

I. A RURAL CENTER ON THE SILK ROAD

Introduction to an Interdisciplinary
Study of the Village Yeghegis

Արտաշեսյուկ
Artashutyuk

Եղեգիս
Yeghegis

Գյուլնոր

Աղխակ

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This volume is about a small rural settlement in the Vayots' Dzor region of the Republic of Armenia called Yeghegis, a tiny spot on a map of the greater area [fig. 1]. Literally, the toponym means "reeds," certainly due to the abundance of this plant at the banks of the homonymous river, a tributary of Arp'a, that flows at the southern edge of the present-day village. Interest in Yeghegis by the co-editors of this volume (and of the research team as a whole) was not accidental. Originally, independently of each other, they were fascinated by the wealth of architectural or other types of material cultural heritage extant in rather high density in this seemingly remote area [fig. 2]. When these two scholars started collaborating in 2018, they had pursued different research paths but with common interests. Michele Nucciotti, an archaeologist, had focused on studying the architectural monuments of Yeghegis not simply as "objects of art," but as much more complex organisms and expressions of multiple processes, according to the methodologies of "Historical Archaeology" and "Light Archaeology."¹ Zaroui Pogossian, a historian and philologist, had worked on Jewish-Christian relations during the Middle Ages, and focused on exploring the historical background that had led to the establishment of a Jewish community in Yeghegis in the thirteenth century and, hence, the existence of a unique material cultural witness to Jews in Armenia – the medieval Jewish cemetery of Yeghegis. The joint field trip held in 2018 – led by Nucciotti and Pogossian – together with their collaboration with the Yerevan State University colleagues (Hamlet Petrosyan and Tatyana Vardanesova), as well as subsequent research by members of their research teams, has led to the realization of this volume.

The volume offers several "firsts" to the scholarly community. To start with, although there have been descriptions and studies of single architectural monuments of Yeghegis, mainly in Armenian and Russian, with a few brief publications in French and Italian, they have been predominantly focused on art history, using "classical" art-historical methodologies, such as analysis of style, iconography, and building typology. There has been no research carried out on the village as a whole, its history, and its monuments, connecting material, cultural, and historical sources with a focus on archaeology.² The existing literature, not voluminous in itself, remains

largely unfamiliar to readers outside Armenian studies or, even more specifically, of medieval Armenian architecture. A holistic approach to Yeghegis, as the one adopted here, exploring the processes and revealing patterns that characterized its medieval history as opposed to an account of *histoire événementielle*, and placing the historical landscape, the built environment, and single architectural monuments against this background has never been undertaken. Chapters of the volume bridge various more or less entrenched disciplinary gaps, such as those between archaeological, art historical, architectural, epigraphic, and historical research, using a rich variety of approaches and methodologies appropriate for each discipline and the specific subject of each chapter. As a result, not only do monuments acquire a new meaning as the end-product of a construction process and not simply as expressions of "artistic genius" when placed against a more detailed historical background, but information gained through archaeological methodologies (such as light archaeology, archaeology of production, and archaeology of buildings) illuminate social practices and social organization that written sources cannot and do not provide. The volume also provides new, ground-breaking analysis on the long-term history of medieval Yeghegis and the region Vayots' Dzor paying close attention both to this areas' internal dynamics (such as dynastic changes, inter-dynastic rivalries) and their participation in wider, continental processes that characterized the history of Eurasia between the ninth and fourteenth centuries,

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1 On "Light Archaeology," where "light" stands for Italian *leggera*, see Michele Nucciotti, Guido Vannini, "Light Archaeology and Territorial Analysis: Experiences and Perspectives of the Florentine Medievalist School", *Archaeologia Polona*, 50, 2012 (2019), pp. 149–169.

2 In order not to overburden this introduction we have minimized the references. The reader is advised to consult the respective chapters for relevant bibliography.



