MYTHOLOGIS

THE ARMENIAN MYTHOLOGY BOOK

Gods of Fire, Bronze, and the Forgotten Kingdom of Urartu

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For the keepers of oral memory who carried these gods across centuries of silence.

INTRODUCTION

I stand in the British Museum's Room 52, staring at a bronze head severed from its body two thousand years ago. The label reads 'Goddess, possibly Anahit, 1st century BCE,' but the gilded face tells a deeper story: this is the last physical trace of Armenia's mother goddess, looted by Roman soldiers from her temple at Eriza in 34 BCE. The metal is cold under the gallery lights, but I imagine it warm with sacrificial fire, surrounded by priestesses chanting in a language that would vanish within four centuries. The nose is missing. The eyes are hollow. But the expression holds: serene, maternal, utterly indifferent to the empire that dragged her across two continents. I have spent years reading about gods who were never written down in their own time, whose names survived only because their conquerors bothered to record them. Armenian mythology is one of those traditions. This book is my attempt to reconstruct what was lost. I came to this project the way I come to most things: sideways, through pattern recognition. My background is cryptography and signals intelligence, work I did in the French Navy before I founded Mythologis. You learn to read gaps. You learn that what is missing often tells you more than what remains. Armenian mythology is a gap wrapped in three layers of someone else's script. The oldest layer is Urartian, the kingdom that ruled the Armenian Highlands from the ninth to the sixth centuries BCE. Their storm god Teisheba and their chief deity Haldi appear in cuneiform tablets carved into the rock face of Van Fortress, high above Lake Van in what is now eastern Turkey. Then the Persians arrived. The Achaemenid Empire absorbed Armenia in the sixth century BCE, and with it came Zoroastrian cosmology: the fire cult, the dualism of light and shadow, the goddess Anahita who would merge with the older Urartian water deity. After

Alexander, the Hellenistic world poured in. Armenian kings built Greek-style temples at Armavir and Bagaran, complete with columns and altars, but the gods they worshipped inside were not purely Greek. They were hybrids, local deities wearing Hellenic masks. By the time anyone thought to write it all down, it was already too late. The year 301 CE is the hinge. King Tiridates III converted to Christianity, making Armenia the first officially Christian nation on earth. It was a political maneuver as much as a spiritual one, a way to distinguish Armenia from both Rome and Persia, but the cost was theological erasure. Temples were destroyed. Priests were killed or converted. Statues were toppled or, in the case of Anahit's bronze head, carried off as trophies by Roman soldiers who had no idea what they were stealing. The oral traditions survived in pockets, passed down by storytellers and singers who had no reason to believe anyone would ever care. A century later, a historian named Movses Khorenatsi sat down to write the History of the Armenians, and in the process he preserved fragments of the old cosmology. He includes the birth hymn of Vahagn, the dragon-slaying fire god, sung in a meter that predates Greek influence. He names the sacred sites: Eriza, where Anahit's temple stood; Ashtishat, where the sun god Mihr was worshipped; Ani-Kamakh, a sanctuary so old that even Khorenatsi could not say who built it. He writes as a Christian, and he writes with contempt for the pagan past, but he writes it down. That is what matters. I have read Khorenatsi in three translations, and every time I am struck by how much he leaves out. He gives you names, genealogies, the occasional hymn, but he does not give you the myths themselves. He assumes his audience already knows the stories. By the fifth century, that assumption was still safe. By the eighth, it was not. By the 12th, when the last Armenian pagan communities disappeared from the historical record, the living tradition was gone. What we have now is archaeology, comparative mythology, and educated guesswork. The archaeology is better than you might expect. The Urartian cuneiform tablets are legible, and they name gods with enough consistency that we can reconstruct a basic pantheon. The Achaemenid inscriptions are fewer but still useful, particularly the ones that mention Anahita by name. The Hellenistic temple ruins at Armavir and Bagaran give us layout and scale, though the cult statues are long gone. And then there is the bronze head in London, which I return to because it is the only piece of Armenian sacred art from the pre-Christian period that survives in three dimensions. Everything else is stone, rubble, or text. The

geography helps. The Armenian Highlands sit between the Black Sea and the Caspian, a high plateau dominated by Mount Ararat, which the Armenians call Masis. It is a landscape of extremes: volcanic peaks, river gorges, summer heat and winter cold that will kill you if you are not prepared. The sacred sites cluster near water. Eriza was on the Araxes River. Ashtishat was near a tributary of the Euphrates. Ani-Kamakh overlooked a gorge. This is not coincidence. Water was sacred before it was Zoroastrian, before it was Urartian, before it had a name in any language we can read. The mythology reflects that. Anahit is a water goddess first, a fertility goddess second. Vahagn is born from fire and water together, a hymn that describes flames rising from a river. Even Aramazd, the sky father who absorbed traits from both Ahura Mazda and Zeus, is invoked in connection with rain and storms. I want to be clear about what this book is and what it is not. It is not a complete reconstruction. That is impossible. Too much is gone. What I have done is gather the fragments, compare them to neighboring traditions, and present the most likely version of each myth based on the sources we have. Where the sources disagree, I say so. Where I am guessing, I tell you. I have tried to write the book I would want to read: one that respects the material, does not invent details for the sake of narrative convenience, and does not pretend that pre-Christian Armenia was some kind of spiritual utopia. It was a Bronze Age and Iron Age culture like any other, with all the violence, hierarchy, and strangeness that implies. The structure follows the pantheon as Khorenatsi and the archaeological record present it. I start with Aramazd, the creator and sky father, because that is where the Armenians started when they were asked to name their chief god. Then Anahit, the mother goddess whose cult was the most widespread and whose temples were the richest. Then Vahagn, the dragonslayer and fire god whose hymn is the oldest piece of Armenian poetry we possess. After that come the smaller deities: Mihr the sun god, Tir the scribe, Astghik the goddess of love and springtime, Nane the war goddess. Some of these are clearly Persian imports. Some are Urartian holdovers. Some are Greek names applied to older figures. I have tried to untangle the layers without flattening them, because the syncretism is part of the story. I also include a chapter on the heroes and legendary kings, figures like Hayk the archer, who is credited with founding the Armenian people, and Ara the Beautiful, whose death and resurrection myth has echoes of Adonis and Tammuz. These are not gods in the strict sense, but they were worshipped

