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Three Important Monuments of Nakhichevan

Patrick Donabédian

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article

“Three Important Monuments of Nakhichevan”

in

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

Edited by

Igor DORFMANN-LAZAREV and Haroutioun KHATCHADOURIAN

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Chapter 4

[p. 89]
[fig. 4.1]**Three Important Monuments of Nakhichevan***Patrick Donabédian***1. Agulis, the Monastery and Church of St Thomas (*Surb T'ovma*) (1694)**

Current location: Republic of Azerbaijan, Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, Ordubad district, village called Yuxarı Əylis in Azeri, a few km from the district capital.

Medieval location: province of Vaspurakan (then Siunik' in the 10th century), canton of Gołt'ën.

Until the First World War, Agulis was a small town with a predominantly Armenian population. Thanks to the silk and cotton trade, taking over from Julfa (Arm. Djula) which had just been ruined, Agulis had experienced a great expansion in the 17th and first half of the 18th century. It had a dozen monasteries

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[fig. 4.2]

and churches, which were looted when the city was taken by the Turkish army in 1918 and then destroyed by the Azerbaijani authorities at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century.

The main complex in the centre of the city was the Monastery of St Thomas. According to the inscription on the western door of its church, it was founded at the very beginning of the Christian period, but its first documented mention is in the colophon of a manuscript from 1375. The monastery was restored in the 17th century and, as the inscription attests, its church was rebuilt in 1694.

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[fig. 4.3]

It was the episcopal seat of the canton and had an active *scriptorium* where a large number of manuscripts were copied.

As in many Armenian monasteries of the modern period, the church stood isolated, without a narthex, in the centre of a rectangular enclosure against the inner wall of which the utilitarian buildings and monks' cells were arranged. Archival photographs show a large fortified complex with two powerful rounded corner towers. The church was built in a very careful masonry bond, with alternating layers of light felsite and grey basalt, following a bicolour fashion common in Armenia in the 17th century. It illustrated the revival of a typology which was widespread in the 7th century but which during the later centuries had only been used once, in the year 1000, in the cathedral of Ani: the

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[fig. 4.4]

composition of an inscribed cross with a dome on four free supports. In the early examples of this type, the dome is placed approximately in the centre of the nave, not including the apse, so that in the overall volume of the building it is clearly offset to the

west. The same was true of St Thomas, where this shift was accentuated by the relative narrowness of the western bay.

In addition to the bicolour façades, St Thomas had several features specific to the Armenian 17th century, in particular the interior configuration of the chevet: an apse with a polygonal outline (here heptagonal) flanked by two transversally elongated sacristies, whose width supersedes their length, with a flat eastern wall (without an apse) on two levels. The passage from the four cruciform pillars to the circular base of the drum was performed, as was very often the case in Armenia at the time, by means of reticulated

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[fig. 4.5]

pendentives. Borrowed from Persian architecture, this device was popularised by the Armenian churches of Isfahan. The drum was externally dodecagonal and had an umbrella-shaped dome, a picturesque shape that was widespread in Armenia since the 10th-11th centuries and was still popular during the modern period, especially among the architects of Nakhichevan.

The sculpted decoration of the church included crude bas-reliefs inspired by Western iconography, placed above the three doors. On the west side was the scene of the Incredulity of Saint Thomas—the holy dedicatee of the church—enhanced with the stone colours and accompanied by paintings (God at the top, the Holy Mother of God on the right and Mary Magdalene on the left), while the Apostles Peter and Paul were carved on the south and north doors. In accordance with the norm of the time, the sculpted decor also included geometric ornamental bands: the angular interlacing known as “Seljuk chain” (drawing a large cross at the top of the façades), a row of stalactites, a cable and a braid. The abundant painted decor inside was rich in arabesques and Iranian vegetal motifs; it reflected the influence, noticeable at the time in Armenia, of the splendid churches of the Armenian district of New Julfa, in Isfahan. This decor was the work of the famous Armenian painter, poet and bard Naghsh Hovnat’an (Nalash Yovnat’an) (1661–1722), founder of the Hovnat’anian dynasty of painters, who taught in Agulis.

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[fig. 4.6]

The tetrapod porches that stood in front of the north and west doors of the church (the latter rebuilt in 1825, 1831 and 1904) were topped by a small lantern—as shown in 19th-century photographs. A third, similar, *ædicula*, dated 1666, slightly to the west of the south door, housed a mausoleum.

