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



TSITSERNAVANK

ART-A
HASM
1990

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



Tsitsernavank, one of Armenia's ancient sanctuaries, lies on the bank of the Akhavno River in Akhayech region of the historical Syunik area, (at present, hachin District of the Azerbaijan SSR, some 4—5 kilometres north of the Khnatsakh village, Goris District).

The monastery stood on the outskirts of the Tsitsernavank village which in the 13th century paid a tribute to Tatev. Tsitsernavank is first mentioned in one of the settlement deeds dating to 844. The medieval Armenian historian Stepanos Orbelyan classified it among the thirty most important 13th-century monasteries in Syunik. In his ode (1655) dedicated to Armenia's noteworthy sanctuaries Tovma Vanandetsi made a point of the montastery's 'rich past'. In the later Middle Ages Tsitsernavank together with eight other Syunik monasteries was in the possession of the Tatev diocese. It reached its heyday in the 17th-18th centuries when Prince Aikaz and Bishop Mkrtych rebuilt the fortification wall with the western arched gate (1613), the monasterial church was repaired (1779), and a refectory went up at its southern end (18th c.).

The well-preserved Tsitsernavank church thanks to its architectural peculiairities holds an exclusive place in the history of Armenian architecture. The church stands at the northeastern end of the enclosed monasterial territory where it occupies an almost trapezoid top of a hill, with depressions on both sides. The crux of the composition is a three-nave basilica of the 'western' type with the projection of the main nave.

Tsitsernavank's masonry shows a specific use of two types of stones. The lower part along its entire perimeter reaching a height of 7—8 rows of stone incorporates smoothly-hewn dark-grey basalt, the remaining part — well-polished light yellow felsite. Along with the upper parts of the walls the apse with annexes, the pylons and pilasters were all added to the basalt part at a later date. The church is an elongated rectangle (exterior size: 12.5 x 25.6 m) lying along an east-west axis. The interior is divided by two rows of pylons into three naves with the middle and the most significant nave twice wider than its lateral counterparts. The form of the pylons commands attention: they have rectangular cross-sections in the northern row and square cross-sections in the southern row. The different sizes of the pylons running lengthwise account for the distinctions in the vaulted area of the horseshoe and two-centred arches. The middle nave in the east culminates in an apse with an emphasized horseshoe layout and a triumphal arch. Like in 4th-5th-century Armenian monuments Diarjaris and Tanaat the apse has no window and along with the adjoining annexes running along a trapezoid perimeter is inscribed into the rectangle of the outer walls producing no visible bulges. The annexes have two storeys with windows on both storeys of the eastern façade.

Tsitsernavank. General view from the west

The interior of Tsitsernavank has a rare specific feature: a balcony over the apse overlooking the main nave through the three arches. The entresol on the first-storey level is illuminated by light coming in through the pair of windows on the church's eastern façade and the semi-circular window above. The arches of the entresol have a horseshoe shape and their middle columns boast simple capitals and bases.

The entresol lacks practical functions and is devoid of permanent stairways. It can be reached only through an opening in the vault of the southern annexe leading to the first floor and further to the arcade balcony. The entresol plays a purely aesthetical role in the décor of the main nave (just as the source of light is allotted a minor role). It can be surmised that stone crosses were set up between the arches, their shapes sharply outlined against the illuminated openings between the arches.

Another example of an Armenian church with entresol is the Srkkhonk Church built in the 5th century by Catholicos Gyut. These has survived a detailed description of its composition by Stepanos Orbelyan.

The existence of this entresol sheds light on the much disputed question concerning the restoring of Zvartnots Church, the masterpiece of Armenian architecture. A major argument used by the opponents disclaiming the existence of an entresol in the Zvartnots Church is the absence of stairways leading up to the first floor. It was also claimed that arched entresols were alien to Armenian architecture and were absent in early-medieval Armenian churches. The examples of Tsitsernavank and Srkkhonk refute these claims.

The middle nave of Tsitsernavank Church, besides the aforesaid illumination from the entresol, receives additional light through windows cut in the walls of the main nave rising over the roofs of the lateral naves, and through the pair of windows on the western façade (such pairs of windows can be observed in the 4th-5th-century one-nave basilicas in Lernakert and Parpi and the three-nave basilica at Ashtarak). The middle nave has a strongly emphasized ogee vault. Like the stone blocks of the roof it may have appeared in the course of 9th-10th-century restoration work. The arcade of naves is dated to a much later period as compared with the apse. This is confirmed by the seams between the western wall of the apse and the adjoining arcade of wall pylons along with the upper details of the walls, and by the fact that the walls of the middle nave obviously obstruct the extreme arched openings of the entresol over the apse.

The rebuilding work that followed, dating to the early Middle Ages, strengthened the northern pylons and the adjoining arches with additional pilasters and double arches, and an annexe on the northern wall of the arcade, its six arches supported by pilasters with square cross-sections. Only finely-polished stone was used. As for the pilasters of the southern row, the additional pilasters they had received reached the cornices of the pylons and were made of roughly-hewn stone.

Undoubtedly, this annexe dates to a later period and is the result of the repairs done in 1779. Stone stairs lead to the one-metre-high altar elevation at the corners of the apse. Inside the apse rises the stone altar: a huge stone block imposed on a column.

The vaults of the naves lack the supporting arches, a constructive element discovered in all Armenian three-nave basilicas. The church's central nave is illumined through the window on the western façade, cut right under the ceiling, and the high and wide windows in the transverse walls (four apiece). The windows have horseshoe arches. Later (apparently in the 18th century) all the windows on the northern wall and two of the southern windows were bricked up.

Of the four entrances to Tsitsernavank Church three have been cut in the southern wall and one in the northern. Three of these entrances were bricked up along with the windows in the late Middle Ages. Only the southwestern entrance, abutting right on the western wall, was left intact. Its threshold is five steps above the church's floor level.

The rectangular entrance apertures were made in the ancient basalt walls of the church. There are no portals like the ones observed in the basilicas of Kasakh, Yereruik and Tekor (4th-5th cc.). Here the cross piece, a basalt monolith, rests on two stone corbels established in the two corners of the opening. The same construction is observed in the ancient entrance to the one-nave St. Gevorg Church (4th-5th c.) in Tekh village (Goris District) near Tsitsernavank.

An important architectural feature of Tsitsernavank Church is the absence of an entrance on the western façade. A curious fact bearing in mind that the relief is no hindrance to an entrance on the west.

The northern and eastern façades of the monument rise directly over the steep side of the hill which accounts for the many-stepped stylobate that supports the church on its northern side, and the supporting wall in the east made up of six rows of rough-hewn basalt. The stone blocks making up the roof jut out to form a cornice. As compared with the roof of the apse the gabled roof of the central nave is considerably lower — also evidence of its reconstruction. A small six-columned belfry topped by a conical dome stands on the gable of the central nave at the junction of the two slopes. It was undoubtedly erected in the late Middle Ages, such belfries being typical of 17th-18th century Armenian churches and widespread in Syunik.

