Cremation and Mortuary Variability in Ancient Armenia

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Though the region that is modern day Armenia has always been part of the Classical world, this is rarely apparent in English language scholarship. Maps of the Classical world almost always relegate Armenia to an adjacent, featureless blob, and data from the region is virtually never included in regional or chronological syntheses. Yet, in Armenian and Russian language scholarship, there is ample data that is the product of decades of dedicated research and regular excavations. This article employs just a fragment of this available data to investigate the variability present in mortuary practices in Ancient Armenia from 330 B.C.E. to 330 C.E. and focuses specifically on treatment of the body. It is frequently noted that variability is characteristic of Classical mortuary practice in Ancient Armenia; however, the social differences that produce this variability have yet to be interrogated. By reconsidering legacy data from the sites of Artashat, Dvin, and Beniamin located in modern-day Armenia, this study will lay the groundwork and begin to answer questions of social difference. Ultimately, it underscores the abundant data available and ready for reinterpretation and incorporation in broader regional and chronological syntheses.

Introduction

This article examines variability in cremation practices in ancient Armenia from 330 B.C.E. to 330 C.E.[1] By analyzing legacy data from the sites of Artashat, Dvin, and Beniamin, located in modern-day Armenia, this study begins to assess various social identities the treatment of the dead may reflect. Prevailing approaches to the study of ancient Armenia have obscured variation in practice in favor of continuity and cultural homogeneity; however, mortuary practice has long been regarded as an arena for negotiating and producing social boundaries.[2] This study asks just one of a multitude of questions that could be asked of the dataset about the production of social boundaries. Namely, what factors may explain peoples' divergent choices in treating the bodies of their dead?

The period this study considers roughly coincides with the Hellenistic and Roman periods in the broader region of the Near East.[3] In western scholarship on the classical east, the study of mortuary practice has largely focused on elite and/or monumental structures; this is true both in Anatolia[4] and along the Black Sea coast.[5] While Moorey's[6] compiled salvage excavation records from Deve Hüyük are a notable exception, the Hellenistic period burials have not been well preserved and available data are sparse.[7] The elite focus limits our understanding of socio-economic identities and negotiations of social difference by omitting large portions of ancient populations.

The history of archaeology produced in the Soviet and post-Soviet sphere offers a strikingly different picture. Non-elite burials in Armenia have been excavated and published extensively throughout the 20th century. This separate development included an emphasis on a unified and inherited Armenian culture.[8] However, this emphasis comes at the expense of recognizing social difference as it is manifested in burial practice.

Much variability has been noted in more recent publications[9] dealing with mortuary data from Armenia's Classical period. However, in each case, the existence and range of difference is simply accepted as characteristic of this broad time period without attempting to explain the potential significance of the differences. The early works of Gevorg Tiratsyan[10] and Babken Arakelyan,[11] both prominent Armenian archaeologists, assume a local/foreign dichotomy. When current scholars such as Gyulamiryan and Khudaverdyan[12] cite Tiratsyan and Arakelyan, among others, to establish the nature of the Armenian state at this time,[13] they perpetuate this binary opposition and greatly limit the range of possible interpretations from mortuary data.

Both Armenian scholarship and western Hellenistic scholarship have offered a limited picture of social life during Armenia's classical period; questions of power and inequality, gender, age, and class have largely gone unasked. Wider developments in mortuary archaeology have shown[14] that the study of burial evidence can inform our understanding of socio-political dynamics[15] by examining core aspects of mortuary practice as they relate to individual or group identities. These core aspects include grave architecture, grave orientation, body treatment, body arrangement, grave goods, and cemetery organization; social identities that may come to bear on these aspects include the age, sex and gender, political allegiance or power, economic power, ethnic, religious, and/or linguistic identity of both the deceased individual and those partaking in the funerary practices. In addition to these factors, other considerations such as accessibility and availability of materials and opportunities for individual choice may play a role. As Gregory Areshyan[16] has noted, there is need for greater attention to the non-verbal communication[17] of various identities in ancient Armenian society.