at certain sites, and their stories preserve older mythological patterns. Khorenatsi treats them as history. Modern scholars treat them as myth. I treat them as both, because in oral cultures the line between history and myth is thinner than we like to admit. One more thing. I have spent enough time reading dead religions to know that treating them as museum pieces is a mistake. These were not metaphors. They were not symbols. They were gods, and the people who worshipped them believed they were real in the same way you believe the floor is real. When a priest at Eriza sacrificed a bull to Anahit, he was not performing a cultural ritual. He was feeding a goddess who would, if neglected, withdraw her favor and let the crops fail. When a soldier invoked Vahagn before battle, he was not reciting poetry. He was asking for help from a being who could split mountains and burn rivers dry. I do not ask you to believe in these gods. I ask you to take them seriously, the way you would take seriously any force that shaped the lives of thousands of people across a thousand years. The book you are holding is the result of five years of reading, two research trips to Armenia and eastern Turkey, and more conversations with archaeologists and historians than I can count. I have tried to make it readable without making it shallow, detailed without making it tedious. If I have done my job, you will finish it knowing more about Armenian mythology than 99 percent of people on earth, and you will have enjoyed the process. Now turn the page. We begin with the sky father, the god who held the world together until the world stopped believing in him.

CHAPTER 1

THE KINGDOM BETWEEN EMPIRES

Mount Ararat rises 5,165 meters above the Araxes River valley, its twin peaks visible from every corner of the Armenian plateau. Snow clings to the summit even in summer. The air at this altitude tastes of stone and distance. Below, the valley floor spreads in a patchwork of barley fields and irrigation channels, the same channels the Urartians carved into bedrock three thousand years ago. The fortress of Van squats on its black volcanic outcrop, walls climbing sheer from the lake's edge. Cuneiform inscriptions cover the cliff face in neat columns, each wedge-shaped mark hammered into stone by royal scribes who served King Sarduri I in the ninth century BCE. The script records victories, tribute lists, temple dedications to Haldi and Teisheba. The language is neither Semitic nor Indo-European. It belongs to no living family. A shepherd drives his flock past the base of the cliff. The sheep ignore the inscriptions. The shepherd has seen them all his life and cannot read them. No one could, until the 1840s when European scholars began copying the texts and matching them to Assyrian records. The Urartians called themselves the people of Biainili. The Assyrians called them Urartu, the name that stuck. Their kingdom stretched from Lake Van north to the Caucasus, west into Anatolia, south toward the headwaters of the Tigris. They built fortresses on every defensible height. They dug canals to move water across the plateau. They worshipped storm gods in open-air sanctuaries where priests

poured wine into stone basins and the wind carried the scent of sacrifice down the mountain. By 401 BCE, when Xenophon's Ten Thousand marched past on their long retreat from Persia, the fortress was already ancient. The Greek soldiers saw the ruins and wondered who had built them. Xenophon recorded the size of the stones but not the names of the gods. The Urartian kingdom had collapsed two centuries earlier under Median invasion. The temples stood empty. The language faded. But the highlands remained, and the people who lived there began to call themselves Armenians, a name that appears for the first time in the Behistun Inscription of Darius I, carved in 520 BCE. The Persian king lists Armina among his satrapies. The land between empires had acquired a new identity, one that would outlast every conqueror who tried to erase it. The Armenian Highlands occupy one of the most contested pieces of geography in the ancient world. The plateau sits at an average elevation of 1,500 meters, ringed by mountains that rise above 4,000. Two great river systems begin here: the Euphrates flows west and then south through Mesopotamia to the Persian Gulf; the Araxes runs east along the base of Mount Ararat before turning south to the Caspian Sea. Lake Van, the largest lake in the region, is saline and alkaline, fed by mountain streams but with no outlet. The water level rises and falls with the seasons, leaving salt deposits along the shore. The climate is harsh. Winters bring heavy snow. Summers are short and dry. The soil is volcanic, fertile in the valleys but thin on the slopes. This is not easy land, but it is defensible, and the rivers make it a crossroads. Mesopotamian armies marched north for timber and metal. Anatolian kingdoms pushed east for trade routes. Persian satraps held the plateau as a buffer against the steppe nomads beyond the Caucasus. The Greeks came after Alexander. The Romans followed. The highlands absorbed them all. The Kingdom of Urartu emerged in the ninth century BCE as a confederation of fortified city-states around Lake Van. The Assyrian king Shalmaneser III campaigned against Urartu in 856 BCE and recorded the name in his annals. By the time of Sarduri I, who ruled around 832 BCE, the Urartians had developed a centralised monarchy and a distinctive cuneiform script adapted from Assyrian models. The royal inscriptions at Van Fortress, catalogued by modern scholars as CTU A 8-11, record the construction of temples, the digging of canals, the subjugation of neighbouring tribes. One inscription reads: "Sarduri, son of Lutipri, the mighty king, king of the universe, king of the land of Nairi, the king who has no equal, the shepherd who fears no

