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David Zorc and Louisa Baghdassarian
*Linguistic and Cultural Implications of the Armenian
Frequency Dictionary*

361

V. HISTORICAL GRAMMAR

Vazguen G. Hambartsumian
La périodisation de l'histoire de l'arménien latinisé

375

Dickran Kouymjian
Unique Armenian Papyrus

381

Sarkis Saryan
The Augment in Armenia

387

Virgil Strohmeier
*Armenian as Seen through the Eyes of Two Renaissance Christian
Orientalists-Cum-Kabbalists: Teseo Ambrogio and Guillaume Postel
and a Follower, Francisco Rivola*

393

The Armenian Alphabet

407

UNIQUE ARMENIAN PAPYRUS¹

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In 1892 the French orientalist Auguste Carrière reported the discovery of a Greek papyrus written with Armenian characters from the Fayyum in Egypt (Fig. 1). It was first discussed by the Vienna Mekhitarist, Yakob Tašean in his *An Overview on Armenian Paleography* of 1898² after a photograph was sent to him from Paris. He observed that the papyrus text is not from a Greek literary work nor is it related to numbers or accounts as are so many other papyri. Tašean pointed out the everyday informal nature of the script, sensing that it was written by someone learning Greek, and learning it orally. "The script is just as we imagined ordinary writing of the time to be," he says, "with easily written letters, but perhaps in a somewhat unschooled hand." The writing is "not completely a semi-*erkat'agir* (majuscule), nor simple *bolragir* (minuscule), though the latter is more dominant. It is a mixture of semi-majuscule and minuscule, or of our "transitional" type of letters, but with some anomalous forms, all marked by rapidity of execution. They cannot be said to be real majuscule *erkat'agir*."³ Earlier in his *Overview*, before discussing the papyrus, Tašean had speculated about the existence of informal Armenian script used for letters, notes, and drafts from the earliest times. He even posed the question of just what letters Mesrop Maštoc' invented in the 5th century and whether or not minuscule and even *notragir* (notary cursive) existed side by side with uncial in this period.⁴

The first serious discussion of the papyrus in a western language came nearly forty years later in George Cuendet's "Un papyrus grec en caractères arméniens," of 1937⁵ and Maurice Leroy,

"Un papyrus arméno-grec," of 1938.⁶ In complementary articles these scholars offered a decipherment of the Greek text based on the photograph used by Tašean, because, unfortunately, by the 1930s the original had disappeared.

Through the work of Cuendet and Leroy we know the papyrus contains a list of run-on 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 Byzantine army stationed in Egypt. On historical grounds, the papyrus has been dated prior to the Arab conquest of Egypt in 640. Therefore, the document displays the oldest surviving example of Armenian handwriting. No other papyrus with Armenian characters is known.

While conducting research for the *Album of Armenian Paleography*, a joint project with colleagues Henning Lehmann in Denmark and Michael Stone in Israel, I rediscovered the papyrus in Paris. It merits a new publication for a number of reasons. A strip of the papyrus on the left side and a fragment from the lower right corner were not included in the photograph published by Tašean, and, therefore, were never transcribed or translated by Cuendet and Leroy. More remarkable, however, the document has a text of equal length on its verso side which has never been published or studied.

On paleographic grounds, the papyrus could date to as early as the 6th century, perhaps even the late 5th. Certain letters resemble those in Armenian lapidary inscriptions traditionally ascribed to the 5th century. This could put the writing very close to the invention of the Armenian alphabet around 406. Equally interesting is the type of script used. Tašean raised doubts about it being *erkat'agir* that is Armenian uncial, the script used in Armenian lapidary inscriptions until the 11th century and employed in early Armenian manuscripts, those of the 9th to the 11th centuries. The script is quite different from any other majuscule and displays a cursive character.

The papyrus forces us to reevaluate notions about the evolution of Armenian script. It is also an interesting Byzantine document, using everyday Greek from a period for which we have mostly literary texts.

