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The Ensemble of the "Seven Churches" – an Ecumenical Monastery Ahead of Time?

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article

**« The Ensemble of the “Seven Churches” –
an Ecumenical Monastery ahead of Time? »**

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Jost Gippert and Jasmine Dum-Tragut

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CAUCASIAN ALBANIA

AN INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOK

Edited by Jost Gippert and Jasmine Dum-Tragut



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Patrick DONABÉDIAN

The Ensemble of the “Seven Churches” – an Ecumenical Monastery ahead of Time?

Abstract: The ensemble of vestiges called The Seven Churches (in Azeri *Yeddi Kilsə*) is located in the district of Qakh (Qax) in the north-western part of the Republic of Azerbaijan, not far from the ruins of the famous Lekit church, a tetraconch inscribed in a rotunda (probably 7th century). For what remains today, the ensemble consists of the vestiges of two churches, five chapels, buildings, apparently conventual, and some other constructions with perhaps economic use, including a cellar. It was protected by a perimeter wall. The ensemble presents a certain technical homogeneity, however with traces of restorations. This group of remains, still little studied, is of great interest in several respects: its size, its typological diversity, the funerary function of the chapels and the kinship of the ensemble with buildings in the neighbouring Kakheti region of Eastern Georgia.

1. In the heart of Caucasian Albania, then in its medieval metamorphoses

The remains of the ensemble called The Seven Churches, in Azeri *Yeddi Kilsə*¹ (hereafter “YK”), are found at the northeast end of the village of Lekit (Ləkit, Lyakit), district of Qakh (Qax), in the north-western part of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The complex is located almost a kilometer and a half north of the ruins of the famous tetraconch church inscribed in a circle,² probably of the 7th century, on the road leading from Lekit to the nearby hamlet of Kötüklü,³ near the gorges of the Lekit river. Its geographic coordinates are 41°29'36" N and 46°51'24" E.

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This part of the Republic of Azerbaijan, between the Caucasus and the Kura river (the ancient Cyrus), divided today between, from north to south, the districts of Balakan (Balakən), Zaqatala, Qakh (Qax), Shaki (Şəki, until 1968 Nukha), Oghuz (Oğuz, until 1989 Vartashen) and Qabala (Qəbələ, until 1991 Kutkashen, Kapalak in Armenian sources), is in the heart of the ancient Caucasian Albania; Qabala/Kapalak was its capital until the 5th or 6th century. Most of the important monuments of Azerbaijan’s ancient Christian heritage are concentrated here. The fairly numerous

¹ National inventory number ID 4558 according to https://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yeddi_kilsə_monastır_kompleksi.

² For a recent and comprehensive update on this major monument of Caucasian Albania, with a detailed bibliography, see Kazaryan (2012-2013: IV, 31–39), as well as chapter 9 of this Handbook by the same author. See also Plontke-Lüning (2007: cat., 180–182, pl. 128–130; 2016: 169–173) and Donabédian (2008: 200–201).

³ Karakhmedova (1986a: 11) names it “Monastery of Katuk”, probably a variant of Kötüklü, and online sites devoted to YK locate it not in Lekit but in Kötüklü, perhaps because the land on which the remains of the complex lie administratively depends on the neighbouring hamlet, located a few kilometers northeast of Lekit.

churches and chapels dating back to the early Christian and pre-Arab period (4th–7th centuries) found there relate to the culture of Caucasian Albania. The region that is home to YK, located on the left bank of the Alazani, the ancient Alazon(ius), the Ałuan of the Armenian sources, is a part of it.

More delicate is the attribution of the monuments built here in the medieval period. Indeed, the last state formations stemming from the ancient Albania gradually ceased to exist in these provinces, the Albanian population which remained Christian gradually became Armenised for its miaphysite part and Iberised for its dyophysite part,⁴ and the political and administrative organisation of the territory changed significantly. The ensemble that interests us, as we will see, probably belongs to both periods, pre- and post-Arab.

Upon emerging from Arab domination, the status of the left bank of the Alazani, as reflected in Arab, Armenian and Georgian sources, had changed. This bank now corresponded to the Iberian province of Hereti, with Shaki (Šak'ē in Armenian) as its capital, a province which had merged with the district of Cambysene (Kambečan in Armenian) located further south-west, with, it seems, a mainly Armenian population.⁵ The Armenian component of this district is attested since Antiquity because, according to Strabo, Cambysene formed the north-eastern end of Armenia, between Iberia and Caucasian Albania.⁶ The Georgian chronicle *Kartlis Tskhovreba* reports that, still under Caliphal rule, in the second half of the 8th century, three Armenian brothers, Bagratid princes of Taron, settled in the Shaki region.⁷ Their probable descendant, Prince Hamam the Pious founded

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in Shaki in 894 a new kingdom which extended from the valley of the Alazani in the north, i.e. from Hereti, the province of Shaki, to the Kura River in the south, encompassing Cambysene, i.e. the lower course of the Iori River, which is the Antique Cambyses, the Kambeč of the Armenian sources.⁸ This vast region, named at the time Hereti in Georgian, Šaki in Arab sources, and Ałvank' (Aghvank) in Armenian texts, is called “Šak'ē-Kambečan” by Aram Ter-Lewondyan, “Šak'ē-Herēt'” by Aleksan Hakobyan, and “Second Kingdom of Albania” by some Dagestanian researchers.⁹

After Hamam reigned his son Adarnase (in Armenian Atrnerseh) the Patrikios (already king in 908–909¹⁰ – d. 942¹¹) who married the Georgian princess Dinar. From

⁴ Hakobyan (2020: 107).

⁵ On the history of Cambysene see Ter-Lewondyan (1988–1989); brief synthesis in Chaumont (1990). Concerning Hereti see, among others, Marjanishvili (2005), according to whom all the monuments of this province, regardless of their date of construction, belong to Georgia, including the churches of YK, called “Lekarti monastery”.

⁶ Strabo, *Geography* XI, 14, 4 (Tardieu 1873: 459). For testimonies of Armenian population and use of Armenian language in Cambysene and the Shaki district in pre- and post-Arab periods cf. Eghiazaryan (2011: 187–188).

⁷ Hakobyan (2020: 186, 189).

⁸ Hakobyan (2020: 183, 185, 223–233, 353; for the date of the founding of the kingdom: 225). See also Zuckerman (2000: 563–569) and Eghiazaryan (2011: 61–71). Aleksan Hakobyan notably renewed the vision we had of these events, rectifying in particular the place until then attributed to the prince of Khachen, Sahl son of Smbat, presumed stock of this new dynasty. For his version of the genealogy see Hakobyan (2020: 433). For the old version, see the genealogy of the “Princes of Schakē and of Hérétie” in Toumanoff (1990: 79–80). Note Constantine Zuckerman's reservations about Hamam's membership of the Armenian Bagratid dynasty and about his identification with a contemporary scholar and exegete named Hamam the Oriental.

⁹ Eghiazaryan (2011: 195–196); Hakobyan (2020: 185, 228).

¹⁰ Hakobyan (2020: 227, 229).

¹¹ Zuckerman (2000: 576).

this marriage was born a son named Ishkhanik (Išxanak in Armenian sources) who inherited the throne in 942 and who is mentioned in 949, 955 and 958.¹² Georgian sources report that in the second half of the 10th century, under the influence of his mother Dinar, Ishkhanik and most of the population of the kingdom, until then miaphysite (probably composed of Caucasian Albanians and Armenians), converted to Chalcedonism (dyophysite orthodoxy).¹³ The kingdom therefore submitted to Georgian religious and cultural influence.

With the death of Ishkhanik, this dynasty died out and, under unknown circumstances,¹⁴ at the end of the 10th century, the kingdom of Cambysene-Hereti-Shaki was annexed by the Iberian prince David of Kakheti. Under his son Kvirike III (the Great, 1009–1037), the kingdom that one can call, for this period, Kakheti-Hereti, experienced an “enormous boom”, according to Giorgi Chubinashvili.¹⁵ From 1038 until the very beginning of the 12th century, four Bagratid

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Armenian dynasts, from the Kvirikian (Kiwrikan) branch of Lori (or Tashir-Dzoraget), succeeded one another on the throne of Kakheti-Hereti.¹⁶ The first of them was the son of King David Landless (Anhoġin) of Lori, Gagik (1038–1058), whom his maternal uncle and predecessor Kvirike III adopted. Gagik was followed by his three descendants: his son Aghsartan I (1058–1084) who converted to Islam and managed to save his kingdom from the Seljuks, then by Kvirike IV (1084–1102), and finally by Aghsartan II (1102–1104 or 1105). In 1104–1105, the kingdom of Kakheti-Hereti was integrated into the unified kingdom of Abkhazia-Kartli, i.e., of Georgia, by David IV the Builder (1089–1125).¹⁷

2. The Discovery of the Yeddi Kilsə site

The first, still indirect, mention of the YK site dates back to the end of the 19th century. It can be found in the report by the Russian-Georgian scholar Aleksandr Khakhanov

¹² Hakobyan (2020: 433).

¹³ On the history of the kingdom of Cambysene-Hereti-Shaki, besides Yakobean (2020: 223–233), see Chubinashvili (1959: 22–24; Ulubabyan (1975: 81–84; 1979); Mkrtumyan (1979); Zuckerman (2000: 563–585, in particular 574–578: chapter “La crise chalcédonienne des années 940–950”); Eghiazaryan (2011: 176–197).

¹⁴ Hakobyan (2020: 272).

¹⁵ On the princely, then royal Georgian dynasty of Kakheti and in particular on Kvirike III, see Chubinashvili (1959: 24–25); Toumanoff (1990: 196, Table 92), who qualifies them, like their predecessors, as “kings of Albania-Kakheti”. Mamedova (2004: 91–94), for her part, reverses the perspective by writing that “a portion of Kakheti was part of the Cambysene region of historic Caucasian Albania”.