For this study, I selected three case study sites—Artashat, Dvin, and Beniamin—and

created a catalogue, synthesizing the available data on those core aspects of mortuary data considered most useful for accessing the negotiation of socio-economic groups in the past: treatment of physical remains, tomb orientation, grave architecture and type, and associated grave goods. The case studies are restricted to sites within the modern borders of Armenia. This is not an exhaustive list of every excavated burial dating from 330 B.C.E. to 330 C.E. Case study sites were selected based on the following criteria: first, chosen sites must have multiple published burials; second, publications must provide a detailed description of each burial to permit catalogue consistency; third, sites having received little scholarly consideration since their publication were prioritized.

Admittedly, the data are imperfect. Some sites were subject to more systematic recovery methods than others,[18] and some sites that could have been included were omitted due to constraints such as publication language[19] or small sample size.[20] In some cases, entire portions of a cemetery have been destroyed, and the data lost (e.g. Beniamin). In other cases, additional burials are likely present at the cemetery but remain unexcavated (e.g. Artashat). Subsequent excavations and research may bring new information to light. However, a wide-ranging and systematized record of the current data allows for the interrogation of the potential factors creating dissimilitude across this small region. Focus on treatment of the body draws attention to emerging patterns along just one axis of material variation across all three case study sites and evaluates the various potential influences that may have driven individuals to make more common or more unique choices.

Case Studies

Artashat

The site of Artashat sits on the border between modern day Turkey and Armenia.[21] Once the capital of the Artaxiad dynasty founded in the second century B.C.E., it was an extensive, planned urban center, stretching across 13 hills and surrounded by large-scale fortifications. Artashat grew and shrank with changes in the local political landscape until it was destroyed during a late fifth century C.E. Sassanian invasion. Babken Arakelyan directed systematic excavations at Artashat beginning in 1970.[22] However, it was salvage work, conducted between 1971-1977 under Zhores Khachatryan, that recovered 85 burials dating to Classical periods.[23] Each burial was recorded in haste as bulldozers prepared the land for large-scale agricultural activity. Despite best efforts, the quality of the resulting data was seriously compromised by these conditions. Nevertheless, Artashat presents a large sample of relatively contemporaneous burials making it an invaluable case study. Of 85 total burials,[24] a substantial number were recovered and reported intact (n=36 or 42.35 percent of all burials), while remaining burials (n=49 or 57.60 percent) were destroyed (n=36 or 42.35 percent) or seriously disturbed (n=13 or 15.30 percent). Despite varying preservation, each aspect of burial practice is reported in as much detail as the data permit. Consequently, while many tomb inventories are incomplete or missing entirely, data such as tomb architecture and treatment of the body almost always can be reconstructed in some detail.

The most prevalent tomb types are cists, comprising 49.41 percent (n=42) of the burials, and pithos burials, comprising 31.76 percent (n=27). Coffins and sarcophagi[25] are rarer, respectively making up 10.59 (n=9) and 3.53 percent (n=3) of all burials. [26] All burials hold one individual with two exceptions: (1) a cist in soil (No. 40) holds cremated remains of such volume that Khachatryan suggests the tomb may contain up to three individuals; and (2) a stone-lined cist (No. 24), also a cremation burial, may hold the remains of two individuals.[27] The treatment of the body is consistent across all burials of a particular tomb type except the two most prevalent types: pithoi and cists in soil. Accordingly,

where the tomb type was a wooden coffin, cave, rock cut tomb, clay sarcophagus, or an amphora the individual was wholly interred; where the tomb type was a stone-lined cist, cist with stones, cist with pithos, or clay mortar lined cist the body was cremated. However, cists in soil and pithoi both contained wholly interred and cremated individuals. Cists in soil overwhelmingly held cremated remains, with 88.23 percent (n=30) of the burials holding cremated remains and only 11.76 percent (n=4) holding intact skeletal remains. Conversely, pithoi mostly held interred individuals, with 55.55 percent (n=15) of burials holding interred remains, 29.63 percent (n=8) holding cremated remains, and the rest being unreported.

