

ROBERT THOMSON

Robert William Thomson

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Summary. Professor Robert Thomson was an exceptionally gifted linguist and philologist who traced the complex relationships between late Antique and medieval compositions in Greek, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian and Arabic. Known primarily for his prolific publication of annotated translations and detailed assessments of Armenian historical, homiletic and exegetical works, Robert Thomson transformed perceptions of medieval Armenian literary culture, showing how Armenian scholars participated in, and were separated from, the surrounding milieux. His precise translations, of both familiar and unheralded material, coupled with his rigorous analysis, will form the basis of future research into medieval Armenia and beyond for generations.

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Robert W. Thomson.

The field of medieval Armenian studies has been transformed in the last sixty years. Both within and beyond the Republic of Armenia, there has been an upswing in the study of the premodern Armenian past, as its complexity, variety and resilience have come into focus. At the same time, scholars have come to appreciate the significance of medieval Armenian literature for studying regional and global developments. Seemingly isolated by language and location, medieval Armenian compositions are now recognised as witnesses to contemporary circumstances and cross-cultural encounters. They were generated in multilingual and multi-confessional contexts and retain the imprint of multiple intellectual and linguistic exchanges. Consequently, they have the potential to contribute to a wide spectrum of disciplines. Although he would have been reluctant to acknowledge it, Robert Thomson (henceforward Robert) was one of the principal architects behind this transformation. For it is primarily through his meticulous research and prolific publication record that so many medieval Armenian compositions – historical, theological, philosophical, cosmographical – have been translated for future generations to discover and assess. While the individual works will always be open to fresh interpretation, his precise translations, always accompanied by sustained literary analysis, will remain at the heart of the study of medieval Armenia and the premodern Middle East for generations to come. Yet as this memoir attests, Robert’s scholarly legacy is not confined to Armenian studies, just as his own linguistic range was not confined to Armenian.

Childhood and education

Robert William Thomson was born in London in 1934, the eldest of three brothers. At the outbreak of war in 1939, the family moved to Bournemouth and then to Edinburgh, as his father’s civil service appointments dictated. There he was educated at George Watson’s College. All three brothers were linguistically talented. His older brother was the noted Slavic scholar, Francis Thomson, whilst his younger brother, Peter Thomson, the noted scholar of drama and performance, was seconded within weeks of starting his national service and sent to learn Russian. Robert Thomson was admitted to read Classics at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, from where he graduated in 1955. He was taught by Robert Casey, then Dean of the College and his future supervisor. Robert’s talents clearly impressed Casey since they co-authored a paper published in *Journal of Theological Studies* in 1955.¹ The article offered two newly edited versions of an apocryphal Greek text, without translation, and two versions of the same text preserved in a transitional form of Church Slavonic/Russian, in English translation but without edition.

¹R.P. Casey & R.W. Thomson, ‘A Dialogue between Christ and the Devil’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 6:1 (1955), 49–65.

A short comparative analysis of the four texts completed the study. The division of responsibility between the two authors is not defined but since Casey was later recalled as being ‘expert in the Christian literatures in Syriac, Armenian and Church Slavonic’, he was presumably responsible for the translations.² At no point is it revealed that Robert was still an undergraduate, nor that he was just 20 years old when the article was written. This scholarly pattern, of edition, translation and textual analysis characterised his scholarly career. He published his final edition, of Nerses of Lambron’s *Commentary on the Dormition of Saint John*, in 2017 and was working to complete an annotated translation of Vardan Arewelts’i’s vast *Commentary on the Psalms* shortly before his death in 2018, over sixty years after his first published work.³

This first publication is also significant for another reason. In 1953, Henry Chadwick became co-editor of *Journal of Theological Studies*. It was therefore under his editorship that Thomson’s first contribution to scholarship was published. When Casey died in 1959, it was Chadwick who took over as supervisor of Robert’s doctoral research and saw it to completion two years later.⁴ Robert published more frequently in *JTS* (seven articles) than in any other academic periodical, the last of which appeared in 1983, two years before Chadwick stepped down as editor.⁵ It is tempting to interpret this frequency of publication, especially in the first fifteen years of his academic career, in the context of the relationship between pupil and supervisor.

After graduation but before embarking on doctoral research, Robert spent a year at the Halki Theological School, a Greek educational institution and seminary in Istanbul.⁶ In addition to climbing onto the roof of Hagia Sophia via the passageway underneath the dome – an experience he later described as ‘terrifying’ – he also took the opportunity to travel in eastern Turkey. This marks the beginning of his longstanding association with the regions and districts of historic Armenia.

On returning to Cambridge in 1956, Robert began his doctoral research under Casey at Sidney Sussex on Syriac versions of works associated with the 4th-century theologian Athanasius of Alexandria. Although Casey had written a number of articles on the Greek,

²J.N. Birdsall & R.W. Thomson (eds), *Biblical and Patristic Studies in Memory of Robert Pierce Casey* (Freiburg and New York: Herder, 1963), p. 274.

³R.W. Thomson, *Nersēs of Lambron: Commentary on the Dormition of Saint John* (Armenian Texts and Studies 1; Leiden: Brill, 2017). For a complete bibliography of Robert’s publications, see T. Greenwood, ‘Publications of Robert William Thomson’, *Supplement to Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 77 (2023), 1*–7*, at https://archive.org/details/DOP77_suppl_Greenwood

⁴R.W. Thomson, ‘Inedita Athanasiana’, PhD thesis (Cambridge, 1962), p. iii.

⁵R.W. Thomson, ‘Gregory of Narek’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*’, *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 34:2 (1983), 453–96. It follows an article by Henry Chadwick.

⁶Oral History Interview by Anna Bonnell-Freidin with Robert W. Thomson, 1 August 2009, at <https://www.doaks.org/to-archive/dumbarton-oaks-archives/historical-records/oral-history-project/robert-w-thomson>

Syriac and Armenian versions of several of these texts,⁷ his research was compromised when the notes and resources he had assembled during fifteen years of work in different European archives were lost in the sinking of the *SS Athenia* in September 1939.⁸ He returned to this field sparingly thereafter and Robert later described it as ‘a blow from which his work never fully recovered’.⁹ Robert received instruction from Casey in Syriac but not Classical Armenian. For it was only when travelling to Turkey in 1957 that he broke his journey in Vienna and began to study *grabar* with Father Nerses Akinean in the Mekhitarist (Armenian Catholic) monastery in Vienna. Robert acknowledged that it was Casey who afforded the introduction;¹⁰ Casey had co-authored an article with Akinean in 1931 and other publications had drawn on the manuscript resources of the Mekhitarist collection made available to him by Akinean.¹¹ On his return from Turkey, Robert continued to develop his knowledge of Armenian under the guidance of Charles Dowsett, recently appointed to a lectureship in Armenian at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. This tuition enabled him to expand his doctoral research to cover Armenian as well as Syriac materials. Robert’s enthusiasm and aptitude for languages is also revealed through his study of Arabic during this period under Charles Bosworth, also recently appointed to a lectureship, but in Arabic and at the University of St Andrews. Parallel instruction might seem improbable given the distances between Cambridge, London and St Andrews, but by this date Robert’s father had left the civil service and been appointed as minister of a church in St Andrews, moving his family to St Andrews from Edinburgh.

