

HOLY ALL SAVIOR GHAZANCHETSOTS CHURCH IN SHUSHI AND "PROTECTION" OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN AZERBAIJAN



Lyuba Kirakosyan 

National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia, Yerevan, RA

Abstract: *The paper presents the circumstances of the founding of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots church (Gazanchetsots "Surb Amenaprkich") in the city of Shushi, its plan, spatial composition and decorations. The essence of the policy of the Azerbaijani authorities to change the ownership of the monument, its rejection from the Armenians, as well as the manifestation of vandalism against the church is revealed. The study was carried out by retrieving archival materials, discussing and conducting own original research. The aim of this study is to, based on voluminous materials on history and architecture of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots church, stored in the National Archives of the Republic of Armenia, find out how Azerbaijan, in the face of political and scientific circles, with the help of what mechanisms, is trying to alienate the Cathedral of Shushi from the Armenian architectural heritage, appropriating Armenian history and culture. Presentation of the real architectural image of the the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots in Shushi and discussion of the events around it during and after the 2020 war is a way to draw the attention of international organizations for the preservation of monuments to the false policy of "cultural preservation" of Azerbaijan, trying to protect the building from further falsifications.*

Keywords: *the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots (Gazanchetsots "Surb Amenaprkich"), Armenian architectural heritage, Azerbaijani vandalism, distortion.*

Lyuba Kirakosyan

E-mail: kirakosyanlyuba@gmail.com

Received: 11.07.2022

Revised: 29.08.2022

Accepted: 15.09.2022

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Introduction

Mesrop Taghiadyan reports on the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church of Shushi after visiting Shushi in the spring of 1821. According to that evidence, the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church of Shushi previously used to be wooden. He mentions that the existing wooden churches were replaced by stonebuilt structures [1]. The National Archives of the Republic of Armenia preserves an extensive material on the history of this church¹. In the Soviet period publications on the history and architecture of Shushi city, the Armenian authors ([2,3,4,5] et al) presented in detail the religious structures and the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots church in Shushi. The Azerbaijani authors did not touch on this topic. Their works mainly present the fortification, urban planning, mosques, dwelling houses of Shushi [6,7]. The plan and volumetric-spatial professional examination of the church is fulfilled in a booklet authored by Manvel Sargsyan on the history of urban development of Shushi [8].

It should be noted that the Azerbaijani scientific community has no publications about the Gazanchetsots "Surb Amenaprkich" in Shushi both after the first Artsakh War and after the Second, in 2020. On the contrary, there were calls to usurp the heritage of Armenians and certain actions were taken to eliminate the traces of Armenians in Artsakh, particularly in Shushi.

On May 19-20, 2022, in Shushi, occupied by Azerbaijan, the Ministries of Culture and Nature Protection jointly organized a conference, the main topic of which was the restoration of the cultural image of "Karabakh region", and the role of culture in a peaceful dialogue. The subject brought up during the presentations and

¹ NAA, f. 56, l. 1, cs. 2145.

discussions referred to the reconstruction works to be carried out in the region "after the Armenian occupation and after the liberation of Karabakh". The conference was attended by Salim bin Muhammad al-Malik, President of the Islamic Organization for Education, Science and Culture (ISESCO), Baghdad Amre, Secretary General of the Turkish Council, Raymond Bondi, Secretary-General of the National Commission for UNESCO in Malta, Miguel Angel Moratinos, High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, Director of the International Foundation for Turkish Culture and Heritage Gunay Efendiyeva others².

The main goal of this study is to clarify, by presenting the architectural composition of the church, how Azerbaijan, in the face of political and scientific circles, with the help of what mechanisms, is trying to alienate the Cathedral of Shushi from the Armenian architectural heritage, appropriating Armenian history and culture, on the way to creating its own identity. To achieve this goal, voluminous materials on the history and architecture of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church, stored in the National Archives of the Republic of Armenia, were studied, the architectural examination of the church was carried out and the current state of the monument after the second Artsakh war, when the city of Shushi came under the control of Azerbaijan, was described.

Materials and Methods

In the course of the study, materials from the National Archives of the Republic of Armenia on the church of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots of Shushi were used, a thorough study and interpretation of which made it possible to clarify issues related to the design and foundation of the church. The bibliographic method of study, historical and comparative analysis, as well as original methods of research were applied. Materials related to Shushi and, in particular, the Holy All Savior, posted on Azerbaijani websites in 2021-2022, and publications of the "monument watch.org." website were also used.

