

Introduction to the History of Classical Armenian

I. General Introduction

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1 Geography & Territory

In ancient geographical tradition, the region called ‘Armenia’ encompasses the territory which borders on the Caucasus Mountains in the north, the Taurus Mountains in the south, and is further delimited by Media Atropatene, the modern Azerbaijan, in the East and the Upper Euphrates in the West.

The historical Kingdom of Armenia encompasses, for the most part, a territory identical to this description, but of course borders have shifted considerably over time.

At its largest extent, the Armenian Empire of Tigran II (*Տիգրան Մեծ*, r. 95–55 BCE) encompassed large bits of Asia Minor, modern-day Iraq and Iran, and reached the borders of the Holy Land (cf. Figure 1). While most territory with the designation ‘Armenia’ was more or less constantly under Armenian rule throughout antiquity, one part of the country, Armenia Minor (*Փոքր Հայք*) was first incorporated into the Roman province of Cappadocia in c. 114 CE under the Rule of Trajan,¹ and after some time of renewed Armenian rule, was created a province in its own right under Diocletian; further changes to its administrative structure followed under Byzantine rule.

The Kingdom of Armenia remained geographically intact until 428 CE, when King Artashes IV was overthrown by his nobles and the Kingdom was turned into a Sasanian *marzpanate* and governor was installed. It remained thus until the Arab conquest of 639 CE, when Armenia was integrated into the Caliphate.

Other notable entities bearing the name Armenia are:

c. 885–1045 – **Bagratid Armenia** – on the same territory as the historical Kingdom, independent owing to Byzantine and Abbasid concentration on one another’s borders;

1198–1375 – **The Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia** (*Կիլիկիոյ Հայոց Թագաւորութիւն*) – effectively a Crusader State;

1918–1920 – **Democratic Republic of Armenia** (*Հայաստանի Հանրապետութիւն*) – established as the result of the disintegration of the Russian Empire;

1920–91 – **Armenian Socialist Soviet Republic** (*Հայկական Սովետական Սոցիալիստական Հանրապետութիւն*) – with a break 1922–1936 when it was part of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic with Georgia and Azerbaijan;

since 1991 – **Republic of Armenia**.

¹All of Armenia was a province in its own right for a short time between 114–118 CE; cf. Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* LXVIII.20.

