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Prof. Hamlet Petrosyan (Bjni, Armenia, 2011)

Foreword

Essays in Medieval Armenian history and literature in honour of Hamlet L. Petrosyan

The remarkable professional career of Prof. Hamlet L. Petrosyan spanning over approximately five decades stands as a testament to dedication, scholarly excellence, and unwavering commitment to cultural heritage of Armenia. Born in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), a fact that would profoundly influence his life's trajectory, Prof. Petrosyan's journey through academic institutions and system of higher education has been both unique and exemplary. After graduating from the Department of Archaeology at Yerevan State University, he continued his academic career as a PhD student under the supervision of Prof. Babken Arakelyan, member of Academy of Sciences, writing his dissertation under this distinguished mentor's guidance. This formative academic relationship helped shape Professor Petrosyan's methodological approach and instilled in him a deep commitment to the study of medieval Armenian culture – a passion that would define his scholarly pursuits.

From his earliest years as a researcher during the late Soviet years, Prof. Petrosyan nurtured a dream that he often recalls: 'When we were researching *khachkar*s (Armenian cross-stones) in Hadrut and Martakert with Artur Mkrtchyan, we had one dream – to graduate from university and return to Artsakh'. True to his word, he did return for research purposes, dedicating a significant portion of his 50-year professional career to studying the cultural heritage of Artsakh. His extensive fieldwork across the region has resulted in groundbreaking discoveries that have reshaped our understanding of Armenian medieval culture and architecture.

As the head of archaeological expeditions to numerous historical sites, Prof. Petrosyan has uncovered invaluable artifacts and structures that illuminate Armenia's rich past. His expertise in Armenian cross-stones has established him as a leading authority in this field, contributing significantly to the preservation and documentation of these unique cultural monuments. His methodological approach combines archaeological precision with a profound understanding of cultural context, allowing him to bridge material findings with their historical significance.

The year 2005 became a turning point in Petrosyan's academic career: he discovered the Antique-period city of Tigranakert in Artsakh and devoted to its excavations fifteen years of his life.

Since 2020, Prof. Petrosyan, together with his students and colleagues, has initiated the *Monument Watch*, an independent academic platform which, over the past five years, has presented the rich cultural heritage of Artsakh while maintaining academic neutrality and integrity.

Prof. Petrosyan's colleagues and students recognize him not only for his scholarly achievements but also for his unwavering dedication to mentorship and knowledge sharing. His generous spirit in guiding young researchers and his collaborative approach to academic projects have fostered a vibrant community of scholars dedicated to Armenian cultural studies.

On the occasion of his distinguished career, this tribute acknowledges Hamlet's profound contribution to Armenian archaeology, medieval studies, and cultural heritage preservation and dissemination.

The Volume Editors emphasize the efforts of Nzhdeh Yeranyan, a former student of Prof. Petrosyan, to bring together the colleagues from Italy, France, the United States, the Russian Federation, Islamic Republic of Iran, Georgia, and Armenia, and initiate the publication of papers in Medieval Armenian history and literature honouring Hamlet Petrosyan on the occasion of his 70th birthday.

Volume Editors

Reviving vessels: Deconstruction of the khachkar in late medieval tombstone imagery

Levon Abrahamian, Ara Demirkhanyan[†]

Abstract: This study explores the symbolic deconstruction of the classical Armenian khachkar within late medieval tombstone imagery, focusing on the migration of core generative motifs – especially the vessel – into new narrative contexts. Drawing on Ara Demirkhanyan's tripartite, mirror-symmetrical generative scheme, the authors trace how the khachkar's structural logic – rooted in a central, life-giving origin – persists in figurative tombstones of the 15th–16th centuries. In these compositions, oversized pitchers adorned with rosettes appear not only in 'eternal feast' scenes but also in unexpected contexts, where they symbolically replace or echo the khachkar's generative core. The study argues that these vessels are not decorative anomalies but encoded markers of rebirth, serving a similar function to the vertical khachkar cross. Tombstones thus become deconstructed khachkars, embedding resurrection symbolism across compositional planes. This continuity reveals a deep integration of cosmological and funerary meaning, where khachkar-derived motifs – particularly the symbolic vessel – mediate the passage from death to spiritual regeneration in late medieval Armenian visual culture.

Keywords: Khachkar, tripartite generative scheme, Armenian funerary art, symbolic vessels, late medieval tombstones, resurrection symbolism.

