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## **DEITIES, SANCTUARIES, PRIESTHOOD, AND TEMPLE COMMUNITIES IN ANCIENT ARMENIA\***

### **Abstract**

In ancient Armenia, during the reign of the Orontid (Ervanduni), Artaxiad (Artashesian), and early Arsacid (Arshakuni) dynasties, many sanctuaries dedicated to gods and goddesses of the state pantheon were constructed in various parts of the country. The Armenian pantheon, which existed during the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC – 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, was a coherent cultic system with a defined hierarchy of deities, associated festivals and rituals, as well as temples and shrines, and other sanctuaries. Temples were served by priests and priestesses who performed rituals and acted as intermediaries between people and the gods. The priesthood played a significant role in the spiritual and social life of the country, enjoying the patronage of the ruling class, which, in turn, relied on the spiritual elite in many matters.

As in other countries of the Ancient World, in Armenia there also existed temple communities that functioned as religious, economic, and administrative centers, integrating cultic practices with social and economic life. The leadership of the entire spiritual life of the country was concentrated in the hands of the priesthood and temple communities, which greatly enhanced their authority in the state and among broader layers of the people. They played a vital role in the social sphere of the kingdom and maintained close cooperation with

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the royal authority, sustaining both ideological and economic ties. The priesthood developed the tradition of deification of kings and the cult of royal ancestors, a striking manifestation of which was the dynastic pantheon of Antiochus I Orontid of Commagene on Mount Nemrut, featuring colossal sculptures of the gods and the king.

The state pantheon, priesthood and temple communities continued to function until the adoption of Christianity in Armenia at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, when the polytheistic religious system was supplanted by the new monotheistic faith. The ancient sanctuaries were converted into churches and monastic complexes, and the pagan priesthood was transformed into a Christian clerical hierarchy.

**Key words:** Armenian pantheon of gods, sanctuary, shrine, royal dynasty, Orontid, Artaxiad, Arsacid, priest, temple community, spiritual elite, deification of king, cult of royal ancestors.

## **Introduction**

In Armenia, during 6<sup>th</sup> BC – 4<sup>th</sup> AD centuries, owing to the development of economy, urban centres, crafts and trade, and a number of other factors, public thought and spiritual life flourished. Under the Orontid, Artaxiad, and early Arsacid royal dynasties, the unification of the state fostered the centralization of the cult in the state pantheon, with a certain hierarchy of deities and a ritual system. This period was also marked by the construction of many temples, shrines, altars, and other sanctuaries dedicated to the gods and goddesses of the state pantheon in different regions of the country. The role of mediator between the people and venerated deities was played by the priesthood – the class of religious leaders, who directed cult practices and had significant power and influence over the spiritual life of society.

The primary sources of data on ancient Armenian religion, particularly concerning sanctuaries, priesthood, and temple communities derive from Greek (Strabo) and early medieval

Armenian (Agathangelos, Movses Khorenatsi) historians, and the research on various aspects of these subjects has been undertaken by many scholars. Despite the sparse data, studies have enabled researchers, mainly historians and orientalists, to reconstruct a more or less complete picture of pre-Christian sanctuaries and cult attendants, the widespread temples with their communities which occupied a significant place in the political, economic, social, and spiritual life of the kingdom.

This article seeks to examine the available material within the framework of the Armenian state pantheon, paying particular attention to the major sanctuaries. It also aims to explore the organization of temple communities and the priesthood, their functions and role in public life, as well as to elucidate the interrelations between the ruling elite and the religious establishment. During the research, we specifically examine the relationship between the priestly class and the royal house, a dynamic that found expression both in mythology and cult traditions. The study primarily employs historical-comparative and analytical research methods, which make it possible to reconstruct the broader picture of the spiritual and cultural landscape of pre-Christian Armenia.<sup>1</sup>

### **Deities, Sanctuaries, Priests**

The Armenian pantheon was formed during the period of the Orontid, Artaxiad, and early Arsacid dynasties and functioned until the adoption of Christianity, constituting the core of the official state religion. The cult system evolved in accordance with its own internal principles and traditions, the origins of which can be traced back to

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<sup>1</sup>In our previous article on the relationship between the religious and state systems in ancient Armenia, we examined the period from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC up to the adoption of Christianity, beginning with the transitional stage to statehood and encompassing the pantheons of Hayasa, the Kingdom of Van, and Orontid-Artaxiad-Arsacid Armenia (see **Вардунян**. 2024, 3-23. The present article aims to explore in greater detail the Armenian state pantheon and priesthood during the Hellenistic period.

earlier stages in the formation of pre-Christian spiritual culture. Ancient beliefs were preserved and transformed within the framework of mythological thought, generating a variety of sacred phenomena and deities. The veneration of gods and goddesses constituted the basis of the pagan religion.

