



## **Evaluation of Diyarbakir Armenian Churches in Lower Mesopotamia Region**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Diyarbakir is located in Asia, in Lower Mesopotamia, and in the Southeast Anatolia Region of Turkey. The Southeastern Anatolia Region is a region where prominent centers of early Christianity are located. The Ottomans managed the administration of the regions where the Armenian lived since the 14th and 15th centuries. However, the Armenians, who accepted the Christianity first, were allowed to act as a separate community despite some restrictions.

The Armenians, as a widespread and settled community in Anatolia, lived in Diyarbakir by taking influential roles in urban population until the 20th century. This study aims to carry into future the 4 churches belonging to Armenians living in Diyarbakır until the beginning of the 20th century by evaluating the churches in terms of history, plan and facade layouts, decoration items, usage and structural conditions and the study proposes to protect these assets.

The consciousness created by the preservation of historical buildings and the survival of cultures in the city at the 2000s has created a positive social force for the restoration of the churches. With the restoration, the Armenians, who lived for centuries but migrated from the city, were able to carry their culture to the new generations and they visited the city as well as the buildings. Hence, the restoration of the architectural product has led to the reestablishment of the cultural bonds. This study has been compiled and updated from the second author's thesis titled "Protection and Usage Conditions of Armenian Churches Located in the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Turkey", which the second author completed in the consultancy of the first author.



**Keywords:** Diyarbakır, Tigranakent, Armenian Church, Documentation, Conservation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Diyarbakır (Diyarbakir, Amid) is a city located in the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Turkey and at the north of Mesopotamia called Cezire. The history of the city dates back to 8000 BC. The Amida Tumulus in the city sheds light on the settlement history of the city (Kuruyazıcı, 1997). Christian art has spread to Egypt, Anatolia, Syria, Armenia and Mesopotamia under the domination of the Roman Empire in parallel with Christianity, which spreads in the first century (Koch, 2007). The discovery of a Roman coin with "Mesopotamia metropolis" mark in Diyarbakır and representation of Diyarbakır in İznik Council, from the 3rd century, proves that the city was under the influence of Christianity at that time (Parla, 2005, 2004, Beysanoğlu, 1987). The Church of St. George, one of the earliest churches in the city dating from this period, is located in the Inner Fortress, the first settlement of the city (Tuncer 2002).

With the conquest of Anatolia by Muslims in the 11th century, the construction of the church continued under the rules of Islamic law. However, the construction of the new church stopped in the 15th century, only repairs were allowed. The diversity in the church designs increased due to the modernization and reform movements in the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century and the construction of the new churches was accelerated (Pekak, 2009). However, the fact that Ottoman modernization failed to achieve the desired results, the effects of wars, deportation and forced migration of non-Muslims from the Anatolian lands caused the churches to disappear promptly.

One of the oldest settlements in Anatolia and Mesopotamia, Diyarbakır is a region where distinctive ethnic and religious groups live. Evliya Çelebi, J.S. Buckingham, and many other researchers, who visited the city in the 16th and 19th century, observed that Diyarbakır has a special diversity compared to the other cities of the Anatolia, thanks to the presence of Muslims, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Yakubi, believers of Abraham, Yezidi, Arabs, Kurds (Bruinessen, 1997, Arslan, 2013, Taş, 2009). Hence, this diversity was ascertained by the presence of numerous churches from different sects of the same religion, who survived in the city until the 1960s.

The Armenian churches, which constitute the subject of this study, are the architectural documents that reflect the construction techniques, culture, and social-economic characteristics of the period, in which they were built. Moreover, the lack of a comprehensive study that examines the whole of the structures, has affected the formation of this study. In this study, it was aimed to determine the problems of the

Armenian churches that are currently in place today, to document the present conditions of the Armenian churches with identification, drawings, and photographs, and to develop the recommendations.

## 2. DIYARBAKIR URBAN TEXTURE AND THE ARMENIANS

Diyarbakir is a developing metropolitan city with new settlements and that has expanded from the old city doctrine with internal and external migration. The utmost prominent structure that remains today from the city's past civilizations are the fortification walls that cover the city and the fortification walls are five kilometers long. Religious, commercial and educational structures constructed in different periods in the historical city called "Suriçi" ("Inside the walls") in the terminology indicate that the city has a long history (Parla:1990:128). Thus, the "walls" witnessing the history, are inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List. Religious structures and remains belonging to different ethnic groups in the city can also be observed today (Fig.1,2).



