

# INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS OF FORTRESSES IN THE CONTEXT OF FOLKLORE AND ARCHITECTURE



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**Abstract:** The ‘fortress’ or ‘castle’ of the Armenian Highlands (the terms are used interchangeably here) has not been comprehensively studied from the interdisciplinary perspectives of folklore and architecture. Historically, among humanity’s most significant achievements, fortresses and fortification systems encompass both tangible and intangible dimensions. While the fortresses of the Armenian Highland have been extensively studied from architectural and design perspectives, their intangible aspects remain relatively underexplored. This article proposes an interdisciplinary approach integrating material analysis with intangible cultural data. It does so by drawing together studies from the province of Tayk, where well-preserved fortifications enable spatial and typological analysis, and from the Shirak region, which is rich in folklore and ethnographic material but has only a limited number of surviving structures. By combining these complementary datasets, the research interprets Tayk’s material heritage through Shirak’s intangible traditions and reconstructs Shirak’s fragmented fortification systems by comparing them with Tayk’s. This reciprocal model offers a more comprehensive understanding of Armenian fortification heritage, linking physical remains with symbolic and cultural meanings and viewing fortresses as carriers of collective memory. The approach taken is: a) To analyze Tayk’s fortification systems using typological and spatial classification; b) To collect and present folklore and ethnographic materials from Shirak related to fortifications, supplemented with written and scholarly sources; and c) To examine interactions between fortification realities and their representation in folklore, and the influence of intangible culture on perception of the material environment. The study used a combined methodology, including fieldwork, comparative analysis, and analytical synthesis. Field research in the Shirak region involved collecting folkloric data through interviews, oral histories, and ethnographic observations, which were later thematically classified with a focus on fortifications. These data were supplemented by scholarly literature, historical sources, and written traditions, including religious texts.

**Keywords:** Fortress, architecture, folklore, fieldwork, narrator, Shirak, Tayk, ethnography.

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Received: 25.04.2026

Revised: 19.05.2026

Accepted: 15.07.2026

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## Introduction

In the Armenian Highlands, castles/fortresses occupy a distinctive and multifaceted role in both material and spiritual cultural heritage, spheres that are often closely intertwined. This study seeks to identify, extract, and analyze representations of castles and fortresses in Armenian folklore and literary traditions, with particular attention to how their symbolic meanings correspond to their architectural forms and material structures. By situating literary and folkloric narratives within fortress architecture, the research aims to

reveal how physical structures function not only as defensive or strategic structures but also as carriers of cultural memory, identity, and ideological significance.

From an architectural point of view, these interdisciplinary analyses are especially important for presenting examples of fortresses from the historical Tayk province, since the main settlement solutions known in the Armenian Highlands, with their fortresses, are well preserved there. In addition, significant geopolitical events in medieval Tayk affected the region's material culture [1].

Fortification complexes that are truly considered the province's distinctive features have been preserved in Tayk. Their relatively good state of preservation allows us to classify them as of provincial (Arsis, Berdagarak, etc.) or local significance (Nikhagh, Vorjnhag, Vzhanget, etc.), and to recreate the province's general fortification system [2]. On the other hand, in the literary environment and folklore of Shirak, significant manifestations of the fortress's spiritual and allegorical use have been preserved, which, when complemented by architectural solutions, yield intertwined results in Armenology. As a result of the fieldwork carried out in 2016-2021 and 2022 to the present day<sup>1</sup>, regularly and canonically, several fortresses have also been documented and discussed.

In this respect, the best-preserved Armenian fortification systems are located in two historical regions: Cilicia and Tayk. Furthermore, within folklore and literary studies, there is a notable gap in specialized works devoted specifically to fortresses.

What is a fortress? What material and spiritual value did it represent? What did it give to native Armenians? What deep consciousness and feelings did Armenians carry, having such a powerful fortress behind them? To answer this question, we want to integrate existing ideas from the Armenian literary environment and intangible folklore with tangible architectural studies.

Systematic fortress-fortification in the Armenian Highlands has an ancient history. Dating back to the Stone Age, it is based on the tendency to protect settlements and ensure the safety of their inhabitants (which, in turn, is connected to human perceptions of nature). The cult of the peak, mountain, and stone had its own place in the system of naturalistic perceptions: "You will burn the stone. And you will eat the stone, and you will build a hill..." [3].

In the urban planning of the Armenian Highlands, since ancient times, it has been customary to consider the settlement and the fortress as one whole. Armen Zaryan, based on the comments made by Strabo and N. Adonts, confirms that "the Urartians organized the country with the concept of 'settlement-fort systems'." Three groups of systems arise:

1. One fortress with villages located around it,
2. Groupings of two or more fortress cities and villages,
3. Groupings of fortress cities [4].

This approach could change due to the influence of the geographical and climatic conditions of the Armenian Highlands. Within this section, the situation arising from the area's "impenetrable" river valleys was considered important and predetermining. In general, in medieval Armenia, it was customary to use a tricentric system to organize the construction of cities (towns) and their "protective" fortresses (for example, Shirakavan-Argina-Tignis or Yervandashat-Yervandakert-Bagaran, etc.) [4].

