

Karabakh
a hidden treasure



Karabakh
A Cradle of Christianity



**REPUBLIC OF
MOUNTAINOUS
KARABAKH**



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According to the Book of Genesis, Eden was located between the Euphrates, Tigris, Gihon and Pishon rivers, which in all likelihood, places it in the Armenian Highlands. This may be the reason why Christianity has had strong hold in this ancient land.

Christianity plays an important role in the history of Nagorno Karabakh (historically, Artsakh). In fact, the birth of Christianity in Artsakh can be directly traced to Thaddeus, one of Christ's Twelve Apostles. There are several important religious centers in Artsakh, such as the monasteries of **St. Yeghishe, Dadivank, Amaras, Tsitsernavank, Gtchavank** and **Gandzasar**. Since ancient times, they have been important bastions of faith, culture and education for Artsakh Armenians.

EARLY EVANGELISTS ■

According to tradition, Christianity was evangelized and spread throughout Greater Armenia in the first century by the Apostles **Thaddeus and Bartholomew**. They are the first saints of the Armenian Church. St. Thaddeus was martyred in Artaz province (region of Atrpatakan, Iran). His disciple, St. Yeghishe, returned to Jerusalem, was ordained a bishop, then traveled back to Greater Armenia to continue his evangelism. He entered Armenia through the eastern territory of Aghvank, which included the provinces of Artsakh and Utik.

In Artsakh and Utik, the evangelism of Christianity began at the time of the Apostles and continued to spread and take root. In the Armenian Church, the period until the 4th century is often referred to as the Era of the Apostles.

Yeghishe and Dadi were disciples of the Apostle Thaddeus who went on to spread Christianity throughout Artsakh and Utik. They are often referred to as the fathers of Christianity in Armenia's easternmost regions.

SAINT YEGHISHE ■

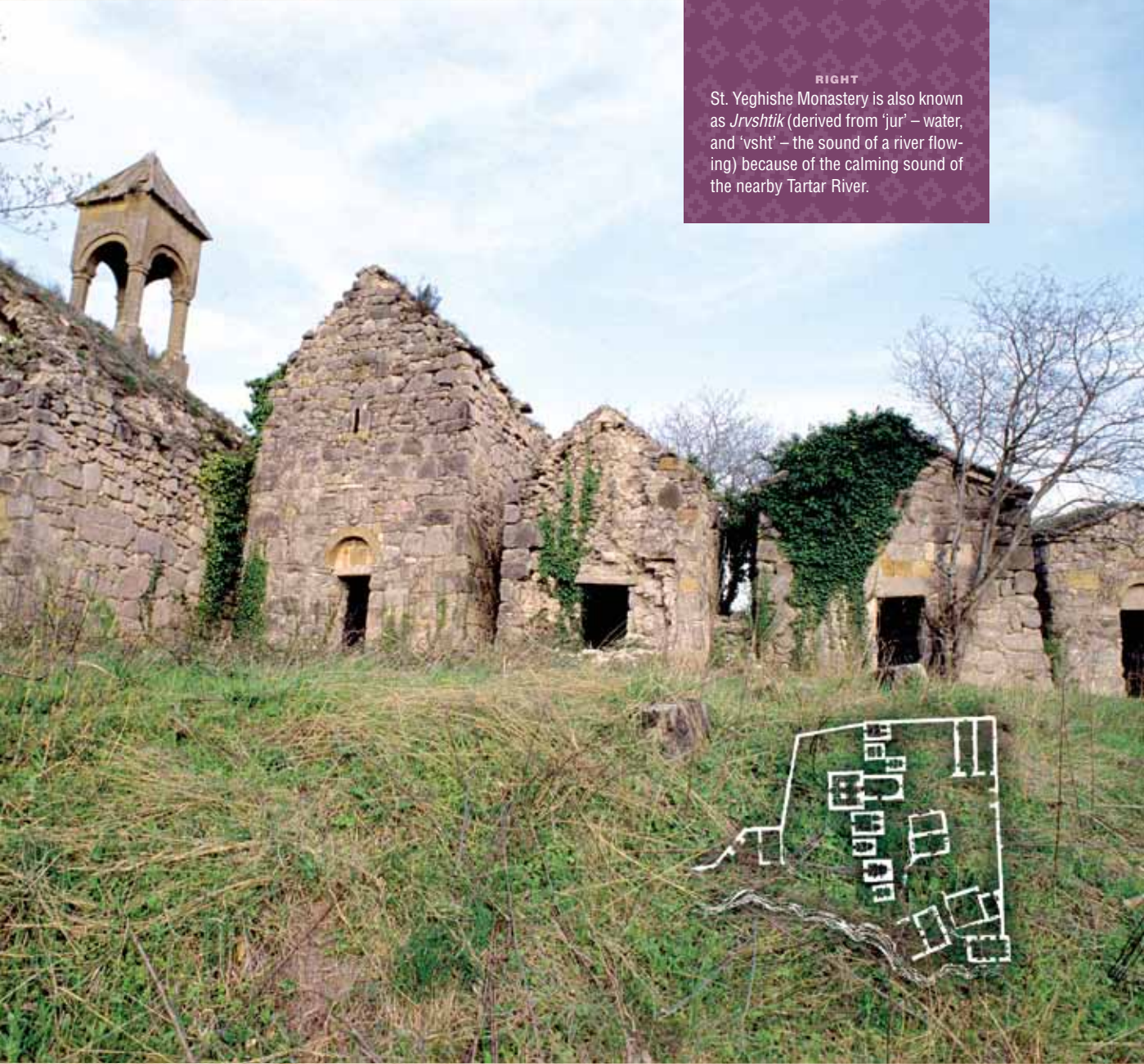
St. Yeghishe founded a church in Gis (village of Kish in the Shaqi region, the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan), which became the first Christian center of the easternmost Armenian region. St. Yeghishe continued his evangelism, encountering many hardships along the way. He was martyred in a place called Homenk (village of Bum, the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan).

