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Fig.14. A piece of a Parthian Belt with an Eagle Riding a Cow; The Metropolitan Museum. Source: <https://raeeka.wordpress.com>

body in the West Mithraism. This effect leads to the incarnation of the bloody Christ in the arms of Mother. The absence of a human image for Mehr in the Eastern churches (e.g. Saint Gregory Cathedral, Armenia) results from slaughtering the holy cattle since the cattle is symbolically slaughtered by a lion or hawk; hence, Eastern (Armenian) churches are ornamented with sacred creatures such as a hawk or a lion instead of the Pieta.

### Endnote

\*.The present article is based on the “The Holy Cattle Slaughterer in the Persian Mithraism” workshop which has been held by the author’s lecture in 2018 at Nazar Research Center.

1. According to Iranian and Armenian images, Iranian Mehr symbolically appears in the form of an eagle and a lion; whereas in European Mithraism, Mehr evolves in the form of a human as other western gods appeared in human bodies. From the ancient time, no human body was assumed for myths and gods in Iran. There can be referred some small fertility goddesses in the ancient Iran, but huge sculptures of the Greeks, Romans, or ancient Egyptians are rarely seen in Iran. Some Sassanid reliefs pictured Ahura Mazda, Mehr and Anahita. But god and the prophet visualization was uncommon in Iran (Javadi, 2017; interview).

2. In the Plateau of Iran including the current Iran and the Caucasus region, particularly Armenia, the main theme of Holy “Cattle Slaughtering” in Mithraism illustrated Mitra (Mehr) lacking and physical personality; rather, Mehr can be seen as an eagle or lion. It is unclear that why there has been visualized no cattle slaughtering in and prior Parthian era, and why Mehr lacks any human body (Javadi, 2017; interview).

3. [www.nazar.ac.ir](http://www.nazar.ac.ir)

4. Pieta is an Italian term meaning pity, pain, throe, and chagrin. It is literally referred to a statue of Saint Mary hugs her injured child. Many similar statues have remained during the 7th and 8th to 10th centuries. Most of these statues have been illustrated in triangular or altar-like composition. Of these, a relief of Pieta in the 8th century can be seen in the National Museum of Archaeology, Warsaw (Javadi, 2016; 16)

5. The ritual utensils and tools in the European Mithraeums and chapels including the holy well and pond, huge lavers for baptism, holy wine bowl, the cane and sword, and red cape and hat in the rituals are all Mithraism memorials survived in the Christianity (Javadi, 2016; 20)

6. Yasna 1: Yasna 12; Yasna 1:4; Yasna 36:1-3; Yasna 3:14; Yasna 16:4;

Yasna 17:11; Vandidad 18:18; Visperd 16:1; Visperd 2:19; and Atash Bahram Niayeshband, 20.

7. The two Mainyu siblings initially emerged in the thought resembles the good and the bad. The wise may select the truth and veracity (Gathas, Song 30, Paragraph 3).

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Fig.7. An eagle hunting the cattle, Saint Stepanos cathedral. Photo: Golnaz Keshavarz, 2010.



Fig.8. An eagle hunting the cattle, Geghard monastery, Armenia .Photo: Seyed Amir Mansouri, 2013.



Fig. 9. A cattle hunted by a hawk, Zahhak Castle, Eastern Azerbaijan Source : <http://faza-falamaki.com>- 24.March.2018.



Fig. 10. Signs and figures carved on the rubbles in Anahid temple, Kangavar. From left to right: Figures of an eagle, cattle, and an eagle taking a hunted to the sky. Source: Kambakhshfard, 1996.



Fig.11. A hunter hawk necklace worn by Armenian Bishops. Source: <http://www.demokrathaber.org>- 26.March.2018.



Fig.12. National symbol of Republic of Armenia (image of a lion and hawk). Source: <https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki> 26.March.2018.



