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The Monumental Heritage of Arts^cakh and Nakhichevan: Christian Architecture

Patrick Donabédian

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article

**“The Monumental Heritage of Arts‘akh and Nakhichevan:
Christian Architecture”**

in

MONUMENTS AND IDENTITIES IN THE CAUCASUS

***Karabagh, Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan in Contemporary
Geopolitical Conflict***

Edited by

Igor DORFMANN-LAZAREV and Haroutioun KHATCHADOURIAN

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The Monumental Heritage of Arts‘akh and Nakhichevan: Christian Architecture

Patrick Donabédian

1. General Characteristics of the Architectural Heritage of the South-Eastern and Eastern Provinces of Armenia (Nakhichevan and Arts‘akh)

In Arts‘akh (today’s Karabagh), in the Middle Ages also known as Khach‘en after the name of the river crossing its central district, and in the province of Nakhichevan, as in the rest of historical Armenia, from the fourth century AD until modern times, cult architecture has been the main manifestation of an art almost entirely devoted to the Christian religion. Despite the tragic trials of history, and in particular the considerable destruction suffered between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 21st century¹—and up until today in these two provinces—, hundreds of monastic complexes, churches and chapels, probably around a thousand heritage units in total, have either survived to the present day or are fairly well attested in the sources available. We do not include here the innumerable “minor” monuments corresponding primarily to the cross plaques called *khach‘k‘ar*, whose initial number of several thousands was drastically reduced by the destruction of the very large cemetery of Julfa, Nakhichevan, at the beginning of this century².

Muslim worship is also represented in these provinces by several dozen monuments. The oldest are in the lower areas of Nakhichevan, where an Arab emirate was established during the Caliphate (8th–10th centuries), followed by Seljuk, Mongol and Turkmen political constituencies (11th–15th centuries). The latter were accompanied by the settlement of Muslim populations on the edges of the mountains that remained under Armenian rule, both in Nakhichevan and in eastern Arts‘akh. There are several Muslim mausoleums of the 12th–15th centuries, some of which are of remarkable quality, in brick in Nakhichevan, and one in stone, in the eastern corner of Arts‘akh, dated to 1314, which will

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be discussed later. A few other Islamic monuments reflect the establishment, in the second half of the 18th century, of a Turkic-Tatar power in the heart of the mountainous massif of Arts‘akh, then called Karabakh: two mosques in the town of Shushi are particularly noteworthy: the “upper” one, built in 1883, and the “lower” one, built in 1875.

The civil and military architecture is illustrated in particular by the remains of medieval fortresses, one hundred and twenty-four in total for the two provinces, caravanserais and numerous bridges (fifty-three in what was, until the autumn of 2020, the territory of the republic of Arts‘akh; and twenty-six in Nakhichevan), reflecting the volume of trade throughout the centuries. Arts‘akh, as the neighbouring

¹. See H. Khatchadourian’s chapter in this volume.

². See A. Ayvazyan’s chapters in this volume.

province of Siunik[՝], also preserves the remains of several princely palaces from the modern period: the residences of the *meliks* of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Also in Arts‘akh, despite the social upheavals of the Soviet period, the folk architecture still includes some ancient specimens of wooden peasant houses, of the *gĕlkhatun* type, with a form of dome called *hazarashĕn* with beams staggered in relation to each other, and a central skylight called *erdik*. It is likely that this very ancient tradition was one of the sources of monumental architecture, particularly for monastic buildings with a truncated dome. More numerous are the large stone houses covered with tiles (or metal sheets), built from the end of the 19th century onwards, which have features common to regions with a relatively mild climate, from the Balkans to the Caucasus, in particular long balconies with openwork wooden balustrades on one or more façades.

In Nakhichevan and Arts‘akh, the cities of Agulis and Shushi experienced a great economic and cultural boom, the former in the 17th and 18th centuries, the latter in the 19th century. In addition to the construction of numerous Christian buildings, this development resulted in the flourishing of urban architecture, which was one of the few examples in the Armenian world to be preserved until after the First World War. Both cities were largely destroyed when they were taken by the Turkish and (newly formed) Azerbaijani armies in 1918 and 1920 respectively.

2. Building Material and Techniques

The main material is volcanic stone, particularly basalt in the southeastern and eastern provinces; limestone, felsite, granite and schist are also used in construction, while tuff is less common here than in the more central regions around the Ararat plain. Although very present in the forests of

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Arts‘akh—but rarer in Nakhichevan, as in the country as a whole—wood is hardly used in monumental construction. Earth-based composite materials are also rare. The province of Nakhichevan is characterised by a fairly extensive use of brick in the late Middle Ages, especially for domes and the drums supporting them, probably to reduce loads and facilitate construction.

Subject to the same requirements, to be not only static but also seismically resistant, as in the whole of Armenia, the vast majority of the church buildings in the south-east and the east of the country are built employing the traditional technique of concrete between facings. This technique is similar to the *opus caementicium* used by the Romans. The stone is broken into small blocks and mixed with sand and lime mortar (not clay, as in antiquity) to form the wall core, while on both sides of the walls, the blocks, more or less regularly cut, form a covering. On the large buildings of the cities and monasteries, this cladding is perfectly rectilinear and the façades are bonded with great care. On the other hand, in Arts‘akh, as in many other provinces of Armenia, more modest monuments use stones that are less suitable for regular cutting, which gives the walls a more rustic appearance. Atypical cases can also be observed: for example, at Bĕri Ełts‘i in Arts‘akh a “pseudo-cyclopean” masonry is juxtaposed with horizontal courses of thin limestone plates. In churches that were intended to be decorated with paintings, for example in the Middle Ages in Dadivank[՝] in Arts‘akh, and even more so during the modern period in many buildings in Nakhichevan, the inner walls were covered with plaster.

On the roofs—in those parts of Armenia where ancient roofs are preserved—ceramic tiles, heir to the ancient Roman *tegula*, are attested up to the end of the 7th

century; from the 9th century onwards, they were replaced by stone slabs. These slabs, fitted in principle like the tiles, give the domes a flat surface and characteristic Armenian shapes: pyramidal, conical or umbrella-like. Arts‘akh, however, is one of the few provinces of Armenia to maintain, here and there, the use of tiles throughout the Middle Ages. The picturesque umbrella dome, which is one of the remarkable creations of medieval Armenian architecture, present in Arts‘akh in the 13th century—for example in Gandzasar and in Gětch‘avank‘ (Monastery of Gětich‘)—enjoyed great popularity in Nakhichevan in the modern period. Until the war in the autumn of 2020, this type of dome displayed a particular elegance on Shushi Cathedral.

