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# THE KILLING OF HERO'S ADVERSARY IN THE ARMENIAN EPIC

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The killing by the hero of his main adversary, the mythological / epic / fabulous wrecker, in general, forms the essence of narrative which often groups details not appearing in other episodes or appearing not very explicitly. Secondary adversary's killing can also contain important information in frames of the plot in whole or in terms of more specific mythological / fabulous schemes.<sup>1</sup> Msra-Melik's killing in the branch "David" of the "Sasna çér" epic refers to such multi-layer plot essences. Below we will consider several peculiarities of the Msra-Melik's killing by David.

## **Msra-Melik as an adversary to Thunderer**

Msra-Melik's killing correlates well with peculiarities of killing by the Thunderer of his adversary in the Basic Myth reconstructed by V.V. Ivanov and V.N. Toporov.<sup>2</sup> The reflection of this myth in the Armenian epic "Sasna çér" and particularly in the branch about David was highlighted while ago by S. Harutyunyan.<sup>3</sup> I will not be retelling his analysis here, I will only mention some moments from the episode about the combat of David of Sasun and Msra-Melik. Thus, David kills Msra-Melik, as it is presupposed of the Thunderer, by lightning – the miraculous lightening sword. In one case, he kills not even with the sword, but with the spark of fire that flies from the shake-up of the sword (ARM. DS, A,<sup>4</sup> 585; RUS, DS,<sup>5</sup> 158). Similar to the Thunderer from the Basic Myth David goes up (to the mountain) – to Sasun, before the fight. Sometimes he takes a running start from the native mountains (from Sasun) (ARM. DS,B /1/,<sup>6</sup> 222; RUS, DS,<sup>7</sup> 289-290) for striking the enemy, though as we will see later he doesn't need a running start but rather a specific position for a precise stroke. The theme of running start especially from the homeland appears as

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in fairy tales when the hero returns from the world of the dead to the life due to the killing of the "secondary" serpent, see Abramyan, Demirkhanyan 1985: 72.

<sup>2</sup> Ivanov, Toporov 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Harutyunyan 1981: 65-85, idem. 2000: 167-195.

<sup>4</sup> Abeghyan, Ohanjanyan 1936.

<sup>5</sup> Ohanjanyan 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Abeghyan, Melik-Ohanjanyan 1944.

<sup>7</sup> Abeghyan *et al.* 1939.

a parallel to the actions of the adversary for whom the running start itself is of great importance: Msra-Melik needs it for a proper stroke and he increases the distance of the running start before the stroke every time (out of three), reaching back to Məsər, to his starting point for the third and last stroke (ARM, DS, A, 201-202; RUS. DS, 287-288; ARM. DS, D,<sup>1</sup> 223).<sup>2</sup> Apparently, the compilers of the cumulative (combined) text had the idea of symmetry in mind when choosing atypical variant where David accelerates from native mountains, and Msra-Melik – from Məsər (DS, 287-290). Nevertheless, it turns out to be an even more interesting picture for comparison of the given fight with the Basic Myth. Generally, cumulative texts, with all obvious and well-known shortcomings, have also a certain advantage: in fact, they serve as another variant, but composed by experts who select or exclude certain items based on considerations different from that of storytellers. Therefore, we will sometimes refer to the cumulative text as well, as one of the options that can be helpful in highlighting sometimes not fully visible details.<sup>3</sup>

And one more remark about variants. We could have formed a table or graph showing the frequency of occurrence of this or that key scene (episode) in all variants. But we will intentionally not carry out any such quantitative-visual analysis. And not because it is not informative. On the contrary, it would have been extremely informative, but from a different perspective, which is not in the centre of our attention here. So, we might need more a variant occurring once or twice (reflecting a certain pattern in the overall context – for example, discussing afterwards anatomical peculiarities of Msra-Melik) rather than the one which is constantly repeated, but is of less significance in this context. Along with this, there are absolutely invariant motifs (for example, David's refusal to use the first two strokes) and are regionally different, full/overall variants and flawed ones. By the way the latter may put "wrong" stress on such details that can be helpful while interpreting "classic" variants. In general, we will evolve from the internal logic of a particular episode, and not appeal exclusively to the arithmetic calculation. Bearing in mind these methodological clarifications let's get back to the fight between David and Msra-Melik.

<sup>1</sup> Harutyunyan, Sahakyan 1999.

<sup>2</sup> As a note to the variant where more distant points are indicated successively, K. Melik-Ohanjanyan rightly observes that these geographic loci are just to emphasize how far gets Msra-Melik for takeoff, and have nothing to do with the epic itself (Arm, DS, A, 813). Cf. the variant, where Msra-Melik takes his running start from Yerevan (ARM, DS, A, 782) or the mountain Masis (ARM, DS, A, 813). Nevertheless, there are quite many variants where adversaries or one of them, taking off from their homeland, are apparently nourished by other mythological interpretations as well associated with mother and motherland – cf. well-known story about Anthea, who got strength from his mother Gaia, that is why Hercules had to cut him off from the ground to win.

<sup>3</sup> In the given case, we do not pursue the goal of engaging all possible, including reconsidered variants and interpretations into discourse (cf. Levi-Strauss 1983: 183-207), later deconstructions (cf. Voskanyan 2006: 17-30) or currently popular mystic-globalist reconstructions. The cumulative text might to some extent be compared to modern "ideal khachkar", composed with consideration of different compositions (schools), see Abrahamian 2001: 268f.

