Revolution or Evolution? The Armenian Book from Manuscript to Print
(A draft subject to radical change)

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I. Premise of a "Revolution"

The mid-fifteenth century innovation of making books in multiple copies with movable type, the Gutenberg revolution, introduced a radically new technology. Though the mechanical aspect of book production experienced a revolution, it did not change the physical aspect of the object. A book looked the same before and after Gutenberg; there was no way to distinguish a manuscript volume from a printed text in Renaissance libraries unless you opened one, because the book, whether manuscript or printed, looked the same before and after innovation of printing and was read in the same way. This was not the case in an earlier revolution in book making: the rather rapid shift from the papyrus or parchment roll to the codex consummated in the fourth century. The scroll had to be unrolled and read a section at a time, most conveniently upon a flat surface; the codex with folded pages could be read in any position and permitted quick movement from one part of the text to the other. Neither is it the case with the digital revolution of our time, where the object itself, the e-book, disappears if the Internet connection is cut or there is no power; furthermore, there is no material item to store, thus no need for brick and mortar structures to house electronic books. In this respect the revolution in our time can be viewed, cynically perhaps, as the disappearance of the book and with it, libraries.

In questioning the notion of revolution associated with the introduction of print culture in the Armenian experience, except as an expedient way of production, one should also reflect on the rather long period from the first Armenian book of 1512 to the

triumph of print over manuscript two and a half centuries later. Such a gradual flow does not evoke a revolution but rather an evolution.

II. A. The Crisis in Armenian Manuscript Production in the Sixteenth Century.

In a statistical study of Armenian manuscripts published more than three decades ago, I pointed out the sharp decline in production in the first half of the sixteenth century, precisely when Hakop Meghapart began the Armenian printing adventure. Based on the published catalogues of some 17,000 Armenian manuscripts, including all of the then nearly 11,000 in the Matenadaran repository, and relying only on precisely dated volumes, some 9,500 items, the results of their plotting on a graph clearly reveal that in the sixteenth century for the first time since the earliest surviving Armenian manuscripts of the ninth century, the level of manuscript production fell below that of the previous century, that is the fifteenth.
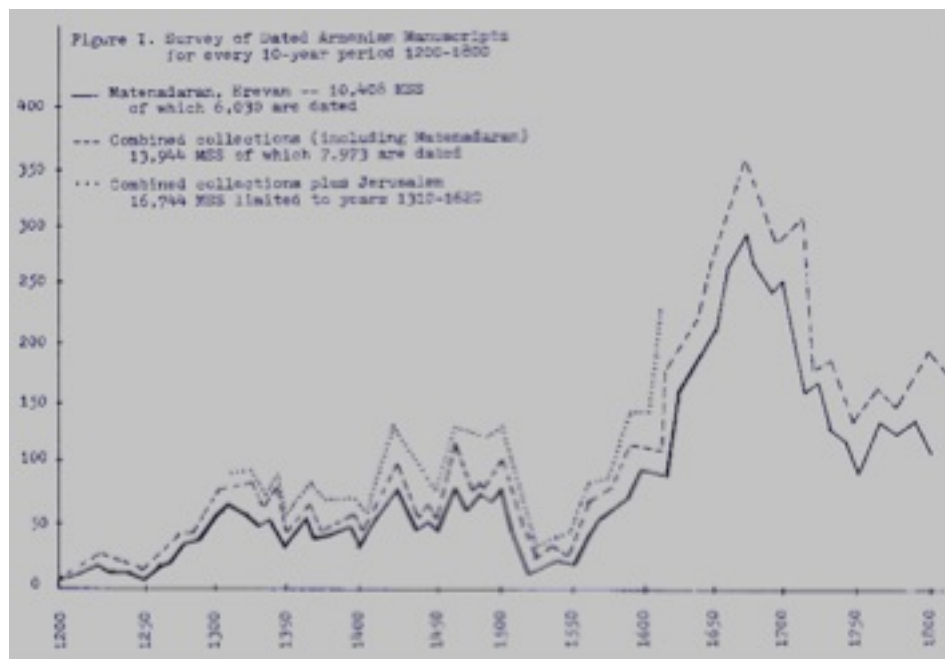
Fig. 1. Dated Armenian Manuscript Production from 1200 to 1800.

