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RESEARCH ON ARMENIAN ARCHITECTURE

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Editor-in-chief
SAMVEL KARAPETIAN

ԽՄԲԱԳՐԱԿԱԶՄ
ԷՄՄԱ ԱՐԱՐՅԱՍՅԱՆ

ԽՄԲԱԳԻՐ Editor
EMMA ABRAHAMIAN

ՀԱՍՄԻԿ ՀՈԿՀԱՆՆԻՍՅԱՆ
ԽՄԲԱԳԻՐ-ՄՐԱԳՐԻԳ

Proof-reader (Armenian text)
HASMIK HOVHANNISSIAN

ԳԱՅԱՆԵ ՄՈՎՍԻՍՅԱՆ

ԹՄՐԳՄԱՆԻԳ Translator
GAYANE MOVSISSIAN

ԱՐՄԵՆ ԳԵՎՈՐԳՅԱՆ

ՀԱՍՄԿԱՐԳՑԱՅԻՆ ՓԵՎԱԿՈՐՈՐ

Designer
**ARMEN GEVORGIAN
LIANA HOVHANNISSIAN-
KORTOSHIAN**

ԼՈՒՏԿԱԿԱՆ ԳՈՐԾՈՒՆԵՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ ԻՐԱԿԱՆԱՅՈՐ
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Responsible for this issue
SAMVEL KARAPETIAN

ԵՐԵՎԱՆ, ԲԱԴՐԱՄՅԱՆ 24/4
24/4 Baghramian Ave., Yerevan, RA

<http://www.armenianarchitecture.am>

<http://www.raa.am>

f RAA Armenia

✉ raayer@sci.am

☎ 010 52 15 25

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FORGOTTEN KHENE

by Raffi Kortoshian

The village of Khene¹ extends on a small hill near the mineral water of Sheikh Isa, east of Yagupie Village, in the north of Jeser-Sheghur District, Syria.

It has a great number of fountains and is surrounded with gardens and orchards of olive and fig trees.²

The first known reference to the name of the village is found in a two-line embossed Armenian inscription of 1804 preserved on an ecclesiastical headgear (crown) which is kept in the treasure house of Aleppo:

Նոր(ն)գ(ե)ցի սաղ(ա)վ(ա)րդս ձեռամբ տ(է)ր
Յոհանէս զահանայիճ և տրամբ իւր կողակցուն / և
տրամբ Իտլիպու եղեալ ժողովրդոցն ի դրան
Ս(ուր)բ Կիպրիանոսի Խնէ գողղին եկեղեց(ու)ն,
ՌՄԾԳ (1804):

Transl.: *This crown was repaired by Priest Hovhannes, with the help of his spouse and the people of Itlip in St. Kyprianos Church of Khene Village, 1253 (1804).*

Published for the first time.



Khene Village from space (Google Earth, 2010). The red circle marks the site of St. Kyprianos Church, which has been destroyed.

Father Sahak Keshishian is known to have copied two inscriptions of 1818 and 1856 in the vicinity of this village.³

In 1852 one of the inhabitants of Khene, Petros Movsessian, was ordained priest in Sis to serve his village.⁴

1 Its present-day official name is Gheneyye (غنيّة) and it is known as a village of Armenian converts to the Latin faith.

2 Տեր-Ղազարեան Յ., Հայկական Կիլիկիա. տեղագրութիւն [H. Ter-Ghazarian, Armenian Cilicia: A Topography] (Antelias, 1966), 216-217.

3 Ibid., 217.

4 Միսրմեան Ա., Պատմութիւն Հալէպի Հայոց [A. Syurmeyan, History of Aleppo Armenians], vol. 3 (Paris, 1950), 811-812.

In the 1870s, when the priest of Khene was Mesrop Nazelian,⁵ the propaganda of the Latin faith penetrated there due to the conflict between two large families, those of Joub and Hanne.

In 1871 Priest Markos Ter-Gasparian was sent to Khene to attend to the issue of an olive orchard belonging to the Holy See of Sis and examine the consequences of the activity of local pro-Latin priest Mesrop. He succeeded in keeping part of the peasants from adopting the Latin faith,⁶ but despite that, in 1876 most of them converted to it.⁷

In 1878 a Latin monastic centre was established in Khene with a church, schools for males and females, a crafts school and a public health care centre. In 1884 another Latin church was founded in the village.⁸

Priest Mesrop's pro-Latin activity was again put under consideration at one of the district meetings in Aleppo in 1878 as between 30 and 40 Armenian families had followed his example and converted to that



A view of the olive gardens of Khene once belonging to the Holy See of Sis

5 Priest Mesrop was born in Karin in 1829. Up until his death (1916), he conducted religious service in the Latin church of the village in the Armenian language (Չոլաքեան Յ., Անտիոքի սնրձակայ Ռուճի հովիտի հայերը [H. Cholakian, The Armenians of the Rouj Valley Close to Antioch] (Antelias, 2006), 126, 136).

