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# ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

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## ON THE ORIGIN OF ROMAN MITHREUMS

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Among the archaeological finds known on the vast area stretching from the Eastern Mediterranean to Iranian plateau different types of temples dedicated to Mithra have been excavated. In the Hellenistic period and later with the worship of this deity are closely related those underground or semi-underground sanctuaries which are called *mithraeums*.<sup>1</sup> As it was generally accepted in special studies, these mithraeums were found only to the west of the Euphrates, not earlier than the III century BC.

Inside numerous mithraeums, along both sides of the main hall, usually are placed furnished podiums, which serve as sofas where people sat during the ritual meal. On these dwellings were placed idols, mostly in the form of reliefs, and ritual vessels as well. These details could be useful for the identification of participants of the ritual.<sup>2</sup>

The ritual building under discussion, according to the myth, is a natural cave, inside which the ritual of *tauroctony* had taken place (Fig.1a, 1b). But in practice, for example in the course of military campaigns mithraistic buildings are only artificial imitations of natural caves; in the landscape where caves are missing these are simply underground buildings where the flue on the ceiling serves as an association with the cave. In settlements or cultic centers it was not necessary to build mithraeums nearby; it could simply be darkened. This practice exists in Erebuni where the *susi*-temple was reorganized as a temple of fire during the Achemenids. Opposite the northern front part of the Urartian building, on the distance of only 1.2 meters was built a pylon. The space between the entrance of the temple and pylon was closed by an attic the purpose of which was to darken the inner part of the temple.

Hence, late mithraeums and their prototypes should be understood as natural or artificial, mostly underground spaces which has certain interior (flue, seats or podiums, an altar and iconographic representations of the Mithra legend – reliefs and statue) built or chosen for the performance of mysteries (Fig.2a, 2b).<sup>3</sup>

In the west, where the cult of Mithra as the tutelary god of Roman soldiers is best represented in Rome and its seaport Ostia, due to the social status of the worshipers of Mithra in the basins of Rhine and Danube.<sup>4</sup> In the legend of Mithra the cave is an essential factor, as well as the bull kept here and killed by the same Mithra.

While discussing the origins of *mithraeums* usually are referred historical-geographic and legendary information and the details of mithraistic ritual. More than a

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1 Campbell 1968.

2 Beck 2008: 2; Clauss 2000: 42-59, 114-130.

3 For more detailed description of natural and artificial caves where *tauroctony* took place see Campbell 1968: 7-8.

4 Clauss 1992. Here see also the maps of the provinces of the Roman empire.

century it is not decided yet was the western Mithra the same as Iranian Mithra, or he was created in the West as a Persian god in the new context. F.Cumont was the first who suggested that mithraistic mysteries had ancient Anatolian prototypes. According to him, the late mithraism appeared in the I c. BC somewhere in Asia Minor.<sup>5</sup> But this idea was rejected by some scholars.<sup>6</sup> In particular, I.Roll demonstrated that mithraism used to have a much wider geography, from Pontus to Dacia and other Roman provinces.<sup>7</sup>

Today in the discussion of the origins of Late Mithraism prevail the view according to which it should be looked for in the west.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, until 1930s most scholars accept the view of F.Cumont who regard western mithraism as the Romanized Mazdeism. By F.Cumont, it has Iranian core which was modified first by the influence of the Chaldaean astrology then also merged with Iranian Mithra and Babylonian Shamash. Finally this cult was modified for the second time by the Iranian *magi* diaspora in Asia Minor,<sup>9</sup> through the influence of the cosmology of Stoicism, particularly that of Eschatology.<sup>10</sup>

If we leave aside the western orientation of I.Roll's idea and accept that anyway the origins of western Mithraism should be looked in the Near East, it should be stated that here also a consensus has not been reached so far (to the west or east of the Euphrates). While F.Cumont was inclined to stress Pontus and regions to the west of the river, some had suggested more easterly location, pointing on Mesopotamia as a place of intense contacts between Semitic and Iranian cultures.

During the excavations at Uruk-Warka, Southern Mesopotamia in 1950s was unearthed a building which could be taken as an argument in favor of Mesopotamia in the discussion of the origins of the cult of Mithra.<sup>11</sup>

This is a small building, 15,5 m. long and 11.2 m. in width which has an apse in the northeast. The entrance is designed in the form of the *iwan*. Inside the building, along the walls were erected seats or podiums. The comparison with the similar buildings excavated in different parts of the Roman empire points that here we deal with the classical mithraeum (Fig.2). Despite the three reconstructive phases the general plan of the building remained untouched. Most probably it was erected during the early Parthian period (II c. BC – I c. BC). That the building under discussion is not a Christian church but mithraeum could be seen, besides its plan, also through a clay seal from Warka which depicts the Mithra-*tauroctone*.<sup>12</sup>

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5 Cumont 1902: 10; Cumont 1899: 8; Cumont 1923: 10.

6 Widengren 1960: 51-52; Beskow 1978: 14.

7 Roll 1977: 58-62.

8 Beck 2008: 7.

9 Bidez, Cumont 1938; Beck 1991: 491-565.

10 Cumont 1931: 29-96; Beck 1995: 421.

11 Lenzen 1956: 32-34; Lenzen 1958: 18-20; Vermaseren 1960: 11, №. 7; Koshelenko 1966: 149-151.

12 Lenzen 1958: 20, Taf. 45a; Koshelenko 1966: 150.

As it became clear later, the last two centuries of the Hellenistic period are too late for the beginning of classical mithraeums, their origins should be looked in much earlier period.

During the excavations of Alalakh (Syria) L.Woolley had discovered a mysterious semi-underground temple in the mid-II mill. layer, which reminds classical mithraeum.<sup>13</sup> The first impression from this find forced some scholars to doubt the possibility of genetic relationship between Alalakh and Hellenistic mithraeum. Despite this big chronological gap some were easy to suggest such a possibility (J.Duchesne-Guillemin, G. Gropp etc.).<sup>14</sup> According to A.Bivar, western mithraism is only one of the representations of the cult of Mithra which was spread from Asia to Europe.<sup>15</sup>

J.Duchesne-Guillemin had noticed that the name of Mithra was attested in the XVI–XV c. BC theophorous onomasticon of the same Alalakh, Nuzi and Boghazkoy. This god is depicted still on the seal of the Mittanian king Šauššatar, in the same manner as on the mithraistic reliefs – with the Phrygian cap and kneeling on the back of the bull.<sup>16</sup> Sharing this view L.Lelekov thinks that if the name of Mithra and its iconography are attested during such a long period in the Near East (XVI c. BC - I–III c. AD), accordingly the existence of temples of this god could not be excluded.<sup>17</sup>

Trying to locate the center of the origins of the cult of Mithra R.Beck discusses two problems – the comparison of the western and eastern Mithras and the possibility of the existence of transitional variants between these two.

When we discuss the first problem mentioned above, it is evident that both the western and eastern ones are so close to each other that one might conclude that Mithra could not have been created anew. As to the possibilities of the transitional variants, they could be supported by means of several arguments.

- a) In his «Lives» Plutarch, in the biography of Pompeius mentions that Cilician pirates perform latent rituals of initiation which had reached until the days of Pompeius, although the term *mechri deuro* is debatable,<sup>18</sup>
- b) Mithra as Helios (Sun) exists in Commagene still in the I century BC, in the pantheon of Antiochus I of Commagene (Fig.3).<sup>19</sup>
- c) Possibly, instead of Commagene the Iranian diaspora of Asia Minor should be regarded as a transitional form of mithraism,<sup>20</sup>

13 Woolley 1955: 68-69; Lelekov 1983: 62; Woolley 1986: 84-85.

14 Gropp 1969: 172.

15 Bivar 1998.

16 Duchesne-Guillemin 1975: 11-21.

17 Lelekov 1983: 62.

18 Plut., Pomp., XXIV.

19 Boyce, Grenet 1991: 309-351; Dörner 1975; Dörner 1978: 123-133; Duchesne-Guillemin 1978: 187-199; Jacobs 2000: 45-49; Merkelbach 1984: 50-72; Schwertheim 1979; Wagner 1983: 177-224; Wagner 2000a; Wagner 2000b: 11-25; Waldmann 1991.