The work of S. Petrosyan is of fundamental importance for the semantic study of fortresses, as he thoroughly addressed the issues of classes and triads. According to him, "the idea of society consisting of three equal classes had taken such deep roots in the Armenian consciousness that it had even conditioned the tripartite system of the economic and social structure of Armenian settlements" [5]. The works of Ashot Grigoryan are valuable for their insights into the origins and principles of Armenian fortress construction and its theory [6]. There are some studies of the architecture of Armenian fortresses. Mikael V. Hovhannisyan

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork is being carried out with the support of the Land and Culture organization.

documented valuable materials related to the Armenian fortresses of Cilicia [7]. In Kirkyasharyan's work, the history of the cities of ancient Armenia and Asia Minor is discussed, which naturally also includes references to fortresses and fortified cities [8]. H. Manandyan, in his work “The Cities of Armenia in the 10th-11th Centuries”, partially touched upon the Armenian medieval fortified cities [9].

L. Kirakosyan, in several works, refers to the fortresses and fortification systems built in different eras of Armenia and Artsakh<sup>2</sup> [10]. Varazdat Harutyunyan [11] and Stepan Mnatsakanyan [12] have descriptive and documentary materials about the fortresses of Syunik. A valuable source about the provinces, regional centers, and settlements of Tayk from the early Christian period is the “Ashkharsuys” [13] (a world atlas with 15 maps). There is some information on the Tayk fortresses in the works of N. Marr, E. Takaishvili [14], and others. There is an illustrated catalog of the fortresses of some of Tayk's provinces in the works of Buba Kudava [15]. We have touched upon the Tayk fortresses in our two monographs and several articles [2,16]. This scientific work thus marks the first attempt to consider the fortress in both spiritual and physical terms through interdisciplinary analyses to reveal its role and significance in Armenian culture.

The results of long-term field expeditions indicate that the fortification system of the historical province of Tayk was formed under the direct influence of Armenian principles of traditional settlement planning and spatial organization. The patterns observed in the spatial organization of settlements were systematically reproduced in fortification construction, forming the foundation for its spatial and functional organization. In this regard, fortresses appear not only as defensive structures but also as expressions of continuity in settlement and territorial organization.

## **Materials and Methods**

The study's methodology can be divided into three main components. First, an analysis and synthesis of primary sources on fortresses from both architectural and folkloric traditions has been conducted. Second, the research is based on the compilation and integration of materials gathered through numerous architectural and folkloric field studies conducted and ongoing by the authors. Third, the study involves identifying and interpreting intangible inherited values and concepts—such as folklore, fairy tales, legends, and related narratives—within the material domain—in this case, architecture.

Davit Nahatakyan was responsible for the study of the architectural component, Ashot Grigoryan for the analysis of historical primary sources and symbolism, and Hasmik Matikyan for the study of the folkloric and ethnographic components. The analyses and conclusions were developed collaboratively by all participants.

## **Results and Discussion**

Based on field studies and comparative analysis of fortification systems within the current territory of the Republic of Armenia, as well as other historical provinces (Turuberan, Vaspurakan, Syunik, Ayrarat, Gugark, etc.), three main spatial-typological groups of fortresses can be distinguished in Tayk. These groups are closely interconnected with the logic of settlement placement and development.

The first group consists of riverbed fortresses, located along major rivers or in adjacent lowland areas. They were formed to control strategic communication routes, since historical road networks largely coincided with river systems. Functionally, these fortresses served as primary defensive nodes, absorbing the enemy's first blow and ensuring the safety of nearby settlements. Within this typological group, both local fortresses (such as Nikhagh, Vorjnhagh, Chordvank in the Arsatspor district; Inkuzeq, Asparashen in Azordatspor, etc.) and regional centers can be distinguished, which coordinated the defense of broader territories (for example, the Tortum fortress, the Bolkha district center fortress—Oltu or Ughtik, etc.) (Figs. 1,2).

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<sup>2</sup> The newly discovered fortress near Tigranakert, Artsakh, Armenian Studies, Stepanakert, 2014, 14-22.



Fig. 1. *The Castles of the Boy and Girl of Parnak*

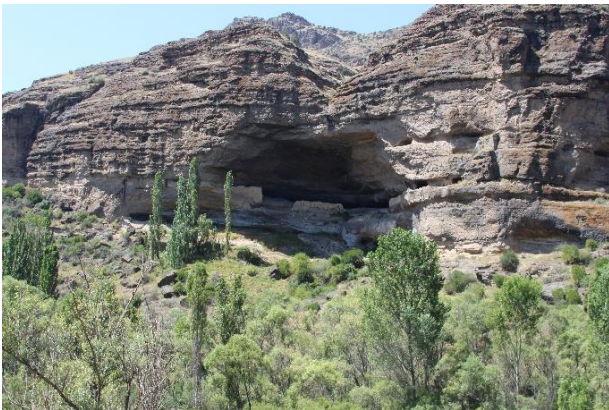


Fig. 2. *The Cave Fortress-Dwelling of Berdunk*

The second group includes mid-river fortresses located along typical sections of tributaries that feed major rivers. These represent the next level of the defensive system. Depending on the length of the tributary and the abundance of arable lands along it—which in turn determined the number of medium and large settlements—multiple fortresses could exist within a single sub-valley. Good examples are the several fortresses of Hovak and Aspak in the Bolkha district. These fortresses are typically situated at elevations of 1400–1700 meters above sea level. They were intended for situations in which the enemy managed to break through the primary river line defense. In such cases, the invasion would continue upstream along tributaries, where each sub-valley formed a new local center of resistance. This type of fortress is numerous in Tayk and played an important role in the depth organization of the defense system, ensuring a mechanism of gradual resistance (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. *Aspak and Arsis/Arsyats fortresses*

The third group consists of high-mountain fortresses, located at elevations of approximately 1800–2200 meters above sea level, mainly on plateaus, often built on hills within these plateaus. These form the third, deepest defensive line and are characterized by wide visibility and high strategic control. Examples include the fortresses of Vorduli in Berdatspor, Geghik, and Vardishen in Okaghe, and Chordvank and Turkashen in Kogh. Notably, this zone contains the oldest layers of fortification, including Bronze Age and Iron Age structures, which indicates the early strategic importance of these areas.

