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**VENERATION OF BOOKS IN ARMENIAN POPULAR CHRISTIANITY**

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**ПОЧИТАНИЕ КНИГ В АРМЯНСКОМ НАРОДНОМ ХРИСТИАНСТВЕ**

*This study is supported by a grant from the Russian Foundation for Basic Research and the Commettee on Science of the Republic of Armenia, within the scholary project No. 20-59-05004 Arm\_a.*

***Abstract***. The article deals with the tradition of book veneration in Armenian folk Christianity. At present, as in former times, there is a cult of sacred books in Armenia. Most often the objects of veneration are old books, among which there are often first printed and handwritten ones. If there is such a book in the family, it is more likely to be a tan surb, a “saint of the home.” The book will be a saint, not an object associated with a holy person. A shrine will be built for such a book, it will have its own keeper, it will be the object of pilgrimages, and it will be associated with taboos and prophetic dreams. Books are prayed to and sacrifices are made to them. Books with religious content are venerated as saints. Most often these are the Gospels, works of Grigor Narekatsi, but also hmayil – books in the form of a scroll with magical content. The article examines the everyday practices of veneration and beliefs about these sacred objects.

***Key words***: Armenians; Armenia; popular Christianity; gospel; hmayil; tan surb; sanctuary; shrine; saint.

*Исследование выполнено при финансовой поддержке РФФИ и КН РА в рамках научного проекта № 20-59-05004 Арм\_а.*

*Аннотация*. В статье рассматривается традиция почитания книг в народном христианстве в Армении. В наши дни, как и в прежние времена, в Армении существует культ книг-святынь. Чаще всего, объектами почитания становятся старинные книги, среди которых нередко встречаются первопечатные и рукописные. Если подобная книга есть в семье, она вероятней всего будет *тан сурбом* – «святым дома». Книга будет являться именно святым, а не ассоциированным с какой-либо святой личностью предметом. Для такой книги будет обустроено святилище, у нее будет свой хранитель, к ней будут совершатся паломничества, с ней будут связаны табу и пророческие сны. Таким книгам молятся, им совершают жертвоприношения. Святыми почитаются книги религиозного содержания. Чаще всего это Евангелия, произведения Григора Нарекаци, но также и хмайилы – книги в форме свитка магического содержания*.* В статье рассматриваются повседневные практики почитания и представления верующих в отношении этих сакральных объектов.

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

Armenia has traditionally had a cult of books and the written word. Long before the Christian era, Urartian and Armenian deities were believed to be able to predict human death by the writing of a person’s name. The belief in the power of the written word continued into the Christian Middle Ages and into modern times: it was then believed that a person could cause an event by writing about it. In the Middle Ages there was also a belief, which still persists today, that books are “saints” that protect their owners and the entire community from disasters, grant prosperity and cure diseases [1, p. 57–58].

Nowadays there is a cult of sacred books in Armenia. Most often these are antique books, including early printed and handwritten ones, richly illustrated and of great archaeographical and antiquarian value. Such books are in private possession. If there is such a book in the family, it is more likely to be worshipped and is tan surb, a “saint of the home.” The book will have a sanctuary in the home or a separate building, its own history of discovery and miracles, its own special holiday, its keepers, it will be the object of pilgrimages, it will be associated with taboos and prophetic dreams. Books with religious content are considered sacred: Gospels, sermons of the Church Fathers, works of Grigor Narekatsi, prayer books, hmayils[[1]](#footnote-1) or other magical or apotropaic collections [2, p. 22]. In my fieldwork I have encountered gospels, hmayils and prayer books. The veneration practices and beliefs associated with these books do not differ from those of surbs[[2]](#footnote-2) veneration in general, there are a number of specific features associated with the particular material form of the surb book.

