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On a Painted Burial Jar from Tigranakert of Artsakh

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Abstract

The article is devoted to one of the jar burials discovered in 2018 during excavations of the Eastern tomb field of Tigranakert of Artsakh. That is a gorgeous painted *karas* with ornamental and figurative bands of various motifs painted in red on a light background. The central and widest part of the vessel bears a depiction of a deer hunting scene happening on both sides of a dense tree with scattered branches. An infantryman and two horsemen armed with long spears and accompanied by hunting dogs, chase a doe and a deer. Hunting scene has been popular and widespread since ancient times. Deer hunting scene is found among the petroglyphs of the Armenian Highlands, on the bronze belts and other decorative-applied works of art from the ancient sites of Armenia and neighboring countries. This theme is especially prevalent in Achaemenid glyptic, in the fine arts of the Classical period, and in the toreutics of the Sasanian period.

Keywords

Tigranakert of Artsakh – burial jar – Tree of Life – deer hunting – Achaemenid period – Late Classical period – glyptic

Tigranakert of Artsakh is located in Askeran region of the Republic of Artsakh, in the valley of Khachenaget, the second largest river of the region, where the Artsakh mountain chain joins the Artsakh plain (Figure 1/1, 2). The traces of the city stretch to the south and occupy an area of 70 hectares, surrounding the foot of Vankasar mountain from the south, east and northeast.

The Artsakh Archaeological Expedition of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia (directed by Dr. Hamlet Petrosyan) found traces of the city in 2005, and carried out archaeological excavations there and in its vicinity. As evidenced by excavations of

