

CAUCASUS HERITAGE WATCH BRIEF

THE CURRENT STATE OF ARMENIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Prepared for:
International Bar Association Human Rights Institute
All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Law,
Justice and Accountability
All-Party Parliamentary Group on Armenia

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INTRODUCTORY NOTES

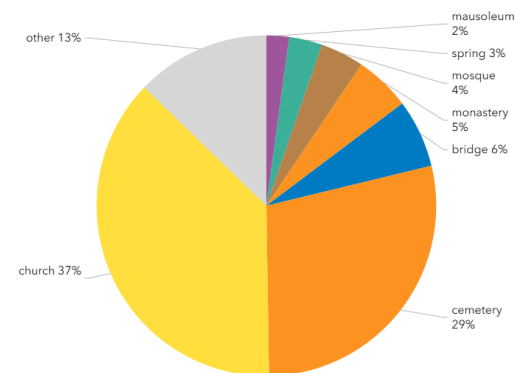
Who We Are. [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (CHW) is a non-partisan academic research group centered at Cornell and Purdue Universities. We were founded in 2020, in the wake of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, to monitor and document cultural heritage sites that have been impacted by the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. We use high-resolution satellite imagery to systematically monitor hundreds of historic sites in our database. CHW focuses on the structural condition of historic sites, assessing evidence of destruction, damage, and heightened threat.

Why Satellite Monitoring? The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of fall 2020 and Azerbaijan's military offensive of September 2023 resulted in the expulsion of an estimated 150,000 ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. This displaced population left behind not only their homes, villages, and towns, but a rich cultural landscape comprising hundreds of historic churches, monasteries, ancestral cemeteries, sacred places, and other historic monuments. At issue in the preservation of these sites is not only the fate of the region's irreplaceable inventory of centuries-old ecclesiastical art and architecture, but the cultural and religious traditions of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh and their ancestral connections to the land.

Due to their association with the region's Armenian inhabitants and considering Azerbaijan's prior record of deliberately targeting Armenian cultural heritage on its territory, these sites are gravely endangered. Azerbaijan has a deplorable record of destroying Armenian cultural heritage sites. Between 1997 and 2010, a state-sponsored program of cultural erasure led to the total destruction of 98% of the medieval and early modern Armenian churches, monasteries, and cemeteries in the exclave of Nakhchivan (or 108 out of 110 sites), which CHW documented in its special investigation, "Silent Erasure: A Satellite Investigation of the Destruction of Armenian Cultural Heritage in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan". This is among the most extreme and meticulously documented cases of cultural erasure in recent history. Azerbaijan not only denies the program of destruction but has argued that Armenians never lived in the region despite extensive documentary, photographic, testimonial, and satellite imagery to the contrary. The demolition of Armenian cultural sites in Nakhchivan as well its official denial calls for vigilance in monitoring Armenian monuments that have been newly transferred to Azerbaijan's jurisdiction.

Satellite monitoring is also necessitated by limitations of on-the-ground access, amidst crackdowns on free press and strict controls on journalists and researchers wishing to travel to the Karabakh region.

