RITUALS OF THE HEARTH IN THE BALKANS AND THE CAUCASUS, WITH EMPHASIS ON GREECE AND ARMENIA

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This paper examines rituals of the hearth from a comparative viewpoint in two almost neighbouring areas, the Balkans and the Caucasus, in order to identify similarities and differences in ideology, in symbolic actions associated with marriage (bride incorporation), the division of the multinuclear family, the customs of the annual cycle, etc. My paper is based on fieldwork in Greece and Armenia, and on unpublished ethnographic and folklore material, as well as on published works by Greek and foreign scholars.

Keywords: Balkans, Caucasus, hearth, ritual, Greeks, Armenians.

INTRODUCTION

The disciplines of Comparative Folklore (Laographia) and Ethnology have been little cultivated in Greece, with the exception of Nikolaos Politis, who in accordance with the spirit of his time (Frazer, Mannhard, *et alii*) had applied himself to a comparative Laographia which could be considered a form of proto-Structuralism (Alexakis 2012a: 74; and in general Puchner 2009).

Ethnology and Social Anthropology, of course, despite the Structural-Functionalism which subsequently predominated, have never ceased to be also comparative disciplines. After all, every discipline has to be comparative in order to be accepted. But the comparison is now made at a more contemporary level. It is the so-called controlled comparison, to use the term coined by the American cultural anthropologist Alfred Eggan (Alexakis 1993: 28, 40, n. 11), and is a basic scientific tool for eliciting on the one hand cultural and social canons and norms, and on the other historical and cultural affinities, through isoglosses and isoethnoses, without of course the external similarity necessarily meaning similarity of semantics or of content.

In Greece, comparison could be applied to Greek space primarily. However, this has not happened. On the contrary, the so-called "monadologies" have held sway, as in Social Anthropology too, that is, works on the society or the folklore of one community.

Mainly, however, comparison should be extended firstly to the neighbouring Balkan peoples, because these are akin to the Greeks in culture and religion, and secondly to the related peoples, in terms of culture and religion, of Anatolia and the

Caucasus, such as Assyrians, Georgians, Armenians. This, of course, does not leave out the Muslim populations (Turks and Kurds) of the neighbouring regions, which were possibly Christian in earlier times.

The lack of comparative studies in Greece could perhaps be explained with regard to the Balkan peoples by the fact that until 1990 these countries were watertight, due to their regimes, although scientific communication with them did exist. The issue was more an ideological one, because the view that Greece was more a Western country than a Balkan one had prevailed.

In the present study I shall attempt a comparison of rituals of the hearth among the Greeks and the Armenians, using the neighbouring Balkan and Caucasian peoples as a frame. I speak of rituals but these are not always organized in a system. Frequently they are simple magical or symbolic acts, but ones that have a particular gravitas in the symbolic system of a people.

We divide the Balkan peoples into Palaeo-Balkan, that is, those which existed in the peninsula in pre-Christian times, mainly the Greeks and the Albanians, and Neo-Balkan, such as the Serbs and the Bulgarians, who appeared in the peninsula during the Christian era. The Romanians should also be included in the comparison, even though Romania is not considered a Balkan country. And this because the Romanian culture has a Balkan affinity or starting point; what holds in the Balkans holds in Romania too, to a great degree (cf. Vulcănescu 1966, 1970, 1985).

In the Caucasus again, where we encounter many peoples of diverse provenance and numerous languages, there is in general outline a cultural homogeneity, but there are also important differences. Of these peoples, one group, such as the Georgians, the Abkhazians, the Circassians, the Chechens, the Lesgins, the Ingushetans, and others, speaks Caucasian languages which are not of Indo-European, Semitic or Turkic origin. The Armenians and the Ossetians, on the contrary, are considered Indo-European peoples. The first of Thraco-Phrygian origin, with Balkan starting point, and the second of Iranian (Alanian) origin. For example, North Ossetia, which belongs administratively to Russia, is called Alania. However, there are also Turkic-Mongolian populations and peoples, such as the Nogai and the Azeri.

The paper is based largely on bibliographical research and to a lesser degree on ethnographic fieldwork in Greece and Armenia (Ashtarak region). I note that the affinity of the regions and the cultures had earlier preoccupied foreign scholars, such as Nicolas Marr and Georges Dumezil, with best known the Japhethitic theory for detecting the third ethnological element, namely the Caucasian, in the Mediterranean cultures, in addition to the Indo-European and the Semitic.

THE PEOPLES OF THE BALKANS AND THE GREEKS

I shall start with the Albanians, about whom much has been written relating to the hearth, both its construction and its symbolism. I note that the Albanian word for hearth is *vatra* (*vatër*), *votra*, a term widespread from Romania and the Ukraine

as far as Greece, and the etymology of which, according to some researchers, derives from the Latin word *atrium* (Gr. *αίθριο*). The word *vatra* is considered to be related to the Iranian as well as the Armenian word *atar*, meaning fire, fuel, cf. also *atrushan*, meaning pyre altar (Huld 1984: 124, 155, 163, 167 and map; Hamp 1976).

Before proceeding to the presentation, I should mention that two-thirds of Albanians are Muslims and thus it is possible that some customs and conceptions that are widely diffused among the Christians of the Balkans are not encountered in Albania to the same extent.

In older Albanian houses the hearth was built at the centre of the large room which is named "house of the fire" or "house of the bread (*shtëpia e zjarrit* or *shtëpia e bukës*). Later, it was constructed at the edge, near the wall, while even later it took on the form of a fireplace (*ojakh*), with chimney. The shape of the hearth in the floor was usually square and only rarely round. The cauldron for cooking the food was hung above the hearth from a chain. This chain plays an important role in the ritual of marriage (see photos 1, 2) (Nopcsa 1925: 10, 11, 78–81, 91, 95 ff.; Riza 1986: 79–104; Muka 2001).

The particular importance of the Albanian hearth for the family is apparent in the belief that there reside the female spirit which protects the kin group, the so-called "mother of the hearth" (*nëna e vatrës* or *ëma e vatrës*), and the ancestors, who are always linked with the belief in the "household snake". Related to all these is the belief in the "*vitora*", which is encountered also among the *Arvanites* of Greece (see below) (Nopcsa 1925: 77, 88; Tirtja 1980: 63–78; Alexakis 2001a).

Various rituals relating to marriage and the incorporation of the bride in her new family are celebrated in the "room of the fire" and around the hearth. First of all, when the bride leaves her parental home she circles the hearth three times, bidding farewell to her ancestors. In the groom's house, the brothers-in-law lead the bride to the room with the hearth, where she repeats the same ritual around the hearth of her marital home. Her father-in-law, mother-in-law and one other old man of the family are seated there, and they place a white kerchief on her head. Purpose of all this ritual is the symbolic incorporation of the bride in the groom's family (Mitrushi 1976: 64–65, Dojaka 1979: 138).

Among other customs, at least among the Christian Albanians, is the placing of a large log on the hearth or in the fireplace on Christmas Eve (Schneeweis 1935: 158).

Among the Serbs too, the hearth (*ognista*) initially had a similar construction. It was situated at the centre of the room, before it was replaced by the fireplace with chimney. Moreover, this development is observed from Romania as far as the southernmost regions of Greece (Crete, etc.) (Banateanu 1960; Stahl-Petrescu 1987: 38 ff.; Alexakis 2007: 81). Here too the hearth is associated with the preservation of the family and with the ancestors. Among these Slavs there is the belief that fire wards of the evil spirits and therefore attracts the benign ones, which are the souls of the ancestors, which come to warm themselves. That is why the hearth is considered dwelling-place of the souls of the family dead and that is why the fire should not be left to go out. It goes out only in the case of death in the family and later a new fire is lit (Schneeweis 1935: 42, 70, 123, 140).

