“Descent of the Only-Begotten Son”

Contextualising the Vision of Saint Gregory

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1 Introduction

The Vision of Saint Gregory the Illuminator is considered to be the oldest witness of this genre in Armenian literature. It constitutes one of the key components of the historiographical account composed in the 5th century, which relates the circumstances of the official conversion of Armenia to Christianity at the beginning of the 4th century. In the story, the Vision appears in relation to the building of the Mother-Church Kat’olikē and the martyria of Hrip’simian virgins in Valaršapat. In the medieval tradition, the Vision had several interpretations and served as justification for different purposes, some of which are highlighted in modern Armenian studies. Thus, the Vision was first analysed as the symbolic model for the architectural typology of the Mother-Church Kat’olikē. Another research has revealed its importance in the defence of Armenian orthodoxy. More recently, scholars have gone further into the apocalyptic and prophetic aspects of the Vision, showing its direct association with the Armenian revolt against the Sassanian Empire in 450–451. I presented elsewhere in a detailed study a theological interpretation of the Vision related to the layout of the four sanctuaries of Valaršapat, as well as a comparative analysis of its literary content, its terminological formulas, and iconographic constructions in order to detect its sources of inspiration. The latter appears to reflect the historical figures and realities of 4th-century Jerusalem.

In this paper contributing to the honours offered to our colleague and dear friend Theo van Lint, I will focus my attention on the eschatological dimension

1 The references to the several versions and ancient translations of this source will be presented successively. For the combined English translation of the principal known redactions, see Thomson 2010. Cf. also Thomson 1976.
2 Sahinyan 1956a–b, 1961 and 1966, taken up by the majority of later studies.
3 See Thomson 1998; Id. 1999, 123 and 760. See also van Esbroeck 1995.
4 Thomson 2014; La Porta 2014.
of the *Vision of Saint Gregory* and the implications it had in the political and religious state of Armenia in the 5th century.

2 The Texts of the *Vision*

The *History of the Conversion of Armenia* (hereafter *HC*) has come down to us in several versions, recensions, and rewritings, translated into various languages. All these documents are divided into two groups which are marked with the general sigla *A* (*Agat’angelos*) and *V* (*Vita*). The texts of the first group derive from the so-called “national” recension, the author of which calls himself *Agat’angelos* (*Aa*);⁷ those of the second group conform to the oldest Greek translation (*Vg*) made from a supposed Armenian version of a *Life of Saint Gregory*.⁸ The original common source of all these texts, most probably composed between 410 and 428 under the supervision of the Catholicos Sahak the Great (387–428/438),⁹ has not been preserved. It is quite possible that it was deliberately abandoned to make way for the new version (*Aa*) amplified and reframed after the Armenian revolt of 450–451.¹⁰ However, this source would have been the first written work of Armenian historiography.¹¹

The *Vision of Saint Gregory* is also known in several versions in different translations. It appears in much shorter form in the versions *Vg* (*Life* in Greek translation) and *Va/Var* (*Life* in Arabic translation from the Greek),¹² while missing from the recensions *Vo* (*Life* in Greek from an Ochrid manuscript, containing parts from the *Agat’angelos’* text)¹³ and *Vs* (Syriac translation of *Agat’angelos* which drew upon both traditions).¹⁴ The existence of the *Vision* in the two main versions of the *HC*, as well as the direct relevance of its content to the circumstances of the conversion of which it constitutes the theological crux, supports the proposition that this composition featured in the narrative

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7 For the recent critical text, see *Agat’angelosi Patmut’iwn Hayoc’* [The History of Armenia by *Agat’angelos*], in the *Matenagirk’ Hayoc’* series, listed as APH in the bibliography here. In this paper, we use the commonly admitted paragraph numbering.

8 Garitte 1946, 18–19; Thomson 2010, 11.


10 Thomson 2010, 11, n. 15 and 80; idem 2014.

11 See Garibian 2014 for the reasons and circumstances. Łazar P’arpec’i (Introd., 1) also mentions that the book of *Agat’angelos* is the first written history of Armenia.

12 For the texts, see Garitte 1946 and Ter-Łewondyan 1973.

13 Garitte 1965.

14 Van Esbroeck 1971. For further information and references see Thomson 2010, 8–12.
from the beginning\textsuperscript{15} or, at least, in a revised version very close to the date of the original archetype, probably composed in 431–432.\textsuperscript{16} Yet, the \textit{Vg-Va} version of the \textit{Vision}, which deviates by several details from the “national” redaction of Agat’angelos, belongs to the passages considered among the oldest ones, most probably going back to the lost original Armenian text of the \textit{hc}.\textsuperscript{17} On the other hand, the Arabic translation of \textit{Va/Var} also presents certain differences compared to its Greek model.\textsuperscript{18} They are therefore taken into account in the following general description of the content of the \textit{Vision}.

3 The Content of the \textit{Vision}

The \textit{Vision}\textsuperscript{19} appeared to Saint Gregory during night-time when he was praying in the dwelling-place of the martyred virgins (i.e. the winepress), where he, too, had found an abode. The Holy man hears a great sound of thunder and a noise like the tumult of sea waves. Then he sees the vaulted structure (\textit{xoranašēn yarkn}\textsuperscript{20}) of the firmament of heaven open and the heavenly waters rain down on the earth. A Messenger of God in luminous appearance and with fire-wings goes down; he asks Gregory to look up to see the wonders that he will show him.\textsuperscript{21} At the end of the vision, the Messenger reveals to him the symbolic meaning hidden in every detail of the revelation.

