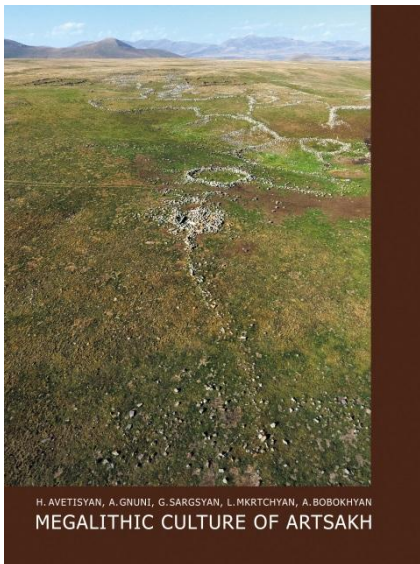


ԳՐԱԽՈՍՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐ/REVIEWS/ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

HAYK AVETISYAN, ARTAK GNUNI, GAGIK SARGSYAN, LEVON MKRTCHYAN, ARSEN BOBOKHYAN, MEGALITHIC CULTURE OF ARTSAKH, YEREVAN, PUBLICATION OF THE INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE NAS RA, 2025, 159 P.

ՀԱՅԿ ԱՎԵՏԻՍՅԱՆ, ԱՐՏԱԿ ԳՆՈՒՆԻ, ԳԱԳԻԿ ՍԱՐԳՍՅԱՆ, ԼԵՎՈՆ ՄԿՐՏՉՅԱՆ, ԱՐՍԵՆ ԲՈԲՈԽՅԱՆ, ԱՐՑԱԽԻ ՄԵԳԱԼԻԹՅԱՆ ՄՇԱԿՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ, ԵՐԵՎԱՆ, ՀՀ ԳԱԱ ՀՆԱԳԻՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԵՎ ԱԶԳԱԳՐՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԻՆՍՏԻՏՈՒՏԻ ՀՐԱՏԱՐԱԿՉՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ, 2025, 159 ԷՁ:
ГАЙК АВЕТИСЯН, АРТАК ГНУНИ, ГАГИК САРГСЯН, ЛЕВОН МКРТЧЯН, АРСЕН БОБОХЯН, МЕГАЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ КУЛЬТУРА АРЦАХА, ЕРЕВАН, ИЗДАНИЕ ИНСТИТУТА АРХЕОЛОГИИ И ЭТНОГРАФИИ НАН РА, 2025, 159 С.



understanding megalithic phenomena in Artsakh from the Bronze Age through later historical transformations.

This review critically evaluates the structure, methodology, interpretive claims, and scholarly contribution of the work. Particular attention is paid to its handling of chronology, typology, spatial organization, and the integration of folklore and collective memory into archaeological interpretation. While the book's contribution is substantial and often innovative, it also reveals certain structural tensions, methodological ambiguities, and interpretive risks that merit careful discussion.

The volume under review represents the most ambitious attempt to synthesize archaeological, historiographical, and interpretive data on the megalithic monuments of Artsakh. Conceived as a collective monograph, it seeks not merely to catalogue monuments, but to embed them within broader questions of cultural development, landscape sacralization, and long-term memory practices in the Armenian Highlands. The work is positioned at the intersection of empirical field archaeology, regional cultural history, and interpretive approaches drawn from landscape archaeology and memory studies. As such, it aspires to move beyond descriptive archaeology and to propose a coherent conceptual framework for

The monograph is structured as follows: a Preface; Chapter I, “The History of Research on Megalithic Monuments”; Chapter II, “Common Principles of the Typology of Megalithic Monuments”; Chapter III, “Megalithic Monuments in Multifunctional Complexes”; Chapter IV, “Megalithic Monuments in Functional Complexes”; and Chapter V, “Megalithic Complexes in the Context of Archaeology of Memory”; followed by a Conclusion, Illustrations, and a Bibliography.

One of the strongest aspects of the work is its detailed engagement with the history of research on megalithic monuments, both in Artsakh and in the wider Caucasian and Armenian contexts. By tracing the trajectory from early travelers’ accounts and ethnographic observations through Soviet-period archaeology and into contemporary interdisciplinary approaches, the authors demonstrate a commendable awareness of the intellectual traditions that have shaped the field.

