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MOVSĒS XORENAC‘I

MOVSĒS XORENAC‘I (Moses of Khorene), from the later Middle Ages, and down to the present, honored as the “Father of Armenian History” (*Patmahayr*). According to his own words, he was a pupil of St. Maštoc‘, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, writing in the 5th century CE. He further claims to have traveled widely to Alexandria, Byzantium, and even inadvertently to Rome, whither he was driven by a storm on his way to Greece (III.lx-lxii), but we have no other information as to his biography.

Despite the fact that several works traditionally attributed to him, among them the *Armenian Geography* (*Ašarhacoyc‘*) and the *Book of Chries* (*Girk‘ Pitoyic‘*), are now believed to be the works of other authors, his *History of Armenia* (*Patmut‘iwn Hayoc‘*) has remained the standard, if enigmatic, version of early Armenian history and is accepted by many Armenian scholars, though not by the majority of Western specialists, as the 5th-century work it claims to be, rather than as a later, 8th-century, composition. Consequently, since the end of the 19th century, a controversy, at times acrimonious, has raged between scholars as to the date of the work. This disagreement, surveyed by Cyril Toumanoff (pp. 467-76), continues to the present day, and no final agreement on this subject has yet been reached.

Movsēs’ *History* presents the early history of the Armenians in three successive books from the legendary times of Hayk, the eponymous gigantic ancestor of the Armenians or *Hayk‘*, as well as within the Biblical tradition (Book I); through the foundation of the Armenian kingdom and the Hellenistic period to the conversion to Christianity of king Trdat (Tiridates) by St. Gregory

the Illuminator (Book II); and finally the Arsacid/Parthian period of the 4th century to the end of the native Arsacid dynasty in 428 CE and the death of his teacher St. Maštoc‘ in 440 (Book III). According to his explicit philosophy of history the author draws on a chronological, rational, and analytic classical approach rather than on the Iranian epic tradition: “considering it superfluous to repeat the fables of pagans concerning the beginnings... I do not hesitate to call all Greece the mother or nurse of the sciences...” and moreover, “Because there is no true history without chronology” (I.iii, ii; II.lxxxii). For the earlier periods, Movsēs relies on current contemporary legends, Holy Scriptures, early temple histories, and the extracts of Parthian archives made by a certain “Mar Abas Catina,” especially on the issue of the organization of Armenian society as given in Book II. However, no such archives are known to have existed, and this archival material has been shown to be fictitious by Robert W. Thomson in the introduction to his most recent translation and study of the *History*. Thomson has likewise traced the origin of much of Movsēs’ information to the *Chronicle* and *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius and to other classical, patristic, and early native and foreign sources such as, among others, Josephus, Philo Judaeus, Socrates Scholasticus, and the *Alexander Romance* (see CALLISTHENES), as well as to the earlier Armenian works of Koriwn, Agat‘angełos (see AGATHANGELOS), the anonymous *Epic Histories* (*Buzandarank‘*) and Łazar P‘arpec‘i.

There is no doubt that wherever Movsēs, a meticulous antiquarian, had access to lost ancient material, or to a reliable source at his disposal, his information can be both sound and valuable. Such are, for instance, his preservation of the Iranian tale of Biwrasp Aždahak inserted between Books I and II of his *History*, or the fragment of the lost Persian hymn celebrating the birth of the god Vahagn/Vereθraγna from the flaming reed in the purple sea, which he incorporated into his First Book (I.xxxi), of which we have no other knowledge. As noted by Giusto Traina, some information on Iranian history and Sasanian central and provincial administration can be gathered from the *History* of Movsēs, as it can also be found in early Armenian sources, although the author tends to reflect a rather anti-Iranian point of view. Xorenac‘i covers the transfer of power in Iran from the Parthians to the Sasanians and the putative origin of both dynasties, as well as the Parthian origin of the local Armenian ruling house. The reigns of Parthian and Sasanian rulers, such as the successive Artašēses, or Ardašir, and Šābur (in the Armenian form, Artašir and Šapuh; see SHAPUR I) are surveyed. Movsēs relates the struggle between Rome and Persia over the control of Armenia and the gradual domination of

