

Silent Sentinels Unveiling the Stories of Armenian Tombstones in Iran

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Abstract Armenian tombstones across Iran act as ‘silent sentinels’ reflecting the long history and cultural continuity of Armenian communities. This study examines their significance through historical and descriptive analysis, using photographic data from Salmast Heritage Association expeditions, the RAA archive, Google Maps, and scholarly sources. It highlights regional typologies – horizontal blocks, slabs, vertical and ram-shaped forms – distinct from traditional Khachkars. Motifs reveal religious symbols, gender roles, and social identity. The research also addresses modern shifts and preservation challenges, emphasizing these monuments as key expressions of Armenian identity and resilience.

Keywords Rectangular Block Tombstones. Slab Tombstones. Combined Tombstones. Tombstone Symbols. Arevakhach. Tree of Life. Cross. Ram. Preservation Challenges.

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1 Introduction

This scholarly exploration, delves into the rich cultural and historical significance of Armenian funerary monuments within Iran, recognizing the Armenian presence as a historical continuum stretching from antiquity to the present day. Throughout this extensive period, Armenian settlement patterns evolved significantly: northwestern Iran, historically intertwined with or part of Greater Armenia, hosted Armenian communities from much earlier times, while central regions, notably Isfahan and its New Julfa district, gained particular prominence during the Safavid period following the forced relocation of Armenians by Shah Abbas I. Established over centuries across these distinct regions, Armenian cemeteries house tombstones that serve as compelling testaments to an enduring legacy and vital artifacts narrating the intricate story of this community, both in its ancient heartlands and areas of later, often involuntary, settlement. These monuments are especially crucial as tangible evidence where Armenian populations have dwindled or vanished. With unique architectural styles (categorized primarily as horizontal, vertical, and combined) and intricate decorative motifs reflecting a blend of local customs and broader Iranian, Islamic, and Central Asian influences, these tombstones stand as silent witnesses to a deep intertwining of Armenian and Persian cultures, shaped by fluctuating socio-political dynamics and reflecting the beliefs and values of the deceased and their community. This paper aims to unveil the stories etched in stone by examining the historical context, multifaceted symbolism, regional variations, stylistic evolution, and profound cultural significance of these memorials, thereby offering a deeper understanding of Armenian heritage, identity, resilience, and cultural continuity within the diverse landscape of Iran, while also acknowledging the significant preservation challenges these invaluable monuments face in the contemporary era.

2 Methodology

This study employs a descriptive and historical methodology, relying significantly on the analysis of photographic documentation gathered from diverse sources to investigate Armenian tombstones across different regions of Iran. For the northwestern region, particularly Salmas, primary visual data was obtained through two main channels. Firstly, extensive photographic materials were sourced from four expeditions conducted by the Salmast Heritage Association (SHA): two in June and July 2017, one in October 2017, and another in October 2018. The latter two expeditions were notably led by Professor Maurizio Boriani (Politecnico di Milano), and the fourth expedition

incorporated specialized aerial imaging, utilizing drones to capture high-resolution footage and photographs of Armenian monuments, villages, and cemeteries, contributing thousands of images that were subsequently categorized and archived. Secondly, this research utilized the photographic archive compiled by Samvel Karapetian and the Research on Armenian Architecture (RAA), specifically drawing upon their dedicated monograph featuring a comprehensive photographic survey of the Salmas region (Karapetian 2019). Visual documentation for Armenian cemeteries in Central Iran, including Tehran and Isfahan, was primarily sourced from publicly available photographs uploaded by users to Google Maps. These extensive photographic collections were supplemented and contextualized by information drawn from relevant published scholarly books and articles, as detailed in the bibliography. The methodology involved the comparative analysis of tombstone forms, motifs, and inscriptions captured in these visual sources, interpreted within the historical and cultural frameworks provided by the secondary literature.

3 Historical Context

The Armenian presence on the Iranian plateau has deep roots, dating back to times predating the formal establishment of Greater Armenia, with historical accounts and inscriptions documenting Armenians as inhabitants across various Persian empires, including the Achaemenid, Arsacid, and Sasanian dynasties. This enduring presence over millennia signifies a deeply rooted history unfolding through numerous political transformations. Prior to the third century AD, Iranian influence on Armenian culture was substantial, often marked by intermarriages among nobility and shared religious practices. However, significant shifts occurred with Armenia's conversion to Christianity in the fourth century and the subsequent Arab conquests, which gradually distanced Armenian communities from some aspects of Iranian socio-religious life (Hovannisian 2022).