Skeletal size was primarily used to identify burials that reportedly contained the remains of children. While it is possible that children count among the cremated individuals at Artashat, only those who were wholly interred are possible to count. Nine burials were reported containing the remains of children (Nos. 2, 10, 37, 69, 74, 77, 78, 80, 81)[28] and the remaining burials are all presumed to hold adults. Ostensibly, the only biological factor used in age estimation was size, while none of the skeletal remains were sexed using bioarcheological methods.[29]

A small number of the burials have no reported grave goods (Nos. 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20, 26, 28, 29, 70, 71, 72), comprising a mere 18.82 percent (n=16) of the total reported burials. The remaining burials have various combinations of materials recovered from both within the burials and in the soil surrounding them. Grave goods include metal objects such as jewelry, other ornaments, and projectile points, stone tools, various glass objects, faunal remains, coins, terracotta figurines, and a wide variety of ceramic vessels.

Faunal remains appear in 20 percent (n=17) of the burials and are always in one of two forms: either knucklebones (Nos. 38, 42, 43, 45, 46, 57, 62, 79, and 85) or all or a portion of the full animal (Nos. 12, 13, 24, 30, 31, 36, 40, 59). Faunal remains are not restricted to a tomb type and frequently, though not always, accompany cremated remains when present, regardless of architecture.[30]

Dvin

The site of Dvin is best known as the early medieval capital of Armenia, but excavations conducted between 1938 and 1981 also exposed activity during the classical period.[31] This included 16 pithos burials from the first century C.E. Kocharyan, in a reexamination of the Dvin Classical tombs, characterized the burials as ordinary, containing a paucity of materials.[32] It is likely that the later occupation of the city disturbed much of ancient Dvin's mortuary landscape. The resulting disorder increases the likelihood of the tomb inventories being incomplete and or lost to possible looting activity; however, there is no direct evidence of such loss. Moreover, Kocharyan, who worked from legacy materials alone, was sometimes forced to rely solely on old photographs, while other times she had access to the recovered materials. Despite these irregularities, Dvin is important to include because the site offers a relatively substantial assemblage of contemporaneous and clustered burials. Furthermore, it includes similar tomb architecture, while suggesting a wide variety of practice through varied grave goods, evidence of mortuary ritual, and human remains.

Every burial in this case study is of pithos type and held wholly interred individuals with no evidence of cremation. Where preserved and reported (37.50 percent of the 16 tombs), all bodies were placed in a flexed position (Nos. 4, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15) and the head was almost always[33] pointing toward the mouth of the vessel. No skeletal remains were sexed using bioarcheological methods. However, based on skeletal size and/or the size of the grave goods, five of the burials were reported containing the remains of children (Nos. 1, 3, 5, 13, and 14).[34] All other skeletons are

presumed to be adults.

Some burials (Nos. 2, 5, 6, 11, 15) do not have reported materials. This could be the product of incomplete recording and reporting; or it may simply suggest that these burials did not have grave goods. Three of these burials (Nos. 2, 5, 6) were excavated at an early date (1947), which may have resulted in lost records by the time of their publication, and one (No. 11) was damaged upon discovery and likely subject to taphonomic processes that may have altered the inventory. All other burials, 68.75 percent, were reported with some combination of grave goods, including metal objects such as bronze or silver jewelry, ceramic vessels, buttons, and beads.

Beniamin

The site of Beniamin extends across a large portion of Armenia's Shirak plain. The site includes fortifications, large scale architecture, domestic structures, and multiple cemeteries.[35] Excavations began at the site in 1989, immediately after the 1988 earthquake, and continued uninterrupted until 2001.[36] During this time, 245 burials were excavated. Eganyan ascribes burials to two distinct periods; the earliest burials at Beniamin date to the period when the site was inhabited (1st c B.C.E. – 1st c C.E.) while the later burials date to the period after the site was destroyed (2nd – 4th c. C.E.).[37] Eganyan reported on 101 burials in detail, including burials from both periods. The rationale for selecting these 101 burials is not clear. It may be tempting to ascribe variation in practice regarding treatment of the body simply to change over time; however, Eganyan[38] reports a row of burials that contains pithoi and stone-lined cists likely dating to the 1st c. B.C.E. at Beniamin. The arrangement of the burials in a row suggests their contemporaneity and supports the conclusion that variation in practice cannot simply be reduced to diachronic developments. The burials were uncovered under unequal circumstances;[39] thus, relative completeness of the data may have also played a role in Eganyan's selection. Furthermore, the large and varied set of data presented, and her research goals of addressing the various represented customs and rituals, suggests that demonstrating the diversity present at Beniamin possibly played a role in her selection.[40]

