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The Fortresses of Qashatagh Region of the Artsakh Republic, Yerevan,
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The monograph “The Fortresses of the Qashatagh Region of the Artsakh Republic” by G. Sargsyan, A. Gnuni, and L. Mkrtchyan represents a major scholarly contribution to the archaeology and historical geography of the Caucasus. Dedicated to the study of 37 fortresses in the Qashatagh region, the work synthesizes decades of fieldwork, archival research, and historiographical engagement. It is situated at the intersection of fortification studies, landscape archaeology, and Armenian historical studies, and aims to provide a systematic account of fortified sites within a strategically significant yet historically understudied region.

Written in Armenian language the volume is structured as follows: an Introduction; Chapter I, *A History of Research on Qashatagh*; Chapter II, *The Natural and Geographical Conditions of the Qashatagh Region*; and Chapter III, *Research Methods*. These are followed by a comprehensive *Catalogue of Sites*, as well as *Conclusions*, *Summaries*, *References*, *Abbreviations*, and indices of *Proper Names*, *Toponyms*, and *Objects*. The main body of the work consists of detailed descriptions and analyses of individual fortresses, organized into chapters authored by the three contributors. The division of authorship is clearly stated: G. Sargsyan is responsible for the preface, conclusion, and the first group of fortresses; A. Gnuni contributes the first and second chapters and a second group of sites; and L. Mkrtchyan authors the third chapter and the remaining fortresses.

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The volume is particularly important in light of recent geopolitical developments, which have rendered many of the documented sites inaccessible. As the authors note, the data collected during the 2016–2020 research program has effectively assumed the status of primary documentation. This circumstance underscores both the urgency and the enduring value of the publication.

Beyond its empirical contribution, the monograph also proposes a methodological framework for the study of fortifications as components of broader cultural landscapes. By integrating architectural analysis, spatial relationships, and historical context, the authors seek to move beyond descriptive cataloguing toward a more holistic understanding of fortified systems.

Chronologically, the study spans an impressive temporal range, from the Bronze and Iron Ages (ca. 3rd–1st millennia BC) through the Urartian period and into the medieval and early modern eras (up to the 17th–18th centuries). This diachronic perspective enables the authors to trace long-term developments in fortification practices and regional organization.

One of the most commendable aspects of the monograph is its comprehensive and systematic treatment of sources. The authors classify the available evidence into several categories: oral traditions, written historical sources, statistical records, toponymic studies, historical-geographical works, travel accounts, and archaeological data.

This typological approach reflects a mature historiographical awareness and allows the authors to critically evaluate the strengths and limitations of each category. For example, oral traditions - while valuable for understanding local perceptions of the landscape - are treated with appropriate caution. Written sources, including medieval Armenian historiography (e.g., Movses Kaghankatvatsi and Stepanos Orbelyan), are integrated with archaeological evidence to reconstruct the historical development of the region.

The discussion of toponymy is another highlight. By presenting multiple interpretative frameworks - linking place names to personal names, ethnonyms, or linguistic developments - the authors demonstrate the complexity of reconstructing historical geography. This nuanced approach avoids reductionist explanations and underscores the importance of interdisciplinary analysis.

The methodological framework articulated in the introduction is one of the most significant contributions of the monograph. The authors propose a three-tiered approach to the study of fortifications:

1. Micro-level (site-specific analysis): This includes the study of internal structures, architectural features, construction techniques, and surface finds within individual fortresses;
2. Meso-level (regional analysis): At this level, the focus shifts to the relationships between fortresses, including their spatial distribution, intervisibility, and connections to natural features such as topography and hydrology;
3. Macro-level (landscape and systemic analysis): This level examines the interaction between defensive, economic, and sacred landscapes, and the formation of multifunctional complexes.

This multi-scalar approach aligns closely with contemporary developments in landscape archaeology and spatial analysis. It reflects a shift away from site-centric studies toward an understanding of archaeological features as components of dynamic and interconnected systems.

The emphasis on intervisibility between fortresses is particularly important, as it suggests the existence of coordinated defensive networks. Similarly, the consideration of natural features highlights the role of environmental factors in shaping human activity.

The empirical foundation of the monograph is exceptionally strong. The authors draw on more than twenty years of fieldwork, including excavations, surveys, and reconnaissance missions conducted between the 1990s and 2020. These include both targeted excavations at specific sites and extensive survey campaigns across the region.

The systematic exploration of the Qashatagh region, particularly after 2008, represents a major achievement. The authors note that many of the sites documented in the monograph had previously been neglected or insufficiently studied. The project therefore constitutes not only an analytical study but also a foundational documentation effort.

