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ARM RELIQUARY FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE ARMENIAN DIOCESE OF ROMANIA: ON THE PROBLEM OF LOCAL ARTISTIC INFLUENCES*

Key words: Armenian colonies, Armenian Diocese of Romania, ritual objects, reliquaries, arm reliquaries, Dexters, Cilicia.

Introduction

Among the types of reliquaries used in the Armenian Church, the Arm reliquary occupies an important place. A large number of examples of the latter have reached us, and they are preserved in various museums of Armenia and the world, in private collections, in Armenian communities. They are presented both with rich artistic decoration, with the use of complex silversmithing and goldsmithing techniques, precious stones, and with simpler solutions.

The article discusses the issue of the possible period of inclusion of Arm reliquaries in the Armenian Church, and presents an Arm reliquary preserved in the Armenian Diocese of Romania, which is being studied for the first time, emphasizing the problems of local cultural influences.

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The art works have never been studied earlier, except in 2012 when on the initiative of Bishop Datev Hakobian, the leader of the Armenian Diocese of Romania and Prof. Levon Chookaszian, Head of Yerevan State University Chair of Armenian Art History and Theory, the study of the collections started.

Observations on the Period and Conditions of Adoption of Arm Reliquaries by the Armenian Church

Actually, there are not many studies on Arm reliquaries in Armenology. But even in those cases, when they are studied, no reference has been made to the possible period of entry of this object into the ritual of the Armenian Church and the conditions contributing to it. Currently, there is a great interest in the phenomenon of "relic" in the world, due to which high-quality multifaceted studies by various scientists are available to help clarify many questions on the subject. Therefore, based on these studies, we will try to clarify the question that interests us, and offer our viewpoint on it.

As Caroline Walker Bynum and Paula Gerson noticed, the use of reliquaries in the form of parts of the human body was developed in the West approximately from the end of the 9th century, but gained more importance only from the 12th–13th centuries¹. Reliquaries in the form of a head, foot, hand and fingers can be met. The most common were heads and hands – the most expressive and communicative parts of the human body: the role of the eyes for communication, the importance of the mouth for speech, the hand for gesture². According to Cynthia Hahn, in the case of this type of reliquaries, first of all the function is important, and it is not necessary that the object correspond in its form to the part of the saint's body to which the enshrined relic refers³. For example, the Dexter makes the blessing gesture during the ritual more impressive⁴.

Reliquaries in the shape of body-parts are not widely used in the Armenian Church. Only the Dexter is used during various rituals: for example, the role of the Arm reliquary of St. Gregory the Illuminator on the blessing of the Holy Chrism, on the occasion of the ordination of Catholicos, the most important church festivals, as well as in dire moments for the country, etc. cannot be overestimated.

The Orthodox Christian Church does not use reliquaries in the form of body-parts. In the case of the Byzantine church, perhaps as a unique example can be

¹ Bynum, Gerson 1997, 4.

² Bynum, Gerson 1997, 5.

³ Hahn 1997, 20.

⁴ Hahn 2010, 166.

considered the Dexter of St. John the Baptist, currently kept in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul, which is not in its original form, but a late Italian work⁵.

According to Ioli Kalavrezou, hand-shaped reliquaries do not correspond to the Byzantine canon and are unusual. Similar reliquaries were avoided probably because, being as a shrine for the holy relic, they were either too similar to a real body part, or were close to a three-dimensional sculpture⁶. The Byzantines preferred to leave the bones exposed as a proof: a silver or gold band was attached to their ends, as well as to the joints, with a note indicating whose relic it was, and then they were placed in a box⁷.

The use of three-dimensional sculptures of saints was not welcome in the Armenian church either⁸. In this case, the question arises as to when and how it received arm reliquaries, many examples of which have reached us. The arm reliquary of St. Gregory the Illuminator occupies an important place among them. According to the legend, the relic of the Illuminator was enshrined in a reliquary in the shape of a right hand back in the 5th century⁹. In general, there are many references to the relics of the Illuminator in the sources. However, the right hand, as a separate relic, is mentioned much later than the 5th century, and as one of the main sanctities, only in the 12th century by Catholicos Nerses Shnoraly¹⁰. The reliquary in the form of an arm is not mentioned in any of the sources of the early period, whereas the reliquary of such important relic could not have gone unnoticed by historians¹¹. Therefore, the point of view that already in the 5th century the relics were enshrined in the reliquary in the form of the right hand, raises doubts. Considering the fact that the use of reliquaries in the form of human body-parts was formed in the West, not in the East, from the end of the

⁵ Kalavrezou 1997, 68–69; A. Ballyan also mentions the outline of Saint Marina's palm, see: Ballian 2012, 88.

⁶ Kalavrezou 1997, 68–69.

⁷ Kalavrezou 1997, 68–69.

