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# Early Christian archaeology and monuments in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict zone: Tigranakert, Amaras, Vachar

## Abstract

The Late Hellenistic city of Tigranakert, which is now under Azerbaijani control, is located in the Askeran region of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabagh), an internationally unrecognized republic which has proclaimed its independence at the beginning of the 90s of the last century after the Armenian-Azerbaijani war. The city is located in the lower valley of Khachenaget river, which is the second largest river in the highland. It is spread over the south-eastern slopes of Mount Vankasar and is adjacent to the slopes near the Royal Springs (Shahbulagh). The city, which occupies more than 70.0 hectares of the original urban area and a chora measuring about 4.0 square kilometers, was discovered, researched, and presented to the international scientific community by the Artsakh Archaeological Expedition, of which I have the honor and responsibility to be the head. This article discusses the archaeological excavations carried out in Artsakh in recent years and tries to find out whether the latest archaeological discoveries can bring news in this field. This article deals with the results of archaeological excavations of early medieval times on the historical territory of Artsakh-Karabakh and Utik, based on the archaeological research of Tigranakert and its surroundings, Amaras and Vachar.

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## 1. Introduction

Artsakh and Utik are the north-eastern provinces of the historical Greater Armenia. These provinces, according to the available data, were a part of the history of the Armenians at least from the 6th century BCE, when they were the north-eastern frontier provinces of the Armenian Yervandid Kingdom. At the beginning of the 2nd century BCE, Artashes I. re-established this frontier by fighting the Caucasian tribes. Tigranes the Great (95–55 BCE) developed a new strategy against the Caucasian tribes by erecting fortresses in the valleys as they reached the steppe, keeping the steppe until the Kura River under control. This situation persists until the fall of the already Christian Arshakunys in Armenia (428 AD). The Sasanians, trying to create

a separate administrative unit from the invasions of the Caucasian tribes in the middle of the 5th century, united the left and right sides of the Kura into a kingdom (then into a province), which is named Ran (in Armenian sources, Aghvank), to which they attached Artsakh and Utik, separating them from Armenia. In the new administrative-political union, when people had already adopted Christianity under the hegemony of the Armenian church in the 5th–6th centuries, probably with the efforts of Albanian Arsacid King Vachagan the Pious and with the support of Jerusalem, a new Church was established under the name of «Albanian Church», the most educated part of which was the Armenian population of Artsakh and Utik. The Albanian Church, as a rule, accepted the supremacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church and followed the same confessional doctrine and rituals. The Armenian nobility of Artsakh and partly of Utik maintained their independent or semi-independent political status until the beginning of the 19th century, before the conquest by the Russian Empire, and until the dissolution and merger of the Albanian Church, including its dioceses, into the Armenian Apostolic Church. The people of Artsakh and Utik, thanks to Christianity, mastered the Armenian scripture and literature. Since the 5th century, they created thousands of Christian structures – monasteries, churches, chapels, tombs, various monuments, and left about three thousand Armenian inscriptions, hundreds of manuscripts, which are the Armenian testimony in these lands.

According to Armenian sources, in the 20s of the 5th century AD, Mesrop Mashtots, the creator of the Armenian alphabet, and his student Beniamin, created the Albanian alphabet based on the language one of the Albanian tribes living north of the Kura River, the Gargars. Until recently, only a few brief or fragmentary inscriptions in this language were found, on the banks of the Kura River from excavations at the Mingeçavur archaeological site. It is notable that till nowadays no Albanian inscription has been found in Artsakh or Utik, while the number of Armenian inscriptions from the 5th–9th centuries is about thirty. At the beginning of the 20th century, Albanian palimpsests were discovered in the monastery of St. Catherine’s on mount Sinai, Egypt, which proves that ecclesiastical literature in the Albanian language existed. It is not clear whether this written language was widely used in Albania itself or abroad, in Jerusalem or Palestine.

If Artsakh occupies the most mountainous and foothill lands of this part of the Armenian Highland, then Utik is more steppe, stretching to the Kura River. Artsakh is a country of river valleys enclosed in the mountains. To the east, where Utik begins, the mountains rise into the foothills and join the steppe. Two different geographical and natural-climatic environments conditioned the dual historical-cultural image: A strong sedentary population in the mountainous zone and constant movements in the steppe. When the political forces were able to unite the mountains and the steppe, the canals flowing from the mighty rivers made the steppe fruitful, otherwise it became a stage for the devastation and fighting of the mobile and militant tribes. Since at least the middle of the second millennium BC, the steppe was covered by agricultural monuments or by big kurgans of predatory and rich tribes. These border areas were also a zone of interaction between many cultures, which is quite evident from archaeological research.

The main purpose of this article is to try to show to what extent the political and religious processes affect the image of culture and what can be understood under the ethnic image of culture in such changing conditions. These are more preconceived notions and hypothetical thoughts than final conclusions. This will be presented in the article, first by archaeological research of Tigranakert, its Later Hellenistic and especially Early Christian culture and by Early Christian sepulchres-reliquaries in Amaras and Vachar.