Emerging at the vibrant historical and cultural crossroads of the Ancient World, the Armenian pre-Christian mythology and cult system maintained notable connections with the religious traditions of neighboring peoples. In the eastern regions of the country, the intensification of contacts with the Iranian cultural sphere left a discernible imprint on ancient Armenian mythology. Already during the reign of the Orontids, starting from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Zoroastrian religion from Achaemenid Iran tried to penetrate Armenia, but despite some influence, the efforts to establish it in the country did not achieve decisive success.

On the other hand, beginning in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Armenia, like other regions in the Near East, became integrated into the expanding sphere of Hellenistic civilization spreading from the West. Its influence was evident in many spheres of material and spiritual culture. These new developments were particularly noticeable in the official pantheon, where Armenian deities were often associated with their Greek counterparts, or local theonyms were accompanied by corresponding Olympian names. The works of medieval Armenian historians attest that during the Orontid and Artaxiad periods statues and busts of deities were brought from the Hellenistic world and installed in Armenian temples. Movses Khorenatsi describes how King Artashes I, after building his capital city Artashat, erected a temple there and transferred from Bagaran the statue of Artemis (Anahit) along with all the native idols, but the statue of Apollo (Mihr) he placed outside the city, near the road.<sup>2</sup> Despite some Hellenistic influence, which imparted new shades to the local religious

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<sup>2</sup>Մովսես Խորենացի. 1991, 176-177:

environment, the Armenian gods and goddesses preserved their national character and were not identified with the Greek deities.

After the decline of the Artaxiad dynasty, especially in the early centuries of our era, Armenia, under the Arsacids, appeared in a complex geopolitical environment, positioned between the expansionist ambitions of Rome and Parthia, and undergoing significant religious and ideological turbulence. Nevertheless, during the whole period of 6<sup>th</sup> BC to the 4<sup>th</sup> AD centuries, in the Armenian pre-Christian religion the official pantheon held a key place in the spiritual life of the country, acting as a hierarchical structure, with certain functions of gods and goddesses.

The panteon was headed by the supreme couple – Aramazd and Anahit, whose cults were distinguished by the splendor of their ritual and the abundance of sanctuaries. Agathangelos mentions Aramazd, the father of gods, describing him as “the great and brave Aramazd, the creator of heaven and earth”, who provides and bestows fullness and prosperity on people.<sup>3</sup> He was the lord of Eternity, the fearsome god of thunder and lightning. Personifying good in the entire Universe, he ruled and patronized the gods in heaven and people on earth; the largest and brightest luminary in the night sky, Jupiter, was dedicated to him.<sup>4</sup> Many temples were built in honor of Aramazd, and the principal one was located in the region of Ani-Kamakh (Upper Armenia). Mazhan, the son of Artashes II, was ordained as high priest there.<sup>5</sup> This fact attests to the close connection between the worship of the supreme god and the royal house, extending even to the deification of royal ancestors and the entire royal family.<sup>6</sup> Another renowned

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<sup>3</sup>Ագաթանգեղոս.1983, 80:

<sup>4</sup>For more information about Aramazd and the other deities of ancient Armenian pantheon see **Вардумян.** 1991, 103-125; Հայոց պատմություն. 2024, 575-597.

<sup>5</sup>Մովսես Խորենացի. 1991, 183:

<sup>6</sup>For the custom of deifying the royal family see **Саркисян.** 1966, 3-26; **Սարգսյան.** 1966, 28-78.

sanctuary, mentioned by Movses Khorenatsi, was the shrine named “House of Aramazd and Astghik” on Mount Pashat (province of Vaspurakan).<sup>7</sup> Movses Khorenatsi also writes about a sanctuary dedicated to Aramazd in the area of Bagavan (in Bagrevand, the province of Ayrarat), in which an eternal flame, symbolizing the Sun, was kept.<sup>8</sup> Here, on August 11, was held the celebration of Navasard, one of the most beloved festivals announcing the beginning of the year. All the people participated in the feast under the patronage of the king, and the priesthood performed ceremonies in the temple.<sup>9</sup>

Many sanctuaries were likewise dedicated to the most beloved goddess Anahit – the Great Lady, the glory and life-giver of the nation, the mother of all beings, the patroness of the country, as Agatangelos described her. To the golden-haired Mother Goddess the Armenian kings would turn before going to battle in the hope of victory.<sup>10</sup> Among the numerous sanctuaries dedicated to her, the most renowned and affluent was the temple in Yeriza (the province of Yekegheats), where solemn festivities and rituals were performed, and sacrifices were offered to her golden image.<sup>11</sup>

