

The Enduring Waters: Tracing the Cult of the Kurdish Mother Goddess Ana from Ancient Mesopotamia to the Present

Part I: The Ancient Matrix of the Mother Goddess in the Near East

The figure of Ana, the pre-modern Kurdish mother goddess of water and fertility, did not emerge from a vacuum. Her cult represents a regional crystallization of a religious tradition that is arguably one of the oldest and most enduring in human history: the veneration of the divine feminine. To comprehend Ana in her full significance is to trace her lineage back through millennia of cultural and religious evolution in the ancient Near East. Her roots are sunk deep into the fertile crescent, drawing sustenance from the primordial mother goddesses of Neolithic Anatolia, the complex and powerful deities of Mesopotamia, and the imperial pantheon of Iran. The cult of Ana is a living testament to this vast and ancient spiritual heritage, a stream that flows from the headwaters of civilization itself, carrying with it the archetypal symbols, myths, and rituals that defined the relationship between humanity, nature, and the sacred for thousands of years. This section will excavate these foundational layers, establishing the historical and mythological matrix from which the Kurdish goddess ultimately took shape.

The Primordial Mother: Goddess Worship in Neolithic Anatolia and Mesopotamia

The worship of a supreme mother goddess is not a late invention but a foundational element of religious life in the ancient Near East, with its origins traceable to the very dawn of settled civilization. Archaeological evidence from across Anatolia and Mesopotamia reveals a profound and continuous reverence for a female deity associated with fertility, birth, and dominion over the natural world. These early cults established the fundamental archetypes that would be inherited, adapted, and elaborated upon by subsequent cultures, including the Iranians and Kurds.

The antiquity of this tradition is staggering. In the Direkli Cave in what is now Kahramanmaraş province, Turkey, archaeologists have unearthed a fired clay figurine of a mother goddess

dated to 16,000 years ago, representing one of the oldest such artifacts in the entire region.¹ This discovery pushes the origins of goddess veneration deep into the Upper Paleolithic, long before the rise of cities or empires. However, it is in the Neolithic period that the iconography becomes more defined and widespread. At the proto-city of Çatalhöyük in central Anatolia (c. 7000-6000 BCE), a famous baked clay sculpture depicts a corpulent female figure seated on a throne, flanked by two felines, in the very act of giving birth.² This powerful image codifies several key attributes of the mother goddess that would echo through the ages: her connection to fertility and procreation, her sovereign power (symbolized by the throne), and her role as

Potnia Theron, the "Mistress of Animals".² Similar figurines from sites like Hacilar and Göbeklitepe confirm that this cult was not an isolated phenomenon but a central feature of Neolithic belief systems across Anatolia.¹ These societies, centered on the life-giving power of agriculture and reproduction, logically placed a female creative force at the apex of their cosmology.⁴

As civilization coalesced in the river valleys of Mesopotamia, these primordial archetypes were formalized into complex, state-sponsored pantheons. Here, the preeminent female deity was the Sumerian goddess **Inanna**, who was later syncretized with her Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian counterpart, **Ishtar**.⁶ Inanna/Ishtar was arguably the most widely venerated deity in the Mesopotamian pantheon, second only perhaps to the chief male gods, and her influence was vast and multifaceted.⁶ She was far more than a simple fertility goddess. Her domains encompassed love, sensuality, and procreation, but also warfare, political power, and the enforcement of divine law.⁶ She was known by the title "Queen of Heaven," and her primary cult center was the great Eanna temple in the city of Uruk, one of the oldest and most important cities in Sumer.⁶

The complexity of Inanna/Ishtar's character reflects the sophisticated worldview of Mesopotamian civilization. The pairing of love and war, creation and destruction, was not seen as a contradiction. In a world of competing city-states where survival depended on both agricultural bounty and military strength, a goddess who embodied both principles was a complete and sovereign deity. She represented the totality of civilized life, with all its creative and destructive potential. Her myths often depict her as ambitious and dynamic, striving to expand her power, as when she took over the Eanna temple from the sky god An or acquired the *mes*—the divine decrees governing all aspects of civilization—from the god of wisdom, Enki.⁶

Her most prominent symbols included the lion, representing her martial prowess and ferocity, and the eight-pointed star, symbolizing her identification with the planet Venus.⁶ Her worship was not merely abstract but was integrated into daily life through the mass production of clay figurines, likely used as household charms, votive offerings, or in magical rituals to secure her favor.⁸ Her most famous myth, the story of her descent into the underworld to confront her sister Ereshkigal, powerfully connects her to the universal themes of death and rebirth, mirroring the agricultural cycle of dormancy and growth that was central to the fertility cults of the ancient world.⁶ This intricate and powerful figure, worshipped for millennia from Sumer

to Assyria, established a divine template whose influence would radiate across the Near East, profoundly shaping the goddesses who came after her.

