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A RARE EXAMPLE OF MEDIEVAL ART (slightly abridged) By Dickran K. Kouymjian

AGHT'AMAR, CHURCH OF THE HOLY CROSS by Sirarpie Der Nersessian, Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies—1, Cambridge, 1965. xiv, 60 pages with 77 plates, \$12.50.

DIE KIRCHE VON ACHTAMAR, BAUPLASTIK IN LEBEN DES LICHTES by Mazhar S. Ipsiroglu, Florian Kupferberg Verlag, Berlin & Mainz, 1963. 140 pages with 57 plates, D.M. 28.

AGH'T'AMAR WAS known to western scholars as early as 1828 by F. Schulz's report on the cuneiform inscriptions at Van (*Journal Asiatique*, II,2,p.186; and again II,9 (1840), pp.315-6). However, the detailed account of the church by Austin Layard (*Discoveries . . .*, London, 1853, pp.413-4) first brought Agh't'amar to the attention of art historians. Later H.F.B. Lynch provided an even more elaborate description as well as three photographs (*Armenia . . .*, London, 1901, II, pp.129-35); this was followed by the studies of E. Lalayan, 1910, W. Bachman, 1913, J. Strzygowski, 1918, and N. Akinian, 1920.

Turkey's massacre and deportation of the Armenians during World War I and her subsequent hostility towards foreigners interested

Transcription from foreign languages has been modified to accommodate the type face available. The *s* in Ipsiroglu should have a cedilla indicating pronunciation as *sh*, and the silent *g* a line over it. The first *s* in Baltrusaitis is pronounced *sh*.

in "things Armenian," left the island deserted and unvisited for forty years. But again at the end of World War II new articles began to appear: A. Sakissian, 1943, Coche de la Ferté, 1956, and R. Burton, J. Donat and P. Koralek, 1958. Sirarpie Der Nersessian, Professor of Byzantine Art (Emerita) at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., using the photographs taken by Burton, Donat, Koralek and P. Ahrend, completed her study of Agh't'amar in 1959. Due to the inability of the original publisher to finish the book, Harvard was afforded the opportunity to publish it as the first work in its Armenian Texts and Studies series. The volume by Mazhar S. Ipsiroglu, Professor of Art History at Istanbul University, grew out of a visit to the island in 1960, when he personally photographed the church.

Both books begin with a short historical sketch. These are the important events: the crowning of Gagik "King" of Vaspurakan by the semi-autonomous governor of Azerbaijan, Emir Yusuf, 908, and twice by the Abbasid Caliph at Baghdad, al-Muqtadir, 916 and 919; the building of the church, 915-921, with major repairs and additions in the XIII, XVI and XIX centuries; the ceding of the kingdom to Byzantium by Senek'erim, 1021; the Seljuk occupation of Vaspurakan, except for Agh't'amar and the fortress of Amiuk, after 1071; the establishment of the Agh't'amar Catholicate, 1113. There is a detailed description of the construction of the church in the *History of the Artzruni* by Thomas Artzruni, a contemporary to the event. The architect was an otherwise unknown vardapet, Manuel, who ". . . depicted, in true likeness, all the figures beginning with Abraham and David until Our Lord Jesus Christ and the groups of prophets and apostles . . . around the church companies of game animals and flocks of birds, also all varieties of wild beasts, boars and lions, bulls and bears. . . . He girded the church with a remarkable and detailed frieze, which represented a grape vine animated with figures of vintagers, with wild animals and reptiles, accurately rendering the characteristics of each species" (T. Artzruni, *Hist.*, Arm. ed., Tiflis, 1917, pp.485-7 as trans. by Der Nersessian, henceforth *D*, p. 4; Ipsiroglu, henceforth *Ip*, uses Brosset's French trans., St. Petersburg, 1874, p.240).

After a review of the architectural plan,

both authors systematically describe the external relief sculpture. D's descriptions are more thorough, detailed and correct than Ip's. The main episodes are: on the west façade Gagik, holding a model of the church, donates it to Christ; the south façade, Jonah and the whale, the sacrifice of Isaac, Moses and the Laws, David and Goliath; the east, Adam and nine saints below; the north, Adam and Eve tasting the forbidden fruit, Samson, David, and Daniel and the Hebrew children. Above the windows on all sides is a pomegranate frieze, a little higher a row of protruding human and animal heads, and above this the famous animated vine scroll. Under the gables is an animal band with human masks and directly under the roof the Four Evangelists, one for each side.

