

ETHNOGRAPHY

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH223594-607>



Research paper

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BURIAL RELATED BELIEFS AND RITUAL SYSTEM IN ARMENIAN ORAL CULTURE

Abstract. This study examines the funeral ritual system described in Armenian oral tradition, including subsequent memorial ceremonies, related beliefs and concepts, and the different types of burial. While the ideas and symbols associated with death are universal, Armenian tradition expresses them through unique ritual forms and oral narratives. Drawing upon ethnographic, folkloric, archaeological, and textual sources, including both published research and fieldwork materials, the study analyzes the cultural and religious layers of Armenian funeral practices and their transformation over time.

Although many traditional customs have changed or disappeared, certain beliefs and practices continue to retain their significance by adapting to new socio-political and cultural realities. Particular attention is given to representations of death, the soul, and the afterlife in folktales and epic poems, where these concepts are personified and poetically interpreted. The persistence of such elements demonstrates the continuity of Armenian spiritual life, revealing funeral beliefs not as mere remnants of the past, but as living expressions of a cultural philosophy that continues to shape collective identity and spirituality, preserve cultural memory, affirm the immortality of the soul, and provide meaning to the mystery of death.

Keywords: death; burial; heaven; hell; soul; grogh; angel; lamentation; funeral; sleep

For citation: Hayrapetyan T., Madatyan L., Arakelyan S. Burial related beliefs and ritual system in Armenian oral culture. *History, Archeology and Ethnography of the Caucasus*. 2026. Vol. 22. № 3 P. 594-607. doi.org/10.32653/CH223594-607

ЭТНОГРАФИЯ

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH223594-607>



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ПОГРЕБАЛЬНЫЕ ВЕРОВАНИЯ И РИТУАЛЬНАЯ СИСТЕМА В АРМЯНСКОЙ УСТНОЙ КУЛЬТУРЕ

Аннотация. В настоящем исследовании рассматривается система погребальных обрядов, описанных в армянской устной традиции, включая последующие поминальные церемонии, связанные с ними верования и представления, а также различные типы захоронений. Хотя идеи и символы, связанные со смертью, универсальны, армянская традиция выражает их через уникальные ритуальные формы и устные повествования. В исследовании, опираясь на этнографические, фольклорные, археологические и текстовые источники – как в опубликованных исследованиях, так и в полевых материалах, – анализируются культурные и религиозные пласты армянских погребальных практик и их трансформация в течение времени. Особое внимание уделяется верованиям, отражённым в народных сказаниях и эпических поэмах, где образы смерти, души и загробного мира получают поэтическое и персонифицированное воплощение.

Хотя многие традиционные обычаи претерпели изменения или со временем исчезли, отдельные верования и практики продолжают сохранять своё значение, адаптируясь к новым социально-политическим и культурным реалиям. Особое внимание уделяется представлениям о смерти, душе и загробном мире, отражённым в фольклорных текстах и эпических произведениях, где эти понятия персонифицируются и получают поэтическое осмысление. Сохранение данных элементов свидетельствует о преемственности армянской духовной культуры, позволяющая рассматривать погребальные верования не как простые пережитки прошлого, а как живые проявления культурной философии, продолжающие формировать коллективную идентичность и духовность, сохранять культурную память, утверждать представление о бессмертии души и придавать смысл тайне смерти.

Данная работа представляет собой важный источник, который будет представлять интерес не только для арменоведов, но и для учёных и исследователей, занимающихся изучением погребальной обрядности и представлений о смерти.

Ключевые слова: смерть; погребение; небо; ад; душа; грех; ангел; вопль; похоронный обряд; сон

Для цитирования: Айрапетян Т.Л., Мадатян Л.Г., Аракелян С.Ш. Погребальные верования и ритуальная система в армянской устной культуре // История, археология и этнография Кавказа. 2026. 22. № 3. С. 594-607. doi.org/10.32653/CH223594-607

Introduction

The ideas and beliefs surrounding death are universal, yet each culture interprets and expresses them through its own unique worldview and ritual practices. Armenians honor the body¹ of the deceased through traditional burial rites, laying the person to rest in the earth and sending them off to eternity.

In Armenia, the funeral rituals form a deeply rooted system that reflects centuries of spiritual thought, mythological imagination, and communal identity.

The Armenian funeral ritual system, along with the associated beliefs and ideas about death, has been the subject of study by scholars such as Manuk Abeghyan, Sargis Harutyunyan, Yerazik Harutyunyan, archaeologist Garegin Tumanyan, armenologists Barbara Schmidt, James Russell, culturologist Vladimir Toporov. In the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, Valuable ethnographic and folklore materials have also been gathered from various regions of the Armenian Highland by researchers, including Yervand Lalayan, Garegin Nzhdehyan, Garegin Srvandzdyants, Gevorg Sherents, Bense and others. The complied materials and works have helped preserve fragments of a worldview in which life, death, and the afterlife are closely intertwined.

Building on this foundation, the present study aims to reveal and analyze the cultural and ritual layers of Armenian funeral practices, along with the religious and mythological ideas that accompany them in oral tradition. For this purpose, we have compared published research with archival folklore and ethnographic materials, unpublished manuscripts, and our own fieldwork. We conducted the study using a combination of historical-comparative, textual and comparative methods of the mythological school. Therefore, the interdisciplinary nature of this research, uniting archaeological, religious, folkloric, and textual perspectives, allows a comprehensive understanding of how Armenians have conceptualized death and the afterlife through time.

This work is an important source that will interest not only Armenologists, but also scholars and researchers studying funeral rites and beliefs about death.