These tan surbs are also kept in a special box or case, wrapped in several shushpas[[3]](#footnote-3) or shushp envelopes. In the same box, next to the shrine, other objects or offerings may also lie, which form part of the surb complex, and are endowed with sacred power by the faithful. These can be crosses, liturgical objects, parts of clergy clothes or special stones, pieces of cross stones, icons, etc. For example, the complex of Grigor Narekatsi’s surb in the village of L., Aparan region[[4]](#footnote-4) includes a handwritten book, an Orthodox icon, 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 shushpas and stored in a special niche in the wall in the center room of the house. The niche is covered by a curtain and next to it is a shelf-stand for sacrificial candles and offerings. The rest of the items are kept in a wooden box in the same niche. Book keeper S., 66 y.o., was sure that the book was the work of Grigor Narekatsi[[5]](#footnote-5). On examining the book, it became clear that it was a handwritten New Testament. Some of the text could be seen – the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. The informant doesn’t know exactly how and from where the book came into the family, she knows that her ancestors fled from Mush and she assumes that it came from there. There was more than one such surb in the family, but the rest of the relics have been lost. Stones, according to the informant, have healing power. The grandmother on her father’s side had the ability to heal with the help of a cross, a book and stones. “The grandmother was a *porverznoh*[[6]](#footnote-6)*,*” reported S.[[7]](#footnote-7) She helped women who had difficulties in childbirth, treated wounds by applying stones to them. She used a metal cross to bless people. The grandmother, according to the informant, had a close connection with the shrine; she received the gift of healing from it.

Only one person in the family is usually allowed to touch the holy book and holy objects. This person is the keeper and main mediator between the faithful and the holy thing. He more often than the other members of the family have prophetic dreams related to the shrine. In these the saint informs about how the shrine is to be guarded, what actions may or may not be taken in relation to it, for example whether it is allowed to be shown to outsiders, and about certain events related to the family and its problems. The holy book and objects associated with it can be used in rites of healing and protection performed in shrines. Such a ritual is usually the reading of a book, its individual chapters or passages. It is done by the keepers of the shrine or ritual specialists connected with it: fortune-tellers, healers. Not all owners and keepers are able to read and understand the contents of the book. The books are most often written in grabar or a mixture of *grabar*[[8]](#footnote-8) and *ashkharbar*[[9]](#footnote-9). According to one informant, she can read the book, as all the letters are familiar to her, but she cannot understand the words and the text[[10]](#footnote-10). I met only one person – the owner of a nineteenth-century printed Gospel in the village of L. of Aparan district, who reads his family’s shrine and understands the meaning of the text. Reading is part of his healing practice: through reading the book he cures fright, headache and other ailments (Fig. 1).

The owners of a shrine are usually aware of its considerable material and cultural value. Most often, the right to own a relic, its associated objects, buildings and the land on which it is located, is inherited by the owners from generation to generation. The fact that a relic once belonged to ancestors greatly increases its symbolic value. The relic is linked to the family memory of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers, who found it and managed to keep it despite hardship and deadly danger. Informants tell stories of having to sacrifice the most precious things, including the lives of their children, to preserve a relic in difficult times[[11]](#footnote-11).

Narratives of the emergence of the shrine in the family most often refer to the provinces of Western Armenia and Iran, and to three periods: the period after 1828 when Armenians migrated en masse to Eastern Armenia, the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the period after 1915 – the period of flight from genocide, when there was a massive displacement of people and values. People removed their own relics and also saved the property of churches and monasteries from looting and desecration.

During the Soviet period, sacred books were persecuted during anti-religious and anti-church campaigns. Community and family surbs-sanctuaries were closed and destroyed along with churches, books were confiscated along with church valuables, and the owners could be arrested and deported. Some books were saved because the owners or new owners, who had the valuables after the arrest of the owners, managed to hide and preserve the relics, risking their lives and the well-being of their families. 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 story relates that when the Bolsheviks threw holy books into the fire, they miraculously emerged from the flames and fell into the hands of an innocent person, most often a child [2, p. 23]. Informants tell us that the persecution had no impact on the veneration of the holy books. There is no doubt that the cult of holy books, at a time when the continuity of the Armenian Church was disrupted, remained one of the few available forms of religious expression by the villagers.

The sacred books are perceived by believers as protectors and guardians of the family and clan, and the loss of the shrine as an irreparable loss, entailing distress and loss to family members or even to the entire village community. The sale of family shrines is regarded as blasphemy, and it is not permissible to take shrines out of the home and into the wrong hands. Fear of the anger of the saint and possible misfortune stops many owners from selling valuable relics, from sending them to churches and museums for restoration and display.

