

AT THE SUMMIT OF MOUNT ARARAT-MASIS

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The most valuable and magnificent names of Ararat and Masis for us Armenians have been known since earliest times. Ararat is mentioned in the Bible as a name mountains where Noah's ark rested after the Flood subsided¹. The word *Ararat* is presented as *Armenia* In Vulgatae and King James Bible². It is suggested that the names of both Aratta (the 3rd millennium BC) of the Sumerian and Urartu (Van Kingdom, the first half of the 1st millennium BC) of the Assyrian cuneiform sources are derivations of the name of Ararat³.



Great Ararat-Masis (5165 m) and Lesser Masis (Sis) (3925 m)

Armenian historical sources preserved several mythological and folk legends connected with Great Masis and Hayk Patriarch's generations (the 3rd-1st millennia BC) and kings of Great Armenia Artashes I (189-160 BC) and Trdat III (298-330 AD)⁴.

While visiting Armenia William of Rubruck and Marko Polo saw Ararat and left testimonies about it. William of Rubruck had been told an Armenian tradition about the

¹ Genesis 8:4.

² Kings 19:37 and Isa 37:38.

³ Պետրոսյան Լ.Ն., Հայ ժողովրդի փոխադրամիջոցներ, Հայ ազգաբանություն և բանահյուսություն. ժողովածու, 6, Երևան, 1974, էջ 123: Kavoukjian M., Armenia, Subartu and Sumer. The Indo-European Homeland and Ancient Mesopotamia. Transl. from the Armenian original by N. Ouzounian, Montreal, 1987, pp. 59-81. cf. Մովսիսյան Ա., Հնագույն պետությունը Հայաստանում, Արատտա, Երևան, 1992, էջ 29-32: Դանիելյան Է., Հայոց պատմական և քաղաքակրթական արժեհամակարգի պաշտպանության անհրաժեշտությունը, "Լրաբեր" հաս. գիտ., 2010, N 3, էջ 54:

⁴ Մովսէս Խորենացի, Պատմութիւն Հայոց, 1991, էջ 40, 84: Ագաթանգեղոս, Պատմություն Հայոց, Երևան, 1977, էջ 117:

Noah's ark on Ararat which he described in his book *The Journey of William Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World* (1253-1255). Marco Polo, in journals of his journey to China in 1271, wrote, "In the heart of Greater Armenia is a high mountain, shaped like a cube (or cup), on which Noah's ark is said to have rested, whence it is called the Mountain of Noah's Ark". Identifying the place as Mt. Ararat, Marco Polo wrote, "On the summit the snow lies so deep all the year round that no one can ever climb it; this snow never entirely melts, but new snow is forever falling on the old, so that the level rises"⁵. Later many travelers, clergymen and official representatives of different countries visiting Armenia admired Ararat. Among them were a Catholic clergymen Odoric of Pordenone (1286-1331), a Castilian traveller and writer and ambassador in the East sent by King Henry III of Castile, Ruy González de Clavijo (died 2 April 1412), a Venetian nobleman, merchant and diplomat Ambrogio Contarini (1429-1499), English merchant John Newberry (1581), a French traveler Joseph Pitton de Tournefort (1701) and et al.

In 1829 the professor of natural philosophy Parrot (from the University of Dorpat, at present the University of Tartu, Estonia) traveled to Armenia to climb Mt. Ararat for geological studies. The Armenian Catholicos Yeprem I Dzoraghegtsi (1809-1830) assigned Khachatur Abovyan as a guide and a translator for the expedition. On October 9, 1829 they reached the summit, where Abovian dug a hole in the ice and erected a wooden cross. Another ascent of Ararat was in 1845 by the German mineralogist Otto Wilhelm Hermann von Abich who climbed Ararat with S. Sargsyan. The next year inspired by Abikh's ascent Abovian took part in the ascent of Ararat was with the Englishman Henry Danby Seymour in 1846.

