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# ARMENIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

## Past experiences and new achievements

edited by

Aram Kosyan, Pavel Avetisyan, Arsen Bobokhyan,  
and Yervand Grekyan

ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY

Association for Near Eastern and Caucasian Studies in collaboration with the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography (National Academy of Sciences of Armenia)

# ARAMAZD

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**Editorial Office:**  
Marshal Baghramyan Ave. 24/4, 375019, Yerevan, Armenia  
Tel. (374 10) 58 33 82  
Fax: (374 10) 52 50 91  
E-mail: [ancs@freenet.am](mailto:ancs@freenet.am), [armenianjournal@yahoo.com](mailto:armenianjournal@yahoo.com)  
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# Tigranakert of Artsakh

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*Hamlet Petrosyan*

## Introduction

Tigranakert of Artsakh is situated in the Askeran region of the Republic of Artsakh (former Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region), in the lower valley of Khachenaget, the second-largest river of the highlands. Occupying an area of more than 70 ha, it is spread over the south-western lower slope of Mt Vankasar and in the plain next to it (Figure 1), in the neighbourhood of the freshwater sources called ‘Shahbulagh’ (‘Royal Sources’). The city was founded at the end of 90s BC by the Armenian King, Tigranes II the Great (95-55 BC). The Artsakh expedition of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia found traces of the city in 2005, and thus far has realised archaeological excavations in its vicinity. Tigranakert of Artsakh is the only one among numerous settlements named after Tigranes that has been precisely located and is being investigated by archaeologists. The archaeological museum of the city was founded in 2010, based on the large amount of excavated archaeological material. Tigranakert is the most visited archaeological site in Artsakh, described in detail on the Internet, and is widely known within scientific circles and the public. The investigations of Tigranakert were undertaken and financed by the ‘Yerkir’ Union of Non-Governmental Organisations for Repatriation and Settlement. Since 2008, the archaeological investigation of the site has been financed by the government of the Republic of Artsakh.<sup>1</sup>

## Tigranakert of Artsakh in written sources

Dynastic names of cities were a common phenomenon in the Hellenistic world, formed as the result of the campaigns of Alexander the Great. Numerous Alexandrias,

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<sup>1</sup> The works of the expedition are directed by Hamlet Petrosyan (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of NAS, RA, Yerevan State University). The permanent members of the expedition are: Lyuba Kirakosyan (National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia), Vardges Safaryan (Artsakh State University), Inesa Karapetyan (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS, RA), Tatyana Vardanesova (Yerevan State University), Armine Gabrielyan, Nzhdeh Eranyan, Ruben Hovsepyan (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS, RA). In addition, Zhores Khachatryan, Ashot Piliposyan, Hayk Hakobyan, Aghavni Zhamkochyan, Ruben Vardanyan, Roman Hovsepyan, Nora Engibaryan, Hasmik Margaryan, Lilit Minasyan, Giusto Traina, Franceska Cheli, Sarah Champi, and Paul Bailey took part in works in previous years.

Selevkias, Antiochias were named after Hellenistic monarchs. The Armenian cities of Yervandashat, Yervandakert, Arshamashat, Artashat, as well as several Zarehavans and Zarishats, were formed by being named in reference to the kings before Tigranes the Great. These newly built cities had also a special principle of population, known as *synoikismos*. The kings evicted classes engaged in trade and crafts from different cities and countries, then settled them in the newly founded city, thus providing a normal development. This explains why these cities were, as a rule, multinational.

This tradition was especially popular during the times of Tigranes the Great, as his great conquests created large opportunities for wealth, labour force, and *synoikismos*. As well as the famous capital city that Tigranakert founded in the province of Aghdznik (the Alše, Alzi(ni) of the ancient Near Eastern sources), which is referred to with admiration by Strabo, Appian, and Plutarch, several other settlements named after Tigran are known in historical Armenia and beyond its borders, including Tigranavan of Goghtn, Tigranan of Media, and Tigranukome of Amanus (Figure 2). It should be mentioned that the exact locations of these settlements, including the capital, Tigranakert, are not known.

Among these settlements, the two called Tigranakert may be included, which are mentioned by Sebeos, the Armenian historian of the 7th century, in his description of the Persian campaigns of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius in 622-624. According to the historian,<sup>2</sup> during that war the Byzantine emperor tried to pass to Iberia<sup>3</sup> from Syunik, via the Artsakh-Utik plain, in order to avoid the Persians; however, a Persian military unit descended into the plain (Artsakh and Utik were two Eastern provinces of The Greater Armenia, which approximately in the half of 5th century were adjusted to the Albanian kingdom by Sasanids) from Gardman and cut him off from his available route 'to the other Tigranakert'. The emperor tried to return, but another army appeared near the 'avan<sup>4</sup> of Tigranakert'. Thus Sebeos mentions two Tigranakerts. The first, 'the other Tigranakert', is situated in the north, and the second, called 'avan of Tigranakert' in the south. It is more than probable that the author called one of the Tigranakerts 'the other' to distinguish it from the 'avan of Tigranakert'. As for the term 'avan', Sebeos used it to mention a settlement, which could have had fortification walls in one case, and be near the fortress, or spread around it, in the other instance.<sup>5</sup> These data are absolutely trustworthy, as the author mentions these settlements during the description of occasions having no connection with Tigranes the Great and his time, and as part of Heraclius' campaigns.

The most direct conclusion from the evidence of Sebeos is that, at the beginning of the 7th century, there were two settlements called Tigranakert in Artsakh and Utik. If we take into consideration that the emperor's army had to go by a busy road to reach Iberia quickly, then it is more than probable that the Tigranakerts were situated not far from the way that passed to the north through the border where there was a

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<sup>2</sup> *Patmut'yun Sebeosi* (1979: 125).

<sup>3</sup> The kingdom of Eastern Georgia, *Virk'* in Armenian sources.

<sup>4</sup> Arm. 'uq'uqi' – a large settlement.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed study of the terms relating to settlements in the *History* of Sebeos, see Petrosyan 1988: 116-119.

connection with the Artsakh mountains and the Utik plain, or even in the immediate neighbourhood of it.

Here we should return to Strabo's famous evidence. In one of his accounts concerning the capital city, Tigranakert, the historian mentions: 'After ascending so high in his power, Tigranes found a city near Iberia, between this place and Zeugma on the bank of Euphrates. After gathering here the population of the twelve Greek cities destroyed by him, he called the city, Tigranokerta. But Lucullus who was fighting against Mithridates, king of Pontus, reached here before the end of the construction of the city. Lucullus not only let the inhabitants go to their native places, but also destroyed what was partly built during the occupation and left only a little village behind.'<sup>6</sup> The mention of Iberia in this context has resulted in ambiguous interpretations by researchers.<sup>7</sup> We think that clarifying the data of Sebeos, and as a result of the archaeological research at Tigranakert, gives us an opportunity to understand in a new way Strabo's data describing Tigranakert as being situated 'near Iberia'. It could be possible that the data available in Strabo's book on the capital city and the other Tigranakerts were confused, and that the Tigranakert near Iberia could be identified with the Tigranakert of Artsakh.<sup>8</sup>

Another historian of the 7th century, Movses Kaghankatvatsi in his *Patmut'yun Alvanic' ašxarhi* ('History of the Land of Albania') also reports on this campaign of Heraclius.<sup>9</sup> After studying this source, it turns out that the southern Tigranakert mentioned by Sebeos, 'the avan of Tigranakert' was situated south of Tartar, not far from Partav and Kaghankatuyk, the birthplace of the historian, where the Artsakh mountains end and the steppe regions of Utik begin. In spite of the fact that Movses Kaghankatvatsi does not mention Tigranakert in his account of the Emperor's campaign, nevertheless, in the 'Letter'<sup>10</sup> by the Armenian catholicos Eghia concerning the council organised in Partav at the beginning of the 8th century, which is given also in Kaghankatvatsi's *History*, there is a reference to a certain Davit, a monk of Kaghankatuyk and Petros, a priest of *Tkrakert*, who took part in that council, among many others. First, it is supposed that Tkrakert is the local pronunciation of Tigranakert, second, it is probable that it was not far from Kaghankatuyk (as it is mentioned immediately after it). These two points suggest it is reflected on the district of Tigranakert or Tigranakert of Artsakh.

That Tigranakert was an important settlement in that time is confirmed also by the fact that by the end of the 7th century a cross-shaped central-domed church was built near the settlement, on the top of Vankasar, which was a famous place for worship, at least up to the mid 18th century. Among the ever-falling, northerly rocks of the same Vankasar, on the bank of Khachenaget, is situated one of the most ancient

<sup>6</sup> Strabo XI, 14, 15.

<sup>7</sup> For a study of various opinions, see Traina 2015: 44; Hakobyan 2007: 24.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. 'Strabo may have added geographical information concerning a different Tigranokerta, located in the eastern part of the empire of Tigran the Great. Archaeological evidence from this site seems to already have proved this fact by the first releases of the expedition directed by Hamlet Petrosyan' (Traina 2015: 44).

<sup>9</sup> Movses Kaghankatvatsi (1983: 132-133, 137).

<sup>10</sup> Hakobyan 1981: 150.

Christian centres of Artsakh – a rock-cut, cultic complex consisting of a rock-cut church, a narthex and a graveyard with numerous cross compositions with Greek and Armenian inscriptions.

During the period of strengthening the domination of Khachen, when the borders of Hasan Jalal's power reached the Kura River, the foothills and plain area of the lower valley of Khachenaget, was called Tigranakert – after the name of the Tigranakert settlement. In an inscription of the 13th century from Koshik Monastery, situated near one of the tributaries of the upper stream of Khachenaget, 'the country of Tigranakert' was mentioned, an inhabitant of which, Hakob, made a donation to the monastery.<sup>11</sup>

Chronologically later data related to the ruins of Tigranakert, or its location, and the contemporary studies of the traces of the city were based on those very data. So, Yesayi Hasan-Jalalyan, the Catholicos of the Caucasian Albanian Church, whose residence was the monastery of Gandzasar,<sup>12</sup> as an eyewitness, described the destructive campaign of the Lezgins to Artsakh at the beginning of the 18th century. Yesayi Hasan-Jalalyan writes that the invaders, by capturing people and taking the cattle, 'migrated from Tkrnakert and inhabited the territories along the River Drdu, which is currently called Tartar in the Persian way: over the bridge which was called Ghari Korpi.'<sup>13</sup> It was more than possible that the invaders concentrated on plundering the valley of Khachen in Tkrakert because of the freshwater sources there. The following evidence from the diary of the Catholicos is more crucial: 'This is the writing of the Tigranakert and Beshiklu church, which is currently called Shahbulagh. I, Shahashah, the son of Ashot, put up this cross of the soul of mine, if you read, remember in your prayers, in the year 712' [1263 AD].<sup>14</sup> In fact, the Catholicos confirms that in his time Tigranakert and its surroundings were called also by the new name – Shahbulagh ('Royal Source').

