

The Armenian Rite



Analecta Gorgiana

135

Series Editor
George Kiraz

Analecta Gorgiana is a collection of long essays and short monographs which are consistently cited by modern scholars but previously difficult to find because of their original appearance in obscure publications. Carefully selected by a team of scholars based on their relevance to modern scholarship, these essays can now be fully utilized by scholars and proudly owned by libraries.

The Armenian Rite

Archdale King



gorgias press

2009

Gorgias Press LLC, 180 Centennial Ave., Piscataway, NJ, 08854, USA

www.gorgiaspress.com

Copyright © 2009 by Gorgias Press LLC

Originally published in 1948

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning or otherwise without the prior written permission of Gorgias Press LLC.

2009



ISBN 978-1-60724-098-3

This is an extract from Archdale King's *The Rites of Eastern Christendom*,
Vol. 2, Chapter X.

Printed in the United States of America

ARMENIAN RITE

Armenia, known to the modern world for its massacred and unhappy people living in any and every country save their own, has the honour of being the first state officially to embrace Christianity. To-day, like the Jews, the Armenians are scattered over the face of the globe, and yet with astonishing vitality they tenaciously retain their national characteristics and distinctive religion. The whole race has only one liturgical rite, celebrated in classical Armenian.

All European languages speak of "Armenia" and "Armenians,"¹ but the natives themselves call the country "*Hayastan*" and the race "*Haikh*," claiming descent from Haik, grandson of Japheth, the son of Noe. This legend is further supported by identifying Mount Ararat (*Urartu*)—the head² and centre of the country—as the exact spot on which the ark rested after the Flood. Etchmiadzin claims to have preserved a relic of the ark, but the whole tradition is a foreign importation and unknown to the Armenian writer Moses of Khoren (ab. 458).

The earliest name for the Armenians seems to have been the "House of Thorgom,"³ a title corroborated by the

¹ *Armé*, "chiefs."

² Lazarus of Pharpi, ab. 490.

³ "De domo *Thorgoma*, equos, et equites, et mulos adduxerunt ad forum tuum." Ezech., XXVII, 14.

prophet Ezechiel, who emphasizes the merchant character of the people.

The original country, with Greater Armenia east of the river Euphrates and Lesser Armenia to the west, lies south-east of the Black Sea, forming a quadrangle and bounded on the north by the Caucasus Mountains, the west by the Black Sea, the east by the Caspian Sea, and the south by the Taurus Mountains.

The present stock is said to be an Ayran race from Phrygia, replacing the former inhabitants (Khaldians) about the end of the 7th or beginning of the 6th century before the Christian era, although there may well have been a fusion between the Phrygians and the people ⁴ of the Taurus Mountains.

History

The "Golden Age" of Armenia is reckoned to be the reign of Dikran (Tigranes), who ruled the country from about 90 B. C. to 55 B. C., but it was only after the battle of Magnesia (189 B. C.), which ended the supremacy of the Seleucides, that the history of the country emerges into the clear light of day. Armenia has always been a buffer state and the "cockpit of Asia," whose sovereignty has been disputed by Romans, Persians, Arabs, Crusaders, Turks and Russians.

Christianity, according to Tertullian (ab. 160-ab. 220), flourished here in the 2nd century, in the reign of King Sanatrouc (166-193), and the same writer, ⁵ commenting upon the Acts ⁶ of the Apostles, gives Armenia, not Judea, as one of the countries which St. Luke speaks of as re-

⁴ Kheti, Khati or Hati (Hittites).

⁵ St. Augustine († 430) gives a similar interpretation.

⁶ *Acta Apost.* II, 9.

presented at Pentecost. Such an exegesis would indeed seem feasible, as Judea can hardly claim to be a "foreign" country to a Jew.