The historiographical narrative successfully highlights the unevenness of research in Artsakh, emphasizing how political circumstances, shifting research priorities, and methodological limitations delayed the emergence of systematic study. This contextualization is not merely descriptive; it implicitly critiques earlier approaches that treated megalithic monuments as isolated curiosities or subsumed them uncritically under broader Caucasian typologies. In doing so, the work positions itself as a corrective, aiming to articulate a regional specificity for Artsakh without isolating it from transregional processes.

However, the historiographical section occasionally leans toward accumulation rather than synthesis. While the presentation of past research is thorough, the analytical implications of historiographical shifts are not always fully articulated. For instance, the transition from culture-historical frameworks to landscape-oriented and symbolic interpretations could have been more explicitly theorized, particularly in relation to how these shifts affect the reading of material evidence.

The treatment of chronology constitutes a central pillar of the work. The authors rightly identify the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages as particularly problematic periods for Artsakh, characterized by conservative material culture and complex regional interactions. The discussion convincingly argues that traditional chronological schemes derived from lowland or Urartian-influenced contexts cannot be mechanically applied to mountainous regions.

By foregrounding local developmental trajectories, the work contributes to a growing body of scholarship that challenges overly centralized models of cultural change in the Armenian Highlands. The emphasis on continuity, gradual transformation, and regional autonomy is supported by archaeological data from cemeteries, fortresses, and ritual complexes. Particularly valuable is the attention paid to the persistence of certain construction techniques and spatial practices across long chronological spans.

Nevertheless, the chronological argument would benefit from clearer internal structuring. At times, discussions of Early Bronze Age, Middle Bronze Age, and Iron

Age phenomena overlap without sufficient signposting, potentially obscuring diachronic distinctions. While the authors intentionally stress continuity, there is a risk that this emphasis may underplay moments of rupture or innovation that are archaeologically significant.

The typological framework proposed in the volume is one of its most ambitious components. Rather than adopting a purely morphological classification, the authors attempt to integrate form, function, and spatial context. This multidimensional approach reflects contemporary trends in megalithic studies and represents a clear advance over earlier rigid typologies.

One of the central methodological challenges in the study of megalithic monuments in Artsakh is the question of definition. The term *megalith* itself, while widely used, encompasses a broad spectrum of stone constructions differing in size, form, function, and chronological attribution. In the context of Artsakh, megalithic monuments range from isolated standing stones to complex architectural ensembles integrated into extensive cultural landscapes. Any attempt at classification must therefore balance descriptive clarity with analytical flexibility.

Earlier studies often applied typologies developed for European megaliths, emphasizing formal criteria such as stone size, orientation, and construction technique. While useful for initial documentation, such approaches tend to obscure local specificities and functional diversity. More recent research in the Armenian Highlands favors a contextual typology, in which monument types are defined not only by morphology but also by spatial relationships, associated features, and patterns of reuse.

In Artsakh, megalithic monuments rarely appear as single, isolated structures. Instead, they are frequently embedded in clusters or complexes that include multiple architectural forms, natural features, and traces of economic activity. As a result, typological classification must be understood as a heuristic tool rather than a rigid taxonomy.

Standing stones constitute one of the most visually striking and widely distributed megalithic forms in Artsakh. These monuments typically consist of vertically set stones ranging from modest slabs to massive monoliths exceeding two meters in height. Their shapes vary from roughly hewn blocks to carefully shaped stelae with flattened faces. Unlike European menhirs, which are often found in isolation or in linear alignments, Artsakh standing stones are frequently integrated into broader architectural contexts. They may form part of cromlechs, mark entrances to enclosures, or be positioned near cairns and ritual platforms. In some instances, later communities reused standing stones as foundation elements for medieval structures or incorporated them into Christian monuments, further complicating their interpretation. Chronologically, standing stones in Artsakh are difficult to date with precision. However, associated materials and spatial relationships suggest a primary phase of erection during the Bronze Age, with continued significance into later periods.

Among the most distinctive megalithic monuments of the Armenian Highlands are the vishap (dragon stone) stelae. While most extensively studied in regions such as Gegharkunik and the Geghama Mountains, vishap stelae are also present in Artsakh, particularly in high-altitude zones associated with water sources and alpine pastures. Vishap stelae are typically elongated stone slabs bearing carved representations of fish, serpents, or bovine elements. Typologically, Artsakh vishaps exhibit both classic forms known from other regions and local variants. Some examples display less elaborate carving, suggesting either chronological variation or differing degrees of ritual investment. Importantly, vishap stelae in Artsakh are rarely isolated; they are usually embedded within complex assemblages that include cairns, cromlechs, petroglyphs, and stone walls.

