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Garni Roman Temple in Armenia

Roman Imperial Court Cameos

# Garni: A Roman Temple for an Armeno-Persian King

Michael Svetbird

My paternal great-great-grandfather came from Armenia and emigrated from there in 1915. I visited Yerevan, its capital, in 1992 with Médecins Sans Frontières shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Armenia was experiencing difficult economic conditions then, with a shortage of electricity and fuel, so there was little heating, along with other socio-economic problems. I did not enjoy my time there because it was persistently cold, nothing worked, the culture seemed alien, and it was generally uncomfortable. Yet, in late 2023, I found myself back in Armenia, and at the top of my list of sites to visit was the temple and complex at Garni (below), located in the central province of Kotayk.

Ancient Armenia, which in a broad historical context is defined as 'pre-Christian', endured for the best part of two millennia, with the waxing and waning of several kingdoms including Urartu (ninth–sixth century BC) and the Hellenistic Eruandid state (sixth–third century BC). Its geographical location ensured that it played an important strategic role between the powers of the East and the West, and it was under Persian influence during the first half of the first millennium BC, especially the Achaemenid (550–330 BC) then Parthian or Arsacid Empire (247 BC–AD 224). With the progressive expansion of the late Roman Republic in the first century BC and the Roman Empire established by Augustus (27 BC–AD 14), the Kingdom of Armenia became a relative sovereign state as a 'protectorate' of Parthia on the eastern frontier of the Roman world, and thereby a buffer state between the two empires. The town of Garni, its temple, palace, and bathhouse, developed because of this political interface. Its subsequent history, and that of Armenia more generally in the Romano-Persian period, was characterised by proxy or direct rule by one side or the other.


Above: the geographical context of Garni in Kotayk province, central Armenia. Public Domain, modified by Mark Merrony.

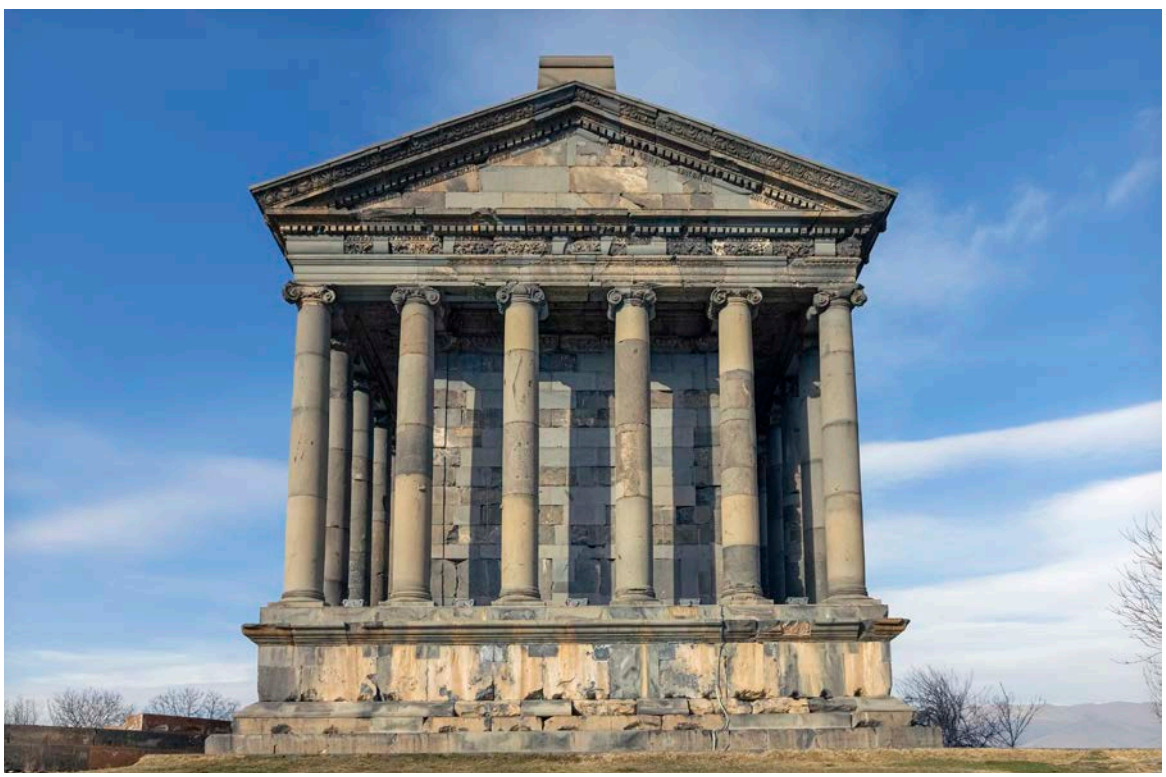
Left: the temple at Garni viewed from the north (front elevation and entrance). Built under Tiridates in AD 77. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

