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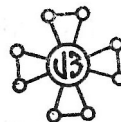
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THE ARMENIANS — By Sirarpie Der Nersessian. London, Thomas & Hudson, Ancient Peoples and Places Series, Vol, 68. 219 pages, including plates, figures, maps and bibliography.*

Sirarpie Der Nersessian is perhaps the foremost expert on Armenian art today, and has probably done more than anyone else to make the subject known to the scholarly and interested public. In this volume, however, she treats us to more than an introduction to Armenian art. In the confines of a relatively small volume (the actual text runs just over 150 pages), she has produced the best single introduction to the culture of the Armenians yet published.

The Armenians have been often compared with the Jews for the similarity of their fates — exile, persecution and the attendant evils — but it is not primarily with such matters that this volume deals. It opens with three chapters tracing the history of the Armenians from the time when they appear on the stage of history in the first millenium B. C. E., through the stormy history of the Armenian monarchy (or should one say monarchies, for independence was gained and lost over and over), through the establishment of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, at the time of the Crusades, and its final fall to the Mamelukes of Egypt in the 14th century.

In this, if you will, there is a similarity with the Jews, for, like E-retz Yisrael, Armenia was a highly strategic area, hotly contested by its larger neighbours: first the Romans and the Parthians, then the Byzantines and the Sassanians, and then Arabs, the Mongols and the 14th century invasion by Timurlane which finally put an end to Armenian independence in any form.

This history is a fascinating one, for the Armenians held a central position between empires, and its implications are little known. For example, during the 9th and 10th centuries, many Armenians, due to the disruptions caused by continual warfare in Armenia, moved to the various provinces of the Byzantine Empire. These Armenians came to hold very eminent positions in the Byzantine administration and army. Indeed, some modern historians refer to the 9th and 10th centuries as the Græco-Armenian period, for most of the Byzantine emperors and chief figures of the administration were Armenians at this time.

But the role of the Armenians in the Byzantine Empire, as interesting a subject as it is, is a byway, for the story laid before us by Professor Der Nersessian is that of the stubborn fight of the Armenians for their national independence and identity against outside forces. And this story is one of valour and strength of national will.

* This review first appeared in the Supplement of "The Jerusalem Post", December 4, 1970. It is here reprinted by kind permission of the Editor of "The Jerusalem Post".

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Yet the book does not limit itself to political history; indeed, the historical section is only part of the story. The culture of the Armenians receives, justly, great attention in the book. That very situation which led to the political vicissitudes — the position of Armenia between empires — meant, too, that the Armenians were in contact with various and differing cultures, and absorbed a great deal from all of them. Yet, equally significant is the fact that all that they absorbed was not parroted, but rather received the individual stamp of Armenian creativity.

Armenian culture was, during the whole period under discussion, largely a religious culture. The very alphabet was invented in the 5th century to answer the needs of the Church. Armenia, according to tradition, had already been the recipient of Apostolic preaching; but it was only in the first decade of the 4th century, with the conversion of King Tiridates by St. Gregory the Illuminator, that Armenia became a Christian nation, indeed the first Christian nation. Yet, for another 100 years all the ritual of the church was carried out either in Greek or in Syriac, for there was no alphabet for the writing of the Armenian language. In the latter part of the 4th century, great pressures were being exerted on the church, among others by the Zoroastrian religion, official religion of the Iranian Empire. In response to this situation the alphabet was invented, and Armenian became a written language.

It must have been a highly developed language of oral literature long before, for when it started to be written, the literature produced was not simple fumbings of writers trying to force a colloquial medium into a literary mold. On the contrary, the literature written in Armenian during the first 50 years after the development of the alphabet is of such quality that this period is called "The Golden Age of Armenian Literature."

In this period, two major literary activities were undertaken. The first was the translation into Armenian of works of Greek and Syriac literature. The very first book published in Armenian was the Bible, and this was followed by liturgical books, by theology, and later by philosophy, science, medicine and all the major areas of human knowledge of the time. And this process of translation continued through the centuries. Later we find translations from Arabic, from Latin and from the other major cultural languages.

The Golden Age also saw the start of written composition in Armenian. Fragments are preserved by various of the Armenian historians of the epic poems which were sung in Armenia before the invention of writing. These generally tell of the pagan gods of Armenia or extoll its heroes. But one of the great glories of Armenian literature is its historians. The first historical works were written in the Golden Age, a tradition which continued down to recent centuries. There was also a good deal of theological and religious writing, and philosophical texts (Aristotle was a favourite), medical, geographical and other works are to be found.

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The chapters dealing with architecture, sculpture and painting are of particular interest, for here, above all, Miss Der Nersessian is in her speciality. She traces for us the development of each of these plastic arts from its beginnings down to the end of the Cilician period. Also remarkable is the status achieved by the Armenians in architecture and painting, particularly. Theirs was not merely a provincial offshoot of Byzantine art, but — although based on Byzantine and even pre-Byzantine models — an independent artistic tradition bearing the stamp of Armenian creativity.

These chapters in particular are enriched by the numerous photographs and many drawings and figures, which are to be found through the text.

This is a book from which both the specialist and the interested general reader can profit and enjoy. The rich bibliography and the index enhance its usefulness.

MICHAEL E. STONE

