

ON THE AUTHENTICITY OF MOSES OF KHOREN'S HISTORY¹

A. O. SARKISSIAN
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

MOSES OF KHOREN is, aside from the saints and a few church fathers, the most venerable character among the Armenian people; and his *History of Armenia*, or, to give the exact translation of his best known work, *A Genealogical Account of Armenia Major*, is the most famous document in the Armenian national literature. As one critic has rightly stated,² his "*History* remains to a large majority of his readers as the most authentic and trustworthy book next to the Bible." Even though he is not the earliest of Armenian historians³ (assuming for the moment that wrote late in the fifth century), yet he has been called the father of Armenian historians, the Armenian Herodotus. He has been referred to by all writers during at least ten centuries⁴ as the Grammarian, a word which in its Armenian original signifies the most learned among writers of history.

Very little is known about this unique character, and that little has come down to us through his *History*. Therein (Book III, chapt. 60) we are told that he was a disciple of Fathers Sahag and Mesrob, the two learned men who originated the Armenian alphabet (in 412 A. D.), that they sent him to Edessa, Alexandria, Byzantium and Athens to study (III 62), and that at the time of the composition of his *History* he was an old and infirm man, preoccupied

¹ A brief version of this paper was read at the Middle West Branch meeting of the American Oriental Society, held at the Oriental Institute (University of Chicago) on April 2, 1938.

² Father N. Akinian, in *Anahid* (an Armenian quarterly of Paris), I (1929) 72.

³ The first attempt to write a history of Armenia was made by Agathangelos, the Greek secretary to King Tiridates (387-442 A. D.), in his *History of King Tiridates*, originally written in Greek. The second writer, Faustus of Byzantium, who wrote a *History of Armenia* covering 344-392 A. D., was probably also a Greek.

⁴ Though it has been assumed that he wrote in the fifth century, yet the earliest reference to his work is made by John Catholicos in his *History of Armenia*, a work written in the third decade of the tenth century.

with works of translation (III 65). Since his *History* concludes with the year 440 A. D., it was naturally supposed that he wrote after the middle of the fifth century. This supposition was at first generally accepted, the prevalent belief being that it was written some time between 460 and 480. The validity of this date was for a while accepted even by one (the late Alfred von Gutschmid of the University of Leipzig) who subsequently proved to be the severest critic of our author.⁵ Such was, and to a large extent still is, the traditional view about the life and the work of Moses of Khoren which was accepted by the Armenians. It is this traditional and unquestioned view that has been subjected to much severe criticism during the course of the past hundred years. The object of this paper is to summarize and evaluate such criticism.

Moses of Khoren states that his work is based upon Armenian, Greek and Syrian sources, but his text as we now have it is based, for the most part, upon the work of a certain Mar Abas Katina (supposedly a Syrian writer) about whom very little is known and whose work has been lost. As a matter of fact this character is shrouded in such obscurity that his very existence has been questioned. Etienne Quatremère, writing in 1850,⁶ came out with the bold statement that Mar Abas Katina was a fictitious name, that there never lived such a Syrian writer; since Moses of Khoren's *History* is based upon the nonexistent work of a fictitious author, it is devoid of authenticity. This view of Quatremère was shared by two of his country men, N. Fréret who wrote before,⁷ and E. Renan who wrote after him,⁸ while F. Lenormant somewhat later (in 1871) was convinced that the said "fictitious author" was an actual writer of the Edessa School.⁹

The criticism of Quatremère, Fréret, and Renan was the first of a series that aimed at the very foundation of Moses of Khoren's *History*. That in itself was not sufficient to discredit and dislodge

⁵ A. von Gutschmid, *Kleine Schriften* IV 286, in an essay supposedly written in 1860.

⁶ *Journal des Savants*, June, 364-5.

⁷ *Mémoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*, 47 (1809), 98 f.

