

# Cognitive Analysis of the Mythical and Poetic Pre-Representations of the Theory of the “Main Myth”<sup>1</sup>

*Myth is the primordial language natural to these psychic processes, and no intellectual formulation comes anywhere near the richness and expressiveness of mythical imagery. C. Jung*

*Knowledge is good, ignorance is evil, and the tree of the knowledge is sown wisdom.*

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## New perspective on the theory of the “main myth”

**The theory of the “main myth”**, developed by linguists V. Toporov and V. Ivanov [1] in 60-70s of XX century, leads to identifying the main mythological motif in Indo-European mythology – the motif of the thunderer fighting a serpent. Cognitive and linguistic analysis of the study reveals that the **theory of the “main myth” is outdated, as it does not cover the entire field of the issues under the study**. Criticism of the theory of the “main myth” is inevitably related to the current provision of the analysis of mythological consciousness in critical philosophy and philosophy of science. However, the growing interest in myth and the basic problems of comparative mythology refer to the study of its matter rather than to philosophical analysis of its form. The systematic problem of the unity of this diverse and comprehensive material in the theory of the “main myth” is presented using the methods of literary analysis and general ethnopsychology, highlighting a common mythological line rather than its source. The new concept of the study of this issue is held, referring to the obtained historical, philosophical, cultural and linguistic facts.

None of the forms has initial independent existence, thus determining the source verifies the origin of the main forms of spiritual culture in mythological consciousness. The issues of the origin of cognition, knowledge, art and writing refer to a common initial stage, when they were all unified into the cohesion of mythological consciousness. For a particular period of time it gradually generates theoretical concepts on cognition, space and time, good and evil, life and death. This “genetic” connection indicates formation of particular motifs and principles of Natural Philosophy concerning the indifferent fundamental principle of mythological consciousness. Thus, this question develops beyond the current interpretation of the theoretical study of the “main myth”, including a more comprehensive 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 (cultivated, cognizing). The proposed framework is systematically crucial as the main mythological motif and **develops beyond** not only Indo-European but also **world mythologies**. The new conception tends to synthetic perception of the genesis concept rather than to its separation into constituent units. The research findings revealed that the motif of the Thunderer (deity) fighting a serpent (embodying darkness) in the traditional interpretation is outdated and requires a novel cognitive interpretation, reflecting cognition in thinking of a cultivated man, the concept of the tree of the 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 good and preservation of the tree of life [2, 3].

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<sup>1</sup> Ivanov V., Toporov V. Studies in Slavic Antiquities. “Nauka”, Moscow, 1974.

## The birth of Vahagn is the prototype of the main mythological motif

Particular representations and motifs do not appear as a given in our minds, but are the result of formation, carried out by the main forces of consciousness, because of the contemplation conditions and pure thought. It not only quests for the categories of objective consciousness in theoretical and intellectual fields, but also suggests that the corresponding categories should act in all fields of formation of the worldview. Every such perception of the world is only possible through distinctive acts of objectification, conversion of plain “impressions” into inherently defined and structured “representations” [4]. A serpent or a dragon is a symbolic representation of a volcanic eruption and avalanche. Prehistoric man witnessed natural processes. Thinking, wise, knowledgeable and experienced men – leaders or tribal chiefs – had the task to study, describe, transfer and visualize the observed processes to preserve and transfer knowledge and experience for training and organization of struggle, survival of future generations, their descendants, 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 the tradition of rock art.

Once in 1000 or 2000 years the Araratian Mountains were the site of catastrophic volcanic eruptions, and it was necessary to carry out accumulation and transfer of knowledge in the form and content that would be available and comprehensible to a pre-historic man. The inhabitants of the volcanic Araratian Mountains managed the task perfectly [5]. Recognition of the importance of national language categorization and conceptualization in terms of identifying and theoretic understanding the fundamental mechanisms, which manage the existence and activity of a native speaker, denotes a particular vector of scientific inquiry, such as cognitive modeling of national experience of cultural forms and linguistic signs. For this reason, reflective research studies models of national linguistic categorization – methodological tools, revealing dialectics of interaction between natural scientific knowledge and empirical evidence under the condition of orienting interaction of native speakers in a coordinate system of respective cultural and historical periods [4].

The motif of the birth of the first man (described in the song “The birth of Vahagn”) is proposed as the main mythological motif [6]. A significant fundamental feature of the analysis is the formation of mythological representations, themes and motifs. Using scientific sources, it is important to establish whether mythical and poetic elements are reconstructed, arise as a result of the author's original formation of myths or are borrowed. During the analysis these units are considered as individual subsystems that are not isolated, but closely related to other levels of this issue. The principles developed within it are mostly universal.

The **basis**, origin, foundation of knowledge and experience that predetermine the victory over the forces of nature (classical elements) and the enemy was knowledge of the **four fundamental forces of nature (fire, air, water and earth)**. The **interaction** of the fundamental **forces of nature** and their results form the “**superstructure**”. Symbiosis of the basis and the superstructure provided the **absolute victory of reason over the wild force, predetermined the issues of survival and viability of a tribe** [7].