**Veneration of the Gospels**

The sacred books of the Gospels have always played an important role in the Armenian Christian tradition. The Gospels are the most widespread text surviving in manuscript form. The Gospels continued to be copied until the eighteenth century, when the printed versions became more popular and widespread. The reading of the Gospel is part of the liturgy, the priests hold the Gospel during services and walk around the altar with it, they are used in religious processions, they are displayed in church to be worshipped by the faithful, they are used for blessing. It is a common practice for parishioners to kiss the book after the service. The text of the Gospel is considered sacred and is revered. The custom of bowing down and kissing the book of the Gospel has been documented in Armenians since the seventh century. The Gospel was used as a sign of vows, it was read at funerals, weddings, childbirth, visiting the sick, blessing houses, lands, crosses, and wells. The Gospel was perceived as a holy person. For example, colophons in manuscripts narrate that the book was stolen by infidels, held by them for ransom and that the community came together to pay the ransom and release the book from captivity [5, p. 191].

The Gospel books, like other religious and liturgical objects, are in private possession and are objects of worship. Nowadays, the number of privately owned sacred objects is not as high as in former times[[12]](#footnote-12). Venerated holy books may be in expensive metal bindings with semi-precious stones, decorated with crosses, or in humble, leather bindings, often poorly preserved, on wooden or cardboard bases without decoration.

Books are worshipped and presented with gifts, candles and incense are lit in front of them, prayers, requests for protection and wish fulfillment are made, as well as sacrifices. It is believed that tan surbs protect the home and family, and some particularly powerful ones protect the whole village from misfortune, illness and hardship. An example of such a gospel that protects not only the family owning the book, but the whole village is the tan surb of the S. family in M. village, Gegharkunik region. The book is kept in a special room of a traditional house covered in embroidered shushpas. The surb is filled with candles, crucifixes, hanging shushpas with embroidered or sewn crosses, reproductions of images of Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary, images of Crucifixion, Mother of God with the Child, saints. This tan surb is named after the owners of the Soghi Karmir Avetaran – (Red Gospel of Sogho). Another example is the tan surb Voskezots Avetaran (Holy Goldplated Gospels) in the village S. Aparan district. The holy book is located in a sanctuary specially built for it – a rectangular chapel. There is an altar in the northern part, where a wooden chest with the book is located. The altar and the walls of the sanctuary are covered with pictures and objects with a religious theme and shushpas. According to informant N., the book was brought from Mush in 1828–1829. Nowadays, only her eldest son Narek is allowed to touch it. Believers report that the book has healing powers and is held in high esteem throughout the district. The book has its own special day of veneration. On the first Sunday in August the book is taken out for veneration and drying. Villagers bring gifts and money to the shrine, they make matah. The shrine is a handwritten paper gospel, illustrated with colour miniatures, measuring 22.5 by 17 cm. I contacted the Matenadaran[[13]](#footnote-13) manuscripts department to determine the date and place of the manuscript’s creation. According to the preserved colophon David Ghazaryan determined that the scribe was Karapet Yerets and the miniaturist was Saghak Vanetsi. The book was produced in the last third of the seventeenth century. The collection of Matenadaran contains another nine books by this miniaturist [6, p. 634-635]. The miniatures in the book are large and colourful. These are the Crucifixion, the Presentation in the Coffin, the Descent to Hell, the Resurrection, the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Second Coming etc. Some of them are unique and not found in other manuscripts[[14]](#footnote-14) (Fig. 2, 3).

Tan surbs are offered not only symbolic offerings in the form of lighting candles and incense, but matah[[15]](#footnote-15) is also made. A small matah with a pigeon or a rooster may be made on the spot, in the courtyard of the house where the shrine is located. If it is made with a ram, the ear of the sacrificial animal is cut. The meat of the sacrificial animal is divided into seven portions and distributed to seven places.

