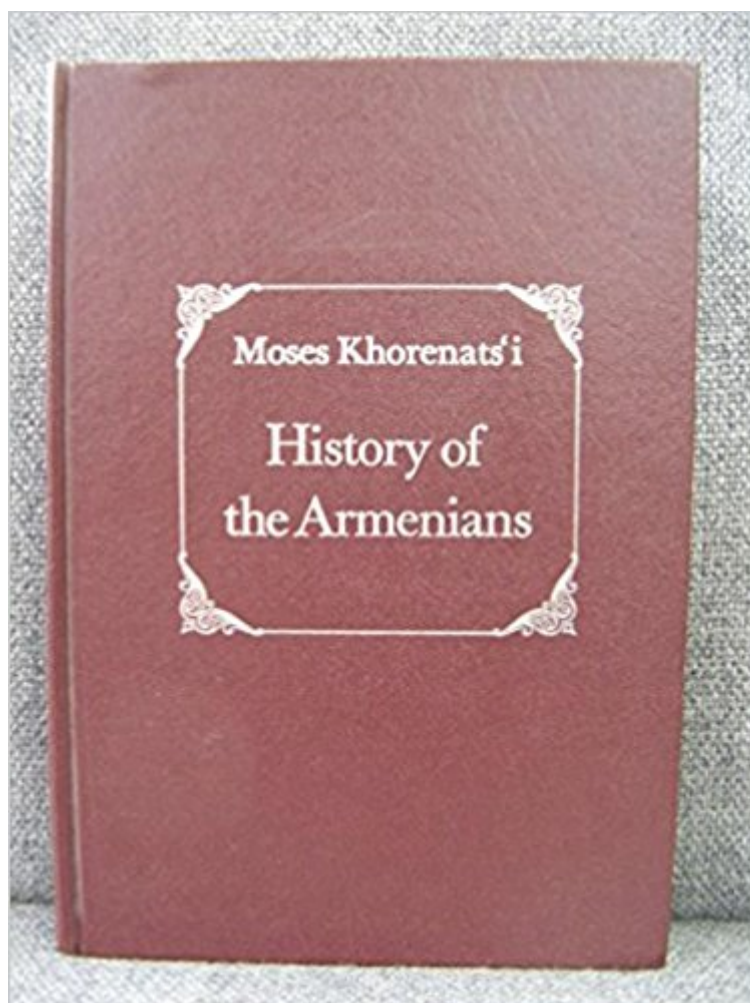


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History Of The Armenians (Harvard Armenian Texts & Studies)



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Customer Reviews

Text: English, Armenian (translation)

Robert W. Thomson was Mashtots Professor of Armenian Studies, Harvard University.

Firstly, let me say that I rate the work itself 5/5. Movses Khorenats'i was an excellent historian, careful for accuracy and consulting official archives and records whenever possible. The translated text is an invaluable historical source. But the translator and his footnotes are unbearable. For hundreds of pages in the footnotes he goes on and on trying to make Movses sound like an unreliable hack, or giving absolutely pointless references to obscure works. If anything takes a moment's thought, then according to the footnotes it is an error. Ironically in many places it is as if Movses knew people would be hypercritical about his work (perhaps because he himself was so discerning with the sources that he used). After referring to Ptolemy as King of the Greeks for example, he discusses for a paragraph essentially saying "YES people I know he was really king of the Egyptians, I'm calling him this because...". Or shortly after saying a piece of information comes from the Greeks, he essentially says "Yeah yeah people I know that the Chaldeans wrote it, but the texts come down to us in Greek preserved by Greeks so I said it was learned from the Greeks". (And those are just in the very first pages!) But if he hadn't explained those things, we'd have heard in the introduction and in footnote after footnote about how Movses was clearly a fraud because he

thought Chaldean texts came from Greeks and that Ptolemy was a Greek king. So do yourself a favor: buy this, but tear out the introduction and use whiteout on all the footnotes. Movses' brilliant work is much better read without the constant interruptions of some hypercritical ivory tower nobody.

Movses Khorenatsi has entered the annals of Armenian history as the "father of Armenian history" because he was the first person to attempt to trace the Armenian peoples' history and document their culture and heritage. Providing magnificently vivid descriptions, Khorenatsi explores in minutiae detail the creation myths of Armenia, the oral traditions, the political and economic situation of Armenia as it fell under the control of the Romans and Persians. This version of the text, however, translated into English by Oxford historian Robert W. Thomson in 1978, is a travesty of a work although not because of the translation. Thomson's opinion of Khorenatsi's work in the introduction is undeservedly and ridiculously harsh and he wastes no time in brazenly restructuring History and accusing the author of being a "mendacious faker", along with a whole other line of insulting adjectives which I need not bother to mention. True, it has been established that there are certain anachronisms in the text and Khorenatsi's work certainly has mistakes which are otherwise unavoidable in writing history (a simple breeze through Herodotus' "Histories" will confirm this). Thomson, though, takes the criticism to the extreme and he blatantly ignores key points made by Armenian and European scholars, notably when he places History in the 8th-9th centuries (there is almost the same amount of evidence that indicates that Khorenatsi was from the 5th century, but the controversy about the dating, in my opinion, is a moot point) and takes Khorenatsi's 19th century critics' debunked criticism at face value. For a counter argument of Khorenatsi's work, one should definitely consult Armenian historian Stepan Malkhasyants's writings regarding the Armenian writer, including his article "Movses Khorenatsi's Mysterious Background" (which, unfortunately, remains in Armenian). One should remember that scrutinizing an ancient source is necessary for all historians and scholars attempting to reconstruct the past. Numerous scholars prior to Thomson questioned the dating of Movses Khorenatsi but they were able to do so without degrading the quality of the work and the value of its information. Every so often, Thomson lists in his footnotes that Khorenatsi is simply borrowing the wording from other authors (often on the basis of a single word!), depriving Khorenatsi of any originality or creativity. After reading Thomson's introduction and translation, as one modern historian put it, a student will wonder why he bothered to translate such an unworthy text written by such an untrustworthy author. It is not Thomson's opinion that is at fault, but the arrogant and haughty tone he takes, as if we should expect an ancient historian to somehow somehow conform to our modern standards of plagiarism and scholarly professionalism. The

translation of the work is otherwise decent but not without faults. Thomson is unable to retain the witty prose of the original work and perhaps this is to be expected. What is perhaps even more inexcusable is Thomson making simple errors in the translation. To begin with, the title of the book (written in the classical Armenian tongue) is not "History of the Armenians" but "History of Armenia". More serious translation defects are seen in the beginning of the book when the translator, for reasons still unknown, mistranslates one of the most popular lines in Khorenatsi's work (the line is in the beginning of the book when Khorenatsi is writing the reason of why he wrote the book: while Khorenatsi writes that Armenians are "limited in number", Thomson translates this as "weak in power"). Thomson has been criticized by many historians for his unbalanced introduction and he has thankfully been less aggressive, but unfortunately no less reckless, in his subsequent evaluations of Armenian authors (see for example his Yeghishe's "History of Vardan and the Armenian War"). Unless you just want to read the translation, you should avoid this work and look toward the more balanced studies done in French or Russian by Jean-Pierre Mahā© and Gagik Sargsyan, respectively.

Khorenatsi indeed wrote first Armenian history, typically full of falsifications. This is what Robert W. Thomson, respected scholar, reveals in the introduction. It is a good source for the historiography of Armenian history, though.

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