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Pre-Christian Polytheism in Ancient Armenia: A Syncretic World of Faith during the Orontids, Artaxiads and Arsacids

Antik Armenia'da Hristiyanlık Öncesi Çok Tanrıcılık: Orontidler, Artaksiadlar ve Aršaklılar Dönemi'nde Senkretik Bir İnanç Dünyası

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Abstract: Pre-Christian Armenia's religious landscape was a diverse blend of polytheistic beliefs shaped by its position at the crossroads of various civilizations. The Armenian pantheon and religious practices incorporated elements from Ancient Persia, Asia Minor, Phrygia, Greece, Rome, Syria, and Mesopotamia, with a significant Iranian influence due to ruling dynasties like the Orontids, Artaxiads and Arsacids. Early chroniclers such as Agatʿangełos and Movsēs Xorenacʿi describe this syncretism, highlighting key figures like Aramazd, Anahita, Mihr, and Vahagn as representations of both local and Zoroastrian belief. This paper delves into the intricate syncretic nature of Armenian polytheism, focusing on the interplay between temples, mythology, and societal customs. It also examines how cultural continuity allowed ancient religious traditions to influence Armenia's spiritual identity long after its Christianization, highlighting the enduring legacy of pre-Christian beliefs in the formation of Armenian religious and cultural history.

Keywords: Syncretism • Polytheism • Zoroastrianism • Armenian Mythology • Pre-Christian Armenia

Öz: Hristiyanlık öncesi Armenia'nın dini görünümü, çeşitli medeniyetlerin kavşağındaki konumuyla şekillenen çok tanrılı inançların çeşitli bir karışımıydı. Armenia panteonu ve dini uygulamaları antik Pers, Küçük Asya, Phrygia, Hellen, Roma, Suriye ve Mezopotamya'dan unsurlar içermekle birlikte, Orontidler, Artaksiadlar ve Aršaklılar gibi hüküm süren hanedanlar nedeniyle İran etkisi taşımaktaydı. Agatʿangełos ve Movsēs Xorenacʿi gibi erken dönem yazarları bu senkretizmi betimleyerek Aramazd, Anahita, Mihr ve Vahagn gibi kilit figürlerin hem yerel hem de Zerdüşt inancın temsilleri olduğunu vurgulamışlardır. Bu makale, tapınaklar, mitoloji ve toplumsal gelenekler arasındaki etkileşime odaklanarak Armenia çoktanrıcılığının karmaşık senkretik doğasını incelemektedir. Ayrıca, kültürel sürekliliğin eski dini geleneklerin Armenia'nın ruhanî kimliğini Hristiyanlaşmasından çok sonra bile etkilemesine nasıl izin verdiğini analiz ederek Armenia dini ve kültürel tarihinin oluşumunda Hristiyanlık öncesi inançların kalıcı mirasını vurgulamaktadır.

Keywords: Senkretizm • Çoktanrıcılık • Zerdüştlük • Armenia Mitolojisi • Hıristiyanlık öncesi Armenia

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Introduction

Armenia's geographical position influenced not only the region's social and economic structure but also shaped its religious life throughout various periods. The western part of the region was dominated by Phrygian and Anatolian gods or traditions, while the southern and eastern regions, due to their proximity to Iranian civilization, were naturally dominated by ancient Persian gods and beliefs. As the ancient geographer Strabo eloquently explains, "the Persian world was the principal source of Armenian customs and traditions"[1]. This influence was rooted in the fact that Armenia's three main dynasties—the Orontids, Artaxiads, and Arsacids—were of Iranian origin, which facilitated the introduction of Persian customs and linguistic elements into Armenia[2]. According to Ananikian, Armenian and even Georgian academics prefer to see the pre-Christian religions of Armenians and Georgians as "local" or "indigenous" traditions with some Iranian elements[3]. On this point, Ananikian's observation is still valid despite the passage of time[4].

The religious diversity of ancient Armenia was not limited to this duality. Depending on shifts in political power, one could also observe the presence of Greek and Roman cults, although they never became central to Armenian worship. In reality, despite the adoption of Zoroastrian elements, the regional differences within Armenia fostered the development of a religious system that was both multi-faith and multicultural. Following the collapse of the Parthian Empire (*c.*224), the Sasanians sought to impose their own interpretation of Zoroastrianism, which diverged in several significant ways from the ancient Zoroastrian beliefs practiced in Armenia. Indeed, Armenia's feudal structure and the territories shared by different families prevented Armenia from having a unified faith in almost every period. As family ties and origins changed, so did beliefs over time, and naturally many cultures and beliefs were gradually intertwined. This blending of traditions was reflected in a mythology that combined various beliefs, as Armenia's vast geographical expanse allowed different religious influences to permeate and integrate with Armenian mythology over time. Moreover, from another direction, the cult of the god (re)born from the rock/stone spread throughout the Armenian Highlands, the Caucasus, Transcaucasia or maybe neighboring regions of Asia Minor. But at the dawn of all this, the archaeological data from Armenians do not provide strong evidence of pre-Christianity[5].