CHW SITES MONITORED BY TYPE

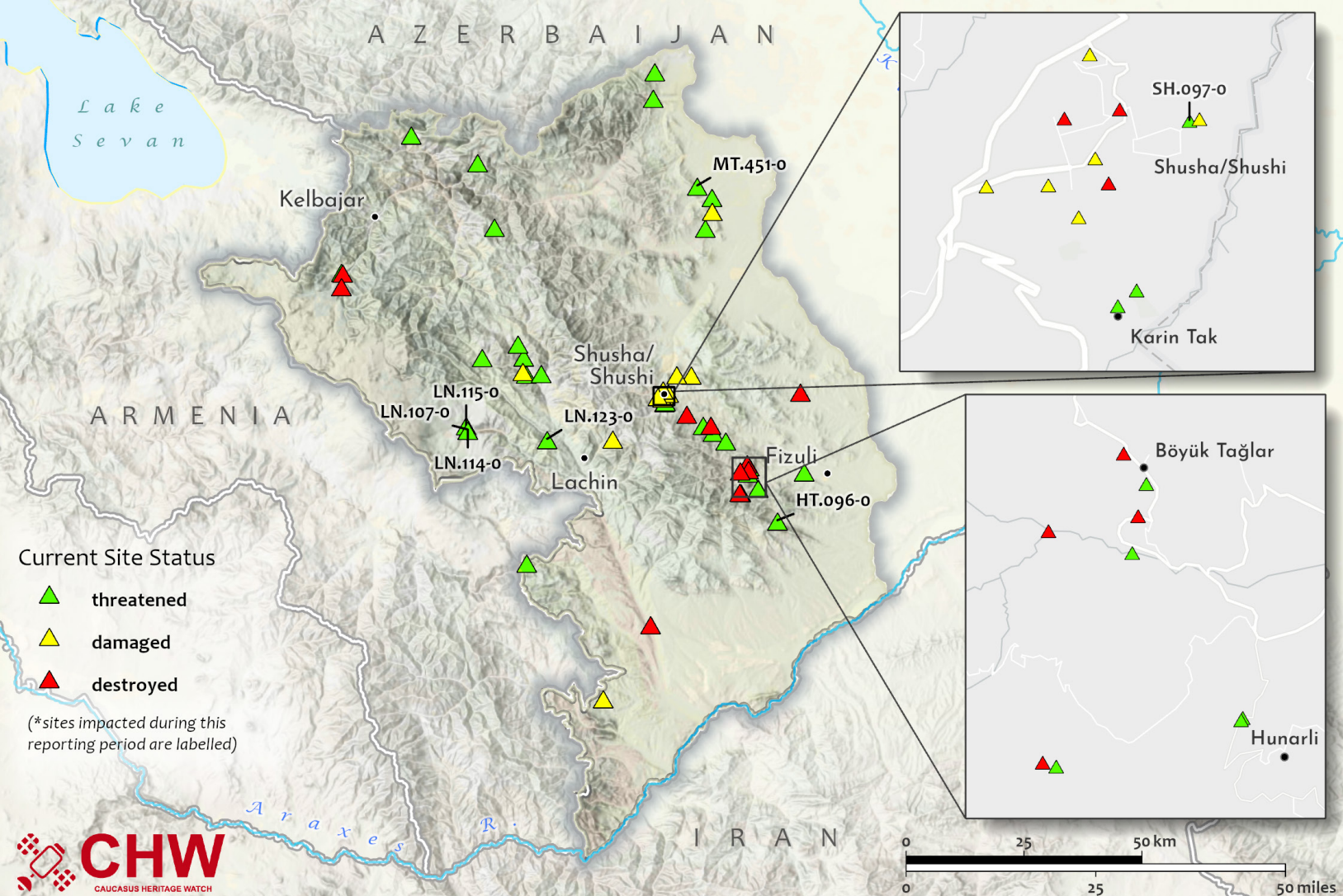


511
Sites currently
monitored

14
Heritage Sites
Destroyed

16
Heritage Sites
Damaged

42
Heritage Sites
Threatened



IBAHRI QUESTIONS

Question 1. What information did you find when conducting research in Nagorno-Karabakh?

Since the start of monitoring in 2021, we have documented the following impacts:

Destruction: 14 historic monuments have been destroyed since the conclusion of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, most notably two churches and four cemeteries.

Damage: 16 historic monuments have been damaged since the conclusion of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, including six churches and six cemeteries. Three of these damaged monuments were subsequently destroyed.

Threat: 42 historic monuments have been assessed as threatened by damage or destruction due to earth-moving in their immediate vicinity. We have determined that in several cases, the threat subsequently receded.

These findings are detailed in eight monitoring reports, which can be accessed from the [Reports page](#) of our website. See also the tables included at the end of this brief.

To date, the most visible impacts continue to take place in and around the town of Shusha/Shushi where in 2024 we documented the demolition of the 18-19th century Ghazanchetsots cemetery and the 19th century St. John the Baptist (*Arm.* *Surb Hovhannes Mkrtych*) Church. We have also documented damage to historic cemeteries surrounding the town, such as the Yerevan Gate and Northern Cemeteries, and imminent threats to a 19th century church and associated cemetery in the adjacent, destroyed village of Dashalty/Karin Tak.

