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**ARMORED CIRCULAR TOWERS:
BURIAL-GROUND CONTEXT AND PROBLEMS OF RITUAL
ARCHITECTURE**

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Abstract

Introduction: Armored circular towers constitute a distinctive group of monumental structures within the cultural landscape of Bronze and Iron Age Armenia. In scholarly literature, these constructions have long been interpreted primarily from a defensive perspective. The aim of this article is to reconsider this approach and to explore the spatial, structural, and contextual characteristics of these towers. *Methods and Materials:* The study is based on the analysis of field observations, archival records, and published data, employing morphological and spatial approaches. A total of 48 armored circular towers recorded across the territory of Armenia are examined, with particular attention paid to their relationship with surrounding burial grounds. *Analysis and Results:* The analysis demonstrates that the majority of the towers are located within burial grounds or in their immediate vicinity and lack the fundamental elements typical of fortification architecture. At the same time, architectural and spatial parallels with funerary constructions are observed. These patterns allow the armored circular towers to be interpreted not as defensive installations, but as monumental structures of ritual and memorial significance embedded within a funerary cultural landscape.

Key words: *armored circular towers, cultural landscape, burial ground, Bronze and Iron Ages, monumental architecture, ritual architecture, memorial structures.*

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**ՋՐԱՀԱԿԻՐ ԲՈԼՈՐԱԶԵՎ ԱՇՏԱՐԱԿՆԵՐԸ,
ԴԱՄԲԱՐԱՆԱԴԱՇՏԱՅԻՆ ՀԱՄԱՏԵՔՍՏ ԵՎ
ԾԻՍԱԿԱՆ ՃԱՐՏԱՐԱՊԵՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՀԻՄՆԱԽՆԴԻՐՆԵՐ**

Հեռն Ա. Մկրտչյան

ԳԱԱ Շիրակի հայագիտական հետազոտությունների կենտրոն, Գյումրի
ԳԱԱ հնագիտության և ազգագրության ինստիտուտ, Երևան, ՀՀ

Ամփոփում

Նախաբան. Ջրահակիր բոլորաձև աշտարակները բրոնզի և երկաթի դարաշրջանների Հայաստանի մշակութային լանդշաֆտում ներկայացնում են մոնումենտալ ճարտարապետության առանձնահատուկ խումբ, որը գիտական գրականության մեջ երկար ժամանակ մեկնաբանվել է գերազանցապես ամրաշինական դիտանկյունից: Սույն հոդվածի նպատակն է վերանայել այդ մոտեցումը և բացահայտել աշտարակների տարածական, կառուցվածքային և համատեքստային առանձնահատկությունները: ***Մեթոդներ և նյութեր.*** Հետազոտությունը հիմնված է դաշտային դիտարկումների, արխիվային և հրապարակված տվյալների համադրության վրա՝ ներառելով մորֆոլոգիական և տարածական վերլուծություն: Ուսումնասիրվել են Հայաստանի տարածքում արձանագրված 48 զրահակիր բոլորաձև աշտարակներ՝ հատուկ ուշադրություն դարձնելով դրանց դամբարանադաշտային համատեքստին: ***Վերլուծություն և արդյունքներ.*** Վերլուծությունը ցույց է տալիս, որ աշտարակների մեծ մասը տեղակայված է դամբարանադաշտերի ներսում կամ դրանց անմիջական հարևանությամբ և գուրկ է ամրաշինությանը բնորոշ հիմնարար տարրերից: Արձանագրվում են ճարտարապետական և տարածական ընդհանրություններ թաղումային կառույցների հետ, ինչը թույլ է տալիս դիտարկել զրահակիր բոլորաձև աշտարակները՝ որպես մոնումենտալ, ծիսական-մեմորիալ նշանակություն ունեցող կառույցներ:

Բանալի բառեր՝ զրահակիր բոլորաձև աշտարակներ, մշակութային լանդշաֆտ, դամբարանադաշտ, բրոնզի և երկաթի դարաշրջաններ, մոնումենտալ ճարտարապետություն:

Ինչպես հղել՝ Մկրտչյան Լ. Ջրահակիր բոլորաձև աշտարակները. դամբարանադաշտային համատեքստ և ծիսական ճարտարապետության հիմնախնդիրներ // ՀՀ ԳԱԱ ՇՀՀ կենտրոնի «Գիտական աշխատություններ»: Գյումրի, 2026: Հ. 1 (29), 5-15 էջեր: DOI: 10.52971/18294316-2026.29.1-5

INTRODUCTION: In the formation of the cultural landscape of Armenia during the Bronze and Iron Ages, tower-type structures function as key elements of monumental architecture, among which circular towers with stone armored platforms occupy a distinct place.

