Armenian paleography: a reassessment

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En ce qui concerne les manuscrits arméniens, les études paléographiques s'appuient sur une longue tradition, qui a vu l’élaboration d’une typologie des écritures et la constitution d’un ensemble important d’œuvres de référence sous forme d’albums, de catalogues et de monographies. Des progrès substantiels sont cependant possibles et, avec l’Album of Armenian Paleography, il serait souhaitable de mettre au point un instrument de travail d’un autre type qui servirait de point de départ à des études plus fines.

The scholarly study of ancient Armenian writing began with Yakob Dashean’s *An Overview of Armenian Paleography* published in 1898. The Melkitist father was inspired in part by a photograph sent from Paris by Auguste Carrière of a unique Greek papyrus written with Armenian letters. Though the papyrus subsequently disappeared, Dashean’s pioneer effort, even though it lacked reproductions, laid the foundation for the science of Armenian paleography. In 1913, Garegin Yovsep’yan, inspired by Dashean, offered his *Album of Armenian Paleography* with 143 photographic samples of manuscript hands and some early stone inscriptions. In his 1928 compendium, *The Letters of the Armenians*, Hrachia Adjarian, using Dashean and Yovsep’yan as a base, presented his own views on the development of Armenian scripts. The last serious study of Armenian paleography was Ashot Abrahamyan’s major manual, *History of Armenian Letters and Writing*, of 1959, revised and augmented in 1973. Step’an Melik-Bakshyan’s *Armenian Paleography* of 1987, is little more than an abridged rewriting of Abrahamyan’s *History* with more and better plates. Soviet studies, like Abrahamyan’s, are compilations concerned more with ligatures, monograms, coded writing, and scribes than with a systematic examination of the evolution of Armenian scripts.

The earliest published discussion of Armenian script types, coming shortly after the discipline of paleography was established by Mabillon for Latin in 1681 and Montfaucon for Greek in 1708, seems to be a brief section under “De Orthographia” in Johannis Schröder’s *Thesaurus Linguae Armenicae* of 1717. Essentially it contains an alphabet table of various scripts and a one page commentary. In 1730, an anonymous writer in Constantinople prepared an Armenian grammar in French with a short section on writing styles entitled “De l’Orthographe”. This unpublished manuscript from the Bibliothèque nationale de France with its unannotated section on Armenian scripts provides an alphabet table similar to Schröder’s. A somewhat more detailed discussion, but without a table, is found in volume III of the Melkhistian Chukas Indjidian’s *The Archaeology of the Geographical World of the Armenians* of 1835. Schröder presented four script types, including a decorative one; the unpublished manuscript of 1730 included seven types, three of which are decorative; and Indjidian listed a dozen types, four that are paleographically interesting, the others being decorative, cryptic, or epigraphic.

Dashean’s remark of a century ago, that most studies on Armenian writing were devoted to the invention of the alphabet and the form of letters rather than to the comparative analysis of bookhands, remains valid today. This delayed interest in paleography among Armenologists is paralleled by a similar neglect of codicology. In part, it is due to an often noted characteristic of Armenian manuscripts: the consistent use of dated scribal colophons. About 60% of all Armenian manuscripts are precisely dated, a percentage much higher than for Greek and Latin manuscripts. Therefore, the pressure to use such ancillary tools as paleography and codicology to help date undated manuscripts has been less strongly felt in Armenian research.

The need for an album of Armenian paleography, which would combine a study of script development with a comprehensive selection of dated manuscripts, was thus immediately felt. In 6.5, the inventory of books with Armenian manuscripts includes several dozen types of script: Erkíntá, Mijjijá, Búydyá, Ñutás, Dero, Xónatá, Fúntii, Dúntii, Púntii, Xóntii, Wónatá, Nónatá. 11. A decade ago a survey was conducted encompassing more than half of the approximately 30,000 extant Armenian manuscripts; see D. Kouymjian, “Dated Armenian Manuscripts as a Statistical Tool for Armenian History”, *Medieval Armenian Culture*, T. Stanev and M. Stone eds., University of Pennsylvania Armenian Texts and Studies, vol. 6, Chico, CA, 1993, p. 425-439. See also Bernard Combe, *Répertoire des bibliothèques et des catalogues de manuscrits arméniens*, Corpus Christinorum, Brepols-Tournai, 1992.

