

Heaven and Earth in Ancient Armenian Mythology

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Abstract

In the Armenian Highlands, various state formations existed during III-I mill. BC, and each of them had its own mythology, cults and rituals. The entire nature surrounding man, from Heaven to Earth, with its various manifestations, was reflected in ancient Armenian mythology. Being one of highly developed peoples of the Ancient World, Armenians had certain knowledge about the Universe, planets of the Solar System, as well as Earth with its nature. Myths and legends were created about earthly and heavenly objects and phenomena, most of them were personified in the images of epic heroes, gods and goddesses, which were worshiped in pantheons of different historical periods. Many ideas about Heaven and Earth in various survival forms have been preserved in folklore, ethnographic reality and the national mentality of the people up to the present day.

1. Introduction

In the Armenian Highlands, various state formations existed in III-I mill. BC, and each of them had its own mythology, cults and rituals (fig. 1). The entire nature surrounding man from top to bottom, from Heaven to Earth, with its various manifestations, is reflected in ancient Armenian mythology. Human life with all its components: existence, daily activities, security, social life, economic relations, etc., depended on nature, the earthly and heavenly environment. Over the millennia, ancient beliefs about the four elements – air, fire, water and earth, were transformed into images of gods and goddesses, and formed pantheons.

Ideas about the cosmic ocean and the heavenly sea occupy a special place in the Armenian mythological thinking, and reflect the ancient cosmological knowledge, as well as beliefs and cults connected with them. And among all celestial bodies the most worshiped was the Sun, *called the Eye of the Universe, the chief of all Luminaries, ... the most obvious reminder of divine and divinity (Alishan 1895, 84).*

Ideas about the Earth were represented in the form of beliefs related to natural environment: mountains, gorges, soil, dungeon, trees, flowers, as well as underground and surface waters, rivers, lakes, springs and streams, etc., all this embodied in images of various spirits, then – deities. Later, all these representations were crystallized in worship of such images that are connected with the ideas of homeland, native country, i.e. ancestors, eponyms, patron gods.

Evidences about ancient gods and goddesses symbolizing Heaven and Earth, earthly and heavenly phenomena, natural environment, etc., are preserved in archeological, linguistic, folklore, ethnographical sources, as well as in the works of ancient Greco-Roman and medieval Armenian authors.

2. Armenian eponymous patriarchs

- 1) The Father of Armenian historiography Movses Khorenatsi (V ce.) in his “History of the Armenians” has preserved many ancient myths in the form of archaic epos, the narratives of which describe victories of the Armenians’ eponymous prefathers – Hayk and Aram. Patriarch (Arm. Nahapet) Hayk, who won a glorious victory against the Babylonian tyrant Bel, laid the foundation of the Armenian native land and its people (fig. 2). And from that time on “our country is called Hayk’ after the name of our ancestor Hayk” (*Movses Khorenatsi, 88*).

Thanks to his victory, Hayk was deified, and his patriotic deed was preserved in people’s memory for many centuries. As a mythological figure, Hayk was the founder and defender of the Armenian

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homeland, he defined the place for Armenians to live, the country Hayk'. He is also the creator of time and eternity, who defines the cosmic order in his country, and appears in the Universe as constellation Hayk, corresponding to Greek Orion¹ (figs. 3-4).

Hayk also defined the beginning of Armenian history – the datum when he defeated Bel, Navasard 1 (August 11) 2492 BC. The Haykid Calendar starting from this day, proclaims the origins of Armenian history, its separation from prehistoric times, and the calendar months are named after his sons and daughters (*Anania Shirakatsi*, 76-77; *Vardumyan 1991*, 87-91). Up to our days, in the annual calendar of the Mother See of Holy Ejmiatsin, the native Armenian Haykid months are still fixed along with the Christian ones.