The architectural exterior of Tsitsernavank is compact and even austere. Its outer façades boast few elements of décor. The windows on the northern and southern façades are emphasized by semi-circular projections (now considerably weathered). The casings of the windows on the eastern and western façades have been cut right into the wall. A horizontal cornice of stone blocks runs below the pair of windows on the eastern façade. The main décor of the church is an ornament characteristic of the early medieval times: a cross with arms of equal length inscribed into a circle. Different crosses have been carved into the western side of the southern wall, between the windows, on the eastern wall and on the cross-beams over the entrances in the same wall. The equal-armed cross inscribed into the circle over the northern entrance is painted red. It is obvious that the crosses on the upper part of the wall laid of tufa were carved at one and the same time. The interior is richly ornamented, especially the pylons. Their capitals are decorated with a biscuit pattern (in a single row, though one comes across a double staggered row too), mullions and undulating motifs, rectangles cut by rays into eight triangles, and rolls. The pylons are carved with six-petalled rosettes inscribed into rectangles, broad and smooth, interlaced in the manner of snakes, streamers and so on. The pylons (along their axis) are topped by funnel-like recesses. Higher up, the walls of the arcade are cut with 'signs of eternity' (Segner ring) and multipetalled rosettes. All these ornaments are typical of early-medieval Armenian art and were widely employed in the 4th-7th centuries. Precise dating of the church is achieved through one of the ornamental reliefs: the rectangle cleaved by eight rays is observed only on 5th-century monuments (Yereruik, Parpi) and mainly in the second half of the 5th century (Tekor, Amaras). As for the annexes to the pylons, the capitals (not all) of the pylons and pilasters on the northern wall are also treated with a biscuit pattern. The north wall contains the remains of a fresco between its pilasters: full-length

portraits of saints. Colour also has a part to play in the interior décor: some of the rosettes and the capitals of pylons are painted red.

Like several other ancient Armenian churches Tsitsernavank lacks inscriptions. There had obviously never been a builders' inscription. One can be sure that up till the 6th century it was not customary in Armenia to leave such inscriptions on either big or small religious structures. In keeping with the psychological and ideological makeup of early Christiandom this was qualified as an immodest act short of being a sin.

By their extensive and smooth surface the Tsitsernavank walls, both inside and outside, offered wide possibilities for leaving inscriptions. The fact of their absence confirms the antiquity of the church, as well as the fact that from early medieval times Tsitsernavank had never suffered radical reconstruction which would have been otherwise perpetuated by a respective inscription.

The monument's memorial inscriptions date to the 16th-17th centuries. The tufa stone above the lintel of the first entrance from the west, and the only one that has remained open, on the building's southern façade had an inscription pointing to the date of the repairs made in the church and belfry (the stone disappeared in 1967).

Undoubtedly the 18th century repairs undertaken in Tsitsernavank, apart from the added belfry on the roof, included the cutting of most of the windows and doors and the reinforcing of the pylons. This is the only evidence of reconstruction work dating to that period.

The Tsitsernavank church bears no marks of its masons either on the more ancient lower sections of the basalt walls, or on the upper tufa parts and pylons. Their absence also testifies to the monument's early date, the first marks making their appearance only in the 6th century. It is identical that of the masons' marks discovered in Tsitsernavank three have been cut into later-date pilasters.

The time of the erection and radical rebuilding of Tsitsernavank can be gathered (with certain allowances) from its architectural and artistic features.

Descriptions of Tsistsernavank Church showed that it had gone through four basic building periods. The first accounts for its outer lower basalt walls; the second — for their upper sections of felsite tufa along with the apse and the entresol and annexes; the third added the dividing arcade and gave the church its vaulted top; the fourth — the reinforcement of the pylons, the erection of the paired arches and the addition of the arcade to the northern wall.

Thus the stylistic peculiarities of its décor set the third period in the second half of the 5th century and the fourth period — in the 6th-7th centuries. The addition of the apse and its two adjoining chambers (second period) can be dated to the late 4th — early 5th centuries when in keeping with the canons of Catholicos Saak Partev (387—436) the priest had to spend his summer months at the church. At that time the monument had a wooden ceiling and, bearing in mind the considerable width of the church, it was a three-nave basilica (the naves divided by a wooden colonnade).

The main problem, however, was to date the foundation of the church, the laying of the first basalt initially rectangle structure that at the time lacked its eastern apse. The available material fails to give the exact date of the foundation of the church. However the pagan origin of its name meaning 'Swallows' monastery' and some of the main architectural peculiarities coupled with historical information on religious architecture during the spread of Christianity in Armenia allow for a rather precise hypothesis: the oldest Tsitsernavank structure had been a pagan temple converted into a church after the spreading of Christianity in Syunik. In the first

decades following the adoption of Christianity church building flourished on all of Armenia's territory. According to 4th-5th-century Armenian historians (Agatanghekhos, Favstos Byuzand, Zenob Glak), starting from 301 most of the heathen temples in Armenia were converted into churches without any or with only a few changes. Here the layout of the heathen temple was repeated: the elongated east-west rectangular plan; only the altar was transferred from west to east.

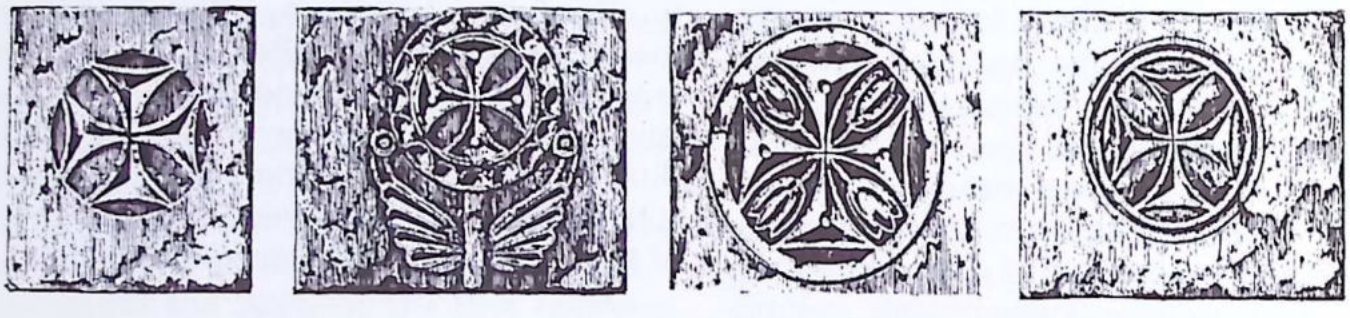
A model of such a possible reconstruction is the ancient basalt part of Tsitsernavank which is also confirmed by its unique architectural peculiarity: the absence of an entrance on the west. This can be explained by the existence of a sacrificial altar in the western part of the pagan temple. During the spread of Christianity Tsitsernavank was also destroyed down to its lower walls, or most probably the structure had been started as a heathen temple and the construction work was cut short by the emergence of Christianity in Syunik.