¹⁶ On the Armenian Bagratid/Kiwrikid kings of “Albania-Kakheti” see Movsesian (1923: 83–87); Acharyan (1942: 112 s.v. Aġsart’an [no. 1] and 435 s.v. Gagik [no. 29]); Chubinashvili (1959: 25, 27–28); Mkrtumyan (1983: 109–119, 130–131); Toumanoff (1990: 125, Table 18; 128, Table 19; 569, par. F, b); Mutafian (2012: 268).

¹⁷ Chubinashvili (1959: 27–29); Silogava and Shengelia (2007: 87–88). Despite the territory’s inclusion in Georgia, the Armenian component (possibly also including armenised Albanians) held firm there for the following centuries. Thus, in 1404, the missionary and archbishop Jean de Gaillfontaine, who had spent a long time in the region, wrote about the province of Shaki: “The majority of the population is Armenian, Armenia by the way is the country’s southern neighbour. But also Georgians, Saracens, Dargis and Lezgs live here”; see Ter-Levondyan (1988–1989: 321, 323). The latter author points out that the passage relating to the Armenian population and the neighborhood of Armenia is absent from the Russian translation of this text published in Baku in 1980 by the Azerbaijani academician Ziya Bunyatov.

(Khakhanashvili) on the missions he carried out in the Caucasus in the years 1892–1895. This author reports that, during his visit to Lekit, which he calls Lyaket, then populated by Lezgins, he was impressed by the number of ancient remains that this locality included and by their size, despite their ruined state. One building in particular, of which he mentions the remains of a tripartite apse and traces of a dome, certainly corresponds to one of the two churches in YK.¹⁸ As he could not find the toponym Lekit/Lyaket in Georgian sources,¹⁹

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Khakhanov hypothesized that this locality could be identified with the medieval site of Tsuketi, seat of the diocese of Eliseni of the Georgian Church, which extended its jurisdiction over the entire region.

However, it was not until the second half of the 20th century that scientific interest in YK began to appear. Published in 1963, the work by Mikayil Useynov, Leonid Bretanitskiy and Abdulvahab Salamzade, after a rather long section on the Lekit rotunda, contains the first – to our knowledge – specific mention of YK; however, this is reduced to a brief paragraph. It indicates the remains of a group of nine buildings, including several cult constructions, “probably chapels-mausoleums built a little later [than the rotunda church], in the 9th century”.²⁰ A few years later, the architect Lev Ishkhanov, writing about the ruins of a single-nave chapel discovered in 1964 not far from there, briefly evokes “a crypt – an underground vault of the kind that was present in the chapels of the upper monastery (‘Yeddi Kilise’) of the village of Lekit, [...] probably dating from the 11th–13th centuries”.²¹

The phase which allowed a notable advance of our knowledge on the YK site was the series of campaigns led by Aliya Karakhmedova between 1980 and 1986. Alongside archaeological investigations, these campaigns provided the opportunity to clear and survey the two ruined churches on the site.²² The results brought to the attention of the public served as a basis for the considerations set out in the publications that followed,²³ and it is from them that this Chapter is still nourished, pending further investigation.

¹⁸ Khakhanov (1898: 35).

¹⁹ Khakhanov (1898: 35) mentions Vakhushti Batonishvili’s “Description of the Kingdom of Georgia” of 1745, where the name is indeed missing. In a lengthy article on the *Saingilo* region (i. e., the northwest of Azerbaijan), M. Janashvili (1913: 84) published a short firman of the Ottoman Sultan Ahmed I to the Sultan of Ilisu, Ali-Sultan, of 1607, concerning villages around Qakh, which comprises the name *leketi*; it is not clear, however, whether this firman was written in Georgian or not. In his “History of Georgia”, the same author (Janashvili 1894: 205–206) had published a colophon of a tetraevangelion (named *magalashvilis*, i. e., belonging to the Maghalashvili family), which was written for the archbishop of Kurmukhi (Kürmüx), a certain Kirile Donauri; this colophon (also treated in Kekelidze 1945: 314–315) mentions a church “of St Nino, equal to the apostles, in Lekarti” (ლექართის წმიდისა მოციქულთ-სწორისა ნინოსისი), which seems to have been the primary name form of Lekit/Lyaket (probably deriving from the self-denomination of the Lezgians, *leker*). Unfortunately the present whereabouts of the tetraevangelion are unknown.

²⁰ Useynov, Bretanitskiy and Salamzade (1963: 33): “вероятно, это мавзолеи-часовни, построенные несколько позднее, в IX в.”.

²¹ Ishkhanov (1968: 62): “крипта – склеп-подземелье подобное тому, что имело место в часовнях верхнего монастыря («Едди Килисе») в сел. Лекит, ... относящегося, по-видимому, к XI–XIII вв.”.

²² Karakhmedova (1986a: 11–16; 1986b; 1986c; 1988; 1990).

²³ Let us mention in chronological order: Akhundov (1986: 215, Fig. 240 and 240a); Mamedova (2004: *passim* and especially 59–60, 80–82, 125, 147–148); Hajieva (2012: 3–4, 9–10); Plontke-Lüning (2016: 174); Khalilov (2018: 169, 204–207). YK is also presented in several online sites: the one mentioned in n. 1 above is in Azeri; the sites https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Едди_Килисе and https://www.wikiwand.com/ru/Едди_Килисе are in Russian.

[p. 392, with fig. 1]

3. Brief description of the ensemble

The YK complex includes two groups of buildings which are badly damaged and still overgrown with abundant vegetation, the site having been almost abandoned since the brush clearing in the 1980s. The main group, quite compact, was made up of religious buildings, numbering seven as its name suggests, and perhaps also of some presumed conventual buildings (fig. 1). It is on a flattened platform and was protected by an enclosure of which only a few portions are preserved. Two portals opened in it, the main one at the south-eastern end (fig. 2), the other one, more modest, at the south-western end of this protected area.²⁴ The second group, peripheral, was located on slightly higher terraces, consolidated by low walls, arranged on the side of the hills forming a semi-circle around the worship space. This group has not been investigated; it may have included dwellings and utility buildings.²⁵ A complementary defensive function is attributed to the remains of a building, on a height above the ensemble, called *Kilsə-qala* ('Church-fort'),²⁶ as well as to chapels, on the neighbouring hills, which would also have served, it is believed, as a lookout.²⁷

Considering the size of the complex and the number of sanctuaries, the scholars correctly concluded that this was a large monastery. According to the right characterisation of Gulchohra Mamedova (*Gülçöhrə Məmmədova*), it was the largest monastic complex on the left bank of the Kura.²⁸ The presence, in the same locality, of another complex, also considerable, not far from YK, around the

[p. 393, with fig. 2]

pre-Arab rotunda (fig. 3),²⁹ confirms that Lekit was a religious centre of very particular importance, as assumed by Aleksandr Khakhanov (quoted above).

The construction technique conformed to the medieval version of the Roman *opus caementicium*. As in the rest of the South Caucasian region, especially in Armenia, both South Caucasian and Anatolian, in most monumental buildings, from late Antiquity to modern times, the core of the wall consists of a lime mortar in which are mixed sand and stone chips; this mixture is poured between two facings. As in the neighbouring region to the north, Kakheti,³⁰ the facings are

[p. 394, with fig. 3]

made up of a mixed bond of pebbles and limestone blocks more or less cut on their outer face; brick courses are also used there. As in all regions where materials suitable for cutting are lacking or scarce, only the important parts of the construction are entitled, in principle, to regularly cut stones: angles, door and window frames, and

²⁴ Karakhmedova (1986a: 12).

²⁵ Mamedova (2004: 147).

²⁶ Karakhmedova (1986a: 11); Mamedova (2004: 147).

²⁷ Karakhmedova (1986a: 11); Khalilov (2018: 205).

²⁸ Mamedova (2004: 147).

²⁹ A schematic plan published in 1947 by P. D. Baranovskiy and then reproduced by several authors, notably Useynov, Bretanitskiy and Salamzade (1963: 33, fig. 26 which we reproduce here as Fig. 3), gives an idea of this vast complex, possibly dating back to the 7th century. According to Trever (1959: 304), this complex included “another church (?), a palace, baths, an inn (?), a swimming pool and a series of other buildings; that is to say that this church was probably part of a large monastery or a castle complex” (“еще один храм (?), дворец, баню, каравансарай (?), бассейн и ряд других строений, т. е. этот храм входил, видимо, в состав большого монастырского или замкового комплекса”).

³⁰ In his brief indications of the construction technique used in Kakheti, Chubinashvili (1959: 4) specifies that the limestone used here, called *širimi*, is travertine.

cornices. This results in a rough overall appearance, especially since the carved decoration is, and was most likely from the outset, very modest. The roofs were covered with tiles. The whole presents a technical homogeneity which can in part plead for a relative contemporaneity of the constructions, even if, in reality, the traditional techniques, constrained by nature, cross the ages. At the same time, one can observe in the masonry the signs of several alterations that are not easy to date. In most constructions, remains of plaster on the interior walls may suggest the existence of murals in the past.

In the main group stand out the vestiges of seven religious buildings. In addition, there are the remains of a few other buildings, possibly for residential

[p. 395, with fig. 4]

and economic use, including, it seems, a storeroom.³¹ Of the seven religious buildings, six are close to each other, grouped to the east of the complex. There is a medium-sized church and five chapels. A second, larger church stood a few dozen yards west of the rest of the complex, separated from it by the road that now crosses it and leads to the neighbouring hamlet. Both churches (fig. 4) were apparently domed compositions, one in the west was believed to be a domed basilica, and the other in the east, an inscribed cross topped with a dome.

