

PRELIMINARY EXCAVATIONS AT AMBROYI VILLAGE, ARMENIA: A HOUSE ON THE SILK ROAD

Frina Babayan, Kathryn Franklin, and Tasha Vorderstrasse

Introduction

The summer of 2013 marked the foundational season of the Project for Medieval Archaeology of the South Caucasus (MASC) (see Franklin and Vorderstrasse 2014). Dedicated to archaeological explorations of social life in Armenia and neighboring regions during the medieval period (AD 301–1600), the MASC Project is a fundamentally collaborative undertaking enabled by cooperation between American researchers and archaeologists from the Armenian National Academy of Sciences Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography. Our long-term aim is to research the social forms and dynamic interactions of medieval life in the south Caucasus through cross-disciplinary methods and to build a community for such research throughout the region. The first year of the project worked toward this aim by strengthening research relationships and opening new directions of inquiry in the medieval past of Armenia. Opening new excavations at a previously unstudied medieval village site, we initiated a research program which should continue to produce challenging and interesting information about life in the medieval Caucasus.

Our research in the summer of 2013 was centered in the Kasakh River Valley of central Armenia, in the uplands north of the capital city of Yerevan. The Kasakh Valley is part of the contemporary Aragatsotn Province: this territory is dominated by the broad volcanic peak of Mt. Aragats, the highest mountain within the modern Republic of Armenia. The Kasakh River collects from tributaries on Aragats and in the Pambak and Tsaghkunyats ranges, and runs past the city of Aparan down the valley to Ashtarak, the capital of Aragatsotn. Ashtarak, itself an ancient city, contains a medieval crossroads where highways left the Ararat plain and took to the highlands, passing to the east and west of Mt. Aragats. One such highway climbed 800 meters in its course, passing the orchards of Ushi and Hovhannavank before reaching Aparan. This highway passed by the contemporary village of Arai (or Ara), the site of the MASC Project excavations in 2013.

During the late medieval period (AD 1200–1500) the Kasakh Valley was situated between major urban centers: Ani to the west, Tbilisi to the north, and Dvin to the south. Historical and archaeological research has demonstrated that these cities were connected in the late medieval period by a system of roads serviced by road inns (Manandian 1965; Haroutyunyan 1960; Franklin 2014a, 2014b). Such road inns (called *caravanserai* in the Near East, or *ijevanatanun* or *caravanatanun* in Armenian) were constructed in Armenia by members of the dynastic aristocracy: these princes or *naxarars* were at various times in Armenian history vassals to Byzantium and to Persia, as well as to the Georgian Bagratids and to the Mongol Ilkhanids. During the tenth to eleventh centuries the *naxarars* were ruled by some of their own under the Bagratid dynasty seated at Ani; in this period many of the fortresses and castles still standing in Aragatsotn were built. However, during the eleventh century the Kasakh Valley

and the surrounding territory of Nig-Aparan were incorporated into the Great Seljuk empire, which was centered in Iran. In the very end of the twelfth century, the territories of Armenia surrounding Aragats were reconquered from the Seljuks by the generals Ivane and Zakare Mhargrjeli, vassals of Queen Tamar of Georgia. After seizing lands from the retreating Seljuks, the Mhargrjelis distributed them to their own followers, among whom was Vache Vachutyan, who was granted the Kasakh Valley and the rest of Nig-Aparan. Vache and his heirs built and re-built castles, churches, and monasteries throughout their territory.

Travel through the Kasakh Valley during the time of the Vachutyans is illustrated in the late thirteenth-century chronicle of Kirakos of Gandzak, who described the journey of the Cilician king Het'um to pay tribute to the Mongol *qahan* Mongke. Kirakos Gandzaketsi described how King Het'um paused in the house of Kurd Vachutyan (son of Vache) and his wife, Xorishah.

