

## **St. Nerses Shnorhali's historical poem "Lament of Edessa"**

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The paper is dedicated to the peak of the literary work of the notable Armenian spiritual worker of the Middle Ages, the outstanding poetik work of NersesShnorhali (1101-1173) - the poem "Edesa Lament" imbued with a patriotic spirit, written at the request of Apirat, the nephew of N. Shnorhali, theyewitnessof the defeat of the city of Edessa: in 1144. by deception and with extreme cruelty it was conquered by the amir of the city of Mosul, ImadeddinZangi.

The introduction gives a brief idea of the placeof theliterary genre Voghb, or lament, in ancient Armenian literature. The core of the report will be the characteristics of the theme, composition and imagery of the poem.

A closer description of the collective main character - the widow Edessa, who laments her misery in Shnorhali's poem, remembers the times of prosperity, curses the cruel opponent, inviting Christians all over the world to mourn with her, hoping that salvation will come through the next Crusade.

It was a difficult period in the history of Armenia, when it had lost its statehood and independence in a large part of its former territory, many were forced to migrate to the Southeast of the Byzantine Empire: Haiku Minor, Northern Assyria and Cilicia. Shnorhali has also documented the struggle of the Armenians for their existence and the restoration of their statehood through artistic means, and has increased the Armenian patriotic spirit in the hope that the scattered people will one day be able to return to their homeland.

Turning to the Great Armenia, Edesa, the main character, recalls the great past of Armenia, the lost city of Ani, Vagharshapat, drawing parallels with the prosperity and destruction she experienced.

*In the XII century... when the Armenian people began to breathe more freely in Kilikia, two great people stood out, two great and yet humble souls--Nerses of Lambron and Nerses Schnorhali -- one of the greatest poets of the Armenian Church.(Rainis, 1983, p.500)*

Shnorhali lived (died 1173) and acted about a century and a half after St. Grigor of Narek (*died 1010*). His imagery is based on the Bible and the ancient Armenian literary tradition of the previous stage. But Schnorhali was also an innovator who enriched the forms and themes of Armenian poetry.

The best-known part of Nerses Snorhali's literary heritage so far have been prayers and liturgical hymns created in the context of various liturgical celebrations.e.g. “*Aravot Louso*” (“*Առավոտ լուսոյ*”: *Morning of Light*) a collection of prayers for the sunrise service vespers. *Both great poets and composers St. Gregory of Narek and IV Šnorhal i Catolicos Nersess have enriched Armenian Liturgy.*(Rainis, 1983, p. 494)

The first translation of Šnorhali into Latvian was carried out by Latvian folk poet Rainis, including in his 1900 article "The Most Unhappy Land and Nation" devoted to Armenian history and literature.

To quote Rainis further:

*It is mainly **church literature**{..} We find this spiritual Armenian poetry bright, so colorful, and fantastic that we would never imagine comparing it with our spiritual literature, which would be completely impossible. Ours then lose so much that they are left to regret (Rainis, 1983, p.494)*

After these words, Rainis cites an excerpt from the Shnorhalis morning prayer.

We need to take a brief look at the lamentation ‘**vogh**’ in Armenian tradition. The genre of lamentation is rooted in the folk tradition that eminent literary scholar Manuk Abeghyan (Մանուկ Աբեղյան) writes about when talking about a folk epic “Vipasanq” and the “Persian War”.

Weeping songs were composed and sung by professional mourners at funeral ceremonies. In the explanatory dictionary of Stepanos Malhasyanc (Ստեփան ու Մալխասյանց), we read:

**Dzaynarku** [Լագ ու ողբի ձայները արձակող \(կին\)](#), [լայական կին](#):▶ [Ջայնարկունները](#)

[Կրկնում էին ողբի մօտ կամ եղերամօտ ողբի բառերն ու լազ ու կոճ անում](#) (*Weeping and lamenting (woman) woman. They repeated the words of a mother of wailing or wailing and weeping.*) (St. Malkhsyanc, 1944, p.159)

The testimony of this tradition has also been preserved in the ancient Armenian literature and language. The historical writer Pavstos Buzand expressively describes the mourning of Gnell's widow Parandzem (P. Buzand, 1987, IV, 15).

*Oghb is often used to describe a type of Armenian poetry that is characterized by **its mournful tone and themes of loss and sorrow.**(...)*

The first literary work on this subject in ancient Armenian literature, on this subject is poem of 7th century poet Davtak Kertogh (Դավթակ Էրթող) "Elegy on the Death of the Great Prince Jevansher ", dedicated to the first Sassanid prince of Caucasian Albania, who accepted Christianity and was murdered. Although it deals **with a secular topic**, the text is permeated by religious themes influenced by spiritual poetry. The imagery is based on the Bible, as it was customary.

