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Typological Classification and Analysis of Armenian Tombstones in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province (from the Safavid to the Pahlavi Period)[1]

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Abstract

Tombstones represent some of the most valuable archaeological evidence, as they reflect not only artistic aspects and stone-carving techniques but also the climatic, cultural, social, and ritual conditions of past communities. The Armenian cemeteries of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, as material evidence of the Armenian presence in this region, constitute a valuable source for understanding the culture, identity, and way of life of Armenian communities through their diversity of motifs, symbols, and inscriptions. This study aims to analyze the meanings and concepts embedded in the motifs and inscriptions of Armenian tombstones and to investigate the social, cultural, and religious status of Armenians in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari. The main research questions are: What are the morphological and decorative characteristics of the tombstones in these cemeteries, and how do their motifs and inscriptions reflect the beliefs, cultural identity, and religious structures of the Armenian communities in the region? This research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach based on field investigations and documentary studies. The statistical population of the study consists of 17 prominent cemeteries containing decorated and inscribed tombstones. The findings indicate that the tombstones were produced in various forms, including arched (mihrab-shaped), cradle-shaped, coffin-shaped, and simple types, and were decorated with anthropomorphic, vegetal, zoomorphic, symbolic motifs, depictions of objects and tools, as well as inscriptions in Armenian and, in some cases, Persian. These decorative elements reflect the religious beliefs, cultural values, and artistic traditions of the Armenian communities. Analysis of the dates recorded on the tombstones and their comparison with written sources suggests that these cemeteries can be chronologically attributed from the Safavid period to the Pahlavi era. Furthermore, the carved motifs, beyond their aesthetic significance, represent the beliefs, ideas, gender identity, social status, and occupations of the deceased. In terms of iconography and execution techniques, these tombstones demonstrate considerable similarities with contemporary examples from surrounding regions, while simultaneously preserving their own local characteristics and distinctive cultural identity.

Keywords: Tombstones; Armenian Cemeteries; Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari; Motifs and Inscriptions; Safavid to Pahlavi Periods.

1. Introduction

The tombstones of historical cemeteries provide a narrative of the fundamental relationship between the context and the environment, religious and cultural beliefs, historical

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"طبقه‌بندی و بررسی سنگ‌قبرهای ارمنیان چهارمحال و بختیاری (دورهٔ صفویه تا پهلوی"

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factors, and human actions in the formation of artistic concepts and manifestations and symbolic systems, and are manifested in the form of a series of monuments, motifs, and abstract signs. These burial works are not merely material elements, but reflect various religious, cultural, social, and memorial dimensions.are considered and are formed as a result of burial and memorial rituals of individuals (Mytum, 2004). The tombstones of Armenian cemeteries in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province are also considered as the most important evidence of the presence of this community in the region. These artifacts, due to the inscriptions and dates recorded on them, are valuable sources for the study of the historical background and cultural ties of Armenians in this geographical area of Iran (Joolaee and Nazifi, 2020: 53). At the beginning of the twelfth century AH and following the policies of population transfer in the Safavid period, by the order of Shah Abbas I, a large number of Armenians of Armenia migrated to Iran and settled in the Isfahan region. Some of them who lived in the Lenjan areas were later transferred to the eastern regions of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari (Ghanbari Adivi, 2021: 50).These cemeteries, as historical, cultural, and social arenas, are important documents of the presence of Armenians in the region, and their study provides researchers with valuable information about the community's place of residence, worldview, customs, and burial traditions. The importance of studying these tombstones is not limited to the artistic aspects and masonry techniques, but also reflects the cultural, social conditions and beliefs are also rituals of the Armenian society and from this point of view, they are considered a valuable source for cultural and historical studies. Accordingly, the present study aims to identify the objective and abstract concepts of images and inscriptions engraved on tombstones, analyze motifs and inscriptions, and explain the cultural, social and religious status of Armenians of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari. In this regard, the following questions are raised: What are the physical and decorative features of the tombstones of Armenian cemeteries in this region, and what types of motifs and inscriptions are included? Also, how can these motifs and inscriptions be explained in the cultural context of the region and what characteristics of Armenian culture and religion do they represent? The research method in this research is fundamental and descriptive-analytical. The research data have been collected through field studies, documentation of works, and library studies. The scope of the research includes Armenian cemeteries in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province, among which cemeteries with inscribed tombstones (17 cemeteries) are specifically examined. In this article, tombstones and their decorative motifs are categorized and analyzed with a comparative and comparative approach in order to explain part of the cultural, artistic and religious values of the Armenians of this region.

2. Research Background

The researches conducted on the Armenians of Iran and their cultural heritage can be categorized into two main axes. The first axis is dedicated to the historical, identity, and cultural studies of this society. In this context, Hoyan (2004) examines the historical background of Armenians in Iran and emphasizes the historical ties and cultural overlaps between Armenians and Iranians. Mahdavi et al. (2009)) also show the continuity of the

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identity components of the identity of this society along with adaptation to the cultural environment of Iran. Some studies have also investigated the architectural and religious heritage of Armenians, especially historical churches, and have explained the role of these works in recognizing the cultural presence of this community in Iran (Hovsian, 2015). The history of the establishment and presence of Armenians in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province has also been studied in some researches (Hashemi Dehkordi, 2003). In this regard, the authors, in an independent study, have examined the links between Iranian-Armenian architecture in the Qajar period and the case study of the Church of St. Hovans (July & Ahmadi, 2024).

The second axis of research is devoted to cemeteries, burial rituals, and historical tombstones. In this field, Armenian cemeteries in different regions of Iran have been introduced and their historical and physical features have been studied. For example, the Armenian cemeteries of West Azerbaijan and Tabriz have been studied in terms of historical background and architectural and site features (Shojadel, 2007; Kabir Saber, 2012). Also, the study of Armenian tombstones of Aligudarz White Stone Cemetery, It has provided information about the structure, motifs, and inscriptions of these works (Sadeghi et al., 2021). Another part of the research is devoted to the analysis of the motifs, symbols, and visual themes of tombstones. In these studies, the decorative elements, religious concepts, and cultural signs in the tombstones have been investigated. For example, the pictorial motifs of Sefidchah Behshahr Cemetery have been analyzed from the perspective of cultural and symbolic themes (Alinejad, 2014). Also, some researches have investigated the specific motifs in Armenian tombstones, such as the motif Fereshteh in the Armenian cemetery of Jolfa in Isfahan and the motifs related to occupations in the tombstones of this region have been studied (Jahanmard and Vali Beig, 2019; In another study, the tombstone motifs of Takht-e Foulad and the Armenians of Jolfa Cemetery in Isfahan have been studied with an emphasis on religious concepts and adaptation to the teachings of the Holy Quran and the Bible (Shekarpour & Jahanmard, 2021). Also, the analysis of the inscriptions of Armenian cemeteries in Markazi province has shown the role of these monuments in representing the identity, social relations, and cultural ties of this society (Naeimi & Sarga, 2023). Despite the studies conducted on Armenian cemeteries and tombstones in different regions of Iran, specific research on Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province is still limited. The studies conducted in this region are mostly prepared in the form of national monuments files and are kept in the archives of the General Administration of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts of the province. These studies have so far been published in the form of scientific papers. Among the published researches, only two articles have introduced the Armenian cemeteries of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province and examined some of the motifs of the graves of Sirk village (July and Nazifi, 2020; However, so far, no research has been conducted on the classification of tombstones, motifs, and readings of the inscriptions of Armenian cemeteries in this province. Therefore, the present study tries to classify and study the motifs and inscriptions of Armenian tombstones in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province with a descriptive-analytical and comparative approach.