The Roman historian Tacitus (c. 56–120) provides a crucial account of the power politics involving Armenia during his lifetime. This began under the Roman emperor Nero (r. 54–68) when Tiridates I, brother of the Parthian monarch Vologases I (c. 51–79), became its Roman client king (r. 63–75 or 78), and the first monarch of the Armenian Arsacid dynasty. His accession was the result of a treaty between Nero and Vologases whereby the king had to be of Parthian noble blood but crowned with the approval of the Roman emperor. This was an attempt by both parties to resolve the long-standing dispute between the two superpowers which triggered two ill-fated military expeditions to Armenia under Marcus Crassus (53 BC) and Mark Antony (36 BC) and a fresh bout of warfare that led to this agreement. Tiridates duly travelled to Naples and Rome (in 66) where Tacitus informs that he was crowned with much pomp and ceremony (*Annals* XV.29.1).

One of the possible consequences of Tiridates' coronation in Rome was the idea of building a temple in the Graeco-Roman style in Armenia, although there is no literary evidence to support this idea. But it seems logical to think that Tiridates was impressed and inspired by what he saw in Rome – the streets, houses, temples, baths, and their decorative elements. Some Armenian scholars, and indeed tourist guides, claim that the Garni temple was a gift from Nero who provided the funds and workforce to build it, but this is pure conjecture; as is the assumption that it was built by workers from Greece. However, archaeological evidence indicates that it was designed and built by Roman engineers, albeit in the Greek style, and craftsmen supported by local construction personnel.

According to a Greek inscription found on the site of the temple: 'The Sun God Tiridates, uncontested king of Great Armenia built the temple and the impregnable fortress in the eleventh year of his reign [AD 77] when Mennieay was hazarapet [military official] and Amateay was sparapet [general]'. It seems that there was a fortress at Garni from the eighth century BC, since a stone fragment in basalt, recovered from a phase of the second half of the first century BC, dedicated under the Urartian king Argishti I (r. 786–764), records: 'I [Argishti I] conquered Giarniani (Garni), the country of the king Siluni. When I returned from the hostile mountains, I drove men and women.' The temple is associated with a later fortification begun in the third or second century BC, which encompassed a palace, dating from the first century AD, bathhouse, built in the third century AD, and the Church of St Sion, circular in plan, was built in the seventh century. Today, the palace, church, walls, and watchtowers of the fortress lie in ruin.

Garni is located some 28km south-east of Yerevan (ancient Erebuni) and 30km north-east of Artaxata (Artashat), the capital of ancient Armenia from c. 176 BC–AD 120. The plateau on which the Garni complex



The temple at Garni viewed from the south (rear elevation). https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

