

About Problem of Preservation of Christian Cave Complexes on the Territory of Nagorno Karabakh

Aleksey Gunko^{1,a*}, Samvel Shahinyan^{2,b}, Sofia Kondrateva^{3,c}

^{1,3} Russian union of Speleology, Voronezh, Russian Federation

² National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia,
105 Teryan Street, Yerevan, Republic of Armenia

^a gunko.a@mail.ru, ^b sshahinyan@nuaca.am, ^c kosofia@yandex.ru

Keywords: Christian cave complexes, Nagorno-Karabakh, preservation.

Abstract. On the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh the most explored Christian cave complexes are at the villages Tandzut, Gochants, Kronk, and on Vankasar mount. Most of them consist of cave temple, cells, refectory, utility and defensive caves. Unfortunately, for many decades they were naturally, and most often artificially destroyed. All mentioned caves were cut out in the adjacent rock mass with a large number of cracks. The artificial destruction of the caves reflected in physical destruction of individual elements of the caves as architectural structures and destruction of Christian symbols and Armenian inscriptions. In the current political conditions, it is necessary to organize a regular comprehensive monitoring of monuments.

Introduction

On the territory of the historical regions of Syunik and Artsakh, Christianity began to spread in the 4th century [1]. The appearance of the first Christian places of worship and the monastic tradition belongs to this period. Thanks to one of the fathers of the Armenian Church Nerses I the Great, "small and great" monastic communities (monasteries) have been spread [2]. Early Christian monastic complexes consisted of not only ground, but also underground architectural objects. Some of them were almost completely formed on the basis of caves and included cave temples, cells, refectory, utility and defensive caves. Currently, on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh the most explored Christian cave complexes are at the villages Tandzut, Gochants, Kronk, and on Vankasar mount.

Complex near the village Tandzut (Fig. 1.1,2)

Located 2 *km* north of the village Tandzut (Garygyshlag) of the Kashatagh region. The main object of the complex is the small cave church (also known as Agzybir cave), carved out in the lower part of the rocky outlier [3]. It is a one-nave basilica, consisting of an elongated rectangular room and an altar apse oriented to the southeast. The floor of the apse is raised by 0.7 *m*. It can be climbed by a narrow exaltation with two steps. Daylight enters the interior of the church through a wide doorway, as well as through two windows, cut at a height of more than 3 *m*. There is a through grotto 30 *m* west of the church, inside a large outlier, which in the past could have been part of a large underground room.

Gochants monastery (Fig. 1.3,4)

Located 0.9 *km* northeast of the village. Gochants of the Kashatag region within the Gochants gorge. It consists of numerous religious, economic and residential rooms, carved out in the left side of the gorge in the middle part of an extended rocky outcrop. In the past, the complex was significantly destroyed. According to one version, it happened during the Soviet period as a result of a directed explosion. As a result, a significant part of the rock collapsed and the parts of the underground rooms were destroyed. Nevertheless, the main rooms of the complex are well preserved [3, 4]. Among them is a cave temple. Three passages lead from the surface to the interior of the temple, as well as two window openings. The temple was carved like a one-nave basilica. It stretches subparallel to the line of the rocky outcrop and is oriented by the altar part to the northeast.

The nave of the temple is 11.5 *m* long, with an average width of approx. 4 *m*, vaults up to 5 *m* high (Fig. 2.3). From the southwest, an elliptical niche with a rough semi-domed vault adjoins the nave. It is separated from the main space in the lower part of the temple by a ledge. The niche is 1.6 *m* deep, 2.5–2.8 *m* wide. The north-western wall of the temple has a complex structure and decor. 4 niches-exedra have been cut into the wall. Exedra № 4, located on the right, is the largest in size and has a width of 1.6 *m* and a depth of 1.3 *m*. It looks the most complete. The cut down archivolt 0.35 *m* wide, emphasizing the contour of the concha, also contributes to this. The archivolt is crowned with a large square niche with a side width of approx. 0.5 *m*. To the left of this niche, an arcature of 8 symbolic "openings" with archivolts and pilasters, at the junction of which "orders" are guessed, is carved in the wall of the temple for 2.5 *m* in length. In the northeastern corner of the nave is an arched passage to the adjoining room. The passage is separated from Exedra № 4 by a lintel 1.1 *m* wide. Four niches with semicircular ends were cut in the lintel. A corner-shaped niche has been cut above the passage, consisting of two parts of different heights. Nearby, in the area where the arch adjoins the eastern wall of the temple, there is a niche similar in structure, but larger in size. Both niches are narrow, only flat rectangular objects could be installed in them. Such objects could be, for example, khachkars.

