

YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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**THE WRITING CULTURE
OF
PRE-CHRISTIAN ARMENIA**

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PRE-CHRISTIAN ARMENIA**

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ON GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WRITING CULTURE OF PRE-MASHTOTSIAN ARMENIA

Summary

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Writing as means of communication, preservation of memory and accumulation of knowledge originated in the initial stage of civilization, then it became a bearer of values of civilization. The origin of writing is related to a certain level of society's organization, i.e. the emergence of statehood, and it is not occasional that the data about the first state formation and the use of script in Armenia belong to the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC.

The development of written culture is a process lasting centuries and millennia, during which writing thinking took roots among people. As its proof is the Armenian Golden Age literature (the 5th c. which commenced with the Mashtotsian scripts' invention) - a product of writing thinking which reached its high level in this. Written culture had long history in pre-Mashtotsian Armenia. In order this notion not to sound as a theoretic speculation, we shall try to elucidate the problem of the use of scripts and development of written culture in pre-Mashtotsian Armenia.

During the first stages (in the Stone Age) of the writing system's development ("object writing", early pictography) simple and earliest ways of ideas transmission were used. The origin of pictography in Armenia reflected in rock-carvings, as well as various objects dated back by specialists to the 5th-3rd millennia BC.

In the 3rd millennium BC a system of linear scripts (LSA) was elaborated (containing over 400 signs) through the development and simplifying of pictography. LSA was used till the beginning of the 1st millennium BC. About 300 inscriptions of this system were found in more than 10 archaeological sites in Republic of Armenia. These inscriptions still remain undeciphered, the same may be said about their writing direction.

In the 15th-8th centuries BC the Hittite-Luvian hieroglyphs were used (written in Luvian - an Indo-European language) in the west of the Armenian Highland, in the Euphrates' valley. The writing system contained about 500 hieroglyphs which had boustrophedon pattern of writing.

In the Kingdom of Van the cuneiform systems were widely used. At the time of King Sarduri I inscriptions in the Assyrian cuneiforms (about 600 signs, with the direction from left-to right) and language were written. After him inscriptions in Assyrian were used in bilingual monuments of kings of Ararat-Urartu (Ishpuini, Menua and Rusa

l). There are also inscriptions in Assyrian inscribed by the king of Ardini-Musasir, Urzana.

At the time of King Ishpuini the local cuneiform system was created (about 200 signs, with the direction from left-to right) of which more than 600 big and small inscriptions have been preserved. This writing system was deciphered in the second half of the 19th century.

Three writing systems were used in the kingdom of Van, one of which is of local origin. It is hieroglyphic writing containing about 300 hieroglyphs, which were written from right-to-left and from head-to-bottom. The key to the decipherment of this system was found in 1995. About 60 hieroglyphs have already been deciphered and interpreted, therefore we can assume that the language of the hieroglyphic writing of the Kingdom of Van was the ancient Armenian.

The fortune of the Armenian hieroglyphic script (*Mehenagir*) used from the 6th century BC to the times of adoption of Christianity still remains undetermined. But as follows from ancient and medieval author's information (see Chapter I), one can conclude that in the state correspondence foreign alphabets were used in that period and the usage of the Armenian hieroglyphic script was limited to temples.

Until the present hieroglyphs continue to be used in Armenia as forms of magic script, as marks of artisan masters in the form of a single ideogram. They appear on the walls of Christian temples, on coins of Cilician Armenia and as separate signaries attested in Armenian medieval manuscripts, being used also in applied art, etc.

After the fall of the Kingdom of Van the alphabetic writing systems had been used (in contrast with previously used logosyllabic systems) until the period of conversion to Christianity as the state religion in Armenia.

Since the 3rd century BC had been used Greek alphabet (24 letters, direction of writing from left-to-right), which became widely used after conversion to Christianity as the state religion, especially in church life.

From the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD inscriptions in Aramaic alphabet were in use (right- to-left direction, 22 letters); the problem of their language is not finally solved yet.

After conversion to Christianity according to the order of King Trdat (Tiridates) III Syriac was used along with Greek for writing at court, during religious sermons and in education. This order was interrupted after the dethronement of King Khosrov IV (389), when in Eastern Armenia Middle Persian (Pahlavi) was used at court writing. The Aramaic alphabet became the basis of both Syrian and Middle Persian alphabets (22 letters, direction of writing from right-to-left).

There is an important group of inscribed monuments of unknown origin and mysterious purpose, among which two exceptionally new writing systems found only in Armenia are clearly distinguished. One of them is a new cuneiform writing system probably created in pre-Urartian period. Today we have three inscriptions belonging to that system. The other one is a system of mysterious huge characters (size of a

character ranges from 70 sm to 3m). Such writings were found in about 20 archaeological sites of the Armenian Highland. There are some examples of enigmatic inscriptions.

Another group of inscriptions is represented by writings left in different sites of the Armenian Highland by the foreigners. They appeared here as a result of wars, trade, economic, cultural and other relations. They do not constitute a part of Armenian writing culture, anyhow, they are important in elucidation of Armenian history before Mashtots.

The *high level of the development of the Armenian Golden Age literary language* (the 5th c. AD) attests to deep roots of written culture and writing thought in pre-Mashtotsian Armenia..

It's comprehensible that during millennia of the statehood's existence in Armenia, official communicative language (used as means of communication in the royal court, during mobilizations, in judicial courts, during the assemblies of secular and spiritual classes, etc.) existed, which had to be understandable in the whole country. It's improbable to suppose that common communicative language (which probably was the dialect of the country's central district) existed and developed only on the colloquial level, and, without being a written language, immediately became the basis of the literal one. As mentions G. B. Jahukyan, the lexicon of literal language, even indefinitely small, excels greatly the lexicon of every dialect. "The average dialect lexicon is usually counted 7-8 thousand; the lexicon, adopted in the classical Armenian (*grabar*), even not completely known, excels 60 thousand words". I.e., the lexicon of the classical Armenian also is evidence of Armenian being elaborated in written form in pre-Mashtotsian period.

These theoretical explanations can be grounded with factual material. As it has been mentioned, the first results of the decipherment of the hieroglyphic system of the kingdom of Van are in favour of the latter's Armenian origin. Moreover, along with voluminous Armenian lexicon in the language of the cuneiforms of the kingdom of Van, recently it became possible to read separate sentences. Therefore, within the circle of our knowledge, we can ascertain that Armenian was a written language, at least fourteen centuries before the great invention of St. Mesrop Mashtots.