

Myth, volcano and sacred landscape: Mount Ararat in the life and works of Khachatur Abovyan

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Abstract: This article examines the role of Mount Ararat in the life, legend, and literary imagination of Khachatur Abovyan. It argues that, in Abovyan's writings, Ararat functions not merely as a geographical setting or the object of a mountaineering feat, but as a complex symbolic space where sacred topography, volcanic catastrophe, myth, and cultural memory intersect. The study first considers the religious and folkloric traditions that represented Ararat as a forbidden mountain and shaped responses to its first ascent by Friedrich Parrot and Abovyan in 1829. It then turns to how that ascent, the controversies that followed it, later expeditions, and Abovyan's disappearance became intertwined in both biographical narrative and popular legend. Finally, it explores the literary transformation of Ararat in Abovyan's travel writing, unfinished prose, poetry, and the novel *Wounds of Armenia: Lament of a Patriot*, where the mountain emerges as a sacred, historical, and imaginative center. Drawing on literary texts, travelogues, periodicals, archival materials, and oral legends, the article shows how Ararat was shaped simultaneously by scientific inquiry, religious belief, and narrative invention. In this way, Abovyan's works reveal how a volcanic mountain was reimagined in nineteenth-century Armenian literature as a site where geology, myth, and national self-understanding converge.

Keywords: *Mount Ararat; Khachatur Abovyan; Armenian literature; sacred mountain; travel writing; nineteenth-century culture.*



University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series
<https://ubr.rev.unibuc.ro/>
Volume 16 | Issue 2 | 2026 |



<https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.16.2.2>
ISSN 2069–8658 (Print) | 2734–5963 (Online)
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Introduction

Mountains, and volcanoes in particular, have long shaped human imagination through their form, position, and eruptions. They have generated myths about the structure of the world (see Eliade; Toporov), cosmogonic narratives (see Hersh), and a wide range of legends and oral traditions. Over time, such myths, together with memories and impressions of actual eruptions, entered literary narrative. Recent interdisciplinary scholarship has increasingly drawn attention to the relationship between volcanoes and literary texts, bringing together geography, literary studies, and mythology (see Hales and Paul; Cocco; Goodall; Hoyte-West). Volcanoes are therefore studied not only as sources of mythic plots, but also as natural phenomena whose eruptions, disasters, and scientific interpretations have become part of literary narrative and cultural memory.

Within this framework, Mount Ararat is especially significant as a biblical, mythic, and geographical phenomenon represented in a wide range of literary and memoir texts. It occupies a central place in biblical, Christian, and pagan narratives, while in Armenian oral and ritual culture it appears in numerous and varied forms. Since antiquity, it has been imagined as a portal linking heaven, earth, and the underworld – an archetype of the cosmic mountain or pillar (Harutyunyan 37-40; Soghoyan and Devrikyan 113-4). At the same time, it also carries a darker meaning: according to popular belief, demons dwell at its foot and abduct human beings (Khorenats'i 114; Abeghyan 134). Within the biblical story of Noah's Ark, Ararat likewise became associated with sanctity, inaccessibility, and separation (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Gen. 8.4; Dwight 189-90).

Modern scholarship likewise treats Ararat as a complex natural site that can be studied through volcanology, glaciation, geomorphology, mountaineering, and geoheritage. One of the central questions in this field is the catastrophic event of 1840 in the Ahora Gorge (Akory Canyon), often interpreted as the volcano's last eruption. This event is important not only as a natural disaster, but also as a historical turning point that generated scientific, documentary, memoiristic, and travel accounts, as well as new myths and literary representations (see Karakhanian, "Holocene-Historical"; Haroutiunian, "Catastrophic Eruption"; Karakhanian, "The Historical Volcanoes"; Haroutiunian, "The Historical Volcanoes"; Ajamoghlyan; Azzoni; Canpolat).

In the nineteenth century, Ararat also became a constant object of interest for European mountaineers and scholars, who attempted to ascend its supposedly inaccessible summit while studying the causes and consequences of the catastrophe in the Ahora Gorge and examining the biblical story of Noah's Ark and related beliefs. In their travelogues and popular-scientific writings, Ararat appears not only as an object of scientific inquiry, but also as a biblical and mythic landscape marked by local Armenian beliefs in the mountain's curse (see Parrot; Wagner; Abich, "Reports"; Abich, *From the Caucasian Lands*).

