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Mystic Contemplation of the Eusebian Canon Tables from Lindisfarne to Armenia

Abstract: This chapter examines the reception of the artwork adorning the Eusebian Canon Tables in the British Isles and medieval Armenia. Taking the Lindisfarne Gospels and Armenian commentaries by Step'anos of Siwnik' and Nerses Šnorhali as its focus, the chapter highlights a number of overlapping exegetical themes that appear in these two traditions, despite their distinct artistic modes of expressing them. In addition, these two manuscript cultures share the assumption that the visual domain can convey theological and historical truth and be used to theorise the nature of the worshiping community in which the gospel codex plays a central ritualised role. It is argued that this shared understanding of the artwork of the Canon Tables is due their inheritance of a common patrimony from Late Antiquity evident already in the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea himself, most consequently the shift away from artistic naturalism towards mystic contemplation.

1 Introduction

As anyone who has spent any time at all with gospel manuscripts from the eastern Christian world will know, these codices are usually accompanied by a prefatory paratext known as the Eusebian Canon Tables. The Canon Tables apparatus comprises three elements: first, an introductory letter providing instructions for the use of the system (the so-called *Letter to Carpianus*); second, a subsequent series of ten tables of numbers highlighting similar and unique material across the four canonical gospels; and third, marginal notation throughout the pages of the gospels demarcating discrete units of text that are keyed to the enumeration in the aforementioned tables. As I argued in a 2019 monograph, the Canon Tables were a remarkable milestone in the scholarly study of the fourfold gospel and exemplify a broader revolution in information technology that occurred in Late Antiquity.¹ Although certain elements of the Eusebian system certainly had precedent, no

1 Crawford 2019. The classic study of Canon Tables is Nordenfalk 1938. More recent studies include O'Loughlin 2017; Strøm-Olsen 2018; Bausi, Reudenbach and Wimmer 2020a; Wallraff 2021; Coogan 2022.

other comparable paratext existed for any body of literature in the ancient world and, in less than a century, it had inspired further developments, specifically a similar cross-referencing system for the Pauline corpus.² In fact, the paratextual apparatus was so successful that it seems to have been translated into virtually every language into which the gospels themselves were translated, ensuring its spread throughout Eurasia and Africa.

The wide distribution of the Canon Tables apparatus renders it a fascinating topic for scholarly scrutiny, since one can trace developments in this tradition as it was adapted to local contexts across this wide geographic expanse and was appropriated by later scribes and artists throughout the centuries. The pages containing the Eusebian paratext are frequently decorated with a range of lavish motifs, including architectural frames and varieties of flora and fauna.³ Although naturally there is some variation, Canon Table illumination displays a striking number of similarities across linguistic traditions. For example, the opening series of folios containing the *Letter to Carpianus* and the numeric tables is often concluded by a depiction of a round temple, known in the scholarly literature as a *tholos* or *tempietto*, a feature that appears in Latin, Greek, Armenian, and Georgian manuscripts, although the greatest number are found in Gə'əz.⁴ In a separate study, I have argued that the function of the *tholos* image within the Eusebian paratext can be illuminated by considering the way real sacred architecture was being used symbolically as a cognitive tool by Eusebius and others in Late Antiquity.⁵ More specifically, Eusebius's own *ekphrasis* on the basilica at Tyre, delivered in 315, provides a model for how one could also use the architectural elements of an illuminated manuscript page as a way of contemplating abstract theological concepts.⁶

The word 'could' in the last sentence is crucial, for we do not have unambiguous evidence from Eusebius's own fourth century that anyone was viewing the Canon Tables in this manner. However, the situation is different if we move forward a few centuries. The present paper thus aims to extend that earlier argument by taking a comparative approach to two manuscript traditions that each developed a distinctive and sophisticated interpretation of the artwork adorning the Canon Tables. I have chosen to focus upon the Lindisfarne Gospels, created in

² Lang and Crawford 2017. Similarly, in the sixth century Victor of Capua adapted the Eusebian paratext to function as a tool for analysing a Latin Diatessaron. Cf. Crawford 2020.

³ On the use of prefatory, especially architectural images in ancient books, see Elsner 2020.

⁴ Gnisci 2020.

⁵ Crawford 2023.

⁶ Eusebius's oration at Tyre is also considered in relation to the Canon Tables in Strøm-Olsen 2018.

Anglo-Saxon England in the early eighth century, and the tradition of medieval Armenian commentary on the Canon Tables which also seems to have emerged by the early eighth century. The reason for choosing these two is, first, that they present unambiguous evidence of symbolic interpretation of Canon Table artwork occurring at roughly the same time, and, second, that they come from regions far removed from one another, with one being the western-most edge of the Christian world at the time and the other a thriving Christian culture sitting at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. A comparison of these two traditions will, I hope, help us to see the Lindisfarne Gospels, an extremely well-known manuscript, in a fresh way, while also recognising familiar themes in the comparatively less studied world of Armenian manuscript illumination.⁷ I will examine each of these traditions in turn and will then conclude by proposing that, despite their differences, they share a common understanding of Canon Table artwork that stems from an important shift in the conception of art that occurred in Late Antiquity.

