

The Construction and Architectural Evolution of the Armenian Church of St. Bartholomew in Genoa (14th–19th Centuries) as a Product of a Formed Spiritual and Cultural Environment

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Abstract

This article examines the Armenian–Italian medieval historical and cultural layers, aiming to document and historiographically analyze the preserved material-cultural traces of Armenian presence along the Ligurian coast, with particular focus on the Church of Saint Bartholomew of the Armenians in Genoa. Founded in the 14th century by Armenian monks, transformed between the 14th and 19th centuries, and still functioning today, the church stands at the center of this study. The emergence of one of Italy’s most prominent port diaspora communities is examined, considering the Church of Saint Bartholomew of the Armenians as its spiritual core, alongside the history of the church’s construction, its architectural transformations, and its historical distinctiveness.

The research methodology encompasses an analysis of the formation and historical existence of the social, spiritual, and cultural environment. The scholarly objectives of the article are to document and analyze, within the context of historical developments, the foundation of the structure, its architectural solutions and characteristics, as well as its structural transformations from the 14th to the 19th centuries.

Primary-source materials have been included in the scholarly analysis; however, the research was conducted entirely on site. Fieldwork enabled a more detailed examination and the identification and synthesis of structural changes that occurred over the centuries.

Keywords: maritime republics, church structure, residential complex, demographic, reduction, façade, Barnabite order, Mandyllion, Armenian community

Introduction

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Armenian communities established themselves in the most commercially dynamic centers of the Apennine Peninsula, particularly in major port cities that functioned as nodes of Mediterranean trade. Among these urban centers, the city of Genoa assumed special importance. Armenian merchant vessels regularly navigated toward Genoa from Cilician Armenia and Crimea, contributing to the consolidation of economic and cultural ties between the Armenian world and the Italian maritime republics (Zekiyan, 1990). Significantly, even after the fall of the Cilician Kingdom, these commercial and communal connections did not cease, but rather continued in new historical circumstances.

A visible testament to this cooperation emerged in 1307, when the Genoese banker Purpurarius donated a plot of land to the Armenian community in one of the elevated suburbs of the city known as Multedo. (Mutafian, 1999). In May 1308, Archbishop Spinola of Genoa laid the foundation stone of what would become the Armenian Church of Saint Bartholomew. (Bizio, 1640) The monastery and church complex were constructed by Basilian monks who had fled Cilician

Armenia in the aftermath of Turkish persecutions (Mutaftian, 1999). Having first sought refuge in Cyprus, they subsequently settled in Genoa, where they established a lasting spiritual and cultural presence [figs. 1, 2].



Figure 1. The historical view of the Port of Genoa



Figure 2. The quarter of the city where Armenians settled

Materials and Methods

This study is based on the analysis of archival documents, historical descriptions, architectural surveys, published scholarly literature, and visual sources related to the Armenian Church of St. Bartholomew in Genoa. A historical-architectural and comparative approach was employed to examine the church's construction, successive building phases, and architectural transformations from the 14th to the 19th centuries, placing these developments within the broader spiritual, cultural, and urban context of the Armenian community in Genoa.

The Process of Distortion, Fragmentation, and Eventual Enclosure of the Main Church Structure within a Residential Complex

Originally conceived as a distinguished ecclesiastical structure combining elements of Eastern Armenian and Western architectural traditions, the Armenian Church of Saint Bartholomew in Genoa was carefully adapted to the structural conditions of a dense urban environment. Today, however, the church is deeply embedded within the volumetric system of a multi-apartment residential building, lacking any externally articulated massing or domed silhouette that would ordinarily signal its sacred function (Giornate Europee del Patrimonio, 2008) [figs. 3, 4].