Taking advantage of the stones’ chromatic richness, builders often resorted, from the 13th century onwards, to the use of bicolour contrasts to embellish monuments, which they systematised at the end of the Middle Ages, particularly in alternating horizontal bands and in a chequered pattern. The churches

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[fig. 3.1]

of Nakhichevan provided many examples of this (Figure 3.2). They also sometimes used contrasting materials, stone and brick (Figure 3.4). The church of St John the Baptist (*Surb Yovhannēs Měkērtich‘*), known as Kanach‘ Zham (i.e. ‘Green Church’), in Shushi, also illustrates a 19th-century decorative use of different materials and masonries—in this case, probably inspired by Western Europe.

Volcanic facing stones are relatively easy to hew and they lend themselves well to bas-relief sculpture, often with a flat surface, carved with wedge-shaped furrows rich in contrasts of light and shadow. On them, the great diversity of the bands of vegetal and geometric ornaments is effectively highlighted. This same technique is also employed on the countless *khach‘k‘ars*. However, more modelled and more prominent sculptures are also used, especially in Arts‘akh on the great monuments of the 13th century, such as Dadivank‘ and Gandzasar; as well as, sometimes, during the modern period in Nakhichevan, for example in Ts‘ėtna. The three-dimensional angels on the bell tower of the Cathedral of the Holy Saviour (*Łazanč‘ets‘ots‘ Surb Amenap‘ėrkich‘*) in Shushi, set in the round, represent the culmination of this trend in the 19th century.

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[fig. 3.2, 3.3]

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[fig. 3.4]

In addition to the technical field, the omnipresence and the importance of inscriptions engraved on the stone of the façades and the tympana of the doors should be underlined (Figure 3.5). Inherited from classical antiquity, the principle of lapidary inscriptions has been maintained throughout the centuries, up to the present day, on a large number of monuments throughout Armenia, and in particular in Arts‘akh and Nakhichevan. Citing the sponsors, and occasionally the craftsmen, relating the motivations and circumstances of the foundations, and recording their date, these engraved texts constitute invaluable historical documents.

3. Semantics and Symbolism of Forms

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[fig. 3.5]

In the ecclesiastical architecture of Armenia, the compositions are divided into two groups: those without a dome, longitudinal, with one or three naves, inherited from the pre-Christian past and relatively easy to build; and those with a dome, better adapted to the Christian faith, in particular to the Christology adopted by the Armenian Church, founded on the dogma of the Council of Ephesus (431), the *Formulary of Reunion* of 433 and the writings of Cyril of Alexandria who defined the person of Jesus Christ as follows: “One is the incarnate nature of God the Word”. The unity of the space covered by the dome is the architectural translation of this (Figure 3.6).

The domed churches are, in turn, subdivided into compositions: a) with a centred, cruciform or radiating plan, b) with a longitudinal plan of an inscribed cross, with supports attached to the walls or with four free supports.

According to the 5th-century Armenian author Agathangelos, during the Christianisation of the country in the early 4th century, a dome that appeared to Saint Gregory the Illuminator in a vision prefigured the mother church, the Ēdjmiatsin Cathedral³. Agathangelos describes the forms shown to him in

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[fig. 3.6]

the vision: “And on the crosses of these four columns, amazing arches joined. And over this I saw a building made of clouds in the form of a dome-shaped cube⁴, an astonishing divine creation” (Agathangelos, 102, 16); then he gives the explanation: “The arches that connected the columns are the sign of the equality and unity of the universal Church; and the dome [*khoran*⁵] above is the image of the supreme city, the gathering place of the kingdom of heaven” (Agathangelos, 102, 53–54).

This text, which probably served as a guide for medieval builders, sets out the essential principle of Armenian architecture, the domed baldachin, and its meaning, the Church united under the symbol of the kingdom of God. It helps us to understand why the dome, standing at the intersection of the arms of the cross or above a radiance, crowns so many church buildings in Armenia. In Arts‘akh, this paradigm is present both on chapels, such as the one at Vank‘asar

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(7th century), and on the main monastic churches of the 13th century: Dadivank‘, Gandzasar and Gĕtch‘avank‘, as well as on some notable sanctuaries of later periods.

In Nakhichevan, too, this same principle was of course applied throughout the centuries, with several variations, but the buildings rarely retained their former state. This principle was applied again during the revival of the 17th–19th centuries, in a large number of sanctuaries, which were preserved until the end of the 20th century. The builders and their patrons had a clear preference for one type of church: they

³. Ēdjmiatsin (Էջմիածին), lit. ‘The Only-Begotten Has Descended’.

⁴. It is difficult to give an accurate translation of the Armenian *gĕmbetadzev khoranard*, which can be also understood as “vaulted cube”, or interpreted as “domed baldachin”.

⁵. The term *khoran*, whose primary meanings are tent, tabernacle, altar, vault, etc., and which is also used to translate “apse”, clearly designates here the space above the four columns described in the *Vision*, which could be rendered as “vault”, but which we propose to translate, as well as *gĕmbet*, as “dome”.

built churches in the form of an inscribed cross, with a dome on four free supports, and they covered the entire province with them.

The dome is always preceded by a drum—when it crowns a church and not a narthex or another conventual building. Depending on the configuration of its base, the drum may be polygonal or cylindrical. The drum is a multifunctional element: it raises the dome, reinforcing its symbolic significance and underlining the vertical axis of the building; it also allows the interior of the church to be illuminated by a quasi-zenithal light, which contributes to this same semantics.

Churches—places where parishioners gather for liturgy—can also be more modest buildings where the dome and the cross are not present in the architectural structures. In Arts‘akh, in the ordinary communities of the mountain villages and in the humble hermitages, there is a large number of elongated, undomed churches, especially with a single nave. In Nakhichevan, as in the whole country, three-aisled basilicas without a dome reappeared in large numbers during the modern period. In these simple compositions, deprived of the hemisphere of the dome, it is the quarter sphere (the conch) covering the apse, at the eastern end of the sanctuary, that evokes the celestial vault and the kingdom of God.

Whatever their composition, the buildings of worship in all the provinces of Armenia, as in principle in the whole Christian world, are oriented, that is to say are turned towards the east (sometimes with a slight deviation). Indeed, the east, from which the sun spreads its rays over the world every morning, is, according to the Gospel (Matthew 24:27), the direction from which Jesus Christ will return for the Last Judgment. At the eastern end of the church, which is called apse (*khoran* in Armenian), on an elevation of a few steps (*bem* in Armenian), whose height increases over centuries, is the altar table (*setan* = table). This is the most important part of the sanctuary, where the Eucharist is celebrated. In the Armenian tradition, the apse is separated from the nave by a curtain which is drawn back at important moments of the liturgy, especially during the preparation of the Eucharistic species.

