

MORE EVIDENCE FOR THE PREVALENCE OF ZOROASTRIANISM IN ARMENIA

Dr. Kersey Antia, Aug 10, 2020

I have written about Zoroastrianism in Armenia enough so far but I found another interesting research work done by M. H. Ananikian which deserves to be annotated (*Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, Vol. I, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924, pp. 794-802). Even though it is almost a century old, it provides such extensive details about the spread of Zoroastrianism in Armenia which I have not come across often.

It seems the Indo-European Armenians who hailed from Phrygia did not become masters of the highland till 7th century B.C. The name Armenia is first attested in the Achaemenian inscriptions and may have been derived from the Vannic word, *Aramani*, meaning 'written tablet'. It was previously known as *Uratu* (Hebrew, *Ararat*), meaning 'Highlands'. The language and religion of the Vannics was too particular to have any correlates with any other people. At the head of the Vannic pantheon was Khaldi and the Vannic kings and people called themselves Khaldians. (While there were Chaldeans in Babylonian territory, I found no evidence of any connection with them here – so far.)

Even though there is considerable evidence from ancient writers about the spread of Zoroastrianism in Armenia, it is however incidental to the cause or main purpose they were discussing and therefore is quite fragmentary. Ananikian hopes an extensive critical study of Armenian folk-lore and popular superstitions which abound in numbers may provide us useful information some day.

Originally, however, Ananikian finds nothing in common between the Persian race and the Vannics who seem to be connected with the Hittites on the West and the Caucasus races of the North. "But," observes Ananikian "Armenia, owing to its geographical position was destined to come into contact with Iranian politics and civilization when the Medes began their political career. When the Cimmerians and Scythians, (another group of Iranian tribes) invaded the Vannics, the Armenians seem to have seen an opportune time to enter the country which henceforth came to be known as Armenia. During the same period the Medes came into prominence in the area and ultimately established their kingdom in 677 B.C. From then on Iranian influences started to have their significant impact on Armenian language, religious beliefs, social norms, political norms, names of divinities, folklore, etc.

Ananikian details them by suitably arranging them under the main features of Zoroastrian theology, namely, belief in Ahuramazda, Amesha Spentas, Yazatas such as Atar (fire), Anahit (water), Mithra (the light of the heavens), Verathragna (the genius of victory), Ahriman (leader of the demonic forces which identified with and thereby absorbed into Christian demonology, which itself, however, as I have shown elsewhere, was considerably influenced by Zoroastrian concepts and beliefs), the Driy (lying, perjuring evil spirits), Azdahak (Zohak, monster Avestan Azi Dahak) and Vishoap (chimeras, Avestan Vishapa, meaning snake which is an epithet of Azi per *Nirangistan* 48, the legend of Avestan Azi Dahak leaving many echoes on the legend of Azdehak in Armenia and Ananikian provides considerable evidence for it. He also traces significant Zoroastrian impact on the Armenian beliefs about Death and the Future life, hereditary priesthood in Armenia, Armenian calendar, belief about the evil eye (*Vendidad* XX, 3, 7, xxii.2 and *Bundahishn* xxviii, 33, 36), next-of-kin marriages, etc. It is interesting to note Ananikian's comments: "The modern Armenians have the same abhorrence for pairings of nail and hair as the *Avesta* (compare *Vendidad*, xvii); nor may fire and water be defiled." As Ananikian provides too many details for all of the above subjects, it is not possible to include them all here, especially as an average reader may not be interested in them all, though it will be worth one's while to review them for gaining further insight or researching this subject further.

In conclusion, Ananikian states: "Great as is the mass of Zoroastrian material in Armenian paganism, it has also serious gaps which I find rather self-contradictory. He also finds substantial deviations from Zoroastrianism as in the case of Anahit and the worship of fire and water. He also finds no trace of a highly developed system of theology, ritual and legalistic observance, as in Zoroastrianism, which may however be lost to us now. He finds abstract beings, the personifications of ideas, virtues and vices, are quite absent, which too may be lost to us now as the history belongs to the victor as was the case in Iran too all of which the latest research findings do not seem to support.

He finds no theological systematization of the heavenly army, no developed dualism, no caste of magi, and no widely spread fire-altars. He also finds no record of any Zoroastrian propaganda in Armenia. When the Sasanians persecuted Christian Armenia, about A.D. 450, they said nothing about a return to the ancient faith, nor did the Armenians ever call their paganism Zoroastrian, all of which the latest research findings do not seem to support. It is probably he thinks that Zoroastrianism gradually penetrated Armenia under the Achaemenian kings and under the Arsacids, but we have no exact knowledge as to when or how. The study here presented however, he says "not be

regarded as a complete picture of Armenian paganism. Both the pantheon and the world of minor spirits contained other non-Zoroastrian names and beliefs have been omitted by him here, but he concedes “the old religion of Armenia was mainly Iranian, and may be described as Zoroastrianism of a corrupt type.” However, this is often the case even with the Iranian people such as the Sogdiens, further removed from the land of Iran.

