

WOMEN  
MEDIEVALISTS



*and the Academy*

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## CHAPTER 58



# “Magistra Studentorum per Armeniam et Byzantium”

*Nina G. Garsoïan (1923–)*

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FOR ANY WOMAN to have had both the temerity and the courage to enter the long-established field of medieval studies in twentieth-century American academic life and to prove herself was a daunting task, indeed. Success was admitted only grudgingly by those long in possession of the discipline. Yet even more daring was for one fascinated by and dedicated to two ancillary subjects—Armenian and Byzantine studies, areas undervalued by both male and female practitioners of the academy—to dedicate her life’s work to their study. This, in essence, is what Nina G. Garsoïan, professor emerita of Armenian history and civilization and of Byzantine history at Columbia University, set out to do; her efforts have been so highly successful they have paved the way for several generations of present and future scholars in those fields.

The past has always figured heavily in Garsoïan’s thoughts and works as it coalesced with her present. Garsoïan has always paid homage to the many remarkable personalities of her own past while acknowledging with typical graciousness the very real influence of those now in her life. Her first book was dedicated quite simply “To My Mother,” Ina Garsoïan, a gifted painter trained in prerevolutionary Russia, whose paintings now hang in several galleries in the United States, Italy and France, and several European countries.<sup>1</sup> A strong female presence with a lively spirit of independence, style, and dedication to her own craft, then dominated by men, she was a perfect parental role model for her inquisitive and equally gifted daughter. In typical fashion Nina Garsoïan’s latest work pays tribute and acknowledges the debt owed to her three academic parents:

À la mémoire des maîtres  
 Elias Bickerman  
 Sirarpie Der Nersessian  
 Garrett Mattingly  
 Qui me donnèrent la formation et l'amour de mon métier d'historien  
 (To my teachers  
 Elias Bickerman  
 Sirarpie Der Nersessian  
 Garrett Mattingly  
 Who molded me and gave me the love of my craft as an historian).<sup>2</sup>

The present was acknowledged in 1993 in her remarks delivered at a symposium held on the occasion of her retirement from Columbia University, as she paid tribute to her many students whom she had mentored and from whom she claimed she had learned much. Both her past and that present have merged since her retirement into a future that has led not to rest but to yet more scholarly achievements.

Garsoïan was born on 11 April 1923 in Paris “into a milieu of émigrés”; “[she was] bilingual from infancy, and transported before [her] teens to the New World.” She recalls, “I have never managed to achieve a single minded or whole hearted patriotism. I have been comfortable in and loved especially Paris and Venice, but also Moscow and Tiflis, Nantucket, New England and New York, but none of them has been my exclusive home. Insofar as limited information and the abomination of Nazi insanities on racial purity permit, I presume that I am ethnically as completely Armenian as is possible.”<sup>3</sup> Her mother’s family came from the Armenian community in the Crimea; her father’s family was from Tiflis, the administrative capital of the Russian Empire’s Transcaucasian Republics. Conditions following World War I and the Russian Revolution led the family to immigrate to France, where their daughter was born. Her father died in 1925, leaving her in the care of her mother and her redoubtable maternal grandmother. Exposed early to music on account of her mother’s connections to the Parisian artistic communities, Garsoïan began studying the piano, eventually becoming a student of the renowned French pianist Robert Cassadesus and training to become a concert pianist. Her plans, however, were later to change abruptly following an accident that injured her hand severely enough to cause the loss of facility and dexterity needed for such a career. Of greater importance was the rise to power of Hitler, which prompted her maternal uncle, then living in New York, to persuade the three—grandmother, mother, and child—to join him in that city on 5 October 1933. Speaking French and Russian only, the young Garsoïan took up residence in the United States and began her formal education.

After earning her diploma from the Brearley School in New York in 1940, Garsoïan then received a baccalauréat in 1941 from the Lycée Français de New York. She went to Bryn Mawr College, where in 1943 she received her B.A. with honors in the fields of classical archaeology and ancient history. Her love of the ancient world led

her to pursue and receive an M.A. in classical archaeology in 1946 from Columbia University, where she continued her graduate studies. After she was appointed an instructor of history at Smith College, she commuted between New York and Northampton, Massachusetts. In 1958 she received her Ph.D. in Armenian, Byzantine, and mediaeval history from Columbia, after defending a dissertation on the heresy of the Paulicians, directed by the brilliant yet severe—at least on his crusty surface—Elias Bickerman. She often recalls her defense when, twenty minutes after its commencement, one committee member asked in a fairly disparaging tone of voice, “Now tell me, Miss Garsoïan, do you really think your argument is convincing?” Before the young scholar could reply, Bickerman gruffly answered in her stead, “Convinced me.” The defense concluded successfully within minutes.