The primary areas of Armenian settlement in Iran can be broadly categorized into two main regions, each with distinct historical trajectories. The northwest of Iran, encompassing areas historically part of Greater Armenia (including regions like Nor Shirakan, Vaspurakan, and Paytakaran within Iranian Azerbaijan), boasts ancient roots and a continuous Armenian presence in cities such as Tabriz, Khoy, Urmia, Salmas, Maku, Ardabil, and Maragheh (Bournoutian 2002). Events like the Seljuk and Mongol invasions in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries spurred further Armenian migration into this northwestern area (Russell 2013), suggesting its tombstones may hold keys to understanding the earliest Armenian funerary traditions within Iran.

The second major area includes the Caspian, central, and southern regions of Iran. These settlements largely emerged later, gaining significant prominence from the Safavid era in the early seventeenth century onwards. This shift was driven primarily by the large-scale forced relocation of Armenians from the Ottoman borderlands under Shah Abbas I, who moved many to central Iran, particularly establishing the New Julfa quarter adjacent to Isfahan (Hovannisian 2022; Bournoutian 2002). This policy, while coercive, led to the flourishing of communities like New Julfa, which played a vital role in trade, connecting Iran with European and Asian markets, and fostered a unique cultural synthesis within the Persian context (Aslanian 2011). Other Armenian settlements subsequently developed in cities like Tehran, Arak, and Shiraz, and regions such as Gilan and Mazandaran.

The political landscape continued to evolve, significantly impacting Armenian communities and their expressions of identity. The Pahlavi era (1921-78), marked by efforts towards national unity and westernization, influenced the architectural expression of memorial tombs, including those of Armenians, often resulting in a fusion of personal artistic approaches with broader national and global design trends (Yaghoubian 2014). By the twentieth century, Iran had become a crucial center for Armenian life in the Middle East, with a substantial population (~100,000 by the late nineteenth century) (Bournoutian 2002). Armenians, particularly those in Iranian Azerbaijan due to their proximity to Transcaucasia, became involved in regional political activities and played an integral role in broader Iranian socio-political events like the Constitutional Revolution (Bournoutian 2002).

However, recent centuries have witnessed a significant decline in Iran's Armenian population due to emigration (Iskandaryan 2019). Understanding these demographic shifts, alongside the long history of settlement, cultural synthesis, political influence, and regional distinctions - from the ancient communities of the northwest to the Safavid-era foundations in central Iran and the transformations of the twentieth century - provides the crucial context for interpreting the Armenian tombstones scattered across Iran. These silent sentinels narrate the rich, complex, and evolving history of their community within a land of diverse influences.

4 Evolution of Armenian Tombstones: From Prehistory to Khachkars

To understand the forms and significance of Armenian tombstones, including those found in Iran, it is helpful to briefly trace the long evolution of memorial stone traditions within the Armenian Highlands. The practice dates back to deep antiquity, with early precursors potentially seen in megalithic standing stone arrangements like Carahunge. More distinctively Armenian are the monumental basalt stelae known as *Vishapakars* (dragon stones), often associated with water sources and bearing unique, pre-Christian carvings (Petrosyan 2015).

Later, during the Iron Age, particularly within the Kingdom of Urartu (ninth-sixth centuries BCE) which encompassed parts of the Armenian Highlands, inscribed stelae served various commemorative and declarative purposes. These Urartian stelae represent a continuation of monumental stone carving traditions in the region (Zimansky 1985) [fig. 1].



Figure 1 Unknown author, Zorats Karer; Vishap stone (Metsamor); Urtian stela (Zvartnots). n.d. Stone monuments. Armenia. Wikipedia, public domain

With Armenia's adoption of Christianity as its state religion in the early fourth century CE, a profound transformation in memorial art began, although it occurred gradually. Early Christian funerary monuments often continued the established tradition of upright stelae, initially bearing similarities in form to their Urartian predecessors. A fascinating testament to this transitional period is the existence of repurposed Urartian stelae, where simple Christian crosses were carved directly onto the older stone, sometimes alongside visible remnants of the original cuneiform script (Rojas 2023) [fig. 2].



