The Dragon (Vishap) as a Symbol of Good and Evil in Late Medieval Armenian Tombstone Art

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Abstract

Dragon (vishap) worship has existed among Armenians since time immemorial, finding expression in khachkar and tombstone art. In recent years, two volumes have been dedicated to the comprehensive study of dragons and dragon stones, gathering data from archaeology, ethnography, philology, art, and other fields, thereby explaining the various transformations of the concept of "dragon". The reflection of dragon worship in art has repeatedly been studied by various specialists. Within the framework of our research, we have considered the image of the dragon on tombstones as a symbol of good and evil, clarifying its semantics, and studying the origin of the spread of the dragon image. Our research is based on material obtained from fieldwork conducted in Gegharkunik Region: we have particularly studied several tombstones located in Noratus, Yeranos, and Geghhovit, in an attempt to typify the forms of dragon depiction. As a result of the study, we have concluded that the depiction of the enemy in the form

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of a dragon on tombstones originates from gospel iconography. This is evident as scenes with dragon-like iconography are most commonly found in miniatures, especially in those depicting the *Harrowing of Hell* and *Baptism*.

Keywords: dragon, tombstone, protective symbol, sign of good and evil, Noratus, Geghhovit, Syunik, dragon stone

In Armenian culture, the image of the dragon was not perceived unambiguously; there were both benevolent and malevolent dragons. The former symbolized fertility and served as guardians of subterranean waters and the Tree of Life, while the latter had diametrically opposing functions[2]. Evil dragons were perceived as symbols of foreign or enemy peoples, initially the Medes, and later the Mongols, and the Armenian eagle was often depicted as rising against them[3]. Asatur Mnatsakanyan notes that if these beings are depicted alongside parental pairs, the Tree of Life, or in isolation, they are benevolent dragon-serpents. However, if they are shown battling animals or humans, consuming the Tree of Life, or in other such scenarios, they are embodiments of malevolent forces. Particularly in Armenian ornamental art, snakes and storks are frequently portrayed as adversaries in scenes of dragon combat[4]. Both forms, benevolent and malevolent, appear in Armenian miniature painting and sculpture. In tombstone carvings, the most commonly depicted scene is that of dragon combat, where a mounted warrior strikes a dragon coiled beneath the horse's feet. In medieval art, this iconography is associated with holy knights, such as Saint Sargis, Saint George, Saint Theodore, and Saint Minas. Hagiographies dedicated to these warrior saints emphasize their principal heroic deed: slaying the dragon and rescuing a virgin girl. Often, these military saints were venerated and depicted together; for instance, Saint Theodore was paired with Saint George[5] or Saint Sargis[6]. A similar

[2] Mnatsakanyan, Asatur. *Armenian Ornamental Art*. Yerevan: Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, 1955, pp. 519–528.
[3] Tatikyan, V. *Clan Carpets of Artsakh*. Yerevan: "Lusabats" Publishing, 2004, p. 17.
[4] Mnatsakanyan, Asatur. *Armenian Ornamental Art*, p. 523.
[5] Interestingly, the name of Saint George means "farmer" or "ploughman," which, in medieval symbolism, was also interpreted as the ploughing of human souls. See: Devrikyan, V. "Liturgical Canons of Horseback Saints," ՊՖՀ 3, 2010, p. 118.
[6] Simonyan, L. *Dragon-Slaying Saints Among Armenians: Myth and Memory*, in *The Dragon at the Border of Tale and Reality*, Yerevan: ՀԱԻ Publishing, 2019, p. 420.

image, showing Saints Theodore and George slaying entwined dragon-serpents, is preserved on a tombstone dated to 1544, located in the cemetery of the village of Gnishik in the Vayots Dzor province, though it bears no inscription of the saints' names[7].

The scene of a dragon being slain by a mounted saint is more widely represented in miniature painting. We are inclined to interpret this scene on tombstones as well as a depiction of horseback saints, endowed with their salvific and protective roles. Nevertheless, on tombstones, these figures appear not so much sanctified as idealized. As Hamlet Petrosyan notes, the central "hero" in such sculptural imagery is the deceased, who is portrayed in an idealized form and within an idealized setting[8]. This is also evident in the examples we have examined.

