

2.2. The Sacred Mountain

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Among the many peaks and mountain ranges in the Highland, a single massive mountain rises up from the Ararat plain, visible from many sites in today's Armenia and appearing especially close to the capital city of Yerevan (see Plate 2.2.1). This mountain is known to the world as Ararat, but its twin peaks have long been sacred to Armenians as Greater and Lesser Masis. For Armenians down through the ages, the mountain's presence has inspired their awe, influenced their thought, and been a source of their mythology.

The early Mesopotamian civilizations lying in the valley below regarded the mountains to their northwest with reverence and awe since their very existence depended on the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers—considered divine—that flowed down from the mountains to fertilize and water their dry deltas. The early Sumerians, Akkadians, and Assyrians believed the frigid snow-clad mountains of the Highland to be the home of their gods, who sent down blessings from on high. In order to communicate with them more directly, they built tall ziggurats in a stepped pyramid shape with a temple at the top.¹ Assyrian writings described the landscape of an upland with mountains as high as “clouds hanging in the sky” that had “the sharpened edge of an iron dagger,” which even “heavenly birds cannot reach” (Diakonov 1951: 272, 273, 282, 285).

As well as providing water and divine blessings, the snow-covered mountains of the Highland could also be a source of misfortune for the lowland civilizations. Among other things, tribes living on the upland slopes surrounding the valleys periodically attacked them (see Figure 1.7 of “In the Beginning” for a map). Azhdahak, the god-king of ancient Medea (present-day Iran), a mountain man himself, spoke about the threat of the Highlanders to his nation in the form of a prophetic dream:

I was in an unknown country near a mountain, which rose above the land, the peak of which was covered with bitter frost, and it was as if I were being told that this was the land of the Armenians. And after I had looked at this mountain for a long time, a woman in a purple dress and blue veil appeared sitting on the peak. Suddenly, the woman gave birth to three sons who were perfect deities. The first, riding a lion, sped to the west; the second, riding a tiger, sped to the north; the third, riding a dragon, was invading our land. (Khorenatsi 1913: 75–76)

Others also perceived danger to come from the mountains of the north, as when the god-giant Bel of Babylon addressed the god-giant Hayk, the progenitor of the Armenians, saying: “You settled in hard frost, but make warmer and moderate the cold freeze of your proud temper” (Khorenatsi 1913: 84). Even the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, when threatening faithless Babylon, suggests the might of the peoples to its north: “Set ye up a standard in the land, blow the trumpet among the nations, prepare the nations against her [Babylon], call together against her the kingdoms of Ararat, Minni, and Ashchenaz” (Jeremiah 51:27).

While the Mesopotamian civilizations worried, with good reason, about the invasions of mountain tribes from the north, the even more formidable threat from that direction was the possibility of catastrophic flooding, and no ancient tale brought more fame and distinction to the mountains on the northern rim of the Fertile Crescent than the Mesopotamian flood legend. The earliest surviving flood account was the Akkadian tale, written on clay tablets in the 3rd millennium BC, in which a man named Utnapishti gained immortality when he survived a



PLATE 2.2.1 Mt. Ararat seen over the apartment buildings of Yerevan. Photo by Sam Sweezy.

terrible flood—with southern winds blowing for six days and seven nights (*Ia otkroiu tebe* . . . 1981: 184–190)—and later landed his ark on a mountain located to the north of his country. Subsequent versions of the flood story came from the Sumerians and Babylonians, followed by the Judaic version related in the Bible, in which Noah escaped the flood in an ark that eventually landed on a mountain: “And the ark rested in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, upon the mountains of Ararat” (Genesis 8.4).

