

# Hayk Nahapet – Epic Hero and Cosmic God

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## Abstract

The Armenian historical tradition has preserved evidence about the eponymous ancestors Hayk and Aram, who gave their names to the country and the nation. The most ancient narratives are about Hayk Nahapet (Patriarch) – the epic hero of the Armenian nation after whom Armenians call themselves *Hay* and their country *Hayk'* (Hayq). The legends also mention Aram, a heroic figure of the sixth generation of Hayk, whose name gave rise to the exonyms *Armenia* and *Armenians*. These patriarchs symbolize Armenian national identity and have been deified for centuries. Both eponyms, Hayk and Aram, are mentioned in various written sources.

This article traces the evolution of Hayk's image – from a brave giant-hunter to an epic archer, and from a patriarch-ancestor to a cosmic god-creator personifying time and eternity. For thousands of years, Hayk has remained the central figure in the ethnogenic myths of the Armenian nation. His multi-layered figure has played an epoch-making role in the processes of the formation and development of Hayk'-Armenia, ensuring its endurance through millennia and its continuation into the present day.

**Keywords:** *Armenia, Aram, eponyms, god-creator, Hayk, Haykid calendar, historical tradition, Mouses Khorenatsi, mythology, Leonti Mroveli, patriarch.*

## 1. Introduction

In the history of a nation one of the main and fundamental issues is ethnogenesis. To study it, the researchers rely on various sources, including folklore, linguistic, archaeological, and ethnographic. Among these, the most ancient are archaeological and folklore monuments, along with written records that provide insights into a nation's origins, often linked to eponymous ancestors or deities. In some cases, these names have been preserved in the names of the countries where they were revered. For example, in Assyria, the supreme god of the empire was Ashur (Ašur), a war deity; in Greece, the eponymous progenitor of the Hellenes was Hellenus (*Ελληνος*), the son of Zeus; in Rome, Romulus, one of the sons of the war god Mars, founded the city with his twin brother Remus; in India, Indra was venerated as a powerful god of war and thunderstorms. Their names became embedded in corresponding ethnonyms and toponyms, reinforcing their symbolic connection to those nations.

In Armenia, the eponymous ancestors were Hayk and Aram, who gave their names to the country and the nation. Historical tradition, myths, and legends recount the stories of the first patriarchs of the Armenian nation who founded the country which was named after them. The oldest narratives are about Hayk Nahapet – an epic hero and the forefather of the Armenian people, after whom Armenians call themselves *Hay* and their country *Hayk'* (Hayq). Another epic figure is Aram, a hero from the sixth generation of Hayk, whose name gave rise to the exonyms *Armenia* and *Armenians*. These patriarchs became symbols of Armenian national identity and were venerated for centuries. Hayk and Aram are mentioned in numerous historical sources, and this study is dedicated to Hayk Nahapet — the legendary forefather and cosmic god of the Armenian people.

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## 2. Armenian historical tradition about Hayk Nahapet

The archaic epic about Hayk Nahapet and the Haykids (Armenian: Haykazun) has been preserved in fragments within the *“History of the Armenians”* by Movses Khorenatsi, the Father of Armenian historiography (V Ce.). He describes Hayk as a descendant of Noah, whose Ark, according to the Biblical narrative, landed on Mount Ararat, the highest peak of the Armenian Highlands. Movses Khorenatsi, adhering to the Armenian Christian tradition, writes about Noah’s sons: Zrvan-Sem, Titan-Ham, and Yapheth-Yabet. Then, the historian presents the line of Yapheth: “Yapheth begat Gamer, Gamer begat T’iras, T’iras begat T’orgom, T’orgom begat Hayk” (Khorenatsi (1978), I. 5).

Further, Movses Khorenatsi describes the activities of giant gods who built the Ancient World after the Great Flood: “Fearsome and renowned were the first of the gods”, and one of them was the son of T’orgom<sup>1</sup> – Hayk, “handsome and personable, with curly hair, sparkling eyes, and strong arms”. He was a mighty warrior, “among the giants he was the bravest and the most famous, the opponent of all who raised their hand to become absolute ruler over all the giants and heroes” (Khorenatsi (1978), I. 9-10).