6 Syurmeyan, 833.

7 «Արևելեան մամուլ» [Arevelian Mamul], no. 49 (1906), 1199-1202.

8 Ազեզեան Հ., Հայերու տեղաբաշխումը Սուրիոյ մէջ [H. Azezian, "The Distribution of Armenians in Syria"], «Լրաբեր հասարակական գիտությունների» [Messenger of Social Sciences], no. 3 (2008), 79.



A crown of 1804 kept in the treasure-house of Aleppo (photos by R. Kortoshian, 2008)

faith. Besides, Father Mesrop had appropriated the garden of olive trees belonging to the Holy See of Sis⁹ and refused to submit a report regarding it.¹⁰

A record of 1888 reveals that certain high-ranking clergymen themselves led their Apostolic flock to despair and conversion to the Latin faith due to their greediness:

Priest Grigor of Yaghupie Village has to pay 25 pieces of gold: he, however, neither has that money nor can borrow it, but who cares about it? Why did he become a priest if he is unable to pay it? He may go to Father Mesrop, who is an adherent of the Latin faith. Priest Matevos of Aramo Village is obliged to provide either gold or a promissory note; otherwise, he will be stripped of the right of wearing a chasuble under the plea that protests have been submitted against him.¹¹

In 1899 O. Mazlumian wrote the following:

Thanks to the strenuous efforts of that Franciscan who calls himself Father Emin, tempted by the large amount of gold he has spent, the three fourths of the inhabitants of Ghenia [Khene] have converted to the Latin faith together with their two priests, Fathers Mesrop and Karapet. In order to hunt for several Armenian houses, he has given up his high post in Aleppo and lives in Ghenia, where he has built a magnificent expensive monastery with an adjoining church and school. He provides education for the peasants' children, both Latin and non Latin, free of charge, preparing the offsprings of those who still cling to their former faith, for the Latin one. As for the Gregorian Armenians (if we are permitted to use this name), they have a church named St. Kyprianos. Do not look for a

school as they do not have one. Nor do they have a priest: every Sunday a priest comes from Yaghubie and conducts a religious service in Armenian, a language he himself does not understand. The Vicar of the city, Father Nerkararian, who was on a tour in the villages of these parts together with us, held a ceremony of worship in the church of this village on 8 August...¹²

In 1906 Khene had a population of 131 houses, including 5 Armenian Apostolic (their priest was Father Karapet Papazian) and 126 Armenian Latin ones (their spiritual shepherd was 80-year-old Priest Mesrop).¹³

St. Kyprianos¹⁴ Church is situated east of the Latin monastery of Khene, in the centre of the village.

Between 1902 and 1905, the Latin Armenians of Khene seized its keys for several times, but they were obliged to return them to Priest Karapet thanks to the mediation of the local authorities. Seeing that all their efforts of appropriating the church were fruitless, they destroyed its roof in the shroud of night in 1905.¹⁵

In August 1906, the issue of the renovation of the church roof was put under consideration during one of the meetings of the diocese of Beria (Aleppo). It was decided to obtain permission for its overhaul by bribing the kaymakam of Jeser-Sheghur (this task was entrusted to two inhabitants of Khene, Ibrahim Asis and Ibrahim Musa).¹⁶ Receiving permission for the beginning of the work, on 6 September of the same

⁹ The descendants of Priest Mesrop still live in the village.

¹⁰ **Syurmeyan**, 856.

¹¹ «Արձագանկ» [Ardzagank], no. 6 (Tiflis, 1888), 73.

¹² **Մազլումեան Օ.**, Սոնսցուած անկիւններ Դընիս և Եազու-սիլէ [O. Mazlumian, "Ghenia and Yagupie: Forgotten Places"], «Բիւրակն» [Byurakn] (1899), 635.

¹³ *Arevelian Mamul*, no. 49 (1906), 1201-1202.

¹⁴ In 2007 the villagers covered the church foundations with earth (we got this information from Avetis Ohanian in 2011).

¹⁵ *Arevelian Mamul*, no. 49 (1906), 1200, 1202.

¹⁶ National Archives of Armenia, fund 1421, list 5, file 4, p. 3.



