15

Between Gusan and Ašuł

Yohannēs Xlat'ec'i and the Porous Borders Negotiated by the Medieval Armenian Bard

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1 Introduction

Various studies have illumined the social status and performance practice of Armenian bards in the Late Antique period, registering their commonalities within the broader Parthian cultural ambience,1 as well as the characteristics of the new florescence of the art in the early modern period from the 16th century in Anatolia and Southern Caucasus largely in a Turkic language milieu,2 in which the significance of interchange is underlined by a number of Christian Armenian exponents apprenticing themselves to Muslim masters.3 The earlier exemplar (gusan) is characterised by the oral exposition of myth, legend, and heroic exploits,4 while the second (ašuł) by the declamation of prose romances, in keeping with a heightened emphasis on the theme of love5 and the composition, inscription, and rendition of various genres of song.6 In contrast, despite clear indications of continuity of bardic activity in Armenian society, the primary features of this interim period have been less systematically studied.7

At the same time, these versatile, professionally trained master-craftsmen possessed a valuable skill-set continually in demand in different geographical (urban gatherings, countryside, etc.) and social settings (court, weddings, and

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1 Boyce 1957, 10–45.
2 Levonyan 1944; Bax’činyan 1987; Yang 2016, 41–101. The incorporation of the region under Ottoman control in the 1520s introduced a new reality. Nahapat Kuč’ak (d. 1591), one of the earliest Armenian exponents of the art, operated in the Van region, but now composed largely in Turkish. Some later Armenian ašułs actually became Muslim Sufis, writing in Turkish and Kurdish, on which see Bayrak 2005. For a study of aşıks’ contemporary status, see Korovinis 2017, 113–143.
5 See K’ot’anjyan 2003.
7 See, for example, Ördoyan 1991.
other festivities) over this wide era. Moreover, granted the ubiquity and centrality of entertainment in such ambiances, we observe the ability of bards to cross various social, religious, and ethnic boundaries in practising their art. Thus, as we read of this type of performers earlier regaling Armenian kings and dynasts, later representatives were employed at foreign courts such as Sayat' Nova in the service of Erekle II of Kartli in the 1750s or T’uǰjar at the Sublime Porte under Sultan Abdülmecid I (r. 1839–1861). Meanwhile, we might parallel those exploits in the mediaeval period by comparing the career of Yohannēs Xlat’ec’i, an Armenian bard active at the court of the Kurdish amīr of Bitlis in the first half of the 15th century.

2 Historical Contextualisation

Xlat' (Ahlat, Khilāṭ) is a city located on the north-western shore of Lake Van administratively in the district of Bznunik' in the region of Turuberan of Greater Armenia until Late Antiquity. As part of the Arab settlement policy to consolidate Umayyad rule in Southern Caucasus the Qays tribe was relocated there in the early 8th century and gradually established an emirate by the end of the next, following the decline of central ‘Abbasid power. Thereafter the city falls under the sway of the Hamdanid dynasty that frequently intermarried with members of the Kurdish community, which had been amassing in the region and thereafter began to administer it under the Marwanid dynasty (990–1085) that held power sequentially under Armenian, Byzantine, and Seljuq suzerainty. These developments gave rise to a long history of Armeno-Kurdish symbiosis in this area of Lake Van.

Thereafter Xlat' became the capital of the much larger Shah-i Arman state (1100–1207) established by the Turkmens in the aftermath of the Seljuq invasion of Anatolia, whose territory also incorporated most of the Bitlis and Van provinces to the south and east. The state's nomenclature indicates that the Armenian population was demographically dominant, a feature that remained

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9 Patkanean 1887, 450–464.
10 Yang 2016, 78–79; Cowe 1995, 32; Meyer’s contribution to this volume.
11 On this figure, see Ācāryan 1946, 651–652 and Órmanean 1927, col. 2289. For Armenian bards operating at Kurdish and other Islamic courts, see further Kardaş 2018, 47.
12 Hewsen 2001b, 49–50.
14 For the transition between Kurdish and Armenian aristocratic identity, see Cowe 2015, 82.
constant up to the modern era. After a short period under Ayyubid reign and Georgian suzerainty Xlat' was annexed to the Mongol Empire in 1243, at which point the princess T'am'ta, daughter of Ivanē, an ethnic Armenian atabeg of Chalcedonian creed at the Georgian court, and wife of the Ayyubid prince Malik Ashraf was appointed ruler. The city then reached its heyday as capital of the Ilkhanid province of Arminiya (1258–c. 1335) and a centre of international trade.

In the interim, the city of Bitlis had charted a parallel trajectory until its emergence as the seat of a Kurdish emirate in 1182 that maintained its local hegemony over the territory under varying suzerainty until its replacement by an Ottoman sanjak in 1847. With the uncertainties of Jalayirid rule in Xlat' after the demise of Mongol power, a process of emigration began to take advantage of the greater security Bitlis provided. That culminated in the latter city's assumption of the former's regional primacy and its physical absorption within the confines of the Bitlis emirate by 1349. The main element in the latter was the Rusaki (Ruzagi) confederation consisting of a core group of around twenty tribes. The territory under the emir's control embraced a few smaller emirates (e.g. Xlat', Muš, Xnus) ruled at various points by members of the emir's family, though Xlat' was normally under the emir's immediate jurisdiction.

The period encapsulating the martyrdom of Yohannês Xlat'ec'i was rather tempestuous and characterised by instability at every administrative level. The Kurdish principalities were frequently wracked by turmoil because of internal rivalries. However, when they would periodically unite in common cause against their suzerain, as in 1420 when Sharaf al-Dīn of Bitlis rebelled on the death of the Qaraqoyunlu ruler Kara Yusuf, the Kurds' refusal to pay tribute provoked the latter's son Jahan Shah to capture Xlat' and besiege Bitlis to compel compliance, thereby inflicting great hardship on the Christian population. Though the Qaraqoyunlu had gained regional suzerainty in the 1360s, governed from their centres in Tabriz and Baghdad, their hold was tenuous and ended in 1468. They too were plagued by internal dynastic strife, which manifested itself at the transition of power between the deceased's sons, while at other times between the generations. Moreover, the intervening century of Qaraqoyunlu

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15 Cowe 2015, 81.  
17 Sinclair 2001, 166.  
20 For its internal configuration, see Sinclair 2001, 156.  
rule was punctuated by a series of three expeditions each by Timur Leng and his son Shah Rukh based in Herat, challenging their right to suzerainty that caused widespread devastation. Moreover, from 1447 onwards the Qaraqoyunlu state became embroiled in intensive strife with the Aqqouyunlu confederation for regional hegemony that further added to the insecurity.

3 The Bitlis Amīrs’ Perspective on the Armenian Community

Naturally, this context of volatile power contestation is crucial in considering the Kurds’ and, more particularly, the Bitlis amīrs’ approach to the Armenian community. Certainly, the rulers tolerated the robust monastic construction programme in the city of Bitlis over the 15th century, and the abundant database of manuscripts copied in this period testifies to the degree of continuity and financial support those institutions enjoyed. From a religious viewpoint, it is also important to note that the Kurds are one of the most heterogeneous polities of the Near East, different groups embracing both Sunni and Shi’a branches of Islam, as well as following various Sufi orders, Alevism, and the syncretic movement of Ahl-i Haqq (Yarsan) established in the 14th century, most of whose adherent base comprises Kurds. While this profile suggests the tribes were very adaptable with regard to creed, it is clear that actual policies varied according to specific rulers and conditions. Thus, the amīr Ibrahim in the late 14th century was punished by Timur’s son Miran Shah for his injustice to Christians. Meanwhile, the historian T’ovma Mecop’ec’i praises his brother and successor Sharaf for his care of his Christian subjects. At the same time, it appears that much of the hardship experienced by the Christian population was the result of collateral damage in raiding expeditions one Kurdish emirate might launch against the territory of a neighbour in ongoing internecine struggles. Consequently, such perspectives provide a certain counterbalance to the rather negative perception of the Kurds that emerges in some contemporary martyrrologies.

4 Mediaeval Armenian Bardic Tradition

From the meagre information we have of Armenian bards in this period it appears that they continued to compose and perform orally either individually or in groups, in which latter case, apart from vocals and instrumentals, it seems they produced extemporised skits based on traditional motifs. From the continued attacks in ecclesiastical diatribes censuring them for undermining social morals it is clear their repertoire contained material regarded as bawdy and lascivious in those quarters. From the unsuccessful attempts to ban them from such gatherings we learn that one of their main venues was rites of passage, in particular the festivities accompanying baptisms and weddings. Consequently, we may conclude they maintained a number of parallels with the corresponding Kurdish tradition, only transitioning to the āšık model typified by written song lyrics in the 16th century in the aftermath of Ottoman annexation of the western expanse of the Armenian Plateau within a Turkic language milieu.

