



WORLD
HERITAGE SITES IN
ARMENIA

The publication of the book was carried out within the framework of the grant of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of the Republic of Armenia

The book is published by the decision of the Scientific Council of the “Scientific Research Center of Historical and Cultural Heritage” SNCO.

World Heritage Sites in Armenia, Yerevan, Hushardzan Press, 2024, 148 pages.

Editor: **Khachik A. Harutyunyan**

The current edition features eight articles on Armenian properties listed in the World Heritage and Tentative Lists. Each article highlights the key components and unique characteristics of these properties, showcasing their outstanding universal value.

The publication is aimed at a broad audience interested in Armenian historical and cultural heritage.



Ministry of Education, Science,
Culture, and Sports
of the Republic of Armenia



UDC 008

ISBN 978-9939-9087-3-1

© Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of the Republic of Armenia

© “Scientific Research Center of Historical and Cultural Heritage” SNCO

FOREWORD

The tangible and intangible cultural heritage created by the Armenian people over millennia is rich and diverse, consistently attracting specialists and tourists from around the world. Each year, thousands of visitors and researchers come to Armenia to personally explore, study, and admire this heritage, leaving with vivid impressions.

Armenia’s unique natural landscape, combined with monuments from various periods situated in deep valleys and high mountains—such as ancient settlements, archaeological sites, monasteries, churches, bridges, and castles—enhances its appeal. The diverse cuisine, folk crafts, and arts, along with numerous museums showcasing the layers and nuances of Armenian history, further enrich the cultural, scientific, and tourist attraction of our country year after year. The genuine hospitality of the Armenian people adds to this allure.

As an integral part of universal heritage, Armenian cultural heritage is valued on the highest professional platforms. This is evident in the inclusion of Armenian values and properties in UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and World Heritage Lists, highlighting their many components and manifestations. The Tentative List also features several significant properties, each with its own rich and unique history and universal value.

This album presents a summarized overview of Armenian properties included in the World Heritage and Preliminary Lists for a broad audience. The state is actively involved in the protection, conservation, and promotion of these sites. Recently, the nomination “The Vishaps and the Cultural Landscape of Tırinkatar” was added to the Preliminary List, and significant efforts are underway to register a new property on the World Heritage List.

Despite the daily challenges threatening cultural heritage today, we believe that heritage has the power to unite humanity, fostering peace and harmony. Therefore, let us commit to preserving, promoting, and passing on a stable legacy and a peaceful, creative environment to future generations.

Alfred Kocharyan

Deputy minister

*of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports
of the Republic of Armenia*

THE VISHAPS AND THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF TIRINKATAR

Arsen Bobokhyan
Alessandra Gilibert
Pavol Hnila

Introduction

In the high mountains of Armenia, unique archaeological monuments have been preserved to our days, which are traditionally called by the people “vishap” (Armenian for “dragon”). These are two to five meter high basalt stelae, which are unique among the stone stelae of the ancient world because of their unparalleled animal iconography and peculiar locations (Fig. 1). Vishaps are either sculpted in the form of a fish (the piscis type) or carved as if a bovine hide with head and extremities was draped over them (the vellus type). Sometimes both iconographies are combined (the hybrid type) (Fig. 2).

Currently ca. 150 examples of these monuments are known. As a rule, they are located in secluded, water-rich, high altitude meadows in the unforested mountains, ca. 1200-3200 m above sea level. Their highest concentration (ca. 120 examples) has been detected on Mt. Aragats, in the Geghama, Sevan, Vardenis and Syunik mountains of Armenia. The limits of their macro-regional distribution are the Lake Van region in the south, the Trialeti mountain range in the north, the Erzurum region in the west and the Sevan mountain range in the east.

The vellus vishaps are the most numerous ones and they are distributed more or less equally across the macro-region. Vishaps of the hybrida type are the rarest and they are so far confined to the south-west of the Geghama mountains in Armenia. Vishaps of the piscis type are currently lacking in the westernmost parts of the macro-region. Since the iconography of vishaps is unique, standardized and very specific, their large-