Casey died in April 1959 after a long illness and Chadwick succeeded him as Robert’s supervisor. The impact of this transition is hard to assess. At some point during his doctoral research, Robert transferred from Sidney Sussex to Trinity College, Cambridge, since this is indicated on the title page of his thesis.¹² He was also a Stanton Student in Divinity, the wording used at the time to describe the recipient of a bursary under the Vincent Henry Stanton Fund. As Stanton had been a Fellow of Trinity, Robert’s transfer may be connected to this award. Supervisory arrangements were disrupted almost immediately by Chadwick’s appointment as Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford. In September 1959, both Robert and Chadwick attended the Third International Patristics Conference, held at Christ Church, Oxford. Indeed, they both had their papers published

⁷ Birdsall & Thomson, *Biblical and Patristic Studies*, pp. 265–9, supplies a full bibliography.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9

⁹ R.W. Thomson, *Vardan Arewelc’i. Commentary on the Psalms* (Armenian Texts and Studies; Leiden: Brill, forthcoming), p. 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ R.P. Casey & N. Akinean, ‘Two Armenian Creeds’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 24:2 (1931), 143–51.

¹² Thomson, ‘Inedita Athanasiana’, title page.

in the proceedings; at the time Robert was still a graduate student.¹³ This would have been an opportunity for them to meet. Forty years later, Robert served as Chair of the Directors of the Thirteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies, convened in Oxford in August 1999, attesting his long association with this academic gathering.

The final stages of Robert's dissertation were completed at a distance. For the year 1960/61, Thomson was appointed as a junior fellow at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington DC, affording him the time, tranquillity and resources to complete his thesis. As he later recalled, it was a pivotal moment in his academic career in two respects. In the course of his fellowship, he met Sirarpie Der Nersessian, the first professor of Byzantine art and archaeology at Harvard and a prominent Armenian art historian, who encouraged him to explore Armenian research interests; he later credited her with being the most influential person on his career. Towards the end of his stay, and with the encouragement of Der Nersessian, Robert travelled to Harvard where he met several friends and colleagues of his former supervisor as well as the chair of the Near Eastern Languages Department. At the time, efforts were being made to create a position in Armenian studies within the university, with local community support. In the course of their meeting, the chair suggested that Robert should complete a year of study with Gérard Garitte at Louvain, after which he would be appointed to a three-year instructorship at Harvard in Armenian. Before he had defended his thesis, therefore, Robert had secured his first academic position.

In 1961, Robert moved to Louvain. There he obtained a licence in three Christian Oriental languages: Armenian, Arabic and Georgian. He had intended to offer Syriac but René Draguet, the Syriac instructor, had previously been told by Casey of Robert's abilities in Syriac and insisted that he study Georgian instead.¹⁴ As a result, he acquired another language of significance for his subsequent research. It is clear, however, that Draguet's refusal to teach Robert did not impede their scholarly discussions or academic friendship. Draguet was the editor of *Scriptores Syri* and *Subsidia* in the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* series, as well as serving as the general editor. In 1965 Robert published the first of four paired volumes – editions and translations are by convention published in separate but sequential volumes – collectively titled *Athanasiana*

¹³R.W. Thomson, 'A Syriac Corpus of Athanasiana', in F.L. Cross (ed.), *Studia Patristica III. Papers presented to the Third International Conference on Patristic Studies held at Chrich Church, Oxford, 1959* (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur Band 78; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961), pp. 142–5; H. Chadwick, 'Justification by Faith and Hospitality', in F.L. Cross (ed.), *Studia Patristica IV. Papers presented to the Third International Conference on Patristic Studies held at Chrich Church, Oxford, 1959* (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, Band 79; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961), pp. 281–5.

¹⁴Oral History Interview with Robert W. Thomson (1 August 2009); accessible at <https://www.doaks.org/to-archive/dumbarton-oaks-archives/historical-records/oral-history-project/robert-w-thomson> [Consulted 29 August 2025].

Syriaca, and observed in the Preface to the edition that it was Draguet who had suggested their publication and thanked him for his encouragement, helpful criticism and kindness.¹⁵ In his introduction to a later publication in the same series, Robert reflected that it was twenty-five years since he had been a student at Louvain and Draguet had first asked him to contribute to the series: ‘For his advice over many years, I remain greatly indebted’.¹⁶ Twenty-five years later saw his final contribution to the *CSCO* canon, marking a full fifty years since his first.¹⁷ The other member of Garitte’s Armenian and Georgian classes that year was the prominent Bollandist scholar Michel van Esbroeck, and their mutual interest in and research on the nexus of traditions attributed to the Armenian author known as Agathangelos attests the profound impact of Garitte’s instruction and inspiration.¹⁸

Late in 1961, Robert submitted his doctoral thesis. Entitled ‘Inedita Athanasiana’, it was examined by John Emerton, then a lecturer in Divinity, and Geoffrey Lampe, Ely Professor of Divinity. According to the Minutes of the Board of Research Studies dated 6 February 1962 which approved the recommendation of Robert’s examiners that the degree of PhD should be conferred upon him, a third examiner had been appointed to comment on his Armenian research but this person was not present at the oral examination and their identity remains unknown.¹⁹ Although the thesis was never published, the research underpinning it formed the basis of the four pairs of volumes which appeared in the *CSCO* series under the title *Athanasiana Syriaca* between 1965 and 1977. Therefore, despite his prominence in Armenian studies, Robert’s first major publications were devoted to the edition and translation of Syriac texts attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria.

Harvard and Dumbarton Oaks

Following the completion of his studies in Louvain, the award of his PhD and his marriage to Judith, in 1963 Robert moved to Harvard, initially as an instructor in

¹⁵R.W. Thomson, *Athanasiana Syriaca Part I* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 257, Scriptorum Syri 114; Louvain: Peeters, 1965), p. i.

¹⁶R.W. Thomson, *The Armenian Version of the Works attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 488, Scriptorum Armeniaci 17; Louvain: Peeters, 1987), p. xv.

¹⁷R.W. Thomson, *Saint Basil of Caesarea and Armenian Cosmology* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 646, Subsidia 130; Louvain: Peeters, 2012).

¹⁸On meeting Robert in Oxford in late November 2003, he apologised to me for his melancholy and explained that he had just learned that his fellow student at Louvain under Garitte, Michel van Esbroeck, had died unexpectedly. To my knowledge, this is the only evidence they had studied together.

¹⁹Minutes of the Board of Research Studies 1961–62, University of Cambridge (UA/BOGS 5/1/22).

Armenian, and from 1969 as Mashtots Professor of Armenian Studies.²⁰ The chair was established through the efforts of the Boston branch of the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research, and at the initiative of Richard Frye, then professor of Iranian Studies at Harvard. Once sufficient funds had been raised, Robert was appointed as its first holder. By the time of his return to the United States, he had already published his first article on a specifically Armenian topic, and the profile of his publications during the 1960s reveals a growing focus on Armenian studies while at the same time fulfilling his commitment to publish the Syriac texts associated with Athanasius.²¹ By 1964 Robert was already working on the *Teaching of Saint Gregory*, a long Armenian catechism integrated into the *History* of Agathangelos.²² His translation of the *Teaching* was published in 1970 in the Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies series.²³ This pattern, publishing one or more articles on some aspect of a specific composition before the appearance of a full translation and commentary, was repeated many times during his career. It indicates when Thomson started to study individual compositions, and illustrates his ability to work on several major projects at the same time. The decision to study the *Teaching*, with its dogmatic and exegetical dimensions, complemented his existing knowledge of patristics, even if works associated with Athanasius did not contribute directly to the *Teaching*. It was therefore a natural progression from studying and translating one section of the *History* of Agathangelos to supplying a translation of the whole, and this appeared in 1976.²⁴ As for his selection of this text, Robert records in his Preface to the *Teaching* that Garitte had first suggested the idea of a translation over five years before – so in or before 1962 – and that Chadwick had encouraged him to annotate the translation.²⁵ But it is also significant that one of Casey's two entries for the third edition of *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (1957) was titled 'Agathangelos'.²⁶ This suggests that the work may have been on Robert's intellectual horizon long before his sojourn in Louvain.

