REPATRIATION OF ARMENIAN CULTURAL TREASURE

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Rev. Dr. Nerses Vrej Nersessian, London, 2011

The Gospel of Queen Keran Sis, Cilicia, 1272 A.D.

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"I have saved from captivity this precious garden, this fragrant orchard, this pure and shining book in memory of myself and of my parents, my wife, and my children. Blessed is he with a child in Zion".

The integral part of an Armenian manuscript is its «Յիշատակարան», literally, "place of memory" - derived from the verb «յիշեմ» meaning "to remember, to recollect, to record" which incorporates every detail concerning the production of the manuscript including that of the scribe, artist, sponsor, binder and its owner. The primary purpose of the colophons was to perpetuate the memory of all those who had contributed to the production of the manuscripts, tying them all to the saving powers

of the Armenian Church. From very early on the act of copying a manuscript or receiving a manuscript was considered as an act of piety. The instruction of Christ 'lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust can corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal' (Matthew 6:20). 'The Zion' is the church and 'the child' is the manuscript.

The deep sense of veneration with which manuscripts were regarded account for the abundance of various kinds of warning with respect to the proper handling of manuscripts, as well as anathemas against those who violated these injunctions.

The scribes beseech the owners of the manuscripts, whether individuals or ecclesiastical institutions, not to regard manuscripts as sellable merchandize or an object that can be mortgaged. For instance, a scribe writes:

No one has the authority
To mortgage this for silver,
Or to sell it for money,
For it is free in all respects *(Matenadaran* MS.no. 7446)

The scribes placed a moral obligation on future generations to recover manuscripts carried off as booty, by ransom or other means. In the Middle Ages captured manuscripts were never referred to as booty, but rather, like human beings, they were either 'carried off into captivity', or they were 'rescued or purchased from captivity'. An example of this kind of injunction is found in a Gospel manuscript copied by the scribe Kostandin Vahkatsi in 1413:

Let no one remove it from this place
Let no one hand it over to an infidel.
Should there be any fear from the Muslims,
Let them put it in safekeeping in a fort,
Or take it to the island of Cyprus;
And when the danger has passed
Bring it back to this place
And receive their fitting reward
(Khatchikyan, Colophons XVth century, vol. I, p. 158).

The scribe Avag writes in the colophon dated 1337: "and should anyone dare to steal this holy Gospel, or tear off pages from it, or remove it from the great church of the holy and most immaculate monastery of Tat'ev, may he share the fate of Cain, Judas and the crucifiers and inherit the doleful maledictions, amen". There were also injunctions against tearing off folios from the manuscripts, as in the following colophon written in 1410 by the scribe Step'anos "and whoever approaches this holy book with a sword or a knife and cuts off folios from this book, may the flaming sword cut off his loins" (Matenadaran, MS.4737).

T'oros Roslin, the most celebrated of the 13"' century Armenian artists

The era of the Armenian Cilician Kingdom, between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries, marks the golden age of Armenian manuscript illumination. In the first half of the thirteenth century the most beautiful and sumptuous manuscripts were copied and illuminated under royal patronage by the most famous Armenian artist T'oros Roslin. The following seven manuscripts, dating between 1256 and 1268, are signed by him:

1. The Four Gospels, dated 1256, copied for Catholicos Kostandin I (Erevan, Mat. 10450).
2. The Four Gospels, dated 1260, copied for Catholicos Kostandin I (Jerusalem, Arm. Patr. 251).
3. The Four Gospels, dated 1262, copied for the priest Thoros (Baltimore, Walter's Art Gallery, 539).
4. The Four Gospels, dated 1262, copied for Prince Levon, son of Hethum (Jerusalem, Arm. Patr. 2660).
5. The Four Gospels, dated 1265, copied for the daughter of Kostandin of Lambron, the Lady Keran (Jerusalem, Arm. Patr. 1956).
6. *Mashtots* (Ritual), dated 1266, copied for Bishop Vardan of Hromklay (Jerusalem, Arm. Patr. 2027).
7. The Four Gospels (formerly Jerusalem, Arm. Patr. 3627, now Erevan Mat. 10675).

