THE MONASTERIES OF ST. THADDEUS
THE APOSTLE AND ST. STEPANNOS NAHKAVKA
ARMEN HAGHNAZARIAN
Land and Culture Organisation was established in 1977 in Paris with the effort of Gegham Gevonian.

The Organisation pursues the objective of engaging the Diaspora youth in the reconstruction of the Armenian architectural heritage in order to strengthen the feelings of national identity among them. The first projects of the Organisation have been initiated in the Monasteries of Saint Thaddeus and Saint Stepanos of Nakhavka, located in the Azerbaijani provinces of Iran, as well as in the Saint Stepanos Church in Kesab, Syria.

Following the earthquake in 1988 the Organisation extended its activities to Armenia proper. The Organisation has contributed to the reconstruction of the Virgin Mary Church in Gogaran. Repairs have been undertaken at the Saint Minas Church of Tatev and the Magnificent complex of Sagmosavank. In the Karintag village of Artsakh the cultural centre, the school and the church have been repaired with the engagement of the Organisation.
The Monastery of Thaddeus the Apostle

**Geographic location.** The Monastery is located in the Artaz District of Vaspourakan province of Historic Armenia, 23 kilometres away from the town of Maku, at 1830 metres above sea level. The Armenian historian Movses of Khoren names the district “Shavarshakan”. The Artaz or Ake’ district now corresponds to the Maku district of the Iranian province of Azerbaidjan (Atropatagan in Armenian), which extends from the Massis mountain (Lesser Ararat) to the south-east, up to Her and Zarehvand districts (today Khoy and Salmas).

**Historic background.** According to Armenian sources the establishment of the Monastery relates to the years 40-41 AD, when the two disciples of Jesus Christ, Apostles St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew travelled to Armenia in order to preach Christianity. In Armenia the King Sanatroug and his daughter Sandoukht embraced Christianity but after a short period under the influence of political considerations the King renounced Christianity, reverting to the pagan religion and started to persecute
the Christians. St Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew succumbed to this persecution and were martyred. The King did not even spare his daughter – the Virgin Sandoukht, who refused to renounce her new faith. The followers of Christ buried the remains of St. Thaddeus in a grave near the place of his martyrdom and the body of Virgin Sandoukht was laid to rest on the top of a nearby hill.

According to the 5th century historians, the district of Artaz has had its own diocese whose leaders, Fathers Zakarya and Stepan as well as Bishop Israel are named. However, there is no information regarding the Monastery itself.

Hovhan Mamikonian confirms that the remains of St. Thaddeus are located in the Artaz district of Vaspurakan. The 5th century chroniclers Eghishe (Elishe) and Ghazar Parbetsi (Lazar of Parb) in their description of the battle of Avarair, known as the Vardanantz Battle, do not mention this Monastery. This implies that the believers, having kept the name of the Apostle Thaddeus in living memory and tradition, built the Monastery some centuries later, possibly on the foundations of an existing heathen temple.
At the beginning of the 8th century, during the reign of Princes Hovnan Odznetzi and Vahan Mamikonian, the remains of St. Thaddeus and Virgin Sandoukht were discovered. St. Thaddeus is mentioned by Tovma A刘备ni in the early part of the 10th century, more detailed information is given by S. Anetzsi a century later. More detailed information about the Monastery can be found in the
Armenian literature and memoirs of various travellers from the 10th century onwards.

In 1247 The Catholicos of All Armenians Costanin Bardzerberdtsi decreed on the boundaries of the Monastery and its adjacent lands. He subsequently sent presents to the Monastery in recognition of the honourable service of the Monks. Taking advantage of
the favourable conditions of peace
the Catholicos has also rendered
financial assistance to Father
Superior Hovsep in order to con-
tribute to the repairs of the earlier
damages inflicted on the
Monastery by the Selucide Turks
and the Georgians. In order to con-
tinue the repairs during the rule of
the Moguls, Father Hovsep seeks
the favour of Commander
Anagurak Nouin. Such favour was
of particular importance as the
summer residence of the Mogul
Commander was located in the
vicinity of the Monastery. With
such favour granted, Father
Hovsep dedicates himself entirely
to the completion of the repair
works.  

