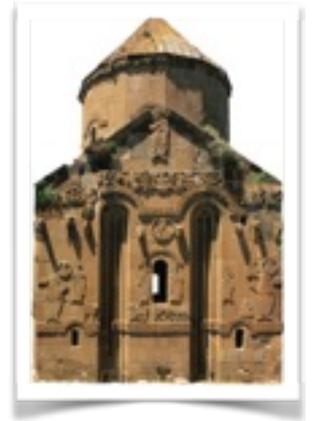


# ELEVEN HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF AGHTAMAR

## Politics, Art and Spirituality in the Kingdom of Vaspurakan



In 915 King Gagik Artsruni started the construction of the Church of the Holy Cross on the Island of Aghtamar, which was completed in 921. It was on this Island of Lake Van where Gagik established also the capital of Vaspurakan – recognised as an independent Kingdom by the Abbasid Caliphate in 908 – and built his most spectacular sanctuary dedicated to the instrument of Salvation, a sign of both victory and a *palladium* for Christians.

This masterpiece of architecture, unique for the wealth of its painted and sculptural decoration, has attracted the interest of art historians well beyond specialists in Armenology or Near Eastern studies. Yet, despite their importance, recent works have not surpassed the magisterial volume on Aghtamar by Sirarpie Der Nersessian published at Harvard in 1965. Nevertheless, our knowledge of the material remnants of the monument has improved since then. Furthermore, advances in topographic studies and the religious history of the relevant period allow us to place the construction of this palatine church in a wider perspective of the deeds, such as other pious foundations, and the political concerns of its commissioner King Gagik.

Gagik's conception of his Kingdom as a Christianity on the frontier urged him to provide it with a spiritual and material protection. Thus, each fortified site was coupled with a constellation of churches, with symbolically important dedications, among which the Church of the Holy Cross was the most significant. Standing next to the royal palace and the seat of the Catholicos (930-950), the Church of Aghtamar was the center of a whole network of monasteries and relics, inspiring an intense theological reflection and fervent piety.

In a multi-disciplinary approach, the conference will explore the architecture of the monument, as well as attempt to decipher the symbolic and Biblical background of its sculptural and painted decorations, placing these analyses in the historical and cultural context of Armenia at the turn of the first Millennium.

