
ROCK-CARVED INSCRIPTIONS OF THE ARMENIAN HIGHLANDS: SACRED SYMBOLISM AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY

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ABSTRACT:

The veneration of rock formations in the Armenian Highland finds its most vivid manifestation also through rock-cut inscriptions. This practice reached particular prominence in the Kingdom of *Van*, especially from the mid-9th century BC, when, alongside the emergence of a centralized state structure, the cuneiform writing system was also adopted. In the Kingdom of *Van*, royal authority was considered to have been bestowed by the supreme deity, *Haldi*; consequently, all actions were carried out in accordance with his will—a principle also clearly reflected in the rock-cut inscriptions.

In any given historical period, the sacred text inscribed upon the rock has symbolized the mutual connection between the spiritual and temporal authorities of that era. This phenomenon remains evident in the post-Urartian and Hellenistic periods, and, ultimately, in Christian Armenia. Although medieval rock-cut inscriptions are fewer in number compared to the pre-Christian tradition, the surviving dozens of inscriptions—mostly commemorative or related to construction—along with rock-cut churches and *khachkars*, testify to the continuity of the phenomenon and to its distinct expressions across different eras.

ABSTRAIT: INSCRIPTIONS GRAVÉES DANS LA ROCHE DES HAUTS PLATEAUX ARMÉNIENS : SYMBOLISME SACRÉ ET CONTINUITÉ CULTURELLE.

Sur le plateau arménien, le culte de la roche a trouvé sa meilleure expression également à travers des inscriptions rupestres. Il était particulièrement répandu dans le royaume de Van, où, à partir du milieu du IX^e siècle av. J.-C., parallèlement à la formation d'un État centralisé, le système d'écriture cunéiforme a aussi été emprunté. Dans le royaume de Van le pouvoir du roi était considéré comme conféré par le dieu suprême Haldi ainsi tout se réalisait selon sa volonté, ce qui se reflétait également dans les inscriptions rupestres.

À chaque période de l'histoire l'écriture gravée dans la roche sacrée symbolisait généralement le lien mutuel entre les pouvoirs spirituels et laïcs de la période concernée. Cette continuité se manifeste aussi bien à l'époque post-ourartéenne que durant la période hellénistique, ainsi que dans l'Arménie chrétienne. Bien que les inscriptions rupestres médiévales soient moins nombreuses que celles de la tradition préchrétienne, les dizaines d'inscriptions principalement commémoratives et relatives à la construction, des églises rupestres et des khatchkars (pierres à croix) qui nous sont parvenus, témoignent de la meilleure manière de la continuité du phénomène et de ses manifestations uniques à différentes époques.

KEYWORDS: Rock-Carved Inscription, Kingdom of Van, Biainili-Urartu, Cuneiform Inscription, Canal, King, Epigraphic Inscription, Khachkar (Cross-Stone), Construction.

MOTS-CLES: Inscription gravée dans la roche, royaume de Van, Biainili-Ourartou, inscription cunéiforme, canal, roi, Epigraphe, khatchkar (pierre à croix), construction.

Introduction

The veneration of rocks and rock-cut structures in the Armenian Highlands has a long and deeply rooted history. As early as the Neolithic–Chalcolithic periods, humans expressed their perceptions of the surrounding world through direct engravings upon rock surfaces.¹ This phenomenon also found a distinctive expression in the pre-Christian monumental culture, particularly through crude or partially worked *menhirs* or *standing stones* carved from rock or natural stone masses. These monuments often had specific ritual or symbolic functions.²

¹ Karakhanyan, Safyan 1970, 6; Tokhatyan 2015, 368.

² Avetisyan et al. 2017, 3; Avetisyan et al. 2023, 206.

The communities that venerated and sanctified mountains, hills, rocks, and stones also wove oral traditions and legends around them—traditions that offer profound insight into the symbolic foundations of such cultic practices.³

The veneration of the rock manifested in new ways during the Kingdom of *Van* (Biainili–Urartu), which emerged in the mid-9th century BC in the region of the Armenian Highlands, situated between the Lake *Van* and Lake *Urmia* basins. It was with its rise that the tradition of inscribing cuneiform on rocks originated in the Armenian Highlands.⁴ The *Assyrian* origin of this cultural practice is evidenced by the ruling dynasty's employment of monumental inscriptions to articulate and disseminate royal ideology.⁵

Within ancient Near Eastern belief systems, rocks and stones were conceived as imbued with supernatural properties and animated essence. Notably, already in the second millennium BC, the zone stretching from the basin of Lake *Van* to the Caucasus served as a focal point for notions concerning rock-born heroes.⁶

In the ancient Near Eastern worldview, the sanctity of cuneiform writing was linked to its restricted accessibility—it was the exclusive domain of the ruling and priestly classes. More broadly, writing itself was generally believed to be a divine gift.⁷ In *Mesopotamia*, according to *Sumerian* mythology, the scribal art was initially under the protection of *Nisaba*, the goddess of grain, due to the script's economic and other administrative functions. However, beginning in the second millennium BC, this role was gradually transferred to *Nabu*, the god of writing.⁸

Given that Urartian cuneiform was related to *Mesopotamian* script traditions, it is plausible to assume that similar sacral perceptions of writing existed also within the Kingdom of *Van*. According to the testimony of Carl Friedrich Lehmann-Haupt, even in the late 19th century, Armenians in the Armenian Highlands and *Northern Mesopotamia* still attributed magical properties to cuneiform inscriptions—believing, for example, that they could ensure the abundance of bread or water sources, and so on.⁹

