

ARMENIAN արքանգեղ IN THE FIELD OF ETYMOLOGY (Silvae Armeniacae IV)

Axel Bakunts (1899-1936), the famous communist writer of Soviet Armenia and victim of Stalinism, mentions in one of his fabulous stories, Սև ցեղերի սերմնացանը “The sower of black furrows”, published in 1932, a flower, which he calls արքանգեղ and which has never been botanically identified with any existing plant. Explanations and commentaries given in dictionaries just repeat what is to be found as descriptions in Axel Bakunts’ text itself. So, in the four-volume dictionary edited by the Armenian Academy of Sciences there is a lemma of արքանգեղ followed by rather a description than a designation which is “frost-resistant autumnal meadow flower” (“Ցրտադիմացկուն աշնանային դաշտածաղիկ”) and accompanied by a thorough quotation of exactly the only literary testimony of the word.¹

Աղջիկները զարդարում էին բեմը: Բնջ կարող է լինել դաշտերում, նոյեմբերյան օրերին... Ղեղնավուն փշատերև թուփեր, դեռ կանաչ մասրենու ճյուղեր և դաշտային արցանգեղներ, որոնք ծաղկում են ցրտերի հետ և միայնակ վայելում աշնան արևը: Աղջիկները դեղնավուն փշատերև թուփերից, մասրենու կանաչ ճյուղերից և աշնան դաշտի ծաղիկներից հյուսել էին մանյակներ ու պսակներ (...)

“The girls decorated the stage. What can be on the fields in November days ... yellowish coniferous bushes, green twigs of the rose hip, wild արքանգեղ-flowers, which blossom in the cold and solely enjoy the autumnal sun. The girls had wound

¹ See Ժամանակակից հայոց լեզվի բացատրական բառարան 1961, 249.

chains and crowns/garlands and wreaths from the yellowish coniferous bushes, the green twigs of the rose hip and the autumnal field flowers (...)”

Axel Bakunts (Ալսուէլ Բակունց) or Alexander Stepani Tevosyan (*13th June 1899 in Goris – +8th July 1937 in Yerevan) was a prose writer, screenwriter, translator (Николай Васильевич Гоголь, Վարդան Այգեկցի), philologist, and public activist of communism. He was educated at the Gevorgyan Seminary in Ejmiatsin and did volunteer service in the battles of Erzurum, Sardarapat, and Kars. After the war, he worked as a Teacher, proof-reader and journalist in Yerevan (1918 – 1919), before studying agriculture at Kharkov Institute in Ukraine (1920-1923) and finally becoming the agronomist in Zangezur land division department (1924-1926).

In the period from 1923 to 1926, before he settled in Yerevan, he already published a series of essays. In 1927, his first collection of short stories entitled Մթնաձոր “The Dark Valley” was published, in 1933 his second collection of short stories entitled Սև ցեղերի սերմնացանը “The sower of the black furrows”. One year later, in 1934, he became a member of the Union of Soviet Writers. Shortly thereafter Bakunts fell victim to the Stalinist terror, accused of alienation from socialist society: He was arrested in 1936 and executed in 1937.

On March 2 of 1955, he was rehabilitated and two decades later the four-volume edition of his entire works began to be published by the Academy of Sciences (Volume 1 – 1976: Երկեր չորս հատորով, հատոր 1 («Մթնաձոր», «Սև ցեղերի սերմնացանը», «Անձրևը»), Երևան, ՀՍՍՀ ԳԱ, 1976, 672 էջ; Volume 2 – 1979: Երկեր չորս հատորով, հատոր 2 (պատմվածքներ, ակնարկներ, Վարդան Այգեկցու «Աղվեսագիրքը»՝ Բակունցի փոխադրությամբ), Երևան, ՀՍՍՀ ԳԱ, 1979, 716 էջ; Volume 3 – 1982: Երկեր չորս հատորով, հատոր 3 (վեպեր և վիպակներ, կինոբրնազիթ), Երևան, ՀՍՍՀ ԳԱ, 1982, 712 էջ; Volume 4 – 1984: Երկեր չորս հատորով, հատոր 4 (գրաքննադատական հոդվածներ: Հրապարակախոսություն, գյուղատնտեսական հոդվածներ և ակնարկներ: Նամակներ, խնդրագրեր, ընծայագրեր: Պաշտոնական գրություններ: Զեկուցումների ու ելույթների ամփոփումներ), Երևան, ՀՍՍՀ ԳԱ, 1984, 664 էջ)