The impacts to Armenian cultural heritage continue to arise out of large-scale earth moving conducted as part of regional redevelopment and road building works. Since the end of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Baku has been implementing plans for massive infrastructure development and population resettlement in Karabakh. CHW is deeply concerned that these plans will have a serious impact on the region's Armenian cultural heritage, as the state rapidly develops the ethnically cleansed territories through the construction of highways, hydroelectric plants, airports, and new housing.

Damage and destruction to date seem to be focused primarily on historic cemeteries. Some of the historic cemeteries in Nagorno-Karabakh contain "khachkars", a traditional Armenian art of engraved stone crosses with roots in the Middle Ages that

is listed on the UNESCO list of intangible heritage. These are at grave risk of removal and erasure.

The pace of heritage abuse accelerated in 2024 as Azerbaijan's development work gained speed. But the picture looked different in 2025, with no new cases of destruction. The rate of damage in 2025 remained steady, with two new cases, and an expansion of damage to one already-damaged cemetery. We documented a slight uptick in the rate of newly threatened sites from 2024 to 2025. Our next monitoring mission is scheduled for spring 2026.

Question 2. What mechanisms have you or your organisation used to assess the current state of cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh following developments since April 2022?

Working with the satellite image provider, Planet, CHW relies on 'satellite tasking' to regularly collect high-resolution images of an estimated 511 cultural heritage sites distributed across more than 7000 square kilometers in the Karabakh region. In each monitoring mission, our team of researchers

carefully compares the newest imagery with the previous imagery, assessing any changes to the condition of sites or their immediate vicinity. Each site is then assigned a status: destroyed, damaged, threatened, or unchanged.

Since spring 2021, CHW has conducted 13 satellite observation missions. We document our findings in periodic monitoring reports, accessible through our website, as well as a [Monitoring Dashboard](#), which provides the public with a snapshot of our current findings in real time.

Question 3. Have you been able to obtain reliable, independent documentation of the condition of Armenian cultural and religious sites in the region?

Since spring 2021, CHW has been the primary global source for reliable independent documentation on the condition of Armenian cultural and religious sites in the former Nagorno-Karabakh.

**RECENT IMPACTS
DESTROYED HERITAGE**



Caucasus Heritage Watch
SH.053-0 St. Hovhannes Mkrtych Church (Kanach Zham), Shusha/Shushi



Image Set #1. An April 4, 2024 Airbus image (right) shows the complete demolition of the 1847 Church of St. John the Baptist. Damaged in the 2020 war, the church had been the site of several propaganda visits promising repair. CHW's last image of the intact historic church was taken on December 28, 2023 (left)



Image Set #2. Damage to the historic Ghazanchets'ots cemetery in Shusha detected in a November SkySat image (above center) has progressed to complete destruction as seen in the April 4 image above (at right). The cemetery was intact as of October 5, 2023 (above, left)

**RECENT IMPACTS
DAMAGED HERITAGE**

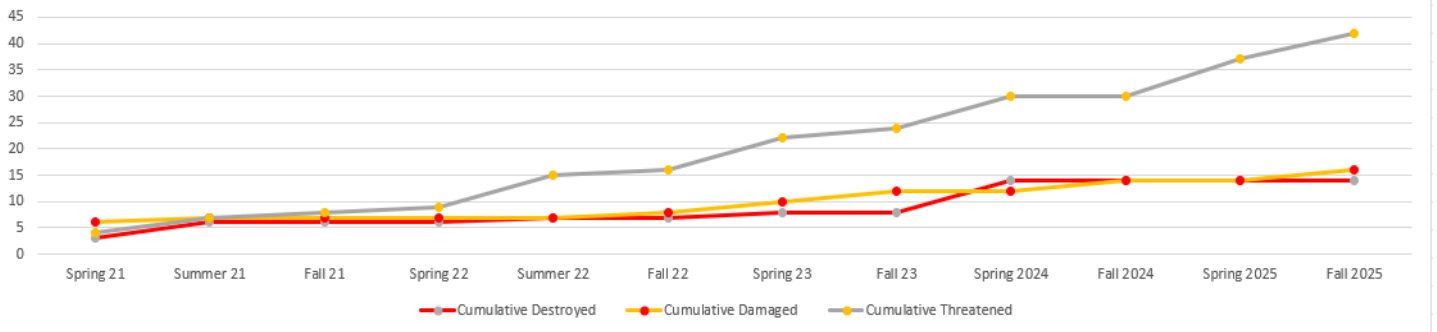
Image Set #3. SkySat images from April (center) and June (right) show damage to the 19th century Tandzatap Church, shown intact in an October 2023 image (left).





