CHIEF DEPARTMENT FOR PROTECTION
AND USE OF HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL MONUMENTS OF
THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS OF THE ARMENIAN SSR



ВТИ

AMARAS

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Good care for guarding of historical monuments and cultural value is a duty of each armenian citizen.
Constitution of Armenian SSR, article 66



Amaras Monastery, the well-known religious and cultural centre of medieval Armenia, lies in Myus Aband province of the historical area Artsakh (present village Sos, Martuni District, Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region). According to Favstos Byuzand, an Armenian historian of the 4th—5th centuries, the church of Amaras Monastery was founded at the outset of the 4th century by Grigor Lusavorich (Grigory the Enlightener). Unfortunately no information has survived on the church's initial composition — this would have been significant in studying the many aspects of the historical development of Armenian architecture.

Amaras reached the height of its fame in the mid-4th century when it became the burial place of Grigoris, a grandson of Grigor Lusavorich. According to Movses Kakhankatvatsi, an Armenian historian of the 7th century, he built all the local churches as far as Atrpatakan. Grigoris perished in 338 and was buried on the eastern side of the church founded by Grigor Lusavorich. At the beginning of the 5th century Mesrop Mashtots, the founder of the Armenian alphabet, established the first school in Amaras achieving at the same time the revival of Christianity is Artsakh-Utik. In 489 King Aranshaghik Vachagan III (the Devout) discovered Grigoris's forsaken grave and set up on its site a chapel and restored the church built by Grigory the Enlightener. The chapel has survived in its almost unchanged form under the altar of the Church of Amaras Monastery. However, at the end of the 5th century Grigoris's tomb was transferred to the side of the church. Later in the course of much restructuring, a church went up right over the chapel-tomb.

From the 5th century Amaras developed into a large religious centre. In 821 it was conquered along with the entire region by the Arabs, in the 13th century it was plundered by the Mongol hordes, and in 1387 destroyed during Tamerlain's invasion. Nevertheless, all this time the monastery and its permanently functioning school remained a religious and cultural centre. In the 15th—16th centuries many valuable manuscripts appeared here in extremely arduous conditions. It was apparently in this period that Amaras was destroyed along with many other monasteries, for in the 17th century it suffered a radical restructuring. In the second quarter of the 17th century Catholicos Petros of Ghandzasar restored Amaras as the centre of the Varand Episcopate, and built the Church of St. Grigoris in the village of Gergher, the summer residence of Amaras.

In the second half of the 19th century, after the annexation of Eastern Armenia to Russia, Amaras Monastery with its strong battlements was used as a frontier fortress, and in 1832—44 served as a Russian-Persian customs — house.

In the mid-19th century Amaras was depopulated. The Archimandrite and scholar Sarghis Dzhalalyants who visited Amaras at the time noted with pain the changes that had taken place in the monastery since his first visit there. The monasterial church must have been severely damaged for in distinction to the defences and civic buildings that have survived almost intact, soon after the visit of Archimandrite Dzhalalyants it had been radically rebuilt. Actually a new church went up on the old site — its composition was absolutely different from that of its previous counterpart. Before that, in 1848, the Metropolitan Ter-Baghdasar of Ghandzasar regained Amaras from the tsar's authorities.

The church was built in 1858 and financed by the Armenians of Shusha. Its northern nave contains the gravestone of Grigoris made by the Shusha architect Mikael Ter-Israelyan in 1898.

At the end of the 19th century the monastery had in its possession large landed estates, extensive ploughlands, orchards and a mill. South of the monastery, on the high right bank of the Amaras river one still observes traces of old-time buildings, kiln chimneys and tombs. It is surmised that these are the ruins of the Amaras settlement.

* * *

The architectural complex of Amaras Monastery was built on a plain and covers half-a-hectare (59x85 m) of a rectangular area locked in by a wall. The lowland and relief promoted regular building work: within the high wall all along its perimeter there were put up dwellings and out-buildings, the eastern side of the complex being divided by a chain of dwelling rooms that produced two courtyards. The three-nave basilica of St.Grigoris, the high-light of Amaras, rises in the centre of the western larger court-yard. All the dwelling chambers, the refectory and the two-storey house of the Father Superior have an exit into the yard. The long and narrow eastern yard is intended for household needs: it contains a barn, stable and food storage houses. The Amaras fortification walls have rotund towers at the four corners which in the 17th century were an obligatory element of all of Armenia's religious ensembles. The only entrance on the south-east opens into the household yard. The latter served a defensive purpose establishing a two-step system of fortifications, and provided an additional barrier to the basic, western part of the monastery in the shape of a heavy gate between the two courtyards (now in ruins). A similar compositional layout is also observed in other religious complexes of 17th century Syunik.

The defensive walls of Amaras and the adjoining dwellings and out-buildings are built of roughly hewn stones set in lime. The corners of the buildings and the embrasures are made of smoothly-worked felsite.

