

= Akhtala Monastery =

Akhtala (Armenian : ????????? ???? ; Georgian : ??????? ?????) ; also known as Pghindzavank (Armenian : ????????? , meaning Coppermine Monastery) is a 10th @-@ century fortified Armenian Apostolic Church monastery located in the town of Akhtala in the marz of Lori , 185 kilometers (115 mi) north of Yerevan . The monastery is currently inactive . The fortress played a major role in protecting the north @-@ western regions of Armenia (Gugark) and is among the most well preserved of all in modern Armenia . The main church at the compound is famous for its highly artistic frescoes , which cover the inside walls , the partitions , and the bearings of the building . The modern name of Akhtala was first recorded in a royal decree of 1438 . The etymology of the name Akhtala is believed to be of Turkic origin , meaning white glade . The original Armenian name of the settlement where the monastery is built is Pghindzahank , which means copper mine .

= = The fortress = =

Between 1887 and 1889 the French archaeologist Jacques de Morgan discovered 576 rectangular stone sepulchers , along with cultural items made of clay , bronze and iron near Akhtala dating back to the 8th century BC . The settlement of modern Akhtala was known as Agarak in the 5th century . The fortress was almost certainly built on top of Bronze and Iron Age foundations . It was built in the late tenth century by the Kyurikids , this branch of the Bagratunis originated from Gurgen (the name was pronounced Kyurikeh in the local dialect of Gugark) . He was the son of the patrons of Sanahin and Haghpata monasteries located not far from Akhtala , King Ashot III the Merciful and Queen Khosrovanush . Gurgen 's brothers were King Smbat II the Conqueror and Gagik I Bagratuni , under whom the Bagratuni Kingdom of Armenia reached the peak of its prosperity .

Ashot III established the Kingdom of Lori (Tashir @-@ Dzoraget Kingdom) in Gugark for strategic reasons and enthroned Gurgen in 982 . Gurgen along with his brother Smbat are depicted on the sculptures of the patrons in both Sanahin and Haghpata . When the Tashir @-@ Dzoraget kingdom fell as a result of Seljuk raids the Kyurikids migrated to Tavush and Metsnaberd yet they maintained ties with their ancestral fortress and compound in Akhtala . The fortress was built on an elevated rocky outcrop surrounded by deep canyons from three sides forming a natural protection . The somewhat accessible parts between the cliffs are reinforced by towers and walls . The only entrance to the compound is on the northern side protected by bell @-@ shaped towers and walls . The walls and towers of the fortress are built of bluish basalt and lime mortar . The Kyurikids gradually lost their influence under the Seljuk grasp by the end of the 12th century .

The monastic life was revived in Akhtala when the Zakarids heading the combined Georgian and Armenian forces liberated most of Armenia . The 13th @-@ century historians Kirakos Gandzaketsi and Vardan Areveltsi called the area Pghndzahank (copper mine) , because of rich copper deposits in the surroundings . Gandzaketsi writes the following : " Ivane , Zakare 's brother , also died [that year] and was buried at Pghndzahank ' near the church which he himself had built , taking it from the Armenians and making it into a Georgian monastery . "

Pghndzahank became the property of Ivane Zakarian in the 1180s . While Ivane 's brother Zakare was Armenian Apostolic , Ivane had accepted Greek Orthodoxy in the Georgian court . Several monasteries in northern Armenia were converted by the Zakarids to Greek Orthodoxy , a prominent example is the monastery of Kobayr . By doing so Ivane enhanced the benevolence of the Georgian court and gained influence among the Chalcedonian Armenians who mostly inhabited Northern and North @-@ Western Armenia . The Zakarids began to lose control starting in the 1220s during the disastrous Mongol invasions of Georgia and Armenia . The son of Ivane , Avak was forced to recognize his subordination to the Mongol leader Chormaqan . The Mongol rule continued until 1340 when it was interrupted by successive conquests of Turkic tribes . The Turkic tribe of Kara Koyunlu began attacking the Caucasus and took control of most of Armenia proper by 1400 . Their rule was interrupted by the conquests of Tamerlane . One of the cliffs that surrounds Akhtala is known as Lenktemur , named after Tamerlane who according to local tradition buried one of his wives under the cliff .

Since the late 18th century the monastery serviced ethnic Greeks who were settled in Akhtala in order to work in the gold and silver mines . Roughly 800 Greek families were moved from Gümüşhane in the Ottoman Empire to Akhtala in 1763 by the Georgian King Erekle II . The Greeks called the monastery " Meramani " . The Greek miners have left inscriptions on the monastery walls . In the 19th century Akhtala was taken over by the Armenian princely family of Melikovs . Currently the monastery has its pilgrimage days on September 20 ? 21 . Armenians , Greeks and Georgians visit the monastery on this occasion . The Ambassador of Greece , Panayota Mavromichali visited the monastery on September 20 , 2006 . An ore mining and processing plant in Akhtala has been dumping copper mine tailings in the pit below the monastery . This has been classified as a threat to local residents .