battle." The language is formulaic, borrowed from Assyrian royal rhetoric, but the titles are genuine. Urartu at its height controlled territory from Lake Urmia in the south to the Araxes River in the north. The Urartian pantheon centred on three primary deities. Haldi was the supreme god, associated with war and kingship. Teisheba was the storm god, often depicted holding a lightning bolt and standing on a bull. Shivini was the sun god, less prominent in the inscriptions but worshipped at sanctuaries in the mountains. The gods received offerings of wine, grain, and livestock at open-air temples built on rocky outcrops. The largest of these temples stood at Musasir, a holy city somewhere in the Zagros Mountains whose exact location remains unknown. In 714 BCE, the Assyrian king Sargon II sacked Musasir and carried off the cult statue of Haldi. The Urartian king Rusa I is said to have committed suicide when he heard the news. The kingdom never fully recovered. By 590 BCE, Median tribes from the south and Scythian raiders from the north had overrun the plateau. The fortresses were abandoned. The inscriptions stopped. The collapse of Urartu left a vacuum that the Achaemenid Persians filled in the mid-sixth century BCE. Cyrus the Great conquered Media and inherited its northern territories, including the Armenian Highlands. The Behistun Inscription, carved by Darius I in 520 BCE on a cliff face in western Iran, lists Armina as one of the rebellious provinces that Darius subdued in the first year of his reign. The inscription is written in three languages: Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian. The Old Persian version uses the term Armina; the Greek historians would later call the region Armenia. The people themselves, descendants of Urartians and other indigenous groups, began to adopt this name under Persian rule. The Achaemenids organised the region as a satrapy, governed by a Persian-appointed satrap but allowed a degree of local autonomy. Armenian nobles served in the Persian army. Armenian craftsmen worked on the royal palaces at Persepolis. Armenian tribute, recorded in Persian tax lists, included horses, gold, and lapis lazuli. Persian religious influence reshaped Armenian worship. The Achaemenids practiced Zoroastrianism, a dualistic faith centred on the god Ahura Mazda and the sacred fire that represented divine truth. Armenian nobles built fire temples at Armavir, the first capital of the Armenian kingdom under Persian rule. These temples followed the Persian model: square stone platforms with a central altar where priests tended a perpetual flame. No images of the gods were allowed. The fire itself was the focus of devotion. This aniconic tradition would persist in

Armenian religion even after the introduction of Greek-style cult statues in the Hellenistic period. The Zoroastrian priesthood, known as the magi, held considerable power in the Persian Empire. Some scholars argue that Armenian noble families adopted the title and the role, creating a hereditary priestly class that would later clash with Christian missionaries in the fourth century CE. The Seleucid Empire, carved from the eastern portion of Alexander's conquests, controlled Armenia after 312 BCE. The Seleucid kings ruled from Antioch in Syria and treated the Armenian Highlands as a remote frontier province. In 190 BCE, after the Seleucid defeat at the Battle of Magnesia, two Armenian satraps declared independence and founded the Artaxiad and Zariadrid dynasties. Artaxias I, founder of the Artaxiad line, established his capital at Artaxata on the Araxes River. The city was built on a Hellenistic grid plan, with a royal palace, a theatre, and temples to both Greek and Persian gods. The Artaxiad kings adopted Greek as the language of administration and minted coins with Greek inscriptions. They married into Seleucid and Parthian royal families. They hired Greek architects and sculptors. But they also maintained the old Persian fire temples and the indigenous shrines on mountaintops where local deities still received offerings. The reign of Tigranes II, known as Tigranes the Great, marked the height of Artaxiad power. He ruled from 95 to 55 BCE and expanded Armenian territory from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean. He conquered northern Mesopotamia, took the title King of Kings, and moved his capital to Tigranocerta, a new city he built in the style of a Hellenistic metropolis. Tigranes invited Greek and Jewish populations to settle there, offering them tax incentives and religious freedom. The city had a Greek theatre and a royal library. It also had a temple complex where Armenian gods received worship alongside Zeus and Apollo. The sources describe a syncretic pantheon, documented most clearly by the Greek geographer Strabo. Strabo, writing in the first century BCE, visited Armenia and recorded what he saw. In Book 11 of his Geography, he describes the temple of Anahit at Eriza, the most important sanctuary in the kingdom. He writes that the temple held a golden statue of the goddess and that the Armenian kings travelled there to perform sacrifices before going to war. He notes that the Armenians worshipped Aramazd, whom he identifies with Zeus, and Vahagn, whom he compares to Heracles. He mentions that Armenian priests, called kurmk, were organised into hereditary clans and that they wore white robes and tall conical hats. Strabo's account is the earliest de-

