

# Common Dwelling Place of all the Gods

Commagene in its Local, Regional  
and Global Hellenistic Context

Edited by Michael Blömer, Stefan Riedel,  
Miguel John Versluys and Engelbert Winter

ORIENS ET OCCIDENS

Studien zu antiken Kulturkontakten und ihrem Nachleben | 34

Franz Steiner Verlag





# Oriens et Occidens

Studien zu antiken Kulturkontakten und ihrem Nachleben

Herausgegeben von

JOSEF WIESEHÖFER

in Zusammenarbeit mit

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und ROBERT ROLLINGER

Band 34

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Nemrud Dağ, view of the statues on the east terrace taken during the campaign of 1953  
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# Armenia and the ‘Orontid Connection’

## *Some Remarks on Strabo, Geography 11,14,15*

GIUSTO TRAINA

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The rulers of Hellenistic Armenia and Sophene are of utmost importance for the study of Hellenistic Commagene and Commagenian kingship. This is due to the immediate geographical proximity of the kingdoms as well as to the shared genealogic roots in the dynasty of the Orontids.<sup>1</sup> Armenia and Sophene thus make up an important part of the regional background against which the Commagenian developments must be considered. In terms of dynastic ideology, the Orontids are often presented as the genealogic link of the Commagenian kings to the Achaemenids; an interpretation that is based on the ancestral gallery of Antiochos I on Nemrud Dağ.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars consider this to be an invented tradition alone, as part of a strategy of legitimation of Antiochos I. Such a view, however, ignores the importance and possibilities the ‘Orontid connection’ possessed to legitimize Commagenian kingship on the regional level (and beyond). This debate is inevitably linked to the specific question of the royal status of the Armenian Orontids, which will be at the core of the following considerations.

The only piece of evidence for the founding of the independent kingdom of Greater Armenia is a passage of Strabo’s *Geography* (from Polybios?):

‘Ὁ μὲν δὴ παλαιὸς λόγος οὗτος, ὁ δὲ τούτου νεώτερος καὶ κατὰ Πέρσας εἰς τὸ ἐφεξῆς μέχρι εἰς ἡμᾶς ὡς ἐν κεφαλαίῳ πρέποι ἂν μέχρι τοσούτου λεχθεῖς, ὅτι κατείχον τὴν Ἀρμενίαν Πέρσαι καὶ Μακεδόνες, μετὰ ταῦτα οἱ τὴν Συρίαν ἔχοντες καὶ τὴν Μηδίαν (τελευταῖος δ’ ὑπήρξεν Ὀρόντης ἀπόγονος Ὑδάρνου τῶν ἐπτὰ Περσῶν ἐνός). εἶθ’ ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀντιόχου τοῦ μεγάλου στρατηγῶν τοῦ πρὸς Ῥωμαίους πολέμησαντος διηρέθη δίχα, Ἀρταξίου τε καὶ Ζαριάδριος, καὶ ἦρχον οὗτοι τοῦ βασιλέως ἐπιτρέψαντος. ἡττηθέντος δ’ ἐκείνου προσθέμενοι Ῥωμαῖοι καθ’ αὐτοὺς ἐτάττοντο βασιλεῖς προσαγορευθέντες. (Str. 11,14,15).

- 1 On these dynastic connections and their impact on the Commagenian kingdom see the contribution by Canepa in this volume.
- 2 Cf. the contribution by Strootman in this volume.

Accordingly, Armenia was previously ruled by the Persians, the Macedonians, and the Seleucids. Then it was split into two independent kingdoms<sup>3</sup>: Greater Armenia (Arm. *Mec Hayk'*) and Sophene (*Cop'k'*).<sup>4</sup> The kings of the new states were Artaxias (*Artašēs*) and Zariadris (*Zareh*), former στρατηγοί of Antiochos III<sup>5</sup>: of course, in this case, στρατηγός means 'governor' more than 'commander, general'.<sup>6</sup>

The independence of Armenia and Sophene was the result of the treaty of Apameia in 188 BCE. But what about Orontes, the last of the 'subordinate governors' who ruled Armenia and Sophene under the Seleucids? Strabo implies that the Orontids did not have royal status. Yet, as we will see, this contradicts the evidence from the inscriptions of Commagene and the Armenian tradition.