20 Beck 1984: 2018-2019, 2071-2073; Boyce, Grenet 1991: 468-490; Colpe 1975: 390-399; Cumont 1939: 67-76; Gordon 1978: 159-164, 169-171; Gordon 1994: 469-471; Schwertheim 1979; Will 1978: 527-528.

- d) Syria lacks any transitional form of mithraism,
- e) In his story dedicated to «Isis and Osiris» (46-7) Plutarch regards Mithra as one between the god Horomazes and evil Areimanius which forces Persians to name him as «mediator»,
- f) The account of the journey of the Armenian Arshakid king Tiridates, of Parthian origins, contains important details about mithraism.

Tiridates I, a brother of the Parthian great king Vagarsh I (Vologes)(50–76), avoids to travel by sea, if possible, in order not to desecrate the holy water.<sup>21</sup> Dio Cassius tells the next story about the speech of Tiridates held in the Forum of Rome. Tiridates spoke thus: «Master, I am the descendant of Arsakes, brother of the kings Vologaesius and Pakorus, and thy slave. And I have come to thee, my god, to worship thee as I do Mithras. The destiny thou spinnest for me shall be mine; for thou art my Fortune and my Fate».<sup>22</sup>

If this episode is not the first wave of the spread of mithraism into Rome, anyway the journey of Tiridates should have had a considerable impact on its spread in the west. It should be mentioned that Armenian Arshakids were loyal to the palace etiquette of Armenian court and religion,<sup>23</sup> despite the differences (if any) between Armenian and Parthian religious beliefs. The Arshakids continue the cults of the royal ancestors of Artashesids (offsprings of Ervandids/Orontids) and the royal tutelary deities of Mihr and Anahit.

As it was mentioned above, the place of the origins of mithraeums until now is looked for either in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, or in the Mediterranean basin. Armenia is left out of this wide geographical area.

Today usually in the western literature under the geographical term «Armenia» is understood not the historical Armenia but only the territory of modern Republic of Armenia, and Western Armenia (most part of historical Armenia) is artificially attached to Asia Minor in the west. Historical Armenia should be understood as a single historical-geographical unit including Greater Armenia, Armenia Minor and Sophene with its trans-Euphratian regions (with Commagene). With such an attitude the processes of interrelations between the neighboring Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Syria and Iranian world could be understood much easier.

As a result, in the discussion of the origins of mithraism Armenia was given a role of passive attendant, except the Armenian kingdom of Commagene. The pantheon and cult centers of the latter mostly are entitled by scholars as «Graeco-Iranian», the plastics of sculptures – Greek, and dress – Iranian.<sup>24</sup> The dress could be renamed as Near-Eastern which significantly changes the emphasis, and often in the discussion of stylistic peculiarities of the sculptures the idea of their Hittite ancestorship is suggested.

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21 Plin., Nat. Hist., I, 6.

22 Dio Cass., LXIII.5.2-3; Plin., Nat Hist., XXX.1.6.

23 Tiratsyan 1985: 58-65.

24 Schlumberger 1985: 50, 52.

Meanwhile, in Nemrut dağı, the main religious center of Commagene, one of the supreme gods bears the name *Mithras – Apollōn – Hēlios – Hērmes*. This fact could point out that the functions of this local god did not coincide with any known Greek god, hence the names of the three gods are listed (Apollōn – Hēlios – Hērmes).

The gods of the Armenian and Iranian pantheons also are not the same. Often under the names of Iranian gods in the Armenian pantheon are hidden local gods. As to L.Lelekov, it is possible that the Mesopotamian-Indoeuropean syncretic processes in Iran and Armenia took place separately, though not completely isolated. Particularly, the Armenian-Iranian divine triad was replaced by the tetrade. Thus, the Pahlawi calendar is built on the tetrade consisting of Ormazd-Atar-Mihr-Den, while in the Hellenistic Commagene we encounter Zeus (Ormazd)–Apollo (Mithra)–Ares (Vrtragna-Vahagn)–Mother Commagene.<sup>25</sup> In this regard J.Duchesne-Guillemin thinks that, probably, the tetrade of Commagene represents the tetrade of Mittani, as a result of the one and a half millennium evolution (Fig.3).<sup>26</sup>

Then L.Lelekov assumes that Western Iran and Armenia had passed a long way of development and both should be regarded as the heirs to the II mill. BC Near Eastern cultures, including early Indo-Aryan. Hence hardly there is any reason to see in the Armenian paganism the reminiscence of exclusively Iranian ideology. The tetrade and concluding female deity were not characteristic for the Indo-European typology. Definitely they emerged in the Near East where the ancestors of Armenians and Median-Iranians had adopted this model which is unknown in India and Central Asia.<sup>27</sup>

The next exception is that the Greater Armenia is regarded as an eastern part of Asia Minor, as well as the western province of Parthian and Sassanian empires. Even under such reduced prism J.Russell had come to a conclusion that Armenia had an extremely significant role in the spread of mithraism to the west.<sup>28</sup>

The studies on eastern late mithraism were mostly focused on its linguistic and mythological aspects, and comparatively less – iconography. For example, G.Koshelenko had noticed that the religious beliefs are similar in Babylonia and Iran which facilitated the infiltration of Semitic influences into Iranian pantheon. Thus, it is possible that the sacrifice of the bull which occupies central place in the mysteries of Mithra, has a prototype in the face of the sacrifice of the bull in the Late Babylonian ritual of Kalu.<sup>29</sup> Not to mention the ritual of the New Year when, like in the mysteries of Mithra, a white bull was sacrificed.<sup>30</sup>

Besides these examples are of interest materials from the II mill. BC Hittite and Mittanian rituals and other religious texts which partly are related to the contact zone between Asia Minor and Mesopotamia as well as the western and southern regions of

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<sup>25</sup> Lelekov 1983: 61.

<sup>26</sup> Duchesne-Guillemin 1978: 198.

<sup>27</sup> Lelekov 1983: 62.

<sup>28</sup> Russell 1978.

<sup>29</sup> Thureau-Dangin 1921: 22-27; Koshelenko 1966: 150.

<sup>30</sup> Widengren 1960: 51-52.

the Armenian Highland. In the Hittite and Hurrian rituals the bull replaces a seek man being sent to the Netherworld instead of him.

During archaeological excavations in the layers of the V-IV mill. BC sites of Armenia and Transcaucasia were unearthed figurines of animals including that of a bull which were sacrificed instead of the real animal.<sup>31</sup> Probably, the figurines were made for the ritual;<sup>32</sup> they were thrown into the fire (Arukhlo), or buried instead of the bull (Tsopi). In Transcaucasia the worship of a bull as one of the main deities continued also in the III mill. BC. This animal was worshiped in Asia Minor, Armenia and surrounding countries of the Caucasus near the removable tables which were decorated with the heads of the bulls.<sup>33</sup> Young bulls were painted with red color, or on their forehead was impressed a star.<sup>34</sup> The later reminiscence of this ritual contains in the story told by Plutarch dealing with Lucullus. He writes that an omen appeared before Lucullus. «...and a favourable sign accompanied his crossing. Heifers pasture there which are sacred to Persia Artemis, a goddess whom the Barbarians on the further side of the Euphrates hold in the highest honour. These heifers are used only for sacrifice, and at other times are left to roam about the country at large, with brands upon them in the shape of the torch of the goddess. Nor is it a slight or easy matter to catch any of them when they are wanted. One of these heifers, after the army had crossed the Euphrates, came to a certain rock which is deemed sacred to the goddess, and stood upon it, and lowering its head without any compulsion from the usual rope, offered itself to Lucullus for sacrifice. He also sacrificed a bull to the Euphrates, in acknowledgment of his safe passage» (Plut., Lucul., XXIV, 6-8).<sup>35</sup>

Returning to Transcaucasia let us mention that excavations had revealed also skulls of bulls with sawed horns (in Gudaberdka<sup>36</sup>, Hoghmik). K.Kushnareva thinks that these skulls or masks belong to bulls.