WHAT DOES it all represent? Is there a unifying element? Or is it a haphazard collection of figures? Are the antecedents in Armenian art? Or must we look to foreign artistic influences? The attempt to provide creditable, and when possible, demonstrable answers to these questions forms the nuclei of the two Aght'amar books. Regarding the decoration of the church, Ip looks primarily to the Islamic tradition, especially the Turkic elements therein, and only secondarily to the Armenian. He regards the overall aesthetic conception as an outgrowth of Iranian Zoroastrianism. Contrarily D, the Armenian iconographer *par excellence*, fundamentally explains the art through prior Armenian examples accented with a residue of older Middle Eastern traditions, particularly Sasanian, and some eclectic borrowings. Both agree that "Aght'amar is a unique example of this date, not only in Armenia but also in the entire Christian world, of a church covered with carvings" (D, p.11) and, ". . . die Kirche von Achtamar ist das einzig erhaltene Beispiel und bleibt in ihrer Art jedenfalls ein Denkmal ohne Vergleich in der Geschichte der christlichen Baukunst des Ostens" (Ip, p.11). Ip's descriptions are more lyrical; he allows himself flights to a multiplicity of oriental lands to explain Aght'amar's inner logic. His work often lapses into an appreciation rather than a study: "The relief though not arbitrary is ruled by a very free conception" (p.28), and later, when comparing the neighboring Islamic art to Aght'amar,

"In the medieval east the development of three dimensional sculpture on a plane surface is executed mainly there, where Islam has a strong influence on art and culture. . . . [But] for Islam the real, tangible, corporeal, is an appearance, a deceit (p.32) . . . it is robbed of its substantial content, so art has to flee into the sphere of phantasy. We see in the Islamic homeland the emergence of an art which falls into a decorative rut. The art becomes formalistic: an abstract play of line and form . . . [but] not so at Aght'amar" (p.32-3).

Though Ip emphasizes the universality of the creatures represented on the exterior of the church, he doesn't quite seize on the unifying theme; one must look to D to see the harmony in this inundation of artistic forms. "The compositions and single figures depicted on the four façades may seem, at first sight, to have been selected at random, but a closer study shows that they are actually parts of a definite program which has both a general and a specific meaning . . . the allusion to the garden of Eden reminds us that the Church itself is an image of paradise. . . . Paradise lost through the sin of our forefathers will be regained through the Incarnation . . ." (p.20-1). Using this allegory, she neatly and convincingly fits in all the episodes. Only the secular vine scroll, animal bands and the masks remain irreconcilable with her schema.

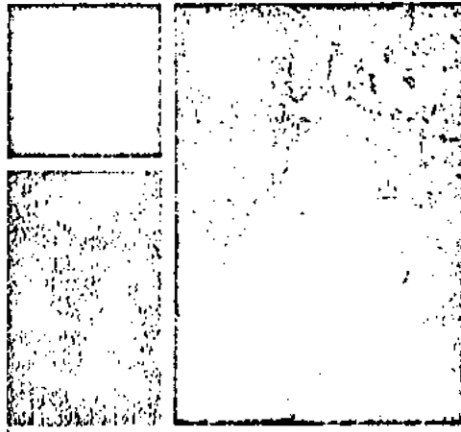
About the masks, Ip says, "In this connection are appropriately cited the grave finds at Pasyryk [V-III cent. B.C.] which show rows of masks on horse bridles carved of wood and gilded" (p.77). Not only the masks (D, pl. 16,30; Ip, 52), but even more, animals like the long antlered reindeer (Ip, pl.5; D,37), the lion attacking a bull (D,pl.51; Ip,52), and the deer in the west vine scroll (D,pl.13; Ip,51) and on the south façade (D,pl.27; Ip,24) bear a striking resemblance to carvings from the excavations of grave mounds in the Altai Mts. of south Siberia (see M. Griaznov, *L'Art ancien de l'Altai*, Leningrad, 1958, pl.9,12 mask, 27,30-1, 44 tiger attacking moose; more recently M. Artamonov, "Frozen Tombs of the Scythians," *Scientific Amer.*, May 1965, pp. 100-109, note lion attacking a moose, p.105). But this likeness to the Pasyryk finds is mitigated by the general prevalence and, if thoroughly investigated, historical continu-

