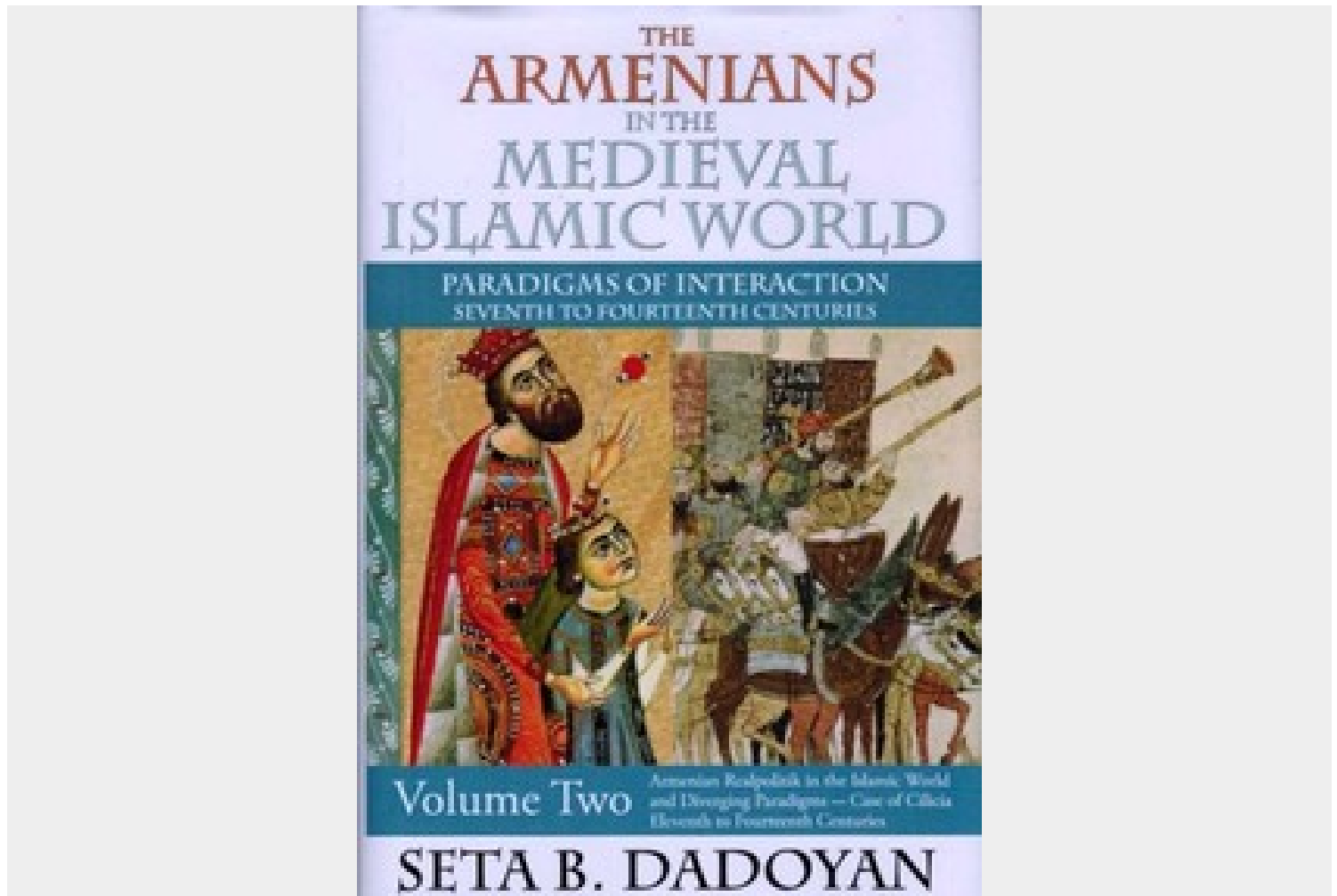


A REVOLUTIONARY TAKE ON MEDIEVAL ARMENIAN HISTORY

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"The Armenians in the Medieval Islamic World—Vol. I and II" by Seta B. Dadoyan (Published by Transaction Publishers).


