

REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof. PhD Petar Nikolov Goliyski

on a dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific degree “doctor”, in the professional field 2.1. Philology, Scientific Major “Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Africa, Asia and Australia” (PhD in Armenian Literature) with the title:

“HERO ARCHETYPE IN THE OLD AND MEDIEVAL ARMENIAN LITERATURE”

presented by Antoaneta Milanova Anguelova

The candidate

Antoaneta Milanova Anguelova obtained a Master’s degree in Armenian Philology in 2001 and completed a second degree in French Language and Literature in 2000 at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. Since 2002, she has been working as an Assistant Professor in Armenian Literature in Armenian and Caucasian Studies Degree Programme, Department of Classical East, at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology. She conducts academic instruction in the following disciplines: Classical Armenian Literature, Modern Armenian Literature, Contemporary Armenian Literature, Armenian Folklore, Armenian Philosophy, The Novel in Armenian Literature, Contemporary Armenian Novella, Introduction to Georgian Literature, and Practical Armenian Language. Since 2000, Antoaneta Milanova Anguelova is an associated member of the International Association of Armenian Studies (AIEA), and since 2022, she is a member of the Association of the Translators of Armenian Fiction.

Antoaneta Milanova Anguelova was enrolled as an independent doctoral candidate on 15.10.2024 by order ПД 20-1954/14.10.2024 in the professional field 2.1. Philology, Scientific Major “Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Africa, Asia and Australia”, PhD programme “Armenian Literature” at the department of “Classical East”. She was withdrawn prematurely on 16.06.2025 by an electronic report of the Dean of the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, with incoming No. 70-04-659/18.06.2025.

During her doctoral studies, the candidate has passed examinations in the five disciplines included in her individual plan with excellent results and has produced the required number of publications related to the dissertation topic. In compliance with the requirements of the Higher Education Act, The Act on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for the Conditions and Procedure for Acquiring Scientific Degrees and Holding Academic Positions at Sofia University “St. Kl. Ohridski”, Antoaneta Milanova Anguelova has submitted a dissertation and has fulfilled all formal requirements. She has provided complete and proper documentation for this procedure.

The dissertation

The work entitled “Hero Archetype in the Old and Medieval Armenian Literature” comprises 420 standard pages, excluding appendices and scholarly apparatus. The scholarly apparatus includes 20 primary sources from the 5th to 7th centuries and 71 specialised studies. Structurally, the dissertation is well organised, comprising an Introduction, Topic Relevance, Research Methodology, Literature and Sources Review, Chapters 1 to 4 – each with its own subchapters – followed by a Conclusion, Contributions, Bibliography, and three appendices (Table of the main characteristics of the mythological hero in Ancient Armenian Literature,

Table of stages of the “Hero’s Journey” in *Sasna tsrer*, and Dictionary of common specific Armenian names).

The first chapter outlines the theoretical framework of the study on the hero archetype in ancient and early medieval Armenian literature. The main methodological support is the archetypal theory of Carl Gustav Jung, according to which the image of the hero is seen as a manifestation of universal structures from the collective unconscious. The analysis is complemented by Joseph Campbell’s concept of the “hero’s journey”, which provides a structural model for the unfolding and exploration of epic narrative (the epic “David of Sassoun”, also known as “Sasna tsrer”). The chapter also acknowledges the contributions of Propp, Dumézil, and Frye to archetypal theory, though it does not apply their frameworks directly due to the cultural specificity of the Armenian context. The functions, symbolism, and transformations of the hero as a bearer of cultural values, archetypal messages, and collective identity are examined. This chapter establishes the conceptual foundation for the further analysis presented in the dissertation.

The second chapter is dedicated to the archetype of the mythological hero in Ancient Armenian literature, with a focus on its earliest manifestations in the works of Agathangelos and Movses Khorenatsi (Moses of Khoren, 5th century). It examines how mythological figures such as Hayk, Aram, Ara the Beautiful, Vahagn, and others intertwine the sacred and the historical to lay the foundations of Armenian cultural identity. Attention is also given to the process of historicizing mythological figures, through which they acquire realistic characteristics while retaining their heroic essence. The chapter emphasises the role of the mythological hero as a connecting link between myth, history, and national consciousness. Thus, an enduring model of the hero emerges as a manifestation of spiritual resilience and cultural continuity within the Armenian tradition.