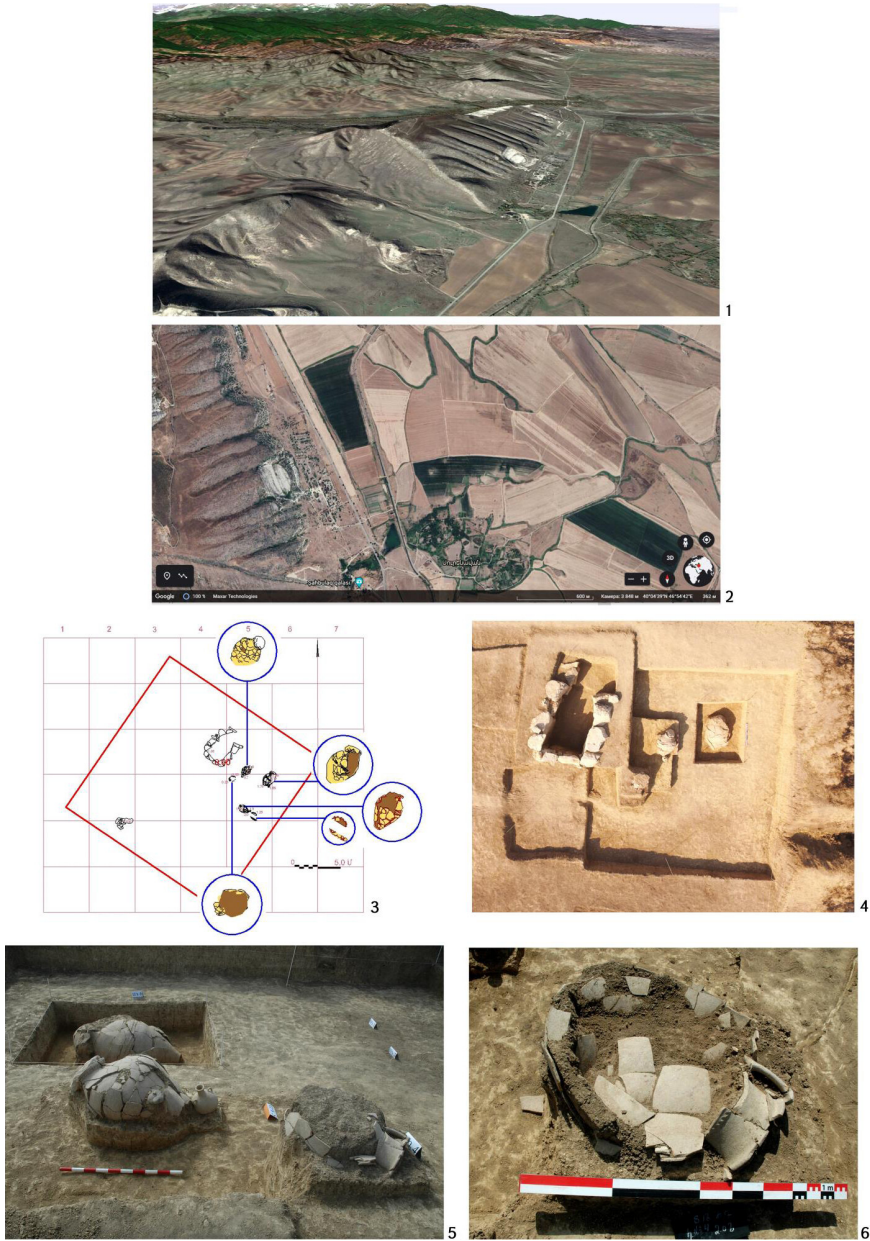


FIGURE 1 The site Tigranakert, with 1: the landscape view; 2: the location on Google Earth; 3: the plan of the Eastern necropolis, 2018, architect L. Kirakosyan; 4: aerial view of the Eastern necropolis, 2018; 5: the fourth, fifth, sixth jar burials, 2018; 6: the fourth painted jar burial, 2018

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2005–2020, the city existed till the end of the 13th century (Petrosyan 2020).¹ The tomb field of Tigranakert dated to the Late Classical Period occupies the territory of the plain 1.5 km to the northeast of the city. In 2010 and 2018, one burial cyst and five jar burials were discovered during the excavations (Figure 1/3–6) (Petrosyan et al. 2021). One more jar burial was excavated in 2017 inside the fortified quarter, not far from the northern wall.

The above-mentioned burials present a part of the funerary culture of the Late Classical Period, which includes evidence of unusual burial constructions in the territory of Artsakh and Utik up to the Araxes River.

Burial structures revealed during excavations, along with those discovered through happenstance, include a variety of types: cyst/stone chest, chambers with ovoid shaped walls, simple ground burials, jar burials, etc. However, starting with the end of the 1st century B.C. to the 1st centuries A.D., jar burials became predominant.

In this period, this type of burials becomes widespread in the whole Hellenistic world, including the Southern Caucasus. Summarizing the results of former and current excavations, we can affirm that among several dozens of tomb fields documented in Artsakh and Utik the jar burials are absolutely predominant.

Jar burials are indicated by a large vessel lying in a horizontal position, accompanied by smaller pots (e.g., oenochoe, spouted vessel, flask) placed near the base or mouth of the large vessel. This custom is documented from the steppe sites of Artsakh and Utik up to the Kura river.

The vessels and burials of Tigranakert do not have a particular orientation to cardinal directions. Grave goods are presented by diverse ceramics, personal weapons, different samples of ornaments, including pendants and beads made of gemstones, clay paste, glass, silver and gold. The presence of coins (seven Parthian coins of 70–50 B.C.) and glass intaglios (engraved gems) inserted into metal rings can be considered characteristic of the burials of Tigranakert (Petrosyan et al. 2021: 293). There are also some unusual examples of jar burials,

1 The citadel of the city is surrounded by a 83 m long defensive wall dividing it from the fortified quarter, and it includes a rock-cut foundation of 450 meters long stretching along the southern walls. The excavations also uncovered a 310-meter-long section of the northern walls up to 5 meters high, as well as a newly-discovered section of the south-eastern wall 40 m long. Recently discovered remains also include the Early Christian neighborhood of the central quarter with a pair of churches, fragments of a cross-bearing monument and early Christian graveyard; rock-cut winepress; and a water basin near the royal springs. One of the tomb fields (the eastern tomb field) of the Classical period and the remains of a post office built in the 19th century have been partially excavated (see Petrosyan MS).

including three from Tigranakert and Martakert, where the surrounding jar bodies are decorated with scenes of a hunting-ritual procession, crafted with red paint.

This report is devoted to one of these painted jars. The vessel was discovered in 2018, at a depth of 30 cm from the ground surface and oriented north-east. This yellowish jar was buried relatively shallowly, and there is evidence of activity by heavy machinery. As a result, it is quite fragmented (Figure 1/6).

The individual inside the jar was placed head downwards. The preservation of the rest of the bones is very poor. In other jar burials found in Armenia and in the region, the skeleton was usually placed in a foetal position. As a result, it can be assumed that this individual was placed in the same position. The grave goods consisted of 14 beads made of carnelian and 2 small round bronze earrings, which were found mixed with the bones.