[fig. 1] Yeghegis in the macro Caucasian-Anatolian-Mesopotamian context

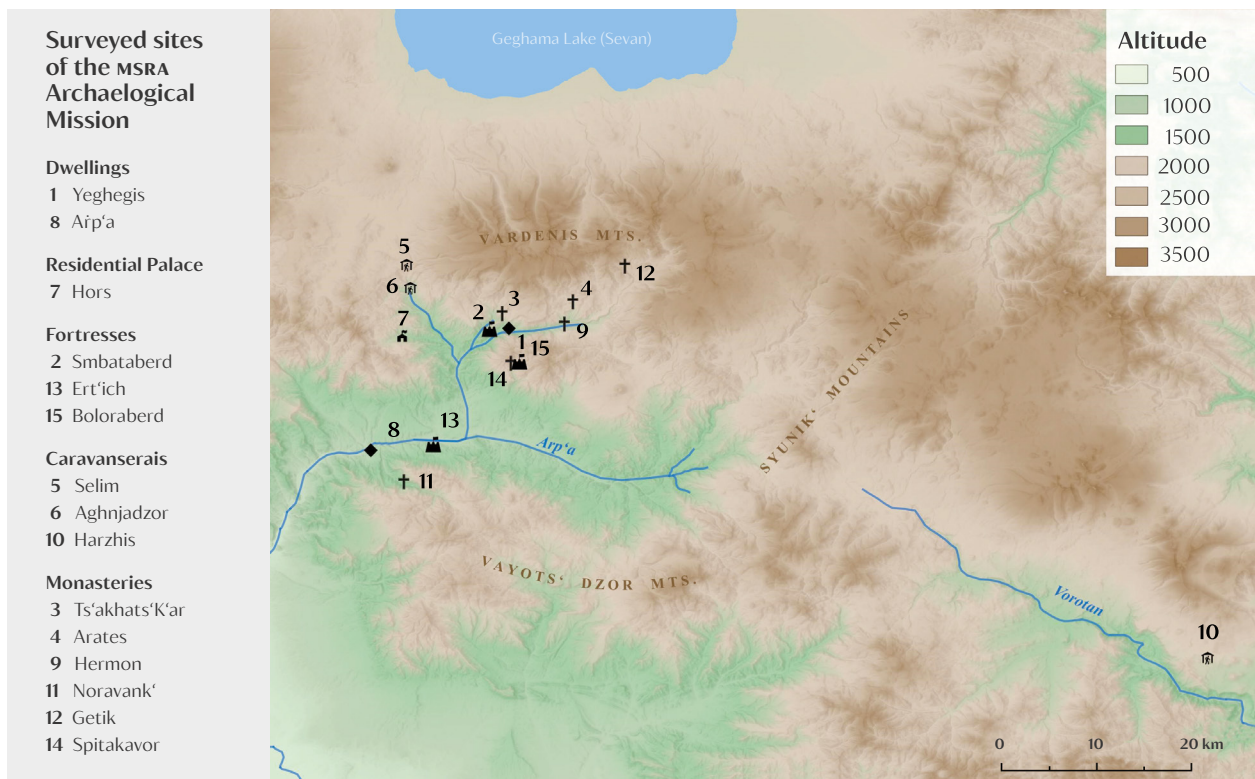
such as the break-up of the Abbasid Caliphate, Seljuk conquests and the establishment of the Mongol Empire. The latter dimension clarifies why we observe fascinating cases of local ethno-religious and linguistic multiplicities in Yeghegis, evident both in the written sources and the archaeological and epigraphic record.

The title of the book combines two much-discussed concepts in recent scholarship: “central places,” in our case a “rural center,” and the “Silk Road(s).” The many definitions of the “Silk Road” or “Silk Roads” proposed since the geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen coined the term *Seidenstraßen*, have since emphasized the diversity of the system or the network of routes, rather than a single, idealized highway connecting one well-defined oasis or urban center to the other, with a strong emphasis on the two end points: China to Western Europe. Scholars have also duly remarked on the multiplicity of commodities traded other than silk.³ Although it may seem self-evident, it is never superfluous to point out that we fully agree with the scholarship that has revealed that the utilization of this road system

was hardly limited to trade; military, diplomatic, and scholarly exchanges and/or conflicts likewise relied on the existence of communication routes of different size and importance that made up the “Silk Road(s).”⁴ In this volume, we do not engage directly

3 Ferdinand von Richthofen, “Über die zentralasiatischen Seidenstraßen bis zum 2. Jahrhundert n. Chr.,” *Verhandlungen der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin*, 4 (1877), pp. 96–122. For a criticism of various approaches to the Silk Roads, with the relevant bibliography, see Khodadad Rezakhani, “The Road that Never Was: The Silk Road and Trans-Eurasian Exchange,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 30/3 (2010), pp. 421–433. For a summary of recent approaches to the definition of the Silk Roads, see also James A. Millward, *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2013.