So, Msra-Melik, as it is expected of the Thunderer's adversary, resides at the bottom – in the plain, moreover, during a combat he hides in a deep pit under the millstones and buffalo skins, which, as Sargis Harutyunyan states precisely, is the same as hiding under a rock and adversary's animals (in the form of animals) from the Basic Myth.<sup>1</sup> I would add that Msra-Melik sometimes also hides under the heap of corpses of people and horses fallen in the battle (ARM. DS, B/ 2/,<sup>2</sup> 140; RUS, DS, 109), and sometimes even behind an alive horse (ARM. DS, A, XIII, 677) (in the last two cases there is no theme of hiding in a pit); he hides under his saddled horse at the bottom of the pit, which is covered by buffalo skins and closed by a millstone (ARM. DS, B/2/282, RUS.DS, 285), or he gets into a pit, which is covered by a pile of forty buffalo skins and there are horses standing on top of it (ARM. DS, A, 281). The latter is remarkable by the fact that before the stroke impact by David Msra-Melik almost literally repeats the motto "I'll hide" of the Thunderer's adversary from the Basic Myth; "I'll hide out under the belly of my horse." Here, David suggests him to also get into a pit and cover himself with skins.

Unlike the Basic Myth, it neither rains after Msra-Melik's killing, nor does water trapped by the adversary pour out.<sup>3</sup> However, in one variant (ARM.DS, A, 435-436) the half of Msra-Melik's corpse is flown by underground Black water, to which David's sword reaches.<sup>4</sup> These Black water could come out and drown the world, but buffalo skins draped over Msra-Melik in the pit, stopped the flow, apparently plugging the breach. In another variant (ARM. DS, A, 282, DS, 291) those deep Black Water, to which David's sword reaches by getting deep down to the ground after the dissection of the enemy, could also flow out and flood the world if the angel wouldn't cover the pit with his wing.<sup>5</sup> Besides, the theme of plugging the water by the adversary (and, presumably, water release after his killing) is witnessed in the standard theme of draining water of the river Batman by the army, as a result of which people of Sasun remain without water and suffer from thirst.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless the theme of release of water as a result of the enemy's killing is present here, as in other subjects related to the killing of chthonic serpent-like antagonist – for example, in case of water eruption in the second part of the vision of Grigor Lusavorich (Gregory the Illuminator),<sup>7</sup> in scenes of the Baptism, beating the theme of Christ's victory over dragon deep in waters of the Jordan,<sup>8</sup> and in famous fairy tales about the Serpent on the spring source.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the combat between David and Msra-Melik quite fully fits into the scheme of the Basic Myth, once again proving that latter is not an invented construct of researchers,

<sup>1</sup> Harutyunyan 2000: 186.

<sup>2</sup> Abeghyan, Melik-Ohanjanyan 1951.

<sup>3</sup> Harutyunyan, 2000: 186.

<sup>4</sup> Harutyunyan, 2000: 186.

<sup>5</sup> There are also variants where the sword reaches the Black water, but there is no mention of their release outside (ARM. DS, A, 203).

<sup>6</sup> Harutyunyan 2000: 183.

<sup>7</sup> The first part of the introduction is directly linked to the combat of the Thunderer with his chthonic adversary – the lord of hell. See Abrahamyan 2001: 361-367.

<sup>8</sup> Abramyan 1993: 165-179.

<sup>9</sup> Abramyan 2009: 22-36.

but a certain fixed scheme, which structures the key plot – killing (neutralization) of the wrecker.<sup>1</sup> By the way, the combat itself forms a wide range of variants that reflect different realia related with the theme of confrontation. Armenian epic version of this scheme is of particular interest as it reflects different sides of the Basic Myth, including the twin motif<sup>2</sup> lying in the basis of the mythologem of confrontation, which, as we tried to show in another occasion,<sup>3</sup> is the source of a universal mythologem developed into the Basic Myth. It's worth also mentioning that the Basic Myth covers wider geography than Indo-European, as it was supposed initially by the researchers who reconstructed it.<sup>4</sup> And the last, the combat of David and Msra-Melik links with and sometimes also overlaps other ritual and mythological universals, some of which we'll discuss below.

### **Pit: trap and shelter**

Pit is seen twice in the episode of the combat. Before the fight David gets into the trap – pit prepared for him by Msra-Melik in his tent and covered purposely with rugs. Another pit is dug by Msra-Melik for hiding from David's stroke. Those are basically two different pits, and variants highlight this. For example, Msra-Melik often requests deferral so that to dig a pit for hiding, whereas the pit-trap already existed (e.g. ARM. DS, A, 71). This is of course clear, as the trap is in the tent of Msra-Melik while the hiding place is dug at the place of the combat. Nevertheless, pits are similar; both are of the same depth – 40 gaz (unit of measurement), both are filled with millstones. It's true that in case of the trap the number of millstones isn't usually indicated (ex., ARM. DS, B, /1/, 183; RUS, DS, 250) as opposed to the pit-shelter, in case of which the number of millstones and skins is mentioned as 40 or 7.<sup>5</sup> The fact that two pits are of similar type and meaning is shown in a rare case (ARM. DS, II/2/, 475), where there is only one pit figuring, and it is dug in front of the tent.<sup>6</sup> Again it is indicative that the cumulative text provides a variant where

<sup>1</sup> Cf. fundamental work of C. Watkins devoted to revealing of “the basic formula” of dragon killing in the Indo-European tradition (Watkins 1995), where the author considers “the basic myth” of V.V. Ivanov and V.N. Toporov as well (1995: 296); he to some extent refers to Armenian data – the mythological formula brought forward by Movses Khorenatsi (1995: 251-254), highlighting that the same archaic thematic and formulary tradition is preserved up to the “Daredevils of Sasun” (1995: 252).

<sup>2</sup> Abramyan 2004: 61-67.

<sup>3</sup> Abramyan, Demirkhanyan 1985: 66-84.

<sup>4</sup> I was told this in a conversation with V.N. Toporov, who clarified why the definition “Indo-European” is no longer used in the concept of “basic myth” in more recent works.

<sup>5</sup> In case of pit-traps the motif of chaining David or keeping him in a specially adapted rings or steel nets is often discussed, while the pit itself turns into a prison.

