

The tomb of St. Grigoris in Amaras monastery: From an architectural and archaeological perspective

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Abstract:

Amaras Monastery represents one of the most significant early medieval religious and architectural complexes of Artsakh, characterised by its multilayered historical development and cultural importance. Located within the monastery is the martyrium of Bishop St. Grigoris, grandson of Grigor the Illuminator, whose architectural composition and spatial organisation are of particular interest in the study of early Christian funerary architecture. This article examines the martyrium's planning and structural features based on archaeological and architectural evidence. The findings are comparatively analysed alongside contemporaneous Armenian and early Christian martyriums in both Eastern and Western traditions. Special attention is given to the spatial configuration of entrances, particularly the debated eastern entry, and its possible connection to liturgical practices and the canonical reforms attributed to Vachagan the Pious. The study demonstrates that the martyrium's original composition followed the typological principles of early Armenian Christian architecture, with a primary western entrance and an eastern niche. The eastern entry is interpreted as a later modification, likely associated with subsequent construction phases and functional adaptations. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of early medieval architectural traditions and the religious-cultural interactions between Armenia and Caucasian Albania (Auank).

Keywords:

Amaras monastery; martyrium; early Christian architecture; Artsakh; Vachagan the Pious; funerary architecture

1. Introduction

Amaras Monastery, located near the village of Sos in the Martuni district of Artsakh (Fig. 1, Fig. 2), represents one of the region's significant early Christian centres. The early medieval architectural heritage of this area indicates that the historical province of Haband played an important role in spreading Christianity. Evidence of early Christian activity can also be traced in nearby settlements such as Chartar and Berdashen [1]. According to the 7th-century historian Movses Kalankatuatsi, Grigor the Illuminator founded the first church of Amaras Monastery and appointed supervisors for its construction [2,3].

Although no physical remains of this structure have survived, its historical importance is confirmed by written sources.

Amaras Monastery is closely associated with Grigoris, the grandson of Grigor the Illuminator and the Catholicos of Virq and province of Aluank. As described in historical accounts, Grigoris actively participated in spreading Christianity across regions extending to Atrpatakan [4]. According to Maghakia Ormanian, St. Grigoris was martyred in 338 in the land of the Maskuts while preaching Christianity. After his body was transported to Haband and buried near the church founded by his grandfather. This burial site later became the location of the martyrium, forming a central element of the monastery complex. Following his death, the region experienced a period of instability and decline. Subsequently, King Vachagan the Pious of the Aranshahik dynasty identified the burial site of the saint's relics and, in 489, commissioned the construction of a martyrium there. Historical sources indicate that a chapel was rapidly erected over the grave and dedicated to St. Grigoris.

According to M. Hasratyan, this expedited construction was likely due to the deteriorated or ruined condition of the earlier church at the site.

The historical development of the region must be considered within the broader context of Caucasian Albania (Aluank), situated east of Greater Armenia (Mets Hayk) and extending from the Kura River to the Caucasus Mountains. Throughout antiquity, this territory was known under different names – Aluank in Armenian sources, Albania in Roman accounts, and Arran in Persian and Assyrian traditions. During the 5th century, the region came under the control of the Sasanian Empire. Following the Armenian uprising of 450–451 led by Vardan Mamikonyan, similar resistance movements emerged in Aluank. In response, the Sasanian administration abolished local monarchies in 461 and reorganised the region into marzpanates governed by Persian officials. As part of this reorganisation, several Armenian provinces, including Artsakh and Utik, were incorporated into Aluank [5].

A key issue in the study of the Amaras martyrium concerns the location and chronology of its entrances. M. Hasratyan argues that the original structure had a western entrance and an eastern niche, corresponding to typical early medieval Armenian martyriums [6]. In contrast, H. Petrosyan suggests that the martyrium, along with comparable examples such as those at Tigranakert and Vachar, originally had eastern entrances, associating this feature with the religious reforms of Vachagan the Pious [7,8]. At the same time, Petrosyan acknowledges the hypothetical nature of this interpretation and the existence of unresolved questions regarding early medieval funerary architecture.