Reviewed by Jirair Tutunjian, 26 March 2013

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A specialist in the Islamic and Armenian interaction in the Middle Ages and author of "The Fatimid Armenians", in addition to five other books, Dadoyan makes no bones about her intentions: "To clear the Armenian psyche of sedimentation and fixities...To draw the outlines of a new philosophy of Armenian history based on hitherto undetected or obscured patterns of interactions." She says Armenian studies are and have always been embedded in cultural-political tradition...the "scholarship and the discipline of Armenian studies in general face serious problems such as cultural traffic lights and institutional validations."

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Dadoyan also alleges that there has always been a deeply rooted and strong culture of authority among Armenians. "There is a tendency to fix authority in all matters, even those of opinion...the institutional infrastructure of the Armenian environment still does not allow the development of a culture of experimentation and critical thinking," she says blaming the politics of Armenian

intellectual culture which wants to safeguard the classical framework and certain foundational concepts. She quotes Armenian historian, Leo, who said that Armenian Medieval authors, who were members of the clergy, "took great care in avoiding the proofs and concealing the facts."

Glaring example of how the Armenian clergy helped falsify Medieval Armenian history is the case of Armenian dissidents who opposed the mainstream Church. According to the standard version of Armenian history, Armenians converted—en masse and totally—to Christianity in 301 and pagan or opposing creeds vanished from Armenia. Yet right from the time of St. Gregory Illuminator to the 15th century (some say up to the 19th century) there was a significant proportion of Armenians who remained semi-pagan and often opposed Church dogma and practices.

The Paulicians and Tondrakians weren't the only dissidents. There were Barborits, Gnostics, Messalians, Manicheans, Nestorians, Phantasists, the Arevordiks ("Sun Worshipers") and others who opposed Church's teachings. According to the accepted version of history, these dissident movements were insignificant blips in Church and lay history. The fact is they threatened the establishment, formed armies to defend themselves, joined forces with the Islamic armies to fight their persecutors—the Armenian and Byzantine lay and Church leaders. The Paulician might have been the ancestors of the Cathars of southern France. In addition to Cyprus and Sicily, many Paulicians were exiled to Thrace. From there some moved to Bulgaria where they helped establish the Bogomil heretics. The latter spread to Europe and eventually settled west of Marseille.

Dadoyan criticizes the monolithic view of Armenian history and the "simplistic constructs centred on the idea of a heroic, yet victimized nation." She demonstrates how, after 970, the Armenian condition changed with the gradual loss of semi-autonomy, and many Armenians migrated southwest to Syria and Cilicia. The decline of the nobility (after the failure of the Armenian rebellion in 774) had begun with the migration of the Mamigonian, Amadouni, Rshdouni and other nakharar clans to Byzantium. Their departure created a power vacuum. A new type of leadership and power centres were created in the fragmented society and space where adventurers, military leaders, brigands, heterodox sects mushroomed to fill the void. The culture of settler Armenians changed as they interacted with the Byzantines, Franks, Arabs, Seljuks, and Memluks.

Urbanization created new classes, including merchants and urban militias made up of young men. These societal changes often resulted in friction between the migrants and Armenians who had remained in Armenia proper. The latter maintained that western Armenians had strayed from the traditional path and mores.

It will come as a surprise to many Armenians that one of the most famous Byzantine epics ("Digenis Akritis") featured a hero of mixed descent--Muslim and Christian--whose grandfather was Armenian Paulician leader Chrysoverigs. The famous romance has been erased from Armenian cultural memory perhaps because our historians looked with disapproval upon national and religious intermingling.

While most Armenians know that some Byzantine emperors and generals were Armenian and that the Byzantine army was often made up of Armenians, very few Armenians know the important role Armenians played in Islamic history. Dadoyan rectifies the omission through original research in primary and secondary Arabic texts and sources. Armenian clergymen/historians—often misguided with a false sense of national and religious priorities—put the lid on these developments. Luckily for Armenians, Medieval Arab authors wrote, at great length about the Armenian contribution to Islamic civilization.