In the course of the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century there were new expeditions to the summit of Ararat⁶.

In the autumn of 1920, during the days of Armenian-Turkish war the Kemalists occupied the district of Surmalu. By the 1921 illegitimate treaties of Moscow and Kars, with the annexation of Kars comprising part of Eastern Armenia to Turkey, the perpetrator of the Armenian Genocide, started the history of "captivity" of free Masis - Ararat, the highest peak of the Armenian Highland, the cradle of Armenians.

According to the Bible, Noah's Ark is said to have finally rested on the mountain Ararat after the great flood. Mount Ararat-Masis is considered the national symbol of Armenia and thus is of principal importance to the coat of arms. Mount Ararat (along with Little Ararat) was depicted on the coat of arms of the First Republic of Armenia. The coat of arms was designed by Alexander Tamanian and Hakob Kojoyan. After the fall of RA and establishment of the Armenian SSR, taking into consideration spiritual significance for Armenians of Ararat-Masis, now beyond the «border», but visible from almost every corner of the Armenian Highland, the Soviet authorities put up with the image of Ararat on the coat of arms of Soviet Armenia, depicted by the might of the

⁵ <http://www.unexplainedstuff.com/Places-of-Mystery-and-Power/Mt-Ararat.html>

⁶ Մելքոնյան Ա., Հայոց անմահության խորհուրդը, Երևան, 2006, էջ 44-46:

painter Martiros Saryan. Even during the hardest years of the Soviet rule, in the period of repressions of 1930s the Armenians continued to perceive Ararat as a symbol of immortality and majesty. It remained a source of creative inspiration for Armenian writers and artists both in the Homeland and in the Diaspora.

In 1950s the routes up Masis were re-opened for the mountaineers of the world. Gradually Ararat turned into one of the centers of international mountaineering thus bringing great financial benefit to the Turkish authorities. But for Armenians the iron curtains of the roads of the so much desired mountain peak were not raised.

The Armenians tried to be on top of the biblical peak within numerous foreign mountaineering organizations. From one publication of the magazine "Garun" ("Spring") it is evident that our compatriots Hamlet Nersisyan and Masis and Grigor Barseghyans had that luck in August 1986.

Mt. Ararat is also depicted on the coat of arms of the Third Republic of Armenia. Along with other symbols reflecting the historical roots of the Armenian statehood, there is a depiction (in the center of the coat of arms) of the Mount Ararat with Noah's Ark on the top. During the years of existence of the independent Republic of Armenia, on September 23, 1992 Alexander Aghababyan, Grigor Taturyan, Alexander Mayilyan and Hayk Tonoyan climbed the peak of Masis as members of the expedition including German, Austrian, Swiss and Swedish mountaineers who were accustomed to overcoming various challenging peaks. The accompanying Turkish soldiers did not allow making videos⁷.

The Armenian audience had an opportunity to watch an interesting video on Armenian TV about the ascent to Ararat of our compatriot Sergey Gayfajyan (from Akhaltskha by birth) during which he hoisted the state flag of the Republic of Armenia on the summit.

At the beginning of 2000s, seeing the ascents or the attempts of ascents of our compatriots from Armenia and the Diaspora, moreover the natural urge of Armenians to hoist the state flag on the top of Mt. Ararat, the Turkish authorities first prohibited the ascent of one Armenian expedition in 2001 (the group included Armenian politician Paruyr Hayrikyan, well-known photographer of the Diaspora Hrayr Baze Khacheryan et al.), and then in order to give permission to climb the peak they required the Mountaineers Union of Russia to exclude from their group the member of the same group Vardan Vardanyan, living in Russia⁸.

Prime Minister Erdogan's government did not even hesitate to make a decision about officially prohibiting the ascent of the representatives of the Armenian people to the top of Ararat. Such a decision was a gross violation of international law and contradicted the obligations Turkey had undertaken in front of the civilized world.