5 Kurdish Music

Most traditional Kurdish music is vocal, although Kurds are familiar with a range of instruments. Similarly, performance is usually solo a cappella, especially in the older repertoire, text and melody being transmitted orally. Under Arabic influence the metre employed is quantitative (al-ʿarūḍ), a common verse type being composed in ten-syllable lines, while the melodies in the north of Kurdistan (northern Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey) reveal the influence of Persian and Arabic modes. Widespread themes include work, love, nature, and the hardships of the migrant. Performance practice also involves different kinds of improvisation. Significantly, it appears there was no particular musical style characterising Kurdish courts, which presumably facilitated Yohannēs’ entrée in Xlat’. Strikingly, the inception of the Kurdish literate poetic tradition in Kurnanji is marked by a contemporary of the Armenian bard, Ali Heriri (1425–

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24 For a detailed study, see Miller 2009.
25 Merati 2015, 310.
26 Merati 2015, 42, 310.
27 Merati 2015, 311.
28 Merati 2015, 312. The author emphasises that Kurdish music is one of the most diversified traditions of the region.
29 Merati 2015.
30 On this form of Kurdish, see Haig—Öpengin 2018.
ca. 1495), whose compositions treat love of country, the beauty of nature, and female attractions.31 Similarly, the first major prose text is the famous overview of Kurdish history provided by the Sharaf-Nāma of a later amīr of Bitlis Sharaf al-Dīn in 1597.32 Meanwhile, only in the 17th century was epic-romance (bayt)33 introduced and transmitted by the bakhši, a counterpart of the āşık, performing to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument, the most accomplished exponent of which was Ahmad Khani (1651–1707), whose magnum opus Memū Zīn dates from 1694.

6 Yohannēs Xlat'ec'i as a Bard to Two Communities

The anonymous martyrology introduces readers to a twenty-year-old Christian Armenian youth, Yohannēs, born and raised in the city of Xlat’, though the epithet xoylu adduced by two of the manuscripts, which seems to represent a secondary addition that nevertheless transmits possibly authentic local information concerning the bard, suggests his forebears had resettled from Xoy. The frequent traffic passing between the commercial hubs of Tabriz and Bitlis via Xoy adds a further level of plausibility to the datum.

Tantalisingly, the author underscores the youth’s professional bardic training without expatiating on the conditions of his apprenticeship or the master with whom he studied. It clearly included instruction on improvisation,34 an important aspect of performance practice in general, which the bard aptly applies later in the narrative to compose a moving lament on his situation. Similarly, the degree of popularity he attained not only in the Armenian community but in Kurdish circles and even in the entourage of the amīr of Bitlis Sayf al-Dīn implies he was bilingual and accomplished in both repertoires. Consequently, the account is noteworthy for the insight it affords on the bard’s social importance in straddling the ethno-religious divide and enjoying the ruler’s patronage.

The author adds that the youth also possessed a familiarity with Armenian liturgical music and would freely incorporate elements of this repertoire into his performance even before Muslim audiences.35 Their comfort level with this...
corpus clearly speaks to the degree of exposure they possessed to the spiritual culture of the majority Armenian community. At the same time, the narrative makes no mention of his having attained one of the minor clerical orders like *dpir* (“clerk”), in which capacity he would have received a specialised training in the various modes of the chant. Likewise, granted the writer’s clerical background, it is highly unlikely that such a detail would have been omitted had he had access to the relevant information. Consequently, it is more plausible that Yohannēs acquired his control of the material from frequent church attendance, once more in a purely oral environment. From this we can also deduce his being a devout Christian.

The one liturgical text marked out for comment is the Great Doxology (*Park’i barjuns*: ‘Glory to God in the Highest’), a Paleo-Christian composition originally in Greek, the nucleus of which is provided by the angelic proclamation (as specified by the redactor at 348.3) at Jesus’ birth at Luke 2:14 to which further verses were subsequently added. In Armenian practice the hymn is sung near the conclusion of Matins.36

At the same time, Yohannēs’ easy familiarity with the conventions of Muslim composition allows him to prevaricate, after his acceptance of Islam, with certain officials who press him to share table fellowship with them during a strict Armenian fast by maintaining that he had determined to devote himself for several days to Khiḍr, regarded as the source of poetic inspiration in that tradition, thereby earning himself some reprieve before he was again pressured to declare his religious identity. Emerging out of a somewhat complex, murky background, this rather elusive figure acts as a guardian and initiator into mystery in different Muslim contexts. Significantly, al-Khiḍr functions as the equivalent of St John the Precursor in the guise of Sultan Surb Karapet of Muš, the protector and patron of Armenian bards.37

It is also noteworthy that a pivotal role in the narrative is played by a Kurdish professional female singer and dancer.38 Such a figure is attested in the Near East from early times and her social and artistic significance in the Middle Ages is affirmed in both Christian and Muslim sources. In Armenian she is referred

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36 See Polarean 1990, 15 and Findikyan 2004, 363–367 and the literature cited there. References such as 348.3 indicate textual variants cited in the apparatus at the designated page and line.

37 van Lint 2005, 335–378; Yang 2016, 68–70.

to by the term varjak in authors from Movses Xorenac’i onwards in his description of pre-Christian Armenian culture. However, one of the most detailed descriptions is provided by Siméon, bishop of Aljinik’, of the 10th century who discusses such figures’ provocative appearance and gestures. The Muslim individual mentioned here whom the redactor denotes as a qawal, a performer frequently encountered at religious feasts, is also presented as an accomplished singer. She was involved in a competition with Yohannēs, which indicates the presence already in the 15th century of this aspect of bardic life, which was subsequently to assume even greater importance.

The description of the youth’s conversion is important in terms of his manifest public transition from one religious community to the other. The legal requirement for this move is recitation of the šahādah before two adult Muslim witnesses, a rite which, though not recorded in the martyrology, was probably enacted before the amīr in front of the castle on the morning after his incarceration. The spectacle which is narrated is the youth’s subsequently being paraded through the entire city to great fanfare astride a black steed. The significance of this act is not so much directly religious as social, as an emphatic testimony to Muslims, but especially to the Christian community, that this great celebrity, their erstwhile coreligionist, has now categorically adopted Islam and identifies with that creed, bearing in mind the Muslim prohibition on dimmîs possessing or riding horses.

The currency of this practice in different parts of Anatolia in this period is substantiated by Yovhannēs Erznkac’i’s anti-romance Yovhannēs and Aša of around the 1280s in which with mock autobiographical reference the protagonist, a vardapet from a monastery near Erzinka (Erzincan), falls passionately in love with the daughter of one of the prominent Muslim figures in the city and is likewise preparing to be paraded round the town, when the narrative encounters a major volte-face that transports the couple towards a Christian wedding in church. Meanwhile, the completion of the bard’s conversion is envisaged by the qāḍī as demanding circumcision, a necessary provision under the Shāfi‘ī tradition of Islamic jurisprudence that was normative in Kurdish society. However, the youth’s repeated blasphemy compelled him to issue the death sentence.

40 Yang 2016, 90–98.
The narrative appears fairly close to the actual circumstances and was probably written soon after the events occurred. In keeping with this, it represents a relatively simple account that progresses largely according to human agency apart from the explanation for the youth’s ability to extricate himself from the clutches of some men attempting to throw him to his death over the castle ramparts, which is attributed to invisible divine intervention. The work manifests several typical characteristics of the genre such as the protagonist’s initially successful career until an issue is raised by a group of Muslims that necessitates the choice between conversion or dying a painful death, associated with trial appearances and the interchange of scenes of violence and inducement to persuade the figure to apostatize. The latter, however, resists this coercion and makes a creedal confession, which swiftly ushers in the final death sentence, usually by stoning. A dazzling light then suffuses the place of execution by night to authenticate the martyrdom, which generally is also visible to representatives of the Muslim community as a vindication of Christian piety preceding the Christians’ solemn burial of the martyr’s relics.

