

Nakhchivan August 2005

The following is an account of my visit to the region of Nakhchivan, in Azerbaijan, during August 2005. My primary purpose in visiting Nakhchivan was to try to discover what the condition of that region's numerous Armenian monuments was. This was in the light of the widely reported damage inflicted on the medieval Armenian cemetery at Jugha, west of modern Julfa, in 1998 and 2002.

My criteria in drawing up a list of sites to be visited was to choose those monuments that were architecturally the most visually interesting, whose locations I could place on a map, and which did not lie too close to the Armenian border. For this I was guided by the photographs and information contained in Armen Aivazian's 1990 publication "Nakhchivan Book of Monuments". The photographs in this book were taken between 1965 and 1987.

I entered Nakhchivan by land, by way of Turkey, and travelled first to Naxçivan city. The following day I hired a car and driver. My destination was the **Yernjak valley**, about 25km east of Naxçivan city. Towering over this valley is Yılanlidağ (Snake Mountain), also known as Odzasar. This is an impressive-looking conical hill, tall enough to be visible from most parts of Nakhchivan. In order to have a safe reason for travelling through the various villages that had Armenian churches in them, I told the driver that I wanted to have a closer look at the mountain and the nearby peak of Alınca (also known as Yernjak).

The first settlement in the Yernjak valley is the village of **Abtrakunis** (also spelt Abrugunis and Abtrakonts). I had explained to my driver on the way that I had heard there was an old church in Abtrakunis and that I wanted to see it. At the entrance to the village he asked a passer-by, a boy of about 12, where the church was. The boy pointed towards some empty ground just to the right of the main road, up a lane, and almost opposite the spot where we had stopped.

I got out of the car and walked up the lane to look around. I found an empty site, whose earth was heavily disturbed and completely bare of vegetation. Sticking out of the loose soil were many fragments of old bricks. A comparison between my photographs of this site and photographs of the church in Aivazian's book removes any doubt that this was the former location of the Armenian church in Abtrakunis. Because of the total lack of surface vegetation it seems unlikely that the destruction of the church took place earlier than 2004.

*Known as **Surb Karapet**, and originally part of a monastery, the Abtrakunis church was built in the year 1381 over the ruins of an older church. Internally, it was a domed basilica with four piers. The lower parts of the church were built of cut stone, but the dome and its tall drum were from a later repair and were built of brick. The interior had some Persian-style frescoes from the 1740s. On the exterior walls were various relief carvings – crosses, eagles, etc. Built against the western end of the south wall was a second church – a small chapel dedicated to St. Stephanos. In 1705 a bell tower had been added to the roof of this chapel. The photographs in Aivazian's books reveal that by the 1980s the church, chapel, and bell tower lay derelict and unused, but were still substantially intact.*

Beyond Abtrakunis the next settlement was Bananiyar. Known to Armenians as **Aparank**, it was an important Armenian settlement during the late-medieval period. At least until the 1970s there were some ruins of a large medieval church located on high ground in the middle of the village. We asked if there was a church in the village, but were told no. On high ground at the eastern end of the village there was a newly built mosque – a grand structure built of brick and with twin domes. The next village, which lay a short distance off the main road, was **Saltagh**, also spelt **Salitagh**. It once had an Armenian church from the 19th century, but the village was too far away from the main road for me to see anything.

We then drove through **Norashen**. A ruined 12th century church, known as **Surb Hovhannes**, existed at the north-western edge of this village at least until the 1960s. Aivazian's book illustrates an Armenian church called Surb Astvatsatsin that was located inside the village, beside the main road. It was a large, stone-built, domeless basilica dating probably from the 17th century. Aivazian's book also has photographs of an extensive medieval Armenian graveyard containing ram-shaped and coffer-shaped gravestones. I found no trace of either churches, or the graveyard.