<sup>6</sup> In one atypical case (ARM. DS, B /1/, 122-123) David, similar to Msra-Melik, gets into a pit during the combat, and it is not clear if this helps him to survive from the opponent's strokes. Anyway, he gets out of the pit safe and sound, while Msra-Melik dies in the pit through canonical “dissection”. By the way, the variant itself is very far from being “canonical” – David dissects Msra-Melik with one and only stroke and doesn't refuse from the other two, as he normally does in majority of cases. By the way, it isn't excluded that this symmetry came out because in this variant David survived from temporary death before the combat not in the pit, but on the land – he was drunken and chained.

Msra-Melik pretending as if he is lying under the tent, gets into the pit, apparently the one he had prepared for David (ARM. DS, A, 434; RUS, DS, 288-289). It's no exception that compilers brought this variant for reasons of symmetry, but this symmetry is also not only a tribute to the external form, but a reflection of deeper similarities between hero and antihero.<sup>1</sup> At the same time formal similarity implies a fundamental difference. For example, David and Msra-Melik shake themselves at the bottom of the respective pits, the first on the advice of his uncle, who came to help his nephew fallen into the trap, the second at the suggestion of David after his stroke, whereas with diametrically opposite results. In case of David millstones and shackles fly around and he himself gets out from the pit, while Msra-Melik splits into two parts and dies.<sup>2</sup> The presence of David in the pit-trap generally coincides to the motif of the temporal death and rebirth which is characteristic of a folk hero, especially a hero of fairy tales, overcoming death and restoring the link between the three worlds.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Msra-Melik finds his death in the pit.

The theme of pit-trap is interesting in another respect as well. A wide range of mythological and various relative heroes appear in a deep pit or a well, starting from Vedic Trita<sup>4</sup> and biblical Joseph and ending up with the third brother of fairy tales. All of them appeared in a deep pit because of the plotting of elder brothers.<sup>5</sup>

### David casts only a single stroke

The striking peculiarity of the combat between David and Msra-Melik is that Msra-Melik casts three strokes, while David casts only one. We've already talked about the hero and antihero being in many regards largely symmetrical, but qualitatively different. This applies also to the quantity and quality of their strokes. There is a special rule, vividly expressed particularly in fairy tales, according to which the hero must avoid a second stroke, otherwise the enemy will revive. In another occasion I tried to explain this rule, in particular on the basis of mirror symmetry of the hero and antihero, including their birth and death,<sup>6</sup> whereas the motif of revival of the adversary from the second stroke is absent from the Armenian epic.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, undesirability of the second stroke by the hero has found its place in the epic in the form of the canonical sufficiency of one stroke. To preserve the symmetry of the adversaries, David also,

<sup>1</sup> See Abramyan for symmetry of hero and anti-hero (2005, § 50, 171).

<sup>2</sup> It is obvious that in one variant (ARM. DS, A, 676), again from the symmetry conceptions, Msra-Melik suggests David to shake himself after strokes, which had no effect on him though.

<sup>3</sup> Toporov 1979: 18f. Cf. the opinion of A. Gulyan about the involvement to David in the threefold structure of the Universe. See Abramyan *et al.* 1981-1984: 22. Cf. also interpretations of A. Petrosyan about David as "the third hero" (Petrosyan 1997: 16-19).

<sup>4</sup> See Toporov about Trita in the well (1977a: 90, 94).

<sup>5</sup> Grigor the Illuminator, another inhabitant of the deep pit, and Trdat the III, who imprisoned him there, also, according to some views, have ties of brotherhood. See Abrahamian 2006: 118f.

<sup>6</sup> Abramyan 2008: 137-142.

<sup>7</sup> In the Nart epic, for example, there is the concept of weapon "shudder" – short curved knife, first stroke of which killed, while the second stroke revived. See Brojdo *et al.* 1936: 636.

similar to Msra-Melik, gets the opportunity to cast three strokes at the enemy. The first stroke belongs to Msra-Melik on the basis of seniority, but David stands these strokes or flees from them due to the horse, the angel or the protective sign on his arm.<sup>1</sup> Three potential strokes of David turn into one fulfilled stroke due to the fact that two of them he gives as a present to Msra-Melik's mother (his breast-feeding mother), to the God or to sister, stated in different order and with different explanations in different variants. Sometimes he does it on his own initiative, more often – at the request of his mother and sister. The most canonical version is when the mother of Msra-Melik bares her breasts and asks to present her a stroke in the memory of the milk with which she nourished him in his childhood.<sup>2</sup> This is a known practice of ending blood hostility; blood enemies symbolically turn to brothers by this gesture, and feuding brothers, who became enemies because of some quarrel, again become relatives. Thus, in one version the mother of twins Sanasar and Baldasar puts an end to their non-lasting feud, which almost led them to fratricide (ARM. DS, A, 882-884). Msra-Melik's mother once saved the life of infant David from the wrath of his stepbrother Msra-Melik in the same way (RUS, DS, 181). And now she does that to save Msra-Melik from the stroke of David. However, in one case this method doesn't work; David scolds her and doesn't release his stroke, only because she was trying to save his son from the third, the final stroke (ARM. DS, A, 93; RUS, DS, 71). There are also non-standard cases, when David gifts the first stroke to God, the second to the mother, and half of the third stroke to Msra-Melik's sisters (ARM. DS, A, 584; SS, 158) or to God (ARM. DS, A, 638). Here the strength of David is obviously emphasized; he can kill Msra-Melik with a "half" stroke.<sup>3</sup> According to A. Gulyan, David still exercises his three presupposed strokes: he doesn't exercise his two attempts later, as he has already cast them in their battle with the army, the body of united chthonic creature, whose head was Msra-Melik. He refuses to give the second strike on Msra-Melik, as this would mean the fourth stroke in total, whereas he wants to keep to the round number three.<sup>4</sup> In variants it is possible to find occasions when David really strikes the army twice – Wed. ARM. DS, I, 25 (Երկու գլխի գնաց, եկաւ ...), SC 39 (twice rode back and forth ...), here is ARM. DS, A, 198, 282, 356, 428, 974, whereas there are far more occasions when an overall thrash is described (for example, ARM. DS, A, 87; SC, 68), or there are other numbers (cf., for example, as "four times galloped up, rushed back ..." (CS, 281); "three or four times ..." (ARM. DS, B / 2/594), in one

