

## Nature, Culture, and War in the Writings of Step'annos Orbelian

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/eiko.108526>

Recibido: 12 de enero de 2026 / Aceptado: 19 de marzo de 2026 / Publicado: 25 de marzo de 2026

**Abstract:** This article reflects on how the transformation of natural sites into cultural spaces was perceived in medieval Armenia, as analyzed in *The History of the State of Sisakan*, written by the bishop and historian Stepanos Orbelian (c. 1250–1304). Orbelian's text opens with the familiar theme of a natural environment being transformed from a desert into a paradise, and describes how monastic colonization turned a wild landscape into a prosperous cultural and fertile place. Art and culture are presented as instruments that bring the environment closer to God's will: thanks to the monastic presence, the region was protected from floods and bad weather. However, human action cannot be seen as positive alone: various invasions by foreign forces should be seen as elements of rupture, damaging nature and culture in order to satisfy diabolical greed. By analysing textual data and architectural heritage, this text explores some of the questions raised within Ecocritical Art History, attempting to understand the issue of the 'exploitation' of natural sites in the past.

**Keywords:** Nature and Culture; Step'annos Orbelian; Siwnik; Natural Environment; War destruction; Ecocritical Art History

### ES Naturaleza, cultura y guerra en los escritos de Step'annos Orbelian

**Resumen:** Este artículo reflexiona sobre cómo se percibía en la Armenia medieval la transformación de los parajes naturales en espacios culturales, tal y como se analiza en *\*La historia del estado de Sisakan\**, obra del obispo e historiador Step'annos Orbelian (c. 1250-1304). El texto de Orbelian comienza con el tema habitual de la transformación de un entorno natural de desierto a paraíso, y describe cómo la colonización monástica convirtió un paisaje salvaje en un lugar culturalmente próspero y fértil. El arte y la cultura se presentan como instrumentos que acercan el entorno a la voluntad de Dios: gracias a la presencia monástica, la región quedó protegida de las inundaciones y las inclemencias del tiempo. Sin embargo, la acción humana no puede considerarse únicamente positiva: las diversas invasiones de fuerzas extranjeras deben verse como elementos de ruptura, que dañan la naturaleza y la cultura para satisfacer una codicia diabólica. Mediante el análisis de datos textuales y del patrimonio arquitectónico, este texto explora algunas de las cuestiones planteadas en el ámbito de la Historia del Arte Ecocrítica, intentando comprender el tema de la «explotación» de los parajes naturales en el pasado.

**Palabras clave:** Naturaleza y cultura; Step'annos Orbelian; Siwnik; Entorno natural; Destrucción bélica; Historia del arte ecocrítica

**Sumario:** 1. Introduction. 2. Creating a paradise on earth. 3. Shaped by greed. 4. Back to paradise. 5. Conclusions: Rewriting Armenian history? 6. Sources and bibliographical references

**Cómo citar:** Foletti, Ivan and Kovářová, Michaela. "Nature, Culture, and War in the Writings of Step'annos Orbelian". In *Ecosistemas sagrados Imágenes de devoción, representaciones y medio ambiente* (siglos IV-XX), Editado por Ivan Foletti, Adrien Palladino y Zuzana Frantová. Monográfico temático, *Eikón Imago* 15 (2026), e108526. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/eiko.108526>

### 1. Introduction

At the end of the 13th century, Step'annos Orbelian (c. 1250–1304), a historian and metropolitan of the Siwnik region, wrote one of the most important and outstanding histories of Armenia, entitled *History of the State of Sisakan*, which became, among other things, one of the most referenced sources for Armenian history (Fig.



Figure 1 Map of the Siwnik region, 7-11th century, © Robert Bedrosian trad., *History of the State of Sisakan*, 2012, p.180

1)<sup>1</sup>. Orbelian was not only an educated bishop but also a member of a respected aristocratic family in Eastern Armenia who participated in running the state; his family, furthermore, was actively involved in the exploitation of the resources of their lands<sup>2</sup>. From the end of the 12th century, the Orbelian dynasty split into two main branches: “Georgian” (with a seat at Orbeli Fortress) and “Armenian” (settled in Siwnik). Relatives of Step’annos Orbelian, who belonged to the Siwnik branch, included Prince Liparit II Orbelian (the 1130s), Elikum I (the end of the 12th century), and Liparit III (c. the 1220s), a governor under King George IV of Georgia<sup>3</sup>. Orbelian’s text,

<sup>1</sup> The name Step’annos Orbelian is spelled many ways (Orbelyan, Orbelean, Orbelian), but in this paper, with a few exceptions in references and footnotes, it will be referred to as Orbelian. Step’annos Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, trans. Robert Bedrosian (Long Branch, 2012–2015), <https://archive.org/details/HistoryOfTheStateOfSisakan>. Regarding this text, see, e.g., Hacıyan, Agop Jack et. al., eds., *The Heritage of Armenian Literature: From the sixth to the eighteenth century*, vol. 2 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 534–558.; Ioanna Rapti, “Monuments et mémoire: à propos de l’Histoire de Step’anos Orbelian,” *Annuaire de l’École pratique des hautes études (EPHE), Section des sciences religieuses*, no. 129 (2022): 334–335.; Naira Tamanyan, “Զրոյցները Սո. Օրբելյանի «Պատմութիւն Միսական» Երկուն,” *Historical-Philological Journal*, no. 2–3 (2009): 186–208, oai:arar.sci.am:175636.

