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FROM PARTHIA TO ROBIN HOOD:
THE EPIC OF THE BLIND MAN'S SON.

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לכבוד הרב מיכאל סטון מורי וידיד נפשי

Nearly a quarter century ago, as we sat by his stove on a cold Jerusalem winter night sipping arak and nibbling sunflower seeds, Prof. Michael Stone declared that it was time I began a new large project, on epic. Since then one has researched Armenian epic literature, from the fragments of the great cycles of the pre-Christian Artaxiads and early Christian Arsacids to the mediaeval and modern folk epics of Sasun and Kašt. Most of these researches have been published and reprinted (*An Armenian Epic: The Heroes of Kasht*, Ann Arbor: Caravan, 2000; and *Armenian and Iranian Studies*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies, 2004). This essay considers the ramifications (that pun will become apparent presently) of another; and it is a pleasure and honor to dedicate it to a great scholar and lifelong friend.

The epic of the Blind Man's Son (*Kōroğlu*) has long been popular among Armenians, and several versions in Armenian are known— both transcriptions from oral recitations in dialect and renderings into the standard modern literary language. But all the characters are Muslims and by far the greatest number of versions of the epic are in Turkic languages, from Central Asia through Iran into Azerbaijan and Turkey. However one must agree with some other scholars that the early form of the epic probably took shape in Arsacid Armenia, with its roots in Iranian types that are older still. The dossier of Armenian epic is thus incomplete without consideration of it; and it is of additional interest in that, unlike the dynastic cycles, it deals with bandits and men of the lower and oppressed classes, rather like

other narratives elsewhere of the Robin Hood type. Its study calls for different methods and other paradigms than those used to interpret the standard epic hero and his martial deeds. The latter's tragic flaw is often his overweening pride, Greek *hubris*; whilst in the bandit epic the Greek derivative verb in its passive voice, *hubrizomai*, to be the humiliated victim of another's pride and violence, supplies the key motif and structural turning point of the plot.

There is a fairly concise but very interesting version of the epic of Kōroğlu in eastern Armenian here that was produced at the turn of the 20th century by an *ashugh* ("minstrel") who worked from both printed Turkish editions and familiar oral recitations by fellow masters of his craft.¹ He intended it for the edification of a community midway between rural mediaeval tradition and urban modernity, between the cultures of orality and print. Though his text was composed in a newly standardized literary language and was set in type at a modern press, it was intended to be enjoyed by an audience used to hearing it spoken and chanted aloud. Such a nexus of cultures, of technologies, is not unique for a people whose history stretches unbroken across cataclysms and ruptures that have brought an end to the career of some nations and thrown up others. Another example of a story with venerable pedigree in Armenian and roots to the east that began its career orally and then found its way into written and then printed literature is the "Tale of the City of Brass (or Bronze)" (Arm. *Patmut'iwn pñjē k'alak'i*) from the collection *Thousand Nights and a Night*, the story most likely going back itself still farther, in my view, to the tale of the Phantom City in the *Saddharmapundarikasutra* ("Lotus Sutra of the Good Law"), a monument of Mahayana Buddhism crafted most likely among speakers of Eastern Iranian languages along the trading roads of Central Asia.²

¹ Mkrtič' Taleanc' (Ashəg [Ashugh] Jamali), tr. from Tk. to Arm., *K'ōrōğlu hek'iat'ə Gzir oğlu ew Pōli bēki het patahac anc'k'erə*, Part I, Tiflis: Tparan Movsēs Vardaneanc'i, 1897, repr. in Āzmiq Sołomonyan, ed., *Aşuł Łarib, K'yor-Ōłli, Amrah ev Salvi, Ałvan ev Ōsan*, Erevan: Zart'onk'-90, 1992.

² "The Cross and the Lotus: The Armenian Mediaeval Miscellany *The City of Bronze*," in Vesta Curtis and Sarah Stewart, eds., *The Rise of Islam (The Idea of Iran, Vol. 4)*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2009, pp. 71-81.

When one speaks in Armenia today of heroic epic, it is the great saga in four branches (*čiwł*) of *Sasna crer*, “The Wild Men of Sasun”, also known by the name of its most prominent character as “David of Sasun” (*Sasunc’i Dawit’*). That epic, first set down in writing by Garegin Sruanjteanc’ from an oral reciter and published in 1874— and since then transcribed in scores of variants— has taken pride of place as the “national” epic of Armenia.³ But long before the epic of Sasun became widely known to the reading public, there was another that already enjoyed great popularity and wide diffusion among Armenians from Constantinople to Astrakhan, and from the 17th century well into the 20th. Soviet Armenians were to renew their acquaintance with it *via* a famous opera and from Russian translations; and Armenians in Turkey and Azerbaijan were familiar with it because of its great popularity and “national” status in those countries. But few surmised that its roots are in part in the culture of ancient Armenia itself. That is understandable, since its main characters are all Muslims, mainly Shi’i, with Persian and Turkic names; and most of the variants are in Turkic languages, principally Azeri and Turkmen, and as far east as Kirghiz, though there are Kurmanci Kurdish, Persian, Georgian, and Armenian variants, with recitations also in Modern Greek. The roots of the epic are in eastern Anatolia, but its diffusion is so general that it was for some centuries a *Gemeinsage* of common folk of the Near East and Central Asia. The political divides in recent times between the various peoples inhabiting the region have become so

³ I will attempt to demonstrate that the epic of Köroğlu has its roots in the pre-Christian culture of what might be called “Greater Iran”: Arsacid Northern Mesopotamia, Armenia, and Parthia, and Scythia beyond. In a series of studies I have explored aspects of the antiquity of the epic of Sasun: “On the Armeno-Iranian Roots of Mithraism”, “Revelations of Darkness: Medieval Armenian Apocalyptic in the Epic of Sasun and the Visions of Yovhannēs Kozeṛn,” “Iran and Israel in the Epic of Sasun”, “The *Šāh-nāme* in Armenian Oral Epic”, “The *Šaraf-nāme* and Armenia: Some Mythological Themes”, “Epic in the Irano-Armenian Marchlands”, and several other articles, reprinted in J.R. Russell, *Armenian and Iranian Studies*, Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies 9, Cambridge, MA, 2004. See also “Argawan: The Indo-European Memory of the Caucasus,” *JArmenSt* VIII.2, Fall 2006 [2007], pp. 110-147; “The Shrine Beneath the Waves,” *RES* 51, Cambridge, MA, Spring 2007, pp. 136-156 (Russian tr. in *Rossiya XXI*, Moscow, 2007, pp. 10-43); “The Epic of Sasun: Armenian Apocalypse,” in press in the *Proceedings*, ed. by S. La Porta, of “After the Apocalypse: The *Nachleben* of Apocalyptic Literature in the Armenian Tradition,” The Center for Literary Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, 4 June 2007.

acute that the idea of such a widely shared literary work, expressive of shared cultural values and themes, is no longer intuitive.