From 1961 to 1962 she continued postdoctoral studies in classical Armenian at the Institut Catholique in Paris, under Father Charles Mercier, and in Iranian dialectology at the École des hautes études of the University of Paris, under Emile Benveniste. Here her formal education ended. Her prior academic pursuits in the classical, Byzantine, and western European worlds were now complemented by training in classical Armenian and Iranian studies. The background indispensable for her groundbreaking reinterpretation of the basic nature of Armenian history and culture in the ancient and Byzantine periods was now hers.<sup>4</sup>

In 1962, while still teaching at Smith College in Massachusetts, Garsoïan became visiting associate professor of Armenian studies at Columbia University. After leaving Smith in 1965, where she had risen to the position of associate professor, she remained, with one relatively brief interruption, both in the Department of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures and in the Department of History at Columbia University until her retirement in 1993. Despite the fact that she was one of only two women professors in each of those departments in the 1960s, her advancement was rapid. In 1965 she became associate professor of Armenian studies and history; in 1969 a tenured professorship was hers. Throughout her career at Columbia she served and was a member of all committees having to do with the status of women scholars at the university. Attracting many students, she began the creation of one of the most formidable centers of Armenian and of Byzantine Studies in the West, while at the same time producing monographs and articles of such depth and intricacy that they would help reshape the discipline for decades to come.

Her career altered when, in 1973, she became the chair of the Department of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures; she continued in that role until she was offered and persuaded to take the position of dean of the graduate school at Princeton University, the first woman to hold that position. Nonetheless, her colleagues Jean-Pierre Mahé and Robert Thomson rather gently maintain that “administration . . . was not to be Nina Garsoïan’s future career for which her [then] colleagues [were] very thankful.”<sup>5</sup> Her antipathy to administration was happily alleviated when, after a successful fund-raising campaign at Columbia University, a chair of Armenian studies was created. In 1979 Nina G. Garsoïan became the first Centennial, afterward renamed

Gevork M. Avedissian, professor of Armenian History and Civilization. Not known for a paucity of energy, she continued as well as professor of Byzantine history in the Department of History. Throughout this period she also intermittently served as visiting professor in several European universities: 1985, 1990, and 1992 saw her at the University of Rome-La Sapienza; 1986, at the Sorbonne in Paris; 1992, at the Collège de France; and 1994, as *directeur d'études* at the University of Paris, École des hautes études.

In addition to her role as scholar and teacher Garsoïan became an active trustee for the Ford Foundation in 1977 and continued in this capacity until 1989. She was a great traveler in her own right, and her duties to the foundation took her along the silk route through Afghanistan and Pakistan into India.<sup>6</sup> Among other highlights of her professional activities are her election as a fellow of the Medieval Academy of America in 1992; her role as a founding member of the United States-based Society for Armenian Studies; she also served as a board member (1980–88) and vice chair (1989–93) of the American Council of Learned Societies, as editor (1984–89) and director (1989–) of the influential *Revue des études arméniennes*, and as an associate member of the Centre de recherche d'histoire et de civilisation de Byzance of the Collège de France.<sup>7</sup> The latest, however, in the series of acknowledgments of her superior contributions to scholarship was her election in July 2002 as corresponding fellow of the British Academy, the highest such academic honor accorded to a non-British citizen.

All of this is the beginning and the end of the story, that is, a litany of the events of her life and training and the rewards reaped from her efforts, but such a narrative risks obscuring her many contributions to her students, to her colleagues, and to the field. Among Garsoïan's many talents is her ability to communicate superbly and eloquently, both as an author and as a lecturer. This skill made her an ideal teacher, whether in general history, Byzantine history, or her seminal work in Armenian studies. Her activities drew a great number of students to her for the study of these disciplines, so much so that an argument can be made that she, a woman operating in a still very patriarchal Middle Eastern society, nonetheless had the capacity to create the most successful and influential chair for the study of Armenian history in the West. In a record unsurpassed outside the Republic of Armenia, Garsoïan directed fourteen doctorates and numerous masters in the field. Many of these students have gone on to fill chairs and take up other positions in the field. Her success as a teacher was recognized by the Armenian community in 1989, when she was awarded the Dadian Heritage Award by the Armenian Students' Association.<sup>8</sup>

Her students soon learned that she was there not only as a teacher, an advisor, and a director but also as a mentor. Those with no place to live in the summers were offered her apartment while she traveled. Those who were themselves fortunate enough to be in the same place as she in her travels—whether Paris, Venice, or Rome—found that they had a willing, energetic, and extremely able tour guide. Those who found themselves in New York at Easter were invited to a traditional Caucasian Easter feast with enough native dishes and vodka to foster conversations both elevated and not.