<sup>2</sup> For information about the Orbelian dynasty and Step’annos himself, see, e.g., Augé, Isabelle et.al., “Le Temps de la Croisade (Fin XIe-FinXIVe siècle),” in *Histoire du peuple arménien*, ed.G. Dédéyan (Toulouse: Privat, 2007), 327–376.; Sergio La Porta, “The kingdom and the sultanate were conjoined’: Legitimizing Land and Power in Armenia during the 12th and early 13th centuries,” *Revue des études arméniennes*, no. 34 (2012): 73–118.; Abraham Mkrtchyan, “Մյուսաց մետրոպոլիտական Աթոռը Օրբելյանների իշխանության ժամանակ,” *Էջմիածին: Պաշտօնական ամսագիր Ամենայն Հայոց Կաթողիկոսութեան Մայր Աթոռու Սրբոյ Էջմիածնի* 45, no. 7 (1988): 49–54, oai:arar.sci.am:246715.; Claude Mutafian, *L’Arménie du Levant (XIe-XIVe siècle)*, vol. 1 (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2012), 303–308, Vol. II, G10.; Steven Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus and His Reign: A Study of Tenth-Century Byzantium* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), 59, 160, 161. <https://archive.org/details/emperorrromanusle000runc>; Loretta Khristoforovna Ter-Mkrtchyan, *Армянские источники о Средней Азии VIII- XVIII вв* (Наука, 1985), 31–33. <https://archive.org/details/ter-mkrtchian-1985-aisa-08-18vv/mode/2up>

<sup>3</sup> According to Cyrille Toumanoff, the Orbelians were the third dynasty (Mamikonian branch) that had been established in Iberia who ruled the Siwnik region, see, Cyrille Toumanoff, *Les dynasties de la Caucasic Chrétienne: de l’Antiquité jusqu’au XIXe siècle: tables généalogiques et chronologiques* (Rome: Roma s.n., 1990), 353–354.; Cyrille Toumanoff, *Manuel de généalogie et de chronologie pour l’histoire de la Caucasic chrétien (Arménie – Géorgie – Albanie)* (Edizioni Aquila, 1976), 355–360. <https://archive.org/details/toumanoff-1976-genealogie/mode/2up>; Cyrille Toumanoff, “Introduction to Christian Caucasian history: II: States and Dynasties of the Formative Period,” *Traditio* 17 (1961), 59. doi:10.1017/S036215290008473.; Nicholas Adontz stated that Orbelian princes

the *History of the State of Sisakan*, should be understood in this dynastic context as it attempts to propose a unified narrative for Western Armenian history (with a focus on the Siwnik region), made up of its moments of glory and of suffering<sup>4</sup>.

It would be possible to analyze this text from multiple perspectives<sup>5</sup>. Still, we would like to focus the present article on the natural context in which Armenian men and women found themselves living and often facing crises due to human greed. Three narrative lines – which will be explored below – punctuate the story. First, the author's description of the heavenly spirit of the country where nature, people, and God, joining their forces, were trying to build a Christian paradise on earth. Second, the terrible line of destruction at the hands of foreign powers raiding the country as a true biblical plague. And finally, the author's reflection on the constant desire of the Armenian lords to restore what had been destroyed by mankind and powered by human greed. In the following pages, therefore, we would like to try to follow these three lines before attempting to sketch a more nuanced interpretation of this text. On methodological grounds, we will thus intertwine two main perspectives: a literary analysis and a classical historiography.

## 2. Creating a paradise on earth

Orbelian's account cannot but devote a significant portion to one of the constitutive elements of Armenian culture, namely the Christianization of the country by Gregory the Illuminator from the 4th century onward<sup>6</sup>. In his story, Orbelian presented, quite simply, how the Armenian landscape had been “converted” by the demolition of pagan (Zoroastrian) altars and the follow-up construction of Christian churches, which usually replaced the pagan ones. In the first instance, the conversion is materialized with a systematic transformation of cultural heritage<sup>7</sup>.

Since there were still many idols and pagan temples in the lords' districts, the prince of Siwnik' requested of the king and of Saint Gregory that vardapets (Doctors of the Church) and teachers come to his land to teach the Christian Gospel and to destroy the altars of the idols. He was granted one of the Syrians [that Gregory] had brought with him. With great joy [the prince of Siwnik] returned to his land and had his entire family baptized in the font of light. He destroyed all the pagan altars to the idols, converted the entire land to Christianity, and gifted the places where the pagan altars had been for the construction of churches, houses of God<sup>8</sup>.

“sought their ancestors in the country of the Čenk’ and considered themselves descendants of the Mamikoneans.”, see Nicholas Adontz, *Armenia in The Period of Justinian: The Political Conditions Based on the Naxarar system*, trans. Nina G. Garsoïan (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1970), 313, 314. <https://archive.org/details/TheReformOfJustinianInArmenia>

<sup>4</sup> The Siwnik (or Syunik) region underwent constant development during the Middle Ages. During Orbelian's lifetime, it included territory from the coasts of Lake Sevan to the banks of the Araks River. In the southwest, it shared a border with Nakhichevan and an eastern natural boarder – the Hakari River – divided Siwnik from Artsakh (today Nagorno-Karabakh). For further information about the Siwnik region, see, e.g., Grigor Grigorian, “Սյունիքի թագավորությունը,” *Historical-Philological Journal*, no. 2 (2006): 134-145. oai:arar.sci.am:175244.; Grigor Grigorian and Sergei Hakhverdian, *Սյունիքի պատմություն* (Հրագրան, 2001). <https://arar.sci.am/dlibra/publication/404384/edition/373770/content>; Tadevos Khachaturi Hakobyan, *Սյունիքի թագավորությունը պատմա-աշխարհագրական առումով* (Միաք, 1966). <https://archive.org/details/Hakobyan1966Siwnik>; Vladimir Minorsky, *Studies in Caucasian History* (Taylor's Foreign Press, 1953), 68–74. <https://archive.org/details/Minorsky1953StudiesCaucasianHistory>; Cyril Toumanoff, “Armenia and Georgia,” in *The Cambridge Medieval History 4, The Byzantine Empire part I*, ed. Joan Mervyn Hussey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 593–637.; Christina Maranci, “Siwnik,” In: *Armenia: Art, Religion, and Trade in the Middle Ages*, ed. Helen C. (New York: Yale University Press, 2018), 101–109.; Levon Alishan, *Միսական, Տեղագրություն Սիւնեաց աշխարհի* (Venice: Սուրբ Ղազար, 1893). On relations of Syunik and Artsakh see, e.g. A. G. Manucharyan, “Սյունիք-Արցախի պատմական անչափությունները (IX-XII դդ.)” *Herald of the Social Sciences 1* (2005): 198-207. oai:arar.sci.am:38582.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. from literary or linguistic perspective: Ani Avetisyan, “Ստեփանոս օրբելյանի «պատմությունն ևսահանգին սիսական» երկի լեզուն ել ռճը,” (PhD diss., National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, 2013). <https://degrees.hesc.am/en/node/9120>; Ani Avetisyan, “Հովանիշենի գործառական և կառուցվածքային առանձնահատկությունները Ստ. Օրբելյանի «Պատմությունն ևսահանգին Սիսական» երկում,” *Shirak Centre of Armenological Studies of NAS RA Scientific works* 18 (2015): 188–196. oai:arar.sci.am:197816.

