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Studies in Honor of Thomas F. Mathews

Edited by Joseph D. Alcheremes
with Helen C. Evans and Thelma K. Thomas

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The Armenian Right Arm Reliquary of St. Nicholas

Dickran Kouymjian

The right arm reliquary or dexter (աջ in Armenian) is probably the most characteristic of Armenian relic containers; some fifty have been identified, more than half of them in the various museums of Holy Etchmiadzin.1 They preserve relics of the most important Christian and Armenian saints. Only two of them belong to women, both to St. Hripsime, whose martyrdom in the first quarter of the fourth century led to Armenia’s adoption of Christianity.2 Beside St. Gregory the Illuminator (five known arm reliquaries),3 founder of the Armenian Church (first quarter of the fourth century), there are only a handful of other Armenian figures honored by an arm reliquary, and most of them are directly involved in the conversion: St. Hripsime; Step’annos, a priest of the Hripsimean family; St. Aristakés, son and successor to St. Gregory (two dexters). The others are St. Sahak Partew, catholicos at the time of the invention of the Armenian alphabet in the first years of the fifth century; Levond the priest, martyred in Persia just after the battle of Vardananc’ (451), who struggled in the same century to preserve Christianity in Armenia; and Suk’ias of the Suk’iasan family, martyred in the early second century. The last three reliquaries are known only through an inventory of 1445 of the relics and reliquaries preserved at Holy Etchmiadzin.4 The dexters of these seven figures, a total of twelve, represented fewer than a third of such reliquaries. The majority encase the bones of the apostles and non-Armenian saints. The arm reliquary of St. Thaddeus the apostle is one from this group;5 other apostles so graced in Armenia include St. Andrew,6 St. James, St. James the Less, St. Thomas, St. Paul, and St. Ananias, to which we might add St. John the Baptist (three dexters),7 St. Stephen the Protomartyr, St. Nicholas (two dexters), and St. Sylvester.8

As has been pointed out, the dexter of St. Nicholas and other Armenian arm reliquaries have no real bases and

4 Babgen Kiwlarsian (Gulessarian), Patmutiwn kat’oghikosac’ kilikiy (1441-en minch’aw mer övero) (History of the Katholickosate of Cilicia, 1441 to the Present), (Antelias, 1939), 1299–1300.
5 Kouymjian, “No. 190 Bras-reliquaire de saint Thaddée,” in Armenia sacra, 420.
8 The latter two, both preserved in the Cilician Museum of the Katholickosate of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon, are well illustrated in Hermann Goltz and Klaus E. Gölzl, Rescued Armenian Treasures from Cilicia: Sacred Art of the Kilikia Museum Antelias, Lebanon, exhibition held at the State Gallery Moritzburg Halle, Art Museum of Saxony-Anhalt, September 2–November 12, 2000 (Wiesbaden, 2000), 90–91, and Anna Ballian, ed., Armenian Relics of Cilicia from the Museum of the Katholickosate in Antelias, Lebanon, exposition at the Benaki Museum, October 30–December 10, 2002 (Athens, 2002), 74, 85. The Cilician Katholickosate also has one of the two most important dexters of St. Gregory, illustrated in both volumes. There is a second St. Nicholas dexter in the Treasury of the Armenian Patriarchate of St. James, Jerusalem, dated 1704.
were not intended to be placed upright on the altar.\textsuperscript{9} This is quite in contrast to European examples, which have very sturdy bases and are almost always displayed upright. This pronounced difference probably arises from the function of these objects in the respective churches. In the West, the arm relic, showing the hand of the saint or bishop to whom it belonged, making the sign of the cross, was placed on the altar and symbolically, the saint, now in Heaven, provided a benediction directly from God to the congregation. The presiding priest, when not a bishop, would hold the dexter before the faithful at the end of the mass and with it make the sign of the cross as benediction to those present.\textsuperscript{10}

In Armenia this practice is unknown. Arm reliquaries were used during certain services and are indispensable for some of them. Dexters are sometimes still used to dedicate new altars, also a common practice in the early centuries in Europe\textsuperscript{11} and Armenia;\textsuperscript{12} relics of saints were sometimes incorporated within the structure. They are also used for consecrating baptismal altars and fonts and corner stones of churches and monasteries. These practices are, however, limited because there exist few arm reliquaries outside of the four patriarchal centers: the katholicosates of Etchmiadzin and Cilicia/Antelias, and the Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Constantinople/Istanbul. Unlike Europe, where the remains of local saints were graced with arm reliquaries, only the most important figures of early Christianity and the founders and defenders of the Armenian Church are so honored. On the other hand, the most important arm reliquaries, particularly that of St. Gregory the Illuminator, are used for specific rites: the consecration of dexters as my heart desired and had it fashioned/restored as a memorial to myself and the faithful at the end of the mass and with it make the sign of the cross as benediction to those present.\textsuperscript{15}