- 2) The second patriarch, from Hayk's sixth generation, Aram Haykazun, also was a great ancestor who defeated the enemies attacking Hayk' from the east, south and west (fig. 5). He extends the borders of the country on every side, becomes so powerful and famous that "by his name all races call our land: like the Greeks, Armenia, and the Persians and Syrians, Armenik" (*Movses Khorenatsi*, 92). Patriarch Aram was a solar god, the patron and protector of the united Armenia, the definer of new cosmic order in Armenian world. He was a creative figure, who expanded the country, populated almost the entire Armenian Highlands with Armenians, assimilated the tribes living in the new territories, ordered them "to learn the Armenian speech and language" (*Movses Khorenatsi*, 95). His enemies were zoomorphic titans and gods whom he defeated with his invincible divine solar power (*Vardumyan 1991*, 91-94).
- 3) The next Haykid, Tork, from the Angeghea region, was connected with the earth elements: stone and rock, as well as sea. Movses Khorenatsi describes how Tork throws huge stones on the enemy ships coming from Pontus (Black Sea) to attack Armenia, and the waves rise and sink the ships (fig. 6). Tork, like Hayk and Aram, was the defender of the country, the god-demiurge of art and writing, as well as rock-carving, he would "polish with his nails hard stones and inscribe eagles and other such [designs] on them" (*Movses Khorenatsi*, 141). On the other hand, the tribe name Angegh is associated with vulture – Arm. Angl, which appears to have been a totem bird for this lineage, suggesting that the cult had deep roots in archaic beliefs (*Vardumyan 1991*, 99-101).
- 4) Movses Khorenatsi writes also about one of Aram's descendants, Ara the Handsome, king of Armenia who rejected "dissolute and lascivious" Shamiram's (Semiramis) love, queen of Assyria, and declined her offer to ascend the Assyrian throne. She became "exceedingly angry" and attacked Armenia with war during which Ara was killed (*Movses Khorenatsi*, 96-98). In the original version of the legend Ara was reborn (as Egyptian Osiris, Phrygian Attis, Greek Adonis, etc.)². As a dying god he was connected with the underworld, meanwhile, his rebirth symbolized the awakening nature in spring and the beginning of agricultural works (fig. 7). Ara's legend indicates the importance of the worship of dying and rising deities as mythic personifications of sunrise and sunset, as well as the hibernation of the nature in winter and awakening in spring. In Armenian folk beliefs there are dog-like deities – Aralezes, who resurrect heroes fallen on the battle. Ara's image was also connected with the red planet Mars, like Greek Ares and Roman Mars (*Vardumyan 2018*, 219). Ara does not accept Shamiram's passionate love and remains faithful to his country and queen Nuard (*Movses Khorenatsi*, 107), with whom they constitute the male (solar), and female (lunar) beginnings in Armenian mythology. According to folk beliefs, the names of the Ararat Valley and Mount Ararat derive from Ara; Mount Aragats is his royal throne, and Mount Ara – his deathbed. The Haykazuns (Haykids) symbolize Hayk'-Armenia country as the cradle of Armenian nation and have remained in historical tradition as deified ancestors (*Kavoukjian 1987*, 155-167; *Vardumian 2010*, 431-435; *Haykazounis 2013*).

3. Gods of Hayasan Pantheon

In the next period, which includes XVI-XIII ce. BC, in a treaty known from Hittite inscriptions, the names of 14 city-gods of the neighboring country Hayasa (Hayk') are mentioned. The supreme god

¹The mythic giant huntsman whom Zeus placed among the stars as a constellation (*Dictionary of classical mythology 1987*, 184-185)

²Ara's resurrection is confirmed by Plato's description of an Armenian soldier, Er's (Ar) death at the battle-field, and rebirth: "Er, the son of Armenius, ...once upon a time was slain in battle, and when the corpses were taken up on the tenth day already decayed, was found intact, and having been brought home, at the moment of his funeral, on the twelfth day as he lay upon the pyre, revived, and after coming to life related what, he said, he had seen in the world beyond" (Plato, Republic, X, 614b).

^dU.GUR, heading the pantheon, the god of thunder and lightning and the underworld, is on the first line of the inscription. In the second line is the supreme goddess ^dINANNA, the patroness of fertility and plenty, who is also associated with heaven and earth. The next deities are patrons of different Hayasan towns (*Kapantsyan 1940, 84-99; Khachatryan 1971, 148, § 6; Petrosyan 2002, 128-131; Ghazaryan 2023, 102-112; Vardumyan, Tokhatyan, 2023, 215*).

4. Pantheon of Van Kingdom

The IX-VI ce. BC, represents the rich state pantheon of Van Kingdom (Urartu/Ararat), mainly recorded on a rock called Mheri Dur (Mher Door), (fig. 23). 70 deities, 35 gods, 35 goddesses, and a number of divine attributes are mentioned in the inscription (*Hmayakyan 1990; Wartke 1993; Salvini 1995; Zimansky 1998; Badalyan 2015; Ayvazyan 2017, 22-50; Grekyan, Badalyan, Tiratsyan, Petrosyan 2018*). The supreme couple, Haldi (^DHal-Die) and Arubani (^DWaruba(i)ne), are the patrons of Heaven and Earth, sciences, arts and crafts, fertility and agricultural work, they rule over everyone and everything in Heaven and on Earth (figs. 8-9).