Fig.13. An eagle depicted on a Sassanid plate.Source: Army Council of Iranian Empire, 1972.

the West is originated from the Western Mithraism. Eastern and Western churches are different in terms of interior decorations. “Pieta”, for instance, is abundantly found in the Western churches; whereas, the Eastern churches lack such figure. It results from the effect of god materialization in the human



Fig. 4. The Star of Compassion .Source: Kambakhshfard, 1996.



Fig. 5. Battle of the cattle and the lion, Takht- e Jamshid.Photo: Ehsan Dizani, 2013.

or in the Eastern Azerbaijan in Zahhak Castle , the image of a hawk pawing the cattle is similar to the the cattle being slaughtered in the Mithraism (Fig.6, 7, & 8).

Figures of a hawk, cattle, and a hawk carrying its prey like Saint Stepanos and Geghard monastery figures can be seen on a rubble carving in the Anahita temple in Kangavar. where the oldest narration of the Mithraism holy cattle slaughter in the East is presented (Fig. 9 &10).

While in Persian Mithraism, a lion or hawk slaughters the cattle, j in the Western Mithraeums, the slaughter is a human. That is why the portrayal of of the “Pieta” cannot be seen in any of Armenian or Georgian Saint Gregory Cathedrals; whereas, the image of a sacred hawk is seen on the cathedral façades and or necklaces worn by Armenian Gregory bishops, as well as on the national symbol of Armenia (Fig. 11 & 12).

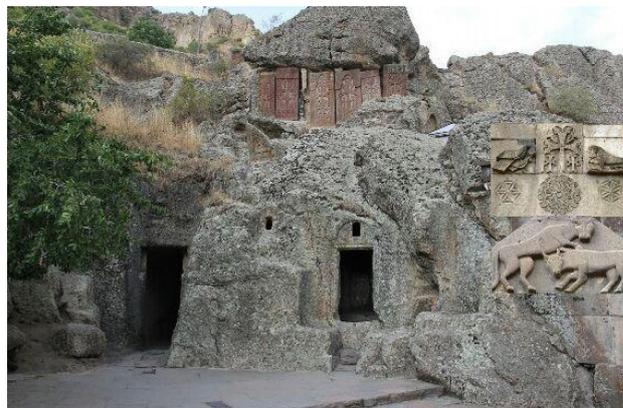


Fig. 6. Battle of the cattle and the lion, Iran. Source: <https://de.wikipedia.org-24.March.2018>.

As earlier mentioned, Mehr Iyzad was the supporter and protector of warriors. Indeed, Mithraism was bestowed upon Roman guards from Iranian warriors; hence, Romans were the first Western devotees to the Mithraism. According to Iranian world view, Mitra was symbolically materialized with no human icon. The great god of worriers is carrying a banner with a hawk as seen in the book of Persian Parade Guideline (Fig. 13).

## Conclusion

Persian and Western Mithraism vary differently in spite of the common origin in terms of architecture and decorations in the Eastern and Western Mithraeums. The reason why in the Persian Mithraism a lion or hawk kills the cattle (on the contrary to the Western Mithraism where Mitra appears in the body of a human being and slaughters the cattle) derives from the Western and Eastern worldviews. The reason is that in the Greek and Roman world (Western world), gods have been visualized in the body of a human being, and even they have been characterized with human traits (e.g.Olympus gods).

On the contrary, in the Persian world view, most gods are symbolically illustrated. In spite of fundamental differences between the East and West Mithraism, this has largely influenced Christianity. However, this effect vary in the East and West Christianity as the East Christianity is inspired by the Eastern Mithraism and

