
THE ARMENIAN CONVENT OF HOLY ARCHANGELS IN JERUSALEM AND ITS EPIGRAPHIC HERITAGE

KHACHIK HARUTYUNYAN

ABSTRACT:

The Armenian monasteries and churches in Jerusalem are rich in pilgrims' inscriptions and graffiti, and the collection and publication of these inscriptions form the primary focus of my research, which began in 2019 as part of the project 'The Armenian Inscriptions and Graffiti of the Holy Land and Sinai,' led by Prof. Michael E. Stone of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This article examines the Armenian Convent of the Holy Archangels in Jerusalem and its epigraphic heritage. According to my research, there are more than seventy inscriptions and graffiti, most of which have already been published. However, as my findings indicate, this is not the actual total number of inscriptions at the site, and it is likely that additional examples can still be documented.

In this article, I present ten previously unpublished inscriptions and graffiti, found during my research in 2019 and 2022, along with their transcriptions, translations, and relevant annotations.

ABSTRAIT: LE COUVENT ARMÉNIEN DES SAINTS-ARCHANGE À JÉRUSALEM ET SON PATRIMOINE ÉPIGRAPHIQUE

Les monastères et églises arméniens de Jérusalem sont riches en inscriptions et graffitis laissés par les pèlerins. La collecte et la publication de ces inscriptions constituent l'objectif principal de mes recherches, initiées en 2019 dans le cadre du projet «Les inscriptions et graffitis arméniens de la Terre Sainte et du Sinaï», dirigé par le professeur Michael E. Stone de l'Université hébraïque de Jérusalem. Cet article se concentre sur le Couvent Arménien des Saints-Archanges à Jérusalem et son patrimoine épigraphique. Selon mes travaux, on recense plus de soixante-dix inscriptions et graffitis, dont la plupart ont déjà été publiés. Cependant, comme le révèlent mes recherches, ce nombre ne représente pas la totalité des inscriptions présentes sur le site, et il est fort probable que d'autres exemples restent encore à documenter.

Dans ce cadre, je présente dix inscriptions et graffitis inédits, retrouvés au cours de mes recherches menées en 2019 et 2022, accompagnés de leurs transcriptions, traductions et annotations pertinentes.

KEYWORDS: Holy Land, Jerusalem, Convent of the Holy Archangels, pilgrims, Armenian inscriptions, Armenian graffiti, scriptoria

MOTS-CLÉS: Terre Sainte, Jérusalem, Couvent des Saints-Archanges, pèlerins, inscriptions arméniennes, graffiti arméniens, scriptoria

Introduction

The Armenian Convent of the Holy Archangels, along with its church, is located southeast of the Armenian Cathedral of Sts. James¹ in the Armenian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem (Fig. 1, plan). It is positioned adjacent to the city walls, near the Zion Gate, and in close proximity to the Armenian Convent of St. Saviour.² It is also known as the "Convent of the Olive Tree" (Deir ez-Zeitun) and the "Convent of the Apple Tree" (Deir el-Tuffah)³.

¹ For further details on the Armenian Cathedral of Sts. James in Jerusalem and its epigraphic heritage, see Khatchadourian, Basmadjian 2014, 113-123; Harutyunyan 2024.

² For more details on the Armenian Monastery of St. Saviour in Jerusalem and its epigraphic heritage see Khatchadourian, Basmadjian 2014, 125-129; Harutyunyan 2022.

³ Vincent and Abel 1922, 501; Sanjian 1965, 177.

