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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AT THE RED CHURCH KHOJAVEND DISTRICT

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Abstract. Initial archaeological excavations and field exploration works were carried out within a 10 m² area of the Red Church (Gırmızı Kilsə/Garnir), a historical architectural monument located in the village of Bine (Domu-Temirli) in the Khojavend district of Karabakh. The monument was constructed in the form of a basilica with a vaulted hall and reflects construction techniques characteristic of the ancient period. The main entrance leading to the temple is situated on the western side of the monument. The church is 11 meters long and 6.45 meters wide, with a total area of 225 m².

Some of these temples were built on the foundations of earlier pagan sanctuaries, while others were reconstructed and adapted in accordance with Christian religious traditions. The relocation of the capital of Caucasian Albania to the city of Barda in 552 contributed to the increase in settlements and Christian Albanian monuments in Karabakh during the Early Middle Ages.

The preliminary results of the archaeological excavations provide grounds to suggest that the Red Church monument was constructed in the 10th century on the remains of an earlier structure. The Red Church architectural monument belongs to the simple-type, single-nave temple category with a vaulted ceiling and dates to the final stage of the Early Middle Ages. During field exploration works, it was also determined that another structure known as the “Small Temple” (Kiçik Məbəd), as well as the remains of a bridge and a caravanserai, are located near the Red Church, indicating that a medieval trade caravan route once passed through this area.

Key words: Karabakh, Albanian temple, archaeological excavation, building remains, cultural layer.

Introduction. The territory covered by the Karabakh Economic Region of Azerbaijan is rich in historical and archaeological monuments belonging to various periods and types. Such diversity is primarily connected with the favorable natural-geographical conditions of the region and the abundance of raw material resources. The transfer of the capital of Caucasian Albania to the city of Barda in 552 resulted in an increase both in settlements and in Christian Albanian monuments in Karabakh during the Early Middle Ages (Mammadov, 2000).

Some of these temples were built on the sites of earlier pagan sanctuaries, while others were reconstructed and adapted to Christian religious norms (Khalilov, 2011). Another group of monuments was constructed within dense forests and rocky areas in order to protect the population from persecution. Research demonstrates that the foothills of the Lesser Caucasus Mountains are rich in architectural and funerary monuments related to Christianity dating from the 5th to the 18th centuries. Since many of these Christian monuments have not yet been comprehensively studied, they were commonly referred to among the local population as “Armenian cemeteries” or “Armenian churches” (Mammadov, 2003).

In this regard, the Red Church monument, located on a high hill to the northeast of the village of Bine (Domu) in the Khojavend district, attracts particular attention. During the initial stage of the research, the geographical coordinates of the monument were identified as GPS 39°34'56.29"N, 46°54'2.76"E.



Figure 1. Khojavend, Binə village. General view of the Red Church Albanian monument (Mammadov A.M.)

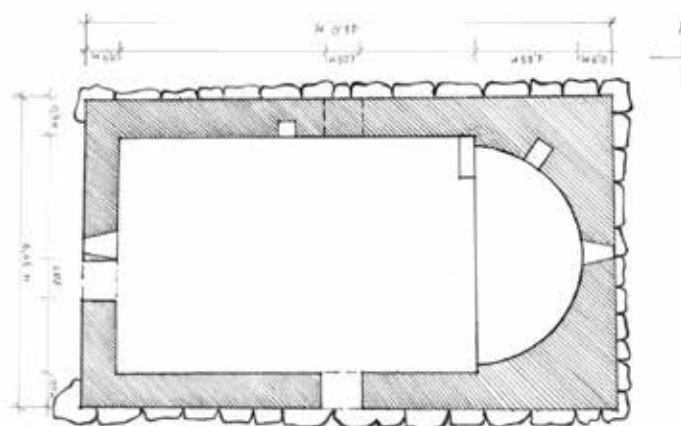


Figure 2. Khojavend, Binə village. Plan of the Red Church Albanian monument (artist: Gasimli K.B.)

Although the Red Church monument has previously been studied from an architectural perspective and some information about it has been provided in scholarly works based on written sources, it was archaeologically investigated for the first time in the autumn of 2025 under the leadership of Professor Arif Mammadov. The Red Church monument is situated at an altitude of 1,750 meters above sea level on the summit of a mountain surrounded on three sides by deep gorges. Considering that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, the sanctuary (apse) of the Red Church was constructed on the eastern side in accordance with pagan temple traditions, while the main entrance gate was placed on the western side. From this, it can be concluded that during the construction of the Red Church monument with its simple architectural design, the rugged relief of the high mountainous area and construction expenses were also taken into consideration.