[p. 396, with fig. 5]

4. Brief study of the main constructions

4.1 The western church

4.1.1 Description

The western church suffered great damage, almost all of its western part, most of its apse and all of its superstructures having disappeared (fig. 5). Nevertheless, thanks to the preserved elements, the observations and the surveys carried out in the 1980s, we can get an idea of its plan: a three-naves basilica, with two chapel-sacristies at the northeast and southeast angles, and three projecting apses. More difficult is the reading of the possible successive strata of its construction history. The presence of a dome is also shrouded in doubt. A first sketch published at the end of the investigations (fig. 6) offers a reconstructed view of the plan and shows certain modifications undergone by the masonry and the western part of the church, as well as the addition of an external staircase, to the south-east, which led to the roof of the *diaconicon* (south-eastern sacristy).³² A second plan, published in 2004, restitutes the hypothetical final state of the composition to which it attributes slightly more (a little too?) large proportions

[p. 397, with fig. 6]

(fig. 7).³³ The exterior dimensions of the reconstructed building, degrees at the foot of the walls not included, are approximately 27.5 × 18 m.³⁴ The interior dimensions noted

³¹ Plontke-Lüning (2016: 174).

³² Karakhmedova (1986a: 13, fig. 9).

³³ Mamedova (2004: 60).

³⁴ These dimensions are evaluated on the basis of the available elements and of the two plans, in particular that of Mamedova (2004: 60), which we have reproduced here with some modifications and additions: straightening of the plan and reduction from three to two of the number of rolls of the central arches.

by Aliya Karakhmedova are 24 × 13.8 m.³⁵

According to the indications provided by the head of the mission, it was a basilica covered with a cupola. The dome has disappeared, but remains of its masonry, according to her, have been identified in the rubble.³⁶ Indeed, the square space almost in the center of the naos seems to have been intended to support a dome. As for the body of the building, A. Karakhmedova speaks of a basilica with three naves, but nowhere does she mention any trace of a transept, without which there can be no question of an inscribed cross. We must

[p. 398, with fig. 7]

therefore assume, without being fully convinced, that the west church of YK was a domed basilica, a composition relatively familiar to Byzantium but foreign to the South Caucasian region (except for some churches of Nakhichevan in the modern period) which prefers that of the inscribed cross with a dome.³⁷

Almost in the center of the church proper (not including the narthex), slightly offset to the east, an (approximate) square is drawn by two free supports to the west and the two ends of the apsidal massif to the east. It must be assumed that four arches rose from the corners of this square and carried the drum of the dome. To the east of this square, the chevet consisted of a central apse and two fairly wide lateral chapels-sacristies with wide apses. The main apse and the two

[p. 399, with fig. 8]

apsidiales were manifested on the outside, to the east, by three fairly marked rounded projections. The central apse hemicycle had three windows. The two chapel-sacristies were accessed both from the sides of the apse and from the eastern end of the side naves (fig. 8 and 9).

The configuration of the angles of the (almost) central square, with a quarter of a pillar housed in the heart of each angle, and the system of support of the drum that it allows to imagine, with arches with two rolls,³⁸ conform to the formula, traditional in the South Caucasus since the 7th century. Opposite the two free western pillars, two engaged pillars protruded from the inner face of the west wall. There were therefore here, too, two double-roll arches. On the contrary, facing these same two free pillars, there was no pillar engaged in the north and south walls, nor any protruding arm on the posterior face of the central pillars, which means that the two lateral arches (which probably must have existed, especially if one considers the presence of a dome) rested on consoles.

The church had three entrances, one to the west, the other to the south in the western part, which was the widest, and the third one, significantly smaller, at the western end of the north wall. However, archaeological observations

³⁵ Karakhmedova (1986a: 13). The measurements given by Karakhmedova (1986c: 16) are 23.8 × 13.8 m.

³⁶ Karakhmedova (1986a: 13). The author does not provide a description or a photograph of the fragments of the dome. Nevertheless Mamedova (2004: 60 and 148), Hajieva (2012: 4) and Khalilov (2018: 206) express no doubt about the existence here of a dome, added, as A. Karakhmedova asserts (see below), during a restoration; G. Mamedova calls the church a “domed basilica”.

³⁷ For a comparative study of these two compositions, “basilica with a cupola” and “inscribed cross with a cupola”, and their main representatives see Mnatsakanyan (1989). Thanks to the crossing of two naves, following the introduction of the transept (present in Tekor, Armenia, probably since the end of the 5th century, cf. Donabédian 2008: 54–55 and 103) which crosses the central longitudinal nave, the base of the drum of the dome is reinforced by the buttresses of four barrels. The inscribed cross is thus endowed with a resistance capacity particularly valuable in a region of high seismic activity.

³⁸ The plan of Mamedova (2004: 60) shows a configuration with three rolls for the four arches of the square carrying the dome. Assuming this drawing was wrong, we reduced the number of these rolls to two on the modified version of this plan, in accordance with that of Karakhmedova (1986a).

[p. 400, with fig. 9]

enabled Aliya Karakhmedova to detect, it seems, among some transformations undergone by the north façade, the walling of a door which, as shown in the plan she published, was located opposite the one that opened in the south façade, and was a little wider.³⁹ Note that these two doors (assuming, in the north, the

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existence of the door then walled up) opened in part on the free pillars inside the naos, which could suggest that the former were older than the latter. We will observe the same curiosity in the position of the doors of the eastern church. It is not known whether the small door at the northwest end of the church could be a later addition.

A pair of windows were pierced, according to Karakhmedova's plan, in the center of the northern end of the transverse bay before the apse (figures 6 and 8). On the plan of Mamedova (2004), applying a principle of symmetry, a pair of windows is also drawn in the center of the southern end (fig. 7). If this were indeed the case in the old building, one could see there, in the absence of a transept, the desire to highlight the central space crowned by the dome.⁴⁰

The western façade of YK's western church was bordered by a transverse narthex (much wider than long) of which little remains. Here again, investigations in the 1980s showed, according to A. Karakhmedova, that the walls separating the narthex from the three naves of the church were not original, but were added. According to the same author, taken up in particular by G. Mamedova,⁴¹ this means that the narthex results from a reorganisation of the western part of the church, that there was initially a second pair of pillars to the west of the first, that the three naves extended to the west wall and the church originally appeared as a basilica with three naves without a dome. A. Karakhmedova indeed supposes a radical reworking of the construction in the 7th–8th centuries (see below), marked mainly by the introduction of the dome.⁴²

All the windows were splayed (opening wider inwards: fig. 8). No element of sculpted decoration is preserved. Certain portions of the internal bond retain traces of plastering which may suggest a painted decoration. A portion of three-step band was unearthed at the bottom of the north façade, indicating that such a device was certainly present all around the building.

After the investigations of the 1980s, A. Karakhmedova presented a chronology of the construction in three stages. It is based on archaeological data obtained from surveys carried out under the ground of the church to a depth, she specifies, of two meters, but of which she does not detail the results nor document them; she only invokes “fragments of ceramic and tiles”.⁴³ These

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soundings revealed, she says, three strata in the history of the construction of the building: 5th–6th centuries, 7th–8th centuries and 11th–12th centuries. This chronology, the foundations of which are not known, is taken up by most of the successive researchers. According to the author, the decisive stage marked by the introduction of the dome structure would have corresponded to the 7th–8th centuries, but we do not

³⁹ Karakhmedova (1986a: 14).

⁴⁰ The basilica of Sanagire in Kakheti, which we will discuss a little later and which is very similar to our church, has such a pair of windows on each of the two sides of the central bay; its central compartment, moreover, is, as here, almost square. However, Sanagire has neither a transept nor a dome.

⁴¹ Mamedova (2004: 60).

⁴² Karakhmedova (1986a: 15).

⁴³ Karakhmedova (1986a: 14).

know the basis of this hypothesis. As we have seen, observations of building archeology, for their part, seem to show that the narthex is not original. In the current state of the monument and of the documentation, it is very difficult to judge. However, it seems probable that the disturbances noted in the masonries, as well as the walling of certain doors and windows, reflect repairs and adaptations at various periods which are difficult to date.

4.1.2 Comments and dating

Despite the absence of tangible evidence (at least in the available publications), it is plausible that the church has experienced several reshuffles starting from an early Christian and/or pre-Arab stratum and that, at this initial stage, the church was a basilica without a dome, with three naves and two pairs of pillars. In such a hypothesis comes naturally to mind the connection with the great basilica, probably pre-Arab, of Qum,⁴⁴ neighbour of Ledit, a connection that several researchers did not fail to make.⁴⁵ We do indeed find some common features: the technique, the two pairs of pillars (if we accept that there was a second pair of pillars in YK), to a certain extent the T-shaped configuration of the pillars, the absence of pilasters opposite the pillars against the north and south walls, and the rounded projection of the apse.

Either way, with the current state of the file, we have to look at the structure as it is today evidenced, as best we can. Thus, despite the uncertainties surrounding the position of the dome on a structure with three naves and not on an inscribed cross, what we see reflects a great kinship with medieval Georgia. In particular, we observe quite familiar technique and forms in the context of post-Arab Kakheti. The plan with two free western pillars among the four supports of the dome, the shape of the chevet with three rounded projections, the opening of the two sacristies both in the apse and in the side bays, the three windows in the apse, all these features are as many links with Georgian monuments and especially

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those of eastern Georgia, as we will see below. They are not characteristic of Armenia or, as far as we can tell, of Caucasian Albania, except for the triple fenestration of the apse.

In Armenia, in churches with a dome on an inscribed cross, the two western free supports are rare and are found mainly in the 13th century within the framework of Chalcedonian communities, that is to say under Georgian influence.⁴⁶ As for the sacristies, in Armenian churches with a dome on an inscribed cross, where they almost always have two levels, their lower level is generally accessible from the “side aisles” and, less often, from the sides of the apse,⁴⁷ but very rarely from both at the same time.⁴⁸ Such a solution is practically only observed in a few Chalcedonian churches,

⁴⁴ Updated notices on the basilica of Qum/Kum, accompanied with detailed bibliographies, can be found in Plontke-Lüning (2007: cat., 175–177) and Kazaryan (2013: 75–80).

