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BOOK REVIEWS



“VAYOTS DZOR. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE STUDIES” (Collective Monograph, edited by Tork Dalalyan)

(NAS RA Institute of Archaeology and ethnography, Yeghegnadzor Regional Museum, Yerevan, IAE publishing, 296 pages)

In the autumn of 2021, a collective monograph dedicated to the historical and cultural heritage of the historic province of Vayots Dzor was presented to readers under the diligent editorship of Dr. T. S. Dalalyan. It brings together valuable studies by almost three dozen scholars on the folklore, ethnography, architecture, and the historical past and present of the Vayots Dzor region. The consecutive and complementary studies presented in this volume are the result of a long-term research conducted by scholars from various scientific centers across Armenia. For readers unfamiliar with the region, these studies reveal Vayots Dzor from multiple perspectives simultaneously. As noted by Pavel Avetisyan, Corresponding Member of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, and editor Tork Dalalyan in the book's foreword, “Each article constitutes an episode in the historical and cultural heritage of Vayots Dzor, and when these episodes are arranged side by side in a logical sequence, they form a coherent whole, resulting in a unique collective monograph made possible through the interdisciplinary research efforts of scholars from various academic institutions.” (p. 12).

The book is divided into five distinct sections – A. "Vayots Dzor: General Information," B. "Medieval Christian Cultural Heritage of Vayots Dzor," C. "The Intangible Cultural Heritage of Vayots Dzor," D. "Archaeological Heritage of Vayots Dzor," and E. "Reports." Each section functions as an independent unit while collectively forming a comprehensive work that illuminates the history of Vayots Dzor.

1. "Vayots Dzor: General Information"

The articles included in the first section primarily examine Vayots Dzor from a demographic perspective, effectively laying the groundwork for the subsequent chapters and forming the initial link in the book's thematic chain. In this context, the contribution by folklorist Ester Khemchyan, "Etymological Legends Concerning the Toponym of Vayots Dzor" (pp. 24–30), is particularly noteworthy. Although focused on the folkloristic genre, it also incorporates a wealth of bibliographical and historiographical sources – such as Khorenatsi, Gandzaketsi, and Manandyan – which lend additional credibility and depth to the existing viewpoints. The author examines in detail the origin of the region's name, drawing on the data provided by prominent Armenian historiographers and comparing them with existing ethnographic and philological materials. This comprehensive analysis leads to important and well-founded conclusions.

The research titled "Ethno-Demographic Processes of the Vayots Dzor Population from 1873–1939" (pp. 31–45), authored by Hamlet Sargsyan, a specialist in demography and ethnography, presents valuable and insightful data. Supported by extensive factual material, the study illuminates over a century of demographic developments in the province. Notably, the author not only introduces a range of factual sources, but also identifies certain ones – mainly from the Tsarist period – that had previously provided inaccurate information. In summarizing his research, H. Sargsyan concludes that, with some fluctuations, the population of Vayots Dzor increased by approximately 1.8 times, or 80.7 percent, during the specified period. The average annual growth rate was 3.6 percent between 1886 and 1897. Subsequently, from 1905 to 1914, it rose to an average of 11.6 percent, and during the period from 1926 to 1939, an exceptionally high growth rate of 53.3 percent was recorded. The author's observation that Armenians constituted 81 percent of the population during that period – representing an overwhelming majority – is particularly noteworthy.

This article is also significant in the broader context of responding to anti-Armenian policies pursued by a neighboring state.

The research conducted by Susanna Adamyan, Ph.D. candidate in History, titled "From the History of the 1905–1906 "Armenian-Tatarian" Conflict" (pp. 46–56), is particularly noteworthy. It sheds light on the mass massacres of Armenians that took place in Eastern Armenia at the beginning of the twentieth century. The sources cited by the author demonstrate that these atrocities were once again instigated by the Ottoman Empire. The article emphasizes that, in preparation for the massacres of Armenians in Baku, Gandzak, Nakhichevan, and other regions, the Ottoman Empire had preemptively distributed weapons and ammunition among the Caucasian Muslims, later referred to as Azerbaijanis. Each stage of the operation was meticulously coordinated in advance with preselected paramilitary leaders.

The first section of the book concludes with a highly relevant study by ethnosociologist Mihran Galstyan, titled "Labor Migration and Socio-Cultural Transformations in Vayots Dzor" (pp. 57–65). The author provides a comprehensive analysis of migration patterns in Vayots Dzor over the past three decades and concludes that, on average, 391 individuals with permanent residence left the region each year and did not return (p. 57).