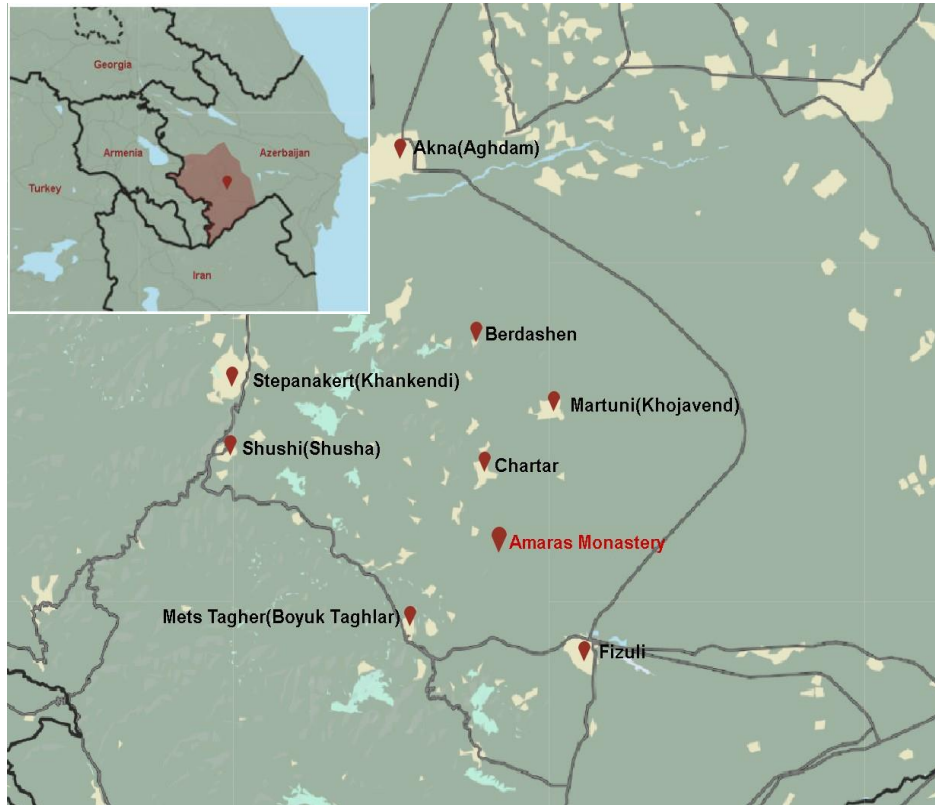


Fig. 1. Satellite image (Google Earth) of the geographical location of Amaras Monastery, source: own study



Fig. 2. Amaras monastery, general view of the complex, photo by D. Abrahamyan

In the current research context, where access to certain monuments is limited, it is essential to rely on documented archaeological data and previous scholarly investigations. Consequently, a critical reassessment of the architectural composition of the Amaras martyrium is required, especially with regard to the configuration and development of its entrances. Despite the limitations in field observation, particularly the inaccessibility of comparable monuments such as the St. Stepanos martyrium in Vachar [9,10], existing studies indicate that the Amaras martyrium follows the typological and spatial principles characteristic of early medieval Armenian funerary architecture.

The aim of this study is to determine the original spatial configuration of the martyrium of St. Grigoris, with particular emphasis on the location and development of its entrances, based on archaeological evidence and comparative analysis.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the materials and methods, including archaeological observations

and historical documentation; Section 3 discusses the results and their interpretation in a comparative framework; and the final section summarises the main conclusions.

2. Materials and methods

Amaras Monastery has functioned as a continuous religious and cultural centre since the early medieval period. Despite multiple phases of destruction and reconstruction, particularly during Arab [3] and Mongol [11] incursions, the site has preserved significant architectural layers that allow for stratigraphic and compositional analysis.

The present volumetric and spatial configuration of the monastery complex was largely formed during the late Middle Ages and underwent substantial reconstruction in the 12th century under the patronage of Catholicos Petros of Gandzasar. Epigraphic evidence from the tympanum of the eastern entrance of St. Grigoris Church confirms these interventions [12].

Subsequent modifications occurred in later periods, including the 17th-century reconstruction under Melik Shahnazar Haykazn of Varanda, when the monastery acquired fortified defensive features. The complex included perimeter walls with corner towers, as well as auxiliary structures such as refectories, kitchens, and accommodation spaces.