Temples of Ancient Armenia

According to Agatʿangełos, the most prominent chronicler of Armenia, there were a total of seven central regions of worship in Armenia, shaped by various traditions and beliefs[6]. These included Tʿordan, Ani (Kamax), Erēz, Tʿil, Bagayaŕič, Aštišat and Artaxata. In addition to these major centers, Agatʿangełos also described another temple

[1] [ἔθη δὲ τὰ πολλὰ μὲν τὰ αὐτὰ τούτοις τε καὶ τοῖς Ἀρμενίοις διὰ τὸ καὶ τὴν χώραν παραπλησίαν εἶναι]. See, Str. XI. 13. 9.

[2] Thomson 2004, 373.

[3] Ananikian 1925, 7-9.

[4] An example, Petrosyan 2007a, 174-201.

[5] See for an example, Invernizzi 1998.

[6] [յեօթն բազինս մեհենից ուխտաւոր…]. See, Agatʿangełos, 22. Also see, La Porta 2018, 1614.

dedicated to the god Vahagn in Aštišat, which he considered *the eighth temple* [ութերորդ պաշտօն հռչակաւոր, անուանեալն Վիշապաքաղն Վահագնի][7]. However, this emphasis on an *eighth* temple likely resulted from a confusion between significant religious centers and smaller shrines. In reality, the religious life in Armenia revolved around ten temples distributed across seven main centers: the temples of Anahita and Tir in Artaxata; Baršamin in Tʿordan; Aramazd in Ani (Kamax); Anahita in Erēz; Nanē in Tʿil; Mihr in Bagayaŕič; and the temples of Vahagn, Anahita, and Astłik in Aštišat (See, *map below*). Armenian texts clearly show that the deities also acquired strong Hellenistic characteristics; Armenian deities were easily and explicitly associated with Greek gods, a common feature of Iranian religious practices during the Seleucid and Parthian periods. These include Aramazd-Zeus, Anahit-Artemis, Vahagn Heracles, Mihr-Hephaestus, Astłik-Aphrodite, Nanē-Athena, Tir-Apollo and Baršamin. Only Astłik ('Little Star') has a clearly indigenous Armenian linguistic origin. Of these, Aramazd, Anahit, Vahagn, Mihr and Tir are of Iranian origin, while Nanē and Baršamin are of Mesopotamian origin[8]. These temples were an integral part of everyday life in ancient Armenia, although R. W. Thomson, dismisses N. Adontz's theory of a connection between the seven altars or temples as unnecessary[9].

In the religious centers of Armenia, Aramazd, or Ormizd (rarer), who represented the Armenian interpretation of Ahura Mazdā, was the greatest deity (Armaz/Armazi [არმაზი] for Georgians). Since the main identity of Ahura Mazdā is that of the creator, Aramazd was also the greatest deity in Armenia, the creator of heaven and earth[10].

The Armenian society, adhering to an ancient and somewhat localized form of Zoroastrianism, referred to this god as Aramazd during the Arsacid period, and as Ōhrmazd or Hormizd after the rise of the Sasanian Empire. This shift in nomenclature also symbolized the reformulation of the Zoroastrian faith into an official state religion after the Sasanian ascendancy. Although Armenian sources described Aramazd as *the creator of heaven and earth*—aligning closely with Zoroastrian beliefs, especially the Zurvanism prevalent in the fourth and fifth centuries CE—Armenian society, with its adherence to older traditions, was still seen as *heretical* in the eyes of the Sasanians[11]. At this point, the Sasanian shift of Zoroastrianism towards Zurvanism was one of the reasons behind their aggressive religious stance against Armenia. The influence of Zurvanism was particularly evident towards the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth centuries CE. Indeed, the name of Shapur II's daughter was Zruanduxt[12]. Additionally, the letter sent by Mihrnersēh to Armenia in 449 clearly referenced Zrvan, the creator of all things, prompting Eznik of Kolb to initiate a theological debate in

[7] Agatʿangełos, 809. On the other hand, after a very old study summarised this issue, the worship and the trace of the old traditions have not changed much. See, Carrière 1899, 7-31.

[8] Canepa, 2019, 199.

[9] Thomson 1976, 440. See for Adontz's theory, Adontz 1928, 243.

[10] Kent 1950, 137, 138; Russell 1987, 154.

[11] Agatʿangełos, 68; Boyce, 1979, 84; Russell 1987, 158.

[12] Pʿawstos Buzand, VI. 1.

response to this belief[13].