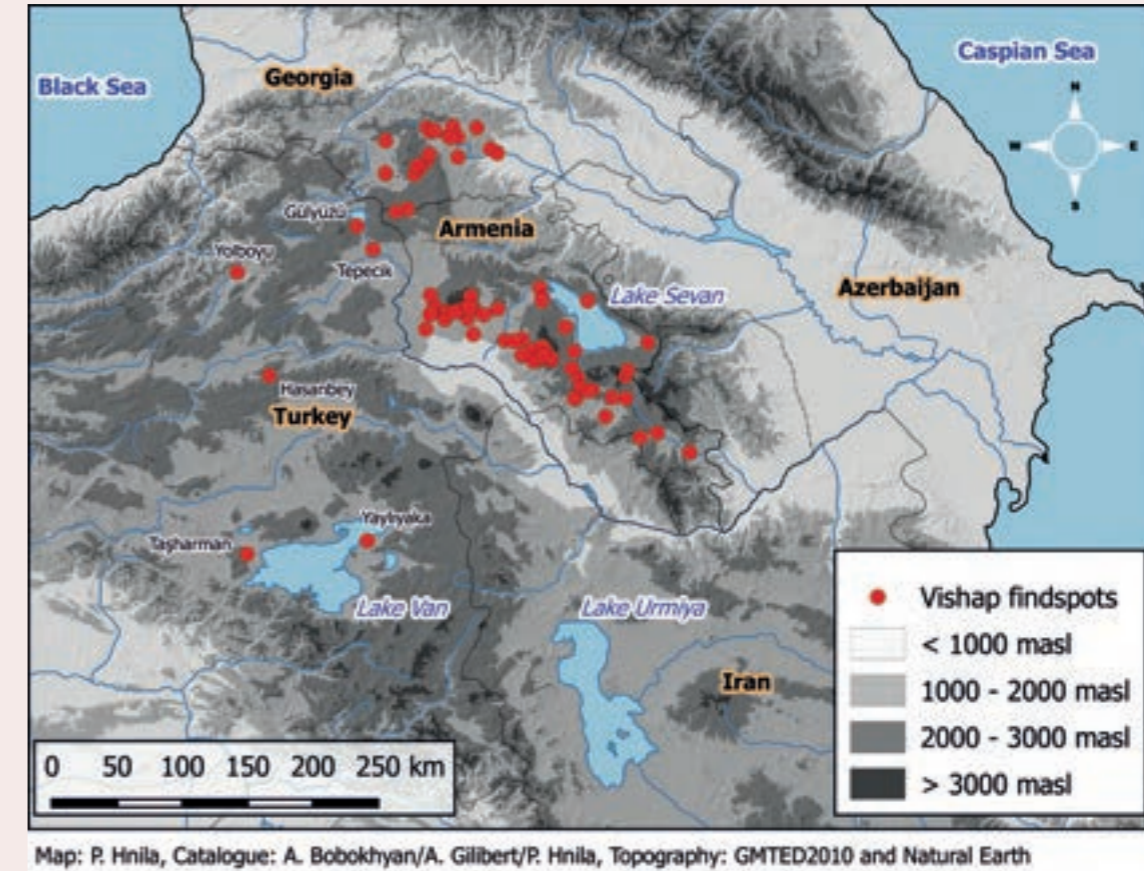


Fig. 1. Distribution of vishaps ('Vishap' project)

scale distribution pattern testifies to the existence of a symbolic and religious common background shared by social groups across the entire region at the time of their erection.

The most significant high altitude site with vishaps and related archaeological monuments is Tirinkatar (Armenian for “Height of the God Tir”). It is an over 370 ha vast archaeological site located on the southern slopes of Mt. Aragats, at an altitude of ca. 2700-3100 m above sea level (Fig. 3-5). Also known by local pastoralist communities as “Karmir Sar” (Armenian for “Red Hill”), it is a stunning summer pasture, rich in grass and water, with spectacular views both of the Mt. Aragats peak and Mt. Ararat.

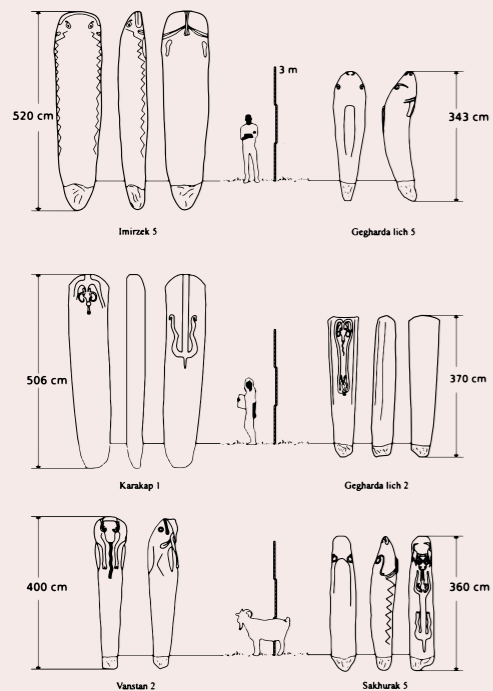


Fig. 2. Typology of vishaps ('Vishap' project)

