

## Persia and Persians in Raffi's *Xamsayi Melik'utiwnnerə*

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### Abstract

This paper takes into consideration the image of Persia and Persians in Raffi's *Xamsayi melik'utiwnnerə*. It is not a literary work, but a kind of history of Լարաբալ/Arc'ax, especially of the Armenian nobility of that region, the so-called *meliks*. During almost the whole period described by Raffi—1600-1827—Լարաբալ was part of the Persian empire, although in a position of strong autonomy. Therefore it is not surprising that we find in *Xamsayi melik'utiwnnerə* many remarkable considerations about Persia and Persians, obviously according to the peculiar ideological perspective of Raffi. As a matter of fact, the western-minded Armenian writer often addresses to the Persians the “orientalist” biases of “religious fanaticism”, “cruelty” and “barbarism”. Nevertheless his text provides an interesting description of the secular relations between Persia and the Armenians, mainly but not only those of Լարաբալ, in the fields of politics, religion and customs. *Xamsayi melik'utiwnnerə* can also be considered an important evaluation of the transition from the Persian influence to the Russian one undergone by Eastern Armenia in XVIII-XIX centuries. In spite of his warm, but not uncritical, support to the Tsarist conquest of Transcaucasia, Raffi was indeed able to give a multisided picture of this process.

### Keywords

Armeno-Persian Relations, Armenian Nobility, History of Լարաբալ/Arc'ax, Russian Empire, Russian Orientalism

### RAFFI AND THE MELIK'S OF ԼԱՐԱԲԱԼ

Raffi (Yakob Melik'-Yakobean, 1835-1888) is one of the most famous Armenian writers.<sup>1</sup> My paper will take into consideration some aspects of his attitude towards Persia and Persians, which is an interesting page of a millenary relation (on this topic see Zekiyan 2005).

First of all we have to remember that he was born near Salmast, in north-western Persia, and spent there his youth. Later, he visited Persia in 1857-58 and,

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<sup>1</sup> For a first approach to this author see (1937), *Raffi (Yakob Melik'-Yakobean). Keank', grakanut'iwne, yišolut'iwnerə*, Paris.; *Hay nor grakanut'yan patmut'yun*, III, Erevan, 1964: 327-420; Čanašean 1973: 86-94; Bardakjian 2000: 144-148.

on the occasion, wrote a *Trip to Persia* (*Čanaparhordut'awn Parskastani*) and a collection of articles about Persia and the Armenians—*A letter from Tabriz* (*Namak Davrežic'*)—whose ethnographical value has recently been studied (Petrosyan 2007). My presentation does not deal with these texts or the literary works devoted by Raffi to the Armenians in Persia, but I'm taking into account the image of the Persians we can find in another text of this author, i.e. *Xamsayi melik'ut'iwinnerə. 1600-1827. Niwt'er hayoc' nor patmut'ean hamar*.

*Xamsayi melik'ut'iwinnerə* is something like a history of Łarabał/Arc'ax, especially of the Armenian nobility of that region, the so-called *meliks* (*melik'ner*).<sup>2</sup> As part of a work in progress of mine on Armenian nobility in modern times,<sup>3</sup> I prepared an Italian translation of this text (Raffi 2008).<sup>4</sup>

Although from a historical point of view, this work is largely obsolete contains a number of mistakes, it can be extremely useful in illustrating not only the history of this region, but also an important page of modern Armenian self-consciousness.

One must consider *Xamsayi melik'ut'iwinnerə* within the ideological frame of Raffi, who was persuaded that the political rebirth of Armenia could not be achieved through the intervention of the great powers, but only by the autonomous action of the people. Such an action, however, depended in his opinion on a large work of self-education, mostly of historical nature. In this sense *Xamsayi melik'ut'iwinnerə* is strictly connected with Raffi's historical novels: indeed, the building of a modern Armenian nation needed a deep consciousness of the past. From this point of view, the *meliks* of Łarabał, who still in the eighteenth century conserved a remarkable political and military role, were very important in Raffi's

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<sup>2</sup> A part from Raffi's *Xamsayi melik'ut'iwinnerə. 1600-1827. Niwt'er hayoc' nor patmut'ean hamar*, in Tsarist period this topic has been studied by Beknazareanc' A. (1886); Kostaneanc' A. (1913); Tēr-Mkrtč'ean K. (1914). Among the few works dedicated to the *melik's* in Soviet time see Barxudaryan S. (1967) and Sargsyan M. (1987). In the West Hewsens R. H. published a number of articles to this subject, see Hewsens 1972; idem 1973-74; idem 1975-76; idem 1980; idem 1981-82; idem 1984. In contemporary Armenia, besides the monograph of Łulyan A. (2001), Małalyan A. has devoted to this topic some articles, see Małalyan 2003; idem 2003a; idem 2004; idem 2004a; idem 2005; idem 2006; idem 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See also my translation of the XVIII century chronicle about Dawit' Bėk written in Venice by the Mekhitarist Łukas Sebastac'i (Sebastac'i 1997). Later on I devoted to this topic some articles and a monograph, see Ferrari 2004; idem 2004a; idem 2006; idem 2007; idem 2009; idem 2011a.

