

AN EMBELLISHED INITIAL IN A JERUSALEM DOCUMENT

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While working on the catalogue of Armenian manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Library, I came across a document that was very interesting but not completely unusual in Armenian tradition. This is a Patriarchal Bull issued by the See of the Sts. James in the 17th century, about 1666.¹ It is a scroll of which one incomplete sheet and only the very top part of a second sheet survive. Most of the first sheet is a painting. The surviving text provides no clue as to the author of the Bull or as to the date. The date given is based upon the script and the seal.²

The surviving parts of the scroll are well preserved. It is written on yellow oriental laid paper. The size of the written area of sheet 1 is 18 × 30.3 cm and of sheet 2 is 20 × 32 cm. The initial letter is a fantastic, decorated *ini*. The rest of this line is in bird letters in a frame, followed by a line of red, uncial (*erkat'agir*) letters, a line in large red *bolorgir* (formal minuscule) and the fourth is in purple *notrgir* (informal minuscule). The first line of the text is in crimson uncial letters and the body of the document is in a clear, black *notrgir*, with red capitals.

THE SEAL

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to present the fairly schematic structure of such Bulls (*gontaks*), but features like a picture of the main sanctuary of the issuing See and two angels carrying a seal are common. The seal here has a rich iconography, which is described in the forthcoming catalogue. It uses formulae common on seals of the mid-seventeenth

¹ CBL 634. See the full description in Stone and Stone, 2012, 175-184, On the dating, see there.

² The first sheet is 106 cm long × 46.8 cm wide, and the second sheet measures 20 cm long × 46.8 cm wide.

century, perhaps of the time of Patriarch Eiazar Aynt'abc'i (about 1666). Our attention, however, will focus on the decoration of the scroll, particularly on the lavishly decorated initial letter of the text.

UPPER PART

The upper part of the first page is illustrated with scenes from the life of Christ and the Cathedral of the Sts. James (**Fig. 1**). An architectural structure is topped by a four-lobed arch. The arch is made of traditional Armenian vegetative decoration in gold, purple, orange, blue and brown. Within it is the scene of the Ascension in two parts. One is a mandorla with an inscription of God's name Է "HE IS" written as a bird letter projecting gold rays. Below, in a second, larger mandorla is the scene of Jesus' ascension. He is wearing a single purple drape and the stigmata are visible. He has a golden halo and around him are disc-like clouds. This presentation is clearly indebted to Western influence. Below is a green mountain, apparently the Mount of Olives (compare Matthew 24:3), on which a pair of shoes lies. The shoes are Christ's iconographic symbol, as he left them before ascending to heaven.

In the corners created by the arch, the spandrels, there are also scenes. The right-hand scene is an apocryphal version of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary.³ She is sitting outside the entrance to her house wearing purple and blue, while her head is covered with a white scarf and a golden halo. She is holding a scarf and raises her hand as a gesture of surprise. Next to her is an open book. A curtain with a design of red roses covers the entrance to her house. In the right corner there is a green angel holding a bouquet of white lilies, the Virgin's symbol. This is the other part of the Annunciation and its iconography is Western in style. Through the clouds on the upper left of the Virgin, a large bird, the Holy Spirit, is sending golden rays towards her.

In the architectural structure there is an arch made of colourful vegetation. Within it, are scenes of the Crucifixion on the right and the Rising of Jesus from the Tomb on the left. In the Crucifixion, against a background of trees, Christ, wearing a loin-cloth, hangs from a black cross with his monogram in gold on its top. He has a halo and his head is turned to the side. Blood is pouring from his stigmata and from the wound in his side. Adam's skull and bones are visible under the cross

³ See Nira Stone, 1999, 161-169.

and the blood is washing them clean.⁴ It is located on a hill, which is Golgotha. On both sides of the Cross stand large candlesticks with burning candles, which may represent the two thieves, crucified with Christ (Mark 15:27).

The left-hand scene depicts Jesus rising from his tomb, which is symbolised by a white sarcophagus on the ground. Over it, within a white mandorla with golden rays, Christ hovers in a round row of disc-shaped clouds. He is wearing a blue loin-cloth and a red drape creates a background. Christ is holding a large staff topped by a golden cross and a purple flag, itself emblazoned with a gold cross. His right hand is raised; His body depicted with the ribs showing and with slightly bent knees.

THE CATHEDRAL (FIG. 2)

This part of the scroll is 40 cm high and 33 cm wide and has its own frame composed of an architectural structure with two columns supporting a square roof with curtain-like corners, filled with golden, stylized plants on a black background. Large blue pillars on the two sides, with orange capitals and bases, continue the architectural form. On the columns, there is a design of black and grey scrolls and the roof is purple. The cathedral stands inside this frame.