The living quarters are found chiefly in the northern and eastern wings of the complex. Their construction is typical of Armenian monasterial dwellings: two rooms abutting on a corridor leading out into the yard. The same composition is observed in dwelling quarters at Tatev, Gndevank, Geghard, Avuts Tara, Akhdzhots vanka and Khor-virap. In Amaras the rooms are rectangular with vaulted ceilings and open on to a common corridor. Small as they are (3.25x4.35 m) the rooms accommodated several monks. All of them have a hearth ('bukharik') and a niche ('patrkhan') obligatory for all monasterial dwellings of Armenia.

The house of the Father Superior is noted for its size and compositional outlay. A two-storey building, its width juts out of the southern fortification wall. The ground floor incorporates two adjutting windowless chambers with vaulted ceilings, which were apparently used as storage rooms ('Maran').

The first floor is reached by stone stairways built against the northern wall. This is the dwelling proper of the Father Superior. In distinction from the rooms below it boasts large rectangular windows in all the four walls, and on the southern façade — a wooden console balcony giving on to the picturesque Amaras valley.

Judging by the hearths and windows the rather large (4.35x6.6 m) rectangular vaulted rooms built on to the northern wall from the west can also be classified among the dwelling premises.

The western rooms show the interesting arched structure of the refectory with an open kitchen having three huge hearths. No less remarkable are the out-buildings and communal structures. The barn and stables abut on the eastern wall of the complex (the barn — on the north, and the stables — on the south). These are long and narrow structures supported by archs with entrances on the outer and inner sides. On its western wall each of the buildings has 16 adjoining arched niches — mangers of different size made of smoothly-hewn stone. Similar mangers are to be found in Avuts Tar and Tatev monasteries. Of the communal structures interest attaches to toilet rooms abutting on the eastern and western walls. These are narrow vaulted structures reached by stairways. The sewage flow was conducted through the outer walls with openings one metre above the ground.

The general outlay of the monasterial complex gives a vivid idea of the division of its premises into functional zones. The isolation of out-buildings is typical of 17th century monasterial architecture in the neighbouring Syukin territory. The existence of a separate, utility yard before the main entrance was not only important

from the point of defence but was a rational measure that kept the cattle and visitors' beasts of burden from entering the main courtyard with the church and dwelling quarters.

Its site on the plain left Amaras vulnerable to the enemy and necessitated a fortification system for its protection in the age that was known for its highly unstable political situation. This explains the great height of the walls with no openings whatsoever in their lower parts that would have detracted from their reliability. The flat rooftops of the dwellings and outbuildings on the inside walls were helpful to the defenders of the monastery in the event of a siege. On the northern and southern side of the western wall there are special vaulted stone stairs leading to the roof. The fortification walls span the rooftops by a height of 1.5 metres. All around the entire wall there are loopholes with triangular consoles on the outside spaced at a distance of 1.1 metres in between. Their analogues are discovered in late-medieval Armenian monasteries and in restructured loopholes in the basilica fortresses of Ashtarak and Parpi.

The towers at the corners of the wall have two storeys and spherical ceilings. Similar ceilings with a tent-like extension is observed in the square rooms in the northeastern and southwestern corners of the complex which served as ante-chambers to the ground floors of the towers. Each tower has two small windows high above the ground and under the rooftop — a set of double loopholes. This made Amaras as invulnerable as other Armenian monasteries and fortresses like Alidzor, Shatinvank and Khor-Virap.

The Amaras church is a four-piered three-nave basilica typical of late-medieval Armenian architecture. It is built of smoothly-hewn cream-coloured felsite and has plastered inside walls. Its rectangular volume (13.5x23.2 m on its exterior) stands on a two-step plinth. Its only entrance is on the west. The extensive prayer hall with two pairs of pylons supporting their respective arches is divided into three naves. In the east the central nave culminates in an altar apse having a 5-metre depth (due to the tombs placed under the altar) with rectangular annexes on each side. The diametrical walls have three rather wide windows (1.4 m outside, 2.0 m inside) apiece. The interior décor is very simple. Ornamentation is confined to the western wall where the tympanum and the upper window boast a highly prominent ornament in the shape of a cross under the pediment.