The Gospel of Queen Keran

Armenian manuscript experts Levon Azarian, Sirarpie Der Nersessian and A. Mkhitarian attribute to T'oros Roslin the following five unsigned manuscripts:

1. Arm. Pat. Jerusalem, MS. 2568
2. Erevan, Mat.MS. 7651
3. Erevan, Mat.MS. 9422
4. Erevan, Mat.MS. 979 and
5. Erevan, Mat.197, dated between 1260 and 1287.

Included among these five is the Queen Keran Gospels, completed in 1272, commissioned on the occasion of her coronation with her consort, King Levon. In the dedicatory picture the Queen is represented on one of the final leaves, together with her husband. King Levon III and their five children - kneeling in front of picture of Christ enthroned flanked by Virgin Mary and John the Baptist . In the long colophon where all the members of the royal family are mentioned, the scribe Avetis writes that when he had completed the copy of the manuscript, the Queen gave it to *'a man skilled and honoured in the art of the scribes, in order to adorn it'* who has been identified as being T'oros Roslin, but according to Prof. S. Der Nersessian "the anonymous illustrator of the Queen Keran (MS. 2563), as gifted a painter as T'oros Roslin if not more so, gave a different impulse to Cilician

paintings". Queen Keran commissioned the Gospels and presented it to the Monastery of Akner.

The full page miniatures include:

Fols.5v-6r. Letter of Eusebius to Carpianus
Fols.7v-16r. Canon Tables
Portraits of the Evangelists with title pages
Fol.l7v.St Matthew
Fol.l80v. St Luke and Theophilus
286v. St John and Prochoros
Full page miniatures
Fol.21r. Nativity
Fol.25r. Baptism of Christ
Fol.69r. Transfiguration
Fol.l66r. Last Supper
Fol.l76r. Resurrection of Christ
Fol.l84r. Annunciation
Fol.l91r. Presentation at the Temple
Fol.333r. Rising of Lazarus
Fol.340v. Washing of the feet
Fol.349. Pentecost
Fol.362v. Crucifixion
Fol.368r. Doubting of Thomas
Fol.380r. Family Portrait of King Levon III, Queen Keran and their five Children

The manuscript was bound in Jerusalem in 1727 in gold *repousse* work by the monks of St James in Jerusalem for the *vardapets* Grigor *Shkhta-yakir* (the Chainbearer,1715-1749), Hovhannes Kolot (1715-1741) and Abraham (II Khosharetsi, 1730-1734). The front cover represents the Crucifixion, and the back the Virgin and Child; on the claps are the four Evangelists.

The repatriation of the two miniatures belonging to the Gospels of Queen Keran

Sometime in the 1910 two leaves from this sumptuous manuscript were torn out and sold. It was bought by the Dutch collector of antiquities Michel Van Rijn and a description of it was published in *Icons and East Christian Works of Art,* edited and published by Michel Van Rijn, Amsterdam, 1980. Under entry 53 there is this description 'Two pages from an Illuminated Manuscript portraying an

evangelist, probably Luke or Mark, and Christ's Ascension. 32 x 22cm, Armenian, 2nd half 13th century (Plates 52 and 53 reproduce the miniatures in full colour).

In 1987 Mr. Thanassis Martinos acquired from a Greek dealer the Van Rijn collection which included the two manuscript leaves. On 18th of May 2011, I received a letter from Mrs. Maria Mersinia, Librarian-archivist on the suggestion of Mr. Timothy Bolton (Medieval Manuscript expert at Sotheby's). In my response I confirmed that the two leaves did belong to an Armenian manuscript and their 'return to its lawful owner would restore the manuscript to its former glory'. In reply I was assured that Mr. Thanassis has no intention to sell the leaves and has the full intention to return the two miniatures as a gift to the Armenian Patriarchate, if I could provide solid proof that the leaves belonged to an Armenian manuscript.

Having investigated the matter and collected all the required documentation I prepared the following brief study for Mr. Thanassis:

Memorandum for the restitution to the Library of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem two illuminated leaves belonging to Jerusalem MS. 2563, dated 1272.

Mr. Thanassis Martinos
Eastern Mediterranean Maritime Limited
69 Grigorioy Lamprald Street
GR-166 75 Glyfada, Athens, Greece

Bibliography

Narkiss, Bezale, ed. *Armenian Art Treasures of Jerusalem,* Phaidon, 1980, Pp.64-74; Portrait of the Royal Family, fol.380 and The Descent of the Holy Ghost (Pentecost, fol.349. Colour plates 77 and 78. Full description on p. 149 (enclosed).

