

II

Let us begin with Otsoun, not because we consider it to be the oldest monument, but because the characteristic features of the church will be of help in determining the date of the memorial.

We think that the discussions in chapters 6 to 8 of the preceding Section, completely refute the generally accepted theory that the church of Otsoun was built by John of Otsoun during the first half of the 8th century while the near-by memorial was the tomb of Sumpad First of the Bagradite (Pakradouni) dynasty, hence of the beginning of the Tenth century. True, the memorial is a sepulchral stele (Fig. 25)*, but not of the 10th century, rather of the late Fifth or early Sixth century. It is one of those numerous steles, listed in the preceding chapter, scattered in various parts of Armenia, varying more or less in shape, and yet closely related to one another through the motifs and style of their sculpture.

We have repeatedly referred in the preceding Section to the close relationship between the church and sepulchral stele of Otsoun, built with the same reddish stone and in the same manner, with a similar cornice decoration consisting of horse-shoe arches, as well as similar sculptured crosses and a rich figure sculpture. Just as the church is a combination of the basilica and a dome on four free standing piers, so also the stele is a combination of local-Iranian and basilican art, and our native architecture. The three smooth-faced piers connected with each other by means of horse-shoe arches, characteristic of the oldest basilicas, stand on six steps on the western side, recalling the steps of Cyrus' tomb. The three large, and three small crosses of equal arms, enclosed in circles, carved on the steps, occur in the oldest basilicas in Armenia, and, also on the buildings or steles bearing Hellenistic influence.

As to the pictorial decoration, it too

opens up new vistas for the understanding of the richness of the early Armenian art. This stele of Otsoun is a unique example in Armenia, and no less valuable for the origin of the pictorial art of the Early Christian period in general. But this stele had not always been a unique example; the broken heads of two similar steles, that is, the upper part of true obelisks, were also found at Otsoun, and are now kept in the church. A similar monumental structure, but a product of the 13th century, is found in the village of Aghood in the distant province of Sunik (Fig. 37), it probably copied the near-by memorials, now extinct, of Dzidzernavank, or a similar basilican building, rather than the stele of Otsoun.

The eastern and western faces of the two columns of the memorial placed under the arches are covered with pictures inclosed in squares, while the southern and northern faces (*) together with corner pieces have been unfortunately scraped off by the villager to be used as cure for the sick. Today the Government of Armenia exercises most rigid vigilance against such superstitious practices.

Unfortunately we have at our disposal neither our notebook of descriptions, nor our photographs and "squeezes" (estampages). We are, therefore, unable to give a systematic description, or reproductions, but we are availing ourselves of the summary notes made for lecture. We have already mentioned in Chapter 7 the picture of the architectural building of the eastern face of one of these obelisks, like columns and explained its value as a documentary evidence of the existence of Armenian domes in the 5th and 6th centuries (Page 11, Armenian text). One of the most important and significant motifs is the picture of a man with a pig's head; not the only existing example, for we have several others, on the sepulchral monuments of Talin and elsewhere; a few are reproduced here to give an idea about this interesting

* See also Strzygowski's *Die Baukunst*, Fig. 665, 666, 667.

*Fig. 25 and 25a; See for further details Strzygowski's *Die Baukunst*, Fig. 665, 666, 667.