

Parrot's Journey to Mount Ararat: Some Observations

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Abstract In the year 1829 Friedrich Parrot (1792-1841), professor of physics at the University of Dorpat (modern Tartu), first climbed Mount Ararat. With him were the Armenian deacon Khachatur Abovian (the 'father of modern Armenian literature'), two Russian soldiers and two local Armenian peasants. His account of the *Journey to Ararat*, published in German in the year 1834, is considered a classic of travel literature. The present paper analyses its debt both to the literary genre and to ancient sources, especially to the *Geography* of the ancient Greek historian and geographer Strabo (ca. 63 BCE-ca. 23 CE).

Keywords Parrot. Abovian. Ararat. Strabo. Travel literature.

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1 Introduction

The year 1829 in which Friedrich Parrot first climbed the Ararat witnessed some major changes in the political landscape of Eastern Europe. In March, Greece was granted autonomy from the Ottoman Empire in the London Protocol signed by the political powerhouses of Russia, France and Britain. In July, the Russian field marshal Hans Karl von Diebitsch launched an offensive during the Russo-Turkish War (1828-1829), which brought the Russian army within 68 kilometres of Istanbul. In September, the Turks signed the Treaty of Adrianople with Russia thereby ending the war. Russia became master of a portion of the territory at the mouth of the Danube and along the eastern coast of the Black Sea. Armenia, previously torn apart by Turkish and Persian forces, was now under Russian control.¹

¹ See e.g. Ferrari [2004] 2008.



These changes² prompted a German-Russian scientist in the far-away university of Tartu (at that time better known as Dorpat in German or Derbt in Russian) to hatch out an idea which he had nourished for many years, since he first beheld the mighty silhouette of this mountain during an expedition in the Caucasus in 1811 (being the first man ever to climb Mount Ararat).

Apart from this defining moment other reasons lead Johann Jakob Friedrich Wilhelm Parrot (1792-1841), or simply Friedrich Parrot,³ to undertake this expedition: an innate curiosity in all things natural, a hope for a professorship in physical science, a zeal for carrying out all sorts of measurements, as he had done during earlier expeditions (for which Parrot had become famous); an interest in history and culture of peoples, especially those of the multinational Russian empire. Surely, to some extent also a desire for adventure and glory; and last but not least, his personal convictions and feelings: Parrot was a devout Christian who believed that Noah's ark was lying on the summit of Mount Ararat, as stated in the Bible.⁴

In my paper, I shall tell first the story of Parrot's travel to the Ararat, albeit briefly, highlighting some details which may be less well-known. The second part will deal with Parrot's view of the Armenians.⁵

2 Parrot's Travel to Mount Ararat

Parrot's plan to mount an expedition and climb the newly acquired Mount Ararat was met with approval by tsar Nikolas I (reg. 1825-1855). He even appointed a *Feldjäger* (a military guide) to accompany Parrot's party, sponsored 1,600 silver roubles for purchasing scientific instruments and defrayed the expenses of Wassili Fedorov, a candidatus of philosophy, who was put in charge of carrying out astronomical measurements during the journey. The other three members of the expedition were Maximilian Behaghel of Adlerskron, a student of mineralogy, and two students of medicine, Julius Hehn and Karl Schiemann.

2 Already in the previous year, in the peace of Turkmanshai, signed on 10 February 1828, the border of the Russian Empire with the Persians was removed from the Araxes to the southern slope of Mount Ararat.

3 For a short but comprehensive overview of Parrot's life and works see, e.g. Stieda 1887; cf. also Stams 1986.

4 Throughout his work, Parrot used the *epitheton* "Heiliger Noahberg" ("Holy mountain of Noah"), which highlights the mystique and religious aura of Mount Ararat.

5 As the edition of Stams (1985, 1989²) is 'bearbeitet' (reworked), I use Parrot's original for references. A PDF of the book can be download, e.g. at <https://archive.org/details/b22009747>. For longer citations the English translation by W.D. Cooley (Parrot 1845) was used. An Armenian translation was published in 1990 and then re-edited in 2006 (Parrot [1990] 2006). Unless otherwise specified, the quoted pages are taken from Parrot's first edition (Parrot 1834a).

