

# ՎԱՐԴԶԻԿ

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RESEARCH ON ARMENIAN ARCHITECTURE

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## THE RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATIONS AND STUDIES OF THE MONASTIC COMPLEX OF CHAREKTAR VILLAGE

by Samvel Ayvazian & Gagik Sargissian

The monastery of Charektar is situated at the top of a hill rising on the right bank of the river Trtu, in Verin (Upper) Khachen District, Artsakh Province, Armenia Maior (present-day Charektar Village, Martakert District, Republic of Artsakh).



A general view of Charektar Monastery from the north-east

The available historical sources do not report much information regarding the monastery, the history of which is elucidated through the lapidary inscriptions preserved there (unfortunately, some of them were lost in the years of the Soviet Azerbaijanian rule). Since the 19th century, its lapidary heritage has been studied and published by S. Jalalians, M. Barkhutarians, M. Ter-Movsissian, H. Voskian, S. Barkhudarian and Sh. Mkrтчian.

So far no sources have been found to reveal the motives and time of the foundation of Charektar Monastery; nor do there exist any records concerning its

name. Deciphering the inscription of a cross-stone found here, S. Jalalians came to the presumption that it was called Mshahan<sup>1</sup> (the same viewpoint was later expressed by M. Barkhutarians). Later, however, M. Ter-Movsissian<sup>2</sup> and S. Barkhudarian<sup>3</sup> rejected this name, which had been put forward as a result of Jalalians' incorrect decipherment of the inscription. At present this cross-stone can no longer be found *in*



*situ*—only a small fragment, with part of the inscription, can be seen in the stonework of one of the walls of a cattle-shed erected on the foundations of the monastic narthex. Another inscription which we failed to find anywhere states that the church of the monastery was named Sourb Astvatzatzin (Holy Virgin).<sup>4</sup>

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the estates of Charektar were within the jurisdiction of Echmiatzin together with those of Dad Monastery (Khutavank) and were mentioned as Khotavank (i.e. Khot Monastery) or Charekdar Monastery in official documents.<sup>5</sup> That the

1 Ջալալեանց Ս., Դանապարհորդութիւն ի մեծն Հայաստան [S. Jalalians, A Journey to Greater Armenia], part 2 (Tphhis, 1858), 228.

2 Տէր-Մովսիսեան Ս., Հայկական երեք մեծ վանքերի Տաբեի, Հաղարծնի եւ Դադի եկեղեցիները եւ վանական շինութիւնները [M. Ter-Movsissian, The Churches and Other Buildings of Three of the Major Armenian Monasteries, Tatev, Haghartzin and Dad] (Jerusalem, 1938), 98.

3 Գիվան հայ վիմագրութեան, կազմող Բարխուդարյան Ս. [S. Barkhudarian, comp., A Corpus of Armenian Inscriptions], vol. 5 (Yerevan, 1982), 132.

4 Jalalians, 229; Corpus, *ibid.*, 134. Also see Ոսկեան Հ., Արցախի վանքերը [H. Voskian, The Monasteries of Artsakh] (Vienna, 1953), 113.

5 Ter-Movsissian, 83, 97.



A general view of Charektar Monastery from the south

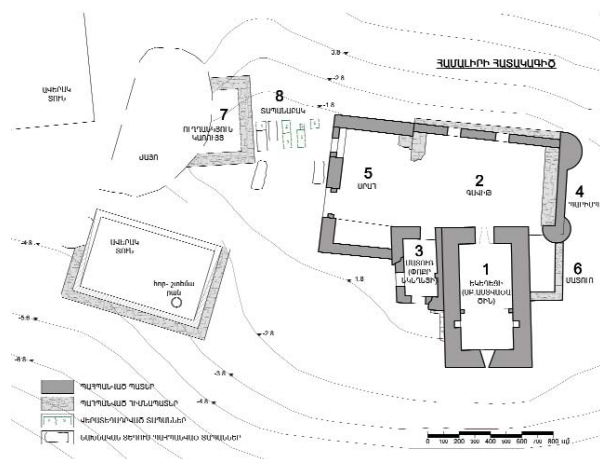
monastery of Charektar is referred to together with that of Dad as *a vast estate* shows that it played an important role in the spiritual life of the region. In the Soviet years, the village of Charektar was totally stripped of its Armenian population, being re-settled with Azerbaijanians. Naturally, the monastery was left uninhabited, too being under the control of the Azerbaijanian authorities with all the grave consequences ensuing from that condition: it was subjected to gradual, deliberately-planned destruction. Almost all the cross-stones of the monastery were broken and used as building material, its structures being reduced to cattle-sheds.