Figure 2 Felipe Rojas, Urartian stelae with Christian crosses. n.d. Stone carvings. Unknown location. Felipe Rojas, copyright

This practice of incorporating the cross marked the crucial step in adapting existing monumental traditions to the new Christian faith. Over the following centuries, this fusion of the stela form with increasingly elaborate Christian symbolism, centered on the cross, evolved into the uniquely Armenian Khachkar (cross-stone). Khachkars, characterized by their intricate carvings of crosses often surrounded by geometric and vegetal motifs, became the quintessential Armenian Christian memorial monument within the historical homeland, serving funerary, dedicatory, and commemorative roles (Mkhitaryan, Avedian 2022) [fig. 3].



Figure 3 Author, Evolution from Urartian stela to khachkar. n.d. Diagram.
Author's collection. Author, copyright

However, while the Khachkar represents the pinnacle of this evolution in Armenia itself, this form is notably less prevalent among the surviving Armenian tombstones within Iran. The Armenian communities in Iran, shaped by distinct historical timelines, regional influences, and migration patterns, developed their own characteristic funerary expressions. As we will explore next, many existing tombstones, particularly in the older settlements of northwestern Iran, often take the form of simpler horizontal slabs, cage-like structures, or rectangular blocks, representing a significant stream within the broader Armenian memorial heritage that warrants specific investigation and categorization.

5 General Classification of Armenian Tombstones in Iran

Before examining the specific tombstone morphologies prevalent in northwestern Iran, it is useful to establish a broader classification of Armenian funerary monuments found across various regions of the country. Generally, these structures can be categorized into three main types based on their orientation and composition: Horizontal, Vertical, and Combined.

- 5.1. **Horizontal Tombstones:** These monuments lie flat over the grave. This broad category includes two principal forms based on their mass and typical location:
 - 5.1.1. The substantial, solid rectangular blocks, which, as will be detailed in the following section, are particularly characteristic of the older Armenian settlements in northwestern Iran [fig. 4].
 - 5.1.2. Thinner, slab-shaped stones, which have significantly less depth compared to the blocks and are more commonly found in the Armenian cemeteries of central Iran, such as those associated with New Julfa (Isfahan) and its surrounding villages [fig. 5].
- 5.2. **Vertical Tombstones:** These consist of single, upright stone slabs erected at the grave site. While varying in complexity, they typically feature a carved cross as a central element, distinguishing them as Christian memorials, though often differing in style and intricacy from the traditional Khachkars of Armenia [fig. 6].
- 5.3. **Combined Tombstones:** This type integrates both horizontal and vertical components. It usually features a horizontal element (which could be either a block or a slab) lying flat, primarily serving as the bearer of inscriptions like names and dates. Rising from this base is a vertical slab, typically adorned with a cross and potentially other symbolic motifs. Intriguingly, this composite structure might be interpreted as a possible continuation or adaptation of ancient memorial traditions, perhaps echoing the form of Urartian stelae which sometimes combined inscribed bases with symbolic upper sections [fig. 7].

Having established this general typology, we can now proceed to a more detailed examination of these forms, beginning with the variations of the rectangular block tombstones that dominate the funerary landscape of northwestern Iran.



Figure 4 SHA Archive, Surp Gevorg Cemetery (Malham) and Payajouk Cemetery. n.d. Photographs. Salmast, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright



Figure 5 Unknown author, Slab-shaped tombstones at Armenian cemetery. n.d. Stone tombstones



Figure 6 SHA Archive, Vertical tombstones at Malham Cemetery.
n.d. Photographs. Salmast, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright



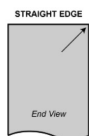
Figure 7 SHA Archive, Combined tombstones (Payajouk and Malham).
n.d. Photographs. Salmast, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

6 Typology of Armenian Tombstone Forms in Northwestern Iran

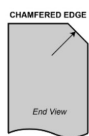
While the evolution of Armenian memorial art in the homeland culminated in the Khachkar, the funerary landscape of Armenian communities within Iran, particularly in the historically significant settlements of the northwest, developed distinct characteristics. Based on observations, especially in regions like Salmas, the predominant tombstone forms are not the vertical Khachkars, but rather horizontal stone blocks (Sadeghi, Javanmardzadeh 2022). These can be primarily categorized as follows:

- 6.1. **The Rectangular Block Tombstone:** this is the most common type observed in the specified region. It consists of a solid, horizontally oriented rectangular prism of stone. This fundamental shape exhibits several variations based on the treatment of its top edges:
 - 6.3.1. **Rectangular block with straight edges:** the simplest form, characterized by clean, right-angled edges along the top perimeter.
 - 6.3.2. **Rectangular block with chamfered edges:** features edges that are cut at an angle, creating a sloped transition rather than a sharp corner.
 - 6.3.3. **Rectangular block with rounded edges:** displays smoothly curved or bullnose edges instead of angular ones.
- 6.2. **Rectangular block with a beveled edge:** characterized by a distinct sloping surface along one or more top edges, potentially related to mounting, placement, or specific aesthetic traditions [fig. 8].
- 6.3. **The Cradle-shaped Tombstone (Օրորոտ - Ororots):** distinct from the flat-topped rectangular blocks is a form known in Armenian as Օրորոտ (Ororots), meaning 'cradle'. This type typically features a curved or gabled top surface, sometimes resembling a stylized cradle or sarcophagus lid. While numerous examples of the *Ororots* shape exist in major historical cemeteries within Armenia, such as the old Vagharshapat (Etchmiadzin) cemetery, this form appears significantly less frequently among the surviving tombstones in northwestern Iran compared to the various rectangular block types [fig. 9].

Therefore, the rectangular block tombstone, particularly with its variations in edge finishing, stands out as the most characteristic morphology for the Armenian funerary monuments historically established in northwestern Iran, especially noted in the Salmas region.



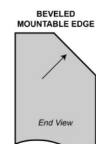
Salmast - Malham - 1880



Salmast - Khosrova - 1896



Salmast - Ghalasar - 1953



Salmast - Payajouk

Figure 8 SHA Archive, Rectangular block tombstones. n.d. Photographs. Iran. SHA Archive, copyright



Figure 9 Author; RAA Archive, Cradle-shaped tombstone (Ororots), n.d. Stone tombstones. Vagharshapat, Armenia; Haftvan, Salmast, Iran. Author / RAA Archive, copyright

7 Ram-shaped Tombstones: A Caucasus Tradition

Beyond the rectangular blocks and the less common *Ororots* forms predominantly discussed thus far, another highly distinctive type of funerary monument is found at Armenian gravesites, particularly in northwestern Iran: the Ram-shaped Tombstone. These remarkable monuments consist of stone skillfully carved, either fully or partially, into the figure of a ram. It is crucial to note that this tradition is not uniquely or exclusively Armenian. Instead, ram-shaped funerary markers are a well-documented phenomenon across the wider Caucasus region, utilized by various ethnic and cultural groups inhabiting the area over centuries (Aghdam, Hajizadeh 2020). Their presence among Armenian graves in northwestern Iran points towards shared historical customs, regional artistic dialogues, or influences prevalent in this geographically interconnected zone (Aghdam et al. 2022). While characteristic of the northwestern regions bordering the Caucasus, these ram figures appear to be significantly less common, or perhaps largely absent, among the known Armenian burial grounds in Central Iran, such as those in Isfahan. This apparent geographical distinction suggests notable regional variations in funerary practices within the broader Iranian Armenian community. These unique zoomorphic monuments add another fascinating layer to the typology of Armenian memorial stones in Iran [fig. 10].

Having outlined the principal structural forms encountered – ranging from horizontal blocks and slabs to vertical markers, combined types, and these culturally specific ram figures – the focus of the analysis will shift to the rich visual language expressed through the motifs and symbols carved onto the surfaces of these diverse tombstone types.



Figure 10 Adriano Alpago Novello; RAA Archive, Ram-shaped tombstones. n.d.
Stone sculptures. Iran. Novello / RAA Archive, copyright

8 Motifs and Symbols on Armenian Tombstones in Iran

Beyond their structural forms, Armenian tombstones in Iran are rich repositories of visual language, conveyed through a diverse array of carved motifs and symbols. These decorations provide insights into the beliefs, identities, and lives of the individuals commemorated. While inscriptions offer textual information, these symbols could also have served as important visual cues for identification, particularly in times or communities where literacy was not universal. These motifs can be broadly categorized into three distinct groups: foundational symbols, gender-specific representations, and indicators of occupation or status.

8.1. **Foundational Symbols:** certain symbols carry deep, often ancient meanings related to faith and cosmology.

8.1.1. **The Cross:** as expected in a Christian context, the Cross is a prevalent symbol, appearing in various forms, signifying faith and salvation [fig. 11].