The scene of slaying the dragon also appears in New Testament iconography, particularly in representations of the Descent into Hell. A fragment of a khachkar cornice from Gavar features this theme as well: the Crucifixion of Christ is accompanied by heraldic depictions of archangels slaying dragons. Hell itself was often portrayed in the form of a serpent or dragon, which is chained and sealed by an angel.

In miniature painting, the “Baptism” scene often depicts a dragon with a coiled serpent-like body beneath Christ’s feet, an artistic embodiment of Satan, much like the figure of the “King of the Jordan”[9]. Over time, the image of the dragon increasingly became decorative, adorning church windows, wall pillars, and capitals, and it found wide application in both khachkars and carpet art.

The Origins and Iconographic Types of the Dragon Image

In tombstone and khachkar art, the highest concentration of dragon depictions has been observed specifically in the Gegharkunik region – particularly in Noratus, Geghhovit, Torfavan, Vardenik, Lichk, Gavar, and elsewhere. It is well known that dragon worship was widespread in Gegharkunik since ancient times, evidenced by the fact that the Geghama Mountains were the

[7] *Corpus of Armenian Inscriptions: Vayots Dzor — Yeghegnadzor and Azizbekov Districts* (ed. S. Barkhudaryan), Vol. 3, Yerevan: Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, 1967, p. 204, No. 907.
[8] Petrosyan, Hamlet. “An Attempt at a Causal, Iconographic, and Semantic Analysis of Late Medieval Armenian Tombstone Sculpture,” *Banber Matenadarani* 21, 2014, p. 304.
[9] Matevosyan, K., and Avetisyan, A. *Gospel Images*. Yerevan: YSU Publishing, 1993, pp. 35–36.

epicenter of the "flourishing period" of vishapakar (dragon stone) culture[10]. It seems no coincidence, then, that in later periods, dragon imagery became so beloved in tombstones and khachkars, symbolizing the forces of good and evil.

Noratus is one of the oldest settlements in Armenia, known for its numerous monuments dating back to the Bronze and Iron Ages. Yet above all, the village is famous for its khachkar field, which includes around 900 khachkars and nearly 100 tombstones, dating from the 9th to the 17th centuries. On the southeastern side of the Noratus cemetery stands a cradle-shaped tombstone, dated to 1556, erected for the salvation of Kaspar's soul. On its southern face is depicted a horseman who has thrust a long cross-shaped staff[11] into the mouth of a dragon coiled beneath the horse's feet. The horseman's face is not well preserved, and overall, the relief is quite weathered, with the images barely visible. Another figure is shown holding the horse's reins, while grasping the Tree of Life on the other hand. The composition continues with a person holding a wine jar and cup, accompanied by two musicians playing the tambourine and zurna. The dragon-slaying warrior is an "idealized hero," whose image the sculptors used to emphasize the power of the deceased (Fig. 1). Similar scenes are also found on tombstones in Geghhovit and Lichk. Slaying the dragon symbolized the triumph over death, while the Tree of Life represented fertility, abundance, and the idea of new life. Alongside overcoming death, the scene also symbolizes the beginning of rebirth. As Asatur Mnatsakanyan notes, in the daily life and beliefs of the Armenian people's ancestors, the Tree of Life and the associated rituals held a prominent place. People sought strength, fertility, immortality, and other such gifts within the trees of life[12].

There are also tombstones depicting dragon-slaying deceased individuals in Geghhovit. One such example is located near the southern wall of the Saint George (Surb Gevorg) Church.

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[10]Bobokhyan, A., Gilbert, A., and Henila, P. *Archaeology of Vishap Stones: The Vishap Stone-Obelisks*. Yerevan: "Gitutyun" Publishing, 2015, p. 294.

