

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Mesrop Mashtots

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: February 19

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IN BRIEF

Saint Mesrop Mashtots

Armenian monk and preacher, creator of the Armenian alphabet and translator of the Bible.

Feast day	February 19
Born	c. 362, Hatsekats (province of Taron, historic Armenia)
Died	February 17, 440, Vagharshapat, Armenia
Canonized	pre-congregation (immemorial veneration)
Era	5th century
Patron saint of	translators, teachers

In this booklet

Life

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Mesrop Mashtots

Saint Mesrop Mashtots was an Armenian monk and preacher, born around 362 and died in 440, who gave his people the Armenian alphabet. With the catholicos Saint Sahak, he had the Bible and the great Christian texts translated into the language of Armenia, founded schools and trained a whole generation of translators. Venerated by both the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian Catholic Church, he is listed in the Roman Martyrology, which remembers him on February 19.

Who was Saint Mesrop Mashtots?

Mesrop, also called Mashtots, is one of the best-loved figures in Armenian history. We know him well thanks to the *Life of Mashtots*, written in the 440s by Koriun, one of his disciples, and to the *History of Armenia* by Moses of Khoren, another of his students. Antiquity has rarely preserved with such precision the name and the work of the man who created a script.

He lived in dramatic times. The kingdom of Armenia, the first state to adopt Christianity at the beginning of the 4th century thanks to Saint Gregory the Illuminator, was divided in 387 between the Roman Empire and Sassanid Persia. Armenians then prayed in Greek or Syriac, languages the ordinary people did not understand. Mesrop realized that the faith would only take deep root if people could read the Gospel in their own language.

Key dates in the life of Mesrop Mashtots

- **Around 362**: Born in Hatsekats, in the province of Taron, west of Lake Van.
- **380s**: Secretary and officer at the court of the Armenian kings in Vagharshapat.

- **Around 395**: He leaves the court, becomes a monk and goes to preach the Gospel in regions that were still pagan.
- **Around 404**: A synod gathered around the catholicos Sahak decides to give Armenia its own script.
- **405**: In Edessa, he completes the Armenian alphabet of 36 letters.
- **Around 420**: Received in Constantinople by Emperor Theodosius II, he obtains permission to teach in Byzantine Armenia.
- **432-435**: The translation of the Bible into Armenian is completed with Sahak and their disciples.
- **February 17, 440**: Death in Vagharshapat; he is buried in Oshakan, where a church is built over his tomb as early as 443.

From the king's service to preaching

The son of a man named Vardan, Mesrop received a Greek education in his youth and also learned Syriac and Persian. He entered the service of the Arsacid kings, as a secretary in the royal chancery and as an officer: Koriun notes that he won the affection of his soldiers. It was at court, his disciple tells us, that he began to read the Scriptures diligently.

Around 395, he left everything to become a monk. He set out to evangelize the region of Goghtn, near the Araxes River, where paganism was regaining strength, and lived as a hermit between preaching journeys. He soon ran into a very practical problem: when he read the Scriptures aloud, he had to translate them at the same time, and when no one translated, the people understood nothing.

The birth of the Armenian alphabet

Mesrop found decisive support from the catholicos Saint Sahak, head of the Armenian Church, and from King Vramshapuh. Around 404, a synod decided to create an Armenian script. They first tried ancient characters brought by a

Syrian bishop named Daniel, but these did not fit the many sounds of the language.

Mesrop then went to Mesopotamia with a group of students, to Amida, Edessa and Samosata, great centers of learning where he studied the Greek and Syriac alphabets. In 405, in Edessa, he completed an alphabet of 36 letters, then fixed the shape of the letters with a Greek calligrapher named Ropanos. The principle was simple and brilliant: one letter for each sound, one sound for each letter, written from left to right like Greek. This alphabet has remained almost unchanged to this day, except for two letters added in the Middle Ages.

According to tradition, the first sentence written in the new script was the opening of the Book of Proverbs: "To know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding" (Proverbs 1:2).

Schools, translations and missions

Back in Armenia, Mesrop and Sahak founded schools where students learned to read, to write, to chant the offices and to translate. Mesrop himself traveled through the provinces to teach. He also went to Constantinople, where Emperor Theodosius II and Patriarch Atticus allowed him to open schools in the Byzantine part of Armenia.

