

Հայագիտական Հրատարակութիւններ

ELISHE, **HISTORY OF VARDAN AND THE ARMENIAN WAR**,
Translation and commentary by R.W. THOMSON, Harvard University
Press, 1982 (353pp.).

ԵՂԻՇԷ, ՊԱՏՄՈՒԹԻՒՆ ՎԱՐԴԱՆԱՅ ԵՒ ՀԱՅՈՑ ՊԱՏԵՐԱԶՄԻՆ,
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This study of Eghishe follows the author's two previous studies of Agathangelos¹ and Movses Khorenatsi².

Professor Thomson begins his investigation of Eghishe's **History of Vardan and the Armenian War** with the presupposition that, like other early writers, the author of the **History of Vardan** "has surreptitiously altered the sources" and secondly that he claims "to be eyewitness of the events they describe, when in fact their histories were composed at a later period" (p.viii). Starting with this pseudo-scientific position, Prof. Thomson sets himself the task of applying historical and literary criticism to the text of Eghishe in order to establish this ill conceived thesis.

In his introduction, Prof. Thomson discusses the sources of Eghishe's **History** in an attempt to elucidate his motivation and to date the text as well as the role of Eghishe's **History** in later Armenian literature. In this review, my intention is to discuss Prof. Thomson's handling of the first question only.

In his previous study of Movses Khorenatsi which I had an opportunity to review³, Prof. Thomson had revived the debunked views of Khala-

1. Agathangelos, **History of the Armenians**, translation, commentary by R.W. Thomson, Albany, 1976.

2. Moses Khorenatsi, **History of the Armenians**, translation, commentary by R.W. Thomson, Cambridge, Mass., 1978.

3. V. Nersessian, **The Journal of Ecclesiastical History**, 30, no.4, 1979, pp.479-480.

tians; in the present study he has reinstated the theories of Nerses Akinian⁴ and B. Kiwleserian⁵. However, Prof. Thomson has added nothing to the arguments already expounded by the two previous scholars.

This study of Eghishe by Prof. Thomson is an irritating book because it claims too much. The work of Eghishe, like the other Armenian authors of that period, has been subjected to detailed scrutiny by various scholars; among them Gr. T. Poghosian, N. Adontz, Catholicos B. Kiwleserian, N. Akinian, E. Ter-MinAsian, and H. Arman. Prof. Thomson is most indebted to the work of Nerses Akinian, whose arguments he describes as "whimsical and arbitrary" (p.24); nevertheless, he accepts all his conclusions. These are: (a) the **History** of Eghishe is an expansive adaptation of Lazar P'arpetsi and was composed after Lazar; (b) there is no compelling reason to accept the "eyewitness" claim of Eghishe to the events he is describing.

Prof. Thomson argues that "Eghishe's claim to be an eyewitness cannot simply be taken at face value" (p.19); other Armenian histories were written by men who claimed to be eyewitnesses but that are now recognized to be later productions (p.19).

It is a fact that all existing manuscripts of Armenian authors date from the tenth century onwards, and in that sense they are "later productions".

Manuscripts were copied and re-copied through the centuries by scribes with varying interests and intentions, thus the texts of the works being copied were edited and altered. If there are "anomalies and difficulties in the text", these belong to the later copyists and not to the original author. The purpose of comparing manuscripts and preparing critical texts is to try to isolate the later interpolations and to reconstruct the original text of the work.

The **History** of Eghishe is not a historical account of an event in the ordinary sense of that word. The author calls his work a **Yishatakaran** — "Memorial" or "Recollection" — of a specific event in Armenian history, the revolt of 450/451 against Sasanian rule. According to Eghishe, he composed his work "in order to reprove his sins, so that everyone who hears and knows they may cast curses on him and not lust after his deeds" (p.191).

