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Research paper

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REVERENCE OF BOOKS IN ARMENIAN FOLK CHRISTIANITY

Abstract. In certain regions of Armenia, there exists a unique cult of shrine books. These ancient books, often including early printed and handwritten copies, become objects of veneration. When such a book is kept in a family, it commonly becomes known as *tan surb*, or “saint of the house.” A sanctuary is built for the book, it has a dedicated keeper, and pilgrimages are made to it. Various taboos and prophetic dreams are associated with these books, to which people pray and make sacrifices. Most often, these revered books are the Gospels or works by Grigor Narekatsi, but they also include *khmayils* – scrolls with magical content. This research aims to identify and describe the main types and components of community and home rural sanctuaries, known as *surbs*. The cult of shrine books is examined through the broader context of the general cult of rural *surbs*, characteristic of this Armenian region. The study employed participant observation and interviews with local residents – venerators of rural *surbs* in the Aparan region of the Republic of Armenia – between 2016 and 2023. The findings reveal that home and community shrines in this region often include ancient books of religious content as well as *khmayil* scrolls. Based on an analysis of the collected material and existing scientific literature, this article describes contemporary ideas and practices related to the veneration of these shrines and compares them with the general cult of rural *surbs* in the region.

Keywords: Armenians; Armenia; folk Christianity; vernacular; Gospel; *surb*; *khmayil*; *tan surb*; shrine; saint

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Исследовательская статья

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ПОЧИТАНИЕ КНИГ В АРМЯНСКОМ НАРОДНОМ ХРИСТИАНСТВЕ

Аннотация. В некоторых областях Армении существует культ книг-святынь. Объектами почитания становятся старинные книги, среди которых нередко встречаются первопечатные и рукописные экземпляры. Если подобная книга хранится в семье, она, вероятней всего, становится *тан сурбом* – «святым дома». Для такой книги обустраивается святилище, у нее есть свой хранитель, к ней совершаются паломничества, с ней связываются табу и пророческие сны. Таким книгам молятся, им совершают жертвоприношения. Чаще всего это Евангелия, произведения Григора Нарекаци, но также и *хмайилы* – книги в форме свитка магического содержания. Целью проводимого исследования является выявление и описание основных типов и составных элементов общинных и домашних сельских святилищ – *сурбов*. Культ книг-святынь рассматривается сквозь призму характерного для данного региона Армении общего культа сельских *сурбов*. Исследование проведено методом включенного наблюдения и интервью с местными жителями – почитателями сельских *сурбов* в Апаранском районе Республики Армения в 2016–2023 гг. В ходе исследования было определено, что домашними и общинными святынями в этом регионе зачастую выступают старинные книги религиозного содержания, а также свитки *хмайилы*. На основе анализа собранного материала и научной литературы в статье дается описание современных представлений и практик почитания данного типа святынь, проводится сравнение с общим культом сельских *сурбов* изучаемого региона.

Ключевые слова: армяне; Армения; народное христианство; вернакулярный, Евангелие; *сурб*, *хмайил*; *тан сурб*; святилище; святыня; святой

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In some rural areas of Armenia, for example, in the villages of Aragatsotn and Gegharkunik marzes¹, there are a cult of books. Most often, the objects of veneration are ancient books of religious content, among which there are often first-printed and handwritten copies, richly illustrated and of great value. If there is such a book in a family, in private possession, in most cases it becomes an object of worship – *tan surb* – “saint” of the home. The book will be the saint itself, not an object associated with any holy person, bearing the stamp of its holiness and divine grace, as is customary in the canonical Christian cult of saints.

Such a sacred book usually has a sanctuary directly in the house or in a separate building, has its own story of discovery and miracle-working, its own special festival, its keeper, pilgrimages are made to it, taboos and prophetic dreams are associated with it. Gospels, works of Grigor Narekatsi, prayer books, works of the Church Fathers, as well as *hmayils*² and magical or apotropaic collections are honored as holy [1, p. 22]. In my fieldwork, I encountered *tan surbs* of the Gospel, *hmayils* and prayer books.

Objectives, methods, geography of the study

This study aims to identify and describe the main types and components of communal and domestic rural sanctuaries – *surbs*. The study is based on field materials, a significant part of which was collected in Aparan region of Aragatsotn marz of the Republic of Armenia (a little-studied region with a rich vernacular religious tradition) by the method of participant observation and interviews with local residents – venerators of rural *surbs*. In the course of the research, it was determined that household and community shrines in this region are often ancient books of religious content, as well as *hmayils*. On the basis of the analysis of the collected material and scientific literature, the article describes the current perceptions and practices of veneration of this type of shrines and compares them with the general cult of rural *surbs* in the region under study.

Literature review

The topic of folk religion in Armenia was covered in the study of pre-Christian beliefs of Armenians, architectural, archaeological and archaeographic monuments [4–7]. In Z.V. Kharatyan’s work “Cult motifs of family customs and rituals in Armenians” books-saints are not singled out as a separate group of shrines; however, the perception of illness and healing rituals related to folk ideas about saints are considered in detail [8].

Certain aspects of folk religious tradition in historical perspective are covered in the work of A. Odabashyan, based on the results of the study of apotropaic scrolls-talismans *hmayil*

1. Region

2. A textual amulet in the form of a scroll

from the collection of Matenadaran and the Russian State Library [9]. Among the few modern works on this topic, we should mention the article by A.A. Rogozhina on the problems of the content and interpretation of magical collections in the Armenian Christian tradition, where the author pays special attention to the problem of interpretation of the *hmayil* scrolls [10]. The article by E. Balicka-Vitakovskaya and R. Phoenix contains a detailed description and translation of the text of a magic scroll from the collection of the University of Uppsala [11]. D. Ghazaryan analyzes miniatures of magic scrolls from the Matenadaran collection and some foreign collections and draws conclusions about the typical character of most of the illustrations of *hmayils* [12; 13].