Gregory then sees through the tear in the sky the upper waters divide into two parts and pile up like valleys and mountain peaks. With the unreal light that fills the earth from above, the innumerable troops of the inhabitants of the intelligible world—the anthropomorphic fire-winged creatures that fill the entire space—descend like particles of dust shining in the rays of the Sun. They

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{See more in Garibian 2014.}
\footnote{See the discussion in Garibian de Vartavan 2009, 219–222. It is also possible that this text was initially composed as a separate work and then has been included in the \textit{hc}. However, unlike S. La Porta (2014), we suggest the years 410–428 as its \textit{terminus ante quem} for the reasons that will be presented below.}
\footnote{For the most ancient passages, see Garitte 1946, 292–293, 299–300, 308–310, 334. See also Garibian de Vartavan 2003–2004 and 2009, 235.}
\footnote{On the comparative analysis of some of these divergent details see Garibian de Vartavan 2003–2004.}
\footnote{\textit{Aa} § 731–755, \textit{Vg}, 77–82, \textit{Va}, 54–62.}
\footnote{The word \textit{xoranašēn} means “in the shape of a tent”; the \textit{yark} can signify a construction, a house or a floor and a roof.}
\footnote{The descent of this messenger is not indicated in \textit{Vg} and \textit{Vo}, but his presence is understood from the rest of the story. It is this same person who explains the symbolism of the \textit{Vision}; he thus cannot be identified with “Providence” as suggested by Thomson (2010, 338).}
\end{footnotes}
are led by a splendid and fearful appearance of man, the “Providence in person” (the “Power of the Pantocrator” according to Va) flying like a fleet-winged eagle. Coming down in the middle of the city, he begins to strike the ground with the golden hammer, breaking mountains, hills, and rocks and transforming them into a plain land.

Then, in the centre of the city, near the royal palace, Gregory sees (in the Vg-Va versions this scene precedes the descent of the “Providence”) a golden base surmounted by a pillar of fire bearing a luminous cross. Three other pillar-crosses of lesser height stand on red bases; they are arranged according to the cardinal points. In the Aa, the four crosses are united by admirable arches, on which a divine construction in cloud in the form of a vaulted ciborium (canopy) rises. The vaults of the latter shelter the images of 37 virgin martyrs. The whole vision crowns a divinely formidable throne of fire bearing the Sign of the cross. In the Greek and Arabic versions, the ciborium and the throne are absent, and the three pillars are grouped apart from the first one and are linked together by three chains. An abundant spring gushes out creating a vast sea, which immediately covers the entire plain up to the horizon. The earth thus takes on the colour of the sky. Innumerable multitudes of fiery altars surmounted by luminous crosses stand on the plain, twinkling like stars.

In the end there appears a numberless flock of black sheep (goats in Aa), which pass with their lambs through the rain and immediately become bright and sparkling. But some sheep (a group of them according to Va) turn back and transform into wolves, which devour the flock.

According to the explanations of the winged Messenger, the sound of thunder and the rain bear God’s mercy and compassion towards his creatures and also symbolise the baptism of all men. The unreal light depicts the preaching of the Gospel, which fills the regions of the North. In this manner, the opening of the gates of heavens and the waters behind them announce Christ’s philanthropy, which will allow the inhabitants of these Northern regions to ascend to heaven. The army of the celestial troops descended because of the delicious perfume of pink flowers, which rose up from the blood of the martyred virgins.

From now on, the angels will live among men.

The pillar of fire symbolises the universal Church; its luminous cross is the great priesthood among peoples in the image of Christ: it foreshadows the High-priest who will teach the faith in the Trinity to the people. In this place a temple of God, a house of prayer—the *Ecclesia Mater*—which will host the pontifical see, will be built. The ciborium rising above the arches symbolises the celestial City, the heavenly Jerusalem, the gathering place (*žolovaran* translating the Greek term *ekklesiasterion*) of the congregation of the Kingdom of Heaven. Above this universal and eternal Church stands the throne of God as
a sign of his essential height and of his presidency over the whole universe. On the spots of the other three pillars three martyria will be built for the rest of the virgins’ bodies. The red bases represent their sufferings and their shed blood while the crosses symbolise their passion, which is worthy of the Passion of Christ. The three pillars carrying crosses imitate the Crucifixion scene (Va) and the three chains, which connect the pillars, signify the faith in the Trinity (Vg). The Trinity makes its appearance through the luminous nimbus of the cross who is the Holy Spirit glorifying the Son. As for the multiple altars adorned with crosses, they bring the general atonement for all and announce the glorification of the name of Christ in all places on Earth. However, not everybody will be saved: certain groups symbolised by the sheep transformed into wolves will deny the received baptism and the pact of union with the Church. But those who will resist the temptation to go astray by following them can receive wings and ascend to the kingdom of Christ.

According to the Messenger, all this means that divine grace is granted to this country because the holy virgin martyrs opened the way with their passion. Their images under the vaults represent the form of the cross of Christ with which they entered glorious eternity. They went up to heaven and thus set up a path for the inhabitants of this country. On the other hand, the colour of the sky, which seized the plain of the Northern regions, is the sign of the union of heaven and earth and the descent of the Kingdom from above.

4 A Theological Interpretation of the Vision

The symbolism of the Vision stands on two theologically important events: the martyrdom of the Hṙip’simian virgins and the descent of the celestial beings on earth, led by the Providence. Both are theophanies, that is manifestations or interventions of the divine nature in the sense-perceptible world. According to the martyrial theology, Saints executed for the faith are immediate witnesses to the divinity of Christ. During their life and especially at the time of their violent death, they are rewarded with a direct contact with the divine world: either they see Christ or hear the voice of God, or they are filled with the Holy Spirit. The texts of the HC report such manifestations that accompany the capture, the torture, and the killing of the Hṙip’simian virgins. While an escort arrived at the virgin’s dwelling-place to lead Hṙip’simē to the king’s palace:

22 Delehaye 1933, 9–10; Grabar 1946, 1, 28–30.
23 Ibid. See also Delehaye 1921, 287 ff.
... there occurred a fearfully loud thundering from heaven which terrified the whole throng, and a voice which said to them: Be strong, stand firm, be of good cheer, because I am with you.\(^{24}\) \(Aa\) §175 compare with \(Va\), 24

... there was a thunder, with the result that many royal [servants] died. And a voice spoke from the thunder: “Be strong, I am with you”. \(Vg\), 44