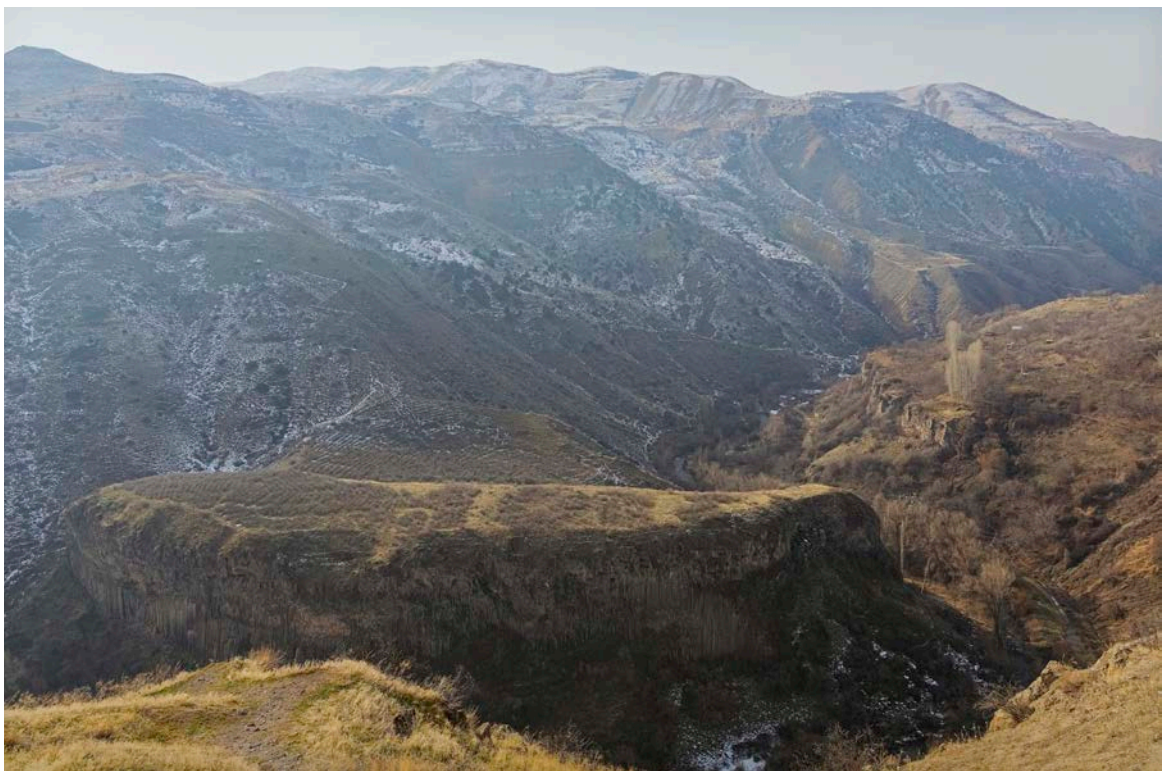
lies in an imposing gorge of the Gegham mountains in the Ararat highlands, an inaccessible triangular-shaped area with two steep cliffs that overlook the exposed Azat river valley, and a rather narrow passage to the plateau (below). It encompasses an area of around 3.5ha comprising the ruined fortifications of the site – watchtowers and walls – preserved to a height of up to 2m and 20cm in thickness, built with large blocks of local blue-grey-sand-coloured basalt. Armenian archaeologists and historians have estimated that the palace complex (page 19, above left), west of the temple (page 19, below left), was most likely a two-storey structure. Adjacent, is a large winepress, where grapes were processed into wine for the consumption of the royal household. The Church of St Sion, built partly over the ruins of the palace (page 19, below right), was destroyed by a powerful earthquake in 1679. A little to the north, the bathhouse, a relatively well-preserved structure (page 19, above right; page 22, below right), is paved with figurative and geometric floor mosaics.

This is an especially beautiful place with a cool microclimate and a magnificent view taking in the greenery of the valley below and the snow-capped mountains which dominate the landscape. In the Roman period, this would have been enhanced by the reflected light of the basalt structures and appeared blue-grey to beige depending on the position of the sun on the buildings.

I was in Garni in January, so the weather was not at its best, when deciduous trees in this part of the world lose their leaves and the ground is often under the cover of snow but, nonetheless, the site looked picturesque and poetic. This view impressed me as a fantastic theatrical scenery that was almost Shakespearean, and I could easily imagine how this splendid setting would have been enhanced by the original structures when they were intact. No wonder the Armenian kings chose this location, combining strategic inaccessibility with a picturesque view and a comfortable climate in the summer months – a 'house of coolness', as the Armenians say.

Considering all the above, perhaps it was only natural that Tiridates chose to build a state-of-the-art architectural form designed and built according to the canons and style of the most advanced civilisation in the known world. It would have been the one ingredient missing from this disputed and remote land on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. Could its construction as a coronation 'gift' from Rome be considered as a manifestation of 'soft power', 'cultural dominance', or 'inclusivity'?