2 The Lindisfarne Gospels

The evidence I will consider from these two manuscript traditions differs in an important way. In the case of the Armenian manuscripts, we have explicit commentary on Canon Table artwork. In contrast, with respect to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, there is, so far as I know, no text that explicitly mentions the Canon Tables, either in terms of their use as a reading aid or their artwork, despite the fact that Anglo-Saxon gospels include the Eusebian apparatus as a staple feature.⁸ Nevertheless, close scrutiny of the ornamentation of Canon Tables created in the Anglo-Saxon tradition reveals a sophisticated attempt to use the artwork to communicate symbolic truth, and this is especially true for the Lindisfarne Gospels.⁹

7 Cf. Tilghman and Bongianino 2021, 45: ‘The discipline of comparative art history [...] can bear fruit in two different ways: by revealing what is familiar in objects that are unfamiliar, and by renewing scholarly interest in artefacts that have become subject to habitual seeing’. Similar to the present study, Benjamin C. Tilghman and Umberto Bongianino examine contemporaneous but geographically remote manuscript traditions, namely insular gospels and Kufic Qur’āns.

8 The situation is different, however, with respect to the Hiberno-Latin tradition which not only produced elaborately decorated Canon Tables but also numerous texts that comment specifically on the Canon Tables as a reading aid, though not their artwork. Cf. Mullins 2001; Crawford 2019, 195–227.

9 On the Lindisfarne Gospels, see Brown 2003 and Gameson (ed.) 2017 and on the wider cultural milieu, see Brown 2016. On the Latin translation of the Eusebian apparatus, see Wallraff 2021, 148–153.

Scholars have been analysing the Lindisfarne Gospels for decades attempting to decode the hidden meanings contained in such abundance in its decorative scheme.¹⁰ Many of these messages are conveyed via the use of numerical patterns, in keeping with a wider interest in biblical numerology that appears as a defining feature of early insular exegesis. Biblical numerology was already a common topic in the patristic exegetical tradition, but insular scholars intensified this focus to an almost obsessive degree, dwelling at length on figures such as the six days of creation, the dimensions of Solomon's temple, the generations of Christ, the four gospels, the number of chapters in the gospels, and so on.¹¹ The relevance of numbers for understanding the artistic scheme of the Lindisfarne Gospels has been elucidated most recently in a 2017 study by art historian Heather Pulliam who examines the numerical patterns evident in the Canon Tables artwork in light of themes found in insular exegetical works.¹²

The overarching argument of Pulliam's study is that the decoration of the Canon Tables in the Lindisfarne Gospels 'conveys meaning through both numeric and mathematical forms of expression, portraying divine perfection through measure and proportion'.¹³ After highlighting the 'stark and repetitive' ornamentation of the Lindisfarne tables, which stands out against the vibrant diversity of motifs evident in the wider corpus of Anglo-Saxon gospel books, she proposes that Lindisfarne, too, is in fact concerned with the theme of variety or diversity but conveys this theme through 'a restricted number of patterns which are subject to endless variation' rather than through the 'wide range of motifs' employed by comparable manuscripts.¹⁴ Close scrutiny of Lindisfarne reveals that its artist Eadfrith had an 'obsession with rhythm and pattern' evident above all in his use of numbers.¹⁵

10 Foundational is the study of Bruce-Mitford 1960, 176–185. See also more recently Brennan 2017. Tilghman 2017 pushes this line of analysis in a fascinating new direction by arguing that the manuscript itself theorises its own making as an emergent process in which meaning is not a product of human creativity but a divinely given reality.

11 This feature of insular exegesis is well documented. See e.g. Richardson 1984; O'Reilly 1998; Werner 1997, 35–38; Anlezark 2010; Tilghman 2017, 12–16.

