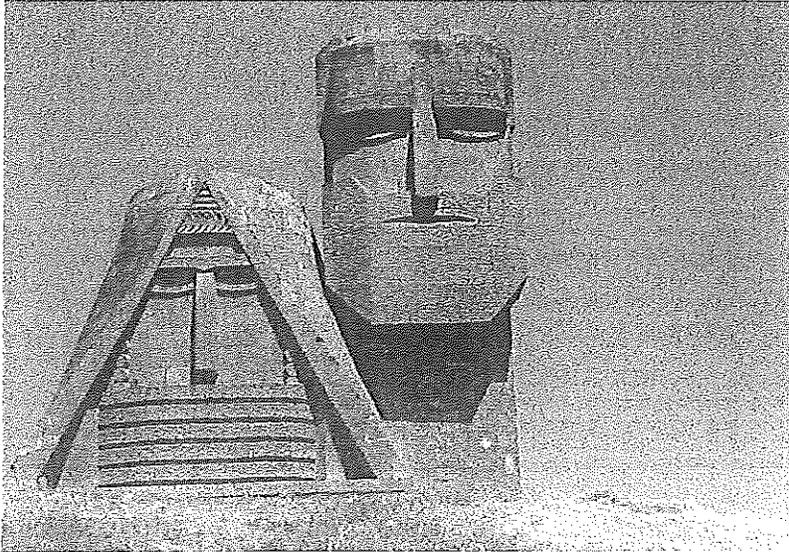


ARMENIA AND NAGORNO-KARABAGH

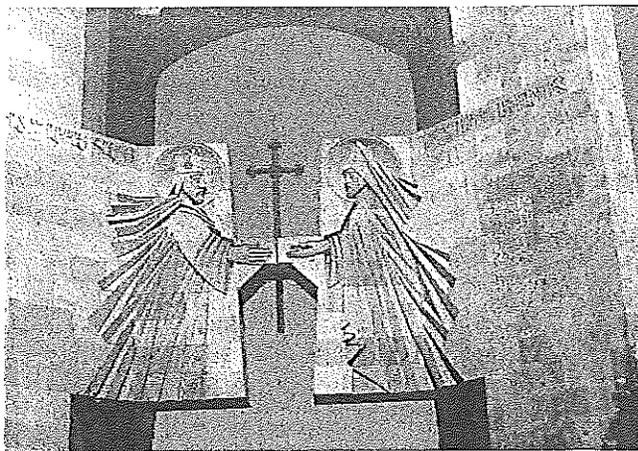
A visa is required for travel in Armenia. For Nagorno-Karabagh a visa must be obtained either beforehand at the embassy in Yerevan or upon arrival in the modern capital Stepanakert at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In either case it



Soviet monument of Karabagh people outside Stepanakert (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

Turkey is little used and closed to Turks and Armenians, those with Azerbaijan all closed and the rail link with Georgia discontinued, but the crossing by road into Iran east of the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhijevan is open and much used for transportation. I flew in from Vienna and flew out to the south. In Armenia there are many good roads, but in Nagorno-Karabagh very few indeed.

For Byzantinists the main attraction of Yerevan is the Matenadaran, which has a small but excellent public display of manuscripts and staff very willing to provide information on its vast holdings; but note also the Erebuni Fortress (begun in 782 B.C. by the Urartu king Argishti I according to a cuneiform inscription) and its associated museum. Those interested in things more modern should not miss the imposing twentieth-century buildings (including a museum and art gallery) of Hanrapetutyan Hraparak (Republic Square), the eighteenth-century mosque off



Detail of modern gateway, Echmiadzin (photograph A.R. Littlewood)

takes about half an hour (but its presence in one's passport precludes subsequent entry to Azerbaijan). A form listing places one wishes to visit is provided for inspection, but I was told (on my visit in June 2010) that this rarely happens and mine was never asked for. Areas close to the Azerbaijani border are off limits. The Armenian land-border crossing with Turkey is little used and closed to Turks and Armenians, those with Azerbaijan all closed and the rail link with Georgia discontinued, but the crossing by road into Iran east of the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhijevan is open and much used for transportation. I flew in from Vienna and flew out to the south. In Armenia there are many good roads, but in Nagorno-Karabagh very few indeed.

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the highest mountain in the republic, and south to Ararat (16,946 feet) which, being in Turkey, is at present inaccessible to Armenians.

