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1 | *Medieval Cemeteries in the Lake Sevan Basin within Modern Settlements, by Number of Preserved Gravestones.*

SIGNS, MEMORY AND MEDIEVAL FUNERARY STONE CARVINGS IN THE LAKE SEVAN BASIN

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Lake Sevan, the largest freshwater lake in the Middle East, lies at the centre of the basin exceptionally rich in historical and cultural monuments. The medieval cemeteries surrounding the lake preserve thousands of gravestones marked by a wide variety of iconography and inscriptions. Within this landscape, the village of Noratus contains the largest preserved medieval Christian cemetery in the Middle East. This study examines the gravestones of the basin of Lake Sevan as sign-bearing monuments whose ornamentation and iconography – including vegetal-geometric, anthropomorphic, and zoomorphic representations, as well as Armenian inscriptions – constitute a semantic and readable system. The tombstones preserved within the cemeteries – horizontally positioned gravestones– and khachkars (cross-stones) – vertically erected gravestones – express, organize, and produce meaning, thereby creating a unified communicative framework. The symbolic images carved on khachkars include crosses, biblical scenes and figures, vegetal motifs, geometric compositions, and celestial symbols. Tombstones, by contrast, often display scenes of feasting, music and song, hunting, military processions and warfare, burial scenes, animal combat, eagles clutching prey, children, scholars (wise men), craftsmanship, and agricultural activities. Considered both individually and as part of broader compositions, these images reflect the social identities, collective memories, and religious beliefs of the communities that inhabited the basin of Lake Sevan between the 9th and 18th centuries.

This study reaffirms that the iconography of these gravestones functions as a semantic tool that engages the viewer and organizes thought by connecting individual, communal, and localized historical perceptions, placing them within the broader framework of universal visual language and symbolic interpretation.

Keywords: *Funerary stones, Iconography, Signifying signs, Medieval Christian cemetery, Near East.*

Introduction

The basin of Lake Sevan should be understood as a historically formed cultural landscape, rather than simply as a geographical unit, in which cemeteries function as structured spaces of memory. In this area, medieval tombstones and *khachkars* function as material condensations of socio-religious meanings, extending beyond their role as individual commemorative markers.

The central question addressed in this article is how funerary iconography can be interpreted as a structured semiotic system. This approach assumes that sculptural compositions, iconographic motifs, and inscriptions form an interconnected semantic field that structures the community's perceptions of identity, life, and death.

The distribution of medieval cemeteries

in the basin of Lake Sevan – either in the vicinity of churches and monasteries or in elevated, visually prominent locations near settlements – indicates that, in the Middle Ages, the lakeshore communities attached significant importance to the ideological reorganisation of space and the deliberate sacralisation of landscapes. Funerary spaces thus constituted a readable landscape, in which each *khachkar* and tombstone functioned as an individual monument, and as a component of an integrated spatial text.

In the state heritage registers, more than one hundred medieval cemeteries and small burial clusters are recorded in the basin of Lake Sevan, which are most likely surviving fragments of once larger burial grounds. In most of these sites, as our field surveys indicate, up to 100 medieval gravestones have been preserved, while a significant number con-



tain between 100 and 500 examples (the city of Gavar and the villages of Mets Masrik, Akunk, Airk, Lchavan, Torfavan, Vardenik, Tsovinar, Zolakar, Geghhovit, and Karmirgyugh). In two sites – Noratus and Nerkin Getashen – more than 1,000 medieval gravestones (tombstones and *khachkars*) have been recorded¹.

Theoretical Foundations and Methodological Approaches

The article is based on a combination of material culture theory, visual semiotics, and social memory studies. The funerary monument is interpreted as a materialised sign whose meaning is not exhausted at the visual level but is instead produced through ritual functions, spatial distribution, and social practices.

Visual composition is interpreted as a coded message that presupposes a “knowledgeable viewer.” However, the contemporary researcher/viewer engages with material preserved under conditions of historical distance; as a result, semantic decoding entails probabilistic reconstruction rather than definitive recovery.

Within the framework of the study, the following methodological approaches were employed:

- detailed field documentation;
- typological and stylistic classification;
- comparative iconographic analysis.



The initial stage of the research was based on field investigations, during which the necessary documentation was carried out, including photographic recording, graphic reproduction of images, as well as the reading and analysis of inscriptions and iconographic motifs. After the presentation of the descriptive data, an analysis of the collected material was conducted.