And hurrying through his territory he came in twelve days to the town of Kars. And having visited Bacu Nuin, who was the commander of the Tartar army in the east, and other great men, and having been honored by them, he halted in Aragatsotn opposite Mount Aray in a village called Vardenis,¹ in the house of a Prince called Kurd, an Armenian by race and a Christian by religion; his sons were Vaçe and Hasan, and his wife Xorishah, of the race of Mamikonians.... (Boyle 1977, p. 179)

This mention in Gandzaketsi's history provides an interesting reference not only to the Vachutyans, but also to the significance of the Kasakh Valley for long-distance travel in the late medieval period. A major aim of our research at medieval Ambroyi is to learn about this period from the perspective of people who were perhaps less famous than Het'um or Prince Vache and his family, but who were nonetheless part of medieval Armenian society and whose lived experience can tell us much about what this stretch of the medieval Silk Road was like for the people who dwelt along it.

Research Aims for the Exploratory Season

The main research aims of the 2013 season were to (1) confirm medieval settlement in the western Kasakh Valley south of Arai village, (2) determine the period of this settlement in more detail, and (3) assess the potential for more sustained excavations in the area (fig. 1). All these aims were achieved.

This area of interest had been explored previously, in monumental surveys of archaeological remains in Aragatsotn (T'oramanyan 1942; Petrosyants 1988) and in an ethnohistorical survey carried out by the National Department for the Preservation of the Historical and Cultural Environment. This work noted the presence of the ruined caravanserai (also recorded by Shakhaturyan in 1842), and recorded local references to an extensive (if only generally defined) area of abandoned settlement south of Arai village called Ambroyi. Our investigations of the Ambroyi medieval settlement established that medieval occupation at this site seemed to be spatially divided into two general areas. The first of these to be investigated was a poorly preserved site of late medieval and early modern occupation on the slope of Mt. Aragats; this area was designated Upper Ambroyi, and was heavily damaged by Soviet-era agricultural landscape modification. The second area of occupation is an approximately 3-hectare area at the western margin of the cultivated area of the Kasakh Valley, around a locally built Tuxh Manuk² shrine. In 2010 K. Franklin collected late medieval ceramics from