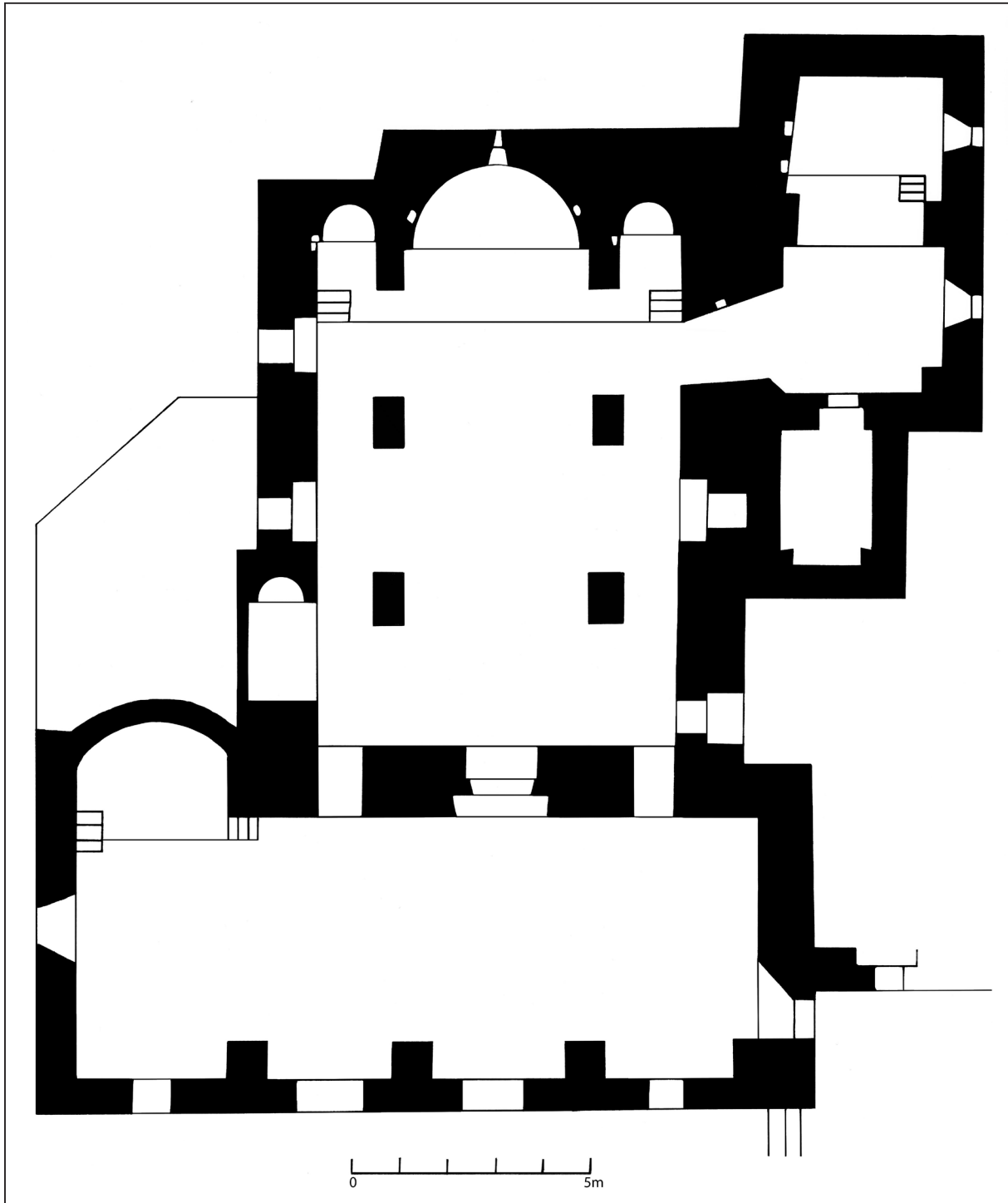


Fig. 1. Plan of the Holy Archangels Church according to Carswell, Dowsett 1972, 4. Elaborated by Taguhi Hmayakyan.

The site is venerated as the house of Annas, the father-in-law of the High Priest Caiaphas (John 18:13). In the outer wall of the monastery, a relic is incorporated: the “screaming stone” that cried out while the disciples of Jesus were silent (Luke 19:40). According to the tradition known to Yovhannēs Hanna vardapet in the eighteenth century, at this spot Christ was chained to an olive tree and underwent sufferings.⁴ At the northern part of the convent, that olive tree is to be seen to which, according to local tradition, Christ was chained.⁵ For this reason, too, the site is known as that of Christ’s first sufferings.⁶

⁴ Hanna 1782, 239.