After Norashen the road divided at the base of a large rocky crag formerly called Yernjak and now called **Alinja**. On it are the ruins of a castle. The road to the left continued northward. The road to the right led down into the village of **Hanagha**. Halfway up a hillside overlooking Hanagha I noticed a domed structure and I decided to visit it. On getting closer, it turned out to be an old Muslim shrine comprising a kumbet-type tomb and a prayer hall. The structure was undergoing the final stage of a restoration that seems to have amounted to a complete rebuilding - there was scarcely a single original brick or stone left in the monument. From its elevated location I had the opportunity to get a good view of Hanagha and the adjoining village - I do not know if there had been churches in these villages, but I saw no trace of any now.

On my third day in Nakhchivan I took the Naxçivan to Julfa train, departing at 10:30 prompt. While still in the station a policeman got onto the train and asked to see my passport. Almost as soon as the train had left the station two railway employees asked me if I would like to go to the dining car and drink tea with them. I received the impression that this was more than just an invitation - probably they had been asked by the policeman to keep an eye on me. In the dining car I asked them if I could take photographs of the **Aras (Arax) gorge** but they said it was forbidden, regardless of whether the camera was pointing towards Iran or to Azerbaijan.

After about 70 minutes I noticed a large building on the Iranian side – it was rectangular, had a mud-red dome with a semicircular roof, and was surrounded by the ruins of a village. Its East-West orientation indicated that it was probably a church.

Shortly afterwards, and from the opposite side of the train, the remains of the **Jugha graveyard** made a sudden appearance. I saw a hillside covered by stone slabs, spread out over three ridges. All of the gravestones had been toppled, without any exceptions. There were many gravestones lying so close to the railway that I could make out the details of their designs. On the easternmost ridge were large bare patches of disturbed ground amongst the gravestones and about 1/3rd of the stones appeared to have been removed. On most of the middle ridge and on the entire westernmost ridge the gravestones all appeared to be still there - but were lying toppled.

The graveyard lies outside the security fence that protects the border zone. However, an army post at the entrance to the gorge bars the only approach road to the site. It would be impossible to enter the gorge without being noticed by the soldiers. For this reason I decided not to attempt a visit to the graveyard. Just after this army post the train slowed down in order to stop at a village. Just before this village I observed a small graveyard that still had some *khatchkar* gravestones standing upright. It lay just north of the railway and below the remains of the medieval town wall of Jugha. Just after leaving the village the Gulustan or Vardut turbe was visible, lying inside the security fence zone. The train reached Julfa town at 12.00 noon.

From Julfa I then took a taxi to the town of **Ordubad**. From Ordubad I had hoped to reach **Agulis** (a small town in an adjoining valley which contained numerous churches at least until the 1980s). Unfortunately, the restaurant in Ordubad in which I had decided to have lunch lay next to the town's police station and contained numerous policemen also having their lunch. On exiting the restaurant, I was met by a security official and then taken to the police station where my bag was searched and I was asked about my purpose in visiting Ordubad. After this I was taken on a tour around the older parts of Ordubad, accompanied by a security official and an English-speaking inhabitant. Then I had to wait with them in the town's tea-garden for an hour until they were able to put me on the next bus back to Naxçivan city.

After what I had seen in the Yernjak valley, I wanted to know if the destruction of Armenian monuments in Nakhchivan had been limited to sites that were easily accessible and close to Naxçivan city. For this reason I decided to visit the village of **Shurut** which lay in a remote location on the north-eastern side of Yilanlidag.

*Shurut, also spelt Shorot, was a small Armenian town during the late medieval period, with churches, schools, monasteries, scriptoria and several tens of thousands of inhabitants. In the 1980s there were four churches still standing in Shurut: the **Surb Stephanos** and **Surb Grigor Lusavorich** churches, an isolated church known as **Kusanants** or *St. Astvatsatsin*, and the village's main church, **Surb Hakob-Hayrapet**.*

The Surb Stephanos church was located about 3km south of the village. It was a small, single-nave structure, crudely built of rubble masonry, and located on the edge of a cliff overlooking the village. Inside this church there was a khatchkar monument with an inscription in Armenian giving the names of nine donors and the date 926.