12 Pulliam 2017. Cf. Tilghman 2017, 12–13 who similarly notes Pulliam's important study.

13 Pulliam 2017, 112–113.

14 Pulliam 2017, 119.

15 Pulliam 2017, 119.

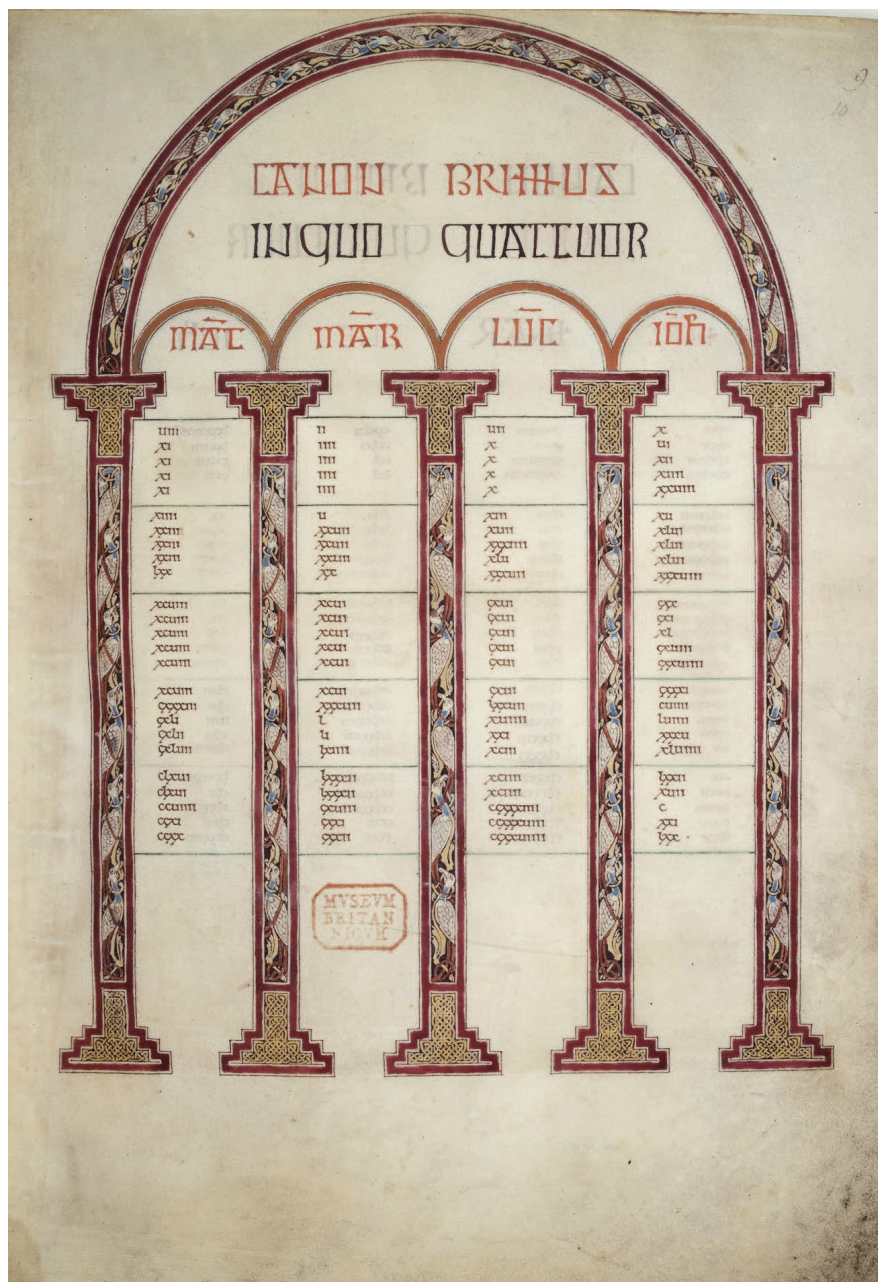


Fig. 1: Canon 1 in the Lindisfarne Gospels (eighth century); British Library, Cotton Nero D. IV, fol. 10^r (© The British Library Board).



Fig. 2: Canon 10 in the Lindisfarne Gospels (eighth century); British Library, Cotton Nero D. IV, fol. 17^v (© The British Library Board).

The numbers that appear most frequently in Lindisfarne's decoration scheme are forty-two and twelve.¹⁶ For example, on five separate pages, the architectural frames housing the Canon Tables contain precisely forty-two creatures (fols 10^r, 10^v, 11^r, 16^v, 17^v) (see Fig. 1), while the frames on two other pages have forty-two red knots and forty-two yellow ones (fols 11^v, 12^r). All five of the pages with forty-two creatures and one of the pages with forty-two knots also use the number twelve by placing a dozen of the forty-two items in the spanning arch at the top of the frame. The number twelve is also evident in another page that has four columns with a dozen red beasts and a dozen blue ones (fol. 13^v), which is followed by a page with columns containing twelve blue rectangles (fol. 13^v); twelve beasts also appear on three later pages (fols 15^v, 16^r, 17^v) (see Fig. 2). Finally, square numbers appear frequently: the sequence of Canon Tables occupies sixteen pages; one page has three separate motifs repeated sixteen times (fol. 13^v); another two pages have sixteen knots in their spanning arches (fols 15^v, 16^r). Other pages contain repetitions of four, nine, twenty-five, and one hundred. Of course, some repetition of numbers is bound to occur naturally and coincidentally. However, as noted by Pulliam, a comparison of the Lindisfarne Gospels with other Anglo-Saxon Canon Tables reveals a far higher degree of consistency in the use of repeated numbers. This implies the artist is aiming for 'a purposeful and ingenious arrangement of patterns to convey the perfection of divine space and place'.¹⁷ The idea that these numbers appear in the decorative scheme by design rather than randomly is supported by the fact that other aspects of the manuscript's artistic scheme reveal a similar degree of intentionality and sophistication, such as the use of symmetry in the carpet pages, which suggests a kind of three-dimensional modelling one would expect of a 'pure mathematician in the making'.¹⁸

Why might these numbers be significant? The answer to this question, as Pulliam shows, is revealed when one considers exegetical literature in the West from Augustine to Bede. Of course, Christian authors were adept at finding a wide range of significance in virtually any number they might come across. However, the dominant theme that emerges from this particular cluster of numbers is the Church as the City of God, comprised of many diverse members united by Christ and his sacrifice, as foreshadowed by the history of Israel. For example, the num-

¹⁶ For what follows, see the summary table on Pulliam 2017, 120 which lists the various number of items that appear on each page and their sums.

¹⁷ Pulliam 2017, 120–121.

¹⁸ Brennan 2017, 161. Similarly, Richardson 1984, 46 concluded that close analysis of the use of numbers in early Irish art reveals 'a vast world of ideas where measurements, numbers and motifs were used with specific intentions'.

ber forty-two probably is an allusion to the generations of Christ as recorded by the Gospel of Matthew, a theme that also appears in the artwork of the Book of Durrow.¹⁹ As for the number twelve, it recalls the description of the heavenly New Jerusalem in John's Apocalypse, which has twelve gates inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel with twelve angels standing beside the gates and twelve foundations with the twelve names of the Apostles written on them. Similarly, the use of the number twenty-four may be an allusion to the twenty-four elders who surround the divine throne in Revelation 4:4.²⁰ Again, the emphatic repetition of the number twenty-eight on fol. 11^v (columns containing twenty-eight yellow and twenty-eight red knots plus an arch containing fourteen yellow and fourteen red knots) is plausibly a reference to the command that the curtains for Israel's Tabernacle be twenty-eight cubits long (Exodus 26:1–2), with the Tabernacle understood as a prefiguring of the Church.²¹ The use of square numbers likely evokes God's command in 1 Kings 5:17 that Israel build the Temple with squared stones as its foundation, a passage that Bede interpreted allegorically as referring, first, to the prophets and Apostles but secondarily to all Christians who make up the Church as the stones of a building.²² Similarly, the heavenly Jerusalem is said to be a square in Revelation 21:16, a description that Bede again took as a reference to the moral state of the members of the Church.²³