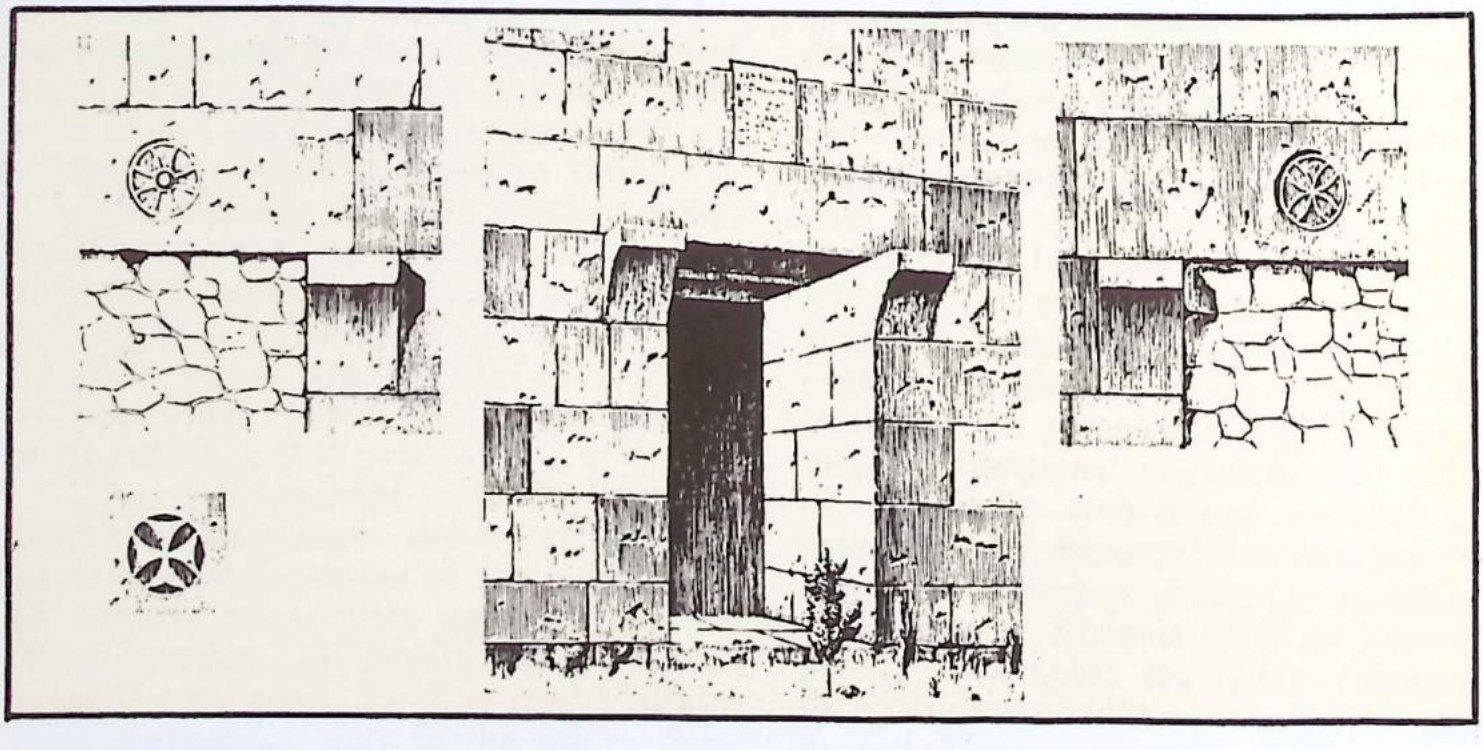
Could there have been heathen temples in Armenia in the form of classical basilicas (the pre-christian Tsitsernavank temple with its width and general proportions was inevitably a basilica)? The answer is positive. It must be said that the Greco-Roman peripteros wasn't characteristic of the Armenian pre-christian religeous buildings. An example to this effect is Garni Temple — the only heathen temple preserved in Armenia. Long before the Hellenic period Armenia had a well-developed religious architectural style and its own types of temple structures (basilica-type and most-likely centric-type) which were used until the adoption of Christianity. Their composition had root in the local environment. There are specialists in Armenian historical architecture who believe that basilica-type churches found their way into Armenia through Syria, a point of view based on the close cultural and religios ties between 3rd and 4th century Armenia and Syria, and on the similarity of certain architectural forms and decorative elements in both countries. Nevertheless, basilicas were known to have gone up in Armenia a millenium before the advent of Christianity. The festive halls in the citadels of Urartu towns are genuine basilicas built on a rectangular plane and divided by piers into naves. Even 4th-century Armenia had a thousand-years-long experience of basilica construction. Tsitsernavank Church in one of the major constructions of this type.