The Iranian Pantheon and the Rise of Anahita

As the center of political power shifted eastward with the rise of the Medes and Persians, the ancient Mesopotamian religious framework began to influence the developing Iranian pantheon. The direct precursor to the Kurdish Ana is found in the Zoroastrian figure of **Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā**, a major goddess whose name, attributes, and cult demonstrate a clear synthesis of native Iranian traditions with powerful Mesopotamian archetypes. She serves as the crucial link connecting the ancient goddess of the Fertile Crescent to the folk beliefs of Kurdistan.

The full Avestan name of the goddess, *Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā*, is a descriptive epithet that encapsulates her core identity. It is composed of three adjectives: *Arədvī* (meaning 'damp' or 'moist'), *Sūrā* ('powerful' or 'mighty'), and *Anāhitā* ('pure' or 'immaculate').¹² Her primary domain is thus "the Waters" (

Aban), and she is venerated as the personification of a mythical world river that flows from the highest heavens, dispensing life-giving waters to all the rivers and streams on earth, dispelling dryness and ensuring the health of all creation.¹³

Her functions extend logically from this aquatic domain. She is a goddess of fertility, healing, and wisdom.¹³ The Zoroastrian hymns describe her in great detail as a procreative deity who purifies the seed of all males, cleanses the wombs of all females for conception, ensures safe and easy childbirth, and provides nourishing milk in the breasts of mothers.¹⁶ This makes her a comprehensive protectress of the entire reproductive cycle, a role that would be inherited directly by her Kurdish successor, Ana. Her primary symbols were water itself and the lotus flower, an ancient emblem of purity and creation.¹³

The origin of Anahita has been a subject of scholarly debate, with evidence pointing toward a complex, syncretic evolution. One theory proposes a purely Indo-Iranian lineage, identifying her with the Vedic river goddess Sarasvatī, who shares a similar name (*Harahvatī* in its Old Iranian form) and function as a divine river.¹³ However, this theory is complicated by the fact that

Harahvatī is not worshipped as a goddess in the Avestan texts, appearing only as a geographical region (Arachosia).¹³

A more widely accepted theory posits that Anahita emerged from the fusion of an indigenous Iranian water goddess with the powerful Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar. This syncretism appears to have been a deliberate act of religious and political policy, particularly during the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550–330 BCE).¹³ The Achaemenid kings, seeking to create a cohesive religious framework for their vast, multicultural empire, systematically aligned their own deities with the great gods of conquered Babylon. Just as their supreme god Ahura Mazda was equated with Marduk and the solar deity Mithra with Shamash, their great goddess Anahita was identified with Ishtar.¹³

This process of syncretism "upgraded" Anahita from a regional nature deity into a major imperial goddess, endowing her with attributes borrowed from her Mesopotamian counterpart. Her association with the planet Venus and the title *Banu* ('the Lady') are both Mesopotamian constructs not otherwise found in early Iranian religion.¹³ The Achaemenid kings, particularly Artaxerxes II, actively promoted her cult, erecting statues and temples to her in major imperial centers like Susa and Hamadan.¹³ Her worship also spread throughout the empire, becoming particularly prominent in Armenia, where she was venerated as **Anahit**, one of the three principal deities of the national pantheon alongside Aramazd and Vahagn.¹⁵ This politically engineered syncretism created a powerful, composite deity who appealed to both Iranian and Semitic subjects. The Anahita who was passed down through the Parthian and Sasanian eras, and whose cult was encountered by the Kurds, was therefore already a rich amalgamation of Indo-Iranian water veneration and Mesopotamian celestial and political power.

The Hurrian-Urartian Link: Goddesses of the Northern Highlands

The mountainous highlands of northern Mesopotamia, eastern Anatolia, and the Zagros range—the very heartland of the Kurdish people—were not a religious void waiting to be filled by Iranian or Mesopotamian cults. This region was home to ancient and sophisticated civilizations, notably the Hurrians (c. 2500–1300 BCE) and the later kingdom of Urartu (c. 860–590 BCE), whose pantheons featured powerful and prominent female deities. These indigenous goddesses formed a local religious substrate that pre-dated the arrival of the Anahita cult, creating a cultural environment already receptive to the veneration of a great mother goddess.