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3. Methodology

This research is fundamental and descriptive-analytical. The research data have been collected through field surveys, cemetery documentation, documentary studies, and library resources. In this regard, the Armenian cemeteries of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province have been identified and documented and the information obtained from field surveys including images, designs, inscriptions and other data related to tombstones has been collected and analyzed. The scope of research includes Armenian cemeteries in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province. Due to the focus of this study on the study of motifs, inscriptions and artistic features of tombstones, cemeteries with inscribed and inscripted tombstones (17 cemeteries) have been selected as the study population. The criteria for selecting these cemeteries was to have examinable samples in terms of decorative motifs, inscriptions, and the ability to document physical and visual data. In this study, the physical characteristics of tombstones, typology of forms, decorative motifs, symbols, and inscriptions are investigated and classified. Also, using a comparative approach, the motifs and artistic characteristics of the studied tombstones are compared and analyzed with contemporary samples in the peripheral regions, especially the Armenian cemeteries of other regions of Iran, in order to explain the common components, regional differences, and local characteristics of these works.

4. Tombstones of Armenians of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari

a) Geographical location of the area

Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province with an area of 16,411 square kilometers is located in the southwest of Iran and in the Zagros mountain range. This province is bordered by Isfahan province to the north and east, Khuzestan province to the west, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad province to the south, and Lorestan province to the northwest (Saeedian, 2009; There are 40 towns and 758 inhabited towns (Figure 1).

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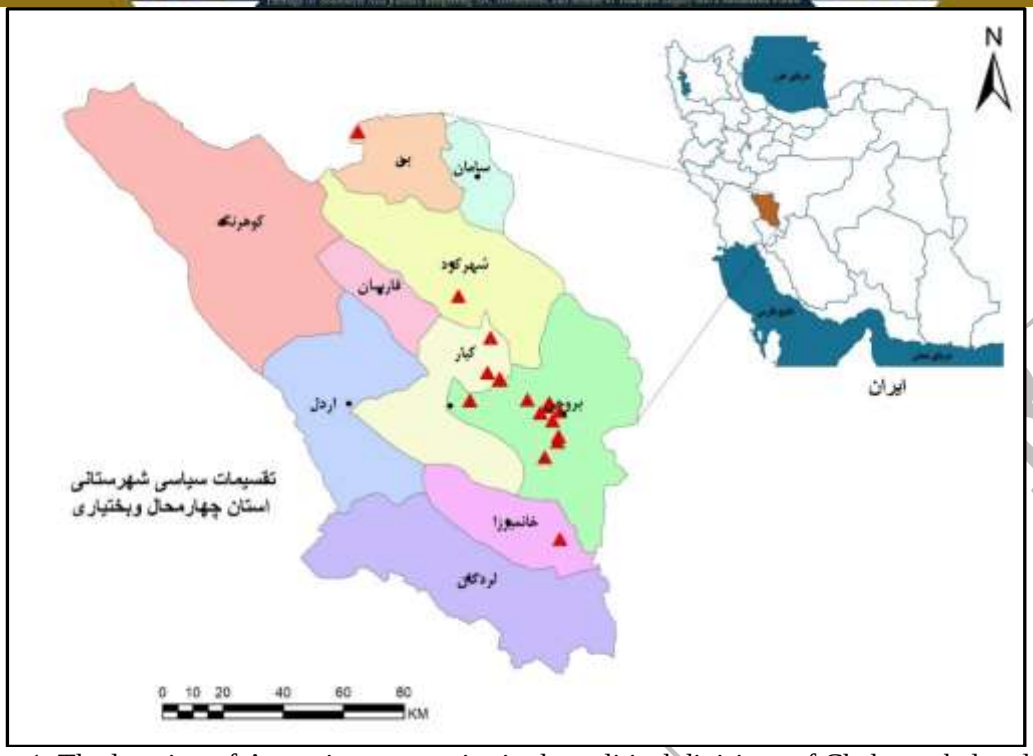


Figure 1. The location of Armenian cemeteries in the political divisions of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province (Source: Authors Based on Bina, 2022: 52).

The province's location in the central Zagros has led to the formation of extensive ruggedness, high altitudes, intermountain plains and deep valleys in this region (Davoudian Dehkordi et al., 2025). The average elevation of the province is more than 2000 meters above sea level, and Zardkuh Bakhtiari peak with an altitude of 4,221 meters is the highest part of it (Bina, 2013). Climatmatically, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari has a dominant cold mountainous climate and a pattern Its precipitation is mainly influenced by Mediterranean precipitation systems and the ruggedness of the Zagros. These conditions have led to the formation of an important part of the tributaries of the Karun and Zayandehrud basins and the development of rangelands and relatively rich vegetation in the province (Bina, 2013). However, climatological studies show that in recent decades, the trend of increasing temperature, decreasing precipitation in some areas of the province and decreasing the number of snow days, especially in rainy stations, can be observed, which indicates the province's impact on climate change and the intensification of water stresses in recent years (Arvin et al., 2016).