Shnorhalis poem "**Voghb Edesiyo**" opens a new literary genre in Armenian literature: a historical poem colored by patriotic feelings, created as an image of real historical events, written at the request of Apirat, the nephew of N. Shnorhali, an eyewitness of the defeat of the city of Edessa in 1144: by deception and with extreme cruelty, it was conquered by the amir of the city of Mosul, Imadeddin Zangi.

*Imadeddin Zangi was appointed governor of Mosul in 1127, taking Halep the following year, and actually laying the groundwork for the united Islamic State of Syria, which became a deadly adversary of the crusade for their existence. In 1144, Zangi overtook the city of Edesia by devastating her, two years later, when Zangi was killed by conspirators, the*

*Franks tried to take the city back, but they didn't succeed.* (Անանուն եղեսացի ի ժամանակագրություն /Յայկական ՍՍՀ ԳԱ հրատարակչություն, 1982 ) [Անանուն Եղեսացի. Ժամանակագրություն - Համահայկական թուանշային գրադարան \(sci.am\)](#) Skatits

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In Shnorhali's poem life in peacetime is contrasted with the ravages of wartime cruelty. *He vividly describes the month-long fierce struggle of the defenders of Edessa against foreign invaders.* (M. Abeghyan, p. 397) This is followed by deep mourning for the devastated, plundered city, and slaughtered, captive inhabitants.

*Beginning in the seventh century, most Eastern Churches faced with the threat of the aggressively expanding Islam* (Hans Juergen Feulner, p.159)

The collective main character - the widow Edessa appeals to Christians around the world.

A poem begins with pathetic, laudatory description in a metaphorical vein of the four seats of God in: **four heavenly rivers (of Paradise)**, irrigating the universe with the name of the Divine, which contributed to the emergence of the first centers of Christianity.

***Nakh aradjin dzez barabarrim***

***arpiap'payl yev hrashali***

***Choreqkerpicn nmaneal***

***Yerkri at'orraq yerknavori***

***Vor eq bkhumn astvatsayin***

***I yaghberen Adenayi*** (5-7row)

Edessa's appeal to the first centers of Christianity: she recalls their importance in the spread of Christianity and requests to mourn with her.

The widow Edesa first turns to **Jerusalem**, from «where the Light of Christ comes», and invites her to mourn with her.

Then - to the mother of cities **Rome** («gerapaytsarr»), there is Big Peter's seat: a church built on a rock ( Jon. 1, 42) and there the apostle Paul («vine watered with blood») and his divine friend chronicler Lucas acted.

After that she speaks to the distributor of Christianity in Armenia the apostle **Tadey** with words «**lac end lacoghs**»(*Cry with me — who weeps*) and invites not only to mourn but to rush to help. «**Dzernn mato vaghvaghaki**» (...)

Then the widow Edesa invites Constantinople, described as the **second Jerusalem, New Rome** "**zarmanali-miraculous, makraguin tegh**" to "*humbly listen to her crying voice*", because Edesa herself was once a mighty city, but is now devastated, empty. She compares herself to an owl in Psalm 101.(«**vorpes bu haveraki**»)

Then the widow stands at the gates of **Alexandria**, the capital of Egypt, so that to remind Alexandria of its **Christian past**. The evangelist Mark worked also here, who was compared to the heavenly seedling above the Earth. Her clergy have been compared to the mighty cedars of Lebanon. The Church Fathers persecuted apostates here. Alexandria herself was also compared to a widow. There is a call to take revenge on the aliens for their difficult fate, although the reason for this is explained in a purely Christian spirit. God's punishment is to chastize her for her accumulated burden of sins.

Edessa asks to listen to the wailing voice of **Antioch** - a prominent center of Christianity in Northern Assyria, where Lucas writes his Gospel. Abode of the Apostles, according to Matthew's Gospel. She reproaches her "beloved sister in good times" for her lack of support: "*Why didn't you protect me from behind?*"

Finally, Edessa turns to the once great Armenian cities Vagharshapat( Chapter with rhetorical question follow : "Where are now ?" [ ur en hima], that recalls the father of Armenian history, Movses Khoreaci' (Մովսէս Խորենացի) famous "Voghb". Biblical reminiscences are associated with the wedding house and feasts. Following M.Khorenaci, Shnorhali considers the Armenian ruler Abgar the founder of Edessa. The origin of the Armenians is associated with the son of Noah, Habet. She recalls the great antiquity of Armenia, the Parthian Arshakid dynasty, who were once neighbors of Edessa.