As Parrot had to wait for the arrival of scientific instruments,⁶ the party set out from Dorpat no earlier than 11 April 1829, quite late in the year as 3500 versts (ca. 3700 kilometres) needed to be covered before the scorching heat of the Armenian summer reached its maximum.⁷

Despite the suddenness of the opportunity and the approval, Parrot had done everything he could to prepare for the expedition. In addition, a colleague at the University of Dorpat⁸ provided him with a map and a collection of ancient sources concerning the regions through which he intended to travel.⁹ Parrot never goes into details, but the account of the Greek historian and geographer Strabo (first century) on the Caucasus and Armenia in book 11 of his *Geography* was surely among these sources.¹⁰

On 10 (22) May the party reached New Cherkask, a city mainly inhabited by Kalmuk Tartars. A measurement carried out there enabled Parrot to contribute to one of the much-discussed scientific questions of that time, i.e. whether there formerly existed a connection between the Euxine and Caspian Seas in the north of the Caucasus.

On 17 June Parrot arrived at Tiflis, the capital of Georgia, or rather the trans-Caucasian provinces of Russia. There, the advance of Parrot's expedition came to a temporary halt when he learned of the outbreak of the plague in Erivan and in the villages along the intended route. The local authorities prohibited any progress, and Parrot was forced (quite reluctantly, as his unfavourable portrait of Tiflis shows)¹¹ to remain in the city and its surroundings. He spent most of the time carrying out observations and making small excursions in the vicinity of Tiflis in order to ascertain its exact geographical position and to collect data on weather and temperature.

Eventually, Parrot recommenced his journey on 1 September. He managed to procure horses along the road, the stations of which were maintained by Kossaks. A week later he entered the gates of Etschmidin with its famous monastery. To Parrot's surprise the patriarch

6 Apart from the scientific instruments which needed to be purchased, the *mechanikus* of Dorpat university constructed and built some others.

7 For the sake of convenience, I shall give the dates also according to the Gregorian calendar, but it should be remembered that Parrot expressed dates only according to the traditional orthodox calendar.

8 Parrot simply called him "professor Kruse" (p. 9). Probably, Friedrich Karl Hermann Kruse (Oldenburg, 21 July 1790, † Gohlis, 3 August 1866) is meant here. He was appointed professor for historical studies at the University of Dorpat in 1829.

9 Among the sources, which Parrot is citing in his work, is the *History of Armenians* by Moses Chorenazi in an English edition. Surely, Parrot meant the Latin translation of the Whiston brothers (London 1736) here.

10 Parrot's route through the central Caucasus (Wladikaskas to Kobi, pp. 20 ff.) is basically the one Strabo describes in his book 11: Roller 2014, 476-512. See Stams 1989, 247.

11 Pp. 46-8. The passage on the licentious Georgian woman owes much to ancient sources, not the least the portrayal of the notorious sorceress Medea.

Ephrem and the Armenian clergy showed little interest and sympathy for his mission. Despite his overall very favourable portrait of the Armenians, at this point in his narrative Parrot inserted criticism as to the superstition and education of the Armenian people. I shall return to this in the second part of my paper.

Having arrived at the foot of Mount Ararat Parrot wasted little time. On the first dawn of morning, he continued his journey. The ice, however, with which the upper part of Mount Ararat is always covered, necessitate steps be cut in order for to the expedition to ascend the mountain. Thus, a day passed before Parrot could reach the summit. To make matters worse, Parrot took a fall on his way back, was slightly injured and afterwards contracted a fever.

A second attempt, on 18 September, also failed. At least Parrot managed to plant a huge wooden cross on the plateau shortly below the top. He also left a Latin inscription inscribed on a thick plate of lead. Interestingly, this inscription commemorated not Parrot himself (a testimony to his humbleness and modesty) but Tsar Nicholas and Iwan Paske-witsch, the governor of the newly installed province, who was praised for vindicating Mount Ararat for the Christian faith (*fides Christiana*). The cross measured no less than 10 feet in length, the inscription weighed ca. 27 pounds, as Parrot informed his curious readers.

A week later, a third attempt finally succeeded. Parrot's party, consisting now of only six members, took the longer route over the north-west side of the mountain, bivouacked shortly below the orographic snowline, and resumed their ascent the next morning. On 27 September (greg. 9 October), "a quarter past 3 pm", as Parrot duly noted, he stood on top of the Ararat. With him were the Armenian deacon Khachatur Abovian, the two Russian soldiers Alexej Sdrowenکو and Matwej Tschalpanow, in addition to two local Armenian peasants, Owannes Aiwassian and Murat Pogossian.

This time, it was young Abovian who planted a smaller cross on the north-eastern side of the summit. He also picked up a chunk of ice and carried it down with him, as he considered the water holy, a deed which Parrot described with amazement and affection.

