

THE ILLUMINATION OF NON-BIBLICAL ARMENIAN  
MANUSCRIPTS\*

by

NIRA STONE

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

*Emma Korkhmazian (1930-2009)*

*In Memoriam*

In this paper we shall discuss the research done in recent decades on illuminated non-biblical Armenian manuscripts (thus also excluding Gospels). The period designated by “recent” is unclear, and we have considered this quite carefully. Is it during the last year, the last fifty years or the last hundred years? The scope of the assigned topic and the indefiniteness of the chronological limits have led us to select only a few subjects and examine them within realistic limitations<sup>1</sup>.

From antiquity, Armenian writers, scholars and scientists were pioneers in their fields. They expressed Armenian creativity in the areas of lyric poetry, law, liturgy, hagiography, medicine, magic, veterinary science, hippiatry, pharmacology, astrology, astronomy, music and history — and this list is far from exhaustive. These and other areas of literature, learning, art and science were transmitted in manuscripts and often accompanied by illustrations<sup>2</sup>.

Our brief is to survey the types of non-biblical paintings and to present what is known about them, with indication of possible further directions of research.

\* This paper originated in a presentation made at a workshop of the AIEA held in Salzburg, Austria on 11-13.4.2005.

<sup>1</sup> The extent of this study has also been governed by the limited bibliographic resources available to me, predominantly in Western languages, which do not cover the earlier part of the twentieth century.

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## PROFANE LITERATURE

**The Alexander Romance** (figure 1)

Probably the most famous example of profane literature in Armenian is *The Alexander Romance* of Pseudo-Callisthenes. This very popular book, telling tales of Alexander's life and exploits, was first translated from Greek into Armenian in the fifth century and there are at least 80 surviving manuscripts. It is illuminated with very interesting illustrations<sup>3</sup>. Pseudo-Callisthenes has attracted the attention of scholars repeatedly over the past century. Among the first was Frédéric Macler in his book *L'Eluminure arménienne profane* in 1928. Numerous scholars followed him, including Hasmik Simonian (1975, 1979 and 1989), Cecilia Arslan Veronese (1992), Christina Maranci, (2003-2004), and Giusto Traina (1996)<sup>4</sup>. Dickran Kouymjian wrote studies of it in 1992-1993 and graciously made available to me his exhaustive article in the forthcoming Weitenberg FS<sup>5</sup>.

Most recently two wonderful volumes have been published by Dickran Kouymjian, Giusto Traina, Carlo Franco and Cecilia Veronese Arslan. One volume is a facsimile of Venice, Mekhitarist Library, ms. V424, and the other, an introduction, an analysis of the miniatures and reproductions from other illustrated manuscripts of Pseudo-Callisthenes. This latest work is very welcome and it summarizes most of what can be said about *The Romance of Alexander*<sup>6</sup>.

**Books of Models**

The existence of an Armenian book of models (manuscript V1434) was first mentioned by Père Levond Ališan in 1896 in a three-installment article in *Bazmavēp*<sup>7</sup>. This is manuscript V1434 of the Library of the Mekhitarist Fathers in Venice, perhaps dating from the fifteenth century (figure 2). Later it was noted by Macler in 1928<sup>8</sup>, but it was Sirarpie Der Nersessian who wrote substantial studies of it in two articles published in 1968 and 1969<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> The most recent critical text was edited by SIMONIAN, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> SIMONIAN, 1979; SIMONIAN, 1989; SIMONIAN, 1976; VERONESE ARSLAN, 1992; MARANCI, 2003-4; TRAINA, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> KOUYMJIAN, 1992-3.

<sup>6</sup> TRAINA, FRANCO, KOUYMJIAN AND VERONESE ARSLAN, 2003. This work also includes all the kafas (poetic explanations) of Khatchadour.

<sup>7</sup> L. ALIŠAN in *Bazmavēp* 1896, 289-293, 385-397 and 446-450.

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For the historians of Western art there has never been any problem in having books of models and books of models were familiar in Western art from early times<sup>10</sup>. However, only from as late as the twelfth century is there evidence for the existence of such works in the Byzantine realm<sup>11</sup>. In 1962, D.J.A. Ross showed that a couple of twelfth century pages in a Latin manuscript (Vatican Lat. 1976) derived from Byzantine models. Already in 1961 Kurt Weitzman had demonstrated that certain Saxon evangelist portraits were copied from a contemporary Byzantine model that he thinks was an icon<sup>12</sup>. In 1974 P. Hetherington published the "Painters Manual" of the Greek monk Dionysius of Fourna, a seventeenth-century prose description of models for manuscript painters in which he drew on earlier Byzantine iconographic sources<sup>13</sup>. This influenced both painters and art historians.

