

# Caucasian Albania



An International Handbook

Edited by  
Jost Gippert and Jasmine Dum-Tragut

**DE GRUYTER**

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Hamlet Petrosyan

## 11 Tigranakert in Artsakh

**Abstract:** This Chapter deals with the results of archaeological excavations from ancient and medieval times on the historical territory of Karabakh and Utik and the adjacent territory, based on the excavations of Tigranakert and its surroundings, Amaras and Vachar in Artsakh.

In the first section, the late Hellenistic image of the city is presented: the fortification system, the two city districts, the Hellenistic burial ground. A comparative examination of the fortification system confirms that it originates from the system erased in Alexandria in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, which with some changes was applied in Artashat and received its classical form in Tigranakert of Artsakh.

The second section discusses the Early Christian square with two churches, remains of a monumental stela with a cross, as well as an Early Christian underground reliquary and a graveyard. The sepulchre-reliquary has only an eastern entrance. As further excavations revealed, the sepulchre-reliquary of St Grigoris in Amaras and the reliquary of St Stephen in Vachar also have only an eastern entrance. All these three structures date from the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the Early Christian East, the only tomb that had only an eastern entrance is the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The analysis of data on Vachagan the Pious (end of 5<sup>th</sup>–early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries), king of Albania (which included since the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> century the eastern provinces of Greater Armenia, Artsakh and Utik), allows to conclude that at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century the king initiated an ecclesiastical reform, trying to link the origin of the Albanian Church to Jerusalem. A new approach to the structures of the Early Christian sanctuaries in and near Tigranakert thus allows us to compare this sacred area with the sacred Early Christian topography of Jerusalem.

### 1 Introduction

The late Hellenistic city of Tigranakert,<sup>1</sup> now under Azerbaijani control, is located in the Askeran region of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabagh), in the lower valley of the Khachenaget river, which is the second largest river in the highland. It is spread over the south-eastern slopes of Mount Vankasar<sup>2</sup> and is adjacent to the slopes near the “Royal Springs” (Şahbulaq). The city was founded at the end of the 90s

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1 Cf. Petrosyan (2020 and 2021) for preliminary accounts of the site.

2 40°4'2.5" N, 46°54'21.2" E.

BCE by the Armenian King Tigranes II the Great (r. 95–55 BCE) and functioned until the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Tigranakert in Artsakh is one of numerous settlements carrying the name of Tigran; however, it is the only settlement that has a precisely identified location and has been explored archaeologically.

## 1.1 Tigranakert in Artsakh in written sources

It is most likely that the Greek geographer Strabo (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE – 1<sup>st</sup> century CE) was aware about Tigranakert in Artsakh, mentioning it as Tigranokerta near Iberia (i.e. Eastern Georgia).<sup>3</sup> The first mention of Tigranakert in Armenian sources belongs to the 7<sup>th</sup>-century historian Sebeos.<sup>4</sup> Describing the Persian invasions of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius in 622–624, Sebeos names two Tigranakerts situated in Artsakh and Utik. In the letter of the Armenian catholicos Elia (I) describing the Council of Partaw in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>5</sup> we find the information that a priest named Petros of Tkrakert (in some manuscripts spelt Tigranakert) participated in the assembly as well. Later we have evidence from the 12<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2 Excavations

During fifteen years of excavations directed by the present author (2006–2020), the following sections of the city were uncovered (Fig. 1):

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

<sup>3</sup> Strabo, *Geography* XI: 14.15 (Meineke 1877: II, 747–748).

<sup>4</sup> Abgaryan (1979: 125).

<sup>5</sup> Hakobyan (1981: 150); cf. Chapter 7 of this Handbook (Dum-Tragut), 6.1 for details as to the council.

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough examination of the written sources see Petrosyan (2020: 327–330).

<sup>7</sup> In case of Tigranakert, the Late Hellenistic period includes the timespan from the early 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.

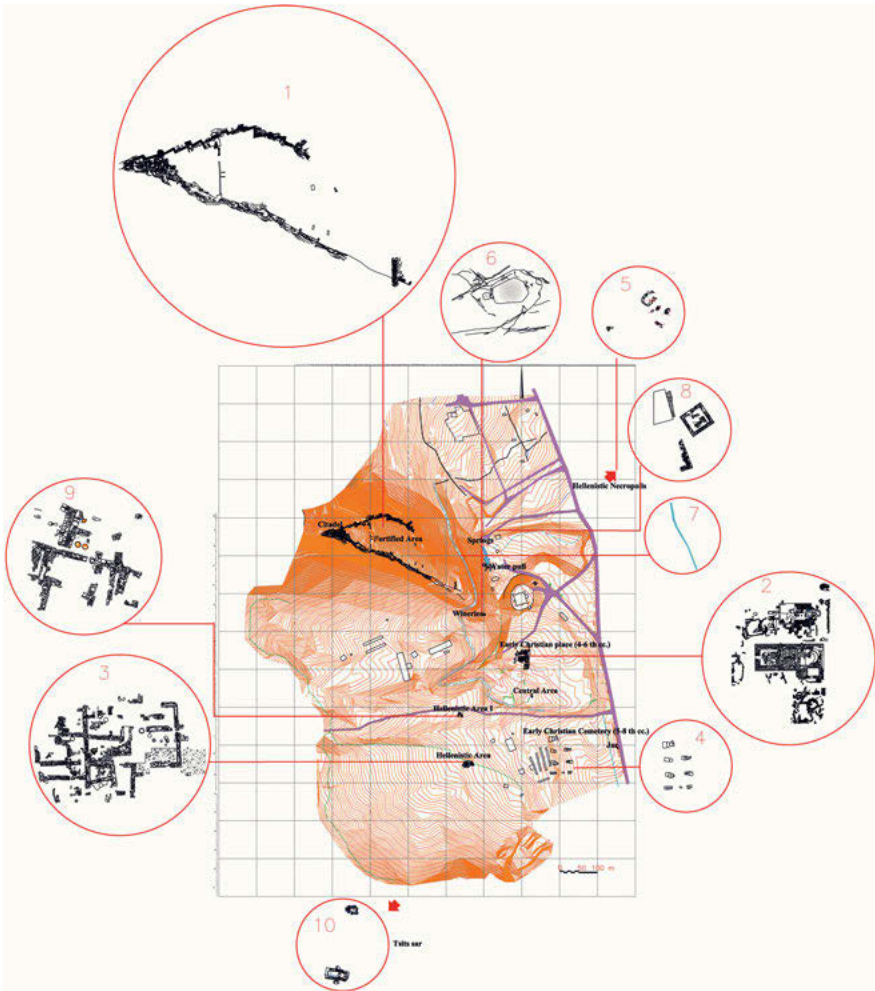


Fig. 1: Layout of Tigranakert with excavated areas marked, 2020.

