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# EXPRESSION

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ON THE INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL EXPRESSIONS OF NON-LITERATE PEOPLES

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## MYTHS AND MEMORIES

## EDITORIAL NOTES

### MYTHS AND MEMORIES STORIES TOLD BY PICTURES

Are myths metaphors of memories?

Whatever the case, ever since the first appearance of *Homo sapiens*, men tried to immortalize myths, to make sure to remember them, to make sure that they were not getting lost. They produced and left behind monuments as testimony of memories, which are not always explicit. Will scholars, in 40.000 years time, be able to reconstruct myths and memories, if faced with the relics of the Hindi Khajurau, of a Tibetan Buddhist temple or of the Vatican's Cappella Sistina?

Myths are the collective memory that defines cultural identities. They are fundamental elements of the world cultural heritage, especially so if they are the expression of forgotten cultures. The identity of the human species is the union of all the human identities. An important task of research is decoding such traces of identity and making their content accessible to culture.

What myths and what memories are revealed in early monuments?

What are the stories behind a painted cave in Dordogne, megalithic monuments in Ireland, the Gobleky Tepe pre-ceramic ceremonial center in Anatolia, the Paleolithic shrine at Har Karkom in the Negev desert, or the immense concentrations of rock art in the Drakensberg, South Africa, Serra da Capivara, Brazil or Kimberley, Australia? What stories are hidden behind a standing stone erected by some human being of a forgotten culture, or behind a group of markings on the wall of a rock-shelter? These monuments preserve myths and memories

of cultures and ages around the world. Each monument, each rock picture, each standing stone, has its stories. By decoding them, history is being produced out of prehistory.

Awakening curiosity and asking questions are no less important than answering questions and solving problems. Reality and imagination are ingredients of our intellect. They complete each other. Reality without imagination and imagination without reality would be void of interest. What is captured by our senses awakens a double process, that of acquiring a sense of the reality and that of applying our imagination to search for a meaning to such sense. Often discerning what is real and what is imaginary is a subjective matter. Images and signs convey just a part of the reality they refer to. The rest of such reality has to be decoded.

I was looking at a splendid exhibition of early Chinese paintings: landscapes with small human beings and gigantic sea waves, dreamy, misty mountains, flowers and leaves having shapes and colors more real than real ones... but the smell of the paintings was not that of the depicted flowers. The paintings were communicating the connection between the theme depicted and the hand and mind of the artist. They express the sense of aesthetic and the metaphoric concepts of a culture that have to be decoded.

Senses are means of access to reality both for us and for prehistoric man. Such reality may be subjective and is formed, deformed or transformed by our senses. They select reality, they make us decide what is real and what is unreal, what to remember and what to forget, they co-ordinate our feelings of pleasant or unpleasant, beauty or ugliness, appealing or not appealing. The real and the imaginary may vary from person to person and both, real

and imaginary, can be accepted or refused. In the human mind there may be peculiar overlapping between knowing and believing. Even when our logic tells us what is real and what is not, we may decide to believe as real what we know is not real. But, in any case, real or not real is a judgment of our senses and our mental functions are related to our senses.

Was the mind of early man much different from ours?

Decorated caves, megalithic monuments, early shrines, sites of rock art, are the containers of myths and memories, the testimony of the immense variety of beliefs and habits, the source for an as yet unwritten history of mankind: the existential history of people's real and imaginary, myths and memories: the history of what has defined our present.

The selection of the real from the imaginary varies from person to person. It varies in different tribes and, no doubt, the same is true for early or forgotten societies. The variety of the monuments left behind by past cultures, the variety in style and subject matter of prehistoric and tribal art, are the mirror of the immense alternatives of the human mind. They are the medium to unveil past adventures of human myths and memories. What do they tell us? What do they tell you? Colleagues and friends are welcome to share the results of their experience, research, discoveries or ideas and submit their papers. Even small contributions may enrich our knowledge and whoever has something to say is invited to share such knowledge.