The Surb Grigor Lusavorich church was located about 1km to the northeast of the village and was from the medieval period but with repairs from the 18th century. It was built of cut stone, had a portico also of stone, and had a lantern belfry on its roof. The settlement of Shurut had once extended all the way to this church, and ruins of houses were still visible in surrounding fields.

The St. Astvatsatsin church, also known as Kusanants, was built in 1631 on the site of an older church. It was built of rubble masonry and its interior had figurative frescoes from the 17th century. North of this church was a khatchkar gravestone dated 924.

The St. Hakob-Hayrapet church was located in the middle of the village. It was from the 12th century, but rebuilt in the middle of the 17th century. It was one of the most impressive churches in Nakhchivan: a massive structure, with a basilica plan rather like the Abrakounis church. It had a tall dome with a polygonal drum that was built of brick and dated from 1706. The church's west entrance was set within an ornate frame of muqarnas mouldings and rope-work interlaces and had a monolithic stone lintel.

To reach Shurut I travelled by taxi back to the Yernjak valley. We asked for directions in Abrakunis and then turned to the right, into a village whose current name I do not know, but which was known as **Krna** by Armenians. Aivazian's "Monuments" book has photographs of a ruined church from the 19th century that stood on a hillside overlooking Krna. It was a cavernous, mosque-like structure that would be difficult to miss. However, I saw no traces of this church as we drove around the edge of the village and then took an extremely rough road that led past the southern side of Yilanlidag.

About half-an-hour after Krna we reached a narrow earthen road that took us northward. After about fifteen more minutes of driving we passed through a small hamlet consisting of a few scattered houses. This was the village of **Gah** which had a large Armenian church built in the 19th century. Photographs of this church are in Aivazian's book. Nothing of it now survives.

Shortly after Gah we passed a man walking along the road. The driver asked him about the church in Shurut – we were told that it had been destroyed.

We continued onward, reaching Shurut after about a further fifteen minutes. At the entrance to the village I notice a large millstone lying at the base of a slope. We drove up the last few metres of road and stopped in the middle of a large open area at the southern end of the village. A half-dozen or so houses lay scattered around the edge of this open area. I got out of the taxi to have a look around. On the ground were the same telltale signs I had seen at Abrakunis: hundreds of small pieces of broken bricks. In a recently built wall outside one of the houses overlooking the open area were a number of cut stone blocks. At the edge of the open area was a large slab of stone. On its face-down side I could see traces of a cut surface: maybe it had been the lintel of the church's entrance. The open area appears to be the former site of Shurut's Surb Hakob-Hayrapet church. I walked further into the village, but it was clear that there was nothing to see - Shurut was now a tiny, miserable place; its few houses, none of which seemed particularly old, were little more than stone shacks and many were boarded up. I scanned the surrounding hills for any traces of the other churches that were once here, or for the village's Armenian graveyard, but I could see nothing.

Returning to the taxi I found that a crowd of villagers were waiting there. One man had his daughter aged about twelve with him. Her name was Niko, and she could speak some English. Through her, her father asked why I was visiting Shurut.

When I told him that I had come to see the old church in Shurut, he replied "Who told you there was a church here?"

"A book did" I responded.

"What book? Do you have it with you?" he then asked.

I did not.

"There was never a church here", said the man, his daughter translating. "I grew up here and there was no church here even then, there never were any Armenians living in Shurut".

At this point an old man with a mouth full of ugly gold teeth barged forward and aggressively barked a few unintelligible sentences at me. At first I took them to be an attempt at German.

“He is speaking Armenian”, the girl then told me. (I presume this was a test to see if I was actually Armenian). To explain why an Armenian speaker was in a village that never had any Armenians she quickly added “he came to Shurut from Armenia”.

I wanted to stop their questions and give them a polite way out, so I asked them “maybe there is another Shurut and it is the one that has the church in it?” But they did not take the hint – “no, there is only one Shurut”.

Things continued awkwardly for a while longer, but eventually we got back into the taxi and the man gave us a parting gift of a packet of bread, meat, and cheese. As we left Shurut the driver then told me that the villagers had phoned the police in Julfa and that a car would probably be waiting for us somewhere along the road.