This study approaches the composition of the khachkar through the lens of the universal, tripartite, mirror-symmetrical generative scheme, originally proposed by the late Ara Demirkhanyan, one of the co-authors of this paper.[1] Rather than revisiting the origins and historical development of the khachkar – a topic addressed comprehensively in the works of Hamlet Petrosyan[2] – our objective is to demonstrate the presence and structural function of this generative model in the classical khachkar composition. Nonetheless, visual parallels between the khachkar and khachkar-type motifs in early Byzantine art may suggest that the generative scheme played a foundational role in shaping not only the khachkar's iconographic origins.

By 'classical composition,' we refer to a central cross flanked by symmetrical 'wings,' with a rosette – or occasionally another geometric figure – placed at the juncture where the wings diverge (Figure 1). The tripartite generative scheme mirrors this layout, but crucially omits the cross (Figure 2a).[3] At its center, where the wings extend outward, lies the generative origin, symbolized through female-coded forms: a downward-pointing triangle (commonly interpreted as 'feminine'), but also a triangle with an upward angle, which can also have generative properties (for example, a

[1] Demirkhanyan 1982.
[2] See especially Petrosyan 2008. See also Sahakyan 2017a.
[3] Demirkhanyan, Abrahamian 1995; Abrahamian, Demirkhanyan 1985: 78, n. 56.

Figure 1. a) Khachkar, 9th-10th centuries, Makenyants Monastery (presently in Echmiadzin). Photo by H. Petrosyan (Petrosyan 2008: 98, Figure 107); b) Khachkar of Grigorik, 990, Karmrashen. Photo by Z. Sargsyan (Petrosyan 2008: 107, Figure 124); c) Khachkar, 1602, Jugha (presently in Echmiadzin). Photo by H. Petrosyan (Petrosyan 2008: 223, Figure 326).

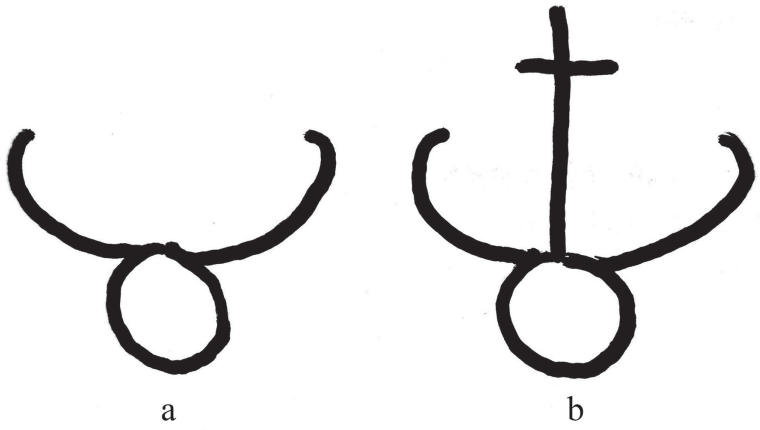

Figure 2. a) Schematic tripartite generative scheme; b) Schematic tripartite generative scheme with a cross emerging from the generative center.

Figure 3. Image on a vessel from Shreshblur or Mokhrablur, 3rd millennium BCE (Khanzadyan 1967: Plate XX).

Figure 4. Fragment of a vessel with a stylized image of a woman, Early Bronze Age. Photo by H. Simonyan. Lori-Pambak Regional Museum, Kosi Choter (Simonyan 2023: 194, Figure 54).

generative mountain),[4] a rhombus, or a circle. From this central origin, a sprout or stylized tree emerges.

We will reserve for future analysis the full typology of vertical forms that grow from this 'feminine' generative source – forms that can be understood as variations of the Cosmic Tree – and focus instead on a few particularly expressive examples. Among the earliest figurative representations are female statuettes with vegetation growing from a triangular womb, Urartian Trees of Life where vessels serve as the generative base,[5] and Kura-Araxes ceramic vessels, which encapsulate the visual language of early tripartite mirror-symmetrical schemes (Figures 3-4).

In the case of the khachkar, a cross emerges from the generative origin (Figure 2b). Uniquely, these khachkar crosses are often rendered as flowering or fruit-bearing – emphasizing their generative symbolism. Within the framework of the tripartite scheme, the cross thus becomes a special case of a vertically ascending element

[4] Cf. vegetive decoration of the columns in Bgheno Noravank Church (10th century) that rise from the triangle with an upward angle (Harutyunyan *et al.* 2005: 173, Plates 1 and 2.