B) The history of the presence of Armenians in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province

Although the history of the Armenian presence in Iran dates back to the first millennium BC, their extensive settlement in different parts of the country took place mainly during the Safavid period and following the settlement policies of Shah Abbas I (996-1038 AH) (Hoyan, 2004: 6). Following the Iran-Ottoman wars and in order to prevent the influence and domination of the Armenian population by the Ottomans, a group of Armenians were

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migrated from Armenian lands to the interior of Iran. Some of them were settled in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province (Tajbakhsh, 1994;

During the Safavid period, Armenian families living in Chaharmahal were given agricultural lands. In a short period of time, they established new settlements by building houses, churches, schools, mills, and in some places Naqareh Khaneh, and played an effective role in the development of agriculture and the prosperity of the region (Sarian, 1981: 260). Armenians lived in this province for about 350 years and most of their economic activities were based on agriculture and animal husbandry. Armenian women were also activeThe families were skilled in carpet weaving and kilim weaving, and these handicrafts were part of the livelihood of their families (Ghanbari Adivi, 2021: 54; Hashemi Dehkordi, 2003: 3). According to field surveys, Armenians were present in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province until 1979, but in the decades after the revolution, most of them migrated to Isfahan and other cities of the country. As a result of this migration, many Armenian settlements were depopulated, and only their churches, cemeteries, and other historical monuments remained as evidence of the presence of this community in the region. Armenian cemeteries are also proportional to the distribution of settlements They are mainly located in the eastern half of the province in the cities of Shahrekord, Kiar, Borujen and Lordegan. According to the authors' field investigations, the last Armenian resident of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province, Mr. Manouk Gharakhanian, died in 2017 in the village of Sirk and was buried in the cemetery of the same village in accordance with Armenian burial rituals. His tombstone was also built and installed according to the common tradition of Armenian tombstones.

c) General description of the cemeteries (statistical society, morphology and historiography)

The distribution of the studied cemeteries shows that the Armenian settlements of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province were mainly located in the cities of Shahrekord, Borujen, Kiar, Bon, and Lordegan (Figure 2).

C-a) Statistical Population: In this study, 17 mausoleums belonging to the Armenian community of this province have been studied, all of which have been registered in the list of national monuments of Iran (Table 1). In addition to these cases, several other mausoleums have been identified in the province, but due to the lack of sufficient information and the lack of prominent features in the tombstones ,such as the Baladaji mausoleum No. 2 and the mausoleum of Tahniz village have been considered in this article. They have not. The average area of the examined cemeteries is about one hectare, and on average, each of them contains 123 graves. Among them, the West Aghbolagh Mazaristan with an area of more than three hectares is the largest and the Baldaji Mazaristan with an area of 2800 square meters is the smallest. Also, the Circus Cemetery with 400 tombstones in an area of 5,600 square meters houses the largest number of graves (Figure 3).

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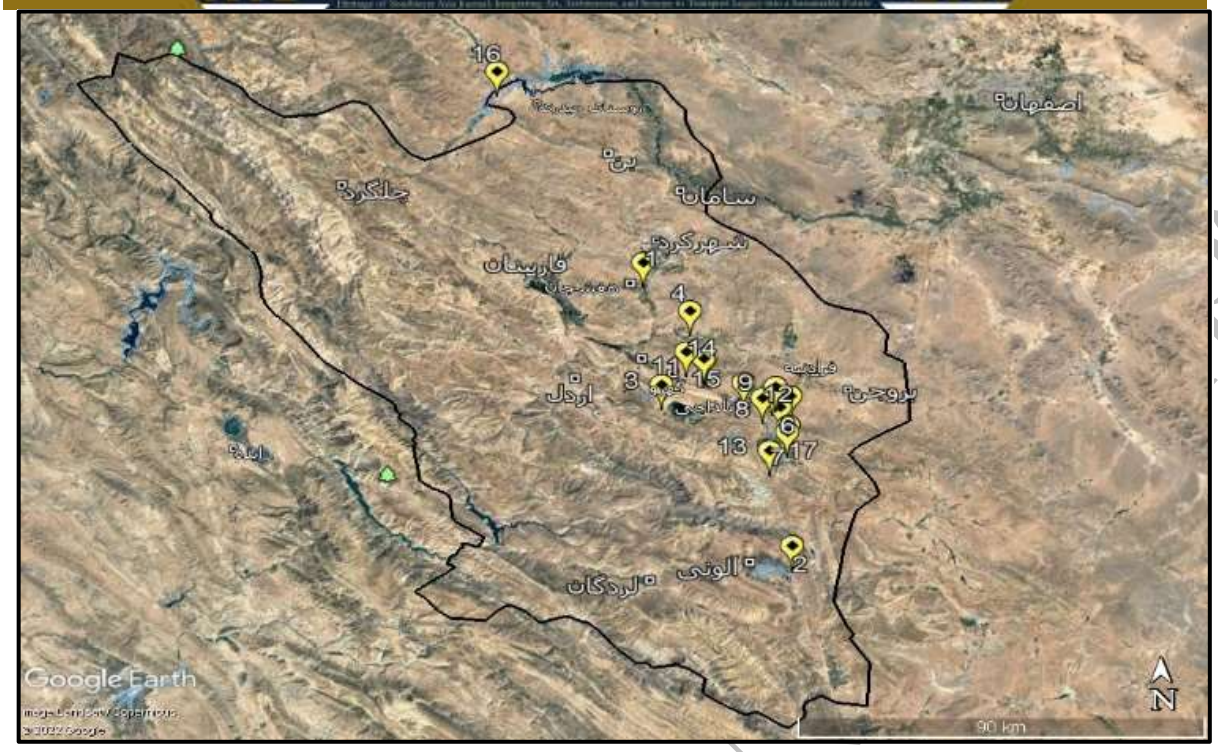


Figure 2. The location of Armenian cemeteries in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province (Joolaee, et al. 2020).

C-b) Morphology: Based on the carving method and general form, the tombstones of the Armenians of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari are classified into four main groups: the first category: altar-shaped tombstones (Table 1–2), the second category: coffin or rectangular cube tombstones that are most abundant (Table 2–2), the third category: cradle-shaped tombstones (Table 2–3), and the fourth category: Simple and undecorated tombstones (Table 2–4). The dimensions of the tombstones are directly related to the age and size of the deceased, so that the gravestones of children are smaller than the adult ones. In some cases, especially in simple tombstones, several pieces of stone have been used continuously to cover the length of the grave (Table 2–5). Also, in a number of samples, there are dents on the surface of the rock whose function is not definitive, but they are probably created with the aim of collecting water, directing it, or creating visual depth in the design of the stone. Among the studied samples, some tombstones have unique characteristics in terms of form, dimensions, or execution methods. One of the most prominent examples is the stone horse statue of the Galugard Mausoleum, which is one of the most prominent examples in this collection. The reason for the separation of the head of this statue is not known, and only its body remains at the moment (Table 2–6). Another prominent example is the tombstone belonging to a bishop in the Ma'moura Mausoleum In terms of the religious status of the deceased and its artistic characteristics, it is of particular importance among the tombstones of the region (Table 2–7). Other notable examples are twin tombstones, which are mainly for couples and in some cases for two women. In these examples, the characteristics of both deceased are sometimes recorded on the same stone and sometimes on two separate and adjacent stones. The sequence probably indicates the burial place of the couples (Table 2–8).