Panah, the implacable enemy of Melikdoms of Artsakh, founded a fortress near the Shahbulagh freshwater sources in the mid 18th century. The Persian documents mentioning this construction called the place Tarnakut, situated near Shahbulagh.<sup>15</sup> Sargis Jalalyants, who visited the ruins of Tigranakert in the mid 19th century, reported that the neighborhood of the sources of Shahbulagh was called Tngrnakert by the Armenians and Tarnagyurt by the Persians, and due to this reasoning he supposed that Tigranakert was situated there.<sup>16</sup> Makar Barkhudaryants, the researcher of antiquities of Artsakh had almost the same information and opinion.<sup>17</sup> Several modern researchers disregarded opinions of Sargis Jalalyants and Makar Barkhudaryants.

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<sup>11</sup> DVH 5: 30.

<sup>12</sup> The monastery of Gandzasar is situated on the bank of the same Khachenaget where Tigranakert is located, but on the upper valley of the river and on its left bank.

<sup>13</sup> Yesayi Hasan Jalaleants (1839: 47. Cf. Matenadaran, Manuscript no. 8206: 29b, 30a). It is interesting that in the Jerusalem publication of the same work the publishers deliberately turned Tkrakert to Akanakert (Yesayi Hasan Jalaleants 1868: 39).

<sup>14</sup> Matenadaran, Manuscript no. 7821: 18b-19a.

<sup>15</sup> Jevanshir Karabagi (1959: 69, 70); Adigesal-Bek (1950: 55).

<sup>16</sup> Jalaleants 1858: 344-345.

<sup>17</sup> Barkhutareants 1895: 28.

## Discovery of the ruins of Tigranakert

Based on the above-mentioned historical and geographical data, the research group of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of NAS, RA investigated in detail the neighbourhood of the sources called Shahbulagh in 2005. This research gave us an opportunity to identify the strip-like rock-cut foundations of a defensive wall stretching 450m long, on the southern rock-edge of the mountain stretching upward from the sources. These strips abutted semi-round carved segments, proving that the fortification walls were strengthened by semi-round towers. On the plain section near the sources, the remains of the limestone walls of the church were located, and, to the south, the early Christian cemetery, with its stone-cist grave, also. And, most importantly, it became possible to fix several dozen fragments of painted pottery dated to the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD in the section of fortified structures. The archaeological data gathered by the expedition were significant, and thus, by using medieval literary sources and topographic data, it became possible to locate Tigranakert of Artsakh in the lower part of the mountain stretching towards Vankasar from the sources of Shahbulagh,<sup>18</sup> and in the neighbouring plain to the south. Then, the archaeological excavations could begin in earnest.

## Excavations

As the result of 13 years of archaeological research, a large settlement, formed with an advanced Hellenistic fortification system and using its construction techniques, was excavated; it was founded in the 1st century BC and existed until the end of the 13th century AD. According to the available data, Tigranakert consisted of a large (c. 6 ha) fortified district, spread over the slope of the mountain in the form of artificial terraces, surrounded by powerful walls with at least four city districts spread in the plain, as well as cemeteries and large agricultural suburbs (Figure 3). The city was completely built of the local cream limestone.

Through the excavations, the extensive Late Hellenistic<sup>19</sup> districts and strata were uncovered: e.g. the upper part of the citadel of the fortified district, 83 m-long retaining walls dividing the district from the citadel, the rock-cut grounds of the southern walls of the same district, stretching over 450 m, parts of the northern walls, 5m high and c. 310m long, part of the south-eastern wall (40 m), the Early Christian square of the central district, with double churches, and the remains of a monumental stele with a cross, as well as an Early Christian underground reliquary and a graveyard. The first Late Hellenistic district, a rock-cut wine press, a part of the Early Christian cemetery, and the structures neighbouring the 'Royal Sources' were also unearthed during the excavations. The second Late Hellenistic district was also partially excavated, as well as the eastern Late Hellenistic necropolis and of the remains of a post-station built in the 19th century, a rock-cut cult complex and rock-cut canal in

<sup>18</sup> Petrosyan *et al.* 2006: 361-365.

<sup>19</sup> In case of Tigranakert, the Late Hellenistic period includes the timespan from the early 1st century BC to the end of the 3rd century AD.

the neighbourhood of the city. In addition, anthropomorphic stelae were discovered in the vicinity, and the early medieval settlement of Gyavurkala was investigated.

### Fortified district

The fortified district of Tigranakert is situated on the naturally formed, triangular spur in the lower part of the south-western slope of Mt Vankasar, near the 'Royal Sources', and to the north of them, *i.e.* the fortress occupied not the top of Mt Vankasar, dominating the region, but the lower part of its southern slope (Figure 4). The district occupied an area of about 6 ha. The top of the roughly triangular fortress was the highest point of the structure, and the base was directed to the plain. Although the spur has high cliffs (to be followed by walls), nevertheless its strategic position was weakened because of it being situated at the foot of the mountain. Consequently, massive, supplementary defensive measures were engineered, conditioned by the circumstance of its severe slope (on 500 m the inclination of the area is *c.* 60 m). We think that the builders were obliged to undertake work in such difficult terrain so as to be as close as possible to the freshwater springs and protect them.<sup>20</sup> If we take into consideration the fact that Vankasar borders Khachenaget, where it leads to the steppe, it can be seen that the fortress of Tigranakert controlled not only the steppe, and the trade-route passing through it, but also protected the entrance to the river valley itself.<sup>21</sup>

From the outset of his rule, Tigranes was certain that military conflict with the Parthians was unavoidable. The same is true regarding the invasion of the northern tribes sparked by the Parthians. Given that we have a written reference of at least two Tigranakerts in the Artsakh foothills adjoining the steppe, it could be possible that to prevent a likely invasion by northern tribes, Tigranes built fortresses on the foothills that controlled the steppe and protected the entrances of the river valleys. As the lower limits of the archaeological complexes of Tigranakert, which did not extend into the 2nd century BC, it was more than possible that Tigranes began to realise this project immediately after his campaigns in Cappadocia, at the end of the 90s – the beginning of the 80s of the 1st century BC. That Tigranakert was founded by the principle of *synoikismos*, and involving the Greek populations of Cappadocia and other regions of Asia Minor, can be confirmed by three pieces of evidence:

- a. The foundations of all the structures of Tigranakert's fortress excavated to date, including the walls, towers and Late Hellenistic buildings of the citadel, are completely rock-cut, a building technique not common in Artsakh previously, but widespread in Cappadocia and the Hellenistic-period cities of Armenia (Yervandashat, Armavir, Artashat).

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<sup>20</sup> In 2012, research in the area next to the springs revealed that the cliffs bordering them were also cut down for the bases of some structures. It is more than possible that the springs and the immediate area were also included in the plans of the city's early construction.

<sup>21</sup> See in detail Kirakosyan 2017: 61-67.



- b. The existence of Greek Early Christian inscriptions in the rock-cut church complex situated in the suburb of Tigranakert.
- c. The references in medieval Arabic sources citing the Greek city located on the Baylakan-Partav road.<sup>22</sup>

As mentioned above, the fortress of Tigranakert was situated on a triangular spur, above the 'Royal Sources', and topped by a rectangular tower, from which the southern and northern walls constituting the sides of the triangle began (Figure 5). In the main, the rock-cut foundations have been preserved for the southern wall (Figure 6). The northern wall has been preserved in some places up to 5 m in height (Figures 7-8). These features suggest that we have an incredible opportunity to consider the whole technical means of construction of the walls. Fragments of rock-cut bases, more than 450 m long, of the southern walls that stretch above the slope of Vankasar were visible before the excavations. Their strip- and step-like structure had been considered by Azerbaijani researchers to be steps leading to the church of the 7th century, situated on the top of Vankasar, resulting in a misinterpretation. The narrow strips cut into the rocks were likened to a path and not linked to the looked-for city.<sup>23</sup> We could not imagine before the excavations that the wall foundations would have such a structure. It seemed that a regular base would have been dug equal to the width of the wall (the width varying between 2.60 m to 2.80 m), in which the blocks of the first row would be placed. In fact, the separate bases of the outside and inside rows of the four-row wall were cut in the shape of strips on the rock (Figure 6). They were carved approximately horizontal,<sup>24</sup> and the channels provided for a separate block were cut into them. The channels were filled with a mortar consisting of lime and limestone, into which the blocks were put and fixed. The bottom of the base laid between the outer and inner strips was not always elaborated: it was filled with mortar and semi-worked blocks, taking into account that they would have a surface equal to all the four rows only in the third or fourth row of the wall height. The mortar was used not only for strengthening the blocks of the first row and filling the inter-block empty spaces, but also for filling and plastering the space between the base and the rock. This was intended to prevent rainwater from flowing under the base.<sup>25</sup> As a rule, the outer strip is wider than the inner one, and together they take up 60%-70% of the width of the wall. Thus, according to the researches, a detailed and well-planned construction was realised, which meant that the wall could fit into the vertical and

<sup>22</sup> Yampolskij 1959: 366-369.

<sup>23</sup> Yampolskij 1960: 249.

<sup>24</sup> If the upper rows of the walls are almost perfectly horizontal, then the wall bases follow the slant of the locality. This means that in the first (probably also in the second and third) row the stones had a more slanting lower surface and a more rectilinear upper surface. I.e. instead of bringing the rock to a horizontal plane, separate blocks were elaborated for that purpose, which was obviously a less labourious process.

<sup>25</sup> Such a diversified use of mortar in the 1st century BC is confirmed in the region for the first time. As already mentioned, the fortress of Tigranakert was built on a limestone mountain and the stone needed for the construction was cut locally, as is demonstrated by numerous traces. Such huge supplies of limestone probably played a central role earlier, compared to other places. It should be noted that it is attested in Artashat more than a century later (Khachatryan 2007: 9).

horizontal deviations of the terrain as closely as possible, by the skilled juxtaposition of different channels, steps and platforms. The wall is based not on an homogeneous, solid mass, but on three separate ‘feet’ (the outer and inner rows and the mass laid between them). We think that it had also an anti-seismic role, by dividing any shocks between the components near the base.

The blocks of the outer and inner rows of the wall reveal a mix of perfectly worked and ‘rustic’ surfaces, with skilfully built *facettes* (slanted cuts to the outer edges of the blocks). The blocks were either simply placed upon each other, or were connected by additional connections – the so-called ‘swallow-tails’ (Figures 9-10).<sup>26</sup> Timber, or in some instances a ballast-mixed lime-concrete, was used as a connection material. This technique was widely known in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and the Ararat Valley. But in Artsakh, it is documented for the first time at this site.

The ‘swallow-tail’ connections were often as small as the blocks themselves. This might suggest that the wall built with small blocks was less strong and was additionally strengthened. It can be also confirmed that more often the stones of the first and outer rows were strengthened with such connections, perhaps for the same purpose. Such construction techniques are confirmed at several sites in Armenia (Armavir, Artashat, Garni) and Georgia (Bagineti) in the Hellenistic and Late Hellenistic periods.

The whole fortification system of Tigranakert consists of three constructive elements, a rectangular tower, a round tower, and a polyline or zigzag wall connecting the towers. The zigzag wall consists of two wings and part of the zigzag: the wings are strictly rectilinear, the turns are rectangular or acute. The zigzag wall has different lengths (the shortest length is 7 m, the longest 25.5 m, the length of the zigzag part is 1.5-9.8 m) and directions, depending on the relief.