Gods and goddesses personifying celestial bodies and phenomena were worshiped, and this fact proves the advanced level of astronomical knowledge in Urartu. Haldi, the first god of the supreme triad, is the embodiment of Jupiter, the largest planet in the Solar System. The second god, Teisheba (^DTeišeba), personifies Mars and thunder and lightning (fig. 10). The third god, Shivini (^DŠivini) is the Sun, his symbol on the seals with sacral contents is the winged solar disk (fig. 11). The Moon – Melardi or Selardi (^DSielardi), as well as the planets are mentioned in the inscription: Mercury – Ardi (^DArdi), Venus – Sardi (^DSardi), Saturn – Tsinuardi (^Dsinuiardi). In Urartu the idea of the Tree of Life – the symbol of connection between Heaven (Universe) and Earth (Dungeon) was developed (*Vardumyan 2018, 220-221; Vardumyan, Tokhatyan, 2023, 215*), (fig. 12).

Sacrifices were made to all these celestial-cosmic gods, as well as to the earth gods of mountains, plains, seas, sacred places, and cities. Especially the works related to viticulture were considered sacred, every stage of which – tun, care, harvesting and other details – was done under the auspices of the supreme couple, accompanied by certain rituals, up to a special wine festival. And this attitude towards viticulture and winemaking is preserved in the Feast of Blessing of Grapes (Assumption of the Virgin) of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which is the only Christian church having such celebration, meanwhile, wine festivals, such as the Greek Dionysias, Roman Bacchanalias, etc., were widespread in ancient Mediterranean (fig. 13).

5. Pan-Armenian Pantheon

In the post-Urartian period, including the Ervanduni-Artashesian-Arshakuni (Orontid-Artaxiad-Arsacid) dynasties with their pan-Armenian pantheon (VI ce. BC – IV ce. AD), gods and goddesses personifying cosmic bodies or celestial phenomena were worshiped, as well as Earth and the whole nature.

- 1) The Universe was perceived as the Cosmic Sea (Tsov Tsirani – Purple Sea), from which everything in Heaven and on Earth had begun. Movses Khorenatsi mentions the song “Birth of Vahagn”.

*Heaven was in travail, earth was in travail,
The purple sea was also in travail,
In the sea, travail also gripped the red reed.
From the tube of the reed came forth smoke,
From the tube of the reed came forth flame.
From the flame, a blond young boy ran out.
He had fire hair, and had flame beard,
And his eyes were suns (Movses Khorenatsi, 1978, 123).*

This verse, as stated by the Russian scholar V. Toporov, is one of the most ancient Indo-European cosmogonic and theogonic myths (*Toporov 1977, 88-106*). The relations between the Earth and Sky, the Seawater and Plant life, the Sun and Fire are obvious (in folk beliefs the Sun is the celestial fire and fire is the terrestrial one). The world elements make the interconnection in entire Universe whose cosmic waters give birth to the sun personified in Vahagn (*Vardumyan 2020a, 167-183*). He kills the

dragon symbolizing darkness, and is called Vahagn-Vishapakagh (Dragon Slayer) (*Movses Khorenatsi, 1978, 123*), (figs. 14-16).

- 2) In Armenian mythology, a special reflection has received the Milky Way (fig. 17). Astronomer Anania Shirakatsi (VII ce.) in his “Cosmography and calendar” tells an ancient myth about the Armenians’ ancestor Vahagn who steals some straw from the Assyrians’ ancestor Barsham in order to warm his people in a cold winter time. And the trace of his scattered straw is called the Straw-Thief’s Path, which is the Milky Way galaxy (*Anania Shirakatsi, 37*). Shirakatsi also gives the scientific explanation of this cosmic object.
- 3) The gods of the pan-Armenian pantheon symbolized heavenly luminaries, planets or phenomena. The supreme couple, Father-god Aramazd and Mother-goddess Anahit, were the rulers of gods in heaven and the protectors of people on earth. Aramazd embodied Jupiter, the greatest planet in the Solar System, and Mars as the god of thunder and lightning (similar to Greek Zeus and Roman Jupiter). The rainbow was the divine belt of Aramazd. Anahit, the goddess of maternity and fertility (as Greek Hera and Roman Juno) personified the Moon but was also called Gold-haired and Gold-fingered, ‘gold’ symbolizing the Sun-color and rays (fig. 18). Their daughter Astghik (Arm. ‘star’), was the goddess of love and beauty (as Greek Aphrodite) personifying Venus – the brightest star in the morning and evening sky (fig. 19). The other daughter, Nane, the goddess of feminine skills and war, was Saturn. Aramazd’s messenger Tir – the god of writing, the dream-sender and the conductor of souls into the afterworld, personified the planet Mercury (Greek Hermes, the messenger of Olympian gods) (*Melik-Pashayan 1963; Vardumyan 1991, 103-125; Vardumyan, Tokhatyan, 2023, 217-221*).

