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ARMENIA: PRE-MONOTHEISTIC MYTHOLOGIES OF A SACRED LAND AND THEIR CURRENT SHAPES

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In this historical study, with a particular focus on religious history, I compare the lasting effects of original, pre-monotheistic elements of belief in the Armenian Highlands, especially among the Indo-European peoples of the Armenians and Kurds. Little is known about pre-Christian Armenian mythology and religious beliefs, which were apparently highly syncretistic and shaped by the veneration of nature and its elements. Being of Indo-European origin, they were later strongly influenced by Mazdaism (e.g., the deities' beliefs of Aramazd, Mit(h)ra/Mihr, and Anahit) and Assyrian traditions. Urartian, Mesopotamian, and Greek deities were also adopted. Monotheism first reached the Armenian settlement area from Iran in the form of Zoroastrianism (Zarathustrianism), or Mazdaism (also Parsism). This religion, which is named after its founder Zarathustra is based on very ancient Indo-Iranian traditions and lore, originating between 1800 and 600 BCE. Its origins are disputed. It spread from around the 7th to the 4th century BCE in the Iranian cultural area (from eastern Asia Minor and Mesopotamia to Persia and Central Asia).

Keywords: *pantheism; monotheism; Mazdaism; Alevism; Armenia; Dersim; transcultural beliefs.*

Introduction

The Christianization of Armenia started as a court religion, then, thanks to early Bible translations, it became a national religion. However, the pre-monotheistic beliefs were not immediately and completely suppressed; instead, they lived on as folk beliefs, especially in retreating mountain regions, such as Dersim, and sometimes more intensely than the official Christian rituals. This article deals with

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the worship of trees, the sun, rivers, mountains, and snakes in Armenia as essential components of natural religious beliefs that were documented until the 20th century.

Veneration of trees and wishing trees

Tree worship refers to the veneration of trees, groups of trees, and sacred groves. They can be regarded as the epiphany of mythological beings themselves, as their symbol, or as their seat. Tree worship is still widespread among numerous peoples around the world today (Cf. Wikipedia contributors: Baumkult, n/d).



Picture 1: Armenian carpet with stylized tree

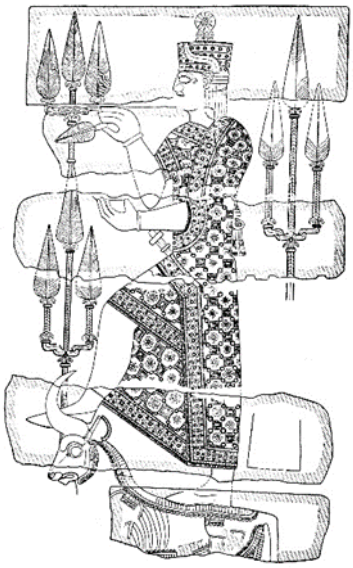
A wishing tree, also known as a votive tree, is a single tree that often stands in a sacred place and is believed to have supernatural powers. Those who hang a strip of cloth or similar item from their personal belongings on the tree hope that this will make a wish come true. The gift can also be a votive offering in gratitude for a miracle that has already been granted. Depending on the respective folk belief, the wish-fulfilling powers are spirits, fairies, saints, or deities. Wishing trees are associated with saints from the European Christian Middle Ages, among others. Wishing trees are often located in a special place, such as a holy spring, a church, a chapel, or an Islamic shrine. In Ireland, they belong to some holy springs called Clootie Wells (Logan, 1980).

The tree of life (also known as the world tree) is a symbol and mythical motif that is widespread in religious history. It is associated with mythological and religious reinterpretations of tree cults (sacred trees) and fertility symbolism, as well as with creation myths and genealogy. The tree of life is part of the mythology of many peoples and an ancient symbol of cosmic order.

It stands at the center of the world as the axis mundi. Its roots reach deep into the earth and its branches touch or support the sky. Thus, it connects the three planes of heaven, earth, and the underworld. Mythical animals usually populate the world tree. Among Indo-European peoples, an eagle often sits in the crown and a snake is found at the bottom of the tree.

Armenian tree cult

The worship of trees is one of the oldest cults in the Armenian highlands. In Urartu (9th-6th century BCE), the tree of life (Armenian: Կենաց Ծառ – Kenac' car) was a religious symbol and was drawn on the walls of fortresses and carved on the armor of warriors. The branches of the tree were equally divided on the right and left sides of the stem, with each branch having one leaf, and one leaf on the apex of the tree. Servants stood on each side of the tree with one of their hands up as if they were protecting the tree. Even the Urartian god of storms and weather, Teysheba, also Teysheb (Wikipedia contributors: T'eyšeba, n/d), adopted from the Churrites of Asia Minor, is iconographically depicted standing on a bull, next to the tree of life, holding a leaf in one hand and a bowl in the other.



Picture 2: The tree of life

The Armenian successors of the Urartians continued their tree worship. "Certain forests were dedicated to this cult and were considered sacred places. Moses of Chorene (I, chap. 20) reports that the grandson of [mythical king] Ara the Beautiful, Anušavan, had the epithet Sos (poplar) because he was dedicated to the poplars that his great-grandfather had planted in Armavir" (Ishkol-Kerovpian, 1986, p. 105). The Armenian historian Nikoġayos Adonc' sees the tree cult of the Armenians in connection with the Attis cult of Asia Minor, "especially since Attis was represented by Ara in the Armenian pantheon. According to Adonc', Anušavan would be the Armenianized form of the Persian Anušervan (immortal soul)" (ibid, p. 106).

Among the children of the sun – Armenian Arevordik' – who existed as Armenian followers of Zoroastrianism until the 1920s (Russel, 1987), the poplar was considered a sacred tree, while Iranian Zoroastrians revered the cypress as the most sacred tree.

The swaying of the branches and leaves of poplar trees and other species caused by the wind led to the belief in certain areas of the Caucasus and the southern Black Sea region that trees were capable of praying; at the same time, the whispering of the poplar leaves served as an oracle. Trees with predominantly rigid branches – such as the oak – are considered non-praying. The belief in sacred praying trees probably originated in the Caucasus. In the Hamshen region (Turkish: Hemşin) in the province of Rize, inhabited by Islamized Armenians, the tradition

still exists in some places that no branches may be cut three days before and during religious festivals, as it is believed that the branches pray (Öztürk, 2005).

Common Kurdish, Dımılı and Armenian veneration of wishing trees

Wishing trees are a universal belief, which is also known to all cultures of Dersim (Armenians, Dımılıs/Zazas, Kurds).1 These trees are often located near sacred springs or rivers and are affiliated with water and fertility cults.

One of the manifestations of the cult of trees in Kurdish culture is the Dārī Mirāzān or Dārā Mirāzā, The Tree of Wishes (Arakelova, 2020, pp. 405). Women would visit these trees believing that such visits could bestow blessing on barren women and help them get pregnant. Others visited them believing that they have spiritual or physical healing powers. Or anyone who wishes their desires fulfilled, would resort to the tree of wishes. They would tie a piece of personal cloth onto the tree, with the idea that now the person has tied a part of themselves onto the tree for blessing or healing. Those struggling with illnesses would tie a rag on the tree, believing that they had attached their pain to the tree. At the same time they would make a request and vow that they will perform some meritorious act if the request is granted (Mustafa, 2023).

