

# The Impact of Mount Ararat on Formation of Armenian Cultural Landscape

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## Abstract

Armenians consider Mount Ararat mother of Armenia. The Armenian history has had deep links with this mountain from the beginning. All of Armenian myths somehow link to the mountain, and Armenian ethnic identity is defined by Ararat. Ararat is considered as symbol of two foldness of Great Armenia and pattern of reattachment of the nation's pieces.

In Armenians opinion, Ararat has passed a trade from nature to myth, from myth to culture, and from culture to landscape. Its status as Armenian's most distinctive element of the natural landscape is the result of Armenians subjective selection of nature, which has been promoted to a cultural element by the association with Armenian culture and mythology. Plus Ararat has had a unique role in formation of Armenian landscape fabric, as the most important ritual (churches in slopes of Ararat) and residential landscapes (Yerevan city) were established directly by the identified impact of Mount Ararat.

In the urban landscape, Mount Ararat appears frequently in the viewpoint, urban graphic and street art; this repeated apparent which is more obvious about Ararat than any other element in the environment, suggests that the mountain has still a centralized role in cultural landscape, as it has retained its unifying role in natural landscape as well.

## Keywords

Ararat, Natural landscape, Cultural landscape, Centralized landscape, Urban art.

### **Essence of natural landscape and cultural landscape**

Studying the concept of landscape as an objective-subjective matter (Mansouri, 2005) seems to be the best method to find precise definition of the concept of natural landscape and cultural landscape. Natural landscape is introduced as the landscape without any human intervention in most definitions; while the phrase "human intervention" seems to be incorrect in this case.

Natural landscape is the result of subjective human intervention in nature, kind of selective Intervention, and is the result of human selection from nature, a result of his subjective classification of natural environment. Natural landscape is a Participatory landscape, in which the manipulation of man is inconspicuous (Ghazanfari, 2008: 22).

According to Otto Schluter, Cultural landscape is the landscape shaped by human culture (Ibid: 21-20). UNESCO introduces cultural landscape as reflect of the interaction of man and nature, not only natural or man-made heritage, but also mixed Heritage (Fowler, 2003: 15). In comparison, it seems that the cultural landscape follows natural landscape and is born of it. While, even without notable objective intervention, natural landscape itself can be upgrade to cultural landscape. This is more taking place about cultural landscapes with a rich history and legends in the community; such as mount Damavand for the Iranian and Mount Ararat, for the Armenian.

### **Status of mountain in formation of cultural landscape in Mountainous homelands**

Enumerating cultural landscape consist of ethical and Accommodational landscape, a survey on history of ancient homelands clarifies pivotal role of their selected natural elements in shaping cultural landscape of the lands. Some elements find special semantic function, related to natural Circumstances. Especially in the middle-east and Caucasus areas, formation and durability of residential communications depends on natural items as effective terms in ways and means. On the other hand, physical life is always tied up with heavenly forces in these lands, and therefore, ethnical landscape has been a part of communities, appearing as the semantic part. Nature was the main column of ethnic landscape; it happened because of dependency of ancient religions to nature, and the belief of holi-

ness of natural elements like water, mountain and plant in that religions.

In Mountainous homelands, mountain has been having encoded meanings beside its functional role. For example, it has been intersection of earth and eden, therefore has twofold Sanctity: both symbol of sacred space and also appearance of Atmospheric effects like the rain, and therefore is the place of gods (Eliadeh, 2010: 107-106). This semantic function has had basic role in formation of cultural structure of this land.

### **Hypothesis**

1. Mount Ararat has entered Armenian culture as the most prominent element of the nature of Armenia, supported by its sacred mythological place in Armenian beliefs. Its unit unrivaled status in natural landscape led to the formation of culturally unified and focused landscape, in case of spatial structure and geographical location.

2. Mount Ararat has properly played the role of a landscape element, keeping its historical durability, has been always exposed to human intervention. The intervention had been more subjective at the beginning; gradually, with the evolution of social Armenian structure, an objective intervention has been increased. In all these stages, Mount Ararat has kept its both cultural and natural landscape role.