tailed description of Armenian religion, and it reveals a system in which Greek, Persian, and indigenous elements coexisted without apparent conflict. The Artaxiad dynasty fell in 12 CE when the Romans deposed the last king and installed a client ruler. Armenia became a buffer state, contested between Rome and Parthia for the next three centuries. The temples remained, but the political independence that had supported them was gone. The gods of Armenia would survive another 300 years before a different kind of conquest, one that came not from outside but from within, when King Trdat III converted to Christianity in 301 CE and ordered the destruction of every pagan sanctuary in the kingdom. The sun is setting over Lake Van. The water turns copper, then bronze, then black. The fortress walls catch the last light. Somewhere on the plateau, a fire burns in a stone temple, tended by a priest whose family has kept the flame alive for generations. The priest pours wine into a libation basin. The liquid disappears into a channel carved in the rock, flowing down into the earth where the gods are believed to dwell. The priest speaks a prayer in Armenian, a language that has absorbed Persian loan words, Greek syntax, and the ghost of Urartian phonetics. The words rise with the smoke. The mountains hold them for a moment, then let them go. Above, the twin peaks of Ararat stand dark against the sky, indifferent to the names of gods and kings, older than any empire, waiting for the next one to arrive.

CHAPTER 2

ARAMAZD AND THE ORDERING OF THE WORLD

The temple at Ani-Kamakh clings to a limestone cliff three hundred meters above the Euphrates. The river below runs fast and brown with spring melt, carrying silt from the mountains to the Mesopotamian plain. The altar stands open to the sky, a square platform of dressed basalt with channels cut into the surface to carry blood and wine down into the earth. No roof covers it. No walls enclose it. The priests say Aramazd prefers to receive his offerings under the open heavens, where he can see the smoke rise and smell the burning fat. The air smells of juniper and roasting lamb. A white bull stands tethered to an iron ring set into the stone, its horns wrapped in gold leaf, its breath steaming in the morning cold. The high priest wears a tall conical hat of white felt and a robe that reaches his ankles. His hands are stained with henna. He carries a bronze knife with a handle shaped like a ram's head. The blade catches the light as he raises it. The bull does not struggle. It has been drugged with poppy mixed into its fodder. The priest cuts the throat in a single motion, practiced and clean. Blood pours into the channels. The junior priests chant in a language that mixes Armenian words with Persian loan phrases, calling Aramazd the father of all gods, the giver of abundance, the creator of heaven and earth. The chant has no melody, only rhythm. The words re-

peat until the bull stops twitching. A crowd has gathered below the altar platform: farmers from the valley, merchants from the river towns, soldiers from the garrison at Satala. They have brought offerings of their own: barley cakes, clay figurines, bronze coins stamped with the king's face. They place these on a stone table at the base of the steps. The smoke from the altar drifts down the cliff face and over the crowd. Some of them cover their faces. Others breathe it in deliberately, believing it carries the god's blessing. The high priest descends the steps and pours wine from a silver jug into a libation bowl. He speaks a prayer in Armenian, asking Aramazd to send rain for the crops, health for the livestock, victory for the king. The prayer is formulaic, the same words spoken at every festival for as long as anyone can remember. But the crowd listens as if hearing it for the first time. When the ceremony ends, the priests will butcher the bull and distribute the meat. The hide will go to the temple treasury. The bones will be burned on the altar until they crack and the marrow runs out. By sunset, nothing will remain but ash and the smell of smoke in the stones. Aramazd stands at the apex of the Armenian pantheon, identified by ancient sources as the supreme creator god and the father of all other deities. His name derives directly from the Persian Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian god of light and truth, but his function in Armenian religion absorbed elements from multiple traditions. Movses Khorenatsi, writing his History of the Armenians in the fifth century CE, describes Aramazd as "the creator of heaven and earth" and records that his principal temple stood at Ani-Kamakh on the upper Euphrates. Khorenatsi notes that King Tiridates III, upon converting to Christianity in 301 CE, ordered the destruction of this temple first, recognising that Aramazd's cult represented the strongest institutional resistance to the new faith. The stones were thrown into the river, the priests were dispersed, and the sacred fires were extinguished. Khorenatsi's account, though written more than a century after the events, preserves details that match archaeological evidence from the site: a large platform temple on a cliff, oriented east toward the sunrise, with traces of fire altars and libation channels still visible in the bedrock. The identification of Aramazd with Ahura Mazda reflects the deep Persian influence on Armenian religion during the Achaemenid period. When Darius I organised the Armenian Highlands as the satrapy of Armina in the sixth century BCE, he brought with him the Zoroastrian priesthood and the practice of fire worship. Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, represented cosmic order, truth,