8.1.2. **The Arevakhach (Armenian Wheel of Eternity):** this ancient Armenian symbol, often resembling a swirling sun or wheel, is frequently found. Within Armenian culture, it powerfully represents the concepts of eternity, perpetual motion, life, death, and rebirth. While visually similar solar or wheel symbols exist in other cultures representing concepts like time, the cosmos, or the sun, the *Arevakhach* carries specific resonance within Armenian identity and spiritual

heritage, predating but also incorporated into Christian usage [fig. 12].

8.1.3. **The Tree of Life:** a symbol with near-universal reach, the Tree of Life appears on Armenian tombstones in Iran as well. Its interpretation is multifaceted, potentially evoking the Garden of Eden, serving as a cosmic axis connecting heaven, earth, and the underworld, or representing spiritual growth, knowledge, wisdom, and the continuity of life [fig. 13].

8.2. **Gender-Specific Representations:** many tombstones feature motifs intended to signify the gender of the deceased, often depicted in panels, sometimes noted as being near the base of the gravestone (Ghorbani, Rahmani unpublished).

8.1.4. **For Women:** common symbols include items associated with domestic life, personal grooming, or craft, such as scissors, combs (sometimes specified as double-edged), mirrors, or kohl-pins. Representations of weaving, like a carpet or a half-finished textile on a loom, also signify female identity and activity.

8.1.5. **For Men:** motifs often depict traditionally male roles, activities, or attributes, such as weapons, figures on horseback, or other scenes representing key aspects of their lives [fig. 14].

8.3. **Occupational and Status Indicators:** symbols and depictions were frequently used to denote the deceased's profession, craft, or social standing, offering a glimpse into their role within the community. Common examples include tools of a trade, such as scissors potentially indicating a tailor (distinct from the gendered use) or a gun for a hunter. Beyond tools, the depiction of specific attire or dress served as a clear indicator of status or role. For instance, Armenian clergy members depicted on their tombstones are often easily distinguishable by their characteristic clerical garments, clearly marking their position within the religious hierarchy and society (Jahanmard, Mohamadzade 2023) [fig. 15].

It is crucial to remember, as historian Marshall G.S. Hodgson suggested regarding symbols in general, that "In the course of history symbols live and change: once established in concrete form, they may move from context to context and be used to diverse ends" (Hodgson 1959). Over time, the original, deeply felt meaning of a symbol might fade or undergo "some sort of desacralization", eventually persisting merely as "sheer un-understood tradition" valued primarily for its "esthetic form" (Hodgson 1959). This perspective is vital when interpreting the motifs on older tombstones, acknowledging that

their meaning for the contemporary observer might differ from their significance to the community that created them.

The intricate symbols and motifs carved onto Armenian tombstones offer a profound, albeit sometimes historically layered, insight into the community's beliefs, identities, and lived experiences. While these individual decorations tell specific stories etched in stone, understanding these silent sentinels fully also requires considering the broader context of the sacred grounds where they are located. Armenian cemeteries in Iran served not only as exclusive resting places dedicated to preserving the memory of the Armenian community but also fulfilled a vital role within the wider landscape of Christianity in the region. Exploring this dimension reveals further complexities in the history and usage of these important sites, particularly regarding burial practices involving other Christian groups.

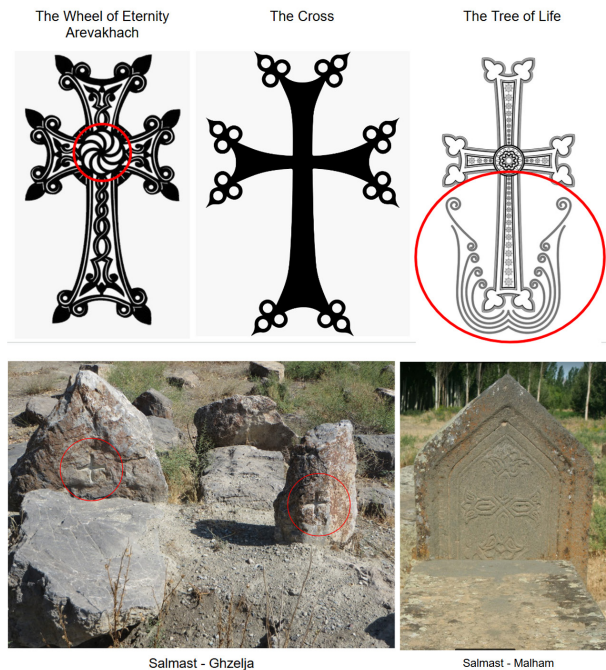


Figure 11 Author; SHA Archive, Cross motif on Armenian tombstones. n.d. Diagram and photographs. Iran. Author / SHA Archive, copyright