The combination of these three types constitutes the complete defensive structure of the Tayk fortification system, grounded in spatial hierarchy and the purposeful use of natural landscapes. In its fundamental principles, this system is comparable to fortification models found both in the present-day territory of the Republic of Armenia and in other historical provinces of Armenia, demonstrating a unified military-architectural approach.

At the same time, it should be noted that Armenian fortification typology also includes a group conventionally referred to as “plain fortresses,” which, however, are absent from Tayk due to the region’s mountainous, gorge-dominated landscape. Plain fortresses are typical of relatively flat environments and are constructed on low hills. Despite topographical differences, certain structural features of these fortresses are comparable to those of highland fortresses. According to our observations, such fortresses are located at elevations of approximately 800–1000 meters above sea level. Examples include several well-known fortresses of the Ararat plain, such as Erebuni, Karmir Blur, and Oshakan, as well as the ancient Armenian capitals Artashat and Armavir.

The long-standing and stable traditions of fortification in Tayk indicate that fortresses possess not only architectural and spatial significance but also carry deeper semantic meaning. They function as multilayered systems in which material, functional, and ideological components are intertwined. In this context, an important theoretical question arises: should fortresses be considered exclusively as physical and spatial structures, or do they also possess intangible cultural, spiritual, and symbolic dimensions? In other words, it is necessary to determine whether fortification is limited to military-defensive functions or also includes processes related to collective memory, folklore, and identity formation.

Research shows that the fortification tradition of Tayk, shaped over millennia, has had a significant cultural impact. Through their continuous use, reconstruction, and spatial role, fortresses became integrated into local cultural systems, acquiring symbolic and sometimes spiritual significance. Thus, the fortification system of Tayk can be characterized as a complex phenomenon in which architectural, spatial, and cultural layers are interwoven. It represents not only a material heritage but also a multifaceted system suitable for further in-depth and sub-typological scientific study.

Armenian authors have consistently accorded castles and fortresses significant importance in their historical novels and literary works, most notably in the works of Gevorg Marzpetuni (Muratsan) and Derenik Demirchyan. They depict castles not merely as architectural structures but as embodiments of historical experience and human resilience in the face of external threats. In their narratives, castles function as both strategic defensive sites and symbolic representations of continuity, protection, and the endurance of Armenian socio-political and cultural life. Castles are prominently featured in biblical texts, often depicted as instruments of defense. God is frequently metaphorically associated with castles, symbolizing protection and security.

### **The Word “Castle” from the Point of View of Semantics**

To emphasize the semantic comprehensiveness of the word castle/fortress, it is important to study the Armenian lexical use of it as a unit in various collocations and metaphorical combinations. In its basic form, the word castle/fortress appears at different linguistic levels. We will particularly address its word-forming possibilities as a lexical unit in a linguistic context. As a root, a *fortress* can actively participate in the formation of both word complexes and word derivations, often becoming a complex derivational word: Fortress, fortalice [17].

The word “castle” is equivalent to the word *Berd* (fortress) – “Berdatsunts” - in the sense of extremely strong, thunderous [18].

We often notice that the word *tower* (*berd*) is used as a synonym for fortress. According to the “Dictionary of the Modern Armenian”<sup>3</sup> a *fortress* is a fortified structure serving defensive purposes, such as a tower. S. Malkhasiants' Armenian Explanatory Dictionary [17] emphasizes the following semantic layers of the word fortress:

1. *Strong place, strong.*
  - Inaccessible mountains are sometimes fortresses.
2. *An artificially fortified position or structure for defense against the enemy.*
  - To build a fortress,
  - To destroy a fortress,
  - They remained besieged in the fortress for two years.
3. *A strong bolt or lock.*
  - A lock for the house makes it a fortress.
4. *A conical mound of dung.*
  - How many fortresses of dung do you have?
  - They plant a broom tree at the edge of the castle.

This last version of this word, in the meaning of a dung heap, is particularly noteworthy. One of the narrators from Shirak, Aregnazan Mkhitarian (H. Matikyan's fieldwork, Shirak region, 2025), mentioned in a private conversation with us: “We call a dung heap a ‘ghalakh.’ We do not use the word *fortress*. We will make a dung heap, cover it with manure, which will resemble a dome, a real fortress. We make it wider at the bottom, then crush it from above. The appearance is that of a fortress”.

In another source, the word ‘fortress’ is also used to mean a dung heap, a place to store dung [19]. The dung cone, or tower, is cattle dung, which, after some processing, is divided into rectangular pieces and stacked in a circular cone shape to dry, so that it becomes winter fuel. This old tradition is still used in Armenian villages, and some skill is needed to stack it correctly, so the “stack” has sufficient strength and is as open as possible from all sides, allowing the dung to dry. This stack, seen from above, resembles a truncated cone and a tower, like the conical towers of a castle.