The site of St. Yeghishe's martyrdom and burial was consecrated, as were the burial sites of several other early evangelists in the region. Monuments, chapels, and churches were later built on these sites. Many of them are preserved to this day, including the grave of St. Yeghishe in Bum, that of his disciple Kahaltsitsik near Vardashen, and



RIGHT

St. Yeghische Monastery is also known as *Jrvshetik* (derived from 'jur' – water, and 'vsht' – the sound of a river flowing) because of the calming sound of the nearby Tartar River.



SAINT YEGHISHE

that of Vlas in the village of Nizh, all of which are located in districts of Oguz and Qabala in the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan.

St. Yeghishe's relics were later taken by his disciples to the province of Metsvenk in Artsakh (the present-day village of Tonashen in the Martakert region of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh). In the 5th century, King Vachagan Barebasht (the Pious) built a monastery on the site of his grave, which he aptly named St. Yeghishe Monastery. According to tradition, Vachagan Barebasht the ruler, immortalized as the builder of 365 churches, was also buried at St. Yeghishe. The monastery became the throne of the Metskoghmank diocese and is considered one of Artsakh's most important ancient religious centers.



RIGHT

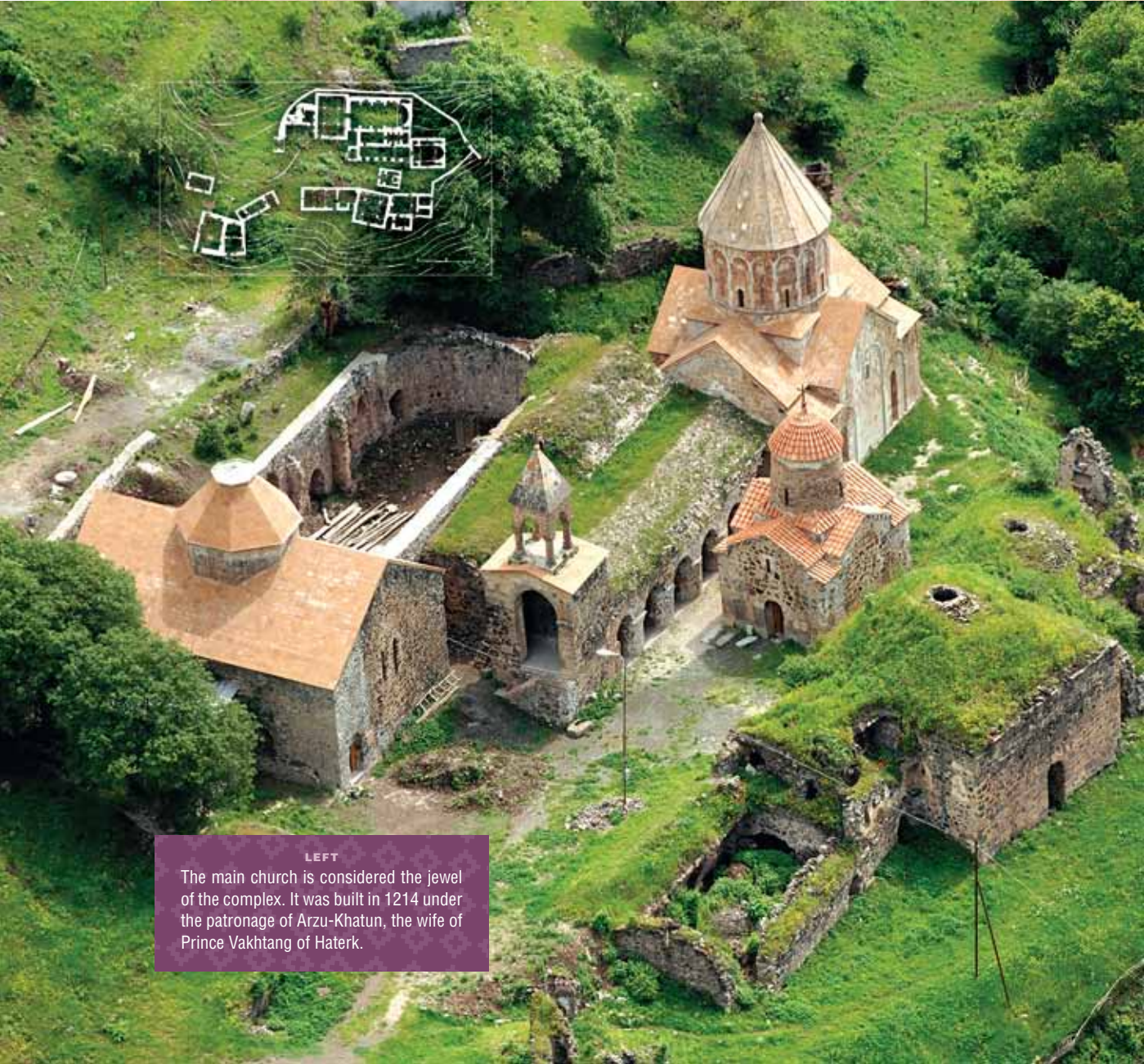
In a 2008 archaeological excavation, Dadivank's crypt was uncovered, complete with holy relics and a wooden throne. Its contents are now on display at the Artsakh State Historical Museum.

Perched on a small hill on the western bank of the Tartar River, **Dadivank Monastery** was founded at the end of the first century, at the site where Dadi, one of the Apostle Thaddeus' 70 disciples, was martyred. In the fifth century, it became the Bishop's Throne of its archdiocese. In the northeast corner of the church, there is a partially buried pillar dedicated to St. Dadi that dates back to the 4th or 5th century.

The monastery was a favorite target for invaders and was plundered many times. Subsequently, it has undergone several restorations over the centuries. To this day, 30 buildings have been preserved in the Dadivank complex.

DADIVANK





LEFT

The main church is considered the jewel of the complex. It was built in 1214 under the patronage of Arzu-Khatun, the wife of Prince Vakhtang of Haterk.



