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Arsen Harutyunyan, Vahe Sargsyan,
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The Tradition of Epigraphy as a foundation of State Strategy in the Armenian Highlands

Key words: cuneiform, epigraphy, Biaynili-Urartu, Kingdom of Van, Classical Armenia, medieval Armenia, construction, donation, stele, inscription.

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The Tradition of Epigraphy as a Foundation of State Strategy in the Armenian Highlands

The tradition of creating inscriptions for various events and occasions was widespread across different civilizations of the ancient world – Egyptian, Assyrian, Urartian, Iranian, and Greco-Roman – during the second and first millennia BCE. The Armenian Highlands were no exception. Here, the establishment of the Kingdom of Van in the mid-9th century BCE led to the creation of Urartian cuneiform writing as one of its strategic state elements, resulting in nearly two centuries of inscription creation.

Over time, influenced by the military and political developments in the Armenian Highlands, writing developed its own characteristic features, becoming a unique tool in Armenian state strategy throughout the post-Urartian, Classical, and all phases of medieval Armenia. Moreover, the tradition of epigraphy in the Armenian Highlands emerged as a distinctive phenomenon of written monuments, maintaining its own traditional templates and formal-contextual methods.

Arsen Harutyunyan, Vahe Sargsyan, Hayk Gyulamiryan

Tradiția epigrafiei ca bază a strategiei de stat în arealul Platoului Armeniei

Tradiția creării inscripțiilor cu ocazia diverselor evenimente a fost răspândită în diferite civilizații ale lumii antice: egipteană, asiriană, urartiană, iraniană și greco-romană, în mileniile II-I î.e.n. Nu a făcut excepție și zona Platoului Armeniei, unde crearea scrierii cuneiforme urartiene a devenit unul dintre factorii strategici ai statului – Regatul Van, format la mijlocul secolului al IX-lea î.e.n., utilizată la realizarea inscripțiilor timp de aproape două secole.

De-a lungul timpului, datorită evenimentelor militare și politice care au avut loc în Platoul Armeniei, scrisul și-a dobândit propriile trăsături caracteristice de dezvoltare, devenind un instrument unic pentru strategia statalității armene atât în perioada post-urartiană și cea antică, cât și în toate etapele evoluției istorice a Armeniei medievale. În același timp, tradiția creării inscripțiilor în arealul Platoului Armeniei s-a manifestat ca un fenomen original al monumentelor scrise, având propriul șablon tradițional, precum și mijloace și metode formal-substantive.

Cuneiform as an Indicator of the Kings of the Van Kingdom's Military Strategy

In the mid-9th century BCE, the Kingdom of Van (Biaynili-Urartu) was established in the region between Lakes Van and Urmia in the Armenian Highlands, marking its rise with the introduction of a cuneiform writing system[1]. This became one of the primary prerequisites for the newly established kingdom, as the ruling dynasty adopted the principle of inscribing monumental structures with cuneiform to present and spread royal ideology, indicating the borrowing of this culture from Assyria [Mayer 1995, 255-256; Salvini 1995, 193-194; Linke 2015, 141, 145].

During the reign of King Sarduri I, son of Lutipri (circa 840-830 BCE), inscriptions were initially composed in the Neo-Assyrian dialect, incorporated into the architectural composition of monuments. In six similar inscriptions on the "Sarduri's Castle" at the western foot of the Van Rock, the king presents himself with a titular sequence characteristic of Assyrian king Ashurnasir-pal II (883-859 BCE)[2], which, according to German Urartologist C.F. Lehmann-Haupt, was a means to challenge the supremacy of the Assyrian king [Lehmann-Haupt 1926, 21-22].

1. The research was supported by the Higher Education and Science Committee of RA (Research project № 24SSAH-6A011).

2. "Great king, mighty king, king of the universe, king of the Nairi lands, king without equal, wonderful shepherd, who does not avoid battle, who subjugates the disobedient, king of kings, who received tribute from all kings" [Wilhelm 1986, 97-98; Salvini 2018, AlA-lF].

During the reign of Ishpuini (ca. 830-820 BCE), who succeeded his father Sarduri on the throne of the Kingdom of Van, the writing system was reformed and simplified, adapted to the Urartian language, and proclaimed as the state language [Melikishvili 1960, 33-35; Hmayakyan 1994, 19]. The cuneiform inscriptions known from Ishpuini's sole reign period, which spread north and east of Lake Van, provide the first accounts in the kingdom of construction [Salvini 2018, A2-1, A2-6 A-C, A2-7 A, B, A2-8], canal building [Salvini 2018, A2-3A-D], and agricultural works [Salvini 2018, A2-5]. In the cuneiform inscription found on a stele from the Karahan, Haldi (also known as Khaldi), the chief deity of the Urartian pantheon, is mentioned as "lord", and the first documented City and Temple of Haldi in the kingdom were established [Salvini 2018, A2-9A]. Subsequently, cuneiform inscriptions were used to formulate royal ideology and expand the cult of the chief deity [Badalyan 2018, 115-116]. These inscriptions became distinct from architecture, also serving as a pure means of information transmission [Salvini 2018, A2-5; Wilhelm 1986, 97-98].