<sup>1</sup> In one variant close to the fabulous David escapes from Msra-Melik's strokes by turning successively into a fly, ant and gnat and hiding, respectively in the nose, hooves and under the tail of horse. It is interesting to mention that here, the hero with the characteristics of the Thunderer and not his chthonic adversary hides (transforms) successfully. However, redistribution of attributes of hero and anti-hero is a known peculiarity of the Basic Myth, see Ivanov, Toporov 1975: 49.

<sup>2</sup> In one case (ARM. DS, B/2/282; RUS, DS, 285) it is emphasized that David rejected to accept Msra-Melik's mother's milk in childhood, but still presents her one stroke as she had nourished him with "honey-sugar".

<sup>3</sup> The idea of half-stroke becomes clear in this variant when David promises Msra-Melik's mother to strike not with full strength ("I will cast a weak stroke")

<sup>4</sup> Abramyan *et al.* 1981-1984: 9; Abramyan 2006: 59, n. 15; *idem.* 2008: 142, n. 16.

case we even encounter the use of the number 366 (ARM. DS, B / 1/121).<sup>1</sup> But, what's more important, there is different logic of a single stroke emphasized in the epic which appeals to the strongman hero's stroke, knowing no failure.<sup>2</sup>

The potential second stroke implies some uncertainty, doubt, fear, whereas the epic hero should not doubt in himself. Therefore, the hero of Russian fairy tales traditionally gives such a response to deceptive appeal to strike again, "hand of bogatyr won't strike twice!" David says literally the same in one variant (ARM. DS, B/ 2/476): «Զե, կտրիճի դարբ ւեկ կ'ելնի, երկու շէլնի». What he usually says is, "God is one, I am one, and my strike is one" (CS, 180). This formula hardly ever varies.<sup>3</sup> David pronounces this when Msra-Melik calls him from the depths of the pit. In fairy tales the adversary requires: "Strike again!", knowing that this deceptive call might save his life. Meanwhile in the epic Msra-Melik, being hidden at the bottom of the pit, just does not realize that the fatal stroke has already been fulfilled, and he does not know either that David yield the right of the other two strikes, so he shouts from the pit: "Cast the other two of your strokes!" (ARM. DS, A, 585-586; RUS, DS, 158), "Cast your second stroke" (ARM. DS, B /2/, 476), "Cut once again" (RUS, DS, 291) or asks "David, cast your stroke or else I got cold here!" (ARM. DS, II /2/, 283; CY, 285). One might think that the epic wrecker lost the ability to revive from the second stroke as his fabulous double, accordingly his call is deprived of guile and magical context. Only in one case one of the halves of Msra-Melik dissected by David gives an insidious advice to David by saying, "dig with left [hand], bury with the right," but David does the contrary: digs with the right hand and buries with the left (ARM. DS, II / 1 /, 78).<sup>4</sup>

The real strongman hero is a man of action; his words should not differ from actions. "My mother gave birth to me once, I say it once and cast a stroke once" is how

<sup>1</sup> David cuts in the midst of the troops to the right and left; he is exhilarated by his horse promise to hit 366 thousand times more than David's sword. The "number-year" in the given cases, similar to other cases (grains of a pomegranate, laces on clothes, etc.) highlights its completeness and guarantees his victory. See V. Hayrapetyan about full (round) number (2011: Index, s.v. krugloe čislo).

<sup>2</sup> Abramyan 2008: 142-144.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. «Ի՛ս իմ, իմ Աստված, նա ւեկ բարբ» (ARM. DS, A, 93), "Here am I, here is my God, here is my last stroke" (RUS, DS, 71).

<sup>4</sup> This variant is brought forward by A. Sahakyan among other factors of differentiating two dissected halves of Msra-Melik's body into "right – left" (2007: 264, 275, n. 33). This is the only case familiar to me, when Msra-Melik similar to fabulous wrecker induces the hero to wrong actions, which apparently has to do with funeral customs, which in many traditions implies change in main oppositions – from up to down, from face to reverse side (of clothing), from right to left. In the given case it's not obligatory to look for a specific ritual corresponding to the fake call by the wrecker; the world of the dead is related to the left, that's why David buries Msra-Melik with his left hand. It is worth mentioning that in Msra-Melik's mythological anatomy, as we will see further, it is emphasized a two-part vertical composition with "right – left" differentiation, so that the fake call correlates with this specific opposition. It should be considered that the fake advice comes from the left side of Msra-Melik.



the hero of Hovhannes Tumanyan's tale «Հազարան բլբուլ» (Hazaran blbul) responses to the call to cast a second stroke. It seems that the hero never thinks but just acts. In this regard he is just like a fool, whose words turn into actions. But it's not that the fool, generally speaking, never thinks, it's that his thoughts fully correspond to his words: the fool never lies, but trusts his words. His thoughts, words and actions are merged into one unity. This is why his actions also became corresponding to his words. By the way, it's not rare in the tales that the fool in particular,<sup>1</sup> not thinking at all or thinking in another way,<sup>2</sup> casts one stroke to the adversary and does not get tempted to repeat it. However, this does not prevent him from meeting the challenges and overreach the most cunning adversaries.<sup>3</sup> But even those similar cases<sup>4</sup> have nothing to do directly to the state of the hero ready to dissect the enemy with only one stroke.

