

Tigran • Amiryan
Arsen • Abrahamyan

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Balat • Orphanage

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Temporal Communities x CSN Lab

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Tigran Amiryan
Arsen Abrahamyan

Address:
Balat Orphanage

*Tracing the
Multiple Pasts of an
Armenian School
in Istanbul*

Translated into English by
Mariam Yeghiazaryan

con • stel • la • tions showcases the results of collaborative research at the intersection of artistic and academic practice in blended formats and explorations that go beyond canonical forms of academic publishing within the humanities.

The series is a project of the eponymous hub for networked and transdisciplinary projects conceived within the framework of the Cluster of Excellence 2020 *Temporal Communities*:

Doing Literature in a Global Perspective at Freie Universität Berlin. Entering into close dialogue with cultural institutions such as museums, theatres, archives and libraries, **CONSTELLATIONS** conjoins methods and perspectives from scholarship, the arts and knowledge formations beyond the university.

Textem Verlag

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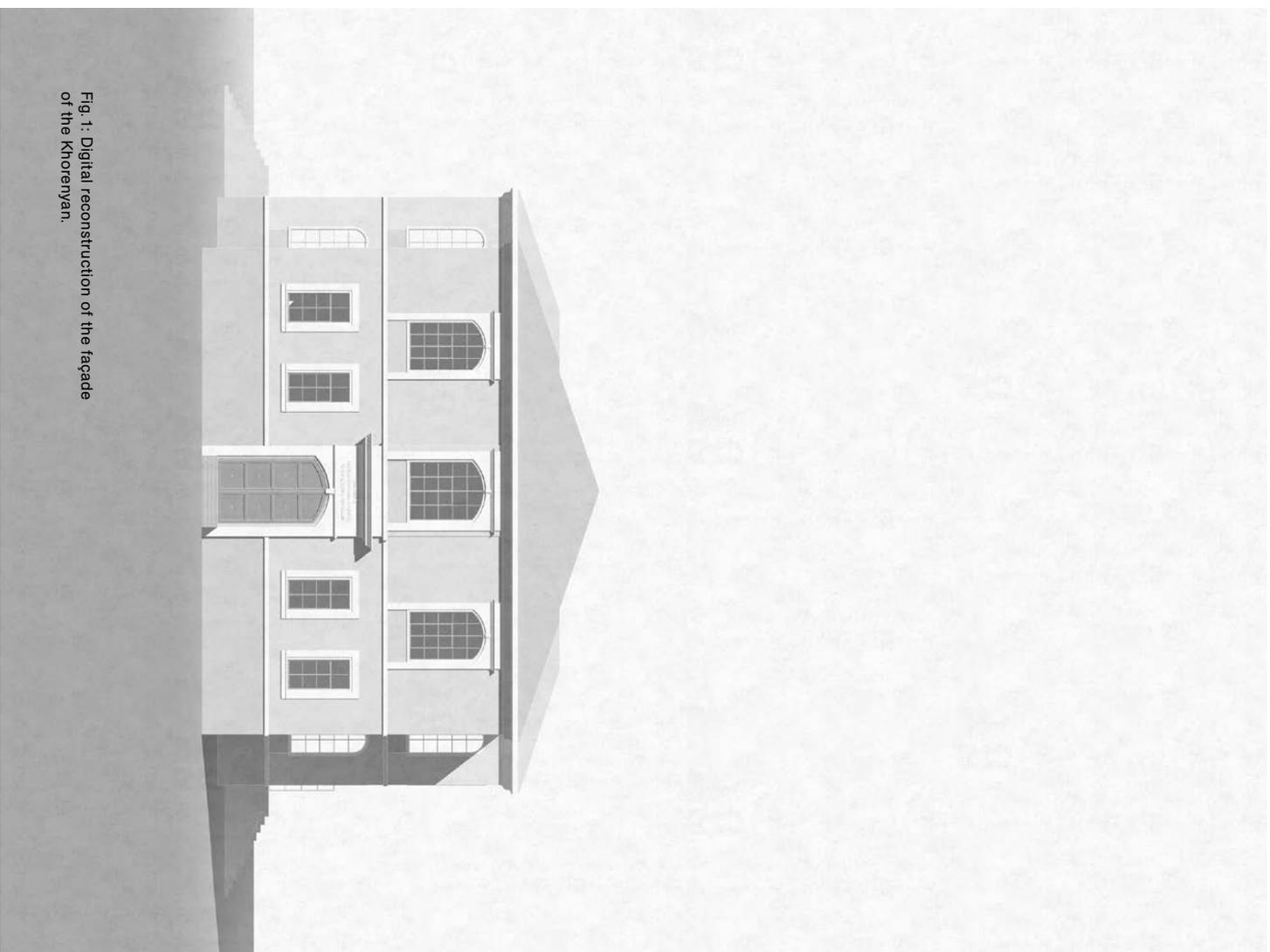


