

Armenian Warriors, Japanese Samurai Military Codes Of Honor

Armenian historiography contains considerable information about ancient and medieval Armenian military ideology. In the works of fifth century historians Pavstos Buzand and Movses Khorenatsi, the commands and legacy of the Armenian sparapetner (commanders in chief) to their successors articulate in detail the obligations and responsibilities of Armenian warriors. Their norms of conduct share striking similarities with the system of values of the Japanese samurai codified during the 16th to 18th centuries, as well as with later medieval West European chivalry of the eight to 14th centuries.

Text **Armen Ayvazyan** | Based on his book *The Code of Honor of the Armenian Military (4-5th centuries)*
Translated by **Arsen Nazarian**

***Fight and offer your
life for the Armenian
World just as your
brave forefathers did,
consciously sacrificing
their lives for this
Homeland...***

Armenian Military Code of Honor
(4th and 5th century)

According to Pavstos Buzand, this was the message of Sparapet (Commander in Chief) Manuel Mamikonian (d. 384) to his son Artashir at the time of passing on “his rule and command of the Army” to his son. This ideological commandment has continued to be part and parcel of the professional value system of the Armenian armed forces. During his lifelong military service, Sparapet Manuel himself was led by this commandment. While he was lying in bed in an incurable physical state surrounded

by the king, queen, noble men and women, Manuel undressed himself and showed those in presence the numerous wounds that he had sustained during the battles waged for the independence of Armenia. “There was no unharmed space on his body which would match the size of a coin. He had been wounded in battles and bore more than fifty scars on his body, even on his masculine organ, which he also opened and showed to all.” Sacrificing one’s life for the sake of fatherland is exactly the same ideology that historian Movses Khorenatsi



← A medieval Armenian miniature representing the battle of Avarayr.

preaches throughout his *History of Armenia* in the following passage about the Armenian King-warrior Aram: Being himself a worldly and patriotic man, this king preferred to die for his fatherland rather than to see that the sons of the foreigners encroach upon the borders of his fatherland and rule over his own people. While codifying the personal virtues of Sparapet Moushegh Mamikonian (d. 376), Pavstos Buzand in *History of Armenia* actually presents a list of the main commitments assumed by

the Armenian warriors towards the Armenian state and nation. Thus, here are the basic components of the Code of Honor of the Armenian military during the fourth and fifth centuries, according to the hierarchical order of priority laid down by Buzand: Loyalty and selfless service to the Armenian Homeland and Kingdom; unblemished preservation of a chivalrous reputation and dignity, if necessary, at the cost of life; loyalty and selfless service to the Armenian King, i.e. the most important sociopolitical institution of

ancient Armenia's state system; loyalty and selfless service to all inhabitants of Armenia, irrespective of their social origin or status; piety towards the Christian faith, the Armenian (national) Church and clergymen and their selfless protection; devotion to family; devotion to kinsmen/noble clan; and loyalty to comrades-in-arms. Some points are akin to the chivalric codes of the medieval European knighthood and the Samurai, Japanese professional warriors, valuing honor and allegiant service to a suzerain above life. ►

A warrior accomplishes the path of Samurai only when he is constantly ready for death.

Bushido: A warrior's path

In his renowned work Hagakure (literally, "Hidden in the Leaves"), samurai Yamamoto Tsunetomo describes the code of honor of the Samurai, Bushido – "A warrior's path". He emphasizes the requirement of disregarding death for a warrior. "Bushido, the path of the warrior, means death. When you have only two paths between which to choose, you must immediately choose the path that leads to death. Don't think anymore. Direct your thought on the path to which you gave your preference and walk!" he writes. "The question arises unintentionally: 'Why should I die if it has no use. Why should I pay with my life for nothing?' These are value judgments of an egoistic man. When you have to make a choice, don't allow the thoughts about use or profit to sway your mind. Since all of us prefer life to death, that preference in fact determines our choice. Think about the indignity that might befall you when you, laboring for profit, may suddenly fail. Think about the despicable fate of the man who continues to live while he hasn't yet achieved his goal."

The Samurai is obliged to give his soul and his body to his prince/lord. He should, moreover, be wise, merciful and valiant. "... Remember! Death does not bring down your dignity. Death does not bring you dishonor. Your fulfillment of commitment must be thorough and your reputation must be unblemished."

A samurai swore to perform the following four commandments: Not to succumb to anything in fulfilling his commitment; To be of service to his lord; to be respectful towards his parents; and to be merciful and compassionate."



The Samurai

The Samurai were the warrior caste of medieval Japan – a class of powerful mounted soldiers who rose to power as retainers of feudal lords and the military arm of the imperial court, before establishing a new national order. A samurai was supposedly a perfect soldier, keeping to a draconian martial code that was set down much later as Bushido. Most notoriously, samurai were

expected to choose death over dishonor. In order to prove that they were not afraid, samurai suicides followed the practice of Seppuku, cutting open the belly, more commonly known as Hara Kiri. This was regarded as the most excruciating and unpleasant death known to man, and was a kind of voluntary torture undergone by samurai determined to prove their purity of purpose.

