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Research article

The Mystery of Arshak, Vasak and Shapur in Faustus of Byzantium's "*History of Armenia*": An Experience of Hermeneutical Reconstruction

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Abstract

The epistemology of most fragments from Faustus of Byzantium's History of Armenia, particularly such difficult passages as chapter LIV of the fourth book, is possible only through exegesis of hidden, sacred meanings. The key to decoding the images, events, and phenomena described in this fragment of Faustus's "History" can be found in theatrical mysteries. It is known that any ancient theatrical action is based on agon, so analysis of dramatic texts is preferably conducted using the method of binary opposition. The agon between Armenian king Arsakes and Sassanid Sapor unfolds in the Persian king's tent, representing the proskeny of ancient theater. In this case, Arsakes acts as protagonist while Sapor plays the role of antagonist. In Faustus's mystery there is also a tritagonist – Sparapet Vasak, who plays a special role in the tragedy. This article represents an attempt to read through the lens of ancient drama a small fragment of an Armenian literary monument from the Early Middle Ages, revealing the dramatic technologies embedded within historical narrative.

Keywords: Early medieval Armenian literature; Hermeneutics; Faustus of Byzantium; Ancient drama; Mystery; Tragic amechania; Salt; Seal; Agon; Arsakes; Vasak; Sapor; Magicians

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Научная статья

Мистерия Аршака, Васака и Шапура в “Истории Армении” Фауста Византийского: Опыт герменевтической реконструкции

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Аннотация
Эпистемология большинства фрагментов “Истории Армении” Фауста Византийского, особенно такого трудного для понимания, как глава LIV четвертой книги, возможна лишь на основе экзегезы тайных, сокровенных смыслов. Ключом для раскодирования образов, событий и явлений, описываемых в рассматриваемом фрагменте фаустовской “Истории Армении” могут стать театральные мистерии. Известно, что в основе любого античного театрального действа находится агон, поэтому разбор текстов драматических произведений предпочтительнее проводить на основе метода бинарной оппозиции. Агон между армянским царем Аршаком и сасанидским Шапуром разворачивается в шатре персидского царя, представляющем проскений античного театра. В данном случае Аршак выступает как протагонист, в то время как Шапур играет роль антагониста. В мистерии Фауста присутствует и тритагонист – спарапет Васак, который играет особую роль в трагедии. Данная статья является попыткой прочтения через призму античной драмы небольшого фрагмента литературного памятника армянского Раннего Средневековья, выявляя драматургические технологии, заложенные в историческом повествовании.

Ключевые слова: Раннесредневековая армянская литература; Герменевтика; Фауст Византийский; Античная драма; Мистерии; Трагическая амехания; Соль; Печатка; Агон; Аршак; Васак; Шапур; Волхвы

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INTRODUCTION

The highest degree of reality is achieved only through signs...

—Charles Sanders Peirce

...and life's path is short, and Ananke is merciless...

—Alcman

Sacrifice is precisely that which alone gives meaning to life.

—Alexei Losev

Faustus of Byzantium (Favtos Buzand) was an Armenian author of the first half of the 5th century who, following Agathangelos, wrote the third and fourth books of the *History of Armenia*. This work can be considered a collective endeavor created by many generations of Armenian authors over nearly one and a half thousand years. Each author continued recording Armenian history from where his predecessor left off, bringing their account to some pivotal event that closed one chapter and opened another in Armenia's history.

Faustus represents a typical Hellenistic author. Even though, like all Armenian medieval historians, he was a monk and advocate of Christian values, he nevertheless relied not only on biblical tradition but also on classical antiquity when writing his work. Particularly interesting is how ancient drama influenced Faustus of Byzantium's "History." His work is divided into separate chapters, many of which can be viewed as great and small tragedies. Most could successfully be staged in any theater today – it is no coincidence that prose writers and dramatists of modern and contemporary times have used individual, still-relevant plots from Faustus's "History" to create their plays, novels, and even operas.[1]

In his "History," Faustus employed many elements of ancient mysteries and narrative structures from Hellenistic dramaturgy that were not yet completely forgotten in his time. Herein perhaps lies the secret of the powerful impact of this outstanding work from the Early Middle Ages.

TECHNOLOGY AS TRAGEDY: THE DRAMATIC STRUCTURE OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

The thematic focus on "Technology as Tragedy" provides a crucial lens for understanding Faustus's historiographical method. The dramatic technologies employed by Faustus – the structural principles of ancient theater, the mechanics of agon, the ritual significance of objects like seals and salt – function not merely as literary devices but as epistemological tools for comprehending historical reality. These technologies of meaning-making transform raw historical events into tragic knowledge, revealing the underlying patterns that govern human fate.