After the liberation of Artsakh, the Department of Tourism at the Government of the Republic of Artsakh embarked on the restoration of the monastery. In order to draw up a scientifically-based project, it was necessary to start excavations in the monastery grounds, and this was carried out between 13 and 23 June, 2009. The archaeological expedition was headed by archaeologist Gagik Sargissian, and the architect was the author of the restoration project of the monastery, Samvel Ayvazian.

It was necessary to excavate the monastery grounds and clean them to be able to carry out measurement there. We were to find out whether the monument had been a fortified monastery enclosed within ramparts or not. At the same time, we were also to clarify the func-

tional significance of the preserved buildings, the chronological order of their construction, trying to find out how many times and to what extent they had undergone renovation.

The excavations revealed that the main monument group of the complex, which was situated at the top of a conical hill dominating the village, consisted of the following structures:



1. The main church, the composition, building technique and material of which trace it back to the period between the 12th and 13th centuries. It represents a basilica in which the apse and hall have equal width,

namely, it is a rectangular hall divided in two parts by a pair of small pilasters (24 cms). The eastern section, which is comparatively smaller, serves as a sanctuary: it rises at a height of 96 cms above the level of the praying hall. The church used to be vaulted and had a tiled roof (we shall substantiate this below): at present neither the vault nor its roof are preserved.

2. A narthex where only half of the retaining walls are preserved.

3. A small church or chapel adjoining the main one in the south and completely sharing its composition with smaller dimensions. Fortunately, part of its vaulted ceiling and tiled roof is preserved. In size and form, the tiles are identical to those found in Dad Monastery and Handaberd, which attests that all these monuments were erected in the same period (12th to 13th centuries).

4. Ramparts with two towers adjoining the narthex in the north.

5. A hall adjacent to the narthex in the south, and another chapel adjoining the church in the north.

S. Jalalians, who visited Charektar in the mid-19th century, writes:

Within the narthex walls, a funerary chapel is built, with a large cross-stone opposite it... nearby can be seen some other chapels with holy altars, but entirely in ruins, with stones heaped around them—probably, they are the remnants of the monks' rooms.<sup>6</sup>

M. Ter-Movsissian writes:

The monastery of Charekdar consists of four small chapels closely adjoining each other.<sup>7</sup>

When presenting the lapidary inscriptions of the monastery, he also uses the word 'church' with reference to its structures, but it is evident that the complex does not comprise only chapels or churches, and there are also structures of other functions.

In the early 1960s, the following was said with reference to Charektar Monastery:

The monastic buildings are in a semi-ruined state: four structures, namely, a church, a narthex, a funerary chapel and another built of undressed stone stand close to one another.<sup>8</sup>

Most probably, the mortuary chapel is the hall mentioned above, and the narthex was probably preserved to some extent. At present only the foundations of the western wall of the narthex are preserved together with its main wall, which was unclosed during the excavations.

The excavations conducted in the southern yard of the main monument group unearthed the vestiges of a rectangular building abutting on the rock, as well as a grave-yard with tombstones.



The remnants of a rectangular building and a cemetery unclosed in the south of Charektar Monastery during its excavations

In the east, the monastic complex was fortified with a series of multi-step retaining walls rising up the hillside: they artificially widened the useful square-like space at the top of the hill.