For the Serbs the chain of the hearth in particular is considered to have great magical aversive power. They bring to this and place upon it the newborn babe, so that it will become strong (as they do on the actual hearth), thus welcoming also the youngest member of the family. But with the chain they also beat "for good luck" the bride, when she enters the house of the groom, which is also a magical act of her incorporation (Schneeweis 1935: 38, 62, 70, 101).

Furthermore, at marriage, when the bride comes to the groom's house, she holds gifts of bread and wine, and after circling the hearth thrice and venerating it, she leaves the gifts on the hearth and makes the wish: "May the cows bring forth calves, the ewes lambs, the sows piglets, and so on". The same act is performed in Bulgaria too. A similar custom with good wishes is observed on Mayday. The children go into the house, holding cherry branches, which they cast on the hearth while making the wish: "male children, male cattle, female sheep, and so on" (Schneeweis 1935: 104, 178).

The Christmas Eve custom too, with the placing of one log or two on the hearth, is encountered also among the Serbs and the Bulgarians (Schneeweis 1935: 153–156, 158).

There is, besides, the belief that if they bring water from the well late at night, they should throw a little on the hearth before a drinking, because otherwise they are in danger of turning into vampires (Krauss 1908:139).

The Greeks have many names for the hearth, such as *εστία* ([*h*]*estia*), *στιά* (*stia*), *βάτρα* (*vatra*), *φόκος* (*fokos*), *αγνίστρα* (*agnistra*) or *ογνίστρα* (*ognistra*), *τζάκι* (*tzaki*), *παρακαμίν* (*parakamin*), *γωνιά* (*gonia*), *τσιμινιά* (*tsiminia*) and others. The hearth is linked with many magico-religious rituals and practices, as well as superstitions, relating to the constitution of the family, the wealth of the household, the fertility of people, animals, plants and fields, the future (prophecy), etc.

In Greek traditional society too, as I have said already, the hearth was in earlier times at the centre of the room. Later, they began to construct fireplaces in the side walls (Mainland) or in the corners (coastal areas, islands), hence the name "*gonia*" (= corner) for the hearth. Sometimes the fireplaces are lavishly decorated with relief or incised representations of various symbols, such as snakes, crescent moons, etc. (see photo. 5).

The major problem was how to construct the hearth or fireplace on the wooden floor, without this being a fire hazard. The solution was to fill in with earth and to create a kind of platform (Gr. *vathro*), which in one view is perhaps why the hearth is named also "*vatra*". On this platform they placed or lay the tiles for the "*parastia*" or fireside (see Kostakis 1960: 289, 322; Megas 1962: 297, 298). On the contrary, the hearth (*κλιβιάνιν* [klivianin] or *χώνος* [chonos]) of the Greeks of Pontus, which is usually round, is opened in the ground or the floor. This practice is widespread in Transcaucasia, Anatolia, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, while we come across it too in prehistoric times in the Aegean and Minoan Crete, something that points to the affinities and migrations of populations (Metaxa-Muhly 1984; Greppin 1991: 204, Alexakis 2008: 63–64) (see photo. 10).

We shall examine in detail the symbolic and ritual ramifications of the hearth and the household fire. The hearth is the strength and the symbol of the family and the ancestors, which is why when a new family is going to be created by the division of the old, the new family head (*pater familias*) takes fire from the paternal or the grandparental hearth and with it lights the hearth in his new home. They consider the fire of the hearth sacred and say that the "fire is an angel and we should not blaspheme it" or they swear an oath on the hearth, saying: "by the angel of the fire" or "by the holy things that this fire raises" (Megas 1949: 96).

In many regions of Greece and particularly where *Arvanites* are settled they believe that there is a relationship between the hearth (*βάτρας* [*vatra*]) and the "protective snake of the house" (usually considered to be a female and maternal symbol), which is to be expected, because the hearth is considered by many peoples as the entrance to the Underworld. This holds for the hybrid (human-serpentine) Vitora, protectress of the house, in Attica, but also, as we have seen, and for the "mother of the hearth" among the Albanians (Alexakis 2001a, 68–76, n. 18). In western Macedonia too (area of Kozani), the female spirit of the house, Saiada, just like Vitora, frequents the fireplace. The same applies to the protecting fairy of the house, the *maissa* of the Greeks of Pontus, which they believe at other times hangs around the roof of the house too (Psychogiou 1984: 564–576; Alexakis 2008: 47, 57).

When a wedding is celebrated and they bring the bride into her new home, which is that of the groom, they lead her to the fireplace and she venerates it three times, in this way expressing her respect for her husband's "gods of the hearth" (Kyriakidis 1938: 516). Sometimes she also rests her foot lightly on the fireside. Other times they lead her to the symbolically equivalent iconostasis of her husband's house, which she venerates. These are acts of incorporation of the bride into the groom's family.

There is information too that the exchange of rings by making the sign of the cross, at the betrothal of the young couple, is performed by the oldest member of the family in front of the blazing fire (Kassotaki 1992: 59). In other regions, the betrothal meal takes place beside the hearth and the bride's relatives put the father-in-law (groom's father) to sit at its right side, which is considered a particularly honorific position. Moreover, they put on the table the betrothal rings, which they have already exchanged during the giving of the word (*λογόδοσμα*). Furthermore, the groom's godfather also sits on the right, honorary side of the hearth, at the wedding (Vikas 1913: 541, 548). The relation of the position by the hearth to the honour accorded to various persons of importance in the social hierarchy (nobles, visitors, etc.), is also apparent from the Pontic proverb originating from Kerasunta: "The bad bride puts her mother-in-law to sit on the dying embers" («κακέσσα η νύφε την πεθερά ς' αποδαύλια καθίζ»). The embers (Gr. *αποδαύλια*) are the half-burnt pieces of wood of the fire, which are found in its lower part. This position is considered less honorific than the upper part of the fire, which is called by the

Turkish name "*oçak pashin*", meaning the head of the hearth, which is the position usually offered to guests (Papadopoulos 1917: 50–51).

Most customs relating to the wealth and the well-being of the house are celebrated at Christmas and New Year. The most widely disseminated in Greece is the so-called "marriage of the fire" (*πάντρεμα της φωτιάς*). Two thick logs are placed upright in the fireplace on Christmas Eve or New Year's Eve and left to burn all night. In other cases, a large log which they call "*babo*" is burnt (Kyriakidis 1934–1937: 661). The burning fire of the hearth wards off the evil spirits which are believed to appear during the Twelve Days of Christmas or *Dodekaimeron*, the goblins known as *kalikantzari*, and others. Also, when the children singing the carols enter the house they are led to the fireplace and one child takes hold of the poker (Gr. *μασιά* or *συνδαύλιστρο*), pokes the fire and makes the wish: "male children and female goats and sheep". As far as the fields are concerned, in many areas of Greece the peasants take the ash from the hearth and scatter it over the sown fields, vineyards and fruit trees, in order to secure a good harvest (Kyriakidis 1934–1937: 661; Kassotaki 1992: 58).

The adversive nature of ash from the hearth is evident also in the custom at Epiphany, when the priest blesses and expels the *kalikantzari*, of sprinkling ash from the fireplace around the house (Kyriakidis 1934–1937: 661). Negatively, the happiness, wealth and strength of the family are preserved by the prohibition (taboo) on giving fire to others at night or during the season of sowing or of the birthing of livestock, or when there is a nursing mother in the house, because her milk will curdle and dry up (Kyriakidis 1938: 516; Kassotaki 1992: 58; Alexakis 2001β: 111). In Aetolia, they believe that if they lend fire at night, the "coolness" (Gr. *δροσιά*) leaves the house, which is why they only lend fire during the day (Loukopoulos 1938: 13). In Laconia, they believe that if they give fire at night, the neighbours may quarrel.