The topic of home sanctuaries *surbs* was developed by A. Marutyan in connection with the study of the structure and functioning of the traditional Armenian dwelling [14]. The author's separate article is devoted to the history and current state of the cult of *tan surbs* – family and home sanctuaries. The article contains excerpts from ethnographic sources of the 19th century; A. Marutyan also relies on the ethnographic field material he collected in the 1980s [15].

Among the publications of recent decades, the illustrated edition “Armenian Folk Arts, Culture and Identity” edited by L. Abramyan and N. Suizi should be mentioned. In the section devoted to the written tradition, H. Petrosyan gives examples and descriptions of especially venerated holy books in Gegharkunik marz [16].

S. Meryan pays special attention to the practices of venerating household book-saints in an article devoted to the tradition of attaching votive offerings to the binding of specially revered books [17]. The tradition of venerating religious manuscripts, particularly the Gospels, is the subject of an article by K. Shekerski, in which the author describes the annual practice of taking out the specially venerated Gospels from Matenadaran for worship by ordinary believers [18].

The Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of NAS RA conducted a series of expeditions, during which it identified and collected data on 40 manuscripts currently in private possession, which are home saints in the families of their owners. In 2022, based on the results of the expeditions, “Home Saint Manuscripts”, an album was published, which includes descriptions of 29 manuscripts [1]. The volume is preceded by an introductory analytical article that talks about the tradition of venerating holy books, the fate of books in the Soviet era, and the role that the studied manuscripts play in the Armenian codicological heritage.

In all the above works, except for the article by A. Marutyan [15] describing the ethnographic material of Gegharkunik Marz of the 1980s and the introductory article to the album “Home Saint Manuscripts” [1], lacks detailed ethnographic material on this problem.

The present study is based on the information from the above publications, as well as on the field ethnographic materials collected by the author in 2016-2023.

Common features in the veneration of shrine books

As a rule, shrine books are kept hidden from the eyes in a special casket, chest or suitcase, wrapped in several *shushp*³-envelopes. In the same casket next to the shrine may lie other objects or offerings that are part of the *surb* complex, and are endowed by the believers with sacred power. These may be crosses, liturgical objects or special stones, pieces of khachkars, icons, etc. For example, the complex of Grigor Narekatsi's *tan surb* in L. village of Aparan district⁴ includes a handwritten book, an Orthodox image, several stones and a metal key in the shape of a cross with a small cross on a chain. The book is wrapped in several woven *shushp* envelopes and stored in a special niche in the wall in the central room of the house. The niche is covered with a curtain, and next to it is a shelf-stand for sacrificial candles and offerings. Other items are kept in a wooden box in the same niche. The keeper of the book S. was sure that the book was the work of Grigor Narekatsi⁵. During the examination of the book, it was found that it was a handwritten copy of the New Testament. Part of the text was examined – the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. The informant did not know exactly how and from where the book came into possession of the family, but she knows that her ancestors fled from Mush, and she assumes that the book was brought from there. There was more than one such *surb* in the family, but the rest of the shrines have been lost. The stones, according to the informant, have healing powers. S.'s grandmother on her father's side had the ability to heal with the help of a cross, a book and stones. "Grandmother was a *portvertsnoh*⁶," S. reported⁷. She helped women who were having difficulty giving birth by treating wounds by applying stones to them. She used a metal cross to bless people with the sign of the cross. The grandmother, according to the informant, had a close connection with the saint of the home, and from it she received the gift of healing.

Only one person in the family is allowed to touch the shrine book and holy objects – S. She is the custodian and the main mediator between the faithful and the saint. It is believed that the custodian more often than other members of the family sees prophetic dreams related to the shrine. In them, the saint informs about how the shrine should be kept, what actions can or cannot be taken in relation to it, for example, whether or not it can be shown to outsiders, and about certain events related to the family and its problems. S. saw the saint in a dream once. She described him as an old man with white hair and wearing white clothes. Much more often, custodians and believers reported hearing the voice of the *surb* in their dreams.

3. An embroidered cloth on which the Gospel is placed during the liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Shushpas in the villages are any cloth votive offerings: vow plates, covers, flaps, ribbons, embroidered envelopes, etc. Shushpas are considered sacred. For more details on the etymology of the name, regional peculiarities of the name, history of the phenomenon and some modern practices, see [19].

4. I believe it is necessary to preserve the anonymity of the owners and their residence (except for those whose information has already been published by other authors), due to the significant material value of their family shrines.

5. St. Grigor Narekatsi (c. 951-1003) was an Armenian poet, philosopher, theologian, and representative of the early Armenian Renaissance. St. Grigor Narekatsi is revered by the Catholic Church as one of the 36 Teachers of the Church. The most famous work written by him shortly before his death is the hymnary "The Book of Lamentations". These hymns are believed to be filled with deep faith, have healing power, so reading out individual fragments of the text is still a common healing practice.

6. From Arm. port – navel, and verznel – to take, lit. "navel-breaker," i.e., a hernia healer.

7. Author's field material. Interviews with informant S., 78 years old; informant A., 24 years old. Conducted in 2016.

The holy book and related objects can be used in rites of healing and protection performed in sanctuaries. Such a rite is, as a rule, the reading of the book, its individual chapters or passages. Not all owners and keepers can read and understand the contents of a book. Revered books are most often written in *grabar* or a mixture of *grabar*⁸ and *ashkharabar*⁹. According to one informant, she can read the book since all the letters are familiar to her, but she cannot understand the words and text¹⁰. I met only one person, the brother of the owner of a 19th century printed gospel in the village L. of Aragatsotn marz, who can read his family's shrine and understand the meaning of the text. Reading is part of the healing practice: through reading the book he treats fright, headache and other ailments (Fig. 1). This book is the legacy of informant N.'s great-grandfather, who was the last priest in the village before the persecution of the Church began. The great-grandfather's father came to these parts from Erzurum. It is believed in the family that this is how the book was also brought to the village. In the old house, where great-grandfather settled, a *surb* was organized. In Soviet times, the family sold the house and moved to a new one, having performed *matah*¹¹ in both the old house and the new one, "so that the *surb* would not be angry that it was moved". "It is not recommended that *surbs* be moved without *matah* and prayers," informant N¹² said. The transfer of the *surb* to the new place went well, the family had no problems with the saint (the saint was not angered), because "everything was done correctly." The family believes that there is still a saint place in the old house at the old place and that "people should be careful with the place where the *surb* used to be".