### **Armenia: fragmented and integrated**

Armenia is a highly homogeneous land in terms of ethnic composition among the lands of Caucasus region. In a way that more than 97% of the current territory of Armenia is Comprised of a single ethnic group. That's why this country has never been exposed to the threat of decomposition (Zargar, 2008: 16). In addition, Armenian mainland is beyond the current borders of Armenia, including parts of the north west of Turkey as well. In fact, Armenia has always been binary land, disputed by neighboring superpowers (Abrahamian, 2006: 331). But twofoldness has never made Armenians forget their homeland's separated parts. As far as, Armenia is threatening territorial integrity of its neighbors, Turkey and Azerbaijan, with the idea of "Great Armenia" and drawing the country's borders to Mount Ararat and beyond (Zargar, 2008: 19-18 / Amirahmdian, 2006: 33). According to Armenians, Armenian plateau was passed by two major roads

connecting the East to the West, so that Armenia had become a battlefield of superpowers struggle to possess the control of roads which Ararat plain right in the center of the Armenian plateau ended - (Abrahamian, et al, 1981: 6).

It may not be clear the reason of Armenian cultural durability and their insistence on maintaining symbols of the land; but undoubtedly Mount Ararat is the most important one of these symbols, which has now been incidentally separated from Armenia. A part of Armenia's nature, which symbolizes natural landscape of the land.

### **Ararat, the myth of nature**

Although there are some Sacred Mountains in Caucasus region (Fig.1) but none can be compared with Mount Ararat in terms of influence, and the national Credit. Mount Ararat, including two small (sis) and large (Masis) peaks is in center of Ararat plain and south part of Armenian plateau; The mountain and its northern plateau bring memories as old as the history of Armenia, intimately linked with all the myths and legends of this land. As we can say, these narratives led to portraying cultural landscape for this natural element.

According to the text In Bible, Armenians claim that Noah's Ark landed on Mount Ararat; And according to Armenian legends, the mountain is origin of mankind and also place the Eden mentioned in Bible (Marshall, 2007: Introduction-xv). That is why the Armenian consider themselves first people on earth after the Noah storm, and for this reason call Ararat the Mother of universe (Buachidze, 1999: 324). Mount Ararat was also regarded as a sacred place before Christianity, as place of sunset and hometown of heroes (Fig. 2).

The mountain is thought to be home of mythical dragons, reminding Ararat crater as their habitat (Marshall, 2007: Introduction-xv). Moses Khorenac'i Armenian historian considers that three legendary brothers, "Zarvan", "Titan" and "Yaptus" who were born in Ararat plain, are three sons of Noah, "Shem", "ham" and "Yapt" hurricane survivors and human ancestors. Also, according to Khorenac'i and local legend, "Ara", Hayk's-founder of the Armenia- little son was killed at Ararat plateau in the foot of Mount Ararat. Ararat was also selected for deployment by Armenak, Hayk's elderly son (Moses of Khoren, 1978, Petrosyan, 2002).

Some consider the mountain's name Iranian originally, meaning "Gracious fire", that's probably related to links between volcanic mountains, sky and sun in the ancient nature religions including Mithraism, as in the ancient ritual literature the word "rat" has been mentioned in connection with the ancient mountains which has been places of worship and sacrifice (Mansouri, 2007: 128-127). While there are such concerns about Mount Ararat, the climate is very dry, with low plant and porous texture; as the melted snow is completely absorbed into the ground before reaching in scope (Bryce, 1877-1878: 176).

Ararat seems unreachable; Sometime climbing was forbidden because of its holiness (Petrosyan, 2007: 16) and today political boundaries made it out of reach. Mount Ararat is binary in form, made of two small and large peaks. Some consider this twofoldness a symbol of Armenian historical twofoldness and its permanent division between the regional superpowers (Abrahamian, 2006: 331). Armenian diaspora has been an impetus for national unity. In the scattering pattern, chronic exile causes severe homesickness irritation, such a passionate desire to regain particular preference social mainland" (Smith, 2003: 198). This feeling strongly exists in Armenian thought; make a sense of continuity alive in their minds (Zargar, 2008: 28). Ararat has been an ever Armenian pattern to get rid of permanent rape of Powers from East and West to Armenia, as it was the savior of Noah's ark and Armenian descent from the storm (Petrosyan, 2007: 19). In terms of the geographical structure, there are three lakes in the central plateau of Armenia, named Van, Sevan and Chichest (Urmia). Aras River, emanates from Ararat, is According to some opinions one of the four rivers mentioned in the Bible heaven. Both semantic and spatial, mount Ararat is the center of Great Armenia.