There is a taboo on throwing the milk of a nursing mother on the fire of the hearth, because lactation will cease and the breasts will shrivel. A nursing mother's milk can be thrown in a place that is not trodden – behind a fireplace, on ash, on plants or on running water –, in order for her to have plenty of milk. For the same reason, a nursing mother should avoid approaching the bakery. If she passes outside a bakery, she must be given a piece of bread, to prevent her milk from drying up. Otherwise, if they want to stop the milk, they take three pieces of glowing charcoal and extinguish them with the mother's milk. These pieces of charcoal are kept and are used, by lighting them, when the next child is born, in order to ensure the flow of milk.

At the level of fantasy, the large over-size breasts of supernatural female/ maternal beings (giantesses, lamias, one-breasted creatures, etc.), which they can throw behind them onto their back, in order to suckle the babies, are likened to cloths used for cleaning the oven. In other words, these imaginary creatures are linked with the household hearth (fireplace, oven, etc.). Oven and hearth, like the iconostasis with the hanging lamp, are considered ethnographic equivalents in both

significance and symbolism, in Greece, the Balkans and the rest of Europe, as has been noted already (cf. Rhomaios 1923: 360, n. 2)

In many cases, indeed, nursing itself is associated with the household hearth, as is apparent from magical rituals. For example, when the woman's bosom hurts, in order to relieve the pain she must lean on the firebricks of the fireplace or put an oven cloth on her breasts. The relationship of elderly women with the hearth and the oven is apparent also from other customs. For example, among the *Arvanites* of Attica, the *propyra* (first trial bread bun) taken out of the oven is offered to the *mamitsa* (grandmother, nurse) of the house (Alexakis 2001b: 111, 115, 116–118 and n. 47, 121, n. 49).

The hearth also plays an important role in foretelling the future. Various magico-religious acts are performed to make predictions (Christmas, New Year, Carnival). For example, they put on the fireside eggs, which they name, and whoever's egg perspires first will be strong all year round, or they put wheat grains or olive leaves or walnut leaves, etc., and whoever's bounces will be lucky and strong all year round (Megas 1949: 122, 1950: 11).

Also, when the fire (flame) of the hearth makes a noise (moans, mumbles), they believe that someone, either friend or foe, is talking about the house or the family. Then they say: "if he is friend may he be happy and if he is foe may he burst!" (Loukopoulos 1938: 2).

Furthermore, they should not throw salt on the fire, nor should they poke it all together, because they may quarrel and become enemies. On the contrary, if the fire flares into flames when one person pokes it, they consider that he is crafty enough for matchmaking (Loukopoulos 1938: 3).

THE PEOPLES OF THE CAUCASUS AND THE ARMENIANS

For the peoples of the North Caucasus we have the classic work by Louis Luzbetak, who gives us important information on the significance and the rituals of the hearth in this region, and refers to the Ossetians, the Circassians, the Abkhazians, the Chechens, the Ingushetans, the Lesgins, and others.

The main characteristic is that the hearth is considered the symbol of the continuity of the family and of the wider kinship group, as well as of the ancestors, which is why the fire must never be left to go out. I cite a typical example from Dagestan in the Caucasus, where the wife disobeys her husband's ban on throwing anything onto the fire, and she throws some liver, with the result that the fire is extinguished and great hardships and dangers ensue for the family and for the husband himself (Chenciner 1997: 84).

The hearth is situated in the middle of the house and hanging above it from a chain is the cauldron for cooking the food. This chain is believed to symbolize the ancestors and to unite the living with the dead of the family (Luzbetak 1951, passim).

The rituals of birth take place at the hearth. The newborn baby is brought to the hearth in an act of its recognition as a full and the youngest member of the family, and comes into contact with the ancestors, accepting their protection. This ceremony is encountered among the Ossetians and the Kurds, peoples of Iranian provenance, (Luzbetak 1951: 144). The Abkhazians at the birth of the child sacrifice a chicken and address a prayer to the god of the family and of the hearth (*achvstaara*) (Benet 1974: 82) (see photo. 6).

The hearth plays an important role in the betrothal ceremony. The prospective groom visits his future father-in-law and during the evening the fire in the hearth goes out, and the prospective spouses join hands, as a ceremony of confirmation and finalization (closing) of the marriage agreement. Only after this can the negotiations for the sum of the bride-price (*kalym*) begin (Luzbetak 1951: 100–101).

The marriage ceremony also takes place at the hearth. The incorporation of the bride in her new house and new family is completed by her procession three times around the hearth. The bride venerates the hearth and in this way shows the appropriate respect for her husband's ancestors. This custom is found among the Ossetians, the Circassians and the Ingushetans. It is encountered among the Lesgins too, but it seems that there it is an exception; Kovalevskij found it only in one tribe (*aul*), near the Georgian border (Luzbetak 1951: 115, 120, 130, 197). It is strange that the custom of incorporation of the bride by parading her around the hearth is not encountered in Dagestan, where worship of the hearth existed until recently but not the wedding ceremony. Luzbetak explains this by saying that here the wife is not a stranger, as she has to be chosen from within the clan. The populations are Muslim and keep the custom of marriage between cousins (Luzbetak 1951: 127).

In some cases the hearth plays a role also in the ritual of divorces, because wherever these happen (mainly among Muslims), for example in Dagestan, a specific procedure is followed. The woman who has been "declared" divorced takes a handful of ash from the hearth and scatters it to the wind, thus showing that she ceases to have any relationship to her husband and his ancestors, which theoretically has been ratified by the preceding ritual of her incorporation, even if today the two ceremonies do not coincide (Luzbetak 1951: 137).

The hearth plays the role also of sacred asylum (sanctuary) for whoever asks protection from the family (murderers, etc.). He who touches the chain of the ancestors is protected even if family members are put at risk. They believe that with this act the victim's ancestors approve the family's adoption of the murderer. Acts of bloody revenge (vendetta) must never take place in front of the hearth or a woman. The chain of the hearth and the woman are considered the symbolic equivalents of sanctuary. The chain is the symbol of the family and for one to pull it down and to remove it is considered the most sacrilegious and abominable insult of the living and the dead of the clan, which must be punished even by death. Because the chain is the symbol of the family, it is buried together with the last member of a clan that has died out. Also, the oath invoking the chain of the

ancestors is considered an infallible criterion that the person who swears it is telling the truth, because to lie in this case is inconceivable; this oath would be a curse for the entire clan and the ancestors. In other words, the ancient solidarity of the clan is closely linked with the ancient religion of the North Caucasians and the shrine or the temple of this religion is the hearth (Luzbetak 1951: 127, 159, 199).

All these practices connect fundamentally the worship of the ancestors and the cult of the dead with that of the hearth, constituting also the cultural link between the Indo-Europeans and the North Caucasians, which is focused on the cult of the hearth (Luzbetak 1951: 199).

The importance of the hearth from the practical, ritual and religious viewpoint, has been noted in the Caucasus since prehistoric times. Archaeologists have excavated in houses of assorted plans (round, square, etc.) many hearths, which are usually situated in the centre of the room, close to the pillar of the house (photo. 13). The hearths are usually permanent constructions on the ground, while in some cases they are portable and of clay. Archaeologists associate the hearths with domestic cult and postulate possible Iranian influences on the worship of fire, as well as of the sun. Some hearths are outside the houses, while there are indications that these were used also for sacrifices (Burney and Lang 2001: passim; Harutunian 2012: 15 and photo.).

