



## AŽDAHĀ IV. ARMENIAN AŽDAHAK

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### iv. Armenian Aždahak

Aždahak is the Armenian form, borrowed from Parthian (cf. Man. Parth. *jdh'g*), of the name of the Avestan demon Aži Dahāka, who in Iranian mythology is said to be chained in Mount Damāvand, from which he will burst forth at the end of days only to be slaughtered by the hero Θraētaona. In the *Šāh-nāma*, Žaḥḥāk (an arabicized form of the name) is depicted as a tyrannical foreign ruler of Iran of demonic aspect: serpents sprout from his shoulders. In Armenian mythology, King Artawazd is said to be imprisoned in Mt. Ararat, like Aži Dahāka in Damāvand (the comparison is drawn by the eleventh-century Armenian scholar Grigor Magistros, *T'ḫ'erə*, ed. Kostaneance', Alexandropol, 1910, letter 36). The Armenian historian Movsēs Xorenac'i relates the same legend as the *Šāh-nāma*, apparently in a Northwest Iranian form (the name of Θraētaona, Mid. Pers. Frēdōn, is found as Hrudēn), in an appendix to book 1 of his *History of Armenia*, but also identifies Aždahak (without the epithet *Biwrasp*, Pahl. *Bēwarasp* "with ten thousand horses" found in the *Bundahišn*) with Astyages, the king of the Medes against whom the Armenian Tigran rebelled.

In varying Armenian and Iranian applications, Aždahak is seen thus as the embodiment of foreign tyranny. He is also seen as a symbol of wickedness and heresy: Xorenac'i condemns certain communistic practices of



Biwrasp Aždahak; this is interpreted as a reference to the Mazdakite heresy (see N. Akinean, “Biwraspi Aždahak ew hamaynavarn Mazdak hay awandavēpi mēj əst Movsēs Xorenac’way” [Biwrasp Aždahak and the communist Mazdak in the Armenian epic according to Movsēs Xorenac’i], *Handēs Amsoreay*, Vienna, 50, 1936). In an anonymous southern Armenian chronicle dated to the 11th-12th centuries, Moḥammad is described as one possessed by demons and breaking free from confinement; the Arab prophet is shown as a heresiarch in terms reminiscent of Aždahak (see M. H. Darbinyan-Melik’yan, ed., *Patmuṭ’iwn Ananun Zruc’agri karcec’al Šapuh Bagratuni*, Erevan, 1971, pp. 40-43).

The depiction of Žaḥḥāk in manuscript illuminations of the *Šāh-nāma* conforms to the Avestan descriptions of the demon as *θrizafanəm θrikamərəδəm xšvašašīm* “three-mouthed, three-headed, six-eyed” (*Yt.* 9.8), but appears to derive from Mesopotamian iconography, as in the late representation of Nergal at Hatra. In Armenia, the fourth-century A.D. king Pap, who persecuted the Church and practiced sodomy, is described by the historian P’awstos Biwzand as having serpents springing from his breasts (*Patmuṭ’iwn Hayoc’*, Erevan, 1968, 4.44, 5.22). A terra-cotta figurine in the Hermitage, probably made in Sogdia in the 7th-8th centuries A.D., shows a man, enthroned and wearing a jeweled tiara, with two snakes springing from his shoulders at the base of the neck (see N. V. D’yakonova, “Terrakotovaya figurka Zakhaka,” *Trudy otdela vostoka gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha* 3, 1940, pp. 195-205 fig. 1). In modern Armenia, the steles with snakes and other figures carved on them are called *višap* “dragon” by the Armenians, but *aždahā* by the Kurds.

In Zoroastrian thinking, temporal values of righteous kingship are closely bound to spiritual righteousness and the sovereignty of Ahura Mazdā; the development of the image of the demonic creature Aži Dahāka as the human Aždahak, a tyrant and heresiarch with visibly demonic attributes, is logical in a Zoroastrian framework.