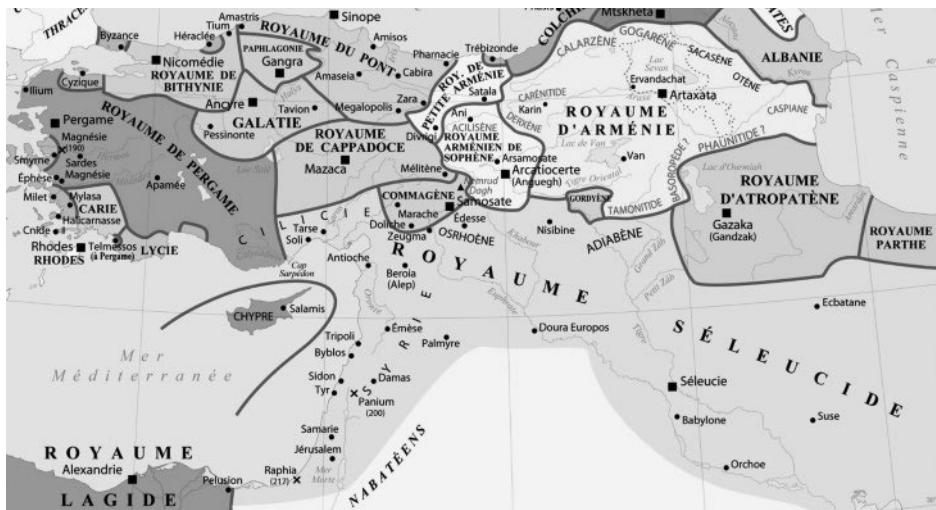


Fig. 1 Armenia after the treaty of Apameia in 188 BCE, from Mutafian – Van Lauwe 2001

Before considering the 'Orontid connection' to ancient Armenia, we need to review the evidence of Str. 11,14,15. All modern translators of Strabo interpreted this passage according to the traditional reconstruction of the events. Yet they – i.e., we – overlooked a textual problem: the syntactic non-sequitur in the expression τελευταῖος ὑπῆρξεν Ὀρόντης. Radt was aware of it. Still, he claimed to solve the problem by giving the verb ὑπάρχω the sense of 'to be a ὑπαρχος' (a lieutenant or a subordinate ruler),

3 Patterson 2001.

4 Toumanoff 1963; Garsoïan 1997; Traina 1999/2000; Traina 2017a; Traina 2017 b; Traina 2018a. Strabo somehow applies to Armenia the well-known model of the succession of the world-ruling empires: Muccioli 2018, 116–118.

5 See also Str. 11,14,5; Grainger 1997, 83. 122.

6 Unfortunately, all modern translators – alas, me too – opt for 'general': Jones 1928, 337; Lasserre 1975, 130; Traina, in Nicolai – Traina 2000, 191; Radt 2004, 397; Roller 2014, 511.

instead of its most common meaning 'to be',<sup>7</sup> and eventually translated τελευταῖος ὑπῆρξεν Ὀρόντης "der letzte Statthalter war Orontes".

Radt's solution is less than satisfactory. No occurrence of ὑπάρχω in Strabo's *Geography* may be translated 'to be a ὑπαρχος'.<sup>8</sup> To explain the inner contradiction in the text, we may not exclude a later gloss, as I suggested in a previous recent contribution.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting the unusual expression οἱ τὴν Συρίαν ἔχοντες καὶ τὴν Μηδίαν. This is an interesting definition of the Seleucid Empire around the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE: a twofold space that included 'Syria' (as Roman historiographers called the Seleucid Empire) and 'Media', that is Iran, namely the Upper Satrapies.