In the early architecture of the Armenian highlands, T. Toramanyan discovered tower-shaped structures built atop hills, preserved as truncated cones without covers (Fig. 4). Their purpose remains unknown; for example, the “Oyugh” tower [20] near the village of Aghavnadzor. The tradition of building towers from dung probably dates back thousands of years and can be linked to the tower-shaped structures of the Armenian Highlands.



Fig. 4. Megalithic period tower-shaped structure of Aghavnadzor ‘Oyugh’ according to T. Toramanyan, Dung Tower, fortress. Traditional Armenian residential house in the village of Tsaghkunk

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<sup>3</sup>Dictionary of Modern Armenian. Language Institute Named After H. Acharyan, NAS RA, Yerevan, 1969 (in Armenian). Available at: <https://surl.li/qzfrvp> (accessed on June 30, 2026).

The synonymic paradigm indicates the following synonyms for the word fortress: fortress, fort, castle, stronghold, military base [21].

The word *castle* has an idiomatic use, where popular ideas are revealed, for example: *air castle / unreal, unrealizable dreams /, building air castles/weaving unrealizable plans /, castle in the air / unreal dream /, castle made of paper* [22] – all having the meaning of an unreal dream.

All of these idioms have a **negative or ironic assessment**:

- “building air castles” → frivolous plans,
- “castle made of paper” → quickly collapsing hope.

This shows that Armenian folk thinking values practicality, moderation, and realism.

The idiomatic uses of the word “castle” reveal the language's figurative thinking. The following elements are also deployed in the cited idioms:

- **air** - emptiness, instability
- **paper** - fragility, temporality

These are contrasted with the castle's traditional material, **stone**, which is a criterion of stability in linguistic thinking.

In parallel, we have encountered a phraseological unit with the same meaning in English-speaking culture: “castle in the air”. In some cases, the expression “building castles in the sand” is common. A rich series of idioms is formed with *air* and expresses uncertainty in Armenian:

- Thrown into the air- empty,
- To shoot into the air – to express oneself in an empty place,
- Being in the air – not stable,
- Living in the air – to live a life detached from life and reality.

In Armenian and English reinterpreted structures, the castle serves as a metaphor for strength, imagination, dreams, and security, and, by linking it to fragile materials (*air, paper, sand*), irony is created. Thus, *the air castle, the paper castle*, and the English *castle in the air* give an idea of the imagination of the human mind, while at the same time emphasizing the real components of the castle's construction – the stone that gives it strength.

The meanings of *house* and *castle* are sometimes identified in English figurative expressions, particularly in proverbs and sayings: “An Englishman's home is his castle”, “A man's home is his castle”, “My home is my castle”. The house is compared to a *castle* because, by law and tradition, it provides the Englishman with protection, power, and freedom, as a castle provides to a king.

The word-formation possibilities of *castle* and the diversity of reinterpreted structures it forms can be explained by its central role in a person's social and personal life. In all cases, the examination of dictionary material allows us to conclude that the words formed with this component predominantly emphasize the dominance of the concept of castle, which acquires its semantic authority during word-compounding and word-derivation. The concept of the *castle* becomes a word-root, a word-pole, around which folk phraseological thinking is also vibrantly formed.

Consider the general architecture of a traditional Armenian residential house in the village of Tsaghkunq, Gegharkunik Province, Republic of Armenia, which has been preserved since the 19th century. We see a rectangular structure, part of whose aisle has the form of a truncated cone. The main halls of the houses had no other windows, and the only window was above. If we compare it with the tower-shaped structure, the tower of the dung (Armenian: *atar*), we will see similar dimensional commonalities. In other words, the term house-fortress shares commonalities in both physical and spiritual senses (Fig. 4).

### The Symbolic Meaning of Castles in Biblical Texts

In biblical texts, the concept of “castle” often symbolizes reliability, protection, and strength, emphasizing divine or human protection. It is associated with mountains. Let us cite examples: Mountains are

extraordinary places with unique environments. They are the threshold of calm and chaos, life and death. Historically, mountains have been places of seclusion, retreat, and sanctuary, places of voluntary spiritual contemplation, meditation, and refuge, or places of involuntary escape from enemies. The Bible makes extensive references to mountains and hills as places of protection: “I will say of the Lord, my refuge and my fortress, my God, in him I will trust”. **Daniel 11:19** “After this, he will turn back towards the fortresses of his own land, but he will stumble and fall and be no more”. This is about a king or general who leans on the **fortresses of his land**, but is ultimately defeated. Physical fortresses do not provide salvation without the will of God.

God is the only fortress where man can find true security—not material, but spiritual and eternal. Human-built fortresses may collapse, but no danger can destroy God's fortress, because it is founded on faith, righteousness, and the name of the Lord.