Finally, other aspects of the Lindisfarne decoration seem intended to highlight Christ as the one who unites the diverse members of the Church. On five folios, the spanning arch filled with creatures has, at its apex, two creatures who meet with bodies that intersect to form an X (fols 10^r, 10^v, 11^r, 14^v, 15^v).²⁴ Similarly, on multiple pages of the series, red and blue elements within the parallel columns alternate to form a series of X's across the page, giving the impression that 'the X's are woven into the very fabric of the pages' design'.²⁵ Given the frequency of the Chi symbol in insular art and exegesis, this motif of repeated X's, both in the spanning arch and in the columns, would have been understood by viewers as a

19 So Pulliam 2017, 121–122. Cf. Werner 1997, 35–36 who proposed that the forty-two animals that appear on fol. 192^v of the Book of Durrow are meant to evoke the generations of Christ.

20 Pulliam 2017, 122.

21 Pulliam 2017, 122.

22 Pulliam 2017, 128, referring to Bede, *De templo*, 1.4.1–1.4.5 (tr. Connolly 1995, 14–17).

23 Pulliam 2017, 129, referring to Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypsis*, 3.37 (tr. Wallis 2013, 265), Revelation 21:16 and 21:17.

24 Pulliam 2017, 124–125.

25 Pulliam 2017, 126–127. Pulliam says this is the 'only design characteristic that occurs with absolute consistency on every page of the Lindisfarne Canon Tables' (p. 126), but it seems to me that a few pages lack this feature: fols 10^r, 12^v, 17^v.

symbol of Christ, the head or cornerstone of the Church who ‘resolves the opposing movement and thrust, sealing the parts into a single, interdependent structure’.²⁶

It seems unlikely to be a coincidence that the numbers that figure prominently in the decoration of the Lindisfarne tables are also highlighted in Latin exegetical literature and especially Bede’s corpus. Rather, the illuminated pages of this famous manuscript are designed to communicate the same message presented in more explicit form in the exegetical tradition. Moreover, the medium is a crucial component of the message, since its abstract method of presentation, via repeated numbers that must be decoded, points towards the order and harmony in the cosmos, a prominent theme in the western exegetical tradition going back to Augustine. Moreover, the fact that it is the Church that is evoked by the biblical associations of these specific numbers suggests that the Church, like the cosmos, derives from a divine plan that can likewise be discerned through a process of contemplation, which this artistic scheme is hoping to elicit from the viewer. This is an incredibly rich and sophisticated decorative programme that invites the reader to consider their own identity as a member of the Church, with scriptural exegesis serving as the key to unlocking its hidden message. Yet, as stunningly original as the Lindisfarne tables are, they nevertheless present numerous parallels with the Armenian tradition we will now turn to.

3 The Canon Table commentaries by Step’anos Siwnec’i and Nersēs Šnorhali

In the reception history of the Eusebian Canon Tables, the Armenian tradition stands out as unique by virtue of the fact that it developed a distinct tradition of symbolic or mystical commentaries on the artwork adorning the paratextual apparatus. A collection of thirteen of these commentaries was published in 1995, though thus far only two have been translated into English.²⁷ For the present study, I will restrict my focus to these two since they are more accessible. They are attributed to Step’anos of Siwnik’, who was active in the early eighth century, roughly at the same time the Lindisfarne Gospels were being made in Northum-

²⁶ Pulliam 2017, 126.

²⁷ Lazaryan 1995. The two texts were translated into English by James R. Russell and published as an appendix in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 206–211. On these texts, see further Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 166–176; McKenzie and Watson 2016, 141–144; Crawford 2019, 228–284. On the Armenian translation of the Eusebian apparatus, see Wallraff 2021, 155–158.

bria, and Nersēs Šnorhali, who served as the Catholicos of the Armenian Church in the mid twelfth century. The commentary by Step'anos is only partially preserved and breaks off midway through the text, so a consideration of the commentary by Nersēs allows us to gain a more complete picture of this exegetical tradition. The two commentaries follow the same method of highlighting a range of artistic features of the Canon Tables' decorative scheme and offering a symbolic interpretation of them for the viewer/reader. These include specific motifs like species of birds and plants, the colour palette used, and the number of times certain elements appear. Moreover, both authors structure their exposition as an ordered progression through the ten pages and an overarching interpretation is given for each of the pages, focusing above all on its architectural frame, termed in Armenian a *xoran*. Much could be said about these fascinating texts, but for the present purpose, I want to draw attention to the fact that the dominant theme of both expositions is the same as what we have already seen with respect to the decorative scheme of the Eusebian apparatus in Lindisfarne, namely the Church made up of diverse members united by their common relation to Christ and pre-figured in Israel's scriptures. To illustrate this claim I will examine, first, the theme of variety; second, that of sacred space and sacred history; and, finally, Christ and his sacrifice.