The magnificent archeological monument in Commagene, built in 62 BC by king Antiochus I Ervanduni (Orontide, 69–34 BC) on the slopes of Nemrut Mountain of the Armenian Taurus, is also devoted to the Sun (figs. 20-22). The monument is a unique architectural-sculptural embodiment of Sun worship. The huge stone sculptures of gods Zeus-Oromasdes (Arm. Aramazd), Apollo-Mithra (Arm. Mihr), Artagnes-Heracles (Arm. Vahagn), patroness-goddess of Commagene (Arm. Anahit), and Antiochus I himself, together with the huge heads of Lion and Eagle – symbols of royal power, stand on eastern and western sides of the artificial hill of 50 m high. Sun Gods, King and the whole group until today meet the celestial luminary in the morning, and see it off to retire in the evening (*Vardumyan 2020a, 167-183*).

- 4) A typical solar god was Mihr, whose widespread image is reflected in such words as ‘mehyan’ – heathen temple; the name of February in the Armenian calendar is ‘Mehekan’ meaning ‘Mihrian’. Mihr was the Armenian parallel of Indo-Iranian deities – Vedic Mitra and Zoroastrian Mithra, whose cults were spread in the Roman Empire as Mithraism (I – IV ce. AD). But unlike Roman Mythra, Armenian Mihr lasted long: echoes of his cult appear in the images of Armenian epic (VII – X ce. AD) heroes Great Mher (Lion of Sassoun), the rising sun, and Little Mher, the setting sun. The latter closed himself in the Raven Rock called Mher Door (Caldean Gates near the Van fortress), because he outraged at the world’s injustices, and with his Fiery Horse, Lightning-Blade and War-Cross, he will stay there “till judgement day, the end of this world, it will be destroyed, and a new world built” (*Daredevils of Sassoun, 71-94, 231-250*), when honesty, peace and prosperity will reign in the world (*Vardumyan 2023, 7-23*). According to a folk legend, in the stone-prison of Mher there is a rotating wheel-of-fate hanging from the sky, keeping the connection between the Cosmos and the Earth, and in some way – between the Space and the epic hero (fig. 23).
- 5) The gods of pan-Armenian pantheon were mostly space-dwelling, in the sky, sometimes they came down to the earth to participate in a celebration dedicated to a god or goddess. The underworld was personified in the image of Sandaramet, the god of dungeon. In general, they believed that in the world around – in mountains and gorges, in caves and underground, in rivers, streams, trees, everywhere, there live evil and good spirits which can either harm or help people. This is how arose beliefs connected with mountain spirits qajk’, thunder and lightning dragons – vishap, nereids – jranuysh, sky spirits – odanuysh, and many others (*Alishan 1895, 148-233*).

They also believed that on New Year day, Navasard, celebrated on August 11, the seven deities – Aramazd, Anahit, Mihr, Vahagn, Astghik, Nane, Tir, descend from heaven, sit on high mountains and watch the festival. The Navasard Games (Armenian Olympic Games) used to take place in Bagavan-Ditsavan, Ashtishat, Armavir and other large cult centers, where altars set up for gods and goddesses

(fig. 24). Plants and animals, the first harvest of fruits were sacrificed to them. The custom of the so-called matagh also comes from those days, when they used to sacrifice a bull or a ram or a rooster. And an important part of the Navasard cycle was Astghik's feast Vardavar (fig. 25) when the folk used to gather near springs, rivers, and the ritual of sprinkling each other with water was the important part of the holiday (*Manukyan 1969, 177-190; Kharatyan-Arakelyan 2005, 201-226, 249-254*). The celebration of Vardavar is kept up to our days, and even now, especially in the villages of Gegharqunik Marz, they always go to highlands to do their open-air matagh.