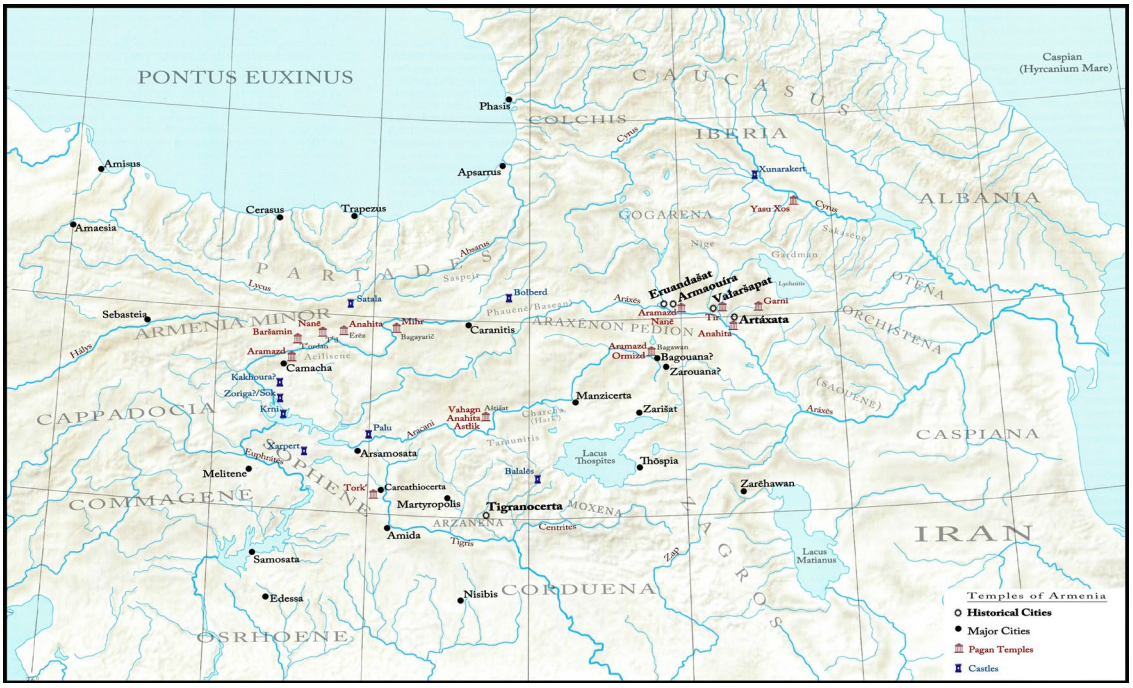

Fig.1 Sources: Hewsen 2001, 31, 33, 35, 45, TAVO B V 6, B IV 12; BAtlas, M89.

In Armenia, there was no singular acceptance of the existence and modes of worship of Aramazd. Movsēs Xorenacʻi, for instance, implies the existence of *four* or *more* Aramazds[14]. The reasons behind Movsēs Xorenacʻi's need for such a classification are difficult to determine, but it is clear from various sources that Aramazd was frequently mentioned alongside other deities[15]. For example, the joint mention of Zeus and Aramazd, as in "Zeus-Aramazd", serves as a strong illustration of this phenomenon [...Զեւս ոիցն Արամազդայ][16]. Interestingly, according to Canepa's claim, a unified cult centre and tombs dedicated to Zeus-Aramazd show parallels with Orontid-Commagene, but we cannot help but wonder whether this is a mere coincidence or the growth of a common ancestral tradition that both dynasties independently tried to claim[17]. Similarly, the depiction of Aramazd as a god of *thunder and lightning* can be linked to Homer's association of Zeus with these elements[18]. This connection suggests that Zeus's

[13] Eznik of Kołb (Floruit c.430-c.450), 145-146.

[14] Moses Khorenatsʻi, I. 31.

[15] According to James Russell, there is probably a connection between Movsēs Xorenacʻi's use of four and the names of the first, eighth, fifteenth, and twenty-third days of the Zoroastrian calendar. See, Russell 1987, 162.

[16] Agatʻangełos, 785.

[17] Canepa 2019, 229.

[18] Hom. *Il*. XXI. str. 161; Moses Khorenatsʻi, II. 86. On the other hand, Movsēs Xorenacʻi says that Aramazd had a son named Inakʻ, but according to the *Chronicon* of Eusebius, Inakʻ was the father of Isis, not the son of Aramazd. See, Ewsebi Pampʻileay Kesaracʻwoy, *Žamanakakankʻ Erkmasneay*, II. 77; Moses Khorenatsʻi, III. 15.

introduction into Armenia occurred first under Artaxias I in the second century BCE and later through artistic influences from the Greeks during the reign of Tigranes II in the first century BCE, such as the theatrical performances in Tigranocerta[19]. Therefore, it is evident that the concept of Aramazd as the supreme deity in Armenia evolved into a multicultural framework, incorporating the major gods of various communities over time.

On the other hand, Agatʿangełos uses the term *dicʿ*, which means "god," when describing the Zeus-Aramazd temple in Ani (Kamax) [hoŋn անուանեալ դիցն ամենայն][20] - The fact that the tombs of the Aršakid kings are also found here indicates that the monarchy was in some way in a relationship of patronage and honour with the greatest god Aramazd. This term likely entered Armenian literature as a counterpart to the Iranian term *bag*. In fact, as N. G. Garsoïan emphasises, the presence of Iranian words in the toponymy of medieval Armenia is widely known. There are numerous settlements with the religious prefix *Bag*- "god": Bagrewand, Bagaran, Bagawan and Bagayaŕič[21]. In the eastern part of Ani (Kamax), there was a cult center referred to by Armenians as *Bagawan* or *Dicʿawan*, meaning "the place of the god," which is synonymous with the Iranian languages[22]. Moreover, In classical Armenian, the word Bagawan was also used in connection with Zoroastrianism in the sense of "altar" or "symbol". Indeed, Movsēs Xorenacʿi, speaking of the perpetual fire at Bagawan, gives the name of the deity as Ormizd under Sasanian influence[23]. Undoubtedly, the most fundamental structure there was the famous temple dedicated to Aramazd[24]. In this context, the term *dicʿ*, which denotes the god Aramazd, was used exclusively to refer to non-Christian deities, while in Christianity, the term for "god" evolved into the different word *astuats* [աստուած]. Mažan, the "high priest" of the temple of Aramazd in Ani, was known by the title kʿrmapet [քրմապետ]. The same title was replaced after Christianity by the Syriac word kʿahanayapet [քահանայապետ][25]. Furthermore, *dicʿ* Aramazd was traditionally considered the creator of heaven and earth, making him a significant part of Armenian mythology. According to Movsēs Xorenacʿi, Kronos and Zrvan were equivalent as the supreme gods, and the mythological deity Bēl was ambiguously referred to as Aramazd in the Armenian version of Eusebius's *Chronicle*[26]. This direct correlation between the term *dios* (god) used by Eusebius and Aramazd is reflected in Tʿovma Artsruni's depiction of *dios*/Aramazd as the father Belos[27].