These literary and folkloric manifestations are not accidental, since the fortress was vital to both the physical and spiritual protection of human identity. In the Armenian Highlands, we know of numerous natural *hill/mountain/ mountain fortresses* that, due to their difficult access, served as natural strongholds for the surrounding population. In this case, we should not only consider physical but also spiritual protection. In general, the choice of the location of the fortresses, the construction approach, the spatial connection between the settlement and the fortress, the role of the fortress citadel and the harmony with nature, the secular and the spiritual, and the essence and manifestations of the interconnectedness with the higher are seen in the examples of Tayk Geghik, Enkuzek, Erknis, Hovak and several dozen other fortresses (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. *The Early-Period Fortress of Geghik Village in the Voqaghe Province, and the Megalithic Fortress of Chordvank Village in the Kogh Province*

A manifestation of Tayk fortress construction, which we labeled "God Ahead" during fieldwork, was probably also found elsewhere in the Armenian Highlands, but was particularly evident in the relatively well-preserved Tayk fortresses. All the fortresses have or had cult structures. Following the example of medieval Tayk fortresses, these have been preserved as churches, mostly modest single-nave churches with halls, lined up like the fortress walls. However, the other regularity is more remarkable, namely the location of the churches within the fortresses. The fortresses are naturally built on heights, and the entrance is usually from the rear. The most protected part of the front is inaccessible, and an enemy approaching through the gorge sees only this aspect of the fortress. Churches within the fortresses are placed near the main facades or, if the facade faces east, are generally integrated into the walls. That is, the enemy is initially "met" by the cult structure. This phenomenon is widespread in Tayk Arsatspor, Vokaghe, Azordatspor, Boghkha, Partizatspor, and other provinces, as recorded by us in Odik, Enkuzek, Arsis/Arsits, Berdagrak, Oshkidzor, Barnak, Aspak, and Berdus (probably Berdunk) Cave-Fortress 2, the third fortress of the village of Hovak, etc. This emphasizes that a person who is physically protected must first and foremost be spiritually

protected. In a private conversation with us, Kaps teller Vrezh Margaryan (H. Matikyan's fieldwork, 2024) compared the cave to a fortress: "In ancient times, the cave was considered an auxiliary defensive place to the fortress. The kingdom of canyons and caves protected the people. They built a wall in front of the cave. There was such a cave-fortress in the territory of the Kaps village".

Shirak teller Katya Khachatryan (Fieldwork, 2025, Shirak region, settlement Horom) mentioned in conversation: "We had our own fortress, our mountain, which was a fortress city".

The mention of a cave-fortress preserved in Shirak folklore is also interesting. It turns out we really do have cave-fortresses. One of the cave-fortresses discovered during our fieldwork this year was Berdus/Berdunk, which also serves as the gateway to the Partez settlement, the provincial center of Partizatspor. The road leading to the provincial center of Partez passes through the gorge past the Berdus/Berdunk settlement, near which it narrows considerably, where it also joins the narrow gorge coming from Berdazpor province. That intersection was mostly protected by three cave-fortresses, the front walls of which have been preserved. Berdus/Berdunk cave-fortress 2 is a complex fortification system-labyrinth with three- to four-story-high caves, the front parts of which were enclosed by a wall (Fig. 2). On the first floor, the entrance junction, lined with high towers, has been preserved. The eastern facade of a single-nave hall church is integrated into the third-floor wall, and about 800 meters to the north, along the fourth floor, the cave leads to another single-nave hall church standing separately on a platform. About 50 meters north of that last church, a small square-shaped lime-mortar fortress has been preserved. This probably enclosed the complex's northern entrance. About 500 meters north of the last fortress, on a high cliff in the gorge, another small fortress is located. In general, cave-fortress settlements are found throughout the Armenian Highlands and adjacent regions, including Ani, Vardzunik, and Khndzoresk.

### The Functional Significance of the Castle/Fortress in the Folklore Environment

The castle or fortress has not only physical but also symbolic significance in Armenian folklore. In fairy tales, the fortress often serves as a closed world in which the king's daughter is imprisoned or a magical object is kept.

It symbolizes a test for the hero, who must cross the border and enter another world.

The word *fortress* recurs in several Armenian folk tales. The king's fortress is emphasized, for example, in the fairy tale "Kiko", while the devil's fortress is prominent in the fairy tale "Khipilik's headwear". In the "Bald Man's Tale", the fortress is described as a structure on the top of a mountain: "... a long way, a short way, against a barren mountain, they saw that small mountain at the top of a mountain fortress...".

This "A long way, a short way" means not only a physical process but also **a test, a hero's path**. "A long way, a short way"—a folk phrase created by the repetition of movement—indicates covering a long distance, which is characteristic of the fairy tale environment. As we have discussed, the means of defense is sometimes manifested in the folklore environment as a fortress. This is depicted not only as a physical structure but also as a place endowed with spiritual, social, and cultural functions, associated with heroism, testing, unity, and preservation of tradition. Many heroes in folk tales must overcome a fortress's walls to prove their strength.

Considering the fortress as a form of test, we first find fortresses where the act of climbing, let alone building, itself constitutes a challenge and a test. For example, the fortresses of Tayk Vordis/Vordik, Aspak, Kitsporut, Vzhjanget, Erakhani, and others are built on inaccessible, remote rocky outcrops, and one cannot help but imagine the challenges the builders must have overcome. The result was a real, psychologically oppressive effect on the opponents and a great psychological advantage for the defenders, who had accomplished a feat simply by building it. They lived proudly below the fortress and always felt protected by it (Fig. 3).

### The Castle in the Artistic Environment

In literary contexts, the castle is identified with the mother, the cradle, and the motherland. All this takes a particular form in the folk art of Hovhannes Shiraz:

*Whether I am a swaddled baby, life is a cradle, you are the child in my arms,  
Whether I am an army, you're my fortress; you are the tent I put up.*

Or:

*Our mother is our **cradle**,  
Our mother is our home's **fortress**.*

In these lines, with musicality, the word "mother" is repeated: she is both the cradle, the beginning, and the source, and she ensures the home's protection.