There are three primary tomb types at Beniamin. Stone-lined cists are the most common, making up 58.41 percent (n=59) of the reported burials. Cist in soil or pithoi[41] burials respectively make up 19.80 (n=20) and 16.83 percent (n=17) of all reported burials. Other reported types appear only once and they are frequently a variation on one of these common types.[42] All three primary burial types held wholly interred remains with the exception of Burial Nos. 28, 40, 198, with no reported treatment of the body, and Burial No. 171, a cenotaph.[43] There is no reported evidence for cremated remains.

Age and sex estimations are available for several of the burials, although the methods used to arrive at these determinations are unclear. Of 101 burials, 45.54 percent (n=46) have no reported age or sex estimations, 24.75 percent (n=25) are child burials with no sex estimations reported, and 29.70 percent (N=30) are burials holding primarily adults with age and sex estimations both reported.[44] Of the 30 burials with both age and sex estimations, 70 percent (n=21) belong to females ages 20 - 60, while 16.67 percent (n=5) belong to males ages 20 - 60.

Eganyan reports grave goods were not common among all excavated burials; only 40 stone-lined cists, 14 pithos burials, and 9 cists in soil held grave goods.[45] Within her sample of 101 burials, 28.71 percent (n=29) hold no grave goods, while the rest all hold some combination of materials. Grave goods include metal objects such as knives, jewelry and other ornaments, as well as various stone objects, glass beads and seal stamps, faunal remains, and a variety of ceramic vessels and terracotta objects.

Discussion

The variation apparent in these three case studies may have been produced by the intersection of understandings of death and mortuary practice with myriad identities including age, sex and gender, economic status, social status, and ethno-religious identity. Due to limitations of the data, it will not be possible to address identities related to sex and gender in this study. Along the Ionian coast, there are instances when, within the same burial site, adults are cremated while children are interred.[46] Thus, in some cases the decision to cremate an individual or wholly inter them may rely on understandings of personhood and age identity. At Artashat, a large number of burials holding cremated individuals exist alongside those holding interred individuals. While it is not possible to determine if children counted among cremated remains, both adults and children count among wholly interred remains. Furthermore, both child and adult burials were also reported at Beniamin and Dvin and both sites reported no cremated remains. Thus, such a division based on age identity seems unlikely. Instead, the emerging pattern is the presence of cremated individuals at Artashat and their absence among the excavated and reported burials[47] at the other two sites. Moreover, this patterning does not seem to be related to specific tomb architecture or a similar deposition of grave goods.[48]

The choice to cremate rather than wholly inter a recently deceased individual may be related to other factors, such as the affordability and accessibility of wood. The act of cremating may suggest high status through expensive resource expenditure. Funeral pyres would require a substantial amount of wood, often a valuable and costly material.[49] Archaeobotanical analysis shows that, in all likelihood, ancient Armenia was mostly steppe;[50] trees were rare and, where they existed, would have been quite small.[51] It follows that the import of a material such as lumber may have been expensive.[52] In addition, lumber may have been in demand for other uses, driving the cost of the material up even more. It is worth noting here that the coffins at Artashat[53] and Beniamin (Burial No. 225) are also made of wood. This may suggest that the use of wood in this context of tomb architecture rather than body treatment also denotes high status through resources expenditure. All of this being said, however, using high resource expenditure as direct evidence for high status in society during life may be problematic[54]. In fact, other factors might make cremation the best choice.

