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## **THE IMAGE OF THE COSMOGONIC SACRIFICE IN THE ARMENIAN HEROIC EPIC ‘SASNA TSRER’(‘THE DARE DEVILS OF SASUN’)**

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The Armenian heroic epic was created in the tenth century under the influence of the struggle of Armenian people against Baghdadian caliphate. It was created in one of the south-western regions of the Historical Western Armenia - in Sasun. The first writing about the epic was published more than a hundred years ago, in 1874. As a true popular work created during the stress situation for the national fortune, the text of the epic absorbed the innermost and sacred traditions of the Armenian people, which stretched the sources of world outlook and world perception of our distant ancestors. In connection with the conversion from heathenism to Christianity on account of the state religious reform in 301 AD, many of the heathen traditions were exterminated, but a part of them nevertheless survived, re-formed outwardly in a Christian way.

Both in best patterns of the folklore texts and in the text of our medieval, unreservedly Christian epic one can find some perfectly idiomatic fragments. The versatile (onomastic, semiotic, ethnographic, etymological, archaeological) analysis of these fragments enables us to decipher the relics of the ancient mythology and cult of the definite cultural region, including the fore-motherlands of the Indo-European, Semitic and other peoples. The main task of our research is the detailed comparative analysis of all textual displays of the epic. The first step of the analysis is the exposure of the contextually survived motives about the creation of the world by means of the dismemberment of the primordial virgin-chaos sacrifice and about the cyclic recurrence of the renewal of the cosmocreative process.

So, the text of our epic is the folklore-poetical narration with a definite structure. The epic consists of four large divisions; each division delineates the biography of a representative of the mythological dynasty beginning from the fore-mother Tsovinar up to the last representative Mher the Younger. The first,

Tsovinar, manifests the originative (productive) beginning. Mher the Younger is the last representative of the dynasty. He by himself locks the life of the dynasty being childless. But he is at the same time immortal and riding on his horse to the cave he reserved the hope and right to return to the renewed world, i.e. the right on revival self-birth. So the end of the plot is laid, but being not closed with it the end contains in itself the ability to create a new, principally similar cycle.

The ability of the spiral continuation of the plot allows to see here the consonance with the spiral-cyclic structure of the text. The initial point symbolizing the birth and the beginning, before returning to itself, serves as the precondition for the transition to the next stage, the epoch of the life-creating circle. The whole plot with the circular motion is divided into four parts (segments), which in Armenian tradition are called 'the branches'. The first branch contains the story about the sources and origin of Sasna Tsrer mythological dynasty, which also has other names: *Jojants Tun* ('The House of the Great Ones', 'The House of the Giants'), *Khajants Tun* ('The House of the Brave Ones'). The branch has the name, which corresponds to the names of the twin brothers, the patriarchs of the dynasty. Non-Christian, patriarchal heathen tradition did not singled out the veritable source (cf. Latin *nomen auctoris stirpis*) for the title of this branch, but presents the name of the virgin mother of the twins and the fore-mother (cf. Latin *auctor stirpis, proavia* etc.) of all the heroes of the kin.

The second branch is the biography of Mher the Great, and the third branch is devoted to David of Sasun, to the son of Mher the Great. The desire for liberty of Armenian people has been described extremely vividly in this part of the epic. The name of David of Sasun is attached not only to the third branch but often also to the whole epic.

The fourth branch is the branch of Mher the Younger who is the son of David of Sasun. In consequence of the malediction of his father, Mher the Younger is childless and immortal. When the feeble Earth refuses to carry him, he goes to the cave on his famous horse, Khurkik Jalali by name, following the advice of his dead parents. It must be remembered that the horse, as well as the lightning-like sword and the royal regalia, had been received as a gift by the patriarchs of the family. The text itself rather obscurely, but the context and the interpretations of the name Tsovinar ('the sea', 'the spirit of the sea', 'the light of the sea') allow us to perceive that both the horse and the other gifts are of her outcome. She is not only an ancestor-proavia of a simple family or house; she is also the Proavia of the royal family, which in the social context has a decisive role for the definite social continuum and in the mythological context she personifies cosmogonic activity.