In his account of the foundation of Artashat, Movses Khorenatsi

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<sup>7</sup>Սրբոյ Խորն մերոյ Մովսիսի Խորենացոյ Մատենագրութիւնք. 1865, 301:

<sup>8</sup>Մովսէս Խորենացի. 1991, 216:

<sup>9</sup>On the Aratsani river banks, the king, accompanied by the royal nobility, military leaders, and the assembled populace, including numerous pilgrims, gathered to partake in royal hunts, equestrian games and competitions, and various public festivities. During these celebrations, peasants presented the results of their harvests and local produce, artisans displayed their crafts, and *gusans* – the traditional bards, competed in the performance of their art, while the youth engaged in singing and dancing. The festival then continued in Ashtishat, centered around the seven sanctuaries dedicated to Aramazd, Anahit, Mihr, Vahagn, Astghik, Nane, and Tir (Խառնադասն-Առաքելյան. 2005, 249-250). A song from the Gokhtan region has been preserved, in which King Artashes I, lying on his deathbed, recalls with longing the Navasard celebration, when trumpets blared and drums thundered during the races for stags and hinds (Գրիգոր Մագիստրոսի թղթերը. 1910, 87).

<sup>10</sup>Ագաթանգեղոս. 1983, 40, 42, 46, 80:

<sup>11</sup>Ագաթանգեղոս. 1983, 436, 442:

notes that the King Artashes brought the statues of Anahit and other native idols, from the famous pagan sanctuary of Bagaran and erected them in the royal capital, and the statue of Mihr-Apollo “he put up outside the city near the road”.<sup>12</sup> Movses Khorenatsi mentions that Artashes set up the copper-gilded statues of Artemis-Anahit, Apollo-Mihr, and Vahagn-Heracles in the celebrated pagan town of Armavir, but when the king died, “the chief priests who were of the Vahuni family, ...supposed to be Vahagn their ancestor”, and they set up his statue in Taron, in their own village of Astishat.<sup>13</sup> In the royal capital of the Artaxiad dynasty, Artashat, there stood the temple named Anahtakan, distinguished for its beautiful ritual vessels. Also noteworthy were the shrines in Ashtishat and Bagavan, as well as the Throne of Anahit on Mount Aryuts in Darbnatskar (the province of Andzevatsyats).<sup>14</sup>

The descendants of the supreme divine couple also enjoyed the reverence of both the ruling elite and the wider populace; they, too, were honored through the establishment and dedication of temples and sanctuaries. Astghik, Nane, and Mihr inherited certain functions of their parents and, according to their role and significance, constituted the rank of principal gods. Among them was also Vahagn, one of the foremost deities, who in some sources is also mentioned as the son of Aramazd. Completing this hierarchy was Tir, the scribe of Aramazd, who occupied a position of particular closeness to the divine family. Astghik, the radiant goddess of love, was, like Anahit, associated with water, and at the Vardavar festival, celebrated in the heat of summer (during the Navasard season), the statues of both goddesses were ritually sprinkled with water<sup>15</sup>. Astghik was particularly venerated in the region of Taron. She was regarded as the beloved of Vahagn, and

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<sup>12</sup>Մովսես Խորենացի. 1991, 177:

<sup>13</sup>Մովսես Խորենացի. 1991, 122-123:

<sup>14</sup>Մելիք-Փաշայան. 1963, 103-125:

<sup>15</sup>About the feast, see Մանուկեան. 1969, 177-190; Խառնատյան-Առաքելյան. 2005, 201-226; Վարդումյան. 2020, 179-180:

their principal sanctuary, known as the “Chamber of Astghik and Vahagn”, was located in Ashtishat. Noteworthy as well were the temples in Artashat and Artamet, which housed remarkable cult images of the rose-fingered goddess. Dragon-stone monuments, called “vishaps”, symbolizing the fertile power of water, were also considered places of worship for Astghik.<sup>16</sup>

Nane, Astghik's sister, was revered as the goddess of feminine perfection, wisdom, ingenuity, the family hearth, and reproduction, having inherited the maternal attributes traditionally associated with Anahit. The principal temple of Nane was located in the village of Thil, in the province of Daranaghyats (Upper Armenia)<sup>17</sup>, while another important sanctuary stood in Bagavan.

