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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CILICIAN MUSEUM COLLECTION FOR THE HISTORY OF ARMENIAN LITURGICAL METALWORK

Armenian metalwork is intrinsically associated with liturgical vessels. Though secular objects in silver, gold, and bronze have come to light through excavations of Urartean and pre-Christian sites, surviving examples from the Christian era, except for an abundance of coins from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, are almost exclusively liturgical items. The artistic history of Armenian Church art has remained unstudied. Thanks to a number of beautifully illustrated albums and recent exhibition catalogues, the abundance of such works in Catholicos and Patriarch collections is indisputable.¹ Unfortunately, there are few survivors prior to the fifteenth century, and those are almost exclusively attributable to the patronage of the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia. Excavations at the early medieval capitals of Dvin and Ani have also uncovered a handful of objects in bronze: crosses, a candelabra, and incense burner.

The oldest group of surviving liturgical

objects, dating from the tenth and fourteenth centuries, is reliquaries, either containing fragments of the true cross or the right hand relics (dexters) of saints. They are preserved in the major patriarchal collections at the Catholicosate of Holy Etchmiadzin, the Cilician Catholicosate, and the Armenian Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Constantinople. Certain objects, like the right hand of St. Gregory the Illuminator, accompanied Armenian catholicosates as they moved over the centuries from one region of Armenia to another.² Their use in church ceremonial helped guarantee their preservation. During centuries of foreign invasion and occupation, accompanied by looting and migration, precious objects in silver and gold disappeared. Comparatively little survives before the seventeenth century other than silver bindings and dexters.

The Catholicosate of Cilicia, patronized by the kings of Armenia when the church followed the nobility to the southwest, has a continuous history from its establishment at Hromkla in 1156 via Sis (1292) and Aleppo (1915) to its present location in Antelias since 1930. Yet, little survives from the glorious days of patronage of the Cilician nobility or

¹ In particular the catalogues of three exhibits held in Paris in 2007 during l'Année de l'Arménie: *Armenia sacra. Mémoire chrétienne des Arméniens (IV^e – XVIII^e siècles)*, Le Louvre, Jannic Durand, Ioanna Rapti, Dorota Giovannoni, eds., Paris: Somogy, 2007; *Ors et trésors d'Arménie*, Musée des tissus et des arts décoratifs et Musée d'art religieux de Fourvière, Maria-Anne Privat-Savigny and Bernard Berthod, eds., Lyon, 2007; *Arménie: la magie de l'écrit*, La Vieille Charité, Marseille, Claude Mutfian, ed., Paris : Somogy, 2007.

² Details in Dickran Kouymjian, "The Right Hand of St. Gregory and other Armenian Arm Relics," *Les objets de la mémoire. Pour une approche comparatiste des reliques et de leur culte*, Philippe Borgeaud and Youri Volokhine, eds. (Geneva, 2005), pp. 215-240.

higher clergy. The Cilician See preserves the oldest dated silver binding (1254) on the Bardzrberd Gospels (Fig. 1), copied in 1248, and the oldest right hand reliquary, that of St. Nicholas of 1315 (Fig. 2). The remainder of the treasures rescued from the Catholicosate at Sis date to the eighteenth century and after. Though certain relics, especially the right hands of St. Gregory, St. Sylvester, and St. Barsauma as well as a number of small relics preserved as crosses, are in part much older despite their more recent silver encasings.

Since the study of Armenian liturgical art is based on chalices, candlesticks, altar ornaments, censers, crosses, liturgical fans, lamps, and reliquaries mostly of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, the art historian is confronted with the problem of tracing the line of development of the form and decoration of such objects from the earliest centuries of Armenian Christianity to the modern period. As in all art the shape and decoration of Armenian objects are affected by tradition and new waves of style. The early fourth century acceptance of Christianity by the Armenians resulted in their participation in the formation of the

shapes and styles of early liturgical vessels. This we know from comparatively abundant vestiges of church architecture from the fifth to the seventh centuries and of painting, mostly manuscript illumination, from the ninth century with a single example from the paleo-Christian period. Even the numismatic evidence from the kingdom of Cilicia demonstrates that Armenian artists were aware of the current Western modes and fashions. There is every reason to believe that the transformation in minor arts taking place in the Byzantine east and the Latin west, civilizations in direct contact with Armenia and the Armenians, was well understood and employed by their artists.

The paper will discuss some of the problems confronting scholars in the study of the history and development of Armenian liturgical metal work through an examination of a number of the most important pieces in the collection of the Cilician Catholicos. I will present briefly three groups of objects from the Cilician Museum to highlight problems and suggest procedural methodologies: chalices, silver bindings, and right arm reliquaries.



