

**Karabakh**  
a hidden treasure



**Tigranakert**  
Historical-Cultural Reserve



REPUBLIC OF  
MOUNTAINOUS  
KARABAKH



# Tigranakert

Historical-Cultural Reserve



After the campaigns of Alexander the Great, newly founded cities all over the Hellenistic world were named after representatives of ruling dynasties. In Armenia, there were also cities that bore the names of rulers, but this tradition became more widespread during the days of Tigran the Great (95-55 BC). Other than the famous capital of Tigranakert, which was located in Western Armenia and described with reverence by Greek and Roman historians, Strabon, Appian, and Plutarch, there were other famous cities throughout ancient Armenia that bore Tigran's name. The settlement of Tigranakert in Artsakh was one of them.

## THE CITY

Tigranakert was founded in the first century BC by the order of Tigran the Great, though the first written accounts of the city only came in the 7th century by Armenian historians Sebeos and Movses Kaghankatvatsi. According to their descriptions, Tigranakert was located on the shores of the Khachen River, one of the region's primary rivers, where the Artsakh mountains turned into flatlands and through which the main trade route from Syunik to Georgia stretched. A city by the name of Tigranakert has been mentioned as far back as the 12th to the 14th centuries, this settlement was called Tigranakert, and beginning in the 18th century its ruins were known to locals as Tgrakert, or Tngranakert.

The Tigranakert Historical-Cultural Reserve was founded in 2008, on a 2136-hectare plot of land. This decision was made by the government of the Mountainous Karabakh Republic in order to preserve the ruins of the historic Armenian city and its rich ancient and medieval cultural heritage.

## EXCAVATIONS

Since 2005, an expedition from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, led by Dr. Hamlet Petrosyan, conducted excavations in different parts of Tigranakert. As a result of their research, we now know that Tigranakert, like many other classical cities, had fortified areas with a citadel, a central commercial district, huge agricultural suburbs, and cemeteries.

The fortified area was situated on the slopes of Vankasar Mountain, above the streams that provided the city's main water supply. The citadel stood at the highest point of the area, and further down, near the slope, there was an aqueduct. At the base of the mountain, south of the streams, was the central area, where several remains of buildings, medieval ceramics and pieces of glass were found.

In the southern and eastern parts of the city, there were fruit orchards and farms, which were also irrigated by the tributaries of the Khachen River. The cemeteries were probably located south of the central district. Relics of early Christian tombs and crosses were found there.



The image shows a section of a massive stone wall, likely part of a citadel, built on a rocky, uneven foundation. The wall is constructed from large, roughly-hewn rectangular stone blocks stacked in several courses. The stones are a warm, yellowish-brown color. The background is a clear blue sky with a few wispy white clouds. In the top right corner, there is an orange rectangular overlay with a repeating white diamond pattern. Inside this overlay, the text "Part of the Citadel wall built on the rocky foundations." is written in a white, sans-serif font.

Part of the Citadel wall built on the rocky foundations.

## EXCAVATIONS

The city was entirely built of local white limestone. With its long balconies, Tigranakert stretched until the foot of the mountain. It was surrounded by mighty fortress-like walls and channels carved of rock. It was a magnificent white city, surrounded by lush, green orchards, and a lively urban centre until the 14th century.

The fortified wall was built with expertly flattened stones and without the use of any adhesive substance, using an advanced dovetailing technique (with triangular niches in the blocks to strengthen the wall and hook it into place). The wall leaves an unforgettable impression on tourists and awes experts with its clever use of technique. The stones are so tightly laid that one cannot even stick a needle through the space between them.

It seems that since the 9th-10th centuries AD, the upper part of the fortified area, the citadel, was not used as a defense post, since excavations show that the area was densely populated. The foundations of the southern wall of the fortified area are 450 metres long. Excavations have already been conducted along 320 metres. 160 metres of the 500 metre-long northern wall have also been uncovered, revealing that the wall reached up to five metres tall in some parts.



General view of the basilica from the south-west after the 2011 excavations.

In the city's central area, excavations have revealed a Christian basilica that dates back to the 5th-6th centuries, built with high-quality limestone blocks. This basilica is distinguished from similar structures in the South Caucasus by its magnificent size, its exquisitely chiselled walls, and the rich, detailed ornamentation at its entrances. A clay disc with a cross, a human figure and Armenian inscriptions were also discovered here.