The Hurrians, whose cultural and linguistic influence extended across the northern Fertile Crescent, worshipped several major goddesses. The most significant of these was **Šauška** (or Shaushka), a complex deity who, much like the Mesopotamian Ishtar, embodied the dual aspects of love and war.¹⁹ She was considered the sister of the great storm god Teššub and was known as the "Queen of Nineveh," highlighting her importance in this major northern Mesopotamian city.¹⁹ Another central figure was

Hepat (or Hepat), the wife of Teššub, who originated as the tutelary goddess of Halab (Aleppo) and rose to become the chief goddess of the Hurrian pantheon.¹⁹ The presence of these powerful female figures at the core of the religious system demonstrates a cultural framework that recognized and venerated female divinity in its highest forms.

The Kingdom of Urartu, which later flourished in the Armenian Highlands centered around Lake Van, inherited and adapted many Hurrian religious traditions.²⁰ The Urartian pantheon was headed by a triad of male gods—Haldi, Teisheba, and Shivini—but their consorts were also significant deities. The most important goddess was

Arubani, the wife of the supreme god Haldi.²¹ As a goddess of the arts and fertility, she is considered a probable predecessor or regional equivalent of the later Armenian Anahit.²² Other notable female deities included

Tushpuea, the winged tutelary goddess of the capital city Tushpa, and **Huba**, the consort of the storm god Teisheba.²⁰

The existence of these well-established goddess cults within the geographical and cultural milieu of early Kurdish ethnogenesis is critically important. It suggests that the later embrace of the cult of Anahita/Ana by the Kurds was not the simple adoption of a foreign belief system. Rather, it was the assimilation of a powerful and compatible deity into a pre-existing cultural structure that already valued and understood the concept of a great goddess. The Iranian Anahita, with her attributes of water, fertility, and power, would have found fertile ground in the highlands, her cult likely merging with and absorbing the traditions of these older, indigenous goddesses. This process of assimilation, rather than replacement, helps explain the deep and enduring resonance that the mother goddess figure has held within Kurdish culture for centuries.

| Attribute | Inanna/Ishtar (Mesopotamian) | Anahita (Iranian) | Ana (Kurdish Folk Religion) |
|-------------------------|---|--|---|
| Primary Domain | Love, Fertility, War, Political Power ⁶ | The Waters (<i>Aban</i>), Fertility, Purity ¹³ | Water, Rain, Fertility, Healing, Wisdom ¹² |
| Etymology/Name | 'Queen of Heaven' ⁶ | <i>Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā</i> : 'Damp, Powerful, Immaculate' ¹² | Direct correspondence to Anāhitā/Anāhid ¹² |
| Key Symbols | Lion, Eight-pointed star (Venus), Dove, Rose ⁶ | Water, Lotus Flower, association with Venus (via Ishtar syncretism) ¹³ | Water, Pomegranate (<i>hanār</i>), Fire (at shrines like Chārsteen & Bābā Gūrgūr) ¹² |
| Procreative Role | Goddess of sensuality and procreation, but not a "mother goddess" in the maternal sense. ⁶ Ill-treatment of lovers. ⁶ | Purifier of male seed and female wombs; ensures safe childbirth and lactation. ¹⁶ | Protectress of women, promotes fertility and safe childbirth. Her springs' water is called 'mother's milk'. ¹² |
| Consort/Myth | Consort Dumuzid/Tammuz; Descent to the Underworld myth. ⁶ | Associated with Mithra. ¹² | Oversees seasons with Mithra; bathes in rivers where two streams meet. ¹² |
| Geographic Locus | Uruk, Nineveh (major Mesopotamian cities). ⁶ | Temples across Iran (e.g., Susa, Hamadan); venerated in Armenia as Anahit. ¹³ | Shrines in Kurdistan (Kirkuk, Chārsteen cave); sacred springs in Dersim; Hānitā fountain in Dalahu Mountains. ¹² |

Part II: Ana: The Mother Goddess in Kurdish Folk Religion

Emerging from the rich religious soil of the ancient Near East, the figure of Ana represents the specific Kurdish embodiment of the great mother goddess archetype. While she inherits the core attributes of her Mesopotamian and Iranian predecessors, she is not a mere copy. In Kurdish folk religion, she is a distinct cosmological figure, deeply integrated into the cultural landscape, social structures, and ritual life of the people. Her veneration was expressed through uniquely Kurdish practices that centered on the life-giving and purifying power of water, marking the rhythms of both the agricultural year and the human life cycle. This section provides a focused examination of Ana herself—her identity, the rituals of her cult, and the sacred geography that served as the theater for her worship.