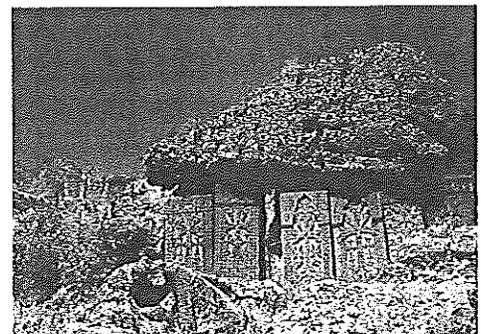
Just outside the capital to the west are sites very easy to visit. At Echmiadzin St Gregory the Illuminator built for the world's oldest officially Christian country its first Mother Church, whose present largely fifteenth-century cathedral houses what are claimed to be the spear that pierced Christ's side and a fragment of Noah's ark. Outside is a small but very interesting collection of *khatchkars* (crosses). Just over a mile away is the seventh-century church of Saint Hripsime, which has architectural details of considerable interest. Closer to Yerevan and completely different is the unique (to Armenia) but ruined (in the earthquake of 930) round church at Zvartnots sponsored by the Katholikos Nerses II in 641-646. Its columns and capitals are reminiscent of Syrian workmanship and obviously derive ultimately from near-eastern Graeco-Roman exemplars.



Temple at Garni (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

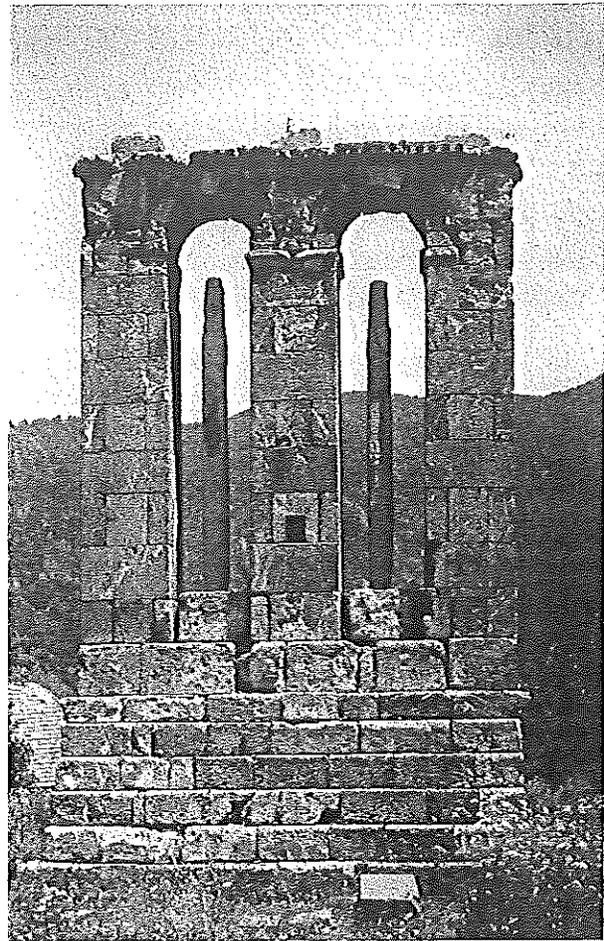
only site in Armenia that charges for admission. Further east up a gorge is the spectacularly situated Geghard (Spear) monastery, now largely from the twelfth to thirteenth century and backed by a rupestrian church and over twenty rock-hewn chapels. Of particular interest are numerous carvings and many outstanding *katchkars*.

To the east of Yerevan lie two remarkable complexes. The nearer, at Garni, is the only surviving (but restored) true Graeco-Roman building in Armenia, a peristyle structure with twenty-four columns topped by Ionic capitals. It has been claimed as a first-century A.D. temple of Helios or Mithras and as the tomb of Sohaemus, a local Romanized ruler, from the late second century. On the site lie also the remains of a four-aisled seventh-century church, a palace and a bath-house with a Greek inscription on a mosaic claiming that "We worked but did not receive anything". Ironically this is almost the



Katchkars at Geghard (photograph A. R. Littlewood)