Fig.1. Diyarbakir city and the development area

It is accepted that the Armenians, who are the oldest citizens of the city, came from the west and settled in Diyarbakir in the 4th century BC (Tuncer, 2002: 186). Therefore, there are many buildings belonging to the Armenians in and around the city center. Diyarbakir was named as "Tigranakent" in the Armenian history before the Ottoman Empire and was accepted as a religious center on the third degree for the Armenians (Seyfeli, 2004).

Tavernier, who visited Diyarbekir in the 17th century, quotes that there were twenty thousand Christians in the city, while the two out of the three were Armenians, and the rest were priests from Nestorian, Yakubi and Franciscan sects. (Korkusuz, 2003). Consul Boyaciyan, Cuinet, LamecSaat gave information about the Armenian population in 1891 in Diyarbakir and pointed out the numbers in the city (Taş 2009).

Table 1. Religious groups of Muslims and Armenians in Diyarbakir city according to the travellers (Taş, 2009).

Religious Groups	Population distribution according to the travellers		
	Boyacıyan	Cuinet	LamecSaad
Muslim	304,548	110,664	10,000
Gregorian Armenian	54,512	57,890	8,700
Catholic Armenian	5,169	10,170	1,200
Evangelical Armenian	4,760	11,069	1,000

Polish traveler, Simeon (1608-1619), mentions the existence of two Armenian churches named SurpGiragos and SurpSarkis together with the episcopacy and school buildings in the city, nearly one thousand Armenian population and also quotes that the Armenians are a hospitable and religious nation, Diyarbakir is considered as the Athens of the Armenians and refers the Armenian community (Korkusuz, 2003). It is acknowledged that Diyarbakir comprised of 65 Muslims, 13 non-Muslims and 42 mixed quarters in the 19th century, while the neighborhoods where Armenians live are located in the southeast and southwest of Suriçi (Yılmazçelik, 1995), (Fig.2).

### 3) DIYARBAKIR ARMENIAN CHURCHES

SurpGiragos, SurpSarkis, Catholic and SurpPirgic Churches in Diyarbakir are the Armenian churches that are identified and stand today. (Kevorkian and Paboudjian, 2013) mention that there were 88 churches, 5 monasteries, a few Evangelic churches and many Catholic churches belonging to the Armenians in and around Diyarbekir, and in the center, there were the SurpToros Cathedral, SurpKevork, SurpYerrotutyun, SurpHovhannes Churches. Moreover, they state that the Archbishop was located in the SurpGiragos Church and the visitors were staying in SurpSarkis Church (Kévorkian 2013).





Fig.3. SurpGiragos Church of the year 2014 - Plan and inner appearances

The church has five naves and it is built according to a basilica plan. The gallery can be reached from the south by a staircase. Emphasizing the sacred orientation, the eastern face of the Naos (Shrine) consists of a main abscissa with a circular section behind five arches and two abscissas on both sides of the main abscissa. Therefore, the passage between abscissa is made through the curved arched doors. To the north of the abscissa, there is a prothesis (altar) and a baptistery. The year of 1883 is marked on the baptistery's gate. Upper floor rooms can be accessed from the stairs built in the side apsis wall built beside the main apse (Fig.3).

The southern front, the short section of the L-shaped narthex, consists of the naos wall, the upstairs rooms, and the ritual preparation room, which is located under the upstairs rooms. There are two windows with semi-circular towards the narthex, which is divided by lancet slots, and entrance for women with a depressed arch. The Western front is the front where the passage with seven arches, which are towards the L-shaped narthex, is located. On the narthex, there is a round-shaped balcony with an exterior wall of gallery floor at a higher level of gallery floor above the main entrance pavilion. The large main entrance gate in the middle and the doors on the right and left end grants the entrance to the naos from the western part of the narthex. The bell tower is situated on this front.

On the south front, there are two pillars and on the north front, there are four pillars (supporting walls) in the round and square forms. There are four windows between each pillar, two on top of each other. Between 2009 and 2012, the community and Diyarbakir Municipality repaired the bulb bell tower, which was known but destroyed, was renovated. The restoration of the building was completed in 2014 and the church was opened to worship.

### 3.2. SurpPirgic Church (Evangelical Community Church)

It belongs to the Protestant Community Foundation. It was used by the SurpPirgic Community until 1981. The church is known as the Evangelical Church in the city. There is no precise document stating the date of construction (Taş, 2003, Atalay, 2006). However, the Diyarbakır Vilayet Newspaper published in 1870 mentions that the church was built between 1846 and 1847 (Atalay, 2006).