Informants say that people who fled from Mush and Kars during the genocide brought with them many ancient books and valuable items. "The people who came from Mush kept these books as their children. They were their main treasures," reports N. Informant A. recalls how her mother used to swaddle the books like her small children. This family used to have a *matur* where many such books were kept, but only one book was saved. In Soviet times, especially during Stalin's time, according to the informants, believers were treated badly, so in order for the family to avoid any problems, they took almost all the books to the church in the nearest town. N.'s grandfather used the book to cure fright, headaches and bone ailments. A. says she was completely cured of severe headaches with the help of a holy book. "It has to do with God's word. When you read God's word, it cures," shares A. The book can currently only be read by N.,'s brother a teacher and architect. He does not see the saint in dreams, but has the gift to heal people with the help of the book.

There are many votive offerings in this shrine. "People used to come for treatment and placed pictures, crosses, shushpas as a gift to the saint to be healed. "Now shushpas are not often brought <...> If something bad happens to someone, but ends well, they come to the *surb* and light a candle" – informants report. Everything they want to give to the saint is put

8. An ancient Armenian written language, used as a literary language until the beginning of the 19th century. The language was used in religious service of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

9. A modern Armenian language.

10. Author's field material. Interviews with informant N., 60 years old; informant A., 26 years old. Conducted in 2022.

11. A tradition of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which lies in the distribution of alms, donation. It is performed in the form of a sacrifice followed by a charitable meal or distribution of the meat of the sacrificial animal.

12. Author's field material. Interviews with informant N., 64 years old; informant A., 62 years old. Conducted in 2018.

on the table. Visitors can also put money and perform *matah*. Mostly relatives come, but there have been cases of strangers who have seen the *surb* or the house where it is kept in a dream. The shrine and the book are stored on the second floor, in a room. The place was chosen specially, it is quiet, the sunrise can be seen in the window, no cars drive under the windows, no one sleeps in the room. The sanctuary is cleaned several times a month by the daughter-in-law. She also washes the shushpas without soap in a basin in which the dough is usually kneaded. The water after cleaning is poured onto a flower bed or onto the roots of a tree.

The owners of such a shrine, as a rule, understand its significance and cultural value. According to informants, the right to own a book is inherited from generation to generation. The fact that a relic once belonged to ancestors significantly increases its symbolic value. The relic is linked to the family memory of grandfathers and great-grandfathers who found it and managed to keep it despite hardships and mortal danger. Informants tell stories of having to sacrifice the most precious things, including the lives of their children, to preserve the relic during hardships¹³.

In Soviet times, *surbs* and holy books were forbidden. During anti-religious and anti-church campaigns, community and family *surbs* sanctuaries were closed and destroyed along with churches, and books were confiscated along with other church valuables. Some books were preserved by hiding the shrine, thus risking the life and well-being of the family. Books were hidden in cellars, in the walls of houses, buried in the ground. There are stories of miracles performed by holy books. For example, one of the stories tells that when the Bolsheviks threw the holy books into the fire, after which they miraculously came out of the flames and fell into the hands of an innocent person, most often a child [1, p. 23]. Informants also tell that the persecutions did not affect the veneration of shrines. The cult of *surbs* in general and shrine books in the times when the continuity of the Armenian Church was broken, probably remained one of the few forms of manifestation of religiosity available to believers.

Practices of honoring the Gospels

The holy books of the Gospels have always played an important role in the Armenian Christian tradition. The Gospels are the most widespread text that has survived to this day in a manuscript form. The Gospels continued to be copied until the 18th century, then printed versions became more popular. The reading of the Gospel is part of the liturgy: priests hold the Gospels during the service and make the rounds of the altar with them, use them during religious processions, display them in the church for worship by the believers, and use them for blessing. The text of the Gospel is honored as sacred. The Gospel was also perceived as a sacred person. For example, colophons in a manuscript tell us that the book was stolen by

13. I express my gratitude to Y. Antonyan for providing information on such family narratives.

infidels, held for ransom, and the community came together to pay the ransom and release the book from captivity [20, p. 191].

Antique Gospel books, like other religious and liturgical objects, may be privately owned and are objects of worship. Nowadays, the number of privately owned sacred objects is no longer as large as in earlier times. Revered holy books may be in expensive metal bindings with semi-precious stones decorated with crosses, or in modest, leather, often poorly preserved, bindings on wooden or cardboard bases without decorations.

