



PROJECT MUSE®

---

An Armenian Fragment of the Gospel of Mark in the *Erkat 'agir* Script: With a Note on Its Codicological Reconstruction

Alin Suciu



Journal of Biblical Literature, Volume 135, Number 4, 2016, pp. 849-857 (Article)

Published by Society of Biblical Literature

► For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/642357>

# An Armenian Fragment of the Gospel of Mark in the *Erkat'agir* Script: With a Note on Its Codicological Reconstruction

ALIN SUCIU

[asuciu@uni-goettingen.de](mailto:asuciu@uni-goettingen.de)

Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen,  
37085 Göttingen, Germany

This article provides an introduction to and a transcription as well as English translation of a previously unknown Armenian fragment of the Gospel of Mark (15:4b–7a, 11b–14a), which is currently kept in a private collection in the Middle East. The fragment was extracted from the binding of a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Garšūni codex that probably came from Diyarbakir in Turkey. The Armenian text is inscribed in the *erkat'agir* uncial (“iron-forged letters”) that can approximately be assigned on paleographical grounds to the late tenth or eleventh century CE. The paper compares the textual variants of the newly identified fragment against the old Armenian text of the Gospel of Mark published by Johannes Zohrap in 1805. Although the text usually agrees with the Zohrap edition, at least one notable difference occurs in Mark 15:5. Finally, the attempt to reconstruct the fragment codicologically raises some questions concerning the format of the manuscript to which it originally belonged.

---

The Armenian parchment fragment introduced here belongs to a private collection in the Middle East. The fragment is inscribed in the *erkat'agir* uncial (“iron-forged letters”) and features the text of the Gospel of Mark 15:4b–7a, 11b–14a. As the *erkat'agir* manuscripts are not as numerous as the later minuscule (*bolorgir*), and most of them date before the eleventh century, the importance of the fragment is evident, not least for the knowledge of the Gospel of Mark in the early Armenian codices.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, given that ancient manuscripts in private hands often change

I sincerely thank Dr. Gohar Muradyan and Prof. Dickran Kouymjian, who had the generosity to read and comment an early version of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Dickran Kouymjian, “Armenian Paleography: A Reassessment,” in *Scribes et manuscrits du Moyen-Orient*, ed. Françoise Deroche and Francis Richard, *Etudes et recherches* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1997), 177–88; Kouymjian, “Notes on Armenian Codicology: Part 2, Armenian Paleography: Dating the Major Scripts,” *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies*

owners, the task of editing them before they vanish again is obviously important. Therefore, this article provides an introduction to and a transcription as well as English translation of the newly recovered Armenian fragment of the Gospel of Mark.

Many *erkat'agir* fragments served as pastedowns or protective sheets and have thus been discovered stitched to the bindings of more recent manuscripts. It is notable that the recycled fragments were usually taken from Gospel manuscripts. This situation was noted long ago by Robert Pierce Casey, who remarked that “Armenians … frequently employed in binding the leaves of gospel manuscripts which they had discarded, and some of the oldest specimens of Armenian paleography are to be found as fly-leaves of much later codices.”<sup>2</sup> The same applies to the fragment introduced here, which was retrieved by a private collector from the inner cover of another manuscript in his possession.

## I. PROVENANCE OF THE FRAGMENT

According to a private report, the owner found the fragment pasted down inside the covers of what he thought to be a Syriac paper codex.<sup>3</sup> Inspection of three photographs, however, reveals that, while the manuscript is written in the western Syriac Serto script, the text is actually not in Syriac but rather in Arabic Garšūnī. The codex is inscribed in a beautifully neat hand that can probably be dated to the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries CE. The photographs examined suggest that the manuscript contains various hymns and prayers that may be of Catholic provenance. The only text that has an *incipit* in the photographs I have seen is a “Hail to you, Mary,” introduced by a heading written in red ink. Below are the transliterations of the heading and *incipit* into Arabic letters,

