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Considerations on Oskan Erevants'i's Printing Activity

On October 13, 1668, in Amsterdam, Oskan Erevants'i finished printing the first Armenian Bible, the *Astvatsashunch'*, in the workshop that had recently been founded by Matt'eos Tsarec'i, known as Surb Etchmiadzin ew Surb Sargsi zoravar. Useful information about the process of printing the Bible can be found in its colophon, which was composed by Oskan.¹ This masterpiece is called by Armenians "the queen of all early publications"² and it represents a dream come true, since the Armenian catholicos³ had strived to print the Bible for a long time. The whole process was very complex in itself, but there were also other factors that Oskan had to consider in order to be able to complete his task, among them the need for funding and suitable type and engravings, the complex and thorny relations with the Catholic authorities, and a certain amount of opposition from the Catholic Armenians. However, in the end, his efforts were rewarded. In 1673, the vicar of the catholicos, Sahak Vardapet, sent Oskan a letter, asking him to print a *Mashtots'*, that is, a book of ordination, but also praising him for having printed the Armenian Bible.

Let it be known about your magnanimity that [when] we heard about your tribulations and sorrows, my heart burned with great pain, remembering how great an occasion was [printing] that edition [of the Bible] and how many people rejoiced and [that] our people were illuminated, while you remained disconsolate and forsaken.⁴

The aim of this study is not to discuss the whole process of printing the Bible but to focus on two aspects: the cultural and religious context and the illustrations of the Oskanyan Bible.

Oskan couldn't print the Bible in Armenia due to the difficult conditions there, as the country was caught between the Ottomans and the Safavids and suffered greatly from the wars that were raging at the time. His only option was to come

1 "Hishatakaran," in *Astvatsashunch'*, Amsterdam, 1666, p. 834.

2 N. Gharibian, A. Sahakian, *The Iconography of the Oskanian Bible*, Yerevan, 2018, p. 19.

3 Plural of "catholicos", the patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

4 P. Ananean, "Oskan vardapeti namakanin", *Bazmavep*, 124/11–12, 1966, p. 302.

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to Europe, hoping to receive help from Rome or the Armenian merchants, who were already established in many port cities.⁵ However, he had to be careful, as the Catholic Church would not easily approve the printing of the Armenian Bible, and without its approval the books could have been prohibited.⁶ If a discussion of the cultural and religious context helps us understand how difficult it was for Oskan to navigate through a complex world marked by confessionalization, and how he succeeded in overcoming the challenges placed before him by the Catholic authorities, an analysis of the illustrations of the Armenian Bible constitutes a case study on the Armenian artistic borrowings from the West and how enduring they proved to be, as the style of the illustrations was copied by later printers.

In 1512, a certain Hakob Meghapart printed in Venice the first Armenian book, *Urbat'agirk'*, which translates as *The Book of Friday*. We do not know much about Hakob and why he chose to print Armenian books. We have only one colophon printed in his second book, *Pataragatetr*, a liturgical book, where we find his name.⁷ Hakob's books can be considered a transition from manuscripts to printed books, as they share various characteristics with traditional Armenian manuscripts, and they were not as standardized as the books printed in Europe. For example, every copy of *Urbat'agirk'* is unique.⁸ As for their content, they are popular books; therefore, Hakob decided to print works that would be valuable merchandise.⁹ As the printing press was a novelty, he decided to copy the design of the manuscripts and use it in his books, so that his printed works would be as prestigious as

5 For the uninterrupted presence of Armenians in Italy from the beginning of the Middle Ages to the 18th century, see C. Mutafian, "Les Arméniens en Italie et les débuts de l'imprimerie", *Bazmavep*, 170, 2012, p. 119–134. According to Sebouh David Aslanian, the Armenian diaspora came into being in the context of the Celali rebellions and especially the wars between the Ottomans and the Safavids. In 1604, Shah Abbas I deported many Armenians to Iran, where some of them founded New Julfa, Isfahan's Armenian neighborhood. As many New Julfa Armenians were merchants, they subsequently moved to important port cities like Amsterdam, Venice, Livorno, Marseille, and Madras. There, they started to accumulate wealth and became involved in the printing of Armenian books, acting as patrons; see S. D. Aslanian, *Early Modernity & Mobility. Port Cities and Printers across the Armenian Diaspora, 1512–1800*, New Haven/London, 2023, p. 1–3.

6 According to the "Decree on the edition and use of sacred books", only the Vulgate edition could be printed in Catholic lands; see Cardinal John Farley, *Dogmatic Canons and Decrees. Authorized Translations of the Dogmatic Decrees of the Council of Trent, the Decree of the Immaculate Conception, the Syllabus of Pope Pius IX, and the Decree of the Vatican Council*, New York, 1912, p. 10–13.

7 *Pataragatetr*, Venice, press of Hakob Meghapart, 1513, p. 83.

8 A. Ouzunian, "Ուրբաթագիրք (Venise, 1512): du manuscrit au premier livre imprimé", *Bazmavep*, 170, 2012, p. 84, 91.

9 M. Pehlivanian, "La révolution typographique en Europe et l'exemple arménien (1512-1800)", *Bazmavep*, 2012, 170, p. 112.

manuscripts.¹⁰ Hakob Meghapart printed five books between 1512 and 1513, when his activity stopped. According to Rafael Ishkhanyan, two Italian brothers, Paulo and Lelio Macsimi, convinced the Venetian authorities to forbid Hakob to continue his printing activities.¹¹

A few decades later, another Armenian, Abgar Tokhatets'i, founded a printing press in Venice. This time, there is more information about the printer. According to a letter written in 1562 by his son, Sultanshah, the Catholicos Mkhitar I Sebastats'i sent Abgar to Rome to renew the ancient alliance (*Dashanc' t'ught'*) between Pope Sylvester and the first Armenian Christian king, Trdat III,¹² to find out whether the Europeans would help Armenian immigrants, and to prepare the way for the visit of the catholicos from Cilicia and Etchmiadzin.¹³