<sup>6</sup> Regarding this enormous and very discussed topic, see, e.g., Jean-Pierre Mahé, “La christianisation de l'Arménie,” in: *Armenia Sacra: mémoire chrétienne des Arméniens (IVe-XVIIIe siècle)*, ed. Musée du Louvre (Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, 2007), 18–21.; Garsoïan Nina, “L'Autocéphalie,” in: *Armenia Sacra: mémoire chrétienne des Arméniens (IVe-XVIIIe siècle)*, ed. Musée du Louvre (Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, 2007), 66–75.; B. Levon Zekiyan, “Le peuple Arménien: notes historiques,” In: *Les Arméniens: Histoire – Art – Archéologie*, eds. Adriano Alpago Novello et. al., (Paris: L'Aventurine, 1995), 49–68.

<sup>7</sup> Fifth century author Agathangelos wrote a story of a vision of the Gregory the Illuminator. A man in the form of light showed Gregory, with a golden hammer and four columns of fire, the places where Gregory and King Tiridates were supposed to build one of the first official Christian churches. Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (State University of New York Press, 1976), 275–301. <https://archive.org/details/historyofarmenia000agat>. For a broader overview of the first architectural structures and the conversion process through material culture, see Patrick Donabédian, “Les premiers édifices chrétiens d'Arménie,” In: *Armenia Sacra: mémoire chrétienne des Arméniens (IVe-XVIIIe siècle)*, edited by Musée du Louvre (Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, 2007), 48–66.; Helen C. Evans, “Armenians and Their Middle Age,” in: *Armenia: Art, Religion, and Trade in the Middle Ages*, ed. Helen C. Evans (New York: Yale University Press, 2018), 122–128.; Nazénié Garibian, “The First Armenian Christian Sanctuaries and Shrines: Reconsidering the Received Tradition,” *Convivium Supplementum* 11 (2023), 42–59. <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.CONVISUP-EB.5.135375>. A postcolonial perspective on the region and its monuments has also been proposed by Kate Franklin, *Everyday Cosmopolitanism: Living the Silk Road in Medieval Armenia* (California: University of California Press, 2021), 41–61. The author tries to contextualize Armenian culture in a cosmopolitan context which transcends the East-West axis generally used for the analysis of the region. On the reception of the book see e.g. Clara Leeder, “Review: Everyday Cosmopolitanisms: Living the Silk Road in Medieval Armenia,” *Global Histories* 9, no. 1 (2023): 99–102. <https://doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2023.555>

<sup>8</sup> Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 5, para. 4, p. 18.

The practice of “conversion” described by Orbelian is anything but unusual: we can trace a similar process within the Roman Empire, but more strongly also in Northern Europe in subsequent centuries<sup>9</sup>. Christianization, as presented by the Bishop of Siwnik, is then both a ritual act and a landscape design transformation. By rebuilding ritual spaces, the entire landscape is, in the eyes of Orbelian, blessed by a godly presence, which is tangible, in the following centuries, in all aspects of the region’s life. Thus, for example, a church combined with a water spring becomes a crucial element in curing diseases that are otherwise impossible to eradicate:

Many years before this, in early and ancient times, a church had been built in a suitable place [...]. Close to it flowed a stream of delicious water, and the entire valley was beautified with vineyards and was dense with fruit-bearing trees. [...] Inside the church, a small stream of water flowed under the bema<sup>10</sup> and, mixed with the water, was a curative oil. [...] Astonishing marvels occurred there, for all sorts of incurable and untreatable human ailments—syphilis, leprosy, and wounds which had purified over a long time, were cured if the sufferers went there in faith and washed in the water and anointed themselves with the oil. If it was a fatal [illness], then the sufferer would die at once. For this reason, the place was greatly renowned throughout the land<sup>11</sup>.

The godly presence was, in Orbelian’s view, certainly crucial, but he did not omit mention of people’s action in transforming the Armenian landscape into a true paradise. As a scrupulous historian, he presented data – such as dedicatory inscriptions – but the central concept is very explicit: Armenian princes and bishops, who generously used the gifts of nature, had the power to transform deserts into beautiful places<sup>12</sup>. The description of these actions is full of literary topoi (especially those linked to various notions of *locus amoenus*, as we will see below), a classical strategy for pre-modern literature (Fig. 2)<sup>13</sup>. In this tradition, many of the descriptions refer to biblical stories. Such a literary scheme naturally adds connotations of “holiness” to the Armenian lands: its very portrayal – heavily indebted to biblical imagery – makes the country an almost tangible counterpart to the Garden of Eden. The chronicle was most probably conceived for an educated audience, but the imagery used must have been within the common understanding.



Figure 2 View on Mount Ararat, Khosrov Forest, 2022, © Michaela Kovářová

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Ivan Foletti, “Dio da dio: la maschera di Cristo, Giove Serapide e il mosaico di Santa Pudenziana a Roma,” *Convivium* 2, no. 1 (2015): 60–73. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.CONV.5.111158>; Megan Bunce, “Shrines, special burials, and the Christianization of Britain,” *Convivium Supplementum* 3 (2021): 128–145. <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/144732>; Klára Doležalová et. al., “Means of Christian Conversion in Late Antiquity. Objects, Bodies, And Rituals. Introduction,” *Convivium Supplementum* (2021): 11–21.; Sian Grønlie, “Conversion Narrative and Christian Identity: ‘How Christianity came to Iceland’,” *Medium Ævum* 86, no. 1 (2017): 123–146.; Richard Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe. From Paganism to Christianity 371–1386 AD*, (Fontana Press 1997). <https://archive.org/details/conversionofeuro0000flet/page/n3/mode/2up>; Philip Esler, *The Early Cristian World (second edition)* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> A bema can be described as a raised platform in a sanctuary; in some Eastern Christian churches, including the Armenian Church, it consists of the altar and area behind the *iconostasis*, the *soleas*, and the area in front of the iconostasis (possibly with the steps).