- 6) Another ancient feast, Trndez, the feast of sun's magic rebirth celebrated on February 14, was dedicated to god Mihr. Greek historian Xenophon witnesses that at Mihr's festivals in Armenia they used to sacrifice a huge number of stallions, as the horse was one of solar symbols, and he himself gives his horse to the chief of an Armenian village to be sacred to the sun god (Xenophontis, *Anabasis*, IV, 34, 98). People performed a ritual to warm the Earth by lighting a bonfire, so that the warm days would come sooner, and the whole month was dedicated to the solar god and was called Mehekan in Armenian calendar. This celebration is very popular up to now, especially among the youth who make bonfire, sing and dance around and jump over when it begins to fade. The top of the festivity is the new-weds' jump; the idea is to achieve good luck and happiness, to have fertile marriage with a lot of children, and prosperous family (fig. 26). The Armenian Apostolic Church celebrates on the same day the feast of Jesus Presentation to the Temple when he was 40 days old (Christmas by the Armenian Apostolic Church calendar is on January 6), and blesses the candles that people take home to make Trndez bonfires in their yards (*Manukyan 1969, 59-70; Kharatyan 2005, 53-62*).
- 7) The Earth in mythology was reflected in the form of mountains and valleys, trees and flowers, stones and soil, rivers and lakes, with them various beliefs were connected, which over time were transformed into the worship of deities. The idea of fertility was associated with goddess Anahit, the underworld – with Sandaramet. Anahit was the patroness of both cattle breeding and agriculture, and on her holidays wreaths and branches, newly grown grain and other harvest were presented to the goddess. Adjacent to the Anahit temples were lands where sacred heifers with a white crescent mark on their foreheads grazed. Goddess Astghik was also connected with nature: the myth tells that when she walked through fields, the blood dripping from her delicate feet turned into red roses.

A further continuation of the Great Mother Goddess Anahit is Tsovinar – the mother of the heroes of the national epic “Daredevils of Sassoun” (fig. 27). Tsovinar includes both heavenly and earthly elements. In her archaic stage, Tsovinar is the primordial Chaos, the Heavenly Ocean or the Purple Sea, which gives birth to the Universe-Cosmos, the world order, and the sun god Vahagn (see “Birth of Vahagn”). Later, transformed into different images – the lightning spirit Tsovian, then the goddess Nar, finally in the Middle Ages, during the Arab invasions (VII-IX ce.), is crystallized in the epic figure, who gives birth to Sanasar and Baghdasar, the heroes of the first branch, the founders of Sassoun Fortress (*Daredevils of Sassoun 1964, 32-70; Vardumyan, Tokhatyan, 2023, 215*).

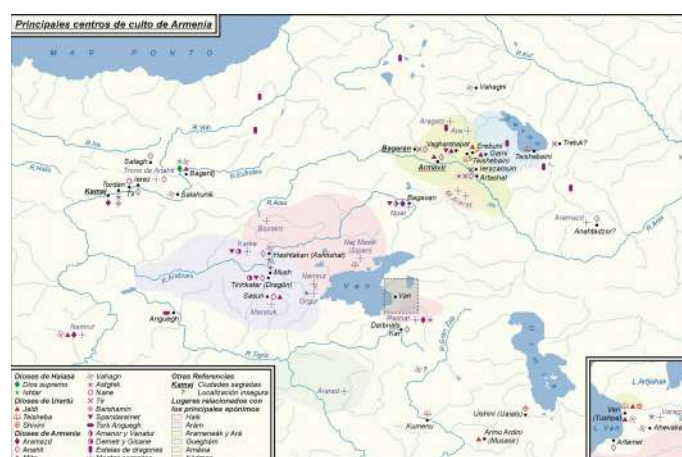
Ancient myths have evolved over time into folk legends, in which Earth and Sky often appear together. In one legend, it is told how “the golden-haired youth Sun crosses the sky every day in his golden chariot, rests on the top of Mount Ararat in the afternoon, then in the evening goes into lake Van, and while having his night rest there is caressed by Sun-Mother and sun-fairies, at dawn, refreshed and radiant, drives again his chariot across the roof of heaven” (fig. 28).