The sacrifice of an animal and eating was equal to the communion with the same god.<sup>37</sup> During the festival of Ascencion Armenians sacrifice a bull against the drought, hail and locust which endanger the harvest.<sup>38</sup> And in Trialeti twice per year a bull was sacrificed for St. Gevorg against the misery, diseases or infertility, and for the sake of good harvest.

Judging by the materials of Amiranis-gora, the Early Bronze age sanctuary-settlement near Akhaltsikhe (Georgia), participants of the funeral feast cut the head of a bull, skin and limbs and put them into the burial. It should be mentioned that the bull

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31 Kushnareva, Chubinishvili 1970: 31, Fig. 9.17.

32 Masson (ed.) 1966: 121.

33 Kushnareva, Chubinishvili 1970: 161.

34 Piotrovskij 1949: 176.

35 Plutarch 1948: 549.

36 Nadimashvili 1963: 150.

37 Sokolova 1972: 184.

38 Bdoyan 1972: 472.

was sacrificed only in the case of the death of a male.<sup>39</sup> The same parts of the bull were found in the burials of Vanadzor, Lchashen, Adiyaman and Trialeti.<sup>40</sup>

The bull is depicted on many *vishaps* from different parts of Armenia. Here he is pictured on top of the monument in the form of a head, and the water flows from its mouth. Semantically the same motive is depicted on the golden cup found in Hasanlu, to the west of Lake Urmia. On the bronze belt from Khojalu (Karabagh) the eyes of the bull are replaced by two suns. In the Armenian ethnographic materials the bull is associated with the worship of sun.<sup>41</sup>

From Transcaucasia to the Crete-Mycenean world and Western Asia Minor is well known the ritual of the sacred battle between the wild bull and a man; in one case on iconographic, and in the second by means of ethnographic materials. On Armenian rock-carvings also figures the representation of this battle.<sup>42</sup>

For many gods of the kingdom of Van (Urartu) once per year were sacrificed bulls; for example to Haldi (6), Teišeba (6) and Šiwini (Fig.4).<sup>43</sup> Usually Haldi is depicted standing on a lion. On the bronze artifact from Western Armenia Haldi or Teišeba are pictured standing on a bull.<sup>44</sup>

After the adoption of Christianity in Armenia and Georgia the worship of bull continue to exist unofficially. It is probable that St. Gevorg, one of the saints of Christianity had some similarities with Mihr/Mithra. With the same saint is connected a habit in Mingrelia, Western Georgia. A bull was kept at the monastery of Ilori and the people say that Mihr had stolen the animal; then a young man was sent there to slaughter the bull.<sup>45</sup>

In the Armenian epos the White Devil is the symbol of evil who terrorizes people, whose strength was placed into the black bull. Mher the elder, another hero along with Lesser Mher, his grandson, sharing the image of Mithra, acts as a hunter, the slayer of the symbol of darkness and hell, who was sacrificed for the Mithra-Sun.<sup>46</sup>

Numerous other examples could be referred to which shows that the worship of a bull and the practice of the sacred killing was familiar to the peoples living to the east of the Euphrates, particularly Armenians.

**Performance of worship in the caves.** The religious functions of the caves is well known in Southern Europe and Etruria, Italy as well.<sup>47</sup> To the west of the Euphrates the sacred caves are known in Asia Minor, in the Hittite world (for example,

39 Chubinishvili 1971: 10.

40 Kuftin 1941: 81-83; Khanzadyan 1962.

41 Kushnareva 1977: 56.

42 Martirosyan, Israyelyan 1971: Table 271. Here the horns of the wild bull form a big bow in order to stress the celestial nature of the animal.

43 Melikishvili 1960: N. 27.

44 According to most scholars Haldi is depicted standing on the lion or sitting on the throne (see Piotrovskij 1959: 223), and the anthropomorph person - Teišeba (idem: 224-225).

45 Schwartz 1975: 417; Cumont 1937: 62-71.

46 Sasunci Davit 1939: 129-130.

47 Etruscan art 1972.



the monumental cave complex of Yazılıkaya, near the Hittite capital city of Hattusa), in Lycia, Cappadocia, also to the east of the Euphrates, especially in the Armenian Highland.

The important cultic function of caves in Armenia is studied thoroughly in the example of the capital city of Armavir.<sup>48</sup> In the cave complexes which were enlarged still in the Bronze and Early Iron ages we encounter the entrance into *mundus*, the Netherworld, where libations to the gods were performed. In Boshat, near Tigranakert, to the left of the entrance was pictured the relief of the sacrificer, and inside the cave - the relief of Mihr/Mithra or the king.<sup>49</sup>

The sacred function of caves is seen especially in Van.<sup>50</sup> And the ancient roots of the cult of Mihr should be looked in the period of the Van kingdom and its pantheon. It is reflected in the «Door of Mher» of the Armenian period (rock-carved niche which in Urartian texts is called «divine doors»).

Lesser Mher, one of the personages of the Armenian epos, cursed by his parents, was imprisoned in Agravakar; one day he was destined to be freed and destroy the world in order to build it anew.<sup>51</sup> Mher wounded the crow, then pursued him until the cave. Here the hoof of the hero's horse were stuck in the sand and the door to the cave was closed behind him. The cave which is known as Zmpzmp-maghara near Van is called «Mher's door».

The cult of Western Mithra where crow also figures, was performed in the temples which were called *spelaea* «caves». Armenians believe that during the Festival of Ascension the crack which was called «Mheri dur» («Mher's door») and from where black water flows, opens and appears Mher who holds the wheel of destiny.<sup>52</sup> This is paralleled with the tradition connected with the cave in Mons Victorialis, where three *magi* were waiting for Christmas.<sup>53</sup>

I.M.Diakonoff doubts the introduction of Western Mithra directly from Iran. According to him. «The religion of Mithra in the form that reached Rome in the I c. BC – I c. AD has nothing to do with Mithra of Zoroastrian Iran, except its name».<sup>54</sup> He assumes that this religion was introduced by Romans from Asia Minor, where the *spaeleum* of Mithra is known in Phrygia in the VIII-VII c. BC. Here, like in Urartu, was known also the cult of the carriage. Most probably both in Phrygia and Urartu we deal with some common ideological process. He concludes that «the birth from the rock

48 Karapetyan, Khachatryan, Kanetsyan 2004: 254-275.

49 Hakobyan 2013a: 8.

50 Hakobyan 2013b: 108-114; Hmayakyan, Simonyan 2013: 70-81; Badalyan 2013: 82-94.

51 Orbeli 1961: 317; Russell 1978: 272-273.

52 Abeghyan 1966: 351. In the beliefs of the population of the north-western part of the Sharur plain, in the plateau of Airich was located a cave «Nahara-hana» (according to T.Avdalbegyan - Mahara, i.e. Mher) where lives a giant or hero «oghuz» who rules over the steppe of Airich, mountains of Oanikh and the forest of Hors (see Samuelyan 1931: 312).

53 Russell 1978: 273.

54 Diakonoff 1983: 192-193.

(doors of the god) and some peculiarities of the system of Western Mithra (tree, lion, possibly the bull) could be traced to the east from the Roman Mithra until Haldi but not further to the east».

