

Art Sunday Edition

Why Armenian Cultural Heritage Threatens Azerbaijan's Claims to Nagorno-Karabakh

Azerbaijan continues to erase Armenian history in favor of a discredited theory that the region's Christian sites were made by a now-extinct group called Caucasian Albanians.



by Yelena Ambartsumian
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Dadivank's khatchkars in 2015 Credit: All photos by the author

Around 3am on September 27, my phone buzzed with messages that Azerbaijan had launched an aerial assault on Nagorno-Karabakh — the

landlocked, mountainous enclave in the south Caucasus populated and controlled by 150,000 ethnic Armenians but claimed by neighboring Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh (historically called “Artsakh” in Armenian) is home to one of the world’s oldest surviving indigenous Christian populations, though their history predates Christianity by centuries. Its rugged and mountainous landscape served as a refuge for early Christians fleeing persecution in the second to fourth centuries CE and later as a buttress against Islamization, which swept through the Caucasus and converted most of the inhabitants in the low-lying plains to Karabakh’s east. Today, its cultural topography, dotted by fortresses overlooking gorges, intricately carved cross-stone monuments with ancient eternity symbols, and centuries-old monasteries with fortified walls, serves as a living witness to the enduring presence of the Armenians.

On that Sunday morning, both Nagorno-Karabakh’s people and its cultural heritage were under attack. While the semi-frozen conflict has seen numerous skirmishes and ceasefire violations over the last two decades, this time felt different. And, indeed, it was. My loved ones were immediately deployed, in their standing militias, to defend their villages, while their families hid in bunkers, makeshift bomb shelters, and dense forests. But, unlike the Nagorno-Karabakh War in the early 1990s that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union — which was preceded by the anti-Armenian pogroms in Baku, Azerbaijan that caused my family and me to become refugees — my fellow Armenians were defending themselves not only from Azerbaijani soldiers less familiar with the area’s mountainous terrain, but from Israeli and Turkish drones that easily reached them from overhead, as well as Islamist mercenaries from northern Syria, all with the logistical and tactical support of Azerbaijan’s ethnic and military ally Turkey.

On October 7, I fell asleep flipping through my photos of Nagorno-Karabakh. That night, I imagined myself visiting the Holy Savior Cathedral (Ghazanchetsots Cathedral) in Shushi and once again stepping inside the small, circular room hidden behind the altar where you can pray and hear your voice 360 degrees around your body. I closed my eyes and traced a path from the cathedral to the Silk Road, which runs through Shushi and on which many of my great-great-grandfathers had traveled with their caravans to Iran and beyond. We were only one week into the war, but I was yearning for peace and already imagining how I could assist in Nagorno-Karabakh’s rebuilding.



Gtichavank's altar (2015), covered in matchboxes and thick layers of candle wax, indicated that local Armenian Christians continued to visit the cathedral for devotional purposes despite that it had not been maintained during the Soviet period.

Looking back now, these thoughts were a fantastical defense-mechanism. In reality, I was keenly aware that exactly 100 years ago, in 1920, Azerbaijanis (or rather, Caucasian Tatars as they were then still commonly called at the time) with the help of their ethnic allies the Ottoman Turks — fresh from their genocide of 1.5 million Armenians — killed every last Armenian in Shushi, burned 7,000 Armenian homes and businesses, and destroyed the city's Armenian churches. At the time, Artsakh's population was over 90% Armenian, but territorial control of the region was in flux. Due to the Caucasian Tatars' claims on the Armenian homeland, including Artsakh, Zangezur, and Nakhichevan, the League of Nations rejected in December 1920 the recently formed Azerbaijan Democratic Republic's request for statehood, finding that it was impossible to determine the exact limits of territory over which it exercised authority.

