

Myth Symbols of Caucasian Mountains

Ketevan SIKHARULIDZE*

Abstract

The article addresses the myth symbol of Caucasian Mountains which is characterized by ambivalence. On the one hand, it is the Place of Gods, on the other hand, it is the place of punishment of deities. This reveals the function of the mountain, as the border of various universes. Therefore, the perpetrator chained here is in an indefinite state. He is not able to act and his destructive force is sustained. Such beliefs of Caucasians influenced the Greek Mythology as well. The article reviews the plots of the Caucasian and Greek Mythology in which Caucasian Mountains represent a sacral place of punishment of deities.

Keywords: Caucasus, mountain, symbol, mythology, deities, chain, punishment

Mountain is one of the well-known universal and diverse mythological symbols. This diversity is due to its parameters. These are its height, inclination, mass and form which are often graphically expressed by a triangle. The mountain was perceived as a model of the universe in which all elements of cosmic arrangement are reflected. The pinnacle corresponds to the celestial sphere, while the bottom of the mountain points to proximity to the abyss. It was thought that there is an entrance to the abyss at the bottom of the mountain. The middle part was sometimes identified with the hub of the universe. The ancient people used to believe that a cosmic mountain is in the center of the universe, where Axis Mundi passes.

Height and proximity to the sky are the main symbolic signs of the mountain. The mountain is raised above the mundane everyday life and therefore, climbing the mountain had a symbolic meaning of spiritual uplift, particularly, when it was thought to be the Place of Gods. Many holy mountains became the personification of divine power. The cosmic mountain is personified by “Meru” in the Hindu Mythology, by “Olympic” in the Greek Mythology, by “Kunlun” in the Chinese Mythology, by “Khimibiorg” in the Scandinavian Mythology etc. The deity Enlil in the Mesopotamian Mythology, who separates the sky and the earth by its own body during the cosmogonic act, is called Kur-Gal, meaning “Great Mountain.” (Kiknadze, 1979, p. 67) Due to such attitude to the mountain, it is the best place for cult service. That’s why a great majority of chapels are built on the mountain. Many mythological plots are associated with it (Flood, bringing rain, gaining Dragon’s strength). In some traditions, the mountain has the same sacral status as the altar in the temple. (Kiknadze, 2002, p.15)

In terms of mythological symbols, Caucasian mountains, which perform an ambivalent function in legends of local people, serve as an interesting example. On the one hand, they are places of Gods, on the other hand, they are places of punishment of perpetrators. The second function was reflected in the Greek Mythology as well.

As the pinnacle is the closest to the sky, initiation of the traditional hero primarily takes place on the pinnacle. Biography of many epic heroes in the Caucasian folklore also begins with initiation on the pinnacle. According to Arnold Van Gennep, initiation consists of three steps: preliminary or separation ritual, liminary or threshold situation, when an individual is at

the threshold, and finally, post-liminary, i.e. attribution ritual. During this ritual the individual finally makes his place with the new status. This may be an age, social or metaphysical change (Gennep, 1999, p. 74). Majority of traditional heroes acquire a significant status and power after the initiation. According to M. Eliade, “An adolescent is transformed into a socially responsible and culturally awakened personality”. (Eliade, 2009, p. 38) On the contrary, if the hero (character) gives up responsibility, commits a crime, he should be punished and interestingly, the same sacral place – Caucasian mountains which represented a threshold between spheres was such place in the Caucasian Mythology. The perpetrator chained to this threshold remains in an uncertain, indefinite, maybe sleepy condition. This is the form of punishment which appears in the mythological model reflecting the fight of opponents. According to this model, a kind deity defeats the representative of the evil and places him in closed space (chains, encircles, confines underground). Thus, the destructive force of the evil creature is restricted. Mainly, there is a fight between the old and new generations of gods about who will reign in the universe. Change of religious beliefs always causes confrontation between the old and new deities. By introducing a new religion, old gods are placed in the negative ranking. They confront the young gods who are representatives of the new universe – the new cosmos and as the old gods want to destroy them, this means that they intend to destroy the cosmos. Accordingly, they personify the evil and if they are not punished, chaos will dominate.

Images created on the basis of the above model, whose name is associated with the motive of fighting the gods, form a diverse mosaic in the Caucasian Mythology. This is a very old layer of the Caucasian Mythology, so most of stories about the chained are fragmented. Study of the folkloric material confirms that the Caucasian chained were goliaths of the old generation punished for confrontation with gods of the new generation. (Sikharulidze, 2006, p. 224)

Nearly all tribes settled in the Caucasus have a legend about a chained goliath. The common and primary characteristic of these heroes is confrontation with the god and the same form of punishment – chaining to some Caucasian mountain. Stories related to these heroes have reached us in various volumes. Storied about the Georgian Amiran and the Abkhazian Abrskil are widely narrated and have several versions.

* Assoc.Prof., Faculty of Humanities, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia.
 E-mail: ksikharulidze@ibsu.edu.ge

Amiran is the son of the goddess, Dali. He was baptized and awarded with great strength by the god so that he could kill Devs and Dragons on the earth. Amiran became arrogant and he dared to fight the god. The god tied and chained him to one of Caucasian mountains. According to the Abkhazian legend, Abrskil became proud, did not obey the god and was punished by chaining to the mountain. (Chikovani, 1947)

Such legends have remained in a compressed form in the folklore of the North Caucasian tribes. In some cases, the plot is lost and only the fact of punishment has been saved in the memory of the people, which is the evidence of the old age of these legends.