(the son). The sacred family was attributed to the pre-Zoroastrian traditions in the Achaemenid era and referred as the holy triangle in the inscription of Ardashir II. “By the aid of Ahura Mazda, Anahita, and Mitra (Nahid and Mehr), I have issued the order of Apadana construction” (Zarrinkoub, 2005: 195). The heavenly significance of these three gods has been institutionalized in the Persian astronomy and penetrated into other civilizations so that the Sun (Mehr), Venus (Anahita), and Jupiter (Hormozd) are referred as three lucky stars at all astrology systems. In Persian mythology, there is an inverse holy family of one parent and two siblings contrary to the holy family of two parents and a descendent. The oldest typical model of such family can be seen in Gathas writing in which Angra Mainyu and Sepand Mainyu were siblings <sup>7</sup>. As shown in the Sassanid references, Zurvan was their father (Hedayat, 1980:103&107). Based on what has been discussed, there would be two triangles. The former is the mortal, tangible and common universe in human communities; and the latter is a paradise, abstract, philosophical and heavenly triangle.

These symbols resemble a chalice and fire flame. Combining the two triangles of the Universe and the Paradise would result in the familiar following figure. The aforementioned symbol is known as Star of David, the sign of Judaism; however, it originally stems from Persian Mithraism, not Judaism. It was commonly prevalent among Judaism to counteract Christian cross. Star of David was initially used in the primary texts of Kabbalah in Hebrew. This symbol was also used in many Christian cathedrals. Star of David, prior to the 19th century, was officially used among Jewish of Czech Republic, Austria, some parts of Germany, and Prague. This icon symbolized Zionism once it was established in 1897 as the Zionism symbol at the first Zionism Conference. Star of David or Shield of David and its relation to the hexagram was first mentioned in the 17th century. The phrase of “Shield of David” which is used in

Siddurim ( a Juish prayer book) is another name for the God of Israel (Yacov Newman, Gavriel Sivan, and Judaism A-Z).

A hexagram is illustrated in the following section. It was discovered in the Anahita temple in Kangavar showing the significance of this star in Mithraism. Temple of the Anahita (Mother of Mitra) was full of Mithraism signs and symbols (Fig. 3).

Star of David has maintained its importance in the

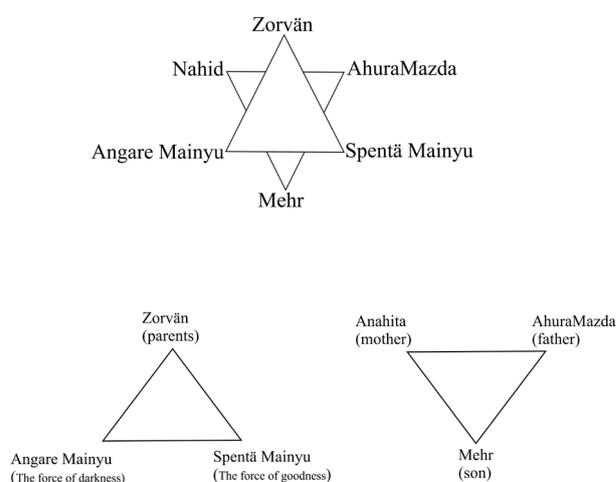


Fig. 3. The sixth star is seen in Anahita Temple. Source: Athuor.

Persia as it is often seen as the sign of power and sacredness in the astronomy literature. In addition, it is accompanied by a Crux in most architectural arrays of Iranian mosques (Fig. 4 & 5).

The scene of cattle slaughter as seen in the Western Mithraeums has never observed in none of Mithraism temples in Iran, Armenia, and Georgia. According to the Persian figures (Iranian civilization area), the cattle slaughterer is never a human being. Rather, it is sacrificed by another animal. The cattle are sacrificed by animals. but the state of the cattle slaughter is the same. The slaughterer is sometimes a lion pawing on the back of the cattle as observed in the Persepolis and Geghard monastery entrance in Armenia; or it can be a hawk like the figure seen in Saint Stepanos cathedral, Geghard monastery entrance façade, and



Fig. 1. The Pietà stone sculpture, Vatican. Source: <https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/-29.March.2018>.