In folk thinking, the mother is also a fortress, a rock. The idea of remaining defenseless is sometimes emphasized in the expression of being an orphan without a mother, that is, being defenseless.

In this parallel of motherhood/motherland, it hardly seems a coincidence to find the fortress of VORDJNHAGH in the Arsyatspor province of Tayk, or the NIKHAGH located next to it. Fortresses are mentioned there, dating back to the early Middle Ages, when they were known as the cradle of the Mamikonians [21]. The names of the fortress are composed of the roots "VORDJ" and "Khagh", as well as "NI" and "Khagh". If we consider, for example, the Oshkidzor settlement and the fortress of Tayk, we will see that the fortress, with its location and majestic appearance, leaves an impression of protection and a cradle, or of protecting the "infant" like a mother, physically and especially spiritually. Almost all large villages in Tayk have their own local fortresses, while the provincial ones are even larger. In other words, for the natives, the builders were psychologically associated with security and warmth. In one of the Shirakian love rhyme songs, the beloved considers his beloved a fortress:

*The water has gone its own way,  
The dew has gone to the rose,  
My beloved brave boy,  
Is a fortress among a thousand.*  
(Hasmik Matikyan's Fieldwork, 2025).

The expression "*Is a fortress among a thousand*" shows that he stands out from all others, like a fortress in a plain: high, unshakable, unique. In musical folklore, especially in songs containing clear local coordinates, the fortress is emphasized by using a clear place name:

*Under the destroyed fortress of Kars,  
My beloved girl was sleeping,  
I called her name, but no response,  
I guess she was aching.*

The terms "beloved fortress", "paired fortresses", and "girls' and boys' fortresses" are again widespread in Armenian fortification practice. According to the memoirs of Atrpet [23] and others, the Parnak twin fortresses of the Berdapor province are known, one of which has an emphasized cult orientation—"GIRL", with "BOY" behind it, leaning on an inaccessible rock mass (Fig. 1). Fortresses with such names have been preserved, for example, in the present-day Tavush region of Armenia, etc. In the context of folklore games, the "Fortress game" deserves attention. V. Bdoyan, referring to "Fortress game", notes that this "Armenian game was written down in the period from the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. The collected games are the remains of medieval fragments; they are important both in terms of form and content".

The traditional game known as "Fortress" derives its name from the concept of a fortress and reflects symbolic notions of defense, territory, and social organization. The central object of the game, representing the fortress, may be constructed from various materials, such as a flag, a large stone, or another selected

marker. Participants are divided into two groups of equal strength: one assumes the role of defenders of the fort, while the other attempts to capture it. The defenders protect the symbolic structure, with the most agile participants placing one foot on the fort or holding a stake or pillar established within it. The opposing team captures the fort by touching the object or placing a foot upon it, followed by a verbal declaration announcing the successful capture. Due to its representation of military strategies, defensive practices, and territorial competition, the game is traditionally classified as a military game [24].

Although the fundamental structure of the game remains consistent, fortress is practiced according to diverse regional variations throughout Armenia. These localized adaptations demonstrate the dynamic nature of folk traditions, in which cultural practices are continuously reproduced and transformed through community participation. A particularly significant element in some versions of the game is the inclusion of an “architect” role. The presence of this figure indicates that the fortress's symbolic meaning extends beyond the physical structure itself, reflecting cultural recognition of the social function of the builder or designer who created and organized defensive space.

This interpretation corresponds with S. Bronner’s concept of **cultural praxis**, introduced in *Explaining Traditions: Folk Behavior in Modern Culture* (2011). Bronner argues that traditions should not be understood simply as fixed cultural forms inherited from the past; rather, they acquire meaning through performance, repetition, and local enactment. Through practice, traditions become active expressions of social structures, collective concerns, and cultural systems of knowledge [25].

From this perspective, the game of Fortress represents more than a recreational activity; it functions as a performative model through which participants negotiate symbolic space, authority, and social roles. The acts of defending and capturing the fort reproduce concepts associated with the construction and protection of physical structures, while the designation of an architect introduces a figure of organization and authority. By imitating the social processes involved in creating and managing defensive spaces, the game operates as a mechanism of folk transmission, preserving and communicating cultural knowledge through embodied experience and participation.

Following Bronner’s approach to folk architecture, buildings and built environments can likewise be examined as cultural expressions that both reflect and shape traditional practices. Architectural forms are not merely material objects but also representations of social behavior, collective memory, and systems of informal learning. Researchers studying folk buildings typically examine their form, construction methods, use, and decoration. Among these elements, form—particularly elevation, façade, floor plan, and decorative features—is often prioritized because it is visible, measurable, relatively stable, and suitable for comparative analysis across different cultural contexts [26].

A further example of the fortress's symbolic and performative significance in Armenian culture is evident in the traditional group dance known as “Berd” (“Fortress”). Similar to the game of Fortress, the dance transforms the concept of the fort into a collective cultural expression. Through the formation of a human tower, in which participants support one another to create a symbolic defensive structure, the dance represents unity, cooperation, and the community's collective strength.

