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Y.V. Vassilkov

Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), Russian Academy of Sciences, Universitetskaya nab. 3, St. Petersburg, 199034, Russia
E-mail: yavass011@gmail.com

The Armenian Epic "Daredevils of Sassoun" and the Mahābhārata: Similarity of the Ethnographic Substratum

The author summarizes the results of his search for parallels between the Armenian epic "Daredevils of Sassoun" ("Sasna cŕer" which is also called "David of Sassoun"), and the Mahābhārata. The comparative study has revealed considerable similarity in the "ethnographic substratum" of both epics, particularly that relating to the archaic social organization mirrored by the epic. The earliest layer of both the Armenian and the Indian epics preserves the memory of a rural, largely pastoral society, in which an important role was played by young warrior brotherhoods. In the Armenian epic, this is indicated by recurrent motifs: the young heroes' rampage followed by exile, the foundation of their own outpost in the backwoods, young warrior brotherhoods, their defense of herds and warding off enemy attacks, battle frenzy (a common characteristic of all the Sassoun heroes), their immutable mentor and leader ("uncle") Keri Toros, allusions to orgiastic feasts, traces of premarital freedom by young men and women, etc. Among the Armenians, these motifs were supported by the existence until recent times of the institution of youth age-set groups, described by ethnographers. A comparative study of the Armenian epic reveals its hitherto unnoticed socio-historical aspects. Its wider use for studying other epic traditions (not only Indo-European but also those of other peoples inhabiting the Caucasus and the Eurasian steppes) will contribute to Comparative epic studies.

Keywords: Armenian epic, Mahābhārata, Comparative epic studies, ethnographic substratum, age-set groups, youth warrior brotherhoods.

Introduction: Indo-Armenian epic parallels

Our search for parallels between the Armenian epic "Daredevils of Sassoun" ("Sasna cŕer"; in Russia it is better known as "David of Sassoun") and the Indian Mahābhārata was triggered by the example of A. Petrosyan, whose Armenological works (2011, 2014) have already revealed some common motifs and images in both traditions. An attempt at moving in the opposite direction (from the Indian epic to Armenian) will be presented below. As we became acquainted with the Armenian epic texts (unfortunately, only in translation), new parallels soon began to come to light.

The historical contents of the Armenian and Indian epics are equally multilayered. Along with the reflection of a time when large monarchical formations and urban culture emerged in a predominantly agricultural society, the Mahābhārata has preserved the earliest stratum of memories about the time of a tribal society of mobile cattle breeders. Herds were recognized as the highest value in this society, and were the reason for conflicts between tribes. Regular exchange of raids on herds was carried out by *vrātyas*, members of young warrior brotherhoods (*gaṇa* or *vrāta* 'pack'). In Vedic mythology, the reflection of such band of young warriors was the *gaṇa* of the Maruts, deities of the storm, the sons of the fearsome god of cattle-breeders Rudra, brothers of the same age. Their

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common spouse or lover (the young goddess Rodasi) stood on a fighting chariot together with them.

The Indian epic emerged in a warriors' milieu and preserved the legacy of archaic heroism better than the priestly poetry of the Ṛgveda. The epic reflection of the young warrior brotherhood seems to be the main characters of the Mahābhārata—five Pāṇḍava brothers. After the death of their father King Pāṇḍu, the brothers grew up at the court of their uncle King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and were in constant conflict with his sons, the princes Kauravas. In order to get rid of his nephews, Dhṛtarāṣṭra allowed them to establish their own kingdom in a remote forest area. When the Kauravas, by means of witchcraft and deception in the game of dice, deprived them of their kingdom, the Pāṇḍavas, accompanied by their common spouse Draupadī, wandered through the forests performing various feats (Held, 1935: 308; Witzel, 2005: 41; Vassilkov, 2010: 307–310).