Figure 3. The Church within the Urban Topography

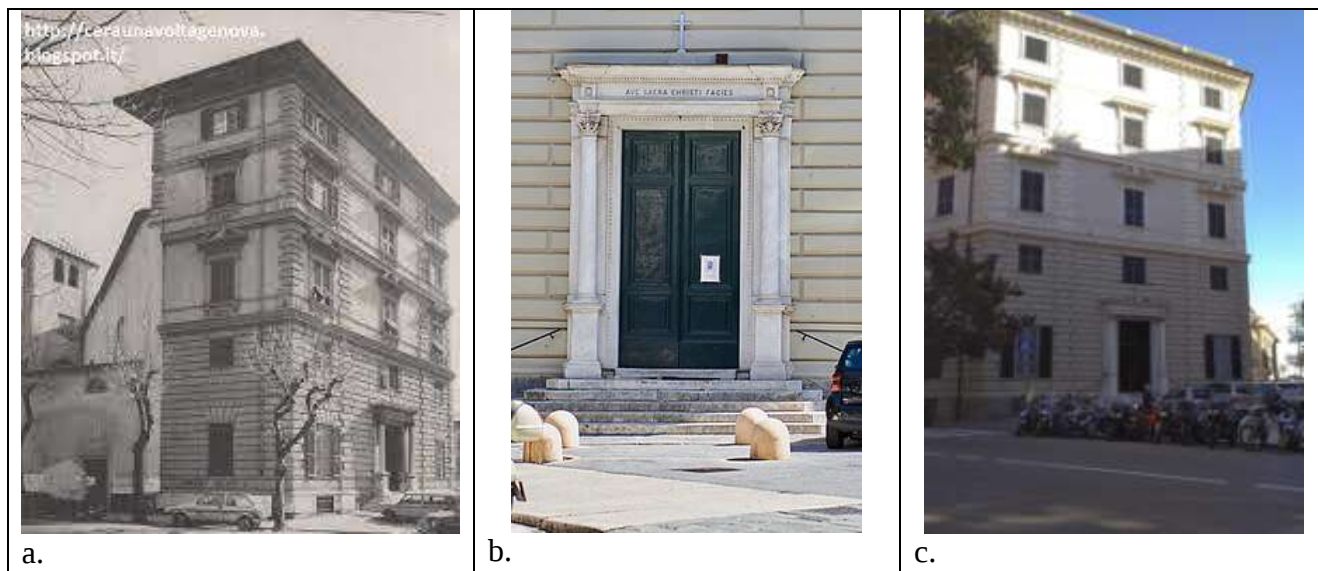


Figure 4. (a,b,c). St. Bartholomew church nowadays

The medieval and early modern urban fabric of Genoa was characterized by tightly packed constructions and narrow streets. It is plausible that the Armenian church initially stood as a relatively modest freestanding structure. Over time, however, it became enveloped by the expanding residential matrix of the city. The scarcity of urban space, coupled with demographic growth and intensified commercial activity, likely prompted the vertical and horizontal expansion of housing. In this process, many historic buildings were demolished, altered, or incorporated into new architectural projects. The Armenian church appears to have undergone a comparable transformation within the evolving environmental conditions of a prosperous and densely populated mercantile city [figs. 5, 6].



Figure 5. Map of the area of the church



Figure 6 . The road to St. Bartholomew in the context of the Armenian presence

Another contributing factor may have been the gradual reduction in the size of the Armenian community in Genoa at certain historical junctures. The maintenance of a large ecclesiastical complex could have imposed financial burdens exceeding the community's capacities. Simultaneously, municipal authorities may have initiated or authorized the addition of structures above or adjacent to the church in order to generate revenue through commercial or residential use. In this context, it may have been deemed expedient to preserve the essential spiritual function of the church within a reduced spatial framework, while accommodating the economic imperatives of the city.

The original church belonged to the domed type characteristic of Armenian architecture. Over the centuries, however, it underwent extensive internal and external modifications. Of the ancient structure, only the domed apse has survived. In 1516, a bell tower was erected, marking an important phase in the church's architectural evolution. The appearance of the complex changed significantly in 1595, when a large single-nave hall was appended to the apsidal core. The façade, which once resembled that of a small rural church, was gradually transformed. Eventually, all visible traces of the original sacred façade disappeared when the church was incorporated into a residential structure used by the Barnabite order, to whom the church had been donated in 1656 and who continue to reside there.

In 1833, the right-side chapel dedicated to Saint Pantaleon was demolished during the construction of an adjacent palace, resulting in the complete enclosure of the church's right flank. The historic bell tower remains visible, while the monastery—formally separated from the church in 1875—continues to stand in Genoa (Giornate Europee del Patrimonio, 2008) [fig. 7].

Today, the interior sacred space is organized within the constraints of the existing structural framework of the surrounding residential building, reflecting principles of architectural integration and spatial adaptation. An environment originally conceived exclusively for liturgical purposes has thus been absorbed into a civil structure. Nevertheless, the church preserves its central liturgical axis and internal hierarchy of sanctity. Access is gained through the shared frontal entrance of the residential building, without any distinct doorway or external volumetric articulation.