2. Agulis, Church of St Christopher (*Surb K’ristap’or*) (1671–1675)

The church was located in the Verin T’at (Upper District) of Agulis. A church with this dedication already existed here in the 15th century, as we know from a colophon of 1447. After it had collapsed in 1670, it was rebuilt in 1671–1675 on the initiative of the district’s inhabitants, who brought in teams of masons from Vaspurakan.

It had the same plan as St Thomas and was also carefully built, but was distinguished by its dome, which was made of brick. This material, often used here during the modern period, made it possible to lighten the weight of the superstructures and facilitate construction. The drum of the dome was octagonal on the outside and its cap had consequently the shape of an eight-sided pyramid. The outer faces of the drum were hollowed out with flat niches terminated by a

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pointed arch in the Iranian style. The reticulated pendentives that ensured the interior support of the drum followed the same trend.

On the other hand, as in St Thomas, the figurative bas-reliefs on the exterior reflected the Western influence that was penetrating Armenian culture during the modern period. Thus, above the western doorway, the Madonna wore a crown. The plastered interior of the church was also decorated with paintings by Naghash Hovnatʿan in the late 17th century. There were some figurative subjects, including portraits of prominent figures of the Armenian Church and angels. And similarly to New Julfa, two foreign sources of inspiration joined here the Armenian tradition: the iconographic models of Western engravings, on the one hand, and the vegetal and geometric ornaments of the Iranian repertoire, on the other.

3. Tsʿĕlna, Church of the Holy Mother of God (*Surb Astuatsatsin*) (1683)

Current location: Republic of Azerbaijan, Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, Ordubad district, village called Çənnəb in Azeri (Çənənəb until 2003).

Medieval location: province of Vaspurakan (then Siunikʿ in the 10th century), canton of Goltʿĕn.

The Armenian village of Tsʿĕlna, attested since the 14th century, expanded on both banks of the river bearing the same name. According to the colophons, three churches stood there, including the church of the monastery of the Holy Mother of God. This church was the only surviving part of a monastery which had been a fairly active scriptural centre; the oldest Gospel book copied there is dated at 1349.

As the inscription on the lintel of its western door indicated, the large church was rebuilt in 1683 by five merchants—on the site of a sanctuary that had already been restored several times. Closely related to the above-mentioned monuments of Agulis, it was built of grey basalt combined with reddish tuff and had the composition of an inscribed cross with a dome on four free supports (cruciform pillars). Also, here the apse had a heptagonal interior contour, and the large two-level rectangular sacristies flanking it had no apse. The external dodecagonal drum was topped by a pyramid.

As in Agulis and in many other Armenian monuments of the period, the sculpted decor combined occidentalising figurative images with Islamicising ornamentation. Above the western door, on a plaque dated by inscription to

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[fig. 4.7]

1683, the Madonna was shown seated, crowned by two angels—a feature borrowed from Western European iconography. Above the southern doorway were the Apostles Peter and Paul holding a cross pattée in a medallion—a reminder of the early Christian centuries. A band of two intersecting rods with angular links, conventionally known as a “Seljuk chain”, encircled the entire building, joining the mouldings that framed the doors and the windows, in a formula developed in the 13th–14th centuries.

The decoration of the doors retained a structure developed in the 10th–11th centuries, with a rectangular frame surmounted by an arched casing, but at the same time their opulent ornamentation followed a new formula, widespread in the 17th century, with Islamic affinities and some references to Europe. The high and wide arched doorframe included, from top to bottom, a braided chain, a cable and either a scroll with small foliage (west door) or a band with stalactites (south door). This “outer”

frame surrounded the two wide bands immediately bordering the rectangular doorway; one bore a very

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[fig. 4.8]

elaborate interlacing pattern, rounded on the west side, angular on the south side; the other was decorated with elaborate arabesques on the west side, and with a row of vases pouring out an abundance of flowers on the south. The latter motif, popular throughout Armenia at the time, was a borrowing from Baroque art, reflecting the links established by Armenian merchants with Western Europe. As in Agulis, the interior of the church of Ts'ĕĕna was decorated with paintings, which were badly damaged in the late 20th century.