Fig. 3. The eastern facade of the church, photo by A. Balayan

This study's methodological approach integrates architectural analysis, archaeological evidence, and historical documentation. The research draws on:

- published excavation reports and measurement data of the martyrium and its structural elements
- visual and metric documentation (plans, sections, and photographs) obtained from archaeological investigations
- comparative analysis with contemporaneous early Christian martyriums in Armenia and neighbouring regions
- written historical sources describing the construction, destruction, and reconstruction phases of the monastery

Particular attention is given to analysing the martyrium's eastern and western access points. This includes examining structural relationships between the martyrium and the overlying church, as well as assessing construction techniques, wall stratigraphy, and later architectural interventions.

Additionally, data from recent archaeological surveys conducted at the nearby site known as *Grigor the Illuminator's Mount (Lusavorchi Sar)* are incorporated into the study. These include findings of architectural fragments, such as hewn stones and a sculpted capital, suggesting the existence of an earlier ecclesiastical structure, potentially related to the original foundation attributed to Grigor the Illuminator.

The analysis aims to reconstruct the martyrium's original architectural configuration and clarify the chronology and function of its entrances by correlating physical evidence with historical and comparative data. However, since 2023, the Amaras Monastery has been under Azerbaijani control. Consequently, further field research has been limited by the lack of physical access to the site, and the present study relies on previously published archaeological data and documentation.

In the 19th century, after the incorporation of Eastern Armenia into the Russian Empire, the monastery was temporarily repurposed as a customs facility (1832–1847) because of its strategic location [13]. After its return to ecclesiastical authority, the present church was constructed in 1858, incorporating the earlier martyrium of St. Grigoris beneath the main altar (Fig. 3).

3. Results

The architectural and archaeological analysis of the martyrium of St. Grigoris at Amaras Monastery provides several key observations regarding its spatial configuration, construction phases, and structural relationships. Measurements and documentation indicate that the original structure consisted of a rectangular chamber with a western entrance and an eastern niche [14]. The partially preserved eastern niche extends approximately 0.8 m and is constructed using the same materials and techniques as the primary structure, indicating its inclusion in the initial construction phase. Archaeological investigations conducted in 1961 [15] revealed stairs adjacent to the eastern façade, suggesting later modifications to the access system. However, these findings do not confirm that an eastern entrance existed in the structure's original phase. (Fig. 4). Subsequent measurements provided by the Archaeological Expedition of Artsakh [7] clarified the spatial configuration of the eastern corridor leading to the martyrium. Contrary to earlier assumptions, the length of this corridor is approximately 2.0 m rather than 3.25 m, corresponding to the thickness of the church's eastern wall, including its structural reinforcements (Fig. 5).

The structural relationship between the martyrium and the overlying 19th-century church demonstrates that the martyrium's eastern wall functioned as a load-bearing element for the later construction. The thickness and integrity of this wall, including the arch of the eastern niche, indicate that it functioned as a foundational support for the heavy superstructure. Evidence suggests that the original western entrance became inaccessible due to successive construction phases and the accumulation of structural layers. As a result, an eastern access route was introduced later to enable continued use of the martyrium.

Comparative architectural observations indicate that similar early medieval Armenian martyriums, such as those associated with Mesrop Mashtots in Oshakan and St. Gayane in Etchmiadzin, share a comparable spatial configuration, including a western entrance and an eastern niche (Fig. 6).