While at Garni one forgets their presence in Armenia, an independent country with centuries of complex ancient and more recent history. The view of the temple gives the impression that you are somewhere in the Mediterranean, Adriatic, or Greece itself, certainly in the West and not the East.



The stunning landscape around Garni viewed from the north. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

The temple, reconstructed in the twentieth century from its original elements and, generally, all the 'cosy compactness' and beauty of this lovely place, the ruins, of ancient European influence, belies the fact that the border with Iran, for instance, is just over an hour away by car, Iraq and Syria are nearby, and Turkey, Azerbaijan (as well as Iran) have a direct land border with Armenia. The only thing that may seem unusual are the colours of the construction materials.

Unlike most temples and other public buildings of ancient Greece and Rome, built mainly with light-coloured marble, the Garni structures are composed of local construction materials – basalt blocks, rocks, stones, and polished slabs of volcanic (igneous) origin. These exude a variable colour palette: shades of light and dark grey, bluish (sometimes seeming purple) intonations, brown and sandy colours – all darker than the marble normally used in the Graeco-Roman world (below; pages 20 and 21). A comparison with 'graphite' comes to mind specifically in relation to the temple, it reminds me of a lead pencil drawing too. However, I would not say that this building is gloomy or heavy – on the contrary, it gives the impression of a certain lightness perhaps and fits in its setting, and its whole conception is rather unusual if not unique.

On closer examination of the internal decorative elements (cella, ceiling panels, architrave, and metopes), one can also perceive an abundance of geometric and floral decoration that include characteristically Armenian motifs – pomegranates and hazel leaves, and squares and rhombuses, are common in Armenian artistic culture through the ages. Of course, these motifs are also popular across the Graeco-Roman world, especially on architectural temple sculpture and secular public buildings and floor mosaics. Nonetheless, though, there is some obvious local flavour.

Tiridates used available materials to achieve a local effect in the decoration of the temple and thereby avoid recreating something he saw in Rome. It is likely that, given its classical canonical concept, the architecture was designed by Roman architects, with decorative elements incorporated and finalised by local craftsmen in accordance with Armenian traditions and tastes.

Aside from the local materials used, the structure is conceptually a typical example of a classical pagan temple of Hellenistic cult culture – the footprint is a rectangular peripteros with colonnades consisting of twenty-four Ionic-style columns. Its basalt

The temple at Garni, taken by a drone camera and viewed from the south-east. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Palace, Garni, first century AD.
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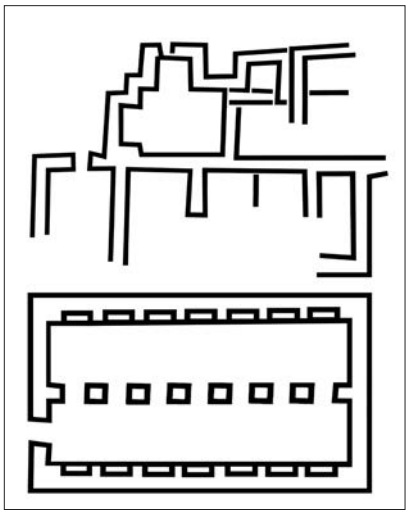

The temple at Garni, first century AD.
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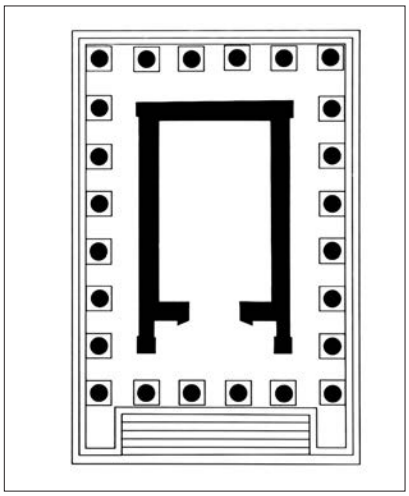
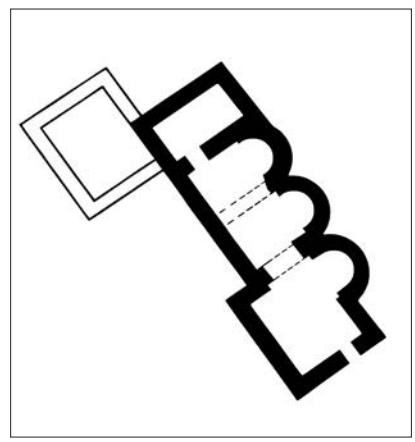