At any rate, this passage of Strabo clearly shows the contradictions of his sources. He was aware of the intermediary status of the Orontids, who *de facto* ruled Armenia, but did not retain royal status. If Radt's translation of τελευταῖος ὑπῆρξεν Ὀρόντης is right, we may argue that Strabo considers Orontes a sort of sub-ruler: in modern historical jargon, a 'dynast'. In short, the Orontids ruled Armenia as 'semi-independent dynasts'.<sup>10</sup> The text of the treaty signed in 179 BCE by several kings and princes of Asia minor mentions two Armenian rulers: Mithradates, a descendant of Zariadris, and Artaxias. Neither is called a king: the former was "satrap of Armenia", the latter "ruler (ἄρχων) of the most of Armenia".<sup>11</sup> So, just a few years after the granting of the royal title, they had been downgraded. Possibly, the Seleucids refused to recognize their legitimacy, one of the side effects of the treaty of Apameia; in short, the independent kingdom of Artaxēs was a creation of Roman diplomacy, but its status was not universally accepted. On the other hand, we know from Polybios that the rulers of Sophene in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE retained royal status.<sup>12</sup>

The earliest mention of an Orontid ruler/satrap of Armenia dates from ca. 370 BCE: in the *Anabasis*, Xenophon recalls his march in 401/400 BCE through "Armenia, the large and prosperous province of which Orontas was ruler".<sup>13</sup> With some imagination, the late Janos Harmatta proposed to identify Orontes in the figure depicted on the silver *rhyton* found in 1968 at the foothill of the citadel of Erebuni (fig. 2).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Strabo highlights the nobility of the Orontids: the last dynast was Ὀρόντης ἀπόγονος Ὑδάρονου

7 As in Cass. Dio 36,36,3. 71,34,3.

8 The only passage of the *Geography* where ὑπαρχος means 'subordinate governor' is 11,12,8, concerning Strabo's uncle Moaphernes, who Mithridates Eupator appointed governor and administrator of Media Atropatene.

9 Traina 2017a, 380.

10 Kuhrt – Sherwin-White 1993, 192; Kosmin 2014, 156. Capdetrey 2007, ch. 7, rightly makes the difference between "espace contrôlé" and "territoire administré".

11 Pol. 25,11–12.

12 Pol. 8,25 (Exc. Peir. P. 26).

13 Xen. An. 3,5,17; see Xen An. 4,3,4.

14 Harmatta 1979, 308–309; Facella 2006, 131–135. Treister 2015, 63–64, is more cautious. On the context of this find, discovered in an archaeological context outside the fortress of Erebuni, see Dan 2015, 16.



**Fig. 2** Erevan, Erebuni Museum, Silver *rhyton* dating from the Achaemenid period, ©Roberto Dan

τῶν ἐπὶ Περσῶν ἐνός “the descendant of Hydarnes”. Rüdiger Schmitt correctly defines their status under the Achaemenids and the Seleucids: Hydarnes “seems to have been rewarded by the Great King as quasi-hereditary satrap of Armenia, since his descendants apparently held this office until Hellenistic times, up to the Orontes, etc.”<sup>15</sup>

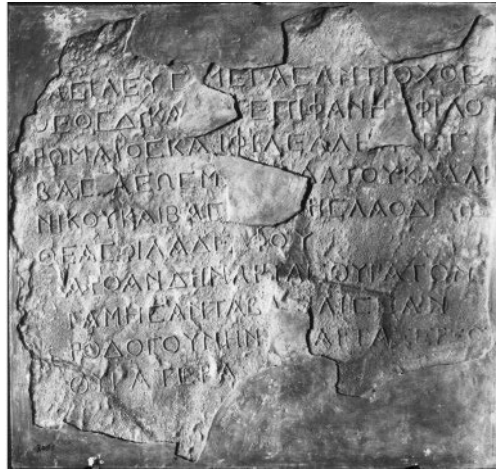
The first Orontid also appears in both versions of stele 6 from the western and the eastern terraces of Antiochos’ *hierothesion* at Nemrud Dağ (fig. 3).<sup>16</sup> In the list of the king’s ancestors, Orontes can be identified with Ἀροάνδης, the son of the ‘king’s eye’ Artasyras. Aroandes/Orontes had a key role within Antiochos’ genealogy, as he provided the Commagenian dynasty with an Achaemenid ancestor. It is hard to say whether this genealogic connection was correct, or rather it was a sort of ‘invention of tradition’. In any case, Antiochos’ ancestors were the dynasts of Armenia and Sophene.<sup>17</sup> Is this genealogy reliable, or was it manipulated by the king? Rolf Strootman argues that “Antiochos Epiphanes, himself the son of a Seleukid princess, likely wanted to use his inherited charisma to unite all Armenian lands, and in the process may have been one of several rulers who sought to create a new ‘world empire’ on the foundations of the former Seleucid state”.<sup>18</sup> *Se non è vero, è ben trovato*.