Results and Discussion

Historical overview

The National Archives of the Republic of Armenia preserves an extensive material on the history of this church³. The time of construction of the Ghazanchetsots stone church on the place of the wooden structure is unknown. However, the stone church built in 1847 was already in a state of disrepair. According to the mentioned materials, it was a three-nave domed basilica covered with stone slabs or tiles. In the same year, Metropolitan Baghdasar began correspondence with the Synod of Etchmiadzin to obtain permission to renovate the church. During the four-year correspondence it is decided to build a new church on the previous site. But it took decades for the idea to materialize. During this time the belfry of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church was built.

The idea of building a new church became relevant again in 1867. The architectural inspector of the city was asked to make a plan, a facade and a cost estimate of the church⁴ (Fig. 1).

Believers and clergy expressed a desire for the church to be built on the example of the medieval Ani Cathedral, but the presented project had a different design. A number of remarks were made when approved by the superior inspectorate. The project was amended for a long time and approved in 1868. The lack of graphic documentation does not enable us to find out to what extent the temple is built in accordance with the design proposals. It becomes obvious that the Holy All Savior was built according to the plan. The inscription

² https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/Mezhdunarodnaya_konferenciya_v_SHushe_zavershila_svoyu_rabotu-43898 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IC6Zlgsy9SY> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCeFp9T3ob8>

³ NAA, f. 56, l. 1, cs. 2145.

⁴ NAA, f. 56, l. 1, cs. 3618.

opened during the renovation in 1982 mentions the names of the architect who built the monument – Simeon Ter-Hakobyants, and master Avetis Yaramishyants [4] (Fig. 2).

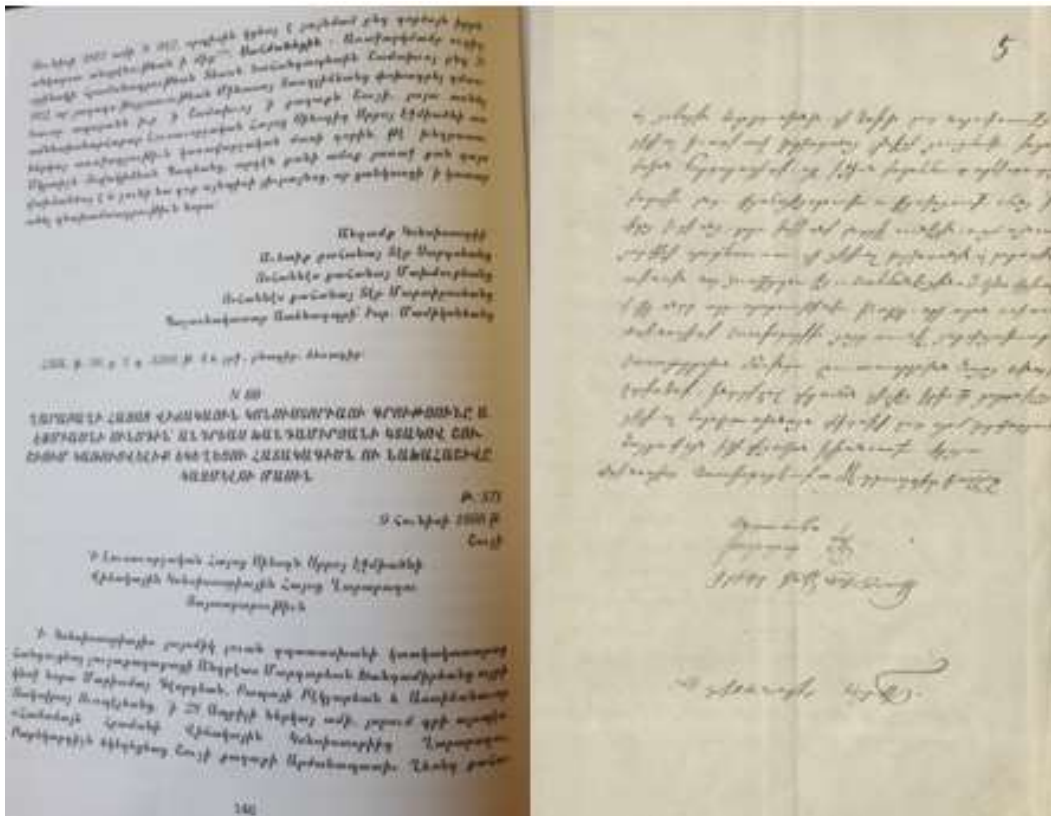


Fig. 1. Materials stored in the National Archive of Armenia on the circumstances of the construction of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi. NAA, F 56, p.1, 2145



Fig. 2. The inscription engraved at the lower part of the church's bas-relief with the names of the master builder and architect

The epigraph placed at the top of the southern portal also mentions that the temple was built with the donations of the parishioners of Shushi: the construction began in 1868 and was completed in 1887 (“Thanks to and by the mercy of Almighty God, this magnificent holy temple was built by the tributes and scots of the pious people of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church of Shushi, whose construction launched in 1868 – in the days of the kingship of the God-empowered Sovereign Great Emperor of All Russians – Alexander II and under the Patriarchate of Gevorg IV, was completed in 1887 – in the year of the kingship of His Son, Blessed Emperor Alexander III and in the Catholicosate of Markar I in September 20, 1888”) [9] (Fig. 3).