Fig. 1: Digital reconstruction of the façade of the Khorenyan.

time. The archive, according to late twentieth-century philosophical critiques, is not simply a static collection of artefacts, and this is exactly what we experienced: we encountered the archival record not as a definitively catalogued, inert relic of the past, but as what can only be described as a living organism. Together with volunteers from the Armenian community—including Karin Şeşetyan, Antranik Avitöglü, and many others—Iren Bıçakçı, Lara Çakmak, and Deniz Derya Dertli meticulously sifted through vast collections of documents on a daily basis, digitising and organising them. This was more than a scholarly examination: the work conducted represented a form of archival co-existence and, at the same time, an integral part of community life, an act of care for a shared past. Many of the thousands upon thousands of pages of archival material had been in very poor condition for decades or even centuries, appearing yellowed and partially damaged due to exposure to cold, moisture, and sunlight. The task was further complicated by the fact that the Armenian language has undergone extensive and numerous transformations over the centuries, and some documents were written in Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish, and French, necessitating extensive linguistic research. We sincerely believe that the tremendous effort of the Hrant Dink Foundation's archival team deserves to be honoured in a dedicated book, which is yet to be written. For the time being, we want to express our heartfelt gratitude to the entire archival department as well as to our friend and colleague Talin Süzme, responsible for the Turkey-Armenia dialogue programme, for the opportunity to participate in this process and gain a unique experience that, although brief, was immensely valuable.

In parallel with our archival research, one of us engaged with the neighbourhood through the eyes of an architect and urbanist, while the other approached it through the stories and memories of local residents and literary narratives of the past. Throughout our fieldwork, we were comprehensively supported by the Balat Foundation and the Surb Hreshdagabed (Saint Archangel) Church. We extend our deep appreciation to the Foundation and to the church's clergy, who opened to us the doors of the last stronghold of Armenian life and memory in the borough. Never to be forgotten is the day when, busily gathering oral histories, conducting urban analysis, and exploring archival documents, we were invited to witness the Easter liturgy at Surb Hreshdagabed, where, over several hours, the singing of the children's choir filled the very space studied by us as a place of childhood from which children's voices were conspicuously absent.

As we observed the digitisation of the Khorenyan Schools' archive, different thoughts crossed our minds. On the one hand, the community's determination to safeguard memory against the ravages of time was evident; on the other hand, as the documents were increasingly transformed into numbers and digital files, we became ever more concerned about the fate of the physical space that embodied the neighbourhood's past. One of the places where earth and stone still keep alive the memory of the Armenians of Balat is the Edirnekapi Cemetery: here, one can still see tombstones carrying the toponymic marker 'Balateci' that for two centuries have preserved not only the names of the Khorenyan's renowned founders and benefactors, but also those of teachers and pupils, the most modest participants in the educational process. This vast archive, engraved into stone, would merely be an archaeological site, were it not for the devotion and hard work of its guardian and archivist, Romanos Vartkes Cezveciyan, who has dedicated nearly half of his life to documenting the fate of Balat's Armenian community. An alumnus of the Khorenyan, he knows the institution from his own lived experience rather than from archival documents; he does not simply gather information about the past one tiny piece at a time, he preserves the very space that embodies it. This essay, as well as our broader research project on Balat, would not have been possible without Romanos and his generous assistance.

In 2024, we carried from Istanbul new knowledge, priceless experiences, and the aspiration to create a new book. Back in Yerevan, thanks to the dedicated efforts of the Cultural & Social Narratives Laboratory team, the impressions and inspirations, the ideas and facts we had brought with us slowly took on a concrete form. But this dream could only be realised thanks to the invaluable support of two institutions: Freie Universität Berlin and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. In 2025, one of the authors, Tigran Amninyan, was invited to a fellowship at the Cluster of Excellence *Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective*; the latter also kindly agreed to publish the present volume in its contributions series overseen by Anne Eusterschulte, Kristiane Hasselmann, Andrew James Johnston, and Anna Luhn. Being able to conduct our work within the Cluster's stimulating environment was a true privilege, and we are particularly grateful to Susanne Frank, whose trust in the project afforded us the opportunity to make the most of the material gathered in Yerevan and Istanbul. The original draft was extensively revised over the course of several months in close collaboration with

colleagues in Armenia and Germany, and readying the manuscript for publication would not have been possible without the dedicated efforts of Barbara Bausch and Martin Bleisteiner. Versions of this book in Eastern and Western Armenian are currently being prepared with the support of the Gulbenkian Foundation, which means that we will continue our daily work across different languages and contexts.