The decline is palpable: The fourteenth century records 593 dated manuscripts from our sample, the fifteenth 832, but the sixteenth only 627, and by contrast, just the first fifty years of the seventeenth century list 1,250 and for all of that century 2,750. To

underline the crisis of the early sixteenth century, the sampling showed that the first two decades represent the severest drop in Armenian manuscript production ever recorded and for the first time, in our sampling, there are four or five years with no manuscripts recorded, virtually an unknown phenomenon in the centuries before and after our survey comprising nearly 60% of the estimated 31,000 surviving codices.

The graph of dated manuscripts just as clearly shows a steady rise in production starting in the 1550s, and more dramatically after 1610, to reach an absolute historic high during the decade ending in 1660 after which there is a gradual, not a sharp, decline until the end of manuscript copying in the early nineteenth century. The rise and fall of copying corresponds to very specific historical events.

How then does one tell the story or present the history of Armenian printing? The early sixteenth century, in terms of measurable cultural production was far poorer than any other. What could the act of printing have meant to those actually producing the books? Did the printers know about the vertiginous drop in manuscript production or were they simply trying to adopt or adapt a new technology for the Armenian environment? Was it an adventure in using a newly discovered method of book (re)production for advancing or expanding literacy and knowledge among those who read this rare language? Was it a purely entrepreneurial experience, an attempt to succeed at something? Did it grow, expand, flourish, at the same rate as printing adventures in other languages? These are among the many questions that need to be asked.

II. B. Did Early Imprints Relieve the Manuscript Crisis?

Since the all time high in manuscript copying is in the decade before the most significant early Armenian printing venture begins, that of Oskan Erevanc'i in the 1660s in Amsterdam, with the first printed Bible of 1666-1668 representing the crowning

achievement, one would suppose that monastic scriptoria would rapidly disappear. But this was not the case. It is only more than a hundred years later, in the second half of the
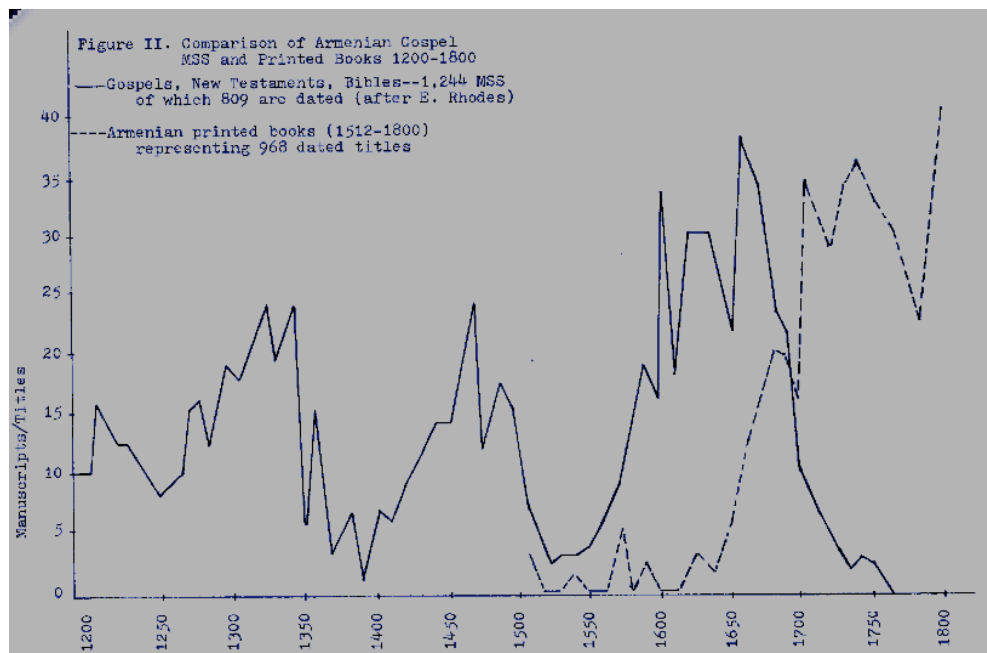
Fig. 2. The Rise in Printing Titles and the Drop in Copying Gospel Manuscripts.