## 2. Tigranakert in brief

The Late Hellenistic city of Tigranakert, which is now under Azerbaijani control, is located in the Askeran region of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabagh), an internationally unrecognized republic which has proclaimed its independence at the beginning of the 90s of the last century after the Armenian-Azerbaijani war. The city is located in the lower valley of Khachenaget river, which is the second largest river in the highland. It is spread over the south-eastern slopes of Mount Vankasar and is adjacent to the slopes near the Royal Springs (Shahbulagh) The city which occupies more than 70.0 hectares of the original urban area and agricultural environs measuring about 4.0 square kilometers, was discovered, researched, and presented to the international scientific community by the Artsakh Archaeological Expedition, of which I have the honor and responsibility to be the head.<sup>1</sup>

Tigranakert in Artsakh is one of numerous settlements carrying the name of Tigran, however it's the only settlement that has a precisely identified location. It is more than possible that the Greek geographer Strabo (1st BCE-1st AC) was aware about Tigranakert of Artsakh and mentioned Tigranokerta, near Iberia (i.e. Georgia) (Strabo, 11 : XIV: 15). The first mention of Artsakh's Tigranakert in Armenian sources belongs to the 7th century historian Sebeos.<sup>2</sup> Describing the Persian invasions of the Emperor of Byzantium Heraclius in 622–624, the historian mentions two Tigranakerts situated in Artsakh and Utik.

In the letter of the Armenian Catholicos Eghia describing the consul of Partav in the early 8th century,<sup>3</sup> there is information that the priest Petros of Tkrakert (in some manuscripts, just Tigranakert) participated in the meeting as well. Then, we have evidence from the 12th, 18th and 19th centuries.

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1 Part of this article is already published by the author, see: Hamlet Petrosyan, *Politics, Ideology and Landscape* (2021).

2 Sebeos, *Patmut'wn [History]* (1979), 135.

3 Aleksan Hakobyan, *Elia Arčišec'i kat'olikosi norahayt tuluty. Եղիա Արճիշեցի կաթողիկոսի նորահայտ թուղթը. The Newly Found Letter of the Kat'olikos Elia Arčišec'i* (1981), 150.

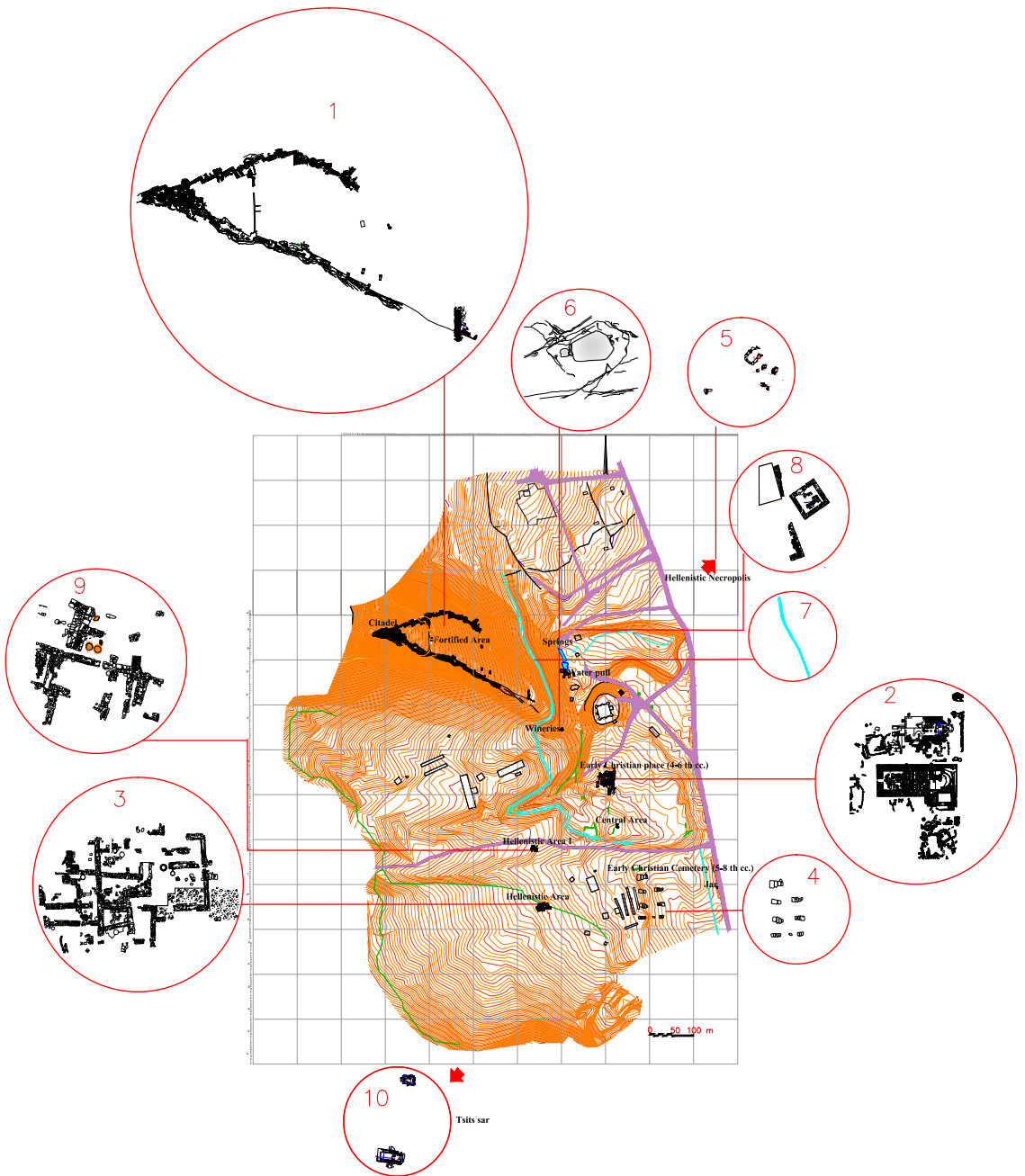


Fig. 1: Layout of Tigranakert with marks of excavated areas. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA - 2020.



