

THE STORIES OF LIVES: BIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION FROM “ROMAN” TO ARMENIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

The first touchstone that comes to mind when considering the tradition of biographical writing in ancient literature is Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, although he was not the earliest example of this method. Much later, came the *Vita Constantini*, a panegyric written by the church historian Eusebius in honour of the Emperor Constantine, and Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*. Moreover, further east, a patristic and encomiastic Armenian biographical tradition exists, albeit partly obscured in Armenian literature and overlooked by ancient authors. Surprisingly, existing literature has not dedicated sufficient attention to the transmission of literature between the East and West, despite the likelihood that the first written Armenian text was a biography. Therefore, this study will discuss the extent to which Armenian literature was influenced by its Roman predecessors in the biographical tradition, especially those who wrote in Greek, and how this tradition was shaped in Armenian literature.

Keywords: Biographical Tradition, Armenian Literature, *Vita*, *Vark' Maštoc'*

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Hayat Öykülerinin Hikâyeleri: Roma'dan Antik Ermeni Literatürüne Biyografi Geleneği

Öz

Antik literatürde biyografi denildiğinde akla gelen ilk Plutarchus'un Paralel Yaşamlar adlı eseridir, ancak bu türün en eski örneği o değildir. Çok daha sonra, kilise tarihçisi Eusebius'un İmparator Constantinus'un onuruna yazdığı biyografik bir panegyrik olan Vita Constantini ve Athanasius'un Vita Antonii'si bu ünü miras almıştır. Bununla birlikte, daha doğuda, Ermeni literatüründe kısmen gizlenmiş ve antik yazarlar tarafından göz ardı edilmiş olsa da, patristik ve anonim bir Ermeni biyografi geleneği de vardır. Şaşırtıcı bir şekilde, ilk yazılı Ermenice metnin bir biyografi olma ihtimaline kardeşin mevcut literatür Doğu ve Batı arasındaki literatür aktarımına yeterli ilgiyi göstermemiştir. Bu nedenle bu çalışma Ermeni literatürünün biyografi geleneğindeki Romalı seleflerinden, özellikle de Yunanca yazarlardan ne ölçüde etkilendiği ve bu geleneğin Ermeni literatüründe nasıl şekillendiğini tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Biyografi Geleneği, Ermeni literatürü, *Vita*, *Vark' Maštoc*.

Introduction

The history of the tradition of life-writing/biography, one of the ways of writing in the ancient world, dates back a long way. However, it was the success of Greek and Roman writers that brought this genre, which focuses on the lives of important people, into the mainstream of literature. The works of authors such as Cornelius Nepos (*De Viris Illustribus*) and Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (*De Vita Caesarum*), who influenced the fashion of writing in the same genre in different centuries, had a profound influence that lasted for generations. Two centuries later, the *Vita et Passio Cypriani* of Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, written by his deacon Pontius and perhaps the *first Christian biography*, became the precursor of the future genre of hagiography.¹ This led to the creation of innumerable biographies by various Christian groups in the East. Naturally, such influences and examples led the communities around the Roman Empire to follow the Romans' example over time. However, unlike the period before the Christianisation of Rome, this tradition did not always have secular tendencies when it was transmitted from

¹ Tomas Hägg, *The Art of Biography in Antiquity*, Cambridge 2012, p. 381.

Rome to the outside world. In fact, in the 4th century, Eusebius, in his praise of Constantine, certainly had a religious inclination, that is, a viewpoint derived from Christianity. Regarding the Caucasus in particular, the fact that the creation of the alphabet was ecclesiastical meant that the people chosen for biography were also clerics. It is therefore often challenging to make a clear distinction between biography and hagiography, and the two genres often overlap. This became a part of the Armenian literary tradition after the Eusebian model when Koriwn, writing a century after Eusebius, wrote *Vark' Maštoc' (Life of Mashtots)* for his teacher and inventor of the Armenian alphabet, Mesrop Maštoc'.²

However, the Romans were not the sole influence for the Armenians. In the Eastern Syriac tradition of biography or hagiography, the *life stories* of saints, a small number of martyrs or prophets were already well-known. This is particularly evident in Syriac literature from the 5th century onwards. Notable among them are the *Acts of Thomas* (3rd century?), *Vita st. Simeonis Stylitae* (5th century), *Vita Rabbulae* (5th century, actually a panegyric).³ This diversity in Armenia's immediate environment was easily reflected in the biographies of Armenian literature.⁴ A range variety of historical figures, including kings, saints, sages, and other