MORUS HASRATYAN

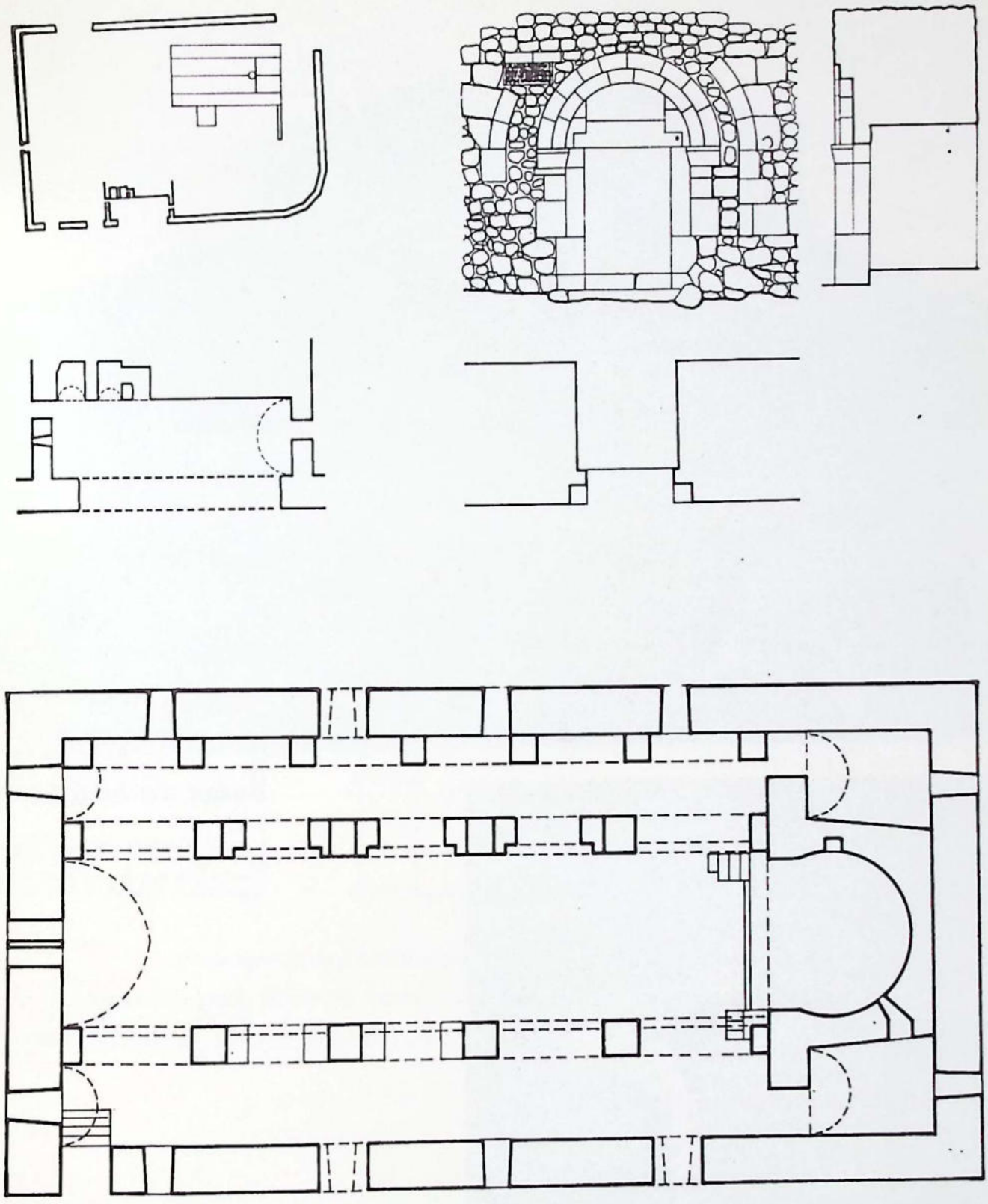


Tsitsernavank. View from the southeast

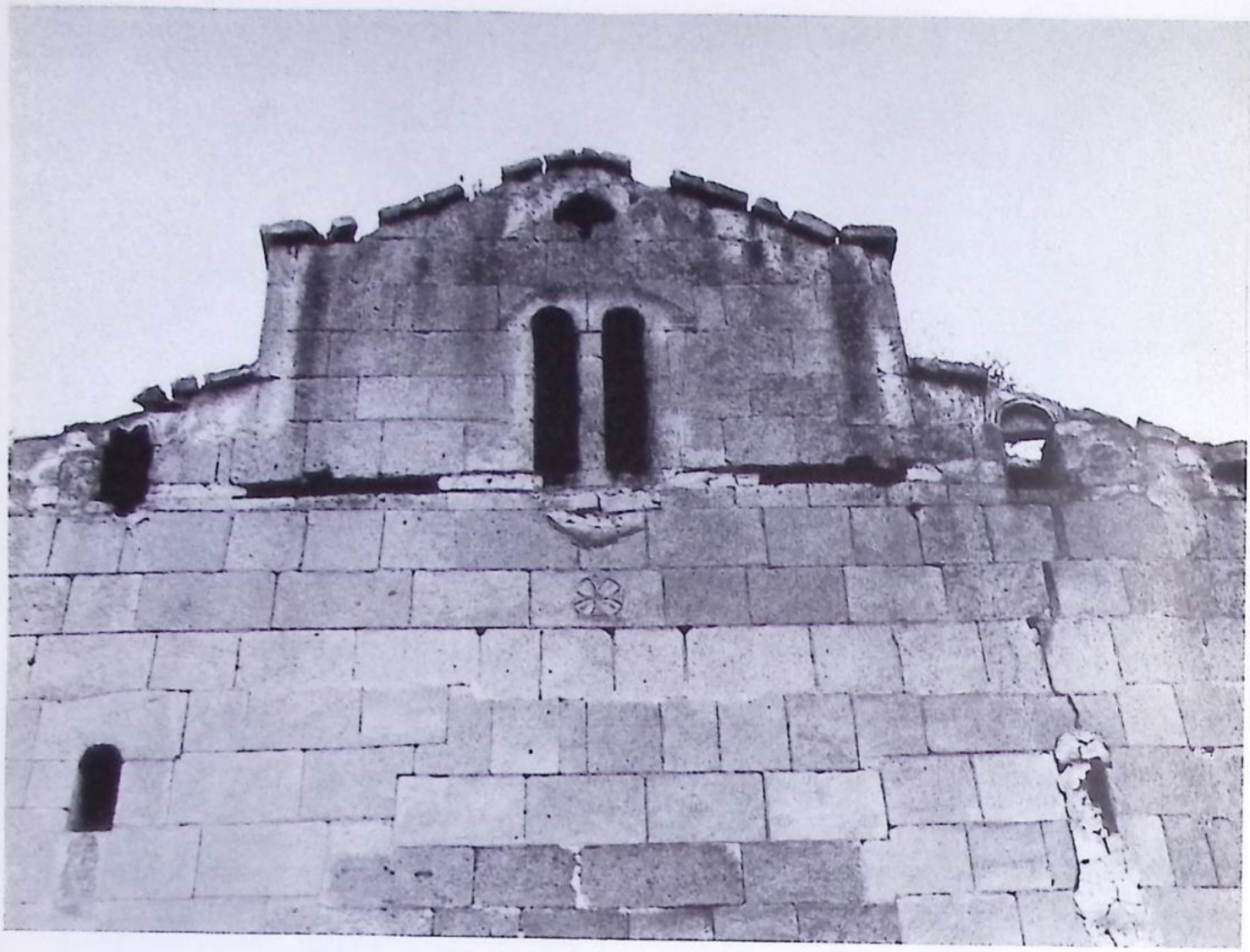




Entrances and decorative reliefs on façades of basilica (drawing by L. Sadoyan)