The fortress of Tigranakert itself is a triangular model (Figure 5), the important elements of which are the towers, rectangular (length of sides, 7-8 m) and round (diameter, up to 9 m), as well as the wall connecting them, which has one zigzag. The different lengths and directions of the walls represent the technical means that helped the triangular model adapt to the natural defensive opportunities of the landscape. With the common features of this construction technique (rock-cut base; foundations with stone blocks and dry masonry providing wall strength from the sheer weight of blocks; the wide use of the swallow-tail connections, along with lime mortar and the formation of the upper part using mudbricks), the sizes of the separate elements of Tigranakert’s defensive system (thickness of the wall, sizes of quadrangle towers) reveal parallels with other Near Eastern Hellenistic sites (Milet, Ephesus, Pergamon, Priene, Magnesia on the Meander, Dura-Europos, etc.).

From the point of view of the layout and architectural solutions, it was very similar to Priene (e.g. a triangular citadel dominating the surrounding area, districts with regular planning spread at the foot, and zigzag walls)<sup>27</sup> and Dura-Europos (wall constructions), dating to the turn of the 3rd-2nd centuries BC,<sup>28</sup> and especially to

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<sup>26</sup> The medium sizes for blocks are: height: 0.45-0.70 m; width: 0.30-1.2 m; length: 0.4-1.5 m.

<sup>27</sup> Wiegand, Schrader 1904: 556.

<sup>28</sup> Renard, Cumont 1924: 41, Figure 1.

Artashat (i.e. a triangular citadel dominating the area; districts with regular planning spread around the base of the hills; zigzag walls; and juxtapositions of rectangular and round towers).<sup>29</sup> In some of its details, in terms of structural technique, it was very close in design to the synchronous fortification of Armaztsikhe-Bagineti.<sup>30</sup> The study of these parallels has meant that we can confirm that Tigranakert reflects the full benefits of an advanced architectural mindset and building technique. These circumstances made Tigranakert one of the key sites of the 1st century BC – 1st century AD, being better preserved than the complexes of the above-mentioned sites.

Only certain details of the inner construction of the fortified district are so far known. The marked inclines of the area necessitated its construction on a series of terraces. Additionally, as a rule, the strengthened walls of the terraces were put on rock-cut foundations, with only the outer sides formed of rustic blocks. The terrace platforms themselves were made of stones covered by a thick, rammed layer of clay. Four terraces have been clearly identified, with one being the wall dividing the citadel from the fortified district. It stretches over 63 m in length and was strengthened by wall supports; it had an entrance where it connected with the northern wall.

The rock-cut bases of the walls in the fortified district of the city, with their huge sizes, are notable for their regularity of construction, perfect symmetry, neat working of flagstones, joined using Hellenistic methods (i.e. ‘swallow-tail’ connections). All these features undoubtedly attest that they were built via the collaborations of skilled and innovative architects and craftsmen. Only such combinations of thought, materials and labour could result in the realisation of such a grandiose project in such a demanding setting, reflecting total state mobilisation, something which confirms again that we are dealing with both royal and state initiative and power.

<sup>29</sup> The Urartian heritage also played an essential role in the planning and building of Hellenistic cities. As the research at Artashat demonstrates, the city was founded on the site of a Urartian fortress. The builders used the Urartian walls, attaching new towers and mudbrick walls to them. The main principles of the Urartian town plan and fortification (straight lines and possibly rectangular dimensions, location of wall bases on rocks) were probably of local origin (Khafadaryan 197: 151-156; Burney, Lawson 1960: 177-196). At the same time, the Hellenistic achievements should also be emphasised when speaking of Tigranakert’s planning, and the importance stressed of the local, traditional experience it reflects. Artashat is of particular interest, with the consistent adaption of round towers and zigzag fortification walls to the local features, a system which was elaborated in all probability in the centres of Asia Minor and the Mediterranean in the 3rd century BC, and then spread to the East. The famous tract of Pilon of Byzantium springs to mind, based on mechanics and architecture from Alexandria (end of the 3rd century BC), where such systems are described in detail (Lawrence 1979: 75-107), as well as the practical realisations of such systems at the sites of Asia Minor (see Winter 1971: 116-122). In this sense, we think that the semi-legendary reports on the planning of Artashat by Hannibal (Plut., *Luc.*, 31; Strabo, XI, 14, 6) can be viewed as an expression of memories linked to the use of Mediterranean practices of Hellenistic fortification building. Cf. also Khachatryan 2007: 11-12; Tonikyan 1992: 161-187; Krol 2012: 219-222. In the sense of construction techniques, what seems more amazing is the similarity, sometimes even the identical practice used, in the fortification wall at Tigranakert and the platform walls of Artashat’s cultic-administrative district of the 2nd century BC (e.g. the rough, limestone blocks, the ‘swallow-tail’ connection system, the combination of blocks set in horizontal and vertical positions, etc.). See Khachatryan 2005: 220, 226.

<sup>30</sup> Janberidze, Tsitsishvili 1976: 22f., Figures 12-13.

As the excavations showed, attempts were made in the early Middle Ages to maintain the military capacity of the citadel, but it lost its military importance approximately in the 11-12th centuries. The top part of the citadel was a densely settled district during the 12-13th centuries (Figure 11). At the same time, the bases of Late Hellenistic period monumental buildings could be determined. Moreover, not only the walls but also throughout the whole Late Hellenistic period the buildings were rock-cut. The purely Late Hellenistic period layer was fixed only in isolated locations by means of perfect examples of painted pottery related to the 1st century BC/1st century AD. The discoveries of the Late Hellenistic period seal-gem (Figure 12) and the Sasanian stamps should be emphasised here, for they demonstrate that Tigranakert had trade and administrative significance.

### **First Late Hellenistic period of the urban district**

The urban districts located in the plain, at the foot of the fortress, greatly help in terms of throwing light on the features of Tigranakert. Of the four archaeologically revealed Late Hellenistic districts, a part of the Late Hellenistic first district was excavated, and test excavations were also undertaken in the second district. The first district was founded at the same time as the fortress and existed until the 7th century AD, after which it was turned into a Christian cemetery. The planning was done according to a principle similar to the Hippodamus construction, i.e. straight street segments and straight walls using only rectangular sections (Figure 13). The building base of the excavated section was the straight wall stretching north-south (excavated to a depth of 25.5 m), along two sides of which were located the dwelling/economic complexes, consisting of rooms roughly square in dimension (Figure 14). During the following two construction phases (3rd-7th centuries AD) the reconstructions were completed mainly by repeating the planning solutions of the available buildings. The rooms had clay floors, sometimes with traces of lime plaster. Simple bases were preserved that provided the wooden columns that bore the covering. Some rooms had hearths preserved to a height of 0.30 m above the floor, while in some Late Hellenistic period rooms *tonirs* were attached. In the paved sections of some rooms, limestone mortars were applied. Finds of fragments of basalt pestles and mills in this area and the remains of pithoi fixed in the floor showed that each economy solved the problem of the processing and storage of cereals in its own way. The several dozen conical, pyramidal and flat looms (Figure 15) of raw clay made by a spinner revealed the domestic character of this craft.

The Late Hellenistic period pottery of Tigranakert should be emphasised here. This was represented by thousands of fragments of both black-polished and red-painted pottery, as well as by several dozen preserved vessels, including large pithoi and churns, delicate pitchers and flasks, various cups, and fish plates (Figures 16-17). The cluster-ornamented black-polished vessels and the classic examples of painted pottery had roots in Atropatene and attest that Tigranakert was a centre of cultural significance for regions along the right bank of the Kura. The examples of imported

pottery should also be mentioned, the parallels of which reached Selevkia on the Tigris, and Dura-Europos.<sup>31</sup>

### The eastern Late Hellenistic cemetery

The Hellenistic cemetery was located on a plain, c. 1.5 km to the north-east of the city. In the course of excavations, one stone-cist grave and six *pithos* burials were found and studied (Figure 18). One burial was also opened during the excavations of the northern wall of the fortified district, within it and not far from the fortification wall. The burials did not have a unified direction and the pithoi were placed in a horizontal position directed to the south-east from the north-west, or to the south-west from the north-east. The first burial consisted of a *pithos* with the body of the deceased and a spouted jar fastened to the *pithos* bottom from outside (Figure 19). The badly preserved remains of the bones of the skull, ribs, and hand of the deceased were found. Two coins were enclosed – one between the teeth and the other among the ribs; these coins were Parthian silver drachmas, very well preserved and related to Mithridates III (57-54 BC, Figure 19) and Orodes II (57-38 BC).<sup>32</sup> Among the finds were beads covered with golden foil and three iron rings with glass gems. A painted flask was found by accident in the context of this burial.

Burial *pithos* number four is of medium size (height: 0.82 m, width: 0.68 m); the skeleton was poorly preserved, and the deceased was probably a child. Its head was near the bottom, the face was directed to the east. Two bronze earrings, 12 beads, fragments of copper tinplates were also found in the *pithos*. *Pithos* five was amphora-like (height: 0.90 m, width: 0.83 m), and had two handles. The painted belt around the shoulder demonstrated a hunting scene: a figure on foot and a rider, with bows, arrows and spears, hunt deer among large, leafy trees, accompanied by their dogs (Figure 20). An iron ring with a glass gem, 50 glass beads, and one Parthian coin were also found in the *pithos*. Near the bottom of the *pithos*, a vertically located two-handled vessel with a round rim was retrieved.

The rim of burial *pithos* six (length: 1.60 m, width of body: 0.95 m) was closed by the central part of another *pithos*. Next to the *pithos* bottom, outside it, a broken *oinakhoia* was discovered. There were two skeletons, facing north, with bent knees in the *pithos*. One of the skeletons lay on the right side, the second one on its back, a little lower down than the first. Based on the finds, one of the skeletons was male, the other one female. The blade of a small dagger and fragments of handle, a glass ornamented gem and pieces of metal tinplate were found in the burial. On the presumed female skeleton there was a string of beads – three bronze pendants, several large beads, and an agate pendant. Rings with paste gems were also discovered (five pieces).

The *pithos* burial excavated in the fortified district (Ac 58 square) differed somewhat in its burial inventory. In addition to the two clay vessels and beads there

<sup>31</sup> For details of the Hellenistic period pottery of Tigranakert, see Karapetyan, Gabrielyan 2016: 46-51; Gabrielyan 2017: 372-383; 2018: 172-181.

<sup>32</sup> The coins were identified and described by Ruben Vardanyan, head of the Department of Numismatics of the State Museum of Armenia, for which we are most grateful.

were also fragments of a spear, bronze mirror, scissors, and gold, crescent-shaped pendants.

*Pithos* burials were widespread just before and immediately after the Christian era. According to present research, this burial rite was typical in southern Caucasia and other regions, discernible by certain features.<sup>33</sup> It was the outright dominant burial form in Artsakh and Utik, and even the small number of finds in Tigranakert seem to attest this tendency. In any case, six of the seven Hellenistic period burials of Tigranakert were *pithos* burials and only one was a stone-cist burial.