Despite their significance, circular towers with stone armored platforms have long been interpreted in scholarly literature predominantly from a fortification-oriented perspective, within the framework of definitions such as “fortress,” “watchtower,” or “defensive structure.” Such interpretations are largely conditioned by the external morphology of the constructions, their elevated positions within the landscape, and their wide fields of view, factors which in themselves are insufficient for determining their structural and contextual functions.

At the same time, most of these structures lack the fundamental components characteristic of fortification architecture, including clearly defined entrances, defensive communication systems, and functional internal spaces, while the stone armored platforms often function not in a defensive capacity but rather as symbolic and delimiting elements. Moreover, a significant proportion of armored circular towers are located within burial grounds or in their immediate vicinity, replicating spatial principles typical of funerary environments and functioning as central, monumental markers of those landscapes.

The relationship observed between the towers and the surrounding burials is not limited to spatial proximity alone; architectural parallels are also recorded, particularly the preference for circular or oval ground plans, the use of massive stone construction, the problem of entrances, and the presence of an internal “blind” space. Within the framework of the present study, armored circular towers are therefore considered not in terms of fortification logic, but as monumental elements formed within a burial-ground cultural landscape, whose significance should be interpreted within the context of ritual architecture.

At the same time, the ritual interpretation proposed in this article is not presented as a predetermined conclusion, but rather as a research problem, the discussion of which is possible only through a comparative analysis of structural, spatial, and contextual data. The aim of the article is to address, through comparative and data-driven analysis, the morphological and spatial characteristics of armored circular towers known from the territory of Armenia, their burial-ground context, and their possible connections with the funerary architecture of the Bronze and Iron Ages. The study is based on systematized data from 48 monuments, including field observations, tabular comparisons, and spatial analysis, which allows the problem to be examined in a broader context and avoids conclusions based on isolated examples.

1. History of Research

The history of the study of armored circular towers can provisionally be divided into several stages, reflecting both changes in scholarly approaches and the transformation of the perception and interpretation of these structures within Armenian archaeology and architectural historiography.

The first of the structures discussed to attract scholarly and literary attention was the Aygeshat 3 (Ardar Davit) tower, located on the left side of the Dasht–Oshakan road (fig. 1). As early as the first half of the nineteenth century, A. Araratski, in his autobiographical novel, mentioned this site, describing a “pile of pyramidally arranged stones” that he had personally visited [Araratski, 1980, 49]. In the context of the so-called “giants’ tombs” (“oguz houses”), G. Ghaphantsyan also referred to this structure, as well as to the “Ulatitik” tower of Ashtarak (fig. 2), considering them among ancient monuments [5, p.93]. The same structure is also mentioned by M. Taghiadyan in the context of describing monuments in the vicinity of Oshakan, where he refers to a hill-shaped ruin of “stone-built constructions” known as the “House of Ardar Davit” [16, pp. 115–117].

From the beginning of the twentieth century onward, armored circular towers entered the sphere of professional scholarly interest. In the 1920s, the Committee for the Preservation of Antiquities of Armenia organized expeditions to the southern slopes of Mount Aragats as part of a general inventory of monuments. During these activities, the structures in question were for the first time studied architecturally by T. Toramanyan, who described the towers of Tsaghkalanj, Aragats, the “oyugh” of Aghavnatan, and Davit Hill [17, pp. 218–219]. From an archaeological perspective, they were introduced into scholarly circulation by A. Kalantar within the general context of megalithic monuments, while at the same time being interpreted as cultic structures [7, pp. 202–203].

Kalantar’s interpretation was later subjected to criticism. Kh. Samvelyan interpreted the Aygeshat 3 (Ardar Davit) structure as a fortress, viewing it within a defensive system [14, pp. 142-

148]. With certain modifications, this approach became dominant in subsequent decades, as a result of which, during the process of state registration between 1980 and 1991, the majority of tower-type structures were recorded as “watchtowers.”

At the same time, alternative interpretations continued to be preserved in scholarly literature. When discussing monuments of Armenia’s prehistoric period, N. Adonts referred to the existence of the Aghavnatan tower and several other tower-type structures [1, pp. 11–12]. Within the framework of examining construction structures of the Bronze and Iron Ages of Armenia, H. Sargsyan addressed “freestanding” towers, without limiting their interpretation exclusively to a defensive function [15, pp. 76–77]. S. Mnatsakanyan, referring to the structures of Merdzavan, the “oyugh” of Aghavnatan, and Aygeshat 3 (Ardar Davit), although chronologically attributing them to Hellenistic Armenia, interpreted them as components of memorial complexes, thus for the first time explicitly linking these structures with the concept of burial and commemoration [10, p.51]. This interpretation is of particular importance, as it not only develops the early observations of Toramanyan and Kalantar, but also clarifies them at a conceptual level.