Khachatur Abovyan (1809-1848), often regarded as a founder of modern Armenian literature and language, is closely connected with these traveler-scholars (Bardakjian 35-7). As translator and companion, he accompanied several European researchers who either ascended Ararat or studied it scientifically. In 1829, as part of the expedition led by Friedrich Parrot, professor at the University of Dorpat, he became one of the first to reach

the summit of the supposedly inaccessible mountain. That ascent proved decisive for both his life and writing: he was anathematized by the clergy, expelled from the Church, and abandoned by many relatives and friends. At the same time, Ararat became a central presence in his literary, publicistic, and travel writing.¹ Even today, nearly two centuries later, myths still circulate among Armenians concerning the blessing or curse of Ararat, as well as the fate and ‘disappearance’ of the writer.

This article examines the real and mythic role of Ararat in Abovyan’s life, in the legends that formed around him, and in his poetic, prose, publicistic, and memoir writing. It also considers how the attempts to ascend the mountain and the story of its last eruption shaped his work.

Corpus and methodology

This study draws on Abovyan’s own texts, European travelogues, Armenian and Russian periodicals of the time, archival materials, and legends circulating both during his lifetime and afterward. It adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining literary studies, folklore studies, sociology, and, to a limited extent, geology. The analysis employs historical-comparative, comparative, biographical, semiotic, and myth-critical methods.

As a supplementary component, the article also draws on a small sociological survey exploring contemporary perceptions of Abovyan as a writer and cultural figure, with particular attention to the place of Ararat in the memory of his life nearly two centuries after the first ascent. The survey was not intended to represent contemporary Armenian attitudes as a whole. Rather, it was used to examine which episodes of Abovyan’s life remain most strongly associated with him today and, in particular, whether the ascent of Ararat still holds a prominent place in cultural memory. Conducted through Google Forms over ten days, the survey included 82 respondents from different age groups, educational backgrounds, professions, and regions of Armenia. Respondents were aged 18-65+; 90.2% identified as female and 9.8% as male, while 35.4% were from the capital Yerevan and 64.6% from the regions. The results should therefore be read with some caution, given the relatively small sample, the considerable gender imbalance, and the possibility of self-selection bias. They are used here as supplementary evidence rather than as representative sociological data.²

¹ Tigran Simyan discusses a comparable relationship between a cultural figure and a place in his study of Ivan Aivazovsky and Feodosia, examining Aivazovsky’s role in shaping the social, infrastructural, and symbolic space of the city and, in turn, the importance of Feodosia and the sea to the cultural image of the Armenian marine painter (Simyan, “Feodosia as a real and visual text” 59–70). In the case of Khachatur Abovyan, a similar connection can be observed with Ararat, which shaped both his biography and literary imagination. For the broader cultural and literary discourse of Old Tiflis and the South Caucasus, see also Simyan, “Creolized Texts of Old Tiflis” 256–85; Simyan, “The paradigm of musical instruments” 143–66; Makaryan and Toghramadjian, “From Constantinople to the South Caucasus” 93–104; and Mechitov, “Old Tiflis.”

² Author’s survey on contemporary perceptions of Khachatur Abovyan, conducted via Google Forms, [Mar 26, 2026-April 4, 2026], 82 respondents.

The Forbidden Mountain and the first ascent

Mount Ararat is an ice-capped dormant stratovolcano in present-day Turkey. It consists of two principal cones: Greater Ararat (Turkish: *Büyük Ağrı*; Armenian: *Mets Masis*), rising to 5,137 meters above sea level, and Lesser Ararat (Turkish: *Küçük Ağrı*; Armenian: *Pok' r Masis*), at 3,896 meters (Azzoni 10). In the nineteenth century, the volcano stood at the intersection of the Russian, Persian, and Ottoman empires, and under Tsar Nicholas I, as well as at the invitation of the imperial authorities, scholars began scientific investigations of the mountain and its surroundings.