Ananikian’s conclusions being almost a hundred years old may not be still valid in view of the later researches, for instance, by James Russell, mentioned elsewhere, but his detailed findings even do not allow him without admitting the the Armenian Zoroastrianism may at least be “of a corrupt type,” much however depending it seems on the writer being Armenian too as well as on the writer defining Zoroastrianism as paganism, thereby evincing his other preconceived inclinations, etc.

Indeed, much of the data mentioned by other writers in the same publication does not quite seem to support Ananikian’s conclusions. The festival of the Transfiguration (Vardavar) is celebrated on the same day as “an old heathen festival,” “the festival of Vichak (Fate) is one of the principal Armenian festivals, and one of those which seems to be relics of pagan times,” relatives and friends “each bringing a lamp with three or seven wicks” to the home of the deceased. “The Arevordians ('Son of the Sun') are met with (even) in the 12th century; their doctrines recall the old ideas of Armenian paganism,” “although Christians,” the Armenians “have popular beliefs and superstitions which have passed down through the ages.” “The young men are continually at war with the Devs,” “the Armenians, especially those of Eastern Armenia, make great use of rolls of prayers containing magical or talismanic formulas, intended to protect them against the evil eye (which Ananikian himself has well described. “Until the middle of the 18th century, Catholic Armenians did not form an autonomous community.” “The Kurds, it is said, are ancient Armenians who have passed under the law of Islam (but originally they were Zoroastrian as some of them are claiming today in Iraq. “Marriage is permitted to the inferior clergy, and women are not excluded from the functions of the deacons.” (pp. 803-807).

All these facts are so revealing for our purpose. Nevertheless, what Ananikian himself painstakingly and eruditely reveals even more strongly suggests the Armenian embrace of Zoroastrianism until the Byzantines wanted a foothold in Armenia to spread Christianity and for political and military purposes. Quoting just a few of his findings will bear it out: “In Anatolia the Catholic Armenian priests are generally married, elsewhere they observe more freely the law of celibacy, which is not obligatory on them” (which is so reminiscent of the Sasanian influence on the Nestorian church), “animal sacrifices survived the fall

of paganism --- besides animals, flower-wreaths and green twigs (*Barsom* of the Avesta?) were offered,” “the priesthood must be hereditary in a well-organized caste. We have the old compound *Krmanuish* meaning 'priestess,'” A critical study of the Armenian church calendar and ceremonies would probably reveal much that could be referred to the pre-Christian ritual. During Lent, for example, the morning service is opened with an abjuration of the devil – (when) the whole congregation turns their backs to the altar and looks towards the west. ---

Evidently the Armenians considered the west as the abode of the devils,” just as, Ananikian notes, “in the Avesta the north is the dwelling place of evil spirits (*Vendidad* vii.2, xix.1. *Arda Viraf* xvii.11),” “The bridge in Armenian belief is obviously Chinwad-bridge of the *Avesta* which is fully described in *Dadestan-i-Denig*, xxi.2-7,” “There was a middle place for those (souls) that were neither good or bad,” which “finds its Iranian source in “Hamestagan, ‘ever-stationary’”. There were probably temple-books which Christianity systematically destroyed.

The temples were numerous, both in the country and in the cities and there were special temple-towns. ---Christian churches and monasteries succeeded both to the wealth and to the veneration belonging to the ancient sacred sites ---there were sacred places on mountain tops, like the throne of Nahata, etc.” All these finds indicate a practice of a well organized Zoroastrianism in Armenia though it may often differ from the one practiced in its native place as was the case with Sogdians and other Iranian people living away from Iran. “Primitive traits are not lacking” in the Zoroastrian angels worshiped in Armenia, “as in the case of Spenta Armaiti,” but such occurrences may be seen among the Iranian Zoroastrians too in view of its antiquity.

As in Iran itself after the Arab conquest, Armenian Zoroastrians were thoroughly demoralized and plundered and ill-treated as they were by the invading Christians for their own political end and creating a religious upheaval Armenians had not evinced or expected until then. It is not surprising therefore that the weight of his own findings propels him to conclude, despite all his hesitations about it: “but the old religion of Armenia was mainly Iranian, --- of a corrupt type,” but the Armenian Christianity he (and others) describe is not free from such “corruptions” due mostly however to Armenia's antiquity which does not allow people to completely set aside their age-old practices and beliefs ingrained in them for centuries as is well depicted by Ananikian himself. (p. 797).