

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE ARMENIAN LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Historical Armenia, the land of “Nairi” (the country of rivers) as it was called by the Assyrians, or the “Greater Armenia” as it was called by the ancient Greeks, extended from east of the Euphrates River to the Caspian Sea bounded by Iberia (present-day Georgia) to the north, Caucasian Albania and present-day Azerbaijan to the northeast, Persia to the east, Mesopotamian lands to the south, and Pontus and Cappadocia to the west. Lesser Armenia was located to the west of the Euphrates River. Historical Armenia was a fertile and rich land with three major lakes (Van, Sevan, and Urmia) and high mountain chains reaching from 9,000 feet near Erzerum to 17,000 feet in the Ararat range. It is also a country of many rapid rivers, and the sources of the Euphrates, Tigris, Araks and Kura Rivers. King Artashes, or Artaxias I, united all the territories belonging to the Armenians in Lesser and Greater Armenia, where the Armenian language, according to Strabo, was then spoken in that entire region, and subsequently proclaimed independence ca. 190 BC. He transferred the national capital to Artashata, famous for its amphitheater where, according to an account by Plutarch, the tragedies of Euripides were often performed.

But it was under the reign of Tigranes II (95 to 55 BC) that Armenia reached her greatest power, with territories extending from the Caspian to the Mediterranean Sea. He assumed the title of “King of Kings” and on account of his successful political and military achievements, Cicero called him the “most powerful king of Asia.” Tigranes built Tigranakerta, his new capital, a city of fabulous wealth and splendorous abundance of palaces, gardens and parks with walls high as 300 feet, a theater where traditional Greek plays were performed as well as dramas written by the king’s own son Artavazd, works that survived as late as the first century AD. Unfortunately, Tigranakerta was subsequently destroyed by the Roman invaders. Cilician Armenia, the last kingdom of Armenia, came into existence after the fall of the Bagradouni dynasty in 1047, as a consequence of the Mongol and Seljuk invasion. Cilician Armenia was established in the south, on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea between the Taurus Mountains and Syria, by a branch of the Bagradouni dynasty that had fled from its capital city of Ani. Cilicia succumbed to the Egyptian Mameluks in 1375, and King Leo V, Lusignan, fled into exile, first to England to seek help, then Spain and finally to France where he spent the rest of his life and where his tomb is located today in the basilica of St. Denis.

Throughout the centuries the boundaries of historical Armenia have been constantly altered so that today, the Republic of Armenia is but a small fraction of ancient Armenia, situated in the Trans-Caucasian region surrounded by Georgia, Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkey, comprising an area of 11,506 square miles.

The presence of the Armenians in central Anatolia dates back to thousands of years. Hittite inscriptions attest to the existence of a mountain country called Hayasa, near the upper valley of the Euphrates around Lake Van. And indeed the Armenians today call themselves “*Hay*” and their country “*Hayastan*,” that is, the land of Hayasa. The Hittites became a strong political empire and flourished in Anatolia from the 20<sup>th</sup> century BC. After the fall of the Hittites and their capital city of Hattusa as a result of the Indo-European invasion, we learn about the Luwians, the Lydians and others, but it would seem that the Thracians, Phrygians and the Armenians were to be the heirs of this powerful Hittite empire. Thus, the Hurri-Mitanni kingdom of Armenia that prospered in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries BC ruled over the Hatti or Hittite lands. The Mushki (another name given to the Phrygians and the Armenians) also inhabited the Armenian provinces (Kurkjian pp. 32-36). One of the first Armenian activities was found in the Assyrian annals of King Tiglath-Pileser I, “who recorded that in 1115 BC the Mushki captured the land of Kadmukhu (in the upper Tigris valley). This ruler claimed that a successful Assyrian counterattack inflicted heavy casualties (Redgate, p. 16).

On the slopes of Mount Ararat, history records the insurgence of an important and powerful kingdom called Urartu, which in Assyrian means “Ararat.” The Hebrews, in the Bible, also called it the land of Ararat. Its capital was called Tushpa, located in today’s Van. Urartu is considered to be the first Armenian kingdom with Aramenh as its first king. Recent excavations made on the outskirts of Yerevan have revealed the ancient ruins of a city, and cuneiform inscriptions confirm that the city of Erebouni (modern Yerevan) was founded in 782 BC by the Urartian King Argishti or Arkisdis I, son of Menuas (Lang, p. 90).

Redgate in her study *The Armenians* (citing Diakonoff) states “that the most convincing explanation of the Armenians’ name for themselves, *Hayk*, is that it derives linguistically from Urartian Khatini, meaning “Hittite.” Its use perhaps reflects the mingling of Armenians and Urartians for “Hittite” was used by both the Assyrians and the Urartians for the Syro-Hittite states which succeeded the Hittite empire. “Hittite could have been used by the Urartians first for the proto-Armenians and later for themselves, as they merged” (p. 24). The Armenian historiographer Moses of Khoren in his *History of the Armenians* recounts the battle of Hayk, from the house of T’orgom, against the Assyrian tyrant Bel from Babylon. Bel was killed and Hayk settled in the Land of Ararat. “Now our country is called Hayk after our ancestor Hayk” (p. 88). Moses of Khoren also sustains that the Armenians were the descendents of the Urartians.