(Fig. 1) *Antelias, Cilician Museum. Oldest date Armenian binding, Bardzrberd Gospels of 1248 Hromkla, binding of 1254: upper cover Crucifixion; lower, Christ enthroned.*



(Fig. 2) *Antelias, Cilician Museum.*
Right arm Armenian reliquary of
St. Nicholas, 1315, restored 1926.

1. Chalices

The provenance of the 29 most prominent chalices in the collection shows a tradition strongly anchored in the catholicosal city, Sis, but with two-thirds from other localities near and far: ten from Sis, three from Constantinople, one each from Aleppo, Palu, Chamishkedek, Belin, Oghvan, Italy, New Julfa (St. Sargis, 1961), and eight from unknown places. On the whole the chalices are fashioned in the oriental tradition with the cup of the vessel nearly cylindrical, whereas in European chalices the cup flares out at the top.

Among the earliest preserved chalices are those of the fifth to seventh centuries found in the Syrian treasures at Hama, Stuma, and Riha. They are simple, usually in three parts: a flaring base, a knop, and a cup. One of these early chalices (from Hama in the Walters Gallery of Art in Baltimore) shows on the cup standing figures under connected arches with braided columns and in each of the spandrels at six-petalled flower bud or star. It also has a lower base form with scalloped flaring elements; the flat rim-base has a second tier, which is also scalloped.

Though no ancient Armenian chalices have survived, the depiction of them in the margin of the miniature of Baptism in the final four miniatures of the Etchmiadzin Gospels, ca. 600, shows a form closely related to these early Byzantine chalices (sixth-seventh centuries) found through excavation. The structure and designs on the base and the knop reflect eastern, western, and purely Armenian usage. No typography has been established, but the Cilician Museum collection lends itself for such study for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sixteenth and seventeenth-century Armenian chalices are extremely rare and none have survived before then.

The three oldest Cilician Museum chalices – 1758 (Sis), 1760 (Constantinople), 1769 (Sis?) – are stylistically similar and seem to come from the same workshop (Fig. 3). I have described each carefully in the draft catalogue of the Cilician Museum. The decorative scheme involves or echoes the theme of the Last Supper and depicts the Apostles, as did many of the earliest Byzantine chalices. Though the Apostles are depicted on them, there is no consistency in number or in the choice except that more often than not Thaddeus and Bartholomew are included satisfying the Armenian Church tradition of an apostolic succession through them. I have treated the question of which Apostles are depicted in Armenian art elsewhere.³ Each of the three chalices has a rather large tapered base with eight tongue-shaped compartments terminating roundel-busts of a selection of Apostles. The base design and the multi-formed knop in the center take their inspiration from renaissance European chalices. As with most Armenian liturgical metal work the task of tracing the origin of the motifs or separating borrowed from indigenous designs has hardly begun. But these early surviving examples and similar ones in other Armenian collections point to a strong influence from the West.⁴

2. Silver manuscript bindings

From earliest times the Gospel-book was always treated with enormous respect and reverence. The famous Etchmiadzin Gospel of 989 is bound with ivory plaques of c. 600. Few bindings in silver survive from ancient times. The oldest and most finely crafted covers, as already mentioned, are dated 1254 on the

³ Dickran Kouymjian, "Identifying the Apostles in Armenian Narrative Miniatures," *From Byzantium to Iran: Armenian Studies in Honour of Nina G. Garsoïan*, Jean-Pierre Mahé and Robert W. Thomson, eds., Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997, pp. 453-474.

⁴ For general remarks see the description of an eighteenth-century chalice from Etchmiadzin: Dickran Kouymjian, "#191 Calice 1756," *Armenia sacra*, p. 421.

Bardzrberd Gospel in the Cilician Museum (Fig. 1). The central motif of the upper cover is the Crucifixion accompanied by busts of the Virgin, John the Evangelist, and the Apostles, with angels and the Evangelists full-length; on the lower cover Christ is enthroned. Another silver binding dated 1255 on a Cilician manuscript in the Matenadaran shows a Deisis (Christ flanked by the Virgin and John the Baptist) on the upper cover and the four Evangelists standing together on the lower. The most popular theme of the upper cover of these manuscript bindings is the Crucifixion, while the lower cover is often reserved for the Resurrection, following a tradition inherited from leather bindings. Other scenes, however, are common: for instance the Presentation of the Magi and the Ascension. Hundreds of silver covers survive from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. They display a great diversity of style and decoration varying from finely crafted works in a naturalistic, classic style to robust and naive works in a purely Armenian mode. Many from the nineteenth century may have been produced in non-Armenian workshops and inscribed in Armenian. In recent years Sylvie Merian and Armen Malkassian in Erevan have done preliminary studies of groups of these.⁵