The opening sentence of Step'anos's text alludes no less than three times to the theme of diversity or variety in the decorative scheme of the Canon Tables, mentioning the 'varicolored houses of the ten *xorank*', with their 'different colors and with paints of varying hues'.²⁸ Nersēs similarly highlights this theme early in his exposition, commenting on the 'luxurious herbs and multicolored flowers and various inventions' with which the 'compilers and founders of the Gospel illustrated (it)'.²⁹ Later he draws attention more specifically to the 'multicolored aspect of the columns', and the 'flower sculptures of multicolored hue of the ten mystical *xorank*' (see Fig. 3).³⁰ Moreover, our authors highlight the theme of variety not only as an aspect of the artistic design but also with reference to abstract, theological truths as well. For Step'anos, the fourth *xoran* 'shows the face of the churches (which are) united in their thoughts but with various arches'.³¹ Nersēs, for his part, looks forward to a day when 'all the forever changing churches unite and become one', and he speaks of believers 'gathering flowers from the meadows of manifold

28 Step'anos, *Comm. xor.*, 1 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 206).

29 Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 4 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 208).

30 Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 11, 17 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 209, 211).

31 Step'anos, *Comm. xor.*, 5 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 206).

virtues'.³² In addition, Nersēs acknowledges the diversity amongst the divine revelation in the Old and New Testaments with its diverse human authors, but asserts that they nonetheless have a 'unity and intimacy' and that the ancient prophets and the Apostles of Christ were 'preachers of a single religion'.³³ Thus, these two authors see variety in the decorative scheme itself, as well as in the worshipping community it signifies and in the history of that community stretching back to Israel's scriptures.

The theme of sacred space throughout sacred history is the key structuring element in these two texts. Nersēs, for example, assigns distinct interpretations to each of the ten *xorank'* that collectively cover the entire scope of redemptive history, beginning with the eternal divine being and proceeding on to the heavenly angels, the Garden of Eden, Noah's ark, Abraham's sacrifice, the two sections of Moses's Tabernacle, Solomon's Temple, and finally the Church. The common feature of these decoded symbolic references is their function as sites of the divine presence at which creation could encounter and worship its Maker at varying moments throughout history, a point that Nersēs himself highlights when he states 'there is the form of an altar in each of the *xorank'*' and 'it is the tabernacle that unifies' the various spaces throughout the sequence.³⁴ Moreover, Nersēs is explicit that the last item in the series is the most significant and, indeed, that which gives meaning to the entire preceding sequence: 'the holy and Catholic Church [...] contains within itself the mystery of all (the others)'.³⁵ Yet, in a further layer of complexity, the progression does not terminate at the Church of the present day, as one might expect, but looks forward to a further, final fulfilment. As he expounds on the meaning of the tenth *xoran*, Nersēs references the New Jerusalem of John's Apocalypse that will descend from heaven and unite the disparate churches on earth both to one another as well as to Christ 'in the marriage chamber of glory'.³⁶

32 Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 16, 17 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 210, 211). This line takes on added significance when one considers that Nersēs himself was engaged in ecumenical dialogue with the Byzantine Church.

33 Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 15 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 210). Step'anos makes the same point at Step'anos, *Comm. xor.*, 5 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 206), that the 'same mystery' is conveyed in the Old Testament and the New.

34 Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 9, 12 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 209).

35 Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 6 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 208).

36 Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 16 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 210).