**Fig. 2:** Air view of fortified district. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA – 2020.

During the 15 years of excavations, the following sections of the city were uncovered

- the Late Hellenistic<sup>4</sup> fortified district (1st c. BCE) and the citadel (Fig. 1: 1)
- the first and second Late Hellenistic districts (Fig. 1: 3, 9)
- the Late Hellenistic cemetery with jug and cist burials (Fig. 1: 8)
- the Early Christian rock carved complex and a rocky canal near the city (Fig. 1: 7)
- the Early Christian cemetery (Fig. 1: 4)
- the Early Christian square with remnants of two churches, a memorial stele, an Early Christian underground reliquary-sepulcher, and a graveyard (Fig. 1: 2)
- the Early Christian sepulcher and chamber on the top of the Tsitssar mountain south of the site (Fig. 1: 10)

As a result of archaeological research, it is possible to talk about a large residential settlement with advanced urban planning and construction techniques that was founded in the first century BC and has survived until the end of 13th century.

Ancient Tigranakert has been constructed in accordance with the advanced Hellenistic urban planning principles and masonry technics: triangle model of planning of the fortified

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<sup>4</sup> In case of Tigranakert, the Late Hellenistic period includes the timespan from the early 1st century BCE to the end of the 3rd century CE.



**Fig. 3:** The upper part of the northern fortification walls. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA - 2009.

district by using zigzag walls, strong alternation of rectangular and round towers, foundation of fortifications exclusively on rocky base, quadras with rustication, bevels with ›swallow-tail‹ connections, and usage of limestone cement. All structures were made with local white limestone, which gave the city a white appearance, making it visible from afar (Fig. 2 and 3).

### **2.1 Tigranakert's Early Christian square and the large church**

Starting with the first steps of the archaeological research, parallel to the excavations of the Hellenistic districts, the expedition paid special attention to the medieval remnants of the city. In the central district a large pit stretched from west to the east and large masses of stone walls were visible before the excavations. Taking into account the fact that Makar Barkhudaryants, in his descriptions of the area of Tigranakert in the late 19th century, speaks of the ruins of a vast church in the territory of Tigranakert,<sup>5</sup> we assumed that the pit spreading from west to east could be a remnant of this church.

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5 Makar Barkhudareanc', Artsakh (1895), 20.



**Fig. 4:** Early Christian square, general view. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA – 2019.

In 2006, a part of the pit, which roughly corresponded to the structure of the apse and the eastern part of the prayer hall (this part of churches as a rule has been better preserved), was separated (a square of 5 meters of the side) and excavations commenced. Only a few hours later, the first abbey stone of the church's apse and the southern wall were opened at a depth of about 0.5 m. As a result of the excavations in 2006–2009, the ruins of a large early Christian temple were uncovered at a depth of about 3.5 meters.

The church by its composition belongs to the same type of basilica dating back to the 4-6th centuries Armenia and Caucasus. By its architectural composition and decoration it is the earliest, most extensive and beautifully decorated hall of its size in the Eastern Caucasus.

Originally, it was a single nave basilica type church with outer five-faceted apse. Later, the five-dimensional volume was incorporated into the rectangular volume, and the southern sacristy was added, which had an entrance from the outside.

In the early churches, the main altar is usually one degree higher than the floor of prayer hall and divided into a bema and a choir. It should be noted that, although the existence of the choir in the early churches is predictable, archaeologically it is the first fixation as real architectural structure.



**Fig. 5:** The large basilica church, the 5th -6th centuries, general view from the south-west. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA - 2009.

The church was built on a three-staired basement with large polished limestone blocks in inner and outer rows and with lime mortar and little stones in mid part. It had a western, southern and northern entrance, a cornice with crackers and a wooden roof covered by ceramic tiles. The entrances had a pair of columns, completed with ornamented capitals. During the excavations, numerous examples of cornices, columns, hundreds of fragments of tiles and two capitals were found. The carving compositions on the capitals represent in one case a cross in the luminaries, and in the second case a cross in the garden environment, both are well-known early Christianity themes. Especially noteworthy are the grapevines (branches, leaves, carnations, cloves) on the second capital, which are typical of the earliest examples of these compositions.

According to preliminary data, the church was destroyed and burned in the 8th-9th centuries. The existence of such a large Christian church is an important argument in favor of the fact that Tigranakert preserved its status as an important settlement in the early medieval times and that the testimonies of the early medieval Armenian sources are accordance with the archaeological results of Tigranakert.