The books-saints are worshipped and presented with votive gifts, candles and incense are lit before them, prayed to, asked for protection and fulfillment of wishes, and sacrifices are made. It is believed that such *tan surbs* protect the house, family, and some, especially powerful ones, protect the whole village from misfortunes, diseases and hardships. An example of such a gospel that protects not only the family that owns the book, but also the whole village is the *tan surb* of the Soghoyan family in the village of Martuni in Gegharkunik region [21, p.95]. The *tan surb* of this family is an illustrated Gospel of the 16th century. The book is kept wrapped in embroidered *shushpas* in a separate special room in a traditional house. The *surb* is furnished with candles, filled with crucifixes, hanging *shushpas* with embroidered or stitched crosses, reproductions with images of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, images of the Crucifixion, the Mother of God with a baby, and saints. This *tan surb* is called after the name of the owners of the Soghi Karmir Avetaran (Red Gospel of Sogho). Another example is the *tan surb* Voskezots Avetaran (Holy Gilded Gospel) in the village S. Aragatsotn marz. The holy book is located in a sanctuary specially built for it – a rectangular chapel-matur (Fig. 2, 3). In the northern part there is an altar elevation on which stands a wooden chest with the book. The altar and the walls of the sanctuary are densely arranged and covered with the images and objects on the religious theme, *shushpas*. According to informant N., the book was brought from Mush in 1828-1829. At present, only N.'s eldest son is allowed to touch it. The book has healing powers and is highly respected throughout the district. It has its own special day of veneration. On the first Sunday of August, the book is brought out for veneration and drying, and *matah* is necessarily performed. Villagers bring gifts to the shrine, put money¹⁴. The shrine is a handwritten paper Gospel illustrated with colored miniatures with the size of 22×17 cm. To determine the date and place of copying of this manuscript, I turned to the manuscript department of Matenadaran. D. Ghazaryan determined from the preserved colophon that the scribe was Karapet Yerets and the miniaturist was Saghak Vanetsi. The book was produced in the last third of the 17th century. There are nine more books by this miniaturist in the collection of Matenadaran¹⁵ [22, p. 634– 635]. The miniatures in the book are large and colorful. These are the Crucifixion, the Position in the Tomb, the Descent into Hell, the Resurrection, the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Second Coming, etc. Some of them are unique, with analogs not found in other manuscripts.

14. Author's field material. Interviews with informant N., 64 years old; informant G., 62 years old. Conducted in 2022.

15. St. Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts in Yerevan.

In addition to symbolic offerings such as lighting candles and incense, *matah* is performed to the *tan surb*. A small *matah* with a dove or a rooster can be made right on the spot – in the courtyard of the house where the revered shrine is located. If the *matah* performed with a ram, the sacrificial animal's ear is cut on the spot and the blood is spilled. The meat of the sacrificial animal is divided into seven parts and distributed to seven places.

The tradition of honoring *tan surbs* is widespread nowadays not only in Armenia, but also in Georgia – in some places of Armenian settlement. In particular, there are 90 Armenian families living in the village of Jala, most of which are descendants of people from Erzurum, Turkey. Many families have saints of the house, and one of them, the Gospel, is considered the patron and protector of the whole village [17, p. 54].

Informants tell stories of how researchers or church representatives asked to borrow holy books from their houses for exhibitions, research, restoration, but the owners refused because they believed that by doing so, they would jeopardize not only their family and house, but also the well-being of the whole village. They were afraid to take responsibility for the disasters that could occur even if the holy book left the village temporarily. Particularly revered shrines have communal ritual functions. For example, with the mentioned *Surb Voskezots Avetaran*, informant S. conducts a rainmaking ritual in times of drought. It is believed that the shrine should not be taken out of the house, transferred into the wrong hands or sold. These beliefs prevent some owners from selling a valuable relic, from giving it to a church or museum for restoration and exposition.

The bindings of some Gospels have metal plates with religious motifs, almond-shaped plates, personal seals and inlays with semi-precious stones, crosses, embroidery, ornaments in the form of a *hamsa*¹⁶, or “hand of the Virgin Mary”. These votives were usually placed on the book without any particular order, often overlapping each other and attached to the binding on chains. S. Merjan, investigating the origin of such objects, comes to the conclusion that these are votive offerings, which at the same time fulfill the function of amulets for these valuable, and therefore at special risk, sacred books. Plates in the shape of a hand or an eye could fulfill the functions of an amulet protecting the book from the evil eye [17, p. 56–86].

Individual gospel books are believed to have miraculous healing powers. The practice of pilgrimage to the most famous and powerful holy books, as well as to “strong” village *surbs* in general, is widespread. Pilgrims worship them and ask for help in adversity and fulfillment of their cherished wish – *muraz*.

An example of a massively venerated book is the Gospel from Shurishkan. The book is currently on display in a separate showcase in Matenadaran. It is one of the Armenian miracle-working Gospels, to which protective properties have been attributed for centuries. Long pilgrimages to worship this Gospel have been and continue to be made. For about three and a half centuries the manuscript was kept in the village of Shurishkan in the Peria province of Iran, then it was transported to Armenia and donated to Matenadaran by the owner. Every year on the first Sunday after Easter, the “Shurishkan Gospel” is taken out of

16. An amulet in the form of a palm

Matenadaran and taken to St. Gevorg Church in the village of Mugni in Ashtarak region, where a liturgy is held and anyone can worship the miraculous book.

Another Gospel, the Zoravor Avetaran (Powerful Gospel) is sent from Matenadaran to the Church of St. Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God) every year on May 14, the day of the memory of Movses Tatevatsi. In the beginning of September, on the day of commemoration of St. John the Baptist and St. Job the Righteous, the “Sangibaran Gospel” is transferred from Matenadaran to the Church of St. Shoghakat in Echmiadzin and exhibited for worship. In the second week of October the “Shukhont Gospel” is transferred from Matenadaran to the church of St. Mesrop Mashtots in Oshakan. And another unnamed Gospel is transported to the church of Surb Sarkis in Yerevan during the feast dedicated to this saint [18, p. 70].

The practice of taking the specially venerated Gospels for worship was introduced by the Armenian Apostolic Church in the 2010s. Usually the worship takes place in the following way: early in the morning, the priest comes to Matenadaran, reads a prayer and, accompanied by an employee of the Institute and police officers, carries the Gospel to the church. Pilgrims greet the manuscript and accompany it to the church with a festive procession. During the liturgy the book lies on the altar. After the service it is placed in front of the altar or at the side of the church so that pilgrims can freely approach and worship the shrine. People approach the book and read prayers. They tend to touch the book with their hands or forehead, kissing the book. They also bring rosaries, crosses, shushpas, prayer books, pictures of the sick and needy and touch the shrine with these items. People offer gifts to the Gospels, most often pictures of religious content or shushpas. The practice of touching the shrine is extremely important for believers. It is believed that in this case part of the divine and healing power of the miraculous shrine is transferred to them. Disabled people, people suffering from various diseases come on pilgrimage. All of them come to the miraculous shrine with the hope of healing [18, p. 75].