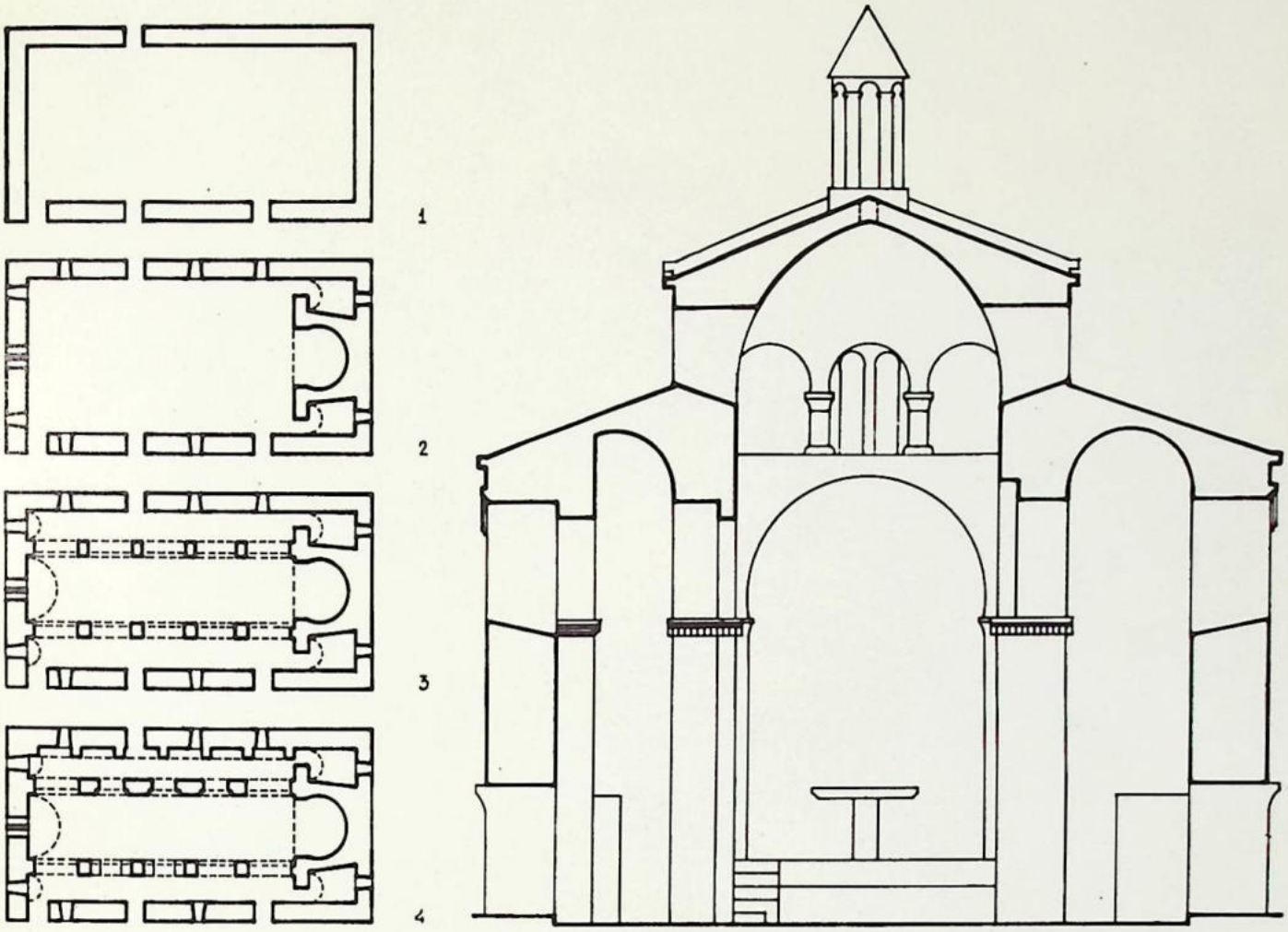
Tsitsernavank. Plan of the complex with refectory, showing façade and cross-section and plan of gate along with a plan of the basilica



Basilica. Western façade (detail)



Inscription on the restoration of the basilica (now gone)



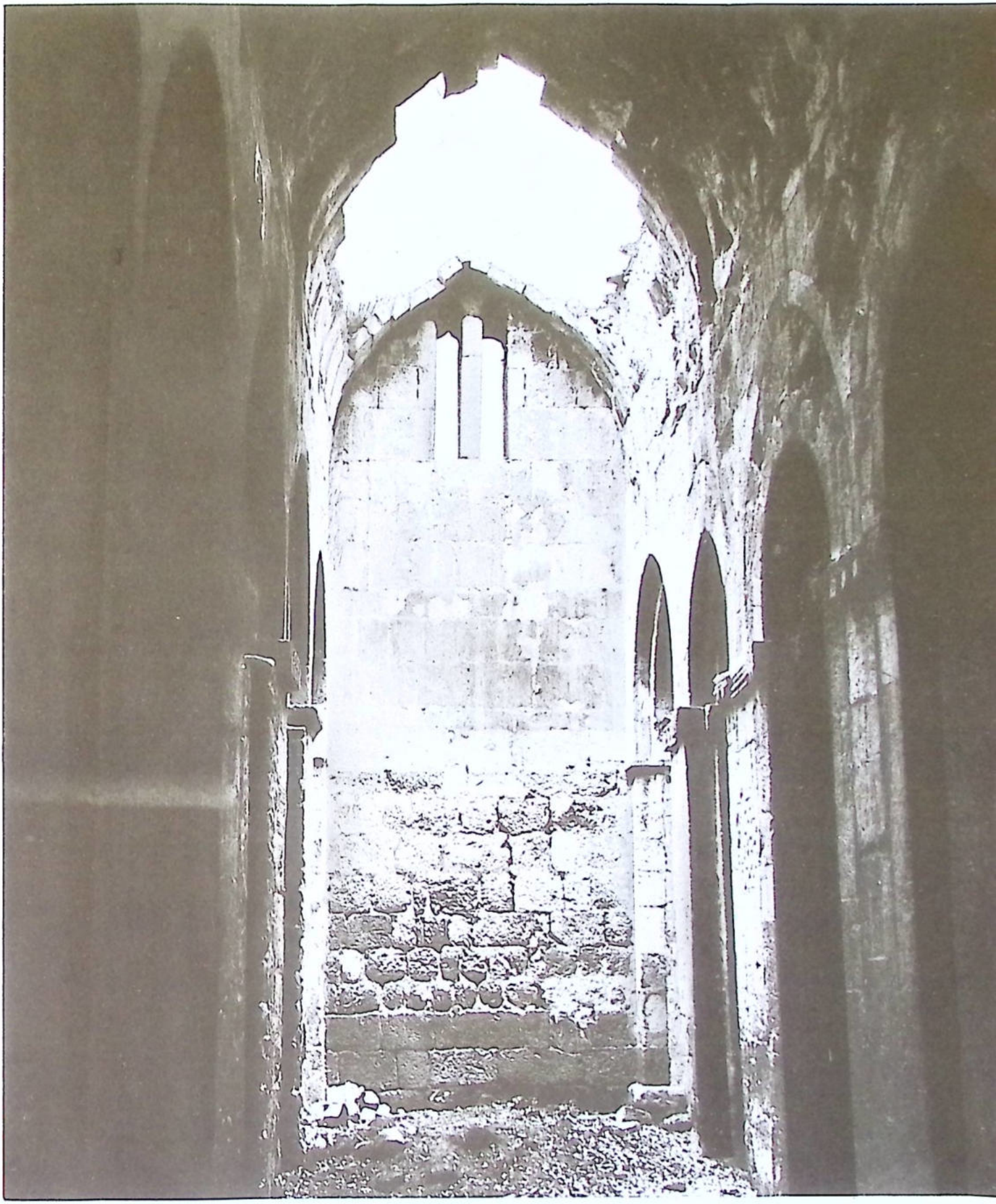
Cross-section and building periods of Tsitsernavank basilica:

1 — plan of church in the 3rd century; 2 — plan of church in the late 4th century;

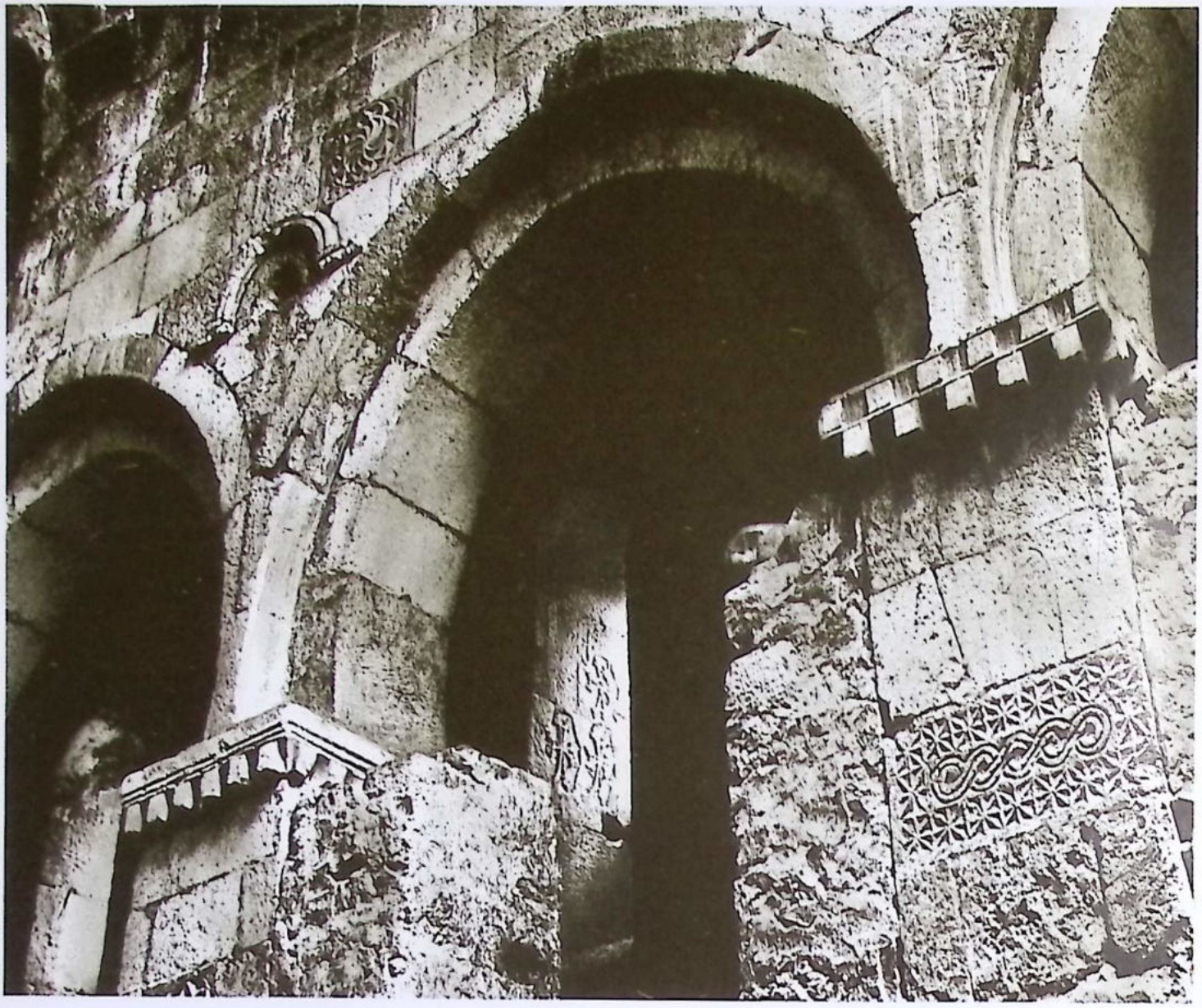
3 — plan of church in the second half of the 5th century; 4 — plan of church in the 7th century



Interior of basilica (view of apse)



Interior of basilica (view from the west)