Another group of epic characters, in which it is also possible to see a Vrātya war-band, is the entourage of Kṛṣṇa, the friend of the Pāṇḍavas—young men of the Yādava tribe. Wine flowed and young women were present at their wild ritual festivities, and the young warriors brought themselves to fierce bestial fury, which ultimately ended up in tragedy: at the last of these festivities, Kṛṣṇa's warriors, drunk and possessed with rage, completely exterminated one other (Vassilkov, 2009: 51–53).

It will suffice to confine ourselves to stating that in the earliest layer of the Mahābhārata we may find some memories of the tribal society of militant cattle breeders, in which it seemed natural for king's sons to go around the shepherds' camps, recount and brand cattle, raid the herds of neighbors, or repel similar raids (Mahābhārata I, 205; III, 227–229; IV, 33–62; all references to the Sanskrit text of the Mahābhārata are given according to (The Mahābhārata, 1933–1966)).

It is also possible to distinguish the layers belonging to various periods in the historical content of the Armenian epic. In the preface to the Russian translation of the "Sasna cŕer", academician I.A. Orbeli rightly noted that a large part of its historical content was determined by the struggle against the Arabs and the Baghdad Caliphate, but the epic also contained many layers from previous periods, and the emergence of some "points of this epic is separated from us not by one, but by many millennia" (1939: IX).

A common ethnographic substratum of the two epics: brotherhoods of young warriors

The greatest similarity to the Indian epic can be found in the earliest layer of "Sasna cŕer", and precisely in the way that the ethnographic substratum of the epic is mirrored in it. This term was proposed by B.N. Putilov for designating the mythological and ritual patterns used in an epic, as well as the archaic social organization. Next, this article will attempt to show that the "Sasna cŕer" and Mahābhārata in a similar manner reflect analogous forms of archaic social organization as a component of the ethnographic substratum of the epic. The author's attention to the group of motifs included in this layer was drawn by Petrosyan's article about "black youths", *t'ux manuk* (2011), where these characters of Armenian folklore were associated with the archaic institution of youth military brotherhoods and mythological "members of the war-band of the Thunder god". The author saw an Indian parallel to the Armenian "black youths" in the mythological groups of young warriors—the Rudras and Maruts, who formed the retinue of Rudra, the god of the storm, and Indra, the thunder god. The earthly equivalent of these mythological groups were the *vrātyas*, mentioned above in connection with the Mahābhārata, the leader of which was thought to be the embodiment of Rudra.

The first thing that strikes an Indologist in the Armenian epic is the young age of the Sassoun heroes, who performed most of their exploits in childhood and adolescence. During their childhood, all protagonists of the "Sasna cŕer", the founders of Sassoun, the brothers Baghdasar and Sanasar, the son of Sanasar Mher the Elder, the grandson of Sanasar David, and the great-grandson of Sanasar Mher the Younger, are distinguished by extraordinary strength and a violent temper. Little Sanasar in Bagdad broke the neck of the Vizier's son. In the town of King Tevatoros, the brothers mutilated local children while playing (David Sasunskij…, 1939: 15, 34–36). Little David inadvertently killed and injured the children of the nobility in Msyr; when he was sent to Sassoun, he crippled his playmates there (Ibid.: 162–163, 192–193; Armyanskiy narodnyi epos…, 2004: 269–270). Six-year-old (or even two-year-old) Mher the Younger made a bridge over the river in Sassoun and hit everyone who walked on it: "Why are you walking on my bridge!" When the townspeople waded through the river, he hit them with the words: "I made a bridge for you. Why are you wading across?" (David Sasunskij…, 1939: 335–336). There is a similar episode in the Mahābhārata (III, 106.10–15): the young prince Asamañjas, the son of King Sagara, "grabbing the helpless, crying children of the townspeople by their heels, threw them into the river"; the townspeople complained to the King and he banished his son from the town.

