

The architectural heritage of Artsakh. Academism and falsification

Lyuba Kirakosyan^a  

^aNational University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia, Yerevan, Armenia.

Abstract Artsakh is rich in historical and cultural monuments spanning various epochs, with several thousand structures. These include religious, secular, and memorial architectural marvels dating from the early Middle Ages to the 19th century. The documentation and presentation of this rich heritage have evolved over approximately 200 years. Initially confined to historiographical narratives, travel notes, and memoirs, the scientific exploration of Artsakh's architectural legacy developed more recently, gaining momentum from the 1970s onward. The heritage of Artsakh has been examined by both Armenian and Azerbaijani specialists, employing varying approaches. This research endeavors to shed light on the approach of Armenian academic science toward the renowned monastery complexes in Artsakh. It also aims to highlight instances of potential fact manipulation and falsification by Azerbaijani specialists. The methodology employed involves a meticulous comparative analysis of professional literature and the synthesis of personal observations. Through the lens of the most celebrated monastery complexes in Artsakh, this study seeks to elucidate the historical and academic discourse surrounding them, tracing the evolution of perceptions and addressing potential distortions introduced by differing perspectives. If specific queries or areas of interest within this topic arise, feel free to delve deeper for a more detailed discussion.

Keywords: artsakh, heritage, academism, falsification

1. Introduction

The preserved architectural monuments of Artsakh are only a part of the once existing ones. The literature shows that hundreds of churches were built in Artsakh only in the 5th century (Kaghankatvatsi, 1969), very few of which have reached us today.

Currently, the official list of monuments in the territory of the Republic of Artsakh contains more than 4 thousand monuments, ten percent of which are pre-Christian, approximately one and a half percent of which are Muslim, and approximately 20 percent of which are from the 14th to the 16th centuries. The rest are Armenian Christian monuments, which refer to the 4th-19th centuries (Atlas of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, 2009).

The architectural heritage of Artsakh has been the subject of research since the 19th century. The historical information about the monastic complexes and the monuments were partially described by the Armenian researchers (Jalalyants, 1842; Shahkhatunyants, 1842; Barkhutaryants, 1895; Lalayan, 1897). Historiographical studies of the end of the 19th and 20th centuries (Barkhutaryants, 1897; Barkhutaryants, 1907), travelogues, travel notes, and memoirs (Leo, 1869) also contain factual materials about the monuments of Artsakh. Such information is very important and acquires the significance of the original source since the monuments of Artsakh have been damaged by natural disasters, as well as by human hands. Many inscriptions, sculptures, and khachkars were destroyed, and many of the buildings of the monastic complexes were also destroyed. Among modern historical studies, H. Voskanyan's (Oskyan, 1953) and B. Ulubabyan's (Ulubabyan, 1975) works are worth mentioning. The architectural heritage of Artsakh became the subject of professional observation for the first time by A. Yakobson (Yakobson, 1977).

In the research on the architectural heritage of the territory of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, great work was done by Sh. Mkrtchyan (Mkrtchyan, 1985; Mkrtchyan, 1989), S. Karapetyan (Karapetyan, 1999), and V. Harutyunyan (Harutyunyan, 1992) in the 1970s and 1980s. Foreign scholars, such as Paulo Cuneo (Cuneo et al., 1988), Jean-Michel Thierry (Thierry, 1991), and Patrik Donabedian (Thierry & Donabedian, 1987), among others, have also studied the architecture of Artsakh. The merit of Murad Hasratyan in the field of academic research on the architectural heritage of Artsakh is invaluable (Hasratyan, 1992). The academic study of the architectural heritage of Artsakh in the first period (starting from the second half of the 20th century) took place when Armenian researchers were deprived of the opportunity to conduct cultural

research in Nagorno Karabakh. The "blocked" state of the territory created by the will of Soviet Azerbaijan made it impossible to address architectural monuments, let alone to examine, measure, and fix them. Moreover, a cultural genocide was carried out against them. The mechanisms of both physical extermination and vandalism, as well as the modification and reuse of monuments, were applicable.