## 2.2 Northern courtyard and the small church

From the architectural features mentioned above we want to stress the two northern entrances. If the presence of the western entrance was quite natural, and the presence of the south-





**Fig. 6:** Small basilica church and the graveyard. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA – 2014.

hern pair of entrances was natural, considering the size of the church and the presence of the peristyle and baptistery adjacent to the south, the presence of the northern pair of entrances was extraordinary. Early Christian temples typically do not have an entrance from the north, but in some individual cases, due to landscape restrictions where it was impossible to open a western or southern entrance, a northern entrance was created. However this is not the case here, since the church is located on a flat plain with access from all four sides. This circumstance was the basis for the assumption that there was an important structure (or structures) in the yard adjacent to the church, which is why a pair of northern entrances were created. So after the church and the immediate vicinity of the southern courtyard, we decided to continue excavating the northern part. The expectations were fully justified as the excavations revealed a large paved courtyard, with fragments of an Early Christian memorial stela. The stela had a basement, pedestal, column, capital and a winged cross. A small church and reliquary-sepulcher was uncovered under the eastern altar of the church and a graveyard adjacent to the western part of this church. An archaeological study of this sepulcher served as a basis to consider similar Artsakh structures and the reforms of Vachagan the Pious.

Though from the church only some blocks of first row and foundations have been preserved, its layout, dimensional solutions and construction are completely understandable and apparent. It had a rectangular layout with circular altar with five-faceted outer appearance,



Fig. 7: An air view on the Early Christian sepulchre. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA – 2017.

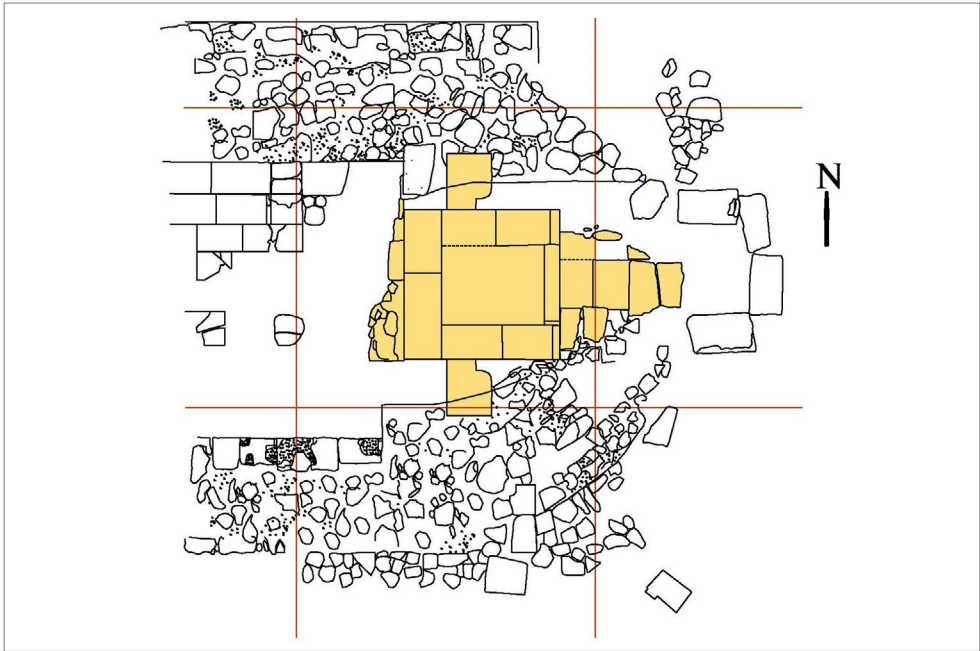
western and southern entrances (the interior of the prayer hall is 9.8 x 4.5 meters, the outer dimensions are 16.3 x 8.3 meters). The floor was covered with limestone slabs.

The yard between two churches is about 5 meters wide and is covered with rough, irregular slabs. Only the path to the southern entrance of the small church is made up of larger stones, among which an anthropomorphic stela dating to the 8–7th centuries of the first millennium BC was used.

### 2.3 The sepulcher

During the excavations in 2013, a rectangular area surrounded by four large stone blocks was uncovered on the eastern end of the newly-opened small church, where the cultural layer was deep into the natural ground. At the depth of 1.40 m from the level of the yard, as a result of the excavation of the well (1.95 x 1.50 m), three polished stairs and the eastern entrance were unearthed.

The excavations of 2014 uncovered the southern and northern walls of a building to the west, with polished limestone blocks, separate parts of the vaulted ceiling, that were also made with polished blocks. In the northern and southern walls niches were embedded. The southern part of the altar wall which goes in parallel with the new structure was implemented with rough, large blocks, which made it possible to assert that the structure was included in a protective coating for softening the lateral pressure from the side of church's



