Wood in Armenian culture. History, oblivion and daily destruction of a neglected heritage

Francesco Augelli
Polytechnic of Milan, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DASStU), Observatory for conservation of wood works, 20158 Milan, Italy, francesco.augelli@polimi.it

Abstract
There are many evidence of a wooden ancient past even in the Armenian architectural culture. To date, however, there are not enough and in-depth studies on this topic. The lack of studies, and therefore the lack of awareness of the importance of these cultural and ethnographical data, determines a daily loss of cultural materials evidence, and with this the memory of the roots of a great ancient people.

The paper aims to demonstrate and retrace, through some examples, how the art and architecture of the great Armenia was heavily based not only on stone, material for which the Armenian monumental architecture is still now known worldwide, but also on wood. The contribution will also have the character of complaint for the destruction of wood components of buildings perpetrated, still now, daily in the Armenian cities and villages.

Keywords: Wood, timber, forests, cultural heritage, vernacular heritage, conservation, valorisation.

Introduction
Armenia is worldwide known for its outstanding medieval churches built of volcanic stone (tuff and basalt) and that over the centuries have characterized itself as “the stone country” (Karastan).¹

But we ask ourselves: the ancient Armenians lived in the churches? Certainly not. The documents and the increasingly rare examples, show that most of Armenian houses were built of wood or stone and wood. With wood were always made roofs, floors, doors and windows, and the typical Armenian large verandas and balconies.

Alpago Novello,² Italian pioneer, in the West, in the rediscovery of Armenian architecture, rightly stated that: “(...) Armenian world is still, in some aspects, in part, to know; for example, those who write, (...), had the opportunity to “discover” (this is not of archaeological excavations, to be clear, but investigations of the surface), Armenians churches, villages and cemeteries until now completely unknown and unpublished (and relatively well preserved!). Furthermore (and this is maybe one of the most important aspects), after the first stage of knowledge, we must try to understand what is behind and within the marks left by the man on the territory, to pick up the meanings and implications of the choices, going from polished stones or from different cultural testimonies to life and to human needs (both those immediate - material type, as well as those more thinnest, but perhaps more important, of a spiritual kind). Is, in short, to rebuild the immense and complex “puzzle” that is formed by the (inseparable) triad territory, artifacts, life”.

And in fact in this triad evoked by Alpago Novello there are much evidence of an ancient past where the wood was part of daily life and the architectural culture of Armenia.

In spite of a territory which today appears with a more reduced forest cover, the evidence of a widespread, and not only vernacular, use of wood in the such as the taste of the vertical, the dynamism, the dematerialization of the interior spaces. (...) The buildings were erected, mostly due to volcanic stone, carved with great care on the outside. (...)”

¹ Adriano Alpago Novello, in AA.VV. Armenia. Incentro con il popolo d’AfrAsia, Tipolitografia Armenia Il Barbacane, Venezia, 1987

² Adriano Alpago Novello, in AA.VV. Armenia. Incentro con il popolo d’AfrAsia, Tipolitografia Armenia Il Barbacane, Venezia, 1987
Armenian architecture and in the daily uses, are numerous and bear witness to what in the past Armenia was more green than it is today.

As is known, the original name of Armenia was Hayk (founder of the Armenian nation), which became later Hayastan, translated as "the land (stan is a typical Persian suffix to indicate a territory) of Hayk."

According to the legend, Hayk was a descendant of Noah, the builder of the Ark of wood that would have saved the human and animal species from extinction determined by the flood. (Fig.01)

Some bibliists and theologians, among them in the seventeenth century, the well-known Jesuit, historian and German scientist Athanasius Kircher, put Armenia in the mythical Eden.

Certainly no one can imagine the Eden like an arid place, devoid of plants and trees. In fact, the Eden is always understood, called and portrayed as the "garden of Eden". (Fig.02)

According to the biblical account of all the trees planted in the garden, there were two specials: the "tree of knowledge of good and evil" and the "Tree of Life". We can find this kind of a symbol of life in other ancient cultures and civilizations such as the Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians.

