

«ՄԱՏԵՆԱԴԱՐԱՆ»
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THE ANCIENT DRAMA IN ARMENIA

On the Origin of Drama

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SUMMARY

The book covers the issue of ancient Armenian mystery play. The research is based on medieval sources, linguistic data and pieces of folklore. There appear to be two types of evidence to suggest the occurrence of drama and theatre in Armenian History. The first one is the ancient Greek word *theatron*, the Armenian equivalent of which is defined as **mythical feast** /or ritual myth/, and the second indication derives from the ancient version of the classical “in - chains” myth with reference to Mithraism and the three mystery names of the central personage, i.e. Artavazd, Shidar and Mher. The historical and philological insight makes us believe that it is the notions of time and destiny with reference to *Oraculorum Syhyllinorum* as well as choral and ritual folklore that lies in the basis of the development of **drama**. This might be associated with Mesopotamic solar calendar and the Armenian pagan holiday of Navasard (relating both to the beginning and the end of the year) which used to symbolize Time, Expectation, Hope and Anxiety. The central personage of the mystery play is the man who stands out facing the destiny, who is said to be the ever-present captive in chains with the black and white hounds leaking the joint day and night. There goes the old pagan drama in Armenia, which can be found in most various records of medieval manuscripts dating to the early compilations of the 5th century and the famous “Hajsmavourq” (Συναζάριον, 13-15th centuries) regarded as holy calendar of the time.

The ancient Armenian mystery play displays thematic associations with “the myth of perpetual recurrence” symbolizing the universal cycle, and an interrelation with the Prometheus theme as well as the Iranian and Caucasian versions of the mythologem of “the captive in chains”. None of the versions mentioned, except for the Greek one has ever been referred to as ritually and dramatically modified. The Armenian version is distinguished by its close relation to the sidereal year (the time in which the earth completes one revolution in its orbit around the sun measured with respect to the fixed stars) and is defined as prophecy drama, called Shidar, a name carrying the meaning of *joint*. The resumption of the tale, with reference to several passages from “Armenian History” narrated by Movses Khorenatsi (5th century), suggests coherence with Saxo Grammaticus’s “Gesta Danorum” (13th century), a partly mythical history of the Danes, which contains the legend of Hamlet, the literary interpretation of which appears to be Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” in which certain mystical inferences can be observed. Thus for

instance, “*The time is out of joint.*” (Act I, Scene V); “*When we have shuffled off this mortal coil*”. (Act III, Scene I). The mystery background of these words takes us too far. “*I am an inmate of my own flesh*” (an ancient Babylonian poem): here is the thesis which serves as universal background for all types of dramatic state. The thematic mode is common for all cultures, but the ritual itself, representing the act of mystery (“the joint of time”) relates to early medieval literary sources of Armenian origin and appears to be closely tied to ancient Armenian beliefs. The captured power appears to be a restrained energy, a sort of anticipated release, a Messiah in the final chapter of “*Sasna Crer*” (“*Cranks of Sassoon*”), the Armenian heroic epic. The hero, chain-bound at the rock, is named Mher which is the analogue of Mithra, the ancient Per god of light. He stares at “the wheel of destiny, which symbolizes the galaxy circle, i.e. the horoscope originated in Western Asian culture. Supposedly, this happens to be the birthplace of the mystical and ritual drama.

The logic behind the object of investigation is closely related to the issue of the origin of drama which has long been covered in literature basically relying on two theories parallel to each other. Those were the so-called “solar” and “vegetative” theories. The current study is bound to develop “the solar theory”, according to which the key symbol tends to be the ancient Attic place resembling a circle /orchestra/ together with the twelve choral dancers dancing around the circle, thus representing the symbolic image of the twelve signs of Zodiac (Sir Edmund Kerchever Chambers, August Mahr).

The very fact of the occurrence of the ancient Armenian choral drama and the idea of ritual myth being a sidereal mystery with Shidar masque in the center of the play remained unknown to English and American scholars, while it definitely represents the time-and-space model of the ancient oriental rituals. The present study tends to accomplish “the solar theory” of the origin of drama. It comes to prove that the semicircle of the ancient Greek orchestra is the implication of an ever-lasting evolution, a sort of transformation of the Assyrian-Babylonian gnomon into a ritual dance circle, the origin of which goes deep into the Western Asian / including Armenian/ gnomon culture.

The Appendix of the book presents the reason for the usage of the word *theatron* for ancient Armenian mystery play in medieval texts. It is evidence of Hellenistic origin dating to third to second centuries B.C. and a sign of the ritual becoming formally accepted, the latter actually taken place during the reign of King Vagharsh the First, in 117 A.D. The ritual was declared forbidden by St. Gregory, the first Armenian Catholicos, in the year 301, and it was immediately replaced by another holiday named after Hovhannes Mkrtych /John the Baptist/, the Christian prophet.