The most remarkable object in this burial is the jar itself. The excavation has shown that a variety of separate sherds covered with carbonized layer bore traces of paintings. After cleaning and restoring the sherds, it became clear that the burial was made not in a standard vessel, but in a gorgeous painted jar with two large handles, a wide mouth and a flat, everted lip (height: 0.80 m, width: 0.60 m) (Figure 2/5, Figure 3).

The surface of the handles and lip are painted red, and the body and neck junction area are marked by a relief band decorated with two red stripes and fingerprints.

Below the neck, the body of the vessel from top to bottom is decorated with five identical red stripes. Each of the three upper horizontal zones contains different decorative elements: the first zone contains star-like, radial or astral signs. The second zone has triangles pointed upwards, which sometimes intersect, resembling a mountainous landscape. This stripe is completely filled with dots that might symbolize rain. And finally, the third zone is decorated with elements interpreted as a bird flock (Figure 3/8). The next zone is figurative, and the lower one is decorated with a densely-painted arcade.

The widest part of the vessel bears a depiction of a deer hunting scene. In this scene, there is a tree, presumably the Tree of Life, with scattered branches, which takes the central place of the composition. Occupying the entire height of the frieze, this Tree of Life is depicted with six (12 in general) long and prickly branches on each side of the vertical axis.

Moreover, the examination of numerous samples of painted pottery of the Late Classical period from Tigranakert shows that the floral ornaments are presented exclusively with ornaments in the form of branches with sharp leaves. These decorations are reminiscent of the iconography of Tyche, the goddess of Antioch, holding a palm branch as depicted on the reverse of the silver and



FIGURE 2 1: Gilded silver bowl of the Sasanian period depict the Shah Yazdegerd first who killed a deer. 2: Gilded silver plate showing a king (identified as Shapur II) hunting a deer. 3: A two-handled jar found in the capital Artashat. 4: A painted jar from Samadlo. 5: A painted burial jar from Tigranakert
 1: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART; 2: THE BRITISH MUSEUM;
 3: THE HISTORY MUSEUM OF ARMENIA; 4: THE GEORGIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM, PHOTO BY A. GABRIELYAN; 5: THE ARCHIVE OF TIGRANAKERT PROJECT