Following the establishment of Soviet rule, a state institutional system was formed in Armenia, within which the State Committee for the Preservation of Antiquities was created. In the committee’s reports, armored circular towers and tower-type structures were for the first time characterized as monuments of “an ancient prehistoric culture” [6, p. 9]. As a result of fieldwork carried out in the 1920s, these structures were incorporated into the general inventory of monuments of Armenia.

In a subsequent stage, state registration became the principal focus of research. In this respect, the largest archival repository is preserved at the “Scientific Research Center of Historical and Cultural Heritage” of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Armenia, where registration files concerning monuments from various regions of Armenia are stored. In total, approximately 80 tower-type structures have been recorded in the regions of Ashtarak, Talin, Armavir, Ejmiatsin, Abovyan, and the Lake Sevan basin, of which the examples from Aragatsotn and Armavir provinces are of primary importance for the present study.

A synthesis of the state registration data shows that a significant portion of armored circular towers was registered during the 1980s and 1990s. Of the 48 monuments discussed, approximately twenty possess state registration, with the earliest examples dating to 1982 (Voskehat 3, Voskehat 6), while the most intensive phase of registration is observed in 1984 (Merdzavan 1, Lernamerdz 1, Shamiram 1, Shamiram 5, Shamiram 6) and 1992 (Aygeshat 1, Aygsehat 2, Aygeshat 3 / Ardar Davit, Tsaghkalanj 4, Aragats 1–4). Additional registrations occurred in 1990 (Ashtarak 1 / Ulatitik, Yerevan 2 / Tsitsernakaberd) and 1991 (Aygeshat 3 / Ardar Davit), while the latest state registration dates to 1997 (Yerevan 4 / Ajapnyak).

In registration records, tower-type structures are generally characterized as “watchtowers,” and their dating is limited to the 2nd–1st millennia BC, based on construction form and surface ceramic material. At the same time, the burial-ground context of these structures and a number of essential architectural details—such as stepped segments and concentric or radial walls—are often overlooked in the registration files, a factor that has significantly contributed to the consolidation of their predominantly fortification-based interpretation in later scholarship.

2. Sources and Research Methodology

The source base of the present study consists of field, archival, and published data concerning armored circular towers recorded across the territory of Armenia, which within the framework of this research have been collated and systematized in a unified tabular and catalog format [8, pp. 108-115]. A total of 48 monuments have been included in the study, representing

varying degrees of preservation, ranging from relatively well-preserved structures to examples that are fundamentally destroyed but retain identifiable structural traces.

The identification of the monuments was carried out not only on the basis of complete ground plans, but also through a comparative reading of stone armored platforms, remnants of masonry, landscape position, and burial-ground context. This approach is conditioned by the fact that many structures within this group have undergone intensive anthropogenic interventions over time, including agricultural activity, the expansion of cemeteries, and urban and infrastructural development. Under such conditions, the research employed a methodological approach of “trace reading,” within which even partially preserved structural elements were considered sufficient analytical bases for typological and contextual analysis.

During the morphological analysis, the ground-plan forms of the towers, dimensional proportions, wall thickness, construction techniques, and the structural character of internal spaces were examined without recourse to any predefined functional interpretation. This approach aims to avoid fortification-oriented or defensive readings that have already become entrenched in scholarly discourse and to ensure an independent analysis of the formal characteristics of the structures.

The spatial analysis encompassed the placement of monuments within the landscape, their relationship to relief, visibility, and the surrounding archaeological environment, with particular attention paid to their contextual connections with burial grounds. Special emphasis was placed on the visual, spatial, and architectural interrelationships observed between the towers and the surrounding burials, which were considered as interconnected components of a single, integrated cultural landscape.

The comparative component of the research is based on the cross-regional analysis of monuments recorded in different parts of Armenia, making it possible to identify both recurring morphological and spatial patterns and local variations. This comparative reading allows armored circular towers to be examined not as isolated monuments, but as elements of a unified monument group.

Overall, the applied methodological approach seeks to avoid conclusions based on single examples and to provide a comprehensive, comparative, and contextual analysis of armored circular towers, which may serve as a foundation for the reconsideration of their functional interpretation.