The expansion of types and nature of inscribed monuments continued during Ishpuini's co-regency period with crown prince Menua (820-810 BCE). During this time, the Rock Door of Mher was carved on the slope of Mount Zmzm (fig. 1), about 4 km from the capital Tushpa-Van, featuring the kingdom's national pantheon, where the names of officially recognized deities and cult concepts were inscribed [Hmayakyan 1990, 6, 10; Salvini 2018, A3-1]. The written codification of sacrificial procedures to the gods in the Mher's Door inscription was a necessary prerequisite, as new rituals were being established [Bernbeck 2003-2004, 286].

Ishpuini's titular sequence – "mighty king, great king, king of Shurili" – was supplemented with the title "lord of the city of Tushpa", establishing the ideological correlation between "the god Haldi", "king", and "capital Tushpa" [Salvini 2018, A2-6, A3-2], which remained unchanged until the fall of the state.

The first military inscriptions were carved on steles and rocks in the capital and conquered territories, testifying to the king's conquests and Biainilian presence in the conquered regions [Salvini 2018, A3-4-3-10]. Such Bianian inscriptions served as distinct symbols of royal authority in newly conquered regions, which in the Ancient Near East also aimed to magically connect the king with the deity [Leo Oppenheim 1964, 234-235].

During the co-regency of Ishpuini and Menua, one of the unique inscribed monuments was the Kelishin stele[3], whose bilingual inscription testifies to the rulers' cultic visit to Ardini-Musasir, the kingdom's spiritual center located in the upper reaches of the Great Zab River [Mayer 2013, 18-19, 46-47; Salvini 2018, A3-11; Dan 2020, 130]. A bilingual inscription about the reaffirmation of Biainilian supremacy in the Musasir region was also left by King Rusa, son of Sarduri (730-714 BCE) [Salvini 2018, A10-5]. Evidently, the bilingual steles in Musasir, serving as symbols of royal authority, had a public character, and such inscriptions in the Ancient Near East were used for legal and political purposes [Leo Oppenheim 1964, 234-235, Mayer 2013, 4].

During Menua's sole reign (810-785/780 BCE), the tradition of establishing structures named after the king began in the Kingdom of Van, such as the Menua Canal and the city of Menuakhinili [Salvini 2018, A5-12-5-23, A5-26, 5-27], a practice that continued under subsequent rulers. Cities or structures named after the king and god, along with their corresponding cuneiform inscriptions, symbolized royal authority over the location and the work completed, while in public memory, the king was perceived as an advocate of prosperity [Radner 2005, 37-38].

During Menua's reign, the first steps were taken to create cuneiform chronicles, as evidenced by inscriptions found on a stele from Van and from the temple of Aznavurtepe [Salvini 2018, A5-9, A5-11 A-B; Grekyan 2018a, 45-46]. The temple chronicles were primarily addressed to the gods and future rulers [Mayer 1995, 2].

The composition of chronicles further developed during the reign of King Argishti I (785/782-756 BCE). These were inscribed in eight columns on the southwestern section of the Van Rock (fig. 2), on the external wall of the king's tomb [Salvini 2018, A8-3]. Argishti's chronicles were also recorded on steles discovered in Van [Salvini 2018,

3. The stele was located in the pass of the same name on the road from Tushpa to Musasir, with its western section inscribed in Assyrian and the eastern section in Urartian [Lehmann-Haupt 1926, 302; Salvini 1995, 43-44].

Fig. 1. The Rock Door of Mher [© Salvini 2017, 14.14].

A8-1, A8-2]. Following Assyrian tradition, the chronicles were inscribed particularly on visible parts of rocks, often at locations where military campaigns had concluded [Mayer 1995, 29, Salvini 2018, A8-4-8-14].

One of the unique manifestations of rock inscription monuments is Sarduri II's (756-c. 730 BCE) Treasury Chronicle, located on the northeastern side of the Van Rock, which was created by his father Argishti I. It combines two rock niches with a stele. Only the western niche bears inscriptions, in front of which stands a documented foursided inscribed stele with an inscribed pedestal facing it [Marr, Orbeli 1922, 15-17; Salvini 2018, A9-3]. The composition of this chronicle, similar to Mher's Door in its architectural solution – combining rock, stele, and cuneiform writing – and its transformation into a place of worship, indicates that in Biainili-Urartu, as in the Ancient Near East, writing was also perceived as a sacred gift from the gods [Gelb 1963, 230-231; Salvini 1995, 145-146].

The inscriptions left by the next king of the Van Kingdom, Rusa son of Sarduri (730-714 BCE), are few in number, which was due to Sarduri II's defeat by Assyria in 743 BCE and subsequent internal problems in the country [Mayer 2013, 50-51; Salvini 2018, A10-1-A10-7]. During the reign of Rusa son of Erimena[4] (714-710/9 BCE), again due to the defeat by Assyria in 714 BCE, only inscriptions about the construction of reservoirs, irrigation canals, urban development, and grain storage facilities are documented under the king's name [Salvini 2018, A14-1-A14-6; Grekyan 2024, 43-45]. Military campaigns, along with urban development and construction works bearing the names of the king and the god Haldi, are again attested only during the reign of Argishti II (710-690/680s BCE) [Salvini 2018, A11-1-A11-8].