**E.A.**

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#### PRESENTATION OF PAPERS IN THE 2018 CONGRESS OF UISPP

The papers included in this issue may be presented in the above congress. Authors should confirm their intent to attend the Congress.

## EDITORIAL NOTE

**EXPRESSION** magazine is published by Atelier Research Center in cooperation with UISPP-CI-SENP, the "International Scientific Commission on the Intellectual and Spiritual Expressions of Non-literate Peoples" of the UISPP, Union Internationale des Sciences Préhistoriques et Protohistoriques.

The goal of **EXPRESSION** is to promote knowledge and ideas concerning the intellectual and spiritual expressions of non-literate societies. It is an open forum in conceptual anthropology, welcoming contributions. Colleagues having something to say will find space in this e-magazine, which is reaching people of culture and academic institutions in over 70 countries. Papers should have precise goals, conceived for this kind of audience, and possibly well illustrated. Letters on current topics and short notes are welcome and may be included in the section "Discussion Forum." Authors are fully responsible for their ideas and for the information and illustrations they submit.

Publication in **EXPRESSION** magazine does not imply that the publishers agree with the exposed ideas. Papers are submitted to reviewers for their evaluation, but controversial ideas, if they make sense, are not censored. New ideas and concepts may awaken debates and criticism. Time will be their judge.

#### **Front page:**

*Rock painting of Tanzania: the record of many ages is superposed on the same surface. The oldest figure in the center of the photo represents a large bird, probably an ostrich (Early Hunters). On top of it a female figure, natural size (Early Gatherers). Overlapping the two previous phases two human figures and an animal (Late Hunters). At the bottom of the photo, the painting an animal and a schematic human figure make the last phase of this rock (Pastoral phase). The surface has been painted in different periods putting figures on top of previous ones. (Base of the photo ca. 1,25m). Mjughada, Tanzania. (Anati, 1980).*

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# NEW PERSPECTIVE ON THE THEORY OF THE “MAIN MYTH”

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The theory of the ‘main myth’, developed by linguists Toporov and Ivanov<sup>1</sup> in the 60s-70s of the 20th century, leads to the identification of the main mythological motif in Indo-European mythology – the motif of the thunderer fighting a serpent. Cognitive and linguistic analysis of this study reveals that the theory of the ‘main myth’ is outdated, since it does not cover all the issues into account. In order to create a new perspective on the study of this issue it is important to keep in mind the historical, philosophical, cultural and linguistic facts which are known now.

The issues of the origin of cognition, knowledge, art and writing refer to a common initial stage, when these concepts were all unified into a single mythological consciousness. Then, in a certain period of time, it gradually generates theoretical concepts on cognition, like space and time, good and evil, life and death. This ‘genetic’ connection indicates the formation of certain particular motifs and of the principles of Natural Philosophy concerning the fundamental principle of mythological consciousness. Thus, this question develops beyond the current interpretation of the theoretical study of the ‘main myth’, including a broader range of issues and objectives.

The new conception is not based on the motif of the thunderer fighting a serpent, but on the

motif of interaction among the four principal forces of nature (genesis), which completes by the birth of the first man (cultured, cognizant). The proposed framework is crucial and develops further not only in Indo-European mythology, but also in world mythologies. The new conception tends to the synthetic perception of the genesis concept, rather than to its separation into different units. Research revealed that the traditional interpretation of the motif of the Thunderer (positive deity) fighting a serpent (embodying darkness) is outdated and requires a new cognitive interpretation, reflecting cognition in thinking of a cultivated man; another important concept is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, reconsideration of the concept of the Tree of Life, reflecting the struggle of the first man (forces of good) with the consequences of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions (natural forces of evil) for the preservation of the Tree of Life.<sup>2,3</sup>

Particular representations and motifs do not come up from nothing, but they are the result of a mixture of contemplation and pure thought, carried out by the main forces of consciousness. It does not affect only the categories of objective consciousness in theoretical and intellectual fields, but these categories act in every aspect of the formation of human worldview. Every perception of the world is possible only through distinctive acts of objectification, through the conversion of plain ‘impressions’ into inherently defined and structured

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2. Vahanyan G., Stepanyan A. Prehistoric art in Armenia: new discoveries, new interpretations and new methods of research, XXI Valcamonica Symposium “Prehistoric and Tribal Art: New Discoveries, New Interpretations, New Research Methods”, Darfo Boario Terme (BS), Italy, 08-14 September 2004.