At the same time, some important divergences from the norm in this work underscore its veracity. Thus, while the threat to burn the protagonist’s corpse is a frequent component of the genre, customarily it is not acted upon, however it features here at the conclusion of the narrative. Similarly, the mob, a random assemblage of the urban Muslim populace, tends to exercise powerful agency throughout the process, quickly becoming incensed by the martyr’s intransigence and not infrequently intervening to intercept and kill him or her before the qāḍī or amīr has delivered the final verdict. Here, in contrast, it is significant that the term ambox is absent, being substituted by reference to the collective as “infidels”. This may partly reflect the demographic situation on the ground by which the Armenians constitute the majority population in both the urban and rural contexts of this emirate, so that Muslims represent a minority.

Likewise, there is a certain tension between the author’s employment of typical images like the group’s rushing “like a rabid dog” to attack the martyr at one point in response to one of his Christian affirmations and its more fundamental perspective of exhorting him to accept Islam and live. This latter element is probably to be understood by reference to the youth’s celebrity

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44 For examples of this conduct, see Thomas—Mallett 2013, 208, 217, 348, 479.
status as a singer throughout the region, whose popularity embraced both the Armenian and Kurdish spheres. Indeed, the enormously contradictory conduct towards Yohannēs manifested by Sayf al-Dīn, the amīr of Bitlis, is probably to be explained in terms of the appreciation in which he held the youth and his musical skill.

This similarly explains the “infidels” readiness to apply medicaments to salve Yohannēs’ wounds and their tangible though short-lived relief at his expressed willingness to go before the qāḍī which they construed as his final acquiescence to actualise his acceptance of Islam by undergoing circumcision, in contrast to the youth’s goal to expunge his previous confession by suffering martyrdom in exactly the same spot.

Although the author does not identify himself in the narrative nor make any indirect allusions that might help clarify his background, it is plausible that the work was penned by a clergyman in the environs of Xlatʽ. That he had close affinities with the local lay Armenian community is suggested by a number of traits antithetical to the monastic provenance of the redactor of his work, as we shall see.

The first of these relates to his very humane handling of the protagonist Yohannēs, who is depicted with all his fickleness and frailties, exhibiting a great degree of individuality rather than conforming to ecclesiastical expectations as a paragon of virtue. Thus, the blandishments the youth was exposed to in prison of attaining a higher social status than that permitted for religious ‘minorities’ were sufficient to persuade him to recant. Still, the same day he experiences a twinge of conscience that motivates him to contemplate martyrdom as the cost of reassuming his Christian identity. Nevertheless, some weeks intervene between his conversion to Islam and his martyrdom, during which period his commitment to his new faith is tested by two Muslim magnates. The latter are presumably well versed in the broad contours of the Armenian liturgical cycle and therefore approach Yohannēs in the course of a pre-Lenten fast to ascertain whether he has any scruples about attending the mosque and then dining with them. This might have been the perfect occasion for a public announcement of his change of heart, however the youth prevaricates and finds an excuse to decline the invitation. Consequently, the real test occurs at a date determined by the qāḍī, on the Saturday before Lent.

The second factor is the author’s genuine appreciation of Yohannēs’ musical talent that encompasses both his natural vocal attributes as well as his virtu-

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45 On this traditional Armenian form of fast that proved so controversial in inner-ecclesiastical discussions, see Ermilov 2010, 79–97.
osity in performance that is so universally spellbinding on his audience in a
wide range of venues. This relates not only to his regular repertoire that also
included certain ecclesiastical hymns which he performed with great skill, but
also the improvised lament on Gospel themes he created to encapsulate his
feelings of contrition on reconsidering his apostasy that had the effect of turn-
ing everyone to tears.

Meanwhile, the third aspect is the writer’s valorisation of Yohannēs’ parents’
attitude to their son’s martyrdom, arguing that this circumstance represents
his wedding feast and that, as he had tasted the spiritual cup of self-giving, the
community was to wear festive white and partake of the fleshly cup to celeb-
rate the occasion. Clearly, the bride and groom’s sharing of a cup of wine as
an integral part of the Armenian wedding ceremony will have informed this
interpretation, as well as the imagery of the wreath or fillet the couple wear
during the sacrament, which mirrors the athlete’s crown that devolved upon
the martyr in Paleochristian iconography.

8 The Influence of Scripture and Hymnography

The author’s religious training finds robust expression in the texture of his com-
position.

Thus, he develops the parents’ blessing of their son before leaving to his
impending martyrdom to assume something of the format of the priestly dis-
missal at the liturgy on the conclusion of the Final Gospel, inclusive of the
gesture of making the sign of the cross (cf. variant at 351.4). Likewise, the
text is redolent with diverse images drawn from the hymns appointed for
the feasts of martyrs. These include the protagonist’s depiction as “honour-
able” (հաստատութիւն) and “worthy of boasting” (ասկինչութիւն) as well as a vari-
ety of martial metaphors portraying the individual as a soldier fighting “in a
virile manner” (սուրբար) against the enemy, conquering adversaries in war,
joyfully drinking the “cup of death”, obtaining the “unfading crown” (cf. Wis
4:2; 1 Pet 5:4; 1 Cor 9:25) through their “perseverance” (համբերութեամբ), and

46 This contrasts powerfully with the ascetic monastic perspective with which the redactor
is so profoundly imbued.
47 One of the first instances of the transference of the image from the athlete to the martyr
is preserved in Eusebius of Caesarea’s account of the martyrs of Lyons in 177, on which see
McGiffert 1995, 211.
49 Šarakan 1853, 831–852.
attaining the “luminous dwellings” Christ prepares for his saints (cf. John 14:6, 23). Finally, the hymnographers emphasise the tone of rejoicing that marks the church’s celebration of the martyrs’ voluntary self-oblation on their feast day (μνημονευτών ἀνάμνησις).

Additionally, the author displays his knowledge of Scripture, especially as this relates to the precedents of St Stephen the Protomartyr and Jesus’ Passion. Thus, the former narrative underlies the formulation of the central passage where Yohannēs raises his eyes to the heavens (cf. Acts 7:55) in a vision of Christ’s advent with a host of angels (ibid., cf. Matt 16:27, 25:31; Luke 9:26). Meanwhile, the “infidels” “rushed at him” (Acts 7:54), while he called out “in a loud voice” (Acts 7:60, cf. Matt 27:50; Mark 15:8; John 11:43). Similarly, Yohannēs is depicted as “commending his spirit” like Jesus on the cross (Luke 23:46; John 19:30), and it is “after three days” have elapsed that his community approaches him (Matt 20:19; 27:63), since some of them have “fled” (Matt 26:56; Mark 14:50) “for fear of” antagonists (John 20:19). Likewise, the youth sells his “goods and possessions” and gives to the poor (Matt 19:21–22; Acts 2:45), while his lament concludes with Jesus’ sobering words on the consequences of denial (Matt 10:33; Luke 12:9) and the necessity of giving an account for one’s actions (Rom 12:20), a theme also apposite to the self-reflection demanded of the community in their preparation for entering Lent.

9 Date

The manuscripts of both the original account and the redaction state the martyrdom occurred on the 16th of the Armenian month of Meheki (= February 22) of the year ուժ (886) of the Armenian era (= 1437 CE). However, the martyrlogy also contains the pertinent information that that date, which was a Saturday, immediately preceded the beginning of Lent. As Armenian Easter fell on March 31 that year, the date in question would have been February 10. Nevertheless, in the following year Easter fell on April 13, which would mean Lent began on Sunday February 23, so that the preceding Saturday would equal February 22, thus matching the other data. Consequently, it appears that the martyrdom under discussion must have occurred in the year 1438.50

50 For the argument, see Manandean—Aĉ’aṙean, 1903, 291–292.
The Work’s Textual Transmission

This martyrology is very rare, its original form being witnessed by three full manuscripts and one abbreviation. The complete text is represented by manuscript M 2711, a miscellany copied in 1480 at the Holy Cross Monastery of Varag by the priest Karapet; M 992, a homiliary of 1651 copied in Edessa by the scribe Malak’ea; and M 3783, a menologium of 1704 copied in T’ok’at’ (Eudocia) by the scribe Géorg T’ok’at’ec’i that adduces a number of textual lacunae and an abbreviated conclusion, while the epitome appears in M 1507, a 17th-century menologium copied by the scribe Azaria. All four witnesses were collated by Manandean and Aĉ’arean as the basis for their critical text, which is followed in the English rendering below. A second text, which is a redaction of the former, was produced by a certain T’ovma vardapet and is preserved in manuscript M 5313, copied in 1465 at Van by the priest Vardan. This date therefore provides a broad terminus ante quem for T’ovma’s redaction, which in turn implies a comparatively earlier dating for the original text.

