



Saint Dertad the King; Soorp T'rdat Takavor

A.D. 250-330

Known as Tiridates the Great (Armenian: T'rdat) Saint T'rdat the King was the King of Arsacid (Arshakuni) Armenia (A.D. 287–330).

Tiridates III was the son of Khosrov II of Armenia by an unnamed mother, the latter being assassinated in 252 by a Parthian agent named Anak under orders from Ardashir I of Persia. Tiridates had one known sibling, a sister called Khosrovidukht and was the namesake of his paternal grandfather, Tiridates II of Armenia. Anak was captured and executed along with most of his family, while his son, Gregory (who would later be "the Illuminator" of Armenia) was sheltered in Caesaria, in Cappadocia. Being the only surviving heir to the throne, Tiridates was quickly taken away to Rome soon after his father's assassination while still an infant. He was educated in Rome and was skilled in languages and military tactics. In addition, he firmly understood and appreciated Roman law. The Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi described him as a brave and strong warrior who participated in the battles against enemies. He personally led his army to victories in many battles.

Kingship

In 270, the Roman emperor Aurelian engaged the Sassanids, who had now replaced the Parthians on the Persian eastern front and he was able to drive them back. Tiridates, as the true heir to the now Persian-occupied Armenian throne, came to Armenia and quickly raised an army and drove the enemy out in 287. When Tiridates returned to Armenia, he made the city of Vagharshapat (later known as Etchmiadzin) his capital in the kingdom as Vagharshapat was the capital of his late father. For a while, fortune appeared to favour Tiridates. But as tensions grew with a powerful re-organized Persian Empire, Armenia was again under attack. Tiridates once more took refuge with the Romans. The Roman-Armenian alliance grew stronger, especially while Emperor Diocletian ruled the Roman empire. This can be attributed to the upbringing of Tiridates, the consistent Persian aggressions and the murder of his father by Anak. With Diocletian's help, Tiridates pushed the Persians out of Armenia. In 299, Diocletian left the Armenian state in a quasi-independent and protectorate status possibly to use it as a buffer in case of a Persian attack. Tiridates married an Alani Princess named Ashkhen in 297. They had three children: a son called Khosrov III, a daughter called Salome and an unnamed daughter who married St. Husik I, an early Catholicos of the Armenian Church.

At the Armenian royal court, Queen Ashkhen would befriend Princess Khosrovidukht, the sister of Tiridates. Together the Queen and Princess would learn of the then underground Christian movement. At that time they were pagans, along with the King and many other Armenians - both nobles and commoners alike - and followers of Zoroastrianism. The persecution of Christians throughout the Roman world was rampant and Tiridates, an ally of Rome and true to his pagan roots, ordered the execution of Christians in Armenia.

Line art by Kalyn Babikyan, based on icon by Daniel Varoujan Hejinian at Saints Vartanantz Armenian Orthodox Church in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. Overview written by Deacon James Magarian.

Conversion

The traditional story of the conversion of the king and the nation is primarily based on the fifth-century work of Agathangelos titled, "The History of the Armenians." It tells of how Gregory the Illuminator, the son of Anak, brought up as a Christian and felt guilt for his own father's sin, joined the Armenian army and worked as a secretary to the king. Christianity in Armenia had a strong footing by the end of the 3rd century but the nation by and large still followed pagan polytheism. Tiridates was no exception as he too worshiped various ancient gods. During a pagan religious ceremony, Tiridates ordered Gregory to place a flower wreath at the foot of the statue of the goddess Anahit in Eriza. Gregory refused, proclaiming his Christian faith. This act infuriated the King. His fury was only exacerbated when several individuals declared that Gregory was in fact the son of Anak, the traitor who had killed Tiridates's father. Gregory was tortured and finally thrown in Khor Virap, a deep underground dungeon (also referred to as a pit).

During the years of Gregory's imprisonment, a group of virgin nuns, led by Gayane, came to Armenia as they fled Roman persecution of their Christian faith. Tiridates heard about the group and the legendary beauty of one of its members, Hripsime. He brought them to the palace and demanded to marry the beautiful virgin; she refused. Hripsime and the other nuns remained true to their faith, but did not find the peace they sought after fleeing Rome. The King had the whole group tortured and killed. After this event, he fell ill and according to legend, adopted the behavior of a wild boar, aimlessly wandering around in the forest. The King's sister, Princess Khosrovidukht, had multiple dreams wherein Gregory was still alive in the dungeon and he was the only one able to cure the king. Both Queen Ashkhen and Princess Khosrovidukht prayed to Christ for the King's recovery.

At this point it had been 13 years since Gregory's imprisonment, and the odds of him being alive were slim. They retrieved him and despite being incredibly malnourished he was still alive. It is believed that someone in the royal court supported an effort by a kind-hearted woman who threw a loaf of bread down in Khor Virap every day for him.

Tiridates was brought to Gregory, and was miraculously cured of his illness in 301. Persuaded by the power of the cure, the King immediately proclaimed Christianity the official state religion. This revolutionary break with the centuries-old pagan tradition made Armenia the first state to officially adopt Christianity. Tiridates appointed Gregory as Catholicos of the growing Armenian Church.

Under St. Gregory's guidance, King Tiridates prayed at the site where the young nuns were martyred. The Greek historian Agathangelos tells that, "By Christ's grace, [Gregory] cured [the king's] hands and feet enough so that he was able with his own hands to dig graves and bury the caskets in them." The repentant Tiridates, together with Ashkhen and Khosrovidukht, personally participated physically and financially in laying the foundations of what would be

magnificent memorial churches over the sites of the relics of these early Christian Martyrs in the area of Vaghashapat.

Agathangelos also writes that King Tiridates, the Queen and the Princess go out to meet St. Gregory upon his return from Caesarea, where he had traveled to receive episcopal ordination. Following a period of fasting and preparation, Gregory baptizes the three of them. They are followed by the baptism of the royal court and nobles of Armenia. Through the baptism by Gregory, Tiridates becomes the first King in the world to rule over a Christian nation. History also reveals that Tiridates, Ashkhen and Khosrovidukht personally participate in the construction of the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin. The stones they used to build the cathedral were brought to Vagharshapat from the slopes of Biblical Mount Ararat.

However, the switch from the long-standing pagan religion to Christianity was not an easy one in Armenia. Tiridates often used force to impose this new faith upon the people and many armed conflicts ensued, because polytheism was deeply rooted in the Armenian people. An actual battle took place between the King's forces and the pagan camp, resulting in the weakening of polytheistic military strength. Tiridates thus spent the rest of his life trying to eliminate all ancient beliefs and in doing so destroyed countless statues, temples and written documents. As a result, there are few local sources about ancient Armenian history and culture. The King worked feverishly to spread the faith and died in 330. Historian Movses Khorenatsi states that several members of Armenian nobility (nakharar families) conspired against Tiridates and eventually poisoned him.

Tiridates III, Ashkhen and Khosrovidukht are Saints in the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, and by extension all of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Their feast day is on the Saturday after the fifth Sunday after Pentecost, usually around June 30. During each Divine Liturgy, the Church remembers St. T'rtad the King.