It is important to note that the miraculous conception of the fore-mother Tsovinar takes place on a certain day in the year-cycle, just in the night before Ascension Day, and every year in this night the entrance to the cave of Mher the Younger opens. It must be mentioned also that this day is marked in Armenian pre-Christian tradition as the day of the sacred wedding of the Earth and the Sky. Probably, this day has a critical sacred meaning of the transition from one cycle to another.

The cyclic character of the inner composition of the epic can be recognized even by getting acquainted with the separate fragments. As a matter of fact in some regions, due to the different motives, the narrators did not reproduce the whole text, but only some parts of the epic. But even in this condition the indissoluble connection with the annual agricultural cycle can be seen. By means of studying all the idiomatic fragments of the epic we may more or less imagine the whole cycle of the ancient festivities, during which ancient Armenians established the communication with the inspired nature. The souls of the ancestors formed apparently the connective link in this contact. Before every festive occasion, before solemnities, it was necessary to propitiate the souls of the ancestors by sacrifice and special prayers in the form of invocational formulas-refrains. These cleaning-propitiating prayers entered the epic in a very archaic natural form and so they have a rather important role in the structural organization of the text. They anticipate both the epic on the whole and each of its branches. These prayers represent in each case the list of persons-heroes whose life and activity are going to be told. The presence of the praying refrains in such order gives the text of the epic the definite rhythm and form of dramatization (air of spectacle). One can get an impression that in the ancient times everything that came to us in the form of the verbal text had been performed in the ritual order, imitating the sacred antiquity. Probably during the ancient ritual times of the epic, the linguistic realities in it were these praying-invocational refrains, anticipating the parade of the sacred actions.

The epic begins with the praying refrain to the first hero-ancestor or rather the heroine-ancestor Tsovinar. The passage in which she is the protagonist is typical: the heterodox despot (usually, the Baghdadian caliph, but occasionally in some regional or narrative variants of the same epic in this role we see a certain shah, Msra-Melik by himself, the western king-idolater, the Persian shah etc.) blockades Armenia with his troops and threatens to destroy the country, to crush the faith. In order to prevent this misfortune, beautiful princess Tsovinar must be given to the despot. But neither her father, nor the people can agree with her loss. The situation is absolutely trivial both in the social and the mythological perspective. In the moral and psychological perspective it may be valued as endless and chaotic. So, Tsovinar unintentionally is turned out to

be the cause of the Chaos.

In various mythological traditions such endless chaotic situations are overcome by a forcible act, by sacrifice. In the cases of Greek Iphigenia and Andromeda, the father sacrifices his daughter to escape a natural disaster and in the case of Accadian Thiamath, the demiurg destroys his ancestor to create the world. All these women are somehow connected with the sea element. While the forcible sacrifice of the Greek virgins had the aim to calm down the sea, Accadian Thiamath is the initial sea-chaos and her intersection is equivalent to the establishing order of the world since the two parts of her body became respectively the sky and the earth.

In the case of Tsovinar, there is no forcible action. She herself makes her choice to commit the self-sacrifice. It is important to emphasize the combination of three synchronous hypostases in one person. She presents the original virgin chaotic sea (which is already codified in her name), the donor and the sacrifice. Compared with Greek Iphigenia and Andromeda and Accadic Thiamath, the combination of three hypostases of Tsovinar looks redundant (Iphigenia was only the sacrifice and then the priestess, Thiamath was the untamed chaos and then the sacrifice), but it reveals her peculiar sacred nature. But where is the sacrifice, if there is no forcible act and Tsovinar does not become the wife of the despot either? If we leave aside the narrative background of the epic, the image of Tsovinar remains as a virgin, uncontrollable, primitive nature left all alone by herself. The existence of these three functions, presented by Tsovinar's three hypostases, is quite sufficient for a such sacred act as sacrifice.