The Katchkars, the famous Armenian crosses, would be merely a stylized representation of the tree of life represented by the ancient civilizations that preceded Christianity and whose branches/arms, to emphasize its mystical ancestral plant origin, sometimes bring fruits. (Fig.03)

Historical evidence of the use of wood in Armenia
A study conducted in 2005 showed that in ancient Armenia was heavily forested with approximately 1,200,000 hectares occupied by trees of various species also useful as a construction material.⁶

At 2005, the same research has counted approximately 300,000 hectares of forest, a quarter of the historical ones.⁵

Being in the past Armenia rich in forests, the timber was abundantly used by builders and craftsmen.

The State Archive of Armenia, the Matenadaran in Yerevan, preserves ancient texts that, through the miniatures, represent carpenters, joiners and cabinet-makers as well as examples of tools and uses of wood.⁶

⁵ In 2012 near the Lake Sevan, I believe I have identified the remains of a fossil forest with pieces of trunks of very big size.
⁶ Moreno-Sánchez, Rafael and Sayadyan, Hovik Y., op.cit.
⁷ A. Cusevelian, The crafts and mode of life in Armenian miniatures, 1987
But, aside from the evidence found in the indirect sources of ancient texts and iconography, there are numerous clues materials, those of direct sources, found in archaeological sites, museums and in some ancient buildings, of a very old and noble use of wood in Armenia. Some examples:

The History Museum of Armenia in Yerevan houses a precious wooden carriage of the Bronze Age (about 1800 BC) discovered by archaeologists in Lchashen near Lake Sevan.

In the archaeological site of Dvin (V-XIII century AD) there are column bases and capitals that had unequivocally, as the main structure, a timber element. (Fig.04)

We can find similar tracks at the Church of the Holy Apostles (Surp Arak’elots-874 AD), which overlooks Lake Sevan where are visible traces of an ancient narthex (gavit) with stone bases for wood columns.

Other important ancient wood works are, always by way of example: a wooden carved capital of 874 AD belonging to the Church of the Holy Mother of God (Surp Astvatsatsin) on Lake Sevan (Fig.05); a walnut panel, preserved in a private collection in London, carved in 1288, belonging to the Church of Holy Cross (Sourp Nshan) in Haghpat; the walnut carved door of 1212 from the Church of St. John the Baptist (Surp Hovhannes Karapet Vank) in Mush destroyed by the Turkish army in 1915 and now in a private collection in Canada; the southern walnut door of 1486, belonging to the Church of the Holy Apostles (Surp Arakelots) on Lake Sevan. (Fig.06)

From the photographic records it is clear that once there were carpenters and joiners. (Fig.07)

Today these kind of craftsmen are almost entirely disappeared focusing only in a few limited areas such as near the town of Dilijan and the around areas.

There was, until less than a century ago, a widespread tradition of wooden buildings for homes,
farms and for important buildings such as manor houses and the balconies of the cells of monasteries housing. Important function has had the wood, also in Armenia, combined with the walls in stone, as a seismic system composed of wooden beams arranged horizontally along the walls and sometimes inside the wall sections. Today, the few surviving buildings, which are wrongly not considered of cultural interest, are increasingly rare and are disappearing forever.

For sure up to the '30s wood has still played an important role in Armenia as evidenced by the working class neighbourhoods of Yerevan combining, a stone and concrete rationalist architecture with some elements, such as those of wooden verandas, typical of civil traditional Armenian architecture.

From the point of view of the forest heritage, the Armenian economic crisis of the '90s, following the independence from the former Soviet Union and the subsequent energy crisis that ensued, led to the last major blow to the forests of Armenia from which has obtained the fuel necessary for the survival of the population. Many wood components of historic buildings, often already in disuse, have been looted for the same reasons.

**The situation today**

Regarding wood, we ask ourselves: is the climate in Armenia conducive to timber cultivation?

The answer is yes it is. The climate in Armenia is the most favourable today as well as it was in the past. Maybe the problem would be to adopt an effective policy of safeguarding, implementation and regulation of the exploitation of forest resources that are now mostly in the north east and south of the country. A certain autonomy of timber, even for new construction, it would be very beneficial for Armenia.

There are tree genres of trees in Armenia, coniferous and deciduous, of good quality. The nut trees, much appreciated not only for the fruit, but also for the production of furniture of great value, are abundant. As shown above, their use in the past is still evident in architecture and art. These works testify to the completion of the architecture of the great craftsmanship of the Armenian people.