2,3 | *Noratus Cemetery, the Largest Medieval Armenian Cemetery on the Shore of Lake Sevan.*

¹ Lalayan, *Works*; Mnatsakanian, *Sevan: Hayravank', Noraduz, Batikian, Hatsarat, Masruts Anapat, Shoghagavank', Vanevan, Kot'avank, Makenotsats.*



Funerary Iconography in the Lake Sevan Basin

In the basin of Lake Sevan, medieval funerary art evolved from simple symmetrical compositions to more complex sculptural and iconographic forms. According to their formal and iconographic characteristics, gravestones are divided into two groups: tombstones and *khachkars* (cross-stones).

According to their volumetric characteristics, tombstones are classified into the following four types:

- unworked or roughly hewn tombstones;
- flat-surfaced tombstones;
- tombstones with a rectangular–parallelepiped block-like (chest-like) base and a double-sloped, semi-cylindrical (cradle-shaped), or flat upper part;
- zoomorphic tombstones.

Unworked or roughly hewn tombstones are the most commonly attested type. They are often found in association with vertically erected *khachkars*. In most cases, an unworked or roughly hewn tombstone was placed above the burial chamber, while a *khachkar* was erected

at its eastern end. In some cases, unworked tombstones were placed individually, without being accompanied by *khachkars*. Unworked tombstones are chronologically attested throughout the entire medieval period. It may be suggested that unworked stones were used as grave markers particularly during periods of political and economic instability². The most numerous type is the flat tombstones. They are found in all settlements of the Sevan Basin and are dated from the Early to the Late Middle Ages. Flat tombstones are rectangular slabs with a smooth surface. They occur both in association with *khachkars* and as independent markers. Flat tombstones were particularly used in churchyard cemeteries, a practice likely motivated by the need to avoid obstructing movement, as walking over them was not considered sinful in the medieval period. Flat tombstones are characterised by simple decoration. On flat tombstones, a schematic representation of the deceased is usually carved, with the head shown as a circle and the body as a rectangle. A more realistic depiction of the deceased is also encountered, albeit infrequently. In some

4,5 | View of the medieval Christian cemetery of Nerkin Getashen.

6 | View of one of the medieval cemeteries in Lchavan village.

² In the 14th century, in connection with the socio-economic decline of Armenia and the complex political situation (Mongol–Turkic invasions and harsh domination), the art of *khachkars* and funerary stelae experienced a significant decline. Until the last quarter of the 15th century, inscribed gravestones (including *khachkars*) are rarely encountered in the basin of Lake Sevan. The 13th–14th centuries also represent the period of the most widespread use of roughly worked tombstones.

³ There are medieval inscriptions in several cemeteries of the basin of Lake Sevan referring to the practice of placing a single gravestone over the burial of two individuals, including sites such as Noratus, Sotk, Vaghashen, and others.



7 | View of the medieval Christian cemetery of Nerkin Getashen.

8 | Cradle-Shaped (Chest-Shaped) Gravestones with Hunting and Agricultural Reliefs from the Medieval Cemetery of Mets Masrik.

9 | Cradle-shaped gravestones from Lchavan, dated to 1698 (a), and Mets Masrik, dated to 1541 (c), as well as a chest-shaped gravestone with a flat top from Noratus, dated to the 16th-17th centuries (b).

10 | Flat Gravestones with Human Silhouettes from the Medieval Cemeteries of Lchavan (a, d), Ayrk (b), Mets Masrik (c), along with a Rectangular Parallelepiped Gravestone from Mets Masrik (e).

cases, the schematic figure is combined with depictions of everyday objects, such as scissors, a razor, a tablet, a wine cup, and a jug.