⁵ The olive tree is also revered today and it known for miracles and healings.

⁶ Aławnuni 1931, 106.

The details regarding the time and circumstances of the church's construction remain unknown. However, it is mentioned in numerous records by Western pilgrims dating from the 14th century onward.⁷ From the 17th century until the mid-20th century, the complex served as a nunnery.⁸ In this context, attention should be drawn to the inscription on the small stone well that once operated on the site (see below No 8).

The church and its surrounding area were renovated during the tenure of Patriarch Gregory the Chainbearer (1715–1749).⁹ This is also confirmed by the local inscriptions (see below No. 4). Between 1726 and 1737, the interior walls of the church were adorned with Armenian Kütahya tiles.¹⁰ To date, no archaeological excavations have been conducted within the church or its vicinity.

Scholars have observed that, while the convent was traditionally known among the Arabs as the “Convent of the Olive Tree,” it has more recently been referred to as the “Convent of the Archangels.” According to one tradition, during Christ's imprisonment, one of the servants struck him, and the sound of the slap caused the archangels Gabriel and Michael to be filled with fear,

prompting them to hide their faces. To commemorate this event and the terror experienced by the archangels, the church built on this site was named the Convent of the Holy Archangels.¹¹

Despite the existence of various traditions regarding its foundation, it is clear that the Convent of the Holy Archangels was an Armenian possession at least from the twelfth century onward. Furthermore, as evidenced by the colophons of Armenian manuscripts copied at the convent, it served as one of the central Armenian ateliers for manuscript production during the Middle Ages. More than a dozen manuscripts copied at the convent are known to date from the 14th century alone (Fig. 2).¹²

Holy Archangels Convent has always been under the care of the Patriarchate, which over the years renovated, cleaned and organized it, and today it is well cared for and maintained.



Fig. 2. Bible, 1331 AD, Jerusalem, Ms 149, 212r; @Matenadaran, 2025

⁷ Vincent and Abel 1922, 492. Some Western pilgrims' accounts of the late 15th century describe the propriety as Georgian: see the sources in Peradze 1937, 193-197.

⁸ Hanna 1782, 242; Ervine 1999.

⁹ For more information about Patriarch Grigor Chainbearer and his activities, see Polarean 1950; Pōlosean 2017; Krikorian 2019, 269-304 etc.

¹⁰ A detailed account of the decoration of Armenian holy sites in Jerusalem using Kütahya tiles can be found in Carswell and Dowsett 1972a and 1972b.

¹¹ Hanna 1782, 240; Alawnuni 1931, 106. See Örmanean 1931, 119 for another tradition of a biblical association of the spot with King David.

¹² Pōlosean 2002; Stone 1969.

The Inscriptions of the Church

The Holy Archangels Convent is one of the richest Armenian holy sites in terms of inscriptions. The majority of these are *xač'k'ars* ('cross-stone'), which were placed on the walls of various parts of the convent over the years. Many of these stand out due to their elaborate decoration and intricate sculpture. They feature elegant Armenian script and provide valuable palaeographic evidence.

The inscriptions have also been the subject of various studies. T. Sawalaneanc' compiled a selection of these inscriptions in his work *History of Jerusalem*. Later, Bishop Mesrop Nšanecan expanded the collection by adding new examples and published Sawalaneanc's work.¹³ Subsequent studies have provided comprehensive details on the inscriptions at the convent, particularly in the field of *xač'k'ar* research, with significant contributions by Khatchadourian and Basmadjian. Their meticulous work offers comprehensive pictorial evidence of the techniques, structure, and other characteristics of the *xač'k'ars* at the Convent.¹⁴ Additionally, we should mention the article by M. E. Stone and R. R. Ervine, which is dedicated to the inscriptions on the candlesticks of the church.¹⁵ However, it should be emphasized that the church also houses ritual objects and paintings that warrant separate study.