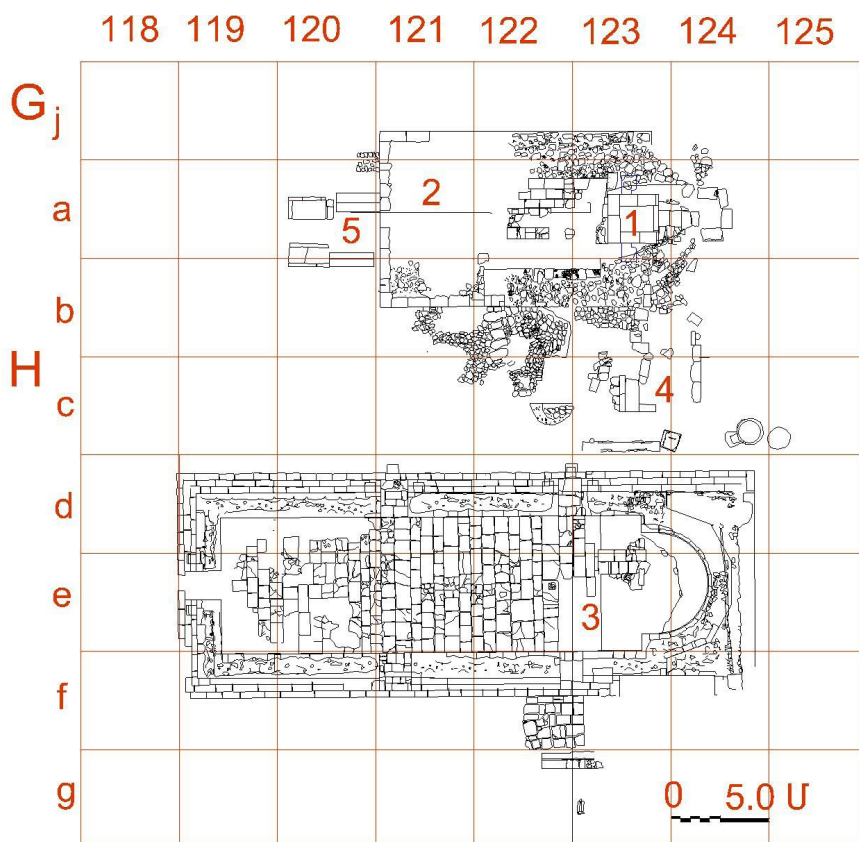
**Fig. 8:** Plan of the sepulchre. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA – 2014.

wall. Excavations in the southern part of the building have also revealed a part of the roof covered with a lime plasterboard. The upper upstream point slightly raised from the floor surface of the church and was included in the volume of the altar. Obviously, we deal with a structure built with the church and enclosed under the church's altar.

When digging went deeper than 2.8 meters below the ground floor and the cultural layer continued, it was decided to stop the excavations due to the threat of collapse. Therefore, this area was filled until the ground level. The building was destroyed in the 8th-9th centuries during the collapse of the Early Christian Square, but the ruins of the building were a subject of curiosity and treasure hunts for centuries, and, as a result of this, the original floor was not preserved. So, the question of burial is still pending. We named this construction conditionally sepulcher-reliquary,<sup>6</sup> based on the small niches in the walls.

As the excavations have shown, the whole structure is made of large polished lime blocks, has a clear west-east orientation in accordance with the orientation of the church, a cylindrical ceiling, and – which was strange – a single eastern entrance. The niches in the southern and northern walls have a cuboid volume with arch shaped ends at the eastern side, most probably intended for the saints' relics.

<sup>6</sup> Hereinafter until the final conclusion we will name this type of constructions of Artsakh just sepulcher.



**Fig. 9:** Plans of Early Christian structures: 1. Sepulchre, 2. Small church, 3. Large church, 4. Monument, 5. Graveyard. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA - 2014.

Despite the devastation, most of the reliquary's stones have been preserved and its further restoration will not cause any problems. It can be asserted that this is the third well-preserved structure in the Early Christian culture after the Aghtsk royal mausoleum and the Saint Grigoris Mausoleum in Amaras. Both of these structures also contained bones but not burials. The excavation results make it possible to validate a new composition of this type of structure, the main feature of which is the only eastern entrance.

After the excavations in 2014, it is possible to restore the process of formation of the Early Christian Square of Tigranakert (Fig. 9).

- building a sepulcher,
- construction of a small church with the sepulcher under the altar,
- construction of a large urban church south of the small church,
- a southern paved courtyard and a stell,
- the graveyard in the western yard of the small church.



**Fig. 10:** The eastern entry of the St. Grigoris after excavation. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA – 2014.

In the Tigranakert sepulcher, the only eastern entrance is exceptionally extraordinary for the Early Christian sepulchers and for the wider, generally the religious structures. The theological and ritual direction of Christianity from the west to the east, from where Christ's Second Coming is expected, conditioned both the ritual movement of the believer from west to east, and the orientation of the sacred area, including the sacred structures from west to east (west-east orientation and stretching, west main entrance, location the altar in the east, etc.). Even in our sepulcher, which has the only eastern entrance, the ›movement‹ to the east is documented by the structure of niches whose eastern parts have been given a rounded solution.