The resemblance of the codes of honor of the Armenian warrior of the Arshakuni era and of the Japanese Samurai, which places honor, dignity and dedicated service to one's lord (suzerain, "master") above life, is striking. In this connection, Pavstos Buzand provides us with a number of cases which speak for themselves. One of them concerns an episode in Persia. "It so happened in one of those days that the Armenian king Arshak entered one of the stalls of the Persian king. The Riding-master of the Persian king was sitting inside. When he saw the king, he uttered no words of welcome, nor paid any attention to him. He even began to deride and insult, telling him: 'King of Armenian goats, come and sit on this heap of grass.'" writes Buzand. "At hearing these words, Vasak, the general and commander-in-chief of the Army of Great Armenia, from Mamikonian dynasty, who was accompanying the king, became enraged. Fuming, he drew his sword which hang from his back and struck at the Riding-master of the king of Persia and decapitated him at once, because he could not endure the impudence shown to his king. He preferred death many times as much to witnessing any insult or indignity to his lord."

The calls of the Japanese Samurai author of the "Hagakure" not to fear death and to strive for an unblemished reputation are uttered almost in the same manner by Armenian Sparapet Manuel in his above cited message-commandment: "And he commanded him to be loyal and dedicated to King Arshag, to be honest, diligent and hard working. "Fight and offer your life for the Homeland of Armenia just as your brave forefathers did by sacrificing their lives consciously for this Homeland. Because, he said, that would be a much more decent deed and one pleasing God and that if you behave like that you will not be forgotten by the Almighty. Strive to have the reputation of a valiant man in this world and do justice for the sake of heaven. And do not fear death, but pin your hopes on the one who has created and founded everything. Throw everything corrupt, unethical and evil out of yourself and worship the Lord with clean heart and faithfulness. Die courageously for the sake

of the God-fearing (Armenian) Homeland, because then you will have died for God, for his churches, for his covenant and for the inborn lords of this Homeland, the Arshakunis."

This passage clearly demonstrates how skillfully the Armenian commanders of the fourth and fifth centuries made use of the Christian faith as a resistance-inspiring ideology in almost unremitting wars waged for the independence of Armenia. "To die for Armenia is to die for God," preached the Commander in Chief Manvel Sparapet and, of course, other Armenian commanders of the fourth century. ("Die courageously for the sake of the God-fearing (Armenian) Homeland, because then you will have died for God"). By this, they brought harmony and congruity between the code of honor of the Armenian soldier, which had already been formed since very old times and sanctified during numerous battles (especially the ideological standpoint to offer one's life for the sake of the fatherland), on the one hand and the relatively new Christian faith and religious sentiments, on the other. Exactly with this same belief, that dying for fatherland is a God-loving deed, the Christian-Armenian warrior continued to fight during all the coming centuries. A striking resemblance with the Samurai code of honor offers another decree of Commander in chief Manvel. He told his warriors to "be honest, diligent and hard-working," which matches the similar postulates of Hagakure: "A soldier should ceaselessly train himself and should never think about rest. There is no end to training yourself. It may happen that you come to a point where you get the feeling that you have reached the point of perfection and you stop doing that with which you busied yourself so far. Whereas, one who wants to be perfect should always remember that he is still far from that point. Be honest and truth loving in your soldierly service. Dishonest people can never serve arms honestly."

However, there are significant differences in the priority of obligations of the Armenian honor code, and the Western European and Japanese codes, as it is evident from

the hierarchy of commitments of the Armenian warrior of the fourth and fifth centuries presented above. The Armenian commander's topmost personal attachment unequivocally went to the country, kingdom, and land of Armenia and commitment to the entire people of Armenia irrespective of their social origin and status – standing higher than the pledges to the own noble family and house and even the piety to the Christian religion and church.

Certainly, this is a stunning ranking for the ancient-early medieval times. Perhaps, this was partly due to the very early formation of the concept of fatherland and nation-state imbedded in the Armenian people long before the adoption of Christianity. As early as the 4th century, the idea of fatherland was expressed by various terms, such as "Hayots ashkharh, Yerkir, Tagavorutiun" (the Armenian "world," country, kingdom). In addition to these terms, Movses Khorenatsi directly used the terms "hayrenik" (fatherland) and "hayrenaser" (patriot).

❏ piogue

In this historical context the Armenian military's code of honor had a solid and lasting impact upon the national character and worldview of the Armenian people – just as the bushido had on the Japanese people. Both Armenian and Japanese collective psyches would remain largely impenetrable, if examined without considering their ancestral warrior ethics. This challenge has been profoundly recognized by perceptive students of Japanese culture.

As Thomas Cleary, a buddhist scholar and translator of many classics of Asian military theory, notes, "Even in the social and cultural spheres, Japan today still retains indelible impressions of the samurai bushido. This is true not only in education and the fine arts, but also in characteristic attitudes and conduct marking the course of political, professional, and personal relations." If observed, however, from a similar angle, Armenian culture would reveal a thorough infusion of martial traditions that originally, and powerfully, stem from the ancient Armenian warrior class. ■