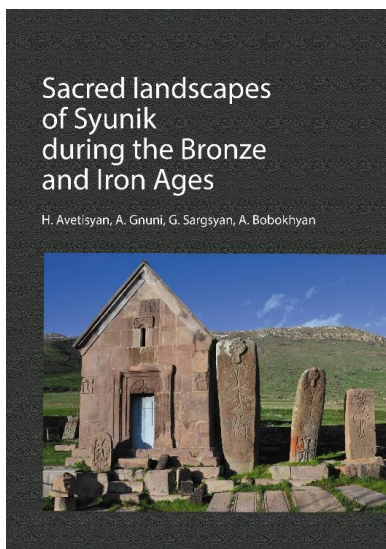


## ԳՐԱԽՈՍԱԿԱՆՆԵՐ BOOK REVIEWS

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### A VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION TO THE ANCIENT HISTORY AND CULTURE OF SYUNIK



The monograph *Sacred Landscapes of Syunik during the Bronze and Iron Ages: Archaeological Survey* (H. Avetisyan, A. Gnuni, G. Sargsyan, A. Bobokhyan, Yerevan, IAE Publishing, 2025, 221 p.) represents a substantial contribution to the archaeology of the Armenian Highland and, more broadly, to the interdisciplinary study of sacred landscapes. Produced under the auspices of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography and Yerevan State University, and funded by the All Armenian Foundation Financing Armenological Studies, the volume synthesizes more than a decade of intensive archaeological fieldwork

and museum research. Its declared aim is to reconstruct and interpret the sacred landscape of historical Syunik during the Bronze and Iron Ages (ca. 3500–500 BC), situating the region within local, regional, and supraregional cultural processes.

Historical Syunik is a pivotal area of the Armenian Highland, distinguished by its exceptional density of archaeological sites. Systematic investigations of these sites have been conducted since the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Lalayan Y., Lisitsyan S., Yesayan S., Barseghyan L., Xnkikyan O., Avetisyan P., Gasparyan B., Hovhannisyanyan V., Piliposyan A., Zardaryan M., et al.), demonstrating the

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considerable potential of the region for advancing our understanding of early historical developments in the Armenian Highland.

Since 2013, systematic research on the archaeological sites of Syunik has been significantly reinforced through expeditions conducted by the Department of Archaeology and Ethnography of Yerevan State University. These investigations were realized within the framework of the project entitled *“Historical Syunik in the Bronze and Iron Ages (according to the latest archaeological data),”* supported by the Higher Education and Science Committee of the Republic of Armenia.

The research under consideration integrates data obtained from systematic excavations, field surveys, and analyses of museum collections, encompassing sites located in the Syunik, Vayots Dzor, and Gegharkunik provinces of the Republic of Armenia, as well as in the Kashatagh region and the Karvachar district of the Shahumyan region within the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.

The study is framed by contemporary debates on sacred space, landscape archaeology, and cultic geography. By explicitly adopting the concept of the “sacred landscape” as an analytical category, the authors move beyond traditional site-based or typological approaches, instead emphasizing spatial relationships, environmental settings, and long-term continuity in ritual practices. In this respect, the book aligns with international scholarship on landscape archaeology while remaining firmly grounded in the empirical traditions of Armenian archaeology.

The monograph consists of an Introduction, three substantive chapters, Conclusions, and extensive supplementary materials, including References, Abbreviations, Tables, and Appendices. This structure allows the main argument to be supported by detailed case studies without overburdening the central narrative.

Chapter I addresses research issues, including the natural environment, historical context, historiography of research, and theoretical foundations. Chapter II proposes a classification of sacred places, while Chapter III (not fully reproduced in the excerpt) focuses on topography and spatial organization. The internal logic of the book progresses from contextualization to conceptualization and finally to analytical synthesis, reflecting a coherent research design.

A major strength of the work lies in its detailed reconstruction of Syunik’s natural and historical environment. The authors convincingly demonstrate that

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Syunik's mountainous terrain, climatic diversity, water resources, and mineral wealth were decisive factors in shaping patterns of settlement, economy, and ritual behavior. The region's role as a corridor connecting the Armenian Highland with the Caucasus and Iran is emphasized through the reconstruction of ancient road networks and transit routes.