⁴⁵ Mamedova (2004: 60); Hajieva (2012: 4).

⁴⁶ Donabédian (2016: 70-85).

⁴⁷ See the synoptic typological plates in Cuneo (1988: II, 721, 726–733).

⁴⁸ There are only a few cases of double-access in chapel-sacristies of Armenia in the 10th–11th centuries and only at the northeast corner (*prothesis*): St Saviour of Sanahin (Cuneo 1988: 293) and St Georges and St John of Hořomos (Baladian and Thierry 2002: 37, pl. 10; 55, pl. 22). In two atypical monuments, Erkan (975) in Upper Armenia, a large three-nave basilica without a dome, probably under Byzantine influence (Cuneo 1988: I, 707), and St Sign of Č'arahān (17th century) in Vaspurakan (Cuneo 1988: I, 571), both north and south chapel-sacristies have a double access.

and only on the *prothesis* side, i. e., the northeast side⁴⁹ (as is often the case in Georgia). Triple fenestration is also not frequent in Armenia: after its introduction, under Byzantine pressure, during the Golden Age of the 7th century,⁵⁰ it is only observed in Chalcedonian monuments of northern Armenia during the Georgian era of the 13th century,⁵¹ and very rarely elsewhere.⁵² As for the transversely elongated narthex, it appears in Armenia only in three 13th-century monasteries with Georgian affinities⁵³ and in a few monuments of the modern period.⁵⁴ These features are also not present in the buildings of Caucasian Albania which are known to us, except, as we have said, the three windows in the apse.⁵⁵ One conclusion is clear: the western church of YK is in all probability part of Georgian architecture or, at the very least, served a Chalcedonian community (of the dyophysite, Orthodox faith) culturally closely related to the Iberian society.

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A church in Kakheti is particularly close (also in a geographical sense) to ours: it is that of the Ascension (*Amaghleba*) in Ozaani (fig. 10 and 11), which G. Chubinashvili proposes to date from the end of the 9th or the 10th century.⁵⁶ Many traits are common, several of which are spread across Georgia:

- the typology with two free supports to the west
- the chevet configuration with triple rounded protrusion
- the presence of three windows in the apse
- double access to the northeast sacristy; concerning this device, two cases are frequent in Georgia: either only the *prothesis* benefits from it, or the two sacristies have a double access
- the absence of a pilaster on the north and south walls, in front of the pair of west pillars
- roughly the same arrangement of the three entrances
- the presence, in front of the western façade, of a long narthex (added, as in YK)
- the presence, on the inner face of the walls, of a coating bearing painting
- the extreme sobriety of the sculpted treatment of the façades (almost the only decoration being the blind colonnade-arcade of the drum)
- roof covering with tiles.

As for the differences, the main one is that Ozaani is an inscribed cross and not a three-nave basilica; the others are few and relatively insignificant:

- the main material in Ozaani is brick, with limestone rubble here and there
- the absolute dimensions are significantly smaller
- the proportions are a little less in width, if we compare them with the plan of Mamedova (2004) which, on this point, is perhaps not very exact
- the configuration of the pillars is cross-shaped (with barely marked arms).

A view of the recently restored Ascension Church in Ozaani will give a rough idea of the original appearance of the big church in YK, with of course the caveat

⁴⁹ Donabédian (2016: 73 [Akht'ala], 76 [Khuchap], 82 [Bgawor]).

⁵⁰ Donabédian (2008: 93–94 and *passim*: 105, 108, 119, 126–128, 151, 158, 172, 175, 182, 276).

⁵¹ Donabédian (2016: 67–69, 71, 76, 82, 84, 86).

⁵² Holy Mother of God of Erkan (975), St Gregory of Kech'afis (1013), Hofekavank' (1279): Cuneo (1988: I, 154, 247, 707; II, 712, 716, 726).

⁵³ Donabédian (2016: 76 [Khuchap], 79 [Kirants'], 81 [Berdavank']).

⁵⁴ Cuneo (1988: II, 735).

⁵⁵ Mamedova (2004: 40 [Kabizdara/Qəbizdərə], 66 [Mamrukh/Armatian], 98 [Zeyzit/Orta Zeyzid]).

⁵⁶ Chubinashvili (1959: 354–363).

regarding the transept (fig. 11). It should be noted that there are other monuments in Kakheti close to the west church of YK. Despite a clear difference in composition, the remarkable domed church of All Saints (*Qvelatsminda*) in Vachnadziani, dated to the 9th century,⁵⁷ has a technique similar to that of YK and a chevet with three projecting apses (trigonal, it is true) and chapel-sacristies (cruciform, it is true) with double access.

[p. 405, with fig. 10 and 11]

[p. 406, with fig. 12]

Even more similar, although without a dome, the basilica of Sanagire near Vazisubani (fig. 12 and 13),⁵⁸ datable to the 10th century, has a lot in common with the large church of YK: technique, proportions, two free western pillars, apse with

[p. 407, with fig. 13]

three rounded projections, three windows in the apse, two windows in the north and south façades in front of the square before the apse, double access to the northeast sacristy, configuration of the pillars, transverse narthex, and interior walls covered with a plaster on which fragments of painting remain. The square shape of the space in front of the apse, as if it were designed to support a dome,⁵⁹ is of great interest and creates a special affinity with the western church of YK. As already noted, many of the above-mentioned traits are also found in numerous churches throughout the rest of Georgia, both in the 9th–11th centuries⁶⁰ and in the 12th–13th centuries.⁶¹

As for the dating of the big church of YK, it must obviously be placed within the framework of the period which we evoked at the beginning of this study: the

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end of the 10th and the 11th centuries, during which the destinies of the two provinces, Hereti and Kakheti, were united and their culture experienced a strong common development. This is roughly the probable date of Ozaani and Sanagire.

4.2 The eastern church

4.2.1 Description

The eastern church of the YK complex was also cleared and studied during the campaigns led by A. Karakhmedova in the 1980s. After a single-line mention in 1986,⁶²

⁵⁷ Chubinashvili (1959: 287–320; Mépisachvili and Tsintsadzé (1978: 100).

⁵⁸ Chubinashvili (1959: 123-129); Alpago Novello, Beridze and Lafontaine-Dosogne (1980: 466, no. 111).

⁵⁹ Chubinashvili (1959: 129) does not hesitate to speak here of “a plan of a domed church, precisely of the type of that of Ozaani” (“план, именно такой купольной, типа Озаани, церкви”).

⁶⁰ Bzyb in Abkhazia (Alpago Novello, Beridze and Lafontaine-Dosogne 1980: 309); for the chevet, Pitsunda (Mépisachvili and Tsintsadzé 1978: 112; Alpago Novello, Beridze and Lafontaine-Dosogne 1980: 295).

⁶¹ Cathedral and St George of Gelati, Betania, Kintsvisi, Pitareti, Kvatakhevi, Metekhi of Tbilisi (Mépisachvili and Tsintsadzé 1978: 183, 193, 194, 198, 206, 213; Alpago Novello, Beridze and Lafontaine-Dosogne 1980: 296, 329, 354, 370, 420, 448).

⁶² Karakhmedova (1986a: 12): simple mention of “the [2nd] domed basilica with three naves and three apses, inscribed in a rectangular plan” (“[...] трехнефной, трехапсидной купольной базиликой, вписанной в прямоугольный план”).

the results of these works and investigations were the subject of a short report.⁶³ In a brief preliminary information, Davud Akhundov contented himself with publishing two drawings accompanied by a very short caption: a) a schematic restitution of “the three-nave domed basilica of YK” (fig. 14, where a door is drawn in the eastern part of the north façade, contrary to what the neighboring plan shows), b) a sketch of plan drawn by G. Mamedova (fig. 15).⁶⁴ Several years later, the bulk of these results were succinctly presented by a few authors, notably Mamedova (2004);⁶⁵ the latter author published a new version of her plan of the church, which we reproduce here with some modifications (fig. 16).⁶⁶ This plan shows a cross inscribed within a rectangular perimeter. We do not know whether the three steps at the foot of the walls around the entire perimeter were drawn on a documentary basis or simply out of a desire to harmonize with the western church.

The eastern church is smaller than the western one, a difference accentuated by the absence of a narthex. The recorded dimensions are 19.7 × 14.3 m.⁶⁷ These two features – relative smallness and lack of addition to the west – seem to show that the eastern church was relatively secondary, while the western one was arguably the main sanctuary of the monastery. Although both were built according

[p. 409, with fig. 14, 15 and 16]

to the same technique and with the same materials, the eastern church is a little better preserved: part of its elevations remains, in particular its north and south façades (fig. 17 and 18), including the gables of the north and south ends of the transept. On the other hand, the superstructures have disappeared. The north and south gables leave little doubt that the church had an inscribed cross composition. This type of structure ensures in principle a good balance of thrusts thanks to the junction of the four barrels which butt against and maintain the central square carrying the drum of the dome. This is undoubtedly the reason

[p. 410, with fig. 17 and 18]

[p. 411, with fig. 19]

for its frequency in the South Caucasian and Armenian region. The chevet, badly damaged but still partly legible (fig. 19), had a central apse flanked by two chapel-sacristies with small apsidiole, the whole inscribed in the quadrangular perimeter, that is to say presenting a rectilinear front to the east. This is, after the inscribed cross structure, one of the main differences from the western church. Another important difference, which we will come back to, is that there was only one window in the apse. On the other hand, as in the western church, the two sacristies have a double opening, both on the sides of the apse and on the north and south arms of the cross. The configuration of the top of the chevet, judging from what its exterior looks like, is unclear. We will come back to that as well. Observations on the bond of the north wall seem to show that it was rebuilt or even, which is difficult to imagine, added, “which

⁶³ Karakhmedova (1988). The author of these lines was unable to access this publication. He borrows its reference and part of its content from Khalilov (2018: 206–207).

⁶⁴ Akhundov (1986: 215, fig. 240 and 240a).