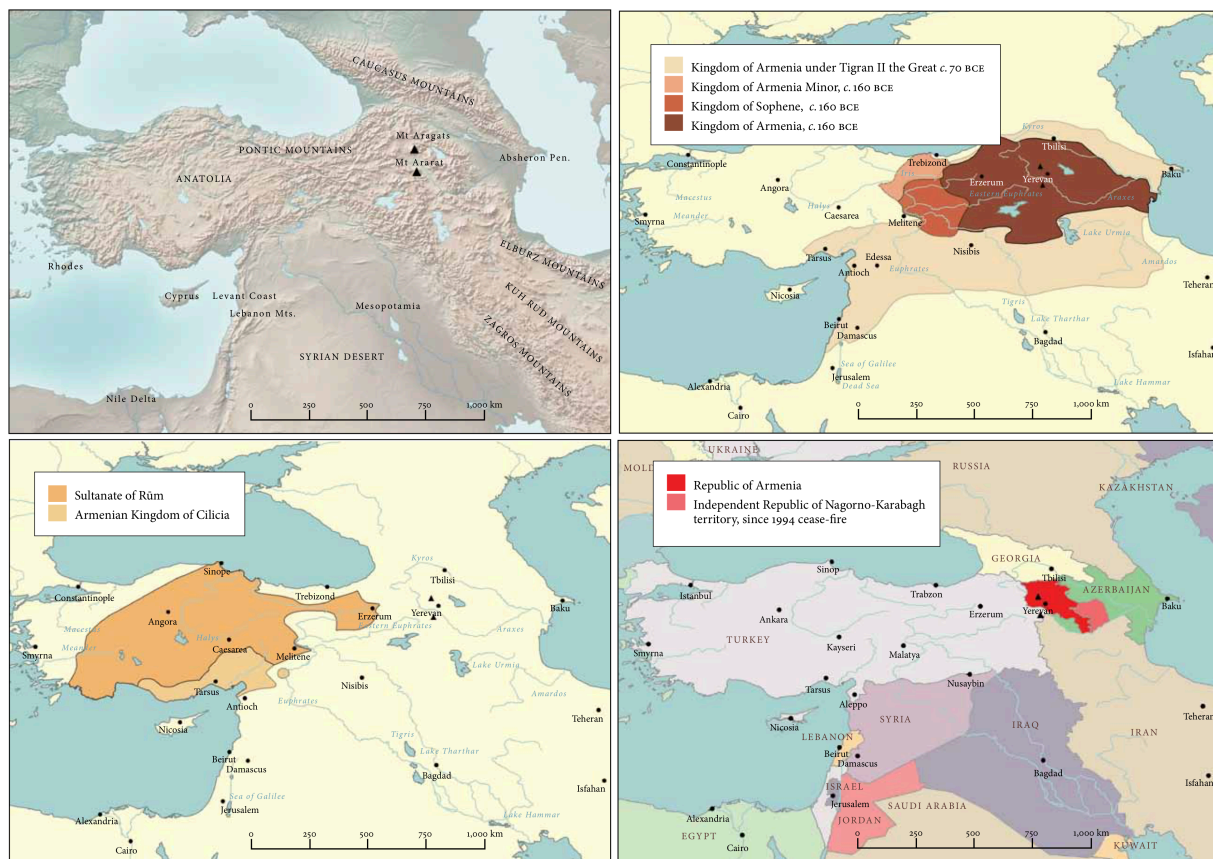


Figure 1: t.l.: topographical map of Asia Minor, the Caucasus, the Levant, and Mesopotamia; t.r.: Kingdom of Armenia 160–70 BCE; b.l.: Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, c. 1220 CE; b.r.: modern political map of the area (cf. VAN LINT AND MEYER 2015:266–7).

2 Historical Overview

The Armenian Highlands, held until at least the late 7th century BCE by the Kingdom of Urartu, came under Iranian influence first during the Median expansion of the late 7th and early 6th century BCE; while Greek historiography suggests Median rule in this region had been established only under Astyages (585–550 BCE),² other sources would have an earlier date of about 612 BCE.³

King Darius says: “these are the countries which came unto me; by the grace of Ahura Mazda I was king of them: Persia, Elam, Babylonia, [...], Media, Armenia, Cappadocia, Parthia, [...]” (DB I.12–16)

The first mention of Armenia in historical sources is found in the Behistun inscription of King Darius I (c. 550–486 BCE) dating to between 520 and 518 BCE; therein, *Armina* is listed as one of the territories under Darius’ rule, and later as one of the regions that unsuccessfully rebelled against him.⁴ Part of the Achaemenid Empire throughout its existence, and subsequently of the Macedonian and Seleucid Em-

²Cf. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* III.7; Strabo, *Geography* XI.3.5. The fact that the Urartian king Rusa IV supposedly ruled until 585 BCE may further substantiate a later date.

³Cf. Movsēs Xorenac‘i, *History of the Armenians* I.22.

⁴Cf. DB I.15 and II.29ff.

pires, both Greater and Lesser Armenia, viz. Sophene, gained independence in 189 BCE under Artashes (Artaxias) and Zareh (Zariadres).⁵

Ἱστοροῦσι δὲ τὴν Ἀρμενίαν μικρὰν πρότερον οὖσαν αὐξηθῆναι διὰ τῶν περὶ Ἀρταξίαν καὶ Ζαρίαδριν, οἳ πρότερον μὲν ἦσαν Ἀντιόχου τοῦ μεγάλου στρατηγοί, βασιλεύσαντες δ' ὕστερον μετὰ τὴν ἐκείνου ἦσαν ὁ μὲν τῆς Ὠφρηνῆς καὶ τῆς Ἀκισηνῆς καὶ Ὀδομαντίδος καὶ ἄλλων τινῶν ὁ δὲ τῆς περὶ Ἀρτάξατα, συνήρουν ἐκ τῶν περικειμένων ἐθνῶν ἀποτεμόμενοι μέρη, ἐκ Μήδων μὲν τὴν τε Κασπιανὴν καὶ Φαυνίτιν καὶ Βασοροπέδαν, [...] ὥστε πάντα ὁμογλώττους εἶναι. (Strabo, *Geographica* XI.14.5)⁶

Under Tigran II, the Great, the two Armenian kingdoms would be united once more, further incorporating territories previously conceded to the Seleucids; the time of the Armenian Empire (83–69 BCE) was cut short by its defeat at the hands of the Romans during the Third Mithridatic War and Tigran's submission to Pompeius in 66 BCE.⁷

Although nominally a vassal state of Rome, the territory of Armenia and the loyalty of the local *naxarars* was often divided between Roman and Parthian sympathies. After some time as a Roman protectorate, the Parthian king Vologaeses I installed his younger brother Trdat I on the Armenian throne in 53 CE; this decision would later be ratified in the agreement of Rhandaia in 61 CE and the coronation of Trdat I by Emperor Nero in 66 CE. Henceforth, the Armenian king would be chosen from a minor line of the Parthian Arsacid, viz. Aršakunik' (*Արշակունիք*), dynasty and his appointment confirmed by Rome. It is under the Arsacids, who ruled Armenia until 428 CE, that the Armenian language underwent the most intense Iranian influence; they remained in power even after the fall of the Parthian Empire and the succession of the Sasanians in 224 CE, and the Christianisation of the Armenians at the beginning of the 4th century. After certain territorial concessions to the East Roman Empire in the late 4th century, and the conversion of the kingdom into a *marzpanate* in 428 CE, Armenia remained a part of the Sasanian Empire until its fall during the Arab invasion.