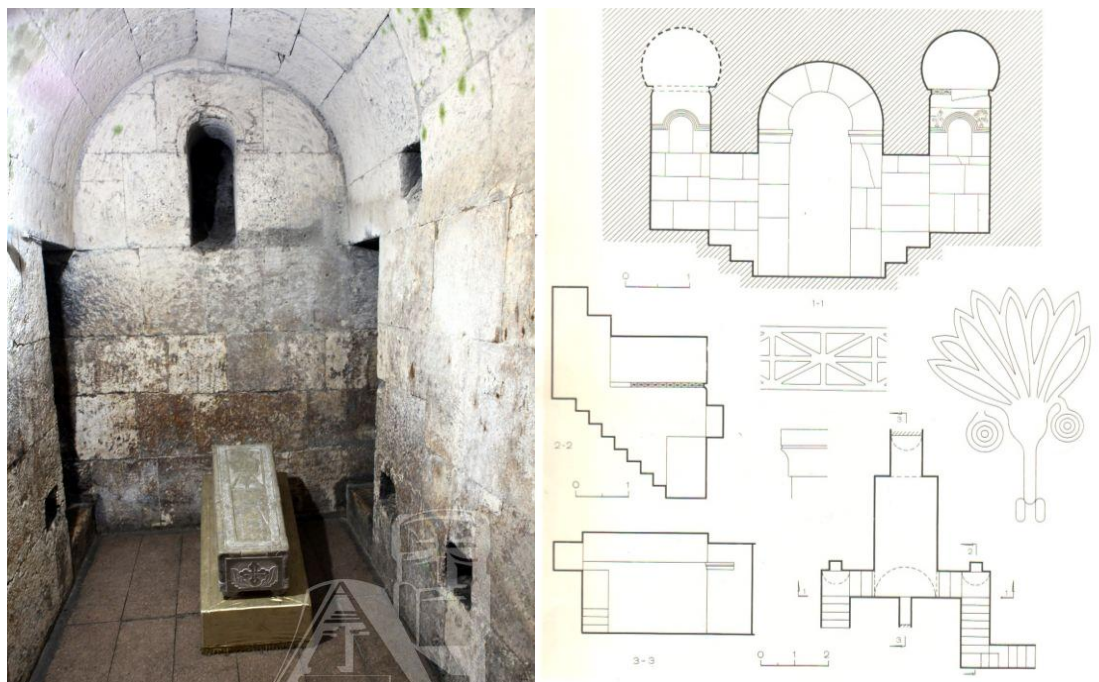


Fig. 4. St. Grigoris' martyrium, measured by M.Hasratyan, photo source: [16]