طلبه على تدبير المسيحى: نقال كل يوم: وهي عجيبة لمن يتقهمها: وهي تغنى عن طلبات<sup>4</sup> كثيرة: لأن  
كلمه من قرب أخير من الف كلامه من بعد

Newsletter 6 (July 2013): 23–28; Kouymjian, “The Archeology of the Armenian Manuscripts: Codicology, Paleography and Beyond,” in *Armenian Philology in the Modern Era: From Manuscript to Digital Text*, ed. Valentina Calzolari, with Michael E. Stone, HdO, Section 8, Uralic and Central Asian Studies 23.1 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 5–22.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Pierce Casey, “An Early Armenian Fragment of Luke xvi 3–25,” *JTS* 36 (1935): 70–73, here 70, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jts/os-XXXVI.141.70>. See also Arthur Vööbus’s remark that the study of the early Armenian Gospel fragments extracted from later manuscripts will revolutionize the research on the Armenian New Testament text, in *Early Versions of the New Testament: Manuscript Studies*, PETSE 6 (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1954), 156; S. Peter Cowe, “The Armenian Version of the New Testament,” in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, 2nd ed., NTTSD 42 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 253–92, here 260.

<sup>3</sup> The informant mentioned that this manuscript is no longer in his possession.

<sup>4</sup> *Lamed* was initially omitted and added later in black ink.

A supplication for the preparation of the Christian. To be recited every day. And it is miraculous for the one who understands it. And it is more enriching than many supplications. Because a word from near is better than a thousand words from afar.

*Incipit:*

السلام لك ياستي العدري ام الخلاص اسألك ان تكوني لى شفيعه في الليل والنellar  
السلام لك ياستي العدري ام البهجه والفرح

Hail to you, my Virgin Lady, the mother of salvation, I ask you to be my intercessor day and night.

Hail to you, my Virgin Lady, the mother of joy and happiness.

Apparently, the owner purchased this and other manuscripts that he describes as Syriac and Garšūnī from an antiquities dealer based in Istanbul, who claimed that the entire batch came from Diyarbakir, located in the southeastern Anatolia region of Turkey. This statement is plausible given that Armenian and Syriac Christians coexisted for centuries in that region, until the massacre and deportations that began in 1915 decimated the two communities. It is possible that other *membra disiecta* of the same Armenian manuscript are to be found in the Syriac and Garšūnī codices from Diyarbakir. It is currently not possible to document a more precise provenance that would narrow the search area for other related fragments. The discovery of the fragment in a Garšūnī codex from Diyarbakir, however, does not necessarily imply that the Armenian manuscript was created in that location. Although this hypothesis cannot be ruled out, it may well be that the codex was imported from a scriptorium situated elsewhere.

## II. DESCRIPTION AND DATING

The hair side (= recto) and the flesh side (= verso) of the parchment are clearly distinguishable, the latter having a lighter color. The fragment currently measures 15.5 cm in height  $\times$  10.0 cm in width and preserves a portion of one column of text on each side. When intact, the manuscript must have contained two text columns and was probably about twice as high. The fragment, however, does not retain the whole length of the leaf but appears to be a piece that is probably equivalent to about a quarter of the entire folio.

At first glance, the position of the text columns on the pages can be inferred from the fact that one of the fragment's margins still seems to preserve the fold pattern of the sheet. Thus, the centerfold appears to be visible on the left margin of the recto and on the opposite margin of the verso. In this case, the recto would feature part of the first text column of the page, while the verso would have a portion of the second column of the next page. As will be argued in the last section of this paper, however, it is more plausible that what appears as the spine of the codex

may actually not be the real fold pattern of the sheet. This would suggest that the recto accommodates the right-hand column of the first page, while the verso preserves the left-hand column of the second page.

The fragment has vestiges of twelve lines of text on each side. The number of letters per line ranges from thirteen to eighteen, the average being sixteen. The text is written in *scriptio continua*. Like some of the earliest Armenian manuscripts, the only punctuation mark employed is the raised dot. In one place (recto, line 3), the fragment features the common *nomen sacrum* ՅԱ, Jesus. The letters are monochrome and the ornamentation is simple. On the recto, lines 3 and 7, the letters *ec'* and *ben*, which open verses 5 and 6 respectively, are written in *ekthesis* and are much enlarged. Judging from the length of verso's line 4, it is likely that the letter *da*, which must be restored in the lacuna that opens verse 12, was also in *ekthesis*.