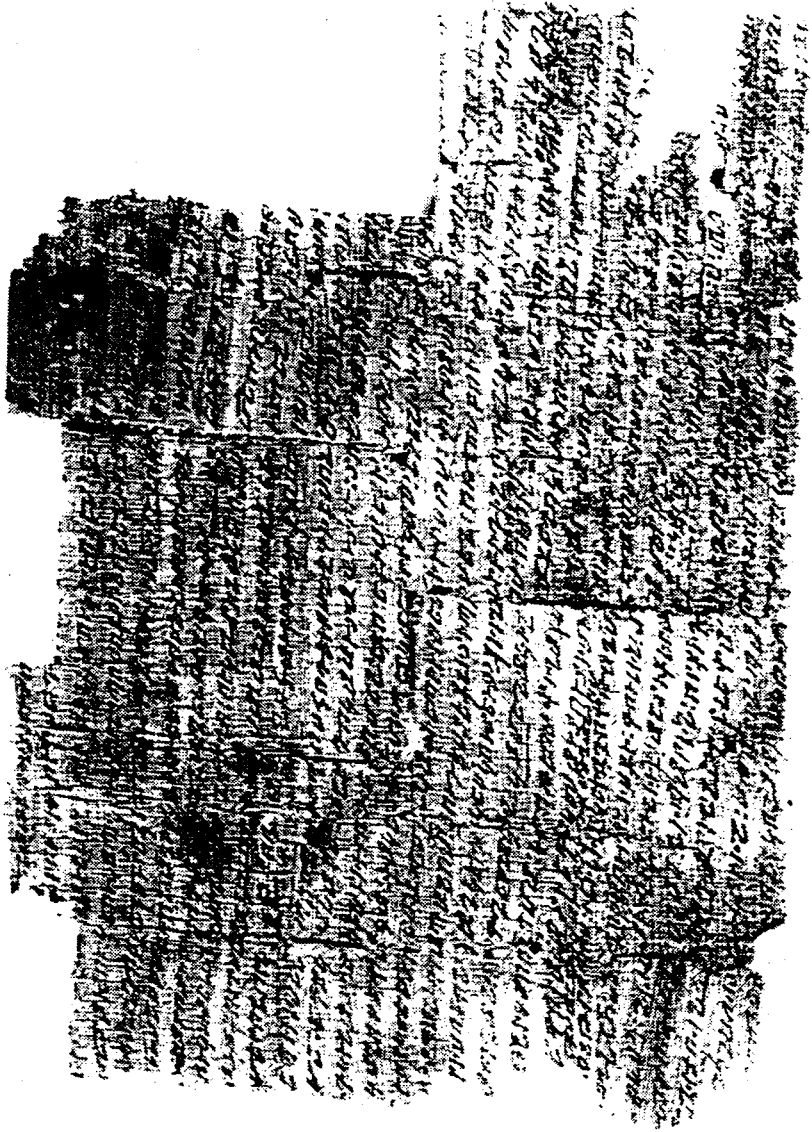


Fig. 1 Armeno-Greek papyrus, recto. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France

Armenian hands fall into four principal categories, with a varying number of sub-categories and transitional forms. These are *erkat'agir* (majuscule), *boloragir* (literally "complete letters" or minus-cule), *notragir* (a notary or scribal writing used in chancery documents), and *štagir* (the modern cursive with joined letters).

Though the invention of the Armenian alphabet by Mesrop is a widely studied phenomenon, scholars have not always agreed on what letter-types Mesrop fashioned and used for the monumental translation of the Bible. Most believe it was *erkat'agir*. With this as a premise, studies on Armenian paleography have generally assumed a linear evolution of Armenian script from *erkat'agir* majuscules to *boloragir* minuscules and on to the more cursive *notragir* and *štagir*. The only important dissident voice has been that of Karo Łafadaryan, who proposed in 1939 that all types except modern cursive were formed by Mesrop's hand and were used in all periods.⁷ Unfortunately, the evidence for either hypothesis is very thin. The earliest dated manuscripts are from the second half of the 9th century. 5th and 6th century Armenian mosaic inscriptions from Jerusalem are not precisely dated, neither are late 5th or 6th century lapidary inscriptions, though we have dated examples from 618 onward.