Based on what has been said, there is a "specific", "central" element in Armenian natural landscape, having territorial impact, covering a large part of the habitable zone of the land. Mount Ararat is a unique element, has played the dual role of life-giving and identifying element in scale of Armenian territory, led to creation of cultural landscape depended on a unique element, in both ritual and residential landscape.

More on this article, cultural signs which imply Ara-

Ararat's unifying role in shaping the Armenian cultural landscape from past to modern time will be studied.

**The aspect of Ararat in primeval cultural landscape**

According to Eliadeh, lasting and durability of holy places, reflects the Independence of "manifestation of holiness", which means man does not choose a

sacred space, but it is discovered by him (Eliadeh, 2010: 347). In fact, nature somehow imposes itself to the culture –by means of mythology and ultra-natural beliefs.

Historical link between nature and myth, rooted in the manifestation of the power and sanctity of nature (Ibid: 345), is so deep in the case of Mount Ararat



Fig.1. Mestia; holy mountain in regional scale; Mestia, Georgia. Photo: Samaneh Rahmdel, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.

Fig.2. Dejection of Noah from Mountain Ararat. Copy painting. Origin by artist Ivan Aivazovsky. 1889. National Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan. Source: www.Artsarmenia.com



that led to the promotion of the mountain to "sacred space"; Place of myths, gods and later prophets and saints. - Residential complexes: History of creation of Armenian residential complexes is linked to mount Ararat, much more than any other motifs in the land. According to Armenian legends, Prophet Noah founded the first city at the hillside of Masis (Ararat); (Petrosyan, 2007: 19). "Coming out of the ark and descending the mountain, Noah planted a vineyard there" (Tatevatsi, 1993: 555). During the reign of the Urartu people on Armenia, about the year 800 BC, the fortress of Erebuni was built in the plain of Ararat (Behzadi, 1991: 114); where later in the early twentieth century, the city of Yerevan (Erebuni modified) was constructed. Other Urartian sites have also been detected mainly around the lakes Van and Urmia (Ibid). This implies that the old Armenian inhabitants have located residential complexes in Ararat slopes. -The ritual Landscape: Ararat's role in formation of the ritual landscape of Armenia is more probable as in the residential landscape. This effect can be investigated from two aspects. First, is Existence of the ritual landscape on the slopes of Mount Ararat, the most important of which is Khur-wirap monastery. Although it is called the oldest monastery in the world, Although it is said that the oldest monastery in the world,

but its location on the hillside at the foot of Ararat and the similarity of this locating to the one of the ritual landscapes of the ancient religions associated with sacred mountains, raises the possibility that this ritual locating has pre-Christian date (Fig.3). Legends also admit the meaningful relevance between Mount Ararat and Armenian ritual Landscape. According to legend, during the early days of Christianity in the 4th century A.D. king Tirdad climbed the mountain in seven days and, as the Armenian forefather Hayk had done, brought down stones to put in the foundations of new churches and chapels (Petrosyan, 2007: 16). The proximity of later Armenian residential and ritual spaces and physical framework of mount Ararat, shows lasting links between the subjective links of myths and the mountain, which leads to promotion of Ararat to the natural landscape. Objective habitat of Christian saints, is also subjective habitat of myths. It is because the Landscape is something continuous during the history. Objective intervention, just make objective face of Ararat more sensible and somehow, improves its historical stability. The cultural face of Ararat landscape is not shaped by these residential and ritual communities, but these cultural Phenomena are just objective emersion of some history lasting subjective phenomenon.

Fig.3. Khur-wirap monastery, the oldest Christian ritual landscape in Ararat slopes, Artashat, Armenia. Source: Wikimedia.org.



