

FEATURES OF HELLENISM IN THE SPIRITUAL CULTURE OF ANCIENT ARMENIA ¹

G. KH. SARGSYAN

Gagik Sargsyan was a prominent Armenologist and expert in ancient Near Eastern civilizations. His scientific interests included several key problems of Armenian history - social-political history of ancient Armenia, Hellenism in Armenia, historicity and chronology and of Movses Khorenatsi's "Armenian history", Pre-Mesropian Armenian historiography, the problem of Urartu-Armenia and issues of the formation of the Armenian people etc.

Below the editorial board presents full text of his report at the international conference "Eirene" (1976) which deals with the problem of the impact of Hellenism on the spiritual culture of ancient Armenia.

Hellenistic culture, which developed in the countries of the Near and Middle East as a result of the interaction of the Hellenic civilization that penetrated here together with the Greek-Macedonians with local civilizations, became one of the most important phenomena in the history of mankind at the end of the 1st millennium BC. According to this phenomenon, the last three centuries BC are called in science the period of Hellenism, although, of course, Hellenism as such by no means exhausted the entire diversity of the history of the region mentioned. Moreover, the nature and results of syncretization were very different in various areas of the region.

For example, in a country like Babylonia, which has gone through the evolution of millennia and developed mature and stable cultural forms. The clay soil of Babylonia did not absorb the rain of Hellenism that had passed through it in any deep way. Its impact here rather led to a certain accumulation of ancient civilization, to its last outbreak before the long-planned decline. One can find examples of other societies that Hellenism did not have a significant impact on, like Babylonian, for reasons, however, directly opposite, namely, due to their insufficient maturity and unpreparedness for the perception of developed forms of Hellenic civilization.

As for Armenia, Hellenism found its society not at its decline and not at the initial stages of development, but at a period of upswing. Two or three centuries before that, the first Armenian state formation was established on the basis of the consolidation of various ethnic units of the Armenian Highlands into a single nationality. Armenia experienced a rapid growth of productive forces, behind which the spiritual culture and ideological superstructure hardly kept pace. Therefore, sometimes it had to turn for ready-made cultural forms, in one way or another corresponding to her needs, the

¹ Report made at the XIV International Conference of Classical Scholars of the Socialist Countries – "Eirene" (Yerevan, May 18-23, 1976), and appeared in the journal *Patmabanasirakan handes*, 1976, issue 3, pp.51-61.

essence of the processes it experienced, to more mature societies with which it came into contact. And the Hellenic cultural forms were the most advanced and perfect for their time.

As a result, Hellenism played a significant role in Armenia. The interaction of Hellenic culture with local civilization stimulated the development of the latter and left a certain imprint on its external manifestations. For about six centuries, including the Hellenistic period itself, as well as the first three centuries AD, which as applied to Armenia, can be called the post-Hellenistic period, some branches of the spiritual culture of the Armenian society developed under the cover of Hellenistic attire, which, however, gradually wore out and, under the influence of the primordially local essence of the corresponding processes, was replaced by local attire.

These processes included a change in the social nature of the Armenian culture. It is no secret that the main arena for the development and spread of Hellenism in any country was the culture of the ruling classes; the same was in Armenia. And in the evolution mentioned above, an important role was played by the culture of the masses, which gradually emerged from the depths of society to the surface and asserted its role. The de-Hellenization of culture was at the same time its democratization. However, the contribution of Hellenism was by no means crossed out by this. It was only creatively mastered and organically merged into the national Armenian culture.

Let us try briefly to trace the above-mentioned phenomena on concrete material relating to various areas of spiritual culture—language, literature, theatre, religion, and science.

