

Preserving Armenian Art and Architecture in Twenty-First Century Iran

The Case Study of Churches in Western Azerbaijan

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Abstract The paper intends to test the current degree of conservation of the Armenian churches in Salmas and Khoy territories, and to define a set of possible interventions in their safeguard and conservation. The study faces the problems of the structural and material degradation of buildings, provides a critical approach to the ongoing interventions, and proposes a set of intervention criteria in restoration, reuse and management. Today, whereas the population of Armenian origin is nearly disappeared. Consequently it will be necessary to involve also with the population currently established in these territories.

Keywords Armenian Churches. Architectural Conservation. West Azerbaijan Tourism. New Uses for Old Buildings. International Cooperation.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Degradation Problems. – 3 Problems of Legal Protection. – 4 Some Conservation Problems. – 5 New Uses. – 6 Possible Forms of Reuse and Recovery. – 7 A Modest Proposal.

1 Introduction

As far as the churches of the Khoy and Salmas regions, this might be a crucial element for their survival, since at least two of them could be easily involved in an expansion of the UNESCO site which includes the two monasteries: they are the Saint George church in Haftvan and Saint George church in Khoy that, in addition to their important historical and architectural value, being in the vicinity of two important towns (Khoy and Salmas) would be well suited to host an exhibition structure and a small documentation / information centre to support a visit of the whole region.

However, many other churches remain in the two provinces (in some cases only ruins), and they require other methods of protection and new uses.

A mission impossible?

When I was asked for the title and abstract of my paper, I wondered if what I wanted to say was not too optimistic a proposal. Today, with what is happening in the Middle East, I would be inclined to say that there is no chance of success, at least in the short term. Why, despite everything, am I presenting this paper now? Because I know many people (not governments), on all sides involved, who are firmly convinced that a collaboration is still possible and that we must be ready when the political situation will allow it.

In recent years I have had the opportunity to carry out some studies on these topics, in three succeeding missions, the first in May 2016, the second in October 2017, and the third in October 2018. The last two were financed and implemented on behalf of the Salmast Heritage Association (SHA) with the help of professor Farhad Teherani and other Iranian friends. The results of these missions were published in 2021 (Boriani, Giambruno 2021)

This paper is intended to analyze and test the current degree of conservation of the Armenian and Assyrian religious buildings in Salmas and Khoy territories, and to define a set of possible interventions in their protection, conservation and use. It is based on previous research by Alpago Novello in 1976-77 (Alpago Novello et al. 1977; Alpago Novello et al. 1978) and SHA in 2017 (SHA 2017) as well as on documents (photos and a number of onsite sketches) from my recent missions.

As said, the starting point was the systematic work developed by the mission coordinated by professor Alpago Novello. This work was published in Italian in two volumes of limited international diffusion. We referred to these volumes about churches names, dating of buildings, floor plans, descriptions of typological and architectural characters [figs 1-3].



Figure 1 Ghalasar, S.Sargis. 1977. © Alpago Novello A.



Figure 2 Mahlam S.Gevorg. 1977. © Alpago Novello A.

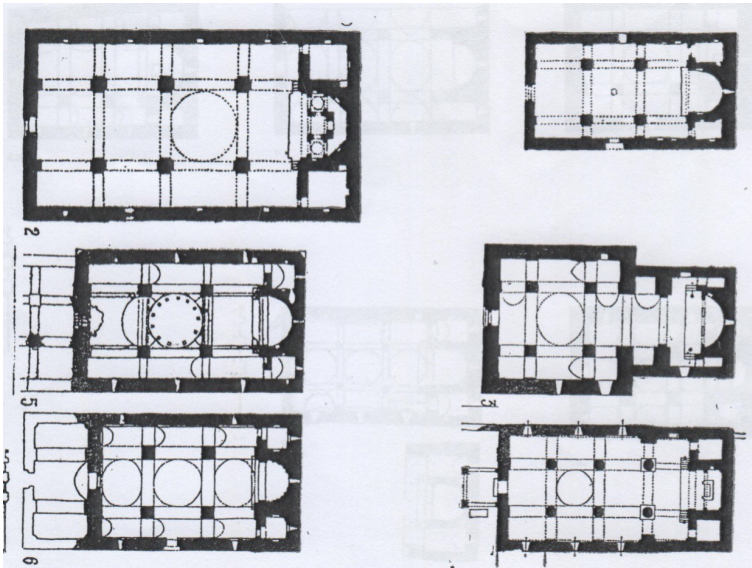


Figure 3 Alpago Novello, Plans of some churches in stone ashlars. 1977. © Alpago Novello A.