In the end, a more nuanced approach may be necessary. In the West, majuscules seemed to have been used for more formal writing: literary texts, Gospels, and important religious works as well as luxury manuscripts. Mesrop and his contemporaries knew Greek and Syriac and were by necessity familiar with minuscule and cursive alphabets used for less formal writing. It is difficult to imagine that Mesrop and his pupils, as they translated the Bible, a task that took decades, would have used the laborious *erkat'agir*-majuscule for drafts as they went along. Unfortunately, beside this papyrus no handwritten documents in Armenian outside of codex manuscripts have survived prior to the 12th century.

In 1993, I examined the papyrus, now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, especially its already published side, to supplement the earlier readings of Cuendet and Leroy from the

sections missing on the photograph they worked with.

Deciphering individual words and letters has been very difficult. Using good prints supplied by the Bibliothèque nationale de France and checking against the original letter by letter, I have transcribed again the entire 27 lines of recto noting all readings that deviate or are additions to the Cuendet-Leroy publications. I have invited interested scholars to join in publishing a monograph on the papyrus. Anyone interested in collaborating on the decipherment of the underlying Greek and dating the language used is welcome to participate in this joint effort.

The discovery of large quantities of Egyptian papyri in the late 19th century changed earlier ideas about the evolution of Greek and Latin paleography. We know now that a form of cursive minuscule existed side by side with majuscule from at least the 3rd century B.C. The writing of Armenian may have undergone a similar experience, with more than a single script type used simultaneously from the beginning.

Important to an understanding of the papyrus is a careful analysis of the language of the text to see if the Greek can be dated on linguistic or grammatical grounds. A late 5th century date can be justified by the paleography of the Armenian. Whether the Greek shows characteristics of that period waits to be determined. (Carbon 14 dating may also help in age determination.)⁸

The uniqueness of the script may be due to either 1) the informal nature of the document and the fact that no other informal Armenian text exists until the 12th century (except manuscript colophons), or 2) the papyrus's great antiquity.

Whatever the outcome of these investigations, the unique Armeno-Greek papyrus provides us with the pretext to scrutinize the received tradition of a linear evolution of Armenian writing and to test the notion that Mesrop only invented and used one script, *erkat'agir*-majuscule.

NOTES

1. Research on the papyrus has been possible in part through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.
2. The section comes in the middle of his book, just after a discussion of the probability of informal Armenian script in the first centuries, H. Tašean, *Overview on Armenian Paleography* [in Arm.] (Vienna, 1898) 93-105. The papyrus serves as the only early example of non-formal writing.
3. *Ibid.* 98.
4. Tašean, 90-91.
5. "Mélanges Émile Boisacq." *Annuaire de l'Institut de philologie et d'histoire orientales et slaves* vol. V (1937): 219-226, esp. 219; henceforth, "Un papyrus."
6. *Byzantion* vol. XIII (1938): 513-537.
7. K. Łafadaryan, *Haykakan gri skzbnakan tesaknerə* (Erevan, 1939 (reprinted in 1953)) 35-36.
8. Experiments in using Carbon 14 dating on papyrus have been undertaken with varying success according to Trianos Gagos of the Papyrology Department of the University of Michigan. I thank Dr. Gagos for this specific reply to my question. He also checked one word in the papyrus denoting a part of the internal organs of the body which is only attested for the first time in the 9th century. This makes clear that the Greek words have to be checked against standard lexicons to see if they are old Greek or more recent, post-Arab additions to the language. One might take this occasion to add that Raffaella Cribiore of Columbia University has completed a doctoral dissertation on school exercises of the period found on papyrus. This information should be of interest in determining the type and date of the Greek.