Religious and mythological beliefs and ideas

According to Armenian folk belief, the day of a person's death is predetermined and inscribed on their forehead, while the record of their life is kept in celestial pots. Each year, a drop of water falls into the pot, and when it becomes full, death arrives. Another belief holds that every person has a star that falls from the sky when their life ends — a poetic image linking earthly existence with the cosmos [3, p. 178].

Despite the diversity of burial customs among different cultures², the philosophy behind them remains universal: the soul is believed to be immortal and in need of care even after death. For this reason, rituals, and prayers continue to serve as bridges between the alive and the deceased, affirming a shared human desire to preserve the memory of loved ones and to give meaning to the mystery of death.

Belief in the soul³ occupies a significant place in the religious ideology of Armenians. It is closely tied to notions of the afterlife and the religious rituals derived from these beliefs, which continue to be a part of Armenians daily life to this day. Notably, even during certain household tasks, people would whisper incantatory prayers, asking for “mercy” to the soul of an unmemorable deceased person. For example, one of the magical prayer formulas recited while untangling a knotted thread is addressed to an unmemorable elderly woman.

Աստուծօ օղորմի աւնիշատակ Մանիշակի հոքուն,

Նրա խնունճն էնի յիդ գայ (արձակուի), իմն էստի:

May God have mercy upon the soul of unmemorable Manishak;

1 Examples can be found in both the works of Armenian historians and epic folklore. These include the honoring of King Artashes's body, as described by Movses Khorenatsi [1, pp. 228–230]; the burial of those who fell in the battle between Indian priests and the troops of Armenian princes near the village of Kuars in Taron, who were interred in a common grave with a memorial monument erected over it [2, pp. 41–42]; and the burial of the deceased accompanied by a liturgy, as mentioned in the Armenian epic “Sasna Tsrer” (Daredevils of Sassoun), among others.

2 A remarkable study on this topic was conducted by the scientists from Florida State University [4, p. 44–50].

3 According to popular belief, souls, angels, and demons are all incorporeal, a notion supported by Yeznik Koghbatsi, the author of one of the key works of Armenian philosophy [5, p. 73]. This concept was also explored by the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, who argued that souls exist independently of the body and are endowed with reason [6, p. 87]. This perspective is likewise embraced by Christianity. One manifestation of this belief can be seen in the frescoes at the western entrance (interior side) of the Akhtala Monastery, which depict the religious ideas of the Armenian Apostolic Church during the Middle Ages.

Let her spindle untangle there, mine here [7, p 17].

So, people often remembered the deceased and prayed for their souls, a practice that still exists in Armenian culture today.

Oral culture provides the means to observe and analyze humanity's perspective on death, the grave, the otherworld, and the deceased which are expressed across almost all genres of folklore, including riddles: *Հողի տուն, մսի դուռ, փետե էրդուխ* (*Earthen house, fleshy door, a wooden threshold*) [8, p. 153]. Here according to popular belief, "Earthen house" is the grave, "fleshy door" is the body of the deceased, and "wooden threshold" is the coffin.

It is important to note that Armenian sources concerning the deceased are directly connected to the relationship between the soul and the body. This belief underlies certain customs, such as avoiding mirrors late at night and covering mirrors in the home of the deceased with a white sheet. According to ancient thought, "every reflection is the opposite mirror twin of the phenomenon," which symbolizes the existence of a parallel or opposing world [9, pp. 149–150].

Based on our fieldwork, during funeral rituals mirrors were covered so that the soul of the deceased would not get into the living person through the reflection, an act that was considered equivalent to death⁴. In this regard, Zalina Kusayeva's article is noteworthy, as it discusses the ritual use of mirrors among many peoples and the multiple symbolic meanings and artistic motifs found in folklore and ethnographic materials. According to the researcher, these qualities grant the mirror the status of a sign [10, p. 73]. Furthermore, the semiotic concept of duality underlying the mirror archetype has been analyzed by Umberto Eco [11, p. 78].

Visions of the underworld

In Armenian folk ideas and beliefs, vision has its own place. It is a state when the soul is snatched from the body, remains in the air or travels, sees various things, which mainly relate to the underworld, and the body temporarily ceases to breathe. The ideas of the afterlife are divided into two parts: heaven and hell. In religious folk ideas, there is the bridge of a hair separating heaven and hell, under which the river of fire flows. Sinful souls are taken by countless devils and subjected to various tortures: one beats them with a lead whip, another pricks their ribs with red-hot steel bottles, another tears their flesh with tongs, their mouths are filled with worms, etc. There is also a seven-headed dragon⁵, which breathes fire and burns them [12, 89; 13, p. 319].

Armenian beliefs about the afterlife share much in common with of Iran. In Iranian religious thought, this world and the underworld are separated by the Chinvat Bridge. On the third day after death, the souls of the departed gather there. The righteous Rashn weighs the deeds of the good and the wicked on golden scales. The bridge widens for the virtuous, allowing them to cross into heaven, which consists of four stations. Sinners, however, fall from the narrow bridge into hell. In both Armenian and Iranian cosmologies, heaven is imagined as being above, while hell lies below [14, pp. 132, 261]. The very words *heaven* (*draxt*, meaning "garden" or "orchard") and *hell* (*dʒɔχk*^h, meaning "evil place") are of Iranian origin [15, pp. 293, 310].

