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THE NUMBER "SEVEN" CONSECRATED IN THE BELIEFS AND RITUALS OF  
MESOPOTAMIA, ANATOLIA AND CENTRAL ASIA

MEZOPOTAMYA, ANADOLU VE ORTA ASYA'NIN DİNİ İNANIŞ VE RİTÜELLERİNDE KUTSAL BİR  
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**ABSTRACT**

It is observed that some numbers have been attributed special meanings in folk stories as well as in many folk cultural elements since time immemorial. These numbers are considered to be sacred because of their meanings. Among the special numbers considered sacred, "three", "four", "seven", "nine", "forty" are the common ones. Some of these numbers go back to the mythological era and found with different cultures and expressed in different beliefs gained throughout history. The secret meanings given to numbers formed number symbolism and number mysticism. This is reflected in many fields; from literature to folklore, architecture to music, magical practices to religious applications and religion systems. Throughout history both mathematicians and philosophers have done much research about number symbolism and different ideas have been advanced. The term "number" became systematical in many cultures and religions under the influence of Pythagoreanism and reached advanced dimensions such as predicting the future by interpreting the sacred texts with numerical values.

**Key Words:** numbers, relation of numbers, consecrated numbers, numbers in the beliefs and rituals

**ÖZET**

Mitolojik dönemden günümüze kadar halk kültürü ürünlerinin çoğunda olduğu gibi halk anlatılarında da kimi sayılara özel anlamlar yüklendiği görülür. Bu sayılar taşıdığı anlamlardan ötürü "kutlu" sayılırlar. Özel anlamlar yüklenen ve kutlu sayılan sayılar arasında "üç", "dört", "beş", "yedi", "dokuz", "kırk", vb. yaygın olanlardır. Bu inanışların bir kısmı mitolojik döneme kadar uzanmakta, bir kısmı da tarih boyunca kazanılan değişik kültür ve inançlara dayanmaktadır. Sayılara yüklenen gizli anlamlar beraberinde sayı sembolizmi ve sayı mistisizmini oluşturmuştur. Bu edebiyattan folklor, mimariden müziğe, büyüsel uygulamalardan, dinsel pratiklere ve inanç sistemlerine kadar pek çok alanda kendini hissettirmiştir. Tarih içinde gerek matematikçiler gerek felsefeciler sayı sembolizmine ilişkin pek çok araştırmalar yapmış ve Pisagorcular başta olma üzere farklı fikirler ortaya çıkmıştır. Sayı kavramı Pisagorcu felsefeden de etkilenen pek çok kültür ve dinde sistemli bir hal almış, kutsal metinleri sayısal değerler ışığında yorumlama yoluyla gelecekle ilgili kehanetlerde bulunma gibi ileri boyutlara ulaşmıştır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Rakamlar, rakamsal ilişkiler, kutsal sayılar, inanış ve ritüellerde rakamlar.

## 1 Introduction

**M**an's creation of number symbolism by giving meanings to numbers has made numbers important in some practises in life, in traditions and in religious systems. People have attributed meanings to numbers and planned their life in the frame of these meanings. Many different types of activities pertaining to daily life, ranging from the times for a wedding or vacation, to litanies in religious rituals, birth rituals and mourning; presuppose, according to various beliefs, that numbers may bring good fortune under certain conditions.

Man, a social creation, has needed number in many aspects like the measuring time and other items of daily life; as a result of this, each civilization has manufactured a counting technique. Since time immemorial when mankind discovered fire, way was found to keep the numbers: notching. Notching goes back to the Stone Age. The notching bones, wood, or a suitable pieces of stone enabled matching as one of the oldest operations of mankind. Evidence proving that this counting of bones date back to about 30000 years ago have been found.<sup>1</sup> This notching capability was later adopted to the processing of metal products.