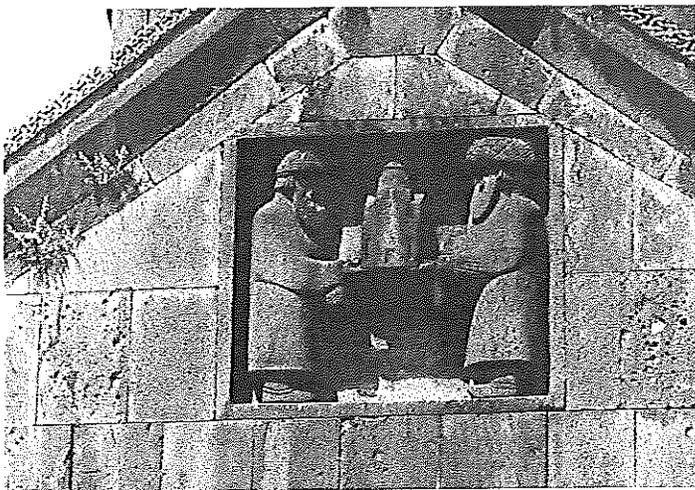
I made one lengthy trip north of Yerevan, principally to the Debed Gorge. The most notable sights on the way to this lowest part of the country were the memorial to Mesrop Mashtots in the form of the sculpted individual letters of his invention, the Armenian alphabet, at Oshakan; two thirteenth-century monasteries on the edge of the picturesque Kasagh Gorge, Hovhannavank and Saghmosavank of rather different styles with the latter having a doorway to the *gavit* in some ways reminiscent of Islamic architecture; and the modern Zoroastrian Yezidi cemetery (one of several in the area) at Aparan. The road over the Pambak range into Lori by the Spitak Pass has been washed away and the new road leads further west over the Pambak Pass (7,060 feet) to Spitak, Vanadzor and the Debed Gorge. Often ignored in the southern reaches of the gorge are two sites. The first is the late twelfth-century monastery of Kobayr which soon after its foundation came under Georgian rule and possesses many Georgian features in architecture and frescos, although the southern parts of the monastery have tumbled down into a deep ravine below. The monastery is approached by a very steep and slippery path, but the second site can be driven to in a vehicle. This is the church at Odzun, built in pink felsite in the sixth century (but reconstructed about two hundred years later). Still surviving is one of the two cloisters, a feature unusual in Armenia. In the surrounding cemetery is a funerary monument consisting of a platform surmounted between double arches by two tall, slender stelae sculpted with biblical scenes. On stylistic considerations it may be dated to the sixth century: the only comparable monument in Armenia is at Aghuni in Syunik.



Funerary stelae at Odzun (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

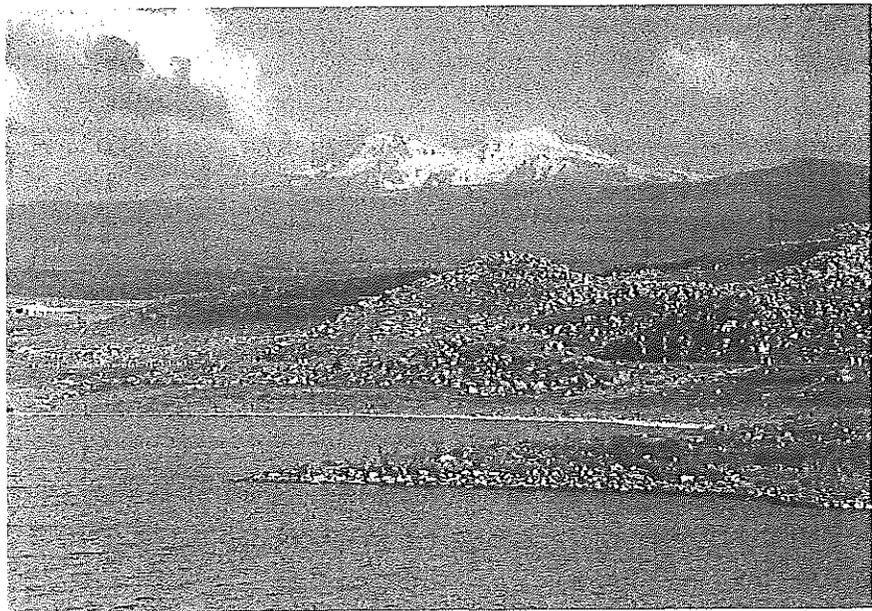
Further north, to the east of the gorge above Alaverdi, are the first sites in the country added to UNESCO's World Heritage List, the monasteries of Sanahin and Haghpat. The village of Sanahin was the birth-place of the Mikoyan brothers, Anastas, the longest-serving member of the Soviet Politburo, and Artem who was

