



ELIŠĒ

ELIŠĒ (Elisaeus), author of *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, a detailed account of the Armenian rebellion against Yazdegerd II (439-57) in 450, which was prompted by his persecution of their Christian faith. The leader of the resistance was Vardan, prince of the Mamikonean family. According to Elišē, the Byzantine emperor refused to intervene, and the Armenian army was defeated at Avarayr (q.v.), southeast of Mount Ararat, in June 451. Vardan was killed, surviving nobles were imprisoned in Persia, and the leading clergy was martyred. After the military victory, Persian persecution lessened. Elišē's *History* is a carefully constructed work of high literary merit, the author being more interested in motivation than in description of events. It shows the influence of Syrian acts of martyrs, of Philo, of works attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, and other early translations into Armenian. Elišē sees the Maccabees as a meaningful model for the Armenian situation, and the language of his *History* has many echoes of the Armenian version of those books. His imagery was adapted for descriptions of later Muslim tyranny (e.g., by T'ovma Arcruni), and his hero Vardan remains a patriotic symbol for Armenians to this day.

The *History* describes in detail the relationship of Armenia (i.e., the larger, eastern sector after the division of 387) to Sasanian Persia. Of value are details concerning the role of Armenian military units in the Persian army, lists of Armenian noble families, titles of officials at the Sasanian court, and the description of campaigns against Kushans and Huns. With regard to Persian religious practices, Elišē describes the cult of fire and the worship of the sun,



matters of ritual purity, and the myth of Zurvan (also elaborated in Eznik).

A shorter account of the same events is found in the *History* by Łazar P'arpec'i. The latter was written about 500, and suggests a more personal motivation for the persecution on the part of Yazdegerd's *hazārapat* Mehrnarseh. The two versions are closely related, with several identical lists of nobles. Although Elišē claims to have been an eyewitness, nothing is known about him save for much later legends. His book is probably a sixth century rewriting of Łazar, using this particular situation as a means to express more general ideas about the clash of secular and religious loyalties. Akinean's theory that the surviving text is a rewriting of an earlier contemporary history in the light of the revolt of 572 has not won general acceptance.

Several homilies and a commentary on Genesis are also attributed to Elišē. But they bear no relation to the *History*, and it is not known if they are all the work of the same author (see Ananian, pp. 232-35).

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