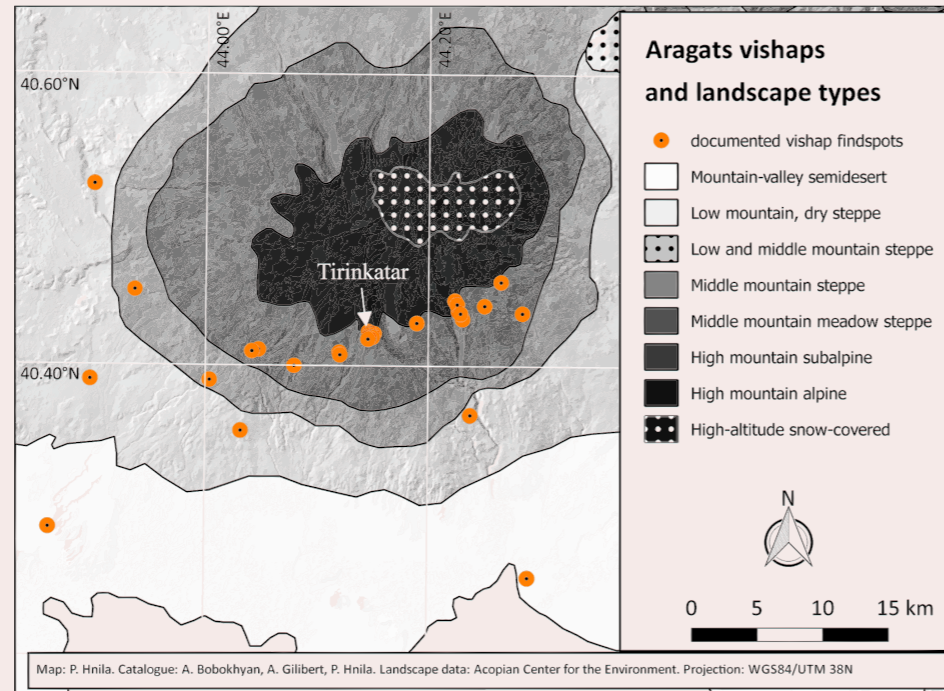


Fig. 3. Aragats vishaps and landscape types ('Vishap' project)

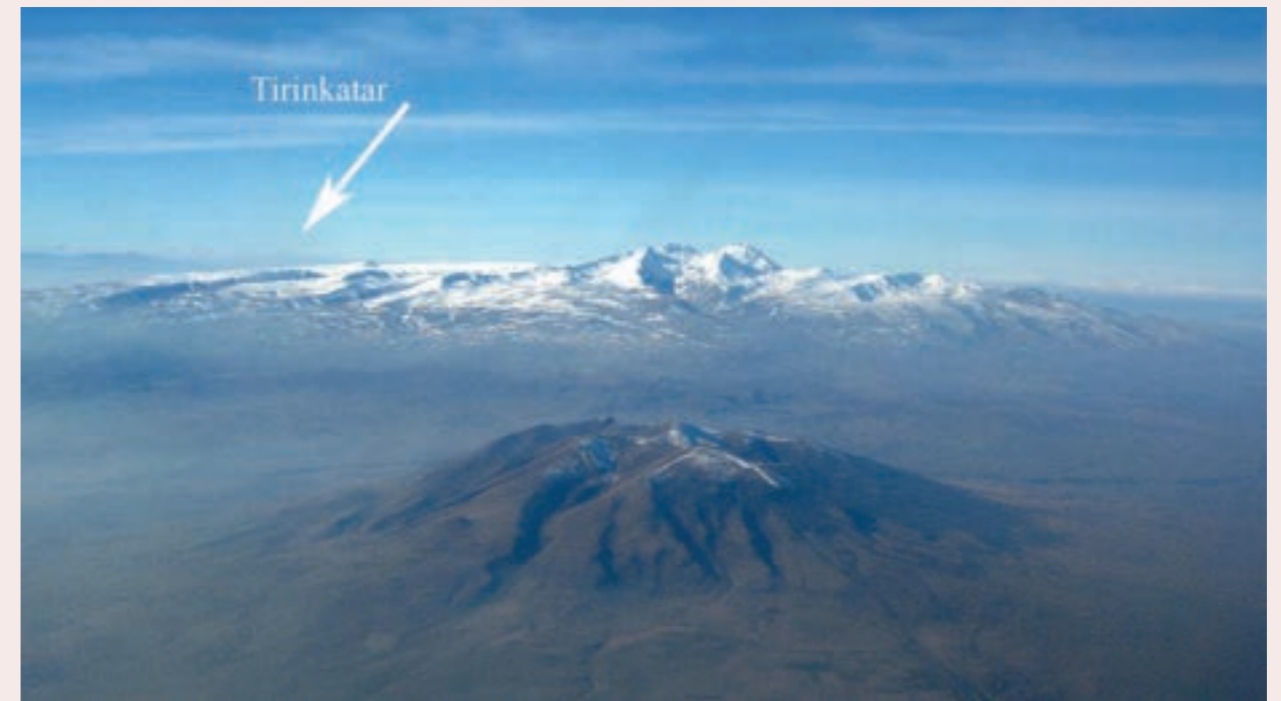


Fig. 4. Location of Tirinkatar ('Vishap' project)

