

THE GOUSANS AND THE ANCIENT ART OF MIME

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The theater of Tigranes and Artavazd is the first on record in Armenian history. The second was founded during the reign of the Arsacides. Just as the former was related to the Hellenistic theatrical arts of western Asia Minor, and also to some extent to the theater of republican Rome, so was the theater of the Arsacides related to the Hellenistic theater of the Roman empire. In the Arsacid theater the artistry of the mimes held first place, as the educational role of the theater of earlier days was replaced by a new emphasis on the amusement of the masses and appeal to the grosser instincts, with prosaic, highly polished, formalistic, technical renditions. The theater of mimes in Rome and in Antioch, the capital of Syria, which led in the scenic arts of the period, had a bearing on the course of the Armenian theater of the gousan-mimos.

The non-literary theater of the mimes of the first centuries of the Christian era, which was the common possession of the entire Mediterranean world, has left no written records for posterity. In contrast to the earlier great dramatic plays of the Greeks which have survived to our day, the theater of the Roman mimes was unable to bequeath anything to posterity of the art of the ear other than works written solely for a reading public, never intended to be produced on the stage.

In the first centuries of our era the gousans in Armenia ceased to be rhapsodists, and the vartzaks were no longer professional dancers. They were in the role of mimos in the older sense of the word, that is, as actors and actresses of the Armenian theater of mimes. The ancient Armenian translators who were familiar with the Syrian, Alexandrian, Roman, and somewhat later Byzantine theater of mimes, translated the word mimos into the Armenian word gousan. At the same time the word mimos entered the Armenian lexicon and it has remained there as synonymous with the Armenian gousan and vartzak. The name of the vartzak Nazenik, the actress- pantomimist of the second century, and the story of her accomplished and enchanting artistry have been saved for posterity by Moses of Khorene in his History of

Armenia, where it is stated that Nazenik "sang with her hands" (ygrger tzeramb) in the court of the prince of Suni. There is also the testimony of Faustus Buzant, writing on the circumstances of the death of King Pap in 374 A.D., whose assassins took advantage of his undivided attention to the multitude of gousans performing on the stage to the accompaniment of an orchestra playing on contemporary Armenian instruments as the proper moment to strike him down.

The Armenian gousan as the mimes of Greece not only had repertory of farces but also the butaphoric phallus, a common attribute of all mimes. The phallus was an indispensable part of the costume of the gousan, a traditional adjunct of the clothing of mimes. This symbol was deeply rooted in the local phallic cults and its presence as such in Armenia is underscored by many recent findings, such as stone representations of the phallus excavated at the monastery Sourp Minas in the village of Noratous, on the southern shore of Lake Sevan, the portza-kar in Zangezour, bronze statuettes found also in Zangezour, among the ruins of the citadel near the village Ardzevank, on the southern shore of Lake Sevan near Nor-Bayazet, among the ruins of a citadel in the village of Sarekamish in the province of Kars, and in the region of Lake Van. Some of the figurines represent dancers who, although clothed have their phallus bare, which is typical of the stage costume of the mimes. Vestiges of the symbolic use of the phallus in the scenic arts also appears in Armenian miniatures of the medieval period. In one such painting, A.D. 1401, found on the margin of a Bible, an actor in his role to the accompaniment of an orchestra, is represented in the same way. An interesting parallel is the naked figure of St. John on the walls of the cathedral of Akhthamar, built A.D. 915-921; and of Adam in a Bible, in Echmiadzin, illustrated by Markar and Markos. All these sensory representations were possible because it was customary for the gousan to appear in that fashion.

Another form of comic acting, parallel to that of the gousan-mimes was that of the kataks, comedians. The gousans appearing in this role were called katakagousans or kheghkatakas. The authors of comedies were called katakergaks, as were Aristophanes and Menander in ancient Armenia. It is probable that the katakergaks continued the traditions of poking fun at the social ills of their time. There is little data on the comic theater of the katakergak