²⁰ All of his major publications are dedicated to Judith, with two exceptions. His single Greek edition – *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* (Oxford Early Christian Texts; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) – was dedicated in 1968 'to my father and mother in recognition of their long-standing support and encouragement'. His translation of the *History* of Thomas Artsruni (Detroit MI: Wayne State, 1985) was dedicated to his sons, Jasper and Crispin.

²¹ R.W. Thomson, 'Vardapet in the Early Armenian Church', *Le Muséon*, 75 (1962), 367–84.

²² R.W. Thomson, 'Some Philosophical Terms in the *Teaching of Gregory*', *Revue des études arméniennes*, 1 (1964), 41–6.

²³ R.W. Thomson, *The Teaching of Saint Gregory: An Early Armenian Catechism* (Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies 3; Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

²⁴ R.W. Thomson, *Agathangelos: History of the Armenians* (Albany: New York State University Press, 1976).

²⁵ Thomson, *Teaching*, Preface. This is dated 1968.

²⁶ R.P. Casey, 'Agathangelos', in Kurt Gallig (ed.), *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3rd edn (Tübingen: Paul Siebeck, 1957), I, p. 170.

The volumes collectively titled *Athanasiana Syriaca* merit careful attention for several reasons. Not only did they constitute Robert's first major scholarly intervention; they also established his methodological approach at the start of his career. From the outset, Robert intended to publish four pairs of volumes, comprising an edition of the text(s) and then an English translation.²⁷ He was aware of plans to revive the publication of editions of the Greek texts attributed to Athanasius, and had consulted Tayets'i's published collection of Athanasian works in Armenian; works in Syriac, however, had not been published systematically.²⁸ Robert therefore resolved to do so, presenting the texts as faithfully as possible, and publishing separate versions of the same text rather than attempting to force them together. Robert also elected not to correct the Syriac by aligning it to the Greek text or any other version, preferring to reproduce the text as presented in the manuscript, even at the expense of meaning; some passages he acknowledged were so literal as to be incomprehensible in Syriac.²⁹ This choice foregrounded linguistic variation across the Syriac versions as well as preserving the revisions with which they were transmitted. Robert adhered to this principle consistently across all four volumes and did not offer any comparative assessment or analysis. Usefully, the volumes presenting the editions all conclude with two indexes. The first identifies direct Biblical quotations in accordance with the Peshitta, indicating when these are in verbal agreement; and the second lists Greek words in Syriac script, invariably of a theological or technical nature, preserved in the texts. The volumes containing the translations also contain two indexes, one identifying direct biblical quotations according to the Septuagint, and the second comprising a list of place names and proper names. Indexes of Biblical quotations appeared in all his major publications, including the historical translations, while the interest in technical and theological terminology established across the *Athanasiana Syriaca* series resurfaced in his later research into Armenian homiletic and exegetical works.

There were also aspects of these texts that Robert chose not to comment upon. Issues of authorship, date and context of production, as well as the later reception of the work, were largely ignored. There is little sense of how these various compositions might have been read or understood by contemporaries, nor how they circulated, nor how they informed subsequent scholarship. Colophons within the manuscripts were translated, but Robert did not reflect further on the identities of those involved in the commission or creation of the manuscripts, nor the intellectual culture of the monasteries involved.³⁰

²⁷ Thomson, *Athanasiana Syriaca Part I* (CSCO 257, *Scriptores Syri* 114), p. i.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ R.W. Thomson, *Athanasiana Syriaca, Part III* (CSCO 325, *Scriptores Syri* 143; Louvain: Peeters, 1972), Preface.

³⁰ See for example R.W. Thomson, *Athanasiana Syriaca, Part II* (CSCO 272, *Scriptores Syri* 118; Louvain: Peeters, 1968), pp. iv-vi.

The only exception is the brief reference in the first volume to ‘tendentious alterations’ in the Syriac translation of the *De Incarnatione*.³¹ This line of thought was developed further in the same year when Thomson published an article titled ‘The Transformation of Athanasius in Armenian Theology (A Tendentious Version of the *Epistula ad Epictetum*)’, in the course of which he demonstrated that the version in question was an adaptation of the Greek rather than a strict translation, and that additional material of a theological nature which diverged from the Greek should be attributed to the Armenian translator.³² In the Preface to his final translation, of Vardan Arewelc’i’s *Commentary on the Psalms*, as yet unpublished, Robert highlighted this article as marking the turning point in his research and future career:

An article entitled “The Transformation of Athanasius” dealt with one particular short work and the adaptations it underwent in Armenian. The use of early translations of texts to help reconstruct the originals, when the surviving evidence in that language was so much later, was of course a well-established tradition in patristic studies, but I came to the conclusion that the converse would be even more interesting. That is, how did the translators and their contemporaries utilize the translations, whether doctored or not. What impact did these foreign works have on the development of the native traditions and on the formation of literary cultures outside their original setting?³³

For Robert, therefore, any departure from a statement of dogma or confession amounted to a tendentious alteration, in the sense that the precise wording had been intentionally changed to support a particular theological position. As his own research demonstrated, this tendency could be found in both Syriac and Armenian texts attributed to Athanasius. Robert would later stress that ‘there was nothing peculiarly Armenian about such distortions.’³⁴ It was, however, when the same terminology was applied to historical rather than theological compositions that Robert’s research became contentious.

In the Foreword to his translation of the *History* of Agathangelos, published in 1976, Robert described his research as being ‘devoted to a critical analysis of Agathangelos’ sources and to an evaluation of his tendentious purposes’.³⁵ He also maintained that the ‘*History* of Agathangelos does not offer us an eyewitness account of the conversion of king Trdat but is rather a tendentious compilation which has expanded and elaborated

³¹ Thomson, *Athanasiana Syriaca Part I* (CSCO 257, Scriptorum Syri 114), p. v.

³² R. W. Thomson, ‘The Transformation of Athanasius in Armenian Theology (A Tendentious Version of the *Epistula ad Epictetum*)’, *Le Muséon*, 78 (1965), 47–69.

³³ Thomson, *Vardan Arewelc’i*, p. 4.

³⁴ R. W. Thomson, ‘The Formation of Armenian Literary Tradition’, in N. G. Garsoïan, T. F. Mathews & R. W. Thomson (eds), *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the formative period* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), pp. 135–50 at 135.

³⁵ Thomson, *Agathangelos*, p. xvii.

earlier traditions'.³⁶ These statements did not attract comment. When Robert used similar phrases two years later in his translation and commentary of the *History* of Moses Khorenats'i – the most prominent Armenian historical composition and already the focus of a longstanding academic controversy – the reaction among some scholars was outrage.³⁷ Whereas for Robert, tendentious described intentional change without moral judgement, for others, tendentious had negative connotations and implied that some form of deceit had been practised which undermined the historical truth of the work. One can only speculate whether his study would have attracted such opprobrium if he had described the historical approach employed by Moses in terms of adaptation, reshaping or reimagination rather than tendentiousness. Since, however, Robert also intervened in the longstanding controversy over the date of composition of the *History* of Moses Khorenats'i and accepted the minority view that, despite the claims of its author, it was composed long after the 5th century – Robert himself leaned towards a later 8th century date of composition – it is possible that his study would have been criticised in any event.³⁸ Arguably it was the combination of the two – the language used to describe Moses' working practices and the preference for a later date – that ignited the criticism.

