

# The Holy Shroud in Armenian Manuscripts and Literature

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The present study is the continuation of the research on the mentioning of the Shroud in Armenian manuscripts. We have already completed the study of the topic in the manuscripts of the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem, and some of the Matenadaran (the Manuscript Library in Yerevan, Republic of Armenia) manuscripts. A recent trip to Armenia made it possible for us to complete the study of the Matenadaran manuscripts as well.

In previous presentations we have considered the study of the Dastarak (Mandilion), or Varshamak, in the Armenian manuscripts. We have reflected upon the vividly described information about the form of the Dastarak and the image on it. For instance, according to one source, the Dastarak is "a white flax of a (one) fathom with golden thread on the edges.<sup>1</sup> The same source also mentions about the "perfect" image of the facial features of Christ depicted on the Dastarak.

Another subject we have considered is the allusion of various sources to the existence of the Dastarak and/or the Varshamak in the Monastery of Hovhannavank, a 4th century complex within 20km. distance from Echmiatsin, which has become one of the most famous medieval churches in Armenia.<sup>2</sup> Vardan Vardapet (thirteenth century) and Arakel Davrijetsi (mid-seventeenth century) mention that the Varshamak of Christ was found in the Monastery of Hovhannavank. Davrijetsi describes in detail about the pillaging of the Monastery of Hovhannavank by the Djalali Turks and the carrying away of "all the sacred objects, that is, the Varshamak of the faces of Christ, a part of Christ's crown of thorns and the hand of St. Stephen" to Persia. The same information about the preserving of the Varshamak at Hovhannavank has been provided by the most renowned Armenian Catholic historians of the Mkhitarist Order of St.

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<sup>1</sup> Manuscript no. 8 of the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem, quoted in our previous presentation of May 1998.

<sup>2</sup> It is believed that the Basilica was built by Gregory the Illuminator, the first Armenian Catholicos, with the aid of King Tiridathes. It is also believed that Gregory brought some of the relics of John the Baptist (after whom the monastery is named) and buried them in this monastery. As well, the right hand of Gregory, the spear pierced on Christ's side and other relics were kept here.

Lazarus in Venice, Ghevond Alishan (18th c.), the founder of the Order, and Mikael Tchamtchian, (19th c.).

However, the information on the preserving of the Varshamak in the Monastery of Hovhannavank is found in no other Armenian source. For instance, in the days of Arakel Davrijetsi, Zakaria Sarkavak (Deacon) was a distinguished member of the Brotherhood of the Monastery of Hovhannavank. Davrijetsi, in his "The History of Arakel Davrijetsi," refers to the renovations made at Hovhannavank under the skilful supervision of Zakaria and speaks highly of the latter's knowledge about the monastery. Consecutively, Zakaria Sarkavak, in his three volume "Patmagrutium" (*Historiography*, Vagharshapat [Echmiatsin], 1870), mentions that both he and Davrijetsi had many long conversations on the history of the Armenian people and other national, ecclesiastical and scientific issues. Zakaria devotes an entire part of his third volume to the history of the building of Hovhannavank, to the renovations made there under his supervision and about the sacred objects preserved in the monastery. It is strange that an authoritative and knowledgeable person like Zakaria, who was later ordained bishop and in 1637 became the superior of the Monastery of Hovhannavank, would not know about the preserving of the Varshamak in the monastery, and would not mention about it in the section of his voluminous work devoted especially to the sacred objects kept there.

Our doubt about the authenticity of the above information is further confirmed by the fact that both historians, Vardan Vardapet (p. 15) and Arakel Davrijetsi (p. 81), at some point confuse between the Varshamak of Christ and the Varshamak of the Mother of God, or that of Veronica. For example, Vardan Vardapet says that "at Edessa, which is the town of Urha, is found the non-hand-made picture, that of Saint Veronica." (According to Great Macarius of the fifth century, Veronica was from the Edessan royalty, and she was the same woman with hemorrhage mentioned in the Bible [Luke 8:443-44]. This picture is found in Rome and Genoa.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in the cited work Arakel Davrijetsi mentions about the "glorious brotherhood of Hovhannavank, the right hand of St. Karapet (St. John the Baptist) and the Varshamak of the Mother of God" (p. 348). It is therefore clear that historians somehow confused between, on the one hand the Varshamak of Christ, and on the other, of that of the Mother of God, and of Veronica.<sup>4</sup> This makes it difficult for