The Latin church of Khene Village

year, Father Arsen Harutiunian arrived at Khene and made up an estimate of 5,600 kuruses. The village head, however, opposed to this initiative saying:

...the majority of the village has converted to the Latin faith... and the church belongs to the majority... the remaining 5 Armenian families do not have the right to take possession of the church...¹⁷

On 6 October 1906, the Apostolic Armenians launched legal proceedings to restore their rights, but the Latins again won as the court was under the pressure of the fathers of Tierra Santa Mission and the consul of Italy in Aleppo.¹⁸

After this fiasco, the Apostolic Armenians of Khene and Yagupie were imbued with fear:

...The Armenian people of Genia [Khene] were overcome with unspeakable terror which had affected even the people of Yagupie. The latter declared that they did not want to see Father Karapet in their village as they were very afraid: they wanted him to either reside in Jisir or move to Aleppo...¹⁹

As of 1907, Khene had 5 houses of Apostolic Armenians²⁰ whose spiritual shepherd, Priest Karapet

Papazian, lived in Aleppo.²¹ He returned only in December 1909,²² when the entire village had already converted to the Latin faith, and the teaching of Armenian had stopped at the Latin school built by the Franciscans.²³

In the 1960s Khene had 100 houses of Arabic-speaking inhabitants of Armenian origin who were adherents of the Latin faith.²⁴ In 2011²⁵ they comprised 70 houses. These people were well-aware of their Armenian roots, but they had absolutely no sense of national identity which had been replaced by that of religious identity.

One involuntarily thinks: who is to blame for the apostasy of the Apostolic population of Khene: Catholicos Mkrtych or Father Mesrop with their greediness? The peasants who were too weak to do anything? Was it the love of gold that brought the Apostolic parish of the village to destruction? We think that the Armenians' indifference was the reason, indifference that led to the disappearance of the Armenian language in a village where it had been not only spoken but also written until the mid-19th century. The language is the bulwark of the preservation of national identity and it is impossible for a nation to continue existence unprotected by it.

Nevertheless, it is not too late. We should stir up national and not religious feelings amidst the people of Khene who still remember their Armenian roots. An Armenian remains an Armenian no matter whether he is Latin or Apostolic: this should be our approach to this issue. And finally, the Armenian language, the teaching of which has stopped in Khene since 1908, should again be taught there. We are calling upon the Armenian Ministry of the Diaspora to attend to this problem and return the Armenians who have been led astray (the existence of the Armenian statehood will indeed be a guiding pharos in this initiative).

We are also addressing our appeal to the Armenian Apostolic and Armenian Catholic prelaties of the diocese of Beria: the latter had such a precedent in 1946, when the Armenian-speaking Latin community of Kesab merged into the Armenian Catholic one.

Finally, we are calling upon the Latin Armenians of Khene to return to their ancestors' and their own national identity.

21 National Archives of Armenia, fund 1421, list 5, file 6, p. 5.

22 Ibid., file 24, pp. 3-4.

23 Syurmeyan, 895-896.

24 Ter-Ghazarian, 216-217.

25 For our 2011 visit to Khene, we are grateful to the Primate of Aleppo Diocese, Bishop Shahan Sargissian, as well as our guides, Japra Pitari, the Head of the Board of the Armenian Apostolic church of Yagupie Village, and one of its members, Avetis Ohanian.

17 *Arevelian Mamul*, no. 49 (1906), 1199-1200.

18 Cholakian, 141-142.

19 Ibid., 142.

20 «Արարատ» [Ararat] (1907), 142.

NEW RAA PROJECTS

In commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Great Armenian Genocide of 1915 and in token of deepest respect of the memory of its innocent victims, RAA intends to complete its decades-long research in Western Armenia in 2015 and present the history of its over 70 districts in 36 volumes.



The members of RAA are also preparing a series of publications on the history and material culture of the towns and villages of Artsakh.



NOTIFICATION

The year 2013 marks the 800th anniversary of the foundation of the renowned monastery of Teger (1213 to 2013), Aragatzotn Region, Republic of Armenia. In commemoration of this, RAA Foundation is planning to dedicate one of the forthcoming "Vardzk" issues of 2013 to this monastic complex, which, regretful as it is, has not been properly studied so far.



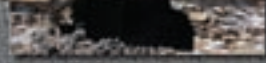
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OBITUARY

We regret to inform our readers about the death of our senior friend, master **SEPUH SAGHATELIAN**, a man of great patriotic feelings, who died at the age of 92 on 27 February 2012 in his birthplace Akhalkspha.





This brief research into the monuments, and particularly, cathedral of Mren is first and foremost an **SOS** to the proper international bodies, primarily UNESCO, to urgently draw their attention to the issue of the preservation or, better to say, salvation of this pearl of architecture consigned to total annihilation. For already many decades, the watch base of Turkish border-guarding forces, stationed in the neighbourhood of the ghost city, has been giving entry permit to only the inhabitants of the adjacent villages who visit it simply for searching for gold there. Unlike them, architects, culturologists and tourists are absolutely denied access to the ghost city



RESEARCH ON
ARMENIAN
ARCHITECTURE

YEREVAN
2012