The trees of wishes are believed to be the abode of spirits, jinns, or dēws (demons) who are associated with fertility, guidance, power, and protection – as well as bad luck and misfortune. The veneration of the trees is, therefore, often accompanied by sacrifices to the spirits under the trees as votive offerings or to ward off evil forces and bad luck. These trees are either single units or groves, their sacred character depends on their location (sacred places), size, and age, rather than the type of tree species.

Widely venerated and awed among the Zazas and local Armenians were the so-called Junipers of Sıbohan, a grove located between the villages Khndzorek and Puta, in the nearby rocky area of the Armenian monastery Surb Ohan/Hovhannes (St. John). It consisted of mostly dead and dry juniper-trees; the number of green ones hardly exceeded one hundred. This grove was credited with the power of bringing rain; in the draughty years people (Zazas and Armenians) made pilgrimage to this grove; they sacrificed animals believing that rain would soon follow. The dry firewood from this grove could be burnt only in the place for cooking the meat of sacrificed animals. It was strictly prohibited to take the wood from this grove home, which was again believed to be a delict subject to divine punishment (ibid.).

Another sacred arboreal place, again in the same area, was Sıbminas grove consisting exclusively of old and very big oak-trees, located near an Armenian

sanctuary called Surb Minas (St. Minas) and equally venerated by the Zazas and Armenians. They believed these trees could save people from hurricanes and unexpected natural disasters. The grove had its defined borders that ensured people to stay unharmed from persecutors even if they abducted a girl: no one was allowed to kill or commit violence within the limits of these holy trees. The pilgrimage to this grove took place, as a rule, every year after the harvest. The intrinsic power of protecting from various misfortunes was attributed to it. Finally, near the Haydaran village, before 1914, there were two large and high spruce-trees, to which the power of protecting the area from the enemies, especially Turkish and Kurdish brigands, was ascribed. This was also the place of pilgrimage.

According to Gevorg Halajian (1973), an Armenian intellectual and resident of Dersim, "the Zazas had generally an overwhelming feeling of reverence towards any tree or green plant; they considered damaging or unjustifiable cutting of trees as a great sin. Therefore, for domestic purposes—for use as firewood or timber—they used to cut only the extinct trees and only in the late autumn. They never burnt newly acquired firewood, but let it stay for some time, even two-three years, in order that the spirit of the tree could ultimately abandon it. Those people, irrespective of their gender, age or religion, who set fire on the forest, following a strict customary law, should have been killed because such an act was regarded as a heavy transgression of the divine order. The perpetrators were subject to persecution, like those who committed unlawful murder tantamount to blood feud custom.

In the mountainous parts of Dersim, the main objects of veneration in the realm of plants were primarily the juniper and the oak-tree, among the latter, the black oak having been the most venerated. The juniper evoked particularly immense devotion, as a tree able to bring luck and prosperity. Also, the spruce and wild poplar were regarded to have awe-inspiring nature among the Zazas, the latter having been the symbol of chastity and faithfulness (Hansen, 1961, p. 162).

Summarizing the extinguished tree veneration in Dersim, V. Arakelova notes: "Unfortunately, the once vast and rich forest covering the Zazas' main habitat in Dersim (Tunceli), which was a proverbial phenomenon still at the beginning of the 20th century, has been almost totally exterminated as a result of the mistreatment by the Turkish government. The folk beliefs related to tree worship have also been considerably erased from the people's memory, lingering on only among the elderly in the remote mountain villages as a dwindling echo of the past" (Arakelova, 2020, pp. 404-407).

In Northern Kurdistan, the Turkish regime often cuts down sacred trees as a form of psychological warfare against the Kurds. Likewise, since Turkey's occupation of Afrin in Rojava in 2018, as part of their ethnic cleansing campaigns

against Kurds, Turkish-backed Syrian mercenaries have cut down over 1.5 million trees (ibid., 406), including the trees of wishes that were over 100 years old (Halajian, 1960).

"For decades, the Turkish and Iranian regimes have been destroying the natural environment of Kurdish settlement areas, including many sacred trees, rivers, and springs, by building dams, diverting rivers, and deforesting, in order to erase the cultural memory of the Kurds and their strong connection to their land.

In response to these attempts, we find within the Kurdish freedom movement a creative, revolutionary dialectic in which ancient nature-affirming values are imbued with new meaning through contemporary social and ecological struggles. [Ahmet Kerim] Gültekin quotes Bilgin's observation that 'in the struggles of Kurdish Alevis against encroachments by dam projects, mining companies, tourism policies, and other threats, a new understanding of nature is emerging'. As Gültekin notes, in these struggles, the Kurds' confrontation with the long-standing threat of genocide is expanding into a profound socio-ecological understanding of the threat that ecocide poses to both the land and the people" (Arakelova. 2020, p. 405).

Other scholars confirm the accusation of ecocide: "The neoliberal ecological destruction taking place in Dersim and other parts of Turkish Kurdistan can be defined as deliberate and systematic ecological destruction, also known as (neocolonial) ecocide. The genocidal and developmental policies of the past seem to have intensified into ecological exploitation, combined with the destruction of people's living environments" (Omer, 2022; Stockholm Center for Freedom, 2021).

Splendor and light of God: sun worship

The sun is the star closest to Earth and forms the center of the solar system. Solar radiation is one of the basic prerequisites for the development and preservation of life on Earth. As the giver and preserver of all earthly life, the sun has been worshipped by humans since ancient times as a deity or image of God. It symbolizes the beginning and end of life and the goodness of God. The fiery sun chariot is an attribute of both the prophet Eliyah and the Roman and Norse sun god Sol. In the revelatory religion of Manichaeism, the sun and moon were worshipped as heavenly vehicles that bring light back from darkness to the land of light (Mustafa, 2023).

In the Roman Empire, the sun god Sol (Latin for sun) was considered the highest and most powerful god. However, his worship competed with the Oriental cult of the Indo-Iranian deity Mithras, which was particularly popular among

soldiers. The cult of Mithras never became the Roman state religion and did not merge with the worship of Sol, even though the followers of Mithras also called their god Sol invictus (invincible sun).

The birthday of the Sol Invictus falls on 25 December. This date was later elevated to Christmas. In 274, Emperor Aurelian elevated the cult of Sol Invictus to the status of a Roman imperial cult. However, by 8 November 392 at the latest, when Emperor Theodosios I issued his religious edict, sun worship became illegal in the (Eastern) Roman Empire. Nevertheless, there were still numerous worshippers of Sol in the 5th century. Around the middle of the 5th century, Pope Leo the Great rebuked the custom, still widespread among "simpler souls" in Rome at that time, of considering 25 December worthy of worship only "because of the rising of what they call the new sun (Dinç, 2025, p. 61). Moreover, the same Roman bishop also lamented the continuing worship of the sun by many Christians, which proves that the Roman sun cult found its way into Christianity; according to Pope Leo, it was common for believers to turn around after ascending to St. Peter's Church to bow down before the rising sun (serm. 27, 3f.).