The strongman hero never gives way to thoughts, he implements whatever is thought over. He can't have two different opinions, he never gives way to doubt, never repeats what was already said and casts only one stroke. Uncertainty, doubt and fear are the key to defeat.<sup>5</sup> So the hero must get rid of them before the battle. David also gets overwhelmed with these feelings at the sight of the immortal army of Msra-Melik;<sup>6</sup> but his magical horse gets him out of that state. That is why David says confidently to Msra-Melik "Shake yourself!" after the first and the only stroke, which seems not to have harmed the enemy at first sight, whereas the latter falls apart into two pieces when he shakes himself.

### **The mythological anatomy of Msra-Melik**

One of the remarkable characteristics of Msra-Melik's killing is the motif of dissecting him into two halves. It can be said that this is the canonical variant of this episode. There are atypical variants where after his defeat Msra-Melik escapes, running away to Məsər (Arm. DS, B/1/, 304; Rus. DS, 214) or where David simply kills his adversary (DS, B /2/, 196; DS, C,<sup>7</sup> 126) or pushes him into the ground at 7

<sup>1</sup> See Abramyan about the link of David's image to the folklore image of the fool (2006: 49-53).

<sup>2</sup> See Ayrapetyan on the folklore fool and bogatyr correlation (2011: 613, 6142, 63172).

<sup>3</sup> See Abramyan about "clever" fool (2008: 143).

<sup>4</sup> Here we should refer to the cunning of the hero based on certain innate skills and knowledge but never on the ability to think.

<sup>5</sup> In the epic there is also the tactic of distracting the hero's attention so that to decrease the efficiency of his stroke: Msra-Melik's mother creates an atmosphere with girls trying to attract David through songs, music and dances, but they do not succeed (ARM. DS, A, 202-203, 435; RUS. DS, p 290-291, ARM. DS, A, 746, 1065).

<sup>6</sup> S. Harutyunyan (2000: 182-183, n. 34) compares this episode before the fight to the situation analogue in Hurrian myth about Ullikummi when the God of Thunder (Teššup) is in despair at the sight of his terrible monstrous adversary. See Ivanov 1977: 132. Uncertainty and confusion before the fight is a reason why God Krishna teaches Arjuna lesson in "Bhagavad-Gita" before the fratricidal battle; Arjuna is obsessed not with fear, but rather with some sort of ethical doubt.

<sup>7</sup> Harutyunyan, Sahakyan 1979.

*gaz* with a stroke of a mace (Arm. DS, B /1/, 30; Rus. DS, 23).<sup>1</sup> In the latter case there is no theme about hiding in a pit – the “pit”-grave originates as a result of David’s stroke. It can be assumed that in these very analogous, though obviously incomplete variants we deal rather with the conceptualization of a stroke with an ordinary mace by the storyteller, than with a cutting sword; as a rule, Msra-Melik strikes with a mace, while David – with a sword. Different weapons of the hero and his adversary often are not discussed, apparently because the fairy lightning sword is one of the plot attributes of David that he has inherited from his father. But in some cases the lightning sword is missing; David suggests Msra-Melik to choose a weapon, and the latter, as a rule, chooses a mace. In one of the cases, withstanding the strokes of Msra-Melik’s mace, David suggests his adversary to choose a weapon for David himself. Judging that he won’t be able to survive from David’s stroke with a mace, Msra-Melik chooses the sword that cuts him in halves (Arm. DS, A, 1122; Rus. DS, 288-289). It can be assumed that the hero is endowed with the sword, and based on the reason, that according to the plot, he must cut his adversary into two exact halves. However Msra-Melik falls down into two halves exactly from the mace stroke (Arm. DS, A, 30-31; Rus. DS, 42; Arm. DS, B/1/, 186; Rus. DS, 251; Arm. DS, B /2/, 508). In other words, the particularity of the death lies in Msra-Melik himself, but not in David’s warlike skills, though the latter bears a special emphasis in the epic.

Therefore, David needs not simply to kill Msra-Melik, but cut him into two equal lengthwise halves. This particularity refers exactly to the fight between David and Msra-Melik, the stepbrothers, but not to any mythological adversaries. From a more general view, the killing of the adversary-wrecker (including the Basic Myth) presents his dissection that relates to the multiplicity of the wrecker as opposed to the integrity of the hero.<sup>2</sup> Notably, in the variant (Arm. DS, B /1/, 247 f.; Rus. DS, 189 f.) where the shattered Msra-Melik runs away to Məsər, he is afterwards killed by David’s son – Little Mher, and with characteristic details of the fight being observed – he presents the first two strokes, hits the adversary ensconced with tents and horse saddles (though there is no pit-shelter). However severing tents and saddles, Little Mher doesn’t dissect Msra-Melik into two halves, but cuts off his head (giving it to Uncle Toros), the penis and testicles<sup>3</sup> (giving those to Msra-Melik’s mother).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In the similar case (DS, A, 813) due to David’s stroke with the mace, Msra-Melik’s back was broken on a stone threshing-floor, while his head had remained in the sky for 7 days, 7 nights until it fell onto the earth. Also in another case (DS, A, 750) due to the stroke with the mace, Msra-Melik’s head falls off making an indentation on the threshing-floor that can be seen to this day. Cf. variant (DS, A, 1065-67) where, according to the agreement, the adversary will cut off the head of the one who won’t stand the stroke with the mace. Msra-Melik’s mother doesn’t let David do that and he cuts Msra-Melik into halves during the subsequent fight, and this time already with swords.

<sup>2</sup> See Abramyan (2008: 138-140).

<sup>3</sup> We will particularly address the theme of Msra-Melik’s testicles.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the variant (DS, A, 720) where David and his adversary are cousins, but not stepbrothers. Herein David does not split his adversary into halves, but cuts his head off.