The importance of the
Monastery is further underlined by
the fact that in 1285 Levon III, the
Armenian King of Cilicia, who had
travelled to Atropatene for negotia-
tions with the Mogul Arghun
Khan, visited the Monastery
accompanied by Thoros the
Philosopher, whose head at the
time was Bishop Der Diratzu. With
its restoration the Monastery
renewed its intellectual activities
as well. Regretfully only few of the
manuscripts from the Monastery
have survived to our times. The
oldest among them is a manuscript
created by writer Restakesi in
around 1315, at the time of leadership of Father Superior Zakaria.

Under more than two centuries of Mogul rule the Monastery was destroyed many times and was heavily taxed. The earthquake of the year 1319 completely ruined the Monastery, where 75 of the monks also perished. Chamchian writes, “there was a great quake which destroyed the Monastery and the Church as well as many houses”.

The work of reconstructing the Monastery took ten years and the reconstruction was completed in 1329. Inscriptions about this
Kafayetzi undertook further repair work in the church, the southern, partly western and northern monastic cells were also repaired. He also enlarged the utilities and fortified the walls of the Monastery. These works were carried out during the years 1692-1694.

The Monastery suffered new damages as a result of the earthquake in 1696, though fortunately there were no human losses. Further damages were inflicted during the renewed Turkish-Persian wars of 1734. A water mill with adjacent granary were erected in 1787, the spring well was repaired in 1793. The wooden cross was replaced by one made of stone in 1794. In 1819 Father Superior Simeon Bznouni, after obtaining permission from the Persian Viceroy Abbas Mirza removed the western facade of the
church and built an adjoining church with white stones. By 1820 the church was complete and only the belfry and the roof of the apses were not completed.

In 1827, as a result of the Treaty of Turkomanachai, the territories of the Monastery were left inside Persia. Subsequently more than 40,000 Armenians of the Atrpatagan (Azerbaijan) district abandoned their ancestral homes and moved to the north of the Araxes River, into the Russian held territories. The 80 Armenian villages around the town of Maku, some of which belonged to the Monastery were left derelict.

Stripped of its income, the Monastery of St. Thaddeus and the Monastery of St. Stepannis (which was in the same predicament) were merged in 1841 with the approval of Holy Echmiadzin. They came
under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Atrpatagan, having its centre in the city of Tabriz.

Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the World War One, the Monastery was known under its pseudonym “The Lonely Monastery”, for it served as an underground transit point for the armed Armenian irregulars on their way to Vaspourakan. In June 1918 the Ottoman regulars joined by the soldiers of the Khan of Maku as well as the Kurdish hoards surrounded the Monastery, where the Armenian population of the surrounding villages had found refuge. The Armenians defended themselves for 33 days, until their ammunition ran out and on July 2nd the Turks breached the fortifications. A wholesale massacre of the defendants followed, with a few women and children being spared, who were taken into slavery. The Church and its treasury were pillaged and the important symbol of the Monastery, the right hand of St. Thaddeus went missing. After the War some Armenian families from the surrounding villages, who had miraculously survived the genocide returned to the Monastery and lived in the cells until 1946, when they were repatriated to Armenia.
The last Father Superior of the Monastery, Father Kajberouni Petros Ghazarian moved to Tabriz, where he died in 1948.

In 1954, the Armenian Diocese of Arpatagan arranged the first pilgrimage to St. Thaddeus Monastery, which took place during the Saints name day at the end of the month of July. This pilgrimage acted as the starting point for the renovation of the Monastery in 1969-70. The repairs were carried out under the supervision of the Iranian Governmental organisation of “Mirase Farhangi” (Cultural Heritage). Part of the funds for the renovation work were provided by the Paris based Land and Culture Organisation (Organization Terre et Culture), who as of 1976 started its relentless campaign concerning the importance of the Monastery and the need for the reconstruction work.

From 1988 onwards, the “Mirase Farhangi” and the Armenian Diocesan Committee appointed for the supervision of the reconstruction work, are jointly managing the reconstruction and repair work in the Monastery.

The Architecture. The Monastery is surrounded by fortifications, having eight round towers
At its corners. The complex is divided into two sections, one part includes the Church and the cells, and the other part has the service area as well as the oil press, the kitchen and the stores.

After the earthquake of 1319 the church has been reconstructed with finely finished dark basalt slabs. The exterior of the church is rectangular but the interior is cross-shaped, with a central dome and the main altar flanked on both sides with vestries. The vertical aspect of the church is accentuated by the drum, supported with 12 columns and topped with the conical capped dome.