4 For example, the “Book road” used by Wang Yong in a 2003 publication in Chinese, as per Glen Dudbridge, “Reworking the World System Paradigm,” *Past & Present*, 238/13 (2018), pp. 297–316, sp. p. 302. Suggestively, Peter Frankopan entitled each of the chapters of his *Silk Roads* with a different commodity name, i.e., “the Road of Faith,” “the Slave Road,” “the Road of Gold,” etc. See Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, London 2015. For an operational definition of the Silk Roads in relation to material cultural heritage, see also Tim Williams, *The Silk Roads: An ICOMOS Thematic Study (ICOMOS Thematic Studies, Silk Roads)*, Charenton-le-Pont 2014.



[fig.2] Map of the sites surveyed by the MSRA archaeological mission

with the study of the huge and complex phenomenon of the “Silk Road(s)” as a whole, whatever definition we give to this network. However, the *floruit* of a rural center and its surrounding area – Yeghegis – in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, expressed among others by the commission of refined religious or public buildings, is unimaginable without surplus wealth that was generated in part, if not in great part, by an increased volume of trade.⁵ This trade, along with the network of roads that facilitated it, therefore, constitutes the “subconscious” background of all the articles in the volume.

While duly acknowledging the importance of trade in the creation of wealth and the subsequent shaping of the built environment of Yeghegis and Vayots' Dzor in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, we do not wish to overestimate its impact on the landscape and settlement patterns in this area during its thirteenth and fourteenth centuries' heyday. Written sources, epigraphy, and archaeological record indicate a great deal of continuity, despite the ebbs and flows of international commerce or transformations in global empires that impacted this area,

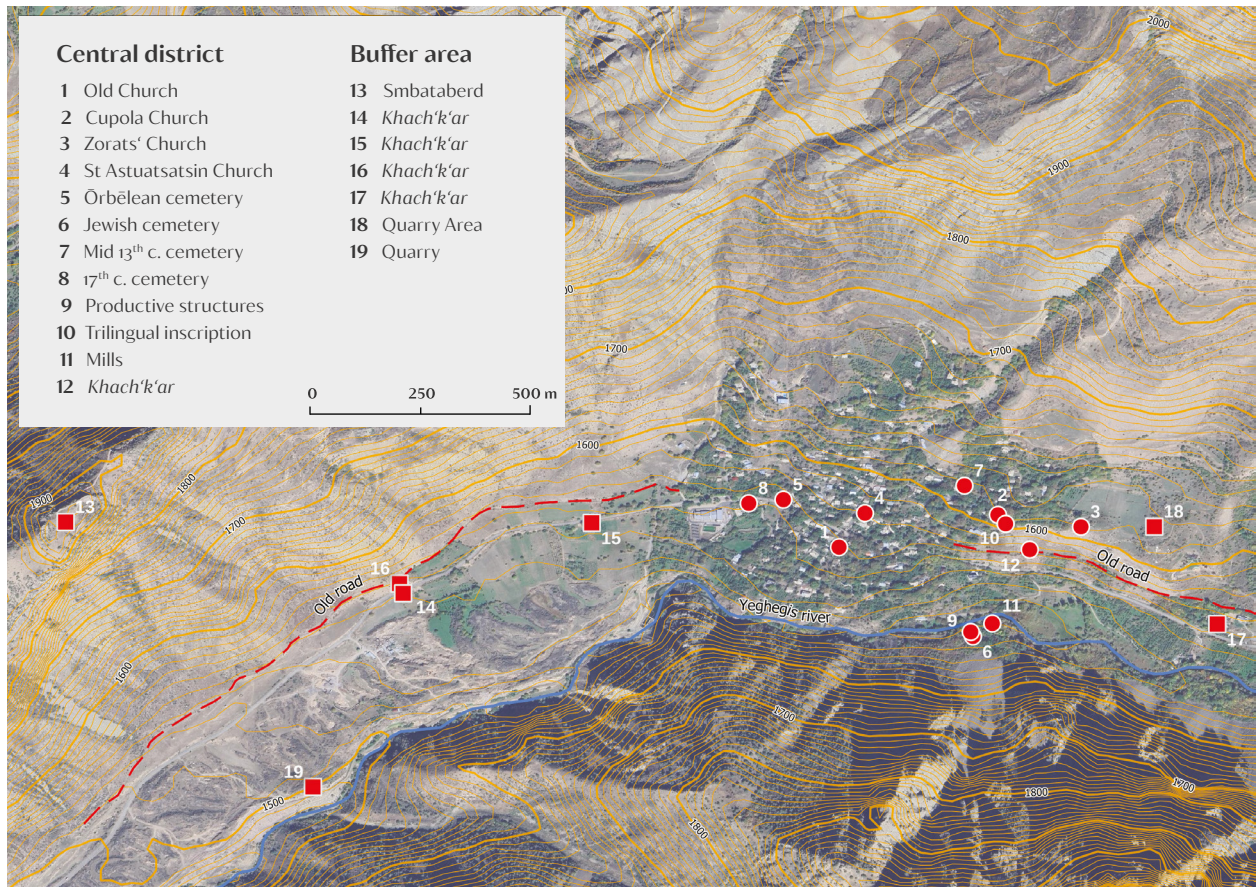
too. One of these stable points was the importance of Yeghegis as a seat of power, even as control shifted from the ancient Syuni nobility to the Bagratids once they annexed Vayots' Dzor, and eventually to the Ōrbēleans. The choice of naming Yeghegis a “center” is dictated by the evidence of the sources themselves, be those written or material. It was a center for the men and women who lived and wrote about it or became patrons of architecture, art, and learning, between the ninth and fourteenth centuries at least.

