# The Figure of the Scholar in Armenian Medieval Relief and Sculpture

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# THE IMAGE OF THE STUDENT AND THE SUBJECT OF TEACHING IN THE MEDIEVAL ARMENIAN FIGURATIVE RELIEF

On the basis of thorough iconographical analysis the image of the student and the subject of teaching in the medieval Armenian figurative relief (on khachkars and tombstones) for the first time are defined. It is proved that this image belongs to the so called ideal images, i. e. the dead person is presented not as he was but as he should have been. The thorough investigation of this subject, with inclusion of vast narrative and epigraphic materials, allowed to make a conclusion on popular manifestations of one of the main complexes of the Armenian identity - the letters and the book, when the teaching was perceived as an ideal process and the student - as an ideal man.

# The Figure of the Scholar and Educational Motifs in Armenian Medieval Sculpture

In recent years, research on Armenian medieval khachkars and tombstone sculptures has gradually revealed a range of vivid, richly expressive, and full-bodied motifs and figures, including the garden-vineyard, the eternal feast, the eternal battle, the burial liturgy, inconsolable mourning, the "family portrait," the king, the warrior, the hunter, the farmer, the shepherd, the mother, the musician, and others. Among these, one can also discern the motif of education and the figure of the scholar.

In figurative sculpture, the depicted figures can be distinguished by three principal characteristics: their relative size (age-related dimension), the rendering of the head or headwear (gender-related dimension), and the expressive posture or gesture (figurative-symbolic dimension). This final indicator implies that the figure can only be correctly identified if the attributes it holds or that accompany it are also recognizable. For instance, for many years, the figure of the "scholar," depicted with a *pnakit* (a stylus board or writing tablet), was interpreted by researchers as holding a mirror. Likewise, the *grchatup-tanaqaman* (pen case and inkwell) was understood as a double-pipe flute.

Due to such misreadings, the figure has at times remained entirely unrecognized, and in certain cases, it has even been mistakenly identified as female.

The "Scholar" figure belongs to the category of idealized representations; that is, the depiction does not necessarily reflect a person who actually existed in earthly life, but rather presents an image of what such a person ought to be. The scholar is typically portrayed as a young male (see Fig. 1), with long hair or braids, holding a *pnakit*, often inscribed with lines of writing. The *grchatup-tanaqaman* (pen case and inkwell) is shown either in his hand, hanging from his belt, or placed separately; but in all cases, not in active use. Certain iconographic overlaps suggest that the *grchatup-tanaqaman* may also appear in the hands of other figures - such as musicians, minstrels (*gusan*), dervishes, and others. In rare cases, the "scholar's" figure is marked by the presence of a book (*girq*).

One of the earliest known sculptural representations of the scholar figure can be identified within the renowned carved khachkar erected by Petevan in Kanaker in 1265 (Figs. 2, 3).

In the inscription on this khachkar, Petevan and his wife Avagtikin state that they erected it in memory of their sons, explicitly naming only one of them, Toghaslan. On the cornice (*qiv*) of the khachkar, flanking the central cross, two figures are depicted holding smaller crosses. Judging by their headwear, both figures are male; these are presumably Petevan himself and his eldest son Toghaslan, both mentioned in the inscription. Considering their placement against the decorative background of the tympanum, it is likely that the artisan portrayed them in a heavenly garden awaiting the True Cross (according to Christian eschatology, the Second Coming of Christ will be accompanied by the arrival of the Cross).

On the ornamental frame of the khachkar are two additional figures, whose attire and accessories, such as garments with heart-shaped openings, wide-skirted tunics extending below the knees, tall, widening hats, and earrings, closely resemble those depicted on the cornice, suggesting that these too are male figures. The figure positioned to the right of the central cross holds in his left hand a rectangular, elongated board inscribed with "Amirpek, Mkhitar" (Prince-lord Mkhitar). Clearly, this object is identified as a *pnakit*. Given that the khachkar's inscription explicitly notes Petevan had other sons, it is highly probable that this figure represents one of them. The figure on the left holds a pitcher in his left hand and a cup or goblet resembling a bowl in his right. Such iconography typically denotes a servant or cupbearer (*matrvak*), a role sometimes performed by younger sons within a family context. Thus, it can be concluded that these sculptures portray Petevan alongside three of his sons, with one son depicted as a scholar and another as a cupbearer.