The only stone-cist tomb located in the eastern cemetery was a large structure (the inner sizes of the chamber were approximately 2.75 m x 3.0 m, with a depth of 1.85 m), with an approximate direction of north-south and a northern entrance built of large blocks placed in three rows (Figure 21). Seven disturbed burials were found, of which only numbers two and three were *in situ*, and the other four were under the southern wall. A secondary set of burials was also discovered here; the new burials involved the irregular accumulation of old ashes in the southern part of the chamber. The four Parthian coins were assigned to the mid 1st century BC. The finds also included a well-preserved painted pitcher with one handle, a bronze crescent-shaped medallion, a bronze leaf-shaped pendant, a bronze string-like object, and a cream-glass gem with an image of a bird. According to the finds, the burials were related to the 1st century BC/1st century AD.

### Early Christian square

As described in the first part of our study, Tigranakert was a large military, administrative and religious centre in early Christian times, situated in the neighborhood of Partav. For this reason, from the start of the archaeological research, the expedition paid special attention to the medieval traces of the city, in parallel with the excavations of the fortified district. It was already clear from the research in this area in 2005 that material traces of the medieval culture were widely visible in the flat area that stretched to the south-east, occupying approximately 7 ha and differing from the surroundings by a height of 4-6 m. It was obvious that we were dealing here with an artificial hill formed as a result of cultural activity during the centuries.

Over the whole area, referred to as the 'central district' (as it has an interstitial position in contradiction to the Hellenistic districts and the Late Medieval fortress, i.e. is surrounded by them), fragments of stone structures, *tonirs*, pits, and hundreds of sherds of plain and glazed pottery have been found. In the district's central part, the extensive remains of large limestone walls were visible before the excavations, running along the eastern and western sides of a large pit, stretching east-west. Taking into consideration the fact that Makar Barkhudaryants, who described the area of Tigranakert at the end of the 19th century, reports on the ruins of a large church just within the area of Tigranakert, we presumed that the pit stretching west-east to be the remains of the this very church that Barkhudaryants mentions: 'In the upper

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<sup>33</sup> Kaziev 1960; Noneshvili 1992; Khachatryan 1981; 1976; Yesayan, Kalantaryan 1988: 59-60.

part of the province, there is the settlement Tigranakert, which is in ruins now. But it should be reported that it was a large settlement, sometimes also the centre of the eparchy, and in the district lay the ruins of a large church, the dilapidated limestone buildings of the market, houses, and bathhouses, which are still present.' (Figure 22).<sup>34</sup>

In 2006, a 5 m x 5 m square trench was cut in the section of the pit, which, approximately, might correspond to the inner angle of the apse area (which seemed to comprise the best-preserved blocks of the 'church' feature). After several hours digging, at a depth of c. 0.5 m, the first polished stones of the church apse and the neighbouring southern wall were revealed. During further excavations here between 2006-2009, the ruins of an Early Christian church were fixed at a depth of c. 3.5 m. The church (Figure 23) related to the standard type of single-nave basilicas (28.85 m x 11.25 m), which spread throughout Armenia and the Caucasus between the 4th-6th centuries AD.<sup>35</sup>

The excavated remains of the church and the unearthed materials gave us the opportunity to almost wholly reconstruct the preliminary volumetric-spatial aspects of the structure, and the changes made subsequently, as well as to reveal the construction techniques and the main features of its composition. It was originally a single-nave hall with a five-faceted apse. Later this apse was included within a rectangular volume and the southern sacristy attached, which had an entrance from outside.

In the yard neighbouring the sacristy from the south, excavations revealed a drain made from pipes and tiles. This has led to the suggestion that the southern sacristy was built as a baptistery and the drain allowed water to run from it. Probably after building of the sacristy, the southern open-air peristyle was added (the inclusion of the faceted apse in a rectangular form was probably necessitated by adding the sacristy from the south). It should be emphasised that despite these changes and additions the inner appearance of the church remained the same. The rectangular, regular-slabbed praying hall, as well as the semi-round apse to the east, also included part of the choir, 2.5 m wide, which is raised c. 0.5 m from the prayer hall. It was slabbed throughout, two steps leading from there to the chancel. In this part of the church, fragments of the stone pillar-work that divided the choir from the praying hall were also found. In early churches, the area in front of the eastern altar, the 'choir', was, as a rule, a step higher and was divided off by a partition of some kind. Here the priests stood during church services and joined in the worship: entry was restricted but the congregation could enter for holy communion. Although the existence of a choir in early churches can be widely assumed, nevertheless its evidence here as a real architectural structure is significant.

The church, built of large, polished blocks, and using lime mortaring, was planned on a three-stepped base, with one western, two southern, and two northern portals; there was a dentil cornice and the wooden roof was tiled. The portals had a pair of pillars with ornamented capitals adjoining the wall. Numerous pieces of dentil

<sup>34</sup> Barkhudareants 1895: 20.

<sup>35</sup> For the detailed architectural study of the church, see Kirakosyan 2016: 115-140.

cornices, pillars and fragments of tiles, as well as two capitals, were found during the excavations. One of the capitals was carved with crosses, the other featured floral themes typical of early Christianity – very fine high relief and realistic carving of vines (branches, leaves, tendrils, and clusters) (Figure 24).

According to our preliminary data, the church was destroyed and burnt at the end of the 9th century, and dwelling complexes were built on its ruins. Only a century later, the section near the sacristy again had a cultic function: a *khachkar* was erected here and burials were found to the north and the west.

The rest of the Early Christian square was turned into a dwelling district, with a history of dense building from the 10th century, the excavations of which revealed three cultural layers:

- a. The 9th-10th centuries: temporary dwellings, limited in extent, were built on the ruins of the Christian structures, and conical small *tonirs* have been found. Irregular additions were made to the polished walls. The plain pottery was characterised by small *pithoi* and jugs with vertical handles (Figure 25). The early examples of glazed pottery were represented by polychrome (seldom monochrome) decoration under a tarnished glaze, and engobe painting under a single-coloured and bright glaze (Figure 26).
- b. The 11th century to first half of 12th century: a series of dwelling/economic complexes, comparatively regularly planned, with clay floors, large pits (depth of fill to 3 m), and large *tonirs* (diameter of fill to 1.5 m), and an Ildegezid coin.
- c. End of the 12th century to first half of 13th century: large, semi-underground complexes, with slanted two-row walls and narrow corridors; these had light roofs, made of reeds, resting on wooden columns. The *tonirs* are small, and many hearths have been revealed, mostly in the form of not very deep pits.

The last two layers were characterised by zoomorphic (especially ram-headed) vessels, engraved small *pithoi* and jugs, and luxurious pottery with underglaze carving on engobe, the iconography of which included animals and birds depicted on a floral background (Figure 27).<sup>36</sup>

The existence of the above-mentioned large basilica related to the Early Christian period is an important argument for Tigranakert having retained its status as an important settlement in the early Middle Ages. It also confirms the evidence from the Early Medieval Armenian sources (Sebeos, Kaghankatvatsi, Eghia Archishetsi) regarding Tigranakert of Artsakh.

Two further architectural peculiarities relating to the above-mentioned church are the northern entrances. If the presence of the western entrance, as well as the two southern ones, are quite standard (taking into account the dimensions of the church

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<sup>36</sup> For the study of the Medieval pottery of Tigranakert, see Vardanesova 2017: 177-192; 2016: 153-159; 2015: 187-190; Zhamkochyan 2018: 310-324.



and the presence of the structures adjoining from the south), then the two northern entrances seem somewhat strange.

Early Christian churches, as a rule, did not have a northern entrance. Only in unique cases, when it was not possible to open western or southern doorways, i.e. conditioned by the location, a northern entrance would be installed. This allows us to suppose that there was some important structure (or structures) in the yard adjoining the church from the north that led to the opening of the pair of northern entrances. This explains why, after excavating the church and the southern yard next to it, the expedition decided to continue digging to the north. The expectations were entirely confirmed, as, during the work, a large paved yard was revealed, with the remains in it of an Early Christian cross-bearing stele (base, fragments of column, and winged cross), as well as the remains of a basilica with an emphasised apse from outside (the second church), a graveyard adjoining it from the west, and a sepulchre located under the eastern apse (Figure 28).

Although only the smoothed stones of the wall base (but not entirely) and the bases made of lime mortar and rough stones were preserved from the church, nevertheless its layout, dimensional features and construction technique were precise and unique. It had a single nave and a rather constricted interior (interior chancel: 9.8 m x 4.5 m; external: 16.3 m x 8.3 m) set on a two-stepped wall base with a rectangular layout, an apse faceted from outside, and western and southern entrances. The floor was covered by smoothed slabs.

The southern yard of the church was covered by rough, irregular flagstones, of 5 m width, probably equal to the length of the ground base of the open-air stele. The paved floor leading to the southern entrance was built using larger stones. Interestingly, one of the stones was an anthropomorphic stele of the beginning of the 1st millennium BC. The entire layout consisted, therefore, of a church, to the south a stele next to it, and a complex with a paved yard.

During the excavations in 2013, a rectangular area surrounded by four large stone blocks was uncovered at the eastern edge of the faceted apse of the newly excavated second church, where the cultural layer deepened into the ground. Excavations of the pit (1.95 m x 1.50 m), located in line with the rectangle, at a depth of 1.40 m, revealed a tiled floor consisting of three polished stones. Under the flagstones, the ground was fixed. It was obvious that we were dealing here with the remains of some kind of structure situated under the apse of the church.

The excavations in 2014 were directed to the west, and revealed sections of the southern and northern walls of the structure, built with smooth, limestone blocks, as well as the separate parts of the semicircular vault, also constructed of smoothed stone. In the northern and southern walls single niches were built using smooth blocks. It was clear that here there was a sepulchre built into the apse of the church (Figure 29). Further excavations demonstrated that the whole structure was built of large, smoothed stones, and that there was a precise orientation west-east, a semicircular vault, and a single eastern entrance. In the southern and northern walls, niches had been inserted in a rectangular, parallel-piped form, with slight rounding in the eastern parts; these were probably intended for relics.

Cleaning the sepulchre provided an opportunity to understand its structure and the circumstances of its building. In particular, the excavations of the area next to the sepulchre from the south revealed part of its roof, covered with limestone plaster. We concluded, therefore, that the tomb had a plastered, gable roof, the upper part of which was raised from the surface of the church floor and was included in the volume of the space under the apse.

The second important detail was the organisation of the section of the southern wall corresponding to the arch in terms of the use of rough and large, smoothed blocks. It became clear that the arch had some form of special protective ‘shell’ to reduce the weight of the sides pressing on it. This was an important argument for clarifying that the church was built at the same time as the tomb, and over it. When the pit was deepened to 2.8 m, we could see that the cultural layer continued from the floor surface. However it was decided to stop the excavations at this point as the structure was unstable. The blocks were taken from the pit and it was refilled with soil up to the floor mark.

Despite the destruction, the greater part of the stones from the tomb had been found, and there was no longer a problem in reconstructing it. The feature was the third well-preserved structure we now have, after the royal tomb of Aghtsk and the tomb of Grigoris of Amaras. The results of the excavations provided us with the opportunity to describe a new structure of this type, the main peculiarity of which was the single eastern entrance.

Although the tomb was destroyed at the end of the 9th century, during the destruction of the Early Christian area, nevertheless, even in ruins, the structure was an object of interest for treasure hunters and the curious over the centuries. Unfortunately, as the preliminary floor of the tomb was not preserved, the question of whose tomb it was remains unsolved.