It can be assumed that cutting the adversary into two parts is the prerogative of David himself. Moreover, David should divide him certainly into two equal halves. In the series of the variants this circumstance is played out with David not taking a run like his adversary, David dismounting by stopping at the pit where Msra-Melik is hiding (e.g. in Arm. DS, A, 358; DS, A, 584; Rus. DS, 158), David changing his clothes before the fight; Uncle Toros advising him either to kneel down at Msra-Melik feet or stand over his head (Arm. DS, B /2/, JA, 140; Rus. DS, 109). The last variant is particularly notable as herein Uncle Toros speaks out about the cause for requiring the "canonical" dissection: David will prove that he is a "valiant man" (Arm: *դնչաղ տղախաղ*) (Arm. DS, B /2/, 140-141; Rus. DS, 109) simply based on how precisely he will dissect Msra-Melik. This condition is so principal that Uncle Toros decides to weight (and weights) the parts of Msra-Melik's body on a large scale. And though in this variant Msra-Melik doesn't hide in the pit-shelter, David's task is no less difficult as his adversary is covered with a mound of horse and people corpses. David manages to cut his adversary into two equal halves and prove his bravery and masculinity.

However the fine precision of the stroke, it can be assumed, also has some connections with another, a more significant circle of phenomena than the valiant stroke. It helps to reveal the latent asymmetry in Msra-Melik's anatomy. First of all, the right half of his body relates to the common father he had with David, while the left one – to his mother. In some cases this is specifically emphasized<sup>1</sup> (Arm. DS, A, 586; Rus. DS, 159; Arm. DS, B /2/, 476; DS, C, 327) or implied (DS, A, 283). That is why David takes the right half with him to Sasun to bury it, and gives the left one to Msra-Melik's mother for her to take it to Məsər, otherwise it will be eaten by dogs and wolves. Sometimes the fragmented halves of the body are not identified on the "right – left" basis, for instance, in the above mentioned variant, where the Black waters carry away one of the halves to the hell (DS, A, 436). In the context of all the "left", malicious and chthonic characteristics, it can be assumed that underground waters carried away exactly the left half, although David suggested Msra-Melik's mother to pull out her son from the pit herself, i.e. to take out the remained, according to the same logic, the right half, that in other contexts, being related to mother, should have been the left one.

It can be stated that such kind of contradiction between the right and left halves of the body anticipates the modern knowledge on the functional asymmetry of the hemispheres of the brain and their correlation (though crosswise) with the right and left halves of the body, and is in accordance with modern psychological and semiotic<sup>2</sup> views on androgyny. Nevertheless, none of the androgyny models familiar to me – from the Orphic (Platonic) androgyny, the Greek Hermaphroditus, the Indian Ardhanarishvara to the Australian genital surgery of penile subincision,<sup>3</sup> do not split human body into absolutely mirror like-symmetric halves as David's sword did it with Msra-Melik's body.

<sup>1</sup> A. Gulyan (in op. cit. on numbers, p. 16) and A. Sahakyan (2007: 264, 275, n. 33) paid attention to this.

<sup>2</sup> Ivanov 1998a: 379-602.

<sup>3</sup> See Abramyan 2005, § 82, 146, 167, 167f., 168, 168f., 181.

Strictly speaking, Msra-Melik's anatomy is not so much his androgyny (the latter is simply reconstructed in the general context of the androgynous texts) but having a "genetic" halfness – the inferiority of one of the opposing stepbrothers that can be traced back to Bałdasar, one of the twins of the first twin pair from daredevils of Sasun. It is noteworthy that neither Bałdasar nor Msra-Melik have any offsprings; it can be assumed that for the latter this was a result of an anatomical anomaly that was revealed by David's sword (Msra-Melik turns out to having one testicle).<sup>1</sup>

It is obvious that in such cases when the dissection of the halves is absolutely equal, there is no mention about an anatomical anomaly, on the contrary, for a firm conviction in the precision of the stroke, it is mentioned that David's sword strikes Msra-Melik from the top and comes out from between his two testicles (Arm. DS, A, 93; Rus. DS, 71). Usually the story is limited by indicating that after the stroke Msra-Melik falls apart into two lengthwise halves. But in some variants, as it has already been said, the precision of David's stroke is tested by weighing Msra-Melik's dissected halves (Arm. DSB /2/, 141; Rus. DS, 109). Exactly weighing allows to state in the other variants that one of the halves is heavier and it is not because David had cut his adversary's body inaccurately, but because one of Msra-Melik's testicles weights (usually 40 litters or pounds) right as much as is the difference between the halves (DS,C, 424, p. 535).<sup>2</sup> According to some cases, mentioning which of the testicles is the only one, as it was expected, it is the right one,<sup>3</sup> for instance, in DS, B /1/, 123,<sup>4</sup> i.e. it is on the right, paternal half. Sometimes apparently in the incomplete variants, it is not clear why they cut Msra-Melik's testicle from his corpse and which one exactly. For instance, without any context one of Msra-Melik's testicles is cut and weighted (DS, B /2/, 689).<sup>5</sup> Or they say that it is the left testicle that is cut and weighted (Arm. DS, B/2/, 283; Rus. DS, 285), but it is not mentioned that it is the only one.<sup>6</sup> However

<sup>1</sup> Cf. interpretation by A. Gulyan of Bałdasar's and Msra-Melik's halfness in relation with numerical characteristics of the epic heroes in the above mentioned work on numbers, p.16.

<sup>2</sup> In one, obviously incomplete variant (Arm. DS, A, 917; Rus. DS, 180) one of the weighted halves is heavier, without mentioning the cause.

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes the left testicle is weighted, without any explanation, as if out of curiosity (DS, A, 204) or its weight is mentioned (DS, A, 829-830) – in these variants Msra-Melik has two testicles but David takes the left one with him (on this see ff.).