<sup>11</sup> Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 64, para. 1, p. 118.

<sup>12</sup> “The church was surrounded by halls and porticoes. Then he wrote the following commemorative inscription: ‘I, Yakob, by the grace of God bishop of Siwnik’, purchased the Vararak water from the God-kept Lord P’ilippe’, lord of Siwnik’ for 12,000 drams and a rare gem. With great expense and very great labor, with assistance from On High, I brought water from Mount Dzage’dzor to irrigate this rose garden and I planted choice grape vines, beautiful vineyards, and gardens full of flowers and fruits for the enjoyment of the blessed patriarchs established on this holy throne, for the blessed assembly [of brethren] and for all believers in Christ.” Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 49, n. 133, p. 86.

<sup>13</sup> A good synthesis is proposed by Clemena Antonova, *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon. Seeing the World with the Eyes of God* (Farnham/Burlington: Routledge, 2010); Tim Ingold, “The Temporality of the Landscape,” *World Archeology* 25, no.2 (1993): 152–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.1993.9980235>; Hans Belting et. al., “The Movement and the Experience of ‘Iconic Presence’. An Introduction,” *Convivium* 6, no. 1 (2019): 11–15.; Martin F. Lešák, “Sacred Architecture and the Voice of Bells in the Medieval Landscape. With the Case Study of Mont-Saint-Michel,” *Convivium* 6, no. 1 (2019): 48–69. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.CONV.1.4.2019023>; Martin Lešák, “Sacral Architecture on the Horizon: The Sacred Landscape of Medieval Pilgrim,” in: *Migrating Art Historians on The Sacred Ways*, dir. Ivan Foletti et. al. (Brno/Roma: Viella, 2018), 61–74.

The building of a paradise garden is thus described explicitly with the mention of fruits known from biblical stories<sup>14</sup>. To draw a clear parallel between the biblical story and historical reality, the writer also insisted on people's hard work – one of the prerequisites for the creation of a quasi-paradise on Earth:

With great labor and enormous expense, he [patriarch Lord Yakob] led the water from Mount Dzage'dzor to Ts'ak'ut, which was opposite the monastery on the other side of the river. In that rocky place which had been covered with brambles, he planted grape vines of the best sort and roses, many vineyards, and orchards of diverse fruits such as olives, figs, and pomegranates. He created a marvelous paradise full of all sorts of fruit-bearers and covered a large expanse with dense trees and the vines of delicious grapes for the pleasure of the brotherhood and for the needs of all the poor and needy. Then, seeing a charming hill in the midst of the orchard, he leveled its summit and surrounded it with a wall. Entering here, one could see a splendid panorama of all the vineyards. Then he built [on the hill] a domed chapel of astonishing design. He had its walls and ceiling decorated with paintings of various colors, representing all the figures of the Incarnation, the Apostles, and the Patriarchs. The church was surrounded by halls and porticoes<sup>15</sup>.

This conception was strengthened by the fact that the monasteries were surrounded by vineyards, gardens, fruit-bearing trees, and springs of water and *de facto* represented *loci amoeni*<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, not only were wealthy people granting vineyards, gardens, and fields as inheritance or intercession to the church or monasteries, monks ("holy men") were also intended to take care of them and the *topos* of a paradise garden thus had a tangible reflection in everyday earthly life<sup>17</sup>.

This particular literary *topos* is certainly not exclusive to medieval Armenia.<sup>18</sup> But the frequency with which the bishop-historian recounted a prosperous, extremely rich, and splendid country is impressive. One might wonder why Orbelian insisted so much on this particular feature of the Christianization of the country. One possible explanation can be seen in the relationship of his family, which was one of the ruling dynasties, with the region. By celebrating the achievements of this region and its transformation into a paradise-like space, Orbelian is implicitly emphasizing the power of the ruling class in the Siwnik region.

### 3. Shaped by greed

The contrast cannot be greater with the second strand of Orbelian's narrative: the numerous moments in history when Armenia (and the Siwnik region) was invaded by foreign forces greedy to possess its riches. In such cases, it is not a matter of "capitalist" lust to conquer natural wealth but an unbridled desire to control all of the country's wealth at any cost:

For when the Khwarezmians saw that our land lacked a ruler, they mercilessly destroyed and took captives, burning down buildings, homes, cities, villages, and monasteries. They burned all the crops and cut down the vineyards and trees<sup>19</sup>.

What Orbelian described was certainly the terrors of war. Humans are killed, cities are destroyed, and natural resources are erased. The goal of such an operation is surely "shock therapy" for the local population, but once again we are facing a literary construction: the war is presented by the writer as a quasi-apocalypse<sup>20</sup>. In the framework of this book, one might wonder if the invasion would not be more precisely described as "exploitation" due to war and thus absolute: all natural and human resources should be exhausted and the result of such an attitude from enemies can only be tragedy:

As a result, severe famine was universal. Thick snakes came crawling into vessels and beds, day and night. Large locusts came and ate up [vegetation] as far as the Ocean sea and, generally, bringing famine to man and beast. And when [the locusts] fell to the ground, their bodies covered the mountains, plains, and valleys. Then came man-eating wolves. Those [folk] who had survived the sword, famine, the snakes [and locusts], died eaten [by wolves]<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> A brief overview about the conception of the world as a (paradise) garden can be found in Hamlet Petrosyan, "The World as a Garden," in: *Armenian Folk Arts, Culture, and Identity*, eds. Levon Abrahamian and Nancy Sweezy (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 25–33.

<sup>15</sup> Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 49, para. 2, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> Liz McAvoy, *The Enclosed Garden and the Medieval Religious Imaginary* (Woodbridge/Köln: Boydell & Brewer, 2021); Dagmar Thoss, "Studien zum Locus amoenus im Mittelalter," *Wiener Romanistische Arbeiten* 10 (Wien/Stuttgart: W. Braumüller, 1972).