Among the Armenians too the hearth, which is called *t'onir*, as in many other neighbouring peoples, with minor differences: *tone*, *tuntir*, *tantir*, *tantu*, *tenur*, *tanur*, etc., and is considered a very ancient word of the wider region, as it is encountered in texts in cuneiform script, Akkadian (*tinuru*), Aramaic (*tannura*), even Hebrew (*tannuri*), is the main symbol of the family (Greppin 1991: 204; Bläsing 2003: 200; cf. also Goldstein 1993: passim). It was often used to denote the family, instead of the noun *endanik* (family), as was the word *chukh* (smoke) (Maroutian 1989: 86; Kharatian 1989: 40). It symbolizes also the ancestors, who are considered to frequent this point (at the centre of the house).

Besides, the "snake protector" of the house *Shahapet* (translated as king, lord), *Shvaz* or *Shvod* (with whom naughty little children are frequently frightened) is usually to be found near the hearth or, according to others, in the earth of the flat roof of the house. *Shvod* is imagined in its human form, as a small black manikin with rickety legs, something like a goblin. I suspect that it is related to the "*arapis*" (black man), spectre of the house in Greece and the Balkans, which guards treasures, gold, etc. Some researchers associate the name with the Syriac word *Shubat*, which corresponds to the month of February. Others consider certain that initially *Shvod* was the name of a category of spirits. Comparable is the spirit *tan dovlat* (wealth of the house) (Kharatian 1989: 42).

It is believed that this sacred snake or "housesnake" (*tanotz*) exterminates the mice that eat the grain in the granaries. This snake, which must be respected and fed with milk, of which it is particularly fond, is also said to bring happiness and wealth (gold, etc.) to the house. They believe that if they kill it, great evil will befall the house. The Armenians sometimes depict snakes on the pillars, the doors or items of property of the houses to protect them from the evil eye. Sometimes

they incise the image of a snake on the stone of the nearest well. Even pregnant women sometimes wear snake-shaped amulets. They consider that the snake is the physical incarnation of the ancestral spirits, which appear also in human form as visitors, which is why one must be very hospitable to strangers-guests, so that no disaster is caused by their displeasure (cf. Ananikian 1925: 74–76, 391, n. 16; Hoogasian Villa – Kilbourne Matossian 1982: 130).

The Armenians' hearth is constructed in a particular way. It resembles closely the hearth of the Greeks of Pontus, with whom the Armenians are, of course, neighbours. It is situated at the centre of the room and is round, opened into the ground or the floor to a depth of 3-5 feet, and coated up to the rim with clay, in the shape of a cylinder (Ananikian 1925: 55; Hoogasian Villa – Kilbourne Matossian 1982: 33). Close to the *t'onir* there is usually a small round depression, in which the woman or another person sits cross-legged when baking the flatbread. The hearth is used mainly for baking the large flatbreads (*lavash*), as well as food, such as *horovats* (roast meat). For this reason it is considered particularly sacred (Geramian 2006: 22–23). In other words, roasting-baking is a sacred ritual. In Zangezur they say: "the *t'onir* feeds, heats and cleans" (Maroutian 1989: 87). The flatbread is baked on the clay walls by sticking it to them at the right moment, when these are hot (see photo. 7). Sometimes the *t'onir* is not used but instead a horizontal hearth in the wall "*pur*" [fireplace?] (Petrosian – Underwood 2006: 30).

One of the tourist attractions in Armenia is to photograph a peasant woman from the village (or a city woman acting the part) baking *lavash* in the *t'onir*. If you search the internet for the Armenian *lavash*, you'll be overloaded with images of the Armenian national flatbread: *lavash* in the *t'onir* or on the pillow, piled up *lavash*, flying *lavash*. What else? Perhaps some Armenian businessman will sell concentrated aroma of freshly-baked *lavash* on e-bay (Petrosian – Underwood 2006: 27).

There are many proverbs about the *t'onir* among the Armenians and neighbouring peoples, Georgians, etc. I mention just one, which is characteristic: "*t'onir tak-tak lavash kolê kê tan*" (slap the *lavash* on the wall of the *t'onir* while it's still hot), which is similar to our own "strike the iron while it's hot" (Bläsing 2003: 199). For fuel they use dried cow pats (*goashgur*), vine twigs, wood or dry branches, pinecones, and so on. Baking in this way is general among the Armenians and neighbouring peoples, with the exception of some regions of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) where the flatbread (*lavash*) is baked on a metal tray which is heated on the fire (charcoal, etc.). A large *t'onir* with raised clay rim is used also in professional bakeries where they bake flatbread, even in large supermarkets and so on. Inside they have a great circular depth, resembling a well shaft, and the fire burns low down (see photo. 12).

As among the other peoples of the Caucasus, the hearth symbolizes life, the longevity and the vigour of the family, as is apparent from many wishes/curses, proverbs and expressions, such as "*mukhud chē mare*" (May your hearth [literally smoke] never go out) or "*mukhus maretsav*" (my hearth has gone out), and so on. Even the power of the royal or ruling family is declared by the strength of the fire

in the hearth. There are many such expressions in the Armenian epic *David of Sassoun* (Surmelian 1964: passim; cf. also Hoogasian 1966: 70; Hoogasian Villa – Kilbourne Matossian 1982: 34). For this reason the women responsible for keeping the fire alive must take care that it does not go out, by any means. In the fairytales, the fire of the hearth was extinguished when a kitten disgruntled by the girl guarding the hearth because she did not give it a raisin, urinated on it. We do not know exactly the symbolic relationship of the cat with fire, as among many peoples the cat is considered the animal/symbol of water. The girl, however, searches on the mountain to find fire, which is offered to her in the end by seven giant sisters. The girl brings the fire to the house, hidden in her skirt (cf. Hoogasian Villa 1966: 115).

The rituals of marriage and of baptism/christening are celebrated at the hearth. The bride, on leaving her paternal home, kneels down and takes a handful of ash from the *t'onir* (Maroutian 1989: 87), while when she enters the house of the groom for the first time, she walks three times around the hearth and together with the groom venerates it at its clay rim. In addition, she throws the ash and incense which she brings from her father's house into the *t'onir* of her new home, so showing respect for the hearth and for the dead ancestors of her husband (Ananikian 1925: 55, Petrosian-Underwood 2006: 36). To the hearth they bring the newborn baby, as well as anything new they acquire, by purchase or other means, such as flocks of livestock, and so on. As the Armenians put it, the hearth is like a sacred registry office. The woman sits near the hearth when she is giving birth. In fact, sometimes they take ash from the hearth and bring it to her so that she can give birth over it, saying: "for the angels of the hearth to help" (Kharatian 1989: 40). The cleaning of the house too, with candles and censing with incense, performed by all Armenians on Saturdays, is also considered a vestige of the worship of the hearth and the ancestors (Ananikian 1925: 56).

The creation of a new family (house), by hiving off from the extended family (*kerdastan*), was symbolized by the fire that the new head of the household took from the paternal hearth and brought to the new dwelling. It was considered that in this way the tradition of the family was symbolically continued. The hearth also plays a symbolic role in cementing a matchmaking for marriage. They say: "We've come to take a handful of earth from your fireplace", "We've come to take a handful of ash from your fireplace to mix it with the ash of our fireplace", or "we've come to take fire from your fireplace" (Kharatian 1989: 40; Maroutian 1989: 86).

