

Zaal Andronikashvili

Ancient Myths and Legends of the Black Sea: An Integrative Analysis

The Black Sea region is one of the oldest cultural regions in the world. Many peoples and cultures have left their traces there: There are traces of human habitation—especially on the east and south coasts—dating back to the Paleolithic Era. The Kura-Araxes culture in the southern Caucasus and the southeastern Black Sea (4000 BC–2000 BC), the Bronze Age Maikop culture (3700 BC–3000 BC) in the northeastern Black Sea region, and the Hattian culture in central Anatolia and the southern Black Sea, display contacts or hybridization between the carriers of the non-Indo-European—(today's) South and North Caucasian, as well as other (now extinct) isolated pre-Indo-European languages (Hattian, Hurro-Urartian)—with the carriers of the Indo-European languages. The Hittite Empire emerged in the seventeenth century BC and was a great power until the twelfth century BC. Hittite was an Indo-European language, but in their religion, cult, and myths, the Indo-European Hittites integrated the religious ideas of the non-Indo-European Hattians and Hurrians. In the ninth century BC, Urartu emerged as a large empire in the Black Sea region (in eastern Anatolia and the South Caucasus around Lake Van). Urartian is also an extinct isolated language whose origin and relationships with the South Caucasian and North Caucasian languages remain somewhat unclear. The Hittite Empire and Urartu linked Mesopotamian cultures with the Caucasus and the Black Sea Region. The religious cults of Hittites and Urartians show a mixture of Anatolian, Caucasian, and Mesopotamian religious ideas: Hittite religious texts mention the Black Sea, and the Black Sea starts to play a role as a location for mythical plots.¹ In the eighth century BC, Iranian-speaking Cimmerians and Scythians appeared in the Caucasus and Black Sea regions. While Cimmerians brought down Urartu and spread to Anatolia, some of the Scythians settled in the northern Black Sea region and founded the Greco-Scythian Bosporean Empire (on the Cimmerian Bosphorus and Kerch Strait), which existed between the sixth century BC and the fifth century AD. On the Black Sea's eastern coast, the kingdom of Colchis arose in the sixth century BC and was conquered by the Hellenistic Kingdom of Pontus in the first century BC. The Kingdom of Pontus had been the great power of the Black Sea region since the third century BC, dominating the entire coast. It could not resist the Roman expansion, especially the land and sea campaigns of Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus. The Greek Black Sea colonies from the fifth century BC onwards, the great empires of the Hellenistic period, the Empire of Alexander the Great, Achaemenid Iran, and later the Roman Empire have had a lasting influence on the Black Sea region politically, economically, and

¹ Gernot Wilhelm, "Meer B. bei den Hethitern," *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, ed. Dietz Otto Edzard (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993–1997), 8:3–5; Volkert Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur: Texte, Stilistik, Motive* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), 97.

culturally. This cultural context also extends to Caucasus and Black Sea kingdoms of Great Armenia, Iberia, and Egrisi, from which emerged the medieval kingdoms of Armenia and Georgia, while most of the Black Sea region was under Byzantine rule in the medieval period until the end of the Comnenian era.

Ancient myths have left their traces in the toponyms of the Black Sea. Bosporus, (the “Ox-ford” in the literal English translation from ancient Greek, İstanbul Boğazı in Turkish), the strait between Europe and Asia connecting the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara, was named after Io, a mistress of Zeus, the Priestess of Hera. Hellespont, the Greek name for the strait of Dardanelles, came from the Argonaut myth, probably the best-known myth about the Black Sea.

Greeks imagined Colchis (western Georgia) as a “barbarian” (non-Greek) land. Its rulers were nevertheless closely related to the gods and heroes of Greece. Aeëtes, the king of Colchis, was the son of Helios and the moon goddess Perse. His sisters were Kirke (the ruler of the island of Aiaia, who turned Odysseus’s companions into pigs and from whom her niece Medea probably inherited her magic skills) and Pasiphae the wife of Minos and mother of Minotaur and Ariadne. Aeëtes possessed the Golden Fleece, the skin of the golden-winged ram with which Phrixos and Helle escaped from Boeotia to Colchis. Once in Colchis, Phrixos sacrificed the ram, which was hung on a tree in the sacred grove and guarded by a dragon.² Jason, the Thessalian prince, was commissioned by his uncle Pelias to retrieve the fleece. It was then that Jason was allowed to become king. He built the ship Argo and assembled a crew. Heracles, the most prominent argonaut, however, never reached Colchis.

Biblical and ancient myths made the Black Sea region especially prominent. However, they constitute only a fraction of the myths and legends circulating in the Black Sea region.

These different cultures’ religious cults and mythical narratives entered into complicated connections with each other and the “local” cults and beliefs, especially in the southern, northern, and eastern Black Sea regions. These connections gave rise to mythological palimpsests in which today we can distinguish several religious-cultural and mythical layers, some of them dating back to the prehistory of the northwestern Black Sea region. To name only two examples, the Scythian goddess Agrimpasa became Aphrodite Ourania, and the Ossetian sea god Donbetyr became Saint Peter.³

Although there are numerous studies on the mythologies of various regional cultures of the Black Sea region, there is still a lack of an integrative, interdisciplinary

2 The Hittites also used the skins of various animals, including sheep, as symbols of power. Cf. Volkert Haas, *Geschichte der hethitischen Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 454; Piotor Taracha, *Religions of Second Millennium Anatolia* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 57.

3 For Agrimpasa, see Yulia Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods of the Bosporan Kingdom: Celestial Aphrodite and the Most High God* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 75. For Donbetyr, see Vasilii Abaev, “Kak apostol Petral Neptunom,” in *Izbrannye trudy: Religii. Folklor. Literatura* (Vladikavkaz: Ir, 1990), 123–36.

study beyond the national-philological, national-historical borders of the religion/mythology of the Black Sea region, especially with a maritime focus.⁴

I can hardly claim to accomplish this task, even as an outline. Nevertheless, I wish to point out the necessity of such an investigation and indicate starting points for it at least selectively. On the one hand, I limit myself to the myths and legends of antiquity (going into more detail on the material from the Near East, the Caucasus, and the northern Black Sea region—ca. 5000 BC to 600 AD—than on Greek and Roman antiquity). On the other hand, I treat those myths and legends that directly relate to the sea or emphasize the aquatic element. Generally, I will refrain from the later use of myths (for example, in literature and art).

The material for studying myths and legends in the Black Sea region is very heterogeneous, as are the disciplines dealing with it. While Hittite texts, for example, date back to the second millennium BC and belong to the oldest evidence of literature, relevant religious and mythical material from the Caucasus were recorded in the nineteenth and, in part, in the twentieth century and were assigned not to literature but to folklore. Archaeology and religious studies also provide insight into the myths and legends of the Black Sea region. However, the interpretations connected to the archaeological material are speculative without corresponding written texts. For example, Hittite religious texts sometimes name gods, but we only know of myths related to some of them.⁵ Therefore, I have chosen the approach based on the mythical or legendary plot. Plot or *sujet*, the intermedial substrate for communicating an occurrence, underlies a rite and a mythological narrative or a pictorial representation (although I will restrict myself to the narrative sources).⁶

4 For example: Haas, *Geschichte der hethitischen Religion*; Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur*; Taracha, *Religions*; Mikhail Rostovtsev, *Skifiia i Bospor* (Leningrad: Rossiiskaia akademiia istorii materialnoi kul'tury, 1925); Elena Virsaladze, *Gruzinskii okhotnichii mif i poeziia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), Georges Dumézil, *Osetinskii epos i mifologiiia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976) (a Russian compilation of different works of Dumézil related to Ossetian mythology); Vasilii Abaev, "Nartovskii epos u osetin," in Abaev, *Izbrannye trudy*, 142–243; Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods*; Zurab Kiknadze, *Kartuli mitologia: Jvari da Saq'mo* (Tbilisi: Ilia Chavchavadze State University Publishing, 2016); Vera Bardavelidze, *Drevneishie religioznye verovaniia i obriadovoe graficheskoe iskusstvo gruzinskikh plemen* (Tbilisi: Izdatel'stvo akademii nauk Gruzinskoi SSR, 1957); Mikheil Chikovani, *Kartuli Ep'osi*, vol. 1 (Tbilisi: Sakartvelos SSR metsnierebata ak'ademiis gamomtsemloba, 1959); Irine Tatishvili, *Kheturi religia: Genezisi, pormireba, p'anteonis st'rukt'ura* (Tbilisi: Logosi, 2004). An example of an attempt to integrate different perspectives on a maritime region: Jens Kamlah and Achim Lichtenberger, eds., *The Mediterranean Sea and the Southern Levant: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives from the Bronze Age to Medieval Times* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2021).

5 There are several examples of a strong presence in the religious cult of the Hittite goddess Inar and the Greco-Scythian goddess Aphrodite Apatouros. However, both are less present in myths (see below).

6 I use the term meta-plot to refer to a plot identical to several unrelated texts/traditions: The plot structure and functions of the protagonists remain essentially identical, despite the different settings and names of protagonists. The pioneer of plot-based reconstruction in folklore was Vladimir Propp. See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Lawrence Scott, intro. Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson (Austin:

In the first part, I will reconstruct the plot of the goddess of wild animals/fish, common to the Black Sea region from the myths and legends of different cultures around the Black Sea (Hittite, Georgian, Scythian, North Caucasian, Greek etc.). I argue that this was the maritime myth common to the whole the Black Sea region before the introduction of agriculture there. In the second part, I will go into the myths and legends in the Black Sea region in which the sea appears either as a setting or as a person acting. Finally, I briefly discuss the transformation of the semantics of the sea from benevolent to rather hostile in the cultures of the Black Sea region and the afterlife of the myths in modern times and the present.

