

= Varagavank =

Varagavank (Armenian : ????????? , " Monastery of Varag " ; Turkish : Yedi Kilise , " Seven Churches ") was an Armenian monastery on the slopes of Mount Varag (Erek Da??) , 9 km (5 @. @ 6 mi) southeast of the city of Van , in eastern Turkey .

The monastery was founded in the early 11th century by Senekerim @-@ Hovhannes , the Armenian King of Vaspurakan , on a preexisting religious site . Initially serving as the necropolis of the Artsruni kings , it eventually became the seat of the archbishop of the Armenian Church in Van . The monastery has been described as one of the great monastic centers of the Armenian church by Ara Sarafian and the richest and most celebrated monastery of the Lake Van area by Robert H. Hewsen .

During the Armenian Genocide , in April ? May 1915 , the Turkish army attacked , burned , and destroyed much of the monastery . Much of it was destroyed in the 1960s , although good sections are barely extant .

= = History = =

= = = Origins = = =

According to tradition , in the late 3rd century St. Rhipsime hid the remnant of the True Cross she wore on her neck at the site of the monastery . In 653 , when the location was discovered , Catholicos Nerses III the Builder built the Church of Surb Nshan (Holy Seal) . It is described by Robert H. Hewsen as " a simple hermitage " . Catholicos Nerses also established the Feast of the Holy Cross of Varag (?????? ????? ???? ???) , celebrated by the Armenian Apostolic Church on the Sunday nearest to September 28 , always two weeks after the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross .

Queen Khushush , the daughter of Armenian King Gagik I and spouse of Senekerim @-@ Hovhannes , the future Artsruni King of Vaspurakan , built a church at the site in 981 dedicated to the Holy Wisdom (Surb Sopi) . In the late medieval period it was converted into a castle and was known as Berdavor (" berd " means " fortress " in Armenian) . The Church of Surb Hovhannes (Saint John) was built to the north in the 10th century .

= = = Foundation and medieval period = = =

The monastery itself was founded by Senekerim @-@ Hovhannes early in his reign (1003 ? 24) to house a relic of the True Cross that had been kept on the site since Rhipsime . In 1021 , when Vaspurakan fell to Byzantine rule , Senekerim @-@ Hovhannes took the relic to Sebastia , where the following year his son Atom founded the Surb Nshan Monastery . In 1025 , following his death , Senekerim @-@ Hovhannes was buried at Varagavank and the True Cross was returned to the monastery . Fearing an attack by Muslims , Varagavank Father Ghukas took the True Cross in 1237 to the Tavush region of northeastern Armenia . There he settled in the Anapat monastery , which was renamed Nor Varagavank (" New Varagavank ") . In 1318 the Mongols invaded the region and ransacked the monastery . All the churches were destroyed except St. Hovhannes , which had an iron door and was where the monks hid . Between 1320 and the 1350s the monastery was completely restored .

= = = Modern period = = =

Persian Shah Tahmasp I ransacked the monastery in 1534 . In 1648 along with other buildings in the region , Varagavank was destroyed by an earthquake . Its restoration began immediately thereafter by monastery father Kirakos who found financial support among the wealthy merchants in Van . According to the 17th @-@ century historian Arakel of Tabriz four churches were restored and

renovated .

The architect Tiratur built a square @-@ planned gavit (narthex) west of Church of Surb Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God) in 1648 . It functioned as a church during the 19th century , called Surb Gevorg . To the west of the narthex was a 17th @-@ century three @-@ arched open @-@ air porch ; to the north was Church of Surb Khach (Holy Cross) ; while to the south was the 17th @-@ century Church of Surb Sion . Urartian cuneiform inscriptions were used as lintels on their western entrances .

Suleyman , the prince of Ho?ap Castle , invaded the monastery in 1651 , looting it of its Holy Cross , manuscripts and treasures . The cross was later repurchased and it was added to the Tiramayr Church of Van in 1655 . The monastery declined in the late 17th century , and in 1679 many of its treasures were sold due to economic difficulties . Archbishop Bardughimeos Shushanetsi renovated the monastery in 1724 .

