

“AREVIK (MEGHRI): HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE
AND INTERCULTURAL RELATIONS”: INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE*

Conferences that take place in the regions of the Republic of Armenia aim not only to activate the scientific life outside of Yerevan, also to arouse interest in the local public in the historical past of the region and to make them aware of the latest scientific studies and innovations. In addition, they give the researchers of the capital the opportunity to enter into direct and mutual contact in the environment they are researching. In this sense, are especially important that scientific events held in the border regions. One of the main goals of the conference was to consider Meghri in the current geopolitical context.

On November 17–18, 2023, was held “Arevik (Meghri): Historical and Cultural Heritage and Intercultural Relations” international conference in Meghri of Syunik region. 28 scientists and researchers from Armenia and abroad participated in the conference. At the conference, historical Arevik province was considered from the perspectives of material and non-material cultural heritage. It should be noted that historical Arevik not only occupied a larger area than the Meghri sub-region of Syunik even it was included in Goghtn province in ancient times. For this reason some reports of the conference were also related to Goghtn Province of Nakhichevan.

The organizers of the conference were the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography (IAE) of NAS RA and Yerevan State Univeristy (YSU), supporters and colleagues: the All-Armenian Foundation Financing Armenological Studies (AFFAS), the National Organization “Land and Culture” (LCO). The two-day conference was held in the building of the Meghri branch of the National Aesthetics Center named after Henrik Igityan. Most of the participants arrived from Yerevan on November 16, and stayed in the village of Agarak near Meghri.

On the morning of November 17 the conference was opened by the director of the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography Arsen Bobokhyan (PhD), after that gave a speech Syunik Deputy Governor Hayk Harutyunyan and Mayor of Meghri Bagrat Zakaryan. The director of the Institute of History (IH), DrHabil, NAS RA academician Ashot Melkonyan presented a scientific report after his welcoming speech, which referred to the role of Arevik-Meghri in the historical, cultural and geopolitical movement of Armenia. A. Melkonyan spoke in detail

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about the importance of Meghri, especially the liberation struggle led by Davit Bek and Mkhitar Sparapet in 1722–1730 and the significance of the region during the Russian-Turkish war of 1804–1813. The speaker also referred to the geographical and strategic position of Meghri, emphasizing its economic and political features in different periods. A. Melkonyan's report was also remarkable in terms of the variety of primary sources.

The second report was presented by the scientific head of the Institute of Oriental Studies (IOS), DrHabil, Academician Ruben Safrastyan ("Meghri: Geopolitical Standpoint"), during which he first presented the geopolitical position of Meghri, which has been an important transport hub, and the advantages and dangers arising from it, which especially in recent years are talked about every day. R. Safrastyan also emphasize that today, more than ever, Meghri is a target area for our enemies and all efforts should be focused in order to by pass the existing dangers.

The third report ("River Araxes as a Culture-Shaping Axis") was presented by Arsen Bobokhyan. He presented his joint report with Hayk Avetisyan (PhD, YSU) and Artak Gnuni (PhD, YSU), in which the Araks river valley was presented as an environment generating and developing social, political and cultural capital. The statement of the group of scientists is particularly noteworthy that Araxes has been an important culture-shaping factor for centuries. The report once again highlighted Meghri's communication features.

The authors of the fourth report were Deputy Director of the IAE, Tork Dalalyan (PhD) and the Chairman of the Yerevan Branch of the LCO Davit Davtyan (IAE). The report was presented by T. Dalalyan, focusing historical sources and linguistic observations regarding the toponyms/village names of Arevik (Meghri district). The orator metioned that they can be divided into four groups: Names composed in the early Middle Ages, which can be clearly explained by Grabar (Classical Armenian) word-formation patterns, then pre-classical Armenian names with a rather obscure etymology, Moder Armenian names, and finally names of unknown origin, which are not attested in ancient sources. During the report, a discussion unfolded between Tork Dalalyan and the attendees, the origin of this or that toponym, the matters of its folk and scientific etymology were discussed comprehensively. Perhaps the most important aspect of the report is the scientific research of native (also borrowed) Armenian toponyms and their probable etymologies were to be circulated.

The four mentioned reports were included in the plenary session, which was entitled "History and culture" and which was conducted by A. Bobokyan.

The second session (chairman: Tork Dalalyan) was entitled "Archaeology and History" and related to the fortress-building and fortress-building system of Arevik Province, the architecture of historical monuments, and also various issues of modern history.

