

ETHNOGRAPHY

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH204886-898>



Research paper

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THE MYTHS ON JARAH-HEKIM ST. TIRAMER MONASTERY

Abstract. This article aims to demonstrate how legends can influence the nature of religious practices and how understanding of a religious object can differ among people from various traditions. The Jarah-Hekim Monastery of the Holy Mother of God exemplifies a persistent yet evolving tradition influencing worship and folk beliefs, enduring even after the disappearance of the physical structure (the church) around which it originated. This research employs diachronic analysis of historical data, content analysis, and a hermeneutic approach to literary sources. The mythological framework of narratives concerning former pagan shrines and their Christianization follows a standard pattern: a brief description of pagan cults, the visit of a saint, the destruction of former sacred objects, and the founding of a Christian church. In the case of St. Tiramer of Timar not only names of pagan priests converted into Christianity are preserved but also the means practiced by St. Thaddeus to pertain the sacral place with its structure. For nearly two millennia, St. Tiramer has been both an object of veneration and a central figure in the mythology surrounding Shirak, Zirak, and Mirak, the legendary founders of cities, villages, prominent families, churches, and monasteries. The research allows to conclude that the monastery's church is a building of Early Christian times that was reconstructed in the 16th or 17th century. Despite being abandoned in the 19th century, the monastery remained a site of regular pilgrimage for Armenians from Vaspurakan, Iran, and Taron, attracting even those from more distant regions. A rich tapestry of beliefs and folklore is connected with the monastery, with origins shrouded in obscurity, yet reflecting actual historical events and figures. The memory of the monastery persisted even after its destruction, preserved in proverbs and a song that became a symbol of returning to Christian values.

Keywords: monastery; legend; pagan priests; pilgrimage; Miragians

For citation: Simonyan L.D., Zhamkochyan A., Hovhannisyan K.H. The myths on Jarah-Hekim st. Tiramer Monastery. History, Archeology and Ethnography of the Caucasus. 2024. Vol. 20. N. 4. P. 886-898. doi.org/10.32653/CH204886-898

ЭТНОГРАФИЯ

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH204886-898>



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МИФЫ МОНАСТЫРЯ ДЖАРА-ХЕКИМ СВ. ТИРАМЕР

Аннотация. Цель статьи – показать, как легенды могут оказывать влияние на характер культа и насколько разным может быть восприятие религиозного объекта носителями разных религиозных традиций. Монастырь Джара-хежим Св. Богоматери служит примером продолжительной и менявшейся в историческом процессе традиции, повлиявшей на культ и народные представления и оставшейся живой даже после уничтожения материального объекта (церкви), вокруг которого возникла эта традиция. Исследование выполнено с использованием диахронического анализа исторических данных, контент-анализа и герменевтического подхода к письменным источникам. Мифологическая канва историй о прежних языческих святилищах и их христианизации сводится к стандартной форме: краткое описание языческого культа, визит святого, разрушение старого священного объекта и основание христианской церкви. В случае со Св. Богоматерью (Тирамер) Тимара сохранены не только имена языческих служителей, обращенных в христианство, но и методы, с помощью которых св. Фаддей сохранил святое место вместе со строением. Почти 2000 лет монастырь Св. Тирамер оставался объектом культа и предметом мифов о Шираке, Зираке и Мираке – основателях городов, сел, известных родов, церквей и монастырей. Исследование позволяет заключить, что церковь монастыря является строением периода раннего христианства, которое было реконструировано в XVI или XVII в. Будучи заброшенным в XIX в., монастырь остался местом регулярного паломничества армян, населяющих Васпуракан, Иран и Тарон, и привлекающим армян из более далеких регионов. С монастырем связаны поверья и словесность неопределенного времени возникновения, но отражающие реальные исторические события и персоналии. Память о монастыре сохранилась после его уничтожения в форме поговорок и песни, ставшей символом возвращения к христианским ценностям.

Ключевые слова: монастырь; легенда; языческие служители; паломничество; Мирагяны

Для цитирования: Симонян Л.Д., Жамкочян А., Оганнисян К.О. Мифы монастыря Джара-Хежим св. Тирамер // История, археология и этнография Кавказа. 2024. Т. 20. No 4. С. 886-898. doi.org/10.32653/CH204886-898

Introduction

Located on the eastern shore of Lake Van, the monastery, dedicated to Holy Mother of God [1, 352]¹ but known by various folk names, was renowned among Armenians for the unique cultural milieu that flourished around it from the first half of the 19th century until the Great Genocide and expatriation of Armenians [2, p. 265–266; 3, p. 119–123; 4, p. 62–63; 5, p. 25–26; 6, p. 272–275; 7, p. 79; 8, p. 210]. The monastery drew attention due to the presence of lepers and cripples who resided around it for many years. This led to the development of a nearby village, named *Tiramayr* or *Astvatsatsin* (Mother of Lord, Mother of God), whose inhabitants subsisted on offerings and gifts from pilgrims. The monastery's reputation as a site of miraculous healing was the primary draw for both pilgrims and those seeking cures.