AMBROYI VILLAGE

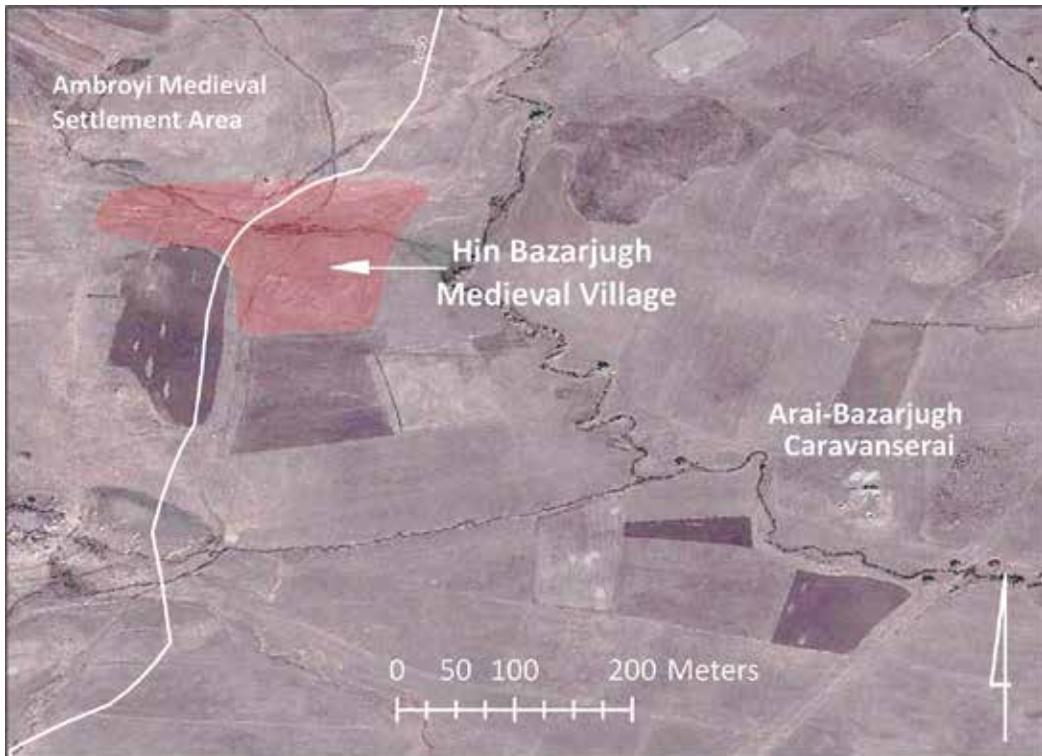


Figure 1. Aerial image of the western Kasakh Valley, showing the research area

this area during pedestrian survey (Franklin 2014a), and field walking confirmed the presence of visible subsurface architecture that was also visible in satellite images. We designated this area Hin Bazarjugh or “Old Bazarjugh,” after the name used ethnohistorically to refer to Arai village (Xalpakchyan 1971, p. 203).

Summary of Investigations

An immediate priority for the MASC research team was negotiating the legacy of Soviet landscape modification in the research area. In the region of Upper Ambroyi, it was surmised that earth-moving tractors had been used to scrape back meters of soil, including the masonry walls and contents of most of a village. Our contacts in Arai village recalled episodes in the 1970s when “the Russians” found enormous vessels, bones, coins, and other artifacts in the course of working in this area. In the region around Hin Bazarjugh, it was observed that the landscaping efforts had preserved an area of medieval settlement south of the contemporary cemetery.

In the area of Hin Bazarjugh we explored what appeared from the surface to be one of several relatively undisturbed architectural units. The excavation team (consisting of Frina Babayan, Kathryn Franklin, and Tasha Vorderstrasse as well as two workers from Arai) opened a 4 × 4 meter excavation unit toward the southern margin of the identified area of medieval remains (fig. 2).

The excavation unit exposed a thick deposit of collapsed stones and soils associated with the masonry walls, which met in a corner in the southwestern sector of the unit. After removing large fallen basalt boulders, we uncovered the rim of a large cylindrical ceramic object embedded in the soils that filled what appeared to be the corner of a room. It emerged that this rim belonged to a ceramic oven, called a *tonir* in Armenian. This oven rested on a floor that had been carved from the clayey bedrock of the Kasakh Valley (fig. 2). The oven, a drum of robust ceramic more than 5 centimeters thick, rested on a ring of stones that were embedded in this clay bedrock; the clay beneath the oven was reddened from a history of fires. The walls of the *tonir* were reinforced with large potsherds (including some featuring applied decoration) laid against its walls and affixed with earth or unbaked clay. The oven appears to have been built to be used while kneeling (on a partial stone platform, which contained the oven's flue) or standing; there are widespread attested comparanda to this form from ancient Anatolia and the Levant (Mulder-Heymans 2002; Parker 2011) as well as many examples from the medieval period (see among others in Anatolia, van Loon 1978, pp. 43–44, pls. 66A, 70, 72–73, 74B, 75A, 102C; and, for examples from the late medieval Caucasus, see Hajafov, Huseynov, and Jalilov 2007, p. 29).

To the south of the oven feature were found a number of pit features (fig. 3). One of these was a shallow, flat lens with a round area of burnt clay in its center. We found a fragment of a large vessel resting in situ along the edge of this depression, suggesting that perhaps a clay vessel had been inverted over the soil and filled with coals. Another, larger pit extended over a meter into the bedrock, cutting into the contemporary groundwater.