The presence of Aramazd in Armenia resurfaced in the mid-fifth century CE with the aggressive policies of Yazdgerd II. During this period, authors like Ełišē and Eznik Kołbacʿi frequently used the term "god Zrvan", highlighting one of the most evident Iranian influences on Armenian literature. Yazdgerd II, who imposed the sacred fire,

[19] Moses Khorenatsʿi, II. 12, II. 14.

[20] Agatʿangełos, 785.

[21] Garsoïan 1976, 12.

[22] *Nor Bařgirkʿ Haykazean Lezui*, 1836-1837, I, 636; Hübschmann 1897, 113; Russell 1987, 159.

[23] Moses Khorenatsʿi, II. 77.

[24] Agatʿangełos, 785; Moses Khorenatsʿi, II. 14.

[25] *Nor Bařgirkʿ Haykazean Lezui*, I, 1032; Ačaryan 1973, II. 481-482.

[26] Ewsebi Pampʿileay Kesaracʿwoy, *Žamanakakankʿ Erkmasneay*, I. 25; Moses Khorenatsʿi, I. 7.

[27] Thomas Artsruni, I. 2.

rekindled in Dvin, along with the Ormizd (Aramazd) temple built there, upon Armenian society in the early 450s, did not achieve his desired outcome. However, in a letter he sent to Armenia, he demonstrated that the Sasanian dynasty had partially evolved from Dualism to Zurvanism[28]. In reality, there was no shortage of opponents of Zurvanism under Sasanian rule, but the repressive power of Šābuhr II relatively silenced opposition to Zurvanism. Moreover, Šābuhr II named his daughter Zruandux (daughter of Zurvan), and in the fifth century CE Mihrnersēh named his son Zurwāndādh (created by Zurvan). Zurvanism was therefore very powerful in the Sasanian court, and this popularity is clearly reflected in Armenian sources[29]. This Iranian influence, traditionally emphasizing fire and, therefore, the sun, continued as a part of the post-Christian ritual, as seen in Movsēs Xorenacʻi's scene of the oath sworn upon the sun[30]. The significance of the sun in society was so profound that it persisted even after the Christianization of Armenia, strongly manifesting in the Armenian calendar. Notably, in both the Iranian and Armenian calendars, the name of the first month of the year, Nawasard, derives from *areg*/*arew*, meaning "sun"[31]. Therefore, while widespread in Armenia, it cannot be concluded that paganism was ever fully preferred over fire worship.

At the top of the pantheon of gods in Armenia stood Aramazd, who, much like Zeus in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, had familial ties with other deities. After Aramazd, the most powerful deity in Armenia was Anahita, an Iranian-origin "lady" who was both his wife and the symbol of fertility[32] (The three goddesses of the Armenian pantheon—Anahit, Nanē, and Astłik—were equated with the Greek deities Artemis, Athena, and Aphrodite. It is clear that, much like their Greek equivalents, Nanē would embody the second function, while Astłik would correspond to the third)[33]. This belief, though faint, was part of a shared worship culture, most notably reflected in the Phrygian tradition, where Kybele represented the most prominent belief system. However, the true connection to Phrygian origins emerged in the post-Christian era, where the Armenian word for "saint", *surb* [unւրբ], was likely derived from the Phrygian word *subra*[34].

The goddess known in Armenian society as Anahit was honored with a dedicated temple in the town of Erēz in the Acilisene region.[35] This area, serving as a cultural

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[28] Elishē, II. p 24-p 28; *Łazar Pʻarpecʻi*, II. 22.

[29] *The History of al-Tabarî*, I. 869; Zaehner 1972, 47; Boyce 1979, 119.

[30] Even in the seventh century CE the depiction of Aramazd in relation to the sun and moon is intriguing. See, Sebēos, XI. On the other hand, it is more accurate to consider the Caucasus region as a whole, including Albania and Iberia. For in these regions, as in Armenia, it was a common custom to swear an oath on the sun. See, Movsēs Dasxuranci, II. 40. Moreover, Šābuhr II began his letter to Constantius II by emphasising the sun and moon [*Rex regum Sapor, particeps siderum, frater Solis et Lunae, Constantio Caesari fratri meo salutera plurimam dico*]. See, Amm. Marc. XVII. 5. 3.

[31] Schmitt 1985, 91-100; *Nor Bařgirkʻ Haykazean Lezui*, II, 408, Garsoïan 1989, 548-549.

[32] Agatʻangełos, 53.

[33] See also, Orbeli 1956, 121.

[34] Russell 1990, 2680.