The primary solitude of Tsovinar is delicately described in the epic: Tsovinar goes to the sea with her girl-friends for a walk before her marriage. Due to her prayers, a white fresh-water spring appears in the gulf of the sea (variant: white rock, from which fresh-water springs). Tsovinar alone reaches the spring and quenches her thirst with two handfuls of water. This passage precisely gives the mythological primary solitude of Tsovinar, who while going into the sea, meets herself. And she did it on the day of the sacred marriage of Heaven and Earth (so called Hierogamia), represented in the christianized code of our epic as the Ascension Day. So the impregnation of virgin Tsovinar takes place in sacrally marked spatio-temporal parameters: in the center of Universe represented as the center of the primitive sea and on the sacred day. After the birth of her twins Tsovinar obtains the single hypostasis - maternity. All her attributes are passed by to her sons and are incarnated in them: her sons are as beautiful and excellent as they are strong in struggle. They always face the danger of being sacrificed to their stepfather's god, in the same way their mother was sacrificed.

The topic of forced impregnation by sea divinity and birth of twins can be

observed in the relics of ancient Minor-Asian and Mediterranean myths. In Greek mythology, which is overflowed by Minor-Asian and Mediterranean mythological and cult motives, one can find several sons of Poseidon, the lord of seas. They all are divinities, but from the point of view of the Supreme divinity they are either evil or disobedient creatures. It is noteworthy that the marriage of Poseidon is either occasional, or forced, or marked by another illegality - by incest.

In Roman mythology the birth of Remus and Romulus by the impregnation of virgin vestal Rhea, is also connected with the water element. In Old Indian mythology the topic of the birth of Asvins resembles to the topic under study. The name of their mother Saranyu ('quick', 'prompt', 'swift') is connected with the Roman Rhea, the name of the mother of Remus and Romulus, through Greek *tó rhéos* ('a stream'), *rhe* ('to flow', 'run', 'stream', 'gust'). Different so-called 'water designations' are often represented as names or epithets of the female divinity of maternity and fertility (cf. also Iranian Anahita).

In all the cases mentioned above, the supernatural nature of fecundation and virginity or sexual indifference of the heroine to the impregnation is emphasized in the text. The exception here is only the myth of Greek heroine Iphimedeia. The incest in this fecundation is perhaps the reflection of the cosmogonic incest of the primary twins. But in the given situation the incest may be treated also as a symbolization of the self sacrifice of the very first lonely creature. And this first sacrifice is considered to be the source of the general cosmogony (cf. Purusha, Ymir, Thiamath etc.).

Thus, as to the topic of Tsovinar's impregnation by the two handfuls of water drunk from the spring and the birth of her twins, it should be mentioned that both in details and in the whole the story coincides most of all with the Greek myth about Aloadai and their mother Iphimedeia. In both cases the story is the same: a young woman goes to the sea, drinks water (or pours it on her breast) to quench her thirst (or her thirst of love) and from that water she gets pregnant. There are many similarities between the Armenian and the Greek twins: both Aloadai and Tsovinar's children are hunters, skillful constructors and theomachists. The Armenian brothers built Sasun using huge rockstones and also Aloadai were the founders of several towns in Boeotia. Moreover, they threatened gods to put the mountains on one another and reach the sky. Both twins are antipodes in the pair. In the Armenian pair, one of the twins is complete in his body, whereas the other one is incomplete. In the Greek pair the twins, being deceived by the gods, shoot a doe running between them and in fact kill each other.

In 1956 on Linear B tables from Pylos was deciphered a name of a previously unknown Mycenaean goddess I-PE-ME-DE-JA, which immediately was

identified with the Greek heroine Iphimedeia. A great number of interesting papers (e.g. by G. Neumann) are devoted to the etymology of this Mycenaean goddess. The name of the goddess is accepted as a compound noun, consisting of two components: *ipe* and *medeja*. The second part of the name is identified with the name of Medea (the daughter of Aeetes, the king of Colchis, and wife of Jason, famous for her magic), also with the name of Medusa (one of the three sister Gorgons, beheaded by Perseus), whereas sometimes it is compared with the second component in such proper names as Alkimeda, Andromeda etc.