It is especially intriguing that, despite the limited historical records concerning the monastery, numerous accounts mention the absence of officiating priests, and ordinary people from the local community independently managed their religious practices. Nevertheless, they considered themselves heirs of the convent (or once cloister) and often made long journeys to gather offerings for the sacral place from people living abroad.

In older sources the monastery was called *Əntsayeats* St. Mother of God, and Eremia K'ēōm-iwrčean (17th century) mentions it as *Həndzanents* Holy Mother of God in his map of sanctuaries (9, Tavola 14, № 447). According to surviving colophons in medieval Armenian manuscripts, the monastery is referenced as early as the 13th century. However, there remains some confusion with another nearby monastery – *Krənkavank* (The Crane Monastery).

The most sacral object stored in the monastery was the kerchief of the Mother of God brought there by the apostle Thaddeus, according to the legend.

Today, the monastery is gone, with no physical trace remaining. We haven't found a single photograph or image of it. However, fragments of memory concerning the convent and its traditions have been preserved in local folklore. None of the storytellers mention any epigraphic inscriptions on the monastery walls. Furthermore, neither European travellers of the 17th–18th centuries nor modern-day tourists make any reference to the monastery itself. It's as if the monastery abruptly appears in the historical record and then vanishes just as suddenly at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Monastery of the Mother of God and Raffi's account of the pilgrimage

The monastery *Surb Tiramayr* was located on a hill not far from the lake Van in the region (*nahiye*) of Timar of the Ottoman empire (now in Gevash province, Turkey). Its popular names were *Asparatsin* [5, p. 25], *Khatun Tiramayr*, or *Khatun Yeghnik* (“Lady Deer”) *Tiramer*, *Balak gyumbet* (“Spotty dome”) [10, p. 19], *Kanach chumbar* (“Green kerchief”, referencing the relic stored in the monastery) [11, p. 98]. Till the end of 19th century only two priests served at the monastery², and people still remembered the vicar named Aharon who served during peaceful times [6, p. 272, 274]. Yet, the most common name was *Jarah-hekim* (“The Healer of Wounds”) *Surb Tiramayr*, or *Tiramer*. According to one version, even the toponym Timar is a shortened form of the name of the convent – *Tiramayr*>Timar.³

1. Some popular names are: *Khatoon Tiramer* (Lady Mother of Lord), *Jarah-hekim* (The Healer of Ulcer), *Asparatsin*, or *Aspatsatsin* (dialect forms meaning “God-born”), *Həndzanants*, or *Əntsayeats* (“of offerings”) Holy Mother of God.

2. A. Tokhmakhean notes that locals exiled the priests and governed the monastery on their own [5, p. 26].

3. Beglaryan Grigor *Van-Tosp – The Foundation of Armenia – The Heart of Our Country* [Internet]. – Art-A-Tsolum – 2023. [updates 2023 Sep. 18]. Available from: <https://allinnet.info/history/van-tosp-the-foundation-of-armenia-the-heart-of-our-country/>

In this recent text we can see a version of the legend slightly different from what is familiar from other sources: “The province got its name from the Yncaits *Surb Astvatsatsin* monastery (Holy Mother of God's Treasury) or *Hatun Tiramayr*, located near the village of Norshen on the northeastern shore of Van, directly opposite the island of Lim. This monastery is more known as *Spitak Vank* (White) or *Asparacin* (Shield-bearing). This monastery had only one church with a dome made of white stone.

According to legend, on the site of the *Asparacin* monastery was one of the oldest temples or shrines of Armenia, destroyed in the 4th century (sic!) by the apostle Thaddeus. In the church laid on the site of the ancient sanctuary, the apostle walled up the Mother of God's head

A tradition existed of wandering legates, or collectors of offerings, who travelled to various Armenian-populated areas. These individuals were typically villagers or ailing pilgrims who had found refuge at the sanctuary. They carried relics from the monastery and other sacred objects, using them to bless people or simply soliciting alms on behalf of the monastery. This practice was considered essential for those afflicted with the “seal of St. Tiramayr” (i.e., ulcers and other ailments) to find a cure. The legates received numerous contributions and gifts for the monastery, and sometimes even expropriated spotted animals (called *balak* in Turkish) – such as horses and cows – which were believed to be consecrated to St. Balak Tiramayr [2, p. 266; 6, p. 275; 10, p. 19].

Some sources mention crowded pilgrimages to the convent and their term – The Feast of the Transformation (Dormation) of the Holy Mother of God in August [12, p. 151; 11, p. 37–38] but provide less detail about the rituals performed there.

