

Symposium “Ancient Armenia: Center and Peripheries”

Alain Bresson – Elizabeth Fagan

Friday, April 9th, 2021 – The University of Chicago

Respondents

Clifford Ando (UChicago) – Catherine Kearns (UChicago)

Goals of the Symposium

It is not distorting the truth to state that today Armenia has the reputation of being a rather isolated country. The image has certainly some reality. But it is itself a product of recent history. In the past, the reputation of Armenia and its role in international relations were very different. Indeed, Armenia was for centuries one of the main centers of cultural, political, and economic development in Western Asia.

A first goal of this symposium is to “re-center” the image of Armenia, focusing on a period when it was a hub rather than a country supposedly “on the margins.” Thus, in the Roman-Early Byzantine period (here defined as starting in the first century BCE and extending to the early seventh century CE), Armenia was indeed subjected to the rival claims of the Roman Empire and of the Parthian and Sasanian Empires. But *per se* it played also a key role in the power struggles in the region, with its dynamic populace and with its soldiers, who enjoyed a formidable reputation. Later, although for a long period Zoroastrianism was the predominant religion of the Armenian state, Armenia probably became the first country that officially converted to Christianity, in all likelihood even before the conversion of Constantine in 314 CE. This conversion had major consequences for the kingdom. When a few centuries later most of its neighbors converted to Islam, Armenia remained stubbornly Christian and became one of the main centers of Christianity in Western Asia.

But a second goal of this symposium is to show that while maintaining a culture of its own, based on a distinctive language, later by Christianity and by a very original system of writing, Armenia was also constantly permeated by foreign influences, those of the Hellenistic, Roman, Iranian, Arab, Mongol and Ottoman Empires, but also those of its regional neighbors. What we wish to insist upon in this symposium is both the specific character of the development of Armenian history and culture, but also the defining role of foreign powers and cultures for Armenian cultural identity.

Armenia developed a sense of its cultural and political identity within the context of those interconnections, and so the symposium will address the specific character of Armenian historical development as the kingdom interacted with other polities from the Mediterranean to Eurasia. The symposium will explore those connections and their impact on Armenia across a variety of periods, and our “Ancient Armenia” must be understood on the *longue durée*, starting at the time of the Roman Empire and extending to the early Modern Period.

Abstracts

Tim Clark (The University of Chicago)

Trajanic Representations of Roman-Armenian Relations

Scholarship on Roman foreign policy in the East following Augustus focuses on Roman relations with Parthia, encouraging the conception of the region as geopolitically “bipolar.” Most historians examine Roman concerns with Armenia and other eastern polities in the context of Roman-Parthian affairs. This paper uses diplomatic ceremony (as narrated by Cassius Dio) and coinage produced during Trajan’s wars in the East to elucidate more complex Roman views of the region. I argue that Trajan deployed diplomatic rituals and numismatic representations to signal different degrees and types of authority that Rome possessed over Armenia and different ways in which he incorporated the kingdom into the Roman Empire. A meeting with the Parthian prince (a presumed successor to the Armenian throne) Parthamasiris rejected any future Arsacid claims to the Armenia. A bronze sestertius, produced in early 116 CE, showed that Armenia, now properly part of the Roman Empire, would be associated with northern Mesopotamia in an entirely new Roman geographic construct. The ceremony and coin show how Roman concerns with Parthia were implicated in concerns about the wider Near East. Trajan wanted to reassert complete Roman control over Armenia, while his mints solidified this authority by demonstrating that Rome could now redraw the map of the region without referencing Parthia at all.

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Lara Fabian (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, BaSaR Project)

Crossing the Greater Caucasus: Dynastic Politics and the Evidence for Interaction between the North and South Caucasus (ca. 300 BCE–400 CE)

This paper considers the role of peoples and political groups from the North Caucasus during a formative period of political consolidation in the South Caucasus, after the dissolution of the Achaemenid Empire. There has been a tendency to downplay these ties, focusing instead on the better-documented relationships with Mediterranean and Iranian neighbors. When the North Caucasian groups—the ‘Sarmatians’ and ‘Alans’—are brought into the story, they are considered to be an external menace: mobile pastoralist raiders who threatened local stability with their

aggressive military incursions. I argue, however, that the contacts across the Greater Caucasus watershed range were more wide-ranging, with consequences for the development of political authority in K'art'li and Albania along the Kura River as well as further south in Armenia.