Below is an attached gilded band of low relief, embossed geometricized floral design. Further down on the plain polished sliver of the arm is a six-line inscription, the last line of which in modern bolorgir (minuscule), reads: “It was restored in 1926.” Just below that is a thin gilded plaque with a three-line inscription in a crude repoussé erkat’agir. Directly underneath is a rectangular gilded plaque (fig. 2) of blind filigree work placed vertically. It is made up of a simple series of loops of twisted wire arranged geometrically. There are

\begin{itemize}
\item Kouymjian, “L’orfèverie liturgique,” 83.
\item Kouymjian, “The Right Hand of St. Gregory,” 223.
\item Full inscriptions in Kouymjian, “No. 120 Bras-reliquaire de saint Nicolas,” in Armenia sacra, 276–77.
\item Open hand or arm reliquaries are much rarer in both the occident and Armenia than the more common variety with the hand showing the sign of benediction; see Kouymjian, Armenia sacra, 280.
\item Kiwlèsérián, History, 1327; Kouymjian, Armenia sacra, 276.
\end{itemize}
The Armenian Right Arm Reliquary of St. Nicholas

five paste glass stones fitted in simple raised mounts. At the very bottom of the polished arm is attached another gilded repoussé band made up of a series of very delicately worked wreath roundels in relief attached one to the other at the tangential point by a wide ring. In the open space between circles, above and below, is a flower with three narrow pointed leaves. In the roundels are a series of birds, some fabulous, in an oriental or Fatimid style. The end or the bottom of the arm (fig. 3) has a Latin inscription in three lines: “Sanctus Lucas,” St. Luke, with the symbol of the Evangelist, a haloed ox or bull holding an Evangel. The diversity of styles in the various parts of the object suggests the accretion of heterogeneous elements over the centuries.

St. Nicholas, the Miracle Worker, was the famous fourth-century bishop of Myra in Lycia, who is believed to have attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 and died shortly after. In the Armenian Church he is celebrated on November 6. His relics were taken from Asia Minor by Italians and brought to Bari in 1087.16 The date in the sixth line of the wrist inscription is extremely hard to read; the first digit is virtually nonexistent, but must be cha, 700, given the dates of the people mentioned in it.

The final digit, da, 4, is clear, but the all important second digit looks to me like ken, 60, rather than ha, 70, for a reading 1315. This would allow us to identify Ōšin as the king of Armenia, 1308–20, son of King Levon II and brother of Het’um II, and the Levon of the inscription with his young son and successor, the future King Levon IV, 1320–42. The katholicos, who is responsible for the reliquary, would be Constantine III, 1307–22. Babgen Kiwlèséri and those following him read the inscription as 1325, which would also satisfy all three names, though the katholicos would then be Constan-

16 Details on the translation of the relics can be found in Charles W. Jones, Saint Nicholas of Myra, Bari and Manhattan: Biography of a Legend (Chicago, 1978).
tine IV, 1323–26, and Ōšin, the uncle and regent of the young Levon IV, assassinated when the latter became of age in 1329. The inscription, however, seems to read “in the time of King Ōšin and his son [ordanu nor] Levon,” ruling out a reference to the regent Ōšin.

The principal inscription in the first person says, “I had this [dexter] made or restored.” The verb kazmel can mean to bring together, thus bind, but also to restore. Previous authorities interpreted it as meaning a restoration. There are a number of indications supporting this supposition. There are two inscriptions attached to the case (nos. 3 and 4), which seem to be unrelated to the relic of St. Nicholas. One (no. 4) was copied on the newly fashioned silver forearm during its consolidation in 1926. It mentions the right-hand relic of St. Stephen and a certain Bishop Sahak in the year 1179, if my reading is right.17 Anna Ballian, who studied the reliquary for exhibitions in Athens (2002) and most recently the remarkable Byzantine exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (2004), says, following Kiwlèsériant: “Both the reliquary of Saint Stephen and the name Bishop Sahak are unknown in the literature.”18 In fact, there exist two Armenian dexters of St. Stephen, one belonging to the priest Stephen, associated with the Hripsimian martyrs of the fourth century, in the collection at Holy Etchmiadzin, and another of St. Stephen the Protomartyr, first century, now in the Armenian cathedral in Tabriz. As for Bishop Sahak, more than one is known, including a Bishop Sahak involved in the Armenian-Greek theological disputes of the 1170s and Sahak, Archbishop and Patriarch of Jerusalem (1152–80), who attended the Council of Hromkla in 1179.19 The inscription, though a twentieth century copy, shows every indication that it was faithfully copied from an earlier one. Its paleography satisfies a twelfth-century date suggesting that it was faithfully copied from an earlier manuscript, though a twentieth century copy, shows every indication that it was faithfully copied from an earlier manuscript, though a twentieth century copy, shows every indication that it was faithfully copied from an earlier manuscript, though a twentieth century copy, shows every indication that it was faithfully copied from an earlier manuscript.