The sun is called Areg, Aregakn, or Arev in Armenian, which also means life. Xenophon (Anabasis IV, chap. 5) attests that the Armenians sacrificed horses to their sun god because horses were considered sacred to him. In Armenian mythology and fairy tales, fire horses very often appear as attributes of heroes.

Areg (Arev) or Ar is thought to have been the original or oldest Armenian sun god, comparable to the Mesopotamian Utu (Richter, 1997, pp. 42f, 53f); he was probably also called Ara. This god was probably mentioned on the Door of Mher near the Urartian capital Tushpa (Armenian: Tosp; Van) as Ara or Arwaa. The linguist Heinrich Hübschmann and, following in his footsteps, the linguists Martin E. Huld and Birgit Anette Olsen suspect that the word arev is related to the Indian name Ravi, which also means sun (Halsberghe, 1972, p. 170).

"The ancient sun cult of the Armenians, which under Persian influence merged with the cult of Mihr and later with that of Vahagn, persisted for a very long time even after Christianization. The sun worshippers of that time were called 'sons of the sun' (Armenian: Arevordik). (...) The ancient Armenians are said to have sworn by the stars, but especially by the sun. (...) The eighth month of the Armenian calendar is called Areg. Areg is also the name of the first day of each month" (Martirosyan, 2014, p. 13).

Merzifon (in the Ottoman kaza of the same name) was home to one of the last communities of Armenian Zoroastrians (Arevordik), who are believed to have been killed in the genocide between 1915–17. In the town of Merzifon, in the early 20th century, the Armenian quarter was known as Arevordi. Furthermore, a cemetery outside the town was known as Arevordii gerezman, and an Armenian owner of a

nearby vineyard was named Arevordean, in other words, Armenian for Arevordison (Hübschmann, 1897, p. 424).

The name of the sun god Areg is still a popular first name for girls and boys among Armenians today, as is the first name Ara (only for men). Similarly, the greeting barev refers to the sun god, as it is a contraction of the words bari and arev meaning good day (literally good sun, good life).

A symbol of the sun and eternity that has been omnipresent in the Armenian settlement area throughout history and remains so today is the Arevaxač' (literally sun cross). It can be found on gravestones and cross stones, on the walls of secular and sacred buildings, and forms the Armenian national symbol. The sun cross symbolizes goodness, life, fire, fertility and birth, progress and development.

The sun cross exists in a clockwise and a counterclockwise variety; the former is associated with activity, the latter with passivity. Similarly, the clockwise version is found on baby cradles when a boy is expected, while the counterclockwise version is associated with a girl.

Paradise and paradise rivers

The three Abrahamic religions developed different interpretations of paradise, the place of longing in all three religions, at different times. The Hebrew Bible refers to the earthly paradise as the Garden of Eden (Hebrew: גַּן־עֵדֶן gan-ʿĒḏen), which, according to the biblical account of creation in Genesis 2–3 EU [Einheitsübersetzung - standard translation], God created for humans but from which he expelled them after the Fall.

"The name Eden [...] goes back to the Hebrew noun of the same name and means 'delight' or 'land of delight' [also: 'land of abundance']" (Ishkol-Kerovpian, 1986, p. 137). In Gen 2:8 EU, Eden initially refers to a mythical land that is distinct from the garden that God planted in it. This differing usage is also reflected in the ancient Greek Septuagint, which transcribes the name of the land as Εδεμ Edem, while translating the garden as παράδεισος (parádeisos, from Old Persian pairidaêza – enclosure (Russell, 1986, pp. 438-444).

The differences can be explained by their historical origins: While the older tradition distinguishes between the land of Eden and the garden, the name of the land was transferred to the garden in the literary version of Gen 2f. The reference in Gen 2:10 ELB [Elberfelder Bible] to the river that flows from Eden (...) probably belongs to a later revision that deliberately leaves the relationship between Eden and the garden open (Gesenius, 2013, p. 927).

In Isaiah 51:3 EU, Eden is equated with the garden of the Lord. Eden is also mentioned repeatedly in the Book of Ezekiel, including the explanation "garden of

God" (Ezekiel 28:13 EU and more often) and the mention of the "trees of Eden" (Ezekiel 31:9 EU and more often) (Bauer, 1988, p. 1242).

For Christians, paradise is a mythical symbol. It describes innocence as the original state before sin – in the form of a thirst for knowledge! – took hold of mankind. Paradise is also a place of yearning and the vision of a world without egocentricity or war.

According to the Christian interpretation of the second and third chapters of Genesis, the Garden of Eden represents paradise. At its center stand the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:9). God forbids humans to eat the fruit of these two trees. But Adam and Eve disobey him and taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge (Genesis 3:6–7). Because this makes them resemble God, God expels them from paradise and denies them access to the tree of life (Genesis 3:22–24), thereby rendering humans mortal.

Paradise also appears outside the Old Testament (Ta'anakh) in some texts of the Jewish tradition, which expected that paradise would eventually be open to humans again. This idea was taken up in the New Testament in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 2:7; Revelation 22:2; Revelation 22:14; Revelation 22:19).

According to Jewish understanding, paradise was also the place where the pious went after death. This meaning underlies, for example, the promise Jesus made to the criminal who was crucified with him: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise!" (Luke 23:43).

This is how the idea came into Christianity: As soon as Christ returns and the Kingdom of God is complete, the dead will rise and the redeemed will enter paradise. In the Middle Ages, however, the doctrine of paradise was supplemented by the doctrine of purgatory, in which all sins are atoned for before one is purified and enters paradise. The Protestant reformers rejected this idea as not based on the Bible (Pfeiffer, 2006).

In Armenian Christianity, paradise is often symbolically seen within the church, with the altar considered the entrance or part of paradise, the holy place where God is present. The altar area is not only a place of liturgy, but also a representation of paradise, the place of closeness to God.

The country itself, with Mount Ararat (Noah's Ark), is strongly interwoven with biblical narratives associated with paradise. Paradise is closely linked to national identity; the church and Christianity are inseparably linked to the history, destiny and survival of the Armenian people. Faith is often lived within the family, but devotion to the church is deep, and historical events have created a strong national identity that sustains the faith.

Rivers of paradise

In Genesis 2:11–15, it is written: "A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides into four main streams. The name of the first is Pishon, which encircles the whole land of Khavila, where there is gold. The gold of this land is good. There you can find the Bedolakh ore [precious resin] and the Shoham stone [carnelian]. The name of the second river is Gikhon, which surrounds the whole land of Kush. The name of the third river is (K)Hid[d]ekel, which flows on the morning side [east] of Ashur, and the fourth river is Perat."

There are widely differing interpretations as to who these four rivers of paradise are. Whether geographical identification is possible at all depends in turn on whether the Garden of Eden is located on earth or in the beyond.

The Perat is usually identified as the Euphrates (Greek), Furat (Kurdish/Arabic), Frat (Armenian), Fırat (Turkish), Pu-rat-tu (Old Assyrian) and Ufrat. The Old Persian version Ufrat, from which most other toponyms are derived, comes from the compound term Huperethuua, which means easy to cross (Hu – good; Peretu – ford). Among Armenians, the popular belief that the Euphrates was sacred remained alive until the end of the 19th century. There was also a belief that whoever crossed the Euphrates and drank its water would gain the gift of healing wounds (ibid.).

