

THE ARMENIAN ALPHABET

1. The Armenian alphabet known as *aybuben* (a term coined on the Greek model by combining the first two letters of the Armenian script) was created in 406 or 407 A.D. by the cleric Mesrop Maštoc' (d. Feb. 17, 440). This alphabet, comprising 36 characters and still in use today, has been an almost perfect medium for the expression of all three phases of the evolution of the Armenian language: Classical (i.e., *Grabar*), Middle, and Modern, the latter represented by two mutually intelligible literary dialects, known as East and West Armenian. In devising the Armenian alphabet, Mesrop, who is recognized as a first-rate phonetician, was guided by the principle that each letter should represent only one sound, and that all sounds in the language must be represented by one symbol each.

Modelled presumably after the Greek alphabet, Armenian writing proceeds from left to right, the vowels are represented by separate symbols, and the extra letters for Armenian sounds not found in Greek are intercalated into the order of the Greek alphabet. So perfect has been the fit of the script to the phonology of the language that it has remained intact from its inception to the present day.

As a rule, the number of syllables in Armenian words depends on the number of vowels they contain. Although some words feature only a single vowel, they are still pronounced as two or more syllables. In most such instances the combination of two or more consonants requires the insertion of the unwritten schwa before or between the consonants.

The syllable patterns in Armenian are (C)V, (C)VC. Although rare, the pattern (C)VCC is also attested; however, no general rule of occurrence for the latter pattern can be formulated, for want of unambiguous evidence (see ROBERT GODEL, *Introduction*, p. 10.). Also as a rule hiatus in Armenian is allowed in morpheme juncture, except after *a* or *o*, which require the insertion of *y*. Conversely, there is no instance of *y* after *e*, *i*, or *u*. (GODEL, *ibid.*). Hiatus also occurs after *u* without qualification:

e.g., *lezu* 'tongue', GenDatLoc *lezui*, but after *i* only when the radical morpheme (root or stem) is monosyllabic: e.g., *di-em* "I suckle", *hi-anam* "I wonder, admire" (*ibid.*, pp. 10-11).

The most reliable primary source concerning the invention of the Armenian alphabet is *The Life of Mashtots*, written in the mid-440s by the inventor's pupil Koriun (see English translation by BEDROS NOREHAD, New York, 1964). The work is written in the form of an encomium, a disciple's tribute to his beloved master (see ABRAHAM TERIAN, *JSAS*, 1987). Two other later authors, Łazar P'arpec'i (*Patmut'iwn Hayoc'*, 1904) and Moses Khorenats'i (*History of the Armenians*, trans. by ROBERT THOMSON, 1978), have relied heavily on the information provided by Koriun.

Mesrop Maštoc' was born in the Armenian province of Tarōn in the mid-4th century A.D. Koriun informs us that after being educated in Greek letters (it is assumed that he was also conversant with Persian and Syriac), he came to the royal court of the Arsacid kings in Armenia Major, where he served as a secretary. He is also said to have been well versed in secular law, and was esteemed for his mastery of the military art as well. While serving the court, Mesrop also devoted himself avidly to the reading of Scripture, which eventually led him to abandon worldly life and enter a monastic order.

Having attracted a number of pupils, Mesrop subsequently devoted himself to missionary work. This was at a time when the services in the Christian church in Armenia were either conducted in Greek or Syriac, both of which were inaccessible to the mass of the Armenian people, or Armenian clerics had to learn these foreign languages and make oral translations and comments. While engaging in missionary work in the district of Goght'n, Mesrop became acutely aware that paganism in Armenia could be combated only by making the Scripture available in the Armenian vernacular.

Bringing his concern to the attention of Catholicos Sahak of Armenia, Mesrop found him to be predisposed to his ideas. Koriun informs us that the two churchmen also held a conclave of monks wherein the idea of creating an alphabet for Armenian was deliberated. Mesrop and Sahak met with King Vramshapuh and informed him of their concern. It should be noted that until the beginning of the 5th century A.D. the Armenians used Greek or Aramaic for their correspondence, inscriptions, and coinage.