It is worth remembering that Robert's first three book-length Armenian publications were produced while he was still completing *Athanasiana Syriaca*. This explains the overlap in terms of approach and language. His long Introduction to Moses Khorenats'i's *History* identified underlying sources in Greek, Armenian and Syriac and examined how passages had been adapted. Unlike the preparatory studies which preceded publication of the *Teaching* or *History* of Agathangelos, Robert did not publish any of his research on Moses' *History* in advance. He does not reveal why he decided to work on this text at this time, beyond noting that such an influential work had never been translated into English and there had been no translation of the critical edition, published in 1913, into any Western language.³⁹ It may, however, have been connected to his language teaching at Harvard. In 1975, Robert's renowned *Introduction to Classical Armenian* was published.⁴⁰ A practical textbook rather than a comprehensive grammar, Robert's primer has introduced an untold number of students to the mysteries and the delights of *grabar*. Divided into seventeen lessons, plus introductory and concluding sections on vocalic alternation and consonantal clusters – how does one pronounce an Armenian word containing six consecutive consonants? – it represents the fruit of years of teaching Classical

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. lxxix.

³⁷ R.W. Thomson, *Moses Khorenats'i: History of the Armenians* (Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies 4; Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 45, 'Moses tendentiousness is patent'; and p. 57 'he wilfully distorts his sources and invents episodes.'

³⁸ Thomson, *Moses Khorenats'i*, pp. 6–8 and 57–60.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Preface.

⁴⁰ R.W. Thomson, *Introduction to Classical Armenian* (Delmar NY: Caravan Books, 1975).

Armenian. Not only were passages from Khorenats'i's *History* included for translation; individual phrases from that work were used to illustrate specific constructions or points of grammar.⁴¹ Evidently Robert was already working on this composition several years before his translation appeared. A second revised edition of his *Introduction* was published in 1989 and reprinted several times thereafter. Copyright issues prevented him from preparing another revised edition which would have allowed him to correct minor typographical errors and adjust the compressed layout. Robert also published a *Textbook of Modern Western Armenian* with Kevork Bardakjian two years later.⁴² These two publications reflected the linguistic dimensions of his university appointments and the interests of the Armenian community associations which had endowed them. Using passages from Moses Khorenats'i, the 'father of Armenian history', to teach *grabar* was both practical and politic.

The three book-length translations from this decade are connected in another way. They are the only works that Robert revised and republished later in his career. Intriguingly they obtained different treatments. The revised edition of the *Teaching of Saint Gregory* was published as the first volume in a new monograph series in 2001, the year in which the seventeenth centenary of the Christianisation of Armenia by St Gregory was celebrated.⁴³ The translation was reworked, its annotations were revised and the Introduction expanded and partially rewritten. Still, the revisions are modest, showing that Robert approved of much of what he had said thirty years before. The revised edition of his translation of the *History* of Moses Khorenats'i appeared in 2006.⁴⁴ Robert revised his translation and made significant additions to his annotations. He did not, however, revise his original Introduction, which traced how Moses had used and adapted a spectrum of Greek and Armenian works, beyond updating select footnotes. Instead, he supplied a new Preface which reflected on the most relevant publications since 1978 and, noting the past criticism, offered a brief defence of his position.⁴⁵ Robert maintained that his intentions had been to challenge those who regarded Armenian histories as 'depositories of information to be mined at random' and to 'clear the air for a better appreciation of Moses as the creator of an Armenian ethos'.⁴⁶ If so, these intentions were implicit; the first edition does not articulate them. The decision to reprint the original Introduction with minimal alteration again indicates that Robert remained comfortable with his earlier

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 100, 151–3

⁴² K.B. Bardakjian & R.W. Thomson, *A Textbook of Modern Western Armenian* (Delmar NY: Caravan Books, 1977).

⁴³ R.W. Thomson, *The Teaching of St Gregory*, rev. edn (AVANT: Treasures of the Armenian Christian Tradition 1; New Rochelle NY: St Nersess Armenian Seminary, 2001).

⁴⁴ R.W. Thomson, *Moses Khorenats'i: History of the Armenians*, rev. edn (Ann Arbor MI: Caravan Books, 2006).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. ix–xvii.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

findings.

Conversely, the revised edition of his *History* of Agathangelos shows substantial alteration. The original publication had comprised three parts: Foreword, Introduction and then Text and Translation. The Foreword set out the broad historical and literary context.⁴⁷ The Introduction began by disentangling the different versions of the work preserved in a wide number of languages, including Greek, Syriac, Arabic, Georgian; then paraphrased the Armenian text in sixteen sections, identifying equivalent passages in the other versions and highlighting some parallels and differences; and finally reflected on the creation of the work, comparing it with other works of Armenian literature and picking out certain Biblical themes.⁴⁸ The third and longest part supplied the Armenian text with facing English translation, without critical apparatus but accompanied by endnotes.⁴⁹ This first edition therefore displayed deep erudition but was not easy to use. Studying any passage required the reader to check the Introduction for parallel passages and attendant endnotes. Moreover, although the comparative analysis in the Introduction identified relevant sections across the different versions, their content was summarised, leaving the degree of proximity or distance between them opaque. With his mastery of the relevant languages, Robert was one of a handful of scholars able to generate these findings at this time, but their value to others was limited. This research was developed further in the revised edition, published in 2010.⁵⁰ Bearing a new title, this addressed the challenges noted above. With the publication of first a facsimile copy of the critical edition of the text and then a fully revised edition available online, there was no need to include the facing Armenian text.⁵¹ The English translation was annotated using footnotes and comments. Most importantly, and impressively, the equivalent passages from versions in Greek, Syriac and Arabic were translated in full by Robert and intercalated with the English translation of the Armenian, allowing the reader to make their own comparative assessment.⁵² The Introduction retains a summary of the Armenian text and highlights major points of difference, but this is much reduced from the first edition.⁵³ Its longest section traces in systematic fashion how the figure of Saint Gregory and the traditions associated with him were represented in subsequent works of Armenian

⁴⁷ Thomson, *Agathangelos*, pp. vii–xviii.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. xxi–xxiii; xiv–lxxiv; and lxxv–xcvii.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1–435.

⁵⁰ R.W. Thomson, *The Lives of Saint Gregory: The Armenian, Greek, Arabic, and Syriac Versions of the History Attributed to Agathangelos* (Ann Arbor MI: Caravan Books, 2010).

⁵¹ *Agat'angeghos, Patmut'iw'n Hayots'*, facs. reproduction with introduction by R.W. Thomson (Delmar NY: Caravan Books, 1980); *Agat'angelos Patmut'iw'n Hayots'*, ed. G. Tēr-Mkrťē'ean & S. Kayaneants', in *Matenagirk' Hayots'* vol. 2 (Ant'iliias: Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, 2003), pp. 1289–735.

⁵² Thomson, *Lives of Saint Gregory*, pp. 111–498

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–24.

literature.⁵⁴ Its conclusion supplies a precise summary of the state of research into the Armenian text and its different versions, together with a set of acute reflections on the date, authorship and purposes of the composition and its role in shaping Armenian self-consciousness – matters that Robert had avoided in his *Athanasiana Syriaca* series.⁵⁵ The clarity of expression and thought in this section belies the complexity of the issues being addressed and the depth and range of Robert's knowledge acquired across five decades of active research.⁵⁶

In 1979, Robert was appointed to a senior Fellowship at Dumbarton Oaks, renewing his connection with the institution. With Nina Garsoïan and Tom Mathews, Robert convened the Spring Symposium for 1980 under the title 'East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period'. The symposium brought together an exceptional group of scholars and its proceedings, published under the same title in 1982, are recognised as groundbreaking, demonstrating what could be achieved through carefully planned gatherings that fostered cross-cultural and interdisciplinary exchanges.⁵⁷ Robert's own contribution attests his recent research into the works of Athanasius and the *Histories* of Agathangelos and Moses Khorenats'i.⁵⁸ But there is also a comparative analysis focused on two other Armenian historical compositions, assembled by Łazar P'arpets'i and Elishē, as well as observations on Basil of Caesarea's *Hexaemeron*, which existed in both Syriac and Armenian versions, and the *Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy* attributed to David the Invincible Philosopher. All these works were subsequently translated by Robert.

