

Geghard (Armenia)

No 960

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Monastery of Geghard and the Upper Azat Valley
<i>Location</i>	Kotaik Region, near Goght Village
<i>State Party</i>	Republic of Armenia
<i>Date</i>	5 March 1999

Justification by State Party

The monastery of Geghard represents the unique survival of a particular type of building, in which structures hewn from the living rock harmonize with free-standing structures. In addition to its unique cultural properties, the monastery is also in a spectacular setting.

The monastery is a unique artistic achievement, the apogee of Armenian medieval architecture. **Criterion i**

As a result of its architectural innovations and the use of decorative art, the monastery greatly influenced the further development of Armenian medieval architecture. **Criterion ii**

The monastery has been, and continues to be, a place of pilgrimage for many thousands of Christians. **Criterion vi**

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of buildings*.

History and Description

History

The monastery is situated at the head of the Azat valley, surrounded by towering cliffs. It was founded in the 4th century, according to tradition by St Gregory the Illuminator. The site is that of a spring arising in a cave which had been sacred in pre-Christian times, hence one of the names by which it was known, *Ayvirkank* (the Monastery of the Cave).

The first monastery was destroyed by Arabs in the 9th century, but it was re-established and was flourishing again by the 13th century under the patronage of the Proshyan princes, who are buried there. They provided it with an irrigation system in 1200, as well as paying for the erection

and reconstruction of most of the churches in the complex. At this time it was also known as the Monastery of the Seven Churches and the Monastery of the Forty Altars.

The monastery was more famous because of the relics that it housed. The most celebrated of these was the spear which had wounded Christ on the Cross, allegedly brought there by the Apostle Thaddeus, from which comes its present name, Geghardavank (the Monastery of the Spear), first recorded in a document of 1250. This made it a popular place of pilgrimage for Armenian Christians over many centuries. Relics of the Apostles Andrew and John were donated in the 12th century, and pious visitors made numerous grants of land, money, manuscripts, etc over the succeeding centuries.

Description

The most ancient part of the monastery complex is the small *Chapel of St Gregory* (formerly the Chapel of the Mother of God - St Astvatzatzin), lying to the east of and outside the main group. It is excavated directly into the rock of the mountainside and is uncompleted. The earliest of the inscriptions on the external wall is from 1177. The ornate decoration of crosses on the facade extends from the built wall on to the rock-face below.

Built according to an inscription in 1215, the *Kathoghikè* (main church) is in the classic Armenian form. The plan, in the shape of an equal-armed cross, is inscribed in a square and covered with a dome on a square base. It is linked with the base by means of vaulting. The east arm of the cross terminates in an apse, the remainder being square. In the corners there are small barrel-vaulted two-storey chapels. On the internal walls there are many inscriptions recording donations. The masonry of the external walls is particularly finely finished and fitted.

Ten years later a *gavit* (entrance hall) was built on the west side of this church to link it with the first rock-cut church. As is customary in medieval Armenian architecture, the structure of this building reproduces that of the peasant hut, in which four massive free-standing columns in the centre support a roof of wooden beams with a hole in the centre to admit light. The ecclesiastical version, in stone, is an imposing structure. The peripheral spaces resulting from the location of the columns are variously roofed, whilst the central space is crowned by a dome with stalactites, the most perfect example of this technique anywhere in Armenia. The *gavit* was used for teaching and meetings, and for receiving pilgrims and visitors.

The *first rock-cut church* (in which the spring worshipped in pagan times arose) was built before 1250. It is entirely dug out of the rock and has an equal-armed cruciform plan. The interior is lined by two crossed arches with a central stalactite dome. An inscription records that it was the work of the architect Galdzak, who also constructed the other rock-cut church and the *zamatouns* within a period of some forty years.

To the east of this church, and also entered from the *gavit*, is a roughly square chamber cut into the rock, which was one of the princely tombs (*zamatoun*) of the Proshyan dynasty. Heraldic motifs are carved above the niche on the far wall.

This tomb gives access to the *second rock-cut church*. This church is known from an inscription to have been built in 1283, the donation of Prince Prosh. It is cruciform in plan. The corners are curved and the drum is lined with semi-

columns alternating with blind windows. The dome is decorated, with a circular opening in the centre. The walls have relief decoration depicting animals, warriors, crosses, and floral motifs.

The second *zamatoun* is reached by an external staircase. Again carved into the rock, its form reproduces that of a *gavit*. It contains the tombs of the princes Merik and Grigor, and others are known to have been there but have now disappeared. An inscription shows it to have been completed in 1288.

The monastery complex was encircled by a defensive wall in the 12th-13th centuries. The main access is through a gate on the western end of the walls, and there is a smaller secondary entrance in the east. To the east and south of the church the walls have been lined on the interior with ranges of small buildings dating from the 17th century, now in ruins. However, it is known that most of the monks lived in cells excavated into the rock-face outside the main enceinte, which have been preserved, along with some simple oratories. The rock-faces over the whole area bear elaborate crosses (*khatchkar*) carved in relief.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The nominated area is protected under the 1998 Law on the Protection and Utilization of the Immovable Historical and Cultural Monuments and Historical Sites. There are strict controls over any forms of intervention on protected sites.

Management

The nominated area is the property of the Armenian Apostolic Church, based in Echmiatzin, since the monastery continues in monastic use. Overall responsibility for its maintenance and management is vested in the Commission for the Protection of Cultural and Historical Monuments. The Church undertakes the financing of maintenance and guardianship activities within the protected area.

The nominated site is surrounded by a substantial buffer zone, established in 1986, within which there are strict controls over any form of development or change. The Kotaik Regional Municipal Agency is responsible for the maintenance and protection of the buffer zone on behalf of the national government.

At the present time the State Department for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments is working on legislation for the Monastery and the Upper Azat Valley to be declared an Historical, Cultural, and Natural Reservation. This will include the preparation of a management plan, covering such items as systematic conservation, special restoration projects, and infrastructural requirements.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Exploratory work began at Geghard in the 1930s, leading to the discovery of a hitherto unknown rock-cut chamber (*zamatoun*) outside the enceinte; this subsequently collapsed.

Restoration work of dubious quality took place from 1967 onwards. However, recent work has been in accordance with internationally recognized conservation standards.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the group is high, not least because the property has been in continuous use as a monastery for many centuries.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the property in May 2000.

Qualities

The Geghard complex is an exceptionally complete and well preserved example of a medieval monastic foundation in a remote area of great natural beauty.

Comparative analysis

Armenian architecture has been the subject of intensive study by specialists from the Architecture Faculty of the Politecnico di Milano and the Armenian Academy of Sciences. This has resulted in the production of a series of scholarly studies of the main architectural monuments.

In the volume devoted to Geghard stress is laid on the importance of this monastery in medieval Armenian religious architecture because of its elaborate plan, and particular the exceptional rock-cut chapels and tombs.

There are other rock-cut churches on the World Heritage List, notably those at Lalibela (Ethiopia) and Göreme (Turkey). However, the architectural and artistic traditions are entirely distinct and so any comparison would be largely invalid.

Brief description

The monastery of Geghard contains a number of churches and tombs, most of them cut into the living rock, which illustrate Armenian medieval architecture at its highest point. The complex of medieval buildings is set into a landscape of great natural beauty.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criterion ii*:

Criterion ii The monastery of Geghard, with its remarkable rock-cut churches and tombs, is an exceptionally well preserved and complete example of medieval Armenian monastic architecture and decorative art, with many innovative features which had a profound influence on subsequent developments in the region.

ICOMOS, September 2000