Similarly, in Armenian belief, a sinful soul cannot cross the bridge of a hair, as it breaks under the weight of sin, casting the soul into the river of fire. There, the monstrous Krjelatam⁶ gnaws human flesh with its teeth like a ghou, and sinners, buried up to their necks, are boiled in vats filled with lead [13, p. 319]. Perhaps such perception explains why Armenians have traditionally treated the body of the deceased with great reverence and care. Until the mid-1920s⁷, it was customary to place the body of the dead person in the church, where prayers and rituals prepared the soul for its journey, purifying it to reach eternal bliss in heaven.

In Armenian notions of heaven, the soul of the righteous takes on an angelic form and dwells among angels in the garden of heaven. The springs of immortality flow and the apples of eternal life grow there; the table of

4 T. Hayrapetyan, S. Arakelyan, *Field Folklore and Ethnographic Materials (FFEM)*, Kotayk region of RA, village Hatis, 2019. notebook № 1, page, 21-22, narrator: Greta Davtyan.

5 Yeznik Koghbatsi expressed his religious perspective on dragons, writing that dragons are nothing more than large land snakes or huge sea fish, which are said to be mountain-shaped and huge [5, p. 80].

6 Garegin Srvandztyants interprets it as a personification of the word "gnashing of teeth" mentioned in the Bible [12, p. 89].

7 Due to the establishment of Soviet rule in Armenia, beginning in 1921–1930 and becoming widespread between 1935 and 1939, mass arrests, exiles, and executions of Armenian clergy and intellectuals took place. In parallel with these repressive measures, churches were closed, demolished, or converted into warehouses [16, p. 96–114; 17, p. 3–25]. Under such conditions, the tradition of placing the deceased in churches came to an end in Armenia. Since the beginning of the 21st century, to avoid placing the deceased at home, funeral halls have been used instead of churches for holding requiem and burial ceremonies.

God is set with all manner of good things for the righteous, and the gates and stones of heaven shine like the sun [12, pp. 89–90]. In this sense, Armenian folk beliefs have preserved the biblical perception of heavenly paradise within their religious and mythological imagination [18, pp. 21, 9–27, 350–351].

Armenian folklore also retains contradictory religious ideas regarding followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church and Armenian Catholics (Franks). The Armenian Apostolic Church rejects the concept of purgatory, teaching that the soul proceeds directly to its waiting place after death. In contrast, the Catholic Church maintains that the soul passes through purgatory before ascending to heaven purified. This difference is reflected in a folk dialogue recorded by Yervand Lalayan between two priests—one Apostolic and one Catholic. When the Apostolic priest asks why Catholic burials are more expensive, the Catholic priest explains: the Apostolic Church sends the soul directly to the kingdom of heaven, while they first send it to purgatory and later remove it through the prayers and offerings of the deceased's family, for which a considerable payment is required [19, p. 17].

Sleep and death

In the Armenian language, sleep and nap (*ninj*) are synonyms, and the latter is also perceived as death, from which we have the noun *nnjetsyal* (deceased), which means a dead person. According to the popular ideas about death, sleep is regarded as a temporary death, followed by awakening and is paralleled with resurrection.

In mythology, the rooster is credited with the idea of resurrecting the dead [20, p. 309–310]. It is interesting to note that there is direct evidence of this belief in Armenian riddles, which first describe the appearance of the rooster, and then its function. Predominantly roosters have its mission of awakening sleeping people who are considered to be the temporarily dead. For example:

Թագն ի գլուխ՝ սղոց է, գիշերվան մեռելահարույց է:

The crown on the head is a saw, the one who resurrects the dead at night.

or

Թագվոր մը կա հինգ,

There was a king from ancient times,

Թագը կրթօխն օսկի սղոց,

The crown on the head is a golden saw,

Էլալ, կանչեց ննջեցեղոց,

He came and called the dead,

Քրիստոս հարչալ ի մեռելոց:

And Christ resurrected the dead [21, 68–69].

Death appears in two ways: objectified and personified [22, p. 387]. By objectifying the idea of death, the individual has tried to find a way to reconcile with the natural resolution of life and overcome the fear of death. For example, in the prayer said before going to bed, sleep is presented as death, and the bed as a grave.

Մտայ ի տիղս (անկողին), ի գերեզմանս,

Անխօսի, անխոստովանի.

Անմահ մեռիլ իմ, անգերեզման թաղվիլ իմ,

Անթառամ փսակին, լուսեղէն դրախտին,

Քրիստոսի տիսին արժանի լիլիմ:

I entered my bed, my grave,

Without speaking, without confession,

I have died immortally, I have been buried without a grave,

I may deserve the imperishable wreath, of the radiant paradise,

to see Christ [7, p.15].

The prayer reveals the supposed similarities between death and sleep, the bed and the grave, and the religious idea of the salvation of the soul, which is connected with the second coming of Christ and the Judgment Day. Epic folklore has preserved interesting ideas about the soul being outside the body during sleep. In the Armenian church epic “Mokos” we find the following: Panpool comes and sees the sleeping Garegin:

Էրեւր կարմիր արև դարձեր, կը հագարնր լուր քերնէն կելլր:

The face had become a red sun, a multicolored light was emanating from the mouth [23, p. 69].

What the brave heroine sees really frightens her, and she realizes that she is dealing with someone “favored” by heaven. A similar phenomenon is observed in the folktale “Shahbaz Melik” compiled from the historical district of Mokos where the hero attributes the light emanating from his mouth to the sanctifying power of myron (holy oil):

Մենք ալիսանի մէջ մըկրրուկեր ենք, Էտի մեռնի շընորքն ա, կէլի, կը մըտնի իմ պերան:

We were baptized in the pool, and it is the grace of the myuron that goes in and out of my mouth [24, p. 85].