Newly published inscriptions

During my research at the Convent of the Holy Archangels in 2019 and 2022, I uncovered several inscriptions that had previously been overlooked by earlier researchers. In this article, I present ten of these inscriptions in chronological order, including both regular inscriptions and graffiti.

Unlike other local Armenian inscriptions,¹⁶ these newly discovered examples are carved in both *erkat'agir* (majuscule) and *bolorgir* (minuscule) scripts, with some featuring a combination of both.¹⁷

In keeping with the structure adopted in my previous articles in this journal, I begin by providing the decipherment of each inscription, followed by its translation and accompanying notes.¹⁸ Dates within the inscriptions are given according to the Armenian calendar [AE], which is 551 years behind the Common Era [CE].¹⁹ In the 'Normalized Transcription in Armenian,' dates are converted to CE, while both AE and CE dates are presented in the translations. Undated inscriptions are assigned tentative dates based on paleographical analysis and stylistic characteristics.

Abbreviated forms and damaged parts are provided in brackets. Additionally, I include some drawings alongside the decipherments to assist in reading the graffiti.

1. Graffito scratched on the northern side of southern column, inside the church. It faces the altar, AD 1363 (Fig. 3/1)



ՏՐ ԿԱ ՅՈՒ ԲՆ
ԲԱԼ ԴԻԲ
ԽԵՆ ԿՐԿԼ

Fig. 3 and 3/1. Graffito scratched on the northern column, @Author, 2022

¹³ Sawalaneanc' 1931b, 1252-1256. The collection contains 40 inscriptions from the Church of the Holy Archangels.

¹⁴ Khatchadourian and Basmadjian 2014, 131-141, 394-402.

¹⁵ Stone and Ervine 2001-2002.

¹⁶ Cf. Stone and Harutyunyan 2020.

¹⁷ On these scripts see Stone, Kouymjian and Lehmann 2002, 66-73. See also Stone 1998.

¹⁸ For the transliteration of the personal names and toponyms I have followed to the standards of the Hübschmann-Meillet-Benveniste (HMB) system used in "Revue des Études Arméniennes."

¹⁹ Abrahamyan 1973, 112-114.

Normalized Transcription in Armenian:

₁Տ(է)ր Ա(ստուա)ծ, Յ(իսու)ս Ք(րիստո)ս. ₂թվ(ին) ԴԺԲ. (1363) ₃Խ(ա)չ(ս)յ(ի)շ(ատակ) [է] տ(է)ր Մէլ(քնի՞ն)

Translation:

₁Lord God, Jesus Christ. ₂In the year 812 [AE = 1363]. ₃This cross is a memorial of Rev. Mēlk'on(?)

Note: The graffito is made in a rough and clumsy script amongst scratched pilgrim crosses. The restoration of the name Mēlk'on is tentative. It also might be read as M(ik'ay)ēl.

2. Graffito inscribed on a xač'k'ar, located on the arch inside the small room in the outer southern part of the church, AD 1512 (Fig. 4/1)

Normalized Transcription in Armenian:

₁Թվ(ին) ՋԿԱ. (1512) ₂Եսայի արեղէս (յ)իշ(եցէ՛ք)

Translation:

₁(In) the year 961 [AE = 1512 CE]. ₂Me, Esayi, monk, remember

Note: The graffito is engraved in erkat'agir on a stone that is also adorned with numerous crosses. The first line appears at the top of the stone, while the second is situated approximately two-thirds of the way down. The spaces between words are indicated by double dots. Notably, instead of the literal form *արեղայս*, the spoken variant *արեղէս* is used.

