

Varak and Vaspurakan



A view of Varakavank by Walter Bachmann (1913) (Public Domain)

I don't think that the residents of Vaspurakan were as inspired by Akhtamar as much as they were by Varak. Varak, more than Akhtamar, spoke to their hearts and minds, especially in the final years. The lives lived and activities done in Varak were better known and more appreciated, were closer to the common stratum of the people. Akhtamar was opulence, Varak, love and sympathy.

Describing the monasteries of Vaspuraken, the region of Van, the Mkhitarist Father Hamazasp Voskian suggests that the island of Akhtamar, housing one of the most iconic of all Armenian churches, the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, was not as inspiring as the set of monasteries and churches on the mountain of Varak, east of the city of Van. This mountain, on which was built the Monastery of Varak and the Monastery of the Holy Sign, is at the center of the uniquely Armenian feast of the Cross we celebrate this Sunday, the Feast of the Holy Cross of Varak. According to the tradition of the Armenian Church, St. Hripsime and her companions brought a relic of the Holy Cross to the Mountain of Varak, but that it was hidden until the 7th century, when a monk named Totig and his student Hovel saw an apparition of the Cross above the mountain that led them to the sacred relic. This relic of the Holy Cross remained for many years at the Monastery of the Holy Sign on the Mountain.

Voskian writes that the history of the founding of the Monastery of Varak is “shrouded in mist,” though there were clearly already monks and pilgrims visiting the mountain by the 7th century. Vaspurakan or Van, of course, is one of the most important regions in all of historic Armenia. The Orontid dynasty, the first royal lineage of an explicitly Armenian kingdom, had their roots in the region. The important noble (*nakharar*) Rshtuni family also had vast holdings in the area. After the fall of the Arshakuni dynasty and the end of an independent Armenian kingdom in the 5th century, the Artsruni family

became the most powerful family in the region of Van. Eventually, in the 10th century, the Artsruni family became the rulers of the Kingdom of Vaspurakan when Gagik Artsruni obtained a crown from both Arab and Byzantine leaders, becoming Gagik I in 908. Thomas Artsruni wrote *The History of the House of the Artsrunik'* to extol the virtues of the royal family. Though it is thinly veiled propaganda to support the predominance of the Kingdom of Vaspurakan over the Bagratid Armenian kingdom in the north, the *The History of the House of the Artsrunik'* is an important medieval Armenian history, the first text to cite Movses Khorenatsi, and a crucial depiction of the region of Van at the time.

During this time, the Monastery of Varak and the other churches and monasteries on the mountain of Varak were supremely important. Though King Gagik I kept his court on the island of Akhtamar and it was under his direction that the Cathedral of the Holy Cross was built, as Robert Hewsen writes, “despite the lavish expense devoted to the erection of the cathedral at Aghtamar, the necropolis of the Artsruni kings was located elsewhere, at a monastery on the slopes of Mount Varag known as Varagavank.” For generations, the Artsruni family members were buried at Varakank: even the Artstruni king who moved to Sepastia ordered that he would be buried there and that the relic of the True Cross would be secured at the Mountain of Varak.

Recommended Source	Comments
Armenian Van/Vaspurakan	A collection of essays by prominent Armenian Studies scholars concerning the region of Van. Based on a conference at UCLA, it is the first of a series of books about Armenian regions edited by Richard G. Hovannisian.
History of the House of the Artsrunik'	Robert Thomson's translation of Thomas Artsruni's tenth-century history of the region of Van extolling the dominant noble family of the time.
Vaspurakan-Vani Vank'ere (The Monasteries of Vaspurakan/Van)	A survey and descriptions of monasteries and churches in the Van region by the Mkhitarist Father Hamazasp Voskian. In Armenian.

After the Artsruni King Senekerim-Hovhannes, in exchange for domains near the city of Sebastia/Sivas, transferred the territories of Vaspurakan to the Byzantine Emperor in 1021, a series of non-Armenian rulers controlled the region of Van. Eventually, the region was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire as the *vilayet* of Van. In the final years of the Ottoman Empire, before the Genocide, Van, and more specifically the Monastery of Varak, again became a source of inspiration. It was there at Varakavank that a young *vartabed* named Mgrdich Khrimian published the first Armenian periodical in the historic Western Armenian provinces of the Ottoman Empire, which he called *Artsvi Vaspurakan*, “The Eagle of Vaspurakan.” At the monastery, he also established the seminary of Zharangavorats. Khrimian, of course, went on to become the Prelate of Taron, the Patriarch of Constantinople, and eventually the Catholicos of all Armenians. Universally beloved, he is known as “Khrimian Hayrig,” an endearing and diminutive form of “father.”

Artsvi Vaspurakan was incredibly important in the formation of an Armenian “provincial” literature, and was one of the most influential publications of the time. Khrimian first published it in Istanbul in 1855, then after a hiatus, began publishing at the Monastery of Vaspurakan in 1858. It ran until 1874. One of the other major contributors to *Artsvi Vaspurakan* was a disciple of Khrimian’s, Karekin Srvandztiants. Srvandztiants, who was himself consecrated a bishop in 1886 and served for a time as the prelate of Trabzon, is best remembered for first writing down the epic *David of Sassoun*. He was an avid collector of folktales and folklore, travelling throughout historic Armenia, both in the Ottoman and Russian provinces. You can read a more detailed account of the literary and historical importance of *Artsvi Vaspurakan*, Khrimian Hayrig, and Karekin Srvandztiants in [this article](#) by Dzovinar Derderian for the excellent online resource, [houshamadyan](#).

The Zohrab Information Center has the collected works of both Khrimian Hayrig and Bishop Srvandztiants, as well as first editions of some of their books. There are also many books about Khrimian Hayrig and his role in Armenian history in the Zohrab Information Center’s Library.

Check out the Zohrab Information Center’s Instagram account, [@zohrabcenter](#) today to see recent photographs of Varakavank taken by the director and early editions of the works described in this article!

Recommended Source	Comments
Mananay (Manna)	A collection of regional knowledge about Van by Karekin Srvandztiants, including history, folktales, and songs. In Armenian.
Trakhti Undanik (The Family of Paradise)	“The Family of Paradise” is one of Khrimian Hayrig’s most important texts. It contains his musings on the importance of the Armenian family. In Armenian.
Artsiv Vaspurakani (Khrimian Hayrig)	A collection of writings about Khrimian Hayrig by the author Raffi, most famous for his novel <i>The Fool</i> . One of many books at the Zohrab Information Center about Khrimian. In Armenian.