The rest of the story - two thirds of the whole book - is told in a noticeably different tone.¹² While the *Journey to Ararat* is written in an optimistic, energetic, quite straightforward style with only occasional excursions, culminating (*si sit verbo venia*) in the ascent of Mount Ararat, the prose in the remaining text is soberer, more reserved, technical and detailed. One may attribute this to an elaborate liter-

¹² Parrot's title *Reise zum Ararat* (Journey to Mount Ararat) is hinting at the climax of the journey, the first ascent of Mount Ararat, but this is already done on p. 160, way before the middle of the two-volume book (263 + 199 pp.). Readers of ancient travelogues may feel reminded of Xenophon's *Anabasis* here.

ary plot – after all, Parrot was a well-versed and well-read author –, but one may also advance another reason. After all, the claim that he had not really reached the top of Mount Ararat (this claim originated already within a year of his feat), obviously, put a strain on him. It took him five years to publish his travelogue and the accompanying scientific papers (unusually long for the standards of nineteenth century, and also for Parrot himself).

On 27 September (greg. 8 November), Parrot also ascended the Lesser Ararat. On 31 October, Parrot left Arguri for good.¹³ Parrot accepted Abovian's invitation to visit his hometown Kanakir near Erivan. He also travelled to some German colonies near Tiflis. From Tiflis, Parrot and von Behaghel travelled to the Black Sea in order to carry out scientific measurements, while the rest of the party was sent home in advance under the command of Wassili Fedorov. This excursion, which Parrot himself deemed "very important", took them 18 days before they came to Tiflis where they celebrated Christmas. The journey back basically followed the route of the outward trip, as Parrot wanted to double-check his own measurement data. On March 1, 1839, he arrived safely at Dorpat.

3 Parrot's View of the Armenians

As already indicated, Parrot's view of the Armenians is quite favourable. This is in contrast with the other peoples described by Parrot, such as the Tartars, Turks, Kurds, or the Georgians. E.g. on the Kalmuks, Parrot writes as follows:

The Kalmuk mode of life is systematically nomadic; and to this they cling with all the tenacity of inveterate habit. What in another age and under different circumstance, would have been but common necessity, has, at present, when neither opportunities nor inducements can be wanting to tempt them to adopt a settled mode of life, become a keenly felt want, and a source of gratification. The peculiarities of their religious notions, language, and manners, are too distinctive to justify any expectation that they could be so far influenced by the example of neighbouring nations as to establish themselves in fixed habitations. (12)

13 Mount Ararat which is composed of volcanic rocks, was hit by an earthquake in June 1840. The monastery of St. James, where Parrot and his team had resided, and the village of Arghuri with the vineyard traditionally believed to have been planted by Noah, were overwhelmed and totally destroyed beneath the rocks, ice and torrent of mud which fell from the great chasm above. Of the monastery of St. James, not a vestige remains.

Parrot's eye was well-trained; he noticed and understood many details immediately (e.g. his botanic expertise was impressive); on the other hand, he absorbed, organised, and evaluated such information according to a preconceived filter. Such an attitude was, of course, quite prevalent among Western travellers of his time, especially of those with elitist background and academic training.

In Parrot's case, the geographer Strabo (mentioned above) may have exerted the most influence on him. As we have seen in the passage cited above, Parrot draws the sharp distinction between a nomadic and sedentary lifestyle, the latter being more refined and more culturally advanced and thus of higher order and to be preferred. This is exactly how Strabo in the eleventh book of his *Geography* (and elsewhere in this but nowhere else in his description of the Caucasus and neighbouring regions) compares the local peoples to the Greco-Roman world of Augustan times.

Cf. e.g. Strabo, *Geography*, 11.4.1, C 501 (Roller 2014, 484):

The Albanians are more shepherd-like and closer to nomadic people, except that they are not savage, and because of this they are only moderately warlike.

Or Strabo, *Geography*, 11.8.3, C 511 (Roller 2014, 493):

Between them [*scil.* the Scythians], Hyrkania, and Parthyaia, as far as the Arians, lies a great waterless desert, which they crossed by long journeys and then overran Hyrkania, Nesaia, and the Parthyan plains. They collected tribute, and the tribute allowed them to overrun the territory at certain appointed times and to carry off booty. But when they exceeded the agreement there was war, and it came to an end and then war began again. Such is the life of the other nomads, who are always attacking those nearby and then reconciling again.

Or Strabo, *Geography*, 11.8.7, C 513 (Roller 2014, 494-5):

Those in the plains, although they have land, do not farm it, but live on sheep and fish, in the manner of Skythian nomads. There is a certain method of life common to all such people, about which I often speak, and their burials, customs, and entire lives are similar. are mischievous, wild, and warlike, but in business they are straightforward and without deceit.