Besides notching technique, another prehistoric technique that developed was counting by fingers, one of the most common methods used for counting not only decimals but also further numbers like thousands, which were counted with different finger positions.<sup>2</sup> In some communities, numeric body maps developed through the use of almost every part of the body such as the arms, legs and body itself. Some other counting methods have been used by tying knots and giving different colors and shapes to gravels. Moreover, Calculus, from Latin calculus which means "gravel", was named after this counting method.<sup>3</sup> Thinking that numbers and counting were developed from five or ten fingers, decimal system was possibly the most used system. However, it is a strong possibility that the vigesimal counting system was used in Maya community, Celts, North and West Europe since very ancient times. This system shows that toes may also have been used and this can explain in part the development of the vigesimal system. Fingers and toes are only part of the explanation concerning the prehistoric roots of these counting systems. There are many reasons. Besides these two counting systems, the sexagesimal counting system used

<sup>1</sup> Denis Guedj, *Sayılar İmparatorluğu*, Çev. Ömer Aygün, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1. Baskı, İstanbul, 2007, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Ali Dönmez, *Matematik Tarihi Ansiklopedisi*, Toplumsal Dönüşüm Yayınları, İstanbul, 2002, 473-478.

<sup>3</sup> Sinan Sertöz, *Matematiğin Aydınlik Dünyası*, Tübitak Yayınları, 14. Baskı, Ankara, 2000, 101-102.

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in Mesopotamia must be mentioned because of its significance in the history of numbers.<sup>4</sup> The sexagesimal system still exists today, and it can be seen in the degrees of a circle, hours, minutes and seconds of the day and offers a more sensible calculation.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 The Number Seven

In Mesopotamian tradition and theology, seven great gods dominate the world of many gods in terms of functions and features. The tradition presents a mythology concerning many issues such as the formation of the universe and creation, the continuation of life on earth, the fate of the human world, agricultural productivity, and death. The gods also control the basic elements such as air, water and soil.<sup>6</sup>

The number seven occurs commonly in Mesopotamian tradition. In Babylonian tradition, seven was known as the number of planets. Etemenanki, the ziggurat which may have inspired the Bible story about The Tower of Babel, was made up of seven terraces. Likewise, King Lugalmundu of Adab is said to have built a temple with seven gates.<sup>7</sup> Seven was sacred not only in Near-East. In Pre-Colombian America, the Mayans used the believe that the sky had seven levels and they used seven as the place determiner. According to their belief, the joining of woman (three) and man (four) produced a new unit: seven. In Asia and Europe, where man was 3 and woman was 4, though contrary to Mayan belief, 7 symbolised the same unit. This reflects a view among ancient civilizations that seven, represented living organisms in at least several early civilizations. Pleiades, which can be observed with naked eye, has 7 stars. This is in addition to the seven planets. The stars of Pleiades used to appear during the warmest 40 days and hide beyond the Mesopotamian horizon. Thus, they were thought to be evil demons. Babylonian tradition mentioned seven demons many times.<sup>8</sup> Despite some negative beliefs, seven was usually considered among benevolent powers. It was thought to be the symbol of abundance and plentitude. This idea seems to spread from Mesopotamia to the neighbouring civilizations. For instance in Egypt, there were seven ways leading to heaven and seven cows deserving heaven. And fourteen cows, two times seven, was present on the land of death.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For more information; Mebrure Tosun, Sümer ve Babil Tanrı Sembollerinin Adları Üzerine Bir Arastırma, *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi*, C.18, S.3, Ankara, 1960, 261-272.

<sup>5</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Sayıların Gizemi*, Çev. Mustafa Küpüşoğlu, Kabalcı Yayınevi, İstanbul, 2011, 14-144.

<sup>6</sup> Abdullah Altuncu, *Sümerlerde Tanrı Anlayışı ve Tanrılar Panteonu*, Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, C.4, S.7, Kilis, 2014, 122.

<sup>7</sup> Victor A. Hurowitz, *I Have Built You An Exalted House*, Sheffield, 1992, 62.

<sup>8</sup> Selim F. Adalı, M. Fatih Demirci, A. Murat Özbayoğlu, Oğuz Ergin, *Why the Names, Gephyra*, c. 11, Antalya, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Schimmel, *ibid*, 140-144.