Figure 12 Author; RAA Archive; SHA Archive, Arevakhach (Wheel of Eternity). n.d. Diagram and photographs. Iran. Author / RAA / SHA, copyright



Figure 13 Author; various sources, Tree of Life motif. n.d. Diagram and photographs. Iran. Internet / Google Maps / SHA Archive, copyright

9 Christian Burial Practices Beyond the Armenian Community

Broadening the scope beyond the Armenian community itself, the historical context of Christian burial practices in Iran reveals an important role played by Armenian cemeteries. Throughout the centuries, non-Armenian Christians, particularly foreigners such as diplomats, merchants, missionaries, or travelers who died while in Iran, were typically interred in the established Christian cemeteries available. Given the prominent and long-standing presence of the Armenian Church, these cemeteries were often Armenian ones. Reflecting this practice, many Armenian cemeteries in Iran, both historic and contemporary, feature dedicated sections specifically designated for the burial of these foreigners [fig. 16]. Furthermore, in certain cases, perhaps depending on the individual's status or affiliation, burials were not confined to the general cemetery grounds but took place within the church building itself or in the adjacent church courtyard. Acknowledging this aspect adds another dimension to the understanding of Armenian cemeteries in Iran, highlighting their function as central Christian burial sites within the country and indicating the potential presence of diverse funerary traditions and memorial styles within these spaces.



Figure 16 Unknown author, Burial sections for foreigners (Polish and Russian). n.d. Memorials and tombstones. Dulab Cemetery, Tehran, Iran. Google Maps, copyright

10 The Shift to Urban Cemeteries in the Twentieth Century

The twentieth century marked a significant turning point for the Armenian community in Iran, driven largely by the country's modernization and industrialization efforts. This period witnessed a substantial internal migration as many Armenians moved from traditional rural villages, particularly in regions like Azerbaijan and the areas surrounding Isfahan, towards burgeoning urban centers such as Tehran, Isfahan, and Tabriz in search of new economic and social opportunities (Barry 2024).

A direct consequence of this demographic shift was the gradual decline and, in many cases, eventual abandonment of historical Armenian cemeteries located in the depopulating villages. These sites, while invaluable historical records, saw decreasing use. Concurrently, the Armenian cemeteries in the major cities experienced significant growth and increased importance, becoming central repositories of community memory and identity for the expanding urban populations [fig. 17].

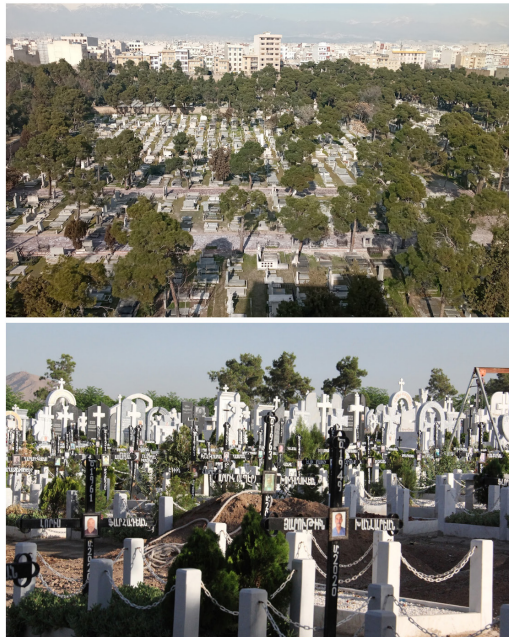


Figure 17 Unknown author, Urban Armenian cemeteries (Dulab and Nor Burastan). n.d. Photographs. Tehran, Iran. Google Maps, copyright

As Armenian communities in cities like Tehran thrived both economically and numerically, their cemeteries reflected this vitality. Alongside the continuation of traditional tombstone forms and motifs, new styles, materials, and artistic influences began to emerge, shaped by changing tastes, available resources, urban aesthetics, and evolving funerary art trends globally [fig. 18]. This resulted in a diverse, and sometimes eclectic, mix of memorial types within these modern urban burial grounds, standing alongside or replacing older traditions (Yavari, Ayvazian 2018) [fig. 19].