During this period, the Azerbaijani authorities have constantly controlled the field of Artsakh cultural heritage research and have given strategic state orders to Azerbaijani scientific institutions and so-called scientists who have undertaken this effort, adopting the policy of distorting and changing scientific unbiased facts and religious affiliation. Official publications, directories, and guidebooks did not mention Armenian architectural monuments; only Muslim architecture was presented (Avalov, 1977; Fatullaev, 1970). Armenian Christian monuments and complexes were claimed to be albanized, and the "albanization theory" was created (Ziia Buniatov and Farida Mahmedovna). In response to this "theory", Sara Crombach, a researcher at the University of Amsterdam, wrote the book "Ziia Buniatov and the Invention of Azerbaijani Past", which presents the life and work of the academician who is the father of the falsification of Azerbaijan's history.

In Asatur Mnatsakanyan's work "Reply to Ziia Buniatov", the author also best opposes the albanization of the Armenian historical and cultural heritage by Azerbaijan and proves the problem scientifically and with arguments. Other researchers also responded to that situation and presented the mechanisms of expropriation of Artsakh's heritage (Petrosyan, 2010).

In the period between the first and second Artsakh Wars, an opportunity was created for the Armenian researcher for a comprehensive study of architectural complexes in the liberated territories. From this point of view, the discovery, archaeological validation and architectural examination of the architectural complexes of the city of Tigranakert in Artsakh and the discovery, which allows us to add to the Armenian historical-architectural heritage, introduce clarifications into the ideas of Hellenistic urban planning and building art, as well as early medieval architecture (research was carried out by the archaeological expedition of Artsakh under the leadership of doctor of historical sciences H. Petrosyan). The process was interrupted by the situation established after the end of the second Artsakh War.

The modern stage of academic research on the architectural heritage of Artsakh is related to many difficulties. After the 44-day war, many architectural monuments found in the occupied territory of the country were inaccessible for academic research and endangered. They are either physically destroyed or transformed and expropriated. The Azerbaijani side continues its policy of falsification, distortion and modification of unbiased scientific facts. The Armenian scientific community is trying to find ways to the greatest extent possible.

After the 44-day war, monitoring of the cultural heritage of Artsakh and presenting the architectural monuments was carried out by the "MONUMENT WATCH" program, which is an independent academic platform that records the state and changes of the cultural heritage of Artsakh and presents and interprets it within the limits of professional knowledge and academic decency (Monitoring the Cultural Heritage of Artsakh, 2021).

Using satellite images, the "Caucasus Heritage Watch" platform monitors and validates the state of cultural heritage passed under the control of Azerbaijan (Caucasus Heritage Watch, 2020).

The mission of the Stepanakert "Monuments of Artsakh" pentalingual website is the unbiased presentation and popularization of the history, culture, and chronology of the occupied territories.

The mission of the Research on Armenian Architecture (RAA) foundation is to search for, document and comprehensively study the monuments of Armenian culture through scientific expeditions throughout historical Armenia (especially in the territory of Artsakh), as well as in historical settlements.

Raffi Kortoshian's English-language book "The Endangered Christian Armenian Heritage of Artsakh" draws special attention to the Armenian Christian monuments in the territories occupied by Azerbaijan, which are more than endangered.

The purpose of the present research is to clarify, with the analysis and scientific examination of the architectural layout and spatial organization of the most significant monastery complexes of Artsakh and observed by Azerbaijani specialists, how Azerbaijan tried and is trying to falsify the facts by "Albanization" of these monuments, that is, by creating the theoretical basis of "Azerbaijanization".

2. Materials and Methods

The study used interdisciplinary methods: analysis of experience, generalization, comparison and typological characterization. A comparison is made between the Armenian and Azerbaijani views on the architectural heritage of Artsakh. The discussion is based on objective scientific facts and our own observations. This research method allows, within the boundaries of professional knowledge and academic ethics, the exposure of the falsity of Azerbaijani science, which is not based on facts and has adopted a policy of falsifying, distorting, and changing the real image of Artsakh's architectural heritage.

3. Results and Discussion

The Gandzasar monastery is one of the best complexes of the Artsakh School of Architecture. Like other developed Armenian monasteries of the Middle Ages, a landscape monument harmonized with the natural environment. Anatoli Yakobson, a great connoisseur of Armenian culture, conducted the first research on the Gandzasar monastery from the professional point of view of Artsakh architecture (Yakobson, 1977).

The so-called scientists of Azerbaijan, while presenting the architecture of the monument groups of Artsakh, referred mainly to individual structures, especially the main churches, ignoring the important feature that is characteristic of Armenian monasteries, i.e., complex unite structure.