15 Schmitt 2004. Lerouge 2013, 113 claims that the Orontids too, as well as other hellenized kings, “affirment certes leurs racines perses, mais ils le font par le truchement de la culture grecque”.

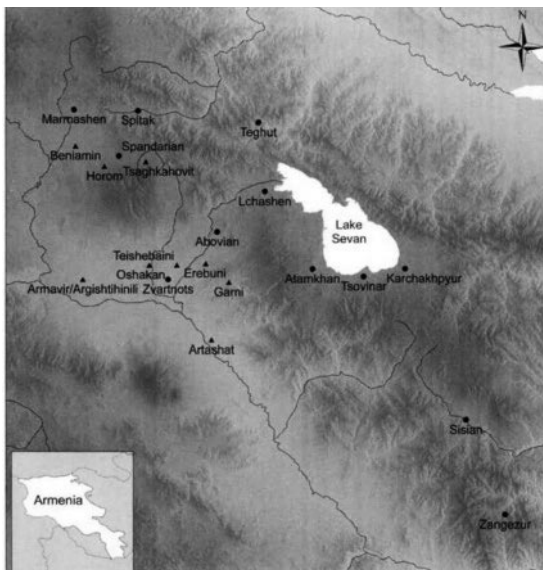
16 OGIS 391/392; IGLS 17 and 3; Facella 2009, 95–97 (see SEG 60, 1640).

17 An useful synthesis in Strootman 2016, 219–220, although his definition of ‘Armenia’, including both Greater Armenia and Sophene, is a bit questionable. As a matter of fact, we are informed of the genesis of the kingdoms of Armenia and Sophene, but there are still many blanks: for example, the rise of Lesser Armenia. See also Marciak 2017, 114–118.

18 Strootman 2016, 308.



**Fig. 3** Inscription on the back of stele 6 (depicting Aroandas [Orontes] on its front) from Nemrud Dağ, from Sanders 1996 2, 215 fig. 407



**Fig. 4** Distribution map of stelae of Artashes I, from Khatchadourian 2007

However, both the dynasties of Commagene and Greater Armenia claimed an Orontid heritage. This is shown by the Aramaic inscriptions engraved in the boundary stelae of Artashes, found in several sites in the Republic of Armenia, where the use of Aramaic language may be considered, as Lori Khatchadourian argues, “an overt alignment with



**Fig. 5** Erevan, History Museum. Stele of Artasēs I, from <http://campusnumeriquearmenien.org>

the Achaemenid past”<sup>19</sup> or, more simply, a rupture with the Seleucid power (figs. 4 and 5). In most inscriptions the king presents himself as the son of Zareh.<sup>20</sup> Still, all the same claims lineage to Orontes, maybe to strengthen his legitimation by a royal pedigree dating back to the Achaemenids.

Another piece of evidence for the royal status of the Orontids is one of the Greek inscriptions found in Armawir, a collection of texts of some importance for the citadel.<sup>21</sup> On the only surviving rock (the other was partly destroyed in WW2), a short inscription bears the greeting formula βασιλεύς Ἀρμαδοείρων / Μίθρας Ὀρόντη / βασιλεῖ χαίρειν “Mithras, king of Armawir, greets king Orontes”.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Khatchadourian 2007, 52.

<sup>20</sup> Marciak 2017, 117–118 only cites two stelae.

<sup>21</sup> This is a sort of equivalent of the epigraphic series engraved on the walls of sanctuaries or public buildings in Anatolia. For a state of the art, see Traina 2018a.

<sup>22</sup> In l.1, all the editors reported ὁ βασιλεύς, but of course this is wrong: the correct formula starts with βασιλεύς: the alleged *ho mikron* is just a dent in the rock. Moreover, in l.3 there is no need to read <Εὐ>ρόντη or <Εβ>ρόντη), as suggested by the former editors (and still followed by Marciak 2017, 119): the inscription has the classical form Ὀρόντης.