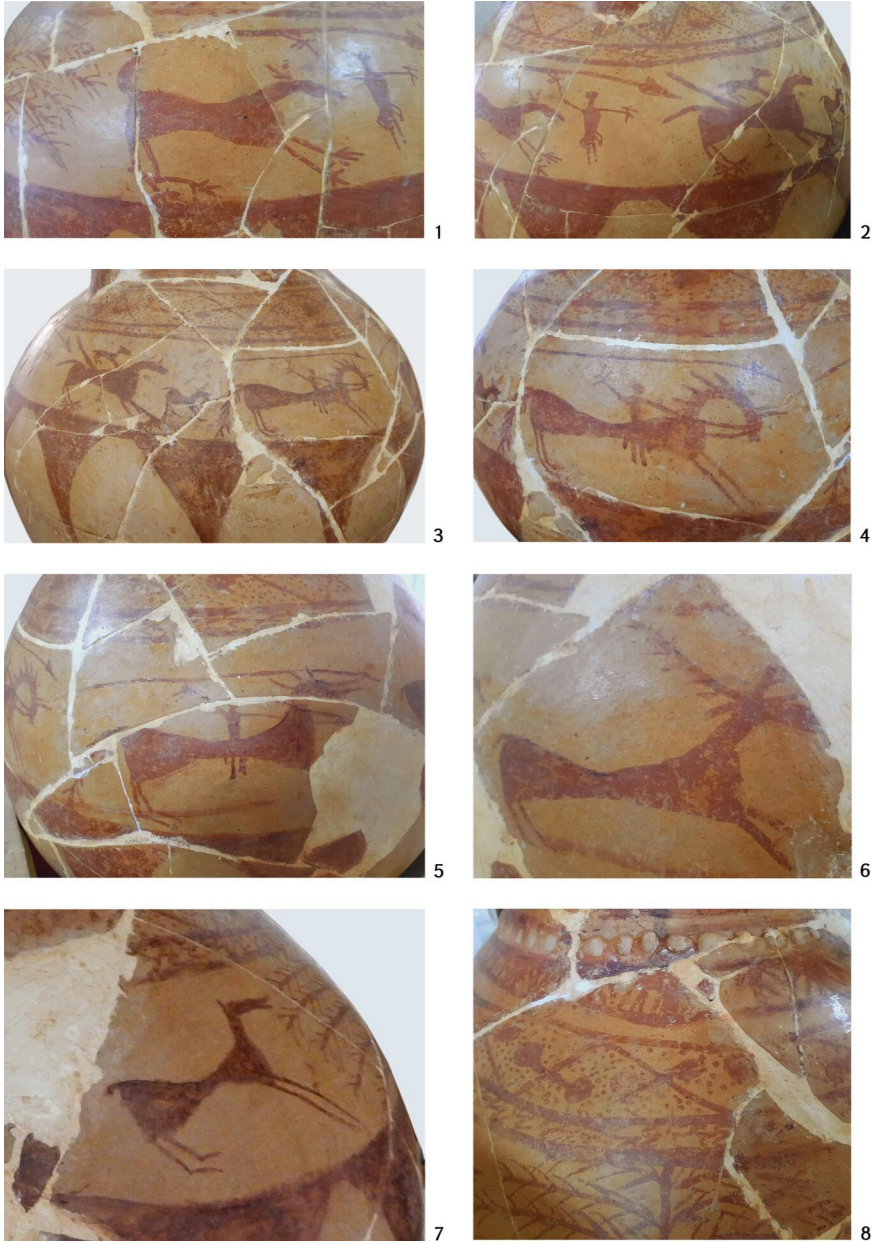


FIGURE 3 Details of a painted burial jar from Tigranakert
PHOTOS BY A. GABRIELYAN

bronze coins of Tigran II. The tree depicted on the jar seems to show a forested landscape, which was a suitable habitat for deer.

The action begins with this tree: all the 12 participants in the hunting scene are moving in one direction (from left to right) forming a unique magic circle. An infantryman and two horsemen chase the deer, armed with long spears and accompanied by hunting dogs. The hunting scene depicts also two wolf-like beasts with large bodies, long legs and wide open paws (Figure 3/1, 2). One of them is already defeated by dogs and stabbed with a spear of the infantryman. The iconographic style of these wolf-like animals is reminiscent of an image of two wolves chasing deer depicted on a painted Bronze Age vessel found in the village of Nerkin Getashen, in the Sevan Basin (Figure 4/1, 2) (K'ešišyan 2012: 304, fig. 2). The horsemen hunters depicted on the jar from Tigranakert go toward the Tree of Life, chasing the deer.

The horsemen have similar depictions: with one hand they hold their reins, while their hands are wide open, raised and ready to throw the long and sharp spear, which is held above their heads (Figure 3/3–5). The horses have very elongated bodies, long legs, and the feathery hair of their manes and tails is depicted with rhythmically repeated oblique lines. The shape of their tails resembles the image of horses on one of the painted vessels of the Bronze Age from the site of Nerkin Naver (Simonyan 2013: 34). The hunters wear long fur coats, the edges of which probably depict animal skins with limbs. Two human figures (probably priests) with similar imagery are depicted on another burial jar found in 2013 in Martakert, with the scene of a ritual procession of people and animals (Petrosyan et al. 2021: 102, fig. 21).

There are three deer. The male red deer with branched horns and the horseman chasing it seems to be emphasized and depicted on a hill of a certain height, marked by a curved solid line (Figure 3/6). Only the legs of the second animal have been preserved. And finally the series ends with the third deer/doe standing in front of the Tree of Life (Figure 3/7). The body of the deer is depicted in an archaic style, with two triangles with sharp tops facing each other.

A scene of deer hunting is depicted on the body of another large painted jar found in Martakert, 10 km away from Tigranakert. There is a horseman holding the reins of a horse with one hand, and delicately painted red deer with spotted horns moving to the left.

In 2012, a fragment of the body of a yellowish-brown closed vessel with a polished surface was found in Tigranakert, dating to the first part of the Classical period. The fragment bore two rows of engraved zigzags made with nails, surrounding a rider facing right and holding a horse's bridle in one hand and carrying a sickle or a spear in another (the ending is not preserved), and it seems like the man is going to throw it.