The first of these, Elishē's *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, was published in the same year as the proceedings of the symposium.⁵⁹ Subsequently Robert revealed that his original plan, first devised in the mid-1970s, had been to publish a comparative study of the *Histories* by Elishē and Łazar; both record an episode of heroic but doomed Armenian resistance to Sasanian Iran in 450/1 CE but they do so in different ways.⁶⁰ While preparing his initial translation in 1976, Robert was informed by Haig Berbērian that a graduate student in Paris was preparing a thesis on Łazar's *History*. As a result, he decided to stop work until the thesis had been completed. The paper delivered by Robert to the Symposium in 1980 clearly drew upon research conducted for, or inspired by, the

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 24–87.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 87–108.

⁵⁶ There is no reference to tendentious, distortion or falsification in this volume.

⁵⁷ N.G. Garsoïan, T. J. Mathews & R.W. Thomson (eds), *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982).

⁵⁸ Thomson, 'Formation of Armenian Tradition'.

⁵⁹ R.W. Thomson, *Elishē: History of Vardan and the Armenian War* (Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies 5; Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁶⁰ R.W. Thomson, *Łazar P'arpets'i: History of Armenia* (Occasional Papers and Proceedings 4; Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1991), p. vii.

original plan. His study of Elishē's *History* also retains clear traces of the proposed comparative study. The opening pages of the Introduction situate the two accounts in comparative perspective before moving away to consider the themes, sources and motivations pertaining to Elishē's *History* and its prominent role in later Armenian literary production.⁶¹ Robert also provided an unannotated translation of the complete second section of Lazar's *History*, the section which overlaps most closely with Elishē's *History*, as a long appendix.⁶² It seems that Robert's ambition to publish related texts together – realised in his first publication with Casey and across the *Athanasiana Syriaca* volumes, but compromised in the first edition of the *History* of Agathangelos – still burned strong. In the event, he returned to his old draft of Lazar's *History* in 1988 and brought his research to publication in 1991.

Although thwarted in his attempts to produce a comparative study, it can be argued that separate publication served the interests of both compositions. For while such a comparative work cohered with Robert's interests in the development of Armenian literary tradition – and there are both exact verbal correspondences and thematic resonances between the two accounts – it would also have shaped the research agenda for future scholars. On closer inspection, the relationship is not as proximate as such an approach implies, with large parts of the first section and almost the entirety of the long third section of Lazar's *History* finding no analogue in Elishē's *History*. There is considerably greater distance between them than the nexus of traditions concerning the life and activities of Saint Gregory discussed above. Separate publication enabled the distinctive features of both works to be recognised. Both were composed within the territorial boundaries of Sasanian Iran, albeit at different times and in different contexts. They present different Armenian perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the Iranian world and therefore possess individual significance and meaning. Publishing the two works together would have risked underplaying, and perhaps even compromising, their individual historical potential.

By 1982 therefore, Robert had published translations and studies of the three most influential Armenian historical compositions: the *History* of Agathangelos, recording the life of Saint Gregory and the conversion of Armenia to Christianity at the start of the 4th century; the *History* of Moses Khorenats'i, tracing the origins of the Armenian people and its early history down to the fourth decade of the 5th century and the death of Mashtots', inventor of the Armenian script; and the *History* of Elishē, describing the resistance of Christian Armenians to religious persecution at the hands of the 'impious' and fire-worshipping (that is, Zoroastrian) Persians in the middle of the 5th century. Robert admitted that other histories might be of interest to scholars wishing to study

⁶¹ Thomson, *Elishē*, pp. 3–8 and 8–53.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 251–327.

specific features of Armenian society or culture, but maintained that, collectively, these three works ‘having a particular place in Armenian tradition as enshrining the received account of Armenian history’ and, by extension, what it meant to be Armenian.⁶³ Only in the third of these publications (Elishē) did Robert trace the reception of the text beyond the medieval era, extending into the 19th century.⁶⁴ His study of Moses’ *History* focused on the literary sources underlying the text and Moses’ creative use of them. Whilst the work is identified as being of major significance in the emergence of Armenian nationalism in the 19th century and a ‘vital force’ in contemporary debates about national identity, these themes are not developed.⁶⁵ The editions of Agathangelos have a similar profile and do not consider the reception of the text beyond the early 15th century. Robert rightly observed that these three works stand out in terms of their significance, whether measured in terms of extant copies or impact on other literary compositions. But their reception in the 19th and 20th centuries was not research that he chose to pursue. As Robin Darling Young recalled, when being presented with a research proposal by a younger scholar, Robert would exclaim ‘There! Now you have your project!’⁶⁶ Having posited the existence of a ‘received tradition’, he was content for others to study its subsequent development; this would be someone else’s project. In much the same way, Robert did not offer reflections on the historical value or meaning of individual passages; again that was left for others to determine.

Of the three other works mentioned in his 1982 symposium paper, work on evaluating and translating the Syriac and Armenian versions of Basil of Caesarea’s *Hexaemeron* was deferred until 1995 and 2012 respectively. As discussed below, this strand of research seems to have developed alongside Robert’s interest in the works of Vardan Arewelts‘i, a 13th-century Armenian scholar. The third work, however, had already been translated and prepared for publication. The *Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy* by David Anhalt‘/David the Invincible Philosopher appeared in 1983, co-authored with Bridget Kendall.⁶⁷ This emerged from Kendall’s own research on Arevshatyan’s Russian translation of that work, prepared while holding a Harkness fellowship at Harvard. It was intended for publication following a commemorative conference in Yerevan to celebrate David’s 1500th anniversary in 1980. Kendall asked Robert if he would look through her translation alongside the underlying Armenian and Greek texts and Robert agreed; as the Armenian was a translation from Greek, he was already interested in this work. A pattern

⁶³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 50–3.

⁶⁵ Thomson, *Moses Khorenats‘i*, p. 60.

⁶⁶ Tim Greenwood & Robin Darling Young, ‘Robert William Thomson’, in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 77 (2023), 1–6 at 4.

⁶⁷ B. Kendall & R.W. Thomson, *David the Invincible Philosopher: Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy* (University of Pennsylvania Armenian Texts and Studies 5; Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1983).

of weekly supervisions developed, as individual sections were translated and reviewed. Robert assisted in finding funding for travel to the conference and secured an alternative publisher when the original arrangements fell through. These circumstances explain why this is the only philosophical text studied by Robert. Nevertheless, there are significant parallels with his previous research. The translation is of the Armenian version of David's work and not the original Greek. The translation is accompanied by the Armenian text, reproduced from the critical edition prepared by Arevshatyan. The authors confirm that their express purpose was to offer their translation as 'a contribution to the field of Armenian thought rather than as a study of late Greek philosophical ideas', maintaining that the work was of 'fundamental importance in the formation of early Armenian scholarly tradition'.⁶⁸ Again, therefore, it is the impact of a translated work on an academic tradition outside its original setting which is identified as being of greatest interest. This in turn required a faithful rendering of the Armenian without collation with the underlying Greek. One departure from previous publications is the absence of a list of Biblical citations but this is simply because there are none; intriguingly the Armenian translator (or translators) chose not to introduce explicit or implicit allusions to Christianity.