Based on factual material, the author suggests that emigration was already driven by poverty in the second half of the 19th century (p. 57). He also mentions that emigration continues in a big way and, for example, every year hundreds of people from the mentioned villages move abroad to find work: "On average, 300 individuals from Areni, 800 from Gladzor, 300 from Agarakadzor, 300 from Arpi, and 400 from Aghavnadzor migrate for employment" (p. 58).

2. "The Medieval Christian Cultural Heritage of Vayots Dzor"

In the second section, as the general title already suggests, the focus is on the Christian cultural heritage created in the region during the medieval period. These monuments are of exceptional importance from several perspectives. The first study, titled "The Rise of Monasteries and Educational Centers in Vayots Dzor" (pages 68–77), is authored by historian and art critic Karen Matevosyan. In his detailed account of medieval Vayots Dzor, the author revisits the region's

political and cultural life, examining both the positive and negative consequences.

K. Matevosyan first briefly discusses the rivalry between the Orbelian and Khaghbakian (Proshian) princely houses, their respective stances toward Mongol rule, and the positions they held within the province. He then provides a detailed account of the establishment of one of medieval Armenia's most prominent educational centers – Gladzor University – examining its educational methods and its connections with Upper Noravank. Finally, the researcher turns to the Hermon Monastery school, which was considered the logical continuation of the Gladzor educational complex.

The following chapter-article serves as a supplementary continuation of the aforementioned study. In her work titled "Toros Taronatsi, the Prominent Representative of Gladzor University" (pages 78–89), art historian Naira Nazaryan examines the 14th-century miniature painter Toros Taronatsi, a student of Esayi Nchetsi and a disciple of Gladzor University.

The author observes that Taronatsi's art is particularly noteworthy for reflecting pre-Cilician, Cilician, Armenian artistic traditions, as well as Byzantine and Western European influence. The article provides a detailed examination of Taronatsi's role and status within Gladzor University.

The next article examines the research of Tigran Grigoryan, which focuses on the symbolism of the reliefs on the eastern façade of the St. Astvatsatsin Church (Burtelashen) in Vayots Dzor – specifically, the symbols of "The Clawing Eagle" and "The Heavenly Kingdom" in the relief sculptures of Noravank (pp. 90–100).

He provides a detailed description of the iconographic system on the eastern façade, examining the symbolism and parallels of the star-shaped figures, and cross compositions. He then turns to the tripartite relief decoration, analyzing it in a hierarchical sequence. According to the author's interpretation, the third ornamental band represents a model of the "small universe," forming part of the broader vision of the "Heavenly Kingdom." The large cross composition in the second band symbolizes the concept of "Salvation."

The first band features the image of the "Clawing Eagle," completing the relief composition (p. 100). The scholar devotes considerable attention to this particular band, making it the central focus of his study. Referring to Karen Matevosyan, he notes that the eagle represents a transformed angel destined to

seize the body of the deceased during the Last Judgment and carry it to the heavenly kingdom (p. 95).

The subsequent chapter, titled "The Liturgy for the Salvation of the Soul in the Epigraphic Records of Vayots Dzor and in Armenian Epic Folklore" (pp. 101–108), is authored by Siranush-Nrane Arakelyan. In this chapter, the author revisits liturgical texts preserved in the Vayots Dzor inscriptions that were specifically commissioned for the salvation of the soul, comparing them with corresponding materials from Armenian folklore.

The author examines the socio-cultural aspects of epigraphic texts, exploring the beliefs and concepts, the perception of the Liturgy in Armenian epic folklore, as well as the religious rituals and their transformations. Occupying a prominent place in Armenian epic folklore, this theme has long drawn the attention of folklorists.

The second section concludes with a review contributed by folklorist Ester Khemchyan, titled "Church-Building Legends and the Sanctuaries of Vayots Dzor" (pp. 109–115). In this work, she explores the legends associated with the churches and other sanctuaries of the province, which primarily focus on their construction, the motivations behind their establishment, and the circumstances or orders that initiated them. Drawing on numerous local narratives and her decades of field experience, the author presents a comprehensive and insightful study, skillfully weaving together various stories and oral accounts related to the construction of the region's churches and creating a cohesive interpretation.

3. "The Intangible Cultural Heritage of Vayots Dzor"

The second part of the book examines the folklore and ethnographic heritage of Vayots Dzor, which is exceptionally rich and has been the subject of extensive scholarly research. It is important to note that, unlike architectural monuments – created once and remaining unchanged – folklore is a living heritage that undergoes continuous development, constantly evolving and expanding its geographical reach, even though it is, unfortunately, often forgotten.