⁶⁵ Mamedova (2004: 80–82, 125); Hajieva (2012: 9); Khalilov (2018: 206–207).

⁶⁶ Mamedova (2004: 81). Our modifications are: slight re-straightening of the plan, reduction from three to two of the number of rolls of the central arches and addition of dotted lines to indicate the dome and the vaults.

⁶⁷ Mamedova (2004: 80); Khalilov (2018: 206).

attests that in the initial construction the lateral [northern] nave was open on its entire length”.⁶⁸

In the center of the church stood a dome on a drum. As (presumably) in the western church, the arches which carried the drum rested, to the east, on the two ends of the apsidal block which formed part of the angles of the chapels-sacristies and, to the west, on two free pillars. At the angles of the square thus

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formed, the protrusion in a quarter of a parallelepiped lodged between the two faces of each support suggests that the same kind of two-roll arches rested on it. The arches of the transept were apparently slightly pointed.⁶⁹ But, and this is yet another significant difference (we will see why below) from the western church, the free pillars had, in plan, a very elongated shape due to a “rear” arm stretched towards the west; echoing these two walls and “coming to meet them”, two pillars engaged in the west wall of the church, in turn, had a strong extension towards the east. Consequently, the western arm of the cross was like flanked by two compartments, if not separated, at least clearly delimited by these two pairs of longitudinal walls. At the same time, as G. Mamedova noted, the extension of the two free pillars to the west improved their solidity.⁷⁰ Another device contributed to their reinforcement: a short arm projecting on the lateral face of the two free pillars served as a support for an arch which, by its presence and that of the lateral vault that it carried, counterbalanced the thrust of the central nave and its vault. The church had three doors, one in each façade (except the eastern one, of course); their layout is quite close to that found in the western church. There is the same curiosity about the side doors, largely opposite the two free pillars. This relative “anomaly” could perhaps betray a reorganisation dictated by the addition to the initial structure, almost opposite the already existing doors, of pillars capable of supporting a dome.

We noted above that the fairly well-preserved gables on the north and south façades make it possible to imagine how the transept, an integral part of the cruciform volume in an inscribed cross composition, appeared above the sides of the parallelepiped. It would be natural that, in such a composition, the western and eastern arms of the cross would be similarly raised and also appear above the side pent roofs, thus allowing the cruciform core of the structure to fully reveal itself in elevation. This is not, however, apparently the case with the eastern church of YK. Indeed, despite the damage and dislocations that its masonry has suffered, the top of the eastern façade, on its northern part where portions of cornice are preserved, seems to show that such an elevation of the central part was almost non-existent or barely marked (fig. 19 and 20). Perhaps as a result of an earthquake, the two wall masses which form the northern part of the eastern façade are slightly dissociated; we can guess, however, that, originally, the cornice formed an (almost) continuous line or at most had a very slight offset between the central part and the edges. It was probably the same on the west side. Despite its schematic character and as unusual as it may seem, the shape sketched out in the restitution published by D. Akhundov (fig. 14) is therefore probably relatively

[p. 413, with fig. 20]

⁶⁸ Mamedova (2004: 81): “Это свидетельство того, что в первоначальной постройке боковой неф был открыт по всей длине”.

⁶⁹ Mamedova (2004: 81).

⁷⁰ Mamedova (2004: 82).

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faithful when it restores a single saddleback roof covering with its two slopes the entire west arm of the church. G. Mamedova confirms this.⁷¹ The general photo from northeast, unfortunately very fuzzy, taken in 1982 before the clearing of the eastern church, at a time when the volumes and in particular their upper parts were perhaps a little better preserved (fig. 1), allows to get a rough idea of the aspect of the west arm. We also know that, like all other roofs throughout YK, the eastern church roofs were tiled.

Portions of cornices and window frames present on the eastern church, as well as the impostes of the four central arches, are, along with a few other fragments of cornices preserved on the neighbouring chapels, the only elements of sculpted decoration preserved (to our knowledge) in the YK complex. Large portions of cornices can be seen at the top of the façades and in particular, as we have just pointed out, on the slopes of the gables (fig. 17 to 20). The profile has, under the tablet of the abacus, a cavetto completed by a small torus. It is one of the prevalent forms of cornice throughout the South Caucasus, from the Early Christian period until the late Middle Ages. The impostes of the four central arches had a very similar molding: “under a large tablet, a torus transforming into an inclined plane”.⁷² In the centre of the north and south façades, around the window which lighted the transept, a rectangular frame remains, arched in its upper part, fairly well preserved on the south side and very damaged on the north side (fig. 21). The continuous body of moldings which surrounds the bay was apparently not ornamented, but simply formed of a relatively broad and bulging band between two thinner tori underlined by a groove. Finally, inside the church, on the plaster that covered the walls, traces of painting were recorded.⁷³

[p. 415, with fig. 21]

[p. 416]

4.2.2 Comments and dating

It is possible that, like the western church, the eastern one had an early stage in which it had a three-nave basilica structure without a dome, a stage which could date back to the pre-Arab period. The hypothesis mentioned above, of an alteration aimed at erecting a dome on pillars that one had to place almost in front of the pre-existing doors, seems plausible. However, since it is impossible for us to verify such a hypothesis, we must, here too, start from the state which is documented to us, despite its lacunas and enigmas. The eastern church of YK, as we have seen, is undoubtedly related to the western one by several common characteristics: its technique and its materials, the presence of two free western supports and the configuration of the central square, intended to carry the drum of a dome (if one admits its existence in the western church), the double access to the two sacristies and, to a certain extent, the arrangement of the three doors. It is therefore quite possible that both churches are contemporary, that is to say that the eastern one also dates back to the 10th–11th

⁷¹ Mamedova (2004: 82) notes “the lack of heightening of the roof of the central nave compared to that of the side naves” which “distinguishes [this monument] from canonical shrines of this type” (“отсутствие завышения кровли среднего нефа над боковыми отличает его от канонических храмов этого типа”).

⁷² Mamedova (2004: 82): “Капители подкупольных устоев образованы верхней широкой полочкой и валиком, который переходит в срезанную под углом полочку”.

⁷³ Khalilov (2018: 206).

centuries. We will see that several arguments confirm this. As for the dating hypothesis of the eastern church in the 6th–7th centuries, put forward by some authors, it is not supported by any argument.⁷⁴

At the same time, it is astonishing to find in the same ensemble, in all likelihood monastic, two churches which, although probably contemporary, are typologically and symbolically so different from each other. The rectilinear chevet and the single window in the apse of the eastern church certainly evoke the practices specific to the miaphysites, in particular Armenians and probably also Caucasian Albanians, as opposed to the triple rounded projection and the three windows in the apse of the western church, clearly oriented towards the Orthodox world. Of course, it is not uncommon to see, also in Orthodox countries, for example in Georgia, churches with rectilinear chevet and a single window in the apse, but what is surprising here is the juxtaposition of these differences in the same ensemble, around the same time.

Attention is also drawn, in the eastern church of YK, to the configuration of its western arm, with the partial demarcation of two separate spaces, almost two chambers, on its sides. Such a device is extremely rare in Georgia where it is observed, if we are not mistaken, and in a lesser form, only in the cathedral of Gelati (first decades of the 12th century) and, in a very different type, in the Cathedral of the Dormition (Bagrati Cathedral) in Kutaisi (early 11th century).⁷⁵ On the

[p. 417]

other hand, a fairly close and very frequent parallel is provided by the numerous churches of medieval Armenia and in particular of the monastic architecture of this country, with inscribed cross and four angular chapels.⁷⁶ Apart from its two free western pillars and the double access to its sacristies, the eastern church of YK seems typologically related to the Armenian monastic sanctuaries. This parallel takes on its full meaning if we accept for the eastern church of YK a dating close to that of the western church: 10th–11th centuries, a period when Georgian and Armenian traditions intersect on several occasions in the concerned region.

Such dating is completely compatible, not only with the composition of the church, with the pointed shape of some of its arches, but also with the general shape and the molding of the window frames (the same is true of the cornices profile, but as it is maintained through the centuries, this clue is not reliable for dating). Such window frames, with a continuous band all around the bay, are unknown on the monuments of the South Caucasus (at least those certainly dated) before the Arab occupation. The very narrow parallels that can be drawn in this regard point to the post-Arab period, both in Kakheti, with for example the apsidal windows of the church of Sanagire (even if the median strip is not convex, but concave: fig. 22), and in ancient Caucasian Albania, with the windows of the churches of Kish, Zeyzit and Calut (fig. 23).⁷⁷ As we saw at the beginning of the present chapter, this period was marked by confessional pressures which resulted in the conversion of the population to orthodoxy. In the eastern church of YK, this tension-fusion seems to manifest itself through the marriage of the Chalcedonian pole embodied by the two free western pillars, the large opening of the eastern sacristies and the shape of the window frames, with the miaphysite pole

⁷⁴ Mamedova (2004: 82, 125); Hajieva (2012: 9); Khalilov (2018: 207).

⁷⁵ Mépisachvili and Tsintsadzé (1978: 142, 183); Alpago Novello, Beridze and Lafontaine-Dosogne (1980: 329, 362).

⁷⁶ Cuneo (1988: II, 728, synoptic typological plate).

⁷⁷ Mamedova (2004: 45, fig. 13; 48, fig. 17 [Kish]; 99, fig. 59; 175, fig. 103 [Zeyzit]). Regarding the Calut chapel, our source of information is a photograph by Samvel Karapetyan.

towards which the rectilinear chevet, the single window in the apse and the west angular pseudo-chambers are oriented.

As we will see below, this part of the monastic complex seems marked, through the chapels surrounding the eastern church, by the memorial and funeral function. It seems possible to consider that the link with the memory of past generations encouraged respect for certain traditions that were still alive, despite the conversion that was underway in the second half of the 10th century. On the contrary, the main, western church unequivocally represented the Chalcedonian orientation which was then becoming predominant.