<sup>4</sup> A Russian translation of this text has been published in 1991 (*Melikstva Chamsy*, Erevan), while in 2010 an English one appeared, see Raffi 2010.

“ideological use of history” (Sarkisyanz 1985: 99). Besides, as his true name (Melik'-Yakobean) seems to show, Raffi descended from a family of the eastern Armenian nobility (Hewsen 1972: 308).

During the summer of 1881, Raffi left T'iflis—where he lived as most part of the eastern Armenian *intelligencija*—and travelled for two months in Ęarabał. He visited almost all the region and collected a multitude of written documents and oral reports concerning the *meliks*. In 1882 he published *Xamsayi melik'ut'iwnnerə* in the newspaper “Mšak”.

#### PERSIA UNDER RAFFI'S EYES

This text is interesting in many ways. Raffi takes into account the persistence of an indigenous nobility, gives a critical evaluation of the Armenian Church, examines the Armenian relations with Russia and the Muslim peoples and, finally, produces a fascinating representation of Persia and the Persians. We have to remember that during almost the whole period described by Raffi—1600-1827—Ęarabał was part of the Persian Empire, although in a position of large autonomy. Therefore it is not surprising that many a remarkable consideration about Persia and the Persians can be found in *Xamsayi melik'ut'iwnnerə*.

First of all, Raffi recognizes that the legitimacy of *melik's* power came from Persia:

*In the last centuries instead of the ancient naxarar houses appeared the melik's, whose power was more legally sanctioned by Šah Abbas (1603). Unlike his predecessors, this creative Persian king understood the relations with the foreign subjects in a wholly different way and allowed them to be ruled by their representatives. So he succeeded in strengthening the inner cohesion of the State. Šah Abbas was the first to confirm the title of melik' that the Armenian princes had used since ancient times. Thus, he also rewarded the Armenian melik's for the important services rendered to him at the time of his victory over the Ottomans (Raffi 1987: 417).*

A century later, their position was recognized also by Nadir-Šah. Raffi remarks that

*... The Armenians, who chased off the Ottomans with the sword from their fatherland, greatly helped Nadir's victory (ibid.: 442).*

The new Persian king did not forget Armenian *melik's* services and, unlike Christian—i.e. Russian—emperors he rewarded them. Once he ascended the throne, Nadir-Šah

*... confirmed them in their domains and gave each of them the right to rule autonomously in their countries, paying an annual fixed tribute. Since then the melik's were subject only to the šah... (ibid.: 442, 444).*

In *Xamsayi melik'ut'iwnnwə* Raffi points out that the Armenians were often in good terms with the Persians. For example, the *melik'* of Łarabał usually had friendly relations to the khans of Ganjak. About one of them, Šahverdi-xan, Raffi writes that he

*... was a good hearted man, as often were the khans of Ganjak. He was of Persian, not Turkish origin. And the Persians proved themselves comparitavly more benevolent toward the Christians than the wild Turks-Mongols (ibid.: 466).*

As a matter of fact, among the Muslim peoples Raffi considers the Persians much more civilized than the Turks. The cooperation between Armenians and Persians has been indeed lasting and profitable for both. Still at the eve of the Russian conquest of Transcaucasia, the heir to Persian throne, Abas-Mirza, considered the Armenians a useful element of Persia:

*Therefore he wanted to improve their situation and granted them several privileges. His father, the good and philanthropic Fatali-šah, shared this benevolence and during his reign the Armenians of Persia could live in an enviable situation. As Šah Abas the Great founded in Isfahan the companies of Armenian merchants to promote Persian commerce, so Abas-Mirza kept Armenian merchants, who used his own capital. He also strengthened the Armenian melik's by granting them rights and honours in order to make the Armenian population of the region safer against the abuses of the Muslim governors. Besides, Abas-Mirza knew well the strong connection of the Armenians with their Church and clergy; thus he not only began to lessen the religious persecution of the Christians, but even tried to sustain and ensure Christendom. Abas-Mirza frequented Christian churches and attended the Armenian religious feasts, thus showing with his personal example that Armenian worship was highly respectable. At the time of Abas-Mirza the bells of the Armenian churches could ring again, where as previously it had been forbidden.*