Following the 2014 excavations, the formation of the Early Christian square can be precisely reconstructed:

- a. The building of the sepulcher-reliquary with the relics of saints.
- b. The building of the small church, including the sepulcher-reliquary.
- c. The building of the southern paved yard and the erection of the stele.
- d. The formation of the graveyard in the western yard of the small church.
- e. The building of the large urban church, south of the small church.

The eastern location of the single entrance in the Tigranakert tomb was a very strange feature for Early Christian burial structures, and religious buildings generally. The direct connection of the redemption perspective of Christianity with the East, from which Christ’s second arrival was expected, conditioned both the ritual movements of believers (i.e. from west to east) and the orientation of the sacred area, including the sacred structures from the west to the east (west–east direction, location of the main entrance in the west, absence of the eastern entrance, location of an apse complex in the east, etc.). Even in our tomb, which had only an eastern entrance, movement to the east was attested by the structure of the niches, the eastern parts of which were round.

Clarifying the peculiarity of the Tigranakert tomb served as the basis for excavations in the tomb-chapel of St Grigoris of Amaras, the well-known Early Christian tomb structure at Artsakh. Its main tomb area was situated under the eastern altar of the present church, and, according to some observations, as well as the southern and northern entrances, it had also an eastern entrance, the traces of which could be found in the church, in the section next to its eastern wall. Indeed, the excavations next to the eastern wall of the church revealed the extension of the chapel-tomb's eastern entrance, the open-air paved floor in front of the entrance, and the entrance, consisting of the six steps that led to the tomb (Figure 30). One of the key finds was the discovery of the base, passing around the walls at a depth of 3 m. This made clear that the tomb was not in fact totally underground, but only partly so. Until the excavations, this had been suggested by the window openings located in the upper part of the southern staircase and the western wall of the hall, which are closed now. The structure was located under the ground below the level of the stairs of the excavated eastern entrance, and was located above ground. More than 100 Early Christian tile fragments were found during excavations, proving that the roof of the structure was tiled.

Together with the sepulchre-reliquaries of Tigranakert and Amaras, another example from Artsakh should be introduced here – the two-storey tomb-chapel of Saint Stepanos (in the historical settlement Vachar), which also has a single, eastern entrance (Figure 31). One of its peculiarities is the special section for relics, as well as an above-ground portion with a rather large space with windows, which allows us to suppose that the ritual ceremonies were completed inside the tomb.

We have already encountered a two-storey structure at Vachar. Such layouts suggest that architects and builders tried to find more convenient forms of interrelation between the burial structure and ritual area, which could help us also when trying to date the structures at Tigranakert, Amaras, and Vachar.

There can be no doubt in terms of the dating of the chapel of Grigoris, i.e. at the end of the 5th century AD; as well as the certain historical context, it can also be verified by the sculpture. The tomb of Tigranakert precedes both the small church and the latest one – the larger church. We have recently also received the radiocarbon data of the bones from the two burials from the graveyard next to the small church to the west: the sarcophagus dates to c. AD 420–565, the cist to c. AD 566–655.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, it should be taken into consideration that the burials were constructed when the church had already been built, as they directly touched its western wall. Especially important is the data from the first analysis, according to which the burial in the first sarcophagus was completed after AD 420, and no later than AD 565. Therefore the Tigranakert tomb must have been built in the second half of the 5th century, or, at the latest, the beginning of the 6th, taking into consideration the spatial and dimensional constructional composition of the two churches and the sculptures from the large basilica.

<sup>37</sup> For this analysis I am grateful to Paul Baily, the team's anthropologist, the expert on Armenia, Patrik Tonapetyan, and art-historian Anna Leyloyan for their assistance.

At this stage we may also refer to the inscription on the clay disk found in the large basilica, and to which we shall return later. Thus, if the Tigranakert sepulchre was directly included under the eastern altar of the church, then the chapel of Grigoris seemed an attempt to juxtapose the tomb with the chapel.

We have thus far, therefore, a group of three sepulchre-reliquaries, the main construction feature of which is the eastern entrance.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, we have no data concerning tombs with an eastern entrance in the Early Christian Orient; and no tombs from other sites in Armenia have such a feature (Aghtsk, Hripsime, Gayane, Talin, Oshakan, Nakhchavan, etc.). The only tomb that had an eastern entrance, was Christ's tomb in Jerusalem.<sup>39</sup> According to our preliminary thoughts, we are dealing here with definite religious reform, attempting to give the Albanian Church a special religious and ritual identity (which differed from that of the Armenian Church) and having essentially the same administrative and political purposes.

In this sense, the church reforms undertaken by Vachagan the Pious, King of Albania, in the last quarter of the 5th, or beginning of the 6th century AD, are of interest here. Moreover, perhaps such reforms could have extended over a longer period of time than the years of Vachagan's rule, for example, the second half of the 5th to the mid 6th century AD. Two issues are raised in relation to these reforms: Albania, as an 'eastern' country, and the hagiography of Eghisha.

Vachagan's religious reforms, which were directed towards: a re-definition of the ranking of the saints (historical background, cult-fasting, dream-vision, miracles, fragrances, use of ancient relics, discovery and distribution of relics, etc.); the clarification of names (Zakaria, Pandaleon, Grigoris, Grigor, Hripsime, Gayane); and to the building of chapel-tombs involving Albanian church relics (i.e. Grigoris at Amaras, Pandaleon at Dyutakan, Eghisha at Jrvshtik). The older churches experienced a new religious stimulus as a result of these relics.<sup>40</sup>

The ideology of Albania, as an 'Eastern' country (differing in some contexts from Armenia by that very circumstance), was attested to both in the history of Vachagan, and, later, by its direct relation to Jerusalem – the centre of the Christian world – and the conception of redemption. Consonant to it seemed to be the hagiography of

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<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that in the eastern entrance we found no evidence that the established dominance of the 'west-east' ideological-ritual flow, accepted by Christianity, was overturned in any way. We found the usual spatial/dimension solutions in terms of the chapel of Grigoris and the structure of the niches of the Tigranakert tomb (the inner eastern dimensions of which have emphasised by niches' curves), indicating, i.e., that the orientation of the worship of the saints' relics was from west to east. Eastern entrances have been ascribed also several Albanian churches. For example, the Azeri archaeologist R. Vaidov has suggested that the earliest church of Mingechaur (4th-5th centuries AD) had eastern entrances. As there is no entrance in the three preserved walls of the structure, and the eastern apse was not preserved, he concluded that the entrance was probably from the east (Vaidov 1966: 95-97). R. Geushev felt, therefore, that in that case the scene was in the centre of the structure, while the entrance was in the east (1964: 83). According to Geushev, the preliminary church at Eghishe also had an eastern entrance (1964: 83). The excavations at Tigranakert and Gyavurkala, where none of the three churches had eastern entrances, or apses that deviated from the norm, calls such suppositions into question.

<sup>39</sup> Wilkinson 1978: 6-13.

<sup>40</sup> Kaghankatuatsi (1983: 56-88).

Eghisha, who brought the origins of the Albanian Church directly from Jerusalem, arriving in Albania and bypassing Armenia.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, we have tomb structures from the turn of the 5th-6th centuries AD with eastern entrances, such as in the case of Grave of the Lord: an ideology considering the country as eastern, a legend ascribing a Jerusalem origin to the church. And we also have a powerful ruler, who tried to give an independent status to the church of his kingdom by political-religious reforms. In his early studies, Aleksan Hakobyan considered the story (or even tale) of Vachagan (including the ‘Rules of Aghven’) as a ‘projected legend’, created by clerics of Albanian church in the second half of the 6th century AD, and had doubts about its historicity.<sup>42</sup> Our study of the newly found sepulchres and the historical data has demonstrated that these approaches and imaginations were formed earlier.<sup>43</sup>

We think it likely that Vachagan, as a powerful king, attempted an independence that suited his kingdom and that might develop in later centuries.<sup>44</sup> Vachagan’s reforms extended to his own traditions, which would thus differ from the pan-Christian and Armenian-Christian ones (‘Eastern’ country, Jerusalem apostle, ‘own’ saints). And included in the materialised expressions of this process were the reliquaries of the saints, with their eastern entrances.

From this point of view, it is also interesting to note the erection of a stele for the martyrdom of Eghisha,<sup>45</sup> replacing the relics of the saint to the monastery of Jrvshtik (later the monastery of the apostle Eghisha) at Artsakh,<sup>46</sup> as well as the tomb ascribed to Vachagan, the gravestone, and the *khachkar* in the same monastery. From the same reliable source we have it that the chapel of Grigoris was built by the direct initiative and participation of Vachagan the Pious.<sup>47</sup>

Returning to Tigranakert, we should now refer, as mentioned above, to one of the most important finds connected to Vachagn, excavated in the city church in 2008. The object involved is a small, clay disk, on one face of which is a cross with arms of

<sup>41</sup> Kaghankatuatsi (1983: 10-11).

<sup>42</sup> Akopyan 1987: 186-187.

<sup>43</sup> In his latest works, H. Hakobyan links the *Novel of Vachagan* to the very beginning of the 6th century AD (cf. Hakobyan, unpublished). Independent of how much researchers consider it as an expression of real facts, we cannot overlook that even before this history the chapel-tombs in Artsakh and Utik dedicated to the saints already existed, introduced as a result of church reform. A similar situation also applies for Grigor the Illuminator, when the already existing stelae were introduced in the mid 5th century AD as objects erected after the apparition of Lusavorich, i.e. at the beginning of the 4th century AD (Petrosyan 2008: 10-18).

<sup>44</sup> The history of Kaghankatvatsi considers the left bank of the Kura as a main area for the activities of Eghisha. The following tradition lived on into the 19th century. Vachagan probably tried to transfer some expressions of that tradition to the right – Armenian bank (i.e. the foundation of the two churches after Eghisha, the apostle in Artsakh, next to Amaras and at Mets Kvenk. In the latter monastery, named Apostle Eghisha or Jrvshtik, according to a tradition, here Vachagan was buried also, and his tomb preserved (10th-11th centuries, with his name, a gravestone and a *khachkar*).

<sup>45</sup> As mentioned above, the remains of an obelisk have also been found at Tigranakert, in the southern yard of the small church.

<sup>46</sup> Kaghankatuatsi (1983: 12).

<sup>47</sup> Kaghankatuatsi (1983: 64-88).

equal length, and on the other an image of a man, his hair and moustache showing (Figure 32). The disk, with two holes so that it could be fitted to some package or box, represented some form of official stamp. On it were carved Armenian inscriptions, the main one of which reveals: 'I am Vach[e] (or Vach[agan]), the servant of the L[or]d'.

The study of the circumstances of this find, as well as the iconography and Armenian script, allows us to date it to the 5th-7th centuries AD. Several individuals had the names Vache and Vachagan at that time, one of whom was, especially, King Vachagan the Pious, who, according to his legend, assembled the Church Council of Albania and spent much time accumulating the relics of saints. These activities could relate to the function and inscription of the disc.<sup>48</sup> It is possible that, taking into account as well the discovery of the Early Christian tomb, with its special niches for the relics of the saints, the depositories for the relics could have been stamped using such objects as the one found. This find from Tigranakert is, in fact, one of the earliest Armenian inscriptions in the area of Artsakh, and was the best argument for early Christian-Armenian features in the lower Khachenaget valley, a trait which was visible also before its discovery, through data from several other sources.