Despite its strong association with Turkic cultures one proposes that the epic of Koroğlu (or, in Azeri, Koroğly, henceforth K), “The Blind Man’s Son”, has its origins in the world of pre-Islamic Iran and of the Parthian Arsacids in particular, its themes and symbols informing a tale of Mesopotamian Jewry in the *Jewish Antiquities* of Josephus, first century CE, in the Iranica of the Babylonian Talmud some two to three centuries later, and in the epic of the Arsacid king Aršak II in the fifth-century *Buzandaran* of P’awstos. The subject matter of these early testimonies was and remained popular because it endowed with heroic characteristics and dimensions a particular kind of hero appreciably different from the regal Agamemnon or Arthur. Ours is not a haughty nobleman but the brave and cheerful bandit who rebels against unjust authority, robs the rich, and gives to the poor. A versatile fellow, he knows how to get by as an itinerant bard, a glib trickster. He doesn’t brood like Achilles. Like so many of us in the real world, he has to hustle. In the West the English Robin Hood with his band of merry men in Sherwood Forest is so much an exemplar of the type that his name is often used simply to define it. But these epics are rolling stones that as they tumble through history gather moss. As will be seen to have been the case with K, the historical Robin Hood of the 14th century seems to have inherited in the legends that crystallized around him the ready-made heroic exploits and characteristics of the hero of a folk epic tradition perhaps five centuries older.

K is not just an interesting Oriental text, an *oikotype* of the Robin Hood theme. It is a classic of its genre, fit to be studied and enjoyed as literature for its own sake; and once a work is thus defined it is licit to study it in translation, since its value is no longer simply philological. A student asked to read a book without immediate utility, if it does not belong to a branch of specialized scholarship in which he is acquiring mastery, is justly entitled to require an answer to the question “So what?” about it. So one will also discuss why this epic and other ballads and

sagas about robbers and bandits are important to the world's spiritual culture, to our understanding of how men through the ages have sought answers to the seemingly permanent problem of human inequality and injustice, much as they have invented sacred scriptures to grapple with the perennial conundrum of theodicy. One will also endeavor to propose how the method of the study of this type of epic can help one to understand some other signal events in remote and recent history that have crystallized into legend.

K can be divided variously; but it is common to break it up into more or less thirty episodes, sometimes called "branches" (Turkmen *şaxá*, from Pers. *šāx*; compare the Arm. *čiwł* "branch", used of the four parts of the Sasun epic) as though the different episodes stemmed from one great and hoary tree trunk, a sort of *Ur*-epic. In this way its reciters, called in Pers. *Kūroylū-xwān* ("K-reader/chanter") analogously to the recounters of Ferdousi's *Book of Kings*, who are dignified by the appellation *Šāh-nāme-xwān*, can work through the whole Muslim month of fasting, Ramadan, reciting each evening for an hour or so the prose sections called in Ar. *qişsa* interspersed with poems sung to the accompaniment of the *saz*, a stringed instrument like a lute. Iranian reciters of the *Book of Kings* often work in coffee houses whose walls are adorned with frescoes of different episodes and characters that they gesture to during their performances, which often include improvisatory passages mentioning and praising the evening's company. Most of the rural reciters of the K epic are poor and perform in barns or other impromptu places: some in modern southeastern Turkey are sharecroppers who augment their meager income by their art. Such was the case with the Armenian reciters of the Epic of Sasun. In the years before the Turks destroyed in the 1915 Genocide the millennial civilization of the Armenians in most of their land, reciters of the Sasun epic would perform for some thirty listeners gathered for warmth on winter nights in the barns where animals sheltered. They, too, both spoke and chanted, and played the same stringed instrument. The reciters of K, like those of the Sasun cycle, tend to have mastered a varied repertory of epics, romances, and ballads; and, like the Armenians again, some but not all know K by heart in its entirety.

First, then, the bare bones of the story: there is a man, the royal stable master. He has various names in the versions of the epic, but ‘Alī, the name that marks eastern, Iranian Islam, is common. A magic stallion, the famous *asp-e bahrī* “horse of the sea” of Iranian folklore, comes out of the waves and impregnates one of the royal mares. Ali duly informs the king— usually this is the great late 16th-early 17th century Safavid Šāh ‘Abbās, though again there are others in variants of the epic— that the colt to be born of this union will be the greatest horse in the world, and the king enthusiastically awaits it. The foal Ali presents to his liege lord is ugly, though; so the monarch orders it destroyed; and, enraged at having been embarrassed by the lowest servant of the royal entourage, blinds the stable master. Ali, his sight darkened, still saves and hides the horse, instructing his only son, Rōšan, whose Persian name means rather ironically in the context of his father’s sudden darkness “bright, shining, clear”, to keep the colt in a lightless stable for a specified time, such as forty days. The boy either inadvertently or through impatience lets a glimmer of light in. The horse will still be strong; but, had he obeyed his father to the letter, it would also have sprouted wings. This interruption of a magical process that would have brought perfection will be recognized as an old folklore type. Some versions add that Ali instructs Rushan to bring him a special milky foam from a spring: again, the boy brings the liquid but cannot resist eating all the tasty foam on the way. Ali says sadly that the foam would have restored his sight; but at least it will make Rushan an invincible warrior. In yet another version, Rushan is instructed in a dream to taste foam of three colors on the river, which will endow him with three skills.

The horse, meanwhile, has grown big and strong; and is named *Kīr-at* (Arm. *Ļ(ə)rat’*, pron. /Gherát/), lit. “dappled gray horse” (tr. thus in Arm. as *Pisak*, also) after its color. It is an unremarkable name; but then the name of the steed of Rustam, the great hero of the *Book of Kings*, Raxš, just means “reddish brown”; and Alexander’s Bucephalus was, well, blunt-nosed like an ox. Rushan takes Kirat out to ride. The youth is instructed by his father to fill a furrow with water over and over

for three days and then ride Kirat there till his hooves get through the mud and kick up the dry earth below. As we have it, this is a strength exercise; but I think it is a late rationalization of an earlier motif whose supernatural symbolism had been forgotten. In the fourth and final branch of the epic of Sasun, the last of the heroes, *P'ok'r Mher*, i.e., Mithra the Younger, finds that the earth has become too soft to support the hooves of the magic steed of his line, *K'urkik Jalali*, "Mighty Little Colt" (the diminutive suffix *-ik* in Arm. usage can be used of respectful affection; the horse is a giant). This is a sign that the world is too evil for the heroes to inhabit any longer; and Mher is to go with the horse into Ravens' Rock at Van— a blind portal inscribed with invocations to the Urartean gods— to wait for the end of days, when a grain of wheat will be the size of a hop and the ground will be hard. As it is, the king sees the splendid Kirat and demands him for the royal stable. Rushan, staring down proudly from the saddle, insultingly refuses, declaring himself for the first time Son of the Blind Man. K and his father escape from Iran into Turkey; and thereafter Ali leaves the story.

