

## PARADIGMS OF MEDIATED TRANSLATION IN ARMENIAN: AN EXPLORATION

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**Abstract:** This paper examines four discreet issues influencing the macro-context of mediated translations into Armenian from Late Antiquity to the modern period. The first treats religious scripture, reviewing the very different contexts for the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (5<sup>th</sup> century) and the Qur’ān (17<sup>th</sup> century). The second analyzes the Silk Route as a vehicle for exchange between peripheral cultures facilitating the Armenian reception of two works of Sanskrit literature. The third pursues evolving literary traditions and their textual diffusion via a case study of the *Alexander Romance*. Meanwhile, the fourth examines the nature of colonial experiments in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries in creating regionality within the wider process of globalization that impinged on the translation processes of communities in different parts of the Armenian *oikoumene* of the time with special attention to Mesrop Taġadian’s novel *Vēp Vardġisi* of 1846.

**Keywords:** hybrid mediation; mediated textual layering; thematic mediation; paradigmatic sequential mediation

### 1. Introduction

The first issue I should like to broach focuses on the problems inherent in translating religious scriptures, one of the most fecund sources of mediated intervention. My examples are antithetical in presenting both insider propagation of a faith and external attempts at refutation and polemics, both engaged in primarily by a committed clergy exhibiting partisanship and seeking to exert a distinct rhetorical effect on readers. Such projects are the hallmark of universalist religions like Christianity and Buddhism that exploit scriptural translations to diffuse their creeds, while intent on undermining their rivals’ credibility and depicting their sages in the worst moral light. These motives permeate the premodern period, since it is only at the end of this era that we observe the growth of nonpartisan scholarly interest in such matters, wishing to comprehend the meaning scripture holds for devotees and share this with an empathetic readership.

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## 2. Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament

Armenian integration into the church in the Roman Empire in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century determined both a mediated access to the Hebrew Scriptures via the Christian Bible and the identity of that intermediary as Greek (Cowe 2012: 143-161). Jewish adoption of Hellenic modes of thought had engendered a set of Jewish translations of Hebrew Scripture into Greek as the dominant cultural medium of the western portion of the northern hemisphere until the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. However, this undertaking provoked an adverse reaction in Palestine to preserve the purity of Hebrew as the revealed word of God, which was not to be polluted by renditions into an alien medium. Consequently, those Greek translations were then adopted by the incipient Christian community. Since the latter identified its core mode of revelation as the incarnation of the divine Word, the “good news” or Gospel constituted a secondary narrative interpretation his advent and salvific activity. Translation, as a result, was encouraged as a vital tool to spread that gospel to the ends of the earth, the feast of Pentecost functioning as a potent symbol to legitimize this process (Cowe 1996: 13-23).

The Greek Old Testament underwent a series of transformations from unregulated local variants in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries to more systematic and institutionally sanctioned recensions in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries, while at the same time witnessing an outpouring of secondary translations into Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and Ethiopic, etc. as the new faith extended beyond Roman boundaries. Time and place largely determine the translational process, consequently the Armenian version of the early 5<sup>th</sup> century differs significantly from those earlier processes as part of a coordinated outreach to the Christian communities east of the Empire to cement their adhesion to its doctrine and practice in the multireligious environment of Iran. Bearing the imprimatur of the Armenian hierarchy, the product of training in Greek schools, applying exegetical principles elaborated in Antioch, the translation is the result of a high degree of organization (Cowe 2012: 143-161).

What are the implications of such a background for this type of mediated text? Let’s begin with linguistics. The Hellenic *paideia* the Armenian translators were exposed to impacted considerations of idiom in their studied avoidance of syntactical Hebraisms still lodged in their Greek Vorlage, such as polysyndeton (clauses linked by the copula...and...and) and the related waw conservative *wayihi* familiar from the often repeated phrase in the King James version “and it came to pass...” These are replaced by hypotactic constructions subordinating secondary actions to the main verb. Similarly, Armenian equivalency patterns tend to align with Greek terminology as at I Chron 21:1 where Satan is invoked. There, the Hebrew form *Shaytan* denoting a shadowy figure from the divine entourage who ultimately metamorphosizes into the principle of evil, in Armenian is rendered by the form *bansarku* (‘slanderer’) literally representing the Greek *diabolos*, the matrix of the English form ‘devil’ via Latin (Cowe 1990-91: 53-96).