From the perspective of cultural praxis, the “Berd” dance demonstrates how architectural concepts can be transformed into embodied cultural practice. The fortress is no longer understood only as a physical structure or military object; rather, it becomes a symbolic form reproduced through movement, coordination, and collective participation. Through their bodies, performers recreate ideas of construction, stability, and defense, transforming architectural knowledge into an intangible cultural expression.

However, a folkloristic analysis of architecture extends beyond physical appearance. The social and behavioral processes associated with constructing, entering, and using buildings provide essential evidence of cultural transmission. The selection of materials, organization of labor, and practical use of enclosed spaces reveal systems of knowledge transmitted through imitation, observation, and participation. In this

sense, both folk architecture and the Armenian game of Fortress demonstrate how communities communicate concepts of space, protection, authority, and social organization through lived practice.

Within this broader framework, medieval Armenian fortifications can be understood not only as physical structures but also as components of larger cultural, spatial, and communicative systems. Ara Zarean's recently published study on the medieval Armenian fortresses of historical Syunik examines the relationship between fortifications and broader networks of mobility and communication, interpreting them as interconnected elements within a regional infrastructural system. The study explores the spatial and functional relationships among roads, bridges, caravanserais, fortresses, and watchtowers, emphasizing their integrated role in the organization of medieval territories and the functioning of defensive, economic, and communication networks.

A significant contribution of A. Zarean's work lies in its systematic analysis of historical and textual sources, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the architectural, historical, and functional characteristics of these fortifications. The study also introduces a concise illustrated glossary of fortress components and related terminology, offering a valuable methodological resource for the classification, interpretation, and comparative study of medieval Armenian fortification architecture [27].

### **Castle/fortress in the Context of Paremiology**

The concept of a *fortress*, entrenched in popular consciousness, also appears in folklore, in blessings and wishes, and in curses. Blessings-wishes, curses, oath formulas, both in general and in Armenian linguistics, are considered words of desire. Wish formulas/blessings/ composed of the words "mountain" and "fortress": sometimes these word combinations are used in parallel. Our fieldwork across various settlements in the Shirak region provides evidence of this:

- ❖ Be as strong as a fortress,
- ❖ Be as strong as a mountain,
- ❖ Be my rock,
- ❖ Stand tall like a mountain,
- ❖ If you have a parent, your parent stands behind you like a rock/fortress/,
- ❖ As firm as a mountain, as upright as a tower.

In several reinterpreted folk structures, especially in blessings, the nouns "mountain" and "fortress" sometimes become equivalent.

Armenian wishing texts demonstrate a marked prevalence of the lexical root associated with "fortress". Formulas that invoke a castle or fortress occur throughout the full range of cultural expressions, from children's nursery rhymes to adult ritualized wishes, reflecting the enduring symbolic significance of fortification in Armenian cultural consciousness. For instance, the Armenian word «ամր» (*amur*)—the root of «ամրոց» (*amrots*) (castle or fortress)—is explicitly described as signifying strength, stability, and protection, further emphasizing the conceptual association between fortresses and resilience in both linguistic and cultural contexts. 'May your teeth be strong', 'May your back be strong', 'May your feet and hands be strong', 'May you have a strong family', 'May your arms be strong', etc.

The meaning of strength is sometimes expressed in the word combinations "wall" and "back":

A piece of *wall* – a giant, or standing like a wall,

To have someone's *back* – to protect someone,

*Back* someone up – to give strength.

In literary sources, we find terms such as "mountain" and "rock". These are logical formulations, since it is no secret that, physically, the fortresses are located on a hill. In this regard, in addition to the ancient traditions adopted across the Armenian Highlands, we also encounter in Tayk a specific fortification principle that the citadel of the fortress was not built on the highest point, but in the middle of the gorge, on a naturally isolated island-shaped rock massif, usually close to a settlement of the same name: Enkuzek,

Norberd, Erakhani, Oshkidzor, Nikagh, etc. It is not that we do not encounter the mentioned principle in other provinces of Armenia, but it is much more widespread here.

## **Conclusion**

During field studies, the question often arises: “Where are the people who built such fortresses?” That question not only suggests a loss of hereditary continuity, but it also emphasizes the need to restore cultural self-awareness as a condition for national vitality and self-preservation. The construction of the cities of settlement and their physical and moral-psychological guardians was based on our ancestors' systematic ideas about the fourfold division of the world and the three-class division of society, which were part of natural philosophy. The urban planning creations of Tayk discussed here were also built using this general approach, which naturally combined with local worldview peculiarities over time.

The comparative approach adopted here revealed that, in Armenian cultural perception, the fortress is not only a material defensive structure. It is also a semantic and symbolic system in which physical reality and folk imaginative thinking are interconnected and mutually shape one another. Fortresses are not only built environments but also narrative spaces where architecture and folklore mutually construct meaning. Grounded in the parallel examination of material structures and intangible cultural expressions, this approach enabled a more comprehensive understanding of fortifications as both built environments and culturally constructed meanings. The authors note that the existing scholarship predominantly comprises historiographical, source-critical, and topographical studies, as well as descriptive analyses of individual fortresses. Systematic and theoretically grounded studies remain rare, and only a limited number of works address issues of spatial organization and territorial distribution. Two main factors can explain this situation. The first is geopolitical: the present territory of the Republic of Armenia is distinctly surrounded by its historical regions, and, due to geopolitical constraints, the physical investigation of fortresses has long been inaccessible to many researchers. The second factor concerns the poor state of physical preservation of fortresses within the current borders of Armenia, where most survive primarily as archaeological remains.