Shortly after the publication of the proceedings of the 'East of Byzantium' Symposium, the president of Harvard, Derek Bok, invited Robert to become Director of Dumbarton Oaks. He agreed to serve a five-year term, starting in 1984. He arrived with administrative experience, having served as Chair of his department at Harvard. His duties were varied, overseeing the three academic programmes supported at Dumbarton Oaks – Byzantine Studies, Pre-Columbian Studies, and Garden and Landscape Studies – running the Fellowship competitions, managing both staff and the budget, reporting to the President of Harvard, meeting with the directors of other scholarly institutions and museums in the Washington area, hosting events and even suggesting music for concerts held in the Music Room. Yet Robert did not reduce his academic commitments. He continued to offer weekly language classes in Armenian or Georgian to students and scholars, setting aside time on Thursday afternoons to teach. He maintained his rhythm of research, attending conferences, publishing regularly and beginning new translation projects. In 1985 his translation of the *History of the House of Artsrunik* by Thomas Artsruni was published, together with a long introductory commentary.⁶⁹ Further translations of historical works by Vardan Arewelts'i, the Anonymous Storyteller and Łazar P'arpets'i appeared shortly after his term of office had ended. It remains unclear how Robert found the time to undertake his own research while also running the institution, but a passing comment in an interview from 2009 reveals a regular regime of very early mornings:

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. vii.

⁶⁹ R.W. Thomson, *Thomas Artsruni: History of the Artsruni House* (Detroit MI: Wayne State University Press, 1985).

I would get up in the warmer weather very early, go out into the gardens before the gardeners – they arrived about six or seven – go for a swim, and get to know everybody on the estate.⁷⁰

Although he does not go on to describe other features of his daily routine, such an early start would have enabled him to avoid the humidity of a Washington summer and carve out a regular time for dedicated research.

When analysed collectively, the four historical works translated and published during these years reveal several interesting features. None of them contributed to the formation of the ‘received tradition’ of the Armenian past. The *Histories* of Lazar and Thomas Artsruni are both preserved in single manuscripts, copied centuries after their composition.⁷¹ They contain much unattested information whose sources can be postulated but not proved. Neither became popular or influential, with later Armenian writers preferring to extract materials from the historical works of Elishē and John Catholicos. The collection of stories attributed to the *Anonymous Storyteller* was also a marginal work.⁷² Its narratives are loosely related to known traditions but offer surprising variants; by way of illustration, the opening story reimagines the prophet Muhammad as a Persian who came from outside Isfahan.⁷³ Its reflection of hybrid and heterodox traditions circulating in the south-eastern districts of 10th-century Armenia – it reflects an acute knowledge of local topography – makes it of considerable interest to historians, but it never formed part of mainstream Armenian literary tradition. Only the later *Historical Compilation* of Vardan Arewelc‘i sits more securely in the canon of Armenian historical literature and complements Robert’s own interests.⁷⁴

Oxford

In 1992, after a career in the United States spanning thirty years, Robert returned to England and succeeded Charles Dowsett as Calouste Gulbenkian Professor of Armenian Studies at the University of Oxford. He held this position for nine years until retirement

⁷⁰ Oral History Interview with Robert W. Thomson (1 August 2009).

⁷¹ Thomson, *Lazar P‘arpets‘i*, pp. 3–4; Thomson, *Thomas Artsruni*, pp. 15–17. For a survey of the fragile manuscript tradition through which many Armenian historical works have been preserved, see R. W. Thomson, ‘Bitlis and Armenian Histories’, in R. G. Hovannisian (ed.), *Armenian Baghesh/Bitlis and Taron/Mush* (UCLA Armenian History and Culture Series, Historic Armenian Cities and Provinces 2; Costa Mesa CA: Mazda, 2001), pp. 105–17.

⁷² R. W. Thomson, ‘The Anonymous Story-teller (also known as “Pseudo-Šapuh”)', *Revue des études arméniennes*, 21 (1988–1989), 171–232.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁷⁴ R. W. Thomson, ‘The Historical Compilation of Vardan Arewelc‘i’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 43 (1989), 125–226.

in 2001. Throughout this period, he maintained the rhythm of teaching, administration and research he had developed in previous institutions. Robert taught Classical Armenian and Georgian, to students admitted onto dedicated Masters' programmes and to those who wished to extend their own linguistic range. He served as Chair of the Faculty of Oriental Studies (now Asian and Middle Eastern Studies) for a three-year term, as well as chairing the organising committee for the 13th Oxford Patristics Conference in 1999, and editing (with Jean-Pierre Mahé) a substantial volume of essays in honour of his fellow scholar of medieval Armenia and longstanding friend, Nina Garsoïan.⁷⁵

Neither teaching nor administration, however, interrupted the pattern of research. During these years, three strands of research may be discerned across his publications. In the first place, Robert continued to publish scholarly analyses and translations of historical texts. In 1996, his study of the Georgian Chronicles appeared, intercalating translations of the underlying Georgian text and adapted Armenian version.⁷⁶ This approach was reprised in the *Lives of Saint Gregory*. In 1999, he published his much-valued translation and literary study of the *History* attributed to Sebeos, with an accompanying historical commentary by James Howard-Johnston, who was also based in Oxford.⁷⁷ Although never viewed as one of the works in the 'received tradition' – it is preserved in one 17th-century manuscript – this 7th-century composition has attracted the attention of late Antique and early Islamic scholars for its breadth of historical vision, and is now treated as one of the principal sources for studying this era of dramatic transition. Secondly, Robert returned to studying different works of cosmology, studying the cosmological thought of Vardan Arewelc'i, and publishing, in 1995, an edition and translation of the Syriac version of Basil of Caesarea's *Hexaemeron*.⁷⁸ This marked his first focused study of a Syriac text since the fourth and final volume of *Athanasiana Syriaca* had appeared almost twenty years before. This was complemented by his study of the Armenian version of that work which was published in 2012 and represents his final publication in *CSCO*. Thirdly, from 1992, Robert began to turn his attention to the vast corpus of medieval Armenian homiletic and exegetical texts. Initially expressed in the form of articles – both wider surveys and focused studies of individual compositions – his first translation, of a homily on the Passion of Christ attributed to Elishē, was

⁷⁵ R.W. Thomson & J.-P. Mahé (eds), *From Byzantium to Iran: Armenian Studies in Honour of Nina G. Garsoïan* (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1997).

⁷⁶ R.W. Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Armenian Version of the Georgian Chronicles* (Oxford Oriental Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁷⁷ R.W. Thomson & J.D. Howard-Johnston, *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos* (Translated Texts for Historians 31; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999).

⁷⁸ R.W. Thomson, 'A Medieval Armenian View of the Physical World: the Cosmology of Vardan Arewelc'i in his *Chronicle*', *Revue des études arméniennes*, 23 (1992), 191–208; R.W. Thomson, *The Syriac Version of the Hexaemeron by Basil of Caesarea* (CSCO 550/551, Scriptorum Syri 222/3; Louvain: Peeters, 1995).

published in 2000.⁷⁹ One of the Syriac texts attributed to Athanasius and published by Robert in 1972 was titled *On the Cross and the Passion*, and the works presented in the four volumes had all been of a homiletic or exegetical character. Therefore, whilst this shift might seem to some to be a departure from historical literature, it is more accurate to portray it as a return to the field in which Robert had first undertaken research, but studying original Armenian homilies and commentaries rather than patristic works written in Greek or Syriac. As outlined below, this reorientation away from historical compositions gathered pace in the years after his retirement.

