Autobiography

Ananias of Shirak (c. AD 610–685)

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Autobiography

[Translated by F. C. Conybeare] Ananias Shirakvantzi the thrice blessed doctor, his description of his life.

"I Ananias Shirakvantzi am he who collected the literature of our race of Armenians, and was learned in divine writ; and day by day I enlightened the eyes of my mind according to the word of the psalmist. And I was for ever hearing of the blessedness of the wise and of those who seek after wisdom; even as it is commanded by Solomon: 'Do thou acquire knowledge and wisdom, and continue to drive away ignorance, calling darkness her parent. If thou expel knowledge, then will I also expel thee.' And I was in dread of these threats, and I desired to attain unto blessedness and longed for wisdom. But I was very wanting in the art of counting, and I reflected that no discourse is in keeping with wisdom in the absence of number, which I regarded as the mother of all philosophies. And among the Armenians I found no man who was learned in this science, nor in their land did I find any books of science. So I set out to go to Greece, and I came to Theodoupolis, and I found there a reasonable man, learned in the writings of the church who was named Eliazar. He told me that there was a certain man who was a mathematician in the region of fourth Armenia, Christodotus his name. And I went and spent with him a space of six months.) And I saw that he had not the whole science, but only a smattering of it; so I went on thence to Constantinople;

and those of my acquaintance who were there met me and said to me: Why have you embarked upon such a long and toilsome journey; when Tychicus the teacher of Byzantium is near to us on the coast of Pontus, which is called Trapezon. He is full of wisdom and has a knowledge of Armenian literature and is well known to the princes. And I said: How do you know this? And they said: We saw many travellers going to him, because of his very great knowledge. |573

"But we now had as a fellow voyager Philagrius the deacon of the patriarch of Constantinople, who was taking many youths to him for instruction. On hearing this I glorified God, who thus fulfilled the desire of his servant, according to the saying: 'Seek ye and ye shall find.' And when I had come, I found him at the shrine of Saint Eugenia. And I announced my coming to him and he received me with joy and said: I thank God for sending thee in search of wisdom; that thou mayest use these sciences in the diocese of St. Gregory; and I

am the more glad, that that land takes its instruction from my self. For in my youth I was a good deal in Armenia, and there was ignorance in the land. And the teacher Tychicus unto whom I went, loved me as his son and schooled me in all his thoughts. And the lord gave me grace, and I learned fully the art of mathematics, so that the pupils in the royal court were envious of me. And I lived with him eight years, and read and learned many writings which were not translated into our tongue. For he had an enormous library, secret books and open, ecclesiastical and profane, scientific and historical, medical and chronological. But I need not enumerate them in detail, for there is no book which was not found with him, and in translating he had such grace as comes from the holy spirit;

for when be desired to translate greek books into Armenian, he did not do it hesitatingly like other translators, for he understood the Armenian tongue, as he did Armenian letters. And he told me how he came to know the Armenian tongue and to acquire such wisdom. He told me that when he was a young man in Trebizond he had been in the court of John the Warrior, and he served in Armenia, and spent a long time there until the reign of Maurice, during which he became acquainted with the tongue and the literature."

But in an irruption of the Persian army on the Greeks, he had been wounded in battle and fled to Antioch, and all his goods were taken among the spoils. "Then", said he, "I prayed to God to be healed of my wounds, and I made a vow, saying: if thou wilt bestow upon me life, I will not treasure up the treasures that pass away; but I will pursue the treasures of knowledge; as it is said 'possess yourselves of wisdom and not of silver, of knowledge rather than of gold.' And God granted my desire, and when I was recovered I went off to the city of Jerusalem and thence to Alexandria, and thence to Rome; where I stayed for some time, and then returned to Constantinople. And I found a teacher in Athens the city of philosophy, a famous man, with whom I spent not a few years in study. And having perfected myself in philosophy I returned to this place, and began to |574 teach as a doctor. But after a few years my own teacher died; and as of his pupils could be found no one equal, by the command of the emperor and of the princes, they sent an invitation that I should go and occupy his chair. But he declined, saying: I am vowed to the heavenly king not to depart from this place. And after that they came to him to learn from all over the earth, because of his exceeding knowledge.

"But I was a humble Armenian and learned of him this mighty science, which is longed for by the princes and is imported into our land without there being any successor, by the help of God alone and by the prayers of the holy illuminator. Nevertheless none of my country men thanked me for my trouble; for the Armenians do not love a learned man nor his knowledge, but are lazy and stupid. For when I came into Armenia many came to me to be taught, but after getting a little knowledge, instead of remaining till they were perfect in the science, they left me and went off and began to teach what they did not know themselves and could not understand. Impostors they, and charlatans, anxious to make a show of knowledge and to be called rabbi by men. And they uttered calumnies about myself, though they were taught by myself. But I am free from the malice which they display in my

teaching and instruction; for I bear in mind the holy text which says: 'Mine is vengeance and I will requite', and again the text: 'Lay my gold with the bankers, and I when I come demand it with interest.' Then I was not hindered by any who wished to teach. And this I leave unto you as a deathless gift, ye teachers of those who really desire to learn: raise no obstacles, and ye shall receive your reward from Christ who freely bestows his grace. And now be glory to Christ."

[Footnotes moved to the end] 1. 1) Or 'the days of the sixth month'. 2. 2) i. e. Trebizonde.

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