Today, however, only few elders know the ancient use of some tools and young people are no longer interested in the ancient traditions of artisanship.

On the initiative of a few sensitive people, conscious of the value of material culture, have sprung up in Armenia some museums that display the tools for manual processing of wood. The museum demonstrates the loss of the everyday life of an ancient craft and art. The ethnographic museums in Yerevan and Dilijan are an example.

Still present, but also in serious danger of extinction, are the traditional wooden buildings, now found almost exclusively in rural settings, called Hazarashen and very well described by Alpago Novello in 1987: "In the field of civil architecture, (...) deserves mention here at least the characteristic type of peasant dwelling houses, so singular as to be accurately remembered by historians such as Xenophon and Strabo (and also by Vitruvius in his Ten Books on Architecture), but

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8 Pibayan Boudjianian D., Armenian independence and deforestation, ICE case studies, n. 179, May 2006
which is found in use today. It is a sort of mound building, partially underground, consisting of a large, multi-use (in which sometimes overlook smaller rooms), square-shaped, with a central two or four upright wooden support and a kind of pseudo vault, consisting by a series of wooden beams arranged one above the other with polygonal, narrowing progressively upwards, where it opens an air intake and light, connected according to a zenithal axility the hearth buried at the center (tonir). This structure is called hazarashen (with a thousand beams, in Armenian) or darbazi (in Georgian). Such examples are found also in cultured version, in stone, in a series of tombs in Phrygia, and the system is also widespread in some regions of Central Asia, as well as in India (of rupestrian type)".9

I observed in 2005 a similar system at the Great Mosque in Yemen Sana’a (about 630 AD).

Very helpful was the study, published in 1972 by Papukyan, a real forerunner on the structural characteristics of wood in the Syunik region. (Fig.08) But scholars are still too few in relation to the large amount of work to be done before it is too late.

In Berkanush, settlement near Artashat, until 2007 there were the ruins of a church with walls made of clay and an internal colonnade hexagonal shape carrying a wooden roof. Today the remains of the church were been completely demolished and removed and a new building has been built.

Due to its favourable geographical location in an area rich in forests, Dilijan is a place where still today the use and woodworking is widespread. However, many buildings that characterize the small town are frequently abandoned and in serious condition. Improper uses, elements replace with incongruous materials, improper transformations, are at the order of the day and are quickly eroding or altering the feature authenticity of the buildings and therefore attractiveness for tourism in Dilijan.

The restorations, where they did it, unfortunately do not respect the authenticity of the material preferring the replacement and reproduction in style, contravention in this way, the basic principles enshrined in the preservation and internationally shared. In 2007 the old wooden elements were been removed and stacked in the area pending their natural destruction, while other old decorative items, dismantled, were waiting for their copy.

It was been documented, as demonstrated the case of the A breakdown of Pushkin Street in Yerevan, that sometimes the natural collapse of historic buildings with wide wooden component is artificially fostered through the creation, by men, of gaps on the roof. All this in order to speed up the release of areas to speculation. (Fig.09)

An old building in Talin, identical to that described by Alpago Novello in 1987, was already a ruin in 2007 when I saw it. Maybe today no longer exists.

9 Alpago Novello A., op.cit.
Conclusion

Art, architecture and daily life of historical Armenia, retain everywhere relevant evidence of the use of wood. These fragile evidences, sometimes also of monumental interest, reduce themselves daily for neglect and probably for unawareness of their values and meanings.

If we want retain the material memory, not only the stone one and for episodes, of the great Armenian architecture, urgent action are required. Starting from the exploring process of the survivor wooden heritage.
This first phase should be accompanied by appropriate operations of provisional safety measures to prevent the worsening of the decay situation and with the permanent loss of these irreplaceable examples of national culture.

Urgent also increase public awareness to avoid replacement or not appropriate maintenances.

For these reasons it is necessary to train new generations of professionals (architects, engineers, restorers, craftsmen) able to take care of the country’s past. Enhancement and care of the past that is, nowadays, not just a moral obligation and a cultural resource, but it can also become, through tourism, an important economic resource for the country.

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