This is a detailed painting of the Cathedral of the Sts. James in Jerusalem. It is named for James the son of Zebedee and James the brother of Christ, the first bishop of Jerusalem. It is built on the spot where traditionally the head of St. James the first bishop of Jerusalem is buried. A white angel with orange wings in the upper left corner of the roof holds a purple cloth upon which lies the head of James the son of Zebedee crowned with a golden halo. A man dressed in blue and purple with a golden halo stands on the right-hand side pointing with his right hand to the Cathedral. He is holding a long staff with a round, blue banner in his left hand. This is perhaps James, brother of Christ, though many features of his iconographical presentation are those of Christ himself.

⁴ Aławnuni, 1936, 48-50 (in Armenian) cites the following tradition from Yovhannēs (Hanna) *vardapet* 1807, 207 concerning Golgotha: "There, according to tradition, were placed the head and bones of our forefather Adam, which Noah's son Shem brought and buried in this place. This is the place where our Lord was crucified and his immaculate blood dripped upon Adam's head and freed him and all his descendants". See also Marr, 1894, 43-44. See for a further example, the illumination in Stone and Stone, 2003-4, 193-211.n

The building is presented as a typical cruciform, centralised church. The painting depicts the front, western entrance as well as the lateral, southern entrance. The western entrance to the cathedral, which is still the main access, has three arches and today an iron grille in the foreground, marking the entrance to the narthex. This grille is not represented in the painting. The perspective with which the door in the middle arch is painted, leads the eye into the church. On the right side of the wall, there is a large wooden semantron, and an iron one, used to summon the congregation to church. The entrance door in the middle is small and served as a secondary entrance at the time when the main entrance was in the southern wall. On that side are the three large arches of the original narthex that were subsequently blocked and create the present chapel of St. Ējmiacin, at which time the western entrance became the main one. In the 17th century woodcut (**fig. 3**), which is drawn from a different angle, you can see those three original arches.⁵

On the left side of the roof, we can see the small Chapel of St. James in orange and crimson, with an open door. Further to the left are the stairs and a door to the inside. The roof is flat and on it there is a raised oblong area, in the middle of which is a round roof with a drum. On the drum are three windows and five blind arches on columns. The dome, which is coloured blue, has a circular opening at the top to allow for the future resurrection and ascension of the saints, as does the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In the right-hand wall is an entry door for the clergy. This painting is a quite accurate representation of the cathedral much as it looks today and, apparently, as it looked when it was painted.

The artist painted flowers and birds on the scroll on both sides of the Cathedral, which are very similar to such motifs in Armenian manuscripts. Below the building are two angels holding up the seal of the Bull, discussed above.

THE ORNAMENTED LETTER

Below the elaborate painting comes the text of the Bull itself. The first letter is a very richly ornamented letter *ini*, 35 cm long, on a gold background. It reaches almost all the way to the end of the surviving text. The

⁵ The wooden block belongs to the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and the print I photographed was made by the late director of the Printing Press, Mr. Ara Kalaydjian and is in my possession.

painter's purpose was not just to decorate the first letter of the text but by it to convey a message to the reader, which reinforced the content of the document.

The practice of painting a very elaborate letter at the beginning of a paragraph or a work is not unusual in medieval manuscripts. To the contrary, we can observe it in both Western and Eastern manuscripts. Often this letter is decorated in such a way that it includes whole scenes, usually, but not always related to the text next to them. Other times, the letters are only decorated, without any scene. One might assume that different Christian cultures would create similar ornamental initials, since the function is similar. On examination, however, we find that this is only partly true. Cultural, religious and geographic reasons often create important differences.

In the Jerusalem Bull, the unusually elaborate letter is made from a complicated scene made of several elements (**Fig. 4**). First comes a human figure dressed in red and green with large blue wings, dark hair and a golden halo. He holds a very long black spear in his two hands with which he is stabbing the head of a long, fearsome, winged green dragon. This is the Evangelist Matthew and he is not holding a book but has a cross (apparently the top of the spear) in his right hand. The spear reaches the dragon's head and by its disposition, the head ties the initial letter to the line of bird-letters in a frame with which the text opens. Overall, from head to tail, the parts of the dragon are tied together by the colour green. The green of the monster's body draws the eye of the onlooker all the way down to the end of the scene. Additional coherence is achieved by the use of green for the garment of the Evangelist holding the spear, as for the adjoining cloud.

Painted below one another down the dragon's body are a brown eagle holding a grey and red book in its beak, a lion, and a bull holding a book in its forelegs. The two books have crosses on them and represent the Gospels. Exigencies of composition have led to Matthew (the man) holding a cross not a book and the omission of the book from the bull (Luke). The man is the symbol of Matthew, the eagle is John, the lion is Mark and the bull is Luke. They all have wings.⁶

The winged man, i.e., Matthew, is portrayed in the pattern of an angel or one of the warrior saints, such as St. George or St. Theodore, defeating Satan or the satanic dragon (**Fig. 5**). His large spear is impaled in the dragon's head. The eagle is brown with brown wings. It is holding the

⁶ See Cross and Livingston, 1974, 487 s.v. "Evangelist".

dragon's neck with its beak. The lion, coloured dark yellow with purple wings, is seizing the dragon with its mouth and paws. The bull is grey with orange wings and horns and it is holding the dragon's tail with its body. Thus the image represents the four evangelists killing the satanic dragon, and, in other terms, the Gospel vanquishing Satan.