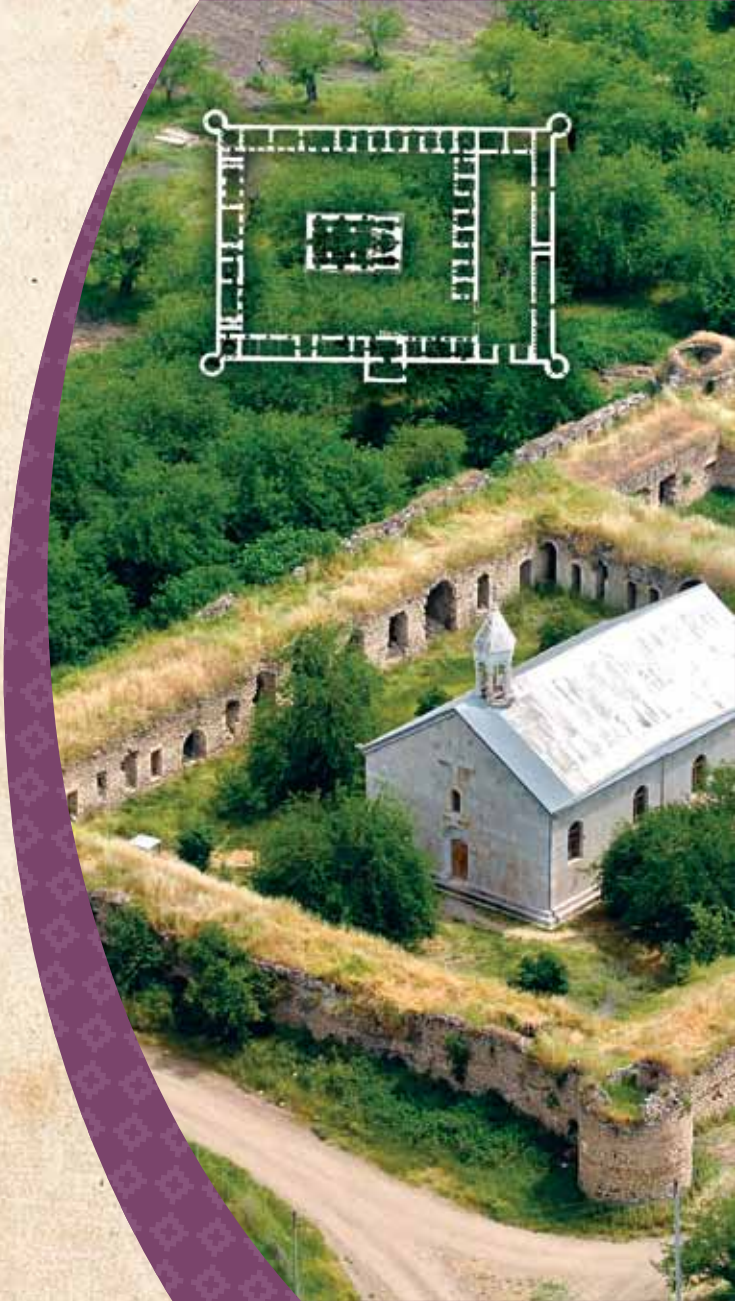
In the 4th century, the teachings of **St. Gregory the Illuminator** encompassed all of Greater Armenia, including the easternmost region of Aghvank. After Christianity was declared Armenia's official religion in 301, Gregory the Illuminator spread the word of God with new enthusiasm and vigor. He founded churches, ordained priests, and opened centers of religious study across Armenia. In Aghvank, one of the most important religious centers he founded was Amaras Monastery (in the present-day Martuni Region of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh).

Gregory the Illuminator's evangelical successor in Armenia's eastern regions was his grandson, Bishop Grigoris. Grigoris continued the teachings of his grandfather not only in Artsakh but across the Caucasus, as far east as the Caspian Sea, where he was martyred near the ancient city of Derbent (in the present-day Republic of Dagestan, Russia). His disciples took his relics to Amaras and buried him in the monastery there. A church was later built at the site where he was martyred. It has been preserved to this day and is perhaps the most famous pilgrimage site for Christians in the Northern Caucasus.