PRINCIPLES OF VIOLIN PLAYING AND TEACHING

Ivan Galamian

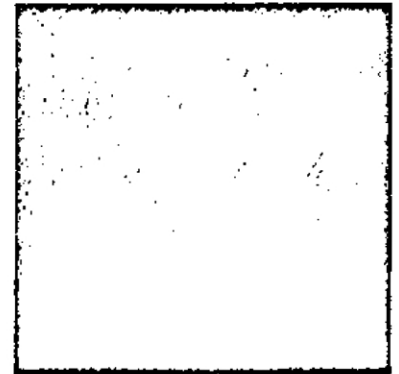
Aght'amar by Sirarpir Der Nersisian Church of the Holy Cross

with Photographs by John Russell and Josephine Powell



M. S. KUPFERBERG Die Kirche von Aghtamar

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ity of this so-called Scythian "animal style" in the Caucasus. Many scholars regard these "Pasyryk" people as originating in the north Caucasus, whence they were driven to south Siberia by other nomadic tribes. This is seemingly confirmed by the north Caucasian Kuban finds (VII-IV century B.C.) of even closer resemblance (see B. Piotrovski, *Vansko tzarstvo (Urartu)*, Moscow, 1959, p.248-9, pl. LII-LV; T. Talbot Rice, *The Scythians*, London, 1957, *passim*). Not only have archeologists found this animal style from eastern Europe to Central Asia (A. Mongait, *Archaeology in the U.S.S.R.*, Moscow, 1959, p.171; Rice, *ibid.*), but it also exists in Georgia and Armenia too (J. Baltrusaitis, *Etudes sur l'art médiéval en Géorgie et en Arménie*, Paris, 1929, pl. LV, LXI, LXVI; S. Amiranashvili, *Istorija gruzinskogo iskusstva*, Moscow, 1963, pl. 3,4,8,9,14; *Aknark hay jartarapetut'yan patmut'yan*, Erevan, 1965, pl. 24).

THE ANTECEDENTS of the vine scroll have inspired much speculation. Ip says, "the [vine scroll] is an independent organic growth" (p.112); D elaborates, "... It is primarily in the animated scroll... that the secular intrusion is most evident. The vine does not have here the symbolic meaning given to it in other early Christian monuments; the crowned man... the other men hunting, wrestling, or tilling the soil, all these genre scenes show the enjoyment of the fruits of the earth and familiar episodes of daily life" (p.25). She

ascribes its origins to rural scenes from people scrolls in the Roman and early Christian periods and Sasanian art (p.26). The vine scroll on the east façade is particularly interesting: "A crowned man, holding a wine glass and plucking grapes, is seated cross-legged on a cushion and waited on by two attendants. The one on the right is presenting a fruit (or a cup?);... The man on the left stands next to a pomegranate tree and plucks a fruit," (D,p.17, pl.39; Ip,pl.20-1). His pose is similar to the king of Nineveh's on the south façade (D,pl.19; Ip, 33,35). Ip, relying on K. Otto-Dorn ("Türkisch Islamisches Bildgut in den Figurenreliefs von Aghtamar," *Anatolia*, 6, Ankara, 1961, pp.99-167), identifies the figure as the Caliph al-Muqtadir (908-932), rhetorically adding: "There is still a need to clarify just how the head of the Islamic world and his entourage is allowed such an important place here, in the bas-relief of a catholicos church, over the portraits of Christian saints, and indeed, on the wall behind the altar. . . ." (p.60). Historically, the early X century was a time of rivalry between Caliph al-Muqtadir and his insubordinate governor in Dvin, Emir Yusuf. The latter was first to send Gagik a crown in order to win the allegiance of Vaspurakan, but al-Muqtadir later twice dispatched his own crown to the Armenian King (see above). Because of this political rapprochement, "Gagik, acknowledging loyalty to the caliph who had bestowed the royal dignity on him, set the portrait of the Abbasid Caliph

