

Echmiatsin/Zvartnots (Armenia)

No 1011

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Cathedral and Churches of Echmiatsin and the Archaeological Site of Zvartnots
<i>Location</i>	Armavir Marz (Region)
<i>State Party</i>	Republic of Armenia
<i>Date</i>	9 July 1999

Justification by State Party

The Armenian culture is one of the world's oldest. It carries all the layers of human civilisation. The beginning of the new period of the history of Armenia is considered to be 301 CE, when Armenia declared Christianity as its state religion. According to the great 5th century Armenian historian Agatangeghos (Agafangel in Greek), St Gregor Lousavorich (St Gregory the Illuminator), first Patriarch of Armenia, had a vision. Christ came down from Heaven and touched the earth with a golden hammer. In that place a church was built called Echmiatsin, "the place where the Only Begotten descended."

Scholars have variously interpreted the original construction of Echmiatsin Main Cathedral. In its present form it is the result of reconstruction carried out in the 5th–7th centuries and belongs to the central domed cross-hall type. It is, in fact, the prototype of all later constructions of the same type. Since the 15th century Echmiatsin with the Main Cathedral and surrounding other buildings has served as the Mother See of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the residence of the All-Armenian Catholicos. Besides the Main Cathedral, there are the Churches of St Gayaneh, St Hripsimeh, Sourb Astvatsatsin (Mother of Christ), St Shoghakat, and others.

Three separate areas are nominated for inscription:

1. The Mother Cathedral of Echmiatsin and St Gayaneh Church (30.2ha);
2. Saint Hripsimeh Church and St Shoghakat Church (25.3ha);
3. The Archaeological site of Zvartnots with the ruins of the Temple, the Royal Palace, and other constructions (18.8ha).

Criteria iii, iv, and v

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of buildings*.

History and Description

Vagharshapat (now Echmiatsin) was an ancient settlement; research has revealed its layout in the 3rd–4th centuries BCE. It was destroyed and rebuilt many times, as a result of invasions from both east and west. At the end of the 19th century the population was about 10,000. During the Soviet period Echmiatsin became a regional centre and the population grew to 61,000 with a territory of some 2000ha.

The *Cathedral of Holy Echmiadzin* is the most ancient Christian temple in Armenia. It was built in 301–303 by Gregor Lousavorich (Saint Gregory the Illuminator), the founder of the Armenian Apostolic Church, in Vagharshapat (the former name of Echmiatsin), the capital and religious centre of Armenia at that time.

Echmiatsin Cathedral was originally a vaulted basilica. Serious damage was caused to it as a result of political upheavals and it received its present cruciform plan during restoration work by Vahan Mamikonian, the Governor of Armenia in 480. In 618 Catholicos Komitas replaced the wooden cupola with an identical one in stone. Its mass is supported on four massive independent pillars connected by slender arcades with the exterior walls; those on the northern side belonged to the 4th and 5th centuries. This structure survives almost unchanged.

A three-tier belfry was built in front of the western entrance in the 17th century. The six-column rotundas on four-pillar bases, built at the beginning of the 18th century over the northern, eastern, and southern apses, give the cathedral a five-domed outline. The interior murals, created by the Armenian painter Hovnatan in 1720, were restored and further worked on by his grandson in 1782–86. Rich gifts of church plate and valuable pieces of art were stored in three buildings added to the eastern side of the cathedral in 1869; they now house the monastery's museum. Around the courtyard of the monastery are the buildings of the Catholicosate, a school, winter and summer refectories, a hostel, and Trdat's Gate, built in the 17th–19th centuries. On the initiative of Catholicos Vazgen I, scientific restoration work has recently been undertaken, in the course of which excavations have revealed finds from the pagan era, such as a sacrificial altar and an Urartian stele in granite.

The *Church of St Hripsimeh* (618) represents the perfect example of cruciform plan and central cupola. Its dominant feature is the basic harmony of layout and proportions, as well as the simplicity and classical purity of its facades, the outstanding qualities of the Armenian architecture of the High Middle Ages. Apart from the addition of a bell-tower in the 17th century, the monument has undergone no fundamental transformation. The *Church of St Gayaneh* was built in Echmiadzin by the Catholicos Yezn in 630. Its distinctive features are its slender and delicate proportions. A dome and ceilings were rebuilt in the 17th century, when a spacious arched portico was built along the western facade as the burial place for the most senior Armenian clergy.

The *Zvartnots Archaeological Site* is a unique example of Armenian architecture of the early Christian period. The temple was built under Catholicos Nerses III (The Builder) in the mid 7th century. He relinquished the Catholicos throne for a time in 652, but after his return to office in 658 he completed the construction of the Temple with its secular annexes and its ramparts in 662.

Zvartnots is an innovative expression of Armenian religious architecture in the 7th century, and as such it exerted a major influence on the architecture not only of its own time but also on that of later centuries. Circular in plan and three-tiered, its only borrowing from earlier cruciform and central cupola churches was the interior cruciform plan, which was set inside walls that were circular on the inside but polyhedral on the outside. Refinements worked out with great subtlety are to be found in the capitals decorated with basket weave or eagle ornament, in the great variety of the external wall carving, in the fillets surrounding the windows, and even on the smallest surfaces.

The remains of Zvartnots and its related buildings, which had been destroyed by an earthquake in the 10th century, were revealed at the beginning of the 20th century by the architect Thoros Thoramian, who carried out the first reconstruction project.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The monuments included in the present nomination are protected under the provisions of the National Law on Protection of Historical and Cultural Monuments, and in particular by Articles 19, 21, 22, 36 and 45. All interventions that may affect the character or significance of monuments and sites require official authorization.

