

## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ARMENIAN COMMUNITY OF VENICE

To begin the story of the Armenian presence in Venice we must begin with a legend. It is said that in the fifth century a first group of Venetians, fleeing the invasion of the barbarians, landed on a small island in the lagoon considered deserted and found themselves with a man who was fishing. History has it that this man, an Armenian named Grigor who lived on that island with his wife and daughter, said to the new arrivals: 'May roses grow where you pass'.

If one literally believes in the Bible, then all humanity would be of Armenian origin as descendants of Noah, and this would be a metaphor of poetic beauty on the link between Venice and Armenia through legends and water. Yet beyond the fables and legends, let us try to briefly review here the Armenian presence in Venice throughout history.

We may divide the Armenian presence in Venice into three periods.

### **Early presence**

The first period begins with the arrival of the first Armenian in the lagoon, Narses, exarch of Ravenna, who built the Church of Saints Geminiano and Mena in the sixth century. It was located in the space that is now occupied by St. Mark's Square, near the outdoor tables of the Caffè Florian. The church was demolished in the twelfth century to enlarge the square.

As is often the case when it comes to antiquity, we have no reliable sources to rely on. Fr. Ghevont Alishan, a Mekhitarist monk who owes his fame to his literary work and his historical research, also says that Narses gave the city the first library, although there are no documents confirming this. Despite this, there seems to be agreement among experts on the fact that Narses gave Venice its first patron saint: Theodore of Heraclea, or San Todaro in Venetian.

And in Torcello there is the oldest document of the lagoon civilization: the marble plaque left engraved in Latin by the Armenian Isaac, ex-arch of Ravenna, to commemorate the foundation, in 639, of the church dedicated to the Mother of God, known by the name of Santa Maria Assunta. In a book entitled "The Venice of the Armenians" ("La Venezia degli Armeni", by Aleramo Hermet and Paola Cogni Ratti di Desio) it is recalled that in the first millennium of our era there were documents and chronicles of marriages between Armenians and Venetians: Grigor and Chiaretta, Agnolo and Mariam, Levon and Andriana, Domenigo and Setta ...

It may have been an Armenian princess, who married Giovanni Orseolo, the son of Doge Pietro, around the year 1000, who may have introduced something fundamental to decor at the table. Princess Maria Argiros, daughter of Byzantine emperor Basil II, may have been the first to introduce the precursors of modern cutlery to Western Europe: Father Levon Boghos Zekiyan, says that the princess 'refused to eat with her hands and she had her food cut into small pieces which she carried into her mouth with a golden two-pronged fork'. It would seem that this was the beginning of the use of cutlery at the table in Europe and then around the world. The princely couple died shortly after their marriage during the plague of 1006.

A short time later, with growing numbers of Armenian merchants who arrived in Venice, the Armenian House, or Hye Dun in Armenian (Հայ Տնուն) was born in the city. It was a house-hostel to provide temporary shelter to fellow countrymen. It would also seem that a certain degree of integration of Armenians into the local population dates back to this era.

As the sale of real estate to foreigners was forbidden until the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, the Armenians Italianized their names: Yacubian became Giacobbi, Derian became Teron, to name a few examples. We may also note that some Armenian surnames naturally assimilated to the Venetian ones because there is a great similarity. Not long ago, I met a young Venetian with the surname "Surian" who did not know that his surname was probably of Armenian origin and also of an important family. Indeed, the Surians were brothers from Constantinople who specialized in recovering shipwrecks, and their trade had brought them to Venice.

The Armenian House was born in Calle delle Lanterne (Street of the Lanterns), later called Calle dei Armeni (Street of the Armenians), in San Zulian, the neighbourhood most densely populated by Armenians,

along the path that necessarily connected the seat of political power, St. Mark's Square, with the center of commercial activity: Rialto. According to the chronicles of that time, towards the end of the twelfth century, the St. Mark's Square was a very cosmopolitan place, and it was not uncommon to hear conversations in Armenian, as well as other languages spoken by the merchants who were selling their wares. Indeed, near the reddish columns of the Basilica there are still graffiti scratched in Armenian by merchants, including names and at least one cross. The Armenian House later gave way to the Church of the Holy Cross, or Surp Khach in Armenian, which still exists and where the Mekhitarist fathers celebrate the Divine Liturgy the last Sunday of every month (a tradition that was observed until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020).

The commercial links between Venice and Armenia were so common that it cannot come as a surprise that the famous Venetian traveler Marco Polo also stayed in Armenia. 'Great Ermenia, says Polo, is itself a great province; and it begins at a city called Arzinga... It has many towns and castles...' We must also point out that his famous journey began in a port of the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia: Ayas, which Marco Polo defines as 'the door of Eastern countries'. At the time, large Venetian fleets periodically docked at Ayas and loaded a large variety of goods.