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The apse is usually rounded on the inside (sometimes horseshoe-shaped). In Arts‘akh, a peculiarity can be observed in many single-nave chapels of the 13th century: the inner contour of the apse is rectangular. We will consider later a possible link of this type with a funerary function, attested in several of these chapels, given that Armenian mausoleums often have a flat eastern wall inside. In Armenian churches, the rectangular apse appears very rarely during the early Christian period, and only once at the beginning of the 10th century in Biurakan; it is a rare sight in Nakhichevan as well. On the other hand, in the 17th century there are many apses in this province with a polygonal internal contour: pentagonal or heptagonal. This feature can also be observed in the province of Vaspurakan (today in eastern Turkey) and in the Armenian communities of north-western Iran.

4. Early Christian and Pre-Arab Periods (Fourth–Seventh Centuries)

Before briefly mentioning the main stages in the history of Armenian sacred architecture in the following sections, it should be noted that the provinces of interest to us here suffered greatly from the strong shocks caused by the Arab occupation (8th–9th centuries), and then by the Turkish, Mongol and Turkmen invasions (11th–15th centuries). This is particularly true for the province of Nakhichevan, where the low-lying part of the Araxes valley was particularly vulnerable. To this must be added,

still for Nakhichevan, the harsh ordeal of the deportation ordered at the very beginning of the 17th century by Shah Abbas of Persia. This is why very few buildings dating from the ancient periods (prior to the 13th century for Arts‘akh and to the 17th century for Nakhichevan) are preserved or attested and documented in these provinces.

The first stage in the history of Christian architecture in Armenia, the early Christian period (4th–6th centuries), is marked by the constitution of two architectural categories, that with a funerary function and that with a strictly ecclesiastical function.

In the first group, for the whole country, we know of a dozen of *martyria* and mausoleums, small rectangular hypogeal rooms, oriented and barrel-vaulted; several of them constituted the lower part of a two-level structure; most of them have an apse on the east side, which can be rounded or rectangular; *arcosolia* or funerary recesses can be dug within the side walls. Three of them are located in Arts‘akh, at Amaras, Tigranakert (Tigranocerta of Classical authors) and Vachař, and have an eastern entrance, a feature unknown elsewhere and probably inspired by the *ædicula* of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

In Nakhichevan, in the homonymous city, the remains of a two-storey dark tuff

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[fig. 3.7]

mausoleum with an octagonal hypogeal vault and an oratory were reported until 1948. This small construction with a rough masonry, the dating of which is unknown, was considered by the population to be the mausoleum of the patriarch Noah⁶.

In the second category are numerous chapels and churches with a single nave and about ten three-nave basilicas, as well as the first chapels and churches with a dome. In Arts‘akh, the ruins of two single-nave sanctuaries, certainly early Christian (4th–6th centuries), were uncovered during the excavations of the city of Tigranakert/Tigranocerta (2005–2020) directed by Hamlet Petrosyan. Close and parallel to each other, these two churches constituted an ensemble of great interest (Figure 3.7), united by the attractiveness of the cruciferous stele monument that stood between them and by the presence of a mausoleum-reliquary under one of them. The traditional tripartite technique mentioned above was employed here, with lime mortar blocking between two faces of stone carefully cut on the outside. The church to the south was the

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[fig. 3.8]

largest single nave in the area, and it retained two carved impostes (engaged capitals), probably from its western portal (Figure 3.8). It may have been flanked on the south by a baptistery, a very rare form in Armenia. Its north wall was pierced by two doors, also a rare feature, to open up to the common memorial space. The chapel to the north was probably a memorial shrine, as it contained a mausoleum under its apse, which was probably intended to preserve relics. This is one of the

⁶. On the ancient tradition associating Nakhichevan with the site of the ark’s landing, and on the apocryphal sources speaking of a city built by Noah after his exit from the ark, see M.E. Stone, ‘Mount Ararat and the Ark’, in M.E. Stone et al. (eds), *Noah and His Book(s)*, Atlanta, 2010, pp. 307–316; M.E. Stone and A. Topchyan, *Jews in Ancient and Medieval Armenia. First Century BCE to Fourteenth Century CE*, Oxford, 2022, pp. 1–18. The Armenian apocryphal account providing an aetiological explanation of the name of the city of Nakhichevan—*nax* (‘primary’) + *ijewan* (‘place of descent’, < [*ij-*], ‘to descend’) —as the Place of Noah’s First Descent has been edited by W.L. Lipscomb, *The Armenian Apocryphal Adam Literature*, Atlanta, 1990, p. 204.

three cases, unique to Arts‘akh, of a mausoleum opened to the east, which will be discussed in chapter 5.

In Nakhichevan, the single-nave, barrel-vaulted chapels and churches that we know of are certainly more recent. It should be noted, however, that of the fifteen or so single-nave churches in Nakhichevan, three had a configuration close to the early Christian types, with an annex chapel flanking the chevet (Holy Mother of God of Agulis, St John of Berdak and St George of Erëndjak), which could betray an early origin.

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A three-aisled basilica, probably partly early Christian, can be mentioned in these territories: that of Tsitseřnavank‘, which is well preserved thanks to several restorations. The chapter 5 gives an account of it.

As mentioned above, since its introduction during the early Christian period, the dome has tended to gather all the parts of the building under the central space that it crowned. Thus, from the end of the 6th and during the 7th century, many different dome compositions were created in Armenia, cruciform and radiating, centred and longitudinal, which are very important in the history of its architecture. These typologies are also present in Arts‘akh and Nakhichevan. In the former, the two main examples dating from this period will be presented in chapter 5. These are the monuments of Vank‘asar, with a dome on a free cross, and Őkhtě Děřni, with a dome on a radiation of four axial conches and four diagonal niches.

In Nakhichevan, a few structures with a dome on inscribed cross, monoconch and triconch, also existed in Julfa, Kuk‘i and Nakhichevan, but their dating is uncertain and several late remodellings are attested. The above-mentioned Cathedral of St George in the city of Nakhichevan, rebuilt in 1869, possibly on the remains of an inscribed cross church with a dome on four free supports from the 7th century, will be commented upon later (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4).

