

ARMENIA

The Little Church of Saint Astvatsatsin (Virgin) of Artik

The church of Saint Astvatsatsin (Virgin), known also as Saint Mariam, is located about 800 metres to the east of the central square of the Artik regional centre of the Republic of Armenia, where it forms an early mediaeval monumental complex with the larger church of Saint George.

No historical or bibliographical information on the little church has been preserved, but it is supposed that it had been commissioned by Kamsarakan arch traitors during the 5–6th centuries. S. Galalyan, G. Alishan, H. Eprikyan, H. Stridzegovski, T. Toramanyan, N. Tokarski and A. Manucharyan have mentioned the description of the monument and its partial analysis in their works. The monument was surveyed for the first time by G. Aghababyan in 1943. But it was entirely cleared from ruins and excavated only in 1969 by the students of the architectural department of Yerevan Polytechnic Institute, under the management of A. Eremyan and A. Stepanyan. During 1982–1984, again with the initiative and scientific management of A. Eremyan, additional excavation, cleaning and survey works were undertaken, under a project to conserve the Artik churches by the staff of the design office of the Board of Historical and Cultural Monuments Conservation of the Republic of Armenia.

The little church (Saint Astvatsatsin – Virgin) of Artik has a crosswise, eastward, three-apse, centric-domed peculiar composition. The main features of the long-range and centric-range space volumetric systems are skilfully combined. The eastward three-apse composition typical to the early Christian basilicas, external porticoes with open apses, the wide nave (transept) close to the main apse are all preserved. On the other hand, the monument also accurately displays the dome, square-framed with four cornered pylons, typical to centric-domed constructions with crosswise plan. The perpendicular crossing is of semi-cylindrical vaults of long-spread and wide-spread cross aisles. The free cross is expressed by two sloped coverings of cross aisles in the roof. The cross of the Artik church and the doming of the square space are entirely different from the methods of four pylons, emphasised in the long-range walls of single-nave halls (Zovuni, Ptghni, Aruch). It is also different from the four separate standing pylons of three-nave basilicas (Tecor, Odzun, Mren).

The ruins of external porticoes, ending with the apses in the eastern side and three centric horse-shoe-like arches and vaults typical to 4–5th century halls and basilica-type churches, have been preserved in the monument. The sizes of windows and the curving of the sides of their apertures, the styles and forms of the crowns are also characteristic of Armenian monuments of the 4–5th centuries. T. Toramanyan has dated this church to the 5th century.

Taking into account the above features, we consider the Artik Little Church to be a hall-church composition with external porticoes typical to the 4–5th centuries, making it an extraordinary experiment and one of the prototypes of single-apse, three-apse and four-apse crosswise centric-domed churches that were widely spread in the 6–7th centuries. Due to this, it is of unique interest in the history of Armenian Architecture.

The technical position of the church is described in the emergency approval connected to monuments:

- Age: around 1500 years.
- Natural calamities: disasters, earthquakes (the monument is

found in the high seismic zone), winds, high level of underground waters and the like. The situation has especially deteriorated because of the earthquake of Spitak in December 1988.

- Architectural calamities: pillages in Arabic, Seldjuk, Mongolian and Turkish conquests; inappropriate reconstructions of buildings during the 14–20th centuries; exploitation of the church as a laundry, apartment; attachment of other buildings; cultivation for agricultural purposes during World War I, and during the 1930–60s of the Soviet period.

Because of the above mentioned reasons the monument is in a decayed situation with numerous and expanding cracks, bent walls, stones fallen from mortar, settling of basements, and deformation of the structural system.

If the monument continues to decay without any urgent stabilisation, in some years it will be lost forever from the history of Armenian architecture.