One Circassian legend is about Nesren-Zhache who insulted the god both verbally and physically. He was chained to the mountain because of that. There is a dog next to him, which is gnawing the chain, but blacksmiths reinforce it. Nesren is strongly shattering the pillar to which the chain is attached, but a bird flies, Nesren hits the bird with a stone as soon as it sits down, and the pillar is again deeply stuck into the ground. This story exactly coincides with one of the episodes narrated in the Georgian legend about Amiran. (Gadagatl, 1967, p. 260)

An old man is chained for his sins in the Adyghe legend, but it is not mentioned what sin he committed. The hero of the Kabardian legend – a one-eyed old man who wished to know the secret of the god is also nameless. He climbed a high mountain, but the Great God did not forgive him for his impudence and chained him to the top of Elborus.

According to Chechen and Ingush beliefs, the mother of storms – Dardza-Nianilg lives on the mount Kazbegi. She made the god angry and was punished. She is encircled and cannot move beyond the circle, i.e. she is chained to one place. (Dalgat, 1972, p. 258)

As mentioned above, most of legends in the North Caucasus are very short, often fragmented, without the dynamics of narration. Similar static images in the Georgian folklore are Rokap and Tartarus. People say that they are chained to the Caucasian mountains but no plots related to them are encountered any more (Chikovani, 1947, p. 385).

All mentioned heroes are chained to any Caucasian mountain. These places are marked with a sacral sign. A Kabardian cyclope is coming here to learn the divine secret. The symbolic image of the mountain and the cave is reflected in other legends too. It should be assumed that these mountains performed the function of the Caucasian Olymp in the ancient era. The fact is that the Caucasian mountains are places of punishment of those rebelling against the god. Homogeneity of legends assumes that the Caucasian model of tytanomachy used to exist whose rudiments is saved in the folklore.

As mentioned, the heroes punished for fighting the god and chained to one place are often found in mythologies of the world peoples, but Prometheus, the famous hero of the Greek Mythology is the closest to the Caucasian chained heroes. Prometheus is the successor of Tytans who fought with the gods of the Zeus generation – Olympians but were defeated. Prometheus did not participate in the war, but his confrontation with Zeus (the new generation) is evident. That's why he was punished by chaining.

Apart from Prometheus, there are opponents of gods in the Greek Mythology who are related to Caucasus. According to the scholiast of Apollonios Rhodius, the monster Typhon (who fought Zeus), exiled by Zeus, came to Caucasus. Zeus caught him when he was on the Rock of Typhaon and struck him with

a lightning. Typhon shed some divine liquid from which a dragon protecting the Golden Fleece was created. (Apollonios Rhodius, Argonautics)

According to the historian Cleanthes (mentioned by Pseudo-Plutarch), the escapee Cronos hid himself in Caucasus and was captured by Zeus. Previously, these mountains were called Boreas Bed (Βορέου κοιτή). In the story of Pseudo-Plutarch "On Rivers and Mountains" it is said that Prometheus killed the shepherd Kaukasos and told Zeus the hiding place of Cronos by haruspication. Zeus confined Cronos in the hell and gave the mountain the name of Kaukasos in honor of the shepherd. Logographos Pherecydes of Syros notifies us that the battle of Olympians and Titans took place in Caucasus. (Urushadze, 1964, p. 445)

Even though the name of Prometheus became closely tied to the Caucasus Mountain Range, but one circumstance should be paid attention to. It is known that Aeschylus wrote a trilogy about Prometheus. First part is "Prometheus Chained", where the author does not specify the place of chaining the tytan, i.e. Caucasus. He suffers on the rock, in Scythia desert. In the following work "Prometheus Unbound", Caucasus and the river Phasis are mentioned. This means that when Aeschylus began writing the trilogy, the place of chaining Prometheus was not specified, and when the Greeks heard the legend about the chained goliath in Caucasus, they imagined him to be Prometheus. (Uslar, 1881) In the Greek written sources, Caucasus is first mentioned by Aeschylus, but possibly it was introduced in the Greek world earlier.

Variants of the mentioned Greek myths show a resemblance with local legends. Deities rebelling against the Olympians look for an asylum in Caucasus and are punished here. It should be assumed that such understanding of the Caucasian myths was facilitated by local legends which became known to the Greeks from residents of this region. There are sufficient written sources evidencing this. The main plot of the Greek Tytanomachy must have been formed by that time. Olympians took the defeated titans to the end of land and sea, "where the sun does not shine and the wind does not blow", "beyond the iron gate and the copper threshold" (Homer, Iliad, 8, 14, 15). Caucasus represented such kind of place for the first Greek navigators which must have been intensified by the impression gained from the Caucasian mountains. These were accompanied by oral legends about chained goliaths who were bound in this geographic area, while the Greeks placed the god-fighters far from their cosmos, in the space bordered by chaos. Therefore, the place described by Homer, "beyond the iron gate and the copper threshold" was located here. Later, participants of the crusade of Alexander of Macedon gave the name "Caucasus" to the mountain range dividing the Oxus and Indus rivers in India as they thought that they reached the end of the earth.

Such was the ancient mytho-poetic picture of Caucasus for the Greeks. Its fragments have been preserved in the data of authors of the later period. After the geographic vision of Greeks expanded, Caucasus, in particular, Aia-Kolchis became a prosperous country for them, where Helios makes its rays rest and which is favored by gods.

As we can see, a myth symbol of Caucasian Mountains is distinguished for its ambivalence: it is not only the Place of Gods, but also the sacral place of punishment of deities. This peculiarity is established on the local grounds and it turned out to be so impressive that Caucasian Mountains were included in the Greek mythological universe with this function.

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