most of the country by the Sasanians, even though the Armenian king is styled “brother” by his overlord. He likewise acknowledges tacitly the secular jurisdiction of the Sasanian ruler over the Armenian Church. References can be found in the *History* confirming Persian place names such as the successive capitals of Ecbatana and Ctesiphon (*Tizboni*) or the “Fortress of Forgetfulness” (*Anyišeli Amroc*). The title of “king of kings” (*arkayic‘ ark‘ay*) and the correct Iranian royal formula, “Most valiant of the Mazdeans” (*Mazdeanc‘ kaǰ*), also found on coins and seals, is accurately given when the author claims to cite Persian official letters. The term *dar* is used for the Persian royal court. The provincial administration of the Sasanian empire is best reflected, as may be expected from Armenia’s subject status vis-à-vis its Sasanian rulers after 428 CE. A royal fisc to which a regular provincial tribute was due is known to Xorenac‘i, and the title of *marzban* for a “governor or viceroy” is commonly used, as is that of *sparapet*, corresponding to the Middle Iranian *spāhbad* for the commander in chief of the army. In general, a number of administrative Persian terms such as *hazarapei* “chiliarch” and *dpir* “secretary,” which are also known from other sources, are familiar to the author. The term *mog* appears for the Iranian clergy. However, the meaning of the Iranian administrative terminology used by the author in an Armenian context must be analyzed with care before it may be transferred to the Persian realm, and its accuracy for the Sasanian period necessarily depends on Xorenac‘i’s disputed date.

A further number of problematic aspects of the *History* have proved a stumbling block to its universal acceptance on its own terms as a contemporary account. In addition to the spurious claims of direct information rather than borrowings from other sources already mentioned and numerous questionable toponyms or other details, such as the mention of Four Armenias, a division introduced by the emperor Justinian I in 536 (I.iv), errors which might be due to a *lapsus calami* by some later copyist, the following points have raised doubts as to the veracity and date of the author:

(1) Although Movsēs claims to have composed his work in the 5th century, no reference to it is to be found before the 10th century, and there is no contemporary mention of him among the known disciples of Maštoc‘.

(2) The work is dedicated to, and glorifies, the Bagratuni/Bagratid house, which had attained the kingship of Armenia with the royal coronation of Ašot I in 884, although its earlier rank in the 5th century was that of “crown holder” (*tagadir*) and “master of the horse” (*aspet*) according to Armenian customary

law, and a branch of the family was still known in the 6th century to the Byzantine historian Procopius (q.v.) as “Aspetianoi” (*De bell. Pers.*, iii.12). However, a 5th-century dedication is unlikely in view of the fact that the head of this house, Varaz-Tiroc‘, had disgraced himself in the great Armenian revolt of 450-51 against the Sasanians by siding with the pro-Persian party of the apostate Vasak Siwni against the national hero and martyr St.Vardan Mamikonean, as attested by all contemporary accounts.

Moreover, the glorification of the Bagratuni has led Movsēs to record a number of chronological and historical distortions, such as the placing of St. Gregory’s great-grandson, Nersēs I, at the first œcumenical council of Constantinople in 380, some eight years after the patriarch’s presumed death (III.xxxiii). Likewise, the author systematically downgrades the great rival house of the Mamikonean, the hereditary “Grand marshals” (*sparapet*) of the realm to the minor rank of royal squires (*zinakir*) (III.xxii). He further obscures their importance by substituting Artawazd Mandakuni for Artawazd Mamikonean as royal tutor (*dayeak*) and commander of the Armenian army, Sahak Bagratuni for Mušeł Mamikonean as the victorious *sparapet* of the Armenians in the great battle against the Persians under king Pap, and Babik Siuni for Manueł Mamikonean as the father-in-law of Pap’s son, the young king Aršak III (III.xxii, xxxvii, xli, lxxxii). His continuous stress on the Bagratuni as the defenders of the true faith, be it at first Jewish and subsequently Christian, long before the martyrdom of Vardan Mamikonean in 451, is best understandable after the death of prince Sahak Bagratuni at the battle of Bagrewand in 772, which gave to his house a martyr comparable to the glory of St. Vardan.

(3) Finally, although the author claims to “trace all the genealogies from father to son… [to] describe briefly but faithfully the origin of all the Armenian noble families as they are found in certain Greek historians” (I.i), he focuses primarily on the royal aspects of early Armenian history and shows in his Third Book a society reflecting traces of evolution from the centrifugal aristocratic pattern found in the works of 5th-century Armenian authors toward a more centralized organization.

(4) For all of his demonstrated acquaintance with non-Christian, Iranian material, the Zoroastrian ideology with its concept of the *xwarrah* or “royal glory” (see FARR[AH]) which accompanied the legitimate king even after his death, a belief familiar to Armenian authors of the 5th century such as the *Buzandaran Patmut‘iwnk‘*, is unknown and incomprehensible to Movsēs by his

own admission (III.xxvii; cf. Garsoïan, 2003-04, p. 36).

In spite of these flaws, which have obscured the value of Movsēs’ *History* and stood in the way of a firm conclusion as to its date of composition, the pre-eminence of the work remains undeniable as a repository of otherwise lost pre-Christian material, for some information on the history, social structure and administration of the Parthian and Sasanian empires, though this is not the focus of the work, and for providing the only known general account of early Armenian history. Marking a crucial stage in the development of Armenian historiography, it transcends the earlier and more provincial accounts limited to the history of the Armenians to address various aspects of the Armenian lands as a single unit rather than to their 5th-century tripartite political division and to integrate this single identity into the historiography of late Antiquity.

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