A nice discovery was the use in Armenian manuscripts of the system of models (figure 3), which was demonstrated by Der Nersessian in two articles written in 1968 and 1969<sup>14</sup>. There she showed that V1434 is made up of two parts, the first of which is on parchment and is older than the second, later part, which is on paper<sup>15</sup>. This manuscript included models drawn from Byzantine sources, and itself served as a model for Armenian artists. A good example is the *Alexander Romance* of 1536 (J473) that was illustrated by Catholicos Grigoris of Alt'amar<sup>16</sup>. (See figure 2.)

In an article written in 1981, Mari Laura Testi Cristiani suggested that this manuscript was intended for private use or to be placed in a shop, where customers might order pictures, consulting the book of models<sup>17</sup>.

### The Jewish Bride

This is a most unusual manuscript, a story written by Eremia Chelebi K m rjian of Constantinople (1637-1695), who was a prolific writer both in Armenian and in Turkish<sup>18</sup>. It survives in various languages and a

<sup>10</sup> An example is the Wolfenb ttel manuscript; see DER NERSESSIAN, 1973, 665-672.

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<sup>16</sup> BOGHARIAN, 1967, vol. 2, 460-466.

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manuscript of it in Armeno-Turkish is preserved in the Spencer Collection in the New York Public Library (Armenian manuscript no. 5) and was published in 1981 by Avedis K. Sanjian and Andreas Tietze<sup>19</sup>. This manuscript has numerous illustrations that have never been studied.

The story is of an Albanian baker who fell in love with a Jewish girl. She converted to Christianity and the purpose of the tale is to establish the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. This is one of Eremia Chelebi's numerous compositions; another, which I have seen in a manuscript copy in the Library of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, is the "Story of the Great Fire in Constantinople," which is also illustrated. Doubtlessly, there exist further illustrations of historical or imaginative stories that remain to be studied.

## Hagiography

Manuscripts containing the sayings and lives of the fathers, martyrs and saints are extremely popular in the Armenian tradition, existing in many copies, the vast majority of which are not illustrated. Moreover, few scholars have published research on these hagiographic illuminations in Armenian or, indeed, in any other eastern Christian art. Those who have done so include Frédéric Macler (1930), Helmut Buschhausen (1981, 1986 and 1988), Hugo Buchthal (1963) and Sirarpie Der Nersessian (1958)<sup>20</sup>. Indeed, when I commenced my doctoral thesis, no major work in this area existed in a Western language.

For this reason that I decided to dedicate my research to Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate no. J285, written in 1430, which contains almost 823 pages, sixty full- or half-page illustrations and about 500 small illuminations — marginal scenes and others (figure 3). I received much encouragement, guidance and information from Dr. Emma Korkhmazian in Erevan and from Prof. Sirarpie Der Nersessian in Paris, who also provided me with unpublished material. I published several articles on this manuscript and associated issues, and a few years later, in 1997, I published a book dedicated to it<sup>21</sup>.

In Italy there are famous hagiographic pictures in various media (not only in manuscripts) that have been discussed by Achenbach (1944),

<sup>19</sup> SANJIAN AND TIETZE, 1981.

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Martin (1951) and Callman (1957)<sup>22</sup>. Helmut Buschhausen wrote an article about the Jerusalem manuscript (J285) in 1986 and again, in 1988, he studied the relationship between the manuscript and the painted cassoni boxes, in which he mentions the fact that this is the first illuminated Armenian manuscript of the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*.<sup>23</sup>

Previous publications and research on illuminated manuscripts of the *Lives of the Desert Fathers* were mainly about manuscripts in Greek and Latin. They mention Jerusalem J285 in the context of other artistic traditions, in such works as J.R. Martin on *The Heavenly Ladder* of John Climacus (1954), J. and M. Sotirov on Mount Sinai icons (1958) and Kurt Weitzmann's works of 1971 and 1982<sup>24</sup>.

There exist nine copies of Jerusalem J285, which were all discussed in my book<sup>25</sup>. Most are in Jerusalem, but there is one in Venice, one in the British Library and one in the Matenadaran. These copies are all later than Jerusalem J285 and were written between 1593 and 1710. Indeed, the study of the relationship of these later copies to their original is fascinating, and I shall resume it soon.