The monument was built in accordance with the construction techniques of the antique period in the form of a basilica and a vaulted hall. The main road leading to the temple approaches the monument from the western side. The church is 11 meters long and 6.45 meters wide, with a total area of 225 m². The surrounding territory of the monument covers nearly two hectares. It has been noted that in early medieval cities, three-naved churches were common, whereas in villages, single-naved small-sized temples were mainly characteristic of Christian monuments of the Near East (Khalilov, 2011). This view may also be applied to the Red Church monument. The temples of Kish (Sheki), Calut (Oghuz), Govurgala (Aghdam), Chaykend (Goygol), Gozlu (Kalbajar), Balligaya (Aghdara), Ayrivang (Gadabay), Torpaggala (Tovuz), Avey (Gazakh), Meshali (Goranboy), Mazingaray (Balakan), Bideyis (Sheki), Bash Kungut (Sheki), Bash Goynuk (Sovma-Sheki), Tatef (Western Azerbaijan – Western Zangezur, Goris), and the Mingachevir temples numbered 1, 2, 3, and 4 are also considered single-naved rectangular Christian religious monuments.

Discussion. The construction of a semicircular apse in the Red Church monument, which belongs to the simple type of religious buildings consisting of a single-naved vaulted hall, distinguishes it from other rectangular-plan structures of its period. The second entrance of the temple was located on the southern side, while the doorway facing north was sealed during restoration works. Although it has been reported that a construction inscription once existed above the doorway in the western wall, no such inscription has been found today. Archaeological investigations revealed that although the roof, the southeastern wall, and the northwestern wall of the temple were destroyed, the eastern wall has survived intact. Gulchohra Mammadova and Mubariz Khalilov, based on written sources, and Arif Mammadov, based on archaeological research, state that the temple was built at the end of the 10th century AD.

The written inscription presented in the text states: “During the reign of Hagik, son of Musa, I, Voski (I. Sofi), daughter of Musa, built this House of God for the salvation of my soul and the souls of my parents.” In the works of Armenian “researchers,” this monument has been referred to as the Qarmir Church, and it has been stated that the eastern wall of the monument has survived. Based on the inscription on the facing of the western window, they claimed that the monument was built by I. Sofi, daughter of Musa, in the summer of the year 449 according to the Armenian calendar.

However, since no Albanian ruler named Hagik is known from historical sources, the above-mentioned claims remain hypothetical in nature. It may therefore be assumed that Hagik and his father Musa ruled the Albanian state after Ishkhanid, the grandson of the Albanian ruler Gregory Hamam. Musa and his son Hagik were probably provincial governors within the Albanian state, which survived until 1008.

Depending on the height of the altar apse in Christian temples, it is possible to determine the denomination to which the church belonged. Altars located 25–40 cm above the floor level of the hall are considered characteristic of Dyophysite churches, where the priest remained closer to the worshippers. In Monophysite churches, however, since the divine and human natures of Christ were regarded as united, the altar was constructed at a higher elevation so that the priest, representing

Christ, would stand above the congregation. The transition to Dyophysite churches during restoration works is associated with the political events of the 6th–8th centuries (Khalilov, 2011).

In 705, the Albanian state temporarily collapsed, and Albanian Christianity lost its status as the state religion. After the weakening of Arab rule, the Albanian Kingdom was partially restored in the mountainous regions of Karabakh in the 9th century. The Principality of Khachin rose to prominence in the regions of Arsakh and Utik (Mammadov, 2022). Following the restoration of the Albanian state by Gregory Hamam, Christianity once again became the state religion between 885 and 1008. This principality flourished further during the reign of Hasan Jalal (1215–1261), who was referred to as the “King of Albania” and the “Lord of the Albanian provinces.” This period represented a revival of Albanian culture and statehood. Although the Albanian state experienced temporary decline during certain periods, Albanian culture was preserved until 1836 (Khalilov, 2011).

The construction period of the Red Church monument also corresponds to the reign of Gregory Hamam. Current archaeological investigations conducted at the Red Church suggest that the foundation of the temple was laid at the end of the 10th century, and that its original plan was close to a rectangular form. During restoration works in the 12th–13th centuries, the dome section of the temple was constructed, giving the monument its final architectural form. The blocking of the northern doorway of the church further confirms that restoration activities were carried out there (Mammadov, Yusifova, Mammadzadeh, & Gasimli, 2025).