Written scrolls-amulets *hmayil*

Not only a book of the Gospel, but also a handwritten or printed scroll can be venerated as a “saint of the home”. In Armenia there is a separate class of textual amulets, the so-called protective writings *tukht u gir’* or *gir’ paharan*. It includes amulet books, in particular, amulet books in the form of a scroll – *hmayil*. Textual amulets with prayers and incantations play a key role in the Armenian magic tradition. In the past, local healers and clergymen were the makers of such amulets. They were called *tukht u gir’ anoh* – lit. “making paper and writing” or *grbats* – lit. “unbinding the writing” [23, p. 327].

Hmayil means “magic divination”. It is a special type of illuminated handwritten scroll-books, performing the functions of an amulet. These scrolls of paper or parchment could range from 2 to 30 meters long and from 4 to 20 cm wide. It was and still is believed that *hmayil*, as well as object amulets, have protective and healing properties, bring good luck and

wellbeing. Armenian *hmayil* goes back to the Old Persian *humav* – “blessing”. The scroll, one of the oldest forms of Armenian magical texts, dates back to early magical practice. According to it, rolled up prayers and incantations are less exposed to external influence and, as a result, are more powerful. In addition to handwritten ones, printed scrolls-talismans were also widespread [13].

Armenian incantation scrolls and collections are a little-studied tradition. They have come down to us in several formats: in the form of small codices, subdivided in turn into two types: *ahraq* astrological compilations and Kiprianos spellbooks, as well as *hmayil* scrolls. The first two can be characterized as magical because of the nature of the texts placed in them and the accompanying images. The *hmayil* scrolls, on the other hand, are difficult to unequivocally classify as magical. The nature of their texts and the fact that the number of surviving scrolls is significant indicates that they were a popular and widespread practice that was probably not unequivocally condemned by church representatives. In the texts of the talisman scrolls, the boundaries between magical incantations, prayers and quotations from the Holy Scriptures themselves are not clear. Most of their texts are excerpts from the Gospel and prayers attributed to the most revered saints of the Armenian Apostolic Church [10, p. 88, 91].

When speaking about the time of origin of textual amulets, researchers usually refer to the XXVI sermon of the Armenian Catholicos of the 5th century Hovan (John) Mandakuni. It contains evidence that already in the second half of the 5th century Armenians actively used protective writing. His sermon “On Sorcerers and Sorceresses” is fully devoted to magic and witchcraft of Armenians. The Catholicos denounces the makers of textual amulets, from his words it becomes clear that the clergy themselves turned to magicians and sorcerers, they also took part in their creation¹⁷ [24, p. 58–62].

Mention of amulet books are also found in the legal codes of the 6-7th centuries. These codes contain prohibitions against carrying *hmayils*, and prescribe excommunication as punishment for disobedience. The belief in the magical power of amulet books was penalized alongside perjury and false oaths [9, p. 109]. These books were often decorated with images of saints, deities, and spirits, and were typically written in *grabar*, with fewer instances in *ashkharabar*. Talismans were created to meet the needs of specific individuals. Over time, as they passed from hand to hand, they gradually lost their original apotropaic functions and became family heirlooms. Modern owners of such *tan surbs* generally cannot read the texts contained within them and are often unaware of the precise nature of their possession. They revere their *hmayils* as Christian relics.

F. Feidi, a researcher of the texts of more than forty manuscript scrolls from the Mkhitarist Library in Venice, published a French translation with extensive commentary. He points out that the textual amulets were attached to the neck, arm, or to a part of the body affected by disease. Alternatively, they could be burned, with the smoke inhaled, or dipped into

17. The details of the description of practices allow us to trace a typological connection with magical texts and related practices of other early medieval cultures of the Christian East, in particular, with Coptic and Greek magical writings on papyri. Textual amulet scrolls also exist in the Ethiopian magical tradition.

water, which was then consumed. The scrolls, which could reach lengths of up to twenty-five meters and widths of over ten centimeters, were made of thick paper and were likely kept in a pocket or under a pillow [25]. D. Ghazaryan suggests that the considerable length of the scrolls might indicate their use in being tied around the body under clothing for protection¹⁸.

The tradition of making textual amulets was widespread in Western Armenia and probably dates back to the Classical, and possibly Early Middle Ages, the period of the greatest prosperity of this practice – 15-17th centuries. Most of the scrolls that have survived to our days belong to the 17th-18th centuries, with some of them belonging to the 19th century. The most significant collection of *hmayil* amulet scrolls is kept in the Matenadaran Institute of Ancient Manuscripts named after Mesrop Mashtots. There are 546 scrolls of different degrees of preservation in this collection¹⁹. The earliest scroll-amulet kept in Matenadaran dates back to 1428. There are scrolls that are in private collections in Armenia and abroad.

D. Ghazaryan studied old printed Armenian talismans scrolls from the Matenadaran collection. They are glued strips of thick paper. The scrolls have a typical structure and content. They contain mostly the same prayers in almost the same order. In a number of talismans there are the same passages from the four Gospels, for example, episodes of healings by Jesus Christ. As a rule, the texts of the scrolls begin with a passage of Nerses Shnorhali's prayer "I confess in faith", include parts of Grigor Narekatsi's "Book of Lamentations", in particular, "Word XII" and "Word XLI" from this work. The total number of prayers in one scroll may reach thirty [13].