The Grigoris Tomb in Amaras monastery is the most interesting and historically valuable monument in terms of Armenian art and architecture. Under the altar there lies a one-nave vaulted chamber with an entrance in the southeastern corner of the prayer hall facing the door of the vestry. Six steps down is the ante-chamber of the tomb, a vaulted tunnel-like room on a west-east axis (3 m long) with a specifically horseshoe vault. The vaulted ceilings and the walls (like the entire tomb) are made of finely-polished stone from nearlying Mt. Khazaz. The eastern façade of the small ante-room has a niche in the shape of a window with a plain casing carved on both sides with palm trees (the southern carving has been preserved best of all). The image is rather stylized, the branches are carved in the shape of lanceolate leaves, and supersized fruit is depicted on both sides of the tree trunk. Such stylized images are typical of 4th—5th century Armenian monuments (Kasakh basilica, Tekor church). The base of the vaulted ceiling in the ante-room is decorated with an ornamental band running geometrical pattern. The perimeter of the ornament has a ratio of the 'gold section' (8:13) and is divided by diagonal and perpendicular lines into 8 equal triangles. It is interesting to note that in early-medieval Armenian architecture this geometrical ornament can be viewed most frequently in 5th century monuments. It is used in the décor of Yereruisk basilica, that of the upper capitols of the apse in the one-nave Tsiraravor church in Parpi, on the bases of the northern façade of the cupola basilica of St.Sarghis in Tekor (478—490) which was built almost simultaneously with the Amaras tomb, and on the pylons of Tsitser-

navank (4th c., rebuilt in the 5th c.) on the Artsakh-Syunik frontier.

From the ante-room one enters the burial vault. This is a rectangular chamber (1.90x3.75 and a height of 3.5 m), extended on an east-west axis. On the northern wall facing the southern entrance a door leads to the second entrance into the tomb. In form and size the first chamber is similar to the second and is in full symmetry with it (during the last restructuring this entrance was bricked up and half-buried).

The northern entrance to the tomb had been apparently closed before the 19th century rebuilding of the Amaras church, for no mention is made of it by later-date visitors. The cryptal window in the western wall shows that the upper half of the Grigoris tomb had initially projected above the ground. It culminates in a horseshoe arch and like other 4th — 5th century Armenian monuments hardly extends its exterior volume. The window casings and the frame of the niche in the ante-room are of the same type. The existence of this window is precise evidence that the Amaras tomb had initially stood 1.5—2.0 m above the ground.

In its western side the tombs end in a long and narrow niche with a horseshoe arch supported by imposts of a simple design (ledge and abacus). On its eastern side the niche is blocked with masonry of rough stones and shingles which coincides with the base of the eastern wall of the church. Thus the tomb had an eastern entrance, as noted by 19th-century scholars. M. Barkhudaryan and Ye. Lalayan.

The eastern entrance was blocked in the 19th century during the building of the present church. A study of the masonry work in the lengthwise walls shows that only 0.8 m of their length dates to the 5th century.

It is clear that the niche's extension belongs to a much later date. Consquently, the eastern entrance to the tomb was also discovered during the radical restructuring of the monasterial church in the 17th century when it received its four pylons and became a domed basilica. On its eastern side the Grigoris tomb has the same composition as the crypts of Gayane in Echmiadzin (387—439) and Mashtots in Oshakan (442—443).

The study of early-medieval Armenian tombs shows that memorial structures of this kind were widespread throughout the country. In bringing out the peculiarities of these interesting and valuable works of 4th—5th century Armenian architecture, taken in their evolution, an important place belongs to the Grigoris Tomb in Amaras as a monument that has a precise date and has been finely preserved to our day.