[35] Agatʻangełos, 786; Moses Khorenatsʻi, II. 60; Sandalgian 1917, 2, 736; Adontz 1936, 511. In addition

center, was referred to in ancient Greek and Roman sources as *Anaïtis Chōra* or *Anaitica*. According to Isidorus of Charax, Anahita's counterpart in the Greek world was Artemis[36]. In this respect, Anahita, as a reflection of the mother goddess cult in Armenia, was described by Agatʿangełos as the *golden mother/woman* [=[*V]oskemayr* ([*Ոսկեմայր*][37]. At this point, discussions on the existence of a lack of goddesses in the Iranian pantheon may be revived[38]. As a matter of fact, just as Kybele was traditionally associated with Attis, Anahita was mentioned alongside Nanē in Armenian sources under a different narrative[39]. Indeed, to the left of the Anahita temple in Erēz, a temple was built in Tʿil, dedicated to Nanē, Aramazd's daughter (and also Anahita's daughter)[40]. Nanē's background likely traces back to Inanna (most likely, the cult of Nané originated in Elam), symbolizing fertility, with roots in Sumer's Uruk city, much like Anahita[41]. Interestingly, the areas once inhabited by Nané became the territory of the Paulicians after Christianity, and even centuries later the name Nané was still used among these groups[42].

Similar to Anahita, Nanē was also paired with Athena -Pallas- goddess of war and victory- under Greek influence. Movsēs Xorenacʿi confirms that a statue of Athena was erected by Tigranes II in Tʿil, indicating that statue worship was indeed part of the religious culture in Armenia[43]. During the Christian era, these temples were destroyed, and both the temples of Anahita and Nanē were demolished together[44]. Aside from Erēz, other religious centers dedicated to Anahita included Artaxata and Aštišat, as well as sites like Armavir, which Movsēs Xorenacʿi mentions as a shared worship area where a statue of Artemis was located[45].

Just as Nanē was the daughter of Aramazd, Mihr, derived from the Iranian god Mithra, was his son, and a temple was built in Bagayaŕič in his honor[46]. According to Ełišē, the

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to Acilisene, according to Strabo, there was a temple of Anahita at Zela, which the Armenian people venerated. However, since Zela is located outside the territory of Armenia, it is not possible to recognise this temple as belonging to Armenia. See, Str. XII. 3. 37.

[36] Str. XI. 14. 16; Plin. V. 20. 83; Dio Cassius, XXXVI. 48. 1; *Parthian Stations by Isidore of Charax* 1914, 3. On the other hand, Agatʿangełos uses the word Anahtakan [Անահտական] when emphasising Anahita. Thus, it is clear that Agatʿangełos was influenced by ancient Greek and Roman literature in this respect. See, Agatʿangełos, 48.

[37] Agatʿangełos, 809.

[38] Iran has never tolerated the rule of women in religion, and their presence in the mythology of Anahit seems to be merely coincidental. For discussions on the subject, see, *The Heritage of Armenian Literature*, 68; Reinach 1942, 69.

[39] On Attis's association with the Armenian myth of Ara the Handsome, see, Matikean 1930, 288.

[40] Agatʿangełos, 786.

[41] Russell 1987, 237.

[42] For detail see, Selian 1996.

[43] Moses Khorenatsʿi, II. 14; *Stepʿanos Tarōnecʿi*, 123.

[44] Agatʿangełos, 786.

[45] Agatʿangełos, 778; Moses Khorenatsʿi, II. 12; Kurkjian 1964, 301.

[46] Agatʿangełos, 790; Moses Khorenatsʿi, II. 14. On the presence of Mithra in Iran, see, Cook 1983, 148-149.

god Mihr was one of the principal deities born from a mortal woman[47]. However, in contrast to Ełišē, the Avesta tradition recounts that Mithra, to whom a long hymn (*Yasht* X) is dedicated, was created by Ahura Mazdā. According to V. M. Kurkjian, the ideology, which developed largely in Armenian paganism, does not have an Avestic character, as it has no place in Mazdeism, and statues in honour of the sun and moon were erected in Armenian temples in Armavir[48]. Symbolizing the sun and being especially popular among Roman soldiers, Mithra was one of the most sacred deities among the Sasanians and served as a cultural bridge between Iran and Rome, gaining almost equal importance in Armenia[49]. Furthermore, as with other gods, efforts to Hellenize Mihr resulted in his being equated with the Greek god of fire, Hephaestus[50]. Yet, despite the gradual association of Mihr with a Greek identity, he retained his Iranian essence and continued to introduce Iranian influences into Armenia. The word *mehean* [մեհեան], used for pre-Christian temples, was borrowed from the Iranian term *Māithryāna*, meaning "the place of Mithra"[51]. Similarly, a cave near Van, originally from Urartian times, was referred to as the "Gate of Mithra" (=*Mheri duṙn* [*Մհեր դուռն*])[52]. On the other hand, one of the ways Mihr was commemorated in Armenia was his position in the Armenian calendar and the festivals organised in his name. In fact, the seventh month of the Armenian calendar was called *Mehekan*, and the Armenians paid their taxes to the Achaemenids every year in the month of Mithrakino/Mithrakāna [Μιθρακίνο][53].