... Immediately a light came upon them, and a voice came to them saying: “I have heard your prayer. And just as I saved you from Diocletian, so also I shall save you from this one”. \(Vs\), 96

With the power of the Holy Spirit Hṙip’simē succeeds in repelling the advances of king Trdat who wants to dominate her by force:

But she, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, struggled like a beast (…) and she vanquished the king, which would hardly have been possible by [natural] force. \(Aa\) §181 compare with \(Vg\), 45, \(Vo\), 77; \(Va\), 26

Or, encouraging her protégé not to renounce her vow of chastity, Gaianē comforts her with the prospect of martyrdom, which will allow her to see Christ:

Be of good cheer, stand firm, and you now will see Christ for whom you long. \(Aa\) §185; \(Va\) has “whom you loved”

Fight bravely and hold out, my child, for soon you will see Christ whom you desired. \(Vo\), 78

Further in the Armenian text, the other virgins give up their souls after having addressed Christ in prayer that suggests a theophany.\(^{25}\)

The second theophany comes through the opening of the visible sky, which allows Saint Gregory to see not only the image of the intelligible realities hidden behind the waters, but also the inhabitants of the Kingdom of God that descend from it.

The two theophanies are necessarily interconnected: Saint Gregory could not have come out of the Deep Dungeon and evangelised the Armenians if the virgins had not been martyred. According to the ideology developed in the

\(^{24}\) All the English quotations follow (with some readjusting) the translation of Thomson (2010).

\(^{25}\) \(Aa\) §§193–197, 200–204, 207; \(Vo\), 83–84; \(Va\), 32–33.
4th century, the testimony of blood was considered as a decisive element for the victory of the Church.\(^2\)\(^6\) As such, the voice of God had announced to the Hriπ'simian virgins that they were chosen for this mission in Armenia:

I have brought you to this place, so that here my name might be glorified before the heathens of the Northern regions. \((Aa \ S\ 175)\)

But on the other hand, it is Saint Gregory who reveals to the Armenians the providential reason and the theological importance of this martyrdom, which are confirmed by his theophanic vision:

So come, we shall tell you, brethren, of the Creator's love for creation shown to you, which was revealed to me as an awesome vision. The Godhead condescended to his holy martyrs and raised them up to the incomparable, indescribable and unequalled height of the kingdom of heaven. He revealed to me the vivifying gift that he intends to bestow on you. \((Aa \ S\ 731)\)

As the Messenger of the Vision also explains, it is the martyrdom of the virgins, that caused the opening of heaven from where the mercy of God is spread on the inhabitants of the earth. This mercy, this “vivifying gift”, which will allow people to access the Kingdom of Heaven, is granted to them only through the testimony of the martyred virgins:

Behold, the gates of heaven have been opened and the waters above have been opened, so that there be no impediment for men of this world to rise up. For the holy martyrs who were martyred here have made a road for these Northern regions, since they have gone up and arranged paths for others. \((Aa \ S\ 741)\)

However, the blood shed by the first Armenian martyrs is interpreted as having entailed far deeper and more important implications than it had in the conversion of the country and the victory of the Church; this act becomes a providential agent for the salvation of people and their access to the Kingdom of God:

They were valiant in the shedding of blood, so that by their martyrdom they might bring you to God. \((Aa \ S\ 720)\)

\(^2\)\(^6\) See Bardy 1960, 98.
In this way, the theological problem of the martyrdom of the virgins becomes comparable to that of the Incarnation of the Logos, as developed in the 4th century. Just as God sent among men His only Son, who agreed to die on the cross and then to be resurrected, thereby affirming Redemption and eternal life, likewise God sent the virgins to “these Northern regions” to witness, through their passion, to the divinity of Christ and to the immortality so that the inhabitants of this country could receive the grace of being saved and become citizens in the Kingdom of God.

This seems all the more true, since the symbolic parallelism as well as the iconographic mimesis between the Passion of Christ and the passion of the virgins are developed in an evident way in the texts of the Vision according to the two main recensions:

The crosses represent the Passion of the Martyrs, who imitated the Passion of the Lord and died for him. They lived in God and were crucified with Christ [...]. For they killed their earthly bodies and hung [them] from the Lord’s cross; they became fellow-sufferers with their Lord, and likewise will share in his glory and power. (Aa § 747)

The three chains which linked the columns [are] their faith, which through the consubstantial Trinity made them worthy to share in the Passion of the Saviour and our God. Hence the three crosses indicate the Cross, which carried [Christ] on behalf of the human race ... (Vg, 82)

The schema with which you saw the columns linked, this is their faith in the sole Trinity, which made them worthy to share with Christ God in his Passion. Now the three fixed crosses are the image of the cross on which Christ was raised for the salvation of the human race between the two thieves ... (Va, 59)

This comparison opens the way to interpret the Vision in terms of its eschatological significance, because Redemption is only possible after the end of time and the Second Coming of Christ. The detailed analysis of the texts of the Vision indeed shows such a tendency from several terminological and iconographic elements, the most essential of which we will present here.

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27 Garibian de Vartavan 2009, 244 ff.
28 Ibid., 242–255; Garibian 2014. On the pattern of the Passion of Christ imitated by the martyrs see Delehaye 1921, 19.
First, it is the opening of the sky that allows the visible world to unite with the intelligible one: the colour of the plain changing to blue-sky signifies this union. The personified Providence striking the earth announces the end of time and of the kingdom of darkness, as well as the resurrection of the dead:

He stuck the wide expanse of the solid ground, and great and immeasurable rumblings sounded in the underground depths. (Aa § 735)

The description of the celestial beings coming down in appearance of a luminous army is one of the commonplaces of apocalyptic imagery. Attracted by the sweet scent of the martyrs’ blood, these beings foreshadow the angels who will dwell among men, as announced by the Messenger of the Vision. However, to obtain eternal life, humankind needs an intercession with Christ the Judge: yet another indissoluble act of the spectacle of the Second Coming, that by their martyrial death the virgins gained the privilege to accomplish:

They are alive with God and intercede for those who commemorate them, and we pray to have their intercession with God. Because they died for God, they can turn the death of many into life. (Aa § 718)

... so that they through their intercession may relieve you from the afflictions and scourge that befell you. (Vn, 106)

Moreover, to repent for the guilt of murdering the virgins and to be purified in order to deserve their intercession, Saint Gregory exhorts people to build burial places for their remains, as recommended and shown in the Vision:

... hasten and build martyria in order to give repose to the martyrs of God, so that they may give you respite from the torments of your punishments, and that you may be saved from the terrible and cruel judgments that have been prepared and promised for the future, and that you may become worthy of the kingdom of Christ. (Aa § 730)

... let us bring together the bodies of the holy women, so that salvation may be granted to you through them, and let us build churches over them, so that you may be worthy to become offspring of his divinity, and your sins may be erased and your evil deeds obliterated. May he make you worthy to be crowned with his saints ... (Va, 72)

The status of intercessor is confirmed in the Vision by the place that the thirty-seven virgins occupy between the vaults of the ciborium and the “divine
throne” which personifies the Trinity. The description of this throne reproduces the well-known iconography of the Second Coming in Early Christian art.\textsuperscript{29}

Similarly, the scene where the sheep transform into luminous lambs represents the just chosen to join the Kingdom of heaven. They receive wings and mingle with the luminous army of angels as they ascend while the sheep changed into wolves are carried away by a torrent of fire, as will happen to the sinners and unholy men. To greet the coming down of Christ, the luminous sheep fly up to the capital in cloud of the first pillar, as the Messenger explains:

the capital of cloud is to receive the just when they will fly up to meet the Lord at his coming. (\textit{Aa} § 744)

According to him, the “Divine Providence” shaking the earth cleanses it of all errors precipitating the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem. The latter is represented in the appearance of the ciborium: “The canopy above represents the type of the celestial city, the gathering-place (\textit{žolovaran}) of the unity of the kingdom of heaven” (\textit{Aa} § 748).

The eschatological character of the Vision is also manifested by the image of the pillars of fire and of cloud, which is inspired by the Apocalypse of John: “Then I saw another mighty angel coming down out of heaven. […] His face was like the Sun and his legs were like pillars of fire” (Rev 10:1).

According to the biblical interpretation, this kind of pillar symbolises the divine word which guides mankind as God guided the people of Israel through the desert: “During the day, Yehovah went in front of them in a pillar of cloud to show them the way, and during the night he went in front of them in a pillar of fire to give them light …” (Exod 13:21).

Finally, the luminous appearance of the cross is abundantly present in the Vision. Its image is inspired by the Vision of the cross that occurred in Jerusalem in 351, which was interpreted by the bishop of the city Cyril as the authentic sign of the Parousia, the announcement of the imminent Coming of Christ.\textsuperscript{30}

Therefore, the descent of the celestial army guided by the man personifying the Providence (or the divine Power) that Saint Gregory saw, foreshadows the descent of Christ on the Last day. This is why later, in the Middle Age, this figure is identified with Christ, consequently changing the name Kat’ošlikē of the Mother-Church to \textit{Eǰ-Miaccinn}—“The Only-Begotten descended” (or “Descent of the Only-Begotten”).\textsuperscript{31}

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\item[29] See for example the well-known 5th century mosaic from Arian Baptistery in Ravenna.
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Yet, according to the Christian conception of the end of time, this capital event cannot commence until the preaching of the Gospels has reached every corner of the Earth. This idea is represented in the Vision by the image of the light, which as a source springs in the middle of the plain and fills all the space symbolising the preaching of the Gospels and the Redemption of the peoples through baptism (Aa § 751).

Thus, the two theophanies—the martyrdom of the virgins and the descent of the celestial beings—combine, through the eschatological Vision of Saint Gregory, to announce the Second Coming of Christ and the salvation of all mankind. These mysteries will be fulfilled through the baptism of the Armenians and of the inhabitants of the Northern regions.

The Founding of a New Jerusalem in Valaršapat in the 5th Century and Its Theological Justification

Set in the historical context of the first quarter of the 5th century (the date on which the Vision would have been written down), the theological analysis of the two theophanies connected in the Vision clearly reveals two tendencies, which are linked to the conception of the Armenians of this period of the role and importance of their conversion.

The first is to mark the sacred nature of the sites where these theophanies are manifested. The first pillar of the Vision stands on the exact spot where the “Providence” has landed and struck the earth with the hammer, while the other three pillars appeared precisely in the places where the virgins had been martyred. The theophanies thus transform these sites into holy places. However, the blood of the virgins shed in imitation of Christ’s Passion purified not only each place of their martyrdom but also all the space extended between the four pillars since in the Vision, the heaven opened above the whole city, the divine light was diffused on the entire land and the blow of the hammer flattened the whole surface on which the pillars of fire appeared. Besides, according to the “national” version of the Hc (i.e. Aa) the ciborium symbolising the heavenly Jerusalem covers the space between the pillars since it rises on the arches, which connect them.