involved in the development of fighter aircraft (the first two letters of MiG-15 are from his surname); but for Byzantinists its attraction is the monastery, founded in 966 by Queen Khosrovanush, wife of the Bagratid King Ashot III, and incorporating two slightly earlier churches. It has many important features such as the library of 1063, possibly the oldest bell-tower in the country (early thirteenth-century), the first sculptural relief of a model of the church (held by Khosrovanush's sons Smbat and Gurgen) and some non-religious *katchkars*. The complex is accessible by a path which begins with the crossing of the mediaeval bridge in Alaverdi and also by a road, as is Haghpat which too was founded by Khosrovanush, is decorated with a relief of her sons holding a model of the church and has architecturally interesting features such as a free-standing gavit, an unusually formed refectory and a three-storied bell-tower whose ground floor (a chapel) has the form of a cross-dome church while the second storey is octagonal and the third heptagonal.



Relief of Smbat and Gurgen holding model of church at Haghpat (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

I did not, unfortunately, have time to visit the very different monastery of Akhtala, where a Georgian church was built in the thirteenth century on an Armenian site, but returned to Spitak, near the epicentre of a devastating earthquake in 1988, turned west to Gyumri and then south to the monasteries north of Mount Aragats, most notably Harichavank which boasts the seventh-century church of St Gregory, the umbrella-domed

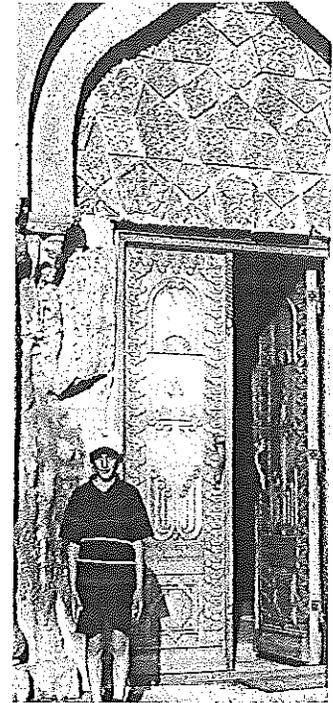


Mount Aragats from north (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

church of the Mother of God from 1201 and an orientally inspired porch to the intervening *gavit*, while in the ravine below is a small chapel now, as a result of seismic activity, perched precariously on top of a precipitous rock.



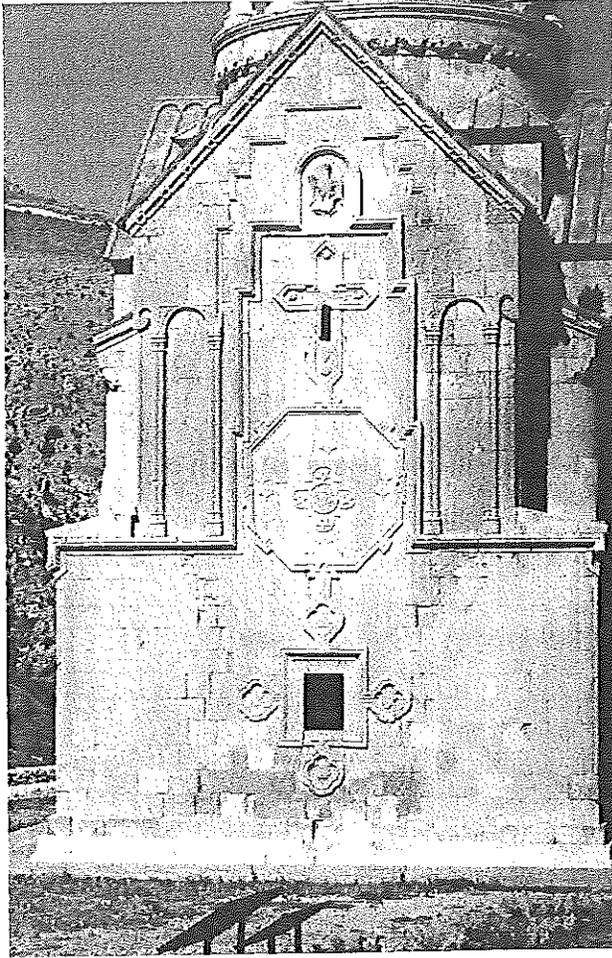
Monastery of Harichavank and porch (photographs: A.R. Littlewood)



Another journey, to the east, began with perhaps the most photographed monastery in Armenia, that of Khor Virap (Deep Dungeon) on a hillock a few yards from the Turkish border and in full view of the two peaks of Mount Ararat. Its name refers to the underground cell, which can be visited down a steep iron ladder but is, fortunately, no longer infested with snakes as when King Trdat the Great imprisoned Gregory the Illuminator there, only to be converted by him to Christianity.