eighteenth century thanks to the aggressive publication of Gospels, New Testaments, Hymnals, and other religious titles in Constantinople and among the Mekhitarists in Venice that copying begins its sharp decline and the manual production of Gospels and other texts necessary for the liturgy and other religious purposes stops. This suggests again an evolution rather than a revolution. The reasons for this are many, but perhaps the most important is that the cheap or free labor of monastic scribes was still more economical to the church than the purchase of expensive printed books from distant Constantinople or the more distant Europe.

III. The Real Revolutions

Nevertheless, revolutions in domains other than production can be postulated by the change, at times radical, in factors associated with the making, the design, the reading, and the subject of books. Among these changes or contrasts there are a number of formal transformations that this paper will try to conceptualize. These include **the**

geographical change of production, no longer in Armenia but in a diaspora, essentially European; **the** environment of production, no longer the religious confinement of the rural monastery with clergymen as scribes, but now an urban one of laymen as creators; **the** structure and format of the book, from titlepage to subject matter; **the** content embracing ever more secular subjects as supplement to traditional Christian texts and eventually dominating them.

A. Geography. The manuscript-book from the early fifth century invention of writing to the fifteenth century was almost entirely copied in historic Armenia. Though it is true that among preserved manuscripts a number were written abroad, Adrianople in 1007, Egypt in 1099, a group in thirteenth-century Italy, and medieval Cilicia, but was not the latter an extension of historical Armenia or a part of it, with its own kings, dynasties, army, and network of monasteries? Starting in the fourteenth century, the Crimea becomes a major center of book production, spilling over in the following century into central Europe, especially Poland and the Ukraine as Armenians moved inland and west after the Genoese lost Khrim to the Ottomans and Tatars. But these are exceptions and together, including manuscripts produced in Western Anatolia towns, make up less than one or two per cent of hand-written codices.

B. Environment. Though the majority of those engaged in Armenian printing in its first two centuries were clergymen of various rank, this was not the rule in the general rise of printing in Europe. though it is true that Protestant and Catholic authorities were powerful factors in the development and the control of the new industry. The actual work itself was carried out in printing shops or offices usually operated by laymen. Furthermore, the printing offices were not parts of monasteries, but in most cases occupied commercial premises or simply set up in private houses.   In Armenia, book production was entirely the prerogative of the monastery and royal scriptoria at

precise historical moments. After the fall of the Cilician kingdom, manuscripts were exclusively produced by the clergy. The formation of a corps of secular scribes in late medieval and renaissance Europe, due in part to the rise of the great universities like Paris and Bologna, had no counterpart in Armenia. Perhaps this was due in part to the relatively small number of secular texts copied in the scriptoria compared to the vast production of such non-religious works in the West and earlier in Byzantium.

In this sense book production was revolutionary. It moved from the monastery, a religious environment, usually in a rural, often isolated, setting, to the print shop, usually functioning on secular terms and almost always in an urban, city environment. The exception in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are the Mekhitarists in Italy and Austria, but also church authorities in Lvov and New Julfa, but even in these cases, though they were monastic establishments, they were firmly establish in important urban centers.

