

Movses Khorenatsi on the Wives of Astyages

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Abstract: Scholars have long recognized the considerable importance of Armenian sources—particularly the accounts of Movses Khorenatsi—for the study of the ancient history of Media and Iran. Armenian sources take on particular significance when systematically compared with evidence preserved in the works of ancient Greek and Latin authors. In this respect, Khorenatsi's accounts are at times comparable to those in classical sources, while in other instances they reveal historical realities concerning Armenian–Median and Armenian–Iranian relations. The present article focuses on Khorenatsi's accounts of Anoysh and Tigranuhi, the women associated with Astyages, king of Media.

Keywords: Astyages, Tigran Haykazn, Cyrus the Great, Armenia, Tigranuhi, Anoysh, Aryenis, Movses Khorenatsi, Thovma Artsruni

Introduction

The history of Armenia during the first half of the sixth century BCE is of considerable importance for the study of the history of its neighboring kingdoms and lands, foremost among them the Median Kingdom. During the period of Median supremacy, Armenia was a relatively powerful polity that twice rebelled against Median domination. The Medes sought to establish control over Armenia not only by military means but also by

consolidating their influence through dynastic marriage alliances, concerning which the Armenian sources preserve valuable evidence.

The Account of Movses Khorenatsi

In discussing Armenian–Median relations, Khorenatsi reports that Tigranuhi, the sister of the Armenian king Tigran Eruandean, married Aždahak, king of Media, who is identified with Astyages in the classical sources. Khorenatsi attributes the following reasoning to Aždahak: “Through such a relationship either I [i.e., Aždahak] shall have a firm friendship with Tigran, or in this way I shall easily lure him to assassination” (Khorenats‘i 1978, 111; Khorenatsi 1997, 104).¹

Even before the marriage was arranged, Aždahak had become apprehensive about the close alliance between the Armenian king and the Persian king Cyrus the Great (Khorenatsi 1997, 105–106; Khorikyan 2025). Beset by anxiety, Aždahak has a dream in which he is killed in single combat by Tigran Haykazean. After discussing the dream and his apprehensions with his counselors, Aždahak resolves to lay a trap for Tigran by requesting the hand of Tigran’s sister in marriage (Khorenatsi 1997, 107). In this way, he intended to allay Tigran’s suspicions and, when a favorable opportunity arose, have the Armenian king killed. Having entrusted one of his counselors with lavish gifts, Aždahak dispatched him to Tigran with a letter containing the following message:

Your beloved fraternity knows that nothing more useful in the life of this world has been granted us by the gods than a great number of friends, and especially truly wise and powerful ones. For thus troubles from outside do not disturb us, and those that do reach us are quickly driven away; while no such evil on anyone’s part finds an entry within but is expelled. Now, seeing that such useful advantages accrue from friendship, I have decided to confirm even more firmly and deeply the love that exists between us, so that we may both be safe on every side and also keep our empires secure and stable. And this will occur if you give me in marriage the princess of Greater Armenia, your sister Tigranuhi, if indeed you consider this advantageous to her that she become queen of queens. Be well our fellow sovereign and beloved brother. (Khorenats‘i 1978, 114)

Several conclusions may be drawn from the passage cited above. Aždahak addresses Tigran as his brother, suggesting that, in Khorenatsi’s account, the Armenian king is accorded status equal to that of the Median king. A further implication is that the Armenian princess could have become the foremost queen of Media—that is, Aždahak’s principal wife—thereby attesting to the political standing and influence of the Armenian king. Nevertheless, evidence from other sources indicates that the Armenian king was a vassal of the Median king. It is therefore hardly coincidental that Tigran gave his sister in marriage

¹ It should be noted that the historical reliability of Khorenatsi’s evidence concerning the history of Media has generally been underestimated by scholars whose engagement with his *History of Armenia* has remained limited (see, e.g., Medvedskaya 2018, 32–33).

to Aždahak. Khorenatsi certainly portrays Tigran as unaware of Aždahak's schemes and as trusting his assurances of friendship. Yet, as a subordinate ruler, Tigran would not have been in a position to reject Aždahak's proposal. Continuing his narrative, Khorenatsi states that, by virtue of her beauty, Tigranuhi became the foremost lady at the Median court and that everyone in the kingdom obeyed her commands. Before long, Aždahak began attempting to turn Tigranuhi against her brother, alleging that:

'Do you not know,' he said, 'that your brother Tigran, incited by his wife Zaruhi, is envious of your authority over the Aryans? And what will become of this, save that first I shall die and then Zaruhi will reign over the Aryans and occupy the place of the goddesses? So you must choose one of these alternatives: either remain friendly with your brother and accept ignominious ruin in the eyes of the Aryans, or, realizing your own best interests, propose some useful advice and take heed for the present situation.' (Khorenats'i 1978, 114–115)

Tigranuhi discerns Aždahak's treachery and secretly warns her brother of the plot. Aždahak subsequently sends envoys to Tigran, proposing that the two rulers meet in person at a location on the frontier between their kingdoms to discuss a matter of great importance. In his letter of reply, however, Tigran exposes Aždahak's hostile intentions, whereupon both sides begin preparing for battle:

The Armenian king gathered [troops] from the confines of Cappadocia², the total elite of Georgia and Albania, and all the elite of Greater and Lesser Armenia. He marched with all his host to the borders of Media. The danger then forced Azhdahak to oppose the Armenian with no less a force. The struggle lasted for five full months, since swift and decisive action languished when Tigran thought of his beloved sister. He made efforts to arrange the outcome of events so that Tigranuhi might have a means of escape. When this had been accomplished, the hour of combat approached. (Khorenats'i 1978, 115)

Khorenatsi then provides a vivid account in which he attributes Aždahak's death in single combat to Tigran (Khorenatsi 1997, 109).³ He thus portrays Tigran as the ruler who brought about the downfall of the Median Kingdom, a representation that contradicts the evidence preserved in other sources. Following Aždahak's death, Tigranuhi returned to Armenia and settled in the city of Tigranakert and the surrounding districts (Khorenatsi 1997, 109). This Tigranakert should not be identified with the eponymous capital founded by the Armenian king Tigran II the Great. Tigranuhi had, in fact, settled in the regions of Utik' (Ὠτηνή) and Artsakh (Ὀρχιστηνή).

Khorenatsi's subsequent account is even more noteworthy, since, according to the historian,

² Following the Battle of the Halys in 585 BCE, the Medes placed the territories situated within the bend of the Halys River under Armenian administration (see Khorikyan 2015).

³ Samuel Anetsi notes that Cyrus killed Aždahak (Anetsi 2014, 97). Khorenatsi's accounts of Tigran and Aždahak have also been examined from the perspective of comparative mythology; however, this approach lies beyond the scope of the present study.

Anoysh, Azhdahak's first wife, and many princesses of Azhdahak's seed with young men and a multitude of prisoners, more than ten thousand in number, he settled from the eastern flank of the great mountain as far as the borders of Golt'n, that is Tambat, Oskiolay, Dazhgoynk', and the other estates on the bank of the river, including Vranjunik', as far as opposite the castle of Nakhchavan, and the three towns of Khram, Julay, and Khorshakunik' on the other side of the river, the entire plain, whose capital is Azhdanakan, as far as the same castle of Nakhchavan. But the aforementioned Queen Anoysh he settled with her sons on the extensive crags of the summit of the great mountain. (Khorenats'i 1978, 116–117)

Khorenatsi's account is significant insofar as the Armenian king did, in fact, participate in Cyrus's war against Media and, following Cyrus's victory, received his allotted share of the spoils. Tigran treated the captives entrusted to him with honor. Among them were Anoysh, Azhdahak's principal wife, and more than ten thousand people, whom he resettled across an extensive territory stretching from Mount Masis to the district of Golt'an (Khorenatsi 1997, 109–110; Harout'yunyan 2016, 22–23).⁴ Khorenatsi identifies Anoysh as Azhdahak's principal (first) wife. It was Anoysh, however, who held the position of queen of Media and foremost lady of the court, rather than Tigranuhi, as Khorenatsi's narrative suggests. In Armenian historical tradition, Azhdahak's descendants subsequently became known as the *Vishapazunk'* ("descendants of the dragon"), since the name *Azhdahak* means "dragon" in Armenian (Khorenatsi 1997, 110). In another passage, Khorenatsi describes Anoysh⁵ as the "mother of dragons" (Khorenatsi 1997, 111).⁶ According to Khorenatsi, Azhdahak's descendants subsequently formed a *nakharar* house known as the Muratsean, whose hereditary chiefs bore the title "Lord of the Marats'ik". Until the reign of Artashes I, Azhdahak's descendants constituted one of Armenia's most prominent princely houses and enjoyed the privilege of ranking second in the kingdom (see also Drasxanakertc'i 1996, 28). Artavazd, the son of Artashes, subsequently eliminated Argam, the patriarch of the Muratsean house, together with all his descendants, and confiscated their extensive estates (Khorenatsi 1997, 126, 159, 162, 166–167). As can be

