

Who is David the Invincible Philosopher?

To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding
Proverbs 1:2

Famously, this verse from the beginning of the Book of Proverbs was the first thing written down in the newly invented Armenian alphabet. Wisdom, *imasdutyun*, is the root of the word for philosophy in Armenian, *imasdasirutyun*, which directly reflects the Greek, meaning “love of wisdom.” After the creation of the Armenian alphabet by Mesrob Masdotz in 405 AD, his students produced a flurry of translation into Armenian. It is this activity of learned translation of edifying works into Armenian that the Armenian Church celebrates this Saturday. We recall the “Holy Translators,” a list that includes Mesrob himself, early writers and translators such as Yeghishe (who wrote the history of St. Vartan), as well as later translators such as Nersess Shnorhali. Among the list of Holy Translators we commemorate this Saturday is one “David the Philosopher.” While his title of philosopher, a lover of wisdom, points to that first moment of translation into Armenian and provides us with a glimpse of the goals and objectives of those translators, he is not as well known a figure as Masdotz, Yeghishe, or Shnorhali. Who is “David the Philosopher,” and why is a philosopher recognized as a holy translator?

Often called “David the Invincible Philosopher,” the figure of David is best known through his texts, which became absolutely central to Armenian literary and philosophical history. He has left us four major texts: two translations and commentaries on works of Aristotle (*Categories* and *Analytics*), a commentary on the neo-Platonist philosopher Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, and perhaps his most well-known work, *Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy*. In these texts, David provided later Armenian authors access to crucial philosophical works of the time. In fact, Aristotle’s *Categories*, collected with other works, including the *Analytics*, were known as the *Organon*, a kind of “Introduction to Logic” textbook that had a profound influence on later Medieval Western philosophy, Arabic philosophers, through to modern logicians. David the Philosopher offered this important philosophical tradition to Armenian readers. Later Armenian writers continued the commentary tradition on Aristotle, though it was the *Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy* by David himself that became the standard philosophy textbook in Armenian for over a millennium. Commentaries were even written on his book!

Recommended Source	Comments
<u>The Life of Mashtots</u>	One of the first pieces of original Armenian literature, written by Koriun, a student of Mesrob Masdotz who provides us with information about the activities of the first “Holy Translators.”
<u>Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy</u>	A translation of David the Invincible Philosopher’s classic by Bridget Kendall and Robert W. Thomson. With an excellent introduction to the text, detailing the traditions about his life and the importance of the text for later Armenian authors.

Davt'i Anhaght' p'ilisop'ayi matenagrutiwnk'	The complete works of David the Invincible Philosopher published by the Mkhitarist monks of Venice. Includes the four works mentioned above, a homily on the Holy Cross, a letter of the Catholicos Giwt I to David. In Armenian.
Lutsmunk' "Storogut'eants'n" Aristotēli	A later commentary on the <i>Categories</i> of Aristotle, by the thirteenth century Armenian philosopher Vahram Rabun. He also wrote a commentary on David's <i>Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy</i> . In Armenian and Russian.

If this gives us a good sense of the magnitude of David the Philosopher's philosophical erudition and importance, we are still less clear about who David was and why he would be included with other Holy Translators such as Masdotz himself. While the commentary and translations of Aristotle might warrant such an inclusion, we should remember that the classical philosophical texts, though crucial to the development of Christian thought, also had to be assimilated into the Christian tradition. In the Christian West, it was Augustine who most famously made the case for the use of classical rhetoric—as long as it was put to Christian purposes. So, it isn't the philosophical work of David that has come down to us in his name that leads him to be included as a Holy Translator. Rather, it is later traditions about his life. So who is David the Invincible Philosopher?

David makes reference, in his *Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy*, to Olympiodorus, a known historical figure and writer who was the head of the famous school of philosophy in Alexandria, Egypt until his death in 570 AD. In fact, Olympiodorus was the last pagan head of the school. Two of his students were Elias and David, who, given the reference in the *Definitions*, should be identified with our Armenian David the Invincible Philosopher. Kendall and Thomson suggest that “there is nothing inherently implausible in an Armenian participating in the scholarly activity of Alexandria in the sixth century,” and indeed many Greek sources identify Armenian students both in Alexandria and other important centers of learning of the Greek-speaking Mediterranean world of the time. This also corresponds to the Armenian tradition, derived in large part from Koriun's work, about Armenians being sent to collect and translate Greek texts. While the mid-sixth century is perhaps the most accurate historical placement for David the Invincible Philosopher, later Armenian writers, inspired by his work, developed the tradition that firmly places in the company of the Holy Translators.

Stepanos of Siunik, who in the 700s is the first Armenian writer to mention David, places him in the second half of the sixth century, which aligns with what we know about him as a student of Olympiodorus. However, the next Armenian writer to name David, Stepanos of Daron, also known as Asoghig, who wrote a well-known history around the year 1000, mentions “David the student of Movses,” that is, the famous historian Movses Khorenatsi. He makes him a companion of Mampre, the brother of Movses Khorenatsi. Together, Mampre and David studied abroad. Placing David the Invincible Philosopher in the circle of Mashdotz's students and the early translators, Stepanos of Daron initiated a tradition about the life of David that would be elaborated upon by many Armenian writers, including St. Nersess Shnorhali, and Stepanos Orbelian, historian and Bishop of Siunik. It is

Orbelian who solidifies David’s position as a “defender of the faith” and companion of the Holy Translators. According to Orbelian, David accompanied not only Mampre, but also Masdotz’s biographer Koriun and the composer of another early Armenian text (*On God*), Eznik of Koghb to Constantinople where they defended orthodoxy at the Council of Chalcedon. By the thirteenth century, then, David the Invincible Philosopher was taken to be a member of the circle of first translators and defenders of Armenian Christian orthodoxy. It is as a result of this tradition that we celebrate “David the Philosopher” along with the other Holy Translators this Saturday.

Recommended Source	Comments
Tiezerakan patmut’yun	The “Universal History” of Stepanos of Daron, known as Asoghik. The first Armenian writer to place David the Philosopher in the company of the early translators. In Armenian.
Patmut’iwn Nahangin Sisakan	The “History of the Province of Sisian [Siunik]” by Archbishop Stepanos Orbelian. He solidifies David as a defender of the faith and member of the circle of Holy Translators. In Armenian.
A Treatise on God	One of the earliest pieces of Armenian literature by Eznik of Koghb, another member of circle of students of Masdotz. It is another important text in the development of Armenian philosophy, and makes use of the mythical beast <i>aralez</i> in exactly the same way that David does.

Whatever the historical veracity of these claims, David the Invincible Philosopher was clearly seen as an important figure for Armenian Christian writers. Perhaps including him in the circle of translators was a way to validate his study of pagan philosophers. Either way, as Holy Translator and as Invincible Philosopher, David’s influence on subsequent Armenian thought has been immense. And even in his extant writings, we can see a fascinating example of his ability as a translator: when dealing with the Greek philosophical tradition, David discusses things that “have no existence (except) so far as they are the product of our thought.” Instead of using a Greek example to explain this idea, he gives an example from Armenian mythology, the *aralez*, a fantastical dog-like creature who could revive the dead by licking them. Movses Khorenatsi tells us of Queen Semiramis, who tried convince the *aralez* to resurrect the Armenian king Ara the Beautiful. Eznik of Koghb also uses the *aralez* as an example for a concept that does not exist except in our thoughts. Using Armenian mythology to help explain Greek philosophy is also a form of translation! Check out the Zohrab Information Center’s Instagram account, [@zohrabcenter](#), to see a picture of the mythical *aralez* from an illustrated Armenian manuscript.