⁸ *Histoire Générale et Système Comparé des Langues Sémitiques* 682 (sixth ed.).

⁹ *Lettres Assyriologiques* I 3.

it from the high place it occupied; more serious and damaging criticism was to follow.

In the seventies of the last century Alfred von Gutschmid brought to bear all the weight of his scholarship and concluded that the *History* was written not in the years 460-480 (as he once had supposed), but between the years 634 and 642.¹⁰ His most weighty argument was confirmed by Moses of Khoren's anachronistic passages, such as his reference to the division of Armenia Major into four provinces (which division took place in 536), and his reference to the Persian advance in Bithynia (which point the Persians first reached in 609). The Nestor of Leipzig was not only the first noted authority to expose convincingly the most serious defects of the *History*, but he also remains as the first to emphasize the fact that Moses of Khoren, assuming that he wrote in the fifth century, was sadly lacking in contemporary historical knowledge.

While many French and German scholars¹¹ were thus digging into the "sacred" regions of Armenian history, some Armenian writers were also preoccupied with similar tasks. Father J. Caterjian of the Armenian Mekhitharist monastery of Vienna was the first of his race to be seriously baffled with the disconcerting chronological events recorded in the *History*, and he finally concluded (in his *Universal History* I, published in 1849) that Moses of Khoren must have written in a period "much later" than the fifth century.¹² A quarter century later (at the very time Gutschmid's study was published) the late K. Patkanian of the University of St. Petersburg was examining another work, the *Armenian Geography*, supposedly written by Moses of Khoren. Curiously enough, he discovered that this work too was written in the seventh century. More curious still, the proofs upon which Patkanian based his con-

¹⁰ "Über die Glaubwürdigkeit der Armenischen Geschichte des Moses von Khoren," in *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Königlich Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften* 27 (1876) 1-43, and also his article on Moses of Khoren in the *Britannica* (ninth ed.).

¹¹ J. A. Saint-Martin, "Notice sur la Vie et les Écrits de Moïse de Khorène," *Journal Asiatique* 2 (1823) 321-44; V. Langlois "Étude sur les sources de l'histoire d'Arménie de Moïse de Khoren," *Bulletin of the Imperial Academy of St. Petersburg* III (1861) 531-83; C. E. Pichard, *Essai de la Moïse de Khorène*, Paris, 1866; Petermann, H., "Die Schriftlichen Quellen des Moses Chorenensis," *Berichte d. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, 1852, 87-104, and many others.

¹² Cited by Father Akinian, loc. cit. 72.

clusion were somewhat similar to those advanced by the Professor at Leipzig. He too noticed anachronisms in the *Geography*, namely, the geographical and ethnographical nomenclature used in the work belonged to a later period.¹³

In 1892 the late Auguste Carrière of the Ecole des Langues Orientales Vivantes (Paris) carried the study of our author's *History* a step further and came out with another startling exposure. His studies not only convinced him that the *History* was a work of the eighth century but also that its celebrated author liberally used sources to which he makes no reference at all.¹⁴ Thus in addition, Moses of Khoren was accused of plagiarism. According to Carrière the two works which Moses of Khoren used freely were the *Life of Silvester* and the *Ecclesiastical History* of Sokrates. The former was available in the Armenian translation no earlier than the year 690, and the latter in 696. Here, therefore, "was proof, short and peremptory," that Moses of Khoren's *History* was at best a work of the eighth century.¹⁵

This sort of argument was exploited to the full by the late G. Khalathianz of the Lazarev Institute (Moscow). In his monumental study, *The Armenian Epic*,¹⁶ he examined Moses of Khoren's *History* and concluded that our author copied not only from works already indicated by Carrière but also from those of Sebeos (an Armenian writer of the seventh century), Faustus of Byzantium, and specially from Ghevont (Leontius) the Elder. And as the work of the last named writer¹⁷ was ready only in the year 790, Moses of Khoren must have written some time after that date, "probably early in the ninth century."¹⁸

¹³ *The Armenian Geography Attributed to Moses of Khoren* (in Russian), St. Petersburg, 1877. Half a century earlier St.-Martin had criticized this *Geography* on similar grounds. Cf. his *Mémoires Historiques et Géographiques* II 301-317.