The rampage of the young Sassoun heroes also resulted in exile. King Tevatoros expelled Sanasar and Baghdasar from the town, however, allowing them to establish their own settlement on his land—Sassoun (Ibid.: 36–43). The Sassounians sent David to herd cattle in the mountains (Ibid.: 192–194; Armyanskiy narodnyi epos…, 2004: 171). After the violence at the bridge, Mher

the Younger was sent to his grandfather in Kaputkokh. The townspeople there also became worried about his rampaging, and the mother was forced to send her son hunting under the supervision of her two brothers. In a quarrel, he inadvertently killed both of his uncles, after which the grandfather sent Mher back to Sassoun (Zaryan, 1973: 219–222).

The rampaging of the young protagonist as a motivation for his exile is an essential element in the plot of both epics and fairy tales (Propp, 1969: 69). Yet there occur many other motivations, such as, for example, the hatred of the stepmother, dispute about the inheritance between the brothers, envy, etc. The use of only this motivation for the protagonist's departure from home in the Armenian epic suggests that the functioning of this motif was supported by a long existence of the institution of youth age-set groups among the Armenians, as evidenced by the ethnographic materials (see, e.g., (Vardanyan, 1967, 1981; Karpov, 1996: 206–207)). This institution made it possible to redirect youthful aggressiveness in the right way and bring its carriers outside the village, to the periphery of the communal territory. Most likely, the institution of youth warrior brotherhoods served as an ethnographic basis for such motifs as the expulsion of the young protagonist for his rampaging and "the house in the forest" of European fairy-tale folklore (Propp, 1946: 97–148). Sassoun thus becomes a kind of "house in the forest", a refuge for the brothers who were removed from the capital for their rampaging. There is a parallel to this in the Mahābhārata: in order to get rid of his nephews, the young Pāṇḍava brothers, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra allowed them to establish their own kingdom in a remote, forest part of his possessions, where they built their own town of Indraprasthā (Mahābhārata I, 199.24–50).

Almost the entire epic biography of each of the "Daredevils of Sassoun" falls during the period of childhood and adolescence, culminating in the marriage and birth of a son, after which the protagonist can only die or go to his last fight. The adventures of the founders of Sassoun ended when Sanasar died, after marrying Dekhtsun and waiting until his son was born (David Sasunskij…, 1939: 106–107). Mher the Elder, after marrying princess Armagan, left her for some time for the widow of Msra Melik, and then returned and died after the birth of his son (David) (Ibid.: 146–151; Zaryan, 1973: 78–90). After his wedding to Khandut-khatun and awaiting the birth of his son (Mher), David went to battle with the Khlatians and died from the arrow of his first bride-to-be whom he had renounced or her daughter born from him (Armyanskiy narodnyi epos…, 2004: 28–29, 185–187, 294). Mher the Younger married Gohar, but before the spouses could consummate their marriage, he had to defeat the army of the Msyr King. Some time after his return, he left Baghdad to defend Sassoun from enemies; after returning, he found that Gohar had died from loneliness, after which he himself left this world (David Sasunskij…, 1939: 365–375; Armyanskiy narodnyi epos…, 2004: 78–83). Marriage thus transferred each protagonist from his youthful status to the next age group, after which the epic lost interest in him.

Not only the protagonists, but their comrades, the "Daredevils of Sassoun", are teenagers, young men, usually referred to by the term *lač* ('young fellow', 'lad', 'boy'). In the dialects, *lač* demonstrates such nuances of meaning which perfectly correspond to the image of a participant in a rampaging teenage band, for example, in the dialect of Sebastia—'(vicious, spoiled) boy'; in other dialects the derivative adverb *lač-anak* means 'bravely, courageously'. This is reminiscent of the evolution of the semantics of the Vedic *márya*, Avestian *mairya*—'young man; a member of a young warrior brotherhood': in the later Indo-Iranian languages, the variants of this word can have the meaning of both 'young lover' and 'villain', 'robber'. Their eternal mentor Keri Toros used precisely the word *lač* when he addressed the Sassoun heroes. These "lads", "boys" constituted the main military force of Sassoun. The translation of the consolidated text describing the struggle against the Baghdad Caliph says, "King Gagik gathered ardent young boys, / From them he threw together regiments… / Keri Toros and all the lads / struck and crushed the Caliph's troops" (David Sasunskij…, 1939: 21).