Further facets of Greek mediation of the Hebrew Scriptures include differences in canon, i.e. institutionally determined principles of classifying a sacred text. Thus, although a series of later Hellenistic books possess (ed.) a Hebrew text, they do not form part of the Rabbinical tradition and hence are commonly referred to as the

‘Apocrypha.’ These books were not only accepted by the Church, but were frequently employed to provide readings for saints’ days. One of those (2 Maccabees, chapt. 7) celebrated what again from a mediated Christian perspective was categorized as the martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons in a campaign of the 160s BCE by the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes to forcibly integrate the Judaeans into his realm. It is plausible that the translators were familiar with the passage from this annual liturgical context, which thereby influenced their rendering, which transforms Antiochus into a stereotypical tyrant. While one of the brothers calls him a ‘scourge’ (*alastōr*) in Greek at v.9, the Armenian roundly condemns him as “imperious, proud, and arrogant” (*sēg, hpart ew ampartawan*). Meanwhile, the portrayal of his socially and physically weakest antagonist, the mother is heightened in that she “stepped forth bravely” (*k’ajūt’eamb yarıj matuc’eal*) to address her son. Meanwhile, the original clash over the imposition of Hellenism encapsulated in the Greek phrase *metabainein epi ta Hellēnika* (“to transfer allegiance to Greek customs) such as prohibiting circumcision at 6:9 is transformed into the much more generic Armenian formulation *zohel* (“to sacrifice”) aligning with hagiographical norms and embracing the contemporary Armenian hermeneutic against persisting local pagan cults (Cowe 2020: 163-167).

As already noted, Christianity employed various aspects of the Hebrew Scriptures to buttress claims to fulfilment of prophecy. On occasion, varying interpretations of the semantic range of terms utilized in the Greek translation without the corroboration of the original aided in the development of certain doctrines, of which that of the Virgin Birth is an excellent example. This hinges on the verse Isaiah 7:14 where the Hebrew term *N’RH* refers to a young woman, a form plausibly rendered by the Greek equivalent *parthenos*, which however, was later construed in its narrower sense of ‘virgin,’ as evinced by the Armenian version *koysn*.

Armenian translators were trained in the principles for scriptural interpretation developed by exegetes associated with Antioch in the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and therefore their version falls into the rare category of a scriptural translation that viscerally embodies this distinct formation in contrast to the Greek, where those insights are transmitted separately in textual commentaries. Consequently, it is of critical significance for the history of thought. Thus, the Armenian version of Lamentations adduces several features of Theodoret of Cyrrhus’ commentary on the book. These include a hybrid parent text, free handling of Greek morphology and word order, recognition of the poetic nature of the text, and enhancing the parallelism between verses. Another feature is doublet renderings, employing two Armenian equivalents for one lexeme in Greek, as at Lam 2:3, where the idiomatic combination of verbs *hašeac’ ew mašeac’* represents the compound Greek form *suneklasen*. Similarly, the approach valorizes the psychological dimension over the physical, as at Dan 4:32 where the metaphorical use of the term ‘hand’ is explicated in terms of ‘power’ congruent with the interpretation of the Antiochene Fathers Diodore of Tarsus and John Chrysostom. Likewise, at 4:20 the Armenian aligns with Theodoret in regarding the textual variant *Khristos Kyrios* (‘Christ Lord’) as a Christological reference, rendering this even more patent by the reverse formulation *Tēr K’ristos* (‘the

Lord Christ') in contrast to the critical Greek text *kyriou khristos*, a royal title meaning 'the Lord's anointed' in keeping with the Hebrew (Cowe 2015: 142-165).

The most striking case in the Armenian Old Testament is afforded by the book of Esther, which develops trends visible in the Greek versions of the work (reducing Jewish reparations, accentuating exodus traditions) and reinterpreting the significance of the Festival of Purim instituted by Esther and Mordecai, thereby integrating hermeneutic imperatives to facilitate the work's reception in a new space and time. I would therefore argue that the translation/redaction should be situated within the ongoing process of writing and rewriting scripture, which I would contend, continued into Late Antiquity in both Jewish and Christian communities (Cowe 2022: 19-39).

A new set of macro-level factors impacted Armenia in the 420s when the regional ecclesiastical authority of Antioch with its emphasis on the reality of Christ's human development in the incarnation clashed with the rival see of Alexandria, whose emphasis lay on the salvific efficacy of God the Word. From its viewpoint on Christ's humanity largely in terms of the Word's "en-flesh-ment," the Antiochene concentration on his human soul appeared to suggest a second principle of action in Christ. This impression was furthered by the extreme expressions of an Antiochene pupil Nestorius, who had become patriarch of Constantinople. In this aporia, an ecumenical council representing the plenum of the church in the Roman Empire in 431 overrode Antioch's status. Meanwhile, in Armenia, despite Theodoret's contacts, the impact of the same earlier ecclesiastical network on the Armenian hierarchy maintained the polity's affinities with the Roman Empire. At the same time, to obviate suspicion of harboring latent Nestorian allegiance, it was regarded as politic to inaugurate a new translation of scripture.