The sons of the supreme couple also occupied especially significant places within the pantheon. Among them, the cult of Mihr reached a high degree of development under the Orontids, when together with Aramazd and Anahit, he formed a triad, particularly venerated by the royal household. Later, Artavazd II (55-34 BC) of the Artaxiad dynasty, even identified himself with his favored god.<sup>18</sup> Mihr, as a solar deity, came to embody the principles of goodness, justice, and law. The renowned sanctuary of Bagaharich housed a cult statue of Mihr-Hephaestus, where he was venerated as the patron of blacksmithing.<sup>19</sup> Especially significant was his temple in Garni, constructed during the reign of King Trdat I (52-58, 62-88), the founder of the Arshakid dynasty. As a solar sanctuary, its architectural design features twenty-four columns, symbolizing the hours of the day, and it is the only pagan temple in Armenia that has survived to our time.<sup>20</sup> The month of Mehekan (February) was dedicated to Mihr, and on its 14<sup>th</sup> day his special festival, Trndez, was celebrated with

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<sup>16</sup>Աբեղյան. 1975, 103-182:

<sup>17</sup>Մովսես Խորենացի. 1991, 127-128:

<sup>18</sup>Վարդումյան. 2024, 588:

<sup>19</sup>Ագաթանգեղոս. 1983, 444; Մովսես Խորենացի. 1991, 126-127:

<sup>20</sup>Առաքելյան. 1976, 27-29, 91-102; Тирация 1988, 162-164.



kindled bonfires, around which people sang and danced. The festival, heralding the advent of spring, was intended to warm the earth with fire, thereby invoking the life-giving power of the sun and hastening the return of warmer days (it is celebrated up to now).<sup>21</sup>

Another solar deity was Vahagn, lord of thunder and lightning, the god of war who embodied courage and masculine strength. Movses Khorenatsi has recorded a hymn to Vahagn, which symbolically represents the birth of the sun from the cosmic “Purple Sea”, itself a metaphor for the universe. In written sources Vahagn is also depicted as Dragon-slayer.<sup>22</sup> The privileged custodians of Vahagn's cult were the priestly nakharars of the Vahuni dynasty, who traced their lineage to the valiant god himself, and here we have a striking example of priest-theophors in ancient Armenia.<sup>23</sup> The most splendid of the sanctuaries dedicated to Vahagn was the Vahevanyan temple in Taron, situated on the bank of the Euphrates – a magnificent shrine richly adorned with gold, silver, and numerous offerings donated by great kings. Also noteworthy were the sanctuary of Vahagn Dragon-Slayer on the slopes of Mount Karke,<sup>24</sup> the shrine in the area of Ahevakan on the slopes of Mount Varaga, and others.

The hierarchy of the principal deities was completed by Tir, the patron of education and knowledge, writing and prophecy, who served as the scribe and messenger of Aramazd.<sup>25</sup> Among his sacred sites were Tretuk in Syunik, and the mountain of Tirinkatar, on the south-western slope of Mount Aragats. Most renowned, however, was the temple of arts and sciences in the village of Yerazmuyn (the province of Vostan), where a copper-gilded statue of the god was erected. The cult of Tir at this sanctuary included the practice of dream divination, for he was believed to inspire dreams and interpret

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<sup>21</sup>Մանուկեան. 1969, 59-70; Խառնադյան-Առաքելյան. 2005, 53-62; Վարդումյան. 2020, 174-176:

<sup>22</sup>Մովսես Խորենացի. 1991, 85:

<sup>23</sup>Մխիթարյան. 1989, 81-86:

<sup>24</sup>Ագաթանգեղոս. 1983, 452:

<sup>25</sup>Ագաթանգեղոս. 1983, 435:

them,<sup>26</sup> and probably the kings appealed to his predictions before going into battle.

In addition to these principal gods and goddesses, the deities Amanor, Vanatur, Spandaramet, Demeter, Gisane, and Barshamin are also attested in written sources. Amanor and Vanatur were deities associated with the New Year, whose main sanctuary was located at Bagavan, where, as noted above, the festival of Navasard was celebrated.<sup>27</sup> The name “Amanor” in Armenian literally signifies “New Year”, and the deity was accordingly regarded as the patron of the festival, celebrated on August 11. During this occasion, Vanatur was venerated as the provider of hospitality, offering shelter and lodging to the multitude of pilgrims who gathered for the feast. The temple priests distributed portions of the offerings donated to Vanatur among travelers, pilgrims, and guests.<sup>28</sup>

Sandaramet was considered the ruler of abysses and inferno, and hell was regarded as his dwelling place.<sup>29</sup> The worship of the deities Demeter and Gisane was particularly widespread in Taron, where they founded the city of Vishap (Dragon), also connected with underworld. A statue of the god Barshamin, fashioned from white ivory and crystal and plated with silver, was erected in the shrine of the village of Tordan (the province of Daranaghyats).<sup>30</sup> The cults of these deities were also associated with royal houses and enjoyed their patronage.