The apostolates of St. Thaddeus (35-43) and St. Bartholomew (44-60), whose feast days are kept on July 20 and November 30 respectively, have little evidence in their favour, and are traceable to a Greek source, invented with the wish to ascribe apostolic beginnings to the church of Armenia. The "graves" of the two apostles, however, are shown at Ardaze (Magou) and Albac (Baschkalé); while the katholikos of Etchmiadzin claims to rule from the "Throne of St. Thaddeus." Eusebius († 339-40) and the *Syrian Chronicle (Leroupnia)* have suggested that the Thaddeus of the legend is in reality Addeus, bishop of Edessa. The tradition also in regard to King Abgar the Black and the portrait of Christ (*vera effigies*) is spurious, although St. John Damascene⁷ spoke of it as *antiquitus tradita narratio*, and the picture is alleged to be preserved in the church of St. Bartholomew of the Armenians at Genoa. A letter to Meruzanes, "bishop of the Armenians," from Dionysius of Alexandria (248-265) "about penitence" seems to show that Christianity was brought to the country from Syria (Edessa) at an early date.

The apostle of Armenia is said to have been a scion of the royal stock of Arsacides,⁸ claiming descent from Abraham. St. Gregory⁹ the Illuminator, who had been converted in Caesarea of Cappodocia, began his work of

⁷ *Sermon on Holy Images*, I.

⁸ This Armenian tradition is wholly unreliable. Arsacid was a generic title for the Parthian kings (cf. Egyptian pharaohs and Persian shahs), and seems to have been an abbreviation of the Sanscrit word *Kehajargha* (Xerxes).

⁹ Grigor Lusavorich.

evangelising Armenia¹⁰ about the year 261, at a time when King Tiridates was persecuting the Christians. The stories connected with the life of St. Gregory, and in particular his vicissitudes in the pit are unsubstantiated by history, although three feasts¹¹ are observed in respect to them—the sufferings (February 4); going into the pit (February 28); coming out of the pit (October 19).

Tiridates († ab. 330) himself, who had put to death the holy virgins Gaiana and Rhipsime (October 5),¹² is said to have received baptism at Bagavan and to have taken a prominent part in the conversion of the country, for which a later generation rewarded him with canonisation.

Mention has already been made of Armenia as the first Christian state, and Eusebius speaks of the war of 311, which the emperor Maximianus waged as a result of his recent conversion.

In 302, St. Gregory¹³ returned to Caesarea for consecration at the hands of the metropolitan Leontius, thereby acknowledging the ecclesiastical supremacy of that see. There is no historical foundation for the tradition that St. Gregory received the pallium at the hands of Pope St. Sylvester. The Life of St. Gregory, attributed to Agathangelos, chamberlain or secretary of King Tiridates, and teeming with the most improbable miracles and marvels, is a com-

¹⁰ The earlier Christian church in the country had suffered heavily at the hands of the Persians.

¹¹ It should be noted that feasts in the Armenian church vary according to the date of Easter, and also that they are never celebrated on a Wednesday or a Friday.

¹² Armenian menology. The Roman martyrology gives September 29 as the date of the martyrdom of these protomartyrs of the Armenian church.

¹³ Attwater (*The Golden Book of Eastern Saints*, p. 18) says that the consecration of St. Gregory took place "about the year 294."

position taken from many sources, and written subsequent to 456. St. Gregory¹⁴ is said to have appointed the sons of converted pagan priests to be his assistants, and that for their maintenance the king gave entire villages, which King Bab, later in the century, for the most part confiscated. Much uncertainty, however, surrounds the work of the saint, and even the date of his death (ab. 330) has been disputed. He seems to have sent his son Aristakes to the council of Nicea (325), and shortly after to have consecrated him as head of the Armenian church, while Gregory himself retired to a hermitage on Mount Manyea in the province of Taron. In the following year he was found dead by a shepherd and buried at Thortan, not far from Ashtishat. The "Confession"¹⁵ of Gregory the Illuminator," sometimes cited as the official creed of the Armenian church, and alleged to have been made at the reading of the *acta* of the council of Nicea, was probably composed at the end of the 5th century as a compendium of the belief of the church.

The relics of St. Gregory are claimed by the Greeks to have been transported at the end of the 5th century to Constantinople, from whence some of them during the Iconoclastic controversy found their way to Naples. The Armenians observe his feast on several days in the year: August 5, February 4, February 28, October 19, and September 30; the Byzantines, Copts¹⁶ (*Babeh* 3) and Syrians on September 30, the date of the translation of the relics; the Copts (*Tout* 19) and Abyssinians on September 16

¹⁴ *Disciplina Armena*, II. *Monachismo*, P. GARABET-DR. AMADUNI. *Fonti*. Serie II, fasc. XII, part II, tit. V, cap. I, pp. 210-211.