Ancient sources also credit him with a role in creating the alphabets of Iberia (present-day Georgia) and of Caucasian Albania. The discovery in 1996 of a Caucasian Albanian manuscript seems to confirm the link between that script and the Armenian alphabet.

With Sahak, he sent his best disciples to study in Edessa, Constantinople and Alexandria and to bring back reliable texts. The translation of the Bible was completed between 432 and 435; it is so beautiful that it has been called "the queen of translations." The works of the Fathers of the Church followed, along

with the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius. His disciples, such as Koriun, Eznik of Kolb and Moses of Khoren, became the first great Armenian writers. The Armenian Church honors them together as the "Holy Translators."

Mesrop was also a poet. Several liturgical hymns, the *sharakans*, are attributed to him and count among the oldest in the Armenian tradition. Koriun also recalls that he defended the weak, obtaining the release of prisoners and the cancellation of unjust debts.

His last years

After 428, Persia abolished the Armenian monarchy and deposed Sahak. Mesrop, who never accepted the title of catholicos, then carried the burden of the Church in Vagharshapat in practice. Sahak died in 439; Mesrop followed him a few months later, on February 17, 440. He was buried in Oshakan, about 20 miles from Yerevan, where a church was built over his tomb as early as 443. A more recent church, built in the 19th century, still shelters his tomb.

Why is Saint Mesrop Mashtots the patron saint of translators and teachers?

Mesrop understood that the Gospel must speak the language of the people. His alphabet was not an end in itself: he wanted every Armenian to be able to hear the Word of God and to pray from the heart. He spent his life teaching, opening schools and training translators, which is why he is invoked for teachers, translators and catechists, and for children learning to read.

By giving his people a script, he also gave them the means to keep their identity through centuries of foreign rule. Armenians in their homeland and throughout the diaspora still honor him as the father of their written culture. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Mesrop Mashtots and the novena to Saint Mesrop Mashtots.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Mesrop Mashtots in art

Armenian miniatures and icons show him as a monk with a long beard, wearing a dark habit and a hood, often holding a book or a scroll. He is sometimes shown writing, or holding a tablet on which the letters of the Armenian alphabet appear. On the famous monument in front of the Matenadaran in Yerevan, he is seated, with a disciple at his side, and the letters of the alphabet are carved in the stone behind him.

Where to pray to Saint Mesrop Mashtots

- **Oshakan** (Armenia): the Church of Saint Mesrop Mashtots, which shelters his tomb.
- **Yerevan**: the Matenadaran, the institute of ancient manuscripts that bears his name, with his statue in front of it.
- **Etchmiadzin** (Vagharshapat): the city where he taught and died, seat of the Armenian Church.
- Armenian Catholic churches, especially on the feast of the Holy Translators in October.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Mesrop Mashtots for Teachers and Translators

Saint Mesrop Mashtots wrote hymns for the Armenian liturgy, but we do not have a reliable English translation that can be quoted in full. This page offers the verse that tradition gives as the first ever written in the Armenian alphabet, followed by an original prayer for teachers, translators and the Christians of Armenia.

The first sentence of the Armenian alphabet

According to Armenian tradition, the first sentence Mesrop wrote in the new script was the opening of the Book of Proverbs:

> *"To know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding."*

Source: Book of Proverbs, chapter 1, verse 2.

Prayer to Saint Mesrop Mashtots for teachers and translators

Saint Mesrop, you left the honors of the royal court to proclaim the Gospel: teach me to seek first the Kingdom of God.

You suffered to see your people listen to the Word without understanding it: give us the desire to make the Gospel accessible to everyone, in simple and true words.

You gave Armenia letters to read, to write and to pray: bless teachers, translators, catechists and all who are learning to read. Watch over the Christians of Armenia and of the diaspora, over their faith, their language and their memory.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Obtain for me wisdom and instruction, understanding of the words of God, and a heart that puts them into practice. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

The Roman Martyrology remembers Saint Mesrop on February 19, close to the anniversary of his death on February 17, 440. Armenians also honor him with Saint Sahak and their disciples on the feast of the Holy Translators, in October.