### **Priesthood, Temple Communities, and Nobility**

In the period under review, sanctuary construction in Armenia reached a particularly significant scale. Accordingly, questions concerning their functioning, the organization of their economy, and

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<sup>26</sup>Ազգաթանգեղոս. 1983, 436; Ալիշան. 1895, 288-292:

<sup>27</sup>Ազգաթանգեղոս. 1983, 464, 466; Ալիշան. 1895, 256, 302:

<sup>28</sup>Ալիշան. 1895, 160-161:

<sup>29</sup>Ալիշան. 1895, 311-312; Վարդույան, 2024, 594:

<sup>30</sup>Ազգաթանգեղոս. 1983, 440, Ալիշան. 1895, 312-314:

the activities of the priesthood inevitably arise in the study of the state pantheon. A number of scholars have addressed various aspects of these issues, analyzing the principal characteristics of ancient Armenian priestly institutions and temple communities.<sup>31</sup>

In the earliest period, the priesthood in Armenia, as in other Ancient Eastern countries, was small in number and lacked institutional independence; religious rituals were performed by secular authorities – regional rulers or the king himself. But, in the process of the advancement of priesthood as a separate layer of society, it already represented a hierarchical organization in which the leading role was played by the upper echelon, consisting of relatives or close associates of the royal family.<sup>32</sup> Going back to the Urartian period (9<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC), it is observed that temple priests were usually appointed from among the king's relatives or trusted associates, while the high priest of the kingdom was generally the king himself.<sup>33</sup> The same trajectory of development can be seen in Armenia in the post-Urartian period, that is from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC to the III century AD. When King Ervand of the Orontid dynasty founded the city of Bagaran, he appointed his brother to serve as its high priest.<sup>34</sup> Tigran the Great (95-55 BC) himself performed the duties of high priest in

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<sup>31</sup>Периханян. 1959, 5-6, 155-157 et al.; Саркисян. 1960, Սարգսյան. 1966; Կրկյաշարյան. 1963, 55-66; Կրկյաշարյան. 1970, 128-158; Մեղիք-Փաշայան. 1963, 119, 122; Մխիթարյան. 1989, 81-86; Հակոբյան. 2001, 145-156; Հակոբյան. 2020:

<sup>32</sup>In ancient Egypt, priests acted on behalf of the pharaoh, essentially representing his person; in Sumer, the head of the community was both a leader and a priest; in the Hittite Empire, the king himself was considered a sacred figure and fulfilled the role of chief priest (Токарев. 1964, 294-205, 302-303, 316-318). The Greek geographer Strabo, in his description of the ancient temple community in Cappadocian Comana, noted: “The priest is master of the temple, and also of the temple servants... He is second in rank... after the king; and in general the priests belonged to the same family as the kings»; they were the owners and rulers of the temple land and managed the profits from the plots cultivated by temple slaves (Strabo. 1917, 12, 2-3).

<sup>33</sup>Հմայակյան. 1986, 120-123:

<sup>34</sup>Մովսես Խորենացի. 1991, 166:

one of the temples dedicated to the goddess Anahit. Trdat I (63–88 AD) was also a priest. The high priest of the temple of Aramazd in Ani was Mazhan, the king's brother. It was not uncommon for a priest-ruler to attain the status of a nakharar (great noble), or for an entire nakharar family to be regarded as hereditary attendants of the cult of a particular deity. For instance, the worship of Vahagn was entrusted to a special priestly-nakharar lineage known as the Vahuni, who were believed to be descendants of the god. The priests and priestesses of this lineage enjoyed the protection of the state.<sup>35</sup>

The cult functions of the Armenian priesthood were very diverse. All the most significant feasts of a nationwide character or associated with the cults of particular deities of the pantheon, were held under the leadership of priests, with the gathering of a huge number of people from nearby and distant cities, towns and villages. This circumstance also strengthened the socio-economic potential of the temples and priesthood in the country. The traditional and periodic nature of the organization of such celebrations turned the areas around temple complexes not only into places of pilgrimage, but also into large fairs, centers of trade and exchange relations. During certain festivals, sacrifices of animals, birds, plants and fruits were made to the gods in temples and shrines under the direct supervision of priests, and the entire population participated in these ceremonies.