K finds a fortress at a place called *Çamlıbel*, "Misty Mountain" (but Tolkien probably did not hear of it: the geographical sources of Middle Earth are northern European), at a spot where the caravans traveling to and from Baghdad, Constantinople, Tabriz, and Isfahan must pass. This crossroads of the Ottoman and Safavid empires is in Armenia; and tradition generally locates it at Sivas (Arm. Sebastia): most of the action of the non-Central Asian versions epic takes place in Western and Persian Armenia, the vicinity of Kars, Erzurum (Arm. Karin), and Salmast. K assembles about him a colorful cast of brigands and outlaws, some of whom bear the epithet *dali*, "crazy" (Tk. *delli*, cf. Arm. *cuř*).⁴ Some are as strong and brave as he, and join him after a contest or confrontation: though he is leader, the sense is not of yet another feudal order but of a band of free men who follow their

⁴ In the Oğuz epic *Dede Korkut*, which incorporated numerous Armenian and ancient Anatolian themes the Turkic invaders of Anatolia encountered, there is a character called *Delli Dumrul* who seems to be based upon the same Polyphemus-like ogre as the Armenian Tork' Angeł: see J.R. Russell, "Polyphemos Armenios," *REArm* 26, 1996-1997, pp. 25-38.

leader out of respect. Though K's men abduct for him the lovely princess Nigâr *xānom* (Pers., "Picture", cf. Arm. l-w *nkar*, as in "pretty as a..."— and the old *topos* of falling in love because of a picture one has seen figures in some versions) and he bears a son, there is no foundation of a dynasty to rival those of the Persians and Turks. The person closest to K seems to be the kidnapped, beautiful youth Ayvaz, who fights alongside him and waits upon him, whom he dotes on and grooms as his heir. It is not clear what else the hero does with this Ganymede; but in any case K's only true mate is neither fellow robber nor noble princess nor even handsome boy. It is his horse, Kirat— just as with Rostam and Rakhsh.

The bulk of the tales are self-contained narratives of adventures, mostly raids, in which K robs the rich and gives to the poor. He is an *aşık*, a minstrel (cf. Arm. l-w *aşut*; the word is Ar. *'aşūq*, "lover", the minstrels of pre-Islamic times having been called Mlr. *gōsān*, Arm. l-w *gusan*, "singer"): often he sings to his friends and foes rather than speaking to them, but sometimes— as when he is captured— he sings of the exploits of K while pretending to be somebody else. K is thus a witty trickster and romantic lover, very different indeed from, for instance, pious Aeneas with his Dido-denying *gravitas*. The manner of K's end differs from one version to another of the epic: he is killed, or Kirat is killed. Or he dies peacefully, making Ayvaz his heir, and puts down his sword. Another ending is supernatural, and recalls the apocalyptic ending of the epic of Sasun, in which the last of the heroes, *P'ok'r* Mher, Mithra the Younger, is occulted into a cave till the end of days: K simply vanishes, or else goes to join the forty immortal saints of the mythology of the mystical Shi'a Bektashi sect. An apocalyptic dénouement is interesting: as we shall see, bandit rebellions frequently compensate for their lack of a coherent social program or ideology with inchoate visions of a violent end to this unjust world, believing also that their leaders can die only by treachery, if at all.

The earliest dated recorded version of K is the *Kūrōylī-nāma*, written in Pers. in the Tabriz area in the 1840's at the request of the Orientalist Alexander Chodzko, who soon afterwards published a much embellished and somewhat bowdlerized

English translation.⁵ As already noted, there are versions from as far west as Greece and as far east as Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kirghizia: in general, the farther east one goes, the more K is cast as a ruler rather than a robber.⁶ There are at least two published Arm. versions of the K epic. One, printed at Tiflis in 1897, is a rendering into a fairly standard Eastern Armenian from Tatar (as Azeri Turkish was then called) prose and verse by Mkrtič' Taleanc', whose name as a minstrel, was Ashugh Jamali. G. T'arverdyan in 1941 published a long versified text transcribed in dialect from recitations by *ashughs* repatriated to Russian Armenia from Persarmenia (Khoy and Salmast) and the Vaspurakan region of Western Armenia (Van, Başkale, Moks). The latter area was a center also of recitation of the Sasun epic, much of whose action takes place in the vicinity; and Moks (Clas. Arm. Mokk') was the home of the famous heroic ballad Mokac' Mirza (i.e., Mirza of Moks) and of the epic *Kašti k'ajēr*, "The heroes of [the village of] Kasht".⁷ So the epic of K would have been part of a rich oral culture and an extensive repertory: the traces of one tale in another bear witness to a natural reciprocity— an inter-textuality of the spoken word— in the learning, transmission, and reception of these works.

And there is ample evidence that the epic was known and popular long before the modern period. Late in the 17th century the historian Arak'el of Tabrīz (Arm. Dawrižec'i), in his account of the reign of Shah Abbas, lists the names of the bandit-leaders of the Jelali uprising, about which we will have more to say presently. One of these is K: *Ays ayn K'ōrōllin ē, or bazum xał ē asac'eal: zor ayžm ašəłnern ełanaken* "This is that Kōroğli [thus, with the Azeri ending -i instead of -u] who recited many songs that *ashughs* perform now." Not long after, in 1721, Eñias Astuacatur Mušełeanc', a rather colorful individual from Erzurum who made his

⁵ The book is extremely useful and its annotations are enlightening and informed by direct experience. It has become common for students of the East to deride the work of the Victorians. That is unfortunate; but intelligent readers of Russian literature are beginning to turn from inferior recent translations back to another Eminent Victorian, Constance Garnett.

⁶ See Judith M. Wilk, "The Persianization of Koroğlu: Banditry and Royalty in Three Versions of the Koroğlu 'Destan'," *Asian Folklore Studies*, Nanzan University, Vol. 60, No. 2, 2001, pp. 305-318.

⁷ See J.R. Russell, *The Heroes of Kasht: An Armenian Epic*, Ann Arbor, MI: Caravan Books Armenian and Caucasian Series, 2000.

living as a merchant and was arrested at Astrakhan' by the Russians as a Persian spy, compiled, and I quote, "A book of songs of music, composed by diverse men and having relation to obscure matters, that is, conceived by poetic men. For that reason, here, I wanted to inscribe something of the sayings those men fashioned, which is pleasure of the body for our brethren. I consider it better thus to bring enjoyment, than to engage in slanderous speech about other people... The sayings concerning K. This K was an Ottoman Turk by race: they say he was from the land of Bayazet. He dwelt in the mountains and forests of the land of the Ottomans, and with many horsemen guarded the passes and the roads. Sometimes he robbed merchants, and sometimes he accepted donations that were freely offered. His actual dwelling was between the cities of Kars and Karin. There is a great wood now named Soğanlı [i.e., "Onionful"]. There he erected a fortress that is called K r Ođli *kalesi* ["fortress"]; and he has fortresses in other places. This was in the time of the king of the Persians Shah Abbas and during the reign of Sultan Murat of the Turks. It was his custom to make merry and to savor the pleasures of the mountains and the forests. Because of his merrymaking his voice resounded through the mountains and the flowering plains of the region. He rebelled against the king. His history is lengthy; but this is not the place to write it. He also captured every beautiful boy and absconded from the city, on account of which many praises are sung. We will write down here, to the best of our ability, what we have heard."⁸