The protagonist's feasts with his companions deserve special attention: Mher "took forty unmarried young lads, / took forty unmarried young girls, / set seven-year-old pomegranate wine for them, and they drank!" (Armyanskiy narodnyi epos…, 2004: 75; David Sasunskij…, 1939: 239). A valuable detail is contained in the prose version of N. Zaryan: David "feasted every day with unmarried lads **of the same age** (emphasis is mine – **Y.V.**), and young girls" (1973: 149). Unfortunately, it was not possible to find out which version of the legend Zaryan used while mentioning that David's companions were of the same age. This may indicate that the "daredevils of Sassoun" belonged to a young warrior brotherhood', since the participants of such associations usually underwent the initiation rite in the same year. The description of such feasts in the "Sasna cṙer" should undoubtedly be related to the joint feasts of archaic brotherhoods of young warriors, which were usually orgiastic in nature. This can be illustrated by the ritual practice of Kṛṣṇa's companions in the Mahābhārata, and, for example, the features of collective meals among youth associations of Central Asia, which were militant in the past (Snesarev, 1963: 179, 187–188). According to ethnographic evidence, in the 19th–20th centuries, young women no longer participated in the feasts arranged by the communities of young men of one age among the Armenians (Vardanyan, 1981: 102, 107).

In the "Sasna cŕer", the feast companions of young David were described as "forty unmarried lads (*azap lač*)" and "forty unmarried girls" (*azap aļǰik*). The definition *azap* is notable. According to ethnography, this adjective in the form of its substantive (*azap*, *azab*) was used for designating groups of young people of pre-marital age, in particular, the retinues of the groom in the wedding ceremony (Vardanyan, 1967: 291–292; 1981: 104). It is also notable that the number of David's young feast companions in the text is forty. Generally, "forty" seems to be an "epic number" in the "Sasna cŕer": forty *devs* (demons) stole forty cows from the herd that David was tending with other shepherds; Msra Melik, fleeing from David, piled forty millstones and forty oxhides upon himself while sitting in a pit, etc. But this "epic number" itself may be explained by the fact that the Armenian epic in its earliest form was the epic of a warrior brotherhood. At least, the number of David's feast companions was the same as the number of men (apparently young), who were at the same time in Keri Toros' house:

> Keri walked back and forth around the house,
> David greeted him,
> Approached him and asked: "Keri,
> How many souls of us are here in the house?"
> And he answered: "With you, there are forty of us".
>
> (David Sasunskij…, 1939: 214)

In an old ethnographic article about "David of Sassoun", this episode was interpreted as a reflection of the "patriarchal big family", typical of medieval Armenia (Pershitz, 1951: 47). Yet, it is much more likely that the episode refers to the home of a young warrior brotherhood whose leader and mentor was Keri Toros. In this regard, it makes sense to take a closer look at the strange image of "Uncle" Toros.

A.I. Pershitz made an accurate observation: "In all four branches of the epic, children are raised without their father" (Ibid.: 49). At the same time, their uncle Keri Toros was always next to the protagonists of all four generations. When the future founders of Sassoun Sanasar and Baghdasar were still infants, the Armenian "youths" led by "Uncle" Toros destroyed the army of the Baghdad Caliph, who attacked Armenia. And later Keri Toros played the same role of mentor to young protagonists for all generations of the Sassoun heroes, but he did not change at all. Judging by the fact that the appellative *keri* means the maternal uncle, Pershitz, in the spirit of his times, saw in this "abstract" figure "distant echoes" of matriarchy and avunculate (Ibid.: 50). However, there is every reason to interpret it as a personification of status and social function. The elder man, "uncle", mentor, often stood at the head of youth warrior fraternities. It is easy to find an example: Armenian ethnography describes a character known primarily for his role in the wedding ceremony, who could well serve as a model for the image of Keri Toros. This is the *kavor*—"proxy father, and subsequently the godfather of the young couple's children… In wedding ceremonies of collective initiation of youth, the *kavor* is a representative of the age group that the initiates are preparing to enter. During the initiations, the *kavor*, being senior in status, acts as a mentor to the initiates, accompanies them everywhere, and after a completion of the initiation rituals, he is the person who introduces them into the next age group" (Vardanyan, 1967: 292).