Figure 2. The completely excavated trench HB1

AMBROYI VILLAGE

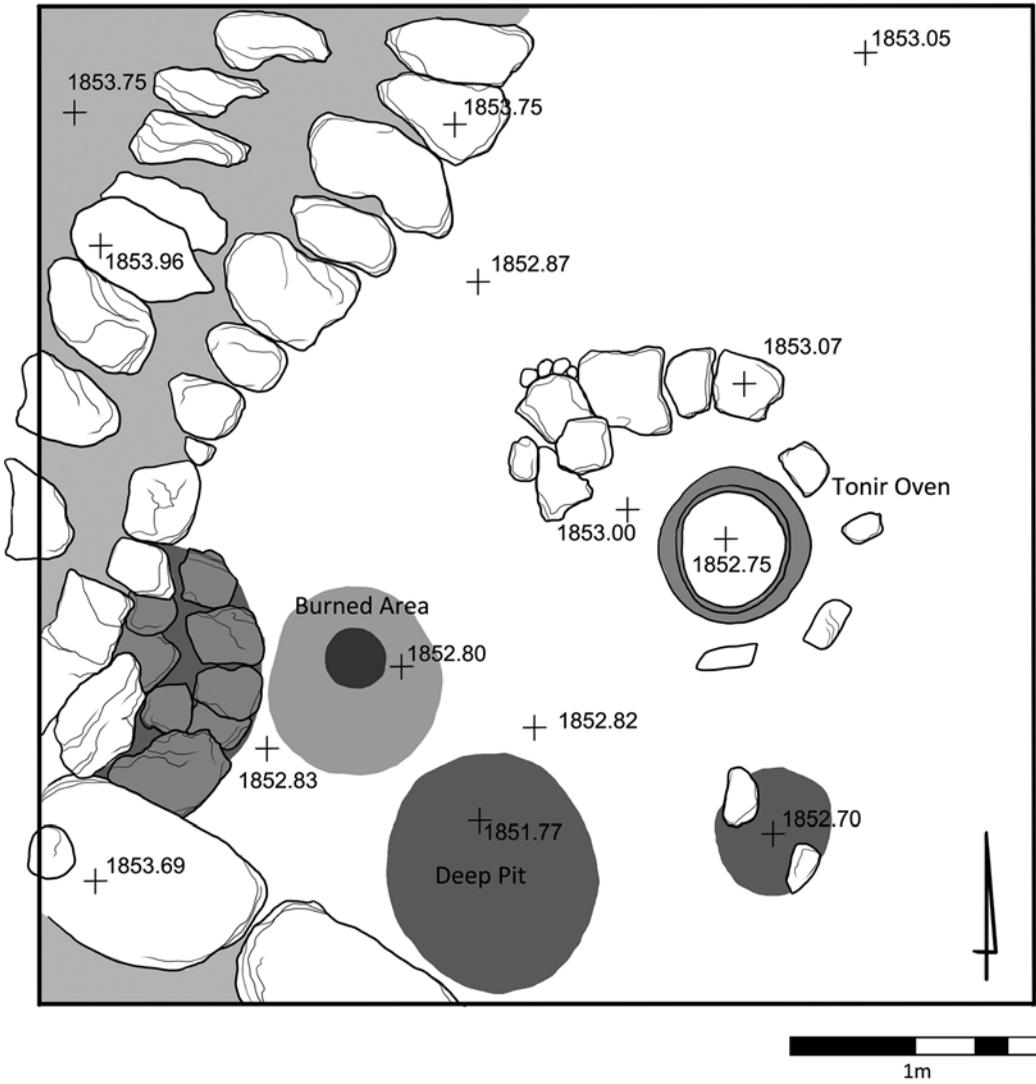


Figure 3. Plan view of the finished excavations, Unit HB1

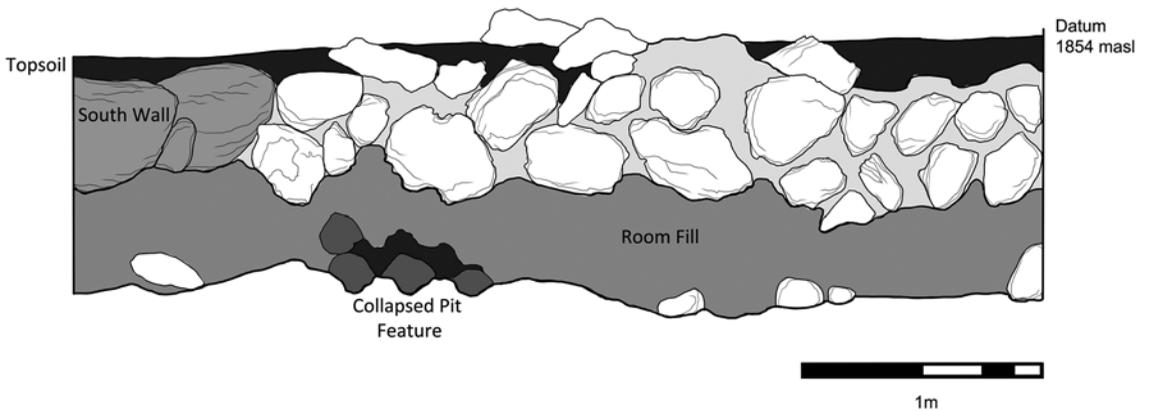


Figure 4. Elevation of the western baulk profile of Unit HB1



Figure 5. Sgraffiato ceramics from soil level HB1.17, just above the bedrock floor levels

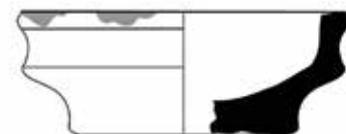
The pit was filled with the same homogenous soils as the rest of the room, indicating that it was empty when the room collapsed (fig. 4). Likewise, the *tonir* was filled not with layers of ash but with a homogenous and continuous fill, suggesting that it was cleaned out before being packed with soil. These observations suggest to us that the structure was deliberately abandoned in a series of acts including the filling of the room with soil and carefully placed stones.

The fill soil contained ceramic artifacts and small finds, all of which dated generally to the thirteenth to fifteenth century. The excavation team recovered red ware ceramics, including many large jar fragments, bowls, cups, and pitchers. Fragments of glazed ceramics were also found; these primarily had red bodies and light slips with monochrome or polychrome splash glaze. Green, blue, purple-brown, and yellow glazed fragments were recovered. A number of the monochrome sherds featured geometric sgraffiato decoration (fig. 5). Also found were two small red clay monochrome glazed vessels with everted flat rims. These were both coated in purple-brown glaze and were perhaps used as saltcellars (fig. 6). Earlier examples of such saltcellars were found on the citadel of Dvin (Kalantaryan et al. 2008, tablitsa XXI).

Small finds from the excavation included three iron nails and several fragments of obsidian. In the debris around the *tonir* were recovered two bronze pins, one of which has a decorated head (fig. 7). These pins may have been fasteners or personal implements. Ten fragments of drawn glass bracelets were found from different contexts throughout the soil fill (fig. 8). These bracelets were made from dark blue glass and were either plain or had twisted decoration. Parallels to these bracelets have been found in the late medieval contexts at Dvin, as well as at other sites (Ghafadaryan 1952; Kalantaryan et al. 2008, tablitsi XL–XLIII).