The stories of K remained popular in the early 19th century. Xa atur Abovean, whose *V rk' Hayastani* ("The Wounds of Armenia") is considered the first modern Armenian novel, thought the bandit-minstrel a member of his own nation. He wrote: "So what, at last, was one to do, that both our own hearts and other nations might understand, even praise us, and love our tongue? I remained mired in doubt. I knew how many notable, wise, talented men there had been in the lands of the Ottomans and the *Kızılbaş* [Tk. "Red Hats", i.e., Shi'a Iran], minstrels loved at the court of Khan, Shah, and Sultan, fine singers of lays and shapers of verses— and

⁸ See X. Samvelyan, intro. to G. T'arverdyan, ed., *K'yor- lli  olovrdakan vipasanut'yun*, Erevan: Armfan, 1941.

many were Armenians. Keşiş oğlu and Kör oğlu are sufficient for my words not to ring false.” And a century before, Joseph Emin had rendered into Armenian a quatrain by K recited to him by Muḥammad Ḥasan Xān of Ganja: *Barik’i dēm, barik’/ Amēn mardu gorc ē;/ Č’arik’i dēm, č’arik’—/ Ktrič mardu gorc ē* “Rendering good for good/ Is the work of every man;/ But repaying evil with evil/ Is the business of the brave.” The late 18th-century Armenian bard of Tiflis, Sayat’ Nova, composed his lyrics in several languages; but the primary tongue of the *ashugh*— understood, therefore, by most listeners of any nationality or confession in the Transcaucasus— was “Tatar”, the regional Azeri Turkish. So it may be supposed that Armenians knew the K epic in that language. Still, Emin’s citation shows that rendering it into Armenian was an option, with a precedent. Later in the 19th century the writer, poet, and revolutionary Ėap’ayēl Patkanean began an Armenian version of his own of K that was to remain unfinished. He wrote of it, “My K is an Armenian, but for a reason understandable to me he rejects the Armenian faith. I intend to quicken in him, in my own fashion, the last embers of Armenian independence... My hero, for the sake of the idea to which he has dedicated himself, sacrifices the most precious and sacred treasure a man has— his religion. I want to unite in him two elements: his God-given talent and lofty soul, and his subtle patriotism...” In this case, the hero’s Islamic faith is an intentional and painful rejection of Armenian Christianity: many reformists believed that the subjugated condition of the Armenians was to be blamed on the emasculating injunction of Christian morality to turn the other cheek. So some sought a revival of an imagined paganism; others maintained that the militant ethos of Islam had encouraged and preserved the virility of the Turks and Kurds.

After Patkanean another Eastern Armenian writer, Łazaros Ałayanc’, rendered into Armenian a quatrain recited by the hero during one of his exploits incognito as a minstrel this way: *Es mi Jalali em, anuns Ėušan,/ Hōrs anunn ē Xor; mōrs, Xorišan./ Arhestov ašuł em, inč’pēs tesnum ēk’:/ Or es K’yoř ołlin č’em, aha jez nšan* “I am a Jelali; my name, Rushan./ May father’s name is Xor; my mother’s, Xorišan./ By trade I am an *ashugh*, just as you see,/ And here’s a sure sign that K

ain't me." What is interesting here is the mention of an apparent variant of the hero's name, *Xor oğlu*. In Turkmen, with the pronunciation of K as *Gör-oghli*, tradition explains that Rushan was born miraculously of a dead mother, in the dark of the grave (from the Pers. l-w *gūr*). In the Sasun epic, both the young David and his horse are immured in lightless chambers. David's relatives do this, not as a kind of incubation to nurture their strength, as in the case of Kirat above, but to prevent hero and steed from emerging and raising a rebellion against the Arab tyrant Msramelik'. The Arm. for "deep" is *xor*, a loan from MIr. and a good paronomastic stand-in for *gur*. In some versions of the Sasun epic there is even a peripheral figure, somewhat supernatural, who makes brief appearances as *Xor manuk*, "Deep child", *manuk* being the Arm. equivalent of *oğul*, "boy, child".⁹ So it is possible that a type of the figure of K has made its shadowy way into the epic that was itself to overshadow K's story in Armenian literature.

The epic of Sasun in its essence is of very great antiquity: the magic, foaming milk of which the heroes are engendered, the unequal founding twins Sanasar and Bałdasar, the magic horse from the sea, battles with dragons, the two heroes who bear the name of the Zoroastrian divinity Mithra, as Mher— are all pre-Christian mythological *topoi* in a cycle of narratives that crystallized in its present form around the events of the ninth-century freedom struggle of the Armenians, begun in Sasun, against the oppression of the Caliphate. That uprising was a signal event in the formation of the Armenian Arcruni and Bagratuni kingdoms.¹⁰ An analogous process may have led to the shaping of the K epic: that is to say, much older epic motifs and themes, including the name and childhood history of the principal character, K himself, crystallized around the epochal events of the Jalali rebellions.

⁹ This character may be related to the *T'ux Manuk* "Black Child" of Armenian mythology. See J.R. Russell, "The Armenian Shrines of the Black Youth (*t'ux manuk*)," *Le Muséon* 111, fasc. 3-4, 1998, pp. 319-343.

¹⁰ It is not coincidental that two of the five principal heroes of the Sasun cycle bear the name Mher (i.e., Mihr, Mithra— the Zoroastrian divinity associated among other things with the Apocalypse). The Armenian revolts were the westernmost of a chain of contemporary uprisings across the Iranian north against Arab rule: in some eastern regions the image and inspiration of the rebellion was the Buddha of the future, Maitreya, whose popularity among Iranian adherents of the Mahayana school may have to do with his linguistic and typology relationship to Mithra.

The famous Russian scholar of Islam, I.P. Petrushevsky, writes, “Most likely one of the leaders of the Jalali movement adopted the name K, which had become popular thanks to a legend that had taken shape in earlier centuries.” So the historical bandit might have taken his name from a legendary predecessor; and his deeds were then recast in archaic legend as the epic grew around him, rather as with the Sasun epic in the same region, or with another bandit epic, Robin Hood, in faraway Britain.