Mkhitar I Sebastats'i was following in the footsteps of another Armenian catholicos, Step'annos V, who had sent in 1550–1551 an embassy to the Holy See that also visited Venice, where the doge was informed that the Armenians were waiting for his arrival to save them: “We know that our salvation and freedom must start with the wisdom of the lords of Venice”.¹⁴

In 1565, after spending some time in Rome, Abgar went to Venice, where he printed two books, a Synaxarion and a Psalter, in order to convince the Ottomans that his embassy to the Holy See did not have political motivations but cultural ones.¹⁵ In 1567, Abgar moved to Constantinople with his printing press, and there he published four books.¹⁶ Mikael Nishanian considers that Abgar's embassy

10 R. Ishkhanyan, *Hay girk'ē*, Yerevan, 1981, p. 30.

11 Ishkhanyan, *Hay girk'ē*, p. 27–28.

12 *Dashanc' t'ught'* is a medieval forgery presenting an imaginary alliance between Constantin I and Pope Sylvester, on one hand, and Trdat III and Gregory the Illuminator on the other. According to it, the Christian world was divided between the Christian rulers. In his letter to Pope Pius IV, Catholicos Mkhitar explains his view of this alliance: “We expect, strongly hope, and ask that if you renew our decree, which the blessed and worthy of memory pontiff Silvestro and the Holy Constantine, the emperor, granted to our king Trdat and to the Holy Gregory, our first catholicos, in the old times, and if you send us a renewal of the old friendship between us, there we will be one flock and one shepherd. And the time has arrived to do this, so that we shall be freed by you from this captivity”; cf. A. V. Palchean, *Patmwt'yun kat'oghike vardapetut'ean i Hays ew miut'ean ēnd Hromeakan ekeghec'woy i P'lorentean syundhodosi*, Vienna, 1878, p. 152.

13 “Sult'anshahi namakē”, in V. Zardarean (ed.), *Hishatakaran (1512–1933). Hay erevelineru kensagrut'ywnnerē, lusankarnerē, dzeragirnerē, grut'ywnnerē, ewln.*, vol. 5, Cairo, 1939, p. 11–12; K'. Korkotyan, *Hay tpagir girk'ē Kostandnupolsum (1567–1850 t't')*, Erevan, 1964, p. 5.

14 G. Alishan, *Hay Venet*, Venice, Publishing House of the Mxitarist Order, 1896, p. 329.

15 Korkotyan, *Hay tpagir girk'ē Kostandnupolsum*, p. 7.

16 Korkotyan, *Hay tpagir girk'ē Kostandnupolsum*, p. 10, 15.

to Rome also had the purpose of receiving the authorization for printing the Armenian Bible.¹⁷

In the following century, more and more petitions were sent by Armenian catholicoi and patriarchs to Rome, asking for the permission to print the Armenian Bible, but with no effect.¹⁸ Hovhannes Ankyurats'i, who worked as a translator for the Venetian representative in Smyrna, came to Rome in 1637 and petitioned the pope, hoping to receive the approval to publish the Bible. He threatened that in the case of a negative answer, he would print it in a heretical (i.e., Protestant) country.¹⁹ However, his threats did not produce any result and he moved to Venice, where he printed a Psalter in 1642, and the famous poem written by Nerses Shnorhali *Hisus Ordî* the next year.²⁰ As the Holy See did not authorize the printing of the Armenian Bible, in 1638, the primate of New Julfa, Khachatur Kesarats'i, decided to establish a press in Isfahan, hoping that one day he would be able to print the Holy Scriptures. Nevertheless, after printing the first book, a Psalter, Khachatur realized that he did not possess the necessary knowledge and tools to print the Bible. Therefore, he sent one of his disciples, Hovhannes Ktrhshents, to Europe, to learn more about printing.²¹

Hovhannes left New Julfa in 1639 and first went to Venice, then to Rome, and in the end to Livorno, where he decided to print a Psalter, since he was away from the censorship of the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide. However, information about him reached Rome, as the engraver who worked with him, Johannes Hermanchircher, was a spy for the Catholic authorities and, according to his reports, Hovhannes wanted to go back to New Julfa and establish an Arabic printing press there.²² In May 1644, Hovhannes finished printing the Psalter and left Europe for his hometown, but when he arrived, he discovered that Khachatur Kesarats'i had died, and his efforts to continue the work of his master were not

17 M. Nicheanian, "Dialogue et rivalités entre l'Église arménienne et Rome au XVII^e siècle: le cas d'Oskan Erevantsi et la Bible arménienne d'Amsterdam", in A. Girard, B. Heyberger, V. Kontouma (eds.), *Livres et confessions chrétiennes orientales. Une histoire conecetée entre l'Empire ottoman, le monde slave et l'Occident (XVI^e–XVIII^e siècles)*, Turnhout, 2023, p. 246. The Catholicos Azaria I of Cilicia sent a manuscript of the Bible to Pope Gregory XIII, asking him to print it, as there were very few copies in Armenia; see Aslanian, *Early Modernity & Mobility*, p. 411, n. 22.

18 Ishkhanyan, *Hay girk'ê*, p. 48.

19 According to Karabet Amadouni, Hovhannes Ankyurac'i did not threaten the Catholic authorities, but warned them about the possibility of printing the Bible in a Protestant country; K. Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i ew ir zhamanakê", Part I, *Bazmavep*, 132, 1974, 3–4, p. 265.

20 *Hisus Ordî* is a poem that retells the Bible. See Ishkhanyan, *Hay girk'ê*, p. 49.