<sup>4</sup> In this variant David takes the right testicle with him (there is no mention in the other cases on the fate of the cut to be weighted testicle) and throws it onto his uncle Vego's roof as the latter has mocked him (there is no mention about this in the variant). The testicle breaks the roof and falls into the house by frightening his uncle – this gives an explanation to his nickname Coward (in Armenian – 'cran', literally 'one with upset stomach'). Also in another variant (DS, A, 829-830) the nickname is formed alongside with an analogous episode but the uncle is frightened by the "canonical" left testicle brought there.

<sup>5</sup> Herein Msra-Melik's mother takes the two halves of her son's body to Məsər.

<sup>6</sup> In this case, that is the only one as far as I know, they might have mixed up the right-left testicles: David takes out one of the halves from the pit and throws it away, but when they take out the other half, they cut the testicle – "it was the left testicle". As in other variants David gives posthumous honors to the right, father-related half, here he most likely throws away the left half, that is why.

the mention about the left testicle no more refers to Msra-Melik's anatomy, but to the marked leftness of the wrecker who in many traditions himself/herself is connected to the left, other, natural and feminine characteristics.

The last one of the above mentioned variants (where Msra-Melik's left testicle is cut) is probably an incomplete version of those variants where such actions are clarified (by the way, all these variants may serve to illustrate the situation where the two halves of the dissected adversary are equal in weight). David cuts Msra-Melik's left testicle to take it to his uncle's wife (Arm. DS, A, 18, 31; Rus. DS, 36, 42-43; Arm. DS, A, 82, 93-94; Rus. DS, 66, 71), the old woman-adviser (DS, II/2/, 550) or to his uncles (ARM. DS, I, 193, 203-204, 829-830). Except the case of the old woman<sup>1</sup> and a variant with the uncle (DS, I, 829-830),<sup>2</sup> David brings Msra-Melik's left testicle (carries it on a cart), by implementing the mocking instruction that people gave him when they learnt that he was going to fight with Msra-Melik. Particularly interesting is the motivation of the uncle's wife: she asks David to bring the left testicle for making a medicine for her eyes.

Generally, the topic of the cutting of the genitals of the killed adversaries is common in the epic; we have already brought such kind of example on Little Mher and Msra-Melik (Arm. DS, B /1/, 346; Rus. DS, 233). With a high frequency, it is played out in the episode where women are scoffing at the survived tax collectors and the latter reply to them (e.g. in Rus. DS, 209): "... In early spring the water flows / will bring you gifts, / carrying the testicles-genitals of your husbands". The ithyphallic warrior and hunter, a quite common, descriptive and narrative figure,<sup>3</sup> is also well known in the ancient Armenia.<sup>4</sup> That is why depriving the warrior-adversary from his reproductive/ "combative" organ, as a matter of principle, fits into the logic of this universal figure.

However the topic of Msra-Melik's left testicle explicitly refers to another mythological context. As it has already been stated, the left testicle underlines harmfulness, and chthonism of the hero's adversary. This phrase has apparently become so fixed that in one of the variants, in the episode where David, not being recognized, enters Msra-Melik's tent and talks to him, by replying to the question of Msra-Melik on how his master looks like: "Like your left testicle" (DS, A, 803), though in this variant there is no episode with cutting of the left testicle.

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subsequently, not the left testicle, but the right one should have been weighted. But as there is no motivation described in this variant, it can be assumed that the mention on the left testicle has transmitted here from those variants where from the two testicles David cuts exactly the left one (see below).

<sup>1</sup> In this variant she doesn't say anything about it, and this is hardly because of her loss as, unlike the mockers, it is she who gives advice on how to get the fairy horse and his father's weapons, and as a result of it, to win his adversary. David takes Msra-Melik's left testicle to her so as she can hang it from her plait, perhaps as a talisman.

<sup>2</sup> In this already observed variant, the uncle seems not to mock, but evince curiosity.

<sup>3</sup> Abramyan 2005: § 169, 169f.

<sup>4</sup> Yesayan 1980: Tab. 56-57; Tadevosyan, Petrosyan 2001: 207, 209, Fig. 6.1.4.

We will try to observe the above mentioned episodes on Msra-Melik's left testicle, putting aside the mockery motif in the instruction of the uncle's wife that constructs the logic of the narrative, and the topic of leftism that we have already briefly presented. We will not specifically focus on the topic of the remedial features of the killed chthonic adversary, but will recall Asclepius, the healing god, and the herbal code of the Basic Myth revealing the origin of many medicinal plants (especially for drugs) from the body of the Thunderer's serpent adversary.<sup>1</sup> One thing is obvious: in the mythological context of the Basic Myth, the left testicle of the chthonic adversary may well serve as a medicine. It remains to find out what connection a testicle has with an eye (though not of the hero himself, nevertheless of someone from his world<sup>2</sup>). As strange as the assumption of such connection may seem at first sight, nevertheless, it is not so unusual. First of all, both an eye and a testicle are similar anatomically – both of them are spherical. For revealing such a similarity, it is not necessary to refer to the history of the anatomical knowledge itself; ancient warriors, including the hero of the epic, often dealt with the "autopsy" of the human body – let us recall at least the cutting of Msra-Melik's testicle. However the similarity between an eye and a testicle also is noticeable without any warrior and medical revealing. For instance, this is played out in the modern caricature that often reveals various archaic connections through grotesque, cf. a schematic image of a nose and eyes that when turned upside down, becomes a phallus with testicles. An amulet in the form of male genitalia, wide-spread in the Mediterranean, and protecting from the evil eye, may witness about the same symbolic connection. The vivid example of the correlation between the phallus and the eye provides a description for another confrontation, and this time from the ancient Egyptian mythology that also originally goes back to the twin one. Thus in the fight for the precedence between the uterine brothers Osiris and Set, the latter dissects his brother into many pieces; Isis, the sister and wife of Osiris, finds the fragmented pieces and reconstructs the body of the killed Osiris. She finds all the pieces except the phallus that has been eaten by fish. Horus, the son of Osiris and Isis, continues the fight with Set, but the latter gouges out the eye of Horus. Later Horus returns his eye back by depriving Set from genitals; Horus then gives his eye to his father to swallow, and resurrects him.<sup>3</sup> These numerous connections between the eye and the phallus, linked to the theme of healing-resurrection, provide ground to think that a medicine for eye could have "really" been made from Msra-Melik's left testicle.