A hunting animal is depicted on yet another similar ceramic sherd. On this sherd, we find a picture of a static deer, standing in a frame made by a nail ornament. Only the front part of the animal has been preserved. The head is adorned with horns and the front legs are contoured. While these two fragments do not match, they do have exactly the same composition of high-quality clay, similar texture, the same ornamentation made with nails on the surface, and the same style of contour engraving of the images, suggesting that these are fragments of the same vessel with depiction of the deer hunting scene (Gabrielyan 2020: 13–14). The depiction of deer hunting on three different synchronous vessels found in Tigranakert of Artsakh and its region speaks of the importance and popularity of this motif.

It is well known that scenes depicting successful hunting in the Old World signified a victory over the enemy. The appearance of this composition on the burial vessels, of course, had a ritual significance, and it could have meant defeating death through struggle.

Generally, deer were so popular in the Armenian Highlands that they became a favorite subject for sculpture, painting and cult offering. This animal was revered not only in ancient times, but also later, up to the Middle Ages. Deer hunting scenes are found among the petroglyphs of the Armenian Highlands (Geghama Mountains, Sisian- Ughtasar) (Figure 4/4–7) (Karaxanyan/Safyan 1970: fig. 139, 159), and known from the bronze belts dating to the 11th–7th centuries B.C. (Figure 5/1–3) (Esayan 1984: 97–198), and on decorative art from the ancient sites of Armenia and neighboring countries (Figure 5/4).

This theme is especially prevalent in Achaemenid glyptic. The so-called Greco-Persian scarabeoids depict galloping animals. The elegant seals precisely present the garments of the Persian hunters, the headdress, as well as the anatomical details of the animals (Figure 6) (Nikulina 1994). This motif develops in the fine arts of the Late Classical period (sculpture, mosaic, pottery), and in the toreutics of the Sasanian period. For example, a deer hunt is depicted on a two-handled jar found in the capital Artashat, where this composition was depicted through plastering and re-embossing techniques (Figure 2/3) (Khachatrian 1998: 126, fig. 38–40). In addition, a 1.70-meter-high painted jar was discovered in Samadlo, which dates back to the 3rd century B.C., and which carries the scene of deer hunting accompanied by dogs (Figure 2/4) (Gagošidze 1979: 88, tables I, II, IV). One of the silver bowls of the Sasanian period depicts Yazdegerd I who killed a deer (Figure 2/1), etc.

The vitality of this ritual theme is shown by its frequent depiction on Armenian medieval tombstones where hunting and animals' battle scenes reflect eternal struggle (Figure 7). According to Petrosyan (2014: 306), one of the ways to overcome death was to kill it in a personified way, to kill an embodied symbol

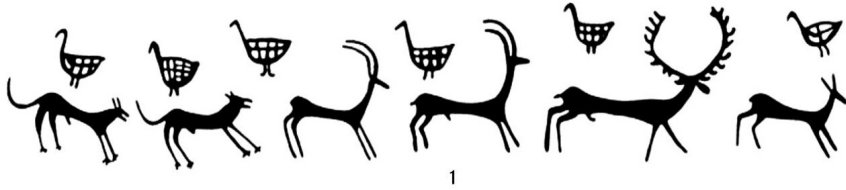


FIGURE 4 Scene of the procession of animals, 1: on the painted vessel from Nerkin Getashen, 19-18 cc. B.C. 2: A painted vessel from Nerkin Getashen, 19-18 cc. B.C., detail. 3: A painted burial jar from Tigranakert, detail. 4-7: The petroglyphs of the Armenian Highlands

1: K'ĒŠIŠYAN 2012; 2: SIMONYAN 2013; 4-7: GEGHAMA MOUNTAINS, SISIAN – UGHTASAR, KARAKHANYAN/SAFYAN 1970; PHOTOS BY K. TOKHATYAN