You can pray to him:

- at the start of the school year, for teachers and students;
- before a work of study, writing or translation;

- for a child who is learning to read;
- for catechists and all who pass on the faith;
- for the Armenian people and for Christians of the Middle East and the Caucasus.

To go further, pray the novena to Saint Mesrop Mashtots or read the life of Saint Mesrop Mashtots.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Mesrop Mashtots

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Mesrop Mashtots as told by his disciple Koriun. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his memorial on February 19, begin on February 10. You can also pray it at any time of the year: at the start of the school year, before an exam, or for a child learning to read.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for each day helps you carry the prayer into your life. If you miss a day, simply continue the next day.

Day 1: Reading the Scriptures at court

Mesrop was a secretary and officer at the court of the Armenian kings. In the middle of this busy life, he began to read the Scriptures diligently. God can reach us in the middle of our work and our responsibilities.

Prayer: Lord, as you touched Mesrop at the royal court, speak to me in the place where I live and work. Saint Mesrop, pray for me. Amen.

Today: Read one chapter of a Gospel during a break in your day.

Day 2: Leaving everything

Around 395, Mesrop left the honors of the court to become a monk. He did not despise his former life, but he had found a greater treasure. Each of us is called to choose what truly comes first.

Prayer: Lord, free my heart from what holds it back and teach me to seek first your Kingdom. Amen.

Today: Give up one small comfort and offer this sacrifice for someone in need.

Day 3: A people that did not understand

When Mesrop preached, he saw that the people did not understand the Scriptures read in Greek or Syriac. Instead of resigning himself, he let this suffering become a question: how can the Word reach every heart?

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to those around me who do not yet know you, and give me a heart that looks for ways to reach them. Amen.

Today: Think of one person who is far from the Church and pray for them by name.

Day 4: Working together

Mesrop did not work alone. He found support from the catholicos Sahak and from the king, and a synod decided together to create a script. Great works for God are born in communion.

Prayer: Lord, give me the humility to ask for help and the joy of working with others for your glory. Saint Sahak and Saint Mesrop, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Thank someone who helps you in your work or your family life.

Day 5: Patience in failure

The first attempt, with the old characters of the bishop Daniel, failed: they did not fit the sounds of the language. Mesrop did not give up. He set out again, studied, searched and started over.

Prayer: Lord, when my efforts fail, keep me from discouragement and give me the patience to begin again. Amen.

Today: Take up again a task you had abandoned because it was too hard.

Day 6: To know wisdom

According to tradition, the first words written in the Armenian alphabet were these: "To know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding." Mesrop's whole work was at the service of wisdom that comes from God.

Prayer: Lord, give me true wisdom, which is to know you and to love you. Bless all who study and all who teach. Amen.

Today: Pray for a teacher who marked your life, living or deceased.

Day 7: Schools for everyone

Mesrop and Sahak opened schools where students learned to read, to write, to sing the offices and to translate. Mesrop himself traveled through the provinces to teach. Education was for him a work of charity.

Prayer: Lord, bless teachers, catechists and all children who are learning to read. May no one be deprived of knowledge and of your Word. Amen.

Today: Read a story to a child, or support a school or a literacy project.

Day 8: Defending the weak

Koriun tells us that Mesrop defended the weak, obtaining the release of prisoners and the cancellation of unjust debts. Love for the Word of God always becomes love for one's neighbor.

Prayer: Lord, make me attentive to those who are crushed by injustice, and give me the courage to help them. Amen.

Today: Do a concrete act of kindness for someone in difficulty.

Day 9: A faithful old age

In his last years, after the deposition of Sahak, Mesrop carried the burden of the Church without ever seeking the title of catholicos. He died in 440, a few months after his companion, having served to the end.

Prayer: Lord, grant me to serve you faithfully until the end of my life, without seeking honors. Watch over the Armenian people and all persecuted Christians. Amen.

Today: Pray for the Christians of Armenia and of the Middle East.

Closing prayer

Saint Mesrop Mashtots, you gave your people letters so that they could hear the Gospel in their own language. Intercede for me and for the intention I have entrusted to you during these nine days. Obtain for teachers, translators and catechists the grace to serve the truth with patience and love. Help me to welcome the Word of God and to share it in simple and true words. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

CREDITS

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