ԹՎ ՋԿԱ

ԵՍԱՅ ԻՍԻ ԵՂԵՍ ԻՇ

Fig. 4 and 4/1. Graffito inscribed on a xač'k'ar, @Author, 2022



3. Inscription on the marble slab embedded in front of the small altar in Christ's First Prison, AD 1715 (Fig. 5)

Normalized Transcription in Armenia:

₁[Նորոգե]ց(ա)ւ սեղան բանտիս ձ(ե)ռնտ(ու)ուր(եամ)ք Յամթ(ե)ցի մահտ(ե)սի ₂Ա(ստուա)ծատրին յ(ի)շ(ա)տ(ա)կ իւր եւ ծն(ո)ղ(ա)ցն՝ Կարապետին եւ Սառ[այի]ն, եւ որդոցն իւրոց. Ի ԹՃԿԴ. (1715) թուին

Translation:

₁This Altar of the Prison was renovated with the support of the mahtesi, of Amida, ₂Astuacatur, in his memory and (that) of his parents, Karapet and Sara ₃, and of his sons. In the year 1164 [AE = 1715 CE]

Note: The inscription is engraved in large erkat'agir script on the altar of the small chapel known as 'Christ's First Prison.' The extant text is generally clear, except at the beginning, where only the ligature ՅԲ is visible. This likely represents the end of *lyumnigun* ('was constructed') or *lyumqagun* ('was renovated'). We have opted for the second interpretation, as this small chapel has served as a pilgrimage site over the years. Therefore, it is probable that Astuacatur of Amida sponsored the renovation of the altar in 1715. No further information about Astuacatur could be found.



Fig. 5. Inscription on the marble slab, @Author, 2022

4. Inscription on the marble slab embedded in the southern wall, AD 1725 (Fig. 6)

Normalized Transcription in Armenian:

Կամօքն Ա(ստուծոյ) նորոգ(ե)ց(ա)ւ Ս(ուր)բ Զ(ե)ր(ե)
շտ(ա)կ(ա)պ(ե)տ եկ(ե)ղ(ե)ցիս բոլոր Իսկերօք, եւ
շինեց(ա)ւ ս(ուր)բ Հ(ե)ն(ի)փ(ւ)սիմէի խորանս մեծաւ
աշխատ(ն)ութեամբ Գրիգոր եւ Յ(ն)վ(հա)նն(ե)ս
վ(ա)րդ(ա)պ(ե)տ(ա)ց և վէրի Յ(ն)վ(հա)նն(ե)ս
վարդապետին եւ ամ(ենայն) միաբ(ա)նից ի յ(ի)շ(ա)
տ(ա)կ հ(ն)գ(ւն)ց մ[երոց] և ամ(ենայն) ազգիս հ(ա)
յ(ն)ց. ի թ[վի]ն ԹՎ ՌՃՀԴ. (1725), յիշ(ե)ց(ե)ք ի Տ(ե)ր

Translation:

By God's will this Church of the Holy Archangel(s) with all the cells were renovated and this altar of St. Hrip'simē's was built with great labour by the vardapets, Grigor and Yovhannēs and by Vicar Yovhannēs vardapet and of all the brothers, in memory of our souls and of this whole nation of the Armenians in the year 1174 [AE = 1725 CE]. Remember (them) to the Lord

Note: This long inscription is engraved in a beautiful and legible erkat'agir on a marble slab (27 x 19,3). The letters are blackened. The faded paint and damage to the lower right-hand corner have made some letters hard to read. In particular, the letters Ճ and Դ of the date in line 9 are barely legible and their shapes may be discerned with difficulty.

The vardapets Grigor and Yovhannēs are Gregory the Chainbearer, Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem (1715-1749), and Yovhannēs Kolot of Bałeš (Bitlis), Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople (1715-1741). The Vicar Yovhannēs, known as Hanna, was Grigor's close friend, and his assistant.²⁰

5. Inscription on the tombstone on the roof of the church, AD 1725 (Fig. 7)

Normalized Transcription in Armenian:

Այս է տանքս տ(ա)պան Է///ալին թվին ԹՃՀԴ. (1725)

Translation:

This is, of this house, the tomb of Է///alin in the year 1174 [AE = 1725 CE]

Note: The inscription is written in handsome erkat'agir script, well preserved and very legible, but for one word, the name.