0 5cm



HB1.24.C.23

Figure 6. Small glazed vessels (saltcellars) from the lower fill levels

AMBROYI VILLAGE



Figure 7. Bronze pins found near the tonir



Figure 8. Fragments of blue glass bracelets from the room context at Hin Bazarjugh

Discussion

The results of the 2013 excavations confirmed occupation of the village at Hin Bazarjugh during the thirteenth century and perhaps into the fourteenth century. Our work also indicated that the area of settlement south of Arai village called Ambroyi was variously occupied perhaps as late as the seventeenth century, suggesting that people moved up the mountain slopes. This possible movement is corroborated by the implication that the house excavated in unit HB1 was deliberately filled and abandoned, perhaps as its owners (and/or their neighbors) moved to a different living place.

The material evidence found in the excavations provides information about the social economy of the village. The majority of the ceramic materials found in the unit were probably made locally: they featured coarse red clays and micaceous and obsidian inclusions familiar from the unglazed red ware pottery found at the caravanserai (Franklin 2014a). Several bowl rims were found that are similar to forms from the caravanserai, and also to ceramics from Teghenyats Vank (Sargsyan 1990; Babajanyan and Mirijanyan 2013). The glazed ceramics, with their aforementioned red clay bodies and colored glazed exteriors, are most similar to vessels produced to the south at Dvin — but it is also possible that they were produced at another contemporary town such as Ashtarak or even Ushi (excavated by Babayan in 2005). Similar connections are suggested by the glass artifacts, which seem like just the kind of object to be carried up the highway by traders.

