

# When Graves Speak: Script Choice, Identity, and Cultural Memory in the Armenian Cemetery of Plovdiv

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## Abstract

This article explores the symbolic power of script choice in shaping diasporic identity and memory within the Armenian community of Plovdiv, Bulgaria. Focusing on the city's Armenian cemetery—an exceptional site of visual and cultural inscription—it examines how gravestone epigraphy, script usage, and linguistic aesthetics contribute to the construction and reinforcement of a collective sense of Armenianness. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork and informed by the anthropology of writing, the study argues that Armenian script functions not merely as a means of communication but as a potent visual and ideological marker of ethnic continuity, distinction, and resilience. In a context where the Armenian language is increasingly endangered, the cemetery emerges as both a commemorative space and a semiotic battleground, where orthographic inconsistencies, aesthetic choices, and ideologically loaded inscriptions reveal the tensions between linguistic erosion and symbolic permanence. The article further considers how writing practices—particularly those surrounding sacred memory and death—mediate the community's relationship to its imagined homeland and to the dominant Bulgarian society. Ultimately, it offers new insights into how material inscriptions serve as enduring vehicles of minority identity, cultural pride, and mnemonic resistance.

## Keywords

Armenian Diaspora, Plovdiv, Bulgaria, Script Choice, Armenian Alphabet, Linguistic Landscape, Armenian Graveyard, Collective Memory

## Introduction

The Armenian diaspora in the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv constitutes the largest and most institutionally developed Armenian minority in both Bulgaria and the broader Balkan region. This is due in no small part to the city's Armenian school and a long-standing presence that dates back to Byzantine times. The community is well integrated into the Bulgarian host society and is characterised by a high level of educational attainment. It contributes significantly to the socio-economic and cultural life of Plovdiv. A substantial proportion of today's Armenian population are descendants of survivors of the Armenian Genocide perpetrated in the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1916. According to official Bulgarian statistics,<sup>1</sup> Plovdiv is home to approximately 2,000 Armenians out of a national total of 5,567. Unofficial Armenian estimates, however, place the number at around 4,000 in Plovdiv and 20,000 across the country.

For Armenians in Plovdiv, as elsewhere in the diaspora, issues of identity are inextricably linked to the question of language maintenance.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the Armenian alphabet, which is unique in the world due to the shape of its letters, is considered by the diaspora to be an essential part of the identity of the language. Nevertheless, the current use of the Armenian language, both spoken and written, is very limited in the Plovdiv diaspora, and the scenario for the future linguistic situation seems rather discouraging. The Armenian language of Plovdiv belongs to the Western branch of Armenian and can be defined as a non-territorial minority language. It is not recognized anywhere as a state language and has no place as a language of administration and public life.<sup>3</sup> In addition, it has never enjoyed any real official protection by the state in any other country, which makes it a highly endangered language whose speakers are particularly exposed to linguistic assimilation.<sup>4</sup>

With regard to the Armenian script and the importance attached to its public use in the diaspora, an important clarification must be made here. The Armenian alphabet enjoys a special prestige, due primarily to the divine inspiration by which Saint Mesrop Mashtots is said to have visualized the letters of the alphabet in the early 5th century AD, an event described as a true miracle.<sup>5</sup> Mesrop Mashtots developed this unique writing system to translate the Holy Scriptures into the local Armenian language, but also to prevent the danger of assimilation of

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<sup>1</sup> BULGARIAN CENSUS 2011: [www.nsi.bg].

<sup>2</sup> SELVELLI, *Language Practices and (Trans)National Identity Construction among the Armenian Diaspora of Bulgaria* & ARAKELYAN, "The role of language in the preservation of Armenian identity".

<sup>3</sup> DERMERGUERIAN, "Espaces de fonctionnement des deux branches de l'arménien littéraire moderne".

<sup>4</sup> AGBU, "The Armenian language as an endangered language in Europe. A contribution to the European Roadmap for Linguistic Diversity"

<sup>5</sup> MAKSOUDIAN, *The Origins of the Armenian Alphabet and Literature*.