In volume II the author details the Fatimid Caliphate history from 1074 to 1163 when eight Armenian viziers governed Egypt. Badr al-Jamali, an Armenian slave who became Fatimid vizier (1074-1094), was the first. His son, vizier Al-Afdal, wrested Jerusalem from the Turks only to lose it to the Crusaders in 1099. Al-Afdal's son, Abu Ali Ahmad Kutayfat Ibn al-Afdal was another progressive vizier. Abul-Fath Yanis al-Rum al-Armani, Bahram al-Armani, father and son Ruzziks—Talai and Majd al-Islam Abu Shuja' Ruzzik rose to power often through the backing of their Armenian armies. These soldiers had left Armenia mainly because of the Seljuk invasions. The Armenian viziers strengthened the Egyptian military, ended corruption, and improved the economy. Despite the challenges from the Turks, the Crusaders and the Byzantines, these Armenian viziers were responsible for a century of Fatimid prosperity. They also acted as godfathers to the 100,000-strong Armenian community in Egypt. The viziers helped Armenian immigrants and built 30 churches and monasteries.

The viziers were not the only prominent Armenians in the Islamic world. Hazaramard, Bargash, Karakush (Guiragos), Baha ed-Din Abdallah al-Nasiri (helped Saladin become vizier), Sharaf ed-Din al-Armani, Azis al-Dawlah, Nawiki (Awaki-Avaki) Aqziz, Husam ed-Din Lulu al-Hajib, and Sultana Badr al-Duja were other Armenian-Islamic commanders, politicians and rulers. There was also the convert to Islam Armenian-Georgian dynasty of Danishmandids in Cappadocia, the Bene Boghusaks in Severek, and the Zakkarids clan in the east. Armenian leaders adopted Islamic names (Senekerim, Abu Gharib) and the nobility intermarried with Muslims and Mongols. Armenian poetry (some of Krikor Naregatsi's opus), architecture and design were influenced by Islamic culture, says Dadoyan.

Dadoyan's ambitious work will challenge many readers' "sacred" ideas of Medieval Armenian history. Criticizing the standard and monolithic version of Armenian historiography, the author shows that Medieval Armenian civilization was syncretic and dynamic. It was philosophically realistic, theologically ecumenical, and politically pragmatic, says Dadoyan. Armenians—from secular rulers to Church leaders to ordinary people—practiced realpolitik as never before. They would form alliances with the Byzantines, the Crusaders, the Arabs, the Seljuk Turks, Mongols and then break up with them when necessary. Similar realpolitik was practiced by all parties involved in Middle Eastern conflicts.

In this cauldron of the late Middle Ages Armenians miraculously witnessed their Silver Age. Armenian authors wrote and translated books on philosophy, theology, medicine, and astronomy. Poetry and illuminated manuscripts, innovative martial and civilian architecture boomed. According

to the author, in the 11th to 14th century the Armenian civilization was in many ways "the single-most significant Near Eastern equivalent of the European Late Gothic and Proto-Renaissance cultures."

While Dadoyan's agenda is serious and seminal, the two volumes brim with dazzling and colorful characters... Kogh Vasil; Red-Haired Dog Lazar; Ashod Msager; Ashod Yergat; iconoclast Emperor Constantine V Kopronymos ("dung-named") by his enemies; Karbeas/Garbis/Garabed, Paulician leader who joined forces with the Muslims to fight Byzantium; Smpad II "Diezeragal" (although he ruled over a patch of land); the larger-than-life Catholicos Yovhan Ojnetsi; Krikor and Tavit Mamigonian who were exiled to Yemen; the red-haired Armenian-Muslim Karmruk (governor of Tripoli); bloody Babik, a convert to Islam who claimed to be the reincarnation of a saint; brigand Gorg, Philaretus, the Edessa chieftain who—like many Armenian Cilician leaders—had converted to the Greek Orthodox Church to hold office in Byzantium; the legendary Manichean woman called Kallinike and her many sons; Simplicia the monk who attacked the Church's "corrupt" dogma and practices...all make their appearance in this Medieval pageant.

We can hardly wait for the third and final volume of Dadoyan's masterpiece.