In the summer of 1829, Johann Jakob Friedrich Wilhelm Parrot (1792-1841), professor at the University of Dorpat, arrived in Yerevan with an expedition intended to ascend the mountain and conduct geographical, botanical, and natural-scientific observations. An experienced mountaineer and researcher, Parrot knew both of Joseph Pitton de Tournefort's failed attempt to climb Ararat in 1701 and of the legends surrounding the mountain's inaccessibility and religious prohibition. He therefore set out consciously to challenge these assumptions and become the first person to reach its summit (Geus 113).

The clergy of the brotherhood of Etchmiadzin received him courteously, yet at the same time recounted stories of the mountain's prohibition in an effort to dissuade the European scholar, sent under imperial auspices, from setting foot on sacred ground. They showed him the relic of Noah's Ark, still preserved there today ("Saint Jacob of Nisibis"), and told him the story of its acquisition (Parrot, *Journey* 84). According to an old Armenian legend, in the fourth century Saint Jacob of Nisibis attempted to climb Ararat to prove to doubters the truth of the biblical account. After enduring great hardship, he fell asleep before reaching the summit. In a dream, an angel appeared to him, gave him a piece of wood from the Ark, and conveyed God's command that no human being should ascend the sacred peak. Upon waking, Jacob found the relic beside him and brought it to the people as proof of both divine truth and divine prohibition (P'awstos Buzand 25-30).

Over time, the biblical story of the "Flood" and the legend of Saint Jacob were supplemented by new traditions connected with the sacred topography of Mount Masis,³ including the spring of Saint Jacob, the monastery bearing his name, and Akori, the village where Noah was believed to have planted a vineyard (Garibian 294). Yet the most enduring of these legends remained the idea that it was impossible to climb the mountain: its summit was protected by divine prohibition, and anyone who violated it would be punished.

Belief in these traditions remained strong in the nineteenth century, when Parrot came to Etchmiadzin intending to reach the summit. On the third attempt, he and his companions succeeded. Alongside Parrot, those who climbed Ararat included the Armenian deacon Khachatur Abovyan, the Russian soldiers Alexej Sdrowenko and Matwej Tschalpanov, and the Armenian peasants Owannes Aiwassian and Murat Pogossian (Geus 113). Abovyan, then a young cleric serving as Parrot's Russian

³ In Armenian tradition, Mount Ararat is commonly referred to as Masis.

translator, asked to join the expedition despite the legend he had heard since childhood. As he later recalled in his travel writings and articles, the ascent was accompanied by conflicting emotions: fear and doubt on the one hand, and on the other the “sweet desire” to become the first after Noah to reach the sacred summit and erect a cross there (Abovyan, *Travelogues* 33).

In his Armenian travel account, written under the immediate impression of the event, Abovyan describes the sensation of reaching the summit in exalted terms: “The wonder appeared, and the desire that had led us toward this joyful sight – toward the birthplace of the whole world – took flight” (Abovyan, *Travelogues* 34). In a short Russian article published in Tiflis in 1831, he again described the experience for a wider readership, emphasizing both joy and wonder. While Parrot carried out barometric measurements, Abovyan recalled running over the summit “like a child,” searching eagerly for some object to preserve in memory, and finally taking only a small piece of snow, whose melted water he later shared with the archimandrites of Etchmiadzin (Abovyan, “Ascent” 180). In his 1835 German article, he adopted a more conciliatory tone, insisting that by ascending Ararat they had not violated the divine command, since they had stood not directly on the mountain’s earth but on the snow above it (Abovyan, “New Testimony” 147).

The successful ascent, however, did not settle the matter. Instead, Parrot and Abovyan soon faced accusations of deception and fabrication. Abovyan first encountered these charges within the ecclesiastical circles of Etchmiadzin. The Synod repeatedly summoned the young cleric, pressured him to renounce both Parrot and the ascent itself, and, according to his later account, even cursed him and drove him from the monastery in the cold without an overcoat (Abovyan, *Travelogues* 193). The Armenian peasants who had taken part in the expedition were likewise threatened, and before long they began to claim that, although they had attempted the climb with Parrot, they had never actually reached the summit and had merely been persuaded by the European professor to spread a false story.