Armenians by Persian and Greek forces. Contemporary rhetoric about the importance of the Armenian alphabet similarly depicts the current situation, in a context where assimilation dynamics are increasingly affecting the global Armenian diaspora.<sup>6</sup> The history of the Armenian alphabet is thus explicitly a social fact, demonstrating that writing is not just a simple mechanism for transcribing the sounds of the language, but also functions as a primary symbolic system that still contains immediate cultural and identity-forming meanings.<sup>7</sup>

The Armenian cemetery in Plovdiv is an appropriate place to reflect on individual and collective memory, identity orientations and their relationship to public writing. The graves of the ancestors represent a history that cannot be forgotten, as most of the people buried there were survivors of the Genocide or descendants of those who were forced to leave their homeland forever. The individual pain over the loss of loved ones is combined with collective suffering in the memorial dedicated to the genocide.

The specific focus on the minority cemetery is part of the empirical, qualitative research on the processes of collective commemoration that continue to shape the Armenian public landscape in Plovdiv that I conducted among members of this community. Methodologically, the data collection involved ethnographic observation of the spaces in the city of Plovdiv described in this article (cemetery, church-museum, monuments, etc.) and all public inscriptions. This work was carried out by familiarizing ourselves with the discourse on memory and identity disseminated by the main local Armenian institutions through their media over the years.

Since my initial engagement with the Armenian diaspora in Plovdiv in 2010—when I conducted a year of field research within the community as part of my master’s thesis—my involvement has remained continuous. In the years that followed, regular visits to the city, the cultivation of both personal and professional relationships with members of the community, and sustained engagement with local publications—particularly the newspaper *Parekordzagani Tzain* (“Voice of Benevolence”) and books issued by the community’s Armenian publishing house—have enabled me to gather substantial insights into how official discourses have shaped the linguistic landscape of Armenian memory in the city. The research methods of the present paper are based on ethnographic fieldwork and the theoretical assumptions of Giorgio Raimondo Cardona (1982, 1986, 2009), which were fundamental for the development of an

<sup>6</sup> CHAHINIAN & BAKALIAN, “Language in Armenian American communities: Western Armenian and efforts for preservation”

<sup>7</sup> CARDONA, *Antropologia della scrittura*.

anthropological approach and a sensitivity to issues related to writing systems and public writing practices.

### **The importance of the written word in minority spaces: the Armenian case**

Since the shift from oral to written speech is essentially a shift from sound to visual space, here the effects of print on the use of visual space can be the central, though not the only, focus of attention. (...) <sup>8</sup> Writing had reconstituted the originally oral, spoken word in visual space. Print embedded the word in space more definitively. <sup>9</sup>

My first visual encounter with the Armenian alphabet in Plovdiv occurred during an exploratory visit in the autumn of 2009, prior to my relocation for fieldwork, at a time when I still knew relatively little about the community. As I walked along one of the streets encircling the old town, I paused and noticed, with quiet satisfaction, a striking indication of Armenian presence. It may sound unexpected, but this realisation came to me through a dense row of obituary notices affixed to a wall—most of them written in Armenian. I was genuinely surprised: it was immediately clear to me that Armenians lived here, that this wall marked the threshold of their “territory”, and, above all, that they wrote in their own script.

I continued through the narrow streets of the upper town and, before long, came upon the heart of the community: a walled compound comprising a cultural centre, church, chapel, bell tower, and school—an enclosed and symbolically charged space, where children were playing in the courtyard.

I also immediately noticed that there was a lot of writing in this space, in the form of memorial plaques, monuments, plaques, painted lettering on the walls, etc... almost all in Armenian, but also bilingual in Bulgarian and in one case also in English (near a *khachkar* stone commemorating the victims of the Genocide). A large “inscribed space”, which was waiting to be read by me.

Armenians show a special sensitivity and affection for all objects written with their alphabet, and so when they have the opportunity, they naturally “mark” their space first with written objects or writing on walls, etc. Although only a minority of community members have mastered the Armenian written language, it would be unthinkable not to use it to mark spaces

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<sup>8</sup> ONG, *Orality and Literacy. The technologizing of the Word*, 115

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

and places of the greatest symbolic importance; it would hardly occur to them to write in public spaces using only another alphabet, such as Bulgarian Cyrillic or Latin.