⁴ The account of Anoyš and Cyrus preserved by the Armenian historian Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi is difficult to interpret, apparently due to corruption in the Armenian source text: "Then, having killed Astyages (Azhdahak), he took the latter's court captive, and assisted by Anoyš, the mother of dragons, and holding Cyrus, he seized and annexed the domains of the Medes and the Persians" (Drasxanakertc'i 1987, 71). It is also possible that the historian, to some extent, confused Tigran Eruandean with Tigran II the Great, whose supremacy was acknowledged by the Parthians. More generally, it should be borne in mind that certain statements made by Khorenatsi concerning Cyrus the Great were subsequently and erroneously attributed by copyists to Tigran Eruandean. One example is the establishment of authority over the Greeks of Asia Minor in the sixth century BCE (Harout'yunyan 1998, 4–5).

⁵ Centuries later, the name Anoysh was preserved among Azhdahak's descendants who had settled in Armenia (Artsruni and Anonymous 1985, 90). Derived from a word meaning "immortal," the name Anoysh came to be used in Armenian to mean "sweet" (Justi 1895, 17; Ačaryan 1942, 171).

⁶ The ethnonym denoting the Medes was rendered in Armenian as *mar*, a form that has been associated with the Iranian word *mār*, meaning "snake".

seen, Anoysh, the wife of Astyages, was granted substantial privileges in Armenia, and this was unlikely to have been coincidental. It cannot be ruled out that Anoysh was Cyrus's maternal grandmother—that is, the mother of Mandane—and that Tigran acted on Cyrus's direct instructions.

The Account of Thovma Artsruni

Thovma Artsruni likewise recounts the war between Tigran Eruandean and Aš(ž)dahak. According to his narrative, Cyrus hastened to Tigran's assistance because the two kings had established an alliance. Aždahak attempted to dissuade Cyrus from supporting Tigran by promising the Persian king extensive territories, including "the regions of Nineveh and Tmorik' with its fortress". Tigran subsequently learned of Aždahak's secret plans. He defeated and killed Aždahak, while Cyrus completed the decisive defeat of the Median army (Artsruni 1985, 101; Artsruni and Anonymous 1985, 62).

Unlike Khorenatsi, Thovma reports that Tigran brought two of Aždahak's children to Armenia and appointed them to official positions. He later elevated them to the status of a princely house and granted them extensive domains. Thovma further claims that these descendants served Tigranuhi, Aždahak's wife (Artsruni 1985, 101–102; Artsruni and Anonymous 1985, 64), although the historical reliability of this assertion is questionable (Harout'yunyan 2016, 23). Thovma's account further indicates that the Araxes River formed the boundary between Armenia and Media and that the Mughan–Makan Plain—corresponding to what Khorenatsi calls "the borders of the Medes" (Khorenatsi 1997, 109), lay within Median territory.

Thovma further reports that the Artsruni family entered into a dynastic marriage alliance with the Median royal house, a connection that conferred considerable prestige upon the Artsrunis (Artsruni and Anonymous 1985, 90; Harout'yunyan 2016, 22). Khorenatsi's account, according to which a larger number of Aždahak's family members were taken captive, appears more plausible. Their removal would have enabled Cyrus II to eliminate a potential Median dynastic threat to his throne.

Comparison and Analysis of the Sources

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, the Armenian sources—or, more specifically, the "popular epic tradition" underlying Khorenatsi's account—assign a prominent role to Tigran Eruandean in the overthrow of the Median Kingdom. These traditions nevertheless provide grounds for suggesting that the Armenians actively supported the Persian king Cyrus in his war against Astyages. In this context, Xenophon's statement that Tigran and Cyrus had maintained close relations since the years they spent at the Median court is unlikely to be coincidental (Xenophon 1960, 220), particularly since Xenophon had visited Armenia and may have encountered traditions concerning their relationship there. Of particular relevance to the present study is the fact that early medieval Armenian sources

mention two women associated with Astyages-Aždahak: Anoysh, a Median woman, and Tigranuhi, an Armenian princess. As noted above, Anoysh—not Tigranuhi—was the queen of Media and the principal wife of Astyages. Armenian historians, however, attributed this status to the Armenian king's sister.