Returning to the number "forty", which determines both the number of "unmarried young males" who feasted with David and the inhabitants of "Uncle Toros' house", noteworthy is a rather interesting parallel in the ritualism of youth (often militant) associations of boys of the same age in Central Asia. In the section of G.P. Snesarev's study, entitled "The Sacral Number Forty and Its Relationship to Male Associations", the author provided some arguments that the number of participants in such associations was usually forty or so (1963: 182–184) (cf. also (Rakhimov, 1990: 58–59)). This parallel may be not only typological, since the youth associations among the Armenians and among the peoples of Central Asia (where even among the Turkic peoples, they may have been derived from the traditions of the ancient, Iranian-speaking population) reveal many common features, even coincidences in terminology (Vardanyan, 1981: 109).

Assuming that the presence of young women at the feasts of the epic protagonist with his comrades indicates their participation in the ritual activities of youth militant brotherhoods, one can hypothetically reinterpret certain oddities in the description of the female characters in the "Sasna cŕer" and some of the vague motifs associated with them, which may be rooted in archaic culture. Thus, the "heroism" of the Armenian epic brides, who often tested their grooms by engaging in duels with them, can be linked to the participation of young women in youth warrior brotherhoods of ancient times. The descriptions of heroic marriages in the "Sasna cŕer" and Mahābhārata contain some vague points that can be the traces of long forgotten archaic institutions and customs. Both epics know two basic forms of heroic marriage. One of them is termed *svayaṃvara* in Sanskrit—'the (bride's) own choosing (of the groom)'. Sometimes this was a real choice of the husband by the young woman: thus, Damayantī chose Nala from among the suitors in the famous legend of Nala (Mahābhārata III, 54), or Khandut chose David by throwing an apple to him (David Sasunskij…, 1939: 310). Sometimes, *svayaṃvara* involved contests of suitors, as a result of which the bride went to the winner, but in some cases the bride had the last word. This archaic ritual in ancient legal treatises, which laid the foundations of traditional norms, was no longer considered among the eight known types of marriage. In Armenian traditional culture, the bride's

choosing a groom was also impossible: in marriage, even "the consent of the young couple, especially the young woman's, was not taken into account" (Vardanyan, 2012: 328). The second common form of heroic marriage in the "Sasna cŕer" and Mahābhārata is the abduction of the bride. Both in India and Armenia, this form was preserved in the traditional culture: Brahmanic treatises recognized, although did not recommend, abduction as an acceptable form of marriage for the military class. Among the Armenians, bride abduction was allowed if the parents of a young woman or man resisted their marriage (Ibid.: 329). Notably, in both epic traditions, *svayaṃvara* and abduction could be combined. For example, in the "Sasna cŕer", Sanasar won the marriage competition (he retrieved a golden apple off the pillar of the palace gates), defeated sixty heroic competitors (*pahlevans*), but still, in agreement with Dekhtsun, he abducted her, fighting the pursuers—soldiers from the Copper town (David Sasunskij…, 1939: 99–103). Although Khandut chose David, he still had to fight with the troops of other suitors—the kings of various countries (Ibid.: 318–327), which possibly implies transformation of the motif of abduction and pursuit. Similarly, in the Mahābhārata, the Pāṇḍava brothers, after Arjuna became victorious in the contest at the *svayaṃvara* of Draupadī and left with her, were forced to repel the attacks of the other suitors dissatisfied with such an outcome (Mahābhārata I, 180–181).