Mkhitarian Arbak, *Treasures of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem,* St James' Press. 1969. Entry no.ll, pp.23-24, figs.ll:l-2. The Royal Family and The Last Supper.

Nersessian Sirarpie Der, *Etudes Byzantines et Armeniennes* = Byzantine and Armenian Studies. Tome I-II. Imprimerie Orientaliste, Lou-vain 1973. See enclosed images: fig.402.fol.l7v.Portrait of St Matthew, **Portrait of St Mark,fol.ll5v missing folio];** fig.405. Portrait of St Luke with Theophilus, fol.l80v. Portrait of St John and Prochoros, fol.286v.

Scenes from the Life of Christ fig.252. The three women at the tomb, fol.l76v; fig.253 Nativity, fol.21v. fig.254. Resurrection of Lazarus, fol.33v., **fig.372 Ascension, foL284v missing folio].**

Nersessian Sirarpie, Der, *Miniature paintings in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia from the twelfth to the fourteenth century.* Vols. I-II. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and collection, Washington D.C. 1993.

Fig.372. **Ascension,** Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate 2563, AD. 1272, foL284v.
Fig.398. **Portrait of St.Mark.** Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate 2563, AD.1272,foL115v.

Disc containing images from the Jerusalem Armenian Ms.2563 prepared on 14th June 2011.

The number of the manuscript can be seen inside the front cover top left corner pasted over the pink coloured doublures.

Portraits of the Evangelist.

In the above listed publications the presence of the portraits are listed as follows:
Fol.l7v. St. Matthew.
Fol. 180v. St Luke and Theophilus.
Fol.286v. St John and Prochoros.

The portrait of St Mark is missing. On the reverse side of the folio in your possession there is the original pagination number 115v, which depicts the Portrait of St Mark. In the disk provided the page on the left has been cut out leaving the title page of the Gospel of St Mark, whose initial word «Ubhqpu» is formed of two confronting lions, which is the customary symbol of the Evangelist. The Portrait of the Evangelist St Mark is reproduced in black and white as Fig.398 by Prof. S. Der Nersessian in her *Miniature paintings in the Armenian Full page miniature.*

In the sequence of the scenes representing the major events in the Life of Christ, the missing miniature is that of the Ascension, which has the original number on the reverse side of the folio as folio 284v, which is clearly demonstrated by the evidence on the disk enclosed. This is also supported by Fig.372 in Prof. S. Der Nersessian's volume on *Miniature paintings in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia,* which is the reproduction in black & white of the image in your collection.

Portrait of King Levon III, Queen Keran and their five children below the image of the enthroned Christ, flanked by the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist. Painted by Toros Roslin (Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Manuscript 2563).

Conclusion

The numberings still in place at the back of the two leaves (folio 115v and folio 284v) leave no doubt in my mind that these two miniatures once belonged to the magnificent Armenian manuscript of the four Gospels in the collection of the Armenian Patriarchate of St James', Jerusalem, as MS.no.2563 called the Queen Keran Gospels. The two miniatures in your collection belong to the Queen Keran Gospels, copied by the scribe Avetis and illuminated by the celebrated artist T'oros Roslin in 1272 AD in Sis the capital city of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia.

In the Middle Ages, captured manuscripts were never referred to as booty, but rather, like human beings, they were either "carried off into captivity", or they were "rescued or purchased from captivity". In a manuscript of the Gospels copied by the scribe Kostandin Vahkatsi in 1413, now in the Patriarchate ofSt James', Jerusalem, the scribe writes:

> Let no one remove it from this place
> Let no one hand it over to an infidel
> Should there for any fear from the Muslims
> Let them put it in a safekeeping in the fort,
> Or take it to the island of Cyprus;
> And when the danger has passed Bring it back to this place,
> And receive their fitting reward (Levon Khtchikyan, Colophons no. 159b,p. 158)

On behalf of the Armenian people and the Brotherhood of St James', Jerusalem, we will forever be grateful for the return of these two leaves "back to its place".

Rev. Dr Vrej Nerses Nersessian
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