

MANIFESTATIONS OF MYTHOLOGICAL IMAGES ON ANCIENT ARMENIAN COINS

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PhD in History

The most ancient coins found on the territory of Armenia refer to the 6th-5th centuries BC. They were mainly of the local - Eruanduni origin of the period of relations with the Achaemenid Empire and later of the Sophene kingdom (since the 3rd c. BC), as well as Miletus and Athens silver and copper coins were also found in a few samples. Coins as a medium of exchange had widely circulated in Armenia particularly since the second half of the IV century BC. Owing to international trade, silver coins of Alexander the Great penetrated to the Armenian market from Asia Minor and Mesopotamia. On Armenian coins of the Hellenistic period, as a rule, the portrait of the monarch is depicted, and on the reverse side mythological symbols and the king's name and title in Greek letters are often depicted¹.

The history of the Armenian currency is rich, and this is probably because of its geographical location - Armenia was in the immediate vicinity to the places where ancient coins were first minted. According to the accepted view, coinage, as a major factor which played an important role in the development of human society, began in Lydia in western Asia Minor, at the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 7th century BC. Herodotus in his "History" refers to the Lydians: "the first of the people they, as far as we know, minted and put into use gold and silver coins, and for the first time were engaged in petty trade"². Shortly after Lydia appeared to be on a busy trade route to Greece and countries of the Ancient East, where it took to arrange early bargains.

The first Greek coins - drachmas, tetradrachms, denarius, sestertii, appeared on the island of Aegina in the 7th century BC. On the front side of the first drachmas was a turtle image - apparently the revered animal on the island. And in Rome, where bronze and then gold coins were minted, the first mint was set up in the temple of the goddess Junona-Moneta, hence the name "moneta" meaning "coin" origins³.

The very origin of the coins is associated with mythology. The ancient Greeks attributed the invention of coins to the heroes of their myths, the Romans - to the gods

¹ See: Babelon E., Catalogue des monnaies grèques de la Syrie, d'Arménie et de Commagène, Paris, 1890; Hill G.F., Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Lycaonia, Isauria and Cilicia, London, 1900; Head Barclay V., Historia Numorum, A Manual of Greek Numismatics, London, 1963, pp. 827-829; Մուշեղյան Խ., Դրամական շրջանառությունը հին Հայաստանում, Հայ ժողովրդի պատմություն (ՀԺՊ), հ. 1, Երևան, 1971, էջ 689-692.

² Herodotus also reports: "The natural attractions, like other countries, Lydia did not have, except maybe golden sand brought in by the river Tmola", folk "began to run to the market square and the river Pactolus (Pactolus, carries with a golden sand, flowing with Tmola through the market square and then flows into the river Hermus, and that - in the sea)" (Herodotus, Historiarum (libri 9), London, 1946-1960, I, 94, V, 101,- <https://goo.gl/Jo5clo>; see also: Максимов М.М., Золото в качестве денег (переход к монетам),- <http://www.bibliotekar.ru/zoloto/12.htm>).

³ See: Античные монеты: драхмы, тетрадрахмы, денарии, сестерции,- <https://goo.gl/8xadHI>;

Janus or Saturn. According to their views, ancient coins with the head of the two-faced god and the ship's nose (rostrum) were minted by Janus in honor of the time-god Saturn, who sailed to Italy from Crete on a ship. The word "coin" - "moneta" translated from Latin means "cautionary, counselor" - a title given to the Roman goddess Juno - thunderer Jupiter's wife. It was believed that she had repeatedly warned the Romans about earthquakes and enemies' attacks. In the Roman Capitol near the temple of Juno Moneta (Iuno Moneta) workshops were housed where coinage was cast and minted. From the word "moneta" is "numismatics" - Latin numisma, nomisma, numismatis, Greek νόμισμα, νόμισματος - which means "established custom, standard procedure"⁴.

From monetary history in ancient Armenia it is known that on many coins there are, among others, images of mythological themes, which can be seen on gold, silver and copper coins of the periods of ancient Armenian royal houses of Ervanduni (Orontid), Artashesyan (Artashesid), Arshakuni dynasties⁵. Mythological themes, by their content, mainly are manifested in the form of images of gods, goddesses and other mythological creatures, and are as a rule on the reverse side of the coin, sometimes they accompany the ruler's image on the front side⁶.

