

CILICIA AND ITS CATHOLICOSATE  
FROM THE FALL OF THE ARMENIAN  
KINGDOM IN 1375 TO 1915

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The paper focuses on three moments in the history of Cilicia and its Catholicosate between 1375 and 1915.<sup>1</sup> They relate to the period after the fall of the last Armenian kingdom, the reestablishment of the Catholicosate in Echmiadzin, and the crises between the patriarchal sees of Sis, Echmiadzin, and Constantinople.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have covered the first two centuries of this period in Dickran Kouymjian, “L’Arménie sous les dominations des Turcomans et des Ottomans (XV<sup>e</sup>-XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles),” in *Histoire de l’Arménie et du peuple arméniens*, ed. Gérard Dédéyan (Toulouse: Privat, 1982), pp. 341-76, and “Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom (1375) to the Forced Emigration under Shah Abas (1604),” in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, vol. 2: *Foreign Dominion to Statehood: The Fifteenth Century to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), pp. 1-50. For the general bibliography of the same period, see Dickran Kouymjian, “A Critical Bibliography for the History of Armenia from 1375 to 1605,” *Armenian Review* 41:1 (Spring 1988):39-45. For the later period, the major work is Babgen Kiuleserian, *Patmutiun katoghikosats Kilikiy (1441-en minchev mer orere)* [History of the Catholicosate of Cilicia (from 1441 to Our Days)] (Antelias: Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1939). See also Maghakia Ormanian, *Azgapatum* [National History], 3 vols. (Constantinople: V. and H. Ter-Nersesian, 1912-1914; Jerusalem: St. James Press, 1927), vols. 2-3; Avedis Sanjian, *The Armenian Communities in Syria under Ottoman Dominion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> It is not possible to deal here with the social and economic history of Cilicia nor present the rescued treasures of the Cilician Catholicosate. These treasures now kept in the Cilician Museum at Antelias have been on display twice: in Halle-Wittemburg and Athens. The exhibit catalogues document the collection and its history. See Hermann Göltz, ed., *Rescued Armenian Treasures from Cilicia: Sacred Art of the Kilikia Museum, Antelias, Lebanon* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000), and Anna Ballian, ed., *Armenian Relics of Cilicia from the Museum of the Catholicosate in Antelias, Lebanon* (Athens: Benaki Museum, 2002).

*After the Fall in 1375*

The fall of the Kingdom of Cilicia was a cruel disappointment to all Armenians, even if the jurisdiction of its rulers never reached into Greater Armenia. Manuscript colophons or scribal memorials of the thirteenth and especially the fourteenth centuries from places as distant as the Crimea, Ilkhanid Iran, Julfa on the Arax, Ayrarat, Siunik, Tiflis, Erzerum, Erzinjan, Sebastia, Baiburt, and the Lake Van region, acknowledged the kings of Cilicia until the kingdom's demise in 1375.<sup>3</sup> Only in Siunik and Lori were Armenian rulers, local princes and barons, like the Orbelians, still mentioned. For the rest of Armenia, the Church remained the only permanent, widespread national institution, its catholicoses, patriarchs, and bishops unflinching referred to in the colophonic formulae.

