The Oldest Armenian Pilgrim Inscription from Jerusalem

Michael E. Stone

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The history of the Armenians in the Holy Land was one of Archbishop Norayr Bogharian's abiding interests. This article is dedicated to his memory in the knowledge that he would have found something of interest in it, and probably several points at which it could have been improved. Those points he would have marked in pencil and, as he did so often, he would quietly but unambiguously have informed me of my errors. My debt to him, both personal and scholarly, is enormous. His passing, however, is not just my loss or the loss of those of us in Jerusalem who benefited from his learning; it is a loss sustained by the Armenian world and by the world of Armenian Studies. It is a grievous loss for the Brotherhood of the Saints James and for Jerusalem. He wrote, at the end of the eleventh volume of his great Catalogue of the Sts. James Manuscripts, words that express well the conclusion of his life's opus:

Փառք Քեզ Աստուած, փառք Քեզ, յաղագս ամենայնի, Տէր, փառք Քեզ:

In the winter of 1996-1997 archeologists excavated a pilgrim hostel just outside the Jaffa gate. The excavation of the hostel, carried out by E. Shukrun, is part of a larger project of excavation around Jerusalem carried out under the direction of R. Reich of the Israel Antiquities Authority. Mr. Shukrun, having encountered the inscription presented here, made it available to me and it is now made public for the first time.

Stone, Oldest Graffito, page 2

The structure which was excavated was abandoned in the middle of the seventh century. This date, the archeologists inform me, is quite certain. It was a Christian installation, adjoining but outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem, at the start of the road leading to Bethlehem. A fragment of marble slab bearing an Armenian inscription was discovered in this building, which appears to have been a pilgrim hostel. The slab shows no signs of wear and was probably part of a wall covering of some sort. The inscription dates, therefore, to before the abandonment of the building, that is, prior to the middle of the seventh century. Below we give a photograph of the inscription, together with the text and translation, and to these we add a number of observations that may help put it into its historical context.[1]

Physical Description: The stone is of white marble, with a dark vein in it that makes the decipherment of the end of the second line difficult. The dimensions of the stone, at its widest and highest points, are 12.5 x 5.7 cms. The written area measures 4 x 7 cms. The inscription is contains four lines of writing, numbered 1-4. Line 1 is 5.6 cms long and the highest letter is 0.9 cms high. Line 2 is 7 cms long and the highest letters, the yi and the ben, are 0.9 cms high. Line 3 is 5.4 cms long and the highest letter is 1 cm high. Line 4 is incomplete. The four certain letters are 2.2 cms long and both middle letters are 0.9 cms high. The stone has broken at both ends and it is not at all certain that the faint line we have marked as a doubtful last letter, was indeed a letter at all.

The inscription is scratched into the stone and is, in general, well preserved. It seems that the author was not a skilled stone mason, as the variation in the form of ayb between lines 1 and 3 indicates. On the other hand, he was clearly literate, as the

---

[1] The excavation is to be published by the Israel Antiquities Authority. Naturally, that publication will provide full information on the archeological and historical context in which the inscription was discovered. The data given here was communicated by R. Reich and E. Shukrun.

Stone, Oldest Graffito, page 3

accomplished script indicates to us.[2] Therefore, we should view the hand that the

inscription presents as part of the manuscript tradition rather than the lapidary.[3]

ՏՐ ՈՂՈՐՄԵԱ

ՏՐՏՐՈՑ ԵԻ ՍՈԻՐԲ

ՅԱՐՈԻԹԻԻՆ

Յ]ԻՇԵԱ.[

Lord have mercy

on Tiratur and holy

resurrection

re]member .[

Notes on the Text and Translation

L. 1: *ՏՐ* "Lord": abbreviation, without an abbreviation mark. The name *ՏՐՏՐՈՑ* "Tiratur"
in the next line is also abbreviated, but also lacks a mark of abbreviation. The verbal form
ՈՂՈՐՄԵԱ is an imperative of *ողորմիմ* which would normally produce a form like
ողորմեաց; cf. Meillet, p. 96. *ողորմեա* is listed, however, as an existing imperative form
of *ողորմիմ* in NBH, vol. 2, 510c.

L. 2: *ՏՐՏՐՈՑ* "on Tiratur": In texts of this vintage, such radical abbreviation, and
particularly the loss of *ա.* is not usual. The name is composed of *տէր + տուր* "Lord"
and "gift", and is comparable with *Աստուածատուր. Քրիստոսատուր*, etc.[4] It is
comparable to Greek Theodore, Hebrew Jonathan, etc. The first attestation of Tiratur in
HAB is of the year 633, an archbishop who participated in the Council of Karin. The

---

[2] The name makes it clear that it was a man who made the inscription.
[3] On this distinction and its implications see M.E. Stone, "Three Observations on Early Armenian
Inscriptions from the Holy Land," From Byzantium to Iran: In Honour of Nina Garsoïan ed. R.W.
Thomson and J.-P. Mahé (Atlanta: 1996), 419-420.

