



MESROP MAŠTOC'

MESROP MAŠTOC', 5th-century monk and saint, and inventor of the Armenian alphabet around 404-6 CE.

Mesrop Maštoc' was supported by the Armenian patriarch St. Sahak, a dedicated group of pupils, and the patronage of the Arsacid (q.v.; Arm. Aršakuni) king Vramšapuh (Wahrānšāpūr, r. 389-415/401-17 CE), who displayed a keen interest in the discovery of the letters. The impact of Maštoc's alphabet on Armenian culture, history, theology, and literature is difficult to overemphasize: it inaugurated a translation movement of Greek and Syriac texts into Classical Armenian; helped to reinforce the autonomy and confessional boundaries of the Armenian Church; and ushered in the dawn of Armenian literary production and historiography. Maštoc's letters moreover provided the foundation for Armenian literary production through the present day, along with the later addition of the letters "ō" and "f" during the medieval period.

The primary source for Maštoc's life is *Vark' Maštoc'i* (*The Life of Maštoc'*), written sometime between 443-51 by his disciple Koriwn (q.v.), who is generally regarded as the most reliable and knowledgeable 5th century account of the invention of Armenian letters. Koriwn's narrative begins with a lengthy justification, which draws heavily on Biblical references, for composing a book in praise of a single man. He is therefore keen, on more than one occasion, to deem Maštoc' a "saint" (*surb*) whose example should be taught to future generations in the same vein as the patriarchs of the Old and New Testament (chaps. XXVI; XXVII; XXIX). Accordingly, whereas Koriwn's



title is most often translated as *The Life of Maštoc'*, it could also be rendered as *The Vitae of Maštoc'* or *The Conduct of Maštoc'*. This didactic and hagiographic dimension is also suggested from Koriwn's first sentence, which first emphasizes the divine nature of the Armenian alphabet as God-given, and secondly positions Maštoc' as a pious man, worthy of memory, through which "such renewing, divine graces" (*aynpisi norogatur astuacelēn šnorhs*), or the Armenian letters, became manifest (chap. I).

The name Mesrop is not found in Koriwn's account, though it appears in later sources. Maštoc' was born in the province of Tarōn, in the village of Hac'ekac', and received a Greek education as a boy (Koriwn, chap. III). He first enlisted his talents in the service of the Arsacid court, which became a vassal to the Sasanians (q.v.) in 387 CE with the partition of Greater Armenia between Rome in the west and the Sasanians in the east. The relationship between language and power could hardly have escaped Maštoc' in the royal chancellery (*ark'unakan diwan*), where he conducted business as executor of commands (Koriwn, chap. III), likely in Greek, Syriac (P'arpec'i, I.x), and Middle Persian (Russell, 1994a, p. 323). Yet, per Koriwn, this man knowledgeable "of worldly rules" (*ašxarhakan kargac'*) and dexterous "with the military art" (*zinuorakan aruestiwn*), eventually left his position and devoted himself to a Christian and hermitic life (chap. III).

When Maštoc' donned the cloth, the Armenian church possessed no translation of the Bible (q.v.) in Classical Armenian. Syriac and Greek texts were therefore used by the clergy, exerting a degree of influence on the Armenian church still reflected by its lexicon for certain religious terms (*k'ahanay* 'priest'; *abelay* 'monk'; etc.), which come from Syriac, and by terms for the church leadership (*episkopos* 'bishop'; *kat'otikos* 'catholicos'; *patriark'* 'patriarch'), which are Greek (Thomson, p. 26). Koriwn's account is careful not to level criticism at neighboring Christian churches, however, but rather at those Armenians who had not become Christian. In fact, although King Trdat (Tiridates; r. 287-330 CE) had converted to Christianity in the early 4th century, many who lived in Greater Armenia had not followed suit. Maštoc' discovered this firsthand when he visited the province of Goł'n (roughly modern-day Nakhchivan, q.v., NAKJAVĀN) with the intention of preaching the Gospel. Though Koriwn has a triumphalist tone, emphasizing that Maštoc' easily turned the inhabitants of Goł'n away from their "paternal traditions" (*i hayreneac' awandeloc'*) and the worship of demons, the implicit difficulty of spreading Christianity seems to

have unsettled his teacher (chap. V). Soon after this sojourn in Goł'n, Maštoc' approached Sahak Part'ew, the patriarch of the Armenian church, and discussed fashioning Armenian letters in large part to ease the evangelization of Armenians. The two in unison then appealed to king Vramšapuh, who received their idea with enthusiasm.