These thriving urban cemeteries, therefore, represent crucial sites for understanding not only the demographic shifts of the twentieth century but also the adaptation and evolution of Armenian funerary practices and artistic expression within the dynamic context of modern Iranian city life.



Figure 18 Author; Contemporary Armenian tombstones with traditional motifs.
n.d. Stone monuments. Iran. Google Maps, copyright



Figure 19 Unknown author, Eclectic tombstones at Nor Burastan Cemetery. n.d. Stone monuments. Tehran, Iran. Google Maps, copyright

11 Challenges and Preservation

The rich history and cultural heritage embodied by Armenian tombstones in Iran face threats, as evidenced by instances of destruction and vandalism. While the most extensively documented cases of large-scale destruction of Armenian cultural heritage, including tombstones, have occurred in regions outside of Iran, reports also indicate instances of damage and neglect within Iran itself (Short, Crispin, Baker 2017). For example, Tehran's historic Doulab Cemetery has reportedly suffered from neglect and vandalism. This vulnerability is particularly acute for cemeteries located in rural villages where Armenian communities have significantly diminished or disappeared entirely. Lacking local oversight, these remote sites are increasingly susceptible to specific threats like illicit treasure hunting and the plundering of stones for use as readily available construction materials [fig. 20]. While the systematic and widespread erasure witnessed in Nakhchivan may not have been replicated within Iran to the same degree, any instance of damage or neglect poses a threat to these invaluable cultural testimonies. The underlying causes often point to broader socio-political tensions or a lack of sufficient awareness and protective measures. The loss of these monuments has a profound impact on Armenian cultural heritage and collective memory. The destruction of tombstones not only eliminates physical evidence of the past but also severs a crucial link to the history and identity of the Armenian community, both within Iran and across the diaspora.



Figure 20 SHA Archive, Rural Armenian cemeteries (Payajouk and Malham). n.d.
Photographs. Salmast, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

12 Conclusion

Armenian tombstones in Iran serve as silent yet eloquent reflections of the enduring traditions, the evolving identity within the diaspora, and the cultural continuity of a people with a long and complex history in the region. These funerary monuments embody the persistence of religious, artistic, and cultural traditions brought by Armenians from their ancestral homeland. Key symbols such as the cross, the Arevakhach, and the Tree of Life continue to appear on these tombstones within the Iranian context, demonstrating a remarkable continuity of core cultural elements. Despite their status as a minority within Iran, Armenian communities have actively maintained their heritage, a fact clearly evident in the enduring symbols and

artistic styles found on their tombstones. Moreover, these funerary monuments reflect the adaptation and evolution of Armenian identity within the Iranian diaspora. They bear witness to the influences of Iranian culture and the unique experiences shaped by life in the diaspora. Events of historical significance, such as the Armenian Genocide and the Islamic Revolution in Iran, have also potentially left their imprint on funerary practices and memorialization. In essence, the tombstones serve as a tangible record of the Armenian community's journey within Iran, illustrating both the preservation of their core identity and their adaptation to the cultural and political landscape of their host country. Perhaps most poignantly, Armenian tombstones in abandoned or significantly diminished settlements across Iran stand as crucial historical records of communities that have undergone substantial change or even disappeared entirely. They are vital for understanding the historical geography and the rich cultural tapestry of Armenian presence throughout Iran, offering silent testimony to lives lived and communities that once thrived.

In conclusion, the Armenian tombstones scattered across Iran represent far more than mere burial markers. They are invaluable cultural artifacts that offer a profound window into the history, beliefs, artistic traditions, and evolving identity of Armenian communities within the Iranian context. From the ancient echoes potentially found in repurposed Urartian stelae to the intricate symbolism of Khachkars, the enigmatic Vishapakars, and the narrative details of gender and occupation, these silent sentinels tell a multifaceted story of endurance, adaptation, and cultural continuity. They stand as poignant reminders of a long-standing Armenian presence in Iran, offering crucial testimonies to communities that have shaped and been shaped by the Iranian landscape. Further research, particularly detailed regional studies focusing on specific tombstone styles and symbolism, comparative analyses with Armenian funerary art in other regions, and the application of modern digital technologies for preservation and analysis, holds the potential to further illuminate the rich narratives etched in these stones.

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