The first official ties between Venice and Armenia date back to this period too, with the exchange of ambassadors. A treaty dated December 1201, written in Armenian and Latin, granted the Venetians privileges for 'their trade and residence' in the kingdom of New Armenia. The last Venetian ambassador accredited to the court of Cilicia or New Armenia was Marino Grimani, in 1333. In 1375, the kingdom of Cilicia fell to the Mamluks.

The bonds between Venetians and Armenians are so close that the last queen of Armenia was the Venetian Caterina Corner, who inherited the Armenian and Cyprus crown by way of her marriage to James II of Lusignan (in Armenian, Lusinian), king of Cyprus, of a dynasty of Crusaders of French origin and heir to the Armenian crown. After the death of her husband, Caterina Corner, forced to abdicate, decided to return to Venice.

'Well escorted, you will therefore return to Venice, where all Venetians will receive you with the utmost honours and great celebrations. On the basin of St. Mark's, with the Bucintoro, the doge Agostino Barbarigo and the leading authorities, all the nobility with elegantly decorated

boats, and with barges and little boats, and the representatives of the various arts and the commoners in *burchi* and *burchielli* [wooden barges usually employed for the transport of merchandise], we read in "The Venice of the Armenians". This is the origin of a landmark event in Venice: "it will be from this manifestation of general jubilation that the historic regatta will be born" which has been celebrated in the city every year for five centuries.

## The Second and Third Periods

We can say that with the fall of the kingdom of Cilicia or New Armenia and the return of Caterina Corner to Venice, the first period of relations between Armenians and Venetians ends.

In the second period, the Armenian community of Venice is already richer and more integrated in the city. Venice was a city that Armenian traders favored in consideration of its proximity to their ancestral homeland and, more generally, to the Ottoman Empire, with which they had a very intense trade. At the time, the city, mainly thanks to Aldus Manutius, was a center of excellence in the press.

This is why it was normal for the first Armenian book to be printed in Venice: the "Friday Book," or *Ուրբաթագիրք* in Armenian (pronounced "Urpatakirk"). The book was printed in 1512, but the author's name is only known by a pseudonym. His real name is perhaps the greatest mystery in the history of Armenian publishing, as it is still unknown. The reason is that, due to the system of privileges that existed in Venice at the time, the author had to print his book in a semi-clandestine way. The book was mostly intended for merchants, and included advice, prayers to heal the sick, and passages from the Gospels. It was called the "Friday Book" because Friday was considered a day of bad luck.

This welcoming atmosphere for Armenians in Venice, coupled with the city's thriving publishing activity and rich cultural life, attracted an Armenian monk who was fleeing the increasingly hostile environment of the Ottoman Empire towards Armenians in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Three hundred years ago, in 1717, Mekhitar of Sebastea founded his monastic order in Venice, the Mekhitarist Congregation, which started a revolution among the Armenians. Thanks to its intense publishing activity, the Mekhitarist fathers renewed the Armenian language and culture, and perhaps saved the Armenian nation by making it universal, linked to the homeland but able to thrive outside of it, in any place where there was

an Armenian church and place of learning. The Armenian we speak today, especially Western Armenian, draws much of its linguistic wealth to do work done by the Congregation on the small and magnificent island of St. Lazarus. And then at the Armenian College Moorat-Raphael, which is located in the neighbourhood of Dorsoduro, the Mekhitarist fathers educated seminal generations of Armenian intellectuals –those who founded modern Armenian literature and culture, almost destroyed in the 1915 Genocide.

It would appear that the Armenian population of Venice began to decline more rapidly following Italian unification and the declining importance of Venice as a center of international trade. It is also necessary to factor in the assimilation after centuries of residence in a welcoming land.

Perhaps we can say that the third period began in 1997, when the Armenian College ceased to function and, in the absence of dozens of students, Venice was left with very few Armenians but with the vital presence, not only for Venice but for the entire Armenian nation, of the monastery of St. Lazarus, an ever-bright beacon for the Armenian nation.

Ray Rahman, an entrepreneur and formerly Wall Street banker, tended to judge foreign communities by the kind of wealth they tended to accumulate. He said that some communities are more inclined to accumulate portable wealth (gold, financial investments) while others buy real estate. Would it be far-fetched to say that the Armenians bought properties in the city because they had come to consider the city their home? Perhaps those generations of Armenians are now invisible because they have finally irrevocably integrated with Venetians and Venice, which they made their last port of call after a peripatetic existence conditioned by Armenian history.

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