The fragment may tentatively be assigned on paleographical grounds to the late tenth or eleventh centuries CE. The hand looks similar to those of the manuscripts Erevan, Matenadaran Institute, Nos. 7735 (Four Gospels, 986 CE) and 3723 (Four Gospels, 1045 CE). The latter codex was copied by the scribe Yusik k'ahanay, perhaps at Melitene or Sebaste.<sup>5</sup>

Several inscriptions appear on both sides of the parchment indicating that, before it was pasted inside the covers of the Garšünī codex, the sheet was used for pen-testing. The recto contains letters in Syriac, inscribed upside down between the lines of the Armenian text. At first glance, the two different scripts give the fragment the appearance of a palimpsest. A more careful inspection, however, clearly eliminates this possibility because the skin does not display any specific mark of treatment proper to palimpsests. Moreover, although some of the Syriac letters form ligatures with their neighbors, they do not seem to form words or clauses. On the verso are scribbled some *probatio pennae* in black and blue ink.

### III. THE TEXT

The recto of the fragment features Mark 15:4b–7a, and the verso has Mark 15:11b–14a. The text generally conforms to the version of the Gospel of Mark in classical Armenian published by Yovhannes Zohrapian (Johannes Zohrap),<sup>6</sup> although some differences can be identified. This is not surprising given that the text edited by Zohrap does not properly reflect the diversity of the Armenian New Testament manuscripts.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>See Michael E. Stone, Dickran Kouymjian, and Henning Lehmann, *Album of Armenian Paleography* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2002), 140–41, 160–61.

<sup>6</sup>The fragment parallels Johannes Zohrap, *Astuacəsunč' matean hin ew nor ktakaranač'* (Venice: Saint Lazarus, 1805), 681–82.

<sup>7</sup>See Claude Cox, "The Textual Character of the Manuscript Printed as Text in Zōhrapean's Bible," *REArm* 18 (1984): 69–83; Joseph M. Alexanian, "The Armenian Version of the New

Among the small variations from the published text, we may note մսչել ի on line 5, recto. This is a variant of մինչել, which occurs in the Zohrap version. Similarly, on recto, line 7, our fragment has տաւնին instead of տօնի. The difference must be explained by the fact that the letter o entered the Armenian alphabet only in the thirteenth century CE, when it started to replace the digraph ui. This orthographic feature gives credit to the early dating of our fragment. Other minor differences, most of them purely orthographic variations, include այնոյինենել[1] for այնուինենել (recto, line 3), կա[պ]եալ for զկապեալ (recto, lines 8–9) and եր for էր (recto, lines 10, 11).

One notable divergence is found in Mark 15:5b (recto, line 6), where the newly identified fragment reads “the judge marveled greatly” (զարմանալյնյժ դատավորին) instead of “Pilate marveled greatly” (զարմանալ յնյժ Պիլատոսի), as the text published by Zohrap has.

Mark 15:5 (the new fragment), Եւ Յիսուս այնոյինենել[1] ոչինչ եւ պատասխանի մսչել ի զարմանալ յնյժ դատավորին

But Jesus did not answer anything from that moment on, so that the judge marveled greatly.

Mark 15:5 (Zohrap), Եւ Յիսուս այնուինենել ոչինչ եւ պատասխանի մինչել զարմանալ յնյժ Պիլատոսի

But Jesus did not answer anything from that moment on, so that Pilate marveled greatly.