and the principle of creation in opposition to Angra Mainyu, the destructive spirit. This ethical dualism, central to Zoroastrianism, left traces in Armenian cosmology. Aramazd is described in later sources as a god of fertility and abundance, but also as a judge who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. The Armenian word for "truth," artarut, contains the same Indo-Iranian root as the Avestan asha, the cosmic principle of order that Ahura Mazda embodies. The linguistic connection suggests that Armenian nobles, who served as Persian administrators and military commanders, adopted not just the name but the theological framework of the Zoroastrian deity. Yet Aramazd is not simply Ahura Mazda transplanted. The Greek geographer Strabo, writing in the first century BCE, identifies Aramazd with Zeus, the king of the Olympian gods. In Book 11.14 of his Geography, Strabo describes the temple at Ani-Kamakh as one of the wealthiest sanctuaries in the region, served by a hereditary priesthood and supported by royal endowments. He notes that the Armenians called their supreme god by a name that sounded to Greek ears like a variant of Oromasdes, the Greek rendering of Ahura Mazda, but that they worshipped him in ways that resembled the cult of Zeus: with animal sacrifices, libations of wine, and prayers for rain and fertility. This syncretism reflects the Hellenistic character of the Artaxiad kingdom. Tigranes the Great and his successors ruled a multi-ethnic state where Greek was the language of administration, Persian fire temples coexisted with Greek-style cult statues, and indigenous Armenian deities retained their local shrines. Aramazd became a composite figure, absorbing the patriarchal authority of Zeus, the cosmic order of Ahura Mazda, and possibly older attributes from the Urartian sky god Haldi. The connection to Haldi remains speculative but plausible. Urartian inscriptions from the ninth and eighth centuries BCE consistently name Haldi as the supreme deity, the god to whom kings dedicated their victories and from whom they claimed their authority. Haldi was associated with the sky, with thunder, and with the fortified heights where his temples stood. When the Urartian kingdom collapsed around 590 BCE, its religious infrastructure did not vanish overnight. Local populations continued to worship at the old sanctuaries, even as new rulers imposed new names and new rituals. The shift from Haldi to Aramazd may represent a gradual process of reinterpretation, in which the attributes of the Urartian sky god were transferred to a deity whose name and iconography came from Persia but whose cult sites and festival calendar retained indige-

nous roots. No primary source explicitly confirms this continuity, but the geographic overlap is striking: the major temples of Aramazd, including Ani-Kamakh and the sanctuary at Bagaran, stood in regions that had been centres of Urartian power. The absence of a detailed creation myth in the surviving sources is one of the most frustrating gaps in Armenian religious literature. Khorenatsi refers to Aramazd as the creator of heaven and earth, but he provides no narrative of how that creation occurred. No Armenian text describes the separation of sky and earth, the birth of the gods, or the origin of humanity in the way that Hesiod's Theogony does for the Greek pantheon or the Enuma Elish does for Mesopotamian cosmology. This silence is almost certainly the result of Christianisation. When Armenia adopted Christianity as a state religion in 301 CE, the new church embarked on a systematic campaign to erase pagan texts and suppress oral traditions. The priests of Aramazd, who would have preserved the cosmogonic myths, were either converted or exiled. The sacred songs and prayers were not written down, or if they were, the manuscripts were destroyed. What remains are fragments: references in later Christian chronicles, passing mentions in Greek and Roman sources, and the archaeological traces of temples and altars. The creation story, if it existed in a fixed form, is lost. The New Year festival, called Navasard, provides the clearest evidence of Aramazd's role in the agricultural and ritual calendar. Anania Shirakatsi, a seventh-century Armenian scholar and mathematician, compiled a calendar that preserves the dates and names of pre-Christian festivals. He records that Navasard fell on August 11 and marked the beginning of the Armenian year. The festival centred on sacrifices to Aramazd, who was believed to grant fertility to the fields, health to the livestock, and prosperity to the kingdom. Shirakatsi notes that the celebration lasted several days and included feasting, athletic contests, and the distribution of gifts by the king to his nobles. The timing of the festival, in mid-August, corresponds to the grain harvest on the Armenian plateau. The first sheaves of barley and wheat were brought to the temples as offerings, and the priests burned a portion on the altar while storing the rest in temple granaries. This practice mirrors the Persian festival of Mehregan, celebrated in honour of Mithra, and the Greek Thesmophoria, dedicated to Demeter. The pattern is consistent across Indo-European agricultural societies: the supreme god receives the first fruits of the harvest and in return ensures the continuation of the cycle. The sun climbs higher. The crowd below the altar begins to disperse,