Petrucchi notes: “Unlike languages, the graphic systems in use today seem to be very impermeable to each other, often, if not mainly, for ideological and political reasons of prestige and national identification”.<sup>10</sup>

This also leads to the conclusion that, in most cases, the Armenian script is not truly “read” but merely observed, grasped visually; nevertheless, the effect will be equally strong through this visual familiarity, inevitably creating a situation of emotional identification and participation, as an Armenian can hardly remain indifferent to the presence of the letters of their alphabet. This, in turn, affects the importance attached to everything written, which contributes to the preservation and spread of “Armenianness”. Therefore, schools, magazines and books play a key role in fostering a collective imagination through the valorization of the alphabet, which is a symbol of the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the Armenian people. However, all these elements could not be as effective in spreading a positive rhetoric about the alphabet if they were not supported by an important visual component, namely the images and objects in which the Armenian script is present and spreads its equally high symbolic value. The images and the various surfaces on which the alphabet manifests itself thus become active participants in the construction of the discourse on national identity, which is based on a transtemporal and translocal sense of belonging to an ancient and culturally rich Armenian identity of which this community's members are inevitably very proud. It also follows that in most cases the Armenian scripts are not really “read” but only looked at, grasped by the eye, but the impact will be just as strong in this visual knowledge and will in any case create a situation of emotional identification and participation, since an Armenian can hardly be indifferent to the presence of the signs of his alphabet. This, in turn, affects the importance attached to everything written, which contributes to the preservation and spread of Armenian.

I therefore consider it interesting to analyze how the alphabet is used in public and private spaces through the image of its table reproduced on different surfaces, which becomes a recurring decorative component with symbolic and aesthetic value, as well as through many other objects, spaces and monuments inscribed with Armenian characters and used exemplarily. In this way, the importance of written objects and the inscription of places in the processes of “symbolic cultivation”<sup>11</sup> of Armenian identity in the diaspora becomes clear: they

<sup>10</sup> PETRUCCI, *Prima lezione di Paleografia*, 52.

<sup>11</sup> SMITH, *Ethnosymbolism and Nationalism*.

are models for the appropriation of space by this culture, act as “context markers”<sup>12</sup> and allow us to see writing as an activity that is dense with identity-creating and ideological meanings and that sometimes also leads to the production of certain artifacts. It is therefore important to try to locate inscriptions and written objects in their anthropological reality: to grasp their function and use without forgetting the meaning they have for people, and not to isolate them from their wider cultural-historical context. In fact, every act of writing can produce effects when read, and these effects cannot be reduced to the transmission of the written message alone, but result from the way in which a statement is presented to the reader:<sup>13</sup> in the Armenian case, as we shall see, reading is not always understood as a phonetic decipherment of the letters, but often consists in a mere visualization of their presence, which in any case conveys a message of cultural identity. Through the aesthetic form of the letters, their positioning in space and the characteristics of what they cover, we learn how the Armenian community perceives their writing as an inalienable link to their original homeland, which in most cases is only imagined and never visited in the course of their lives: It is precisely because of the level of imagination generated by emotions that people need effective, immediate symbols.

The analysis of writing in relation to public and private space draws attention to the written elements of an environment and the way in which inscriptions constitute, control and delimit it. Furthermore, writing can be viewed from two sides: from the perspective of the reader and “consumer” and from the perspective of those who commission certain inscriptions or create certain written objects. In this way, we can find a partial answer to the two questions we pose from the perspective of the anthropology of writing: “What do we do with writing? And what does it make us do?”<sup>14</sup>

The Armenian spaces of the city thus come directly into the citizen's field of vision and trigger a kind of mechanism of approach, of interest in them. From the reader's point of view, they catch the eye and invite the passer-by, the observer,<sup>15</sup> whose “visual sense” was stimulated to decipher it. The choice of language reveals a lot about people's sense of identity and their target group. In this context, it is important to keep in mind the fact that the context in which Armenians move is that of a city that is not Armenian, but Bulgarian, and that therefore the inscription of the space is also a way of symbolically appropriating a place, of giving it its own cultural marker that makes it visibly “different” compared to the rest of the city. The ideal

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<sup>12</sup> BATESON, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 335-337

<sup>13</sup> FRAENKEL, “Writing acts: when writing is doing”, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> MC LUHAN, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 6.

audience of Armenian scripts is therefore not only the members of the community, but also from the outside, from anyone observing a space where something about another cultural identity is obviously conveyed through the immediacy of a different writing system.