After the fall of the Tower of Babel, Hayk led 300 men and their families “to the land of Ararat”, where they lived in peace. But the Titan ruler of Babylon, Bel,<sup>2</sup> wanted to impose his tyranny upon Hayk’s people. Hayk rebelled, and Bel invaded Armenia. A great battle took place in Hayots Dzor (Armenian Gorge). Hayk’s warriors fought bravely for many hours against the huge Babylonian army; many giants on both sides were killed in the fierce struggle. Finally, the skillful archer Hayk “pulled taut his wide-arched bow” and shot Bel with his “triple-fletched arrow” (Figure 1 a). The hill where Bel and his warriors fell was named Gerezmank’ (Graveyard<sup>3</sup>) (Khorenatsi (1978), I. 10-11).

Soon after the glorious victory of Hayk and the Haykids, they founded the fortress Haykaber and the city Haykashen in the Vaspurakan province of Armenia, on the site of the battle. Hayk was subsequently deified, and his people began to call themselves *hay*, emphasizing their descent from the legendary hero. Concluding the legend of the great patriarch, Movses Khorenatsi writes: **“Now our country is called Hayk’ after the name of our ancestor Hayk”** (Khorenatsi (1978), I. 11).

Hayk’s glorious victory marks the beginning of a new and most important era in the history of Armenia: the transition from prehistoric times to the historical period. In this new era, the patriarch’s people no longer appear as tribes scattered across the Highland, but as an ethnic unit with its own name and the name of its country. With the onset of the historical period, the foundations are laid for the formation of Armenians as an ethnic unit with its own language and culture and the beginnings of statehood (Vardumyan (1991), 87-90; (Vardumyan, 2022a,b)) (Figure 2 a, b).

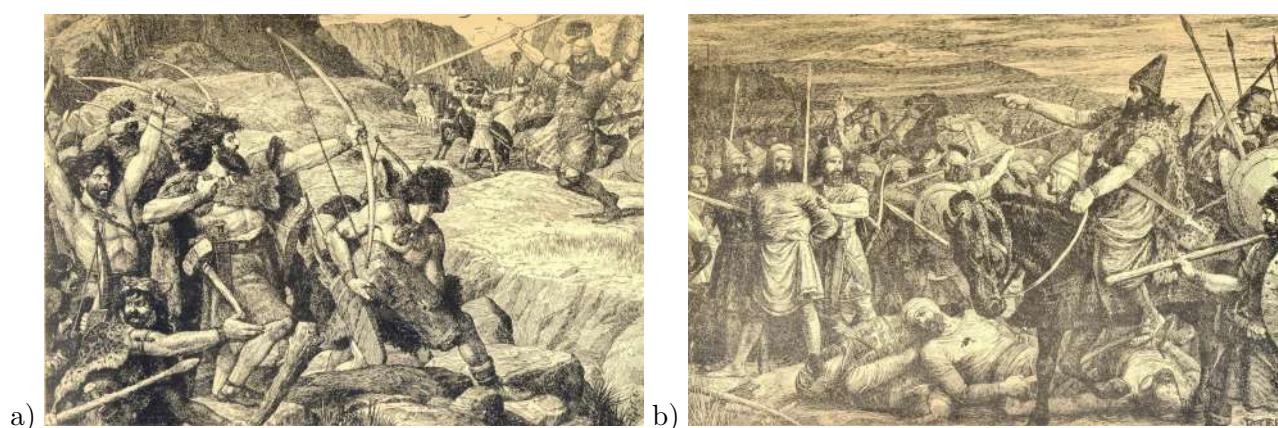


Figure 1. a) Hayk’s victory, 2492 BC; b) Aram’s victory against Nyuqar Mades, king of Medes. (by Josef Rotter, ~ 1910)

<sup>1</sup>In Armenian historical tradition, ‘the House of T’orgom’ is considered synonymous with Armenia, and the people are sometimes called ‘T’orgomian, T’orgomatsin’ – meaning ‘born from Torgom’ (HAP (1971), 195-196; (Kossian, 1998).

<sup>2</sup>Bel is associated with Nimrod, who is mentioned in the Bible as the king of Babylon. The legend about him, linked with the construction of the Tower of Babel, is recorded in Josephus Flavius’ “Antiquities” (Flavius, Book I.4).

<sup>3</sup>According to folk legend, Bel’s body was burned, and his ashes turned into water. His warriors and camel caravans turned to stone from fear.



Figure 2. a) Statue of Hayk Nahapet in Yerevan (1970, author Karlen Nuriyanyan); b) “The Progenitor of the Armenians”, postage stamp (1997).