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The number seven also had significance in Anatolian traditions and practices. It is understood that there were different methods in Hittite magic rituals. Rituals may assume what is referred to as analogy, as a method to establish symbolism. According to this method, some symbolic movements and magical words were connected twith the real world and to evil. For example, by melting butter and calling evil to fade away, with the expression, "may the evil fade away in the way this butter melts", it is aimed that the metling of butter will reflect the fading away of evil.<sup>10</sup> In Hittite magic rituals, some numbers appears to be more important and some actions were repeated and various materials were used in relation these numbers. For example, an evocation rite mentions purifying water and ritual items to gain divine favour and in relation to "the seven paths and seven roads coming from the mountain, the river, the grass, the sky, and the land". The rituals also mentions the bringing the god from its realm "seven times". The reference to the seven paths and roads are believed to lead the gods from their world to the world of humans in several Hittite texts.<sup>11</sup> In some texts collected under the Catalogue of Hittite Texts, gravels in groups of seven in two bowls of water (CTH 417, 418), seven gravels from a water source to a bowl tied with red wool (CTH 446), spring water and seven gravels with a tamarisk tree (CTH 706) are mentioned in Hittite rituals.<sup>12</sup> In addition to these, according to the Assyro-Babylonian mouth-washing ritual, seven bowls weare filled with river water and then many objects of plants and minerals are added into this water once the night descends down.<sup>13</sup>

A Mesopotamian purifying ritual, known from K(Kültepe) 9873, was done for the establishment of a new home. The text uses the number seven both for the number of materials and the number of repetitions.<sup>14</sup> Again in Papanikri's Hittite birth ritual, we find the number seven. "When she gives a birth, when the seventh day comes after the birth, they make a mala-offering for the child. If the child is male, they purify the child with some kunzigannahi when the third month comes. If the child is a girl, they purify the child with some kunzigannahi when the fourth month comes."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ahmet Ünal, "Hititlerde ve Çağdaşı Kavimlerde Büyücülük", *Elemterefış Anadolu'da Büyü ve İnanışlar*, İstanbul, 2003, 18; Nurgül Yıldırım, "Eski Mezopotamya ve Anadolu'da Uğursuzluk İnanıcı ve Bununla İlgili Büyü Ritüelleri", *History Studies*, Volume 7 Issue 1, A Tribute to Prof. Dr. İbrahim GÜLER, p. 239-248, March 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Yiğit Erbil; Alice Mouton, Water in Ancient Anatolian Religions, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Volume 71, 2012, 60-62.

<sup>12</sup> For CTH, see Hethitologie Portal Mainz (<http://www.hethport.uni-wuerzburg.de/CTH/>).

<sup>13</sup> Rita Strauß, *Reinigungsrituale aus Kizzuwatna, Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung hethitischer Ritualtradition und Kulturgeschichte*, 2006 Berlin-New York, 53-71.

<sup>14</sup> F.A.M. Wiggerman, Mesopotamian Protective Spirits The Ritual Texts, *Cuneiform Monographs I*, Groningen, 1992, 119-125.

<sup>15</sup> Yusuf Kılıç, Serkan Başol, "Hitit Büyülerinde Sayı ve Renk Sembolizmi", *Turkish Studies - International Periodical For The Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic* Volume 9/7 Summer 2014, 51-64, ANKARA-TURKEY