<sup>1</sup> Toporov 1977b: 196-207.

<sup>2</sup> Here it is not significant that the wife of David's uncle is often characterized as unkind, lustful or ethnically stranger (these characteristics are not studied in this article). Unlike other plots played out with strangeness and wickedness of Thunderer's wife (on them in the context of the Basic Myth, see Petrosyan 1997: 7), she nevertheless relates to "our" world.

<sup>3</sup> Lapinskaya, Martsiniak 1983: 54f., 123; Rubinshtein 1980: 311.

### **Msra-Melik's killing as a repetition of the act of creation**

According to the mythopoetic thinking, every significant activity circulates the act of creation of the world.<sup>1</sup> This refers to the key fight between David and Msra-Melik, too. Again we will address the fine precision that David needed to dissect Msra-Melik. As we have already seen, such precision was needed for Msra-Melik not to fall down simply into two parts (as it is attested in most of the variants) but into two different constituents of his body. And since these parts are respectively paternal and maternal, it is difficult to restrain from the temptation and not to relate such division to the initial act of creation,<sup>2</sup> especially as according to a series of clues, one can make an assumption on the existence of the original inseparable "paternal-maternal" unity in the Armenian tradition.<sup>3</sup> In other traditions, for instance, in the Maori one, the original inseparability is represented in the form of the eternal embracing of the father-sky and mother-earth. The latter were separated from each other by Tane (Tāne), the forest god, by standing on his head and leaning his legs on the father-sky,<sup>4</sup> by that depicting the famous figure of the arbor inversa – the shamanic inverted tree. Let us remember the cane "separating" the earth from the sky in the Armenian cosmogony that is passed onto us by Movses Khorenatsi. The dynamic picture of the tree-Tane in the Maori cosmogony is reflected in the static picture of the Cosmic Tree (*arbor mundi*) in many cosmogonies;<sup>5</sup> in many mythologies, the sky and the earth are united/separated by a tree, hill, and column or by other equivalents of the Cosmic Tree, regardless of the attempts made by the contemporary poststructuralists to deprive the world from this archaic construct.

It is noteworthy that before the fight with Msra-Melik, that as we know, concludes with the division of the "duplex" adversary, David is going through a test; he is trying the strength of his stroke – with a single stroke he has to dissect a steel column resembling the world column in the centre of the world (*axis mundi*). This is more obvious in one of the variants where the column, instead of standing, is hung from the sky (Arm. DS, A, 83, 85; Rus. DS, 67) somewhere in a field at some unknown height. In the context of the paternal-maternal cosmogonies, a conclusion can be drawn that before dividing the adversary into paternal and maternal parts (with a single stroke) to reestablish the order in the world, David cuts the column (again with a single stroke) uniting the father-sky and the mother-earth in the beginning of times, i.e. reestablishes the world order. Other cosmogonic scenarios could also have been "seen" in Msra-Melik's killing by David (e.g. an original sacrifice), but I am afraid such literal readings by a researcher may result in (and often they do) a

<sup>1</sup> Petrosyan 1997: 6. A. Petrosyan fairly relates this statement, based on the famous thought by M. Eliade on archetypes and repetition, to the Armenian epic.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gulyan op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Toporov 1977a: 103; Ivanov 1983: 22-43.

<sup>4</sup> Grey 1961: 1-11.

<sup>5</sup> On the Cosmic Tree, see Toporov 2010.

new mythology, by establishing new “branches” and “variants” in science, folklore and national discourse. This does not mean that the fight, that is being observed, has nothing to do with the cosmogonic mythology. By no means, it has,<sup>1</sup> but not in the form of literal repetition,<sup>2</sup> but that of constantly updated deconstructions.<sup>3</sup> A researcher has to do rather with a set of elements that are combined on the basis of special mythopoetic and anthropological rules,<sup>4</sup> with the principle of being close to the linguistic etymology.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the fight between David and Msra-Melik, the overall picture becomes complicated by juxtaposing other models and interpretation levels, something that we tried to briefly outline in this article.

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<sup>1</sup> At least because in many mythologies the cosmogonies are established on the initial division of the androgynous beings (see e.g. Tokarev 1980: 358f.) that had direct connection with the mythologem of the first twins, including the ones that were engaged in fatal fights (Abramyan, Demirkhanyan 1985: 66-84). Besides, as C. Watkins summarizes the views of the specialists who studied this initial motif, the universal mythological plot about the hero who kills the dragon (and the dragon features of Msra-Melik are quite obvious), are necessary because the dragon, in a broad sense, symbolizes Chaos, thus the killing of the dragon represents a victory of the Cosmic order over Chaos (1995: 299).

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes we are lucky to have an opportunity to observe rather constant scenarios in some genres and rituals, e.g. the archaic realities and structures in a wedding ceremony that often play the role of a “settler”.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Smbat Hovhannisyan whose observations (at “Identity in the Changing World” conference, Yer. State Ling. Uni. after V. Brusov, July 4, 2006) helped me draw the current conclusion.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Abramyan 2009.

<sup>5</sup> See Abrahamyan 2006: 9-14; Abramyan 2008a: 67-74.



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