The archaeological site as such was unknown to the scientific community until recent years, although the surrounding area is mentioned already a century ago by Armenian archaeologists Ashkharbek Kalantar and Grigor Kapantsyan. In their studies of prehistoric water management systems on Mt. Aragats, they highlighted the importance of “Twelve canals” situated immediately east of Tirinkatar, within the gorge of the river Amberd to divert the river water to foothill villages and their summer pastures (Fig. 11). Neither of the two early authors appears to have been aware of the existence of the archaeological site itself, located just above the source of this canal system. In the foothill town of Ashtarak, however, Kapantsyan did hear and record stories about a certain “Maiden’s Sanctuary” which appears in those legends as a sacred place connected with the Armenian deity Ara. Kapantsyan was told that at the site there was “a stone throne with stone chairs,” and other stone images. Today we know that the “Maiden’s Sanctuary” is part of the wider archaeological site of Tirinkatar, first documented by the Armenian-Italian-German team in 2012.

Since that year, systematic surveys and excavations have been carried out in the site by the expedition directed by Arsen Bobokhyan (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia), Pavol Hnila (Free University of Berlin) and Alessandra Gilibert (Ca’ Foscari University of Venice). Archaeological data collected from excavated contexts indicate that Tirinkatar was visited and used for campsite activities at least from the Neolithic period, i.e. from the end of the 6th millennium BC onwards. At least since the Chalcolithic period, around 4000 BC, the site was also used for cultic purposes, which were centred on a variety of megalithic monuments, including an extraordinary number of vishaps. During the 3rd to the end of the 2nd millennia BC, other archaeological features were added, including large aggregated cell structures, circular stone structures commonly termed “cromlechs”, circular structures with a stone filling and an inner stone chamber, commonly termed “giant’s houses”, as well as barrows and petroglyphs (Fig. 6-13). In addition to the archaeological monuments, there are also modern loci of religious activities and cult, such as the “Maiden’s Sanctuary”, fields of



Fig. 5. Cultural landscape of Tirinkatar ('Vishap' project)

“dream stones” (tower-like structures constructed by dry stacking of stones and made by people of faith for the purpose of fulfilling their wishes) tombs, etc. (Fig. 14).

Justification of outstanding universal value

Vishaps are the earliest examples of figurative monumental art in the Caucasus region. They are elaborated on four sides and therefore can also be considered one of the earliest examples of monumental statues in the world. The uniqueness of these monuments is also revealed in their geographical location and iconography, which are very specific and do not have parallels in the ancient world. Vishaps also represent one of the earliest manifestations of organized and complex cult.

The site of Tirinkatar contains the largest accumulation of vishaps (12 statues), being one of the highest archaeological complexes known in the world. It is an exceptional manifestation of early seasonal settlement and domestication of a high mountainous area, as well as of an organized and constantly evolving cultural landscape, a living palimpsest and material

archive of millennia of collective spiritual practices. Similar high altitude archaeological sites in other parts of the world are known from the Andes and Himalayas and are dated back from the Late Bronze Age to the Medieval period (e.g. Machu Picchu, Tiwanaku, Chavin de Huantar), while Tirinkatar was used as early as the Neolithic period (6th millennium BC), gradually turning into a major cult center during the Chalcolithic period (end of 5th millennium BC) and into a pastoralist and funerary center during the Bronze Age (3rd and 2nd millennia BC).

The archaeological site clusters around the vishaps, together with other archaeological features as ritual platforms, giant’s houses, cromlechs, petroglyphs, etc., represent one of the earliest and unique cultic systems typical for the Armenian Highland (Fig. 8-13). The complex of Tirinkatar demonstrates how religious practice and so the management of collective memory influenced the formation of early identities and became one of the primary means for uniting communities and organizing the economy (irrigation, herding, seasonal migrations). It is not an accident, that the largest accumulation of vishaps ever found at a single site is documented just at Tirinkatar, indicating that the site was the main cult center of the corresponding society.

The outstanding universal value of the site further lies in the fact that it epitomizes one of the earliest monumental art, earliest cult places, and earliest remains of seasonal pastoralism in the high mountains – not only for the South Caucasus but far beyond. The exceptionally high density of archaeological features still preserved on the surface reveals continuity of human activities over millennia and thus the existence of a rich cultural landscape in the high mountains – a zone that archaeology has only recently discovered and that remains were globally underexplored.

Moreover, Tirinkatar is still a living place of pilgrimage and wonderful case for ethnoarchaeological investigation (for ethnographic units cf. Fig. 14). At the highest point of the site, on top of a red pumice hill, is situated the “Maiden’s Sanctuary”, built on a prehistoric megalithic structure and surrounded by memorial pillars and graves. It is regularly visited by pilgrims of different faiths, and stands out as a unique example of shared sacred site, where multiple religious communities have created a locus of encounter. There, both the Christian Armenians and Yazidis come to say prayers and perform archaic rituals and sacrifice, bringing people together through sharing space



Fig. 6. An example of a vellus vishap: Tirinkatar no. 8 ('Vishap' project)

for diverse devotional practices in mutual respect. Compellingly, these devotional practices sometimes also involve the vishaps and other prehistoric megalithic structures.

