

THE IRANIAN EXPANSE

TRANSFORMING ROYAL IDENTITY
THROUGH ARCHITECTURE, LANDSCAPE,
AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT,
550 BCE–642 CE

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place hosting a fire cult and could refer to interior or outdoor shrine, possibly the sort attended by a specific class of priest, which shows up in the Nisa documents: an *āturšpat*.¹⁶² Armenian *Mehean*, “temple, place of Mihr,” on the other hand, was more often used to refer specifically to a temple, though it could be associated with either a *bagin* or an *atrušan*.¹⁶³

Building Arsacid Armenia

Throughout the first and second centuries, the Arsacid dynasty of Armenia consolidated their hold on the institutions and legacy of Armenian kingship. They were successful to the point that by late antiquity the name “Aršakuni” not only meant the Arsacid dynasty, but could be used to refer generally to all ancient Armenian kings. As an important component of this process, the Arsacid kings incorporated the Orontid and Artaxiad topographies of power, grafting their significance onto their own. Artashat served as the Arsacid royal residence. The Arsacids cultivated the ancient Armenian royal dynastic sanctuary, which had been shifted with each move of the royal capital since the Orontids. The ancient sanctuary of Bagawan became especially important for the Arsacids, and the royal family celebrated the Iranian New Year’s festival there.¹⁶⁴ This parallels other evidence of Arsacid efforts to appropriate and incorporate the ancient Orontid and Artaxiad topographical traditions, and underscores how deeply integrated the landscape had become as a reservoir of legitimacy and memory for Armenian kingship.

Even after their kings became Christian, Armenian and Georgian kingship continued to grow from deep Iranian royal roots. While Zoroastrianism, the Good Religion (*wehdēn*), was an important pillar of Iranian identity, and the Sasanians understood that a good Iranian should follow the Good Religion, the relationship between “Iranian-ness” (*ērīh*) and Zoroastrianism was not always clear-cut in either daily life or realpolitik. To be sure, the Islamic-era, Pahlavi priestly texts present “Iranian-ness” as conflated entirely with adherence to Zoroastrianism; however, in the Sasanian Empire Iranian identity had the expanded sense of both Iranian cultural and religious affinity, and could be a mark of someone living anywhere in the empire, even converts to Zoroastrianism.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, there was a great deal of diversity in the way Zoroastrianism was practiced, with several heterodoxies persisting, despite the efforts of priests like Kartir to extirpate them. The contrast between the views of the court and the Zoroastrian

priesthood is illuminating. The inscription that the high priest Kartir added to the Ka’ba-ye Zardosht clearly lists lands that he considered to be part of Anērān in the late third century: Armenia, Iberia, Albania, Balāsagān, Syria, Cilicia, and Cappadocia.¹⁶⁶ Shabuhr I’s inscription, carved a few decades earlier on the same structure, includes Armenia, Iberia, Albania, and Balāsagān, all located in the Caucasus, in Ērānšahr. Reflecting a priestly view, Kartir’s inscription judges these lands according to the degree to which their inhabitants adhered to the Zoroastrian religious practices of Pars instead of their importance to the empire or their elite’s integration into the Iranian cultural sphere more generally. While Kartir’s idiosyncratic priestly perspective, focused on his own formulation of Zoroastrianism, excluded Armenia and Iberia from Ērān, the Sasanians already considered them to be an integral part of Ērānšahr in the early empire.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, after its population had apostatized to Christianity the later Sasanians often put great effort into “reconverting” Armenia back to Zoroastrianism when they succeeded in reoccupying portions of it. Such a tension between political and cultural affinities and fidelity to Zoroastrianism becomes magnified with the conversion of the Armenians and Iberians to Christianity. Even in times of open conflict, the kings and nobles of the Caucasus were, for all intents and purposes, full and active participants in the Iranian cultural sphere despite being Christian.¹⁶⁸

As would be proven again when the Sasanians took power, Persian memory and the forms of the rightful Iranian king were as rooted in present political realities and regional traditions as the past itself. These new traditions of kingship were means to navigate multiple poles of power and root initially ephemeral political power deeply into the landscape. In the Caucasus, these strategies enabled these sovereigns to deploy ancient, competing, Iranian topographies of power in opposition to Sasanian pressure. The Armenian and Georgian courts eventually turned a different face toward the Roman world, but as witnessed by the intense interest and considerable resources they expended, the ancient Iranian past was a deep well of power and legitimacy, and was the idiom that the Sasanians found most powerful and threatening. It is notable that the Armenians continued to honor the tombs of their pre-Christian kings in a way that is unparalleled in the Roman Empire after Constantine. Pagan or Christian, the bones of the kings were the locus of the Armenian Royal Fortune.