**Fig. 6** Ancient citadel near the village of Nor Armavir.  
Detail of the rock with Greek inscriptions, ©Giusto Traina

Usually, the epigraphical dossier of Armavir is dated from the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. to the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE; the Orontes greeted by Mithras in the top inscription is commonly identified with the last Orontid. Still, nothing says that all texts date from the same period. Although we ignore the content of Mithras' letter, the inscription highlights the relationship between a local ruler and a satrap/governor, both calling each other 'king'. In fact, we do not necessarily need to identify this Orontes with the last Orontid: he could be any Orontid. Possibly, the prominent position of the inscription in the rock hints at the most important document kept in the local archive.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, we could infer that Mithras' letter was sent to the founder of the Orontid dynasty. But let's not overdo it with the *ben trovato*.

A section of Movsēs Xorenac'i's *History of Armenia* transmits another account of the passage from the Orontids to the Artaxiads. As this is a very long text, I made a reader's digest:

"Once upon there lived a king who ruled the Eastern Armenian highlands: his name was Eruand. He was the son of 'a certain woman of the Arsacid family, fat of body, horribly ugly, and libidinous', who begot him and his brother Eruaz. Eruand was the overseer of

23 Traina 2018a.

king Sanatruk, who had been converted to Christianity by the apostle Thaddaeus. When Sanatruk died, Eruand became king of Armenia in the eighth year of the last Dareh (Darius). Suspecting of Sanatruk's sons, he slaughtered all of them but Artasēs, then a child. His wet nurse brought Artasēs to Persarmenia and also informed his foster-father Smbat, who lived in Western Armenia, in the province of Sper (present-day İspir), the homeland of the Bagratid family.

Smbat took the child with him and wandered for a long time in the highlands, helped by the local shepherds and herdsmen, until he managed to join Dareh. Eruand vainly tried to convince the Persian king to surrender him Artasēs; he eventually went after Smbat's supporters, who were looking after his daughters in Bayberd (Bayburt), not far from Sper. A tributary king of Rome, Eruand ingratiated himself with Vespasian and Titus by granting them Mesopotamia. He transferred his court from the site of Armawir to a new place, located at the junction of the rivers Arak's and Axurean, that he named Eruandašat. He also built a smaller city, called Bagaran 'the place of the Altars', where he transferred the idols from Armawir, appointing great priest his brother Eruaz. He also built and embellished another town called Eruandakert.

While young Artasēs was growing up, his foster-father Smbat fought valiantly against the enemies of the Persians. The king of kings agreed to bestow him a gift, and Smbat obtained Darius' help to put Artasēs on the Armenian throne. With the young Artasēs, Smbat marched with an army against the province of Utik', but Eruand fled to Eruandašat to gather the troops. The Armenian princes in Utik', who Eruand had left behind, were scared by the force led by Smbat and Artasēs; moreover, they realized that the Romans were not supporting Eruand, and they finally abandoned him, despite his generous, yet less than disinterested gifts.

Smbat and Artasēs marched through central Armenia until Eruand's camp. Artasēs convinced the noble Argam, a descendant of the Mede Aždahak (Astyages), to desert Eruand. Attacked by the valiant Armenian knights, the Iberians of king P'arsman fled away. Eruand's army was slaughtered. A squad of 'brave men' from the mountains of the Taurus attacked Artasēs, but Gisak, the son of his wet nurse, fought them and eventually died to save Artasēs' life. Subsequently, Artasēs arrived at Eruand's capital, where Smbat was waiting for him. After the first attack, the garrison of the fortress surrendered. A soldier struck Eruand with his saber, and he died after a reign of twenty years.

As Eruand had some Arsacid blood, Artasēs ordered to bury him in an honorable way, with funerary columns. Smbat entered the city and 'finding the crown of King Sanatruk, he placed it on Artasēs' head and made him king over all of Armenia in the twenty-ninth year of Dareh, king of Persia.' Then Smbat went after Eruand's brother, Eruaz, killed him and settled his slaves in a town behind mount Masis (present-day Ararat). He named the place with the same name Bagaran, then went to Persia bearing to Darius, by order of Artasēs, the treasures of the first Bagaran. But when Smbat was away, the Roman army arrived at



the Armenian border, imposing the payment of taxes. Then, Artašēs had to pay a double tribute”<sup>24</sup>