During the reign of Rusa son of Argishti (690/680-650/640s BCE), the last powerful king of the Kingdom of Van, urban development was again emphasized, with at least four new administrative centers built in both central and peripheral regions of the country, named after the king and the gods [Grekyan 2018b, 227]. This urban development surge led to the creation of rock inscriptions commemorating construction, religious, irrigation, and agricultural works in the newly established centers, while the resettlement of captured populations prompted the recording of military campaigns (Salvini 2018, A12-

4. There are conflicting opinions in Urartian/Biainilian studies regarding the reign of King Rusa son of Erimena in Biaini-Urartu [Roaf 2012, 187-188; Salvini 2018, 18], but this dating appears more probable in the overall context of rock inscriptions.

Fig. 2. The Chronicle of Argishti I [© Salvini 2017, 14.19].

1-A12-10). About one and a half centuries after the creation of the *Mher's Door inscription*, the pantheon of the kingdom's gods was again recorded, with certain modifications, in the "Susi" temple of the newly built Rusahinili Eidurukai (Ayanis), which served as a residence for the country's king [Salvini 2018, A12-1; Grekyan 2024, 50, 55]. After Rusa son of Argishti, the state essentially fragmented, and the royal dynasty lost its former authority. In the second half of the 7th century BCE, parallel to the decline of statehood, the creation of cuneiform-inscribed monuments in the Armenian Highlands also ceased.

Writing and Historical-Cultural Events in Classical Armenia

Following the dissolution of the Kingdom of Van, cuneiform writing underwent a transition to include Aramaic, Greek, and Latin inscriptions, which subsequently gained widespread prevalence in Classical Armenia. These inscriptions have consistently garnered scholarly attention since the late 19th century. Rock inscriptions served as a medium for recording various political and economic events and decisions in the country, thereby making this information accessible to the public. This demonstrates that even in the pre-Christian period, writing was regarded as a means of documenting trade relations, taxes, and legal codes, thus contributing to the establishment of an effective governance system.

The inscriptions from Commagene primarily inform us about the succession of the Yervanduni kings. The last king of this dynasty, Orontes IV (220-201 BCE), constructed a new capital for Armenia, Yervandashat (220 BCE), as evidenced by the Greek inscriptions from Old Armavir [Boltunova 1942, 35-61; Trever 1953, 120-147], which are also significant for elucidating the country's political, economic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and other issues [Manandyan 1946, 3]. According to the historian Movses Khorenats'i, Armavir, which had been Armenia's capital since the mid-4th century BCE, remained the seat of Yervand the Last [Khorenatsi 1991, II/LVI]. It is known that the affairs of the Yervanduni royal court were conducted in Greek [Tiratsyan 1971, 514], as vividly attested by the Greek inscriptions authenticated in Armavir, especially the second stele dedicated to the Assyrian-Macedonian calendar [Manandyan 1946, 23]. Comparing these inscriptions with the corresponding testimonies of Khorenats'i, we can clarify such important events as the state of Yervanduni Armenia, the relocation of the capital, the rebellion of Artaxias against Orontes, and his murder, burial, and the erection of a monument, and so on [Manandyan 1946, 29-30].

The course of events was different during the period of the Artaxiad dynasty, which succeeded the Yervandunis. The Seleucid Empire suffered a crushing defeat at the Battle of Magnesia in 190 BC, and the Treaty of Apamea in 188 BC marked the beginning of the decline of that empire [Polibii 2005, XXV, 2, 12]. Following these events, in 189 BC, the *strategoi* of Armenia under Seleucid rule, Artaxias and Zariadres, aligning themselves with Rome, declared themselves independent kings. As noted by the Greek historian Polybius, the largest territory was that of Greater Armenia, and "the ruler of the greater part of Armenia is Artaxias" (189-160 BC) [Polibii 2005, XXV, 2, 12], a fact also confirmed by Strabo [Strabo 1928, XI, 14, 5].

Following the expansion of Greater Armenia, Artaxias implemented economic reforms in the country, which held significant strategic importance. This is evidenced by a number of boun-

dary stone-stele inscribed in Aramaic, which were erected during his reign and preserved to this day [Dupont-Sommer 1946-1948, 54], as well as the account by Movses Khorenats'i regarding the fact that: Յետ ամենայն առաքինութեանց և գործոց ուղղութեանց Արտաշիսի, հրամայէ զսահմանս գիւղից և ագարակաց որոշել. քանզի բազմամարդացոյց զաշխարհս Հայոց, եկամուտս բազումս ածելով ազգս, և բնակեցուցանելով ի լերինս և ի հովիտս և ի դաշտս: Եւ նշանս սահմանացն հաստատեաց այսպես. հրաման տալով քարինս կոփել չորեքկուսիս, և պնակաձև փոսել զմէջսն, ծածկելով յերկրի. և չորեքկուսիս ի վերայ յարուցանել ամբարտակս, սակաւ ինչ բարձրագոյն յերկրէ – "After all of Artaxias's virtues and righteous deeds, he ordered to determine the boundaries of villages and estates. For he had made the Armenian world populous by bringing many nations and settling them in mountains, valleys and plains. And he established the boun-dary markers thus: he ordered stones to be carved on four sides, and their centers to be hollowed out like plates, burying them in the ground, and to raise quadrilateral embankments above them, slightly higher than the ground" [Khorenats'i 1991, II/LVI].