3. Armored Circular Towers as a Research Problem

This section presents a comparative synthesis of the data discussed in the preceding sections, with the aim of formulating the principal research problems related to the study of armored circular towers, without arriving at final functional or chronological conclusions. The observations presented are based on the results of morphological, spatial, and historiographical analyses and are directed toward rethinking the scholarly frameworks within which these structures have been interpreted.

Synthesis of Morphological and Spatial Commonalities

The comparative study of 48 monuments demonstrates that armored circular towers, regardless of their degree of preservation and local variations, are characterized by a series of stable and recurring morphological features. Among these, the predominance of circular or slightly oval ground plans, the use of massive stone construction, the structurally “blind” character of the internal space, and the presence of stone armored platforms stand out; the latter often function as the external boundary of the structure and as an element emphasizing its position within the landscape.

Spatial analysis indicates that a significant proportion of the studied towers is located in dominant, though not isolated, positions within the landscape, providing wide visibility while at the same time maintaining close connections with the surrounding archaeological environment. Of particular importance is the fact that most of these structures are situated within burial grounds or in their immediate vicinity, as recorded in the burial ground of Aghavnatan [13, pp. 92–101], the Aygeshat burial ground [3, pp. 5-36: 2, pp. 156–162], the ritual landscape of Norakert (fig. 4) [4,

pp., 25–38], as well as in the monument clusters of Merdzavan (fig. 3), Tsaghkalanj, and Shamiram [11, pp. 13–14; 12, p.173].

Limitations of the Fortification-Oriented Interpretation

Historiographical analysis shows that the fortification-based interpretation of armored circular towers was formed primarily on the basis of external morphology, elevated topographic position, and extensive visibility. However, the combined consideration of morphological and spatial data reveals significant limitations in this approach.

In the majority of the studied structures, fundamental elements characteristic of fortification architecture are absent, including clearly defined entrances, defensive communication systems, and a developed organization of functional internal spaces. Moreover, in cases where towers are located in central or nodal areas of burial grounds (e.g., Aygeshat, Norakert, Tsaghkalanj), the assumption of a defensive function is difficult to reconcile with the spatial and structural logic of the surrounding funerary environment [13, pp. 92-101; 11, pp. 13-14].

Burial-Ground Context as an Interpretative Axis

The stable relationship observed between armored circular towers and burial grounds constitutes one of the most problematic, yet simultaneously most promising, components for interpreting this group of monuments. The placement of towers within concentrations of burials or in their immediate vicinity, as well as the architectural commonalities observed between burials and towers—such as circular ground plans, massive stone construction, and the presence or absence of entrances—have been documented in a number of excavated complexes, particularly at Aghavnatun) [3, pp. 92–101], Aygeshat [3, pp. 5–36; 2, pp. 156–162], Norakert (fig. 5 [4, pp. 25–38]), Merdzavan, and Tsaghkalanj [11, pp. 13–14; 12, p.17].

Within this context, the towers appear not as secondary or incidental structures in relation to the burials, but as monumental axes of the given cultural landscape. At the same time, within the framework of the present article, this observation is treated as a research direction rather than as a final explanatory model.

Directions for Future Research

The synthesis presented here allows for the formulation of a number of research problems that cannot be fully resolved within the scope of the present article. Among the most important are the possible functional interpretations of armored circular towers, their involvement in funerary and ritual practices, and the clarification of their chronological frameworks based on stratigraphic and material data. This includes evidence from multilayered burials recorded in the Tsaghkalanj burial ground (11, pp. 13–14] and indications of long-term use of the Aygeshat complex [3, pp. 5–36; 2, pp. 156–162].

CONCLUSION: In the present article, armored circular towers have been considered not as isolated or self-contained architectural phenomena, but as a complex, multilayered group of monuments whose semantic and functional interpretation is possible only through a comparative analysis of their morphological, spatial, and cultural contexts. The examination of the history of research, sources, and methodological approaches, as well as the identification of patterns in the placement of these structures within burial-ground landscapes, demonstrates that their scholarly interpretation cannot be confined to traditional fortification or defensive categories.

Recurring morphological features, the use of stone armored platforms, the structurally “blind” character of internal spaces, and, most importantly, the stable and systematic relationship observed with burial grounds together form a body of evidence that necessitates a reformulation of the problem. In this context, armored circular towers appear as monumental components of the

cultural landscape, embedded within specific social and ideological systems, the comprehensive explanation of which remains a task for future research.

Within the framework of this article, these relationships have been treated as a research problem rather than as a final conclusion. The aim has been to establish a scholarly foundation upon which more in-depth studies can be built, focusing on the clarification of the functional, ritual, and chronological aspects of these structures.

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Fig. 1



Fig. 4



Fig.5

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