5. Period of the Kingdoms (Tenth—Eleventh Centuries)

The post-Arab period (10th–11th centuries), during which several kingdoms more or less vassal to the Bagratid kingdom of Ani were formed, is illustrated throughout the country by a brilliant architectural flourishing. One has merely to recall the remarkable churches of Alt‘amar in Vaspurakan and of Ani in Shirak. In the province of Arts‘akh, this period is represented by a few buildings. They are not precisely dated and are poorly preserved, but various clues allow us to link them to the same period. These include the cruciform domed chapels of Varazgom, K‘ashat‘al/Lach‘in district (see chapter 5) and, further north, St Sergius (*Surb Sargis*) of Getabek/Gədəbəy and St Sergius of Gag (on the border of the provinces of Gugark‘ and Utik‘, in the district of Kazakh/Gazakh/Kasāl [Qazax]), as well as the single-nave churches of Poladlı and Parisos in the district of Getabek/Gədəbəy.

Within this group, we should note the curious domed chapel of St Sergius of Gag, an inscribed monoconch cross, flanked on the north by a mononave chapel (Figure 3.9 and Figure 3.10). It is noteworthy in particular for two features: a) its unusual position, on a summit dominating the north-eastern limits of the Armenian Plateau, like the chapel at Vank‘asar; b) as at Varazgom, the

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[fig. 3.9, fig. 3.10]

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curious atrophy of its western arm, a tendency which is not entirely foreign to the region, but is generally much less marked than here. We shall return to these points later on.

Several sanctuaries in Nakhichevan, restored or rebuilt later, are supposed to have been founded during this period, but no tangible traces of them have been found. Today, unfortunately, seeking ancient evidence is no longer possible there.

6. The Feudal Period (End of Twelfth—Middle of Fourteenth Century)

There are many more works that attest, particularly in Arts‘akh, then called Khach‘en after the name of the river crossing its central district, to the architectural boom that Armenia experienced in the post-Seljuk period, under Queen Tamar of Georgia and her successors, and during the Mongol period (from the end of the 12th to the first half of the 14th century). As in the rest of the country, the princely families who dominated the province multiplied the number of foundations, particularly monastic ones. The monasteries were the main centres of spiritual, cultural and artistic life; they housed *scriptoria* in which numerous manuscripts were copied and illuminated. Most often fortified, these complexes reflect a search for geometric rigour in their composition and for balance in the layout of their components, as well as a concern for harmony with the surrounding nature. The monastery of Dadivank‘ (12th–13th century), which we will examine in chapter 5, is one of the largest conventual complexes in medieval Armenia, consisting of some twenty buildings divided into three groups, each with its own functional specificity: a) worship, b) activities of the brotherhood, c) housing.

Among the monastic churches in Arts‘akh, one can still find many single-nave, undomed, barrel-vaulted compositions under a saddle (two-pitched) roof. The reason for this is probably the ease of execution. The most characteristic example is found in the monastery of the Holy Apostle Elisæus (*Surb Elishē* or *Elisha Arak‘eal*, district of Martakert), which will be discussed later, with no less than eight single-nave chapels arranged from north to south. As mentioned above, many of the Arts‘akh single-nave churches have a flat sanctuary, which, as we shall see, may be related to their funerary function. Murad Hasratyan and Jean-Michel Thierry have suggested that this is a remnant of the pagan past or a borrowing from the Nestorian churches of upper Mesopotamia (later, however). Another reason, as in medieval Europe, where the phenomenon is not uncommon, is the simplicity of construction. A large, wide church with a single nave and a rounded apse on the inside, whose superstructures have not

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been preserved, stood to the north of the monastery of Dadivank‘. It probably housed the martyrion of the saintly dedicatee.

Apart from the particular phenomenon of single naves, the most common model in Armenian monasteries of the time is the domed church on a partitioned inscribed cross. This is a composition deriving from the “domed hall” of the 7th century, in which the interior cruciform volume is inscribed in a rectangular perimeter, the supports of the dome are attached to the wall perimeter, and two or four two-storey sacristy-chapels are housed in the corners.

This type can be seen in the churches of three monasteries in Arts‘akh: Dadivank‘ (1214), Gandzasar (1216–1238) and Gětich‘ (1241–1246). In the latter

two sites, the dome adopts the picturesque shape of a pleated cone (or an umbrella dome) on the outside, which was widespread in Armenia from the 10th–11th centuries. These three monastic sanctuaries are among the best examples of medieval Armenian art, owing to their elegant proportions, the care taken in their masonry and the abundance of sculptural, notably figurative, decoration, to which in Dadivank‘ was added a painted decoration of high artistic quality.

Characteristic of Armenian monastic architecture, especially in the 13th century, the *gawit‘* (identical from the 13th century onwards to *zhamatun*), a narthex used mainly as a mausoleum and probably also as a meeting room, is almost omnipresent in front of the west façade of the main churches. In Arts‘akh it takes various forms. Some archaic *gawit‘*s are reminiscent of early experiments in Siunik‘ (south-eastern Armenia) in the 9th–10th centuries, such as the simple barrel-vaulted room or the open gallery to the south. Examples can be seen at Dadivank‘ and St James of Mets Ařank‘ (Mets Iranċ). Some others are atypical, such as the asymmetrical hall of Gětich‘, with two naves, a wide central one and a very narrow northern one.

The *gawit‘* (or *zhamatun*) can also adopt the quadrangular hall composition with four pillars in the centre supporting a dome with a central skylight, which is attested for the first time in 1038 in Hořomos near Ani and was widespread throughout the country: this is the case in Dadivank‘ in 1224 and in Khat‘ravank‘ in 1225 (Figure 3.11). Finally, the remarkable formula where the vault is supported by two pairs of intersecting arches can be observed at Bėři Elts‘i (Figure 3.12), Gandzasar (1261) and Hořekavank‘ (1284). The Gandzasar *gawit‘*, which has the same composition as those of Habat and Mėshkavank‘ (northern Armenia), offers, in its centre, an example of a vault cut with stalactites (Figure 3.13), close to those seen at Harich and Geřard (early 13th century), as well as on Seljuk constructions in Asia Minor and Western Armenia.

In the large complex of Dadivank‘, the group of southern buildings seems to include some spaces important for the life of the monastic community: a refectory and kitchen, a large room called *tachar* (a kind of chapter house) and a library with a *scriptorium* (functions remaining uncertain). At the south-

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[fig. 3.11]

western end of the complex, a large two-storey building housed a monastic hostelry; it adjoins buildings that probably served as a prelature and a residence for the abbot, as well as an oil press and a cellar.