Old printed talismans are decorated with miniatures of scenes from the Holy Scriptures: images of the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus in her arms, John the Baptist, the Holy Trinity, the Nativity and Adoration of the Magi, the Entry into the Temple, the Crucifixion, the Burial of the Lord, the Sacrifice of Isaac, the Archangel Gabriel, the twelve Apostles, portraits of the four Evangelists, as is customary in the iconography of Armenian miniature painting, as well as portraits of Saints: St. George, Gregory the Illuminator, Nerses Shnorhali, St. Stepanos (Stephen), St. Gregory Narekatsi, St. Sarkis, and others. The scrolls are characterized by typical illustrations, which may have had an apotropaic significance. Such typical images include the Sacrifice of Isaac, which is accompanied by a typical cross-shaped lattice inscription. This inscription is inscribed with a passage from the Bible text Exodus 22 as well as numerous prayers to the Holy Cross written in the opposite direction diagonally. To some of the prayers are added enumerations of misfortunes and calamities from which God is to protect the wearer of the amulet, making them resemble conspiracies. Among them are prayers to the Venerable Crosses of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Images and inscriptions in the form of lattices are found in Aramaic incantation and incantation monuments, as well as in Ethiopian magic scrolls [11, p. 58]. In addition to

18. Expert interview with D. Ghazaryan, conducted in 2018.

19. Another 46 scrolls are stored in the collection of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, 44 scrolls are in the Library of the Mkhitarist Congregation on St. Lazarus Island in Venice, 43 scrolls are in the Cathedral of St. Savior in New Julfa in Iran. 13 scrolls - in the Museum of Armenian History in Yerevan, 13 scrolls – in the British Library in London, 11 scrolls – in the Library of the Mkhitarist Congregation in Vienna, 6 scrolls – in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, 3 scrolls – in the Manuscripts Department of the Russian State Library, several amulet scrolls – in Romania, as well as in the Library of Congress in the United States [12].

lattice inscriptions in the scrolls there are other elements that researchers attribute to magic: circles, triangles and other geometric figures, small circles added to letters²⁰, letters of the Arabic alphabet, sometimes there are images of demons. Symbols and signs can be designed in the form of a special table - “magic square”.

Miniatures of amulets as a rule have no perspective, they have no drawn background. The background is the natural color of parchment or paper. Miniatures necessarily correlate with the content of the texts. They represent the authors and characters to whom the texts are dedicated. As a rule, the images do not follow strict pictorial canons. In some scrolls the images are rather primitive. Most likely the scribes themselves acted as miniaturists in these copies.

This fact is well illustrated by the handwritten scroll of Surb Hmayil (Holy Talisman) from the village of L. in Aparan region. According to D. Ghazaryan’s estimation, it was produced in the second half of the 19th century. The stamp of the paper factory on the glued sheets of the scroll allows us for determination of its production. This scroll is approximately 10 meters long and 8-10 cm wide. It has not survived intact, as the colophon is lost. The scribe had no artistic talents; the style of miniatures is primitive and resembles children’s drawings; the same violet ink was used for the miniatures as for the main text. The scroll contains several portraits of the same type, as well as a “magic square” (Figs. 4, 5).

This scroll is the *tan surb* of the family, it was brought by the great-grandfather of the present owner in 1881 when he fled from Mush. The scroll is an object of worship. It is believed to protect all members of the family well. If someone is in danger or problems arise, a candle is placed and prayed to the saint of the home. In earlier times, the scroll was used for healing and childbirth. The current owners do not use it for healing, but they realize that it is valuable and keep it carefully. In case of necessity, if, for example, someone in the family is giving birth, they turn to the saint. They approach the surb, call the name of the woman in labor and light a candle. When the wife of informant A. gave birth to her last child, the labor was very difficult and he could lose not only the child but also his wife. The whole family prayed to Surb and the saint helped them. According to A., they prayed, put candles, and this gave strength to the doctor so that he was able to save both the child and the mother. “The surb is with us always,” the informants conclude²¹.

Most of another handwritten scroll I discovered, called Surb Grigor Narekatsi (Saint Grigor Narekatsi), has not been preserved. It is a “saint of the home” in a family from the village of L. of Aragatsotn marz. The scroll was almost completely destroyed in a fire in the sanctuary, caused by a sacrificial candle. Only a few fragments survived from the fire, including a part with a lattice inscription, an image of the sacrifice of Isaac, a text placed in intersecting circles, as well as fragments that can be identified as part of the images of St. George, apostles and/or evangelists. The scroll is made of paper. The illustrations are drawn in black lines, and brown, black, and red ink is used in the miniatures, ornaments, and initials. The text is printed in black, red, and brown ink (Figs. 6, 7). The typicality of the

20. Which relates them to the Coptic magic papyri [10, p. 100].

21. Author’s field material. Interviews with informant A., 68 years old; informant A., 84 years old. Conducted in 2018.

subjects depicted in the miniatures aids in their identification. To identify these images, I compared fragments of the miniatures with those in a similar 18th-century amulet scroll studied by D. Ghazaryan and L. Sargsyan [12].

The saint of this family is on a windowsill in one of the living rooms. It is covered with several shushpas. Next to the *surb* lie various items: shawls from Soviet times, old photographs, magazine clippings with images of Mona Lisa, images of St. Sarkis, St. George, sheets with handwritten prayers. On one of the pictures, it is written “A gift from Slavik to Surb Sarkis”; on the other – “From Nver to Surb Sarkis”. According to informant Sh., people leave offerings at will, she has no right to touch them, as only unmarried people are allowed to do so.

