



## ARTSRUNI

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**ARTSRUNI**, one of the most important princely families of Armenia, an offshoot of the Orontids, Achaemenian satraps and subsequently kings of Armenia, but claiming descent from Sennacherib of Assyria. Mithrobarzanes, or more correctly Mithrobuzanes, Tigranes the Great of Armenia's viceroy of Sophene in 69 B.C. (Plutarch, *Lucullus* 25; Appian, *Mithradatic War* 12.84), may well be the first historically known member of this family. In the Arsacid monarchy, from the first to the fifth century, the Artsrunis reigned in the princely states of Greater and Lesser Ałbak, southeast of Lake Van, and gradually expanded over the entire surrounding territory, known after the sixth century as Vaspurakan. The political weight of this house can be seen in the fact that the feudal aid which it had to render to its suzerain, the king, consisted of 1,000 horses. The Iranian abolition of the Armenian monarchy in 428 left the Artsrunis, like the rest of the princes, who had always reigned in various subdivisions of the country under the suzerainty of the king and who had brought about that abolition, quite independent, save for a distant control exercised now by the Great King of Iran. When, in the ninth century, the Bagratid dynasty re-established the monarchy, the Artsrunis were among its most powerful vassals and rivals. This new unity proved ephemeral, however, and a century later was succeeded by a number of subkingdoms, each in control of lesser princes. One of these succession-kingdoms was Vaspurakan: its prince, Khatch'ik (Xaç'ik)-Gagik II Artsruni received the royal crown from the caliph in 908. It lasted till Byzantine annexation and Saljuq conquest destroyed it after the abdication of the last king, Sennacherib-John in 1021. A branch of the family then moved to Cilicia, where it held Tarsus for the



Byzantine emperor; another, known by the name of Mankaberdeli, played a considerable role in Georgia, in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.

In the perennial struggle of Iran and Rome over Armenia, the Artsrunis tended, partly out of princely opposition to the crown which was on the whole pro-Roman, but also because of the geographical position of their state, occasionally to espouse a pro-Iranian policy—as later they tended to follow a pro-Arab policy—and this in the circumstances meant also Mazdaizing in religion. Thus, in about 363, Meruzhan (Mithrobuzanes) I Artsruni passed to the side of Iran, exchanged Christianity for Mazdaism, and was one of the leaders of the Iranian invasion of Armenia. On the other hand, Nershapuh I took an active part in the anti-Iranian insurrection of 451 and Vasak I was crucified by the Iranians, during the Byzantine war of Kosrow II, in 610/11.

The cultural aspect of the Artsrunid rule is evidenced in the splendid tenth-century monuments of architecture and of fresco and miniature painting, especially in the palace and the church of Aġ'aġmar, the island residence on Lake Van, raised by Khatch'ik-Gagik II, or in the Gospels of his consort, Queen Mlk'e, as well as in literary productions, such as the *History of the House of Artsruni*, by the tenth-century Thomas Artsruni.

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