In 1779 father Baghdasar vardapet decorated the narthex walls with frescoes of King Abgar , Empire Theodosius , Saint Gayane , Saint Rhipsime , Khosrovidukht , and Gabriel . According to Murad Hasratyan , the unknown painter had fused together the styles of Armenian , Persian , and Western European art .

= = = 19th century = = =

A wall was built around the monastery in 1803 , and fourteen years later , the Church of Surb Khach (Holy Cross) was completely renovated and converted into a depository of manuscripts by archbishop Galust . In 1832 Tamur pasha of Van robbed the monastery 's treasures and strangled the father Mktrich vardapet Gaghatatsi to death . In 1849 Gabriel vardapet Shiroyan restored the Church of Sion , which had been destroyed by an earthquake , and converted it into a wheat warehouse .

Mkrtich Khrimian , the future head of the Armenian Church , became father of Varagavank in 1857 and made the monastery effectively independent and subordinate only to the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople . He founded a printing house and began publishing Artsiv Vaspurakani (" The Eagle of Vaspurakan ") , the first newspaper in historical Armenia , which was published between 1858 and 1864 . He also established a modern school . The school taught subjects such as theology , music , grammar , geography , Armenian studies and history ; the prominent novelist Raffi was briefly one of the teachers . The school produced its first graduates in 1862 .

During the Hamidian massacres of 1896 the monastery was sacked and robbed , while some teachers and students were killed . According to a contemporary report by an American at Van , " Varak , the most famous and historic monastery in all this [Van] region , which has weathered the storms of centuries is almost certain to go [on fire] . "

= = = Sacking and abandonment = = =

Early in 1915 ? during the early stages of the Armenian Genocide ? Turkish government forces laid siege to Van , while the local Armenians organized self @-@ defense in what became the most notable resistance to the Turkish campaign of deportations and massacres . During most of April , the monastery was held by Armenians , but was captured and burnt by the Turks some time in late April and early May . The date of the burning of the monastery is contested . An April 27 , 1915 a message sent to " To Americans , or any Foreign Consul " by missionaries Clarence Ussher and Ernest Yarrow said that " From our window we could plainly see Shushantz afire on its mountain @-@ side and Varak Monastery , with its priceless store of ancient manuscripts , going up in smoke . " Missionary Elizabeth Barrows Ussher , Clarence 's wife , wrote in her diary that the monastery was attacked by 200 cavalry and foot soldiers on April 30 , but they were repulsed . She gave May 4 as the day when the monastery was burned . American missionary teacher Grace H. Knapp recounted , however , that " On the 8th May we saw the place in flames , and Varak Monastery near by , with its priceless ancient manuscripts , also went up in smoke . "

Van Governor Djevdet Bey ordered the Erzerum Battalion , composed of 300 cavalymen and 1

@,@ 000 militiamen equipped with cannons , to attack Varag on May 8 . The 250 Armenian defenders were overwhelmed , and the monastery 's collections of medieval manuscripts burned and destroyed .

= = Current state = =

A significant number of the structures surviving the 1915 destruction were destroyed in the 1960s . As of 2006 the monastery 's remains were used a barn . According to historian Ara Sarafian , as of 2012 , " good sections have just barely survived until our days . " Dr. Jenny B. White , a scholar on Turkey , wrote in 2013 that on her visit the remains of the monastery " consisted of nothing more than a few brick vaults used to house goats amid a clutch of tumbledown Kurdish homes . " The best @-@ preserved section of the monastery is the church of Surb Gevorg (St. George) , which is now looked after by a caretaker . The dome is partly collapsed and contains some traces of surviving frescoes . The dome of the church of Surb Nshan is entirely gone .