A particular attention was paid to the high porch-bell tower that stood in front of the southern door of the church of Ts'ĕĕna. First of all, while respecting the principle of the two- or three-storey porch-bell tower, leaning against the church façade, which is typical of the modern period, its structure was singular. Unlike most representatives of this type, the first tetrapod level was here surmounted by two superimposed octopod rotundas. The last one was crowned with a very tapered umbrella. Secondly, the figurative carved décor used unusual formulas. On the top of each of the two southern pillars of the porch, a niche was carved. In the left niche, the crucified Christ was sculpted,

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[fig. 4.9]

with the Armenian initials of “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” on the three upper arms of the cross. The right-hand niche was occupied by the figure of the Mother of God, with her arms folded and her hands crossed over her chest, with two small angels sculpted on the sides of the niche (the one on the right-hand side is very eroded and is barely visible), holding a crown on her head. It is interesting to note that, despite the Western European imprint present on these sculptures (for example in the crown worn by the Virgin), the feet of Christ crucified are shown parallel, attached to the cross by a single nail, as on several Armenian sculptures from the end of the 13th century, and not crossed, as is common in the West. At the foot of the cross, however, the photographs seem to show that the widespread Western pattern of the skull between two crossed bones (based on the Gospels) was chosen instead of the

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[fig. 4.10]

Armenian tradition of the head of Adam (based on an old Christian belief).¹ Finally, the strong projection of these two sculptures and their position constituted an interesting novelty. Mirroring its period and milieu, the sculpted décor of Ts'ĕĕna achieved a synthesis of three traditions, Armenian, Islamic and West European.

1. The ancient tradition of Christ's Crucifixion above Adam's burial site has been examined in two recent works: E. Grypeou and H. Spurling, *The Book of Genesis in Late Antiquity*, Leiden, 2013, p. 230, and, in regard to the Armenian sources, I. Dorfmann-Lazarev, 'Eve, Melchizedek and the Magi in the Cave of the Nativity According to the Armenian Corpus of Homilies Attributed to Epiphanius of Salamis', in J.N. Bremmer et al. (eds), *The Protevangelium of James* (Studies on Early Christian Apocrypha; 16), Leuven, 2020, pp. 269–276, 298–300.

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Fig. 4.10. Church of Surb Astuatsatsin (1683), Ts'ėlna, region of Nakhichevan. Sculpted decoration of the west and south portals. Photos: A. Ayvazyan (1980s), UIOTC V-22169, 22328 and 22309, Argam Ayvazyan's Fund. Fragmentary photos assembled into a single image by P. Donabédian

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Fig. 4.12. Church of Surb Astuatsatsin (1683), Ts'ėlna, region of Nakhichevan. Porch-bell tower leaning against the south façade. South view. Niches with sculpted images of Christ and the Virgin. Photos: A. Ayvazyan (1980s), UIOTC V-23983, 23993 and 23994, Argam Ayvazyan's Fund. Fragmentary photos assembled into a single image by P. Donabédian



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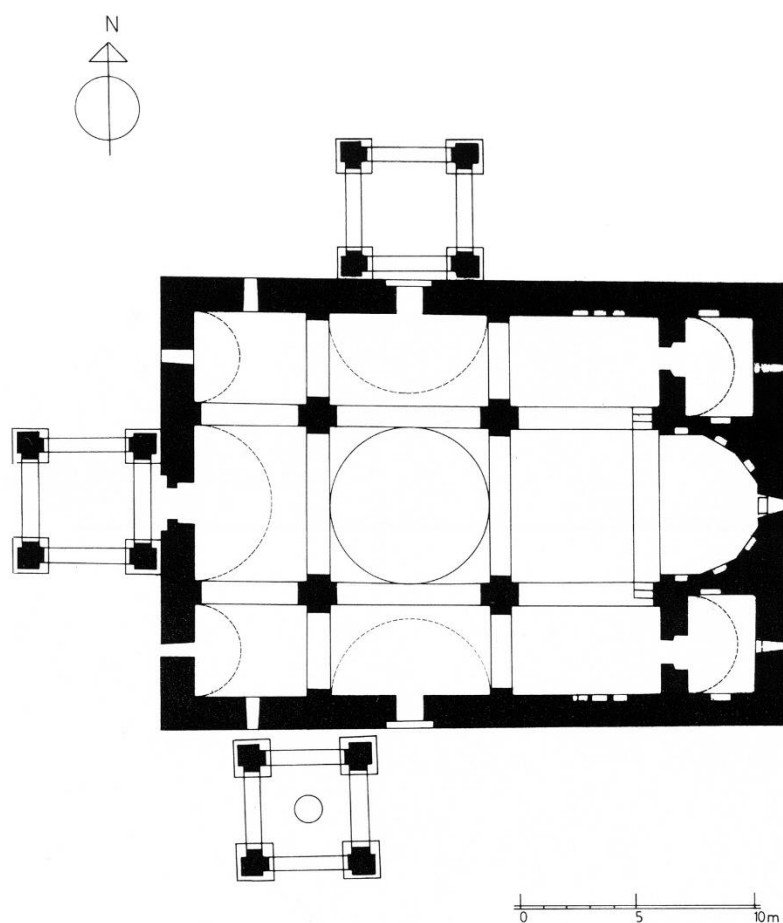