Leaving aside the adverb “greatly” (յնյժ), which is a variant proper to the Armenian version of Mark, the Zohrap version renders precisely the parallel Greek text, *θαυμάζειν τὸν Πιλᾶτον*. Our fragment’s reading “the judge” in Mark 15:5, finds support at least in the manuscript Erevan, Matenadaran Institute, Ms. No. 3784 (*olim* Ms. 362.G of the Catholicosate in Etchmiadzin [Vagharshapat]). This parchment codex was inscribed by the priest Thomas at Melitene in 1057 CE.<sup>8</sup> The manuscript received the siglum “C” in Frédéric Macler’s extensive study of the Armenian versions of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark.<sup>9</sup> According to Macler, this manuscript of the “Mq type” contains many variations compared to the text published by Zohrap, evincing a Greek-oriented revision of the Armenian text, probably due to the Hellenophile translators of the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>10</sup> The variant in

Testament,” in Ehrman and Holmes, *Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, 157–72, esp. 158–59.

<sup>8</sup> Description in Frédéric Macler, *Rapport sur une mission scientifique en Arménie russe et en Arménie turque (juillet–août 1909)* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1910), 41–44.

<sup>9</sup> Frédéric Macler, *Le texte arménien de l’Évangile d’après Matthieu et Marc* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1919), 93–167.

<sup>10</sup> On the Hellenophile School of translators, see Charles Mercier, “L’École Hellénistique dans la littérature arménienne,” *REArm* 13 (1978–1979): 59–75; Abraham Terian, “The Hellenizing

Mark 15:5, however, was recorded by Macler among the “arbitrary variants,” which are those readings without correspondent in the Greek or Syriac versions.<sup>11</sup> Compared to the new fragment, it is only the word order that differs in the Matenadaran manuscript, զարմանալ դատավորին յնյ (‘the judge marveled greatly’).<sup>12</sup> Despite this similarity, the newly discovered fragment is more akin to the Zohrap text than to that of Macler’s manuscript C.

The reading դատավորին (‘the judge’) in some Armenian manuscripts of Mark 15:5 can probably be explained as a borrowing from the parallel passage in Matt 27:14, մինչեւ զարմանալ դատավորին յնյ, ‘so that the judge marveled greatly.’ This would justify the occurrence of the adverb ‘greatly’ (յնյ) in Mark 15:5 in Armenian, because the same adverb is present in the Greek text of Matt 27:14, ὅστε θαυμάζειν τὸν ἡγεμόνα λίαν.

#### IV. A CODICOLOGICAL CONUNDRUM

Because of the damaged character of the fragment, the codicological reconstruction of the folio remains a conundrum. As I have already mentioned, one of the fragment’s margins seems to preserve the folding pattern of the sheet, which suggests that the surviving piece belonged to the inside part of the folio as it was originally bound. The fragment preserves Mark 15:4b–7a on the recto and 15:11b–14a on the verso. Consequently, the lacuna would extend from the first column of the recto to the second column of the verso, a space too large to contain only Mark 15:7b–11a, which occupies about six and a half printed lines in the Zohrap edition. By comparison, the surviving text on the recto—eleven manuscript lines—corresponds roughly to five lines in the Zohrap edition. This makes it unlikely that the missing portion of Mark could fill more than two complete columns of text, which represents the gap between the end of the first column of the recto and the second column of the verso. To further bolster this argument, it is noteworthy that in a Gospel manuscript from the same period, whose facsimile was published by Macler, the entire text of Mark 15:4–14 fits on two columns.<sup>13</sup>

It is likely that our manuscript had a minimum of twenty lines of text per column and that it measured approximately 35 cm in height × 25 cm in width, which is the average size of the Armenian manuscripts of the tenth and eleventh

School: Its Time, Place, and Scope of Activities Reconsidered,” in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Dumbarton Oaks Symposium, 1980), ed. Nina G. Garsoian, Thomas F. Mathews, and Robert W. Thomson (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 175–86.

<sup>11</sup> Macler, *L’Évangile d’après Matthieu et Marc*, 124–25.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>13</sup> Frédéric Macler, *L’Évangile arménien: Édition phototypique du manuscrit n° 229 de la Bibliothèque d’Etchmiadzin* (Paris: Geuthner, 1920), f. 108r.

centuries CE.<sup>14</sup> The following improbable scenarios show that the arguments that the codex had another format or that it contained only one column of text cannot be sustained.