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2. Yovsep'yan, G., *Gef'or'van amunat ha haygo' yor*, published as “Ke'nti huy hragu'tan”, *Shoghakat*, S.*iymian binyagik yshgvan",* no. 1, Vagharshapat, S. T'jダya, 1913, pp. 170-174, 1, 98 pls., 143 figs. 
3. Hrach'oy Adjarian, *Haygor* (prev. National Library, vol. 69, Vienna, Melkitist Press, 1958). His groups are eri'ktag, mijn (small), Mesoplitan eri'k tag, v'ai (small) eri'k tag, um'yan g'or or transitional script, belorg, nororg, and alorgi'g.
4. He prepared two shorter earlier studies on Armenian paleography: A. C. Abrahamyan, *Harim'a asrâqi ihtijakan palagraphe*, *Evran*, 1940, idem, *Haygor palagraphe*, Evran, 1948. These have not been available for this study.
5. Abrahamyan, A. C., Hay gor en ge'k'or'van patwut'yan (History of Letters and the ‘Erni'k tag’ manuscripts), Evran, 1959. The second edition of Abrahamyan’s work entitled *Haygor en ge'k'or'van* (Letters and Writing of the Arme-
7. Johannis Schröder, *Thesaurus Linguae Armenicae, antiquae et hodiernae*, Amas-
8. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Manuscript Armen 2/7, a gramani copied in 1738 in Constantinople. The script types are listed under “De l’Orthographe” and cover pages 13-23. Seven types of script are listed: xamakir, zuke, zaggyegir, ergakir, yllukak, bolnakir, atorabir.
9. I am preparing a short note on the manuscript and its paleographic dissertation.
Examples, induced professors Michael Stone, Henning Lehmann, and myself to prepare an *Album of Armenian Paleography*. The project, initiated by the Association Internationale des Études Arméniennes, has been adopted by the Armenian National Academy of Sciences and publication has been assured by Aarhus University Press. To date the manuscript collections of A. Eremian, Jerusalem, Dublin, London, Paris, and several American collections have been surveyed. During a working seminar this past January in Aarhus, a preliminary selection of manuscripts to be included was made12.

**Types of Scripts**

Four principal Armenian scripts, with a varying number of sub-scripts and transitional forms have become the accepted types. They are *erkat'agir* (majuscule), *belogir* (literally “complete letters” or minuscule), *noretir* (a notary or scribal writing used in chancery documents), and *shighagir* (the modern cursive with joined letters), Schröder, the Anonymous manuscript of 1730, and Indjijdean13 employed the first three terms14. The word *shighagir* (now understood as slanted letters) seems to be a fourteenth century formulation15.

**Erkat'agir**

The invention of the Armenian alphabet by Mesrop Mashtoc in 404 A.D. is a widely studied phenomenon. The origin of each of the thirty-six letters of this extremely flexible and rich collection of consonants and vowels has been reasonably explained. Scholars have proposed different hypotheses on just what letter types were used in the monumental translation of the Bible undertaken by Mesrop and his disciples.

From the time of Indjijdean, scholars have been emphatic that Mesrop created and used *erkat'agir*. With this as a premise, most studies on Armenian paleography, including most of those cited above16, assume a linear and chronological evolution of Armenian from *erkat'agir* to *shighagir*, albeit with overlapping and some dissension. The only major dissident voice has been that of Garo Ghafadaryan, who in 1939 proposed that all types except *shighagir* were formed by Mesrop's hand and were used in all periods17.

The term *gir*, letter, is common to all names for scripts. The expression *erkat'agir*, literally “iron letters”, is attested as early as the tenth or eleventh century18. The term Mesropian *erkat'agir*, suggesting letters invented or used by Mesrop, describes the script of the earliest Armenian Gospel manuscripts, especially those of the tenth and eleventh centuries, and lapidary or stone inscriptions from the late fifth through the eleventh centuries. The letters are large, very erect, gracefully rounded capitals, uncials as we have come to call such majuscules in Latin and Greek paleography. Two theories explain the word *erkat'agir*, neither is totally convincing: one suggests an iron stylus was used to write the letters, the other contends that a ferrous oxide was employed in the ink of Armenian manuscripts. Schröder invoked the former, while Indjijdean disputed the stylus theory in favor of an iron oxide ink.