Further research at Hin Bazarjugh and throughout the Ambroyi area will continue to explore these possible relationships between the people living in the village, travelers staying in the caravanserai, and the wider medieval world. Specifically, we are interested in tightening our understanding of the chronology of the village, so that we can know how life in this part of the Kasakh Valley may have been affected by the Mongol invasion and other historical events. The historical chronicle of Kirakos of Gandzak implies that under the Ilkhanids the Kasakh Valley was still a pleasant place for a king to stop and rest; was it still a hospitable landscape for farmers and shepherds? We will be interested to see if the instance of abandonment seen at HB1 indicates a larger pattern, or if the picture of life was more complex. Also,

one carved *khatchkar* (cross-stone) was located and drawn in 2013, some distance from our excavations. We will continue to explore the extent of medieval remains at Ambroyi and to contribute knowledge of mortuary practice as well as domestic life into our conceptualization of the site. Of superlative significance was the confirmation of medieval archaeological remains in this part of the Kasakh Valley that were previously little-known: we have excited not only our own academic interest but also the curiosity of local inhabitants, who began to have an increased awareness of the stones beneath their fields.

Acknowledgments

This project owes an enormous debt to Dr. Pavel Avetisyan, the director of the Republic of Armenia National Academy of Sciences Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography; without his support, the work would have been impossible. We likewise give great thanks to Gil Stein, director of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. The authors would like to thank Boris Gasparyan for providing early data about monuments in the Kasakh Valley, and Mr. Edik Petrosyan, mayor of Arai village, for his hospitality.

Notes

¹ This site is thought to be in the contemporary locale of Vardenut, where a castle contemporary with the Vachutyans has been excavated by the RA NAS Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography (Karakhanyan and Melkonyan 1989, pp. 80–82; 1991, pp. 111–12).

² A quasi-folkloric tradition associated with mothers and sons; see Petrosyan 2011.

References

Arakelyan, B.

1962 *Kaghaknere yev Arhestnere Hayastanum IX-XIII Darerum*. Haykakan SSR GA Hratarakchutyun, Yerevan.

Babajanyan, A., and D. Mirijanyan

2013 “Teghenyats Teghenyats Vanki Khetseghene.” *Patma-banasirakan Handes* 192(1). Yerevan: H.H. G.A.A. “Gitutyun” Hratarakchutyun. 134–50.

Babayan, F.

2002 “Ushii Sb. Sargis Vanki peghumnerits haytnabervats hakhdjapakin.” *Hin Hayastani Mshakuite* XII. Hanrapetakan gitakan nstashrjan: Zekutsumneri himnadruitner. H.H. G.A.A. “Gitutyun” Hratarakchutyun, Yerevan.

2005 *Sourb Sargis Vank at Ushi*. Yerevan: Gitutyun Hratarakchutyun.

Babayan, L.

1977 “The Development of Zakarid Power and New Armenian Feudal Houses.” In Aghayan et al 1976. *Hay Zhoghovrdi Patmutyun*. Haykakan SSH Gitutyunneri Akademiya Patmutyan Institut; Haykakan SSH Gitutyunneri Akademiayi Hratarakchutyun. Yerevan. 547–55.

Boyle, J. A.

1977 *The Mongol World Empire, 1206–1370*. London: Variorum.

AMBROYI VILLAGE

Fletcher, R.

- 1983 "Identifying Spatial Disorder." In Mitchell, S. 1980. *Aşvan Kale. Keban Rescue Excavations, Eastern Anatolia*, A. McNicoll. Oxford: BAR Press. 193–241.

Franklin, K.

- 2014a "This World Is an Inn": Cosmopolitanism and Caravan Trade in Late Medieval Armenia. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago Department of Anthropology.
- 2014b "A House for Trade, a Space for Politics: Excavations at the Arai-Bazarjugh Caravanatun, Armenia." *Anatolica* 40: 1–21.

Franklin, K., and T. Vorderstrasse

- 2014 "The Project for Medieval Archaeology of the South Caucasus, Armenia." *Oriental Institute News & Notes* 220: 19–21.