<sup>17</sup> Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 50; Mary W. Helms, "Sacred Landscape and the Early Medieval European Cloister. Unity, Paradise, and the Cosmic Mountain," *Anthropos* Bd. 97 (2002): 435–453. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40466044>

<sup>18</sup> Adrien Palladino, "Dynamics of Medieval Landscape. Measure, Environment, Conversion," *Convivium* 9, no.1 (2022): 12–27. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.CONVI.5.131643>; Veronica della Dora, *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 66, para. 2, p. 133.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview of representations of war in the Middle Ages and Medieval literature, see, e.g., Joanna Bellis and Laura Slater, eds., *Representing War and Violence, 1250–1600* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2016); Richard Abels, "Cultural Representation and the Practice of War in the Middle Ages," in *Journal of Medieval Military History: Volume VI*, eds. Clifford J. Rogers et al. (Boydell & Brewer, 2008), 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781846156496.001>

<sup>21</sup> Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 66, para. 2, pp. 133, 134.

The exploitation of resources and human greed – described using topoi known from the plagues of Egypt or the Book of the Apocalypse – is not the sole purpose of the various wartime invasions<sup>22</sup>. At least according to Orbelian, one of the systematic results of each invasion is certainly what we might today describe as attempted “cultural genocide.”<sup>23</sup> The country’s most important sacred sites and monasteries were targeted and destroyed in a more or less systematic manner.



Figure 3 Tatev monastery, 9–10th century, Tatev, ©Wikimedia Commons, Diego Delso, CC BY-SA 4.0

[Satan] entered the hearts of the Ishmaelite military commanders who were in Movkan and Talish, in Ahr and Ardabil (Artawe'l), and in Atrpatakan. [Satan] aroused them to move [against Tat'ev] because of the renown of this illustrious House. (...) Bishop Lord Yovhanne's, as it happened, was not there at the time. But the rest were all put to the sword, while the church, which was in the name of Saint Gregory, [the marauders] filled with wood and set ablaze, destroying the beautiful structure, which they pulled apart. They also wanted to destroy the marvelous column which had been erected at the great church two years earlier by the great Lord Yovhanne's. However, by some miracle, they did not dare to touch it. This was also true for the large church. Nonetheless, they burned down and wrecked all the [other] structures at the monastery—the workshops, dining hall, and all other buildings of the clerics and other residents. Whatever they found, they took as booty and then departed for wherever they had come from<sup>24</sup>.

The tale of Tatev's destruction combines elements of war history – looting and resource control – with references to attempts to win control over the cultural life of Armenia<sup>25</sup>. Another noteworthy aspect is, of course, the divine presence that miraculously saves the most sacred elements. Human greed plunders, and war destroys, but God, in his eschatological war with Satan, with the assistance of the Armenian people saves what He can.

<sup>22</sup> Examples of books considering the topoi of the plagues of Egypt: Laura A. Smoller, “Of Earthquakes, Hail, Frogs, and Geography: Plague and the Investigation of the Apocalypse in the Later Middle Ages,” In: *Last Thing: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, eds. Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 156–188; Richard Emmerson and Bernard McGinn, eds., *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Cornell University Press, 1992). <https://archive.org/details/apocalypseinmidd0000unse/page/n5/mode/2up>

<sup>23</sup> Regarding the question of cultural genocide, see such recent publications as Elisa Novic, *The Concept of Cultural Genocide: An International Law Perspective* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Edward C. Luck, “Cultural Genocide and the Protection of Cultural Heritage,” *J. Paul Getty Trust Occasional Papers in Cultural Heritage Policy* n. 2 (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2018); Irina Bokova, “Culture on the Front Line of New Wars,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 22, no. 1 (2015), 289–296. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24591015>.

<sup>24</sup> Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 58, para. 2, pp. 105, 106.

<sup>25</sup> For a general overview of the topic of the destruction of culture during war conflicts, see, e.g., Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev, “Stalin's Legacy in the Post-Soviet Nations and the Genesis of Nationalist Extremism in Azerbaijan,” in: *Monuments and Identities in the Caucasus. Karabagh, Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan in Contemporary Geopolitical Conflict*, eds. Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev and Haroutioun Khatchadourian (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 237–305.; John W. Jandora, “War and Culture: A Neglected Relation,” *Armed Forces & Society* 25, no. 4 (1999): 541–556. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X9902500402>; Adda B. Bozeman, *Strategic Intelligence & Statecraft: Selected Essays* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 46–78; Leila A. Amineddoleh, “The Legal Tools Used before and during Conflict to Avoid Destruction of Cultural Heritage,” *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2017): 37–48. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5749/futuante.14.1.0037>; regarding specific examples from history such as the burning of Persepolis (4th century BC), the sack of Constantinople in 1204 or its fall in 1453: Eduard Rung, *The Burning of Greek Temples by the Persians and Greek War-Propaganda*, in: Krzysztof Ulanowski, ed., *The Religious Aspects of War in the Ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome: Ancient Warfare* Vol. I (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2016), 166–176.; Donald M. Nicol, *Byzantium and Venice: Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 124–147.; Janna Israel, “A History Built on Ruins: Venice and the Destruction of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople,” *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 9, no. 1 (2012): 107–122. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/493927>.

Once again, Orbelian's choice to speak about Tatev Monastery (Fig. 3) as an *exemplum* for the tragedy and also God's intervention is everything but accidental: Orbelian is indeed describing a monastery that was financed for generations by his family and that, furthermore, was his own seat and the presence of two bells in this monastery from the beginning of the 14th century with his name inscribed on them testifies to his authority in and beyond Tatev Monastery<sup>26</sup>. The historical tale is thus framed by the author's personal ambitions and also partly by his desire to promote his own and his family's influence in the region.

