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A Note on Armenian *hrmštk-el*

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Abstract

The hapax **framaštaq* in the Babylonian Talmud is a loan from a Middle Iranian slang word for the penis; from its base comes the common Armenian verb *hrmštkel*, “to shove in”, which is not attested in Classical texts and might have had an obscene connotation in ancient times that it no longer possesses.

Keywords

Slang, Babylonian Talmud, Sasanian dynasty, *Buzandaran*, *Köroghlu*, *framaštaq*, *marz-*, *mālidan*, *hrmštkel*, Alexander Romance, *Bušāsf*, Paruyr Sevak

The Aramaic of the Babylonian Talmud is replete with Middle Iranian loan words, some of which reflect the same dialect variations as the Middle Iranian loans into Armenian of roughly the same period: *hraman* instead of *framān* for “command”, *navasard* instead of *nō sāl* for “new year”, and so on. The narratives in the text abound in Iranian themes, too; and in recent years a number of scholars, notably Daniel Sperber, Isaiah Gafni, Shaul Shaked, Yaakov Elman, and Geoffrey Herman have been exploring these. They are of interest to the study of ancient Armenia in both expected and unpredictable ways. For instance, we learn that in the fourth century the Sasanian monarch Šābuhr (Shapur II, r. AD 309-379) sat down to lunch with the Jewish Exilarch and the two august personages dined upon a single *ethrog*—a sort of citrus fruit used by Jews during the festival of Sukkot. This sounds rather silly on the face of it and it is probably an abbreviation: presumably they ate, and most definitely drank, a great deal more. The dessert of fruit is most likely to be understood as a kind of rhetorical shorthand for the comfortable intimacy of friendship and leisure the two men enjoyed. This was an enviable situation for the leader of a religious minority of course. In a world of swords and sabers one checked at the entrance to the

dining-tent or left with horse and groom, here they were concluding their meal, wielding a little fruit knife of peace.

Knowing that this shorthand was current and understandable to contemporary readers and listeners adds pathos to the already poignant scene of the death of the Armenian king Aršak II imprisoned by the same Šābuhr. One recalls that the epic narrative of P'awstos, the *Buzandaran*, leads one through a series of confrontations, each a set piece of oral *topoi*, at the climax of which the Armenian Arsacid was cast into the Fortress of Oblivion. There, thanks to the interventions of his faithful eunuch Drastamat, he was allowed to enjoy a last feast in the manner of kings: he reclined on pillows, watched dancing girls, and suddenly reached for a fruit knife and ended his life. Once we know the register of symbols, the little fruit knife as suicidal weapon becomes that much more tellingly poignant, that much sadder. And one might add that free men at feasts after they surrendered their heavier, longer blades were still allowed to retain in a scabbard strapped to the upper leg a sort of pocket dagger, in Armenian *nran*, which one explain from Iranian **ni-rāna-* literally “on the thigh”. Aršak was lacking even this token weapon allowed any nobleman at any occasion. One mentioned pillows: in Parthian and Sasanian society, the more pillows one reclined upon at a feast, the more elevated one's rank was; and Armenian custom followed the practice, even using the standard Sasanian term for “pillow”, *bališ*, to mean an honor bestowed. In the Middle Ages, the *khalat*, or robe, was to take place of the latter. So in the Talmud a Rabbi losing a disputation has one mat after another yanked away from underneath him till he dies—yet another example of how an image can be inverted to drive home a point in a standard tale.¹

Many are familiar with a cycle of epic tales about a Robin Hood-like figure called in Turkish *Köroğlu*, “Son of the Blind Man”: multiple versions exist in Armenian, as well as the Turkic languages, Kurdish, and even Modern Greek.

¹ The *locus classicus* for the investigation of this technique is Professor Nina Garsoian's analysis of the transformation of Trdat the Great in the Agathangelos into a pig for his imprisonment of St. Gregory: here it is the royal *varaz*, the boar-totem of Verethraghna, that is inverted. I have proposed, in a study of the bas-reliefs on the drum of the Cathedral of the Holy Apostles, an inversion in the opposite direction in the same narrative cycle: the thirteenth “Apostle” is Gregory, beset by two serpents. These torture him as they do the imprisoned Zahhak; but the Christian saint will overcome them and emerge bringing salvation rather than apocalypse (see Russell 2004: 1165-1191).

The story begins with the father of the hero, who is master of the royal stables, being blinded. In ancient Iran, the *ākhwarrbed*, “stable master”, was part of the court hierarchy but also the lowliest courtier. Of Rabbi Yehuda I the Babylonian Talmud says, *Ahōrērē dā-Rabbī ‘atīr mi-Shābūr māl-kā*, “The Rabbi’s stable-master [using a Persian loan word, the same as that found in Armenian] was richer than king Shapur”. So the office is a marked term whose meaning is best understood in its Parthian and early Sasanian context: it calls the attention of the listener to an epic or folk tale to what I would term a switching point in the narrative plot. That is, the son of the stable master can move either up or down in the social order. In this case the man is blinded for a supposed offense of *lèse majesté* and his son becomes a bandit-leader, an anti-king who dedicates his life to avenging his father’s unjust humiliation. The mention of the stable master is not so much Jewish hyperbole as Talmudic shorthand based upon the realia of Parthian and Sasanian society in Mesopotamia; and we can see how the topos, when understood in its Iranian context, serves as an anticipatory signal in the narrative from the Armenian highland from which the Kōroğlu cycle drew its core material.