= = Surp Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God) church = =

The main building of the monastic compound is Surp Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God) church . The exact date of the building of the church is unknown . It is generally regarded as an 11th @-@ 13th century complex , but the current church has been built on an earlier foundation . Kirakos Gandzaketsi mentions that Ivane Zakarian was buried in the church in 1227 . Stepanos Orbelian refers to the church in 1216 . Modern researchers date the murals within the church to 1205 ? 1216 . Princess Mariam , the daughter of Gurgen II (Kyurikhe II) made a record in 1188 on the back of a khachkar found in a place called Ayor adjacent to Akhtala which refers to the construction of the Holy Mother of God church at Akhtala . The inscription on the khachkar states the following : " I , the daughter of Kyurikhe , Mariam , erected Surp Astvatsatsin at Pghndzahank , those who honor us remember us in their prayers . " In 1185 Mariam had constructed the narthex of the main church in Haghpats . According to some local lore , the church was built in the 7th century by Byzantine emperor of Armenian extraction , Heraclius . Another legend assumes that the church was built in the 5th century by Georgian King Vakhtang I Gorgasali . There is no reasonable evidence to support either story .

The church used to contain the cross which according to folklore was used by John the Baptist to baptise Jesus Christ . Vasak , the father of Prince Prosh , is said to have given this relic to Ivane Zakarian who later sold it for a large sum to the monastery of Noravank in Syunik .

The church is situated in the middle of the fortress ' territory along the longitudinal axis . It belongs to the domed basilica type of churches , where the bearings join with the side @-@ chapels of the apse . Two pairs of arches divided the longitudinal stretched prayer hall into three naves , the central one of which (with double side @-@ chapels) on the eastern side ends with low staged , half @-@ rounded apse and the side @-@ chapels end with sacristies . They are characterized with stylish iconography , richness of theme and variety of different colors (where blue is dominant) . The vertical axis of the building was crowned by a massive dome . The pointed dome with the cylindrical drum has not survived . It was damaged during Tamerlane 's invasion and completely demolished in 1784 when the Avar Omar Khan invaded the Transcaucasus from Dagestan . In the 19th century , Viceroy of the Caucasus , Prince Mikhail Vorontsov built a semi @-@ spherical wooden dome covered with iron sheets in place of the original dome . The dome was renovated during Soviet years .

= = Murals of Surp Astvatsatsin = =

The murals are one of the best representations of Byzantine art outside the traditional borders of Byzantium . The majority of the murals bear scriptures in Greek . The murals were painted under the patronage of atabek Ivane Zakarian between 1205 and 1216 . Parallels have been drawn between the murals and the 11th century Armenian miniature paintings of the Mugni Gospels . The coloring of the murals is characteristic of typical Byzantine art while the thematic solutions are more Armenian . New and Old Testaments scenes as well as various saints including Saint Gregory the Illuminator are depicted on the murals . A large image of the Holy Virgin is depicted in the dome holding Jesus . The mural has been badly damaged and only parts of it survived . Below the Holy

Virgin , the Communion is shown where Jesus is depicted twice , turning on the right and left sharing bread with the Apostles . The images of the Apostles Peter , John the Evangelist , Paul and Matthew have survived . The common Christians saints are depicted below the Communion scene , including Pope Sylvester , Saint James the son of Alphaeus , Saint John Chrysostom , Basil the Great , Gregory the Illuminator , Jacob of Mtsbin , Clement of Rome , Gregory the Thaumaturgist , Cyril of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea . The murals on the western wall depict the Kingdom of Heaven . The northern wall depicts the trial of Jesus by the high priest of Caiaphas and by the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate . Some of the murals were renovated in 1979 . The arches , niches and columns are also covered by murals .

= = Other structures = =

The most prominent structure after the Holy Mother of God church is the rectangular edifice attached to the western wall of the church . The remaining section of the façade of the main church is situated immediately next to it with a ridge roof . Ivane Zakarian and his son Avak were buried inside in 1227 . A small structure with a lean @-@ to roof is attached to the northern wall of the main church . It was used to store ceremonial items . On the north @-@ western side of the monastery , a single nave and ridge @-@ roofed church is located detached from the main church . Another building that hasn 't survived used to be located next to it . Numerous dilapidated dwellings and auxiliary structures are scattered in the territory of the fortress such as a two @-@ story building believed to be a residence for guards . There are traditional networks of tunnels , crypts , water reservoirs and wine cellars , found among most monasteries of medieval Armenia . Not far from the monastery one can find other medieval monuments such as the Holy Trinity monastery , Saint George church , a 13th @-@ century spring monument , a 19th @-@ century Russian chapel , a Greek church as well as various khachkars and chapels .

= = Known residents = =

Inscriptions from nearby khachkars point out that the monastery was headed by Petreh in the 1240s . The most prominent figure who resided at the monastery was the translator and scribe Simon of Pghndzahank . His diaries have survived . He was born in 1188 and was a clergyman for several years at the monastery translating Byzantine theological literature . He collaborated with another Armenian of Chalcedonian faith , Minas Syunakyats of Trabzon . In 1227 Simon compiled a volume of works by Gregory of Nyssa . His diary reads :

In 1227 I completed the book by Bishop Gregory of Nyssa which was a preserved old copy translated by the sinful and undeserving clergyman Simon who lived in Armenia , near Lore town , at the Holy Mother of God monastery of Pghndzahank . The book was translated during the reign of atabek Ivane , the founder of the monastery , may God grant him and his sons long life .

Simon also translated into Armenian the Elements of Theology by Proclus Diadochos , The Fountain of Wisdom by John Damascene , The Ladder of Divine Ascent by John of Sinai , A History of Georgia (Kartlis Tskhovreba) and The Greek Prayer Book . Simon also noted in his diaries that he only translated works which previously had not been translated into Armenian . The prominent Armenian filmmaker of the 20th century Sergei Parajanov filmed two episodes of his film The Color of Pomegranates at the monastery .

= = Gallery = =

Akhtala Monastery