So far, the earliest documented evidence of the penetration of the Greek language into Armenia and its use here are Greek inscriptions from Armavir, the ancient capital of Armenia (to the west of Yerevan). Seven inscriptions carved on two large boulders were found here. Their most probable dating is the turn of the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC. The inscriptions amaze with the variety of content. On one of the stones, we find: a royal letter—an appeal from “the king of Armavir Mithras” to “the king of Euront” (Yervanduni) with a wish for prosperity; a complete list of the names of the months of the Seleucid calendar; two texts, fixing some historical events, with the mention of a certain “Hellenic Numenius”, and in one of them Armenia is mentioned twice. In one of the inscriptions on another stone, the names of Hesiod, the author of “Works and Days”, and his brother Perses are found; the second inscription is a 12-line poetic text, individual sentences or phrases of which can be correlated with excerpts from the tragedies of Euripides; the third inscription is possibly a votive text: it mentions about four horses.

Such a diversity in the content of the inscriptions, on the one hand, of course, makes it difficult to assess them in general, to classify them as a whole under any particular category of epigraphic monuments. On the other hand, however, this diversity testifies to the versatility of the interests of the author (authors) of the inscriptions, to his (their) considerable erudition, which included information about ancient Greek poetry, Greek classical tragedy, the Seleucid calendar, Greek epistolary formulas, etc., and, at

the same time, information about Armenia, about the historical events connected with it and about the names of its rulers. All this, undoubtedly, gives the inscriptions a huge historical and cultural interest, they are clear evidence of the penetration of the Greek language and culture into Armenia.

A number of inscriptions dating from a later period show that Greek at this time continued to serve the Armenian society as a written language and, in particular, the language of the state chancellery, performing this function along with the Aramaic language inherited from the Achaemenid imperial chancellery.

One of the interesting samples of the Greek inscriptions of the Armenian kings is the inscription from Garni, carved on the square of the fortress wall in the 11th year of the reign of Trdat I, therefore, in 76 AD. Of particular interest here is the term λιτουργός, the interpretation of which gives reason to judge the existence of the institution of liturgy in ancient Armenia, although it differs significantly from the polis liturgy as here the action is performed not in favor of the city, but of the king; the liturgist, apparently, pays for the cost of the walls of the royal fortress, the nominal founder of which in the inscription is the king.

Of great interest is a Greek inscription from Tigranakert dating back to the turn of the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. This is the latest, one might say, surviving example of a kind of documents very common in the Hellenistic period, messages of kings to cities, in which they expressed their will to the urban community in the form of wishes, in accordance with the semi-autonomous status of cities in the state.

Of the other Greek inscriptions on the territory of Armenia, two epitaphs dating back to the 2nd century AD should be focused on. One of them refers to a lady named Athenais, whose mother, judging by her name, Antonia, daughter of Lucius, was a Roman, and her father, perhaps, an Armenian. The other is dedicated by the chiliarch of the division of the XV legion, Apollinaris Poplius Elius Valens, stationed in the ancient capital of Armenia, Vagharshapat, to his wife and daughter. In both cases, and especially in the second, an epitaph, rather in Latin, would be expected. The fact that both of them are still made in Greek testifies to the prevalence of this language in Armenia and its use, in addition to the royal office, in other areas of life. The Greek language, which served the Armenian society as a written language, finally lost this role with the invention of Armenian scripts at the beginning of the 5th century and with the transformation in connection with this of the Armenian language into a written language.

Strengthening of Hellenism in Armenia in the 1st century BC was largely due to the fact of the mass resettlement by Tigran II (95-55) of the inhabitants of the Hellenistic cities of the countries he conquered to Armenian cities, both to the newly founded capital Tigranakert, and to other cities that developed in the previous period. Probably no less than half a million people were resettled.

The sources make it possible to restore some phenomena of Hellenism, one way or another connected with the mentioned facts. Of these, the data on the Hellenistic theater in Armenia are the most prominent. At the same time, they testify to a new stage

in the penetration of the works of Greek “classical literature” into Armenia. According to Plutarch (Lucullus, 29), Tigran II built a theater in Tigranakert and invited a troupe of Greek actors to perform. If it was a genuine, that is, an ordinary theater—and Plutarch’s message does not allow for any other interpretation—then its creation must have been conditioned by the presence of a sufficient mass of spectators familiar with the Greek language. The audience of the theater were, undoubtedly, to some extent, settlers from Hellenistic cities, accustomed to the polis life. However, the real purpose of creating a theater in Armenia, of course, could not satisfy the needs of these segments of the population. Such was the desire to instill in the Armenian society the Greek theater as one of the most important elements of the Hellenic culture. The desire to perceive and develop this culture in Armenia is clearly seen in the activities of both Tigran II himself and his descendants, and was also manifested in the title “Philhellen”, the bearers of which were some of them.