The first Artaxiad boundary stones were discovered in the 1950s-1960s [Markaryan 2017, 222]. There are 16 of them in the Republic of Armenia, with the majority found in the Sevan basin, and several others discovered in Ishkhanasar (Syunik) [Perikhanian 1965, 107], Teghut [Périkhanian 1971, 170] (fig. 3), and other locations [Khachatryan 2014, 43-59]. During Artaxias's reign, judging from the inscriptions, the language of the royal chancellery was Aramaic. However, as the Armavir inscriptions show, Greek spread to Armenia much earlier and was aspiring to become the state language [Sargsyan 1971, 537]. Aramaic inscriptions in Armenia have also been documented from archaeological excavations at Garni and Artashat [Arakelian 1982, 33; Perikhanian 1964, 124].

Although the Aramaic inscriptions on the boundary stones are similar in nature, there are sometimes variations in the wording in the sections describing the king. For example, on one boundary stone we read: "King Artaxias, son of Zareh the Eruandid, divided the land into parts" [Tiratsyan 1957, 107]. On another stele we find: "King Artaxias the Eruandid supreme, son of Zareh, divider of land here in (such and such) village" [Tiratsian 1980, 99]. And on another: "King Artaxias 'the good' Eruandid, son of Zareh, and crown-bearer Nicephorus (or Nicphar) son of Ashkhshakhrasart" [Perikhanian 1965, 108].

During the reign of the Arsacids, who succeeded the Artaxiads, particularly noteworthy

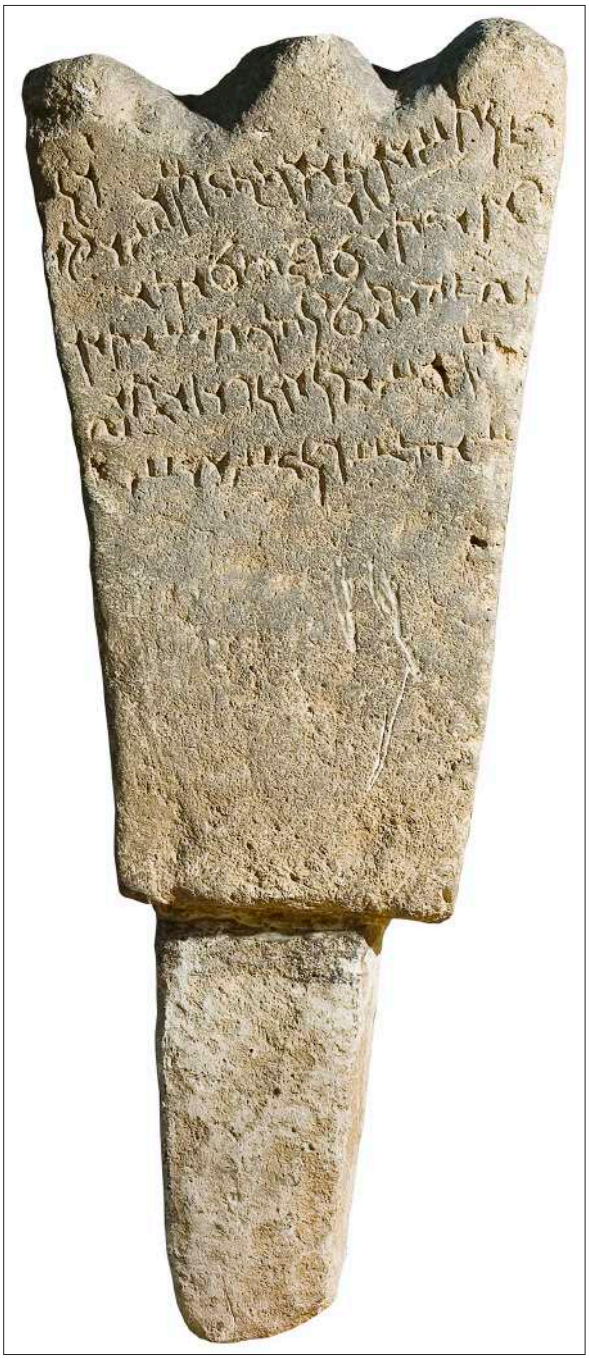

Fig. 3. The boundary stone of Artashes I (© History Museum of Armenia).

Fig. 4. The Greek inscription of Tiridates I (1st c. CE) (© ArmenianArt).

is the Greek-inscribed stele of Tiridates I (66-80 CE) from Garni, which was later converted into a khachkar in the 9th-10th centuries. After the events that took place in Armenia in the 50s CE, King Tiridates I was crowned by Roman Emperor Nero and returned to Armenia in 66 CE with gifts worth 50 million denarius and craftsmen, as the "Great King of Greater Armenia". The inscription indicates that Tiridates built the palace and impregnable fortress for the queen in the 11th year of his reign, in 77 CE [Trever 1953, 187] (fig. 4). As K. Trever rightly notes, the craftsmen who came to Armenia participated not only in the restoration of the capital Artaxat but also in the reconstruction of the Garni fortress and the foundation of its temple. The inscription commemorating this was probably placed on a visible section of the fortress wall, also proclaiming the establishment of the new Arsacid dynasty in Armenia.

In the early 20th century, another Greek inscription was discovered in *Aparan*, according to which *Tiridates* the Great, King of Greater Armenia, donated the province of Nig to one of the princes of the *Gntuni* family [Arakelyan 1940, 76]. This is, in fact, a deed of gift by which the King of Greater Armenia granted the province of *Nig* to the *Gntuni* dynasty.