Fig. 2. A wall painting of Mitra, Marino, Italy (3rd century), Source: 24. March.2018 - <https://en.wikipedia.org>.

National Museum of Archaeology (Poland), around 1450, thermal paint on wood. Once Christianity was officialized by Constantin in the 4th A.C, many efforts have been gradually made to annihilate prior customs and traditions, art and Christian culture. Early Christianity, the first basilicas were built next to the former temples or on their ruins. As architecture and church decorations were affected by Mithraism temples, some customs, tools, ritual wares, as well as head and body clothes were also transferred into a new religion<sup>5</sup>.

At a cave-like altar, Mehr, as leading character, is pictured sacrificing the cattle. In -this image, all elements are composed in a triangular form (Fig. 2). This model has been manifested in the Christian art where the statue of Mary and Jesus is appeared in a cavern-like place with rounded and sometimes sharp (triangular) arches. Museums and Mithraeums around the world are filled with countless statues of Mitra, slaughtering the cattle. The “Pietà” expresses the pains suffering Jesus and the sorrow for Mary; it symbolically illustrates a mother-child relationship through the religious-Christian art. According to the evidence, it is clear that the ideas for such a composition and cave-like triangular altar come from the cattle slaughtering in Mithraism. The scene of holy cattle slaughtering presents the eternity of art and religious beliefs from tradition to the tradition. The

main theme in Mithraism is to slaughter the holy cattle; and the Jesus crucifixion in Christianity is shown in the temple and church altar, too. Parallel to turning Mithraeums into cathedrals, Mary and Jesus statues also were replaced by Mithraism reliefs in the altar. Hence, the “Pietà” gradually appeared in the cave-like triangular alta in cathedrals. Later, the “Pietà” became an independent art in the form of painting, statue, and relief used for the main altar or the walls around the cathedral (Javadi, 2016: 16 & 20).

The “Pietà” scene was influenced by Mithraism cattle slaughtering in terms of physical shape and form in a triangle, cave-like place or an altar. The holy triangle is indeed a crucial sign of Eastern Mithraism, which found a way to the Western cathedrals’ ornamentation. Reviewing Yasna demonstrates that Ahura Mazda (Father) and Spenta Armaiti (Mother) have been a couple gave birth to a child whose celestial face has been Rta (April) and his worldly face is Azar (December). That is why Azar has been frequently referred as the Son of Ahura Mazda<sup>6</sup>. This saint family with celestial face comes from three identical social classes; a heavenly wise father (Ahura Mazda) with Magi, goddess of fertility (Spenta Armaiti) with farmers, and their breed, a young warrior with militants. When Zoroastrian tradition was integrated with earlier religions, the triangle emerged differently: Ahura Mazda (Father), Anahita (Mother), and Mehr

with the sun and Mehr. As stated in Borhan-e Ghate, “Yalda is a Syriac term implying Arabic birth at the first night of winter and the last night of fall, which is the tallest night of the year” (Khalf Tabrizi, 2005: “Yalda” entry). Birooni wrote, “the first day of Dey Mah or Khor Mah is called Khoram Rooz or the sun day; both the day and the month are named after the great god, Hormozd ” (Birooni, 1942: 256).

All these indicate that Yalda Night (Shab-e Yalda) and Dygan Day are closely tied to the Mehr since then dominates the darkness and the day gets longer. It is the day of Mehr largely valued by Iranians and known as the greatest ceremony i.e. birth day of Mehr and the beginning of the year (Razi, 1992: 541). According to the Mithraism, Mehr is the universe creator and god. “Mithraism in Iran dates back to the age of Fereydoon. As stated by Ferdowsi, Mithraism removed any previously common perversity and obstinacy. Mithraism is also characterized with happiness and productivity. To achieve such productivity, it demands truth and integrity so that a salubrious livelihood is attained (Joneydi, 1983: 13). According to the Europeans, Mithraism needed to pass seven difficult steps to the highest. In the Persian culture, these seven steps equal the Seven Labors of Rostam or Haft Khan-e Rostam, or Seven Cities of Love in the theosophy as stated by Attar of Nishapur” (Ibid:13).