## 2 The Late Hellenistic city

As a result of the archaeological research, it is possible to talk about a large residential settlement with advanced urban planning and construction techniques, which was founded in the first century BCE and survived until the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Ancient Tigranakert was constructed in accordance with the advanced Hellenistic urban planning principles and masonry techniques: a triangle





**Fig. 2:** Air view of fortified district, Early Christian square and 18<sup>th</sup>-century fortress, 2020.

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

## 2.1 The 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 Mount Vankasar, near the “Royal Springs”, and to the north of it, i.e. the fortress occupied not the top of Mount Vankasar, dominating the region, but the lower part of its southern slope (Fig. 3). The district covered 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 towards the plain. Although the spur has high cliffs (followed by walls), its stra-



**Fig. 3:** Air view of fortified district, 2020.

tegic position was nevertheless weakened because of its being situated at the foot of the mountain. Consequently, massive, supplementary defensive measures were engineered, conditioned by the severe slope (on 500 m the inclination of the area is *c.* 60 m). We think that the builders were obliged to undertake their work in such a difficult terrain so as to be as close as possible to the freshwater springs and to protect them.<sup>8</sup>

If we take into consideration the fact that Mt Vankasar borders the 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>9</sup> From the outset of his rule, Tigranes was certain that a 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 written reference to at least two Tigranakerts in the Artsakh foothills adjoining the steppe, it is conceivable that to prevent a

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<sup>8</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>9</sup> See Kirakosyan (2016b: 63–67) for details.

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 did not extend into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, it is more than possible that Tigranes began to realise his project immediately after his campaigns in Cappadocia, between the end of the 90s and the beginning of the 80s of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. That Tigranakert was founded by the principle of *synoikismos*, involving the Greek populations of Cappadocia and other regions of Asia Minor, is 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 that was not common in Artsakh previously but widespread in Cappadocia and in the Hellenistic-period cities of Armenia (Yervandashat, Armavir, Artashat)
- b) the existence of Early Christian inscriptions in Greek in the rock-cut church complex situated in the suburb of Tigranakert
- c) references in medieval Arabic sources mentioning a Greek city located on the road from Baylaqan to Barda'a (Partaw).<sup>10</sup>

As mentioned above, the fortress of Tigranakert was situated on a triangular spur above the "Royal Springs" and topped by a rectangular tower, from which the southern and northern walls constituting the sides of the triangle originated (Fig. 4). In the main, the rock-cut foundations have been preserved of the southern wall. The northern wall has been preserved in some places up to 5 m in height (Fig. 5). These features suggest that we have an incredible opportunity to consider the technical means of the wall construction in their entirety. Fragments of rock-cut bases, more than 450 m long, of the southern walls that stretch above the slope of Mt 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 7<sup>th</sup> century, situated on the top of Mt Vankasar, which resulted in a misinterpretation. The narrow strips cut into the rocks were likened to a path and not linked to the looked-for city.<sup>11</sup>

We could not imagine before the excavations that the wall foundations would have such a structure. It seemed that a regular base had been dug equal to the width of the wall (a width varying between 2.6 and 2.8 m), in which the blocks of the first row were placed. In fact, the separate bases of the outside and inside rows of the four-row wall were cut in the shape of a strip on the rock (Fig. 6).

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<sup>10</sup> Yampolskiy (1959: 366–369).

<sup>11</sup> Yampolskiy (1960: 249).

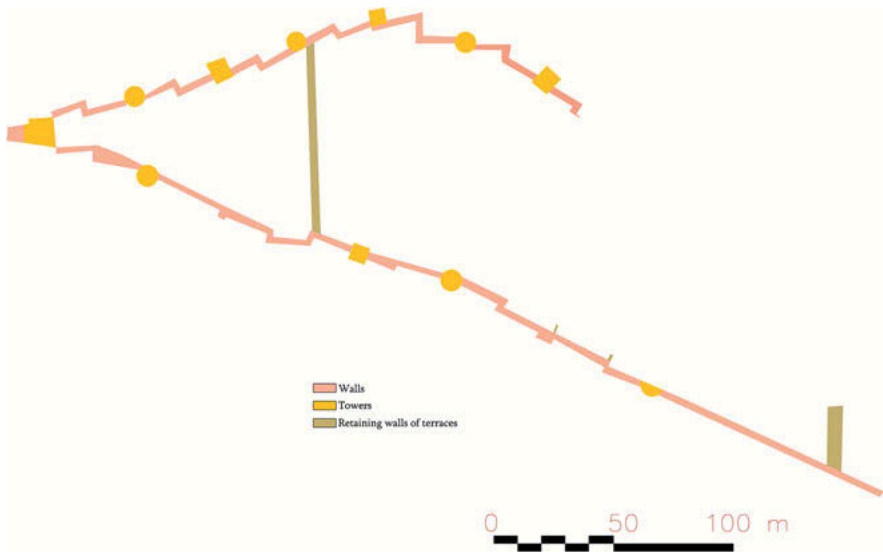


Fig. 4: Layout of the fortified district, 2020.



Fig. 5: Upper part of the northern fortification walls, 2009.





**Fig. 6:** The rock-cut bases of the southern fortification wall of the fortified district, 2007.

They were carved approximately horizontally,<sup>12</sup> and 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 unfixed. The bottom of the base that was 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 but 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 empty spaces between the blocks 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>13</sup> As a rule, the outer strip is

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**12** Whereas the upper rows of the walls are almost perfectly horizontal, 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.

**13** Such a diversified use of mortar in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE 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).



**Fig. 7:** Horizontal polished surfaces of the quadras, rustic elaboration of the outer faces, facets and “swallow-tail” connections of the northern fortification wall, 2009.

wider than the inner one, and together they take up 60–70 % of the width of the wall. Thus, according to our research, a detailed and well-planned construction was realised, which meant that the wall could fit into the vertical and 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 a homogeneous, solid mass but on three separate “feet” (the outer and inner rows and the mass laid between them). We think that it also had an anti-seismic role, by dividing 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 with additional connections – the so-called “swallow-tails” (Fig. 7).<sup>14</sup> Timber, or in some instances a ballast-mixed lime-concrete, was used as the connection material. This technique was widely known in Asia Minor,

<sup>14</sup> The medium sizes of the blocks are: height 0.45–0.7 m; width 0.3–1.2 m; length 0.4–1.5 m.

Mesopotamia, and the Ararat Valley, but in Artsakh, it is documented for the first time at this site.