The Greek historian Herodotus commented on the Armenians in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC, observing that the Armenians who were in the Persian King Xerxes’ army when he invaded Thrace in 480 BC were armed like the Phrygians. However, one of the earliest surviving references to the Armenians comes from the carvings and inscriptions made high on the cliff at Behistun to commemorate the glories of Darius the Great, Achaemenes, King of Persia. The bas-reliefs and the

inscriptions in trilingual script (Medo-Persian, Akkadian and Elamite) engraved in 516 BC illustrate Darius facing the nine rebel leaders whom he defeated. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Englishman Henry Rawlinson was able to decipher the Medo-Persian inscriptions that translate as follows in the first two quotations:

“Says Darius the King: - Whilst I was at Babylon these are the countries that revolted against me: Persis, Susiana, Media, Assyria, Armenia, Parthia, Margiana, Sattagidia, and Sacia.”

“Says Darius the King: - Then Dadarses by name, an Armenian, one of my servants, him I sent to Armenia. I thus said to him: Greeting to thee, the rebel state that does not obey me, smite it. Then Dadarses marched. When he reached Armenia, then the rebels, having collected, came before Dadarses arraying their battle. Zuzza by name a village of Armenia, there they engaged. Ormazd brought help to me; by the grace of Ormazd, my forces entirely defeated the rebel army.....” (Terzian p. 18)

In the Akkadian or Babilonian version the name given to Armenia is Urartu.

The names Armenia and Armenian, after all, “were names bestowed not by ‘Armenians’ but by others. The Greeks took ‘Armenian’ from the Persians. The Persians had taken it from the Aramaeans. The Aramaeans had simply applied the name of the nearest proto-Armenian speaking group who lived in the country of Arme, to all the peoples living where the state of Urartu had been” (Redgate p. 23).

With the introduction of Christianity in Armenia during the rule of King Tiridates III, Armenia became the first nation to accept Christianity as a state religion in 301 AD. This important historical event demanded the creation of a proper national alphabet for the translation of the scriptures. Until then the Greek and Aramaic alphabets were utilized in Armenian writings and in more ancient times cuneiforms were used in the inscriptions. One hundred years later, Mesrob Mashdotz, a monk and a scholar (with the help of Catholicos Sahak Partev and under the patronage of King Vramshabuh, between the years 401-405 AD) after years of research and travel created a unique alphabet of 36 letters to correspond to the exact sounds of the Armenian language. Two more characters were added later.

According to tradition, while meditating in a cave, Mesrob Mashdotz had a vision in which the hand of God wrote the alphabet in letters of fire. With the invention of the alphabet a new era began for the Armenian letters, called the Golden Age, because during this period many translations of old texts were accomplished by Sahag and Mesrob’s collaborators and their assistants and this activity was continued by their students. The first translation into classical Armenian was made from the Greek version of the Bible starting with the first verse of the Proverbs of Solomon; “To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding....” (Kurkjian p. 383)

The alphabet was instrumental in protecting Armenians from assimilation, fostering their religion and representing a means of enlightenment. “The Madenatarn in Erevan contains more than 25,000 manuscripts dating to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Many of these are Armenian translations of philosophical, scientific, historical and religious writings going back as far as the Hellenistic Greece. Some are the only existing versions of the originals.” (*Discover Armenia*, Internet)

The Armenian language belongs to the Indo-European family of languages; however, it stands as its own single group. Attempts made by linguists to associate it with Phrygian were unsuccessful. For some time it was believed to be a dialect of Persian, because of a number of loan words from Iranian were borrowed during Parthian rule. It was also believed to have some phonetic similarities with the Georgian, but grammatically it was considered to be closer to the Greek language, yet not close enough to form a group. Tradition has it that the Armenian Language was brought to Anatolia around the 10<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC and in the process assimilated words and phrases from the other languages of the region, languages that are extinct today. It also borrowed from the Greek, Latin, Arabic, and most recently from Russian, French and English (Baldi, pp. 79-80).

In their efforts to find a common ancestor to the so-called Indo-European languages, linguists supported the theory that it originated in Europe, descended and traveled to the East, giving birth to the development of its various offspring languages. However, the recent studies carried out by Gamkrelidze and Ivanov “indicate that the proto-language originated more than 6,000 years ago in eastern Anatolia and that some daughter languages must have differentiated in the course of migrations that took them first to the East and later to the West. The reconstruction of the protolanguage’s consonants shows them to be closer to those of the Germanic, Armenian and Hittite daughter languages than to Sanskrit” (Baldi, p. 80).

