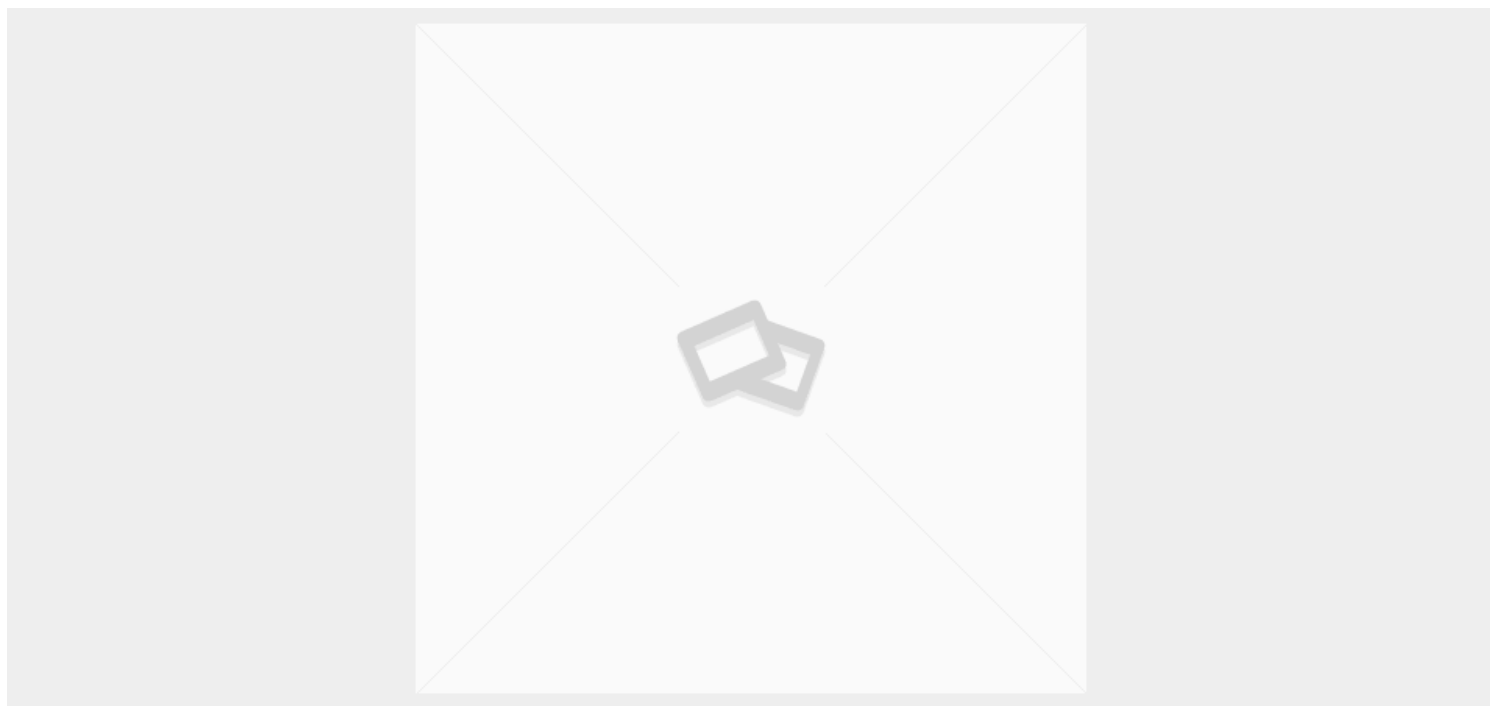


# NEGLECT, MISMANAGEMENT AT HISTORIC YEREVAN SITE

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By Joseph (Hovsep) Dagdigian, Harvard, MA, 18 September 2013

***Joseph (Hovsep) Dagdigian of Harvard, MA is a computer engineer with keen interest in Armenian archeology and architecture. In the past few years he was a representative of the Cambridge-Yerevan Sister City Association in Yerevan for the Shengavit Museum project. Every year he spends extensive period of time in Yerevan where he has a house.***

***Photos of the Shengavit Museum (before renovations) were taken by then Shengavit Director Volodya Tshagharyan.***

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**Shengavit museum building after Tshagharyan became director**

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Until mid-summer 2013, Vladimir Tshagharyan served as Shengavit preserve's director, having assumed the post in 2009. Tshagharyan is an architect and has spent most of his career in the protection and preservation of Armenia's historic, archaeological, and cultural monuments. Though Tshagharyan was the director of the Shengavit site, overall directorship of Shengavit, the Karmir Blur Urartian site in Yerevan, and the Erebuni archaeological site and museum are under Erebuni's director Gagik Gyurjyan.

