

Early Armenian Encounters with Islam

This week, on Thursday, the Armenian Apostolic Church commemorates the “Sainly Princes Sahak and Hamazasp.” Most weeks of the year, the Armenian Church sets aside several days to remember saints, and the services for the day are subtly altered to recall and recognize these faithful examples. It is precisely this liturgical celebration that marks a saint for the Armenian Church; there is no rigorous “canonization” process parallel to that of the Catholic Church. Often, these saints are taken from the Bible or early universal Christian history: we have days to celebrate the prophet Job from the Old Testament, St. John the Baptist from the New Testament, and St. Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great who is credited with finding the true Cross of Christ and starting to build many of the churches in Jerusalem. Such saints are well known and shared across many Christian traditions. Other saints are specific to Armenian Christianity, but are still immediately recognizable to someone familiar with the Armenian Church and Armenian history: St. Gregory the Illuminator or St. Vartan Mamigonian, for instance. Other saints, however, like our “sainly princes” Sahak and Hamazasp are less familiar to us, coming from later, less well known, or less celebrated moments in Armenian history. Yet every saint commemorated by the Church is in some way an icon of Christ, offering us a model of holiness for our own lives. When we learn about the lives of the saints, we not only have the opportunity to understand Armenian history more fully, we are also spurred on to greater faith, inspired by their examples.



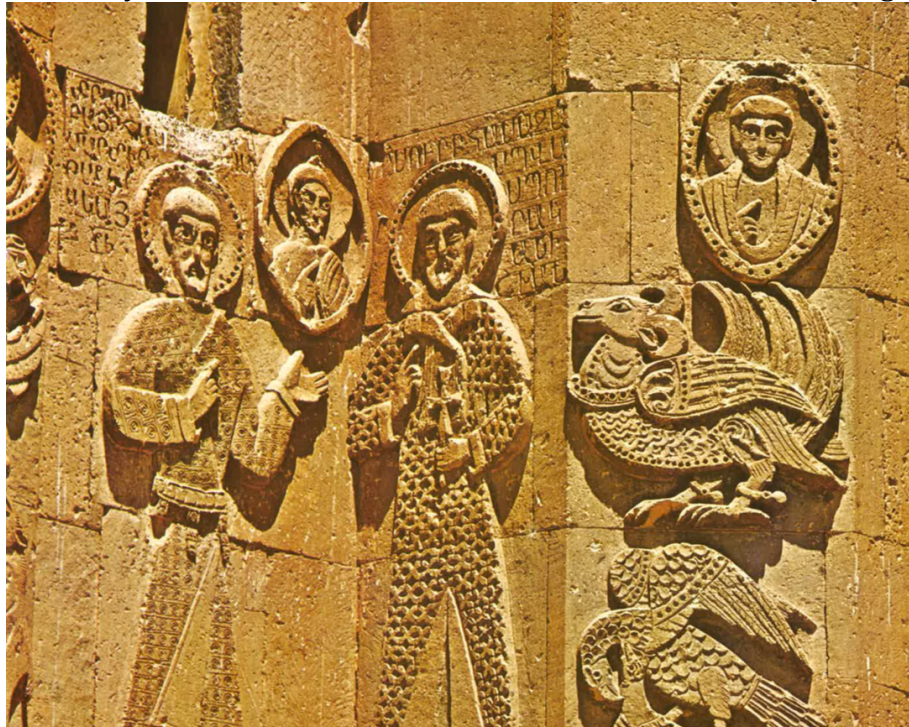
The Arab Domination: The Abbasid Period, 750-885. From Hewsen (2001).

Sahak and Hamazasp were members of the noble Artsruni family, the important *nakharar* family from the Vaspurakan region around Van whom we met last week while discussing the Feast of the Cross of Varak. Well before the Artsruni family became kings of Vaspurakan, it was already an established princely house in the region. Sahak and

Hamazasp lived during a chaotic time in Armenian history, after the fall of the Arshakuni dynasty in 428 and before either the Bagratuni or Arstruni kingdoms were established. While the period under Persian governorships, the *marzpanate*, included its fair share of difficulties (notably, the Battle of Avarayr in 451), with the coming of Islam and the Arab invasions, Armenians would face new challenges and pressures.