This space, doubly sacred through the blood of the martyrs and through the vision of Saint Gregory, defines the new Christian Valaršapat, the perimeter of which matches with that of the Upper city. To consecrate this new city, four

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shrines—a Mother-Church (house of God) and three martyrria—must be built on the spots of the pillars, according to the instructions of the Messenger of the Vision. It is currently established that the layout of the martyrria around the Mother-Church Kat’olikē dates back to the years 406–417 when the Catholicos Sahak the Great undertook their construction following the invention of the relics of the Hṙip’simian virgins. This layout reproduces the sacred topography of Christian Jerusalem, as formed during the 4th century by the perimeter of its first four major churches: the architectural complex of Resurrection (including the Anastasis, the Cross, and the Martyrium or the Basilica of Constantine) at Golgotha place, the basilica of Agony with the Cave of the Arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, the basilica of Eleona on the Mount of Olives, and the Mother-Church of Apostles on Mount Zion. These churches commemorated the places of Jesus’ theophany and the descent of the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, Saint Sahak invokes the mimesis of the “living iconography” of the holy places in Jerusalem to definitively fix his See in Vałarşapat and to obtain recognition of the supremacy of this city as the holy centre, the spiritual metropolis of all Armenia to the detriment of the southern See of Aštišat. This mimesis endowed the “copies” of the holy places with the same value of sanctity and the same divine power, as had their original models. In this way, apart from the parallelism of the martyrdom of the virgins with the Passion of Christ, mentioned above, one finds several other figures and elements in the Vision, which reflect in diffraction an image composed according to iconographic benchmarks and literary formulas from the Hierosolymitan sources. The description of the crosses in the Vision recalls the first monument of the Cross on Golgotha hillock, which shone with a blazing and unreal glow in the eyes of the believers, but it also refers to the Letter of Cyril of Jerusalem to Constantius II, to his Catecheses, and to the Vision of Constantine from the tripartite version of the Legend of the True Cross. These sources are among the first

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34 Ibid., 195–203.
36 On the relationship between the “copies of the holy places” and their originals, see Vikan 1998; Ousterhout 1993. On the various forms that these copies took, see the contributions in Lidov 2009.
works translated into Armenian after the Bible and therefore enjoyed considerable popularity.\footnote{Garitte 1963; Bihain 1963; Ter-Petrosyan 1984, 9; Thomson 1985.}

Then, the place where the first pillar appeared is assigned to the future Mother-Church Kat’olikē, which is supposed to evoke, by its name and by its central position, the complex of Resurrection on Golgotha. The symbolism of the three other cross-pillars, which according to the Greek-Arabic version are linked by chains as “the image of the cross on which Christ was raised between the two thieves”, also, seems to refer to the same iconographical source. Their distribution according to the cardinal points, which takes up the Trinitarian iconography of the Crucifixion, bears the signs of influence from the early Hierosolymitan liturgy of the exaltation of the Cross, on Good Friday, which took place in the Basilica of Constantine at Golgotha.\footnote{Ibid. It also refers to the creation of Adam in Jerusalem according to the \textit{Cave of Treasures}, l.11–16 (RI 1987).} On the other hand, their East-North-West position, according to the \textit{Vg} version, could allude to the main gates of Jerusalem mentioned by the pilgrims: that of Benjamin in the East, that of Neapolis (or Saint Stephen) in the North, and that of David in the West.\footnote{According to Eucherius, the bishop of Lyon, \textit{The toponography of Jerusalem}, 5, dated between 444–456, see Maraval 1996, 169.}

The \textit{mimesis} of the “living iconography” of Jerusalem is also noted in the liturgical field. Planning to systematise and standardise the Armenian rites and the festive calendar, Sahak the Great sent to the Holy Land (between 417–428) some disciples of the Exegetical (թարգմանչաց) school freshly founded in Vałaršapat, in order to translate and bring back the main liturgical books: the Breviary and the Great Lectionary.\footnote{Renoux 1976, 1989, 415–512, and his many other publications on this subject. For the prayers and songs see also Findikyan 2010 and 2016; Garibian de Vartavan 2011. More recently, Mahé 2018, 62–64.} As “sacred copies” of holy places, these books are received and used almost without changes. As a result, the annual feasts and rites that took place in Vałaršapat as well as in the whole of Armenia were linked to those of the Holy City not only by identical prayers, readings, and chants, but also by the evocation of the names of the shrines and the processions between them. From this date on, all the sources originated in Jerusalem acquired a supreme authority in the observance of the feasts as in theological discussions.\footnote{Terian 2008, 17.}

In this way, Christian Vałaršapat became perfectly comparable, even interchangeable with the Holy City, its holy places and its holy liturgy. It could there-
fore claim the title of “New Jerusalem”, a claim that characterises the second tendency detected in the two theophanies in question. The Vision of Saint Gregory would thus have received the noble mission of providing the theological justification for this undertaking, the providential affirmation of which is granted by Heaven and transmitted by the Messenger.

This claim is also highlighted in the work of Koriwn, one of the first disciples of Maštoc’ and the author of his biography (written in 443, henceforth VM). Describing the circumstances of the invention of the Armenian alphabet, which he presents as a prodigious incarnation of the Trinity, a grace given all at once and by one person, he does not forget to clarify that it is the province of Ayrarat and the city of Vašrap which become (for the second time after the martyrdom of the virgins and the vision of Saint Gregory) the centre of the distribution of this grace:

On their part they streamed in and were thrilled to come from all regions and districts of the land of Armenia to the flowing spring of divine knowledge. For in the district of Ayrarat, at the royal and high-priestly centers, there gushed forth for the Armenians, the House of T’orgom, the grace of God’s commandments. The (following) prophetic (word) should have been recalled there: “And there shall be a spring gushing forth for the House of David.”

It is by a similar paraphrase that Eusebius of Caesarea speaks about the Holy Land and Jerusalem:

... he has selected two places in the eastern division of the Empire, the one in Palestine—since from thence the life-giving stream has flowed as from a fountain for the blessing of all nations ... (LC, IX.15)

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44 As was the custom in the Christian world for inventions and translations of relics, Koriwn most likely received the order to write the Life of the Holy Man on the occasion of the transfer of his remains to the crypt of the church built three years after his death (see VM, XXVII, 9).
46 This biblical figure, like his brother Ashkenaz, from this time was considered as the ancestor of the Armenians.
48 The English translation of Koriwn’s passages by Abraham Terian, who kindly shared these quotes from his forthcoming book The Life of Mashtots by His Disciple Koriwn (the volume will be issued in 2022, by Oxford Early Christian Texts. Oxford University Press).
49 Eusebius of Caesarea, In praise of Constantine (henceforth LC), see Drake 1976.
... in our own province of Palestine, and in that city from which as from a fountain-head the Saviour Word has issued forth to all mankind ... (\textit{LC}, XI.2)

This image is faithfully resumed by Agat'angelos:

From every region and province of Armenia they excitedly came to the opened source of the grace of the knowledge of Christ. For in the province of Ayrarat, at the royal residence, there flowed forth for the Armenian house of Torgom the grace of the preaching of the gospel of God’s commandments. (\textit{Aa} §76)

And we also find it in the miraculous appearance of the \textit{Vision} of Saint Gregory:

There gushed forth an abundant spring, flowing over all the plains [...] as far as the eye could see. [...] this light which filled the land is the preaching of the gospel, which also fills the northern region. (\textit{Aa} §§739, 742)

The texts of the \textit{Vision} therefore allow us to define not only the chronological framework but also the providential intentions of this mimetic claim.