Reuven Kipperwasser, a prominent Israeli Iranist and Talmudist, recently called my attention to a passage in tractate Mo’ed Qatan 18a of the Babylonian Talmud, in which Avitūl the Scribe (or maybe the Barber, there is some dispute about how to read his epithet) says in the name of Rav Papa that “the Pharaoh who lived in the time of Moses was one *amah* tall, his beard was one *amah* long, and his **framaštaq* was one *anah* and one *zereth* long”. This fulfills the prophet Daniel’s observation (Dan. 4.14) that God appoints the lowest of men over the kingdom of men, the text smugly observes. The average height of a man in the Talmud is four *amahs*; so the king of Egypt is a priapic dwarf. The text adds that he was a magus—a Zoroastrian. Prof. Martin Schwartz has proposed in correspondence for *framaštak*, a hapax, a persuasive derivation from the base *marz-* “rub”, with preverb *fra-*. The base gives us both the Armenian loan *marzem* “exercise” and Persian *māl-īdan* “to rub” (so Persian-in-Turkish *peshtimal*, “back-rubber”, i.e., “towel”).² In the Armenian version of the Alexander Romance

² Jastrow explains Talmudic Aramaic *parmašt-aq* as *contrectatus* or *extensus*, *membrum virile*, citing Pers. *parmāštak*. The latter New Persian form is not cited by Steingass, but one finds *parmāš-īdan* “touch, extend” (Steingass). (The suggestion is cautiously advanced here that Turkish *parmak* “finger” may be the result of a loan from Iranian, digit and penis being typologically related.) This loan-word from Middle Iranian into the Aramaic of the Jews of Parthian or Sasanian Mesopotamia

the Egyptian Pharaoh Nectanebos is a rather pathetic figure: he dies by falling into a hole he has not noticed because he was too busy discoursing on the mysteries of the stars above, as the young Alexander observes with prim indifference. The hapless Egyptian is depicted as indecently lustful, too. When he meets the gullible Olympias, *i t'aguhin macuceal karuc'aw aranc' t'ap'eloy, k'anzi ēr vawašamol i kanays* “at (the sight of) the queen he stiffened with an erection without ejaculating, for he was crazed by lust for women” (Simonyan 1989: 73).³

The Iranian term for the *membrum virile* found in the Talmud is not attested in modern Persian or Classical Armenian. But one recognized it at once as the source of the common modern Armenian denominative verb *hrmštk-el*, “to push or ram in hard”. The word escaped the notice of both the great etymological lexicographers of the 20th century, Adjarian and Jahukyan; and it does not appear in the 19th century *Nor Baḡirk'* since it is not attested in Classical Armenian texts. Yet it is self-evidently a loan into Armenian from northwestern Middle Iranian, probably in the Arsacid or early Sasanian period, a slangy term for penis that appears to have been fastidiously bypassed by Christian writers, even though its southwestern Middle Iranian form was judged suitable for the purposes of a scabrous, derogatory Talmudic yarn about the detestable, priapic

in the era of the compilation of the Babylonian Talmud may have been vocalized in fact as **framaštak*; and the Iran. form may be derived from OIr. **fra-mar-*, with a base H.W. Bailey suggested in his *Dictionary of Khotan Saka* could mean “mark, feel”. Kohut proposes an etymology from the base *vaxš-* “grow, sprout” with preverb *fra-* “forth”. Such a shift from *v* to *m* is normal, as is the reduction of the cluster *xš* to *š*; and the form is possible. Moreover, one notes that the base with prepositional *frā-* is indeed attested in Yašt 19.50, in a series of boastful physical threats against the man-dragon tyrant Dahāka after the latter has threatened the sacred fire: *frā šwqm zadangha uzuxšāne* “I’ll mount both your buttocks!”. Such a passage would have lent itself in popular tradition precisely to the kind of vulgar sexual jocularity one finds in the Talmudic passage. Prof. Martin Schwartz finds scant foundation for Bailey’s understanding of the root as “feel” and argues that *mar-* cannot produce **maštak* in Parthian. (But one notes at least OIran. **fra-jar->* Arm., *via* Pth., *hra-žar-em*, “take one’s leave of, reject” and *hražešt*, “farewell”.) Schwartz instead proposes a derivation from the well-known base *marz-* “rub”—this is the root that produces New Persian *māl-īdan*. (One may recall the Arm. surname Peshtimaljjan, from Pers.-in-Tk. “towel maker”.) The latter is very well attested in Armenian of all periods, cf. *marz-em* “exercise”, *marz-aran* “stadium”, etc. In Pahlavi the base can have a sexual overtone, as in *kun-marz*, “anal intercourse”, an activity of which the Zoroastrian books universally and sternly disapprove (unless, one supposes, one is Taxma Urupi or another Kayanian hero sticking it to Aži Dahāka).