The most detailed illustration of the ritual forms is given by Raffi in his novel “Sparks” [13, p. 432–441, 453–454, 457–458]. Besides the main church, there are several additional sacral buildings and objects of worship such as *Vichaki* rock (“Boulder of Fate”), *Katnaghbyur* (“milky spring”) basin. In a fiction-like but thorough account Raffi reports on the unusual lifestyle of inhabitants of the village Tiramayr (whom he calls “lazy and stupid” since they never engaged in farming or cattle-breeding but lived at the expense of donations given for the convent) and the legates (called *məghdəsi* – pilgrims) of the monastery who confiscated oxen, cows, buffalos, and horses “for the sake” of the monastery, took cripple, disabled children and relics in the journey from village to village with the aim to gather money and gifts. Raffi gives a description of the game of chance (see below), the festive market, the ceremonial passage of pilgrims between the two rows of sitting “The Holy Mother’s Pitiful Ones” (i. e. the “victims” of the saint) to the parvis connected with the main church with a small door that was paradoxically called “gate” (*darpas*).

Telling about the pilgrimage, Raffi mentions the display of sacred objects within the cathedral, fortune-tellers in trance, the ritual of forging sibling bonds, and young rope-walkers performing outside the monastery walls. His depiction of pilgrims arriving from various regions of historical Armenia and setting up their tents around the monastery is particularly significant for understanding the extent of the convent’s influence and its geographical reach. Raffi highlights certain rites that appear reminiscent of pre-Christian ceremonies and customs. One such rite, performed by the legates, involved placing a relic or a cross from the monastery into a sieve and allowing children seated beneath it to receive the holy power believed to flow through the holes [13, p. 433]. The author describes another rite, comparing it to the oracle at Delphi. This involves the prophesying of a young woman in a trance state (referred to as *ənkavor* or “falling one,” possibly epileptic). The woman lies on the ground, shivering and uttering seemingly meaningless phrases or rhymed verses. She sometimes calls out the names of those present and speaks in sentences largely incomprehensible to the audience. An acolyte stands nearby, murmuring prayers and periodically placing a cross into the woman’s mouth. This acolyte then interprets her utterances, typically prescribing offerings to be brought to the monastery. [13, p. 437–439]. Raffi notes a little girl sitting on a rock and foretelling the future for children. Even traditional dramatic contests of improvising musicians in the context of the pilgrimage rites are reminiscent from pagan times to the author [13, p. 436–437].

Meanwhile, Raffi views the monastery and its surroundings as a manifestation of St. Nerses’ (4th-century patriarch) reforms. He sees it as a refuge for individuals and families suffering from various illnesses, embodying the concept of a hospital-sanctuary for the sick. Raffi believes hospitals originated in monasteries, citing the old convent of St. *Tiramayr* as an example [13, p. 435]⁴.

Although the novel was published in the 1880s, the writer presents an earlier period in the sanc-

veil – lachak, brought by him to Armenia, due to which the monastery began to be called Yncaits Surb Astvatsatsin. ...Over time, the village began to be called Verin Timar after its church, now the Kurds call it Pir-Karib...”. One curious expression of this fragment is indication of the popular name “*Spitak Vank*” (White Monastery) unknown to us from other sources. Usually, Armenians call that way churches constructed of white stone, and there is no other mentioning of that color of material in other sources. Instead, other authors report on black and white walls of the church. Equally undocumented is the Kurdish name of the convent – “Pir-Karib”.

4. It’s more likely that, at some unknown point in history, the monastery – once renowned for its power, healing abilities, and monastic feasts with night vigils – gradually transitioned into a popular destination for those seeking remedies and blessings from the Holy Mother of God.

tuary's history, a time he perceives as better, when church servants still performed regular divine services and liturgy, blessed salt for sacrifices, read personal prayers for believers, etc. Other sources offer little information on the architectural structures, or simply mention that the church was constructed with contrasting white and black stones, hence the name *balak gyumbet* ("spotted, multi-coloured dome") [6, p. 272, 274]. Raffi describes the interior of the church as follows:

"The interior construction of the Holy Mother of Lord monastery has the same form that one can see in other churches of this region whose age reaches the fifth century, that is, the cathedral is separated from the vestibule called "gate". People stay in the gate, and the divine service proceeds in the church so that spectators do not see the clergymen. Only one door leads from the cathedral to the gate, where the celebrant of the Liturgy arrives from time to time to perform a proper ceremony" [13, p. 454–455].

Raffi's description evokes the structure of an old church, such as Hovhannavank, lending credence to the idea that *Surb Tiramayr* might date back to the early Christian period. This suggests that the folk belief attributing the church's construction to an apostle (discussed below) may not be entirely unfounded.

Raffi describes a ritual where pilgrims approach the Boulder of Fate and attempt to attach small stones to it. The belief is that if the stones adhere, the pilgrim's wish will be granted.⁵ He goes on to describe the Milky spring located in a nearby gorge, situated beneath a large rock where the water has formed a basin. Pilgrims would bathe in this basin, believing it would cure them from various ailments [13, p. 441, 457].