### **The Armenian graveyard: what the graves tell us**

“The inequalities among men, produced by the control always and in every case exercised over the social use of writing, were and are so manifold that one may be excluded from it. This proves true not only with regards to the direct practices of writing and reading, but also(...) on the occasion of the final event of individual existence, death. .Indeed,even in the face of death, the practical achievements, the places and forms of representation, their ideology and their languages continue to reveal (...) differences in culture, social class and income; so that , (...) written death continues to highlight differences.”<sup>16</sup>

When we look at writing in the context of the cemetery, it is important to keep in mind that this place is both public and private, in a sense it stands at the intersection of both, and because this very reason it is extremely interesting for the study of the practices of writing and self-representation embedded in the broader context of the positive ideology of literacy in the Armenian language promoted by the community in various ways. In short, it is a place where we can reconstruct the ways in which certain ideologies took hold early on, and where we can get practical feedback. So here we also take the side of those who receive such ideological messages and react to them more or less positively and accordingly.

Since the cemetery is a place where the public and the private meet, we can focus here on the interaction between the “cultural elites” and the other sections of the population in order to analyze how the ideals and messages disseminated by the former contribute to creating a sense of national identity and practical achievements among the people. The motive for the use of symbolic resources is in fact the willingness to support ideologies and collective actions<sup>17</sup>.

Nations require ethno-cultural resources to create themselves as supportive communities, especially given the crucial importance of the subjective dimension for a sense of national identity: in the Armenian case, the written language is precisely once again a medium in which much capital from symbolic value<sup>18</sup> is concentrated.

In order to study written culture understood in a broad sense for the Armenian community, it is important not to overlook any area in which it manifests itself “publicly.” In

<sup>16</sup> PETRUCCI, *Prima lezione di Paleografia*. 46.

<sup>17</sup> SMITH, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> BOURDIEU, “Social Space and Symbolic Power”.



the interview conducted with Rupen Chavushian, then president of the Parekordzagan/AGBU in Plovdiv,<sup>19</sup> it emerged how such a place is of relevance to both writing and reading the Armenian alphabet. The Armenian cemetery is not separate from the general cemetery but is exclusively Armenian, the only in Bulgaria. There is also a small church built thanks to the charity of donors, at the entrance of which there is an inscription in both Armenian and Bulgarian:

“Everything is written in Armenian as you see, here this is an important thing because people write it down and so that way they exercise on the written language, to read the names. It is the most beautiful cemetery in Plovdiv. Here is the grave of our Tiutiundjian people who made our school. This fact of our cemetery is important because you can find so many inscriptions and everyone can read them”.<sup>20</sup>

Mr. Chavushian highlights a fundamental fact here: namely, the fact that the graves are important not only for writing, but above all for reading (and thus presuppose an audience), both in the place where they are located and on the website he maintains: some of them even find virtual space on the website of the Plovdiv branch of the Armenian organization AGBU. Upon entering the cemetery, even before glancing at the graves, one immediately notices the proliferation of Armenian inscriptions: two further lengthy inscriptions appear on the inside of the door (which would then serve as the exit), exclusively in Armenian, as well as on the outer walls of the small church, where various engraved plaques, also bilingual, commemorate significant events such as the construction of the building in 1924 in memory of the Tomasian family. Another plaque in front of the ritual hall reminds us that this room was built to commemorate the victims of the Armenian genocide 80 years after the tragedy in 1995.<sup>21</sup>

While exploring the tombs and their inscriptions, I immediately notice something very significant: By reading the inscriptions, we can gain a wealth of information — not so much about the names of those who lie there, but rather about how history influences the way they are written, precisely through the use of the alphabet and the choice of script. There are some graves that look very old and have a big impact on the viewer; they're really aesthetically pleasing - the oldest ones are from the 1880s, when the cemetery actually opened. All the graves from this early period have inscriptions written exclusively in Armenian characters.