As in the earliest Christian temples, the Red Church monument possesses only a small number of narrow windows (two surviving examples), which create a dim lighting effect inside the hall. Through this method, an impression of “divine darkness” was created within the temples. Worshippers, isolated from the outside environment, were symbolically transferred into a mystical and mysterious world, thereby strengthening the spiritual influence of Christianity.

The total dimensions of the rectangular prayer hall of the church are 9.3 m in length and 4.5 m in width. The semicircular altar apse of the temple is incorporated within the rectangular structure. Its dimensions, in terms of the ratio of length to width, are 1.85×3.70 m. Although large river and rock stones were mainly used in the construction of the temple, its upper section (the rotunda) was covered with baked bricks measuring $27 \times 27 \times 5$ cm, which represents a construction technique characteristic of Christian religious architecture during the late stage of the early medieval period. Lime mortar was used as the binding material in the construction of the temple.

Although the southwestern walls of the temple collapsed, the northeastern wall has survived to a height of 2–3 meters. The thickness of the wall is 90 cm. Both the southern entrance and the western doorway, which is considered the main entrance, are 1.05 m wide. The window is located on the eastern wall of the altar apse. The loophole-shaped window opening measures 90 cm in height and 47 cm in width. There is also a loophole-shaped window on the eastern wall of the altar and niches in the northern wall. At a height of 1.1 m from the dismantled floor of the altar, there is a niche in the northern wall measuring 50 cm in width and 40 cm in height. Beside it, another niche, which was sealed during restoration works, measures 40×40 cm. The edges of the second niche are bordered on both sides with cut stone blocks placed vertically. Both niches were mainly used for lighting candles and placing votive offerings. The cut stones framing the restored niche are completed with a slab covering.

A semicircular apse is located in the area where the cross stone leans against the eastern wall of the monument. The height of the cross stone is 1.20 m, its width at the bottom is 67 cm, and at the upper part it measures 78 cm. Small cross motifs, later engraved by carving technique, are clearly visible on the lower section of the cross stone (Mammadov, Yusifova, Mammadzadeh, & Gasimli, 2025).

According to researchers, the cross became a Christian religious symbol from the 4th century onward (Museyibov, 1992). In 326, Christianity was proclaimed the state religion in Caucasian Albania (Khalilov, 2011).

The earliest examples of cross stones appeared in the 9th century and gradually replaced memorial pillars. The “interlaced ribbon” ornament, widely распространённый in Christian monuments, began to be engraved on cross stones in the 10th century (Khalilov, 2011), which corresponds to the depictions found on the cross stone of the Red Church monument. The oldest examples of Albanian crosses in Azerbaijan were discovered during the excavations at Mingachevir. Most of the Mingachevir crosses are characterized by rounded knobs at the ends of their arms. Although this form of cross continued for several centuries, during the medieval period the rounded knobs gradually acquired a leaf-like shape. Straight crosses without protrusions on their arms were also discovered during the Mingachevir excavations, and similar examples have been identified in other regions of the South Caucasus (Vahidov, 1961).

The earliest knobbed crosses are dated to the 5th–6th centuries. Such crosses are known from the basilicas, the Gagik Temple, and the Church of the Holy Apostles located in the territories of historical Albania, particularly in Western Azerbaijan (present-day Armenia)

In the southwestern part of the church’s prayer hall, there is a Christian grave bearing the date of death 1878. It appears that this tombstone was placed there at a later period. The fact that the oldest Christian graves recorded around the temple date only from the mid-19th century onward suggests that Christian populations relocated from Iran and Türkiye were settled in the area and that they had no direct historical connection with this temple. According to our preliminary investigations, this rectangular and elongated structure, oriented along the east–west axis, terminates in the east with a semicircular apse. From the northeastern side, the temple consists of an elongated rectangular hall covered with a semi-cylindrical dome. The roof covering is dome-shaped, while the inner walls were plastered with white lime mortar. The square-shaped prayer hall is completed in the northeastern part by a semicircular altar apse. The interior and exterior of the structure, whose prayer hall measures 6.3 m in length and 4.5 m in width, possess a rectangular architectural form (Mammadov, Yusifova, Mammadzadeh, & Gasimli, 2025).

