

ARCHAEOLOGY OF ARMENIA
IN REGIONAL CONTEXT



National Academy of Sciences of Republic of Armenia
Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography

ARCHAEOLOGY OF ARMENIA IN REGIONAL CONTEXT

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CONTENTS

The Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography: Past and Present <i>Pavel Avetisyan, Arsen Bobokhyan</i>	7
A Step Forward to the Neolithization: Early Holocene Sites of the Republic of Armenia <i>Artur Petrosyan, Makoto Arimura, Samvel Nahapetyan, Dmitri Arakelyan, Boris Gasparyan</i>	26
“Gauchos” in the Armenian Highlands? Bolas or Slings in Syunik Rock Art <i>Franziska Knoll, Harald Meller</i>	42
Perspectives on the Kura-Araxes: The View from Shengavit <i>Mitchell Rothman</i>	52
Margahovit: Craft and Subsistence Economy in a Bronze/Iron Age Community between Pambak and Bazum Mountains, Armenia <i>Aram Gevorgyan, Henrik Danielyan, Roman Hovsepyan, Harutyun Vanyan, Nina Manaseryan, Nyree Manoukian, Anna Azizyan, Arsen Bobokhyan</i>	69
Maikop-Novosvobodnaya Community: Problems of Internal Typology, Chronology and Distant Connections <i>Sergey Korenevskiy</i>	89
Symbols of Power: Portraits of Hero-Kings and a Battle Chariot from the Royal Tomb of Verin Naver, Armenia <i>Hakob Simonyan</i>	96
Dragons under Microscope: Determination and Identification of the Geological Sources of Vishap Stone Stelae <i>Arshavir Hovhannisyan, Arsen Bobokhyan, Dmitri Arakelyan, Marianna Harutyunyan, Varduhi Siradeghyan, Pavol Hnila, Alessandra Gilibert</i>	115
Archaeological Investigations in Kotayk Region as Part of the Kotayk Survey Project (KSP). A Glance at a Selection of Fortresses (2013–2019) <i>Artur Petrosyan, Roberto Dan, Priscilla Vitolo, Varduhi Melikyan, Onofrio Gasparro, Samvel Nahapetyan</i>	135
Preliminary Results of the 2018–2019 Tavush Archaeological Project <i>Bérengère Perello, Levon Aghikyan, Ruben Badalyan, Karen Azatyan, Benjamin van den Bossche</i>	154
The Metsamor Project: Results Following Six Seasons of Field Excavation <i>Krzysztof Jakubiak, Ashot Piliposyan</i>	169
Remarks on Deposition of Pottery in the Lower Town of Metsamor <i>Mateusz Iskra</i>	180
Lernakert: ein neues archäologisches Projekt in Shirak <i>Benik Vardanyan, Ruben Davtyan, Sona Manukyan, Mariam Saribekyan</i>	189
Archaeological Landscapes of AI Lakes <i>Hayk Avetisyan, Artak Gnuni, Arsen Bobokhyan, Gagik Sargsyan, Levon Mkrtchyan, Anzhela Davtyan</i>	201