By integrating environmental data with historical geography, the authors show that Syunik was not a marginal periphery but a structurally significant zone within the central-northeastern cultural subregion of the Armenian Highland. This positioning underpins their later argument that Syunik functioned as a "gateway" mediating cultural influences between the Highland and the Caucasian world.

The historiographical survey presented in Chapter I is comprehensive and critically informed. The authors divide the history of research into three stages: pre-Soviet (1870–1920), Soviet (1920–1990), and post-Soviet (since 1990). This periodization allows them to contextualize changing research agendas, methodologies, and institutional frameworks.

Particularly valuable is the discussion of early discoveries and the descriptive nature of nineteenth-century investigations, followed by the systematic excavations and syntheses of the Soviet period. The authors do not shy away from addressing the intellectual and political ruptures caused by Stalinist repressions, which led to the loss of data and scholarly continuity. The post-Soviet stage is characterized by renewed international collaboration, intensive surveys, and the reexamination of legacy collections.

One of the theoretical pillars of the book is the nuanced definition of the sacred landscape. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature, the authors distinguish three analytical levels: sacred area (landscape), sacred place, and sacred object. This tripartite model provides a flexible yet structured framework for interpreting archaeological evidence.

The use of concepts such as hierotopy and hierophany demonstrates engagement with broader theoretical discourse, particularly the works of Mircea Eliade. Importantly, the authors adapt these concepts to the specific realities of the Armenian Highland, avoiding uncritical transplantation of theoretical models. The sacred landscape is thus understood as a dynamic system shaped by natural features, human agency, and long-term cultural memory.

The book identifies a series of factors contributing to the formation and persistence of sacred landscapes: topographic prominence, spatial separation

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from profane areas, accessibility via road networks, proximity to settlements, and associations with subsistence strategies such as pastoralism and agriculture. The inclusion of natural resources and craft activities as cult-forming factors broadens the analytical scope and highlights the economic dimensions of ritual behavior.

This multifactorial approach allows the authors to explain why certain locations retained their sacred significance across millennia, even as specific ritual forms and material expressions changed.

Chapter II offers a detailed classification of sacred places, focusing primarily on platforms and monumental stelae. Platforms are further subdivided into structural platforms and those situated on natural rock outcrops. The authors provide an impressive array of archaeological examples from settlements, cemeteries, and isolated contexts, demonstrating the versatility of platforms as ritual installations.

The discussion of platforms associated with burials is particularly insightful, revealing complex ritual sequences involving construction, deposition, and reuse. Comparative references to sites in Armenia, the Caucasus, and the Near East situate Syunik within a broader cultural horizon.

The treatment of vishap (dragon stone) stelae constitutes one of the significant contributions of the volume. Syunik is presented as a core area in the distribution of vishaps, and the authors provide a thorough historiography of their study, from early documentation to recent systematic investigations.

By embedding vishaps within their archaeological and landscape contexts, the authors move beyond earlier typological or mythological interpretations. The discussion highlights issues of reuse, relocation, and reinterpretation, particularly during the medieval period, underscoring the *longue durée* of sacred meanings attached to these monuments.

A notable methodological strength of the book is the integration of data from surveys, excavations, and museum collections. Newly discovered sites, such as Yelpin and Aghavnadzor, are discussed alongside reexamined legacy collections from regional museums. This holistic approach allows for a more nuanced chronological and functional interpretation of material culture.

The detailed presentation of pottery, among others also ritual vessels, and animal-shaped objects enriches the discussion of cult practices and symbolic expression, particularly for the Middle and Late Bronze Age.

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The authors consistently situate Syunik within wider cultural networks. By identifying three major cultural subregions of the Armenian Highland, they convincingly argue that Syunik belonged to the central-northeastern sphere, with particularly strong ties to Utik and Paytakaran. At the same time, the region's openness to Caucasian and Iranian influences is emphasized.

This balanced perspective avoids both isolationist and diffusionist extremes, presenting Syunik as an active participant in regional cultural dynamics.

While the monograph is rich in empirical data and theoretical reflection, certain limitations can be noted. The density of archaeological detail may at times challenge non-specialist readers, and clearer syntheses at the end of some sections would enhance accessibility. Additionally, while the theoretical framework is sound, further engagement with recent international landscape archaeology case studies could strengthen comparative perspectives. Nevertheless, these points do not detract significantly from the overall scholarly value of the work.