My research compares the 1977 state of the buildings to the 2018 situation, both referring to its evolution during the three-year duration of my missions. Survey fields were the same buildings testified in the two books from Alpago mission, yet limited to the territories of Salmas and Khoy, but involving also some Assyrian (Catholic) churches. Not all the buildings recorded in the SHA Catalogue are included in the present study. Here we rather focused on the ones that, starting from the available documentation, looked like the most interesting either by an architectural or historical point of view, and potentially fit for their involvement in a real estate enhancement policy. The buildings neglected by the present study are unfortunately reduced to few ruins and though surely interesting in historical and archaeological terms, they are mostly uninteresting for a conservation and reuse project, even though they still stand important by an archaeological point of view [fig. 4].

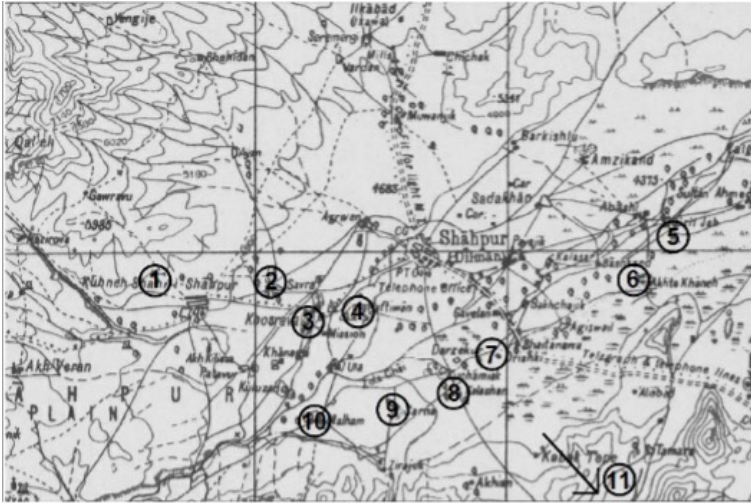


Figure 4 Location of the villages of the Counties of Salmas and Urmia visited during the missions:
1. Kohneshahr, 2. Savra, 3. Khosrova, 4. Haftvan, 5. Ghalasar, 6. Ghezleja, 7. Akhtekhaneh, 8. Drishk, 9. Sarna,
10. Malham, 11. Gharabagh, 12. Jamalabad, 13. Payajuk © USA Army map of Iranian Azerbaijan, 1943.
USA Library of Congress (map) and Boriani M. (locations)

2 Degradation Problems

The study carried out faces the problems of the structural and material degradation of buildings, provides a critical approach to the ongoing interventions, and proposes a set of intervention criteria in conservation, reuse and recovery.

Materials used for building were adobe, kagil plaster and roofing in wood for the poorest churches while the best buildings were made of regular or rough ashlar of stone, both for the walls, arches and vaults.

In this paper I will show some images as records of the main ongoing degradation phenomena, which can be summarized as follows:

- the erosion caused by the rain or rising damp from the ground;
- cracks pattern;
- no box-like behaviour, very dangerous in case of earthquakes;
- domes and vaulted roofs collapsed;
- vandalism and illegal excavations;
- animal infestation - garbage;
- plaster and molding detachments, chromatic alteration, erosion and superficial deposits.

I present here some images [figs. 5-7] that document the various forms of degradation found.



Figure 5 Dirshk S.Sargis cracks in the east wall. 2018. © Boriani M.



Figure 6 Ghzelja S.Hovhannes, no box-like behavior. 2018. © Boriani M.