The glass flask found during the excavations of the city church should also be emphasised here. Accounts of the finding of the relics of Grigoris stressed especially the presence of two glass flasks, in which the blood of Zakaria and Pandaleon were preserved.<sup>49</sup> The amphora-shaped flask was made of dark-blue glass and was dated to the 5th-7th centuries AD, and probably served the same purpose.

There is also a folk tradition from the 19th century connected to a church at Vankasar with the name of Vachagan the Pious, which speaks of Vachagan, the King of Albania, coming to Shahbulagh in his final years. There he built a monastery on the top of the mountain, where he devoted himself to an ascetic life, or settled as a bird – Tarnagyurt.<sup>50</sup>

### **Early Christian rock-cut complex and rock-cut canal**

The complex and canal are situated on the northern edge of Mt Vankasar, 3.3 km from Tigranakert. The complex consisted of a church, cut into the rocky bank of the river, as well as a narthex and a graveyard, where the rock-cut road led, and the walls of which were covered with numerous cross compositions and several Armenian and Greek inscriptions. The first data of the complex comes from the 1970s,<sup>51</sup> but more detailed information has come in recent years.<sup>52</sup> In 2006, a group from the archaeological expedition of Artsakh entirely cleaned and excavated the complex. Additionally, the rock-cut canal passing through the foot of the rock, parallel with the river, was also excavated.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Petrosyan, Zhamkochyan 2009: 166-176.

<sup>49</sup> Kaghankatuatsi (1983: 81).

<sup>50</sup> Haykuni 2010: 39.

<sup>51</sup> Geushev 1964: 98-99.

<sup>52</sup> Simonyan, Sanamyan 2005: 159-176.

<sup>53</sup> Petrosyan, Kirakosyan 2016: 165-170.

Mt Vankasar is entirely formed of Mesozoic limestone deposits, with many karstic caves. In all probability, the complex we are dealing with was also formed at the base of such a cave. The rock-cut road leading to the church structures, and stretching over 120 m, consisted of six open-air halls, with three narrow paths passing along the edge of the rock; stairs connected the halls and the paths, as well as an observation-post entrance. The open-air halls had one or two rock walls. The round holes made in the floors and their walls suggested that the halls had a wooden cover leaning on the logs. As a rule, the cross compositions were found in the eastern parts of these halls. It can be supposed that those halls acted as special prayer halls/dwellings, or waiting areas. Some of the holes were sufficiently large to lead us to suppose that they might have had some sort of economic function.

The stairways were adapted as much as possible to the setting (Figure 33). Two or three individuals can pass along the wider parts, but in certain narrow areas only one can pass at a time. The height of the steps reached 0.6-0.8 m, and only by climbing was it possible to move forward. In three places the route passed through a narrow path cut into a vertical rock. To make the passing safe, special horizontal grooves were carved in the rock to act as handholds. Only one person could use these sections at a time, using these. Roughly in the central section of the way, a cubed entrance/guard post was cut, with a frame provided for a wooden door. The rectangular frame of this feature is clearly visible, as well as holes for the doorpost and bolt fittings. With the door secured it would have been impossible to continue. It is clear, with the narrow, steep steps, the paths designed for single-file use cut into the vertical sections of the rock, as well as the protected entrance/guard post, that the complex, when necessary, could be well protected from unwanted visitors without great effort.

The core of the complex consisted of a rock-cut church, narthex, and graveyard. The church was located c. 50 m from the foot of the rock; its plan and dimensional composition are of special interest: the chancel had a north-south orientation, irregular layout (length: 5.8 m; width: 2.4 m; maximum height: 2.10 m), ending in an altar to the south. A more regular altar was opened in the eastern wall of the chancel. This plan leads to the suggestion that we are dealing here with an earlier, probably non-Christian structure, that had been turned into a Christian one only later. The builders used the existing dimensions, but built a new altar in the rock for the liturgy, directed to the east. The eastern direction was emphasised also with numerous crosses and cross compositions carved into the eastern wall (Figures 34-35).<sup>54</sup>

The narthex was sited in the north-western angle of the church (Figure 36); a platform stretched west-east (length: 10.8 m; width: 2.9 m), and a smoothed mass of rock (3 m) was enclosed on the western side. The natural gap between the entrance and the narthex of the church, according to the available traces, was once covered by wooden roofing, by which the church and narthex were linked to each other. In fact, the narthex continued to the west and provided a safe entrance to the church. In the

<sup>54</sup> The importance of the sacred axis (i.e. the rite), from west to east, for both the church and the whole complex is reinforced by the fact that the majority of crosses and cross compositions, as well as the orientation of the graveyard and burials, were also oriented in that direction.

south-western section of the narthex, there are three rocky platforms of different heights. The walls were covered with large cross compositions – crosses in circles, on stairs and high columns, and covered with floral additions and ribbons.

On the floor of the narthex, cut into the rock, there are deep pits, some 20 cm deep, with rounded and rectangular layouts, from which brooks begin along the whole platform. Probably these were technical features connected with pre-Christian rituals (oblation, sacrifice, etc.). Along the edge of the narthex, looking to the gorge, there were further holes (depth: 7cm depth; diameter: 11-24 cm) placed c. 25-45 cm apart. These attest that wooden pillars for some form of handrail were located here.

On the floor of the narthex, on the rock surface, in front of the platforms, three interlined rectangles were carved, including carved lines connecting the central points of the sides and the tops of the rectangles with each other. This composition was also carved both on the floor of the hall of the first basilica of Tigranakert, and on the floor of the church in the site known as ‘Gyavurkala’, not far from Tigranakert. In all probability this was the ‘board’ of a contemporary game called ‘crosses and rounds’, which spread from the East, carved later when the churches were destroyed and their paved floors served as meeting points for nomads. The floor appeared rather polished, suggesting frequent visits by large numbers of people, as well as the continuous and long use of the site itself.

In the eastern part of the narthex, in the southern wall, a niche was cut at a height of 1.7 m (width: 0.8 m; depth: 0.5 m). This niche, as well as the one also noticed in the altar of the church, probably served for storage.

Some 4 m west of the narthex, separated from it by a rocky ledge, the graveyard was located (Figure 37). It included five sarcophagi, cut to a depth of 2.5 m in the rock of the yard, and with an area 5.0 m wide in front of them. During excavation, the sarcophagi were found already opened, without lids or any contents. Four sarcophagi had dimensions of 2 m x 0.45 m; all have 10 cm -15 cm wide side portions, into which the lids once fitted. The depth of the stone graves was c. 0.3 m - 0.4 m. In the rock bordering them from the south, niches were cut, and, as well as on the surface of the rock, cross compositions were carved. At the end of the graveyard there is a platform arrangement, where, on the eastern wall, a two-stepped base, 20 cm high, is cut. It is decorated with a cross with wide arms, rising on a column, and having schematic bird sculptures. On two sides of the upper wing of the cross, the Christogram was written in Greek letters ‘IC XC’ – Jesus Christ. Three rock steps, 0.6 m long, lead to this sculpture. The southern part of this platform arrangement was probably used for placing the ashes of the deceased. It can be assumed that the funeral liturgy took place there.

Along the whole rock-cut road, from the foot to the rock-cut church, crosses and cross compositions are carved on the rock wall of the roadside. These are more abundant in the narthex, church, and graveyard. Although among the crosses there were simple examples carved imperfectly, the majority were complex compositions, presupposing precise measurements and sketches done beforehand to provide the required symmetry and precision of the separate details.



The complicated cross compositions were stylistically very similar. They mainly emphasised the essential dimensional, constructional and ideological features of the complex, and in all probability were done during the building process. The majority were coloured red, traces of which are still visible in some places. The eastern altar of the church was also painted the same colour.

In the compositions of the complex, the crosses consisted mainly of arms of equal length (there were also several crosses with irregular proportions), widening to the edges. The crosses are often included within multi-profile, rope-woven, and triangle-ornamented circles, set on high columns or posts. As a rule, these compositions include also floral, ribbon, and bird ornamentation. If encircled crosses with arms of equal length demonstrate the light-giving (and victorious) theme of the cross, then the vegetative and bird decorations, as well as the ribbons, represent subjects linked to the tree-of-life and adoration.<sup>55</sup>

These early cross compositions have very close parallels with Armenian Early Christian cross compositions, and are related to the 5th-6th centuries AD.<sup>56</sup> They mirror the cross compositions found at Ereruyk, Parpi, Tsiranavor, and, especially, Tsitsernavank. The encircled crosses, of course, reveal more parallels to Irish high crosses.<sup>57</sup>

Chronologically, the next group of crosses relate to the 8th-11th centuries AD, i.e. the examples with mainly strained proportions and linear solutions with a pair of line attachments to the winged edges. There are also a number of irregular crosses carved by pilgrims, which cannot be dated. Three crosses in the church and the graveyard had dedications in Greek to Christ – Christograms. In addition, three Armenian inscriptions have been carved on the walls of the church.

If we take into consideration the fact that Tigranakert was founded as a multi-national city, including the population brought by Tigranes from Asia Minor, the Greek inscriptions can be explained by the presence of the Greek community in the city.<sup>58</sup> The Armenian inscriptions were names probably carved by pilgrims. Among the names that can be identified were those of ‘Didoy’ and ‘Hama[m]’.<sup>59</sup>

As a result of our work, a rock-cut canal that passes through the foot of the complex was discovered and partly excavated. The canal begins at Khachenaget, approximately 1.5 km higher than the complex, before turning towards Tigranakert, coming out of the steppe. A rock-cut portion of 300 m is preserved (Figure 38), which also had tunnel sections (Figure 39). On the walls of the canal we found simple cross engravings. Some elements of the canal were built on the ground. In this case, the

<sup>55</sup> For Early Christian cross compositions in this sense, see in detail Petrosyan 2008: 10-68.

<sup>56</sup> Petrosyan 2008: 26-44; 2015: 10-13.

<sup>57</sup> Petrosyan 2012: 169-180.

<sup>58</sup> It is clear that in the Medieval Arabic sources a city called Yunan (i.e. Greek) is mentioned between the cities of Paytakaran and Partav, the location of which is not precise (*Yampolskij 1959*). It is more than possible that Tigranakert of Artsakh was also called by that name. We shall return to the detailed study of this problem in the future.

<sup>59</sup> Perhaps reflecting Prince Hamam of the 9th century from Hayaghvank (Armeno-Albania), whose name was also found in an Armenian inscription on the lid of a sarcophagus from Gyavurkala, situated not far from the complex (see Barkhudaryan 1964: 61-64).

floor was first strengthened using small burrs, and was then tamped using sand. Unfortunately, the part of the canal that reaches the city is not clearly identified, and further excavations are required to reveal its route and/or remains.