At the end of the fourteenth century, the Near East had three major powers: the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria, the Ottomans in western Asia Minor, and the Timurids in Iran and Central Asia. Armenia was ruled by a number of Turkmen dynasts, formerly in the employ of Mongol rulers of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> The Ottomans themselves started out as one of these.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Levon S. Khachikyan, *XIV dari hayeren tseragreri hishatakaranner* [Colophons of Fourteenth-Century Armenian Manuscripts] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1950), and the selective translation of these colophons and those of the following century also published by L.S. Khachikyan, *XV dari hayeren tseragreri hishatakaranner* (cited hereafter as *XV dari hishatakaranner*), 3 vols. (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1955-1967), in Avedis K. Sanjian, *Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts, 1301-1480* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> These were the Kara Koyunlu and Ak Koyunlu, the Black and White Sheep dynasties. See Kouymjian, "Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom," pp. 4-9; Faruk Sumer, "Qara-Qoyunlu," *Encyclopaedia of Islam (EI<sup>2</sup>)*, vol. 4, pp. 584-88; Vladimir Minorsky, "Aq Qoyunlu," *EI<sup>2</sup>*, vol. 1, pp. 311-12; Faruk Sumer, "Kara Koyunlu," *İslâm ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: Maarif Matbaası, 1940-1988), vol. 6, pp. 292-305; Mukrimin Halil Yinanc, "Akkoyunlu," *İslâm ansiklopedisi*, vol. 1, pp. 251-70; Vladimir Minorsky, "The clan of the Qara Qoyunlu rulers," *Mélanges Fuad Köprülü* (Istanbul: Osman Yalçın Matbaası, 1953), pp. 391-95; John E. Woods, *The Aqqoyunlu: Clan, Confederation, Empire* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Claude Cahen, *Pre-Ottoman Turkey* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1968), remains to this day the best source on the early evolution of the Ottomans.

For the first hundred years after the fall of the Cilician Kingdom, Armenian life was structured not much differently from that of previous centuries. Since Armenia was at the juncture of the principal international trade routes, it benefited by making those segments under its control function efficiently. However, the Mediterranean route from Persia through Greater Armenia to Cilicia, which had in part been responsible for the wealth and prosperity of both Cilicia and Armenia proper, became virtually inoperative after the collapse of the kingdom.

There was a rapid decline in Armenian activity among the coastal cities. Except for Sis—graced by its Catholicosate—little is heard of the many Cilician centers active earlier. There is, however, a moment in the 1580s when Catholicos Azaria (1584-1601) plays out the final chapter in the sixteenth century struggle for Armenian liberation through his relationship with Pope Gregory XIII (1572-85). In a letter sent to the pope and preserved in Rome, the catholicos, after the visit of a papal delegation to Sis, expressed his willingness and that of several of his bishops to enter into church union, if at the same time the pope would protect the Armenian “sheep” who were menaced by the Muslim “wolves.”

#### *The Election of 1441*

The narrative of events during the five centuries under consideration is dominated by church affairs. The catholicos had been settled in the Taurus Mountains and Cilicia since the late eleventh century. In 1147, the seat was moved from Tsovk to Hromkla, and from there to the royal capital Sis, in 1293, after the brutal sack of Hromkla by the Mamluks. Once again, if only for less than a century, the spiritual head of the nation was resident in the royal capital. The Armenian Church, however, was far from unified and no longer centralized. Since 1113, there was an independent catholicos on the Island of Aghtamar, and in 1311 a patriarchate was established in Jerusalem. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were characterized by powerful, semi-autonomous clergy led by the abbots of the principal monasteries in Greater Armenia; and the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were witness to the evolution of a powerful patriarchate in Constantinople.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The traditional view that a patriarchate for Armenians was established

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immediately after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 by Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror has been dismissed by Haïg Berbérian [Perperean], *Niuter K. Polsoy hay patmutian hamar* [Materials for the History of the Armenians in Constantinople] (Vienna: Mekhitarist Press, 1965).

Despite the demise of the kings, a large Armenian population continued to exist in Cilicia until World War I and its immediate aftermath. The catholicos also survived, maintaining his formal residence at Sis, until 1915. However, lacking the financial and sovereign support of Armenian rulers, the prestige of the Cilician Catholicosate declined and the caliber of the leading clergy was ostensibly diminished. In the first half of the fifteenth century, bishops in Greater Armenia asserted that conditions in the north were better than those in Cilicia: they claimed a higher population density and a larger number of surviving noble *nakharar* families.<sup>7</sup> At that time, however, Vagharshapat/ Echmiadzin was not in any better position than Sis, since it too was under Turkic domination. But the northern monasteries, Gladzor, Tatev, Hermoni, as well as Haghbat, Sanahin, and Geghart, had eclipsed Sis and the once-great Cilician centers such as Hromkla, Skevra, Drazark, and Akner. The only monastic rivals to the northern establishments were those of the Van region, which were to become powerful in the fifteenth century, and those of Upper Armenia, especially in the Erzinjan area. The leaders engaged in the return to Vagharshapat/Echmiadzin were Tovma Metsopetsi (Tovma of Metsop), the abbot of the declining Tatev monastery, and Hovhannes Kolotik, abbot of Surb Hermoni monastery. Prior to the reestablishment of a catholicosate in the north, Tovma Metsopetsi had actually moved from Tatev, which had become unsafe during the long period of wars between the Timurids and the Kara Koyunlu Turkmen dynasty, to Metsop monastery near Bitlis. He was in close contact with Catholicos Zakaria of Aghtamar and no doubt convinced Zakaria to acquiescence in the reestablishment of the catholicosate in the north. Already in 1431, Rustam, the son of Prince Beshken Orbelian, and a close associate of Tovma