Mythological themes are observed on the coins found in Erebuni, and two of these specimens represent lions' portraits on silver coins of the 6th century BC (fig. 1).



1

The lion portraits from Erebuni impress by their horrifying and majestic views. It is not surprising, if we remember that the main god of the supreme triad in Van Kingdom

⁴ From the same Latin root *monere* - *caution* derived the word *mantle* indicating the process of determining human destiny by judges, and in some countries prosecutors and lawyers put on the mantle in courts (see: Монета, деньги,- Энциклопедический словарь Брокгауза и Ефрона, в 86 т. (82 т. и 4 доп.), СПб., 1890-1907; Этимологический словарь русского языка. Вып. 10 /под общей редакцией А.Ф. Журавлёва, Н.М. Шанского, М., Изд-во МГУ, 2007,- <http://enc-dic.com/rusethy/Moneta-2058.html>).

⁵ Ատրպետ, Հայ թագավորների դրամները. Յետ Աղեքսանդրեան շրջան, Ազգագրական Հանդես (ԱՀ), 1912, գիրք 23, էջ 27-38.

⁶ See: Мушегян Х., Денежное обращение Двина по нумизматическим данным, Ереван, 1962; Մուշեղյան Խ., Հայաստանի դրամական գանձերը, հ. 1, Երևան, 1973; Варданян Р., К вопросу о датировке двух армянских монет эллинистической эпохи, Պատմա-բանասիրական հանդես, 1987, 2, էջ 195-207:

(Biainili-Urartu-Ararat kingdom) Haldi, the father of gods and the thunder-god, is often depicted standing on a lion, symbolizing his leading role in the pantheon (fig. 1).

Different images of a lion in future will be part of medieval coins and coats of arms. In Armenian mythology lion, eagle and horse, from most ancient times symbolized royal power, which was considered as god-given, basically - the Sun-god⁷. The cult of kings and the royal ancestors was common in Armenia⁸ as well as in other countries of the ancient world (e.g. in Egypt, where next to the name of the pharaoh often figured the name of the Sun-god Amun-Ra⁹).

Images of the “kings” of the animal world, long before the formation of pantheons, can be found among the petroglyphs in the Armenian Highland, as e.g., fig. 2.



2

The lion and the eagle as symbols of the Sun-god and royal power, in the form of huge stone statues, are preserved in the pantheon built under Antiochus I Ervanduni in I century BC, on the eastern and western slopes of Mount Nemrut in Kommagene, where they, along with statues of gods and goddesses, and the king himself, represent the royal power and the Sun-god (fig. 3)¹⁰.

⁷ About the Sun cult in ancient Armenia see: Մնացականյան Հ., Արեւապաշտության հետքերը հին Հայաստանում, Երևան, 1948; Աբեղյան Մ., Հայ ժողովրդական հավատալիքները, Երկեր, հ. Է, Երևան, էջ 40-44; Իսրայելյան Հ., Արևի պաշտամունքի հետքերը բրոնզեդարյան Հայաստանում, Լրաբեր հասարակական գիտությունների, 1967, 7, էջ 77-88; Idem, Պաշտամունքն ու հավատալիքները ուշ բրոնզեդարյան Հայաստանում, Երևան, 1972; Вардумян Г., Дохристианские культы армян, Հայ ազգագրություն և բանահյուսություն, հ. 18, Երևան, 1991, էջ 113-119.

⁸ See: Саркисян Г., Обожествление и культ царей и царских предков в древней Армении, Вестник древней истории, 1966, 2, стр. 3-26.

⁹ Амон, в мифологии // Энциклопедический словарь Брокгауза и Ефрона : в 86 т. (82 т. и 4 доп.), СПб, 1890 - 1907, Т. Iа, стр. 665; Матье М. Э., Древнеегипетские мифы, Ленинград, 1956; Коростовцев М. А., Религия древнего Египта, Москва, 1976; Рубинштейн Р.И., Египетская мифология, Мифы народов мира /энциклопедический словарь/, т. 1, Москва, 1980, стр. 420-427:

¹⁰ Тирацян Г.А., Культура Древней Армении (VI в. до н.э. - III в.н.э.), Ереван, 1988, стр. 109-112; Аракелян Б. Н., Очерки по истории искусства древней Армении (VI в. до н.э. - III в.н.э.), Ереван, 1976, стр. 20-24.