The manuscripts’ generic classification reveals much about the milieux through which the work transitioned. Typologically the earliest is M 2711, which as a miscellany contains elements from widely disparate subject matter, only one facet of which is hagiographical. Congruent with this, M 992 represents a collection of homilies and similar texts, the final section of which comprises a collection of 15th-century martyrologies largely from the Van region. Granted that the present work’s redaction features a similar collection including two martyrologies in common also in final position (which may actually be an addition to the codex’s original structure) it appears that this latter was probably the format in which the work originally circulated. The rationale for the corpus of martyrologies under discussion to function as a hagiographical addendum is obvious from M 5313. Since it adduces the recension of the Armenian menologium finalised by Grigor Xlat’ec’i,55 who himself suffered martyrdom in 1425, we can deduce that scribes sought to update the volume by appending more recent material. In time, copyists integrated those data into the body of the menologium according to the date of their feast day, abbreviating the narrat-

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52 For the Armenian edition, see Manandean—Aĉ’arean, 1903, 292–298.
53 These include those of Grigor Xlat’ec’i and Mirak’ Tavriţec’i.
54 Since the original manuscript was copied in 1465, those of Siruni Hizanc’i (1476) and Mirak’ Tavriţec’i (1487) must be later additions.
55 Avdalbegyan 1982.
ive to adjust it to its new liturgical setting, in which it would be one of several commemorations requiring to be enunciated during vespers on the eve of the feast.

11 The Text of the Work’s Redaction

Also of significance is the occasional alignment the redactor’s text shares with that of M 992 and M 1507, which sometimes probably maintains the original text where M 3783 witnesses a later addition, as at 349.20. Meanwhile, his textual agreements with individual manuscripts, in contrast, demonstrate scribal interventions to impact the narrative in various ways. Thus, his reading with M 2711 at 347.4 creates a doublet description of the martyr’s parents, categorising them as not only “pious” but also “God-loving”. However, most of the redactor’s singular affiliations are with M 992, which anticipates some of his own recensional tendencies. In this way, the original text’s enthusiasm for the youth’s attractive voice and appreciation for his training is muted by the omission at 347.6 and 8, while the technical term ḫaḷ to describe the bard’s light secular composition is replaced by a more neutral designation as ērg (“song”) at 347.6, directing attention away from non-religious facets of the narrative. Similarly, the youth’s contemplation of the idea of martyrdom, an expression that might appear too nonchalant, is replaced by his committed “desire to die” (349.9), while his confession of the Trinity (350.4) is theologically nuanced by balancing the reference to the three distinct persons by affirming their unitary Godhead, thereby rendering Yohannēs at once more stereotypical as a martyr and his theological acumen more refined, as would be more fitting for a more discerning clerical and monastic readership, in contrast to the wider lay congregation the original addressed.

Although the redaction is relatively intact, there is at least one section where the text of M 5313 must be deemed secondary (350.16). When the Muslim magnates report to the qāḍī on the results of their encounter with Yohannēs, one expects the latter’s response (cf. ḫu ṭawū uuḥ, “and he said” in the original version) to their statement, however the redaction repeats the introduction to their previous remarks (ḫu ṭnopū uuḥū “and they said”). It is therefore they who decide on their next actions rather than the judge, as the authority figure to whom they had appealed, who thus remains silent. The decision itself is also problematic, since instead of the original plan of biding time ḥ ṭawū ḥnaḥū (“until their fast”) which would refer to the commencing of Great Lent, a point reinforced several times later in the narrative, it reads ḥ ṭawū ḥnaḥū ʿulpū (“until our fast”), which would imply the opening of Ramadan, an issue never alluded to there-
after and therefore inconsequential for the account. The impression is thus of an isolated scribal intervention at some juncture in the work’s transmission history. In contrast, the qāḍī’s resolution to time the youth’s circumcision to coincide with the start of Lent is clearly calculated to wreak the most powerful psychological damage on the Christian community, then at its most vulnerable, by showcasing one of their celebrities’ manifest transference of religious allegiance during the season of deepest soul-searching and introspection.

12 The Redaction’s Authorship and Perspective

Data in M 5313 ascribe authorship to a certain T’ovma vardapet without further definition. And indeed, evidence of two such figures exists as copyists of manuscripts M 2152 and M 917 of the early 15th century. However, in the introduction to his critical edition of the work of the well-known contemporary historian T’ovma Mecop’ec’i (b. 1376–1379, d. 1446) Xač’ikyan attributes our redaction to him on stylistic and linguistic grounds.56 Further confirmation is provided by the number of martyrologies T’ovma reports in his main history, in which he employs a set of themes and topoi that recur here, which reinforce the plausibility of his authorship. One striking feature is the concept of the martyr’s “requiting” Christ or returning to him the gift of life he had bestowed on the faithful by submitting to death in his name. This theme is enunciated in several of the martyr hymns in phrases such as “they shared the cross with your son Christ ... they ‘exchanged’ (փոխանակեցին) their life for you”,57 and “they shed their blood in exchange (փոխանակ) for your blood, O Lord”.58 T’ovma then develops the topos in his history while describing the martyrdom of Grigor Xlat’ec’i in which the Kurds “sorely afflicting him, butchered and sacrificed him as an innocent lamb ... in exchange for (փոխանակ) the lamb Christ”.59 Similarly, the redactor places a speech in the protagonist’s mouth stating that “I will requite (փոխադարձարարից) him. Because Christ suffered for us, I will suffer for him” (351.2).

Although the redaction excises various portions of text, it is significantly longer than the original. Clearly, different types of addition serve divergent

56 Xač’ikyan 1999, li–lii. See also Zakarian’s contribution to this volume.
57 Šarakan 1853, 823.
58 Šarakan 1853, 839.
59 Xač’ikyan 1999, 62.
purposes. Some at the most basic level afford stylistic editing, often creating rhetorical parallelism, as in describing the youth as “nourished and trained” in the musical arts (347.5). Others gloss rather bald or obscure statements to offer clarification: thus, the female Kurdish singer is specified as active “in the same city” (348.1), while the hardship the bard indicated his parents have endured is spelled out as “in parenting me” (350.22–351.1), and the undetermined place where his parents and other members of the community congregated near the conclusion of the narrative is highlighted as being that “of the martyrdom” (352.27).

More particularly, the redaction evinces a notable ‘spiritualisation’ of the original narrative that is more conducive to a lay environment and hence provides us with a valuable opportunity to examine the parameters of permissible diversity in effecting such a theological revision of the account. In the process of rendering it more edifying for a monastic readership, the redactor has deleted more secular aspects, frequently substituting protreptics to an idealised application of Christian ethics. This project is immediately visible in the treatment of the bard’s innate talent and musical training in which T’ovma follows the standard pejorative ecclesiastical portrayal of bards by removing details of the youth’s “sweet voice” and attractive performance style (347.6). Similarly, his wide circle of devotees is reduced to the Kurdish amīr (347.8), thus largely eliding the Armenian community, while his main venue is contemptuously vilified as the latter’s drinking bouts (347.9). In view of this, the redactor dismisses the bard’s profession as an “empty art” and his career in entertainment as “useless and harmful” (348.1–2). Hence, instead of introducing some hymns into his secular repertoire primarily with the intention of heightening rapport with his audience through their attractive melody (348.3–4 and 4), Yohannēs is presented as a committed proselytist, boldly preaching about Christ and praising the Trinity to his Muslim audience (348.2–3 and 4) like the contemporary controversialist martyr Vardan Bališec’i. Consequently, in his subsequent interchange with the amīr, he gives the latter a lesson in the Christian view of marriage more befitting a priest (348.13).

Similarly, reflecting on his hasty acceptance of Islam, the original author depicts the youth applying his skill in improvisation to his psychological situation to fashion a simple effective lament culminating with the dread anticipation of judgment, twice emphasizing its impact on hearers as moving all to tears (349.13–14 and 350.1–2). Here, too, rather than laud the bard’s technical skill, the redactor portrays his lament as the result of his sincere contrition that finds expression in profound weeping and lamenting. Dispensing with most of the original content, the redactor replaces it with an alternative illustrating the tradition of lament composition from the curriculum of monastic schools that
manifests a rather different aesthetic. Much more rhetorically elaborated, it begins with a series of paradoxes, followed by the parallel invocation of the members of the Trinity, and culminates with the conventional trope of evoking all of creation in terms of the denizens of the heavens and earth to give ear to his plaint, which is couched in the form of a sorites cataloguing the stages in his downfall (350.1). Finally, the redactor transforms the physical aspect of the feasting and merriment the youth’s parents organise in celebration of his crowning, replacing that with spiritual jubilation as the Christian congregation joins in an act of praise and thanksgiving (352.28–29 to 353.3).

