On the Historical and Literary Value of the Colophons in Armenian Manuscripts

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Anyone who has come into contact, however briefly, with the world of Armenian manuscripts will know that they contain not only eloquent texts and the images that often accompany these texts, but also their colophons. In its own right a rich channel of communication about the past, the Armenian colophon – as with other book-cultures, but possessing some distinctive traits – was usually written by the scribe towards the end of the book so as to leave a record of himself and his work for posterity.

There is a special place reserved within a manuscript for the colophon (in Armenian yiśatakaran, literally the “place of memory” or the “memorial”), usually marked off by a frame, or by some blank lines, or placed on a fresh page, or written in a distinct style of script, using smaller letters, for example, or by some other special sign. In this sometimes lengthy concluding section – which completes the manuscript – the scribe addresses the reader directly, placing his “signature” on the work he has carried out and thereby furnishing important information concerning the manuscript’s co-ordinates in space and time. It is not rare, moreover, that the scribe does not confine himself to indicating only his name, the place and date of writing, together with other details of the microcosm that surrounds him – the name of the monastery, of its abbot, of the person who commissioned the manuscript and sponsored it, of some of the brethren or of his family –, but he also lifts his eyes to comprehend the political and cultural macrocosm that formed the background to his act of copying: he mentions the political and religious authorities of his time, he records invasions or current wars, natural disasters, or simply details of daily life, and he formulates prayers, thanksgivings, exhortations, curses and so on.

In a civilization such as the Armenian, which has developed for most of its long history without reference to an established power of state that could guarantee the preservation through archives of the nation’s historical events, and given the dispersion suffered even by those documents gathered within the archives produced during the sorrowful history of Armenia, it is in manuscript colophons that we can still find the substance through which to reconstruct many aspects of the political, cultural, civic and social history, as well as the daily life of the Armenian people. The first famous and systematic corpus of Armenian colophons, entitled Yišatarkarank’ jeṙagrac’ (= Manuscript
colophons), was published in Antelias in 1951 by the catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, G. Yovsép’ean, who remarked in his introduction:

Without recourse to the colophons, it is impossible to get a precise idea of the history, literature, art and culture – or even of the economy – of Armenia, Cilicia and the colonies. Indeed, the colophons also shed much light on the wars and other relations between Armenians and neighbouring countries.1

In order to present the fullness of the significance of the yišatakaran’ and the value of their rich data, one may compare them with those in manuscripts from an adjacent cultural area, that of Byzantium, in which even the scribe’s name often remains unknown: colophons, where present, are short and mention few facts, such as the scribe’s name and a date, if at all. For this reason, Byzantine palaeography and codicology have also developed as disciplines seeking to provide criteria by which to clarify a manuscript’s provenance and dating.2

It is not so for Armenian manuscripts, which contrast with the Greek reticence by their loquacious character, maintaining in this way the information placed in them through centuries of history and significant geographical dislocations. One need not underline the great advantage deriving from this expansiveness provided to the spheres of Armenian philology and history, especially when one considers that, besides the autograph colophon written by the scribe at the end of the manuscript, one also often finds a plurality of notes added on various pages by successive owners, restorers and readers of the manuscript, each desirous to place a personal memento on the book.3 It is thanks to the

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1 Garegin I Kat’olikos 1951, XIV.
2 On further comparison with Byzantine manuscripts, see also the considerations below in this article. Approximately, one may calculate the relative frequency of colophons according to the following proportions: on average, eight out of ten Armenian manuscripts contain a colophon (and the lack of a subscription often coincides with a material lacuna in the codex); whilst for Byzantine manuscripts, one in ten may display a subscription.
3 One should note the use of the word yišatakaran in Armenian manuscript catalogues to indicate not only the scribal colophon, but also other non-scribal notes (such as notes of possession and so on), with the following distinctions: glxawor yišatakaran (= main colophon), or yišatakaran gc’tue’an žamanaki (colophon contemporary with the creation of the codex), and yišatakaran yetagayi (= colophon added subsequently); by galap’ar yišatakaran or yišatakaran naxagalap’ar ōrinaki is designated the main colophon in the model which has been transcribed in the apograph by the following scribe (“copied colophon” or “colophon of the model”). In the terminology adopted in this essay the word “colophon” designates the