In contrast, Mirakhorean makes no mention of the Boulder of Fate or the Milky spring. Instead, he highlights different sacred sites within the village of Tiramayr, such as the ruined chapels of St. Hovhannes and St. Simon. He also identifies three other significant locations near the monastery: *Karmir khach* ("Red Cross") and *Kapuyt khach* ("Blue Cross") chapels, and the Tomb of the Deceased, a place sought by those seeking solace in their despair [6, p. 275–276]. This apparent discrepancy might be explained by the fact that pilgrims originating from different regions likely focused their veneration on different sacred objects. In Raffi's account, the pilgrims hailed from Aghbak and Salmast, while in Mirakhorean's narrative, they came from Van.

Despite Raffi's detailed portrayal, he notably omits the legend associated with the renowned sanctuary. Fortunately, this legend has been preserved through other sources.

The Myth according to Mirakhorean, Sherents and Haykuni

The stories surrounding the foundation of St. Tiramayr Monastery are imbued with legendary, even mythical, qualities. One version links the monastery's origins to the apostolic era:

"...before Christ this site was a heathen shrine, served by a dedicated priesthood. Three names of the head priests still sound without distortion, that of Shirak, Zirak and Mirak – three brothers, lords and dukes of our land. Later, at the dawn of Christianity, when the saint apostle Thaddeus arrived and preached of Christ, he converted many. These converts planned to destroy the idols and their sanctuary and build in its place a monastery dedicated to St. Mary. Initially, the three priest-lords plotted to kill Thaddeus. However, the apostle, aware of their substantial following and influence, chose to negotiate with them. As a result, the brothers assisted in dismantling the pagan shrines and constructing a monastery on the same site. Thaddeus himself consecrated the right cornerstone, thus establishing the cloister. He then entrusted the monastery to the brothers for their livelihood." [6, p. 273–274].

M. Mirakhorean describes the key pilgrimage sites, including a natural basin believed to possess healing properties. He also notes that a local clan, calling themselves Miragians after one of the former head priests, resides in the village and claims to be the monastery's custodians. Representatives of other ethnic groups, visiting the monastery, and nearby residents simply refer to the village as Mirak [6, p. 274].

The same story is narrated by Gh. Pirghalemean [16, p. 21–23]. In his version, after baptizing King

5. Such rituals are typical for many sanctuaries in Armenia even in present days.

Abgar, St. Thaddeus travelled to lands held by the Gnuni dukes and began preaching. He converted numerous people and then commenced construction of a cathedral, consecrating the foundation stone and naming the church St. Mother of God. But prior to the cathedral's construction, a pagan pilgrimage site existed on the same location. Idolatry and Zoroastrianism thrived there, and sacred fire-altars (*atrushan*) were of great honour. Three brothers—Shirak, Zirak, and Mirak—descended from the noble Gnuni family, owned the temple and lived lavishly off the sacrifices offered by pilgrims. Following their conversion, the brothers lost their source of income. Shirak, embittered by this loss, cursed the newly constructed cathedral. The three brothers then demanded ownership of the cathedral, claiming the same rights they had held over the former pagan temple. St. Thaddeus, though grieved, agreed to relinquish the church to them.

For centuries, the local population benefited from the sanctuary and the pilgrims who visited it. By the 19th century, the inhabitants of the village of Tiramer-Mirak were known as skilled beggars, disdaining farming and cultivating the land. They believed themselves to be descendants of the ancient pagan priests who had served as hosts of the sanctuary.

A shorter version of the story links the location to St. Nerses the Great (5th-century patriarch). This version claims the church's site was originally a pagan shrine dedicated to deities named Shirak, Zirak, and Mirak. St. Nerses is said to have destroyed these idols and built a hospital (leprosarium) in their place for the inhabitants of Van province [7, p. 79].

This final version connects to a recognizable historical context. Collected by S. Haykuni in the Alashkert region of Western Armenia, it has remained unpublished until now, and is presented here for the first time:

“Mirak, Zirak, and Shirak were three brothers who stole cattle from Georgia and brought them to the Monastery of the Holy Mother of God. They let the animals graze there. When the cattle approached the monastery's spring to drink, they became spotted (*balak*). The monastery was in ruins at the time, but the three brothers, witnessing this miracle, promptly sold the animals and used the proceeds to restore the monastery. Then they built three villages nearby and gave them their own names: the first was named Mirakli in honour of the eldest brother, the second – Shirakli, and the third – Zirakli. These geographical names survived along with the historical memory and generations until our times. Only an offshoot from Mirak's family named Ghazar moved to Alashkert, to Gharakilisa village and founded a new village, now mentioned as Ghazar village. With newcomers, the population primarily consisting of Ghazar's children and grandchildren, became a large village...”⁶

Therefore, Haykuni's version doesn't describe the founding of a church on the site of a pagan sanctuary, but rather the restoration of a ruined monastery. In this account, the brothers are simply cattle thieves, not important figures like nobles, clergy, or ordained priests.

While the protagonist names and location remain consistent, Haykuni's version paints a drastically different cultural backdrop. This version resonates more with the lived experience of Western Armenians under Ottoman rule, who were familiar with cattle rustling, ruined sanctuaries, and pilgrimage. By the end of the 19th century, the context had shifted. Laypeople, not clergy, owned and profited from sacred sites, and pilgrimages often served financial rather than purely spiritual aims. A common thread across all four versions of the story is the special right granted to the three brothers and their descendants to manage the monastery's property. This suggests an underlying reality – the brothers' control – which the different versions of the myth attempted to legitimize.