Nevertheless, in 2005-2006 a great number of our compatriots through different channels, bypassing the "legislative" barriers of the despotic country, managed to

⁷ Հորիզոն, 1992, 27 հունվար:

⁸ He filed a lawsuit against the Turkish mountaineering company.

realize their cherished dream. On a frosty day in July 2006 due to the efforts of Gevorg Hatchyan, a lecturer of Yerevan State University, Hrach Makaryan, an experienced mountaineer, Albert Toneyan and Mkhitar Mkhitarian, the heart of the great Armenian poet Hovhannes Shiraz found its eternal rest in the everlasting ice cover of the top of Mount Ararat. That had been the poet's desire.

During the recent years the incredible stories of different groups about reaching the summit of Ararat, perturbed and inspired new layers of the Armenian nation.

In September 2006, during the successive pilgrimage to Western Armenia we met a Kurd in Kogovit (present Bayazet) who had been experienced in guiding expeditions to Mount Ararat. Samvel Baroyan, an experienced mountaineer (who had conquered Mount Elbrus as well), and Vahram Mkrtchyan immediately started a lively conversation with him.

I noticed that the idea of climbing Ararat had started to seriously attract my other friends as well - researchers Liparit Petrosyan and Khoren Kotanjyan, who were fond of mountaineering.

A whole year - up to the summer of 2007, during the negotiations young Orientologist Ashot Soghomonyan, as well as Liparit and Khoren carried out with the above-mentioned Kurd, an agreement was reached to make the ascent at the end of July. Khoren and Liparit were astonishingly sure that I was also able to do it and often repeated that the hike could not be carried out without a historian. But I, never having had the chance or, in a sense, the courage to climb Abul (3301m) in my native Javakhk and Aragats (4090m) in RA, realized that my friends overestimated my abilities by wishing to accompany me to the unreachable Ararat. In their case perhaps it was explicable. They climbed Aragats numerous times, had some mountaineering experience and were very well aware of the details of the magnificent ascent of their friend Hrach Makaryan in 2006 and all this prompted that the idea was quite feasible.

The nearer was the day of the journey, the stronger was my friends' pressure on me. Samvel Baroyan and Vahram Mkrtchyan had joined that pressure. In order to dispel my doubts concerning my health, Khoren Kotanjyan, with confidence characteristic of him, assured that there was no reason to worry and before the hike we would undergo a medical examination, and besides, we would climb Aragats which was successfully fulfilled in the second half of July.

At the beginning of August 2007 I had a short rest at the shore of the Black Sea with my family. In those days it seemed incredible that several days later I would reach the height of 5165m from the sea surface - 0m. This feeling made my journey even more mysterious. On August 5 we set out for my native Javakhk. Bidding farewell to the members of my family in my ancestral home the next day I joined my friends that had arrived from Yerevan.

We entered the country of our grandfathers, Western Armenia, through the border checkpoint of Vale, not far from Akhaltskha. Once again we were in Kars, Ani, Berkri waterfall, Van. We saw the reconstructed Church of the Holy Cross of Akhtamar and on

August 8, early in the morning we again came to Kogovit. There, the Kurds preparing the hike were waiting for us. Bidding farewell to our other friends who had come to a pilgrimage, ten of us came to the house of the manager of the expedition. Here we received mountaineering equipment like metal claws for strengthening the shoes, spotlights, glasses, canes, a modern compass (GPS). We were “armed” with high-quality photographic technology and photo cameras. As one year earlier, this time also my brother Karapet had given me the Canon video camera of ATV-12 Television Company in Akhalkalak which was meant for professional filming.

The expedition had a very original composition. Many of us - Samvel Baroyan, Khoren Kotanjyan, Liparit Petrosyan, Vahram Mkrtchyan and I were old friends. We had made friends with Sergey Chatrchyan and Artak Haroyan when we climbed Aragats on July 29. The opportunity to get acquainted with Artak Gevorgyan, Liparit's cousin had presented itself about one month before, after one of my lectures at a conference of Armenian youth in Tsaghkadzor. We were joined by surgeon Armen Hovhannisyan, sharing the same ideas, who had chosen that hard way with his son Rafayel, a student of the second year at Yerevan state university of economics.