These oral pressures were soon reinforced by the press. In the 17 January 1831 issue of *Tiflis Gazette*, I. Shopen wrote that after Noah no human had ever again set foot on the summit of Ararat (Shopen, “Statistics” 38). In a footnote to the same article, however, the editor replied that Shopen was perhaps unaware of the ‘glorious feat’ performed by Professor Parrot and his expedition (40). In February of the same year, Shopen returned to the matter in a longer article, openly accusing Parrot of deception and insisting that both the Russian soldiers and Armenian peasants had told him personally that they had never reached the summit, while Abovyan alone continued to circulate false testimony (see Shopen, “Correspondence”).

Two months later, Parrot answered these accusations in the same newspaper, describing the route and the difficulties of the ascent in detail (see Parrot, “Criticism”). Abovyan’s own Russian article was published alongside this reply as additional evidence (see Abovyan, “Ascent”). In an effort to put an end to the controversy, Parrot even secured sworn statements from members of the summit party before Russian officials. Later English-language scholarship has emphasized that Abovyan did not participate in the oath ceremony in Yerevan, possibly because of pressure from the church authorities at

Etchmiadzin, although his testimony might have proved especially valuable (Bryce 178; Peck 213).

Abovyan's absence from that ceremony, however, had a more practical explanation. First, as noted above, he had already publicly affirmed the ascent in his Russian article of April 1831 (see Abovyan, "Ascent"). Second, in 1835 he returned to the subject again in German, confirming once more that they had indeed climbed the sacred mountain and explaining that he had not sworn with the others because by then he was no longer in Etchmiadzin. At Parrot's invitation and on a scholarship provided by order of Tsar Nicholas I, he had already left for Dorpat to pursue higher education at the university there (Abovyan, "New Testimony" 147). Moreover, in August of the same year he was formally questioned in Dorpat and gave sworn testimony before local officials, without ever retracting his claim (P. Hakobyan, *Ascent* 159–63).

The controversy surrounding the first ascent thus shows that Ararat was perceived in the Armenian milieu of the period not merely as a geographical summit to be conquered, but as a sacred and symbolically charged space whose violation provoked religious anxiety, communal resistance, and competing narratives of truth. For Abovyan, however, the consequences of crossing this sacred boundary extended far beyond the controversy over the ascent and became closely intertwined with the course of his own life.

Abovyan's life in the presence of Ararat

Since childhood, Abovyan dreamed of receiving a higher European education. As a young man preparing for clerical service at the monastery of Etchmiadzin, he imagined studying at one of Europe's leading institutions and then returning to his homeland to found schools on a European model and help enlighten Armenian children. It is therefore not surprising that the arrival at Etchmiadzin of a professor from one of the most prestigious universities of the time, who had come to ascend Ararat, filled the young scribe with excitement. The event revived his hopes, and Abovyan resolved to ask Parrot, on the symbolic summit of Ararat itself, to help him obtain an education at Dorpat. Later, he would describe that inner experience once again through the symbolism of biblical Ararat.

Parrot appeared – my saving angel [...] And on the summit of Noah's sacred mountain, together with the holy cross, my vow and my prayer also rose upward; yet still distant was the place from which I was to return toward Ararat with the green branch in my hand. (Abovyan, *Travelogues* 193)

In Abovyan's imagination, Dorpat University likewise became a symbol of saving Ararat, a place from which, after a difficult journey, he would return like Noah's dove bearing the branch of education, enlightenment, and knowledge to his people. Yet for the man who had broken the divine prohibition against ascending Ararat, the road to a distant land did not come easily. He was pressured, promised ecclesiastical positions, urged to forget Parrot, and even anathematized and expelled from the Church. Rumors spread that

he was leaving for a dangerous place where he would change his religion, betray his people, and turn away from God (P. Hakobyan, *Khachatur Abovyan* 343-51). Because of such stories, Dorpat itself acquired in the local imagination the character of a strange, almost half-magical place – one to which, for the first time, a young Armenian had gone, and that Armenian was precisely the young man who had dared to climb the forbidden Ararat.

When Abovyan returned to his homeland in 1836 and began his pedagogical and literary activity, he once again found himself surrounded by legends and stories. Even within his own family, he was no longer received with the same spontaneity and warmth as before; according to Wagner, his own mother was afraid to speak freely with a son educated in a distant land and covered her face from him, as women in the Caucasus traditionally did in the presence of unfamiliar men (230-31).