Mehr is the god of liberation coming down to the earth from time to time to bestow blessing to and bring salvation for people through cattle slaughtering or guiding them (Bahar, 2002: 226). Mehr drives a swastika pulled by four immortal white horses with silver and gold horseshoes. According to the Zoroastrian, Mitra is a huge, thousand-face goddess deeply honored and respected. She is summoned for public litigation (Boothe, 1995: 582).

He is the guardian of truth and order; he judges the soul after death; he is a strong powerful golden armored warrior with big shoulders carrying a silver spear and fighting with the evil gods (Gershevich, 1959: 121). As the Persian Mithraism evidence shows, it is the religion

of mysticism. What distinguishes Mithraism from other ancient world religions is the voluntary contribution of followers after the age of puberty. On the contrary, in traditional religions, being born to a family means parents’ religion will be automatically inherited by a child in a predetermined way (Beck, 1996: 176 &185). Mystery of Mithraism is inferred from its architecture. In Rome, Mithraeums used to be built underground and the sun was being spotted through a hole in the ceiling on a holy place in the temple. the cults of Mithraism, used to held the rituals in a place called “cave”. In case where natural caves were inaccessible, a usual underground room used to be decorated to look like a natural cave. On the contrary to all religious traditions, Mithraeums was not recognizable from outside and in which no impressive architecture and aesthetic elements were used (White, 1990: 47&59). Such simplicity and naturalism of the Mithraeums indicate that mysticism has been truly observed so that probably most neighbors have been unaware of these Mithraeums. Saying pray required knowing some secret mysteries and having skills, which was unknown to the public. Mehr is the only God that the prayers for him would not be accepted if it is not well performed. In other word, Mehr seriously cares for the prayer ritual and punishes those going astray, unlike the gods in other religions who just care for the sacrifice and the slaughterer identity. Mithraism is consistent with Zoroastrian traditions. According to Avesta, Mehr is respected and honored like Ahura Mazda (Mehryasht, 1, Paragraph 6).

### **Cattle slaughtering in the Persian and Western Mithraism**

In the Western Christianity, a particular scene is made by several artistic forms including painting and statue. Today, “Pieta<sup>4</sup>” has appeared in most European cathedrals symbolizing the Jesus pains and sympathy with the Mary within the history of Christian art (Fig. 1).

Left picture: Tubadzin Pieta (a village in Poland),

As the myth deals with supernatural beings and their holy powers; hence, it is regarded as a model. In the theory of “three functions” proposed by Georges Dumézil, the French mythologist, gods, goddesses, heroes, and other associated rituals are separable, in the contrary, they are part of a structure used to serve particular functions. Using this theory, he could revive the Roman old culture and religion (Satari, 2013: 10&35).

### The Western and Persian Myth of Mehr

Mehr refers to the love, affection, amour, friendship, kindness, justice, testament and promise. The friendship of Aryan goddess and its kindness are also used for Mehr. In the Old Persian, the term “Mehr” is the latest form of Mitra symbolizing the sun. It is worth notifying that ancient Iranians deeply respected the Sun; whereas, they did not give importance to Hur God. Therefore, praising the sun was indeed a tribute to Mehr (Christiansen, 1992:102). The sun was highly revered in ancient Iran not just for being the sun; rather, but for its light, glory and Mehr namely the god of light. This association is well interpreted as follows: Mitra is not the sun; rather, it is the light eliminating the darkness to grant its blessing to the universe, to fertilize nature, and to defeat the devils of the dark (Coman, 2004:25).

In Iranian religious literature, the sun and Mitra are clearly positioned. Ahura Mazda, reins an endless realm which is spaced from the sun as equally as the earth is. The evil is in the realm of darkness, and Mitra is placed in the middle (Ibid: 30). According to the song of Mitra in Avesta, four white horses pulling her golden-wheel carriage imply that the god blesses his body in the light of morning and creates many phenomena.

