'FORGERIES': THE ARMENIAN ART THAT AZERBAIJAN MAY 'ERASE' FROM CHURCHES

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By Amos Chapple, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, 09 February 2022
Photography by Hrair Hawk Khatcherian

Baku announced -- then partly walked back -- steps to remove what it calls "fictitious traces" of Armenian heritage from churches now under Azerbaijani control in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Archival images show what some of those inscriptions and artworks look like.



Crosses and Armenian text on the walls of the Dadivank Monastery in Azerbaijan's Kalbajar District.

The Dadivank Monastery (pictured above) is one of scores of Christian sites recaptured by Azerbaijan during the 2020 war with ethnic Armenian forces over Nagorno-Karabakh. Dadivank is currently under the control of Russian peacekeepers inside Azerbaijani territory.



A detail of Dadivank Monastery with Armenian script and carved figures.

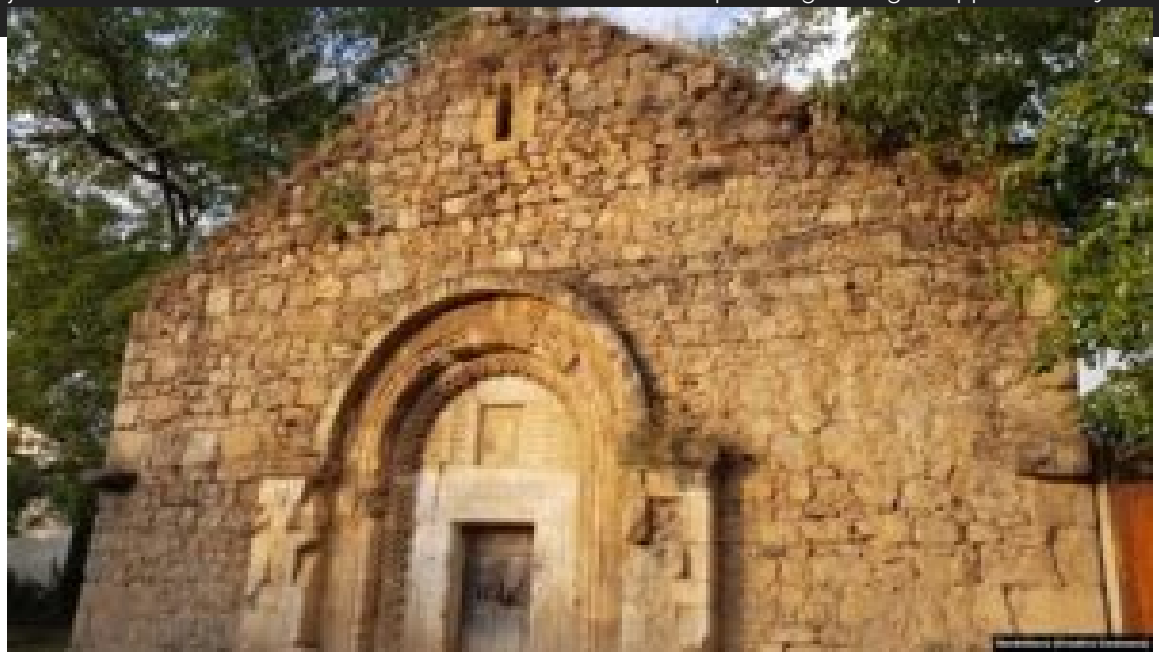
On February 3, Azerbaijan's Cultural Ministry caused an outcry when it **announced the creation of a committee** that would take steps to "remove the fictitious traces written by Armenians on Albanian religious temples" in the recaptured areas.



A detail of a 12th-century khachkar (cross-stone) in Handaberd, a fortress in the Kalbajar region.

In a tweet, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said it is "deeply concerned by #Azerbaijan's plans to remove Armenian Apostolic inscriptions from churches. We urge the government to preserve and protect places of worship and other religious and cultural sites."

Azerbaijani officials have repeatedly claimed ancient monuments in the Nagorno-Karabakh region are of Caucasian Albanian -- rather than Armenian -- origin and that artworks, such as the khachkar above, are “forgeries.”



A 2018 photo of the Holy Mother of God Church in the recaptured Hadrut region. Armenian script is visible above the entrance.

When Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev visited the church pictured above in March 2021, he **dismissed Armenian script on the entrance**.

"All these inscriptions are fake," Aliyev declared. "They were written later," suggesting the church had Caucasian Albanian origins.



Details, including Armenian script, on a wall of the fifth-century Yeghishe Arakyal Monastery in the Tartar region of Azerbaijan.

Historians say Christian Albanian tribes did live in an area of today's Azerbaijan. Their last king was assassinated in 822.



A small khachkar above an entranceway in the ruined Mokhrenis Church in the Hadrut region of Azerbaijan.

In the 1950s, controversial Azerbaijani academic Ziya Bunyadov **first floated the theory** that ancient churches in Nagorno-Karabakh were built by vanished Albanian tribes and not Armenians. That claim has been amplified in recent years by Azerbaijani officials.



A khachkar in the recaptured Lachin District of Azerbaijan.

The Albanian claim has been widely panned by international scholars. Thomas de Waal, a British expert on the Caucasus, calls the Azerbaijani claims “rather bizarre” and notes the argument “has the strong political subtext” that Armenians “had no claim to .”

Bunyadov was **behind a notorious article** in which he claimed Armenians engineered a 1988 massacre of Armenians to vilify Azerbaijan.



A fresco inside Dadivank Monastery.

After the February 3 announcement by Azerbaijan's culture minister that a working group had been set up to "restore Armenianized Albanian temples," the Culture Ministry followed up with a response to the reporting of what it called "biased foreign mass media outlets."



Armenian script at the entrance to the 13th-century St. Sargis Church in Azerbaijan's recaptured Kalbajar District.

The **February 7 statement** appeared to partly walk back the earlier announcement, saying only that the working group would note any "falsifications" to monuments in recaptured territory, which would then be "presented to the international community."



Khachkars embedded in the walls of Dadivank Monastery.

A ruling by the International Court of Justice in December 2021 on a case brought by Armenia declared that Azerbaijan must "take all necessary measures to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration affecting Armenian cultural heritage" in the recaptured territories.



A cross visible on the Yerits Mankants Monastery in Azerbaijan's Tartar District.

But there are fears -- after the **erasure of Armenian heritage** from the Azerbaijani exclave of Naxcivan -- that Azerbaijan will press ahead with wiping out Armenian cultural heritage in the retaken areas.

Analysts have pointed out that Baku has renewed leverage with the West due to tensions with Moscow over Ukraine.



A carved stone on the grounds of Yerits Mankants Monastery.

There are no comments yet.