Yet as important as her contribution as scholarly parent to these future scholars was, it is in the products of her impeccable scholarship that her renown lies. Garsoïan studied lands whose history and culture had from the beginning of modern scholarship on the medieval world been interpreted through Western eyes. This Eurocentric school of thought more often than not obscured the accurate nature of these societies; only a few scholars had studied the requisite native languages in which most of the primary source materials had been composed. Through a series of publications of original monographs, articles, and translations, Garsoïan has gone far to restore the balance and elucidate the nature of ancient and medieval Armenia in particular and of the region of Anatolia and Iran in general. She first subjected all topics, whether political or religious or artistic in nature, to a rigorous examination of the extant primary sources. When none was available, consultation with colleagues followed. Garsoïan was always eager to benefit from the learning of others; her questions were legion and her graciously expressed thanks numerous.

This gratitude to the past and present is amply displayed by a series of translations Garsoïan produced of monographic works of distinguished Armenian scholars; in so doing she implicitly recognized the high level of scholarship being produced in Armenia. These translations, it must be understood, were not slavishly done but were always augmented and brought up to date, using the most rigorous academic standards. In 1965 she published a translation of the still unsurpassed study by H. A. Manandian, *The Trade and Cities of Armenia in Relation to Ancient World Trade*. In 1970 the English edition of Nicholas Adontz's *Armenia in the Period of Justinian: The Political Conditions Based on the Naxarar System* appeared. Its subtitle states that Garsoïan translated the work "with partial revisions, a bibliographic note and appendices." In point of fact, she had more than doubled the length of the original, providing what were to become the hallmarks of all her works and publications: extensive and exacting notes, the texts and elucidation of key historical and legal primary source materials, and a toponymic index, which is still consulted for the wealth and great variety of information it contains. No mere study of Armenia in the sixth century, the work is now used to good effect by everyone who studies the Byzantine Empire in that period and especially Justinian's reign and his failed actions to reconstitute the old Roman Empire. In 1976 she published a translation of Aram Ter Ghevondyan's *The Arab Emirates in Bagratid Armenia*, again a work published in the Soviet Republic of Armenia on a subject little studied in the West. Its importance has been underscored by the events of 11 September 2002 and the resulting demands for resources on Islam, Christianity, and the Middle Eastern countries.

It was in 1989, however, with the appearance of her translation of the classical Armenian text of what was almost universally thought to be a history of Armenia ascribed to a certain P'awstos Byzand, that her activities as translator reached their apogee. In an extended and cogent introduction, she argues that the work's attribution is incorrect and that it is, indeed, an early repository of history, folklore, and oral traditions known as the *Buzandaran Patmut'iwnek'* (Epic histories).<sup>9</sup> The text is presented

in a clear, grammatical, yet literal translation. In this work she followed her own instructions to her students not to apologize for the text by smoothing over its faults; what results is not a great work of literature but rather an accurate version of a work important for the study of the early-Christian period in Armenia and for what it teaches us about the true nature of the earliest periods of Armenian Christianity, a period at one more with the Syrian tradition and Iranian worlds than with the later Greek Orthodox strata added after the victories of the West.

Garsoïan's original monographs and articles all reflect the same exactitude displayed in her translations: detailed and meticulous research of both primary and secondary materials in all formats; honest critique of previous scholarship on the subject, without resorting to ad hominem or ad feminam attacks; lengthy and exacting footnotes, supplemented with massive appendices, to arm the researcher interested in going even further with a topic; and a literary style attuned to the scholarship of the past that maintained that works of history are also literature.