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<sup>3</sup> *Bazmavep*, December 1921: 375

<sup>4</sup> The study of these sources requires a clarification of the use and the meaning of the term "Varshamak." We have already explained that according to the renowned Armenologist Hrachia Acharian, "Dastarak" is the Armenian equivalent of the Greek "Mandilion" and the Jewish "Varshamak." However, in the Eastern Armenian dialect the term "Varshamak" has substituted for "Dastarak." In fact, it is frequently used as the "Varshamak of the faces of Christ"--thus in the meaning of "Dastarak" or "Mandilion"--in the works of the historians mentioned throughout this paper.

us to confirm that it is the same Varshamak they refer to that was kept at the Monastery of Hovhannavank.

Moreover, a well known historian from the Order of the Monastery of Hovhannavank is Ghazar Parpetsi. Although Parpetsi wrote on the "History of the Aluank," nevertheless, in his referring to the Monastery of Hovhannavank, he, too, does not mention about the preserving of the Dastarak or Varshamak there. Similarly, Catholicos Simeon, in his "Djambr" (Vagharshapat, 1873), writes about the Monastery of Hovhannavank but makes no mention of the Dastarak.

In addition, the famous contemporary archaeologist Karo Ghafadarian, who supervised the excavations of the site and wrote a book about the inscriptions in the Monastery of Hovhannavank, including the history and the legends associated with it, mentions the other sacred objects, such as the relics of St. John the Baptist, the hand of St. Gregory, and others, but makes no mention whatsoever about the Varshamak of Christ being kept there.<sup>5</sup>

Further, Archbishop Maghakia Ormanian, in his three volume exhaustive work on the history of the Armenian people and the Church "Azgapatum" (Beirut, 1959), devotes a section of his first volume to the sacred objects held by the Armenians. Unlike other sacred objects "held" by the Armenians, here the author refers to the Dastarak as an object "venerated" by the Armenians. Ormanian says that the Dastarak became an object of special worship in Edessa, it disappeared for a while, was found again in 539A.D., and transferred to the West by the Crusaders. He then says that currently (second half of the XIX c.) the Dastarak is displayed as the original in the Church of St. Bartholomew in Genoa, whereas for some the one kept in the Church of St. Seghbestros in Rome is regarded as the prototype. He concludes the section on the Dastarak saying that "whatever the real story of the Dastarak, there is no need for us to deal with it, as in the beginning it was kept with the Syrians and now with the Italians" (p. 34). Here, we need to take into consideration the fact that Archbishop Ormanian, before being elected as the Patriarch of the See of Constantinople (1896-1908), was educated in Rome. Therefore, apart from his vast knowledge on the Armenian people and its church, his account of the Dastarak is probably obtained through Catholic sources.

Another source telling us about the Varshamak is from among the manuscript collection of Catholicos Kevork (George). According to the information provided through manuscript no. 11 (p. 25a), written probably in the seventeenth century, among other sacred belongings of Christ was "the Varshamak, (which) was not with other wrappings (clothes) but was folded separately, (these) were taken to Great Hamshen near Djanet and the city of Trapizon." The same source also

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<sup>5</sup> Karo Ghafadarian, "Hovhannavanke ev nra Ardzanagrutiunnere" (Hovhannavank and its Inscriptions), Yerevan, 1948, 124.

mentions that "the *khandzarur* is in Rome,"<sup>6</sup> and that "St. Thaddeus carried to Armenia the spear covered with the godly blood and the thorny crown of Joseph Arimathea, his right hand, the perfume bottle of the nobleman and the Virgin's picture."<sup>7</sup>

It is well known that Armenian sources on the Dastarak, the earliest of which is cited in the "History" of Movses Khorenatsi, are the most reliable and original after Labubna's text in Syriac. It is this version of the story that has often been narrated in most of the manuscripts. Perhaps it would have been possible to find more details on the subject in earlier manuscripts. Unfortunately, the earliest Armenian manuscript dates from the ninth century only, as those of the earlier centuries have completely been burned and destroyed by the Muslim conquerors of Armenia. As regards the study of the referring of some historians to the Dastarak or Varshamak of Christ at the Monastery of Hovhannavank, it is obvious that those few sources on the subject are countered by others' referring to the Virgin's picture. Based solely on the above-mentioned, it is therefore difficult to confirm that indeed it was the Dastarak, or Varshamak of Christ, kept at the Monastery of Hovhannavank.