The other inscription, no. 3, on a band just above the filigree-decorated rectangle was apparently at one time part of a hand reliquary of St. Gregory the Illuminator. The words “St. Gregory’s hand” are clear, but the first line and especially the third line are difficult to decipher. If the reading Tēr T’eodorus proposed by Kiwlèsériant is correct,20 his suggestion that the reference is to Katholicos T’eodorus II (1382–92) would be a logical choice. The style of the script in a rounded erkat’agır is acceptable for that date.

The supposition that relics of more than one saint, including St. Gregory, St. Stephen, and St. Nicholas, might have once been included in a single reliquary, in this case a hand reliquary, seems to me to have little merit. Though in the Latin West there are hand or arm reli-
quaries with the relics of more than one saint and among Armenian reliquaries, there are many with the remains of more than one saint, I know of no Armenian arm reliquary among the dexters I have cataloged that contains the remains of more than one person. Furthermore, since dexters of St. Stephen exist and several of St. Gregory, it is probable that the inscriptions were once part of these. Finally, considering the importance of the right hand of St. Gregory, founder of the Armenian Church, and its use in the blessing of the Holy Chrism, it is hard to imagine his arm relic being combined with those of another’s in the same receptacle.

If the inscription of 1315 was one of restoration, when would the original reliquary have been fashioned? St. Nicholas became popular as a saint in the Latin and Byzantine Churches in the eleventh century, but there is little evidence that the cult became popular in Armenia before the mid-thirteenth century. The first Armenian representation of the saint is in a medallion on the Skevra triptych reliquary of 1293 now in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. The name is virtually unknown in Armenia before the 1240s but becomes very popular toward the end of the thirteenth and in the fourteenth centuries. This was the time of the first Franciscan Pope, Nicholas IV (1288–92). During this period the king of Armenia was Het’um II, who is shown kneeling on the lower part of the inner right flap of the same Skevra reliquary. King Het’um himself was a Franciscan monk. The medallion of St. Nicholas on back of the dexter is of the standard St. Nicholas type, as we see in Byzantine and later Russian art; it is roughly similar to the portrait on the Skevra reliquary, though more finely carved. However, there is a difference in the identifying inscriptions of the two objects: $\text{[OUR]}\text{P NIKAWLIOIS}$ in 1293 and $\text{[OUR]}\text{P NIKAWL [NIKOL]}$ on the dexter of 1315. The oldest attestation of Nicholas as an Armenian first name is in this form, Nikòl, the brother of a scribe working in Cilicia in 1241. Chronologically the next two occurrences of the form Nikòl occur in the fifteenth century in a western context, that is in Poland and in the

23 The St. Nicholas medallion was published as a detail in Alvida Mirzoyan, Le reliquaire de Skevra (New York, 1993), 80, unnumbered color reproduction.
Crimea. Using the L instead of the more correct Armenian Ł (GH) suggests a clear Latinizing or Westernizing influence. Based on these considerations, I would date the original arm reliquary of St. Nicholas to the second half of the thirteenth century, but again as suggested above, the inscription of 1315 could also justify the fashioning of the reliquary at that time.

As to how the Armenian Church got the relics of St. Nicholas, though no direct evidence exists, it was probably from Italians trading in Cilicia, or even directly from Bari, where Armenians were settled and active from as early as the late tenth century.25

The dexter of St. Nicholas was in part radically restored after its rescue from Sis. A photo (fig. 5) belonging to the Cilician Katholicoate taken in Aleppo after the reliquary was rescued from Sis along with other treasures before the advancing Turks at the moment of the genocide of 1915, but before the renovation of the three dexters, allows a comparison of the reliquary before and after its 1926 restoration (fig. 6). The principal six-line inscription on the wrist seems to be visible in the same place it is today. It is the lower part that has been reconstructed, or rearranged with the various pieces visible on the upper part of the dexter. The arm itself is now a single piece of dark silver, which was part of the original reliquary, because the rectangular object (called a window by Ballian) decorated with filigree and five colored stones is approximately, perhaps exactly, where it was on the old photo. The vertical three-line inscription band, which can be read with difficulty on the old photo, is now wrapped around the arm just above the rectangular ornament. The latter cannot be considered a window, like those in European dexters, showing the relic bone underneath, because such usage is otherwise unknown among the fifty or so existing Armenian arm reliquaries.26 The new inscription of restoration has been engraved on the silver body, just above this band. Finally, the upper floral band could be either the original band at that spot or one of the two long vertical bands (the one to the right on the old photo, fig. 6), recycled here, while the band at the bottom of the restored object seems to be the vertical segment to the left of the photo. The original bottom band seems to have