The Identity and Attributes of Ana

Within the pre-modern Kurdish cosmological framework, Ana is the goddess of water and rain, a powerful deity whose primary role is to ensure the survival and prosperity of the holy creation.¹² Her domains extend beyond simple agricultural fertility to include wisdom and healing, establishing her as a multifaceted and benevolent protectress.¹⁶ She is particularly concerned with the well-being of women, promoting fertility and guaranteeing safe childbirth.¹² Her essence is embodied in the life-giving waters that flow from the sacred mountain springs down to the rivers and lakes, a tangible manifestation of her divine power.¹² The linguistic connection to her Iranian antecedent is direct and unambiguous: the Kurdish name *Ana* is a direct correspondent to the Persian *Anāhid* and the Avestan *Anāhitā*.¹² This etymological continuity confirms her place within the broader Iranic religious tradition. Furthermore, like her Iranian precursor, Ana is often paired with the solar deity Mithra. Together, they are believed to oversee the orderly change of the seasons, a partnership that places Ana at the heart of the cosmic order, governing the fundamental cycles of nature.¹² Perhaps the most remarkable and tangible persistence of Ana's authority is found in the socio-religious concept of "**Anaship**." Within the heterodox Kurdish faith of Rêya Heqî (often associated with Alevism), women are considered to possess a degree of divine nature, a belief that stands in stark contrast to the patriarchal norms of the surrounding Abrahamic religions.¹² This belief is institutionalized in the role of the *ana*, a title for a female saint or spiritual leader. Anaship is not merely an honorific; it is a recognized position of spiritual authority. In a significant subversion of typical religious hierarchies, an *ana* can even assume the duties and status of a *pîr* (a male saint or elder) in his absence.¹²

This institution represents far more than a quaint folk survival. It is a living remnant of the goddess cult, a structured social and religious role that translates the mythological power of

the divine feminine into tangible authority for human women. The existence of Anaship demonstrates how the prestige and power of the ancient mother goddess were not entirely relegated to myth but were preserved in a functional capacity, creating a protected space for female spiritual leadership within the community. It stands as a socio-religious fossil of the pre-Islamic era, a direct link between contemporary female leaders and the divine authority of the goddess Ana.

Rituals and Veneration in the Cult of Ana

The worship of Ana was not a matter of abstract belief but was expressed through a rich tapestry of communal rituals. These practices, deeply embedded in the rhythms of daily life, translated faith into action, reinforcing the bond between the community, the land, and the goddess. The rituals centered on the key liminal moments of both the agricultural year and the human life cycle, with water serving as the primary medium of the sacred. In her capacity as a divine guardian of transitions, Ana was invoked to ensure safe passage, continued life, and prosperity.

Water and Fertility Rituals:

The most direct manifestation of Ana's cult is found in rituals designed to secure rain and ensure the fertility of the land. The "Rain Bride" (Bûka Baranê) ceremony was a widespread practice during times of drought. Villagers would construct a doll, often from wood or cloth, to represent the Rain Bride. This effigy would be paraded through the village from door to door, accompanied by songs pleading for rain. A typical song implores, "God let the rain fall, for the sick and the poor".¹² After the procession, the doll would be thrown into a river or stream, a symbolic act of returning the effigy to the goddess's domain to activate her life-giving power.¹²

This connection between Ana and water was deeply personal. In the Dersim region of Northern Kurdistan, it was believed that on the morning of *Chiley Hāvîn* (the fortieth day of summer), Ana herself would descend to bathe in a river, specifically at a point where two streams met—a confluence symbolizing potent spiritual energy.¹²

Life-Cycle Ceremonies:

Ana's protective influence was considered essential during the vulnerable transitional phases of human life, particularly those related to birth and marriage. The village well, a direct conduit to the subterranean waters of the goddess, served as a primary ritual site.

- **For Newborns:** A forty-day-old infant would undergo a special washing ceremony. The water used for this ritual bath was sanctified by the inclusion of forty seeds of wheat, a potent symbol of life and agricultural bounty, thus placing the child under the goddess's protection from the very beginning of its life.¹²
- **For New Mothers:** A new mother was traditionally secluded within her home for forty days post-partum, a period of recovery and vulnerability. Her re-entry into public life was marked by a formal ceremony where she was taken to the village well, ritually re-integrating her into the community under the sacred gaze of Ana.¹²

- **For New Brides:** Similarly, a new bride's first public appearance after her wedding was a procession to the village well. This ritual served to introduce her to the spiritual heart of her new community and place her marriage and future fertility under the goddess's blessing.¹²

Seasonal Festivals:

The agricultural calendar was punctuated by festivals that honored Ana's role in the cycle of growth and harvest.