Fig. 6. Inscription on the marble slab, @Author, 2022

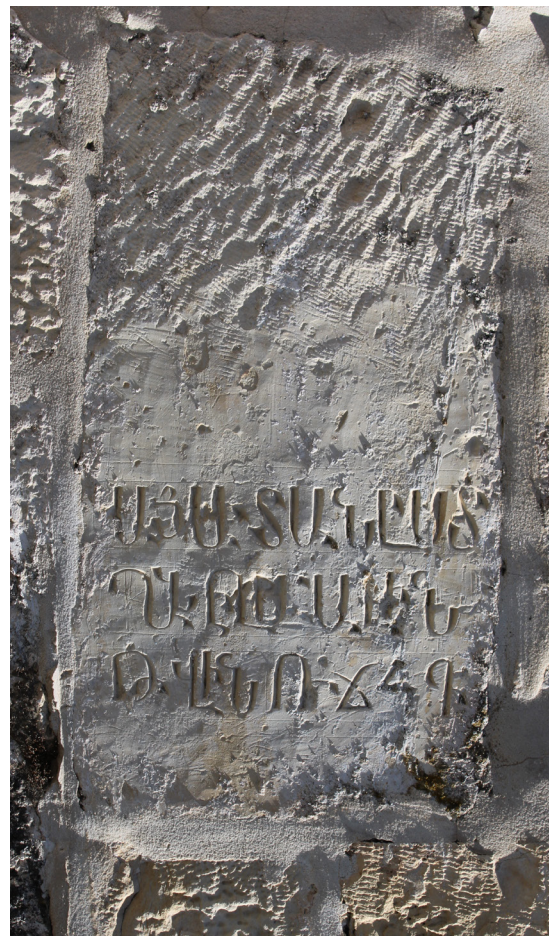


Fig. 7. Inscription on the tombstone, @Author, 2022

²⁰ See Połosyan 2015; Krikorian 2019, 269-304.

6. Inscription on xač'k'ar embedded in the northern wall, AD 1747 (Fig. 8)

Normalized Transcription in Armenian:

1Տ(է)ր Ա(սսոռւա)ծ, 2Յ(իսու)ս Բ(րիստո)ս. 3ՌՃՂԶ. (1747). 4ս(ուր)բ իս(ա)յս բարեխօս է առ Ա(սսոռւա)ծ 5վ(ա)ս(ն) մահդ(ե)սի օղաբաշի Այւազին 6եւ ծնողաց՝ Գրիգորին, Յուսնի(ի)ն

Translation:

1Lord God, 2Jesus Christ, 31196 [AE = 1747 CE]. 4This holy cross is an intercessor to God 5on behalf of mahtesi, ṓdabaši Aywaz 6and (his) parents, Grigor, Yusni.

Note: The inscription, written in a handsome erkat'agir, is located in the lower part of an ornamented xač'k'ar (29.5 x 24 cm). The first two lines are positioned above and below the horizontal arms of the central cross, which is adorned with sculpted decorations. Below these horizontal arms, two small crosses are present. It is worth noting that M. Nšanian read a similar inscription in the church, mentioning the same individuals, although its content differs slightly.²¹ We could not locate it.

Mahtesi Aywaz was likely a functionary in a hostel or caravanserai, as he holds the Turkish title *odabaşı* (*ṓdabaši*). The word *oda* is often found in local inscriptions and reflects Turkish *oda* “room, cell”. In the same way, *ṓdabaši* means “the one in charge of rooms, chamberlain.”²²

The female name of Yusni rarely occurs in the Armenian sources of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries,²³ but Aywaz is one of the names common in this period.²⁴

These two persons, Grigor and Husni, are also mentioned in other local inscriptions.²⁵



Fig. 8. Inscription on xač'k'ar; @Author, 2022

7. Inscription on the metal festoon inside the church, to the left by the main altar, AD 1817 (Fig. 9)



Fig. 9. Inscription on the metal festoon, @Author, 2022

²¹ Sawalaneanc' 1931b, 1254.