Cromlechs and stone circles represent another significant category of megalithic monuments in Artsakh. These structures consist of stones arranged in circular or oval patterns, sometimes enclosing a central feature such as a cairn, platform, or standing stone. Their diameters vary widely, from small enclosures measuring a few meters across to expansive circles exceeding twenty meters. Earlier interpretations often linked cromlechs exclusively to funerary practices, drawing parallels with burial circles in other regions. However, excavations and surveys in Artsakh suggest a more diverse range of functions. While some cromlechs are clearly associated with burials, others show no evidence of interments and appear instead to have served as ritual spaces or markers of communal activity.

Cairns and stone-built platforms constitute one of the most numerous but least understood categories of megalithic monuments in Artsakh. These structures typically consist of piles or layers of stones forming mounds, terraces, or flat platforms. Their sizes and shapes vary considerably, and many have been altered or reused over time. In some cases, cairns are associated with burials, containing stone cists or chambers beneath their surfaces. In others, they appear to function as ritual platforms, observation points, or markers within pastoral landscapes. The absence of consistent burial evidence in many cairns suggests that funerary interpretations alone are insufficient.

Stone platforms, often found near water sources or along movement routes, may have served as focal points for communal gatherings, ritual activities, or economic coordination. Their flat surfaces and prominent placement indicate intentional design rather than incidental stone accumulation. The frequent association of cairns and platforms with other megalithic elements reinforces the idea that these structures formed part of integrated systems rather than serving isolated functions.

Beyond individual monuments, Artsakh features extensive linear and architectural stone constructions that challenge traditional definitions of megalithism. These include towers, long stone walls, fences, and terraced structures built from large blocks without mortar. While not always classified as megaliths in a strict sense,

their construction techniques and integration into megalithic landscapes warrant inclusion in this discussion.

A defining characteristic of Artsakh's megalithic record is the prevalence of hybrid and transitional forms that resist simple classification. Standing stones incorporated into walls, cairns enclosing earlier stelae, and cromlechs reused as medieval enclosures illustrate the dynamic life histories of these monuments. Such hybridity reflects both long-term continuity and adaptive reuse. Rather than being abandoned after their initial construction, megalithic monuments in Artsakh were repeatedly reinterpreted and repurposed by successive communities. This process complicates chronological attribution but provides valuable insight into the persistence of cultural memory.

The distinction between standalone monuments, functional complexes, and multifunctional ritual landscapes allows for a nuanced reading of megalithic structures as active components of social life rather than static architectural forms. The inclusion of roads, pathways, and boundary features within the megalithic system is particularly insightful, underscoring the importance of movement and procession in ritual practice.

At the same time, the typological system occasionally suffers from conceptual elasticity. Certain categories risk becoming so inclusive that their analytical precision is weakened. For example, the boundary between ritual and functional complexes is sometimes blurred, raising questions about whether these distinctions are heuristic tools or reflections of emic categories. A more explicit discussion of the criteria used to assign monuments to specific types would strengthen the framework.

One of the most original contributions of the work lies in its sustained engagement with landscape archaeology. The authors convincingly argue that megalithic monuments in Artsakh cannot be understood apart from their natural settings, which include water sources, elevated plateaus, caves, and natural amphitheaters. The recurring association between megaliths and water, in particular, is explored with sensitivity to both archaeological and symbolic dimensions.

Earlier scholarship, influenced by typological and culture-historical approaches, often treated megaliths as isolated objects detached from their surrounding environment. Recent research, however, increasingly demonstrates that such monuments were rarely conceived or used in isolation. Instead, they formed parts of complex cultural landscapes structured by movement, seasonal activity, ritual practice, and long-term memory.

The concept of the *megalithic complex* provides a more appropriate analytical framework for understanding Artsakh material. A megalithic complex may be defined as a spatially coherent assemblage of monuments, natural features, and built structures that together articulate social, economic, and symbolic relationships within the landscape. In Artsakh, these complexes often encompass standing stones, vi-

shap stelae, cairns, stone platforms, enclosures, towers, walls, petroglyphs, and natural elements such as lakes, springs, mountain passes, and pasturelands.