In both examples, there is a notion of the “dualism” of the soul, which is connected to the Holy Spirit or the Comforter, a person of the divine Trinity who dwells within humans through the imprint of the myuron.

Հոգիդ արքայութեն, մարմինդ խանգիստ խանգատարան գնայ,

յոս-կամար փայլի գերեզմանիդ, յիշատակդ բարի էլնի:

May your soul enter the kingdom, your body enter a peaceful resting place,

May your grave shine with light, may your memory be kind.

or

Գաբրիէլյան փողին, խաչի լուսուն, Էրանական ձայնին,

անմահական փառք պատուին ու պսակին արժանանաս:

May you be worthy of the trumpet of Gabriel, the light of the cross, the blessed voice,

May you be worthy of the glory, honor, and wreath of immortality [8, p.163].

The wish for the body to rest in peace, as expressed in the first blessing, becomes clear when we relate it to the epic genre of the folktale. These tales often mention the punishment of the dead⁸ who have unresolved debts, the beating of their bodies, and the eventual payment of those debts by a protagonist. Afterward, the body is reburied with a priest's blessing. According to the Armenian fairy tales corresponding to number 505 in Hans-Jörg Utter's "The Types of International Folk Tales" [25, p. 289-290] the heroes are protected from further trials by the angel of the “saved” deceased or the soul of the same deceased. [26, p. 230-231, 245, 252; 27, pp. 450-451; 28, pp. 234-235, 242]. The desire for a light-arch to descend upon the grave is likely tied to the Holy Spirit. According to Christian doctrine, saints are incorruptible, and their graves are considered blessed. The imagery of a light-arch descending on a grave is reflected in Armenian epic “Sasna Tsrer” (Daredevils of Sassoun). The protagonist David, spending the night in his father's hunting lodge, sees light emanating from a stone. This light marks Mher's grave, located beneath the ruins of the Church of the Holy Mother of God on Mount Maruta:

Մարմար քար պացվիր ի,

Լուս կամար վերեն կանգնիր ի,

Վանքի խիմ պացվիր ի:

The marble stone has been opened, a light-arch has been erected on it,

The foundation of the monastery has been opened [29, p. 262; 30, pp. 191-192].

After the vision, David rebuilds his father's monastery, which is essentially the embodiment of the idea of resurrection. Both the grave and the church implicitly identify their sacredness in popular imagination, which leads to the idea of the grave as a home, a resting place [31, p. 125]. The Armenian heroic epic poem has preserved this idea, placing Mher's grave at the base of the the Church of the Holy Mother of God on Mount Maruta⁹.

The cemetery, in addition to being a resting place for the deceased, is a meeting place¹⁰ for the living people and a safe place to connect with the deceased and share their worries with them. As a meeting place, it is mentioned in folktales [27, pp. 343-344], and we also find motifs of visiting the cemetery and asking for advice in the “Sasna Tsrer” (Daredevils of Sassoun)¹¹.

While discussing the concept of death, it becomes necessary to consider the role of the dog as a guardian, mediator, and companion between this world and the next in Indo-European and Armenian death rituals. This is reflected in the Armenian myth “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram”, which preserves traces of ancient beliefs within a historical-traditional framework [22, p. 364; 32, pp. 389–390]. In these narratives, one of the dogs is associated with death, while the other embodies life [33, p. 41]. Similar motifs also appear in Romanian mourning songs, where dog-wolf figure symbolically represents death [34, p. 133].

According to medieval Armenian authors such as Yeznik Koghbatsi and Sebeos, ancient Armenian beliefs held that the *Aralezs*, spiritual beings descending from dogs, resembled the life-giving canines of the underworld. They were believed to lick the wounds of the deceased and bring them back to life [5, p. 78].

⁸ This phenomenon is also recoded by Armenian philosopher, translator, social and ecclesiastical figure Yeznik Koghbatsi [5, p. 37].

⁹ There are quite a lot of churches built on the graves of saints in the Armenian Highlands, which are also called testimonies. Among them are the monastery of St. Karapet in Taron, the monastery and the church of Hripsime and Gayane in Vagharshapat, etc. And this cultural text occupies its stable and somewhat pivotal place in Armenian epic folklore.

¹⁰ Shakespeare used this motif in his famous play “Romeo and Juliet”.

¹¹ All stories of Little Mher's branch have this section.

According to the tradition, the Assyrian queen Shamiram placed the body of the slain Armenian king Ara the Beautiful in the care of the *Aralezs*, imploring them to lick his wounds and restore him to life [1, pp. 60–62; 35, p. 51]. The severed head of Armenian general Mushegh Mamikonyan was to be revived by the *Aralezs* [36, p. 362]. According to Armenologist James Russell, “In the fourth century, Christians apparently believed that the *Aralezs* descended from heaven to revive dead heroes” [32, p. 41]. The life-giving role of these dog-like spirits also appears allegorically in Armenian folktales, particularly those classified under Type 590 in Hans-Jörg Uther’s “The Types of *International Folk Tale*” [25, p. 347], (forty-four Armenian variants of the cycle have been identified). For instance, in the tale “Zanjil Kran” (Chain Cutter) [37, p. 141], dogs dig up a grave, retrieve a dead boy, and revive him with the Water of Life:

Ձեն կինի մէջ քյաղքին, թէ թաւաւորոյ փեսան շներ հարուցուցին, խանին վեր:

Your wife’s dead son-in-law, the dogs have awakened, the khan has risen [37, p. 141].