The etymology of the first component has remained mysterious up to today, in spite of great efforts of scientists. In one of his articles J. Puhvel presents an interesting comparison of two Indo-European ritual terms: Vedic *aśvamedha* (horse sacrifice) and Gaulish IIPOMIIDVOS, a proper name, attested on silver coins of the Gaulish Aruerni (interpreted formerly as ‘mad for horses’).<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that in Rig-Veda *aśvamedha* is attested only as the exocentric name of a prince, which also motivates a comparison with the Gaulish proper name on silver coins. According to Puhvel the second components of these compound names are connected with their origin, with the old Indo-European term for the sacrifice ritual. In Sanskrit *aśvamedha* means the process of sacrifice, whereas in Gaulish *epomeduos* means the ‘owner’ or performer of the sacrifice. In both cases the etymology of the second stem-component and its functional connection with the sacrifice ritual is evident. The origin of Gaulish word goes back to the Indoeuropean *\*medhu* (‘honey’, ‘wine’ or another sweet, intoxicating liquid substance), which was an integral requisite of ritual. And the first component of the *aśvamedha* and *epomeduos* goes back obviously to the Indoeuropean *\*ek/h/uo* (‘horse’).

It is possible to compare these Rig-Vedic and Gaulish proper names with the name of the Mycenaean goddess and the name of Greek heroine. As a result of the comparison one can find interesting series of names: Rig-Vedic *Aśvamedha*, Gaulish *Epomeduos*, Mycenaean *Ipemedeja*, Greek *Iphimedeia*. In all these words the origin of the second component and its connection with the sacrifice ritual is evident. The first component of Greek *Iphimedeia* arouses some phonetic-etymological difficulties, but probably it is the distorted reflection of the Indoeuropean *\*ek/h/uo*. Thus, referring to the heroes of the Armenian epic, let us remember Khurkik Jalali, the inseparable companion of Tsovinar’s generation, which in fact also originates from her.

The name Tsovinar (cf. Armenian *Covinar*) has no etymological link with this isogloss series. On the other hand the second component of this compound name is connected with Pehleve *-nvar* (cf. Zoroastrian ritual term *aspanvar* ‘horse sacrifice’), which is the reflection of the same Indo-European origin or

the word is ritual loan term from Iranian source (cf. Armenian *nver* ‘donation’, ‘sacrifice?’).

Our comparison allows us to conclude that here we have the cult of the zoomorphic sea divinity or divinity of uncontrollable primitive nature and its relics in different Indo-European traditions, which reserves several topics common to the inhabitants of the Indo-European fore-motherland. The mortal heroine of the Armenian mediaeval heroic epic ‘Sasna Tsrer’ goes back to the original image of this hippomorphical divinity.

### Literature

<sup>1</sup>Puhvel, J. Vedic *Aśvamedha* and Gaulish *IIPOMIIDVOS*. In: *Language*, V. 31, No. 3, 1955, pp. 353-354.

## SOULS’ VISITING TIME IN THE ESTONIAN FOLK CALENDAR

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The concept of the souls’ visiting time in the Estonian folk calendar is known throughout the country. It signifies the perception by the Estonians that there is a period when the souls of the dead are moving around and visiting their former homes. Specific definitions of this time differ. Judging by different archives, the measure can be a certain day in a certain week, or in several successive weeks, a certain number of weeks or days. The most important feast days of autumn are used to define the beginning and end of the souls’ visiting time: September 29 – Michaelmas (*mihkkipäev*), November 10 – Martinmas (*mardipäev*), November 25 – St. Catherine’s Day (*kadripäev*), Christmas. And besides, the frequent use of such adverbs as ‘before’, ‘after’, ‘around’, ‘towards’, etc., seems to arise not from forgetting but from the fact that the idea of the actual duration of this period was vague.

In the course of time, the idea of the souls’ visiting time as a longer period seems to have acquired the meaning that it was necessary to do something special – to arrange a worthy reception for the souls. Food could be left on the