al-Muqtadir and his Turkish guard on the east wall . . . opposite his own portrait on the west . . ." (Ip, p.60, citing Otto-Dorn, *ibid.* p.19). D is of another opinion: ". . . It is probable that this image was also intended to represent the King [Gagik]" (p.25). "The Abbasid caliphs did not wear crowns," she says, supporting her guess, "their headdress had the shape of a round cap with two ribbonlike bands hanging at the sides, as can be seen from the portraits of al-Mutawakkil . . . and that of al-Muqtadir (908-932) . . . stamped on a medallion" (D p.31; see also G. Miles in the E. Herzfeld Memorial Vol., N.Y., 1962, p. 159 and pl.XXVIII, fig. 3). Despite D's evidence, the Otto-Dorn/Ipsiroglu' thesis is compelling. In any event the iconography of the scene is clearly Sasanian, later adopted by Islam, as indicated by D's evidence (p.25, citing Ghirshman, *Artibus A.*, 16) and, more recently, both by K. Trever, "Novoe 'Sasanidskoe' bliudtze Ermitazha," *Orbeli shornik*, Moscow, 1960, pp. 256-270, and G. Miles, "A Portrait of the Buyid Prince Rukn al-Dawlah," *Museum Notes XI*, Amer. Numismatics Soc., N.Y., 1964, pp.283-293.

Der Nersessian underlines her premise of Aght'amar's essential Armenian-ness: "The style of the Aght'amar vine scroll is closer to that of the Early Christian and especially of the old Armenian examples, than it is to any of the Islamic monuments" (p.26). To her examples of vine scrolls at Dvin and Zvart'nots, one can add the following: a capital on the Georgian church at Martvili (?VII/IX century) with a bird eating from a grape cluster (Baltrusaitis pl.LIX, compare D, pl. 55; Ip, 16); capitals at Isixan (VII cent.) and again Dvin (L. Marut'yan, *Zvart'nots*, Erevan, 1963, pl. 20,22). "That such a secular program could be developed at Aght'amar, alongside the religious scenes, and placed in a prominent position is due," adds D, "to the fact that the church was the royal chapel built close to the palace and had a gallery reserved for the King. Aght'amar is the oldest extant example of the combination of religious and secular themes adopted for a palatine church . . ." (p.27).

Neither author has suggested the possibility of looking into the regional folk epic, David of Sasun, for a clue to the iconograph of the vine scroll. Geographically, the province of Sasun borders on Vaspurakan with the plain of Moush sloping down to the shores of Lake

Van. The protagonists in the early cycles of the epic are the Caliph of Baghdad and the Armenian King, "Gagik." Chronologically, all authorities place its date at the very latest in the X/XI century (G. Grigoryan, *Hay Zhoghovordakan herosakan epose*, Erevan, 1960, pp.29-56,639). Would it not seem reasonable, though fanciful, that various stories familiar to the workmen, if not most of the indigenous population, honoring a legendary "King Gagik," should be placed as secular motifs on a palatine church built by the real King Gagik? Here is a random list of episodes resembling activities in the vine frieze (cited from A. Shalian, *David of Sassoun*, Athens, Ohio, 1965): Sanasar and Baghdasar wrestle (p.71; compare Ip, pl.45; D, lacking); Mher fights a lion, pulling its jaws apart (p.122; comp. Ip, 55; D, 52); Sibdag Dev rides a black ox which Mher later pierces in the belly (p.129; comp. Ip, 39,40,52; D, 23,49); David chases rabbits (p.185; comp. Ip, 22; D, 38); there are many more. The innumerable farming and rural scenes and features such as Mher's game preserve with "all kinds of animals [abounding]" (p.221), could account for the great variety of pastoral and country scenes in the Aght'amar frieze. In any case, once this association is made, whether genuine or not, it is hard to picture either the vine scroll or the epic without immediately recalling the other.

ACCORDING TO Ip's chapter "On the Tracks of the Zoroastrian Religion," the design and construction of the church reflects a residue of the earlier glorification of light and the sun in the Zoroastrian and Mazdean religions of Iran. His remarks on the effect of the light on the relief sculpture as the sun moves over the island from dawn to dusk are well taken. Since he was there, able to record the phenomenon during the course of some days, his contribution adds to our finer understanding of the remarkable monument. He points out that the architect deviated from the standard ground plan. The church is designed in such a way as to catch the play of light. Note the sunlight's intensity in Ip's truly spectacular picture of the island, the church and the mainland, all from above (pl.1), and its effect on the same scene, Adam and Eve, at three different times of the day (pl.6-8). As for the

glass vessel in
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to in my possession

influence of Avestan fire and light worship, this is much harder to accept, especially from the evidence Ip cites. He concludes: "If one goes back to the traces of pagan customs in the popular thought, one will find that sun worship lies in the blood of the Armenians; even today they attribute a holiness to the glow and splendor of the sun" (p.102). One might add that this is particularly true of Armenians living in smog bound New York or fog bound London!