Stone, Oldest Graffito, page 4

name becomes frequent in the latter part of the thirteenth century. Ačaṙyan's single attestation prior to the thirteenth century, indicates that early use of the name is not widespread. However, not many inscriptions from the first centuries after the invention of the Armenian script survive either.

Ll. 2-3: *ՍՈՒՐԲ ՅԱՐՈՒԹԻՒՆ* "holy resurrection": I have translated this phrase word for word. Observe that neither word is abbreviated. The reading of *ՍՈՒՐԲ*, though perhaps not completely visible in the photographs because of the dark vein in the marble, is nonetheless quite unmistakable when the stone itself is examined. The words are clearly the subject of the imperative *[Յ]իՇեՍ.* in line 4. That is, "holy resurrection" is called upon to remember someone (most probably Tiratur, the author of the inscription) to God or Christ. The syntax is absolutely clear because the name Tiratur is in the dative case (*Տիրատրոյ*) as would be expected following the verb *ողորմիմ*, while *սուրբ յարութիւն* is in the nominative, being the subject of *[յ]իշեա.*

Thus, the Lord is called upon to have mercy on Tiratur and *սուրբ յարութիւն* is invoked to remember *nn*. But what could this second invocation mean? That was not immediately evident and when I consulted colleagues, two interpretations were proposed to me. R. Ervine considers that *սուրբ յարութիւն* designates Christ's resurrection. This salvific event is invoked, at a site within ten minutes walk from the Church of the Anastasis which is called the Church of *Սուրբ Յարութիւն* in Armenian. The formulation of a pilgrim's inscription in terms of an adjacent holy place and the event that happened in it seems natural enough and other examples can be found. Thus, the oddness of the invocation of Christ's Resurrection can be understood in light of the particular site where the inscription was made.

---

4 See Ačaṙyan, HAB, s.v.

Stone, Oldest Graffito, page 5

L. Di Segni has proposed to me, based on her extensive experience of Greek
graffiti from the Holy Land, that *Սուրբ Յարութին* is the name of a saint. She would
compare with Greek inscriptions, which contain an invocation of God's name, followed
by an invocation of a saint.[5]

Dr. Di Segni's explanation is attractive in view of the similarity sometimes to be
observed between the formulae of Greek and Armenian graffiti in the Holy Land.
Nonetheless, it faces two difficulties. First, there is no Armenian saint of this name and,
moreover, as a name, *Յարութին* does not occur until the fourteenth century. The second
objection is that this formula of invocation of a saint is not found in any other Armenian
graffito from the Holy Land.

One might, perhaps, wish to compare the text of the inscription on the Mount of
Olives mosaic, conventionally dated to the sixth century, which reads ԲԱՐԵԽԱՒՍ
ՈՒՆԵԼՈՎ ԱՌ Ա[ՍՏՈՒԱ]Ծ ԶՍՈՒՐԲ ԷՍԱՅԻ ԵՒ ԶԵՐԱՆԵԼԻ ՀԱՐՍՍ, ԵՍ ՎԱՂԱՆ ԱՐԱՐԻ
ՎԱՆ ԹՈՂՈՒԹԵԱՆ ՄԵՂԱՑ ԶՅԻՇԱՏԱԿԱՐԱՆՍ ՁԱՅՍ "Having Saint Isaiah and the
blessed fathers as intercessors to God, I Vałan made this memorial for the forgiveness of