The swallow-tail connections were often used in case of small blocks. This might suggest that the wall built with small blocks was less strong and was additionally strengthened. It can also be 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) for 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 a zigzag-shaped central part; 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, 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 forms 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 swallow-tail connections, along with lime mortar and the formation of the upper part using mudbricks), and the sizes of the separate elements of Tigranakert's defense system (thickness of the wall, sizes of the quadrangle towers) reveal parallels with other Near Eastern Hellenistic sites (Miletus, Ephesus, Pergamon, Priene, Magnesia on the Meander, Dura-Europos, etc.).

From the point of view of the layout and the architectural solutions, it was very similar to Priene (e.g., the triangular citadel dominating the surrounding area, districts with regular planning spread at the foot, and zigzag walls)<sup>15</sup> and Dura-Europos (wall constructions), dating to the turn of the 3<sup>rd</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE,<sup>16</sup> and especially to Artashat (the 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>17</sup> In some of its details, in terms

<sup>15</sup> See the plan in Wiegand and Schrader (1904: 556).

<sup>16</sup> Renard (1924: Pl. XIII, Fig. 1 and 40–41 [appendix by Franz Cumont]).

<sup>17</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.

of structural technique, it was very close in design to the synchronous fortification of Armaztsikhe-Bagineti in Georgia.<sup>18</sup> Thanks to the study of these parallels 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 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE – 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, being better preserved than the complexes of the other above-mentioned sites.

Only a few details of the inner construction of the fortified district are known so far. 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 being 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 was connected with the northern wall.

The rock-cut bases of the walls in the fortified district of the city, with their huge dimensions, are notable for their regularity of construction, their perfect symmetry, and the neat working of flagstones joined using Hellenistic methods (i.e. swallow-tail connections). All these features undoubtedly attest that they were built collaboratively by skilled and innovative architects and craftsmen. Only tight combinations of thought, materials and labour could result in the reali-

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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 (Ghafadaryan 1972: 151–156; Burney and Lawson 1960: 177–196). At the same time, the Hellenistic achievements should also be emphasised when speaking of the planning of Tigranakert, and the importance of the local, traditional experience it reflects should be stressed. Artashat is of particular interest here, 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 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and then spread to the East. The famous tract by Philo of Byzantium (end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) comes to mind, based on mechanics and architecture from Alexandria, 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 antique reports on the planning of Artashat by Hannibal in Plutarch's *Lucullus* (31.4; Ziegler 1969: 403) and Strabo's *Geography* (XI: 14.6; Meineke 1977: 2, 743) 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; Kroll 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 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (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).

18 Janberidze and Tsitsishvili (1976: 22–23, Figures 12–13).





**Fig. 8:** Agate gemma with its stamp, 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE – 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, 2008.

sation of such a grandiose project in such a demanding setting, reflecting a total state mobilisation, something which confirms again that we are dealing with both royal and administrative initiative and power.

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<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries. The upper part of the citadel was a densely settled district during the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the same time, the bases of the monumental buildings from the Late Hellenistic period could be secured. Moreover, not only the walls but also the buildings were rock-cut throughout the whole Late Hellenistic period. The purely Late Hellenistic layer was determined only in isolated locations by means of perfect examples of painted pottery related to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE – 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. The discoveries of a Late Hellenistic seal-gem (Fig. 8) and Sasanian stamps should be emphasised here, for they demonstrate that Tigranakert had administrative and trade significance.

## 2.2 The first and second Late Hellenistic urban districts

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 first one was excavated, and test excavations were also undertaken in the second one. The first district was founded at the same time as the fortress and existed until the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, after which it was changed into a Christian cemetery. The planning was done



**Fig. 9:** Layout of first Late Hellenistic district, 2014.

according to a principle similar to the Hippodamus construction, i.e. straight street segments and straight walls using only rectangular sections (Fig. 9). The building base of the excavated section was the straight wall stretching north-south (excavated to a depth of 2.55 m), along two sides of which were located



Fig. 10: Late Hellenistic painted pottery, 2007–2010.

the dwelling and economic complexes, consisting of rooms roughly square in dimension. During the following two construction phases (3<sup>rd</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) 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 which bore the covering. Some rooms had hearths preserved to a height of 0.3 m above the floor, while to some Late Hellenistic period rooms clay ovens (*tannurs*) 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 of raw clay made by a spinner revealed the domestic character of this craft. We should emphasise here the Late Hellenistic period pottery of Tigranakert. 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 (Fig. 10). 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 Seleucia on the Tigris and Dura-Europos.<sup>19</sup>

### 2.3 The eastern Late Hellenistic cemetery

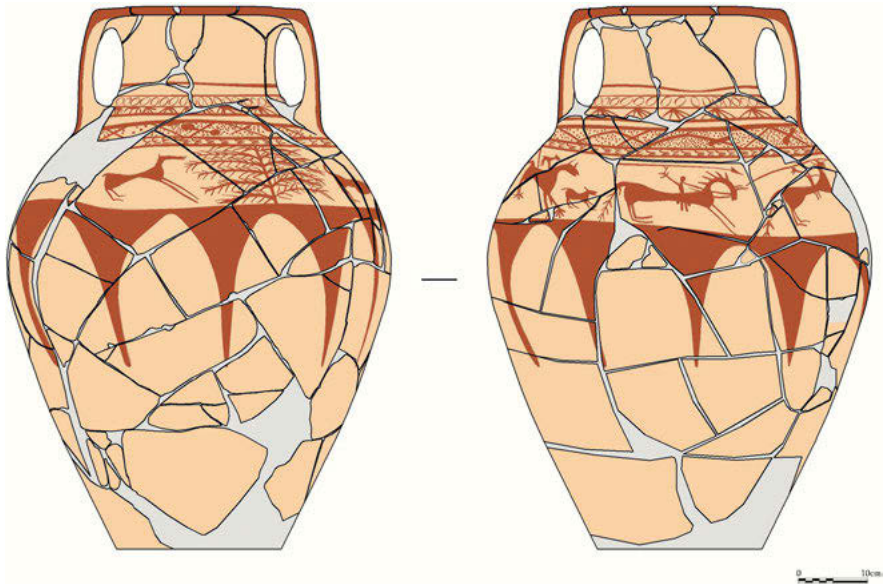
The Hellenistic cemetery was located on a plain, c. 1.5 km to the north-east of the city. In the course of the excavations, one stone-cist grave and six *pithos* burials were found and studied (Fig. 11).<sup>20</sup> One burial was also opened during the excavations of the northern wall of the fortified 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. Let us discuss only two of them.



**Fig. 11:** Eastern Late Hellenistic cemetery, general view, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> For details of the Hellenistic period pottery of Tigranakert, see Karapetyan and Gabrielyan (2016: 48–53); Gabrielyan (2017: 373–384).