The section on the invention of the alphabet in Koriun (see NOREHAD, *Koriun, Life*, pp. 29-31) unfortunately contains a number of corrupt passages and obscurities. When King Vramshapuh was informed of Sahak's

and Mesrop's concern, he is said to have disclosed that a certain Syrian bishop named Daniel in Mesopotamia "unexpectedly had come into the possession of letters of the Armenian alphabet" (*ibid.*, p. 29). The passage where this enigmatic assertion is made is thought to be corrupt, and thus has given rise to various interpretations and emendations. Be that as it may, upon learning about the so-called Danielian Armenian script, the king was prevailed upon to have it brought to Armenia. Soon thereafter young children were gathered at the order of the king and Mesrop and Sahak began to experiment with them the imported alphabet. However, when after a trial period of two years "they became aware of the fact that those letters were insufficient to form all the syllables of the Armenian language, especially since the letters essentially proved to have been buried and then resurrected from other languages, they found themselves in the same anxieties and for some time were engaged in search of a solution (see NOREHAD, *Koriun, Life*, pp. 29-30; cf. THOMSON, *Khorenats'i*, p. 319, and *P'arpec'i*, pp. 41-43).

The exact nature of the Danielian alphabet, its provenance, the number of its letters, the length of time it was used by Mesrop and his colleagues, and other related issues have been the subject of numerous studies, but to date none of these crucial questions has been satisfactorily resolved. The passage where Koriun attempts to explain why the Danielian script had been considered to be inadequate to reflect the phonological system of Armenian also seems to be corrupt, for the meaning of the statement that these letters "happened to be buried and resurrected from other languages" remains quite obscure. Secondly, some scholars who have argued that two years is much too long a time to discover the inadequacy of the Danielian script, have advocated the view that the phrase *ams erku* (two years) in Koriun is a scribal error and should be emended to read *amis(a)s erku* (two months). (Concerning the issue of textual corruption both in Koriun and Khorenats'i see S. K'OLANJYAN, *Banber Matenadarani*, 1958, pp. 163-182. For a dissenting view consult HAGOP NERSOYAN (*JSAS*, 1985-86, pp. 51-71). Finally, in a recent study Andranik Granian (*Haigazian Hayagitakan Handēs*, 1991-92) has proposed the spurious view that the Danielian script had been in use in pagan Armenia; that when Armenia was Christianized in the early 4th century the clergy replaced it with the Greek alphabet; that when it was rediscovered in the possession of Bishop Daniel it was readopted as the original Armenian alphabet, Mesrop's sole contribution being the creation of the symbols for the vowels, which the Danielian characters had lacked. Apropos of this, it should be underscored that there is no evidence that Armenian was ever written in any other alphabet before the time of Mesrop.

Abandoning the Danielian script, Mesrop, together with a group of his pupils, journeyed to the Mesopotomian cities of Edessa and Amid. And in answer to his "prayerful labors [and] tearful pleadings", probably at Edessa, "God the All-Bountiful finally granted him that good fortune: for with his holy hand he [Mesrop] became the father of new and wonderful offerings — letters of the Armenian language, and then and there quickly designed, named, determined their order, and devised the syllabification" (NOREHAD, *Koriun, Life*, pp. 30-31). Although Koriun refers to the Armenian alphabet as having been "God-given" or as a "divine gift", both he and P'arpec'i do not attribute its discovery to miraculous intervention. In contrast, Khorenats'i embellishes the story by claiming that Mesrop "saw not a dream in sleep, not a vision while awake, but in the depths of his heart there appeared to the eyes of his soul a right hand writing on rock; for the stone retained [the shapes] as tracks are traced in snow. And not only did he have this vision, but the details were gathered in his mind as in a vase. Arising from prayer he fashioned our alphabet with Rufinus, who gave shape to the script prepared by Mesrop, altering the Armenian letters according to the exactness of the Greek alphabet" (THOMSON, *Khorenats'i*, p. 320).

Koriun too narrates that Mesrop went to Samosata and collaborated with the Hellenic master calligrapher Rufinus, "by whose hands all the variations of the letters, thin and heavy strokes, long and short, the single letters as well as the diphthongs were devised". After this had been accomplished and with the help of two of his pupils, he proceeded with the task of translation, thereby launching Armenian literature in the vernacular. Koriun underscores that the first text translated into Armenian was the Proverbs of Solomon, which opens with the exhortation: "To know wisdom and instruction, to perceive words of understanding" (NOREHAD, *Koriun, Life*, p. 31).

Arriving in Armenia with the newly created alphabet, Mesrop was received by King Vramshapuh and Catholicos Sahak, as well as by a large assemblage of courtiers and a throng, like Moses the Lawgiver and the Apostle Paul. Soon afterwards, Sahak, Mesrop and their pupils devoted themselves to the translation of the Bible and other religious texts from Greek and Syriac, to the creation of original works, and to the teaching of the Christian faith in the Armenian vernacular. It should be noted parenthetically that, according to Koriun, Mesrop also invented scripts for Georgian and Caucasian Albanian (see NOREHAD, *Koriun, Life*, pp. 37, 40-41; THOMSON, *Khorenats'i*, p. 322; MOVSĖS DASXURANČI, *Caucasian Albanians*, pp. 68-69; and KURDIAN, *JRAS*, 1956, pp. 81-83), but this claim is not confirmed by non-Armenian sources.