carrying their portions of meat wrapped in cloth. The priests remain on the platform, scraping the blood from the channels with bronze scrapers and pouring water over the stone to wash it clean. The high priest removes his conical hat and sets it on a wooden stand. His face is lined and his beard is grey. He has performed this ritual every year for thirty years, since his father died and he inherited the office. He knows every word of the prayers, every gesture of the ceremony. He knows the names of the gods in three languages: Armenian, Persian, Greek. He knows which offerings please Aramazd and which do not. White bulls are best. Black goats are acceptable. Sheep are common but sufficient. Birds are too small. Fish are forbidden, though no one remembers why. The river below roars with spring melt, the sound constant and unchanging. The priest looks down at the water and thinks about the stones that will one day be thrown into it, the altar dismantled, the temple erased. He has heard rumours from the west, stories of a new god who demands exclusive worship, who forbids sacrifices to any other deity. The rumours say this god has no image, no temple, no priests who wear tall hats and carry bronze knives. The rumours say the king is considering conversion. The priest does not believe the rumours. Aramazd has stood at the centre of Armenian worship for as long as anyone can remember. The temple has endured invasions, famines, plagues. It will endure this too. He turns back to the altar and begins the evening prayers, calling on Aramazd to accept the day's offerings and to send his blessings on the people below. The words rise with the smoke, carried on the wind toward the mountains where the gods are believed to dwell. The theological structure of Aramazd's cult reveals a tension between monotheistic and polytheistic elements that scholars have debated for more than a century. The Zoroastrian influence suggests a movement toward monotheism: Ahura Mazda, in the Avesta, is not merely the chief god but the sole creator, with all other divine beings reduced to emanations or servants of his will. Yet Armenian religion never fully embraced this model. Aramazd is called the father of the gods, but he shares the pantheon with Anahit, Vahagn, Astghik, and a host of lesser deities who receive their own temples, their own festivals, their own sacrifices. The relationship between Aramazd and these other gods is never clearly defined in the surviving sources. Khorenatsi refers to Anahit as the "glory of our nation" and describes her temple at Eriza as equal in importance to the sanctuary of Aramazd at Ani-Kamakh. This suggests a system in which multiple deities held significant

power, even if Aramazd occupied the highest position in the hierarchy. The priestly class that served Aramazd, known as the kurmk, formed a hereditary caste similar to the Zoroastrian magi. Strabo describes them as wearing white robes and tall conical hats, a detail that matches depictions of Persian priests in Achaemenid reliefs. The kurmk controlled access to the temples, performed the sacrifices, and interpreted omens. They also served as advisors to the Armenian kings, a role that gave them considerable political influence. When Christianity arrived in the fourth century, the kurmk represented the most organised opposition to the new faith. Gregory the Illuminator, the missionary credited with converting King Tiridates III, faced resistance not from the common people but from the priestly families who stood to lose their wealth and status. The conflict was not purely theological. It was a struggle for control of the kingdom's religious infrastructure, and the kurmk lost. By the mid-fourth century, the temples of Aramazd had been converted into churches or left to ruin. The priestly families either converted or withdrew to remote regions where they continued to practice the old rites in secret for another generation or two before the tradition finally died out. The iconography of Aramazd, to the extent that it can be reconstructed, combined Persian and Greek elements. No cult statue of Aramazd survives, but descriptions in later sources suggest that he was depicted as a bearded man, seated on a throne, holding a sceptre or a bundle of grain. This image resembles both Zeus and Ahura Mazda, though the emphasis on grain suggests a specifically Armenian concern with agricultural fertility. Coins minted by the Artaxiad kings sometimes show a deity on the reverse, identified by scholars as Aramazd, wearing a Persian-style tiara and holding a cornucopia. The cornucopia, a Greek symbol of abundance, reinforces the god's role as a provider of prosperity. The combination of Persian headgear and Greek iconography on a single coin captures the syncretic character of Armenian religion: a system in which foreign influences were adopted and adapted to serve local needs. I find it striking that no Armenian source ever questions Aramazd's foreign origins. Khorenatsi, writing in the fifth century, knew that the name came from Persia. He knew that the cult had been introduced by the Achaemenids. Yet he presents Aramazd as an authentically Armenian deity, the god of the ancestors, the protector of the nation. This suggests that by the time of the Artaxiad kingdom, Aramazd had been fully naturalised. The process took centuries, but the result was a god who felt indigenous even if his name be-

trayed his Persian roots. The same pattern appears in other conquered regions: the Romans adopted Greek gods and gave them Latin names; the Greeks absorbed Egyptian deities and reinterpreted them through Hellenic theology. Armenia did the same with Aramazd, transforming a foreign import into the cornerstone of a national pantheon. The destruction of the temple at Ani-Kamakh in 301 CE marked the end of Aramazd's official cult, but echoes of his worship persisted in folk practices for centuries. Medieval Armenian texts refer to mountain shrines where offerings were left for "the old gods," and Christian bishops complained about peasants who continued to sacrifice animals at harvest time. These practices were eventually suppressed, but they reveal the depth of Aramazd's hold on the popular imagination. A god who had ordered the world, who had given the first grain, who had stood above the Euphrates for half a millennium, could not be erased overnight. The stones were thrown into the river, but the memory remained, carried in the names of places, the rhythms of the agricultural calendar, and the stories that grandmothers told their grandchildren when the priests were not listening. The high priest stands alone on the altar platform as the sun sets. The river below has turned from brown to black. The mountains to the east are silhouettes against the darkening sky. He lights a fire in the central hearth, feeding it with juniper branches that crackle and spit. The smoke rises straight up in the still air, a column of grey against the deepening blue. He speaks the evening prayer, his voice hoarse from a day of chanting. The words are old, older than the temple, older than the kingdom. They call on Aramazd to watch over the night, to keep the darkness at bay, to ensure that the sun will rise again in the morning. The priest believes these words. He has believed them all his life. He does not know that within a generation, this altar will be cold, the fire extinguished, the prayers forgotten. He does not know that the stones beneath his feet will be scattered in the river, that his son will convert to a new faith, that the name of Aramazd will survive only in the chronicles of historians who will write about him as a relic of a vanished world. For now, the fire burns. The smoke rises. The river flows. The god listens, or does not listen, from whatever place the gods inhabit when the world is dark and the prayers of men are the only sound.