Some large houses had two *t'onirs*, a small one for cooking and a larger one for baking the flatbread. In more sophisticated houses there is also a fireplace (*otzak*). The word is Turkish and means the hearth built into the wall, which is used for warmth. In many Armenian houses there is a combination of *t'onir* and *otzak*, that is, one, two or more *t'onirs* inside a fireplace in the wall (see photo. 8). The fireplace too symbolizes the family. They say: "*metz otzak*" (great fireplace, affluent or wealthy family) and "*shen otzak*" (comfortable family) (Maroutian 1989: 86). I note that in Armenia today fireplaces are few or have disappeared, because natural gas is used in all houses, even rural ones. So, many customs

associated with the fireplace have been modified or lost. The *t'onirs*, however, are still used and in some cases they are organized in a system (with air vents, etc.) in a special room or space, as I had the opportunity to observe in the village of Karbi in Ashtarak.

In other words, the *t'onir* is usually inside the *tonratun* (oven), a shed intended for baking the flatbread. In general, the space in which the *t'onir* for baking the flatbread is installed is called "*hatsatun*", which means "bread house" (Maroutian 1989: 73). Many rural families in Armenia today use "*atar*" (cow-dung bricks) as fuel in the *t'onir*. These can be seen piled up next to the house (Petrosian – Underwood 2006: 28–29).

A new *t'onir* is something to be proud of and pleased with, in much the same way as a microwave oven for the owner of a modern kitchen. But a god-fearing villager would never use the new *t'onir* without first inviting the priest to bless it and to sprinkle its inside walls with holy water. As I have said, according to Armenian superstitions, all evil spirits dwell in the ground, and so the *t'onir* has to be protected from the chthonic world. Bread, crumbs in the ground were considered a sin, because it could feed the daemonic forces in the form of bugs and worms (Petrosian – Underwood 2006: 36–37).

It was a bad omen if a little butter fell into the *t'onir*; bad news would arrive. It was a good omen if two pieces of flatbread stuck together while baking. The custom was to break or tear apart the joined flatbreads over the head of a family member, who would thus become rich. It was also a bad sign when the children, while playing, put the *lavash* over their head, and they were scolded. The commonest belief was that very bad weather would come or that the local prices of goods would rise (Petrosian – Underwood 2006: 37).

The traditional central point of the house, the *t'onir* was not only for cooking and for heating. Family members could place a low table, which is called "*kursi*" in Arabic, above the sunken *t'onir*. They would eat around the *t'onir* or relax in its warmth. During the cold winters, the whole family slept close to the *t'onir*, with the feet wrapped under a blanket upon the "*kursi*". Moreover, the main room with the *t'onir* was the place where the Armenians entertained their guests (Petrosian – Underwood 2006: 176–177).

Even before the Armenians received the Persian influence of Zoroastrianism they worshipped and respected fire. They use two words for fire, which is considered feminine – they say "sister fire" and "brother water": *hur*, which is equivalent to the Greek word *pyr*, and *krak*, which some researchers link with the Armenian word *tzrag* (candle), arguing that it derives from the corresponding Persian *kiratz*, *tsiratz*, also meaning candle (Ananikian 1925: 55).

Fire is associated with some pre-Christian deities, such as the Armenian national god Vahagn, which means etymologically "he who brings fire" (the name includes the Indo-Iranian word for fire, *agni*) and the god Mithras, Mihr in Armenian. There is a song about Vahagn's birth, which was sung by bards (*gushanner* or *ashugner*) to the accompaniment of the lyre (*knar*), even after the

conversion of the Armenians to Christianity, and which relates that the god was born through the reed. At some stage one cult was replaced by the other, with syncretism of the two deities (Ananikian 1925: 34–35, Boyajian 2009: 159).

I note that in the village of Avan, near the capital Yerevan, an episcopal palace of the seventh century AD, attached to the church, has been found, in which there was a hearth or a stone fireplace with an incised or sculpted lion (see photo. 9), which symbolizes the fire and the sun, and therefore Mithras (Mihr) (D' Onofrio 1984: 127). Moreover, in the Holy See of Etzmiatzin there was a pyre altar (*atrushan*) under the altar table (photo. 14), as well as in the basilica of Kasakh (Garsoian 1989: 306, 511; Grigorian n.d. photo.).

The fire is sacred and must not be polluted. No one should spit on it or throw impure things or objects on it, such as hair and nails. It can also be contaminated by breath, which is why the mouth of women using the fire is covered. In particular, a death inside the house is considered to pollute the fire, which must be extinguished and a new pure one lit with a flint (Ananikian 1925: 54). They swear oaths on the fire in the hearth, as well as on the sun. To this day, the fire is considered the most effective means of driving out evil spirits (Hoogasian 1966: 70).

Certainly there was in the pre-Christian period a form of fire worship among the Armenians, which is why some authors called them "ash-worshippers, just as the called the Persians. However, the Armenians' fire-worship was more symbolic than material, unlike the situation for the Persians, who maintained both special fire altars and fire temples (*atrushan*), where they worshipped fire (Boyajian 2009: 159, Garsoian 1989: 511).

The Armenians worshipped only the sun (*arev*), as material hypostasis of the heavenly fire. Indeed, a heresy of sun-worshippers existed until recently and was called "children of the sun" (*arevordik*). I note that for the Armenians the word "sun" (*arev*) also means metaphorically "life" (Bartikian 1968; Garsoian 1989: 329; cf. Boyatjian 2009: 160). Sun-worship was in any case widespread among most peoples of the Caucusus from prehistoric times (see Alexakis 2012b).

Among all Indo-Europeans fire, regardless of its provenance (heavenly, chthonic, infernal), is considered to take on different forms but has a single substance: sun, lightning, fire of the earth, and so on. I should like to point out here something that is often overlooked by those engaged in studying Armenian culture, namely that Armenia is *par excellence* a region of volcanic origin and consequently worship of the infernal fire is something that should be taken for granted. Even the fact that the *t'onir* is opened to a certain depth inside the house must be related to this. There is an associated tradition that the light that is sometimes seen on the summit of the volcanic Mount Ararats in Armenia is the lamp of St Gregory the Enlightener (*Surp Krikor Lusavorits*) (Boyajian 2009: 135, n.1).

I note that among the Armenians, apart from the domestic hearth (*t'onir*), there is frequently also a community hearth of the village, which belonged to the chief or to the first founder of the settlement. If there was no church in the village, the rituals of marriage and christening/baptism were celebrated there (Ananikian

1925: 55). Even in the monasteries and specifically in the refectory there is sometimes a huge *t'onir*, as symbol of the unity of the monks in the coenobium. Today, the enormous hearth similar to the *atrushan*, where the "undying fire" burns in the Genocide Monument in Yerevan, has elements in common with the *t'onir* (Shakhkian 1989: 62 (photos 15, 16).

The hearth is linked also with the annual ritual bonfires that the Armenians light on certain days of the year and in particular 13 February, which coincides with the forty days of the Virgin's confinement after the Nativity of Christ (6 January by the Old [Julian] Calendar). This is the feast of *Diarendas* (shortened form of *Tiarn-endaratz*), the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. The bonfires are lit in the courtyards of the churches, by the priests, the bishops or the newly-wed couples (grooms) who had married within the last year, with a flame taken with candles from the flame in the lamp kept alight on the altar table of the church. This procedure is preceded by a brief religious ceremony (Hoogasian Villa-Killbourne Matossian 1982: 136–138). The custom of the bonfire on the feast of *Diarendas* is still observed in Armenia today, for example in the region of Ashtarak (village of Oshakan, and elsewhere).