² *Vark' Maštoc'* is often considered a hagiographic work. See Jean-Pierre Mahé, “Une Légitimation Scripturaire de l'Hagiographie: La Préface de Koriwn (443) à la Vie de Maštoc', Inventeur de l'Alphabet Arménien”, in *De Tertullien aux Mozarabes: Mélanges Offerts à Jacques Fontaine, à l'Occasion de Son 70^e Anniversaire, par ses élèves, Amis et Collègues*, (Ed. Louis Holtz et Jean-Claude Fredouille), I, Paris 1992, pp. 29-43.

³ The influence of Syriac works on Armenians can be easily traced especially in the translation into Armenian of the works of famous names such as Ephrem. 3iterat an example, Louis Leloir, *Saint Ephrem, Commentaire de l'Évangile Concordant, Version Arménienne*, Louvain 1953; Adam Carter McCollum, “Greek Literature in the Christian East: Translations into Syriac, Georgian, and Armenian”, *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World*, III, (2015), pp. 15-65. On the other hand, 3iterat 3iteratüre on the Syriac biography/hagiography tradition, see Frederick F. Lent, “The Life of St. Simeon Stylites: A Translation of the Syriac Text in Bedjan's Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum, vol. IV”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, XXXV, (1915), pp. 103-198; Han J. W. Drijvers, “The Man of God of Edessa, Bishop Rabbula, and the Urban Poor: Church and Society in the Fifth Century”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, IV/2, (1996), pp. 235-248; Muriel Debié, “Syriac Biography”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Biography*, (Ed. Koen De Temmerman), Oxford 2020, pp. 401-416. On Syriac-Armenian relations see Edward G. Mathews, “Early Armenian and Syrian Contact: Reflections on Koriwn's Life of Maštoc'”, *Saint Nerses Theological Review*, VII, (2002), pp. 5-19.

⁴ The most obvious examples of Syriac influence are the chapters on Daniel in *Buzandaran* and *the teaching of Addai* in Movsēs Xorenac'i. See Srbouhi Hairapetian, *History of Armenian Literature*, New York 1995, p.93. Besides, Armenia, which was once affected by other dominant literature, later transformed into an affectional virtue in the Caucasus, particularly influencing Georgian literature. One of the most striking examples of this is the *Life of Šušanik*, a work compiled in many later centuries and *Life of St. Nino* and *Vita Petri Iberi*. See also, *Life of St. Nino*, (Trans. Margery Wardrop and James O. Wardrop), New Jersey 1903, pp. 1-88; Stephen H. Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography: Early Texts and Eurasian Contexts*, Lovanii 2003, p. 35-39.

influential figures (those for whom no book was written directly, but who were included in books), featured prominently in this genre of writing.⁵

In late antiquity, narratives derived from Greek biography, enriched by panegyrics, shed light on new texts. As in the post-Christian Western tradition, i.e. Greek and Roman, the Bible was undoubtedly at the centre of this diversity of sources of this genre for the Armenians.⁶ And then, above all, the deeds of the martyrs occupied a central place within this model.⁷ The models that formed the core narrative of the biographies were adorned with elements of fiction that consistently pointed in the same direction: for Christians, those who renounced worldly pleasures and endured suffering, those who laid down their lives for God, and those who shared in the Passion of Jesus.⁸ As a result, in the tradition of biography, the word that the Greeks called *bio* and the Romans called *vita* (plu. *vitae*) is often not *life* for those who created the literature of Christianity. This word *life* often alluded to *passio* and *martyrdom* and sacred meaning in Armenian biographies, and the word *vark*⁹ used in Armenian literature for life writing should also be considered in this sense.⁹ This is precisely why Łazar P'arpec'i, writing around the year 500, referred to Agat'angelos, not Koriwn, as the first *historian*. Since Łazar P'arpec'i said that he had known Koriwn,¹⁰ the only explanation for this assertion is that Koriwn was not considered a *historian* - *patmut'ivn* - as an encomiast. He simply wrote a *vark*⁹.

4 The first example of the Armenian biographical tradition - very few *vitae* survived until the 10th century - and probably the first manuscript written in

⁵ Armenian - and also Georgian - literature differed from Syriac in this respect. Because the Syriac never had a state, there were no political characters in their biographies, but this was not the case for Armenians and Georgians.