A car was indeed waiting for us, shortly after the hamlet of Gah. In it were a policeman and someone in civilian clothing. The policeman got out and got into the back of my taxi. He could speak rough English and said that he was actually traffic police.

“Do you have topographic map, ethnographic book?” he asked.

I replied in the negative – but he made a cursory search of my bag anyway.

We continued along the earthen road and on reaching the tarmac road we turned to the left, towards the town of Julfa. In Julfa we stopped at the police headquarters, where I was first taken to see the head of the traffic police, then to the deputy-head of the regular police (where my bag was again searched). After waiting in a corridor for a while, I was escorted outside and into a car that took me to the town’s Araz Hotel, the taxi driver following behind in his car. I was escorted into a garden at the back of the hotel. Waiting at a table was a man in his 50ies, and a younger man in his 20ies. My escort also sat down at the table, and gestured to me to take the remaining chair. The taxi driver was given a seat a few metres away. The time was now about 5.30pm, and it was not until 8pm that I was finally allowed to leave. I will not bore you with details of all the questions that followed – however I will mention those that seem to throw some light onto the attitudes that Azerbaijan holds about Armenians and anything Armenian.

Everything in my bag was taken out and carefully looked at, and the bag itself was examined for any secret compartments. This lasted for about 15 minutes, without a word being spoken. Then the younger man spoke to me in English, mostly translating questions given by the older man (whom I took to be some sort of security chief – he never gave me his name or position).

To start with I was asked “What was my job, how much did I earn, who paid me to come to Nakhchivan, why would I use my own money to come here?”

He examined carefully a notebook I had with me. One of the things that I had written in it was the title of a book about Ottoman Armenians I had seen in a bookshop in Turkey. Seeing the word “Ermeni” in the title he asked me about it. When I told him what it was, there was incredulity in his voice – he was clearly astonished that a book about Armenians, written by a Turkish Armenian, could be published in Turkey, in Turkish, and that Turks would wish to buy it!

They checked through all the photographs stored in my digital camera. Fortunately I had left those of the Yernjak valley in my hotel room. They showed most interest in a photograph I had taken in Naxçivan city. It was of a stone slab that I had seen in the gardens opposite the Momina Hatun mausoleum, surrounded by a large collection of ram-shaped gravestones. On this stone was carved a cross rising from a rectangular base. The arms of this cross ended in a two-pronged fork, and the head ended in a semicircle. When I had seen it I thought that it resembled a very simplified *khatchkar*. “What do you think this is”, he asked.

“It looks like a cross”, I replied.

“No it isn’t. It cannot be. Only Muslims have ever lived in Naxçivan!” he replied.

“Well, what do you think it is?” I asked him.

They had a discussion amongst themselves for a while, before pronouncing that “the curved top is a crescent moon – that is a Muslim symbol, so it is really an Islamic carving”.

They seemed pleased with themselves for concocting this explanation – so I was surprised to discover, when checking over my pictures later, that they had deleted the two photographs that showed this stone.

They asked me why I thought that there was a church in Shurut.

“Because a book had told me”, I said.

“It is wrong, it is lying to you. It is an Armenian book, yes?”

“Yes” I replied.

“You see, Armenians are always lying – they are lying to everyone”.

I couldn't resist pointing out to them that there were photographs of the Shurut church in the book. To this they responded by saying “Armenians, they came here and took photographs of Shurut village and then they went back to Armenia and put into them photographs of a church in Armenia.”

“It is all just Armenian lies. They are lying to you! There never were any Armenian churches anywhere in Naxçivan. There were no Armenians ever living here - so how could there have been churches here? There never was a church in Abrakunis, there never was a church in Shurut, there never was a church in Julfa!”

My interview culminated with them having a discussion amongst themselves, at the end of which they said, “we think that you are not here with good intentions towards the Azerbaijan republic”. I was told that I had to be out of Nakhchivan by midnight. It was agreed that for an additional 50 dollars on top of the agreed fare to Shurut, my taxi driver would take me back to Naxçivan city and then on to the Turkish border. I crossed the border with about 45 minutes to spare.