The central province of the Highland, as well as the plain in that province, where Armenian kings lived and ruled from the 4th century BC to the 5th century AD—a span of nearly eight centuries—was called Ayrarat, and the big double-peaked mountain rising in the south of the plain was known as Masis.² The same, or a similar name, was used for other mountains of the Highland: the second highest peak north of Lake Van—now called Mt. Sipan—was also called Masis. According to the Greek geographer Strabo, who lived at the time of Christ, the two peaks in the eastern Taurus mountain range dividing Mesopotamia and Armenia were called Masios (Strabo 11.12.4, 14.2, and 16.1.22). The Sumerian hero Gilgamesh, on his search for Utnapishti to learn the secret of immortality, also reached a mountain called Mashu in the northern end of the world, through which the

climbing the peak, and according to legend, it was climbed only once in the early days of Christianity, when King Trdat scaled it in seven days and brought down eight rocks to put in the foundations of new churches and chapels (Agatangeghos 1914: 390). So strong was the taboo against climbing Masis that even as late as 1829, when a German professor, Friedrich Parrot, climbed the mountain with the Armenian author Khachatur Abovian and reported details of their ascent, Church officials refused to believe that this had actually happened (Alishan 1890: 456).

While the high peak of Masis was held to be sacred, the base of the mountain was identified with the kingdom of snakes and dragons and was considered to be the home of Azhdahak's dragon-like offspring. (*Azhi dahaka* means a dragon named *dahaka* in Persian, and this Azhdahak was the same god-king of Medea who had dreamt of the mother of Armenians giving birth on the mountain's peak.) This association with dragons was amplified by the spewing forth of gases and smoke from the crater when the mountain's volcano erupted or an earthquake shook the region, as well as by the stream of “black water” that issued from the crater and ran down the mountain. (The name of the river, *Sev Jur*, means “black water” in Armenian.) The crater's unusual location just below the mountain's peak gave the appearance of being an entrance into the mountain, which undoubtedly added to the

idea that dragons lived there.

From ancient times, the Masis mountain on the Ayrarat plain was significant to the people who lived in its presence. It was called “Azatn Masis,” meaning “holy,” “high-born,” and “free” in Old Armenian, and its taller peak was considered particularly sacred. It was believed to be the place where the sun lay down to rest every night, where Armenian heroes were born, and where the *kajs*, the mythical protectors of kings, made their home. A taboo existed against anyone

And so the legends grew. One tale told of Queen Satenik, who plotted with the dragons living in the mountain against her husband, King Artashes, but was foiled by their son, Prince Artavazd, who fought the creatures until they retreated into their lair.³ Along with his heroic characteristics, however, Prince Artavazd apparently had some dragon-like ones of his own (an ambiguity explained in one epic song that tells that the real prince had been kid-

napped from his cradle by dragons and replaced
with one of their cubs). The legend says that

local spring was named for this St. Hakob, and a

church was built nearby dedicated to him. The

three parts: a heavenly peak, a dragon-filled base, and a middle section whose inhabitants could enjoy an idyllic life. This symbolic tripartite construct is replicated in many areas of Armenian life: for example, in myth, the hierarchy ranges from god to king-hero to dragon, and in the social structure, it ranges from father to son to wife-mother.⁷ The three parts can also be seen as representing three worlds—separate but symbiotically connected, from which life obtains its meaning and history its dynamic force. For example, in the story of Prince Artavazd, his movement back and forth between the heavens, the underworld, and the human world provides a dynamic element that links the three spheres. He is both hero and dragon; he fights against both upper and lower worlds; he was present at the beginning of time and will be present at the end of time.

Armenian folklore viewed Masis-Ararat as a creative force, and—in the case of King Azhdahak's dream of the mother of Armenians giving birth to heroic sons on its peak—as a child-bearing mother. In this context, the taboo against climbing the sacred peak can be seen as an ancient warning against incest that later legends attempted to explain. One such legend tells that when the sister mountains, Masis and Aragatz, argued about who was the tallest and most beautiful, they cursed each other, with Aragatz saying, "Let nobody in this world climb your crest" (Ghanalanian 1969: 10–11).

In 1255, a French monk, William Rubruk, who stayed some days at the foot of Masis-Ararat, reported:

Many people attempted to climb this mountain, but nobody succeeded. . . . This mountain seems to me not so high that people are unable to climb it. An aged man gave me a very logical explanation. . . . "Nobody," he said, "should ascend Masis, for it is the Mother of the World." (H. Hakobian 1932: 18)

Drawing on several strands of related lore, a high-ranking clergyman, upon hearing of the previously mentioned ascent by Parrot and Abovian in 1829, commented that "whoever tries to ascend the peak of Masis wishes to tire the womb of the mother of all mankind in a dragonish mode" (Taghiadian 1847: 164).