This landscape-oriented perspective aligns with broader developments in archaeology, particularly the shift toward understanding monuments as active agents in the production of space and social meaning. In the mountainous environments of Artsakh, where visibility, access to resources, and seasonal mobility are critical, megalithic complexes functioned as durable anchors within otherwise fluid patterns of movement and use.

The organization of megalithic landscapes in Artsakh is inseparable from the region's environmental characteristics. Artsakh is marked by pronounced vertical zonation, ranging from river valleys and foothills to high-altitude plateaus and alpine zones. Each of these zones offered distinct economic opportunities and constraints, shaping the placement and function of megalithic monuments.

The concentration of megalithic monuments in high-altitude areas challenges earlier assumptions that monumental construction was primarily associated with sedentary agricultural societies. In Artsakh, monumentality emerges as a key component of mobile pastoral lifeways, providing durable markers of presence, ownership, and ritual authority in landscapes characterized by seasonal use.

Movement is a fundamental organizing principle of megalithic landscapes in Artsakh. Many monuments are situated along natural corridors connecting valleys, passes, and pasture zones. Stone alignments, standing stones, and walls frequently mark routes used for seasonal transhumance, trade, or ritual processions.

These routes were not merely practical pathways but socially charged spaces where movement was structured and symbolically framed. The presence of megalithic markers along routes suggests an effort to formalize access, assert collective rights, and embed memory into habitual patterns of movement. In this sense, megalithic landscapes functioned as mnemonic systems, encoding social knowledge into the terrain.

The integration of monuments with routes also implies a concern with visibility and orientation. Standing stones and towers placed at strategic points would have served as visual guides, signaling entry into particular territories or zones of activity. Such features contribute to a sense of continuity and order within otherwise variable and seasonally changing environments.

One of the most significant insights gained from landscape-based studies in Artsakh is the inseparability of ritual and economic functions within megalithic complexes. Rather than representing distinct spheres, ritual practices and subsistence activities appear deeply intertwined.

Pastoralism, especially in high-altitude zones, required coordinated access to water, grazing land, and routes. Megalithic monuments associated with water sources (such as vishap stelae and stone platforms) can be interpreted as ritualized mechanisms for managing these resources. By embedding economic activities within

a symbolic framework, communities reinforced social norms and collective responsibilities.

Seasonal rituals likely accompanied key moments in the pastoral cycle, such as the movement to summer pastures or the return to winter settlements. Megalithic complexes provided durable settings for such gatherings, enabling the repetition of practices over generations. The labor invested in constructing and maintaining these monuments further suggests their role in fostering group cohesion and shared identity.

A hallmark of Artsakh's megalithic landscapes is their long-term use and adaptation. Many complexes exhibit evidence of repeated construction, modification, and reuse across different periods. Cairns were enlarged or reshaped, standing stones reoriented or incorporated into new structures, and ritual platforms reused in later cultural contexts.

This temporal depth complicates attempts at precise dating but offers valuable insight into the dynamics of cultural continuity. Rather than being abandoned after their initial use, megalithic landscapes remained active and meaningful over extended periods. Their enduring presence allowed successive communities to anchor new practices and interpretations within established spatial frameworks.

The reuse of megalithic monuments in Christian contexts, such as the incorporation of standing stones into churches or the erection of crosses near ancient sites, illustrates the adaptability of these landscapes. While meanings changed, the significance of place endured, highlighting the role of megaliths as persistent loci of memory.

The scale and complexity of megalithic complexes in Artsakh imply a high degree of social coordination. The construction of large stone monuments, walls, and platforms would have required collective labor and shared planning. In the absence of centralized political structures, such efforts likely depended on kinship networks, seasonal gatherings, and ritual obligations.

The distribution of monuments across different zones suggests that multiple social groups participated in shaping the landscape. Some complexes may have served as shared ritual centers for several communities, while others functioned as markers of specific group territories. The coexistence of communal and group-specific features reflects a flexible social organization capable of balancing cooperation and autonomy.

While the organization of megalithic landscapes in Artsakh exhibits distinctive local characteristics, it also reflects broader regional patterns within the Armenian Highlands. Similar configurations of monuments, water-related symbolism, and pastoral integration are observed in regions such as Syunik, Gegharkunik, and the Geghama Mountains.