Cuneiform Rock-Carved Inscriptions of the Kingdom of Van

In the newly established Kingdom of *Van*, it was likely during the reign of *Sarduri I*, son of *Lutipri* (c. 840–830 BC), that the arched recess carved into the southern face of the *Van Rock* at *Tushpa*, the capital, was created (Fig. 1). The cuneiform inscription, composed in the Neo-*Assyrian* dialect, refers to the offering of animal sacrifices.¹⁰ According to other interpretations, however, the text may represent a legal record detailing punishments for various transgressions, or a royal ritual ordinance for the expiation of bloodshed.¹¹ A cavity carved into the floor of the rock niche served to anchor a stela, while the flat forecourt before it suggests the site had cultic significance.¹²

Under the rule of the next king, *Išpuini*, son of *Sarduri* (c. 830–820 BC), the cuneiform script underwent a process of simplification and was adapted to the *Biainili* (Urartian) language, officially declared the state language.¹³ From this period dates the earliest known inscription embedded within first rectangular rock-cut niche located some 12 kilometers south of *Van*.¹⁴ It should be noted that monuments of this architectural form are known as “Gates of *Ḫaldi*,” symbolizing the entrance of the god *Ḫaldi* into his “house,” that is, the rock or mountain, and they functioned as open-air sanctuaries.¹⁵

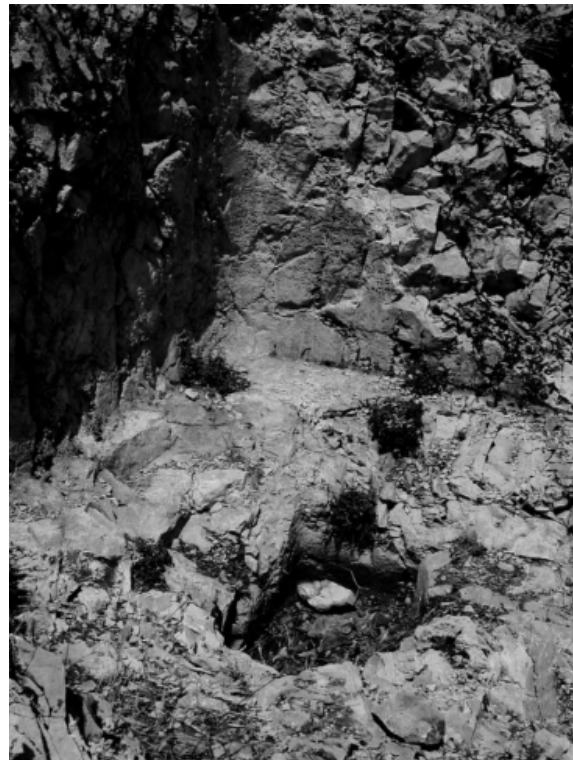


Fig. 1. Rock-cut niche with Assyrian inscription.
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³ Ghanalanyan 1969, 10-34.

⁴ The research was supported by the Higher Education and Science Committee of RA (Research project № 24SSAH-6A011).

⁵ Mayer 1995, 255-256; Salvini 1995, 193-194; Linke 2015, 141, 145.

⁶ Haas 1982, 167, 202.

⁷ Gelb 1963, 230-231; Saggs 2023, 80-85.

⁸ Krebernik 2002, 56; Lion 2011, 91-92.

⁹ Lehmann-Haupt 1910, 368; 1926, 37-38.

¹⁰ Lehmann-Haupt 1926, 25-27; Salvini 1989, 84; 2018, A 1-2; Badalyan 2018, 114-115.

¹¹ Diakonoff 1989, 93; Mayer 2013, 138-140.

¹² Taner Tarhan 2021, 701-702.

¹³ Melikishvili 1960, 33-35; Hmayakyan 1994, 19.

¹⁴ Belli, Dinçol 1980, 180-181.

¹⁵ Işik 1995, 13; Salvini 1995, 145; Grekyan 2021, 184.



Fig. 2. Inscription of the “Gate of Mher”. © V. Sargsyan, 2018.

The inscription records the establishment of a vineyard dedicated to the deity¹⁶, an act that within the cultic framework of the Kingdom of *Van* held ritual equivalence to temple construction.¹⁷ Significantly, the text also records the inscription of the rock gate of this open-air sanctuary as being dedicated directly to the deity himself—a unique phenomenon, which in itself indicates that the inscribed rock was conceived as a votive offering to the god.

The practice of inscribing cuneiform texts onto rock surfaces continued during the joint reign of *Išpuini* and his crown prince *Menua* (c. 820–810 BC). It was during this period that the trihedral rock-cut “Gate of *Ḫaldi*” was carved on the slopes of Mount *Zymzym*, approximately 7 kilometers northwest of *Tushpa*—an edifice known in later Armenian tradition as “*Meher’s Door*” (Fig. 2), complete with its cultic platform.

Inscribed upon this sacred rock is the official state pantheon of the Kingdom of *Van*—the assembly of deities and cultic concepts formally recognized and sanctioned by the state.¹⁸

Deities of newly conquered territories were also recorded in the pantheon, for in the religious worldview of the ancient Near East, the mere mention of a god’s name constituted an assurance of that deity’s presence. The inscription of the name on the sacred rock symbolized the essence of the gods and, in general, of the mentioned individuals, a phenomenon that is likewise attested in Armenian medieval epigraphic inscriptions.¹⁹ Incidentally, while in the medieval period the engraver could often allude to the act of readers reading the script and subsequently remembering the names, such testimonies are not present in the written culture of the Kingdom of *Van*.