Ghafadaryan, K. G.

- 1952 *Dvin kaghake ev nra peghumneri*, Volume 1. Erevan: Haykakan SSH Academy of Sciences Archaeological Expeditions 1937–1950 tt. Work results. Erevan.

Hajafov, S.; M. Huseynov; and B. Jalilov

- 2007 *Dashbulag: Report on Excavations of Dashbulag Settlement at Kilometre Point 342 of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and South Caucasus Pipelines*. Baku: Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography.

Haroutyunyan, V.

- 1960 *Mijnadaryan Hayastanum karavanat'nere yev kamurjnere*. Yerevan: Haypethrat.

Kalantarian, A.; N. Hakopyan; A. Zhamkochyan; K. Ghafadaryan; and G. Kocharyan

- 2008 *Dvin IV: The City and Its Excavations*. Yerevan: NAS RA Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography. "Gitutyun" Publishing.

Kalantaryan, A.; G. Karakhanyan; H. Melkonyan; H. Petrosyan; N. Hakobyan; F. Babayan; A. Zhamkochyan; K. Nawasardiyah; and A. Hayrapetyan

- 2009 *Armenia in the Cultural Context of East and West: Ceramics and Glass (4th–14th Centuries)*. Joint Research Project of the Swiss National Science Foundation. Republic of Armenia National Academy of Sciences Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography. Yerevan: NAS RA Gitutyun Hratarakchutyun.

Karakhanyan, G., and H. Melkonyan

- 1989 "Vardenut: peghumneri ardyunkneri." *Haykayan Hanrapetutyun 1987–1988 tt. Dashtayin hnagitakan ashkhatankneri ardyunkneri nvirvats Gitakan Nstashrjan*. Yerevan. 80–82.
- 1991 "Anberdi yev Vardenuti Peghumneri Ardyunkneri." *Haykayan Hanrapetutyun 1989–1990 tt. Dashtayin hnagitakan ashkhatankneri ardyunkneri nvirvats Gitakan Nstashrjan*. Yerevan.

Manandyan, H.

- 1965 *The Trade and Cities of Armenia in Relation to Ancient World Trade*. Translated by Nina Garsoian. Lisbon: Livraria Bertrand.

Mulder-Heymans, N.

- 2002 "Archaeology, Experimental Archaeology and Ethnoarchaeology on Bread Ovens in Syria." In *Civilizations: pain, fours et foyers des temps passes* 49. 197–221.

- Parker, B.
 2011 "Bread Ovens, Social Networks and Gendered Space: An Ethnoarchaeological Study of Tandır Ovens in Southeastern Anatolia." *American Antiquity* 76/4: 603–27.
- Petrosyan, A.
 2011 "Armenian Traditional Black Youths: The Earliest Sources." *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 39/3–4: 342–54.
- Petrosyants, V.
 1988 *Nig-Aparani Patmadjartarapetakan Hushardzannere*. Haykakan SSR Patmutyun yev kulturayi hushardzanneri pashtanutyan enkerutyun. Yerevan: "Hayastan."
- Sargsyan, G.
 1990 "Teghenyats Vanki Peghumner (1979–1989 tt. ardyunknere)." *Patma-banasirakan handes* 3: 174–90.
- Shakhatunyan, I. Episciposi
 1842 *Storagrutyun katoghike Ejmiadzni yev hing gavarats Araratay*. Hator yerkrord. Ejmiadzin. 168–69.
- T'oromanyan, T.
 1942 *Nyuter haykakan djartarapetutyan patmutyan*. Hator I. Yerevan.
- van Loon, M.
 1978 "Architecture and Stratigraphy." In *Korocutepe 2: Final Report on the Excavations of Chicago, California (Los Angeles) and Amsterdam in the Keban Reservoir, Eastern Anatolia 1968–1970*, edited by M. van Loon, pp. 3–56. Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company.
- Xalpakhchyan, O. K.
 1971 *Grazhdanskoe zodchestvo Armenii (zhilye i obschestvenniye zdaniya)*. Moscow: Izdatelstvo literatury po stroitelstvu.
-