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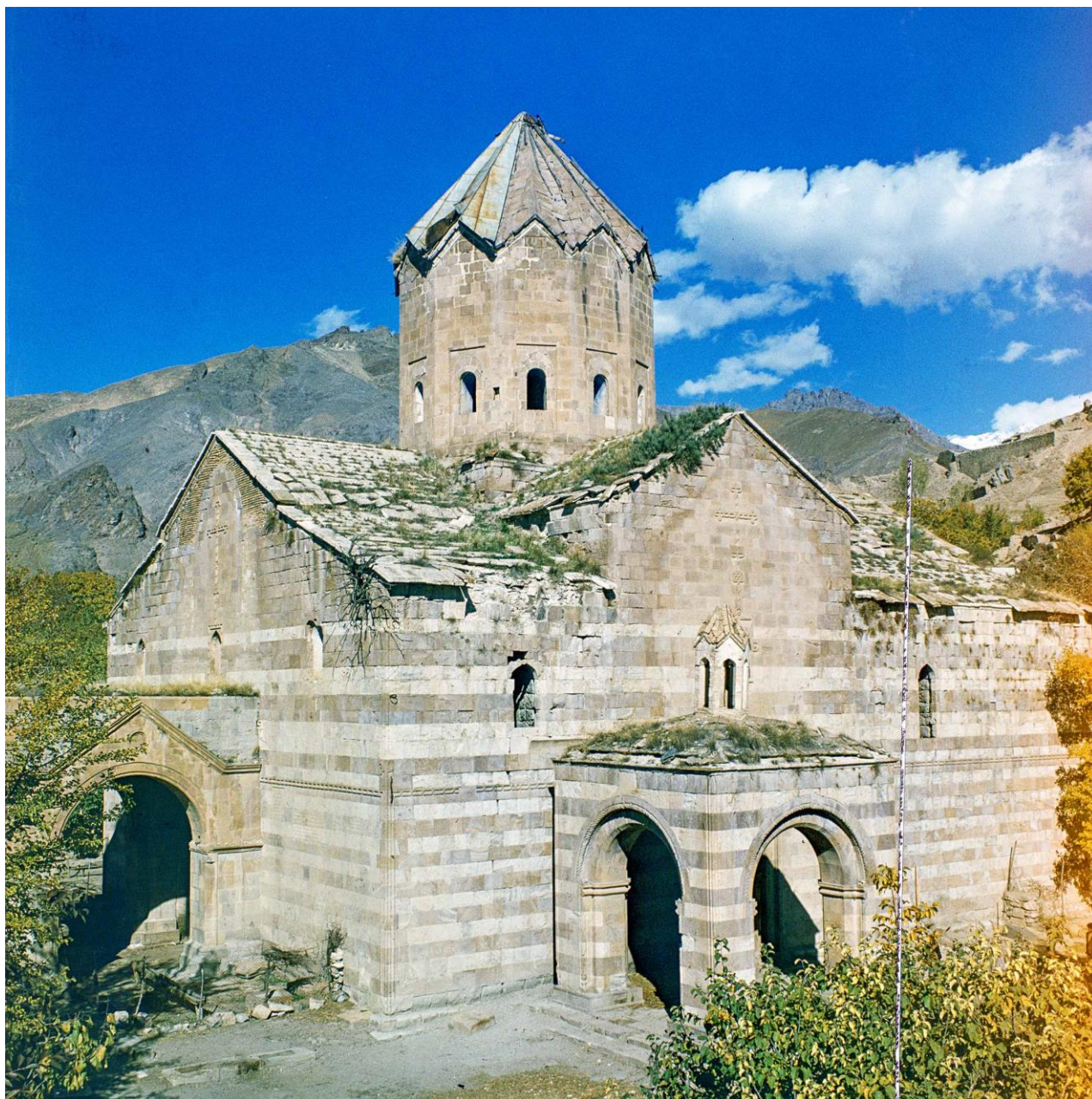