The following principle of one over many entrenched in the consciousness of a pre-historic man: the four forces dominate one of them taken individually (these views were further transformed and included in the teaching on the principles of Natural Philosophy and Metaphysics). They perceived that a system dominates its constituent elements. A system unit cannot withstand an entire system. A system has qualities that none of its constituent elements possesses (the 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 thinking. This law of thickening or concurrency of correlated units in mythological thinking can be identified in logics and genesis of thinking, wisdom and mind of a pre-historic man, modeled based on interpretation of themes and motifs of the complexes of Armenian rock art. A number of depictions of thunderers and serpents/dragons are identified. In the prehistoric

culture of the Araratian Mountains there are unique artifacts – dragon-stones carved from basalt, the so-called “vishapakars”.

A **thunderer** is the cultivated and wise first man that possesses knowledge and “supernatural” powers due to his cognitive abilities, wisdom, knowledge, intellect and mind. He is depicted in rock art and described identically in myths, embodying a hero, meeting the challenge of the wild forces of nature threatening the earth, world (including flora and fauna), mankind, cosmos, sun and moon and other forces of nature. A **serpent** symbolizes negative forces, **trying to destroy flora and fauna, to kill a man, to swallow the sun and the moon, to block the access of a man to the source of life, water** [8].

**Knowledge of “good” and “evil” is presented in a comprehensive manner for perception, realization, teaching and using within a particular period of time in a comprehensive stylized form of universal integrated 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 **act of the victory of good** (wisdom, knowledge, forces of light and the sun, lightning, etc.) **over evil, a serpent/dragon** – the final form of the genesis of the paradigm of victory over the classical elements due to knowledge, wisdom and courage of the leaders and tribal chiefs (fearless leaders and sages, that were exalted or venerated into the status of divine beings throughout the history, embodying thunderers in traditional mythological perception and representation).

The authors propose a novel conception of the “main myth”, which is in all a reconstruction formed on the basis of modeling the action of the four forces of nature, expressed in the principles of Metaphysics and Natural Philosophy in the song “**The birth of Vahagn**” and in the works of M. Khorenatsi and A. Shirakatsi regarding the four forces of nature [9-12]. In the “Book of letters” M. Khorenatsi reveals the mystery of the genesis of a man, using the language of metaphysics, the teachings of the unity of nature and man, emphasizing that the forces of nature are interconnected and comprise the four fundamental principles – the classical elements (earth, water, air and fire) [9]. The song is an artistic interpretation of the poem set to music. It is a sequenced description of an algorithm of interaction of the four forces of nature: opposition of not the first man (thunderer) and his opponent/enemy – chthonian serpent, but interaction of the principal forces of nature personifying 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 over death, the supremacy of the conception of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil 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 the heaven and on the earth: the earth, water (sea), fire (flame, smoke) and air (sky)” [10]. Flora is embodied in the form of a reed in the sea, from which Vahagn is born, surrounded by fire and flame [11]. In social and cosmic respect there are two related but opposing worlds: human and nature. The forces of nature are the boundaries between them; all the significant events proceed in the space between heaven and earth. A large number of representations of flora are largely determined by the function they perform.

The poem-song “The birth of Vahagn” is not a description of the sun, sunrise or thunder, as some researchers consider. This is indeed a poetic description of natural phenomenon. This is a poetic narration of a volcanic eruption. It is not a coincidence that in this song the birth of the fire-eyed youth is the outcome of the four fundamental elements in heaven and on earth: the earth, water (sea), fire (flame, smoke) and air (sky). In this 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 volcano, from its crater rise smoke and flame (smoke and flame together are inherent to neither the sun nor thunder or lightning,

notwithstanding the attempts to present it as their description), from which [flame] the youth is born, symbolizing bravery and courage, love and devotion. According to the authors, this song does not have East-Indian or Iranian origin, but was created on the territory of historical Armenia, in the paradigm of Armenian culture and worldview. It was created in the vicinity of Van Sea impressed directly by a volcanic eruption on [possibly] Nemrut or Tendurek [Tondrak] mountains located near the sea. The “crimson sea” described in the song is Van Sea, which was colored crimson during a volcanic eruption from erupted crimsonish red magma flames and fire. The song-poem “The birth of Vahagn” – a poetic figurative description of volcanic eruption – represents in fact the origin of the god of war, battle and courage, lightning and thunder in the Armenian pagan pantheon [12].