#### **2.4 Parallels to Tigranakert's sepulcher: Amaras and Vachar**

The problem of clarifying this peculiarity of Tigranakert's sepulcher was the reason for initiating excavations in the most prestigious early Christian sepulcher of Artsakh – the Saint Grigoris sepulcher of Amaras, the main volume of which is located under the eastern altar of the present church built in 1858. This sepulcher had two southern and northern entrances, had a long corridor instead of an altar and based on the look of it had been cut during the construction of the church, and the continuation of this corridor should be outside the church behind the eastern wall. The excavations initiated by our expedition at the adjacent part to the eastern wall of the church in 2014 revealed the continuation of the corridor with an eastern portal with pavement and six stairs going down. (Fig. 10). After these excavations





**Fig. 12:** The eastern entrance of St. Stephanos sepulchre in Vachar. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA - 2017.

sepulcher seems to have no doubts at the end of the 5th century. Besides the clarified historical context,<sup>8</sup> the sculptures can also be dated to the 5th–6th centuries AD.<sup>9</sup> As we have seen, the sepulcher of Tigranakert was preceded by a small church, which preceded the large church. Recently, we have also received data on the carbon analysis of two burial bones at the western side of the small church: sarcophagus – 420–565 years, stone cist – 566–655.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, it is obvious that the burials were made when the church was already built, as they immediately touched its western walls. Particularly important is the data of the first analysis, according to which the first sarcophagus burial was performed after 420, but not later than 565. Thus, the dating of Tigranakert's sepulcher in the second half of the 5th century and at the beginning of the sixth century leaves no doubt. The same date could be confirmed by the constructional compositions of small and large churches of Tigranakert and by reliefs of the large church.<sup>11</sup> The Armenian inscription on the clay disk found in the large basilica can be added as another artifact, which will be described below.

8 Movsēs Kalankatuac'i, *Patmut'iw'n Aluanic' Ašxarhi* [History of the Country of the Albanians] (1983), 83.

9 Murad Hasratyan, *Haykakan čartarapetut'yan Arc'axi dproc'ə* [The Artsakh's School of Armenian Architecture] (1992), 19–24.

10 For these analysis, I am grateful to anthropologist Paul Bailey, armenologists Patrick Tonapetian and Anna Leyloyan for their professional, friendly and financial support.

11 Hamlet Petrosyan, *Similarities between the Early Christian Armenian Monuments and Irish High Crosses* (2012), 172–174.

### 3. Religious reforms of Vachagan the Pious and the Jerusalemite legend of the origin of the Albanian Church

So far, we can speak about three sepulchers, the specific aspect of which is the eastern entrance.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, sepulchers with eastern entrances are unknown in the Middle East. There are no such scalable solutions to the well-known sepulchers-chapels known from other parts of Armenia (Aghtsk, Hripsime, Gayane, Talin, Oshakan, Nakhchavan and others). The only sepulcher which has an eastern entrance is the Lord's tomb in Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> According to our preliminary hypothesis, we are dealing with a religious reform, which tried to give the Albanian Church a special religious and ritual identity (differing from the Armenian Church) and is essentially based on political reasons.

In this regard, it is necessary to pay special attention to the reforms of Vachagan the Pious in the last quarter of the fifth or at the beginning of the sixth century, the perceptions of Albania as an eastern country and Yeghisha's legend. The reforms of Vachagan included the new hierarchy of Albanian Church saints (Zacharia, Pantaleon, Grigoris, Grigor, Hripsime, Gayane) via ›discovering‹ their relics and constructing chapels and reliquaries for these relics (Saint Grigoris – in Amaras, Saint Pandaleon – in Diutakan, Saint Yeghisha – in Jrvshtik). In addition, the old churches got a new impetus for worship thanks to these relics.<sup>14</sup> Second, it was the council of Aghuen which adopted new regulations for the Albanian Church and the society as a whole.<sup>15</sup> Here, we do not dwell on the question of Partav (the capital of the state) – in the history of Vachagan it is not mentioned – more than likely it was not there yet.

In parallel with this, as we have mentioned, the ideology of Albania as an eastern country, which is witnessed in Vachagan's story<sup>16</sup> and later, was created to be directly related to Jerusalem as the center of the Christian world and to the sacred topos of salvation. The hagiography of the Apostle Eghisha, who came to Albania from Jerusalem circumventing

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12 Let us note that the eastern entrance did not at all mean ignoring the dominant eastern-western ideological-ritual direction of Christianity. This is evidenced by the spatial resolution of the Saint Grigoris and Tigranakert's sepulchers, Tigranakert's sepulcher niches and small church direction, and even the west-east direction with an eastern altar of second floor chapel of Saint Stepanos sepulcher. The eastern entrance was also attributed to an early church (4-5th cc.?) uncovered in archaeological site Mingechaur on the river of Kur. Since, there is no access to the three preserved walls of the structure and the eastern absorption has not been preserved, Azerbaijani archaeologist Rahim Vahidov concluded that the entrance was probably from the east (Rahim Vahidov, Mingəçevir III-VIII əsrlərdə [Mingechaur in the 3rd–8th Centuries] (1961), 95-97). Rashid Gejuşev supposed that in this case the altar was in the center of the building, and the entrance to the east (Rashid Gejuşev, *Christianstvo v Kavkavskoj Albanii* [Christianity in the Caucasian Albania] (1984), 83). It is difficult to understand, how we can define a three walls structure without altar and entrance as a church. Excavations in Tigranakert and Gyavurkala (an Early Christian settlement in vicinity of Tigranakert), where none of the three churches lack access to eastern part and have eastern altars, seems to question such assumptions.