In order to expand the church, the western wall of the church and the belfry were demolished in 1819 and were replaced with another church, the replica of Holy Echmiadzin, connected to the old church. This new church too has a drum with 12 supporting columns and a conical dome, but is constructed with white stones, brought from a quarry near the village of Kurch-Bulakh. Only the belfry to the west of the church and the roof of the apses are left incomplete.

In contrast with the sombre and simple exterior of the old church, the new white church has
elaborate decorative carvings on the exterior. These can be divided into four categories. At the lower lever, the sections of the walls, surrounded by arched columns are mainly decorated with Khachkars (stone-crosses) and “tree of life” carvings. Further up the church has two belts of carvings, one purely with botanical designs & the other with carvings depicting daily life and scenes from mythology. At the next level, separated with cornices, stand the figures of the saints, separated by wall columns. The uppermost part is relatively simple and ends with yet another cornice.

The influence of the Islamic Safavid architecture can be noted in some of the details of the carvings of the white church. Here the influence of the carvings of the 10th century Holy Cross Cathedral of Aghtamar Monastery near Van is particularly noticeable.

To the north of the Monastery, on a hill there stand two chapels, together with the ruin of the third one. The chapel next to the rock with a semicircular dome is called the Holy Martyr and the other, smaller one is called Holy Mother of God. Near the Monastery, in the once Armenian village of Gharakilisse (in Turkish - the Black Church) the small village church is still intact. To the south
ph hrapinyu, phph qaamrhu t ammpu dawmher Upr. Umparnim huru amputu:

of the Monastery, on the top of a hill stands the famous Chapel of “Virgin Sandoukht”.

1”Manr Zhamanakagrununer”,
Volum II, Yerevan, 1956, p. 314
2 Hovhan Mamikonian, “History of Taron”, Yerevan, 1989, p. 32
3 “Manr Zhamanakagrununer”,
Volum I, Yerevan, 1951, p. 203
7 “Register of Armenian Manuscripts of the XIV century”, Yerevan, 1950, p. 114
8 “Historical records collected by Father Samvel of Ani”,
Vagarshapat, 1893, p. 157
9. “Manr Zhamanakagrununer”,
Volume I, Yerevan, 1951, p. 309
10. ibid, p. 284
The Monastery of Saint Stepannos Nakhavka, also known as the Monastery of Maghard or Monastery of Darashamb

**Geographic location.** The Monastery is located in the Vaspourakan province of Historic Armenia, which today lies in the north of the Iranian province of Azerbaidjan, (Atropatagan in Armenian). It is located 18 kilometres to the West of the town of Julfa on a slope leading towards the river Arax.

The Monastery was built on the foothills of the Maghard mountain, on a hill covered with trees. On the North of the monastery across the Arax river rises the rocky and arid mountain range of Goghtan. The chapel of Saint Andre' the Son lies on the left side of the road leading from Julfa to the Monastery. The Armenian cemetery of Old Julfa, with hundreds of old and unique Khachkars (Cross stones) which are as tall as a man, lies on the northern bank of the Arax river across the Monastery. The architecture of this cemetery as a whole is considered as a unique example of late medieval Armenian stonemasonry. A church built in the 17th or 18th century is the only structure still standing where the village of Darachamb once was. The village of was located three kilometres to
the West of the Monastery, where the river Tghmut (now called Akchay) and Arax merge.

**Historic background.** The exact date of establishment of the Monastery is not known. According to tradition the Monastery was established by the Apostle Bartholomew himself, who was preaching in the town of Nakhichevan, then located in the Aghbak district of Vaspourakan province of Armenia. He was subsequently martyred in the same town. Later on another monastery was actually constructed on the very spot where St Bartholomew was martyred and which bears his name. This was located in the “Valley of the Armenians” (Hayots Dzor) located in Aghbak province. One of the first written records about the Monastery is dated 966. It is an inscription from the
Monastery, which later served as a socle for a glass cross in memory of Shushan and her son King Ashot. The Holy Cross was later moved to St Etchmiadzin. In an encyclical by the Catholicos Khachik Ardzrouni in the year 976 the Apostle Bartholomew is mentioned as the founder of the Monastery. Therein are also specified the land boundaries and the tax status of the Monastery. About the same time King Ashot Bagratouni the Merciful issued a dedicatory epistle where the dioceses of the Maghard Monastery are mentioned.