¹⁴ *Nouvelles Sources de Moïse de Khoren*, Vienne, 1893.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* vii. Cf. also F. Conybeare's "The Date of Moses of Khoren," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 10 (1901) 489-504.

¹⁶ *The Armenian Epic: Moses of Khoren's History of Armenia* (in Russian), Moscow, 1896. Cf. also his "Zur Erklärung der Armenischen Geschichte des Moses von Chorene," *WZKM* 7 (1893) 21-8.

¹⁷ *Wars and Conquests of Arabs in Armenia* (in Armenian).

¹⁸ *On the Newest Sources of Moses of Khoren* (in Armenian), Vienna, 1898, 14.

It seemed that both Carrière and Khalathianz had tried to prove more than was warranted by their findings, and on that assumption they were at once challenged by the late F. Conybeare of Oxford. In his attempt to refute Carrière's argument Conybeare observed that the author of the *History* could very well have used the sources named, and if these (the *Life of Silvester* and the *Ecclesiastical History* of Sokrates) were not available in Armenian until late in the seventh century, surely they were to be had in their original in the fifth century. He further observed that although a number of passages in the *History* bear close resemblance to those found in both the works mentioned, yet (and here Conybeare's argument weakens) these passages could have been used by Moses of Khoren "just as Eginhart [Einhart] went to Suetonius for a description of Charlemagne."¹⁹ And he replied to Khalathianz's criticism with the statement that not "a single passage in the History [was] clearly copied or imitated from any Armenian text later than 450, A. D."²⁰

It was not to be supposed that this barrage of criticism, persistently aimed at an old national institution such as Moses of Khoren's *History* had become, would pass unchallenged. From the very beginning nearly all the learned fathers of the Armenian Orthodox Church headed by the inmates of the monastery at Etchmiadzin (Armenia), and ably seconded by the learned fathers of the Armenian monastery in Venice, clung to the traditional view. And the stock arguments which they advanced were that Mar Abas Katina was an actual authentic historian and his work is preserved in that of Sebeos,²¹ and therefore Moses of Khoren's principal source should not be questioned;²² that the so-called original and "purer" MSS²³ do not contain any geographical and ethnographical names and dates which show anachronisms; furthermore, since Moses of Khoren was the favorite pupil of Fathers Sahag and Mesrob, he could not have lived and written in any other time than during the last half of the fifth century. Of course, the

¹⁹ *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 11 (1902) 400-401.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 10 (1901) 501.

²¹ Langlois seems to imply that this is actually the case; cf. his *Collections des Historiens Anciens et Modernes de l'Arménie* I 195 ff.

²² Father M. Chamchian, *History of Armenia* (in Armenian) I 34.

²³ The oldest MS. extant, believed to be the one found in the Armenian monastery of Venice, is of the twelfth century.

upholders of this view have clung, and still steadfastly cling, to the half-biblical and half-mythological account of the origin of the Armenian people.²⁴

Next to the native critics of yesterday Father Akinian of the Mekhitharist monastery of Vienne is the most outspoken critic of today. As such he is the most thoroughgoing critic of his race, and has come very near to uprooting everything connected with Moses of Khoren. Unfortunately, some of his writings, exhaustive and learned as they seem, are more in the nature of polemics, more attractive than convincing. Approaching his subject with a mastery seldom equalled in Armenian studies, he has delved into it from various angles, and at every turn he has seen Moses of Khoren as a character of the eighth century, the mere mouth-piece of the Bagradite princes (the ruling princes of Armenia from 885 to 1080), advocating their claims against other contending princes.²⁵ And in his most recent studies,²⁶ he relegates the "Armenian Herodotus" not only to the low level of a faker and masquerader, but by assigning his work to Ghevont the Elder, he brands Moses of Khoren with the same phrase which Quatremère had applied to Mar Abas Katina, "a fictitious character."