Movses Khorenatsi continues to describe the further deeds of Hayk and his descendants, who, following the instructions of the patriarch, populated more and more new territories, building their houses and dastakerts<sup>4</sup> on new lands. Soon, the Haykids’ possessions extended from the central regions of the Armenian Highland in various directions, covering vast territories with mountains, valleys, lakes, and rivers. The Haykids — Aramaneak, Aramayis, Kadmos, Amasya, Gegham, Shara, Harmay, Aram, and many others, continued the patriarch’s mission and maintained balance in their land. At the end of the stories about Hayk’s direct descendants, Movses Khorenatsi once again affirms that the great patriarch “was the ancestor of the Armenians, and these were his families and offsprings and their land of habitation. And afterward, they began... to multiply and fill the land” (Khorenatsi (1978), I. 12). In this context a second famous Haykid ancestor appears – Aram, from the sixth generation of the patriarch, whose exploits are no less significant in the early history of Armenia, and he is the second eponym of the Armenians. Movses Khorenatsi tells of Aram’s wars: in the east with the Medes, in the south with the Assyrians, and in the west with the Cappadocians, all three of which are crowned with the victory of Aram over the invaders (Figure 1b). He performs many heroic deeds in battles and extends the borders of Armenia on every side, after which **“by his name all races call our land: like the Greeks, Armenia, and the Persians and Syrians, Armenik”** (Khorenatsi (1978), I, 12).

In the legends about Hayk, Aram and their descendants, researchers see an interweaving of historical realities with ancient myths, believing that Movses Khorenatsi presents a picture of the genealogy of the Armenians’ ancestors, based on the narratives preserved in oral tradition, passed down through the storytellers (Armenian: *vipasan*). In Movses Khorenatsi’s “History of the Armenians”, there are many references not only to the name of Hayk, but also to the names of the Haykids and place-names derived of them. These references demonstrate the connection of Hayk and Aram with the name of the Armenian nation and its ethnogenesis.

<sup>4</sup>The Armenian word ‘dastakert’ corresponds to English word ‘estate’.



Historians of the V-IX Ce., such as Agathangelos, Sebeos, Tovma Artsruni, Hovhannes Sarkavag, Stepanos Lehatsi, and others, relying primarily on evidence from Movses Khorenatsi, also write about Hayk Nahapet as the greatest epic figure in the ancient history of Armenia.

### 3. Georgian historical tradition about Hayk-Hayos

Hayk, as the glorious patriarch and eponymous ancestor of the Armenians, is also mentioned in Georgian historical tradition. The XI Ce. author, Leonti Mroveli, in his “Kartlis Tskhovreba” or “Life of Kartli” (known as “The Georgian Chronicles” or “The Georgian Royal Annals”), tells about the Yabet’ branch of Noah’s sons, including T’orgom (Targamos). The historian begins the narrative with the words “Let us recall the fact that the Armenians, Georgians, Aghuans, Movkans, Herans, Leks, Kovkases and Egers had one father named T’orgom, son of T’iras, son of Gamer, son of Japheth (Yabet’), son of Noah” (Mroveli (XI Ce.), 1. 1).

Then the legend continues as follows: T’orgom “was a brave, gigantic man. At the time of the destruction of the Tower [of Babel] and the division of tongues and the dispersion of mankind throughout the world, came and settled between the Masis and Aragats<sup>5</sup> mountains”. As T’orgom “had many women; sons and daughters of his sons and daughters were born, . . . they spread out and enlarged their boundaries: from the Pontic sea to the sea of Heret’ and Kasp and by the mountains of the Caucasus” (Mroveli (XI Ce.), 1. 1-2). According to the genealogical scheme of T’orgom’s sons, Hayk (Hayos) was the first, the second was Kartlos, the ancestor of the Georgians, and then followed the rest six brothers, ancestors of other Caucasian peoples. Among them all, “Hayk was the strongest and bravest, there was no one like him on earth, not before the deluge nor after it, to the present. T’orgom divided his land among the brothers, half he gave to Hayk and half to the seven sons, according to their merit” (Mroveli (XI Ce.), 1. 1-2).



Figure 3. Patriarchs Hayos and Kartlos sculpture in Javakhq (2012).