Figure 7 Akhtekhaneh S.Astvatstatsin, erosion of the top caused by the rain and rising damp from the ground © Boriani M.

3 Problems of Legal Protection

Contrary to what one might think, Armenian churches, from a legal point of view, enjoy a fair amount of protection in Iran. As already said, two important monasteries and some annexes have been protected by the UNESCO Convention (World Heritage).

As required by UNESCO World Heritage, the two monasteries of Saint Stephanos and Saint Thaddeus (Kara Kilise) are also protected by an adequate buffer zone, taking into account that these monumental complexes are very popular during crowded pilgrimages.

The buildings included in the World Heritage have been the subject of important restorations carried out by the Iranian Center for Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organisation (ICTHO) (Karimi 2021).

The Armenian churches of Khoy/Salmas region protected by law from the Iranian government are not few: among the 18 churches studied in this paper as many as 8 were registered between 1998 and 2006, 4 in the Khoy region (Malhazan – S.Khateh [Sargis]; Gris – S.Astvatsatsin; Khoy – S.Sarkis; Fanai – S.Sarkis), and 4 in the Salmas region (Salmas, Haftvan – S.Gevorg; Akhtekhaneh – S.Astvatsatsin; Ghezelja – S.Hovhannes; Mahlam – S.Gevorg).

Among the ten unprotected buildings, seven are ruins which however deserve to be preserved (all, except Qoruq, in the Salmas region:

Drishik - S.Sargis; Ghalasar - S.Sargis; Khosrova - Mar Givargis an Assyrian church; Mahlam - S.Zoravar; Sarnaq - S.Avatatzin; Payadjuk - S.Gevorg; Qoruq - dedication unknown; and three are small adobe chapels: Khoneshar. S.Hakob; S.Sargis) (Karimi 2021).

Some of those churches have recently been the object of restoration interventions, some of which were still ongoing or interrupted for fund lack, at the moment of my surveys. In Haftvan Surp Gevorg church the architectural restoration was practically complete at the time of my last visit, while work was still underway on some interesting early nineteenth century paintings.

In Akhtekhane S.Astvatsatsin church some restorations of the front wall looked in progress during our visits, even though probably interrupted waiting new funding.

Other important works are related to the Malhazan S.Khateh (S.Sargis) church, a building attended as pilgrimage end until short ago. Here the dome has been restored along with and the eastern wall and the interior, even if with questionable interventions. The roof has been waterproofed with bituminous sheath [figs 8, 9].

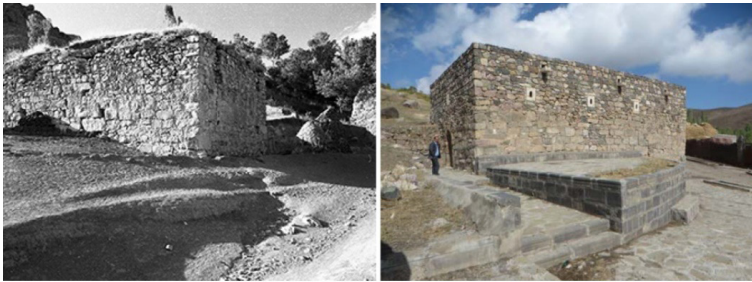


Figure 8 Gris, S.Astvatsatsin, before (1977) and after restoration (2017)
© Alpago Novello A.; Boriani M.



Figure 9 Mahlasan, S.Sargis (S.Kateh), before (1976) and after restoration (2018)
© Alpago Novello A.; Boriani M.

4 **Some Conservation Problems**

The worst preserved churches are made in adobe: a material needing continuous maintenance particularly in a territory where rare but strong autumn rains quickly wash away the hardly protected walls. In such cases, regarded as 'less important' by local authorities, the few interventions I have been able to observe are due to the goodwill of some local residents. Where those interventions are lacking, I could observe a quick decay of those buildings along my three missions.

I do not mean to judge in this occasion the nature of the restoration of past or current interventions: in comparison to the European standards some criticism could be advanced, yet ungenerous if we took into account the economic and technical difficulties, and the international isolation faced today by the local restorers.