In conclusion, therefore:

- a. The rock-cut complex was preliminary a range of natural karstic caves. In the Late Hellenistic period its upper cave part (where the church and narthex are now situated) was adapted into a religious and burial complex.
- b. In the 5th-6th centuries, the Hellenistic complex was adapted and enlarged as a church and narthex; a graveyard was added; sarcophagi burials took place; the passage, with its defensive elements, was built; and most of the cross compositions were carved, including compositions with Greek inscriptions.
- c. In the 8th-9th centuries, new crosses (which were mainly simple forms, imperfectly undertaken) and Armenian inscriptions were made by pilgrims.
- d. Later, probably in the 11th century, the site became a shelter for nomadic tribes. Probably at that time the 'board game' design was carved within the narthex.
5. After the 11th century the complex was abandoned and underwent no further major cultural transformation. At the end of the 20th century, the inhabitants of the neighbouring Azeri village tried to erase the cross carvings. As a result, on the walls of the complex hundreds of scrawls with their names appeared, which greatly damaged the earlier crosses and inscriptions.

### **Test excavations at the newly found fortress**

A fortress is situated on the left bank of the Khachenaget, on the mountain above the village of Nor Maragha. Test excavations were undertaken, in May 2007, in the area next to the rock edge, revealing several features: a section 3.5 m wide; the fortification wall; regular masonry made of large blocks, the entrance; and remains of a semi-round tower built next to the edge of the rock (Figure 40).

As the result of the archaeological work, the length of the excavated section of the wall extended for 20 m. Excavations at the citadel of Tigranakert in August 2007 revealed an almost identical wall adjacent to the so-called 'swallow-tail' wall. This gave enabled us to date the newly found fortress on the Khachenaget to the Late Hellenistic or Early Medieval (4th-8th centuries AD) periods. During the survey of the whole area of the fortress and the excavations, numerous fragments of Sevan/Uzerlik-type pottery appeared, dated to the first half of the 2nd millennium BC, suggesting that the hill has been inhabited since those times. This powerful fortress, located on the mountain above the left bank of the Khachenaget (especially if we take into consideration the existence of Tigranakert), demonstrates the strategic importance

of this lower area of a second powerful river valley of Artsakh, since ancient times, as a gateway and a defensive system for the highland interior.

The archaeological investigation of Tigranakert continues and we hope that new excavations will give us an opportunity to reconstruct a more detailed image of the city.

**Hamlet Petrosyan**

*Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS, RA*  
 Charents Str. 15, 0025 Yerevan, Armenia  
 Yerevan State University  
 Alek Manukyan 1, 0012  
 Yerevan, Armenia  
 hpetrosyan@gmail.com

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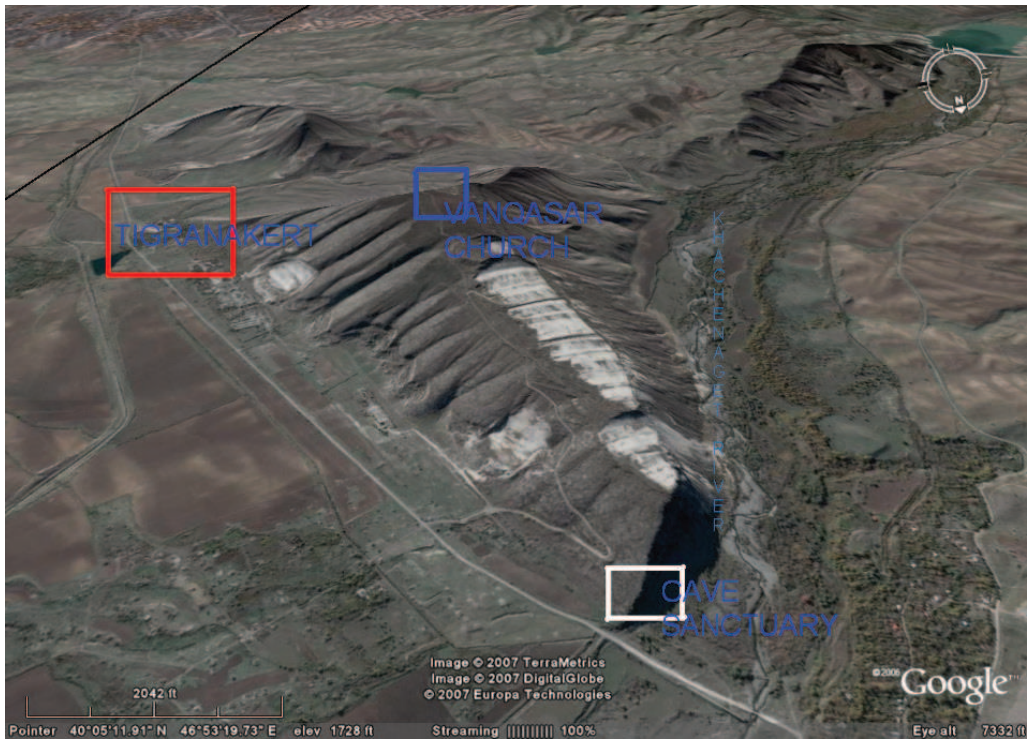


Figure 1. The monuments of Vankasar. All the materials belong to the Artsakh archaeological expedition of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA.



Figure 2. The empire of Tigranes the Great and Tigranakert in Artsakh.

Figure 3. The layout of Tigranakert with areas excavated in 2018 marked.

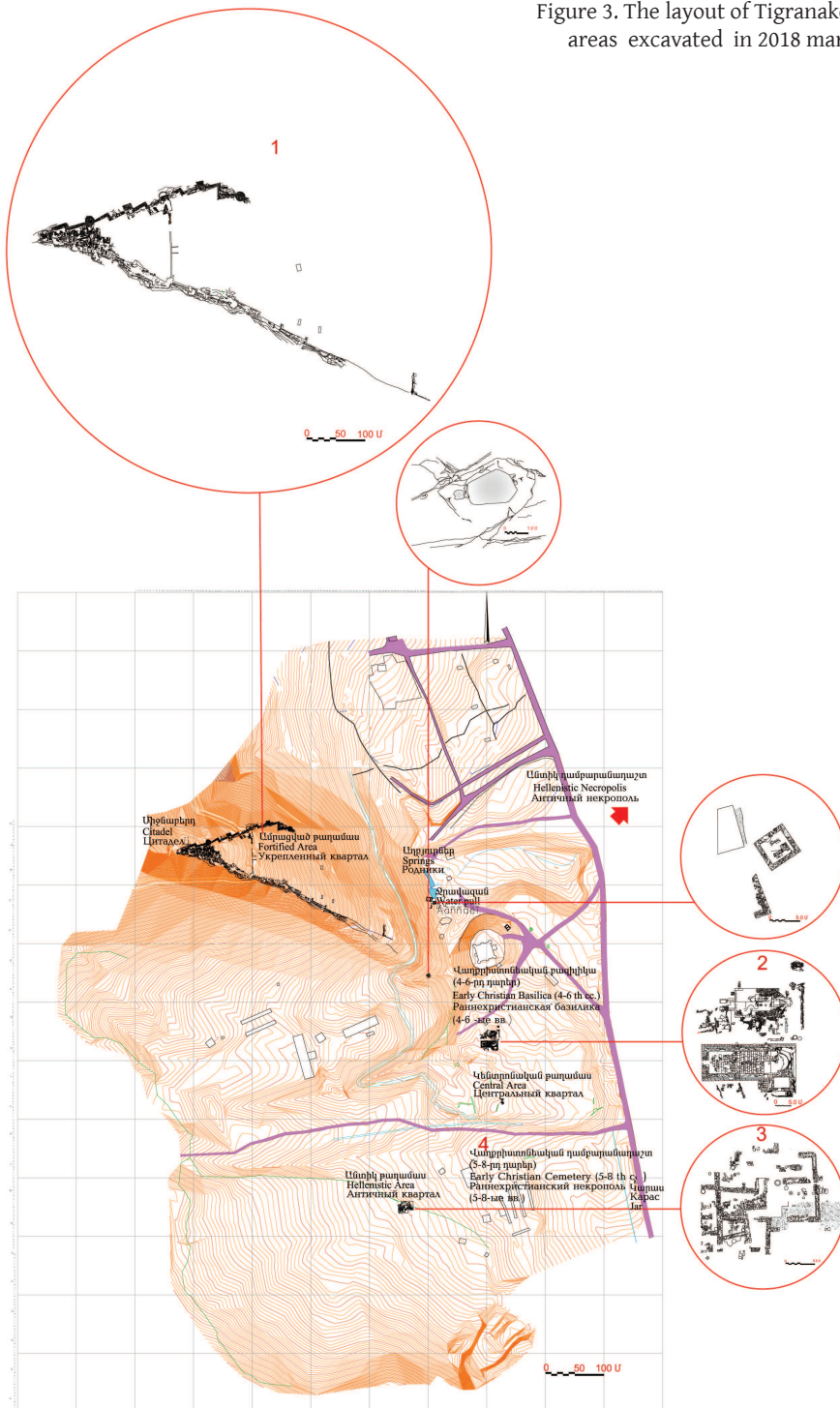




Figure 4. The Fortified district of Tigranakert on the lower south-eastern slope of Vankasar.



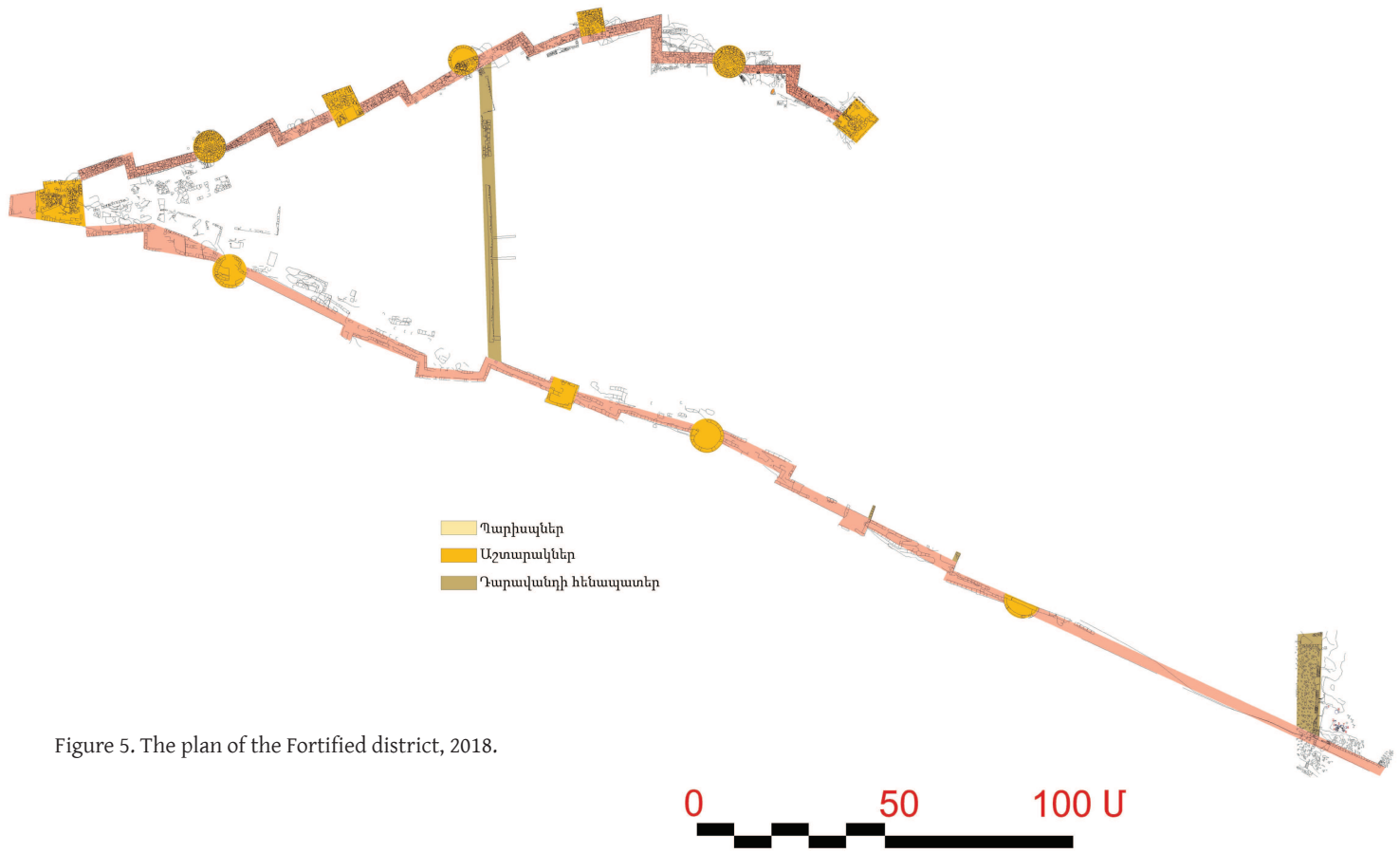


Figure 5. The plan of the Fortified district, 2018.