Monastery of Khor Virap with main peak of Mount Ararat behind (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)



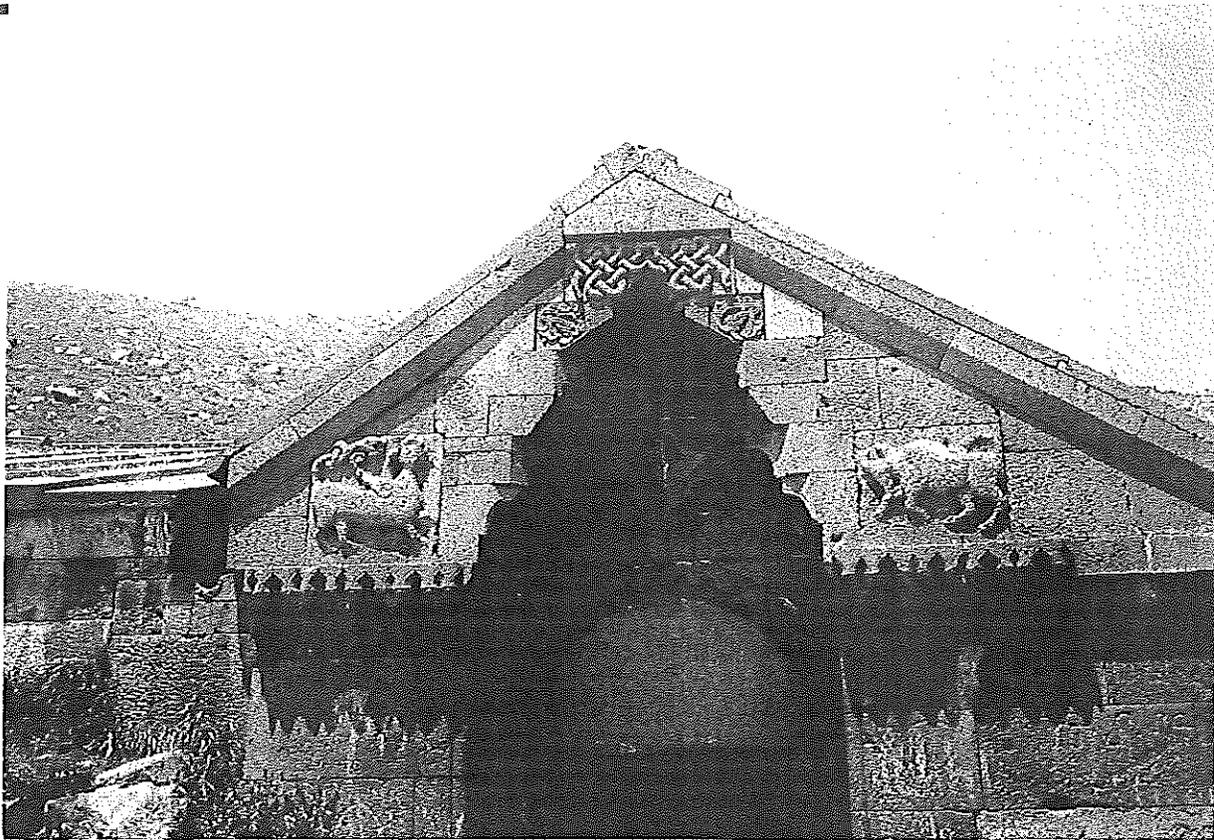
Sculpture on church of Mother of God at Noravank
(photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

the exterior steps leading to the upper storey of the Mother of God church, but the complex abounds with fine sculpture and many graves (some of Orbelian princes). On the return journey I took a different route, going north over the Selim Pass (7,907 feet), just below the summit of which is Armenia's best-preserved caravanserai (dating from 1332), and on to the vast Lake Sevan the Soviet plan to reduce the extent of which, inaugurated in 1933, was fortunately reversed in the late 1950s. Although billed as Armenia's holiday centre, there is little evidence of this, and its height of about 6,250 feet makes for a refreshing swim.