The first report "Fortification System of Arevik Canton" Levon Mkrtchyan (Service of Protection of Historical Enviroment and Historical-Cultural Museum-Reserves/ Shirak Center of Armenological Studies) presented the results of joint fieldwork with Gagik Sargsyan (IAE), which was based on the

research carried out within the framework of the Fortification System 'Fortresses of Historical Artsakh and Eastern Syunik and the Fortification System'. L. Mkrtchyan presented also the overall panorama of fortresses and fortress-like structures of Meghri region their arrangement, advantages, etc.

The second report "Architecture of the Small District of Meghri in the Context of the Earthen Heritage of the 19–20th Centuries" was presented by Hamazasp Abrahamyan (IAE / History Museum of Armenia). He referred to earthen buildings in Armenia and in that context, considering Meghri region in particular, one of the most beautiful and colorful corners of the city, its Small District, which is distinguished both by architectural solutions and the characteristics of the choice of building materials.

The author of the third report ("A Revolutionary Man from Meghri: Paramaz"), Yeghia (Yeghik) Djerejian, former deputy of the Lebanese Parliament could not arrive from Lebanon therefore the written text of the report was presented by Lusine Amirjanyan (PhD). The report, in fact, was a biography of writer Paramaz, who was a member of the Social Democrat Hunchakian Party, an outstanding representative of the Armenian liberation struggle.

With the fourth report ("Astvatsatur Vachyants: The Oil Industrialist and Philanthropist") Gevorg Stepanyan (PhD, IH) presented a prominent person of the time A. Vachyants' biography detailing his literary-cultural and social life, which is filled with many interesting pages. He was a member of the ARF (Armenian Revolutionary Federation), during the years 1898–1917 he was periodically elected as a member in the city council (Duma) of Baku, he was a correspondent member of "Mshak" newspaper. The speaker noted that these are the important and main points of Vachyants' biography.

The fifth report ("Process of Formation of Borders of Meghri District in 1922–1929") was presented by Hamo Sukiasyan (PhD, IH), he presented the formation of the borders of Meghri, which began in the early Soviet years and continued for about seven years, during which Soviet Azerbaijan repeatedly resorted to falsifications, demarcating in one or another part of the border in his favor and to the detriment of Armenia. H. Sukiasyan showed in detail how "after years of discussions, the Presidium Federation of the Central Executive Committee of the Transcaucasian Federation decided on February 18, 1929, to cede the villages of Nyuvadi, Einadzor, and Tghut with their lands to the Meghri district and to divide the disputed lands of the villages of Kartchevan of the Meghri district and Kilit of the Ordubad district almost equally between the two villages".

The third session, "Art and Cultural Monument" (chairman: Hamo Sukiasyan), included remarkable reports that examined the frescoes of the churches of the region, khachkar epigraphies, sources and location of the monuments.

The first report of the session was not only about Meghri region, but also to the iconographic and stylistic features of the churches of the region. Knarik Avetisyan (PhD, State Academy of Fine Arts of Armenia) presented the

generalities of the interior decorations of a number of churches of the XVII–XIX centuries in Arevik (“Iconographical and Stylistic Features of the Paintings of Churches in Meghri City and in the Regio”), Goghtn and Yernjak Provinces (St. John and St. Astvatsatsin of Meghri, St. Tovma and St. Christopher of Agulis, St. Karapet of Abrakunis).

Ashot Manucharyan (IAE) presented the second report, “Inscriptions of Lichkvaz”, he spoke about the epigraphic inscriptions found and already known in Lichkvaz village, located about 10 km from the city of Meghri, which refer to the three throne princes (Hrahat: 827, Smbat: 902, Abusahl: 1083). A. Manucharyan added to all this another stone inscription he discovered, which proves the existence of the fourth reigning prince, Vasak (941).

With the third report, “Meghri Region’s Places Mentioned in David Beck’s History and the Present-Day Monuments Located around Them”, Naira Hayrapetyan (Service of Protection of Historical Environment and Historical-Cultural Museum-Reserves) referred to the settlements of Meghri and the monuments in their territory, which are mentioned in the history of “David Bek” by Ghukas Sebastatsi. “Generally, David Bek’s history mentions settlements (Meghri fortress, Kaler village, Tashtun, Manlev, Ikis, Vank, Yerkdastan, Shvanidzor, Levaz, Karchevan, Bughakar, Ardzanakar, Saipun), many of which are just villages with many monuments, which date 18–19th centuries. Essentially, these monuments are the historical passports of the mentioned villages, which have a biography and which must be preserved to pass down to generations”, detailed N. Hayrapetyan.

On the second day of the conference, on November 18, were held two sessions and one workshop. The reports of the first session (chairman: Svetlana Poghosyan) were mainly about ethnography and source studies. Guests from Russia and Germany presented their reports at this session.