1 The Lady of the Wild Animals/Fish and her Rebellious Son

One of the most widespread mythical or legendary plots narrated in different versions and variations throughout the Black Sea region is the myth of the Lady of Wild Animals/Fish. From her union with a mortal is born a hero who threatens the cosmic order and is finally overpowered and punished by a celestial or weather god. I will reconstruct the plot of the goddess of wild animals/fish from the following myths from different cultures around the Black Sea.

1.1 Inar/Hittite Goddess of Wild Animals and Hunting

The Hittite texts are among the oldest written sources of the Black Sea region. The Hittite Illuyanka myth belongs to the “genuine Anatolian myths, which originate from the Hattian tradition” and thus are of a pre-Indo-European origin.⁷ Hoffner dates this myth to the Old Hittite period (1750–1500 BC).⁸ The setting of the myth is the coast of the Black Sea “near the former mouth of the River Kızılırmak near Barfra.”⁹ There are two versions of the myth. In the first version, the Storm God is overpowered by the chthonic snake Illuyanka. To help the Storm God, the goddess Inar organizes a festival and asks a human called Hupasiya for help. At the feast, Hupasiya ties up Illuyanka, whom the Storm God then slays. Inar brings Hupasiya into her house on a rock in the land of Taruka and rewards him with her love. However, she forbids him to

University of Texas Press, 1968). For the plot-based approach, see Zaal Andronikashvili, *Die Erzeugung des dramatischen Textes: Ein Beitrag zur Theorie des Sujets* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2008).

⁷ Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur*, 96. The Hattic language was a non-Indo-European language whose speakers populated Anatolia in the Bronze Age. They were displaced or assimilated around 2000 BC by Indo-European Hittites, who took over part of their language but also their cults, religious beliefs, and mythology.

⁸ Harry A. Hoffner Jr., *Hittite Myths* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 11.

⁹ Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur*, 97.

look out of the window, where he can see his wife and children. Hupasiya violates the goddess's prohibition. In Haas's reconstruction of the incomplete text, the violation leads to the death of Hupasiya.

Inar has several functions in the Hittite pantheon. She is the city goddess of Hattusha, the capital of the Hittite Empire. But she is also a goddess of wild animals¹⁰ and the goddess of hunting. While Inar was the goddess of the capital city, there were comparable goddesses in other Hittite towns of central and northern Anatolia.¹¹ Other mythological plots associated with these goddesses are unknown.¹²

The Illuyanka myth does not address Inar's function as a goddess of wild animals. However, in the second sequence of the Illuyanka myth, she becomes the protagonist, rewards the mortal with her love, and takes him to his house. This sequence is not directly related to the Illuyanka myth but is connected to other myths from the Black Sea region, where a goddess of wild animals or a goddess of hunting plays a central role (see 1.3). Hupasiya, the mortal lover of the goddess, is comparable to the human lover of the goddess of animals from the Caucasus and her rebellious son (cf. 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6). While in the Georgian myths about the goddess of the wild animals, the hunter (the mortal lover of the goddess) is punished for violating her prohibition, her son is the one who fights chthonic or aquatic monsters.

1.2 The Hittite Myth of the Kingship of the Rebellious Deer God Kurunta

The Kurunta myth¹³ belongs to the Hurrian-Hittite cycle surrounding the god Kumarbi, the father of the gods who belongs to the gods of the older generation and is, according to Hoffner, a God of the netherworld, as opposed to his son Teshub (Hittite: Tarhunta), a celestial god¹⁴ who has to fight different monsters fathered by Kumarbi. (Only in the case of Kurunta is the connection unclear.) The cycle is incomplete, but there is consensus that Teshub triumphs in the end.

¹⁰ Taracha, *Religions*, 42–43.

¹¹ Taracha, 53.

¹² Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 12–13. In the Illuyanka myth, different mythical narratives that may have belonged to the different mythical cycles converge. For example, in the first sequence of the Illuyanka myth, Inar helps the storm god defeat the serpent. This sequence is related to other Hittite myths in which the storm god fights different monsters related to the sea (see II below). In the second version of the Illuyanka myth, the connection between the serpent and the sea is more explicit. While it is unclear whether the snake lives in the sea, the battle takes place on the shore.

¹³ Some Hittite gods are not known only by the designation ^DLAMMA. The logogram D (Dingir) means god and is used as determinative for all divine names. “Kurunta” is one possible reading for the tutelary deity ^DLAMMA which is used in some translations of Hittite texts. On the reading of the ideogram ^DLAMMA (meaning the god LAMMA), see Gregory McMahon, *The Hittite State Cult of Tutelary Deities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 23.

¹⁴ Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 41.

Inar and Kurunta belong to the same religious sphere of hunting, wild animals, and tutelary gods and can be represented by the same ideogram ^DLAMMA,¹⁵ which generally means tutelary god without specification of name or gender.¹⁶ The patron god is iconographically depicted as standing on a stag, with a lance or bow and arrow, often holding a hare as hunting prey.¹⁷ Kurunta can appear iconographically both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic.¹⁸ He is, like Inar, a deity associated with hunting. Therefore, he belongs to a cult or religious belief related to Inar.¹⁹ Volkert Haas describes the Kurunta myth as “a utopia of a happy hunter epoch in which the toils of fieldwork were still unknown.”²⁰ As we will see, the Kurunta myth demonstrates features not uncommon in the myth of the Lady of Wild Animals. Therefore, we can legitimately consider the Kurunta myth in the context of hunting myths.

The Kurunta myth narrates the short kingship of the deer god Kurunta over the gods and his fight with the storm god. Ea (the god wisdom) and Kumarbi agree to give their “kingship in heaven” to the deer god Kurunta.²¹ Kurunta attacks the storm god Tarhunna and his sister Ishtar. He injures Ishtar with an arrow, hits Tarhunna with a stone, and snatches the royal insignia from him. “Under Kurunta’s rule, humanity, disregarding the gods, lives in vain joy,” and Kurunta himself “refuses [...] in presumptuous pride to revere the ‘great gods’.”²² As a result, Ea and Kumarbi decide to punish Kurunta and take the kingship of the gods from him. In the battle with Tarhunna and Ninurta, Tarhuntas vizier, Kurunta, is defeated and must acknowledge the rule of the weather god.

Kurunta’s hubris and struggle with the storm god make him comparable to the characters from the Caucasus (see 1.4 and 1.5).

15 Myths of Inar and Kurunta belong to different linguistic and cultural areas and periods (Hittite, Hurrian, and Old Hittite and the period of the Hurrian-speaking dynasty in the fourteenth century BC). While Hattian myths are located in northern Anatolia, Hurrian myths are set in southeastern Anatolia, Syria, the Gulf of İskenderun, and around the Van Sea. Therefore, from the philological point of view, it is impossible to connect the myth of Inar with Kurunta. However, the history of religion and the plot-based approach provide some connections between Kurunta and Inar.

16 McMahon, *Tutelary Deities*, 5.

17 McMahon, 4.

18 Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur*, 144.

19 However, this connection is missing in the (mythological) plot. The tutelary deities are generally from the pre-Hittite (and pre-Indo-European) Hattic religious culture, while the Kurunta myth is Hurrian from a likewise non-Indo-European, but different cultural area.

20 Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur*, 146.

21 Haas, 144.

22 Haas, 145.

1.3 The Lady of Wild Animals / Fish (Eastern Coast of the Black Sea / Caucasus)

The Georgian ethnographer Elene Virsaladze, in her research on Georgian hunting myths, reconstructed a mythical plot of the Lady of Wild Animals.²³ In this plot, mostly handed down in fairy tales, the goddess lives in a cave on a rock or a rocky island in the sea. She can take the shape of different animals, especially a chamois or deer (cf. 1.1 and 1.2). She chooses a hunter to whom she offers her love or luck hunting as a reward. However, the goddess's gifts are ambivalent, for the chosen hunter ultimately perishes due to the goddess's love, usually because he violates one of her prohibitions, including that of returning to his family (cf. 1.1). In some legends, the goddess shows herself as a wild animal but has a special mark. If a hunter shoots her, the bullet or arrow will backfire and kill him. In other legends, the goddess entraps the hunter on the rock, which he cannot leave. He might hang there on a rope or even on the golden hair of Dali (cf. 1.4) and dies there or commits suicide by jumping down from the rock.

The minimal version of the plot of the goddess of wild animals from the Caucasus is comparable to the myth of the Hittite hunting goddess Inar. In both cases, the hunting goddesses choose a mortal human and reward him with their love on the condition of specific prohibitions. In the Hittite myth, the connection with the sea is not clear.

A double of the goddess of the wild animals in western Georgia was the goddess of the fishes, also called Mistress or Mother of the Waters.²⁴ Similarly to the goddess of wild animals, to Inar or Atargatis (cf. 1.8), the goddess of fish was a fertility goddess. She plays a similar role for fishermen to the one the goddess of wild animals plays for hunters.²⁵ The fish and animal goddesses have the same characteristics and similar external appearance (beautiful women with shiny golden hair who can transform into fish and animals, respectively).

For Virsaladze, the goddess of the wild animals was a developmental stage of religious ideas between an animal deity yet to be anthropomorphized and its replacement by the goddess of the animals and, later, the male god of wild animals and hunting.²⁶

²³ Virsaladze, *Gruzinskii okhotnichii mif*.