During the joint reign of *Išpuini* and *Menua*, another rock-cut “Gate of *Ḫaldi*” was also constructed on *Mt. Nazarabad*, some 60 kilometers east of *Van*, near the site of *Ašotakert* (Fig. 3). This inscription, likewise dedicated to the god *Ḫaldi*, contains a cultic invocation that refers both to the construction of a *susi* temple for *Ḫaldi* and also to the carving of “*Ḫaldian gates*”.²⁰ Notably, instead of a temple, the inscription explicitly mentions the rock itself—the gate—as the locus of sacred presence. *Uartian susi* temples, in terms of their architectural design, were architectural imitations of such natural rock formations.²¹

¹⁶ Salvini 1989, 85; 2018, A 2-5.

¹⁷ Hmayakyan 2024, 73-74.

¹⁸ Hmayakyan 1990, 6, 10; Badalyan 2018, 128-131; Salvini 2018, A 3-1.

¹⁹ Salvini 1995, 44-45; Radner 2005, 114, 130; Harutyunyan 1975, 25-86.

²⁰ Salvini 2018, A 3-2.

²¹ Grekyan 2021, 193.



Fig. 3. The Khaldian Gate of Ashotakert. © V. Sargsyan, 2018.

In effect, the construction and inscription of the temple functioned as a votive offering to the god—simultaneously serving as the most enduring means of commemorating both the name of the deity and also that of the royal builder²². That is, through the act of inscription, the sacred triad was rendered complete: the rock, as the liminal space leading to the netherworld²³; the deity, as its celestial inhabitant; and the king, as the executor of the divine will.

The same period also attests to the earliest military-type cuneiform inscription, carved into the rock.²⁴ We refer to the rock inscription found along the roadside location in the *Araxes Valley*, within the *Nakhichevan* plain, which commemorates the newly conquered lands, as well as the names of the kings and of the god *Ḫaldi*.²⁵ No less remarkable is also the inscription of the “Tabrizian Gates” carved at the eastern extremity of the *Van Rock*, which states that *Išpuini*, *Menua*, and the latter’s son *Inušpuini* erected a *susi* temple and a gate before the city of *Tušpa*, established a sacrificial rite, and — most intriguingly — repeated the inscription three times, suggesting a magical, apotropaic function of the writing.²⁶

During the reign of *Menua* (ca. 810–790/780 BC), alongside the territorial expansion of the kingdom, numerous military inscriptions were also placed upon the rocks of newly conquered territories. Thus, in the northwest, the inscription of *Yazılıtaş* — located on a military road not far from *Erzurum* — records the conquest of the land of *Diaukhi* and the forcible subjugation of its king to tribute.²⁷ To the west, the inscription on the rock-cut gate of *Palu* (Fig. 4), situated on the right bank of the *Aratsani River*, relates the campaign carried out in the Euphrates region and also mentions the erection of a stela in the newly conquered city of *Šebeteria* for the god *Ḫaldi*, as well as the construction of a cultic structure called an (*iarani*).²⁸ Considering the nature of the inscription and the elevated position of the gate, it may be inferred that it also served a religious function, symbolizing the divine.²⁹ The rock-cut inscription of *Taştepe*, located south of Lake *Urmia* on the road leading to the land of *Mana*, records the construction of a fortress in the newly conquered district and the campaign conducted against *Mana*.³⁰

²² Radner 2005, 134, 140.

²³ Badalyan 2018, 130.

²⁴ Salvini 2018, A 3-8.

²⁵ Dann 2020, 129.

²⁶ Reimschneider 1965, 315.

²⁷ Salvini 1995, 54; 2018, A 5-3; Grekyan 2024, 17.

²⁸ Salvini 1995, 51; 2018, A 5-5; Grekyan 2021, 188.

²⁹ Işik 1995, 27.

³⁰ Salvini 1995, 41, 51; 2018, A 5-10; Dann 2020, 152; Grekyan 2024, 17-18.



Fig. 4. *Inscription of Palu*. © V. Sargsyan, 2018.

The rock-carved inscriptions of a hydraulic-engineering nature also relate to the reign of *Menua*, such as those attesting to the construction of the “Canal of *Menua*” (about 54 km) that supplied the capital, and another canal of the same name in the *Manazkert* region.³¹ Another remarkable group of such rock inscriptions are four identical inscriptions: three carved in the quadrangular niches of the northern section of the *Van Rock* of the capital *Tushpa*, and one in the arched niche of *Rum* in the southeastern part of Lake *Urmia*. It is noteworthy that at *Rum*, the spring, flowed, perhaps directly, from the inscribed wall niche in the rock.³² It is no secret that springs, together with rivers and mountains, formed a ritually sacred landscape; the very source of water itself was considered a cultic site, in communion with the underworld. In the *Hittite* kingdom and in *Assyria*, rituals were also performed near springs.³³ In the ancient Near East, the piety of the king also symbolized his stewardship of the land entrusted to him by the gods—cultivating arid areas, maintaining hydrotechnical systems, and founding cities.³⁴

Turning to the rock-cut inscriptions of King *Argishti I*, son of *Menua* (ca. 790/780–770/750 BC), the greater part of these, dating from the early years of his reign, concern campaigns and conquests carried out beyond the *Araxes*—from *Erzurum* to the northwestern part of Lake *Sevan*—against the lands of *Diaukhi*, *Etiuni*, and *Eriakhi*.³⁵ Another rock-cut inscription preserved in the southeastern region of Lake *Urmia* provides information on *Argishti I*’s campaigns against *Mana*.³⁶

³¹ Salvini 2018, A 5-12A-D, A5-15A-D, A 5-20.

