

On Preconditions of Medieval Armenian Schools

In the course of its centuries-old history, the Armenian nation has created magnificent monuments of science, literature and art. The most remarkable events in the cultural and spiritual life of the nation were recorded early in the 5th century when the Great Enlightener and scholar Mestrop Mashtots invented the Armenian alphabet.

The Armenian alphabet that proved to have decisive significance for the future of the country, was but a historical necessity. It was followed by the establishment of the Armenian school, which in its turn aroused the idea of the independent statehood and promoted the spirit of patriotism among the people. In rather a short period of time the Armenian culture experienced a dynamic growth. Armenian schools opened throughout the country. They trained spiritual leaders, teachers and translators. The graduates of those schools became the first disseminators of the “seeds” of the national language and literature.

The establishment of Armenian schools was far from being an easy task. The Byzantine empire initially resisted and hindered any attempt to set up schools in the Western Armenia. It is known that in 387 Armenia was split between two rival countries – Persia and Byzantine. However, the Armenian elite and the church maintained certain rights with respect to internal governance of the two parts of the country. Though Persia and Byzantine shared the same political goals concerning Armenia, they were forced to be tolerant towards various happenings in the country. This was just the case with the invention of the Armenian alphabet and the establishment of Armenian schools nationwide. Persia, for example, was trying to enhance the independence of the Armenian church and oppose it to that of Byzantine. Meantime, Byzantine tried not to let Armenia experience the impact of the Assyrian church and unleashed a violent ideological war against it. This was the reason why the Armenian king Vramshapuh and Catholicos Sahak Partev sent Mashtots to Greece to ask them for permission to set up Armenian schools in the country. The emperor gave his consent.

The formation of the Armenian school was followed by rich chronology. The art of translation was in full swing. The works of ancient thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Xenon and others were translated into Armenian and presented to the public.

However, the love of the Armenian nation towards language and literature had originated well before the establishment of the Armenian school. A great number of young Armenians had received education in diverse universities of Rome, Athens, Antioch, Edessa, Alexandria, etc. They returned home and got involved not only in religious and philosophical activities, but carried out a vast scientific pedagogical activity, came up with valuable studies in this or that field of science and translated the works of ancient classics.

*M. Mashtots*

Remarkably enough, after Mashtots had invented the alphabet, Armenian youth left for abroad – Rome, Greece, Egypt and elsewhere, overcoming all sorts of difficulties and hardships in their way. The aim was to improve their knowledge so as to be able to translate the works of antique masters more skillfully and precisely.

The thriving spiritual life, the prosperity of culture and science provided grounds and served as preconditions for higher national schools.

Higher educational institutions were set up in Ani, Tatev, Gladzor, Sanahin, Haghpat. Some of them were called universities. They played an enormous role in the long history of the Armenian culture training

historians, musicians and top specialists in other fields, as well.

The School of Ani: One of the Medieval Armenian schools was that of Ani. From the 20s of the 10th century to the 11th century Armenia lived in peace. This was a favorable period for economic and cultural development in the country. In 992 when the Armenian Catholicos moved from Argina to Ani together with its luxurious store of ancient manuscripts, the school of Ani was founded. The first records about the school date back to the 11th century. Grigor Magistros, the eminent statesman and teacher, was one of the founders of the school. He made great efforts to modernize the school. To achieve the goal, he paid much attention to exact and natural philosophical sciences. He sought to bring teaching closer to the developments in life.

The School of Ani witnessed significant progress when Deacon Hovhannes Imastaser (appreciating wisdom), a gifted poet, mathematician, grammarian and philosopher took the office of the headmaster. His scientific fame soon swept the whole country. People from nearly all parts of the country came to study in his school. The life and work of the scientist can be compared with the work of an industrious bee and his school may be called a treasury of science and the graduates left school taking with them treasures of science, of course, each according to his ability or “mental powers”. During his tenure, natural sciences were also highly valued.

On the way to the development of the university education, the school of Ani could have prospered further on, if not for the unfavorable political conditions of the time.

Gladzor University. The University of Gladzor occupies a special place among the medieval higher educational establishments of Armenia. It was the best among others with respect to its educational and scientific level, as well as with the great role it played in the social life of the country.