⁶ Abraham Terian, *Patriotism and Piety in Armenian Christianity: The Early Panegyrics on Saint Gregory*, Crestwood 2005, p. 14.

⁷ Narratives of the *lives* of non-martyrs also began to attract interest at the end of the 4th century. The most obvious example is Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus (Vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi)*. See Robert Wiśniewski, "Clerical Hagiography in Late Antiquity", in *The Hagiographical Experiment: Developing Discourses of Sainthood*, (Eds. Christa Gray and James Corke-Webster), Leiden 2020, p. 95.

⁸ Not all of the sources that Armenians looked up to or used were religious. Iosephus was used by Armenian historians, as were Eusebius and Socrates Scholasticus. See Robert W. Thomson, "The Concept of "History" in Medieval Armenian Historians", in *Eastern Approaches to Byzantium: Papers from the Thirty-third Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, March 1999*, (Ed. Antony Eastmond), Aldershot 2001, p. 90. Also, Erna M. Shirinian, "Notes on Some Syntactic, Lexicological and Morphological Particularities of the Armenian Translation of Socrates Scholasticus' Ecclesiastical History (the Longer Socrates)", *Le Muséon*, CXIII, (1995), pp. 79-84.

⁹ According to Delehaye, 3 factors are decisive: (1) The Martyrs' *Passion*; (2) The Acts of the Apostles; (3) The Lives of the Saints. See Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les Passions des Martyrs et Genres Littéraires*, Brussels 1921, p. 3.

¹⁰ Łazar P'arpec'i, XVIII.

Armenian, is the *Vark' Maštoc'*.¹¹ Believed to have been written in the middle of the 5th century by Koriwn, a student of Maštoc' who gave the work its name, it is the first vital line in the destiny of Armenian literature. Indeed, the *life* of Maštoc' and the period in which Koriwn penned these stories and his personal experiences were extraordinary: The invention of the alphabet, the fall of the Arsacid monarchy, the Council of Ephesus in 431, the appointment of catholicoses of Syrian origin (Brkišo and Samuēl) and the increasing Sassanid pressure... Though there exist no ancient documents to substantiate this, the usage of Syriac loanwords for Christian terminology in early texts offers compelling evidence of the influence of Syrian Christianity on Armenia. Although there are no ancient documents to support this, the use of Syriac loanwords for Christian expressions in early texts provides strong evidence of the influence of Syrian Christianity in Armenia.¹² The Armenian aristocracy would have needed a biblical framework system and the unity that could be achieved by telling the life of the creator of the alphabet. For Koriwn, like all other Armenian historians of the 5th century, salvation rests in Jesus Christ, his apostles, companions and, of course, Christianity.

The Dawn of Armenian Lives: *Vark' Maštoc'* and *Vita Gregorii*

The spiritual aspect of the invention of the Armenian alphabet confirmed Mesrop Maštoc's view of himself as the one who would lead the Armenians to *salvation*. Therefore, it was inherently the duty of his *youngest* yet *special* disciple Koriwn to write his *vita*.¹³ Koriwn's education and language skills were also of primary importance.¹⁴ Koriwn was already a translator, had been educated at a Greek school in Samasota, and had travelled to Constantinople, according to his own words.¹⁵ Naturally, he was familiar with the Greek rhetoric books, and the *progymasmata*, and had seen examples in Greek before writing the *vita* of Mesrop Maštoc'.¹⁶ In particular, the fact that he wrote a *vita* almost 40 years after his

¹¹ Before the invention of Armenian, Armenia was written in Aramaic, Pahlavi, Greek and Syriac. See Artak Movsisyan, *The Writing Culture of Pre-Christian Armenia*, (Trans. Varditer Grigoryan and Mary Grigoryan), Yerevan 2006, p. 199, 214, 250, 253.

¹² Robert W. Thomson, “Mission, Conversion, and Christianization: The Armenian Example”, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, XII/XIII, (1988/1989), p. 33.

¹³ *Vark' Maštoc'*, I.

¹⁴ Abraham Terian, “Koriwn's Life of Mashtots' as an Encomium”, *Journal of Society for Armenian Studies*, III, (1987), p. 6.

¹⁵ *Vark' Maštoc'*, XIX. For commentary on Mesrop Maštoc', see Gabriele Winkler, *Koriwns Biographie des Mesrop Maštoc': Übersetzung und Kommentar*, Roma 1994, p. 364-366.