Image Set #4. A July 2021 SkySat image (at right) shows extensive demolition and earth moving related to road construction directly adjacent to Surb Astvatsatsin Church in T'aghavard/Tağaverd. The church is intact in a June 2021 SkySat image (at left).

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS OVER TIME



Question 4. Have you faced any obstacles to verifying reports of destruction? What are the main obstacles to verifying reports of destruction, alteration, or appropriation of cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh?

Satellite images often provide sufficient, verifiable evidence of impacts to cultural heritage sites, particularly in cases of outright destruction or structural damage to free-standing architecture. But there are limits to satellite monitoring as a methodology for cultural heritage preservation. When CHW encounters these limits, it is often not possible to verify our preliminary findings through recourse to other information sources.

The primary obstacle to verifying satellite-based findings is the impossibility to 'ground-truth' observations through in-person assessment, foreign reporting, or work with journalists or researchers in Azerbaijan. Restrictions on press freedom, strict controls on foreign journalists, and an authoritarian climate that prohibits open inquiry into the history of the Armenian presence in Karabakh make it virtually impossible to verify satellite-based observations when questions arise. The government of Azerbaijan is not a reliable or willing resource for researchers investigating the condition of Armenian monuments on its sovereign territory.

These obstacles are particularly consequential in two respects:

First, limits on the resolution of commercially available satellite imagery make it difficult for us to verify impacts to small heritage objects, such as individual tombstones or *khachkars* in a historic cemetery. While the unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh produced inventories and documentation for hundreds of Armenian heritage sites, this documentation is sometimes insufficient. This is particularly unfortunate, as our findings show that historic cemeteries are the most vulnerable Armenian cultural heritage sites in Azerbaijan. They are not protected by Azerbaijani cultural heritage laws, nor will they be "protected" through revisionist historical narratives that may otherwise preserve the architecture of Armenian churches that have been falsely refashioned as "Caucasian Albanian". When we suspect damage to a historic cemetery but cannot conclusively prove impacts to individual tombstones or *khachkars*, there is no means to verify the finding and thus we do not publicize such cases.

Second, while satellite images can document the physical or structural condition of historic sites, they cannot reveal the underlying causes or motivations behind the impacts we document, or the specific actors and institutions involved in any given incident. Determining not just *what happened*, but why and by whom requires on-the-ground reporting and investigation. This is not possible.

Question 10. How is your office engaging with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as international organisations like UNESCO, to ensure cooperation and transparency?

We are an independent, non-partisan, university-based research group and not an NGO. We do not partner with governments, but we do make our reports and findings publicly available so that all stakeholders – including UNESCO and the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan – can benefit from our findings.

We also value the partnerships we have forged with Yerevan-based Armenian research entities, including Research on Armenian Architecture and Monument Watch. We are open to developing similar partnerships with Azerbaijani researchers who share our mission and can safely partner with us, without facing state repression. At this time, those opportunities do not exist.

Question 13. What role can civil society and academic institutions play in providing credible monitoring or data?

CHW's work demonstrates the critical role that researchers can play in providing credible monitoring and a platform for making findings available to global publics and policy makers. University-based teams can assemble researchers with the range of expertise – historical, linguistic, and technological – as well as necessary access to resources (computing, libraries, etc.) to carry out such work. At present, there are no other civil society groups or governmental institutions that can provide such data for Nagorno-Karabakh.

Question 14. What recommendations do you envision for ensuring long-term protection of the region's multicultural heritage?