- 8) In ancient ideas of Heaven and Earth, a special place occupy dragons which symbolize the elements of wind, storm, thunder and lightning. In folk tales, they are either good beings, guardians of the sacred water, or evils closing the source of the water, the immortal spring, and no one could approach to drink water. In another legend, dragons swallow the Sun and cause eclipses, but are slain by the thunder-warrior, Dragonfighter hero who frees the luminary and brings light and warmth to people³. Some folk beliefs about the soul are also related to cosmological ideas, according to which, after being separated from the body, the soul moves into the universe, becoming a good or an evil spirit. The souls are identified with the stars, among which the bright ones are considered the souls of the righteous, and the dim ones – the souls of the sinners, and at the moment of death, his star falls and darkens.

³It should be noted that the worship of dragons was widespread in many countries of the Old World, from China to Britain, but only in Armenia it turned into the art of dragon stone steles, which can be considered an exclusive phenomenon of our pre-Christian sculpture, like khachkars in Christian culture (fig. 29).

- ## 6. Summary

Many images of ancient mythology were transformed into heroes of the national epic “Sasna Tsrer”. And many ideas about Heaven and Earth in a survival form have been preserved in folklore, ethnographic reality and the national mentality of the people to the present day. All this indicates not only the high level of development of the mythological thinking of our distant ancestors, but a continuous process of world recognition from the earliest stages of Armenian history.



Vardumyan G.
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Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.

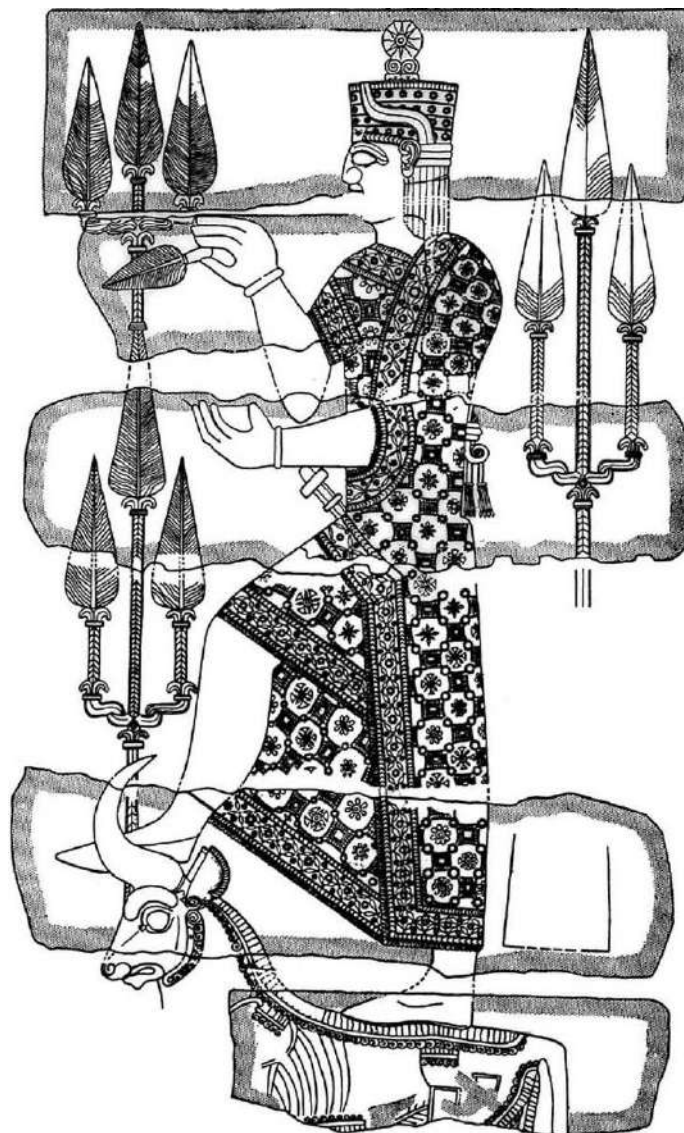


Figure 10.



Figure 11.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.



Figure 14.



Figure 15.



Figure 16.