A magical esoteric force has thrown Mehr away from a rock to the world. Mitra is almost naked wearing a crown and holding a dagger and torch. She is the light descendant born from a rock. The rock was pregnant and gave birth to the Mitra (Razi, 2002:296). European

Mithraeums illustrate her birth. It is worth notifying that no such statue or relief has ever been found in Iran. The only relief of Mehr is in Taq-e Bostan in Kermanshah. Mehr is at Ardeshir’s crowning ceremony of Ahura Mazda and standing on a lotus holding a branch and wearing a light glowing crown. Some also believe that Nahid, Mother of Mitra has been fertilized in the water by the semen of Zoroaster.

Some also believe that the semen has been kept inside water lily lies in Lake Hāmūn that is why sometimes the images are represented on a water lily or a Lotus. Mithraism symbols are specifically knitted to water. The maiden fertilization and the growth of pearl in the water have made the followers think that Mitra has been borne by a shell or kept in the water. Apparently, they thought Mitra was grown up inside a water lily; hence, lotus is tightly associated to the Mithraism. Lotus and the shell are the two significant symbols of Mithraism. However, as evident in the figures and statues of the Mithraeums, the best honorable and respectable symbol of maintaining the semen in the water is a dolphin. A dolphin nurtures the child like mammals; so, it can keep Mitra in the water. Others, claim that her birthplace was in the fire rather than the water. It is consistent with the Persian conceptualization of fire which used to serve as a witness. As Mitra is the god of justice and arbitration; thus, it is closely associated with the fire (Rostampour, 2003: 100).

The birth and life of Mehr and Anahita have been differently narrated. However, it is clear that these two gods are associated with water and water-affiliated inseparable elements (Javadi, 2017: Interview<sup>3</sup>). Apart from how Mehr was given birth, it is also important to find when it was born. As his birthday is an astronomical phenomenon at a night called “Yalda” (Shab-e Yalda) dating back to thousand years ago. December 21 is the shortest day and longest night of the year; however, once winter starts, days get gradually longer and nights get shorter. That is why this night is called Yalda Night (Shab-e Yalda) meaning invincible sun which was the god of Mehr. Meaning of Yalda reveals its association

### Research hypothesis

The image of the cattle slaughter in Iranian Mithraism is different from the west. In Iranian Mithraism, the cattle slaughter is visualized as a lion or hawk; while, in the western Mithraism, Mehr embodies in a human being. This difference has caused diversity in the decorations of the western and Armenian (Eastern Christianity) churches.

### Introduction

The great Mehr, the Aryan god, the god of light and the glow of the sun, the light messenger and darkness eliminator, the supporter of warriors and truth the god of hunting and sacrifice, the slaughter of the holy cattle is the one who brings both abundance and blessing to the human beings, animals and vegetation. The mythic Mitra has symbolically evolved in the East and West worlds and deeply influenced the religion, culture, and art of the Christian world. On the other side, it also transformed Islamic-Iranian traditions. According to the sincere Aryan religion, the sky, fire, wind, sun, moon, stars, and rain are all life manifestations being worshiped; on the contrary, nature and devastating powers are materialized and condemned as evil (Samadi, 1997: 17).

The myth constitutes cultural anthropology and originates from human thought and emotion. It reveals ambitions. Therefore, it is closely tied to the philosophy and religion, and has largely influenced art and literature. Although, myths differ in details; they share a common structure. It is because all are based on a global pattern. The mythic Mehr, the messenger of light and glow, whose mission is to slaughter the cattle, has been born to grant blessing to the universe; to fertilize the vegetation, wild life and human being; and to keep the universe alive by the blood flood of the holy cattle. According to Herodotus, ancient Iranians did not believe in polytheism and multiple temples so polytheism was the sign of brainlessness. They extremely believed in non-human gods. They worshiped god at the top of the tallest mountains

(Herodotus, 1983: 104). Ancient Iranians respected Mehr and Anahid (the sun and moon) and valued their signs including water, fire, tree and mountain. Natural caves, springs and old trees were the Persian place for worshipping. Later, Chahartaqs (four arches) were set up as caves to serve as the very sanctuaries of Anahita and Mehr.