- a. Provide reliable monitoring of heritage at risk as a critical first-line response to the crisis. This is where CHW's work seeks to intervene, by providing fact-based expert analysis;
- b. Insert a sustained concern for cultural heritage preservation into foreign policy. In order for monitoring to be impactful, it must be amplified by policymakers who can impose a reputational cost. UK government actors should be more visible in supporting heritage at risk;
- c. Establish a 'truth and reconciliation' body that offers a forum for reckoning with past abuses of cultural heritage in this conflict (both Armenian and Azerbaijani) and offers an alternative means of public accountability, given the limitations of international law;
- d. Create a bi-communal cultural heritage entity, modeled on the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage in Cyprus, learning from its strengths and weaknesses. The scope of this body can extend beyond Karabakh to also include the preservation and care of Azerbaijani cemeteries in Armenia;
- e. Encourage action by global actors. UNESCO has largely removed itself as a credible actor in addressing Azerbaijan's erasure of Armenian heritage due to its close ties with Baku. But if UNESCO ever changes course and decides to become a fair-minded actor in addressing this region's cultural heritage quagmire, it should create a structure that allows for frequent, unrestricted access to Armenian cultural heritage sites in Azerbaijan – not only the major monuments but modest village churches and cemeteries;
- f. Create a structure (perhaps working through the countries' religious institutions) that permits regular, safe religious worship by Armenians at the Armenian churches in Karabakh and visitations to cemeteries so that the displaced Armenians can maintain connection with the grave sites of their ancestors.

Question 16. What challenges do you face when trying to bring the issue to international attention?

The global response to Azerbaijan's program of heritage erasure has been insufficient. The US and others were quick to deplore heritage destruction by the Taliban, ISIS, and now Russia in Ukraine. But Azerbaijan has not faced any consequences for its assaults on cultural and religious monuments. The treatment of cultural heritage, as documented in our reports, should play a role in shaping bilateral relations with Azerbaijan. The protection of Armenian heritage in the former Nagorno-Karabakh is an imperative not only to preserve historic monuments but more importantly to assert the basic human right to cultural expression and religious practice.