Similar bonfires are lit also in the streets (at crossroads) and the courtyards or on the flat roofs (before they were turned into modern pitched roofs) of the houses where a wedding had taken place that year. The young people dance around or jump over the bonfires. In particular, newly-weds but also childless (barren) women take part in these rituals, in order to conceive and bear children. If there are new-born babies and infants under the age of one year, they parade these around the fire, singing and dancing, sometimes to the accompaniment of music. Often they hand round sweetmeats and so on.

Furthermore, they predict the future (for the harvest, etc.) from the direction of the flame and the smoke. They light candles from the bonfires and bring the flame to their houses, and after lighting or renewing with these the fire in the hearth, they enact the same customs around it, while drinking and making good wishes for the new house (hearth or family). In other cases they take half-burnt embers and ash, and reverentially keep them safe in the house, believing that these bring "good luck" (Ananikian 1925: 58; Rendel Harris 1904: 436; Hoogasian Villa 1966: 70–71; Hoogasian Villa – Kilbourne Matossian 1982: 136–138). Moreover, in Armenia as in Greece, at Easter the faithful bring the sacred light of the Resurrection from the church to the home and with it light or renew the fire in the hearth.

The annual ritual bonfires are at once sacred and associated with fertility. That is why the faithful take the ash from them and sprinkle it on the fields, so as to secure a rich harvest. They also give their livestock water mixed with ash from the bonfire to drink, to make them strong and productive. The ash from the bonfire has curative properties too; it is mixed with water to make a paste which is used as a medicament for animals and humans (ointments, etc.) (Ananikian 1925: 57–58; Rendel Harris 1904: 437).

The February bonfires again, linked of course with the Christian belief in the purification (40 days after parturition) of the Virgin, coincide with the month of Mekhakan in the Armenian calendar, which is dedicated – as its name indicates – to the pagan god Mihr (Mithras). I note that bonfires were lit also on the feast day of Mithras, in his honour, in open spaces, and that from one of these they lit a lamp which they kept alight all year round in his temple (Boyajian 2009: 159). More generally, these bonfires coincide with the customary bonfires or Candlemas of the Western Church (Rendel Harris 1904: 436).

All the beliefs pertaining to fire – domestic, community, religious – constitute a system in which pagan and Christian religious views and practices/rituals are structured and are in absolute harmony.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

From what I have exposited above, the affinity of the rituals/magical acts associated with the hearth among the peoples of the Balkans and the Caucasus is obvious. This, of course, had been pointed out by earlier researchers too, such as Luzbetak for the Caucasus, Nopcsa for the Balkans (mainly Albania) and the Caucasus, Dumezil for the Indo-Europeans as well as the peoples of the Caucasus. Among all these peoples, the hearth is the centre of family life and family cohesion, and is linked with the ancestors and protection. All new members of the family, from the newborn babies and the brides, as well as those seeking sanctuary in the house, must pass by the hearth and ask for its protection and their acceptance by the ancestors. Moreover, the hearth among all peoples plays a role also at New Year, connected with the solar calendar or the sun.

Another connotation of the fire of the hearth is that in many cases it has been split up into its individual functions, such as the oven and the iconostasis with the lighted lamp. However, this does not apply generally. For example, among the Armenians there is no iconostasis and lamp, as there is among the Greek Orthodox Christians. The same applies too to the Muslims of the Caucasus.

The question raised by these similarities is not merely ethnological. Why, for instance, does the hearth display such similarities among the Indo-Europeans, among the peoples of the Caucasus and among the Turks-Mongols? Besides, something of the kind can be expanded also to other peoples, whether neighbours or not. The details of the construction of the hearth, its shape, its accessories, such as the chain and its significance, as well as the details of the individual rituals, point also to a historical affinity of these populations.

The reality is that these contacts exist from the beginning of History to the present day. From prehistoric times, peoples of the Caucasus and of Anatolia have migrated to the Balkans, particularly to Greece, e.g. Colchians, Carians, Lelegians, Pelasgians and others, Etruscans to Italy, Iberians (Georgians) to Spain. But the

opposite has happened too. Indo-Europeans have migrated to Anatolia and the Caucasus, such as Hittites, Luvians, Armenians from the Balkans, and Ossetians and Kurds from the East.

Furthermore, we should not forget that the Caucasus and Armenia, from Early Christian times into the eleventh century, with the exception of some interludes when they had their own kings (Tigranes the Great, Tiridates the Great, Arshak II, *et alii*), had been divided up between the East Roman Empire (Byzantium) and the Persian Empire, while more frequently the land was partitioned into principalities or petty kingdoms. The first important division was made in the reign of Emperor Theodosius the Great, in AD 387 (Baynes 1910). Later, after the Battle of Manzikert (1071), areas of the Caucasus and Transcaucasia passed to the sovereignty of the Seljuk Turks, and subsequently of the Ottoman Empire. Nonetheless, during both the Byzantine and the Ottoman period, population movements from the Balkans towards Anatolia, as well as vice versa, were very common.

The historical sources do not just refer to the administration of these regions, but also to installations of military units and populations. For example, we know that there were military units posted there in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, such as the twelve legions (an army of some 72,000 men) under General Terentius in Transcaucasia (Georgia or Iberia, Armenia), as well as other military forces from Dalmatia and other regions (Chapot 1907: 100–108, 307, 357–362; Baynes 1910: 625–643; Garsoian 1989: 186, 195, 213, 306; 2004: 103).

One other question is: To what extent do the rituals of the hearth have exactly the same content? Of course there are differences, for example in Armenia and the Caucasus there is greater consciousness of the sanctity and the religious significance of the fire of the hearth. This was the case for the Greeks too, in antiquity, but in recent times this has waned and the fire has greater symbolic importance. Also, the fire for the peoples of the Caucasus and the Armenians is directly related to the sun. This is theoretically the case among the Greeks too and the Balkan peoples, but here the connection emerges from the symbolic/structural approach to the subject.

In conclusion, we note that affinities of the populations of the two regions are noted also in other symbolic/ritual manifestations, which should be studied. As I see it, the field of comparative research and study of these issues is wide open.

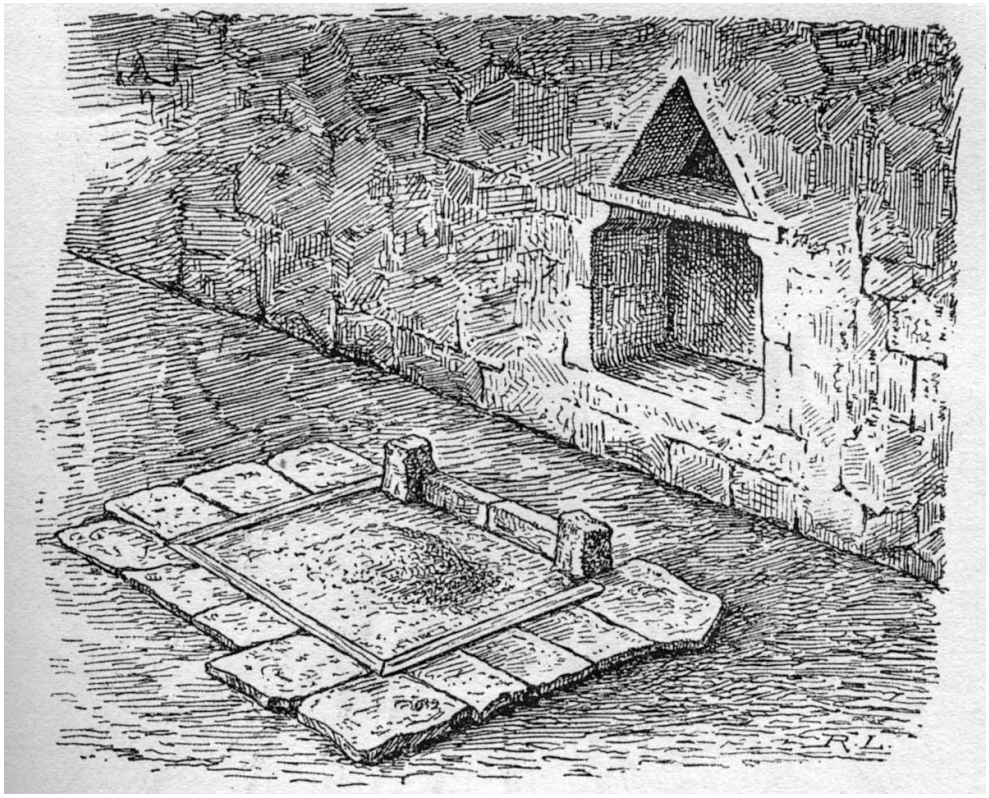

Fig. 1. Albania. Square hearth.