In their joint study "Folk Culture of Vayots Dzor in the Records of the Specialist in Folklore" (pp. 118–127), folklorists Lusine Ghrejian and Lusine Hayriyan revisit the monumental works of earlier researchers, who collected folklore materials from the region during different periods – works that were

significant not only in their own time, but remain valuable to this day. Particular attention is given to Kajberuni, the region's first folklorist and ethnographer. Originally trained as a doctor, he recorded and preserved a vast body of folklore, saving it from oblivion – material that remains invaluable for contemporary research. The distinguished ethnographer and folklorist Yervand Lalayan is also discussed – an exceptional figure not only in Armenian folklore studies, but also in the documentation and classification of Vayots Dzor's oral heritage.

The study by folklorist Marine Khemchyan, titled "Philologist Sargis Harutyunyan's Collection of Folklore Materials from Vayots Dzor" (pp. 128–141), focuses on the folklore gathered in Vayots Dzor by one of the leading figures in Armenian folklore studies, Sargis Harutyunyan. The author first highlights Harutyunyan's remarkable contributions to the field of Armenian folklore, then traces how he came to Vayots Dzor and began collecting folklore materials during his years as a PhD student in the late 1950s.

The chapter titled "The Vayots Dzor Version of the Saga about Hovhan Odznetsi according to Kajberuni's Recording" (pp. 142–154) is a highly significant study by folklorist and linguist Tork Dalalyan. The author revisits Kajberuni's work "The Travel Notes," focusing on the stories about Hovhan Odznetsi as narrated by Tados, a storyteller from the village of Khachik in the Vayots Dzor province. Before turning to the main theme, Dalalyan introduces Kajberuni, discussing his historical role and his connections with Mikayel Nalbandyan and Stepanos Nazaryants, while also emphasizing the continuing relevance and importance of Kajberuni's work today. He then discusses how Dr. Gabriel Ter-Hovhannisyanyan, who later became known as Kajberuni, began collecting folklore materials and became actively engaged in ethnographic research. Drawing on Kajberuni's series of stories, the researcher revisits the figure of Hovhan Odznetsi and examines his representation as a patron of young warriors. He analyzes and interprets the ritual of the bridegroom's head shaving, while also revealing its cultural and symbolic significance. Under the subtitle "Wheat as a Symbol of National Identity," Tork Dalalyan revisits a story recorded by the folklorist about the "horoms,"¹ who forbade Armenians to bake

¹ The word "Horom" in Armenian originally means "Roman," and in later periods it also came to denote a "Byzantine." The term "Horomner" is likewise used to refer to the followers of the Orthodox Church.

wheat bread. He recounts the episode of an old woman who begged for bread for her dying son, but was refused by a "horom" mill owner, also noting the symbolic "presence" of Odznetsi within the narrative. Dalalyan then presents the Vayots Dzor version of the story, in which Odznetsi is portrayed as a man with a radiant golden beard. He then examines, one by one, the symbolism of gold and the radiant golden beard, Odznetsi's ability to "cast spells," the red-eyed Arab commander Ali appointed by Odznetsi in the battle against the "horoms," the cross-adorned sword, the motif of the bridge, and Odznetsi's resolution of the issue concerning the non-sacrifice of seven Armenian men on the mysterious bridge. T. Dalalyan's analysis of the symbolic meaning of the wisp of hair is particularly noteworthy. He explores its magical significance, noting that in earlier times warriors were required to possess it. He further explains that the shaving of a warrior's head was associated with order and served as an initiation ritual through which a "disorderly" young man was consecrated and transformed into a mature individual (p. 148). The researcher also outlines the geographical scope of the custom – from Greece to Iran – drawing on the works of both Armenian and foreign scholars, who have studied the subject. He further refers to the motif of Odznetsi boiling the bishops of the "horoms" in copper, comparing it to a story recorded in Lori, in which the Greek patriarch threatens to boil Odznetsi himself in copper. T. Dalalyan also includes in his article a story recorded by Kajberuni about an agreement between Odznetsi and the Arabs. According to the account, every Armenian was required to pay tribute to the Caliph. If the Arabs happened upon a sleeping Armenian while passing by, they were to cast a shadow over him with the lap of their garment until he awoke. In return, Armenians were expected to give way to any Arab they encountered, as a gesture honoring the Arab people (p. 150). This story, we suggest, is particularly interesting and valuable from the perspective of folk thought. The act of casting a shadow over sleeping Armenians functions as a folkloric consolation – a symbolic wish or collective dream – later incorporated into the main narrative to mitigate or redeem an episode that, in reality, entailed the dishonorable obligation of paying tribute to the Arabs. Thus, T. Dalalyan examines the Vayots Dzor cycle of stories related to

As a result, numerous toponyms derived from the name Horom – such as Horom, Horamayr, and others – are found throughout the Armenian Highland.