Most probably, some structures of everyday use were located in the south-eastern part of this square, their vestiges comprising a well serving as a barn and the remnants of a leaning structure. In consequence of the collapse of the main walls and the construction activity of the nomads who took up a sedentary life in the village in the 20th century, the historical environment of this part of the hill has been completely dis-



The monastery as seen in its distorted historical surroundings

<sup>6</sup> Jalalians, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Ter-Movsissian, 98.

<sup>8</sup> Corpus, *ibid.*



The church floor as flattened with mortar

torted as residential and utility buildings have been constructed here together with cattle-sheds.

We started the excavations with cleaning the interior of the preserved structures. In the course of this work, we found out that the church floor had been smoothed by means of mortar. The floors of the other structures have not come down to our days.

The examination of the inner surface of the rampart with two towers, serving as the northern wall of the cow-house erected close to the western facade of the church, showed that the inner layer of the wall was not laid in the accepted simple way, like the outer surface of the same rampart: instead, the stones and backfill of



An inner view of the northern wall of the cattle house adjoining the church

the masonry were realised as touching some surface serving as an encasement. Judging from this, the rampart was linked to another wall, and in order to clarify this point, we dug deeper into the floor of the cow-house in its section close to the rampart, unclosing the lower row of the wall masonry. As the western wall of



The unearthed thick retaining wall

the cattle-shed had been erected on the basis of the thick retaining wall of an earlier structure, it became clear that a building used to stand in the west of the church—it might be either a narthex, as was usually the case in the volumetric-spatial composition of medieval monastic complexes, or a fortified wall (not the present-day ramparts with two towers). We think that it was a narthex—the one described by Jalalians and the authors of the *Corpus of Armenian Inscriptions*—the remnants of which comprise only its northern and western main walls with a small unearthed part (178 cms in length) of the main western section of its southern wall erected on a rock basis that can be seen inside the cattle-shed.

The rampart and its two towers were later attached to the narthex wall, apparently, for the purpose of its consolidation.

After removing the soil in the north of the monastic complex, we found out that the ramparts did not have a continuation, and encompassed only the northern wall of the narthex, which is destroyed at present. Close to the northern wall of the church and the eastern tower of the rampart, we unclosed a small rectangular struc-



The remnants of a chapel unclosed north of the church

ture—most presumably, a chapel—which used to be vaulted judging from the vault fragments scattered throughout the interior of the structure. The chapel is preserved to a height of 2 to 3 rows and has a western entrance leading to the narthex. The steps constructed later in the east of this structure (only some meagre remnants of them can now be found) lead to the attic of the cattle-house.

After carrying away the soil in the south of the monastic complex, we unclosed a rectangular building preserved to the height of 2 to 3 rows, its eastern and western walls joining the rock in the south. Beyond it,



The southern part of the complex after the excavations

no wall traces can be seen, which suggests that the southern wall of the structure was totally levelled with the ground.

Four grave-stones were unearthed in the area between the rectangular building and the hall: they were preserved *in situ*, which shows that this part comprised the monastic cemetery. Two of them, placed side



Two inscribed tombstones unclosed in the cemetery after the excavations

by side near the northern wall of the rectangular building, bear inscriptions.

We found and restored the upper fragment of the first tombstone which contained most of its four-line inscription reading:

*Այս է հանգ||իստ Ըստեփ|անոսի քահ|անայի:*

Transl.: *In this grave reposes Priest Stepanos.*



The epitaph of Priest Stepanos

The grave-stone was deliberately broken, this being attested by the fact that its head part was used for making mortar (the lime remnants were clearly seen on it): this was probably done during the construction of the cow-house.