1. If Mark 15:7b–11a was accommodated by the recto's second column and the verso's first column, the codex could not be very high since the text is too brief. In other words, this would mean that the width of the hypothetical two-column manuscript would be standard, that is, about 25 cm, but its height would be only slightly more than 15.5 cm, which is the current height of the fragment. This would yield an unusual rectangular codex of about 15.5 cm height and 25 cm width. Even if such a manuscript could be imagined, the missing text would still have to fill two columns of about twelve lines, which already exceeds its length.<sup>15</sup>

2. If the codex had only one column of text, Mark 15:7b–11a would have to be placed on the inferior part of the recto and the superior part of the verso. This would yield a codex of normal height (more than 30 cm), but its width would not change much, which means that it would have been only slightly larger than the current 10 cm. The idea of such an unusual format (ca. 30 × 10 cm) must be rejected from the outset.

Unless the portion of the parchment that has disappeared was either erased or unavailable for some other reason for writing, one may speculate that the fragment actually belonged to a lectionary, in which case it is theoretically possible that the text of the Gospel of Mark was separated by another biblical reading. This hypothesis, however, is undermined by the fact that the lectionaries are usually standard collections of biblical readings and, as far as we are aware, Mark 15:4–14 is not divided in the Armenian lectionaries.

There is at least one other possibility that might explain the format of the fragment. If the recto preserved the second column of text, and the verso the first column of the next page, then the missing portion of Mark 15:7b–11a could just be accommodated in the lacuna. In this case, what appears as the centerfold of the sheet on the left side of the recto and on the opposite side of the verso is not the ancient fold of the manuscript but rather an alteration that the piece of parchment suffered after it was cut off from the folio. A few details support this argument. The

<sup>14</sup>Dickran Kouymjian, “La structure et illustration des manuscrits arméniens,” in *Illuminations d'Arménie: Arts du livre et de la pierre dans l'Arménie ancienne et médiévale*, ed. Valentina Calzolari (Cologne: Fondation Martin Bodmer, 2007), 41–59, here 42. Kouymjian provides a chart with the typical dimensions of Armenian codices during the course of time, based on the examination of 282 dated manuscripts (“Archeology of the Armenian Manuscripts,” 9 n. 12). According to this research, the ninth- and tenth-century Armenian codices were typically 34.4 cm in height × 26.7 cm in width. The eleventh-century manuscripts are slightly smaller, 31.3 cm in height × 24.1 cm in width.

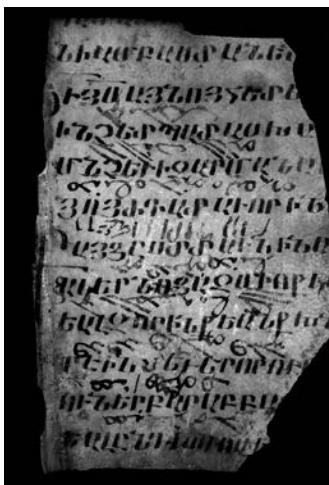
<sup>15</sup>My stichometric calculation suggests that Mark 15:7b–11a roughly corresponds to sixteen lines of text in the manuscript.

letter *ec*‘, which is written in *ekthesis* on line 3, is partly lost, together with the left margin of the fragment. Similarly, the enlarged letter *ben* that opens line 7 appears too much projected into the hypothetical margin of the page. Moreover, the same letter is inscribed almost completely on what seems to be the folding pattern of the sheet. The position of these letters is a significant issue from a codicological point of view because it is quite unlikely that the copyist inscribed them so near to the centerfold of the manuscript. This indicates that the apparently discernible outer spine of the codex may actually be some kind of erosion due to the recycling of the fragment inside the cover of the Garšūnī codex and not the true centerfold.<sup>16</sup> In the absence of any other satisfactory codicological reconstruction of the manuscript, this explanation remains the most likely one.