Another report by Plutarch (Crassus, 33) about the Hellenistic theater in Armenia concerns the period of the reign of Tigran II’s son Artavazd II (55-34). In Artashat, the capital of Armenia, where two allies, the Parthian king Orodes and the Armenian king, met, they watched Euripides’ “Bacchae”, performed by the Greek troupe of Jason of Thrall. It happened during the battle at Carrhae, and during the performance a messenger arrived with the head of Crassus on the tip of a spear. From the scene described by Plutarch in very dramatic tones, regardless of the degree of plausibility of its individual details, it is clear, in any case, that even after Tigran II, interest in the Hellenistic theater in Armenia did not fade away - the works of Greek tragedians were staged and famous Greek actors were invited for this purpose.

The interest of Plutarch’s message increases in connection of the news immediately reported by him that King Artavazd II himself wrote tragedies. This means that the described incident with the performance of the “Bacchae” was not an episodic phenomenon in Armenia, and here, apparently, it was in the capital Artashat that there probably existed a theater in which, along with Greek tragedies, the works of Artavazd were also staged. These works, which, unfortunately, have not reached our days, were written in Greek and, of course, were in line with Hellenistic literature. However, they could also have local features, in particular, in the plot, characters, etc. For there is no doubt that the Armenians in the previous period created original games and actions of a cult-theatrical order, and the introduction of the Hellenistic theater in Armenia could not have proceeded completely without the influence of these local forms on it. In the future, we receive information about these games and actions from Armenian sources of the 5th and following centuries. And the life of the Hellenistic theater in Armenia was short-lived.

The history of the Armenian pagan pantheon has not been studied enough, but the main lines of its development are known. The original pantheon is recorded as already existing, in addition to the original Armenian deities, also of the deities of the Hurrian-Urartian and Hittite circles. Contact with Iranian society led to changes, expressed in the

fact that some of the old gods - Hayk, Ara, Tork and others, were reduced to the level of heroes, and their divine functions were embodied in the gods with the Iranian names Aramazd, Vahagn, Mithra, Anahit, etc. The penetration of Iranian theonyms into Armenia, however, does not in any way indicate the introduction of Iranian Zoroastrianism with its dualism in Armenia. The Armenians remained with their former religion, only partially replacing the names of the gods. An excellent parallel to this phenomenon is the widespread penetration of Iranian anthroponymy into Armenian onomastics, which, apparently, was used here without taking into consideration its most important — semantic, etymological side, i.e., it did not bring with it the ideology associated with it. These curious phenomena still should be studied.

The great prevalence of syncretization of religions in the Hellenistic period is known by comparing or identifying local gods with Hellenic ones on the basis of the approximate similarity of their divine functions. The temptation of such syncretization probably lay in the fact that it made possible to bring greater order to the local pantheons, to observe the gods according to a certain ranking - a quality generally characteristic of the Greek pantheon, if we ignore the frequent inconsistencies and deviations in it.

This phenomenon was in the Armenian society, too. The god Aramazd, the supreme deity, was compared with Zeus, the god Vahagn with Heracles, the goddess Anahit with Artemis, Mithra (or sometimes Tir) with Apollo-Helios, etc. We meet these identifications in a surviving form even in the Christian Armenian historiography of the 5th century, namely in the works of Agathangelos, Faustus of Byzantium and Movses Khorenatsi. That they really date back to the Hellenistic period is illustrated by the fact that they were mentioned as early as the 1st century BC in Commagene, neighboring Armenia, a country connected with Armenia by age-old political, cultural and ethnic ties, in which, moreover, a branch of the Armenian Orontid dynasty (Yervanduni) ruled for about four centuries. In the sanctuary on Nemrut-Dağ, built by Antiochus I, a representative of this dynasty, a contemporary of Tigran II, colossal statues were erected, dedicated, as is clear from the inscriptions, to three gods - Zeus- Aramazd, Apollo-Mithra-Helios-Hermes, Heracles- Artagnus (i.e., Vahagn) - Ares and the goddess of Commagene. The latter acts as a Commagene hypostasis of the same goddess Anahit, the most important function of which, as it is known, in the Armenian pantheon, was precisely the guardianship of the country.

