THREE ARMENIANS IN MEDIEVAL ICELAND

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Category: Opinions

By Edward Tashjian, Beirut, 24 June 2026

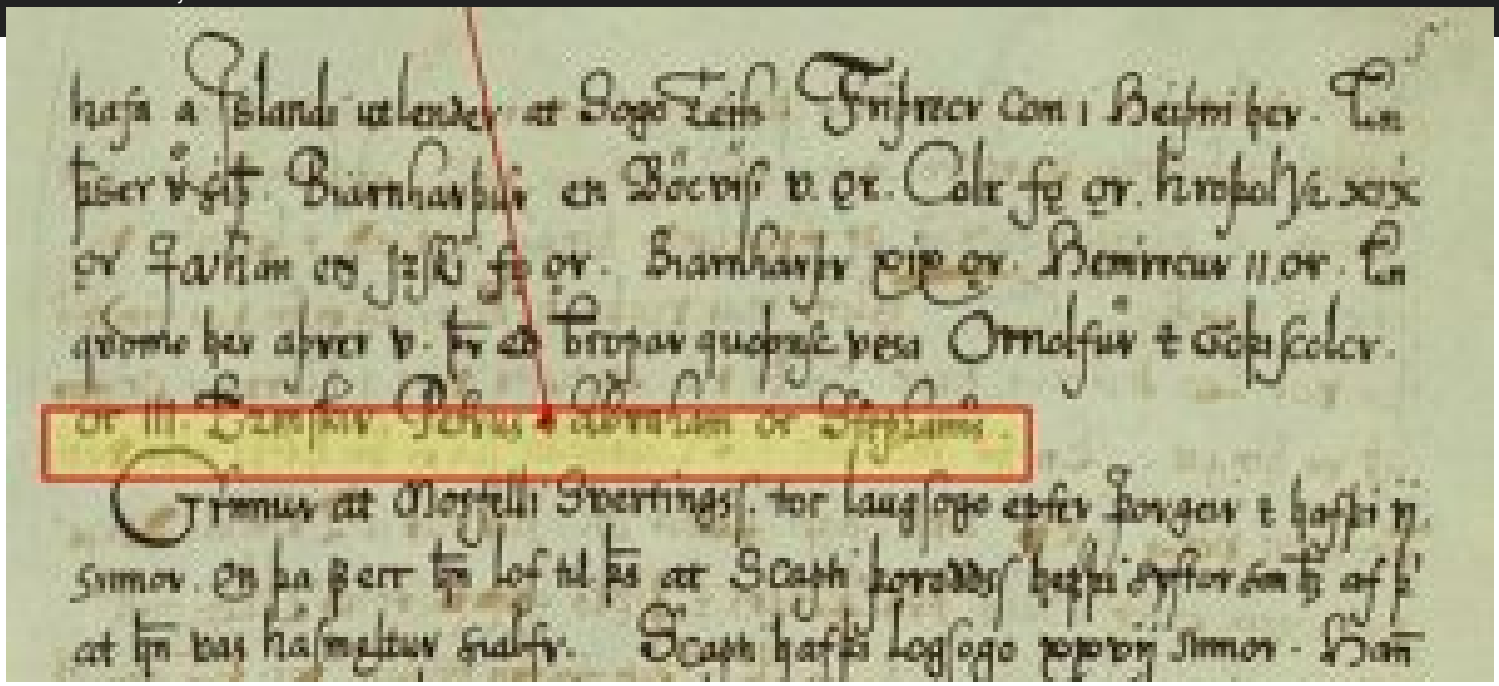
A short passage in one of Iceland's earliest histories preserves three Armenian names: Petrus, Abraham, and Stephanus. In the early twelfth century, the Icelandic priest and historian Ari Thorgilsson listed them among foreign churchmen who had reached Iceland in the eleventh century. He called them the "three *ermskir*." Later Icelandic texts identify Petrus, Abraham, and Stephanus more explicitly as coming from Armenialand. This is the starting point for the limited evidence that survives.