The extent of Mihr's influence on the Armenian monarchy can, of course, be explained by the Gaṙni temple, which was built in Greek architectural style by Tiridates I to dedicate to Mihr[54]. Furthermore, Cassius Dio's statement about Tiridates I -when he declared his allegiance to Emperor Nero, saying, "I have come to you, my god, to worship you as Mithra"- clearly demonstrates Mihr's influence on the Armenian monarchy under all circumstances[55]. However, it is intriguing that in Gaṙni, Mihr was not referred to as Hephaestus but as Hēlios, which could signify the pairing of Mihr first with the sun and later with fire[56]. As Xenophon noted in the fourth century BCE that the Persian king made sacrifices to the sun, Movsēs Xorenacʿi also preserves the oath that Armenians swore by Mihr, the sun god[57]. Regarding Mihr's association with fire, Tʿovma Artsruni, in a mythological manner, states that Hephaestus (Mihr) stole fire from Aramazd to bring it to humanity. However, according to Movsēs Xorenacʿi, it was Hephaestus

[47] Elishē, II. p. 32. It is interesting to note that Ełišē's use of the word "god" for Mihr is not *dicʿ* for the pagan god, but *astuats* for the Christian god.

[48] Kurkjian 1964, 301.

[49] Christensen 1936, 154.

[50] Moses Khorenatsʿi, I. 7; Thomas Artsruni, I. 3.

[51] Russell 1982, 1; Pourshariati 2008, 388. This also applies to the similar Georgian calendar, which can be reconstructed. See, Gippert 1988, 87-154.

[52] Russell 2005, 34.

[53] Gray 1907, 338. The same was true for the Georgian calendar. See, Jong 2015, 124.

[54] Moses Khorenatsʿi, I. 12; Russell 1987, 269-270; Nersessian 2001, 101.

[55] Dio Cass. LXII. 5. 2.

[56] For more detail, see, Reynolds 1971, 152; Gregory 1995, 1, 69-70; Mastrocinque 2017, 201-202.

[57] Ksen. *Kyr.* VIII. 3. 12; Moses Khorenatsʿi, III. 17.

himself who discovered fire[58].

In addition to the children of Aramazd, there was also the god Tir (Tīri), referred to by Agatʿangełos as Aramazd's *scribe* [...դիւան գրչի Որմզդի][59]. Tir, whose origins trace back to the Sumerians under the name Nābu, was likely one of the four Semitic names listed by Movsēs Xorenacʿi among the idols/symbols of King Abgar[60]. However, in Movsēs Xorenacʿi's account, Tir was also equated with the Greek god Apollo, a form that became more widely recognized in Armenia[61]. Tir's place of worship was primarily the sacred area between Artaxata and Vałaršapat, where priests interpreted dreams and provided education[62]. Due to this characteristic, the region was named *Erazamoyn* in Old Armenian, meaning "dream" [Eraz+a+moyn]. Similarly, the common Armenian name *Trdat* was derived from the god Tir, meaning "granted/blessed by Tir"[63].

Among all these interconnected gods, Vahagn, who was incorporated into the Armenian pantheon as the equivalent of Verethragna (*Ave*. Vərəθraγna; Part. Varhraγn; also, Vedic Vṛtrahan)[64] from the Iranian world, held one of the most privileged positions. Armenian kings believed they derived their legitimate ruling power from him. However, Vahagn did not always fulfill this role alone; in cases like that of Tiridates IV, Vahagn was part of a triadic prayer or ritual alongside Aramazd and Anahita — Fertility from the noble Aramazd, preservation from Anahita; heroism from the brave Vahagn[65]. Primarily symbolizing courage, Vahagn was described by Agatʿangełos as a *dragon slayer*, while other sources equated him with Heracles, the Greek god of war (višapakʿał [վիշապաքաղ])[66]. Vahagn's depiction as a *dragon slayer* likely stems from his battle against Aži-Dahāka (Aždahā), a dragon-form symbol of evil in the Iranian world.

Beyond being a god, Vahagn's role in Armenian history was rooted more in mythology than theology, which is why he was regarded as the only god of purely Armenian origin. Moreover, Vahagn was traditionally regarded as the ancestor of the Vahevuni family, and therefore the site of his worship was Aštišat, where the Vahevunis were[67]. Both Vahagn and Heracles are mentioned by Movsēs Xorenacʿi, who describes Vahagn's nature and birth in a manner reminiscent of Iranian tales: "The sky was in labor, the earth was in labor, even the crimson sea was in labor; the pain in the sea was holding a reed (instrument). Smoke rose from the reed's tube, fire emerged from the reed's tube. From the fire came forth a red-haired young boy. His hair was aflame, his beard was of fire, and his eyes were suns"[68]. It is assumed that the ancient Armenian

[58] Moses Khorenatsʿi, I. 7; Thomas Artsruni, I. 3.

[59] Agatʿangełos, 778.

[60] Four idols/symbols: Nabog, Bēl, Batʿnikʿal, Tʿaratʿa. See, Moses Khorenatsʿi, II. 27.

[61] Moses Khorenatsʿi, II. 12.

[62] Agatʿangełos, 77; Moses Khorenatsʿi, II.15. The fourth month of the ancient Armenian calendar was called *Trē*, after the god Tir. See, *Nor Baṙgirkʿ Haykazean Lezui*, II, 897; Gray 1907, 336.

[63] *Nor Baṙgirkʿ Haykazean Lezui*, I, 665; Russell 1987, 296-297.

[64] Dumézil 1970, 122-123.

[65] Agatʿangełos, 127.

[66] Agatʿangełos, 809; Moses Khorenatsʿi, I. 31.