The first Armenian history to document the emergence Islam is the history attributed to one “Bishop Sebeos.” While the full version of this history starts with the earliest beginning of the Armenians in a manner similar to Movses Khorenatsi, Sebeos then offers an Armenian account of Muhammad, the birth of Islam, and the initial spread of Islam. As with other Christian sources, Sebeos sees the Arabs as descendants of Abraham’s son Ishmael, thus one of the common names for Arabs found in Armenian accounts, “Ismaelites.” After documenting the fall of the Persian Sasanian Empire in 651 to the Muslim Caliph Othman and the submission of some Armenian nobles to the invading Arabs (many of whom shortly thereafter renounced that submission and accepted Byzantine rule), Sebeos ends his history with the crisis of Muslim succession and the assassination of Ali, the event that led to the continued division between Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

Our next Armenian source, the *History of Ghevont Vartabed*, begins with Muhammad and moves swiftly to the Umayyad Caliphs, the first Muslim hereditary dynasty, based in Damascus. He portrays the relations of the Armenian nobles, mostly the Bagratuni and Mamigonian families, with the Umayyad armies in Armenian. The final Umayyad Caliph Merwan had elevated Prince Ashot of the Bagratuni family to a position of prominence, leaving Grigor Mamigonian jealous. But the Arab rulers had their own difficulties, and Ghevont Vartabed recounts the defeat of the Umayyad Caliphs by the Abbasids, the next dynasty of Muslim Caliphs, who would base their rule in Baghdad, in 750. It was under the Abbasid Caliphs that Yazid was appointed a governor of Armenia. During this governorship, as well as under the yoke of another military leader Saleh al-Kindi, Armenians suffered heavily: taxes were heavy and Saleh, Ghevont tells us, “shed a lot of blood” (Paragraph 32).



*Sahak and Hamazasp in bas-relief on the Cathedral of the Holy Cross on the Island of Akhtamar
From Aght'amar (Documents in Armenian Architecture)*

It is shortly after this, in the early years of the Abbasid Caliphate, that Ghevont tells us the story of the martyrdom of the Artsruni princes Sahak and Hamazasp: the Caliph al-Hadi Musa sent Khazm as governor of Armenia, and Khazm met the Artsruni Princes in the city of Dvin, where, envious of them he threw them into prison and through false accusations secured a death sentence against them. When they were given the option to save themselves by converting to Islam, Ghevont tells us that they replied: “God forbid that we should exchange the truth of God for lies, or the eternal life for the temporal, for neither we prefer transitory glories to those eternal, nor do we seek our own little lives instead of Christ, the hope of all” (Paragraph 40). The two valiant brothers, steadfast in their faith in Christ, were martyred on Christmas, January 6, 786.

Recommended Source	Comments
The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos	A translation of the history of “Bishop Sebeos” by Robert Thomson. The first Armenian history to mention Muhammad and Islam. It offers a portrait of the first interactions between Armenians and Muslims.
History of Lewond: The Eminent Vardapet of the Armenians	Picking up where Sebeos leaves off, Ghevont Vartabed carries us through the Umayyad and much of the Abbasid Caliphates. He details strife between different Armenian noble families, economic hardships imposed by Muslim governors, and gives us an account of the martyrs Sahak and Hamazasp Artsruni. Translated by Rev. Zaven Arzoumanian.
The Arab Emirates in Bagratid Armenia	A modern history of the Arab and Armenian connection by Aram Ter Ghewondian, translated by Nina Garsoian. While mostly covering a later period than what we have discussed here, it contains a useful summary of the period under discussion.
The Armenians in the Medieval Islamic World: Paradigms of Interaction (Seventh to Fourteenth Centuries)	A three-volume contemporary history of the interactions between Armenians and the Islamic world by Seta B. Dadoyan. She argues that “Armenian things are also things Near Eastern and must be studied as such,” taking up the task of “the re-conceptualization of the medieval Armenian experience within the context of cultural and political Islam” (1).