Besides being a translator and philologist dealing both with foreign (Николай Васильевич Гоголь: Կարս Բուլբա; Նիկոլայ Գոգոլ, Տարաս Բուլբա, Երևան, Պետհրատ, 1934) and medieval languages (Վարդան Այգեկցի, Աղվեսագիրք, Երևան, Պետհրատ, 1935), Axel Bakunts was an agronomist, who wrote also about Կարսոնֆիլի մշակությունը, and, as a local from Goris, the country town and capital of the district Zangezur in the south of Armenia, he might have known all the plants of this region also by their vernacular names; he even entitled – besides other stories (e.g. Ծիրանի տափ, Ծիրանի փողը, Օրանջիա) – what would become his most famous story by the name of a flower, Ալպիական մանուշակ. According to the description of the circumstances the սրցանդեզ-flower grows under one might suppose her to be a kind of *Colchicum autumnale* L., also commonly known in English as so-called *autumn crocus*, as it resembles the true crocus, *meadow saffron* or – even – *naked lady*. These terms may be applied also both to the genus as a whole and, generally, to its single species including the similar looking *Colchicum autumnale* that, indeed, to a non-expert observer looks like crocus that appears in spring, but – besides other botanically crucial differences – lacks the superficially obvious crocus-like foliage, which is the reason why it is called “naked”.

The botanical terminology *Colchicum* clearly shows the origin of this flower which, from the Ancient world’s point of view, is supposed to be Kolchis, the region known from the myth of the Argonauts. It is situated east of the Black Sea which nowadays is the district Mingrelia belonging to Georgia. As a source of toxic ingredients, the plant has been known since antiquity, as can be seen in Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, 65 BC-8 BC) *Carmen* II 13,8-10 (...) *ille venena Colcha / et quidquid usquam concipitur nefas / tractavit* (...) “that one dealt with Colchic toxic and whatever crime has been invented so far” and in Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, 43 BC-17 AD) *Metamorphoses* VII 394 *Sed postquam Colchis arsit nova nupta venenis* (...) “Yet after she just being married burned from the Colchic toxic”. *Colchicum autumnale* contains colchicine, a toxin which causes poisoning similarly to that of arsenic and, in lack of any known antidote, is deadly.

Colchicum autumnale is endemic in the Caucasus region. While in the Romance languages like e.g. French (*colchique*) and Italian (*colchico*) the Latin term is used, in Russian the flower is called *безвременник осенний* which means “without time” or “timeless” and is most probably a loan translation from German *Zeitlose*, already the name of this flower in Old High German, *zītilōso*, and superficially seems to have a meaning like “timeless” or better “not in the right time”, i.e. premature as it refers to what is, in confusion, originally considered a kind of crocus, which is a spring flower, but in fact is used to designate what is called autumn crocus, which only comes into blossom in fall.

In Armenian, as is usual with names of flowers and plants in general, a number of different names exist for *Colchicum autumnale*² which might be in regional or local use only or might have their origins as synonyms simply in confusional identification. Examples of the latter include *ձյունածաղիկ*, which is also applied to the flower called *ձնծաղիկ* “snow flower”, or *սապոնուկ*, which is also applied to the flower called *քրքրուկ* “crocus”. Another name that exists for *Colchicum autumnale*, i.e. *շնասպան* “dog-killer”, comes close in its original meaning to that of the orthonym of *Colchicum autumnale* in Armenian which is *շնդեղ* (*աշնանային*) and originally means “dog poison”.

Concerning the question of the origin of the word *արցունքեղ* within Armenian or any other linguistic source, as a vernacular name it preferably might come from an Armenian dialect. A reasonable solution seems to be the following:

One can analyze the word in **արցան* and *քեղ*, the first of which contains, again, two parts, *արս* and *ցան*,³ which in composition mean “the sower of the field”. The form of the reconstructed compound **արցան* might be the result of a syncope of the form **արսացան*, a development comparable to that of *արցունք* “tears” coming from *արսասունք* both of which forms are attested, though. The other part of the whole word, *քեղ*, might be identified with the existing word *քեղ* for

² See Kouyoumdjian 1984, 839a.

³ See Acharʿyan 1913, 154a.

‘crack’, synonymous with ճաք⁴, rather than with a reconstructed *gez “way”.⁵ So the original meaning of the word արցանդեղ might have been “the breaking of the field-sower” which of course was no longer understood in Bakunts’ times, particularly outside Zangezur region. This smooth explanation would also make this flower’s enigmatic name a fine allusion to what happened in Bakunts’ short story to the sower who died in the field.

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⁴ See Suqiasyan 1967, 138b.

⁵ See Jahukyan 1991, 37f.