Thus, during the Achemenide period or later the cult of Haldi was amalgamated with the cult of Mithra and consequently the door of Haldi became «Mher's door».55 At the same time it should be mentioned that in the history of the Near East Haldi was one of those phenomenal deities which, like Greek Zeus, combined several functions, actually pretending to monotheism. In this regard it is important that later Haldi amalgamated with Mithra was also the Sun god, like Šiwini, another deity of the triad. On the fragment of the shield from Andzaf Haldi is depicted in the form of a beardless young man whose head is caught with the ray of sunlight,56 which reminds reliefs of Mithra known from the Hellenistic Commagene (Fig. 4 and 5).

In the pre-Christian Armenia Mithra was associated with caves and rocks. In the course of his description of the Araxes Pseudo-Plutarchus tells the next. «Near it (the Araxes) also is a mountain Diorphus, so called from the giant of that name, of which this story is told: Mithra being desirous of a son, and hating the race of women, impregnated a certain rock; and the rock, becoming pregnant, after the appointed time bore a youth named Diorphos. The latter when he had grown to manhood challenged Ares to a contest of valour, and was slain. The purpose of the gods was then fulfilled in his transformation into the mountain bearing the same name as he» (Pseudo-Plutarchus, De Fluviiis, XXIII, 4).57 M. Schwarz was first to notice the similarities of this story with the Hittite legend of Kumarbi.58

***Oldest architectural manifestations of mithraeums in Armenia.*** The differences or similarities of the Near-Eastern mithraeums from/with the classical western ones is not enough in the discussion of their connection and heritage. If, following the study of L. Beck, assume that the origins of mithraism should be looked in the Near East, then one might take into account that in this center of ancient civilizations different processes of religious syncretism including cultic architecture had taken place, among which the development of mithraistic beliefs was only one of them. Hence, the search for classical mithraeums in this region means little if nothing.

Chronologically the earliest example of cultic architecture of the region under discussion is the V mill. BC sanctuary of Imiris-gora (Georgia) which consists of two sections or rooms. In the first section there is a rounded hearth bordered with stones, and in the second section – a podium in the form of an apse.59 Although it is not certain that we deal with the earliest form of the mithraeum, but one thing is clear; sacral buildings with a podium are already known in the northern part of the Near East.60

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55 Idem: 191-192.

56 Belli 2000: 34, Fig. 17.

57 Russell 1978: 271.

58 Schwartz 1975: 416. Cf. Adonts 1972: 371-372.

59 Javakhishvili 1970: 60, Tab. 9.

60 The cultic buildings of ancient Armenia were discussed in our study (Hakobyan 2012: 33-52).

The next notable but mysterious building was found by the joint Armenian-Italian team of archaeologists in 1995 in the southern basin of Lake Sevan, at the fortress of Mtnadzor, 4-5 km to the south-east the village of Gegghovit, near Martuni. The eastern wall of this rectangle construction is built in the form of an apse. The entrance is located at the southern part (width – 1 m). The length of the building is 7.70 m. width 3.50 m. On the eastern side of the building was an altar whose retaining wall consists of 2 or 3 rows of stones. In the central part of the western section was made an anchor from stone. In the north-eastern corner of the building was dug a pit. From the upper horizon of the latter was found a millstone. Slightly to the south of it was unearthed a vertically standing semi-anthropomorphic idol (0.70 x 0.40 x 0.30 m).

From stratigraphical point of view it is important to mention the existence of two floors made of stones and alumina. The upper floor (width 0.25-0.30 m) was about 1.15-1.20 m below the surviving height of the walls and covers the altar. This means that during the period of the upper floor the altar was out of use. The lower floor was found directly under the upper one, about 1.40-1.45 m below the surviving height of the walls.

Surprisingly, among the finds artifacts made of iron were found which belong to late Middle ages.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, on the lower floor were found three fragments of the 13-14 c. AD glazed pottery.

According to the preliminary dating, the monument was ascribed to the Early Iron ages (11-9/8 c. BC).<sup>62</sup>

Preliminary observations show that the building was subterranean or semi-subterranean. One more observation could be useful for the evaluation of Mtnadzor monument. In the Sevan basin and elsewhere in Armenia the so-called cyclopean fortresses were reconstructed and used during later periods, hence the existence of medieval ceramics. It seems that the Early Iron age ceramic complex might be dated with the later centuries, otherwise we have to propose a chronological gap with later periods which is not characteristic for such monuments. We shall mention also that in the altar of the eastern semicircular apse stands a stone of about 0,5 meters in height which is similar to other idols registered in Armenia, and which were dated with the period reaching the end of the Hellenism.

The next important building was excavated at the end of the XIX century by the Russian scholar A.A.Ivanovskij in the middle basin of the Araxes.<sup>63</sup> On the slopes of Mount Ararat, on the mound near Tashburun was opened a large building. From west to east the building stretches about 32 meters, from the north to the south - 20 meters (Fig. 6). The building has thick walls (2,1 m in width) built of well-processed stones. The floor of the building was about 1.3 m lower than outside the walls. In the northern and southern walls were opened two doors. In the eastern part the building has a

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61 Tumanyan, Yengibaryan, Bashikyan 1996: 29.

62 Idem: 30.

63 Ivanovskij 1911.

semicircular apse. On the photo made by A.A.Ivanovskij, before the northern wall, next to each other were placed 12 stones which form a bench or podium.<sup>64</sup>

The dating of this monumental building causes problems. S.Hmayakyan thinks that it is an Urartian temple of Haldi and should be placed in the IX c. BC.<sup>65</sup> This suggestion is based on the idea of M.V.Nikolskij who refers to the Urartian cuneiform text, according to which after the conquest of Luhiuni, the center of the country of Eridiuahi, Minua, king of Urartu had restored the doors of Haldi and other building of the palace and called them Minuahinili. This gave M.V.Nikolskij a clue to think that before Minua in the city exist both a temple and a palace. Hence, Tashburun during Minua and before him was an important cultic and political center.<sup>66</sup>

The architect K.Hovhannisyan takes the building in Tashburun as a temple and puts it into his typological scheme and regards as a late phase of Urartian «transversal» temples (VII c. BC).<sup>67</sup>

A.A.Ivanovskij, the excavator of Tashburun was inclined to see here a temple or some other important public building.<sup>68</sup>

As to M.V.Nikolskij, the Tashburun monument was a building which was submerged deep into the ground.<sup>69</sup> Further he wrote that, according to A.Uvarov, at the place of the first inscription of Minua, like in Armavir, on the edges of well-worked stones were made hollows. Most probably, these hollows in the form of the tail of a swallow were made in order to tie to each other stones without cementing.

