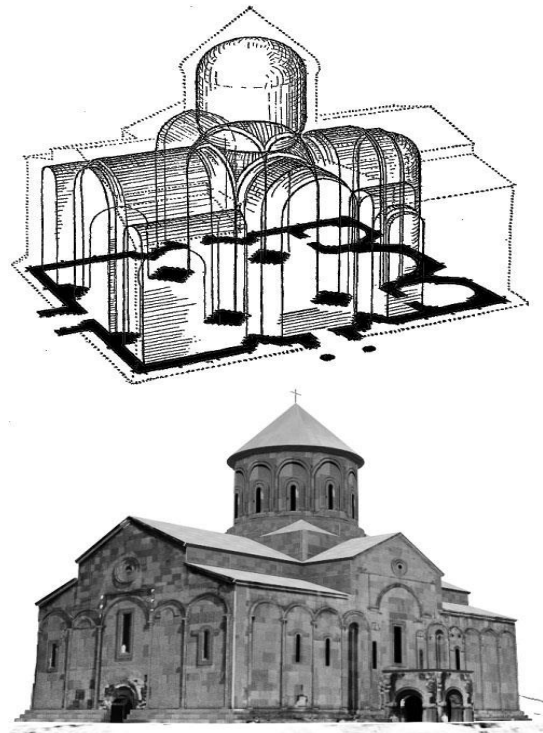
had been the strongholds of the conception of Armenian architecture. The architects of New-Julfa abandoned the urban design of the medieval Armenian square (with the church or churches on one side) and isolated, fortified monasteries. The churches were "hidden away", "camouflaged" into the urban fabric of the district. One common entrance led into the interior of the religious complexes and only later and not in all cases were they given bell-towers or lanterns. Often, there was a long corridor leading from the entrance into the interior, as if to cancel out the importance attributed to the church as a "place". The domes were invisible from the narrow tangles of streets in the district, and only by passing through mini-entrances could one gain access to the heart of the complex, the courtyard that took on the appearance of a back-to-front square, a "courtyard-square" with the church looking out over it. On the one hand one can note the influence of Iranian architecture on the courtyard-square, on the other, considering its function as a meeting-place for worshipers before and after the service, it can safely be said that the courtyard-square confirms an urban design dear to Armenian social and architectural tradition (Fig. 6).

### Architecture

In this section, first I am going to focus on the main characteristics of Armenian Church architecture and then I will compare it with those in New-Julfa.

The churches of Greater Armenia are all built of stone; smooth faced slabs, carefully cut and joined, line the walls on the exterior and the interior, while the inner core is of rubble concrete. These buildings are usually small, but imposing by their solid mass and their position, for they are often erected on top of a hill. The dome rests on a high polygonal or cylindrical drum and it is covered with a pyramidal or conical roof, a characteristic feature of Armenian churches. The roofs are always gabled and the straight lines give no indication of the vaulted covering of the interior.

In fact, the plan is rarely reflected in the exterior. Triangular slits, or recesses, in the walls are often the only indication of the inner divisions of the church, and even these slits are sometimes omitted. The apse and adjoining chambers are frequently buried in the thickness of the walls; square or rectangular exterior may easily mask a circular, quatrefoil or more complex plan.



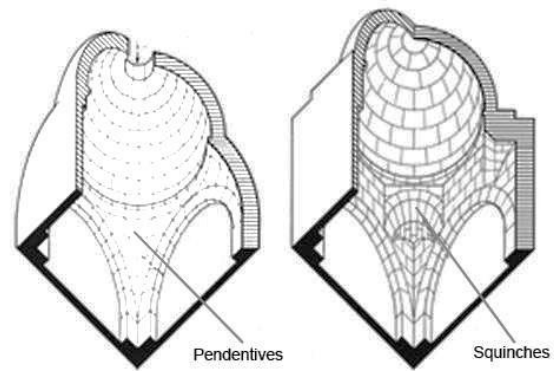
**Fig. 7.** Ani Cathedral (1001 AD), a wireframe drawing and a 3D model.