From the northeast to the nave of the temple adjoins the altar part, carved in the form of a traditional apse. In plan it is horseshoe-shaped, 3.4 *m* wide in the narrow part (at the entrance to the altar), and 3.9 *m* in the wide part. The floor of the altar rises above the main space of the temple by an average of 0.45 *m*. The vault is semi-domed (concha), 4.2 *m* high, framed by an archivolt from the side of the nave. There are 11 different niches within the walls of the apse. Their main group is concentrated on the left side. These are 7 niches cut at different heights. Two niches have a triangular (close to lancet) end, and one has a carved frame. The altar part is lighted through a window cut in the southern wall of the apse in the form of a "corridor" with a ledge (from the apse side), completed with an oval hole. On both sides of the altar there are two sections of the eastern wall of the temple, with numerous niches.

To the north of the temple there are three small caves that can be identified as residential cells. The northern part of the temple complex of the monastery is completed by a large underground room - the refectory. It has a complex configuration and is partially destroyed. The western wing of the room structurally looks like a corridor, separated from the main space by two columns. A number of niches have been carved into the surviving wing wall. The wing adjoins the main part of the room that has been preserved. It stretches from northwest to southeast. Conventionally, we can distinguish its northern and southeastern parts. The northern part is 6 *m* deep, 4 *m* wide at the entrance, and 4.8 *m* inside. The ceiling is flat with a rounded transition to the walls. Ceiling height is 1.9 *m*. A number of niches and depressions of various shapes and sizes have been carved in the walls. The northern part is separated from the southeastern part by a passage to the gallery. The arch of the gallery is at first box-type, then semicircular. The gallery, 1.0–1.6 *m* wide and 1.5 *m* high, goes to the northeast, where after 6 *m* it goes to a cliff in the middle part of the rocky outcrop. The southeastern part of the room faces the terrace formed by the collapse. It consists of two depressions, cut in the manner of exedra. To the west of the temple, as well as under it and under the refectory, there are large caves up to 4 *m* wide.

Kronk monastery (Fig. 1.5)

Located 1.5 *km* south of the village. Tsakhkaber (Gulabird). The complex consists of two main parts - a cave temple and a system of economic and residential rooms. The temple was carved out at the base of a rocky outcrop on the southern side of the gorge. It is a one-nave basilica 5 × 11 *m* in size [5]. The altar apse of the temple is facing southeast (Fig. 2.1). The outer wall of the room is badly damaged. It has two windows through which light enters into the interior of the temple. The nature of the working of this wall from the outside and the holes for fastening wooden beams indicate that some room was attached to the rock - a narthex. It is likely that it was two-tiered. Between the collapsed stone blocks, one can see the cracks in the underground rooms located under the temple. On the opposite side of the gorge, 40 *m* to the northeast of the temple, a system of caves,

consisting of four rooms, was cut down. They are connected by complex vertical passages and are equipped with storage chambers. The inaccessibility of these caves and the peculiarities of their construction indicate that they could have been used for a relatively long autonomous residence during the attack on the monastery. In addition, from these rooms it was possible to defend the complex effectively.

Complex on Mount Vankasar (Fig. 1.6)

Located in Askeran region, 3.3 *km* from Artsakh Tigranakert on the northern cliffs of Mount Vankasar. As the researchers believe, the complex could have been done on the basis of karst caves developed here in the thickness of the Mesozoic limestone [6]. The key object of the complex is a cave church, carved out at an altitude of about 50 *m*. The church has an unusual layout. The cave stretches from north to south by 5.8 *m* (Fig. 2.2). The width of the cave is 2.4 *m*, the height is up to 2.1 *m*. In the southern part, it ends with an apse. In the left wall of the cave, an altar apse has been carved out, facing northeast. Numerous crosses are carved on the walls around it.