#### 4. Back to paradise

The third leitmotif of Orbelian's narrative is certainly one of reconstructing the countryside and buildings following each disaster caused by war or nature. His account is sprinkled with moments of rebuilding destroyed monuments and new efforts to turn the scorched earth left by foreign troops into a quasi-paradise. Again, in the case of Tatev, we read about a third reconstruction of the monastery:



Figure 4 Saint Gayane Church, 7th century, Vagharshapat (Etchmiadzin), ©Wikimedia Commons, Dav Sargsyan, CC BY-SA 4.0

Then we began to [re]build the blessed church at Tatev, named after Saint Gregory the Illuminator, which had been demolished to the foundations. This was the third rebuilding. The first had been done by Prince Philip in the time of Lord Dawit', bishop of Siwnik'. The second [re]building was done by Lord Yovhanne's, by order of King Smbat. The third [re]building we ourselves undertook with the grace of God, using solid stones in elegant proportions suitable to its structure. Now it happened that when we were pulling down a column on the north side of the little that remained of the foundation, we discovered an indescribably holy treasure: a relic of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. [This consisted of] a part of his skull and a fragment of his right arm, placed in a small wooden chest, closed and sealed with a lead seal. We were overjoyed with this and glorified God with great thanksgiving. After the building was completed, we placed it in a suitable place in that church, in a spot concealed from everyone<sup>27</sup>.

Divine intervention is not slow to manifest: during the restoration work, important miracles occur. In this sense, the pious work of Prince Philip, who commissioned the first rebuilding of the monastery, and implicitly also the tragedies of war are presented in a different light since without the destruction, the greatest treasure, consisting in the relic, would never have been discovered. This passage is, however, very interesting also from an art history perspective: Orbelian is indeed describing the rebuilding of a "sacred space" around a miraculous object<sup>28</sup>. On a literary level, Orbelian's story also connects Tatev with the most important "fragments

<sup>26</sup> For further information about Step'annos Orbelian and Tatev Monastery, see: Rapti, *Monuments et mémoire*, 334–337; Tamanyan, *Զրույցները Ստ. Օրբելյանի*, 186–208.; G. M. Grigoryan, "Ստեփանոս Օրբելյան," *Historical-Philological Journal* 4 (1976): 155–164. oai:arar.sci.am:172353.; Gérard Dedeyan, "Les Arméniens en Occident, fin du Xe siècle - début du XIe," In: *Actes des congrès de la Société des historiens médiévistes de l'enseignement supérieur public*, 9<sup>e</sup> congrès, Occident et Orient au Xe siècle, Dijon, 2–4 June, 1978, 123–139, spp. 131, 132. <https://doi.org/10.3406/shmes.1978.1279>; Robert Bedrosian, "The Turco-Mongol Invasions and the Lords of Armenia in the 13th–14th centuries" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1979) 266–281, ProQuest (302921316).; Arsen Harutyunyan, "Տաթևի վանքի շինարարական փուլերը (ըստ երկրաշարժերի տարեգրության)," *Herald of the Social Science* 2 (2022): 250–267. oai:arar.sci.am:325391.

<sup>27</sup> Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 71, para. 8, pp. 159, 160.

<sup>28</sup> On the topic of "sacred space" and the importance of relics in the Middle Ages, we can mention recent works such as Michele Bacci, "Site-worship and the iconopoietic power of kinetic devotions," *Convivium* 6, no. 1 (2019): 20–47. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.CONVI.4.2019022>; Michele Bacci, "Sacred spaces versus holy sites: On the limits and advantages of a hierotopic approach," In:

of eternity” of the southern Caucasus, such as the column of Saint Nino from the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta and the relics of Hripsime and Gayane at Etchmiadzin (Fig. 4)<sup>29</sup>. Surprisingly enough, Orbelian’s favorite monastery thus in a way benefits from war itself.

However, not only were Armenian resources exploited through the terrors of war, but the conquered country was also vexed by terrible taxation<sup>30</sup>. In Orbelian’s account, it is Smbat (2nd half of the 13th century) – the Prince of Siwnik – who is the key figure in restoring balance to this poor land<sup>31</sup>. He personally went to the khan to negotiate different treatment for Armenia’s sacred sites, and his operation was crowned with success:

Smbat had circulated around [visiting] our monasteries, which were enduring bitter taxation. He had prayers recited in evening services and entrusted himself to the saints. He swore a vow that should he return successfully, all the priests would be freed from taxes, all the churches would receive gifts, and all their stolen patrimonies would be returned. [...] he arrived in an eastern country at the throne of the world-ruling Khanate, [in the city] called Qaraqorum. Since Mongke-Khan was a legitimate Christian, he had at his great palace a church and priests who were continually offering mass and services without interruption. [Mongke-Khan] himself greatly loved Christians, who were called ark’ayun, and the entire land practiced Christianity. [...] [Mongke-Khan] asked: “What nation do you belong to?” And [Smbat] replied: “By faith, I am Christian, and by nationality, Armenian.” Therefore [the Khan] liked him even more and asked the reason for his arrival. Then [Smbat] related everything to him—the harassment of the churches, his own deprivation, the faithfulness of his brother toward Aslan-noyin, and everything concerning the affairs of the land. [Mongke-Khan] greatly approved of [Smbat] and accepted his statements [as accurate]<sup>32</sup>.

This passage is extremely interesting for several reasons: first, it shows the diplomatic action of the Armenian prince in favor of his country, submitted to the Mongols. From Orbelian’s perspective, the very reason for Smbat’s success is his Christian faith. Furthermore, it is again the heavenly power of a small relic taken by Smbat to the Khan’s court that convinces the Great Mongke-Khan to trust him<sup>33</sup>. And, indeed, it is possible that his religious identity may have played a role in this situation since the Khans of the Mongols were in this period greatly tolerant of various religions including Christianity<sup>34</sup>.

At the same time, it is obvious, and this is the second main meaning of the passage under examination, that Orbelian is advocating for the reduction of church taxes and the prince’s generosity. The writing of almost contemporary history can thus be seen as an occasion to remind the ruling dynasty of its moral obligation towards the Church.

In this context, it is evident why Step’annos Orbelian, the Metropolitan of Siwnik, emphasized the sense of the prince’s evergetism:

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*Icons of Space: Advances in Hierotopy*, ed. Jelena Bogdanović (London: Routledge, 2021), 15–28; Rapti, *Monuments et mémoire*, 337–339.; Dawn M. Hayes, *Body and Sacred Place in Medieval Europe, 1100–1389* (New York: Routledge, 2003).; Ivan Foletti, “Spaces for Miracles: Constructing Sacred Space through the Body, from Conques to the Mediterranean, and Beyond,” *Convivium* 9, no. 1 (2022): 168–185. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.CONVI.5.131651>.