3

As for the coins of Ervanduni period (6th-3rd centuries BC), portraits of Armenian gods and goddesses are seen on them - Aramazd, Anahit, Vahagn, and of their Greek parallels - Zeus, Athena, Hercules. On the reverse side of the gold coin of the king of Armenia Ervand II or Ervand-Orontas (the end of the 5th - the first half of the 4th century BC) a horse image is seen (fig. 4) which was also a symbol of royal power in the Ancient World, and the kings, including the Armenian, often are depicted in the form of a winner-rider¹¹.



4

The horse, representing yet another symbol of the Sun, not only was depicted on coins, but also appeared in the cult life of the ancient Armenians. As described by the Greek historian Xenophontis (Xenophon), among Armenians was common the custom to sacrifice large number of stallions to the Sun-god Mihr, and he himself gave his horse

to the headman of an Armenian village as a gift for the sacrifice rite¹².

Starting from the second half of the 3rd century BC Armenian kings of Sophene - Arsames, Xerxes, Abdisares and others, also minted their coins, among which are

¹¹ A horse, like Pegasus, the Centaur, etc., have been active players in the Indo-European, in particular, the Greco-Roman mythology (Vigneron P., *Le cheval dans l'antiquité gréco-romaine*, Nancy, 1968; Животные в мифологии. Конь,- Мифологическая энциклопедия // <http://mythology.info/myth-animals/kony.html>).

¹² Xenophontis, *Anabasis (Expedition Cyrus)*, Lipsiae, 1878, IV, V, 34.

known some silver ones, too¹³. A specific reflection of the sacred Mount Ararat may be observed on coins, in particular on a coin of the king Arsames II of Sophene, which shows not only the Great and Small Masis, but also the sparkling stars on their peaks, symbolizing the connection of the worshipped mountains with the space. This picture witnesses that in pre-Christian times, Ararat had also been a national shrine, not only in



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Great Armenia, but also in the small Armenian states, including Sophene, from where Ararat is not visible from any point of observation. It is also interesting, that the mountains on this coin are bordered on both sides by a pattern that resembles the Tree of Life, which is another ancient mythological

concept, symbolizing the eternal cycle of life (fig. 5).

On another coin of Sophene-Commagene cast by king Xerxes Ervanduni (220-212 BC), a mythical creature is pictured resembling the winged goddess Nike-Victoria, whose portraits are very common on the coins, because she symbolizes king's victories on the battlefield (fig. 6, 7).



6



7

Ancient Greek goddess Nike (Νίκη) (the Roman equivalent was Victoria) - daughter of Titanium Pallas and Styx, sister of Kratos (power), Bia (force) and Zelos (energy), is known to act as the goddess of victory. She accompanied Zeus-Thunderer. The coins of Alexander the Great (fig. 8) and Constantine II (fig. 9) are known with Nike-Victoria's image on the coins of the Ancient World¹⁴.



8



9

¹³ In the works of Jacques de Morgan are also represented the coins of Ervanduni dynasty of Sophene: De Morgan J., Manuel de numismatique orientale de l'Antiquité et du Moyen Age, t. 1, Paris, 1923-24, pp. 11-14;

¹⁴ Müller L., Numismatique d'Alexandre le Grand, Basel-Stuttgart, 1957.

The largest number of Armenian coins came to us from the time of Artashesyan kingdom (189 BC - 1 AD). Since Tigran I until the end of Artashesyan reign coinage did not stop¹⁵. Coins cast in Artashat, the capital of Great Armenia, still retained Hellenistic tradition - they were produced by the Attic monetary-weight system, which was based on the Greek drachma. During the Artashesyan reign the monetary circulation in Armenia was represented by the coins cast by Armenian kings, as well as by coins of neighboring states - Parthia, Rome (in the initial period the Roman Republic and later the Roman Empire), Seleucia, Cappadocia. Part of Armenian coins circulated in the neighboring countries, especially during the reign of Tigran the Great (95-55 BC), when they played the role of the international coin currency, and after him continued to be in circulation not only in Armenia, but also in other countries, where they were applicable and recognizable¹⁶.