Seals from Lori Berd <i>Seda Devedjyan, Ruben Davtyan</i>	215
The Fortress of Aramus in its Historical Context <i>Walter Kuntner, Hayk Avetisyan, Sandra Heinsch</i>	234
Main Results of the Study of Anthropomorphic Stelae in Artsakh <i>Nzhdeh Yeranyan</i>	248
The Issue of the Scythian Presence in Armenia in the Works of Gevorg Tiratsyan <i>Garegin Tumanyan</i>	255
A Review of Trepanations in the Armenian Highland with New Cases <i>Anahit Khudaverdyan</i>	259
Recent Archaeological Research at Armavir, the Capital of Ancient Armenia <i>Inessa Karapetyan, Amina Kanetsyan, Lilit Minasyan, Ruben Vardanyan, Ruzan Palanjyan, Nvard Tiratsyan, Diana Mirijanyan, Hasmik Hovhannisyan, Elizabeth Fagan</i>	274
Reflection on Mass Pottery Production at the Capital Artashat <i>Hayk Gyulamiryan</i>	286
Pithos Burials of Tirganakert in Artsakh <i>Hamlet Petrosyan, Vardges Safaryan, Inessa Karapetyan, Lyuba Kirakosyan, Ruben Vardanyan, Tatyana Vardanesova, Armine Gabrielyan</i>	293
Categorie des sanctuaires en Arménie antique selon leurs emplacements: Étude historiographique et archeologique <i>Arevik Parsamyan</i>	305
Recent Archaeological Research at Dvin <i>Hamlet Petrosyan, Koryun Ghafadaryan, Niura Hakobyan, Frina Babayan, Aghavni Zhamkochyan, Gayane Kocharyan</i>	331
Yereruyk: A Site Rich in Enigmas and Promises. The Armenian-French Archaeological Mission of LA3M in Armenia (2009–2016) <i>Patrick Donabédian</i>	342
Christian Funerary Archaeology in Armenia <i>Diana Mirijanyan</i>	366
A View on Life in the Medieval Fortress at Dashtadem: Results of the 2015 and 2018 Excavation Campaigns <i>Astghik Babajanyan, Soseh Aghaian, Davit Davtyan, Husik Melkonyan</i>	373
Local Canyons, Global Views: Results of the Vayots Dzor Silk Road Survey Project Based on the 2015–2019 Seasons <i>Astghik Babajanyan, Kate Franklin</i>	397
The Research of Epigraphs of Tatev Monastery and Surrounding Monuments <i>Arsen Harutyunyan</i>	414
The Way to Dvin: Life and Work of Karo Ghafadaryan <i>Aghavni Zhamkochyan, Nyura Hakobyan</i>	427

Main Results of the Study of Anthropomorphic Stelae in Artsakh

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Abstract. The phenomenon of anthropomorphic stelae in Western Asia is known for millennia. Among them are the distinguished stelae discovered in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh). Their systematic investigation was launched in 2013 as a part of a scientific project of the Artsakh archaeological expedition of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of Armenia. As a result of five years of investigation the initial locations of previously known, but relocated stelae were identified and their cultural and archaeological environment has been defined. A substantial number of new stelae have been discovered. This paper aims to present the main results of the study. The issues of chronology and function are the main topic of this contribution.

Keywords: Artsakh, Tigranakert, Nor Karmiravan, anthropomorphic stelae, landscape, iconography, chronology, function.

Introduction

The stone anthropomorphic stelae of Artsakh are one of the essential components of the pre-Christian culture of the region. These are rectangular, flat elongated slabs, which were given anthropomorphic form by three-dimensional treatment. The slabs are divided into three parts by means of two horizontal grooves, accentuating three parts of the body: the head, body and lower body. The stelae are approximately 30–70 cm wide, 120–200 cm (in some cases up to 250 cm) high, and 30–40 cm thick. All are made of limestone.

The first stelae of this series became known during the 60's of the 20th century. Discovered rare examples, however, have been studied without application of appropriate research methodology. For this reason, the issues of their technical, iconographic, semantic specifics, as well as problems of chronology and function remain obscure and unclarified. After 90's new opportunities were opened up for the study of the ancient history and culture of the region. Physical accessibility of anthropomorphic stelae allowed their description in more detail, measuring, photography, as well as the investigation of their historical and cultural environment.

Objectives and Issues of Study

The present study of Artsakh stone anthropomorphic stelae has been launched in 2013 and was a part of a scientific project of the Artsakh archaeological expedition of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography

of Armenia. Around four dozen stelae have been documented and studied. Moreover, a substantial part of them is introduced into scientific use for the first time.

The main objectives of this research is to clarify the initial location of the previously known, but relocated stelae and their cultural and archaeological environment; to survey and discover new stelae in the physically accessible parts of the Artaskh steppe zone; as well as to examine the issues of erection, chronology and function of the stelae on the basis of research of other archaeological source materials. Physical accessibility of anthropomorphic stelae was the essential circumstance and fact, which allowed their detailed investigation, measuring, photography, as well as study of historical-cultural environment.