Figure 7. Remains of the ancient church, including the bell tower

From a contemporary spiritual–philosophical perspective, this condition may be interpreted as embodying the notion of an “inner” sanctuary, whose presence is symbolically rather than visually asserted. The Holy Altar occupies the eastern sector of the interior on an elevated platform, thereby restoring the traditional sacred hierarchy characteristic of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture. Artificial lighting now replaces natural illumination, and the interior finishes display a subdued stone-toned palette harmonized with the broader architectural context.

Although the church has become physically “hidden” within the mass of a multi-apartment building, its inner spiritual, historical, cultural, and touristic significance within Genoa has not diminished. Rather, its concealed condition may be understood as a unique testimony to the endurance of Armenian heritage within a Western urban environment [fig. 8].



Figure 8. Illustration of an Armenian stone-carved inscription in the interior of the church

The Significance of the Preservation of the Mandylyon in the Armenian Church of Genoa

The placement and preservation of the Mandylyon within the Armenian church of Genoa carries profound symbolic meaning. In a foreign cultural and political environment, the Armenian community succeeded in safeguarding a sacred relic entrusted to its care. According to longstanding local belief, the image has for centuries protected Genoa from disasters and malevolent forces, thereby acquiring both spiritual and civic dimensions of significance (Giardelli, 2002).

The Mandylyon’s presence in Genoa bears historical, religious, cultural, and even diplomatic implications. It symbolizes a Mediterranean continuum linking Edessa, Byzantium, Constantinople,

and Genoa, while simultaneously testifying to the deep-rooted Armenian presence in Italian soil. The relic's uniqueness resides in its acheiropoietic character—that is, its status as an image “not made by human hands.” In the absence of unequivocal documentary evidence concerning its early history, this symbolic and theological dimension becomes all the more accentuated [fig. 9].

From a historical perspective, the trajectory Edessa–Constantinople–Genoa reinforces the shared sacred heritage of Eastern and Western Christianity. The Mandyllion thus functions not merely as an object of veneration but also as a material witness to the interconnected devotional cultures of the Christian Mediterranean.



Figure 9. Christ's Hand-Painted Image: Part of the Relics of the Church of St. Bartholomew

Within Armenian tradition, both in the East and in diaspora communities of the West, sacred relics have never been perceived solely as works of religious art. Rather, they have been understood as tangible expressions of national identity, faith, and communal continuity. The deliberate placement of the relic in the Armenian Church of Saint Bartholomew was therefore intended to serve distinct Armenian spiritual and cultural purposes, while also honoring it as a precious diplomatic or personal gift within the broader Christian world.

To this day, the Mandyllion remains preserved in the Armenian Church of Saint Bartholomew in Genoa. The site is maintained under the supervision of Latin ecclesiastical authorities, ensuring appropriate custodianship and security, while simultaneously safeguarding the historical continuity of Armenian presence. Within this framework, faith, mutual respect, and inter-ecclesiastical cooperation are effectively combined. The church also houses the painting *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1596) by Lazzaro Tavarone, further enriching its artistic and devotional significance (Bozzo Dufour, C., & Poleggi, E., 1987)

These circumstances help explain why the relic has not been transferred to another Italian church or public institution. Despite the fact that the church is registered in the inventory of the Holy See and maintained by clergy of the Latin Church, the Mandyllion has retained its spiritual and cultural resonance within the Armenian community.

Conclusion

A combination of factors—including spatial constraints, financial limitations, demographic decline, competing communal needs, and broader architectural and urban-development dynamics—likely shaped the historical trajectory of the Church of Saint Bartholomew of the Armenians in

Genoa. Despite the fragmentation and partial enclosure of its original structure, the church continues to endure as a significant manifestation of Armenian heritage in northern Italy.

The acheiropoietic Mandylion constitutes the most revered sacred relic of the Genoese region, and its longstanding presence within the Armenian Church of Saint Bartholomew elevates the site to a sanctuary of pan-Christian importance.

Notably, the relic's preservation within the relatively modest and architecturally integrated Armenian church has ensured a stable and secure environment, allowing it to survive numerous military-political upheavals, economic fluctuations, climatic challenges, and other external disruptions that have affected the region over the centuries. In this sense, the concealed yet continuous existence of the church and its relic may be regarded as a powerful metaphor for the endurance of faith, memory, and identity across time and space.

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