Number of Greek and Latin inscriptions related to the Roman army are also known in the Armenian Highlands [Mitford 1997, 141-142; Rastovtsev' 1915, 243; Ter-Martirosov 1989, 178; Vinogradov 1992, 13; Speidel 2020, 135], most of which were discovered around the Upper Euphrates *limes*, where Roman legions were concentrated. Of particular interest are the architectural and monumental structures erected on the occasion of significant military events in the classical world, and the inscriptions adorned with semantic decorations. This tradition was widespread in the Roman Empire and also extend to Armenia. The clear evidence of this is the large-lettered, calligraphic Latin inscription of Emperor Trajan (fig. 5), dated to the second half of 116 CE, discovered in the capital Artaxat [Arakelian 1971, 116], which demonstrates the use of writing and language as an important state tool in the ancient world. Comparable to this inscription are the late antique Greek inscriptions reused in the walls of Amid-Tigranakert, whose content remains incomplete to this day and is probably related to the city's autonomy [Trever 1953, 288]. During the transition period from late antiquity to the early medieval period, Greek and Latin inscriptions gradually gave way to the Armenian Mesropian script, laying the foundation for a new era in the formation of Armenian statehood.

It is evident that inscriptions, as a means of information transmission, played an exceptio-

Fig. 5. The Latin inscription of Emperor Trajan (the second half of 116 CE) (© History Museum of Armenia).

Fig. 6. The oldest Armenian inscription, Tekor's temple, 480s CE (© History Museum of Armenia).

nal role and had significance in almost all phases of statehood. They best illuminate the political events of the time, victorious wars, construction works, donations, legal contracts, and privileges, among others.

The Traditional Foundation of Medieval Armenian Epigraphy

In medieval Armenia, the country's political, economic, and cultural events continued to be primarily recorded through stone inscriptions, alongside which a second written form of information transmission also became widespread: the colophons of manuscript codices[5]. After the fall of the Arshakid kingdom (428 CE), when the country was governed by *marzpans* (governors) and noble houses under the *marzpanic* administrative system established in Armenia (5th-7th centuries), church construction developed due to the need to spread Christianity and build places of worship. It is no coincidence that the earliest Armenian inscriptions are exclusively epigraphic memorials composed on the occasion of constructing churches and various monastic buildings.

The oldest of these is considered to be the building inscription of the St. Sargis Church (referred to as a martyrium in the inscription) of Tekor[6], which is dated to the second half of the 5th century CE, specifically the 480s (fig. 6). It has been published multiple times and has attracted scholars' attention not only for being chronologically the earliest surviving inscription to date but also for its paleographic characteristics of letter forms and its content. The inscription was composed in the name of Sahak Kamsarakan, son of Arshavir Kamsarakan, the lord (*tanuter*) of the Arsharunik province, who is mentioned as the builder of the St. Sargis martyrium, meaning the temple's construction was carried out under his patronage. According to the inscription, its foundation ceremony was performed by Armenian Catholicos Hovhan Mandakuni (478-490), during the time of Hovhan Bishop, the leader of Arsharunik province, Tayron, the abbot of Tekor, and Manan the *hazarapet* (chiliarch). …եւ հիմնարկեցաւ տեղիս ի ձեռն Յոհանու հայոց կաթողիկոսութեան եւ Յոհանու Արշարունեաց եպիսկոպոսի եւ Տայրոնի՝ Տեկորոյ վանաց երիցու եւ Մանանայ հազարապետի… – **…and this place was founded by the hand of Hovhannes, Catholicos of Armenians, and Hovhannes, Bishop of Arsharuniq, and Tayron, the abbot of Tekor monastery, and Manan the Hazarapet…** [Yovsepean 1913, 5-6; Greenwood 2004, 80; Ghafadaryan 2007a, 109]: The mention of prominent figures in epigraphs from the Armenian Highlands reflects the continuity of the tradition of stone inscriptions into Christian Armenia. While the names and the structures commemorated in these inscriptions changed with the advent of Christianity, the underlying concept of memorialization remained fundamentally unchanged.

Regarding the stylistic and structural characteristics of medieval Armenian inscriptions, they demonstrate a notable continuity with the pre-Mesropian written tradition. For instance, during the early medieval period, the scribes and master craftsmen responsible for creating these inscriptions paid particular attention to recording the names of secular and spiritual leaders of the land. Subsequently, references were made to the

5. For detailed information about medieval manuscript colophons [*see* Harutyunyan 2019].

6. The inscription has survived through an estampage made by the artist Taragros in 1920, whose plaster copy is currently displayed in the History Museum of Armenia (*see* photo).

structures that were commemorated, primarily churches. It is noteworthy that during this period, certain elements characteristic of later Armenian inscriptions was absent. These include references to specific events prompting the inscriptions, such as the offering of liturgies on religious holidays, as well as formulas of curses and blessings, which became prevalent only after the establishment of the Bagratid Kingdom, particularly from the 9th to the 14th centuries. Exemplary early medieval inscriptions have been preserved on the walls of notable churches, such as *Saint Hripsime* in *Vagharshapat*, and the churches of *Aruch*, *Kosh*, *Talin*, *Mastara*, and *Mren*. Unfortunately, inscriptions from other significant structures, including the now-destroyed churches of *Bagavan*, *Alaman*, *Bagaran*, and other contemporaneous sites, have been lost. However, these inscriptions have been documented both in topographical surveys and in scholarly works [Orbeli 1963, 371-439].