The typological analysis of Tayk fortifications reveals a coherent hierarchical system consisting of riverine, mid-valley, and high-mountain fortresses. This spatial structure reflects not only defensive logic and adaptation to geography but also a deeper principle of territorial organization embedded in the settlement culture of the Armenian Highlands. The recurrence of similar organizational patterns across regions confirms a long-term, stable tradition of integrated settlement–fortress planning. At the same time, analysis of architectural materials, folklore, literary texts, oral testimonies, and Biblical texts demonstrates that the fortress occupies a central position in Armenian cultural consciousness. It is consistently reinterpreted as a symbol of protection, endurance, identity, and moral strength. Metaphorical structures such as fortress-mother, fortress-homeland, and fortress-cradle reveal how architectural space is transformed into a cultural model of collective security and belonging. Idiomatic and semantic extensions of the term “fortress” itself further confirm its deep integration in an Armenian linguistic worldview, where concepts of stability and protection are anchored in both material and symbolic dimensions.

The convergence of architectural evidence and folkloristic interpretation indicates that Armenian fortresses function as memory-bearing structures, linking physical space with narrative tradition and collective identity. They are not isolated monuments but active components of a cultural system in which the built environment, language, and belief mutually reinforce one another. The methodology applied here demonstrates that the fortress, as a form of tangible cultural heritage, cannot be fully understood outside the framework of intangible cultural memory. While fortresses are materially present as architectural and archaeological structures—defined by walls, spatial organization, topography, and defensive logic—they simultaneously exist in cultural consciousness as vehicles of collective memory, transmitted through folklore, oral narratives, linguistic expressions, and symbolic representations.

From this perspective, the semantic field of “fortress” is directly conditioned by architectural form and function. Key physical characteristics of fortifications—such as elevated placement, enclosure, defensive systems, and visual and spatial dominance—are consistently mapped onto linguistic and conceptual structures that denote strength, protection, stability, and security. Consequently, any semantic analysis of the lexical unit “castle/fortress” must be firmly anchored in its architectural and spatial foundations, since the built environment constitutes the primary experiential source shaping its cultural, metaphorical, and linguistic meanings. In biblical discourse, fortresses symbolize a human security that is insufficient unless grounded in spiritual protection and faith in God.

This is further supported by folkloric evidence, where the concept of the fortress, deeply embedded in popular consciousness, is widely reflected in blessings, wishes, curses, and oath formulas. In Armenian linguistic and ethnographic tradition, such verbal expressions are generally classified as “words of desire”, functioning as culturally codified forms of aspiration, protection, and moral evaluation. Fieldwork in various settlements of the Shirak region demonstrates that wish formulas frequently incorporate the lexical fields of “mountain”, “fortress”, and “rock”, which are often used in parallel or in interchangeable configurations. These expressions reveal a shared metaphorical system in which physical elevation, stability, and structural strength are transferred into ethical and emotional domains. Many stories preserved in folklore come from ancient times and are directly related to male-female, earth-sky, stone-mountain, guardian, and tripartite structures (father/mother/child; Father/Son/Holy Spirit in the era of Christianity), a strong guardian, and many other philosophical ideas. In literary contexts, we find the fortress compared to the mother, the cradle, and the motherland, among other metaphors, as well as to the mountain and the rock. In song folklore, parallels are sometimes drawn, such as fortress-wall strength and beloved fortress. In epic folklore, building or appearing in a fortress is associated with trials and heroism. The mention of a cave-fortress preserved in Shirak folklore is also interesting, revealing a conceptual understanding and also pointing to a material history. Fortress games also place particular emphasis on social construction through the mandatory role of an architect-game maker.

These literary and folkloric manifestations are not accidental, since the fortress was of vital importance to the physical and spiritual protection of human identity. Armenian medieval fortresses are monuments of multi-layered cultural and spiritual value that, by their nature, go beyond the boundaries of purely defensive or constructional structures. The fortress in the Armenian cultural system acts not only as a material heritage—walls, towers, and defensive systems—but also as a symbol of spiritual security, collective self-awareness, and an inner connection with the native land. The study of folklore and ethnographic sources, particularly those from the Shirak region, shows that Armenians also perceived the fortress as a spiritual refuge associated with higher powers, the maternal image, the cradle, and protection.

In contemporary culture, the paucity of such structures surviving in Armenia, along with the historical realities of centuries of migration and displacement, has led to a gradual erosion of awareness of spiritual and physical protection. As a result, a certain weakening of national identity, of land ties, and of psychological tendencies toward adaptation has been observed. A combined interdisciplinary approach incorporating the folklore and intangible heritage of a region may therefore help to fill out our broader understanding of the partial record of a historical, tangible region or settlement.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Higher Education and Science Committee of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of the Republic of Armenia (RA MoESCS) for funding the two research projects underpinning this study.

The authors sincerely thank **Francesco Augelli** (Politecnico di Milano) and **Paul Cowdell** (University of Bristol) for their valuable guidance and academic support. They also acknowledge the Shirak Center for Armenological Studies (NAS RA), the National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia, and the Land and Culture National Organization for their institutional support.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Funding

The research was supported within the two projects financed by the Higher Education and Science Committee of MESCS RA (1. Research project № 25RG-6B114; 2. Research project № 25RG-6A091).

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