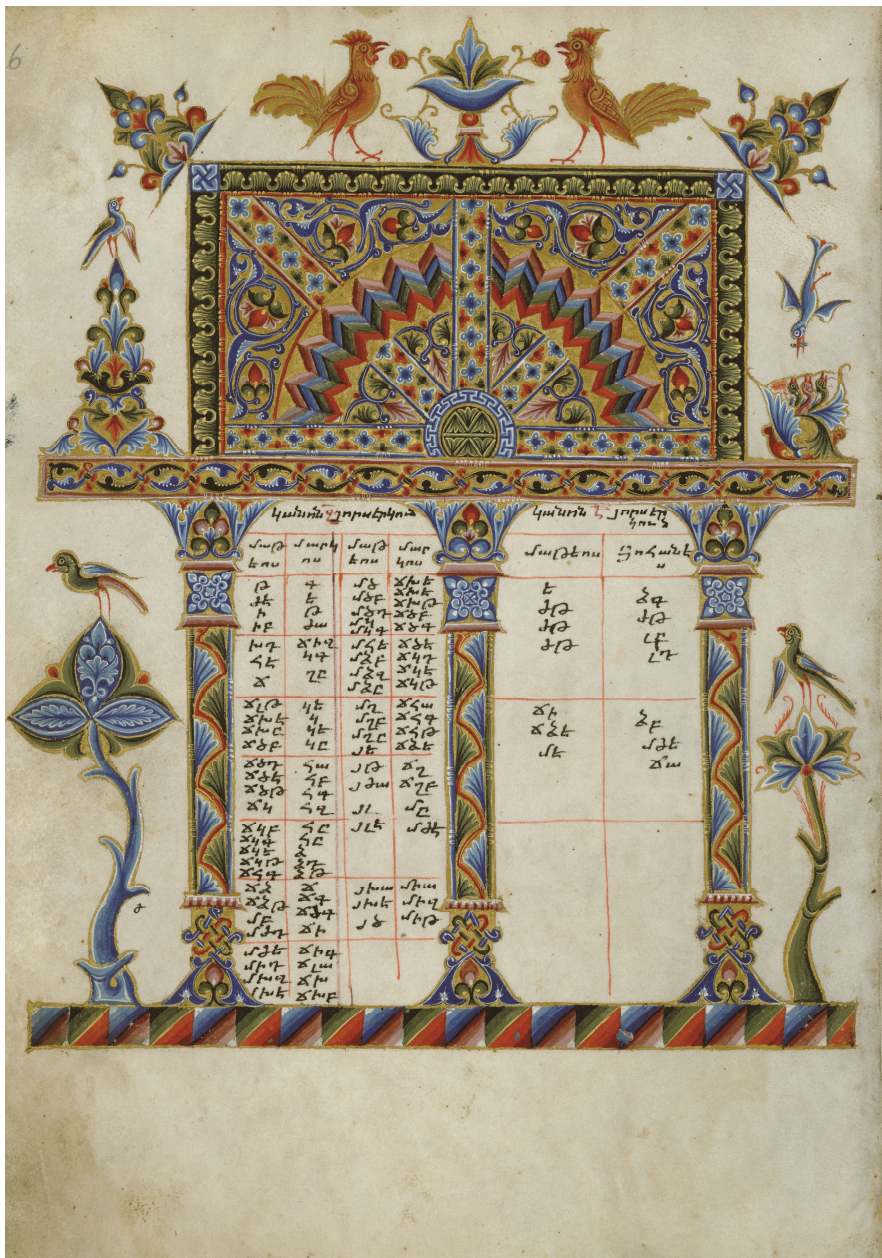


Fig. 3: Canons 6 and 7 in the Gladzor Gospels (c. 1300); Gladzor Gospels, Los Angeles, University of California, Charles E. Young Research Library, Library Special Collections, Armenian MS 1, p. 16.

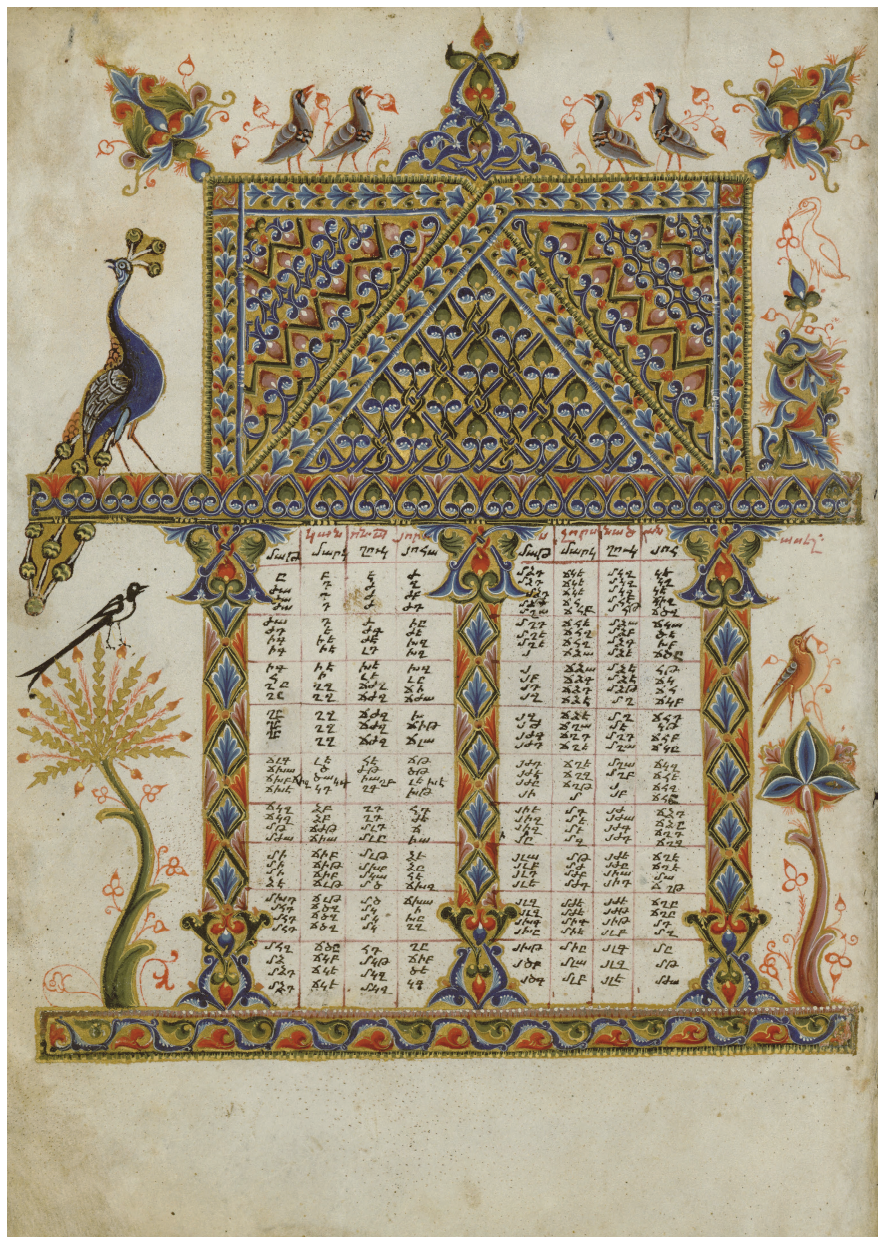


Fig. 4: Canon 1 in the Gladzor Gospels (c. 1300); Gladzor Gospels, Los Angeles, University of California, Charles E. Young Research Library, Library Special Collections, Armenian MS 1, p. 8.