21 Aslanian, *Early Modernity & Mobility*, p. 124–130.

22 Aslanian, *Early Modernity & Mobility*, p. 131–132. I am pursuing this investigation, hoping to find more information on this early project of opening an Arabic press in Iran.

welcomed by the local community. He moved to the old town of Julfa, Nakhijevan, in 1650, where he soon died.²³

A great step towards the printing of the Armenian Bible was represented by the foundation of an Armenian printing press in Amsterdam in 1660 by Matt'eos Tsarets'i. A priest from the province of Tsar in Armenia, Matt'eos went to Venice in July 1657, but he did not find the proper type for the Holy Scriptures and thus had to move to Rome. However, there he met with the opposition of the Catholic authorities. He asked the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide the permission to either use the Armenian type of Hovhannes Ankyurats'i, or to buy a new series of type, but he did not receive any answer. Moreover, the authorities forbade all craftsmen from working with Matt'eos. Thus, seeing that he would not have any success in Rome, in 1658 he moved to Amsterdam, where he met with the engraver Christoffel van Dyke, who created type and matrices that could be used for a common book, as well as for a Bible. In 1660, when van Dyke finished approximately 100 pieces of type, Matt'eos Tsarets'i started to print the poem *Hisus Ordi*, but he did not live long enough to see it completed. When Matt'eos had arrived in Amsterdam, he had not had the necessary money for founding a printing press, so he had taken out loans. Now, when he was on his deathbed, the creditors came to him asking for their money. Salvation came in the person of Avedis Ghlijents'i, an Armenian merchant who paid Tsarets'i's debts and became the administrator of the press after the Armenian priest died. However, Avedis did not know how to operate the press, so, he called his brother, Oskan Erevants'i, to help him.²⁴

Between 1974 and 1976, Karapet Amadouni published a series of articles in the journal *Bazmavep* about the life of Oskan Erevants'i based on documents from the Archivio Storico de Propaganda Fide and the Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, which had previously attracted little interest from historians, or none at all. From his studies, we can draw a clear picture of Oskan's life and activity.

Oskan Erevants'i was born in 1614 in New Julfa, where he went to school until 1629, when he moved to Etchmiadzin. There, he met in 1633 Paolo Piromalli, a Dominican whose task was to oversee the Catholic missions of Armenia. Thus, Oskan became the (unofficial) apprentice of the Catholic missionary. The close relations between the two were not agreeable to the Armenian clergy, and Oskan was going to suffer from his connections with the Catholic Church.²⁵ According to one of

²³ Aslanian, *Early Modernity & Mobility*, p. 132–135.

²⁴ Rich information is provided by Matt'eos and Avedis in the colophon of the book they printed, *Hisus Ordi*, Amsterdam, 1661, p. 600–614. See also Aslanian, *Early Modernity & Mobility*, p. 154–163; Ishkhanyan, *Hay girk'ě*, p. 58–59.

²⁵ K. Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erewants'i ew ir zhamanakě", Part II, *Bazmavep*, 133, 1975, 1–2, p. 6–9.

Piromalli's later testimonies, in 1634, Oskan decided to enter the communion with Rome, thus becoming a Catholic.²⁶

One of Piromalli's main aims was to open a Catholic school in Armenia. According to the Papal Bull *Sancta Mater Ecclesiae* of 1584, Pope Gregory XIII announced the plan to build a school for Armenians in Rome, which was founded later by Pope Urban VIII as part of the Collegio Urbano. Simeon Lehats'i mentions that he saw the Armenian school when he went to Rome in 1611.²⁷

However, it was not enough, and in 1629 the Catholicos Movses III Tat'evac'i, together with other clerics and merchants, sent a letter to the Holy See asking the pope to open an Armenian college in Rome, a matter that the Catholic authorities started to study, to search for the best place to build it, whether in Italy or somewhere else, where it would be easier for Armenians to attend.²⁸ Paolo Piromalli sent petitions to Rome arguing that the option of opening a college in Armenia should be taken off the table, as the opposition of the Catholicos P'ilipos I was very strong and he could appeal to the Safavid authorities to close it.²⁹ As Armenia did not prove welcoming to a Catholic school, Oskan Erevants'i went to Poland in 1638, together with other Armenians who were eager to study, as the Armenian bishop there, Nikolas Torrosowicz, had entered into communion with Rome in 1630. They were accompanying Paolo Piromalli, who went there to mediate the conflict between Torrosowicz and his congregation, as the Polish Armenians did not accept the Union with the Catholic Church.³⁰ According to a letter written by Oskan Erevants'i in 1638 in Constantinople, where he spent some time before departing to Poland, wherever he went, he suffered various persecutions for preaching the Catholic faith. Therefore, he asked for the protection of the Holy See.³¹ It was mandatory to move to a place where he would not be persecuted for his Catholic faith.

Oskan converted to Catholicism early in his life, in 1634, when he was 20 years old, and formed a strong friendship with Paolo Piromalli, who had been sent to Armenia to coordinate the missionary efforts there. Piromalli himself did not have an easy life: a short time after he came to Armenia, he was thrown in prison and

26 K. Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i ew ir zhamanaké", Part VI, *Bazmavep*, 134, 1976, 1–2, p. 34.

27 Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i", Part II, p. 39–40.

28 Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i", Part II, p. 40–41.

29 Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i", Part II, p. 44.

30 Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i", Part II, p. 50. For the question of the Union between the Polish Armenians and Rome and its impact on the relations between the Catholicos See of Etchmiadzin and the Holy See, see Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i ew ir zhamanaké", Part III, *Bazmavep*, 133, 1975, 3–4, p. 257–287.

31 Ananean, "Oskan vardapeti namakanin", p. 293–294.

stayed there for 22 months.³² Most likely after the Catholic missionary was freed, Oskan told him that he wanted to be a Catholic. However, being a Catholic in Armenia at the time was not easy, all the more so since Oskan was interested in studying, while the ecclesiastical hierarchy did not want to let young people spend their time learning instead of working.³³ Of course, Piromalli was too zealous, and it seems that he did not understand the difficult situation of the Armenians. As he wrote in a letter addressed to the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, "Let the Pope know that Armenia is destroyed. The brothers³⁴ are few: ignorant, without a moral order, and riotous; they sell the sacraments and always complain".³⁵ This intransigent behavior was not welcomed by the locals. Oskan understood that if he wanted to study he had to go abroad, and he left Armenia for Poland. But when he came back, he faced persecution from the Armenian clergy. However, he stood fast and even continued to preach the true faith.