Armenian academic scientific thought has repeatedly referred to the architectural complex of Gandzasar (Paulo Cuneo, Anatoli Yakobson, Bagrat Ulubabyan, Murad Hasratyan and others). Not aiming to present in detail the architectural complex familiar to everyone, we would like to address several points (problems of spatial organization, comparative analysis of plan and volume-spatial composition, characteristic of the architectural school, traditionality of building art) that undeniably prove the Armenian affiliation of the Gandzasar Monastery and the other monasteries of Artsakh in general, contrary to the works of Azerbaijani specialists, where without justifications and research and examination of the abovementioned problems, a premeditated goal is clearly observed: to "Albanize", i.e., "Azerbaijanize", the complex.

The main Surb Hovhannes Mkrtych Church, dating back to the 13th century, the narthex (gavit) and the refectory belonging to the 17th-18th centuries, are part of the complex. The monastery's refectory is in the northeast corner of the complex, and the two-story building of the school is on the east side. The monument group is surrounded by walls lined with limestone and semifinished basalt. There is a building serving as an accommodation for pilgrims outside the gate on the southeast side (Figure 1).



Figure 1 General view of Gandzasar Monastery from above. Photo: H. Baze.

The main church has a rectangular structure outwardly, cross-shaped inwardly, with two-story sacristies in each of the four corners. The compositional type "inscribed cross", which appeared in Armenian architecture in the 10th century, originated from the "domed hall" (Haghpat-967-991, Sanahin-967-972, Kecharis-1033). It became more popular in the 13th century. The churches of the monasteries Geghard, Noravank, Hovhanavank, Saghmosavank, Harichavank and Khorakert belong to the compositional type of the Gandzasar church.

The narthex (gavit), which is a pillarless gavit, is attached to the church from the western side. A pair of intersecting arches meet in a stalactite dome at the intersection, above which a light, octagonal rotunda rises. Such a cover solution is found only in Armenian architecture, which was formed as early as the 12th century and is found in a number of monuments (Yakobson mentions 19 such monuments: Haghpat, Mshkavank, Khorakert, Arates, Haghpat and Haghartsin refectories). The structures of the vaults of Haghpat and Mshkavank are especially close to the roof of the Gandzasar gavit (Yakobson, 1977).

In his abovementioned extensive scientific article dedicated to the *Gandzasar Monastery*, Anatoly Yakobson, who presented in detail the discussion of the plan, spatial, constructive and artistic expressiveness of the complex, considered it necessary to express his surprise in connection with Geyushev's (Geyushev, 1973) groundless remark that the Gandzasar Monastery does not belong to Armenian architecture but is a monument of Aghvank culture (Yakobson, 1977).

Indeed, Geyushev's and not only his but also Akhundov's claims are absurd, illogical and unscientific. Their only goal is, in the form of statements, to alienate Gandzasar Monastery from Armenian architecture. The numerous Armenian inscriptions on the walls of the Mother Church (which Hovsep Orbeli mentioned much earlier), the date of construction, are ignored. In the first half of the 13th century, when Aghvank as a state entity did not exist for a long time, neither did the form of the church nor its gavit (which, by the way, is not discussed at all among Azerbaijani authors), which are typical of Armenian architecture and were spread in different schools of Armenian architecture.

For Gandzasar, as the residence of the Caucasian Albania Catholicos, the Azerbaijani authors ignore the fact that the Gandzasar monastery was built almost two centuries before the Caucasian Albania Catholicos was moved there. D. Akhundov, speaking about the ornamentation of the Gandzasar monastery, seeks to "Mithraist" the reliefs of the temple and vestibule, as well as the canonical, pan-Christian pictorial plots on the khachkars (Akhundov, 1986).

Another manifestation of the anti-scientific approach is when some monuments of Artsakh are deliberately made archaic (Geyushev, 1984). For example, the single-nave basilica of Dadivank, which belongs to the 13th century with its architectural features, construction art, decor, and inscription, is dated in the book to the 6th-7th centuries. The author also considers the Amaras basilica to be early medieval, which was completely built in 1858. Overall, M. Hasratyan sees an obvious tendency to make the process of further "Albanization" of monuments easier (Hasratyan, 1992):

Davud Akhundov's book on the architecture of Azerbaijan provides the theoretical basis of "Albanization" for the Azeriization of the medieval monuments of Artsakh (Akhundov, 1986).