The first report, “The Domestication of the Territory: The Cultural Heritage of Nakhichevan in the Narratives of the Local Azerbaijanis”, presented Dmitry Baranov (PhD, Russian Museum of Ethnography, Saint Petersburg), he spoke about the fieldwork carried out in Nakhijevan in 2021 and 2023, which, in fact, are conversations about the deportation of the Armenians of Nakhichevan and the Azerbaijanis who settled there after the occupation of the territory. The interesting thing is that during the research of the Russian scientist, the Azerbaijani side spoke about the lack of Armenian culture and called native Armenians “immigrants”.

The second report, “Religious Life of the Armenians of Goghtn in the Late Soviet Period”, was presented Dr. Yulia Andreeva (PhD, Germany, independent researcher). The report was dedicated to the religious life of the Armenians of the historical Goght province. The orator presented in detail the religious rituals and customs of the indigenous people of that area, including in the context of the anti-religious Soviet years. Y. Andreeva prepared her report based on the 1960s–1980s. On the interviews conducted with the Armenians who emigrated from Nakhichevan’ which were performed in 2021–2023.

The third report, “Religious Holidays and Holy Places of the Armenians of Goghtn in the Late Soviet Period”, was presented Evgenia Gulyaeva (RME), which was closely related to the previous report and presented the sanctuaries and religious calendar holidays of Nakhichevan in the 1950s–1980s. E. Gulyaeva's report was compiled from interviews conducted in 2021 and 2023 with 44 Armenians who emigrated from Nakhichevan, and live both in Armenia and the Russian Federation. 28 of them are Armenians from Goghtn. All interviewees mentioned their national rituals and holidays in detail: New Year, Trndez, Easter, Vardavar, etc.

The fourth report “The Gospel of Vahravar (1322) as a Symbol of Worship for the People of Meghri and a Source of History” was presented Arsen Harutyunyan (PhD, IAE/“Matenadaran” Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts Nmaed after Mesrop Mashtots). The subject of the study is a manuscript Gospel copied in 1322 under the auspices of the former St. Gregory the Illuminator church of the Vahravar village, which today kept in the manuscript’s collection of Matenadaran (Matenadaran: 7450). Harutyunyan mentioned that the Gospel which is written by order of Priest Tiranun and by scribe Religious Hakob is illustrated. Both at time of writing and late period colophons are preserved, which are the documents of the history of manuscript.

The fifth report “An Important Primary Source about Shvanidzor: About the Nikol Aghbalya’s Demographic Material “Letters From the Zangezur district”” was presented Armen Manukyan (PhD, M. Abeghyan Institute of Literature). He presented the aforementioned travelogue of Nikol Aghbalyan, which was published in the 3rd–4th issues of 1900 of the “Hammer” magazine published in Tiflis. The material of which he collected in the spring of 1896 while traveling in Syunik. The material refers to the demography of five villages: Shvanidzor, Kemants, Shikahog, Chakaten and Geghanush.

The session was concluded by Knarik Mirzoyan (Yerevan State Institute of Theatre and Cinematography) with her report “Characteristics of the National-Folk Holidays in Meghri Region”, in which the Meghri region was presented not only as an anthropogenic, but also as an ancient cradle of ancient civilization. Livestock, farming, households, agriculture that become the cradle of national traditions.

The second session of the second day (chair: Roman Hovsepyan) was dedicated to ethnography and folklore studies. The speakers presented the plant-collecting culture of Meghri region, food made from wild edible plants, plant names, in addition, reports related to archival materials related to the ethnography and folklore of the Meghri region.

The first report “Names of Plants in the Arevik Region in the Study “Sisakan” by Ghevond Alishan and Their Dialect Equivalents” was presented Haykanush Mesropyan (DrHabil., H. Acharyan Institute of Language). She considering the names of plants presented in the 10th chapter “Arevik” of Father Ghevond Alishyan’s work (“Sisakan” Topography of the Land of Syunik”). Mesropyan presented the semantic-functional features of plant

names, literary and dialectal versions, Latin equivalents accepted by botanists, substantiated the emergence of village names and microtoponyms derived from plant words.

Roman Hovsepyan (PhD, IAE) presented his, Hasmik Abramyan's (PhD, IAE), Anush Nersesya'n (PhD, A. Takhtajyan Institute of Botany) and Ani Saratikya'n (PhD, IAE) joint report ("Some Wild Edible Plants Typical for Meghri and Food Prepared of Them"). Summarized the results of the fieldwork carried out by the research group in 2020–2023, which allowed the group to assume that Meghri and the surrounding villages, in terms of the culture of plant collection and the use of wild plants, basically repeat the examples of other regions of Syunik.