A large number of eighteenth and nineteenth century silver bindings, from Armenian



⁵ Sylvie Merian, "Silver Covers," in T. Mathews and R. S. Wieck, *Treasures in Heaven, Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts*, NY: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1994, pp. 115-123; Armen Malkassian, on silver bindings, "Kesarahay kazmarvesti' patmut'yunits' (XVII-XVIIIth darer), [From the History of the Bishops Art of Caesarea], *Armenia sacra*, vol. 53 (1996) *Chalices of 1758 (Sis) and 1760 (Sis or Constantinople)* 5-6), pp. 174-190.



(Fig. 4) *Antelias, Cilicia Museum, silver binding (post-1769) on a Gospels printed in Constantinople in 1769. Upper cover, Crucifixion with the 12 Apostles in the border and Evangelists symbols in the corners; lower cover, Resurrection, both covers displaying Western iconography.*

centers in eastern Asia Minor, employ a standard formula for their decoration. A scene of the Crucifixion is fashioned on the upper cover, the Resurrection on the lower (Fig. 4).⁶ Likewise, in the large corpus of Armenian leather bindings from New Julfa,⁷ the Crucifixion remains the steady motif of the upper cover, the Resurrection has given way to the Virgin Mary on the lower cover (Fig. 5), a phenomenon also encountered among silver plaques. Their binders either seem to have moved away from the earlier tradition, or sim-

⁶ For example, a late eighteenth-century silver binding on Antelias ms no. 50, a printed Gospel book of 1769, published in Anna Ballian, ed., *Armenian Relics of Cilicia from the Museum of the Catholicosate in Antelias, Lebanon*, Benaki Museum, Athens: Olkos, 2002, figs. 8-9.

⁷ For examples, Dickran Kouymjian, "The New Julfa Style of Armenian Manuscript Binding," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies*, vol. 8 (1995, pub. 1997), pp. 13-36.

ply failed to understand it. It should be pointed out, without discussing the details, that the earliest Armenian silver bindings do not display the conventions of either contemporary leather covers or later silver ones.

There was a clear and enduring decorative tradition on tooled leather bindings of Armenian Gospel manuscripts, understood by the artisans who executed them. These designs offered a short and dramatic summary of the subject of the Gospels: the Crucifixion and saving Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The scenes were represented symbolically by means of a cross and a rectangle. In later centuries when the meaning of the rectangle was lost, some binders, probably secular craftsmen as opposed to the monks of the earlier centuries, simply replaced it with a visually clearer and more easily understood image of the Resurrection to match what by then had become a very iconic Crucifixion in place of the barren braided cross. Indeed, in the late tradition in both leather and silver bindings, many lower

covers bore an image of the Virgin in place of the Resurrection.⁸

Later, especially after the seventeenth century, the new iconography for the Resurrection showing Christ rising up from the tomb,

(Resurrection) continued to be used on leather Gospel bindings right up to the end of Armenian manuscript production, as we can see in the example of 1651 from the remote Monastery of Tat'ev (Fig. 6).⁹



(Fig. 5) Venice, San Lazzaro, Mekhitarist Library, ms V1351. Grigor of Tat'ev *Religious Questions*, copied and bound by Tēr Mkrtič' in Isfahan in 1695. Upper cover: Crucifixion with sunburst, inscribed 1695; lower cover, the Virgin in a starburst.

again an importation from the West, was quickly and permanently adopted for the back of silver Gospel bindings. I know of no example of a silver binding with the rectangle design standing alone, whereas in the leather binding tradition, especially in remote monasteries that were conservative by nature, the braided cross (Crucifixion) and rectangle

⁸ For a complete discussion see Dickran Kouymjian, "The Decoration of Medieval Armenian Manuscript Bindings," *Le reliure médiévale*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), pp. 209-218, esp. p. 214, and *idem*, "Post-Byzantine Armenian Bookbinding and Its Relationship to the Greek Tradition," *Vivlioamphiasts 3. The Book in Byzantium: Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Bookbinding*, Niki Tsironis, editor, Athens, 2008, pp. 163-176.

⁹ The covers of fig. 6 may be viewed as color slides in Dickran Kouymjian, *The Arts of Armenia (Accompanied by a Collection of 300 Slides in Color)*, Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1992, nos. 298-300; they are also available on the Armenian Studies Program, CSU Fresno, website: http://armenianstudies.csufresno.edu/arts_of_armenia/index.htm.