The news spreads through the city that the dogs have revived the king’s son-in-law. In another tale, “Oske Tsam, Oske Jkund” (Dolden Hair, Golden Finger) [38, pp. 97–98], a dragon takes out the protagonist’s eye and buries his body in an inaccessible place. Two dogs dig up the earth, recover the boy, and bring him back to life. In certain variants, such as “Archin Tghan” (The Son of the Bear) [39, pp. 274–275], the dog hides the hero’s eyes from the dragon, keeps them in its mouth, and later replaces them in the protagonist’s sockets using water and a dove’s feather, restoring his sight:

Ըտեղ մին թուլա յա ինում, դաստի աշկերը յօր ա օնում, պրբանումը պահում:

There is a dog there; it immediately takes the eyes and holds them in its mouth [40, p. 127].

Folklorist Sargis Harutyunyan interprets the dog-like *Aralezs* as a product of Armenian mythological thought, noting that both their name, derived from *Ara*, and their life-restoring function symbolically link them to King Ara the Beautiful himself [22, p. 383].

Soul taker

In folk beliefs, *grogh*¹² the personifications of death and the Archangel Gabriel also have their stable role and function. Although in Christian doctrine Gabriel is considered a herald, in folk beliefs he remains rooted as a soul taker. In folktales and ethnographic materials, the ideas about *grogh* or soul taker are very similar: if a person is evil, *grogh* takes the soul, if he is good then the angel takes [3, 178; 13, 309]. The methods of soul taking vary: the reaper extracts something dark from the mouth of an evil person, symbolizing the sinful soul, accompanied by torment. In contrast, from the mouth of a good person, the angel joyfully extracts something luminous, symbolizing the righteous soul [26, pp. 473–474]. The soul is often envisioned as a black or white bird [3, p. 185]¹³. This concept persists to this day in various regions of Armenia, where Armenians refer to dying as “to give the soul”¹⁴.

In the tale “Karapet-Bek” [42, pp. 456–477] there is an interesting Christianized notion: the souls of two different people are taken by the same old man, who is visible only to the protagonist and the dying hosts. He takes the soul of the first person by beating him and extracting something dark from his mouth, while he takes the soul of the second person by offering a golden apple surrounded by light, making him happy and extracting something resembling light from his mouth. In other words, the souls of both individuals are taken by the same old man, but he appears as a gloomy figure to one and as a bright angel to the other¹⁵.

According to folk beliefs, *groghs* gather at night at the command of the chief *grogh*, who has a fiery green stick. When he strikes the ground three times with his fiery stick, the *groghs* congregate in an instant. The *groghs* are described as having their heads in the clouds and their feet in the abyss, and their faces are as black as the darkness of midnight, their muzzles hang down to their knees. They have the power to transform into the size of a flea or expand into a large cloud covering the sky and earth. Each *grogh* carries a stick, which they use to beat and torture dying individuals [12, pp. 79–80]. There is also a belief that *groghs* cannot enter houses

12 An imaginary evil spirit or angel.

13 We also encounter the epistemological concept of the soul of the righteous person taking the form of a dove and inheriting the kingdom of heaven in Agathangeghos [41, pp. 339, 341 (605–606)].

14 T. Hayrapetyan, S. Arakelyan, FFEM, Kotayk province, village Hatis, 2019, notebook № 1, sheet 3–5, speakers: Greta Davtyan, Anna Sahakyan, Bella Manukyan.

15 We find this notion in the conversation between Gregor Lusavorich (Gregory the Illuminator) and his angel. Mesrop Mashtots Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, Hand. 2782, pp174b–179b.

where there is a *Hmayil*¹⁶ or *Narek*¹⁷ [12, p. 80-82]. People light a lamp at the entrance and pray to attract the angel of God to protect the house. The angel then chases away the *groggh* and takes the soul of the dying person to heaven. *Grogghs* are believed to live in trees at night, as well as in water sources, wells, canals, and ruined buildings. When an epidemic breaks out, people believe that God has removed his hand from the area where the *grogghs* have carried out their “dark work” unhindered. According to folk beliefs, the chief *groggh* keeps a *davtar* (a notebook) where he records the names of those “left out of God’s protection” and sends his officials to them [12, pp. 81-82]. Moreover, according to folk beliefs, *grogghs* are identified with demons and devils, and their notion in epic folklore is embodied by strangers: Artavan, Msramelik, Arab, or demons: Charbahar Wind, Hamtol, etc. These are all agents of evil and spread only destruction and death after them, which are defeated and killed only by chosen heroes who enjoy the patronage of the good force, Fortune.

In daily life, when someone started yawning or sneezing they would close their mouth to prevent the devil from entering their stomach and causing them to become possessed. These beliefs stem from the notion that if Christian individuals are not buried with prayers and the presence of a priest after death, they transform into *gornadabs*¹⁸. Therefore, relatives make every effort to ensure that the deceased is buried with the presence of a priest.

Burial

The ritual of sending off the soul to the underworld is called *hugharkavorutyun* (funeral) in Armenian (i+ughi+arkanel – to send off), culminating in the burial of the deceased and the sealing of the grave. Ghevond Alishan mentions that among our pagan ancestors, the cremation of the dead was not practiced; instead, it was common to bury the deceased in the ground or place the dead in a semi-preserved grave within a stone tomb [44, p. 443].

Thus, it can be assumed that the ancestors of the Armenians, holding the belief in bodily resurrection, did not cremate the body. Instead, after the ritual of washing, they buried the deceased in the ground, using either a coffin or a shroud. This distant connection to the idea of resurrection can be linked to the belief in a dying and resurrecting deity of nature, a concept that became more firmly established during the Christian era.