The establishment of statehood across much of the Armenian Highlands under the leadership of the Bagratid dynasty in the second half of the 9th century heralded a new era of architectural revival. This period exhibited distinct characteristics, particularly the development of the feudal system, which reached a new level of maturity by incorporating the Armenian clergy into its structure [Grigoryan 1973, 27-32]. To avoid the periodic pressures of foreign rulers, the institution of ecclesiastical feudalism, or lordship, entered into close cooperation with secular feudalism. The church, being primarily a tax-exempt institution, enabled secular feudal lords to make various donations (including both movable and immovable assets). The income generated from these taxexempt assets contributed to the development of the country's economy and culture [Mkrtchyan 2013, 10].

This same approach continued during the Zakarid principality and in subsequent centuries. As a result, monastic complexes were built with multi-apse churches and narthexes, often featuring double-story chapels and altars for liturgical offerings. These structures were designed to fulfill the expectations of benefactors, namely to ensure that their names would be remembered during liturgies and, in some cases, etched onto the sacred walls of churches [Harutyunyan, Hakobyan 2016, 87-98].

The 874 CE dated inscription of *Sevanavank* already attests to the construction of churches by Princess Mariam of Syunik, as well as the donation of one vineyard each from *Yerevan* and *Garni* to the monastery. These donations were granted as "*vakhm*" (վախմ), meaning inalienable property. …եւ տվաք վախմ Սբ Առաքելոցս… այգի (ի) Գառնի եւ յԵրեւան… – **…And you gave [donated] to the Holy Apostles... a vineyard in Garni and Yerevan...** [Ghafadaryan 2007b, 165; Harutyunyan 2020a, 248].

The phenomenon became more widespread during the medieval period, when regular stone inscriptions appeared on church tympanums, entrance lintels, and visible sections of walls, containing both construction-related texts as well as dedicatory and canonical-legal inscriptions. Hundreds of preserved inscriptions in medieval Armenian monastic complexes – *Sanahin*, *Haghpat*, *Haghartsin*, *Vorotnavank*, *Tatev*, *Geghard*, *Vahanavank*, *Makaravank*, and other spiritual centers – directly attest to this. The inscriptions from developed medieval period are more standardized in format:

a. They typically include a specific date.

b. List secular and religious figures, such as: the king, queen, prince, princess, high-ranking officials with their titles and positions.

c. Identify the key figure(s) – construction initiator, donor, patron, etc. – under whose care the inscribed event took place.

d. Include expectations and commitments, mainly concerning salvation and intercession for the souls of the actors and their relatives at Christ's Second Coming, confirmed by the monastery's promise of specific numbers of liturgies on designated feast days.

e. Conclude with formulas cursing those who violate or fail to fulfill the terms, and blessings for those who comply.

The cited template examples demonstrate that medieval inscriptions also required naming prominent figures of the country and protecting texts from vandalism through curse formulas – a practice characteristic of Urartian cuneiform inscriptions[7]. Influenced by Christian ideology, construction, dedicatory, and canonical-legal inscriptions validating works by Bagratid and Cili-

7. Folklorist Sargis Harutyunyan conducted a comparative analysis of Urartian cuneiform inscriptions and Armenian manuscript and lapidary sources, particularly highlighting the common connection of curse and blessing formulas in the texts [Harutyunyan 1975, 43-44, 47].

cian kings/queens and Zakarid princes/princesses typically followed the above template sequence. Here are some examples.

The 1001 CE building inscription of the Ani Cathedral first mentions Armenian Catholicos Sargis I Sevants'i (992-1019), King Gagik I Bagratuni (990-1020), and Queen Katranide (fig. 7). It then states that under Katranide's care and King Gagik's order, the cathedral's construction was completed, which had begun during the reign of Gagik's predecessor, King Smbat II the Universal (978-990). Upon completion, the queen made "honorable" donations to the newly built sanctuary in memory of her relatives and children, which was confirmed through promises of liturgies on the Feast of Transfiguration and a curse formula against violators. …յետ էլից բարէպաշտ թագուհոյս զՎարդավարին յիսնեակսն միով քառասնիւ կատարել անխափան մինչեւ ի գալուստն Քրիստոսի, եթէ ոք զարձանագրեալդ անփոյթ առնէ, դատապարտեալ եղիցի ի Քրիստոսէ… – **...after the death of the pious queen, [perform] an uninterrupted liturgy in her memory for forty [days] during the fifty days preceding Vardavar until the Coming of Christ. If anyone neglects this inscription, let him be condemned by Christ...** (Orbeli 1966, 35_{101}).