¹⁶ The translation activities of Koriwn and his colleagues also provide the first works of Armenian literature. See for a few examples, Adam Carter McCollum, “Greek Literature in the Christian East: Translations into Syriac, Georgian, and Armenian”, *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World*, III, (2015), p. 48.

education indicates the continuity of the influence of Greek literature.¹⁷ It is already known that the works of prominent figures such as Irenaeus, John Chrysostom, Eusebius, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Jerusalem and Cyril of Alexandria were gradually translated into Armenian.¹⁸ Considering the work as a whole, the structure of the Koriwn follows the old tradition of (1) prologue, (2) origin or family, (3) birth, (4) achievements for Christianity and (5) epilogue. Although this order is similar to that of the *Vita Constantini*, written in Greek a century earlier,¹⁹ it is not realistic to think that Koriwn follows it directly. No Armenian version of the *Vita Constantini* has yet been found,²⁰ but the *life* of Constantine was known to Armenian writers and even to the aristocracy before the invention of the alphabet. It is not unusual for Koriwn to have parallel narratives to Gregory Nazianzen's *Life of Basil of Caesarea*.²¹ Moreover, Koriwn initially displays a self-deprecating humility, just like Aristotle, Isocrates and Cicero, representatives of the older rhetorical tradition.²² Nevertheless, *vark'* is not entirely distinct from *vita*. In Koriwn's praise of Mesrop Maštoc', the main emphasis was on the invention of the alphabet under the influence of Christianity and the arduous spiritual struggle endured along the way. Eusebius, on the other hand, praised the great and glorious Emperor Constantine, who legitimised Christianity in the Roman Empire. Both narratives stem from a shared motivation—Christianity. Both authors wrote posthumously about their subjects, understanding that they had encapsulated merely a minute fraction of history.

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*We set aside the innumerable accomplishments of the saints in order to recount in some detail the most significant events.*²³

¹⁷ Learning and studying through Greek literature and wisdom; and travelling are paralleled in the *Patmut'ivn* of Movsēs Xorenac'i and the *Vita Severi* of Zacharias Rhetor (Scholasticus). See Movsēs Xorenac'i, III.61; *Vita Severi*, fol.110.

¹⁸ Jesse S. Arlen, "Armenian", in *Eastern Christianity: A Reader*, (Ed. J. Edward Walters), Michigan 2021, p. 145. On how the Hellenistic schools influenced the Armenian literature, see. Abraham Terian, "The Hellenizing School: Its Time, Place, and Scope of Activities Reconsidered", in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, (Ed. Nina G. Garsoian, Thomas F. Mathews and Robert W. Thomson), Washington 1982, p. 175-186.

¹⁹ Averil Cameron, "Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* and the Construction of Constantine", in *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire*, (Eds. S. Swain and M. Edwards), Oxford, 1997, p. 148

²⁰ The *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius was translated from Syriac in the 5th century, and the *Chronicle* was translated from Greek into Armenian later.

²¹ Robert W. Thomson, "Armenian Literary Culture through the Eleventh Century", in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, (Ed. Richard G. Hovannisian), vol. I, New York 1997, p. 206.

²² Michael P. Rewa, "Early Christian Life-Writing: Panegyric and Hagiography", *Biography*, II/1, (1979), p. 63; Abraham Terian, *The Life of Mashots' by His Disciple Koriwn*, Oxford 2023, p. 29-30.

²³ *Vita Constantini*, XI.2.

Since even these events are innumerable, I shall pick out from those which have reached us the most significant and worth recording for those who come after us...²⁴

While the *Vita Constantini* stands out as a remarkable work due to its depiction of the emperor, it was Athanasius of Alexandria’s renowned work, the *Vita Antonii*, that emerged as the most widely circulated and prominent writing from the mid-4th century. Antonius, a foundational figure in the Christian monastic system, seemingly served as Koriwn’s model for asceticism, seclusion, and above all, devout religious commitment.²⁵ St Anthony was a symbol of conversion from wealth to poverty, of pain and suffering, of devotion to Christianity. According to Koriwn’s *Vita*, Mesrop Maštoc’ similarly embraced seclusion wrestled with an array of challenges, and ultimately reaped divine recompense.