Let us consider briefly, then, the Jalali movement—the great upheaval in which the historical K of the epic took part. With the rise to power of the Shi’i dynasty of the Safavids around 1590 and the consolidation of the Iranian state as a major Near Eastern imperial power after a hiatus of centuries, hostilities began with the rival neighboring power, the Sunni Ottoman Empire of the Turks. The two Muslim states collided on the Armenian plateau, the devastation lasting over a century. In the lawless conditions of a power vacuum the Shi’i armed bandits called Jalali after one of their leaders ravaged the Armenian communities, and scribes writing in the colophons of their manuscripts in the period speak with one voice, decrying them as “the bloodthirsty beast” (*ariwnarbu gazan*) and “the evil dragon” (*č’arn višap*, a designation of the Antichrist). Employing an ancient genre to bewail an all-too-familiar kind of disaster, Azaria of Sasun wrote a “Lament on the blows delivered to the eastern provinces and the realm of Armenia by the Jalalis” (*Otb i veray haruacoc’ arewelean gawarac’ ew ašxarhin Hayoc’ i jeřac’ Jalaleanc’*). An important source already mentioned is the *History of Arakel of Tabriz*, who studied and worked at Echmiadzin in the mid-17th century and compiled his chronicle at the suggestion of Catholicos P’ilipos, on the basis of both colophons and eyewitness accounts of events. He completed his book in 1662 and died eight years later. As we have seen, Arakel observes that K’s songs, composed during the reign of Shah Abbas, that is, *ca.* 1600, were popular with the minstrels of his day. K’s is one of a number of names in a list, of whom Arakel writes, “All of these are Jalalis, who refused to submit to the king. They did not dwell in any one place, but were destroyers and despoilers of the earth; and wherever they heard word of prosperity, thither did they hasten, pillaging, robbing, setting fire to buildings and burning them to the

ground.” He adds that they attracted followers from among the Armenian community: “But from amongst the Christian folk some men who had no fear of God in them, when they saw what the Muslims [*aylazgik’*, lit. “those of another nation, gentiles”, the disparaging designation frequently employed for Muslims] were doing, began to do likewise. For their hands were eager to do what their eyes beheld (*vasn zi ač’ōk’ tesin ew srtiw yōžarec’an*)— whether it was rape in plain sight or theft in secret, that is what they did. For the land was without a ruler (*antēr*) and barren of strong masters to control the realm; so every man satisfied the inclinations of his desire.”¹¹ The traveler Eremia Çelebi Kōmürçiyān calls the Jalalis “a motley crew of barbarians (*xar’ničatanč gundk’ xuzadužk’*) who terrified those who saw them. They dragged off women with their children into captivity and surrounded themselves with them.” Nigar and Ayvaz in the epic of K would have been among these unfortunates.

So it would seem that some Jalalis were Armenians, possibly apostates from Christianity like the legendary Fr. (*Tēr*) Simon who became an Alevi Shi’a to save his flock from massacre, after whom the region of Dersim (Tk. “Tunceli”) supposedly got its name. Doubtless even more of the hapless victims of Jalali kidnappings were Armenians as well. The names of Jalali bandits (*awazakk’*) provided by Eremia and Arakel give one a colorful picture of their piratical character: *Küçük Ahmet* (“Little Ahmed”), *T’awil pičn erkaraygi* (“Dirty Long Tail”), *K’esek’es* (“Cut and Cut Again!”), *Kör kaya* (“Blind as a Rock”), *Qalenter oğli* (“Son of the Mad Dervish”), *Abu Hancar* (“Father of Dagger”), *Kara sāt* (“Black Hour”, meaning the time that has tolled for you if you meet him), *Tengri tanımaz* (“He recognizes **no** God”), and *Siki büyük anpatkar* (“Shameless Big Dick”).¹² The chaos in which these bands arose, and to which they contributed, lasted nearly a century and a half, affecting every ancient center of Armenian life from the outskirts of Constantinople in the west to Tabriz in the east. Conditions were so desperate that many were driven to cannibalism, and

¹¹ See Arak’el Dawrižec’i, *Girk’ patmut’eanc’*, tr. L.A. Khanlaryan, Arakel Davrižhetsi, *Kniga istorii*, Moscow: Nauka, 1973, ch. 7 (p. 89 f.).

¹² See M.K. Zulalyan, *Jalalineri šaržumə ev hay žołoavrđi vičakə ōsmanyan kaysrut’yan mejš*, Erevan: Arm. Acad. Sci., 1966, p. 165.

spurred an exodus that may be seen as the first wave of the modern Armenian diaspora. So the period is certainly significant enough for an ancient epic to have assumed a contemporary shape around it.

The motivations of the bandits were varied: political and economic chaos allowed charismatic leaders to come to the fore. Shi'a religious faith, with its strong millenarian aspect, inspired many who felt the end of days was imminent. Though the Jalalis acted with barbarity and excess, many felt also that they were fighting for freedom and justice. In an Arm. version of the K epic, the hero *Zalāmin kəčartēr, axktin kəsirēr, / Zankinic' kaṛnēr, fukarin kətar* "Slew the oppressor and loved the destitute, / Took from the rich and gave to the poor;" and his men boast, *Menk' ašxarhi ēn t'ayfan enk', or lci tak č'enk' māneli* "We are that race of the world that will not remain under the yoke." Since this Robin Hood-like legacy has persisted, let us look at the bandits then, not from the standpoint of outraged scribes, but from the perspective of social history.

The leftist British historian Eric Hobsbawm, in his landmark study *Bandits*,¹³ drawing mainly from examples in Europe and South America of the past two centuries, finds that the ones around whom legends typically grow begin their careers, not as criminals, but as avenging victims of an outrageous, humiliating act of injustice or aggrieved status of subservience. They flourish in regions without the strong control of a central government, but tend to fight local oppressors, for the most part, rather than opposing a distant reigning monarch. Almost invulnerable, the noble bandit can be killed only by an act of betrayal. The average bandit band operates for two to three years and has about twenty members. (In the epic, with its typical hyperbole, K enjoys from 365 to 777 confederates, and his exploits last a lifetime.) The members of Hobsbawm's model gang are called "bent" or "crooked"—as in the K and Sasun epics—because of their apartness from law-abiding "straight" society. On bandit violence, Hobsbawm remarks, "A wild and indiscriminate

¹³ Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2000.

retaliation: yes, but perhaps also, and especially among the weak, the permanent victims who have no hope of real victory even in their dreams, a more general ‘revolution of destruction’ which tumbles the whole world in ruins, since no ‘good’ world seems possible.”¹⁴ Thus the apocalyptic violence of our Shi‘a revolutionaries in eastern Anatolia.