C. Structure and Format. As mentioned above, in first two hundred and fifty years of the Armenian press, the look of a bound manuscript or a printed book was the same. Since the codex, a book with folded pages, was the form used in printing, the folding of the print sheets into quires or gatherings and their sewing into a single block was identical to the method of preparing a completed and bound manuscript, following the folio, quarto, octavo and even smaller formats employed long before Gutenberg. Thus, it should be no surprise, though today perhaps strange that in monastic libraries printed books were arranged with manuscripts on the shelves; furthermore, it was not uncommon to find a printed text bound together with a manuscript, especially when treating a similar subject. Though printing result in mass production of texts, uniform binding techniques only developed centuries later, in the Armenian case in the late eighteenth century. I have suggested elsewhere that to the scholar or clergyman, there

was a certain casual indifference to whether the desired text was a manuscript or one set in type.

Once the book was open, the difference was clear and in some respects dramatic. Printing created uniformity in page layout, text size, pagination, and perhaps above all, the formation of the titlepage. Already in the incunabula (books printed up to 1500), the decorative titlepage appeared, eventually with an elaborate architectural structure within which was incorporated the title, often very elaborate, as well as the names of the author, patron, and printer and the place and date of publishing, information that was traditionally included in a scribal colophon or memorial at the end of manuscripts. Armenian printers borrowed this new motif as they did the whole idea of a titlepage and a pre-titlepage from the West. Often this arcade is crowned by a rotunda, especially among presses in Constantinople, which must be that of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

Fig. 3. 1590, de Bry's Grand Voyages, Frankfurt titlepage; B. 1660. Nerses Shnorhali, *Yisus ordi***, Venice; C. 1717, Chrysostom,** *Commentary on St. John***, Constantinople.**

Such a system resulted in major changes to some texts, for instance the Gospelbook, the most copied manuscript by far in the Armenian tradition. In the first two centuries of Armenian printing Gospels were rarely printed, except as incorporated in the Bible of 1666. Thus the carefully developed formula for the layout of text and illustrations for the Gospelbook was of little use to the layout chosen by printers of the

first books. Once Gospels were printed in large numbers in the eighteenth century, finally putting a stop to monastic copying, they were modified in layout.

From the inception of the codex in the fourth century Gospels began with a an elaborately decorated concordance, a set of ten canon tables, with vertical columns of numbers of the various episodes in the narrative arranged so the reader could conveniently find the equivalent of a narrative that appeared in more than one Gospel. The first two pages of a Gospel manuscript began not with a title, but with a letter placed under an arcade like the canons themselves in which the inventor of the system, Bishop Eusebius of Palestine, explains their use. The printing of the Gospels, whether as part of a New Testament or a complete Bible, resulted in the elimination of the Eusebian Letter and Canon Tables, almost from the beginning. The earliest separately printed full Gospel of 1680 by Michelangelo Barboni in Venice, had no Canon Tables, but curiously five years latter, the same printer issued another Gospelbook, using the same engravings of the four Evangelists as before, but this time adding the Eusebian Letter and Canon Tables. This seems to be the only example of in a printed volume, probably because already in the edition of 1680 and those that followed there was an elaborate index of episodes at the end of the volume. The idea of the titlepage was so compelling that occasionally later manuscripts copied them from printed books; it was also common for a monastic copyist to use as his exemplar a printed version of a text rather than an earlier manuscript.

Fig. 4. A. Manuscript, Th. Aquinas, *Summa*, vol. 2, with manuscript Titlepage Designed for Printing, MS M118, copied in Venice 1729; vols. 1 and 3 were printed by the Mekhitarist of Triest in 1788. B. Mxit'ar of Sebastia, *Dictionary*, Printed Titlepage, Venice, 1749.

    D. Content. The content or the texts that nourished the new technology changed

little, at least in the first three centuries, from the practice of manuscript production. The

majority of texts were religious, predominantly liturgical. There were of course secular

books right from the start among the little, pocket-size volumes of Hakob Meghapart

and then in the following century practical publications for merchants and other travels:

Ephemerides, Almanacs with information on weather forecasting, books for converting

currencies, calculating distances, and a great deal of pseudo-science, like astrology. In

the hundred years starting just after the mid-seventeenth century, there was an

aggressive campaign to publish historical works, among which was the first history

issued during the lifetime of the writer, that of Arak'el of Tabriz in Amsterdam, 1669.