The contemporaries described the University of Gladzor with utmost delight, calling it “Superfamous university”, “the capital of wisdom”, “Great Home of Education”, etc. These descriptions were not least exaggerated. They witness the great fame and popularity the university enjoyed at that time.

The university was founded in the Vayots Dzor province of Syunik. In the 12th-14th

centuries, under the reign of the Mongols, the representatives of Orbelyan and Khaghbakyan dynasty were able to win the respect and trust of the Mongol masters and save their land from being robbed and ruined. The Armenian educational center (*vardapetaran*) that operated in the Msho Arakelots church was robbed annually by the nomadic tribes. Soon the *vardapetaran* was moved to Aghberts church in Vayots Dzor where there were more favorable conditions to conduct teaching and to expand the educational center, which later developed into a university. The first headmaster was Nerses Mshetsi. After the death of Mshetsi, Yesayi Nshetsi took the leadership of the university and presided it for over fifty years.

The university of Gladzor, unlike other medieval Universities, was more modern. The philologist G. Hovsepyan was quite right when writing: "Gladzor was not a church with commonplace way of thinking. It was an excellent school. People came here not only to get education but to improve themselves. It served as an intellectual centre not only for the Eastern Armenia. People from far off Cilicia came to satisfy their thirst of knowledge".

Along with theological sciences, "free arts" like grammar, oratory, and logics were also paid special attention to. Arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music classes found their place in the curriculum, as well. Philosophy was among the leading subjects. It is worth noting that philosophy was banned in the university of Byzantine for it was regarded a sectarian and anti-Christian discipline. The university of Gladzor not only taught the subject but interpreted it properly. The works of the prominent scholars of the ancient and early Christian period such as Plato, Aristotle, etc. were extensively studied. The lecturers and the students of the university worked hard to collect the manuscripts of the ancient Armenian scribes and miniaturists to imitate and to duplicate them and prevent them from being ruined. And today we owe the great number of manuscripts that have come down to us due to their endless efforts.

During the 60 years of its existence Gladzor University carried out enormous work to educate devoted intellectuals. According to the evidence, the number of its graduates exceeded 360.

Some researchers, focusing on the resemblance in the academic programs, subjects and hierarchy between Gladzor University and European universities, observe some similarities. Thus, for example, L. Khachikyan, compared the university of Gladzor with European Universities and saw some likeness between them. He writes, "The university of Gladzor, being contemporary to one of the most notable and popular European Universities - the University of Paris, rivals it both with its cultural and educational role, the rich heritage of manuscripts, the diversity and depth of subjects taught".

Gladzor University and the European Universities of that time did have notable similarities. They were more obvious in the subjects taught at universities. Unlike higher educational institutions of the ancient world (Athens, Rome, Alexandria), the European Universities had a wider scope of sciences included and along human sciences, natural sciences were also paid special attention to. Mathematics, medicine and other subjects were equally taught along with philosophy, history and linguistics. This wide scope of subjects comes to explain the fact why the school of Gladzor was called a university

unlike other medieval educational institutions.

Theology was considered to take a special place in the schedule of the European Universities. Hence, the study and interpretation of the works dating back to the early Christian times, the particular interest in the same was true for Gladzor University, too.

The graduate of a European university was to pass an exam and to be awarded a scientific degree. The same hierarchy existed in Gladzor.

How are we to explain these similarities?. The American-Armenian scholar K. Sarafyan explains it in the following way: “Remarkably enough, the use of the term university in Armenia in the first quarter of the 14th century coincides with the period of the development and expansion of the medieval European universities. This proves that at that time Armenia was in touch with the intellectual movement in Europe and established its educational institutions in accordance with those in Europe”.

It is beyond any suspicion that in the 13th-14th centuries Armenians were in close touch with the people of Europe. Armenian communities were set up in Italy, France and other European countries. Armenians had a great opportunity not only to get acquainted with the culture and life of the universities, but to pass the experience they got to their native country, as well. However, there are also other factors explaining these similarities. Gladzor University like the European ones had inherited the early Christian educational tradition that came from the ancient world. Hence, the similarities in the academic plans of Gladzor University and the European Universities. However, these universities being at a great distance from each other, accepted the ancient method of teaching individually. It was dictated and conditioned by the peculiarities of the national life. This circumstance makes the difference between Gladzor University and European Universities more than obvious. Here are some of them.