Bandits often rise up against foreign oppression, and oppose to tyranny, even in rigidly class-bound societies, a remarkably egalitarian system of self-regulation. The bandit ethos thus combines a kind of chivalry with religious conviction: “We were... knightly, though also spiritual” (*caballeresco pero espiritual*), recalled a Spanish Anarchist; and Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first minister of culture of the Soviet Union, called Communism “the last religion”. The Communist League founded by Karl Marx himself was at first named the League of the Outlaws; so the relationship of bandits to revolutionary movements has a semantic and ideological reciprocity. Each inspires the other. One of the archetypal bandit-revolutionary heroes of the Communist movement in the Russian Empire was Semyon Arshakovich Ter-Petrosyan (1882-1922), the legendary Kamo, an Armenian who robbed banks to finance the revolution. Though the Tiflis heist he pulled off in 1907 netted 200,000 rubles, Kamo lived like an ascetic devotee of the cause, never spending more than fifty kopeks a day for his own needs. Kamo’s patronymic, “son of Arshak”, introduces a pleasing symmetry: as we shall see presently, the epic legend of a fourth-century Armenian king, Aršak II, is cast in the same mold that centuries later was to give shape to the K epic in its present, recognizable form, in the same lands where Kamo and his comrades were later still to fight to bring down the old world and make a new one. (In the words of the hymn of the world Communist movement, *The Internationale*, *Весь мир насилья мы разрушим до основания и затем/ Мы наш, мы новый мир построим: кто был ничем, тот*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

станет всем. “We will destroy to its foundations the whole world of violence and then/ We will build our own new world, and who was nought, he shall be all.”)¹⁵

We have seen that K was a minstrel. This too, is typical of some famed bandits, rebels, and outcasts. In 14th-century France, the greatest of the balladeers was the vagabond criminal François Villon. And bandits have often been the heroes of folk ballads, from Jesse James in 19th-century America to the Anarchist bandits of Benamejí in Andalusia celebrated in the *Gypsy Romances* of the early-20th-century poet Federico García Lorca.¹⁶ Russians still sing songs like *Ой да не вечер* and *Из за острова на стрежень* that honor and mourn the bandit rebel Sten’ka Razin: this writer grew up in red diapers, listening to and singing Shostakovich’s cantata based on Yevtushenko’s poem about him. The genre endures: William S. Burroughs’ *Western Lands* trilogy, an apocalyptic celebration of revolutionary banditry, interweaves pirate utopias (an entire separate topic but along much the same lines: bandit society at sea) with Western tales of the fellowship of honest thieves of the American hinterland, the so-called “Johnson family”. In his monograph *Der Räuber Nikola Schuhaj*, 1953, the East German scholar Ivan Olbracht sums up the essence of the strivings of these rebels: “Man has an insatiable longing for justice. In his soul he rebels against a social order which denies it to him, and whatever the world he lives in, he accuses either that social order or the entire material universe of injustice. Man is filled with a strange, stubborn urge to remember, to think things out and to change things; and in addition he carries within himself the wish to have what he cannot have— if only in the form of a fairy tale. That is perhaps the basis for the heroic sagas of all ages, all religions, all peoples, and all classes.”

Thus the popularity of the archetype of K. But where does the archetype come from, in the region of eastern Anatolia and the Transcaucasus— the Armenian

¹⁵ The romantic aura of revolutionary movements is especially seductive to intellectuals with the good fortune to live far away from the sanguinary horrors they bring in reality to the unfortunates under their sway. See Jamie Glazov, *United In Hate: The Left’s Romance With Tyranny and Terror*, Los Angeles, CA: WND Books, 2009.

¹⁶ See Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, New York: Norton, 1965, p. 78.

highland? Georges Dumézil traced it to a legend about the Scythians in the *Histories* of Herodotus (5th cent. BC), IV.1-4:¹⁷ the Scythians, he writes, *blind* all their slaves (*tous de doulous... tuphlousi*) by reason of the milk they drink (*tou galaktos heineken tou pinousi*). Some of these slaves married Scythian women; and their children rose in rebellion but were put down in a curiously humiliating way— the Scythians advanced on them with horsewhips instead of swords or arrows, reminding them thereby that they were slaves. This psychological tactic broke their morale, and they capitulated. An aspect of the episode has mystified scholars: it is easy to understand the sons of blind men rising up against those who had blinded their fathers, and Dumézil may be right in seeing the kernel of the K epic here. But what of the milk— mares' milk, actually? In the K epic Rushan is instructed by Ali, as we have seen, to bring his father foam from a spring, and he drinks it off instead. It would have cured Ali's blindness, but at least it makes K strong. This magical milk seems to be the same kind of potation as the seminal fluid of the *kat'nałbiwr*, the "milky spring" of Armenian epic. Covinar, whose name probably means something like "Lady of the Sea", drinks one-and-a-half handfuls from a rock phallus spurting the stuff that stiffens out of the waters of lake Van, and in nine months' time bears the unequal twins Sanasar and Bałdasar, the first generation of heroes of the Sasun epic. In the analogous episode of the Ossetic *Nartæ*, it is a shepherd's semen rocketing across the river Terek and impregnating the rock behind which the lady Satana hides, that does the job. In the epic of the heroes of Kasht, the village men drink from a *kat'nałbiwr* that makes them both "bent" and strong. So perhaps in an earlier variant of the Scythian tale, the son of a blinded servant drank magic milk, acquired valor and strength, and rebelled against those who humiliated and flogged him.

The Armenologist Haïg Berberian, in a book-length review of Dumézil's study, finds elements that were later to appear in the K epic, in the legends that accumulated around the Armenian Arsacid kings of the fourth century AD. According to both the *Buzandaran* of P'awstos and the *History* of Movsēs Xorenac'i,

¹⁷ Georges Dumézil, "Le legends de 'Fils d'aveuglés' au Caucase et autour du Caucase," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 117, 1938, pp. 50-74.

the violent and impious king Tiran is captured and blinded by the Persian Shah; Tiran's successor, Arshak II, receives from Tiran's chamberlain, P'isak ("Dappled"), a request from the Sasanian governor of Atrpatakan, i.e., Azarbaijan, for the splendid roan and dappled (*čarpuk čančkēn*) mount of the Armenian king. The latter sends one that is alike but not as good, and the treacherous courtier not only points out the deception, but lets the Persian know that his own masters plan to revolt and restore their deposed Arsacid kin to the Iranian throne. Blindness, horse, deception, rebellion: the elements, only slightly differently distributed, are wholly familiar. And to this dossier one might add two additional testimonies from other sources in the Parthian world.