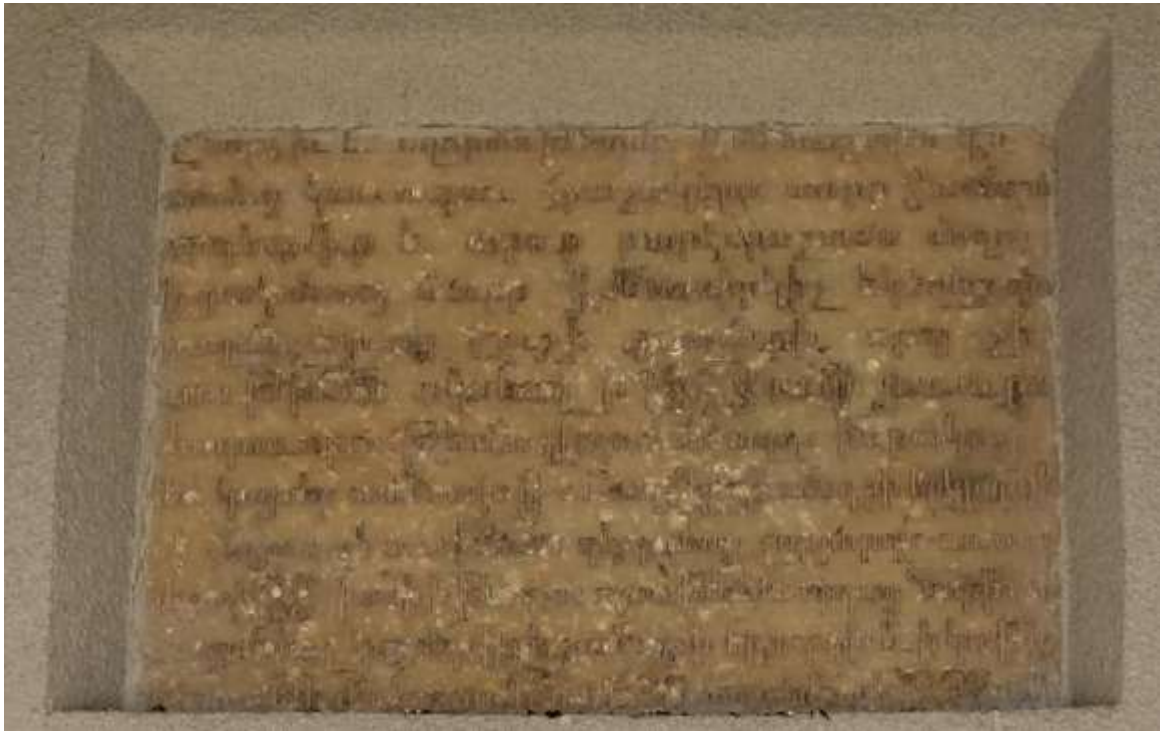


Fig. 3. *The building inscription placed on the southern facade of the church*

Architectural - compositional examination



Fig. 4. *Location of the church*

The complex of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church is located in the central part of the city, 1378 m above the Karkar valley. Thanks to its elevated location, it dominates the entire plateau (Fig.4). It is the architectural dominant of Shushi city. The church and the belfry are built of finely hewn white limestone (Figs. 5,6).

The Holy All Savior has impressive dimensions (34.7 x 27 x 42 m) and is one of the largest Armenian churches. The four facades of the church with a rectangular plan have externally accentuated apses, which convey cruciformity to the structure (Fig. 7). There are bas-reliefs on the pediments. In the center of the prayer hall, the dome rises on four thick pillars. With its general volumetric solution, the Holy All Savior received a cross-domed composition reminiscent of the Mother Cathedral of Etchmiadzin.