Although the relationship between the Armenian people and their Iranian overlords may have varied between full acceptance and outright hostility, it must be kept in mind that the Armenian ruling class was Iranian, either in origin or by marriage, since the Orontid dynasty under the Achaemenid Empire, as is betrayed *inter alia* by Armenian nobles' names.⁸

3 History of Scholarship

Until Heinrich HÜBSCHMANN's seminal 1875 paper *Ueber die stellung des armenischen im kreise der indogermanischen sprachen*, the Armenian language had been thought to pertain to the Iranian group of Indo-European languages, as still asserted by BOPP (1857-61). Yet, it is of note that the 'Vater der modernen, wissenschaftlich betriebenen armenischen Sprachwissenschaft' (BOLOGNESI 1988a:561) was

⁵Cf. Strabo, *Geography* XI.14.15.

⁶"According to report, Armenia, though a small country in earlier times, was enlarged by Artaxias and Zariadris, who formerly were generals of Antiochus the Great, but later, after his defeat, reigned as kings (the former as king of Sophenê, Acisenê, Odomantis, and certain other countries, and the latter as king of the country round Artaxata), and jointly enlarged their kingdoms by cutting off for themselves parts of the surrounding nations,—I mean by cutting off Caspianê and Phaunitis and Basoropeda from the country of the Medes; [...] and therefore they all speak the same language, as we are told." (tr. J. Henderson)

⁷Cf. Movsēs Xorenac'i, *History of the Armenians* II.15ff.

⁸Cf. GARSOÏAN (1997:46–7). The Iranian origin of names such as Artasir (cp. MP **rthštr* /ardaxšir/, a hypocoristic form of Clr. **arta-xšaθra-* 'whose rule is order') and Trdat (cp. MP *tyldt* /tirdād/, < Clr. **Tira-dāta-* 'given by Tīr') had already been recognised by HÜBSCHMANN (1897:28–9, 87–9); further cp. GIGNOUX (1986, supplement 2003:II/46, II/167).

not the first to recognise that the Armenian lexicon was composed of multiple layers, including inheritance from Indo-European and many other strata of loanwords; in his 1711 treatise,⁹ Johann Joachim SCHRÖDER successfully distinguishes a stratum consisting of ‘Antiqua Parthica ab Arsacidis in Armeniam introducta vocabula, Persis etiam & Turcis communia’ (1711:46) from lexical items ‘ex vocibus ejus propriis’ (cf. BOLOGNESI 1988b:563). SCHRÖDER’s data are based on shared lexical items between Classical Armenian and Modern Persian; nonetheless, his attribution of said loans to the Northwest Iranian language Parthian and to Arsacid period coincides exactly with the later findings of HÜBSCHMANN.

After his proof that Armenian is indeed “ein eigener zweig des indogermanischen” (1875:38), HÜBSCHMANN went on to provide further material in his *Armenische Studien* (1883), in which are collected 232 words of pure Indo-European heritage; this project was later supplemented by the *Armenische Grammatik* (1897), discussing loanwords and names from Iranian, Syriac, and Greek, as well as *echtarmenische* words.

A pioneer in his field, HÜBSCHMANN’s work suffered from a lack of Middle Iranian evidence that came to light only over the course of the 20th century and would allow for the differentiation of distinct loan sources of the Iranian material in Armenian.¹⁰ Only the work of MEILLET (1911–2) revealed the largely North and Southwest Middle Iranian, viz. Parthian and Middle Persian, origin of loanwords in Armenian; with the help of the publications of Friedrich W. K. MÜLLER and Friedrich C. ANDREAS, MEILLET established on the basis of phonetic differences between the two Middle Iranian languages that Parthian was the source of most loanwords.¹¹ The work of later scholars interested in Iranian and Armenian, most notable amongst whom are Émile BENVENISTE, Giancarlo BOLOGNESI, John A. C. GREPPIN, and Rüdiger SCHMITT, has since sought to develop and refine the understanding of dialect stratification, timeframe and context of language contact, and replicated material. Next to confirmations of HÜBSCHMANN’s etymologies, much of 20th-century scholarship has been dedicated to the systematisation of Irano-Armenian loan processes, the addition to and rectification of Iranian etymologies for Armenian lexical items, as well as the expansion of scope to include both morphological items and syntactic calques; research into the latter is, however, still in its infancy.