The use of modern technologies, such as drone-based aerial photography, is briefly mentioned and suggests an openness to methodological innovation. While the extent of such technologies' application is not fully elaborated in the provided text, their inclusion indicates a forward-looking approach.

The context of the 2020 war adds a poignant dimension to the work. The loss of access to many of the surveyed sites means that the data presented in the monograph may remain the most comprehensive record available for the foreseeable future.

The core of the monograph consists of detailed analyses of 37 fortresses located in Aghavno and Hochants river basins (25 units, among them Spitakajur, Eznagomer, Hak etc.) as well as Vorotan, Hagari and Araxes river basins (12 units, among them Mazra, Setants, Barkushati Berd etc.). Each site is examined according to a consistent set of criteria: planimetric features, construction techniques, topographical setting, and archaeological context.

The authors aim to establish a typology of fortifications, distinguishing between various categories such as fortresses, watchtowers, citadels, and fortified settlements. This classification is based on both architectural and functional criteria.

The emphasis on construction techniques is particularly valuable. Differences in masonry styles, building materials, and structural design provide important clues about chronological phases and cultural influences. For example, the identification of Urartian features or medieval Armenian construction techniques can help situate sites within broader historical frameworks.

The analysis of spatial relationships - such as lines of sight between fortresses - adds a dynamic dimension to the study. This approach suggests that fortifications were not isolated entities but components of coordinated defensive systems.

The monograph goes beyond architectural analysis to situate fortifications within broader historical and cultural contexts. The authors argue that fortresses functioned not only as defensive structures but also as political, economic, and sometimes religious centers.

This multifunctional perspective is consistent with recent scholarship on fortified landscapes, which emphasizes the integration of military, administrative, and symbolic functions. The authors' attention to the relationship between fortresses and surrounding settlements, agricultural zones, and sacred sites is particularly noteworthy.

The long chronological span of the study allows the authors to explore patterns of continuity and change. For instance, the repeated use of certain strategic locations across different periods suggests a degree of landscape continuity. At the same time,

variations in construction techniques and site organization reflect evolving technologies and socio-political structures.

The integration of historical sources with archaeological data enhances the interpretative framework. By correlating textual references with material evidence, the authors are able to reconstruct aspects of regional history that would otherwise remain obscure.

The monograph makes a significant contribution to the archaeology of Armenia and the South Caucasus more broadly. The Qashatagh region, despite its historical importance, has received relatively little scholarly attention. This work therefore fills a major gap in the literature.

Moreover, the study has implications beyond the immediate region. The methodological approach and analytical framework can be applied to other areas of the Caucasus and the Near East. The emphasis on landscape integration and multi-scalar analysis is particularly relevant for comparative studies.

The work also contributes to ongoing debates about the nature of fortified systems, the role of geography in shaping human activity, and the interaction between political and environmental factors.

Despite its many strengths, the monograph is not without limitations.

First, the balance between description and analysis could be improved. While the detailed descriptions of individual sites are invaluable, the synthesis of these data into broader interpretative conclusions is sometimes less fully developed. A more explicit comparative framework - both within the South Caucasus and in relation to neighboring regions - would enhance the analytical depth.

Second, the engagement with international theoretical literature is somewhat limited. Although the methodological framework aligns with contemporary trends, a more explicit dialogue with global scholarship on landscape archaeology and fortification studies would strengthen the theoretical dimension of the work.

Third, chronological issues remain a challenge. As is often the case in survey-based studies, the dating of sites relies heavily on surface finds and architectural features, which may not always provide precise chronological resolution. A more detailed discussion of these uncertainties would be beneficial.

Nevertheless, the significance of the monograph extends beyond its immediate scholarly contributions. In the context of recent geopolitical changes, the documentation of the Qashatagh region's fortifications acquires an added dimension as a record of cultural heritage.

The authors' work serves as both a scholarly resource and a form of preservation. By systematically documenting sites that are no longer accessible, the monograph ensures that they remain part of the academic discourse.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of proactive archaeological research and documentation, particularly in regions affected by conflict. It underscores

the role of archaeology not only as a discipline of the past but also as a means of safeguarding cultural memory.

The Fortresses of the Qashatagh Region of the Artsakh Republic is a major scholarly achievement that combines extensive fieldwork, methodological rigor, and interdisciplinary analysis. It provides a comprehensive account of a historically significant region and offers valuable insights into the nature of fortified landscapes.

While there is room for further analytical development and broader theoretical engagement, the monograph's strengths far outweigh its limitations. It stands as an essential resource for scholars of Caucasian archaeology, historical geography, and fortification studies.

In light of the current inaccessibility of many of the documented sites, the work also serves as a vital record of cultural heritage. As such, it is likely to remain a foundational reference for future research in the region.

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