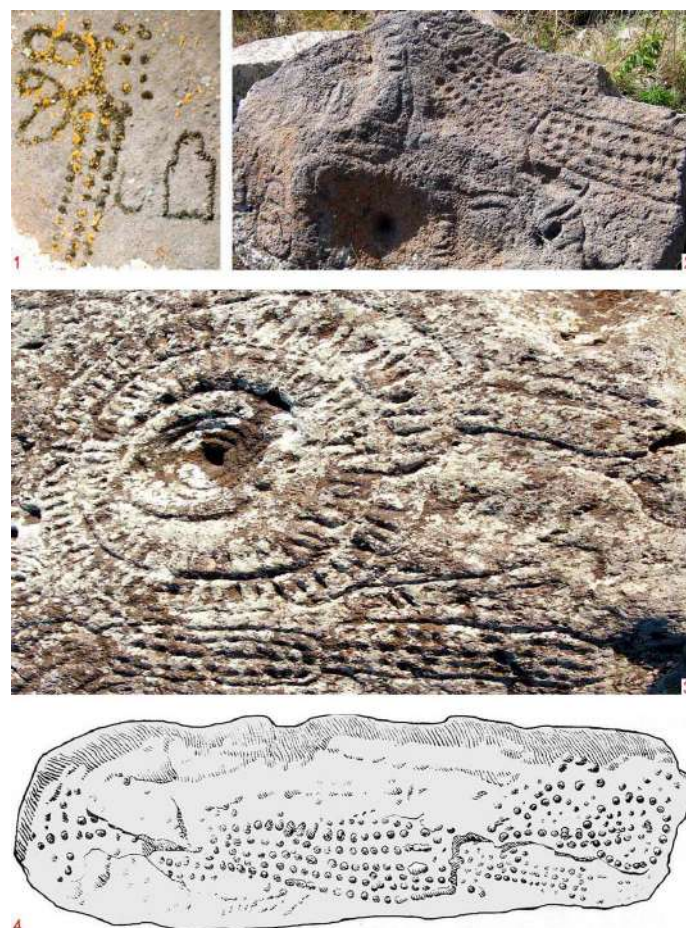


Figure 17.



Figure 18.



Figure 19.



Figure 20.



Figure 21.

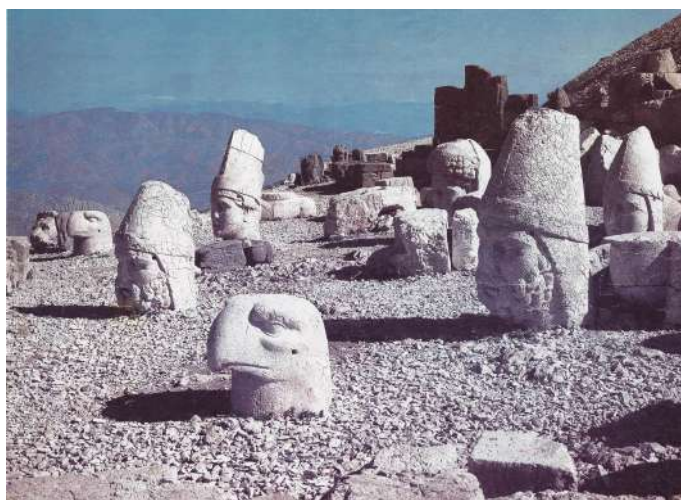


Figure 22.

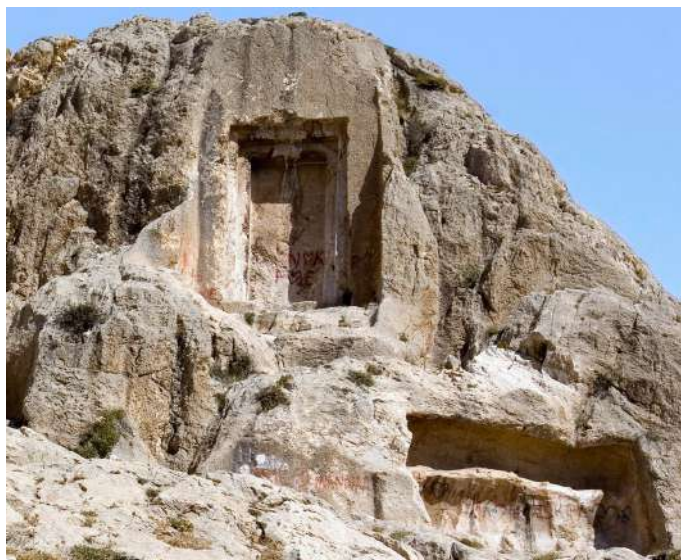


Figure 23.



Figure 24.



Figure 25.



Figure 26.



Figure 27.



Figure 28.



Figure 29.



Figure 30.

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