



KORIWN

KORIWN, Vardapet (ca. 380-450 CE), Armenian author and translator.

The Late Antique period was an era of widely shared cultures not only in the southern Caucasus but also throughout the ancient Near East. Yet relative to the Iranians, the Byzantine Greeks, and the Christian Syrians of the Fertile Crescent, Armenians and their neighbors to the north and to the east lacked a native script, the need for which became more pronounced after the adoption of Christianity (q.v.). While church and state leaders depended on foreign languages and their alphabets in dealing with the outside world, worship in Greek and Syriac within the Armenian Church had to be tolerated until remedied; acculturation had its limits. At the turn of the fifth century Maštoc' (also known in later texts as Mesrop) took the process of religious inculturation to new heights not only by crafting letters (406 CE) but also by transferring into Armenian much of the accumulated Christian heritage of the day, thus distancing Christian Armenia farther away from Zoroastrian Iran (see ARMENIA AND IRAN).

The dramatic development was recounted not by a historian but by an orator, the eulogizer Koriwn, a disciple of Maštoc'. Consequently, there are historical gaps, at times at critical points, in the *Life of Maštoc'* — one of the earliest extant compositions in the newly found alphabet. There is, nonetheless, a certain historical perspective in the *Life*, in that Koriwn regarded his work as another *Acts of the Apostles*, the biblical book which recounts the spread of Christianity. Following up on this theme, historians of the 5th century sustained the perceived continuity of the Armenian people with God's people



in the Scriptures.

Koriwn was a translator, an occupation for which he was prepared with others by their teacher Maštoc'. He speaks fondly of his filial relationship as he refers to his/their spiritual "father" in the few self-references, where he names himself but once (chap. 20). We do not know much about him except for these rare autobiographical remarks, where he also divulges just as little information about the others, of whom he names eleven. He tells nothing about his specific contribution to the collaborative effort of translating biblical books and patristic writings. His biblical quotations do not indicate any of this. He was part of a team or a school of translators and, judging from his preface to the book, a studious fellow among them. He was probably more at home with Greek than with Syriac, and in 429 was on a mission to Constantinople to acquire more Greek manuscripts of the Bible (q.v.), thus necessitating a complete revision of the earlier translation presumably from Syriac. He returned two years later, bringing also the canons of the Council of Nicaea (325) and those of the newly convened Council of Ephesus (431).

He must have been deservedly distinguished among his classmates, having been asked even by the most illustrious senior among them, the *locum tenens* of the Patriarchate and Bishop of Ayrarat (q.v.), the "honorable" Yovsēp' of Hołoc'm, to write about their beloved teacher. Considering it a great privilege, the author declares himself "the least" of the disciples to be given such an honor (chap. 1). The understatement, known as *litotes* in rhetoric, purposefully represents the author as less significant than he is, thus achieving an ironic effect. Upon further encouragement by fellow disciples, Koriwn embarks on his task, which, though not lengthy, proves to be a truly remarkable work. It consists of some thirty average pages in manuscript form, or about forty — considering the fact that only uncials (Arm. *erkat'agir*) were used through the end of the first millennium of the Common Era.

The request was for a special occasion in Ošakan: for a memorial service in 443, commemorating the third anniversary of the teacher's death and the likely transfer of his remains to a newly built shrine by the chancellor Vahan Amatuni (see AMATUNI). This is the last dated event recorded in the *Life* (chap. 27). The work concludes with a chronological summary covering the regnal years of the Sasanian (q.v.) rulers of the period, from Bahrām IV (q.v., r. 388-99) to Yazdegerd II (q.v., r. 439-57), a postscript possibly by the author himself (chap. 30). It ends with the second year of Yazdegerd II (440, the year

of the death of Maštoc', on 17 February), or his "first" year if the accession year is not to be counted, as is consistently the case in this piece of chronological information and throughout the *Life* — as well as in all Armenian writings of the 5th century, where the accession years of the Sasanian kings are not counted. The date of composition (443) is further substantiated by the commendable mention of Vasak Prince of Siwnik' as a devout supporter of Maštoc' (chap. 15). Later authors of the 5th century speak negatively of Vasak as a lapsed traitor during the 451 war with the Persians (see EĻIŠĒ and ŁAZAR P'ARPEC'I). The *Life* was thus composed as a eulogy, an encomium intended for oral delivery, a formal expression of praise (Arm. *govest*) to extol Maštoc' and his memorable work. Conversely, the written tribute is as much a memorial for its author as it is for his teacher.

More than his identity as a translator, Koriwn is an eminently inspiring rhetorical writer, unconcerned about historical details considered to have been familiar to his immediate audience. Koriwn's work falls outside the genre of historiography, even though historical elements abound in his work. Among the more important historical features is the secondary, collaborative role played by the Patriarch Sahak (in office 386-428; d. 7 September 439), the last of the heirs of St. Gregory the Illuminator (257-331 CE) to hold the office. He is introduced in Chapter Six and featured next to Maštoc' on several occasions in the ensuing narrative. Sahak's enthusiastic support for the endeavor notwithstanding, the somewhat tense relationship between the two men seems to have been glossed over by Koriwn, at times apologetically. There is also the supportive role of the Armenian Arsacid (q.v.) King Vramšapuh (r. 401-17), whose counsel to obtain readily available alphabets — however helpful it might have seemed at first — yielded but abortive results (chap. 6).

Koriwn's work deserves more literary attention than it has hitherto received. In so many ways it has left an important influence on Armenian literature ever since its beginning. This is attributable, in part, to the fact that as a discourse the *Life* is highly appealing, in form as well as in function, by a rhetorical theory of presentation. The formal structure of its particular parts comprises an ingenious composition in which the author exhibits mastery of the various rhetorical conventions in the Late Antique period. And there is more than the mastered conventions of the *technē*, the aesthetic side of the discourse, the artistically pleasing presentation of the content.

Apart from the full text of the *Life* (recension A), the best textual witness of which is but a late manuscript from the year 1675 (Matenadaran, MS 2639;



Iwzbashean and Muradean, eds., pp. 229-57), there are two shorter versions (recensions B and C, Matenadaran, MS 3787 and Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Arm. 178, respectively). The latter versions are late-7th- or 8th-century adaptations for liturgical reading, part of the early development of the *Synaxarion*, the hagiographic compilation of the lives of saints (Iwzbashean and Muradean, eds., pp. 258-63, 264-72).

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