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C-c) Dating: The dates recorded on the tombstones are written in Armenian script and based on the Gregorian calendar. The type of silver script is mainly embossed, recessed, and in some cases ordinary embossed. The study of these dates shows that most of the graves belong to the Qajar and Pahlavi periods, and there are tombs with a higher age. According to the recorded Gregorian dates, the two tombstones of the Sirk cemetery belong to the years 1609 and 1695 AD and this cemetery can be considered to belong to the Safavid period. Also, the two cemeteries of Vetegan and Galugard are among the oldest Armenian tombs in the province. The oldest tombstone of the Qajar period is related to the graves of the western front of Livasgan dated 1853 AD. Based on historical evidence and documentary sources, from the Safavid period, groups of Armenians from the western regions of Iran and Armenia migrated to areas such as Isfahan and Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari under the command of the Safavid kings (Aramaian, 1996: 45 Kouymjian, 1997: 213). The travelogues and reports of European travelers also confirm the stable presence of this community in the region and show that in addition to Isfahan, Armenians lived in the villages and cities of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari until the Qajar and Pahlavi era (Yildirim, 2016: 90; Chahin, 2001: 178). For example, Jean Chardin, a French traveller, in his travelogue, has discussed the settlement of Armenians in Isfahan and their role in the economy and culture of the city (Chardin, 1984: 250) . Therefore, based on written sources and evidences, the remains of Armenian churches in Isfahan and Chaharmahal (July, 2024: 213) and their mausoleums in the Safavid to Pahlavi period are consistent with their presence in this region and reflect the cultural, economic, and religious continuity of the Armenian community in the region over several centuries and reveal their role in the formation of the local social and cultural fabric.

Table 1: List of Armenian burial grounds in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province (Source: Authors, 2026).

NO.	Cemetery Name	Location	Number
1	Sirek	Shahrekord County – Sirek Village	400
2	Gushki	Lordegan County – Gushki Village	100
3	Golugerd	Borujen County – Golugerd Village	200
4	Goshni(z)jan	Kiar County – Goshni(z)jan Village	30
5	Mamureh	Boldaji County – Mamureh Village	115
6	Livasgan	Borujen County – Livasgan Village	300
7	Konarak-e Olya	Borujen County – Konarak-e Olya Village	90
8	West Aqbalagh	Borujen County – Aqbalagh Village	106
9	North Aqbalagh	Borujen County – Aqbalagh Village	50
10	East Qaleh Mamka	Kiar County – Qaleh Mamka Village	130
11	North Qaleh Mamka	Kiar County – Qaleh Mamka Village	180
12	Sanajan	Boldaji County – Sanajan Village	105
13	Vastegan	Borujen County – Vastegan Village	105
14	Hajiabad	Kiar County – Hajiabad Village	115
15	Boldaji	Borujen County – Boldaji City	20
16	Azadegan	Ben County – Azadegan Village	608
17	Konarak-e Sofla	Borujen County – Konarak-e Sofla Village	20

Table 2: Shape of tombstones in Armenian tombs in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari (Authors, 2026).

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A cradle tombstone from Mazar-i-Sharif, north of Qala Memka


Coffin-shaped tombstone from Livasgan cemetery


Altar-shaped tombstone from Sanajan cemetery


Tombstone in the shape of a stone horse from Mazar-e-Khalid


Full-length tombstone of the deceased, Haji Abad cemetery


Tombstone without decoration and only with the symbol of Christ, Haji Abad Mazaristan


Tombstone with vase decoration from Mazar-e-Aqbalagh


Twin tombstones in Mazar-i-Sharif, east of Mamka Castle


Tombstone of the Bishop of Mazar-i-Sharif

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Figure 3. View of the Sirak cemetery (Authors, 2026).

D) Proportions and method of construction of tombstones

Armenian tombstones have a considerable variety in terms of dimensions, however, a dominant species with dimensions of approximately 141 cm long, 46 cm wide, and 44 cm thick is observed among them. It seems that the dimensions of the tombstones are related to factors such as the age and size of the deceased and, in some cases, his social or religious status, so that the tombstones of priests are usually larger And it has more decorations, while for children, stones of smaller dimensions have been used. Also, the limitations caused by the dimensions of the stones extracted from the mines or the surrounding mountains have also been effective in determining the size of the tombstones. In some cemeteries, especially in Vestegan and Beldaji, the tombstones are made of marble with precise carving and desirable execution quality. The largest identified tombstone among the Armenian cemeteries of the province is located in the Vestegan cemetery, and with dimensions of 320 cm long, 80 cm wide, and 90 cm thick, it is considered the most prominent specimen in terms of size. In contrast, the smallest specimen in the cemetery Azadegan has been recorded with dimensions of 40 centimeters long, 25 centimeters wide, and 80 centimeters thick. According to field studies, two types of stones, including travertine (sedimentary stone) and marble (metamorphic stone), were used in the construction of these tombstones, which were extracted from the mines and rock outcrops of the region. The tools used in masonry included pens, hammers, rulers, pencils, and paints. The use of marble and travertine in the region has a long history and the use of these stones in the construction of stone valves in cemeteriesBakhtiari can also be seen[1].

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E) Typolog and Classification of Functions

The motifs of the tombstones of the studied cemeteries can be classified into five main types: 1- Human paintings, 2- Plant motifs, 3- Animal motifs, 4- Objects and tools, 5- Conceptual and abstract symbols. Each of these motifs has been selected according to the profession, gender, and sometimes social status of the deceased person, and therefore, they are considered as a reflection of his identity and life (Table 3). This visual diversity not only has aesthetic aspects, but also carries cultural, religious, and social messages. In this context, Pourkarim writes about tombstones and their motifs: "A person's grave is a sign of his life before it indicates his death, so I would not be surprised if I saw the manifestation of art in the carvings of tombstones and was unable to admire it" (Pourkarim, 1963: 31). The presentation of the motifs of the studied tombstones is such that the audience, even without reading the name of the deceased, can identify the gender of the deceased person according to the type of carved motifs. For example, on women's graves, images of angels, flowers, and the sun are associated with feminine delicacy and symbols, while men's graves are often decorated with images of sturdy, masculine figures.