13 John Wilkinson, *The Church of the Holy Sepulchre* (1978), 6–13.

14 Movsēs Kalankatuac'i, *Patmut'iw n Aluanic' Aşxarhi* (1983), 56–88.

15 Movsēs Kalankatuac'i, *Patmut'iw n Aluanic' Aşxarhi* (1983), 89–94.

16 *Ibid.*



Armenia, fully corresponds with this line of thought and is an attempt to attest to the Jerusalemite origin of the Albanian church.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, we have the sepulcher structures adapted to the direction of the Lord's tomb at the border of the 5th-6th centuries, the country's eastern ideology, the legend of the origins of Albanian church from Jerusalem. And we have a powerful ruler who tried to convey an independent status to his church by means of religious reforms.

In his early investigations Alexan Hakobyan considered the Vachagan history (including the »Aghuen's rules«) as a »planned legend« created in the mid-6th century and thus questioned the historicity of the king himself. Our archaeological findings and historical data seem to indicate that these approaches and ideas were formed politically via a real king and real reforms.<sup>18</sup> In our opinion, it is the mighty king who would try to give to his church appropriate autonomy suitable to his kingdom (at that time, when Armenia lost its kingdom, became a Sasanid province and lost its north-eastern provinces Artsakh nad Utik), a process that could be further clarified and finalized in the following centuries. Vachagan with his reforms, alongside Christian-Armenian traditions, was trying to shape its own traditions (Eastern country, Jerusalemite Apostol, »own« saints). And one of the materialized expressions of this is the eastern entrance to the sepulchers.

Returning to the question of terminology for these constructions, it seems more suitable that name reliquary be used instead of sepulcher. Because in all of these cases we have no evidence about burials but only stories about discoveries, gathering and putting the relics of saints into buildings created for this specific purpose.

From this point of view, it is also remarkable that Vachagan erected a stela to the place of the martyrdom of Eghisha<sup>19</sup> and transferred the relics of the saint to the Jrvshik monastery of Artsakh (renamed the monastery to Eghisha Apostle).<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that according to some sources, the chapel of Grigoris was built directly by command of Vachagan.<sup>21</sup>

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17 Movsēs Kalankatuac'i, Patmut'iwn Ałuanic' Ašxarhi (1983), 10–11.

18 In his latest work, Aleksan Hakobyan relates the *Novel of Vachagan* to the very beginning of the 6th century (cf. A. Hakobyan, *The Creation of a »Pious« Image of King Vačagan II (2021)*).

19 As we have noted, the remnants of such a monument were unearthed also in Tigranakert, in the courtyard between two churches.

20 Movsēs Kalankatuac'i, Patmut'iwn Ałuanic' Ašxarhi (1983), 12. The History of Kalankatuac'i considers the main area of activity of Yeghisha on the left bank of Kur river. It corresponds to the oldest tradition, up to the 19th century. Vachagan probably tried to shift some of the traditions of that time to the right bank of Kur, to the new Armenian provinces Artsakh and Utik, adjacent to his kingdom, which probably had more close ties with the Armenian Apostolic Church. And two new monasteries named after Eghisha were established: Near Amaras and in the Great Kvenq, to rename the last from Jrvshik to Eghisha monastery. According to tradition, Vachagan was buried in this last monastery, where currently a 13th c. mausoleum, an 11th c. tombstone and a khachkar are preserved.

21 Movsēs Kalankatuac'i, Patmut'iwn Ałuanic' Ašxarhi (1983), 82–83.



**Fig. 13:** A clay disc with Armenian inscriptions from the excavations of the large church, the front side. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA - 2008.

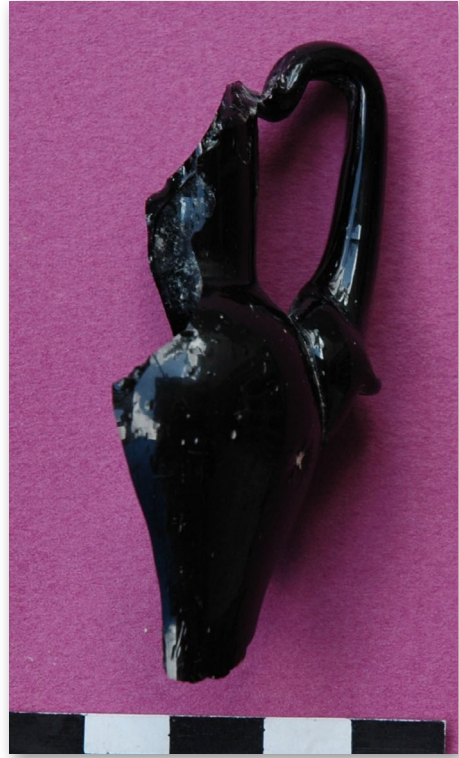
#### 4. Some Tigranakert findings concerning the theme

In 2008, inside the territory of the large church, a small ceramic disk (diameter 7.5–7.8, thickness 0.5–1.0) was discovered (Fig. 13). A circle and an equally winged cross on one side of the disk were engraved. The reverse had a portrait of a man wearing a fur hat, with a beard and moustache was carved. The disk had a hole making it possible to attach it to a box or scroll. So probably it was supposed to serve as a seal. There are Armenian inscriptions on the disc, the main inscription reads ՆՍ / ՎԱՉ[Է] (կամ ՎԱՉ[ԱԳԱՆ]) / ՆԱՌԱՅ Տ[ԵՍՌ]ՆՆ« (»I / VACH[E] / (or VACH[AGAN]) SERVANT OF L[OR]D«).<sup>22</sup>

Examination of the disk, the caption and the Armenian fonts can be attributed to the 5–7th centuries. The name of Vache or Vachagan was attributed to several people at that time. Vachagan the Pious is the most distinguished among them.