The (K)Hid(d)ekel is usually equated with the Tigris; however, the etymology is unclear. In the languages of the region, the river has the following names: Sumerian idigna, Akkadian idiglat, Aramaic: deqlath, didshla, Old Persian: tigrā, Arabic دجلة didshla, DMG diğla, Hebrew: חידקל, ḥiddæqæl or, simplified, chiddekel, Armenian Տիգրիս Tigris, Turkish Dicle and in Kurdish Dîcle. In many countries in the Middle East, the name Ditjle is used. The names Tigris or Tikrit are also common.

In Sumerian, id means river, so the name can be broken down into id-igna. Since there is a Sumerian word with a similar sound, igira, meaning heron, and the cuneiform character for idigna in its oldest form could be interpreted as a picture of a heron, Jan Keetman suggests that the name could be translated as heron river (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, n/d). In Old Persian, according to Rüder Schmitt, the river name was borrowed from Babylonian and interpreted as arrow-fast because of its rapid current (Ishkol-Kerovpian, 1986, p. 157).

The Bible gives no indication as to which river the Gihon is. The Kush associated with it in the Bible later mostly referred to Ethiopia. This is probably where the identification with the Nile comes from. Originally, a different place was meant. Possible candidates are the Sumerian-Akkadian city-state of Kiš in Mesopotamia, which is mentioned in records dating from around 2800 BCE, or the Hittite city of Kush(ar) or Kuššara, which has not yet been located.

Egyptologist David Rohl believes that the Aras is the biblical Gihon. Rohl cites a document from the time of the Islamic invasion of Persia that proves the Aras was known under the name Gyhun until the 7th century. The old name of the region on the Gyhun was Kush. One of the peaks in the region is still called Kusha-Dagh (Mountain of Kush). The Aras, Arak's or Arax (Azerbaijani: Araz, Persian: ارس Aras, Armenian: Ախ աք u Arak's, Kurdish: Erez, Urartian: Muna, Greek: Araxes, Turkish: Aras Nehri) is the longest tributary of the Kura in the Near East, with a length of 1072 km (Keetman, 2016, pp. 7-11).

Another interpretation identifies the paradise river Gihon with the Ceyhun (Turkish) or Amudarya (Persian: Oxos). In medieval texts, this river is called Jayhun (جیحون, DMG Ǧayḥūn) in both Arabic and Persian. In Iranian mythology, it is a contested border river between Iran and Turan. The name Āmūdaryā (آمودریا), which is also common in modern Persian usage, is a compound of the words āmū(y) (آمو), the name of a sandy plain in Transoxania, and daryā (New Persian دریا, sea), which derives via Middle Persian drayak from the Old Persian drayah (meaning sea or large watercourse).

The river Pishon is connected to the land of Khavila. The German theologian and classical philologist (Ugarith) Manfried Dietrich identifies the Pishon with the Karun in southwestern Iran, David Rohl with the Ghezel Ozan, a tributary of the Iranian Sefid Rud. At 720 km, the Karun is the longest and only navigable river in Iran. In the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, it is often referred to as the Ulai River.

Of the four possible rivers of paradise, three originate in the historical Armenian Highland: the Euphrates and Tigris near the present-day city of Elazığ, and the Arax south of Erzurum in the Bingöl Mountains. From its source, it flows eastward, passing Mount Ararat to the north. In this area, the river forms the border with present Armenia. Later, it becomes the border river between Iran and the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, and continues to form the border between Iran and Armenia and Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan, it flows through the Mugan steppe and empties into the lower reaches of the Kura, which flows into the Caspian Sea.

Two other rivers in the source region of the Euphrates and Tigris, which are or were tributaries of one or both of these rivers, can also be considered part of the network of sacred paradise rivers, including the Murat, the longest source river of the Euphrates. The Murat River, also called Eastern Euphrates (Turkish: Murat Nehri, Kurdish: Çemê Miradê, Armenian: Ախ ած ան ի – Aracani), is a major source of the Euphrates River. The Ancient Greeks and Romans used to call the river Arsanias (Ancient Greek: Ἀρσανίας). It originates near Mount Ararat north of Lake Van, and flows westward for 722 km through mountainous terrain. The river was called Arşania in sources of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and Arsanias in Classical Greek and Roman sources. Those forms may be derived from an earlier

form of Armenian Ա ր ած ան ի Aracani, which Armen Petrosyan derives from an Armenian descendant of the Proto-Indo-European root *h_2 erǵ white, bright (Schmitt, 2014, p. 255). Armenian Aracani may have developed from an earlier form *Artsani (whence Akkadian Arşania with the addition of the toponymic suffix -iya and Greek Arsanias) under the influence of many other Armenian toponyms beginning with Ara-. The present name is usually connected with the Turkish given name Murat or the word from which that name derives, murat purpose, intention, desire. But this may be folk etymology, so the US-Armenian linguist Hrach Martirosyan tentatively proposes derivation from Old Armenian mōrat, murat – mud marsh (Wikipedia contributors: Aras, n/d).

In an interview, the co-founder of the newspaper Agos, Sarkis Seropyan (1935-2015), spoke about the veneration of Aracan (Western Armenian: Aradzan) and the paradise river Euphrates in Dersim, dating back well before Abrahamic religions: "The Armenians in Dersim regard the Euphrates as a mother with arms. They also see Mount Munzur as a mother figure. They even compare its silhouette to the goddess Anahit. Traditions tell that the milk that flowed from the breasts of this goddess gave rise to the rivers Euphrates and Munzur.



Picture 3: Sacred Landscapes of the Alevis of Dersim

I think rivers play a central role in Armenian religious culture. Two rivers are central to this: the Euphrates and the Murat (which we call Aradsan). The Aradsan is a particularly sacred river for Armenians, as it was there that the first Christian baptisms took place" (Petrosyan, 2002, pp. 73-74).

Sacred peaks and fiery rituals

The venerated mountains of the antic Armenian Highlands, shaped by volcanism, were dedicated to Mazdaist and even pre-Iranian deities, such as the sun god Mithras/Armenian: Mihr, the Armenian pre-Iranian god of hunting and victory, Va(r)hagn, and the creator and supreme Mazdaist deity Ahuramazda (Middle Persian: Ohrmazd), who was worshipped in Armenia under his Parthian name Aramazd. Toponyms and religious rituals in the region of Dersim confirm that Alevi sanctities such as Mountain Düzgün Baba, Tujik (Mount Baba Sultan),

Tendürek etc. stand in the continuity of deities and religious practices dating back to antiquities when Armenian immigrants, trying to avoid Christianization, escaped to the Dersim mountains.

Mountain and fire worship

In Armenian, Mount Ararat is still called Masis, a combination of Ma (mother, head) and Sis (mountain), meaning mother or goddess/head of the mountains, because the peoples of Asia Minor called the progenitor of the gods Ma, whose seat they considered to be the highest mountain. According to the biblical creation myth, Noah's Ark landed "on the mountains of Ararat" (Genesis 8:4). Of course, this did not refer to Masis, but – due to a vocalization error – to Urartu, as the Assyrians called the ancient Oriental empire on Lake Van (Martirosyan, 2009, pp. 80-81). Mount Masis was only considered the site of the ark's landing from the High Middle Ages onwards, whereas previously Jebel Judi was regarded as the ark mountain. It is located in Mesopotamia in a region that the Romans and Greeks called Gordyene and the Armenians called Kardowx. In Armenian Jebel Judi was also named Ararad, which may explain the transfer of the toponym to the Masis after Masis was considered the ark mountain (Gündoğan, 2023, p. 475; Conybeare, 1901, pp. 335-337).