In this chapter on Armenian religious buildings of the 13th–14th centuries, a place must also be reserved for a Muslim monument, that of Khach‘en-Dorbatlı, located on the eastern fringe of Nagorn‘i Karabakh, today in the district of Ađdam (Figures 3.14 and 3.15). It belongs to the numerous category of *turbes*, medieval Muslim mausoleums in Asia Minor and the South Caucasus, which are based on the principle of a cylinder with conical dome, surmounting a vault. These monuments are clearly related to the drum and dome of Armenian churches; but the one at Khach‘en-Dorbatlı has an even closer connection to Armenian architecture. An Arabic inscription states that it was built in 1314 by a master builder named Shahik. With its refined sculptural decoration, technique, numerous animal themes and ornamental repertoire, including remarkable stalactites, this mausoleum closely resembles a Christian

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[fig. 3.12]

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[fig. 3.13]

burial chapel built in the first decades of the 14th century, further west in the small town of Yeghvard/Ełuard (Republic of Armenia), by the same architect (*vardpet*) Shahik who engraved his name in Armenian. A third mausoleum, a Muslim one, located in Yerevan, dated 1319 and visible only from the inside, decorated with stalactites (*muqarnas*) identical to those of the two previous ones, also bears the signature of Shahik, again in Arabic. It should be noted that, as indicated in H. Achařian’s dictionary of Armenian anthroponyms, the first name Shahik, a diminutive of Shahēn, of Persian or Pahlavi origin, is attested several times in Armenian sources from the 11th to the 17th centuries⁷. These accounts of the execution of three projects by a builder who was probably an Armenian, for both Christian and Muslim patrons, are precious because they shed light on one of the main modalities of the interactions, which were numerous at that time, between Armenian and Islamic arts⁸.

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[fig. 3.14]

Several authors (A. Ayvazyan, P. Cuneo, M. Hasratyan, S. Karapetyan) agree that a series of churches were founded in Nakhichevan during the period dis-

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[fig. 3.15]

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cussed (and notably: St Thomas of Agulis, St John the Baptist of Abrakunis, Holy Sign of Kuk‘i, Holy Mother of God of Ōts‘op). Indeed, the available photographs show here and there masonries and decorative details that could confirm this hypothesis. However, the extensive alterations in the modern period, the lack of detailed documentation and the destruction of the monuments make it impossible to ascertain their dating.

7. H. Ačařyan, Հայոց անձնանունների բառարան [Dictionary of Armenian Personal Names], vol. 4, Yerevan, 1962, pp. 119–120.

8. On the phenomena of cultural blending and mutual imitation in the arts in the area between the 11th and the 13th cc., see: R. Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture. Form, Function and Meaning*, Edinburgh, 1994, pp. 307–308; P. Blessing, ‘Medieval Monuments from Empire to Nation State. Beyond Armenian and Islamic Architecture in the South Caucasus (1180–1300)’, in I. Foletti et al. (eds), *The Medieval South Caucasus: Artistic Cultures of Albania, Armenia and Georgia*, Brno, 2016, pp. 55, 58; R. McClary, ‘Craftsmen in Medieval Anatolia: Methods and Mobility’, in P. Blessing et al. (eds), *Architecture and Landscape in Medieval Anatolia, 1100–1500*, Edinburgh, 2017, pp. 31–34, 39, 51–52, fig. 2.2; P. Donabédian, ‘Armenia–Georgia–Islam. A Need to Break Taboos in the Study of Medieval Architecture’, in A. Ferrari et al. (eds), *L’arte armena. Storia critica e nuove prospettive/Studies in Armenian and Eastern Christian Art*, Venice, 2020, pp. 80, 83–99, fig. 11–18; I. Dorfmann-Lazarev, ‘Between the Planes and the Mountains: the Albanian-Armenian Marches in the 12th Century and David of Gandzak (c. 1065–1140)’, in J. Gippert et al. (eds.), *Caucasian Albania. An International Handbook*, Berlin, 2023, pp. 553–560 (esp. 556–557).

7. Modern Period (Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries)

After a long interruption due to the invasions and wars in the 14th to the 16th centuries, the restoration of peace between the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Persia by the treaty of 1639 allowed architectural life to flourish again throughout Armenia. In all parts of the country, monasteries were restored, enlarged, and new complexes were built. In Nakhichevan, where a large part of the Armenian population had been deported to Persia and where the destruction had been considerable, vast campaigns of integral reconstruction were carried out.

In the new monasteries, according to the most frequent architectural formula of the time, the church is isolated in the centre of the quadrangular enclosure along which the cells and other monastic premises are arranged. The narthex, which in earlier periods almost always stood attached to the west façade of the church, is now often replaced by a three-arched gallery or a porch-belltower. The porch-belfry, leaning against the façade (usually western, sometimes southern) of the church, is one of the emblematic creations of this period. Sometimes it has two, but more often three levels; the first two as a tetrapod canopy and the last one as a rotunda, generally octastyle.

Many monastic and parish churches adopted the relatively easy-to-build composition of the dome-less basilica, with three naves separated by one, two or three pairs of pillars. A two-pitched roof covers the whole building, often with a small lantern at the top, over a small opening for the rope that operates the bell. Large churches are also built in the form of an inscribed cross, with a dome on four free supports. In Arts‘akh, examples include St Grigoris of Herher (1667–1676) and the church of the monastery of the Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace (*Erits‘ Mankants‘*, 1691).

In Nakhichevan, such examples were numerous. Two of them merit our special attention. First, the large church of the Holy Mother of God (*Surb Astuatsatsin*) in Ts‘ėhna (Ts‘ėghna), built in 1683, was impressive for its size, the height of its south porch-belfry, with two rotundas on a tetrapod baldachin (the opposite of the usual formula), the originality of its figurative sculpted

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decoration and the care with which its bicolour bond (light grey basalt and reddish tuff) is created. We will examine it in the following chapter (n° 4). Secondly, the elegant church of St Stephen of Agulis (*Surb St‘epanos*), whose chevet had the particularity of having three deep apses almost equal in width (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2). Supported by four free cruciform pillars, the high octagonal drum was crowned by an elegant umbrella-like dome. The façades of light colour were enlivened with a continuous horizontal band of dark stone, decorated with a “Seljuk chain” that went around the portals and rose on the gables with one or two crosses. The whole was further enriched by the corner quoins with alternating long and short blocks of dark stone on a light background, as well as by the orange tuff window frames.