Of undoubted interest for this topic, in addition to what has been said, is the fact of the existence in ancient Armenia of the institution of the cult of the royal dynasty and the deification of the living king. This “political religion”, which was very widespread in the Hellenistic world, as it is often called, was called upon to raise the authority of the king and royal power to an unattainable height. Deified kings were often identified with some classical deity—Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus, Helios, etc.

The example of the powerful Seleucids and Ptolemies was followed by the rulers of small countries - Pergamon, Bythinia, Cappadocia, Pontus. The richest data are

available for Commagene, one of the smallest countries of the Hellenistic world. These data, as already noted, can be attributed to some extent to Armenia. The Commagene sanctuary on Nemrut-Dağ was dedicated specifically to the dynastic cult, and next to the mentioned colossal statues of four deities, King Antiochus I erected a fifth of his own. Nearby he arranged in two rows dozens of steles with bas-reliefs depicting his ancestors from the paternal and maternal side, and provided these steles with the corresponding Greek inscriptions. On the paternal side, Antiochus built his genealogy through Aroands (Armenian Yervand, Orontes of ancient authors) - kings and satraps to the Achaemenids and to Darius I himself; from the maternal side - to the Seleucids and, further, to Alexander the Great.

Data about Armenian sanctuaries of this nature, preserved in the narrative sources of the 5th century, are reminiscent of Commagene sanctuaries. So, from the “History of Armenia”, authored by Movses Khorenatsi, we learn that one of the Armenian kings, attributed by him to the II century BC, Vagharshak, “built a temple in Armavir and installed statues of the Sun and the Moon and images of his ancestors in it.” Further, the author calls the statues of the Sun and the Moon also the statues of Apollo and Artemis, respectively. Another Armenian author of the 5th century Agathangelos calls these same deities by their local names - Tir and Anahit. According to another Armenian author of the 5th century Faustus of Byzantium, the family tomb of the Armenian Arsakids was located in the fortress of Ani, at the temple of Zeus-Aramazd.

The very composition of the deities associated with the cult of ancestors, Zeus-Aramazd, Apollo-Tir-Helios (the Sun) and Artemis-Anahit-Moon, indicates the connection of the Armenian version of the cult of the dynasty with the corresponding Commagene and, further, Seleucid cults, where also in the first turn are Zeus and Apollo. There are clear similarities in the organizational form of the cult.

A number of other data on the cult of the royal dynasty in ancient Armenia refer to the identification of a living king with some deity. In one of the prologues of Pompeius Trogus, “Tigran, called God” is mentioned, undoubtedly it is Tigran II. The legend of “King Tigran, God” is read on a coin of one of the following Tigrans. The identification of the Tigran II with the god Heracles-Vahagn is evidenced by the story told by Movses Khorenatsi, where King Tigran clearly acts as the dragon-slayer god Vahagn, who, according to the data of the same Movses Khorenatsi, and also, as it is known, inscriptions from Commagene, identified with Heracles. The same is evidenced by the coins of Tigran II with the image of Heracles on the reverse side.

The son of Tigran II Artavazd II, apparently, was identified with Helios-Mithra. The legends of the Mithraic circle are connected with the name Artavazd, according to which Artavazd is imprisoned in chains in the depths of the mountain, and he has to come out of there and destroy (in another version, save) the world. The coins of Artavazd II with the image on the reverse side of the quadriga, which Helios usually rules, have also reached our times.