Stories about the Christianization of former pagan sites often follow a standard narrative structure: They typically mention a pre-existing sanctuary dedicated to a deity, sometimes including a brief description of pagan rituals practiced there. Then, a saint (an apostle, martyr, patriarch, etc.) arrives, destroys the old sacred objects, and establishes a Christian church in their place. The story of St. Tiramer of Timar offers a less dramatic depiction of conversion than the typical narrative of destruction and replacement. It preserves not only the names of pagan priests who converted to Christianity, but also the sacred site itself, including its structure and meaning.

6. *The Miragian Family*: Museum of Literature and Arts, Yerevan. Sargis Haykuni fond (In Arm).

Mirak, Shirak and Zirak as historical figures

Beyond the myths, evidence suggests that a historical figure named Mirak, and possibly even three brothers (the eldest of whom was Mirak), actually existed. At least two of them—Mirak and Shirak—are mentioned in the *Chronicle* of the 17th-century historian Arakel of Davrizh. They are identified as wealthy individuals (*khoja*) of Van city [17, p. 191]. The same people might have been mentioned in the decree from the *Kr̄nkavank*, or *Tsovahayeats* (Looking on Sea) monastery of the Holy Mother of God, or colloquially as *Əndsayeats*, located near Van city. In this decree, Prior Martiros appoints Shirak, Mirak, and Zirak to administer the monastery and encourages generous donations to support the care of one hundred indigent people living there [18, p. 17]. The same names are mentioned in an epigraphic text from another Monastery of the Holy Mother of God in the same region, namely, *Karmravor* Holy Mother of God, situated on the slope of Varag mountain. On the stone over the western entrance Ye. Lalayan has read the following: “This is an inscription of Holy Mother of God, while Jesus Christ perished to save the humanity and ministered the ritual (of holy liturgy), that is renovated by the God-loving *khoja* Zirak. Remember Mirak and his soul and his parents *melik* (duke) Sargis, mother Janagh and brothers Grigor, Melikzat and *khoja* Zirak’s spouse Solti, son Al[as], Mirza, and uncle *khoja* Shirak on Armenian time-reckoning of RKZ (=1617).” [19, p. 77–78]. Brothers Zirak, Shirak and Mirak as *khoja* Atom’s sons are mentioned in a colophon attached to the sacral *Zəmrut* gospel to that time (19th century) stored in *Karmrak* monastery in Bitlis [20, p. 267].

The name Zirak appears multiple times in historical records. An inscription on the western interior wall of the church of Atheni (Georgia), deciphered by D. Bakradze and later I.K. Javakhishvili, mentions an Arab military commander named Zirak in 853 AD. Javakhishvili believed this Zirak to be the same individual referred to as Zhirak in the Armenian chronicle of Tovma Artsruni and Zirak in at-Tabari’s History [21, p. 282–283]. Zirak’s name is connected with the province of Bulanukh, too. Bense mentions a rivulet called *Tərbe-Ziro* (Ziro’s tomb) not far from Aznavur’s fortress of Manazkert city [22, p. 33].

All these obviously are different people judging from their patronymics, and at the same time all of them were engaged in acts of philanthropy: restoring monasteries, commissioning manuscripts, and making donations to the church. It’s likely that the patrons of *Kr̄nkavank* were historical figures who served as the basis for the mythical founders of Tiramayr monastery. The shared name *Əntsayeats* connects both monasteries, lending legitimacy to Mirak, Zirak, and Shirak’s patronage of *Kr̄nkavank*.

As previously mentioned, S. Haykuni’s legend mentions the villages of Mirakli, Shirakli, and Zirakli, named after three brothers. This motif echoes the 7th-century chronicle’s account of three brothers – Kuars, Meghti, and Khorean – who founded the corresponding cities of Taron [23, p. 47]. However, there are not enough reasons to suggest that the myths of Van and Alashkert underwent influence of the early medieval story of Taron. These narratives could have emerged independently, reflecting archetypal themes common to many cultures.

Here it is important to mention another Miragian clan, this time – in Dersim region (now Tunjeli in Turkey). The family was so big that they even had their own sub-dialect and the representatives of it could identify themselves equally as Armenians or as Zaza (Alevi). Andranik [24, p. 68, 152] describes the clan as very powerful, originating from the common ancestor Ter-Ohan Miragian who lived in Havlori village (now destroyed) and owned the monastery of the village – St. Karapet, just like Miragians of Timar earlier owned St. Tiramayr. There are no data suggesting any connection (or blood relationship, hereditary liaisons) between Miragians of Vaspurakan and Miragians of Dersim, but stories about both being former pagans were common [25, p. 252-254]. It is reasonable to assume that they are once separated branches of the same big family that have later forgotten their common origin.