While the centre of the *oikoumene* is civilized, stable, and ideal, its periphery is roamed by barbaric peoples, strange halfings and wild animals. For Strabo, nomadic lifestyle is a good indicator for the low

level of civilization. His basic concept was, of course, manifold varied in the ethnographic texts of the Greeks and Romans which Parrot valued so much.

How do the Armenians fit into this concept?¹⁴ Parrot, who was fluent in German and Russian and also knew some Arabic, had no command of the regional languages, including Armenian or Georgian. His knowledge of Armenian history was limited as well, as this passage may illustrate (104-5):

Did I not stand on the valley of the Araxes, upon the banks where Hannibal sought refuge after having paid the penalty of his superiority on the plains of Italy? Was I not almost within view of the ancient Artaxata, the rich and mighty capital of Armenia, where the Parthian Tiridates assumed the kingly crown which he had received from Rome, and where he sought to stifle the growth of the first thinly-scattered seeds of Christianity, till, but a little before his death, he himself received the boon of Christian instruction from Gregory "the Enlightener" – a glorious atonement for the murder of the father of the king by the father of the saint?

Obviously, Parrot is confusing two Tiridatidai here. One is the founder of the Arsacid family in Armenia in the first century AD, the other, the so-called Tiridates the Great, proclaimed Christianity the state religion in Armenia more than two centuries later, in 301 AD. (We should not be too harsh on Parrot, as neither the modern German nor the English edition of Parrot's *Journey to Ararat* point to this mistake.)

Parrot's positive view of the Armenians is, of course, mainly influenced by his affection and admiration for Khachatur Abovian, then a twenty-year old deacon, later the founder of modern Armenian literature. He was much impressed by Abovian's zeal of knowledge and kindness. Therefore, shortly after his return, Parrot invited Abovian to Dorpat and even arranged for a Russian state scholarship in 1830.

Parrot's very positive remarks on Abovian's character and abilities allow him to balance his criticism.

This total indifference to the study of the Greek and Roman classics, several of whose works are preserved in their library in the monastery, is no less to be deplored than wondered at: as such pursuits would seem more calculated than any others to relieve lassitude and dissipate those worldly anxieties so likely to engender the vices which too often beset men living under the restrictions and confinement of the cloister. Their only literary occupation was the study of the history of their country; if it really can be

¹⁴ For a recent overview of the history of Armenian people, see Ferrari, Traina 2020.

deemed a literary employment for an Armenian monk to read the histories of his nation in the Armenian tongue, without the least idea of intelligent criticism, and to receive with blind submission all that their authors assert, either upon their own authority or that of worthless traditions, with all the errors and variations of careless transcribers; or, at least, to represent them to the people as positive and undoubted truths, whenever it suits their interests of hierarchical policy to do so. (104-5)

Parrot's view on the Armenians, as expressed here, is the exact opposite of his description of Abovian. It is rooted deeply in the contemporary habit of Western travellers to compare the visited nations according to their own standards, to highlight the differences, and to construct the "otherness" of these cultures (and, quite often, to establish and manifest a hierarchical order, as we have seen above). But, in Parrot's case, it may go even deeper. Again, one can highlight the influence, the ancient geographer Strabo and his system of cultural order may have exerted on Parrot here, but another reason may be mentioned: Well-documented is Parrot's disappointment with the two Armenian peasants who were part of the final leg of his expedition to Mount Ararat and who afterwards claimed that he did not reach its summit. Parrot simply brushed away this claim as mere ignorance and superstition.¹⁵ He linked to the popular opinion of that time that no human foot would be permitted to touch the Ararat before the consummation of all things.

I tend to think there is no good reason to deny Parrot's claim of being the first man to climb Mount Ararat. Nevertheless, his way of presenting the events, especially by inserting personal feelings and evaluating data in his narrative is very deliberate. I do not hasten to call this a rhetorical strategy. Taking this into account, an astute reader may wonder whether Parrot's text is really so 'scientific' or 'objective' (if such a thing like a scientific or objective account is possible at all) as it appears to be at first glance. Hence, my conclusion may sound trivial, but it is nevertheless important to be aware that the *Journey to Ararat* is, at pieces, more than an impartial narrative of a sober, 'scientific' mind.

15 Later reviews of Parrot's book also highlight some sophisms like that Parrot did not stand on top of Mount Ararat, as the top was covered in snow, i.e. that he was not standing on naked ground (cf. Anonymous 1838).

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