Notes on Armenian Codicology. Part 2.
Armenian Palaeography: Dating the Major Scripts

The present article continues the introduction to Armenian codicology which appeared in *COMSt Newsletter* 4, 2012, pp. 18–23.

A historical dimension which Armenian writing shares with almost no other ancient language is the secure knowledge of just when and by whom the Armenian alphabet was invented: between 404-406 by Mesrop Maštoc', precocious monk with close ties to the catholicos and king of his time, both of whom encouraged him. Much has been written about the creation of the original thirty-six letters, an invention intimately tied to Christianity and a source of pride to a people who have had a turbulent history.[1] This creation *ex nihilo* effectively eliminates any discussion of the evolution of Armenian from earlier proto scripts, a factor that complicates the study of early Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew writing.[2] Armenian is not unique in this respect, since Georgian and the virtually vanished language of the Caucasian Albanians[3] were invented shortly after by the same monk Maštoc', at least according to contemporary Armenian sources, but fiercely disputed by many modern day Georgian scholars. Later of course there is the somewhat different example of the invention of Cyrillic.

The theoretical result is a precise form for the letters of an alphabet conceptualised at a specific time and place by a religious scholar. Methodologically one can imagine describing the slow changes, perhaps evolution, of the letters over the centuries to produce an intelligible profile of the course of Armenian palaeography. Unfortunately, this is not possible in any linear way, at least for the earliest period of evolution, simply because no example of fifth century Armenian manuscript writing has survived. There are undated fragments of stone inscriptions from the Holy Land of the fifth century, innumerable fifth to seventh century graffiti from the Sinai of Armenian pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem, a couple of metal crosses which bear inscriptions of the sixth or seventh century, and the famous fifth to seventh century mosaics with Armenian inscriptions from greater Jerusalem. However, when it comes to manuscript script, the only early example of Armenian is on a unique papyrus from Egypt (fig. 1) now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which I believe to date from the sixth century, but in all probability before the Arab invasion of 640.[4] The small document is precious but poses many questions, beginning with its text, which is entirely in Greek, though written with Armenian letters.[5] Furthermore, not only is it unique as the only existing Armenian papyrus, but also the form of its script has no parallel. Scholars, mostly working in Armenia, have dated parchment fragments and at least two whole manuscripts to the seventh and eighth centuries, some even to the fifth, but there is no unanimity on this matter, though recent palimpsest studies reveal pre-ninth century underwriting.[6]

For the palaeographer neat classification and distinct periodisation are easier to work with than a confused tradition. Armenian script styles are neither neat nor clean cut. The use of one type with another is common. Real standardisation only occurs universally after the advent of printing, when the idiosyncrasies of the scribe are abandoned for total consistency in letterforms. The only other moment when there was a quasi uniformity was under the patronage of the aristocracy and the high clergy during the Cilician kingdom (1198–1375), which gave birth to a near print-like minuscule (*bolorgir*). Yakob Tašian[7] remarked that rounded *erkat'agir* (majuscule) also had an extraordinary consistency in Gospel manuscripts of the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries irrespective of the region where the manuscript was copied. Even after the start of printing in 1512, scribes continued to mix scripts right up to the nineteenth century. The most recent Armenian manuscript catalogues, those of Erevan, Antelias, and recently Paris, have started the excellent habit of including a small photographic sample of the script of each manuscript as well as of older guard leaves.

The first precisely dated codices are two Gospels from the second half of the ninth century after which there is a steady and ever increasing number of specifically dated codices. The challenge is to try to reconstruct what happened to Armenian writing in the four centuries that separate Mesrop and his students from the Mlk'ē Gospel of 862. The script

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1   As may be expected there is an enormous amount of literature on the invention of the Armenian alphabet. The primary source is a biography of St. Mesrop (362–440) written by his pupil Koriun shortly after his death; for a recent critical translation, see Mahé 2005–07.

2   For a convincing study on how Maštoc' logically constructed the Armenian alphabet, see Mouraviev 2010.

3   On the only surviving Caucasian Albanian manuscript, a palimpsest, see Gippert – Schulze – Aleksidze – Mahé 2008–10.

4   See Kouymjian 1996 and 1998.

5   For a careful analysis with full bibliography, see Kouymjian 2002b; for an analysis of the Greek text (a series of grammatical exercises and short literary excerpts), Clackson 2000.