M. HASRANYAN

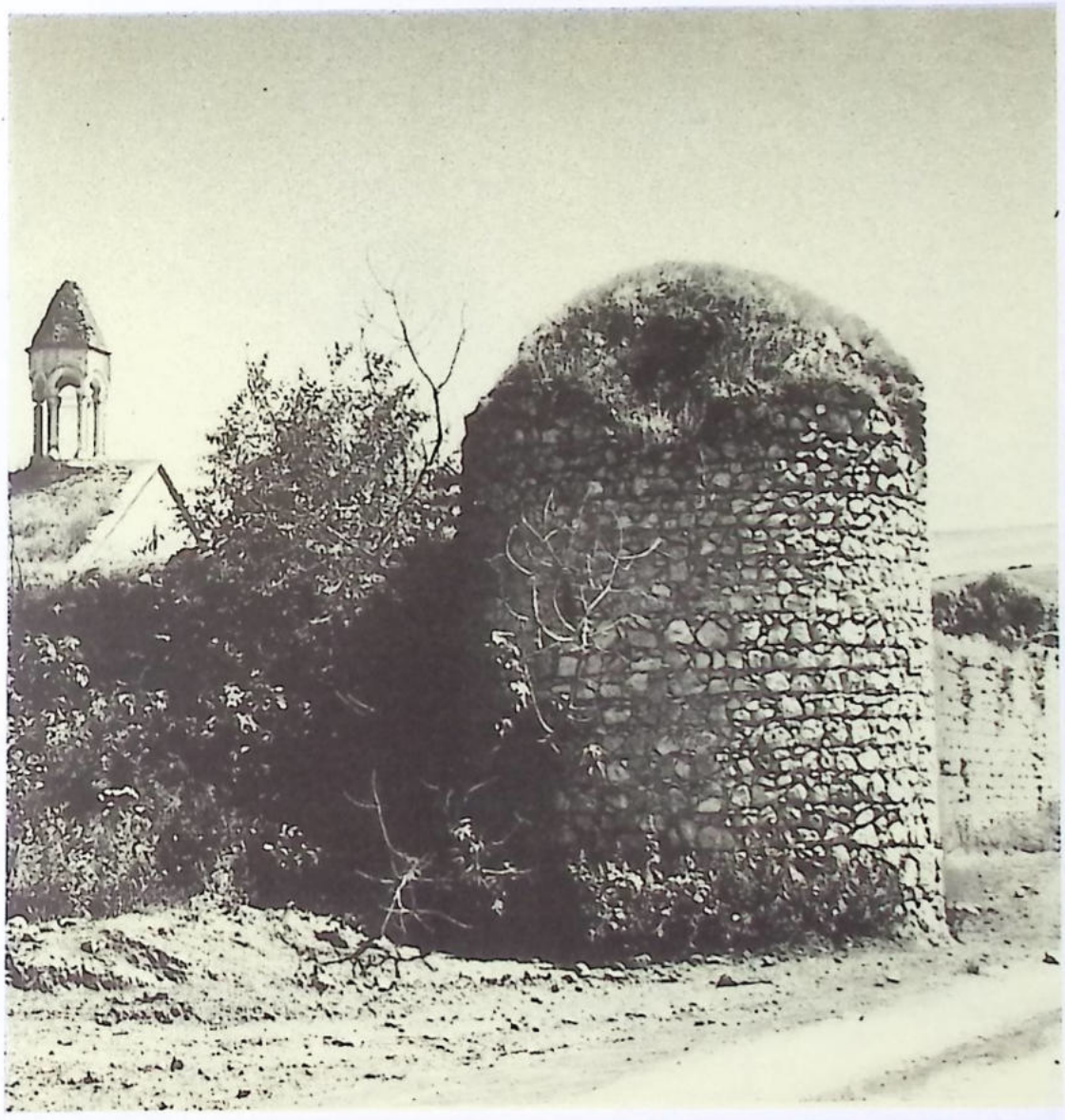
Plan of Amaras Monastery



Northern wall of Amaras Monastery

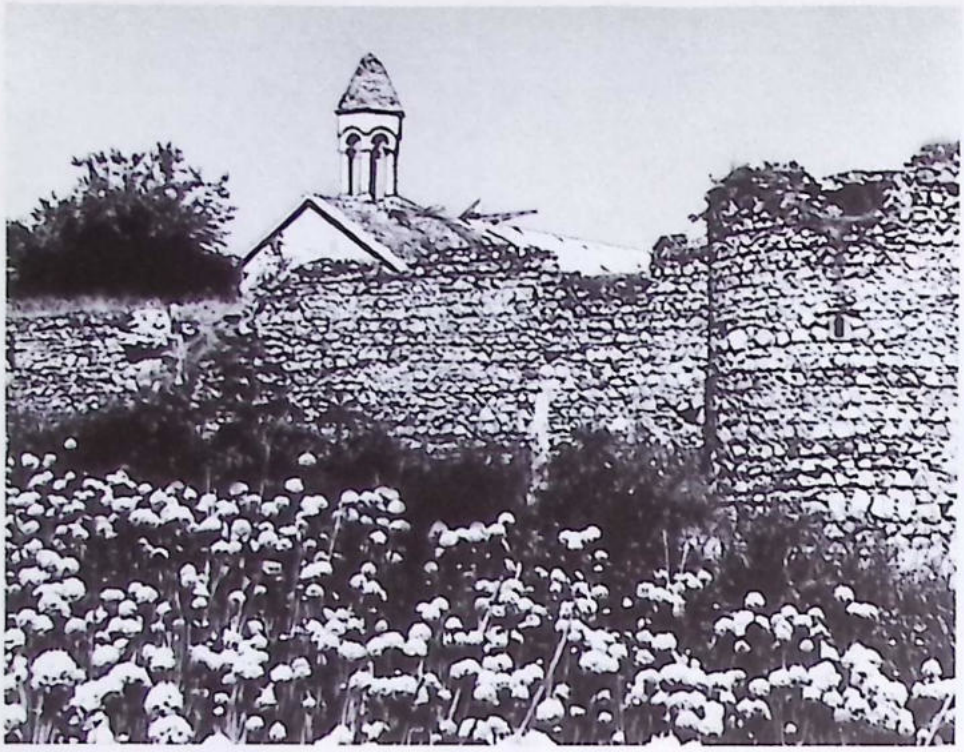


Amaras Monsatery from the northwest