Our preliminary research demonstrates that the Red Church architectural monument belongs to the group of single-naved, vaulted Christian temples representing the simplest type of early medieval Christian religious architecture and that it originally consisted of a rectangular construction. Archaeological excavations uncovered roof tile fragments that once ensured water drainage from the upper part of the church, numerous unglazed ceramic artifacts, a limited number of glazed pottery samples, part of a cutting tool, small quantities of glass fragments, and osteological remains. Similar materials are known from archaeological investigations conducted in the territory of Kalbajar District, particularly in the village of Keshdak (Mammadov, Allahverdiyeva, & Abbasova, 2006).

The material culture remains discovered during archaeological excavations, mainly dating from the 10th to the 19th centuries, together with the dimensions of the baked bricks used in construction, correspond with the information found in written sources and confirm that the presently visible section of the monument was built in the 10th century. It should be noted that although the collapse of the Albanian state under Arab conquest and the subordination of Albanian Christian churches to the Armenian Gregorian Church restricted the activities of the Albanian Church, they did not entirely stop them. During this period, important church centers such as Gandzasar Monastery, Khudavang Monastery, Berdakur, St. Yelisey, and Mahrassa were constructed (Mammadov, Allahverdiyeva, & Jafarov, 2007). The seat of the Albanian Catholicosate was located near Derbent in Chola during the 4th–5th centuries, in Barda during the 6th–7th centuries, in the Khudavang Monastery during the 8th–9th centuries, and in the Gandzasar Monastery during the 12th–19th centuries (Mammadov, 2005). Churches built after the Arab conquest were often constructed in order to avoid the jizya tax imposed on non-Muslim populations. However, considering that such temples were generally erected deep within forests and in inaccessible rocky areas where secret worship was conducted, the construction of the Red Church represents an exception.

In our opinion, before the construction of the Red Church, there had been a Zoroastrian place of worship in its vicinity, and a commercial caravan route passed through the area. This assumption is supported by the remains of bridges and buildings, as well as traces of narrow caravan roads observed and documented during field survey investigations around the church territory. Since the Red Church had not been used as a place of worship from the mid-19th century onward, additional burials were made inside the temple. One of these graves belonged to a woman buried in a supine position and discovered at a depth of 60 cm adjacent to the southern wall of the church. Inside the temple, to the north of a 19th-century grave located in the western section, two skeletons of young children buried side by side were uncovered in a cavity measuring 60 cm in length. These graves were found at a depth of approximately 1 meter. Another skeleton was recorded on the right side of these burials, adjacent to the northern wall of the church. Overall, excavations inside the church reached a depth of 1.60 meters.

Along the northern wall of the church, in the apse section, various objects believed to have been used for talismanic purposes were discovered at a depth of 20–30 cm near the wall line. During the research, it became clear that the local Albanian Christian inhabitants of the area regarded this monument as a sacred pilgrimage site and shrine. The presence of symbols resembling a “rooster’s claw” and a “ram’s horn” on the trunks and branches of the oak trees located northwest of the temple supports the idea that these features were associated with certain folk beliefs and ritual practices. There are also remains of ruined structures surrounding the Red Church. Survey investigations established that water had been supplied to both the church and the village through ceramic pipes extending from a nearby mountain source. Local inhabitants referred to these ruins as the “king’s palace.” Ottoman sources from 1727 indicate that the territory where the Red Church is located belonged to the Dizag district. It is possible that the remains described by the local population as ancient structures once constituted one of the estates of the rulers of Dizag.

Some distance away from these ancient ruins, on another lower hill surrounded by an old cemetery, there are the remains of another religious structure encircled by ancient graves. On the southern side of this religious building, an old grave without an inscription attracts attention. Local residents refer to this tombstone as the “king’s grave.”

In the valley between the palace and the village, there is a spring surrounded by the remains of ancient structures. The local population remembers it as the “King’s Spring.” These findings suggest that the monument was not constructed solely for memorial or religious purposes, but also served military-strategic functions while simultaneously controlling trade routes passing through the region. In the 10th century, the area formed part of the Shaddadid Dynasty state, and archaeological as well as historical studies indicate that the Shaddadids maintained similar observation points. During the rule of the Shaddadid dynasty, fortresses such as Gulustan Castle (Goranboy), Namard Gala (Gadabay), Gula (Gazakh), Carbend (Aghdara), and Maiden Castle (Jabrayil) were primarily used for defensive purposes, while churches such as the Band Temple (Goygol) and Beshikdash (Aghdam) functioned as observation points.