One of the methodological highlights of my analysis was to isolate new or changed iconographic and stylistic elements, and to attempt to explain them in light of the historical and religious contexts and movements of the period in which the manuscript was created. *Mutatis mutandis*, a similar undertaking was carried out independently by Mathews and Sanjian in their study of the Glatzor Gospels<sup>26</sup>.

## Liturgical Manuscripts

### *The Hymnal — Šaraknoc'*

Among the liturgical books used by the Armenians, the distinctive illustrative cycle of the Hymnal or Šaraknoc' is noteworthy. In recent years, the Hymnal has been the object of systematic research being carried out at Halle in Germany. As a result, important articles were written

<sup>22</sup> ACHENBACH, 1944; MARTIN, 1950; CALLMANN, 1957.

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<sup>25</sup> Pace RAPTİ, 2001-2, 440-442. These are Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate nos. J23, J228, J971, J410, J293, J268, J1409; Venice V1922; LOB (British Library) add. 27301 and Erevan, Matenadaran M789. I am informed by Prof. L. Chookaszian that there may be an incomplete copy in Seattle, WA.

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<sup>24</sup> MARTIN, 1954; G. and M. SOTIROU, 1958; WEITZMANN, 1971; WEITZMANN, 1982a; WEITZMANN, 1982b.

<sup>25</sup> *Pace* RAPTİ, 2001-2, 440-442. These are Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate nos. J23, J228, J971, J410, J293, J268, J1409; Venice V1922; LOB (British Library) add. 27301 and Erevan, Matenadaran M789. I am informed by Prof. L. Chookaszian that there may be an incomplete copy in Seattle, WA.

<sup>26</sup> MATHEWS AND SANJIAN, 1991.

in 1995 by Hermann Goltz (on its illumination) and by Armenuhi Drost-Abgarjan (on its text)<sup>27</sup>. Goltz presents the different types of illuminations in the fully-illustrated Hymnal and describes the cycle of marginal and large miniatures.

### *The Maštoč' — Ritual*

There is a completely unstudied tradition of illustration of the *Maštoč'*, the book containing the liturgies for the sacraments and other special occasion, to be used by priests. This includes scenes like the building of a Church, the interment of a bishop and other similar illustrations. With Michael Stone I am working on two such manuscripts, one in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin and the other in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. Doubtless, much more remains to be done.

### **The Physiologus**

The *Physiologus* is a collection of Christian allegories. Composed originally in Greek, it was translated into Armenian in the late-fifth or early sixth centuries, and existed also in Latin and other languages from an early date. The Armenian text was published by N. Marr and later studied by Xaç'ikyan and Arevšatyan<sup>28</sup>. Gohar Muradyan has recently finished a new edition of the text, completing the work of a research group at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies in 1997-8.

Dr. Muradyan has informed me that in all the manuscripts she has examined there is only a single illumination, a marginal picture in ms Matenadaran 2890 (1719). It shows a lion being hunted by a demonic figure resembling a four-legged rooster (figure 4). In Chapter 2 Appendix 2-16 of Dr. Muradyan's edition and translation we read, "the hunter Satan will come, find him (i.e., the sinner who is compared with the lion) unready and kill him." In the picture the lion's rear right foot is caught by the rooster-Satan.

Motifs from the *Physiologus*, however, penetrated Armenian art much earlier. In an article about a fifteenth-century Armenian Gospel in Boston Public Library, Sirarpie Der Nersessian observes that the motif of the

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However, a much earlier illustration of this motif is known, from the scene of the Baptism in the Eĵmiacin Gospels no. 1 (M2374), dated usually to the latter part of the first millennium.

### History of the Armenians and Historical Events

The most renowned historian of Armenia is Movsēs Xorenac'i and his work has had extensive scholarly attention over the past couple of centuries. For our purposes, questions of authenticity and date may be laid aside. Xorenac'i is only one of numerous Armenian historians and most often, if their works are illustrated, it is with a portrait of the author usually at the beginning. An example of this is the picture of Movsēs Xorenac'i, Prince Sahak Bagratuni and the commissioner, Nersēs Gnuni in M2865 of 1567 from Xizan (figure 5).