Abovyan's reputation also spread beyond Armenia. Travelers from tsarist Russia and Europe came to the region to ascend Ararat under his guidance, conduct research, or explore local myths and legends. Among them were Moritz Wagner, August von Haxthausen, Hermann Abich, Friedrich Bodenstedt, Georg Rosen, Karl Koch, and Andrei Muraviev (A. Hakobyan, "Khachatur Abovyan's Interrelations" 125).

Wagner visited the region in 1843 and again in 1847. Together with Abovyan, he travelled on the slopes of Ararat, saw the ruins of the destroyed village of Akori, and examined the catastrophe in the Ahora Gorge, which he interpreted not as the result of an earthquake but of a volcanic eruption (Wagner 178-81). The Russian government likewise sent the geologist Hermann Abich to investigate the 1840 event. During 1844-45, Abich attempted to ascend Ararat several times, though only the last attempt was successful. Abovyan accompanied him during the first two expeditions and the related geological investigations, but did not reach the summit with him. Unlike Wagner, however, Abich proposed an exclusively tectonic explanation, interpreting the landslide as a consequence of seismic shaking rather than volcanic activity (see Abich, "Reports"; Abich, *From the Caucasian Lands*).

Abovyan reached the summit of the forbidden mountain for the second time in 1846, together with the English traveler and mountaineer Henry Danby Seymour (1820-1877) (Alcock 322-3). A few months later, he published a Russian article in the Tbilisi newspaper *Кавказъ* [*Caucasus*], presenting the journey to the "sacred mountain" in the form of travel notes (Abovyan, "A New Ascent" 79). Yet this ascent, too, did not pass without consequence. In response to Abovyan's article, two unsigned pieces appeared in the Armenian-language *Կովկաս* [*Caucasus*] on 7 June 1847. They denied both Seymour's ascent and the ascent with Parrot seventeen years earlier, while at the same time discrediting Abovyan and the European climbers. According to these articles, Parrot, Abich, and Seymour had all falsely claimed to have climbed Ararat, and Abovyan was accused of repeating and embellishing that falsehood. The charge was not only factual but also religious: the climbers were presented as godless men whose claims undermined belief in Eden, Noah's Ark, and the Flood, and thereby provoked divine wrath ("Mount Ararat and Noah's Ark" 91-9).

The influence of these articles quickly spread, and many people began openly accusing Abovyan of falsehood and impiety, condemning both him and the Europeans.

The National Archives of Armenia preserve an official record of how this hostility took a more public form. On 18 November 1847, Abovyan and Yerevan postmaster Harutiun Kalantaryan engaged in a heated public argument in which Kalantaryan declared that all stories of ascending Ararat were fabrications and insulted the well-known scholars by name. As a result, in the presence of representatives of the tsarist authorities, the two men made a wager: in the following year, 1848, Abovyan would climb the summit of Ararat again and prove the truth of the previous ascents. The vice-governor of the Erivan Governorate, Nikifor Blavatsky, also agreed to accompany the expedition. According to the terms of the bet, if the ascent failed, Abovyan and the vice-governor would pay Kalantaryan 1,500 Russian chervonets; if it succeeded, they would receive 1,000 from him and donate the sum to charity. A few days later, the wager was officially ratified at the Yerevan city police office (see “Document concerning the wager”; *Archive of Khachatur Abovyan* 188-90; A. Hakobyan, *The Yerevan Period of Khachatur Abovyan’s Life and Work* 131-33).

In the autumn of 1848, however, Abovyan was unable to make the ascent. On the morning of April 2, he left home and disappeared under circumstances that remain unknown to this day. Police efforts and local searches brought no result, and the subsequent fate of the writer has never been clarified. This disappearance further intensified the mysterious aura surrounding Abovyan in the popular imagination: to the ascent of Ararat and the journey to a distant land was now added the fact of vanishing in unexplained circumstances. Various realistic, romantic, and semi-fantastic versions began to circulate almost immediately: suicide, murder motivated by jealousy or debt, exile to Siberia, escape to the Ottoman Empire or South America, and many others (P. Hakobyan, *The Mysteries of Khachatur Abovyan’s Biography* 347-410). Yet among the people, the most enduring versions proved to be those linked to Ararat’s curse. In one widespread legend, the well-known wager with Kalantaryan was transformed into a wager with Tsar Nicholas I himself: if Abovyan succeeded in ascending Ararat once more, the tsar would grant independence to Armenia.⁴ The writer, however, disappeared on the difficult road leading toward the sacred mountain (Ghanalanyan 58-62). According to another version, his disappearance was a heavenly punishment for having defied God’s command and climbed the forbidden mountain (Mordovtsev 81-82).