This phenomenon is notable in canonical-legal inscriptions as well: A 1251 CE inscription at the Holy Apostles Church in Ani establishes a canon by order of Catholicos Konstantin I Bardzrberdtsi (1221-1267) and Commander-in-Chief Shahnshah, condemning bishops or leaders who ordain priests through bribery, pronouncing anathema upon such individuals. …թէ ոք յեպիսկոպոսաց կամ յառաջնորդաց կաշառաւք կամ անմիրու երէց առնէ, կամ առանց ճշդիւ եւ յոյժ ընտրութեան, դատի Աստուծոյ… – **...if any bishop or leader ordains a priest through bribery or without precise and most careful examination, [they] shall be judged by God...** [Orbeli 1966, 15_{54}]. Contemporary inscriptions with nearly identical content have been preserved on the walls of the Holy Mother of God Church in *Bjni* and Mren Cathedral [Sargsyan 2006, 123].

A unique donation inscription has been preserved above the northern entrance of the narthex of the Sanahin Monastery, dating to 1191 CE. This inscription records a donation agreement involving King George (Gorge) of Georgia, Amirspasalar Zakare and his brother Ivane, as well as the donors – Hamazasp Marzpan's grandsons *Kurd*, *Hasan*, *Hamazasp*, and *Sargis*. According to the inscription, they donated half of the Mantash estate and a portion of land called Tayk, which were their personal properties, to the monastery. This donation was made for the salvation of the souls of their deceased family members and for the well-being of the living. In return, the abbot Hovhannes and the local monastic community established a rule to celebrate a liturgy at all the monastery's altars (referred to as "churches" in the inscription) on the Feast of the Ascension. ...ընկալաք Հայրս Յովանես եւ միաբանք եւ գրեցաք զՀամբարձումս աւրս զամէն եկեղեցիք նացա ժամս... – **…we accepted – Father Hovhannes and the brotherhood – and recorded that their commemoration shall be observed in all churches on the Day of Ascension…** [Barkhudaryan *et all.* 2012, 37_{24}].

In medieval Armenia, early medieval quadrilateral monuments, along with widely distributed khachkars (cross-stones) and various tombstones, came to replace pre-Christian monumental structures (menhirs, vishap, phallic monuments, stele, boundary stones, etc.). Beyond their distinctive volumetric and sculptural characteristics, these monuments were often inscribed as well.

These monuments, which range from simple commemorative inscriptions to those documenting historical events and occurrences, have frequently drawn scholarly attention (S. Barkhudaryan, A. Yakobson, A. Shahinyan, L. Azaryan, H. Petrosyan, and others). As an illustrative example, we can cite the khachkar from 1200 CE, currently positioned at the church entrance in Antarut village, Aragatsotn Province, Republic of Armenia. This khachkar commemorates Zakare Amirspasalar's liberation of Amberd fortress from the Seljuks, which was the occasion for its erection [Petrosyan 2008, 246].

Another noteworthy example is found in the "King Alan" sanctuary's narthex in the abandoned settlement of Old Harzhis in Syunik Province. A sculptured tombstone dated 1326 CE remains preserved there today. Its epitaph explicitly mentions the name of Alan, a noble military commander who died (perhaps martyred) at a young age, leaving his parents in grief and sorrow. The entire sanctuary continues to be known as the "Monas-