The tradition of veneration of the tan surbs is common today not only in Armenia, but also in Georgia in some Armenian settlements. There are 90 Armenian families living in the village of Jala, most of them descendants of people from the Turkish city of Erzurum. Many families have saints of the home, and one of them, the Gospel, is considered the patron and protector of the entire village [7, p. 54].

Informants tell stories of how scholars or church representatives asked to borrow the saints of the homes for exhibitions, research, or restoration, but the owners refused because they believed that by doing so, they would endanger not only their family and home, but also the well-being of the entire village. They were afraid to take responsibility for the disasters that might occur even if the sacred book left the village temporarily. Especially revered shrines have communal ritual functions which, in the case of such a transfer, could be disrupted. For example, with the mentioned Surb Voskezots Avetaran perform the ritual of invoking rain in times of drought.

Individual books of the Gospel are believed to have miraculous healing and evil-dispelling powers. It is very common to make pilgrimages to the most famous and powerful shrines. Pilgrims worship and ask the surbs for help in hardship and for the fulfilment of a cherished desire, the *muraz*. Some of these ‘mighty’ books are called Karmir Avetaran (Red Gospel). The origin of this name is unknown.

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, or “the hand of the Virgin Mary,” were attached to the bindings of some Gospels. These votives were usually placed on the book in no particular order, often overlapping and attached to the binding on chains. S. Merian, investigating the origin of such objects, concludes that these are votive offerings, simultaneously serving as amulets for these especially valuable, and therefore at particular risk, sacred books. The plates in the shape of a hand or an eye could act as an amulet protecting the book from the evil eye [7, p. 56–86].

Another example of a revered gospel is the Gospel of Shurishkan. The book is currently displayed in a separate cabinet in the Matenadaran. It is one of the Armenian miracle-working Gospels, to which protective properties have been ascribed for centuries. Distant pilgrimages have been, and continue to be made to worship this Gospel. The signature to this Gospel tells us that this manuscript is also known as “Karmir,” “Pap,” and “Saint Basil of Caesarea.” For about three and a half centuries the manuscript was preserved in the village of Shurishkan in Peria Province in Iran, then it was transported to Armenia and donated to Matenadaran by its owner. Every year on the first Sunday after Easter the Shurishkan Gospel is taken from the Matenadaran and brought to St. Gevorg Church in Mugni village of Ashtarak region, where a liturgy is held. On this day anyone can visit the church and worship the miraculous book.

Another Gospel, the Zoravar Avetaran (Powerful Gospel) is sent annually from Matenadaran to St. Astvatsatsin (Holy Virgin) Church on the feast day of Movses Tatevatsi on May 14. In early September on the feast day of St. John the Baptist and St. Job the Righteous, Sanghibaran Gospel is taken from the Matenadaran to St. Shoghakat Church in Echmiadzin and is put on display for veneration. The “Shuhont Gospel” is transferred from the Matenadaran to the Church of Saint Mesrop Mashtots in Oshakan in the second week of October. And another unnamed gospel is transported to Surb Sarkis Church in Yerevan during the feast dedicated to this saint[[16]](#footnote-16) [8, p. 70].

The practice of taking especially revered Gospels out for worship was introduced by the Armenian Apostolic Church in the 2010s. Worship of the shrine usually takes place as follows. The priest arrives at Matenadaran in the morning and, after the reading of prayers, carries the Gospel to the church, accompanied by the staff of the Institute and the police. Pilgrims accompany it in a festive procession. During the liturgy, the book is placed on the altar, and after the service it is placed in front of the altar or in the side chapel of the church, so that pilgrims can freely approach and worship the shrine.People approach the book and read their prayers. They tend to touch the book with their hands or forehead and kiss the book. They also bring rosaries, crosses, shushpas, prayer books, pictures of the sick and those in need and touch the shrine with these items. People bring gifts of vows to the gospel, most often pictures of religious content or shushpas. The practice of touching the shrine is extremely important to believers. It is believed that in this case a part of the divine and healing power of the miraculous shrine is transferred to them. Disabled people, people suffering from various illnesses come on pilgrimage. They all come to the miraculous shrine with the hope of healing [8, p. 75].