Although several stelae were known already in the 60's of the past century (Khalilov 1987, 4–8; Vaidov et al. 1974, 446–447), it is important to note that this territory has not been studied sufficiently in the Soviet years for known reasons (Petrosyan 2010, 137–148). Existing researches are obviously politicized. This also applies to anthropomorphic stelae, which were represented by several Azeri scholars as Albanian. They attempted to interpret their distribution especially in Artsakh as presence of Albanian ethno-cultural substrate.

More than thirty stelae were physically accessible for our studies. Certain details about other three stelae were gained from other sources (diary of H. Petrosyan, various publications and photos available on Internet).



Fig. 1. An anthropomorphic stela. Martakert local lore museum (Photo: Author).



Fig. 2. An anthropomorphic stela. Martakert local lore museum (Photo: Author).



Fig. 3. An anthropomorphic stela from Gyavur kala (Photo: Author).



Fig. 4. An anthropomorphic stela. Artsakh State Historical Museum (Photo: Author).

It is possible that the stelae are spread within an extensive, physically inaccessible for us area, that is the eastern part of the Artsakh steppe and Mil plain to the east of it. Given the current situation, however, their documentation is impossible not only on the other side

of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, but also on the borderline.

It is not possible to carry out studies of the stone anthropomorphic stelae in Artsakh without examination of comparative materials and parallels. Within



Fig. 5. An anthropomorphic stela from Nor Karmiravan (Photo: Author).



Fig. 6. An aerial view of Nor Karmiravan burial (Drone photo: A. Mkrtchyan).

this framework, one of the important theoretical and methodological aspects of the present research is integration of the stelae of Artsakh within the broader Western Asian cultural context.

Iconography of Stelae

The stelae under consideration are nearly rectangular, flat elongated slabs, which are divided into three parts by means of wide horizontal grooves, “separating” three body parts: the head, which forms a little less than one third of the whole stela, the body and a part from the waist down. The lower part is usually slightly hewed (dressed). It has been either buried into the ground or fixed in a special foundation. The stelae are approximately 60–70 cm wide, 120–140 cm (in rare cases up to 2.5 m) high and around 30 cm thick (Figs 1–5).

Apart from accurate three-dimensional treatment, the relief sculptures of stelae were carved with an attention to details. Three main techniques of relief carving can be documented: relief carving of the background, grooved relief depiction, incised relief depiction.

The eyes, nose, folded forearms on the chest and upward-directed fingers are mainly depicted on the front side of the stelae. On the back side of the stelae, as a rule, are depicted the hair wrapped in a “kerchief”, sometimes also the dagger in a scabbard.

In case of sculpture morphology some details can be separated, which are typical of all stelae. There are other details that are present only on several ste-

lae. In general, among the canonic details are hands, nose, and, as a rule, eyes. The ears are never depicted. Depictions of mouth and hair are issues for separate consideration. Among the elements of garment, the daggers, bracelets and “kerchief” can be mentioned. It can be suggested that iconography of the stelae from Artsakh is strictly schematic, “poor”, numerous elements of the “body” are not apparently depicted, although their “presence” is assumed. Interestingly, the images of mouth and ears on the stelae are missing.

Topographic Studies

The first anthropomorphic stelae were discovered in the northeastern regions of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) Republic: Martakert region and neighbouring territories. Today the accumulations of these monuments are known in Tigranakert of Artsakh, within the territory of Nor Karmiravan village not far from the latter, as well as in the vicinity of Gyavurkala settlement. In the Soviet period, several stelae were relocated from this environment and transferred to the Artsakh State Museum and Martakert museum of history and regional studies, and the other part still remains in the open field.