To the best of my knowledge, such authors' portraits have not been studied systematically and no monographic study has been devoted to them. However, numerous examples are reproduced in published collections of Armenian miniature paintings and in exhibition catalogues. Indeed, such portraits also exist of other authors of books, not only of historians. One type is of the monastic teacher with his students at his feet. These include well-known pictures of Vardan Aygekc'i (M7006 of the seventeenth century)<sup>31</sup>, Yesayi Nč'ec'i (J365 of the thirteenth century) and Grigor Tatewac'i (M1203 of 1449) with their students (figures 6 and 7).

Another type of author's portraits are pictures of David the Invincible Philosopher (M 1746 of 1280 [?]), of St. Mesrop Maštoc' (M5996 of 1725), of Dionysius the Areopagite (J324, 14th century), Grigor Xlatec'i (M3714 of 1419), Grigor Magistros (M6988 of 1763-4) and many others. They are often presented in a style and stance similar to Evangelist portraits (so David the Invincible Philosopher in figure 8).

<sup>29</sup> DER NERSESSIAN, 1950 and DER NERSESSIAN, 1973, 687-8

<sup>30</sup> "In similitude to Christ the pelican pierced his side and fed his young. Christ pierced His side and redeemed us with His blood" is the title under the illumination in the manuscript (DER NERSESSIAN, 1973, 683-694, especially 687-88).

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Finally, in a seventeenth-century manuscript of the historical Arak'el of Tabriz, we find a schematic diagram of the Ottoman dynasty, presented as a coiled snake with the founder of the dynasty at its head.

### Amulets and Apotropaic Writings

There exist rather numerous Armenian amulets on rolls, containing text and pictures. These amulet rolls, sometimes very long, comprise a combination of magical and apotropaic prayers and formulae, with poems by Grigor Narekac'i and Bible extracts serving a magico-medical function, as well as magical formulae, lists of angelic names, and so forth. One magical picture in a codex is from Venice, Biblioteca Marciana VEB cod. Or. 95 (= 210), f. 111r.

In addition to amulet rolls, there exist "amulet books" in the form of codices that resemble the rolls in content and illustration. Certain of the images and symbols also occur on metal plaques, rings, metal apotropaic seals designed to be hung around the neck, and so forth.

The oldest of the rolls is dated to the fifteenth century, and they continued to be produced down to recent times, the latest of them being printed rather than hand-copied. Armenian magic and apotropaic texts have been little studied, and we know of only four pieces of research in Western languages. Some work has been done in Armenia, particularly by A.A. Odabashyan, in the context of ethnographic and anthropological research and documentation and a corpus of texts has appeared<sup>32</sup>.

In 1986 the late Frédéric Feydit published the texts of a group of amulet rolls (*hmayils*), nearly all from the Mekhitarist library in Venice<sup>33</sup>. He

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presents a substantial number of texts and he gives many reproductions of illustrations found in the rolls at the end of his book. He carries out no analysis, however, of the art itself, or of its interaction with the textual material.

Two further pieces of research have been available to us. The first is Yoav Loeff's thesis written at the Hebrew University, in which he publishes four texts from the oldest *hmayil* scroll in the holdings of the Matenadaran, Scroll no. 115 dating to 1428. Although he reproduces the six pictures found in this scroll, again artistic analysis is lacking. The second is our own detailed description of a number of *hmayil* scrolls in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, which will be included in the catalogue of the hitherto unpublished Armenian holdings of that library (figure Fig. 10). In that Library, too, is a *hmayil*-book, and we have shown clearly the interrelation between its illustration and that of the *hmayil* scrolls<sup>34</sup>.

Finally, Gabriella Uluhogian discusses the sequence of the pictures in the amulet scrolls in an article on a *hmayil* in Sofia, Bulgaria. Her discussion is very brief, but it is the first in the literature we have surveyed. Her comparative material is drawn from the Venice collection and she is able to reach some preliminary but important conclusions from the sequence of the pictures. Much more work needs to be done on this topic<sup>35</sup>.

Two typical scenes are the archangel Gabriel guarding a soul (Feydit, figs. 9 and 57) and St. Sarkis the General and his son Martiros (figs. 11 and 12).

### **Patriarchal Bulls**

Little attention has been paid to the decoration of Bulls (*gontaks*) issued by various Patriarchal and Catholicosal Sees. We cannot analyse these in detail, except to say that usually the top of the Bull presents a picture relating to the issuing See and to the first part of its text, which usually deals with the special virtues and privileges of that See. These pictures are sometimes of great historical interest, as is the one of the old building of the now-destroyed monastery of Armaš in the Chester Beatty Library. In addition, they sometimes represent in a concentrated form the iconography that evokes the particular sanctity and importance of the

<sup>34</sup> LOEFF, 202. Loeff is preparing a monograph based on this thesis. See also, STONE and STONE, forthcoming. On a different usage of the same iconography see the apotropaic plaque published in STONE, M.E., 2001-2. [Russell 2001 appeared after completion of this article.]