The historian Josephus, writing shortly after the disastrous revolt of the Jews of Israel in the first century AD against Roman dominion, recounts in his *Jewish Antiquities* XVIII.314 in terms steeped in Iranian epic imagery and theme the tale of two unequal brothers with twin-like, rhyming names, Anilaeus and Asinaeus, sons of a widow in Nehardea, a Jewish town of Parthian Mesopotamia. Apprenticed to a weaver and flogged with stripes (*plēgais*) for some infraction, they react to the indignity (*hubris*) by revolting. Styling themselves generals, they gather around them other young men of the lowest social orders (*tōn neōn hoi aporōtatoī*), build a citadel (*akropolin*), and live by robbery. They defeat the army of a satrap sent to deal with them; and Asinaeus is invited by the admiring Arsacid king Ardavān III to attend at the royal court. When the courtiers mock the Jewish hero-bandit for his diminutive stature, the king retorts that Asinaeus has a soul greater in stature than his small body (*hōs meizona en tēi parathesei parekhoito tēn psukhēn tou sōmatos*). Geoffrey Herman, in a brilliant study of this episode,¹⁸ notes that it has a parallel in the epic cycle of Arshak in the *Buzandaran*, where the defeated Armenian commander Vasak Mamikonean is derided by the Sasanian king Šābuhr (Shapur) II as a crafty little fox. Vasak retorts, employing an intricate hypogrammatic strategy,

¹⁸ Geoffrey Herman, "The Story of Rav Kahana (BT Baba Qamma 117a-b) in Light of Armeno-Persian Sources," in Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer, eds., *Irano-Judaica VI*, Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2008, pp. 53-86.

that Shapur has seen only half of him— half his name. Now he is a fox, *ahuēs*, but when he was a full Vasak, he was also a *skay*, a giant.¹⁹ The brave Asinaeus is killed by treachery— poisoned by the Parthian wife of his weak-willed brother, Anilaeus. Only thus, by treason, can a true bandit hero die. In Josephus’ narrative, chronologically midway between Herodotus’ Scythians and the Armenian Arsacid court of the *Buzandaran* of P’awstos, we encounter a true bandit epic, just south of the Armenian mountains.

The tale of Anilaeus and Asinaeus makes no mention of a wonderful horse; but another Jewish source from Parthian and Sasanian Mesopotamia, also mined by Prof. Herman for its Iranian content, supplies interesting additional equine material. This is the Talmud. We have seen that K’s father Ali was the royal stable master. This office is convenient thematically: Ali is best placed to recognize the worth of Kirat. But it is also symbolic, or was so, in ancient Iran, where the *āxwarrbed*, “stable master”, was part of the court hierarchy but also the lowliest courtier. Of Rabbi Yehuda I the *Bavli* says, *Ahōrērē dā-Rabbī ‘atīr mi-Šābūr mālkā*, “The Rabbi’s stable-master [using a Pers. l-w] was richer than king Shapur.”²⁰ Ali’s office is thus a marked term whose meaning is best understood in its Parthian and early Sasanian context.

... impiis invidiam, prosperitatem peccatorum observans, ... in aerumnis mortalium non versantur, et cum hominibus non flagellantur. Ideo cingit eos, ut torques, superbia, et violentia, ut vestis, operit eos. Psalm 72.

Certain of the themes and images reviewed above merit an excursus. The horsewhip figures prominently in the narrative of Herodotus on the servile

¹⁹ For a discussion of the word game in this passage with relation to Armenian oral poetics and ancient mythological themes, see J.R. Russell, “Magic Mountains, Milky Seas, Dragon Slayers, and Other Zoroastrian Archetypes,” Ratanbai Katrak Lecture, University of Oxford, 3 November 2009 (in publication in the *Proceedings*, ed. Elizabeth Tucker).

²⁰ See Geoffrey Herman, “Ahasuerus, the Former Stable-Master of Belshazzar, and the Wicked Alexander of Macedon: the Parallels between the Babylonian Talmud and Persian Sources,” *AJS Review* 29.2 (2005), pp. 283-297.

rebellion: the mere sight of the instrument is sufficient to quell the uprising. In the *Anabasis of Alexander* of Arrian, Hermolaus, one of the noble Macedonian youths serving as a page in the entourage of the Macedonian king, insults the latter on the royal hunt by riding in and spearing a boar before Alexander can. For this act of *lèse majesté* he is whipped in front of the other boys and his horse is taken away from him. Enraged by this insult— the Greek word *hubris* is used— he and his lover vow to murder Alexander. In the *Kārnāmag* (“*Res Gestae*”) of Ardešīr, son of Pāpak, the young Persian, this time in the service of the last Parthian king rather than the last Mede, likewise forestalls him at the hunt and is punished by being sent to work *in the royal stables* and having his horse taken away from him. In the *Histories* of Herodotus, the young Cyrus plays king in a game and has one of the other children, the son of a Median noble, flogged. The father of the boy is so outraged by his son’s humiliation— the passive denominative verb *hubrizomai* is used!— that he complains to king Astyages himself. In the *Frogs* of Aristophanes, Dionysus and his servant go down to Hades to select the best poet to save Athens, and in the course of their adventures undergo a sort of flogging competition on their bare bottoms. The comedian here is patently disarming a potent and keen taboo: the free man, much less the god, is immune from the humiliation against the most private parts of the person exemplified by the application of the whip applied in punishment to the naked body of a slave, particularly his nether parts. Greek *eis to sōma hubrithai* “to be ‘hubrised’ on the body” signifies a physical outrage against the body such as mutilation. Additionally the long, springy, punishing horsewhip is *pars pro toto* of the horse, a symbol not only of noble privilege— cf. the Roman *eques*— but of genital prowess and penetration, and, because of the way one rides, of the anal parts as well. It combines aspects of both social and sexual potency, the reversal of which, by the use of a horsewhip on a noble youth’s backside, seems to me a switching point in the narrative where the potential epic hero is so radically dehumanized and degraded that he must become an outlaw, a bandit. Note that the narratives concerning the future kings Cyrus and Ardeshir utilize the *topos* only in part: the actual persons of the two are not violated, but the *hubris* of their Median and Parthian overlords is sufficient to doom the latter. In the case of K, the physical

violence of blinding is visited upon the stablemaster Ali; so K's revenge is to take the very best horse—the one Shah Abbas rejected—and begin a life of brigandage against Sultan and Shah alike.

These ancient sources provide a host of both large themes and plots and small but intensely significant symbols and details that are to be encountered in the K epic of later ages. The roots of the epic are in the legends of the Iranian peoples and those culturally and politically kindred to them; and the epic grew on their lands. It is thus the monument of a developing regional culture founded in antiquity, shaped by a turbulent history, and perennially animated by hopes, sufferings, and strivings that engender balladry and epic wherever there is destitution and oppression and the stubborn resilience, the will to resist, of the human spirit. The study of the bandit epic type provides a way to understand in a new light other important historical narratives that memory has retained as legend. There are three examples to be adduced: the first, the Sasun epic itself. We have seen how its heroes are called “bent”, how the first generation of them is a pair of unequal twins born to a princess about to be sent away as a hostage to a foreign tyrant. She drinks of a magical, milky spring and her strong, brave sons are born. The heroes acquire a magic horse and found a fortress, Sasun, from which they, in the company of vividly-named fellow braves like *Dzenov Hovan*, “John of the Booming Voice”, sally forth to fight against oppression. The greatest of them, David, is immured by cowards, as is his steed, the second part of whose very name, Kurkik Jelali, has a special resonance to the student of K and his times. David dies by treachery, the only way a hero can, and his son Little Mher provides the apocalyptic dénouement, entering a cave at Van to remain till the end of days. Then he will come forth to save or destroy the world: the ambivalence of this point may have to do with the Christian faith of the reciters or the inchoate violence of bandit eschatology, or maybe a bit of both. Even the way Kurkik Jelali will tread solid ground then has an echo, as we have seen, in the epic of K and its description of the training of Kirat in a water-filled furrow of the field. The heroes of Sasun became in legend a titan race, different from smaller, weaker from “straight” folk, called in the epic “Armenians”; but the latter-day *jan-fedayis*, the

guerrillas of Sasun, Zeitun, and elsewhere in Armenia had the appearance, and enjoyed the popular repute, of the bandits of legend.