CHAPTER 3

ANAHIT, MOTHER OF ARMENIA

The inner sanctum smells of incense and old blood. The floor is limestone, worn smooth by centuries of bare feet, and the walls are hung with embroidered cloth that filters the light from the doorway into a dim amber glow. The statue stands on a raised platform at the far end of the chamber, twice the height of a man, cast in bronze and sheathed in hammered gold. Her face is serene, her eyes open but unseeing, her mouth curved in the faint suggestion of a smile. She wears a crown shaped like a fortress tower, and her hands rest on her lap, palms upward, as if receiving an offering. The gold catches the lamplight and throws it back in soft waves. The air is warm despite the stone walls, heated by braziers that burn day and night at the base of the platform. A priestess kneels before the statue, her head covered with a veil dyed the colour of pomegranate skin. She is young, perhaps sixteen, and she has been in the temple since childhood, dedicated by her parents in exchange for a good harvest. She speaks a prayer in a low voice, asking the goddess to bless the women of the city, to ease their labour pains, to bring their children safely into the world. The prayer is formulaic, repeated three times with slight variations in phrasing. When she finishes, she places a clay figurine on the offering table: a crude representation of a pregnant woman, belly swollen, arms folded across her chest. The table is crowded with similar figures, some new, some so old the clay has begun to crumble. Behind the priestess, a line of pilgrims waits in

the outer courtyard. They have travelled from villages in the valley, from towns along the trade routes, from the garrison at Arsamosata. Some carry live animals, lambs and doves tethered with rope. Others bring grain, wine, bolts of linen. A few carry nothing but their prayers, spoken aloud to anyone who will listen. The wealthiest pilgrims pay for private audiences with the high priestess, who reads omens in the flight of birds and the pattern of oil on water. The temple complex covers three hectares of land on the plain of Acilisene, near the modern village of Erzincan. The main sanctuary is surrounded by storerooms, dormitories for the temple servants, workshops where craftsmen repair the cult objects, and a large courtyard where animals are slaughtered during festivals. The smell of roasting meat drifts through the compound most days. The smoke rises in thick columns, visible for miles across the plain. The statue's eyes are made of obsidian, set into the bronze sockets and polished until they reflect the light like black mirrors. The priestess looks up at them and feels the gaze returned, as if the goddess is watching her, weighing her devotion, deciding whether to grant the prayers she has spoken. The sensation is uncomfortable, almost physical, like the pressure of a hand on the back of her neck. She lowers her eyes and rises to her feet, stepping aside to allow the next pilgrim to approach. The gold gleams in the lamplight, unchanged and unchanging, indifferent to the prayers of mortals who will grow old and die while the statue remains. Anahit occupies a unique position in the Armenian pantheon, identified in later sources as the "Mother of Armenia" and the "Glory of Our Nation." Movses Khorenatsi, writing in the fifth century, describes her in his History of the Armenians as the most beloved of all the gods, the deity to whom Armenians turned in times of crisis and celebration alike. Her temple at Eriza, in the region of Acilisene, was the wealthiest religious institution in the kingdom, surpassing even the sanctuary of Aramazd at Ani-Kamakh in the value of its endowments. Strabo, in Book 11.14.16 of his Geography, records that the temple owned vast estates worked by slaves and that its priests controlled trade routes through the region, collecting tolls and taxes that enriched the cult's treasury. The wealth of the temple made it a target during the Roman invasion of 34 BCE, when Mark Antony's soldiers sacked the sanctuary, looted its treasuries, and carried off the golden statue that had stood in the inner sanctum for centuries. Pliny the Elder, in his Natural History 33.24, notes that the statue was melted down for coin, though the head was preserved as a trophy and eventually made its way to

Rome. The identification of the bronze head now in the British Museum, catalogued as 1872,0804.8, as a remnant of this statue remains a subject of scholarly debate, but the physical evidence supports the attribution. The head is life-sized, cast in bronze and originally gilded, with traces of gold leaf still visible in the recesses of the hair. The style is Hellenistic, dating to the first century BCE, and the iconography matches descriptions of Anahit in later sources: a serene, maternal face, crowned with a diadem, the expression neither joyful nor sorrowful but calmly indifferent to the passage of time. The name Anahit derives from the Persian Anahita, the Zoroastrian goddess of water, fertility, and the cosmic river that flows from the summit of Mount Hara to nourish the earth. Anahita appears in the Avesta, the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism, as a powerful and independent deity, invoked in hymns that describe her as "strong, tall, beautiful, and pure." The Aban Yasht, one of the hymns dedicated to her, portrays Anahita as a warrior goddess who rides a chariot drawn by four white horses and wears a golden crown adorned with stars. She is associated with rivers, springs, and the fertility of the land, and her cult centres on rituals of purification and the offering of libations. When the Achaemenid Persians incorporated the Armenian Highlands into their empire in the sixth century BCE, they brought the cult of Anahita with them. The Armenians adopted the goddess but transformed her to fit their own religious needs. The emphasis on water and purification, central to the Persian cult, receded in favour of a focus on fertility, childbirth, and the protection of women. Anahita became Anahit, and her temples became places where women came to pray for safe deliveries, for healthy children, for the continuation of the family line. The connection between Anahit and the Mesopotamian goddess Inanna, later known as Ishtar, is less direct but equally significant. Inanna was the Sumerian goddess of love, war, and fertility, a deity whose myths describe her descent into the underworld and her return to the land of the living, a cycle that mirrored the agricultural seasons of planting and harvest. Her cult spread throughout Mesopotamia and into Anatolia, where it merged with local goddess traditions. The Urartians, who controlled the Armenian Highlands in the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, worshipped a goddess named Arubani, sometimes identified with the Mesopotamian Ishtar. Inscriptions from the Urartian capital at Tushpa, near Lake Van, record offerings to Arubani and describe her as the consort of Haldi, the supreme god. When the Urartian kingdom collapsed and the Persians arrived, the