At the same time, Artsakh displays unique combinations of monument types and spatial arrangements. The density of high-altitude complexes, the specific forms of cairn-platforms, and the integration of extensive wall systems distinguish Artsakh

from neighboring areas. These features underscore the importance of local environmental and cultural factors in shaping megalithic traditions.

By situating Artsakh within a network of regional interactions rather than treating it as a peripheral zone, megalithic landscapes emerge as dynamic expressions of both shared traditions and local innovation. Megalithic landscapes in Artsakh were not static backdrops but actively produced and reproduced through daily practices, seasonal cycles, and ritual performances. Their enduring presence shaped how communities perceived and navigated their world, embedding social values into the material fabric of the environment.

Nevertheless, the interpretive leap from spatial association to symbolic meaning occasionally relies on implicit assumptions. While the recurrence of certain landscape features is compelling, the argument would benefit from more explicit consideration of alternative explanations, such as pragmatic concerns or environmental constraints. The balance between symbolic interpretation and empirical restraint is delicate, and the work sometimes approaches its limits.

The incorporation of memory archaeology represents one of the most theoretically ambitious aspects of the book. By tracing the transformation of megalithic sites through later historical periods, including Christianization, the authors demonstrate how monuments can acquire new meanings while retaining their spatial and symbolic significance.

This diachronic perspective effectively challenges linear narratives of cultural replacement. Instead, it emphasizes processes of reinterpretation, adaptation, and selective continuity. The discussion of how pagan sacred sites were recontextualized within Christian frameworks is particularly well developed and resonates with broader studies of religious transformation.

Yet, the memory-oriented approach raises methodological questions. The integration of folklore, medieval sources, and modern ethnographic observations into archaeological interpretation requires careful calibration. While the authors are generally cautious, there are moments where the continuity of meaning across millennia is suggested more strongly than the evidence may warrant. A clearer articulation of the limits of inferential continuity would enhance the robustness of this section.

Although the primary focus remains firmly on Artsakh, the work consistently situates its findings within a broader regional context. References to megalithic phenomena in neighboring regions of the Caucasus and beyond underscore both shared traditions and local particularities. This comparative sensibility prevents the study from lapsing into regional isolationism.

However, the comparative dimension is unevenly developed. While parallels are frequently noted, their analytical implications are not always fully explored. A more systematic comparison, explicitly addressing similarities and divergences in construction techniques, spatial organization, and ritual practice, would strengthen the argument for Artsakh's distinctiveness within a wider megalithic world.

Methodologically, the work demonstrates impressive breadth, combining excavation data, survey results, architectural analysis, and interpretive frameworks drawn from anthropology and cultural studies. The collaborative nature of the volume is evident in the diversity of perspectives and areas of expertise represented.

At the same time, this diversity occasionally results in unevenness of tone and analytical depth across chapters. Some sections are tightly argued and theoretically engaged, while others remain closer to descriptive synthesis. Greater editorial harmonization might have mitigated these disparities. Another limitation concerns the implicit hierarchy of evidence. Archaeological data, historical texts, and folklore are often treated as complementary, yet their epistemological status differs significantly. While the authors are aware of this issue, a more explicit methodological discussion would clarify how different types of evidence are weighted and integrated.

The megalithic culture of Artsakh represents a complex and resilient tradition that challenges simplistic narratives of prehistoric monumentality. Its monuments are best understood not as static relics but as active participants in social life - structuring movement, mediating relationships with the environment, and anchoring memory across generations.

By synthesizing existing research and outlining future directions, this important monograph establishes Artsakh as a key region for advancing the study of megalithic traditions in the South Caucasus and Eurasia. Continued investigation of its landscapes promises to yield important insights into the diverse ways human societies have shaped, and been shaped by, the monumental expressions of stone.

Ani Petrosyan
Անի Պետրոսյան
Ани Петросян

Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, National Academy of Sciences, Armenia
Հնագիտության և ազգագրության ինստիտուտ, Գիտությունների ազգային ակադեմիա, Հայաստան
Институт археологии и этнографии, Национальная академия наук, Армения

ani.petrosyan@iae.am

DOI: 10.53548/0320-8117-2026.1-311