Yet, we should not forget that in the centuries-old manuscript tradition, beside the

Gospels, Hymnals, Psalmbooks, Lectionaries, and the like, there were commentaries and

translations of Greek and Syrian church fathers, and later, Latin ones, followed in

number by the rich tradition of purely Armenian historiography as well as poetry. In that respect, little was to change until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when the majority of books were on non-religious subjects, as was the case everywhere. Let us not forget that though Arak'el's history was published, his contemporary Simeon of Poland wrote a remarkable travel account of his two trips to Armenian communities throughout the diaspora and western Armenia, which was only published three centuries after his death.

IV. Illustrations in the Earliest Imprints.

Miniaturists and Armenian printing. The texts for early Armenian printings were with few exceptions those already existing in the manuscript culture. This is obvious for the Gospels and other liturgical texts, but also so for early translation from other languages. The predominant source for printing material was earlier Armenian manuscript texts, whether religious or not.   Therefore, it is a surprise that this was not true for the illustrations, which adorned these same books. It seems that there was no mobility of monastic miniaturists and illuminators from the world of the manuscript to that of the printed book, no recycling so to speak from the long and artistically successful history of illustrated manuscripts. The exception is the Constantinople printer and engraver Grigor Marzvanec'i, who was trained as a copyist and illuminator at the Amrdawla Monastery of Bitlis. His woodcuts are found in books that he and others published from the 1690s to the 1730s and even after 1734. when he died or simply retired. Though Grigor developed a very characteristic style, he was inspired by the both the iconography and manner of early European engravers; he often directly copied the work of Christoffel Van Sichem II, whose woodblocks were used in the popular Oskan Amsterdam Bible of 1666-1668 and the Hymnal of 1664.

The result was that the style and iconography of the illustrations of early Armenian printed books was entirely European, mostly Dutch. Some of this western art made its way through printing into still active Armenian scriptoria as evident by the style in certain Gospels but also on other media of seventeenth-eighteenth century art. Seemingly a parallel, but independent, tradition in Armenian miniature painting

Fig. 5. Annunciation, Gabriel with Fleur de lys wand with the Virgin before a Lectern: A. Christoffel van Sichem (cVs), Dutch New Testament, Antwerp, 1646. B. van Sichem, Voskan Bible, Amsterdam, 1666. C. Triptych, Cilician Museum, Antelias, early 19th cent.

flourished during these same centuries. Miniaturists, especially in the second half of the seventeenth century, often turned to medieval Armenian masters of the Cilician period rather than to the new approach to religious iconography available to them through European engravings. Was this an intentional refusal to break with Armenian tradition, a rejection of the West, perhaps perceived as heterodox, as Catholic or Protestant?

Artistic borrowing and exchange are as old as art itself. Grigor Marzvanec'i's art was in turn freely copied by artists after him, for instance on the silver binding of 1798 on a Gospel book printed in Constantinople two years earlier; the monumental Nativity with the Adoration of the Magi is copied from a folio edition the Synaxaire (*Yaysmawurk'*) published and illustrated by Grigor in 1706 and reprinted twice.

Fig. 6. Nativity with Adoration of the Magi: A. Grigor Marzvanecʻi, Synaxaire, Constantinople, 1706/1730/1733. B. Silver binding, lower cover, 1798 on Gospelbook printed in 1796, Constantinople.

In the final analysis it is hard to say if these various interconnected evolutionary processes represent a revolution. In political terms, the French or American Revolutions, for example, are almost instantly perceived as such, but in matters of cultural change, modification in modes of production such as that of book-making is only labeled "revolution" often long after the fact and usually in a figurative sense. Call it what you will. That there were radical modifications in how books were created and used is clear. Whether or not the concomitant changes in Armenian society, that is, all the innovations that make up what we call the modern or pre-modern period -- the structure and role of the church, the introduction of new ideas, the disruption in class structure -- were actually consequences of the adventure of printing is question complicated enough to merit another conference.