[p. 418, with fig. 22 and 23]

[p. 419, with fig. 24]

4.3 The chapels, their dating and function

The YK complex had five chapels, arranged near the eastern church. One of them, to the north of the church, is almost entirely preserved (fig. 24 and 25); a second, to the southeast, is partially conserved; a third one, to the northeast, has retained only its eastern end (fig. 26 and 27) and portions of the first courses of its other walls; the last two chapels are in ruins. These five chapels were small single-nave constructions with, to the east, an internally rounded apse, covered with a conch, the whole inscribed in a rectangular perimeter and topped with a saddleback roof. Two small rectangular niches were often carved into the sides of the apse, intended to receive liturgical objects. The length of the chapels oscillated between 5.5 and 7.5 m, and their width between approximately 4 and 5 m; their height was about 5 m. They were, like churches, oriented and had a door in their western façade.

These chapels are built in the same technique as the churches, with a generally rustic masonry, which, added to other arguments mentioned later, makes probable a medieval dating close to theirs (10th–11th centuries). However, the chapel located to the north-east of the church, of which only the apse remains, has a neat bond of well-cut beige limestone blocks, partly preserved on its eastern facade (fig. 26). The vertical arrangement of several of these blocks corroborates

[p. 420, with fig. 25]

[p. 421, with fig. 26]

[p. 422, with fig. 27]

the dating hypothesis put forward above, since such a device was rarely used in the South Caucasian/Armenian region in the pre-Arab period. The same can be said of the marked inclination of the slopes of the roofs. At the top of this façade, we notice the same type of cornice as on the eastern church. Seen from the west (fig. 27), this chapel presents a “natural section” which makes very visible the technique implemented in this architecture, as in the whole region, with filling in the coffering formed by the two layers of coating. The inner wall of the apse was coated with plaster presumably intended to bear paintings.

Aliya Karakhmedova gives the internal dimensions of this northeast chapel (5.5 × 3.8 m),⁷⁸ specifies that its walls are preceded on the outside by two steps in

⁷⁸ Karakhmedova (1990: 38).

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well-cut limestone (which we no longer see today), and makes two important remarks about its apse: a) the floor of the apse is significantly raised compared to that of the nave (two steps are still more or less visible today, see fig. 27); b) its height has been increased several times, from 48 to 55 cm, then from 55 to 65 cm.⁷⁹ Recall that the elevation of the apse, known as *bem* in Armenian (from Greek βῆμα), is, together with the altar curtain, specific to the sacred architecture of Armenia and was probably also adopted by the Caucasian Albanian communities close to the Armenian Apostolic Church. It differs from the devices which separate the choir from the nave, such as the chancel or the templon, which are practiced in countries with an Orthodox (Chalcedonian) tradition, particularly in Georgia. Let us add that the interventions aimed at increasing, over the centuries, the elevation of the floor of the apse are a phenomenon known in Armenia, where the oldest churches had a low elevation of the apse, while in those of the Middle Age the apse is significantly higher. A height of 65 cm would be entirely in agreement with a dating of the 10th–11th centuries.

The relatively high number of chapels in the YK complex drew the attention of G. Mamedova, who saw it as a characteristic of the monasteries of Caucasian Albania; she based this opinion on two examples taken from the Armenian architecture of Artsakh.⁸⁰ In fact, it is a widespread phenomenon throughout the Armenian monastic architecture of the Middle Ages, regardless of the province considered. Most Armenian monasteries have at least one or two chapels, either attached to the church or to the narthex, or close to them or at a certain distance (we do not take into account, of course, the chapels-sacristies in the interior of churches or narthexes, nor chapels-*khachkars*). And there are many monastic complexes in Armenia which have more than two chapels. Let us quote for example, in the province of Artsakh, the monasteries of the Apostle Eliseus (7 chapels) and of Bῑ Eghts'i (4 chapels); in the province of Ayrarat: Bagnayr (3), Haῑich (3), Hoῑomos (5), Kech'aῑis (4), T'eleneats' (4), Khtzkonk' (3);⁸¹ Gogarene province: Goshavank' (4 or 6), Haῑbat (4), Hoῑomayr (4 or 5), K'obayr (3), Sanahin (3 or 4); province of Syunik': Arates (2 or 5), Mak'eneats' (3); Vaspurakan province: Holy Cross of Alt'amar (4), St Thaddeus of Artaz (5 surrounding chapels).⁸² It should

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also be noted that, in most cases, these chapels had a funerary or memorial function.⁸³ It is the same in YK, perhaps because of the pervasiveness of Armenian traditions or related to them. What can be considered as specific to YK is the grouping of five chapels around a church; this creates indeed a certain kinship with St Eliseus of Artsakh, where the seven chapels are roughly aligned on the same north-south line as the very small central church, and where two of them are undoubtedly funerary.

⁷⁹ Karakhmedova (1990: 39).

⁸⁰ Mamedova (2004: 154).

⁸¹ These are three very small sanctuaries (with a dome), too small to be called “church”, and mainly funerary. On this subject see Donabédian (2018–2019: 199–200).

⁸² For these monasteries see Cuneo (1988: I, 152 [Kech'aῑis], 172 [T'eleneats'], 248–249 [Haῑich], 278–279 [Hoῑomayr], 288 [K'obayr], 291 [Sanahin], 302–303 and 310 [Haῑbat], 348, 350 [Goshavank'], 378–379 [Mak'eneats'], 383 [Arates], 435 [Bῑ Eghts'i], 456–457 [Apostle Eliseus], 639 [Khtzkonk'], 646–648 [Bagnayr], 673–678 [Hoῑomos]). For Alt'amar see Cuneo (1988: I, 556) and Der-Nersessian and Vahramian (1974: 99); for St Thaddeus, Kleiss *et al.* (1971: 60).

⁸³ The Armenian term *matuῑ(n)*, which is translated into English as “chapel”, comes from the Greek *μαρτύριον*; in other words, in Armenian perception, a chapel is a small sanctuary with a primarily martyrial (memorial/funerary) function. See Donabédian (2018–2019: 199, n. 15).

Annegret Plontke-Lüning specifies that three of YK's chapels had crypts which, she believes, housed the graves of members of aristocratic families.⁸⁴ Indeed, from the 1960s, a memorial and funerary function was noted in the “chapels-mausoleums” of YK.⁸⁵ The scholar responsible for the investigations carried out on the site in the 1980s confirms the presence of several funerary arrangements in the monastic area. Two of them do not seem to be associated, at least directly, with the chapels and have unusual, even enigmatic characteristics.

Aliya Karakhmedova thus indicates, in 1980–81, to the south-west (?) of the complex a “vault/tomb” (*склеп*) whose north wall measures 11.4 m in length, a construction that has undergone, she writes, damage and reconstructions and where fragments of ceramic, especially painted and lustred, and tiles from various periods, from Late Antiquity to the 11th–12th centuries have been discovered.⁸⁶ In a later report, the same author specifies that this mausoleum had a rectangular-trapezoidal plan, had preserved traces of a vault, as well as fragments of tiles from its roof and, we are not told why, could be dated to the 4th–5th centuries.⁸⁷ The same author reports the discovery, in 1982, to the north-west (?) of the ensemble, of a semi-hypogeum with a slightly trapezoidal plan (length 5.2 m, width North 2.4 m, South 2.1 m), the ground of which was 1.6 m below the current ground and which was accessed by a staircase with several steps. She calls it again a “vault/tomb”. Like the previous one, this new vault was empty of any burial, had its entrance from the south side and was oriented from south to north. Fragments of lustrous ceramic dishes and tiles from the 11th–12th centuries have been found there, but the building can be dated, she believes, still without providing a basis, to the 7th–8th centuries.⁸⁸

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On the other hand, according to A. Karakhmedova, a funerary function is very clearly attached to the northeast chapel mentioned above (fig. 26 and 27). There were indeed, near the western entrance, against the remains of the side walls (interior faces of the north and south walls), two tombs, each with two superimposed sepulchres of which the lower, visible only on the south side, was located below ground level.⁸⁹ These facilities were badly damaged and empty when they were examined in 1982. The tomb on the north side, if we understand the description correctly, had the appearance of a longitudinal box made of stones placed vertically (as in medieval Armenian tombs), surmounted by a “two-slope” cover (which therefore looked like the lid of a sarcophagus). The external dimensions noted are 2.8 × 1 m, and 90 cm high, with walls 30–35 cm thick; the internal dimensions were 2 × 0.65 m. On the south side, the tomb was much smaller, almost square (the tank is still partially visible, to the right of the entrance). Its dimensions are according to A. Karakhmedova 116 × 84 cm, and 75 cm high, with walls 14 to 46 cm thick.

It is therefore clear that the funerary function was very present in the monastic ensemble of YK. There was undoubtedly one and very probably several chapels dedicated to this function, necessarily bearing an attachment to ancestral tradition. In addition, a clear Armenian or related tropism emerges from the elevation of the apse in the northeast chapel, obviously funerary.

⁸⁴ Plontke-Lüning (2016: 174).]

⁸⁵ Useynov, Bretanitskiy and Salamzade (1963: 33), mention crypts under “chapels-mausoleums”; see also Ishkhanov (1968: 62) who, without further details, dates the chapels of YK to the 11th–13th centuries.

⁸⁶ Karakhmedova (1986b: 78–79).

⁸⁷ Karakhmedova (1990: 37).

⁸⁸ Karakhmedova (1990: 37).

⁸⁹ Karakhmedova (1990: 39).

5. A very provisional conclusion

The important monastic complex of YK, the largest on the entire left bank of the Kura, located in what looks much like a vast religious metropolis, is of major interest as a witness to the history of the northern territories of the former Caucasian Albania. Through the first strata, still difficult to apprehend, of its constructions, it probably illustrates the early Christian and pre-Arab period of this great formation which is still poorly known. Then in the medieval form that its buildings take to us, the complex reflects the situation of a world undergoing profound change. We see the marriage of traits relating to the culture being propagated in the course of the 10th century, that of the Iberian society of Chalcedonian faith, with a substrate from an earlier tradition, marked by the miaphysite confession of a probably mixed population, composed of Caucasian Albanian and Armenian elements.