He ate once a day, after sunset, sometimes once in two days, and often even in four. His food was bread and salt, and his drink, water only. Of flesh and wine it is superfluous even to speak... A rush mat served him to sleep upon, but for the most part he lay upon the bare ground.²⁶

He subjected himself to every spiritual discipline: solitariness, solitude in the mountains, hunger and thirst, feeding on herbs, the dark cells, wearing sackcloth, and having the floor for a bed.²⁷

The second most popular *vita* of the 5th century is actually part of the *History* attributed to Agat’angelos. *History* does not deal directly with a life like that of Koriwn but rather tells the story of Gregory, the patron saint of Armenia, and his pivotal role in the conversion of Armenia to Christianity.²⁸ Although this is the reason why the holy life of Gregory is squeezed between the texts of Agat’angelos, and writing *life* is not the main purpose, it is praiseworthy in itself. Unfortunately, the Armenian version of this section, called *Vita Gregorii (Vark’ ew Patmut’ iwn Srboyn Grigori)*, has not yet been discovered. Two of the existing versions are in Greek and Arabic.²⁹ Undoubtedly, the other ancient texts are also instructive because they offer valuable insights into Gregory’s *life*. In addition, the fact that the

²⁴ *Vark’ Maštoc’*, XXIX.

²⁵ *The Life of Antony* was very popular in the 4th century and his fame spread far and wide, especially after his translation into Latin by Evagrius of Antioch. The work was later translated into Syriac, Armenian, and Arabic. Sister M. E. Keenan, “Life of St. Anthony by St. Athanasius”, in *Early Christian Biographies, The Fathers of the Church*, XV, (Ed. R. J. Deferrari), Washington, 1952, p. 128. Jerome’s *Life of Paul* and Sulpicius Severus’ *Life of Martin of Tours* have always been modelled on Antony. See also, William Harmless, *Desert Christians*, Oxford 2004, p. 97-98.

²⁶ *Vita Antonii*, VII.

²⁷ *Vark’ Maštoc’*, IV.

²⁸ Peter Cowe, “Armenian Biography in Late Antiquity”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Biography*, (Ed. Koen De Temmerman), Oxford 2020, p. 437.

²⁹ Gabriele Winkler, “Our Present Knowledge of the History of Agat’angelos and its Oriental Versions”, *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, XVI, (1980), p. 131.

text was written at the end of the 5th century adds to the experience that the Armenian writing tradition has now spanned more than half a century. It is already evident that the writings of Koriwn influenced Agat'angelos.³⁰

*As for the blessed one (Mesrop Maštoc'), embarking immediately upon the art of evangelism, he set out across the district with the unwavering support of the prince. Capturing them all away from their ancestral traditions and their servitude to satanic idolatry, he brought them to obedience to Christ.*³¹

*He (Gregory) took over the province, and with the devoted assistance of the king brought all from their traditional customs and from the service of satan and demons to obedient servitude to Christ.*³²

*... river of salvation, so that the miracle equals the one who has it.*³³

*King went to a baptism in the water of Euphrates, and significant sign was signalled by God; river stopped and then turned back again...*³⁴

Conversely, within classical Armenian texts, there exist characters who lack a direct *vita*. These figures can be further classified into examples that fall within the hagiographical and epic genres. For instance, Hřip'simē, a symbolic female character in Armenian literature, lacks a dedicated biography, but fragments of her life can be discerned within the *Patmut'ivn* of Agat'angelos.³⁵ The narratives surrounding her are woven through *passio* and martyrdom, making the text "The Martyrdom of the Hřip'simian" (*Vkayabanut'ivn Hřip'simeac'n*) not inherently distant from the *vita* tradition and notably influenced by contemporary trends.

*They (Hřip'simē and her companions) gave their bodies as treasure for the Lord...³⁶
Yet the dominus knows who belongs to him, ... he has treasures.*³⁷

Apart from Hřip'simē, the life of Nersēs, the distinguished, legendary and renowned patriarch, arguably the most significant religious figure of the 4th century, is also characterised by a great deal of literary interaction. In this regard, certain instances in the *Buzandaran* evoke parallels to the lives of Alexianus and

³⁰ Agat'angelos' work contains both Armenian oral cultural tradition and Iranian folkloric elements.

³¹ *Vark' Maštoc'*, V.

³² Agat'angelos, §785.