**Hmayil scroll amulets**

A revered ‘saint of the home’ can be not only a book of the Gospel, but also a handwritten or printed scroll. In Armenia there is a separate class of written amulets, the so-called protective writings *tukht u gir’* or *gir’ pakharan*. It includes amulet books, in particular amulet books in the form of a scroll – hmayil. Written amulets with prayers and incantations play a key role in Armenian magical tradition. In former times, the performers and compilers of such amulets could be local healers and clergymen skilled in such art. They were called *tukht gir’ anokh* (lit. “making paper and writing”) or *grbats* (lit. “unleashers of the writings”) [9, p. 327].

*Hmayil* – lit. means “magical divination.” This is a special type of illuminated handwritten scroll book, serving as a talisman, an amulet. These scrolls of paper or parchment could be from 2 to 30 m long and from 4 to 20 cm wide. It was and still is believed that hmayils, like object amulets, have protective and healing properties, bring good luck and happiness. The Armenian *hmayil* is derived from the ancient Persian *humav* ‘blessing.’ The scroll, one of the oldest forms of Armenian magical texts, dates back to early magical practices. According to it, rolled up prayers and incantations are least exposed to external influences and, therefore, have greater power. In addition to handwritten ones, printed talisman scrolls were also widespread [10].

Armenian incantation scrolls and collections are a poorly studied tradition. They have come down to us in several formats: as small codices, subdivided into two types: *akhtagԛ* astrological collections and *Kiprianos* incantation collections, 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 images accompanying them. On the contrary, the hmayil talisman scrolls are difficult to classify as magical. The nature of their texts and the great number of surviving scrolls indicate that they were a popular and widespread practice which probably was not subject to explicit condemnation by church officials. In the texts of scrolls there is a blurring of boundaries between magical incantations and proper prayers and quotations from the Holy Scriptures. Most of their texts are precisely extracts from the Gospel and prayers attributed to the most revered saints of the Armenian Apostolic Church [11, p. 88, 91].

Speaking about the time of the emergence of written amulets, researchers usually refer to the XXVI sermon of the Armenian Catholicos of the fifth century Hovhan (John) Mandakuni. It contains evidence that already in the second half of fifth century Armenians actively used protective writings. His sermon “On wizards, sorcerers and fortune-tellers” is entirely devoted to the Armenian magic and sorcery. The Catholicos denounces the authors of the written amulets; from his words it becomes clear that magicians and sorcerers were approached by the clergy themselves, they also participated in their creation. The Catholicos describes the process of writing amulets and speaks out against sorcerers and those who use their services [12, p. 58-62].

Mention of amulet books can also be found in the judicial books of the sixth and seventh centuries. The judicial books contain prohibitions against carrying hmayil, and in case of disobedience they prescribe excommunication. Belief in the magical power of amulet books was punished similarly to false oaths and perjury [13, p. 109]. They were decorated with images of saints, deities, and spirits. They were usually written in grabar and, less frequently, in ashkharabar. Talismans were made for the needs and on the order of a particular person. Passing from hand to hand, they gradually lost their original apotropaic function and became the family shrine. The present-day owners of such tan surbs are usually unable to read the texts contained therein, and do not know what they possess. They venerate their hmayil as a Christian shrine.

F. Feydit, a researcher of the texts of some forty manuscript scrolls from the Mkhitarist Library in Venice, has published a French translation with extensive commentary. He points out that the written amulets were attached to the neck, arm or affected part of the body. They could also be burned and the smoke inhaled or dipped in water, which was then drunk. Scrolls, which could reach twenty-five meters in length and more than ten centimeters in width, were made of thick paper, most probably kept in a pocket or under a pillow [14]. D. Ghazaryan notes that the considerable length of the scroll may be an indication that it could have been used to wrap the body under clothing for protection[[17]](#footnote-17).

The tradition of making written amulets was widespread in Western Armenia, the period of the greatest flowering of this practice being the fifteenth – seventeenth centuries. Most of the scrolls which have survived are of the seventeenth – eighteenth centuries, some are dated to the nineteenth century. The most important collection of hmayil amulet scrolls is preserved in Matenadaran. This collection has a total of 546 scrolls in varying degrees of preservation[[18]](#footnote-18). A significant number of scrolls are in private collections in Armenia and abroad. The earliest handwritten amulet scroll in the Matenadaran dates back to 1428.