Mythological images minted on the Armenian coins were dedicated to the worship of the patron-goddess of the capital-city, from which, in ancient perceptions, depended the fate of the whole country¹⁷. Such images with inscriptions in Greek occurred in the coins of the cities of the Hellenistic period. Among the coins of Artashat city, there are such ones where on one side is the head of the patron-goddess Tyche-Anahit with a tower-shaped crown on her head, and on the other side - a palm branch and winged Nike holding a laurel wreath above the name of the city (fig 10).



10

On the coins of Artashesyan period, along with the winged goddess, are depicted the symbols of the gods and goddesses of wealth and power, such as Anahit, Vahagn, etc., and bearing the same symbolism of eagle, horse, etc. The portraits of Armenian kings are also on the coins - those of Tigran I, Tigran II the

Great, Artavazd II, Artashes II, Artashes III of Tigranes, Artavazd IV, Tigran IV and Erato, Tigran V. Such an interesting specimen is the coin of Artavazd II, with a chariot drawn by four horses, symbolizing the unique power of the king and his proximity to the image of the Sun-god (fig. 11)¹⁸.

¹⁵ Langlois V., *Numismatique général de l'Arménie*, Paris, 1859; Բասմաջյան Կ., Հայկական ընդհանուր դրամագիտություն և Հայաստանի վերաբերյալ դրամներ, Վենետիկ, 1936.

¹⁶ About Artashesyan coins see: De Morgan J., *Manuel de numismatique orientale de l'Antiquité et du Moyen âge*, t. 1, Paris, 1923-24; Պտուկյան Զ., Արտաշիսյան հարստության դրամները, Վիեննա, 1969; Bedoukian Paul Z., *Armenian Coin Hoards /Special publication № 5/*, English and Armenian Edition, "Amazon", 1987; Он же, *Selected Numismatic Studies of Paul Bedoukian /Masnawor Hratarakutiwn, Hay Dramagitakan Enkeraksitiwn/*, "Amazon", 1981.

¹⁷ Ատրպետ, Հայ թագավորների և քաղաքների դրամները, ԱՀ, 1913, գիրք 24 (1), էջ 83-89:

¹⁸ About Artashesyan coins see: Ատրպետ, Հայ թագավորների դրամները. Յետ Տիգրան Մեծի, ԱՀ, 1913, գիրք 24, էջ 57-67; Bedoukian P.Z., *A Classification of the Coins of the Artaxiad Dynasty of Armenia /Reprinted from the American Numismatic Society/*, "Museum Notes", 14, New York, 1968, t. IX-XI.



11

Armenian coins were in international circulation, as already noted, during the reign of Tigran the Great. They were cast in Armenia (in the capitals Artashat, then Tigranakert), and in the cities of Syria (Antioch, Damascus). His silver coins submitted as tetradrachms and copper coins are well known. Particularly

noteworthy are those coins of Tigran II on which he is depicted with the Armenian crown - tiara, which has no analogues among the rulers of any Eastern or Western countries at the time, it was typical only for the rulers Artashesyan dynasty. The tiara top contains luminous bulges – pointed teeth, and its middle is decorated with the symbols of the Sun cult - eight-pointed star between two eagles. Eagles are in the tilted position but looking at each other¹⁹.

The portrait of King Tigran II with courageous and dignified look, is usually fringed by woven ornament, and on the reverse side mythological symbols are depicted, mainly of the country's patroness-goddess, sitting on a rock, with a palm branch in her hand, with a cone-shaped crown on her head, under the legs (in some coins) a floating water-deity is seen. Worship scenes are usually edged with inscription of the name and title of the king in Greek, in two types - "King Tigran" (cast in the mints of Syria), or "Tigran King of Kings" (cast in the mints of Armenia)²⁰. Having international importance, those coins were distinguished by an abundance of mythological themes, mythical images of the country's power and victory of the king, thus emphasizing the idea of royal power as something God-given and eternal (fig. 12: Coins of Tigran the Great).



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¹⁹ About the tiara of Tigran the Great see: Тирацян Г., Армянская тиара: опыт культурно-исторической интерпретации, Вопросы древней истории, 1982, 2, стр. 90-95.