Odznetsi in a new light, enriching the material of a collector of folklore with original insights and scholarly analysis.

The next article-chapter is authored by folklorist Nvard Vardanyan. In her piece titled "Modern Folklore Recordings from the Village of Zangakatun" (pp. 155–161) she presents folklore materials collected in 2019 in the village of Zangakatun (Vayots Dzor). These materials are particularly valuable for understanding contemporary perceptions of oral folk narratives and the transformations these narratives have undergone.

N. Vardanyan notes that the materials were recorded from Rafik Karapetyan – an 83-year-old storyteller. The first recorded story concerns the etymology of the name of Lake Sevachya. The second, titled "Shahkuli Demon," is linked to superstitions about the devil. The third recounts the tale of the "Inspiration Cave," where demons are believed to dwell. According to the legend, mothers of unattractive newborns would place their babies at the cave's entrance so that the demons might "transform their ugly children into beautiful ones."

In his article "The Culture of Feasts and Ceremonies in Vayots Dzor" (pp. 162–181), Samvel Mkrtchyan discusses the feasts and ritual ceremonies practiced in the province over the past hundred years, comparing them with earlier traditions when relevant. The author drew on the works of both Kajberuni and Yervand Lalayan, who studied Vayots Dzor from ethnographic and folkloric perspectives with great expertise, as well as other sources. Samvel Mkrtchyan revisited the feasts of Navasard, Christmas, the Water Blessing, Saint Sargis, Tyarnndarach, Barekendan, Great Lent, Mid-Lent, Palm Sunday, Easter, the Feast of the Ascension, Vardavar, the Elevation of the Holy Cross, and the Annunciation to the Holy Mother, describing in detail how each was celebrated in Vayots Dzor. He emphasized aspects of family life, inter-community and intra-community relations, as well as the broader modes of life and worldviews.

The following noteworthy chapter-article by ethnographer Anzhela Amirkhanyan, "Harvesting Culture in Vayots Dzor (Tradition and Modernity)" (pp. 182–190), explores the traditions of harvesting and using wild plants in the cuisine of Vayots Dzor. The article is based on field survey materials collected in 2019 in the villages of Areni, Gladzor, Rind, Karaglukh, Chiva and the town of Jermuk. The descriptions of innovations in harvesting culture are particularly

noteworthy. A separate chapter is devoted to the resort significance of the town of Jermuk.

The third part concludes with Nikol Margaryan's article "The Linguistic Landscape of Yeghegnadzor City according to Functional Analysis of Modern Ergonyms" (pp. 191–205), which examines the names of enterprises. By studying more than five dozen enterprise names, the author juxtaposes this material with data from the Soviet and early post-Soviet periods, thereby constructing a thought-provoking and insightful factual sequence.

4. Archaeological Heritage of Vayots Dzor

The fourth part presents the information base of the Vayots Dzor archaeological heritage, uncovered by researchers during excavations carried out over different years. These findings are significant, as they are later preserved in various museums, offering the public a visual connection to specific historical periods. They also serve as the foundation for numerous scholarly and popular publications, which, in turn, transport the reader mentally into the past. The topics addressed span from antiquity to the medieval period.

This key section opens with the study "Archaeological Landscape of Artavan and Gomk Villages" by archaeologists Hayk Avetisyan, Artak Gnuni, Arsen Bobokhyan, Levon Mkrtchyan, Henrik Danielyan and Gagik Sargsyan (pp. 208–222). It examines the archaeological zones of Gomk and Artavan in the province. In the course of their investigation, the team of scholars revisited and confirmed previously known monuments within these archaeological areas, building on materials collected during earlier surveys conducted by Yerevan State University. Alongside their scientific reaffirmations, the group described an unstudied tower and a cyclopean fortress on the mound known as "Andraniki Berd" in Artavan village. They also examined a stele discovered in the village of Gomk, which differs significantly from the standing stones found in Armenia to date. This is the only article in the collection authored by more than two scholars. It consolidates the research findings of six meticulous archaeologists into a single, comprehensive and cohesive scientific study.

In her study titled "Ceramic Traditions of the Population Residing by the Arpa River in the Eneolithic Period (According to the Excavations of the Areni-1 Cave)" (pp. 223–230), archaeologist Diana Zardaryan revisits the rich archaeological materials unearthed in the Areni-1 cave in the Vayots Dzor region

during 2007–2013. She examines their significance and modes of use, shedding light on the household and social conditions that prevailed in the region in ancient times. In describing the geographical location of the Areni-1 Cave, the author identifies three cultural horizons that have been preserved in an undisturbed state to this day (p. 223), dating to 3700–3400 BC, 4000–3800 BC, and 4300–4000 BC.