At the current stage of the work it is impossible to identify the primary location of the several stelae, as they have been relocated as early as in Soviet times and have not been documented *in situ*. It is noteworthy that although the major part of the stelae was not discovered *in situ*, most probably, they were not replaced from remote areas to the place of their secondary use.



Fig. 7. Excavations of Nor Karmiravan burial
(Photo: Author).

During research we managed to clarify the place of initial discovery of previously revealed fifteen stelae. Thanks to the study and comparison of the data towards discovery of stelae, it can be suggested that they were found at an altitude of 500 m above sea level. Thus, the zone, where the stelae have been found, is similar to the meadow-steppe landscapes of Artsakh.

The stelae were spread within the extensional area connecting Artsakh Highland and steppe, stretching for around 30–40 km (Fig. 11). All places of discovery are located in the lower valley of the Khachenaget river (in the area where the river flows into the steppe) or its surroundings. The investigated territory occupies the southeastern side of the Minor Caucasus, including the western part of the Kura-Araxes valley, eastern part of the Artsakh steppe and, further to the east, the western-most part of Mil steppe (Avdeev, Akhundov 1942, 10–14).

Nowadays these territories have favorable conditions for development of animal breeding and agriculture. It seems that this meadow-steppe zone through which flows one of the largest rivers, was supposed to be the “pull factor” for those, who stood at the origins of this culture.

The Issues of Chronology and Function

One of the important issues of research was also clarification of the problems of stelae chronology and function. The anthropomorphic stelae of Artsakh represent a single system by their function and ideological content, which reflects the concepts of death, cult of

ancestors and world order of that period. It is important to determine chronology of the stelae in order to understand their function and ideological content. This will let us understand not only their primary function, but also the system of beliefs and conception of the cosmic phenomena of those, who erected them.

The issue of chronology of the stelae of Artsakh was studied superficially by the scholars engaged in their research. For all researchers the primary source for dating were the paragraphs of “The History of Albania” by Movses Daskhurantsi (Kaghankatvatsi), where the Khazar invasions and appearance of Khazar warriors were described. According to the historian, these tribes were “...broad-faced, beardless and feminine” (Movses Kaghankatvatsi 1969, 103–104). It is also noteworthy that they were long-haired and loose-haired (probably also wore a kerchief), had no eyebrows and beard (Aramonov 1936, 55).

As we can see, the described characters have certain similarities with the character, depicted on the stelae of Artsakh. For that reason, Sh. Mkrtychyan dates the stelae discovered from Seysulan village to the 7th century AD (Mkrtychyan 1985, 351). M. Khalilov suggested that the stelae were erected in 6–7th centuries AD and added that they reflect idol worship manifestations known in Albania (Khalilov 2004, 104). R. Geyushev also found that these stelae were erected in 7–8th centuries AD by the local Christians (Geyushev 1966, 77–79). Evident typological iconographic similarity of the discussed stelae to the earlier stelae excludes such a later dating.

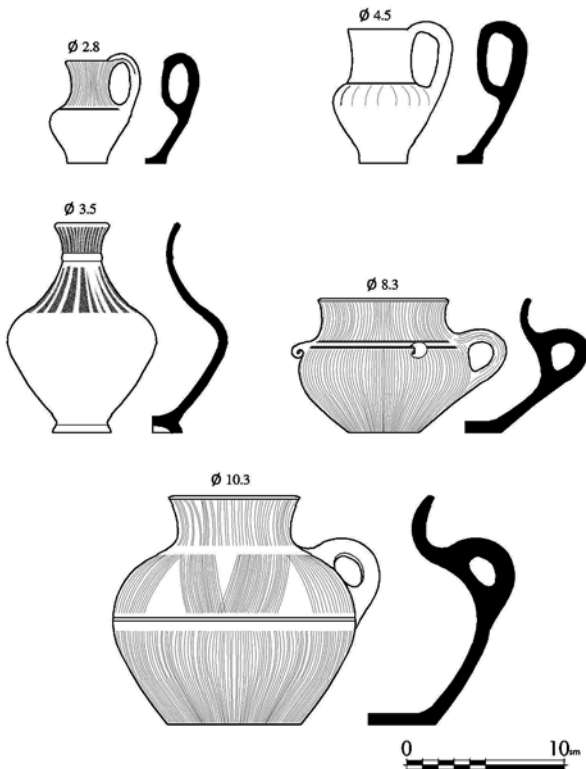


Fig. 8. Finds from Nor Karmiravan excavations (Drawings: L. Minasyan).