In addition to the rituals that are still being performed in the area, people are also engaged in seasonal animal husbandry, just like in prehistoric times. In this sense, Tirinkatar represents an outstanding and pristine environment that has preserved the cultural memory of thousands of years.

Criteria met

What are those criteria, which underline the importance of vishaps and the sacred landscape of Tirinkatar from the point of word archaeology?

Criterion (i): Vishaps are monumental stone stela, which are exceptional among the statues of the ancient world because of their dating and specific iconography. They



represent masterpieces of early human creative imagination, performed with a high technical level and expressiveness. The creation of these monuments indicates the existence of a developed belief system and infrastructure, the ability to organize the work in large human groups, which jointly contributed to the revealing and expression of the creative genius of the corresponding society.

Criterion (ii): The Tirinkatar complex is a unique testimony of the settlement and domestication of high mountainous areas in the prehistoric period and of the gradual formation of an organized cultural landscape and monumental art. It demonstrates how religious practice influenced the shaping of early identities and became one of the primary means for uniting communities and organizing the economy (e.g. irrigation, herding), creating the prerequisites for the emergence of early complex societies in the region. The largest accumulation of monumental stela called vishaps is documented just at Tirinkatar, indicating that the site was the main religious/cultic center of the corresponding society.

Criterion (iii): The vishaps of Tirinkatar and the archaeological monuments related to them represent an exceptional prehistoric cultural tradition with roots in early agricultural societies, which is documented only in modern Armenia, and partly in Southern Georgia and Eastern Turkey, regions which made up a common cultural zone in prehistory. That tradition occupied such a fundamental place in the life of the corresponding society, that it likely spread from the Aragats region throughout the highlands, forming a unified spiritual and cultural oikoumene. Although that cultural tradition no longer continues physically (archaeological data and radiocarbon chronology hint on Early Iron Age, ca. 1200-1000 BC as the end of the prehistoric cult), its physical remains survived and were variously interpreted and interacted with in Medieval times, with echoes that can still be traced among the local population.



Fig. 7. An example of a piscis vishap: Tirinkatar no. 6 ('Vishap' project)

Criterion (vi): As thousands of years ago, nowadays Tirinkatar is still a sacred place, where people make pilgrimages to say prayers and perform rituals, as well as celebrate folk festivals. People still have respect towards vishaps and giant's houses, considering the latter as "saints' graves", next to and on top of which "dream stones" are often built and new shrines, such as the "Maiden's Sanctuary" – the main holy place of the site. In the meantime they tell folk stories about vishaps and giants. From this point of view Tirinkatar is a unique site demonstrating the *longue durée* of human impact within the same sacred area.

Statements of authenticity and integrity

Authenticity. The authenticity of the outstanding universal value of the vishaps and the cultural landscape of Tirinkatar is confirmed by multidisciplinary and international archaeological study, as well as by rich archival and ethnographic data.

The frequentation of the site during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods (from the end of the 6th to the end of the 5th millennia BC) is confirmed by archaeological excavations. Artefacts typical of that period were discovered in the context of vishaps, as well as 13 out of ca. 50 radiocarbon dates are available, which suggest the mentioned dating.