This finding of Tigranakert is actually one of the oldest Armenian records found in the territory of Artsakh, and the best argument for the early Christian-Armenian image of the city.

<sup>22</sup> Hamlet Petrosyan, Aghavni Žamkoč'yan, Hayeren arjanagrut'yunnerov skavařak Arc'axi Tigranakertic' [A Disk with Armenian Inscriptions from Tigranakert in Artsakh] (2009), 166–176.



**Fig. 14:** Glass bottle from excavations of the large church. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA - 2007.

Noteworthy is a glass bottle in the shape of amphoriskos found in excavations at the same church (Fig. 14). The story of Saint Grigoris' relics is specifically relevant and important since it talks about two glass bottles in which the blood of the sacred Zacharias and Pandaleon was kept.<sup>23</sup> Our amphoriskos appearance, made of dark blue glass, dates back to the 5th–7th centuries and is not less likely to have served similar purposes. Excavations of the large church of Tigranakert also unearthed a clay token with the scene of the Crucifixion (?), the Palestinian-Jerusalemian origin is yet questionable.

The folk tradition, which has reached us in the 19th century, connects Vachagan the Pious with the church of Vankasar. »[...] the king of Albania Vachagan came to Shahbulagh (i.e. Tigranakert) in his last years. He built a monastery on the top of the mountain, where he rested in seclusion«.<sup>24</sup>

23 Movsēs Kalankatuac'i, *Patmut'iwn Aluanic' Ašxarhi* (1983), 81.

24 Egišhe Haykuni, *Ulegnac'akan aknarkner* [Travel Guides] (2010), 39.



**Fig. 15:** The Early Christian Tigranaert's landscape: 1. The Early Christian square, 2. Vankasar's church, 3. Cave sanctuaries, 4. Tsitsar's sepulcher. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA.

## 5. On Christianization of landscape as a future research goal

The archaeological investigations of Tigranakert have revealed four Early Christian complexes in the city and its surroundings: the Early Christian square in the Central district, the church of the 7th century on the top of Vankasar mountain, the Early Christian cave sanctuaries on the bank of Kha-chenaget river and a reliquary unearthed on the top of Tsitsar in 2019 and dated to the same period. So we can see the real reculturalisation of the landscape in the Early Christian period (Fig. 15). It is interesting to clarify how this organisation of landscape of Tigranakert can be connected with the reforms of Vachagan the Pious and Jerusalemian landscape and Christian sacred topography.

In his list of Armenian monasteries in Jerusalem, Anastas Vardapet, author of the 6th century, lists also the churches belonging to the Albanian church (this part was copied by Kaghankatvatsi, 285–286). It includes eleven Albanian monasteries, seven of which were mentioned by name. The names of five of them can be identified (Holy Virgin of Partav, Holy Forty Infants of Mrov, Holy Virgin of Artsakh, St. Gregory of Amaras, monastery of Kalanka-tuik) and all five are located in Artsakh and Utik.

Furthermore, if the territory of the activities of Elisha and Grigoris originally was the left bank of Kur (which could be reconstructed via fragmentary preserved information), it is more than likely that Vachagan's religious reform's key intellectual and ritualistic center



**Fig. 16:** The archaeological camp of Tigranakert after enemy shellings. © Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA – November 2020.

and impact area was the right bank of Kur, the Artsakh and Utik provinces of Great Armenia, which were joined to the Albanian kingdom not much earlier than those times. The reliquaries with the eastern entrance and related archeological findings of Artsakh greatly help to clarify the civilizational milieu of the religious reform of Vachagan the Pious.

Thus, if in the case of ancient Tigranakert we see the obvious introduction and influence of Hellenistic civilization in the field of fortification, urban development, but more stability of local traditions in the field of ritual, then the examination of the tombs-reliquaries of Tigranakert, Amaras and Vachar gives an opportunity to assume the primacy of the political-religious situation.

## 6. Afterword

During the 44-day war in 2020, the Tigranakert archaeological site was destroyed by shellings (Fig. 16). The Artsakh authorities, the Tigranakert archaeological museum and our research team evacuated the materials from the excavations in order to preserve our heritage from more destructions. In case of peace, they will be returned to Stepanakert and will be exhibited in the museum dedicated to it.

Preserving, promoting and passing on cultural heritage is an international and fundamental right to every people. The people of Artsakh worries about what could happen to its cultural heritage since it remembers the destruction of thousands of khachkars in Jughha in 2005–2006. My colleagues and I are willing to continue the research of Artsakh's cultural heritage, its popularization and will report any act of vandalism. The scientific discoveries in the city of Tigranakert and their importance in the comprehension of the early Christian history shows that the Artsakh heritage is part of a larger history that belongs to everybody. It reinforces the need to preserve it with the cooperation of the international authorities and the countries involved in the conflict. Tigranakert could thus be a joint project that brings together professionals from both belligerents around the preservation of a heritage that must stay common.

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