After several years spent in Poland, Oskan returned to Armenia, where he became in 1641 abbot of the Monastery of Saint Sargis of Ushi, a position that he held until 1662. During this period, his relations with the Armenian clergy worsened, and he was even in danger of losing his title of *vardapet* and his ecclesiastical position.³⁶ Oskan's relations with the catholicos improved when his nemesis, Simeon Jughayets'i, died in 1658, and Hakob IV decided to reopen the negotiations with the Holy See, also ordaining Oskan as bishop.³⁷ According to information provided by François Pallu, bishop of Heliopolis and apostolic vicar of Tonkin, who passed through Armenia on his way to Vietnam, Oskan was indeed a Catholic, and the Catholicos Hakob acknowledged the pope as the head of the Church and even wanted to travel to Rome.³⁸ In this context of an opening towards Rome, when Matt'eos Tsarets'i died in 1661, Oskan was sent by the Catholicos Hakob IV to continue his printing activity and, if possible, to publish the Armenian Bible.³⁹

32 Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i", Part II, p. 18–21.

33 Piromalli's letter of 22 April 1632 states that he wanted to gather as many Armenian students as possible and start teaching them, but the archbishop of Nakhijevan considered that money was more important than studying: "Because these Christians are already learned and holy; we need money, not knowledge", cf. Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i", Part II, p. 13.

34 Members of the Armenian Uniate congregation.

35 Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i", Part II, p. 11.

36 K. Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i ew ir zhamanakē", Part V, *Bazmavep*, 134, 1976, 1–2, p. 14–15, 22.

37 Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i", Part V, p. 27–29; Nichanian, "Dialogue et rivalités entre l'Eglise arménienne et Rome au XVII^e siècle", p. 259.

38 H. Berberian, "Ėjmiatsni vank'ē 1662-in", *Hask*, 1950, 8–10, p. 271–273, *apud* Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i", Part VI, 1976, p. 30.

39 Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i", Part VI, p. 32.

A passage in one of Oskan's letters addressed to the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide explains why he decided to leave Armenia and how important it was to publish the Armenian Bible. Writing on October 29, 1668, two weeks after he finished printing the Holy Scriptures, he presents a grim picture of the cultural life in Armenia.

[...] Because our people do not possess knowledge and are not wisdom lovers like yours are, and because of that [they] do not ask for books to read, [an activity] that is the mother of knowledge, but they do not need them. Although a few people, one in a thousand, are seekers of knowledge and need books, that too [is] not with passion and in a complete manner, especially that [even if] he has a deep love [of knowledge], because of the absence of anyone to feed the fire within him day after day, it is extinguished and fades away, [so that] darkness and sheer ignorance make it fruitless. Moreover, the books of the *vardapets* of the Church have disappeared from our people, to the end that [they] cannot be found elsewhere, and even if they are found with certain people, they cannot understand the meaning of the words, because some of our *vardapets*, by misguided words, have unsettled the minds of our [people], establishing their words [as the true ones]. Therefore, our ancestors' knowledge was obliterated from [the mind of] our people and the words of the ones at the end endure as the true words, because the words of the old doctors of theology are lost.⁴⁰

Oskan presents his itinerary in the colophon of the Armenian Bible. In September 1662, he left Armenia and traveled to Europe, intending to print the Bible. After a troubled journey, he arrived in Livorno, where he found no one to help him with his task. Hoping to be more successful, he went to Rome, but there too, it was to no avail. Thus, he returned to Livorno,⁴¹ where he finally succeeded in convincing three Armenian merchants to help him: Step'annos, Petros, and T'eodoros. They signed a contract and the first two of them promised to send the profits from the selling of the Bible to Etchmiadzin, while the last one agreed to donate half of its profits to the Armenian church in Jerusalem, and the other half to the Monastery of Saint Sargis of Ushi.

Having received the necessary funds to print the Bible, Oskan went to Amsterdam, where he continued to print the books that had been prepared by his brother, Avetis Ghlijents'i. However, as the type was not suitable to print the Holy Scriptures with it, he ordered a new set and printed a *Sharaknoc'*, a book of hymns, in order to try them. Satisfied with the result, he then started printing the Bible, which was finished on October 13, 1668.⁴²

40 S. Chemchemean, "Oskan vardapet Erewants'ii norahayt namaknerē", *Bazmavep*, 147, 1989, 1–4, p. 181.

41 Here, Oskan met with his brother, Avetis Ghlijents'i; cf. Amadouni "Oskan vardapet Erewants'i", Part VI, p. 32–33.

42 "Hishatakaran", in *Astuatsashunch'*, 1666, p. 833–834.

When Oskan arrived at Livorno in 1663, he had in his possession a manuscript of the Bible.⁴³ He moved to Rome in the autumn of the same year, and after a few months, he sent a request to the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, asking for authorization to print the New Testament. The Propaganda Fide approved his request on one condition, namely, to find someone to examine the printed version, to check for mistakes, but as no one could be found, the project did not materialize.⁴⁴

Oskan remained in Rome, while the Congregatio was unsure about the purpose of his visit. He told them that he wanted to print some books, and on June 21, 1664, he received a letter of recommendation that was to be handed to the apostolic legate in Brussels, who was informed that the Armenian bishop would come there to print some books “for the service of his Catholic people.”⁴⁵ According to a letter dated 1670, Oskan also received the right to print the Bible.⁴⁶ Knowing the Catholic authorities’ position towards the printing presses of the Netherlands, Oskan did not tell them that he intended to print the Bible there, when he asked for money to cover his expenses.⁴⁷ Although Oskan was a true Catholic,⁴⁸ he understood that in the context of confessionalization, he should not disclose his main objective to the Catholic authorities, an attitude that can be considered wise. While the Propaganda Fide believed that Oskan would print books that would benefit the Catholic Armenians, in the colophon of the Bible we read that the Armenian bishop and the three merchants who agreed to support his endeavor would pay the necessary expenses until the printing would be completed, “for the profit of our nation and the benefit of the Holy See”.⁴⁹ Caught between two worlds, the Armenian and the Catholic, Oskan decided to reconcile them: he was a true Catholic, but he did everything he could to help his people.⁵⁰ In the words of Mikaël Nïchanian, “De fait, comme Mekhitar [de Sébaste], l’évêque Oskan semblait souhaiter concilier, réconcilier, voire à unir les deux Églises, leurs doctrines, leurs traditions et même leur clergé.”⁵¹ He hoped that one day the Armenians would be in communion with Rome, and declared that he