6   See Gippert et al. III, 2010.

7   Tašian 1898.

Fig. 1. Armeno-Greek papyrus, c. 600, BnF, arm. 332, verso.

of all early dated or datable manuscripts, almost exclusively Gospels, is an upright majuscule called *erkat'agir*, literally iron letters. These were the ones used in the Jerusalem mosaics and on a number of lapidary inscriptions preserved or recorded on palaeo-Christian Armenian churches, but they differ greatly from the script of the papyrus or the graffiti.

If then we are to approach the history of Armenian palaeography from a theoretical point of view, our first interest might be to try to determine or reconstruct the form of Mesrop's letters and their evolution into the writing we view today on extant manuscripts. Is this a productive exercise toward the goal of producing a useful "Introduction to Oriental Manuscript Studies", or should one rather work to provide practical tools for reading the scripts used in the vast majority of works in these languages, and thus put aside such pursuits as the history and evolution of scripts or the decipherment of unusual, at times unique, hands? A compromise response might be both, but to decide on what proportion of one or the other to include would predicate a defined goal or at least a sense of who would be the end users of such an Introduction.

On the other hand if our excursion into palaeography is intended to aid the cataloguer of a disparate collection of manuscripts among which there are one or more Armenian specimens, then an overview of the types of scripts used over time and perhaps in different regions would allow for a preliminary classification by a non-specialist. For this perhaps the best approach is to describe the major scripts found in Armenian manuscripts and comment on problems associated with assigning dates and perhaps even elucidating the literature contained in the works.

Armenian script names can be assigned to two categories: (1) those which were used by scribes in ancient and medieval times, perhaps this can be called the received tradition, and (2) those terms which were created by early modern scholars — palaeographers or proto-palaeographers — writing well after the tradition of producing books by hand had given way to printing. In the first category, I would suggest, only three terms qualify: traditional *erkat'agir, bolorgir*, and *nōtrgir*. Each has some textual (manuscript) pedigree. In the second group would be variants of the latter: *anc'man gir* (transitional scripts), *mijin* or *ułłagic* (intermediate/ semi or angular) *erkat'agir, p'ok'r* or *manr* (small) *erkat'agir,* and *šłagir* (modern cursive). Even terms like *pun* (original), *boloracev* (rounded), or Mesropian *erkat'agir* are analytical ones of palaeographers. On the other hand, the names of certain decorative scripts have textual antecedents.

This second group represents expressions that clearly describe the type of script: size, geometry of the ductus, thinness or slant or relationship to other scripts (i.e. transitional forms). Confounded by the contradiction between etymological meaning and the appearance of the letters described, Tašian agreed with Hugo Schuchardt that the terms *erkat'agir* and *bolorgir* did not conform to the letters one would expect from the name.[8] Ašot Abrahamyan went so far as to say that even certain terms used to describe scripts of other languages fail to invoke the look of the letters, thus reflecting a generalised situation in palaeographic terminology not unique to Armenian. Only the briefest attention has been given to the origin and exact meaning of the labels used to describe the various scripts, some of them
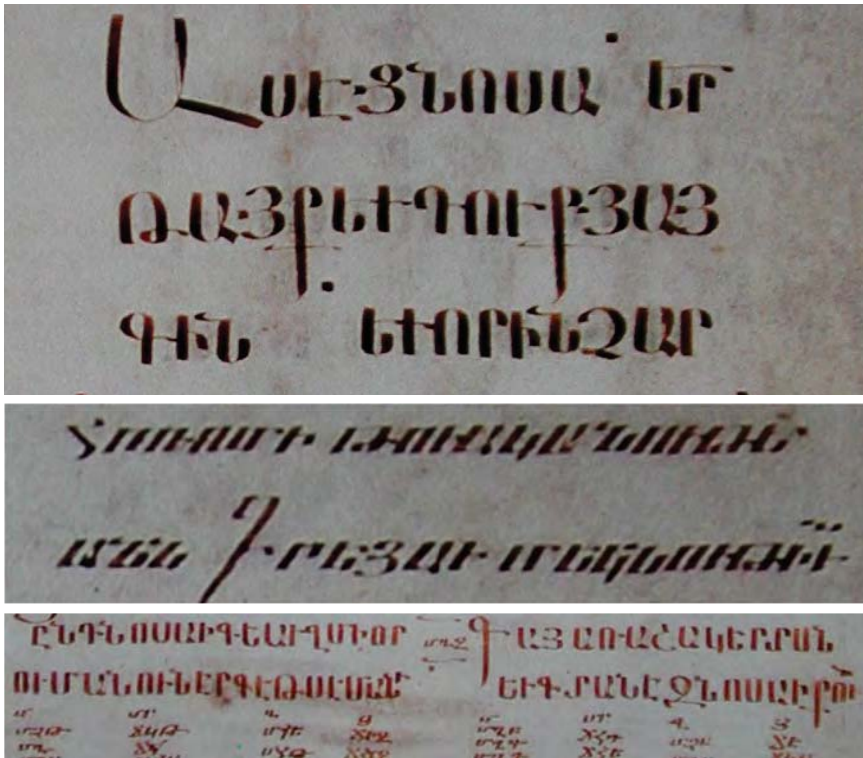
8   Kouymjian 2002a:25.