The other tombstone is engraved with a 7-line inscription:



One of the two inscribed tombstones unclosed in the cemetery after the excavations

Այս է հանգիստ Պետրոսի եղբայր ս(եանն) Մարգարէիկն եւ | Առաքելա, ա(ստուա)ծ | յղորմի սնա, սն/եմ:

Transl.: *In this grave repose Petros's brother, Father Margare, and Arakel. May God have mercy upon them. Amen.*

One of the other two tombstones was placed near the north-eastern corner of the rectangular building, and the other in the central part of the hall, close to its southern wall.

The excavations also unearthed other displaced grave-stones one of which was broken to several



An inscribed tombstone fragment used as the base of a wooden pillar in a cattle-house

pieces. We were able to find only two of its fragments, one of which had been used as a fust for the wooden pillar of the cow-house. The other part of the four-line inscription was on the fragment (or fragments) missing from the upper left corner of the grave-stone.



The tombstone fragments as joined together

[Այս է] տապա[[ն Յոհ]ա-նիսի որ[[ղի] ...արտի ե[[լ խաթ]ունիկն:

Transl.: *In this grave reposes Hovhannes's son... and Khatun.*

The lower half of another tombstone (its upper part is engraved with an inscription the contents of which are well-known),<sup>9</sup> was used during the construction of the monastic hall, being placed in its southern wall. Later it fell off (we joined these parts together).

Similarly well-known is the inscription carved on the upper part of another grave-stone,<sup>10</sup>



The tombstone fragments as joined together

<sup>9</sup> For its decipherment, see Corpus, 135, no. 453p.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., no. 453u.



but we were unable to find its lower fragment. We collected all the displaced fragments, joined the broken parts together and arranged them beside the grave-stones of Priests Stepanos, Margare and Arakel that had been found in the south of the hall.

A number of wholly-preserved and broken cross-stones were unclosed in the course of the excavations and during the work in the monastic grounds and the ruins of the nearby houses. The composition and stylistic peculiarities of the reliefs of these cross-stones trace them back to the time-span between the 12th and 14th centuries. Some of them bear inscriptions which follow below:

1. An ornate cross-stone of white marble broken in two parts was found in the yard of a house far from the monastery. Its back part bears an inscription of 12 lines:

Կամանն ա(ստուծոյ) ես | Մխիթար Փորսկար-  
դի[ի] | որդի անուանի խաչգործ կանգնեցի զս(ուր)ք  
Գրիգորս ի բարեխաւսութի(ւն) հոգոյ իմն, | որք ըն-



The front and one of the sides of a khachkar of 1290



The cross-stone (1240) erected by prominent master Mkhitar

թեանոյք լի | բերանով ասացէք | Ք(րիստո)ս ա(ս-  
տուա)ծ ողորմի Մխիթարայ եւ իւր ծնողացն, ամէն,  
| ՈՉԹ (1240) էր թիւն:

Transl.: *By the Lord's will, I, Mkhitar Purskard, the son of an outstanding cross-stone master, erected St. Grigor for the salvation of my soul. May those who read this sincerely pray for God Jesus' mercy upon Mkhitar and his parents. Amen. The year was 689 (1240).*

Apart from its artistic value, the cross-stone is also remarkable for the reference to the sculptor's name, and especially, his profession (cross-stone master).

2. A finely-ornamented cross-stone which is completely crumbled all along its northern edge was found in the midst of the ruins of a house situated in the south-west of the monastic complex. The following



lines are carved on both sides of the upper cross wing and on its narrow southern side (on the whole, at least 9 lines):

ՉԼԹ (1290), | ...ս... | ...[կ]անգ[լ]նեցի զխաչս  
ծնողաց իմ եւ իղբարց իմ, | յիշեցէք ի Ք(րիստո)ս:  
Transl.: *739 (1290)... I erected this cross in memory of my parents and brothers. May you remember [us] to Christ.*

3. The upper part of a small cross-stone, found from the midst of the same ruins, bears the beginning (5 lines) of a multi-line inscription carved on its northern narrow side:

Ա(ստուա)ծ | ողորմի Խոտցադ(եղա)...:  
Transl.: *May God have mercy upon Khotsadegha...*

4. Six lines are engraved on the lower part of a small cross-stone:

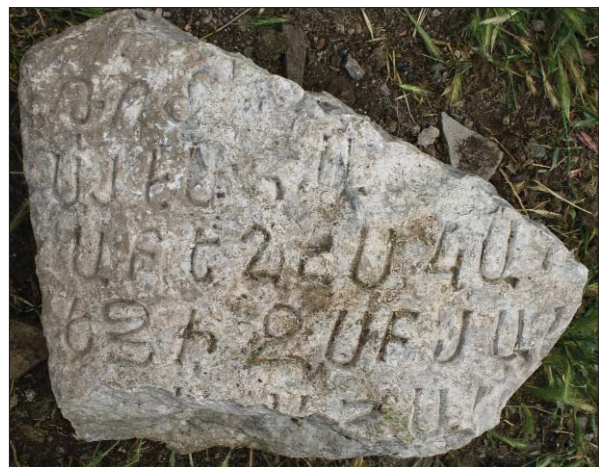
Ես Գրգորիկ | արկի զհզին, | տվի Սարգիսայ  
տարին Ա (1) ալր ժամ, ով | ...

Transl.: *I, Grgorik, planted a garden, gave Sargis an hour a year...*

5. A finely-finished piece of marble which once served as a revetment stone bears 5 lines:



The cross-stone of Grgorik, who is known to have planted a garden (inscription 4)



The fragment of a cross-stone erected by a coenobite in 1208 (inscription 6)



The donation inscription of monk Pokrik (inscription 5)

Ա(ստուծո)վ, ես՝ Փոքրիկ միաբանեցաւ ս(ուր)բ ուխտիս, Յոհանէս եւ եղբարքս ետուն :Բ: (2) | սար ժամ ս(ուր)բ Գրիգորի, ով | խաւիան դատի յս(տուծո)յ:

Transl.: By God's will, I, Pokrik, joined the holy monastery, Hovhannes and the brethren gave [a holy mass] 2 hours a day [on the feast day] of St. Grigor. May those who hinder this be subjected to divine judgement.

6. Engraved on the back part of a cross-stone fragment:



The fragment of a cross-stone dating from 1002 (inscription 7)



Remnants and specimens of tiles unclosed during the excavations

ԹՎ(ԻՆ) ՈԾԷ (1208), (Կամսաւն) | ա(սսուծոյ) Եւ  
Հա... | աբեղես կա(ն)գ/եցի զս(ուր)ք յաղ... | ...ս...:

Transl.: *In the year 657 (1208), by God's will, I, coenobite Ha... erected the holy...*

7. Only the initial 5 lines of an inscription are preserved on the lower left part of a cross-stone fragment:

ԹՎ(ԻՆ) | ՆԾԱ (1002), | Ի ժա|ման|ալս...

Transl.: *In the year 451 (1002), in the times of...*

The monastic walls and grounds used to bear some more inscriptions and cross-stones<sup>11</sup> which cannot be found *in situ* at present.

While cleaning the roof in the part where the church and chapel (the smaller church) adjoin each other, we unclosed part of the tiles of the latter which is preserved *in situ*, this attesting that it used to have a tiled roof. It was filled with scattered remains of broken tiles, which shows that those of a taller structure evidently fell on it: this could have been only the church adjoining the chapel, which suggests that the former used to have a tiled roof, too (at present its inner overhead covering and the roofing material are missing).

The tiled roof of the chapel was constructed in accordance with the medieval principle of traditional tiled roofs: first the smooth ribbed table-shaped tiles were laid, with their junctures covered with semi-cir-

cular tiles with projections. The hydro-insulation of the junction of the church and chapel was carried out through a raffle slanting eastward: it was made by means of smooth table-shaped tiles.

During the excavations, we also removed the corroded roof (originally built of wood and slates of asbestos) of the cattle-shed built in the site of the narthex and hall.