<sup>29</sup> Luigi Canetti, *Frammenti di eternità, Corpi e reliquie tra Antichità e Medioevo*, Rome: Viella, 2002.; regarding Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta, see George Gagoshidze, “Mtskheta-Georgian Jerusalem, Svetitskhoveli,” In: *Jerusalem as Narrative Space, Erzählraum Jerusalem*, eds. Anette Hoffmann and Gerhard Wolf (Leiden: Brill 2012), 47–62.; Giorgi Chubinashvili, *ქართული ხელოვნების ძეგლები საქართველოში და მისი სამი მთავარი კათედრალი*, Tiflis: ს. ს. უ. ს. პოლიგრაფტრესტის 1-ლი სტამბა, 1925.; for the story of saints Hripsime and Gayane, see Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*, 147–217; Agathangelos also presented a legend about the construction of churches of saints Hripsime and Gayane at Etchmidzin (n. 6); for a deeper overview of these monuments, see Arsen Harutyunyan, “Ս. Հռիփսիմի և Ս. Գայանի վանքերի որմերի ազդեցված խաչքարերի նորահայտ վիճակը,” *Էջմիածին: Պաշտօնական ամսագիր Ամենայն Հայոց Կաթողիկոսութեան Սայր Աթոռոյ Սրբոյ Էջմիածնի* 67, no. 5 (2011): 88–94.; Patrick Donabédian, *L’âge d’or de l’architecture arménienne*, Marseille: Parenthèses, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> The taxation policy during the Mongol occupation of Armenia was quite extensive, for example a tribute of military service, a herd tax, and charges for food and provisions can be mentioned as established in Armenia. R. Hovannisian gave a good general overview on the tax levels: “...in 1243 by command of the Great Khan Guyuk himself, taxes amounting to between one-thirtieth and one-tenth of value were imposed on virtually everything movable and immovable, and a heavy head tax of 60 silver drams was collected from males.” In: Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, St. Martin’s Press, 1997, 259–264, sp. 259. [https://archive.org/details/armenianpeople/r0rich\\_0](https://archive.org/details/armenianpeople/r0rich_0); For more about the Mongol taxation policy, see, e.g., Dashdondog, 2022, 111–120; H. H. F. Schurmann, “Mongolian Tributary Practices of the Thirteenth Century,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 19, no. 3/4 (1956): 304–389. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004216358\\_010](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004216358_010); Ann K. S. Lambton, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia: Aspects of Administrative, Economic, and Social History, 11th–14th century*, New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1988. <https://archive.org/details/continuitychange0000lamb/page/n5/mode/2up>

<sup>31</sup> There is a lack of sources and information about Smbat Orbelian, but according to the Khambartsumyan, V. H., *Հայկական Սովետական Հանրագիտարան* (=Armenian Soviet Encyclopedia). Vol. 10 (Yerevan: ՀՍՍՀ ԳԱ, 1984), 455. and Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, 477–482., Smbat Orbelian was the uncle of Step’annos Orbelian and after the death of Smbat’s elder brother Elikum, he became the head of the house of the Orbelians of Siwnik. He went to Mongolian territory and received a privilege of paying taxes directly to the Mongol khan, so the Orbelians and Siwnik region were de facto no longer under the control of the Zakharians and the Georgian king. Smbat was formally the Prince of Siwnik and even though he is sometimes referred to as the king, he never gained this title officially.

<sup>32</sup> Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 66, para. 12, p. 136.

<sup>33</sup> Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 66, pp. 134–140.

<sup>34</sup> See in general, e.g., Jana Valtrová, “Christian Material Culture and the Mongols: the Case of William of Rubruck,” *Eurasian Studies* 17, no. 2 (2020): 228–243. <https://doi.org/10.1163/24685623-12340074>; George Lane, *Genghis Khan and Mongol Rule*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009.; Bedrosian, *The Turco-Mongol Invasions*.; Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, Macmillan, 2010. <https://archive.org/details/dli.pahar.3709/page/n1/mode/2up>; Bayarsaikhan Dashdondog, “Some Dynamics of Mongol-Armenian Interactions,” *Հանդէս հայագիտական, բանասիրական, գրական* 168, no. 3–4 (2010): 597–627. oai:arar.sci.am:260545.; Christopher P. Atwood, “Validation by Holiness or Sovereignty: Religious Toleration as Political Theology in the Mongol World Empire of the Thirteenth Century,” *The International History Review* 26, no. 2 (2004): 237–256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2004.9641030>; Francis Woodman Cleaves (trad.), *The Secret History of the Mongols*, Harvard University Press, 1982. <https://archive.org/details/Cleaves1982SecretHistoryMongols>

[Smbat] built a marvelous chapel at Noravank', above their own cemetery. At great expense, he also enriched and beautified the church, giving it villages and vineyards, as we mentioned earlier. [Smbat] went to Basen, at Hulegu's order, to see about acquiring pine timber to construct a great palace in the plain of Dar', which they call Aladagh. He came to Ashorni and went to the monastery of T'at'ul where, after spending much money and expending great effort, he acquired a fragment of the head of the holy Illuminator, Gregory, since one side of his head was located there<sup>35</sup>.

In sum, Armenian resources were ruthlessly exploited by foreign powers. But in Orbelian's account, thanks to divine support, with each generation local rulers and princes have the strength and generosity to allow Armenian lands to return to what appears to be their natural state, that of a small quasi-paradise on earth.