Informant Sh. and her husband D. often pray to the saint for their children who live abroad, asking for their safe return home. For example, if their grandchildren have to take an exam, they call Sh., who then goes to the saint, prays, and lights a candle. Subsequently, the grandchildren receive high marks on their exams. The informant does not know how the *surb* came to be in the house; to her knowledge, no one in the family has ever practiced healing. Sh. believes that they inherited the *surb* “from their grandfathers.” The shushpas given to the saint have not been washed for two or three years. According to Sh., this task should be performed by unmarried girls, but there are no such girls in the family at present.²²

Sh. states that the *surb* is quite famous in the village, people in the village see it in their dreams and come to their house. Most often they are relatives. Once their house was visited by a priest. He said that they should take down all the images that hang in the shrine and take them together with the scroll of the saint to the church. However, Sh.’s husband did not allow her to take the *surb* to the church. *Matah* is performed to *surb*, most often roosters are brought. The animal is not brought into the house, it is cut on the street near the stairs. Before slaughtering, they put some consecrated salt in the animal’s throat. According to the informant, *matah* is performed if there are serious problems, for example, if someone in the family is going to have a medical operation. There was a case when a child stuck his hand into a socket but survived, he was not even electrocuted. Sh. is sure that he was kept safe by the saint of the house. After this incident, they performed *matah* in gratitude to the saint: first they slaughtered a rooster, and then the whole family gathered and slaughtered a lamb²³.

Conclusions

The tradition of honoring books in Armenia dates back at least several centuries. In the vernacular Christian tradition, books are regarded as holy persons. The presence of an ancient book in a rural family almost automatically signifies that the book is a *surb* – a specially honored saint of the house and family. Shrines are built for such saints, to whom

22. Author’s field material. Interviews with informant Sh., 60 years old. Conducted in 2016-2018.

23. Author’s field material. Interview with informant Sh., 66 years old. Conducted in 2018.

prayers, symbolic and direct sacrifices are offered. Pilgrimages are made to them, prophetic visions and dreams are experienced, votive offerings are presented, and they are appealed to for the fulfillment of cherished wishes, or *muraz*. There are specific taboos and behavioral norms regarding them as sacred objects. The most common shrine book is the handwritten or first-printed Gospel, but believers may also venerate other written monuments, such as magical apotropaic scrolls-talismans, or *hmails*. The daily practices of veneration and the believers' perceptions of these sacred objects are unified.

Having studied the practices and beliefs surrounding book-shrines in the studied region of Armenia, we can conclude that the cult of books is an integral part of the vernacular cult of rural *surbs*, which can take various forms. For instance, besides a book, a *surb* may be a *khachkar*, a tree, a spring, a stone, a rock, a picture with a religious theme, or church and monastery buildings in various states of preservation. The practices of veneration and the representations related to saint-books do not differ significantly from the general practices of *surb* veneration. However, there are specific features in their cult related to the unique material form of the saint-book.

During periods when the continuity of the Armenian Church was disrupted, the cult of *surbs* and holy books remained one of the few accessible forms of religious expression for believers. Even today, the veneration of ancient books in rural areas of Armenia remains a significant way of practicing Christian worship within the folk tradition.

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Fig. 1. Owner with an Avetaran *tan surb*, village L., Aparan district. Photo by N. Kryukova.

Рис. 1. Владелец с *тан сурбом* Аветаран, село Л., Апаранский р-н. Фото Н. Крюковой