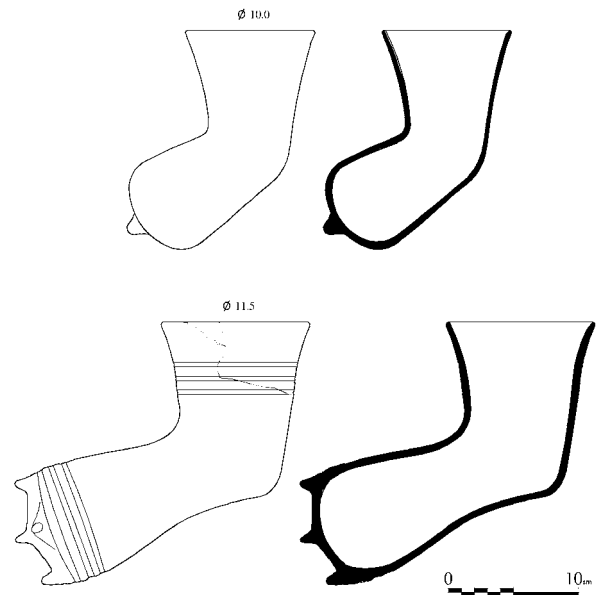


Fig. 9. Finds from Nor Karmiravan excavations (Drawings: L. Minasyan).

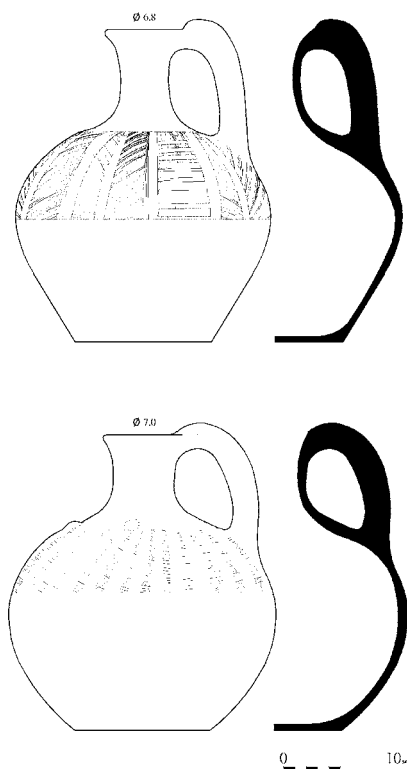


Fig. 10. Finds from Nor Karmiravan excavations (Drawings: L. Minasyan).

Existing archaeological data, however, also allow disproving this dating. During investigation in 2016, excavations carried out around several anthropomorphic stelae discovered in Nor Karmiravan village (Martakert region) revealed that the majority of stelae are placed on the tomb, within their environment. Archaeological material unearthed in the burial dates back to the 8–6th centuries BC, which is the most likely period for dating the stelae (Figs 6–10).

Comparative-historical examination also supports this dating of the stelae. When comparing the data on the similar anthropomorphic stelae known in the region, we arrive at conclusion that anthropomorphic stelae from Artsakh were made and erected between 8–6th centuries BC¹.