The Tiramayr monastery’s reputation for healing reached Javakhk (present-day Georgia), but the

narrative surrounding it transformed into a distinctly mythical form. V. Bdoyan's published account [26, p. 269] begins with a common Armenian folktale motif: a priest's wife offering bread, water, and a kiss to a passerby in God's name. Then, like in other similar stories, the priest returns home to witness his wife kissing the stranger. He then commands her, in God's name, to jump into the *tonir* (oven). She obeys, but miraculously, the *tonir* fills with water. God then transforms the oven into a lake and the priest's wife into a fish. But in this narrative Tonir later becomes a pilgrimage site of *Tiramayr* situated either in Moghni (in Armenia) or in Habash (Ethiopia) "as if *Tiramayr*" (a form of addressing to a priest's wife) "became a saintess". According to the narrative, people suffering from wounds (ulcers) visit the lake and, in the name of God, ask the priest's wife (now a fish) to reveal herself. The fish obliges, turning over to expose its belly. Upon witnessing this, the pilgrims' wounds miraculously heal. The only connecting thread between this story and the renowned monastery of Tiramayr (Timar) is the motif of miraculous healing by the Mother of God.

Folk prayers and songs

As *Əndzanats Asvaratsin* (Azatek village in Vayots Dzor), *Əntsayin* (Vagharshapat), *Həndzana surb Astvaratsin*, *Səb Khatoon Tiramer* (Van) the monastery, as a personified sacred entity, is invoked in folk prayers. This is especially true in prayers recited for frightened children and women experiencing difficult childbirth [27, p. 113, 120, 123, 128]. These prayers largely consist of ritualistic formulas such as "One Jesus, one Christ // One *Əndzanots Asvaratsin*", except for the prayer cited for protection of mothers during childbirth, where *Khatoon Tiramer* is mentioned along with several other sanctuaries of Vaspurakan and Taron.

In a protection prayer for a newborn child:

"Aman, my *Khatoon Tiramer*, I am the sacrifice for your baby,
Intercede before God,
For the sake of your Only One,
Keep my baby by me as my single consolation" [26, p. 301].

This prayer substantiates once more that *Khatoon Tiramayr* is not only the healer of ulcers but also the patroness of children and motherhood.

The following text might be another prayer to the same saint recited during pilgrimages:

Մարիամ սուրբ կուս	Mariam saint virgin
Ասպածածին,	Mother of God,
Ուխտաւոր են	There are thousands
Հազար ու մին,	Of pilgrims to You.
Քրիստոս է Զու սուրբ որդին,	Christ is Your saint son,
Օգնական, պահապան	Helper, protector
Ձեր շեն օջախին,	For your steady house,
Ձեր տուն ու տեղին,	For your home and hearth,
Մալ ու դովլաթին,	For cattle and fortune,
Ձեր հավ ու ձվին,	For hens and eggs,
Մեծ ու պզտկին,	For the senior and the junior,
Բարեխոս եղավ	Intercessor of us
Սուրբ Ասպածածին ⁷ :	Is the Saint Mother of God.

Several pilgrimage songs of different origin have been preserved relating to the monastery of *Tiramayr*. In many cases they simply describe the diseases sent by the saint such as *Tiramor balak*,

7. G. Tarverdyan (ashough Verdi). Folkloric materials: State Archive of Armenia. Fond 1336; Inv. 7; File 1043: 001336. (In Arm).

a skin disease characterized by rash and ulcers and believed to be the consequence of the saint Virgin's "hit", and thus should be healed by *Tiramayr* [28, p. 72]. G. Sherents also indicates steady folk representations concerning people infected by *Tiramor balak*, that is *Tiramor kheghj* (the poor of *Tiramayr*). That expression has been used until recent times in figurative sense, denoting extremely lazy people, living at someone else's expense. The curses and swears expressing wishes to somebody to get that disease, are mentioned in literary sources, as well.

However, there are texts panegyricizing the monastery and its personified holiness. Most of them are folk songs [29, p. 18-19]. A particularly popular example is "*Jarah-hekim Surb Tiramer*" (Holy Tiramer, the Healer) by Khoyli Vardan. This older song experienced a resurgence in the 1990s after being set to music by the young female composer Astghik Stamboltsean. It subsequently became a symbol of Armenia's return to Christian values. Despite the fact that most Armenians in the late 20th century didn't grasp the symbolism and connections to the legend of the monastery—destroyed some 70 years before the song's resurgence—or even realize its association with an ancient convent in Western Armenia, Khoyli Vardan's song remains one of Armenia's most beloved spiritual compositions today.

