

ANCIENT SEPULCHRAL STELES AND THEIR ARCHEOLOGICAL VALUE FOR THE HISTORY OF ARMENIAN ART

I

The origin and development of the civilization and art of a country are closely connected with its religion and beliefs. Kraus, the noted historian of Christian art, has said that the art of nations begins with their tombs: this is true not only for primitive peoples whose buildings and art are indeed connected with their tombs, but also in succeeding centuries when the appearance of new religious ideas gives birth to a new art and culture, resulting from the gradual transformation of the old forms. If the art and culture of Egypt in their many manifestations have been the expression of the idea of the immortality of the soul; if Greek art and literature in all their branches are connected with and comprehensible only by reference to the religious conceptions of the Greek people; similarly Christianity brought about a new art and culture in those nations who embraced it, and that art also had its development through the centuries. The art of the catacombs is the connecting link between pagan art and the origin and development of Christian art in the west. A similar phenomenon may be seen in Armenia.

The remains of sepulchral steles scattered throughout our country which have not yet received the attention they deserve, bring valuable assistance to an understanding of the early periods of Armenian art. Unfortunately very few of them are preserved in their entirety; most of them are in a damaged condition, partly or wholly defaced, broken to pieces, but they are so numerous that it is possible to form an opinion about them. We still lack complete and detailed information, but the steles which, within the last decades Prof. Marr, Toramanian, and myself were able to see and collect form a vast group worthy of extensive and thorough study.

We shall again follow the same meth-

od of scientific research that we attempted to use in part in our previous study, devoted to the elucidation of specific architectural problems. Even a cursory study of these steles shows that they do not belong to the golden age, of Armeian architecture, which as we have already seen, is the seventh century. The pictorial and ornamental carvings of these monuments are different in style, form, and motifs, from those which occur on our seventh century buildings. Nor do they appear during the Bagradite (Pakradooni) period, or the Renaissance of the 13th century. Hence, we conclude that they must belong to an earlier period, to that different trend in art which had already begun to die in the seventh century.

And indeed, from the point of view of their origin and place, they reveal the closest relationship to the origin, place and style of our basilicas. This phenomenon in itself indicates how they must be considered, and their place in the history of Armenian art. We hardly know of any other sepulchral steles of this type which are not connected with basilicas. These monuments reveal the same interchange of influence between Hellenistic, Syro-Mesopotamian and local Sasanian arts that we saw in architecture.

A considerable number of these steles are still extant in Talin, the great town and capital of the Gamsaragans, but by their origin and place they have no connection with the Cathedral or the church erected by Nerses Gamsaragan, but they are connected with another, ruined church, and were carried and used by the peasants as tombstones for their dead.

The late Prof. Marr had also brought a few similar monuments from the village of Akrag in the province of Gars to the museum of Ani (fig. 29). At Akrag near the extant chapel supposed to belong to