Figure 6. The rock-cut bases of the southern fortification wall of the Fortified district, 2007.



Figure 7. The upper part of the northern fortification wall, 2009.

Figure 8. The highest part of the northern fortification wall: the rock-cut base, rustic elaborations of quadras, the facets and 'swallow-tail' connections.



Figure 9. The horizontal polished surfaces of the quadros, rustic elaboration of outer faces, the facets and 'swallow-tail' connections: northern fortification wall.



Figure 10. Northern fortification wall, the first round tower, 2017.





Figure 11. General view of the citadel of the Fortified district, 2017.



Figure 12. An agate gemma and its stamp, the 1st century BC – the 1st century AD.



Figure 13. General view of the First Late Hellenistic district, 2017.

Figure 14. The excavation process of the First Late Hellenistic district, 2014.



Figure 15. Clay pendants of a weaver's tool from the excavations of the First Late Hellenistic district.



Figure 16. Examples of the Late Hellenistic pottery from the excavations of Tigranakert (the 1st century BC - the 1st centuries AD).





Figure 17. Examples of the Late Hellenistic pottery from the excavations of Tigranakert (the 1st century BC – the 1st century AD).



Figure 18. Late Hellenistic eastern cemetery, general view, 2018.



Figure 19. Pithos burial at the Late Hellenistic eastern cemetery, 2010.

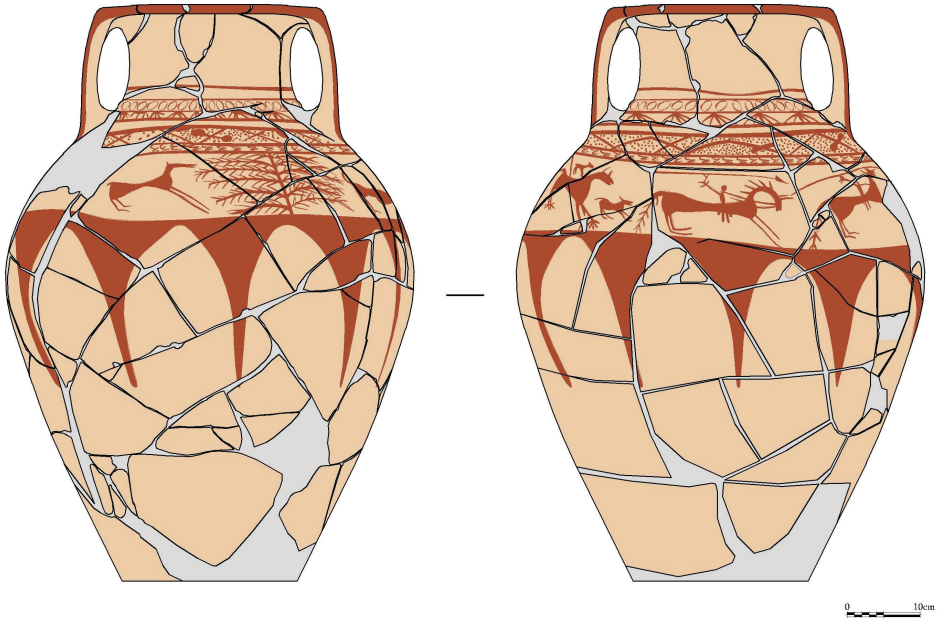


Figure 20. An amphora-shape burial pithos with a hunt scene on its shoulder (the 1st century BC – the 1st centuries AD).



Figure 21. Stone-cist burial (the 1st century BC – 1st century AD).





Figure 22. Early Christian square, general view, 2017.



Figure 23. The large basilica church, 5th -6th centuries, general view from the south-west, 2009.



Figure 24. A capital of the large basilica church, the cross in the garden environment.



Figure 25. Examples of plain pottery from the excavations of the Central district, the 9th-13th centuries.

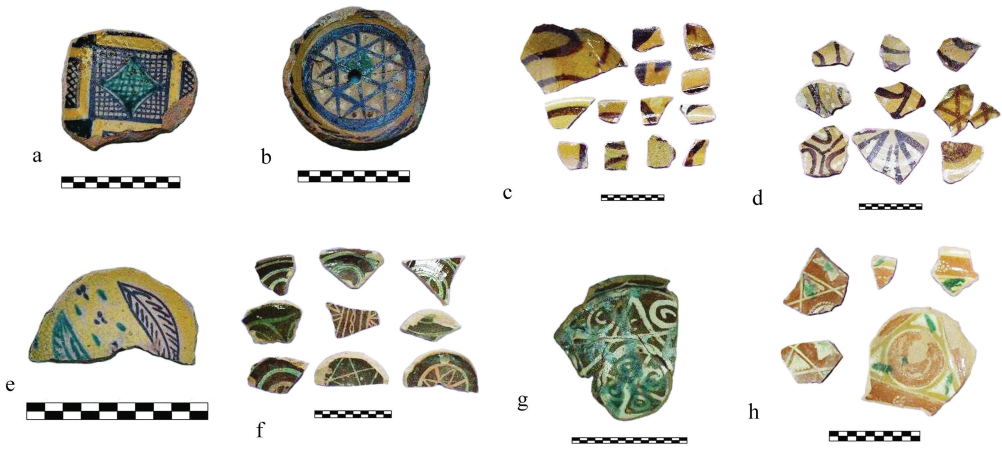


Figure 26. Early pottery with underglazed ornamentation, the 9-10th centuries.

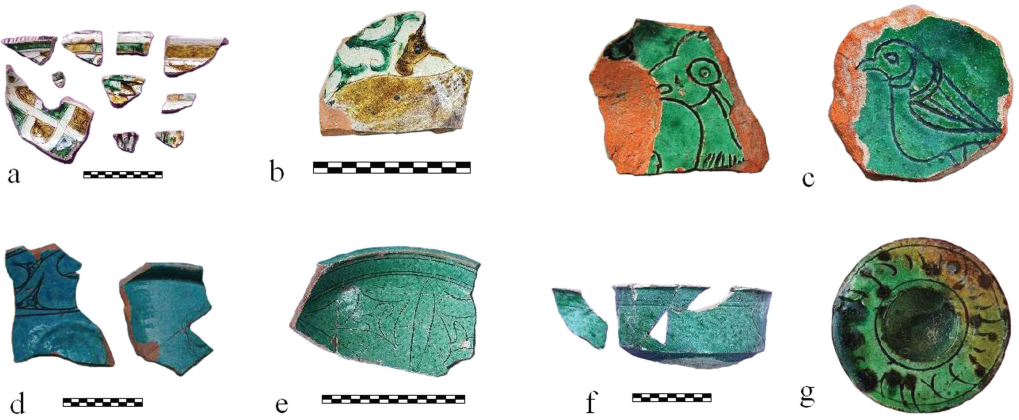


Figure 27. Glazed pottery, the 12th-13th centuries.

Figure 28. The small basilica church of the Early Christian square and the graveyard, 2014.





Figure 29. A view on the Early Christian sepulchre-reliquary, 2017.



Figure 30. The eastern entry of the chapel-reliquary of St. Grigoris in Amaras, 2014.



Figure 31. The eastern entry of the sepulchre-reliquary of St. Stepanos in Vachar, 2017.

Figure 32. A clay disc with Armenian inscriptions from the excavations of the large basilica church, 5th-7th centuries, front side.



Figure 33. Rock-cut religious complex: the stairs.



Figure 34. Rock-cut religious complex: the church.



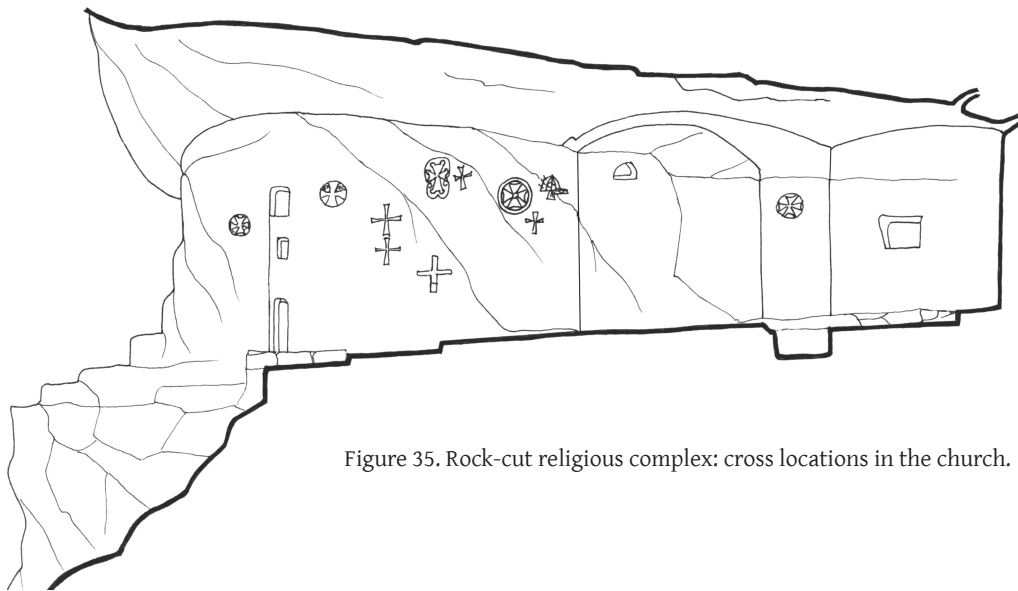


Figure 35. Rock-cut religious complex: cross locations in the church.



Figure 36. Rock-cut religious complex: general view of the narthex.



Figure 37. Rock-cut religious complex, the graveyard.

Figure 38. The excavations in the rock-cut part of the canal, 2006.



Figure 39. One of the tunnel parts of the canal.



Figure 40. The part of the entry of the new-revealed fortress.