Unlike the other Armenian Churches in Diyarbakır, the structure was planned as a closed Greek cross (Fig. 5.). The narthex is located in the north-south direction to the west of the structure. There are three naves in the church, while the center was the timber-framed dome, the sidewalls comprise flat roof on wooden beams. Diyarbakir is the only church, which uses a dome. In addition to the main entrance at the west, the church also has entrances in the north and south directions.



Fig. 4. SurpPirgic Church floor plan, sections (DVBM Archive), view of abscissa from the gallery, south façade

The abscissa of the church is externally emphasized and internally rounded. The bema podium built in front of the abscissa is accessed by a two-stepped staircase. There is a wooden gallery floor rotating the western, northern and southern wings in U shape. The wooden stairs leading to the gallery floor are built in the northwest and southwest of the naos. On the north of the church, there is a lead-covered bell tower (Fig. 4).

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naos. On the north of the church, there is a lead-covered bell tower (Fig. 5). SurpPirigic Church is the only structure, in which the abscissa of the eastern wall is crystallized by the semicircle. The north and south fronts consist of seven windows. The vertical plaster, which provides support to the arches inside the walls, is an element observed in all the churches as a local element.

### 3.3. Armenian Catholic Church, (SurpHosep Church)

It belongs to the Armenian Catholic Foundation. Although, no precise information about the date of construction can be reached, the curved forms of the tile and mihrab ornamentation observed in the structure reflect the characteristics of the Baroque method that lasted from the 18th century until the beginning of the 19th century in the Ottoman Art (Hasol, 2008). In addition, the residents of the building stated that an Armenian merchant named "HocaHosep (Hosev) had built the church in the 1890s in front of his house and that the church's name was HocaHosep Church. They added that they and their grandfathers lived together in the church until the 1950s while the church was used as a chicken farm and oil reservoir between 1950 and 1970. Hence, according to these verbal statements, the church seems to be built in the 19th century (Özyerli, 2011). The Regional Directorate of the Foundations between 2008 and 2009 repaired the church. The church has three naves and it is built according to a basilica plan. In addition, the porched narthex is located in front of the main space and opened to the courtyard with three arches. A three-door entrance grants the passage from the narthex to naos. Apart from the doors in the narthex, a door was opened in the northeastern corner of the structure for the entrance and exit of the priests in the south and north facades of the naos (Fig.5).

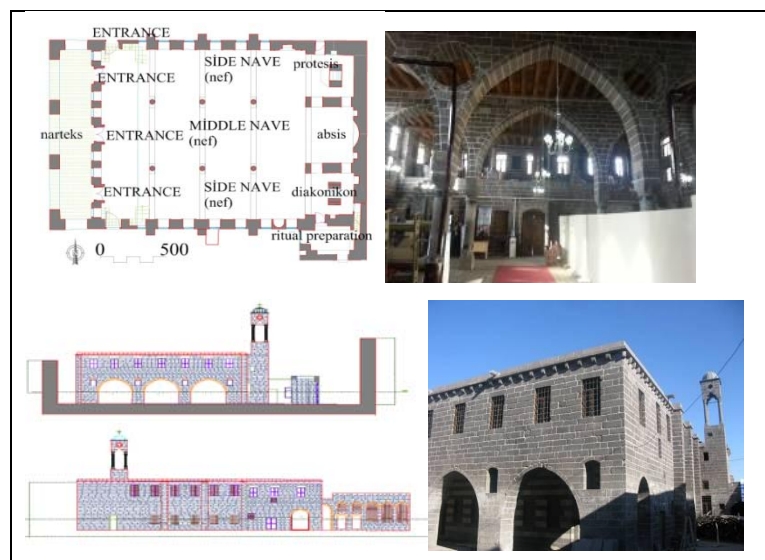


Fig. 5. Floor Plan, north front (D.V.B.M. archives) and interiors





Naos is divided into three naves with two columns. The main nave is wider than the side naves. Each nave is built of pointed arches that connect them with columns. To the east of the nave lies the main abscissa with a semi-circular plan and side abscissas to the right and left. The triple abscissa arrangement with the prothesis in the north and the diaconicon in the south and the central main abscissa in the middle is smooth from the outside and simple. The main abscissa in the center is higher than the prothesis and diaconicon and emphasizes the sacred orientation together with the main nave. There are passes between the abscissas to provide connectivity. In the Prothesis wing, the staircase placed inside the wall is used to reach the lead-covered bell tower rising on the four columns, while the gallery, which is located on the upper floor of the narthex in the west of the naos, can be reached by using the stairs in the northwest and southwest.