The official festival was held in the temple and was attended by the ruling elite, the middle class, and the common people. The ritual was solemn, conducted according to ceremonial rules, under the joint patronage of the spiritual and secular elite, and accompanied by royal festivities and entertainments. In contrast, the public celebration was simpler and more spontaneous, taking place in homes or in open spaces, such as town and village squares or the countryside, and was accompanied by songs and dances, games, costumed and masked

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<sup>35</sup> Մովսես Խորենացի. 1991, 122:

performances, and lively events.<sup>36</sup> Both types of events stimulated the development of communication routes and the organization of various craft industries on the spot, which contributed to the emergence of permanent trade and artisan quarters around the temple complex. The temple priesthood developed a system of religious and mythological ideas, rooted deep in antiquity, associated with the state religion. It established the genealogy of the deities of the Armenian pantheon as a means of expressing the unity and kinship of all regions and ethnic groups within the unified state. The priesthood in pre-Christian Armenia exerted a great influence on all aspects of spiritual life, on the development of art, scientific knowledge and literature, temples, served as centers of culture, and held ideological authority within the ancient Armenian state.

Sanctuaries and temple communities of Asia Minor and Armenia were classified by A. Perikhanyan into three structural types. The first type comprised sanctuaries located outside settlements, functioning as theocratic communities with independent economies and holding either local or national significance. The second type encompassed temple communities that included villages and towns, combining extensive landholdings with relatively large populations. The third type was represented by temple cities, around which trade and craft quarters developed, thereby fostering the expansion of economic networks and transit trade. These large temple complexes played a crucial role in the religious and socio-economic life of Armenia during this period.<sup>37</sup>

S. Krkiasharyan, studying the cities of ancient Armenia, noticed that, as in other Eastern countries (Babylon, Syria), here also, the entire population of urban centers was closely connected to the sanctuary situated at the heart of the city. In such temple-cities, the priesthood had considerable influence on various aspects of spiritual

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<sup>36</sup>For Armenian festivals and rituals, see Մանուկեան. 1969; Петросян. 2024; Խառնաշայկ-Առաքելյան. 2005:

<sup>37</sup>Периханян. 1959, 5-6, 155-157 et al.

and social life. Among the most significant of these cultic centers were Armavir, the capital of the Orontids, as well as Ashtishat, Bagaran, and Garni. The temples and the priesthood held control over writing, literature, schooling and education, the regulation and administration of civil acts (birth, marriage, family, and familial relations), the definition of laws, judicial authority, divination, intercession before the gods, and even medicine, in short – the entire spiritual life.<sup>38</sup>

High priests enjoyed great authority and were considered close to the king, holding their positions for life. In Armenia, as in other Hellenistic countries, kings endowed temples and their priests with vast land holdings and a large workforce, which constituted the main source of economic and political power for the priestly class.<sup>39</sup> The names of several prominent priests are also preserved in historical sources, such as Ervaz, Mazhan, Voghyump.<sup>40</sup> An interesting phenomenon in the heathen religious life of Armenia has been observed – the institution of the priest-theophor, a high-ranking priest originating from the ruling clan, who bore the name of the deity he served. Such priests wielded considerable political authority and even commanded a contingent of troops.<sup>41</sup>

Temple communities derived income mainly from their extensive landholdings, where they were engaged in agriculture and cattle breeding. Certain sanctuaries of the goddess Anahit, for instance, possessed vast estates (dastakerts), settlements, and forests, while the Vahuni clan of Taron owned a number of villages, numerous warriors, and even the entire province of Hashteanak was under their control.<sup>42</sup> In addition to income from landholdings, temples amassed wealth through donations from kings and princes, especially from

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<sup>38</sup>Կրկյաշարյան. 1963, 55-66; Կրկյաշարյան. 1970, 128-158:

<sup>39</sup>Կրկյաշարյան. 1994, 84-96:

<sup>40</sup>Մովսէս Խորենացի. 1991, 175, 183, 176:

<sup>41</sup>Մխիթարյան. 1989, 81-86:

<sup>42</sup>Մելիք-Փաշայան. 1963, 119, 122:

wartrophies. Agathangelos witnesses, that after a successful military campaign the king was obliged to distribute a considerable portion of the booty to both the army and the temples.<sup>43</sup>

In the countries of the Ancient East, rulers always sought to endow their authority with a supernatural dimension, presenting themselves as intermediaries between humans and the gods or as divine heirs, and at times even proclaiming themselves and their ancestors to be deities. While examining the phenomenon of king deification and royal ancestor worship in ancient Armenia, G. Sargsyan argues that a vivid example of this tradition is the sanctuary of Commagene, the family pantheon of Antiochus I Orontid. The monument, situated on Mount Nemrut in the Armenian Taurus Range, is constructed upon a 50-meter-high artificial tumulus rising from the mountainslope. At this site are colossal stone statues of deities, each enthroned upon seats measuring approximately eight meters in height. Greek inscriptions identify these figures as Zeus-Oromazd (Armenian Aramazd), Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes (Armenian Mihr), Heracles-Artagnes (Armenian Vahagn), the patron goddess of Commagene (Armenian Anahit), as well as King Antiochus himself. Nearby stand the statues of a lion and an eagle, traditional emblems of royal authority. The sculptural ensemble is symmetrically reproduced on both the eastern and western terraces of the tumulus, and the deities and the king, enthroned in majesty, symbolically greet the rising sun at dawn and bid farewell to it at dusk. After describing all this, G. Sargsyan shows that King Antiochus himself was regarded as a solar figure endowed with divine attributes, exercising authority granted to him by the gods. In this capacity, he ensured the prosperity of his people and acted as a patron of diverse spheres of economic and social