<sup>20</sup> For the *pithoi* burials, see Petrosyan et al. (2021).



**Fig. 12:** Amphora-shaped burial pithos with a hunting scene on its shoulder (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE – 1<sup>st</sup> century CE), 2018.

The first burial consisted of a *pithos* with the body of the deceased and a spouted jar fastened to the bottom of the *pithos* from outside. Only 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 IV (57–54 BCE) and Orodes II (57–38 BC).<sup>21</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. In the fourth burial *pithos*, 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. The *pithos* was amphora-like (height 0.9 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 accompanied by their dogs, with bows, arrows and spears, and hunt deer among large, leafy trees (Fig. 12). An iron ring with a glass gem, 50 glass beads, and one Parthian coin were also found in the *pithos*. Near its bottom, a vertically located two-handled vessel with a round rim was retrieved.

<sup>21</sup> The coins were identified and described by Ruben Vardanyan, head of the Department of Numismatics of the History Museum of Armenia, for which we are most grateful.





**Fig. 13:** Stone-cist burial (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE – 1<sup>st</sup> century CE), 2016.

*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. 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. The only stone-cist tomb located in the eastern cemetery was a large structure (the inner sizes of the chamber were approximately  $2.75 \times 3.0$  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 (Fig. 13). Seven disturbed burials were found, of which only the second and the third were *in situ*, while 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 finds included four Parthian coins that were assigned to the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, as well as 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 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE – 1<sup>st</sup> century CE.

### 3 The Early Christian square (Fig. 14) and the large church

Starting with the first steps of our archeological research, parallel to the excavations of the Hellenistic districts, the expedition paid special attention to the medieval remnants of the city. In 2006 a part of the pit, which could roughly correspond to the structure of an apse and the eastern part of a prayer hall, was separated, and excavations commenced. Only a few hours later, the first corner stone of the church's apse and the southern wall were opened at a depth of about 0.5 m. As a result of the excavations in 2006–2009, the ruins of a large Early Christian temple were uncovered at a depth of about 3.5 m (Fig. 15). By its composition, the church belongs to the type of basilicas in Armenia and the Caucasus dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries. By its architectural composition and decoration it is the earliest, most extensive and beautifully decorated hall of its size in the Eastern Caucasus. Originally, it was a single-nave basilica type church with a



Fig. 14: Early Christian square, general view, 2019.



**Fig. 15:** The large basilica church, 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries, general view from the south-west, 2009.

five-faceted outer apse. Later, the five-dimensional volume was incorporated into the rectangular volume, and the southern sacristy was added, which had an entrance from the outside. According to preliminary data, the church was destroyed and burnt down in the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries. The existence of such a large Christian church is an important argument in favour of the fact that Tigranakert preserved its status as an important settlement in the early medieval times and that the testimonies of the early medieval Armenian sources are in accordance with the archeological results of the city.

### **3.1 The northern courtyard and the small church**

Among the architectural features mentioned above we want to stress the two northern entrances. Considering the size of the church and the presence of a peristyle and a baptistery adjacent to the south, the presence of a northern pair of entrances was extraordinary. Early Christian temples typically do not have entrances from the north, so we assumed that there was an important structure (or structures) in the yard adjacent to the church, which is why a pair of northern entrances was created. So after the church and the immediate vicinity of the southern courtyard, we decided to continue excavating the northern part. The expectations were fully justified as the excavations revealed a large paved court-





**Fig. 16:** Small basilica church and graveyard, 2014.

yard, with fragments of an Early Christian memorial stela. The stela had a base-ment, a pedestal, a column, a capital and a winged cross. A small church and a reliquary-sepulchre were uncovered under the eastern altar of the church and a graveyard adjacent to the western part of the church (Fig. 16). The archaeological study of this sepulchre served as the basis for considering similar structures in Artshakh and the reforms of Vachagan the Pious. Though of the church only some blocks of the first row and foundations have been preserved, its layout, dimensional features and construction are completely understandable and appar-ent. It had a rectangular layout with a circular altar with a five-faceted outer appearance, and western and southern entrances (the interior of the prayer hall measures  $9.8 \times 4.5$  m, the outer dimensions are  $16.3 \times 8.3$  m). The floor was covered with limestone slabs. The yard between the two churches is about 5 m wide and is covered with rough, irregular slabs. Only the path to the southern entrance of the small church is made up of larger stones, among which an anthropomorphic stela dating to the 8<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries of the first millennium BCE was used.

### 3.2 The sepulchre

During the excavations of 2013, a rectangular area surrounded by four large stone blocks was uncovered at the eastern end of the newly-opened small church,