The Western Universities were founded at a time when Europe experienced more favorable economic, social and political conditions. When the people of Europe were welcoming Renaissance, Armenia was being mercilessly invaded and devastated by foreign conquerors. The financial and economic state of these universities were far from similar. The European universities were supported by the endless funds provided by the Vatican and the court. As far as Gladzor University was concerned, it survived only due to modest and mediocre means granted by the people and the aristocratic families of Vayots Dzor. This was the reason why the number of students did not exceed 50 or 60. Nevertheless, Gladzor university had one distinctive feature compared to those in Europe. Here, the teaching was conducted in the native tongue. Whereas, Latin was the only language taught in European Universities until the 15th century and this deprived them of the chance to be called national universities.

Gladzor University had another peculiar feature, as well. It was its social-national position. In the 13th-14th centuries Armenians were fighting against foreign invaders. The students of Gladzor did not stay indifferent to these developments and had their direct participation in the struggle for the liberation of the country.

In 1386, under certain circumstances the university moved to **Tatev**. Thus, the university of Tatev was the immediate descendant of Gladzor University, the direct bearer of its traditions and its follower. However, by the time the University moved here,

there had been a school in Tatev with a small number of students which underwent further improvement after the establishment of Gladzor University. Within a period of time it advanced and soon reached the level of a university, itself.



*The portrait of Grigor Tatevatsi
(miniature)*

The fame of Tatev University spread nationwide in rather a short time. People from all over the country hurried here to study. After the death of Hovnan Vorotnesti, the University was headed by Grigor Tatevatsi. The latter being a famous scribe and miniaturist is also known as a “skillful pedagogue”, a gifted painter and a musician who had a sweet voice. We are familiar with 20 works by Tatevatsi which tell us about the wide spectrum of his scientific and pedagogical views. He was a materialist in his philosophical approaches and attitudes towards life in general. He accepted the existence of the objective world irrespective of a human being and believed that it is recognizable. He thought a person should be aware of the standard practices of the nature. This knowledge, according to him, is not innate. People acquire it through hard work and

education. He thought that a child is a blank slate which records everything he can see around. He concluded that a child should be educated and brought up from early years of his life, right from the cradle, as the young are capable of perceiving even more than the grow-ups. Tatevatsi was sure that the prior responsibility of a good teacher was to arouse love and respect in his pupils towards the country and science.

Philosophy was a subject of great importance. Tatev University was not an educational institution confined to science and pedagogy only. The university displayed an active participation in the public life. It played a decisive role in the ideological struggle against the unitors.

The medieval Armenian schools and universities played a unique and specific role in the organization of educational centres, the expansion of culture and science and in the development of the traditions of higher education.

The 16th century was rather a gloomy period in the history of Armenia. The country lived under hardest conditions. Armenia was split between two powerful Asian dictatorships – Safawiyah Persia (Safavids) and the Ottoman Empire. The year of 1512 saw another fierce war between Persia and Turkey which desolated the country. The cultural life was in decline. Those were really harsh times for education. Sahak-Mesropyan schooling, that was the key condition of the Armenian identity, the basis of the nation’s spiritual and cultural life, was endangered. Some Armenians turned their faces to Europe where the art of printing was in full swing. The idea of spreading Armenian books through printing was becoming more and more appealing. However, the hard political situation made it impossible for



Urbatagirk

Armenian specialists to found a printing house in Armenia. The publication of Armenian books abroad seemed the only reasonable way out. Hakop Meghpart took the burden of that job. He became the first publisher to found a publishing house in Venice and took up that job.

In 1512 Hakop Meghpart issued the first Armenian printed book “Urbatagirk” and four others the following year. This was the beginning of the Armenian publications. Future

publishers, continued the traditions started by Meghpart and handed the art of printing to the succeeding generations. Surprisingly enough, only 260 years later, in 1771, the Catholicos of All Armenians was able to set up a publishing house in Armenia, Echmiadzin. Here in 1772 the collection of his poems was first published. The advent of the art of printing spurred the development of the spiritual life of the nation.