### Definition of a myth

A myth refers to human's traditional beliefs, customs, culture, knowledge which are shaped through the history.. It reflects human's ideals which have gone through a new life and a particular identity during the history. The natural phenomena narrated in the myth are regarded as a true story reflecting a logical reality (Amoozgar, 1995: 4&5).

The important issue in mythology is the significance of the symbols in revealing the role of gods and heroes in the public social life in the past. A myth narrates a divine and sacred story of life, "it quotes a religious and spiritual truth relying upon a special magic" (Shaygan, 1976: 106).

The main objective of studying a myth is to discover and interpret the man's primary knowledge of the universe and the way he figures out what the universe is . The myth reflects the primary man's mental behavior to uncover the depth of the truth and existence. Now, it is commonly believed that the myth and legend are rooted in the historical facts, as they used to be. However, most mythological themes around the world almost have been used for justification First, the myth tries to understand the wonders associated with the world and the man, and the sanctity of the secret t. Second, the myth reflects the cosmologic aspect of the science. Third, it is used in the sociology. The myth is committed to protect and give credit to a certain social system. These functions justifies why the myths in different places have their own features Fourth, the myth also contributes to the pedagogy and sheds light on the way human spends his life under different conditions (Campbell, 2015: 60 & 64).

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## The Holy Cattle Slaughterer in the Persian Mithraism\*

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### Abstract

Mitra is one of the oldest myths in Iran. As this belief has directly influenced many traditions and religions, it has aroused the interest of several national and western authors. The effect of Mithraism on Zoroastrian, Christianity, Judaism, and some Islamic and oriental mystics has been investigated. In the antiquity, the mysterious Mithraism directed toward West from Iran, its origin, by militants and warriors. Warmly welcomed, many Mithraeums were built throughout Roman Empire from Turkey and the current Syria to Germany, Poland, Italy, and France. Western Mithraism focuses on the theme of Holy "Cattle Slaughtering" painting and relief in all Mithraism temples; whereas, Mithraism is different in its home land, Iran. During the Sassanid period, the signs of Mithraism began to fade away when Zoroastrian religion was formally recognized. Almost all Mithraism temples were turned into Zoroastrian fire temples where Ahura Mazda, the only god, was accompanied with Mitra and Nahid. However, Mithraism survived and its traditions penetrated into the new religion so much so that Mitra (god of Mehr) accompanied Ahura Mazda. With the arrival of Islam, following Sassanid, fire temples became Islamic holy places and Mithraism customs continued to evolve through transformation in Islamic traditions. Historical misfortunes and religious transformations in the form and the performance of Mithraeums ruined almost all independent Mithraism temples in Iran; while, Mithraeums turned into churches in the west and many Mithraism beliefs spread in the formalized Christianity. However, within the area of the Plateau of Iran, there were some parts such as Armenia underwent the least modifications comparing the central area. Many signs of Iranian Mithraism can be easily seen in Armenian Christianity. Iranian and western Mithraism shares many commonalities; although, there can be seen some fundamental differences<sup>1</sup>. The effect of Mithraism on Christianity, makes a distinction between western Christianity and Christianity in the Plateau of Iran (Armenia)<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the present research attempts to study the differences between Iranian and Western Mithraism based on the Mithraism signs and symbols in various decorations.

**Key words:** *Myth, Gavkosh (Cattle Slaughter), Mehr, Mitra, Iran, Armenia, Hawk, Cattle, lion.*

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