The subject of the third report is "Collecting Culture of the Meghri Region (Tradition and Modernity)", it was presented by Angela Amirkhanyan (IAE) based on the field material recorded in Tashtun, Karchevan, Lehvaz and Shvanidzor villages of Meghri region in 2023, in addition on Danielyan's atypical work on the Meghri region kept in the archive of the IAE and also based on Y. Mkrtumyan's and E. Margaryan's works.

The authors of the final report of the session were Tork Dalalyan (PhD, IAE/IL), and Gevorg Gylumyan (IAE). Gylumyan presented "IAE Archives' Folkloric and Ethnographic Materials Concerning the Region of Arevik" with a pictorial slide show. The speaker described them according to the authors: Levon Danielyan, Zareh Ter-Minasyan and Victor Vardanyan, the material of the first one is ethnographic, the other two – folklore. According to the reporter, the materials, except for some of Zareh Ter-Minasyan's notes, are atypical and need careful research and classification.

After the end of the main part of the conference, was held a three-hour workshop (chairman: Davit Davtyan), during which were presented the research programs carried out in the Meghri region, were discussed the development possibilities of Meghri and the ways of their realization.

The authors of the first comprehensive report "The Problems and Perspectives of the Development of Cultural Tourism in Meghri Region According to the Research Conducted in 2002" were Samvel Mkrtchyan (DrHabil, IAE/YSU) and Svetlana Poghosyan (PhD, National Museum of Armenia Ethnography and History of Liberation Struggle/IAE). Poghosyan presented the tourism potential of the Meghri region and possible developments in the present and future. The speaker briefly told about the above-mentioned research project funded by the "Hayastan Foundation" in 2002, and then about the ethnographic launch project of the "Guest House" of Meghri Small District.

The second ("The Main Results of Excavations of Saint Hovhannes Monastery of Meghri in 2016–2020") was presented by Arman Nalbandyan (Scientific Research Center of the Historical And Cultural Heritage/IAE). He spoke in detail the results of the four-year excavations of St. John's Monastery. The costs of the entire workflow and restoration of the monument were covered by American–Armenian benefactors Haig and Hilda Manjikian. The

excavations have been carried out by the archaeological expedition of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of NAS RA in 2016 and 2018–2020 (the expedition leader A. Nalbandyan, archaeologists H. Badalyan, T. Aleksanyan).

The last extensive report “The Results of Project “Monuments’ Study of the Meghri Region” Implemented in 2021–2023” referred to the results of the project implemented with the funding of LCO in 2021–2023, which were presented by Davit Davtyan (IAE) and Davit Nahatakyan (National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia). The speakers described a number of religious structures of Meghri (Vahravar, Karmravank, Zvaravank, Agarak’s Amenaprkich and Akntsaver, Tkhkut, Gudemnis, Kuris, Lichk, Vank, Kaler, Apkes, Tos churches, Boghakar, Lehvaz, Shvanidzor), fortification structures (Meghri Fortress with its 6 towers, Kakavaberd, Berdin Kar, Terterasar, Manlev and Karchevan fortresses), archaeological monuments (Aghavnadzor, Apkes, Tos, Ikis, Verin Manlev, Zvar, Mnashu, Hegut, Verin Shen, Pushkag, Lsavank, Romelants, etc.), production-economic and engineering structures, residential houses and auxiliary structures, monuments of the Soviet and post-Soviet period.

After summarizing the reports of each day, the conference participants visited the sights of Meghri. On the first day, immediately after their arrival, they visited Meghri St. Hovhannes or Anapastanats Monastery and St. Astvatsatsin Church, and on the second day, Karchevan village, where they got acquainted with local historical monuments and folk architecture, they visited the village church, saw the Tsor natural monument-waterfall. On the third day, the participants of the conference visited Vahravar village and the Red Monastery, also St. Hovhannes Church of Meghri Small District, which is known for its exceptional frescoes. On the return day, November 19, the participants of the conference visited the village of Shvanidzor, viewed the medieval aqueduct and walked around the ruins of the old village. On the last day, November 19, the participants of the conference visited the village of Shvanidzor, saw the medieval aqueduct and walked around the ruins of the old village.

Accordingly, the conference that held in Meghri was important not only in terms of scientific and content, also in terms of Meghri's importance and international resonance especially nowadays.

Gevorg Gyulumyan – Junior Researcher at the Department of Folklore Studies of the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of NAS RA. Scientific interests: Armenian folklore, ethnography, Armenian literature of the XVIII–XIX centuries. gevorg.gyulum.1995@gmail.com

Anahit Khechoyan – Senior Assistant at the Department of Folklore Studies the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of NAS RA. Scientific interests: Armenian philology, folklore, ethnography, “Folklore and the Internet”. khechoyan.anahit@mail.ru