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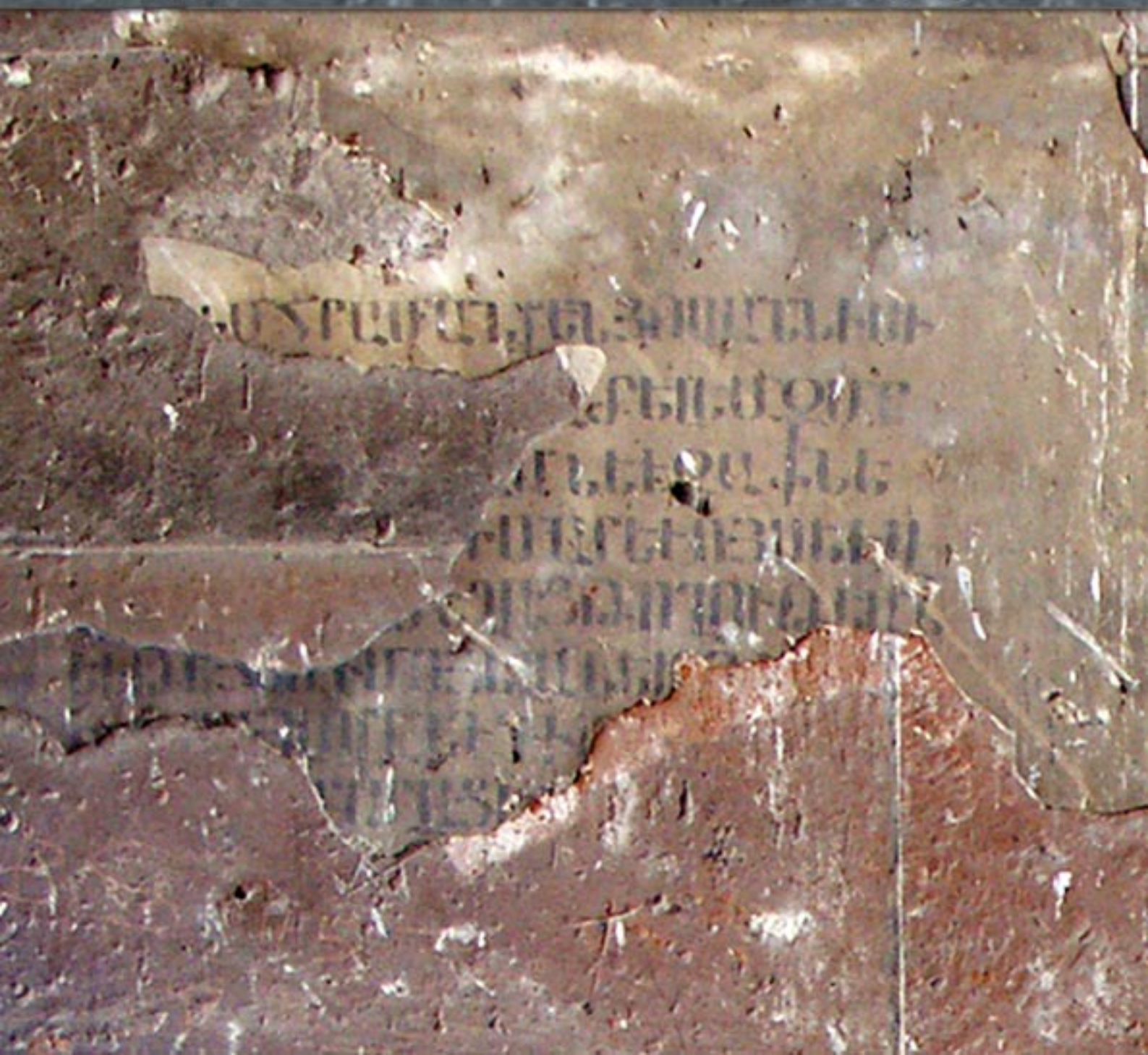


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## PERSONA NON GRATA FOR GEORGIA: WHY?

by Samvel Karapetian

On 18 October 2015, the members of Research on Armenian Architecture (RAA) Foundation, including me, attempted to make a visit to the Republic of Georgia for the purpose of conducting research into historical Armenian monuments at present in the territory of this country. However, at the Armeno-Georgian Border Checkpoint of Sadakhlo, I was banned entry to Georgia without any explanation. As for the RAA group of specialists, immediately after crossing the border, they found themselves under the close watch of the Georgian Security Service: for 10 days, they were followed everywhere from morning until evening, both openly and secretly.

So, why am I considered persona non grata for Georgia? Why is the RAA research regarded so dangerous by the Georgian authorities?