One can learn more about the earliest Indo-Europeans by reconstructing their vocabulary. “Some words describe an agricultural technology whose existence dates back to 5,000 BC. The Indo-European words for ‘barley,’ ‘wheat’ and for ‘apples,’ ‘cherries’ and their trees, for ‘mulberries’ and their bushes; for grapes and their vines; and for the various implements with which to cultivate and harvest them describe a way of life unknown in northern Europe until the third or second millennium BC, when the first archaeological evidence appears.” (Baldi, p. 80) The same is evident from words that apply to the flora and fauna. Furthermore, “the linguistic translocation of the Indo-European homeland from northern Europe to Asia Minor requires drastic revisions in theories about the migratory paths along which the Indo-European languages must have spread across Eurasia. Europe is seen, therefore, as the destination, rather than the source, of the Indo-European migration. And the homeland of the Indo-Europeans, the cradle of much of the world’s civilization, was in the ancient Near East: ‘*Ex oriente lux!*’ ” (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, p. 114)

When we speak about the Armenian language we understand the existence of three languages: classical Armenian, modern Eastern Armenian and modern Western Armenian. Classical Armenian, the Grabar or the Krapar (meaning “the written word”) was used virtually unchanged up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the educated and by scholars and is still used today by the church, while people used the vernacular that evolved over the centuries into two main dialects called the Asharabar or Asharapar meaning “the word of the people,” “the spoken word.” At the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, poets and writers such as Khachatur Abovian and Ghevond Alishan began to use the vernacular in their writings in order to reach the masses by conveying their collective spirit and advocating their aspirations. Under the influence of the Romantic ideals of discovering their own national identity and aspiring to attain justice and equality, Armenian intellectuals encouraged the learning of both reading and writing of the spoken language. The 19<sup>th</sup> century is considered the real period of renaissance for the Armenian letters that flourished with the publications of many books of poetry, prose, drama, as well as newspapers and periodicals in Eastern and Western Armenian dialects in the cultural centers of Tbilisi and Constantinople, thus creating two modern literatures.

Eastern Armenian is spoken in the regions east of Mount Ararat in the Republic of Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran, Georgia, Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union where Armenian communities exist. Western Armenian is spoken in the area west of Mount Ararat in the provinces of Armenia prior to the 1915 genocide, where some regional dialects were also used that are unfortunately lost today. Currently Western Armenian is spoken in several countries of the Middle East, in Europe and the Americas, mainly in Canada, the United States, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina, where Armenian colonies were established in the last century.

The Armenian language has six to seven declensions; conjugations of regular and irregular verbs, singular and plural of nouns, but no gender. The word order is free; the verb could be placed at the beginning or at the end of the sentence. Eastern Armenian and Western Armenian are written with the same alphabet; however, during the Soviet era Eastern Armenian underwent some orthographical reforms. The eastern language differs from the western in the pronunciation of some letters. The sonorous labial, guttural and dental letters ‘b,’ ‘g,’ and ‘d’ heard in the eastern form become ‘p,’ ‘k,’ ‘t’ in the western language. For example; the word *Grabar* written with the same letters is read *Krapar*. The endings of nouns and pronouns in declensions and of the verbs in conjugations have different forms. For example, the sentence “I write or I am writing” in the eastern language is *Grum em* while in the western is *Ga krem*. There are also different expressions, or words with different meanings. The question “How are you?” in the eastern language is *Vontz es?* for the singular and familiar forms, and *Vontz ek?* for the plural and formal forms, and in the western is *Inchbes es?* or *Inchbes ek?* Over all the two languages are mutually understandable, although if one is not familiar with the language, comical situations

can occur. The question “Is your father alive?” is, in eastern Armenian, *Hairat gentani e?* but in western Armenian this means “Is your father an animal?”

The Academy of the Armenian Language is located in the capital Yerevan. The Armenian language is taught throughout the Republic of Armenia and in Nagorno-Karabakh and all over the Diaspora, since, wherever Armenian communities were established, there are also Armenian language schools and in some places even institutions of higher learning. In the United States there are departments of Armenian studies at many universities, such as Columbia University, Harvard and UCLA. Lately there has been a significant increase in the number of students and scholars, Armenian and non-Armenian alike, interested in the learning, teaching and research of the Armenian language, as well as the country’s history and culture. The English poet Lord Byron spent some time on the island of San Lazzaro (in Venice) at the Mekhitarists Congregation quarters, where he came to study Armenian and simultaneously collaborated in compiling an Armenian-English grammar with Father Pasquale Avcherian, who was also his teacher. In a letter to a friend on December 5, 1816, Byron wrote as follows:

...I have began, and am proceeding in the study of the Armenian language.  
 ....I find the Armenian language—which is twin, the literal and the vulgar—  
 difficult but not invincible; at least, I hope not. I shall go on ....It is a rich  
 language, and would amply repay anyone for the trouble of learning it....

(Kurkjian, p. 368)

The Spanish philosopher and writer Miguel de Unamuno in his essay “*En torno al casticismo*” defines national identity as the manifestation of the expression of a language when he calls language the receptacle of the experiences of a people and the sediment of their thoughts. And, that in the deep significance of its metaphors as in the immense majority of its words the collective spirit of a nation is imbedded. This certainly is the case of Armenia and its twin languages.

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