One other publication from this era deserves special mention. In 1995, Robert published *A Bibliography of Classical Armenian Literature to 1500 AD*;⁸⁰ an updating supplement appeared in *Le Muséon* in 2007, extending its coverage of publications to 2005.⁸¹ In common with his brother Francis, Robert was an assiduous compiler of scholarly references. He followed a traditional approach, creating a catalogue of individual, handwritten cards, organised in alphabetical order by author – Armenian or non-Armenian – and stored in long narrow boxes. His decision to publish the fruits of his research through these two publications was anything but traditional. Such bibliographic treasuries are usually prepared by teams of scholars within funded projects; they are rarely the products of a conscientious individual. In his own undemonstrative fashion, Robert identified and met a scholarly need, creating a primary research guide for specialists and non-specialists alike.

Robert was a prolific scholar but how did he accomplish so much research? My own impression, established in the years after 1995, is that he was methodical and ordered in his approach to the process of research, following a strict daily regime which rarely wavered. He arrived at the Oriental Institute in Pusey Lane by 9am and worked for two hours, either teaching hour-long language classes or concentrating on his own research, after which he descended to the Institute's subterranean common room for a cup of coffee and conversation with colleagues, visitors and students. Then from 11.30, another hour and a half in his office before leaving for lunch, either at Pembroke or at home with Judith. A brisk walk back to the office for a further two hours' work, sometimes interrupted by visits to nearby libraries to check references, until 4pm and a cup of tea in the same common room. Then either a final period of research or attendance at a seminar, which tended in Oxford to start at 5pm. This may not have constituted the full picture of

⁷⁹ R.W. Thomson, 'Aspects of Medieval Armenian Exegesis', in J.J.S. Weitenberg (ed.), *New Approaches to Medieval Armenian Language and Literature* (Dutch Studies in Armenian Language and Literature 3; Amsterdam/Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 47–61; R.W. Thomson, *A Homily on the Passion of Christ attributed to Elishe* (Eastern Christian Texts in Translation 5; Leuven: Peeters, 2000).

⁸⁰ R.W. Thomson, *A Bibliography of Classical Armenian Literature to 1500 AD* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995).

⁸¹ R.W. Thomson, 'Supplement to "A Bibliography of Classical Armenian Literature to 1500 AD": Publications 1993–2005', *Le Muséon*, 120:1–2 (2007), 163–233.

his daily regime – were there early morning or evening sessions as well? – but Robert appears to have followed this regular rhythm of work, day after day, week after week, year after year. Kevork Bardakjian has confirmed that Robert had already established a similar daily routine at Harvard in 1974.

Retirement in 2001 did not bring any noticeable change in pace to his research. Robert commented to his successor at Oxford, Theo van Lint, that the only thing that had changed on his retirement was that he could now read the morning newspapers in a more leisurely fashion. The years after retirement also witnessed a change in his academic focus, moving away from studying historical compositions and returning to homiletic and exegetical works, but in Armenian rather than Syriac. There were two final historical publications. His translation of the Armenian adaptation of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates Scholasticus – a reworking of the earlier Armenian translation of the Greek original, involving multiple additions, which show knowledge of other Armenian texts, as well as some omissions – appeared in 2001.⁸² This was complemented by his translation of the two Armenian versions of the *Life of Sylvester*, published on facing pages, which appeared in 2005.⁸³ Robert showed that the same scholar revised existing Armenian translations of the *Life* and the *Ecclesiastical History*, and that later scholars had treated the legendary *Life* as part of the *Ecclesiastical History*. Although published separately, therefore, the revised versions of these compositions became directly related to one another in Armenian tradition, illustrating once more how works originally composed outside Armenia could have unexpected and unpredictable impacts on the formation of Armenian literary culture. As discussed above, Robert published a revised edition of his translation and commentary on the *History* of Moses Khorenats'i in 2006, as well as a complete reworking of his research into the multiple versions of the *History* of Agathangelos in 2010. There were, however, no further translations of historical works after 2005.

Robert's introduction to his study of a homily on the Passion of Christ attributed to Elishē reveals some of his reasoning for this development. He observed that whereas 'most of the [Armenian] historians had received some attention ... many other texts have been left in the obscurity of classical Armenian' and 'the vast mass of homiletic material in Armenian has been almost entirely neglected'.⁸⁴ Although it lacked a modern or critical edition, Robert resolved to translate this homily anyway in order to highlight the existence of a substantial body of such material in Armenian and to encourage comparative analysis with other early Christian homiletic literature.⁸⁵ It was a preliminary translation

⁸² R.W. Thomson, *The Armenian Adaptation of the Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus* (Hebrew University Armenian Studies 3; Leuven: Peeters, 2001).

⁸³ R.W. Thomson, 'The Armenian Versions of the 'Life of Sylvester'', *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies*, 14 (2005), 55–139.

⁸⁴ Thomson, *Homily on the Passion of Christ*, p. 1.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

which he hoped would serve as a basis for further research. Thus Robert notes parallels with Ephrem's *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, several apocryphal works, including the *Acts of Andrew* and the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and the *Teaching of Saint Gregory* without finding, or asserting, a direct relationship with any one of these works.⁸⁶ Both the date of composition and authorship remain unresolved: Robert suggests that 'the homily would seem to belong to the period before Armenian theological terminology became fixed' without defining exactly when that was.⁸⁷

In the following years, seven other works – one homiletic, six exegetical – were translated, together with a host of shorter studies.⁸⁸ An eighth was in preparation and approaching completion at his death 2018. In 2007, Robert published annotated translations of four homilies traditionally attributed to Mambrē – identified by later authors as the brother of Moses Khorenats'i – two on the Resurrection of Lazarus and two on Christ's Entry into Jerusalem.⁸⁹ These differed from one another in approach and presentation and uncertainties about dating and single authorship remain. By this date, Robert had already published his edition, translation and commentary of Hamam's *Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*.⁹⁰ There are grounds for accepting a later 9th-century date for its composition, although the figure of Hamam is obscure. Robert found few direct parallels with earlier Greek and Syriac commentaries, or with the later commentaries on Proverbs by Nerses of Lambron (completed in 1197) and Grigor of Tat'ew (later 14th century).⁹¹ His Introduction supplies an invaluable guide to Armenian exegetical writing before Hamam.⁹² In 2007, Robert provided a translation of one of Nerses' commentaries, on the Revelation of John.⁹³ Unlike the shadowy figures of Elishē, Mambrē and Hamam, Nerses was a prominent public figure and prolific scholar. His commentary, however, is an adaptation of the earlier Greek commentary by Andreas of Caesarea, a work completed in the late 6th century.⁹⁴ In tackling this work, therefore, Robert was back on familiar ground, comparing underlying Greek and adapted Armenian versions. A decade later, Robert published an edition, translation and commentary of Nerses of Lambron's

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 6–14.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 22.

⁸⁸ In addition to the five individual monographs discussed below, Thomson published a translation of an exegetical work as an article: 'A Commentary on Joshua and Judges attributed to Elišē', *Revue des études arméniennes*, 31 (2008–2009), 59–99.

⁸⁹ R.W. Thomson, 'Mambrē and his Homilies', *Revue des études arméniennes*, 30 (2007), 99–168.

⁹⁰ R.W. Thomson, *Hamam: Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (Hebrew University Armenian Studies 5; Leuven, Paris, Dudley MA: Peeters, 2005). The text comprises a diplomatic edition based on Matenadaran 1151.

⁹¹ Thomson, *Hamam*, pp. 26–40

⁹² Ibid., pp. 3–11.

⁹³ R.W. Thomson, *Nerses of Lambron: Commentary on the Revelation of Saint John* (Hebrew University Armenian Studies 9; Leuven: Peeters, 2007).

⁹⁴ Thomson, *Commentary on Revelation*, pp. 13–37.