The religious worship of high mountains is widespread in many cultures throughout the world, including among Indo-European peoples such as the Armenians, Kurds, Zazas/Dımılı, and Dersimlis. Cone-shaped volcanic mountains are particularly revered, as their eruptions cause terror and destruction, but their lava promotes fertility and prosperity. This is especially true of the highest mountain in the Armenian Highlands and in Turkey, the Great Ararat (Armenian: Masis; Kurdish: Çiyayê Agirî/Shaxi – Fire Mountain, Turkish: Ağrı Dağı – Mountain of (Labor) Pains; 5,165 m), but also for the mountains Aragac' (4,090 m), K'ark'e (near Ashtishat, Mush Province), Parkhar, Grgur, Korduk' (Greek: Kordyene), Npat, Varag (on Lake Van) or Armağan (2,811 m) near Lake Sevan, which was venerated in pre-Christian times as well as in the Christian period.

In pre-Christian and folk beliefs, these holy mountains are inhabited by gods and spirits, including the Višapner (Vishap – dragon) and K'aǰk' (brave). Living in the mountains, caves and gorges, the latter have the task of carrying out punishments. "Armenian mythology, for example, knows the K'aǰk' of Mount Masis, who chained Artavazd, cursed by his father, in a cave" (Hofmann, 1997, p. 8). The Višapner, on the other hand, appear in Armenian fairy tales and legends as evil spirits in various forms; their oldest incarnation seems to have been the snake, their most common one that of a giant (whale) fish. Tall steles, the Višapakarner



Picture 4: Holy mountain: Volcano Lake on top of Mount Armağan

(dragon stones), have been erected in connection with spring and fertility cults in the Armenian highlands since the Bronze Age (c. 4000–2200 BCE).

In Dersim, the mountain near the village of Kıl outside Nazımiye, which is attributed to the mythological ancestor of the Kuraşan Ocağ or Alevi Kurashan community, is considered a locus sanctum (ziyaret, jiar). According to local belief, Seyyid Kureş/Kuresin (Sah Haydar), who is known primarily as Düzgün Baba (Kırmancki: Bava Duzgı, Kurdish: Dızgun/Duzgi Bava), disappeared from its summit, which the locals call Kemerê Duzgını (Duzgı Rock), Kemerê Bımbareki (Dımılki: Holy Rock; Mubarak) or Kemerê Seyyid Kureş/Kuresin. The motif of ascension is also found in both Christianity and Islam, whose founder and prophet Mohammad ascended to heaven from the Temple Mount (Mount Zion) in Jerusalem.

The Alevi Düzgün Baba was a descendant of Sayyid Mahmudu'l-Kebir-Seyyid Hacı Kures'e Qûr, who moved to Dersim with twelve Talip (scholar) tribes in the 1220s. According to tradition, his ancestors came from Kermanshah and spoke Kırmancki (Kirmanşah).

Duzgı/Dızgun or Düzgün means perfect, regular, correct, and smooth in Kırmancki as well as in Turkish. In Dersim Kırmancki, it means holy. Duzgı/Dızgun is thought to be derived from the term Tuzik/Tujik (Kurdish for sharp, pointed). Like Duzgı, Tujik relates also to a mountain (Turkish: Sultan Baba Dağı) in Dersim and is identified with the Herculean, presumably pre-Iranian Armenian god of hunting and victory, Va(r)hang. Within the framework of this continuity thesis, it has been argued that the place name Tujik derives from duzakh, which meant hell among the Mazdaist Armenians.

Mount Tujik is also an ancient but active volcano. Another example can be found in the toponym Tendürek (Armenian: T'andurek, T'onddrak – Թանդուրեկ, Թոնդրակ; 3,452 m), known to Turks as Cehennem dağı (Hell Mountain). The Armenian place name is derived from tandur (baking oven), which is popularly regarded as a kind of small hell. Its cup-shaped crater is 320 m deep (Ishkol-Kerovpian, 1984, p. 119).

There is much to suggest that the cult surrounding Düzgün Baba (Bava Duzgı, Dızgun Bava) is part of the tradition of the cult surrounding the Armenian sun god Mihr – Persian: Mithras (Aksoy, 2012, 99-115), whose earthly manifestation is fire. The mountains of Dersim were probably a place of refuge for Mazdean Armenians who had rejected Christianization. The cult sites of several Mazdaist deities in the belt around ancient Dersim are particularly strong evidence of this continuity. Bagayarič (Pekeric, since 1963 Çadırkaya in the province of Erzincan) was, for example, a cult center of Mihr, Ani-Kamax (Kurdish: Kemax; Turkish: Kemah) the most important cult center of the creator and supreme Mazdaist deity Ahuramazda, who was worshipped in Armenia under his Parthian name Aramazd.

Some mythological elements illustrate the continuity between the sun god Mihr and Düzgün/Duzgi. First of all, Mithras/Mihr was a god of contracts and friendship, as well as the protector of truth. Düzgün Baba is likewise considered by the Alevis of Dersim to be the protector of truth and honesty. He is the epitome of trustworthiness. As the protector of truth, Duzgi resolves individual conflicts among Alevi Zazas, Kurds, and the Alevized Armenians of Dersim. If someone has a problem (dava) with someone else and cannot resolve it himself, he climbs to the summit of Duzgın Mountain and asks for help with the words: "I have left my case to Düzgün Baba."

The belief also states that a married man in Dersim who does not yet have a son visits Düzgün Baba, makes a sacrifice, takes a vow, and begs him to give him a son. If his wish is fulfilled, he names his son Düzgün. For this reason, the name Düzgün is widespread in Dersim. This characteristic is also found in Mithras. In the Avesta, he bears the epithet "the giver of sons" (putro-da). The fact that the Alevis of Dersim pray to Duzgı at the first rays of the morning sun—as did the followers of Mihr/Mithras—is another clear similarity.



Picture 5: Surb Sargis Zoravar – patron of the youth and love and his son Martiros

Mithras and Duzgı are both shepherds. Both are symbolized by eagles, which is called Heliye Çhal (Heliyo Duzgını) in the case of Duzgı. Both are horsemen and wear red robes. For this reason, Duzgı also bears the epithet Surela (<sur; red). This Mihr tradition includes one of Armenia's most popular saints, the Cappadokian Greek martyr General (Stratelatos) Sergios (Armenian: Surb Sargis Zoravar – Սուրբ Սարգիս

զորավար; 285-337), patron of the youth and love. He and his son Martiros ("martyr") are also depicted as riders on horseback and in a fire-red cloak.