Common motifs include a simple carved cross, an angel or sun, a cross or a multi-feathered flower, an angel above the head, and the sun in human awe (Fig. 4). Tombstones are usually filled with motifs and decorations, and the main part consists of writings that contain information about the deceased person, such as the name and year of death.There are also graves that are built in a simple way and without motifs. This difference in decorations, as mentioned earlier, seems to have been related to the social status of the deceased, so that more luxurious tombstones are reserved for prominent people and simpler stones are reserved for anonymous or underage people. Most tombstones have a specific framing that determines the boundaries of the motifs. In most cases, inscriptions are engraved on these frames that provide the identification information of the deceased. The paintings used are a combination of real and symbolic motifs that are mainly engraved on the upper surface of the tombstone and sometimes on the sides. Beyond the decorative aspects, these elements carry concepts of the identity of the deceased and the ritual beliefs of the Armenian community, and often carry the burden of sacredness. In some cases, the lack of proportions in the design of the motifs, such as the magnification of flowers or tools in relation to human size, has indicated the emphasis of the masonry artist on the importance of that particular motif. Such exaggerations in painting express the symbolic value of motifs and emphasize their semantic messages.

Human motifs: Human motifs are mainly carved in several ways, sometimes the figure of a woman or a man without any decoration or other elements, or the role of a woman with two beautiful flowers on the sides and two angels on the top of the head, or the role of a man with objects that represent the deceased's occupation. Human motifs are mostly displayed in a standing form. In some cases, a person riding a horse or accompanied by two angels can be seen. The motif of a winged man riding a horse with a long spear, or a woman, or two children on the left and right, among other notable things, has been used to depict humans. Men's graves are usually decorated with motifs of sturdy figures or symbolic animals that represent concepts such as bravery, bravery, and warriorship.

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Plant motifs: In many quarries, the motifs of flowers, plants, and fruits can be seen, which are either placed in the hands of humans or in the midst of images similar to angels, or as if a plant with flowers has grown from the hands and backs of the deceased. Some of the plant motifs are flowers inside the pot, which are sometimes as tall as the human motifs, and the drawings show the deceased person caressing the flowers . Therefore, in some cases, the Kia motifs show a ritual aspect, and in some cases, they are decorative and filling.

Animal motifs: Paintings such as horses, lambs, lions, and birds are engraved in tombstones. Most of the animal motifs in existence belong to horses, which can be seen in the motifs of a man riding a horse. Other frequent motifs include the motifs of lion and man in natural awe, the motif of two beautiful birds at the top of the text of the tombstone, the motif of a bird in the right hand of a man, and the motif of two birds at the bottom of the tombstones.

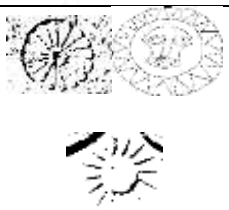
Motifs of objects and tools: The tools that have been carved are mostly practical tools in daily life, and some of them that are the most frequent are: Sunshine and pelvis: utensils for washing the hands of the guest, agricultural mining, comb of the hair, which is a sign of purity and adornment, and if the shoulder is one-sided, the owner of the grave is a man, and if it is two-sided, it is a woman. Hookah is another frequent painting, especially in the circus cemetery. Closed scissors and double-sided comb: The pattern of closed scissors and double-sided comb can be seen in the grave paintings of Armenian women. The closed scissors are a symbol of purity, chastity, and chastity, which is shown singularly at the bottom of the tombstone. The double-sided shoulder is also seen among many motifs.

Motifs of conceptual and abstract symbols: Some religious symbols (faith, purity, and worship) include the motif of the cross, the mihrab, winged angels with a plant in their hands, an angel with the body of a bird, and a conical hat similar to an owl. The cross is a sacred symbol for Christians as well as a reminder of the crucified Christ. In Armenian architecture, the cross is located at the highest point of the seal or dome of the church, to which Christians always pay their respects and swear. Another symbolic motif that can be seen in abundance in tombstones is the sun. The mihrab is another religious symbol of tombstones. Also, the motif of the octopus flower and the star are other motifs that can be seen among the paintings.

Table 3: The Motif of Motifs on the Armenian Tombs of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari (Authors, 2026).

No.	Motif Type	Description of Motifs	Sample Image of Motif

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1	**Anthropomorphic Motifs**	1- Woman with a cup (sketch); 2- Woman and man, either alone or together; 3- Solitary standing human figure with rudimentary carving; 4- Human figure accompanied by two angels; 5- Sacrificial figures depicted as horse riders within a doorway; 6- Man riding a horse; 7- Man holding a cup; 8- Winged human figure riding a horse with a long spear; 9- Woman or two children on the left and right; 10- Woman holding only a flower branch; 11- Woman between two flower branches.	
2	**Floral Motifs**	1- Floral bush motif; 2- Prominent multi-petaled flower motif; 3- Decorative cross among tulip branches; 4- Simple flower branch motif; 5- Symmetrical flower motifs.	
3	**Faunal Motifs**	1- Man riding a horse; 2- Lion and human in a naturalistic form; 3- Two birds above the inscription on the gravestone; 4- Man holding a bird in his right hand; 5- Two birds at the bottom of the stone.	
4	**Motifs of Objects and Tools**	1- Scissors and carpet-weaving tools; 2- Hookah; 3- Prayer beads; 4- Aaron's staff; 5- Sickle and plow; 6- Cradle; 7- Gun; 8- Sword; 9- Mace; 10- Hammer; 11- Plow; 12- Axe; 13- File; 14- Hammer; 15- Shovel.	
5	**Conceptual and Abstract Symbolic Motifs**	1- Cross; 2- Sun; 3- Mihrab and winged angel; 4- Winged circle; 5- Star; 6- Eight-petaled flower.	

F) Inscriptions and writings: All the text on the tombstones is in Armenian script and language, and the dates are also written in the Gregorian calendar. The engraved lines in the text of the tombstones are in two forms: raised and recessed, with the latter type mostly being more elaborately carved. The lines are usually framed by rectangular or altar-shaped frames. The text of the inscriptions contains information including the name of the deceased, gender, date of death, and some religious concepts. Some tombstones are in pairs, sometimes belonging to a husband and wife, and sometimes to a couple. For example, an example from the Azadegan cemetery can be mentioned, which, as shown in Figure 12, concerns two women, who died under the names of Maryam in 1900 and Gulnabat in 1911, with an 11-year gap between the two dates, indicating that both were the wives of Mr. Abkar (Table 4).

Table 4. Inscriptions on the Armenian Gravestones of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province (Source: Authors, 2026).