3. Vahanyan G. Volcanic eruptions from Mountains of Ararat till Alps, Indo-European myths, Rock art and iconography. Convegno internazionale, L'arte Rupestre Delle Alpi, Capo di Ponte, Valcamonica, Italy, 21-24 October 2010.

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1. Ivanov V., Toporov V. Studies in Slavic Antiquities. “Nauka”, Moscow, 1974.

'representations'.<sup>4</sup> A serpent or a dragon is a symbolic representation of a volcanic eruption or an avalanche. Prehistoric man witnessed natural processes. Wise, knowledgeable and experienced leaders or tribe chiefs had to study, describe, transfer and visualize the observed processes. They had the task to preserve and transfer their knowledge and experience in order to train their people to fight against the evil forces of nature, to survive using the available means. The oldest instrument used to visualize the forces of nature and human interaction with flora and fauna and the four fundamental forces of nature was rock art. Once in 1,000 or 2,000 years catastrophic volcanic eruptions occurred in the area of the Araratian Mountains and it was necessary to transfer this knowledge in a form that could be available and comprehensible to prehistoric men. The inhabitants of the volcanic Mountains managed the task perfectly.<sup>5</sup>

Each people managed this task in a different way, according to their cultural and linguistic background. It is necessary to recognize the importance of national language categorization and conceptualization in terms of identification and theoretic understanding: this is the only way to discover and understand the fundamental mechanisms that regulate the existence and activity of a native speaker. This can be done by using a particular vector of scientific inquiry, such as the cognitive modeling of cultural forms and linguistic signs according to national experience. This way of thinking denotes Reflective research

4. Kassirer E. The Philosophy of symbolic forms. Volume 2: Mythological thinking. "Uni-ver-sitetskaya kniga" Moscow-Saint Petersburg, 2001.

5. Vahanyan G., Vahanyan V. Araratian Rock art as a paradigm of communication and visual arts in the past and future, The XXIVth Valcamonica Symposium "Art and Communication in pre-literacy societies", Capo di Ponte, Valcamonica, Italy 13 - 18 July 2011.



Fig. 1: A dragon-stone carved from basalt, Armenia

studies the different models of national linguistic categorization – methodological tools, revealing dialectics of interaction between natural scientific knowledge and empirical evidence and orienting interaction between native speakers in a coordinate system, in the frame of a particular cultural and historical period.<sup>6</sup>

The basis, origin, foundation of knowledge and

6. Vahanyan G. The Role of Rock Art Clusters in Mythology, Religion and Magic: the Concept of the Knowledge Spiral, EXPRESSION N°10 Quarterly e-journal of Atelier in Cooperation with UISPP-CISNEP, December 2015.



Fig. 2: The thunderers and serpents/dragons, Armenian Rock art, VIII-IV millennium BC

experience that led mankind to the victory over the forces of nature was the knowledge of the four fundamental forces of nature (the classical elements: fire, air, water and earth). The interaction of these fundamental forces of nature forms the so-called 'super structure'. The symbiosis between the basis and the superstructure brought to the absolute victory of reason over the wild forces, securing the issues of survival and viability of the tribe.<sup>7</sup>