D. Ghazarian has studied old printed Armenian scrolls from the Matenadaran collection. They are strips of thick paper glued together. The scrolls have a typical structure and content. They mainly contain the same prayers in almost the same order. A number of talismans contain the same passages from the four Gospels, such as episodes of Jesus Christ’s healings. As a rule, the texts of the scrolls begin with an excerpt of Nerses Shnorkhali’s[[19]](#footnote-19) “I confess in faith” prayer and 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 can reach thirty [10].

The scrolls were actively used, rolled up and unwrapped, and the texts were read for ritual purposes. The paper scrolls have worn out, lost their original appearance, and the strips have become separated, so that the written amulets have very often survived partially or with great loss. This makes it very difficult to conduct research.

The old-printed scrolls are decorated with miniatures of scenes from the Holy Scriptures: depictions of the Virgin Mary with baby Jesus in her arms, John the Baptist, the Holy Trinity, the Nativity and Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation to 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 common in iconography of Armenian miniature painting, and portraits of saints: St George, Gregory the Illuminator, Nerses Shnorhali, St Stepanos (Stephen) the First Martyr, Grigor Narekatsi, St Sarkis and others. The scrolls are characterized by typical illustrations, which may have had apotropaic value. Among these typical images is the Sacrifice of Isaac, which is accompanied by a typical cross-shaped grid record. The text of the Bible, Exodus 22, is written in this inscription, as well as many prayers to the Holy Cross, written diagonally in the opposite direction. In some of the prayers are added lists of misfortunes and disasters from which God should protect the wearer of the amulet, making them similar to incantations [10, p. 70].

Grid-like images and inscriptions are found in Aramaic incantation monuments, as well as in Ethiopian magical scrolls [15]. In addition to the grid-like inscriptions, the scrolls contain other elements researchers consider magical: circles, triangles and other geometric shapes, small circles added to letters[[20]](#footnote-20), letters of the Arabic alphabet, and sometimes representations of demons. Symbols and signs may be arranged in a special table – the “magic square.”

Amulet miniatures generally lack perspective and do not have a painted background. As a rule, the images do not follow strict visual canons. In some of the scrolls the images are rather primitive. It is most likely that the miniaturists in these copies were the scribes themselves.

This fact is very well illustrated by the handwritten scroll Surb Hmayil (Holy Talisman) in the village L. of Aparan district, which, according to D. Ghazaryan, was produced in the second half of the nineteenth century, probably in the 1860s. The production period of the scroll can be determined by the paper factory’s stamp on the glued sheets of the scroll. The scroll is about 10 meters long and 8–10 cm wide. It has not survived in its entirety, the colophon has been lost[[21]](#footnote-21). The scroll maker had no artistic talent, the style of the miniatures is primitive and looks like child’s drawings, and the same purple ink was used for the miniatures as for the main text. The scroll Surb Hmayil requires a separate study by specialists, the text needs to be interpreted and the images need to be identified. The scroll contains several portraits of the same type, as well as a “magic square” (Fig. 4).

A major part of another handwritten scroll I discovered called Surb Grigor Narekatsi (Saint Grigor Narekatsi) has not survived. It is a "saint of the home" in one of the families in the village of L. of Aparan district. Preliminarily the scroll-amulet can be dated to the seventeenth – eighteenth centuries. The scroll was almost completely burnt in a sanctuary fire caused by a sacrificial candle. Only a few fragments were saved from the fire, including a part with a grid inscription, an image of the Sacrifice of Isaac, text placed in intersecting circles, and fragments that can be identified as part of the images of St George, the apostles and/or the evangelists. The scroll is made of paper. The illustrations are executed in black lines, with brown, black and red ink being used in the miniatures, ornaments and initials. The text is in black, red and brown (Fig. 5, 6). The identification of the subjects of the miniatures is helped by their typicality. In order to identify the images, I compared the fragments of the miniatures with similar miniatures of the 18th century amulet scroll, studied by D. Ghazaryan and L. Sargsyan [16].