The third chapter examines the transformation of the hero archetype in ancient and early medieval Armenian literature, spanning from the emergence of the written tradition (post-405 AD) to the end of the 7th century AD – a period marked by significant cultural and religious changes. Under the influence of Christianity and the emergence of new literary forms, the hero is constructed as a moral and spiritual figure, embodying national¹ and religious ideals. The chapter analyses key figures such as King Trdat III, Vardan, and Vahan Mamikonean, who represent various manifestations of heroism – from martyrdom inspired by Christian faith to political wisdom and insight. Special attention is given to the continuity between pre-Christian and Christian heroes, who serve as figures of collective memory and moral exemplars.

The fourth chapter offers an extensive analysis of the hero’s portrayal in the Armenian medieval epic “David of Sassoun” (“Sasna tsrer”) through the lens of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth theory. The four main characters – Sanasar and Bagdasar, Mher the Elder, David of Sassoun, and Mher the Younger – follow the archetypal hero’s journey, though not always consistently or through every stage. The characters in the first three branches are characterised by mythological and supernatural traits and adventures, whereas the last exhibits more realistic psychological and moral depth.

Research Contributions

Antoaneta Anguelova has every reason to be proud that her dissertation is not only the first systematic academic study of ancient and early medieval Armenian literature in Bulgarian but also fills a significant gap in Bulgarian Oriental and Comparative Studies. By being the first

¹ With all the convention implied by the term “national” as a technical concept, since in the 4th–5th centuries it would not have been appropriate to speak of nations in the modern sense.

of its kind, this dissertation explains and justifies the absence of a detailed list and commentary on previous scholars who have worked on the topic – an element otherwise mandatory in every dissertation.

Since I have been dealing with texts by medieval Armenian authors for years, and Chapters Two and Three are based precisely on such, I will add that Antoaneta Anguelova has also done enormous hard work, not to mention hard labour, in searching for, selecting, translating, and analysing the specific excerpts from the relevant authors from the 5th–7th century. For this reason, besides its scientific value, the dissertation also has the features of a christomatology.

Another undeniable and significant contribution of the dissertation is that, for the first time not only in our country but globally, the archetypal theory of C. G. Jung and Joseph Campbell's model of the "hero's journey" are applied in parallel to Armenian material. However, the hero archetype is not examined in isolation but, which is another strength of the dissertation, is situated within the broader cultural and literary-historical context of the Armenian tradition – from mythological tales and historical prose to epic narrative – in order to explain the mechanisms behind the construction of the heroic figure and its significance within Armenian cultural heritage. A goal which, in my opinion, has been successfully achieved.

Among the valuable observations made by the doctoral candidate in Chapter 2 is the fact that, alongside the development of the ancient narrative tradition, a tendency towards the historicization of mythological figures can also be observed. They approach reality by transitioning from semi-divine and cosmic entities to figures possessing historical substance – kings, warriors, and state leaders. This does not result in the loss of their heroic traits; on the contrary, it reinforces them by situating the figures within a new cultural and religious context. Or, as Antoaneta Anguelova states: "*Even in the earliest layers of Armenian literature, the conceptual model of the hero as the embodiment of the national, sacred, and ethical was established—a model that has remained relevant throughout various historical periods*". (Chapter 2, p.139).

It is also admirable to trace in Chapter 3 how the traditional model of the warrior hero and the hero-king from the pagan era is adapted to the new Christian ethic. At the same time, it retains many of its pre-Christian features, revealing the Armenian heroic image to be multifaceted and multi-layered. Anguelova successfully shows how the image of the king in early medieval Armenian literature combines characteristics of the historical ruler on the one hand, and of the sacred leader on the other, a figure who is simultaneously a military leader, a defender of the faith, and a moral guide for the community. I fully endorse the following conclusions drawn by the doctoral candidate, which I hereby quote: "*The hero-kings and warriors of old Armenian literature, such as Trdat, Arshak, Vache, Vardan, and Vahan Mamikonean, can also be seen as inheritors and incarnations of more ancient Armenian archetypes, such as the brave Hayk, the just Aram, the wise Tigran, or the martyr Sanatruk. Each of these figures carries within them elements of the heroic heritage of pagan Armenia, but refracts it through the new Christian understanding of self-sacrifice, faith, and service in the community's name*" (Chapter 3, p. 248).