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<sup>19</sup> SELVELLI, “The role of the newspaper Parekordzagani Tzain and its related institutions in the preservation of language and identity in the Armenian community of Plovdiv”

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview to Mr. Rupen Chavushian, November 2010

<sup>21</sup> SELVELLI, “Preserving the Postmemory of the Genocide: The Armenian Diaspora’s Institutions in Plovdiv”





**Figure 1. Gravestone of the Hindlian family with inscription in Armenian script, Plovdiv Armenian Cemetery.**

The grave above belongs to the Hindlian family, which is the same historic Plovdiv family of merchants who named a street in the upper town and whose house is preserved as a museum in this part of the city.

I have read that there are graves inscribed in Turkish using Armenian characters in Bulgaria<sup>22</sup>. Unfortunately, I must admit that I have not managed to find or identify them, which I consider a great pity, as they would be extremely relevant to my study. Among the newer tombs, I notice one with a bilingual Armenian–Bulgarian inscription: the family name in Bulgarian is *Arsenian*, but in Armenian it appears as *Arsentzan*. How can it be, I wonder, that the two inscriptions are not transliterated consistently?

Analyzing the photo taken some time later, I realize that the only possible and consequential explanation is the following: the person who executed the Armenian inscription must not have known it that well, because it seems obvious that he mixed up the letters Յ with ԅ, since they may vaguely resemble each other, though only in their capitalized form. The engraver evidently did not know Armenian well.

<sup>22</sup> MICEVA, *Armencite v Balgarija*, 154.



Figure 2. The Arsenian Family Grave.

This impresses me greatly, and in pondering what such a fact might entail, I come across a note in the Mc Luhan book, in which it is stated that gothic writing is difficult to read: “it is as if the written page was to be looked at and not read.”<sup>23</sup>

May it be the same case for Armenian writing for the Plovdiv diaspora community? By whom then should it be looked at? By someone, as is the case with most Plovdiv Armenians, who cannot instantly decipher the Armenian alphabet correctly, otherwise they would immediately notice the error. Thus a certain type of “audience” is assumed: the “engraved” word is thus the harbinger of an intense and visually oriented awareness.

For this reason, we are by no means in a situation in which the alphabet is used for the pure purpose of phonetic transcription, as should be its main function according to classical Aristotelian and Augustinian doctrine,<sup>24</sup> that is: letters are signs of sounds. “When it is written, it is not a word, but the sign of a word which, by presenting its letters to the reader's eyes, shows to his mind the sounds he has to make verbally. What do letters actually do if they do not show themselves to the eyes and, moreover, show words to the mind?... and thus written words (...) are to be regarded as signs of words. Words do not show themselves to the eyes through themselves, but through the signs that are their own”.<sup>25</sup> The definition of letters proposed by Augustine proceeds from an implicit phonological analysis, which forms the classical basis for the conception of written language as dependent on the orality of pronunciation. As Saussure similarly observed: “Language and writing are two distinct systems

<sup>23</sup> MC LUHAN, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, citing E.A.Lowe.

<sup>24</sup> TODOROV, *Teorie del simbolo*, 65.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first.”<sup>26</sup> However, as the following examples show, in the context of the Armenian diaspora, the fundamental correspondence between sound and sign is disrupted, and another level of interpretation is imposed — namely, the symbolic one. In practice, it looks as if an ideographic aspect is recovered:<sup>27</sup> ideographic scripts transcribe thoughts (ideas), not speech, and so it seems to me that the presence of Armenian characters reveals to some extent more than sounds to be pronounced, precise ideas of Armenianness to be preserved...

### **Further observations on the writing choices on the gravestones**

By looking carefully at the graves of the Armenian ancestors we can thus deduct many important information on the symbolic use of language for this minority community throughout its recent history.

In another case, the same Յ character, that earlier in its capital lettering had been confused with Յ is rendered in its lowercase form, but in the wrong context because the rest of the word is instead in capital letters. It is rendered in its lowercase form “յ” but in capital letters as “J,” thus a letter that is not present in the Armenian alphabet. It follows that the person who made the engraving - we cannot know whether he/she was an Armenian or not - did not know the correct form of the letter. This was also the case with the stonemasons of classical antiquity, who were craftsmen and not philologists and therefore made mistakes, even if it was only when copying proposed models. In any case, this seems to me to confirm once again that knowledge of the alphabet is usually very imperfect, but does not hinder its practical application. From this observation I draw the conclusion how much we are in the realm of self-representation practices in the visual realm and that the cemetery is not a neutral space, but is charged with the will to impose a sign on visitors. And so, in this context too, the Armenian alphabet proves to be a strong symbol of identity that people often cannot and do not want to escape - even if they may not know it.