[5] Taşyürek 1975: Plate 48; Abrahamian, Demirkhanyan 1985: 70, Figure 21.

growing from below, occupying the central axis and embodying the khachkar's core symbolic message. In certain examples, this cross even transforms into a Cosmic Tree, crowned by celestial bodies – sun, moon, or birds – marking its apex.[6]

The generative logic embedded in khachkar compositions echoes similar meanings in tombstones, which, although appearing later in historical chronology, draw upon analogous visual structures. Tombstone khachkars are generally believed to have emerged around the 12th century.[7] It is worth noting that when the khachkar tradition was revived in the latter half of the 20th century, it initially re-emerged not as a conventional funerary marker, despite being linked to themes of death and rebirth. A key example is the 1965 memorial to the victims of the Armenian Genocide, erected by architect Raphael Israyelyan at the Echmiadzin Cathedral grounds. Although commemorative in function, its design employed khachkar-based compositions.[8]

The use of khachkars as grave monuments only became widespread starting in 1971, with the creation of a khachkar by Artashes Hovsepyan.[9] The newly revived khachkars often incorporated 'ideal' or 'complete' compositions, likely facilitated by modern access to visual archives and consolidated albums of historical khachkar imagery. In this sense, the traditional Armenian term for a khachkar master – *kazmoł* ('compiler') – takes on renewed significance, reflecting the contemporary artisan's role in assembling motifs from diverse sources into unified compositions.[10]

A grave marked by a khachkar embodies a dual approach to death: the deceased is physically sealed under a heavy, horizontal (or double-pitched) tombstone, yet symbolically reanimated through the vertical presence of the khachkar rising at the foot of the grave. As is traditional, graves are aligned along the east-west axis, so that the deceased 'faces' the cross – now reinterpreted as a rising sun – on the khachkar's western face. In this way, the khachkar functions both as a boundary and as a conduit of resurrection. Hamlet Petrosyan has vividly illustrated this reviving dimension of the khachkar.[11]

It is important to emphasize that the blossoming cross of the khachkar, though erected posthumously, also refers back to the central symbolic role of the cross in the tripartite generative scheme. The emergence of the cross from below contrasts with a dominant Christian iconographic convention in which the cross descends from above as a victorious weapon – overcoming the pagan winged disc.[12] Similarly, crosses mounted above crescent-shaped bases atop church domes are frequently interpreted as triumphalist symbols of Christianity's victory over Islam. Yet the crescent, when viewed through the lens of the tripartite scheme, may simply represent a stylized version of the symmetrical 'wings,' rather than a symbol of religious opposition.

[6] See Petrosyan 2008: 373, *idem* 2001: 66. Cf. Abrahamian, Demirkhanyan 1985: 73, 78.
[7] Petrosyan 2008: 141.
[8] Petrosyan 2008: 374f.
[9] Hovsepyan 2007: 28.
[10] Abrahamian 2001: 268f. Cf. Petrosyan 2001: 68.
[11] Petrosyan 2008: 140f.
[12] Petrosyan 2001: 64, 279, n. 2.5.3.

The cross of the khachkar, emerging from a generative origin, can be interpreted through non-canonical narratives. One such example is a khachkar composition in which the head of Adam replaces the generative center, and Adam's hands, extending from either side, hold small crosses in place of the side wings (Figure 1c). This configuration has been interpreted as a visual representation of the legend that Adam, before his death, held the seeds of the forbidden fruit beneath his tongue – seeds from the very fruit that led to his expulsion from Paradise. According to this narrative, a tree later grew from those seeds, and it was from that tree that the Cross of the Crucifixion was fashioned[13] – the same cross we now recognize in the khachkar's form.