<sup>35</sup> ULUHOGIAN, 1984, especially p. 607.

issuing See. Two of our examples are drawn from the Chester Beatty Library and the third is a modern Bull issued by the late Catholicos Vasken I, on 26 June 1985.

Chester Beatty Arm 635 is a Bull from Armaš issued on 20 May, 1803. This bull (*gontak*) was issued on the occasion of renovation work done at the Armenian monastery in Armaš. Of special interest is the second section that depicts the life of the surrounding village, of the church and the church itself (figure 12).

Chester Beatty Arm 634 is a Patriarchal Bull from Jerusalem (seventeenth-eighteenth century). It presents a detailed architectural description of the Armenian St. James Cathedral in Jerusalem and an assembly of the major iconography of the See of the Saints James (figure 13).

On a contemporary Bull of Catholicos Vazken 1 the cathedral of Eĵmiacin is in the centre, flanked by the peaks of the greater and lesser Masis, below which is the coat of arms of The Catholicos of All Armenians. This is, therefore, the same pattern as was discerned in the Constantinople and Jerusalem *gontaks*.

## Science Including Astronomy, Astrology, Medicine and Veterinary Medicine

### *Medicine and Veterinary Medicine*

After translating the medical books of the Greeks and Syrians, the Armenians also specialized in pharmacology and veterinary science. Medical manuscripts were illustrated, though not much has been written about these pictures. One picture is from a manuscript of the year 1644 (Matenadaran M7046) which is a *Miscellany* containing the poem "On the Heavens and their Adornment". This was written by Nersēs Šnorhali at the request of the famous physician and astronomer Mxit'ar Herac'i (figure 14)<sup>36</sup>.

With the use of horses in battle and their general economic significance, hippiatry was of very great importance. A central work in Armenian is the translation of Faraj's work on the topic, edited and annotated by Babken Chookassian in 1980 and recently translated and studied by Jasmine Dum-Tragut<sup>37</sup>. (figure 15).

<sup>36</sup> See *Teaĳn Nersēsi Šnorhalwoy čap'erakank'* (Venice: S. Lazar, 1830), 281-302 and see BOGHARIAN, 1971, 236-37.

<sup>37</sup> DUM-TRAGUT, 2005

*Astronomy and Astrology* (figure 16)

The signs of the Zodiac were known to the Armenians and were important both for astronomy and for astrology. Here we give a picture of the sign of Virgo as an example. In addition there are works in the field of calendar, that in the complexity are in the borderland between text and illustration. They will not be discussed here.

**Concluding Remarks**

I am very conscious that the survey I have given is incomplete. However, it is also evident that the field of Armenian non-biblical manuscript illustration has been little studied in the past century. In addition to the areas that I have enumerated, there are further aspects that I have not addressed all. One is the illustration of apocryphal texts and the introduction of apocryphal motifs into Bible, particularly Gospel illumination.

In addition, the representation of kings and notables, particularly in dedication pages of manuscripts (and for example in relief on the Church of Ałt'amar) is worthy of a special study that cuts across the somewhat artificial biblical / non-biblical distinction. Moreover, marginal decorations frequently contain human figures, representing various trades and professions, such as have been assembled, though not analysed<sup>38</sup>. A similar situation exists in relation to the representation of secular figures in various types of illumination. Much could be learnt of social, technological and economic history, as well as of artistic development and tradition, through the study of these elements.

Another aspect I have passed over is the particular tradition of Armenian Catholic book production and illumination. A especially luxurious example is the *Book of Laws*, Chester Beatty Library Arm 623. Others doubtless exist.

It is clear that the investigation of these and other similar aspects of manuscript illumination remain on the list of *desiderata*.

<sup>38</sup> GUEVORKIAN, 1978.





Fig. 1  
*The Alexander Romance*, Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate J473, 1536.