King Vramšapuh also plays a significant, if somewhat understated, role in Koriwn's narrative. It was he who reported that a certain Daniēl, a bishop in the Syrian church, had already come into possession of a suitable Armenian alphabet. Thus the first collective action of Maštoc', Sahak, and Vramšapuh was to retrieve these letters. However, Armenian sources are somewhat divided on the role that the Daniēlian letters played in Maštoc's invention. For instance, the late 5th century historian Łazar P'arpec'i (q.v.), who refers to Koriwn though departs from him significantly, implies that the Daniēlian letters only needed minor adjustments to be ready for Armenian usage (I.x; see also Thomson's introduction to P'arpec'i, pp. 10-11). The 11th century historian Step'anos Tarōnec'i (Asołik, q.v.) seems to buttress this claim, reporting that Maštoc' employed the Daniēlian alphabet after receiving seven missing letters from God (Tarōnec'i, II.xi); these missing letters were perhaps vowels if Daniēl's script followed an *abjad* (q.v.) system (Russell, 1994a, p. 326). Koriwn, for his part, states that after a two-year period of experimentation, Maštoc' found the Daniēlian letters, which were repurposed from "other literatures" (*yayloc' dprut'eanc'*), unsuitable for expressing the full range of Armenian phonemes (chap. VI). In this account, Maštoc' then departed with a group of students, half of whom he sent to Edessa (q.v.; "the Syrian school") and the other half he later joined in Samosata ("the Hellenic school").

Armenian sources also ascribe credit for the invention of the alphabet in different ways. Łazar P'arpec'i, for instance, largely praises Sahak for successfully adapting the Daniēlian letters, obscuring the agency of Maštoc' in this labor. Koriwn conversely stresses it was only due to God's graces that Maštoc' was able, "by his holy hand" (*surb aĵovn iwrov*), to become the father of "novel and wonderful offsprings" (*cnunds norog ew sk'anč'eli*), or the Armenian script (chap. VIII). Yet it was the historian Movsēs Xorenac'i (q.v.), claiming to be a student of Maštoc' although likely from a later period (Garsoian, 2012), who would more explicitly frame the invention of the alphabet in terms of divine revelation. According to Xorenac'i, Maštoc' beheld a hand writing on a rock with "the eyes of his soul" (*hogwoyn ac'ac'*) (III.liii).



This mysterious writing was the Armenian script, which Maštoc' then committed to memory.

Koriwn and Xorenac'i agree, at least, that after conceiving of the Armenian letters, Maštoc' appealed to a Hellenic scribe named Rufinus in Samosata, who then committed the alphabet to writing. Maštoc's choice of Rufinus (Arm. Hřop'anos) was hardly neutral. As James R. Russell has noted, by arranging the Armenian alphabet largely in the Greek order, beginning with *ayb* (the Armenian equivalent of alpha) and ending with *k'ē* (the first letter in the Armenian spelling of Christ), as well as by writing the letters separately, from left-to-right, Armenian writing acquired a visually western and symbolically Christian configuration (Russell, 1999, p. 289). This in turn distanced Armenian from the right-to-left writing systems of Avestan, Middle Persian/Pahlavi, and Syriac in an immediately legible manner (see IRAN vi.[3] Writing Systems). Koriwn's emphasis on the first sentence to be written in Armenian at the dawn of the translation movement, a verse from Proverbs 1:2, further underscores the ideological orientation of Maštoc's newly devised script: "To know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding" (chap. VIII).

With the letters in hand, Maštoc' then returned to the Arsacid court. Koriwn likens this homecoming to Moses's descent with the Ten Commandments from Sinai, claiming that the entire assembly of courtiers left the city to greet him on the banks of the Ārah river (chap. IX). The scene, while deployed to serve a typological and rhetorical purpose, is at least suggestive of the intersection between the interests of the court and church in developing an Armenian literary culture. This relationship, of course, would be somewhat curtailed, as the Arsacid monarchy of Armenia was ended in 428 CE. Still, a robust translation movement began shortly after Maštoc's return, inaugurated in part by a translation of the Bible from Syriac sources, which allowed the prophets and apostles to become "Armenian-talking [and] Armenian-speaking" (*hayabarbarġk' hayerēnaxōsk'*) in Koriwn's phrasing (chap. XI); this initial translation would later be revised based on the Greek originals.

Maštoc' continued to travel widely after the invention of the alphabet, establishing schools and various communities of anchorites. In Constantinople, he joined several of his students whom he had dispatched to collect manuscripts and receive a Greek education. There, he was received by the Greek patriarch, Atticus. He also obtained authorization from the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II to proselytize youths in the western part of Greater Armenia and to fight the sect of the Borborites (Arm. *barbarianosk'*)



(Koriwn, chap. XVI). According to Koriwn, Maštoc' additionally created the Georgian alphabet after traveling through “the barbarian region” (*barbarosakan kołmann*) of the northern Caucasus (chap. XV). He is reported to have followed this by examining the “barbarian speech” (*zbarbaros zbars*) of the Caucasian Albanians, for whom he also fashioned a script (chap. XVI). However, although Xorenac'i also depicts Maštoc' as the inventor of the Georgian and Albanian alphabets, this tradition is notably absent in P'arpec'i.

In his later years, Maštoc' chose to retreat to the wilderness and live an ascetic and monastic life, punctuated by tearful prayer, in the company of a few devoted followers. He seems to have died a natural death around 439 CE, perhaps adding to Koriwn's apparent anxiety over whether it is permissible to write, in a hagiographic vein, the life of a man who was not martyred (see Maksoudian's introduction to Koriwn, p. xv). Thus Koriwn's account attempts to resolve this conflict by depicting a miracle: at the moment of Maštoc's death, the cross appears over his residence. Fittingly, then, Maštoc's body was first interred “in the tomb of martyrs” (*i martirosarann*) in Ōšakan (chap. XXVI), and later relocated to a chapel built nearby.

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