4 Attestation & Sources

Armenian is first attested in the 5th century CE in a lapidary inscription in Nazareth (Figure 2; STONE 1990–1); the earliest manuscript is a Gospel from the 9th century, the so-called Queen Mlk’ē Gospel (between 851–862; Figure 3).

Apart from the translation of the Biblical texts, early Armenian literature focuses on the history of the country, with numerous texts entitled *History of the Armenians*. Other important works include biographical and hagiographical accounts of important personalities in Armenian history; religious treatises; and translations of Greek grammatical or philosophical works.

⁹Cf. SCHRÖDER (1711); for a longer discussion of this work, see BOLOGNESI (1988a). HÜBSCHMANN (1897:XII) acknowledges this work only briefly in the foreword to his *Armenische Grammatik*.

¹⁰As noted by CONSIDINE (1979:213), HÜBSCHMANN could not provide Middle Iranian evidence for more than 40 per cent of the lexicon thought to be of Iranian origin.

¹¹MEILLET (1911–2:245) compares, for example, Arm. *boyr* ‘scent, smell’ with Manichaean Parthian *bwd-*, found e.g. in *bwdyst’n* /bōdestān/ ‘garden’, cp. Arm. *burastan* ‘id.’; the regular development of Parthian intervocalic -d- /δ/ to Arm. -r- cannot be explained on the basis of the Middle Persian forms, where historical intervocalic *-d- has yielded MP -y-, cp. MP *bwy* /bōy/ ‘smell, scent’.

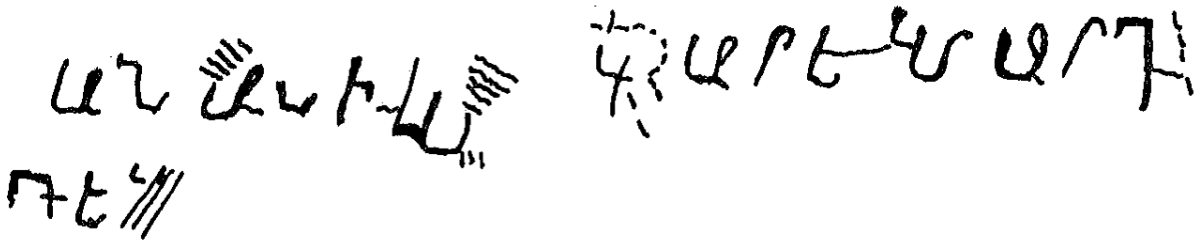


Figure 2: Nazareth Arm 1 (STONE 1990–1:317)

A selection of the most important early pieces:

- *The Epic Histories* (Բուզանդարան Պատմութիւնք, *Buzandaran Patmut'iwnek'*) attributed to P'awstos Buzand;
- *The Life of Maštoc'* (Վարք Մաշտոցի, *Vark' Maštoc'i*) by Koriwn;
- *The History of the Armenians* (Պատմութիւն Հայոց, *Patmut'wn Hayoc'*) by the unknown author called Agat'angelos;
- *The History of Armenians* (Պատմութիւն Հայոց, *Patmut'wn Hayoc'*) by Łazar P'arpec'i;
- *Concerning Vardan and the Armenian War* (Վասն Վարդանայ եւ Հայոց պատերազմի, *Vasn Vardanay ew Hayoc' paterazmi*) by Elišē;
- *Against the Sects* (Եղծ Աղանդոց, *Elc Ałandoc'*) by Eznik Kolbac'i;
- *The History of Armenians* (Պատմութիւն Հայոց, *Patmut'wn Hayoc'*) by Movsēs Xorenac'i.

As at least some of these titles suggest, all seven works deal with the history of Armenia and some of its most prominent leaders or historical figures such as St Grigor Lusaworič', who was instrumental in the Christianisation of Armenia in the early 4th century (Agat'angelos); Mesrop Maštoc', the monk and scholar who invented the Armenian alphabet (Koriwn); and Vardan Mamikonean, who lead the Armenian army in the Battle of Avarayr in 451 CE and secured the position of Christianity in Armenia (Elišē).