One cannot compare the work of Lazar P'arpetsi with that of Eghishe or consider the merits of one over against the other. Lazar's **History** is an

4. Nerses Akinian, *Eghishe Vardapet ev Iwr Patmut'Iwn Hayots Paterazmi*, 3 vols., Vienna, 1932, 1936, 1960. See the extensive review of this work in E. Ter-MinAsian, *Patma-Banasirakan Hetazotut'Iwnner*, Erevan, 1971, pp. 110-208, which Prof. Thomson conveniently avoids mentioning.

5. Babgen Kiwleserian, *Eghishe K'nnakan Usumnasirut'Iwn*, Vienna, 1909. See E. Ter-MinAsian.

unemotional analytical recounting of Armenian history from the end of the 4th century to the fifth in the context of which the events of 450/451 are just an episode, while in Eghishe it is the only event with which the author is concerned. Eghishe immortalises the “heavenly valour” of his main characters with the aim of providing “comfort to friends, hope to the hopeful, and encouragement to the brave”. Indeed, it would be very strange if two authors describing the same event did not disclose substantial parallels, as in the case of Eghishe and Lazar, but it would be wrong to overestimate the similarities with the effect of obliterating the important differences between them.

For instance, in the list of bishops who participated in composing a reply to the Persian king, Eghishe gives the name of the place where the bishops assembled as being “the capital city of Artashat” (p.82), while Lazar does not name the place (cf. p.258). More important, if Eghishe was following Lazar, it has not been explained why Eghishe should have excluded the name of his hero, the priest Lewond, from the list contained in Lazar. Similarly, in the description of the actual battle scene, Eghishe employs an interesting military-phrase which does not occur in Lazar. The phrase in question is “having broken the right wing, they threw it back on to the left, and they put all to the sword over the face of the plain and turned them to flight as far as the secure regions...” (p.128). Compared to this vivid account, Lazar records how Arshavir Kamsarakan, ignorant of the terrain, ran into a deep bog and was stuck down with his horses, and subsequently “dragging his horse freed himself from the bog in the process loosing one of his boots” — a novelistic reconstruction of a battle scene compared to Eghishe’s account. While describing the acts of the rebellious Vasak, Eghishe lists by name all the fortresses and estates which the former had “seized and destroyed, and set fire to”, (a total of 13 names which have all been attested in other sources), while Lazar in the corresponding section has a general remark “they[Vasak] removed the garrisons of the Armenian fortresses and installed their own troops to guard them” (cf.p.81).

In chapter three of his **History**, Eghishe states that the Armenians sent Prince Atom of the Gnuni family with a letter seeking “aid and support” (p.122) from Byzantium. According to the author, no help was received because Emperor Theodosius II was considering the question of procuring help when he died and his successor Emperor Marcianus “thought it better to preserve the pact with the heathen, for the sake of terrestrial peace, than to join in war for the Christian covenant” (p.124). It is worth noting that the battle of Avarayr took place in May 451, preceding the Council of Chalcedon, by four months. There was no representative of the Armenian Church at the Council of Chalcedon, whose doctrinal formulations were condemned by Catholicos Babgen at the Council of Dwin in 506 on

primarily theological grounds. Now, if the **History of Vardan** is an account of the events of 572 (Akinian) or if the **History** must be "dated in the last decade of the sixth century" (Prof. p.27) one must explain why there is no mention of the Council of Chalcedon. It is impossible to imagine that Eghishe could have remained untouched by the stormy quarrels which so deeply troubled Armenia following the rejection of the Council of Chalcedon. The **History of Vardan** must be dated before 506, the date for the rejection of the Council of Chalcedon and the subsequent breaking off of relations with the Greek Orthodox Church. It must be sufficiently obvious that the storm that blew up over the Council of Chalcedon would have made the efforts of the Armenians to seek help from Byzantium a vain proposal.

How Prof. Thomson, in the face of these discrepancies in the two accounts, can suggest that Eghishe is following Lazar remains totally unexplained. The fact that Eghishe lists all the fortresses individually by name is an indication that he is standing closer to the events, while Lazar, who composed his **History** 40-50 years later, saw no significance in the names. Every historian has the privilege to select and arrange the appropriate facts in the most effective way. It is the historian who decides to which facts to give the floor and in what order of context. The belief in a "hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy but one which is very hard to eradicate"⁶.