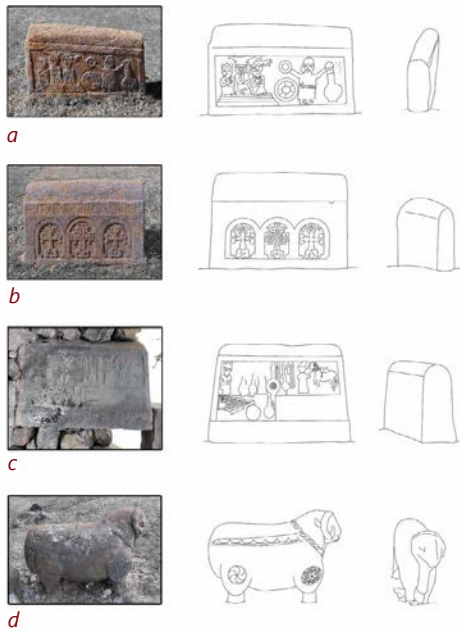
Rare iconographic examples include tombstones depicting paired human figures (likely spouses or brothers)³ and those showing the Virgin and Child. Flat tombstones without figurative decoration are also known, while clergy tombstones are often marked by the depiction of a staff. Flat tombstones are often inscribed.

In the cemeteries of the lake basin, a large number of tombstones have a rectangular base and a double-sloped upper surface. These tombstones are found

in association with 9th–13th century *khachkars* and are likely to date to the same period.

From the mid-15th century onward, tombstones with a rectangular base and a semi-cylindrical upper part (chest- or cradle-shaped⁴) became widespread in funerary culture (fig. 9-12). This type gradually became the principal funerary monument, combining the commemorative function of the upright *khachkar* with the horizontal form of the tombstone.

One of the southern or northern sides of cradle-shaped tombstones usually bears a row of three to five arched niches containing carved crosses.



11 | Relief Depictions of Crowned Deceased Figures from Lchavan (a), Cross Motifs within arched niches from Mets Masrik (b), a Musician and Musical Instruments from Mets Masrik (c), and a Ram-Shaped Tombstone from the Medieval Cemetery of Zolakar (d).



12 | Gravestone featuring a relief scene of learning, with the first six letters of the Armenian alphabet (Ա, Բ, Գ, Դ, Ե, Ն) inscribed on a writing tablet (a), as well as a relief depicting a hunting scene and an eagle clutching its prey (b), both from the village of Sotk and dated to the 16th-17th centuries.

- ⁴ Because they are formally similar to a medieval cradle.
⁵ Barkhudaryan, *Corpus of Armenian Epigraphy. Part IV: Gegharkunik: Kamo, Martuni and Vardenis Regions*; Shahnazaryan et al., *History of the Armenians. Middle Ages (mid-9th century - first half of the 17th century)*.
⁶ Azarian, *Armenian Khatchkars* Azarian, Manoukian, *Khatchkar*; Shahinyan, *Medieval Monumental Monuments of Armenia: Khatchkars of the 9th-13th Centuries*; Petrosyan, *Khatchkar: Origin, Function, Iconography, Semantics*.
⁷ Barkhudaryan, *Medieval Armenian Architects and Stonemasons*.

The eastern and western narrow sides are usually carved with crosses, as well as human, animal, and geometric motifs, the eternity symbol, eagles clutching prey, and other decorative elements. Non-standard tombstones with asymmetrical forms are also attested, including examples with a projection on the upper flat surface, a markedly sloping or stepped upper part, or unusually narrow and tall proportions.

Tombstones with a rectangular base are generally inscribed, usually providing detailed biographical information about the deceased, including the name, date and circumstances of death, family background, and profession⁵.

Of particular interest are the reliefs on tombstones with a rectangular base, which are distinguished by their thematic diversity, including various objects as well as human and animal figures. In thematic reliefs featuring a single human figure, the depiction is typically accompanied by elements such as a wine cup, jug, plate, tablet, musical or working tools, wild or domestic animals, and crosses. Notable are reliefs with two or more human figures, distinguished by clear narrative content and structured thematic scenes. Horsemen constitute one of the most widespread iconographic themes. The rider may appear as a warrior, armed or bearing a cross, confronting a dragon-serpent or another adversary. In other cases, he is represented as a hunter accompanied by a dog, a falcon, and wild animals such as deer, hare, ibex, or lion. Riderless horses are also attested.

Feasting scenes are also widely represented on medieval tombstones, showing figures seated around a richly set table, often accompanied by musicians. Another common motif found on tombstones depicts human figures accompanied by a writing tablet and other writing implements. There are also grave-stones depicting scenes of ploughing and sowing with a plough. In such cases, a multi-yoked plough and the farmer are usually depicted⁶ Rare iconographic compositions also occur, including representations of the deceased lying with crossed arms over the chest, as well as family scenes depicting a mother, child, and cradle.