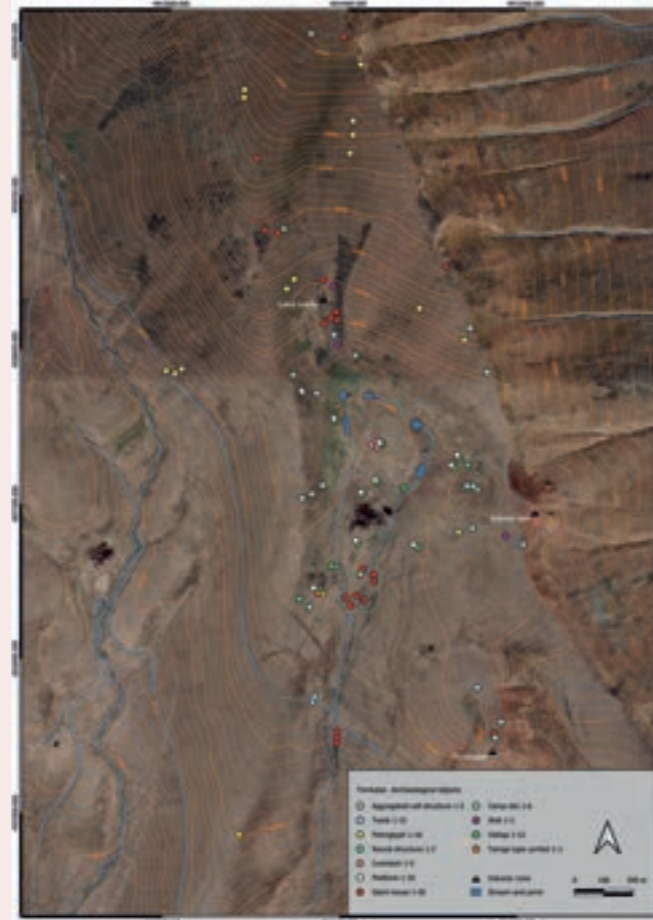


Fig. 8. Archaeological sites at Tirinkatar cultural landscape ('Vishap' project)



Fig. 9. Tirinkatar Giant Houses no. 5-8 ('Vishap' project)

The originality of the physical features of vishaps and their utilization during the prehistoric times are also confirmed by excavations and radiocarbon dates. Vishaps were unearthed in their original context, in situ, accompanied by dateable artefacts (e.g. pottery and obsidian) as well as organic remains (e.g. charcoal and bone), which suggest the final 5th millenium BC as the period of their construction, with reuse in the 3rd and during the 2nd millennia BC. To date, eight vishaps have been excavated and recorded in detailed and multidisciplinary studies (zooarchaeological, archaeobotanical, geological, chemical, etc.), also documented in databases, maps and drawings. The vishaps of Tirinkatar and the types of monuments associated with them were also observed in a broader cultural context



Fig. 10. Tirinkatar Tomb no. 7 ('Vishap' project)

and subjected to a comparative examination with similar monuments of the region and the world, to consider the issue of their dating, cultural affiliation and function in a wider context.

A large bibliographical and archival record also attests the authenticity of the site. Notes and descriptions about the vishaps and the surroundings of the site Tirinkatar have been preserved in the works of the 19th-20th centuries travelers and researchers. On the other hand, numerous local legends, fairy tales, songs, magical prayers and riddles reflect various aspects of the vishap worship. In addition to archival and folklore materials, dozens of scientific articles and volumes have been published, which discuss various aspects concerning the vishaps and the archaeological cluster of Tirinkatar.

The authenticity of the sacred nature of the site is not only evident in the exceptional



Fig. 11. Tirinkatar irrigation system no. 1, the so called '12 canals' ('Vishap' project)

density of symbolic prehistoric megalithic structures but is reflected also through the living tradition. Currently, Tirinkatar is a place of pilgrimage, where both Armenians and Yazidis come to say prayers and perform rituals in the environment shaped by archaeological monuments. Recent sanctuaries and monuments of cult significance such as "Maiden's Sanctuary" and the "dream stones" are constructed next to or directly on top of the ancient monuments (such as giant's houses).

Due to its high altitude location, the site is exceptionally well preserved, with minimal contemporary disturbances. No restoration works have been carried out. The original appearance of the landscape with its archaeological monuments has not been damaged or changed in recent times. Some of the vishaps have been secondarily reused for different purposes in prehistoric and in Medieval times, yet these ancient interactions express the multifaceted history of the site.

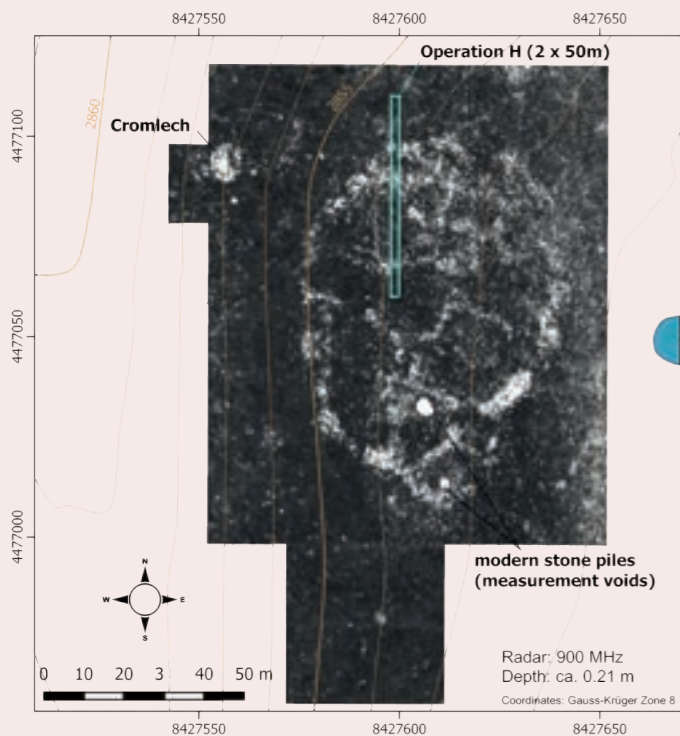


Fig. 12. Tirinkatar aggregated cell structure no. 1: green - excavated area ('Vishap' project)

Integrity. The cultural landscape of Tirinkatar contains all the elements that express its outstanding universal value. These include vishaps and ritual platforms associated with them, giant's houses, cromlechs, petroglyphs, prehistoric settlements and camp sites, barrows, as well as structures of modern period ("Maiden's Sanctuary", "dream stones", tombs, etc.), which reflect the permanence of corresponding perceptions and practices.