The idea of M.V.Nikolskij was echoed by G.A.Tiratsyan and A.A.Sahinyan. They noticed that on the stones of old Armavir are seen the hollows for connecting them which were made like a swallow tail and are characteristic for ancient Armenian architecture. Such technique is absent in Urartian architecture; they came into presence later, in Armenia (for example, the walls of the early Hellenistic burial at Hasan-kala, as well as stones dated with the III-I c. BC at Tashburun, Tsolakert, Zernaki-tepe, Ani, Yervandakert).<sup>70</sup> A.Sahinyan stresses that «this peculiarity of architecture had come to Armenia, probably, from the west where it was known in the Ionian-Lylian world still in the VI c. BC». <sup>71</sup>

For the solution of our problem is important to refer to the Hellenistic temple complex of Hoghmik, located to the north of Gyumri. Here we shall focus on two buildings among dozens of rooms and auxiliary apartments. First of them is the room N.1 (Fig.7) which is about 13 m long and 9 m in width. Opposite the southern wall passes an elongated *mastaba* made of stones (0.5 meters in height and width). It is built

64 Ivanovskij 1911: 40-47, Fig. 24.

65 Hmayakyan 1990: 148, in the section of Tables (31.2).

66 Nikolskij 1896: 18.

67 Oganessian 1981: 91.

68 Ivanovskij 1911: 46.

69 Nikolskij 1896: 18-19.

70 Tiratsyan 1976: 154-156. Sahinyan 1996: 214.

71 Idem.

on a pavement, 2 meters in width. Opposite another wall also is made a *mastaba* but it breaks off in two places. In the center, between two *mastabas* was placed a badly preserved altar, and in the north-western corner was opened a box made of stone which contains burnt remains of an animal (probably a goat). Before the box, on the edge of the wall is seen a rectangle opening, probably for an idol. The room is divided into three parts by means of four pairs of columns. The four central columns are located at some distance from each other, in order to secure a place for the garret, a peculiarity of the main room of the Armenian traditional house. Next to the building were erected two sanctuaries and an *iwan*. Our first suggestion was that the three apartments of the room which are oriented to the east were dedicated to the supreme gods of the Armenian pantheon. They were built in the II c. BC and survived about four centuries, until the adoption of Christianity as a state religion. About twenty meters to the north of these apartments was opened an apartment with the traces of numerous animal sacrifices, *mastabas* and altars, as well as idols. Between these buildings, in one of the rooms was found a clay figurine of Mihr-Mithra (Fig. 7c).<sup>72</sup>

The next room is N. 6 (Fig. 7a, 7b) which is an extensive building whose entrance comes out to the southern edge of the vertical cliff. Inside the apartment and opposite the northern wall is made a pavement in the shape of the Latin letter «L». On the north-eastern corner an entrance leads to the apartment N.3. Along the eastern wall until the south-eastern corner above the pavement is built a *mastaba*. A *mastaba* is extant also near the eastern half of the northern wall, to the west of the abovementioned entrance. From the west next to *mastaba* is placed a box made of big plates of stone. Further to the west is erected a podium of about 20 sm in height. In the center of the apartment are placed anchors of four rectangle columns made of *tufa* stone which reach the edge of the pavement. Along the both long walls, opposite the four anchors are placed other anchors of lesser measurements. So, the apartment was divided into two sections by means of four columns, one with paved floor, the another with an earthen one. In the center of the western wall was opened an altar, a low table made of stone (52x104 sm). Slightly to the south of the north-western corner of the apartment there was an exit to outside, which was closed. From the box and podium, in the rock was dug a groove which continues outside the building; probably, its purpose, like in the temple of Haldi in Erebuni was to wash the remains of the sacrifice. In relation to two apartments located to the north and east this apartment N.6 is substantially lower. It is interesting that all buildings of Haghmik, like western mithraeums, were closed through special ritual after the adoption of Christianity.

A remarkable building was found in the province of Vayk, near the village of Yelpin. Here on the rocky terrain is dug a stairway which leads up the hill. Opposite the last step is dug out a square platform in the rock where are seen the remains of an altar. To the right of the stairway and the platform is a cave with an entrance made in the

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<sup>72</sup> Hakobyan, Vardanyan 1994: 32-34.

shape of a triangle. Inside the cave also some work was done, since its space was enlarged. This complex reminds the sacred platforms in Van with its rock-carved building, which could be reached by means of a stairway, although the monument from Yelpin is much smaller in size.

The cultic buildings mentioned above, some monumental, some small in size, which are found in different regions of Armenia, used to serve for the performance of the worship of the Armenian Mihr or other gods; they have some similarities with the western mithraeums. But they do not repeat the classical mithraeums by the details of architecture. Even the removable mithraistic altar found in Dvin (Fig.8), which should have been present in this context, is absent; one might suggest that here was built a II c. BC classical western mithraeum.<sup>73</sup>

It is debatable to expect western mithraeums in Armenia which precedes the earliest Roman ones. Even in the places where durative Roman presence is fixed (for example, in the camps where the Roman legions were located, such as Satala and Melitene) until now mithraeums are lacking. On the other side, in the zones of close contacts between Armenians and Romans (in the Euphrates basin, Vagharshapat-Cainepolis, Erzerum) and elsewhere is expected to be found classical Roman mithraeums, at least their earliest forms, quite distinct from classical ones.

Comparing the buildings dedicated to Mithra in Armenia and in the Roman empire K.V.Trever observed in the former overground and in the latter underground architecture, thus coming to the next idea. In contrast to the western underground mithraeums in Armenia they could have also other locations. The cult of Mihr in Armenia was developed distinctly which differ from that in other countries of the Near East and elsewhere, particularly in the west. As is well known, the mithraeum at Dura-Europos also is a completely overground building. According to K.V.Trever, the temples of Mithra in the East and in Armenia are essentially different from the temples of Rome and western provinces of Rome (the so-called mithraeums) She explains this situation as the next: in the West mithraism was an introduced phenomena brought from the East by the Roman soldiers, that is why its cult could not express the peculiarities of local architecture in foreign country, as it is evident in eastern countries. The western mithraeums and temples of Mithra are not studied yet from this point of view. It could be stated only that eastern temples of Mithra differ from each other due to the peculiarities of different historical developments. As an illustration to this idea are the temples of Mithra at Dura-Europos (Mesopotamia) and Niha (Syria). The temple of Mithra at Dura-Europos is closer to the western mithraeums, but anyway it is different from them since it is an overground building and has other architectural details. The Roman legions stationed at Dura-Europos (III, IV, XVI and others) who had restored the temple were responsible for the transfer of mithraism to the west where this «military religion» very soon became popular.<sup>74</sup>

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73 Kocharyan 1991: 64-66.

74 Trever 1953: 90-91.

One architectural peculiarity should be stressed, if it is not a mere coincidence, but a common feature for the three temples of Apollo-Mithra in the east: all they have an unusually steep fronton the height of which is equal to one fifth of the width (for example, the temple of Garni, the temple of Apollo at Sagalassus<sup>75</sup>, and the temple of Mithra in Cremna in Pisidia<sup>76</sup>).

K.V.Trever has pointed also on the builders of the temples of Mithra and the social status of its worshipers. Western mithraeums differ from the luxurious temples at Garni, Niha and Perge built by the kings of Armenia, Syria and Asia Minor by the absence of monumentalism, but also by their social content. The columned temples decorated by reliefs were built by the kings and their neighborhood and serve the court. As to the western mithraeums, they were built by unbaked clay and serve ordinary people and soldiers.<sup>77</sup>

According to written sources, the eight main temples of the pre-Christian Armenia bear the name of *mehean*,<sup>78</sup> but it should be mentioned that the cult centers dedicated to Mihr also were called *mehean*. In the Arabic version of the «History of Armenia» of Agatangelos, translated by N.Marr, the name of the settlement Tordan which was the main center of the cult of Barshamina, is referred to as *Mithrodan*.<sup>79</sup> Bagayarich, the main temple of Armenian Mihr was located in its neighborhood, not far from the modern Pkeric, in the same province of Daranali.<sup>80</sup>

It was suggested that the Armenian word *mehean* is an Iranian loanword (from *mithra-dāna* «the place of Mihr») to which was added Armenian suffix *-ean*.<sup>81</sup> According to A.Meillet, *mehean* comes from an Iranian word *māithryāna* (with the same meaning).<sup>82</sup> J.Russell has pointed on the difficulty of borrowing during the Sassanian period, since hardly the Armenian Arshakids could have taken this important word from their enemies - Iranian Sassanians.<sup>83</sup> Probably, this word had entered Armenian language earlier.

Regarding the assumption of K.V.Trever concerning the social character an addition should be in place. It seems that the Romans could have borrowed in the East not only the royal architecture and a part of the official cult along with the temples, but also everyday life and beliefs of ordinary people, those small-sized sanctuaries which serve the local population. It could be proved through the analysis of western mithraeums.