While analyzing burial rituals, it is noteworthy to mention that among Armenians there was once a tradition of placing a stone in the place of the deceased when taking him out of the house, so that his memory would remain in that house [45, p. 323], and it also served the function of distracting the deceased so that his soul would lose its orientation on the way home and would not lead anyone away from the house [46, p. 160].

Of note, to this day, Armenians pour water behind the coffin as it is taken out of the house, so that the path of the deceased may be smooth and he may cross the boundary of the afterlife without hindrance [46, p. 160]. After the burial, those who participated in the funeral procession are expected to wash and then share a funeral meal together.

Commemorative ceremonies for the deceased continued at the cemetery (on the day after the burial, on the seventh day, on the fortieth day, and on the first anniversary) and were always accompanied by a meal, as it was believed that the souls of the dead wandered near their graves for a year [47, p. 26]. “The soul first requires material pleasures, i. e., it needs something to eat and drink,” writes Adolf Bastian, “considering it the remnant of ancient worship” [48, p. 8].

Through these commemorative rituals (burning incense and praying, observing mourning, visiting graves, and placing a tombstone on the anniversary) Armenians continue to strengthen the spiritual bond between the deceased and their family, ensuring the continued protection of the deceased over their kin. This also explains the practice of sprinkling wheat or barley on the grave, which is linked to the riddle of dying and reviving wheat and symbolizes the continuity of life [49, p. 249].

16 Hmayil is a written amulet in the form of parchment.

17 Narek-The Book of Lamentations written by St. Gregor Narekatsi. St. Gregor Narekatsi (c. 951–1003) was an Armenian medieval poet, philosopher, cleric, and Christian theologian, regarded as a foundational figure in the revival of Armenian literature. In February 2015, Pope Francis included St. Gregor Narekatsi among the thirty-six Doctors of the Catholic Church. Among Narek’s works, the most renowned and widely appreciated is the poetic collection of prayers known as the *Book of Lamentations*, commonly referred to as the *Narek*. Narek is recognized among Armenians as a holy book, believed to possess miraculous and healing powers.

18 According to belief, if the deceased is not buried according to ecclesiastical rites, the soul remains on earth and takes the form of a dog or wolf, which is called *gornadab*. For more details about *gornadab* or *gornapshtik*, see 43, p.162-168:

Types of burials: Dismemberment and the Reburial of the Relics of Saints

In Armenian epic folklore, burial is depicted in its various forms, with interpretations that reflect the people's everyday beliefs and perceptions. It is worth discussing particularly the burial of Msra-Melik in the branch of David of the epic poem "Sasna Tsrer". The people honor their identity and the blood that flows within Melik, and as a sign of respect for their own identity, David buries a piece of Melik's body, which has been divided into two parts and the other part of body is taken by Melik's father.

Վարդ վիր էրաւ՝
 Մէ կտուրդ դէս կնաց, մէ կտուրդ դէն կնաց:
 Աջակողմը Դավիթ դրեց ձիու վերս,
 Պիտեց, ժամով-պատարագով թաղել տւից:
 When he rose, one part went one way,
 And the other part went another.
 David placed the right side on his horse,
 Brought it and buried it with a religious ceremony [29, p. 283].

As we can see above, the epic poem preserves the memory of dismembered funerals¹⁹, which later received a Christian interpretation: a burial conducted with religious ceremony. The 13th-century Armenian historian and church figure Kirakos Gandzaketsi reports that due to sharp disputes between different communities over the burial place of the deceased, the body of the Armenian King Levon was divided and part of it was buried in the royal city of Sis, the other part in a monastery called Akner [51, p. 139].

Historians often mention how the archpriests of the church brought relics of apostles and other Christian saints to Armenia and reburied them in a process referred to as *ampopum* (entombment). These entombments involved dismemberment, as specific parts of saints' bodies were reburied, sometimes along with relics of multiple saints following a special rite [2, p. 49]. In some cases, this was carried out under the guidance of an angel, and, as a rule, churches were built at these sites²⁰.

In this case, there is no washing ritual before the burial, nor any requiem, burial and memorial services. However, it should be noted that in this case, the "reburied" saints are continuously commemorated during church ceremonies and the Holy Liturgy, especially in the church where they are interred, and are regarded as intercessors before God. Their "new grave" is also sealed²¹ and entrusted to the care of the monastic community of the respective monastery [2, p. 28].

Alive or ritual burial

This type of burial is reflected in folklore, where protagonistes are often depicted as being imprisoned within rocks. In Armenian epic folklore, the "imprisoned" heroes are cultural heroes who are princes with the strength of a giant. They are usually "imprisoned" in rocks against their will. In the fairy tale "Odz Manuk and Arin-Armaneli" (The Snake-Child and Arin-Armaneli), the heroine follows the instructions of her deceased mother and locks herself in a cave with the enchanted Arin-Armaneli. With the help of the girl, the latter is freed from the spell, fully revives, and leaves the cave [52, pp. 175-181]. In epic poems, both Artavazd and

19 In Armenia, burial mounds with dismemberment have been excavated, which are located in the archaeological sites of Artik, Stepanavan, Verin Naver, Karashamb, Talin, Aparan Reservoir Bank, Hnaberd, Lchashen 2, Kanagegh, Artsvanik and mainly relate to the Early Bronze Age period. For details, see 50, p. 138-152. An artifact with body parts enclosed in a sacred vessel with a ritual dismemberment of a man dating back to the 4rd millennium BC was also found in Areni 1 Cave in Vayots Dzor, Armenia (The material has not yet been published). We would like to thank the head of the scientific expedition excavating Areni 1 Cave, archaeologist Boris Gasparyan for the information).