The Arsakids who came to power in Armenia in the middle of the 1st century AD, preserved the tradition of deification of the royal ancestors and the ruler. Trdat I (66-80) calls himself “Helios-Tiridates” in a Greek inscription from Garni. In the future, the cult of the king in Armenia undergoes a certain romanization, and in the Greek royal inscription from Tigranakert, referring to the very end of the 3rd or the beginning of the 4th century AD, and, consequently, belonging to Trdat III (298-330), we are already talking about the “fate” of the monarch, which, as it is known, was an important component of the imperial cult in the Roman Empire.

All these phenomena disappear with the victory of Christianity in Armenia at the beginning of the 4th century.

Let us move on to the field of science. We are talking about the first steps in the development of historiography in Armenia. The beginning of Armenian historiography is usually dated to the time of the invention of Armenian alphabet, to the 5th century AD. However, “a number of circumstances force us to reconsider this thesis. This is a fact of the high level of development of the Armenian statehood in the II-I centuries BC, during the reign of the Artaxiad dynasty, and further in the I-V centuries AD, which in itself should have given rise to an urgent need for historiography, for fixing the history of the state. This, further, is the fact of the rapid flourishing of the Armenian historiography in the 5th century, which cannot be historically comprehended without the assumption of a preliminary gradual accumulation of products of historiographical thought. These general considerations are supported by specific data. These have already existed since the time of Tigran II. It has already been noted that he was a promoter of Hellenism; he gathered around him representatives of Greek-oriented thought and education. Of these persons, in the aspect of the origin of historiographical thought in Armenia, we may be interested in Amphicrates of Athens, who wrote the work “On Great Men” that has not reached us, in which, perhaps, a place was given to Tigran II, and especially Metrodorus of Scepsis. These were representatives of the layer of wandering Hellenic intelligentsia typical of the Hellenistic period.

Information about Metrodorus has been preserved by many ancient authors - Strabo, Plutarch, Pliny, Cicero, Athenaeus, scholia to Apollonius of Rhodes). Metrodorus was known as a hater of the Romans. The authors speak of him as a versatile figure – “a man with great level of knowledge” - a politician, philosopher, rhetorician, naturalist, historian and they also note about the amazing style of his writings. We know the names of some of them: “Alexander, or on the presence of mind in dumb animals”, “About Customs”, “About Tigran”.

Naturally, we are interested here in the last of these works, from which, unfortunately, only a short, insignificant fragment has survived. Since Metrodorus died in 70, his work on Tigran II was supposed to cover the first, conquering period in the history of the reign of this king, when he created a great power stretching from the Caspian to the Mediterranean Sea. Written, in all likelihood, by royal order, the work was, of course, panegyric in nature. The introductory part could also present the

predecessors of Tigran II (beginning, perhaps, with the founder of the dynasty, Artashes I), the source for which could be both local tradition and ancient authors, for example Polybius, who is known to be well aware of Artashes I.

Considering the work of Metrodorus about Tigran as one of the facts of the birth of historiography in Armenia is due to the fact that it did not turn out to be episodic and single in the Armenian reality. Metrodorus had a successor, moreover, not a Greek, but an Armenian, although he wrote in Greek. This was King Artavazd II (55-34), who has already been mentioned as a playwright. The same Plutarch reports that he also wrote historical works (Crassus, 33). Plutarch notes that some of them survived; they used to be read, therefore, even a century and a half after their creation. However, they did not reach us. One can only guess about their content, but the assumption that they were dedicated specifically to the history of Armenia will not be arbitrary.

We obtain information about the further development of historiographical thought in Armenia from the works of the early medieval Armenian historians who mention their sources and their predecessors, in particular, from the “History of Armenia” by the “father of Armenian history”, the author of the 5th century Movses Khorenatsi.

Movses names many of his sources—written and oral, local and foreign. Some of them are still mysterious. We are interested here in those of the written sources mentioned by him, which have developed in Armenia itself, regardless of the language in which they were written. This is primarily the “Temple History”, attributed to Olympius, the priest of the temple of Zeus-Aramazd in the fortress of Ani, in the ancient Armenian region of Daranali on the Euphrates.