³³ [...ποταμῷ σωτηρία...] *Vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi*, 933. The story of Gregory Thaumaturgus was highly publicised throughout late antiquity and was translated into many languages, including Armenian. See Stephen Mitchell, "The Life and Lives of Gregory Thaumaturgus." in *Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium and the Christian Orient*, (Ed. Jan Willem Drijvers and John W. Watt), Leiden 1999, p. 116-117.

³⁴ Agat'angelos, §833.

³⁵ Also see Zaroui Pogossian, "Women at the Beginning of Christianity in Armenia", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, XIX, (2003), p. 359.

³⁶ Agat'angelos, §562.

³⁷ Origenes, *In Numeros Homilia*. XI.2.

Irenaeus.³⁸ The *Epic History* attributed to *Buzandaran* is one of the pioneers in this respect, and *Buzandaran* is essentially the background for the *Vita Nersēs*, which is dated to the 10th century and later.

... *Nersēs were lifted up into the clouds, for God’s angels were carrying him upward...*³⁹

... *looking up saw in the air someone being borne upwards, and there was much joy among those who met him.*⁴⁰

Special Lives Amid Sacred Texts

Although there was a rapid increase in the concept and number of *vitae* after the 5th century, these were not always permanent. The number of studies attributed to the symbolic names that have survived to the present day is much smaller than one might anticipate. Many of the writings gained greater prominence during the late 5th and 6th centuries when heroes - or even traitors - were encompassed within the *vitae*. After the battle of 451, the notions of heroism, glorification and martyrdom that defined the literature of those epochs are the counterparts of the *vitae*. Elišē and Łazar P’arpec’i emerge as notable representatives of this type of writing. Both authors support the Armenian national identity through *heroic* lives. Their focus is narrowed to a select few names, with the most prominent lives belonging to *sparapēt* Vardan Mamikonean, and to some extent, Vasak as well.⁴¹ The subtext of the narratives here is essentially characteristic of Armenian historiography in the 5th century and is also a consequence of the pro-Mamikonean character of the sources from this period.

*His (Vasak) entrails began to burn, his chest hurt and was festered, his belly shrank... The sinews of his arms decomposed, and the heels of his feet were bent backwards.*⁴²

*He (Herod) had a slow fever. He suffered also from continuous pains in his colon, and there were swellings on his feet like those of a person suffering from dropsy, while his abdomen was inflamed.*⁴³

Conversely, the *Vita Šušaniki* (*The Passion of Saint Šušanik*), which attracted more attention in literature because she was the daughter of Vardan Mamikonean, was first written not in Armenian but in Georgian, since Šušanik’s husband was the Georgian *bdeašx* Vazgen. The *Vita*, thought to have been written in the 5th century, is also the earliest work of Georgian literature and a classic hagiographical work

³⁸ Hairapetian, *History of Armenian Literature*, p. 94.

³⁹ *Buzandaran*, V.25.

⁴⁰ *Vita Antonii*, LX.

⁴¹ Important names are Sahak Part’ew, Vardan Mamikonian, his nephew Vahan and Vasak. See Cowe, “Armenian Biography”, p. 438.

⁴² Elišē, VI.p.139.

⁴³ Eusebius, *HE*. I.8.6.

that was later translated into Armenian.⁴⁴ However, the longer Armenian version is quite different from the Georgian, raising questions about its origin.⁴⁵ The *debate* over dating extends beyond this instance, with the manuscripts from this period attaining new heights through Movsēs Xorenac‘i, marking the pinnacle of the golden age of Armenian historiography. Xorenac‘i’s role in Armenian historiography is evident in the substantial number of individuals he characterizes and the extensive use of Greek and Roman sources. Furthermore, just before or after Xorenac‘i, the literary focus noticeably shifted from the Mamikoneans to the Bagratuni. Consequently, the panegyric that was originally centred on the Mamikoneans, like the writings, transitioned into being a *panegyric* of the Bagratuni. Xorenac‘i is not a *vita* writer, but he makes active use of five Greek works in Armenian, some of which he applies to the lives of individuals: Josephus, the *Alexander Romance* of Ps.-Callisthenes, the *Chronicle* and *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, and the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates Scholasticus.⁴⁶ Because of this diversity of sources, Xorenac‘i inspired many Armenian sources written after him, such as the *Vita* of Aristakēs and the *Vita Nersēsī*.