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The striking reflection of this is the juxtaposition, in the same monastic complex, of a main sanctuary with a clearly Chalcedonian orientation and a second place of worship, obviously secondary, which preserves miaphysite elements in the process of merging with the new dominant orientation. This center of interactions is surrounded by a memorial and funerary environment that seems to embody the resilience of an ancestral heritage. This ensemble, astonishing object of observation, appears to us as a melting pot of ecumenism before its time, but it actually gives, on the one hand, the fleeting image of a past in the process of extinction, while, on the other hand, the powerful mechanism of a metamorphosis is at work.

The present observations and hypotheses should be regarded as provisional conjectures, as they are based on a still very insufficient knowledge of the ensemble. Fortunately, a statement from the Azertac agency dated 31 July 2021 announced the establishment of an Italo-Azerbaijani scientific project to study and conserve the YK monastic complex. To this end, a team of young researchers is placed under the direction of two professors from the Baku University of Architecture and Construction, and the *Politecnico di Milano*. We want to see in this the promise that our knowledge of this complex and enigmatic site will soon be renewed and enriched. Let us wish this new research program every success, the results of which will be eagerly awaited and closely followed.

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Illustrations



Fig. 1 (p. 392). Yeddi Kilsə. General view of the complex from northeast. Photo of 1982, after Mamedova (2004: 150, fig. 83), horizontally reversed



Fig. 2 (p. 393). Yeddi Kilsə. Southwest portal. Online photograph Urek Meniashvili. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/f1/Seven_church_monastery.JPG/1920px-Seven_church_monastery.JPG

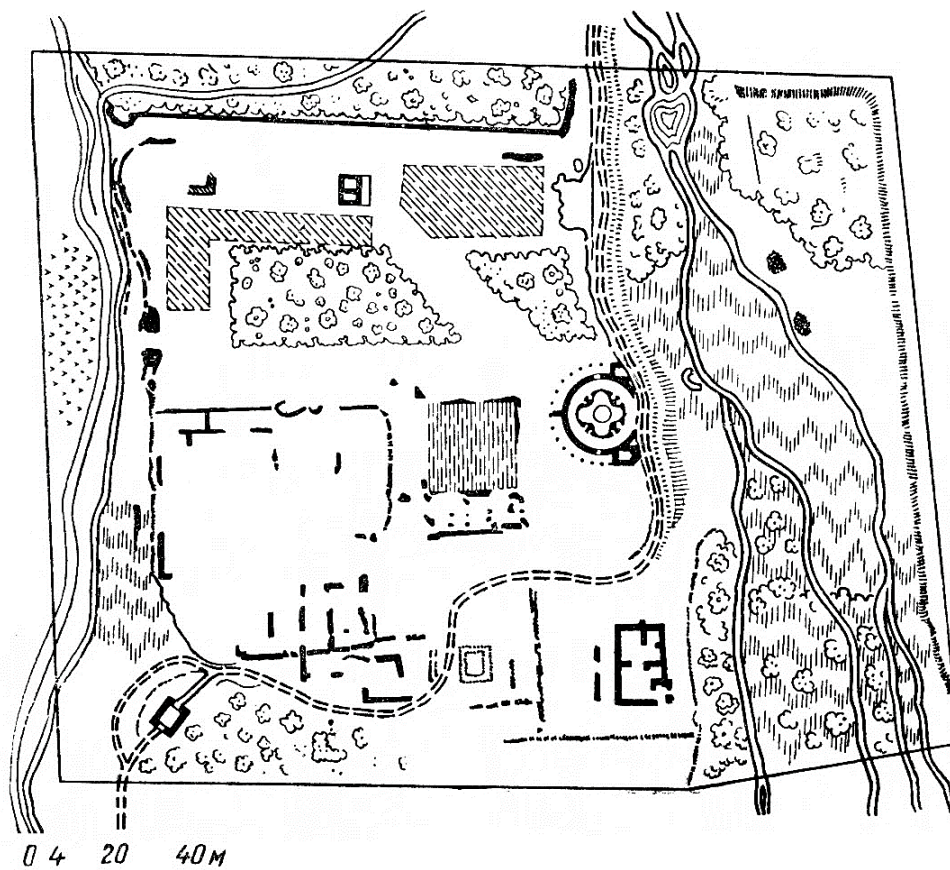


Fig. 3 (p. 394). Lekit. Schematic plan of the complex around the tetraconch church inscribed in a rotunda. After Useynov, Bretanitskiy and Salamzade (1963: 33, fig. 26)

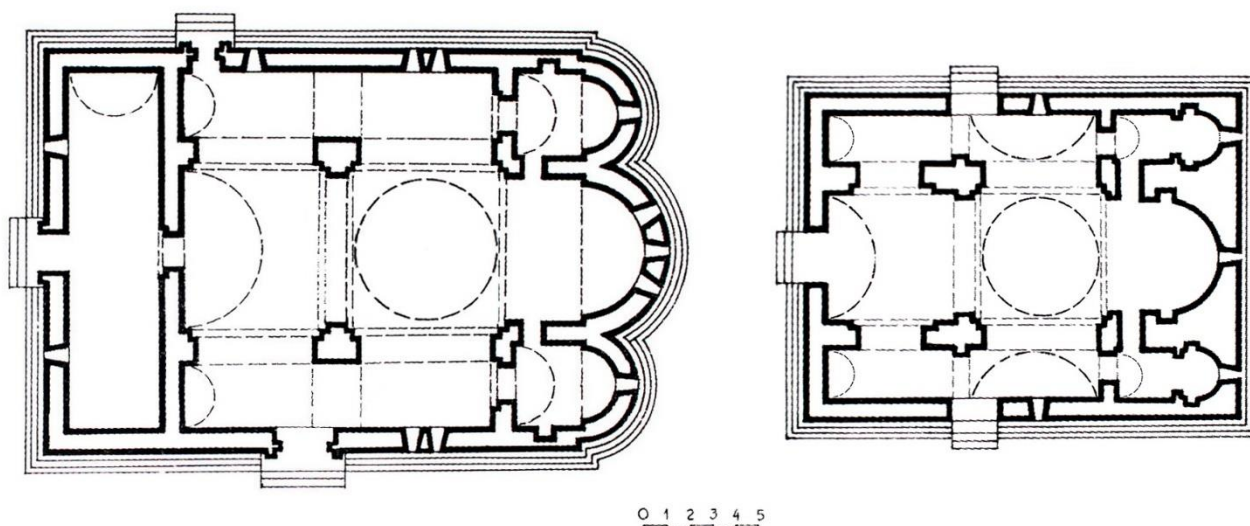


Fig. 4 (p. 395). Yeddi Kilsə. Plans of the two churches, after Mamedova (2004: 60 and 81), modified by P. Donabédian



Fig. 5 (p. 396). Yeddi Kilsə. Western church, general internal view from west to east.
Online photo Sefer Azeri.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yeddi_kilsə_monastırının_Qərb_bazilikasını_n_altar_istişamətinə_ümumi_görünüşü.jpg

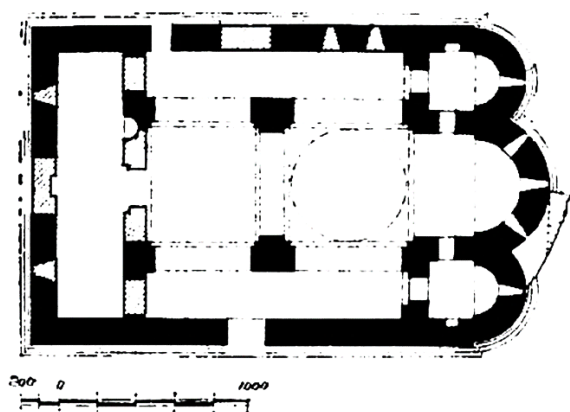


Fig. 6 (p. 397). Yeddi Kilsə. Western church.
Plan after Karakhmedova
(1986a: 13, fig. 9)

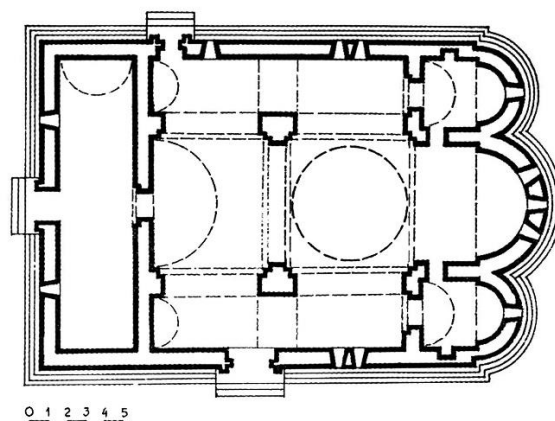


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Plan after Mamedova (2004: 60),
modified by P. Donabédian



Fig. 8 (p. 399). Yeddi Kilsə. Western church. North wall and northeast sacristy from the south. Online photo Sefer Azeri.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/2/2e/Yeddi_kils%C9%99_2.jpg/700px-Yeddi_kils%C9%99_2.jpg



Fig. 9 (p. 400). Yeddi Kilsə. Western church. Northeast sacristy with its two entrances. Online photo Sefer Azeri.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yeddi_kilsə_monastırının_Qərb_bazilikasını_n_altar_yanındakı_iki_otağından_birinin_kilsə_interyerindən_görünüşü.jpg