Xorenac’i claims that this epic history “is accurately told by Ołimp (Olympios), priest of (H)ani, composer of temple histories, as are also many other deeds that we have to relate and to which the books of the Persians and the epic songs of the Armenians bear witness”<sup>25</sup>. Xorenac’i also mentions a Greek source of the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE, Iulius Africanus, which seems to give the framework for a large part of his second book.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, as usual, Xorenac’i combines local oral traditions with Greek and Roman sources; the result is a chronological hodgepodge, spanning at least four centuries. He dates the accessions of Eruand and Artašēs to the Armenian throne, respectively, in the eighth and the twenty-ninth year of the reign of Dareios III: but the last Achaemenid king did not rule more than six years.<sup>27</sup> This does not match the timeline at all, as Xorenac’i dates the war between Eruand and Artašēs to the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE, as he mentions Vespasian, Titus, and P’arsman (*Pharasmanes*) king of Iberia.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Xorenac’i links the whole story to the Arsacid dynasty: Artašēs gave Eruand respect to his Arsacid blood. In fact, Xorenac’i’s chronological system presents two different Parthian (that is, Arsacid) kings named Artašēs: the first defeated the Lydian Croesus, the second Eruand. A similar confusion may be found in the *Primary History*, where Eruand is embedded in the genealogy of the Armenian Arsacids, and Artašēs is considered his brother.

Such documentary chaos justifies the harsh criticisms shared by several Armenian scholars, especially in the West. The late Robert Thomson, one of the most authoritative specialists and the author of a translation of Xorenac’i’s *History*, said:

“It is at once the most significant historical work in Classical Armenian literature and the most controversial [...] since there were no sources written in the Armenian language until the invention of the script circa A. D. 400, Moses has preserved much that was handed down by word of mouth; and indeed he quotes verbatim several short extracts from oral tales current in his own day. But Moses also claims to be writing an authoritative history in which much has been based on archival sources written in other languages that give information about Armenia. It was when this claim was to put to modern scholarly scrutiny

24 This account is an abridgement of Movsēs Xorenac’i 2,37–48.

25 Movsēs Xorenac’i 2, 48.

26 See Topchyan 2006; Gazzano 2016; Mari 2016.

27 Under Darius III, a dignitary called Orontes was one of the commanders of the Armenian contingent at the battle of Gaugamela in 331 BCE (Arr. Anab. 3,8): he was very likely a descendant of Orontes I. Maybe Xorenac’i is confused with another Dareh, a Parthian Arsacid king who reigned thirty years according to the so-called *Primary History*, a chronicle transmitted in the manuscript tradition of the seventh century historian Sebēos (see Traina 2018b).

28 Xorenac’i supports his chronology with the fact that Sanatruk, the ruler of Armenia before Eruand, was a Christian convert: see van Esbroeck 1988.

that some doubts began to emerge concerning the reliability – or even the existence – of some of these early written sources. And when known sources used by Moses were identified, the ways in which he used them for his own purposes led to suspicions concerning his untrustworthiness<sup>29</sup>.

So much for Xorenac‘i? The story of Eruand and Artašēs is indeed one of the most desperate cases in the *History of Armenia*: although Xorenac‘i gives compelling evidence for the memory of pre-Christian Armenia in late Antiquity, he is quite useless for any historical reconstruction. On the other hand, he provides evidence of a violent dynastic shift, that supports Str. 11,14,15. Despite Artašēs’ claim of Orontid legitimacy, as he shows in his boundary stelae, the Armenian epic traditions preferred to highlight a dynastic break from the Orontids to the Arsacids. In his simplified abridgment of the earliest history of Greater Armenia, Strabo shared this version, but with a significant difference: he did not attribute to the Orontids a royal title. Yet, as we have seen, the situation was more complicated, as shows the title of βασιλεύς in the inscription of Ar-mawir. However, the sentence *τελευταῖος δ’ ὑπῆρξεν Ὀρόντης ἀπόγονος Ὑδάρνου τῶν ἑπτὰ Περσῶν ἐνός* seems awkward and does not explain the relations between the last Orontes and Artaxias and Zariadris (and, of course, we cannot exclude a gloss). Future studies on ancient Commagene should not overlook the importance of Orontid kingship in the Armenian tradition, keeping in mind the connected historical and philological problems.

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