Indeed, in the Russian Revolution's aftermath, several nation-states emerged in Transcaucasia and attempted to define their borders, often resulting in interethnic violence. Amidst the chaos of this bloody nation building, the British, Germans, and Turks each sought to control the resource-laden city of Baku (present-day Azerbaijan) and its oil reserves. (At that point, my family was already living in Baku and working in positions in the oil and natural gas industry, as were many other Armenians from Artsakh.) In 1920, the Bolsheviks solidified their grip on Baku, which was critical for the Soviet Union's energy needs. With the help of certain ethnic Armenian factions, the Bolsheviks overthrew the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and replaced it with the newly formed

Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic (“SSR”). Soon after, apparently under pressure from Turkey and to placate the Azerbaijan SSR, Joseph Stalin carved out Artsakh from its ancestral home in Armenia and plopped it within the borders of the recently created and oil-rich Azerbaijan SSR. As a half-hearted consolation to the Armenians and perhaps out of recognition that Artsakh had maintained a multiethnic but Armenian majority population for over two-thousand years, the territory became an autonomous, largely self-administered oblast (the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast), with Shushi as its administrative center.



After reclaiming Ghazanchetsots Cathedral from Azerbaijani-occupation during the 1990s Nagorno-Karabakh War, the Armenians chose not to repair certain elements of the cathedral’s destruction to serve as a reminder for future generations — including this example whereby Jesus’s face and most of his body have been hammered off, presumably by Azerbaijani iconoclasts (2015).

After dreaming about my return to Shushi, the next day, October 8, I awoke to photos of a shelled Ghazanchetsots Cathedral. Azerbaijan had struck Shushi’s historic cathedral not once, but twice. The second strike, reportedly from a missile-laden drone, injured three foreign journalists who had come to the scene to document the first attack. Having been to Shushi several times, I understood that this strike could not have been an accident. The only structure near Ghazanchetsots Cathedral is a Soviet-era apartment building. There were no military targets. And we soon learned that mothers had been taking cover in the cathedral’s basement with their children, to hide from Azerbaijan’s aerial bombardment and drone attacks. Azerbaijan denied that it had targeted the cathedral and called such accusations both “fake news” and “black propaganda” — as is common for its autocratic, totalitarian regime when questioned about its numerous war crimes and human rights violations. Meanwhile, on October 9,

2020, I watched a [Russian-Azerbaijani journalist on a Russian news program, Evening with Vladimir Soloviev, posture that the attack, if it did happen, was justified](#) because Armenian soldiers were using Ghazanchetsots Cathedral for prayer and Azerbaijan must snuff out these Armenian “terrorists” in whatever “toilet” they can be found. While soldiers praying in a church does not justify converting a religious or cultural site into a military objective under the relevant international laws, it is a telling portrayal of how today’s despotic Azerbaijan teaches Azerbaijanis to view Armenians and Armenian cultural and religious heritage.



The view from Ghazanchetsots Cathedral (2010) (photograph courtesy the author)

month. Nearly each day, I received distressing news from my friends on the ground about Azerbaijani forces’ apparent use of cluster munitions in residential areas, beheadings and mutilations of prisoners of war and captured civilians, and incendiary munitions raining down on Nagorno-Karabakh’s dense forests outside of my maternal line’s village of Nngi, accompanied by video documentation on social media channels — only for most news outlets and numerous inter- and non-governmental organizations to call on “both sides” to end hostilities, or worse, repeat the Azerbaijani regime’s unsubstantiated and illogical accusations (supported and repeated by Turkish officials and media) that it was ethnic Armenians who were behind these crimes and “provocations.”

By November 10, 2020, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a Russian-brokered ceasefire (the “Trilateral Agreement”), which ceded over two-thirds of Nagorno-

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Karabakh, including Shushi, to Azerbaijan and welcomed a revocable Russian peacekeeping presence into the region. The parallels between today's conflict and what happened one hundred years ago could not be any more apparent. The single new dimension, however, was the power of social media, which is both how we received our information about what was happening on the ground and how Azerbaijan's regime disseminated the disinformation it wanted the international community to believe.