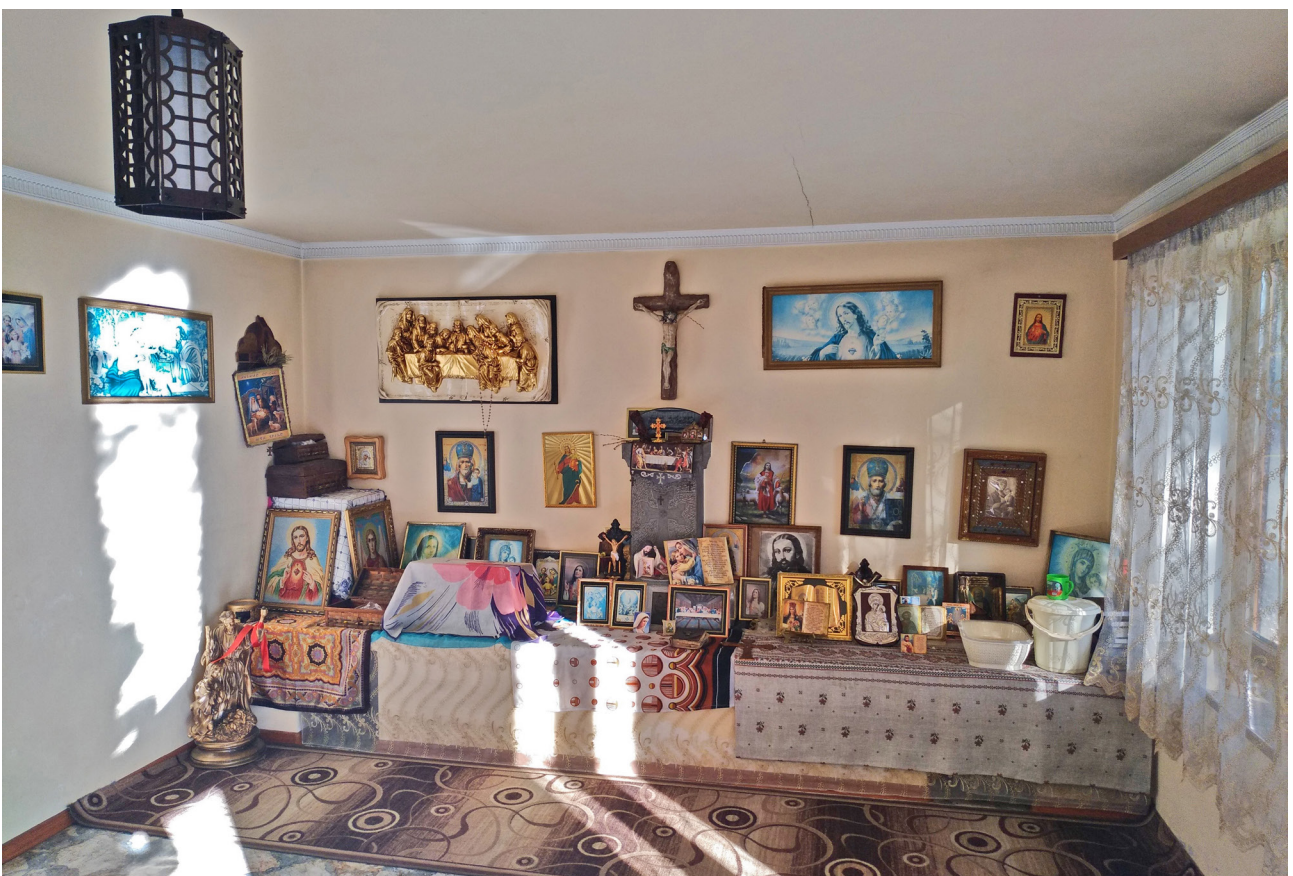


Fig. 2. Sanctuary of *Surba Voskezots* Avetaran, village S., Aparan district. Photo by N. Kryukova.

Рис. 2. Святителище *сурба* Воскезотс Аветаран, село С., Апаранский р-н. Фото Н. Крюковой



Fig. 3. *Surb Voskezots Avetaran*, village S., Aparan district, 2022. Photo by N. Kryukova.

Рис. 3 *Сурб Воскезотс Аветаран*, село С., Апаранский р-н, 2022. Фото Н. Крюковой

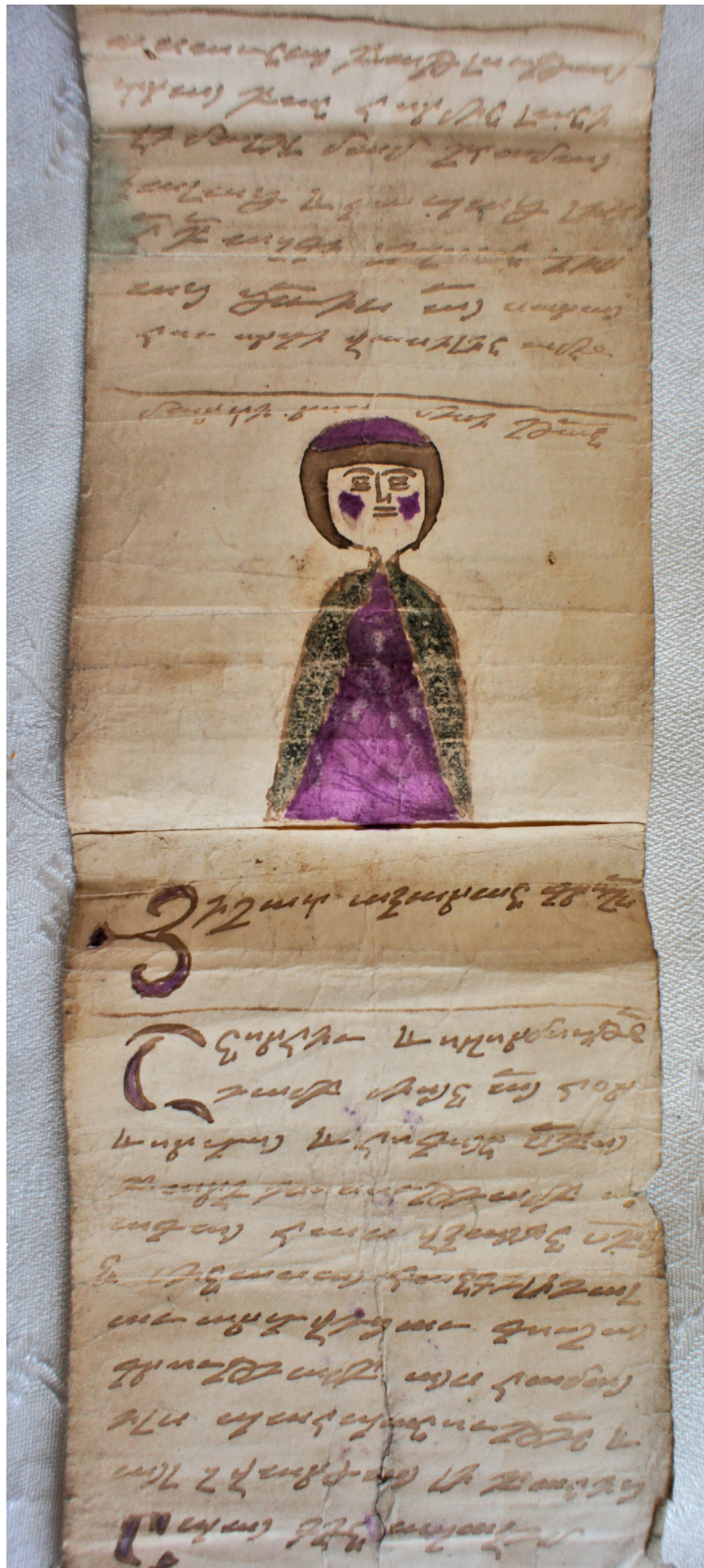


Fig. 4. *Surb Khmayil*, village L, Aparan district, 2018. Photo by N. Kryukova

Рис. 4 *Сурб Хмайил*, село Л, Апаранский р-н, 2018. Фото Н. Крюковой



Fig. 5. *Surb Khmayil*, village L., Apransky district, 2018. Photo by N. Kryukova

Рис. 5 *Сурб Хмайил*, село Л., Апанский р-н, 2018. Фото Н. Крюковой



Fig. 6. *Surb* Grigor Narekatsi, village L., Aparan district, 2016. Photo by N. Kryukova
Рис. 6 *Сурб* Григор Нарекаци, село Л., Апаранский р-н, 2016. Фото Н. Крюковой



Fig. 7. *Surb* Grigor Narekatsi, village L., Aparan district, 2016. Photo by N. Kryukova

Рис. 7 *Сурб* Григор Нарекаци, село Л., Апаранский р-н, 2016. Фото Н. Крюковой

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