Preservation of caves

Christian cave complexes of Nagorno-Karabakh have the most important historical and cultural significance, comparable to the significance of large land-based monasteries. However, for many decades they were naturally, and most often artificially destroyed. Natural processes of destruction are connected primarily with geological conditions. All mentioned caves were cut out in the adjacent rock mass with a large number of cracks. Frequent earthquakes and gravitational processes caused the opening of these cracks, falling out of the roof pieces of rock, cracking of the outer walls. The root system of plants and frost weathering also contribute to the opening of cracks.

The artificial destruction of the caves related to the spontaneous and sometimes results-oriented actions of the residents of the nearest Azerbaijan villages. These actions can be divided into two groups: physical destruction of individual elements of the caves as architectural structures; destruction of Christian symbols and Armenian inscriptions.

In Soviet times the complete destruction of the caves was not the goal, since they could be used for economic purposes, for example, as temporary cattle pens or shelter in bad weather. For these reasons, residents tried to increase the width of doorways passage by destroying them and part of the outer walls (Tandzut, Gochants, Kronk).

To deprive the objects of the Christian component in all cave complexes the main element of the temple – the throne was destroyed or taken away. It is noticeable that it was important to remove all Christian symbols. In the temple of the Gochants monastery vertical scratches and chips are clearly visible. They indicate the breaking out of khachkars from tightly fitted niches using a sharp metal tool. Areas of local wall cleaning are marked. In the temple of the complex on mount Vankasar, there are numerous random scratches and traces of scraping of the surface in the places where the early Christian compositions of the crosses and pilgrimage crosses were placed. On top of the symbols and inscriptions made in Armenian and Greek, as well as in well-visible areas, there are deeply cut graffiti – names and surnames in Azerbaijan Cyrillic. They date back mainly to the second half of the 20th century. The widespread smokiness of the walls and the accumulation of charcoal indicate that large fires have been made several times right inside the temples.

In the current political conditions, the issues of protecting Christian cave temples are becoming even more topical. Unlike ground-based monuments, destruction of underground objects can go unnoticed. Therefore, they require close attention from international observers. It is necessary to organize a regular comprehensive monitoring of monuments with the involvement of relevant specialists - speleologists, archaeologists, and culturologists. During a number of international research expeditions organized by the Armenian Speleological Center, as well as archaeological research in 2005-2006 a rich topographic and photographic material was collected, which should become the basic basis for monitoring.