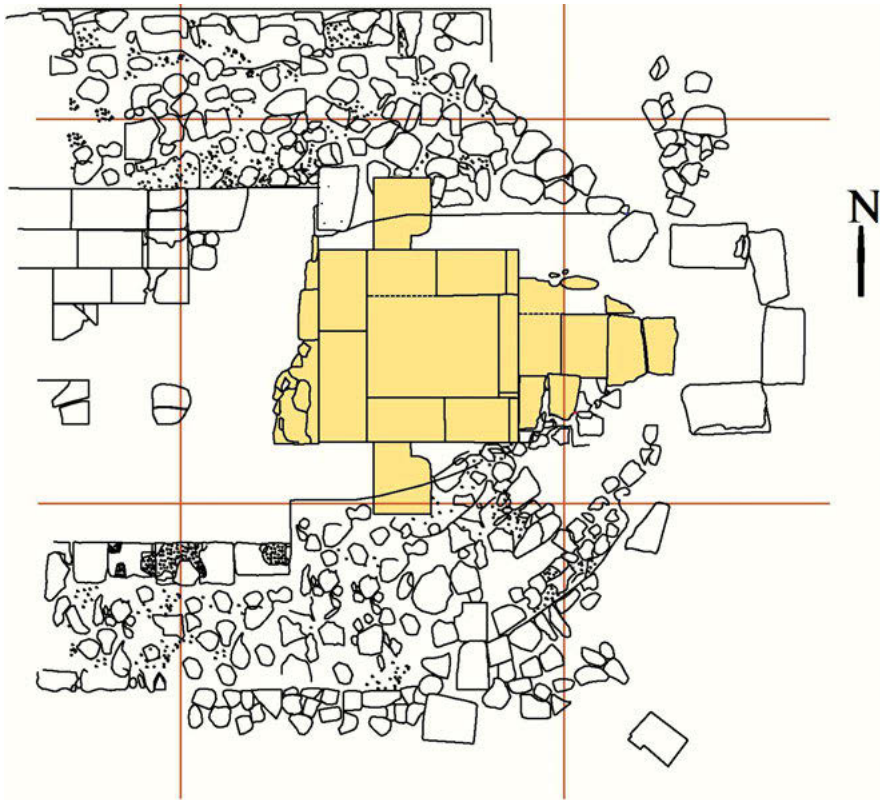


**Fig. 17:** Air view of the Early Christian sepulchre, 2017.

where the cultural layer was deep in the natural ground. Three polished stairs and the eastern entrance were unearthed. The excavations of 2014 uncovered the southern and northern walls of a building to the west, with polished limestone blocks; separate parts of the vaulted ceiling were also made from polished blocks. In the northern and southern walls niches were embedded. Architectural evidence made it possible to assert that the structure was included in a protective coating for softening the lateral pressure from the church's wall. Obviously, we here deal with a structure that was built with the church and enclosed under the church's altar (Figures 17, 18). We named this construction conditionally a "sepulchre-reliquary",<sup>22</sup> based on the small niches in the walls. As the excavations have shown, the whole structure is made of large polished lime blocks, has a clear west-east orientation in accordance with the orientation of the church, a cylindrical ceiling and – which was strange – a single eastern entrance. Despite the devastation, most of the reliquary's stones have been preserved and its fur-

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<sup>22</sup> Hereinafter until the final conclusion we will name this type of constructions of Artsakh just "sepulchres".



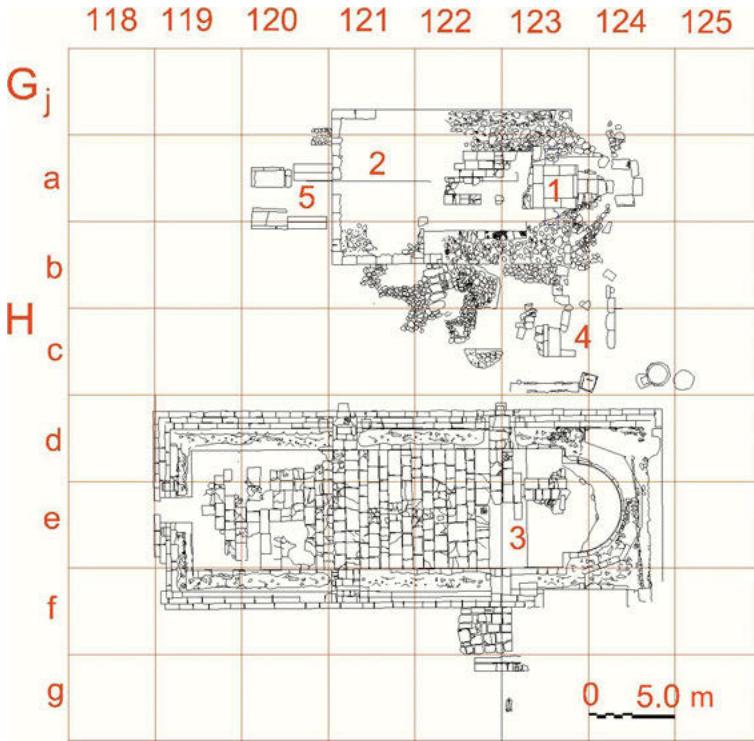
**Fig. 18:** Plan of the sepulchre, 2014.

ther restoration will not cause any problems. It can be asserted that this is the third well-preserved structure from the Early Christian culture of the region after the royal (Arshakid) Mausoleum of Aghdzk and the St Grigoris Mausoleum in Amaras. Both of these structures also contained bones but no burials.

After the excavations of 2014, it is possible to restore the process of formation of the Early Christian square of Tigranakert as follows (Fig. 19):

- a) building of the sepulchre
- b) construction of a small church with the sepulchre under its altar
- c) construction of a large urban church south of the small church
- d) addition of a southern paved courtyard and a stela
- e) addition of the graveyard in the western yard of the small church.

The fact that the Tigranakert sepulchre has only one eastern entrance is exceptional for Early Christian sepulchres and extraordinary for religious structures in



**Fig. 19:** Plans of Early Christian structures: 1) Sepulchre, 2) Small church, 3) Large church, 4) Monument, 5) Graveyard, 2014.

general. The theological and ritual direction of Christianity from the west to the east – from where the Christ’s Second Coming is expected – conditioned both the ritual movement of the believer from west to east and the orientation of the sacred area from west to east, including individual sacred structures (west-east orientation and stretching, main entrance in the west, location of the altar in the east, etc.). Even in our sepulchre, which has only an eastern entrance, the “movement” to the east is documented by the structure of niches whose eastern parts have been given a rounded solution.

### 3.3 Parallels to the sepulchre of Tigranakert

The problem of clarifying this peculiarity of the sepulchre of Tigranakert was the reason for initiating excavations in the most prestigious early Christian sepulchre of Artsakh, the St Grigoris sepulchre of Amaras, the main volume of which is