Emblematic of the fundamental shift of focus in the redaction is the reformulation of the one instance of divine intervention alluded to above where the original author presents Yohannēs as withstanding the efforts of a group of men to hurl him over the battlements through invisible divine assistance. Here the revised form ascribes agency directly to God (348.15–16) consonant with a long tradition of paraenesis on humility in monastic literature, such as that penned by the 10th-century abbot Anania Narekac’i, who offers the following advice:

Humility means that when people congratulate you and reward you, you should not ascribe it to your own worth, but should glorify and give thanks to God and say, “This is thanks to your mercy, not something I deserve.”

Humility means that, when you practise virtue, you do not consider I did that by myself with my own ability, but with assistance from God. As the Apostle says, “Not I, but the grace of God in me.”

1 Cor 15:10

In consequence, the youth embodies the stereotypical traits of the martyr from the very outset, manifesting perfect assurance and full commitment to his holy mission, something completely at odds with his inexperience and vacillation in the original account, which appears far more true to life. This generates a series of additions to the dialogue where the protagonist emerges as a defender of the faith, continually forthright and vociferous in his critique of Islam (348.11 and 12, 351.15). Similarly, the men’s offer of status to undermine the youth’s resolve is suppressed (349.2) together with the original comment on his easy malleability (349.7) and the infidels’ compulsion (349.7–8) and the

youth’s later reference to his mounting a horse to symbolise his renunciation (351.9). Moreover, his capitulating response in jail is redefined as a ruse to dupe the men temporarily into thinking their tactics have yielded fruit. Hence, in the process of granting his subject the desirable qualities of resolution and determination, while preserving the overall contours of the earlier account, the redactor is constrained to interpret Yohannēs’ motivation as deception, thereby subverting the consistency of his presentation by enduing him with such an uncharacteristic trait (349.3) that unflatteringly pairs him with his Kurdish traducers, whom the redactor accordingly classifies as “deceptive” (348.5–6).

Another facet of the redactor’s approach is an enhanced identification with scriptural precedents, primarily Stephen and Jesus. Thus, in an act of piety like the former, Yohannēs kneels (351.14: Acts 7:59) in order to be vouchsafed the divine vision, which the redactor develops significantly to include Stephen himself and the other martyrs along with the Trinity and the angels (351.11–13). Likewise, far from being a frozen tableau, the scene which meets his eyes is animated with motion, as Christ urges the martyrs in glory to come forward to get a better view as Yohannēs prepares for the climax. This detail appears to depend on another paean to martyrs, Catholicos Komitas’ festal hymn on St Hṙip’simē and her attendant virgins from 618, which bears the lines:

It is a wonder beyond the miraculous
In the thoughts and words of angels and humankind;
For God the existing One with almighty power
Bent down to view the virgins’ spectacle.63

The final stich (խոնարհեալ տեսանէրզհանդէս կուսանացն) seems to have inspired Tʽovma’s rendering զվկայիցնքաջալերատ տեսանել զարի եւ զարի իհանդիսականատենին (“gave encouragement to the martyrs to come and see the virile and brave martyr in the contest arena”). Likewise, the redactor heightens parallels with Christ, as at 349.10–11 where the youth’s expression on dying “today and tomorrow” echoes Jesus’ words at Luke 13:32–33 in a similar vein. Moreover, the martyr’s confession of Christ “as true God” clearly alludes to the formula at John 3:33 and 17:3 at 352.10. Finally, the reference to the Christian community going to recover the martyr’s body “at dawn” (352.26) recapitulates the role of the myrrhbearers (Matt 28:1; John 20:1).

63 Šarakan 1853, 574–575.
As mentioned above, the redaction belongs to a series of more overtly theological treatments of martyrdom emanating from the Van region in this period when the thriving monastic communities there played an important role in sustaining intellectual life after the demise of the pivotal academic centre of Tat‘ew at the turn of the 15th century. One facet of this is the pursuance of questions of causality into the supernatural realm, invoking Satan as the source of evil and the adversary of humanity from its very origins in the Garden of Eden (348.5–6 and 351.15) in parallel with the approach adopted in the martyrology of Catholicos Zak‘aria II of Alt‘amar (1393) on the role of evil in the divine economy and that of T‘amar (1397) where the author emphasises the importance of theodicy, underscoring the absence of the divine sphere from implication in evil. With less theological precision, we also observe T‘ovma Mecop‘ec‘i employing the theme in his history to brand Leng Timur, the primary agent of mayhem, as “Satan’s son”.64 Here the reference gains in currency as the allusion refers to the devil’s etymological core as the slanderer who is therefore the instigator of the process to calumniate Yohannēs before the amīr (348.5–6).

13 The Redactor’s Erudition

As some of our previous comments have indicated, the redactor patently much surpassed the original author in erudition. This emerges notably with regard to the handling of the Kurds. Significantly, two witnesses to the earlier text (M 3783 and M 992) cite the ethnic group purely by that term at 348.5–6, while M 2711, perhaps inserting a marginal gloss, also associates them with the Medes, which is the designation the redactor prefers. Moreover, the latter’s addition of the epithet “snakelike” to illumine their previous reference as “deceptive” reveals his awareness of the recondite lore connecting them with the mythological dragon Aždahak, whom Movsēs Xorenac‘i records in Book 1 of his History.65

The redaction is also notable for its use of the recherché term հանդիսադիր to designate Christ’s role in the upcoming proceedings in Yohannēs’ vision (351.9). The term is calqued on its Greek equivalent ἀγωνοθέτης (“adjudicator at the games”) and may have been coined by Step‘anos Siwnec‘i for his translation of Ps. Dionysius’ Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, which appears to mark its first appearance. Granted the importance in which the Dionysiac corpus was held

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64 Xač‘ikyan 1999, 2.
in the curriculum of monastic academies and the major space devoted to it in Grigor Tat’ewac’i’s magnum opus of 1397, its currency in this work by a graduate of one of those institutions is understandable. Indeed, as the Christianisation of Proclus’ Neoplatonic system, the corpus exercised a profound influence over the development of apophatic theology throughout the Mediterranean basin and beyond and constituted the primary focus of the Armenian intellectual tradition at this period. Hence, it is hardly a surprise that the same volume influenced the author’s replacement of the original less sophisticated terminology interpreting the vehicle for Yohannēs’ vision as the “eye of the soul” to the philosophically more refined expression the “contemplation of the intelligible mind” for the cognoscenti (351.9).

14 Policing Religious Norms

Martyrdom is obviously one of the prime acts distinguishing one religious community from another, and therefore it is incumbent on the related literary genre to highlight that distinction to foster internal solidarity and cohesion and maintain integrity by ‘othering’ the second polity in terms of creed and practice. This means accentuating the priority of religion as a criterion for corporate identity formation in contrast to competing differentials and frequently reinforcing one side’s esprit de corps by denigrating the other’s morals and way of life. As we have already seen, this imperative informed the original author’s working method. Here, too, we note the degree to which the redactor develops this discourse, bifurcating Yohannēs’ audience into believers and non-believers (347.7), expanding the incidence of “infidel” to denote the Kurds (e.g. 348.15 and 351.14), and extending the ubiquitous epithet “impure” to mark Muslims in general (348.13). Meanwhile, though the youth’s original retort to the amīr’s accusation of fornication casts this charge of impurity back at the speaker and other unspecified “leaders”, in the redaction the term is piquantly altered to the singular, establishing a tauter parallel with Christ and thereby creating an unmistakable allusion to Muḥammad, that would more directly incur the charge of blasphemy (348.12). The intensity of this expression is then exacerbated at the crux of the narrative after the youth is granted an authenticating vision. In his response the redactor balances Yohannēs’ original proclamation of his belief in Christ’s divinity with a parallel denunciation of Islam in the following terms: “Your leader is impure and all his youths. Cursed is Satan and all his debauched demons” (351.15). The first phrase Muḥammad and his “youths” (մանկունք) seems deliberately to target one of the blasphemy formulae “against Muḥammad and his companions” and therefore suggests the
author’s familiarity with the legal background in *Shariah*. The continuation appears to rest on traditions associating Muḥammad with the Antichrist and therefore the harbinger of Satan. Such anti-Islamic polemic is congruent with the contemporary generation of controversialist manuals and Christian apologetics in Armenian monastic academies and reflects a wider currency of such debates. Clearly, such works were responding to an awareness at the time of a significant incidence of apostasy as reflected in Tʻovma’s history, one also incorporated in the redactor’s activity. The symbolism of the rose as a cipher for the martyrs’ voluntary death gained popularity in literature on the subject, as exemplified by the phrase “your rosy shedding of blood” in the hymnic repertoire. Building on the literary paradox of spiritual fruit appearing in winter when the agricultural cycle is dormant that was employed, for example, with regard to Vardan Balıšec’i’s martyrdom of January 4, 1421 (իզառմանապայր ածառույթ ընթացքում “in this evening-like wintry season”), the original author wrote in similar terms that God had made a rose blossom (իզառմանապայր ածառույթ ընթացքում) (lit. “in this wintered time”). Developing his initial expression, the anonymous writer of Vardan’s martyrology dilates in like vein (իզառմանապայր ածառույթ ընթացքում (“in this frozen and congealed … time”), a phrase with which the redactor may have been directly familiar. The latter thus introduces his version at 353.5 with the phrase (իզառմանապայր ածառույթ ընթացքու (“in this freezing and chilly time”). However, his continuation indicates he understands the image figuratively in arguing that the marvel consists in God not making an affront of the Christians in the eyes of the Muslim community, as would have been the case if a high-profile celebrity like Yohannēs had remained true to his conversion (353.5–6). Hence, the meteorological reference probably points to the author’s perception of a cooling of religious fervour and commitment within the church at the time. Significantly, Tʻovma Mecop’ec’i employs the metaphor in a very similar manner to account for Grigor Xlat’ec’i’s