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Cemetery	Image	Armenian Text	Persian Translation
Azadegan		Ս.Ս.Լ. Մ.Ա.Լ. ՏԱՂԱՄԱՆ Ս.Հ.Պ.Ա. Ս.Մ.Դ.Ա. ՐԻԴԻ ՐԻԴԻ ԴԱՍԱՍ. Լ.Ա.Լ.Դ.Ա.Է. Ս.Մ.Դ.Ա. ՅԻՇԱՏԱԿ Ս.Մ.Դ.Ա. Ի ՔՐԻՍՏՈՍ 1900 | 1911:	Left: This tombstone belongs to Maryam, wife of Abkar. 1900 Right: This tombstone belongs to Golnabat, wife of Abkar. [1911]
Qara Bolagh		ՍՈՒՐԲ ԱՆՍ ԳՐԻԳՈՐ ԽԱՉԱՏՈՒՐ ԿԱԹՈՂԻԿՈՍ ՏԷՐ ՔՐԻՍՏՈՍ ԴԱՍԱՍՏԱՆ ՄԱՐՏԻ 1928 ՅՈՒԼԻՍ 10	Gregory Khachatur, the Holy Catholicos (Katolikos), Lord Christ (may He forgive him in His place). 10 July 1928
Hajiabad		Վասն յիշատակի Զաքարիայի Մաթևոսի Կարապետեանց Գիւղն Հաջիաբադ 1912	In memory of Zakaria, son of Matthew Karapetian, village of Hajiabad, 1912
Cemetery		ՏԻԳՐԱՆ ԳԱԲՐԻԷԼԻ ՍԱՐԳՍԵԱՆՑ ԳԻՒՂՆ ՍՆԱՁԱՆ 1900 ՄԱՐՏ 15	Tigran, son of Gabriel Sarkisian, village of Sanajan. 15 March 1900

6. Analysis and discussion

One of the most important ritual functions of the tombstone is to play the role of "guardians of the tomb" (Jung, 1973: 370), which means that the recorded motifs and inscriptions not only express the memory of the deceased person, but also serve as a reflection of his soul and identity (Berkli, 2012: 34). In a general view, the inscriptions and inscriptions, while registering, the date of death, and the identity of the individual, provide information about the culture and beliefs of the deceased. The region also offers (Furtun, 2014: 200; Arsalan, 2010: 1924; Yildirim, 2016: 90). A comparative study of the tombstones of the Armenians of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari shows that these artifacts, while having their special characteristics, are in many cases comparable to the commemorative traditions of Islamic and Armenian societies of the same period in Iran and the Caucasus (Table 6).

6-1. Morphological analysis of tombstones: The morphology of the tombstones of the Armenians of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari shows that their form, dimensions, and method of settlement have been influenced by religious, cultural traditions, and environmental conditions. In terms of the method of settlement, although the existence of horizontal and vertical examples in Armenian and Islamic tombstones has been mentioned in various sources (Jahanmard & Valibeg, 2019; Sattarnejad et al., 2020), here all the tombstones are

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seen horizontally. The predominance of coffin and altar forms, similar to those of Jolfa in Isfahan and Azerbaijan, indicates the continuity of the burial traditions of the Armenians of Iran (Hovsian, 2015; Jahanmard & Vali Bey, 2019). Their mihrab frames, along with Christian concepts, are compositionally similar to the Islamic tombstones of Safavid and Qajar (Ahmadi, 2023; Rasouli & Ahoo Dashti, 2022). This indicates the artistic interaction between the two cultural traditions. Use of marble and travertine and similarity Carving techniques with the works of Muslims and Bakhtiari stone lions indicate the use of local resources and the transfer of masonry knowledge between Armenian and Muslim masters. In general, these tombstones, in addition to their burial function, are a reflection of the interaction of Armenian traditions with native art and the environment of the region between the Safavids and the Pahlavis.

6-2. Analysis of human motifs: Human motifs are the most important pictorial elements of the tombstones of the Armenians of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, and contrary to the common tradition of Islamic cemeteries, the representation of the face and body of the deceased has a special place in them. This feature is rooted in the pictorial tradition of Christian and Armenian art and expresses the emphasis on the individual identity and social status of the deceased (Terian, Berkli, 2012). Men are often depicted in the common clothing of the Qajar period, beards and mustaches, and sometimes objects such as hookahs or rosaries, which indicate their social status and material culture (Pourbakhtiar, 2020), while women are more represented with flowers and plant motifs. These types of representations can be compared with the examples of eastern Central Zagros (Nourollahi & Alilou, 2016), Jolfa of Isfahan, and Takht-e Foulad (Shekarpour & Jahanmard, 2021). From a comparative perspective, the way the figures, clothing, and composition of the images are similar to the Armenian tombstones of Jolfa in Isfahan, Takht-e Foulad, and the historical cemeteries of Azerbaijan, but the examples of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari are simpler in terms of embossing and elegance of carving, a difference that is probably related to the economic conditions, the quality of the stone, and the skill of the local craftsmen (Jahanmard & Vali Beig, 2019;). Also, the type of clothing and the features of the faces indicate the influence of the art of the Qajar period on the Armenian masonry tradition.

6-3. Analysis of plant motifs: **After** human paintings, plant motifs are one of the most abundant decorative elements in this collection. The study of these motifs shows that two main methods have been used in the representation of plant elements: the first group includes realistic motifs such as flowers, pots, branches, trees, and plant clusters, and the second group includes abstract and decorative motifs, especially Islamic and ivy motifsIt includes plants. Similar patterns have been reported in Takht-e Foulad in Isfahan (Safikhani et al., 2014) and Hafshjan Cemetery (Mehrabi, 2016). **The** simultaneity of these two styles indicates the fusion of Armenian artistic traditions with the common patterns of Iranian Islamic art. Among the floral motifs, flowers are the most abundant and are usually carved individually, in vases or in the hands of the deceased, especially women. The vase is also one of the most frequent motifs in this collection and is often accompanied by multi-branched flowers or symmetrical combinations.The tombs of the Armenians of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari are similar in

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composition to the examples of the Armenian cemeteries of Jolfa in Isfahan and Takht-e Foulad, although in this region, the execution of the motifs has been simpler and with more emphasis on the main lines (Safikhani et al., 2014; Another part of the plant motifs consists of Islamic motifs, ivys, and intertwined branches, which are mostly used as frames or margins of the main inscriptions and paintings. Comparison of these motifs with the reported samples from Hafshjan Cemetery, Takht-e Foulad, Jolfa of Isfahan and some historical cemeteries of Azerbaijan shows that there are significant similarities in the choice of subject, composition and method of performing plant motifs (Safikhani et al., 2014; Mehrabi, 2016; Jahanmard & Vali Beig, 2019). However, in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari tombstones, the motifs are usually executed with less depth, more limited detail, and a greater emphasis on simplicity. This difference is probably due to the material of the stone, the facilities of the local workshops, and the skill of the native craftsmen, rather than the difference in symbolic concepts.