Fig. 2. *Erkat'agir*. a. Mesropian *erkat'agir*, Queen Mlk'ē Gospels, 862, Venice V1144, f. 89; b. angular slanted *erkat'agir*, Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary*, 973, Erevan M2684, f. 240; c. small *erkat'agir*, Gospels, 986, Erevan M7735, f. 128.

going back many centuries. The lack of an updated historical dictionary makes the investigation of these terms frustrating.[9]

More than two decades ago Michael Stone, Henning Lehmann, and I set out to produce the *Album of Armenian Paleography* in order to present an up-to-date study-manual of the discipline. The large folio volume with 200 full-colour examples in actual size of an equal number of precisely dated manuscripts from the earliest preserved dated Gospel to the twentieth century contains letter analyses for each sample and exhaustive tables of the evolution of each letter of the alphabet over the centuries. We used what was a quarter of a century ago new computer technology to extract the individual letters from high-resolution scans rather than reverting to traditional skillful drawings or photographs. The book was published in 2002 with a near identical Armenian version in 2006, making it accessible to what we might call the target audience, researchers with strong Armenian language skills.

In the *Album of Armenian Paleography*, I presented in elaborate detail almost everything important on the development of Armenian manuscript writing.[10] Nevertheless, there are still questions and problems. Research on the origin of each of

the thirty-six letters has provided a reasonable explanation for the source of this extremely flexible and rich collection of consonants and vowels. The name of each of the four main scripts is designated by a word ending in *-gir*, letter, and preceded by a qualifying term as a descriptive.

A. Erkat'agir

Erkat'agir, iron letters or writing, has perplexed almost all palaeographers.[11] In its most majestic form,

Date	Mss	Erkat'agir	Bolorgir
600-850	8 n.d.	8	
0851-875	1	1	
0876-900	1	1	
0901-925	2	2	
0926-950	0		
0951-975	4	4	
0976-1000	4	3	1
1001-1025	3	3	
1026-1050	12	12	
1051-1075	9	9	
1076-1100	4	3	
1101-1125	2	1	1
1126-1150	1		
1151-1175	13	5	4
1176-1200	21	3	11
1201-1225	25	6	12
1226-1250	23	2	15
1251-1275	46	3	33
1276-1300	84	1	69
1301-1325	62	0	61
1326-1350	63	0	60
1351-1375	45	0	48
1376-1400	32	0	28

Table 1. Sampling of 455 dated manuscripts to 1400. Script: Majuscule (*Erkat'agir*) vs. Minuscule (*Bolorgir*).

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9 The famous Mekhitarist dictionary of 1836–37, *NBHL*, though a monumental achievement and well ahead of its time, has not been updated. Ačaṙian 1926–35 (repr. 1971–79) is of some value. Individual concordances of the Bible and Armenian historical texts (the latter hard of access) must be consulted one by one. The Armenian text databases in Leiden and Erevan are quickly becoming the most complete tools for searching Armenian vocabulary in medieval texts.