The multilayered nature of marriage customs as reflected by the Indian epic can be illustrated by the example of one episode from the Mahābhārata (I, 211–212). During a wild celebration of young warriors of the Yādava tribe led by Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna saw the beautiful Subhadrā. Kṛṣṇa noticed his excitement and offered his "sister" to Arjuna as a wife. At first Kṛṣṇa said, "If you want, I will talk to my father", that is, hinted at the possibility of a "dharmic" marriage according to the rules. Yet there was no further mention of the father. Kṛṣṇa considered it risky to make a marriage according to the *svayaṃvara* rite common to a noble warrior: after all, Subhadrā might reject the winner. Therefore, he suggested to Arjuna to abduct his "sister", to take her away by force, which Arjuna did. Kṛṣṇa managed to calm down his angry companions, who were ready to dispose of the abductor. Arjuna and Subhadrā were offered to come back to celebrate the wedding. Notably, the fate of the young woman was not decided by her father, but by her "brother" or, more precisely, by the assembly of the warrior brotherhood. The words "brother" and "sister" in the above description are put into quotation marks, since in the common Indo-European language, **bhrātar* (as later its derivatives in some Indo-European languages) "meant the brotherhood, which was not necessarily blood-related", and could refer to the members of various religious or military brotherhoods (Benveniste, 1969; Kullanda, 2002: 90–92). The word "sister" in the context of such a brotherhood (and the *gaṇa* of Kṛṣṇa looks precisely like that), might have been similar to the "sister" in the "house in the forest" of the European fairy tales (Propp, 1946: 106–109).

In the "Sasna cŕer", at least two cases can be found when a "brother" offered his "sister" as a wife to the protagonist. In one of them, Gohar, to whom Mher came in order to ask her hand in marriage, came to meet him wearing a suit of armour, announced that she was "Gohar's brother", and tested Mher three times, calling him into battle or contest with the words, "If you defeat me, you can take my sister Gohar!" (David Sasunskij…, 1939: 362–365; Armyanskiy narodnyi epos…, 2004: 227–228). In another episode, *dev* Kulynk found Mher the Younger (a traveler who was sheltered and fed by his sister) in his house. He accepted Mher as a guest, but in the morning called him for a fight, "If you win, I will give my sister to you in marriage!" Mher won, refused the marriage, but became the sworn brother of the dev (Armyanskiy narodnyi epos…, 2004: 297). The offer of the sister as a wife to the protagonist is associated here with the relationship of sworn brotherhood, which again is related to the historical reality of young warrior societies.

In the Mahābhārata, Arjuna won Draupadī at *svayaṃvara* (where, by the way, the main steward was the bride's brother, Mahābhārata I, 176.35), but she became the common wife of five Pāṇḍavas. At the time when the epic was codified, this contradicted all norms of marriage and required some artificial explanations. The Pāṇḍavas, who were hiding at that time and who were participating in the *svayaṃvara* under the guise of the Brahmins, returned together with Draupadī to the house where their mother was waiting for them, and told her still from the street, that they procured something (as alms). The mother, being behind the wall of the hut and not seeing her sons, replied: "So own it/ enjoy it together!" Then, seeing Draupadī, she became horrified with her words. Yet the real point behind this motif is that unmarried girls were present in the house of the archaic brotherhood of young warriors, and entered into more or less stable premarital relations with the boys (Vasilkov, 1990).

Some ambiguity in the relationship between Dekhtsun and the two brothers Sanasar and Baghdasar may point in the same direction. After learning about Dekhtsun's request of Sanasar to come after her, and seeing the portrait she sent, Baghdasar became so full of jealousy that he engaged in a fight with his brother. Sanasar won, but out of sympathy for his brother, offered him to marry Dekhtsun. Baghdasar calmed down and refused. When the brothers, taking away Dekhtsun, were destroying the army that pursued them, the king, Dekhtsun's father, appeared before them and asked them to stop the slaughter, "I will give you everything you want: If you