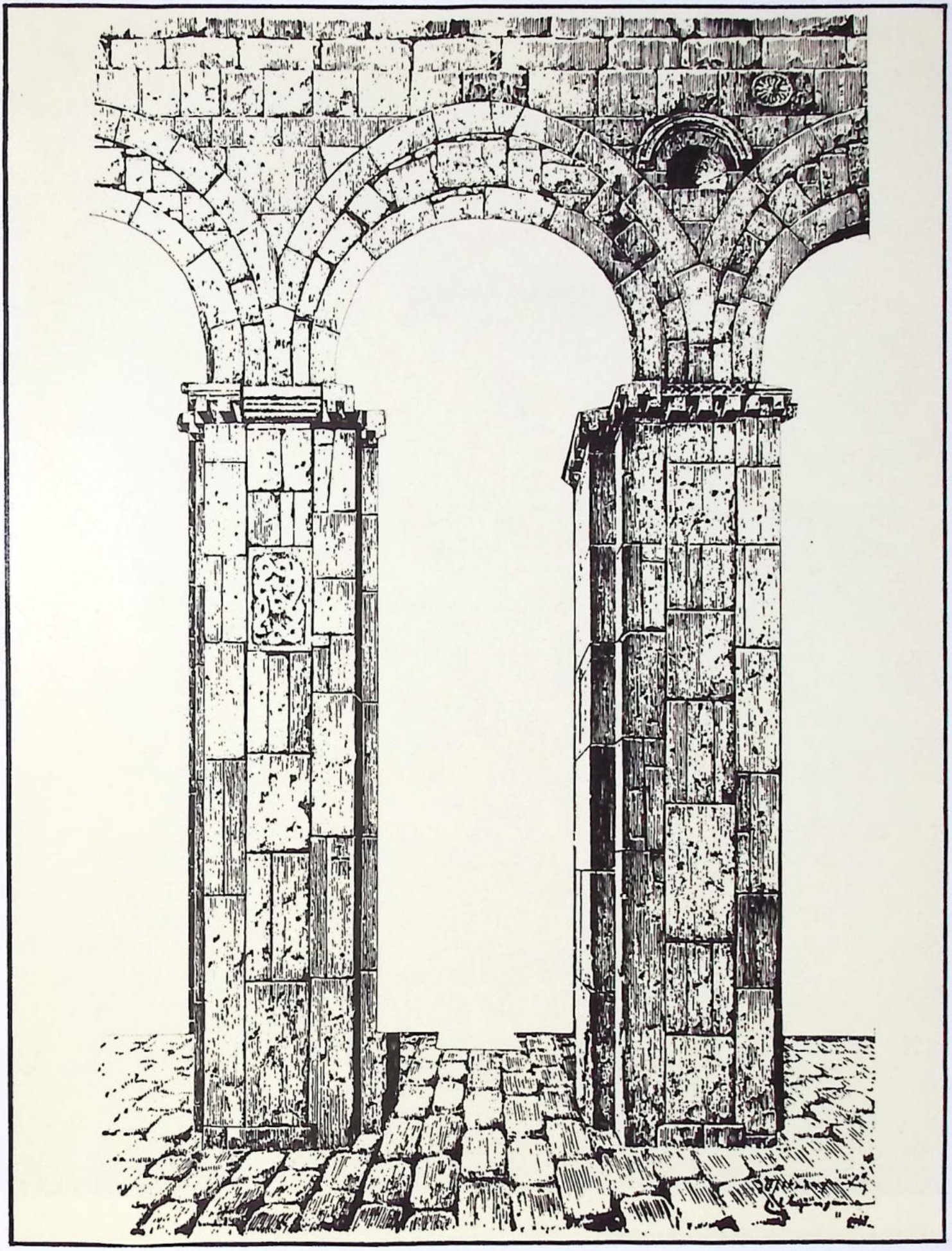


Southern pylons in the main nave of basilica



Relief of snake on basilica pylon

Northern pylons in basilica's main nave
(drawing by L. Sadoyan)