Since 1978 I have devoted all my life to studies of historical Armenian monuments located outside the borders of the Republic of Armenia. The primary targets of my research have been the monuments of the historical Armenian lands that remain annexed by the states neighbouring Armenia, including Georgia. Indeed, some research has also been carried out in the settlements of the Armenian Diaspora. The same goal has also been pursued by Research on Armenian Architecture NGO (Founding Director: Dr. Armen Hakhnazarian), which has been working as a foundation under my directorship since 2010 (its Yerevan Headquarters were officially registered in the Republic of Armenia in 1998).

Studies of historical Armenian monuments located in Georgia have always been high on the RAA list of priorities. It should be noted that since 1989 to 1990, these monuments have been subjected to an attitude of flagrant discrimination and intolerance, in consequence of which, many of them, particularly the religious ones, have been either appropriated or totally annihilated. Armenian cemeteries have been levelled to the ground; medieval *khachkars* (*cross-stones*) have just “disappeared,” some of them being buried beneath plaster; hundreds of Armenian lapidary inscriptions and a great number of frescoes have been scraped away.

In the early 1990s, I published numerous articles exposing these acts of vandalism that showed no tendency of abating. In 1998 I also published a book (in Armenian) entitled *The State Policy of Georgia and the Monuments of Armenian Culture*: it presents eye-wit-

ness testimonies, substantiated with photos, against the destruction of Armenian monuments in Georgia (I hoped that my publications might help prevent further demolition and appropriation of these monuments). The contemporary Georgian press kept total silence about the formidable evidence included in the book. Some authors only expressed annoyance at the title of the work, which stressed the fact that the destruction of the Armenian architectural heritage of Georgia had been, and was being, perpetrated as a result of a persistently exercised state policy. In fact, however, only one of the photographs included in the book is enough to prove this: it shows Ed. Shevardnadze at the ceremony (1995) of the blessing of the foundations of a new Georgian church in the site of the historical Armenian cemetery of Khojivank, which was deliberately levelled to the ground in the 1930s (the President represents the state, does he not?).

Apart from publications exposing the destruction and appropriation of Armenian monuments in Georgia, the RAA has also produced the documentaries *Silence* (2008) and *A Day in Kakhet* (2012), which treat the same issue (available, also with English subtitles, on RAA Armenia YouTube Channel).

The works in the Georgian front of my activities also include: *The Mayors of Tiflis*<sup>1</sup> (2003, in Armenian and Russian); *The Armenian Collection of the Caucasian Museum* (2004, in Armenian); *The Armenians in Kakhet* (2004, in Armenian); *Javakhk* (2006, in Armenian; 2011, in English), and *Akhaltskha* (2008, in Armenian). These publications reveal the Armenian cultural and architectural heritage of Georgia, also

<sup>1</sup> The book presents the lives and activities of 47 mayors who governed Tiflis for more than 800 years (from the 12th century until 1917). It is interesting to note that only two of them were Georgians, and their graves are preserved intact, whereas those of the other 45, who were Armenians (they were buried in Tiflis), do not exist at all.

During the presentation of the book in the National Library of Armenia, Nino Aktsiauri, the cultural attache of the Embassy of the Republic of Georgia in the Republic of Armenia, expressed her indignation at the facts highlighted in the book. She particularly stated that Hayos and Kartlos, the eponymous patriarchs of the Armenian and Georgian nations respectively, were brothers, and it was impermissible to publish materials compromising this “fraternity.” Well, a question arises: if they were truly brothers, why did the descendants of Kartlos destroy the graves of Hayos’ scions? How can a brother excavate the grave of his brother and scatter his remains here and there?

showing the Armenians' decisive role in the history of this country and their contribution to its development.

It has already been several years since the Armenian diocese of Georgia raised the question of the restitution of several Armenian churches, appropriated since the 1920s to 1930s, to their only legal owner, the Armenian Apostolic Church. In order to support and substantiate this demand, which has been declared groundless by the Georgian side, I have prepared brief texts (published in the periodical *Norashen*) on the history of some of these churches to prove that they *do* form part of Armenian cultural heritage. In 2012 the RAA also published a book, *Sourb Nshan Sourb Nikoghayosi Church, Tbilisi* (in Armenian, Russian and English), in order to give an exhaustive answer to the long-disputed question of the belonging of this church (after its publication, no further encroachments were made by the Georgian side).<sup>2</sup>

The latest work in the Georgian front of my activities is a review of *The Miaphysite Monuments of Georgia, book 1: Kvemo Kartli* (in Georgian) by Giorgi Gagoshidze and Natia Chantladze (Tbilisi, 2009; editors: Zaza Alexidze, Professor of the Academy of Sciences of Georgia, and Professor Dmitri Tumanishvili, Dr. of Historical Sciences).<sup>3</sup> In fact, this book is thoroughly woven around a newly-concocted thesis through which the Georgian side attempts to “substantiate” the appropriation of Armenian monuments located in Georgia. Thus, according to the authors and editors of the book, the Armenian churches preserved in Somkheti<sup>4</sup> were originally built not by Armenians but by Georgians who were converted to the Miaphysite (namely, Armenian Apostolic) faith under the pressure

of Armenians; therefore, they are not Armenian, but Georgian churches.