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<sup>7</sup> The major reasons are given by Tovma Metsopetsi, *Patmutiun Lank Tamuray ev hadjordats iurots* [History of Timur Lang and His Successors] (Paris, 1860), partial trans., F. Nève, "Exposé des guerres de Tamerlane et de Schah-Rokh dans l'Asie occidentale, d'après la chronique arménienne inédite de Thomas de Medzoph," *Académie royale des sciences, des lettres et des beaux-arts de Belgique. Mémoires couronnés* 11:4 (Brussels, 1861). The famous *Colophon* of Metsopetsi attached to his history was published in Tiflis in 1892. The details and positions of various authorities are discussed in Kouymjian, "Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom," pp. 35-37. See also Krikor Maksoudian, *Chosen of God: The Election of the Catholicos of All Armenians from the Fourth Century to the Present* (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1995), pp. 70-71.

Metsopetsi, gave seven villages to Echmiadzin in order, it is thought, to supply the ancient center with resources to support a supreme patriarch.

Other reasons for the move were also invoked. Since the fall of the kingdom, many of the catholicoses had obtained their offices by bribes and even assassination. Not only had learning declined at Sis, but ~~also~~ the Cilician bishops were on close terms with the Franciscans who had become powerful under the last Armenian kings. Catholicos Kostantin (Constantine) VI (1430-39) seems to have supported the movement toward union with the Roman Catholic Church. The northern clergy believed that the transfer of the catholicosate deep into Armenia would remove it from Roman influence, especially after the Armenian lords of Artaz, themselves converts to Catholicism, had been destroyed by the Kara Koyunlu in 1426. In any case, when it was finally decided to call a national assembly, the Kara Koyunlu leader Jihanshah seems to have given his approval. His emir at Erevan, Yakub, not only endorsed a meeting in his domain at Vagharshapat but also threw a grand reception for those participating in the two-day affair—all of which is elaborately described by Tovma Metsopetsi.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Tovma Metsopetsi, *History*, pp. 55-63; Maksoudian, *Chosen of God*, pp. 70-72.

Tovma, the principal source for the proceedings, reports that in May 1441, 300 bishops, clerics, and dignitaries from various parts of Armenia came to Vagharshapat.<sup>9</sup> The major candidates were Bishop Grigor Jalalbekiants, who already held a major office in Vagharshapat and was formerly bishop of Artaz; Bishop Zakaria, abbot of Havuts Tar monastery; and Catholicos Zakaria of Aghtamar. Grigor IX Musabekiants, the reigning catholicos at Sis, did not attend the meeting, and his role in the entire proceedings is unclear.

Internal power struggles among the candidates and their supporters produced a deadlock, which led to the choosing of a compromise candidate, the ascetic vardapet, Kirakos Virapetsi, who had little previous administrative experience. His pontificate lasted only two years, when he either resigned—in disgust, some say—or was removed by more powerful forces. Grigor Jalalbekiants was elected catholicos in 1443. Catholicos Zakaria of Aghtamar, who was of course against Grigor and the northern clique, continued his independent catholicosate and even succeeded in 1461, with the help of Jihanshah, in having himself declared “Catholicos of All Armenians.”<sup>10</sup>

The sources of the period present a blurred picture of the status of the catholicos. He was resident in Vagharshapat, as this traditional religion center at Echmiadzin had become an antiquity, a sort of museum without regular services and with no great monastic complex, frequented only occasionally by pilgrims and travelers. It was to remain so until the early seventeenth century, when a revival and expansion of the site took place. According to travelers, Echmiadzin was often closed, its keys in the hands of lay doorkeepers, at times even Persians. Yet, the colophons make it clear that for most Armenians, certainly those in the north, a restoration of the Catholicosate to the Ararat Valley had taken place.