The practice of veneration of scroll books by villagers does not differ from the practice of veneration of books of the Gospels and other books of religious content.

The tradition of book veneration in Armenia dates back at least several centuries. In popular Christianity, books are treated as holy persons. The presence of an ancient book in a rural family almost automatically means that the book is a tan surb – a specially venerated saint of the home and family. For such saints shrines are arranged, they are prayed to, and symbolic and direct sacrifices are offered. As sacred objects, they are subject to special taboos and norms of behavior. The most common sacred book is the handwritten or first-printed Gospel, but believers may also venerate other written monuments, such as magical apotropaic scrolls-talismans hmayil. The everyday practices of veneration and the believers’ perceptions of these sacred objects are unified. The cult of holy books, at a time when the continuity of the Armenian Church was broken, remained one of the few available forms of manifestation of their religiosity to the villagers. Veneration of holy books is part of the general Armenian cult of rural surbs, a way of practicing Christian worship in the folk tradition.

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1. *Hmayil* – a scroll-shaped written amulet. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Surb* (Armenian “saint”) – a saint and the sanctuary associated with him. A Surb can be a spring, a book, a khachkar, a tree, a cross, etc. The veneration of rural surbs is one of the traditions of folk Christianity in Armenia. For more details on the tradition of veneration of surbs see: [3, 4]. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A *shushpa* is a cross-shaped veil to cover the chalice during the liturgy. In the villages, shushpas refer to all kinds of cloth votive offerings: vows, shrouds, scraps, ribbons, embroidered envelopes, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I believe it is necessary to preserve the anonymity of the owners and their place of residence because of the considerable material value of their family shrines. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Saint Grigor Narekatsi (c. 951 – 1003) was an Armenian poet, philosopher, theologian, representative of the early Armenian Renaissance. Saint Grigor Narekatsi is revered by the Catholic Church as one of the 36 Teachers of the Church. The most renowned of his works, composed shortly before his death, is the hymnbook “The Book of Lamentations.” It is believed that these hymns of profound faith have healing power and the recitation of fragments of the text is still a common healing practice. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. From Armenian *port*, belly button, and *verznell*, to take, i.e. ‘treating hernias.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Field Data – Personal Interviews with Armenians conducted in Aparan region in 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Grabar* is an ancient Armenian written language, used as a literary language until the early 19th century. The liturgical language of the Armenian Apostolic Church. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ashkharaba*r is the modern Armenian language. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Field Data – Personal Interviews with Armenians conducted in Аparan region in 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I thank Y. Antonyan for providing information on such family narratives. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of NAS RA conducted a series of expeditions and collected data on 40 such manuscripts in private possession. In 2022 an album of 29 manuscripts was published based on the results of the expeditions [2]. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Matenadaran – St. Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts in Yerevan. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Field Data – Personal Interviews with Armenians conducted in Аparan region in 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Matah is a tradition of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The essence of matah is the making of alms, a sacrifice. It is performed in the form of a sacrifice followed by a charitable meal or distribution of meat from a sacrificial animal. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. It is celebrated 63 days before Easter. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Field Data – Expert Interview conducted in 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Another 46 scrolls are in the collection of the Holy Etchmiadzin, 44 scrolls in the Library of the Mekhitarist Congregation at St Lazarus in Venice, 43 in the Cathedral of St Lazarus in New Julfa in Iran, and 13 scrolls in the British Library in London. There are 13 scrolls in the Armenian History Museum in Yerevan, 13 scrolls in the British Library in London, 11 scrolls in the Library of the Mekhitarist Congregation in Vienna, 6 scrolls in the National Library in Paris, 3 units in the manuscript department of the Russian State Library, some amulet scrolls in Romania, and also in the US Library of Congress [16]. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Nerses Shnorhali (1110–1173) was an Armenian poet, Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Saint of the Armenian Apostolic and Roman Catholic Churches. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Which links them to Coptic magic papyri (11, p. 100). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Field Data – Personal Interviews with Armenians conducted in Aparan region in 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)