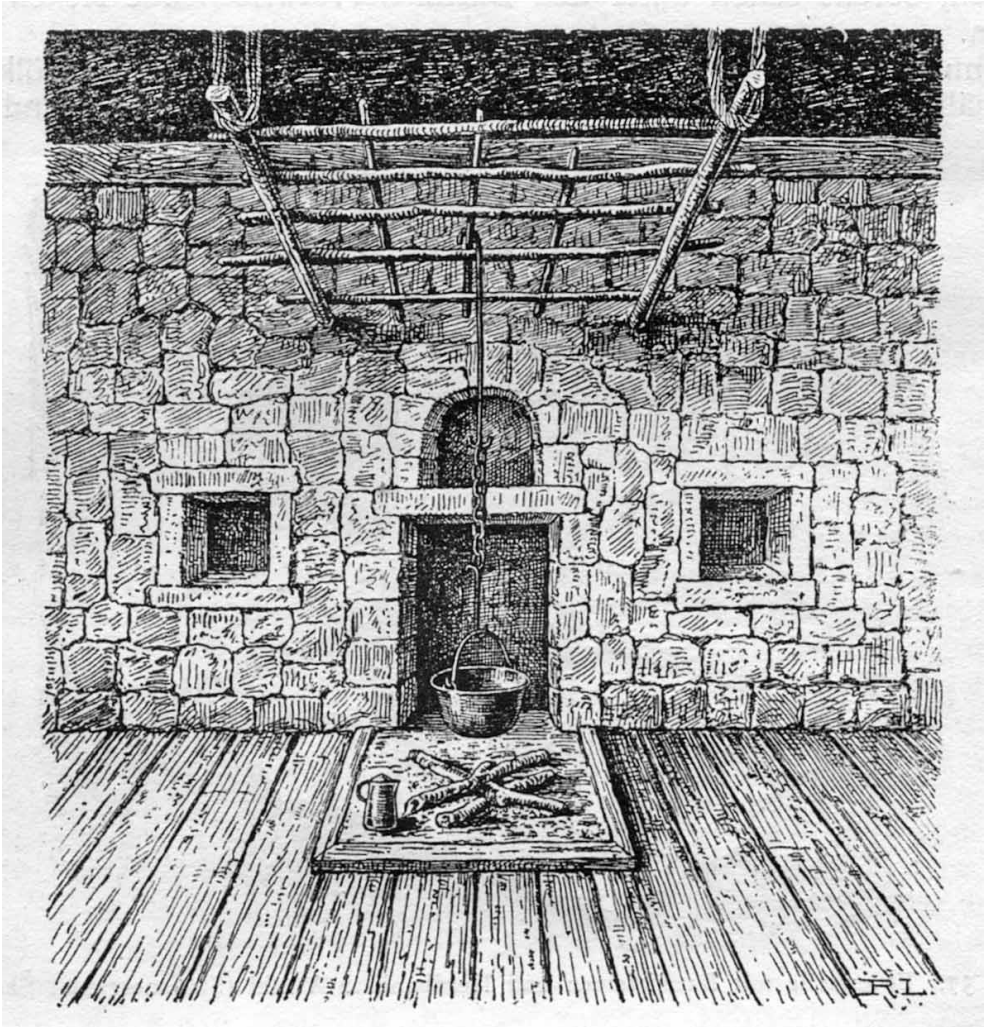

Fig. 2. Albania. Hearth (fireplace) in the wall.

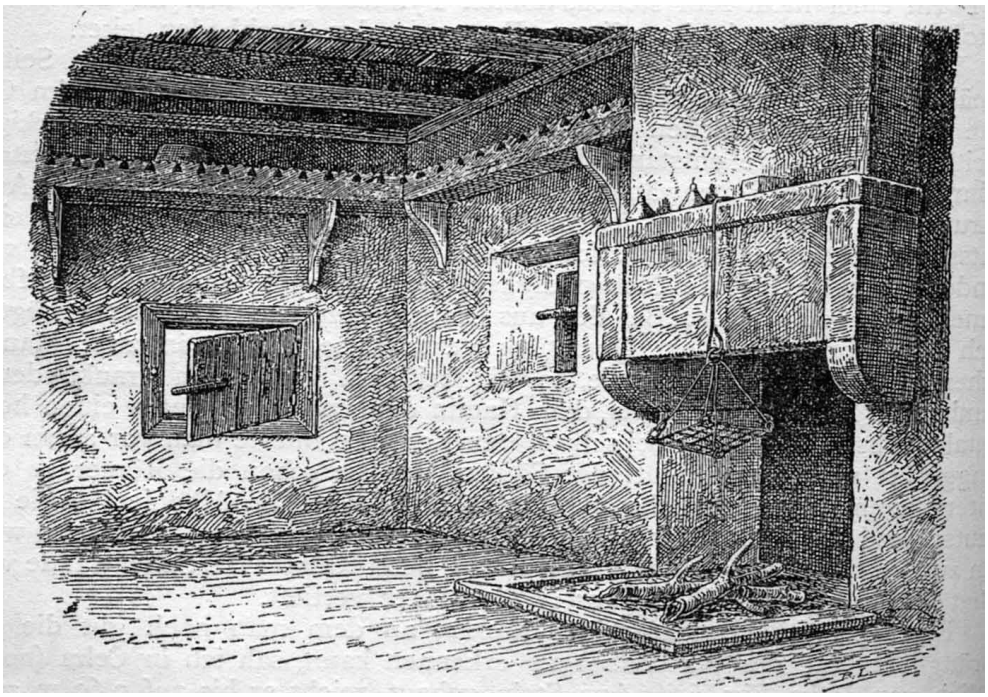

Fig. 3. Greece, Nafpaktia. Hearth at the centre of the room.

Fig. 4. Greece, Kephalovryso (Metzitie) Pogoni. Fireplace in the wall.

Fig. 5. Greece, Thesprotia. Fireplace with relief snakes and moons.

Fig. 6. Georgia, Abkhazia. Hearth at the centre of the room.