The present monastic church, dedicated to the Mother of God, dates, however, only from 1661; and just outside the walls is an even more recent structure – the place of regular animal and avian sacrifices. The eastward road continues to Nakhichevan, but, this border being closed, turns now abruptly to the left, crosses the Tukh Manuk Pass (5,889 feet) and descends into the very scenic Areni Valley, south from which one can enter the narrow gorge of the Amaghu. After passing a restaurant situated in a cave with no sign indicating its purpose (“because everybody knows”) one reaches the outstandingly picturesque monastery of Noravank, founded perhaps in the ninth century but developed largely in the thirteenth and later in the fourteenth by the architect Momik. Most spectacular, perhaps, are



Exterior steps of church Mother of God at Noravank (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)



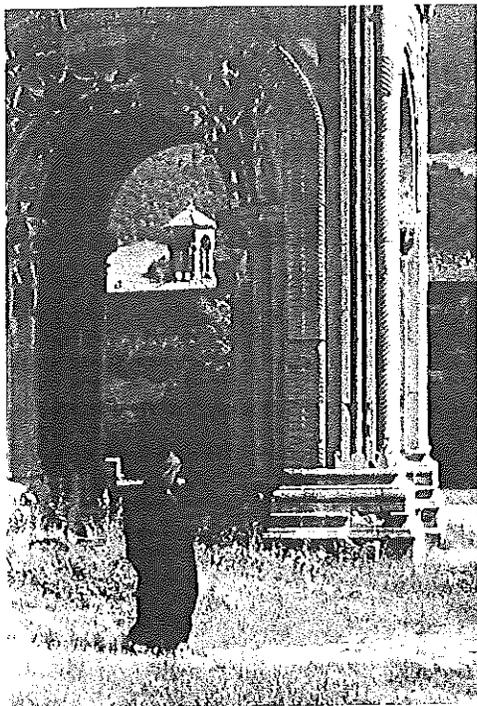
Doorway of caravanserai on Selim Pass (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

Still on my outward journey I crossed into Syunik over the Vorotan Pass (7,690 feet) on a good road much used by Iranian lorry-drivers but originally one of the routes of the Silk Road. My main goals here were the astronomical observatory of numerous stones (many with holes pierced through) erected

something over 4,000 years ago at Karahunj, the rupestrian village of Khndzoresk and the monastery of Tatev. This last, high above the Vorotan Gorge, is approached by a spectacular road which, unfortunately, there are plans to replace for visitors by an “aerial tramway” of a few miles in length. Enclosed in protective walls are the church of Sts Peter and Paul from 895-906, two later churches, a bell-tower (for whose restoration a rusting



Observatory at Karahunj (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)



Monk at Tatev Monastery (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

crane still sits there) and late monastic buildings, subsequent to the monastery's heyday in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when it was a centre of learning. In the grounds is an octagonal pillar erected in 904 supposedly to detect tremors of the earth when it rocks on its base.



Leaders of the herd near Tegh, Syunik, Armenia (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

The regular entry point into Nagorno-Karabagh (Mountainous Black Garden: note the combination of languages) is through the Lachin corridor to Berdzor. When wandering round this country beware of snakes and unexploded mines left from the bitter war of 1989-1994 (the Halo Trust has put up signs to indicate where land has been cleared). I made my base (in the house of a painter) in the former capital of Shushi, a town still half in ruins atop a gorge which was amazingly scaled in an attack by night in 1993 which proved a turning-point in the war. Time did not allow a visit to the large and important monastery of Dadivank in the north, while Tigranes I's capital of Tigranocerta (later Martyropolis) I was told was inaccessible except by a four-wheeled drive vehicle and is usually off limits because of its proximity to Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, I was able to visit, in the extreme north-west of the district of Askeran high above



Studio of artist Hovik Gasparyan in Shushi (photograph A.R. Littlewood)

the Khachenaget river, the restored and now once more working monastery of Gandzasar, dedicated in 1216 to John the Baptist, the burial place of Khachen rulers and the seat of the *katholikos* of eastern Armenia until the nineteenth century. The outstanding feature is the sculptural reliefs, both delicate abstract designs and also human (and animal) figures, especially notable being those on the tambour two of which sit in an oriental position with their feet hidden beneath them.



Antony Littlewood

Gandzasar Monastery (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)