Bishop Grigoris' tomb has been preserved in Amaras Monastery. Unfortunately, during Karabakh's war of liberation in the early 1990s, the gravestone was broken by Azeri vandals. Its inscription, which was added to the gravestone in the 1860s, remains intact. It reads: "The mausoleum of St. Grigoris, grandson of St. Gregory the Illuminator, born in 322, ordained in 340, martyred in 348... in Derbent... brought to rest in Amaras, Artsakh..."

Like Dadivank, Amaras was subject to several brutal attacks over the centuries. It was not spared by Timur (Tamerlane), the ruthless 14th century conqueror of much of Central Asia. Legend says that after plundering the monastery, Timur lined up his soldiers from Amaras to the Arax River (45 kilometers away) and ordered them to pass the monastery's stones to each other along the line and toss them into the river. The monastery has undergone several restorations over the centuries.

From the 16th to the 18th centuries, Amaras was fortified and adjacent buildings were constructed for lodging and other purposes.





CENTER

Its basilica-style church was rebuilt in 1858 with donations from the citizens of Shushi.

Armenia's next religious resurgence is inextricably linked with the name of **St. Mesrop Mashtots**, who founded the Armenian alphabet in the early 5th century and embarked on the task of opening schools across Armenia to enlighten the population and strengthen the foundations of Armenian Christianity. In the first two decades of the 5th century, Mashtots journeyed to Aghvank to continue the evangelism of Bishop Grigoris. According to tradition, St. Mashtots founded Artsakh's first academic center at Amaras Monastery, where a hall with the Armenian alphabet inscribed in its ceiling has been preserved to this day.

Towards the end of the 5th century, **Vachagan Barepasht** (the Pious) became the ruler of the revived kingdoms of Artsakh and Utik. According to the historian Leo, he was "a peaceful builder and an especially devout believer." Under his leadership, the authority of the Church significantly increased in the easternmost regions of Armenia. 365 churches were built during his rule, one for every day of the year. Through his direct participation, the pious king promoted the supremacy of Christian rituals and ceremonies throughout his kingdom. In addition, he made the worshipping of relics mandatory for the citizens of Artsakh and Utik through special edicts.

MASHTOTS ■

■ BAREPASHT

TSITSERNAVANK

Only 5 kilometers from the border with the Armenian province of Syunik, **Tsitsernavank** is especially popular among believers because the finger of the Apostle Peter is preserved in its walls. The name Tsitsernavank is derived from the Armenian words *tsitser* (little finger) and *vank* (monastery).

Its architectural style, broad and simple, speaks of its ancient roots. Experts believe that Tsitsernavank was built in the 6th century on the site of a pagan temple. Additions and restorations took place throughout the Middle Ages. The entrance, bell tower, and fortifications were built later, in the 17th century.

GANDZASAR MONASTERY

Nestled among the high peaks of the Martakert region, **Gandzasar** is a jewel of medieval Armenian architecture. Construction of Gandzasar Monastery began in 1216, under Catholicos Hovhannes of Aghvan, as the direct initiative of the Khachen Prince Hassan Jalalyan. According to tradition, Hassan Jalalyan found St. John the Baptist's head, brought it to Artsakh, buried it, and built a church in his honor over the shrine. St. John the Baptist Church was consecrated in 1240 with an elaborate opening ceremony.

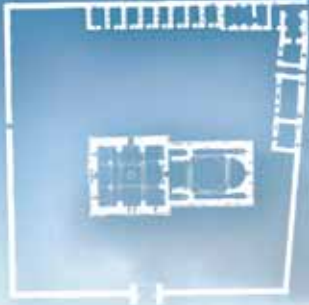
The monastery quickly gained the status of the region's most important spiritual and cultural center. In the 16th century, the Armenian Catholicosate of Aghvank was moved to Gandzasar. In the 17th and 18th centuries, it also became a center for the national liberation movement, a role which it once again assumed during the war of liberation in the early 1990s. Today, Gandzasar is a fully functional monastic complex.



RIGHT

Tsitsernavank is one of Artsakh's prominent ancient spiritual centers in the Kashatagh region.





LEFT

The walls of St. John the Baptist church of Gandzasar are covered with beautifully crafted rock carvings that give the overall impression of lacework.

Gandzasar Monastery is one of the most splendid examples of medieval Armenian architecture.



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