5 Earlier studies have highlighted that a route which we can view as part of this larger network, connecting the metropolis Dvin to Partaw (Bardha'a) and thence to the Caspian Sea passed through the region Vayots' Dzor, not far from Yeghegis. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the Ayas-Tabriz route gained in importance, and that too must have affected trade on lateral routes. Zaroui Pogossian, “Vayots' Dzor, Syunik', and the World. Global Transformations and Local Dynamics between the 9th and 14th Centuries”, pp. 24–66, in this volume. See also Zaroui Pogossian, “Marco Polo in Armenia: Art, Culture, and Commercial Relations” and Michele Nucciotti, “Crossing Armenia at the Time of Marco Polo: The Silk Roads Landscape in Vayots Dzor”, in *The Worlds of Marco Polo. The Journey of a Venetian Merchant from the 13th Century*, Giovanni Curatola, Chiara Squarcina eds, Milan 2024.

The chapters in the volume are arranged thematically. The first part intends to establish the contours of the historical-archaeological context of the region, placing the settlement of Yeghegis and the architectural monuments that dot its landscape against that background. In chapter 2, Zaroui Pogossian provides a detailed investigation of the history of Vayots' Dzor from a long-term perspective. She focuses on patterns in rulership practices and strategies as external circumstances changed, affecting the political geography of Vayots' Dzor. She emphasizes the flexibility of the local actors, particularly the Ōrbēlean and Khaghbakean dynasties. Furthermore, she delves into their rivalries for the control of Vayots' Dzor, with its impact on the physical landscape of the region via the foundation and support of churches, monasteries, monastic schools, and caravanserais, among others. This local dimension, however, does not obstruct our view of these elites' continental connections. Their members traveled far and wide, to the Mongol centers of power in Qaraqorum, Sarai on the Volga, or Tabriz in Iran, and many of them fought in the Mongol campaigns in Asia Minor and Central Asia. Chapter 3 examines the specific monuments of Yeghegis, revealing the difficulties when trying to harmonize the evidence from written sources with the extant monuments. The chapter also explores the ethno-religious and linguistic multiplicities of Yeghegis as witnessed by material cultural evidence (a trilingual gravestone, Jewish graves with Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions), placing this phenomenon into a larger Armenian context. Chapter 4, authored by Michele Nucciotti, builds upon the previous two chapters to contextualize the development of the built landscapes in and around Yeghegis, drawing on both written sources and the stratigraphic and archaeological evidence presented in the following chapters. The adopted methodology involves applying a broad array of interpretative frameworks – from archaeo-anthropological to historical-archaeological perspectives – to the Yeghegis dataset in order to underscore the documentary potential of this local case study for Afro-Eurasian medieval history. Such an approach, inspired by the theory of linear perspectives, as well as theories of empire and “Great and Little Traditions” not only enriches our understanding of the region's spatial dynamics but also