²⁴ Virsaladze, 35; Giorgi Chitaia, "Imeretis eksp'editsia: Baghdatis raioni," *Bulletin de l'institut Marr de langues, d'histoire et de culture matérielle* 2, no. 3 (1937): 339.

²⁵ In Georgian, hunting applies to both animals and fish. Bardavelidze, *Drevneishie religioznye verovaniia*, 98, points out that in Georgian fairy tales, the fish can also assume the function of the goddess of wild animals. It gives a mortal a gift, which, however, is connected with a taboo. After violating this taboo, the mortal is punished.

²⁶ In the Svanetian (a group of speakers of a Kartvelian language in the western Georgian Caucasus) religious beliefs, there are different deities for different animals: for mountain game (Dal), for forest game (the male forest angel), for wolves (Saint George), and for birds and trout (the male deity Apsaets). A supreme deity of animals is Beršišvliš (the Naked Lord of Animals). Georgian ethnologist Mikheil Chikovani assumes that a goddess of animals ceded her influence to the male deities with the transition to

In the minimal plot of the goddess of wild animals found in Georgia and the North Caucasus, the rule of the goddess is not challenged by other gods. She is sovereign over wild nature and provides humans with her grace, but also punishes them for violating her taboos. However, in the Caucasus, we can find a more extended plot in which a goddess of wild animals plays a role (cf. 1.4 and 1.5).

1.4 Dali and Amirani (Eastern Black Sea / Caucasus)

The cycle of Amirani—a hero of the Georgian epos—consists of different, sometimes originally unrelated episodes, of which those about his birth and punishment are probably among the oldest.²⁷ It is handed down in numerous oral narratives in Georgia and the North Caucasus and a medieval Georgian chivalric novel by Mose Khoneli.

In the most archaic Svanetian versions of the Amirani-saga, he is a son of Dali, the goddess of wild animals.²⁸ According to Svanetian versions of the Amirani saga, a hunter hears the voice of Dali and ascends to the rock where the goddess dwells,²⁹ whereupon the goddess falls in love with him. The hunter's wife sneaks into the goddess's house out of jealousy, cutting off her hair and thereby causing the goddess's death. The goddess asks the hunter to cut a child she is pregnant with from her belly. The child is born with a golden tooth (a feature his enemies recognize him by). In one of the versions, he claims that he does not burn in fire because he is made of brass. (In this characteristic, he shows similarity with Batraz [cf. 1.5]). The dying Dali asks the father of Amirani to abandon the child in the cradle at the water source of Iamani.³⁰ Iamani brings up the abandoned Amirani; with the sons of Iamani, Amirani later commits his heroic deeds.

patriarchy, but did not disappear entirely and rather turned into a malevolent deity. Chikovani, *Kartuli ep'osi*, 113.

²⁷ The connection between different episodes is controversial (Chikovani, *Kartuli eposi*, 77). The beginning and the end of the Amirani plot (his birth and his punishment) do not appear in the novel. Therefore, it is assumed that they are the oldest layers of the tradition. For the sequence of events in the Amirani plot, see Chikovani, *Kartuli ep'osi*, 207.

²⁸ Chikovani, *Kartuli eposi*, 156; Virsaladze, *Gruzinskii okhotnichii mif*, 99. Dal is also the supreme deity in several northern Caucasian languages, see Virsaladze, *Gruzinskii okhotnichii mif*, 131.

²⁹ In some versions of the Amirani saga, Amiran's father, the hunter, remains nameless. In some Svanetian versions, he is called Daredzhan or Danjelan. In a Pshavian version, his name is Sulkalmakhi. The Abkhazian version of the saga does not know the father at all; Amirani is conceived "immaculately." Therefore, Chikovani (*Kartuli ep'osi*, 152) assumes it is the myth's oldest, matriarchal version. In some versions, the goddess does not die; rather, the hunter abandons her. Amirani, when he grows up, searches for his father. There are Dali sagas in which Amirani does not appear. These sagas repeat the myth's plot structure about the goddess of wild animals and the hunter. See Virsaladze, *Gruzinskii okhotnichii mif*, 94.

³⁰ Chikovani, *Kartuli ep'osi*, 210, rightly points in this context to the supra-regionally widespread motif of the abandonment of the child in the water. In the Black-Sea-related myths, Batraz (cf. 1.5) is abandoned and brought up in the sea kingdom. See also the myth of Agrimpasa/Derceto (cf. 1.8).

In the middle parts of the saga, which play a significant role in the medieval novel and the oral epic, Amirani (together with his adoptive brothers) performs heroic deeds: He defeats monstrous male and female giants (Georgian: *devi*). Some of Amirani's heroic actions are explicitly connected to the sea: Amirani defeats sea dragons (Georgian: *veshapi*, literally: wales), and steals the daughter of the weather god, who dwells "behind the sea" between heaven and earth. In some versions of the saga, the sea dragon that Amirani vanquishes is fire-breathing and dwells in the sea or, specifically, the Black Sea. In some versions, the female personified Black Sea is the dragon's mother. The sea dragon, as in the Hittite Illuyanka myth (see 2.1), swallows the sun. Initially, Amirani cannot defeat the dragon and is also swallowed himself. But Amirani can free himself from the dragon's belly with the help of his diamond knife and release the sun.

There are other aquatic motifs in Amirani sagas: In the Pshavian version, Amirani's father is called Sul-Kalmakhi (literally: trout spirit). "Kalmakhi" (trout) generally designates a fish in Georgian and plays a prominent role in fertility customs (cf. 2.2). Amirani meets Mr. Igri (Igri-batoni), who guards healing water. Chikovani reconstructs Igri as a "virg"—a dragon or crocodile who lives by the rivers, springs, and lakes and protects them.³¹ Amirani defeats Igri-batoni and takes healing water from him.

At the end of the cycle, Amirani, who has fallen into hubris, wants to wrestle with his godfather, Christ, to whom he owes his strength. As punishment, Amirani is bound to the Caucasus to suffer the eternal torment of a bird tearing at his liver.³² Amiran's punishment was for a long time at the center of scholarly interest primarily for its resemblance to the Prometheus myth.³³ However, Amirani's punishment is only one part of a more complex plot.³⁴

The Amirani cycle plays a crucial role in the reconstruction of the mythology of the Black Sea region. He is a hunter, as is his father, and his mother is a goddess of wild animals. His genealogy makes him comparable with the Hittite (see 1.1 and 1.2) and

³¹ Chikovani, *Kartuli ep'osi*, 182.

³² Several other figures in myths and legends from the Caucasus were punished by being bound to a rock. Rokapi is an evil female deity known from Georgian folklore. She is tied to an iron pole plugged deep in the earth with an iron chain. Rokapi shakes the pole until it is loose, but at this moment, a bird comes to sit on it. Rokapi, in her rage, tries to kill the bird with the hammer but instead plugs the pole deeper into the earth again. There are also several northern Caucasian myths about an old man bound to the mountain, but they don't give a reason for his punishment. Movses Khorenatsi (410–90), a medieval Armenian historian, narrates in his history of Armenia a legend about King Artavasd, cursed by his father and held captive in Mount Ararat. Two dogs gnaw at his chain, which gets thinner. But the chain grows thicker when smiths hammer on the anvil. For the detailed treatment of Amirani's *doppelgänger*, see Chikovani, *Kartuli ep'osi*, 189–206. The motif of being bound to a rock is also present in the legends of the hunter entrapped by the Lady of Wild Animals. However, the motive of bondage is present but not central there.

³³ Chikovani, *Kartuli ep'osi*; Georges Charachidzé, *Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne: L'analyse structurale d'une civilisation* (Paris: La Découverte, 1968).

³⁴ Chikovani, *Kartuli ep'osi*; Virsaladze, *Gruzinskii okhotnichii mif*; Kevin Tuite, "Achilles and the Caucasus," *Journal of Indoeuropean Studies* 26, no. 3–4 (1998): 289–344.

the North Caucasian and northern Black Sea (1.5–1.8) corpus of myths and texts related to the hunting cults and myths about rebellious heroes born from the union of a goddess with a mortal human.

While his punishment makes him comparable to Prometheus, unlike Prometheus, he is not a cultural hero and is highly ambivalent in his qualities. His punishment, however, is a result of a conflict with a celestial/astral deity, a motif present both in the Hittite Texts of the Kumarbi cycle and North Caucasian Nart epics (cf. 1.5 and 2.1). The Canadian Caucasiologist Kevin Tuite extended this context to the Mediterranean and compared Amirani (as well as other figures from the Caucasus, the Ossetian Batradz and the Abkhazian Tswitsw) to reconstruct the figure of Proto-Achilles (cf. 1.6).

1.5 The Daughter of Donbetyr and Batraz (North Caucasus)

The Nart epic cycle, especially in its Ossetian version, is most relevant for reconstructing the mythology of the Black Sea region, because it provides important links for the reconstruction of the meta-plot of the Lady of Wild Animals/Fish and explicitly links the hunting myths to the sea.³⁵ The Narts are related to the aquatic element.³⁶ Uarchag, the progenitor of the Nart clan, is married to a daughter of the sea god Donbetyr, Dzerassæ, who was previously married to his deceased son Æhsærtæggatæ. From the marriage of Dzerassæ and Æhsærtæggatæ the twin brothers Uryzmæg and Haemyts are born. The latter marries a sister of Dzerassæ's and becomes the father of Batraz. Also, Satana, the wife of Uryzmæg and one of the central characters of the Nart epos, is the daughter of Dzerassæ and the astral god Uastyrdzhi.³⁷ The plot of Æhsærtæggatæ is similar to the plot of the goddess of wild animals: while hunting, Æhsærtæggatæ wounds Dzerassæ, in the form of a bird, with an arrow, pursues her to the sea, where her father Donbetyr lives, and takes her as his wife.