25 Notarial acts from the tenth to the twelfth centuries mentioning Armenians in Bari, including several with signatures in Armenian, are preserved in archives in Bari, the Vatican, and other Italian libraries. Five of these are reproduced with explanation and bibliography in Claude Mutafian, Roma–Armenia, catalogue of an exhibition in the Vatican, March 24–July 16, 1999 (Rome, 1999), 200–201, 203. There is some suggestion that it was Armenians from Bari who were behind the translation of the relics from Myra; see C. D. Fonseca, “Tra gli Armeni dell’Italia Meridionale,” Atti del Primo Simposio internazionale de Arte Armena (Bergamo, 28–30 Giugno 1975) (Venice, 1978), 184–85.
26 The single known Armenian example actually proves the point. What I have referred to as the fifth right-arm reliquary of St. Gregory the Illuminator, kept in the treasury of the church of San Gregorio Armeno in Nardo, Italy, has such a window through which a large slice of bone is visible. But of course this is a silver reliquary of Italian manufacture for an Italian church, with a proper stand to keep the dexter upright on the altar. It has a strange open hand in the Italian manner; see Kouymjian, “The Right Hand of St. Gregory,” 246, fig. 10. A similar Italian dexter with an open hand like a claw, on a stand and with a window, is of St. Davino Armeno, an eleventh-century pilgrim who died in Lucca. The reliquary in the church of San Michele in Foro in Lucca, was fashioned in 1424 but has an eighteenth-century base; see Mutafian, Roma–Armenia, 240, fig. VIII, 5.
disappeared, for the old photo shows raised gem holders for stones. Pieces from the other side of the arm would also be missing. The old photo shows these various plaques almost hanging loose, giving the impression that the part of the arm relic starting after the wrist inscription was larger than the upper part, like that of St. Sylvester’s reliquary (fig. 5) next to it, where the sleeves of a garment, as we see in medieval Western dexters, are intended.

There is a precious and moving description of the arm reliquary of St. Nicholas before restoration given to Coadjutor Katholicos Babgen Kiwlèséri (1931–36) by Kathälicos Sahak II (1902/3–39):

Letting St. Illuminator’s dexter rest in peace, we freed [those of] Sts. Sylvester and Nicholas by stripping them of their rotten shrouds – their fetters and chains… St. Nicholas’s dexter was crushed …, patched, covered with crude nails and damaged – a true example of the suffering Armenian nation. After all, why should the sacred objects venerated by the Armenians have remained exempt from the perennial misery endured by the Armenian people! Like us, the dexters too have barely survived, going from one mountain to another, from one fortress to another, and then exiled to the deserts, reaching the brink of death.27

How nice it would have been if Sahak Katholicos had ordered the jewelers in Aleppo responsible for the restoration of all three dexters to open the casings, look inside them, record and perhaps even photograph what they found. But Katholicos Sahak was reluctant to touch what he considered sacred objects. Earlier, when Bishop Babgen (later Katholicos) had asked Sahak to remove the cloth shroud that wrapped the right arm reliquary of St. Gregory the Illuminator, the latter replied: “The many-layered covering or shroud of St. Illuminator’s dexter is sealed in a few places with an illegible seal. Scruples do not permit touching and undoing it. Besides, I suspect that it is in a crushed state like that of St. Nicholas, accounting for its being carefully wrapped and tied thus. If we dare undo it and my suspicions prove correct, we will not be able to have it photographed.”28

It would be just as nice if today His Holiness Aram I, Kathälicos of the Great House of Cilicia, would allow the three arm reliquaries to be x-rayed.29 That would give us both an idea of the construction of objects and also some notion of what bones might be inside. So far he has refused, but he is still young.

27 Kiwlèséri, History, 1326; unpublished partial English translation of the last part of the History kindly supplied by Aris Sevag, typescript, 52.
28 Kiwlèséri, History, 1328; Sevag, trans., 53.
29 An x-ray of a European arm reliquary from Hildesheim, ca. 1195, with the bone very apparent can be seen on the Cleveland Museum of Art Web site (June 17, 2008) at www.clevelandart.org/exhibobj/consexhib/html/howar.html.
Plate 24

Colorplate XXIV. Right arm (dexter) Armenian reliquary of St. Nicholas. Antelias, Cilician Museum of the Armenian Katholicoate of Cilicia