The following principle of 'one over many' entrenched in the consciousness of prehistoric man: each element, taken individually, has the power to dominate one of the other three (these views were further transformed and included in the principles of Natural Philosophy and Metaphysics). So, mankind perceived that a system dominates its constituent elements. A system unit cannot withstand the power of an entire system. A system has qualities that none of its constituent elements possesses on its own (principle of emergence). Thus, the main mythological motifs acquire a certain chain of mediating links, in which, however, a single set of changes is framed, forming a universal

7. Vahanyan G. The Beginning of natural philosophy and metaphysics in the rock art of Armenia. EXPRESSION N°6, International Journal of Art, Archaeology & Conceptual Anthropology, August 2014.

way of thinking. This law of thickening or concurrency of correlated units in mythological thinking can be identified in the themes and motifs of Armenian rock art complexes. A number of depictions of thunderers and serpents/dragons (*fig.1*) can be identified. In the prehistoric culture of the Araratian Mountains there are also unique artifacts - the so-called 'dragon-stones', carved from basalt (*fig.1*).

The thunderer is the representation of the cultivated and wise first man. He possesses knowledge and 'supernatural' powers due to his cognitive abilities: he is characterized by wisdom and intellect. He is depicted in rock art and described identically in myths, embodying a hero who meets the challenge of the wild forces of nature threatening the earth. The negative forces are symbolized by a serpent, depicted while trying to destroy flora and fauna, to kill a man, to swallow the sun and the moon (*fig. 2*), to block the access of mankind to water, the source of life.<sup>8</sup>

Knowledge of 'good' and 'evil' is almost always represented in a comprehensive

8. Vahanyan V., Vahanyan G. Armenian Pleistocene Rock Art as Origin of the Universal Visual Motifs of the Indo-European Myths. IFRAO Congress "Pleistocene Art of the World", Tarascon-sur-Ariège and Foix, France 6-11 September 2010.



Fig. 3: A dragon-stone carved from basalt, Armenia

stylized form, as the universal concept of the 'Tree of Life' and the 'Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil'. Knowledge of good and evil is characterized by the final victory of good (wisdom, knowledge, forces of light – the sun, lightening, etc.) over evil, the serpent/dragon. This depiction is the symbolic representation of the paradigm of victory over the classical elements thanks to knowledge, wisdom and courage of the leaders and tribal chiefs (fearless leaders and sages, that were later exalted and venerated like divine beings, embodying the traditional mythological perception and representation of thunderers).

The authors propose a new conception of the "main myth", which is in all a reconstruction from the concept of the four forces of nature, as expressed in the principles of Metaphysics and Natural Philosophy. The main mythological motif, according to this research, is the one of the birth of the first man, as described in the song The birth of Vahagn. In the Book of letters

Khorenatsi reveals the mystery of the genesis of man by using the language of metaphysics and the teachings of the unity of nature and man, emphasizing that the forces of nature are interconnected and comprise the four fundamental principles – earth, water, air and fire.<sup>9</sup> The song is an artistic interpretation of the original poem, set to music. It is a sequenced description of an algorithm of interaction of the four forces of nature: not the opposition between the first man (thunderer) and his opponent/enemy (chthonian serpent), but the opposition between the principal forces of nature (representing life, synthesized in the act of the birth of Vahagn) and the anthropomorphic force (catastrophic volcanic eruption, symbolizing death and chaos). To this opposition relate all other oppositions, which ensure the victory of good over evil, reason over folly, wisdom over ignorance, light over darkness, order over chaos, life

9. Abeghian M. Old Armenian ecclesiastical literature, <http://www.portal-credo.ru/-/site/?act=lib&id=290>



Fig.4: A dragon-stone carved from basalt, Armenia

over death and so forth. Infinite time stems to the origin that formed the forces of nature.