In the case of the already-mentioned grave, there is another very interesting detail that this time refers not only to the final part of the typical Armenian surname “ian.” The spelling of a surname in 1962 (written as “Sop’taian”<sup>28</sup>) and 1980 (as “Soft’aian,” the correct version of the surname, derived from the Ottoman title “softa”) do not match: On the first inscription,

<sup>26</sup> SAUSSURE, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> See SELVELLI, *The Alphabet of Discord*, 182, 271 for a similar consideration in relation to the use of the Glagolitic alphabet by Croats in contemporary times.

<sup>28</sup> From the Ottoman title “Softa” (Sukhta), an undergraduate in a madrasa.

the letter “Փ” was used instead of the letter “Ֆ” This can be explained not only by the vague similarity of the letters in their capitalization in Armenian, but also and especially by the fact that this Armenian letter, pronounced as /ph/, matches in its graphic form with the Bulgarian letter, which is read as /f/. It is the same letter, namely “Փ” in uppercase form, a letter that comes from the Greek alphabet. This probably led to a confusion in the first person responsible for engraving this surname.

Furthermore, in the second spelling from 1980, when the Soviet Eastern Armenian spelling had already been introduced among the Bulgarian Armenian community, the letter “Գ” (pronounced as /t/ in Western Armenian) is replaced by the aspirated /th/ “Թ” (in both Western and Eastern Armenian), although the reasons for this are unclear. If the intention in 1980 was to comply with the rules of Soviet Armenian orthography, then “Գ” should have been replaced by the letter “Տ,” which is read as a non- aspirated /t/ in Eastern Armenian.

A dense graphic history can emerge from a single marble testimony, since technique, ideology and practice coexist and influence each other on all levels. As a consequence, it is possible to find three different spellings of the typical ending of the Armenian surname “-ian” on one and the same gravestone: once with the letter "յ" (+ “an”) (again incorrectly with a lowercase letter), another time correctly with the letter "Յ" (+ “an”) in capital letters according to Soviet orthography and finally another time with the letter "Ե" (+ “an”) according to the current (post-socialist) orthography of Western Armenian.



Figure 3. The Softaian Family Grave.



Armenian writing seems to position itself in this field as a kind of “context marker”, in the sense that it is clearly deemed necessary to make Armenian identity immediately visible to visitors to the site: a message conveyed by the form that remains engraved on the stones, thus exemplifying the permanence of letters in contrast to the transience of sounds.<sup>29</sup>

Letters thus allow us to distance ourselves from the construction of the “now” that weighs on the spoken word, and writing enables us to take into account not only the “other time” but also the “other space.” Writing was also invented to be able to communicate with the absent, and it is defined by its complicity with absence. In the Armenian case of the diaspora, absence is also the absence from and of the territory understood as the nation-state, and in the cemetery, of course, the absence of the people who are no longer there.

In a way, then, writing plays the role of connecting, of creating passages between worlds, between spaces and times, which can thus communicate. It is appropriate to consider writing practices in a given alphabet as the result of the interaction between writing technologies and ideologies of literacy, which are themselves part of a larger ideological system that constitutes political, economic and cultural systems of thought. Certain ideological foundations can initially determine the respective technical and linguistic principles: in this case, the Armenian alphabetic system or the Bulgarian Cyrillic system.

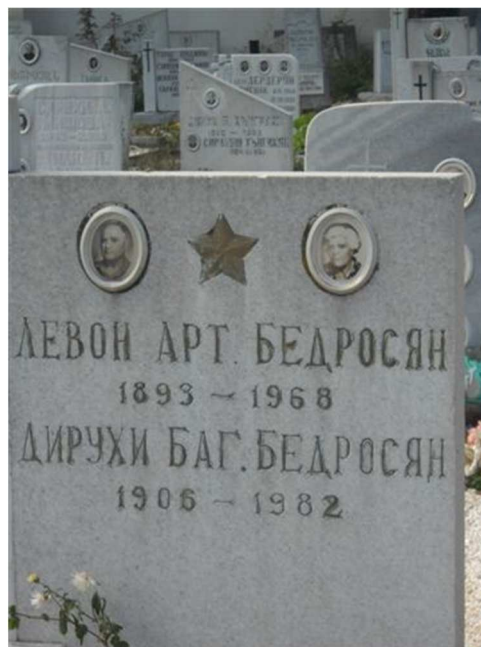


Figure 4. The Bedrosian Family Grave.