Memories of ties spanning the Caucasus are preserved in the medieval literary traditions of both K'art'li and Armenia, where narratives of dynastic marriage between South and North Caucasian families loom large in early history. This imagined past is substantiated by an increasing body of archaeological evidence, particularly from Georgia, that demonstrates long-running material flows between the regions. Focusing on these two bodies of evidence and drawing on parallels with other cases of 'Sarmatian' interaction from the North Pontic, I make a case for re-integrating the northern neighbors into the picture of the South Caucasus' multipolarity.

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Alain Bresson (The University of Chicago) and Elizabeth Fagan (Virginia Commonwealth University)

Evidence for the Christianization of Armenia: Moses Khorenatsi and Beyond

Our paper will re-examine the early history of Christian Armenia and the question of the historical sources on which it can be based. With his History of the Armenians, Moses Khorenatsi remains our major source of information for the period of Armenia's transition from paganism to Christianity, which took place in the early fourth century BCE. There are many reasons to look critically at Moses' account, between the embellishments which have garnered him some notoriety for inserting distortions into the historical record, and also the fact that he likely lived in the late seventh or early eighth century CE – despite claiming to have lived in the fifth. Some might even say that his account is twisted far enough from reality that it holds little use for writing an account of early Christian Armenia. This paper will maintain a critical stance when considering Moses' text. However, it will also point out how archaeological evidence has been brought to bear to both 'confirm' and 'deny' the historicity of Moses' account. The paper will problematize the question of historicity and put the textual and material sources in conversation, allowing for a different perception of the history of early Christian Armenia through a new reading and interpretation of a long-known document that helps to illuminate it.

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Rachel Goshgarian (Lafayette College)

Armeno-Turkish and the Space of Language in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Worlds: Manuscript Production and the Circulation of Ideas, Literature, and People

In 1641, an Armenian deacon residing in the city of Kaffa (Kefe/Feodosia) on the Black Sea completed a manuscript. This fact, in and of itself, is not particularly noteworthy. By the mid 17th century, the Armenian population of the city of Kaffa was large and the metropolis was home to a number of Armenian churches and scriptoria that were quite active. At first glance the manuscript, itself, seems a straightforward compilation (Armenians use the term *յօժովացու*, equivalent of the Ottoman *mecmuat*) very typical of an early modern church-educated and employed Armenian author in that it is filled with parables, poetry, and prayer.

Upon closer examination, however, the manuscript reveals itself to offer insights into the complicated ways in which an Armenian living in 17th-century Kaffa imagined himself in the context of his varied identifications: Armenian, Christian, celibate, urban, displaced, Kafac'i (or, Kefeli) and – to a certain extent, Ottoman. Deacon Mikayel's manuscript sets out to define the borders of a world within which cities such as Erzincan, Erzurum, and Tokat are imagined as part of a(n Armenian) "homeland" while the Ottoman capital of Constantinople is referred to as a "foreign country." Still, the manuscript contains several Armeno-Turkish poems (or, poems written in Anatolian Turkish [not Kipchak] using the Armenian alphabet), placing the author's literary milieu firmly within the framework of a relatively educated, urban, multi-lingual Ottoman set.

Armeno-Turkish, or Turkish written with Armenian letters, is a language that was used by Armenians from the 13th through the 20th centuries, from Erzincan to Fresno. It has yet to be studied in historical perspective. My current research project aims to: uncover the ways in which Armeno-Turkish was used in and around the Ottoman Empire; and to understand the particularities of topics and texts written in Armeno-Turkish, within the context of other languages used by Armenian communities. This project will help us to analyze the relationships between ethnicity, faith, and language in the early Ottoman Empire, and to see language not uniquely as a marker of community, but also as a vehicle for the circulation of entertainment, goods, ideas, and literature in the medieval and early modern world.