75 Lanckoronski, Niemann et Petersen 1893 II: 157, Fig. 123, Tab. XXV.

76 Idem: 179.

77 Trever 1953: 91.

78 «He came to the temple [= *mehean*] of Mihr, called the son of Aramazd, to the village called Bagayarich, in the Parthian tongue» (Agathangelos 1976: § 790, p. 329).

79 Marr 1905: 119, Ch. 5; Russell 1978: 263.

80 Hakobyan 2012b:151-168, especially p. 157.

81 Gershevitch 1975, I: 87, no.8, and II: 357.

82 Meillet 1920: 233-234.

83 Russell 1978: 264-265.

The number of people which could be placed on the podiums built along the walls of western mithraeums was limited. Mithraism was a religion of comparatively small communities. They represent «voluntary organizations» of people, and above all not always having strict religious orientation.<sup>84</sup>

If it is possible to assume that mithraeums originated from the popular ritual buildings of the Near East, then two alternative variants comes to mind. First of them is the communal sanctuary located in the settlement whose architecture should have been the same as the public house - the temple is the house of the god, probably more well-maintained and bigger than an ordinary house. The next should be sought out of the settlement or the center of worship located in an elevated terrain. Here also the building might have been located inside the cave or in some building constructed by the worshipers. If we accept that the patriarchal family represents not only a solidary community of kinsmen but also an economic, sometimes military and worshiping center, then the worship in the settlement and outside it should have been performed in relatively small buildings and caves, as in the case of the Roman mithraistic communities.

As an example for the aforementioned situation could be referred *orgions* in Athens, Greece. According to written sources foreigners, like Thracian *metoikoi*, were united in clubs around some deity, mostly Heracles or Dionisus. The members of this ritual unions were renting some buildings since they, as foreigners, could not possess with real estate including permanent ritual building. This and the performance of rituals require expenditures which was collected through membership fees. It is important to note that the ritual of *orgions* consist of the ritual proper and a daily routine. The first includes the sacrifice of an animal to the deity, opposite the building. The second part of the ritual was the last and more durative process - a feast during which the social stratification of participants disappears. As we can see, *orgions* and similar unions by their form were religious structures despite being partly secular phenomena. These clubs soon became popular and Athenians also created similar organizations.<sup>85</sup>

Probably, the aforementioned unions were the prototypes of the first Roman communities of mithraists which perform their rituals in the buildings imitating their traditional houses. Soon the spread of such groups of associates composed of civilians and soldiers gave birth to numerous worshipers of their tutelary gods.

This hypothesis also should be put into circulation until new archaeological or written data could prove or reject its credibility. At present we are inclined to favor the idea that western mithraeums had originated in the region of the Near East where the contacts between the East and Rome were more durative and intense. We mean the integrated culture of the population of the Euphrates River basin.

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84 Beck 1996: 176-185.

85 Ustinova 1988: 192-218.



Here we find appropriate to focus on the phenomenon which until now was not touched upon regarding the origins of western mithraeums, that is Armenian popular house.

In one of the two variants of the Armenian popular house which is characteristic for the Upper Armenia (in the north-west of the Armenian Highland, the region of Erzerum) and the western part of the Euphrates basin, also Armenian settlements of Cappadocia (Fig.9, 10) the residential part of males was *oda* which often was located next to the cattle shed. From the latter *oda* was separated by 3-4 columns which sat on a wall (1¼–1½ meters in height). About such underground or semi-underground houses mentions still in the late V century BC Xenophon (Xen., Anab., IV,4,25).

It is noteworthy that Armenian *oda* was the place of assembly of «secret» unions of young people, a place where some popular games were organized («khan», «shah», «pasha»).

As is well known, the popular house used to have a considerable impact on the architecture of the temples and secular buildings in different cultures, as in the case of Armenia. The similarity of the male section of Armenian *oda* with the Roman mithraeum requires a thorough analysis in the context of the Armenian-Roman cultural contacts. Since the possibility of the influence of Roman cultic building on the Armenian traditional house planning should be excluded, one might propose an opposite variant. This process could have been originated in Rome where used to exist an Armenian diaspora (in the army, pretorian regiments, also civilians), or along the entire contact zone, from Commagene and Upper Armenia until the easternmost extension of the Roman military presence.

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86 Bdoyan 1974: 82.

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***Translated from the Armenian by Aram Kosyan***





Fig.1a - Mithra slaughtering a bull. A relief from the Roman Mithraeum, British museum



Fig.1b - Tauroctonia. A Roman relief, Karlsruhe museum (Germany)

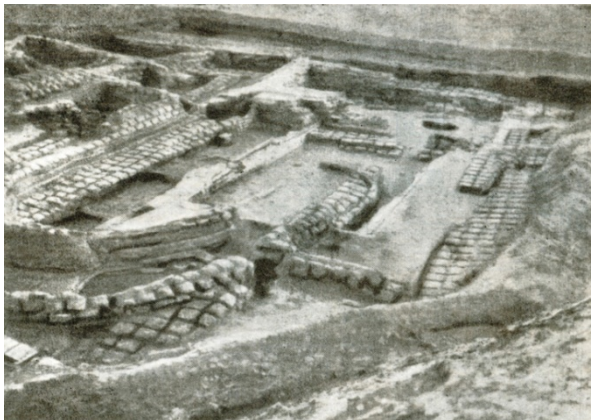


Fig. 2 - General view of the mithraeum unearthed at Uruk-Warka (Iraq)



Fig. 2a - Ostia. Interior of a mithraeum (Italy)



Fig. 2b – View of a mithraeum, III century AD, Hadrian's wall, Northumberland (England)





Fig. 3 - Tetrade of Commagenian pantheon. Above left - Zeus-Oromazdes, right - Mithra-Helios-Hermes, below left - Commagene, right - Heracles-Artagnes



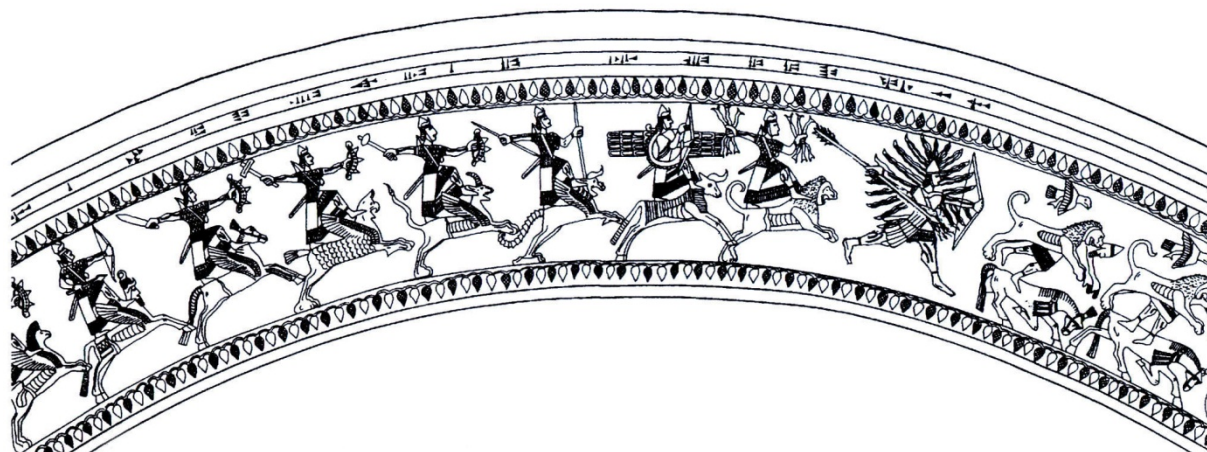


Fig. 4 - Haldi glowing to the right, riding on lion-back, armed with a javelin and bow. Anzaf, fragment of a shield (Belli 2000, Fig.17)