"Die Wandmalereien sind heute nicht mehr vorhanden" (p.44), says Ip, referring to the church's interior. Unfortunately, this has been the prevailing attitude of scholars for more than a century; the frescoes have been described either as "a few rude paintings" (Layard, *ibid.*, 413) or as no longer existing. Perhaps Prof. Der Nersessian's description and commentary, the first complete explanation of the frescoes, are the most valuable of the many outstanding contributions of her study. She states there was no official opposition in Armenia to the representation of sacred subjects as earlier scholars had believed. "But only at Aght'amar have the paintings survived almost in their entirety, and the significance of this ensemble becomes even greater when we recall the scarcity of surviving monuments from this period in the Byzantine Empire and neighboring countries. Except for the rock-cut chapels of Cappadocia, the oldest of which can be assigned to the tenth century, there is no church earlier than the eleventh century which has retained its entire decoration. Thus, the paintings of Aght'amar, though partly damaged and repainted, and less impressive at first sight than the carvings on the outer walls, are of primary importance for the history of East Christian church decoration" (p.36-7). She then provides a detailed description and iconographical analysis of these frescoes which, unlike the Old Testament carvings of the exterior, portray (except for Adam and Eve on the inside of the dome) New Testament incidents from the life of Christ.

A few miscellaneous points should be mentioned. Ipsiroglu identifies neither the four Evangelists under the gables on each side of the church, nor any of the figures on the east façade. This is from an improper reading of Artzruni. Ip, referring to the east façade: "Unten sind neun Heiligengestalten wieder-

gegeben, obwohl nach Thomas' Beschreibung hier nur die vier Evangelisten zu erwarten wären" (p.58); Artzruni: "Aux quatre côtés de l'apside du sanctuaire, il peignit les quatre évangélistes, saints hors de ligne, formant la couronne de joie de la sainte église" (Brosset's trans., p.240). He describes the bearded head in the south vine frieze as typically Armenian (pl.46; D, 17, on right above rams)! The twin lions, hind legs thrust upward, licking Daniel's feet on the north façade (pl.52; D,49, far right) remind Ip of the Gilgamesh epic; a look at Baltrusaitis (pl. LXXII) would have shown him the identical prototype from the (?) VII/IX century church of Martvili in Georgia —D also neglects to cite this particular example. Ip does not seem to understand the importance of Aght'amar as a royal, palatine church, even comparing it to the cloistered, monkish tradition of Sinai and the Cappadocian cave churches (p.114-5). Finally, because of the high mineral content of Lake Van, Ip concludes ". . . kein Fisch leben kann" (p. 128). There is in fact one species of fish found in the lake, the *tarex*, a sort of herring which, eaten fresh or salted, is a staple of the area. Strabo was the first to mention its existence (*Geography*, II, 14:8; also Lynch, II, 40,45; Layard, p. 20-1; *Encycl. Brit.* 11th ed., under Van).

clearly influenced
by Gilgamesh
DK. 11/73

Der Nersessian describes the Fall on the north façade as Adam and Eve "about to taste the fruit" (p.19,pl.47; Ip, pl. 6-8). Rather it appears that Eve has already eaten and now Adam will join her in a perfect Miltonian interpretation of Genesis 3.6: "So when the women saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate: and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate." In the vine scroll on the north façade, D says the two figures are "kicking each other" (p.20, pl.55; Ip, lacking). But are they not engaged in some sort of contest of strength with their feet braced against opposite sides of the vine? Jonah is described on page 13 as "reclining on top of the gourd tree instead of under it" and in the caption under pl.19 "Jonah under the gourd tree." One must admit the portrait (see close-up, Ip, pl.37) is confusing and does give the impression Jonah is peacefully enjoying a shady rest—on top of the tree!