Immediately after the ceasefire, Azerbaijani politicians took to Twitter (the social media platform of their choice) to declare victory in "liberating" Nagorno-Karabakh (never mind that Nagorno-Karabakh had never been ruled by a post-Soviet independent Azerbaijan) and to espouse the unsubstantiated theory that Nagorno-Karabakh's centuries-old religious sites are not Armenian at all but rather Caucasian Albanian (a confederation of tribes dating from the second century BCE and later a kingdom in the Caucasus that they regard as proto-Azerbaijani and the original inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh, a claim unsupported by any serious scholarship). This revisionist Azerbaijani social media activity was met with a simultaneous plea to preserve Armenian cultural heritage, by institutions such as [the Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), as well as [an open letter](#) from numerous scholars, and even a warning to Azerbaijan from President [Vladimir Putin himself](#) stating that Christian sites must be protected.

I had come across Azerbaijan's Caucasian Albanian claim several years ago, when researching what protections, if any, existed under international law for Armenian cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh under Azerbaijan's control. This was particularly important given that the Armenian Republic of Artsakh in which the cultural heritage resided (until the recent Trilateral Agreement) is a republic unrecognized by any other country, which poses a problem for international protection of such cultural heritage as most intergovernmental organizations are built around the principle of [sovereign equality of states](#) instead of the [rule of law](#). At the time, I believed that if the quarter century of negotiations under the auspices of the [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe \(OSCE\) Minsk Group](#) failed and war broke out anew, Azerbaijan would once again intentionally target Armenian cultural and religious sites as they did in the 1990s Nagorno-Karabakh War, with impunity. The Caucasian Albanian claim, however, is a threat to Armenian cultural heritage *during peacetime* — or rather, whenever Armenian cultural heritage finds itself inside the borders of Azerbaijan.

And, unfortunately, there is no formal mechanism in international law that can protect these sites from Azerbaijan's intentional destruction.



Remnants of the damage to Gandzasar's exterior, from Azerbaijani aerial bombardment in the Nagorno-Karabakh War in the 1990s, are still visible to this day (2010).

As long as Azerbaijan lays claim to Nagorno-Karabakh, the region's Armenian cultural heritage sites are at grave risk. Because these sites predate the concept of an Azerbaijani national identity by over a millennium (in some cases, two millennia), because

many of them predate even Azerbaijan's predominant religion (Islam) by several centuries, and because they predate the appearance of Azerbaijan's ethnic forefathers (the Turkic tribes from Central Asia), their existence threatens and directly undermines Azerbaijan's historical claims to this region.

Azerbaijan employs its Caucasian Albanian argument to tie itself to a vanished Christian civilization in the South Caucasus, in order to remove a living one: the Armenians. Despite espousing the notion that Armenian cultural heritage is Caucasian Albanian and thus proto-Azerbaijani, as applied to other regions, such claims have not stopped Azerbaijan from the wholesale destruction of both movable and immovable Armenian cultural heritage that finds itself within Azerbaijan's changing borders. (Azerbaijan's recent destruction of 89 Armenian churches and thousands of medieval cross-stones, called khachkars, and Armenian tombstones in the exclave of Nakhichevan — **as reported in Hyperallergic** — is but one glaring example.) Moreover, although Azerbaijan claims Nagorno-Karabakh's Christian religious sites are proto-Azerbaijani, Azerbaijan has not nominated any of the hundreds of churches and monuments in Nagorno-Karabakh to UNESCO's World Heritage List. But it has nominated a fortress in Shushi. (Armenia is not able to nominate any sites because the United

Nations regards Nagorno-Karabakh as a territory lying within the borders of Azerbaijan, contrary to Nagorno-Karabakh's historical autonomy in the Soviet period and the population's later referendums on self-determination during the breakup of the Soviet Union.)