The western front consists of the narthex with arched openings, and walls of galleries formed by the rectangular windows above them. The eastern front is the abscissa wall. In addition, the house adjacent to the building occupied the eastern front of the church. The pilasters in the north and south fronts, which are symmetrically arranged, divide the wall surfaces into vertical pieces; each of these pieces contains a door or a window opening.

#### **3.4. St. Sargis-Sarkis-Çeltik Church**

Diyarbakır Armenian Surp (also known as Small Church, Hıdırİlyas Church) belongs to the SurpGregos Churches Foundation and it is in ruins and vacant. In the repair inscription, the construction date is written as 1840 AD. Berchem and Stryzowski admit that the church dates to the 16th century (Korkmaz, 2006). The church has three naves and it is built according to a basilica plan. In the west, there is a narthex, which is partially collapsed, consisting of five pieces. The entrance to the church is granted by the main door in the middle of the narthex and doors at the both sides of the church (Fig.6). The church resembles the Armenian Catholic Church in terms of its plan layout and front features.



Fig. 6. SurpSarkis Church first floor plan (Tuncer, 2002), west front and view of abscissa from the naos

In addition, the naos is divided into three columns with two columns established on square bases. To the east of the naves lies a semi-circular main and side abscissas. There are stairs to reach the upper floor corner rooms inside the walls of the baptistery and the ritual preparation room on the diaconicon cells in the south and prothesis cells in the north.

The walls of the galleries, separated by arches and with rectangular windows, form the front in the west. The narthex is divided into five units by the arches. In addition, the unit in the middle is symmetrically opposite to the front. Behind the narthex, there is a closed door and windows with rectangular gaps on both sides. The eastern front of the church ends with flat walls with small passage windows. The pilasters in the north and south fronts, which are symmetrically arranged, divide the wall surfaces into vertical pieces; each of these pieces contains a door or a window opening. In addition, the western door used by women is emphasized with profiled door frame while the door dedicated to religious officials to the east of the southern wall is simple. Flat lintels were used in every window. The upper and lower floor windows have the same arrangement and the two sides of the fronts are kept small due to the use of doors.

#### 4. CONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUE AND MATERIAL USAGE

In Diyarbakır Armenian Churches, local basalt stone, wooden beams in the upper cover, woodwork and grab rails in the doors and windows were used in the carrying system and flooring.

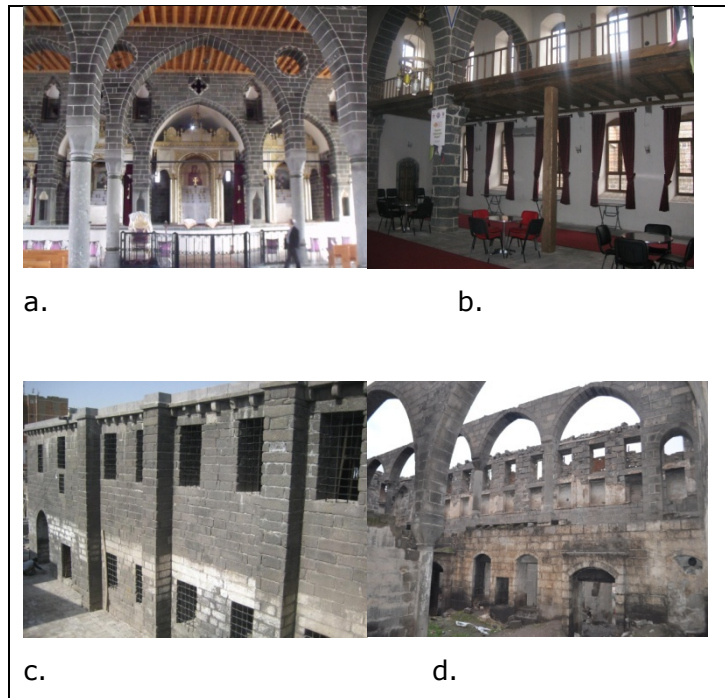


Fig. 7. Material used in the buildings (a) SurpGiragos Church b) SurpPirgiç Church c) Armenian Catholic d) SurpSarkis Church)

The walls are 80-130 cm thick and the outer parts are made of regularly spaced rubble-filled basalt stone. Together with the walls, there are stone columns with a diameter of 40-60 cm in the interior of the church. Loads are transferred to the columns and walls by the arches. Apart from the central dome of the SurpPirgiç Church, the top cover was made of wood siding on wooden beams and a roof with a khorasan mortar. The churches are built in such a magnificent way that they look like a castle from the outside (Fig.7).