But it is not merely sacred space that is signified by this sequence. Step'anos and Nersēs also regard these locations as a metonymy for the human worshippers themselves and use a variety of elements in the artistic scheme to convey this point. For Step'anos, the peacocks that sit atop the first *xoran* were the people of 'the Old Law' (see Fig. 4), while the doves above the fourth are 'those who have received the Holy Spirit', namely believers in the Church who are also represented by the roosters in the fifth *xoran*.³⁷ Nersēs gives a more specific interpretation of the roosters in the ninth *xoran*, seeing them as the Maccabean martyrs who were renown just prior to the emergence of the 'ineffable light' at Christ's incarnation, while on the tenth page the herons are the Apostles and the teals are the evangelists.³⁸ Similarly, the olive tree in the sixth *xoran* stands for the patriarchs while the lily on the same page signifies both the patriarchs as well as the church of the gentiles.³⁹ It is thus not merely specific historical *loca sancta* that these authors are emphasising but also the community gathered in worship at each of these sites throughout history, leading up to the liturgy enacted in the churches of the present day which itself anticipates the consummation of the New Jerusalem.

Finally, allow me to draw attention to the theme of Christ and his sacrifice. Like the Lindisfarne scheme, our Armenian authors allude to Christ's human genealogy, with both Step'anos and Nersēs identifying the partridges as the two prostitutes in his lineage.⁴⁰ They also refer repeatedly to the sacrifice of Christ. Step'anos observes that the colour red becomes brighter beginning in the fifth *xoran* because 'the cross has come near'.⁴¹ Nersēs repeats this point, stating that with the ninth *xoran* 'the red has waxed brilliantly', while in the tenth blue is entirely gone and the entirety is 'resplendent and brilliant with rosy red paint', since 'all has become new, bedaubed with the blood of Christ'.⁴² In addition, Nersēs says that in the tenth *xoran*, 'the splendidly adorned cross appears with shining rays', seemingly referring to an actual image of a cross, perhaps surmounting the spanning arch on the last page. Nersēs also makes the somewhat puzzling remark that in some of the *xorank'* 'in murky shape a cross appears palely beneath the canopies'.⁴³ It is hard to know what he means but one cannot

37 Step'anos, *Comm. xor.*, 2, 5, 6 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 206, 207).

38 Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 14, 15 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 210).

39 Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 11 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 209).

40 Step'anos, *Comm. xor.*, 6 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 207); Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 13 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 209). The genealogy of Christ is also mentioned at Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 14 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 210).

41 Step'anos, *Comm. xor.*, 6 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 207).

42 Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 14, 15 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 210).

43 Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 9 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 209).

help but recall the use of alternating blocks of colour within the Lindisfarne columns to produce an X across the page. Furthermore, Nersēs claims that Christ ‘came and stood at the head of the upper arch’ on the tenth page.⁴⁴ Although, again, it is unclear what he has in mind, his statement is reminiscent of the way the Lindisfarne artist has overlapped the bodies of his creatures to form an X in the spanning arch on several pages.

4 Conclusion

The concurrences between the message conveyed by the numerical symbolism encoded within the Lindisfarne artwork and the explicit commentary of these Armenian authors are striking.⁴⁵ Both focus above all on the community of worshippers who currently regard the codex as sacred and employ it in their rituals; both define that ecclesial community in terms of the history found in Israel’s scriptures and the eschatological consummation of the New Jerusalem in John’s Apocalypse; both see Christ as the one who has created this community and binds it together. Cutting across all of these themes is the motif of diversity or variety: diversity among the churches of medieval Christendom; a diversity of dispensations in God’s dealings with humanity throughout history; diversity even in the four sacred texts that preserve the canonical narratives of Christ’s life. Yet this diversity is not mere random chaos, but a rightly ordered harmony with an overarching unity. We should recall that the problem of diversity is what gave rise to the Eusebian Canon Tables in the first place. By the end of the second century, virtually all Christians seem to have settled on preserving four irreducibly distinct versions of Jesus’s story, and Eusebius’s paratext was designed as a technology for navigating and understanding the complex interrelations of this corpus. It seems entirely fitting, therefore, that later medieval artists discerned in the artwork of the tables a message of unity in diversity in these other domains as well, indeed, in the very communities they inhabited.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Nersēs, *Comm. Mt.*, prol., 15 (tr. Russell in Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 210). See also Step’anos’s comment that red is used in the top portion of the second *xoran* ‘on account of the blood of sacrificial offerings’ (p. 206).

⁴⁵ Pulliam herself briefly mentions the Armenian tracts as support for her reading of the Lindisfarne numerology (Pulliam 2017, 116). I hope to have expanded upon this point in the present study.

⁴⁶ For an argument that the patterns of reading intrinsic to the Eusebian apparatus influenced various aspects of the decorative scheme of medieval gospel books, see Kitzinger 2020.

Furthermore, in addition to the specific ideas and motifs found in both these traditions, we must not miss their even more fundamental agreement with respect to the mode of viewing they think appropriate for the artwork of the Canon Tables. The artist responsible for Lindisfarne's decoration and the authors of the two Armenian commentaries together regard the decoration as symbolic and susceptible to a mystical interpretation that can reveal the deepest truths about history, the divine, and human identity. It may be unsurprising to us that they each engage in this kind of viewing, but in fact, this is evidence of them drawing from the common source of late antique Christianity. Jaś Elsner has argued persuasively that the shift from artistic naturalism evident in the early imperial period to the abstraction of Byzantine art was due to a fundamental transformation of the conceptual frame within which artwork was viewed, with a draining of the secular and the emergence of the idea that all of reality is redolent of the divine for those who have eyes to see.⁴⁷ These treatments of the Canon Tables wonderfully illustrate this point, since, in one sense, the tables of numbers that comprise the Canon Tables strike the modern viewer as exceedingly prosaic, while to the medieval eyes of Eadfrith, Step'anos, Nersēs, and countless others, they were saturated with symbolic meaning conveyed via the medium of abstract artwork. Such a mode of viewing had some isolated precursors in the pre-Christian Greco-Roman world,⁴⁸ but attained an unprecedented dominance and sophistication in late antique Christianity and thus became a defining feature of the Christian Middle Ages, as is evident in the preceding analysis of the Lindisfarne and Armenian tables. Moreover, these treatments of Canon Table artwork illustrate well Elsner's corresponding claim that 'all the arts of Medieval Christian culture came to be based on a brilliant and symbolic pattern of scriptural typology and exegesis',⁴⁹ since the various symbolic meanings they highlight almost without exception arise from scriptural interpretation. Indeed, the artwork in these two traditions is a visual manifestation of the overflowing abundance of beauty and truth their makers discerned in the sacred texts that narrated the history and ultimate destiny of their own worshipping community.⁵⁰