Metal styluses were used in antiquity, but only for writing on durable materials such as clay tablets, or, in the Latin world, waxed boards, the precursors of the codex. But we have no evidence of waxed tablets being used in Armenia19. As for ferrous inks, many early Armenian manuscripts employed a brown variety, characteristic of iron oxides, rather than the dark black of an Indian or Chinese ink common in Latin, Byzantine, and later Armenian manuscripts. Yet, because the same brown ink is found in some belogir or minuscule manuscripts, deriving the term *erkat'agir* from the use of ferrous ink also has its problems20.

How then do we explain the name iron letters? The answer is probably to be sought in the upright quality of this writing. Like Latin capitals, large *erkat'agir* was the preferred script of Armenian stone inscriptions, some of

18. According to the famous Mesropian dictionary, Nor hagikht’ haykakan esci, Venice, 1836-1837, p. 586. The earliest attestations of the word is in the fifth century; however, a much earlier citation is found in a short colophon on folio 4 of Venice MS 123, a Gospel, generally dated to the tenth century (the colophon is difficult to read), Baraneg Sasirian, Catalogue of Manuscripts in the Venice Mesropian Collection, vol. I, p. 544, suggests a reading of 911 for the colophon. Cf. A. Mat'evoyan, Haykapen gii aratsnakht’ esci, Erevan, 1980, p. 168-175, reprinted with photos in Manya Ghazaryan (editor), Garegin Hresyan, Nyker ta armenease esci (Essays on Armenian History), Erevan, 1982, n° 151. Mat'evoyan does not include this colophon in his collection.
19. Charles Mercier in his "Notes de paleOGRAPHIE ARMÉNIENNE" (fragments de ses coques), Revue des études arménienes, n.s., 13 (1978-1979), p. 51-58, accepted the idea of the metal stylus theory.
20. One would have to go back more than two thousand years before the invention of the alphabet to postulate an iron stylus tradition from Urartian cuneiform tablets of the early sixth century B.C.
which go back to the late fifth century. An iron chisel was used to carve these letters. Indeed, there is an instantly perceptible monumentality in early inscriptions. It is as though the alphabet was fashioned from iron and would, therefore, endure forever.

Of the four major writing styles, erkat'agir has been given the most subdivisions: Mesropian or rounded, slanted, semi, angular, small, and transitional. This situation underlines the scholarly preoccupation with the epoch of the invention of the alphabet and a concentration of interest on the oldest manuscripts. The latter is usually bolgor, used in the majority of all surviving manuscripts, has only three sub-designations, traditional bolgor, which like transitional erkat'agir is a mixed script, Cilician bolgor, and eastern bolgor. Notogir and shghagir are usually not subdivided. On the other hand, it is true that proportionally more erkat'agir manuscripts have lost their colophons and are thus undated. Furthermore, perhaps two to three thousand byleaves are preserved from otherwise lost erkat'agir manuscripts. All these are dated essentially on paleographic grounds. Thus, it is important that a rational set of categories for erkat''agir be formulated.

Bolgor

Bolgor, the ancestor of modern Armenian type fonts, dominates scribal hands from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. Its use for short phrases and colophons and even for copying an entire manuscript is attested as early as the tenth century. Bolgor used both majuscule and minuscule letters, often with quite different shapes. As mentioned above most authorities believe bolgor evolved gradually from erkat'agir because of the dual exigencies of saving time (fewer pen strokes) and economizing on parchment (smaller letters).

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24. Only sixteen of the thirty-six letters display different forms in majuscule and minuscule, and the nearly half show only a minor difference. It is on the basis of these letters that an evolutionary change must be established.
25. See note 16 supra.
26. Bischoff, Paléographie de l'antiquité romaine, p. 79. The discussion is about Latin paleography, but it serves the term "recent cursive" (as opposed to majuscule cursive) and suggests a firm usage by the third century; this minuscule cursive gradually replaces the majuscule cursive.
27. Yovsepian seems inclined toward such a possibility, see note 16 supra; Mercier also flirted with such an hypothesis: "Si, dès le xiiie siècle, on trouve capitale et minuscule, on ne peut conclure que ces deux écritures ont toujours coexisté," "Notes", p. 37. Yet, there are 500 years between the invention of the Armenian alphabet and the tenth century, plenty of time for an evolution to bolgor.
In the end a more nuanced approach may be necessary. Uncials or majuscule letters seem to have been used in the west for more formal writing: literary texts, Gospels, and important religious works as well as luxury manuscripts. The data gathered for the Album of Armenian Paleography points to a similar pattern. The bolgorig manuscripts of the tenth and eleventh centuries seem chronologically anomalous until it is observed that most of them are philosophical or less formal texts rather than Gospels.