In this way, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, whose fruit Adam and Eve consumed, becomes the origin of the Crucifixion Cross – the cross seen on the khachkar, symbolically growing from Adam's head. Yet, this narrative is depicted within the framework of a three-part, mirror-symmetric generative scheme. In alternative versions, the connection between the Crucifixion Cross and Adam's head could be explained more directly, without the elaborate mythological storyline – by depicting Adam's head or bones beneath Golgotha – the stepped hill on which the Crucifixion is placed – in perspective of our generative scheme, from which the Cross of Crucifixion rises. Thus, parallel to the theological and mysterious relation between the Cross and Golgotha,[14] we have a symbolic rationale for khachkar compositions in which the generative center takes the form of a triangular hill or mountain, representing Golgotha.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, a distinct type of tombstone emerged, shaped as an elongated, rectangular prism, often with a rounded top or gently sloping side edges, placed lengthwise along the grave. Due to their resemblance to an overturned boat, these tombstones are commonly referred to as 'boat-shaped.' They may be seen as serving a dual function: both as a horizontal pressure slab and as a vertical khachkar. One of the side edges is carved with crosses that serve a symbolic life-giving or protective function akin to the khachkar, while the opposite edge often features scenes with anthropomorphic figures, thought to represent aspects of the deceased's life and deeds.

As graves are traditionally aligned along the east-west axis – with the deceased 'facing' the rising sun or the cross on the western face of the khachkar positioned at the feet – crosses are often carved on the narrow edge, eastern or western (sometimes on both ends) of these boat-shaped tombstones. A notable example of this type exists in the 19th-century cemetery of Old Goris, where a relief of the crucified Christ with radiant beams emanating from his head is carved into the edge of a tombstone (Figure 5).

On khachkars from Artsakh dating to the period of 10th to 14th centuries, but predominantly focusing in 12th–13th centuries, two narrative elements are

[13] Schiller 1971: 12f.; Abrahamian, Demirkhanyan 1985: 77.
[14] On the concepts of Golgotha and Cross see Petrosyan 2008: 23f. (with sources and literature).

Figure 5. Crucified Christ with radiant beams emanating from his head on the narrow edge of a 19th-century tombstone, Old Goris. Photo by L. Abrahamian.

often integrated into a single unified composition: the figurative section – what Hamlet Petrosyan refers to as the 'folk' component – is typically placed in the lower portion of the khachkar.[15] If we examine these compositions structurally, rather than through speculative reconstructions of their historical evolution, we may observe that the two distinct parts of the Artsakh khachkar are analogous in form and layout to the opposing faces of boat-shaped tombstones. As we will attempt to demonstrate, this formal, even hypothetical, transformation may hold deeper semantic significance beyond a simple division between narrative and symbolic elements.

The figurative scenes have been extensively studied by Hamlet Petrosyan, who classifies them into a few categories, like 'book of life,' 'eternal battle,' 'eternal feast' and others, which are imbued with symbolic meanings connected to the broader theme of rebirth.[16] Our interest here lies particularly in the scenes of feast. According to Lianna Beginyan, some of these images may not represent an abstract or mythologized eternal feast but rather reference wedding celebrations – specifically on the tombstones of young men and women who died before having the opportunity to marry.[17] While a wedding inherently involves a feast, its portrayal in funerary imagery serves a different symbolic function: it integrates the unrealized marriage into the tripartite life-cycle model – birth, marriage, death – which is fundamental to Armenian cultural cosmology. In such cases, funerary rites themselves may incorporate wedding symbolism.[18]

[15] Petrosyan 1997: 164f.
[16] Petrosyan 1997: 164.
[17] Beginyan 2018.
[18] Beginyan 2014.

Figure 6. Small pitchers under the cross of a khachkar, 1041, Tsakhats Kar Monastery (Harutyunyan *et al.* 2005: 233, Plate 205/2).

In the 'eternal feast' compositions, one is struck by the appearance of disproportionately large pitchers and vessels[19] – presumably filled with wine, as suggested by the logic of the depicted scenes. Notably, smaller pitchers also sometimes appear in the lower portion of khachkars, below the main cross (Figure 6), and outside any discernible narrative context. These vessels have been examined by Boris Gasparyan and co-authors, who contextualize both the pitchers in the feast scenes and the non-narrative examples within the broader framework of Armenian winemaking traditions.[20]

Hamlet Petrosyan pays special attention to the pitcher depictions, relating these 'Pitchers of Life' with the 'Cup of Life' in the context of general symbolism of revival. Hence the presence of huge pitchers on other scenes, which have no logical connection with feast.[21] Joseph Orbeli, being acquainted with only one depiction of a pitcher on a 16th-century gravestone from Gandzasar, understood the strangeness and importance of such disproportionate pitchers: '[T]he pitcher has some general symbolic meaning unknown to us and must be considered in connection with other pitchers, depicted in large numbers in the hands of figures on later Armenian tombstones'.[22]

[19] See Harutyunyan *et al.* 2005: 263-280.
[20] Gasparyan *et al.* 2018. See also Harutyunyan *et al.* 2005.
[21] Petrosyan 1997: 169.
[22] Orbeli 1963a: 203; Petrosyan 1997: 169.