³² Salvini 2018, A 5-58A-C, A 5-59 A-D; 2021, 92.

³³ Streck 2006-2008, 202; Haas, 203-205.

³⁴ Radner 2005, 177.

³⁵ Salvini 1995, 59-61; 2018, A 8-7-11; Grekian 2024, 20-21.

³⁶ Salvini 2005a, 247-248; 2018 A 8-13.

This period also saw inscriptions created on the occasion of canal construction. One inscription, carved into a high section of rock on the left bank of the *Araxes* (21 km west of *Armavir*), attests to a canal built in the *Ararat* plain “by the command of *Ḫaldi*”³⁷, which, perhaps, extended for about 30 km, irrigating lands to the west of the city of *Argishtikhinili*.³⁸ It should be noted that in Mesopotamia canals were regarded as structures created and overseen by the deity.³⁹ Judging from primary sources, similar notions about canals existed also in the Kingdom of *Van*.

The series of rock-cut inscriptions is also complemented by annals. Thus, on the southwestern section of the *Van* Rock, on the outer façade of *Argishti I*’s rock-cut tomb, are inscribed his annals (Fig. 5), arranged in eight columns, in which some events already attested in other inscriptions are also recorded⁴⁰. The inscription at the entrance to the royal tomb first of all immortalized the king’s name together with his deeds. The tomb, and the inscription itself, were guarded by sentinels⁴¹, who were believed to ensure the “eternal life” of the king entombed in the rock by means of the annals.



Fig. 5. Annals of King Argishti. © V. Sargsyan, 2018.

One of the unique manifestations in the creation of an inscribed monument is the Treasure Gate complex, which includes the annals of *Argishti I*’s son, *Sarduri II* (ca. 770/750–730 BC), at the Treasure Gate on the northeastern part of the *Van* Rock—consisting of two rock niches and a stele. Only the western niche bears an inscription; opposite it, archaeological excavations uncovered an inscribed quadrangular stele and a pedestal inscribed only on its front side⁴². Architecturally akin to the Gate of *Mher*, the Treasure Gate complex, characterized by its distinctive integration of rock, stele, and cuneiform inscriptions, was transformed into an open-air ritual site, suggesting the creation of a monument perhaps dedicated to the veneration of the king through the symbolic union of rock and script.⁴³

³⁷ Salvini 2018, A 8-15.

³⁸ Martirosyan 1974, 37.

³⁹ Stol 1976-1980, 363-364.

⁴⁰ Salvini 2018, A 8-3.

⁴¹ Lehmann-Haupt 1926, 120.

⁴² Marr, Orbeli 1922, 15-17; Salvini 2018, A 9-3.

⁴³ Salvini 1995, 145-146; Taner Tarhan 2021, 728-735.

The rock-cut inscriptions from various years of *Sarduri II*'s reign, extending from the *Euphrates (Izoli)* to Chldr and Lake *Sevan (Vardadzor, Tsovak)* and to Iranian Azerbaijan (*Sekendeli*) (Fig. 6), attest to campaigns and conquests against the lands of *Melitea, Ukhimeali, Tulikhu, Arqouki, Puluadi*, and others.⁴⁴ While territories subjected to Urartian campaigns were not invariably incorporated into the kingdom, the presence of rock inscriptions in such regions demonstrates that military expeditions conducted “by the will of *Ḫaldi*” were commemorated in situ, thereby both documenting and symbolically claiming these conquests. The king fought for the supremacy of his gods and, with their support, waged war against his enemies; the wealth gained in war was materialized in offerings to the temples and in structures raised for the gods.⁴⁵



Fig. 6. Inscription of King Sarduri II at Sekendeli. © V. Sargsyan, 2018.

An inscription on the *Archesh–Padnots (Արձիշ–Պաճոճ)* road north of Lake *Van* attests to a canal built there by King *Sarduri II*, while two inscriptions 2 km east of *Archesh* record the planting of a vineyard in a regnal year of the king.⁴⁶

As for the cuneiform inscriptions of King *Rusa*, son of *Sarduri* (ca. 730–714 BC), they are few—this being due to the defeats suffered by *Sarduri II* at the hands of Assyria in 743 and 735 BC, as well as to internal problems in the country. The *Tsovinar* inscription, preserved in the southern part of the Lake *Sevan* basin, records that in one year the king conquered the lands of four kings on this side of the sea and nineteen on the far side, building fortresses there, including one named “City of Teisheba”⁴⁷, and appointing a governor.⁴⁸ Recording these conquests, construction works, and the appointment of a governor on the rock in this way also served as a form of validation of the presence of *Biainian* sovereignty here in its own way.

⁴⁴ Salvini 2018, A 9-4-8.

⁴⁵ Radner 2005, 177.

⁴⁶ Salvini 2018, A9-10-11.

⁴⁷ Between the villages of *Tsovak* and *Artsvanist* in the present-day *Gegharkunik* Province of the Republic of Armenia.

⁴⁸ Harutyunyan 2001, 295-298₃₈₉; Salvini 2018, A 10-2.