In addition, like Mithras (Anahita), Düzgün Baba had a sister (Xaskar). While Anahita is the goddess of water and symbolizes purity, Duzgı's sister Xaskar is associated with a sacred water source on Mount Duzgı. This natural sanctuary is known by her name as Henia (kaniya) Xaskarê. It is believed that the spring will not dry up if visitors have a good heart and drink from it. This belief is consistent with the cult of the Indo-Iranian goddess Anahita (Armenian: Ani), the daughter of Aramazd, who is considered pure and immaculate. In the Avesta, an-ahita means immaculate. Furthermore, the name Xaskar probably derives from the Armenian voskuc' (Western Armenian: voskeen), which means made of gold. In fact, Anahita is often described as wearing golden robes. Consequently, according to the prevailing view, Xaskar and Duzgi/Dızgun emerged as a continuation of the Anahita and Mithras cults of the Mazdaist Armenians who lived in the Munzur Mountains in ancient times (Wikipedia contributors: Թոնդրակ (հրաբուխ), n/d).

"The Old Armenian forms Mdnjur and Mzur = Mazur probably go back to an even older *Munjur. But Munjur had to become Muzur in the dialect of Aken (= Egin on the Euphrates west of our canton) […]. Because of the cult of Anahita that flourished in this canton (Strabo c. 532), it was also called η Αναχίτα Χώρα [the land of Anahita] […]. Presumably, the great mountain with 'the place of the gods, which is called the throne of Anahit' […] was located in this canton. Certainly, however, the following places were located here: Erêz (Gen. Erizay) with the temple of Anahita […], Erizay […], later Erznga […], Erzngan, Ezngan […], today's Erzingian or Erzinjan [Erzincan]; the village of Til with the temple of Nanè […], east of the river Gail [Armenian 'wolf'], now Til or Thil on the right bank of a tributary of the Euphrates, at the eastern foot of Kohanam Dagh; the village of Khakh (Xax) northwest of Thil" (Aksoy, 2006).

Even among the Christianized Armenians, the worship of the sun god Mihr remained so powerful that Christian priests had to incorporate his sun and fire cult into their faith (→ interpretatio christiana): On the feast day of Christ's presentation in the temple (Armenian: տեառնընդառաջ, Տյառնընդառաջ – Teaŕnęndaraǰ; originally: Տէրընդեզ – T(e)rndez – "The Lord is with you"), which is celebrated on 14 February, ancient pre-Christian purification rituals, especially fire worship, have been preserved. On this day, bonfires are lit in the courtyards of churches and houses, on rooftops and in the streets, and people gather around them singing and praying. Newlyweds jump over the flames, believing that if touched, they will soon be blessed with children. Barren women burn the hems of their clothes with "holy" fire in the hope of healing. The ashes from the bonfires are

scattered from pots into houses and barns and onto the land near the houses to bring abundance, fertility, and good health (ibid). On this day, people eat roasted wheat, raisins, fruits, and various sweets. People also keep some of the ashes in their homes to protect themselves from illness and misfortune. If the smoke and flames from the wood pile drift eastward, toward the sunrise, it is a sign that the year will be a good one.

As the successor of the sun-god Mihr, Christ is worshipped even today as the "Sun of Justice" (Prophet Maleachi 3,2), and a hymn of the same name is sung in Armenian churches on 14 February (Hübschmann, 1969).

Shahmaran and Shahapet: The snake cults of the Kurds, Yazidis, and Armenians

The worship of snakes is one of the oldest natural religious or polytheistic beliefs worldwide. There are two contrasting views: 1) Snakes are seen as positive because they embody wisdom, fertility, and the power that derives from these qualities. This attitude was particularly prevalent in pre-Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions in the Middle East. 2) Snakes are seen as the embodiment of chaos, evil, and destruction. In both cases, however, they are attributed with great powers. The embodiment of wisdom is based on the fact that snakes know both the world above and below the earth's surface. They glide back and forth between these worlds and are inhabitants of both. Since snakes seem to renew themselves infinitely in the eyes of humans due to their regular molting, they were considered immortal not only in ancient Greece.

The worship of snakes, especially non-venomous snakes, as wise and healing protective and household deities is one of the oldest traditions and rituals of the snake veneration. With the advent of monotheism, the view of snakes changed drastically. It was replaced by a sharp dualistic separation of good and evil. This was already the case in ancient Iranian Mazdaism, in which the snake lost its role as protector and became in instrument of destruction of the vulnerable tree of life, Gaokerena. Ahriman, the evil counterforce to the divine creator Ahura Mazda, attacks the tree by sending frogs and snakes to poison it. With the Creation account in the Old Testament of the Bible (1st millennium BCE), the human view of snakes shifted even more radically: from a protective deity who guarded the tree of the Hesperides in ancient Greece, it became a satanic tempter.

A comparison of the cultures and beliefs in Kurdistan and the Armenian Highlands, as well as in the east and southeast of present-day Turkey, shows that the original, pre-Abrahamic nature-based beliefs have been preserved most consistently in the Yazidi faith. This is the more remarkable as the Yazidi belief is

otherwise influenced by Zoroastrism and Islamic beliefs. In the Kurdish belief system, the myth and image of Shahmaran testify to the continued existence of elements of nature-based religion beyond Islamization. The same applies to the Christianized Armenians, whose totem and protective animal, the common grass snake, remains Šahapet even centuries after Christianization, especially in remote and protected mountain regions such as Dersim.

Ancient snake cults

Ancient Egypt assigned the opposing characteristics of good and evil, knowledge, power, and destruction to different snake gods. The snake goddess Vadjet was worshipped as early as pre-dynastic times. Her symbol was the uraeus. She is considered the goddess of Lower Egypt and, together with Nekhbet, the goddess of Upper Egypt, is the protective goddess of the pharaoh. The Egyptians also knew the serpent god Mehen, who protectively encompassed the sun god Re on his nightly journey through the underworld. Since the Middle Kingdom, belief in the god Apophis has also been documented. Depicted as a giant serpent, this god embodied dissolution, darkness, and chaos. He was also the great adversary of the sun god Re.

In ancient Greece, the snake was considered sacred. Since it could renew itself infinitely often in the eyes of humans through regular molting, it was considered immortal. This constant act of rejuvenation and the fact that snakes were believed to possess healing powers made them a symbol of the medical profession. To this day, it has remained the symbol of the rod of Asclepios, which, in a greatly simplified form, can also be found in some pharmacy signs. Snakes were also said to have clairvoyant powers, which is why they were an animal of the goddess Gaia, one of the first deities after the original chaos. Snake priestesses (Pythea) performed their duties at the Oracle of Delphi, which once belonged to the mythological serpent Python and was considered the navel (omphalos) of the world. Python was killed by the god Apollo, who then took over the sanctuary and its priestesses.

It was not only in the Judeo-Christian tradition that there was a tree guarded by a snake: in ancient Greek mythology, the garden of the Hesperides contained the life-giving apple tree, which had been bestowed upon the goddess Hera by Gaia and was guarded by the snake Ladon.

In the Near East, the Levant, the Golden Crescent, Mycenaean culture, and many other cultural areas of Western Asia, snake cults were of great importance in the Epipaleolithic and Neolithic periods. Every deity was associated with representations of snakes, especially on reliefs and ceramics.

The Old Testament of the Bible, on the other hand, views the snake almost entirely in a negative light. The snake presents Eve with the forbidden fruit and tempts her to violate the divine prohibition against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, before Eve persuades Adam to break the taboo as well.