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<sup>9</sup> This information is from Tovma Metsopetsi's colophon; Mikayel Chamchian, *Hayots patmutiun* [History of Armenia], vol. 3 (Venice: Mekhitarist Press, 1786), p. 486, claims his source gives the number of 700 notables in attendance.

<sup>10</sup> Zakaria is mentioned in dozens of colophons. As late as 1464 he is called catholicos resident in Echmiadzin, See Khachikyan, *XV dari hishatakaraner*, vol. 2, p. 218, no. 264b, and p. 223, no. 270; cf. Sanjian, *Colophons*, pp. 285-286, 376.

The sources do not speak of a “transfer” of the Catholicosate from Sis to Vagharshapat. After his election and consecration in 1441, Kirakos sent his respects to the elderly Catholicos Grigor IX Musabekian in Sis. It is unclear how Grigor reacted, though some sources say he sent his blessings to Kirakos. That he did not himself move his residence is an historical fact; yet there seems to be no evidence that he protested the elections carried out at Vagharshapat. He apparently continued as catholicos in Sis until his death in 1445. In the following year, his successor, Karapet of Tokat (1446-77), is regularly mentioned as catholicos at Sis in colophons not only from Cilicia proper but also from Bitlis and Arabkir.<sup>11</sup>

The Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia (*Metsi Tann Kilikio*), as it became to be called, continues to this day. From time to time, usually during a period of church crisis, it has claimed that since there was no formal transfer of the office to Vagharshapat, the legal succession of the head of the Armenian Church continued and continues through the Cilician catholicoses. Echmiadzin, on the other hand, maintains that the assembly and election of 1441 were clearly recognized by most bishops and the people as a return and, more, a transfer to the original Holy See. The sources support both positions, even though a colophon of 1446 from Arabkir suggests that a purely “Cilician Catholicosate” came into being with the consecration of Karapet, which coincided with the discovery in Sis of the lost right-hand relic of St. Gregory the Illuminator.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For Karapet, see Khachikyan, *XV dari hishatakaranner*, vol. 1, p. 603, no. 679a (1446), and vol. 2, p. 229, no. 277 (1464), p. 285, no. 368 (1469); cf. Sanjian, *Colophons*, pp. 208, 287, 297.

<sup>12</sup> The full text can be found in Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *The Chester Beatty Library: A Catalogue of the Armenian Manuscripts*, 2 vols. (Dublin: Higgis, 1958), pp. 152-53. On the history and tribulations of the right-hand relic(s) of St. Gregory, see Dickran Kouymjian, "The Right Hand of St. Gregory and other Armenian Arm Relics," *Les objets de la mémoire. Pour une approche comparatiste des reliques et de leur culte*, Philippe Borgeaud and Youri Volokhine, eds., Geneva: Peter Lang, 2005, esp. pp. 227-231.



No matter how the legalistic interpretations are argued, the de facto relationship between the two catholicosates remained quite clear for the coming centuries. There was reconciliation between them, including also the Catholicosate of Aghtamar, marred only twice when violent disputes surfaced between Sis and Echmiadzin in the mid-seventeenth century and at the end of the nineteenth century. In the mid-twentieth century, the two centers fell into disagreement after the election in February 1956 of Bishop Zareh Payaslian, Prelate of Aleppo, as Cilician Catholicos in Antelias, Lebanon.<sup>13</sup> But these quarrels should not be seen as a division in the Armenian Church, since none of them involved doctrinal questions, but rather disputes over diocesan jurisdiction.