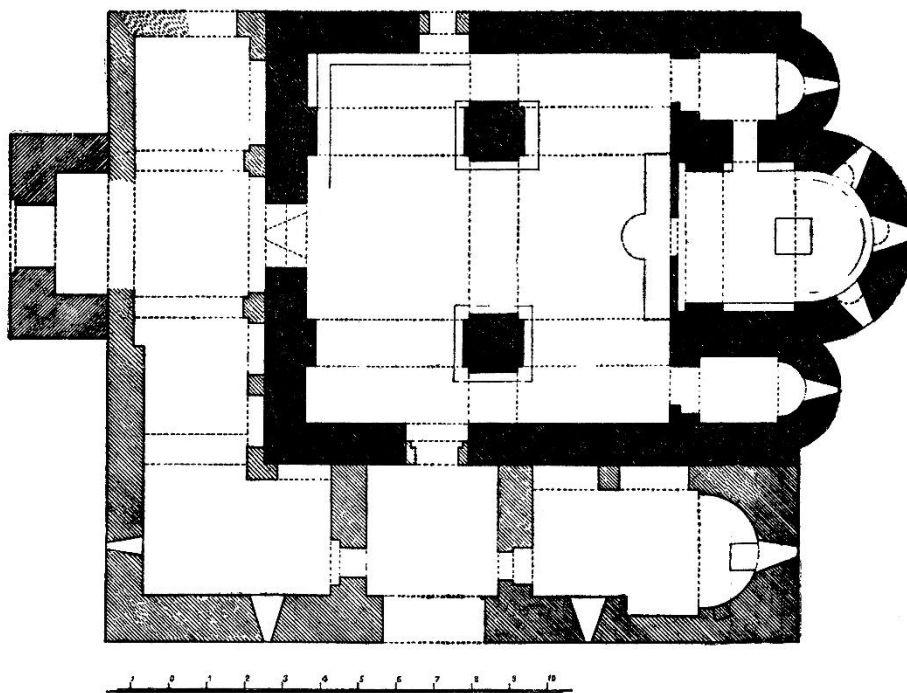


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Plan after Chubinashvili (1959: 356)



Fig. 11 (p. 405). Ozaani, Kakheti (Georgia). Ascension church.
General view from northeast. Photograph P. Donabédian

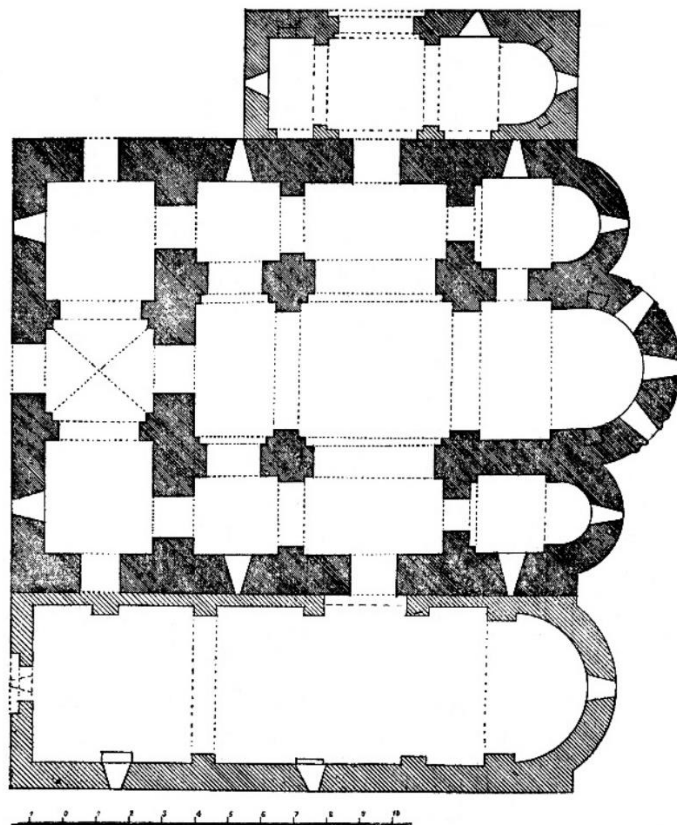


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Plan after Chubinashvili (1959: 124)



Fig. 13 (p. 407). Vazisubani, Kakheti (Georgia). Sanagire.
General view from northeast. Online photograph Tengö Kekenadze

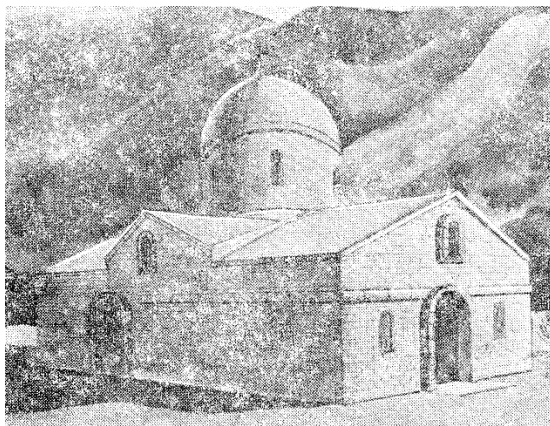


Fig. 14 (p. 409). Yeddi Kilsə. Eastern church.
Schematic restitution after Akhundov (1986: 215, fig. 240)

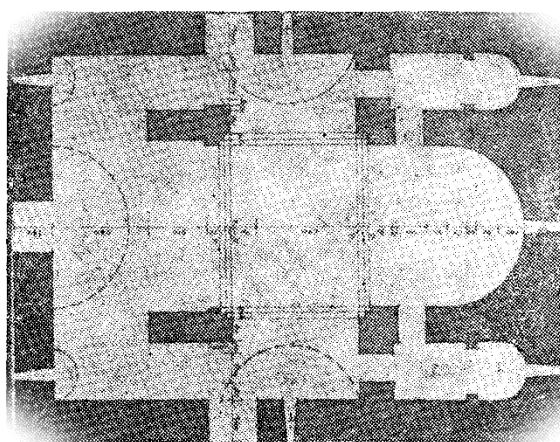
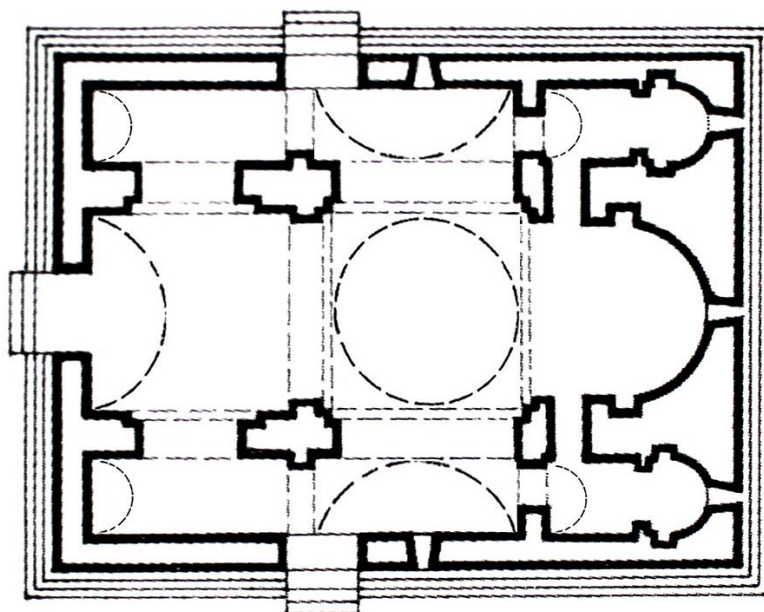


Fig. 15 (p. 409). Yeddi Kilsə. Eastern church.
Plan by G. Mamedova, in Akhundov (1986: 215, fig. 240a)



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Fig. 16 (p. 409). Yeddi Kilsə. Eastern church.
Plan after Mamedova (2004: 81), modified by P. Donabédian



Fig. 17 (p. 410). Yeddi Kilsə. Eastern church. South façade.

Online photograph Interfase.

https://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yeddi_kilsə_monastır_kompleksi#/media/Fayl:Seven_church_monastery_38.jpg



Fig. 18 (p. 410). Yeddi Kilsə. Eastern church. North façade.

Online photograph Sefer Azeri.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yeddi_kilsə_monastırının_Şərq_bazilikasının_ümumi_fasad_görünüşi.jpg



Fig. 19 (p. 411). Yeddi Kilsə. Eastern church. East façade.

Online photograph Sefer Azeri.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yeddi_kilsə_monastırının_Şərq_bazilikasının_altar_hissəsinin_fasad_görünüşi.jpg



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Fig. 21 (p. 415). Yeddi Kilsə. Eastern church. Central window of the south façade.
Detail of online photograph Interfase.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Seven_church_monastery#/media/File:Seven_church_monastery_21.jpg



Fig. 22 (p. 418). Vazisubani, Kakheti (Georgia), Sanagire. External view of the apse.
Detail of online photograph Nino Gvazava.
<https://dzeglismegobari.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/satavo-foto.jpg>



Fig. 23 (p. 418). Kish, Zeyzit and Calut chapels, Azerbaijan. Moulded frames of windows. Kish: photograph A. Plontke-Lüning (2004); Zeyzit: photograph Mamedova (2004: 99); Calut: photograph Samvel Karapetyan (ca. 1984)



Fig. 24 (p. 419). Yeddi Kilsə. Three chapels to the north of the eastern church.
Photo Mamedova (2004: 152, fig. 85)



Fig. 25 (p. 420). Yeddi Kilsə. Chapel to the north of the eastern church.

Online photograph Interfase

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Seven_church_monastery#/media/File:Seven_church_monastery_11.jpg



Fig. 26 (p. 421). Yeddi Kilsə. Vestiges of a chapel to the northeast of the eastern church, eastern façade. Detail of online photograph Interfase.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Seven_church_monastery#/media/File:Seven_church_monastery_9.jpg



Fig. 27 (p. 422). Yeddi Kilsə. Vestiges of a chapel to the northeast of the eastern church. Interior view towards the east. Detail of online photograph Sefer Azeri. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yeddi_kilsə_monastırının_Şərq_bazilikasının_həyətində_yerləşən_İkinci_sovmənin_ön_tərəfdən_görünüşü.jpg