The *Vita Nersēsī*, written retrospectively, regardless of the periods in which the hagiographic subjects of the works lived, and dated from the earliest to the 10th century, has become one of the most famous of this genre in Armenian literature.⁴⁷ The presentation of the *life of Nersēs*, who brought about great changes in the Armenian Church and had a great influence on the phases of institutionalisation, continued to increase in the medieval period with a *panegyric* view, just like Saint Gregory. This work, attributed to an unknown person called Mesrop Holoc‘mec‘i, is largely based on *Buzandaran* and builds on his knowledge with religious motifs.⁴⁸ As in this example, the characters chosen are usually noble, but the authors are

⁴⁴ Margit Bíró, “Shushanik’s Georgian Vita”, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, XXXVIII-1/2, (1984), p. 188; Cornelia B. Horn, “The Lives and Literary Roles of Children in Advancing Conversion to Christianity: Hagiography from the Caucasus in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages”, *Church History*, LXXVI/2, (2007), p. 276. For the Armenian edition see Paruyr M. Muradyan, *Surb Šušaniki V kayabanut‘ivnə (The Martyrdom of Saint Šušanik)*, Yerevan 1996, pp. 18-60.

⁴⁵ Krikor Maksoudian, *The Passion of Saint Shushanik: A New Translation of the Principal and Lesser Texts*, New York 1999, p. xvi.

⁴⁶ Robert W. Thomson, *Moses Khorenats‘i, History of the Armenians*, London 1978, p. 22.

⁴⁷ For a discussion on date, see Vahan Inglisian, “Die Armenische Literatur”, in *Handbuch der Orientalistik, I/vii, Armenisch und Kaukasische Sprachen*, Leiden 1963, p. 185; Michel van Esbroeck, “Témoignages Littéraires sur les Sépultures de Saint Grégoire l’Illuminateur”, *Analecta Bollandiana*, LXXXIX, (1971), p. 392.

⁴⁸ Zaroui Pogossian, “Jews in Armenian Apocalyptic Traditions of the 12th Century: A Fictional Community or New Encounters?”, in *Peoples of the Apocalypse*, (Eds. W. Brandes, F. Schmieder and R. Voß), Berlin 2016, p. 154.

anonymous.⁴⁹ Therefore, it is difficult to say that *Vita Nersēs* developed a new discourse; rather, it can be interpreted as a necessity of the process or a tradition of writing. At the same time, because it was written later, it has a greater variety of sources and parallels with Ammianus Marcellinus, with whom *Buzandaran* somehow developed a common narrative.

The Greek commander (Traianus) prepared a great banquet and invited Pap, the great king of Armenia, to the banquet with great befitting him, as it is proper to invite a king to a banquet...⁵⁰

And now forcing himself upon his banquets; finally, when his plot was matured, he invited him with great respect to a luncheon.⁵¹

The general (Traianus) invited Bab (Pap), the king of Armenia, to a banquet, and he hid legionnaires in the house who carried naked swords in their hands.⁵²

From the 6th to the 10th century, many works were translated into Armenian. After the 10th century, in addition to the abundance of *vitae*, the high number of forgeries or distortions in their contents is another problem for *vitae*. For example, attempts to date manuscripts such as the *Vita* of Mar Augēn in a 13th-century manuscript (Matenadaran 1552, fol. 216) and the 15th-century *Vita* of St. Erasmios to the 5th century are inconsistent.⁵³ Moreover, many non-Armenian *vitae* were translated into Armenian. This also shows the value of *vitae* in Armenian literature, and most of the surviving Armenian *vitae* belong to translations made after the 12th-13th centuries.⁵⁴ The best known of these are manuscripts such as the *Life* of Evagrius of Pontus or the *Life* of Silvester.⁵⁵

Conclusion

When Peter Brown asked in 1971, “Why did the holy man come to play such an important role in the society of the fifth and sixth centuries?”, he surely knew that the answer had to do with Christianity and the socio-cultural change it

⁴⁹ Peter Cowe, “Armenian Hagiography”, in *Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography*, (Ed. S. Efthymiadis), vol. 1, Aldershot 2011, p. 310

⁵⁰ *Buzandaran*, V.32.

⁵¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, XXX.1.19.

⁵² *Vita Nersēsī*, XV (CHAMA, p.42).

⁵³ Nina G. Garsoïan, *The Epic Histories Attributed to P’avnos Buzand*, Cambridge 1989, p. 28.