The terms of the Trilateral Agreement require ethnic Armenians to leave several districts of Nagorno-Karabakh, including the Aghdam region which contains the partially excavated ruins of the second century BCE Armenian city of Tigranakert (**also shelled by Azerbaijan during its recent aggression**), the Lachin region (Kashatagh in Armenian) which contains the fifth century CE Armenian church and former monastery of Tzitzernabank, and the Kalbajar district (Karvachar in Armenian) which contains many treasures of Armenian religious heritage. In 2015, I secured a research grant from the US-based National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (**NAASR**) and set out to investigate the Caucasian Albanian claims as they applied to three churches that were founded or rebuilt in the 13th century — located within the Dadivank and Gandzasar monastic complexes in the Kalbajar district and Gitchavank in Hadrut. Under the Trilateral Agreement, most of these monasteries are now under Azerbaijani control and, for reasons I explain below, all three are vulnerable to Azerbaijan's cultural erasure if not outright destruction.

Armenians have had an enduring presence in Nagorno-Karabakh for over two millennia. In 189 BCE, under the Armenian **King Artashes**, the region of Nagorno-Karabakh (then called "Artsakh") became one of the 15 provinces of the Kingdom of Armenia. Two of the 12 apostles (Saints Thaddeus and Bartholomew) were the first evangelizers of the Armenians and were martyred, in the first century CE. Christianity, however, continued to spread throughout the region, from the efforts of St. Gregory the Illuminator — an Armenian-Parthian noble, raised in Cappadocia (present-day Turkey). By roughly 301 CE, King Trdat III made Christianity the official religion of the Kingdom of Armenia, which included Artsakh.



Map of the Kingdom of Caucasian Albania, showing its relation to the Kingdom of Armenia in 387 CE before the Armenian provinces of Artsakh, Utik, and Syunik were combined to this region to create the province of "New Albania" under the Sassanids ([via and courtesy Wikipedia](#))

In 387 CE, the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires partitioned the Kingdom of Armenia between themselves, resulting in Artsakh later becoming part of the Persian province of New Albania in 428 CE. This province combined the former Armenian regions of Artsakh, Utik, and Syunik to the region of Albania — which was inhabited by the Caucasian Albanians. Despite the Sassanid’s unsuccessful campaign of forced assimilation, New Albania’s local princes largely maintained their autonomy. During this period of autonomy, in the early fifth century, St. Mesrop Mashtots invented the Armenian alphabet and opened the first Armenian language school in New Albania, at the [Amaras Monastery](#). (Mashtots also later created an [alphabet for the Caucasian Albanians](#).)

The creation of the Armenian alphabet in the early fifth century helped to homogenize Armenian culture, because it finally allowed churches to conduct their liturgies in Armenian, rather than in Greek or Syriac as they had been doing. Having an alphabet also allowed the Armenians to differentiate themselves from the surrounding peoples and to preserve their culture and identity, despite numerous later attempts by empires and invaders to subsume and assimilate them. The Armenian Apostolic Church’s split from Byzantium, following its rejection of [the Council of Chalcedon](#), also played strongly into the Armenian conception of its inherent uniqueness.

The next several centuries saw multiple waves of migration through Artsakh, including the Arabs, Seljuk Turks, and Mongols. The Arabs arrived in the seventh

century, usurped the Sassanid presence in the region, and ruled there until the 10th century. Although the Arabs converted many of the inhabitants of Transcaucasia to Islam, they were unsuccessful in changing the religious character of most ethnic Armenians. In *The History of the Albanians*, Movsēs Dasxuranci, writing in the 10th century, explains how the Armenian and Caucasian Albanian noble families allied with one another in the seventh century, often through intermarriage, to fight the Arabs. By the end of the 10th century, there was no longer a distinction between the Armenian and Caucasian Albanian inhabitants of New Albania. Indeed, by the end of Dasxuranci's chronicles, the Prince of Albania was referred to as "Abu Ali, the native Armenian," the brother of the Armenian King Smbat.