allows us a reading of the ideological background and the meanings that many of Yeghegis' monuments projected, setting a valuable methodological precedent for similar future studies. Chapter 5, by Elisa Pruno, examines for the first time the intricacies of stone production in medieval Yeghegis through a detailed study of raw materials, finished products, and tool marks. Drawing on both the epigraphic record and a wide array of stratigraphic and morphological evidence derived from “Light Archaeology,” Pruno employs a dual methodology that analyzes the physical characteristics of preserved stone artifacts alongside a systematic survey of local quarry sites, thereby integrating the archaeology of production with field-based investigations. Ultimately, the chapter offers innovative insights into the local production system, contributing to a fresh and broader understanding of the architectural and cultural production chains in medieval Yeghegis. Chapter 6, the last in this part, written by Tatyana Vardanesova, analyzes the ceramic finds from the region of Vayots' Dzor, particularly from Yeghegis and its vicinity, as evidence of connectivities via trade along the Vayots' Dzor portion of the Silk Roads. In doing so, Vardanesova draws attention to heretofore unpublished material from the Yeghegnadzor Regional Museum, putting it into scholarly circulation for the first time. This article emphasizes the availability of ceramics of different origins. Although the items studied rarely come from stratigraphic, systematic excavations, but are usually accidental finds, they testify to the movement of goods along the proverbial “Silk Roads,” either for trade or other types of exchanges.

The chapters in the second part of the volume are dedicated to a detailed archaeological study of individual monuments in Yeghegis, each accompanied by an architectural description [fig. 3]. The archaeological study includes the Old Church, studied by Michele Nucciotti and Francesca Cheli; the Cupola Church, examined by Marianna De Falco and Leonardo Squilloni; and the architectural complex of Zorats', analyzed by Francesca Cheli and Diletta Bigiotti. It presents a critical edition of analyses based on light archaeology and stratigraphic building archaeology for each of these monuments, accomplished in this volume for the first time. Chapters 7–9 are structured into three



[fig. 3] Map of the archaeological evidence in and around the village of Yeghegis

sections: the first synthesizes the *status quaestionis* of research on each monument; the second presents the reconstruction of the material biography of the buildings based on stratigraphic chronology; and the third provides a complete record of the analyzed elevations, including graphic mapping of the *Masonry Stratigraphic Units* (MSU), a list of MSUs, and stratigraphic diagrams. These are archaeological monographs based on the practices of stratigraphic archaeology of architecture, developed from methodological reflections in the field of medieval archaeology in Italy since the 1970s.⁶ This body of knowledge offers an innovative framework for reconstructing the history and interpretation of buildings that have otherwise been studied mainly from a historical-architectural perspective and with the methodological tools of art historical research. Furthermore, these chapters are supplemented by

historical-architectural reports in the form of appendices, prepared by the architecture team of the University of Florence, led by Cecilia Luschi. These reports include details on architectural survey operations for the production of architectural graphics used in the archaeological analyses of each of the aforementioned monuments. The chapters (and the entire volume) focus on the medieval period and, therefore, the eighteenth-century church of the Mother of God is excluded from these detailed analyses, as this would take us beyond the scope of the present book and require a very different historical contextualization, as well as a discussion that would go beyond the limits of space established for this volume.

6 A comprehensive methodological exposition can be found in Gian P. Brogiolo, Aurora Cagnana, *Archeologia dell'architettura – metodi e interpretazioni*, Florence 2012.

The second part closes with a research tool that will hopefully become a valuable resource for future studies on Armenian architecture: an atlas of masonry types, presented in chapter 10, written by Nucciotti, Pruno, and Lapo Somigli. This chapter provides a detailed analysis of the technological characteristics of each masonry technique recorded through the process of Stratigraphic Building Archaeology and represents, in itself, a significant outcome of large-scale light archaeology surveys. The individual masonry types are technically described and dated through an integrated process of stratigraphic observations and historical-documentary reconstruction. Finally, the atlas of masonry types includes a synoptic table of the stratigraphic and chronological relationships between the different masonry types. This tool can be effectively employed in future studies to date the masonry of other historical buildings in the Yeghegis area without necessarily requiring archaeological excavations. The authors hope that it will become a significant point of reference for researchers.