Similarly, the marriage of Haemyts is a consequence of the hunt. There are different versions of his marriage and the birth of Batraz, but all of them are connected with

35 For the Nart epos in general, see Abaev, "Nartovskii epos" and Dumézil, *Osetinskii epos*. The Nart legends are widespread among the North Caucasian peoples: Ossetians, Abkhazians, Circassians, Chechens, Balkars, and Ingush people. Abaev traces the origin of the epos to Ossetian tradition (the only Indo-European language in the North Caucasus). Abaev and Dumézil assume the Scythian origin of the Nart cycle.

36 Abaev assumes that Ossetians must have initially lived by the sea or the great river. Abaev, "Nartovskii epos," 158.

37 Uastyrdzhi is associated with St. George. In western Georgia, Saint George also replaces a storm deity; Chikovani compares him with the Hittite storm god Teshub. See Chikovani, *Kartuli ep'osi*, 126–27. However, St. George replacing a lunar deity is more common in Georgia. In several Georgian legends, St. George is the enemy of the goddess of wild animals and Amirani, cf. Virsaladze, *Gruzinskii okhotnichii mif*, 138–37. In one of the Georgian versions of the Amirani saga, St. George asks Christ, Amirani's godfather, to punish him with death. However, Christ chooses a "milder" punishment and binds him to the rock with an iron chain. See Chikovani, *Kartuli ep'osi*, 165.

the sea. In one version recorded by Vsevolod Miller, Haemyts meets a dwarf from the clan of chthonic Bytsentæ while hunting. He is so skilled that Haemyts wants to marry a woman from his clan. Bytsentæ are dwarves who live underground, below the ant-hill, and are relatives of the Donbetyrs. He marries the sister of the Bytsentæ named Bytsenon. One of the conditions of marriage is a taboo: The woman must not be offended by anyone. Once the taboo is broken, Bytsenon leaves Haemyts, but before leaving, she transplants her unborn son onto Haemyts's shoulder. After Batraz is born from his father's back, he is thrown into the sea, where he grows up and becomes a mighty warrior. Batraz does not want to be like all men of flesh and bone but asks the divine blacksmith Kurdalægion to temper him. After that, he asks the blacksmith to cool him in the sea, and his body becomes steely (in some traditions, a part of him remains unhardened, leading to his death).³⁸ In another version, Batraz jumps into the sea after his birth, where his relatives from the Donbetyr clan bring him up.

In a version also recorded in the nineteenth century by Shanaev, Haemyts pursues a wonderful white rabbit, which revives itself three times after Haemyts kills it. In the end, the rabbit comes to "the edge of the earth" to the sea and disappears there. An older man comes to the perplexed Haemyts, standing on the shore. Talking to him, Haemyts calls the rabbit "Ovsati"—the god of wild and domestic animals and assumes that it is a punishment because the Narts, among others, also fight Falvara, the lord of all animals. The older man reveals himself to be a servant of the sea god Donbetyr, and explains to him that the white rabbit is the daughter of Donbetyr, who has fallen in love with Haemyts and is destined to be his wife.³⁹ Haemyts is to return in a month to marry the daughter of the sea god. The daughter of Donbetyr can live on the hot earth only if she wears the shell of a sea turtle during the day, shedding it at night. The cunning Narte Syrdon hides in the bedroom, watches Donbetyr's daughter shed her shell and turn into a beautiful woman, and then burns the shell. When the wife of Haemyts can no longer find her shell, she leaves him forever. Since she is pregnant, she transplants her fetus to the Haemyts's shoulder. Finally, after nine months, from his shoulder, Batraz is born.⁴⁰

In this version, the plot sequence of Batraz's tempering is missing, but his connection with the sea and hunting deities are made explicit.⁴¹ We can reconstruct the plot

³⁸ Vsevolod Miller, *Osetinskie etudy* (Moscow: Imperatorskii Moskovskii universitet, 1881), 15.

³⁹ In different versions of the marriage of Haemyts and the birth of Batraz, three circles are connected or are interchangeable: the realm of the goddess of wild animals and hunting, the chthonic and aquatic elements: In some versions, the wife of Haemyts is a chthonic deity (related to the sea god Donbetyr), while in others she is the daughter of the sea god Donbetyr. However, in both versions, the marriage starts with a hunting scene.

⁴⁰ Dzhantemir Shanaev, "Iz osetinskikh skazanii o Nartakh," *Sbornik svedenii o kavkazskikh gortsakh* 9, no. 1 (1876): 234.

⁴¹ In different versions, a) Batraz is born burning hot, and after his birth, immediately jumps into the black sea; b) he is heated by the divine blacksmith Kurdalægion and then thrown into the sea for cooling, where he is hardened; c) after Batraz is born on the tower of his parental house from the bladder on his father's shoulder, the glowing infant breaks through seven floors. On each is a cauldron of water. Batraz

sequence of Batraz as follows: hunting—the marriage of Haemyts to a demigoddess—the disappearance of the demigoddess—the birth of Batraz—exposure (and/or education in the realm of the sea god—tempering and acquisition of supernatural powers and qualities—heroic deeds—the fight with the astral and weather deities—death.

Batraz is an ambivalent hero. He lives not on the earth but in the sea and in the sky and comes to the earth to perform his heroic deeds. When a thunderbolt strikes, the Ossetians believe that Batraz rises from the sea to the sky to fight the weather deities and the evil spirits.⁴² He inherits this liminality and ambivalence from the sea, which marks his life's beginning and end. Although he is a Nart, he is at enmity with a part of his tribe responsible for his father's death.

The plot sequence of the daughter of Donbetyr is comparable to that of the Lady of Wild Animals. As already demonstrated, the goddess of wild animals has her double in the goddess of fish, at least in the eastern Black Sea region. The sea, the mountain, and the forest are interchangeable and can generate similar religious or mythological ideas. As we will see below, this plot sequence is also comparable to the plot sequence of Derceto/Agrimpasa (cf. 1.8).

Batraz and Amirani are comparable in several plot sequences: the birth and abandonment of the heroic child of a goddess are one of them. Moreover, in Batraz's struggle with the storm deities Uatsillatæ (St. Ilia) and Uastyrdjytæ (St. George) and his subsequent death, Abaev saw parallels to the battle against the celestial Gods of Prometheus and Amirani.⁴³

1.6 Achilles and Thetis (Greece / Mediterranean / Northern Black Sea Coast)

The popularity of Achilles's cult on the northern coast of the Euxine is usually attributed to the Greek colonists.⁴⁴ In Olbia (close to today's Parutyne, Ukraine), Achilles was honored as Achilles pontarches (the King of the Seas).⁴⁵ Snake Island in the northern Black Sea region (today's Ukraine) is known as one of the most important cultic sites of

stops only in the seventh cauldron on the lowest floor; d) Batraz asks the hostile Narts to build a huge pyre for him, where he is brought to heat, jumps into the sea, and comes back hardened and kills his enemies.

⁴² Abaev, "Nartovskii epos," 187. This characteristic made Dumézil and Abaev ("Nartovskii epos," 184) believe Batraz was a storm deity. However, his connection to the hunter myth and his conflict with storm deities, which leads to his death, makes this interpretation implausible. Therefore, Abaev interpreted Batraz as a pre-Christian storm deity who fights already Christianized storm deities, Ilia and St. George, to resolve this contradiction. See Abaev, 186.

⁴³ Abaev, 183.

⁴⁴ Guy Hardeen, "The Cult of Achilles in the Euxine," *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 60, no. 3 (1991): 314–15, 320.

⁴⁵ Anna Rusiaeva, "Voprosy razvitiia kulta Akhilla v Severnom Prichernomore," in *Skifskii mir*, ed. Aleksei Ternozhkin et al. (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1975), 174–85.

Achilles.⁴⁶ According to the (lost) poem *Aithiopsis*, which is known in Proklus's summary, after the death of Achilles in the Trojan War his mother, the Nereid Thetis, snatches him from the funeral pyre and takes him to the White Island to lead an immortal life there.⁴⁷ The White Island was identified with Island of the Blest or Elysian Fields, with the difference that the White Island, unlike other islands where the dead lead an immortal life, was located in the real geographical space in the realm of mortals.⁴⁸ On the White Island, he lives in a marriage with Helena.⁴⁹ According to legends, Achilles is occasionally seen on the island in his armor and is considered the protector of sailors.⁵⁰

Mythologically, there is no explicit connection between Achilles and the Black Sea, which makes it challenging to explain the origin of his cult in the region. However, the Canadian Caucasiologist Kevin Tuite, in his reconstruction of the figure of Proto-Achilles, a pre-Homeric layer of Achilles, has compared him with the Caucasian heroes Amirani, Batradz and Tswitsw. This comparison served not only "to prove an old and long coexistence between the groups of peoples of the South Caucasus and the Indo-European origin",⁵¹ but also to explain the origins of the cult of Achilles in the Black Sea and help reconstruct maritime mythologies of the region.⁵²

Achilles is born as the son of the nereid Thetis and the Peleios, the king of Mirmidonians (who is also connected to hunting). Thetis tries to make him immortal in fire or the water of the Styx, depending on the different traditions. However, her husband, who does not understand the meaning of her actions, prevents Thetis from immortalizing her son. As a result, she leaves her husband (and child) in a rage and returns to her father, Nereus. Achilles is trained by the centaur Chiron and can die young but achieve eternal glory or lead a long but uneventful life. He chooses eternal glory and is killed in the Trojan War by Paris or Apollo, who wounds the only unprotected part of his body—the heel.