Fig. 5. The south-western Armenian segment of Shushi and the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church (1911). Photo: a page from the book by Mkrtychyan Sh., Davtyan Sch., 1997



Fig. 6. The Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church of Shushi in the city panorama before the 2020 war. Photo by Hrayr Baze



Fig. 7. The southern facade of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church of Shushi. Photo: a page from the book by Mkrtychyan Sh., Davtyan Sch., 1997

It is similar to the composition of another monument of the XIX century - the main church of the Tade monastery. It is obvious that the architect of the Holy All Savior, Simon Ter-Hakobyan, sought to remain native to the traditions of early Christian Armenian church construction (Fig. 8). The church has three portals that open to the west, south and north. In front of them three-arched semicircle, inwardly and externally multi-faceted nartex-vestibules are built. Originally, there used to be five arches, but the two lateral ones were later lined and closed (perhaps, due to functional purposes). Their existence is one of the features of the Holy All Savior Church of Shushi. Small cruciform windows are opened at the top of the vestibules. The upper parts of the doors are decorated with bas-reliefs included within the frame (Fig. 9).

The external decoration of the church is represented by numerous decorative zones, dimensional portals, window edgings, ornamented arches of doors and windows. Wide and high windows convey upsurge to the volume and abundance of light to the interior.

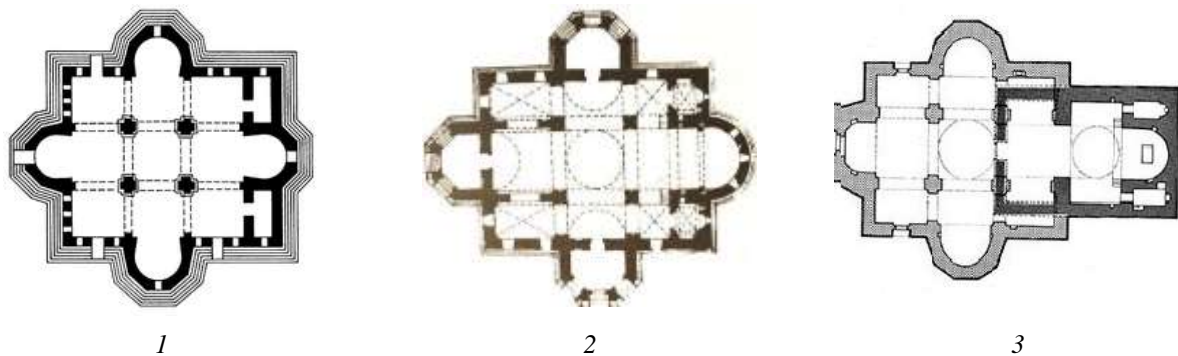


Fig. 8. 1 - Mother Cathedral of Etchmiadzin, 7th century, 2 - Plan of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church of Shushi, 3 - plan of the main church of the Tade monastery



Fig. 9. *The pediment of the southern vestibule with a bas-relief included within a frame.*
 Photo by L. Kirakosyan

The dome of the church is also slender, the drum facets are designed in vertical symmetries, with inlined window-niches. The drum is crowned with a fan-shaped spire (Fig. 10). There are numerous Armenian inscriptions on the walls of the church.



Fig. 10. *The dome of the Holy All Savior Church.* Photo by L. Kirakosyan

A three-storey belfry is located a little far away, on the western side of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church. The cube-shaped volume of the first floor is accentuated by an east-west axis with a transversal arched opening. In the corners of the upper part of this floor there are four statues of angels blowing trumpets. The faceted walls of the second and third floors of the belfry are joined by wide arched openings. The third floor of the belfry, as in case of a church, is crowned with a fan-shaped spire.

The embellished belt of the belfry is performed with an outstanding craftsmanship. We learn from the extensive inscription on the eastern wall of the building that it was built by Abraham Khandamiryants from Shushi in memory of Gabriel Hovsepyan-Batiryants, who originated from Ghazan and pilgrim Mkrtich Margaryan-Khandamiryants, his wife Balasan, sons of Arup and Stepan, as well as all residents of Ghazan. The date of construction is mentioned at the upper part of the southern wall of the belfry: the summer of 1858 [10]. It is not difficult to notice from this inscription that the belfry had been built earlier than the temple of the Holy All Savior (1868) and that the old church mentioned by Mesrop Taghiadyan, built in the 18th century, used to stand here instead of the current Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church. This is the reason why the belfry stands separately (it is generally accepted that the belfry is built after the church and it is mainly attached to the latter).