---

[5] In a note most graciously communicated to me, she cites the following examples:
"Κ(ύρι)ε ΥΣ Χ(ριστò)ς κè ἅγιε Μηχαὴλ πρόσδεξε τὴν καρποφορίαν τòν δούλον
σοῦ etc.; Herodion, 6th century. L. Di Segni in G.D.Bottini, L. Di Segni and E. Alliata, *Christian
Archaeology in the Holy Land*(SBF Collectio maior, no. 36; Jerusalem 1990), 177 (*SEG* 40, 1470).
Κύριε [ἐλέησον τòν ἀδελφòς [Κύρ]ιλλος (sic) and below:
"Ἁγια Σαλώμη ἐλέησον Ζαχαρίαν υ(ιο)ῦ Κυρίλλου. Ἀμήν. Church of St. Salome, H. Qazra near
Beth Govrin. L. Di Segni and Y. Patrich, *'Atiqot* 10 (1990), 142-143 (*SEG* 40, 1451).
"Ἁγιος. βοήθι Ζα(ννον?) or Ζα(χαρίαν?) may be connected with the inscription immediately
above it and made with the same technique (scalpelled and not scratched): Κ(ύρι)ε βοήθι Deir Mukallik,
Y. Patrich and L. Di Segni *Eretz Israel* 19 (1987) 275-276 nos. 4-5 (*SEG* 37, 1505, somehow *SEG*
neglected no. 5).
Χ(ριστ)έ καì ἅγιε Σέργιε βοήθητε Nessana, Kirk and Welles, Nessana no. 47.
Κ(ύρι)ε Ἰ(ησο)ῦ Χ(ριστ)έ καì ἁγία Μαρία ἡ Θεώτοκος ἐλέησον etc. Pharan Sinai, Y,
Meimaris, *Liber Annuus* 30 (1980) 225-232.

Stone, Oldest Graffito, page 6

sins." There we find the use of *սուրբ* and the invocation of a saint as an intercessor. The mosaic uses the same formula with the word *բարեխաաս*by which in later centuries Armenians frequently invoked the Holy Cross.[6]

The usage in the Mount of Olives mosaic, then, and the frequent similarity of the formulae in Greek and Armenian inscriptions from the Holy Land, might lead us to consider Dr. Di Segni's proposal more seriously. Yet, if a "St. Yarut'iwn" is being invoked, it is certainly bizarre that the name Yarut'iwn only occurs so late in Armenian.[7] Indeed, the name Anastasios ('Ἀναστάσιος) was common enough in Greek, and as Acaṙyan pointed out, its transliteration is found in Armenian as *Անաստաս*.[8] In Byzantine Greek usage, it was borne by Emperors, Patriarchs and Popes. Anastasios I was Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem from 458-478 and Anastasios II was Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem from 639(?)-706. The name was used by Armenians from the sixth to fourteenth centuries. Subsequently it was translated into Armenian as *Yarut'iwn*, and the Greek form was abandoned.[9] Notable among the persons named Anastas in Armenian who are listed by Acaṙyan is Catholicos Anastas I Akoṙec'i (661-667); the (pseudepigraphical ?) author of the famous list of Armenian churches and monasteries on the Holy Land, Anastas vardapet;[10] and Anastas Catholicos of the Albanians 742-742.[11]

There are scores of inscriptions worded 'Ἀγία or 'Ἀγίε so-and-so, help, or have pity, or remeber, or save, or accept the offering of .... Same with incriptions worded 'Ὁ Θεὸς τοῦ ἁγίου so-and-so, help, or remember, or save, or accept the offering of ..."

[6] But, of course, these cases of invocation of the cross occur in crosses which are being dedicated.

[7] Of course, as we observe, Tiratur is also a name that appears only once in the ancient period, and subsequently in the thirteenth century.

[8] See *HAB*, 1, 155-157.

[9] Ibid., 156.

[10] A.K. Sanjian, "Anastas Vardapet's List of Armenian Monasteries in Seventh-Century Jerusalem," Le Muséon 82.3-4 (1969) 265-29.

[11] A theological writer of the eighth century called Anastas, is mentioned in a number of ancient sources; see Garegin I Catholicos Yovsēp'ian, *Յիշատակարանք Ձեռագրաց. Հատոր Ա (Ե դար մինչեւ*

Stone, Oldest Graffito, page 7

To follow Dr. Di Segni's interpretation, we must assume that (a) the name is that of a Greek saint, calqued into Armenian, and (b) that this was a saint revered in Jerusalem and unknown to us so far from Greek inscriptions or historical sources. The first assumption is particularly difficult because the form "Anastas" occurs regularly in Armenian at this time, and its Armenian translation Yarut'iwn does not occur for another 700 years or more. No other instance of an isolated translation of a Greek name into Armenian is known to us, nor does any motive for such a translation come to mind.[12]

Thus, both interpretations present difficulties, most of which cannot be resolved with the information currently at our disposal. For the moment, we tentatively prefer the interpretation "Holy Resurrection", but rather hesitantly.

The Historical Context of the Graffito

This graffito is the oldest Armenian graffito from Jerusalem, known to date. None of the inscriptions of the Armenian Patriarchate complex are as old as this, the oldest dating back to the tenth or eleventh centuries.[13] The chief earlier Armenian monuments in Jerusalem are the mosaic floors and two tombstones. Mosaics have been discovered in two general

---

1250) (Colophons of Manuscripts, Part 1 [5th Century to 1250]) (Antelias: Catholicossate of Armenians of Cilicia, 1951), col. 656 and other sources.