On the basis of comparison with the Caucasian mythological and legendary heroes, Tuite reconstructs the plot of Proto-Achilles as follows:

46 The modern names of the White Island are Ostriv Zmiinyi (Ukrainian), Insula Șerpilor (Romanian), Ostrov Zmeinyi (Russian), Phythonsy (Greek), and Yılan Adası (Turkish), meaning Snake Island. The name is associated with the many snakes that inhabit the island, which is also related to the cult of Achilles and its chthonic aspects. Snake Island made international headlines when Ukrainian border guards refused to surrender to the superior force of the Russian warship after the Russian aggression in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. "russkii voennyi korabl idi na khui" (Russian warship fuck you!) became the slogan of Ukrainian resistance, even making it onto a postage stamp, which has become a sought-after collector's item.

47 Hardeen, "The Cult of Achilles," 320.

48 Hardeen, 320.

49 Hardeen, 320.

50 Hardeen, 320.

51 Charachidzé, *Le système religieux*, 338–39; Tuite, "Achilles and the Caucasus," 21.

52 Walter Burkert thinks that the region's cult of Achilles as a ruler of the Black Sea is connected much more to his mother than his popularity founded on epic. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 172. At least it would be difficult to understand the Black Sea Achilles cult without his connection to Thetis.

Proto-Achilles is born from the union of two individuals representing two very different worlds. His mother's people dwell in nature, outside of and either above (mountains) or below (sea) the spaces domesticated by humans. They are an ancient race, largely female in some traditions (e.g. the Nereids and the Dæls), with an economy based on herding, hunting or fishing, ignorant of agriculture (and perhaps even of fire), but immortal. [...] The hunter gets the goddess pregnant, but through a careless or rash action—intruding on her immortalization of the child, refusing to leave Dæl's cave before his wife finds them, allowing her to be humiliated—causes the child to be thrust into the world, or even ripped prematurely out of the maternal womb, before he can fully become his mother's son.⁵³

The chthonic aspect of Achilles and his mother, Thetis, was pointed out by the Russian cultural scientist Vladimir Toporov.⁵⁴ Thetis is the daughter of Nereus, the son of Pontus and Gaia. Thetis's mother is Doris, a daughter of the Titan Oceanus and Tethys. Nereus's siblings are, among others, Phorcys and Ceto, whose daughter is Echidna, the snake, who is also part of the origin myth of the Scythians. Thetis turns into a snake, among other things, when she tries to escape Peleus. According to Toporov, Achilles is also imagined as snake-footed.⁵⁵ In his reconstruction of the Proto-Achilles, Toporov assumes his origin as a chthonic deity, and among the Near Eastern texts that could help in the reconstruction of Proto-Achilles, he also assumes the Hittite myth of Ullikummi (cf. 2.1) and the South Caucasian material.⁵⁶

Achilles's connections to the Caucasian and Hittitian material, established by Toporov and Tuite, allow his inclusion in the reconstruction of the Black Sea myth of the goddess of wild animals (with her chthonic or aquatic variations) and her rebellious son.

1.7 The Snake-Footed Goddess and the Progenitor of the Scythians (Northern Black Sea Coast)

According to Herodotus (I4, 1–11), in the ancestral myth of the Scythians, which he ascribes to the Greeks living in the Pontus, the Scythians are descendants of Heracles. The mythical story is that Heracles, while driving the cattle of Geryon, had come “to the land now called Scythian.” When he lay down to rest, the cattle disappeared. So,

⁵³ Tuite, “Achilles and the Caucasus,” 47–49.

⁵⁴ Vladimir Toporov, “K rekonstruktsii Proto-Akhilla,” in *Balkany v kontekste Sredizemnomoria: Problemy rekonstruktsii iazyka i kultury. Tezisy i predvaritelnye materialy k simpoziumu*, ed. Viacheslav Ivanov, Vladimir Neroznak, Vladimir Toporov, and Tatiana Tsivian (Moscow: Nauka, 1986), 21–36.

⁵⁵ Toporov, “K rekonstruktsii Proto-Akhilla,” 33.

⁵⁶ There is another possible connection between Achilles and Batraz through the chthonic genealogy of both heroes. Achilles's grandfather Aikes, a son of Zeus, prayed to him to populate the uninhabited island of Aegina. Zeus then transformed the ants into human beings, from which emerged the Mirmidonians, whose king was Achilles. See Toporov, “K rekonstruktsii Proto-Akhilla,” 29. In one of the versions of the Ossetian Narten epic, Batraz is a son of the chthonic Bytsenon, whose tribe lives “below the ant-hill.” (Cf. above 1.5)

after a long search, he went “to the land called the Woodland” (Hylaia), where he found a half-maiden and half-serpent in a cave. “When he saw her, he was astonished and asked her if she had seen his mares straying; she said that she had them and would not return them to him before he had intercourse with her; Heracles did, in hope of this reward. But though he was anxious to take the horses and go, she delayed returning them so that she might have Heracles with her for as long as possible.”⁵⁷ She bore Heracles three sons, the strongest of whom—Scythus—became king and tribal father of the Scythians.

There are five different Greek myths of Scythian origin. The plot is similar; however, the protagonists differ. 1) A Scythian version (narrated by Herodotus but held by him to be implausible) makes them the descendants of Zeus and the daughter of the river god Borysthenes; 2) A story that Greeks who live in Pontus told to Herodotus makes them the descendants of Heracles and the snake-footed goddess; 3) Valerius Flaccus makes them the descendants of Jupiter and Hora, who also has the form of a snake; 4) Diodorus of Sicily makes them the descendants of Zeus and the snake-footed goddess; 5) Tabula Albana makes them the descendants of Heracles and the daughter of the river god Araxes, but only after Heracles defeats Araxes in battle.⁵⁸ While the father figure changes in different versions of the myth, the mother’s features remain constant: a chthonic goddess, half-woman, half-snake who dwells in a cave, or a daughter of a river god.

The mythical story narrated by Herodotus (in the version of the Greeks of Pontos) is the most extended one. It parallels the plot line of the goddess of wild animals/fish who dwells in a remote place. However, in the case of the Scythian myth of origin, it is not a hunting mortal but Heracles with Geryon’s cattle. However, the sequence of the plot is intact, even if the protagonist changes.

Comparing different stories of Scythian origin makes clear that chthonic and aquatic elements are interchangeable in the myth. According to Rostovtzeff, the snake-footed goddess is associated with Aphrodite Ourania Apatouros, who had a widespread cult in the northern Black Sea area. This identification, however, is disputed.⁵⁹

1.8 Aphrodite Ourania Apatouros / Agrimpasa / Snake-footed Goddess (Northern Black Sea Coast)

The Kingdom of Bosphorus existed for almost a thousand years from the fifth century BC to the fourth to fifth centuries AD on the two sides of the Cimmerian Bosphorus, now called the Kerch Strait on the Crimean Peninsula and the Taman Peninsula.

⁵⁷ Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, trans. A. D. Godley (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1921), 2.207.

⁵⁸ Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods*, 87–89.

⁵⁹ For the detailed treatment, see Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods*, 40.

Among the most prominent cults of the Kingdom of Bosphorus was the cult of Aphrodite Ourania (between the fourth century BC and the third century AD).⁶⁰

One—perhaps the most important—sanctuary of Aphrodite Ourania was located in Apatouros in the Greek colony of Hermonassa on the Taman Peninsula.⁶¹ Probably for that reason, Aphrodite Ourania was also called Aphrodite Apatouros by Strabo (11.2.10), who provided an etymological explanation of that name: “here is also in Phanagoreia a notable temple of Aphrodite Apaturus. Critics derive the etymology of the epithet of the goddess by adducing a certain myth, according to which the Giants attacked the goddess there; but she called upon Heracles for help and hid him in a cave, and then, admitting the Giants one by one, gave them over to Heracles to be murdered through ‘treachery’.”⁶² Since *apate* means treachery in Greek, the etymological myth of Aphrodite Apatouros is “treacherous.”

Contrary to the Russian and Soviet scholarly tradition (cf. 1.7), Ustinova identified Aphrodite Ourania Apatouros not with the snake-footed goddess but with the local Scythian goddess Agrimpasa, whose cult was adopted by the Greek colonists.⁶³ Although the cult of Agrimpasa is well-attested in the northern Black Sea region, she has no explicit connection to any particular mythical plot. Ustinova based her argument on complicated series of identifications of Aphrodite Ourania with Agrimpasa in the northern Black Sea region (attested by Herodot 4. 59), on a well-attested identification of Aphrodite Ourania with Astrate in Syria,⁶⁴ and on the identification of Aphrodite with the Syrian goddess Derceto.⁶⁵

Derceto’s myth, as narrated by Diodorus of Sicily (*The Library of History*, 2.4), goes as follows: “Aphrodite, being offended with this goddess, inspired in her a violent passion for a certain handsome youth among her votaries; and Derceto gave herself to the Syrian and bore a daughter; but then, filled with shame of her sinful deed, she killed the youth and exposed the child in a rocky desert region, while as for herself, from shame and grief she threw herself into the lake and was changed as to the form of her body into a fish; and it is for this reason that the Syrians to this day abstain from this animal and honour their fish as gods.”⁶⁶

Iconographically, she is depicted with an upper body of a woman and the lower body of a fish. Cultically, she is devastated in Ascalon (Syria) and identified with Atargatis, a fertility goddess. The connection with Atargatis creates another essential link.