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Pythagoreanism and Pythagoreans have a special role in the history of number symbolism. Though there were and still are beliefs about the mystical and magical properties of numbers in many cultures, the most systematic and philosophical thought concerning this subject was put forward by the Pythagoreans. According to the doctrine of the Pythagorean traditions, God made the numbers as a series of symbols and each had a different character. Numbers are stated in their order and character as Monad, Duad, Triad, Tetrad, Pentad, Hexad, Heptad, Ogdoad, Ennead and Decad. The number seven which is called Heptad has great significance in Pythagorean thought. Heptad, consisting of the unification of sacred Triad and Tetrad, which symbolizes harmony, is the symbol of divine evolution and the pyramid made from triangles on a quadrangle, and is the symbol of seven. It can be thought that Pythagoreans had been influenced by Egypt and put forward an explanation for the Pyramids. The number seven is considered to be the symbol of intelligence, light and strength. Music, which supports the idea that everything in the universe is based on numbers, also is also built on seven notes. Pythagoreans believe that musical notes match the seven planets and that the sound that comes out when the planets are moving. Number seven is also considered to be an important number with regard to the number of the planets known those days.<sup>16</sup>

There are not many written sources from antiquity in Central Asia. However, the number seven can be traced in two important epics of Manas and Dede Korkut, which were based on oral sources before they were put into writing. The important thing that appears in the Manas Epic is that "seven" is used frequently. The moon, showing a difference in shape every seven days, completes a month in four levels, that is 28 days. The seven-day-period of the Moon was a good way of measuring time for the people in the past. Phrases using seven are common. For example, the flag waving at seven places, seven leopards, seventy strong men, seventy-day long rain, Acıbay who can speak seventy languages, seven tribes, seven-day-long war, seven divisions of enemy, city in seven waters, seven hundred soldiers, and wounded from seventy parts of the body can be found in the epic.<sup>17</sup> In the Dede Korkut Epic, seven streams and seven paths are mythological. Furthermore, besides being the ideal pictures, for example, of travelling for seven days and seven nights, seven days and seven nights of wedding, seven days of mourning; the number seven is also found in negative things such as seven-headed monster and enemy of seven thousand.<sup>18</sup> According to the creation legend which is common in Central Asia, the god Ülgen commands the formation of the heavens and earth and it comes to be. Then the whole earth is created like this

<sup>16</sup> Schimmel, *ibid*, 144-168.

<sup>17</sup> Ülku Çelik Şavk, "Manas ve Maaday-Kara'da Sayılar", *Milli Folklor*, 2001, 50.

<sup>18</sup> *Dede Korkut Kitabı*, Haz: Muharrem Ergin, Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 2. Baskı, İstanbul, 1971, 4-240.

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and he creates three fish and places the ground of the earth on them. The creation of earth lasts six days and on the seventh day, the god Ülgen goes to sleep.<sup>19</sup>

Folkloric beliefs are beliefs which are beyond the religious orders and teachings kept alive in communities, transmitted from generation to generations. The most accepted approach about the origins of such beliefs is that they are the relics of old religious and cultural structures and they continue in some form as part of the daily life of those communities. Many civilizations founded in Anatolia in old times, and Shamanism, Persian religions, Arab culture and similar cultures with which the Turks were in touch with, accounts for origins and development of folk beliefs in Anatolia.<sup>20</sup>

In human life there are three main stages: birth, marriage and death. These main stages have sub-levels. There has been many traditions, rituals, ceremonies, religious and magical acts in these sub-levels. The main purpose of these acts is to celebrate the new situation and bless it, as well as keeping him/her away from the dangers and harmful things which may arise at these levels. Numbers have great importance while both carrying out such ceremonies and receiving their results.

We can now describe some manifestations of the number seven in Anatolia with some examples. It is believed that when a baby under 40 days is left alone, the jinn may approach the baby and change the baby with their own babies. These Jinn babies do not grow either physically or mentally. If this happens, people are to go the grave yard and pass seven graves. After that, seven pieces of yarn in seven different colours and seven strings are buried. The baby is left somewhere and hidden. When the cries of the baby are heard, it is believed that the jinn came back and took their own child, releasing the child of the family. This belief is not so common in Anatolia today but it is still alive in Azerbaijan. In Anatolia, mostly in rural areas, some numbers have great importance for treating the ill child. The grass picked up from the boundaries of the seven lands are boiled and the child is washed. Clover is collected from seven houses and burnt then the child is made to step on the ashes. Some kilos of meat, as heavy as the child, is buried at seven turns of road.