Unfortunately, the incomplete nature of the fragment precludes any firm conclusion concerning the character of the manuscript to which it originally belonged. I offer below the photographs of the fragment and a transcription and translation of the text, in the hope that someone else will either confirm or disprove my attempts to explain this conundrum and will thereby shed light on the kind of text represented on this fragment.

## TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION OF GOSPEL OF MARK 15:4B-7A, 11B-14A

Recto (Hair Side) Mark 15:4b-7a



15 <sup>4</sup>[...] [...] [...] [ՏԵՍ ՔԱ]  
ՆԻ ԱՄԲԱՍԱՆԵՆ [ԶՔԵՆ-]  
5 ԵՒ ՅԱ ԱՅՆՈՅԵՏԵՏ[Ի ՈՉ]  
ԻՆՉ ԵՏ ՊԱՏԱՍԽԱՆ[Ի]  
5 ՄՆՉԵՒԻ Ի ԱՐՄԱՆԱՆ[Լ]  
ՅՈՅԺ ԴԱՏԱՀՈՐԻՆ[.]  
6 ԲԱՅՑ ԸՍՏ ՏԱԲԻՆԻ Ա[ՐՉ]  
ԱԿԵՐ ՆՈՅԱ ԶՄԻ ՈԲ ԿԱ[Պ]  
ԵԱԼ ԶՈՐ ԻՆՔԵԱՆՔ ԽԱ[Դ]  
10 ԲԵՒՆ. <sup>7</sup> ԵՒ ԵՐ ՈՐՈՒ[Ս ԱՆ]  
ՈՒՆ ԵՐ ԲԱՐԱՔԲՈՒ [ԿԱՊ]  
ԵԱԼ ԸՆԴ ԽՈՒՈՎԻ[ՉԱՆ]

<sup>16</sup>The owner could not give any clear information concerning the position of the fragment inside the binding of the Garšūnī manuscript that would provide evidence of the relationship of the columns.

Recto 15<sup>4</sup> "... [see how much] they accuse [you]." <sup>5</sup>But Jesus did not answer anything from that moment on, so that the judge marveled greatly.<sup>6</sup>But at the feast he released to them one prisoner that they themselves asked.<sup>7</sup>And there was one whose name was Barabbas, who was bound with the fellow-agitators ...

Verso (Flesh Side) Mark 15:11b–14a

<sup>11</sup>[...] [...] [...] ՀԱՒԱՆԵ  
 [ՑՈՒՑ]ԻՆ. ԶԻ ԱՐՉԱԿԵՑՔ  
 [ՆՈՑ]Ա ԶԲԱՐԱԲԲԱՅՆ  
<sup>12</sup>[ՊԱՐ]ՉԵԱԼ. ՊԱՏԱՍԽԱՆԱՆ  
 5 [ԵՏ] ՊԻՒՂԱՏՈՒ ԵՒ ԱՍՔ ՑՆ  
 [ՈՒ]Ա. ԻՆԿ ԶԻՆՉ ԿԱՍԻՔ.  
 [ԹԵ] ԱՐԱՐԻՑ ԶԱՐՔԱՅՆ ՀՐԵ  
 [ԻՑ]Ն. <sup>13</sup>ԵՒ ՆՈՔԱ ԴԱՐՉԵԱԼ  
 [ԱՂ]ԱՂԱԿԵՒՆ ՑՈՒԶԵԱԼ. Ի  
 10 [ՔԱՀ]ԱՆԱՅԱՊԵՏԻՑՆ. Ի  
 [ԽԱՉ]ԱՆ ԶԴԱ. <sup>14</sup>ԱՍՔ ՑՆ  
 [ՈՒՍ]ՊԻՒՂԱՏՈՒ. ԶԻՆ



Verso<sup>11</sup> ... they persuade[d] (the crowd), so that he should release Barabbas [for them].<sup>12</sup>Pilate answered again and said to them, "But what do you want me [to] do to the king of Jews?"<sup>13</sup>And they cried out again moved by the archpriests, "[Crucify] him!"<sup>14</sup>Pilate said [to them], "What ...