The present text was translated from the Armenian by our esteemed colleague Marian Yeghiazaryan. We thank Marian not just for her tireless commitment to accurately conveying the essay from one language to another, but also for her indispensable help in transforming it into its final shape.

Tigran Amiryan and Arsen Abrahamyan
Yerevan and Berlin, at the end of 2025

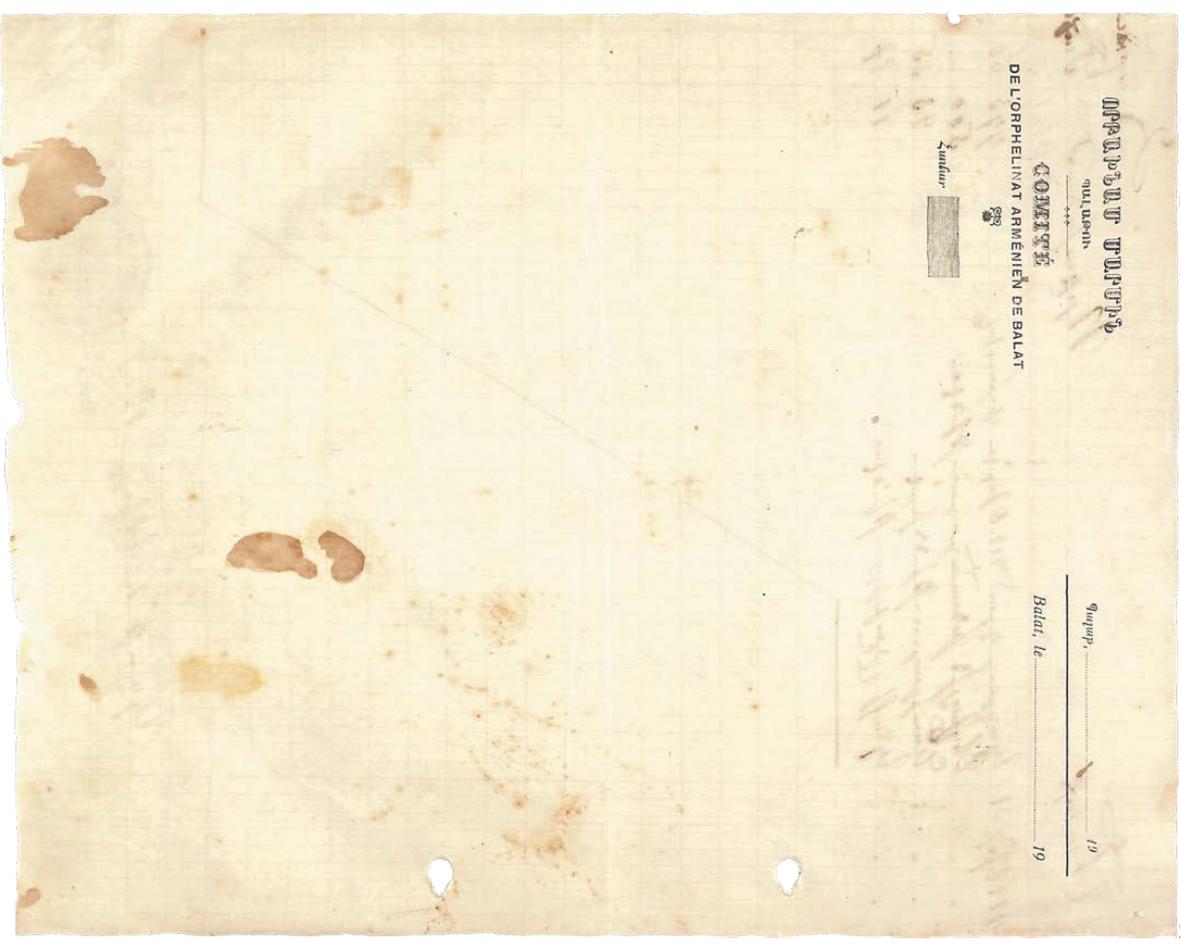


Fig. 3: The bilingual (Armenian–French) “Orphan Care Body of Balat” letterhead, used on administrative documents of the Khorenyan Orphanage.