construction blocks were reinforced inside, vertically and horizontally, with iron joints, some of which have survived and then reused in the reconstruction. The classical triangular-shaped tympanum with acroteria on top were also reproduced (using original elements and materials) and are features of the common Graeco-Roman architectural form. The footprint of the temple (at podium level) is 165sq m; its height 10.7m (from the ground to the top of the tympanum at rooftop level). Therefore, the temple appears relatively small in area and compact in its proportions.

It was probably built specifically for the use of the royal family and their inner circle given the proximity of the temple to the palace. It is known that King Tiridates was a Zoroastrian, a dominant religion in the Parthian Empire alongside Mithraism and the worship of Hellenistic deities. In Zoroastrianism the universal supreme god Ahura Mazda ('Wise Lord') was venerated alongside Mithra (or Mehr), the god of light, sun, justice, honesty, and covenants, metaphorically associated with the 'rising sun'. The cult of Mithra also spread through the Roman Empire and was also popular in the army. A number of mithraea are known in various regions, from Rome to Hadrian's Wall, and representations of Mithra slaying the bull are widely known and recognisable on ancient friezes and sculptures.

In Armenia and Persia Mithra (Mehr or Mihr) was revered as the Zoroastrian god of the sun and the patron of kings. Accordingly, as conventionally acknowledged by scholars, the Garni temple was dedicated to this deity and his statue or relief was placed on the altar pedestal inside the temple (page 22, left). Unfortunately, this sculpture is not preserved, but the white marble fragment of a bull's head found near the temple in 2011 enables us to imagine the religious decorative programme of the temple. The question of its proportions and artistic conception occupied my mind while I was in the interior of the building. Inside, standing silently in front of the altar illuminated by natural light penetrating through a rectangular hole in the ceiling (typical of Roman temples), one can really feel the breath of Graeco-Roman cultural heritage, at



Bathhouse at Garni, late fourth century AD.
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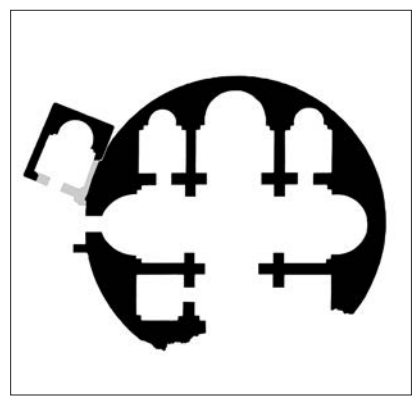