The Last Will and Testament of King Ashot’s daughter, written in 981 mentions the churches of St Mary Mother of God, St. George and St. Stepansos, which were reconstructed according to the royal decree issued by her father.

During the 11th century Seljuk rule information about the monastery is scarce. In 1143 however, Stephan Orbelian gave details of the activities within the Monastery and mentions by name Ter Barsegh (Basil) as the Father Superior of the Monastery. Later the scribe Michael the Syrian confirms this. On other occasions historical sources mention the repository of manuscripts and library of the Monastery. An ivory-backed gospel bearing the date 1178 together with the inscription of “Monastery of Stepannos Nakhavka” today can be found in
the library of Holy Etchmiadzin.

There is a continuous scarcity of information about the Monastery during the Mongol rule in Armenia (13th to 15th centuries). In 1270 Vardan Bardzrabertsi mention the Monastery in one of his studies. In the year 1330 in a decree issued by the Mongol ruler Abu Said Il-Khani the Monastery land holdings are confirmed.\(^3\) Thereafter manu-
scripts, encycyclics and epistles give us, without notable interruption, the continuous historical picture of the Monastery from the 15th century to our times.

In 1427 Grigor Aknetsi mentions the Monastery with its three churches and qualifies them as “famous”. The Yerevan Manuscript Depository (Matenadaran) as well as the New Julfa library have many manuscripts produced in the Monastery of St. Stepannoss Nakhavka dating from the

Dating from the 15th and 16th centuries. These testify to a monastic environment where the intellectual and spiritual activities were earnestly pursued.

As a result of the lengthy hostilities between the Ottoman Empire and Persia and the subsequent forced resettlement of Nakhichevan Armenians in Persia during the 17th century the Monastery faced serious financial problems. An encyclical dated 1614 by Melikset Catholicos and an epistle dated 1631 issued by Catholicos Movses III Tatevatsi formally give authority to the Monastery to raise funds from the faithful for the preservation of the spiritual centre.

In 1633 Hagop Jughayetsi was installed as the Father Superior of the Monastery. According to the 17th century historian Arakel Davrizhetsi the Monastery build-
ing was in such as state of disrepair that the Superior was compelled to rebuild the whole church and renovate different parts of the complex. Further more he installed pipes to bring drinking water to the Monastery from a nearby spring. These large-scale constructions lasted 12 years. An inscription on the Northern corner of the Eastern wall of the church mentions that “The construction began in the year
1643 and ended in the year 1655. The present configuration of both the Monastery and the church are the result of this reconstruction effort. In 1655 Hagop Jughayetsi was elected as Catholicos of All Armenians and moved to St. Etchmiadzin. The Monastery Superiors Hovhannes, Petros and Hagop Shambetsi undertook further construction. The Western fortifications of the Monastery and the bell-tower were re-built as well as the refectory and the Monks’ cells.

In 1759 under the rule of Father Michael an earthquake destroyed the roof of the church, damaged the cells and wrecked the southern side of the fortifications. The very same year and later in 1780 Hagop Shamakhetse and Ghoukas (Lucas) Catholicos confirm the financial problems faced by the Monastery in their encyclicals. About fifty years later in 1826, during the leadership of Father Superior Sarkis the church and particularly its interior was renovated, frescoes were executed by the painter Nagash Hovnathan giving the church a renewed splendour.

The Russo-Persian hostilities ended in 1828 under the Treaty of Torkamanchai. By virtue of this treaty the river Arax became the international border between the two countries. The consequences of this Treaty were dire for the
Monastery, since it was deprived of the support of the Armenians of Nakhichevan and the levies paid by the Armenians of the Goghtan province. To avert crisis economic aid was given to the Monastery by the Persian Fath-Ali Shah and his Regent Abbas Mirza. They gave the Monastery the lands of the Armenian-inhabited village of Darashamb. In 1840 the bell-tower was once again damaged by an earthquake and was repaired in 1845. The church roof underwent further repairs between 1865 and 1866.