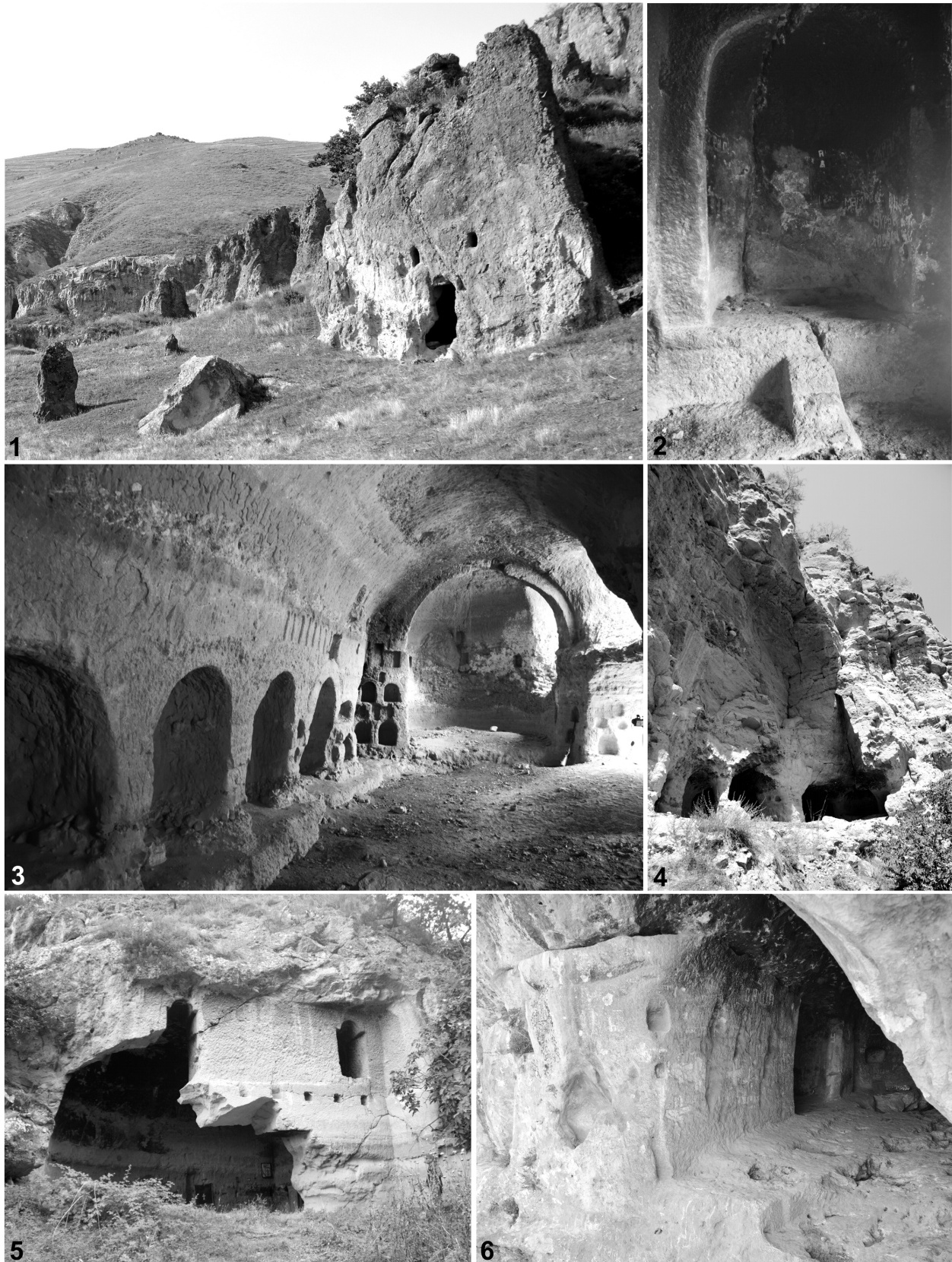


Fig. 1. 1 - Entrance to the cave church near the village of Tandzut, 2 - altar apse of the church near the village of Tandzut, 3 - the cave temple of the Gochants monastery, 4 - the collapsed part of the temple complex of the Gochants monastery, 5 - entrance to the cave church of the Kronk monastery, 6 - entrance to the cave church on Mount Vankasar