Commentary on the Dormition of Saint John, the final section of the apocryphal *Acts of John*.⁹⁵ As Robert records, in 2005 the Matenadaran had supplied him with an electronic copy of one of their manuscripts containing Nerses' *Commentary on Revelation* which he used in preparation of his translation; he was also supplied, without invitation, with a Xerox photocopy of the other text in the same manuscript, Nerses' *Commentary on the Dormition of Saint John*.⁹⁶ Both commentaries were completed in 1179. Robert identifies several apocryphal and patristic sources, including Athanasius of Alexandria's *Life of Antony* and Basil of Caesarea's *Hexaemeron*, together with an incontrovertible citation from the *Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy* by David the Invincible.⁹⁷ In addition to the serendipitous provision of the photocopy, therefore, this work also attracted Robert's attention through its use of texts and authors on which he had previously published.

By virtue of their importance and their length, the two final commentaries merit special mention. In 2014, Robert published his study and translation of the *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John* by Nonnus of Nisibis.⁹⁸ As the preface of its Armenian translator reveals, this work had a complex background.⁹⁹ It was composed in the second quarter of the 9th century in Arabic by Nonnus, who exploited scholarship in Syriac rather than Armenian, but was sponsored by an Armenian prince, Bagrat Bagratuni. Eventually it was translated into Armenian at the direction of his great-niece, Marem princess of Siwnik', probably in the 880s. The Arabic text has not been preserved, denying Robert the chance of comparing the underlying Arabic with the adapted Armenian. The extent to which the Armenian translator introduced changes, abbreviations or expansions is therefore unclear. Robert identified parallels with the *Homilies on John* by John Chrysostom, the commentary on John's Gospel by Moše bar Kepha, and the *Commentary on John* by Theodore of Mopsuestia, all of which were available in Syriac.¹⁰⁰ He also reflected on the specific circumstance of its composition, noting that its stress on Christ's divinity and its internal dialogue with Jewish opponents may be interpreted in terms of contemporary Christian-Muslim disputation.¹⁰¹ Since it offers a commentary on each lemma, this is a substantial composition, extending to more than twice the length of any other exegetical text previously studied by Robert. But his final study and annotated translation of Vardan Arewelts'i's *Commentary on Psalms* overshadows even this.

⁹⁵ R.W. Thomson, *Nersēs of Lambron: Commentary on the Dormition of Saint John* (Armenian Texts and Studies 1; Leiden: Brill, 2017).

⁹⁶ Thomson, *Commentary on the Dormition*, pp. ix-x.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-20.

⁹⁸ R.W. Thomson, *Nonnus of Nisibis: Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John* (Writings from the Islamic World 1; Atlanta GA: SBL Press, 2014).

⁹⁹ Thomson, *Nonnus*, pp. xvii-xxi.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, xxviii-xxxiii.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. xl, xliii-xliv.

Robert always intended this volume to be his last major work. In correspondence with the editors of an Armenian series to which it was destined, he termed it his ‘chant du cygne’; to his family, it was simply his ‘opus’. This monumental work, with its verse by verse analysis, is twice the length of Nonnus’ *Commentary*. It was completed in 1251. As Robert shows, Vardan drew upon the writings of earlier scholars, although it is hard to establish with any certainty exactly what Vardan had access to.¹⁰² One of the patristic authorities that Vardan cites by name is Athanasius of Alexandria. There is therefore a remarkable symmetry to the span of his research and publications, since Syriac texts attributed to Athanasius had been the focus of his doctoral research and first publications sixty years before. Vardan’s inclusion of many Hexaplaric readings is a distinctive feature of his *Commentary*, and Robert identifies Theodoret of Cyr’s *Commentary* as the most likely original source for these.¹⁰³ Theodoret’s work circulated in Armenian pseudonymously under the name of a less controversial figure, Epiphanius of Salamis.

Three general features of these publications stand out. The first is the remarkable range of homiletic and exegetical works selected for analysis and translation. Two of the works date from the 9th century, two date from the late 12th century and one from the middle of the 13th century; the three homiletic collections are hard to date. Of the commentaries, two focus on books of the Old Testament (Proverbs and Psalms), two on the New Testament (Gospel and Revelation of John) and one on the apocryphal Dormition of John. Robert selected both well-known scholars (Nerses and Vardan) and little-known or unknown figures (Hamam, Elishē, Mambrē). In other words, Robert did not focus on one author, nor on commentaries of one Biblical book, nor on one period. He preferred to range widely and tread unfamiliar paths, opening them up for further investigation. Secondly, these works present methodological challenges. Some offer precise details of date of composition, authorship and context but many remain elusive. Authors of exegetical or homiletic works rarely identify the specific works they had consulted or acknowledge from where specific interpretations derive. Where possible, Robert traced parallels with patristic sources, but he readily acknowledged that direct relationships were hard to prove. Given these opaque qualities, Robert devised his own comparative methodology, studying each composition in terms of its exegetical approach, the theological and technical language employed, and its interest, or otherwise, in number symbolism. These were never brought together into a single comparative study – although he had written on number symbolism in Armenian texts at the start of his career – but they offer vital starting points for further investigation.¹⁰⁴ Finally, and typically, Robert was at pains to

¹⁰² Thomson, *Vardan Arewelc’i*, pp. 8. 11–15, and 27–29.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁴ R.W. Thomson, ‘Number Symbolism and Patristic Exegesis in some Early Armenian Writers’, *Handes Amsorya*, 90 (1976), 117–38.

downplay his contribution and stressed repeatedly the preliminary nature of his research. Writing in the Preface to his study of Vardan's *Commentary*, he observed:

My primary purpose in this publication is to present the text of Vardan's Psalm commentary in English, so that a readership unfamiliar with the classical Armenian language may gain some insights into the wealth of medieval Armenian literary culture. Those involved in biblical scholarship will find much that is old, that is new, that is borrowed, and that has been adapted from a different tradition. Specialists in Armenian will notice the many failings and lacunae in my interpretations. But this aspect of Armenian writing has been relatively little explored, so I can only hope that a small beginning (though a rather long text) will make a worthwhile contribution in the larger scheme of things.¹⁰⁵

Legacy

In recognition of his extraordinary contribution to Armenian studies, Robert was awarded many distinctions. In addition to his election as Fellow of the British Academy in 1995, Robert received the Saint Sahak and Saint Mesrop Medal from the Catholicos of All Armenians, Vazgen I, 'for his great service to the scholarly study of the history of the Armenian people'. Such honours attest his achievements but do not speak to his nature. Robert's deep learning was coupled with a sincere interest in and commitment to the scholarship of others. This was appreciated by the many colleagues and students from around the world who received a kind word or suggestion for future direction. His willingness to teach Classical Armenian and Georgian to allcomers, even while serving as Director of Dumbarton Oaks, speaks to his generosity as well as an awareness of the need to nurture future generations. Although Robert did not supervise any doctoral students, he encouraged many postgraduates in the course of his long career. Naturally reserved, Robert very much enjoyed being in the company of others, listening and offering his thoughts, not as the world-famous Armenologist but as an interested and entertaining colleague, companion and friend. Visitors were warmly welcomed to Buckingham Street in Oxford, with an aperitif, in the garden during summer months, followed by a meal prepared by Judith. Few were aware of his love of music or his talent for the piano, something he had in common with Nina Garsoïan. He practised regularly but in private. The only time he mentioned it to me was when he told me of a letter of thanks he had received from students living next door in Oxford who had heard his playing over the previous year and wanted to express their appreciation. Through his erudition, Robert shaped the field of Armenian studies for generations to come; through his personal kindness he affected the lives of those who met him.

¹⁰⁵ Thomson, *Vardan Arewele* 'i, p. 6.

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Note on the author: Tim Greenwood is Bishop Wardlaw Professor in the School of History at the University of St Andrews. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2024.

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