Analysis

Several issues concerning the monastery *Jarah-hekim Surb Tiramer* demand explanation. The first of all – the real age of the construction. Although the monastery has probably been functioning for many centuries as an official church and a convent belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church and/or as a sacred place for folk Christianity, only in the late 19th century was its legendary story documented in a literary form. Do legendary narratives contain any historical facts or they simply reflect the mood of the so-called "pagan revival" of that time? This question, more or less relating to all folkloric materials with mentioning of national deities or containing descriptions of pagan cults, is a stumbling block of any investigation trying to make clear how folk Christianity of the New Age absorbed the ideas reigning in the intellectual society and how deep the roots of local traditions are embedded in the pre-Christian representations. The only verifiable fact is that the legends mentioning the names of the priests pertain specifically to that particular monastery, with no documented connections to pagan eras in literary and epigraphic sources. However, Raffi's depiction of the church, showing distinct features of early Christian architecture, supports the notion that the original church may have been constructed on the site of a former pagan shrine, as in the case observed in numerous early churches such as the St. Cross of Aparan or St. Symbol of Varag (*Verin Varag* near Van). The main building of the monastery most likely was a basilica of the *arakelashen* type ("built by an apostle"), with a corner stone possibly dating back to pre-Christian era. The monastery may have operated during the Early Middle Ages only to be abandoned later due to war or as a consequence of mass migration. Potentially, during the 16th to 17th centuries when the Armenian Apostolic Church experienced a revival and numerous churches and monasteries were reconstructed, the *Āntsayeats* or *Hndzanants* Holy Mother of God may have been restored by generous individuals, potentially including figures like Mirak, Zirak, and Shirak mentioned in epigraphic records. It could have functioned once more for a period until subsequent tragic events led to its decline.

The connection between the Christian convent and pagan practices are seen through several aspects:

- Ritual of incubation, which involved hundreds of people moving to the convent, staying there with families for one or two nights, building homes, and forming a village around the sanctuary as a place of their permanent residence;

- Similar to well-known ancient temples, the convent exhibited a "specialization" in treating ailments, including specific ulcers and the sick known as "the poor of Tiramayr";

- Confiscation of animals from ordinary people as something belonging to the monastery;

- Mantic rites of telling fortune and demanding special sacrifices, certain actions.

At the same time, nearly all accounts concerning these forms of cults emphasize their commercial nature. In other words, both the official clerics and the civilian villagers sought personal profit from visitors. The legend, therefore, served to justify, explain, and legitimize the existing customs, thereby

influencing history. It prescribed that contributions be made to the hosts as payment for treatment or patronage, favoring the Holy Virgin. Additionally, the peculiar rituals were attributed to traditions initially introduced by pagan priests.

Early Christian influences were also characteristic of the Jarah-hekim Monastery. The village of the “poors of Tiramer” represents a variation of the refuge-hospital, a form of care developed by early Christian fathers. Although there are no historical records of medical care at the monastery, this does not preclude the possibility that such treatment was practiced. If a monastic hospital did exist – whether established by St. Nerses as legend suggests or otherwise – it is plausible that buildings were constructed for the poor and the sick. Additionally, structures for pilgrims may have been erected during restorations, which later became residences for the village’s inhabitants. Historical events could cause the degradation of Christian forms of beneficence into mere subsistence involving beggary and parasitism. This particular example serves as an extreme case illustrating how religious sentiments can be manipulated to become a general way of life. Still, there is the possibility that St. Tiramayr began as a convent and later became a residence for the sick during a period of decline, when it remained in ruins for several centuries.

Another example of folk customs mimicking the activities of the official Church is the presence of traveling legates. The Mother See of Etchmiadzin, for instance, employed legates to inspect local monasteries and churches and to draw pilgrims to the central sanctuary of all Armenians – the Cathoghike Church. In contrast, the itinerant “representatives” of the Jarah-Hekim Monastery did not represent the Church in any official capacity and lacked any formal status. They were often beggars and sometimes self-seeking adventurers. However, for “the poor of Tiramayr,” begging in the name of Jarah-Hekim Holy Mother of God was a necessity to seek treatment. Many sick people would genuinely gather contributions for the monastery and then return home, reportedly miraculously healed. Some even turned this practice into a professional activity. Nonetheless, this degraded legacy is rooted in folk Christian traditions rather than pagan forms of worship.

All sources point to the mass pilgrimage and the nearly constant presence of the sick around the monastery, highlighting its significance in various ways through local traditions. For the Armenians living in Vaspurakan and Iran, the Jarah-hekim St. Tiramer Monastery was a traditional pilgrimage site during the feast of the Dormition of St. Mary. During these pilgrimages, they engaged in customary practices and observed the normative behaviors typical of such religious journeys, without performing any unusual rituals. They used the familiar natural healing basin, worshipped the relics (first of all – the St. Virgin’s green kerchief) but did not stay in the neighbouring village for long. People inhabiting the neighbouring province Mush-Hark called the monastery *Khatun Yeghnik* (“Lady Deer”), and this may indicate a different forgotten tradition with the female deer time to time visiting the monastery as in some legends on other Armenian sanctuaries. For all of them as it can be presumed from the folk prayers, the monastery was a sacral place helping childless people to have progeny and protecting women at birth.