This medieval castle is located within the fortified area of Tigranakert. The Tigranakert Museum of Archaeology was founded inside the castle after it was restored.





Distinct among the excavated artefacts are the remains of black and polychrome polished and ornamented pottery that date back from the first century BC to the first century AD. Other unique artefacts include horns, seals, reliefs, early medieval glass, and 9th to 11th century glazed ceramics.

Two jar burials (sarcophagi) were excavated in Tigranakert's ancient cemetery, and one of them contained several precious artefacts, including clay pots with delicate illustrations, metal rings, gilt beads, and well-preserved silver coins from the mid-first century BC.

## THE SURROUNDING AREA ■

The Lower Khachen River is a unique natural and historic area, where the beautiful landscape has been preserved over four historic ages. It carries the rich legacies of the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, early Christianity and the Middle Ages.

## THE SURROUNDING AREA ■

### **The Late Medieval Castle**

There is a castle dating back to the late Middle Ages within the limits of Tigranakert. The rectangular castle, fortified with tall towers, was built when the Southern Caucasus area was under Persian rule. The Tigranakert Museum of Archaeology was founded inside the castle after it was restored. The majority of the findings from the excavations are displayed there. A natural spring babbles on the skirts of the castle. Near the spring, a three-arched building has been preserved.



10-11th century khachkar located in the southern courtyard of the basilica



### **Vankasar Mountain**

Tigranakert is situated on Vankasar mountain, which stands at 680 metres above sea level. The steeple of the 7th century church built at the summit of Vankasar tops the mountain. With its towering stance, Vankasar serves as a wonderful observatory, where you can gaze up at the stars with all of western Karabakh, the Southern Caucasus, and even the expanse of the entire mountainous Caucasus region before you. The chapel of Vankasar is a small, cross-shaped church. There are Armenian inscriptions on its walls, and it once housed khachkars (Armenian cross-stones).

### **Gyavurkala**

The settlement of Gyavurkala (“fortress of infidels,” in Turkish) is located north of Tigranakert. It is best known for the ruins of an early Christian church, which has an adjacent cemetery with sarcophagi. Its early medieval pillars are laid out in the typical Armenian cross-shaped pattern. This church dates back to the 4th to 5th centuries.

### **Ancient Burial Mounds (Kurgans)**

The ancient history surrounding Tigranakert is mostly visible in the second to first century BC Bronze and Iron Age burial sites. According to historians, these burial mounds are linked to the movement of early Indo-European tribes. The rock carvings dating back to the 7th to 6th centuries BC also attest to a rich cultural legacy.

### **Early Christian Cave Complex**

Three kilometres from Tigranakert, on the right shore of the Khachen River, there is a series of caves consisting of a church carved in the depths of a rock, an entrance hall, and cemeteries. A long path, carved like a staircase into the rock takes you to this complex. The walls are decorated with cross compositions and inscriptions written in Armenian and Greek. The cross compositions depict early Christian culture, with their decorated frames and ornaments of flowers and birds, which symbolize victory over death, the salvation of the soul and heaven.

### **The Canal that Flows Through the Rock**


During excavations, a canal was discovered carved in the base of the cliffs, which began from the Khachen River, flowed along the foundations of the early Christian cave complex, and turned towards Tigranakert. The 300-metre-long canal consisted of several tunnels and was directly linked to the city of Tigranakert and its suburbs. Carved crosses, which date back to the 9th to 11th centuries, have been preserved in the walls of the canal.



The small cross shaped church of Vankasar houses many Armenian inscriptions on its walls.







Coaching inn, a typical medieval three-arched building, stands near a natural spring

### **The Recently Discovered Castle**

In December 2006, the ruins of a castle were found on the left bank of the Khachen River, atop the mountain near Nor Maragha village. The castle dates back to Late Antiquity (2nd to 3rd centuries AD) or to the Early Middle Ages (4th to 8th centuries AD). Located on the left bank of the Khachen River and very close to Tigranakert, one might assume that this fortified castle was used as a defense post.

THE SURROUNDING AREA ■



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**REPUBLIC OF MOUNTAINOUS KARABAKH**

Government Tourism Department

2, Knounyantsner str., Stepanakert  
+ 374 47 949172  
info@tourismdept.nkr.am

[www.karabakh.travel](http://www.karabakh.travel)