⁶⁰ Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods*, 27.

⁶¹ Mikhail Rostovtsev, *Ellinstvo i iranstvo na iuge Rossii* (Petrograd: Ogni, 1918), 124; Sergei Tokhasev, “Apatur: Istoriia Bosporskogo sviatilishcha Afrodity Uranii,” *Vestnik drevnei Istorii* 2 (1986): 138–45.

⁶² Strabo, *Geography*, trans. H. L. Jones (London: William Heinemann/Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press: 1961), 5:201.

⁶³ Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods*, 44.

⁶⁴ Ustinova, 79, 80.

⁶⁵ Ustinova, 81.

⁶⁶ Diodorus of Sicily in *Twelve Volumes*, trans. E. C. Oldfather (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press: 1933), 1:359.

Walter Burkert compares Atargatis with Leucothea, the white goddess, who was worshipped in Colchis.⁶⁷ Leucothea was “originally a mortal woman, daughter of Kadmos, who acted as a nurse-maid to Dionysos, but Hera made her mad, and she threw herself into the sea along with her own son Melikertes-Palaemon.”⁶⁸ Burkert suspects as a common ground for these cults “Agaen fishermen cults and myths devoted to the Mother and Mistress of the sea creatures [...]”⁶⁹

Ustinova concludes that “Argimpasa-Aphrodite Ourania [...] evolved as a distinct divine personality, with her own cult, mythology, and iconography, presumably due to the powerful impact of Near Eastern religions. The realm of Scythian Argimpasa-Aphrodite embraced fertility of the animal and vegetal kingdoms, the underworld and heaven, the life of the entire Scythian people and the stability of royal power.”⁷⁰

If the connection of Agrimpasa with Derceto and Atargatis is correct (via the figure of Aphrodite Ourania of Ascalon, who should be identical to Derceto according to Herodotus, and at least this connection seems to be credible), Agrimpasa/Derceto/Aphrodite Ourania will share the structure of the mythical plot with Lady of the Wild Animals/Fish from the Black Sea region.

Agrimpasa/Aphrodite Ourania, associated with Aphrodite Ourania (and indirectly with Agrimpasa) in her realm and features and especially in the mythical plot of Derceto, allows us to compare her with other goddesses of fertility, hunting, and fishing.

1.9 A Narrative Reconstruction and Interpretation of Short and Extended Versions of the Meta-Plot of the Lady of Wild Animals/Fish and her Rebellious Son

We can now proceed to a reconstruction of a metaplot from the above myths coming from different cultural and religious contexts. This reconstruction is a hypothetical one. A metaplot containing all elements, should it have existed, has not been preserved. In different myths around the Black Sea, we encounter only fragments of the plot of the Lady of Wild Animals/Fish in different versions and under the cover of different religions. Reduced to a plot scheme, it looks like this:

1. The protagonist of the meta-plot is the Fertility Goddess/Lady of Wild Animals/Fish (Derceto/Atargatis/Agrimpasa, Lady of the Wild Animals, Dali, Inar). Indirectly, the connection with animals also occurs in the myth of Heracles and the snake-footed goddess, as she offers him the cattle in exchange for her love, as in the meta-plot of the Lady of Wild Animals.

⁶⁷ Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods*, 92.

⁶⁸ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 172.

⁶⁹ Burkert, 172.

⁷⁰ Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods*, 128.

2. The goddess is anthropomorphic and zoomorphic; she has the shape of a human and a snake or fish (snake-footed goddess or fish deity) or can change her anthropomorphic shape and become different animals or fish.
3. The Fertility Goddess/Lady of Wild Animals is connected either to the aquatic element or to the chthonic element, which are generally compatible or interchangeable.
4. In the short version of the meta-plot of the Lady of the Wild Animals, the goddess falls in love with a mortal and offers him her love in exchange for a reward. As a result, the mortal is usually granted extraordinary luck in hunting and/or sexual relations with the goddess. The love of the goddess is, however, ambivalent. As a rule, the mortal violates a prohibition of the goddess and therefore dies, sometimes trapped on a rock which he cannot leave alive.
5. In the extended version of the meta-plot, the goddess gives birth to a heroic child whose father is her mortal lover.
6. The son/daughter of the goddess grows up to be a mighty hero and commits heroic deeds. These deeds include fighting against sea or chthonic monsters.
7. Overcome by hubris, the son of Lady of Wild Animals rebels and attacks other gods (usually the supreme god or the astral or storm god). In this battle, he is defeated and punished in one form or another (usually by the storm god).

The cult of the fertility goddess in her different hypostasis (as a Lady of Wild Animals or Lady of Fish) is widespread throughout the Black Sea region (it is less known on the west coast of the Black Sea) but also in the Caucasus.

Elene Virsaladze, Walter Burkert, and Volkert Haas assume that the Lady of Wild Animal was a goddess of a Paleolithic, pre-agricultural fertility cult and a myth associated with it. Burkert also makes a special connection between this cult and the sea.⁷¹ The fight of the rebellious son of the Lady of Wild Animals with the astral and storm gods and his demise could have captured the demise of the old hunter religion, which was replaced by the agricultural religion with a different structure to the pantheon: strong astral and storm gods on the one hand and with the more strict division between celestial, terrestrial, and chthonic realms as in the pre-Indo-European hunting/fishing pantheons around the Black Sea. The former supreme goddess survived in lower functions of the pantheon in succeeding cults or even as a demonic figure in folklore.⁷²

71 "The Idea of a Master or a Mistress of the Animals who must be won over to the side of the hunters is widespread and very possibly Paleolithic in origin; in the official religion of the Greeks this survives at little more than the level of folklore." Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 172. See also Virsaladze, *Gruzinskii okhotnichii mif*, 102, 145; Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur*, 146, 174. Both Haas and Burkert occasionally refer to the material from the Caucasus. A more integrative study of Black Sea mythology would require more substantial consideration of ethnographic material from the Caucasus.

72 For the structure of the changes in the pantheon of the Hittite Empire, see Taracha, *Religions*, 53, 81–82, 92–93.

2 Maritime Plots around the Black Sea

The Lady of Wild Animals/Fish plot is not the only plot connected with the Black Sea region. The Sea features in several other traditions, with the Hittite as the most prominent, as a location or protagonist of myths and legends.⁷³

2.1 Hittite Legends about the Sea

2.1.1 The Illuyanka Myth

In the second version of the Illuyanka myth (cf. 1.1) Illuyanka defeats the storm god and removes his heart and eyes. The storm god Tarhun(ta) begets a son with the “poor man’s daughter.” This son grows up and marries the daughter of Illuyanka. As a gift from the bridegroom, he demands his father’s eyes and heart. When the weather god regains his organs, he resumes the fight with Illuyanka on the seashore. He defeats Illuyanka. The weather god’s son, now loyal to his father-in-law, asks his father to kill him too, or he will have to take revenge for Illuyanka. The weather god then kills him. The setting of the myth is “the coast of the Black Sea, probably the estuary of the River Kızılırmak.”⁷⁴

2.1.2 The Telipinu Myth

Telipinu is a Hittite deity of cultivated plants that dies and resurrects, similarly to Tamuz, Attis and Osiris. Telipinu is the son of the king of the gods, the storm god Tarhun(ta) (cf. 1.1 and 1.2). Telipinu myths belong to the pre-Indo-European Hattic substrate of Hittite mythology.⁷⁵

The cycle of Telipinu myths includes the myth about the sea god who steals the sun god Ištanu. The storm god Tarhun(ta) instructs his son Telipinu to bring back the sun god. The sea god is afraid of Telipinu. It releases the sun god and gives Telipinu his daughter as a wife. The sea god receives from Tarhun(ta) a thousand cows and a thousand sheep as a dowry.⁷⁶ In another myth about the disappearance of the sun god, the sea god and its daughter Hatepuna figure as helpers of the sun god.⁷⁷

⁷³ For a general discussion, see Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur*, 151–52.

⁷⁴ Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur*, 98. Haas believes that the myth preserves the memory of the “matrilocally structured society that had long ceased to exist at the time of writing.” Haas, 102.

⁷⁵ Haas, 104.

⁷⁶ Haas, 114; Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 26–27.

⁷⁷ Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur*, 117; Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 27–28.

2.1.3 Kumarbi Cycle

The myth about the sea serpent Hedammu belongs to the Hurrian Kumarbi cycle (cf. 1.2). The cycle centers on the rivalry between the god Kumarbi and his son, the storm god Teshub (identical to Tarhunta), and thus on the generational struggle of the gods.⁷⁸ Kumarbi claimed the throne from his father Anu and emasculated him. To prevent Anu from having further offspring, Kumarbi swallowed his sperm and became pregnant. Teshub is born from the skull of Kumarbi. Kumarbi fights with his son Teshub not in person but with the help of various adversaries (such as Kurunta and ^DLAMMA, respectively). The sea serpent Hedammu, Lord Silver, and the stone giant Ullikummi (and possibly ^DLAMMA)⁷⁹ are sons of Kumarbi, whom he begets to defeat Teshub. The sea god is one of Kumarbi's allies against the weather god Teshub.

The setting of the Hedammu myth is the Bay of İskenderun on the Mediterranean Sea. The song of Ullikummi is set around Mount Ararat.⁸⁰ The Song of Lord Silver and the Song of Ullikummi parallel the Caucasian myths (cf. 1.4 and 1.5).