Archaeologists Astghik Babajanyan and Kathryn Franklin, in their joint study "Medieval Arpa at the Crossroads of Caravan Trade Routes" (pp. 213–249), revisit the history of the ancient village of Arpa. Drawing on the results of excavations conducted in 2016 within the framework of the project "Archaeological Research of the Silk Road in Vayots Dzor," they demonstrate the advantageous geographical position of the Arpa settlement, its significance as a caravan hub and the consequent administrative and economic advantages that emerged from this location. The authors first refer to the "Silk Road" that passed through the territory of Armenia, briefly outlining the political context of the period and the conditions of transportation networks, while identifying the settlement of Arpa as a key center at this major crossroads.

The final study in the fourth part is authored by the archaeologist-historian Tigran Aleksanyan. In his work titled "Observations about the Vayots Dzor Monuments of Vardanank" the author examines the account of the Vardanants War as described by the historian Stepanos Orbelyan. According to Orbelyan, an Armenian military detachment, retreating after the battle, attempted to reach Artsakh, but was pursued by Persian forces led by the military commander Atashkhuda. As a result, four battles took place between the Armenian and Persian troops. The author, where possible, precisely localizes the probable sites of the four battles. Based on the available data, he also attempts to identify the possible locations of these chapels, presenting several compelling hypotheses. According to him, the first battle took place near the Kyoshk Fortress in the town of Yeghegnadzor (as proposed by Sedrak Barkhudaryan); the second, near a chapel located close to the village of Shatin; the third, near a church situated along the Shatin-Yeghegis road (locally known as "Tak ingyoz" – "Lonely Walnut"); and the last one, to the west of Artabuink, near the village cemetery, where a single-nave structure now stands, constructed from the stones of an earlier church.

5. "Reports"

The final, fifth part brings together a series of engaging reports and studies that discuss the museum, library, and monument culture of Vayots Dzor, as well as the trends in their development. This part may be regarded as the thematic synthesis of the entire volume. In the report titled "Relics of Cultural Heritage of Vayots Dzor in the Collection of the Museum of Armenian Ethnography," ethnographer Svetlana Poghosyan first presents the ethnographic surveys conducted by the Sardarapat State Museum of Ethnography and the Vayots Dzor items preserved there. These items are of great significance not only to the local population, but also for attracting tourists interested in Armenia's history and ethnographic heritage.


In her report titled "The Role of Local Lore Museums in the Development of the Region (The Case of the Yeghegnadzor Regional Museum)" (pp. 274–282), museologist Lianna Gevorgyan first examines the past and present interpretations of the term museum, and then discusses their role and influence on the community and its population. She notes that, in addition to the factor of time, societal changes have also played a significant role in the development of museums.

In her report titled "Monument and Community on the Silk Road: Practices and Perspectives from Armenia Based on Areni, Shatin and Yeghegis Villages" (pp. 282–287), cultural studies scholar Julietta Grigoryan explores the relationship between monuments and local communities, as well as the attitudes of those communities toward the monuments. The report is based on research conducted in the villages of Areni, Shatin and Yeghegis. Its primary objective is to clarify the role of archaeology in the life of society, and conversely, the role of society in the protection of monuments and cultural heritage. In this context, the above-mentioned villages serve as objects of case studies. The report also highlights the significance of the monuments situated along the Silk Road.


The fifth part - and indeed the entire volume – culminates with Mher Ghazinyan's report titled "Libraries of the Vayots Dzor Region: The Past, Present, and Future" (pp. 288–294). In the report, the author refers to the libraries of the province, comparing their past and future. Particularly valuable are the author's observations concerning the present state and future development of library culture.

Thus, all thirty co-authors of this collective monograph, through their chapters presented in the form of articles or reports, comprehensively document, summarize and complement the tangible and intangible heritage of Vayots Dzor – archaeological, architectural, ethnographic and folkloric. The volume is substantial, as almost all chapters, though focused on the past, are interpreted in the light of contemporary developments, offering a fresh perspective and a bold step toward the future. This book, quite deservedly, should not only receive the high recognition it has earned within the Armenian academic community, but also find its place on the desks of foreign scholars, whose objective evaluation would undoubtedly be equally favorable. In addition to its considerable scholarly value, the volume may also serve as a form of cultural and intellectual response to the anti-Armenian propaganda and historical falsifications promoted by Azerbaijan.

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