Along with the main investigation also four reports are incorporated into the text. One of the most substantial contributions is the detailed presentation of the Joj Dar cemetery near Yeghegnadzor (V. Hovhannisyan). Based on excavations conducted in the 1980s, the study offers a careful reconstruction of Late Bronze and Early Iron Age burial practices. The tombs, surface-built stone structures arranged in small groups across hills and watersheds, demonstrate a funerary tradition characterized by collective burial, animal sacrifice, and rich assemblages of weapons, tools, ornaments, and pottery. Particularly valuable is the author's nuanced discussion of disturbance and looting, which avoids simplistic ritual explanations and instead convincingly attributes the fragmented condition of the assemblages to ancient robbery and later reuse. The comparative analysis situates Joj Dar within wider cultural networks linking the Ararat Valley, Syunik, Nakhchivan, and northwestern Iran, reinforcing the site's importance for understanding Early Iron Age interaction spheres.

The chapter on anthropomorphic stone stelae of the Artsakh steppe provides a theoretically informed examination of symbolic monuments within a broader Eurasian context (N. Yeranyan). The author convincingly demonstrates that these stelae, rectangular slabs depicting stylized human figures with folded arms and raised hands, belong to a tradition closely related to Scythian anthropomorphic tomb markers known from the North Caucasus and Black Sea regions. The discussion of iconography, particularly the presence of swords or daggers and the

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ritualized hand gestures, is enriched by references to earlier Bronze Age traditions and Near Eastern ideological influences. By engaging with classic interpretations of Scythian stelae as representations of heroized ancestors or warrior elites, the chapter situates the Artsakh material within debates on ancestor cults, social hierarchy, and cosmological symbolism. The documentation of later reuse of these monuments in medieval and Christian contexts adds an important diachronic dimension, illustrating how ancient sacred objects retained ritual potency even as their meanings shifted.

Equally significant is the treatment of the Sotk region of historical Syunik, presented as a coherent sacred landscape shaped by metallurgy, mobility, and long-term occupation (M. Amiryan, et al.). The excavations at the fortified settlement of Sotk 2 reveal a complex, multi-layered site spanning from the Chalcolithic to the Early Iron Age. The authors' identification of three architectural traditions, clay structures, stone buildings, and rock-cut features, allows for a nuanced understanding of changing economic and ritual practices. Of particular interest is the interpretation of rock-cut pits, some of which appear to have served not only as storage or workshops but also as loci of cultic activity. The presentation of nearby sanctuaries and cemeteries further reinforces the regional perspective. The Sotk 15 sanctuary, marked by cromlechs and cup-marked stones, and the Sotk 10 cemetery, with evidence for decarnation and possible sacrificial practices, are interpreted within broader Middle Bronze Age ritual traditions. The Norabak 1 cemetery, with its long sequence of use from the Late Bronze to the Middle Iron Age, provides an especially compelling case study. The discussion of group burials, excarnation, and the early appearance of iron contributes meaningfully to debates on social structure and ritual practice in the Sevan Basin.

The final section, devoted to sacred sites of Syunik preserved in state repositories, adds an important documentary and historiographic dimension to the volume (L. Mkrtychyan). By systematizing archival records of rock platforms, menhirs, vishaps, dolmens, cromlech cemeteries, and monumental stelae, the author highlights the exceptional density and diversity of cultic monuments in the region. Although many of these sites remain insufficiently studied, the catalog underscores their potential for future research, particularly in addressing questions of dating, function, and landscape organization. The emphasis on the sacralization of natural stone formations, often continuing into the Christian

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period and even the present, offers a compelling illustration of cultural continuity in ritual attitudes toward the landscape.

Overall, the volume makes a significant contribution to the archaeology of the Armenian Highland by foregrounding the concept of sacred landscape as an analytical framework. Its principal merit lies in demonstrating that cemeteries, settlements, sanctuaries, and monuments formed interconnected systems of meaning, deeply embedded in social memory and regional identity. While some chapters remain primarily descriptive and would benefit from more explicit theoretical engagement, the richness of the empirical data and the breadth of regional comparison more than compensate for this limitation. The book will be of particular value to scholars of Bronze and Iron Age archaeology, landscape archaeology, and ritual studies in the South Caucasus and adjacent regions.

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0009-0003-5699-1253 

DOI: 10.54503/1829-4073-2026.1.202-208

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\* *The article has been delivered on 14.01.2026, reviewed on 14.01.2026, accepted for publication on 30.04.2026.*

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