Fig. 5 - Antiochus of Commagene saluting Mithra. A relief from Sofraz, I century BC (Museum of Gaziantep, Turkey)



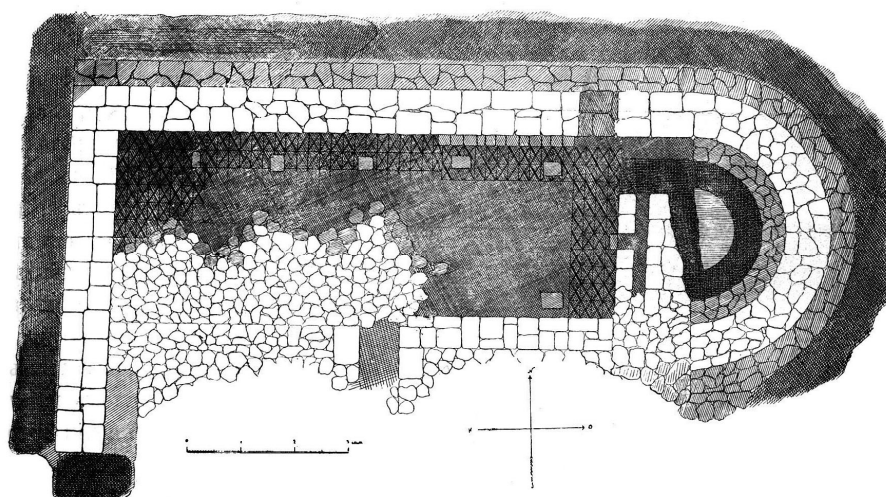


Fig. 6 - Plan of Tashburun temple with apse (after A.A.Ivanovskij)

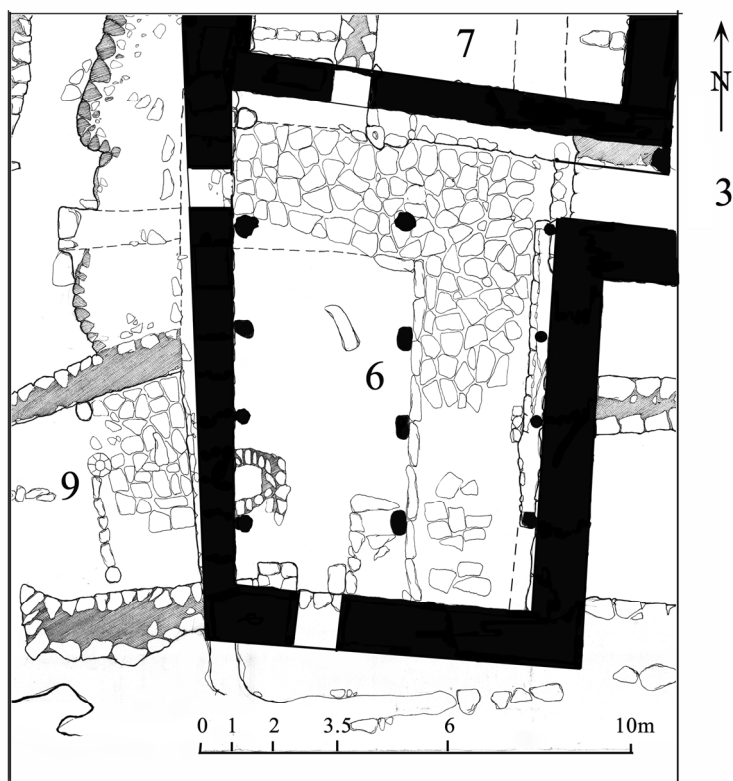


Fig. 7a - Fragment of Haghmik sanctuary complex, plan of the sanctuary nbr.6

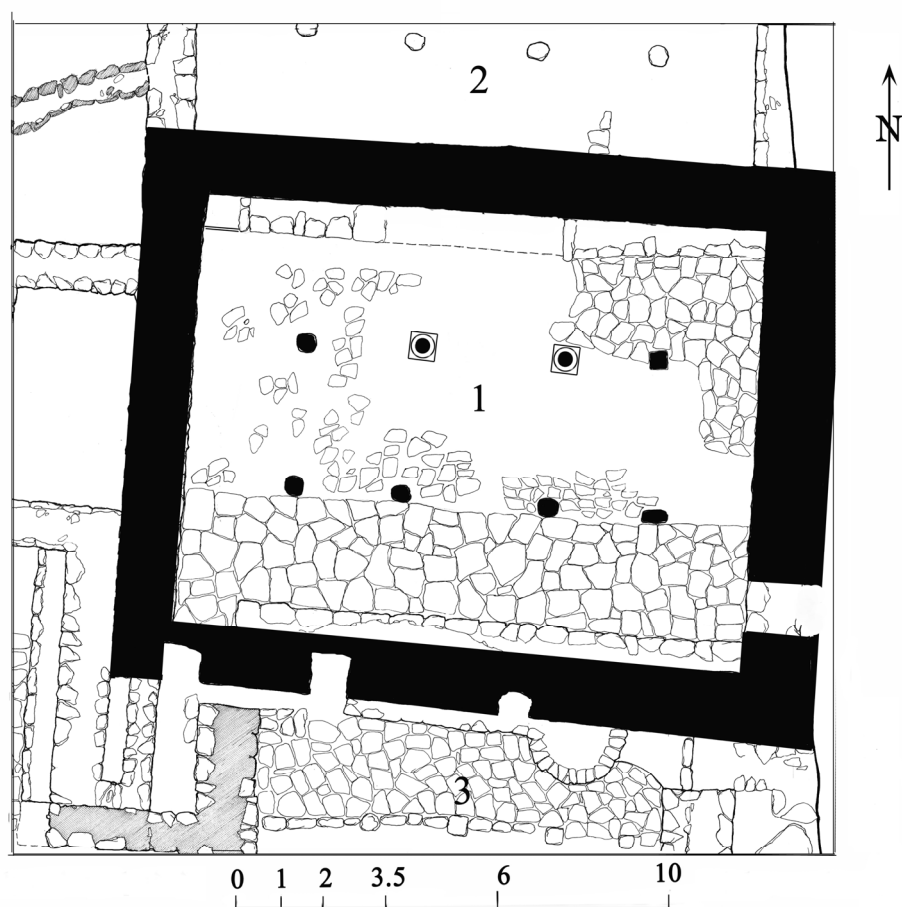


Fig. 7b - Fragment of Hoghmik sanctuary complex, plan of the sanctuary nbr.6



Fig. 7c - A terracotta figurine of Mithra. I-III centuries AD Hoghmik sanctuary complex



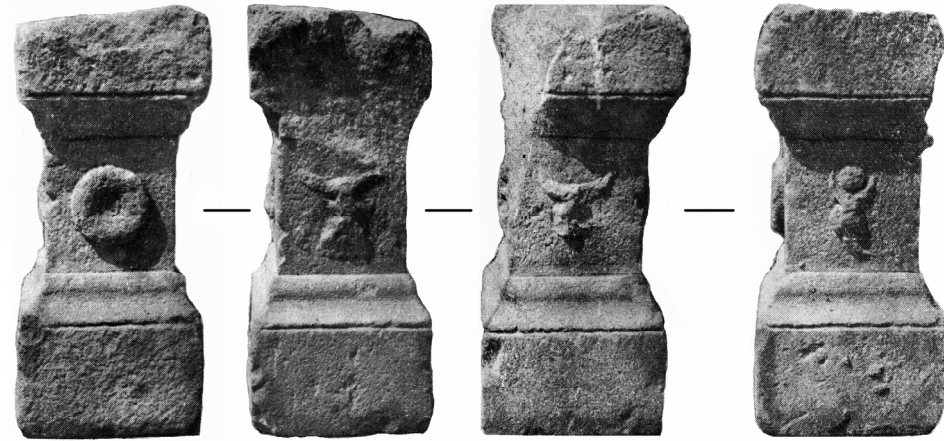


Fig. 8 - A Roman altar from Dvin with Mithraistic symbols  
SUN from the south, RAVEN from the north, BULL from the west, CANCER from the east