Matthew, ed. Vat.
sept., p. 226; from
Dulacrier p.183

IN SUMMARY, Ipsiroglu presents a tone poem of Aght'amar with the brilliant sun of the Van region as the *leitmotiv*. His attention is directed toward the syncretic diversity of the forms and their inspiration by, and relationship to, Islamic, Central Asian, Iranian and Byzantine models. Der Nersessian, while not denying the broad eclecticism and the assimilated features, looks, and finds, the iconographic prototypes in Armenian art. Her concise verbal descriptions, seeming familiarity with the total corpus of Armenian artistic representation, and sense of organization have made her book indispensable for students of Medieval Christian art.

After these two fine studies attention should be shifted away from Aght'amar's antecedents and to its influence on later artistic monuments of Asia Minor. Ipsiroglu and with him S. Yetkin (lecture on Seljuk Turbels, N.Y.C., 6/XI/63, and *Islam Sanati Tarihi*, Istanbul, 1954, *passim*) refuse to consider the possible influence of Aght'amar and other Armenian churches on Seljuk mosques and turbels (conical burial chambers), preferring, in the case of the former, to attribute the Seljuk stylization and ornamentation to "small art," i.e. rings, coins, earrings (Ip, p.38), and, the latter, on nomadic tent shapes (*op. cit.*). Perhaps. But how horse-riding nomads developed highly skilled masons and seasoned architects in such a short time is incomprehensible by medieval standards.

There remains only the preservation, and hopefully, the restoration of Aght'amar. "Comparison with photographs taken before 1914 shows a number of fresh breaks in the reliefs and carvings in the round which adorn the façades; shrubs are growing in the cracks of the stones and will soon dislodge them; the rain blowing in through the broken windows and seeping through the damaged roof will further damage the paintings which were already flaking off. It is to be hoped that before it is too late careful measures will be taken to preserve this rare example of Medieval art" (D,p.49). "Today it is a testimony of a long gone, epic-inspiring time, which is only sung about in songs," adds Ipsiroglu (p.128); one hopes he will serenade his government about the preservation of this "Wunderwerk."

WITH OUR CONTRIBUTORS (Continued)

characters. . . . HARRY KEYISHIAN contributed his two pieces before leaving on a trip to Europe this past summer. An editor of ARARAT, he has written a study and a couple of reviews for the quarterly on Saroyan's work. He has just joined the faculty of Fairleigh Dickinson University. Excerpts from the Gulbenkian book appeared in the April Esquire, with a note that the autobiography would be published in America this fall. . . . MACK (MEKERDITCH) CHAHIN was born in Smyrna and has lived in London since the age of ten. He is a lecturer at a Technical College in London and has always been keenly interested in history. His research in recent years on the origin of Armenia and the Armenians resulted in the present monograph—written specifically for the general reader—the second half of which will appear in our next issue. . . . JAMES V. HATCH was born in Iowa and has a Ph.D. from the State University of Iowa. He has taught at UCLA, in Cairo on a Fulbright, and now at CCNY, his subjects including stage direction, dramatic writing and theater research. He has written plays (produced), films, articles and stories. Two more of his pieces are on tap for ARARAT: a story and an article on Achod Zorian, an Armenian painter in Cairo. . . . ROBERT GODEL became interested in the Armenian language and culture during a six-year stay in Istanbul where he had gone to teach French. There he married Miss Meline Papazian. After his return he taught the classics in the high schools of Geneva and, since 1951, Latin language and literature in the University. In 1964 he was invited to Harvard University for the spring term as a visiting professor of classical Armenian. He also took part in the Conference on Armenian Language in Cambridge in June of that year. . . . ANAHID AJEMIAN studied with Edouard Dethier at the Juilliard Graduate School of Music. Shortly before graduation she won the Naumburg Award and made her debut as a concert violinist at New York's Town Hall. She has concertized extensively in the United States and abroad, both alone and with her pianist sister, Maro Ajemian. She has made many recordings and television appearances. Miss Ajemian is married to record producer, George Avakian. . . . GABRIEL VAHANIAN has written a number of pieces for ARARAT. His reviews and articles have most recently appeared in The Christian Century, Theology Today, The Centennial Review and other publications. A German translation of his book, *The Death of God* (ARARAT, Autumn 1961), is under way. It appeared in French in 1962. He is now back at Syracuse University after a year in France. . . . DICKRAN KOUMJIAN had a review in our last issue.