Between the years 1917 and 1920 on four different occasions the Turkish inhabitants plundered the Monastery and set the library
on fire. After the First World War a number of Armenians from Darashamb village returned to their ancestral homes. A few families elected to settle within the confines of the Monastery. In 1948-1949 some of these families were repatriated to Armenia while the others chose to move to Tabriz. In his letter to the Catholicoi of All Armenians Gevorg Chorekchian dated 1948 Father Tigran Darbinian gives detailed description of the damages inflicted on the Monastery, the famine and the sufferings of the villagers.6

Since 1983 the Iranian State Agency “Mirase’ Farhangi” (Cultural Heritage) has made funds available for the renovation of the Monastery. The church roofs as well as the cells have been renovated. The Paris based Armenian organisation “Land and Culture Organisation-LCO” (Organisation Terri et Culture - OTC) has been relentlessly warning everyone about the precarious state of the Monastery and the urgent necessity of raising funds for it restoration.

Architecture of the Monastery. The Monastery buildings are grouped in two internal courtyards, the whole complex is square in shape and is equipped with fortifications having semi-rotunda towers.7 The main entrance is located on the West within the exterior recess whereby
the complex is divided into two. The Monastery is made up of three sections. The middle section is the entrance, which leads to the main hall from where a stairway leads to an arched kitchen with four columns. On either side of the stairway lie the two floors with various rooms, which act as larders and food storing facilities.

The church of Stepannos Nakhavka is located in the northern enclosure. The single nave church of St. Paul and St. Peter with its slate covered arches was later built adjacent to the main church in the area between the church and the fortification walls. The bell-tower is located to the south of the main church. The first two floors of the bell-tower are square shaped and the third floor is made of eight arched columns that support the capped cupola.

The cells adjacent to the eastern walls are monks’ cells. In the Southern courtyard of the complex there are further monks’ cells, which are two storied. Next to them are the Father Superior’s quarters and the library. The Vahan Mamikonian hall and the refectory are situated to the east.

The exterior of the church is faced with polished tufa stone of light and dark brown colour. The interior is brick covered with lime aggregate. From the exterior the church looks square but inside it is cross shaped and three apsed, with a central dome. The side apses are seven pillared and the vestries in
The central drum of the church has 16 columns and is covered with fan shaped capped dome. The exterior facades of the church are divided into two sections by means of interwoven, ornamental stripes. The western facade differs from the others by having three recesses, which are capped by arches and semi-circular strips. The decorative Khachkars donated by the church benefactors and pilgrims are installed in the two outside recesses. The central recess leads to the main entrance of the church with its elaborately carved wooden door donated by the population of the town of Agulis. Scores of Khachkars decorate the eastern and southern wall of the church.

On the eastern facade, the altar ogive is framed by decorative carvings above which one can see an important carving relating to the Monastery, that of the stoning of St Stepannos Nakhavka. The eastern facade ends with carving of roses and an eagle – the guardian of the Monastery.

Viewing from a distance, the attention is drawn to the dome of the church, which dominates the Monastery complex.

The 16 pillars of the drum and the interconnecting arches are reach with decorative carvings, Khachkars, roses and angels, in particular with the carved statues of the 16 saints. These consist of the carvings of Jesus Christ on the
western column, John the Baptist on the eastern, Mary Mother of God on the northern and St. Gregory the Illuminator on the southern columns. The 12 apostles are carved on the remaining columns. Stone crosses seat on the corners of the fan shaped cupola.

The interior of the church is plastered on the surface of which, in some places the remains of the 19th century frescoes are still visible. The paintings belong to the school of Hovnatanians, who decorated the churches of the Goghtan province in the 18th and 19th centuries.

1 K. Basmajian, “Our heritage”, “Banaser”, 1902, No. 4, 15, 98
4 H. Voskean, “Monasteries of Nakhjewan”, “Handes Amsorya”, 1941, p. 204
6 Armenian State Archives No. 409, list 1, file 4243, p.p. 4-5
7 Hartmut Hofrichter, Das Klosier Sdepannos Nachawega in der iranischen Provinz Aserbaidschan «Revue des études Armeniennes, IX, Paris, 1972, t 9193-239:
The Monasteries of St. Thaddeus Apostle and
St. Stepannos Nakhavka
This book is dedicated to the "Land and Culture" Organisation in recognition of many years of its activities and devotion to the nation.

"Research on Armenian Architecture" Organisation