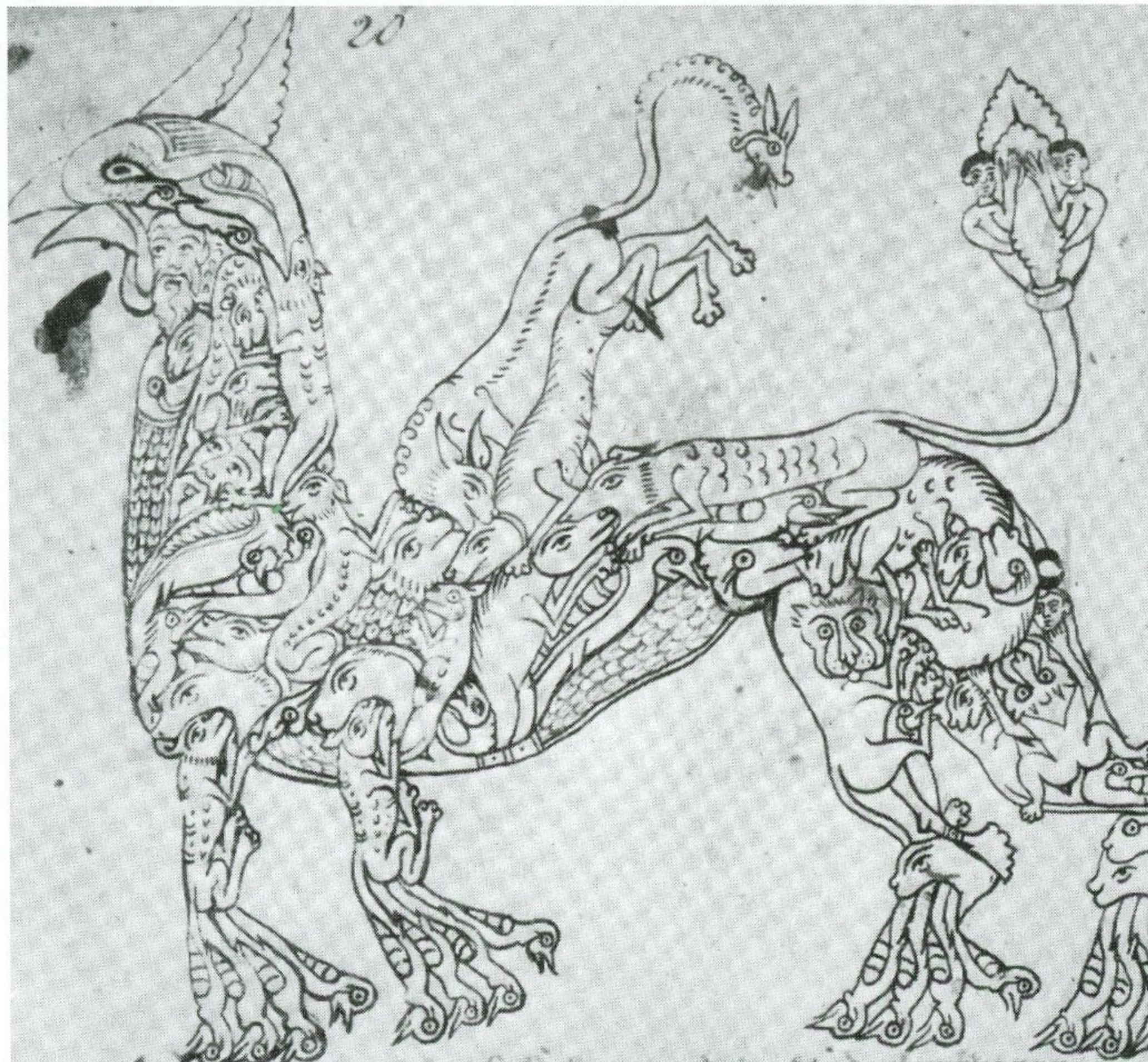


Fig. 2

Exemplar and Copy: *Fantastic Animal Venice*, Mekhitarist Library, V1434, fol. 2r and *Bucephalus*, Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate, J473, fol. 10v.



Fig. 3

Markos and Serapion, Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate J285, 1430, p. 652.