20 The ideological cornerstone of building a memorial or church at the burial sites of saints among Armenians is the vision of the Gregor Lusavorich, in which he was instructed to build resting places-chapels over the bones of the Hripsimeans [41, pp. 420-421].

21 In the Armenian funeral rite, the priest places a seal with the sign of the cross on the grave of the deceased, which, according to belief, will be opened on the Day of Judgment, when the seven seals of the Book of Life are opened [18, 336-338, Revelation chap. 5, 6], the seven trumpets of the angels sound [18, 339-340; 341-342, Revelation chap. 8, 9, 11:15-19], when the judgment of the dead takes place [18, 349-350, Revelation 20:11-15]. The funeral rite is written in detail in the Armenian Church's ritual book called "Mashtots". See, Mother Mashtots (10th century)[53, p. 255-275].

Little Mher are locked in rocks due to the curse placed upon them by their fathers. Artavazd is kidnapped by *kajks* (invisible demons) and replaced by a demon, while Little Mher gains demonic power. Both characters have a duality because of which they were cursed to remain immortal, without descendants, imprisoned alive in a mountain against their will: Artavazd in Mount Masis, and Little Mher in Agravakar. Both of them are accompanied by sacred animals: Artavazd by dogs, Little Mher by a horse. Over time, significant changes have occurred in eschatological insights and folk beliefs: when Artavazd comes out, the world will face destruction. In contrast, in some stories, Little Mher awaits the second coming of Christ, and according to the others, when justice will be established in the world. The key difference between these two heroes lies in their roles within the epic cycle: Artavazd exists outside the cycle and does not contribute to the creation of a new world, while Little Mher remains an integral part of the epic narrative. Little Mher is destined to play a role in the creation of a new world. Ancient Greek philosophers also examined similar ideas and concluded that “in reality, there is both resurrection and the birth of the living from the dead, as well as the existence of the souls of the deceased” [6, pp. 80–81]. A similar belief exists among Armenians: a living hero must emerge from the chaos of the underworld to restore justice on the Earth. In this context, the protagonists, locked in rocks against their will, undergo a sacred burial ritual, which their fathers voluntarily undertake to perform, through a curse which condemns them to immortality and prevents them from having heirs. Meanwhile, religious and folkloric eschatological perspectives evolve over time and are influenced by spatial-temporal transformations. Although these insights sometimes run parallel, they also develop along distinct, independent lines.

Ritual system: Washing the body of the deceased

German armenologist Barbara Schmidt claims that funeral rituals are necessary to support the helpless deceased and to treat the lifeless corpse with respect. Consequently, funeral traditions and burial customs are created in different cultures and are carefully passed down from generation to generation [54, 79–80]. These traditions, which is still deeply rooted among Armenians have found their permanent place in national folklore. For example, in the church poem “Mokos”²², though briefly, the ritual stages are mentioned:

Փորեցի գետինը, լոզցուցի, էջուցի գերեզմանը.

Դրան քաշեցի քարը, գրեցի անունը:

I dug the ground, I washed it, I put it in the grave,

I put the stone on it, I wrote the name [23, էջ 37].

Here the ritual of washing is presented which is still performed immediately after the death of the deceased [3, p. 179]. After the death of a loved one, the relatives invite a priest to their house, who blesses the water for bathing the body and offer consolation to the grieving family.

During the ritual washing in Gandzak, a lamp was lit near the feet and head of the deceased and the following wish was whispered:

Քարդ քաղած ընի, հողդ մաղած ընի.

Դատաստանդ քաղցր ընի, զնալի ճանապարհդ քարի ընի.

Աղօթքդ տանդ լիսայ ընի, մնացածներդ քարի ընեն,

Դու էլ քարի մեռել ընիս, չմոռանան քե:

May your gravestone be set, and your soil be sifted,

May your judgment be sweet, and your journey peaceful,

May prayers be upon your house, and those who remain be kind,

May you be a blessed soul, and may you not be forgotten [45, p.321–322].

This act reflects the belief in the “Last Judgment” and the immortality of the soul, as well as the notion that even after death, the deceased continues to care for their family and loved ones from the underworld, praying for their well-being. Therefore, the wish for a safe journey to the underworld symbolically “paves the way” to heaven, where the soul is believed to be granted the blissful company of angels and saved souls. Additionally, the hope of becoming a blessed soul is connected to the idea of not taking anyone else with them after death and being remembered by their descendants and loved ones.

²² “Mokos” is an Armenian national epic, which mainly includes Christian talks and memories of the preaching of Christianity and the proclamation of the state religion in Armenia (1st–4th centuries AD). The prominent Armenian philologist, Armenologist and linguist, academician Manuk Abeghyan gave this type of epic the definition of a church novel [55, p. 184].

In ancient times, Armenians performed a mandatory ritual washing of the deceased's body. In mythology, water is viewed as a sacred and dual element, both living and dead, serving as a boundary between the upper and lower worlds [56, p. 102; 22, p. 16–17]. It symbolizes the passage through which the soul of the deceased moves from one reality to another [57, p. 67].

This ritual continues to this day among Armenians. At dawn, on the day following the funeral, a male relative closest to the deceased silently carries a bottle of water to the grave and breaks it above the headstone. This act is believed to quench the thirst of the departed soul and aid its journey into the afterlife²³.

Dirge

Dirges have important role in the funeral rituals [46, pp. 123–218], which are characteristic of all peoples. The ritual culture of laments is presented quite remarkably in the works of Armenian historians. Being the first writers of national epics²⁴, they paid great attention to this ritual layer related to the funeral. They described in detail not only the ritual of mournful songs but also the characters and their functions.