- **Chiley Hāvîn/Hāwîn:** This mid-summer festival, celebrated on the fortieth day of summer, marked the turning point of the season when the intense heat begins to subside and the first fruits ripen. It was a time for communities to visit springs, rivers, and lakes to offer thanks and prayers to the life-giving water.¹² The festival was a joyous occasion, filled with the music of the *daf* (frame drum) and *tambūr* (lute), and the distribution of the early harvest, particularly pomegranates, figs, and grapes.²⁵ The most evocative tradition of this festival was the creation of dolls representing the goddess Ana. At the festival's conclusion, these dolls were thrown into a river, mirroring the Rain Bride ceremony and reinforcing the cyclical nature of giving back to the goddess to ensure future bounty.¹²
- **Newroz-Related Rites:** The influence of Ana extended even to rituals associated with the great Iranian New Year festival. A practice recorded among Kurds involved baking a special cake from wheat grown exclusively for the ceremony. This cake would be left overnight in a room in the hope that "Aisha or Fatima (Queen Anāhitā)" would come and leave the imprint of her hand upon it as a sign of blessing for the coming year's harvest. The cake was then shared among family and neighbors.¹² This ritual is a striking example of syncretism, where the ancient goddess, explicitly named as Anāhitā, operates under the guise of revered Islamic figures. The pomegranate (*hanār*), considered a heavenly tree in Kurdish culture, was a key offering and symbol throughout these rituals.¹²

The Sacred Landscape of Ana

The veneration of Ana was not confined to prescribed rituals or designated festival days; her presence was inscribed upon the very geography of Kurdistan. Her cult sanctified the natural world, transforming mountains, caves, springs, and even geological phenomena into living shrines. This sacred landscape served as a permanent, decentralized temple, embedding the memory and power of the goddess into the land itself. This tradition is part of a broader Kurdish worldview that holds nature to be sacred, a perspective that has been instrumental in preserving ancient beliefs.

Archaeological and Natural Shrines:

Archaeological evidence attests to the existence of formal temples dedicated to Ana during the Parthian and Sasanian periods. One of the most significant sites is the Chārsteen ('four pillars') cave in Duhok province, which is believed to have been a fire temple dedicated to the

goddess. The discovery of her emblem, a fire-altar, at the heart of the cave, along with an open-air sacrificial area, confirms its use as a major cultic center.¹² The association of a water goddess with a fire temple is not contradictory; in the Iranic worldview, fire and water were two primary, sacred elements, often linked to the divine pair Mithra and Anāhitā respectively.¹² Another important sanctuary,

Rabana-Merquly, has also been suggested by archaeologists as a site dedicated to Anahita.¹⁶

Beyond constructed temples, the cult of Ana was powerfully connected to dramatic natural phenomena. The eternal flames at **Bābā Gūrgūr** near Kirkuk, fed by natural gas and petroleum seeps, were a major site of pilgrimage. These self-sustaining fires would have naturally attracted Mithraic and Zoroastrian veneration, and a shrine to Ana was established there, linking her directly to this potent manifestation of nature's power. Kurdish women would visit Bābā Gūrgūr to pray for fertility, invoking Ana's name and seeking blessings from the sacred fire.¹²

Water sources were, naturally, the most common and intimate of Ana's shrines. In the Dersim region, a place of particularly strong pre-Islamic survivals, there was a "**Spring of Ana**." The water from this spring was reverently called 'mother's milk' by the Rêya Heqî Kurds. Its sanctity was so profound that it was used in reconciliation rituals, where warring parties were brought to drink from the spring as a binding oath to end their conflict.¹² Similarly, within the Yarsani faith, a holy fountain named

Hānitā—a direct linguistic variant of Anāhitā—is believed to flow from the heart of the sacred Dalahu Mountains in Eastern Kurdistan.¹²

The Broader Context of Nature Veneration:

The specific veneration of Ana's sites fits within a wider and deeply ingrained Kurdish spiritual tradition of nature worship. This worldview is encapsulated in the Kurdish Alevi concept of Jiare. A jiar (plural: jiare) is a sacred place or object—an ancient tree, a mountain peak, a distinctive rock, a cave, or a river—that is considered to be a living, sentient entity, often embodying or connected to an ancestral or semi-deific spirit.²⁶ This belief system transforms the entire landscape of regions like Dersim into a