³ Albert Wolohojian’s English translation bowdlerizes the passage.

Egyptians. In this disregard for Egypt the Jews of Mesopotamia shared a sentiment with their Zoroastrian neighbors. The Pahlavi books call “Alexander the Accursed” (he is never “the Great”) *musrāyīg menišn*, “the Egypt-dweller”—clearly, the son of a fellow with endowments much like those of his ancestors. In Armenia, meanwhile, **hramaštak* would have endured down the ages in unrecorded vernacular usage, surfacing only when the latter began to be chronicled; and by then, only the derivative verb remained, its meaning having become innocuous. Such de-demonizations are fairly common, within the Iranian sphere: Asmussen long ago noted that the Avestan demoness of sloth, *Bušyqstā*, a personified optative “let it be (later)”, becomes a Judaeo-Persian common noun for sleep, *bušāsf*, which has no connotation of evil. And for the tendency to render innocuous sexually explicit expressions one might cite the Modern English example of “suck”. “This coffee sucks” means that the beverage tastes terrible, not that it has become mysteriously endowed with very unlikely erotic skills. (The lyric “where the bees suck” of the Bard in *The Tempest* has been ruined for this modern ear, which hears but a complaint about somehow inadequate insects.) Michael Adams, in his book *Slang: The People’s Poetry*, points out that the derogatory use of the verb actually had nothing to do with fellatio originally, though everybody polled wants, it seems, to think it does anyhow. *Fra-marz-*, *hrmštkel*, “shove it in”: *honi soit qui mal y pense*. We can recover something of the conversational language of ancient Armenia, and imagine some of the *topoi* of its storytelling, too, by looking at two kinds of sources: Irano-Talmudica and the modern Armenian lexicon; and by applying some of the methods of analysis of the folktale. The *hramaštak* signaled a lustful rascal of a king; an *axorāpet* minding the royal mounts was a low courtier about to get rich or rebel; one counted pillows and measured the tension of position and prestige; and a knife at table, depending on its size, was to be a symbol of amity or tragedy—Chekhov’s rifle on the wall that must be fired by the end of the play.

But the story does not end here for *hrmštk-el*. The study of Pahlavi and Talmudic Aramaic are enriched by a knowledge, not only of ancient Armenian, but of the modern language, as here. Those other tongues are dead, but Armenian is fertile and alive, and its literature evolves with old words and new imaginings; so we find forms of this verbal base, for instance, in the poem “Nightfall” (*Gišeramut*) of the great poet Paruyr Sevak (1924-1971), in his cycle *Etic’i luys*, (“Let there be light!”), (Sevak 1969: 32):

The automobiles
 That seemed until now to be blind,
 Blind as a cat's newborn brood
 Now see one another and kindle their eyes.

And the silence already
 Is thrusting all else aside
 To clear itself its proper place
 And from that long-drawn thrust
 The mountains appear to have moved afar.

'U l'rut'yunə
Arden amen inč' hrmštorum ē,
Or iren hamar kargin tel bac'i,
Ev ayd tevakan hrmštoc'ic' ē,
Or herac'ac en t'vum le'nerə'.

Loneliness, like Khayyam, is getting drunk,
 Getting drunk and cursing God.
 And now the good dogs' bark,
 It seems, is not at all a barking but a prayer
 Dispatched to blasphemed God
 To ask Him that He pardon His abuser.

The dark becomes a wet sponge on the board
 Erasing all the sky till heaven
 Is slowly encrusted with hoar frost of stars.

And men begin to speak
 Less, and more quietly,
 Since the lights and the lamps
 Tell more eloquent tales.
 Every house sends forth
 Its declaration to the sky
 In the cry of a child,
 A mother's call,
 The animals',
 The cars'
 Telegraphic bleat and bark,
 But above all else in these,
 The lights that burn and blink, go out,
 Unending, corresponding
 To an alphabet, a new Morse code.

And then,
When all these voices are already still—
The lights, as well—
It seems the time has come
For the universe to respond:
In sleep all men receive their answers
In the shape of nightmares or good dreams.

Good dreams alone to you, my darlings;
Let your nightmares only come to me, your friend.

The verb becomes a part now of an introspective meditation on the way silence comes to a great city, Erevan, at dusk, the mountains in the darkness and the quiet seeming to recede. It is not merely de-demonized, but ennobled in its context. The poet, seemingly standing aside to perceive the esoteric language of the nightfall, emerges at the end beside us, a friend ready to shoulder even the weight of our nightmares. The scholarship of Professor Garnik Asatrian embraces all the provinces and ages touched upon in this philological note, and many more; but those who have rejoiced in his hospitality know a Parthian paradise on the plain of Ararat where good wine and conversation mingle with the magic night, and many are the burdens he has shouldered for us as a friend, like a titan on Masis or a hero of Sasun, for which our gratitude will have no end.

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