Garni is noteworthy because it demonstrates all of these processes at work at a single site. Garni presents a

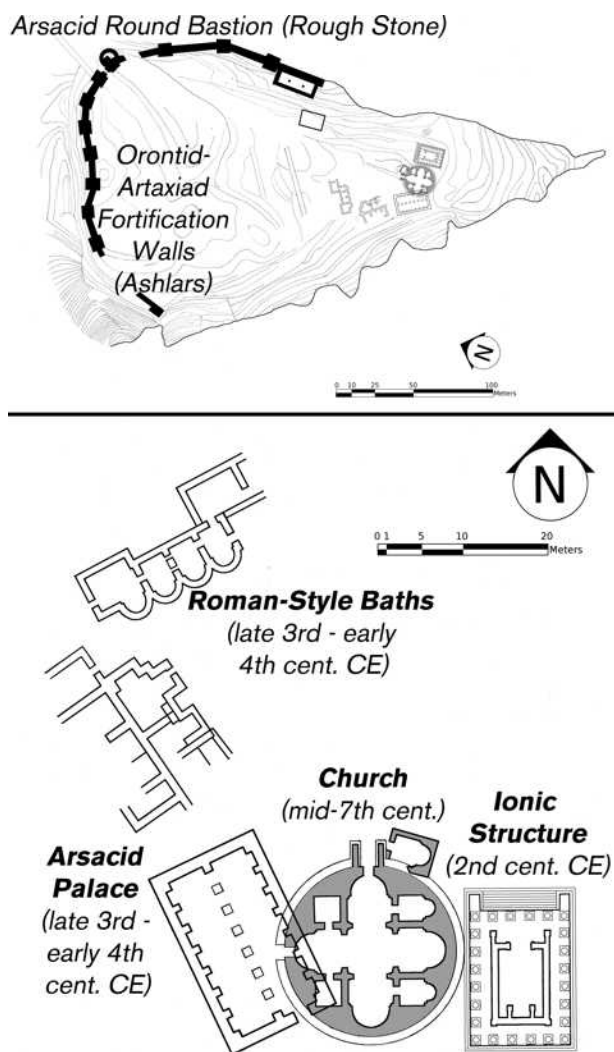


FIGURE 5.9 Plan of the fortress of Garni, Armenia.

site with a deep Artaxiad-Orontid, Urartian, and Bronze Age history, as well as illustrating the impact of Rome's growing influence on Armenia. Garni was the site of an important fortress that had long defended the northern approaches along the Araxias River to the major settlements of the Ararat Plain. Like other Armenian fortress settlements, that of Garni capitalized on the natural advantages of a triangular promontory rising above the Azat River gorge. Natural precipices protected the southern half of the fortress, and protecting the north was a 314-meter ashlar fortification wall with fourteen bastions.¹⁶⁹ The wall and its towers were constructed of huge basalt ashlar using dry masonry secured with iron clamps and sealed with lead. Lime mortar filled in any gaps. Following the pattern of Armavir and

Artashat, Garni functioned as a fortress before and after the Achaemenid period.

The site's Soviet excavations identified four phases in the techniques and associated strata of the fortification walls. Excavators discovered foundations of a Bronze Age cyclopean masonry wall preserved in a few sections and accompanied by Early and Late Bronze Age sherds.¹⁷⁰ This wall corresponds to other Late Bronze and Early Iron Age fortifications built before the Urartian expansion.¹⁷¹ The Urartian king Argishti I (785–763 BCE) left a cuneiform inscription recording his conquest of Garni (“Giarniani”) and forced deportation of its inhabitants.¹⁷² Like Armavir and Artashat, Garni was rebuilt in the third century BCE after falling into ruin in the Persian period. During this time, the site gained its massive, finely wrought ashlar fortification walls. Supporting its continued importance as a defensive bulwark in the period between the fall of the Artaxiads and the rise of the Arsacid dynasty of Armenia, Tacitus mentions Garni as a major fortress in the course of recounting Roman military interventions in Armenia ca. 51–52 CE.¹⁷³