2. The Armenian alphabet originally comprised 30 consonants and 6 vowels. The vowel *ö* and the consonant *f* were introduced in the 12th century, the first to render the diphthong *aw*, and the second the foreign sound *f*.

Classical Armenian texts are now read according to either the East or West literary dialect of Modern Armenian. The vowels are pronounced almost identically in both dialects. In the case of the consonants, however, the West dialect has retained only two degrees, voiced and aspirated, as opposed to the original three levels (voiced, voiceless, and aspirated) preserved in the East dialect.

There are two standard systems of Armenian transliteration: the Hübschmann-Meillet scheme, which utilizes diacritical marks, and the Library of Congress system, which uses two Roman digraphs to reflect certain consonants. Until the adoption of the Arabic numerical system in the 17th century, the Armenian script was also utilized to express numerals.

The following table provides the inventory of the Armenian characters in their standard order, the names of the individual letters, the Hübschmann-Meillet transliteration according to the phonology of East Armenian, and the numerical value assigned to the letters of the alphabet.

<i>The Letters</i>		<i>Names of the Letters</i>	<i>Transliteration</i>	<i>Numerical Value</i>
Ա	ա	ayb	a	1
Բ	բ	ben	b	2
Գ	գ	gim	g	3
Դ	դ	da	d	4
Ե	ե	eč'	e	5
Զ	զ	za	z	6
Է	է	ē	ē	7
Ը	ը	ət'	ə	8
Թ	թ	t'o	t'	9
Ճ	ճ	žē	ž	10
Ի	ի	ini	i	20
Լ	լ	liwn	l	30
Խ	խ	xē	x	40
Ս	ս	ca	c	50
Կ	կ	ken	k	60
Հ	հ	ho	h	70
Ձ	ձ	ja	j	80
Ղ	ղ	lat	l	90
Ճ	ճ	čē	č	100
Մ	մ	men	m	200

<i>The Letters</i>		<i>Names of the Letters</i>	<i>Transliteration</i>	<i>Numerical Value</i>
Յ	յ	yi	y	300
Ն	ն	nu	n	400
Շ	շ	ša	š	500
Ո	ո	o	o	600
Չ	չ	č'a	č'	700
Պ	պ	pē	p	800
Ջ	ջ	jē	j	900
Ռ	ռ	ra	r	1000
Ս	ս	sē	s	2000
Վ	վ	vew	v	3000
Տ	տ	tiwn	t	4000
Ր	ր	rē	r	5000
Յ	ց	c'o	c'	6000
Խ	ք	hiwn	w	7000
Փ	փ	p'iwr	p'	8000
Գ	գ	k'ē	k'	9000
Ա	ա	u	u	—
Օ	օ	ō	ō	—
Ֆ	ֆ	fē	f	—

The consonantal structure of Armenian may be classified as follows:

	<i>Voiced</i>	<i>Voiceless</i>	<i>Aspirated</i>	<i>Nasals</i>
<i>Stops:</i>	b d g	p t k	p' t' k'	m n
<i>Affricates:</i>	j č	c č'	c' č'	
<i>Fricatives:</i>	z ž	s š x h		
<i>Resonants:</i>	l r v w y	l r		

The vowel are comprised of: a, e, ē, i, o, (ə), ow = u.

There is a large body of literature which attempts to connect the Armenian alphabet with other Eastern systems of writing, such as Syriac, Phoenician, and Pahlavi Aramaic. Although the shapes of the 36 letters are rather unlike any other known characters, the consensus of opinion is that the Armenian script was basically modelled after the Greek as evidenced by the succession of letters, and by the use of the combination *ow* (Greek *ou*) for the vowel *u*. Furthermore, the shapes of certain letters seem derived from a variety of cursive Greek. The Greek alphabet, however, could not have supplied all the characters that the phonological system of Armenian needed; hence it is assumed that Mesrop supplemented it either by borrowing from some other writing system, or by coining new symbols. It is generally agreed that Mesrop may be credited with the invention of the Armenian letters ձ, շ, լ, ք, զ, հ, յ, ճ, յ, ճ', յ, վ, ր, and շ' (GODEL, *Introduction*, p. 3). The following table illustrates the succession of letters in the Greek and Armenian alphabets:

Gk.	α	β	γ	δ	ε	ζ	η	θ	ι	κ	λ	μ	ν	ξ	ο	π	ρ	σ	τ	υ	φ	χ	ψ	ω
Arm.	ա	բ	գ	դ	ե	զ	է	թ	ր	կ	լ	մ	ն	շ	ո	պ	գ	դ	հ	ւ	փ	ք	ղ	վ