In the reign of the new ruler of *Biainili-Urartu*, *Rusa*, son of *Erimena*⁴⁹ (ca. 714–710/9 BC), conditioned by the defeat suffered by *Rusa*, son of *Sarduri*, at the hands of Assyria in 714 BC, only two rock-cut inscriptions are attested. The inscription carved on Mount *Varaga*, 15 km east of *Van*, is damaged and largely illegible, with only the king's name and a curse formula preserved⁵⁰. The second inscription, three lines long, located near the reservoir built by *Rusa*, son of *Erimena*—*Keshish Göl*—is of great interest. Only the words “City of *Haldi*” and “stele” can be read, while the king's name is absent. According to *N. Harutyunyan*, this inscription was dedicated to the City of *Haldi*⁵¹, whereas *M. Salvini* believes it was simply a scribal exercise.

Military campaigns are attested in cuneiform inscriptions once again only under *Argishti II* (ca. 710–690/680 BC)⁵². Two inscriptions carved in the *Sabalan* region of Iranian Azerbaijan, and another located further north, report reaching the *Varzhakan* River, conquering new lands, and building fortresses in the name of the king and of *Haldi*.⁵³

From the period of the last king of the Kingdom of *Van*, *Rusa*, son of *Argishti* (ca. 690/680–650/640 BC), there is known a single rock-cut inscription, located about 15 km northeast of *Mazkert*. It is carved on the intersecting walls⁵⁴ of the dromos (entrance passage) of a rock-cut tomb composed of two chambers, to the left of the entrance. In the fortress area adjacent to the tomb, there is also an open-air cultic complex with rock-cut niches.⁵⁵ This heavily damaged inscription apparently refers to a certain ritual in which pagan priests are mentioned⁵⁶; the toponym *Tsupa*—*Tsopk*—is also legible.⁵⁷

After *Rusa*, son of *Argishti*, perhaps due to a prolonged drought in the kingdom and other factors, the royal dynasty lost its former mighty power⁵⁸, and in the second half of the 7th century BC, along with the fall of the state, the carving of monuments with cuneiform inscriptions in the Armenian Highlands also came to an end.

It is evident that in the Kingdom of *Van*, the authority of the king was considered to be granted by *Haldi*, that military campaigns and conquests, as well as the subsequent construction works, were carried out by his will, and that the rock-cut inscriptions testifying to these events served as manifestations of the divine—symbolizing both the *Biainian* statehood and *Haldi* himself.

Rock-Carved Inscriptions in the post-Urartian period

It is noteworthy that the *Van Rock*, as an inscription-bearing monument, continued to be used even in the post-Urartian period—under *Achaemenid* rule. After the fall of the Kingdom of *Van*, in the 6th century BC, the newly ascendant kingdom in the Armenian Highlands—*Orontid Armenia*—had its capital at *Van* as well. In 522–521 BC, *Orontid Armenia* was among the main centers of the powerful uprising against *Achaemenid* Iran. After the suppression of the rebellion by the commanders of *Darius I* (521–486 BC), Armenia was incorporated into the empire, and *Van* became the center of a satrapy⁵⁹. *Xerxes* (485–465 BC), son of *Darius I*, left the well-known trilingual inscription (in *Old Persian*, *Babylonian*, and *Elamite*) on the southern section of the *Van Rock* (Fig. 7), which testifies to his divine right to rule in *Van*, now turned into a satrapal center: “Great is the god *Ahuramazda*, greatest of the gods..., who made *Xerxes* king”.⁶⁰ The trilingual inscription directly confirms that the *Achaemenids* knew that the capital *Tushpa* had been located there, and it is logical to assume that their scribes could read not only *Assyrian* but also *Biainian* inscriptions.⁶¹

The rock as a sacred basis for composing inscriptions was also perceived in later times. Although not to the same extent as before, in the Hellenistic period as well, rock-cut writing was an integral part of open-air cultic complexes. This is most clearly seen in the former Armenian capital of *Armavir*, where about a dozen preserved dedicatory inscriptions testify to the continued transformation of the same phenomenon (Fig. 8).⁶²

⁴⁹ In Urartology, there exist various datings regarding the reign of King *Rusa*, son of *Erimena*, in *Biainili-Urartu* (Roaf 2012, 187-188; Salvini 2018, 18), but within the context of the study of written monuments, the dating proposed by Y. Grekyan appears to be the most plausible (Grekyan 2024, 43-44).

⁵⁰ Salvini 2018, A 14-3-4.

⁵¹ Harutyunyan 2001, 385-386⁴⁸².

⁵² Salvini 2018, A11-4-6.

⁵³ Salvini 1995, 101; Grekyan 2024, 49.

⁵⁴ Lehmann-Haupt 1910, 468-472; Salvini 2005b, 260-261; 2018, A-12-6.

⁵⁵ Işık 1995, 5.

⁵⁶ Harutyunyan 2001, 340-342⁴¹⁸.

⁵⁷ Dann 2020, 16.

⁵⁸ Grekyan 2024, 55-61.

⁵⁹ Dandamaev 1985, 90-92, 175.

⁶⁰ Kent 1953, 152-153.

⁶¹ Salvini 2021, 237.

⁶² Trever 1953, 104-156.



Fig. 7. Trilingual inscription of Xerxes. © V. Sargsyan, 2023.



Fig. 8. One of the Greek rock inscriptions of Old Armavir. © R. Sargsyan, 2023.