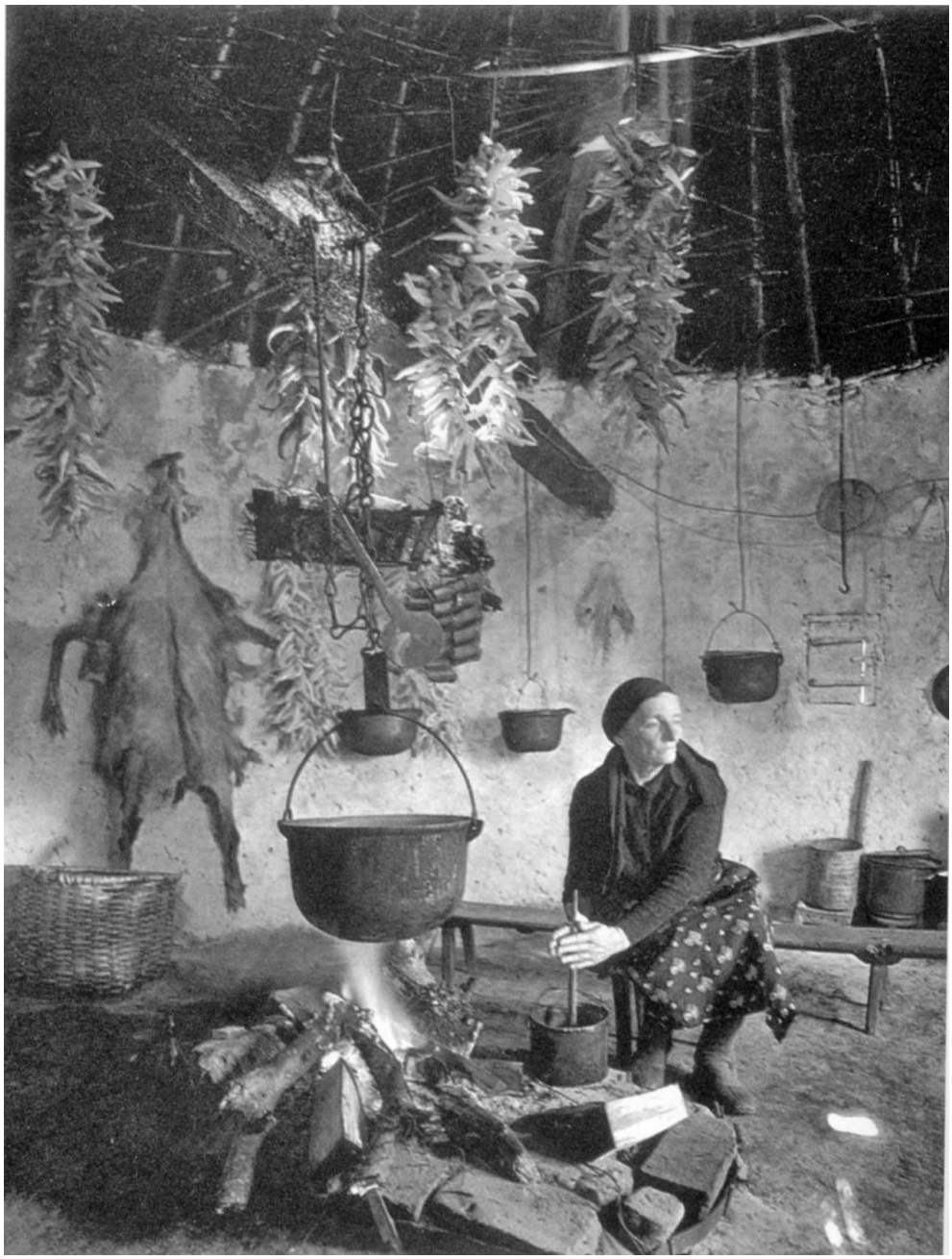

Fig. 7. Turkish Armenia (Van). Preparing the *lavash* (flatbread). At the edge, right, the *t'onir*.

Fig. 8. Turkish Armenia. Fireplace with *t'onir*.

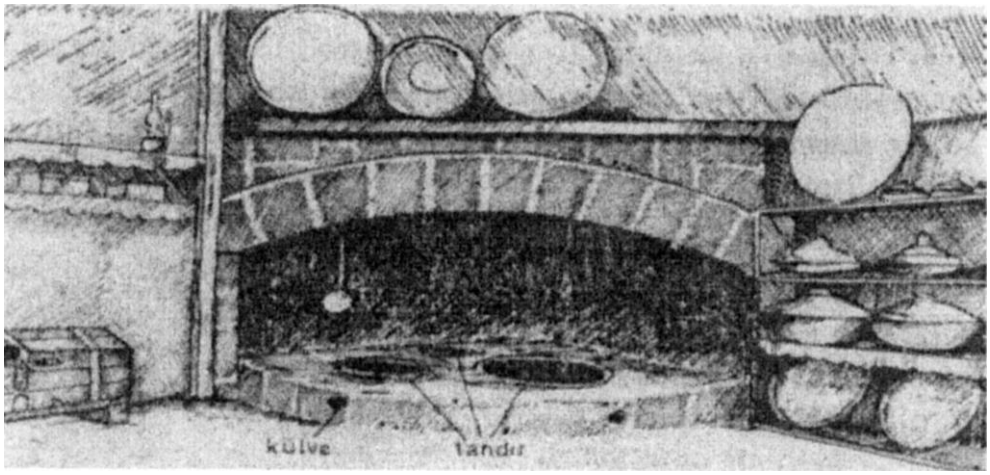

Fig. 9. Armenia, village of Avan. Hearth with chimney and representation of a lion, in the episcopal palace (7th c. AD).

Fig. 10. Minoan Crete, Malia. Round hearth in the floor.

Fig. 11. Armenia, Parpi of Ashtatak. Modern *t'onir*.

Fig. 12. Armenia, Yerevan. Modern large *t'onir* in a bakery (shop).

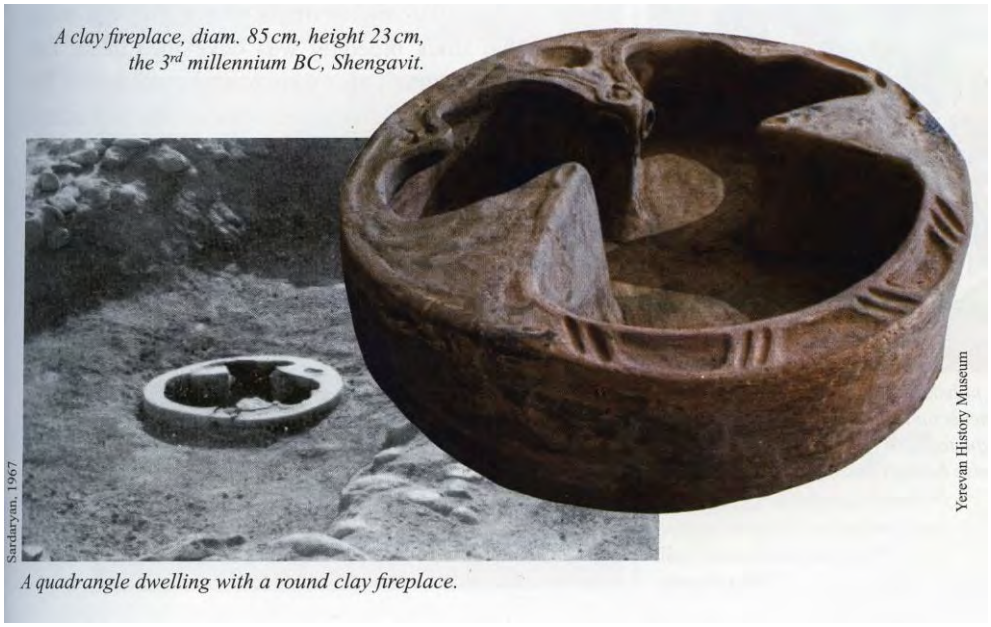

Fig. 13. Trefoil round clay hearth from Armenia (Shengavit) of 3000 BC.

Fig. 14. The *atrushan* below the altar table at Etmiatzin.

Fig. 15. The enormous hearth of the Genocide in Yerevan. View of the exterior and laying a wreath.

Fig. 16. The huge hearth of the Genocide in Yerevan. View of the interior and offering of white carnations.

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