In this new mediated version authority moves to Constantinople, dictating a different Greek textual basis and featuring a new translation technique characterized by close calquing of Greek morphology and syntax. This more 'literalizing' approach influenced by the translators' training in Greek grammatical thought focusing on the definition and usage of parts of speech, is typified more by inflexible patterns of lexical equivalency that run the risk of undermining the version's ability to communicate fully the semantic appropriateness of its parent text (Cowe 2012: 143-161).

### 3. The Armenian Version of the Qur'ān

The Armenian experience with the Qur'ān represents the antithesis of the Bible. Islam, like Judaism, views scripture as an inimitable form of divine revelation that cannot be duplicated by humans in other idioms. Hence, it is only in the Arabic original that the scripture is read at the mosque and the daily prayer cycle of *salah*. However, the renditions into Persian, Sindhi, Turkic, etc. have facilitated the religion's spread by clarifying its overall message. In contrast, the Latin version produced by Robert of Ketton in 1143 formed part of the wider project of the abbot of Cluny Peter the Venerable to effect Muslim conversion to Christianity in the context of the Second Crusade. Published in Basel in 1541, with a foreword by Martin Luther, it became the prime medium for Qur'ān translation up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Armenians had lived in symbiosis with Islam since the 7<sup>th</sup> century, acquiring an oral familiarity with the religion, though without access to Qur'anic schools or madrasses. Instead, their knowledge was acquired through polemical epistolography and accounts of formal debates, followed by a series of treatises, some of which seem to rest on actual exchanges (Cowe 2016: 75-86). The immediate purpose for the Armenian translation of the Qur'ān produced in 1680, the autograph copy of which is still kept in Matenadaran MS 934, was probably to further dialogue with the Safavid shahs in New Julfa, a quarter of the capital Isfahan where most of its copies were made. There Shah 'Abbas had settled the Armenian mercantile elite, who played a crucial role in international trade in raw Persian silk in 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. A contemporary chronicler documents a meeting the patriarch Yakob IV had with Shah 'Abbas II which typically ends with the Christian convincing his interlocutor of the truth of Christ's divinity (Dadoyan 2021: 251-252). Hence, curiosity concerning the contents of the Qur'ān probably derived from the desire to delegitimize it with greater specificity.

The appeal to a Latin intermediary relates to the active interchange Armenians were engaging in with the Catholic hierarchy during the Counter-Reformation. On the whole, Lehaç'i's rendering accurately represents Ketton's rather loose paraphrase of the Arabic. He reproduces the distorted transliteration *azaora* representing the term *al-sūrah* as a section heading deriving from the spoken form *as-sūrah*. More importantly, he also follows his source's editorial intervention dividing the text into 124 *sūrahs* instead of the 114 of the Arabic original. In contrast, his one major omission is of Muhammad's designation as a *pseudopropheta* ('false prophet') in the title perhaps as an act of self-censorship to avoid confrontation with the Islamic authorities. In many ways, the most significant aspect of his oeuvre is paratextual in reproducing Ketton's marginal glosses that highlight topics rife for exploitation in debate: denial of Muḥammad's prophethood, refutation of Muslim charges against Christians, and underscoring internal inconsistencies such as between the prohibition on wine in society, while including it as an indissociable element in depicting the afterlife (Dadoyan 2021: 257-261).

#### 4. Mediated Translation between Peripheral Cultures

Alexander of Macedon's empire created a powerful land bridge between India and the Mediterranean, the efficacy of which was developed by the inauguration of the Silk Route in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. However, until the Pax Mongolica the road was segmented into separate sectors for which distinct intermediaries were responsible. Naturally, commerce along it included artistic and cultural products. Thus, chess passed to Persia by the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, was practiced in Armenia by the 9<sup>th</sup>, and known in Europe by the 10<sup>th</sup>, while the digit zero reached the Persian scholar al-Khwarizmi by the early 9<sup>th</sup> century and was disseminated in Europe by Fibonacci in 1202. Texts underwent a similar process. Sanskrit's influence across the western half of the northern hemisphere diffused works then transmitted by sequential intermediate forms in a process that automatically impacted their nature and content. I'd like to discuss two of these also extant in Armenian.