Rock-Carved Inscriptions in Christian Armenia

Although the tradition of engraving inscriptions upon rock surfaces in the Armenian Highlands began to gradually decline following the fall of the Kingdom of Van—yielding its place to inscriptions carved upon the dressed stone walls or steles of architectural monuments—rock-cut inscriptions, exhibiting entirely new forms, continued to be attested in Armenia after the adoption of Christianity (301 CE). Quantitatively, these are certainly fewer than the aesthetically refined inscriptions found predominantly on the walls of ecclesiastical buildings; yet it is noteworthy that, in the medieval period, alongside the practice of engraving text upon rock, the veneration of the rock itself persisted. In particular, the rock was often regarded as a tomb or sacred site, upon which a cross or cross-stone (khachkar) design was carved, or upon which a khachkar was erected, or a monastic complex was founded on a huge-rock massif (Tatev, Harich and so far). This phenomenon constitutes a distinctive manifestation of symbolic Christianization, through which the salvific Cross of Christ, oratories, or—in certain instances—commemorative inscriptions anticipating remembrance became integrated within the natural rock environment.

It is worth recalling that, already in the Holy Scriptures, Christ calls the Apostle Peter the “Rock of Faith” upon which the temple of God shall be built: “*And I say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church...*” (Matthew 16:18). The same epithet is encountered in written sources, for example, in one of the inscriptions of the former Church of Saints Paul and Peter in Yerevan: «Սբ. Պետրոսի Վէմ հաւատոյ» [*“Saint Peter — Rock of Faith”*]⁶³, as well as in a wall painting of the same church, accompanied by the inscription: «Պետրոսի Վիմին հաւատոյ» [*“Of Peter — the Rock of Faith”*].⁶⁴

The Byzantine and Eastern Christian worlds preserve numerous examples of rock-cut or partially rock-cut cultic monuments, including temples and tombs of Greco-Roman and Cappadocian culture (the *Tokali* Church, the Pigeon House of *Çavuşin*, the churches of *Ihlara*, etc.), the rock-cut monument of *Vardzia* in Georgia, the subterranean complexes of medieval *Ani*—the *Bagratid* capital—, the monuments of *Geghard*, *Horomayr*, *Spitak*, and *Martiros*, the recently discovered tomb of *Ohanavan*, and others. In certain cases, a church was built directly adjoining a rock face, as documented in the archaeological excavations of the early medieval church at the village of *Mirak* in Armenia’s *Aragatsotn* Province, where the northwestern section of the building was entirely contiguous with the rock, which had been partially hewn flat to serve as a foundation wall.⁶⁵



Fig. 9. Narthex of the Papak Chapel, Geghard Monastery. © A. Harutyunyan, 2017.

⁶³ Harutyunyan 2021, 97.

⁶⁴ Harutyunyan 2021, 29.

⁶⁵ Sargsyan, Harutyunyan 2015, 258.

In the high Middle Ages, coinciding with the establishment of the *Bagratid* Kingdom of Armenia and the consequent flourishing of spiritual and cultural life, rock-cut churches and chapels were constructed alongside monasteries, the unsurpassed example being the monastic complex of *Geghard* (*Ayrivank'*), with its large and small rock-cut structures, cross-stone compositions, and inscriptions (Fig. 9).

It is noteworthy that the monastery's inscriptions repeatedly mention the rock-cut nature of the structures. For example, the construction inscription of 1288 CE, located on the capital and the shaft of the northeastern pillar of *Papak's* chapel, states that *Papak*, the son of Prince *Prosh*, directly declares: «...փորեցաք զժամայտունս յինքնաբուն վիմաւ...» “...*We engraved the chapel in a natural rock...*”⁶⁶ (Fig. 10) — meaning, a gavit-oratory hewn from the natural cliff. Another inscription, in the name of *Papak's* father, *Prosh Khaghbakyan*, testifies to the endowment of *Ayrivank'* with new lands «...լեռամբ եւ դաշտաւ եւ ամենայն կազմութեամբ...» [“...*with mountain and field and all appurtenances...*”], along with the construction of a rock-cut church referred to in the inscription simply as «...փորեցի ի վիմէ տուն Աստուծոյ...» [“*I carved the house of God in the rock*”]⁶⁷ (Fig. 11). There is also a similar evidence in one of the



Fig. 10. Construction inscription of the Papak Chapel, Geghard, 1288 CE.
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rock-carved epigraphs of the lower monument group of the Horomayr Monastery (Lori province of the Republic of Armenia) about the construction of the monastery's bell tower and the cutting of the refectory stone by the donators. «...շինեցաք զանկակայտուն, կտրեց սեղանայտան քարն...» [“*We built the bell tower and cut the stone for the refectory*”]⁶⁸, which previous researchers of the epigraph have rightly identified with a rock-cut refectory, meaning that the rock was cut, processed, and adapted for that purpose.

In addition to ecclesiastical buildings, monumental forms such as *khachkars* were also integrated with rock faces or, alternatively, *khachkar* compositions were placed on large or small rock fragments, imbuing them with monumental significance.⁶⁹ The symbolic cross of Christ could either be carved on the most suitable or partially worked surface of the rock (Tigranakert, Kapuyt, Bayburd, Geghard, Mankunk, Marmashen, Chiva, Astghadzor, Akner, Lanjanist and so far), or frequently, the rock itself or a rock fragment served as a pedestal for freestanding *khachkars* (Tatev, Shinuhayr, Hayravank, Herher and so far).