want my daughter, I will give her to you…" The brothers answered, "We want Dekhtsun and we are taking her". Sanasar and Baghdasar offered the *pahlevans* whom Dekhtsun had earlier rejected, to fight for her, "If we win, she will become ours" (David Sasunskij…, 1939: 103–105). In one version of the legend, the *pahlevans*, refusing to fight, gave Dekhtsun to both of them, "Let this young woman bring you (both) happiness!" (Armyanskiy narodnyi epos…, 2004: 137). As soon as the brothers together with Dekhtsun left for Sassoun, Sanasar, who had overcome all obstacles in the struggle for the young woman, suddenly, for the second time, offered Baghdasar to marry her, and he again refused. Some uncertainty as to whether Dekhtsun belonged to both brothers or to one of them, and to whom exactly, suggests that a trace of a long-forgotten archaic institution may be manifest here. In his day, Orbeli interpreted the club left by Mher the Younger, when he was leaving for war, at the entrance to Gohar's chambers as "a memory, which among the people was already dim, of a stick or quiver placed at the entrance to the dwelling of a wife with many husbands by the husband who had already come to her" (1939: XXXVIII), that is, a memory of polyandry. However, in the context of what was said above, it would probably be more correct to say that this, just as in the case of Dekhtsun's marriage, was a "dim memory" of the presence of girls in the militant brotherhood of boys who had not yet reached the marriageable age.

On "pastoral heroism" of the archaic epics

In the Indian epic, as it was said above, young warrior brotherhoods were associated with the practice of mobile cattle breeding and reciprocal raids on herds. Notably, the Sassounian society was also described as exclusively cattle-breeding. Keri Toros explained to Mher the Elder the cause of the famine: the Sassounians bred and grazed cattle, but did not sow and plow, and the delivery of bread from the neighbors was hampered by a man-eating lion (David Sasunskij…, 1939: 122). Cattle breeding played a great role in the biography of young David: he became a skilled shepherd, fraternized with all the local shepherds, became their leader, and defended the interests of his "brothers" (Ibid.: 206–213). Mher the Younger also showed a certain connection to shepherds: a shepherd once saw him when a door opened in a rock, and Mher told him that he would come out into the world when the new era of fertility and justice comes about (Petrosyan, 2014: 177–178).

The protection of herds from raids is second most important among the exploits committed by the protagonists of the "Sasna cŕer", the first being fighting historical invaders. David the shepherd pursued forty *devs* who had stolen cows from the public herd, caught up with them, and killed them (David Sasunskij…, 1939: 210–216). Young Sanasar and Baghdasar lived, hiding their origin, at the court of King Tevatoros in Manazkert, and served him as his steward and cup-bearer. However, when robbers chased away the town herd, the boys pursued the thieves, captured and brought them and the cattle back to town (Ibid.: 32–34). This story shows a striking parallelism with a plot from the "Virāṭa Parvan" (Mahābhārata IV, 5–62). The sequence of motifs common to both epics seems to be the following:

brothers (Pāṇḍavas / Sanasar and Baghdasar);

after long wanderings through forests, came to a town where they wanted to settle (Virāṭanagara, the capital of King Virāṭa / Manazkert, the capital of King Tevatoros);

the brothers had to hide using different names (according to the condition of the game of dice with the Kauravas / because people were afraid of the Caliph from whom they fled);

the King accepted them for serving in various capacities (Yudhiṣṭhira as the adviser and expert in the game of dice, Bhīma as the chief cook, Arjuna as the dance teacher, Nakula as the horse keeper, and Sahadeva as the cattle keeper / Sanasar as the steward and Baghdasar as the cup-bearer);

a year later, the robbers / enemies chased away the king's / town herd. The brothers defeated the robbers and returned the cattle back to town (the Pāṇḍavas revealed their names and origins / Sanasar and Baghdasar revealed their nature as heroes and mighty warriors).

It would be too risky to claim that here we have a specific plot representing Indo-European or common Aryan-Greek-Armenian heritage. However, the chance that similar motifs in two different traditions formed such similar combinations testifies to the typological proximity of the societies of the "heroic age" reflected in the early strata of the Armenian and Indian epics.