As said, Armenian population has almost completely disappeared from this territory, so there is a lack of clarity about who today is the owner of the buildings. Their ownership is claimed by the Bishopric of Tabriz, which however is not able to intervene, alone, in the defence of a heritage too vast compared to its resources.

It is true that some of the most important churches are protected by law, but a large part of this Heritage is left to itself, sometimes with attempts to misappropriation.

Several buildings have historical interest but low architectural quality. As already said, the same restorations underway by the local government are often interrupted due to lack of adequate funding, leaving unfinished interventions, including urgent ones. The state of abandonment of many Armenian churches naturally raises the problem of their reuse, without which a maintenance or restoration would appear to be unsustainable.

The severest problem to be faced is the strong seismicity of the territory where the churches are placed. Western Azerbaijan is a strong seismic area (Berberian, Tchalenko 1974): I have not been able to obtain information on the damage suffered by the churches after the 2024 earthquake of Qotur (a city on the border between Türkiye and Iran, near Khoy) but I fear that it was significant. Anti-seismic consolidation works are urgent, at least through provisional works putting at safe some buildings or parts of unsafe buildings.

Those interventions will be possible only if it will be first possible to answer a question: Why preserve these buildings? Below I try to give some answers.

All these churches have a historical value that deserves to be preserved and enhanced in any case:

- they bear witness to the long-standing presence of important Armenian (and, more generally, Christian) communities;
- they are the destination of a "return" tourism by the Armenians of the diaspora who inhabited the region;

- they are buildings that deserve to find new uses, which make the conservation and maintenance works economically convenient;
- the villages where these buildings are located lack collective spaces that could constitute a point of reference for the community and the seat of some collective services. Churches no longer in use could be an important resource for these villages.

By this latter point of view the urban context where the churches are placed today has to be considered: some are located on the edge of the built-up area and near orchards and gardens. This can be an advantage from the point of view of environmental conditions. Others are in the urban area. These villages are never large: in any case a central position can favour a destination of use for collective services.

Others again are isolated in the countryside: if the church of Malhazan is a place of pilgrimage and close to an important communication road, difficult are the cases of ruins isolated and therefore also difficult to control.

5 New Uses

Finding new destinations of use looks like one of the indispensable conditions for the conservation of those buildings. What goals could we set to ensure that churches can be properly reused? Of course, not all uses should be allowed.

- In any case, maintaining the character of a building of worship and providing for forms of reuse that are congruent with the original nature of these buildings;
- respecting the architectural and decorative features and their historical-artistic and cultural values;
- planning a destination of use that be useful for the local population;
- enhancing the cultural potential of buildings (even those that are in ruins), primarily in memory of history and in support of the identity of the various villages, without, however, excluding their involvement in view of tourism (religious and cultural);
- also keeping the structures in a state of ruin or totally collapsed, in order to preserve their interest in ethnographic and archaeological research;
- involving the local population and that of the diaspora in the management and surveillance of the various sites. An environmental alarm system could protect churches from vandals.

6 Possible Forms of Reuse and Recovery

- 6.1. First evaluate whether some churches can be reopened for worship, at least on the occasion of some religious holidays or pilgrimages. Responsible: the Religious Authorities at various levels.
- 6.2. Buildings protected by law must be restored and, as far as possible, involved in cultural and 'roots tourism' religious and/or secular. Responsible: the National and Provincial Protection Bodies.
- 6.3. For all other buildings, which still maintain static conditions and roofs in good condition or easily recoverable: plan for the placement of small collective activities to support local communities (meeting rooms, small craft activities, child care, other cultural or social activities, in any case compatible with the religious origin of the buildings). Responsible: the Local communities or no-profit associations.
- 6.4. For ruins that cannot be recovered as buildings for use, but have nevertheless maintained a significant character in the urban landscape: set up small public spaces with trees, furnishings and places for rest and recreation (shade, small fountains, seats, etc.). Responsible: the inhabitants of the neighbourhood.
- 6.5. All areas of churches and their historic cemeteries must be subject to archaeological restrictions, promoting field research and recovery of any finds.
- 6.6. Rehearsing the observations at the beginning of this paper, in the hope that the political situation in the Middle East can be resolved in a peace process, Iranian Azerbaijan has great potential for cultural tourism:
 - presence of important cities as Urmia, Tabriz, Khoy and their accommodation and transport infrastructures;
 - proximity to the South Caucasus and Armenia in particular, areas of recent and important tourism development: UNESCO Armenian Monastic Ensembles of Iran, St. Thaddeus, St. Stepanos and the Chapel of Dzordzor are the destination of important pilgrimages. They are certainly a point of attraction from broad, both for religious and architectural aspects [figs 10a-b];
 - presence in the surroundings of Important Archaeological and Islamic monuments and sites of natural interest;
 - some Armenian buildings of the area offer great potentialities;
 - the church of St. Sarkis in Khoy could house (in the sacristies and/or in the side aisles) an exhibition structure and a small documentation / information centre to support