However, I disagree with the excessive moral idealisation of the motives attributed to two Armenian aristocrats of the turbulent fourth century AD. The doctoral candidate interprets the desertion from the royal banners by Artavazd and Vasak as a manifestation of "*a sense of honour, duty, and profound familial loyalty*", and the open conflict with the king as a manifestation of "*a decisive act of protest against the moral decay of the government*" (Chapter 3, p. 181). In reality, this was a rather prosaic rebellion by aristocrats who believed their rights were being infringed upon by the king's efforts to maintain the country's unity and curtail the *Nakharar* autocracy. Something painfully familiar to us from the European Middle Ages.

However, Antoaneta Anguelova rightly concludes that the images of Vasak Mamikonean and Vardan Mamikonean (both historical figures) construct and affirm the archetype of the warrior-martyr – defender of the Christian faith and national identity – who embraces suffering and death as the highest expressions of spiritual and national loyalty. Anguelova also makes the intriguing observation that, in the Armenian Christian tradition, the warrior-martyr serves as a direct instrument of God, acting through him on earth and repeatedly saved the Armenian people (Chapter 3, p. 176). This concept is not entirely unexpected, given that late antique Armenian Christian political and state ideology portrayed the Armenians as a divinely anointed people – one of the nations that emerged from the Confusion of Languages in Babylon.

By the way, in connection with the above, I would add that a mechanism somewhat similar to the adaptation of the hero-warrior and hero-king is seen in the transformation of ancient Armenian deities into Christian saints. For example, the sun god Mithras was transformed into St. Sargis (St. Sergius), the most venerated saint after St. George in medieval Armenia.

The fourth chapter carries the greatest weight in the dissertation, not only because of its length and the extensive textual analysis it contains, but also because it most clearly shows the presence of Campbell’s model² within the medieval Armenian epic tradition. As the doctoral candidate notes, “*David of Sassoun is best structured according to the Campbellian model. He passes through all the main stages, from the call to adventure to the inner transformation*” (Chapter 4, p. 386).

However, in her dissertation, Antoaneta Anguelova establishes that within the Armenian context (in “David of Sassoun”), the Campbell model is present, not in its classical form, but rather in an adapted and dynamically variable version. Although “David of Sassoun” generally follows the Campbell model, it does not adhere to any of the sub-stages of the “return” phase. Antoaneta Anguelova points out that the case of Mher the Younger is particularly interesting, as certain stages of the heroic journey are repeated, but the complete return and liberation are absent. This results in the character’s permanent alienation and impasse, sharply distinguishing him from the classic Campbell model. Therefore, the Armenian epic presents an adapted and contextualised version of the monomyth, reflecting the distinctive dynamics of heroism within the Armenian cultural and historical tradition.

This, along with the comprehensive construction of the evolutionary model of the archetype in “David of Sassoun” – which has not been previously undertaken—constitutes the major contribution of this chapter. I am pleased to note that the doctoral candidate has considered my suggestion to present the components of Campbell’s model, both those present and absent in “David of Sassoun”, in a tabular form in the Appendices.

Conclusion

In my view, the true value of a scholarly work is measured not only by its thematic contributions and merits but also by its potential to serve as a starting point or foundation for comparisons and the search for analogies beyond its narrow academic specialisation. That is, whether the work also has an interdisciplinary character. Anguelova’s dissertation fully meets

² Joseph Campbell’s concept of the monomyth represents a universal model of the heroic journey, applicable across a wide cultural and historical context. This model unites recurring structures and motifs found in mythological and epic narratives from diverse societies, reflecting universal stages in an individual’s psychic and spiritual evolution. The heroic journey, both in its symbolic and literal forms, serves as an archetypal expression of inner human development – passing through trials, acquiring knowledge, undergoing transformation, and integrating a new identity into social reality.

these criteria and can be useful not only to Armenologists, but also to specialists in the fields of literary studies, cultural studies, mythology, folklore studies, and even theology.

Based on the merits of this dissertation, detailed above, and considering the accessible language in which it is written as an undeniable advantage, I give my positive assessment and, without hesitation, recommend to the esteemed scientific jury to award the candidate the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor” in the professional field 2.1. Philology, Scientific Major “Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Africa, Asia, and Australia” (PhD programme “Armenian Literature”).

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