⁵⁴ The *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis* (BHO, Brussels 1910), a collection of hagiographical texts in many languages such as Coptic, Syriac, and Armenian, contains many manuscripts in alphabetical order, such as the *Vita* of Sargis or the *Vita* of T’ēodoros. For Armenian collections see. *Sop’erkē’ Haykakan* (Paris 1853-1854) and *Vark’ Srbotis’ Harants’ ev K’agbak’ avarut’ innk’ Nots’ in [Lives and Deeds of the Holy Fathers]* (Venice, 1855).

⁵⁵ Monica J. Blanchard, vd., “The Armenian Version of the “Life of Evagrius of Pontus”, *St Nersēs Theological Review*, V/6, (2000-2001), pp. 25-37; Robert W. Thomson, “The Armenian Versions of the “Life of Silvester”, *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies*, XIV, (2005), pp. 55-139.

brought about.⁵⁶ One of the most intellectual trends of the period was the success of *these holy men* and their success in shaping society. It is not surprising that this movement also affected Armenia and that its literature was influenced by it. For although *vita* existed before Christianity, with the momentum it gained after Christianity, it was reflected in literature as a torchbearer that focused more on religious figures. For the Eastern Christians, as for the Romans and Greeks, the study of the *lives* of symbolic leaders was considered essential. This was because it was a propaganda argument on behalf of Christianity through important figures. This because the level of Christianity in Armenia in the 5th century was not as high as one might think. External factors such as dispersed feudal families, strong Iranian pressure in the first half of the 5th century and Syrian influence created the need for such propaganda and idealised portraits.

Although the Armenian *vita* through Koriwn refers to the genre of personal eulogy in Armenian literature, the *vita* tradition is not clear and comprehensible without in-depth study. In particular, the fact that Greek and Syriac were recognised as languages of education and aristocratic society determined the future course of the *vitae*. Undoubtedly focused on the *holy* and *ascetic* life of important religious figures and technically *illuminating* the community, the stories of the saints are usually composed of passages based on the Greek tradition and occasionally adapted. Initially pioneered by the Armenian cultural elite, the public reception of a few Armenian-language biographies led to a sampling of translations of *vitae* from Greek and Syriac. Indeed, an educated person who could write in Latin, Greek and Syriac was highly respected in society, and it was natural that the Armenian aristocracy or clergy would want a share of this.

The stereotypes of the *lives* of important figures and their aspirations also turned the *vitae* into a useful form of uniformity. This monotony was an attempt to use the prestige of well-known figures such as Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus to find a counterpart in Armenia. The legendary figures of previous centuries are therefore symbolic constructions on the invisible side of the *vitae*. This also led to the transmission or preservation of many more *vitae* into Armenian after the 10th century, as Armenian society had now created a depth of literature and established a tradition of writing. It is interesting to note that, unlike other societies, the tradition of *vita* in Armenia continued into the 19th century and even into the present day. The possible subtext of Armenian literature's refusal to abandon this tradition can be seen as a thesis against the cultural threats in the geography in which they lived.

Further Reading

⁵⁶ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity", *The Journal of Roman Studies*, LXI, (1971), p. 80.

While the *vitae* occupy an important place in Armenian literature, the autobiography of Anania Širakac‘i, who belonged to the aristocratic class and whose intellectual depth was further enhanced by *Ašxarhac‘oyc‘* (*Geography*), further coloured the existing literature. Širakac‘i was probably the first and only Armenian historian to write an autobiography (*Ink‘nakensagrut‘iwn*).⁵⁷ Although Širakac‘i presents his own life as secular, he does not distance himself from Christianity. So much so that this time it is not the *lives* of the saints and the chosen ones that are described, but Širakac‘i’s journey and efforts to achieve scholarly success. The autobiography differs in part from the biographies in that it ends with an exhortation: *Do not place obstacles in the way of those who love learning and seek wisdom and knowledge.*

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⁵⁷ For different editions of the *Autobiography* see. Anania Širakac‘i, “Ink‘nakensagrut‘iwn (Autobiography)”, in *Matenagrutiun*, (Ed. S. G. Abrahamian and G. B. Petrosian), Erevan 1979; Frederick C. Conybeare, “Ananias of Sirak,” *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, XI, (1897), pp. 572-584; Haig Berberian, “Autobiographie d’Anania Širakac‘i”, *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, N.S. I, (1964), pp. 189-194.

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