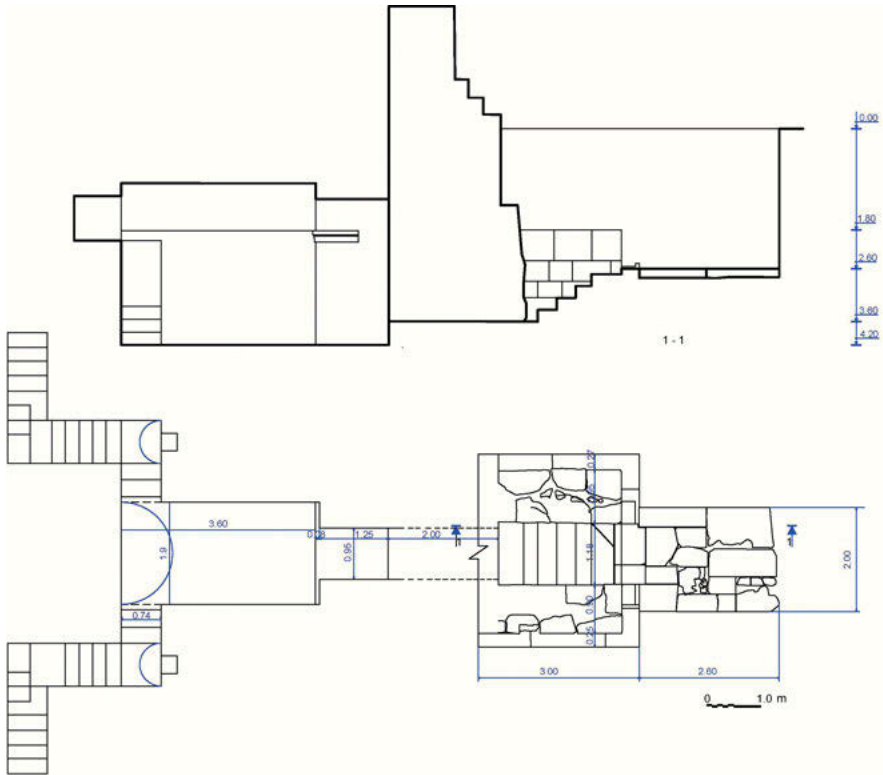


**Fig. 20:** The eastern entrance of St Grigoris after excavation, 2014.

located under the eastern altar of the present church built in 1858. This sepulchre had two southern and northern entrances and a long corridor instead of an altar which, based on its look, had been cut during the construction of the church so that the continuation of this corridor should be outside of the church behind the eastern wall. The excavations initiated by our expedition at the adjacent part to the eastern wall of the church in 2014 revealed the continuation of the corridor with an eastern portal with pavement and 6 stairs going downwards (Fig. 20). After these excavations we currently have an original plan of the sanctuary (Fig. 21). One of the major results of these excavations was the discovery of a basement crossing over the walls at a depth of 3 m from the current surface, which made it possible to assert that the sepulchre was partly under and partly above the ground. The fragments of more than one hundred early medieval tiles found during the excavations testify that the roof of the structure was tiled.

The third such type of sepulchre (with only an eastern entrance) was uncovered by our expedition in 2016. This is the sepulchre of St Stephen in the historical settlement of Vachar, on the right bank of the Khachenaget river, not far from the Gandzasar monastery (Fig. 22).<sup>23</sup> One of its peculiarities was that it had a

<sup>23</sup> For more details, see Petrosyan (2019: 11–30).



**Fig. 21:** Plan of St Grigoris after excavations, 2014.

special section for relics constructed inside, in parallel with the western wall. Thus, whereas the sepulchre of Tigranakert is directly enclosed under the church's main altar and the sepulchre of St Grigoris is a combination of underground and upper volumes, the sepulchre of St Stephen initially was a standalone structure, and only in the 13<sup>th</sup> century a second stair chapel was added. This diversity suggests that architects and builders were essentially trying to find more suitable forms of relationships with the structure holding the relics and the ritual area, which can also speak about the impending chronology of such structures. The sepulchre of St Grigoris can with no doubt be dated to the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Besides the clarified historical context,<sup>24</sup> the sculptures can also be dated to the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> In Movses Kalankatuatsi's *History of the Country of the Albanians*, book I, ch. 23 (Arakelyan 1983: 83).

<sup>25</sup> Hasratyan (1992: 19–24).



**Fig. 22:** The eastern entrance of St Stephen's sepulchre in Vachar, 2017.

As we have seen, the sepulchre of Tigranakert was followed by a small church, which preceded the large church. Recently, we have also received data on the carbon analysis of two burial bones from the western side of the small church; according to them, the sarcophagus is datable to the years 420–565, the stone cist to 566–655.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, it is obvious that the burials were made when the church was already built, as they immediately touched its western walls. Particularly important are the data of the first carbon analysis, according to which the first sarcophagus burial was performed after 420 but not later than 565. So the dating of the sepulchre of Tigranakert to the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century leaves no doubt. The same date is confirmed by the constructional compositions of the small and large churches of Tigranakert and by the reliefs of the large church.<sup>27</sup> An Armenian inscription on a clay disk found in the large basilica can be added as another artefact of importance here; it will be discussed further below.

<sup>26</sup> For these analyses, I am grateful to anthropologist Paul Bailey and Armenologists Patrick Donabédian and Anna Leyloyan for their professional, friendly and financial support.

<sup>27</sup> Petrosyan (2012: 172–174).

## 4 The religious reforms of Vachagan the Pious in the light of new archaeological investigations

So far we can speak about three sepulchres whose specific aspect is the eastern entrance. Unfortunately, sepulchres with eastern entrances are otherwise unknown to us in the Middle East. There are no eastern entrances in the well-known sepulchre-chapels known from other parts of Armenia (Aghdzk, St Hripsime, St Gayane, Talin, Oshakan, Nakhchivan, and others). The only known sepulchre that has an eastern entrance is the Lord's Tomb in Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup> According to our preliminary hypothesis, we are dealing with a religious reform here, which tried to give the Albanian Church a special religious and ritual identity (in contrast with the Armenian Church) and had essentially political reasons. In the last quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century or at the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Vachagan the Pious initiated reforms, including the new hierarchy of saints venerated in the Albanian Church (Zachariah, Pantaleon, Grigoris, Gregory, Hripsime, Gayane) via “discovering” their relics and constructing chapels and reliquaries for them (St Grigoris in Amaras, St Pantaleon in Dyutakan, St Elisaeus in Jrvshtik). In addition, the old churches gained a new impetus for worship thanks to these relics.<sup>29</sup> In parallel with this, as we have mentioned, the ideology of Albania as an eastern country was established by directly relating it to Jerusalem as the centre of the Christian world and the sacred topos of salvation. The hagiography of the Apostle Elisaeus, who was reported to have come to Albania from Jerusalem circumventing Armenia,<sup>30</sup> fully corresponds with this line of thought and is an attempt to attest to the Hierosolymite origin of the Albanian church. Thus, we have the sepulchre structures adapted to the direction of the Lord's Tomb at the border of the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries, the country's eastern ideology, and the legend of the Jerusalem origins of the Albanian Church. And we have a powerful ruler who tried to convey an independent status to his Church by means of religious reforms. In his early studies, Aleksan Hakobyan considered the history of Vachagan (including the canons of the “Council of Aghuen”)<sup>31</sup> as a “planned legend” created in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century and thus questioned the historicity of the king himself. However,

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28 Cf. the “Reconstruction of the Constantinian Martyrium and Anastasis as completed before A.D. 348” in Wilkinson (1978: 10).

29 Movses Kalankatuatsi, *History*, book I, ch. 19–24 (Arakelyan 1983: 56–88).

30 Movses Kalankatuatsi, *History*, book I, ch. 6 (Arakelyan 1983: 10–11).

31 Cf. Chapter 7 of this Handbook (Dum-Tragut), 3.2.



our archaeological findings and historical data seem to indicate that these approaches and ideas were formed politically by a real king and via real reforms.<sup>32</sup> In our opinion, it was a mighty king who tried to give his Church appropriate autonomy suitable to his reign (at a time when Armenia lost its kingdom, became a Sasanid province and lost its north-eastern provinces Artsakh and Utik); a process that was further clarified and finalised in the following centuries. Vachagan with his reforms, alongside Christian-Armenian traditions, was trying to shape its own traditions for his state and his Church (an eastern country, a Hierosolymite Apostle, its “own” saints). One of the materialised expressions of this were the eastern entrances in the sepulchres.