47 Elsner 1995. See specifically p. 88: 'My contention is that the transformation of Roman art from the first century to the sixth is deeply implicated with a transformation in viewing away from naturalist expectations towards the symbolism inherent in mystic contemplation'.

48 See, for example, Elsner's discussion of the *Tabula* of Cebes (Elsner 1995, 39–46).

49 Elsner 1995, 9.

50 In the course of her study of the adaptation of the iconography of the Eusebian apparatus for other purposes, Susanne Wittekind similarly observes that 'the canon tables often served as a visual cue for the idea of harmony in diversity and for the communion of the saints, the living, and the dead in Christ' (Wittekind 2020, 247).

In other words, these concurrences between Northumbria and Armenia are, of course, not due to direct influence of one upon the other but are evidence of a common patrimony each inherited from the world of Late Antiquity. In fact, the message conveyed by these two decorative schemes presents striking similarities to Eusebius's own aforementioned *ekphrasis* on the basilica at Tyre delivered in 315.⁵¹ Celebrating the reconstruction of the church building that had been demolished in the Great Persecution, Eusebius's oration is the earliest written description of a church to have survived. Eusebius, however, did not content himself with a straightforward account of the building's layout and magnificent decoration but added a scripturally laced retelling of the recent persecution and a symbolic interpretation of the sacred architecture as representing various groups within the Church. The physical church in Tyre is, therefore, a symbol of the Church made of the souls of the redeemed, described by Eusebius as

the great temple, which the Word, the great Creator of the universe, has established throughout the whole world beneath the sun, as he himself likewise in turn formed this spiritual image upon earth of those transcendent heavenly vaults.⁵²

The artwork of the Lindisfarne tables and the symbolism of the Armenian tracts could be seen as but variations on this same theme, based upon the same mode of viewing and resulting subjectivity that had been fostered by the Christian liturgy for centuries by the time of Eadfrith and Step'anos.

This brings me finally to the aim of the present volume of reframing the history of the codex and its illustration in a globalised perspective. While it would certainly be misleading to pretend that the medieval Christian cultures across Eurasia and Africa possessed some sort of romantic uniformity, it would equally be a mistake to overlook the significant commonalities they present. The present chapter has taken as a test case two manuscript traditions separated by a vast geographic distance, which might be assumed to have little in common, and has revealed that they shared not only a common set of sacred texts (the Four Gospels), but also a common material form for those sacred texts (the codex), equipped with translated versions of the same paratext (the Eusebian apparatus), and that they fostered a common mystic mode of viewing the artwork adorning that paratext, through which one could discern a symbolic message that is in

⁵¹ Eusebius's oration is found at *Historia ecclesiastica*, 10.4 (tr. Oulton 1932, 396–445), on which see Smith 1989; Schott 2011; Corke-Webster 2019, 54–57. On *ekphrasis*, see especially James and Webb 1991; Elsner 1995, 23–28; Webb 2009.

⁵² Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 10.4.69 (translation my own; tr. Oulton 1932).

broad outlines the same for both traditions.⁵³ These similarities stand in sharper relief when one considers how far they depart from other contemporary manuscript traditions, such as Kufic Qur'āns which rely on a very different visual ecosystem arising from a distinct theology of the sacred text.⁵⁴ There are, of course, distinctions between these traditions as well. For example, the Lindisfarne tables convey this message in a more abstract form than the Armenian tracts, using local artistic motifs to do so. They are also more riotous and seemingly disordered than the orderly progression of the Armenian treatments, though the theme of harmony and order is still present, as we have seen. Finally, while the Armenian tracts are overt and didactic, modelling for the reader how to view the artwork, the Lindisfarne tables are more elusive and require patient contemplation to unravel their mysteries.⁵⁵ Such divergences reveal the adaptation of the late antique Christian patrimony to local cultures, but hardly negate the unity that exists amidst these diverse modes of expression. In fact, one might say that the diversity evident in the interpretation of medieval Canon Table artwork exemplifies the principle of unity amidst diversity that Eusebius, Eadfrith, Step'anos, and Nersēs regarded as the message revealed by the Canon Tables themselves.

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⁵³ Cf. the comment by Bausi, Reudenbach and Wimmer 2020b, viii: 'Canon tables can be seen as exemplifying a specifically Christian manuscript culture that formed, developed and spread across the East and West between 300 and 800 CE, not least because, as it is often mentioned, they are closely linked to the codex format, the medium preferred by Early Christians'.

⁵⁴ See the stimulating study by Tilghman and Bongianino 2021 which compares early insular gospels with Kufic Qur'āns.

⁵⁵ Cf. Tilghman 2017, 22 who proposes that the carpet pages in the Lindisfarne Gospels 'remind the readers of the active role they must take in making sense of the divine plan apparent in scripture'.

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