

The Historiography of Artaxias I: A Comparative Approach to Greek and Armenian Sources

Recent years have seen an increasing awareness of the value of multidisciplinary approaches to ancient problems. As classicists become more aware of new avenues of inquiry in other fields, we see potential for new discoveries and insights, even on old topics. This holds true especially for those ancient historians looking for more layered understandings of the Roman eastern frontier and of the indigenous cultures found there. It has long been known that classical sources can display significant biases in their coverage of Near Eastern societies. Perhaps the most famous tropes are the decadence and effeminacy attributed to Achaemenid culture in some Greek writers. Nonetheless, when we compare classical and Near Eastern material, we can set some of those biases in a previously unrealized context and gain further insight into the value of both sets of sources. To illustrate these points this paper will examine the case of Artaxias I of Armenia (r. c.190 – c.160 BCE). If we were to rely only on one set of sources, Greek or Armenian, we would have an even more incomplete picture than we already do. The divergences themselves help to indicate that Artaxias was a dynamic king, a game-changer in the history of Armenia, whose legend rose high within and beyond Armenian tradition.

According to Strabo (11.14.15 C531), the Romans placed Artaxias on the Armenian throne sometime around 190 BCE, in the aftermath of the defeat of the Seleucid king Antiochus III. In the Armenian tradition, represented especially by Movses Khorenats'i, Artaxias is remembered for creating a kingdom that his grandson Tigranes the Great would briefly turn into a superpower in the Near East in the early first century BCE. During this territorial expansion, according to Movses, Artaxias captured King Croesus and brought an end to the Lydian empire.

Movses acknowledges the tradition of the Persian king Cyrus' role in Croesus' demise but rejects it (2.12-13). In her recent study of these sources, Francesca Gazzano has effectively demonstrated that Movses' reshaping of Artaxias' story is based on earlier patterns. Specifically, Artaxias' deeds are in fact those of the Achaemenid kings. The capture of Croesus is just one example. The purpose of this narrative reshaping is clear enough. Rather than give credit to the Persians, it is Armenia that can claim to have overcome the mighty Lydian empire, allowing Artaxias' kingdom to join the ranks of the great powers of history (Gazzano 2016).

Artaxias' contribution to Armenia's material prosperity is also prominent in Movses. He records the king's organization of the land and claims that because of Artaxias Armenia had become a "land of prosperity" (շինութեան երկրիս, 2.56). He describes the founding of the capital Artaxata and says that Artaxias named the city after himself. Interestingly, Movses cites as his source an oral tradition passed down in the district of Goł'n, famous for its storytellers, i.e., a local Armenian tradition (2.49, cf. 1.30).

A feature Movses shares with the Greek sources is Artaxias' bellicose expansionism, but whereas this aggression is for Movses a point of pride, a sign of a strong and successful king, the classical sources use it to characterize Artaxias as more of an adventurer. In the pages of Polybius, Diodorus, and other Greek writers, Artaxias is a schemer and opportunist whose external ambitions drew him into international conflicts and intrigues. The irony of his position is that he ultimately proved a disruptive element in the Near East, the opposite of what the Romans had intended in c. 190. Artaxias' schemes included his fruitless attempts to interfere in the internal politics of Sophene in 163 (Diod. 31.22, Plb. 31.16.1-2) and his supposed alliance with the would-be Seleucid usurper Timarchus in 161 (Diod. 31.27a, cf. App. Syr. 47).

The fuller picture that combining each tradition gives us is very helpful, but Artaxias' case illustrates the hazards in play. While Artaxias falls into the category of Near Eastern despotic adventurer for the Greek writers, in the Armenian tradition he serves an important purpose in the development of a national identity shaped in part by the adoption of Christianity in the fourth century, the creation of the Armenian alphabet in the fifth, and the struggle against the pressures of Sasanian Persia throughout late antiquity. This is the world of Movses, "the father of Armenian history," who may have been active in the early fifth century (some scholars place him later) and certainly did his part to promote one of Armenia's most important heroes in service to this nationalistic goal.

Bibliography

- Gazzano, F. 2016. "Croesus' Story in the History of Armenia of Movsēs Xorenac'i." *Greek Texts and Armenian Traditions: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Eds. F. Gazzano, L. Pagani, G. Traina. Berlin/Boston. 83-114.