a knowledge of the region and serve as a starting point for visits [fig. 11].



Figure 10 S. Thaddaeus Monastery © Marouti A. and Dzor Dzor Chapel after restorations © Wiki Commons.
The chapel was dismantled and moved 600 meters following the construction of a dam

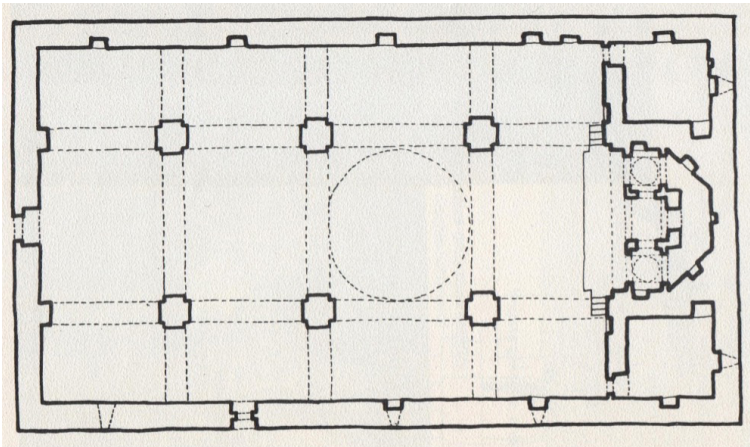


Figure 11 Khoys, S. Sargis: plan of a church which could be added to the UNESCO site. 1977.
© Alpagu Novello A.

In Haftvan in the church of S. Gevorg there are some interesting and rare frescoes recently rediscovered and restored [figs 12-13].



Figure 12 Haftwan S. Gevorg after recent restorations. 2018. © Boriani M.



Figure 13 Haftvan, S. Gevorg: mural paintings recently discovered and restored (details). 2018. © Boriani M.

Furthermore, in the enclosure of the church, there are the remains of the ruins of an Armenian theatre would also consent, the realisation of a lapidary museum, given the vast presence in the territory of tombstones and elements of decorations and inscriptions: many churches and cemeteries have been looted or vandalized in the past in all the Salmas region: the gravestones and sculptures of greater historical or ethnographic interest could be collected in the theatre building, rebuilt by recovering the surviving parts [fig. 14].



Figure 14 Haftvan, ruins of the theatre that might be rebuilt as Visitor Centre for the complex of Armenian churches in the Salmas territory © Boriani M.

7 A Modest Proposal

In my opinion it seems indispensable that specific agreements should be drawn up involving the Armenian Diaspora abroad, the Iranian Armenians, the Government of Armenia, the Iranian National and Regional Governments, ICHTO, National and International Universities and the local population for a strategic plan to safeguard and enhance this heritage, in which the rights and duties of the various parties are made clear.

I hope this paper will be a first opportunity to start a fruitful discussion on these issues as well as a concrete program of protection and conservation of this important Historical and Cultural Heritage.

Too optimistic? I realize that the current situation is not favourable.

Yet I think we still have a responsibility to look ahead and prepare the ground for when the time comes, as we said. It shouldn't be difficult to find intellectual resources, not only economic, to begin setting up a feasibility study that verifies what I have illustrated on this occasion. I am ready to cooperate in this work.

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