Returning to the question of the terminology for these constructions, it seems more suitable to use the name “reliquary” instead of “sepulchre”, because in all of these cases we have no evidence for burials but only narratives about the discovery, the gathering and the deposal of the relics of saints in buildings created for this specific purpose.

## 5 Some more findings

In 2008, inside the territory of the large church, a small ceramic disk was discovered with an Armenian inscription on it that can be attributed to the 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries (Figures 23–24); it can be read as ԵՄ | ՎԱՉ[Ե] (or ՎԱՉ[ԱԳԱՆ]) | ԾԱՌԱՅ Տ[ԵԱՌ]Ն (Es Vač[ē] / Vač[agan], caṙay T[eaṙ]n, i.e. ‘I, Vach[e] or Vach[agan], servant of the L[or]d’).<sup>33</sup> The names Vache and Vachagan were attributed to several people at that time, Vachagan the Pious being the most distinguished among them. This find of Tigranakert is actually one of the oldest records of written Armenian found in the territory of Artsakh, and the best argument for the Early Christian-Armenian background of the city.

Another noteworthy find is a glass bottle in the shape of an *amphoriskos* detected during the excavations in the same church (Fig. 25). In this context, the narrative of St Grigoris’ relics is specifically important since it talks about two glass bottles in which the blood of Ss Zachariah and Pantaleon was kept.<sup>34</sup> By its appearance, our *amphoriskos*, made of dark blue glass, can be dated back to the 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries and it is most likely to have served similar purposes. The excava-

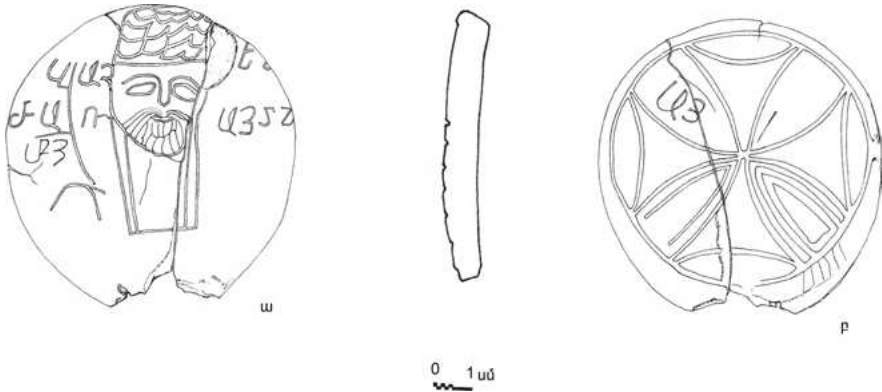
<sup>32</sup> In his latest work, A. Hakobyan (2021b: 239–248) relates the “Tale of Vachagan” to the very beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>33</sup> Petrosyan & Zhamkochyan (2009: 166–176).

<sup>34</sup> Movses Kalankatuatsi, *History*, book I, ch. 23 (Arakelyan 1983: 81).



**Fig. 23:** Clay disc with Armenian inscription from the excavations of the large church, front side, 2008.



**Fig. 24:** Clay disc with Armenian inscription from the excavations of the large church, front and back sides, drawing, 2008.

tions of the large church of Tigranakert also unearthed a clay token which probably displays the scene of the Crucifixion; however, its origin from Palestine or Jerusalem is still questionable.



**Fig. 25:** Glass bottle from the excavations of the large church, 2007.

## 5.1 The Early Christian rock-cut complex

The rock-cut complex was originally a range of natural karstic caves. In the Late Hellenistic period its upper cave part was adapted into a religious and burial complex. In the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Hellenistic complex was further adapted and enlarged as a church with its narthex, a graveyard was added, sarcophagus burials took place, the passage with its defensive elements was built, and most of the cross compositions were carved (Figures 26–27), including compositions with Greek inscriptions.<sup>35</sup> In the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries, new crosses (which were mainly simple forms, imperfectly elaborated) and Armenian inscriptions were applied by pilgrims. Later, probably in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the site became a shelter for nomadic tribes. Probably at that time a “board game” drawing was carved within the narthex. After the 11<sup>th</sup> century the complex was abandoned and underwent no further major cultural transformation.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the inhabitants of the neighbouring Azerbaijani 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. If we take into consideration the fact that Tigranakert was founded as a multinational city, including the population brought by Tigranes

<sup>35</sup> Petrosyan and Kirakosyan (2016: 165–170).



Fig. 26: Early Christian rock complex, cross-composition, stairs, narthex, 2007.

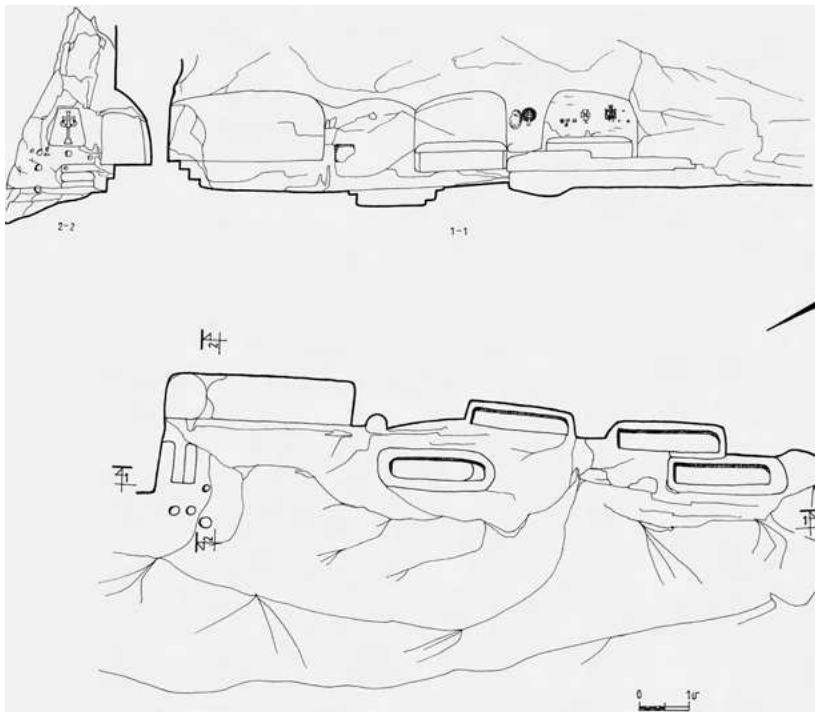


Fig. 27: Early Christian rock complex, graveyard, 2007.

from Asia Minor, the Greek inscriptions can be explained by the presence of a Greek community in the city. The Armenian inscriptions were names probably carved by pilgrims. Among the names that can be identified were *Didoy* and *Hama[m]*.<sup>36</sup>

## 5.2 The canal

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 the Khachena-get, approximately 1.5 km above the complex, before turning towards Tigranakert, coming out of the steppe. A rock-cut portion of 300 m is preserved, which also had tunnel sections (Fig. 28). On the walls of the canal we found simple cross engravings. Some elements of the canal were built on the ground. In these cases, the floor was first strengthened using small burrs and then tamped using sand.