Upon his appointment as Shengavit director, Tshagharyan discovered that about 40% of the remaining land site had been privatized shortly after Armenia's independence. Armed with extensive archival documentation and photographs, Tshagharyan fought a year-long battle-- going to the city hall, the courts, the public prosecutor's office, and the regional city hall. The documents transferring the land to individuals were signed by the prime minister. People have indicated that while it's likely that the prime minister was presented with a stack of documents to sign by advisors, it is unlikely that he would have had knowingly signed such a document.



#### **Before Renovations**

The privatized land was received by two institutions: Hospital Number 6 and a polyclinic (both next to the Shengavit preserve) and three individuals, including Vanush Babayan. Babayan's wife is the janitor at Shengavit, although her husband serves instead. He also was, until recently, hired by the police department to serve as a day watchman at the site. The police department later dismissed Babayan as Shengavit's daytime watchman. Until then Tshagharyan had paid him, out of his pocket, an additional stipend to help with the maintenance and construction of the site.

All those who had acquired portions of Shengavit land have verbally agreed to relinquish ownership of the land and return it to the Shengavit preserve. However, to officially and legally return the land to the Shengavit preserve, Gyurjyan, in his position as director of Erebuni, must ask the management of Hospital Number 6 and the polyclinic to formally and legally, in writing, renounce ownership of the land and return it to the Shengavit preserve. ***Oddly, Gyurdjyan, as of the date this report was compiled (late summer, 2013), has NOT requested that the necessary documents be signed and recorded in the city archives. Without these documents the land cannot officially be returned to Shengavit. One can only be suspicious of the failure to act and speculate that there may be an attempt to keep the land privatized or transferred to others.***

#### **Administration of the Shengavit Site**

The Shengavit site is under the control of Erebuni museum's director, Gyurjyan, and ultimately under the control of the Minister of Culture Hasmik Poghosyan and the city. The culture ministry is in charge of the antiquities. It can allow or disallow excavations, and controls the disposition of ancient artifacts from the site together with Erebuni's director. Shengavit's land belongs to the city. Thus there appears to be a divided responsibility regarding the protection of the site and its contents.

The city government funds the Erebuni archaeological site and museum which, in turn, is responsible for funding the upkeep of the Shengavit and Karmir Blur sites. **But Shengavit has received no funding for its upkeep from Erebuni.**



### **New Entrance**

The Erebuni site and its museum, as well as Karmir Blur, are Urartian sites dating to the Iron Age (roughly 1100 – 800 B.C.). In contrast, the Shengavit site and its culture predate the Urartian era by roughly 2,500 years, and is at some distance from Erebuni. It is difficult to justify, on geographic, cultural, or historic grounds the authority of Erebuni over Shengavit site as there are completely different issues involved in the study of these two disparate historical eras and in preservation issues. In the opinion of many, the indifference, neglect, and mismanagement of the Shengavit site by Erebuni director makes it imperative that Shengavit site be separated from Erebuni and Shengavit director report directly to the ministry of culture.

When **Tshagharyan** was appointed director to Shengavit, the site had no water or rest room facilities, air conditioning for its museum, **or** pavilion to shade visitors from the hot sun. There was no outside lighting. There was only a short, inadequate section of fencing which provided no protection from intruders or trespassers. The museum building was in shambles. There was no bench for visitors and signage was inadequate. There was no real entrance to the site and often garbage was found dumped on the site. Though there originally was a staff of three-- inadequately paid workers--including Tshagharyan, there was no funding for the operation and maintenance of the site. Tshagharyan renovated the museum building, posted attractive signs on the site, and made other improvements which were financed by small donations from friends and from his own meager pay. No funding was dispensed to Shengavit by Erebuni or its director.

### **CYSCA's Shengavit Project**

During a visit to Armenia in 2011, **my wife and I** purchased a small amount (\$200 to \$300) of construction materials which Tshagharyan used to do some maintenance on the site.

In 2012 the Cambridge-Yerevan Sister City Association (CYSCA), with the support of concerned donors, purchased supplies to repair a broken bench on the site, to install and repair fencing around about 30% to 40% of the site, to repair leaking roofs on two small stone/cement buildings which were planned to become a bathroom and an office, to install an entrance and door to the site, and to make other improvements. The transformation of the site was startling though there remained much

more to be done. This was all done without any funding from Erebuni or from the Ministry of Culture which is responsible for the preservation of Armenia's antiquities.