St. Grigoris Church from the north

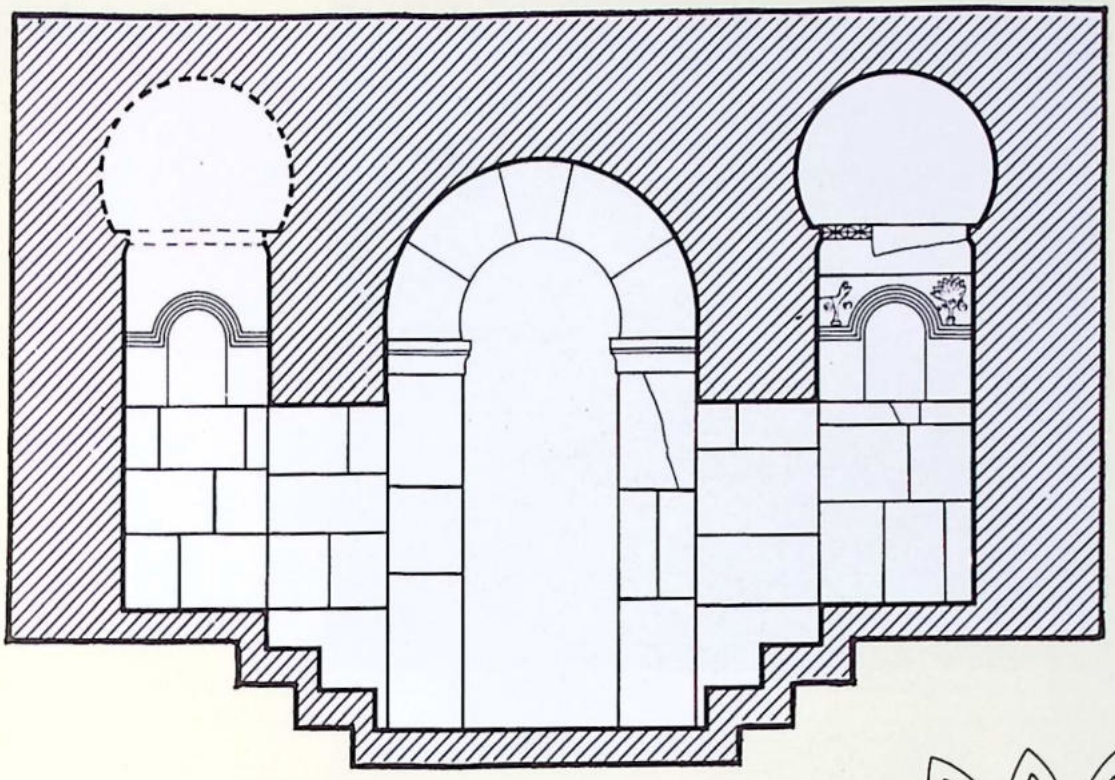
Grigoris Tomb. Cross-section, plan, cross-sections of ante-chamber, decorative elements