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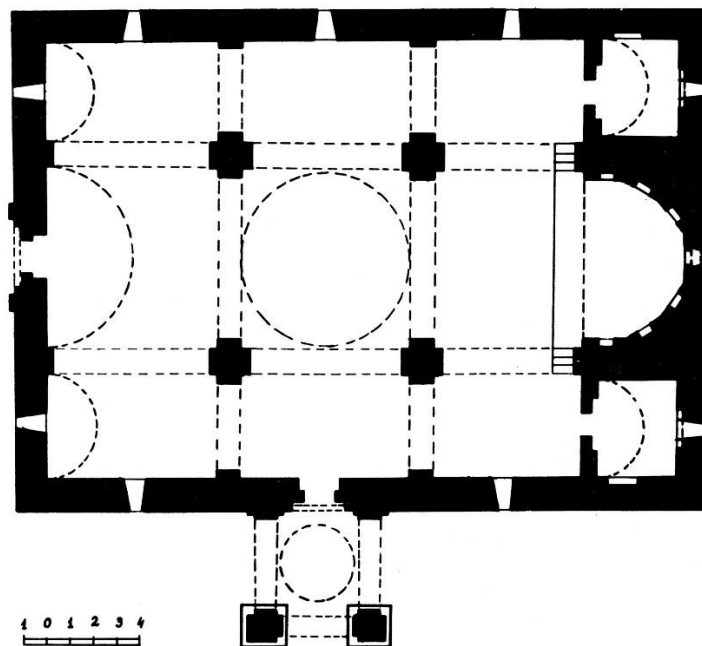


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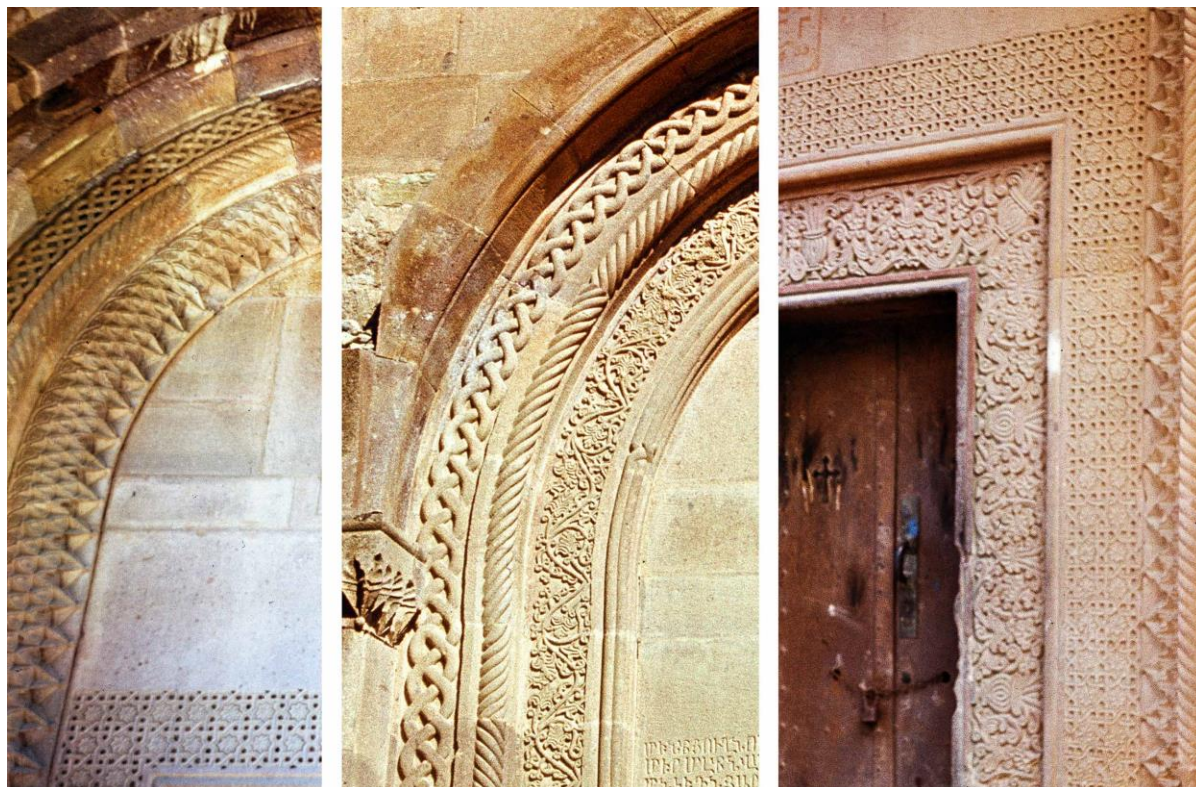