The architecture of *Dadivank*, another large complex in Artsakh, has also been distorted (Figure 2): D. Akhundov attributes the asymmetric solution of the Khatravank church to Dadivank (Akhundov, 1986). There are many such deceptions and falsifications of facts among Azerbaijani authors. The same Akhundov appropriates texts from M. Hasratyan's studies dedicated to the palace hall of Dadivank, adapting some ideas to his goals. If Hasratyan writes that this hall is a "unique monument of civil architecture of medieval Armenia", Akhundov presents it as "a unique monument of civil architecture of medieval Albanian" (Hasratyan, 1992).



Figure 2 The general view of Dadivank. Photo: S. Ayvazyan.

Yeghisha Arakyal Monastery has also *been described* (Akhundov, 1986). Akhundov does not even attempt to discuss the problems of the spatial organization of the monastery, the plan and spatial solutions of individual structures, or the questions of traditionality and inheritance of the composition. Most importantly, the organization and construction of the spatial environment of the monasteries were not considered because of their functions. Accordingly, the monasteries were formed as ensembles of religious and secular structures.

Yeghisha Arakyal Monastery consists of churches, a vestibule attached to the main church from the west, the chapel-tomb of Vachagan Barepasht (Figure 3). Most of the structures of the monument group have construction inscriptions, according to which, and taking into account the architectural features, they date back to the 12th-13th centuries. The main church is a vaulted hall without vaulted arches and has a rare feature: the semicircular altar joins the longitudinal walls with a smooth passage inside without corners. The churches of Sedvi and Saint Astvatsatsin Church of Mshkavank are also vaulted. The forms of altars in monastery churches are diverse: semicircular (4, 6, 7), rectangular (2, 3, 8), and double altars (1, 5). Such a variety of altars in one monastery is rarely found in Armenian complexes. Double altar churches were widespread in the developed Armenian architecture of the Middle Ages.

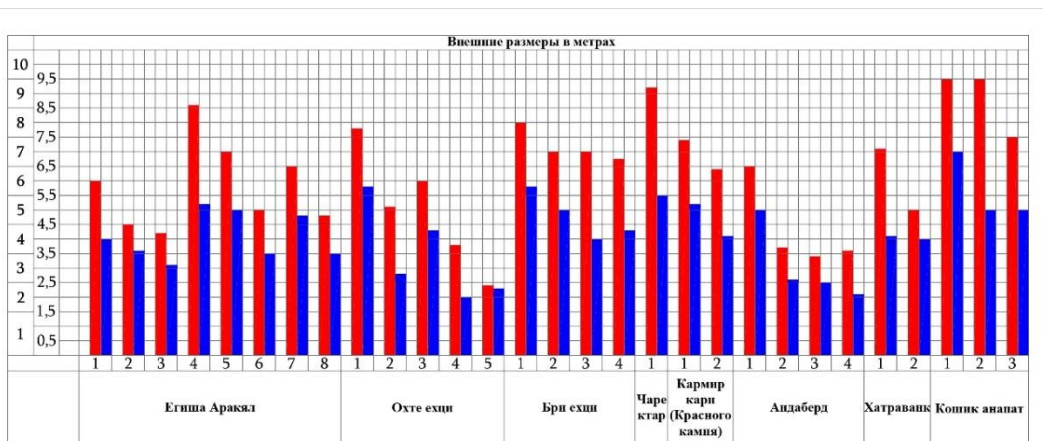


Figure 3 The metrical analysis of the churches of Yeghisha Apostle Monastery, Bri Eghts Monastery etc. diagram.

Akhundov’s book also presents the early medieval monuments of Artsakh: Tsitsernavank and Mokhrenes. The Tsitsernavank Basilica (now occupied by Azerbaijan) is "Albanized" on the grounds that a pair of pylons is located in front of one of the entrances, which is allegedly not found "in the Christian architecture of Armenia and Georgia" (Akhundov, 1986). Commenting on this misunderstanding, Hasratyan writes that the author, not being aware of the reconstruction of the Tsitsernavank pillars, makes such baseless summaries (Hasratyan, 1992). For the same reason, the cradlings are located in front of the entrances and in other early medieval Armenian basilicas: Yereruk, Yeghvard, and Tekor.

The church of Vankasar is situated in the Martakert region of Nagorno Kharabakh Republic on the left side of the highway from Stepanakert to Martakert, on the highest peak of Vankasar Mountain.