The farther we went by the minibus loaded with tents and food towards east, by the earthy and rocky road, the bigger became the majestic massif of Ararat. Under the weight of the people and loads the cooling system of the engine could not ensure the water cooling and at the height of 2200m we had to stop the ascent by car and continue the way on foot. It was already noon. After unloading our things from the car we stayed under the burning sunrays for quite a long time, while the accompanying Kurds noisily loaded the things on horses and donkeys. In the light backpacks most of us had, we placed the photo cameras and first necessity goods. Not all of us got mountaineering sticks. More experienced friends generously gave us their “working tools” that had a very important role during the whole ascent.

The first day of the ascent, August 8, was not chosen by chance. In case of a three-day successful ascent the Armenian group would be on the top on August 10, i.e. **on a very symbolic day for Armenians, the day of the Treaty of Sevres**. It was the ideological meaning of the ascent.

We said the “Holy father” near a rock to the right side of the earthy highway. We were to make the first steps by the earthy-rocky ascending road still climbable by powerful machines. Our group's ascent of the first day by the relatively mild slope rich in Alpine meadows was successful. In a flat land at the height of 3200m above sea level where tents of various mountaineering groups were located, we, the Armenian mountaineers, stopped for rest. The terrain had turned into a large tent village. Different foreign tent groups could be seen. After supper we continued the conversation which first of all concerned the things to be done the next day.

In the morning of August 9 we continued the ascent. The way up became quite difficult. The trail was narrow; the animals also went up with great difficulty. Gradually the meadows were replaced by rocks where we noticed isles of colorful mountain

flowers. There were no more mountain sources, a cold wind was blowing and the clouds covered the mounts of both Great Masis and Lesser Masis (or Sis), as well as our surroundings. In addition there was a feeling of oxygen starvation and each of us had an incredible feeling of being in extraterrestrial conditions. When the altimeter recorded the height of 4000m we found it necessary to congratulate each other.

Our group again set up a camp among innumerable rocks on the slope at the height of 4200m, at the brim of the beautiful waterfall created by the stream falling down from the eternal glacier into the south-western rift of Masis. The cold made us send the animals back to the camp at the height of 3200m⁹.

Towards evening the sky grew darker and the rainbow came out after the lightning and rain to the south in the direction of Lesser Masis and Artaz region.

Before the hardest ascent preparatory works were necessary - adjusting metal claws on the shoes, choosing warm clothes, placing first necessity goods, photo cameras and food into the backpacks. Many of us were exhausted. Inexperienced mountaineers had oxygen starvation. Since the last "attack" was to be made at night, we were suggested to sleep earlier than usual. But hardly anybody could do it. On the third day of the hike, in the morning of August 10, at 3 AM, one hour after having tea the crucial ascent started with winter clothing and spotlights.

At around 6:30 AM our expedition reached the eternal snow cover. Then the walk on the ice continued with the help of the metal claws on the shoes. There our guys for the first time hoisted the tricolor flag they had brought. I reminded my friends that it was August 10, the day of the Treaty of Sevres, the symbolic day of realization of cherished dreams for Armenians.

It was dawning: the view was splendid. Lesser Masis (Sis) was to the south, the valley of Kogovit was to the south-west and while the sun was rising, the shade of Great Masis, slowly stretching and presenting a mysterious image, was noticed on it. The majestic peak was to the east.

Soon we overcame the line of the 5000m height. We recorded that success by taking photos hands up, all the five fingers (expressing the 5000) open. At around 7 AM the disc of the rising sun suddenly glistened from behind the mountain.

Slowly we approached the powerful and frightening iceberg protruding at the end of the glacier which astonished us both for its huge size and appearance reminding of an image of an animal - a lion or the famous Egyptian sphinx.