[12] An examination of further sources of Armenian onomastic data does not change this picture. We consulted Aławnuni's proposopography of Armenians in Jerusalem (M. Aławnuni, *Monks and Visitors of Armenian Jerusalem* [Jerusalem: St. James Press, 1929] in Armenian); the indexes of Bogharian's catalogue of the manuscripts of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem; of G. Yovsēp'ian's and A. Mat'evosyan's collections of colophons of Armenian manuscripts down to the 13th century; of the catalogue of manscripts of the Matenadaran in Yerevan, and of vol. 1 of the catalogue of Armenian manuscripts in the Mechitarist Library in Vienna. None of these sources showed a Yarut'iwn before the 14th century, while Anastas fell out of use by that time.

[13] On the early history of the Armenian Cathedral of Sts. James, see also the comments by J. Prawer. "The Armenians in Jerusalem under the Crusaders," Armenian and Biblical Studies ed. M.E. Stone. (Supplement Volumes to Sion, 1; Jerusalem: St. James Press, 1976), 289. Earlier habitation of the site is dealt with by D. Bahat and M Broshi, "HaHafirot baGan HaArmeni," Kadmoniot 19-20 (1973) 102-103 (in Hebrew). There is considerable further literature on the history of this area of the city, which is not dealt with here.

Stone, Oldest Graffito, page 9

The connection of the Armenians with the area of the House of Caiphas, near David's Tomb on Mount Zion, also seems to be very ancient, although none of the buildings presently visible can lay claim to very great antiquity.[17] There is also evidence for a nunnery of St. Menas, "near the Tower of David" which was established around 438 C.E. In 1165 a German traveller mentions Armenian monks living near the Tower of David (the Citadel).[18] These traditions are mentioned since the location of the graffito being published here is closer to these sites than it is either to Musrara or to the Mount of Olives. Nonetheless, if Shukrun and Reich are correct about the character of the building, this graffito was probably inscribed by a pilgrim and not by an Armenian resident, clerical or other.

A further point should be raised. In another paper we pointed out that the monastic complex in which the Eustathius mosaic was laid in the seventh century, was inhabited by both Greeks and Armenians. This phenomenon is not an isolated one.

The Oldest Armenian Graffito from Jerusalem

Many Armenian graffiti from Jerusalem were included in the catalogue of the Rock Inscriptions and Graffiti project.[19] These are concentrated in the Holy Places, as well as around the Cathedral of the Saints James and other churches of the present Armenian quarter. They are all later than the present inscription, to judge by paleographic criteria and historical context. Thus the Jaffa Gate graffito is the oldest Armenian pilgrim graffito from Jerusalem. Elsewhere, we have assembled a number of pieces of evidence

---

[17] Prawer, "Crusader Jerusalem," 229.
[18] *Ibid.*, 231.
[19] M.E. Stone, The Rock Inscriptions and Graffiti Project, Catalogue of Inscriptions, Volumes 1-3: Inscriptions 1-8500, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992-3).

Stone, Oldest Graffito, page 10

bearing on Armenian pilgrimage to Jerusalem.[20] The movement of Armenian travellers is

attested from earliest Christian times down to the present, both by literary sources and by

pilgrim inscriptions. We must view the new epigraph in the context of this Armenian piety

and particular devotion to the Holy Land.

Paleographic Remarks

The writing of the inscription, as noted above, should be assessed in the context of

graffiti and not in that of formal inscriptions of the seventh century, such as the Komitas

inscription from St. Hřip'simē Church in Ejmiacin (618). In such an informal context it

can be compared with certain of the Sinai inscriptions and with the Armenian papyrus to

be published by Kouymjian.[21] It is not practicable, at this juncture, to carry out such a

comparison in detail, because we await the publication of the papyrus. Suffice it to remark

that the inscription is an example of informal uncial (erkat'agir) writing. We are

profoundly convinced that, once the Album of Armenian Paleography has been

published, the next major task facing Armenian paeographers is the study and analysis of

Armenian informal hands.[22] We prefer, therefore, to leave the full paleographic

discussion of this inscription for a later occasion.

---

[20] M.E. Stone, "Holy Land Pilgrimage of Armenians before the Arab Conquest," Revue Biblique 43
(1986), 93-110.
[21] Dickran Kouymjian, "Armenian Paleography: a reassessment," Scribes et manuscrits du Moyen-Orient,
eds. François Déroche, and Francis Richard (Paris: Bibliotheque nationale de France, 1997) 178-188.
[22] M.E. Stone, D. Kouymjian and H. Lehmann, Album of Armenian Paleography (Aarhus: Aarhus
University Press, forthcoming).