This small church of the early Middle Ages is a cross-like, central domed, three-winged type of church. Its plan and spatial composition are similar to those of Talin, Aylaber and Karashamb churches in the territory of the Armenian Republic. A cross was carved on the tympanum of the western door, and it was destroyed by Azerbaijani, restorations, etc. There are signs of the master in the form of Armenian letters on the walls of the church. Some of them still exist and are in their places and have survived the Azerbaijani reconstruction. Notwithstanding these facts, the church was regarded as a Caucasian Albanian church.

Moreover, in the 1980s, the Azerbaijanians reconstructed the Azerbaijanians, neglecting its constructional and proportional features, which were characteristic of the period. As a result, this fine early Christian church became a mass of architectural nonsense (Figure 4). The Azerbaijani political project brought about serious difficulties in reconstructing the original plan of the monument.



Figure 4 The church of Vankasar after the Azerbaijani, restoration. Photo: H. Baze.



However, factual arguments, analogical material, rich layers of early medieval culture and similarities of architectural monuments in Armenia enable us to introduce the original form of the Vankasar Church and suggest its reconstruction (Figure 5) (Kirakosyan, 2013). This project will address the so-called theory of the Caucasian Albanian–Azerbaijani relationship and all attempts to call Azerbaijani the material culture and heritage left by the Armenian people of Artsakh. Previously, the restructuring project was also presented by Armen Ghazaryan (Kazaryan 2013, 603-604).

The architectural heritage of Artsakh, having originality arising from local and topographical conditions, was in close contact with the architecture of central Armenia. These common features were expressed in construction techniques, methods of using stone, constructive solutions, plan and volume-spatial solutions, and decorative motifs. The "Bri Eghtsi" complex involves the cooperation and architectural relations of master architects from different regions of Armenia. According to the dated record of the smallest church of the monastery, it was built by Khachenik Vardpet (Architect), who was from Ani (Barkhudaryan, 1982). The church has a rich and luxurious decoration of the facade, the entire surface is covered with bird-shaped geometric sculptures and khachkars, and the western porch is specially decorated (Figure 6). Khachenik Anetsi also built the monuments of "Bri Eghtsi", in which the picturesque style was also used. The appearance of this style in the 12th-13th centuries was mainly connected with the urban culture of Ani (Yakobson, 1972). In the inscription on the ornate facade of the other church in the "Bri Eghtsi" complex, located west of the main group of monuments, there is another mention of Shahen Vardpet-Architect.