The Lake Sevan Basin also contains zoomorphic tombstones (horse-shaped

and ram-shaped) decorated with carved crosses and Armenian inscriptions.

Another group of funerary monuments in the Lake Sevan Basin consists of *khachkars*, which were widespread in cemeteries from the second half of the 9th century through the 18th century⁷. One of the earliest dated Armenian *khachkars*, bearing an inscription and erected in 881 by Prince Grigor Atrnersehyan, is located in the village of Mets Masrik on the southeastern shore of Lake Sevan (fig.6). *Khachkars* from the late 9th to 10th centuries in the Lake Sevan Basin are predominantly carved from roughly worked stone blocks. The arms of the carved crosses end in paired ring-like motifs. In most cases, vegetal ornamentation emerges from the base of the cross, while a bunch of grapes is depicted hanging from its upper part.

Khachkars of the 11th century exhibit a more regular rectangular form. The arms of the cross terminate in three ring-like motifs, and the carved cross is framed by a marginal band.

In the 12th century, a decline in khachkar production is observed, associated with the fall of the Bagratid Kingdom of Armenia and the Seljuk Turkish invasions.

In 1201–1203, as a result of a military and political alliance with the Kingdom of Georgia, the Zakarid Armenian princes liberated the Lake Sevan Basin from Seljuk Turkish control, marking the beginning of a period of economic and cultural revival characterized by intensive construction activity. During this period, the largest surviving medieval *khachkars* in the territory of the Republic of Armenia were created in the Lake Sevan Basin, including examples in the village of Zolakar (approximately 4 m in height), as well as in Akunk, Khachaghbyur, and Nerkin Getashen (exceeding 3 m in height). Despite their large scale, these *khachkars* display a simple and unadorned compositional structure. In the 13th century, *khachkars* featuring the depiction of two crosses became widespread. Inscriptions on these monuments indicate that they functioned as family gravestones and symbolized the posthumous unity of a married couple. In the 13th century, a cornice appears in the upper section of khachkar composition.

The 14th–15th centuries represented a period of decline in khachkar production, due to the raids of Mongol-Turkic tribes in the Lake Sevan Basin and the heavy rule of the Ilkhanate rule in Armenia. The most devastating blow was probably the 1378 campaign of Timur’s army (Tamerlane) toward Lake Sevan.

From the late 15th to the late 17th century, khachkar production experienced a renewed revival, and the Lake Sevan Basin became one of the principal centers of khachkar craftsmanship in Armenia. This was largely due to the stable economic conditions established by influential local princely families, in particular the Melik-Shahnazaryans. *Khachkars* of this period are characterized by the richness of their sculptural decoration, including a projecting cornice, a circular rosette beneath the cross, and figural representations symbolizing Christ, the Virgin Mary, angels, archangels, and the Evangelists, as well as a range of biblical scenes (the Virgin with the Child, the Presentation of Christ, the Crucifixion, the Passion of Christ, the weighing of souls, and the Last Judgment).

In the Lake Sevan Basin, a number of renowned khachkar masters gained wide recognition, elevating Armenian medieval sculptural art to a new qualitative level. The name of the master sculptor was carved on the most visible part of the monument, functioning as a distinctive marker of authorship and, in a broader sense, conferring prestige upon the deceased’s family. Stylistic analysis of the carvings and inscriptions on gravestones reveals the names of several master stonemasons who worked in the Sevan basin, among whom the following are particularly notable: Vardan Stonemason (13th century); Bishop Grigor the Painter (early 16th century); Simon the Book-binder (mid-16th century); Trtat (mid-16th century); Melikset (mid-16th century); Manvel (mid-16th century); Arakel (mid-16th century); Aakob the Painter (second half of the 16th century); Kiram (late 16th-early 17th century); Melikbek (mid-17th century); Anania (mid-17th century); Ohanes (second half of the 17th century); Bab (early 18th century); Nerses (first half of the 18th century); A dozen works by these craftsmen are known, with the exception of Kiram, who was perhaps the most prominent

khachkar master of medieval Armenia and is credited with more than 100 known works. From this group, Akob the Painter also stands out, to whom approximately three dozen gravestones are attributed⁸.