Fig. 4  
*Lion and Satan in Physiologus, Matenadaran M2890, 1719.*



Fig. 5

*Mosvēs Xorenac'i* Matenadaran M2865, 1567



Fig. 6

*Esayi Nč'ec'i and his Students Jerusalem J365, 1299*



Fig. 6

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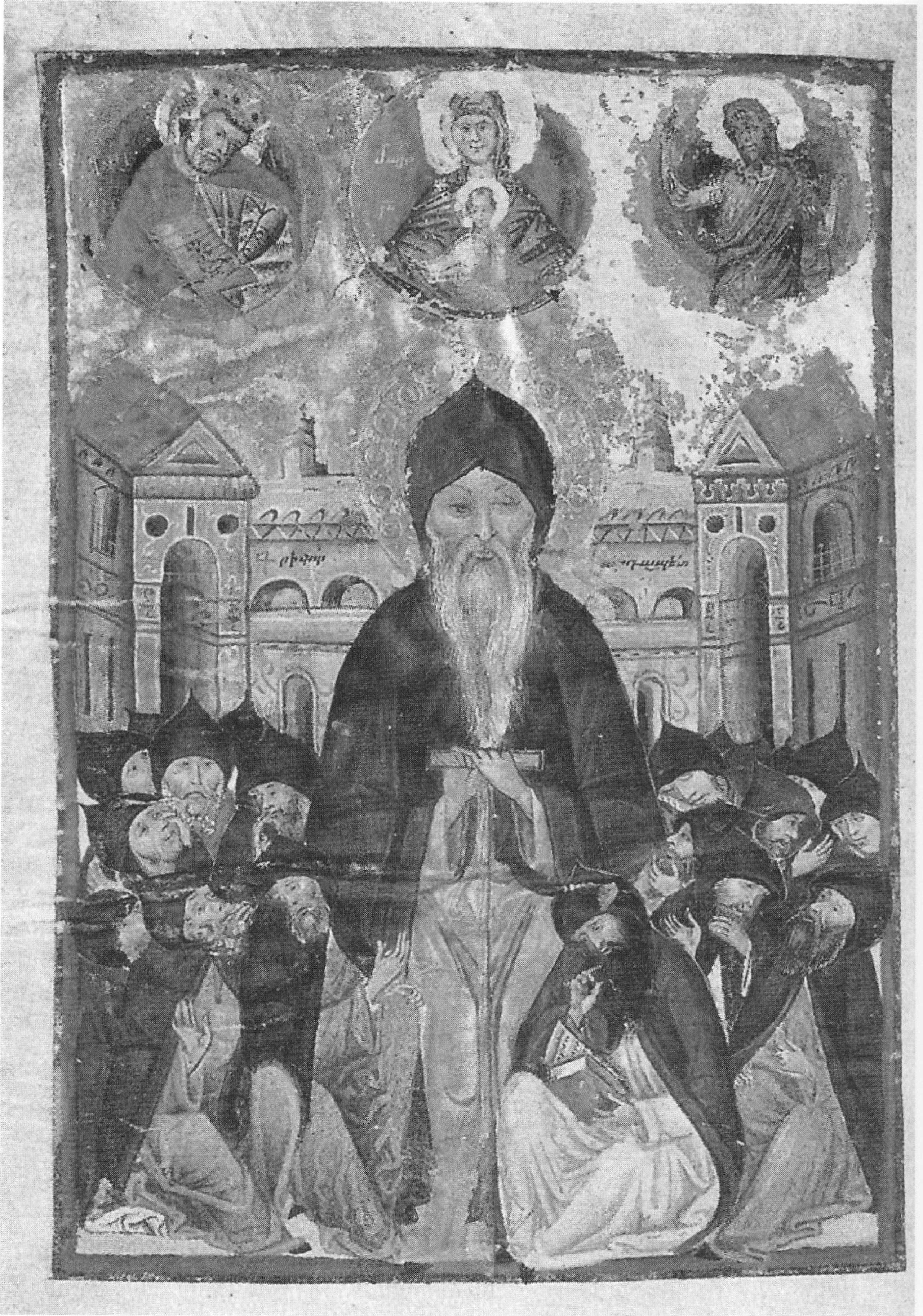