The reference appears in *Íslendingabók*, or *The Book of the Icelanders*, Ari's account of Iceland's settlement, conversion, and early church. In a section on foreign bishops, he adds five men "who claimed to be bishops." Among them are the three Armenians: Petrus, Abraham, and Stephanus. Ari lists them without pausing to explain their presence.

The phrase "claimed to be bishops" applies to all five men, not only the Armenians. Ari may have doubted their standing, or he may simply have marked them as visitors whose authority was not fully accepted in Iceland's developing church. Either way, it shows that episcopal authority was a live question in early Christian Iceland. The sentence separates their presence from the question of their authority.

Ari gives no further details. He does not say where the men came from, whether they travelled together, or what route brought them north. He names no church where they served and no Icelandic community attached to them. No Armenian chronicle has yet been securely connected with Petrus, Abraham, or Stephanus. Three names cannot be turned into a complete story of an Armenian mission to Iceland. That silence sets limits on what the surviving record allows us to reconstruct.

Iceland lies far from the places usually associated with Armenian medieval movement. Ari's sentence does not establish an Armenian community on the island, but it does record Armenian clerics in Iceland. One of the natural questions that arises is: was their visit an isolated episode, or were Armenian churchmen known in Iceland more broadly?



Grágás, the medieval Icelandic law code, gives that question a sharper form. One clause deals with bishops and priests who come to Iceland without knowledge of Latin. It specifically names two groups: *ermskir* and *girskir*, meaning Armenian and Greek/Russian. The wording does not speak vaguely of foreigners: it names the two groups. Icelanders were permitted to attend their services if they wished.

The rest of the clause is more revealing still. Such clergy were not to receive payment for services, and Icelanders could not accept priestly office from them. A bishop who did not know Latin could not consecrate a church or confirm children. If he did so, the act had to be performed again by the resident bishop, and a fine followed. The provision addresses permission to worship and the limits of recognized authority.

Yet, a legal code is not a visitor's logbook. *Grágás* cannot tell us how many Armenian clergy reached Iceland, whether they came before or after Petrus, Abraham, and Stephanus, or whether the clause was written because of any particular visit. Laws can preserve inherited rules and anticipated problems as well as responses to events. Still, the provision shows that Armenian and Greek/Russian clergy formed a meaningful enough category for Icelandic churchmen to regulate. The law tells people what they may do when such clergy appear and which powers they may not recognize. It shows that Icelandic churchmen thought the matter necessary enough to define in law.

That does not prove a sequence of Armenian arrivals after Ari's three men. It does make it harder to dismiss them as a random anecdote. Ari's account gives us three names but *Grágás* places Armenian clergy within a legal discussion of worship, payment, ordination, confirmation, and church consecration. The concern is practical because the law sets the terms of contact between Icelanders and such clergy, defining both the worship they could share and the authority those

clergy could exercise.

The two sources should be read together, but not collapsed into one complete story. *Íslendingabók* records three named Armenians among visiting churchmen in Iceland. *Grágás* sets rules for Armenian and Greek/Russian clergy outside the Latin-speaking hierarchy. Neither proves an Armenian settlement or permanent Armenian church in Iceland. What they give us is concrete evidence: three Armenian names in one of Iceland's earliest histories, followed by a medieval Icelandic law that names Armenian clergy in a rule about worship and authority. It leaves a serious historical question open: how often did Armenian churchmen reach the far North, how influential were they in Iceland, and how much of that contact has disappeared from the record?

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Comments



Antoine S. Terjanian – 2026-06-29 18:12:47
Thank you Mr. Tashjian for this interesting story. Your research confirms the story I had read in a translation of the “Sayn’sche Chronik” by Alexander Graf von Hachenburg (Published by Ludwig Röhrscheid, Bonn, 1929) that Armenian "Bishops" have migrated west (some carrying "holly relics") I have published the story and related photos in the end-note of my Letter from Armenia # 27. Here is the link to the story I published in May 2009 - please go to the End-Note:
https://lettersfromarmenia.blogspot.com/2009/05/letter-27-armenian.html



David Boyajian – 2026-06-28 21:54:10
Fascinating stuff. Thank you. Can this piece be published in Iceland somewhere?