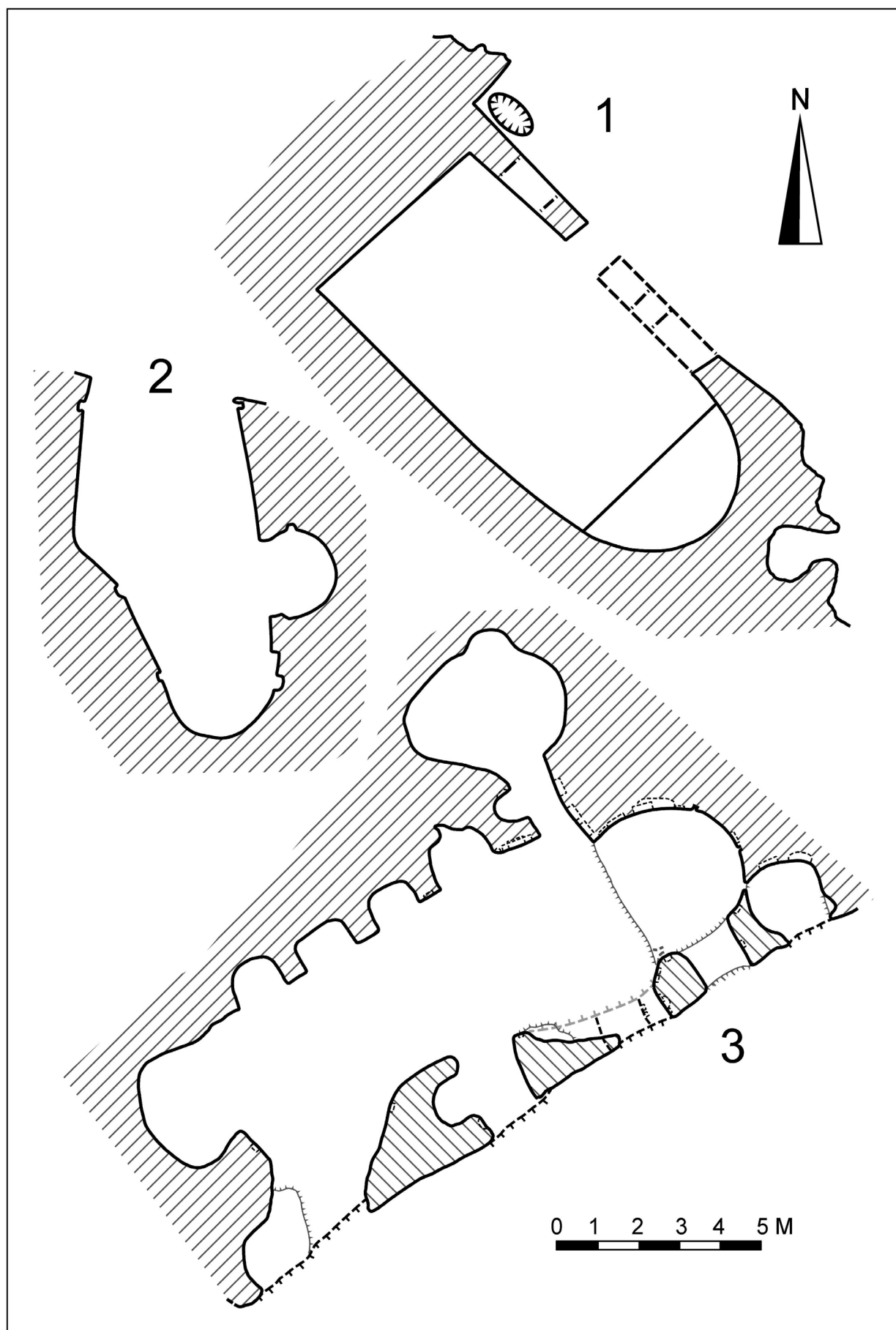


Fig. 2. 1 - The plan of the cave church of the Kronk monastery [5], 2 - plan of the cave church on Mount Vankasar [6], 3 - plan of the church in the Gochants monastery [4]

References

- [1] S. Orbelian, The history of Syunik, Sovetakan grokh, Yerevan, 1985.
- [2] A. Anninsky, History of the Armenian Church (until the 19th century), Chisinau, 1900.
- [3] S.M. Shahinyan, Monastery Hochintse, Caves as objects of history and culture: Proceedings of the International Scientific Forum (Voronezh – Divnogorye, Russia, 19–22 April 2016), Nauchnaya Kniga, Voronezh (2016) 196–199.
- [4] A.A. Gunko, S.M. Shaginyan, S.K. Kondratyeva, Church complex of Gochants Cave Monastery, Speleology and spelestology: Proceedings of the VII International Scientific Conference. - NGPU, Naberezhnye Chelny (2016) 176–184.
- [5] S.M. Shahinyan, Religious Underground Structures in Gochants Basin (Artsakh), Speleology and spelestology: Proceedings of the VI International Scientific Conference. – NGPU, Naberezhnye Chelny (2015) 164–168.
- [6] H.L. Petrosyan, L.V. Kirakosyan, Early Christian Cave Sanctuary of Tigranakert In Artsakh, Speleology and spelestology: Proceedings of the VII International Scientific Conference. – NGPU, Naberezhnye Chelny (2016) 185–191.