## 5. Conclusions: Rewriting Armenian history?

The manner in which Orbelian's text is written appears obviously biased. We have already mentioned several times the extent to which personal, ecclesiastical, and family matters influenced his historical narrative. The author wants to present himself as a skilled historian, regularly mentioning the sources from which he drew. So, he writes, for example:

I sought and assembled [information] from the old and new histories of the Armenians, also from inscriptions on churches, and from the oldest documents collected and kept in secure repositories in the monastery of Tat'ev...<sup>36</sup>

However, the sources mentioned, including the epigraphic ones, represent not only a documentary treasure but also a valuable probe into the progressive development of Armenian self-consciousness at a time of crisis. Indeed, the cyclical narrative proposed by the bishop-historian makes sense in the context of its editing, which was completed in 1299<sup>37</sup>. The entire work begins with the creation of the world, followed by an idealized history of the Armenian people (with a focus on Siwnik), culminating (in chapter 66 out of 73) with the Mongol rule over the country. It is evident from the chronicle that Orbelian personally knew both Arghun Khan (r. 1284-1291) and his successors Il-Khan Geikhatu (r. 1291-1295) and Ghazan Khan (r. 1295-1304)<sup>38</sup>. The interesting fact is that the three Mongol rulers confirmed all his rights to the bishopric. Furthermore, the Smbat mentioned in the final part of the story is a member of the same Orbelian family, which ascends through him to the great princely title, mentioned in Noravank in 1275 (Fig. 5)<sup>39</sup>. Armenian history, a story of glory and tragedy, thus intersects with the personal and family history of the author of this narrative.



Figure 5 Noravank monastery, 13-14th century, Amaghu Valley, ©Michaela Kovářová

<sup>35</sup> Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 66, n. 213, p. 138.

<sup>36</sup> Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 73, colophon, pp. 168, 169.

<sup>37</sup> Naira Tamanyan, Զրույցները Ստ. Օրբելյանի.; Rapti, *Monuments et mémoire.*; Robert W. Thomson, "The Major Works of Armenian Historiography (Classical and Medieval)," *Armenian Philology in the Modern Era, From Manuscript to Digital Text* 23, no. 1 (2014): 309. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004270961\\_015](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004270961_015); Bedrosian, *The Turco-Mongol Invasions*, 32-37.; Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, R. Bedroian's Preface, 8-10.

<sup>38</sup> Bayarsaikhan Dashdondog, *The Mongols and the Armenians (1220-1335)*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, 17-18.; Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, R. Bedroian's Preface, pp. 8-10; Grigoryan, Ստեփանոս Օրբելյան, 155-164.

<sup>39</sup> Regarding the phenomenon of commissions by noble families of architecture and its additional inscriptions and engravings, see Annie Mahé and Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Histoire de l'Arménie des origines à nos jours*, Paris: Perrin 2012, 213-220.; regarding Noravank and connections with the Orbelians: Adriano Alpago-Novello et al., *Amaghu Noravank': Documenti di architettura armena* 14, Edizione Ares, 1985. <https://archive.org/details/daa-14-noravank-1985/mode/2up>; Isabelle Augé, "Les lieux de mémoire des princes Orbelean: mémoire écrite, mémoire inscrite," *Mélanges Jean-Pierre Mahé, Travaux et Mémoires* 18 (2014), 65-84. (hal-03062854).; Sirarpie Der Nersessian, "Deux Tympanes Sculptés Arméniens Datant de 1321," *Cahiers Archéologiques: Fin de l'Antiquité et Moyen Age* 25 (1976): 109-122.; Zaroui Pogossian, "Princes, Queens, Bishops, Sultans: Seljuks in Syunik' and the Rise of the Monastery of Noravank," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 89, no. 1 (2023): 207-250.; Rapti, *Monuments et mémoire*, 336-339.

It is therefore not surprising that it is in Noravank where the narrative stops the bishop-historian's words and then shows the full complexity of the situation.

...[Written] in the sublime and glorious monastery of Noravank, under the protection of the temples where God resides and [under the protection of] relics which have borne God, during days of exile and bitterness, while we are living in the midst of dreadful turmoil and constant despair, with our eyes looking only to a visit from On High<sup>40</sup>.

Even under the yoke of the Mongols, peace and a certain prosperity can be found. But from the bishop's words, we feel all the bitterness of a man aware of the desperate situation of the culture to which he belonged. His people were under constant genocidal threat, and that had been the case for centuries. Already in the 19th chapter of his account, he in fact wrote:

Now since the time of the blessed Vardan, Persian troops overran the entire country. Some pursued those taking flight, some went against the fortresses and strongholds. They were attempting to completely exterminate the Armenian nation. The sword was ever held over the heads of Armenian soldiers to make them, by just one single word, deny Christ, or bow their heads to the sun otherwise to be beheaded on the spot. Thus, there were martyrs everywhere in Armenia, among the rocks, ravines, valleys, and hills, massed densely like stars in the night<sup>41</sup>.

What Orbelian told is, in a sense, the story of a “martyred people”, a title that continues to be attached to Armenian history, through the entire 19th century up to the present. In the medieval centuries, such a situation – shaped by inhuman greed – could be explained by the country's great wealth, and over the following centuries by the Armenians' commercial successes. Today, however, the situation is a considerably different one, and one wonders why the country's culture, art, and population itself are being martyred in this way.

The situation of Armenian monuments within the territory of Nakhichevan, which around the 10th century was part of the Siwnik Province and historically a territory fought over by the Persians, Armenians, Mongols, and Turks, can serve as an example<sup>42</sup>. For the past several years and in the present days, a systematic destruction of Armenian heritage has been carried out within and beyond the territory of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, and not much is being done to prevent it<sup>43</sup>. The question is now how long Armenian cultural heritage in Nagorno Karabakh will be preserved. It would be appropriate for global institutions of heritage protection not to stay silent and to raise public and political awareness of the problem. Otherwise, there is a risk that the destiny of the monuments in Nagorno Karabakh will be as tragic as the ones in Nakhichevan.

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<sup>41</sup> Orbelean, *History of the State of Sisakan*, cap. 19, para. 2, p. 34.

<sup>42</sup> Argam Ayzazian, *The Historical Monuments of Nakhichevan*, trad. K. H. Maksoudian, Wayne State University Press, 1990. <https://archive.org/details/ayvazian-1990-nakhichevan/mode/2up>; David Marshall Lang, *Armenia: Cradle of Civilization*, Allen and Unwin, 1970, 178. <https://archive.org/details/armeniacradofo0000lang/mode/2up>; Veronika Tsibenko, “Nakhchivan,” In *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*, eds. Kate Fleet et. al., vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 113–116.

<sup>43</sup> For more, see Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW Silent Erasure): <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/48703f664f2f467b8f4f42008d8c75da>

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