In the 11th century, Turkic tribes invaded from central Asia and created the Seljuk Empire in 1071 CE. Many historians argue that the Seljuk Turks' most important legacy was linguistic, because the Turkish language led to multiple semi-nomadic tribes in Transcaucasia identifying as Turks, despite their lack of Turkish ethnicity. By the end of the century, however, the Christians regained their independence, and the Armenian princes took control of the region. The 12th century ushered in a period of feudal states, which resulted in the construction of many monastic foundations.

When the Mongols invaded in 1235 CE, they destroyed much of Transcaucasia and settled semi-nomadic Turkish and Kurdish mercenaries in the area, resulting in the disappearance of several Armenian princely families who were either killed or exiled. The Turkish linguistic influences deepened with the arrival of the Oghuz Turks who founded the Ottoman Empire in 1299, and, after two successful wars with the Persians and Safavid Iran, consolidated their occupation of the region in the early 16th century. These gains, however, lasted little more than a century. Russia soon entered the sphere, resulting in a three-way struggle over the region between Ottoman Turkey, Imperial Russia, and Safavid Iran.



In addition to being the first Armenian language school in the 5th century, Amaras Monastery contains the burial tomb of St. Grigoris, the grandson of St. Gregory the Illuminator, and the Catholicos of New Albania. Amaras was plundered in the 13th century by the Mongols, desecrated in 1387 by the campaigns of the “Sword of Islam” Tamerlane, and demolished once again in the 16th century only to be rebuilt in the 17th with fortified walls, then later abandoned, then used by Russian Imperial troops as a frontier fortress, then rebuilt and its church reconsecrated in 1858 with funds from the Armenians of the city of Shushi. This photograph was taken in 2015.



A different view of Amaras’s crypt, 2015

In contrast to the largely homogenous Armenian self-identity, Azerbaijani identity developed more recently and looks externally. The first references to this Turkic-speaking population as “Azerbaijani” and “Azeri” appeared in the early 20th century, upon the formation of the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918. Prior to that, the population was referred to as the “Caucasian

Tatars” or simply “Tatars.” Unlike Armenians who had a distinct language, alphabet, and religion, Azerbaijanis looked outward — identifying both with Turks, linguistically and ethnically, and with Iranians, religiously, due to their shared Shia’s Muslim faith. This split between the Turkic and Persian worlds may have made it difficult to develop a distinct Azerbaijani national or ethnic consciousness.

The Caucasian Tatars’ claims to Nagorno-Karabakh originate in the late 19th century, after the Russians created the Elisabethpol Governate in 1868, by carving out Karabakh and annexing it to the plains to the east, which were inhabited by various semi-nomadic herding populations (such as the Caucasian Tatars, Talysh, Tat, and Lezgin people). This territorial reorganization created competing claims to Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the 20th century, which were further exacerbated by Joseph Stalin’s decision in the Soviet period to overrule the Caucasian Bureau of the Communist Party and place the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast within the newly created Azerbaijan SSR rather than in the Armenia SSR.



The view from Shushi in 2010

In the early 20th century, the concept of Pan-Turkism greatly

influenced Azerbaijani self-identity. Pan-Turkism, which propagated during the decline of the Ottoman Empire, espoused the union of all Turkic peoples from the Balkans to western China — with Armenia being the only geographic obstacle dividing a unified Turkish world. Moreover, after the Ottomans’ “Islamic Army of the Caucasus” invaded Armenia towards the end of World War I to support

Azerbaijani claims to Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenians began to equate the Caucasian Tatars with the Ottoman and Young Turk perpetrators of the Armenian pogroms of 1895–1896 and the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

Of course, the presence of Armenian cultural sites — which predate the Caucasian Tatars' presence in the region by several centuries — created a problem for Azerbaijan's territorial claims, since they undermine any so-called historical rights that Azerbaijan has to Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, while no one would deny that numerous ethnic groups lived in Transcaucasia and contributed to its multifaceted cultural landscape, it is hard to believe that the Caucasian Tatars, whose identity was shaped by their adoption of Islam, can be the inheritors of Christian religious sites. As ethnic Armenians began to exercise their rights to self-determination and Nagorno-Karabakh's majority Armenian population voiced their demands to secede from Azerbaijan SSR in accordance with the Soviet Constitution, Azerbaijan's already tenuous ties to Nagorno-Karabakh required a stronger case.