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<sup>43</sup>The historian describes that, after his victory over the Persian army, King Khosrov of the Arsacid dynasty dedicated lavish offerings to the sanctuaries and temple altars associated with his royal house. These included white bulls and goats, white horses and mules, ornate gold and silver jewelry, and precious gems. In addition, he distributed one-fifth of the abundant spoils of war to the priests and the army (**Ագաթանգեղոս**. 1983, 26, 28).

life. In its own time, the Commagene pantheon functioned as one of the principal sacred places of the kingdom, serving as a venue for ritual ceremonies, the celebration of pagan feasts, and the veneration of Antiochus Orontid and his dynasty. The Nemrut sanctuary, as a monument of outstanding cultural significance, holds exceptional value for the study of the history of Eastern Hellenism and the Hellenistic era of Armenia.<sup>44</sup> The material evidence preserved at the site offers insights into a wide range of issues, including the political history of the Orontid royal family, the religious and ideological conceptions of the period, artistic representations, costume traditions, as well as the organization of temple economies and land relations.

The Armenian pantheon and priesthood continued to function until the adoption of Christianity as the state religion at the beginning of 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, when the old faith was officially replaced by the new – Christian religion. During the reign of Trdat (Tiridates) III the Great (298-330), many churches, monastic complexes, and chapels were constructed, often on the very sites and using the same stones of the ruined heathen temples, shrines, and other sanctuaries. Some members of the former priesthood became the first clergy of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Certain ancient deities found echoes in the images of Christian saints, and numerous heathen festivals were reinterpreted and transformed into Christian feasts. In general, many elements of the pre-Christian past have survived to this day in the form of folk Christianity.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusions

In Armenia, with the formation of a unified state during Orontid, Artaxiad, and early Arsacid dynasties, the state pantheon

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<sup>44</sup>For the Commagene pantheon and the veneration of kings and royal family, see Սարգսյան. 1966, 23-78, 129; Առաքելյան. 1976, 20-24; Тирациян. 1988, 109-117.

<sup>45</sup>For folk Christianity in Armenian festive life, see Վարդումյան. 2020, 163-186:



emerged, characterized by a distinct hierarchy of gods and goddesses, whose cults embodied the mythological concepts of ancient society and were venerated throughout the country. The pantheon was organized as a divine family, headed by the supreme couple – the almighty father of the gods and the great mother goddess, who ruled over both the celestial deities and humankind. Their descendants constituted the hierarchy of major gods, whose cults were associated with various mythological concepts linked to nature and society, while a group of lesser deities, personifying different spheres of social life, completed the structure of the pantheon.

As the religious and mythological system of the pantheon became more consolidated, temple complexes and an organized priesthood emerged, within which priests and priestesses guided the spiritual life of society. They played a crucial role in the ideological, socio-economic, and cultural spheres of the country. The temple communities and priesthood developed a system of religious and cultic norms deeply rooted in antiquity, formulating a genealogy of the pantheon's deities that symbolized the unity and kinship of the various regions and ethnic groups within the centralized state. Under the patronage of the king and nobility, who often served as high priests themselves, a tradition of royal deification emerged, expressed in the veneration of the king and his ancestors, as well as the construction of dynastic pantheons, one of which has been preserved on Mount Nemrut in the Armenian Taurus.

The adoption of Christianity in Armenia introduced an entirely new reality into the spiritual life of the nation: the worship of pagan deities was replaced by the veneration of Christian saints, monasteries were established on the sites of former temples, and some members of the pagan priesthood entered the service of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

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### **Ամփոփում**

Հին Հայաստանում Երվանդունիների, Արտաշեսյանների և վաղ Արշակունիների արքայատոհմերի ժամանակաշրջանում երկրի տարբեր մասերում կառուցվել են պետական դիցարանի աստվածներին և աստվածուհիներին նվիրված բազմաթիվ սրբավայրեր: Հայոց դիցարանը պաշտամունքային կուռ համակարգ էր՝ աստվածությունների սահմանված աստիճանակարգով, նրանց աղերսվող տոներով և ծեսերով, տաճարներով, մեհյաններով, խորաններով և այլ սրբավայրերով հանդերձ: Տաճարներում ծառայում էին քրմեր և քրմուհիներ, որոնք իրականացնում էին ծիսակատարությունը, և նրանք էին միջնորդները մարդկանց ու աստվածների միջև:

Քրմությունը կարևոր դեր էր խաղում հասարակության կյանքում և վայելում իշխող դասի հովանավորությունը, որն իր հերթին շատ հարցերում ապավինում էր հոգևոր վերնախավին:

Ինչպես հին Փոքր Ասիայի երկրներում, այնպես էլ Հայաստանում, գոյություն ունեին տաճարային համայնքներ, որոնք գործում էին որպես կրոնական, տնտեսական և վարչական կենտրոններ՝ միավորելով պաշտամունքային սովորույթները սոցիալական և տնտեսական կյանքի հետ: Երկրի ողջ հոգևոր կյանքի ղեկավարությունը կենտրոնացած էր քրմության ձեռքում, և տաճարային համայնքները մեծապես բարձրացնում էին նրանց հեղինակությունը պետության մեջ ու ժողովրդի լայն շերտերի շրջանում: Նրանք նշանակալի դեր էին կատարում նաև երկրի հանրային ոլորտներում, սերտ համագործակցություն մեջ էին թագավորական իշխանության հետ՝ պահպանելով ինչպես գաղափարական, այնպես էլ տնտեսական կապերը: Քրմությունը զարգացրեց արքաների և արքայական նախնիների աստվածացման և պաշտամունքի ավանդույթը: Դրա վառ դրսևորումը Կոմմագենեի Նեմրուֆ լեռան՝ Անտիոքոս Ա Երվանդունու տոհմական պանթեոնն է, որում թագավորի և աստվածների հսկայական արձաններն են:

Պետական դիցարանը, քրմությունը և տաճարային համայնքները հարատևեցին մինչև Հայաստանում քրիստոնեության ընդունումը (IV դ. ), երբ բազմաստվածային կրոնական համակարգը փոխարինվեց նոր՝ միաստվածային հավատքով: Շատ հին սրբավայրեր վերածվեցին եկեղեցիների և վանական համալիրների, իսկ հեթանոս քրմական դասը



վերափոխվեց քրիստոնյա հոգևորականության:

**Քանալի բաներ'** Հայոց դիցարան, սրբավայր, մեհյան, արքայատոհմ, Երվանդունի, Արտաշեսյան, Արշակունի, քուրմ, տաճարային համայնք, հոգևոր վերնախավ, թագավորի աստվածացում, արքայական նախնիների պաշտամունք:

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**Древней Армении**

### **Резюме**

В Древней Армении, в период правления династий Ервандуни (Ервандидов), Арташесян (Арташесидов) и ранних Аршакуни (Аршакидов), в различных частях страны было построено множество святилищ, посвященных богам и богиням государственного пантеона. Армянский пантеон представлял собой целостную культовую систему с четкой иерархией божеств, связанными с ними праздниками и ритуалами, храмами, капищами, алтарями и другими святилищами. Храмы обслуживались жрецами и жрицами, которые совершали обряды и выступали посредниками между людьми и богами. Жречество играло значительную роль в духовной и общественной жизни страны, пользуясь покровительством правящего класса, который, в свою очередь, во многих вопросах опирался на духовную элиту.

Как и в странах древней Малой Азии, в Армении также существовали храмовые общины, выполнявшие функции религиозных, экономических и административных центров, интегрируя культовые практики с общественно-экономической жизнью. Сосредоточение главенства над всей духовной жизнью страны в руках жрецов и храмовых общин значительно укрепляло их авторитет в государстве и среди широких слоев

населения. Они играли важную роль также в общественной жизни и тесно сотрудничали с царской властью, поддерживая как идеологические, так и экономические связи. Жрецы развивали традицию обожествления и культа царей и царских предков, ярким проявлением которой является династический пантеон Антиоха I Ервандуни в Коммагене, на горе Немрут, с огромными скульптурами богов и царя.

Государственный пантеон, жречество и храмовые общины продолжали свое существование вплоть до принятия христианства в Армении в начале IV в., когда политеистическая религиозная система была вытеснена новой монотеистической верой. Многие древние святилища были преобразованы в церкви и монастырские комплексы, а языческое жречество трансформировалось в христианскую духовную иерархию.

**Ключевые слова:** Армянский пантеон богов, святилище, капище, царская династия, Ервандиды, Арташесиды, Аршакиды, жрец, храмовая община, духовная элита, обожествление царя, культ царских предков.