### *The Crises*

With confirmation of Simeon II as Catholicos of Cilicia in 1633, the first major quarrel between Echmiadzin and the Patriarchate in Constantinople erupted. Despite the conferring of ever-increasing power by the Ottoman sultans on the patriarch, he, unlike the Catholicos of Sis, had neither the right of consecrating bishops nor of blessing the Holy Chrism. When shortly after his election, Catholicos Simeon ordained a bishop in Ankara, a diocese under the jurisdiction of Echmiadzin, Catholicos Pilippos sent him an encyclical rebuking this act and emphasizing the supremacy of Echmiadzin over the Cilician and all other sees. In his reply, Simeon called himself “Catholicos of All Armenians” and referred to Pilippos merely as “Catholicos of Armenians”; he pointed out that in the past both sees consecrated bishops outside their immediate jurisdictions. Both men accused the other of corruption. The patriarch of Jerusalem, at the time under the authority of Cilicia, but very close to both the patriarch in Constantinople and the catholicos in Echmiadzin, engaged in mediation. The dispute was settled when a document drawn up by Pilippos was signed in Jerusalem in 1651 by himself and Simeon’s successor, Catholicos Nerses of Cilicia (1648-54). The most important points dealt with the rules for the consecration of bishops. The catholicoses signed as

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<sup>13</sup> Much has been written on this election, strongly contested at the time by the Catholicosate of Echmiadzin. For a detailed study, see Dickran Kouymjian, “The Crisis in the Armenian Church,” M.A. thesis, American University of Beirut, 1961.

equals; there was no reference to the superiority of one see over the other.<sup>14</sup>

The next crisis between the sees and with the Patriarchate of Constantinople was more complicated, addressing as it did fundamental conflicts between secular and religious authority. As Ottoman power increased, jurisdictional authority in the Armenian Church became confused and disputed. The Armenian prelate of Constantinople gradually became the patriarch of all Armenians in the empire. In 1517, Cilicia, with its catholicosate, was incorporated into the Ottoman state by Sultan Selim, and afterward, for a time, Erevan and Vagharshapat also came under Ottoman rule. During the second half of the fifteenth and much of the sixteenth century, the Catholicos at Sis had the strongest say in the succession of prelates/patriarchs in Constantinople. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, however, during the protracted Turko-Persian wars, a shift toward Echmiadzin became clear. Only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the patriarch of Constantinople to enjoy an overwhelming dominance in the affairs of the Armenian Church.

In 1871, the Armenian National Assembly (Azhgagan Zhoghov), established by the Ottoman Armenian National Constitution of 1863, ruled that the Cilician Catholicosate came under its jurisdiction. The catholicos was not authorized to deal directly with the sultan but had to work through the National Assembly and the patriarch in Constantinople. In addition, elections for Cilician prelates had to pass through the Assembly for approval. A dispute broke out among the principals, Mkrtych Kefsizian (1871-94), the first catholicos of Sis elected under the new National Constitution, Mkrtych Khrimian (1869-73), patriarch of Constantinople, and Gevorg IV (1866-82), Catholicos of Echmiadzin.<sup>15</sup> From the sultan's point of view, Echmiadzin was under tsarist control, and too strong an influence by the catholicos on the patriarch of Constantinople would be detrimental to Ottoman interests. Mkrtych Kefsizian, much criticized for his arrogant ways and accused of corruption, nevertheless refused any compromise that diminished the independence of the Cilician See. In 1874, new

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<sup>14</sup> Kiuleserian, *Patmutiun*, cols. 315-38, 1215-52; Sanjian, *Armenian Communities*, pp. 230-32.