²⁰ About the coins of Tigran the Great see: Ասրիպետ, Տիգրանի Մեծի դրամները, ԱՀ, 1911, գիրք 21, с. 200-222; Seyrig H., Trésor monétaire de Nisibe, Revue Numismatique, Paris, 1955, p. 84-88, 121; Bedoukian P. Z., A Hoard of Copper Coins of Tigranes the Great and a Hoard of Artaxiad Coins / Special publication № 7, English, "Amazon", 1991.



13

As an interesting issue of this period should be noted the silver tetradrachm of the Tigran II the Great's son, Artavazd II (55-34 BC) with a quadriga on it and the image of goddess Nike, carrying the victory wreath in her hand, in a graceful pose, and the name and title of the king in Greek letters (fig. 13)²¹.

On the coins of Tigran III winged goddess is sometimes replaced by the image of Vahagn - the war-god personifying the power and might of the country, or by an elephant image also symbolizing the invincible power (fig. 14)²².



14



15

Of particular interest are the coins of Tigran IV, one of which - on the copper coin is the portrait of the king and queen Erato. This is the only coin, which has the portrait of an ancient Armenian Queen (fig. 15).

The copper coin of Tigran V is worthy of special attention, since it shows the reverse side of the Great and Small Masis, in the form as seen from the capital Artashat. At the foot of the two mountains are depicted trees, maybe the Tree of Life symbolizing the germination of new life, its beginning, the cycle of life and eternity (fig. 16).



16

From the reign of Arshakuni dynasty (66-428) is known that monetary circulation was carried out mainly in neighboring countries coins - of the Roman Empire and the Parthian kingdom, later of Sassanid Persia and the Byzantine Empire²³.

From this period are also known Roman coins among which the circulation of gold coins - *aurei* (with wonderful realistic portraits belonging to the best works of ancient art) was very limited. The silver coins

²¹ Muschegjian Ch., Eine Tetrachme Artavazdes II, - Bibliotheca classica orientalis, 11 Jahrgang, Heft 4, Berlin, 1966, S. 208-209; Wroth W., Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Galatia, Cappadocia and Syria, Bologna, 1964, t. XIV.

²² Bedukian P.Z., A Classification of the Coins of the Artaxiad Dynasty of Armenia, pp. 63-65.

²³ About the coins of Arshakid Armenia and Roman medallions see: Ասրպետ, Հայ թագավորների դրամները նախնական ժամանակներից մինչև Տրդատ Մեծ եւ Փոքր Արմենիայի իշխանների եւ քաղաքների դրամները, ԱՀ, 1912, գիրք 22 (1), 198-231, 23 (2), էջ 39-56; Տաշյան Հ., Արշակունի դրամներ, մաս 1, 2, Վիեննա, 1920 (1917-60); Պտուկյան Հ., Հայաստանի վերաբերյալ հռոմեական դրամներ և մեդալիոններ, Վիեննա, 1971; Մուշեղյան Խ., Դրամական շրջանառությունը Հայաստանում I-II դարերում և հռոմեական շքադրամներ, ՀԺՊ, հ. 1, էջ 813-822.

were called *denarius* and *quinarius*, and the copper ones - sesterces, etc. The cast of these coins had the purpose of exalting Caesar's victories. Among them were coins dedicated to Armenia. A remarkable specimen of silver coin of the 2nd century BC has been preserved belonging to Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (nicknamed "Armenian") with the image of a seated woman in a majestic pose, and in the lower part of the coin is visible the inscription in Latin letters *Armen*, i.e. Armenia (fig. 17)²⁴.



17

On the Armenian coins of the Arshakuni period appear the images of Roman gods: the supreme god Jupiter, father of gods; the god of waters and seas Neptune; goddesses protectors of victory - Victoria, Fortune, Roma; the Greek mother goddess Demeter and others (fig. 18-19).



18



19

Thus, mythological images on ancient coins were intended to emphasize the majesty and power of producing them ruler, and therefore depicted mostly the supreme god, the goddess of victory, the mother goddess, animals symbolizing the royal power. The presence of mythological themes on coins basically had a number of representations, among which especially significant are the idea of the divine origin of the royal dynasty, the protection of king's activities by gods, and many other ideas characteristic of the mythological thinking in ancient societies. In Ancient Armenia, as in other countries of the Ancient World, the money circulation passed through different stages, and mythological images and themes always accompanied the images of kings, giving a special shade to the iconography of coins.

²⁴ Mattingly H., *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, v. 1, London, 1923, p. 281, № 406-412.