People from more distant locations, such as Eastern Armenia or the North Caucasus, visited the monastery when necessary, not just on the day of the feast, for specific purposes like healing from diseases or seeking divination. This suggests that the legend and fame of the “half-pagan” healing sanctuary were initially intended for Armenians from far-off places and people of other nationalities. In contrast, those who regularly visited *Asparatsin* or *Kahtun Yeghnik Surb Tiramer* regarded it as a routine sacred place that provided them with a sense of unity and safety.

The challenge of determining the date of the legends is intertwined with the question of authorship. These legends may have originated later and could have been crafted by members of the congregation living in the convent, a form of “monastic folklore,” as well as by those from the village. This creation could have served as a form of advertisement, aiming to attract potential benefactors to the monastery. The mention of Mirak, Shirak, and Zirak in these texts may be explained by the authors using the names of well-known benefactors, likely sponsors of the monastery’s restoration, to legitimize the narrative. However, it’s also possible that these legends were inherited from earlier times and repurposed as public relations material in the 19th century.

Data on St. Tiramayr Monastery highlight how the understanding of a single historical-cultural site can vary among people from different geographical regions, even when they share the same eth-

nic identity. Historical events have the power to shape and transform the forms of religious cults. It wasn't until the 1990s that a unified perception of the ruined monastery as a symbol of national religion emerged among all Armenians, assisted by a new song created using the old poetry by Khoyli Vardan.

Conclusion

Based on the investigation of the sources, we can conclude that the monastery was originally a building of Early Christian times that was reconstructed during the 16th or 17th century and abandoned by the end of 19th century.

When exactly the monastery *Jarah-hekim (Khatun)* Holy Mother of God became a popular site of pilgrimage, still remains unknown. Existing data prompt that St. *Tiramayr* was an ancient church, presumably, a basilica of Early-Christian period of the *arakelashen* (built by an apostle) type that had been abandoned and forgotten for many centuries, and later, possibly in 16-17th centuries it had been restored by some benevolent figures (possibly, by Mirak, Zirak and Shirak). In the Early Middle Ages and continuing through the 16th to 19th centuries, the site likely functioned as a convent. By the end of the 19th century, following its restoration, it transitioned into a folk sanctuary. During this period, clerics would visit the monastery only on pilgrimage days to celebrate the Liturgy and perform other ceremonies.

In the 19th century, the monastery gained immense popularity as a pilgrimage site for Armenians from Vaspurakan, Iran, and Taron, as well as from more distant regions. Pilgrims from the three provinces regarded the sanctuary differently, primarily viewing St. Tiramer as a child-giver and patron of mothers and children.

The monastery gained renown for its healing properties, possibly attributed to a healing basin, relics, or other sacred objects. It became known as a place for curing ulcers and wounds, granting children, and providing refuge for the sick. Furthermore, there existed the tradition of wandering legates who took relics or crosses from the monastery and begged in the name of St. *Tiramer*, performing folk rituals aimed at healing skin diseases believed to be inflicted by the saint's "hit." Many rituals resemble that of pagan times.

A complex body of beliefs and folklore surrounds the monastery. Only myths, descriptions published in the 19th century, and the expression "a poor of Tiramayr" are preserved today. It is unclear when folk stories concerning the monastery's foundation or restoration arose. However, they suggest an origin in the Early Middle Ages, which corresponds with the church's architectural style. The myth attributes the names of prominent figures who reconstructed the church in the 16th-17th centuries to converted pagan priests.

The stories about the monastery mention an eminent family known as the Miragians, believed to be descendants of the pagan owner or sponsor, Mirak, who supported the reconstruction of the ancient building. Another notable clan of Miragians resided in the Dersim region, speaking their unique sub-dialect. Historical sources do not establish any connection between these two groups of Miragians, suggesting a potential separation in earlier times that was subsequently forgotten.

The *Balak Khatoon* Holy Mother of God has been remembered by Western Armenians for many years, despite its ruin, thanks to the folklore that has been created around it, primarily due to the popular song of Vardan of Khoy (Khoyli). Even today, a significant amount of folklore, including legends, songs, prayers, proverbs, and swear formulas, persists around the mysterious monastery. The enigmatic forms of cult and its obscured history contribute to the St. Tiramer Monastery being regarded as one of the most captivating historical shrines in Western Armenia.

The case of St. Tiramayr exemplifies a sanctuary with a long history that has been viewed in various ways by members of the same ethnic group over centuries. Despite its specific national character, exploring the monastery's accounts and the stories woven around it in the context of historical changes can offer valuable insights into how social and informational shifts influence religious practices, the development of myths and beliefs, and the construction of folk memories. The history of the monastery also represents a distinctive chapter in the annals of Eastern Christianity.

Acknowledgements. The research was supported by the Higher Education and Science Committee of RA (Research project № 24SSAH-6A005).

Финансирование. Исследование поддержано Комитетом по высшему образованию и науке Республики А (исследовательский проект № 24SSAH-6A005).

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Received 17.01.2024

Accepted 23.05.2024

Published 15.12.2024

Поступила в редакцию 17.01.2024 г.

Принята в печать 23.05.2024 г.

Опубликована 15.12.2024 г.