[67] Toumanoff 1963, 215; Cinemre 2022, 72.

[68] Moses Khorenatsʿi, I. 31. About the connection of Vahagn's birth with Indian mythology, see, Russell

hymn of Vahagn was constructed according to the principles of the Eastern Indo-European poetic language, for which anagrams and kennings are especially characteristic[69]. Vahagn, who is also considered among the mythological ancestors of the Armenians, was depicted as an extremely *brave* god (bravery comes to you from brave Vahagn)[70], serving as the protector of both Armenia and Iberia. The location of Vahagn's temple in Armenia was Aštišat, which was more like a divine settlement[71]. According to Agatʿangełos, the temple of Vahagn there had grown immensely rich in gold and silver, likely sustained by offerings from the monarchy[72].

The goddess associated with Vahagn was Astłik, whose temple was also located in Aštišat and who was described by Agatʿangełos as Vahagn's lover or wife[73]. The name Astłik, likely influenced by Manichaean prayers and meaning "little star," was a goddess equivalent to Ishtar in Mesopotamia and Aphrodite in the Greek world, and in Armenian sources, she was more commonly referred to by the name Aphrodite[74]. Astłik's primary place of worship was in Aštišat, where both Anahita and her lover/husband Vahagn were venerated[75]. This situation also evokes a kind of trinity. As a matter of fact, King Trdat's edict showing Aramazd, Anahit and Vahagn as the source of power and the existence of three famous temples in Aštišat support this theory. The Urartians also had three great gods: Khaldis, Thiespas and Artemis. The same can be said of Zoroastrianism; Aramazd, Anahit and Mihr[76]. This location was also where, during the Christian era, the temple was destroyed, and the first church in Armenian history, the Monastery of Karapēt, was established[77]. The Vardavar festival, which was derived from the traditions surrounding Astłik (or Anahita) and later adapted to Christianity, continued to be celebrated in this region[78].

Mythological and "Other" Syncretism

In Armenia, there were other deities, similar to Vahagn, who evolved from being gods to mythological figures, taking on more mythological roles. Among these was Baršamin (Baal Samin/Beʿel Šamîn/Baʿl Šamin), whose worship center was in Tʿordan, and who was believed to be the "Lord of Heaven". Baršamin held a distinct position due to his Syrian origins[79]. Baršam was a *giant* and *tyrant* in Assyria, and Aram, the ancestor of the Armenians, defeated him[80]. Eusebius equated him with Zeus, and according to Movsēs

1989, 317-330.

[69] Ivanov 2011, 9.

[70] Petrosyan 2018, 206-207.

[71] Pʿawstos Buzand, III. 14.

[72] Agatʿangełos, 809.

[73] Sandalgian 1917, 775.

[74] Russell 1987, 213; Lurje 2020, 457.

[75] Tʿovma Artsruni mentions statues dedicated to Astłik in the vicinity of Lake Van, but other sources do not provide enough information on this subject. See, Thomas Artsruni, I. 8.

[76] Kurkjian 1964, 301.

[77] Agatʿangełos, 810-811; *Pʿawstos Buzand*, III. 3; Aristakes Lastivertçi, XXI.

[78] On the etymology of the name Vardavar see, Russell 1992, 63-69.

[79] Agatʿangełos, 784; Sandalgian 1917, 777-778; Dirven 1999, 76; Aleksidze 2018, 141.

[80] Lurje 2020, 458.

Xorenacʿi, his statue was brought from Mesopotamia by Tigranes II. Similarly, Bēl, another figure of Syrian origin, symbolized a different belief system that found its way into Armenia[81]. However, Bēl transcended the role of a deity, adopting a more earthly form and becoming one of the core symbols of Armenian mythology[82]. This is because Bēl, a title often attributed to gods in Mesopotamian religions, was, the king who built the Tower of Babel and was ultimately defeated by the Armenian mythological leader Haykʿ[83].

Another belief associated with Haykʿ is the mythological figure Torkʿ Angeł, who, as a descendant of Haykʿ, represented strength[84]. This folk etymology, mentioned by Movsēs Xorenacʿi, traces its origins back to the Hittites, specifically to the storm god Tarhunda (Tarkhu) of Anatolia[85]. Although the primary worship center of Torkʿ Angeł was in the region of Carcathiocerta (Angeł-tun), it is noteworthy that Armenian sources, including Agatʿangełos, do not mention the destruction of any temple or altar dedicated to him during the Christian period[86]. This suggests that the cult of Torkʿ Angeł may have remained distant from Armenia's Zoroastrian traditions or was unable to be assimilated[87]. Furthermore, the term "Torkʿ" is believed to be rooted in "Turka", while "Angeł" reflects the influence of the Sumerian and Akkadian sun god of the underworld and death, as it was adapted in Armenia[88].

Among the less widespread idols or deities in Armenia was Gisanē (Gissaneh), a fertility goddess considered equivalent to the Greek goddess Demeter, whose origins trace back to India[89]. Although Armenian sources do not extensively mention Gisanē, Yovhannēs Mamikonean (likely Zenob) notes that a bronze statue of Gisanē continued to stand in the region of Tarōn until the Christian period.[90] The Armenian sources give a heroic account of the actions of Grigor Lusaworič, who transformed the temple of Gisanē into the church of Karapet, thus turning the gateway to *hell* into the gateway to *heaven*[91]. Another less widespread cult was that of Sandaramet/Spandaramet, of Iranian origin. Probably the word for sacrifice was spand "the place of sacrifice was called *Spandaran*" (*spenta*) the place of sacred things and the family of priests who supervised the sacrificial rites were known as Spandunis[92]. In Armenian historiography,

[81] Petrosyan 2007b, 299.