Of particular interest to our topic is a tombstone from Brnakot, dated 1551, whose sculptural composition centers around the contrast between life and death (Fig. 4). According to the tombstone's inscription, the central figure is Melik Mirjan, depicted as the head of a family. Death in this composition is symbolized by a deceased figure lying in a grave, clasping Melik Mirjan's feet with both hands. Life, in contrast, is represented by Melik Mirjan's family: he stands facing his wife and son. The spouses jointly hold a cross in one hand; with his other hand, Mirjan accepts a cup of wine from a cupbearer. Nearby, dishes placed on tables hold grilled

meats and other foods. This depiction uniquely blends Christian symbolism with elements of folk imagery, granting both the cross and the festive meal a salvific significance. Mirjan's wife is elaborately adorned: a triangular forehead ornament with a central, double-cone-shaped jewel hangs beneath her flat headwear; her chest is decorated with a necklace consisting of similar double-conical pendants; her earrings follow the same double-cone pattern. The child is dressed in a tunic reaching down to the knees, cinched at the waist with a belt; his hair is arranged in a prominent, upwardly pointed bun tilted to the left side of his head. A simple necklace adorns his neck. It appears likely that the bun is tied at the crown by a ribbon of some width, creating a slightly raised appearance. The child, whose height barely reaches his mother's waist, clings with both hands to the hem of her garment, clearly suggesting his very young age. Positioned between the parents, the depicted pen case and inkwell (*grchatup-tanaqaman*) symbolize the promising future awaiting the child.

Another tombstone composition from Areni (currently preserved at the Eghegnadzor Geological Museum) explicitly illustrates the act of writing (Fig. 5). All figures here are depicted seated, indicating an interior scene of leisure. They wear double-flapped (*erkpesh*) coats (*arkhalugh*), a garment widely adopted by men during this period. The hairstyle of the first two figures closely resembles that of the child from Brnakot described above. The first figure (from left to right) holds a pen case with attached inkwell and possibly a paper-cutting knife in one hand, and a stylus or pen whose tip touches a *pnakit* in the other. A bird is depicted at his feet. The second figure holds a sheet, already inscribed or illustrated, in his right hand and extends his left hand toward a cup offered to him by a third, beardless figure. Based on his role, this third individual is presumably a servant or cupbearer, holding a wine pitcher in his left hand. The attire and hairstyle of the second figure match exactly those of the first, suggesting that the same individual is depicted engaged in two activities, study and leisure. The inscription confirms a single deceased individual, reading: "This is the resting place of Tankum, son of Lord Gharam, Year 1595."[1]

On a flat tombstone from Shoghaga Monastery, the deceased is depicted with long hair falling below his shoulders, wearing a robe that extends slightly above his ankles, secured with a

[1] «Այս է հանգիստ Թանկումին, որ որդի է պարոն Ղարամին, թվ. ՌԽԴ»

belt, with his hands crossed on his chest. The inscription identifies him clearly: "This is the resting place of Deacon Voskan, who departed at the age of 15, Year 1535."[2] Although this young figure does not hold a *pnakit* or pen case, this depiction provides crucial evidence regarding both the age and social or clerical status of the deceased. It is noteworthy that all our identified “scholar” figures have long hair.

Examples of this type could be multiplied, but even the ones presented here suffice to conclude that, as a rule, figures depicted with writing tablets (*pnakit*), styluses, pen-inkwell sets (and occasionally books) are typically the youthful deceased.

As we can observe, youthful figures constitute a significant proportion of tombstone sculptures, particularly from the 15th to 18th centuries. This type of figure can be reconstructed in detail, especially with the help of tombstone sculptures from Gegharkunik, where the majority of smaller tombstones feature "heroes" depicted with one, two, or, in rare cases, three braids[3].

Thus, we can confidently conclude that one of the idealized figures found in tombstone sculpture is the scholar, depicted with writing implements and engaged specifically in learning. This depiction suggests clearly that the emphasis is placed on acquiring the ability to read and write, rather than copying manuscripts or practicing professional scribal work.

An inscription from one of the khachkars in Bnunis provides a textual characterization of such a "hero":

> “…Year 1331. O holy cross, intercessor of the world, we, Martiros and Vaneni, entreat you to remember our sweet and charming, sun-like and flower-faced child Avrpel, who was so filled with divine grace that within half a year he learned the Armenian script and within a single month mastered the Mongolian script, astonishing all who saw him and becoming beloved and valued by all, both nobles and commoners…”[4]

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[2] «Այս է հանգիստն Ոսկան սարկաւագին, որ :ԺԵ: ամեաց փոխեցաւ. թվկ. :ՋՁԴ:»
[3] See H. Petrosyan, The figure of the “child” in Armenian late medieval tombstone sculpture.
[4] Insert Armenian text?

It appears that in this case the inscription conveys even more (particularly in the excerpt emphasized here – H.P.) than the tombstone sculpture itself does. For both noble and commoner, and indeed for the entire Armenian community, scholarship and learning represent the ideal lifestyle, and the scholar represents the ideal person.