#### 5. DETERIORATION AND DAMAGES OF THE BUILDINGS

In the Armenian churches of Diyarbakır, the main reasons that caused deterioration and damage in these buildings are as follows; the immigration of the main users of the structures, the fact that the remaining members of the community do not have sufficient economic power, the change of socio-cultural structure, the inadequacy of cultural policies for historical monuments, the lack of the maintenance and repair works.

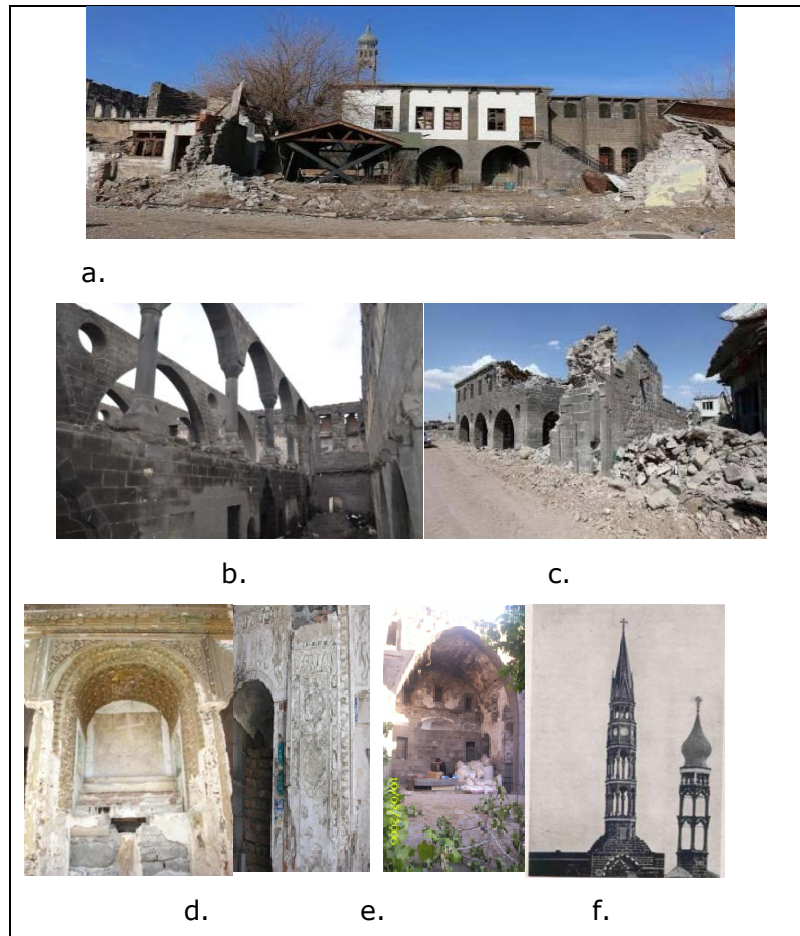


Fig. 8. Damages in the buildings (a,d) SurpGregos Church (2016), b) SurpSarkis Church (2013), c,,e) The Catholic Church (2016), f) Bell Tower of the SurpGregos Church, which is destroyed)

Covering the floor with concrete paving stones; using PVC material or windows and doors that do not fit the original size, using cement filling for the stone walls are among the wrong interventions within the scope of the restoration, that can be observed in the buildings. The firearms used during the conflicts that occurred in the city in 2015 and 2016 destroyed the walls and interiors of the SurpGregos and Catholic Church. The Armenian community's initiatives for the restoration of SurpGregos Church and the reuse of the SurpPirgich Church with the original purpose continue. Moreover, the restoration work began at the Catholic Church, which suffered the most because of the conflicts. In SurpSarkis Church, the upper cover is destroyed and a part of windows and doors is closed. Hence, the church is abandoned due to the lack of budget for repair works (Fig.8.).