Fig. 7

*Grigor Tat'ewac'i and his Students* Matenadaran M1203, 1449





Fig. 8

*David the Invincible Philosopher* Matenadaran M1746, 13<sup>th</sup> century

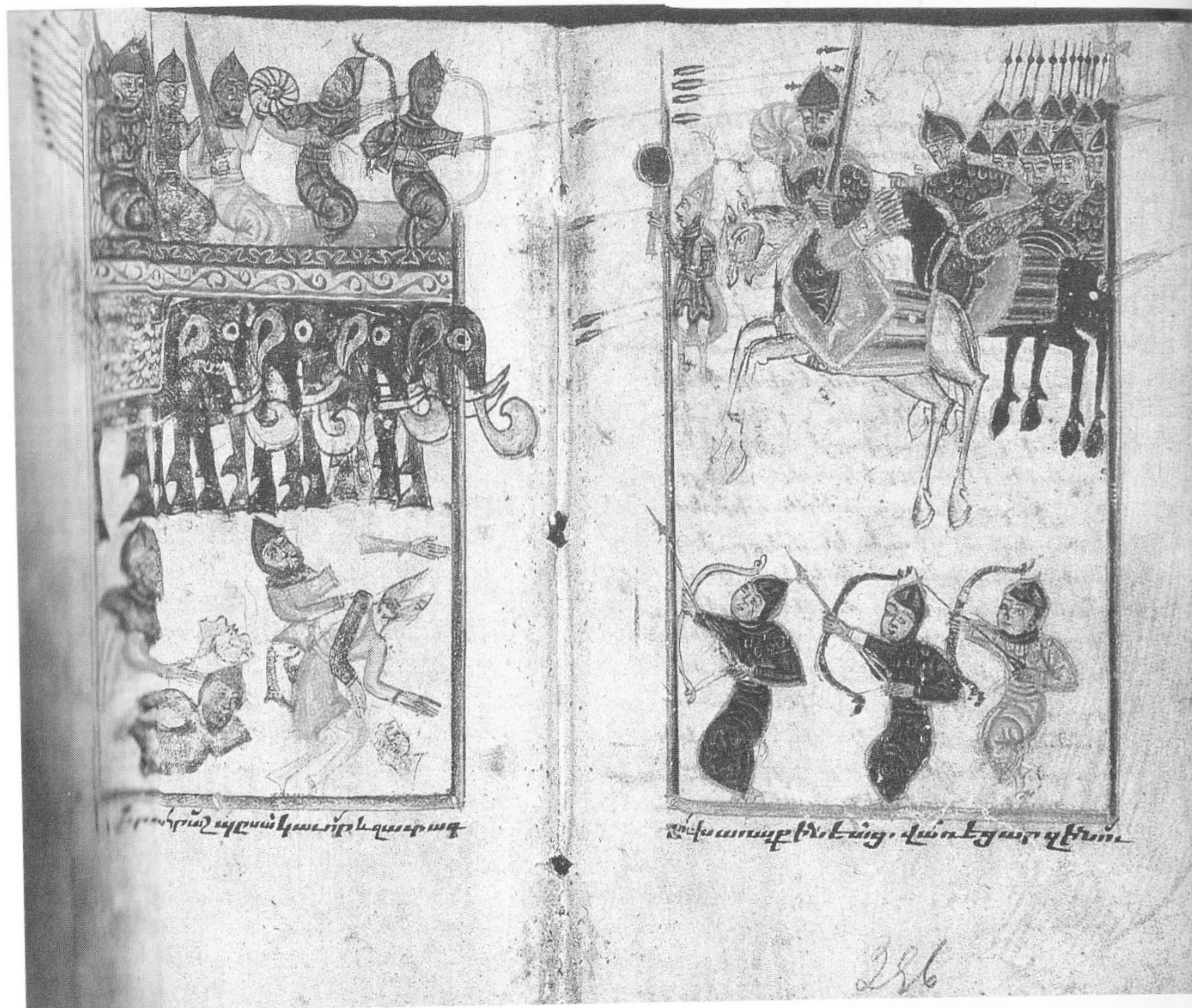


Fig. 9  
Battle of Avarayr Matenadaran M1620, 17<sup>th</sup> century



Fig. 9  
*Battle of Avarayr Matenadaran M1620, 17<sup>th</sup> century*



Fig. 10  
*Gabriel guarding a Soul, Venice, Mekhitarist V3015, 1715*



Fig. 10  
*Gabriel guarding a Soul, Venice, Mekhitarist V3015, 1715*



Fig. 11  
*St. Sarkis and his Son Martiros*, Venice, Mekhitarist V3041, 18<sup>th</sup> century



Fig. 12

*Monastery of Armaš (partial)* Dublin, Chester Beatty Library, Arm 635, 20 May, 1803



Fig. 13

*Cathedral of Sts. James, Jerusalem* Dublin, Chester Beatty Library,

Arm 634, 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century





Fig. 14 *Nersēs Šnorhali instructs Mxit'ar Herac'i Matenadaran*,  
M7047, 1644, fol. 196v



Fig. 15  
*The Horse* Private Collection, Los Angeles, 1296-8.



Fig. 16  
 The Constellation "Virgo" Matenadaran, M3884, 1461-1478

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