[11] H. Petrosyan notes that in many variations of khachkar compositions, the cross is depicted as an all-conquering weapon, with a defeated dragon shown beneath it (its back broken or "bound"). In the medieval period, imagery of the cross driving away serpents or dragons was widespread. See: Petrosyan, H. *The Khachkar: Origin, Function, Iconography, Semantics*. Yerevan: "Printinfo," 2006, pp. 383–384.

[12] Asatur Mnatsakanyan notes that according to ancient beliefs, gods were born from plants, entered into plants upon death, and were depicted in the form of a grain. People's early conceptions of divine death and resurrection were most clearly expressed through the metaphor of the seed, marked by death, sprouting, fruitfulness, and then the same cycle repeating endlessly. See: Mnatsakanyan, Asatur. "On the Mythology of 'Vishap' Stone-Obelisks and Dragon Combat," *Bulletin of the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, Social Sciences*, no. 5, 1952, pp. 75–78.

On the southern side of the tombstone, the relief shows a figure holding a gata (Armenian pastry) or a wine cup marked with the sign of eternity, followed by two bowls filled with food, a wine jar, a quill and inkwell, a writing tablet, and a book. Next appears the image of a saddled horse, beneath whose feet a coiled dragon is shown. On the tablet is inscribed only the name of the carver in two lines: "Hakob the painter"[13] (Figs. 2, 3).

Another tombstone in Geghhovit likewise preserves only the name of the carver: "Nerses." On the sculpted surface, there is a depiction of a quiver full of arrows, beneath which is a saddled horse with a dragon coiled under its feet. A figure holds the horse's reins, followed by a wine jar, a cup, and the traditional Armenian *khorovats* (barbecue). The composition ends with another figure seated cross-legged, hands folded over the chest, wearing a distinct triple-pointed crown (Fig. 4). Tombstones with such compositions do not follow a rigid pattern of depiction. However, a common layout includes the saddled horse and coiled dragon on one side, the deceased on the other, and the space in between filled by the sculptor with imagery of food, wine vessels, or writing tools.

Entwined twin dragons as a symbol of good

In other variations of dragon-themed scenes, the creature is not depicted beneath the horse's feet but rather shown separately, most often in the form of a pair of entwined dragons. A similar depiction is found once again in Geghhovit. In this scene, the saddled horse stands alone, while in front of it appears a pair of dragon-serpents, more decorative in nature than symbolic. Interestingly, in this case, the sculptor has given the deceased a distinct space within the overall composition, separating them from the other figures with a vertical line.

Another tombstone with a similar composition is located in the central part of the Torfavan cemetery. It is dated to 1564 and was erected in memory of Aziz Bek[14]. On the

[13] *Corpus of Armenian Inscriptions: Gegharkunik — Districts of Kamo, Martuni, and Vardenis* (ed. S. Barkhudaryan), Vol. 4, Yerevan: Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, 1973, p. 216, Inscription No. 907.
[14] *Corpus of Armenian Inscriptions*, Vol. 4, Inscription No. 1497, p. 372.

northern side, a horseman is depicted, with a fleeing deer shown in front of him. Directly below them are two dragon-serpents, facing each other with open jaws.

To the east of the Holy Mother of God Church (Surb Astvatsatsin) in Noratus stands a rather large tombstone, nearly 3 meters in length; that draws attention with its depiction of two coiled dragons. Sedrak Barkhudaryan notes that during his time, the inscription was severely worn and illegible, so he relied on the version published by Lalayan. The content of the inscription reads: "I, Melik Vokhkes, built this tomb for my father, Melik Par(ek)[15]."