Mountains appeared to most early civilizations as a sacred presence and were, therefore, surrounded by myth and made into icons. Potters of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC in the Near East indicated sacred mountains by chains of triangles drawn on their clay vessels, just as they did the heavenly ocean of water by wavy lines below the triangles, as shown in Plate 1.2 of "In the Beginning." Artisans also carved stone into triangular fertility idols as archaic symbols of women (A. R. Demirkhanian 1982a: 67–70), and metalsmiths etched triangles on their artifacts so frequently that the sacred symbol became commonplace. In the cross-stones of the Christian Middle Ages, the triangular mountain symbol appears to signify the center of the universe from which the Cosmic Tree grows in the form of the cross, and the sacred mountain became the allegorical "Rock of Faith" that found spatial and visual expression in cult architecture, sculptures, and illuminated manuscripts (see "The Temple" in this chapter).

The ancient view of Masis-Ararat as sacred remained dominant throughout the Middle Ages, and the mountain has continued to be a powerful emblem of Armenian identity into modern times. When Armenia began to participate in the political scenes of Europe and Russia in the 18th century, Masis-Ararat became the nation's symbol, and relics of the Ark were sent from the patriarchal residence of the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church at Echmiadzin to Catherine II, Queen of Russia. When, as a result of the Russian-Persian wars of the early 19th century, Russia annexed the greater part of East-

ern Armenia—including Masis-Ararat—from Persia, the mountain became the symbol of these struggles, which both Armenians and Russians considered wars of liberation. Masis-Ararat, crowned with the Ark, was depicted on the banners of the Armenian volunteer battalions from this period, one of which is shown in Figure 2.2.1, and on Russian medals cast when Yerevan was liberated from the Persians. Many images were created at this time—in weavings, embroideries, and engravings—showing “Mother Armenia” grieving over her past, surrounded by Armenia’s ruins, with the Masis-Ararat mountain in the background (see Figure 1.15 of “In the Beginning”).

The first Armenian Republic came into existence in 1918, after World War I, and fell in 1920, when Turkey attacked Armenia and annexed the mountain, along with other territories. Ever since the 1921 Russo-Turkish treaty, Armenians have been physically separated from their Sacred Mountain, although they would claim never to have been far removed from it in spirit, which is proved by the presence of Masis-Ararat in the coat of arms of the three successive Armenian Republics—the first, the Soviet, and the present-day one (see Figures 2.2.2 and 2.2.3). The mountain looms before the eyes of those living in the capital of Yerevan and for miles around, inspiring artisans and painters to constantly reproduce its image (see Figure 2.2.4). Shops, stalls, and fairs in Yerevan are full of its likeness—captured, for better or worse, in various media, techniques, and styles, as shown in Figure 2.2.5. Images of Masis-Ararat are presented to visitors and taken as a gift to friends in foreign countries.⁸ The mountain has become, for all intents and purposes, the calling card of Armenia.





FIGURE 2.2.1 (OPPOSITE TOP) Standard of the Armenian volunteer battalion that participated in the Russian-Persian war of 1827, c. 50 inches (129 cm) wide. Courtesy of the State Museum of the History of Armenia. Photo by Zaven Khachikyan.



FIGURE 2.2.2 (OPPOSITE BOTTOM) The coat of arms of the Republic of Armenia, 1918–1920 and since 1991. Photo by Zaven Khachikyan.

FIGURE 2.2.3 (TOP RIGHT) The coat of arms of the Soviet Republic of Armenia, 1920–1991. Photo by Zaven Khachikyan.

FIGURE 2.2.4 (CENTER RIGHT) A 1904 silver cigarette case from Van and a 1956 glass holder from Yerevan with engraved images of Mt. Ararat. Courtesy of Harutyun Marutyan. Photo by Sam Sweezy.