10 Kouymjian 2002a:12–75.

11 An attempt to resolve the problem can be found in Kouymjian 2002a:66–67.

Fig. 3. *Bolorgir.* a. Cilician *bolorgir* marked with neumes, *Lectionary* of Het'um II, 1286, Hromkla, Erevan, M979, f. 199; b. later *bolorgir*, works of Gregory Naziansus, Cyril of Alexandria, 1688, Ispahan, Venice Mekhitarist V1028, f. 95.

the script is found in all early Gospel books; it is a grand script in capitals similar to the imposing uncials of early Latin manuscripts (fig. 2a-c). It is the form employed in most Armenian lapidary inscriptions, though in a more angular style, up through the tenth century. As table 1 shows it was virtually the only script employed for the parchment codex until the mid-twelfth century, and the exceptions include no Gospel or Biblical texts.

B. *Bolorgir*

Bolorgir, or minuscule, with compact and very regular shapes employing ascenders and descenders (fig. 4a-b), dominated scribal hands from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, and continued well into the nineteenth. Ultimately it became the model for lowercase Armenian type fonts just as *erkat'agir* became the prototype for capital letters in printed books. *Bolorgir's* use for short phrases and colophons and even for copying an entire manuscript is clearly attested by the late tenth century.[12] It appears

even earlier, or at least some of the *bolorgir* letterforms are found in the pre-seventh century Armenian papyrus (fig. 1). Like medieval Latin and Greek minuscule, *bolorgir* uses majuscule or *erkat'agir* for capitals, resulting in quite different shapes for many upper and lower case letters. Most authorities argue that the spread of *bolorgir* was due to time and economics: it saved valuable parchment because many more words could be copied on a page, and it conserved time because letters could be formed with fewer pen strokes than the three, four, or even five needed for the ductus of *erkat'agir*.[13]

A major question concerning Armenian palaeography is: What letters did Mesrop Maštoc' use? Most scholars hold that Mesrop invented and used a large, upright rounded majuscule, similar to that found in early lapidary inscriptions, and thus they called it Mesropian *erkat'agir*. Indeed Serge Mouraviev's scientific reconstruction of how Maštoc' proceeded systematically from a half a dozen basic

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[12] The oldest paper manuscript, M2679, a *Miscellany* of 971 or 981, uses a mixed *erkat'agir-bolorgir* script.

[13] For instance Mercier 1978–79:53: "Is it not also possible that bolorgir, used at first informally, was elevated to formal status because of considerations of time and expense?"
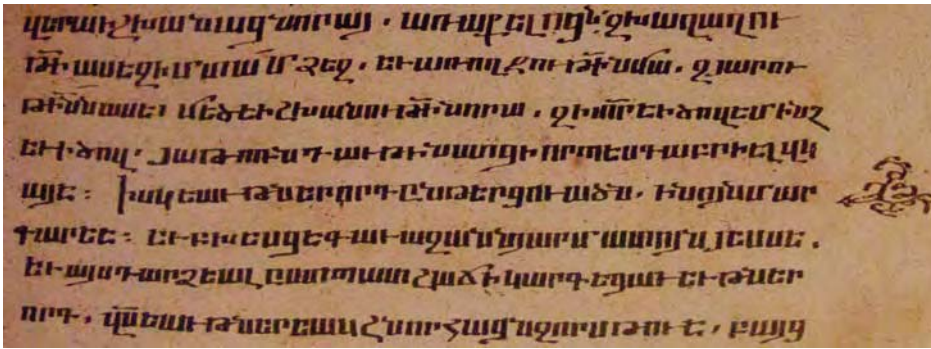
Fig. 4. Mixed *erkatʻagir-bolorgir* script, *Miscellany*, 1231–34, from Sanahin, Erevan, M1204, f. 129.

forms (including two and their mirror images that produced four of the six) to which were added in a consistent manner descenders and ascenders and lateral strokes to the right and left, would in itself preclude any suggestion of evolution.[14] It has been argued that this script eventually went through various changes – slanted, angular, small *erkatʻagir* (fig. 2b-c) – and eventually evolved into *bolorgir* (fig. 3a-b), and in time into *nōtrgir* (fig. 5) and *šłagir* (fig. 6), the post sixteenth-century cursives. Doubt about such a theory started quite early; Yakob Tašian himself, the pioneer of the scientific study of Armenian palaeography, hesitated, but Karo Łafadaryan in 1939 even maintained that *bolorgir* already existed in the time of Mesrop.[15]

It was also once believed that minuscule gradually developed from earlier formal Latin and Greek majuscule found in inscriptions and the oldest manuscripts. But the late nineteenth-century discovery in Egypt of thousands of Greek and Roman papyri forced scholars to abandon this notion. Some scholars trace the roots of Greek cursive of the ninth century back to the informal cursive of pre-Christian papyri. Latin minuscule is evident already in third-century papyri.[16] Is it possible that along with majuscule *erkatʻagir* some form of an informal cursive script, which later developed into *bolorgir,* was available in the fifth century?[17]

Uncial was used in the West for more formal writing: Gospels, important religious works, and luxury manuscripts. The data gathered for the *Album of Armenian Palaeography* point to a similar pattern. The earliest *bolorgir* manuscripts (tenth century) appear chronological anomalous until one notes that they are philosophical or non-liturgical texts rather than Gospels.