Since its inception in the 5th century, at least four distinct scripts have been created for the writing of Armenian. The oldest is the uncial called *erkat'agir* (literally, 'iron-forged letters'), also referred to as the "original Mesropian" or "Mesropian *erkat'agir*", named after its creator. This script was employed as the standard writing system from the 5th through the 13th centuries, and it has also been the preferred script for epigraphic inscriptions. Created in the 10th century, the *bolorgir* (cursive) became the popular system of writing from the 13th century onwards and has been the standard script for printing of Armenian books and periodicals since the beginning of the 16th century. The *notrgir* (minuscule) script, created by speedwriters and notaries in the 13th century, was exclusively employed during the 16th-18th centuries, especially in the colonies of the Armenian diaspora, and subsequently became a popular mode of printing. Finally, the *šelagir* (literally, 'slanted writing') has now become the most commonly used writing system. Although the use of ligatures has not been attested in Armenian manuscripts written in *erkat'agir* script, it has been employed extensively in epigraphic inscriptions since the 7th century. In contrast, the use of ligatures in codices written in *bolorgir* and *notrgir* scripts has been a very common practice.

As a written language, Classical Armenian preserved its grammatical structure through the centuries, whereas the spoken dialects underwent

gradual changes. It is generally assumed that the rules of pronunciation, as they are formulated in medieval Armenian grammars, go as far back as the 11th or 12th century. The pronunciation rules given below are equally valid for Classical as well as for the two literary dialects of Modern Armenian.

The Consonants

The consonants *l* and *x* are the graphic signs for a pair of voiced and voiceless guttural sounds: the voiced *l* is pronounced as a velar fricative similar to the French guttural *r* as in *rouge* (red) or closer to the modern Greek *ɣ* as in *γαῖα*. The voiceless *x* is pronounced like the German *x*-Laut in *lachen* (to laugh). The affricate *c* is pronounced like the English *ts* in *cats*, and the affricate *č* like the English *ch* in *much*.

The consonant *y* occurs in all positions. In initial position, it is pronounced like English *h*: e.g., *yoys* > *huys* 'hope'; in medial position, it is like English *y* as in *yet*: e.g., *ayg* 'dawn', and it occurs before the unwritten schwa and the vowels *a* or *o* but never after any other vowel; in word final position, the *y* is, as a rule, not pronounced: e.g., *caṛay* > *caṛa* 'servant'; it is pronounced in final position after vowels only in a few monosyllabic nouns: e.g., *xoy* 'ram', *t'ēy* 'tea'.

The liquid consonants *ṛ* and *r* seldom occur initially; *ṛ* is the trilled *r*, occurring mostly before the nasal *n*, and *r* is comparable to the English *r* in *rose*.

The consonants *v* and *w* stand in complementary distribution: *v* occurs in word initial position: e.g., *i vayr* 'down', and after the vowel *o*: e.g., *hogvov* 'with spirit'. Both *v* and *w* occur either between vowels or after a vowel in word- or syllable-final position. However, *v* is never found between a vowel and an implosive consonant, while *w* frequently is. Moreover, both *v* and intervocalic or final *w* are pronounced as *v*: e.g., *hawatal* > *havatal* 'to believe'; *hoviw* > *hoviv* 'shepherd'. The vowel *ow* > *u*, when followed by another vowel, is also pronounced *v* or *əv*: e.g., *Astowac* > *Astvāc* 'God'; *nowēr* > *n(ə)vēr* 'gift'.

The Vowels

It is presumed that Classical Armenian had no contrast of long and short vowels. The Armenian vowel *a* is pronounced like the English *a* as in *car*, and it occurs in all positions: e.g., *arew* 'sun', *awazan* 'pool', *ara* 'do, make'. The vowel *e* is pronounced differently depending on its position: in initial position it stands for *ye*- as in English *yet*; within words, it

is pronounced *e* as in English *red*; it never occurs in word final position, excepting the conjunctions *t'e* and *et'e*, both meaning 'that', which however were later spelled *t'ē* and *et'ē*.

The vowel *ē*, as a development of the former diphthong *ei/ey*, must have once been a long vowel. In Mesrop's days, it probably stood in contrast to *e* as a close *e* to an open one; but about the 10th century *e* and *ē* eventually merged, except in initial position as seen above. The *ē* occurs mostly in final syllables: e.g., *sirē* 'he, she loves', and also before vowels: e.g., *Hrēastan* 'Judea'.