In the scholarly literature, the reign of Astyages has generally been dated to 584–550 BCE (Medvedskaya 2018, 187). In Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, certain episodes are attributed to Cyrus the Great although, in historical terms, they appear to relate to Cyrus I (Harout'yunyan 1998, 22–23). During the reign of Cyrus I, Armenia rebelled against Median rule and attempted to regain its independence. Cyrus I, however, compelled the Armenian king to acknowledge once again the supremacy of the Median king. The question of primary relevance to the present study is whether the classical sources preserve any information concerning the wife or wives of Astyages.

Of particular importance in this context is Herodotus's account of the war between the Lydians and the Medes. The battle between the two sides was interrupted by a solar eclipse, after which they concluded a peace agreement. Herodotus continues:

Those who reconciled them were Syennesis the Cilician and Labynetus the Babylonian; they it was who brought it about that there should be a sworn agreement and an exchange of wedlock between them: they adjudged that Alyattes should give his daughter Aryenis to Astyages, son of Cyaxares; for without a strong bond agreements will not keep their strength. (Herodotus 1975, 91, 93)

This battle is conventionally dated to May 28, 585 BCE. Through the mediation of Nabonidus, king of Babylonia, and Syennesis, king of Cilicia, the Halys River was subsequently established as the boundary between Lydia and Media (Medvedskaya 2018, 204). Peace between the two kingdoms was consolidated through the marriage of Alyattes's daughter to the son of Cyaxares. According to some scholars, Herodotus's account conflates two separate Lydo-Median wars. The second of these was allegedly initiated by Astyages in either 577 or 575 BCE and concluded with his marriage to Aryenis (Medvedskaya 2018, 204). The present study is not concerned with a detailed examination of the wars between Lydia and Media. What is significant in Herodotus's account is that one of Astyages's wives was named Aryenis and that she was the daughter of the king of Lydia, one of the most powerful states of the period. Tigranuhi, another of Astyages's wives, was likewise a princess. This suggests that Astyages attached considerable importance to dynastic marriages as an instrument of foreign policy. Khorenatsi's statement that Mandu was the name of Argam's concubine, a descendant of Aždahak, is also noteworthy. Mandu, whom the historian characterizes as exceptionally beautiful and distinguished by her graceful bearing, was subsequently taken from Argam by Artavazd, the son of Artashes (Khorenatsi 1997, 166). The name Mandu appears to be etymologically related to that of Mandane, the mother of Cyrus the Great (Ačariyan 1946, 198). Mandane was the daughter of Astyages and the wife of the Persian king Cambyses (Herodotus 1975,

138). This circumstance suggests that the name of their royal ancestress remained preserved in the collective memory of Astyages's descendants.

The available evidence thus suggests that Astyages had at least three wives. Armenian sources identify Anoysh as his first wife in chronological terms. If Tigran Eruandean's reign is dated to 569–524 BCE (Harout'yunyan 1998, 83), Tigranuhi would have been Astyages's third wife, following Anoysh and Aryenis.⁷ Her marriage to Astyages was probably brief and may have taken place shortly before the collapse of the Median Kingdom.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis supports the conclusion that Tigran Eruandean, also known as Tigran Haykazean, king of Armenia, played a significant role in the political developments of Western Asia by assisting Cyrus the Great in the overthrow of the Median Kingdom. An examination of the historical sources indicates that Tigran Eruandean was a vassal of Astyages, king of Media, and was consequently compelled to give his sister Tigranuhi in marriage to the Median king. The evidence preserved in Armenian sources suggests that Aždahak/Astyages had at least two wives. One of them, Anoysh, served as principal queen and, following Astyages's death, was forcibly relocated to Armenia. Herodotus's account further indicates that another wife of Astyages was Aryenis, a Lydian princess. The surviving sources have thus preserved the names of three women associated with Astyages—Anoysh, Aryenis, and Tigranuhi—although the actual number of his wives was presumably greater.

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⁷ It is plausible that Amytis, mentioned by Ctesias as the woman whom Cyrus the Great married, was the daughter of Aryenis and Astyages (Medvedskaya 2018, 206). As Pierre Briant (2002, 24) has pointed out, "[the ancient authors] portray Mandane as the daughter of Astyages and the Lydian princess Aryenis, daughter of Alyattes and thus sister (or half-sister) of Croesus".

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