¹ The stelae accumulation in the north-eastern part of Iranian Atropatene, in the site called Meshkin Shahr in Ardabil valley is particularly noteworthy (Ingraham, Summers 1979, 67-73). A British scholar Ch. Burney was one of the first researchers, who referred to these stelae. He mentions that some stelae in Arjak Kale on the eastern outskirts of Meshkin Shahr had been reused to build fortification and barriers. This argues in favour of early dating of the stelae. Ch. Burney mentions that the stelae, most probably, date back to the second half of the Iron Age (beginning of the 1st millennium BC). Their common connection to nomadic tribes of the northern steppes is beyond dispute (Burney 1979, 155). According to M. Ingraham and G. Summers, 120 anthropomorphic stelae have been found here,

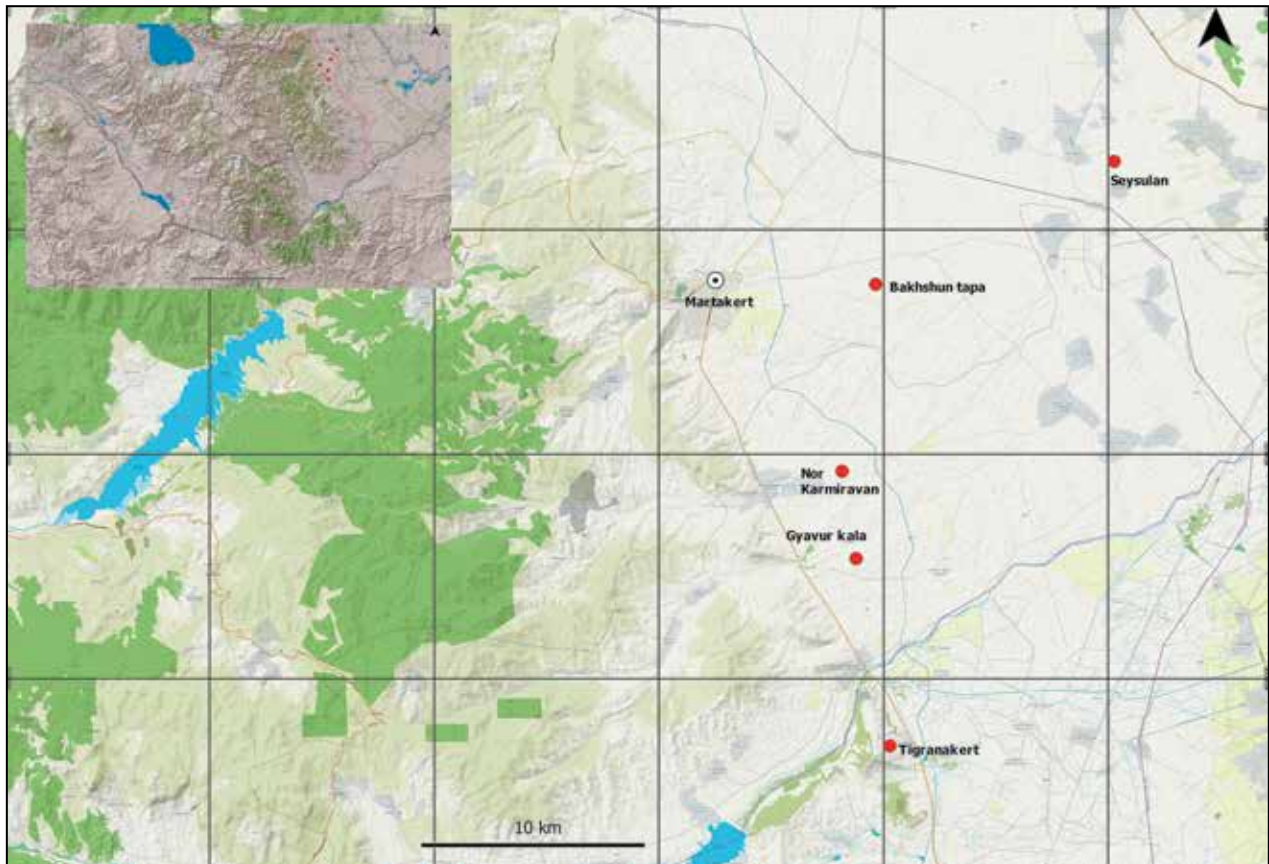


Fig. 11. Distribution of anthropomorphic stelae (1. Bakhshun tapa, 2. Tigranakert, 3. Nor Karmiravan, 4. Gyavur kala, 5. Seysulan) (Map:: L. Mkrtychyan).