6-4. Analysis of animal motifs: Although animal motifs are less abundant than human and plant motifs, they have found a special place in the burial art of this society conceptually and symbolically. These motifs mainly include birds, lions, horses, rams, deer, fish, and some mythical animals. Among these motifs, birds are among the most abundant examples and are usually used individually or symmetrically in On both sides of the cross are the flower or tree of life. On the other hand, symmetry in the execution of these motifs, in addition to creating visual balance, also inspires concepts such as order, immortality, and holiness. The role of horses, although less frequent compared to other animals, is one of the most prominent motifs in this collection. A prominent example of this is the stone horse statue of the Galugard Mausoleum, which is unique among the tombstones of the Armenians of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari in terms of form and dimensions. From a stylistic perspective, the animal motifs of this complex have significant similarities with the reported samples from the Armenian cemeteries of Jolfa in Isfahan, Takht-e Foulad, West Azerbaijan, and some historical cemeteries in northwestern Iran (Noorollahi and Alilou, 2016; These similarities are mostly seen in the choice of the theme, the way the composition and symmetry of the motifs. Animal motifs sometimes appear symmetrically or next to human paintings and are similar in form to Qajar examples in different regions of Iran (Sattarnejad et al., 2021;

6-5. Analysis of the motifs of tools and objects: Unlike many decorative motifs, tools and objects have a direct relationship with the social status, profession, way of life, and even the beliefs of the deceased. The study of these motifs shows that artists, in addition to recording their personal identity, have also tried to represent a part of the life and social status of the deceased on the tombstone. Among the depicted objects, hookah is the most abundant and mainly in the tombstone. It can be seen next to the portrait of men. Although the hookah seems to be an everyday tool at first glance, from the Safavid period onwards, it became one of the important symbols of socialization, hospitality, and social status in Iran (Pourbakhtiar, 2020). Therefore, its presence on the tombstones cannot be considered as merely a representation of a consumer device, but this motif probably represents the social status, economic power, and lifestyle of the deceased. The widespread use of this role among the

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Armenians of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari shows that while maintaining their religious identity, they also accepted many elements of the material culture of the surrounding society. Some objects, such as canes, books, crosses, goblets or other items associated with religious rituals, are more commonly seen on the tombstones of priests and religious figures. A comparative study shows that the use of tools and personal objects on tombstones has a history in other Armenian cemeteries in Iran, especially Jolfa, Isfahan and Tehran, however, in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, hookah is more abundant than other objects, which probably reflects the cultural and social characteristics of the Armenian community in this region. In contrast, in some Armenian cemeteries of the Caucasus, religious tools and ecclesiastical symbols have a greater share in the decoration of tombstones, reflecting regional differences in the choice of pictorial elements (Terian, 2005). From an artistic perspective, objects are usually executed alongside human paintings as part of the overall composition of the tombstone, and are rarely seen independently.

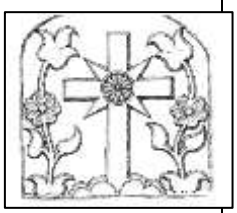
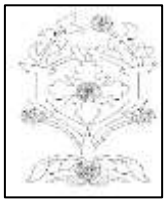
6-6. Analysis of Symbolic Motifs: The study of these motifs shows that the cross is the most abundant religious symbol that can be seen on tombstones in various shapes and combinations. In addition to being the most important symbol of Christian identity, the cross is considered a symbol of salvation, resurrection, and the triumph of life over death in burial art (Outtier et al., 2019). The placement of the cross in the center of the composition of many tombstones indicates the central place of this concept in Armenian religious beliefs. Similar examples of this method of composition can be seen in the Armenian cemeteries of Jolfa in Isfahan, Tehran, and the Caucasus (Jahanmard & Vali Beyg, 2019; Terian, 2005). The symbol of the sun is also another notable element of this collection. The lotus flower is also one of the symbolic motifs of this collection. Similar examples of this motif have been reported in the tombstones of Jolfa in Isfahan and some Armenian artworks (Khodadadi et al., 2018). Another notable element is the winged circle, which has a long history in ancient Iranian art (Shahbazi, 2011). Although this motif is less abundant compared to the cross or the sun, its presence suggests that a part of the symbolic memory of ancient societies, even after religious changes, remains in commemorative art. Comparison of these symbols with the examples of the Armenian cemeteries of Jolfa in Isfahan, Takht-e Foulad and some historical cemeteries in the Caucasus shows that there are many similarities between them in terms of subject choice and general concepts (Jahanmard & Vali Bey, 2019; Interestingly, the effect of these symbols can be seen even in applied arts such as Armenian carpets (Soltaninejad et al., 2014). Therefore, the motifs of the studied tombstones, while having specific symbolic meanings, contain a combination of Christian concepts and native culture, a combination that clearly shows the coexistence and mutual influence of Armenian and Islamic traditions (Table 5).

6-7. Analysis of the inscriptions: The study of the inscriptions shows that most of them were written in the Armenian language and script and the date of death was often recorded based on the Gregorian calendar. This feature, while the surrounding environment used the Persian language and the Hijri calendar, indicates the adherence of the Armenian society to

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its religious and cultural traditions and a conscious effort to preserve the ethnic identity in the context of Iranian society (Kouymjian, 1997). From the perspective of visual structure, the inscriptions are usually placed in regular, often mihrab-shaped frames. This method of framing, in addition to creating order in the composition of the tombstones, is remarkably similar to the Islamic tombstone inscriptions of the Safavid and Qajar periods. However, differences in language, typescript, and religious themes have maintained the independent identity of these works. In terms of content, many inscriptions go beyond the registration and date of death, providing information about the deceased's religious status, family relationships, and social status. For example, mentioning religious titles for some people or referring to family lineage indicates the importance of the family structure and the position of the church in Armenian society. Also, the presence of couple gravestones and the registration of the characteristics of two people on the same stone shows the importance of the family institution and the continuation of family ties even in the memorial space of cemeteries. This method of memorialization is observed in other Armenian cemeteries in Iran, especially Jolfa in Isfahan, as well as in some historical cemeteries of Caucasus Armenians (Terian, 2005; Markarian, 2010). Comparing the dates on the tombstones with written sources and historical documents shows that this collection mainly belongs to the Safavid and Pahlavi periods. The similarity of the motifs and type of carving with the Islamic graves of the region shows that the local culture has also influenced it. However, it cannot be ignored that according to local research, many of the tombstones were worked by Muslim master stonemasons (especially the stonemasons of Hafshjan). In terms of social and family function, examples such as couple's tombstones have a function beyond individual commemoration and serve as a sign of family ties and the position of women in Armenian society of that period. The case of Mary (d. 1900) and Golnabat (d. 1911), both of whom were wives of a man named Abkar, represent the emphasis on family continuity and the position of women in commemorative narratives. Such evidence can be found He compared it with similar traditions in the Armenian societies of Jolfa in Isfahan or the Armenian tombstones of the Caucasus, in which family and religious significance is also represented in the form of writing and images (Terian, 2005: 141; Thus, inscriptions are not only identity and religious documents, but also serve as "social texts" and reflect family and belief networks.