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66 The technical terms are *sabb al-rasul* (blasphemy on the Prophet) and *sabb al-sahabah* (blasphemy on [his] companions). See also Keller 1997, 657–658, 690, 811–812, 822.
67 Such views concerning Muḥammad were in circulation among Christians from at least the 9th century.
68 Tat’ewac’i inserts a section on the theme in his *Book of Questions* of 1397, while his pupil Matt’ēos Julaçek’i devotes an unpublished treatise to an apologetic answering questions posed by Muslims in c. 1392. See also, more generally, Thomson 1986.
69 See, for instance, Vardan Balıšec’i’s debate with amīr Shamshaddin of Bitlis in Manandel—AČ’aṙean 1903, 232–243.
70 Xač’ıkyan 1999, 41.
71 Šarakan 1853, 840.
single-minded devotion to literary activities rather than the theological instruction characteristic of *vardapets* because of “the chilly disposition of the students of our nation” (թափքա ազատազրկ երրորդ նահանջածայի վերած ազդեցություն). 72

15 Pragmatic Considerations of Kurdish Rule

The majority of the redactor’s interventions were motivated by religious concerns; however, one appears to be determined by issues of practical politics. The question relates to the identity of the authority figure the bard encounters in the castle—the *amīr* Sayf al-Dīn or his son? As noted above, the original writer ascribes both Yohannēs’ sharp exchange there and his appearance next day to affirm his adoption of Islam as occurring in the presence of the *amīr*. In contrast, the redactor divides the role, assigning to the *amīr* prior adulation of the singer and attendance at the youth’s ‘conversion’, while the intermediary interlude in the castle is ascribed to his unnamed son. A number of other factors differentiate the two accounts, but it appears that the key matter hinges on the interpretation of two related adverbs աներեւութաբար (“stealthily”) and գաղտնաբար (“clandestinely”). The former relates to Yohannēs’ apprehensions about what might happen to him alone in prison overnight in the original narrative, presumably reflecting the youth’s thoughts concerning his false accusation and the subsequent attempt to kill him, which the men might actually realise now with no witnesses around. Naturally, the redactor’s protagonist is fearless and therefore does not engage in this type of internal dialogue. Therefore, the somewhat modified adverb is reassigned as a pivotal element in the Kurdish men’s scheme, which is to encompass the bard’s downfall in a surreptitious manner. To probe the internal consistency of both accounts it is necessary to view them in isolation.

Although the original martyrology does not elucidate the role of the four men the bard meets when responding to the *amīr*’s summons to an audience, it is patent from the intelligence the *amīr* reveals concerning his alleged illicit sexual relations with a female Muslim entertainer that they are presumably to be identified with the four adult male witnesses *shariah* requires to bring a charge of *zinā’* (fornication). Their purpose was to gain revenge on the youth as disgruntled supporters of the defeated Muslim singer by provoking the *amīr* to destroy him. The *amīr*’s initial verdict suggests he accepts the veracity of

72 Xač'ikyan 1999, 60.
the testimony without the further investigation the qāḍī might have initiated. Despite plausible awareness of the shariah penalty of a hundred lashes to be administered to unmarried parties in such cases, he presumably assumes the youth has feelings towards the girl and so wishes to facilitate their union by having Yohannēs Islamicise so that the couple can be legally married. This would be all the more important a consideration since shariah also stipulates that someone engaging in fornication may only marry another fornicator.73 However, the bard’s unexpectedly severe disparagement of Islam provoked his summary judgment of blasphemy, the penalty for which he then beckons the accusers to execute by putting the youth to death in the accepted manner by hurling him over the parapet.74 Yohannēs’ subsequent acceptance of Islam would probably have reconciled him to the amīr who thereafter disappears from the narrative.

In contrast, the adverb “clandestinely” that marks the men’s plot in the redacted version likely influenced their decision to bypass the amīr either because of his high esteem for the bard which might call their project into suspicion or his insistence on more formal trial proceedings. Consequently, they appealed instead to his son, who might be less enthralled by the Armenian’s skill and more open to heed their suit, while perhaps less concerned with adhering to due process. The latter figure is presented rather negatively throughout the scene from the opening ‘trick’ question he poses, presumably because he has already been informed about a liaison by the false accusers (348.7). Moreover, as there is no mention of the female singer and the possibility of marrying her, the legal basis for Islamicising is undercut, albeit ironically it is precisely discourse on the law which features most prominently in the son’s two speeches (348.9–10 and 14) in which the term recurs three times. This, of course, paves the way for Yohannēs’ more developed discussion of Christian law and its focus on purity. Ultimately, the amīr’s son indicates that non-compliance would lead to a painful death, which he then attempts to enact immediately afterwards.

The impression is therefore left that the rationale for introducing the extraneous figure of the amīr’s son is to exculpate the father from responsibility for pronouncing the youth’s death sentence and hence in a measure precipitating his martyrdom particularly in the redactor’s more polarised, rancorous version of the debate. The perception that the latter sought to mollify the ruler

73 For a 14th-century legal collection from the Shafiʿī school, see Keller 1997, 660.
74 Note that the east side of the fortress in Bitlis looked onto a deep gorge. The amīrs employed it for conducting the death sentence, in consequence of which it was named the kanlı kale (“bloody tower”).
if not actively to curry favour with him is reinforced by the redactor’s elevation of his status at 347.8 from mere amīr to amīr-in-chief (ամիրապետ).

Moreover, by avoiding giving cause for community antagonism against their amīr the redactor was thereby freeing them from any potential repercussions from that quarter against either the Armenian population or the church. If this is so, his procedure appears an intriguing exercise in self-censorship.

16 Translation

The apparatus is largely given over to documenting the variants introduced by the redactor in terms of changes, additions, and omissions. In this way his activity can be fairly easily reconstructed.

Inscription: On this Day the Martyrdom of the new Martyr of Christ the Youth Yohannēs

This honourable martyr Yohannēs worthy of boasting was [martyred] as the offspring of pious parents from the city of Xlat’ in the district of Bznunik’ in the year 886 of the Armenian era [= 1437 CE]. He had been trained in the musical art of bardic songs and had such a sweet voice and sang so attractively that he was a marvel to those who saw and heard him. He was also beloved in the eyes of all, especially the amīr Sefedin and [hence] frequently found himself in his presence.

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There was also a woman who sang and danced before the same *amīr*. That foul woman was worsted by the youth before the public as the youth Yohannēs would include in his performance the song ‘Glory in the Highest’ with a beautiful melody as well as the sweet sound of other hymns and amaze everyone. Still, the deceitful nation of the Medes, who are also [called] Kurds, provoked the *amīr* to put him to death.

So one day the *amīr* summoned him to an audience at the castle and said, “I’ve ascertained that you once had illicit relations with the female Muslim singer, and therefore you must now accept Islam and marry her or die an excruciating death.”

However, the servant of God Yohannēs boldly replied and said, “That act befits you and your leaders, but is far from us Christians, as being servants of Christ; for Christ is pure and loves the pure.”