<sup>29</sup> In his *De doctrina christiana*, Saint Augustine stated: "Since sounds disappear immediately after passing through the air and do not survive their reverberation, their signs have been fixed by letters" cited in TODOROV, *Teorie del simbolo*, 66

It is interesting, for example, that on the graves associated with the times of the peak of Bulgarian communist repression of minorities a red star can be seen are written only in Bulgarian Cyrillic script. Writing is obviously a communicative technology: its transfer of language into a visual form always has a significant impact on society. The visualization of language and its reification in text promotes certain values and ideologies rather than others: In this case, it was perhaps important to show the writing in Bulgarian and to use the communist star during the critical years of the regime's violation of minority rights (including the ones of the Armenian minority in Plovdiv, who suffered the closure of its school) of minorities. In this case, we can contextualize such decisions in the years of communist ideologies: perhaps the owners of this gravestone wanted to show their willingness to write in Bulgarian and to use the red star as a strong political symbol.

“Changes in the signs are the signs of change,” Petrucci quotes Malcolm Parkes as stating: in fact, each of the graphic systems has its own more or less long history, characterized by modifications, adaptations and sometimes outright graphic revolutions. All these phenomena are symptoms and consequences of profound social, economic and cultural changes.<sup>30</sup>

Certainly, new practices can emerge from the interaction between technological developments and existing ideologies.<sup>31</sup> For example, today new modes of literacy are developing in the context of Internet technologies, and they are changing to some extent the perceptions that young Armenians have of their endangered language.

Inside the cemetery, in addition to the graves, there is an extremely important element, namely a memorial to the victims of the genocide. This monument is truly impressive, and at its base there is a plaque bearing Armenian inscriptions on three of its four sides. Unfortunately, two of the three inscriptions are quite weathered, making them difficult to decipher, apart from the name of the famous Soviet Armenian poet, Silva Kaputikian. Nevertheless, the visual impact remains striking. On the best-preserved plaque we read the names of the Anatolian towns from which the Armenians were physically eliminated (Urfa, Muş, and others).

On the fourth side, however, there is an inscription in Bulgarian: “In memory of the 1.5 million Armenians from Turkey and Western Armenia who died on the path of forced exile due to the barbaric persecutions from 1915 to 1918.”

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<sup>30</sup> PETRUCCI, *Prima lezione di Paleografia*.

<sup>31</sup> FIELD, "Literacy and language ideologies in a European situation of language loss", 97.

Remembrance here is inevitably linked to writing. The graves of the ancestors of the Armenians of Plovdiv represent the signs of a history that cannot be forgotten, as most of them are descended from those who had to leave their homeland forever: a place where the meaning of memory is even more palpable: I would say memory upon memory. These memories truly consecrate the cemetery; the memories of each individual contribute to the sacredness of the place. Individual feelings for deceased loved ones combine with the collective suffering that materializes in the Genocide memorial, in which everyone recognizes a part of themselves and feels Armenian.



**Figure 5. One of the four sides of the Armenian Genocide Memorial at the graveyard.**

These sites can be seen as particularly important places of inscription, because it is around and through them that memory asserts itself and presents itself as an instrument for strengthening the bonds of a social community.<sup>32</sup> This also confirms the importance of symbols and rituals in the construction and maintenance of national and ethnic identities.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, ethnic communities can survive in a form similar to their original one if the succeeding generations of their members continue to identify with the enduring memories, symbols and

<sup>32</sup> LINKE, "Collective Memory. Anthropology of".