The tragic dimension emerges precisely through the technological apparatus of drama: the careful orchestration of protagonists and antagonists, the strategic use of space

[1] The most famous examples are Raffi's novel "Samvel" and the first Armenian opera "Arshak II" (1862). However, the most talented use of Faustus's plot to date remains the "Legend of the Destroyed City."

(the tent as proskeny), and the ritualized procedures of judgment. This technological framework allows Faustus to transcend mere chronography and achieve what Aristotle (4th century BCE/1983) distinguished as the domain of poetry – the exploration of what could be, rather than merely what was. In this sense, the dramatic technologies become instruments of historical truth, capable of revealing the deeper structures of reality that escape ordinary observation.

SHAPUR'S VOTUM[2] AND DEVOTIO[3]: SALT AND SEAL

The compositional backbone of the fourth book of Faustus of Byzantium's *History of Armenia* is chapter XVI, which describes the agon between Armenian king Arshak II (350-368) and the sovereign ruler of Iran, Sapor II, also known as Shapur or Shapuh the Long-lived (birth date unknown, king of Persia from 309 CE, died 379 CE).

In our chosen chapter, it is told how in the third year of the so-called Four-Year Armenian-Persian War (364-368), the shah of Iran, suffering one defeat after another, was forced to approach Arshak II with a peace proposal. Faustus of Byzantium describes these events: "Meanwhile, the Persian king Shapuh earnestly entreated king Arshak, sending him gifts and letters, and kindly invited him to establish mutual love and peace and great friendship from then on."

Though unwilling to submit to Shapur and distrusting his promises, Arshak nevertheless yielded to the Persian's persuasions. According to tradition, Shapur managed to achieve his goal through ritual oath. As a guarantee of safety for Mazdaists, the king sent Arshak a message in the form of salt sealed with a signet ring bearing the image of a boar, threatening that if the Armenian king did not come to Ctesiphon even after this sacred Mazdaist vow, war would resume, and this time the outcome might not favor the Armenians. Faustus writes on this matter: "...and he, according to the custom established in the Persian kingdom for solemn oaths, ordered salt to be brought, applied to it a ring with the image of a boar and sent it to Arshak, saying that if even after this oath he does not come, then let him prepare for war." For Mazdaists, such an oath was equivalent to kissing the cross among Christians.

As we can see, Shapur implores *Arshak to appear before him* and swears that he will be granted amnesty and royal mercy, while at the same time he curses the Armenian king in case he does not respond to his call. Let us turn to Shapur's salt oath, to the form in which it was made and what stands behind it. The very circumstance of salting the oath cannot fail to attract our attention.

However, in Shapur's oath, the presence of salt is not the only important element; the boar's imprint left on the wet salt has special significance. The boar and the Simurgh bird are dynastic symbols of the Sassanids. Both connotative signs have roots in the archaic era and are connected with totemism, primitive shamanism, and magic.

At the same time, the seal is a simulacrum of power. Through seals, brands, and marks, power places its stamp on things, animals, people, and phenomena. In a certain

[2] Vow, ritual oath (Latin).
[3] Dedication to the underworld gods, curse (Latin). From the same root comes the verb *devoveo* - "to doom," "to sacrifice."

sense, the seal is comparable to fate. Power places the seal but breaking the seal is also a symbol of power. To break the former owner's seal means to free the object from their power and possibly establish one's own power over the object or phenomenon. Since antiquity, seals have been given a special place in magical-religious symbolism, which is why most oaths, vows, and pledges were sealed with a seal or thumbprint.[4]

Thus, it can be asserted that the boar-tessera or boar-theorikon sent to Arshak by the Persian shah is not an object guaranteeing the Armenian king's safety, as it might appear at first glance, but an invitation to a bloody spectacle, a dramatic performance that must inevitably end with the hero's death. In reality, Shapur is not inviting spectators – rather, Faustus himself, acting as choragus-coryphaeus, invites us all to a theatrical performance.

TRAGIC AMECHANIA: BETWEEN WALL AND SWORD

As in ancient drama, liturgical characters exist in Faustus's *History of Armenia*. King Arshak and his sparapet or military commander Vasak are typical examples. According to Faustus, Arshak, unwilling to end the war and go to Ctesiphon to bow to the Persian, was forced to submit to pressure from his own court and army, tired of the hopeless war with the Persians.