2.1.4 The Song of Silver

Silver beats an orphan for revealing that Silver is also growing up without a father. Silver threatens his mother, who eventually reveals the identity of his father, Kumarbi. Silver sets out to find him. He becomes king of the gods and threatens the sun and the moon.⁸¹ The end of the song has not been handed down, but it is assumed that Silver will perish in the battle with Teshub. The characteristics of Lord Silver make him comparable to the rebellious son of the Lady of the Wild Animals. There are direct parallels to the Amirani myth (e.g., the insult by his peers who know the secret of his birth and the search for the unknown father).

2.1.5 Hedammu Snake

The sea god gives Kumarbi his daughter Sertapsuruhi, a beautiful giantess, as a wife. From this marriage is born Hedammu, a snake or dragon. Hedammu is so voracious that he causes famine and threatens the cosmic order. The sister of the weather god, the love goddess Shaushka, seduces the snake. The song is incomplete, but Höffner assumes that “the overall plot line of the Kumarbi cycle implies that each opponent of Teshub is eventually defeated.”⁸²

⁷⁸ Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 40–41.

⁷⁹ According to Hoffner, 40–41.

⁸⁰ Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur*, 131.

⁸¹ Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 49.

⁸² Hoffner, 51.

2.1.6 Ullikummi

Kumarbi begets the stone giant Ullikummi with a rock.⁸³ To protect the child before he grows and becomes powerful, Kumarbi hides him in the underworld and mounts him on the shoulder of the world giant Ubelluri. Ullikummi grows bigger and more powerful by the hour. Similarly, as in the song about Hedammu, Shaushka tries to seduce him, but Ullikummi is deaf and blind and can resist the charms of the goddess of love. In the first battle he defeats the weather god Teshub. The wisdom god Ea advises Teshub to cut Ullikummi from Ubelluri's shoulder with a sickle. Thereupon Teshub can defeat him. The song is incomplete, but it is assumed that Ullikummi, similarly to other adversaries of Teshub, is defeated.⁸⁴

2.1.7 The Song of the Sea

The battle of the sea with the storm god Teshub, in which Teshub overpowers the sea god, is considered by some scholars to be part of the Kumarbi cycle, although it is not certain that the Song of the Sea was part of the Kumarbi cycle.⁸⁵ Hurrian and Hittite versions of the Songs have survived. In both, the sea rages in the form of a storm flood reaching the heavens. Kumarbi advises the gods to pay tribute to the sea god. The sea god is nevertheless dissatisfied. In the reconstruction of the myth based on the Astrate Papyrus the sea demands the goddess Ishtar (who is identical with Shaushka) as his wife.⁸⁶ There then follows the battle of the storm god with the sea, ending with the victory of the weather god.

As well as the Kumarbi cycle, the song of the sea belongs to the Hurrian cultural circle. The weather god Teshub, who fights with the sea (among others), can be identified with the Hattic weather god Tarhunta.⁸⁷ In Hurrian and Hattic texts from northern Anatolia, their battle can be explicitly located to the Black Sea region. In both traditions, the sea has different semantics. While in Hurrian, the sea is clearly in

⁸³ For the birth of Ullikummi from the rock Haas finds parallels only in the Caucasus, in the Nart epos; see Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur*, 174. The Nart Soslan (Sosruko) was also born from a rock, which was fertilized by the sperm of a shepherd and/or a god who saw the naked Satana. Unlike Batraz, Soslan has no connection with the sea. Like Batraz, he is vulnerable only in one part of his body. He also dies in battle with the celestial gods. See Abaev, "Nartovskii epos u osetin," 172.

⁸⁴ Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur*, 154; Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 55.

⁸⁵ Philo Howink ten Cate, "The Hittite Storm God: His Role and His Rule According to Hittite Cuneiform Sources," in *Natural Phenomena: Their Meaning, Depiction and Description in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Diederik J. W. Meijer (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1992), 83–148; Daniel Schwermer, "The Storm-Gods of the Ancient Near East: Summary, Synthesis, Recent Studies. Part II," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 8, no. 1 (2008): 6. Cf. Alfonso Archi, "Orality, Direct Speech and the Kumarbi Cycle," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 36, no. 2 (2009): 209–29.

⁸⁶ Haas, *Die hethitische Literatur*, 152.

⁸⁷ Schwemmer, "The Storm-Gods," 22.

opposition to the sky gods and can rather be assigned to the underworld, this opposition is not clear in Hattic mythology.⁸⁸ While the Hurrian myths, possibly under the influence of the Mesopotamian myths, make it possible to understand the battle of the storm god with the sea as a fight for cosmic order against chaos,⁸⁹ it seems that in the Hattian religious culture, there was a cult of the sea.⁹⁰ In an ancient Hittite founding ritual, the insignia of royal power come from the sea.⁹¹

Despite this difference between Hattic and Hurrian semantics of the sea, in both religio-cultural circles, the storm god struggles with the sea or with other gods from around it. This reference has not yet been clarified in the history of religion.⁹² The texts from the Caucasus also indicate a struggle between old (hunter/fisher/gatherer) gods with direct or indirect reference to the sea and the younger agricultural storm gods (see 1). This context from the Caucasus and the eastern Black Sea coast could at least also be used for the religious-historical interpretation of the assertion of the weather gods as the supreme deity of the pantheon.

2.2 Maritime Myths and Legends from the Caucasus

2.2.1 The Sun Goddess who Dwells in the Sea

The Georgian ethnologist Vera Bardavelidze investigated the afterlife of the cult of the great mother Nana and her children in Georgian myths and rituals.⁹³ Her cult survived, particularly in the customs related to healing infectious diseases (especially smallpox and measles). The goddess has children (minor deities, primarily of infectious diseases) called *batonebi* (the lords). The relatives of the person affected with an infectious disease had to appease them with flowers (roses and violets), fruit and ritual food, special candles, and bright, especially red, decoration of the sick person's room.

⁸⁸ Alfonso Archi thinks that Hurrites adopted the weather god from northern Mesopotamia and Syria and that he prevailed as king of the gods in the pan-Hurritic pantheon in the second millennium BC. Archi, "Orality, Direct Speech and the Kumarbi Cycle," 212. On the emergence of the weather god, see also Guido Kryszat, "Herrscher, Herrschaft und Kulttradition in Anatolien nach den Quellen der altassyrischen Handelskolonien – Teil II. Götter, Priester und Feste Anatoliens," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 33, no. 1 (2006): 106.

⁸⁹ Schwemmer, "The Storm-Gods," 25.

⁹⁰ Wilhelm, "Meer B. bei den Hethitern," 4; Ian Rutherford, "Puduhepa, Piyamaradu and Sea: Kub56.15ii15–24 (Aht26) and its background," in *Acts of the IXth International Congress of Hittology*, ed. Aygül Süel (Ankara: Çorum, 2019), 2:823–33; Alfonso Archi, "The Anatolian Fate-Goddesses and their Different Traditions," in *Diversity and Standardization: Perspectives on Ancient Near Eastern Cultural History*, ed. Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum, Jörg Klinger, and Gerfrid W. Müller (Munich: De Gruyter, 2013), 1.

⁹¹ Wilhelm, "Meer B. bei den Hethitern," 4; Archi, "The Anatolian Fate-Goddesses," 1.

⁹² Schwemmer, "The Storm-Gods," 27.

⁹³ Bardavelidze, *Drevneishie religioznye verovaniia*, 81–82.

Nana—according to Bardavelidze—is the fertility goddess. She was associated with planting (especially spring flowers, roses, and violets) and water, with awakening nature, and with love. In Georgian songs, fairy tales, and folk rituals the land of the goddess is called the *batonebi* land (the land of lords), the *batonebi* garden (the garden of the lords), or the sun garden.⁹⁴ The *batonebi* land is difficult to access; it is located either high in the mountains on the inaccessible rock above the sea or an island in the sea. In the *batonebi* realm, a garden blooms and withers simultaneously. The place also has similarities with the land of milk and honey: rivers of honey and milk flow there. In the house of the goddess—the mother of the *batonebi*—there is a pillar with the eyes of people afflicted by *batonebi* diseases.⁹⁵ (The healing rituals reproduce at the bedside the *batonebi* land). The place of Nana and *batonebi* bears some resemblance to the Isle of the Blessed, but their realm is less a realm of the dead than a liminal space. There, for instance, the souls of those who have fallen ill with *batonebi* diseases dwell, but they can return after recovery to their homes. Bardavelidze considered the legends about the great goddess Nana and the *batonebi* land fragments of an older astral religion, since she considered Nana a sun deity. Nevertheless, the realm of this goddess lies in the sea. Hittite religion knows several celestial and earthly sun deities. According to Volkert Haas, the sun goddess Arinna represents the night sun.⁹⁶ Irine Tatishvili, on the contrary, thinks, that the two principal designations of the sun deity, *nepišaš*, “of heaven,” and *taknaš*, “of the earth,” refer not to two different sun deities, but to two essential functions of the same deity, the two hypostases of the sun. As she writes, “in the Hittite cosmology, the relationship of the Sun deity with the earth is based on the idea that the sun sets on the horizon in the evening in order to pass through the underworld and shine out again in heaven. However, unlike other peoples, the Hittites believed that the Sun was neither asleep at night, nor had a rest, [n]or was captured or acted as a judge in the netherworld as it is in the Egyptian or the Mesopotamian theological systems, but ruled over the earth, the underworld.”⁹⁷

Tatishvili’s findings might explain why the sun goddess dwells in the sea—as one of the realms the sun passes temporarily.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Bardavelidze, 78.

