

Elishē. *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*. Trans. Robert W. Thomson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Elishē's *History of Vardan and the Armenian War* is a work of classical Armenian literature about fifth-century Christian Armenians' resistance to the religious persecution of the Sassanians.¹ In particular, Elishē's work is a narration of the events surrounding the Armenian revolt of 450/451 against Sassanian rule and the consequent fate of the Armenian prisoners in Iran.² Originally written in classical Armenian, the *History* is "a conscious and sophisticated interpretation of events that took place in the fifth century in an Iranian setting as viewed through the eyes of a Christian."³

The historical events described in the *History* began with the start of Sassanian domination of Armenia during the Marzpanate period in the fifth century. Sassanian rule purportedly did not begin well for the Armenians, who revolted repeatedly.⁴ The issue at hand was religion which, according to prevailing political theory at both the Byzantine and Sassanian courts, viewed political loyalty as inseparable from religious conformity.⁵ Matters came to a head during the reign of the Persian king Yazdgrid II and his Prime Minister Mihr-Narseh, who was a zealous believer in Zoroastrianism. The result was an open armed rebellion led by Armenian magnate and General Vardan Mamikonean.⁶

¹ Robert W. Thomson, introduction to *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, by Elishē, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 2.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 1.

⁴ Nina Garsoïan, "The Marzpanate (428-652)," in *The Armenian People From Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian, 2 vols. (New York: St. Martin's Press), 95.

⁵ Ibid., 96.

⁶ Ibid., 100.

Although the rebellion began well for the Armenians with their route of the Persians in the summer of 450, they were ultimately defeated the following summer by a large Persian army consisting of an elite corps of the "immortals" and a contingent of elephants.⁷ During this battle, which took place on 2 June in the region of Artaz, Vardan was killed along with the majority of the Armenian nobility.⁸ Many of the surviving supporters of Vardan were then deported and imprisoned, and the leaders of the clerical opposition were martyred in Persia.⁹ However, a new *marzpan*, or governor, was sent to Armenia in 451 along with a more tolerant policy and the prisoners were eventually released.¹⁰ According to UCLA's Robert W. Thomson, early Armenian literature specialist and translator of Elishē's *History*, there is no mention of the events of the Armenian revolt of 450/451 in any non-Armenian sources.¹¹

Despite the fact that Elishē claims to have been an eyewitness to these events,¹² there is currently debate over when the history was actually written. The fact that other Armenian histories have been written by men falsely claiming to be eyewitnesses has raised doubts as to whether Elishē was actually a contemporary of the revolt. Instead, Thomson places the writing of Elishē's *History* during the last decade of the sixth century (or later) and argues that the *History* is an interpretation of an event, "in which the speeches, letters, and edicts play an effective literary role and are not to be taken as

⁷ Ibid., 100.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Thomson, introduction to *History of Vardan and the Armenian War* by Elishē, 3.

¹² Elishē, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, 59.

verbatim reports."¹³ Along with this confusion as to when the *History* was written comes confusion about Elishē himself. Thomson refers to Elishē as "the most elusive of all Armenian historical writers,"¹⁴ and indeed most of what is "known" about Elishē belongs more in the realm of myth rather than biography.

According to Thomson, Armenian literature is valuable because of the information it contains on Armenian social and political history, Armenian theology and art history, and information about the peoples and cultures that the Armenians came into contact with.¹⁵ Despite the current conjecture that Elishē was not an eyewitness to the events of 450/451, and despite modern confusion as to whom exactly Elishē was, the *History of Vardan and the Armenian War* remains an important historical work. No small part of this importance is due to the fact that Vardan and the Armenian war is not mentioned in any non-Armenian source.¹⁶ However, the *History* of Elishē has also been quoted for other reasons besides his description of Vardan and the Armenian war. For example, Mkhit'ar Gosh quotes Elishē in his thirteenth-century compilation of secular law as evidence for the different ranks of the church.¹⁷ Finally, Thomson notes that "[s]ome stress has been placed on Elishē's work as an interpretive history. It is because of that particular outlook on a revolt that went unnoticed outside Armenia that Elishē has

¹³ Thomson, introduction to *History* by Elishē, 27, 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 41.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3. The other Armenian source which mentions Vardan and the Armenian war is the *History* of Lazar P'arpets'i.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

continued to be read and to exert an influence on later Armenian literature, art, and thought."¹⁸

¹⁸ Ibid., 29.