In looking at the specific example of Armeno-Turkish (or, Turkish written with Armenian letters) from the 13th through the 17th centuries, this paper will offer a framework of analysis to help us understand the ways in which Armenian scholars and poets used Turkish alongside (or in lieu of) Armenian. Armenians were a people living in Anatolia prior to the arrival of various Turkic groups, beginning in the 11th century. As early as the 13th century, Armenians began writing in Turkish. After the establishment of the Ottoman Empire, Armenian authors continued to write in Turkish. They wrote advice literature, poetry, plays, and histories in Armeno-Turkish. They wrote in various dialects and registers of Turkish. And they wrote in Armeno-Turkish both inside and outside the Ottoman Empire itself. Due, in part, to nationalist claims about the relationship between ethnicity, language, and identity, Armeno-Turkish has largely been studied as a phenomenon created by pressure from the Ottoman state to erase the Armenian language. My research project attempts to move against these nationalist currents, not just for the sake of doing so, but because there is so much to learn about the ways in which Armenians living in the early centuries of the Ottoman Empire experienced language and literary culture.

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Hripsime Haroutunian (The University of Chicago)

What If She Said “Yes” To The King? The Story of One Little Maiden Who Fought Like A Man And Turned Around The Course of History

The presentation focuses on the story of martyrdom of Hripsimé and her companions, as described in the work by the Armenian chronicler of the 5th c. Agat’angelos, and attempts to discuss Agat’angelos’ validity as an accurate source. According to the story, Hripsimé, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, resisted the Armenian King Tirdat’s advances, and so, after his failure to overpower her, the king ordered for her to be tortured to death. Tirdat was later punished for his sins by being “turned into a wild boar,” and it was revealed that only Gregory, who had been earlier imprisoned by the same king Tirdat for his devotion to Christ, could cure him of this transformation. After Gregory baptized Tirdat, the newly “cured” king proclaimed Christianity as the sole state religion in Armenia. This conversion greatly altered the political landscape of Armenia and its neighbors. Ultimately, the Armenian Christian faith contributed to the preservation of Armenian identity. The presentation argues that Hripsimé’s rejection of the king might have unwillingly and consequentially changed the course of Armenian History in the beginning of the 4th century. The presentation also includes speculations on possible aftermath in case Armenians failed to adopt Christianity.

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Christina Maranci (Tufts University)

Hard as Stone, Smooth as Wax: Interpreting Urartian Spolia in Medieval Armenian Architecture

One fairly neglected dimension of Armenian church architecture is the reuse of earlier building materials. Yet even a cursory survey of monuments reveals the frequency of this practice and its persistence across centuries and historical regions (e.g. Cathedral of Etchmiadzin, Zvartnots, Anavarza in Cilicia, and throughout Vaspurakan). This paper will ask: why did medieval Armenian patrons and builders reuse materials, and how was this practice perceived by contemporaries? Given the great abundance of stone in Armenia, it was surely not about the scarcity of building materials. In addressing these questions, I will focus on the reuse of Urartian

materials in the churches and khachkars of Vaspurakan, considering the placement and treatment of the spolia as well as descriptions of Urartian structures in medieval sources.

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Kate Franklin (Birkbeck, University of London)

“World-rulers” and Local Worlds: Medieval Armenia and the Mongol Ecumene

This paper considers the ‘mutual regard’ of political cultures and material worlds situated in southern Armenia, during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. The high middle ages in Armenia were punctuated by shifts in geopolitics, with the princedoms of Armenia encircled within multiple ‘worlds’ with centers elsewhere: Seljuk Anatolia, Bagratid Georgia, Mongol Central Asia and Iran. These shifts entailed changes in the political gaze of Armenians, and a re-orienting of Armenia’s place within a transforming Eurasian world. In the thirteenth century in particular, Armenian princes such as the Orbelyans of Syunik (a medieval province which contained modern Syunik and Vayots Dzor) reconciled dynastic traditions within an Ilkhanid Mongol “world-rule” (x). For the 13th century historian Kirakos Gandjakec’i the Mongol invasion represented the “end of time;” a perception accepted and echoed by later histories of the medieval Caucasus. However, evidence from Vayots Dzor—including architecture, epigraphy and the chronicle of Step’anos Orbelyan—indicates, if not a ‘beginning,’ then perhaps a new view on a changing world. By centring on Armenia and on Vayots Dzor in particular, I will consider the implications for global medieval history more generally of de-peripheralizing not only Armenia, but the worlds of medieval Central Asia as well.