(Fig. 6) Venice, San Lazzaro, Mekhitarist Library, ms V1476, Gospel copied and bound at Tat'ev Monastery in 1651. Traditional Armenian binding with braided cross on a stepped pedestal on the upper cover and a braided rectangle on the lower cover.

3. Right hand reliquaries

The right arm reliquary or dexter (*aġ* in Armenian) is probably the most characteristic of Armenian relic containers; some forty have been identified, more than half of them in the various museums of Holy Etchmiadzin.¹⁰ They preserve relics of the most important Christian and Armenian saints. Only two of them belong

¹⁰ On Armenian reliquaries see Dickran Kouymjian, "Reliques et reliquaires. Comment les Arméniens honorent leurs saints," *ARMENIACA 2. La culture arménienne hier et aujourd'hui*, Actes du Colloque "La culture arménienne hier et aujourd'hui, 1600 ans après la création de l'alphabet," Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, 16-17 mars 2007, Robert Dermerguérian and Patrick Donabédian, eds. (Aix-en-Provence, 2008), 171-182. See also Kouymjian, "L'orfèverie liturgique en Arménie," *Ors et trésors d'Arménie*, pp. 78-89, especially 80-84 on reliquaries.

to women, both to St. Hġip'simē, whose martyrdom in the first quarter of the fourth century led to Armenia's adoption of Christianity.¹¹ Beside St. Gregory the Illuminator (five known arm reliquaries),¹² founder of the Armenian church (first quarter of the fourth century), there are only a handful of other Armenian figures honored by an arm reliquary, and most of them are directly involved in the conversion: St. Hġip'simē, Step'annōs a priest of the Hġip'simeanc', St. Aristakēs, son and successor to St. Gregory (two dexters). The others are St. Sahak Partew, catholicos at the time of the invention of the Armenian alphabet in the

¹¹ Both are discussed in Dickran Kouymjian, "No. 5, Bras-reliquaire de sainte Rhipsimé," *Armenia sacra*, p. 34.

¹² Details in Kouymjian, "The Right Hand of St. Gregory," pp. 230-234.

first years of the fifth century; Levond the priest, martyred in Persia just after the battle of Vardananc' (451), who struggled in the same century to preserve Christianity in Armenia; Suk'ias of the Suk'iasanc' family, martyred in the early second century. The last three reliquaries are known only through an inventory of 1445 of the relics and reliquaries preserved at Holy Etchmiadzin.¹³ The dexters of these seven figures, a total of 12, represented fewer than a third of such reliquaries. The majority encases the bones of the Apostles and non-Armenian saints. The arm reliquary of St. Thaddeus the Apostle is one from this group¹⁴; other Apostles so graced in Armenia include St. Andrew,¹⁵ St. James, St. James the Less, St. Thomas, St. Paul, St. Ananias, to which we might add St. John the Baptist (three dexters),¹⁶ St. Stephen the Protomartyr, St. Nicholas, and St. Sylvester.¹⁷

As has been pointed out, the dexter of St. Nicolas and other Armenian arm reliquaries have no real bases and were not intended to be placed upright on the altar.¹⁸ This is quite in contrast to European examples, which have very sturdy bases and are almost always dis-

played upright. This pronounced difference probably arises from the function of these objects in the respective churches. In the West, the arm relic, showing the hand of the saint or bishop to whom it belonged, making the sign of the cross, was placed on the altar and symbolically, the saint, now in Heaven, provided a benediction directly from God to the congregation. The presiding priest, when not a bishop, would hold the dexter before the faithful at the end of the mass and with it make the sign of the cross as benediction to those present.¹⁹ In Armenia this practice is unknown. Arm reliquaries were used during certain services and are indispensable for some of them. Dexters are sometimes still used to dedicate new altars, also a common practice in the early centuries in Europe²⁰ and Armenia,²¹ but with relics of saints being incorporated within the structure. They are also used for consecrating baptismal altars and fonts and corner stones of churches and monasteries. These practices are, however, limited because there exist few arm reliquaries outside of the four patriarchal centers: the catholicosates of Etchmiadzin and Cilicia/Antelias, and the Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Constantinople/Istanbul. Unlike Europe where the remains of local saints were graced with arm reliquaries, only the most important figures of early Christianity and the founders and defenders of the Armenian Church are so honored. On the other hand, the most important arm reliquaries, particularly that of St. Gregory the Illuminator, are used for specific rites: the consecration of the catholicos and at times bishops and the elaborate liturgical ceremony of the blessing of the Saint Chrême (*Surp Miwton*).