As a result of the research made exclusively on the study of the Varshamak in the rest of the Matenadaran manuscripts, as well as in secondary Armenian sources, we can now conclusively say that probably no Armenian manuscript conveys any information about the Shroud. Similar to the previously studied ones, almost all of these manuscripts narrate, with insignificant changes, the story of the Dastarak. It is believed that for either political or religious reasons Armenian sources do not consistently give a full account of the events related to the Dastarak. For instance, the transferring of the Dastarak from Edessa to Constantinople in 944 is not fully elaborated in Armenian historiography because the story is associated with the Byzantine Emperor Romanus who persecuted Armenian monks in order to impose the Chalcedonian doctrines on them (see Kirakos Gandzaketsi and Vardan Vardapet/Patmich).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Armenian term "khandzarur" may mean either "shroud," or the cloth used to wrap Christ the infant.

<sup>7</sup> Mesrop Vardapet, commentary on N. Mar, "On the non-tailored tunic of our Lord in the Armenian, Georgian and Syriac literary legends," in *Ararat*, the then Official Monthly of the Holy See of Echmiatsin, no. 1 (May 1898): 227.

<sup>8</sup> The deteriorated relations between the Armenians and the Romans also explain the indifferent attitude of the Jacobite historians (Michael the Syrian, etc.) about the transferring of the Dastarak to Constantinople. Aram Ter-Ghevondian, "The non-hand made Dastarak in Arab Historiography," in *Echmiatsin*, (the official monthly of the Holy See of Echmiatsin), January 1981, 42.

### *Mar on the non-tailored tunic of Christ*

During our research we came across a study made by the renowned Russian scholar Nicolas Mar on the non-tailored tunic of Christ. Here we briefly mention about it as it might be of interest to some scholars. According to the Armenian, Georgian and Syriac legends since ancient times the tunic of Christ was preserved in the churches of these three Eastern nations. "In the East only the Georgians owned a copy of the tunic, which is now in Russian hands; and the Catholic Church has 'numerous copies of it.'"<sup>9</sup> After such an introduction Mar narrates about the historical events which led to the transferring of the tunic into Russian hands. He says that in 1625, Urusam bek (of Georgian origin), the messenger of Shah Abbas of Persia, offers Patriarch Filaret a golden box decorated with precious stones. This box contained the tunic of Christ. Moscow doubts the authenticity of the gift made by the Mohammedan ruler and asks the opinion of the patriarchs in Jerusalem and Constantinople about it. The latter confirm that indeed such a sacred object once existed in Georgia. Mar then brings in the information provided by the medieval Armenian historian Arakel Davrijetsi, who tells us that Shah Abbas destroyed and plundered Georgia, and carried away to Persia many precious church vessels and sacred objects, among which was the non-tailored tunic. These were kept in the royal treasury of Isfahan. Later they were sent to Russia, where (the tunic) was kept in the main cathedral of Usbenski, and the sacred objects in the monastery of Alexander Nevski, in the grand royal church of St. Petersburg, and in the main cathedral of Paul and Peter.<sup>10</sup>

Mar then reinforces this information by compiling the literary legends on the tunic told by Eastern Christians. According to the oldest Georgian annals ("Brief History of the Georgians," Venice, 1884) preserved only in Armenian, the tunic was kept in the town of Mtskheta. New Georgian annals confirm this information with a slight variation, and in the biography of Nune it is mentioned that the tunic is found in Northern Armenia, which Mar believes to be the Georgian town of Mtskheta. Mar also considers the information found in the Armenian version of the "History of Michael the Syrian," according to which the tunic of Christ was carried away to the land of the Gauls and until today it is kept in the city of Makson (Paris). While other sources narrate the whereabouts of the tunic, Armenian and Syriac texts describe the traditional story of the origin of the tunic. In a previous presentation we have mentioned about this and therefore refrain from any repetition here.

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<sup>9</sup> Mesrop Vardapet, 224.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 224-25.