The archaeological cluster is large enough (ca. 370 ha) to fully express the functions and processes that represent its outstanding universal value. It does not suffer from unfavorable circumstances of the events in the area. Most of the monuments have a good degree of preservation.

The site is registered as a historical-cultural monument and is under the protection of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport of the Republic of Armenia, as well as of local authorities

Comparison with other similar properties. The vishaps and the archaeological complex of Tirinkatar in terms of geographical location, types of monuments, dating and interrelationships have no direct parallels among the properties included in the World Heritage List. This is especially true of vishaps, which are unique among the prehistoric stone stelae of the entire Eurasia due to their representations of animal imagery and their likely dedication to the cult of water.



Fig. 13. Tirinkatar rock-carving no. 13 ('Vishap' project)

However, there are properties that contain partial similarities with the site in terms of location and types of the monuments. Among these properties are the Bronze and Iron Age "deer stones" from Mongolia (Dossier: 1621 rev), which, similar to the vishaps, are monumental stone stelae endowed with zoomorphic and symbolic iconography, positioned on flat meadows and representing local points of sacred landscapes. The other such properties are the petroglyphs of Tanbaly, Kazakhstan (Dossier: 1145), Altai, Mongolia (Dossier: 1382) and Hail, Saudi Arabia (Dossier: 1472), which, similar to petroglyphs of Tirinkatar, depict anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures, various scenes of domestic and symbolic nature. From the point of view of megalithic architecture, the Bronze Age burials of Sammallahdenmäki, Finland (Dossier: 579 rev) and Bat, Al-Khutm and Al-Ayn, Oman (Dossier: 434) reflect some commonalities with burials and giant's houses of Tirinkatar.

In terms of location in the high-mountainous isolated areas the complex of Tirinkatar can be compared with the Historic Sanctuary of Machu Picchu (Dossier: 274), the city of Tiwanaku (Dossier: 567 rev), the archaeological site of Chavín (Dossier: 330), however these

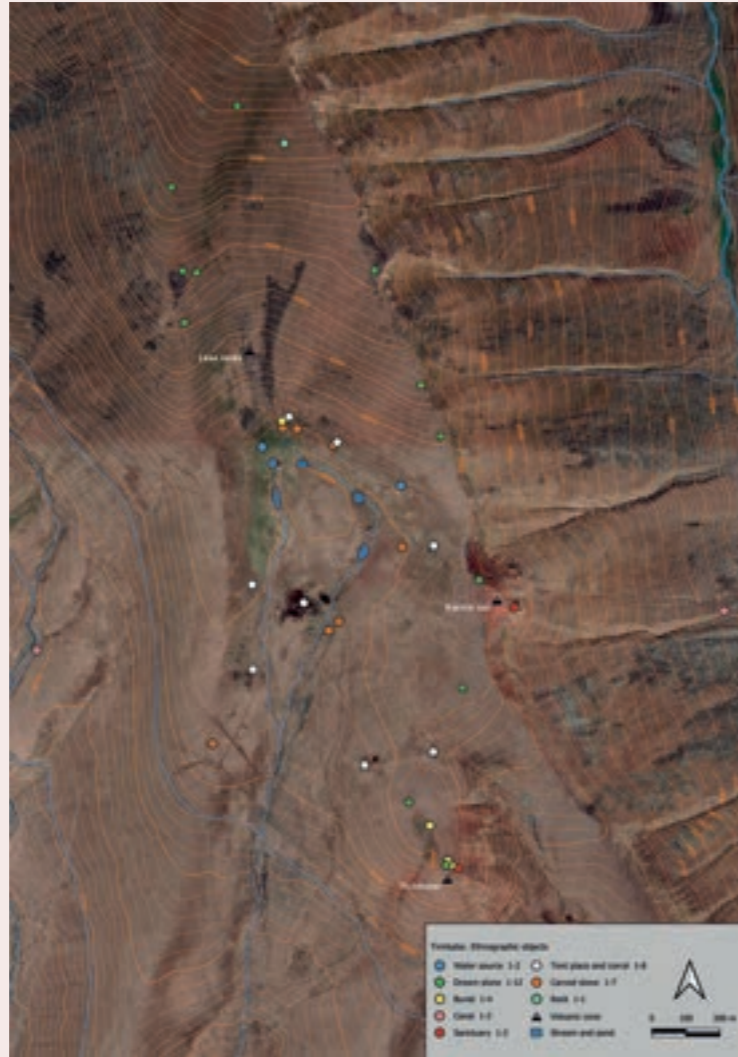


Fig. 14. Ethnographical objects of the Tirinkatar cultural landscape ('Vishap' project)

sites significantly differ from Tirinkatar in terms of their architecture, chronology and function.