### The continuity of culture at the shadow of Ararat

English philosopher John Locke expresses personal identity through the memories. According to Locke, Paul Liquor also considers sense of identity transferable to the community and can be influenced by it. Memory is fundamentally linked to the future. Sense of continuity, as one of the main functions of memory; in fact, establish the relationship between youth and aging (Liquor, 1995: 49-48). Collective memory takes the role of keeping historical continuity of a nation, by the successive transfer of generations from beginners to the young. Objectification of collective memory is very important in creating this historical continuity. Liquor defines this objectification through the narratives and community celebrations (Ibid, 51-53). Art, architecture and landscape architecture, as modern social tools with deep impacts are considered the narrators of community's collective memory. Urban art links the past and the future and reflects the collective identity of the community in a society with strong collective memory. Having a great collective memory called Ararat; Armenian community is expected to present objective persistence of collective memory in modern urban space. What has been said so far was about the aspects of the cultural landscape of ancient Armenian landscape, which has been influenced by the natural landscape of Ararat. But it seems that the impact of Mount Ararat on the formation of cultural landscape, is not limited to past centuries and this mountain has maintained its culture-making role until modern times. To prove this claim, it is necessary to survey some aspects of Mount Ararat and its subsidiaries -including Ararat Plain and Lake Sevan- in contemporary urban landscape of Armenia. In this context, the objective aspect of Mount Ararat in Armenian urban landscape particularly in Yerevan city as a symbol of the modern urban landscape, is studied in three scales; macro-scale, middle-scale and micro-scale. The station of Ararat in silhouette of city is expressed on the macro scale. On intermediate-scale, appearance of urban symbols of Ararat in urban spaces such as streets and facades is studied. Micro-scale specifically mentions the impact of Mount Ararat on Armenian paintings, as a representative of the spectrum of the intellectuals at the society.

1. Macro scale (Ararat as background of city):

viewpoint is considered the common denominator in the perception of citizens from the city, as a situation in which general perception of city is possible. Viewpoint has the capability to help citizens have common memory of the City (Heydari, 2010: 78). First, the importance of viewpoints is to present a clear public image of the environment; subjective image of many inhabitants from face of city. In other words, it is about points that the public participate in mind about the shape and contours of part of city, based on their shared culture and thought (Tayyebifar, 2007: 38). Image of Yerevan made in slaves of Mount Ararat, with the mountain in background, presents an important face to introduce the town. Urban viewpoints such as Cascade (Thousand Steps) and the symbol of Armenian genocide are designed according to this natural-cultural background, facing Mount Ararat. In fact, viewpoints of Yerevan look at the town from the window of which Mount Ararat is background. Ararat familiar frame Strengthens the sense of place in urban space; for familiarity creates a sense of place, and integration the shape and orientation, expresses the impact (Lynch, 2008: 168-169). Although viewpoint itself is not a new subject, using it in the body of urbanscape improves the quality of today's urban landscape. The relationship between cultural and natural landscape in Yerevan is influenced by identical status of Ararat in Armenian history (Figs. 4).

2. Intermediate scale (symbols and signs in urbanscape): Excessive repetition of an element at urbanscape indicates its importance for residents. According to Lynch replication of a factor from urbanscape, makes it easy to understand physical manifestations of an urban complex (Lynch, 2010: 194-193). The name and iconic image of Mount Ararat, appear in different forms in Yerevan city; Such as names or signs on billboards goods, at the façade of urban spaces such as hotels, shops, etc. and in urban graphic and artwork, especially of those which are devoted to the introduction of Yerevan to tourists. No other element, at any quality and relevant, is able to compete with Mount Ararat in terms of urban graphic. Ararat is frequent in Yerevan (Figs. 5&6).

3. Micro scale (appearance in contemporary art): Artworks of any land greatly reflects important cultural symbols and elements of the land. Culturally different combinations, from natural landscape to



Fig.4. Khur-wirap monastery, the oldest Christian ritual landscape in Ararat slopes, Artashat, Armenia. Source: Wikimedia.org.