Church of St Sion at Garni, seventh century AD.
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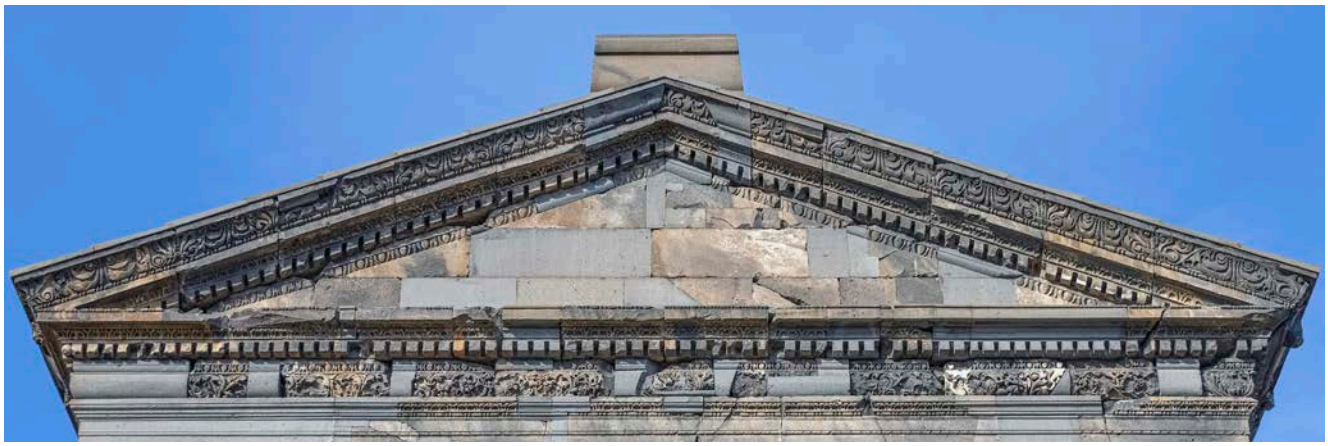
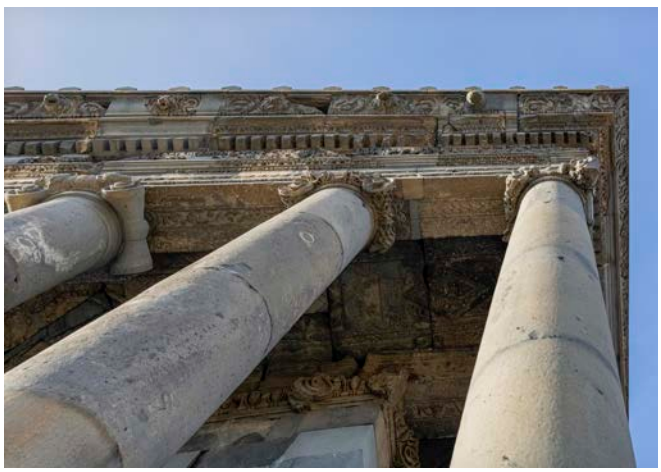
Pediment of the temple at Garni (below); entablature (below left); columns, and capitals (below right). https://www.michaelsvetbird.com





least in architecture, brought here, to the East in the mountains from more than 3,000km away. At the same time, in the cult-religious context, comes the realisation that the dedication of the temple to the Zoroastrian god seems to have greater relevance in this location.

It should be noted that some scholars, such as the Armenian-American historian Christina Maranci, believe that the structure was not a temple but perhaps a royal funerary tomb or monument. However, it is difficult to reconcile this idea with the location of the structure adjacent to the palace rather than in the capital at Artashat. One only has to think of the House of Augustus on the Palatine hill in Rome to reference a well-attested example of a ruler living in proximity with a favoured place of worship.

The temple and other structures in Garni and as far as Yerevan were destroyed by the devastating earthquake of 1679. It is considered to be one of the most powerful in the recorded history of Armenia (reaching a magnitude of 8 and possibly 9 on the Richter scale) with its epicentre near Garni. Its details were chronicled by the Armenian historian Zakaria Sarkavag (1627–1699). These are unfortunately common in the region as quite recent events have shown. In 1988, the so-called Spitak Earthquake killed perhaps as many as 50,000 people.

In 1834, the Swiss-born archaeologist and historian Frédéric DuBois de Montperreux (1798–1850), known for his travelogue in the Caucasus region, came across Garni and, in addition to other research, attempted to recreate an original design of the temple. It is not known how successful this attempt was because this element of his work is lost. The next programme of research, in 1912, the final era of Tsarist Russia, and five years before the Russian Socialist Revolution (and subsequent formation of the USSR, which included Armenia as a republic), the Russian architect Konstantin Romanov (1882–1942), a member of the Russian Imperial Archaeological Society, followed de Montperreux's work and developed preliminary designs for a feasible reconstruction project.

Around the same time, further archaeological work conducting a limited programme of excavation and survey at the temple was conducted by a small expedition led by Nickolai Marr (1864–1934), Georgian-Russian ethnographer, historian, archaeologist, and specialist of the Caucasus region.