Comparable myths about Abovyan’s image and disappearance circulate even today, even though he has long been canonized in Armenian culture as a major writer whose works are compulsory in school and university curricula. To gain some insight into contemporary perceptions of Abovyan, I conducted a small-scale survey focusing on which episodes of his life people remember most clearly. The results are telling: 93.9% of respondents mentioned the ascent of Ararat, while the same percentage mentioned his disappearance. These two episodes thus emerge as the most prominent elements of

⁴ Most of Eastern Armenia was incorporated into the Russian Empire following the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828, although certain Armenian-populated regions had already come under Russian control earlier, between 1801 and 1813 (Bournoutian 241). These territories remained within the Russian Empire until its collapse in 1917, and the Republic of Armenia was established in 1918.

Abovyan's biography in the respondents' cultural memory. Although 85.4% also recalled his education in Dorpat, other biographical and literary facts formally included in school and university curricula were recalled by considerably fewer participants.

It is equally striking that, nearly two centuries after Abovyan's ascent of Ararat, a further fantastic legend still circulates in contemporary oral tradition: according to this version, Abovyan withdrew toward the biblical mountain in the nineteenth century and remains hidden at its foot to this day as a mythic guardian of a secret library containing the mysteries of life, the world, and the universe.⁵

Both during Abovyan's lifetime and today, the episodes of his life that have remained most vividly in popular memory are those connected with Ararat. People doubted him, accused him of lying and of offending religious belief, and interpreted the catastrophe in the Ahora Gorge and the destruction of Akori as consequences of violating divine command, even as signs of apocalypse. Over time, however, these same actions also came to inspire admiration and pride, becoming evidence of the writer's defiance, determination, and courage. The close connection between Ararat and Abovyan's biography was also reflected in his writing, where the mountain acquired meanings that extended beyond the circumstances of the ascents themselves.

Texts and representations

Ararat occupies a central place in Abovyan's literary imagination. As the previous sections have shown, in his travel accounts and articles on the ascents he stresses both the joy of becoming the first after Noah to reach the sacred mountain and the fear of not returning alive. For all his determination, he remained inwardly troubled by stories of divine prohibition and possible curse. In his literary works, however, Ararat acquires additional dimensions, becoming part of a wider system of historical, geographical, artistic, and mythic meanings.

As part of the scientific investigations into the 1840 catastrophe in the Ahora Gorge, Abovyan accompanied Wagner, Abich, and Seymour, took part in their field studies, and became familiar with competing explanations of the event. He returns to these questions in his travel-style article *A New Ascent of Ararat: Extract from a Letter by Kh. A. Abovyan*. Recounting his second ascent, he places side by side two memories of Akori at the foot of the mountain: his first visit with Parrot, when the village was still flourishing, and the later sight of its ruins. The passage also shows that Abovyan agreed with Wagner's interpretation, attributing the village's destruction to a volcanic eruption rather than an earthquake:

Old Akori [...] It is sorrowful to look upon these sad traces of what were once flourishing settlements, especially for me, who remember their former prosperity and has visited these places often with the late Parrot, with Mr. Wagner four years

⁵ This legend was recounted to us by Arevik Stamboltsyan, director of the Khachatur Abovyan House-Museum, who noted that museum visitors have repeated it to her on several occasions, albeit in somewhat varying forms.

ago, and with Mr. Abich in 1844. No more than six years ago there still existed here a beautiful village, remarkable for its site, location, climate, wealth, and antiquity, but one fatal eruption of Ararat in a matter of minutes spread only desolation and covered with a tragic grave 5,000 inhabitants together with all their houses, gardens, and fields across an area six versts wide and fifteen to twenty versts long. (Abovyan, "A New Ascent" 79)

The catastrophe of the Ahora Gorge appears in another form in the unfinished Russian work *Three Wise Men from the West*, written in 1847. There, Abovyan reworks the journey he undertook with Abich in June 1844 to the Persian region of Maku, whose purpose was to investigate the south-eastern slopes of Ararat and the causes of the earthquake or eruption. The text takes the form of an adventure narrative and, as Abovyan himself indicates, shows stylistic and structural affinity with James Justinian Morier's *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (see Morier; Karagyozyan 862-3).