India's literary reputation is paramount in the domains of epic and drama, but it is the more popular genre of fables like the *Pañcatantra* that entered the widest circulation. The latter consists of a collection in fifteen chapters clustering around a frame narrative that present anthropomorphic animals illustrating situations to inculcate *niti* (prudent conduct) for a ruler's edification. Translated into Middle Persian in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, then Arabic in the 8<sup>th</sup>, the compilation is better known by its title in the latter as *Kalila Wa Dimna*, foregrounding the activities of the two jackals who recur as narrators and actors. The 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries proved a remarkable era of state construction around the Mediterranean, that created a new market for manuals on statecraft for the fledgling monarchies. Alongside Near Eastern sapiential works like the *Wisdom of Ahikar* and the *Admonitions of Anōšīrvan*, that similarly passed into Armenian via several intermediaries, some of the episodes of the *Pañcatantra* entered the *Aluesagirk'* (lit. 'foxbook'), a collection associated with Vardan Aygekc'i for the instruction of the Armenian court and society (Cowe 2015: 77-105).

India has also been the spawning ground for several religions and religious philosophies. It is significant that both Vedic Brahmin institutions as well as the sramana ascetic tradition of the North East are represented in Armenian. The second collective is represented in *Barlaam and Iosaphat*, a lightly Christianized version of the biography of Siddhartha Gautama, i.e. the Buddha. Indeed, the name Josaphat betrays vestiges of the form *bodddhisatva* denoting a devotee on the path of enlightenment. Earlier accounts of the life mention his wife and children and portray his decision to follow a higher way of life through asceticism as a personal goal. However, the *Nidanakatha* of the 5<sup>th</sup> century features the addendum that he was inspired by an ascetic, who becomes the basis for the Christianized figure of Barlaam. Meanwhile, the legendary accretion of a seer's prediction that he would either become an exceptional king or a religious leader introduced the further stratum that his father the king deliberately shielded him from all manifestations of suffering to steer his son only towards kingship. Here, the Christianized version inserts the motif that the father had been persecuting the church and that the seer prophesied the child would become a Christian. Finally, after his son's establishment of a Buddhist *shangha* or monastery, the father determines to abdicate and dedicate his life to ascetic labors. The narrative passed from Sanskrit to Middle Persian and then to Arabic in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, after which it transitioned to Georgian and Greek. There exist three distinct redactions of the work in Armenian requiring fuller investigation (Ant'apyan 1980: iii-xviii).

## 5. Evolving Literary Traditions and Textual Diffusion

Under this rubric I should like to broach issues pertaining to the translation of a more popular evolving textual tradition that does not respect the work's original form, but views this as malleable material for reformulation in a continuing process of development. One of the most instructive examples in Armenian is the Alexander Romance.

A legend in his lifetime, Alexander of Macedon carved out a vast empire breaking down sociopolitical boundaries and ushering in an era of unprecedented cultural

exchange. In death, his iconic stature continued to grow until in the Ps. Callisthenes' *Alexander Romance* the protagonist assumes almost superhuman proportions as an intrepid explorer, strategist, monarch, and thinker who extends the bounds of the known world in several dimensions — physical, mental, and spiritual. As a result, over the next millennium this Greek narrative achieved a truly global reach, with translations and adaptations springing up from Western Europe to Mongolia and all the languages of S.E. Asia (Simonyan 1989: 69-363).

Consonant with this, the early Armenian version is one of the best witnesses to the alpha and initial beta recensions of the Greek tradition, portraying the hero as an embodiment of the pagan Hellenic ethos. However, gradually, we observe the creation of new Armenian recensions as epitomes which curtail the pagan material no longer relevant to the new image the protean hero was generating to enhance his contemporary charismatic appeal. These texts also become hybridized through the inclusion of episodes emanating from an Arabic milieu. These include the northern tribes of Gog and Magog, whom against whom Alexander keeps at bay by an iron gate until the Last Judgment. Similarly, the motif of the Copper City from the *Arabian Nights* is superimposed on Alexander's visit to the capital of Queen Candace of Meroe (Tašian 1891: 45-53).