As Hayk was the prince of the seven brothers, he rebelled against the giant tyrant Nimrod (Bel) who ruled the entire world as king at the time. But “when Nimrod heard about this he was angered, assembled a multitude of many giants and rabble, set out against them and came to the Atrpatakan land. Hayk was with his people by the foot of [Mount] Masis. Nimrod dispatched sixty giants with a great multitude. [The two sides] clashed with each other with a fearsome intense crash like the sound of thunder clouds. There were countless, incalculable numbers slain on both sides. Hayk stood at the rear of his people encouraging steadfastness. Like lightning, he himself raided around and felled the

<sup>5</sup>Masis is Ararat, the highest peak of the Armenian Highland, and Aragats is the second highest peak of the Highland.

last of those sixty giants and their troops. He and the seven brothers remained safe... When Nimrod learned about what had happened, he became extremely agitated and he himself went against Hayk. But Hayk, not having as many soldiers as [Nimrod], fortified himself into the rough places of the Masis valleys. Nimrod was heavily armored with iron, from head to foot. He ascended the crest of a hill and summoned Hayk to [return to] his former obedience. But Hayk did not respond to him; rather, he said to his brothers: “Cover me from the rear and I shall descend to Nimrod”. He approached him and shot an arrow at [Nimrod’s] breast-plates, which went straight through to the other side. Turning about he expired forthwith and his entire army fell; and the House of T’orgom reposed without a care. Then Hayk ruled his brothers and all the neighboring peoples as king” (Mroveli (XI Ce.), 1. 2-4).

From this story about Hayk, it is evident that Armenian and Georgian historical traditions are very similar in their core narrative. In both traditions, Hayk-Hayos is a brave leader and a skilled warrior who rebels against the tyrant Bel-Nimrod, and wins. The details of the battle between Hayk and Bel-Nimrod are almost identical in both written sources. However, there is a significant difference: in Armenian narrative, Hayk is presented as the leader of the Armenian people, with his image formed and developed within the Armenian context. This is complemented by Georgian narrative, where Hayk’s image transcends the borders of the Armenian Highland, and he becomes a pan-Caucasian hero – a powerful leader of the eight brothers. Though the other seven are also brave rulers governing different parts of the Caucasian region, Hayk is their mighty king, and they obey his command.

According to Leonti Mroveli, Hayk’s domain of residence was primarily the Armenian Highland, the ancient habitat of Indo-European peoples, and even beyond. However, the sphere of influence of Hayk’s rule extended across the entire Caucasus, an area also inhabited by Kartvelian peoples. The leader of all these Indo-European and Caucasian peoples was Hayk, the most powerful son of brave T’orgom-Targamos, from the lineage of Yabet’, the son of Noah. The seven brothers were also brave giants and acted under the command of Hayk, after whose victory they ruled their territories under his dominance (Figure 3).

## 4. Hayk as a cosmic god, and the Haykid Calendar

Hayk’s victory gave birth to the symbolic chronology of Armenian history embodied in the Haykid Calendar, which begins from Navasard 1 (August 11), 2492 BC.<sup>6</sup> This dating, calculated by Ghevond Alishan,<sup>7</sup> localizes Hayk’s country not only in space – on the Armenian Highland, but also in time, placing it in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. The national Haykid Calendar marks the traditional beginning of Armenian history.<sup>8</sup> The founder of this calendar, Hayk, was deified as a time-god, similar to Cronos in ancient Greek mythology and Zrvan in Iranian tradition (Vardumyan (1991), 88-91). Historical evidence linking the calendar to Hayk Nahapet has been preserved by Anania Shirakatsi (VII Ce.), the founder of Armenian natural sciences. He notes that the Armenian months, named after Hayk’s sons and daughters, have existed since ancient times, long before the birth of Christ (Shirakatsi (1940), 76-77).

Medieval authors Mkhitar Gosh and Mkhitar Anetsi (XII-XIII Ce.) connected Hayk with the planet Mars. As a skilled archer, Hayk is also associated with the sign of Sagittarius, which corresponds to the month of December and is described by Hakob Ghrimetsi (XIV Ce.) as severe and deadly dangerous (Ghrimetsi (1987), 260). Thus, we can allegorically assume that the victory of the brave archer Hayk in his battle against the tyrant Bel was inevitable, as Sagittarius-December is fierce and terrible.