43 Chemchemean, “Hay tpagrut’yuně ew Hřom”, *Bazmavep*, 146, 1988, 1–4, p. 64.

44 Chemchemean, “Hay tpagrut’yuně ew Hřom”, p. 64–65.

45 SOCG, vol. 223, fol. 224, *apud* Chemchemean, “Hay tpagrut’yuně ew Hřom”, p. 65.

46 Ananean, “Oskan vardapeti namakanin”, p. 299.

47 Chemchemean, “Hay tpagrut’yuně ew Hřom”, p. 67; Amadouni, “Oskan vardapet Erevants’i”, Part VI, p. 36.

48 Johannes van Neercassel, the papal vicar in the Netherlands, confirmed the veracity of Oskan’s Catholicism; cf. Amadouni, “Oskan vardapet Erevants’i”, Part VI, p. 44.

49 “Hishatakaran”, in *Astuatsashunch’*, 1666, p. 833.

50 In the letter of 1668 addressed to Pope Clement VIII, Oskan mentioned that his nation was still under the Turkish yoke; Ananean, “Oskan vardapeti namakanin”, p. 294–295.

51 Nïchanian, “Dialogue et rivalités entre l’Église arménienne et Rome au XVII^e siècle”, p. 245.

had preached the Catholic faith in many places of Armenia: “[...] io, conosciuto la verità Cattolica, subito ho cominciato propagarla in diversi luoghi, anzi nella stessa residenza del nostro Patriarcha, così in publico come in secreto; da che ne ho patito molti disprezzi e supportato persecutio da un luoco all’altro”.⁵²

In 1668, Oskan sent a copy of the Bible to the pope and the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide. In a letter addressed to Clement VIII, the Armenian bishop presented his work as having two objectives: “Ad altissimi Dei gloriam, Fidei Catholicae propagationem et nostrae Armeniacae Nationis emolumentum”.⁵³ However, it was not an easy task for Oskan, as he complained that he was separated from his people to such an extent that they did not accept him at liturgy and even despised him.⁵⁴ At the end of the Bible, the Armenian bishop wrote in a message to the reader that he had made certain changes to bring the Armenian Bible as close as possible to the Vulgate and that he did so only where it was possible.⁵⁵

In a letter he sent to the secretary of the Congregatio, we read that he translated from Latin the books of Joshua, the fourth chapter of Ezra, and the preface that Saint Jerome had written for the Vulgate.⁵⁶ However, in the letter addressed to Clement VIII in 1668, Oskan informed the pope that he could not modify the Bible too much, otherwise the Armenians would not accept it, and he would have invested so much money and effort to no avail.⁵⁷

The Congregatio de Propaganda Fide had a spy in the Netherlands, Johannes van Neercassel, archbishop of Utrecht, who sent letters informing the Catholic authorities about Oskan’s activity there. Except for the first reports, which did not provide reliable information, van Neercassel wrote to his superiors that the Armenian bishop was acting at the orders of the catholicos, that he was an orthodox Catholic, and that he was confronted with many problems. Therefore, he even encouraged the Propaganda Fide to provide him with money. Moreover, he presented Oskan’s disciples and proposed them as future candidates for the Collegio Urbano. The Congregatio agreed to send some money to Oskan, on condition that his Bible was checked so that no error would creep inside it.⁵⁸

Although the Catholic authorities were carefully watching Oskan and his activities, as Karapet Amadouni emphasizes, the Propaganda Fide did help the

⁵² Ananean, “Oskan vardapeti namakanin”, p. 299.

⁵³ Ananean, “Oskan vardapeti namakanin”, p. 294.

⁵⁴ Chemchemean, “Oskan vardapet Erewants’ii”, p. 183.

⁵⁵ “Aṙ ěnt’ercōghsd”, in *Astuatsashunch’*, 1666, p. 831.

⁵⁶ Chemchemean, “Oskan vardapet Erewants’ii”, p. 181–182.

⁵⁷ Chemchemean, “Oskan vardapet Erewants’ii”, p. 181.

⁵⁸ Amadouni, “Oskan vardapet Erewants’i”, Part VI, p. 43–45.

Armenians in their process of printing the Bible.⁵⁹ Moreover, one of the main obstacles on the path of printing the Bible was the hesitation of the Armenians who arrived in Rome, as they chose to eschew a straight attitude towards the Holy See.⁶⁰

Soon after printing the Bible, Oskan left Amsterdam and went to Paris, where he received a royal decree from Louis XIV granting him the right to establish a press in Lyon or Marseilles. However, he did not head to any of these cities but traveled to Livorno, where he met with his disciple, Karapet Andrianats'i, who had travelled to Italy to bring two copies of the Bibles to the pope and the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide. Oskan printed three more books in the Italian city, and in 1672 he moved to Marseilles.⁶¹

The Armenian bishop offered some explanations regarding his departure from the Netherlands. In 1668, while still in Amsterdam, Oskan asked the Congregation to offer him a place to stay, as he wanted to come to Italy because he suffered more persecution in the Netherlands than in the Ottoman lands and he became suspicious of everyone, whether Armenian or foreign.⁶² According to a letter of 1670, afraid that the catholicos could send another vardapet who would print heretical books, he left Amsterdam for a Catholic country.⁶³ Oskan's mention of a menace of printing heretical Armenian books in Amsterdam seems odd: he came to Europe by order of the catholicos, and it seems they were on good terms. Maybe because of causes unknown to us, Oskan's relations with Hakob IV turned cold. But there is also the possibility that the Armenian bishop used this excuse to convince the Catholic authorities about his commitment to the Holy See. Perhaps he reacted to some criticism that was formulated against him by Armenians in Italy.