The available examples before the research were scanty and out of their environment. That was the reason why certain questions including their function remained unclear. Subsequently, the data obtained in the result of research filled this gap. We managed to find out, that nine stelae in the yard of the museum of history and regional studies in Martakert were relocated in 1975–1976 from the place named Bakhshun Tapa at a distance of 3 km to the north of Martakert. The stelae were discovered during gardening activities when the land was leveled (Karapetyan 1989, 38–41).

According to verbal report of the work supervisor, who was present during the discovery, fragments of skeletons, several ceramic vessels and a sword were also found along with stelae. Although the stelae have

which are divided into four groups and are put in rows (Ingraham, Summers 1979, 74; cf. Pogrebova 1984, 199). Archaeological investigations in Meshkin Shahr were also carried out by the Iranian expedition of Tarbiat Modares University in Tehran. In 2004, the expedition documented 400 similar stelae (Azarnoush, Helwing 2005, 216–217). These stelae were also studied by K. Piller. He mentions that although there are even medieval monuments within the area, discovered black and red burnished pottery proves that the site dates back to the beginning of the 1st millennium BC (Piller 2010, 68–71).

been documented without application of appropriate methodology, by comparing available data it can be suggested that they were connected to the mound, where most probably was a burial. Some fragments of stelae were discovered during the surveys. Thus, the field that is leveled now, once contained cultural horizons.

Excavations in the surrounding area of the stelae discovered in Nor Karmiravan village played a principal role in the study. A burial was documented inside the discovered tomb, which belonged to a 25–30 years old male individual. Excavations of the Nor Karmiravan burial and extensive study of stelae environment suggest connection between the stelae and the tomb.

Similar anthropomorphic stelae from Iran, North Caucasus and Pontic Littoral dated to approximately the same period, supplement the available archaeological data. Thus, for example, similar anthropomorphic stelae in the settlement Meshkin Shahr within the territory of Iran have not been examined in detail. However, as Ch. Burney and G. Summers mention, they were initially placed on top of burials, including pit burials (Burney 1979, 156; Ingraham, Summers 1979, 69–70).

The data about stelae in the territory of North Caucasus and Black Sea littoral is more informative. Thus, according to V. Olkhovskiy, despite the fact that the stelae discovered there, in 30% cases had been relocated from other place, the study of the stelae discovered in situ proves that these were erected exceptionally on the burials (Olkhovskiy, Evdokimov 1994, 41–44).

In conclusion it can be mentioned that the stelae discovered in Artsakh as well as their known parallels were “gravestones”, or/and cultic symbols, which were placed on the burials (possibly, also pit burials) attached to the pedestals or without pedestals. These stelae were erected in case of death of an individual, who belonged to an upper social class.

Main Results and Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be stated that as a result of the study more than twenty anthropomorphic stelae were discovered, the topographical, technical and iconographical specifics of the previously found and newly discovered stelae were clarified, including the chronological and functional issues.

The stelae under consideration are usually located in a quite isolated area that occupies the eastern part of the Artsakh steppe and, further to the east, the westernmost part of the Mil plain. The examined stelae refer to the 8–6th centuries BC and were gravestones, which were placed on the burials and/or on top of pit burials. The modest technical arsenal of the sculpture, sketchiness and “poorness” of iconography allow suggesting that in case of Artsakh stelae we are dealing with the primary manifestation of a broad historical and cultural phenomenon. From this perspective, the similarities between both Iranian, “Cimmerian” and “Early Scythian stelae” are particularly noteworthy. This suggests that Artsakh stelae refer to the earlier group of stone anthropomorphic stelae distributed over an extensive area. It is possible that the appearance of these stelae in Artsakh could be connected to the process of first infiltration of Cimmerians and Scythians into the Western Asia, which happened in the 8th century BC.

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