In essence, the king is subjected to ostracism, silent boycott, and like a pharmakos or symbolic human sacrifice is expelled from his own kingdom. In the prevailing circumstances, he is no longer master of his fate; the decision is made for him by all of Armenia, and he merely submits to the flow of external circumstances no longer dependent on him.

Like ancient heroes, Arshak submits to his Ananke (predestination, inevitability, fate); he and his mentor Vasak can only follow where the finger of fate points. However, though Faustus writes about the hopelessness of Arshak's situation, everything is not so simple. Arshak and Vasak have the possibility of choice – the most important choice in human life. Only this is a choice of a different order.

As José Ortega y Gasset observed when describing extreme situations in which circumstances leave almost no way out, humans are paradoxically compelled to choose: “Death is inevitable, the situation is hopeless… one must choose the scenario of one’s own destruction – that of a coward or a hero, that is, a shameful or beautiful death.” (Ortega y Gasset, 1991, p. 506) This existential dilemma corresponds closely to the state that Anatoly Akhutin (1997) characterizes as *tragic amechania* – the impossibility of acting under conditions that demand action.

As José Ortega y Gasset observed when describing extreme life situations where circumstances leave almost no way out: “Death is inevitable, the situation is hopeless. What, it would seem, is there to choose from? It turns out, precisely between sword and wall. What an amazing privilege that humans sometimes enjoy, or rather the cruel fate from which they sometimes suffer! For one must choose the scenario of one's own destruction – that of a coward or a hero, that is, a shameful or beautiful death!” (Ortega y

[4] It is characteristic that even in our pragmatic causal age, the seal continues to be perceived as a sacred symbol; any paper with a seal acquires legitimacy.

Gasset, 2000, pp. 22-23). In Faustus's *History*, the Armenian king and his sparapet face a similar choice. Like heroes of ancient drama, they find themselves in a state of *tragic amechania*, that is, "the impossibility of acting under conditions of necessity to act," as Anatoly Akhutin (2005, p. 22) characterizes it. Similar choices are made by Arshak and Vasak. From this moment on the alienation of heroes from the society that rejected them becomes an insurmountable chasm.

LIBERATING SOLITUDE

However, if one generates for the hero a kind of Coriolanus syndrome (or Coriolanus-like defiance), ostracism makes him absolutely independent. Previously, for both heroes, Arshak and Vasak, private interest and public interest were inseparable. Now everything is different: they are both *personae non gratae*, each now a marginal exisctence that finds itself not simply outside society but elevated above it.

Following the traditions and canons of ancient theater, at the beginning of his "drama about Arshak," Faustus of Byzantium presents his hero in the image of a typical hiketes (suppliant, petitioner) of ancient drama, who – trying to avoid his fate – begs Shapur for mercy. As has been shown by many researchers, the hiketes is not simply a "suppliant" in the sense of "beseeching," but also a "suppliant" in the sense of "praying to higher powers," offering them sacrifice.[7]

However, in the same plot, Arshak, while being a "suppliant," appears before us as a hybrist, mocker, scoffer, trickster (Shilman, 2006). This too is a very ancient archetypal image (Jung, 2004).

THE AFTERLIFE JUDGMENT OF SHAPUR

Before we turn to the symbolic and theological dimension of what I call "Shapur's Afterlife Judgment," it is necessary to outline for the non-Armenian reader the narrative core of the episode as it appears in Faustus of Byzantium's *History of Armenia*, for without this brief reconstruction the mystical and dramatic character of chapter LIV may appear detached from its literary foundation. In Book IV, chapters 15–16, Faustus describes how the Persian shah Shapur II, repeatedly defeated by the Armenian king Arshak II, invites the Armenian monarch to peace negotiations; the invitation, however, is made not through diplomatic channels but through a ritual oath constructed according to Iranian religious tradition. Faustus writes: "Then Shapuh… according to the custom of the Persian kingdom for solemn oaths, ordered salt to be brought, pressed upon it a ring engraved with the image of a boar, and sent it to Arsak, saying that if even after this oath he did not come, he should prepare for war" (Faustus of Byzantium, 1985).

The act of sending salt sealed with the royal boar-signet signified a sacred Mazdaean *votum* – a guarantee of safe conduct equivalent, in Christian terms, to kissing the Cross. The Armenian king, pressured by his nobles and army, is compelled to accept the oath despite distrusting Shapur's intentions (Faustus of Byzantium, 1985, IV. 15–16). What follows, beginning in chapter LIV, is not a political negotiation but a ritual ordeal,

a staged cosmic drama in which Arshak and his general Vasak become *pharmakoi*, expiatory victims whose fate echoes archetypal patterns of ancient tragedy.