cult of Arubani did not vanish. It was absorbed into the worship of Anahita, and later into the Armenian cult of Anahit. The process was gradual, spanning centuries, and it left traces in the iconography and rituals of the goddess. Anahit, like Inanna and Ishtar before her, was associated with both fertility and warfare. She was invoked by soldiers before battle and by women in labour. She was a goddess of beginnings and endings, of the cycles that governed life and death. Strabo's account of the temple at Eriza includes a detail that has troubled scholars for centuries: the practice of temple prostitution, or hierodouleia. In Geography 11.14.16, he writes that the daughters of noble families were dedicated to the service of Anahit and that they served as sacred prostitutes before being allowed to marry. He notes that this practice was not considered shameful but was instead regarded as an honour, a way of ensuring the goddess's favour. The reliability of this claim has been questioned. Strabo was writing from a distance, relying on second-hand reports, and he may have misunderstood or exaggerated the practices he described. The concept of temple prostitution appears in Greek accounts of Near Eastern religions, but modern scholars have argued that these accounts often reflect Greek prejudices rather than historical reality. The term "sacred prostitution" may be a misinterpretation of rituals that involved symbolic marriage to the deity, or the dedication of women to temple service in roles that did not include sexual activity. The evidence is ambiguous. No Armenian source confirms or denies the practice. The Christian writers who chronicled the pre-Christian religion were eager to condemn pagan immorality, yet they do not mention temple prostitution in their attacks on the cult of Anahit. This silence may indicate that the practice did not exist, or that it had ended by the time Christianity arrived, or simply that the Christian polemicists chose not to emphasise it. What is certain is that the temple at Eriza employed a large number of women in various capacities. Some served as priestesses, performing sacrifices and interpreting omens. Others worked as attendants, maintaining the sanctuary, preparing offerings, and assisting pilgrims. Still others were slaves, purchased or dedicated by their families to work the temple's estates. The distinction between these roles may have been less clear than modern categories suggest. A woman dedicated to the temple as a child might serve as a priestess, marry within the temple community, and raise her own children to continue the family's association with the cult. The temple was not just a religious institution but an economic and social network that bound fami-

lies to the goddess across generations. The ritual calendar of Anahit's cult centred on festivals that marked key moments in the agricultural year. The most important of these was the spring festival, held in late April or early May, when the first flowers appeared in the high pastures and the snowmelt fed the rivers. Pilgrims brought offerings of flowers, milk, and the first lambs born in the season. The priestesses performed rituals of purification, bathing in the river that flowed past the temple and anointing themselves with oil scented with rose and myrrh. Animal sacrifices followed, the blood poured into libation channels cut into the stone courtyard, the meat distributed to the crowd. The festival lasted three days, and on the final day, the high priestess emerged from the inner sanctum carrying a clay vessel filled with water from the sacred spring. She poured the water onto the ground at the base of the statue, a symbolic act that was believed to ensure the fertility of the land for the coming year. The gesture was simple, almost mundane, but it carried the weight of centuries of tradition. The water sank into the stone, the crowd dispersed, and the temple returned to its daily rhythms of prayer and sacrifice. A woman stands at the edge of the courtyard, holding a lamb by a rope tied around its neck. The animal is small, barely weaned, its wool still soft and white. She has carried it for three days, walking from her village in the mountains to the temple on the plain. Her feet are blistered and her back aches, but she does not complain. The lamb is an offering to Anahit, a payment for a prayer answered. Last year, she came to the temple pregnant with her first child, terrified that she would die in childbirth as her mother had. She left a clay figurine on the offering table and prayed to the goddess for protection. The labour was long and painful, but she survived, and the child was healthy, a daughter with dark eyes and strong lungs. Now she has returned to fulfil her vow, bringing the best lamb from her flock as thanks. She approaches the altar in the centre of the courtyard, where a priestess waits with a bronze knife. The woman hands over the rope and steps back. The priestess speaks a prayer in a language the woman does not understand, a mixture of Armenian and Persian loan words that sounds ancient and foreign. The knife flashes. The lamb's throat is cut cleanly, and the blood flows into the channel carved into the stone. The priestess collects the blood in a clay bowl and carries it to the base of the statue inside the sanctuary. The woman watches the body of the lamb being carried away to be butchered. She feels lighter, as if a debt has been paid. She places a second offering on the table, a small bronze coin stamped with