FIGURE 2.2.5 (BOTTOM RIGHT) Paintings of Mt. Ararat at Vernisage, the open-air market in Yerevan. Photo by Zaven Khachikyan.



Urartian civilization to its close connection with this legendary Assyrian queen, Shamiram (Semiramis).

6. The towns built at this time were Arshamashat, Yervandashat, Yervandakert, Artashat, and Tigranakert.

7. According to the tradition of the Armenian Church and following the majority of scholars in Armenia, the adoption of Christianity took place in 301, and the 1,700th anniversary of this date will be celebrated worldwide in 2001. [*American editor's note: Some Western scholars of Armenia consider the date 314 to be more accurate.*]

8. The pit (called *Khor Virap*, meaning "deep pit") and the monastery built above it in the 17th century continue to be a popular place of pilgrimage (see Plate 2.1.1. of "The World as a Garden" in Chapter 2).

9. The Byzantine Church, later known as the Eastern Orthodox Church, today includes the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches, among others.

2. Symbols of Armenian Identity

2.1. The World as a Garden

1. The word *aygi*, which now means "garden" in the modern sense, meant "vineyard" in Old Armenian. The symbolic garden we speak of in this book actually denoted a vineyard in earlier times.

2. The historical Queen Shamiram lived at the end of the 9th and beginning of the 8th centuries BC. Legends about her and mythical King Ara reflect the conflict between Urartu and Assyria at that time.

3. The pomegranate is the only fruit that Armenians compare to the grape, and it appears in early writings with, or as a substitute for, the grape. Many Armenian fairy tales, epic tales, and poems claim that pomegranate wine—especially seven-year-old wine—is superior to grape wine, and they emphasize that the nature of both fruits is sacred and magical.

2.2. The Sacred Mountain

1. The Assyrian name of the temple, *ziquratu*, means "summit" or "mountain top."

2. The etymology of the name "Masis" is traced back to Akkadian "Mashu," which means "twin mountain" (Lipinski 1971: 49).

3. The historical King Artashes and Queen Satenik lived and ruled in Armenia in the 2nd century BC.

4. In Syriac and Latin translations of the Bible,

Noah's Ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat, but the Arabic and Chaldean translations speak of the Korduk mountains as the landing place.

5. For the first evidence of Masis being considered the mountain on which Noah's Ark landed, see Alishan 1890: 468 and Veber 1901: 69–72.

6. These stories were clearly amplifications of the biblical passage, "And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard" (Genesis 9:20).

7. According to these hierarchies, the woman is related to the dragon, reflecting a common mythological concept that traces a woman's closeness to nature (L. H. Abrahamian 1994).

8. The mountain has also inspired some interesting scientific—or pseudo-scientific—theories. See, for example, the ideas of A. Tonakanian (1998: 64–73) about the bio-energy emitted from Mt. Ararat attracting UFOs in the late 1980s and, much earlier, causing Noah's Ark to land on the mountain in the first place.

2.3. The Temple

1. In the Middle Ages, the Urartian "door" in the rock of Van was called the Door of Mher (see Surmelian 1964 for the general outline of the epic tale of Mher). It is worth remarking that in the Urartian inscription, deciphered in the 19th century, this "door" was called "the door of Khaldi." For more on the Door of Mher, see Russell 1987: 272–274.

2. These temples of fire are mentioned in the sources but not described. They were destroyed by the early Christians and have not yet been archaeologically fixed. Contrary to the opinion of early medieval historiographers and some contemporary scholars, for example, James Russell (1987: 481–514), we do not consider the cult of the hearth in ancient and even contemporary Armenia to be connected to Zoroastrianism. See "Home as the World" (Chapter 3) for more on the hearth.

3. On the symbolism of the golden sledgehammer in this vision, see H. Petrosyan 1997b.

4. The Christian temple built over pagan temple ruins signified the defeat of "malign" forces just as Christ can be seen defeating them in the form of a dragon in medieval miniature scenes of the Baptism, an image that can be related to scenes of a cross-bearing column that rises from the depths of the Jordan River (L. Abrahamian 1993a: 165–179).

5. In the Armenian translation of the biblical gospels, the term "rock" is substituted for the name