ABOUT CHW



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CHW LIST OF IMPACTED SITES

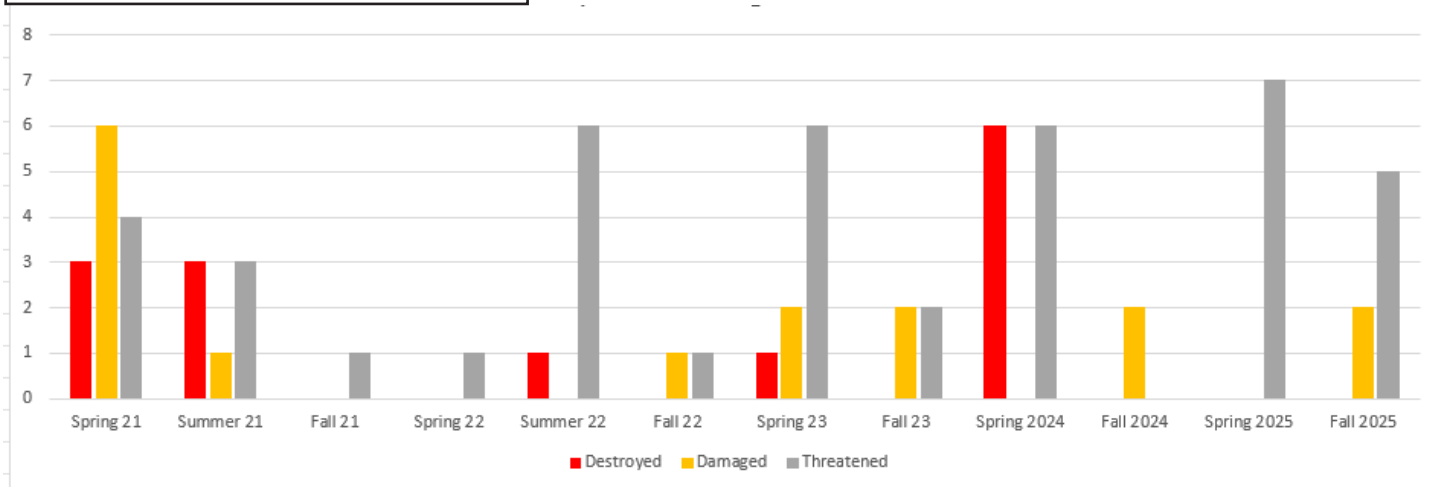
Destroyed Sites

Site #	Name	Type	location (Az./Arm.)	Observation Dates	Mission	Report
HT.069-1	Mets T'agher Cemetery	cemetery	Böyük Tağlar/Mets T'agher	Spring 2021	1	1
LN.004-0	Yusifbeyli Mosque	mosque	Yusifbeyli/Aygek	Spring 2021	1	1
SH.052-2	Ghazanchets'ots' Inscribed Stone	inscribed stone	Shusha/Shushi	Spring 2021	1	1
AN.342-0	Sghnakh Cemetery	cemetery	Siğnaq/Sghnakh	Summer 2021	2	2
HT.070-0	Makun Bridge	bridge	Böyük Tağlar/Mets T'agher	Summer 2021	2	2
SH.241-1	Fine Arts Museum Sculpture Garden	museum	Shusha/Shushi	Summer 2021	2	2
HT.061-0	St. Sargis Church	church	Mokhrenes/Susanlyg	Summer 2022, Fall 2023	5,8	4,6
HT.072-0	Halevor Bridge	bridge	Böyük Tağlar/Mets T'agher	Spring 2023	7	5
AN.038-0	Ghuze T'agh Cemetery	cemetery	near Garabulag/Aknaghbyur	Spring 2024	10	7
KR.022-0	Zar school	historic building	Zar/Tsar	Spring 2024	10	7
KR.063-0	Chirag school	historic building	Chirag/Chragh	Spring 2024	10	7
MI.079-0	Kohak	sacred place	Chartar	Spring 2024	10	7
SH.053-0	S. Hovhannes Mkrtych/Kanach Zham	church	Shusha/Shushi	Spring 2024	10	7
SH.103-0	Ghazanchets'ots' Cemetery	cemetery	Shusha/Shushi	Spring 2024	10	7

Damaged Sites

Site #	Name	Type	location (Az./Arm.)	Observation Dates	Mission	Report
SH.052-0	Ghazanchets'ots' S. Amenap'rkich	church	Shusha/Shushi	Spring 2021	1	1
*SH.053-0	S. Hovhannes Mkrtych/Kanach Zham	church	Shusha/Shushi	Spring 2021	1	1
SH.054-0	Surb Meghrets'ots'	church	Shusha/Shushi	Spring 2021	1,8	1,6
SH.074-0	The Zhamharyan's house	historic building	Shusha/Shushi	Spring 2021	1	1
SH.093-0	Eastern Rampart	fortification	Shusha/Shushi	Spring 2021	1	1
SH.101-2	Northern Cemetery	cemetery	Shusha/Shushi	Spring 2021	1	1
SH.063-0	Geological Museum	museum	Shusha/Shushi	Summer 2021	2	2
*HT.072-0	Halevor Bridge	bridge	Böyük Tağlar/Mets T'agher	Fall 2022	6	4
LN.177-0	Cemetery	cemetery	near Hajisamly/Vazgenashen	Spring 2023, Fall 2023	7,8,12	5,6,8
MT.212-0	Cemetery	cemetery	near Gizil Kangarli/Nor Maragha	Spring 2023	7	5
*SH.103-0	Ghazanchets'ots Cemetery	cemetery	Shusha/Shushi	Fall 2023	8	6
SH.105-0	Yerevan Gates Cemetery	cemetery	Shusha/Shushi	Fall 2023	8	6
LN.206-0	Tandzatap church	church	Garababa, Zangilan	Fall 2024	11	8
SH.005-0	Kanach Tala Cemetery	cemetery	Göytala/Kanach Tala	Fall 2024, Fall 2025	11, 13	8
HT.126-0	Karmir Khach Church	church	Tumi/Bina	Fall 2025	13	pending
MT.444-0	Napat Vank Monastery	Monastery	Gulisdan/Tufaf	Fall 2025	13	pending