On this tombstone, the two dragons, facing each other with open jaws, occupy the entire sculpted surface of the southern face. Nowhere else in Gegharkunik have we encountered dragons represented in such a distinctive manner, especially with an entire face of the stone dedicated solely to their depiction. Similar representations can be found on the lintel of the entrance to the Vanstan Monastery (13th century) and the lintel of the Arinj Fortress (1501)[16]. The northern face of the tombstone features a banquet scene, complete with depictions of musicians. The thematic composition begins with a sculptural image of a fascinating mythical creature – a single-headed, two-bodied beast. Similar images exist in Hayravank, Kaghsi, Gandzak, Noravank, Jugha, and other locations. On the cornices of Jugha's khachkars, such mythical creatures are abundant; even their tails transform into horned, open-jawed dragons, facing either inward or outward[17]. In this case, due to the moss covering the stone, the creature's eyes and mouth are no longer visible, while its tail curves backward and reaches up to its waist. To the right of the mythical beast are two seated musicians in a cross-legged position, one holding a *kamancha*, the other a *saz*. Following them is the traditional Armenian *khorovats* (barbecue), beneath which stands a human figure holding a wine jar in one hand and the horse's reins in the other. The scene concludes with a horseman, holding a wine cup in one hand and a

[15] Ibid., p. 15.

[16] For a more detailed discussion of similar dragon iconography in sculptural decoration, see: Mikayelyan, L. "The Image of the Dragon-Serpent in 10th–14th Century Armenian Sculpture: Iconography and Symbolic Interpretations in the Context of Christian Culture," in *The Dragon at the Border of Tale and Reality*, Yerevan: ՀԱԻ Publishing, 2019, pp. 396–410, Figs. 17–18.

[17] For a more detailed discussion of these mythical creatures, see: Petrosyan, H. *The Khachkar...*, pp. 227–233; Mikayelyan, L. "Guides of Souls and Celestial Guardians: The Images of Sirens and Sphinxes in 13th-Century Armenian Sculpture and the Art of the Islamic East," in *Between East and West: Saint Alexander Nevsky, His Era and Image in Art*, Collection of Articles, Moscow: Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Center for Medieval and Armenian Studies, 2021, pp. 514–519.

quiver full of arrows in the other. The musicians' images are far more eroded and less preserved than the sculpted figures of the horseman and his attendant. The tombstone is also distinguished by its triangular projections, ending in images of coiled serpents, while the flat top surface bears a large depiction of a deer. This tombstone is unique for its protective symbolism, marked by images of serpents and dragons (Figs. 5, 7).

In Noratus, there is another tombstone with similar iconography, mentioned in epigrapher Aleksandr Khachatryan's *Corpus of Arabic Inscriptions of Armenia*. The tombstone belongs to Saad and Sayf ad-Din. According to local accounts, it was erected in memory of two brothers, Aslan and Kaplan, who were killed in battle[18]. The same tombstone is also featured and discussed in one of epigrapher Tigran Mikayelyan's articles, along with a photograph[19]. Azerbaijani researcher Telman Ibrahimov has also dedicated one of his articles to the analysis of this tombstone. Based on his unsubstantiated claim, the Muslim cemetery in Noratus was allegedly destroyed by Armenians, with only this single tombstone left intact. The image and inscription of the tombstone have been published multiple times in Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Soviet academic literature. The tombstone is dated to the 14th century (1305), and on its side are depicted two opposing dragons and the deceased's warhorse. According to Ibrahimov, the two dragons facing each other symbolize harmony and cosmic order, while their mysterious, guardian-like protection extends over both the material (physical) world and the afterlife (spiritual) realm[20] (Fig. 6).

As art historian Lilit Mikayelyan observes, paired dragons are typically entwined, often with coiled, stone-bound bodies and wide-open jaws resembling the heads of ferocious beasts[21]. The depiction of twisted or coiled dragons and serpents is based on an abstracted visual interpretation of real snake movements, the spirals of storms and whirlwinds, and the wave-like

[18] Khachatryan, A. *Corpus of Arabic Inscriptions of Armenia (8th–16th centuries)*, Vol. A, Yerevan: Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, 1987, p. 66.
[19] Mikayelyan, T. "A Survey of Arabic-Script Epigraphic Monuments in the Territory of the Republic of Armenia," *Turkology*, no. 3, 2012, p. 12.
[20] Ibrahimov, T. *Dragons of a Turkic Tombstone in the Armenian Village of Noratus*, https://www.academia.edu/96665138/DRAGONS_OF_A_TURKIC_TOMBSTONE_IN_THE_ARMENIAN_VILLAGE_OF_NORATUS (accessed 24.02.2024).
[21] Mikayelyan, L. *The Image of the Dragon-Serpent...*, p. 404.