²² Redhouse 1880, 272.

²³ Ačārean 1946, 98.

²⁴ Ačārean 1942, 143.

²⁵ Khatchadourian and Basmadjian 2014, 407 (JER-SEP021); Sawalaneanc' 1931b, 1254; Khatchadourian and Basmadjian 2014, 395 (JER-HTP007).

Normalized Transcription in Armenian:

ՂՍ(ուր)բ Հր(եշ)տ(ա)կ(ա)պ(ե)տու երկր(ւ)ց դասուց երկ(ա)թե(ա)յ ճ(ա)ղքս շինեց(ա)ւ ի պ(ա)տր(իա)րզ(ուր)ե(ան) տ(եառ)ն Թէոդորոսի ռաբուն(ա)պետի արդեամբ Խ(ա)րբ|₂ե(ր)թց(ի) ժամակոչ մ(ա)հ(տես)ի Գրիգորին՝ ի յիշ(ա)տ(ա)կ իւր եւ ծնող(ա)ցն եւ ազգիս հայոց ՌՄԿԶ. (1266)ին

Translation:

The iron bars of the two classes of the Church of the Holy Archangels were constructed in the Patriarchate of the pontiff, Rev. T'ëodoros, at the expense of |₂ the beadle, mahtesi Grigor from Xarbert', in memory of himself and his parents and of this Armenian people. [In the year] 1266 [AE = 1817 CE]

Note: The inscription in small erkat'agir is engraved on the thin metal festoon, which is affixed to the left against the main altar of the church, on the pair of bars decorated with beautiful vegetative designs. The writing is well preserved and legible.

The inscription mentions T'ëodoros II of Van, Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem (1801-1818), and the beadle, mahtesi Grigor of Xarberd who sponsored the fashioning of the bars with this beautiful decoration in the Church of the Holy Archangels. The term 'two classes' used in this inscription refers to the two church classes adopted in the Armenian Church: the right-hand and left-hand classes. These classes are located in front of the altars and are mainly separated from the rest of the church by iron bars²⁶.

8. Inscription on the well that is located in the southern part of the church, outside, 18th century, after the year 1751 (Fig. 10)

Normalized Transcription in Armenian:

Թ(ի)շ(ա)տ(ա)կ է մուսուլման երկր(որդ) |₂ թարգման ե///նի Ամթեցի մ(ա)հ(տես)ի |₃ Կարապետին ի [վա]յել[ւմն] |₄ մ(ա)յրապետ Եւայն |₅ եւ մ(ա)հ(տես)ի Թագուհի թվին ՌՄ///

Translation:

This spring (well) is a memorial of the second |₂ dragoman E///NI of Amida, mahtesi |₃ Karapet for the enjoyment of |₄ nun Eway |₅ and mahtesi T'aguhi 12/// [AE = 17/// CE]

Note: The inscription is in large erkat'agir and is engraved on the front of the well. However, due to damage to the surface of the stone, several portions of the text have become illegible, particularly the ends of the lines, including the date at the end of the fourth line. The first two digits, ՌՄ, are clear, but the remainder is unclear. Similarly, the reading of Ե///ՆԻ in the middle of the second line is problematic.

The inscription mentions the Brotherhood's dragoman, Karapet, and Ewa, the Mother Superior of the Convent of the Holy Archangels. While no information has been found about these individuals, further research may yield details, particularly regarding the Mother Superior. The inscription also references a certain T'aguhi mahtesi.

