

**Classical Armenian Theatre** *By Georg Goyani, digested & translated  
By Veronica Arvanian & Lillian G. Murad.  
Excerpted From Two Thousand Years of the Armenian Theater (The  
Armenian National Council of America, 1954).*

The original and characteristic theater of the ancient Armenians was already fully established when the Greek tragedians arrived at the "country of the rivers". The Greek tragedies introduced in Armenia by them seemed familiar to the native population because they had already a fully established theater of their own. The word "tragedy" never entered the Armenian language, because the Armenians already had a name for it — voghbergoutiun, which is still in use to designate the same thing.

The historic bond between the Armenian tragic theater and the pagan rites of interment, lamentations for the dead, and the glorification of their heroic deeds found fuller expression in the word voghbergoutiun, song of lamentation. It was more comprehensive than the Greek word tragoedia, apparently meaning goat-song, probably from the singer's being clothed in goatskin. Armenian translators rejected the Greek word and kept it out of the Armenian vocabulary. David Kerakanaged, the Armenian grammarian of the sixth century wrote that "voghbergoutiun, in Greek means nokhazer-goutiun (that is, the singing of goats), because goats were sacrificed in the cult of Dionysus, the god of wine."

Armenian tragedy from the time of King Artavazd in the middle of the first century before our era kept the ancient name of voghbergoutiun, originally used for the pagan funerary ceremonial. In classical Armenian writings the word voghbergak, singer

"KING OF KINGS, ARTAVAZD"

Title inscribed on coins of Tigranes II inherited by his son King

Artavazd.

(The other side of the coin shown on page 16)

of laments, was used as a synonym of *tzainarkou-gousan*. The Greek word *komoedia*, ode sung at festal processions, which found a place in all European languages, suffered the same fate as *tragoedia*, for which also the Armenians had an apt name of their own — *katakergoutiun*.

In all probability the first Greek theater appeared in Armenia in the third to second century B.C. and not later than the first century B.C. The Greeks found the art of the *gousans* in transition from the pagan rites to the theater of antiquity, a stage which the ancient Greeks had already undergone. In Armenia the Greek theater followed the same line of development as in Rome during the previous three centuries. The first performances were given in Tigranocerta and Artashat, by Greeks, as had been the case in Rome. The introduction of tragedies and comedies, from Athens, in Rome had been accompanied with the staging of dramatic plays written by Romans but following the Greek forms. In Armenia, the arrival of the company of Greek actors with their repertoire, and the giving of Euripides coincided with the presentation of the works of the Armenian dramatist King Artavazd.

The Roman theater which had evolved out of religious rituals was still in its primary form when it met the highly developed theater of the Greeks. The Romans learned speedily from the Greeks, and even adopted some of their traditions; but their theater never became a copy of that of the Greeks. It remained distinctively Roman. The Armenians too profited from the Greeks, though the theater of the *gousans* was not as primitive as it had been with the theater of the Romans. The new theater born on the shores of the Araxes did not become a copy of either the Greek or Roman theater, but remained distinctively Armenian.

The first known theater building in Armenia was in Tigranocerta, founded by Tigranes II in 69 B.C. It was in keeping with those of the Greeks of Asia Minor and Syria under his dominion. It was built for the people of a large city, and not simply for the aristocracy of the court. Up to this time there had been no buildings for theatrical performances in Armenia, and therefore no corresponding word in ancient Armenian. Artavazd, the son of Tigranes, followed the example of his father and built a second large theater at Artashat, with a professional group of actors, directed by the tragedian Jason. Artavazd made his debut in the

role of the first Armenian dramatist, the author of a tragedy. He directed in 53 B.C. an original production of the Artashatian group of Euripides tragedy Bacchanals, cleverly substituting the mask of Pentheus with the head of Crassus, at the last minute as a political commentary at the expense of expanding Rome. Such creative treatment of a classical drama, revealing a commanding grasp of its underlying ideas and philosophy implies a society familiar with classical literature and the classical theater.

There is documentary proof that Armenians had the drama, following the form of the tragedies of Euripides, not later than the first century B.C. The Greek inscriptions on a stone tablet found in 1911 at ancient Armavir on the Araxes river has been proven to be in iambic verse, resembling somewhat one of the tragedies of Euripides but not belonging to any one of the known works of the ancient classical authors. The presence of words in the text indicates that the author was not a Greek. The whole appears to be the beginning of a prologue to a tragedy dedicated to "the goddess of war", probably Anahit or Artemis. It has been proposed that the text may be a fragment of one of the tragedies of King Artavazd himself.

The erection of a theater building in the capital of pagan Armenia, the presence of a professional group of actors at Artashat, the originality of the ancient dramas, and the political uses to which the theater was put, all suggest that the scenic art of ancient Armenia was an integral part of the culture of the land. Progress was made under Tigranes II and Artavazd II, linking Armenian culture with the Hellenistic culture of the first century B.C. The flourishing of the dramatic arts during this period was one manifestation of this wider movement. The founding of the Armenian theater under these gifted monarchs was definitely a step forward.

The Armenian theater prior to the division of Armenia between Persia and Byzantium benefited from the traditions of the Greek theater and partly represents a phase of their development at the time of its origin.

The ruins of ancient theater buildings in various parts of Asia Minor erected in the first to third centuries of our era, which have been excavated by archeologists, denote a link between the Armenian theater and the scenic art of neighboring countries during this period, of which clear traces have been left also in a number of contemporary historical literary sources. In addition to the architectural monuments such as the temple of Garni and the city of Artashat as reconstructed by architects and master builders brought to Armenia by Tiridates I, there is on record the actor-mimes presented to this monarch as a gift by Nero, the company of Roman mimes visiting Armenia during the first to third centuries, the highly developed theater of Armenia's immediate neighbor Syria as it appears in the ancient Armenian language in Syrian script, and the use of the word "mime", from the Greek mimos, in the Armenian language. There are other links which indicate the relation of the Armenian theater to the contemporary scenic art of neighboring countries.

ARTAVAZD II KING Of ARMENIA (55-34 B.C.)

One Side of One of His Coins, taken from the Antiquarian Collection of the Museum of History, Yerevan