If the mantle of Moses of Khoren's critics has fallen upon the shoulders of the learned inmate of the monastery at Vienna, that of the upholders of the traditional view has been claimed by Father V. Hatzouni of the Mekhitharist monastery of Venice. Though devoid of the heavy artillery of German training with which his adversary is equipped, Father Hatzouni is equally persistent in his valiant but decidedly weak defense. In his most recent study,²⁷ by which he hopes to place Moses of Khoren back in the traditional station, he attempts to refute seriatim all the critics of the *History* and its

²⁴ It must in fairness be stated that some among the most learned of those who once held this view were beginning to disown it, even as early as in the 'nineties. Cf. the late Archbishop Tourian's *History of Armenian Literature* (in Armenian) 48 ff.

²⁵ The best summary of his findings is presented by himself in *Anahid*, I (1929) 67-77.

²⁶ *Ghevont the Elder and Moses of Khoren*, Vienna, 1930; and his articles on Moses of Khoren scattered in *Hantes Amsorya* for 1929-1931 (both in Armenian).

²⁷ *Moses of Khoren Returns to the Fifth Century* (in Armenian), Venice, 1935.

author, from La Croze²⁸ (a French critic, 1661-1739) to Father Akinian. He admits that in the *History* are "recorded events that have no connection with the fifth century"; and he also concedes the presence of anachronisms therein;²⁹ but he adds that these were incorporated into the MS by the later copyists while the original MS must have been wholly free from such "excrecences." It is not necessary to follow his reasoning, since it is little more than the stock arguments referred to above which scarcely can withstand any critical examination.

While both the native and foreign critics have been concerned with settling of this historic controversy abroad, the students of the subject now resident in Soviet Armenia have also displayed some interest in it. That is why the appearance of Professor H. Manandhian's little book has been greeted with enthusiasm, even though the book is not all that its title implied.³⁰ The author did not even venture to deal with the *History*; he merely examined two other works attributed to Moses of Khoren, the *Geography* and the *Book of Rhetoric*,³¹ and found that both are Moses of Khoren's own writings; and, as there seemed to be no difference in style and composition between these and the *History*, he concluded that all three must have been written by the same author.³² He did not have any doubt about the author's being a character of the eighth century, but he rightly declared that all efforts to place Moses of Khoren in his proper time will be futile until a comparative study of at least most of the extant MSS has been made by a group of scholars.

Such is the considered opinion of one who has spent a quarter of a century of his life in the study of the subject; he admits that the information is inadequate for a definite settlement of the contro-

²⁸ La Croze was perhaps the first critic who in 1730, in a letter to William Wiston of London (who translated the *History* into Latin and subsequently published it in 1736), expressed the view that Moses of Khoren was a writer of the "ninth or the tenth century." Cf. G. A. Schrupf's *Les Etudes Arméniennes en Europe* (the Armenian translation, Venice, 1895) 52.

²⁹ Hatzouni, op. cit. 9.

³⁰ *The Solution of Moses of Khoren's Riddle* (in Armenian), Erivan, 1934.

³¹ On the *Rhetoric* cf. A. Baumgartner's "Über das Buch 'die Chrie,'" *ZDMG* 40 (1886) 457-517.