Unlike the early development of erkat'agir, that of bolgorig, or Armenian minuscule, can be charted in manuscripts from its earliest intrusion to its perfection in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Its progress parallels remarkably that of Caroline script in Latin paleography. When introduced in the early years of Emperor Charlemagne’s rule, just before 800, Caroline swept aside all earlier attempts at forming a compact, uncluttered, uniform, and legible minuscule. So, too, in Armenia, under the impetus of princely and royal families of the newly established Armenian Cilician state, and nurtured by very literate catholici and bishops in the twelfth century, bolgorig became the bookhand of the major scriptoria. For more than 500 years it was the dominant script for biblical and literary texts. Erkat’agir was relegated to incipits and lavish display pages. Exceptions ran parallel to the experience of Caroline: some later royal Gospels were executed in erkat’agir, like the Gospels of 1268 of T’oros Roslin, among the most sumptuous of his manuscripts.

Unfortunately, the Caroline and bolgorig analogy breaks down when we search for the evolutionary history that may have produced Armenian minuscule. Examination of pre-Christian and early Christian Latin papyri clearly shows the origins of Caroline script in earlier cursive minuscule found in them. The invention of the Armenian alphabet in the early fifth century precludes any pre-Christian antecedents, indeed, we have no Armenian manuscript writing of a certain date before the ninth century. The near totality of Armenian lapidary and mosaic inscriptions up to the eleventh century are in a rounded erkat’agir. With no tangible earlier evidence to support a different position, scholars have proclaimed that bolgorig evolved linearly from erkat’agir. Without the fund of papyri or other documents in minuscule dating back to the early Christian era available to Latin and Greek paleographers, Armenian researchers are at a disadvantage to specify the steps in the development of bolgorig.

Mesrop, who knew Greek and Syriac, was by necessity familiar with minuscule and cursive alphabets. It is difficult to imagine that he and his pupils, as they translated the Bible, a task that took decades, would have used the laborious erkat’agir for drafts as they went along. Unfortunately, no written documents in Armenian outside of book manuscripts or fragments of them have survived prior to the twelfth century. The earliest Armenian chancery documents in a very cursive bolgorig or a proto-notogir are from the Cilician court when minuscule bolgorig is the standard bookhand.

The dilemma between a theory of a later evolution of minuscule and the speculation that erkat’agir and bolgorig scripts co-existed from the fifth century will not be easily resolved, but the methodology and tools to be described at the end of this paper will bring us closer to an understanding of the use of different forms of writing in the early centuries.

Papyrus

In this respect a single document may help re-phrase certain questions and at the same time alter our notion about early Armenian hands. The lost Greek papyrus written in Armenian letters mentioned earlier has been rediscovered. I had been trying to locate it since the start of the paleographic project. In 1993 I found the papyrus in Paris and since then have gathered together a team of scholars to study it in its entirety. Dashan inserted a detail of the photograph sent from Paris by Carrière in his Overview of Armenian Paleography, and briefly discussed its style and date. In 1937-1938, Georges Cuendet and Maurice Leroy, unable to locate the original, published the text contained on Dashan’s photo.

The text of the papyrus is a run-on list of expressions in everyday Greek written by someone who had a weak knowledge of that language. It has been conjectured that the author was an Armenian soldier in the