Movses Khorenatsi, mentioning the funeral of King Artashes, describes the wailing women and chanting maidens who played a role in the funeral ritual system [1, p. 230]. The Armenian historian Pavstos Buzand speaking about the circumstances of Gnel's death and the mourning that followed, describes Arshak's grieving and refers to Parandzem as the “mother of lament”, with whom the chanting maidens wept [34, p. 190].

In ethnographic materials, we also encounter dirges described by folklorists, which have the function not only of praising the deceased, highlighting their merits, and presenting their last will, but also aim to uncover and publicize the circumstances of death, as well as to reveal notions about the afterlife, etc.

The last word of the dying man is a sacred law for the living. He commands that when his sons get married they should visit his grave and announce the desirable news:

Մնաւ ու օսիցար արաւ՝ իս նամբուն վրայ թաղեցէք,

Քարս նշանով դրէք, անունս վրա գրեցէք,

Որդիկս ուր թագուր անէք, եւ աշօք անիմ, նայեցէք:

He died and left a request:

Bury me by the roadside,

Place a stone on me, write my name on it.

When you marry my sons, I will give a sign; watch for it [46, p. 154].

During one of our funeral service fieldwork, we witnessed the mourning of the deceased man's mother, who in her lamentation praised not only her son's external qualities but also his “pearly teeth” and expressed her wish to anoint his body with the balm of flowers from paradise.

Բալասանի ծաղիկ, որդի ջան,

Խորասանի ծաղիկ, որդի ջան,

Անունդը ջալահիր, որդի ջան:

Balsam flower, my son,

Khorasan flower, my son,

The teeth are jawahir, my son [46, 173].

The mother, who compared her deceased son to the “Balsam” and the “Khorasan”, likely referred to the most beloved frankincense tree and the unfading flower. She wished for her son's body to be anointed with the aforementioned balsams and for him to be deemed worthy of entry into Heavenly Paradise. The word *jawahir* (jawāhir) is an Arabic borrowing that means a precious stone. Here it is associated with a pearl which symbolize the pearl-like teeth of the deceased. This not only indicates the young age of the deceased but also highlights the ritual significance of pearls. Seashells and pearls have long been regarded as important artifacts in ancient burials across the Middle East. This is evident in archaeological findings from burial sites such as Lchashen, Talin, and Aygeshat [58, p. 38; 59, p.146, 241; 60, p. 129; 61, p. 155–156, 398]:

While compiling some folk traditions, we came across a mourning song of the deceased's mother during the funeral service, where, among the external virtues of her son, the pearl teeth and the desire to anoint the body with the balm of heavenly flowers are also mentioned:

²³ Hayrapetyan T., FFEM, Syunik region of the Republic of Armenia, village Tegah, 2007, notebook 3, pages 12–13. Narrator: Sudarik Elyazyan.

²⁴ “Vipasank”, “The War of Taron”, “Persian War”.

Բոյ բուսարթով բալա ջան,
 Մարգրիտ ակռերով բալա ջան,
 Ա՛խ, կարենայի դրախտի ծաղկանցից բալասան սարքեի,
 Յալիդ դարման անեի, բալա ջան...
My son with a tall, graceful figure,
My son with pearl-like teeth,
Ah, if only I could make a balm from the flowers of paradise,
I would heal your pain, my dear son²⁵...

It should be noted that in epic “Sasna Tsrer” the burial is also presented in the context of burying the deceased in a family tomb with a liturgy. The funeral song appears only in the form of litanies, which is one of the song sections of the epic and is connected with the memory of ancestors.

Although the Armenian Church, with strict rules [62, pp. 247, 304–305]²⁶, forbade burying the deceased with lamentation, tearing clothes, and funeral dirges, it was unable to eradicate the folk custom that had formed over millennia. This customs, with its unique features and vivid character continued to persist.

Conclusion

In conclusion, burial, with its rituals and beliefs, is reflected in Armenian folklore, often personified in specific genres. The funeral ritual system includes washing the body, interring the deceased with prayers and incense, and accompanying the burial with mourning. In Armenian religious and mythological perception, burial has types that are mostly fictionalized: dismemberment, living or ritual burial. The latter involves a hero locked in rocks, who awaits the time of his release, having a dog or a horse as a companion.

In folk traditions, death has a unique perception, with its materialization linked to vision, sleep, and bed. In contrast to the soul, death is personified as *grogh* and an angel. These two figures can be united in a single entity, depending on whether the deceased is considered kind or evil. In folk religious beliefs, *groghs* form a separate group, who are depicted in a negative way and are presented as agents of hell.

Sleep and vision are recurring short-term states in folk religious beliefs, symbolizing temporary death and followed by awakening as a sign of resurrection. Vision is mainly this worldly “fact” confirming the ideas of the underworld, hell and heaven, and these notions were accepted unconditionally.

Today, although these ideas and beliefs are not part of Armenian everyday life, they continue to be transmitted orally as a cultural value. The respect for the deceased remains significant, accompanied by a distinct ritual system and its transformation.

25 Hayrapetyan T., Arakelyan S., Madatyan L., FFEM, Aragatsotn Province of the Republic of Armenia, Ashnak village, 2021, notebook 3, pp. 21-24, narrator Varduhi Adamyan.

26 The Canons of Gregor Lusavorich, The Canons of Athanas Alexandratsi.

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Поступила в редакцию 18.02.2025 г.
 Принята в печать 03.02.2026 г.
 Опубликовано 30.09.2026 г.

Received 18.02.2025
 Accepted 03.02.2026
 Published 30.09.2026