The third part completes the study of Yeghegis by looking into yet another type of evidence that represents a perfect synthesis of written and material sources: epigraphy. In chapter 11, Hamlet Petrosyan and Zaroui Pogossian republish all the inscriptions from Yeghegis and its vicinity, in some cases introducing important new readings and corrections, provided by Petrosyan. Perhaps the most exciting novelty published in this chapter was the discovery of a ninth-century inscription on the Old Church, which comes to confirm the date of its foundation, as well as provide new, invaluable evidence for the hypothesis of Yeghegis' emerging political importance in the ninth century. Another significant contribution is the establishment of the original dedication of the Zorats' Church – to the Mother of God (Astuatsatsin) – made due to the *in situ* field work carried out by Petrosyan. All the inscriptions have been translated into English by Zaroui Pogossian for the first time and will, thus, be available to researchers outside the specialized field of Armenian studies.

Chapters 12 and 13 focus on a trilingual gravestone and inscriptions from the Jewish cemetery, respectively, contributing to our knowledge of the multilingualism of Yeghegis' communities and the village's

religious multiplicities. Relying on methods from sociolinguistics, Michael Pifer provides an imaginative reconstruction of how the trilingual inscription on a martyr's grave in the courtyard of the Cupola Church of Yeghegis would be perceived by different viewers with different linguistic skills and knowledge. He carefully analyzes not only the content but also the genre selected for each language and the messages each portion transmitted.

Taking as her starting point the original work on the Jewish cemetery by Michael Stone and David Amit, Alexandra Cuffel provides her own reading and translations of the Hebrew inscriptions from the Jewish graveyard of Yeghegis. Besides providing new interpretations of some of the inscriptions and the purpose of citing certain biblical verses, Cuffel also looks into broader Eurasian contexts and coeval cemeteries of Jewish communities, for example, in Afghanistan, in search of parallels to the burial and memorializing practices that indicate the connectivity of the Jews of Yeghegis with other, presumably Persianate Jewish communities.

The concluding chapter by Vasco La Salvia highlights the major findings and contributions of the chapters collected in the volume for the study of medieval history, archaeology, and connectivities in Eurasia.

The extensive illustrations included in virtually all the chapters of the volume will hopefully render the presentation of Yeghegis as a fascinating rural center on the "Silk Road(s)" and guide the reader into a visual journey through its history as they read the multi-disciplinary chapters. Moreover, the 3D reconstructions of the construction phases of Yeghegis' churches provide an important scholarly tool for the study of architecture and the archaeology of architecture.

In conclusion, and returning to the title of this volume, the collection of studies presented offers an original perspective on various aspects concerning both the themes and methods of investigation adopted within the framework of scientific projects dedicated to the Silk Roads. Key elements include the strong integration of material and written sources, the acquisition of new archaeological and epigraphic evidence through fundamental field research, the application of innovative theoretical-interpretative

frameworks to Armenia, and, ultimately, the study of global effects on a territory that is not merely localized but, above all, rural. This stands in contrast to the predominant studies on the Silk Road, which are largely anchored in major urban centers and key commercial hubs. The research demonstrates that the dynamics of political, cultural, economic, ideological, and technological layering – often observed on a continental scale across medieval Afro-Eurasia – find, in the case study of Yeghegis, a compelling witness and a representative example of how local multiplicities emerged in relation to broader cultural and social entanglements at the macro scale. Remarkably, this territory – seemingly “in the middle of nowhere” within the vast imperial landscapes of medieval Eurasia – proves to be a significant microcosm for understanding such transformative processes. We close with a fascinating

note from Japanese manga publishing: since 2023, the series *Kanshin Smbat* (Disloyal Retainer Smbat), set in the thirteenth-century Vayots’ Dzor, has depicted as manga avatars virtually all the key historical figures discussed in the second chapter by Pogossian.⁷ Evidently, it is not only the authors of this volume who have recognized the paradigmatic potential of Yeghegis’ local history in conveying the medieval history of Eurasia to a wider audience. The editors take great delight in this unexpected yet fitting testament to the enduring relevance of the volume’s many subjects.

7 Tomato Soup, *Kanshin Smbat* [Disloyal Retainer Smbat], available online (https://firreflly.co/kanshin-smbat-disloyal-retainer-smbat-manga-set-in-13th-century-armenia-georgia/#google_vignette) [accessed on September 2, 2025].