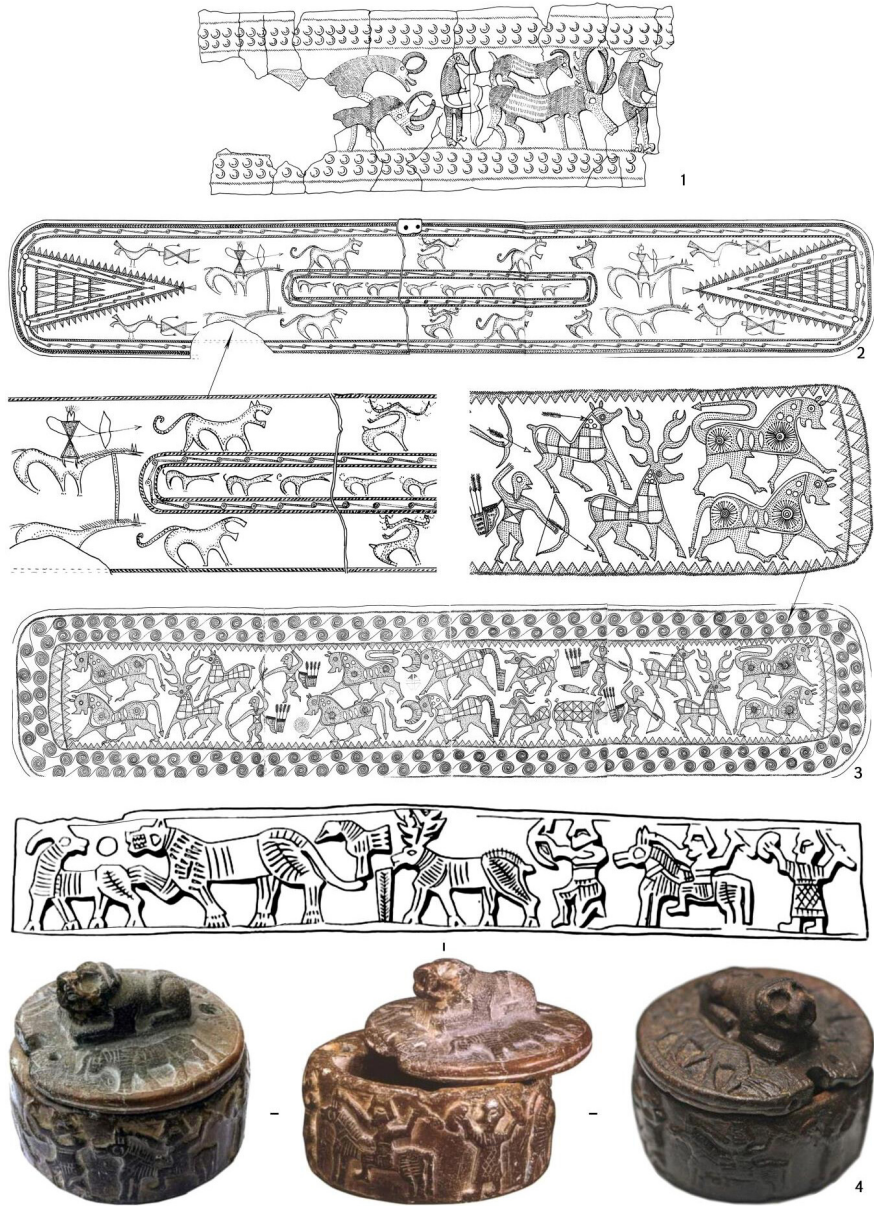


FIGURE 5 The bronze belts from 1: Akthala, 2: Astghi blur and 3: Trialeti. 4: A jewelry box. Karmir Blur. VIII–VII centuries B.C. Steatite

1: ESAYAN 1984: TAB. 14, FIG. 46; 2: ESAYAN 1984: TAB. 13, FIG. 42;

3: CHIDAŠELI 1986, ABB. 8. 4: PHOTO BY M. BADALYAN



FIGURE 6 Examples of Achaemenian glyptic
 NIKULINA 1994; 1: NO. 501; 2: NO. 494; 3: NO. 308; 4: NO. 306;
 5: NO. 508; 6: NO. 472; 7: NO. 468



1



2



3

FIGURE 7 An Armenian medieval tombstone with deer hunting scene, 1: Gavar; 2: Sotk; 3: Vaghaver-Fantan, Kotayk

PHOTOS BY 1: ST. NALBANDYAN; 2: A. GRIGORYAN;
3: H. PETROSYAN

of death. In this case, it seems, the deceased overcomes his own death through struggle and ensures his immortality.

Conclusion

Summing up the above, we can say that the most distinct feature of certain cults of the inhabitants of the region of Tigranakert of Artsakh is the use of illustrated vessels in their funeral rites. Among the assemblage of these vessels, one of the burial jars of the eastern tomb field of Tigranakert, Artsakh, has a special place. Its high-quality decoration, stylistics, semantic and religious significance, and the presence of the composition of the Tree of Life and deer hunting one of the burial jars of the eastern tomb field of Tigranakert, Artsakh, has a special place, depiction shows that the vessel has a ritual significance. We think that a legend or myth reflecting the forgotten cult views of our ancestors, which could have had an idea of defeating death through struggle, is depicted here.

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