Examination of pre-Christian Latin papyri shows

the origins of Caroline script, which is similar to Armenian *bolorgir*, in earlier cursive minuscule found in them. But the invention of the Armenian alphabet in the early fifth century precludes any pre-Christian antecedents.[18] Greek and Syriac, the languages that most influenced Mesrop Maštocʻ in creating the Armenian alphabet, used both cursive and majuscule in that period. It is difficult to imagine that Mesrop and his pupils, as they translated the Bible, a task that took decades, would have used the laborious original *erkatʻagir* for drafts as they went along. The use of the faster-to-write intermediate *erkatʻagir* seems more than probable, yet it was not a minuscule script nor cursive. Unfortunately, except for the papyrus, no such cursive documents in Armenian have survived before the thirteenth century.[19] Deciding between a theory of evolution to *bolorgir* versus the notion that *erkatʻagir* and more cursive scripts co-existed from the fifth century is still an open question.[20]

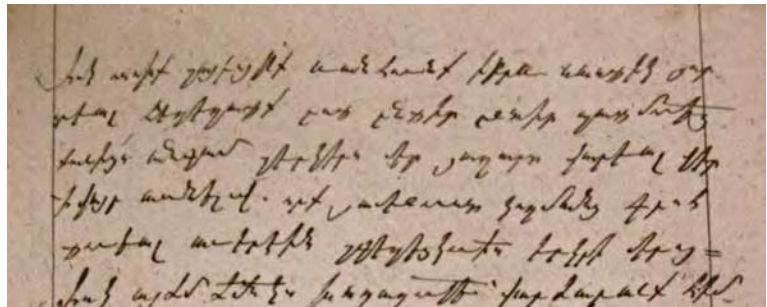### C. Mixed *Erkatʻagir-Bolorgir* Script

From the mid-eleventh to the end of the thirteenth century a somewhat bastardised script was noticed among certain manuscript (fig. 4), mostly from Greater Armenia to the northeast, which employed both uncials and minuscule letters – *erkatʻagir* and *bolorgir* – in the same document. It was named "transitional script" by early palaeographers, however, my colleague and co-author Michael Stone, during the preparation of our *Album of Armenian Palaeography*, proposed that it was a separate script and published an article to that effect in addition to his comments in

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[14] Mouraviev 2010:20-45 with abundant tables.

[15] See the discussion in Kouymjian 2002a:70–71.

[16] Bischoff 1985:70.

[17] Mercier 1978–79:57, seemed inclined toward such an hypothesis, "Si, dès le 10e s., on trouve capitale et minuscule, on n'en peut conclure que ces deux écritures ont toujours coexisté"; yet, there were 500 years between the invention of the Armenian alphabet and the tenth century, plenty of time for an evolution to *bolorgir*.

[18] Indeed, we have no Armenian manuscript writing with a specific date before the ninth century. Some scholars claim that an undated manuscript (M11056) is older and that some fragments in Erevan are from the fifth century, hopefully recent and continuing study of Armenian palimpsests will result in better grounded conclusions on their dates.

[19] The earliest Armenian chancellery documents are from the Cilician court (thirteenth century) and by then minuscule *bolorgir* was already the standard bookhand.

[20] Łafadaryan (1939:71) believed a minuscule script existed from Maštocʻʼs time not in the form of *bolorgir*, but as *nōtrgir* or notary script.

Fig. 5. Decorative *nōtrgir*, religious *Miscellany*, 1740, Constantinople, Erevan, M101, f. 301.