³² Manandhian, op. cit. 53.

versy. But if the student at the University in Erivan (Armenia) thus warns against premature judgment, Mr. H. Levy of Jerusalem boldly tries to settle it in a brief study. He is the most recent among Moses of Khoren's severest critics, and his article³³ among the latest of their works. But Mr. Levy has little of his own to offer; he briefly reiterates the views of some earlier critics, and then, in his attempt to expose Moses of Khoren's "purpose," indulges in a bit of psycho-analysis. Welcome as his venture is in this respect, it is based only upon a few scraps of doubtful discoveries; and his conclusion that internal evidence found in the *History* proves it to be the work of a late ninth century writer is grounded upon a misunderstanding of Armenian history. A closer study would reveal that the internal situation in Armenia during the fifth and the ninth centuries has many similarities, as Professor Adontz has stated.³⁴ Besides, the scholars have not studied exhaustively the subject so as to resort to the exercise of psycho-analysis. The author, his work, and the date of the composition of his work must first be established on the basis of some such researches as are suggested by Professor Manandhian, before an inquiry into the "purpose" could begin.³⁵

Having summarized the major portions of weighty criticisms on Moses of Khoren, I shall conclude by adding a few remarks upon his importance in Armenian history.

Moses of Khoren was the first of his race to conceive and execute the plan of a complete history of Armenia, from the earliest times to about the middle of the fifth century A. D. Whether he be considered a fifth or a ninth century writer, to him belongs that distinct priority; in that he was the pioneer, and on that all his critics agree. His *History* is also an unrivalled document as one of the earliest examples of national history, based partly on presumably written

³³ "The Date and Purpose of Moses of Chorene's *History*," *Byzantion* 11 (1936) 81-96. Cf. also Professor N. Adontz's brief reply, "Sur la date de l'*Histoire de l'Arménie* de Moïse de Chorene," *ibid.* 97-100, and Mr. Levy's rejoinder with Professor Adontz's counter-rejoinder, *ibid.* 593-9.

³⁴ Cf. the preceding note.

³⁵ Such a plan was once under way, on a comprehensive scale, in 1904, when C. Der-Mekerditchian and S. Malkhasian began their series of *Armenian Historians*. But the fruits of their labor on Moses of Khoren were lost in the Russian Revolution, and we have the works of only two Armenian historians (Agathangelos and Lazar of Pharb) thus carefully edited.

accounts and partly upon the traditional national folk-tales and ancient beliefs. As such it is a mine and treasure of unrecorded folkloristic literature of a high order, thus constituting a primary source of Armenian history. On that too his critics are unanimous. In addition, the *History* has certain literary qualities which place it among the best works of classical Armenian literature. The author's dignified style and the lofty spirit displayed therein, his poetic gift and his ability to condense his thoughts in succinct and pithy expressions, his confident grasp of such learning as he possessed and its effective use in his hands, all these have made his *History* a literary masterpiece. Small wonder that it has been difficult to dislodge him from the esteem which he commands among Armenian historians of all time, long after it has been proved that his *History* as history is of little value.³⁶

To date there exists no satisfactory history of Armenia in any language. Many have tried to fill that important gap in world history, but none has succeeded in the difficult task. According to Professor Manandhian and many others³⁷ this enviable enterprise has been rendered most difficult by Moses of Khoren's *History*. For it is indeed difficult to destroy myths, and national myths have an uncanny persistency of reviving themselves. And the *History* of our author, it must be admitted, is replete with myths that have wandered from mouth to mouth in the pre-Christian era and have been "sanctified" in the national history of the oldest Christian people at the hands of a gifted, imaginative and versatile writer.

³⁶ The first Armenian edition of the *History* was published in Amsterdam in 1695. The Latin translation of Wiston Brothers was issued in London in 1736 (along with the Armenian text); the first Russian translation by J. Ohanian was published in 1809; the first French translation and the first Italian translation were issued in 1841; the only German translation was prepared by M. Lauer and published in 1869. There is no English translation of this work.

³⁷ Manandhian, op. cit. 50. Cf. also C. Funduklian's articles on Moses of Khoren scattered in *Anahid* for 1930, 1931 and 1936, and especially A. Baumgartner's "Armenia" in Pauly-Wissowa's *Real-Encyclopadie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (new edition).