Having received the Bible in 1668, the Propaganda Fide asked two Armenian Catholic missionaries, Basilio Barsegh and Hovhannes Holov, to translate the New Testament into Latin. They translated only parts, including the colophon and the dedication to the catholicos, as well as some phrases where Oskan explained why he had decided to print the Bible in Amsterdam and not in Rome.⁶⁴

At the same time, these two missionaries were in conflict with the Armenians in Livorno, as their efforts to convert the community to Catholicism led to a wave of antipathy. The local Armenians had asked the catholicos to excommunicate them.⁶⁵ Barsegh and Hovhannes had the support of an Armenian merchant, Gaspar, who

59 Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i", Part I, p. 273.

60 Amadouni, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'i", Part I, p. 274–275, n. 35.

61 Aslanian, *Early Modernity & Mobility*, p. 193–197.

62 Chemchemean, "Oskan vardapet Erevants'ii", p. 182.

63 Ananean, "Oskan vardapeti namakanin", p. 299.

64 Chemchemean, "Hay tpagrut'yunē ew Hrom", p. 72.

65 Chemchemean, "Hay tpagrut'yunē ew Hrom", p. 73.

had paid their tuition to the Collegio Urbano and was even involved in the affair of Oskan's Bible. Gaspar sent three letters to the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide in which he denigrated the catholicos, defended the two missionaries, and reported that the Armenian press in Amsterdam printed books that were full of mistakes. It was not by chance that Oskan moved to a Protestant country: he wanted to print heretical books, in a heretical country. Oskan himself could not be a trustworthy man since he could be bought with money.⁶⁶ Perhaps the Armenian bishop was already informed of these accusations. Therefore, in his letter of 1670, he tried to tone down these accusations by implying that Oskan wanted to move to a Catholic country in order to save his press from printing heretical books.

Oskan Erevants'i could not have printed the Armenian Bible without enough money to cover all expenses. And money was, perhaps, the main reason that led him to leave Amsterdam. According to one of Oskan's assistants, T'eodoros Erëts' Hamazaspean, the three merchants who agreed to support Oskan's mission gave him money only in the beginning. While he was printing the Bible, the Armenian bishop ran out of money and had to take loans from a merchant living in Amsterdam. As the danger of bankruptcy was looming, the Armenian bishop decided to escape his creditors and moved to France.⁶⁷

After he established his printing press in Marseilles, Oskan's activity came under the close watch of the Catholic censors,⁶⁸ but his press managed to survive his death, which occurred in 1674, and even continued to print books until 1717.⁶⁹

Oskan Erevants'i had to navigate a complex web of political, cultural, and religious relations to be able to print the first Armenian Bible. As I have discussed above, he was a Catholic but also an Armenian, and he tried to combine both elements of his identity: he obeyed the pope but honored Armenian culture. This combination of elements from Western and Armenian civilizations can also be seen in his masterpiece, the Armenian Bible. Oskan adopted various European artistic elements so that his Bible could be in line with the books that were printed at the time. Thus, he had a strong and long-lasting influence on the subsequent typographers who printed new editions of the Holy Scriptures.

In the colophon of the Bible, Oskan noted that he ordered a new set of typefaces, as the one used by Matt'eos Tsarets'i was not suited for printing the Holy Scriptures, and he used the new type for the first time to publish the *Sharaknots'* (*Collection*

⁶⁶ Chemchemean, "Hay tpagrut'yuné ew Hrom", p. 74–75.

⁶⁷ Aslanian, *Early Modernity & Mobility*, p. 169–170.

⁶⁸ For the activity of the Catholic censorship regarding the "Holy Ėjmiatsin and St Sargis Zoravor" press, see Aslanian, *Early Modernity & Mobility*, p. 190–225.

⁶⁹ Ishkhanyan, *Hay girk'ë*, p. 71.

of *Armenian Hymns*). However, he did not say anything about the engravings that were used to illustrate the Bible. To trace the history of the woodcuts used by Oskan, we must analyze the book that was printed in the same press by Matt'eos Tsarets'i. *Hisus Ordi* was published in 1661, after Matt'eos's death, through the efforts of Avetis Ghlijents'i,⁷⁰ and contains 99 illustrations that are signed with the initials C. V. S., which correspond to Christoffel van Sichem.⁷¹ The *Sharaknots'* also contains 49 illustrations marked with the same initials.⁷² The fact that the engravings are linked to biblical subjects represents additional proof that the main mission of the press in Amsterdam was to print the Holy Scriptures.⁷³

Christoffel van Sichem came from a Dutch family of well-known engravers. Christoffel van Sichem the Elder (1546-1624) was the first member of his family to work as an engraver. His son, Christoffel van Sichem the Younger (1581-1658), followed in his father's footsteps and continued to work as an engraver and illustrator.⁷⁴ Most of the illustrations printed in the Oskanyan Bible had been published also in two other previous works, *Bibels tresoor* (1646) and *Biblia sacra* (1657).⁷⁵

Why did Matt'eos Tsarets'i decide to buy the woodcuts from Christoffel van Sichem? Certain Armenian researchers consider that they were affordable and accessible.⁷⁶ However, there is also another possible reason, which is related to the complex ties between Europe and the East in the 17th century.

The Armenian community in New Julfa started to build a few churches there soon after the foundation of the colony in 1606. The Cathedral of the Holy Savior (Vank), the Church of Bethlehem, and the Church of Saint Menas were built between 1606 and 1650.⁷⁷ The paintings of these churches were most likely executed by European, not local artists. The Safavid shahs of the 17th century hired European artists to work for them, and, undoubtedly, the Armenians encountered them.⁷⁸ Otto Meinardus's analysis of the painting of the Last Judgement in the Cathedral

70 See the colophon of the books in N. Shnorhali, *Hisus Ordi*, Amsterdam, 1660-1661, p. 600-614.

71 N. A. Oskanyan, K. A. Korkotyan, A. M. Savalyan, *Hay girk'ë 1512-1800 t'vakannerin*, vol. 1, Erevan, 1988, p. 36.

72 Oskanyan, Korkotyan, Savalyan, *Hay girk'ë 1512-1800 t'vakannerin*, 1, p. 47.

73 A. Enok'yan, "Oskan Erevants'u tpagir grk'eri patkeragrut'yunë ev dra azdets'ut'yunë hay grk'arvestum", in H. T'amrazyan, V. Devrikyan, K. Matevosyan (eds.), *Oskan Erevants'i champ'ordut'yun hay tpagrut'yan k'arughinerov*, Erevan, 2016, p. 77-78.