The second case comes from the Parthian era and the homeland of Josephus and involves a young man whose mother, according to tradition, was supernaturally inseminated. Though of the royal Davidic line, he grew up in obscurity as a carpenter, then collected a ragged crew of fishermen and other lower-class types, with whom he traveled around preaching against the tyranny of the rich and the oppression of the poor, and asserting that his kingdom— of justice and kindness— is not this one. He was arrested as a rebel against the alien Roman occupier and was forced to endure the humiliation of being stripped naked and flogged. The four standard accounts of His life all record that He was crucified between two other men, one to His right and one to His left. Both were bandits, one of whom who mocked him, apparently for His belief that some good might come of this tortuous, humiliating execution. In the early narrative of one of His followers, Mark, He died with a despairing complaint from the Psalms on His lips: “My God, why did you abandon me?” According to other Gospel accounts, though, Jesus Christ, the Jewish rebel hero, gave up the ghost with a calmer affirmation culled from the Jewish evening prayer, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” This version, Luke’s, which is most likely closer than others to a Hebrew Gospel (often attributed by the Church Fathers to Matthew), makes the bandit on the right a righteous man; the one on the left, a blasphemer. By the 5th century AD these two have names, Dysmas and Gestas; and an apocryphal text, *The Story of Joseph of Arimathea*, embroiders the legend this way: “The first, Gestas, used to strip and murder wayfarers, hang up women by the feet and cut off their breasts, drink the blood of babes; he knew not nor obeyed any law, but was violent from the beginning.” But “the other, Demas [i.e., Dysmas], was a Galilean who kept an inn; he despoiled the rich but did good to the poor, even burying them, like Tobit. He had committed robberies on the Jews, for he stole the Law itself at Jerusalem, and stripped the daughter of Caiaphas, who was a priestess [!] of the sanctuary, and he took away even the mystic deposit of Solomon

which had been deposited in the place.” That is, Gestas is a reprobate murderer; Dysmas, a Robin Hood-like bandit hero, and an anti-Semite besides.

For Gestas goes on to declare that had he only know Jesus was king, he would have killed Him, too; while Dysmas asks Jesus to protect him from the devil and looks forward to the punishment of all twelve tribes of Israel. Christ grants him a place in Paradise and assures him that “the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Moses shall be cast out into the outer darkness.” When Joseph of Arimathea arrives later on to recover the bodies for burial, those of Jesus and Dysmas are gone; but the corpse of Gestas lies there, monstrous, “like that of a dragon”. He has been dehumanized to a reptile, to the snake that deceived the father and mother of mankind. In subsequent depictions of the Crucifixion, the two thieves are shown contorted with their arms and legs gashed and broken, while Christ is whole. This detail of the thieves refers to the medieval practice of breaking criminals on the wheel and then exposing them to a slow and hideous death. Gestas is shown, as one would expect, writhing in agony and deformed and hideous to behold, while Dysmas receives Christ’s benevolent gaze and sometimes has his mouth open to receive a spray of the salvific blood of the Savior.²¹

The message of this developed narrative is plain: Christ is not to be confused with rebels or bandits, even though he shares their company and their punishment. Moreover, the idealized thief receives Christ as king, and not as king of the Jews but as their enemy. Christ has been transmuted into Caesar as surely as the poor thief Gestas is metamorphosed into a reptile. Such malign inversion is not unusual in the process whereby nascent Gentile Christianity sought to distance itself from its origins, gradually demonizing the latter. If one looks beyond this perverse corruption, with its malign, degenerate, anti-Semitic intent, one may attempt to reclaim and restore a semblance of the original. A poor man raised without a father gathers a band of young men like himself and travels around his home territory,

²¹ See Mitchell B. Merback, *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

never traveling far in his mission, and offends the rich and powerful while feeding and healing the poor. He can be captured and killed only by treachery and betrayal. He dies at the hands of a foreign tyrant in the company of a pair of bandits, one perhaps braver and more likeable than the other. His is an otherworldly kingdom; their manner of rebellion is more earthly and violent.

Two millennia pass. David of Sasun fights the Arabs, Robin Hood fights the Sheriff of Nottingham, the heroes of Kasht fight Tamerlane, K fights Shah and Sultan, the revolutionaries of 1789 rise up, then the Communards of 1871, the Armenian *fedayin* resist the Ottomans, in 1917 the Winter Palace falls, the workers of Vienna, then the Spanish Anarchists and Communists fight fascism, armed with a newer, wider, more articulate plan for the liberation of the world. But the plan itself drowns in the blood of the Cheka's camps and torture chambers. A deeper darkness falls: it is 1941, and we are in Belorussia. The Nazis begin their planned extermination of the Jews: nobody, says Hitler, remembers the genocide of the Armenians a generation ago. Who will stop him now?²² (The Germans and their many enthusiastic Ukrainian, Latvian, and Lithuanian henchmen killed about a million Soviet Jews with ordinary bullets, a year before the first gas chambers went into operation.) In the village of Stankiewiczze there is a farming family. One of their twelve children, Tuvia, b. 1906, is a rebellious tough, a good rider, a trained soldier. He has a brother who is a little less heroic and charismatic. But the two Bielskis—the Sanasar and Baghdasar!— establish a stronghold in Nalibocka forest, robbing the Germans and their collaborators. Subservient to none, they rescue every Jew, young or old, who will join them, and run their partisan unit on the basis of labor democracy. The people who see Tuvia on his white horse, in his leather jacket, with his tommy gun in hand, acclaim him as a latter-day Judas Maccabeus. At the end of the war, the Bielskis have saved some 1500 people. Tuvia moves to New York, gets

²² I propose in my recent study “From Musa Dagh to the Warsaw Ghetto: Armenian and Jewish Armed Resistance to Genocide” (in publication, *Judaica Petropolitana*, St. Petersburg) that Hitler’s remark was intended ironically. In fact everybody remembered the Armenians, and Franz Werfel’s book about the Genocide was an international bestseller. The point was, rather, that nobody *cared*.

married, lives a simple life, and passes away in his old age.²³ The Nazis called the partisans bandits; the French collaborationist authorities, too, derided the Manouchian group— Jews and Republican Spaniards, led by an Armenian— of the Maquis as “L’Armée du Crime”.

Bandit epics matter because imagination empowers reality and the theme of these epics is, however ancient in its literary and mythological roots, also current events. Fighting for authentic freedom is possible, it is right, and it is necessary in most every generation. It has happened before, and, human affairs being what they are, it will happen again. We might as well be ready and retell the story, and enjoy it in the retelling.

²³ Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.