In Prehistoric Britain, research has shown that cremation may be used to destroy the bodies of lower status individuals.[55] At Artashat, the overwhelming absence of grave goods aside from ceramic vessels in many of the cremation burials[56] may support a lower status designation for the individuals interred in this way.[57] However, this seems unlikely when considered alongside the fact that, at Artashat, pithos burials, which frequently held no grave goods,[58] also held fewer cremated remains than wholly interred ones. The lack of materials in pithos burials at Artashat aligns with Kocharyan's characterization of similar burials at Dvin as 'ordinary'. Hovespyan's[59] archaeobotanical findings suggest that burial pithoi were used for practical storage before becoming burial vessels. This also lends support to Kocharyan's claims that these are burials belonging to those with low economic status, as it is likely communities were reusing whatever resource was available to conduct the burial. The lack of cremated remains may now also support Kocharyan's claims. Concurrently, cists in soil at Artashat overwhelmingly held cremated remains and reported remains of funerary feasting nearby, suggesting there was some kind of visible ceremony or ritual conducted near the burial involving fire and wood, faunal resources, and ceramics. This may differentiate those with a low economic status from those with low social status. Those with low economic status may desire and be able to save up to honor the deceased through what is likely ritualized feasting, while it may not be possible or

desirable to perform the same feasting ritual for those interred individuals with low social status. The minimal materials required to construct a cist in soil tomb may allow for more resources to be devoted to cremation and feasting. Moreover, lumber use and high economic and/or social status is also evident in wooden coffin burials, which require lumber to construct and hold grave goods such as bronze mirrors (Artashat Burial No. 67) and possibly imported ceramic vessels like lekythoi (Artashat Burial No. 63). Thus, it may be that the evidence from all three case studies indicates that variability in body treatment, as well as tomb architecture and grave goods can be attributed to a combination of economic status, social status and simple choice. Individuals burying the deceased may have limited resources and be forced to choose between a cremation and feast, substantial burial architecture, and/or grave goods. These choices may be influenced by other factors such as ethno-religious identity or age, however, the data needed to shed light on this matter are unavailable.

Conclusions

A reexamination of the data shows that the practice of cremation was not ubiquitous between 330 B.C.E. and 330 C.E. in Armenia, and that it very likely may have been tied to individual or group economic status. More data is necessary to further elucidate these claims. It is not possible to rectify the map errors that exist for the large dataset at Artashat, however it is likely that archival research would produce additional information to add to existing legacy datasets. Entirely new data from new sites employing current methodologies would also prove invaluable. Useful data to this end would include expanding the dataset through new burial excavations and producing thorough and accurate maps during the course of these excavations. Accurate and holistic maps would facilitate a better spatial understanding of burial fields and allow for the surrounding landscape to be brought into the conversation on mortuary practice and social boundaries. Additionally, bioarchaeological data focused on questions of demographics, diet, and indicators of stress may serve to confirm or contradict the conclusions reached in this study.

With more robust spatial and demographic information, it will become possible to illuminate questions of age identity and sex and gender identity. As Joyce[60] has shown, these factors can bear on nearly every aspect of burial practice, including presence and types of grave goods. Spatial and demographic data will also allow questions that can improve upon the conclusions regarding economic and social status discussed in the analysis above. Grouped burials may reveal kinship ties, ethnoreligious groups, or even divisions in social status. This article demonstrates the range of mortuary data available from ancient Armenia that scholars of the Hellenistic and Roman world have largely neglected to acknowledge. Ultimately, it highlights the need to incorporate this data into broad regional and chronological syntheses in order to ameliorate our understanding of social groups, boundary making, and mortuary practice in the Hellenistic and Roman world.

Endnotes:

1 This period begins with the end of Achaemenid control in the region, encompasses the tumultuous transfer of power after the death of Alexander the Great and the establishment of the first Armenian kingdom under the Artashean dynasty, and ends when the capital of Armenia was moved to the city of Dvin.
2 Hodder 1982, 152; Pearson 1999, 1-20; McHugh 1999, 1-18.
3 Fagan 2015, 1.
4 e.g. Roosevelt 2006; Ahrens 2016; Rice 2016; Scardozzi 2016.
5 e.g. Mordvintseva et al. 2012.
6 Moorey 1980.
7 Moorey 1980, 10.
8 Khatchadourian 2014, 207.
9 Eganyan 2010, 19; Khudaverdyan 2014, 220; Gyulamiryan 2014.
10 Tiratsyan 2003.
11 Arakelyan 1976.
12 Khudaverdyan 2012, 5.
13 Khudaverdyan 2012, 5.
14 McHugh 1999; Parker Pearson 1999, 5-20.
15 e.g. Georganas et al. 2009 and Alexandridou 2016.
16 Gregory Areshyan 2018, 19.
17 While Areshyan (2018, 19) identifies monumental architecture as one element of material evidence that should be considered, this would preserve the blind spot Hellenistic scholarship has for non-elite mortuary evidence in Anatolia and the Caucasus.
18 Beniamin was excavated and reported more recently and with more current and standard methodologies when compared to the haphazard circumstances under which researchers salvaged data from Artashat, or the disparate legacy data from which the Dvin burial reports were collected.
19 Russian-language scholarship was excluded from this study (e.g. Khachatryan 1976).
20 The singular wealthy tomb from Sisian was also excluded (for well-known examples see Khachatryan 2011 and Khachatryan 2013).
21 Khachatryan 1981; Arakelyan 1982.
22 Khatchadourian, 2008, 266.
23 Khachatryan 1981.
24 See Table 1 provided in the online supplemental material at chronikajournal.com.
25 It seems the main difference between coffins and sarcophagi at Artashat is that the former are constructed with wood and nails and the latter are built out of clay.
26 See Table 1 (provided in the online supplemental material) for details on the less commonly occurring tomb types that will not be considered here.
27 Khachatryan 1981, 11 and 14-15.
28 10.59 percent of the 85 burials.
29 See Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994 for standard methods.
30 Thus, 76.47 percent or 13/17 burials with faunal remains held cremated individuals while only four burials with faunal remains held interred individuals (Nos. 62, 59, 79, and 85).
31 See the following for more on Dvin: Kalantarian 1976; Kocharyan 1991; Ghafadaryan and Kalantarian 2002.
32 Kocharyan 2015, 8.
33 Of the five burials where it is possible to identify the position of the head in relation to the pithos, four (Nos. 8, 12, 14, 16) have the head pointing towards the mouth of the vessel while one (No. 4) has the head pointing towards the foot of the vessel.
34 31.25 percent of the 16 burials.
35 Zardarian and Akopian 1995, 185; Eganyan 2010.
36 Excavations were started by a team from the Shirak Regional Museum in 1989 and by 1990 this team was joined by another team from The Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography NAS RA.
37 More burials (n= 197) date to the second phase, than the first phase (n=48). Eganyan points out that all burials belonging to the latter group were conducted in wells, granaries, and room floors (Eganyan 2010, 20).
38 Eganyan 2010, 20.
39 8.91 percent of all reported burials were destroyed, 6.93 percent were disturbed, and 84.16 of the burials were reported intact.
40 See Table 3 provided in the online supplemental material.
41 The presence of holes on the pithoi (e.g. Nos. 43A and 182), which suggest that the pithos once required mending, supports the notion that these vessels were indeed once used in a domestic context before becoming tomb architecture.
42 See Table 3 provided in the online supplemental material.
43 Eganyan 2010, 16 and 30.
44 Among this 29.70 percent are two burials, No. 183, which belongs to an individual aged 10-15-years-old and has been determined to be female, and No. 195 which holds two individuals reported to be a 5-7-year-old male and an 11-15-year-old female. In general, it is accepted that it is not possible to accurately determine the probable sex of an individual who is so young as those sexually dimorphic traits which aid the estimation have not yet had time to develop (Derevenski 1997, 877).
45 Eganyan 2010, 20.
46 Mariaud 2007.
47 Subsequent excavations may yet reveal evidence to contradict this. Nevertheless, this is the pattern among the currently available data.
48 See the discussion of body treatment above in the Artashat Case Study.
49 Parker Pearson 1999, 49.
50 Joannin et al. 2014; Leroyer et al. 2016.
51 Personal communications with Amy Cromartie; Cromartie et al. Forthcoming.
52 Lumber may have been available in what is now Georgia and thus it may have been possible to import it from the north. (Messager et al. 2013).

53 Burial Nos. 59, 60, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, and 68.
54 McHugh 1999, 54.
55 Bradley 1984.
56 E.g. Burial Nos. 47-55.
57 Note that the burial architecture for these graves is minimal as they are cist is soil type burials.
58 See Table 1 provided in the online supplemental material.
59 Hovsepyan 2019.
60 Joyce 2001.

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