In early summer of 2012, during a conversation with me as a representative of CYSCA, Gyurjyan indicated that all assistance to Shengavit should go through him or through the city government. He was informed that CYSCA was a non-profit organization and that funds were raised for the express purpose of directly purchasing building supplies and making them available to Tshagharyan to renovate and maintain the Shengavit **site**. The proper use of the material would be monitored. I emphasized that any use of funds for purposes other than their intended **use** would be illegal under U.S. law. Gyurjyan then asked how much funding CYSCA had collected. When told it was about \$1,000 or a bit more, he replied "Jisht ek anoom" ("You are doing the right thing").

In 2013, with the help of generous donors, additional funds were raised by CYSCA. The funds were again to be used directly to purchase construction materials for Shengavit's maintenance and renovation under Tshagharyan's directorship. Priorities and renovation plans were established by Tshagharyan to renovate the museum building, install water and rest room facilities, and provide an outdoor pavilion for visitors as well as generally cleaning up the site.

In 2013, with Tshagharyan, I visited the U.S. Embassy's Cultural Affairs Officer Sean O'Hara and other embassy officials to discuss the Shengavit project. Mr. O'Hara had previously accompanied U.S. Ambassador Heffern and Mrs. Heffern to Shengavit. President Serge Sargsyan had also visited the site. There were good indications that assistance, in one form or another, would be forthcoming through the U.S. Embassy, though no detailed plans had yet been worked out. The American Research In the South Caucasus (ARISC), through a grant initiated by archaeologist Dr. Mitchell Rothman of Widener University in PA, allocated funds to help renovate Shengavit's museum building using architectural plans drawn up and donated by Tshagharyan.

In short, renovation of the Shengavit Historical and Archaeological Preserve was on track. It was an evolving success story.



#### **Damaged Wall**

#### **Problems Arise**

During the summer of 2012 American and Armenian archaeologists excavated the site, though there was little effort to adequately preserve these excavations. Permission to excavate Armenian archaeological sites and the responsibility to oversee the preservation of these sites ultimately rests with the Minister of Culture and, in the case of Shengavit, on Erebuni's Director. Shengavit's director had no authority to allow or disallow excavations or to demand adequate preservation after excavations are conducted. Additionally, artifacts recovered from excavations at Shengavit are required, by law, to be placed either in Shengavit museum or in Erebuni's museum, as Erebuni has authority over Shengavit.

As of the date of the initial writing of this report, few if any significant artifacts from Shengavit have been deposited either at Erebuni or Shengavit, and instead remain in the possession of one or more Armenian archaeologists who have excavated Shengavit. Artifacts currently on display in Shengavit museum were recovered from Soviet-era excavations and dealt with properly.

As work was to begin in the summer of 2013, with funds newly collected by CYSCA, Shengavit's director dismissed one of Shengavit's employees, Mr. Babayan, for just cause. The following morning, Erebuni's director reinstated Babayan and told him not to cooperate with Tshagharyan's efforts to renovate the site. Tshagharyan attempted to hire a recent graduate of the construction institute to help with renovations. There was to be **NO** net increase in the total salaries paid to Shengavit's staff. Again, Erebuni's director overruled Tshagharyan and prohibited the hiring of the young man. It was clear that the Shengavit renovation project was being deliberately blocked. Tshagharyan tendered his resignation as Shengavit's director.

### The Aftermath

Erebuni's director, Gyurjyan, initiated a meaningless investigation of Shengavit's finances. He was sent a letter by CYSCA indicating that financial records for CYSCA's support are with CYSCA, and he should notify CYSCA, in writing, if he has any issues or questions. In short, there are no Shengavit finances. Shengavit received **no** operational funding from Erebuni or the Armenian government. Neither did Shengavit receive funding from CYSCA. CYSCA purchased construction material and had it delivered to Shengavit for use by Tshagharyan. In fact, Gyurjyan had seldom expressed interest in the renovation of Shengavit to either Tshagharyan or to CYSCA. His expressions of concern have been about how much funding CYSCA and ARISC had allocated for Shengavit.

Gyurjyan threatened to reject Tshagharyan's resignation. Under **Armenian** law, an employer has a right to retain an employee for up to four weeks following that employee's resignation, and four weeks had already expired. Tshagharyan was no longer Shengavit's director or subject to Gyurjyan's authority.