Jiār u Diyār—a sacred land animated by non-human agencies and mythic time.²⁷

A prime example of this is the "**Tree of Wishes**" (**Darê Mirazan**). Across Kurdistan, ancient and venerable trees were regarded as sacred. People would visit them for healing or to have their wishes granted, tying a piece of cloth to a branch as a physical link to the tree's power.²⁸

These trees were believed to be inhabited by guardian spirits called

Dêw, who were associated with fertility, guidance, and protection, and to whom sacrifices were made.²⁸ This practice, documented by numerous travelers and scholars over the centuries, is a powerful illustration of the Kurdish belief in a sacred, living nature.²⁸

This conception of an animated, sacred landscape has profound implications. In the face of historical pressures from state-sponsored orthodoxies and modern development projects that seek to control or exploit the land, the *Jiare* system functions as a form of spiritual and cultural resistance. By embedding divinity within the land itself, the tradition creates a religious framework that is decentralized, resilient, and intrinsically tied to Kurdish identity and

ancestral memory. The land becomes a living archive and an active participant in the community's spiritual life, making its sacredness difficult to erase. The veneration of Ana's springs and sacred groves is therefore not merely nature worship; it is an act of placemaking that defines the homeland as sacred, preserving an ancient worldview in the face of external pressures.

Part III: Persistence, Syncretism, and Parallel Myths

The cult of the mother goddess Ana demonstrates remarkable resilience, having survived millennia of profound religious and political upheaval. Her persistence is not an isolated curiosity but is emblematic of the broader endurance of pre-Islamic beliefs within the unique cultural and religious landscape of Kurdistan. This survival was achieved through two primary mechanisms: the preservation of ancient theology within the "ark-religions" of heterodox Kurdish faiths like Yezidism, and the strategic process of syncretism, whereby the goddess's attributes were camouflaged under an Islamic veneer. To fully appreciate the depth of the divine feminine in Kurdish folklore, it is also necessary to examine the parallel myth of Shahmaran, the serpent queen, a figure who embodies the chthonic, or earthly and subterranean, aspects of feminine power, complementing Ana's celestial and life-giving nature.

The Survival of Pre-Islamic Beliefs in Kurdistan

The mountainous and often inaccessible terrain of Kurdistan has historically served as a sanctuary for religious traditions that were suppressed or eliminated in the more centralized plains. Before the advent of Islam, the dominant faiths among the Kurds were Iranic religions, primarily **Mithraism** and related belief systems, sometimes grouped by scholars under the term **Yazdânism** or the "Cult of Angels".¹² While Zoroastrianism was the official state religion of the Sasanian Empire, many Kurdish tribes retained these older, Mithra-centric beliefs.²⁹ These ancient faiths did not vanish with the arrival of Islam but found refuge and continued expression in the heterodox communities of the Yezidis, Yarsanis (Ahl-e Haqq), and Alevi Kurds.³¹ These religions acted as cultural and theological "arks," preserving core elements of pre-Islamic cosmology, including the belief in a heptad of seven divine beings or angels who govern the world.¹²

A compelling case study of this preservation is found in the Yezidi faith, specifically in the figure of the female *Xudan* (divine being) **Pîrâ-Fât**. A close analysis reveals her to be a near-perfect continuation of the Iranian goddess Anahita.

- **Shared Function:** Pîrâ-Fât's primary role in Yezidi cosmology is that of the "preserver of the first seed".¹⁶ This function directly mirrors the Avestan descriptions of Anahita as the deity who "makes the seed of all males pure" and "makes the womb of all females pure for bringing forth".¹⁶ Both goddesses are fundamentally responsible for the sanctity and

success of procreation.

- **Authentic Iranian Mythologeme:** This concept is not an incidental similarity but a core theme in Iranian mythology. The role of Pīrā-Fāt parallels the myth of Spandārmāt (the personification of Earth) in the Zoroastrian creation story, the *Bundahishn*. In this myth, when the primordial man, Gayōmart, dies, his seed falls to the earth and is preserved by Spandārmāt for forty years, eventually giving rise to the first human couple.¹⁶ The preservation of a primordial seed is a recurring motif in Iranian tradition, confirming the authentic lineage of the Pīrā-Fāt myth.
- **Theological Specialization:** The Yezidi pantheon further elaborates on this theme through a second female figure, **Xatūnā-farxān**, whose name means "The Dame of Children".¹⁶ While Pīrā-Fāt oversees the entire procreative process, including conception, labor, and the postnatal period, Xatūnā-farxān's domain is more focused on the protection of women during pregnancy.¹⁶