## 6. EVALUATION

When examining the documents available about the history of Armenian Churches in Diyarbakır, it is revealed that the SurpPirgich Church and the Armenian Catholic Church



were destroyed and rebuilt in the 19th century, the SurpGregos Church was built in the 16th century, repaired in 18th century and enlarged and rebuilt in 19th century and finally the SurpSargis Church was constructed in the 16th century.

While the Catholic, SurpSargis, and SurpPirgic Churches have three naves, the SurpGregos church has five naves with a basilica layout. The narthexes, which constitute the main entrance of the church, have a rectangular plan composed of 3 parts in Catholic Church, five parts in SurpSargis Church and seven parts in SurpGregos Church. While the galleries of the churches on the narthex have a U-shaped naos in Diyarbakır SurpPirgic Church, L-shaped naos in SurpGregos church, the others have a rectangular plan.

The baptistery is placed in a simple niche on the north wall of a cell in the Church of SurpGregos, while it is placed in the niche covered with muqarnas, near the abscissa in the north wall. In SurpSargis Church, it is located in the north corner cell.

The position of bell tower in churches is as follows; in the middle of the western wall in SurpGregos Church, in the north in Catholic church (this tower is destroyed in 2015), in southwest in SurpSargis Church (destroyed but the traces can be observed), in the northwest in Evangelical Church.

The churches were built with the masonry technique with cut stones. In addition, the churches reflect the local construction techniques as well as the use of material such as the coherent joint and double-walled walls, stone floors, earth-sheltered structure, lime plaster, wooden gallery railings and wall coverings, iron tie, boxing window guards. Hence, the churches in Diyarbakır are simple structures where the ornaments are available in the interior. Outside and inside, the smooth and meticulous stone walls, decoration and jointing, wooden beaming, earth dome reflect the remarkable characteristics of the local style. In the interior of the churches, while the gypserly, mihrab filled with muqarnas, botanical and geometric compositions, muqarnas on the top of the columns, ornaments in the dome were observed as the common features, the ceramic material used in Diyarbakır Armenian Catholic Church was not found in other churches.

The Armenian Churches, which reached the present day in Diyarbakır, are covered with a flat roof and rectangular layout. Thus, they differ from the Armenian churches, which are widespread in the mainland of the Armenians and East Anatolia, since they have generally a central plan and cylindrical or polygonal dome (Hillez, 2016). The Syrian influence on the Armenian Churches of Diyarbakır is observed in the arrangement of the



structure and the front. In this context, the Armenian Churches reflect the effects of the church architecture that Eyice describes as follows, "the basilicas with regular cut stones of the Syria, wide arched entrances, pieces dividing the naves and arches with wide openings on them or covered vault" (Eyice, 1988). The similar places to the places called "upper floor corner rooms" in the early Syrian churches are observed in Diyarbakır SurpSargis and SurpGregos Churches, in accordance with the Açıkgöz and Ahunbay's citation (2008) from Teteriatnikov. Apart from the SurpPirgich Church where the dome and abscissa are directed outwards, the abscissas of other churches are circular in plan, similar to the ones in Syria, and the outer walls are flat.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Diyarbakır Armenian Churches are structures that reflect the social, political and architectural environment of the era and their aesthetic value is undeniable. Hence, they have a remarkable (unique) place among the Ottoman period structures since they have a different naos arrangement than the churches available in Anatolia and nearby provinces, which can be linked to Syrian churches, with their variety in terms of dimension and plan.

These exclusive features are prominent factors that necessitate the protection of the churches. Diyarbakır Armenian churches are the structures left in the city by Armenians, who left the regions for reasons of deportation and war. In the city, many churches have quickly disappeared because of abeyance, vandalism, treasure seekers, looters who took away the stones, which were used as building material, and the natural events. The restoration and interventions in Diyarbakır Armenian churches, except the SurpSargis Church, lead to positive results by contributing these structures to the social structure of the city. The SurpGragos Church was restored on October 23, 2011, and the worship started after 97 years. Hence, that was as an exemplary restoration and function model in the country as well as in the world. The terrorist incidents that occurred in the city in 2015-2016 damaged the churches again and therefore they are out of use. However, we believe that the churches may be protected, despite all the negative events, if they are included in the restoration program.

Moreover, it is a historical and social responsibility to contribute these structures to the social structures and keep these structures living with new functions by a quick restoration without deteriorating their architectural integrity in order to preserve and carry into the future these churches with their unique historical, local, rare and symbolical value.

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