In general, some of the types of monuments of the Tirinkatar cluster (such as camps, petroglyphs, burials, etc.) are known separately in different parts of the world, however as an interconnected cultural landscape, especially with vishaps as central monuments, they appear only in Tirinkatar. This indeed makes the site an exceptional

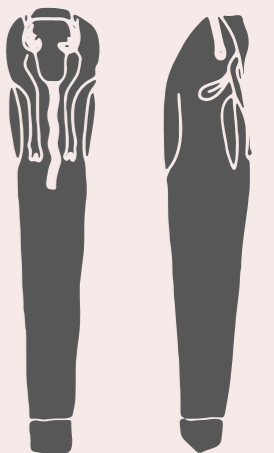
paradigm demonstrating the full process of organization of a prehistoric religious/cultic system as well as its social order and economy. Tirinkatar is a place where ancient and modern traditions meet to shape a real feeling of continuous sacred landscape.

Acknowledgements

We express our gratitude to the National Academy of Sciences of Republic of Armenia and Higher Education and Science Committee of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport of the Republic of Armenia (grant no. 21AG-6A080), the Ca' Foscari University Venice as well as the Freie Universität Berlin for co-financing the investigation of vishaps. Our special thanks goes to the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport of the Republic of Armenia for support in preparation of Tirinkatar archaeological site for submission to the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List, and particularly Mr. Harutyun Vanyan, Mr. Khachik Harutiunyan and Ms. Mariam Shakhmuradyan for undertaking the submission process.

Bibliography

- Bobokhyan A., Gilibert A., Hnila P. (eds.), *Vishap between Fairy Tale and Reality*, Yerevan 2019 (in Armenian).
- Gilibert A., Bobokhyan A., Hnila P., *Dragon Stones in Context: The Discovery of High-Altitude Burial Grounds with Sculpted Stelae in the Armenian Mountains*, *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft* 144, 2012, 93-132.
- Hnila P., Gilibert A., Bobokhyan A., *Prehistoric Sacred Landscapes in the High Mountains: The Case of the Vishap Stelae between Taurus and Caucasus*, in: Engels B., Huy S., Steitler Ch. (Hrsg.), *Natur und Kult in Anatolien*, *BYZAS 24: Veröffentlichungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Istanbul*, Istanbul, 2019, 283-302.
- Kalantar A., *Mount Aragats in History*, Yerevan 1933 (in Armenian).
- Kapantsyan G., *On Stone Stelae in the Mountains of Armenia*, Yerevan, 1952 (in Russian).
- Marr N.J., Smirnov Y.I., *Les vichaps*, Leningrad, 1931.
- Petrosyan A., Bobokhyan A. (eds.), *Vishap Stone Stelae*, Yerevan, 2015 (in Armenian).
- Piotrovskiy B.B., *The Vishaps: Stone Statues in the Armenian Mountains*, Leningrad 1939 (in Russian).



CONTENTS

FOREWORD	3
PREFACE	4
ARMENIAN PROPERTIES ON THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST	
HAGHPAT AND SANAHIN MONASTERIES	
Khachik Harutyunyan	8
CATHEDRAL AND CHURCHES OF ETCHMIADZIN AND ZVARTNOTS	
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE	
Khachik Harutyunyan	30
GEGHARD MONASTERY AND UPPER AZAT VALLEY	
Khachik Harutyunyan	58
ARMENIAN PROPERTIES ON THE TENTATIVE LIST	
MONASTERY OF NORAVANK	
Karen Matevosyan	70
THE EARLY CHRISTIAN AND MEDIEVAL SITE OF YERERUYK	
Patrick Donabédian	84
THE MONASTERY OF TATEV AND THE HOMONYMOUS HERMITAGES	
Arsen Harutyunyan	100
THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF THE CITY OF DVIN	
Dvin Archaeological Expedition	118
THE VISHAPS AND THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF TIRINKATAR	
Arsen Bobokhyan, Alessandra Gilibert, Pavol Hnila	132



WORLD HERITAGE SITES IN ARMENIA

Edited by Khachik A. Harutyunyan

Graphic design, page layout and editing of photos: Anahit Khanzadyan

“Hushardzan” Publishers, 1/3 Pavstos Buzand str., Yerevan, Armenia.

Email: armheritage@gmail.com, info@armheritage.am

Printed in “Antares” Publishing House

Circulation 1000 copies

ISBN 978-9939-9087-3-1



9 789939 908731