*... Abas-Mirza and his predecessors appreciated the Armenians not only as farmers, merchants and craftsmen, but also for their military and administrative qualities.... Many Armenians attained high military ranks, ruled whole regions as viceroys, served in the diplomacy, controlled the treasury and even looked after the Šah's harem (ibid.: 593).*

In this point of *Xamsayi melik'ut'iwnnerə* Raffi inserts also an extremely long note in which he enumerates many Armenians who distinguished themselves in the Persian empire (Raffi 1987: 593-595). Raffi finally remarks that

*... the line of conduct of Abas-Mirza had his political aims. He desperately tried to bind Armenian hearts to Persia, cooling their sympathy toward Russia. Nevertheless, apart from his political aims Abas-Mirza's benevolence toward the Armenians is unquestionable (ibid.: 593).*

However, this benevolent policy of the late Persian Empire could not dissuade many Armenians from backing the Russians. One should not forget that the Russian conquest of Transcaucasia depended also on Armenian demand, since Israyēl Ōri's first famous mission to Moscow in 1701 (Johannissjan 1913; K'iwrtēan 1960; Essefian 1972). Also in the time of the Persian expedition of Peter the Great (1721-22) several *melik'* and the *kat'olikos* of Ganjasar backed the Russians and began the so-called Armenian Liberation Movement.<sup>5</sup>

According to Raffi,

*... In the face of the dissolution of Persia, the melik's of Ęarabał decided to exploit the situation. Until then they had considered themselves Persian subjects, but then they tried to reverse this yoke to build an independent Armenian state (Raffi 1987: 430).*

So, in spite of the large self-government of the *melik's* and the already mentioned good terms with the Persians, Raffi calls their domination "a yoke". Why? Although we can't consider him a devout Christian such a definition partially depends on religious and moral considerations. For example Raffi severely blames Melik'-Šahnazar of Varanda not only for helping P'anah-xan in building a Muslim Khanate in Ęarabał, but also for being influenced by Persian customs. In Chapter XI he writes that

*... Melik'- Šahnazar was a completely immoral man who followed Persian customs and had many concubines ... So doing, he introduced in his house the polygamy of the Muslims. Such a behavior deeply offended the religious feelings of the people and made him odious to the other meliks of Ęarabał (ibid.: 452).*

The Muslim religion of the Persians is for Raffi a tremendous barrier between them and the Armenians. He often highlights the religious fanaticism of the Persians, who from this point of view are considered to be even more intolerant than the Turks. For example, according to Raffi, P'anah-xan was morally better than his son, Ibrahim-xan, because he had preserved the simplicity of his (Turkish) stock. On the contrary, Ibrahim-xan

*... had been educated in Persia where he had learned all the fanaticism of the Muslim religion (ibid.: 496).*

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<sup>5</sup> On this remarkable episode of modern Armenian history see Arutjunjan 1954; Aivazian 1997.

The religious fanaticism of the Persians is stigmatized also in the chapter devoted to the cruel execution of the young Safareli-Bēk, who had murdered Aḷa-Mamad, the founder of the Qajar dynasty:

*The Armenians [of Tabriz], who knew that he was the son of Christians and believed in Christ, asked his body for burial. The Persian dignitaries told them that they could bury his body according to their contemptible rite. Indeed, they considered the burial according to the Armenian rite more shameful than being fed to the animals (ibid.: 526).*

Therefore, in Raffi's perspective, Armenians could certainly be in good terms with Persians on the basis of personal links but only in spite of their respective religion. As a matter of fact, Raffi considered Islam a fanatical and oppressive religion, but at the same time he blamed the Armenian Church for passivity, lack of culture and insufficient national spirit (Bardakjian 2000: 145; Ferrari 2010). For Raffi, who was indeed a progressive intellectual deeply influenced by Russian radicalism, the basic questions of his time didn't have religious, but cultural character. So, when in chapter XXXVIII he writes that after the Russian conquest of Transcaucasia

*... for the Armenians began a new life: the Persian tyranny ... gave way to a Christian state (Raffi 1987: 539).*

we ought to understand his thought correctly. Russia was a Christian country, but first of all a European and modern state. According to Raffi, while Persia was an Asian, Eastern and backward country, Russia represented for the Armenians a model of Western progress and development.<sup>6</sup>

From this point of view Raffi's description of the last Russo-Persian war (1826-1827) is very interesting. As a matter of fact the result of that war was the complete Tsarist conquest of Eastern Armenia, which for centuries had been a Persian domination. In the *Xamsayi melik'ut'iwinnerə* the main hero of the Russo-Persian war is General Madat'ov, an Armenian from Łarabał. Raffi describes his victory near Šamk'or as a kind of colonial battle:

*His [Madat'ov's] threatening name, that had already become legendary among the Muslims, sufficed to terrify them. Besides, in his military operations he resorted to tricks, which strongly impressed the imagination of the Orientals (arm. arewelk'c'iner). Like Homer's heroes, who built a huge wooden horse to conquest Troy, Prince Madat'ov ordered to make a big cart, a kind of infernal machine, which was slowly pushed by his soldiers and equipped with cannons. The enemy was frightened*

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<sup>6</sup> On this topic see Ferrari 2011.