This division of labor between two distinct female deities is a sophisticated theological development. It suggests that as the ancient, multifaceted great goddess Anahita was integrated into the Yezidi system, her various functions were partitioned and assigned to specialized figures. This was not a dilution of her power but a meticulous method of preservation. By creating these distinct yet complementary roles, the Yezidi faith ensured that all the essential attributes of the ancient Iranian mother goddess were carefully maintained and curated within their new theological framework. These heterodox faiths, therefore, are not merely passive "survivals" but active and conscious curators of a pre-Islamic religious heritage.

Syncretism and Transformation in the Islamic Era

The eventual conversion of the majority of Kurds to Islam, a process that began in the 7th century and was often violent and contested, posed a direct threat to the open veneration of pre-Islamic deities.²⁹ However, the deeply rooted cult of the mother goddess was not eradicated; instead, it underwent a profound transformation through religious syncretism. This process allowed for the continuation of ancient rituals and the veneration of the divine feminine by grafting the attributes of Ana onto revered female figures within Islam, most notably Fātima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad.

This "Islamicization" of the goddess was a strategic act of cultural preservation, creating an acceptable public face for ancient beliefs. The core functions of Ana—as a protectress of women and a guarantor of fertility—were seamlessly transferred to Islamic saints. It is explicitly noted that after the spread of Islam, the beliefs surrounding the mother goddess were "transformed into the cults of Mother Aisha... and Mother Fātima," whose images as patronesses of women became extremely popular.¹²

The most telling evidence of this conscious syncretism comes from ritual practice. The previously mentioned ceremony, performed in the days following Newroz, involved leaving a specially prepared cake in a room overnight. The purpose was to have it blessed by the touch

of "Aisha or Fatima (Queen Anāhitā)".¹² The parenthetical equation of Fatima with "Queen Anāhitā" is not a modern scholarly interpretation but a recorded part of the folk tradition itself. It reveals a clear and conscious understanding that the figure being venerated was the ancient goddess, operating under an Islamically sanctioned name. This is a classic example of old wine being poured into new bottles, a mechanism that allowed the essential beliefs and, crucially, the associated rituals for ensuring a good harvest to continue uninterrupted. This syncretism was not always total. In some areas, the original name of the goddess persisted alongside her Islamic counterparts. For instance, even Muslim Kurds are known to have maintained a shrine dedicated to "Ana the Pîr," or 'Ana the Elder,' demonstrating that the memory of the original deity was not entirely effaced.¹² This blending of traditions allowed the fundamental archetype of the mother goddess to survive. She proved powerful enough to endure by adopting a new "mask" when her old one became religiously and politically untenable, a testament to the profound and lasting hold she had on the Kurdish spiritual imagination.

The Serpent Queen: Shahmaran as a Parallel Mythological Figure

A complete understanding of the divine feminine in Kurdish folklore requires looking beyond the celestial water goddess Ana to another potent and enduring figure: **Shahmaran**, the serpent queen. While Ana represents the life-giving, uranian (or heavenly) aspect of feminine power, Shahmaran embodies its complementary chthonic (or earthly and subterranean) aspect. Her myth explores themes of secret wisdom, the duality of nature, sacrifice, and the tragic consequences of betraying ancient, sacred knowledge.

Shahmaran, whose name derives from Persian and means "Queen of Snakes" (*Şah-ê Maran*), is a mythical being who is half-woman and half-snake.³³ She rules over a hidden, underground kingdom of serpents, a realm of esoteric wisdom concealed from the human world.³⁵ The core narrative, with minor variations, tells of a young man—variously named Tahmasp, Jamasp, or Camasb—who accidentally discovers her subterranean realm after being abandoned by his friends in a cave or well.³⁵ Instead of harming him, Shahmaran welcomes him, shares her profound knowledge of the world, and they become lovers.³³

Eventually, the man longs to return to his own world. Shahmaran reluctantly agrees, but makes him promise never to reveal her existence, warning him that his body now carries a sign of his time with her—scales that will appear on his skin if he bathes with other men.³³ Years later, the mortal king falls gravely ill, and his advisors declare that the only cure is to eat Shahmaran's flesh.³³ The king's men force all men into the baths to find the one who knows her location. Tahmasp is discovered and, under duress, betrays his promise. Shahmaran is captured, and in a final act of wisdom and sacrifice, she instructs her captors on how to prepare her body: her flesh will heal the king, but the water from her first boiling (or her poisonous tail) will kill the greedy vizier, while the water from the second boiling (or her head) will grant her own wisdom to the one who drinks it—Tahmasp.³⁶ The prophecy is fulfilled: the greedy die, the king is healed, and the betrayer is cursed to wander the earth with the burden of her wisdom.³³