Enter Caucasian Albanian historiography. Caucasian Albanian historiography, which claims a direct link between present-day Azerbaijanis and the vanished Caucasian Albanians, has its roots in 1947, when a group of Azerbaijani archaeologists discovered remnants of Caucasian Albanian writing in the Azerbaijan SSR. Linking Azerbaijanis to the extinct Caucasian Albanians was one permissible way in which to construct a national identity within the Soviet Union, which encouraged academics to engage in historiography to legitimize the creation of the Soviet republics and their borders but would have frowned on Azerbaijan's Muslim, Turkish, and Iranian associations. In 1965, Ziya Bünyadov, the father of Azerbaijani historiography, published a book on the history of Caucasian Albania during the Arab period, titled *Azerbaijan in the 7th to 9th Centuries*. Among several dubious claims that underlie his construction of an Azerbaijani national identity, Bünyadov posited that Movsēs Dasxuranci's 10th century *History of the Albanians* was originally written in Caucasian Albanian (not Armenian) and later translated into Armenian and destroyed, though no evidence for this claim exists and several scholars later showed that Bünyadov had falsified his translations, omitting reference to Dasxuranci's Armenian heritage as well as that of many of the historical players who were clearly described as Armenian. Bünyadov also theorized that the Armenian princes of Nagorno-Karabakh, such as the Beglarians and Hasan Jalal — whose names you will see on the founding

inscriptions adorning several Armenian cathedrals — were not ethnically Armenian but were instead Armenianized Albanians.

In 1986, Bünyadov's student, Farida D. Mamedova, argued that the geographic and political boundaries of Caucasian Albania were far more extensive than previously accepted. Mamedova portrayed the Caucasian Albanians as an integrated ethnic group and argued that medieval Nagorno-Karabakh was not Armenian and that St. Mesrop Mashtots (the creator of the Armenian alphabet) did not create the Armenian alphabet but instead reformed the Caucasian Albanian one. She further argued that the Caucasian Albanian Church was independent of the Armenian Apostolic Church for centuries and was only subsumed by the Armenian Apostolic Church after the Arab conquest.

To be clear, Bünyadov and Mamedova's purpose was to remove any mediation between the vanished Caucasian Albanians and the living Armenians, while claiming for Azerbaijanis an ancient, albeit Christian, indigenous identity. Although just about every non-Azerbaijani historian who has touched the subject has heavily criticized Bünyadov and Mamedova's scholarship, their revisionist mythology succeeded in planting the notion in current Azerbaijani consciousness that it is not the Armenians but rather the Caucasian Tatars that are the descendants of the Christianized Caucasian Albanians and, by extension, the ancient and rightful owners of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Though there was coexistence between Armenians and Caucasian Albanians in Artsakh, as evidenced by their deep religious exchange, Azerbaijani Caucasian Albanian historiography attempts to use every reference to New Albania, Albania, or "Aghvank" in Armenian as a reference to Caucasian Albania, to obfuscate the Armenian presence in the region. Similarly, the claim that many Armenian princes were not Armenian at all requires one to disbelieve everything that contemporaneous historians wrote about these princes. For example, one would have to believe that Hasan Jalal's title as "Prince of Armenia" was in name only and somehow did not define his ethnicity. And while Armenian and Caucasian Albanian noble families allied with one another, often through intermarriage, to fight the Arabs, by the end of Dasxuranci's 10th century chronicles, the Prince of Albania was "Abu Ali, the native Armenian," the brother of the Armenian King Smbat — meaning that in Nagorno-Karabakh the Armenian and Albanian identities had blurred.