The uniform surfaces of the facades, broken only by the doors, the triangular slits and the narrow windows, provided ample room for sculptured decoration. Blind arcades, with slender coupled colonnades, cover the walls as well as the drum of the dome; sometimes large crosses, interlaced and foliate motifs, animal and human forms are also carved on the façades (Fig. 7).

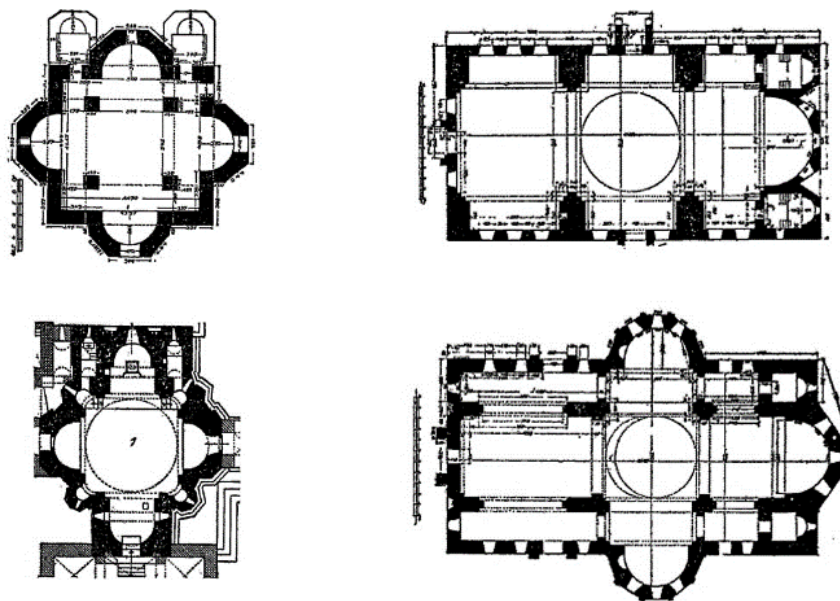
These domed churches, studied with great care by Strzygowski, may be divided into two main groups: the centralized plan and the domed basilica (Fig. 9). In most of the churches the dome, raised over a square bay, rests on squinches, that is on the masonry or the corner arches which transform the square into an octagon. This type of construction is particularly suited to small buildings, where the central space is enclosed by the walls of the church. In larger buildings, where the dome could not be extended to cover the entire inner space, another type of construction is used: this is the dome on pendentives, of which there are a number of examples in Armenia (Figs. 8 and 10). Four free-standing pillars, placed at the angles of an imaginary square, are joined by means of semicircular arches. The space between two adjacent arches is filled by pendentives, that is, inverted spherical triangles; the upturned bases of these triangles, which touch one another, provide the continuous ring of masonry needed as a base for the drum of the dome. The centralized churches, as well as the domed basilicas of Armenia, show that the architects understood the

problems of adequate support and proper buttressing by the abutment of parts of the church rather than by exterior additions (Figs. 9 and 10).

After knowing about the Armenian architecture in Armenia, I can confront it to that of New-Julfa churches and see how the Armenian architects adapt themselves to new materials and philosophy of Persian architecture. In this part I will study some examples separately. Here there is a map of New-Julfa and its thirteen churches (Fig. 11).