<sup>6</sup>In ancient Armenia, the Navasard festivities, which lasted about two weeks (August 11-23 in the current calendar), heralded the beginning of the New Year. The feast was known by solemn ceremonies in temples, accompanied by plant and animal sacrifices to the gods, under the auspices of the priestly class. These were followed by the beating of drums and blowing of trumpets, Navasardian games, royal horse and hunting races, as well as various folk competitions, displays of harvest, entertainment, and other festive events (see Alishan (1869), 84-97; Vardumyan (2013), 216-220).

<sup>7</sup>An Armenian historian and priest of the Mekhitarist Catholic Congregation on St. Lazarus Island in Venice.

<sup>8</sup>To this day, the Holy Mother See of St. Ejmiatsin publishes an annual calendar, which, in addition to the year of the Lord, marks the months and days according to the Haykid Armenian calendar. According to Grigor Broutian, the Haykian (Haykid) Calendar began in 2341 BC and the Fest of Navasard was celebrated right before the summer solstice (Broutian, 2016).

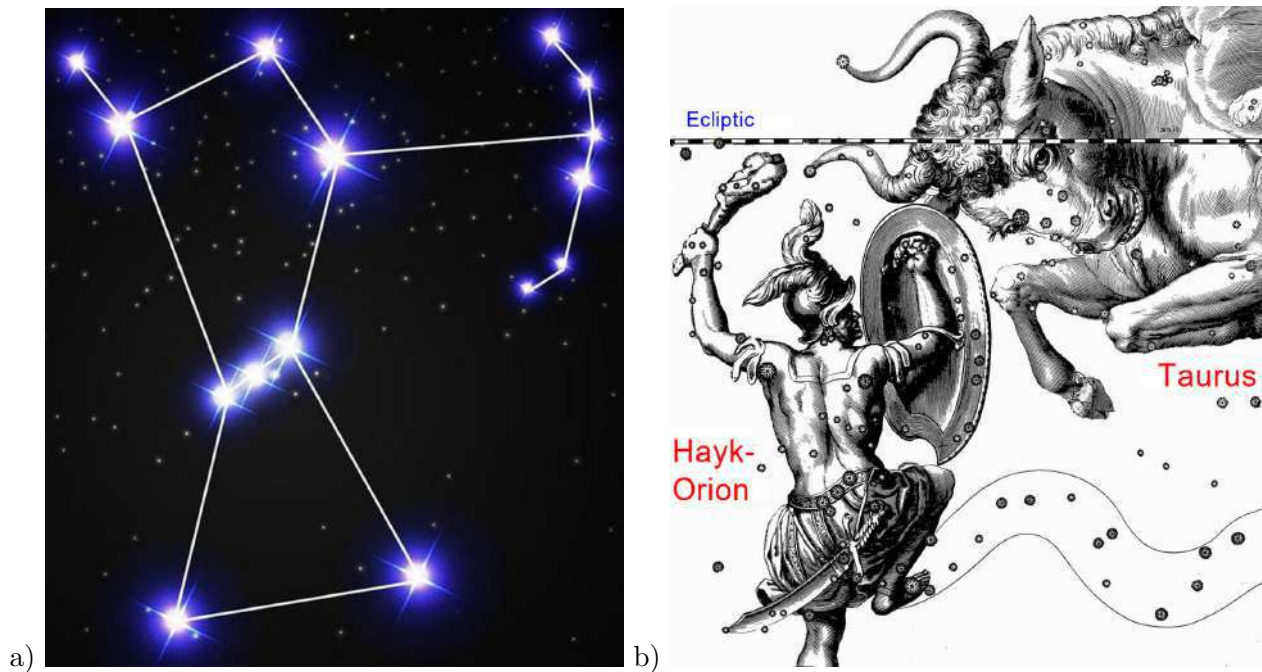


Figure 4. a) Orion constellation b) Orion and Taurus constellations (by Johannes Hevelius, 1690).

Hayk is a cosmic figure who symbolizes both earthly and heavenly time, as well as eternity. As the supreme god of ancient Armenian mythology, the embodiment of light, goodness, and wisdom, his image emerged from the fusion of the cosmic creator and the Armenian ancestor-forefather (Vardumyan, 2020). The worship of Hayk was universal among the people of Hayk', who, in their mythological beliefs, elevated him to the heavens, naming one of the brightest constellations after the epic archer. This constellation corresponds to the Greek Orion ( $\text{'}\Omega\rho\acute{\iota}\omega\nu$ ), also a bow hunter (Abeghyan, 1966, 1968, Tokhatyan, 2013, 2014) (Figure 4 a, b).