In the Bible, the snake is largely a symbol of the devil. In the story of Paradise (Genesis 3) in the Old Testament, the snake is a symbol of temptation and seduction into evil. Only in some Gnostic sects were Eve and the snake revered for the knowledge they provided to humans (where the snake was sometimes depicted as Eve's male companion, Ophion).

Even though Jesus advises his disciples, "Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves!" (Matthew 10:16), in the Book of Revelation, the serpent remains an image of evil: "And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan" (Revelation 20:2 EU).

Yazidi serpent symbolism

In the Yazidi religion, the serpent has long been a symbol laden with meaning (Nicolaus, 2011). Any visitor to Lalish Nurani (Northern Iraq) will engrave in their memory of the first thing they saw, an image of a massive black snake that welcomes them upon entry into the courtyard of the Yazidi main sanctuary and is kissed by the devotees (Açıkyıldız, 2009).



Picture 6: The entry into the courtyard of the Yazidi main sanctuary

The Yazidis believe that humanity survived the flood thanks to the serpent's help. According to Yazidi tradition, Noah's Ark was lifted up and carried by the waters to the top of Mount Sinjar. There, it collided violently with the rocks, creating a breach in the hull, but the serpent curled up and coiled itself in the opening to seal the leak. This is why the Yazidis have such excessive respect for snakes, to the point that a Yazidi saint, Shaykh Mand Pasha, is considered the protector of snakes, and the facades of his mausoleum are also decorated with images of snakes (Bozyel, 2023; Տյառնընդառաջ, n/d).

The Yazidi religious tradition, rooted in ancient Mesopotamian beliefs and influenced by Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam, encompasses various symbols, among which the serpent holds a prominent position. The Yazidis associate the serpent with wisdom, knowledge, and the divine. The snake is often seen as a symbol of creation and fertility, as well as a representative of cosmic forces and the transcendent. In Yazidi cosmology, the serpent plays a role in the creation of the world and is associated with the deity Tawûsî Melek, also known as the Peacock Angel. The Peacock Angel himself, often depicted with serpents, is considered both a benevolent figure and a bringer of knowledge.

Representing wisdom, creation, and the divine, the serpent holds a central place in Yazidi rituals and traditions. It is believed that the snake possesses healing powers, and Yazidis revere them as intermediaries between humans and the divine. Snakes are often kept in Yazidi shrines, and their presence is believed to bring blessings and protection. Yazidi religious practices also involve snake handling and dances, where participants express devotion and seek a spiritual connection with the divine through the serpent's symbolic presence (Տյառնընդառաջ, n/d).

The Kurdish snake goddess Shahmaran



Picture 7: The Kurdish snake goddess Shahmaran

Shahmaran is a mythical creature, half-snake and half-woman, portrayed as a dual-headed being with a crown on each of her two heads, possessing a human female head on one end, and a snake's head on the other, possibly representing a phallic figure (Ishkol-Kerovpian, 1986, p. 128). The human part is decorated with a large necklace. Together with snakes, she lives in the Underworld/Otherworld.

The name Shā(h)mārān (Shaymaran; Turkish Shahmeran) derives from the Persian words Shāh (شاه), and mārān (ماران; transl. snakes; sg. مار mar). Hence, Shāhmārān literally means the king/ruler of snakes (Baran, 2020, p. 92).

In Turkey, Shahmaran is believed to live in the Mediterranean town of Tarsos, and a similar legend is told in Mardin, a town with a large Kurdish and Arab population. In these regions her legend is commonly evoked, with her image depicted in embroidery, fabrics, rugs, and jewelry. Kurds have traditionally viewed the serpent as a symbol of luck and strength, and they continue to have images of

the goddess Shahmaran on glass or metal work, which is in turn displayed on their walls.

Kurdish scholar Dilşa Deniz interprets Shahmaran as an androgyn "body of sacred unity": "[…] the whole is built from a series of contrasts or dualities: human/animal, woman/man, feminity/masculinity, death/rebirth. Despite the apparent physical contrast of two seemingly incompatible creatures, perfect balance is achieved. As they are forged into a single entity at the opposite ends of each body, the Shamaran image and myth represent the perfect map showing how dualistic balance is achieved. Alongside the female part, the masculine is represented by the features of the snake: strong long neck, plain style of adornment, the ruler's crown atop the head, and the snake's stance as a protector" (Deniz, 2023) of the human, female part of Shahmaran.

Shahmaran is attested in Middle Eastern literatures, such as in the tale The Story of Yemliha: An Underground Queen from the 1001 Arabian Nights, and in the Camasb-name. Her story seems to be present in the Eastern part of the Anatolian peninsula, or in southeastern and eastern Turkey (comprising areas of Kurd, Arab, Syriac and Turkish communities) (Baran, 2020 p. 92).

Due to its antiquity of perhaps 5,000 years, there are many variations of the myth of Shamaran. In one version, the first human Shahmaran encounters is a young man named Jamasp (Persian: Jāmāsp جاماسپ), who is also known by Yada Jamsab (other spellings are Jambs, Camasb, and Jamisav). Jamasp gets stuck in a cave after he tries to steal honey with a few friends. His friends leave him alone in the cave. He decides to explore the cave and finds a passage to a chamber that looks like a mystical and beautiful garden with thousands of off-white colored snakes and the Shahmaran living together harmoniously. At this point Shahmaran and Jamasp fall in love and live in the cave chamber, and the Shahmaran teaches him about medicines and medicinal herbs. But Jamasp misses living above ground and wants to leave. So, he tells the Shahmaran he will not share the secret of her living there. Many years pass.

The king of the town of Tarsos becomes ill and the vizier discovers the treatment of his condition requires Shahmaran's flesh. Jamasp tells the townspeople where Shahmaran lives. Unlike Jamasp, Shahmaran remains faithful to her human lover and even makes him the heir to her divine wisdom: According to the legend Shahmaran says, "blanch me in an earthen dish, give my extract to the vizier, and feed my flesh to the sultan." They bring her to the town and kill her in a bath called, Şahmaran Hamam. The king eats her flesh and lives, the vizier drinks the extract and dies. Jamasp drinks the water of Shahmaran and becomes a physician, by gaining Shahmaran's wisdom.

The Armenian snake cult



Picture 8: Grass snake symbolizing the Armenian veneration of snakes.

Armenians shared their veneration of snakes as symbols of power, water, and wisdom with many neighboring cultures in the ancient Near East and Mesopotamia, but in particular with Kurds and Yazidis. A unique feature of the Armenian veneration, however, was the belief that Armenians saw themselves as relatives of the endemic grass snake (Natrix natrix; Armenian: Սովորական լորտու, Կողինջ – Sovorakan Lortu, Koğinǰ; Western Armenian: Lordu – Common grass snake) (Սովորական լորտու, n/d).

Snakes play an important role in the nature and culture of the Armenian highlands. Remnants of a pre-Christian snake cult persisted into the 20th century, for example in the ancient city of Ashtarak on the edge of the Ararat plain. The grass snake, which is non-venomous to humans and can grow up to 120 cm long depending on its age, was also kept as a pet snake. Similar to the ancient Roman Manes, they were considered protectors of the house, the hearth, and the family, but also of an entire region, reflecting the belief in the snake as the totem animal of the Armenians. Armenians saw the grass snake as related to them and also considered it to be Armenian, friendly to the Armenians as a blood relative (Hofmann, Koutcharian, 1983, p. 127). If a house snake left its home, this was considered a very bad omen. The skins that snakes shed during molting were preserved as talismans and good luck charms.