Faustus's description of the "court" of Shapur should therefore not be read as a legal proceeding: when the Armenian king enters the Persian tent, the emphasis is on theatricality and sacrality, for Shapur's tribunal is not worldly judgment but a ritualized descent into the realm of death. In the English translation, the episode opens with a striking description of the space as a cosmic stage, "prepared beforehand" for the king's humiliation and symbolic destruction (Faustus of Byzantium, 1985, IV.54).

Here a crucial parallel becomes apparent: the scene operates as a Hellenistic-style *katabasis* – a descent into the underworld for trial, testing, and symbolic death, echoing Greek heroes from Heracles to Orpheus and Odysseus (Homer; Vergil; Plutarch) – while simultaneously reflecting ritual ordeals (*ordaliae*) in Iranian, Mesopotamian, and Indo-European traditions, including the Persian *varə* and Vedic fire ordeal, in which the hero undergoes a trial by exposure to fundamental forces. Arshak's entry into Shapur's tent corresponds structurally to such ritual descent, a movement from the world of the living into a liminal space where the verdict is divine rather than human. Faustus frames the entire meeting as a preordained mystery-play in which Shapur, assisted by magi and Chaldean astrologers, enacts an otherworldly trial, examining Arshak and Vasak through divination, riddling, and ritual degradation.

The judicial procedure of chapter LIV – its mystical setting, symbolic actions, and foreknown outcome – bears no connection to ordinary, profane reality: it is a sacred judgment, a cosmic agon in which the Armenian king and sparapet serve as expiatory victims offered in place of the land itself. Olga Freidenberg describes such tribunals as "originally an afterlife court, not a legal one… The legal court is merely a variant of the afterlife court… its principal function is to punish, to assign 'death' or 'reward'" (Freidenberg 1973, p. 114).

Within this interpretive frame, Shapur's sorcery constitutes genuine postmortem judgment, condemning Arshak and Vasak to confinement in the dungeon of the Anhush fortress in Khorasan — a space associated with oblivion, the shadow-world of the living dead, where time ceases. Just as Odysseus or Aeneas seek counsel among the dead, and as heroes in ritual ordeals undergo symbolic death to be reborn, so Arshak descends into the darkness of Anhush, stripped of power, honor, and protection. Chapter LIV thus depicts not merely a narrative episode but an initiation into the underworld, a dramatized katabasis whose meaning aligns both with Indo-Iranian trial-rituals and the broader Mediterranean tradition, fusing Hellenistic *katabasis* and Iranian *ordalia* into a single dramaturgical technology.

PLUTONIC ARSHAK

In Faustus's work, Shapur and Arshak, as well as Vasak, are endowed with infernal netherworld creature. Arshak himself appears to viewers as a simulacrum of Plutus-Pluto, lord of the underworld, who, like all chthonic beings, draws his strength from native earth. It is no accident that the magi and Chaldean astrologers chose the first of the four primary elements – earth – to test Arshak.

The medieval reader, like the viewer of ancient theater, would have unmistakably recognized in "Armenian earth" the emanation of Arshak's "Glory." For each hero passes through stages of initiation in the primary element native to his people (Margaryan, 2001, pp. 39-41; Matie, 1996). For Greeks it is water, the sea; for Iranians – fire; for Semites air; and for designating the natural essence of Armenians and the country of Armenia, earth, the terrestrial firmament – the first of the four elements – is perhaps most suitable.

TRICKSTER VASAK

Like Arshak, Vasak is also an expiatory sacrifice who initially appears as a hybrist, – a mocker and scoffer. Following his lord, he appears at the afterlife judgment. Here during the mystical agon he teases Shapur, mocks him. However, this is the laughter of a hunted pharmakos, expelled from the world as a kind of human sacrifice – a wild and bloody laughter.

In Faustus's *History*, Vasak Mamikonian is a kind of mime-philosopher, holy fool, whose image echoes that of Socrates. Under the mime's mask, which, as is known, also symbolizes the mask of the deceased, hides a pharmakos artistically playing the role of expiatory sacrifice in the cosmic drama unfolding at Shapur's court.