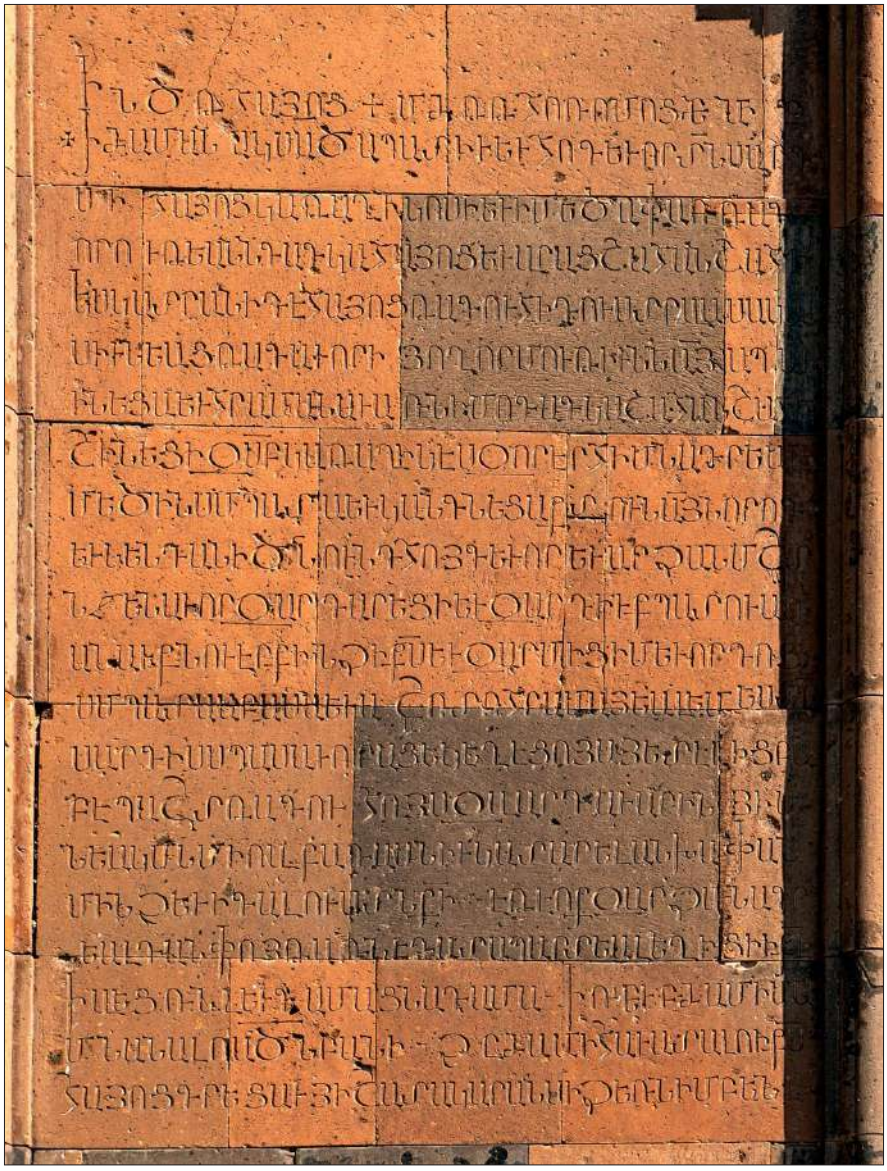

Fig. 7. The building inscription of the Ani Cathedral, 1001 CE (2017).

tery of Alan King" [Harutyunyan 2024, 549-550].

In late medieval Armenia, under the rule of Safavid Iran, construction and monumental culture experienced new developments, particularly in Eastern Armenia. Notably, after the great earthquake of 1679, significant construction activities took place primarily in the Ararat Plain and several districts of Nakhichevan. These efforts were largely supported by the financial contributions of wealthy merchants (*khojas*) and noble houses (*meliks*), which were commemorated and recorded in stone inscriptions.

In earlier medieval inscriptions, the names of secular and spiritual leaders of the land were consistently recorded. However, in the 17th-18th centuries, inscriptions began to reflect a new hierarchical order. They often included the name of the Catholicos of All Armenians, the Shah of Persia (referred to as a king), the local governor, the head of the respective spiritual center, and, importantly, the patron or benefactor. For example, a 1652 CE inscription in the narthex of Sanahin first mentions Shah Abbas II of Persia (1642-1666), Georgian Bagratid King Rostam Shahanshah, Catholicos Philipos I Aghbaketsi (1633-1655) and his successor Hakob IV Jughayetsi (1655-1680), as well as Amir Ghorghmaz Bek. Only then does the main content of the inscription follow, which

describes how Archbishop Sargis, son of Melik of the Arghutyan dynasty, who is referred to as the servant of the monastery, restored the monastery's churches, bell tower, and reliquary (or scriptorium) with the assistance of the monastic community. The inscription reads: …հանդերձ միաբանաւք նորոգեցի Ամենափրկիչն եւ Աստուածածինն, զանկակատունն, Սբ Գրիգորն, նշխարայխուցն. ամէն – **…with the brethren, I restored the All-Savior and the Holy Mother of God, the bell tower, Saint Gregory, and the reliquary (scriptorium). Amen** [Barkhudaryan *et all.* 2012, 38_{25}].

The content-specific features of the inscriptions from the period in question are particularly evident in examples from the Ararat Plain and Nakhichevan. One such example is the 1693 CE poetic inscription commemorating the construction of the Zoravor Holy Mother of God Church in Yerevan. Preserved on the western wall inside the narthex, the inscription attests to the construction of the Holy Mother of God Church on the site of the hermitage of Saint Ananias the Apostle. This took place during the patriarchate of Catholicos Nahapet I Yedesats'i (1691-1705) and was funded by the pious and God-loving merchant benefactor Khoja Panos. The inscription also mentions the names of the benefactor's children, grandchildren, the local spiritual leader, and the overseer [Harutyunyan 2020b, 168_{1}].

It is worth noting that small-sized khachkars (cross-stones) bearing the names of the benefactor and his relatives were also embedded in the exterior eastern wall of the church. This practice was traditional for monuments of that period [Harutyunyan 2020b, $171\text{-}172_{2\text{-}6}$]. A similar example can be seen in the inscriptions of the Saint Shoghakat Church in Vagharshapat. The main inscription mentions the benefactor, Aghamal Nakhichevants'i, along with his parents, spouse, and children. Small inscribed khachkars bearing their names were embedded on the pediment sections of all the church walls [Harutyunyan 2016, 338_{679}, $343\text{-}345_{682\text{-}686}$]:

Conclusion

This study is dedicated to the tradition of epigraphic inscriptions in the Armenian Highlands and the structural and stylistic characteristics of their texts. It represents the first attempt to shed light on the phenomenon of documenting events and creating records through sacred writing in the Armenian context. Although a substantial body of literature has been accumulated on these written monuments, the local traditions, structural, and even ritual significance of the inscriptions have not received specific attention.

The examples presented here, which could be extended with hundreds more, clearly illustrate the longstanding practice in the Armenian Highlands dating back to the era of the Kingdom of Van – of kings, queens, princes, noblemen, spiritual leaders, and prominent and affluent individuals authenticating their deeds through written records and thus striving for commemoration.

Military-political events, construction projects, donations, legal regulations, and various other occurrences were inscribed on stone tablets, serving as enduring chronicles. The preservation and readability of these inscriptions have remained a priority throughout history, transcending differences in civilizations, religions, and cultures. This may explain the widespread use of curses and blessings at the conclusion of inscriptions. These distinctive formulas functioned as a seal, affirming the recorded deed, and a solemn invocation for the remembrance of the individuals named in the text.

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