“The Orphan Care Body of Balat” — addressing the complexity of a place’s memory

*Never forget this small building where you first put your
trembling fingers upon the ABC, its flickering, fragile,
yet pure light that illuminated your minds, O children.*
— Farewell letter to graduates of the Khorenyan, 1924¹

In the pages before you, we discuss the past (and its echo in the present) of the Khorenyan, an Armenian educational establishment in Istanbul’s Balat neighbourhood, that, over the course of its history, served purposes extending far beyond the remit of a traditional school by operating as an orphanage and a communal centre in the widest sense of the word. “The Orphan Care Body of Balat” is a literal translation of the printed heading on some of the Khorenyan’s archival documents, “ՈՐԲԱՆԿԱՆ ԿՐԹԱՐԻՄ ՊԱՆԱԹՈՒՐ”, a letterhead that appeared and disappeared in the middle of a drastic disruption in the life of the institution.² Characteristic of bureaucratic terminology

¹ Quoted from the farewell letter from the administration of the Khorenyan School to the graduating class of 1924, in: *Ziqwutluw unenqluquqhn lurnp’k’k’luw Epluqhn ulurdunululh*, Գեորգեաւ երգալիտի տաւաղաւ, 1933, էջ 9.
[*Five-Year Bulletin of the Khorenyan Co-Educational School*, Terzean Brothers Printing House, 1933, p. 9.]

² The archive concerning the Armenian community of Balat, the Surp Hreshdagabed Church, the Khorenyan School, and the Khorenyan Orphanage comprises more than 2,000 documents, mostly dating from the early nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century. It includes materials relating to the Khorenyan School and the Khorenyan Orphanage, such as correspondence, accounting records, information on members of the institutions, as well as internal regulations. These documents exhibit recurring features among which the “Orphan Care Body of Balat” letterhead, appearing after 1915, is particularly notable. Hrant Dink Foundation Archive: Balat Surp Hreshdagabed Church and Khorenyan School Collection, OASK5YO.

from the late Ottoman and post-World War I era, the phrase also stands as a metaphor for the Armenian community during that dark period, whose entire existence was suddenly condensed into a single entity with the sole task of looking after its most deprived members.³ The Khorenyan’s chequered past could be approached from many angles. Yet in what follows, it is precisely this aspect we want to focus on: its history as both a physical space and an intangible infrastructure of care sustained across generations—a perspective that grows from the tribulations experienced by the Armenian community in the Ottoman Empire and later in the Republic of Turkey, as well as from that community’s persistent efforts at self-support and self-assertion.

Our approach revolves around documents and narratives produced by Armenians, honouring their legacy as agents in the telling of their own (hi)story. In the Ottoman Empire of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, archives primarily served the needs of the imperial bureaucracy; yet the Khorenyan’s archive also became a form of self-preservation—after all, it was compiled and safeguarded by the inhabitants of Balat themselves. The Khorenyan Orphanage, despite—or maybe because—of its appearance and disappearance over a brief period of time, forms an essential part of the neighbourhood’s cultural identity: it captures the very moment when the local community became traceable through documentation and institutionalisation, or, in the words of Jan Assmann, the physical embodiment of its memory.⁴ “The Orphan Care Body of Balat”—in the fabric of thousands of archival documents, the printed heading is not only a common thread that ties together the Khorenyan’s legacy before and after the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century; it is also a constant reminder of the shattering of the Armenian community’s future. If this essay foregrounds the fate of one particular institution, the Khorenyan was not an isolated phenomenon: at the beginning of the twentieth century, similar places of care began to emerge all over the region in cities such as Athens, Cairo, Aleppo, Alexandropol, and

³ Due to the flexibility of the Armenian language, the English phrase ‘caretaker of orphans’ can be expressed with a single adjective—*vorbakhran* (որսպետարան). In the everyday parlance of the early twentieth century and for a long time thereafter, the term ‘Khorenyan’ referred not only to a school, but also to an orphanage (Սննդարան, literally ‘a house for children’).

⁴ Assmann, Jan, ‘Communicative and cultural memory’, in: *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, De Gruyter, 2008, pp. 109–18, here p. 111.