Figure 7. Huge pitcher with the sign of eternity, Grave stone, 16th-17th centuries, Arates (Harutyunyan *et al.* 2005: 278, Plate 232/2).

Given their exaggerated scale, one might be inclined to interpret these vessels as products of naïve or even conceptual art. However, their disproportionate size appears to serve a symbolic function that extends beyond the feast narrative and abstract concept of Cup of Life. In many instances, these pitchers form a compositional bridge to the upper part of the khachkar – or, in the case of boat-shaped tombstones, to the opposing face that features the crosses. Their scale allows them to carry the symbol of eternity (Figure 7), thus linking them not just to the feast, but to the generative center of the khachkar composition itself.

Indeed, many of these pitchers are adorned with a motif resembling the rosette commonly found in the central medallion of the traditional three-part khachkar structure, often incorporating the eternity symbol. It may be argued that the vessel – specifically, the vessel bearing the rosette – has migrated from the khachkar's core symbolic language into the narrative imagery of the feast. This suggests a continuity of symbolic meaning across compositional parts, reaffirming the generative and

Figure 8. Tombstone at Gndevank Monastery (Vayots Dzor), 17th century. Photo by S. Sweezy (Abrahamian, Sweezy (eds) 2001: 208).

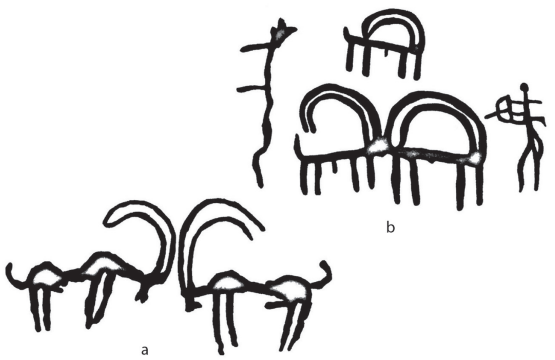

Figure 9. Petroglyphs depicting confronting horned goats and an arched hunter, a) Ughtasar (Karakhanyan, Safyan 1970: Plate 10/1), b) Geghama mountains (Martirosyan 1981: Plate 34/1).

spiritual dimensions of both life and afterlife as visualized in the khachkar tradition.

As already mentioned, at times, vessels adorned with rosette motifs appear not within the expected context of the 'eternal feast,' but rather in completely different narrative scenes where their presence initially seems incongruous. One particularly striking example is the relief found on a tombstone from Gndevank (Figure 8). In this composition, a huge vessel bearing a rosette design is placed on the right side of a three-part layout. One might mistake it for a solar symbol – were it not for the presence of a clearly defined neck, a characteristic feature of vessels commonly depicted on tombstones. Just as in feast scenes where vessels with rosettes harmoniously align with the logic of celebratory imagery, in this Gndevank composition the vessel may symbolically stand in for the sun, thereby assuming a cosmological or generative role.

The Gndevank tombstone is notable for yet another reason. On its left side is a depiction of a mounted archer aiming his bow at two goats. This hunting figure aligns closely with those found in the 'eternal battle' type of tombstone composition, as classified by Hamlet Petrosyan. The central panel features a pair of mirror-symmetrical goats standing upright on their hind legs, their horns locked in confrontation. These opposed animals appear to be direct borrowings from prehistoric rock art (Figure 9), faithfully reproducing a key component of the mirror-symmetrical generative scheme. Meanwhile, the generating element of the composition – the huge vessel – is placed independently on the right, isolated from the central pair.

If we extend the logic of this tripartite symbolic structure, the cross – typically the product or culmination of such a scheme – would presumably be located on the reverse side of the tombstone, which is visually inaccessible.

In conclusion, the relief compositions found on boat-shaped tombstones can be understood as containing a deconstructed khachkar – an encoded structure that symbolically assures the rebirth of the deceased. Vessels featuring motifs associated with the generative center of the mirror-symmetrical model play a pivotal role in this process. Their inclusion in narrative tombstone scenes is not merely decorative but deeply symbolic, integrating seamlessly into funerary iconography that visually reinforces the cyclical themes of death and renewal.

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