6 \textbf{The Eschatological Significance of the New Jerusalem in Vałaršapat}

In the 4th century Jerusalem regained the preeminent status as both the centre of the universe and the “Mother of all the churches”\textsuperscript{50} through the discovery of the relics of the Cross, and through the Vision of the cross. According to the theological interpretation developed by Cyril of Jerusalem, the one confirmed the mystery of the Passion and the Resurrection of Christ, the other authenticated the relics of the Wood and announced the Second Parousia. With the discovery and the vision of the Cross, reality and Truth joined in Jerusalem, which thus embodied both the biblical past and the eschatological future.\textsuperscript{51}

Therefore, although Christ did not say when and where he would descend, the city of his revelation and his Ascension received all the rights to become also the site of the accomplishment of the Providential History and the Second Coming. This is all the more so since the vision of the Cross by itself attested to

\textsuperscript{50} Dignity offered to the Holy City at the 1st Council of Constantinople in 381, see Drijvers 2004, 175–176.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 159–162; Baert 2004, 51.
the imminent promise of this event, the expectation of which was also intensi-
ified towards the end of the 4th century.\textsuperscript{52} In this context it is noteworthy that
the \textit{Cave of Treasures}, an apocryphal source dating back to the 5th century,\textsuperscript{53}
situates the creation of mankind in Jerusalem, on the very site of the Crucifix-
ion, and on Friday.\textsuperscript{54}

Likewise, the supreme dignity of Vałaršapat as a spiritual centre analogous to
Jerusalem, from which the preaching of the divine word was spread in Armenia
and in the “Northern regions” and which was gratified by an eschatological vis-
ion, is revealed to Armenians through the discovery of the relics of the holy
martyrs at the beginning of the 5th century. Confirming their passion similar
to the Passion of Christ, these relics become comparable to the relics of the
Cross, since they authenticated the received tradition of the circumstances of
the conversion of Armenia. As for the \textit{Vision of Saint Gregory}, reported by this
tradition, not only did it announce the Second Parousia by the images of the
luminous crosses and the descent of celestial beings, but it especially projec-
ted the conditions predefined by the Economy of Salvation, as Gregory explains
before telling his vision: “He revealed to me the vivifying providence that he
intends to bestow on you” (\textit{Aa} § 731).

It is through the conversion of the Armenians and the inhabitants of the
northern regions that the way to the Kingdom of Heaven will be opened for
the just who are saved.

Apart from the \textit{Vision}, the eschatological meaning of the conversion of the
Armenians is also noticeable in two other passages of the \textit{HC}. The first reports
the hasty arrival of the wife of Saint Gregory\textsuperscript{55} in Armenia because she heard
about “the wonders of holy martyrs and of Gregory, which bear witness to the
coming of Christ” (\textit{Vg}, 95). The second describes a miraculous vision of the
cross, which appears during the baptism of the Armenians in Bagawan:

\begin{quote}
... a wonderful sign was revealed by God. [...] The waters of the river
stopped and then turned back again, a bright light appeared in the like-
ness of a shining pillar. [...] Above it was the likeness of the Lord’s cross.
The light shone out so brightly that it obscured and weakened the rays of
the sun. (\textit{Aa} § 833)
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{52} Drijvers 2004, 159–162.
\textsuperscript{53} Leonhard 2001.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Cave of Treasures} 1, 2–16 (see Mahé 1992c, xiv–xv).
\textsuperscript{55} Her name was Yulita, according to \textit{Vg}, 97.
\textsuperscript{56} Compare with the ancient ceremony of the Baptism of Christ taking place at the bank of
Jordan, on the feast of Epiphany (see Maraval 2002, 213, 11.4).
\end{flushright}
Taking myron and oil, he poured them into the river, making the form of a cross. A great miracle occurred: the river reversed its course, staying calm, and the currents stood still. [...] A fiery column appeared in the midst of the waters having the form of a cross. (Vg, 167)

This claim derives from the geographical conception—both classical and biblical, which was also adopted by the Armenians and their northern Christian neighbours. According to this conception the Caucasus (which includes the northern lands of Armenia) was considered as the North-North-East limits of the known world (or rather of the civilised world).57 Seen under the light of the Gospel telling about the conditions necessary for the end of time, this position of extreme periphery is accepted by the Armenians as a privilege, a “vivifying gift” because it granted them a role of immense importance in the Economy of Salvation: their conversion followed by that of the Iberians and the Alouanians58 precipitated the end of time and the advent of Christ. Armed with this connection of ideas and equipped with the Antiochian exegetical model according to which the Bible presented an account of historical events since the Creation until the end of the world predesigned by the Providence, the intellectuals from the circle of the “exegetes-translators”, guided by their masters Saints Sahak and Maštoc’, developed a new attitude towards Armenian history. After the conversion of the country to Christianity, the latter received the full right to be considered as a continuation of the biblical story.59 This perspective also allowed them to reframe the perception of the Christian identity of the Armenians who from then on could be seen as a new chosen people with whom God concluded a New Covenant.60 From this point of view, the term uxt ("pact", "covenant", "congregation", "engagement") recurrent under various formulas in the Armenian literature of the 5th century61 also seems to express this biblical connotation.