Prof. R.C. Zaehner in his major study on the Zervanite form of Zoroastrianism has devoted several pages to the evidence of Eghishe, in particular to the edict of Mihr-Narse in which the cardinal tenets of the Zervanite religion are expounded. Eghishe's account differs in small details from the accounts transmitted by Eznik, Theodore bar Konai, and Yohannan bar Penkaye. Prof. R.C. Zaehner accepts with many other well-known scholars the authenticity of Eghishe's account of the Zervanite doctrine on the premises that Eghishe "had a knowledge of the religion of the Persians altogether outstanding in an Armenian historian, vastly superior to that of Lazar, for instance, who describes the same events" (p.43). In this edict, Eghishe makes Mihr-Narse refer to the Christians as "deaf and blind and deceived by the demons of Ahriman", thereby producing exactly the Pahlavi interpretation of the Avestan terms **Kavi** and **Karapan**. Eghishe knows that it was forbidden to slaughter cattle without first stunning the victim, that excrement was not to be put on the fire, that one should wash one's hands with gomes (cow's urine) — and he is familiar with the technical terms — that it was unlawful to kill beavers, foxes and hares, but that it was meritorious to destroy snakes, lizards,

6. E.H. Carr, **What is History**, London, 1974.

frogs, ants, and all sorts of vermin. In addition, Eghishe gives information concerning the Magian schools which we get in no other sources (cf. pp.40-43).

Prof. Zaehner has given the translation of the Zervanite myth transmitted by Eznik, Eghishe, and two Syriac writers on pages 420 ff. of this work⁷.

In another of his studies summing up his verdict on Eghishe, Prof. Zaehner declares "there is no good reason to doubt the authenticity of this digest (i.e. edict). Of the many sources that recount the Zervanite myth in its classical form, Eghishe is with his fellow Armenian Eznik the oldest. His testimony is supported by the Christian martyrs Adhur — Hormizd and Anahidh, who were put to death during Yezdigird's [Yazkert's] reign"⁸. In the text of the decree of Mihr-Narse, the Christians are roundly censured on the grounds that they mock the name of Fate (**baxt**) and greatly insult Fortune (P'araworut'iwn), the two names for Zurvan attested in Pahlavi books. Eghishe, whose veracity has been so needlessly impugned, was familiar with this well-attested equation of Zurvan with Fate or Fortune.

Prof. Thomson's greatest weakness is his readiness to pass "whig" judgements without giving adequate attention to new evidence. On the question of whether the Persians under Yazkert II had conducted a war against the Greeks, follows Akinian's view that Eghishe's comment "in his great folly, like a ferocious wild beast he [Yazkert] attacked the land of the Greeks. He struck as far as the city of Nisibis" (p.61) is unreliable, and there is no other source which suggests that it was attacked by Yazkert (p.61, n.5.). Back in 1946, E. Ter Minasian in his review of Akinian's study has conclusively proved on the bases of the evidence contained in Tabari and Noldeke that such an invasion had taken place. His conclusion was confirmed by H. Arman in 1962 when he drew the attention of scholars to an imperial code given "on the sixth day before the Kalends of July at Constantinople in the year of the consulship of the Most Noble Cyrus — June 26,441" in which the following information is communicated: "Therefore, since we knew through the well considered report of your sublimity that the district of Armenia which is situated almost upon the very threshold of the border of the Persians and which was formerly protected by the troops and garrisons of the royal farms, **has been exposed at the present time to the invasions of the Persians...**"⁹. This

7. R.C. Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, New York, 1972, pp.40-43.

8. R.C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, London, 1961, pp. 188ff.

9. *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmundian Constitutions*, Transl. with commentary... by Clyde Pharr, Princeton Univ. Press, 1952, p.492; E. Ter-Minasian, *A Propos des Campagnes de Yezdedjerd II, "Banber Matenadarani"*, VIII (1964), pp.271—274.

argument for substituting Yazkert II with Khosrov I Anushirvan as the "original for Eghishe's characterization" (p.24) is totally wrong.