The condition before and after the war

The church was closed during the Soviet era. In the 1940s, it was used as a grain warehouse. During the 1950s, the statues of angels at the church entrance were damaged and the dome was destroyed. The Azeris living in the city tore down the hewn roof slabs and the stones of the upper row of the facades and built houses (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. *The view of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi from the northwest (1972).
Photo: a page from the book by Mkrtychan Sh., Davtyan Sch., 1997*

In the late 1960s, the church was turned into a parking lot for agricultural machinery. A decade later, barbaric and deliberate explosions and fires were organised inside the church, the epigraphs were effaced. All this has always provoked the protest of the Armenian population. In 1982, the restoration of the Church of All Savior began, which was not going smoothly. According to the restoration master Volodya Babayan, the high leadership of Azerbaijan was hindering the construction of the dome. They realized that after that the church would become dominant not only over Shushi, but also in the vast Karkar valley [11].

During the first Artsakh war, the Azerbaijanis converted the church into a military depot. After the liberation of Shushi, the restoration of the destroyed dome and the whole complex was completed in 1998 (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12. *General view of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots and the bell tower of Shushi from the southwest (after restoration, 1998). Photo by L. Kirakosyan*

On October 8, 2020, the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church was targeted by the enemy: it was rocketed, the dome of the church and the roofs of the cross-wings were damaged (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13. *The condition of the church after the October 8, 2020 missile attack*⁵

Immediately after the end of the war official Azerbaijan announced that the historic districts of the city, mosques and churches in Shushi will be restored, in its media emphasizing especially the restoration of the churches as an indicator of religious, national solidarity. It is noteworthy that almost all the delegations arriving in Shushi, the representatives of the organizations were shown the "restoration" of Ghazanchetsots, which would gain "its original appearance", and which, according to the Azerbaijanis, was not Armenian. The Azeri media presents Gazanchetsots "Surb Amenaprkich" church, sometimes as an Orthodox, sometimes as an Uidian church, which "the Armenians Armenianized that by transforming the dome after the occupation of the city"⁶

According to the website "monument watch.org" before the visit of Ilham Aliyev and his wife in early January 2021, only some "renovation" work was done inside the temple.

The Azerbaijani side, after its double shelling, removed the pile of stones inside the temple, collapsed walls, scaffolding was erected around the temple, the church dome was removed, which thereby distorted the appearance of the temple, the inscriptions written with paint were removed. It can be seen that the green construction netting is frayed, and the part of the roof that collapsed after the shelling of the southern wing has not been restored, not even covered, the rest of the ceiling is in disrepair (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14. *General view of the of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi as of 1921*

⁵ Photo source: meganewes.am/assets/uploads/7vu8puzzo7ftn596c1mz1605464215

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHiZjQh2E4>.

It can also be stated that the fence of the temple courtyard was destroyed, the gates, khachkars that were standing in the courtyard were displaced.

In a video shared on Telegram-channel of the Armenian Military Portal on May 22, 2022, it is seen that a fairly dense grass cover has grown in some parts of the roof, the damage and collapse have not been eliminated and the entire area around the temple is in a state of disrepair (Fig. 15) .



Fig. 15. *The dome of the church of Gazanchetsots "Surb Amenaprkich" in Shushi*⁷

This practice is typical for Azerbaijan's "policy of cultural preservation". The same was done with the early Christian church of Vankasar [12-17]. In Baku, they claim that, allegedly, the temple originally looked like this before it was "Armenianized by the Armenians".

Conclusion

The bibliographic and original research of the temple of the Holy All Savior of Shushi showed that:

- The church was built according to the preliminary order and developed project, in accordance with the traditions of the Armenian medieval church architecture.
- The orderer of the church was the Armenian community of Shushi represented by the residents, so called "ghazanchees".
- It refers to the cross-domed structural type, which became widespread in the Armenian architecture of the 6th-14th centuries AD.
- Both during the Soviet period and during the Artsakh wars, the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots was attacked and destroyed by the Azerbaijani authorities, which are qualified as manifestations of cultural vandalism.
- Currently, Azerbaijan, denying the previous restoration of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots of Shushi, ignoring and distorting all the facts proving its Armenianness, is reconstructing the structure, passing it off as a Russian Orthodox church.
- The popularization the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots of Shushi is a way to draw the attention of international organizations for the preservation of monuments to the false policy of "cultural preservation" of Azerbaijan, trying to protect the building from further falsifications.

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⁷ Photo source: https://t.me/military_arm/13434?single&fbclid=IwAR0IYpXzM09vjsMasjji_Gwy1kqtpfwkYq4cxPJ5Dp4yK6N35xfiXlzIDGMU

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Lyuba Kirakosyan, Doctor of Science (Architecture) (RA, Yerevan) - National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia, Professor at the Chair of Theory of Architecture, Restoration and Reconstruction of Historical-Architectural Heritage, Fine Arts and History, kirakosyanlyuba@gmail.com