Fig.5. View from Mount Ararat from top of the Cascade, Yerevan, Armenia. Source: Wikimedia.org.



urban landscape, have always had a place in the country's paintings according to their importance in the cultural community. An overview of the works of famous Armenian artists specifies that Mount Ararat and reconstruction of traditions and legends associated with it, like the myth of Hayk and Noah's flood has always been important to artists (Fig. 7). Paintings in the National Gallery of Armenia, which is somehow an extract of the land art history, also approve the accuracy of this claim. In this Gallery, the most frequent component of the natural landscape appear in paintings is Mount Ararat. The mount is the main subject of paintings, from past to present and of realism style to a variety of modern artworks. Some believe that the painting as

a personal art would not send extended messages (Haghighi, 1991&1992: 56). Even by accepting the opinion, the repeated image of Ararat in Armenian paintings approves the collective subjective structure of Armenian artist community, as the community's cultural representatives. Street painting arts, as one of cultural urban activities and part of the popular landscape, can occur correctly the identical elements of the environment. Street paintings can also be considered a kind of street art, in terms of using urban space as a place for appearing. Street art uses street as a fair; and as an urban phenomenon, is able to become a tool or weapon to explain the cultural concepts; can become mirror of city aspects (Sadr-al-sadat, 2010). At the same time, as a way of painting, street art arise from inside of artist, and is non-customized in essence; otherwise changes to illustration or graphic work (Haghighi, 1991&1992: 56-55). Mount Ararat and spaces derived from it in the slopes of Mount Ararat or Ararat plain - like the Lake Sevan and Khur-wirap monastery - are undoubtedly most repeated motifs in landscape artworks of street painters in Yerevan (Fig. 8). The latest iteration of an element, and the light appearance of the other elements, represents a penetration rate of Ararat, as the natural landscape, in Armenian cultural structure (Table 1).

Fig.6. Ararat in urban graphic next to the other symbols representing the city of Yerevan, Yerevan, Iran. Photo: Samaneh Rahmdel, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.



Table1. Typical elements in Armenian natural landscape. Source: Author.

Landscape quality	Aspect
Dominant natural landscape	Mountain
Highland landscape quality	Sparse
Central natural landscape	Mount Ararat
Locating residential complexes	Ararat slopes
Holy natural elements	Mount Ararat-Lake Sevan

**Conclusion**

Acquisition of a certain unique natural landscape element is what distinct Armenian natural landscape from other Caucasian lands. The general conception of "mountain" has improved to a natural special unique element called "Mount Ararat" in Armenia (Table 2). When there is natural focused unrivaled landscape, the following cultural Landscape become Unifying, homogeneous and influenced by the unique natural landscape element as well. In other words, natural landscape does not have just functional role in this country, but is considered the source of meaning and identity in cultural landscape. For what is identify-giving is durable as well in the structure of ancient cultures. Ararat has passed a continuous trade during history as a landscape object, has always been present in Armenians collective memories. The status of Mount Ararat





Fig.7. Name of Ararat in graphic of a Bank with the same name, Yerevan, Armenia. Photo: Samaneh Rahmdel, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.

Fig.8. The Ararat Plain. By: Peter Shlikov, 1962. Source: [www.Hebrewhome.org](http://www.Hebrewhome.org).



as cultural landscape is rooted in the concept of "mountain" in the eyes of the ancients as a sacred space. Ararat's objective appearance in contemporary cultural landscape is not separated from ancient conception of the mount's relation with Armenian myths as well. In fact, the subjective promotion of Mount Ararat as a cultural landscape with subjective appearance occurred before its objective cultural appearance. It can therefore be concluded that the formation of the cultural landscape in Armenia depends on and is born from the quality of the natural landscape.

Table2. Influence the natural landscape of Yerevan Ararat on three scales. Source: Author.

scale	aspect	sample
Macro-scale	Urban viewpoint-silhouette of city	Cascade (Thousand Steps)-viewpoint of symbol of Armenian genocide
Intermediate-scale	Urban graphic	Urban façade- Commercial advertisement- Cultural Advertisement
Micro-scale	Painting	Armenian Art Gallery- Street artists

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