A comprehensive description of the main motif of the poem-song *The Birth of Vahagn* is recorded in *Armenian History*: “This wonderful song presents the origin/birth of cultivated life as a process of unity of four opposing polar elements in heaven and on earth: the earth, water (sea), fire (flame, smoke) and air (sky)”.<sup>10</sup> Flora is embodied in the form of reeds in the sea, from which Vahagn is born, surrounded by fire and flames.<sup>11</sup> In social and cosmic respect, there are two related but opposing worlds: mankind and nature. In this poem-song the process of volcanic eruption is compared with travail: in travail are heaven and earth, crimson sea and red reed rising from the sea when Vahagn is born. Red reed symbolizes a volcano, smoke and flame rising from its crater, from which the youth is born: the flame surrounding it symbolizes bravery and courage, love and devotion. According to the authors, this song does not have East-Indian or Iranian origins, but it was created on the territory of historical Armenia, according to the

10. *The Armenian History*. V. 1, NAS, Yerevan, 1971, p. 485.

11. Khorenatsi M. *History of Armenia*, “Hayastan”, Yerevan, 1990.

paradigm of Armenian culture and worldview. The “crimson sea” described in the song is Van Sea, which was colored crimson from the magma erupted from a near volcano. The birth of Vahagn – a poetic, figurative description of a volcanic eruption – represents in fact the origin of the god of war, battle and courage, lightning and thunder in the Armenian pagan pantheon.<sup>12</sup>

The analysis reveals many similarities between the old Armenian motifs (the birth of the cultivated hero, the first man Vahagn, his beautiful bride Astghik, the motif of the hero fighting a dragon and liberating water) and the ancient mythology of many different people. For example, in ancient Greek myths there are not only similar motifs, but also similar places: Zeus’ fight against Typhon (a serpent from Cilicia, according to another version from the Caucasus), the creation of men out of clay mixed with water by Prometheus (again, in the Caucasus) and his punishment for the theft of fire (he was chained to the rocks of the Caucasus). Also the Argonauts, led by Jason, set out on the quest of the Golden Fleece (symbol of the ancient knowledge recorded by runes) to the Caucasus (Colchis), where a dragon was guarding a water source and a tree – the symbol of the knowledge of good and evil. According to Norse mythology, the Aesir Odin created the Runes from an oak tree (symbol of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil), coloring it with his own blood<sup>2,6</sup>. According to Norse tradition, dragons were depicted on runic stones. Their bodies were filled in with runes instead of blood, i.e. dragons guarded ancient knowledge. Knowledge and wisdom (their perception and application) had the value of life or death.

Thus, the entire conceptual meaning of the

12. Shirakatsi A. *Cosmography and the calendar*, Yerevan, 1940.

motif of the thunderer fighting a dragon is entrenched in the mind/consciousness of ancient people. The final battle and its catastrophic consequence (volcanic eruption), recorded by Khorenatsi and passed down from generation to generation as a vivid, realistic, artistic and poetic song, is the first decisive trial for the one who knows and puts into practice the wisdom and knowledge of prehistoric men. The authors study, reveal, identify and interpret this main theme in the main motifs of rock art in the Araratian Mountains.<sup>613</sup>

Also, relations of the “main myth” with the biblical motif of the genesis of Adam and Eve can be identified. They lived in the Garden of Eden, where the four river stake their sources, they were tempted by a serpent and ate the forbidden fruit of knowledge of “the Tree of Good and Evil”, and later they were banished from the site, which from then on is guarded by a cherub wielding a flaming sword (also, a volcanic eruption can often be seen in the depictions of Adam and Eve’s expulsion there). There are also many other relations to old Greek, Kassite-Babylonian, Sumerian-Acadian and Hurrian-Hittite myths, e.g. the theme of Cadmus (hero of Phoenician origins) fighting a dragon; the Vedic myth of Indra (god of