These original works are most important for the new interpretations they bring to bear on the topics at hand. Garsoïan is an iconoclastic observer of the past, a skeptic who maintains that a constant reassessment based on whatever new evidence is available is needed to reach any sort of a synthesis. Especially in Armenian studies, a discipline dominated by orthodox and pseudorthodox traditions, her works on occasion have led, side by side with praise, to condemnation.<sup>10</sup>

Her first major exploration was her dissertation, a detailed examination of the heresy known as Paulicianism. After a careful discussion of the primary source materials related to this sect and then of the origins of Christianity in Armenia itself, Garsoïan is led to conclude, "The sect first developed in Armenia whence it passed to the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire and was probably imported into the Balkans."<sup>11</sup>

Political, social, and military history also figure prominently in her output. Many of Garsoïan's students had reason to be thankful for the detailed lectures she delivered on the run of Armenian history from ancient times to the Russian conquest in the early nineteenth century, and not a few bragged that they were still able to use their notes while fashioning their own lectures. Her studies led her to correct again the rather Eurocentric interpretation of that history and to restore the greater importance of the Anatolian and Iranian milieus in which Armenia grew and thrived. The best written record, until recently, of her reinterpretation of the ancient and medieval periods was published in the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*.<sup>12</sup> A conclusion succinctly stated at the beginning of this influential article is known now to many of her students and colleagues as Garsoïan's law: "From antiquity, Armenia's geographical position at the meeting point of the Greco-Roman and Iranian worlds created a situation that favored the country's cultural life, enriching it with two major traditions but playing havoc with the continuity of its political history. As a general pattern, therefore, Armenia flourished only when the contending forces on either side were in near equilibrium and neither was in a position to dominate it entirely."<sup>13</sup> Since 1997 researchers have had at their disposal several chapters she authored about Armenia in the ancient

and Byzantine eras that provide a more extensive and updated narration of Armenian history.<sup>14</sup>

Early Christianity in Armenia and the evolving nature of the Armenian Church and its institutions in its earliest and formative periods have been of special interest to Garsoïan. This examination of Christianity and Christian institutions has both coexisted with and complemented her political, historical, and cultural studies of Armenia and Iran and their relations since the mid-sixth century B.C. A series of influential articles on this subject was capped in 1999 by the publication of her work on the Armenian Church and "the Great Schism" of the East.<sup>15</sup> A detailed examination of the history of Armenia and of its church from the fourth century up to its break with the Church of Georgia in the early seventh century, it offers a fresh and challenging interpretation of the growth of the anti-Chalcedonian aspect of Armenia's national church and its nature, which was increasingly unacceptable when viewed through the eyes of the Chalcedonian churches of the West. Among this work's many important contributions guaranteeing its importance for decades to come in academic circles are appendices that present to the Western world translations from important classical Armenian religious texts, most notably from the collection of ecclesiastical letters known as the *Girk' t't'oc'* (Book of letters), many of which have been previously inaccessible to Western scholarship. In typical fashion, implicitly requesting a scholarly dialogue on the subject, Garsoïan maintains that her conclusions are provisional, pending the results of her further research into the topic.

In 1998 the excellence her scholarship earned her the Anania Širakac'i Award, rarely bestowed by the Academy of Sciences of Armenia on a foreign scholar. In 1993 she was awarded the Mesrop Maštoc' Medal for academic excellence by Katholikos (Patriarch) Garegin I of the Katholikate of the Great House of Cilicia. Yet iconoclastic interpreters of national histories do not fare well and are often condemned by the more ethnocentric interpreters of that history: "A prophet is without honor in her home town." With her emphasis on the centrifugal nature of the lands of the Armenians and the fragmentation of those lands; with her stance on the origins of the Armenian people and their ethnicity; with her inviolable rule that the sources should speak for themselves and that all forms of primary source materials must be examined and used and never, ever altered; with her demand for as strict an objectivity as is possible and her belief that apologetics are not needed for any interpretation of Armenian history; and most of all, as with Socrates, with her passing these tenets on to her students, she (and many of her colleagues) has received harsh criticism in the Republic of Armenia following its declaration of independence from the USSR in 1991. With freedom a new national consciousness awoke in all the former Soviet republics, and in each, in small yet potent circles, ethnocentric schools have arisen to condemn anyone who does not maintain a rigid orthodoxy of the racial purity of the people and their autochthony. It is then all the more fitting that Garsoïan's last published article, to date, is her assessment of the present state of Armenian studies both in the Republic of Armenia and in the Armenian diaspora in the West.<sup>16</sup>



As this essay goes to press, Garsoïan is crafting a reinterpretation of the Armenian frontier zone while continuing her latest grand exploration—a reexamination of the growth of early monasticism and monastic institutions in Armenia. It will no doubt be a unique excursion that will enlighten as well as provoke.

