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The Armenian Manuscript Tradition under Ottoman Rule*

Armenia was only conquered by the Ottoman Empire in the first quarter of the 16th century. While it is true that the lowest point in the history of Armenian manuscript production was in the first half of that century, the cause was the destruction and insecurity resulting from the Turkish invasions and occupation. By the second half of the century, manuscript copying had begun to accelerate again, which is clearly visible graphically. The production of Armenian manuscripts peaked in the 17th century, especially the second part of it, with a sharp decline occurring in the 18th century when printed Armenian books finally became cheaper or more cost-effective than exploiting the free work of monkscribes in monasteries.

During the Ottoman era, scribes continued copying texts almost without interruption, both in the monastic centres in the northeast and in the vast Armenian diaspora – the Crimea, Central Europe and Iran, in other words. With no Armenian state or government after the end of the 14th century, it was the Armenian Church and its monasteries that served as centres of learning and book production. Although the overwhelming majority of Armenians lived under Ottoman rule, there was little hindrance of the development of writing and copying since Armenians were accepted as one of the three non-Muslim populations of the Empire tolerated from the very beginning, the other two being the Orthodox Christians and the Jews. During this period, though not necessarily under the Ottomans as many of the localities where copying was carried out were not part of the sultan's domains, monasteries were responsible for producing the vast majority of texts. The most important of these scribal centres were located in or near Bitlis, Erzurum, Muş and Constantinople in present-day Turkey, Tatev, Haghbat, Sanahin and Etchmiadzin in present-day Armenia, and in diasporic centres elsewhere.

Throughout the period in which manuscripts were written and copied, namely from the 5th to the 19th century, only the Armenian alphabet was used. It was invented in part to render the Gospels in the vernacular shortly after the Armenians' conversion to Christianity in the 4th century. Armenian letters, however, were often used to write other languages, – Kipchak Turkish, Ottoman Turkish and Kurdish, for example – because of their flexibility and the great variety of sounds the 39 letters could represent.

One example is the exhibit Ms. or. oct. 342 from the Berlin State Library – Prussian Cultural Heritage, Oriental Department, a codex in Armeno-Turkish (Turkish in the Armenian script) with the legend of Saint John Chrysostom, originating from the 19th century (Figure 1).

Unlike the situation in Europe, where manuscript copying and production moved out of the monastic environment, at least in part, in the Armenian experience, the priesthood remained responsible for the copying of texts well after the first Armenian books were printed in the early 16th century. This continued to be the case until well into the 19th century, in fact, especially in the historical Armenian homeland, where printing only caught on in the 18th century. Of the estimated 30,000 to 35,000 Armenian manuscripts that still exist, the overwhelming majority were copied in the 17th and 18th centuries.



FIGURE 1: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin - Ottoman Empire, 19th century, Armeno-Turkish. The legend of Saint John Chrysostom.

Armenian printers started working in Venice as early as 1512 and then did so in other localities in the West with large Armenian populations. They were among the first to print books in the Ottoman Empire, Iran, Arab lands and even some urban localities further west. The major Armenian printing centres in the 17th and 18th century were Venice, Vienna, Rome, Constantinople, Amsterdam, Isfahan and Madras. Nevertheless, the texts could be read universally because manuscripts and printed books used the same Armenian alphabet and only the classical version of the language, somewhat like Latin in Europe before printing in the vernacular became popular.

Even though there have not been many studies on this phenomenon, it would seem that printing resulted in a dual process: the vast Armenian diaspora both to the east and the west of Armenia profited from the print revolution, while the central heartland of Armenia – deprived of urbanisation and, thus, such modern crafts as the mass production of books – did not.

In terms of reading habits and the use of the written word, the introduction of printing does not seem to have felt like a dramatic revolution. Manuscript copying remained important until the mass production of texts substantially reduced the price per copy. There are cases in the 18th century, for instance, when those few secular individuals who could afford to have private libraries added manuscripts and printed books to them at the same time, even casually binding together works similar in nature, one text handwritten, the other printed. As in most traditions, the copying of



FIGURE 2: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin - West Armenia, late 17th century, Armenian. Four Gospels

religious texts continued much longer than secular ones – often a century or two longer, in fact, and mostly out of reverence. The most popular text to be copied was easily the Four Gospels (FIGURE 2). Monastic scriptoria continued copying them into the 19th century, even though the entire Bible had been printed in Amsterdam as early as 1666. And as in all writing traditions, church decrees, formal directives and official documents continued to be written by hand.

The evolution of the Armenian manuscript tradition, its confrontation with printing and its ultimate demise seem to have been little affected by central government policies. In this respect, it might be closer to the pattern in Europe where printing imposed itself on the manuscript tradition. Despite the great distances separating Armenian centres in Asia Minor from diaspora colonies in Europe and Persia, the language itself remained the same – classical Armenian with essentially the same orthography as that of the 5th century, with a stable alphabet and vocabulary – until the late 19th century when regional vernaculars were written and printed. Monastic scriptoria and the 19th-century Armenian school system throughout the Empire guaranteed rigorous consistency in the language, although handcopying had become a matter of convenience rather than one of necessity by this time.



17th-century Armenian miscellany, purchased in Istanbul in 1730 by Père François Sevin.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Arménien 128.



Armenian hymnal (*Sharagan*) manuscript.
Raşid Efendi Manuscript Library 26789, Kayseri.