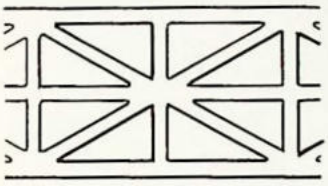
Amaras Monastery from the west

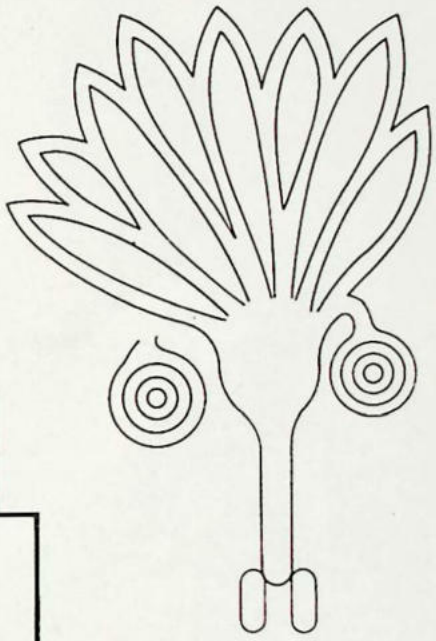


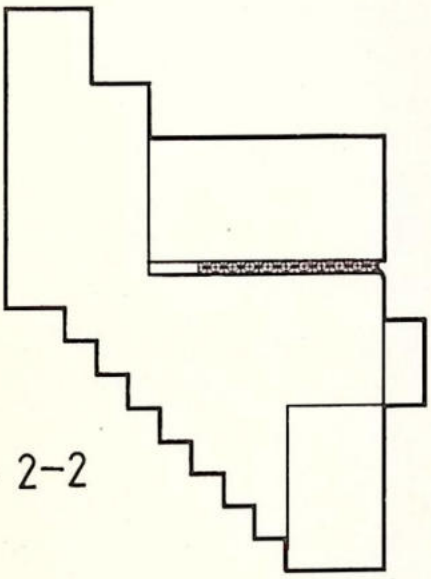
Amaras Monastery from the southwest



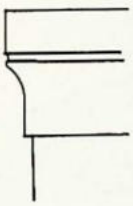
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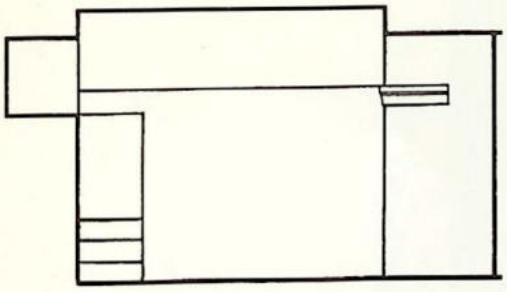






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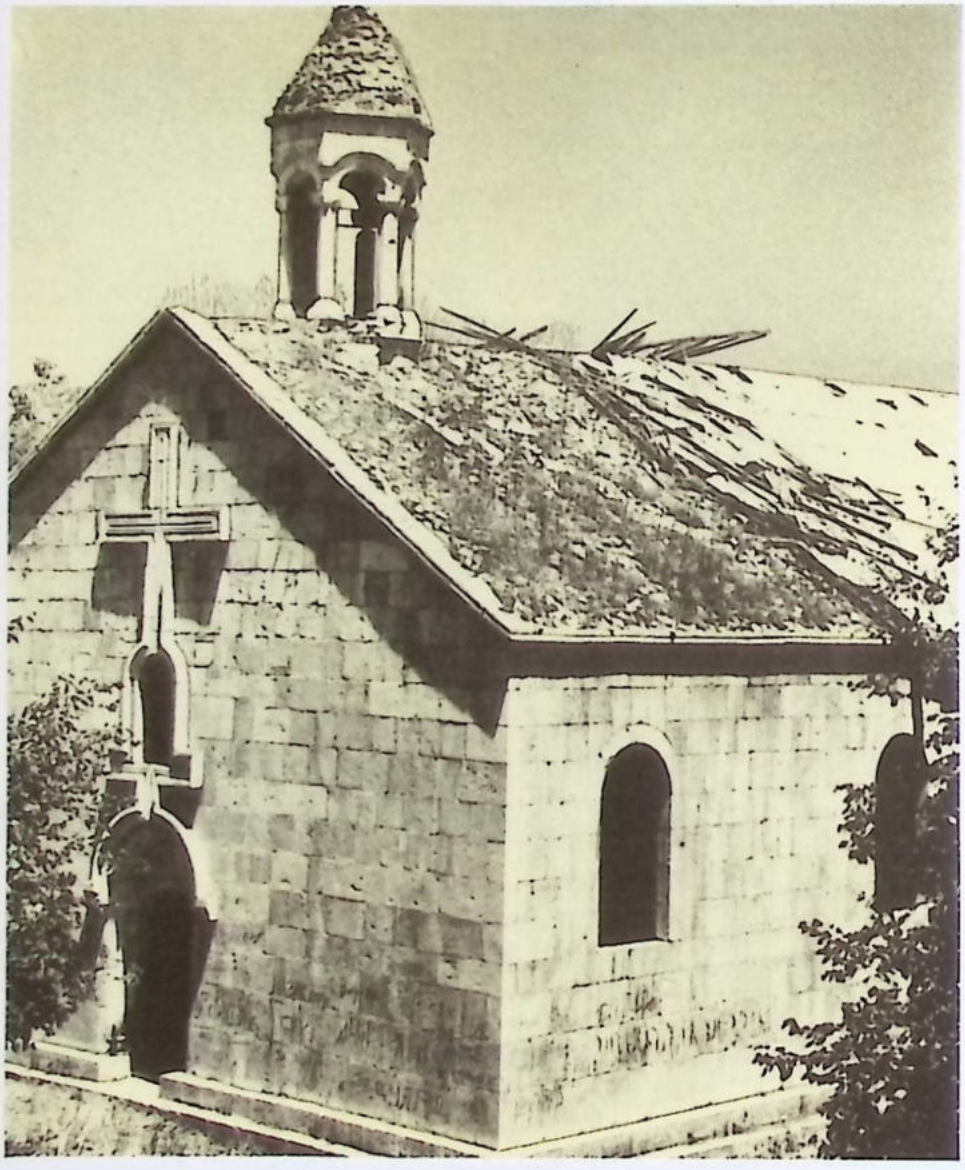