Ghevond Alishan connects Ayk with the Pleiades and the constellation Libra. He also associates the Haykid Circle (Sothis Cycle) with the appearance of the brightest star, Sirius, in the sky. In Armenian medieval astronomy, this star is called Shnkan - Canis (dog), which is comparable to the brave hunter Orion in Greek mythology who had two dogs, after which the constellations Canis Major and Canis Minor were named (Alishan (1895), 238-239; (Eynatyan, 1986)). As a cosmic figure, Hayk was also linked with the Sun, stars, and constellations, which formed the signs of the Zodiac according to the Sun's movement. Many images of creatures and animals represented in the Zodiac are reflected in petroglyphs of Armenia (Tokhatyan, 2013, 2014) (Figure 5 a, b, c).

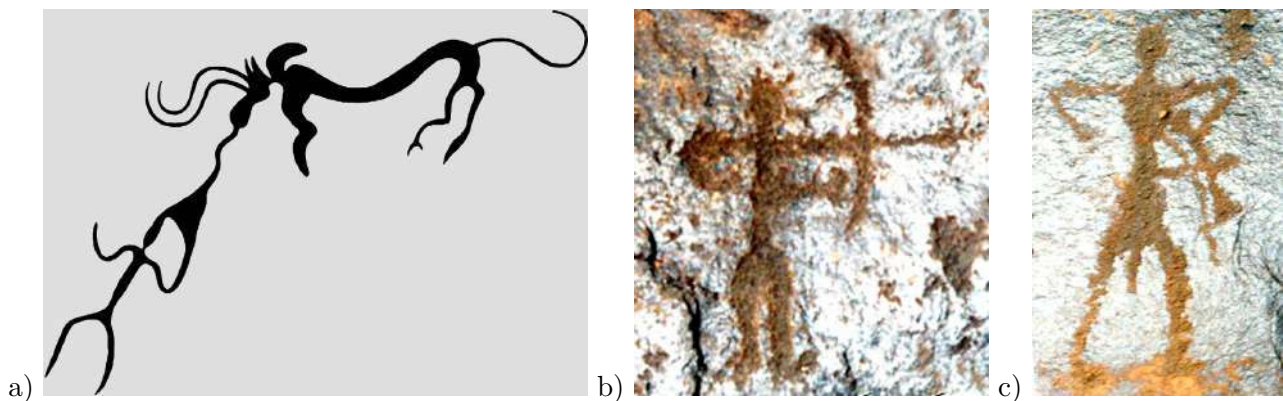


Figure 5. a) The archer (Hayk - Orion) is shooting the bull (Taurus), petroglyph (Geghama Mountains, by S. Petrosyan, 2005); b) and c) Archers, petroglyphs (Geghama Mountains, by K. Tokhatyan, 1998).

The image of Hayk in fairy tales has transformed into Zhuk-Zhamanak (Time), a gray-haired old man sitting on a high mountain, symbolizing the Sky. When he rolls down the white coil and pinches

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the black one, the Sun rises and shines on the Earth, bringing day. Then, when he rolls down the black coil and pinches the white one, the Sun sets, bringing darkness and night (Srvandztyants (1978), 437; Abeghyan (1975), 48-49; Vardumyan (1991); 90; Harutyunyan (2000), 443). This imagery enriches the diverse portrayal of Hayk as a cosmic figure and reveals the richness of the mythological ideas associated with him.

## 5. Conclusion

Hayk is presented as the most ancient hero in Armenian historical tradition, where he is portrayed as a legendary patriarch, the founder and forefather god of the Armenian nation, who gave his name to the country Hayk'-Armenia. The narratives about him existed for thousands of years in historical tradition and in the ethnogenic myths of the Armenian nation.

Hayk was the glorious patriarch of the Armenian nation and the cosmic creator of the Armenian World, under whose leadership the Indo-European and Caucasian peoples together defeated the enemies. After the great victory, each of these peoples established their own countries, as evidenced by Movses Khorenatsi and Leonti Mroveli. Hayk's multi-layered figure, rooted in Armenian tradition and mentioned in Georgian historical sources, as well as in mythology, has shaped the national identity and mentality of the Armenian people. Hayk's image and role have played an epoch-making part not only in ancient times but throughout the entire subsequent process of the formation and development of Hayk'-Armenia, ensuring the country's continuity from the depths of millennia to the present day.

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