This is also why, we think, it would seem to Saints Sahak and Maštoc’ that there was an urgent need to complete the illumination work of Saint Gregory with a second evangelical mission targeting the regions which remained pre-
dominantly pagan or threatened with forced conversion to the Zoroastrian
religion. This attempt led Maštoc’ to the conviction that in order to success-
fully carry out this task the Armenian language had to be endowed with a
special alphabet which would make it possible to fight, by a new written cul-
ture based on the Bible and the knowledge of true God, against the traditional
orality, the vehicle of paganism.⁶² On the other hand, the alphabet served as a
fundamental factor, a “functional model” to safeguard the cultural unity of the
Armenians divided between the two Empires.⁶³ The Armenian alphabet is thus
perceived and received by contemporaries as another “gift of God” comparable
and measurable only to the Tables of the Law offered to Moses and the people
of Israel. It is another pledge which a century later succeeds the Vision of Saint
Gregory and which confirms the pact of union with God:

At that time our blessed and pleasant land of Armenia became truly won-
derful, where at the hands of two associates [Sahak and Maštoc’—NG],
as if suddenly, Moses the teacher of the Law with the prophetic order,
progressive Paul with the whole apostolic group, along with the world-
sustaining Gospel of Christ, came to be found in the Armenian tongue,
became Armenian-speaking! (VM XI, 8)

In this passage Koriwn adapts one of the essential theological formulas of the
Church defined by Saint Paul: “built upon the foundation of the apostles and
prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:20). Thus,
the Word of God in Armenian erects the Church of Christ solidly and deeply
on the Armenian soil.

On the other hand, the invention of the alphabet seems to be a project all
the more decisive since alongside the translation of the Bible and the important
works of the Christian literature which depended on it, it also made possible
the writing down of the national history starting from the conversion of the
country to legitimise its integration within the Holy Scripture. This is why the
first properly Armenian literary work had to be of the historiographical genre
and that it had to relate the narrative of the conversion of Armenia.⁶⁴ The
second Armenian original work that fits into this perspective is that of Koriwn:
by explicitly drawing parallels between Moses, Paul, and Maštoc’, he presents
the activity of his teacher as a new apostolic vocation⁶⁵ which was to complete
the evangelization of the “Northern regions”.

⁶³ Zekiyan 2004.
⁶⁴ On the arguments of this dating, see Garibian 2014.
⁶⁵ Mahé 1992b and 2006b.
Yet, precisely like the *Vision of Saint Gregory*, the invention of the alphabet, which very early qualified as a theophanic vision,\(^66\) also carries an eschatological message, since it offered all Armenians the possibility of knowing God’s plan from the beginning to the end and of recognizing themselves in this economy:

For a land unfamiliar even with the fame of those regions where all the miracles wrought by God had been performed, soon learned all the things that had taken place and all the God-given traditions: not only those that had been venerated through time, but also those that were long before, from eternity, and those that are to come later—the beginning and the end. (*VM XI*, 10)

The echo of the founding of the New Vałaršapat “in the image and likeness” of Christian Jerusalem still resounds in the other source from the end of the 5th century, the *History of Armenia* written by a third-generation disciple of the “exegetical school” of Vałaršapat, Łazar P’arpec’i:\(^67\)

... the magnificent, famous, and illustrious province of Ayrarat [...] desirable land, incomparable and overflowing with the gifts of God [...] the capital of Armenia [...] which is a model of profusion, in scripture’s words “the land of the Egyptians and God’s paradise” [...] the city of Vałaršapat, the residence of Arsacid kings [...] the angelic (արքունիք) foundation of the holy house of God, the great church Kat’olikē and the martyria of the blessed ascetic virgins ... (*LP*, I, §§ 7–8)

P’arpec’i also continues to develop the parallel between the invention of the alphabet and the evangelising mission of Saint Gregory, stressing however the important role of the catholicos Sahak, the great grandson of Gregory:

... So too may this task be arranged by the wisdom of your virtue, and do you accomplish it. Just as the holy champion of Christ, Gregory, was preserved unharmed in his torments [...] and he was given to Armenia to illuminate our understanding, so too for you, his descendant, has been preserved and granted the lot of inheritance for this glorious task—

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\(^{66}\) See Movsēs Xorenac’i (listed in the bibliography here as *MX*), III, § 53. For an English translation of Xorenac’i’s work the reader can consult Thomson 2006.

\(^{67}\) See Łazar’s *History* (henceforth *LP*), in the *Matenagirk’ hayoc’* series; English translation by Thomson 1991.
make a beginning to this improving work and become an imitator of your saintly ancestor who led Armenia from ignorance to the true knowledge of God. (*LP*, 1, §11)

Intending to legitimise this “ emulation”, P’arpec’i introduces another theophanic vision with an eschatological allure, which appeared to Saint Sahak in the Mother-Church Kat’olikē on Holy Thursday, before the evening service, at a time when he was not yet consecrated catholicos of Armenia. Reserving the detailed analysis of this Vision for another publication, I will only refer here to its direct connection with the Armenian eschatological aspirations of the period of Saints Sahak and Maštoc’. The most ancient core of the text of this Vision (*LP*, 1, §17) dating back to the 5th century is closely related to Saint Gregory’s Vision. Its imagery also recalls the Early Christian iconography of the Golgotha Cross-monument and that of the Second Coming. In the same manner a celestial messenger in human appearance comes down from heaven to explain the vision that revealed not only what was to happen in the immediate future, but also all that would happen until the end of the world, as he had done for Sahak’s ancestor Gregory. Yet, while the latter perceived through the eyes of his spirit the intelligible image of celestial Jerusalem which offered him the sacred model for the foundation of the New Vašaršapat, Saint Sahak sees the intelligible image of the celestial liturgy which would later inspire him during the decision to reform the Armenian liturgy. We have seen that both imitated the examples of the holy places in Jerusalem.