The main content of the work of Olympius, as it is revealed in the “History of Armenia” by Movses Khorenatsi, is the history of King Artashes I (mentioned as Artaxias by ancient authors): the history of his struggle with the usurper Yervand (Orontes, as mentioned by Strabo), victory, the founding of the capital Artashat (Artaxata, as mentioned by ancient authors), military campaigns of Artashes, internal reforms, including the division of land into private and communal land through the establishment of boundary stones, etc.

If we exclude, however, an anachronism, which is significant, but at the same time characteristic of Movses Khorenatsi, in dating the reign of King Artashes (a shift of more than two centuries), then the facts reported from the words of Olympius are surprisingly consonant with the data of epigraphic monuments (namely, boundary stones with inscriptions in Aramaic on behalf of Artashes I) and ancient authors—Diodorus, Justin, Appian, Plutarch and others—about this king. The similarity with Strabo’s data is especially clear, so clear that it encourages us to look for a connection between the two authors, Olympius and Strabo. It can be assumed that both of them, directly or indirectly, used the same or similar materials of local origin - something like the works of Metrodorus or Artavazd II mentioned above.

The most probable time of the life of the historian-priest of Olympius is I-II centuries AD. His Greek name, of course, does not mean that he was a Greek. He was

a priest, although at one time somewhat Hellenized (as the double name - Zeus-Aramazd shows), but still a primordially Armenian temple, and there is no reason not to consider him an Armenian. But he apparently wrote in Greek.

In all likelihood, the Syrian scholar Mar Abas Katina, as Movses Khorenatsi calls him, or Maraba of Mtturn, as he is named by the anonymous author of the 5th-7th centuries, who lived at the court of the Armenian Arsakids, as they believe, in the 4th century, also wrote in Greek. He wrote the history of Armenia, making extensive use of the Armenian oral tradition—tales and legends that existed among the people, as well as written sources—the royal archives and some Greek work on chronology. His work served as the most important source for Movses Khorenatsi and for the mentioned anonymous author. So, the fragmentary data that have reached us, allow us to judge that historiography, which originated in the Hellenistic period in Armenia, developing in temples and at the royal court, was an important flourishing factor in the 5th century, immediately after the invention of the Armenian alphabet, genuine national Armenian-language historiography, which produced such a brilliant constellation of authors as Koryun, Agathangelos, Faustus of Byzantium, Ghazar Parpetsi and the “father of Armenian history” Movses Khorenatsi.

A general description of the significance and role of the features of Hellenism in the spiritual culture of ancient Armenia was given at the beginning of the article, and we will not return to this. We confine ourselves to formulating the most general conclusion. The influence of one culture, civilization on another is not a unilateral action. In varying degrees and in a different sense, both sides are always active - influencing and perceiving. Often even the latter surpasses the former in activity, being more interested in perceiving than the former in acting.

In conclusion, we should say the following. Dealing with the issues of contacts between different cultures and civilizations, we constantly face somehow frightening variety of diversities and combinations of such contacts. At the same time, a clear lack of development is revealed, often simply even the absence of a scientific approach to them, which prompts us to argue that the problem as a whole is neglected. Meanwhile, in our opinion, it has full right to turn into a separate branch of historical science, covering the relevant phenomena not only of antiquity, but of all epochs of human history, up to the present day.

We are far from sufficiently differentiating such terms as influence, mutual influence, contact, impact, interaction, collision, merger and other concepts of this kind that characterize the variants of contacts between cultures and civilizations, although their meaning, like the significance of their differences, is enormous. We are accustomed to assessing this kind of phenomena by eye, and often with a fair dose of emotionality. And our present message is no exception to this.

But here, as it is in other areas of historical science, precise definitions, clear criteria, careful systematization of facts, their quantitative and qualitative analysis, their generalization, and the development on this basis of a certain theory are possible and

necessary, designed to identify general patterns and chronologically areal features, finally, to find out the very mechanism of various types of contacts between cultures and civilizations in the amplitude from collision to merger, to make it possible to mathematically model these processes, etc.

It seems to us that this need is already being understood, and one of the types of evidence of this is the very fact that the problems of the current XIV Eirene conference are set at the forefront of precisely the problem of “Ancient World and the East”.