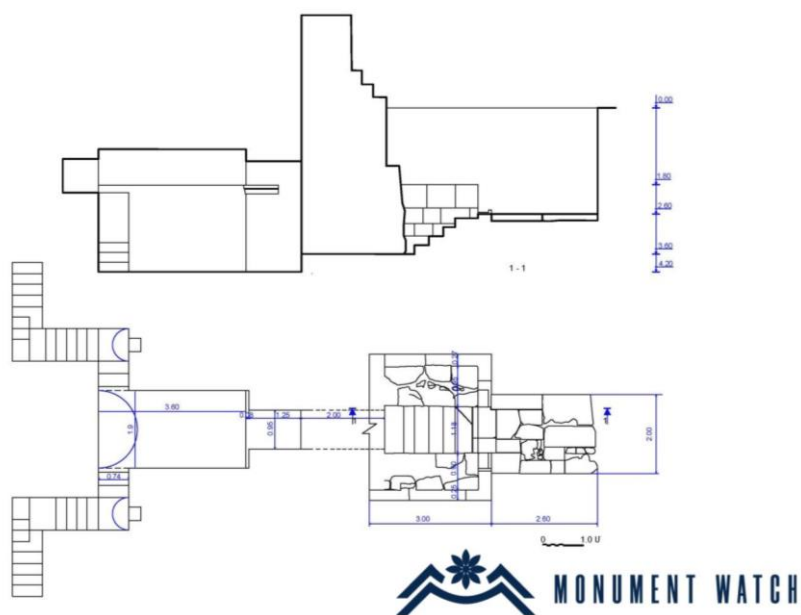


Fig. 5. St. Grigoris' martyrium, measured by L.Kiracosyan and L.Minasyan

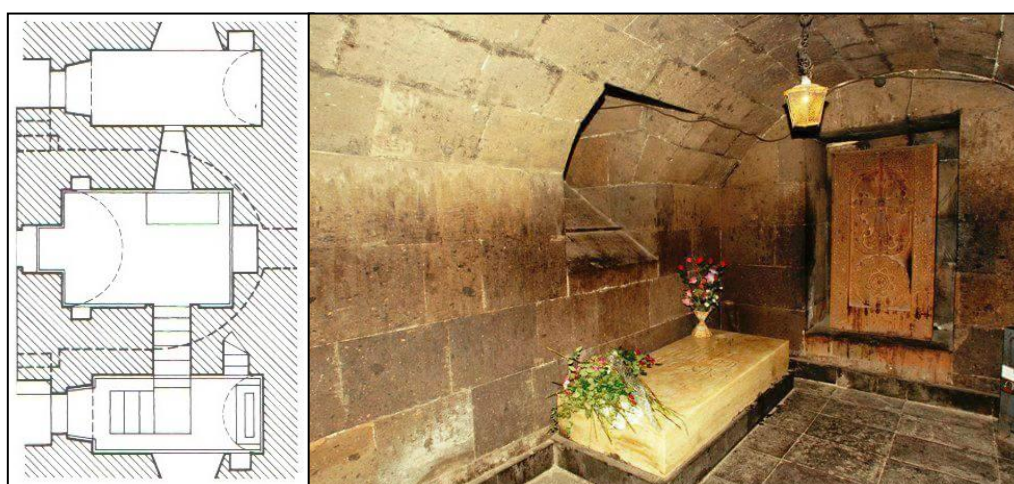


Fig. 6. Martyrium of St. Mesrop Mashtoc in Oshakan, measured by M. Hasratyan, photo source: [17]

In the vicinity of the village of Sos, on a wooded hill, lies the shrine known as *Grigor the Illuminator's Mount (Lusavorchi Sar)*. Architectural and archaeological investigations at this site in 2019 revealed substantial stone remains of an early medieval structure, most likely a church [18]. Among the findings were large, carefully hewn wall stones and a sculpted capital featuring three decorated faces and one plain, hewn surface (Fig. 7, Fig. 8).

The presence of such architectural elements suggests that the structure originally incorporated free-standing columns, indicating a basilica-type composition [19].

The capital's ornamental design shows close similarities to examples from the early Christian church of Tigranakert, indicating possible stylistic and chronological connections (Fig. 9).



Fig. 7. Hewn stones and corner elements from the sanctuary, source: author



Fig. 8. Sculptured faces of the capital from the sanctuary, source: author



Fig. 9. Capital from the early medieval church of Tigranakert, photo by A. Balayan

According to Maghakia Ormanian, St. Grigoris was martyred in 338 [20]. Following his death, the region experienced a period of decline, described in historical sources as one of instability and hostility [2,3]. Subsequently, King Vachagan the Pious of the Aranshahik dynasty identified the burial site of the saint's relics and, in 489, commissioned the construction of a martyrium there.

The original structure of this martyrium has been preserved beneath the platform (altar area) of the present church. Historical accounts indicate that a chapel was rapidly constructed over the grave and dedicated to St. Grigoris [2,3]. According to M. Hasratyan, this expedited construction was likely due to the deteriorated or ruined condition of the earlier church at the site [15]. These findings provide evidence of an earlier ecclesiastical structure at the site, likely predating the construction of the martyrium.

4. Discussion

The results of the architectural and archaeological analysis allow for a critical reassessment of the long-standing debate regarding the orientation and configuration of entrances in the martyrium of St. Grigoris. The evidence supports M. Hasratyan's interpretation that the martyrium's original design followed the typological model of early medieval Armenian funerary architecture, characterised by a western entrance and an eastern niche [15]. The construction techniques, material continuity, and structural integration of the niche into the building's original fabric reinforce this conclusion.

In contrast, the hypothesis advanced by H. Petrosyan, suggesting the existence of an original eastern entrance associated with the religious reforms of Vachagan the Pious, appears less consistent with the available architectural evidence. Historical analysis further weakens this interpretation. As noted by the historian and orientalist Kamila Trever, the canonical constitution attributed to Vachagan the Pious primarily regulated ecclesiastical authority, legal relations, and social organisation, strengthening the Church's institutional role rather than introducing architectural reforms [21]. The constitution's provisions addressed taxation, judicial authority, and the relationship between secular and ecclesiastical power, while also resolving tensions between clergy and laity [2,3].