In February 2010 , following the renovation of the Holy Cross Cathedral at Akdamar Island in Lake Van , Halil Berk , the Deputy Governor of Van Province , announced that the Governor 's Office sought to restore Varagavank and the Ktuts monastery at Çarpanak Island . In June of that year , the governor also stated that the monastery at Çarpanak Island and Varagavank would be renovated " in the near future . " In October 2010 Radikal reported that a nearby mosque , built in 1997 , would be demolished to make room for the restoration of Varagavank .

The monastery was damaged as a result of the 2011 Van earthquake . According to Ara Sarafian , " parts of the main church collapsed , while other parts were significantly weakened . Old cracks got bigger , new ones appeared . " Turkish engineers reportedly inspected it and announced that they would commence restoration work in the spring of 2012 . Sarafian wrote that " such promises have been made in the past and one needs to be a little skeptical . The current state of the church makes such work much harder than at any time in the past . " He noted in a 2012 article that the local and provincial governments supported the preservation and restoration of the monastery . In October 2012 , the artist Raffi Bedrosyan , who contributed to the restoration of the St. Giragos Church in Diyarbakır , stated that he had hoped to restore Varagavank and added that " Both Ankara and Van agreed to launch the restoration project , but social and natural obstacles delayed the process . "

= = = Ownership = = =

Taraf reported in September 2012 that the monastery is owned by the Turkish journalist and media executive Fatih Altaylı . In an interview Altaylı told the newspaper that the monastery belonged to his grandfather and he inherited it from his father . The monastery was confiscated during the Armenian Genocide . A group of Armenians in Turkey , led by the activist Nadya Uygun started a petition asking him to " Apply to the Armenian Patriarchate of Turkey and transfer the title deed of the church to the concerned [Armenian community] foundation . " Altaylı told Agos that he is ready to give it to the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople , but no government authority has approached him to respond to his offer to give back the church to its owners , and that they displayed no interest in cooperating . Revolutionary Socialist Workers ' Party (DSİP) activists demonstrated in early October 2012 before the Habertürk headquarters in Beyoğlu , Istanbul demanding the return of the monastery land to the Armenians . As of September 2014 there was no progress .

= = Architecture and manuscripts = =

The monastery was composed of six churches , gavit , narthex (nakhasrah) and other structures . The main church of Varagavank was called Surb Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God) . It dated to the 11th century and was similar in plan to the prominent Saint Hripsime Church in Vagharshapat . The earliest structure was on the southern part of the ensemble and was known as Surb Sopia (10th century) . Queen Khushush left an inscription (dated 981) on its western wall .

In the 10th century Queen Mlke , the wife of Gagik I , presented the monastery the " Gospel of Queen Mlke " (arm) , one of the best known Armenian illuminated manuscripts . In the 14th ? 16th centuries the monastery became a major center of manuscript production . A number of Varagavank manuscripts are now kept at the Matenadaran in Yerevan .

= = Cultural references = =

Raffi mentions the monastery in volume two of the novel Sparkles (« ?????? » , 1883 ? 87) . The prominent poet Hovhannes Tumanyan wrote an article about the monastery in 1910 on the fiftieth anniversary of Mkrtych Khrimian becoming father of Varag and the monastery 's subsequent revival as a great center of education and culture .

= = European visitors = =

Austen Henry Layard (1853) : " ... the large Armenian convent of Yedi Klissia , or the seven churches , built of substantial stone masonry , and inclosing a spacious courtyard planted with trees . [...] The church , a substantial modern edifice , stand within the courtyard . Its walls are covered with pictyres as primitive in design as in execution . "

Henry Fanshawe Tozer (1881) : " ... the broken Varak Daggh formed a noble object on the further side of the plain . In one of the upper valleys of the last @-@ named mountain lies an important monastery , which is the residence of the archbishop , and has a good school . "

H. F. B. Lynch (1893) : " The monastery of Yed Kilisa , situated on the slopes of that mountain , is the most frequented of the numerous cloisters in the neighbourhood ... "

= = Gallery = =