According to the plot, the expedition travels by order of the tsarist authorities but, for lack of time, fails to secure an official letter of introduction to the khan of Maku. Upon arrival, the group finds itself in danger, as the local inhabitants mistake them for ordinary travelers and plan to rob them.⁶ At this point, Abovyan, well acquainted with the myths surrounding Ararat, begins to play on local fears and imaginations. He presents the European and Russian scholars as wise men and himself as their interpreter-mullah, sent by order of the tsar to reveal the secrets of Mount Ararat:

Great Russia, having taken note of the destructive earthquake of 1840 and the baleful and catastrophic deeds of the subterranean spirits, was finally compelled to seek someone who understood all the secrets of nature and could show the means of destroying all those infernal evil forces. (Abovyan, *Travelogues* 183)

This invented story drew its force from local belief. In the nineteenth century, both Muslim and Christian populations of the region still imagined the foot of Ararat as a place linked to the underworld, inhabited by demons, evil spirits, and jinn who could abduct human beings (Khorenats'i 114; Abeghyan 134; Harutyunyan 37-40). The people of Maku had themselves suffered from the events of 1840, and even the khan's palace was damaged, so the disaster was widely associated with subterranean evil powers. Abovyan, fully aware of these beliefs, presents his companions as magicians who can move through the air, create lightning-fast machines, and read the stars, and who have come to 'bewitch' the evil spirits of Ararat so that no such earthquakes or eruptions will occur again. The story made a strong impression on the locals. According to Abovyan, what ultimately saved the group was Abich's barometer, which correctly predicted several weather changes and was therefore presented as a 'key to heaven and earth,' capable of

⁶ When Abich started his investigations in the early 1840s, the immense territory of the Caucasus still seemed largely unexplored – almost a "tabula rasa." Numerous districts, populated by autonomous Muslim peoples and tribes, were marked by prolonged armed conflicts between local groups and Russian imperial troops (Milanovsky 178).

controlling the weather (Abovyan, *Travelogues* 183).

Abich recounts the same journey in *From Caucasian Lands*, but in a markedly different way. Whereas Abovyan reshapes the episode as a semi-mythical adventure, Abich emphasizes geological and geographical observation, describing the mountain from the Persian side and focusing on local dangers, hospitality, the ceremonial reception with carpets, and the destruction of the khan's palace. Yet even in this more scientific account, Ararat still appears to the local population as a place of magical and unsettling power, and the khan seems to view Abich not simply as a foreign researcher, but as a man of mysterious status and hidden purpose (Abich, *From the Caucasian Lands* 91-115).

Ararat also plays a central role in Abovyan's poetry. In the 1824 poem *Longing for the Former Glories of My Homeland*, written years before he met Parrot, the mountain appears as a witness of time, one that has seen both the heroic and the tragic periods of Armenian history (Abovyan, *Complete Works in Eight Volumes* 17). In *Hayk's Entry into Armenia and the Terrors of His Imagination at the Time of the War of 1826*, it becomes a symbol of Armenian freedom and independence (62). In *The Joyful Feeling of a Grateful Armenian at the Liberation of His Homeland*, it is paralleled with Greek Olympus, another mountain on which the voice of God may be heard (24).

The poem *Imagination on a Journey to Mount Ararat, on 28 September 1829*, has been written under the immediate impression of the ascent itself, bears the mark of lived experience and the myths surrounding the mountain. Its hero wanders at the foot of Ararat and decides to spend the night on one of the rocks. At twilight, the demonic side of the mountain reveals itself: Ararat roars, thunders, and cries out because its ancient sleep has been disturbed. The hero imagines evil spirits rising from the foot of the mountain to punish him and faints in terror. Upon waking, he finds himself near the summit, bathed in holy light.