Impacts by Mission



Threatened Sites

Site #	Name	Type	location (Az./Arm.)	Observation Dates	Mission	Report
AN.226-0	S. Astvatsatsin	church	Madadkend/Madatashen	Spring 2021	1	1
AN.344-6	Vank'asar	church	Aghdam	Spring 2021	1	1
HT.074-0	Amenap'rkich Church	church	Böyük Tağlar/Mets T'agher	Spring 2021	1	1
KR.022-0	Zar school	school	Zar/Tsar	Spring 2021	1	1
AN.225-0	T'ukhnakal Mansion	historic building	Moshkhmhat	Summer 2021	2	2
HT.071-0	Tahis Bridge	bridge	Böyük Tağlar/Mets T'agher	Summer 2021	2	2
MI.023-0	S. Astvatsatsin Church	church	Taghaverd/Taghavard	Summer 2021	2	2
KR.009-1	Mrchmants' Church	church	Marjimak/Mrchmants	Fall 2021	3	3
LN.055-1	Ughtamejk' Cemetery	cemetery	Ewazli/ Doghar	Spring 2022	4	4
HT.176-0	Mokhrenes Cemetery	cemetery	Mokhrenes/Susanlyg	Summer 2022	5	4
LN.016-0	Arakhish Church	church	Arikli/Arakhish	Summer 2022	5	4
LN.016-1	Arakhish Cemetery	cemetery	Arikli/Arakhish	Summer 2022	5	4
LN.017-0	Zorakhach' Church	church	Arikli/Arakhish	Summer 2022, Fall 2023	5,8	4,6
LN.187-0	Vakunis Church	church	Pichanis/Vakunis	Summer 2022	5	4
MT.161-0	S. Yeghishe of Mataghis	church	Sugovushan/Mataghis	Summer 2022	5	4
KR.008-0	The Church of Yeritsushen	church	Ghamishli/Eghegnut	Fall 2022	6	4
LN.156-0	St. Poghos-Petros Church	church	Shalva	Spring 2023	7	5
LN.176-0	Vazgenashen Church	church	Hajisamly/Vazgenashen	Spring 2023	7	5
MT.056-0	Amenap'rkich Church	church	Talish	Spring 2023	7	5
MT.213-0	Gavurgala Church	church	Boyahmadli/Nor Haykajur	Spring 2023	7	5
MT.452-0	Gyzyl Kangarli Historical Cemetery	cemetery	Gyzyl Kangarli/Nor Maragha	Spring 2023	7	5
MT.453-0	Mausoleum	mausoleum	near Gizil Kangarli/Nor Maragha	Spring 2023	7	5
AN.003-0	S. Astvatsatsin	church	Chanakhchi/Avetaranots	Fall 2023	8	6
HT.088-0	Kavak'avank' Church	church	Chiraguz/Jrakus	Fall 2023	8	6
HT.039-0	Ptkat'aghi Vank'	church	Hunarli/Tsakuri	Spring 2024	10	7
HT.039-1	Ptkat'aghi Cemetery	cemetery	Hunarli/Tsakuri	Spring 2024	10	7
KR.018-0	S. Sargis	church	Zar/Tsar	Spring 2024	10, 13	7
KR.019-0	S. Grigor	church	Zar/Tsar	Spring 2024	10, 13	7
SH.240-0	S. Astvatsatsin	church	Dashalty/Karin Tak	Spring 2024	10	7
SH.257-0	K'arin Tak Cemetery	cemetery	Dashalty/Karin Tak	Spring 2024	10	7
MT.451-0	Papravend Historical Cemetery	cemetery	Papravend	Spring 2025	11	8
HT.096-0	Spitak Khach Monastery	monastery	Chinaryl/Vank	Spring 2025	12	8
LN.107-0	St. Miriam Astvatsatsin	church	Hak/Minkend	Spring 2025	12	8
LN.114-0	Aghvesahaki Bridge	bridge	Hak/Minkend	Spring 2025	12	8
LN.115-0	Hak Bridge	bridge	Hak/Minkend	Spring 2025	12	8
LN.123-0	St. Stepanos Church	church	Hochants/Hochaz	Spring 2025	12	8
SH.097-0	Khan's Palace	historic building	Shusha/Shushi	Spring 2025	12	8
KR.023-0	Tsrntot Bridge	bridge	Zar/Tsar	Fall 2025	13	pending
KR.024-0	Hadjav/Oktyabr'end Church	church	Hadjav/Oktyabr'end	Fall 2025	13	pending
KR.026-0	Hadjav/Oktyabr'end Cemetery	cemetery	Hadjav/Oktyabr'end	Fall 2025	13	pending
SH.239-0	Simonants Bridge	bridge	Dashalty/Karin Tak	Fall 2025	13	pending
ST.006-0	Mazi Bridge	bridge	Khankendi/Stepanakert	Fall 2025	13	pending