A new planimetric formula (new for Armenia: in Byzantium it had been practised for a long time), almost antinomic with tradition, had been chosen for several churches in Nakhichevan, of the 17th century or slightly later: St John the Baptist (*Surb Yovhannēs Mėkėrtich‘*), The Holy Sign (*Surb Nėshan*) and The Holy Trinity (*Surb Errordut‘iun*) of Agulis (in the quarter of Nerks‘in Agulis), The Holy Mother of God (*Surb Astuatsatsin*) of Shahkert, St Gregory of K‘eolk‘, The Holy Mother of God (*Surb Astuatsatsin*) of Tanakert, St John (*Surb Yovhannēs*) of Chahuk. These were “domed basilicas” and not inscribed cross churches: the drum

and the dome surmounting it were supported by four pillars placed in the centre of the basilica’s inner space comprising three parallel, barrel-vaulted naves without a transept. This resulted in the absence of a cross in the volumetry and in the external image of the building, particularly the roof; the dome rose above a flat or a two-pitched roof. This solution was perhaps dictated by a concern for simplification and economy, but was less resistant, since the balance of buttresses is a great advantage of the inscribed cross, with the crossing of the transept and the nave. This is probably the reason why on the photographs of most of these buildings we see the domes made of brick, which is unusual for Armenia, or collapsed.

Another peculiarity of Nakhichevan in this period is that, whatever the composition of the churches, the two sacristies flanking the apse often had a rectangular shape without the usual small apse. It should be noted that these sacristies, which comprised two levels, were partly hypogeal on the lower level, which suggests a funerary function. This brings us back to the hypothesis of a link between flat sanctuary and funerary function.

Finally, the 19th century is also marked here by a combination of references to earlier sanctuaries and innovations. Let us mention two characteristic cases.

In the city of Nakhichevan, St George Cathedral, built in 1869 in ochre tuff and surmounted by a brick dome (Figs. 1.3, 1.4), was erected on the remains of an earlier church (of the 7th century?), thanks to a public fundraising. It was a

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large inscribed cross-shaped construction with a dome on four free supports, which had a series of original features inspired in part by the heritage of the 7th century:

a) the chevet, slightly lowered in relation to the general volume, had an unusual breadth which led to a strong offset of the dome towards the west—a common offset in the 7th century, but very marked here; on the other hand, the shape of the apse and sacristies in three deep rectangular compartments is a rare formula;

b) each of the central compartments of the four façades was slightly projecting, as on the east and north façades of St Hrip‘simē in the 7th century;

c) in the centre of the gable of each arm of the cross, an oculus was open, as in the T‘alin and Zuart‘nots‘ Cathedrals, 7th century, and in that of Ani (1001 AD);

d) the apse was pierced by two windows, instead of the traditional single window of the Armenian Apostolic churches (i.e. non-Chalcedonian), perhaps approaching the three windows of the Chalcedonian churches;

e) the façades were quite plain, with a wide, high window in each bay, topped by a small arched cornice with linear mouldings and short horizontal wings, reminiscent of the golden age of the 7th century;

f) in the centre of the east façade, at the spandrel of the double arcade of the pair of windows, a rectangular plaque bore, in flat bas-relief, the image of Saint George slaying a dragon;

g) a large cylindrical drum topped by a dodecagonal dome was pierced by twelve windows alternating with twelve flat niches;

h) this vigorous rhythm was underlined, at the top of the drum, by a horizontal band decorated with twenty-four small triangles, a sort of allusive reference to the gables bearing an umbrella.

The second, even more innovative, example is the Holy Saviour Cathedral in Shushi (1868–1887) in Arts‘akh, one of the largest religious buildings in modern Armenia, which will be discussed in chapter 5. Here we will merely point out that it borrows its plan from the cathedral of Ēdjmiasin, in one of its oldest states, but is

distinguished by the slender proportions of its umbrella-like dome and by the breadth of its openings, which transforms its conches into a kind of porches. The high campanile that stands next to it—and echoes the sharpness of its umbrella—stands out for its statues of angels in the round, a great novelty in the history of Armenian art.

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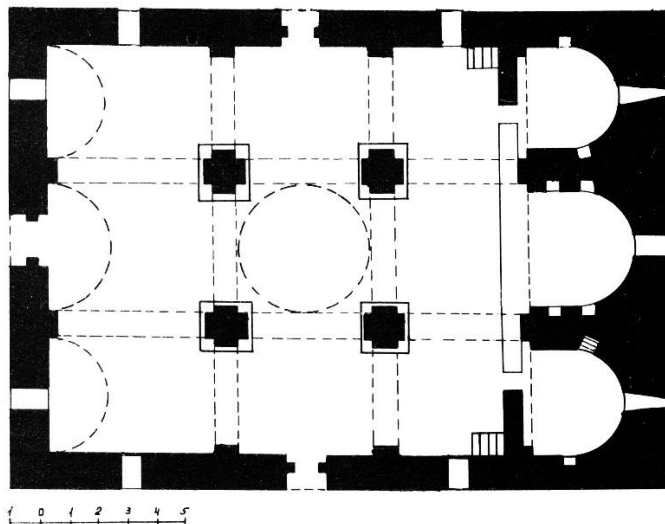


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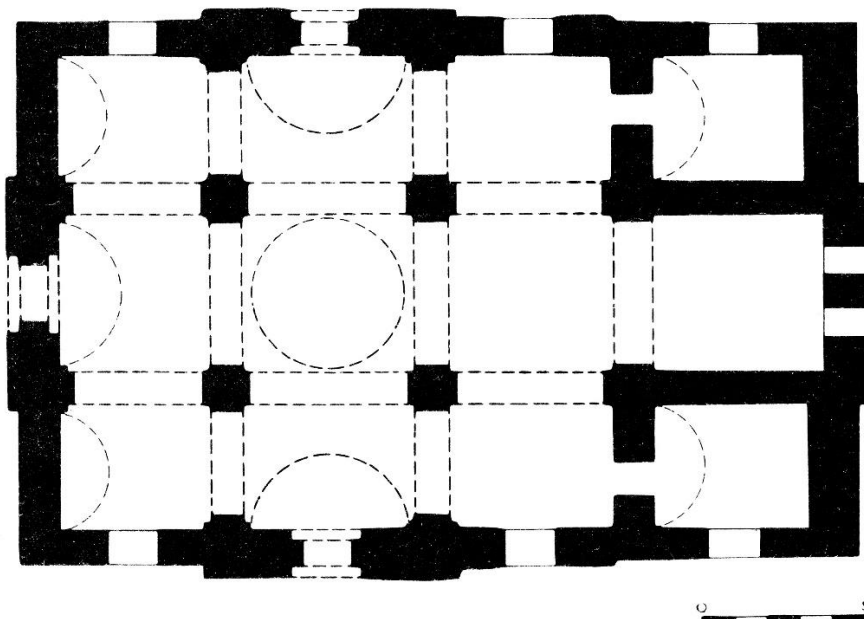