In light of the vicissitudes of Russian-Soviet and Armenian history of the first half of the twentieth century, a fully-fledged reconstruction project of the temple materialised only in 1933 (the Stalinist era), unifying all components, architectural and archaeological, after an additional survey of the site. Subsequently, the progression of all drawings to a realistic 'design development' stage was undertaken and completed by the Armenian Nickolai Buniatyan (1878–1943), Chief Architect in Yerevan (1924–1938) and an associate of Marr since pre-Soviet times.

However, this project did not materialise, since the Soviet authorities were occupied with the internal repressions of the mid-1930s, the Second World War, and the subsequent post-war restoration of the country which continued through to the 1960s. Only in 1949 did the Armenian Academy of Sciences resume the project at Garni and initiated additional systematic and methodological excavations of the site and subsequently approved and commenced the actual reconstruction works in 1968.

The restoration of the temple works was led by the Armenian Alexander Sahinian (1910–1982),

The temple at Garni, peripteros on the east side.
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The temple at Garni, cornice over the entrance to the cella.
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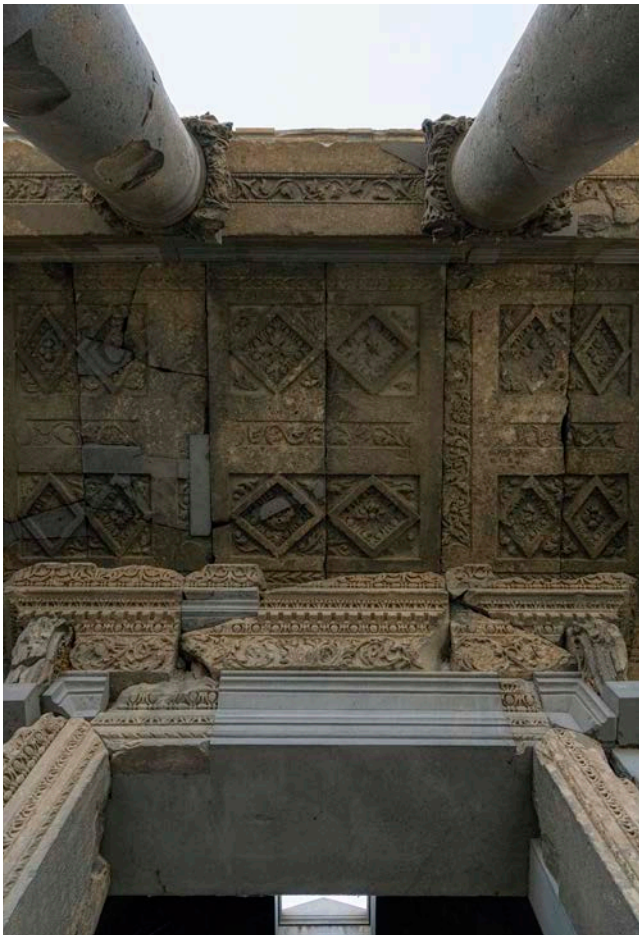

an art and architectural historian and Head of the Architecture Department in the Armenian Academy of Sciences. These were eventually completed in 1975–1976, while Garni was opened as a tourist attraction in the early 1970s. It is, therefore, amusing to consider that it took King Tiridates roughly ten years from conception to completion of the temple, yet its most recent phase was completed in 142 years.

Armenia declared its sovereignty on 23 August 1990 and became a fully independent country recognised by the United Nations on 23 September 1991. Currently, the Garni temple is the only existing and preserved classical Graeco-Roman temple in Armenia and the broader region, inscripted as a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 2000. In 2011, the site was awarded the UNESCO-Greece Melina Mercouri International Prize for the Safeguarding and Management of Cultural Landscapes (along with the Battir Cultural Landscape in Palestine). It has been recognised for measures taken to preserve its cultural vestiges, and the emphasis placed on efforts to interpret and open the site for national and international visitors. The