<sup>15</sup> Kiuleserian, *Patmutiun*, cols. 723ff.; Sanjian, *Armenian Communities*, pp. 240ff.

regulatory instructions were sent to Sis requiring that each of its ten bishoprics establish a general assembly and civil and religious councils elected according to the provisions of the National Constitution.<sup>16</sup> Catholicos Mkrtych not only refused these demands but also accused the patriarchate of being pro-Russian. He appealed directly to the Ottoman government for protection of his see's independent status. The crisis remained unresolved at Kefsizian's death in 1894. The election of Sahak Khapayan (Sahag Khabayan, 1902-30) as Catholicos of Cilicia in 1902 by a unanimous vote of the Cilician Assembly was quickly approved by both the sultan's government and Patriarch Maghakia Ormanian (1896-1908). The crisis appeared to be over when Catholicos Sahak almost immediately acknowledged Echmiadzin as the pre-eminent see and recited the name of the catholicos of Echmiadzin, then Mkrtych Khrimian, at his ordination. Yet, Catholicos Sahak continued to insist on the independence of the Cilician Catholicosate and on his right to consecrate bishops for the see and even beyond. Ormanian was in a difficult situation between the two catholicos authorities, especially with renewed Russian pressure on Echmiadzin through the confiscation of church properties and stricter regulations. At the same time, the Sublime Porte decreed in 1906 that bishops serving in Armenian churches in the Ottoman Empire should be consecrated by the Catholicos of Cilicia. Sahak continued to demand equal status with Echmiadzin for the Cilician See and the right of its bishops to serve everywhere in the empire and to be eligible for the highest clerical offices. He wrote directly to Patriarch Ormanian and even to Catholicos Khrimian.<sup>1</sup> But the Young Turk revolution of 1908, the resignation of Maghakia Ormanian as patriarch in the same year, the Adana massacres of 1909, followed by World War I and the Armenian Genocide made jurisdictional matters meaningless.

In September 1915, Catholicos Sahak, having been warned that Sis would be subject to the same massacres as had occurred in other parts of the empire, made an orderly retreat to Aleppo, while he assigned to Khat Vardapet the task of transferring as many of the holy relics of the Armenian Church as possible to Aleppo. Thus began the long, painful, and quite miraculous trek by ox cart from

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<sup>16</sup> The text of the proclamation of July 24, 1874, appears in Kiuleserian, *Patmutiun*, cols. 732-35.

Sis to Aleppo of the most precious manuscripts and liturgical objects belonging to the Great House of Cilicia, including the relics of Saints Gregory, Nicholas, Sylvester, and Barsouma, the relic chest, the cauldron for the preparation of Holy Oil, still full of the consecrated Chrism, and hundreds of other sacred vessels and artifacts.<sup>17</sup> Today, these form the nucleus of the collection of the Cilician Museum in Antelias.

In May 1916, Ahmed Jemal Pasha, Young Turk leader and military governor in Syria, met with Catholicos Sahak in Aleppo and informed him that the Turkish government intended to cut off all ties between the Armenian Church and the Catholicosate in Echmiadzin. Furthermore, he added, the government was going to abolish not only the See of Aghtamar, already ravaged by Turkish forces, but also that of the Catholicosate of Sis, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and even the Patriarchate of Constantinople. In their place was to be a single Armenian religious authority, a sort of patriarch-catholicos, with residence in Jerusalem, and he, Sahak, was offered the post. On August 11, 1916, the Young Turk government proclaimed Catholicos Sahak as the new head of the Armenian Church. The Ottoman authorities drew up fresh regulations governing the Armenian *millet* under the patriarch-catholicos.<sup>18</sup> But this, too, was of short duration. With the end of the war in November 1918, the Patriarchate of Constantinople was restored, as was the Catholicosate of Cilicia. Sahak returned to Sis as catholicos and began the work of rebuilding. However, the French withdrawal from Cilicia in 1921, followed by the exodus of more than 130,000 Armenian inhabitants, ended definitively the Armenian presence in Cilicia. The catholicosate was reestablished in the diaspora, in Antelias, Lebanon.

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<sup>17</sup> Khat Vardapet, later archbishop and locum tenens from 1952-55, wrote a moving description of the march from Sis to Aleppo. An English translation is now available in Göltz, *Rescued Armenian Treasures from Cilicia*, pp. 10-18.

<sup>18</sup> Sanjian, *Armenian Communities*, pp. 257-58.