The analysis reveals related cause-effect cohesions (invariants, analogous and common archetypes in themes) between the old Armenian motif describing the birth of the cultivated hero, the first man **Vahagn**, his beautiful bride **Astghik**, the motif of the hero fighting a **dragon** [**vishap**] and **liberating water** (on the territory bordering the **Caucasus**) and ancient Greek myths, in particular **Zeus** fighting **Typhon** (a serpent from **Cilicia**, according to another version from the **Caucasus**), **Prometheus** fashioning man out of clay mixed with water in the **Caucasus**, Prometheus punished for an extraordinary deed (an act of kindness by providing people the knowledge of getting fire). By the will of Zeus Prometheus is chained to the rocks in the **Caucasus**. The Argonauts, led by Jason, set out on the quest of the Golden Fleece to the **Caucasus** (**Colchis**), where the dragon guarding the water source and the Golden Fleece (the symbol of ancient knowledge recorded by runes) expected them on an oak tree (the symbol of the **tree of the knowledge of good and evil**). According to Norse mythology, the Aesir **Odin** created the Runes on an oak tree (the symbol of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil), coloring it with his own blood [2, 6]. 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, application) had **the value of life or death**.

### **The cognitive assessment of the main mythological motif**

Thus, the entire conceptual meaning of the motif of the thunderer fighting a dragon is entrenched in the mind/consciousness (thinking) of ancient people by realizing the paradigm of the value of ancient knowledge expressed in the form of the notion of knowledge of the “**tree of good and evil**”, in the knowledge of “**ripe fruit of wisdom and knowledge**”. The decisive battle with the consequences of catastrophic volcanic eruption, recorded by M. Khorenatsi and passed down from generation to generation as a vivid, realistic, cognitive, artistic and poetic song, is the first fundamental and decisive trial for the one who knows and puts into practice 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 Caucasus, the Araratian Mountains, on the territories inhabited by the ancestors and descendants of Noah and Japheth, Tiras, Askanaz, Torgom, Riphath and Javan) [11, 14].

Are identified the relations of the “main myth” with the biblical motif of the genesis of **Adam** and **Eve** (in the Garden of Eden in Vaspurakan, bordering the **Caucasus**, where the **four rivers** take their sources), eating the forbidden fruit of knowledge of “**the tree of good and evil**” (the serpent tempts Eve to taste it) and their expulsion from the site, where a characteristic picture of a volcanic eruption is observed. Relations to other old Greek, Kassite-Babylonian, Sumerian-Acadian and Hurrian-Hittite myths, e.g. the theme of **Cadmus** (from Phoenicia, the grandson of Hayk Nahapet) fighting a **dragon**; **Jason** fighting a **dragon** in **Colchis** (**Caucasus**); the Vedic myth of **Indra** fighting **Vritra**; Baltic mythological motifs of Perkunas and Velnias, etc. For knowledge transfer (cf. the story of Prometheus) to mankind in the form of Christian worldview, as revival or continuation of the Creator’s teaching, carried out by his son Jesus, in the end for his deeds is “bound”, crucified on the **cross**, symbolizing the “**tree of the knowledge of good and evil**” and “**the tree of life**” [15]. 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” has passed to Christianity and penetrated into the frame of medieval Christian doctrine. The plan and architecture of a medieval temple reveal 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 sun. The four points of the cross are also identified with the four cardinal directions and the corresponding division of the world. On this simple schematic basis in Christianity is based the increasingly refined and profound symbols, in which all the inner content of the faith as if protrudes, 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 [16]. People frequently use words not on their semantic level, but on the level of 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 the basis for the recipient to perceive the meaning [17]. A language reflects contemporary culture; still it also bears the imprint of its previous forms, which secure a universal worldview, the system of sustainable representations, reflecting the cognitive abilities of our ancestors in the historical context.

The current level of development of linguistic science presupposes a profound study of the issues of systemic organization and categorization of the vocabulary of a language, word analysis in its connections and relations rather than taken individually. Language reflects contemporary culture, but it also carries the imprint of its previous states, in which the universal worldview is affirmed, the system of persistent representations. The Armenian language has retained vivid traces of this relation. Vahagn (embodies four consonants in v, h, g, n) is a dragon-slayer (“vishapaqagh”) and a thunderer, the liberator of water, whom the authors directly correlate with the four forces of nature (fire, water, air, earth), and, accordingly, with volcanic eruption and lava. The roots of these theonyms \*van, \*ia, \*an, \*agn and \*uel- become universal indicators of the relations within the four forces of nature, with the antagonist serpent. They are identified absolutely everywhere – in the names of pagan gods, Greek Zeus, Baltic Velnias; in toponyms such as Volosovo, Veletovo, Volhynia, Wawel; in the words Valkyrie, Valhalla, and Wayland; in the names denoting water (“aqua”), etc.

Non-rational (mythological doxal) 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 mind, processing the data of sensory perceptions, senses, is capable of modeling the unknown, 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 the first man 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 [18] and the results of the comparison, analysis and interpretation of the system of simple-, gega- and mega- clusters of rock art, discovered in the vicinity of the three sacred Armenian lakes (Van, Sevan and Urmia), on the site of the settlement of the descendants of Tiras, Askanaz, Torgom and Riphath, including the territory of modern Armenia, Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey [19].

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