¹⁵ This Confession is repeated by the celebrant in the liturgy after the creed (*q. v.*).

¹⁶ A third feast of St. Gregory is observed by the Copts on December 11 (15 *Kihak*), which the *Synaxarion* claims to be the day of his death.

(*Maskarram* 13); and the Latin church,¹⁷ “*pro aliquibus locis*, on October 1, where St. Gregory is mistakenly called a “martyr.” The Roman martyrology, however, commemorates the apostle of Armenia on September 30. St. Aris-takes (325-333) was succeeded as primate of Armenia by his elder brother St. Vertanes (333-341), and it was not until after the 5th century that canon law forbade the elevation of a married priest to the episcopate. The early chronology¹⁸ is obscure, but the primacy would seem to have been at first restricted to the family of St. Gregory.

The title “patriarch” was only assumed after the break with Caesarea, and the early bishops were called *katholikai*. Their first residence was at Ashtishat on the Euphrates in the province of Taron, but the seat of the civil government was, until the 5th century, at Vagharshapat,¹⁹ although there does not appear to have been, as in later centuries, one fixed see city. The name *katholikos*²⁰ originated in the civil office of the imperial minister of finance. It was first used for the vicar²¹ of a bishop, and later denoted an office even higher than that of patriarch, although circumstances have compelled the Gregorian Armenians to admit three *katholikai* (Etchmiadzin, Aghthamar and Sis).

As we have seen, Armenia was at first dependent upon Caesarea, which in its turn owed allegiance to the patriarch of Antioch, so that the canonical position was regular and normal.

¹⁷ Inserted by Gregory XVI (1830-1846), September 1837.

¹⁸ St. Houssik (son of St. Vertanes, 341-347); St. Nerses (grandson of St. Houssik, 353-373); St. Sahak or Isaac (son of St. Nerses, 387-439), known as the “Illuminator of Knowledge.”

¹⁹ Known later as Etchmiadzin.

²⁰ A title used afterwards by the primate of Persia.

²¹ Cf. Syrian mafrian.

Soon, however, there occurred a breach with the primatial see, originating in a conspiracy against the *katholikos* Nerses (353-373), who, at the instigation of St. Basil, had attempted to reform the irregularities in the Armenian church, and at the same time to curb the king in the excesses of his personal life. Faustus of Byzantium²² (ab. 395-416) asserts that Nerses was consecrated by Eusebius, metropolitan of Caesarea, who held that see from 362-370, so that if the chronicler is correct the Armenian bishop could not have taken office before 363.

Possibly the legend²³ that brought about the change of name from Vagharshapat to Etchmiadzin was used to show divine approval for the autonomy of the church of Armenia. The promulgator of the story may very well have been the *katholikos* Comitas I (615-628), who rebuilt the ruined primatial church and discovered the relics of St. Rhipsime.

St. Basil († 379) protested against the disloyalty towards his exarchate, although there does not seem to have been any breach between Caesarea and Armenia. The very nature of the complaint, however, shows that autonomy was a novel claim, although the one-time dissident patriarch of Constantinople, Ormanian,²⁴ in his anxiety to prove that the Armenian church was never subject to outside authority, has maintained that the Basilian letters related only to the bishoprics of Nicopolis and Satala, situated within the limits of the jurisdiction of Pontus.

The great influence of St. Basil upon Armenia at this

²² Faustus wrote a history of the Church in Greek.

²³ Etchmiadzin means "the only-begotten has descended," in commemoration of an alleged divine apparition to St. Gregory. The Turks call it *Utch kilise*, "Three churches" (St. Gregory, St. Gaiana and St. Rhipsime).

²⁴ *The Church of Armenia*, p. 16.

time fostered the growth of monasticism²⁵ in the country, especially in regard to the coenobites. The council of Ashtishat²⁶ (ab. 364) provided a better monastic organization, but the poisoning of St. Nerses by King Pap (369-374) produced a schism with two conflicting parties. St. Isaac I (387-439), the son of the murdered prelate, contrived to heal the breach, although the separation from Caesarea continued. In the 5th century, through the efforts of St. Isaac and St. Mesrob, the country was filled with religious houses, all claiming to follow the Rule of St. Basil. Many reforms and developments were undertaken in the episcopate of St. Isaac, the "Illuminator of Knowledge" and the last of the direct line of St. Gregory. Chief among these developments were the invention of the Armenian alphabet, the translation of the Bible and the revision of the liturgy, for up to this time culture had been Greek with an admixture of Syriac. A leading part in these reforms was undertaken by St. Mesrob, a *vartabed*²⁷ (doctor), and his disciple Ezkik of Kolb.²⁸ Some time after 458 Moses of Khoren composed his famous, but none too reliable, *History of Armenia*, a work added to by anonymous contributors in the 7th and 8th centuries.