Moreover, according to A. Hakobyan, these regulations were codified in the second half of the 6th century, when the martyrium of St. Grigoris had already been constructed [22]. This chronological discrepancy further weakens the hypothesis that the introduction of eastern entrances in martyriums was directly linked to these reforms. Therefore, attributing a systematic shift in martyrium orientation to Vachagan's reforms requires stronger empirical evidence than is currently available.

While the presence of eastern entrances in certain early Christian contexts cannot be excluded, the case of Amaras does not provide sufficient structural or stratigraphic support for this interpretation. The comparison with the rock-cut tomb of Christ is particularly relevant here (Fig. 10). The eastern orientation of entrances in structures associated with the Holy Sepulchre is determined by the physical characteristics of the original burial site, rather than a generalised architectural principle [23]. As such, this feature did not become a standard model for constructing martyriums in the Armenian architectural tradition.

The introduction of the eastern access to the martyrium at Amaras can be more plausibly explained as a functional adaptation during later construction phases. As the original western entrance became obstructed or inaccessible due to structural transformations, the eastern entry provided an alternative means of access while maintaining the usability of the space (Fig. 11). Furthermore, the structural role of the eastern wall in supporting the later church construction suggests that modifications to this area were closely linked to engineering and stability requirements, rather than purely liturgical considerations.

At the same time, the limitations of the study, particularly the restricted access to comparable monuments such as the martyriums of St. Stepanos in Vachar (Fig. 12) and of Tigranakert (Fig. 13), must be acknowledged. These constraints highlight the need for further archaeological investigation and comparative analysis to fully clarify regional variations in early Christian funerary architecture.

Overall, the findings suggest that the martyrium of St. Grigoris preserves the canonical features of early Armenian Christian architecture, while later modifications reflect practical and structural adaptations rather than fundamental changes in architectural typology.

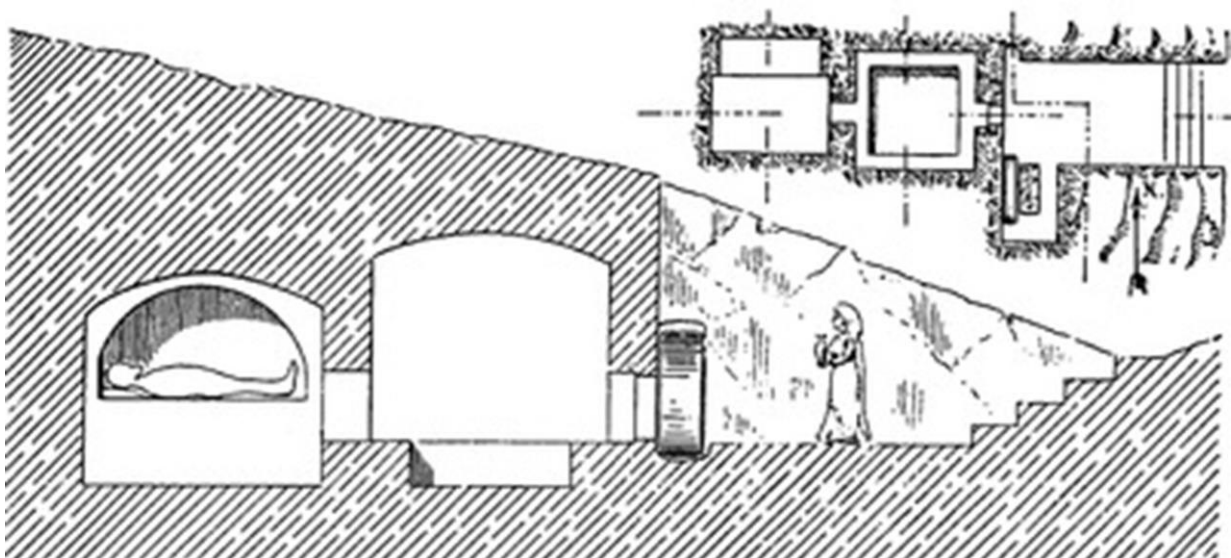


Fig. 10. Reconstruction of the rock-cut tomb of Christ based on Gospel descriptions, source: [23]