Compared with other sections of the monument, a greater concentration of scattered stone debris was recorded in the southeastern part of the temple. This suggests that these stones may have belonged to materials used during the period when the church was under Armenian control. After clearing the soil and stone debris, several ceramic vessel fragments and part of a cutting tool were uncovered. As excavations continued, a stone slab measuring 40 cm in length and 60 cm in width was identified in the central part of the apse. Numerous fragments of unglazed ceramic vessels were also recovered near the western section of the church (Mammadov, Yusifova, Mammadzadeh, & Gasimli, 2025).

Lime was used as the binding mortar in the construction of the temple, while river stones and rock stones were predominantly preferred in the masonry. Baked red bricks measuring $27 \times 27 \times 5$ cm were used in the construction of the window opening and the dome section, and some of the gaps within the masonry were filled with rectangular and square-shaped stones. During excavations in the

central part of the temple's prayer hall, when the depth reached 60 cm, a neatly arranged stone pavement measuring 70 cm in length and 33 cm in width was uncovered. This stone pavement was found at the same level as the stone debris located in front of the masonry wall, which was probably part of the original structure. The recovered finds consisted of fragments of glazed and unglazed ceramic vessels, a small number of animal bone remains, glazed pottery mainly painted in light and dark brown monochrome colors, and a limited number of glazed vessels decorated with schematic motifs. The ceramic fragments represented body, rim, base, and handle sections of bowls and plate-type vessels (Mammadov, Yusifova, Mammadzadeh, & Gasimli, 2025).

The incense burners discovered in the Red Church are also of particular interest. A fragment on one ceramic artifact resembling a human skull is especially significant. This find is interpreted as representing a relic of a sacred body, which is characteristic of Christian religious traditions (Khalilov, 2011).

Approximately 500 meters northwest of the church, remains of another structure were documented by our research team. Around this monument, which we provisionally named the "Small Temple," fragments of surface pottery dating to the early medieval period were observed scattered across the area. The concentration of ceramic remains within a relatively limited territory suggests the possible existence of a small caravanserai-type stopping point there. It is likely that the structures presented locally as a "fortress" are in fact the remains of this caravanserai (Mammadov, Yusifova, Mammadzadeh, & Gasimli, 2025).

Near the village of Binə, there are numerous monuments dedicated to the brave prince and Dizag ruler Yesai Abu Musa and his successors. Although it is reported that the famous Goroz Fortress once stood on the western side of the trees currently regarded as a sacred pilgrimage site (pir), no visible traces of the fortress survive today. Some of the graves accidentally discovered in the territory of Binə village date back to the 1st–3rd centuries AD. The graves were arranged in two rows and covered with stone slabs measuring approximately 2.5 meters. Numerous clay vessels, beads made of bone and colored stones, decorated buttons, copper and bronze bracelets, rings made from goat horn, and shields bearing insect motifs were found within the graves.

In female burials, diadem ornaments made of coins, earrings, arm jewelry, and metal belts were discovered near the skulls of the skeletons. Close to the area where these graves were identified are located Goroz Fortress, Tahal Tower (9th century), the Royal Palace (10th century), the Khachkar monument in Qarmir Kar (Red Village) dating to the 13th century, and the Atautchay Bridge from the 18th century. Goroz Fortress is described as being situated in a landscape similar to the Ktich Mountains.

Conclusion. Based on the material culture remains and construction characteristics discovered within the excavated cultural layer of the Red Church (Qarmir) Albanian-period architectural monument, the currently visible structural remains may be dated to the 9th–10th centuries. The observation of deeper archaeological layers beneath the cultural strata inside the Red Church suggests that this temple was constructed on the remains of an earlier early medieval structure. Our preliminary investigations indicate that the Red Church architectural monument belonged to the group of single-naved, vaulted Christian religious buildings representing the simplest type of early medieval ecclesiastical architecture and that it originally possessed a rectangular construction plan.

Overall, it was determined during the excavation process that the wall remains uncovered beneath the destruction layers had been constructed mainly from river and rock stones. The identification of a caravanserai-type stopping point and bridge remains near the so-called "Small Temple," located approximately 500–600 meters northwest of the church, indicates that an important trade caravan route once passed through this territory. The discovered material culture remains suggest that the monument continued to be used until the first quarter of the 18th–19th centuries. It may therefore be concluded that following the abolition of the Albanian Catholicosate by the decision of the Holy

Synod of Saint Petersburg in 1836, the temple was destroyed by newly resettled Christian populations relocated from the territories of Iran and Türkiye under the terms of the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828) and the Treaty of Adrianople. Subsequently, another church was constructed in the center of the newly established settlement of Binə village.

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