The century, however, was momentous in shaping the course of the religious development in the country. Until the council of Chalcedon (451) Armenia had been foremost in upholding the Catholic faith. Gnosticism had made but little headway, while the council of Shahapivan (447) had condemned the Messalian and Paulician heresies, which

²⁵ Monasticism was received in Armenia from Cappadocia in the 4th century, and probably there were solitaries before the advent of coenobites.

²⁶ The council of Ashtishat introduced the *Διδασκαλία τῶν Ἀποστολῶν* and many disciplinary measures concerning marriage and fasting.

savoured of licentious quietism. Alone among the rites of Christendom, Armenia retains the anathema attached to the creed of Nicea, and a hymn of praise ascribed to St. Gregory the Illuminator. A commemoration of the council is observed on September 7, while Constantinople (381) and Ephesus (431) are called to mind on February 16 and August 10 respectively, since St. Nerses the Great is said to have assisted at the former, and St. Isaac the Great to have taken part in the latter by correspondance. A synod held at Ashtishat (435) considered the teachings of Nestorius, and two priests were sent to Proclus, patriarch of Constantinople, for enlightenment, although St. Isaac had already condemned Theodore of Mopsuestia, under whose writings Nestorius was now sheltering. The dogmatic letter taken on this occasion to Constantinople formed the grounds for the rejection of the *Three Chapters* by the general council of 553 (II Constantinople). Political reasons made the acceptance of Nestorianism by Armenia next to impossible, since Persia, her hereditary foe, was already tainted with the heresy. That country, however, was still predominantly pagan, and in 449 King Yezdeguert II (439-451) had declared Zoroastrianism (Mazdeism) to be the national religion.

Schism

On May 26, 451, the very year of the council of Chalcedon, an Armenian army, led by St. Vartan (Mamikonian), was routed at Avarair, a disaster²⁹ annually commemorated on February 11.

²⁷ The order of *vartabed*, peculiar to the Armenian church, was instituted in the 5th century.

²⁸ Author of the *Refutation of the Sects*.

²⁹ Cf. The observance by the Serbs on June 28 (*Vidovdan*) of their defeat by the Turks at Kossovo.

The *katholikos*, John Mandakuni (478-490), obtained toleration for the Armenian Christians, and transferred the primatial see to Dvin, but the country was definitely hostile to the decrees of Chalcedon, formally repudiating its canons in 491, although ten Armenians had been present at the council and had signed its acts.

Various causes led up to this decision, but they were in the main political rather than theological. Armenia had been deserted by the emperor Marcian (450-451), a staunch Chalcedonian, just at the most critical time in her contest with Persia, while later in the century a further demand for imperial assistance brought help from the emperor Zeno (474-491), who was himself Monophysite. On the other side, it was commonly reported from Syria that Chalcedon was a reversal of Ephesus, and the synod of Edessa (482) maintained that its decrees *were* Nestorian in character. The formula of St. Cyril, "one nature of the Word incarnate" was claimed by the Armenians to be in agreement with their teaching. The difficulty,³⁰ also, of translating Greek theological terms accurately was very great: for *φύσις* and *ὑπόστασις* there was only *pnuthiun* (*bnouthiun*), and only one word existed for "begetting" and "bringing forth," so that it was difficult to make a distinction between "begotten of the Father" and "born of the Virgin." The creed professed at ordination maintains that our Lord has "one united nature" (*Miaworial mi bnouthiun*). Armenian Monophysism is Julian³¹ rather than Severian³² (followed by the Jacobites and Copts), although

³⁰ e. g. The translation of the Tome of St. Leo.

³¹ Julian of Halicarnassus († after 518) upheld the incorruptibility of the body of Christ.

³² Severus of Antioch († 538) taught that our Lord's body was "corruptible" by its own nature.