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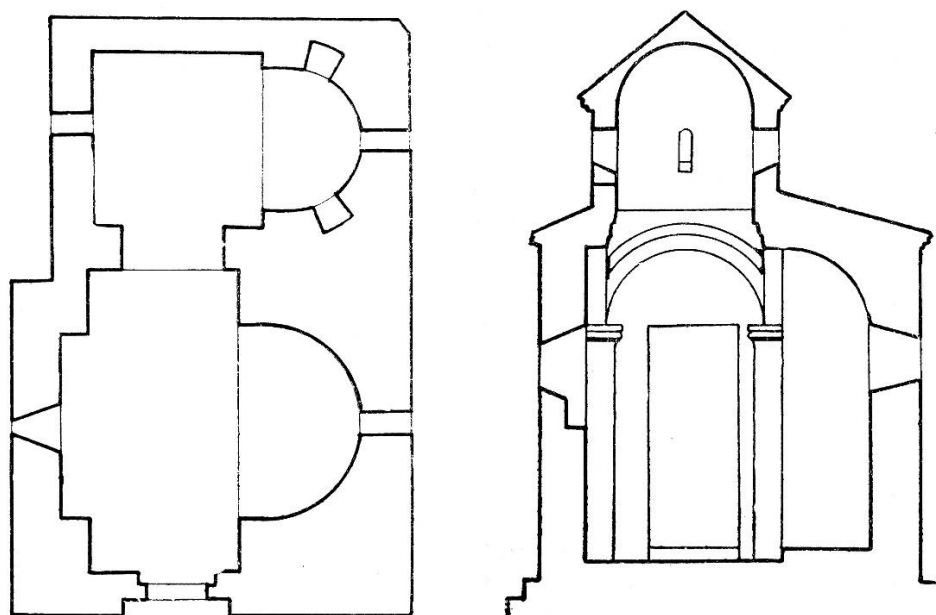


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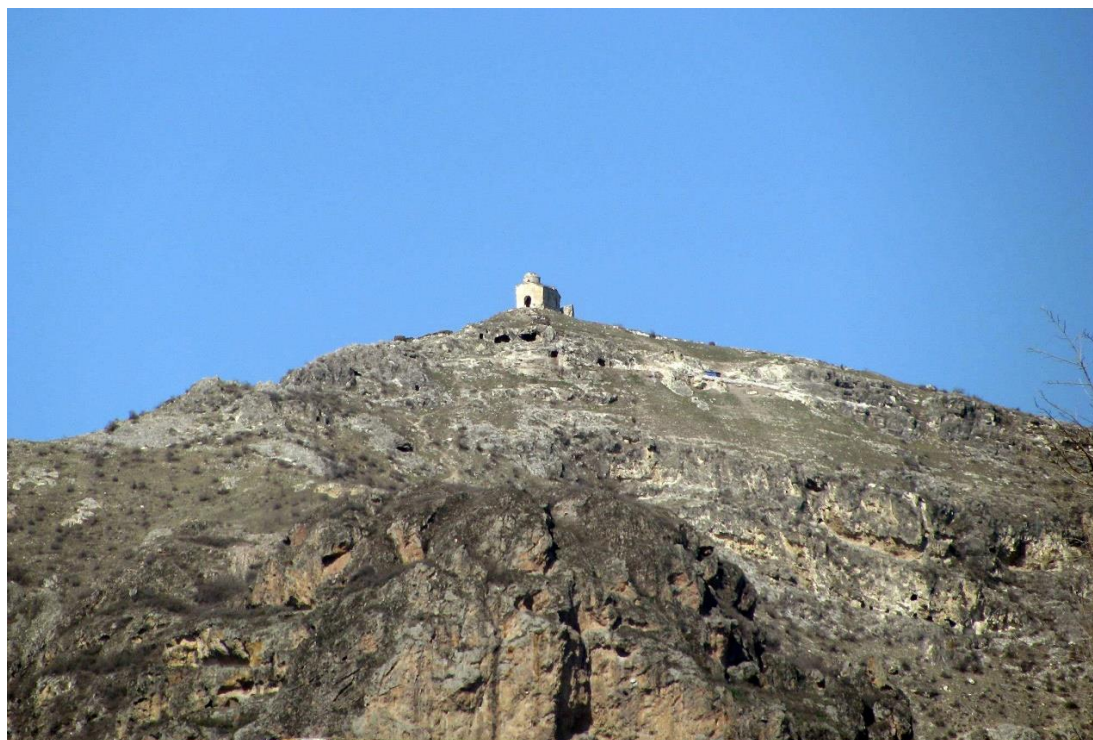


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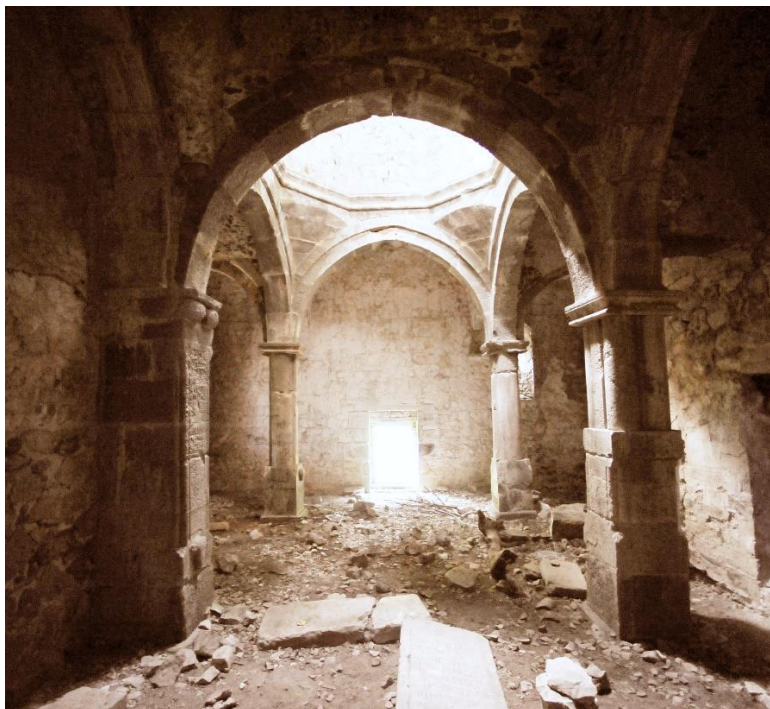