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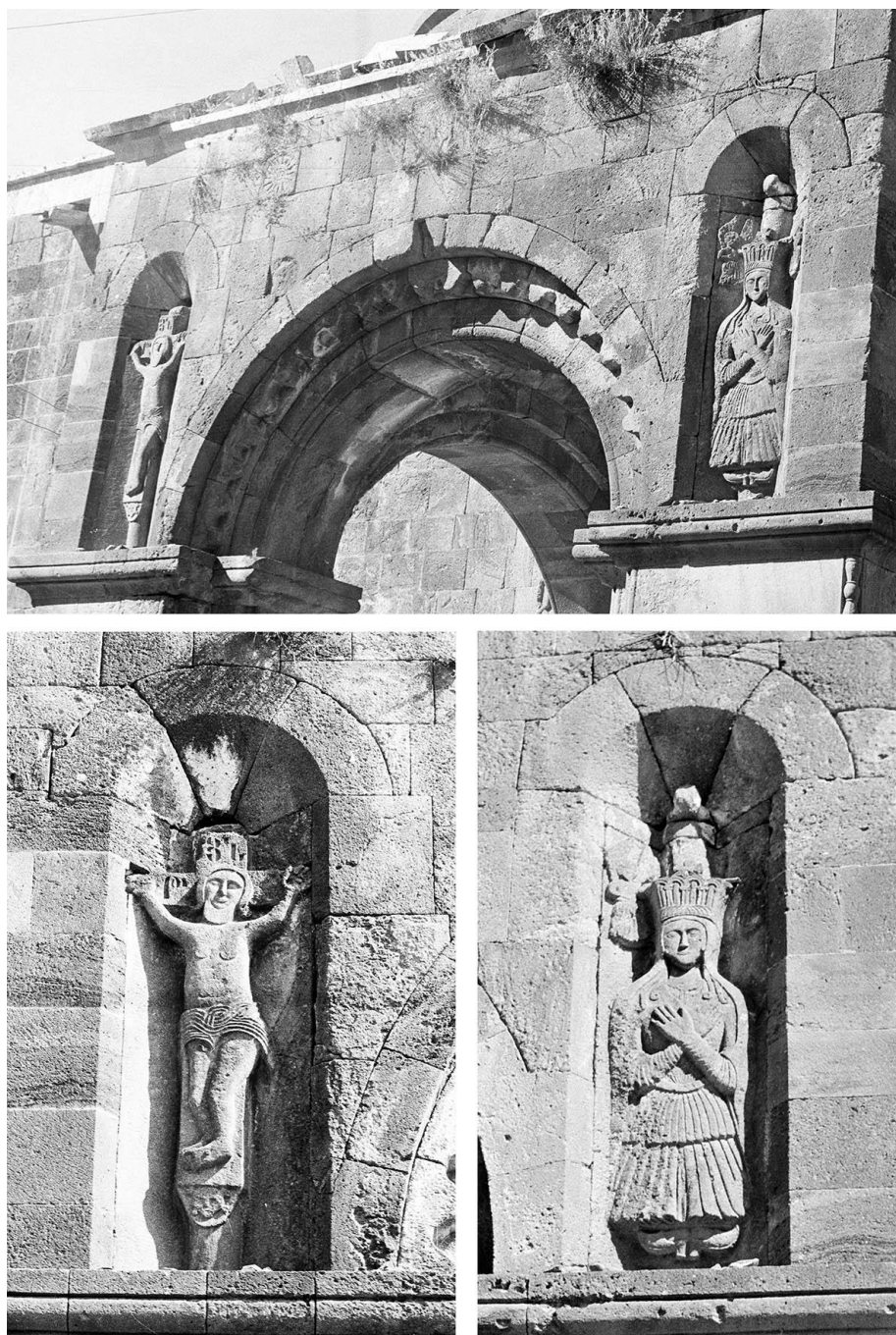


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Appendix

Select Bibliography on the Armenian Medieval Architectural Heritage of Nakhichevan

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