

# The history of the anonymous storyteller

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## The Anonymous Story-teller

**Date of Birth:** Unknown

**Place of Birth:** Unknown

**Date of Death:** Possibly early to mid-11th century

**Place of Death:** Unknown

### Biography

The Anonymous Story-teller leaves few traces of his identity in his single known composition. Despite this, we can be reasonably confident that he was active at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century in eastern Vaspurakan, for the majority of the stories he tells are located in or connected to south-eastern Armenia and the regions immediately to the east, around Lake Urmia and eastwards towards Tabriz, called the 'golden city', and Ardabil. Despite the focus in Part II of his work on the deeds of Artsruni princes, it is far from clear that he was commissioned by members of this house, for, while his portrait of the impossibly generous Grigor Deren is highly favourable, the other Deren is described as a lover of women, *knkanas ēr*, who committed adultery with the daughter of a local Muslim emir, and his arrogance and scorn of advice shines through. The dearth of religiosity in Part II is also notable, and could be construed as reflecting a non-clerical origin. If so, these stories are all the more valuable.

### Primary Sources of Information

Anonymous Story-teller/Pseudo-Šapuh Bagratuni, *Patmut'iwn Ananun zruts'agri kartsets'eal Šapuh Bagratuni*, ed. and trans. M.H. Darbinyan-Melik'yan, Yerevan, 1971

R.W. Thomson, 'The Anonymous Story-teller (also known as "Pseudo-Šapuh")', *Revue des Études Arméniennes* 21 (1988-9) 171-232 (English trans.)

### Secondary Sources of Information

R.W. Thomson, 'Muhammad and the origin of Islam in Armenian literature', in D. Kouymjian Ed.), *Armenian Studies in Memoriam Haig Berberian*, Lisbon, 1986, 829-58

R.W. Thomson, 'Armenian variations on the Bahira legend', *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 3 (1979-80) 884-95

## Works on Christian-Muslim Relations

### Patmut'iwn Ananun Zruts'agir

*'History of pseudo-Shapuh Bagratun'i'*

*'History of the anonymous story-teller'*

**Date:** Late 10th or early 11th century

**Original Language:** Armenian

### Description

This is a little-studied composition, best known for its misidentification in 1921 as the *History of Šapuh Bagratuni*, a 9<sup>th</sup>-century text that remains missing. It comprises a series of unreliable tales featuring well-known figures from the past, loosely woven together. It is divided into two parts which were transmitted together and separately, although individual sections also circulated.

Part 1 opens with a biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, though this is left incomplete. It is followed by a series of stories about caliphs, commanders and emperors covering the period from the late 6<sup>th</sup> to the early 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. These recount familiar episodes – the recovery of the True Cross by the Emperor Heraclius; the era of Islamic conquests; the siege of Constantinople in 717/18 – in unfamiliar ways, sometimes with an Armenian spin. By way of illustration, Heraclius's search for the True Cross is accomplished by a Roman merchant from Theodosiopolis who travels to Tabriz, the 'golden city', to recover it. The commander of the forces sent to besiege Constantinople is identified as Ahmat son of Mahmet rather than Maslama ibn 'Abd al-Malik. Ahmat features in several stories, in one of which he is described as the son of the legislator Mahmet, a term usually reserved for the Prophet.

Part 2 comprises a collection of entertaining stories associated for the most part with members of the Artsruni princely family between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. They are portrayed interacting with caliphs, local emirs and other Armenian princes, including close

relatives. The overall orientation of this part is therefore different from that of Part 1. It is structured around the lives of generations of Artsruni, Anjewats'i and Bagratuni princes. It does not follow from this, however, that these stories should be accorded greater probative value than those found in Part 1. From the perspective of historical narrative, they are just as muddled, blending history and fiction in highly creative ways, conflating homonymous figures, generating a colourful but largely imaginary past. Just as the figure of Amr in Part 1 is a conflation of two caliphs, 'Umar (I) ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and 'Umar (II) ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz, so the figure of King Smbat Bagratuni in Part 2 is composite, an amalgam of Smbat I and Smbat II from the beginning and end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century respectively.

If the discipline of history is limited to narrative, studying what happened to whom and when and why it happened, this collection of stories has nothing to offer. It presents a recognisable but reconfigured past, oriented around notable figures and events that have been revised and reimagined in different ways. It is not possible to disentangle the authentic from the spurious, the real from the imagined. It is a work of historical fiction.