<sup>33</sup> SMITH, *Ethnosymbolism and Nationalism*.



traditions.<sup>34</sup> Ethnic survival does not require the maintenance of an intact culture or even a homeland, as the case of the Armenians shows, but the exercise of a particular memory.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusions

As anthropologist Giorgio Raimondo Cardona has stated<sup>36</sup>, since writing is in direct contact with thought, it can acquire some of its power: propositional, active, creative, depending on the ideologies that underlie it. In the case of Armenians, the strongest ideology the one linked to the memory of the past and to the exercise of an ethnic and cultural memory. Thus, in the case of Armenians in the diaspora, writing conveys not only communicative but also of a highly symbolic nature, which are a suitable subject for anthropological investigation.

According to Barth's theory, an ethnic group also defines itself in relation to others, and in the case of the Armenians of Plovdiv, I believe that identity is defined through interaction with the Bulgarians, who incidentally represent the great assimilationist threat. However, I would like to add that this is also the case with another minority, the Turks, with whom the Armenians do not want to be confused. In both cases, the alphabet proves to be extremely important and helpful. For even in the past, Armenians defined their ethnic identity in a "Barthian" way through their alphabet, using it as a "mark of distinctiveness," a symbolic and defensive barrier that separated them from other groups with whom they risked being mixed up if they did not have their own script.

The alphabet represents a symbol of the antiquity of the Armenians, and it is at the same time also the instrument through which they brought forth their uniqueness and distinction, their being a "chosen people": its characters were and continue to be, therefore, symbols that bind them to God.<sup>37</sup> It is presented as an element of the ethnic configuration invested with symbolic meaning, made the object of symbolization also and especially because it has the task of making ethnicity appear as an "eternal" entity<sup>38</sup>.

Such factors must be taken into account when we try to reconstruct the desired effects of the so-called acts of writing, as they are to be interpreted as significant cultural processes: writing politics are not a sterile act, but is meant to disseminate values, to convince people of the merits of the institutions' (in this case Armenian) policies and their essential function for

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<sup>34</sup> SMITH, "Chosen Peoples: Why ethnic groups survive".

<sup>35</sup> FABIETTI, *L'identità etnica*.

<sup>36</sup> CARDONA, "Introduzione", 5.

<sup>37</sup> SMITH, "The power of ethnic traditions in the modern world", 329.

<sup>38</sup> FABIETTI, *L'identità etnica*, 150.

community cohesion. It is part of visual strategies, using central places of exposure to pursue a communicative policy aimed at both the literate and illiterate population<sup>39</sup>. This explains the importance of the visibility of the Armenian language and its writing system in Armenian memory and in Armenian identity practices in the multiethnic and multilingual context of the city of Plovdiv, despite the limited knowledge of writing and reading in this language on the part of the speakers in everyday life.

The importance that the Armenian writing has for Armenians all over the world is reflected in the enormous value attached not only to books and manuscripts, but also to all monuments and works of art that can bear its traces and manifest its presence in history and space, since it is a writing system of its own and unique. The enemies of the Armenian people seem to be well aware of this, because the first thing they do after occupying a site is to erase the Armenian inscriptions in the Armenian monuments in that site. Several examples can be cited of the relatively recent attempts by Azeris and Turks to destroy evidence of Armenian identity from historical monuments<sup>40</sup>.

Anthony Smith's ethno-symbolist approach<sup>41</sup> argues that cultural elements such as symbols, myths and memories are as much a part of a people's social reality as any other material or organizational factor: in fact, social reality is inconceivable without symbolism. He emphasizes how wrong it is to present the “symbolic” to people as something purely constructed from the outside, because it is rather part of their inner world, and that is why elites and intellectual constructors of national discourse use these elements to achieve an emotional involvement of community members.

Symbols and myths ensure a certain degree of collective consciousness, if not cohesion, in times of crisis and change by providing the community with a symbolic repertoire that helps it to distinguish itself from other similar communities in the eyes of its members and outsiders. At the same time, this shared symbolic tradition continues to define the community and ensures a sense of continuity with previous generations.

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<sup>39</sup> BEROUJON, “Lawful and unlawful writings in Lyon in seventeenth century”, 194.

<sup>40</sup> MAKSOUDIAN, *History of the Armenian Alphabet and Literature*, 129, as well as the recent cases of destruction of Armenian heritage in Artsakh by Azerbaijani forces.

<sup>41</sup> SMITH, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism*, 25.

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