While Movses Khorenats'i attributes the construction of the complex to Tiridates III, the archaeological evidence indicates that Garni's fortification walls and the structures they enclose were built in several phases.¹⁷⁴ Some sections preserved a Late Bronze Age cyclopean fortification wall. However, the walls that first traced an extensive fortification circuit show the characteristics of Orontid and Artaxiad masonry: large hewn ashlar, secured with iron clamps and without mortar, and measured according to the Nippurian cubit.¹⁷⁵ The excavators dated this first construction period to the third to second century BCE, based on comparable techniques at other Orontid and Artaxiad sites.¹⁷⁶ The fortress of Garni defended the northern approaches to the Artaxiad royal city of Artashat. Given the fact that the masonry of its first period closely matches the masonry at Artashat and Tigranakert-Artsakh, it is possible that Garni was built in the second century in the Artaxiad period to defend the new royal city.

Although Tacitus mentions the fortress as intact ca. 51–52 CE, at a certain point, likely not long after, the walls were substantially destroyed.¹⁷⁷ Their destruction can plausibly be associated with the Roman general Corbulo's campaign, which culminated in the destruction of Artashat and capture of Tigranakert. After an interval, the walls were reconstructed in a major restoration. In those places where the Hellenistic walls survived, the new walls rose on their standing remains.¹⁷⁸



FIGURE 5.10 Photo of Garni's Ionic structure (standing remains), dark red stone foundations of the church (midground), foundations of the Arsacid palace (foreground right). Courtesy Oana Capatina.

This restoration was carried out using dry masonry, but with stones that were of noticeably different size from those of the Hellenistic fortifications.¹⁷⁹ The excavators associated this restoration with the reign of Tiridates I and connected it to a damaged Greek inscription on an ashlar found near the fortification wall, which had been fashioned into a *khachkar*, a stone cross stele, in the Middle Ages.¹⁸⁰ The inscription's lacunae have encouraged a range of different readings, and a number of scholars have offered alternative editions and competing translations of the inscription, most of which must be dismissed as overly imaginative. The inscription states that a king named Tiridates built a fortress for his queen in the eleventh year of his reign.¹⁸¹ Both the inscription's regnal era and paleography cohere with the reign of Tiridates I and suggest the fortress was reconstructed ca. 76 CE. This corresponds to the Roman Empire's contemporary policy of strengthening the passes through the Caucasus and controlling them through its allies.¹⁸² Garni remained an important royal residence and fortress for the Arsacids throughout the life of the dynasty.

Garni's best-known monument is an Ionic temple-like structure that rose on the southeastern point of the fortress's interior. The Ionic building was constructed out of ashlar masonry with iron clamps and sparing use of

mortar. Despite being the best-known and most frequently studied structure of the complex, its exact date and function are still not entirely clear, though the weight of the evidence suggests that it was constructed in the late second or early third century.¹⁸³ While many of its features correspond to the architecture of a standard Roman pedestal temple, several others are peculiar. Architecturally speaking, the Ionic building's platform, frontal orientation, stone vaulted ceiling in the cella, and buttresses flanking the front stairway are consonant with Roman architecture. Its use of the Ionic order, which fell out of use in favor of the Corinthian order after the second century, suggests that it either dates before 200 CE or that it was a deliberate archaism. Its architectural ornament corresponds most closely to that seen in structures of late second-century Roman Anatolia.¹⁸⁴ Unlike a normal temple, the entrance to this structure is oriented to the north, and it has been suggested that it incorporated a hole in the floor of the cella. The only clear parallels for these features come from funerary monuments of Roman Anatolia and Syria built to resemble temples. Cohering with this, excavations around the structure produced no evidence relating clearly to cult activity, but instead yielded many graves from the first and second centuries.¹⁸⁵ Large

amounts of marble bas-relief fragments were recovered from the area to the north of the structure. These included remains of figural and architectural sculpture from a sarcophagus or sarcophagi whose ornamental features closely resemble Anatolian sarcophagi created around 175 CE.¹⁸⁶