Unlike my friends I was in a much more unfavorable condition. Each second I was being oppressed by the "load" of the knowledge of the stories of hard ascents to Ararat:

⁹ Since our ascent was not officially approved by the Turkish authorities we had to introduce ourselves to the foreign mountaineers we met on our way as citizens of Russia. When one Bulgarian mountaineer descending from the peak, guessed our "secret", not only did we not deny it, but we also were rather touched especially that the foreigner was very well aware of the spiritual connection the Armenians had to Ararat and of the inhuman decision of the Turkish government to officially ban the Armenians' ascent to Masis.

since Parrot - Abovyan to Herman von Abich and Henry Lynch. I often remembered their soul-searing descriptions.

From the height of about 5000m, on the peak flooded in the sunrays, flying flags could already be seen. Only at the moment it was clear to most of us that we were only several minutes away from the cherished moment of reaching the peak. That conviction seemed to give each of us supernatural strength, the exhaustion immediately yielded and each of us, already one by one, violating the unbroken agreement of walking together, rushed towards the sacred peak. Between 8:45 and 9:18 Yerevan time all the members of the group reached the peak.

This peculiar expedition, composed of Armenian scientists who had become mountaineers, was on the neck of the peak at the height of 5165m, with a length of 40-50m and a width of 4m from south to north. The whistling wind was waving the flag of the Republic of Armenia in this sacred place. To the north, in the clouds Mount Aragats was discerned, to the east and north-east - fog-covered Erebuni-Erevan, Ejmiatsin and Eraskh-Araks.

It was an ineffable, inexplicable feeling. It seemed to be a dream. The first pleasant moment I felt was that there were no more massifs above us. At the same time I had a feeling of injustice: I, being an ordinary mortal, was on the peak of the sacred mountain when that right first of all belonged to Ghevond Alishan, Hovhannes Tumanyan, Avetik Isahakyan, Vahan Teryan, Yeghishe Charents, Hovhannes Shiraz, Hamo Sahyan, Silva Kaputikyan, Mushegh Ishkhan and all of our great men who had praised Ararat, were inspired by it and devoted everlasting works to the sacred mountain. Probably it was consoling that here on the peak; under the eternal ice, the heart of Great Shiraz found peace for already a year.

In this divine place each of our guys performed a ritual - from waving the state flag of Armenia to burying crosses in the ice cover and addressing sacramental words to their relatives and all the Armenians, portraying the tricolor flag with red, blue and orange clothes, gathering stones and glacial pieces from the southern, sun-exposed part of the mountain as holy relics, dancing Kochari and singing "Mer Hayrenik" (Our Motherland, national anthem of RA), reciting "Our Father" and "Yes im anush Hayastani" (I love my sweet Armenia's).

Being originally from Javakhk I remembered to send my greetings to my fellow countrymen and Mount Abul, the highest peak of Javakhk. Several times we remembered about the national mission given to us on August 10, the imperative to return our occupied Homeland.

We stayed on the peak for about an hour. All around us was open space and a terrible wind. It was 9-10 degrees below zero. Because of the severe wind it was so cold that my camera stopped for a moment, the memory card of Khoren's photo camera was out of order. Nevertheless, on that day the weather was wonderful for the peak of Ararat. Both God and the mountain were kind to us. There had been groups before us, but the weather had not been so favorable.

A number of metal bars in the ice cover of the stretching flat land on the peak and the colorful fabrics of the flags waved by the severe wind reminded us that in this way the mountaineers from different countries also had wanted to mark their success of being on Mount Ararat, home to the Noah's Ark.

It also means that the world is still looking for the saving ark of Noah. We, the Armenians, as fate would have it, are condemned to look not only for the pieces of Noah's ship, but also for the historical truth, identifying the return of the symbolic mountain of our occupied Homeland with the cherished dream of re-creating united Armenia.

***Translated from Armenian
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