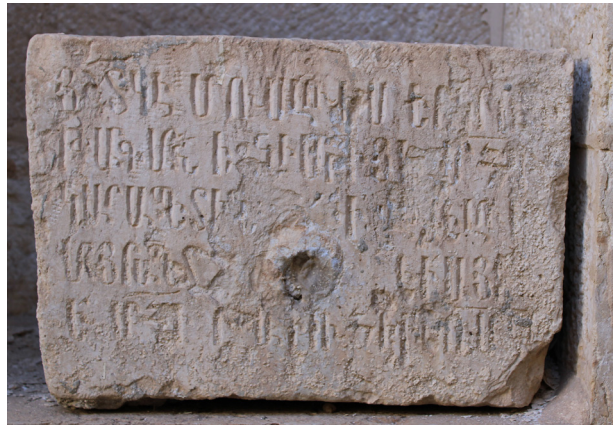


Fig. 10. Inscription on the well, @Author, 2022

9. Graffito incised on the northern wall inside the church, 16th century (Fig. 11/1)

Normalized Transcription in Armenian:

Կանկ(նե)ց(աւ) իս(ա)շս |₂ Մարգ(ա)րարին

Translation:

This cross was set up |₂ (in memory of) Margarit

²⁶ Ōrmanean 1979, 109-110.



Note: This graffito is scratched rather than incised. It consists of a combination of majuscule and minuscule letters and is located on the lower portion of a sculpted *xač'k'ar*. The shapes of the letters, particularly the uncial form of the letter *U*, are notable. The third *n* in the name *Uwinq(u)nnp/hū* is likely a mistake. The writing style suggests that the inscription can be dated no earlier than the sixteenth century.



Fig. 11 and 11/1. Graffito incised on the northern wall inside the church, @Author, 2022

10. Graffito incised on the northern pillar inside the church, 16th - 17th century (Fig. 12/1)

Normalized Transcription in Armenian:

1Ի(ւ)2 կան2 կ(նե)ց(աւ) տ(է)ր 3 Գրիգ(ո)ր4 հն

Translation:

1(This) cross was 2 set up (in memory of) Rev. 3,4 Grigor

Note: The graffito is engraved in an unskilled and uneven minuscule script. A *u* appears, written by the same hand, slightly to the left of the graffito. It may represent the beginning of the word *un* ("Rev."), written either by mistake or as a trial. The inscription is likely dated to the sixteenth or seventeenth century.

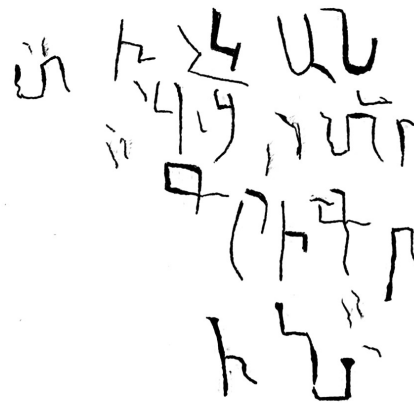


Fig. 12 and 12/1. Graffito incised on the northern pillar inside the church, @Author, 2022

Conclusion

The ten inscriptions presented in this article demonstrate that further research is needed to fully uncover the local epigraphic heritage. This is not only true for the Monastery of the Holy Archangels but also applies to other Armenian monasteries and churches in the Holy Land. It is important to note that, in some cases, new research allows for corrections and additions to previous decipherments, improving their accuracy. In addition to

the transcriptions of the published inscriptions, we also consider the brief annotations to be crucial, as they provide additional information about both the inscriptions and the individuals mentioned in them.

Furthermore, we believe that publishing the Armenian inscriptions alongside English translations is especially significant, as it allows a broader circle of researchers to engage with the Armenian epigraphic heritage of the Holy Land.

We are confident that the collected and published epigraphic data with relevant information will contribute to numerous future studies and discoveries.

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KHACHIK HARUTYUNYAN

“Scientific Research Centre of Historical and Cultural Heritage” SNCO,
“Matenadaran” – Mesrop Mashtots Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts
khachik.har@gmail.com