In contrast to the terrifying lower slopes, the summit stands close to paradise, where he encounters the grey-haired Noah, patriarch and guardian spirit of Masis. The poem thus brings together personal fear, the lived ascent, and the dual myths of Ararat as both demonic and sacred. The contrast is also structured spatially: the lower slopes belong to darkness, fear, and demonic forces, while the summit is associated with light, sacredness, and the biblical past. The ascent therefore becomes more than a physical movement up the mountain; it brings together, within a single journey, the conflicting meanings that Ararat held in Abovyan's imagination.

During his years of study in Dorpat (1831-1835), Abovyan repeatedly represents Ararat as a symbol of homesickness and attachment to the homeland, as in *Spring, Love for my Homeland*, and *Thoughts at the Sight of My Homeland*. From afar, Armenia increasingly takes shape in his imagination through the symbolic image of the mountain. Ararat also has crucial symbolic significance in the topography of Abovyan's best-known work, *Wounds of Armenia: Lament of a Patriot*, written between 1841 and 1845. The novel, rightly regarded as a foundational work of modern Armenian prose, revalues questions of Armenian identity, historical memory, and remembrance within a people long subjected first to Persian and then to Russian imperial rule. In passages outside the main plot, Abovyan repeatedly returns to the sacred mountain as one of the key symbols of Armenian values.

In the lamenting prologue of the novel, often seen as a manifesto of modern Armenian literature, he explains his reasons for writing the work:

Masis stood always before me, pointing with its finger to the land from which I was born. Eden lived vividly in my mind, bringing before me, in dream and waking, the name and honor of my country. (Abovyan, *Wounds of Armenia* 42)

The references to Ararat and the Garden of Eden immediately establish the sacred geography of the novel's narrative space. Abovyan alludes here to the Book of Genesis, invoking both the story of creation and the location of Eden between the Tigris and the Euphrates (*Gen.* 2.10–14), as well as the resting place of Noah's Ark on Ararat after the Flood (*Gen.* 8.4). In this way, Armenia is presented as the place from which human history began twice. A few lines later, Abovyan also stresses the sacred origin of the Armenians themselves, calling them the "grandchildren of Noah" and "inhabitants of Eden" (Abovyan, *Wounds of Armenia* 42).

He returns to the same biblical framework in the opening of the second chapter, where the seemingly peaceful description of Armenian life gives way to scenes of captivity, massacre, and subjugation. In accordance with this shift, sacred space itself is represented as desecrated and ruined:

The fortress of Yerevan, the soil of Armenia, which after a thousand years had become the dwelling-place of thieves and bandits ... that very land, that wondrous world, where Eden had once stood, where, when God destroyed the whole world by the Flood, only the holy mountain of Masis was deemed worthy to receive Noah's Ark, and from the Armenian land humanity multiplied again and went on to found other countries. (Abovyan, *Wounds of Armenia* 113)

The contrast between these passages is significant. In the prologue, Ararat and Eden establish Armenia as a sacred place of origin, while in the second chapter this same sacred geography becomes the setting of historical suffering and loss. Ararat thus connects the biblical past with the historical present, allowing Abovyan to present the *Wounds of Armenia* not only as a political and historical tragedy, but also as the desecration of a landscape invested with sacred memory.

Conclusion

In Abovyan's writings, Ararat is far more than a geographical setting or the object of a mountaineering feat. It becomes a layered symbolic landscape in which volcanic catastrophe, sacred topography, mythic fear, historical memory, and national self-imagination come together. Seen in this light, Ararat connects the historical event of ascent with the literary transformation of sacred space, showing how a volcanic mountain may function at once as natural reality, religious boundary, and narrative structure. Abovyan's case suggests that the meanings of Ararat emerged not only from its physical

presence and scientific exploration, but also from the myths, prohibitions, and textual representations that gathered around it. His works therefore show how volcanic space can be reimagined in literature as a site where geology, memory, and cultural symbolism meet.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Citation: Soghoyan, A. Myth, volcano and sacred landscape: Mount Ararat in the life and works of Khachatur Abovyan. *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 16(2), 2026: 19-36. <https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.16.2.2>

Received: May 31, 2026 | **Accepted:** August 14, 2026 | **Published:** August 17, 2026