Fig. 11. Eastern entrance of the martyrion, photo by A. Balayan

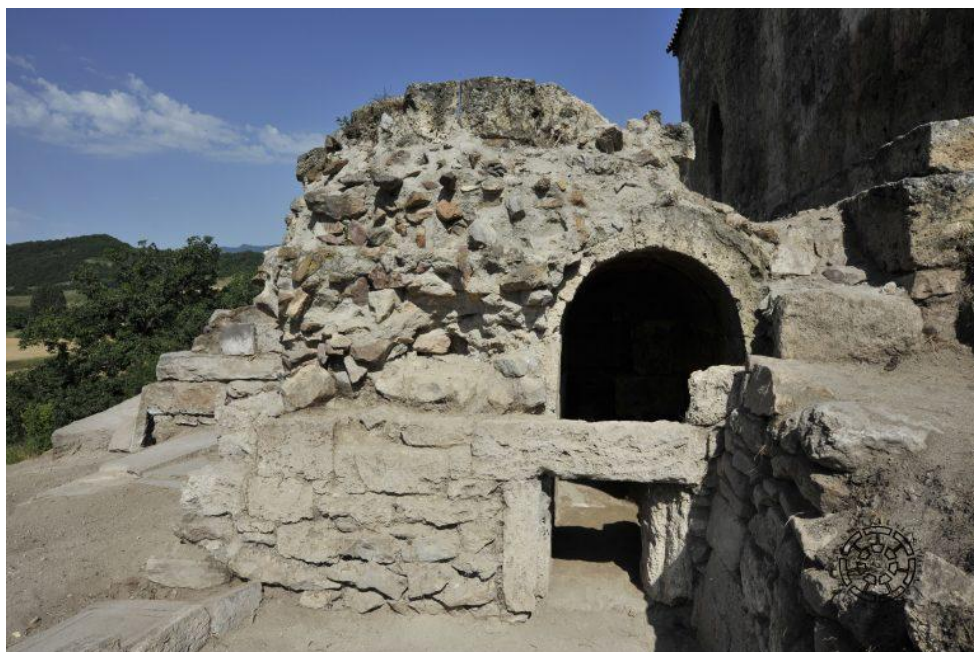


Fig. 12. Martyrium of St. Stepanos in Vachar, photo source: [22]



Fig. 13. Martyrium of Tigranakert, measured by L.Kirakosyan, photo source: [24]

5. Conclusion

This study examined the architectural configuration and development of the martyrium of St. Grigoris at Amaras Monastery, with particular emphasis on the location and chronology of its entrances. By integrating archaeological data, architectural analysis, and historical sources, it was possible to reconstruct the structure's original spatial organisation and to clarify subsequent modifications. The findings indicate that the martyrium was originally designed according to the typological principles of early medieval Armenian funerary architecture, featuring a western entrance and an eastern niche. The construction techniques, material consistency, and structural integration of the niche confirm that it formed part of the initial design. In contrast, the eastern entrance is interpreted as a later intervention, introduced during subsequent construction phases to maintain access after the original western entrance became obstructed.

The eastern wall of the martyrium played a crucial structural role in supporting the later church built in 1858. This relationship explains the architectural modifications in the eastern section and highlights the importance of considering engineering constraints alongside liturgical interpretations. Comparative analysis shows that the eastern orientation of entrances in structures associated with the Holy Sepulchre reflects a site-specific condition rather than a general rule in early Christian martyrium construction. Consequently, the hypothesis that eastern entrances in Artsakh's martyriums were systematically introduced as part of the reforms of Vachagan the Pious is not supported by the available architectural evidence.

Beyond the specific case of Amaras, this research contributes to a more precise understanding of early medieval Armenian funerary architecture, particularly regarding spatial organisation, construction logic, and the interaction between original design and later transformations. It also highlights the importance of integrating archaeological measurements with historical and comparative analysis in studying complex, multilayered monuments. At the same time, the study is limited by restricted access to certain monuments and reliance only on previously published archaeological data. Future research should include direct field investigations, expanded comparative studies, and advanced documentation techniques to further clarify regional variations and unresolved questions.

In conclusion, the martyrium of St. Grigoris represents a well-preserved example of early Armenian Christian architectural tradition, in which later modifications reflect functional and structural adaptations rather than fundamental changes in typology.

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