Management

The owners of the properties that make up this nomination are the Mother See of Echmiatsin, the Municipality of the City, and the State Department for Protection and Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments. The churches and their immediate surroundings belong to the Mother See, the protection and buffer zones mainly belong to the municipality (administered by the Office of the General Architect). The archaeological site of Zvartnots is owned and managed by the State Department on Protection and Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments through its Directorate of the Zvartnots Historical Cultural Reservation–Museum.

Most of the monuments included in the nomination are protected at national level, but some (or parts of them) are protected at regional level. A special body, in each *marz* (region) is responsible for the protection of the latter group of monuments. However, the State Department on Protection and Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments exercises overall supervisory control over these regional bodies.

There is an effective buffer zone around each of the properties which regulates all activities that may have adverse impacts on their settings.

Funding for all work of maintenance, conservation, and restoration comes variously from the central Government, the Municipality of Echmiatsin, the Mother See of Echmiatsin, the Armenian Fund for the Protection of Historic Cultural Monuments, and personal donations.

Echmiatsin is one of the most visited sites in Armenia. In the 1980s about 220,000 tourists and pilgrims visited Echmiatsin, but after the economic crisis the number of visitors has declined to around 40,000. The Government is expecting the expansion of tourism in Armenia with the forthcoming celebration of the 1700th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity. The General City Plan for Echmiatsin, prepared in 1997, has been approved by the central Government; it contains provisions relating specifically to the protection and presentation of the historic heritage and its role in tourism development.

Responsible bodies of the Armenian Government are at the present time working on the Management Plan for Echmiatsin and the Archaeological Site of Zvartnots, and this will be in force early in 2001. The plan will include further restoration work on the monuments and the development of tourism.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The Government of the Soviet Republic of Armenia decided in January 1945 to improve the historical part of Echmiatsin. In May 1948, the Council of Ministers of Armenia granted state-level protection to the city. In the decades that followed protection was extended to many individual monuments.

Over the same period a number of restoration and conservation projects were carried out. These included:

- conservation of Zvartnots archaeological site and part-reconstruction of the Church of St Gregor, 1952-73;
- renovation of the Church of St Hripsimeh, 1959;
- renovation of the Mother Cathedral, 1965;
- renovation of the Church of St Gayaneh, 1970;
- restoration of the bell-tower of the Church of St Mariam Astvatsatsin, 1978;
- renovation of the Seminarium, 1998.

Most of the ecclesiastical monuments are in good condition. Some are being renovated and restoration plans are being prepared for the others. The Mother See is taking care of the churches in use in co-ordination with the State Department of Protection of Historic and Cultural Monuments and the Municipality of Echmiatsin. At the present time restoration and consolidation work is in progress on some parts of the walls of the lowest tier of the Zvartnots Temple.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the ecclesiastical monuments is reasonable, given that they have been in religious use for many centuries and have been subject to changes in liturgy and fashion over that period. The archaeological site is fully authentic, since it consists solely of excavated remains of

vanished structures. However, some of the restoration work is not fully in conformity with the principles of the 1964 Venice Charter.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the property in May 2000.

Qualities

The religious buildings and archaeological remains in Echmiatsin bears witness to the implantation of Christianity in Armenia and to the evolution of a unique Armenian ecclesiastical architecture. This exerted a profound influence on architectural and artistic development in the region.

Comparative analysis

Armenian architecture has been the subject of intensive study by specialists from the Architecture Faculty of the Politecnico di Milano and the Armenian Academy of Sciences. This has resulted in the production of a series of scholarly studies of the main architectural monuments.

In the volume devoted to Echmiatsin it is pointed out that it is difficult to compare the early Christian buildings there with other structures of the central domed cross-hall type in the region, since it was essentially here that the form evolved from Byzantine prototypes and served as the model for most subsequent buildings.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

The ICOMOS expert mission expressed concern about the proposal to construct a large open-air sanctuary near the Katholikon at Echmiatsin, which appeared to be out of sympathy with the existing monumental buildings. It also had some reservations about the nature of the restoration work carried out at Zvartnots, although it is recognized by ICOMOS that this had taken place at a period when contemporary approaches to restoration were not actively applied in the former USSR. It is accepted that any future restoration work should be carried out in accordance with present-day standards.

At the meeting of the Bureau in June 2000 this nomination was **referred back** to the State Party, asking for reconsideration of the open-air sanctuary project and recommending that the name of the property be revised to "The Cathedral and Churches of Echmiatsin and the Archaeological Site of Zvartnots."

At the request of ICOMOS, one of its senior members who was carrying out another mission in Armenia in September visited Echmiatsin and discussed the Sanctuary project with His Holiness the Katholikos of All Armenians. Following this meeting, a new plan has been provided which shows that the new open-air altar will now be located outside the area proposed for inscription. It will be situated in an area of gardens, the landscaping of which is to be improved (including the removal of a car-park). This information has subsequently been confirmed by the State Party. ICOMOS believes that the new structure in the location proposed will have no adverse impact on the setting of the nominated site, which will, in fact, be improved as a result of the new landscaping proposals.

The State Party has accepted the proposal of ICOMOS for the renaming of the nominated property.

Brief description

The cathedral and churches of Echmiatsin and the archaeological remains at Zvartnots graphically illustrate the evolution and flowering of the Armenian central-domed cross-hall type of church.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of **criteria ii and iii**:

Criterion ii The developments in ecclesiastical architecture represented in an outstanding manner by the churches at Echmiatsin and the archaeological site of Zvartnots had a profound influence on church design over a wide region.

Criterion iii The churches at Echmiatsin and the archaeological site of Zvartnots vividly depict both the spirituality and the innovatory artistic achievement of the Armenian Church from its foundation.

ICOMOS, October 2000