Essays cannot do justice to a person; the biographer's task is unenviable, for it must attempt to be comprehensive yet fair, laudatory yet seemingly objective. It is difficult, nonetheless, to overestimate the contributions of Nina G. Garsoïan. Her impact on the study of ancient and medieval Armenia and on Byzantine studies should by this point be evident. Her influence on her students and her constant interaction with them and her colleagues in the United State, in her native France, and, yes, even in Armenia, continues. A lively dialogue flows as the constant examination proceeds.

Yet if one had to choose the one achievement that outshines all others, it is the fact that she and her colleagues have created a corpus of works of the highest scholarly caliber on Armenian translations, analyses, and syntheses, which has made the study of Armenia—the land, its people, and their culture—finally accessible to Western scholarship. These publications have gone a long way toward alleviating if not eliminating the bias against these disciplines; their influence and the standards they display will be long felt, just as certainly as the acknowledgment of Nina Garsoïan's role in this success is assured.

#### NOTES

1. Garsoïan, *Paulician Heresy*, 5. The title of this essay parallels the *Magister militum per orientem et Armeniam*, the honorific of the Justinianic official responsible for military affairs in the East and in Armenia.

2. Garsoïan, *L'Église arménienne et le grand schisme d'orient*. On Garsoïan's friend and mentor, the great art historian Sirarpie Der Nersessian, see Dickran Kouymjian's essay in the present volume and Garsoïan, "Sirarpie Der Nersessian." Elias Bickerman, the avowed misogynist, became Garsoïan's doctoral advisor at Columbia University and a strong advocate for her position at Columbia. A testament to her thirst for knowledge and admiration for all historic inquiry is that, although Mattingly's historical studies in the Renaissance and Counter Reformation were outside her own, she nonetheless attended his lectures at Columbia for the sheer brilliance of his approach; she often credits his continuing influence on her written style.

3. Quoted from an unpublished memoir of her early years that Nina Garsoïan kindly sent to me for use in the present study. Although ostensibly a record of her life from birth through her early studies and first trip to her beloved Venice in the late 1940s, this intriguing document paints a brilliant portrait of the lives of the Armenian nobility and bourgeoisie who lived in prerevolutionary Russia and follows them into exile to Europe and beyond.

4. Garsoïan has received many fellowships, grants, and awards throughout her career, chief among which were a Fulbright for study in Italy (1952–53); an American Association of University Women Fellowship to France (1961–62); a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies/Academy of Sciences of the USSR Senior Exchange Program (1970, 1976); a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (1970–71, 1984–86); and a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship (1985–86).

5. Mahé and Thomson, *From Byzantium to Iran*, xv.
6. Again from her unpublished memoir, 1: "My friend Norma who knows me best maintains that I shall die with my bags packed."
7. *Revue des études arméniennes* is arguably the most important of the Western academic journals dedicated to the study of Armenian history and civilization.
8. The award recognizes "individuals who have made an outstanding contribution to the preservation and presentation of the Armenian heritage to the world community."
9. Garsoïan, *Epic Histories Attributed to P'awstos Buzand*.
10. See Avdoyan, *Pseudo-Yovhannēs Mamikonean*, ix–x, especially note 3, for a discussion of the orthodox, iconoclastic, and pseudorthodox Armenological circles. "Pseudorthodox" is a handy word borrowed from the writings of the brilliant Morton Smith: "But everywhere there are persistent efforts to square the facts of the OT [for us, Armenian history] as far as possible with the traditional teachings of the institutions and even more, to make them serviceable for homiletic [in our case, chauvinistic] presentation." See Morton Smith, "The Present State of Old Testament Studies," *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 21.
11. Garsoïan, *The Paulician Heresy*, 232. Never fearful of altering her position on a subject and changing her conclusions in reply to criticisms of certain aspects of her thesis that she deemed justifiable, she published "Byzantine Heresy: A Re-Interpretation." Both works are still considered the state of the question on the subject by most reputable scholars.
12. See "Armenia: History of," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 1:471–88. Garsoïan was an associate editor of this massive and indispensable reference work; as a result, it is one of the first works on the medieval period to include major articles on the lands and peoples of the Middle East on an equal footing with those concerning the lands and peoples of Europe.
13. *Ibid.*, 474.
14. See chapters 3–8, in Hovannisian, *Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, 1:37–198.
15. Garsoïan, *L'Église arménienne et le grand schisme d'orien*.
16. Garsoïan, "Evolution et crise dans l'historiographie recente de l'Arménie médiévale."

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