More recent Azerbaijani historiography has gone even further to remove Armenians from their homeland, claiming that the Russians and Iranians introduced Armenians to certain parts of Armenia (such as its capital Yerevan) and Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 19th century. Azerbaijani academics prop up such claims with sloppy references to Russian population surveys and fashioning for themselves a cloak of credibility by citing respected academics such as George A. Bournoutian (perverting their work in the process), while Azerbaijani officials at the highest levels posit that large portions of Armenia, such as Yerevan, Sevan, and Zangezur are “historically” Azerbaijani territory.

What does the Caucasian Albanian claim mean for Nagorno-Karabakh’s cultural heritage, and why do many scholars fear that these sites face “cultural erasure”? Well, for starters, it means that any elements of these sites that contain unique or distinctive Armenian characteristics (that cannot be passed off as Caucasian Albanian) will be destroyed. This includes the following:

(1) **Cupola:** Most of the Armenian cathedrals in the region, including those found in the Dadivank, Gandzasar, and Gtichavank monastic complexes, exhibit similar architectural features to those of the **Etchmiadzin Cathedral** in Armenia, which is the holy mother church of the Armenian Apostolic Church and one of the oldest churches in the world. These architectural features include a cruciform plan topped by a rounded and pointed dome (i.e., cupola). The cupola is one of the most recognized features of Armenian sacred spaces. Already, from Azerbaijani-controlled Shushi, we are seeing photos of Azerbaijan’s post-ceasefire destruction of the “Kanach Zham” (Green Chapel) Armenian Church of St. John the Baptist **by the removal of its cupola**. True to its revisionist tactics, Azerbaijan claims, without any basis, that the early 19th century Kanach Zham church is not Armenian but Russian Orthodox.



Gtichavank in Hadrut was undergoing extensive restoration before Azerbaijan's recent military aggression (2015); this cathedral is now under Azerbaijani control.

(2) **Founding Inscriptions and Donor Portraits:** Two other distinctive elements of Armenian cultural heritage are inscriptions explaining the church's founding and accompanying portraits of the church's donors. Donor portraits are particularly unique to Armenian churches in the region, the most notable of which were created in the ninth and 10th centuries by the Bagratuni dynasty, and which typically depict a model of the church in the hands of its donor. As such, inscriptions and donor portraits are the most problematic elements for Azerbaijan's claims that Armenian churches are Caucasian Albanian, because the inscriptions are engraved using the Armenian alphabet and the donor portraits document and depict the Armenian nobles that commissioned the cathedrals and gave land for the monastic sites. Azerbaijani revisionism posits, again with no basis, that these inscriptions were added by Armenians centuries later to hide the Caucasian Albanian provenance of these cathedrals. Accordingly, if given the opportunity, many people fear that Azerbaijan will erase Nagorno-Karabakh's cathedrals of their Armenian inscriptions. Already, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense released a video from Dadivank, and in the footage Dadivank's inscriptions (which are prevalent on both the interior and exterior walls of the cathedral) are tellingly absent.



Dadivank's exterior donor portraits, and various carving on the facade engraved in Armenian characters.

At Dadivank, for example, the inscriptions explain in medieval Armenian that in 1214 CE Queen Arzou of Haterk funded the construction of the church in her sons' memory and to fulfill their promise, as they had intended to build the church themselves but were unable to do so because of their untimely deaths:

I, Arzou-Khatoun, obedient servant of Christ ... wife of King Vakhtang, ruler of Haterk and all Upper Khachen, with great hopes built this holy cathedral on the place where my husband and sons rest in peace. My first-born Hasan martyred for his Christian faith in the war against the Turks, and, three years later, my younger son Grigor also joined Christ. Completed in the year 663 [in the Armenian calendar].

On the cathedral's southern façade, the two sons, Princes Hasan and Grigor, are depicted presenting a model of the church.