*by the fire and the cannon balls emerging from this monster. In the result, the Persians were completely defeated (ibid.: 587-588).*

In this description we can find not only the affirmation of the technological superiority of modern European Russia upon backward Asian Persia, but also a new version of the archetypical contrast between East and West, between Asia and Europe. Madat'ov is depicted as a new Ulysses and his Western reason inevitably prevails upon Eastern emotionalism. I think that this passage could be quoted as a perfect example of Western Orientalism, in Edward Said's sense.<sup>7</sup> However, we must also take Raffi's peculiar perspective into consideration. He was not a Europe-born "Orientalist", but an (Eastern) Armenian who, like Xaçatur Abovean before him, was indebted to Tsarist Russia for a new "western" perspective. Thus, the Western-minded Armenian writer can look at the Persians, the traditional neighbours of his people, not only as adherents to a different religion, but also as representatives of a backward, Eastern and "Oriental" world. From this point of view, expressions linked to the Persians like "religious fanaticism", "cruelty" and "barbarism" which we can find rather frequently in the *Xamsayi melik'utiwnnerə* are largely connected to the new political and cultural situation embraced by the Eastern Armenians after the Russian conquest.

At the same time, one must remember that Raffi was not dogmatic in his pro-Russian stance. For example, he understood Melik'-Mejrum's decision to help Ała-Mamad-xan, the founder of the Qajar dynasty, who in 1795 invaded Transcaucasia. According to Raffi,

*Ała-Mamad-xan was a barbar, but also an intelligent man and a good politician. He understood very well that with the Armenian help it would have been easier for the Russians to penetrate into his dominions. Therefore, granting concessions to the Armenians, he blocked the Russians' way to Persia. But the Armenian meliks preferred to remain loyal to the Russians and to resist Ała-Mamad-xan and even joined the enemy of old, Ibrahim-xan. They thought that doing this it would have been easy to destroy him afterwards, while following a submission to Ała-Mamad-xan the liberation of the motherland would have become impossible. Only Melik'-Mejrum's Israyēlean didn't agree ... Melik'-Mejrum was an intelligent young. He was aware that his ancestors could hold and defend an autonomous principdom in the mountains of Ľarabat only thanks to the Persian Šahs, not to a Christian kingdom (ibid.: 508-509).*

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<sup>7</sup> For a picture of the issue of Russian Orientalism see Knight 2000; Khalid/Knight/Todorova 2000; Jobst 2000; Ferrari 2003/2012; Meaux De 2010); Schimmelpenninck 2010; Tolz 2011. On the Russian "Orientalist" approach towards Persia in Tsarist period see Andreeva 2007.

Thus, Raffi did not refuse *a priori* Melik'-Mejlum's pro-Persian option, which might have a firmer historical bases than the pro-Russian one. At the same time Raffi often criticizes Russia for its ingratitude shown towards the Armenians. As a matter of fact, the *melik's* of Լարաբալ received a poor reward for their services; unlike the Georgian nobility, they were not recognized as princes by the Russian government (Hewsen 1972: 295). From this point of view Madat'ov was an exception and Raffi openly criticizes him for trying to introduce serfdom in his lands in Լարաբալ where such an institution had never existed under Persian domination (Raffi 1987: 580).

#### CONCLUSION

Apart from its importance for the study of the Armenian nobility, Raffi's *Xamsayi melik'ut'iwnnerə* can be considered as an important description of the transition from Persian influence to Russian dominion undergone by Լարաբալ and Eastern Armenia in the XVIII-XIX centuries. In spite of his warm, but not uncritical, support to the Tsarist conquest of Transcaucasia, Raffi was able to give a multisided assessment of this historic process. Therefore, the *Xamsayi melik'ut'iwnnrə* provides an interesting description of the secular relations between Persia and the Armenians, mainly, but not only, those of Լարաբալ, in the fields of politics, religion and custom. To a certain extent this text can also be interpreted as a reflection of the Orientalist approach borrowed after the Tsarist conquest of the Caucasus by the Eastern Armenians from Russian culture.

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