Fortunately, however, the scope of historical enquiry is not limited to recovering what happened. Every work of history is an expression of the social, intellectual and cultural context in which it was composed. In this case, three particular features of the composition stand out. Although the stories may be contrived, the geographical space in which they are situated is real. This is particularly notable in Part 2. Its tales are situated in the districts of eastern Vaspurakan and regions further east, in Her, Salmast and Marand. There is, however, no hint of any movement westwards into Byzantine territory by members of the Artsruni family, a permanent shift that was undertaken by king Senek'erim Artsruni in 1021. Part 2 opens with the assertion that Armenia is divided between the house of the Bagratunik' in the north and the Artsrunik' in Vaspurakan; this is not revised to take account of the departure of the Artsrunik' and the Byzantine annexation of Vaspurakan. The latest episode in the narrative appears to be a campaign of Smbat II Bagratuni against Abkhazia in 989. Finally, there are no references to Turks anywhere in the work, suggesting that the collection of traditions was written down before Seljuk raiding parties began to impinge on Vaspurakan in the decades after 1030. Collectively, these details indicate that the *History of the anonymous story-teller* was compiled somewhere in Vaspurakan in the first two decades of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The significance of the work therefore lies in its unique construction of the past and its commentary on contemporary Christian-Muslim relations.

Three passages merit particular attention for the versions they give of historical episodes. The biography of the Prophet Muḥammad at the start of Part 1 is unique in Armenian tradition. He is presented as a Persian, the son of 'Abd al-Raḥmān (rather than 'Abd Allāh), from the city of Rueran, near the city of Reyy, opposite the fortress of Isfahan. Fāṭima is

described as his sister rather than his daughter, although her marriage to his nephew 'Alī XXX the historical Ali was Muhammad's cousin XXX conforms to Islamic tradition. Muḥammad is cured of demonic possession by a Syrian monk, the Nestorian Sargis, and is taught the art of sorcery and all the magical doctrines and heresies of Nestorius. This echoes the polemical Baḥīrā legend, the first appearance of which in Armenian tradition occurs in the *History* of T'ovma Artsruni. However, Sargis also explains to Muḥammad how to trick the merchants accompanying him from Samarra to Egypt into accepting him as a prophet, which is not found elsewhere. Furthermore, Muḥammad is expelled from Persia by King K'asrē/Khusro, along with 'Alī and Fāṭima, and goes to found the city of Baghdad. In a later story, the city of Jersusalem is captured by Muḥammad acting in concert with 'Alī. Muḥammad is also credited with the conquest of Egypt, including the city of Alexandria, which he renames Msr, XXX no vowels in Msr ? XXX and also of Persia and Khorasan, and with the imposition of taxation on all nations.

The second passage comes from Part 2 and concerns the impossibly generous Artsruni prince Grigor Deren. He sells everything he owns so that he can have an open table set up every day in the square (Armenian *moytan*, Persian *meydan*) of the city of Van. Deren turns out to be someone who can speak Arabic fluently and has medical knowledge. He cures the king of Baghdad and, having travelled to Mosul and then Baghdad, ends up recovering his fortune and more besides. Another Artsruni prince called Derenik is portrayed as married to Hranush, the sister of King Smbat Bagratuni, but he is also in an adulterous relationship with K'ulinar, the daughter of Apumsar, the prince of Her and Zarevand. Having appealed in vain to Derenik to mend his ways, Smbat then contacts the brothers of K'ulinar and plots Derenik's murder, which is eventually accomplished.

The third passage, which also comes from Part 2, preserves a divergent version of the history of the Iranian Muslim Sajid dynasty. A great emir called Apusech, who controlled the city of Ardawet/Ardabil, died leaving two sons, Afshin and Usep/Yusuf to be brought up by the *amirapet* Ali son of Apusaylep. Eventually, Usep married the daughter of the emir of Sraw/Sarav and acquired Artawet, Norh and the district of Zaravand/Khoy. Having captured, imprisoned and poisoned Ali, Usep turns his attention to King Smbat Bagratuni. Contrary to received Armenian tradition, however, Smbat is not martyred but triumphs on the field of battle and forces Usep to retreat to Persia.

## Significance

The significance of the *History of the anonymous story-teller* lies not in its preservation of reliable historical information but rather in its focus on regional history, both Muslim and Christian, Persian and Armenian, exploring relations between local lords and their

interactions with more distant, non-Armenian rulers. It constructs a world in which relationships do not depend primarily on religious or ethnic identities, where one Armenian prince can unwittingly assist the 'king of Baghdad' and reap the rewards and another can have an adulterous relationship with the daughter of a neighbouring emir, even where stories of how local emirs came to power hold meaning.

### **Manuscripts**

### **Editions**

Anonymous Story-teller/Pseudo-Šapuh Bagratuni, *Patmut'awn Ananun zruts'agri kartsets'eal Šapuh Bagratuni*

Thomson, 'The Anonymous Story-teller (also known as "Pseudo-Šapuh")'

### **Studies**

Thomson, 'Muhammad and the origin of Islam'

Thomson, 'Armenian variations on the Bahira legend'

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