flow of water[22]. These paired dragons generally serve a protective function, guarding sacred space from all danger and evil forces[23]. Astghik Israelian notes that the most defining characteristic of serpents and dragons is their ability to fulfill multiple roles simultaneously, protecting and empowering, protecting and blessing, protecting and bestowing wealth, and so on. In the tombstone examples we have studied, these paired dragons likewise serve as protective symbols, whose primary role was to guard the grave of the deceased from demonic forces. Water and mountain dragons, as guardians of the underworld, embody much older semantic traditions, since in many cultures bodies of water and caves are seen as gateways to the realm of the dead[24].

Intriguing examples of dragon imagery can be found not only in the Gegharkunik region, but also in Syunik. During fieldwork conducted in 2016 and 2017 in the villages of Vorotnavan and Tolors in the Sisian district, the Research Center for Historical and Cultural Heritage discovered two tombstones, made of the same type of stone, in different colors, and bearing the same carved composition. The tombstones depict a scene of two dragons locked in combat, being struck by a warrior armed with bow and arrow[25]. The iconography of these two Syunik examples differs from that of the Gegharkunik tombstones. In these cases, the main section of the sculpted surface is occupied by the dragon combat scene, while the armed deceased, shown fighting the dragons with bow and arrow, is rendered in a much smaller scale. It seems that the sculptor-masters chose to emphasize the significance of the dragon battle itself, rather than the figure of the deceased, who is typically the central "hero" in tombstone compositions (Figs. 8, 9).

Conclusion

In tombstones, the dragon is depicted as a symbol of evil when associated with a mounted warrior or an unmounted horse. In contrast, separately depicted, intertwined dragon pairs carry a

[22] Israelian, A. "The Benevolent Functions of the Horse and Dragon in Armenian Beliefs," in *The Dragon at the Border of Tale and Reality*, Yerevan: ՀԱԻ Publishing, 2019, p. 202.
[23] Mikayelyan, L. *The Image of the Dragon-Serpent...*, pp. 403–405.
[24] Hovhannisyan, K. "Manifestations of the Archetypal Image of the Dragon in Armenian Thought," in *The Dragon at the Border of Tale and Reality*, Yerevan: ՀԱԻ Publishing, 2019, p. 82.
[25] Research Center for Historical and Cultural Heritage SNCO, https://www.facebook.com/armheritage/posts/pfbid02CbcHh9aJkEqgeLg-73mLUXdL69pgD7VAQDqWWLKN13MG4quiRuREay85XEq7VyeM1l (accessed 26.02.2024).

positive symbolism, as protectors of the deceased and guardians of the tomb. In Gegharkunik, master sculptors followed three main principles for depicting dragons.

The first is the idealized deceased figure, slaying the dragon in a manner reminiscent of mounted saints, endowed with salvific and protective functions. The dragon, wounded and coiled beneath the horse's hooves, embodies evil, hell, or the devil – imagery stemming from Gospel iconography, most commonly seen in scenes of the Baptism and the Descent into Hell. Unlike in miniature painting, tombstone reliefs with such imagery emphasize a worldly setting, complementing the scene with depictions of wine jars, cups, banquet tables, or other such elements.

The second is the coiled dragon beneath an unmounted horse, part of a secular sculptural composition, in which the primary thematic scene represents an eternal banquet. In most cases, the saddled horse and coiled dragon are depicted on one side, the deceased on the other, and the space between them is filled by the sculptor with images of food, wine jugs, or writing tools.

The third is the depiction of paired, usually intertwined dragons, which symbolize the protection of the tomb from demonic and evil forces. Such imagery also appears in fortress and church decoration, serving to protect the sacred space from any harm or evil.

Beyond their narrative and symbolic roles, these compositions also hold significant semantic meaning. The deceased overcomes death through either feasting or battle, securing their own immortality. Another way to overcome death was to kill it – represented in this context by the dragon.

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