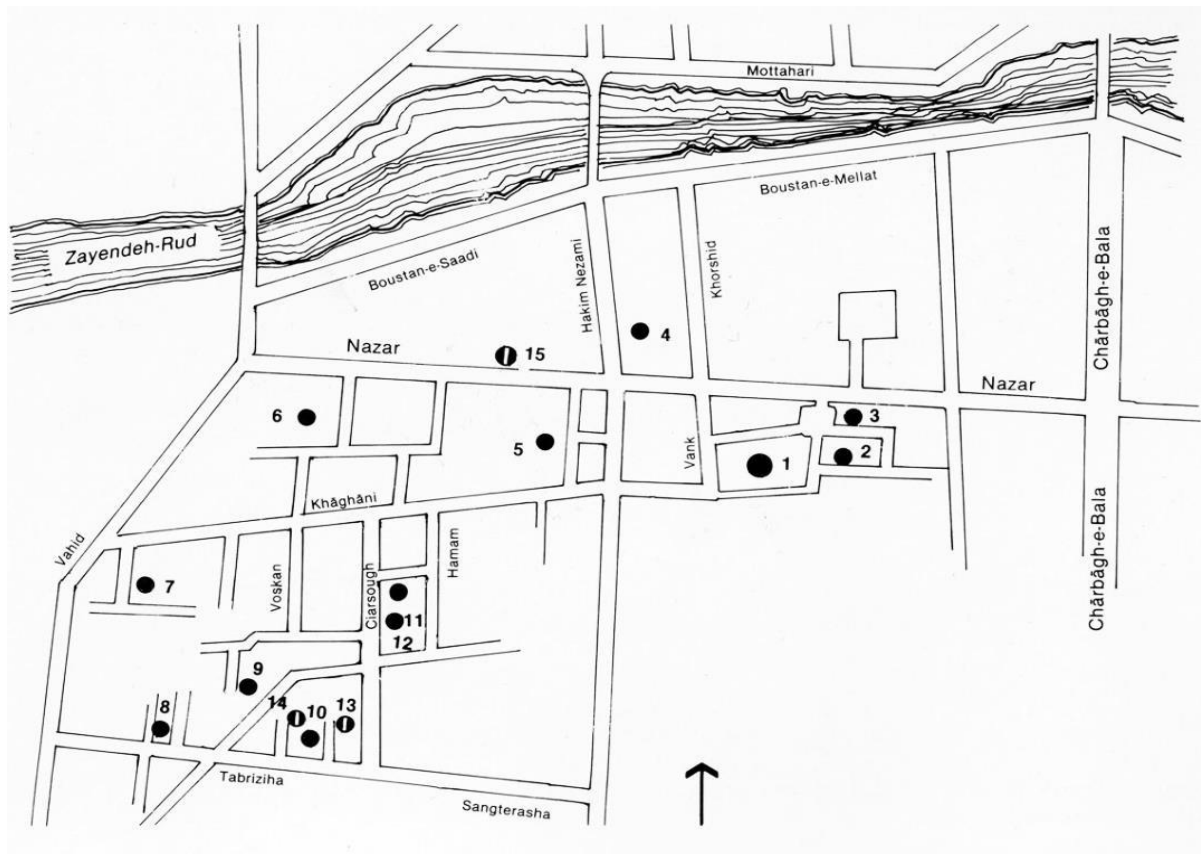
**Fig. 8.** Pendentives and squinches are two systems for resting a circular dome on a square base.



**Fig. 9.** Two main groups of domed churches, the centralized plan and the domed basilica. Top left: Bagaran cathedral, top right: T'alish cathedral, bottom left: Aght'amar, Holy Cross, bottom right: T'alın cathedral.



**Fig. 10.** Interior of Ani Cathedral (1001 AD). The pendentives on which the dome is rested are clearly visible. The clustered piers, the pointed arches and vaults remind one of early Gothic architecture but these forms appear in Armenia about 100 years before Western Europe (Author).



- 1- The Monastery of Surb Amenaprkc (Savior of All) (1664).
- 2- The Complex of Surb Astvatsasin (Holy Mother of God) (1613).
- 3- The Church of Surb Betghehem (Church of Holy Bethlehem) (1628).
- 4- The Church of Surb Gevorg (St. George) (ca. 1611).
- 5- The Church of Surb Grigor Lusavoric (St. Grigor the Illuminator) (1633).
- 6- The Church of Surb Stepanos (St. Stephen) (1614).
- 7- The Church of Surb Sargis (St. Sergius) (1659).
- 8- The Church of Surb Minas (St. Miniatus) (1659).
- 9- The Church of Surb Nikoghayos (St. Nicholas) (ca. 1630).
- 10- The Church of Surb Nerses (St. Nerses) (17<sup>th</sup> century).
- 11- The Church of Surb Hovhannes Mkrtric (St. John the Baptist) (1621).
- 12- The Convent of Surb Katarine (St. Catherine) (1623).
- 13- Protestant Church.
- 14- Catholic Church.
- 15- Adventist Church.