Later redactions reconceptualize the hero as proselytizer for one or other of the monotheistic religions. Of these, the Greek Epsilon recension (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> cc.) represents him as converting to Judaism while in Jerusalem. Recently, identified one of the six discrete Arabic branches of Alexander-related texts was identified as deriving from this model (Doufikar-Aerts 2010: 17), and initial research suggests this, in turn, is the intermediary of an Armenian version in which Alexander accepts the sovereignty of the God of heaven and earth, undertaking his campaigns to the latter's glory. Apart from thematic parallels, the text reveals Arabic linguistic data such as the astronomical terminology *shams* as 'sun' and the orthography of names, where Nectanebo appears as Naktinafon. Moreover, the Christian ambience is reinforced by the form *č'astuack'* (lit. 'non-gods') to refer to pagan deities. A brief colophon indicates that the translation was made at Aghtamar, an important ecclesiastical center in L. Van, the Western Armenian phonetic values of which are periodically apparent in transliterations, such as the form Tarios to denote the Persian king (Assis Rosa et al. 2017: 123-124).

## 6. Colonialism, Oceanic Optics, and the Incipient World System

The rise of the West and its economic, military, and political expression in colonialism at the macro level becomes a major factor in determining language diffusion and the currents of cultural exchange from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The French early positioned themselves in the eastern Mediterranean. Meanwhile, after a brief rivalry, they yielded India to the British, thus rendering English the *lingua franca* for the already well-established Armenian mercantile community there. This division of power is broadly determinative of the pathways by which foreign novels entered the Armenian market at the micro-level. Those published by the Mkhitarist Armenian-Catholic Congregation in Venice in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were rendered from

French, even when the original is English (as in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*), while those published in Calcutta illustrate the opposite trajectory (e.g. *Paul et Virginie*) (Davt'yan 1967: 3-332). Germany, however, was still in the process of unifying and thus was late to enter the colonial enterprise. Hence, its literature's wider dispersion depended on mediated translation, and since our final focus addresses a novel published in Calcutta in 1846, logic demands its transference via English.

The work also illustrates mediation within a broader framework, since the literary genealogy of its crux, the contention of two male figures of contrasting character to gain the affections of a young woman against the background of an older male authority figure alternatively related to the former or the latter begins with an instantiation in Johann Leisewitz's tragedy *Julius von Tarent* of 1774, which then inspired Schiller's tragedy *Die Räuber* of 1781. This, in turn, engendered Heinrich Zschokke's novel *Abällino, der grosse Bandit* of 1794, which thereafter impelled the Romantic Armenian scholar-writer Mesrop Taghadian to employ it as the core of his *Vēp Vardgisi* (Vardgēs' Novel). To add a further complication to the mix, as mentioned above, Taliadian only accessed Zschokke's material via Matthew Gregory Lewis' English rendering which appeared as *The Bravo of Venice* (London, 1805).

In contrast to the two plays' serious social commentary, Zschokke's novel composed at age 22, is an action-packed blockbuster tale of a master of disguise embodying both male traits above, who jumps from one cliffhanger to the next in his quest to regain his status, ingratiate himself with the doge of Venice, and win the latter's niece as his bride. Without applying the extreme model of French 18<sup>th</sup> century translators, Lewis intervenes to calibrate the level of violence to British taste. However, crucially, he adds the character of the Count of Monaldeschi, who enables him to integrate the hero's backstory, and his love interest, engineering a powerful conclusion scene absent in the original, all of which benefits Taliadian's plot construction (Lewis 1805: v-vi).

In consequence, Taliadian's molding of his coming-of-age story transforms the work into a *Bildungsroman* in which his hero Vardgēs matures in understanding through his vicissitudes until he emerges self-assured in the dénouement to gain a reward for his patriotic services. At the same time, the author's feminist predilections portray Vardgēs' bride Haykanduxt as a much stronger character, whose defense of her love in the trial scene is pivotal in turning public opinion in his favor. Consequently, the work emerges as a powerful embodiment of and protreptic to the contemporary Armenian nationalism (T'aliadian 1846: 1-168).

## 7. Conclusion

I have tried to demonstrate some of the macro-level issues that impacted mediated translation in the Armenian micro-context, arguing they reflect much wider paradigms. Religious texts reveal that distances impeding direct communication may be social as well as geographical. Similarly, literary genre and type offer important clues as to which categories are most amenable to mediation especially those easily assimilable and of significant utility (Assis Rosa et al. 2017: 121). Directionality and sequence in



intermediation also appear susceptible to the construction of clear typologies in processes where the role of culturally dominant languages is pivotal (Assis Rosa et al. 2017: 114; 119-120). Meanwhile, it is crucial to consider the participation of various institutions in selecting, transmitting, and affording access to mediated materials. Finally, it is essential to acknowledge that all these variables are subject to the continual agency of wider political, economic, and technological factors, dynamically altering sensibilities and generating change.

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**Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

**Ethical Standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.