⁹⁵ The motif of the eyes as a part of the soul of a (sick) person is preserved in Hittite and Georgian sagas. (Cf. the Illuyanka myth in 2.) For example, in the Amirani saga the eyes of the stepfather of Amirani, Iaman, are stolen by a giant (*devi*) and brought back by Amirani and his brothers.

⁹⁶ Volkert Haas, *Die Religionen des alten Orients: Hethiter* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 226.

⁹⁷ Irine T’at’ishvili, “Aietes – Son of Helios (For the Study of Hittite-Georgian Religious Parallels),” *Phasis, Greek and Roman Studies* 10, no. 1 (2007): 182–92.

⁹⁸ For the parallels between Hittite and Georgian religious worlds with further bibliography, see Tatishvili, “Aietes,” 182–83.

2.2.2 The *mesephebi*, Lords of Wild Animals who Come from the Sea

In the areas adjacent to the sea in western Georgia, people worshipped male and female sea deities called *mesephebi* (the Georgian word *sepe* also means royal, belonging to the lord), who dwell in the sea and come to the land from October 28 to November 3 to count the living animals and revive the dead ones.⁹⁹ *Mesephebi* are again closer to the Lady of the Wild Animals/Fish than to the myths about the fertility and sun goddess Nana.

2.2.3 Fish Cults in the Caucasus

Georgian ethnographer Alexi Robakidze, who studied fish cults in Georgia, concluded that they were part of an early religion in which the fish was related to procreation, fertility, power, and recovery. This cult was related to the “Mother of Fishes.”¹⁰⁰ Based on ethnological material in the South and North Caucasus, Robakidze concluded that in the different parts of the Caucasus different gods were associated with fish cults: the fish god St. Larsa in the Georgian province of Imereti,¹⁰¹ the Cherkessian water god Kodes,¹⁰² and the Ossetian water god Donbettir (see 1.5 above). Robakidze associates the fish cult in the Caucasus with the Sumerian fish god Ea. Still, the evidence of this association hardly goes beyond some analogies (such as procreative and healing powers).

2.2.4 Vishaps

Nikolai Marr and Iakov Smirnov discovered fish-shaped stelae in Armenia, known as *vishaps*. *Vishap* (Armenian) or *veshapi* (Georgian) referred to a whale but also a dragon.¹⁰³ Similar stelae were found in Georgia and in the North Caucasus. In Armenia and southern Georgia, the fish idols are found in an area reached by water, but not by the sea. Usually, they are decorated with ornaments representing water, cranes, or ox hide. Marr and Smirnov, as well as later scholars, associated them with a water and fertility

⁹⁹ Virsaladze, *Gruzinskii okhotnichii mif*, 38.

¹⁰⁰ Alexi Robakidze, “K voprosu o nekotorykh perezhitkakh kulta ryby,” *Sovetskaiia Etnografiia*, no. 3 (1948): 120. In the Soviet research, it was assumed that with the replacement of matriarchy by patriarchy, the male gods took over the functions of the goddesses; even if the latter did not completely disappear, their rank or function changed. In the case of aquatic gods too, there are female and male gods in the Caucasus. In the meta-plot about the lady of animals/fish, the female deities are usually the daughters of the higher male aquatic gods.

¹⁰¹ Chitaia, “Imeretis eksp’editsia”, 339.

¹⁰² Robakidze, “K voprosu,” 125.

¹⁰³ Nikolai Marr and Iakov Smirnov, *Vishapy* (Leningrad: OGIZ, 1931), 96.

cult.¹⁰⁴ Marr assumed the existence of a pre-historical cult, which later was displaced and demonized in a transformed form by a new religion, where the initial sacral fish became a demonic snake or dragon.¹⁰⁵ Marr considered the vishap idols to be the oldest religious artefacts in the South Caucasus.¹⁰⁶ In Armenian and Georgian legends, the vishaps are evil spirits living in the sky or mountain (especially Mount Ararat).¹⁰⁷ However, a number of the legends portray vishaps as at least ambivalent or even helping.¹⁰⁸ In Georgian legends, quoted by Elene Virsaladze, *The Lady of Wild Animals*, vishaps and snakes appear in similar plots: They grant hunters (or humans more general) help, hunting luck, or other superhuman abilities. However, the gift of the deities is connected with a taboo. By violating this taboo, a human is punished (usually by death).¹⁰⁹ As in the case of the *Lady of the Wild Animals/Fish*, Virsaladze considers vishaps to be the gods of the pre-agricultural hunter cult. With the transition to agricultural culture, the predecessor gods migrated into demonology and were now fought and defeated by the celestial or storm deities.

3 Conclusion

Especially in the southern, eastern, and northern Black Sea region, there are traces of religious beliefs associated with the aquatic element in general and the sea in particular. The oldest layer of this religious beliefs is represented by the zoomorphic, fish-shaped idols (vishaps); in these cults, fish were associated with vitality and fertility. The fish stelae discovered in Armenia, Georgia, and the North Caucasus are material survivals of these cults, which also survived in folklore and popular beliefs until the middle of the twentieth century. The next layer was the zoo-anthropomorphic *Lady of the Wild Animals or Fish*, a fertility goddess with a house in a liminal space (on a rock or in the sea). She is ambivalent and grants wealth to the humans (hunters) she chooses as her partners but she is also a cause of their death. The *Lady of the Wild Animals and/or Fish* is also a goddess of a pre-agricultural hunter cult. In different forms, her cult is known especially in the Hattic substrate of Hittite religious culture, in the folklore epic of the South and North Caucasus, and in the Greco-Scythian religious culture of the northern Black Sea.

With the transition to agriculture, the cult of *Lady of the Animals/Fish* was supplemented by her son's fight with the astral or weather gods, in which he is defeated and killed or punished. However, the older Hattic myths (*Illuyanka*, *Kurunta*), the Caucasian

¹⁰⁴ Virsaladze, *Gruzinskii okhotnichii mif*, 76.

¹⁰⁵ Marr and Smirnov, *Vishapy*, 98, 102–3.

¹⁰⁶ Dating back to the first millennium BC but possibly up to the fifth millennium BC. Virsaladze, *Gruzinskii okhotnichii mif*, 77.

¹⁰⁷ Marr and Smirnov, *Vishapy*, 98.

¹⁰⁸ Virsaladze *Gruzinskii okhotnichii mif*, 78.

¹⁰⁹ Virsaladze, 90–91.

myths (Amirani, Narts, hunter myths) and the Scythian myths of the northern Black Sea region, which have become Grecized, might have preserved the fragments of the old, pre-agricultural (Neolithic to Middle Bronze Age) religion.

Another goddess with a house in the sea was a sun goddess, Nana, who seems not to have any connection with the hunter cult but is also responsible for fertility, prosperity, and health. Chronologically she might stand between the pre-agricultural hunting goddesses and later agricultural religions with a celestial pantheon. However, she seems to represent a dual structure of the cosmos (Heaven/Earth) as opposed to a tripartite structure (Heaven/Earth/Underworld), more common for Mesopotamian and Indo-European religions. Deities are not strongly associated with their respective realms in religious cultures with a dual cosmic structure. Still, they can migrate from one realm (Heaven) to another (the sea), as in the case of Hittite and possibly the Georgian sun goddess. The dual or tripartite structure of the cosmos influences the respective semantics of the realm (for example, of the sea or the earth), which can be negatively connotated in the tripartite cosmic structure and ambivalent in the dual.

These religious shifts attribute to the general change in the cultural semantics of the sea. From the benevolent space of wealth and prosperity, the sea (as an aquatic element in general) starts to be ambivalent and finally hostile to celestial deities and humans. From the ancient Greek perspective, the Black Sea is a place of escape and exile charged with strong connotations of the otherworldly, yet, or perhaps for this very reason, it exercises a fascination of the liminal.

The Black Sea had great mythogenic potential over the millennia. A cult directly connected with the sea—a cult of the goddess of wild animals and fish—united the cultures—at least before the emergence of the first great empires—into a religious and narrative region. This heritage, even if overwritten several times, remains in many cultures to this day. This shared heritage of the Black Sea region has been studied differently: The Hittite and Greek myths tend to be assigned to (high) literature, while the Greek heritage in particular became canonical in Western Europe and enjoyed multiple modifications over the centuries. Meanwhile, many of these fragments from Georgian, Turkic, Persian, or North Caucasian cultures, less known to the Western public, were partly assigned to folklore partially found in hagiographic and historical works, travelogues, or literary works.

Especially in the age of nationalism, mythological figures such as Amirani, Medea, or the Narts, which tended to persist across cultural and linguistic barriers, were used as national symbols or for national branding. To this day, the mythological heritage of the Black Sea culture, especially in Crimea or on Snake Island, is abused to legitimize imperial claims—Russian chief ideologist Aleksandr Dugin, for example, exploited the archaeological heritage of the northern Black Sea as justification of territorial

claims,¹¹⁰ while on the Ukrainian side the same Snake Island leads to the formation of new national heroic legends.

Ultimately, I would emphatically reiterate the necessity of integrative, interdisciplinary study beyond the national-philological, national-historical borders of the religion/mythology of the Black Sea region, especially with a maritime focus. Even if this kind of “post-national” research does not solve political conflicts, it will help us understand the international foundations of culture later monopolized by imperial or national actors.

110 Aleksandr Dugin, February 25, 2022, posting on VK https://vk.com/wall18631635_10015: “Snake Island plays a crucial role in the sacral history [...] Whoever controls the Snake [Island], controls the course of world history.”