**Fig. 11.** Reference sketch map of the New-Julfa district. Scale 1:14.000 approx.

### The Monastery of Surb Amenaprkc (Savior of All or Vank) (1664)

The church has the classical structure of the domed hall, in spite of its small dimensions. Two imposing half-columns neatly divide the interior space into two separate areas: the west area, roofed by a small dome, is for worshipers, while the east (open exclusively to the clergy) is surmounted by a large dome and its drum. All the arches are pointed Safavid arches and the space between the arches is filled with segmented pendentives which is another characteristic of Safavid architecture. The dome is also Iranian in shape and the only Armenian

architecture elements visible are the small bell tower in front of the dome and the drum itself. Even the openings of the drum are pointed arches. To the east, the church is closed off by a pentagonal apse flanked by two corner chapels. The interior is illuminated by windows that open into the apse and onto the perimeter walls, but most of the light undoubtedly comes from the eight openings in the drum of the dome. The outer walls of the building are filled with large blind pointed arches with eclectic tile decoration (Fig. 12 and 13). The bell tower in front of the church is a later addition (1702) and is Armenian in shape but Iranian in material (brick) (Fig. 13)



**Fig 12.** The Vank cathedral (1664). Right: The North elevation; the Armenian elements are highlighted. Middle: Section, the Safavid elements are highlighted. Left: The Interior Decoration. (Author).



**Fig 13.** Vank Cathedral bell tower (1702), Armenian in form but Iranian in material (brick). Note the Safavid blind pointed arches on the left wall (Author 2008).

### **The Church of Surb Betghehem (Holy Bethlehem) (1628)**

The Holy Bethlehem is the largest church in New-Julfa. It is a domed hall but the main arches which the drum is resting on are not meeting each other and they are creating a unique combination of tall squinches and five segmented pendentives which two of them are bigger and it transform gradually the square hall to a circular base which the drum rests easily on it (Fig. 14). Again like the Vank Cathedral, except the ground plan form, all other elements are dictated from Safavid architecture tradition. The only windows are those on the drum (with pointed arches) and from inside, it seems that the dome is floating on light. This illumination is also

Armenian. The exterior, unlike the disposition of masses in Muslim monuments of the period- which were heavily decorated with tiles or mosaics- is devoid of all embellishments.

### **The Church of Surb Sargis (St. Sergius) (1659)**

the ground plan of this small church is Armenian, a hall with four free standing pillars in the central area surmounted by a dome and the apse flanked by two chambers and hidden in heavy masonry. The main arches which support the dome are pointed and the drum of the dome rests on segmented pendentives and the only light openings are on the drum of the central dome and the lantern of a smaller dome in front of the apse. The

shape of the bell tower is very particular because of the combination of Armenian conical dome with Persian dome (Fig. 15).



**Fig 14.** Bthlehem Church. Right: East elevation, middle: Section, the tall squinches are highlighted. Left: The Interior Space; The combination of tall squinches and segmented pendentives create the circular base for the drum (Hakhnazarian, Mehrabian, Nor-Djulfa).



**Fig 15.** St. Sergius (1659)(Hakhnazarian, Mehrabain, Nor-Djulfa)

### Conclusion

New-Julfa is a rare urban space which is losing its original identity due to large number of migrations. The 17<sup>th</sup> century zeitgeist is still perceptible to someone who is familiar with both Armenian and Persian cultures and can identify them. Fortunately the churches are still standing in good condition and further study and research can be done about how the imposing rules of the time affect the appearance of them both internally and externally. Other urban facilities specially the merchants’ masons are all lost and only some mediocre ones are survived and now house the different branches of Isfahan University.

### Acknowledgements

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### Conflict of Interest

Authors declared no conflict of interest.

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