The right hand reliquary of St. Nicholas the Thaumaturg (Fig. 2) is kept in the Cilician

¹³ Babgen Kiwlēsērian (Gulesserian), *Patmutiwn kat'oghikosac' kilikioy (1441-en minch'ew merore)*, (History of the Catholicosate of Cilicia [1441 to the Present]), Antelias, 1939, cols. 1299-1300.

¹⁴ Kouymjian, "No. 190 Bras-reliquaire de saint Thaddée," *Armenia sacra*, p. 420.

¹⁵ Kouymjian, "No. 186 Bras-reliquaire de saint André," *Armenia sacra*, pp. 414-5.

¹⁶ Kouymjian, "No. 122 Reliquaire de la main de saint Jean-Baptiste," *Armenia Sacra*, pp. 279-280.

¹⁷ The latter two, both preserved in the Cilician Museum of the Catholicosate of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon, are well illustrated in Hermann Goltz and Klaus E. Göltz, *Rescued Armenian Treasures from Cilicia. Sacred Art of the Kilikia Museum Antelias, Lebanon*, exhibition held at the State Gallery Moritzburg Halle, Art Museum of Saxony-Anhalt (Wiesbaden, 2000), 90-91, and Ballian, *Armenian Relics of Cilicia*, pp. 74, 85. The Cilician Catholicosate also has one of the two most important dexters of St. Gregory, illustrated in both these volumes.

¹⁸ Kouymjian, "L'orfèverie liturgique," p. 83.

¹⁹ Cynthia Hahn, "The Voices of Saints, Speaking Reliquaries," *Gesta* 36/1 (1997), p. 22.

²⁰ C. Walker Bynum and P. Gerson, "Body-Part Reliquaries and Body Parts in the Middle Ages," *Gesta* 36/1 (1997), p. 3.

²¹ Kouymjian, "The Right Hand of St. Gregory," p. 223.

Museum. According to one of its five inscriptions it was restored (or possibly made) in 1315 in Sis, then the capital of the Armenia kingdom of Cilicia and the residence of the Catholicos of All Armenians.²² I have speculated elsewhere that if 1315 is the date of restoration, the original reliquary was made in the second half of the thirteenth century.²³ I have suggested to understand better these reliquaries, it would be instructive to X-ray them to see just how much of the bones of the saint preserved in them survives; such work has been done by other museums and has provided valuable results and images such as one in the Cleveland Museum of a twelfth century European dexter (Fig. 7). It is up to the spiritual authorities that control the fate of these church collections to move forward with such scientific inspection.²⁴



(Fig. 7) *Cleveland Museum, dexter from Hildeshim, ca. 1195 and X-ray of the same object showing the bone inside.*

²² Full inscriptions in Kouymjian, "No. 120 Bras-reliquaire de saint Nicolas," *Armenia sacra*, pp. 276-7.

²³ Dickran Kouymjian, "The Armenian Right Arm Reliquary of St. Nicholas," *Studies in Honor of Thomas F. Mathews*, in press.

²⁴ I have suggested to the catholicos of both Holy Sees to undertake such investigations.

CONCLUSION

The study of any collection of items requires a methodology. This is as true for texts as it is for material objects. Certain methodologies apply to nearly all categories, for instance classification and arrangement into discrete groups, in the case of liturgical objects – textiles, metalwork, manuscripts – and these into subgroups.

The Cilician Museum preserves the unique historical collection of liturgical items used in an Armenian Holy See that was willfully destroyed and its clergy as well as the multitude of the faithful killed or driven away from the wide expanse of its centuries-old homeland, a collection that dates from before the 1915 genocide. Beside the intrinsic value of specific objects, their totality as a preserved group of liturgical objects of an annihilated locality of a catholicosate is of inestimable value.

A holistic approach to their study, however, can only be properly made after each item or group of items has been minutely examined and described. Profiles of the elements that need to be elucidated are:

A. Their classification

1. The place of each item within the group of similar Armenian objects.

2. The relationship to similar objects from other Christian liturgical traditions, Eastern or Western.

3. The developmental history of the class of each liturgical object from earliest Christian times.

B. Function of the object: How is it used in the liturgy, with reference to textual citations.

C. Provenance: When and where was the vessel fashioned, by whom and for whom, including the recording of all inscriptions.

D. A detailed description of the item.

If this work is properly done for the Cilician Museum collection, even though it is not the largest, it will serve as the model, the paradigm, for the organization and publication of

the other Armenian liturgical collections.