The *i* occurs in all positions and is pronounced like *i* in English *miss*. When used as a preposition with the accusative, locative, or ablative case, and followed by a word beginning with a vowel, *i* becomes an inseparable *y*: e.g., *i awani* > *yawani* 'in a town', but is pronounced *havani*.

The vowel *o* has different phonetic values depending on its position. In word initial position, it is pronounced *vo*: e.g., *oē* 'style' is pronounced *voē*; exceptions are such words as the interrogative *ov* 'who?', which is pronounced *ov*, and *ovkianos* 'ocean' pronounced *ovkianos*. In all other positions, including word final, it is pronounced *o*. As seen earlier, the vowel *ō* was added to the alphabet in the 12th century to replace the diphthong *aw*: e.g., *awr* > *ōr* 'day'. The *ō* is often found in printed texts of Classical Armenian but does not represent the original sound. In Modern Armenian the *ō* has merged with *o*, except in word initial position.

In creating the Armenian alphabet, Mesrop did not devise a special symbol for the vowel *u*; instead, *u* was represented by the combination *o + w*, that is, *ow* > *o*, on the pattern of the Greek *ov*.

The semivowel *a* or schwa, which is pronounced like the English *a* in *about* and *around*, is rarely written, even though it is the most common vowel in spoken Armenian and must have been so in Mesrop's time as well. In this regard Armenian orthography did not and still does not reflect the true phonological reality, for *a* occurs in many positions, especially in consonant clusters, where Mesrop did not deem relevant to write it. The schwa is written in word initial position for monosyllables and compounds derived from them before *m*, *n*, or *x* plus consonant: e.g., *ambem* 'I drink'; *antir* 'select', *anker* 'companion', *atjam* 'I wish, long for'; it also occurs in the prepositions *and* 'to, at, towards, etc.', and *ast* 'according to, in relation to, etc.'. Moreover, it has been attested that there are words in Armenian that contain as many as six consonant clusters, which of course cannot be enunciated without the insertion of the unwritten schwa. Some examples of these consonant clusters are: *krak* > *k(a)rak* 'fire'; *xndal* >

x(a)ndal 'to rejoice'; *bžškut'iwn* > *b(a)ž(a)škut'iwn* 'cure'; *trtnjiwn* > *t(a)rt(a)njiwn* 'murmur'; *anxlēmtank'* *anx(a)lēm(a)ntank'* 'lack of scruple'.

The following vowel combinations should also be noted: *ea* is pronounced *ya*, as in *atean* > *atyan* 'tribunal'; *ew* is pronounced *ev* before vowels and when they occur in final position (note that the spelling *iw* for *ew* is widely found in ancient Classical Armenian texts: e.g., *miws* for *mews* 'another', and *iwx* for *ewx* 'oil'); *iw* is pronounced *yu* when followed by a radical consonant, as in *niwt'* > *nyut'* 'material', but this rule does not apply to nouns ending in *-iw*, *-ay*, or *-oy*; and *oy* before a consonant is pronounced *yu*, as in *loys* > *luys* 'light', except in word final position, in which case it is pronounced *-o*. Also to be noted are the triphthongs *eay* as in *Hreay* > *Hrya* 'Hebrew', *eaw* as in *yareaw* > *haryav* 'he arose', and *iay* as in *kriay* > *krya* 'frog'.

Finally, the orthography of Armenian has undergone three stages in its development (see S. V. GYULBUDALYAN, 1973). In the first phase (5th-10th centuries) the orthography remained an almost perfect reflection of the phonological structure of Armenian. Beginning in the 11th century, phonological changes in the spoken vernacular began to manifest themselves, but the orthography remained intact, excepting the diphthong *aw* which was replaced by the newly adopted vowel *ō*. The third phase was initiated by the government of Soviet Armenia in 1922, when it decreed "reforms", ostensibly to make the orthography of Armenian more phonetic. The vowel *ō* was eliminated from the alphabet and wherever it occurred in the traditional orthography it was replaced by the vowel *o*. The use of *w* was restricted to its combination with *o* to produce the vowel *u*. The vowel *ē* was also replaced by *e* in all positions. Initial *ē* and *o* were respectively spelled *ye-* and *vo-*. The diphthongs *ea* and *iw* were also changed to *ya* and *yu* respectively. Finally, word initial *y* was replaced by *h*, and mute *y* in word final was eliminated. In 1940, however, the Soviet authorities decreed the restoration of the vowels *ō* and *ē*; and the vowels *e* and *o* in word initial were again written *e* and *o*. It is significant to note that Armenians in the diaspora never adopted the "reformed" Soviet orthography and have continued to employ the traditional, classical spelling.

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