At Gandzasar, which became the burial place of the Armenian princes of Khachen in 1216 CE, the donation inscriptions are engraved within the interior of the church, in its most sacred spaces. On the north wall, an inscription describes Prince



Gandzasar's donor portraits, depicting the Armenian prince Hasan-Jalal (2015)

Hasan Jalal Dawla's wish to commission the Gandzasar Monastery, the construction of which began in 1216 and lasted until 1238. The donor portrait on the exterior of the church, on the dome, depicts Prince Hasan Jalal sitting cross-legged with a model of the church — a device meant to project power at the Seljuk court. Despite adopting an Arabic-influenced name as was fashionable at the time, Prince Hasan Jalal Dawla (Grand Prince

of the Armenian dynasty of Khachen) was described by his contemporaries as Armenian: "Hasan, the great prince of Xach'ēn and Arts'ax region, whom they endearingly called Jalal, a pious religious man and a modest Armenian by nationality." Azerbaijani revisionists such as Bünyadov and Mamedova, however, claim that Prince Hasan Jalal Dawla was not Armenian but Caucasian Albanian.

(3) **Khachkars:** The cross, which represents Jesus's crucifixion and salvation through that crucifixion, is an important part of worship for Armenian Christians in their meditative and devotional practices. Armenians create what are known as khachkars — intricately carved Armenian cross-stones that contain a cross resting on the symbol of a sun or an eternity symbol. Khachkars are on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity. They dot both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh's landscape; you will find them along roads, at the top of mountains, and, of course, in churches and cemeteries — their bases often covered in melted wax from candles lit by praying Christians. Recent footage from Hadrut shows Azerbaijani military personnel destroying a khachkar in Hadrut, a region Azerbaijan claimed during its recent military advance.



A view of Gtichavank's monastic buildings in 2015 with a large khachkar embedded into the facade

There are over 4,000 Armenian cultural sites in Nagorno-Karabakh, including 370 churches. Now that most of this cultural heritage is in Azerbaijan's *de facto* control, even with the presence of Russian peacekeepers in certain regions, there is little hope that Azerbaijan will not destroy them. Most experts predict that Azerbaijan's cultural genocide will occur slowly over many years, if not decades, starting with the more recent Armenian churches, dating to the 17th to 19th centuries (as with Ghazanchetsots and Kanach Zham in Shushi) before moving on to the older, lesser known sites (such as Okhte Drni in Hadrut and Yeghishe Arakyal near Madagiz, which contains the tomb of the king of the Caucasian Albanians, "Vachagan the Pious"), and finally to the crown jewels of Armenian cultural heritage (such as Dadivank).

In fact, Azerbaijan thwarts even preliminary efforts to safeguard this cultural heritage by continuing to deny entry to independent experts seeking to inventory and assess the status of Nagorno-Karabakh's sites. (This, of course, makes it easier to destroy Armenian sites and later claim they never existed, as Azerbaijan did in its exclave of Nakhichevan.) On December 21, 2020, UNESCO issued a press release lamenting Azerbaijan's lack of cooperation with UNESCO's request to send an independent, technical mission of experts to Nagorno-Karabakh — a decision of UNESCO's Second Protocol Committee that Azerbaijan reportedly had tried to prevent.



Khachkars line the interior of Gandzasar's monastic walls (2009)

Nagorno-Karabakh's Christian religious sites unquestionably refer to a unique Armenian visual tradition. Nevertheless, trying to disentangle what Christian heritage is exclusively Armenian versus Caucasian Albanian is beside the point: Living Armenians use and venerate these sites and living Armenians are now excluded from these sites. Therefore, the calls to save Armenian cultural heritage are not pleas to preserve an extinct indigenous group's millennia-old monuments for future tourist attractions; they are an urgent demand to stop an ongoing cultural genocide, which has seen hundreds of Armenian sites erased from present-day Turkey and the South Caucasus. For now, however, Nagorno-Karabakh's sites still stand after hundreds of years of conquest and are a living witness to the region's long Christian heritage. Nagorno-Karabakh's cultural landscape thus poses a formidable challenge to modern, competing territorial claims. Any ethnic group laying claim to Nagorno-Karabakh must first explain its ties to these cultural monuments. Or, in Azerbaijan's case, it must first explain them and then erase them.

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