14. Draskhanakertsi H. History of Armenia, Yerevan, 1984.

rains and lightning) fighting Vritra (a serpent or dragon representing drought); Baltic mythological motifs of Perkunas (heaven deity) and Velnias (the devil), etc. According to Christian worldview, the story of Jesus can be seen as similar to Prometheus’: for knowledge transfer to mankind he receives a ‘punishment’ for his deeds: he is “bound” and crucified on the cross, symbolizing the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil” and the “Tree of Life”.<sup>14</sup> His resurrection symbolizes the revival of the Tree of Life in heaven. His coming as the savior symbolizes the revival of the Tree of Life on earth. From pre-pagan and pagan periods the same theoretical and religious “orientation” was passed to Christianity and penetrated into the frame of medieval Christian doctrine. The plan and architecture of a medieval church show the same characteristic symbols of the four cardinal directions, peculiar to the mythological sense of space. Sun and light are no longer deities but divine attributes. Faith in Jesus as the “sun of justice” replaced the cult of the sun. The four points of the cross are also identified with the four cardinal directions and the corresponding

15. Vahanyan G., Vahanyan V. The Cross, the Swastika, the Star of David, and the Eight-Pointed Star in the Rock Art of Armenia. XXV Valcamonica Symposium “Art as a Source of History”, Italy, 20–26 September 2013.



Fig.5: Illustration of volcanic eruption and solar eclipse. Armenian Rock art, VIII-IV millennium BC

division of the world. On this simple schematic basis was based the increasingly refined and profound symbolic system, in which all the inner content of the faith is objectified in elementary spatial relations.

Human thought formation is based not only on the categories and units of a particular language, but rather on the universal content structures.<sup>15</sup> People frequently use words not on their semantic level, but on the level of their transmitted meanings, i.e. concepts and conceptual features in entirely different, non-respective contexts, without conceiving the way a particular word is formed in the dictionary, which serves as the basis for the recipient to perceive its meaning.<sup>16</sup>

The current level of development of linguistic science presupposes a deep study of the issues of systemic organization and categorization of the vocabulary of a language, analyzing its connections and relations rather than its single words. Language reflects the contemporary culture, but it also carries the imprint of its previous forms: this way, the universal world-view of a certain culture is affirmed, a system of persistent representations. The Armenian language has retained vivid traces of this relation. Vahagn (his name embodies four consonants: v, h, g, n) is a dragon slayer and a thunderer, the liberator of water, directly correlated with the four forces of nature (fire,

water, air, earth) and, accordingly, with volcanic eruptions and lava. The roots of these (the onyms \*van, \*ia, \*an, \*agn and \*uel-) become universal indicators of the relations within the four forces of nature and with the antagonist serpent. They are identified everywhere – in the names of pagan gods, like the Greek Zeus or the Baltic Velnias; in toponyms such as Volosovo, Veletovo, Volhynia, Wawel; in words like Valkyrie, Valhalla, and Wayland; in the names denoting water (“aqua”), etc.

Non-rational (mythological) and rational (discursive, analytical) thinking are different, complementary forms of reflection, creation and perception of the world. Consciousness, based on the conclusions and arguments of human mind, processing the data of senses and sensory perceptions, is capable of modeling the unknown by resorting to the sense embodied in the memory, to sensor/haptic representations. According to the authors, these representations are mostly expressed in the motif of the birth of Vahagn from the four forces of nature, which is the prototype and universal pre-representation within the frameworks of the theory of the ‘main myth’. The records of Armenian historians obtain scientific evidence through the findings of other interdisciplinary studies.<sup>17,18</sup>

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17.Gray D., Atkinson Q. Language-tree divergence times support the Anatolian theory of Indo-European origin. *Nature* 426, 2003, 435-439.

18.Vahanyan G. Armenian Rock Art as Visual Knowledge for Understanding the History of Civilization in Asia, Europe and Scandinavia. XXVI Valcamonica Symposium “Prospects on prehistoric art research: 50 years since the founding of the Centro Camuno”, 9–12 September 2015, Italy.

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16.Demyankov V. The dominant linguistic theories in the late XX century. *Language and science at end of the XX century*. The Institute of Linguistics RAS, Moscow, 1995, p. 239-320.

17.Boldyriev N. *Cognitive semantics: lecture courses*. Tambov, TSU, 2000, p. 123.