In light of the theological analysis of the Vision and of its contextualization in the historical framework of the 5th century, it would seem that the definitions “Northern region” and “Northern peoples” used abundantly in the *HC* texts and particularly in the Vision, refer not only to the northern provinces of Armenia, but also to the Caucasus or more precisely to the neighbouring kingdoms which had also accepted Christianity. This assumption is supported by the texts of *Vg-Va* where the kings of Lazars, Iberians, and Alouanian are specifically mentioned during the convocation of the general assembly of the.

68 Sargsean 1931–1932; Akinean (1948, 40–41) considers the oldest layer as originally being part of the History of P’arpec’i. Muradyan (2014) suggests that the date of the Vision of Sahak could have gone back to the years 482–484.

69 The Trinitarian symbolism of the Vision of Sahak is mentioned by Yovhannēs Mayragomenc’i (7th century) in his Commentary on the Church (*Verlucit’ow Kat’olikē ekelec’way*, listed in the bibliography here as ve).

70 The 35 and 350 years are regarded as the same time in the Vision; they are mythical numbers echoing the 3.5 years of the Antichrist rule before the Second Advent of Christ (Muradyan 2014, 319–320). The scholar also mentions the Catechesis of Cyril of Jerusalem as one of the possible sources of Sahak’s Vision.
princes and nobles by King Trdat in order to make them part of his decision to embrace Christianity. They are mentioned again alongside Trdat during the solemn reception of Saint Gregory after his return from Caesarea and at the time of the baptism of all. Finally, after his enthronement in the church of Aštišat, Gregory sends missionary priests and bishops to their respective countries. In fact, this view of the united conversion of the Caucasian nations and its apocalyptic importance reflected in the Greek and Arabic versions of the Life agrees with the historical data on the role that Maštoc' played in the creation of the alphabets for the Iberians and the Alouanians, whose religious and secular authorities must have had the same concerns as those of Armenia: make the Second Parousia possible by accomplishing the Christianization of their respective peoples. We should not forget that this is also the period when the first writing of the History of the Conversion or rather the Life of Saint Gregory was born. We can therefore conclude by supposing that the foundation of the Christian Valaršapat would have the intention of creating not the Armenian, but rather the “Caucasian” New Jerusalem.

7 Conclusion

The convergence of all these arguments and their overlap with the analysis of the Vision allow us to perceive, in the endeavours of the Armenian authorities at the beginning of the 5th century, the possibility of yet another reason which would have motivated the foundation of the “Caucasian Jerusalem” in Valaršapat. It was a question of preparing the ground to welcome the Second Coming of Christ, the purpose of which would have been once again inspired by the Hierosolymitan example. Since the Gospels specify neither the time nor the place of this Descent, it could just as easily happen in Valaršapat, this New Jerusalem of the Caucasus—one of the extremities of the world, the Christianization of which is the condition sine quan non for the Parousia of Christ.

According to the “théorie d’ascendance” widespread in the Christian thought of the time, the mimesis of the Hierosolymitan iconography was applied to

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71 Vg 92, 98; Va, 85, 86; Vs 219, which does not name the three countries but says in this passage: “Then the kings and nobles and judges gathered together and said ...”, which suggests the kings of the neighbouring countries.

72 Vg 159, 164; Va 147, 152.

73 Vg 163, 170; Va 151, 158. Vs, 128 mentions here only the Alouanians.

74 This theory expresses the tendency to successively relate the terrestrial realities according to the biblical conception “in image and likeness” (icona-mimesis) and applying the prin-
the Armenian realities with the “superlative” principle showing the Armenian cases in a superior level compared to their models.\textsuperscript{75} Always following this principle, one could suggest that it was this possible choice of place of the Descent that would be shown by the Providence to Saint Gregory. Moreover, according to the received tradition about the conversion, this vision appeared a few decades before the vision of the cross in Jerusalem. Again, it was to prepare this event that the Providence himself through his messenger would have shown to Saint Gregory the type and the layout of the new holy city with its holy places, as well as the site of the new Temple of God—Mother-Church Katʼołikē. And surely it was to confirm this providential intervention that another eschatological vision would have been shown a century later to Saint Sahak. This attitude is also perceivable in the case of Maštoc’ and the invention of the Armenian alphabet which in comparison with Moses and the Tables of the Law is put by Koriwn in a more favourable position.\textsuperscript{76} Thereafter, one could presume that it is to affirm this new Covenant with the converted inhabitants of the “Northern regions” and to finally approach the accomplishment of the History of Salvation, that God was supposed to have presented first the Armenians, then the Iberians and the Alouanians with the prodigious alphabets: benevolence operated through Saints Sahak and Maštoc’. Thus, according to the architects of this new Covenant with God, it would necessarily be this Caucasian New Jerusalem—the capital of the newly chosen people, purified and sanctified by two successive theophanies and founded in the image of the Upper city, which would have been the most worthy of all places to receive from heaven Christ in his glory.

Bibliography


\textsuperscript{75} Principle of superiority for all that is new compared to its ancient model, see Sansterre 1972; Dagron 1996, 20–21 and 291. Eusebius of Caesarea also applies it to praise the advantages of the new chosen people—the Christians, and the New Temple of God—the Church, compared to the old people and Temple, see Garibian de Vartavan 2009, 48–57.

\textsuperscript{76} See Mahé 2006a and 2018, 49–50.


Garitte, G. 1965. "La Vie grecque inédite de saint Grégoire d’Arménie (Ms. 4 d’Ochrida)", Annales de Bollandia, 233–290. DOI: 10.1484/j.abol.4.02577.


ve = Yovhan Mayragomec'i, Verlucut'iwn Kat'olikē eketelecrowy ew or in nma yawrineal kar-
Garibian, Gac’ [Commentary on the Catholic Church and on Its Liturgy], in M.H. 2005, 349–354.

VM = Patmut’iwn varuc’ ew mahan aṙn eranelwoy srboyn Mesropay vardapeti meroy t’argmanč’i [History of the Deeds and Death of the Blessed Holy Man Mesrop Vardapet, Our Translator], in M.H. 2003, 229–257.