Then the infidel was filled with wrath and ordered four men to cast him down from the castle, but they were unable, because the saint overcame them through God’s invisible help. Instead, they beat him harshly and severely with...
bastinado, bound him hand and foot, and put him in prison. Meanwhile, by
night they cajoled him, promising him status so as to relax his grip on his faith.
And so he said, “Tomorrow let your will be done,” afraid that they would stealth-
ily finish him off by night.

In the morning they took him out to the amīr and forced him to mount a
horse and paraded him around the whole city. As he was a youth of twenty
and easily swayed in everything, the same day he regretted the impure laws,
which the infidels had forcibly foisted on him, and repenting in his mind, he
conceived the idea of dying for Christ’s name. So he sent one of the Christian-
s to the priests with the message “Give me communion in Christ’s body so
tomorrow I can undergo martyrdom for His name.”

However, they did not take it seriously, calling him an unbeliever and
apostate. But he wore and wasted away internally and out of the bitterness of
his heart composed a lament to turn one to tears on his account and went about
the city with his girdle untied in a simple shift, calling woe and alas on him-
self and saying, “Woe to you, apostate Yohannēs. You have sorried the priests
and made your parents sit in mourning and embittered your dear brothers and
companions. You have forgotten the font that bore you as a son of God, you
abandoned the Gospel that illumined you with preaching. You departed from
Christ’s eyes and your guardian angel departed from you. And now what reply
will you give to Christ your God on the day of judgement, on which he says in
the holy Gospel, ‘He who will deny me before men, I will deny him before my
Father in heaven.’”

2 faith] M 5313 “they softened him”. 3 he] M 5313 adds “deceived them and”. 4 Tomorrow let ...
He composed a lament like this and more and wept the whole time and moved those who heard him to tears. Afterwards he sold all his belongings and possessions and gave [the proceeds] to the poor and needy. Then he went [and stood] in front of the church and confessed the all-holy Trinity and Christ's incarnation and, lamenting and weeping, he confessed his sins before all the priests and indicated [the place of] his grave in front of the holy altar and said, "Bury me here." Then he entrusted himself to God and the holy church and readied himself in all purity and when he attained the Fast of the First Fruits, he spent the five days in abstinence.

At that point, two of the leading men of the infidels approached him and said, "Come, let's go to our place of prayer and eat and drink together, otherwise you'll die at our hands." But he replied, "I've promised these many days to the holy Khiḍr, so I can't come."

They were filled with such rancour that they went to the qāḍī and reported about him, "He is a true Christian and has betrayed us and our religion." He replied, "Keep quiet until their fast [begins] and we'll circumcise him that very day. And if he resists, we'll put him to death excruciatingly."

They kept quiet until the final day of the week of Mardi Gras and that same day they went and seized him, punching him as they led him away. When his parents saw this, they began to lament bitterly and wail as they followed behind him. He said to them, "O parents with divinelike affection, don't weep for my death, weep rather for my perdition. But, I beg you, don't begrudge your hard-
ships and give me [your] blessing, for today I'm going to be a martyr for Christ like James."

His parents extended their arms, made the sign of the cross, and blessed him and said, “God the empowerer empowers you. Go in peace and may Christ himself be with you.”

The infidels took him to the qāḍī and he in turn sent him to the amīr with the message “Have him renounce again and undergo circumcision.”

When he reached the castle gate, he stood his ground and said, “Where are you bent on taking me? Here I mounted Satan's horse and renounced Christ. This is where I'm going to die.”

Raising his eyes, he saw Christ with the eye of the soul coming with many angels and ranks of martyrs, bringing him an unfading wreath. He encouraged and reinforced him for the fight and promised him the luminous dwellings. This made his face assume a radiant glow, and he lifted up his hands heavenward and said, “I believe in Christ, my God, maker of heaven and earth.” Then running from their hands, he fell to the ground and, making the sign of the cross over the soil, he thrust some in his mouth and said, “Kill me for Christ's sake right here.”

Then the infidels rushed at him like a rabid dog and beat his head with sticks and stones until his brain tissue oozed out and he collapsed among them as dead, so that many of them claimed he had died. However, he suddenly regained consciousness, got to his feet, sat down, and anointed his face with

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1 I'm going | M 5313 "I wish to go to Christ". 1–2 to be ... like James | M 5313 "and like James I wish to be a martyr for Christ". 2 James | M 5313 adds "I will requite him. Because Christ suffered for us, I will suffer for him. Christ was dishonoured for me, I will be dishonoured for him. The immortal God the Word died for me, I am going to die for him". 4 God the empowerer empowers you | M 5313 "Christ God the empowerer of the heavenly and earthly confirms you with his almighty power". 9 I mounted Satan's horse and | M 5313 follows M 992 in om. || Christ | M 5313 om. 11 his eyes | M 5313 "suddenly his head, the crown of his person". || Christ | M 5313 "the all-holy Trinity, the earliest martyr with the endurance of martyrs, and Christ, the adjudicator of all". || with the ... the soul | M 5313 "with the vision of his intelligible mind". || coming | M 5313 "to assist, he was strengthening the infirm". 11–13 with many ... luminous dwellings | M 5313 "Therefore he summoned the ranks of angels to come forward, he rewarded the righteous with their due, and gave encouragement to the martyrs to come and see the virile and brave martyr in the contest arena, while he pleated the wreath, fashioned the crown, readied his place of repose, [and] showed [him] his dwelling". 14 This made ... radiant glow | M 5313 "the infidels saw that the form of his image became beautiful [and] the cheeks became inflamed on his face like fire, the vision of [his] eyes became radiant, and [his] nostrils registered the sweet fragrance of Christ, the immortal king". || and | M 5313 adds "he knelt down". 15 and | M 5313 adds "cried out in a loud voice and". || I believe ... and earth | M 5313 "Christ is my creator and I believe in him. Your leader is impure and all his youths. Cursed is Satan and all his debauched demons." 16 from their hands | M 5313 "into the middle of the crowd". 21 as dead | M 5313 om.
his blood and said, “See the incorrupt cup, which I have drunk and the honourable death, which has befallen me today.”

And the infidels said, “Don’t worry. Just say the word and we’ll restore you to health with medications.”

Once more he confessed Christ as God and, making the sign of the cross again over the soil, he thrust it in his mouth and, crossing himself over his heart, he called in a loud voice and said, “Strike me and kill me, for I am a servant of Christ.”

When the infidels saw the brave martyr’s perseverance, they left him and went to the qāḍī and said, “That impostor won’t stop confessing Christ as God.” The latter said, “Why didn’t you kill him?” They said, “We did kill him, but he revived again.” So the qāḍī ordered them to go and stone him. They went and remonstrated with him [the martyr] and coaxed him to do as the judge wished. So he said, “Let’s go to the judge.”

Relieved at that, they led him to the qāḍī. However, the powerful soldier and courageous dueler for Christ, disregarding his enervation and physical pain, climbed up and reached the spot where he had mounted the horse of renunciation and called to the Christians close by, “Here I mounted the black horse and here I’ll die for my Christ.”

Seeing his true faith, the infidels struck him with sticks and stones and battered every part of his body. Thereby he gave up his spirit to God by the hands of angels. The infidels took the body of the blessed youth and set it on fire.

That night a bright light shone over him and the infidels hung their heads in shame. After three days the amīr gave permission to remove his relics and grant them burial. Meanwhile, the Christians who had fled for fear of the infidels, congregated around his pious parents and came to the place, and his parents removed their weeds of mourning and put on white. And they began offering thanks to God with great praise and said, “Rejoice today with us, all of you, for the body...”
this is our son's wedding feast. Exult, you priests and all people, for our son has drunk the spiritual cup. [So] let us drink the fleshly cup and make merry.” And they rebuked those who wept or expressed regrets. And the holy bishop Step'anos took the remains of his relics together with a multitude of priests and people and they praised God who in this time of winter had made a rose blossom for us with sweet fragrance. And they bore them and placed them in church below the sanctuary where he himself had marked the spot with psalms and hymns to the glory of the Creator.
Conclusion

The Van region in the late mediaeval period provides a fecund area for research on Armenian cultural creativity and interchange in several different artistic domains and in rapport with a variety of ethnoreligious communities (Arab, Mongol, Kurd, etc.) over several centuries. During this period the Armenians represent the majority population in both urban and rural environments and are in many ways the most stable demographic and an important economic factor, contrasting colourfully with volatility in the regional administration resulting first from internal dynastic struggles engendered by the lack of firm conventions of succession and secondly contested suzerainty at a higher level between the Timurids and Turkmen that persisted until Ottoman annexation in the 1520s. One facet of the emerging symbiosis is the activity of Armenian stonemasons whose cross-cultural receptivity is manifest in Ani in the integration of *muqarnas* into ecclesiastical structures. Once engaged in Arcruni construction projects, Armenian architects and masons were now responsible for the well-known *türbes* in Xlat’ during the Mongol period and other largescale projects under Kurdish rule.