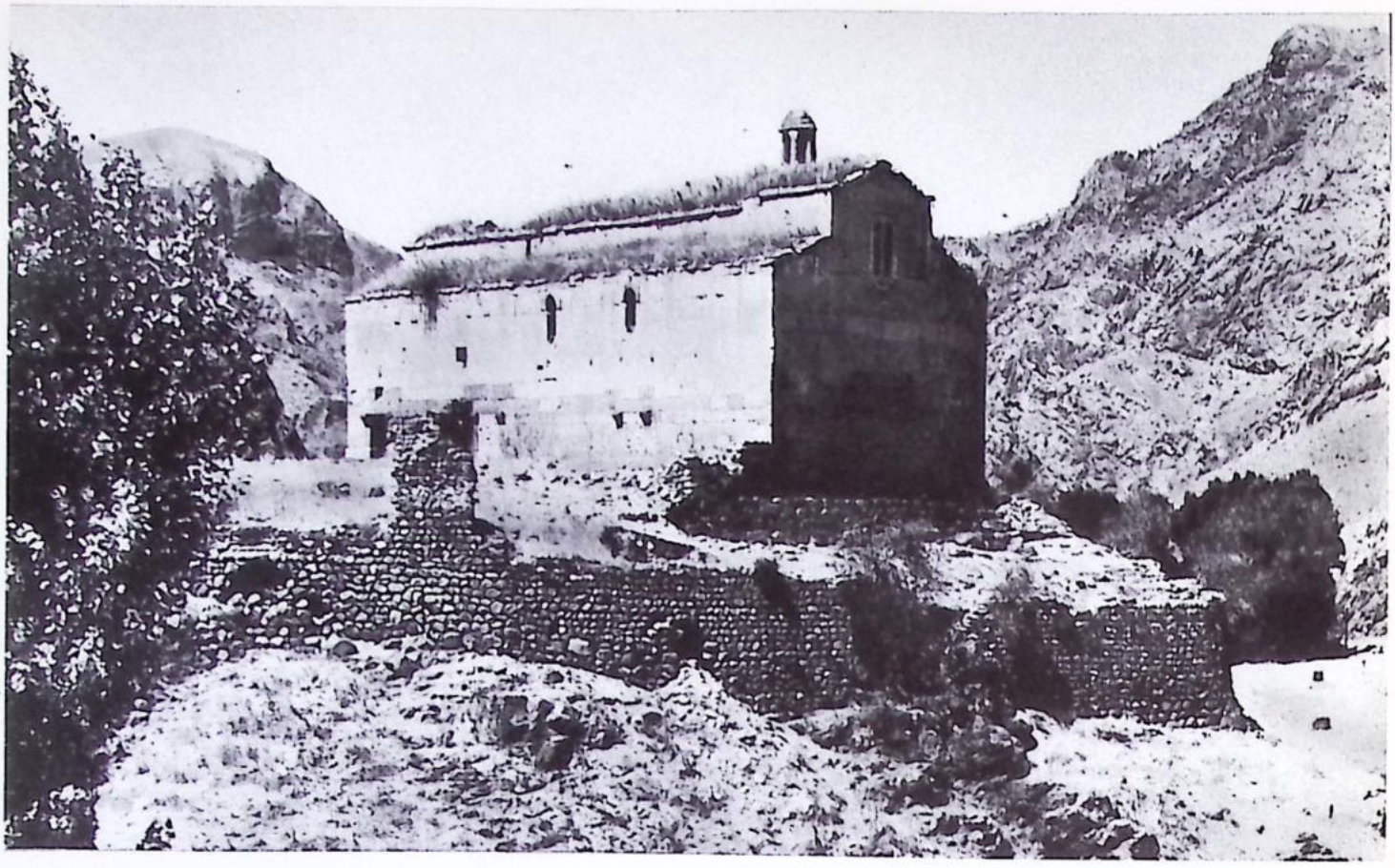




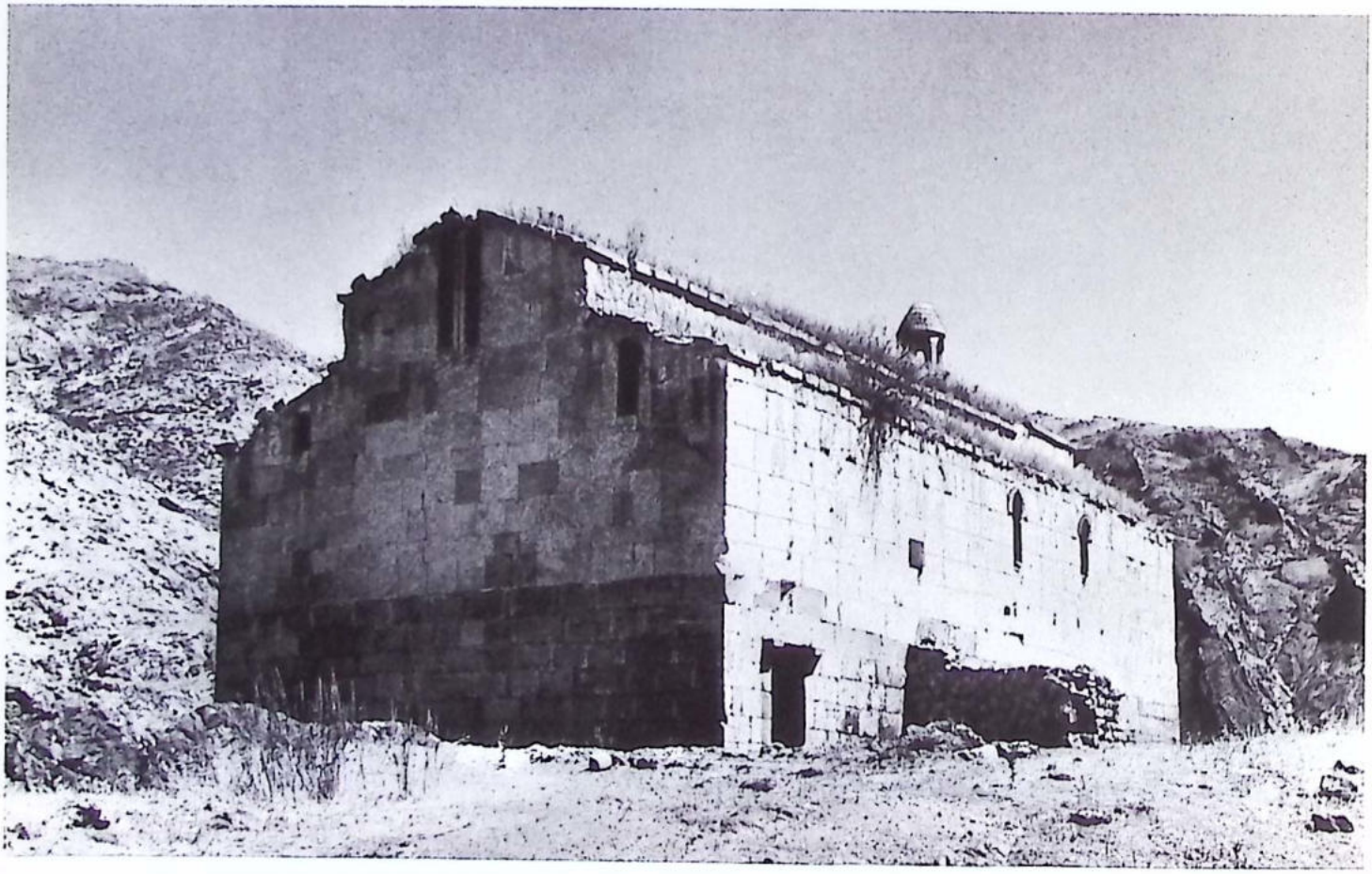
Decorative relief in basilica interior



Southeast pylon of basilica

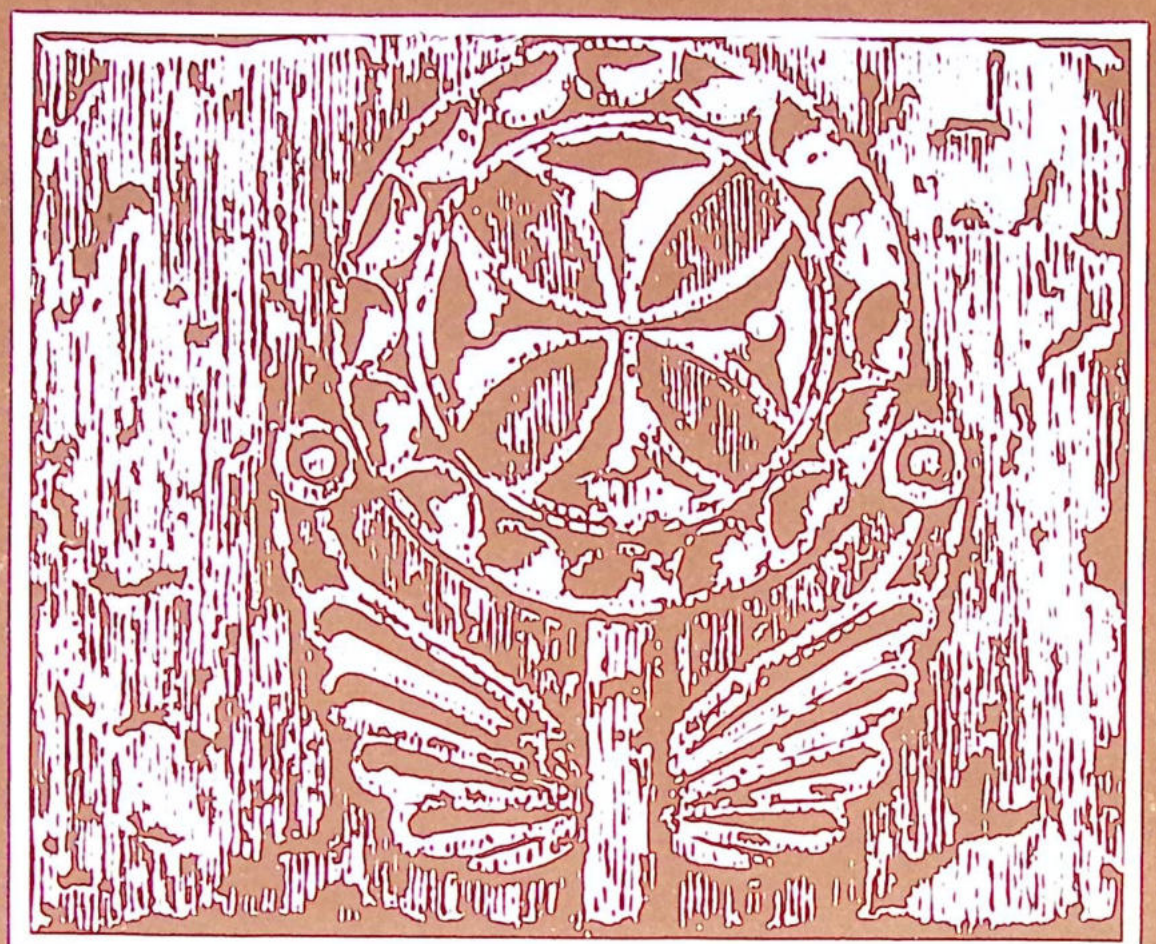


Tsitsernavank basilica from the southeast





Decorative relief on southern pylon of the main nave



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