Table 5. Designs of Carved Motifs on the Gravestones of the Armenian Cemeteries in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province (Source: Authors, 2026).

Floral and Faunal Motifs	 Sirak Cemetery	 Maamoura Cemetery	 Konrak Alia Cemetery	 Konrak Alia Cemetery	 Maamoura Cemetery

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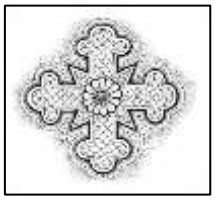
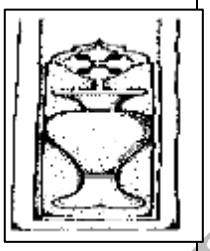
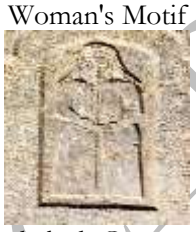
Human Figure Motifs	 Azadegan Cemetery	 Sirak Cemetery	 Sirak Cemetery	 Maamoura Cemetery	 Sirak Cemetery
Abstract and Symbolic Motifs	 Ghale Mamka Cemetery	 Azadegan Cemetery	 Westgan Cemetery	 Westgan Cemetery	 Hajiabad Cemetery

Table 6. Examples of Symbolic Motifs on the Gravestones of the Armenian Cemeteries in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province (Source: Authors, 2026).

Human Figure Motifs	**Floral Motifs**	**Faunal Motifs**	**Abstract Motifs**	**Symbolic Motifs**
Priest's Motif  Ma'amoureh Cemetery	Flower's Motif  Livasgan Cemetery	Bird 's Motif  Upper Konrak Cemetery	Scissors's and comb Motif  Azadegan Cemetery	Sun's Motif  Livasgan Cemetery
Woman's Motif  Aqbalagh Cemetery	Flower's Motif  Katak Cemetery	Lamb's Motif  Hajiabad Cemetery	Gun, dagger, axe  Sirak Cemetery	Cross Motif  Hajiabad Cemetery
Male Portrait 	Flower's Motif 	Horse's Motif  Sirak Cemetery	Diggers' Motif 	Winged angel Motif  Qale Mamka

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Livasgan Cemetery	Livasgan Cemetery		Qale Mamka Cemetery	Cemetery
Comparable to:	Comparable to:	Comparable to:	Comparable to:	Comparable to:
Noorollahi and Alilou, 2016, issues 6 to 24	Safikhani et al., 2014, Tables 1 and 2.	Satarnejad et al., 1400, Table 4.	Sharifinia and Lashkari, 2018, Table 1.	Jahanmard and Vali Beg, 2019, Figure 5.
Shakarpour and Jahanmard, 1400, Table 4, Figures 16 to 20	Mehrabi, 2016, Figure 16.	Sharifinia et al., 2016, Figures 6 and 11	Shakarpour and Jahanmard, 1400, Table 4.	Khodadadi et al., 2018, Figures 1 to 15.

7. Conclusion

The Armenian cemeteries of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari provide valuable evidence of the presence and activity of this community in Iran from the Safavid to Pahlavi periods, and their tombstones are an important source for understanding the culture, art, religious beliefs, and social structure of the Armenians of this region. In this study, the tombstones of seventeen Armenian cemeteries of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari were examined. The results showed that based on the recorded dates, these cemeteries are older than It covers the Safavid to Pahlavi period and is consistent with the historical background of the Armenian settlement in the region. All tombstones are made horizontally and with a rectangular outline, and in terms of shape and carving method, they can be classified into four groups: mihrab, coffin, cradle, and simple. The study of the material of the stones showed that mainly travertine and marble were used as native materials of the region. Also, the difference in the dimensions of the tombstones was probably related to the individual characteristics and social status of the deceased. Carved motifs can be categorized into five main groups, including human, plant, animal, objects and tools, and conceptual and abstract symbols. In addition to decorative aspects, these motifs are related to the gender, profession, and sometimes social status of the deceased and represent the cultural and religious beliefs of the Armenian society. Human paintings are often depicted as realistic and standing, sometimes on horseback or accompanied by angels. Plant motifs are executed in both natural and geometric ways, and animal images, including horses, lions, and birds, in some cases show similarities with Islamic tombstones of the Qajar period. Also, tools and objects such as hookahs, combs, and scissors express aspects of the lifestyle and social identity of the deceased. Symbols such as the cross, the altar, the sun, the eight-pointed flower, and the winged circle also express religious concepts and in some cases can be a reflection of the continuity of some ancient traditions and symbols in the context of Armenian Christian culture. The tombstone inscriptions are written in Armenian script and according to the Gregorian calendar, and are usually placed in rectangular or altar frames. In addition to providing information such as the name, date of death, and gender of the deceased, these inscriptions also convey religious and social concepts. In the couple examples, family ties and the position of women in Armenian society are also well reflected. The use of the Armenian language and script in an environment where the Persian language and the Hijri calendar were prevalent, shows the efforts of this society to preserve its cultural and religious identity. A comparison of the findings with other Armenian cemeteries in Iran, especially Jolfa in Isfahan, as well as

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Islamic cemeteries in western and central Iran, shows that the tombstones of the Armenians of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari have been influenced by the artistic and cultural traditions of the surrounding environment, while maintaining their identity and religious characteristics. Therefore, most of these motifs, while having specific symbolic meanings, are influenced by the culture of the region, beliefs, and their time and place. A comparative study with other Armenian cemeteries in Iran, especially Jolfa in Isfahan, and comparison with Islamic cemeteries in western and central Iran shows that the tombstones of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, while preserving Armenian cultural originality, have also been influenced by local culture and Islamic-Iranian artistic traditions . Therefore, the tombstones of the Armenians of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari show a combination of ethnic identity, religious beliefs, and the cultural influences of the surrounding environment. These works serve not only as personal memorials, but also as valuable documents of the social, cultural and religious networks of Armenian society, and provide the opportunity to study the cultural and artistic interaction between Armenians and the Muslim community of the region.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that this research entails no conflicts of interest—whether financial, organizational, professional, or personal—with any related individuals, institutions, or organizations.

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Authors' Contributions

The first author (Vahid Joolaee) was responsible for the conceptualization of the research, data collection, initial drafting of the manuscript, data analysis, revision and editing of the text, and provision of specialized perspectives. The second author (Fatemeh Nazifi) contributed to the research design, information gathering, and preparation of tables and figures. The third author (Khosrow Ahmadi Khoyi) undertook the scientific review and content revision of the article. The final version of the manuscript has been approved by all three authors.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, Navidsangan.

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