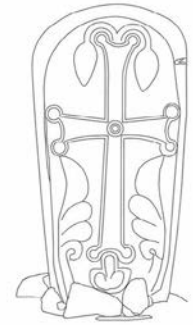
Discussion and Conclusions

The medieval funerary monuments of the basin of Lake Sevan represent a spatially and conceptually organized visual language. They materialize memory, reinforce social identity, and construct communal narratives.

Funerary iconography functions as a structural mechanism of self-representation in medieval society, being both locally rooted and integrated into the broader pan-Christian symbolic discourse. It is also important to discuss the purpose of medieval funerary monuments and the function of their iconography. It may provide insight into how the medieval Christian communities of the Sevan Basin perceived life and death, how they sought to preserve the memory of the deceased, and how they simultaneously attempted to come to terms with death while continuing the course of everyday life. In medieval tombstone iconography, the deceased is presented as an idealized figure. The deceased is depicted as a diligent figure engaged in agricultural, pastoral, or other occupational activities. Alternatively, the depiction of the deceased is accompanied by carved tools representing his profession or occupation. The deceased is also depicted as a literate figure, a participant in feasts, a hunter, or a crowned noble; the mounted archer symbolizes bravery and chivalric status.

In inscriptions, relatives request prayers for the salvation of the deceased’s soul and also commemorate his good deeds and titles.

They typically include reflections on the transience of earthly life and moral values, expressing human attitudes toward the world. The inscriptions on gravestones also constitute an important primary source for the history of Armenia and its neighboring regions, as they contain texts referring to geopolitical events, record the names of kings and princes, and provide dates of military



13 | Khachkar from the Medieval Cemetery of Mets Masrik, 9th-Century.

“ The funerary monument is interpreted as a materialised sign whose meaning is not exhausted at the visual level but is instead produced through ritual functions, spatial distribution, and social practices.

⁸ Škerjanec, Čaval, Kokalj, *Digitising stećci - 3D documentation and relief visualisation of medieval tombstones*; Kazempour, Shokrpour, *A Symbolic Analysis of the Islamic Period Gravestones in the Ahar Museum*, pp. 1065-1086.



campaigns and related historical occurrences. On the other hand, *khachkars* erected vertically on the eastern side of graves, in addition to occasionally depicting Christian biblical-themed reliefs, are mainly adorned with crosses and vegetal-geometric ornamentation. These elements emphasize the intention to alleviate grief through prayer, to foster acceptance and consolation in response to the loss of a relative, and to express intercessory prayers for the salvation of the deceased's soul.

In the Lake Sevan Basin, nearly all known volumetric types of medieval Armenian tombstones are attested, along with unique examples characterized by non-repetitive and distinctive volumetric solutions. Field research indicates that in the 15th–18th centuries the Lake Sevan Basin became one of the key centers for the production of cradle-shaped (chest-shaped) tombstones in the Near East, as it represents one of the most densely documented areas in terms of preserved examples.

The Lake Sevan Basin was also one of the early centers of khachkar production, representing another major group of funerary monuments. Here it is possible to trace the entire development of khachkar production from the 9th to the 18th century, including some of the most elaborate and monumental examples

preserved in the Republic of Armenia, as well as one of the largest surviving concentrations of medieval *khachkars* in the world. The thousands of khachkars preserved in the Lake Sevan Basin testify the high artistic sensibility of medieval society, and the profound importance attached to commemorating the dead, the high status of master stonemasons, the widespread character of monumental art, and its accessibility across all social strata.

Thus, by deconstructing the visual, volumetric, and iconographic – both explicit and implicit – meanings of medieval funerary monuments in the Lake Sevan Basin, it can be argued that the khachkar functioned as a sculptural medium articulating the confessional and social narratives embedded in the funerary landscape.

As for the texts and imagery of funerary monuments, they constituted an integrated and coherent semantic field. Armenian inscriptions on gravestones not only document personal names and dates, but also play a role in structuring and regulating social memory. Text and image operate as an integrated semiotic structure. This combination produces a “readable memory”, in which visual and written languages complement one another, enabling the production of multi-layered meaning.

14, 15 | One of the khachkars carved by Kiram, one of the most renowned master khachkar carvers of medieval Armenia, bearing the sculpted inscription of the master's name in Armenian; Noratus Cemetery, dated to 1602. 16th-Century Khachkar from the Medieval Cemetery of Sotk (Currently Preserved at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin).

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