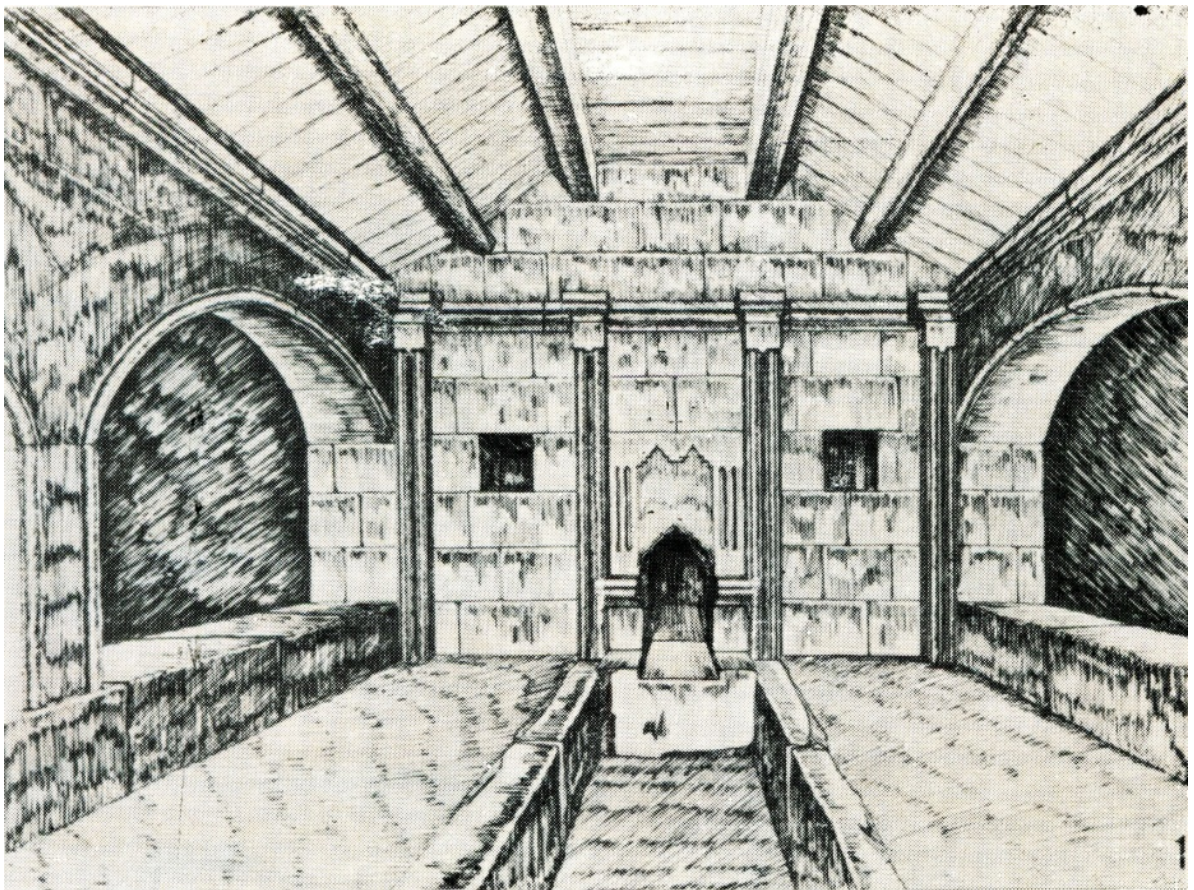


Fig. 9 - Interior of the main room or refectory - *glkhatun* in the Armenian traditional house. Type characteristic to the region of Higher Armenia (Bdoyan 1974: 80; Marutyan 1989, Pl.III.1)



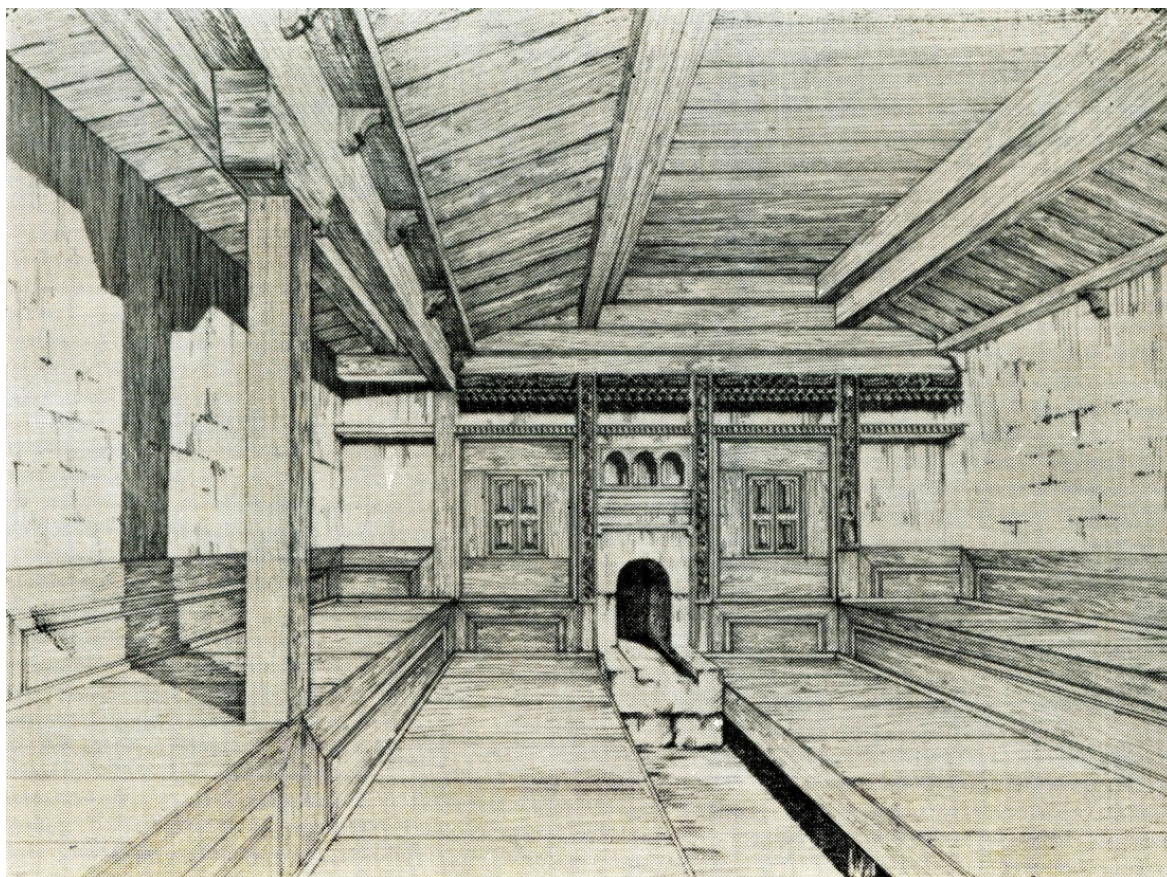


Fig. 10 - Interior of the main room or refectory - *glkhatun* in the Armenian traditional house. Type characteristic to the region of Higher Armenia (Bdoyan 1974: 81; Marutyan 1989, Pl.III.2)