As this text indicates, entertainment is a second sphere that would unite the two lay communities. Indeed, the contemporary savant Ārak’el Siwnec’i underscores the porousness of borders in this domain by employing the Turkish nomenclature *awzan* to denote mediaeval Armenian bards, thereby implying the term’s acceptance in Armenian parlance in this period. This rapport permitted the protagonist Yohannēs to exploit his innate talent and training to create a niche career for himself. Indeed, it is ironic that, but for his subsequent martyrdom, he would have remained so melded into his social fabric as to have passed completely into oblivion.

The very reference to his apprenticeship, however, indicates the youth belonged to a pre-existing tradition stretching back several generations, albeit he may be the first to receive literary documentation. Consequently, it is important to situate him within the larger contours of Armenian involvement in Kurdish musical culture, as not only were Armenians among the first to research Kurdish music academically, but were also active in its dissemina-

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75 Taylor 1994, 94–103.
76 Pancaroğlu 2017.
77 Cowe 2020, 244–248.
79 Cowe 1995, 43; Yang 2016, 43, 46.
80 See Solomonean 1982 for the transcription of twelve Kurdish melodies published in 1903.
tion,\textsuperscript{81} one of the most famous of those practitioners being Karapetê Xaço from the early 20th century.

Further parallels and exchanges between the two cultures include their mutual borrowing from the Iranian heroic tradition as primarily oral inheritors and continuators of the Šāhnāma.\textsuperscript{82} In this connection, it is noteworthy that Armenian forms of this literature largely developed in the Van region, also the provenance of most of the Kurmanji versions.\textsuperscript{83} Moreover, both traditions of oral transmission, some of which are bilingual, also share a particular penchant for elaborating episodes from the Rustam cycle. In addition, contact between their indigenous epic genres emerges in the transference of the originally Indo-European typology of twin brothers founding a city from the Armenian work \textit{Sasna Cṙer} (Daredevils of Sasun) to the Kurdish epic cycle \textit{Šaraf-Nāma}.\textsuperscript{84}

In this connection it is also striking that while in the oldest stratum of the Armenian epic Covinar, the mother of the twins Sanasar and Baghdasar, is married to the king of Nineveh, a figure who is subsequently updated to the ‘Abbasid Caliph of nearby Baghdad, in the oral variant transmitted by Manuk Harut’yunyan of Moks, the \textit{mise-en-scène} of the incident is indigenized in Armeno-Kurdish relations in the Lake Van region. In keeping with this, Covinar is presented as the daughter of king Gagik I of Vaspurakan to the south and east of the lake. There the young woman is espied strolling with her ladies-in-waiting by the son of the Kurdish \textit{amīr} of Ostan and, although his father’s immediate reaction is to say, “Son, we are Kurds, she is Armenian—how can this be?” the marriage proposal is accepted on condition that the girl retains her Christian religion.\textsuperscript{85} Though this particular union is precluded by the historical details of Gagik’s death in c. 943 and the inception of the Kurdish emirate in the 14th century, it remains a testimony to the Arcruni policy of intermarriage with the surrounding Muslim aristocracy as that was emblazoned on the popular memory and evoked in later oral tradition.

Narrowing our focus to Yohannēs’ martyrology, we observe that it is precisely the bard’s enormous popularity with both the Armenian and Kurdish population that distinguishes his situation from so many Armenian martyrs of this period. Indeed, the crowd is unprecedentedly insistent that he approach the

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\textsuperscript{81} Kardaş 2018, 47.

\textsuperscript{82} Merati 2015, 133; Cowe 2018, 142. For the epic’s impact on Armenian literature in Erzincan, see Srpanyan 1962, 209.

\textsuperscript{83} Arakelova (online). Some Kurdish versions were also propagated by Armenian singers.

\textsuperscript{84} Harut’yunyan—Bart’ikyan 1975.

\textsuperscript{85} Abelyan—Melik’-Ōhanjanyan 1936, 637–648.
qāḍī, repent, and accept Islam so as thereby to continue his career. In this context clearly appreciation for the youth's voice and musical skill prevailed over his Christian protestations. At the same time, Yohannēs is sufficiently conversant with Muslim cultural lore to appeal to the figure of al-Khiḍr, while the amīr has obtained sufficient exposure to Armenian liturgical music to value the inclusion of certain chants in a mainly secular programme, and the qāḍī is aware of the primary events on the Armenian ecclesiastical calendar. Nevertheless, this commonality should not obscure the presence of religious sensibilities on both sides, which ultimately bring about the youth's harrowing death.

While musical performance like sports events can unify diverse demographics, competition tends to encourage the formation of partisan loyalties by which certain fans identify with their representative so absolutely across various perceived divides that the party supporting the defeated candidate experiences such an overwhelming sense of disgruntlement and injustice that they seek to vent their frustration on the winning figure and their fanbase. This appears to account for the small group of the Kurdish female singer's supporters bringing their suit against Yohannēs. Moreover, beyond the immediate circumstances, the initiative seems to reflect more widely held perspectives regarding the appropriate social status of the administratively subordinate religious confession that was expected to maintain a lower profile and not appear too obtrusive. Clearly, success in major public events under the amīr’s patronage was viewed as disrupting that status quo and therefore required intervention to reestablish social norms.

As already indicated, the genre of martyrology is likewise evoked by the death of individuals and groups for maintaining their faith across religious divides. Consequently, the purpose of such works is not only to document the course of events but also to underline the presence of characteristics validating the figure's standing as a martyr and often to rhetorically enhance the person's portrayal to function more effectively as a model for community emulation. In these ways, those texts also seek to subvert the dominant narrative of the faith's inauthenticity circulating within the hegemonic polity by co-opting some of their representatives as witnesses at different points in the account who testify to the martyr's innocence and the reality of divine manifestations (e.g. the brilliant light resting on the martyr's physical remains) that authenticate both the individual and his or her faith.

At the same time, we are exceptionally fortunate in this case to gain an entrée to two very distinct versions of this genre depicting both a lay and monastic perspective on events. Moreover, granted that the latter represents one of the primary voices in Armenian written literature from its very inception, it is particularly important to note the striking contrasts between that account
and that of the original text that appears to powerfully embrace the stance of the lay community. Granted that many non-monastic texts derive from technical spheres like medicine, astronomy, and law or various poetic genres, it is valuable to possess this type of narrative text. Such works highlight Armenian literature’s multifaceted structure and the need for a more nuanced conceptualisation and reading to allow for insights into the thought patterns and priorities of the general public that still tend to be relegated to the margins until their expanding expression through the medium of printing from the 17th century.86

Patently, many different kinds of relation and interchange continually existed between those two milieux, but are often difficult to pursue because of lack of source materials.

Inevitably, T’ovma vardapet’s redaction maintains the monastic community’s dismissive attitude to entertainment and therefore to the celebrity the youth had attained,87 although here, too, more moderate opinions were increasingly expressed by various writers.88 Similarly, the monastery’s almost exclusive monopoly of higher education meant erudition in scripture, patristics, history, and theology, insights from which were woven into a much richer tapestry that could nuance the narrative impact to illumine the protagonist and denigrate the antagonists, thereby appealing to the taste of more discriminating readers demanding a different rhetoric and aesthetic. Yet at times this had the effect of distancing the narrative further and further from its roots in contemporary corporate reality.

Significantly, when we contrast the situation of the parish priest and the vardapet, we observe the greater responsibility incumbent upon the latter to engage at a higher level with both the spiritual and physical realms for the benefit of their community. Much has already been stated concerning the former of those, however the latter was equally crucial in securing peace and protecting the local Armenian polity and its religious foundations. Consequently, we are lucky that T’ovma vardapet’s unicum manuscript survives to afford us a vignette into his retouching of the amīr’s involvement in the youth’s affair. Anticipating potential negative repercussions and deflecting reprisals, his redactional interventions are calibrated to placate the ruler in a politically volatile atmosphere where adverse reactions might be expected at any point. The dialogue between the two writers that emerges therefore affords us a valuable matrix out of which

87 The ambience is hardly commensurate with the image of the street musician busking purveyed by Ter-Dav’t’yan 2011, 347.
88 Ōrdoyan 1991.
to construct more nuanced paradigms within which to interpret the activities, circumstances, and motivations of mediaeval authors of martyrology.

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