*«The city of Vagharshapat was founded during the reign of the Arshacid king Vagharsh I (r. 117-140 CE). Although it was the capital city of Armenia for a time, the city's fortunes declined as it was attacked and destroyed during the [Sasanid](#) invasions of 368-369 CE. The city, however, remained prosperous due to its ideal position in the [trade](#) routes between the [Roman Empire](#) and Sasanid [Persia](#).» [Etchmiadzin Cathedral - World History Encyclopedia](#) [skat.*

26.02.2024]

Shnorhali figuratively describes the time when Armenians adopted Christianity: "*You gave birth to sons in Babtisteria, breastfed, with life-giving blood. Teach me to mourn with dignity.*"

**"Voghbal"** in that way points to Armenian wounds, suffering. If Armenian legends and historians are to be believed, Jesus Christ appeared to Saint Gregory the Illuminator in a vision, requesting that a cathedral be built within the ancient city. In the vision, Jesus Christ showed the exact spot where the proposed structure should lie, striking the ground with a golden hammer in his hands. (Y. Petrosyan, 2001, p.11)

*Construction of Etchmiadzin Cathedral began around c. 303 CE. The cathedral was dedicated in turn to the Virgin Mary, and aptly named "Etchmiadzin" or "the descent (ichnel) of the only begotten (miatsin). .»*

[Etchmiadzin Cathedral - World History Encyclopedia](#) [skat. 26.02.2024]

Then Edesa speaks to the once rich, prosperous city of the East, **Ani**, the capital of Armenia's Bagratids, and invites her to share her grief "masnakic linel". The 3 letters of her name in the interpretation of Shnorhali implicitly express the secret of the Trinity.

The metaphor of growth is richly used to depict the flourishing times of the city: it is compared to a vineyard, a fruit-bearing fig tree. Happy children have been compared to a garden scented in smells.

Ani was «**cankali**», «**vayeludj hars qoghatsatsk**» = fair, all-coveted bride with a covered cheek, which was talked about near and far.

Now there is nothing left of its luxurious churches. The ancient glory faded like a dream.

The literary scholar Manuk Abeghyan characterises the way how Shnorhali depicts the ongoing struggle: *"To begin with, he (Shnorhali) reports relatively calmly about*

*the Arab attacks that debilitate Edessa, but when he comes to the conquest of Edessa, he fills with hatred for the inhuman conquerors and portrays their actions and atrocities in thickened colors. The scene follows the scene. Words of encouragement, exclamations, despair from the defenders alternate with cruel scenes of battle. A horrible assailing ensues."* (M.Abeghyan, p.397)

M.Abeghyan highly appreciated Shnorhali's poetic mastery in portraying the barbaric way of waging war in the Middle Ages. The siege of the city, the struggle of the inhabitants against the attackers, the massacre of the population, the massacre just like that the historian Aristakes Lastiverci has described the picture of the fall of Ani in 1064.

Edessa, the mother who lost her sons, curses the assailant Zengie.

According to the M. Abaghyan in his «History of Ancient Armenian Literature», author himself is a truly Christian man, a poet with a sensitive soul who remains faithful to his realistic style. Snorhali associates the unhappy fate of Edessa, like the fate of Armenia, with the accumulated burden of sins and God's just punishment, and the curses are placed in the mouth of a desperate woman who a little further into the text becomes gentle when she talks about her dead children, who will always be alive in her heart and will surely go to heaven. (M.Abeghyan, p. 400-401)

Snnorhalis poetic talent is brightly visible: gloomy events are depicted figuratively, vividly, accurately, poetic lines run smoothly, in masterfully string uniform rhymes that would be almost impossible to reproduce in other languages, e.g., such as Latvian.



Let's consider a few to be more clarifying: the ending -i in Ancient Armenian is multifunctional.

- Productive noun ending in genitive –i,
- productive adjective ending –li
- verb ending in the past in the singular 1st person –i, i holovum

Nersess Shnorhali uses a wide arsenal of means of artistic expression: The text is rich in assonances(arrdzaynuyth), alliterations(baghadzaynuit), e.g.,

*Arbucanel ztiyezers/*

*avetaber bkhmamb bani*

*ar vors khosim aghersali*

*douq lseceq laloys dzyni* (9., 10. row)

Compound "avetaber " is built from nomen Avetis + verb berel. Meaning: "The One Who bears, spreads the Good News".

Nersess Shnorhali creates more new words, semantically significant variations. Semantic item "mourning" is widely represented in the lexicon of the poem: **Voghb, voghbal**, compound «**vogbasacuthyun**»; adjectives with affix **-kic**: «**sgakic linel**» , «**voghbakic linel**», such expressions as:**Lur imoys darrn dzayni!** (Hear the voice of my cry), «**lac end lacoghs**» (Cry with me — who weeps), «hmut laleac bani».

## Conclusions

For the first in Armenian literature, patriotic ideas were expressed in ideas in poetic form, awakening national self-confidence and hope that the nation scattered in the world of

historical cataclysms will one day return home and experience prosperity. Poem is dedicated to real political events. The attacks of Arab that debilitate Edessa, the conquest of Edessa are described expressively. Life in peacetime is contrasted with the ravages of wartime cruelty. Deep mourning for the devastated, looted city, slaughtered , captive inhabitants. There is a call to take revenge on aliens for her difficult fate, although the reason for this is explained in a purely Christian spirit. The lyrical hero is personified in the poem - the poem was written by "**dimarrnuthyan dzevov**". Snorhali created a bright realistic image of a mother that has lost her children.

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