For example, at the site known as *Khachi dzor* (“Valley of the Cross”), 3 km south of *Marmashen* village in Armenia's *Shirak* Province, massive rock fragments bear cross designs, four of which are inscribed and dated to

⁶⁶ Yovsēpean 1969, 308_{A20}.

⁶⁷ Yovsēpean 1969, 305_{A16}.

⁶⁸ Barkhudaryan, Ghafadaryan, Saghumyan 2012, 314₆₈₁.

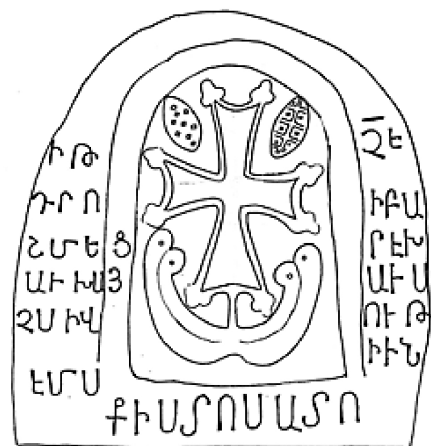
⁶⁹ Petrosyan 2008, 79-82.



Fig. 11. Construction inscription of the rock-cut Avazan Church, Geghard, 13th century.
© A. Harutyunyan, 2019.

1249–1265 CE. One particularly intriguing carving is a cross set within an arched niche. Its inscription suggests that the act of carving was meant to “seal” or Christianize the rock with the symbol of the cross (Figs. 12 a, b); «Ի թվին ՉԷ (1258), դրոշմեցաւ խաչս ի վէմս...» [“In the year 707 of the Armenian Era (1258 CE), this cross was imprinted upon the rock...”].⁷⁰

Similarly, near the Chapel of Saint Hripsime in the village of Astghadzor, Gegharkunik Province, a large rock fragment is covered with numerous cross designs, at the center of which is a principal cross with pronounced details and a stepped pedestal symbolizing *Golgotha*. The principal inscription is carved below this cross, in a formula typical of freestanding khachkars: «Յանուն Աստուծոյ, ես՝ Տիրոս, կանգնեցի զխաչս յիշատակ հոգոյ իմոյ, Ճ (100) տարի ապրեցաւ զինաւոր...» [“In the name of God, I, Tيروس, erected this cross in memory of my soul, I lived 100 years as a soldier...”].⁷¹ (Fig. 13), dated to (1291 CE). The cross design elements, however—such as the bifurcated and channeled arms and the circular center—are characteristic of the earlier (9th–10th century) stage of khachkar art, suggesting that the inscription may have been added later. The reference to *Tيروس*’ century-long life as a soldier should be interpreted as an affirmation of his military identity and presumed success, a status deemed worthy of validation in sacred script.



Figs. 12a, b. Rock-cut cross-stone composition, Khachi dzor of Marmashen, 1258 CE.
© A. Harutyunyan, 2016.

⁷⁰ Barkhudaryan 2017, 106₁₆₇.

⁷¹ Barkhudaryan 1973, 169₆₉₃.

Another notable example is found in the *Syunik* Province village of *Akner*, at a site known as “The Split Rock,” where an eight-line inscription is carved on a smoothed rock face alongside three crosses symbolizing the Holy Trinity (Figs. 14a, b). According to the text, in 1294 CE Bishop *Hovhannes Syunetsi*, at the request of his predecessor *Ter Hayrapet* and by the will of God, restored a 30-km aqueduct — originally purchased and constructed with great difficulty in the early 10th century by Bishop *Jacob Dvinetsi* of *Syunik* — which originated from the *Vararakn* springs of *Dzagedzor* and extended to the foot of Mount *Tsakut*, now known as *Vardut* (near the “Devil’s Bridge”): «... տարա (Հովհաննես եպիսկոպոսը – Ա. Հ.) զջուրս Վարարական ի Վարդուտն, զոր աստուածապատիւ եւ հոգեւոր Տէր Յակոբ գնեալ էր եւ տարեալ բազում աշխատութեամբ եւ արդեամբք, զխափանեալն ի բազում ամանակաց կրկին նորոգեցաք...» [“...I (Bishop Hovhannes – A. H.) diverted the waters of Vararak to Vardut, which the God-honoring and spiritual priest Yakob had purchased and brought with great labor and expense, and what had been obstructed for many years we restored again...”].⁷² Above the Armenian text is also visible a two-line Arabic-script inscription, first published in facsimile by the Arabist *Aleksandr Khachatryan*, though without interpretation, as he had not examined the stone in person.⁷³

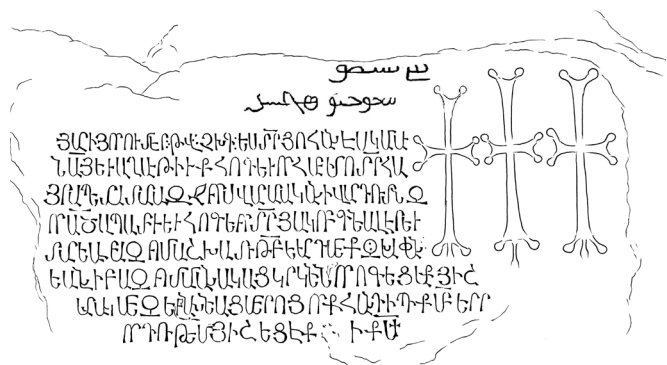


Fig. 13. Cross-adorned rock fragment, Astghadzor, 1291 CE.

