Collections and Catalogues of Armenian Manuscripts

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Few cultures attach as much value to manuscripts as the Armenians. For them, a manuscript book is much more than a simple tool of transmission. It has a double value in Armenian eyes: that of the texts it contains, which are preserved and disseminated as a result, but it also has its own intrinsic value as a manuscript book, as an object that has become the symbol of a culture and identity. The vicissitudes of Armenian history play a key role in this process. Armenians have often been dominated by foreign powers and have had to seek affirmation of their identity in non-political elements: religion, language, writing, and attachment to ancestral lands have been the main vectors of Armenian cultural identity. These vectors also reflect a culture that is very much oriented towards intellectual endeavours, where reference to texts is extremely important, whether these be biblical or patristic texts that are central to Armenians’ religious and spiritual life, or other material such as historiographical texts. It is therefore not surprising that manuscripts have been held in such high esteem by Armenians. Another reason lies in the continual enrichment of the manuscript by Armenian artists, whose illuminations and decorations represent one of the highest achievements of Armenian art. Manuscripts continued to be produced long after the invention of printing, even though printing allowed Armenian works to reach a wider audience more quickly.¹

These factors certainly explain the relatively large number of Armenian manuscripts that have survived, compared with manuscripts in Greek, Latin or Georgian. Based on data from library catalogues, we can put the number of Armenian manuscripts at a little over 30,000, perhaps even 31,000. This may seem a low figure, but anyone who is familiar with Armenian history and the succession of destroyed towns and monasteries – not forgetting the tragic events of 1915 – will regard the figure of 30,000 as almost miraculous. It is

¹ See Kévorkian & Mahé 2005 for a good summary of the history of Armenian books, from manuscript to printing; see Kévorkian 1986, and in particular the preface by Jean-Pierre Mahé, pp. VI–XXXII, for information on the beginnings of Armenian printing, its historical context and its cultural and religious aspects. – The author would like to thank Valentina Calzolari, Dickran Kouymjian, and Michael Stone for their advice and comments in the preparation of this chapter.
particularly impressive when we consider, for example, that around 55,000 Greek manuscripts have survived, along with 300,000 Latin manuscripts\(^2\) and 12,000 Georgian manuscripts. Armenian manuscripts thus constitute an extremely significant cultural heritage and show the vitality and creativity of a culture in contact with the Latin West, Byzantium, and the Iranian world, which fed on the works of classical antiquity and was eventually able to produce its own treasures.

The description and catalogography of manuscripts is part of the discipline of codicology (the study of manuscript books);\(^3\) these activities are also an important branch of library science. There have been significant developments in the catalogography of manuscripts since the mid-twentieth century, and standards of description have been raised. This is because various groups are interested in manuscripts: philologists, palaeographers, codicologists, and art historians; one scholar may want to obtain information from colophons, while another is interested in the bindings, watermarks, parchment, paper, ink or rulings. Nowadays, a catalogue must do more than simply state the age and contents of the manuscript. Every user expects to find the information he needs, making the catalogographer’s task more and more difficult. This trend has given rise to considerable debate on the limits of catalogography, on the tools that should be used to help it progress, and on how to specify the expectations of each user group. Various ideas have been put forward and tried out in the field of Latin (and to a lesser extent Greek) manuscripts. Readers can get a good idea of this process from the website of the *Gazette du livre médiéval* (www.palaeographia.org).

As Alphonse Dain rightly points out, “l’inventaire des manuscrits est […] la tâche essentielle des codicologues, tant que ne sera pas achevée complètement pour toutes les bibliothèques de manuscrits la confection de catalogues scientifiques”.\(^4\) Inventory, catalogue … Descriptions of manuscripts can indeed take several forms depending on the aim in view; specialists will want to have tools that are ideally matched to their area of research:

- catalogues of catalogues;
- catalogues of libraries, collections, holdings;
- catalogues of types of manuscripts (dated or illustrated manuscripts, palimpsestes, catalogues of fragments, etc.);

\(^2\) Some scholars even talk of 500,000 to 600,000 Latin manuscripts…

\(^3\) Dain 1997, 77.

\(^4\) [“Creating an inventory of manuscripts is […] the vital task of codicologists, until such time as scientific catalogues have been produced for all manuscript libraries”], Dain 1997, 78.