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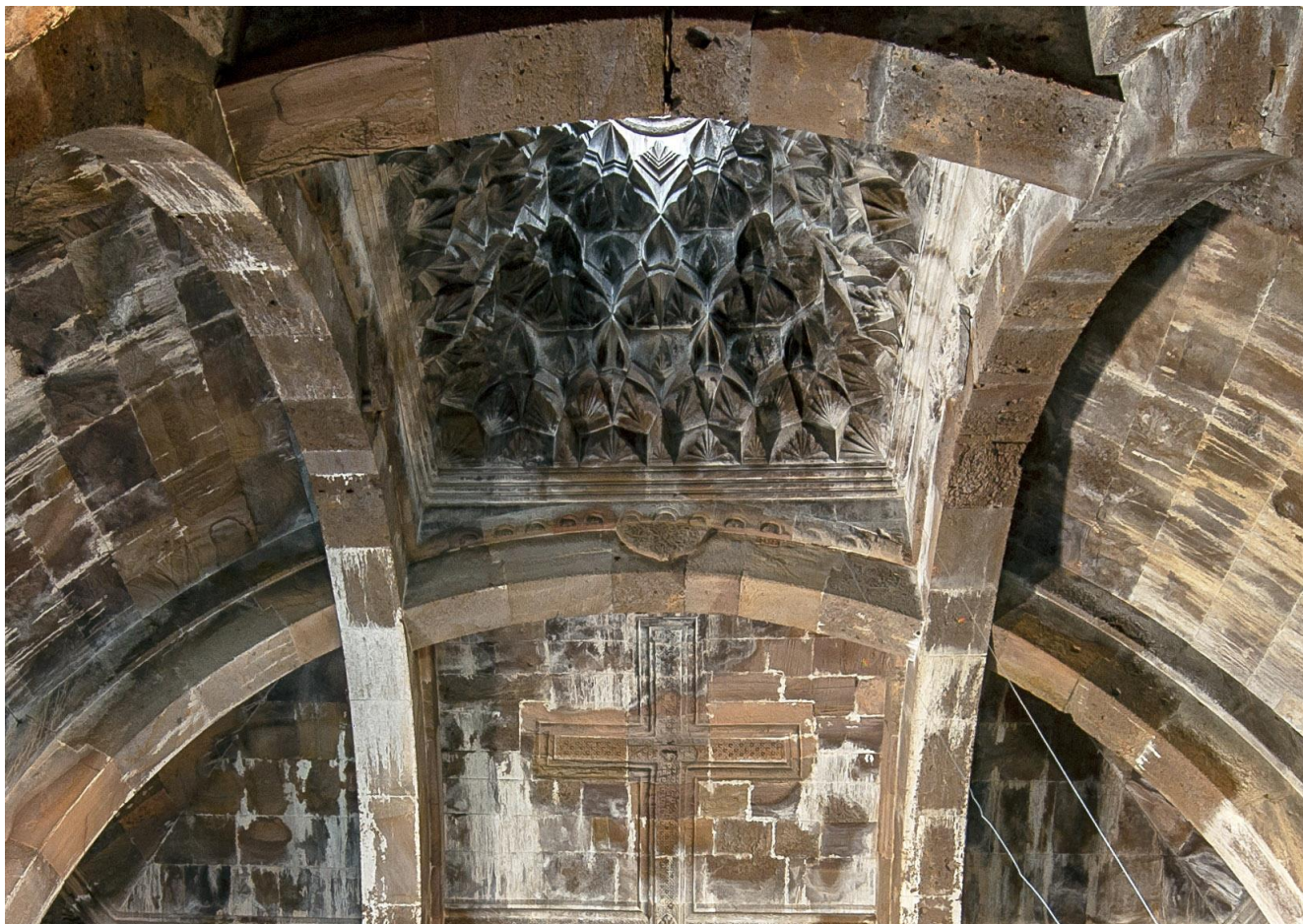


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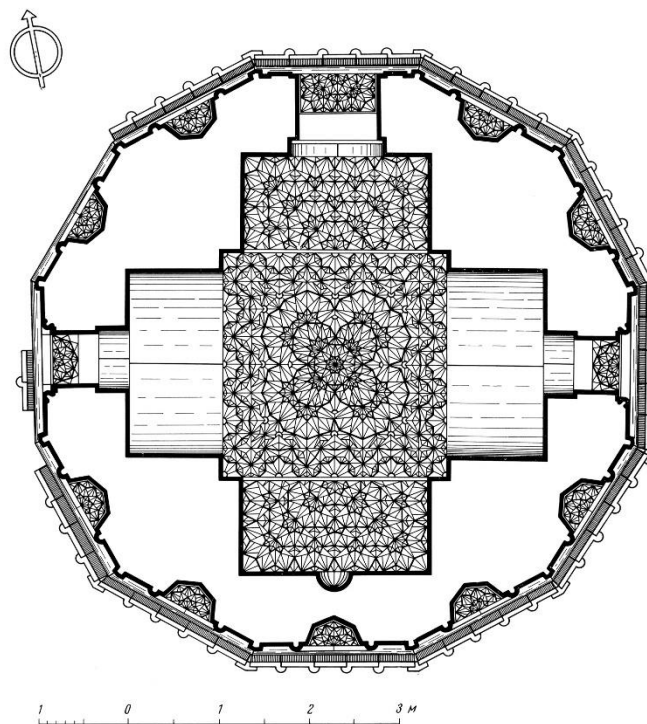


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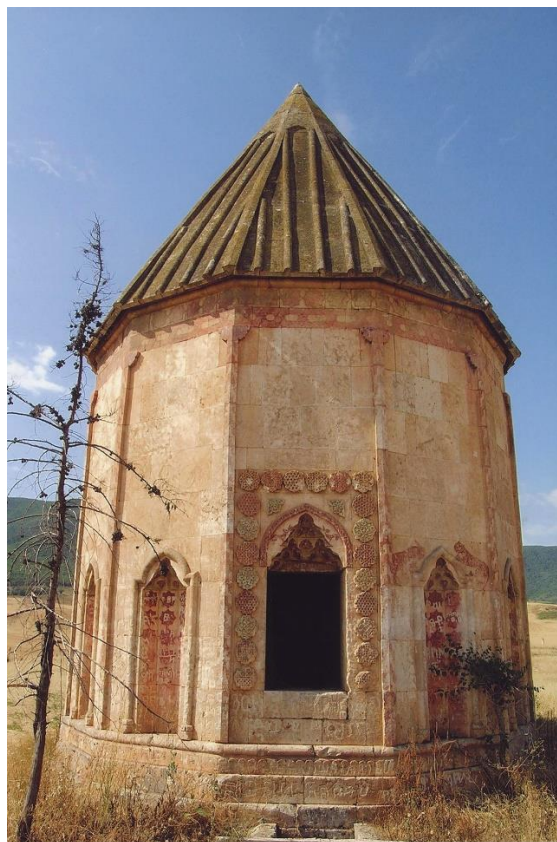


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Appendix

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