Like mime-Socrates or Cynic Diogenes, Vasak poses riddles to his antagonist. It is known that riddles are an integral part of mystical rituals[5]. Once with the help of magi, the profane Shapur had already coped with a difficult test and solved Arshak's riddle. Thus, he discovered the source of the Armenian king's strength, revealed his anima,[6] hidden from superficial view,[7] which made the Armenian king vulnerable and defenseless.

Now Shapur alone tries to solve Vasak's riddle[8] in order to reveal his nature, his totemic principle. Partly Shapur succeeds: he guesses Vasak's totemic animal – it is a fox, a trickster-fox. [9]

The trickster-fox or trickster-coyote is a provocateur, a ribald, a fool. Characteristically, the trickster was usually depicted as a half-human, half-fox or coyote, jackal, etc.

THE LOTS OR SCALES OF FATE

In the debates between Vasak and Shapur, as in the mystical agon between Shapur and Arshak, the opposition of actants, heroes and anti-hero, their position and the casting

[5] The phenomenon of riddle-solving in the mythopoetic consciousness of primitive man has been studied in science for a long time and in detail. One of the first to address this topic was Franz Boas (1926).
[6] Like Koschei, whose strength, enclosed in the four elements, was discovered with the help of the wise Yaga
[7] These ideas are also very rare and have roots going back thousands of years. See: Onians, 1954, p. 326, 397-98, 409-10, 416.
[8] Everything known becomes unknown, poles reverse, meanings change to opposite. What opens is not an instructive meaning, but an irremovable, fundamental *enigmaticity* of being and man
[9] In all his manifestations, the trickster is always in internal conflict with himself; he is neither Chaos nor Order, which oppose each other, he is always on the border of these two manifestations

of lots, the oscillation of the scales between life and death is extremely important. Thus, Arshak, inside the shah's tent, like a pendulum, led by the hand by Shapur from west to east and back, inclines from life to death and vice versa[10].[18]

Finally, Arshak's lot, like a tossed symbolon coin, falls down to earth and after long rotation lies face down toward the underworld and eagle up (the eagle being a symbol of glory). Thus, the Armenian king, multiple victor over Shapur and the Roman emperor, transforms from hunter into hunted totemic sacrificial animal.

Similarly, the scales of fate oscillate in the description of the court-duel between Vasak and Shapur, where the debate takes the form of riddle-solving. Especially characteristic is the episode with two mountains, like oscillating scales of fate,[11] alternately going underground under the weight of the "giant" Vasak.

However, the hybristic death of Arshak and Vasak is thoroughly imbued with life-affirming pathos. Sacrifice as affirmation of life through death in Faustus's *History* heralds the revival of the house of Arshakids, and with it the country and kingdom of Armenia, whose foundation is mixed with blood – this most binding, most cementing substance.

During sacrifice, as never before, the pathos of sacramental seriousness is justified. The idea of "eternal return" – the cycle of nature's cycles – is not an irresolvable contradiction but the norm of archaic thinking. For archaic consciousness, the phrase "killing the sacrifice" is meaningless. The sacrifice cannot be killed in the sense we speak of it today. The "murder" of sacrifice is possible only as forgetting its memory. As the German saying goes: "Tot ist Der – der vergessen wird" ("Only he who is forgotten is dead").

CONCLUSION

The hermeneutical reconstruction of Faustus's narrative reveals how dramatic technologies function as instruments of historical understanding. The structural apparatus of ancient theater – agon, the tragic trinity of protagonist, antagonist, and tritagonist, the ritual use of space and objects – serves not merely as literary ornamentation but as an epistemological framework for comprehending the deeper patterns of historical reality.

The tragic technology embedded in Faustus's historiography transforms mere chronicle into cosmic drama, revealing how individual fates participate in larger structures of meaning. Through the technological apparatus of drama, historical events become legible as manifestations of eternal patterns, while particular sufferings achieve universal significance.

This technological dimension of tragedy – its capacity to generate meaning through formal structures – demonstrates how the ancient world understood drama not simply as entertainment but as a technology of truth. In an age when "Technology as Tragedy" shapes our contemporary consciousness, Faustus's medieval deployment of dramatic

[10] At the same time: "Scales," writes Olga Freidenberg, "should not be imagined as modern commercial scales. This is a crossbar, horizon, one end of which is heaven, the other is the underworld."

[11] Freidenberg describes this situation: "The lot represents a piece of wood, a branch, a piece of stick with special signs (also a brand), a fragment of stone; lots are scattered on white clothes or placed in a pile. "

technologies offers insights into how narrative structures can themselves become instruments of knowledge, capable of revealing truths that escape ordinary historical discourse.

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