74 N. Gharibian, A. Sahakian, *The Iconography of the Oskanian Bible*, Erevan, 2018, p. 23.

75 A. Enokyan, "Oskan Erevants'u Astuatsashnch'i patkerazardman hamakargë", in G. Tër-Vardanean, *Oskanean Astuatsashnch'i hratarakut'ean 350-ameakë*, Etchmiadzin, 2018, p. 51.

76 Enokyan, "Oskan Erevants'u hamakargë", p. 53.

77 O. Meinardus, "The Last Judgement in the Armenian Churches of New Julfa", *Oriens Christianus*, 55, 1971, p. 182.

78 Meinardus, "The Last Judgement in the Armenian Churches of New Julfa", p. 183.

of the Holy Savior reflects a Western influence (Fig. 1). Paradise is depicted as a tower with a gate, while in front of it there are twenty members of the Armenian clergy and four women, a scene that the author considered to be a copy of Stephen Lochner's *Last Judgement*.⁷⁹ Among the models that Meinardus considered a source of inspiration for the artists who painted the walls of the churches in New Julfa were also the woodcuts of Christoffel van Sichem.⁸⁰ Another scholar, T. S. R. Boase, had formulated the same opinion earlier, in 1950.⁸¹ The woodcuts of the illustrations used by Oskan to print the Bible were already available to the illustrators in New Julfa, who had used them in a manuscript in 1645.⁸²

According to some reports of 1638, the Dutch East India Company was ready to send to Persia a certain Barend van Sichem, whose paintings had already arrived at the royal court in Isfahan, and the shah had liked them.⁸³ Undoubtedly, he was a member of the same family as Christoffel van Sichem. He died in Bandar Abbas in 1639.⁸⁴ As the painting of the Cathedral of the Holy Savior was finished no later than 1664,⁸⁵ the conclusion is that the Armenians in New Julfa knew about the artistic works of the van Sichem family before the printing of the Bible. Thus, there is the possibility that Matt'eos Tsarec'i knew about Christoffel van Sichem's woodcuts when he bought them. I would go even further and say that maybe, given the popularity of this family in Iran, he wanted to be sure that the Bible that was going to be printed would be appreciated by the Armenians of New Julfa.

Oskan Erevants'i's decision to use Christoffel van Sichem's woodcuts in his Bible had important consequences on Armenian art in general.⁸⁶ One of the reasons for his long-lasting legacy is that the Dutch engraver copied works of art by other European artists, such as Albrecht Dürer, Hendrick Goltzius, Maarten van Heemskerck, Virgil Solis, Philip Galle, Marcello Venusti, and Leandro Bassano.

79 Meinardus, "The Last Judgement in the Armenian Churches of New Julfa", p. 186.

80 Meinardus, "The Last Judgement in the Armenian Churches of New Julfa", p. 193–194.

81 T. S. R. Boase, "A Seventeenth-Century Typological Cycle of Paintings in the Armenian Cathedral at Julfa", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 3, 1950, 3–4, p. 323–327.

82 Enokyan, "Oskan Erevants'u hamakargë", p. 53–54.

83 Enokyan, "Oskan Erevants'u hamakargë", p. 54.

84 M. J. Bok, "European Artists in the Service of the Dutch East India Company," in M. North, T. Kaufmann (eds.), *Mediating Netherlands Art and Material Culture in Asia*, Amsterdam, 2015, p. 198.

85 J. Carswell, *New Julfa. The Armenian Churches and Other Buildings*, Oxford, 1968, p. 30, n. 1, *apud* Meinardus, "The Last Judgement in the Armenian Churches of New Julfa", p. 184.

86 Enokyan, "Oskan Erevants'u hamakargë", p. 52.

Some of the woodcuts bear their initials.⁸⁷ In this way, many Armenians became acquainted with European art.

Many illustrations from *Hisus Ordi* and *Sharaknots'* are present as well in the Armenian Bible, but there are also cases where Oskan decided to use other woodcuts, which were also made by Christoffel van Sichem. For example, in *Hisus Ordi* there are two illustrations to represent the moment when Noah brings all animals onto the ark, but only one also appears in the Bible.⁸⁸ Other illustrations, such as Jacob wrestling with the angel,⁸⁹ Moses on Mount Sinai,⁹⁰ or Moses breaking the tablets of the Ten Commandments,⁹¹ are not reproduced in the Oskanyan Bible using the same woodcuts.⁹² The situation is the same for some illustrations from the book *Sharaknots'*. The episode where God orders Adam not to eat from the forbidden fruit does not appear in Oskan's Bible.⁹³ Another important difference is related to the portrait of Saint John the Evangelist (Fig. 2): the *Sharaknots'* and the Bible use two different woodcuts.⁹⁴ Other illustrations fall into the same category: the Prodigal Son⁹⁵ and the Crucifixion.⁹⁶ There is also a difference between *Hisus Ordi* and *Sharaknots'*: the latter has an explanation under every illustration. The different uses of the illustrations and the presence of explanations in *Sharaknots'* represent additional proof that these two books also had the purpose of a test, where Oskan could experiment with the type and illustrations.

The illustrations in the Oskanyan Bible are also present in other editions of the Bible, like the one printed in 1705 in Constantinople by Petros Latinats'i. There is no information about him other than what is written in the colophon of the Bible: he printed the book in 1705 and used a copy of Oskan's Bible without changing

⁸⁷ Enokyan, "Oskan Erevants'u hamakargë", p. 51–52; Gharibian, Sahakian, *The Iconography of the Oskanian Bible*, p. 24.