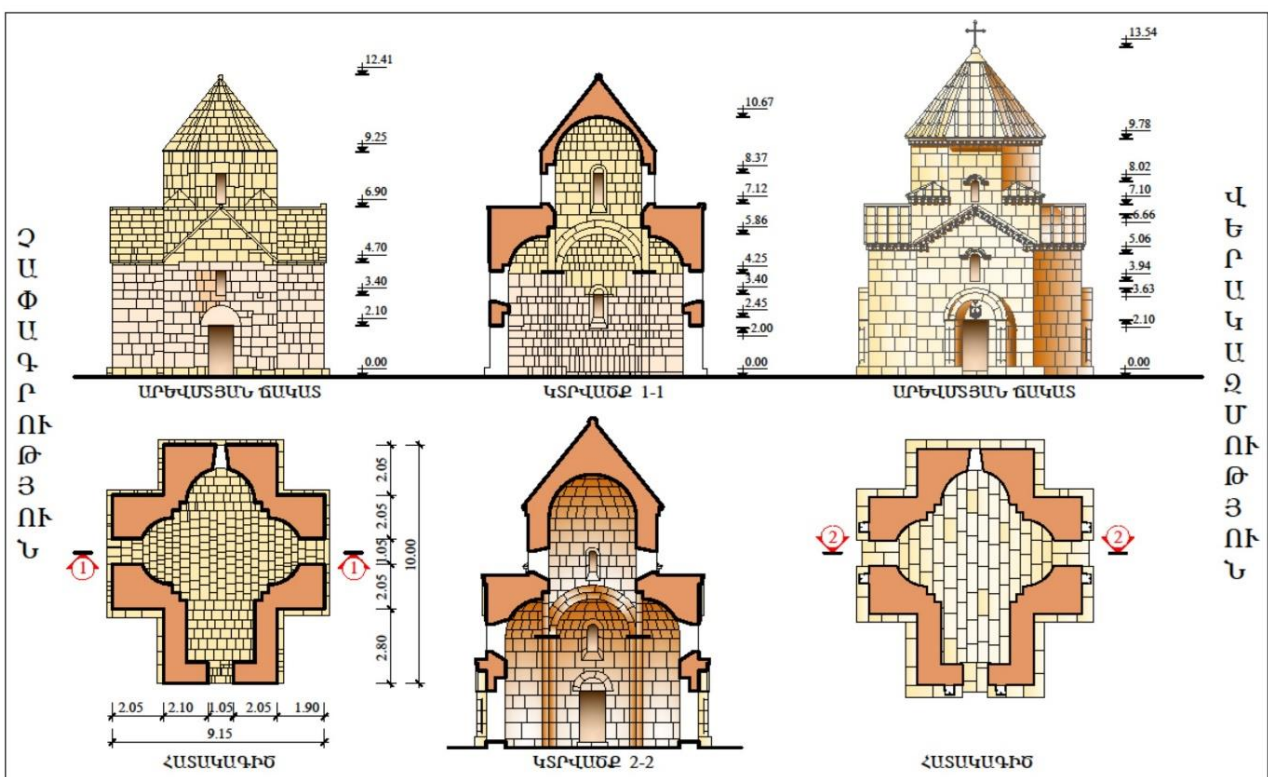


Figure 5 The restoration project of the Vankasar Church: Author L. Kirakosyan.

As in the whole territory of Armenia, the construction of monuments and groups of monuments in Artsakh was carried out with stone via the "midis" technique using lime mortar. Both clean-cut stone and rough-cut stone were used. Only the structural nodes of the building (corners of walls, masonry, and arches) were smoothly hewn. This was also the case for the structures belonging to the architectural school of Syunik, which neighbors Artsakh (Mnatsakanyan, 1960). It should be noted that the structural relations of the architectural complexes of Artsakh with the architecture of Syunik continued even in the late Middle Ages. The two-column structure of three-nave basilica-type churches, which is widespread in the late medieval churches of Artsakh (St. Astvatsatsin of Tsaghkavank, the Hermitage Kusanats of Avetaranots Church), is typical of Syunik (the Hermitage Shnerhi, Knevank) church architecture (Hasratyan, 1973), which is also found in other states of Armenia. Leaving all this aside, in March 2021, during a visit to the Hadrut region, in particular to Tsakuri, Ilham Aliyev, pointing to the inscription in St. Astvatsin Church of Tsakuri (Tsaghkavank) made an unfounded and distorted interpretation that the inscriptions and crosses were newly carved and that the Udi church was Armenianized (<https://youtu.be/blq-Kn1QnMs>). This once again speaks about the fact that the Armenian cultural heritage in the occupied territories is being transformed and destroyed under the high patronage of the state and is clear evidence of the purposeful policy pursued by Azerbaijan (Kirakosyan, 2023).





Figure 6 The facade of the small church of Bri Eghts Monastery. Photo: H. Petrosyan.

The same politicization and unscientific nature is also evidenced by the Russification of Shushi's two churches—Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi (Figure 7) and Hovhannes Mkrtych Church of Shushi or Kanach Zham (Green Church) (Figure 8), which are preserved—have building inscriptions in Armenian script and archival materials confirming their being Armenian (<http://realkarabakh.com/>). The facts about the Armenians are presented in the article published by us (Kirakosyan, 2022).

Notably, as a result of cultural vandalism, the Church of St. Hovhannes in Shushi, which was formerly proclaimed Russian, has been physically destroyed today. It no longer exists (Monument Watch, 2024).



Figure 7 Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi. Photo: L. Kirakosyan.



Figure 8 Hovhannes Mkrtych Church of Shushi or Kanach Zham (Green Church). Photo: H. Petrosyan.

4. Final considerations

We can state the following:

Azerbaijan's position on the presentation of the architectural heritage of Artsakh is obvious: with the task of the high political leadership and the direct participation of implementing a clear programmed policy of eradicating the Armenian cultural and historical traces from the territory of Artsakh, which is accompanied by different methods: vandalism, misrepresentation, misappropriation. Such an approach is far from science and academicism and is a policy of falsification of regional history and culture, which is a part of the institutionalized anti-Armenian discourse in Azerbaijan.

One of the important tasks of Armenology studies today is to present and popularize the impartial, academic study of the architectural heritage of Artsakh to the world scientific and political community, which will take this heritage under its protection and respond to the Azerbaijani anti-scientific processes that vandalize, manipulate and usurp this heritage.

Ethical Consideration

Not applicable.

Conflict of interest

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