© S. Arevshatyan, 2018.

տարա (Հովհաննես եպիսկոպոսը – Ա. Հ.) զջուրս Վարարական ի Վարդուտն, զոր աստուածապատիւ եւ հոգեւոր Տէր Յակոբ գնեալ էր եւ տարեալ բազում աշխատութեամբ եւ արդեամբք, զխափանեալն ի բազում ամանակաց կրկին նորոգեցաք...» [“...I (Bishop Hovhannes – A. H.) diverted the waters of Vararak to Vardut, which the God-honoring and spiritual priest Yakob had purchased and brought with great labor and expense, and what had been obstructed for many years we restored again...”].⁷² Above the Armenian text is also visible a two-line Arabic-script inscription, first published in facsimile by the Arabist *Aleksandr Khachatryan*, though without interpretation, as he had not examined the stone in person.⁷³

In certain cases, medieval inscriptions on rock are accompanied by simple linear crosses, which may have been added at a later date. An example is found near the ruins of the fortress of *Kapuyt*, east of the village of Herher in *Vayots Dzor* Province, where a smoothed rock face bears a 14-line inscription (Fig. 15). Noted already in the 19th century by *Ghevond Alishan* and *Kajberuni*⁷⁴, with some discrepancies in readings, and later deciphered by epigraphist *Sedrak Barkhudaryan*⁷⁵, the text records that in the year 1149 CE a certain *Grigor*, a cleric (կրօնավոր), during the tenure of “the greatly renowned Illuminator” priest *Hovhannes*, came to reside «...ի տան մեծապատիվ քահանայի՝ Գագիկ իրիցոյ, աթոռակալ եկեղեցոյ եւ իշխան ժողովրդեան...» [“...in the house of the honorable priest



Figs. 14a, b. Inscription of the renovation of the Vararakn Canal, 1294 CE

a. © M. Khumunts, 2017, b. Ó A. Harutyunyan, 2024.

⁷² Barkhudaryan 1960, 78.²²⁹

⁷³ Khachatryan 1987, 77.

⁷⁴ Alishan 1893, 112; Kajberuni 2003, 289-290.

⁷⁵ Barkhudaryan 1967, 49.¹²⁸

Gagik, the abbot of the church and the leader of the people”]⁷⁶. In the local church, Father *Grigor* was appointed as the succeeding clergyman of the latter, since there was no other priest, while *Gagik* the priest’s son *Sarkavag* (perhaps a name), who had been honored with the dignity of priesthood at a young age, had died prematurely, therefore: «...Էսձ խաւար յետամնաց իւրոց» [...darkness came upon his descendants]⁷⁷. Subsequently, Father *Grigor* continues to present the unfortunate history of that family, describing how after his brother’s death, his sister *Ashkhen* loses her eyesight, and being greatly saddened by this, Father *Grigor* receives consolation from God: «...շինել զեկեղեցիս ի բարեխաւսութիւն հոգոյ իմոյ, ի յաւգնութիւն աշխատաւորաց, ի հաստատութիւն մանկանս իմոյ՝ Գրիգորոյ եւ զառաքումն Սարգսի՝ վերականգլի ժողովոյս եւ այլ տանուտերացս» [...to build a church for the intercession of my soul, for the help of the laborers, for the establishment of my children—Grigor and your servant Sargis—to become overseers of our congregation and other household members”]⁷⁸. At the end, he asks the readers to remember *Ashkhen*, daughter of *Gagik* the priest and their sister. This inscription may be characterized as a unique testimonial document of human struggle and spiritual aspiration, focusing on ecclesiastical construction or renovation. The renowned Armenian scholar *Father Ghevond Alishan* had already noted that the identity of priest *Hovhannes*, who received this characterization of “renowned Illuminator”, is problematic, who, judging from the composition of the inscription, should have been either the Catholicos of the time or the occupant of the metropolitan throne of *Syunik*, whereas no leader with that name is mentioned in Armenian historiography during the specified time period.⁷⁹



Fig. 15. Inscription on the rock fragment of Herher, 1149 CE. © A. Asatryan, 2022.

Conclusion

The sequence of rock-carved inscriptions could still be extended; however, the examples presented above are sufficient to provide a comprehensive view of the phenomenon in question within the Armenian Highlands. It is evident that in all the periods under consideration—regardless of religious affiliation—the rock was venerated as a sacred entity, a medium through which they sought to express their own conceptions and expectations. The

⁷⁶ Barkhudaryan 1967, 49¹²⁸.

⁷⁷ Barkhudaryan 1967, 49¹²⁸.

⁷⁸ Barkhudaryan 1967, 49¹²⁸.

⁷⁹ Alishan 1893, 112.

phenomenon is particularly characteristic of the Kingdom of *Van*, when the kings of *Urartu* regarded the rock as the most fitting means of “communicating” with the supreme deity, *Haldi*. The rock also served as an inscribed monument in subsequent eras—during the post-Urartian period under the *Achaemenids*, in the Hellenistic age, and even after the adoption of Christianity, throughout the Middle Ages.

Although no longer as numerous as before, the tradition of inscribing on rocks or rock fragments was not alien to medieval Armenian epigraphy. The difference lies in the fact that, under the influence of the new religion, such inscriptions were accompanied by crosses and cross-stone compositions, based on the idea of uniting the sacred rock with the equally sacred script within a single, integrated monument.

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