Shahmaran is a complex symbol of wisdom, protection, abundance, and resilience.³⁴ The serpent itself is a near-universal symbol of the earth, the underworld, fertility, and the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth (through the shedding of skin).³⁸ Her connection to fertility is evident in the tradition of young brides including an image of Shahmaran in their dowry to ensure a happy and fruitful marriage.³⁶ Rituals associated with her include the preparation of a ceremonial porridge, "Dakulaney Şamaran," distributed to neighbors to invoke her blessing and protection against snake bites.³⁵

The myths of Ana and Shahmaran can be understood as two halves of a complete cosmology of the divine feminine. Ana, the goddess of celestial waters that flow from the mountains, represents the bright, public, life-sustaining aspect of the mother goddess. Her rituals are communal and tied to the visible cycles of the seasons and human life. Shahmaran, the queen of an underground kingdom, represents the dark, secret, and initiatory aspect. Her wisdom is esoteric, her realm is hidden, and her story is a tragedy of sacrifice and the transfer of power through death. Together, they encompass the full spectrum of feminine divinity: the life-giving mother and the wise, chthonic crone. The myth of Shahmaran can also be read as a powerful allegory for the suppression of this ancient, earth-based female wisdom by the forces of a patriarchal order (represented by the mortal king) that seeks to consume her power for its own survival, ultimately destroying the source of that power in the process.

Conclusion

The cult of the mother goddess Ana in pre-modern Kurdish folk religion stands as a profound testament to the endurance of ancient Near Eastern spirituality. This report has traced her genealogical origins, demonstrating a clear and continuous lineage that extends from the primordial fertility deities of Neolithic Anatolia, through the complex and powerful figure of the Mesopotamian goddess Inanna/Ishtar, to her direct Iranian precursor, the water goddess Anahita. Ana is not merely a regional variant but the Kurdish inheritor of a multi-millennial religious tradition, a syncretic figure embodying the combined attributes of Mesopotamian political power and Iranian nature veneration.

The veneration of Ana was deeply woven into the fabric of Kurdish life, expressed through a rich corpus of rituals centered on the life-giving and purifying properties of water. Ceremonies like the "Rain Bride" and festivals such as *Chiley Hāvîn* marked the rhythms of the agricultural year, while rites performed at sacred wells for new mothers, brides, and infants sanctified the critical transitions of the human life cycle. Her presence was not confined to temples but was inscribed upon the land itself, in a sacred geography of fire temples like Chârsteen, natural shrines like the eternal flames of Bâbâ Gûrgûr, and the holy springs of Dersim. This broader Kurdish worldview of a sacred landscape, or *Jîar u Diyâr*, has served as a resilient, decentralized framework for preserving ancient beliefs against external pressures.

The survival of Ana's cult through centuries of religious change was facilitated by two principal mechanisms. First, the heterodox "ark-religions" of Kurdistan—Yezidism, Yarsanism, and Rêya Heqî—preserved core elements of pre-Islamic theology. The Yezidi figure of

Pīrā-Fāt, the "preserver of the seed," stands as a near-perfect continuation of Anahita's functions, demonstrating how these faiths acted as active curators of ancient belief systems. Second, within mainstream folk Islam, the goddess underwent a strategic transformation. Through syncretism, her attributes and rituals were mapped onto revered Islamic figures like Mother Fātima, allowing the essential archetype and its associated practices to continue under an acceptable guise, a process explicitly acknowledged in folk traditions. Finally, a complete understanding of the divine feminine in the Kurdish psyche requires acknowledging the complementary figure of Shahmaran, the serpent queen. Where Ana represents the celestial, life-giving aspect of the goddess, Shahmaran embodies the chthonic, earth-bound aspect of secret wisdom, sacrifice, and rebirth. Together, these two figures form a complete and powerful cosmology of feminine divinity. The enduring legacy of the mother goddess, in all her forms, continues to resonate within the Kurdish cultural and spiritual landscape, reflected in the unique social and religious authority granted to women through concepts like "Anaship," and in the profound, unyielding connection between the people and their sacred, living homeland.

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