Several mystic and magical practices are meant to protect babies. The number seven has an important role in these practices. In Muş, families who have had children who did not live long after birth, sacrifice an animal each year until their children are seven years old. The children are

<sup>19</sup> Abdülkadir İnan, *Tarihte ve Bugün Şamanizm*, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 5. Baskı, Ankara, 2000, 19-21.

<sup>20</sup> Bekir Şişman, "Anadolu'da Yaşayan Halk İnançlarının Menşei Üzerine Bir Araştırma", *Milli Folklor*, C. 6, 46-105.



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not to wear a brand-new piece of clothing until they are seven. Their clothes made from fabric are collected from seven houses, and blue beads with holes are sewn on the clothes as charms.<sup>21</sup> . In Sivas, they collect oil from seven houses where a person named "Mehmet" lives, and make a pastry with the oil and hang it on the child's neck. They make clothes for the child using the fabric collected from seven or 40 houses where a person named "Fatma" or "Mehmet" lives.

Marriage is an important stage in life. The number seven is also used in rituals concerning marriage. They have "şah bezeme" custom (tree decorating) in Iğdır, Kars, Ardahan and Ağrı. They decorate a tree using fruit and nuts, this custom is believed to bring happiness to the bride and groom. This tree with seven or nine branches is kept in the bridal room for three days. A similar practice may be encountered in Azerbaijan. They decorate a tree with seven or nine branches using fruit and candies. Members of the youth believe that they will see their future-wives in their dreams if they eat from that tree. There is a similarity between the number of branches in the tree in the myths of creation and the number of branches of the tree in the "şah bezeme" custom. This similarity can be the result of the relation between marriage and reproduction.

Traces of past beliefs and practices can be seen in various publicly known notions. Through his research in Anatolia, Jean Paul Roux found that people have preserved much from their medieval beliefs despite a Muslim history of nine centuries.<sup>22</sup> In Hakkari, people who go for condolence do not visit the house where a family member died but instead they visit seven neighbouring houses in order to confuse the evil deeds and keep the evil spirit away from themselves. In Tekirdağ, they read the Quran for seven days. In different places of Anatolia, they have a custom of crying over the dead and mourning for him/her. The most common periods for mourning is three, seven or 40 days. During the mourning period, some things should be avoided. They do not wear colorful or decorated clothes, they don't attend entertainments, weddings or engagement ceremonies are postponed or carried out in a simple or plain manner.

In Anatolia, commemoration days have great significance. The days which the dead person is commemorated are generally the first night, the first Friday, the first week, the fortieth day, the fifty second day and the anniversary of his/her death. On the day of known as seventh, "the death meal" or "the seven charity" is done and it includes feast, delivering halwa and reading the Quran to comfort the dead's soul.

<sup>21</sup> Yaşar Kalafat, *Doğu Anadolu'da Eski Türk İnançlarının İzleri*, Ebabel Yayınları, 5.Baskı, Ankara, 2006, 138.

<sup>22</sup> Jean- Paul Roux, *Türklerin Moğolların Eski Dini*, Kabalıcı Yayınları, 2. Baskı, İstanbul,1998, 33.

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### 3 Results

Numbers are always in our lives from the beginning of mankind. Studies show that the concept of numbers are ancient as they extend to the early times of the existence of languages. In the historical period, man gave hidden, mystic and metaphysics meanings to numbers. The Pythagoreans built up a "number metaphysics" on the base of both mathematics and philosophy. The possibility that their philosophy influenced many cultures, thoughts and religious beliefs, and they themselves were influenced from earlier traditions, should be considered and this can be studied in the future.

It was observed that usually the number of the stars and the planets that can be seen in the sky was decisive for the preferred numbers of the practices concerning the number sevens. In ancient times, seven celestial bodies identified in the sky helped to perceive that the sky with seven layers. The number 'seven' was holy as it had a relationship with the sky. And this belief is observed obviously in many cultures, including Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and in Turkish culture.

Despite the many studies, numbers continue to keep their magical and mysterious aspects.

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