⁸⁸ Shnorhali, *Hisus Ordi*, p. 20–21. The woodcut on p. 21 was used by Oskan to illustrate this episode in the Bible.

⁸⁹ Shnorhali, *Hisus Ordi*, p. 37.

⁹⁰ Shnorhali, *Hisus Ordi*, p. 53.

⁹¹ Shnorhali, *Hisus Ordi*, p. 57.

⁹² See *Astuatsashunch'*, 1666, p. 7, 177. The episode where Jacob wrestles with the angel is not illustrated in the Bible.

⁹³ *Sharaknots'*, Amsterdam, 1664–1665, p. 130.

⁹⁴ *Sharaknots'*, p. 105; *Astuatsashunch'*, 1666, p. 430. In this case, in the illustration from *Sharaknots'*, besides the initials C. V. S., two other letters appear: *fe*. Maybe this woodcut was made by another member of the van Sichem family.

⁹⁵ *Sharaknots'*, p. 156. This illustration, which shows the Prodigal Son working as a pig keeper, does not appear in the Bible.

⁹⁶ *Sharaknots'*, p. 269. See *Astuatsashunch'*, 1666, p. 426.

anything.⁹⁷ The book has few illustrations, but they are also marked with the initials C. V. S., meaning that Petros used the same woodcuts as in the case of the Oskanyan Bible, with two exceptions: an illustration that presents the moment when God orders Adam to abstain from eating the forbidden fruit,⁹⁸ which he might have taken from the *Sharaknots*; the other case is represented by the portrait of Saint John the Evangelist, which is different from the illustration of the other Evangelists.⁹⁹ It could imply that Petros did not have this woodcut and had to improvise (Fig. 3, 4). Besides these slight differences, Petros Latinats'i's Bible is just a copy of Oskan's.¹⁰⁰ The same illustrations as the ones from the Oskanyan Bible can be seen in the edition printed by Mkhitar Sebastats'i, but this time copper plates were used.¹⁰¹

As mentioned above, the Oskanyan Bible is considered the queen of Armenian early printing. What Oskan Erevants'i accomplished in such difficult circumstances left a lasting mark on Armenian history. In the first part of this paper, I presented the cultural and religious context of the 17th century and the way Oskan succeeded in navigating a complex web of relationships marked by confessional allegiances. But, perhaps, the tragic part of Oskan's life happened when he came to Europe and the Catholic authorities did not fully trust him. As he declared in his letters, he sought comfort and protection from them, knowing that he had suffered rejection from his people.¹⁰² However, even though he faced many difficulties, he completed his goals. It is important to emphasize that his greatest adversaries were the two Armenian missionaries from Livorno, Basilio Barsegh and Hovhannes Holov: because they were in a conflict with the local Armenians, their scrutiny of Oskan's Bible was not objective at all, and their accusations were entirely false.

The first printed edition of the Bible is a masterpiece from every point of view. Its influence lasted for a long time: the editions of Petros Latinats'i and Mkhitar Sebastats' are considered reprints of the Oskanyan Bible.¹⁰³ Oskan spent a fortune to publish it. A major difference between this Bible and the other books that were printed between 1512 and 1800 is represented by their print runs. Usually, Armenian typographers did not print more than 500 to 1,000 copies of one book, except for

⁹⁷ *Astuatsashunch'*, Istanbul, press of Petros Latinats'i, 1705, p. 407.

⁹⁸ *Astuatsashunch'*, 1705, p. 6.

⁹⁹ *Astuatsashunch'*, 1705, p. 416.

¹⁰⁰ Vahan vardapet Teryan, "Astvatsashnch'i hayeren tpagrut'yan patmutyunits", *Ėjmiatsin*, 9, 1960, p. 13.

¹⁰¹ Enokyan, "Oskan Erevants'u hamakargë", p. 52.

¹⁰² Ananean, "Oskan vardapeti namakanin", p. 293–294, 296–298.

¹⁰³ V. Nersesian, *The Bible in the Armenian Tradition*, The Getty Museum, 2001, p. 34, *apud* Enokyan, "Oskan Erevants'u Astuatsashnch'i patkerazardman hamakargë", p. 52.

the Oskanyan Bible, which was published in around 3,000 copies.¹⁰⁴ The study of the circulation of cultural products between Europe and the East is useful on the one hand to understand the importance of networks, as Sebouh David Aslanian emphasized,¹⁰⁵ and on the other hand to understand how the first printed edition of the Bible paved the way for Western influences on the Armenian art. As Dickran Kouymjian noted, the process of adopting European artistic influences was not limited to printing but also spread to vestments and religious items.¹⁰⁶ Undoubtedly, Oskan's Bible opened a new era in the history of Armenian art.¹⁰⁷

104 Pehlivanian, "La révolution typographique en Europe et l'exemple arménien (1512–1800)", p. 99–100.

105 Aslanian, *Early Modernity & Mobility*, p. 148–189.

106 D. Kouymjian, "Between Amsterdam and Constantinople: The Impact of Printing on Armenian Culture", in M. Dimitrieva, B. Kovacs, S. Troebst (eds.), *Die Kunst der Armenier im östlichen Europa*, Köln/Weimar/Vienna, 2014, p. 24.

107 Enokyan, "Oskan Erevants'u hamakargë", p. 57.



Fig. 1: *The Last Judgement*, fresco, 17th century, Cathedral of the Holy Savior, Vank, Isfahan, Iran (Public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Catedral_Vank_Isfahan%3%A1n,_Ir%C3%A1n,_2016-09-20,_DD_106-108_HDR.jpg).



Fig. 2: *John the Evangelist in the Sharaknots*, Amsterdam, 1664-1665/1712?, Library of Congress, Washington DC (Public domain, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/amedscd.2005554925/?sp=105&r=-0.95,-0.055,2.9,1.508,0>).





Fig. 4: *The Holy Evangelists in the Astuatsashunch*, Amsterdam, 1666, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, African and Middle Eastern Division, Armenian Rarities (Public domain, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/amedscd.2003550072/?sp=1071&r=-0.037,0.29,1.242,0.646,0>).

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