Fig. 6. *Šłagir*, *Miscellany*, Tabriz and Salmast, 1853-4, Erevan, M5138, f. 19.

the *Album*.[21] I have not fully accepted his argumentation basing my skepticism on what seems to be a trend of more *erkat'agir* letters in the earlier mixed script manuscripts of the period, while toward the end, when *erkat'agir* is disappearing as a manuscript hand, the majority of the letters seem to be *bolorgir*, suggesting a transition. The question is still up in the air, unresolved.

D. *Nōtrgir* and *Šłagir*: The Cursive Scripts[22]

The secretary working as a scribe (in Latin *notarius*) at the Armenian royal court or the Catholicosate, by necessity employed timesaving cursive versions of *bolorgir* and even smaller *nōtrgir* letters (fig. 5). The term could have entered Armenian from either late Byzantine Greek or Latin. Łafadaryan felt there was no convincing antecedent to the script and, therefore, he assumed that it must have had its origins in the early centuries, even in the time of Maštoc'.[23] The script when it became formalised in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was composed of small, but thick, unattached letters made of dots and short lines making those without ascenders or descenders hard to distinguish one from the other.

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[21] Stone 1998.

[22] A longer discussion can be found in Kouymjian 2002a:73–75, section entitled "Nōtrgir (Late Minuscule) and Šłagir (Ligatured Cursive)".

[23] Discussed in Kouymjian 2002a:74.

Šłagir (fig. 6), which is modern handwriting with attached letters, usually thin in ductus (it derives from "fine" and not "slanted" as some believe), is easy to identify; its beginnings are probably at the end of the eighteenth century.

Date	Mss	Parch-ment	Paper	*Erka-t'agir*	*Bolorgir*
600-850	8 n.d.			8	
0851-875	1	1		1	
0876-900	1	1		1	
0901-925	2	2		2	
0926-950	0				
0951-975	4	4		4	
0976-1000	4	3	1	3	1
1001-1025	3	3		3	
1026-1050	12	12		12	
1051-1075	9	9		9	
1076-1100	4	3		3	
1101-1125	2		2	1	1
1126-1150	1		1		
1151-1175	13	7	6	5	4
1176-1200	21	8	13	3	11
1201-1225	25	11	14	6	12
1226-1250	23	14	9	2	15
1251-1275	46	26	20	3	33
1276-1300	84	19	65	1	69
1301-1325	62	17	45	0	61
1326-1350	63	11	52	0	60
1351-1375	45	1	53	0	48
1376-1400	32	2	30	0	28

Table 2. Sampling of 455 dated manuscripts to 1400. Parchment vs. Paper and Majuscule vs. Minuscule.

Conclusion

By the last quarter of the twelfth century minuscule *bolorgir* supplanted majuscule, which was to disappear as a regularly used script about a half-century later (table 1). According to the data I have marshaled in table 2, this did not coincide exactly with the disappearance of parchment, which followed nearly a century after (precise moments indicated in blue and yellow). By the end of the thirteenth century one can say fairly safely that the Armenian manuscript was a codex made up of twelve paper folio quires and written in minuscule *bolorgir*. The only change to be observed in the later period from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century was the gradual addition of the two cursives scripts, *nōtrgir* (fig. 5), the so-called notary script, and *šłagir* (fig. 6), the modern cursive with attached letters.

Addendum: Guide for Cataloguers

Below are some basic rules for Armenian manuscripts that can help in supplying rough dating, if the principal colophon is lacking or there is no one to decipher what is written. For a text written on paper, nine chances out of ten the script is not *erkatʻagir* and the text dates to after 1200. Fly or guard leaves in parchment are almost always from manuscripts dating before that year, thus written in *erkatʻagir* (fig. 2a-c). Paper manuscripts exist in abundance in the three other scripts, *bolorgir*, *nōtrgir*, and *šłagir.* In general the last of these would only be found for modern writing of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, usually letters or documents rather than texts, but if texts, they would be unique items, diaries, dictionaries, practical manuals, memoirs, novels, poetry and other modern literature. A manuscript in *bolorgir* (fig. 3a-b) would almost certainly date from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century after which scribal manuscript copying stops; it would be the preferred script for liturgical works. Finally, a codex in *nōtrgir* (fig. 5) would most likely be of the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Though these are very approximate guidelines, they would in fact be accurate in more than 85 per cent of cases and could be controlled by comparing an unknown item with the plates or charts in the *Album of Armenian Paleography*, or, if one needs a minimalists guide, four good photos, one each of the principal scripts discussed above.

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