The Monastic Complex of Surp Karapet

The monastic complex of Surp Karapet (the ‘Forerunner’ – i.e. John the Baptist), located in the Ararat Marz (district), is set on the edge of a small gorge along the mountain stream, about 1 kilometre before the remains of the mediaeval Djindjirlu village and 8 kilometres before the village of Lusashogh. It is an important cultural and spiritual place and a vital social centre. The whole complex (abandoned in the late 19th century) comprises the church of Surp Astvatsatsin (also Spitakavor), Mausoleum, three-storeyed Mausoleum (with Chapel and Bell Tower), dwellings and various service rooms of the previous community, a little cemetery and a system of walls.

The church construction works were started at the beginning of the 14th century by the famous Armenian Orbelyan Prince Family (architect Bout).

Arthik. St. Miriam's Church, interior view



A rectangle from the outside, the entire volume is defined by the dome in the centre of the hall with the semi-circular altar, on both sides of which are housed the double-storeyed sacristies. The only entrance to the church is from the west, where the Gavit (now destroyed, square space designed for both civil and religious use) was attached.

The Mausoleum is attached to the south-west corner of the church. It looks like a square form from the outside, with a double sloping roof (now destroyed) that was covered with crossing vaults.

The three-storeyed structure is attached to the Mausoleum from the west. The vaulted Mausoleum (without entrance) and two windows are on the first-floor level, and the vaulted chapel with semi-circular altar is on the level of the second floor. The third part of this building – the Bell Tower – was crowned with rounded arcades, a spherical dome and octahedral spire.

After the earthquake that caused the destruction, the monument was displaced and divided into two parts.

It is noteworthy that the church remained, bearing only limited damage. Slightly more damage can be seen at the three-storeyed structure, where only the rotunda and the part of the chapel's altar were destroyed, because it was built on the roof of the attached Mausoleum.

The main force of the earthquake impacted the Mausoleum and divided it diagonally into two parts. As a result of this, the eastern and western parts of the Mausoleum were displaced about 80 centimetres in the horizontal plane and 50 centimetres in the vertical plane.

The above-mentioned occurrence is unique and astonishing, as the fabric remained standing after such a large displacement. The subsequent existence of the remaining part is at risk, and conservation works are urgent. Partial restoration works on the northern wall and church's roof have been undertaken by the Board of Historical and Art's Monuments Conservation (the project being undertaken by architect G. Mikayelyan).

The Monastery of Karkop

About 2 kilometres before the village of Khachik, Vayots Dzor Marz (district), the sadly ruined remains of the 9th-century Karkopi or Khotakerats ('grass-eaters') monastic complex are visible on the right. The site owes its name to the vegetarian ascetics who used to live in the gorge, assembling only for Sunday prayers.

Arthik. St. Miriam's Church, view from west



Surp Astvatsatsin church

They were reined-in and monasticised by Bishop Hovhannes III. The Bishop built the church of Surp Astvatsatsin with the support of Shushan, the widow of the Prince of Syunik, Ashot I. It has been dated to 910 (according to the remaining inscription, and to Stepanos Orbelyan, it was rebuilt several times after earthquakes)

The monastic complex comprises the Surp Astvatsatsin church, Gavit (square space in front of the church used for both civil and religious purposes) dated to the 13th century, dwellings and other service rooms. There are traces of a system of walls. Nowadays the Gavit and attached service rooms are destroyed, and only a few rows of masonry are still standing on-site.

The church is the most intact structure of the complex. It is a cross-shaped, central-domed type of church, with a semi-circular altar and barrel vaults. Four sacristies are housed in angular areas. The only entrance is from the west, through the Gavit.

The dome and coverings of the church were demolished after the earthquake. There are multiple cracks on the walls. Among the remaining structural elements are the whole barrel vault on the northern side and all the sacristy vaults.

The only restoration works were done in the 13th century, when the upper part of the church's masonry was rebuilt with smoothly hewn felsit.

Severe damage to the monument can be observed. The problems are mainly of a structural nature – it is in a condition of failure due to the fractures and lack of roofs. The external coat of the lime mortar has not been preserved due to the atmospheric humidity. It requires important consolidation support and a full programme of restoration works.

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