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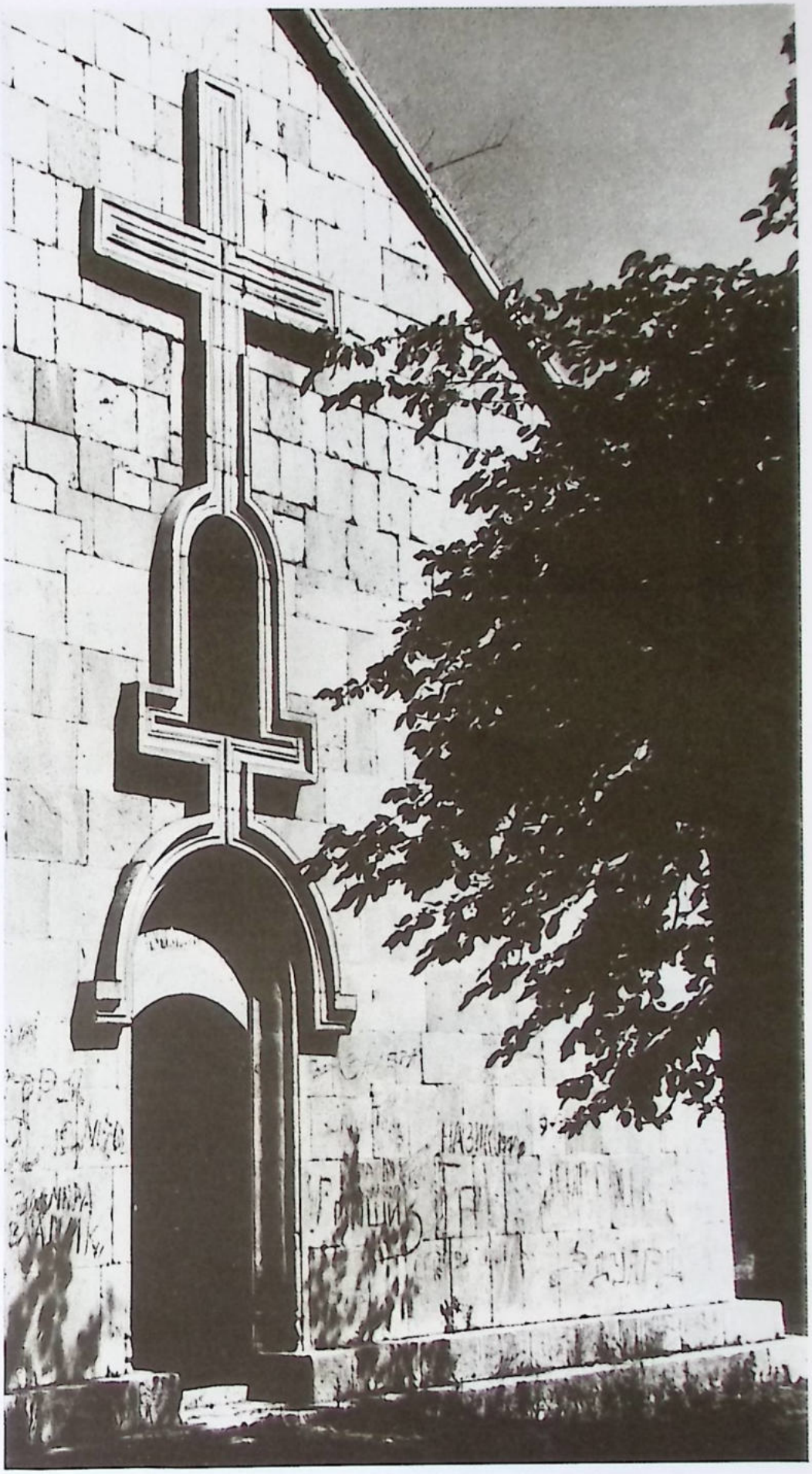


Ante-chamber of Grigoris Tomb (489)