Agat'angelos' *History of Armenia* details the developments in Armenia between the onset of the demise of Arsacid rule over Persia after 224 CE and the death of St Grigor Lusaworič' in c. 325 CE. For the better part, it is concerned with the life, deeds, and teachings of St Grigor, most importantly his conversion to Christianity of King Trdat III, the Great (r. 287 – c. 330), and the rest of Armenia (cf. THOMSON 2010). The *Epic Histories* are an account of the later years of the Arsacid dynasty in Greater Armenia, covering the period between the reign of Xosrov III Kotak (r. 330 – 338/9 CE) and the partition of Armenia between the Byzantine and Sasanian empires (387 CE), and describes in some detail the precarious position of Armenia between these two great powers (cf. GARSOÏAN 1989).

Łazar's *History of Armenia* begins where the *Epic Histories* ended, with the division of Armenia in 387 CE, and ends after 484 CE with Vahan Mamikonean entering into negotiations with the Sasanian king Valarš. The bulk of the history treats of the 5th-century conflicts between Christian Armenians and Zoroastrian Sasanians, including the battle of Avarayr (cf. THOMSON 1991).



Figure 3: Queen Mlk'ē Gospel, Venice, Mekhitarist Library, San Lazzaro, Ms. 1144/86

The latter battle and its circumstances and consequences are also narrated, in somewhat greater detail, by Elišē (cp. THOMSON 1982).

Koriwn's *Life of Maštoc'* stands out amongst these texts to a certain extent owing to its subject, namely the life and works of Mesrop Maštoc' (c. 362 – 440 CE; cf. MAHÉ 2005–7; WINKLER 1994).

The work of Movsēs Xorenac'i encompasses all these periods, reaching the reign of Emperor Zeno (r. 474–91); it has a distinct political twist and favours the Bagratuni dynasty. This and textual evidence has led to suggestions that this may not be a work of the 5th century (cf. THOMSON 1978).

Eznik's work is a philosophical and theological tractate refuting paganism, Zoroastrianism, Greek philosophy (esp. Pythagoreans, Platonists, Peripatetics, Stoics and Epicureans), as well as the dualist belief of Marcionism (cf. ORENGO 1996).

5 Writing System

Letter	Name	Transliteration	IPA	Pronunciation	Value
Ա ա	ayb	a	/ɑ/	bath	1
Բ բ	ben	b	/b/	aback	2
Գ գ	gim	g	/g/	goose	3
Դ դ	da	d	/d/	dawn	4
Ե ե	ečʻ	e	/ɛ/, /jɛ/	bed, word-initially yet	5
Զ զ	za	z	/z/	size	6
Է է	ē	ē	/ɛ:/	Scottish days	7
Ը ը	ətʻ	ə	/ə/	bird	8
Թ թ	tʻō	tʻ	/tʰ/	tin	9
Ճ ճ	žē	ž	/ʒ/	vision	10
Ի ի	ini	i	/i/	meet	20
Լ լ	liwn	l	/l/	let	30
Խ խ	xē	x	/χ/	German Bach	40
Տ տ	ca	c	/ts/	nights	50
Կ կ	ken	k	/k/	track	60
Հ հ	hō	h	/h/	high	70
Ձ ձ	ja	j	/dz/	ads	80
Ղ ղ	lat	l	/ʎ/, /ɣ/	French rester	90
Ճ ճ	čē	č	/tʃ/	bleach	100
Մ մ	men	m	/m/	him	200
Թ թ	yi	y	/j/	you	300
Ն ն	nu	n	/n/, /ɲ/	nice	400
Շ շ	ša	š	/ʃ/	sheep	500
Ռ ռ	o	o	/ɔ/, /ʊɔ/	knot, word-initially German wo	600
Ձ ձ	čʻa	čʻ	/tʃʰ/	chin	700
Պ պ	pē	p	/p/	triple	800
Ջ յ	jē	j	/dʒ/	jump	900
Բ բ	ra	r	/r/	Scottish curd	1000
Ս ս	sē	s	/s/	sand	2000
Վ վ	vew	v	/v/	vault	3000
Տ տ	tiwn	t	/t/	stamp	4000
Բ բ	rē	r	/ɹ/, /r/	red	5000
Յ չ	cʻō	cʻ	/tsʰ/	aspirated ts	6000
Ո խ ռ լ	—	u	/u/	boot	--
Խ խ	hiwn	w	/w/	aware	7000
Փ փ	pʻiwr	pʻ	/pʰ/	pool	8000
Ք ք	kʻē	kʻ	/kʰ/	kite	9000
Օ օ	ō	ō	/o/	Scottish go	--
Ֆ ֆ	fē	f	/f/	fill	--

A PowerPoint presentation providing more details about the Armenian alphabet is available here:
http://rnbmyr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/alphabet_short.pdf

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