Fighting for herds of cattle in the "Sasna cŕer" occurred not only with *devs* and robbers. The campaign of the Msyr army led by Kozbadin on Sassoun was not much different from a simple raid. Its goals are indicated in a stable formula, repeated in the various versions of the epic:

> Bring red milking cows,
> Bring black yoked oxen,
> Bring tall women to load the camels,
> Bring short women to spin the millstones,
> Bring beautiful maidens for us!
>
> (Armyanskiy narodnyi epos…, 2004: 105; 274) (cf. (David Sasunskij…, 1939: 244, 245, 247, 252–253))

Sometimes it is added, "And forty packs of silver, / And forty packs of gold…" Yet the invariant of the formula mentions only two objects of the raid—women and cattle, which was specific precisely to the societies

of warlike cattle breeders. Among the Indo-Aryans of the Ṛgveda, military booty consisted of cattle and women. The hymns, praising the gifts that were received by a priest from a noble warrior-donor, mention cattle, horses, and female slaves. Variants of this formula are preserved in the epic: for example, King Virāṭa offered Yudhiṣṭhira to play dice and offered his stake as "women, cows, gold, and all other wealth" (Mahābhārata IV, 63.32). Monuments to heroes built over the past 2000 years in the cattle-breeding regions of India generally represent the mourning of the hero by those whom he protected losing his life; these are either women or cows (Vassilkov, 2011: 201–202, fig. 1, *1–3*).

The "battle frenzy" of archaic heroes

In conclusion, we should briefly discuss another point indicating the role of young warrior brotherhoods in the genesis of the Armenian epic. The key word, present even in the title of the epic cycle ("Sasna cŕer"), is *cuŕ* (plural *cŕer*), which has the original literal meaning of 'curved'. In the Russian translations, it is transmitted either by the adjective "shalnoi" ('wild'), "bezumnyi" ('crazy'), "yaryi" ('ardent'), or "beshennyi" ('mad'), or as a noun "udalets" ('daredevil'), "sumasbrod" ('crazy fellow'), or "bezumets" ('madman'). The analysis of some contexts in which the word *cuŕ* was used in the epic performed with the help of the Armenologist and Indo-Europeist P.A. Kocharov, has shown that apparently it meant a person who was capable of falling into a state of violent rage that drove out all fear of death, multiplied strength and guaranteed victory in a fight. Parallels to this are provided by the Indian epic in which young warriors cultivated a state of battle frenzy during their wild feasts, which manifested itself, as in the Armenian epic too, in "bloodshot eyes". We can also mention the ability of the members of the Iranian warrior brotherhoods to work themselves up into a state of fierce wrath (Avestian *aēšma*, Persian *xašm*) (Wikander, 1938: 57–60; Daryaee, 2018: 41, 46), a similar state of "wolfish rage" (λύσσα) in the Homeric epics, the violent rage (*wut*) of the ancient German berserkers, or the uncontrollable rage (*ferg*) of the Irish epic hero Cúchulainn (Lincoln, 1975). A detailed argument in favor of exactly this understanding of the word *cuŕ* is provided in another article (Vassilkov, 2018).

Conclusions

Both in India and Armenia, the archaic motifs in the epic poetry were definitely supported by the fact that early forms of social organization, including youth age-set groups, were preserved until modernity at least on the periphery of the culture. Yet the emergence of these motifs in both cases should be attributed to the ancient period; in the Indian epic tradition, possibly to the Bronze Age.

The interpretation of the Armenian epic proposed in this study will remain hypothetical, until it has been either rejected or confirmed by specialists in the Armenian studies who are able to read the text in its original language. Nevertheless, we hope that a comparison with the Mahābhārata has made it possible to broaden the parallel proposed by Petrosyan between the "black youths" of the Armenian epic and the Indian Maruts (2011: 345). It seems that we have also been able to confirm to some extent the point of view, according to which a comparative study of the "Sasna cŕer" against the background of world epic folklore reveals new aspects of form and content previously hidden from us (Egiazaryan, 2016: 5, 6). Broader involvement of the Armenian epic data in the study of other epic traditions will undoubtedly enrich and stimulate Comparative epic studies.

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