An Aramaic inscription created by the “Great King of Armenia, son of Vologases,” corresponds to Xosrov I, son of Valarš (early third century–ca. 216), and mentions the construction of a palace.¹⁸⁷ Movses Khorenats’i paraphrases the content of the inscription in his narrative; however, Khorenats’i, the author, attributes all the standing remains of the fortress to Tiridates III, and adapts the epigraphic evidence to the standing remains extant when he was writing. By the time Movses Khorenats’i’s text was written, the Arsacid palace was in ruins and its foundations were partially built over by a seventh-century church, possibly constructed by the catholicos Nerses III the Builder. However, the Ionic structure and the fortification walls still stood. Movses attributes the walls, palace, and inscription to Tiridates III, but without any other standing remains identifies the Ionic structure as the palace mentioned in the inscription.

While the Greek inscription reflects Tiridates I’s initial rebuilding of the fortress, a complex of structures, whose masonry work reflects late third- to early fourth-century techniques, was indeed likely the work of Tiridates III. Located on the southern tip of the fortress’s triangular enclosure, this complex of structures likely served as a royal residence and audience hall. The structures identified in this complex consisted of a two-story palace, storerooms, and a multiroom bath complex, all constructed out of lime mortar and rough stone masonry, with courses of brick alternating at irregular intervals with rough-hewn stone blocks.¹⁸⁸ The palace and the baths were both oriented according to roughly the same axis, which differed from that of the Ionic structure, while the subsidiary structures in between them are slightly offset. Altogether, this complex occupied an area measuring roughly 40 meters long and 15 meters wide and extending along the western ridge of the outcrop.¹⁸⁹

The main palatial structure lay 25 meters west of the Ionic building, and featured a grand hall on its lower story measuring 9.65 by 19.92 meters.¹⁹⁰ A central colonnade of eight massive pillars placed on stone plinths running longitudinally across the room’s central axis divided the main hall of the palace into two “naves.” A corresponding succession of pilasters lined the east and west walls, from which sprung a vaulted ceiling that

supported the second story. Fragments of painted murals indicate that the interior walls of both the upper and the lower story were richly painted. The exterior façade was articulated with elaborated alternating decorative insets and bays.¹⁹¹ The overarching architectural design of this structure does not correspond to Persian palaces or to late Roman palaces. In contrast, even in its reduced level of preservation, its exterior façade evokes the exterior ornamental brickwork treatments of Parthian and early Sasanian palace façades. Attesting to the sophisticated manner in which the Armenian court navigated between the Roman and Parthian cultural and political spheres, Roman-style baths with hypocausts and mosaics adjoined this late third-/early fourth-century palatial complex. These baths were constructed with the same masonry technique as the palace, which suggests they were not a foreign imposition nor were they disconnected from the original conception of the fortress. Also using this same rough stone masonry technique, a circular tower was constructed at the entrance of the fortress, and partially enclosed the eastern entrance, extending it over the gorge.¹⁹² This circular addition was constructed with an interior core of rubble fixed with lime mortar rather than iron clamps and dressed with rectangular basalt stones that were a much smaller size.¹⁹³ The excavators assigned this to the end of the third/beginning of the fourth century as well.

Architecture and Transcultural Royal Identities in Iberia and Armenia

At a certain point, Armaztsikhe’s Achaemenid-style hypostyle hall and associated structures fell out of use. By the second century CE, Armaztsikhe had accumulated Roman-inspired palatial structures and baths, and was protected with strong fortification walls that enclosed an area of about 30 hectares.¹⁹⁴ Part of the later phase, a building excavated at Armaztsikhe presents a wooden structure consisting of a hexaconch placed inside a square with a column base for a central pillar placed at the center. The excavator interpreted it as a temple; however, the structure was attached to a storage depot for wine, and no evidence of cultic activity was discovered. While its shape evokes later Georgian ecclesiastical architecture, it also matches contemporary, late antique Roman *triclinia*, and very likely served this purpose for its Georgian patron.¹⁹⁵

The introduction of Roman building types and construction techniques is evident at several other palatial sites, where baths were constructed, and which were accompanied by an array of Roman forts throughout