The results of the excavations and the available historical records lead us to the following conclusions:

1. Charektar Monastery served as a place of religious worship as early as the beginning of the 11th century, this being attested by the cross-stone fragment of 1002.

2. The existence of tombstones belonging to secular and spiritual leaders, the numerous ornate cross-stones, as well as its being mentioned as an estate together with Dad Monastery between the 19th and 20th centuries show that despite the small volume of its structures, Charektar Monastery played a significant role in the spiritual and public life of Artsakh in the Middle Ages.

3. The northern rampart, which had two towers, did not extend any farther, which suggests that the complex was not a fortified monastery.

4. The first of the rectangular structures unearthed in the north and south of the complex may be considered as a chapel. As for the southern one, we failed to find out its function.

5. The aforementioned tombstones and khachkars were found from beneath the layer of earth and in the walls of the dwellings of the Muslims who took up living in Charektar in the 20th century.

The chronological order of the construction of the buildings of Charektar Monastic Complex is as follows:

The oldest surviving structure is the church (12th to 13th centuries) of a rectangular apse, which was later adjoined by a narthex in the west (at present only the foundations of the latter's northern and western walls are preserved together with a small part of the base of



The chapel adjoining the western part of the southern facade of the church

<sup>11</sup> Corpus, vol. 5, 132-135.

its southern wall). Next comes the smaller church (chapel) adjoining the western section of the southern wall of the church (by the time it was erected the narthex had already been considerably damaged). We have arrived at this conclusion after a detailed study of the western wall of the chapel the surface of the lower part of which shares the structure of the inner surface of the ramparts described above within a height of about 250 cms. This indicates that it was erected to adjoin the narthex wall existing in that section, while above the height specified, it is laid in accordance with traditional stonework, like the other walls. Therefore, the western wall of the chapel was erected as attached to the narthex wall with its lower section, the upper one representing it as a free-standing wall as the narthex wall no longer existed above that level.

The next stage which might coincide with the construction of the smaller church (chapel) marks the building of the northern rampart with two towers. It was outwardly attached to the northern wall of the narthex probably for consolidation (as already stated above, the narthex walls had already been damaged or ruined by that time). This construction activity may have been unfolded between the 13th and 14th centuries.

Then the hall with a vaulted ceiling was erected. Its northern wall was built onto the southern facade of the narthex, and for this reason, the Muslim newcomers who planned to build a cattle-shed there levelled it with the ground together with the narthex. The other walls of the hall underwent changes. The southern wall of the hall used to have two wide openings with arches of arrow-



The southern wall of the hall

shaped ends. The eastern opening was laid with stones into a rectangular entrance, while the western one was changed into a window. The mortar of this structure flagrantly differs from that of the other monastic buildings in colour, composition and hardness (it is yellowish and probably contains clay being less solid). It may have been erected in the 17th century or even later.



Traces of reconstruction on the church pediment

The last stage of construction activities unfolded in Charektar encompasses the 20th century, when the Muslims used the walls of the former narthex and hall to build a cattle-shed of thinner walls resting on wooden pillars and covered with slates of asbestos.

The church underwent reconstruction for several times, its traces being evident both inwardly and outwardly. Studying these remnants and taking into account the unclosed tiles, we have come to the conviction that originally it used to be a vaulted building of a tiled roof, like the smaller church and chapel.

After the construction of the narthex and smaller church (chapel)—apparently, during the erection of the hall—the church was plastered inwardly and its vault was replaced by a wooden covering. Its plaster still preserves a frieze made up of circular rosettes and bearing the traces of blue and red paint. It goes round the entire interior of the church, running over its entrance and eastern window.



Ornament remnants on the plaster

After the excavations, the working team made certain analysis and carried out architectural studies the results of which became the basis for the elaboration of projects for the complete restoration of the church and chapel of the complex and the partial restoration and consolidation of its other structures.

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