The dragon resembles a snake with a fearsome head and mouth, and big eyes. Its mouth is open and in it there are two red circles, perhaps representing fire coming out of its maw. It has orange wings, of which one is visible as is one short leg, apparently ending in clawed toes. The other wing and leg are not represented. The dragon has scales the whole length of its body. The winged dragon or serpent is common in scenes of the Temptation of Adam, based on an exegesis of the curse in Gen 3:14.⁷

At the end of the dragon's tail is a scene of a dark grey boat. In its centre stands a church with a cross on its grey dome. On the right, there is a large gold cross and on the left, a pole topped by a red banner. Flowers are painted in-between all of these.

It is possible that the boat is inspired by Noah's Ark, which in many cases serves as a symbol of the wood of the Cross, an interpretation strengthened by the cross the boat carries and by that surmounting the Church upon it. It is very possible that the flowers hint at Paradise and redemption. Perhaps the Church, borne by the salvific Ark, evokes the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Golgotha and redemption through Christ's Cross.

A letter of this size (35 cm) is very unusual and the scenes in it show the ability and creativity of the artist. That it decorates a Bull issued by the See responsible for the Dominical Holy Places is a basic statement of the victory of the Gospel and the Christian faith over Satan.

It is interesting to compare this letter with the initial letter of the text of the Bible in Jerusalem, manuscript no. 1933 of the year 1645. (**Fig. 6**) The manuscript was copied in Isfahan and donated to St. James by Nikolayos in 1661.⁸ This means it was in Jerusalem roughly at the time of copying of the Bull. Here the letter *ini*, from "In the beginning" (Gen 1:1) bears a basic resemblance to and shares some specific details with our complex letter. It is a representation of a father receiving inspired Scripture. The long stroke of the *ini* is made up of a father, with a son on his knees. The father is holding a thick book with leather covers and reddened edges in a cloth. Above, is a dove with a halo representing the Holy Spirit. According to Armenian tradition, the first verse translated into Armenian comes

⁷ See, for example, Jerusalem Hymnal no. 1667 (1529 CE) 58v.

⁸ See Bogharian, 1973. 6, 455.

from the Book of Proverbs 1:2. Six verses later in that chapter, we read: “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction” (Prov. 1:8). This might well be the intent of the image, that the father, who receives Scripture, should teach it to his offspring.

However, in Freer Gallery 56.11 fol. 243 a rather similar *incipit* is found to the Gospel of St. John. The manuscript was copied in Cilicia at the Monastery of Gıner in 1263. The beginning of John is deliberately formulated on the basis of the beginning of Genesis, and both books commence with “In the beginning ...” Consequently, John also starts with *ini*. This *ini* very much resembles that in the 17th century manuscript, Jerusalem 1933. Here the dove perches on the book which is held up by a man holding a child. That man is standing on the shoulders of a second human figure, while the curved right-hand stroke of the *ini* is composed of yet a third man. Because this image is older than that in J1933 by several centuries, the interpretation of the *ini* in J1933 offered above might be a secondary valuation of what was originally a statement of the inspiration of Scripture that was given to humans.

As distinct from Freer 56.11, J1933 is a whole Bible and therefore, this initial is surmounted by a headpiece with God the Father in the centre and blue streams issuing from his hands, which represent the blessing and inspiration streaming forth. His fingers are in the position of blessing. On the left is the dove in a mandorla and on the right, Christ. We must reserve discussion of the images surmounting the headpiece for a later time. Thus, the initial letter of this Bible echoes the theme that is set in the headpiece, but in a this-worldly form, with the inspiration concretized in the book of the Bible and to be transmitted from generation to generation.

In the initial letter of the Freer manuscript, the red-clad, unbearded Christ on the knees of the Father is reaching out with his right hand and grasping a dragon-serpent which, as in the Jerusalem Bull, forms the curved right-hand line of the *ini*. The serpent is trodden underfoot by the divine figures, presumably in accordance with the Christian understanding of Psalm 74:13-14 = Arm 73:13-14: “You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan.” This verse formed the basis for the introduction of a serpent under Christ’s feet in scenes of the Baptism.

In Jerusalem 1933, then, we have an iconographic formulation of the same idea as the Baptism scenes, that the revelation of the divine will conquer Satan. On the basis of some such image, the painter of the Jerusalem Bull has elaborated his statement or re-statement of the same idea, also embodying it in the first letter of his text.



Fig. 1
CBL 634, Upper Part



Fig. 2
CBL 634, The Cathedral of the Sts. James



Fig. 3
17th Century Woodcut of the Cathedral



Fig. 4
CBL 634 The Initial



Fig. 5
CLB 636 St. George



Fig. 6
Jerusalem J1933, Decorated Page

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