### View of American Embassy (in the background) From Shengavit

It was mentioned to Tshagharyan and to CYSCA that renovations or modifications to public property must be approved by the city. As director, Tshagharyan's responsibility was not to manage excavations, but to maintain and operate the site – **though he received no operational finances to do so**. In fulfilling his duties, he replaced or renovated fencing surrounding about 40% of the site, installed new attractive signs, repaired a ruined bench for visitors, painted the museum building, fixed leaking roofs on two buildings, dug a trench to provide the site with water and sewage connections, installed outside lighting, and installed doors and locks on two auxiliary buildings and on Shengavit's entrance. These are precisely in line with the tasks that the director of such a site is expected to be concerned with.

Erebuni's director, Gyurjyan, is known to boast of his power and influence through powerful friends in the government. He does have influential contacts. With his influential contacts he certainly, in an instant, could get approval **for** any construction work needed at Shengavit-- **if approval was necessary**.

Evidence of Gyurjyan's influence may be gleaned from a June 30, 2009 news article in "[Armenia Now](#)" website. The article cites corruption within Armenia's Ministry of Culture where \$330,000 had been misappropriated. Gyurjyan was deputy-minister of culture in charge of monument preservation projects at the time. As a result, on June 24, 2009 Gyurjyan was removed from office.

**Despite being tainted through his association with the scandal, he was made director of the Erebuni preserve and museum later in the year.**

In a related issue (ARKA news agency, April 2, 2013), it was reported that the Armenian Monuments Awareness Project (AMAP), together with the Armenian Society for the Protection of Birds, is receiving 325,500 Euros to promote tourism along the historic Silk Road, which includes Armenia. Participating in this is the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Gyurjyan is the head of the Armenian branch of ICOMOS. See [ARKA](#) and related articles in [Hetq](#) and [EDMC](#).

On July 31 a new Shengavit director was appointed. That same day the new director protested the absence of water and rest room facilities at the preserve. He also noticed the partial destruction of an attractive stone wall along part of Shengavit's border with Hospital Number 6's parking lot. The partial destruction of the wall was approved by Gyurjyan at the request of Zori Balayan, one of the hospital's owners, while Tshagharyan was visiting the U.S. as guest of CYSCA. Balayan wanted part of the wall torn down to "**get a better view of Mt. Aragats from the hospital's parking lot.**" **Gyurjyan had no objection.** The newly-appointed director of Shengavit resigned the following day.



#### **Ancient artifacts on display in the Shengavit museum**

After his resignation, Tshagharyan was criticized for not installing water and rest room facilities at Shengavit. Tshagharyan **had no funding** for rest rooms, water, or anything else for that matter. Yet plans were made and work begun to install water and sewage, and a rest rooms building was partially renovated using material purchased by CYSCA. It is likely that this fall water and a bathroom would have been available had Tshagharyan been allowed to continue his work unhindered.

A new temporary director was appointed. She is the lone employee at Shengavit, other than the janitor. The latter never shows up. The janitor's husband, Babayan, who does show up, as of the time this report's writing, had not cut the tall dry grass at Shengavit which poses a fire hazard should a discarded cigarette ignite the grass. Also hospital waste was recently found on the site. The current operational budget for the maintenance of the site is still zero.

Significant improvements have been made to the Shengavit preserve, thanks to CYSCA and

individual donors. Thanks also to Tshagharyan's dedication to the preservation of Armenia's historical and cultural heritage. But much more needs to be done to make Shengavit visitor- friendly and to preserve Shengavit's archaeological record. It's unclear what the future holds for Shengavit. Will the recently-privatized land be reincorporated into the Shengavit preserve? Will additional land be privatized? Will necessary amenities be established for visitors and researchers?

It's time for the Shengavit Historical and Archaeological Culture Preserve be removed from the neglect and mismanagement of the Erebuni museum's director and be placed under honest and competent upper-level management and be provided with adequate funding.

### **Photographs:**

**Figure 1A:** Shengavit museum building before renovations.

**Figure 1B:** Shengavit museum building after Tshagharyan became director.

**Figure 2:** Newly-constructed entrance to the Shengavit preserve.

**Figure 3:** Damaged stone wall at the Shengavit preserve.

**Figure 4:** View of US Embassy from the Shengavit preserve.

**Figure 5:** Ancient artifacts on display in the Shengavit museum