**Fig. 28:** Water canal. Excavated rocky tunnel part, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> The latter name perhaps refers to the 9th-century prince Hamam of Hayaghvank (Armeno-Albania), whose name was also found in an Armenian inscription on the lid of a sarcophagus from Gavurkala, situated not far from the complex; see Barkhudaryan (1964: 61–64).



Unfortunately, the part of the canal that reaches the city has not been clearly identified, and further excavations are required to reveal its route and remains.

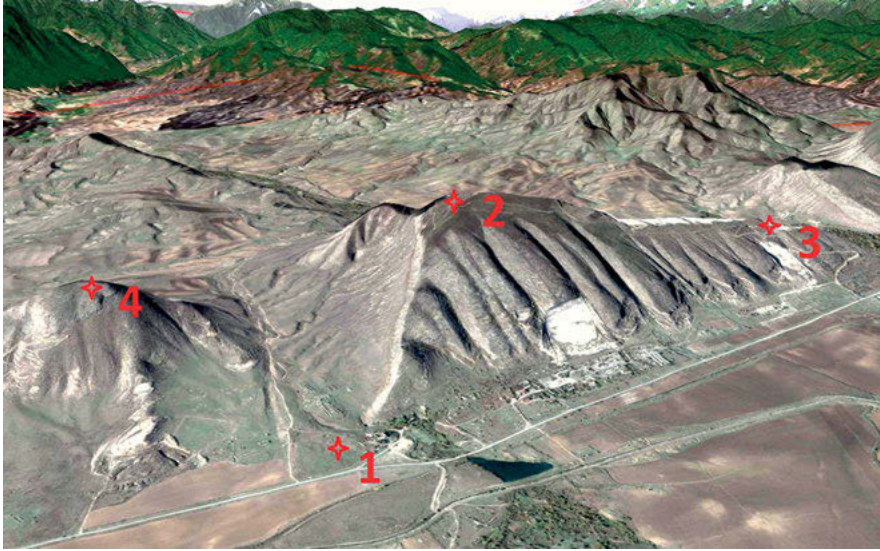
## 6 Conclusions: on the Christianisation of the landscape

The archaeological investigations of Tigranakert have revealed four Early Christian complexes in the city and its surroundings: the Early Christian square in the central district, the church of 7<sup>th</sup> century on the top of Mt Vankasar, the Early Christian cave sanctuaries on the bank of the Khachenaget river, and a reliquary and chamber unearthed on the top of Mt Tsitssar in 2019 and 2020 (Fig. 29), which are dated to the same period. So we can see a real reculturalisation of the landscape in the Early Christian period (Fig. 30). It is curious, then, to clarify how this organisation of the landscape of Tigranakert can be connected with the reforms of Vachagan the Pious and the landscape of Jerusalem and the sacred Christian topography. This is a question which we will try to investigate during the next stage of research.

In his list of Armenian monasteries in Jerusalem, Anastas Vardapet, author of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, also lists the churches belonging to the Albanian Church. This



**Fig. 29:** Chamber and sepulchre on Mt Tsitssar, 2020.



**Fig. 30:** The landscape of Early Christian Tigranakert: 1) Early Christian square, 2) Church on Mt Vankasar, 3) Cave sanctuaries, 4) Sepulchre on Mt Tsitsisar.

includes eleven Albanian monasteries, seven of which are mentioned with their names. Five of these names can be identified, and all five are located in Artsakh and Utik.<sup>37</sup> If the territory of the activities of the first saints, Elisaeus and Grigoris, originally was the left bank of the Kura river (which can be concluded from the fragmentary information available), it is more than likely that the intellectual and ritualistic centre and impact area of Vachagan's religious reforms was the right bank of the Kura, i.e. the Artsakh and Utik provinces of Great Armenia, which had been joined to the Albanian kingdom not much earlier. The reliquaries with the eastern entrance and related archeological findings of Artsakh greatly help us to clarify the civilisational milieu of the religious reforms of Vachagan the Pious. Thus, if in the case of ancient Tigranakert we see the obvious introduction and influence of Hellenistic civilisation in the field of fortification and urban development, contrasting with a higher stability of local traditions in the field of ritual, then the examination of the tombs-reliquaries of Tigranakert, Amaras and Vachar gives an opportunity to assume the primacy of the political-religious situation. As for the use of the written language, although we see the simultaneous use of Armenian and Greek in Tigranakert in the 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries, the number of early Armenian inscriptions (5<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries) in the territory of Artsakh and

<sup>37</sup> See Chapter 8 of this Handbook (Tchekhanovets), 3. for details.

Utik in general reaches about thirty, and this in the absence of any inscription in Albanian up to the Kura river. It can be concluded that although Artsakh and Utik entered a different political and ecclesiastical formation due to the political circumstances, the ecclesiastical written (and, most likely, also oral-conversational) language remained Armenian.

## Appendix: Tigranakert during the War of 44 Days

During the War of 44 Days in 2020, the Tigranakert archeological camp was destroyed by hostile shellings (Fig. 31). The Artsakh authorities, the Tigranakert archeological museum and our research team evacuated the materials from the excavations in order to preserve the heritage from further destructions. In case of a peace treaty, they will be returned to Stepanakert and will be exhibited in a museum dedicated to it. Preserving, promoting and passing on cultural heritage is an international and fundamental right for any people. The people of Artsakh worries about what might happen to its cultural heritage since it remembers the



**Fig. 31:** The archaeological camp of Tigranakert after hostile shellings, November 2020.



destruction of thousands of *khachkars* in Julfa (Jugha) in 2005–2006. My colleagues and I are willing to continue our research on the cultural heritage of Artsakh and its popularisation and will report any act of vandalism. The scientific discoveries in the ancient city of Tigranakert and their importance for the comprehension of the early history of Christianity shows that the Artsakh heritage is part of a larger history that belongs to everybody. It reinforces the need to preserve it with the cooperation of the countries involved in the conflict and international authorities. Tigranakert could thus become a joint project that brings together professionals from both belligerents with a view to the preservation of a heritage that must remain common.

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