The book also includes numerous Armenian inscriptions allegedly carved by the aforementioned Georgian converts. What is particularly noteworthy, the decipherments of these lapidary records are deliberately distorted and falsified, evidently, for the purpose of decreasing the age of the historical Armenian monuments mentioned in them: thus, for instance, the renowned cross memorial of Samshvilde, erected in 961 and dedicated to Armenian Prince of Princes Smbat, has been traced back to 1621, while the 1237 construction inscription of St. Sargis Church of Darvas Village, Bolnis District, has been ascribed to 1857. The authors of the book also mention the 1615 inscription of one of the Armenian churches of Gorel City Site, declaring that it is not a trustworthy record, being merely a fabrication by Armenians (perhaps, it was for this reason that it disappeared from the site!).<sup>5</sup>

These mistakes could be attributed to ignorance, even given the fact that the authors and editors of the book are renowned scholars. To my mind, however, these falsifications simply pursue the aim of reducing the historical value of the monuments in question.

I have always felt it my duty to protect the monuments of Armenian material culture against various encroachments, and because of my very activities, I have become persona non grata for Georgia. I have been stripped of my legal right to conduct studies of historical Armenian monuments on the spot. In this situation, when the authorities of the Republic of Georgia ban my entry into their country (although they always declare themselves as advocates of western values),<sup>6</sup> certain Georgian scholars who are busy falsifying history to appropriate Armenian monuments have free access to the Republic of Armenia. Can there be any explanation for this fact?

If I am considered dangerous for the Republic of Georgia just “because of” my honest and truthful scholarly activities, the Georgian researchers publishing biased works abounding in anti-Armenian statements and distorted facts of history are far more dangerous and unwelcome for the Republic of Armenia...

<sup>2</sup> In 1995 I published a folded booklet with very brief information regarding the Armenian churches of Georgia, over 650 in number (including the name, location, construction and/or renovation year(s) or century(ies) and the condition of each church). It aroused a storm of indignation amidst Georgian researchers, including Armenologists. One of them, Bondo Arveladze, even published an entire book (“Армянские” или грузинские церкви в Грузии?) [“Armenian” or Georgian Churches of Georgia?], Tbilisi, 1996) to refute the information contained in the booklet, which, indeed, does not claim to be a scholarly work. You can judge about the trustworthiness of his “counter-arguments” regarding almost all the religious monuments mentioned in the booklet by looking through, for instance, the part on Sourb Nshan Church of Tbilisi (pp. 14-15).

<sup>3</sup> See the review online in *Vardzk* no. 8 (Yerevan, 2013) at: [http://www.raa-am.com/vardsk-8/Vardsk-8\\_E\\_poqr.pdf](http://www.raa-am.com/vardsk-8/Vardsk-8_E_poqr.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> The toponym *Somkheti*, which is translated as *Armenia*, has been used with reference to this region for centuries by the very Georgian sources. The authors of the book, however, have completely ignored it and concocted the name *Kvemo Kartli* (*Lower Kartli*). Apparently, they have followed the example set by their Turkish counterparts who deliberately avoid using the name *Ermanistan* in connection with the Turkish-conquered lands of Armenia although it can be found in abundance in the very Turkish sources: they have replaced it with the newly-coined geographical term *Eastern Anatolia*.

<sup>5</sup> The same attitude has been shown to the historical Armenian monuments located in Azerbaijan: thus, for instance, various Azerbaijanian publications present the world-famous cemetery of Old Jugha, as well as numerous churches and monasteries once situated in the region of Nakhichevan as forming part of the heritage of Caucasian Albanians, the alleged ancestors of the Azerbaijani people. This, however, did not prevent the annihilation of these monuments by the very Azerbaijani authorities.

<sup>6</sup> Immediately on my return from the Armeno-Georgian border, I wrote a letter to Tengiz Sharmanishvili, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Georgia to the Republic of Armenia, hoping to get some explanations. However, I have not received any answer yet.



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