The Vaspurakan artistic traditions and Cappadocia Murals painting similarities

The miniatures of Vaspurakan and the monumental Cappadocia paintings similarities have not been thoroughly studied, especially if we consider the views in the professional literature, according to which, to some extent the Vaspurakan miniature art was influenced by the murals art in Cappadocia.

In this case, the time frame is very important, as from the 9th, to the 14th, centuries, the Armenians have had a very big role and influence in the cultural and political life of Cappadocia. When combining the Vaspurakan and Cappadocia artistic traditions, we have no right to ignore the cultural environment, the era and ideology, also, when we talk about the frescos, the first thing we have to do is to pay attention to their stylistic peculiarities and differences between the artistic schools, in an implication to the same period of time these differences were created. As we know, the one part of the Vaspurakan population headed by Senekerim Artsruni (Sennacherib A.) settled in Sebastia and the surrounding territory, and specifically in Cappadocia, he has acquired the right to rule the area that stretched from Kesaria (Kaiseri) to the Euphrates and from the Pontos to Malatia. The first studies dedicated to Cappadocia are general studies and they do not focus on the stylistic features and peculiarities or the iconographic features of the frescos, the identification of the source, nor do they monitor the interaction of spiritual and artistic traditions, the relationships between the province and the capital, date issues. Our focus is on the churches dated 10th, and 11th, centuries in the Ihlara general area, namely the Egri Tash, Kokar, Purenli Seki, Agatch...
Alti, Yilanli churches (Kilise). As the difference of frescos in these churches compared to the others lies in their iconography and style, outstanding as a class by themselves. In spite of the current, damaged condition of the frescos (the faces of the saints have been purposefully erased and damaged, damaged and burnt are specifically those neighborhoods that were covered by frescos) the traces of the frescos are preserved in the form of a general structure on the walls.

There is a list of foreign (non Armenian) researches who have stated the Armenian origin of the frescos in Cappadocia. G. Jerphanion has suggested that some of the “Archaic” frescos of Cappadocia are made by the Armenians, see G. Jerphanion, Une nouvelle province de l’art byzantine. Les eglises rupestres de Cappadoce, Paris, 1925-1942. 1950-1990s the same suggestion has been researched further and presented by M. and N. Thierry, see N & M. Thierry, Nouvelles eglises rupestres de Cappadoce. Region du Hasan Dagi, Paris, 1963, p. 76. J. Lafontaine-Dosoge, see J. Lafontaine-Dosoge, Nouvelles notes Cappadoiciennes, Bruxelles, 1963, pp. 31-45. A.W. Epstein, see A. W. Epstein, The Fresco Decoration of the Column Churches, Goreme Valley, Cappadocia//CahArch 29, 1980-81, p. 45. K. Jerphanion used the term “Armenian influence” based on mistakes in the Greek inscriptions in the churches, which led him to suspect that the authors were Armenians (not Greek). It is also remarkable that besides the dictation errors/mistakes, we see artless and sometimes unreadable letter forms, which are telling that the authors are not Greek.

Back to the connections between the Cappadocia frescos and the miniature art of Vaspurakan, we cannot ignore the group of manuscript that have...
Similarities to both the Cappadocia frescos and the Vaspurakan miniature art, considering the time frame these manuscripts were created, place, the social and cultural environment. One of those manuscripts is a bible dated 1038 A.D. (MM N 6201). L. Durnovo was the first to mention the similarities and influences between the manuscript and the iconography, and Vaspurakan style miniature art from the 13th, -15th, centuries. According to L. Zakarian, the 1033 A.D. (MM N283) manuscript must have been created in one of the literary workshops / centers in Vaspurakan. Zakarian is basing the conviction on the stylistic particularities, development of the plane shapes/forms, development of the eyes, faces, and typical clothing development, and the separation of the main characters from the general scene.

As we know, in the 11th, century, “Pokr Haik” (Armenia minor) was dominated by Byzantine empire, and Sebastia was the center of the cultural life, so it is logical that the local workshops and literary centers would express Greek traditions, but four (4) manuscripts saved from Melitine and Sebastia bear clear stylistic similarities/ influences by the Vaspurakan miniature art.

The first similarity between the Frescos and the miniature art is the development of the frieze figures. This approach is in the Later works of the Vaspurakan art style as it is in the frescos of the above mentioned churches of Cappadocia, where we see the same stylistic peculiarities, especially in the development of the figures, their delineation, development of the pleats in the clothing, placement of colorless figures in the depth of the image, development of wide - opened eyes on the faces.

The four manuscripts that we are interested in: 1041(MM N3624), 1045(MM N3723), 1057(MM N3784) pp. and 2º 974, contain apostles painted with traditional characteristics and typical compositions, such as a two-folded arch and elongated bodies.
The stylistic and the iconographic similarities are allowing us to say that the shapes developed in them became the base for the stylistic particularities and the iconographic development in the later phases of the Vaspurakan miniature art. And it is not impossible that the artists who came out of this cultural environment participated in the creation / foundation and development of the monumental mural art in Cappadocia.

Our digital album is based on the above mentioned murals in the churches of Cappadocia, the Armenian manuscript group from the 11th century, and samples from the different schools of the Vaspurakan miniature art, 13th, - 15th, centuries. The Eastern origin of the frescos in Cappadocia and specifically their connection to the Vaspurakan artistic traditions, can be greatly explained by the nationality of the local artists/masters, which makes us think that they are possibly Armenian, because specifically, as we have mentioned, the Armenians had migrated from Vaspurakan along with Senekerim Artsruni and settled in Cappadocia a long time ago and the masters had brought with them the expertise and cultural artistic traditions.

Being the creation of the local popular classes, the murals in the above mentioned churches also slightly express the preferences of the Armenian population, thus becoming a unique branch of the Armenian arts in the complex crossroads of the Eastern and Western art, where it was possible to become acquainted to the artistic traditions of the neighboring nations, to influence and become influenced by them.
# Photos

1. Egri Tash, Annunciation, The meeting between Mary and Elizabeth.

2. 1041 A.D. Annunciation, The meeting between Mary and Elizabeth.

3. Purenly Seki, Annunciation - The meeting between Mary and Elizabeth.

4. 1057 A.D. Annunciation – The meeting between Mary and Elizabeth.