St. Grigoris Church from the southwest

Western façade of
St. Grigoris Church

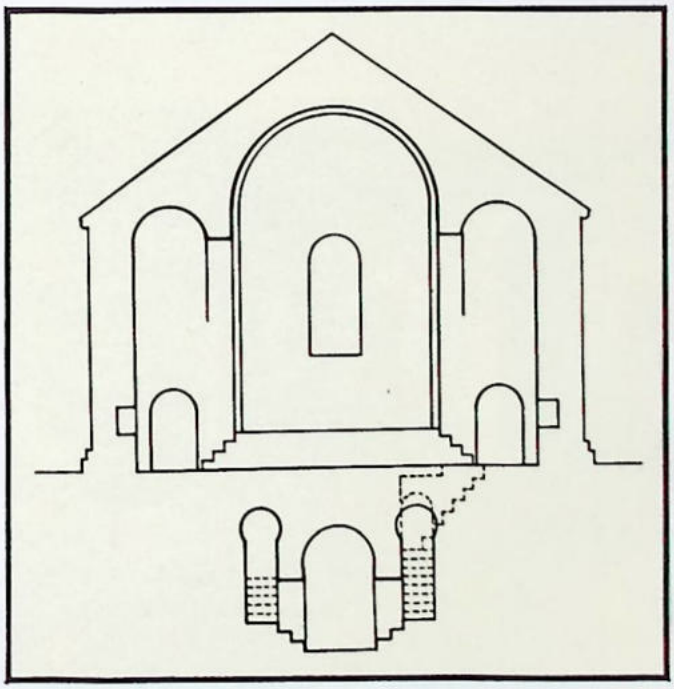




Eastern façade of St.Grigoris Church

St.Grigoris Church from the southeast

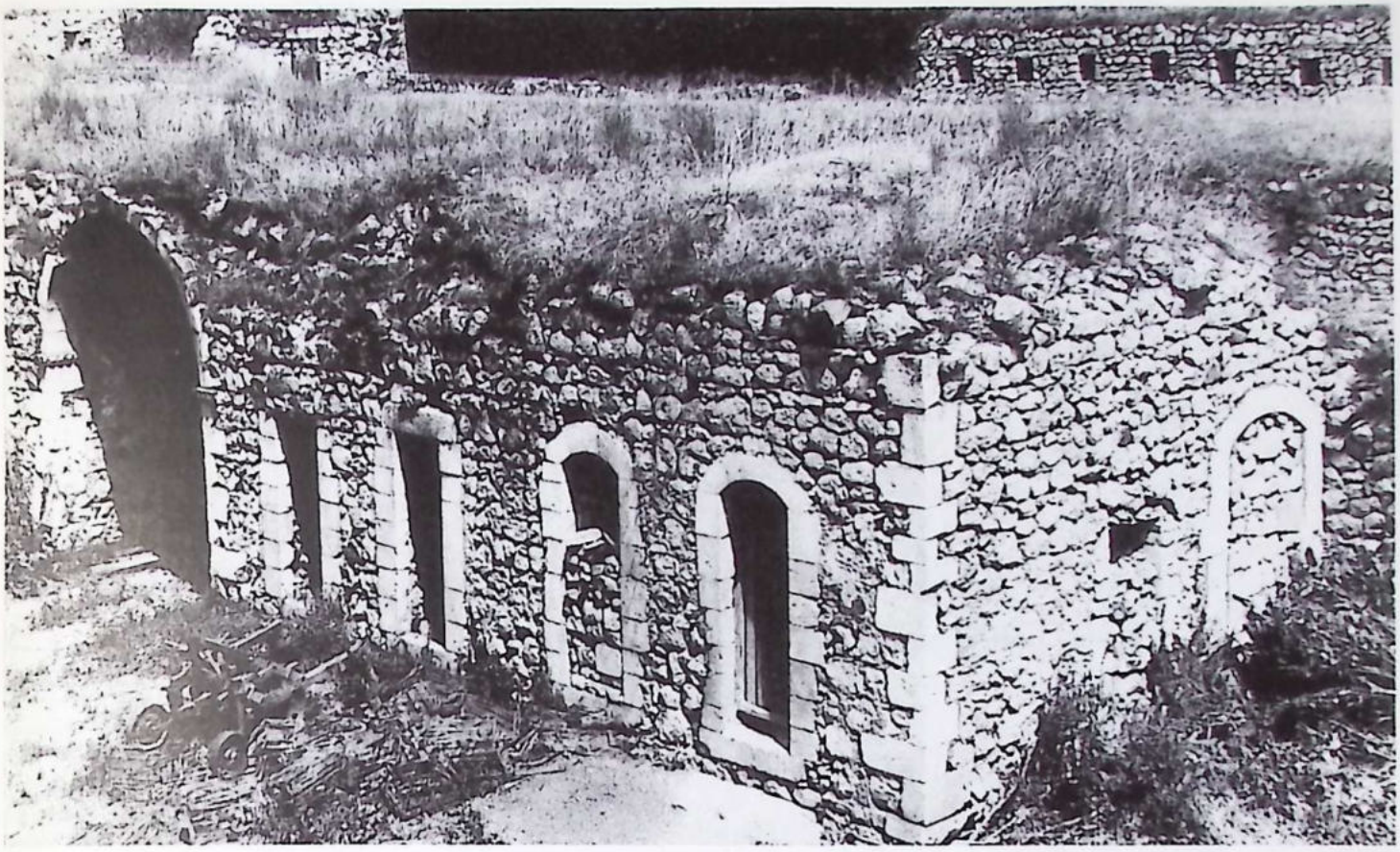
Belfry of St.Grigoris Church



Cross-section of St.Grigoris Church and Tomb







Utility courtyard of Amaras Monastery

Western yard of Amaras Monastery



Eastern chain of monasterial dwelling quarters

Monastery gate



Gate to the House of the Father Superior



Decorative elements on the gate to the House of the Father Superior



House of Father Superior (17th c.) and St.Grigoris Church (1858) from the northeast



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