Another argument used by Thomson to justify the shunting of Eghishe from the fifth to the "last decade of the sixth century or later" is the presence of "the influence of translations from the "Hellenising" period on Eghishe. The influence of Philo of Alexandria on Eghishe is self evident. The Armenian translation of Philo together with that of Timothy Aelurus's **Refutation of the Definitions of the Council of Chalcedon**" belong to the earliest period of the so called "Hellenising" school between 480-484¹⁰. Therefore, the dating of the "Hellenising" translation does not depend on the dating of Eghishe, nor is it determined by the presence of "Hellenising" vocabulary in Eghishe. Philo of Alexandria, a Jew by birth, was himself fully "Hellenised", presenting a very Greek face to the world. Prof. Thomson makes the remark that "Eghishe knew Philo through the Armenian version" (p,21) and at the same time makes the absolutely contradictory statement further on that to "accept Eghishe as an author of the fifth century means to move back the beginning of "Hellenising" translations to the fifth century".

The truth is that there is no need to either move Eghishe to the sixth century or the "Hellenising" school to the fifth century to suit Prof. Thomson's theorizing.

There are no verbal literal parallels between Eghishe and Philo. Eghishe adopted and borrowed images and phrases freely from Philo's Greek text which he himself translated into Armenian.

Prof. Thomson in his Introduction dwells in great length on the indebtedness of Eghishe to the Bible on the whole and to the books of the Maccabees in particular¹¹. Given the subject matter of Eghishe's work, and the fact that his work is one of the outstanding expressions of Armenian Christian literature, this is not altogether surprising. Eghishe does not hide his knowledge of the Maccabees. The parallel between the Armenians and the Maccabees is stressed by Eghishe: "Taking up the brave model of the Maccabees, he read[Vardān] it out to them all, telling them in fluent words of the outcome of events" (cf.pp.157m 161, 166).

It is true that Eghishe does not evercrowd his text with a swamp of biblical reference as expected by Prof. Thomson. But again this is not unique in Armenian Christian literature. Thanks to the excellent work done by scholars like O. Perler and H. Surkau on the books of the Maccabees,

10. Sen Arevshatian, *Platoni Erkeri Hayeren T'argmanut'ian Zamanake*, "Banber Matenadarani", X (1971), pp.7-20.

11. S.Y., *Eghishe ew Makabayec'woc Crk'eri Yaraberut'ean Xndire*, "Ararat", 1896, pp.553-555.

we knew that late Jewish literature provided the literary models as well as the ideas of some of the earliest Christian **Acta Martyrum**. Persecution for religion and martyrdom does not start with Christianity. The sufferings of the Church in both halves of the Roman Empire were linked to the sufferings of the children of Israel. The persecutions in Alexandria, Antioch, Damascus, and Caesarea described in Philo were familiar to Eghishe. The experience of the Vardanians is deeply rooted in the Christian experience of which the Bible is the record, a record through which the fifth century historian Eghishe moved surely with confidence and authority. Eghishe writes with a passionate sense of belonging to a church called to fearless martyrdom and resistance to all compromise. Prof. Thomson's remark that Eghishe "does conceal the extent to which he was indebted" only shows the degree of failure on his part to grasp the nature of the work he is discussing and the meaning of the comment of Eghishe that "they were strengthened in the love of Christ, especially because **many of them had studied the Holy Scriptures from their youth**" (p.74).

Prof. Thomson displays an impatient sense of superiority in his approach to the study of ancient texts which he expects to be dry-as-dust factual histories.

Eghishe's **History of the Vardan** is not a work in the category of *Biwand* or *Lazar* but rather in the genre of the **Life of Mashtots** by Koriwn. Both these works are **Acta Martyrum** in which the respective authors have immortalised a group of Christian martyrs, people, who gave their lives for their faith — best summed up by the phrase "anjink' nuirealk' siroyn K'ristosi"[individuals devoted to the love of Christ] contained in the hymn by Komitas on the Hrip'simeants martyrs.