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30. Only a few of these manuscripts are in bolgorig or a mixed erkat’agir-bolgorig script; Stone has studied these in an article “The Mixed Erkat’agir-Bolgorig Script in Armenian Manuscripts”, forthcoming in Middle Eastern Manuscripts.
31. IlN, MS arm. 332. Bernard Coulote of Louvain has agreed to work on the Greek, Jos Weitenberg of Leiden on the Armenian phonology and other linguistic questions, and I will deal with the historical and paleographic aspects of it. Michael Stone has also offered many suggestions about the papyrus over the past months. See now D. Konyumjian, “Unique Armenian Papyrus”, Acts of the 7th International Congress of Armenian Linguistics, Delmar, NY, 1996, p. 381-386.
32. Dashan, Sasanis, p. 92-104.
33. According to Dashan, Carrière had written to him about the papyrus in 1892 and sent the photo sometime later. A brief note about the papyrus was published in Revue des ponts of Venice (1892), p. 39, partially cited by Dashan, p. 93, note 1, reporting on a letter sent to Fr. Gheorghe Alifan announcing the discovery. In his letter Carrière clearly pointed out that the papyrus had writing in Armenian letters on both sides, a detail seemingly missed by later scholars.
As for the refinement and standardization of bolorgir as the chosen book-hand and the circumstances which converged to allow such a codification, it can be more readily studied. A hypothetical reform or standardization of Armenian bolorgir would be localized in the twelfth century at the Cilician court. It was the moment of active contacts between the Armenians and the Crusaders. The impact of the Latin west on Armenian culture in language and the arts has been amply documented. Several thirteenth century Armenian manuscripts were copied in Rome and other Italian cities, and at least one Armenian manuscript, now in Jerusalem, of the tenth or eleventh century, has small Greek majuscules juxtaposed with small Armenian erkat'agir. Thirteenth century documents from the royal court of Cilician Armenia, written in Latin rather than Armenian and addressed to the Pope, have survived. Yet, the impact of medieval Latin or Greek on the evolution of Armenian paleography remains unstudied.

Time does not allow for a discussion of the cursive hands, notigir and shoagir. They are used mostly in informal texts: colophons in early manuscripts, marginal notations, and above all chancery documents, starting in the twelfth century, but they, too, have not been studied properly.

Methodology

An indispensable first step in the paleographic study of Armenian is an adequate definition of the characteristics of each of the letters that constitute the four major scripts. Adjarian in his The Letters of the Armenians took up the analysis in a hundred page, letter by letter, description relying mostly on published samples from Hovsep’ian’s Alburn. Though much of his analysis is colored by a priori assumptions, he did set down criteria for the examination of letters: how they were drawn, and, through ascenders and descenders, their relationship to the baseline of the text. Unfortunately, Adjarian’s work has not been carried forward.

As a working methodology for the Alburn of Armenian Paleography, it was decided to put aside all previously identified script categories and arrange all samples chronologically. From the nearly one thousand manuscripts examined, some 600 were photographed. From these a selection of 200 precisely dated specimens, representative of all important variant scripts, was extracted. Original photographs, either in color or in black and white, have been digitized through the Kodak Photo CD-ROM process for display and manipulation on a Macintosh Power PC. With appropriate software, particularly Adobe Photoshop, the manuscript pages were enlarged for a letter by letter examination of scribal hands. Individual letters from each document have been isolated and gathered together by the

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36. Dashean was also inspired by a number of Armenian palimpsests published in the 1980s.

37. Both N. March and T. T’oramanian favored a dating of 490 to 525.
well known "copy and paste" method into a unique alphabet chart for each manuscript. Eventually, these alphabets will be examined against a standard grid so that the ascenders and descenders of letters can be accurately measured and such questions as bilinearity—that is, the letter’s positions between an upper headline and a lower baseline—properly addressed. This is being done for all two hundred specimens. The alphabets will then be placed into large tables juxtaposing upper and lower case letters of all samples. A new and broad comparative tool will then be available to use with scripts of undated manuscripts. The tables will also serve as empirical guides toward resolving some of the questions asked during the course of this talk.

**Conclusions and the Future**

Why do we need paleographic studies for Armenian manuscripts? Simply put: if 60% of Armenian manuscripts are dated, 40% are undated, and paleography remains the leading method of ascribing dates to them. Even approximate dating on paleographic grounds of the thousands of erkal'agır manuscript fragments will prove invaluable for localizing the codicological information contained in them. This information will also allow the grouping of manuscripts and the discovery of relationships between regions and specific scriptoria. The storage capability of the new generation of desktop computers permits the bringing together of hundreds, even thousands, of paleographic samples from Armenian manuscripts. With the perfection of Newton-type technology, it should become possible to teach the computer to recognize letter shapes, scan a new manuscript, and determine which dated writing style already in the database most closely resembles it. Through such a method, dating should become less hazardous and perhaps more rational, and attribution to specific workshops and even individual scribes facilitated. It is hoped that when the *Album of Armenian Paleography* is completed and all samples have been computer-analyzed and stored, a powerful and innovative method will be in place to supplement traditional paleographic studies of Armenian scripts. In turn, this same methodology may be applicable for research in Latin, Greek, Arabic, and other alphabets.

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39. This work is being carried out by Michael Stone in Jerusalem.

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**Esquisse d’une histoire du développement des colophons dans les manuscrits musulmans**

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