In ancient Armenian folk beliefs, snakes were revered as sacred and protective symbols, not as a unified cult. These beliefs involved domestic snakes (lortu/lordu) seen as guardians of the home, bringing good luck and fertility. Moreover, Armenians worshipped the harmless lortu and called it hay (corresponds to the Armenian ethnonym hay). The equation of the Armenian ethnonym with grass snakes or Armenians is also found in other ancient cultures: Sumerian god of wisdom and keeper of records, Haya, was portrayed as a snake. Bedouins called snakes haya.

The lortu/lordu snakes were considered protectors that chased away evil spirits and defended their human relatives against poisonous snakes. As a totem for Armenians, the lortu appears in myths as a friendly, benevolent guardian spirit called šahapet (literally leader of the Shah(s). If treated kindly, they would leave gold, if not, they would bring strife and mischief.

Additionally, the powerful dragon-like višap symbolized water and storms in mythology. In some myths, višapner lived in primordial waters and waged war with mountain-dwelling snake kings, with their battles causing storms.



Picture 9: Žaltys, the holy grass snake

Images of snakes were popular in art, rug weaving, adornment, and place names. Snakes were a common motif carved on house pillars, furniture, and on jewelry, symbolizing fertility and protection. Women wore ornaments in the form of a snake because snakes were also a symbol of fertility. Numerous place names such as Odzun and Odzaberd (snake fortress), Odzi get (Snake river), Odzi Kaġak (Snaketown), etc. derive from the Armenian word for snake (oð - odz). Armenian folk tales tell of Odzmanuk, the snake youth, who, like the snake deity Shahmaran, is half human and half snake. We also encounter the motif of the snake ruler who bequeaths his brain and thus his omniscience to a human successor.

It was believed that leaving milk out for the grass snakes would result in them leaving gold in return. Their presence was a sign of good fortune, and mistreating them was thought to bring misfortune and loss. This element of snake worship is also found among Baltic peoples: in their pre-Christian religion, snakes, like toads, played a significant role. Every family considered itself lucky if a grass snake settled in the fireplace, in the bathhouse, or under the hand mill. They were fed like pets with eggs and milk, and people watched carefully to see if they accepted the food. As in Kurdish beliefs, the Baltic/Lithuanian snakes were ruled by a queen, Egle. In Lithuania, snake charmers, Žaltones (from the Lithuanian žaltys, grass snake), are part of tradition.

The similarity between Armenian and Lithuanian snake worship is all the more striking in that it is not based on neighborly influence, but is typological in nature. In post-Soviet Lithuania, in contrast to Armenia, there seems to have been a revival of snake worship. Numerous, often highly original monuments to crowned and uncrowned snakes are reminiscent of the ancient pre-Christian snake cult of the Balts, which contrasts with the beliefs of their East Slavic, especially Russian, neighbors, who, like many Christian cultures, saw snakes as the embodiment of evil.

After the adoption of Christianity, the snake cult in Armenia gradually disappeared, with the exception of remote areas. The endemic grass snake is now often kept in captivity in Armenia. The šahapet, once revered as an Armenian totem animal and a relative, has become a farm animal abused for research purposes.

Conclusion

The elements of pre-monotheistic belief in the Armenian settlement area were shaped by nature religions and pantheistic beliefs. Animals, plants, rivers, mountains, and the sun were regarded as embodiments of God or individual gods, if not as deities themselves. These beliefs originated in pre-national times, which explains why they are still shared by the ethno-religious communities in the Armenian Highlands today and why they unite them more than they divide them. However, comparisons at the international level – both in terms of historical longitudinal and cross-sectional comparisons – show that the similarities are by no means limited to neighboring cultures or religions, but that the former pantheistic elements of the Armenians can be found in geographically distant cultures such as the Baltic. Among neighboring cultures, the Alevis of the Raa Haq communities from Dersim show the greatest affinity to the beliefs and rituals of the Armenians in pre-Christian times. Especially in view of current efforts in nature conservation and, above all, species protection, such similarities offer a desirable basis for international and inter-cultural cooperation.

Notes

1. At the beginning of the 20th century, the majority of the inhabitants of Dersim spoke two Iranian languages: Zazaki or Dımılki (also known as Kırmancki or Kırdki), depending on the region, and Kurmanci (Kurmanji), also known as Northern Kurdish. Dımılki belongs to the northwestern Iranian language group and is most closely related to the extinct Parthian language. Most speakers belong to the Raa Haqi religious community, which represents a distinct sub-group of Alevism. The UNESCO World Atlas of Languages (WAL) lists Zazaki and Western Armenian as "potentially endangered" languages in present-day Turkey. Today, many Alevi speakers of Zazaki consider themselves a separate ethnic group. The term Zazas is largely rejected as a Turkish or foreign term.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research.

Ethical standards
The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆ. ՍՈՒՐԲ ԵՐԿՐԻ ՆԱԽԱՄԻԱՍՏՎԱԾԱՅԻՆ ԴԻՑԱԲԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ԵՎ ԴՐԱ ԱՐԴԻ ԴՐՍԵՎՈՐՈՒՄՆԵՐԸ

Թեսա Հոֆման

Սույն պատմակրոնական հետազոտությունը համեմատում է Հայկական լեռնաշխարհի հնագույն՝ նախամիաստվածային հավատալիքների մնայուն ազդեցությունը հայերի և քրդերի շրջանում: Քիչ բան է հայտնի հայկական նախաքրիստոնեական դիցաբանության և կրոնական հավատալիքների մասին, որոնք, ըստ ամենայնի, եղել են խիստ սինկրետիկ (բազմաշերտ) և ձևավորվել բնության և դրա տարրերի պաշտամունքով (բնապաշտությամբ): Լինելով հնդեվրոպական ծագման՝ դրանք ուշ շրջանում կրել են մազդեականության (Արամազդ, Միհր և Անահիտ աստվածությունների հավատալիքները), ինչպես նաև ասորական, ուրարտական, միջագետքյան և հունական ազդեցություններ: Միաստվածության առաջին տարրերը տարածաշրջան են թափանցել Իրանից՝ զրադաշտականության (մազդեականության) տեսքով: Այս կրոնն իր անվանումը ստացել է հիմնադիր Զրադաշտի անունից և հիմնված է հնագույն հնդիրանական ավանդույթների և առասպելաբանության վրա, որոնք սկզբնավորվել են մ.թ.ա. 1800-600 թվականների միջև: Դրա ծագումը վիճելի է: Այն տարածվել է մոտավորապես մ.թ.ա. 7-4-րդ դարերում իրանական մշակութային տարածքում (Արևելյան Փոքր Ասիայից և Միջագետքից մինչև Պարսկաստան և Կենտրոնական Ասիա):

Բանալի բառեր՝ *պանթեիզմ (համաստվածություն), միաստվածություն, մազդեզականություն, ալևիականություն, Հայաստան, Դերսիմ, միջմշակութային հավատալիքներ:*