Altar in the cella of the temple at Garni.
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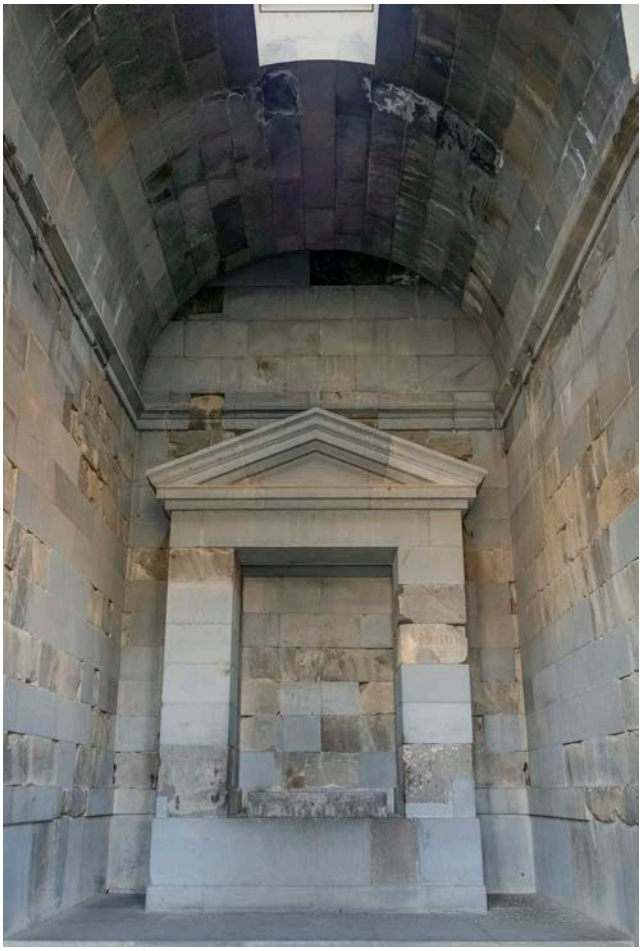

jury also praised the integration of this work into the lives of local communities, encouraging social and economic development.

The bathhouse, also designated as 'The Royal Bath of Garni', as titled in the Garni information material, was built at the end of the third century AD, according to archaeological evidence. This would have been under Tiridates III (r. 298–330), who had seized the throne with the support of the Roman emperor Diocletian (r. 284–305) after a rebellion in Armenia, wresting control from the Sasanian monarch Bahram II (r. 293) after fifty years of direct Persian rule. Tiridates is known for declaring Christianity as the state religion of Armenia in 301 and credited with the reconstruction of the entire fortress complex by the ancient Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi (c. 410–490), including the bathhouse.

It is situated about 50m north-west of the temple and some 30m from the palace. Built from irregular limestone blocks in a typical Roman design, the complex consisted of four consecutive rooms: a changing room (apodyterium), cold pool (frigidarium), hot pool (caldarium) (below), and a recreational room (laconicum), and was furnished with underfloor heating (hypocaust).

The bathhouse is better-preserved than other buildings at Garni except the reconstructed temple, and its internal walls and basement level give a good idea of its original constitution. Its roof and ceilings obviously did not survive the 1679 earthquake, but it appears to have been a vaulted structure. The floor mosaics in the laconicum were only discovered in 1953 and are largely incomplete and executed in a rather provincial Roman style, as one may expect (not illustrated). It is composed of natural stone cubes (tesserae) (1-1.5 sq cm) sourced from the Azat river. Their general palette is green with other colours.

Depicted are mythical sea creatures and personalities from Graeco-Roman mythology, identified according to their inscriptions in Greek as: 'Oceanus', 'Thetis', 'Peleus', 'Glaukos', 'Thalassa', 'Eros' and 'Pothos'. Thetis and Peleus were the parents of Achilles. The floor mosaic may have been dedicated to Thetis, a central character of the composition, and one of the Nereids and the goddess of the ocean, mother of Achilles and granddaughter of the sea-goddess Tethys. Other Greek inscriptions translate as: 'the depth of sea', 'serenity of sea', 'beauty', 'beach' and, what is indeed curious, surprising and sarcastic: 'we worked without getting anything'.

I wonder if Armenian kings could understand what was meant in this last passage that has miraculously survived throughout the centuries and perpetuated this 'epic' soul cry of unknown masters (possibly Greek) which, perhaps, in some cases is still relevant today.

Hypocaust in the caldarium (hot pool) of the bathhouse.
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