[82] Yovhannēs Drasxanakertcʿi, II. 1-5.

[83] See also, Diod. XVII. 112. 3.

[84] Movsēs Xorenacʿi attributes the origin of Torkʿ Angeł to Paskʿam, a mythological descendant of Haykʿ. See, Moses Khorenatsʿi, I. 23.

[85] Moses Khorenatsʿi, II. 8; Laroche 1958, 88-93.

[86] Although there is no sign of any temple at Angeł-tun, it is clear that the Orontid necropolis site was at Torkʿ. It is therefore possible that the Orontid monarchy made a possible connection between the "powerful" god Torkʿ and the dynasty. See, Moses Khorenatsʿi, II. 8.

[87] Russell 1987, 369.

[88] Toumanoff 1963, 299.

[89] Pseudo-Yovhannēs Mamikonean, VIII. 36; Seth 2005, 621.

[90] Pseudo-Yovhannēs Mamikonean, XXXII. 98.

[91] Vacca 2022, 55.

[92] Ananikian 1925, 18.

Sandaramet was associated with the underworld and hell, and was often identified with Hades or Dionysos[93]. Indeed, According to Russell, Tʿovma Artsruni states that King Artaxias III constructed two temples in the Vaspurakan region, dedicated to Heracles (Vahagn) and Dionynos, where the term "Dionynos" likely refers to Sandaramet[94].

In Armenia, there were other deities or belief systems that were not definitively recorded in sources. Among these, Arałez/Aṙlezkʿ, a dog-like spirit or mythological being, which influenced the story of Ara Gełecʿik and the Assyrian queen Semiramis, holds a prominent position. Movsēs Xorenacʿi writes that Semiramis prayed to the god (Arałez) to lick Ara Gełecʿik's wounds to revive him, while Pʿawstos Buzand recounts that Mušeł Mamikonean was placed on a high point after his death so that Arałez/Aṙlezkʿ could bring him back to life[95]. Although Arałez/Aṙlezkʿ is more frequently mentioned, two other names, Amanor and Vanatur, also appear in Armenian sources, though their identities are not clearly defined. Amanor and Vanatur, the gods of the new year and harvests, were worshipped in the region of Bagavan during the Nawasard (New Year) festival[96].

In addition to these gods and belief systems, there were other traditions that permeated Armenian society, often as cultural practices rather than formal religious structures. For instance, the custom of burying the dead and showing reverence towards them, introduced to Armenia through Iran, was widely practiced[97]. Moreover, elements from daily life considered sacred in Iran, such as the sun, moon, fire, and cypress trees, also found their place in Armenian culture[98]. Alongside these traditions, the Zoroastrian principle of dualism, a core tenet of the faith, was reflected in Armenian philosophical texts as the ongoing struggle between *good* and *evil*[99].

Conclusion

The examination of ancient Armenian religious practices and as far as the argument of this article requires a complex tapestry of multi-faith syncretism driven by Armenia's location and historical interactions. Armenia's unique position at the crossroads of several ancient civilizations facilitated a rich confluence of religious influences, including Phrygian, Anatolian, Iranian, Greek, and Roman traditions. The predominant influence of Persian or Iranian deities, such as Aramazd, Anahita, and Mihr, underscores the significant impact of Persian culture and Zoroastrianism on Armenian religious practices. This influence was further evident in the integration of Iranian deities into the Armenian pantheon, as well as the adaptation of Iranian ritualistic elements.

The religious landscape of Armenia was characterized by a fluid blend of indigenous and external religious elements. Temples dedicated to gods like Aramazd, Anahita, and Mihr, alongside lesser-known figures such as Gisanē and Sandaramet, exemplify the

[93] Agatʿangełos, 735.

[94] Russell 1987, 325.

[95] *Pʿawstos Buzand*, V. 36. See also, *Eznik of Kołb*, 122; Colpe 1986, 88.

[96] Seyfeli 2011, 153-154.

[97] The kings of Armenia were buried first at Angł and later at Ani (Kamax) and Bagawan. See, Agatʿangełos, 785; Moses Khorenatsʿi, II. 61.

[98] Boyce 1979, 85; Toumanoff 1963, 387.

[99] Eznik of Kołb, 145-146.

diversity and adaptability of Armenian religious traditions. This syncretism was not merely an assimilation of foreign deities but a dynamic process that involved reinterpretation and integration into the local mythological framework.

Furthermore, the evolution of certain deities, such as Aramazd and Vahagn, from their initial roles in Iranian mythology to their unique positions within Armenian tradition, highlights the transformative nature of religious beliefs. The adaptation of these deities, along with the persistence of practices such as fire worship and dualism, reflects the resilience and continuity of pre-Christian Armenian spirituality, even amidst external pressures and eventual Christianization.

In summary, the religious and mythological heritage of ancient Armenia is a testament to the region's capacity for cultural assimilation and transformation. The interplay between local and foreign religious elements created a multifaceted religious system that continued to influence Armenian cultural practices long after the decline of paganism.

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