⁸ Գիտ Արք. Աղանեանց 1902, 48:

⁹ Սահակյան 2002, 417; Ղարիբյան Ի., Գրիգոր Լուսավորչի աջը <https://lusamut.net/%D5%A3%D6%80%D5%AB%D5%A3%D5%B8%D6%80-%D5%AC%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%BD%D5%A1%D5%BE%D5%B8%D6%80%D5%B9%D5%AB-%D5%A1%D5%BB%D5%A8/> 26.01.2023 թ.

¹⁰ Թուղթ ընդհանրական 1865, 2:

¹¹ A detailed examination of written sources on the Dexter of St. Gregory the Illuminator see: Kouyoumjian 2005, 1–18.

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9th century and started to be considered more important in the 12th–13th centuries, we tend to think that the reliquary in the shape of the right hand was made later.

It is an established fact that in the 15th century the arm reliquary of the Illuminator already existed. The undeniable proof of this is the Dexter depicted in the scenes of the episcopal ordination (11 b) and the consecration of the Catholicos (50 b) of the 1461 in "Mashtots of Ordination" (M 4997) of Matenadaran after Mesrop Mashtots in Yerevan. Examining the scene, art historian Edda Vardanyan came to the conclusion that the Dexter of Gregory the Illuminator is depicted¹².

As mentioned above, the use of arm reliquaries was characteristic of the Western Church. So, we can assume that this phenomenon entered our church as a result of western influence. Accordingly, it is possible to put forward the point of view that the arm reliquary began to be used in our country around the time when certain movements, tendencies towards the Catholic Church began to be noticed in the Armenian Church. In this sense, the spread of similar reliquaries in the West coincides with the period when pro-Catholic moves began to be observed in Armenian Cilicia already in the late 12th and early 13th centuries¹³. It is also important that in the context of the aforementioned tendencies, changes took place in the Liturgical vestments of the Armenian Church, borrowing many elements from the Latin Church¹⁴. Therefore, the introduction of arm reliquary was also possible in that period.

Among the arguments supporting our hypothesis in favor of the Cilician period are also the earliest examples of arm reliquaries with a clear dating. Among them, the cross-reliquary with the dexter of John the Baptist kept in the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin was made in the city of Adana in Cilicia in the 14th century¹⁵. The other arm reliquary, the Dexter of St. Nicholas, is the oldest example with a definite date: according to the inscription it was "bind" in 1315, again in Cilicia¹⁶ (Museum of Catholicosate in Antelias, Lebanon).

¹² **Vardanyan** 2003–2004, 188.

¹³ **Mutafian** 1988, 408–411; **Հովհաննիսյան** 2018, 28–29:

¹⁴ See Տն. Ներսեսի Լամբրոնացոյ Տաքսոնի եպիսկոպոսի 1838, 203–242; See **Սմբատյան** 2015, 499–513:

¹⁵ **Բաբաջանյան** 2013, 99:

¹⁶ **Kouyoumjian** 2015, 179–181. In his last mentioned article, D. Kouyoumjian rejects the widespread "1325" reading of the year written in the inscription on the Dexter of St. Nicholas, and confirms the date 1315. On the stylistic and artistic analysis of the Dexter of St. Nicholas see: **Ballian** 2012, 87–93.

In the composition of the cross-reliquary with the Dexter of John the Baptist, the presentation of the hand in a relief seems to suggest the gradual development of the depiction of the Arm as a three-dimensional sculpture¹⁷, while the Dexter of St. Nicholas already represents the new ritual object completely with its characteristic features.

Another definition is noticeable in the Cilician examples, that is the principle of hiding the relic. Western reliquaries show the relic, and eastern reliquaries hide it (that is, they do not show the relic under the rock crystal typical of the west)¹⁸. Although the researchers note that Western reliquaries until the Gothic period also hid the relic¹⁹, by the time the Cilician examples were made, Western reliquaries were already "opened". This circumstance also indicates that the type of object was still new in our environment: despite its Western form, it remained connected to local principles, forming it as a synthesis of Western and Eastern traditions. Later, the vast majority of arm reliquaries that have come down to us already display the relic in a visible place of the object, mostly on the forearm, under a piece of rock crystal, completely in accordance with the Western tradition. Despite this, the arm reliquary has completely become an inseparable part of the ritual items of the Armenian Church, fully bearing the features and characteristics of the Armenian art in its artistic decoration.

The given justifications can be considered as a sufficient basis for regarding the penetration of arm reliquaries into the Armenian Church through the Cilician environment. Later, if more arguments are found, this hypothesis can either be fully substantiated or denied. It also follows from the above discussed, that A. Babajanyan's opinion, according to which the initial type of reliquaries in the Armenian Church were the boxes made in the shape of body-parts of the saint, can be challenged²⁰.

Arm Reliquary of the Armenian Diocese of Romania

Only two arm reliquaries are preserved in the Armenian Diocese of Romania, both of which are local works. One of them was made quite recently, the other is a work of the 19th century (No. 117), which we will consider in the article.

¹⁷ This type, with some change, is found later, see: Landau, Marteen van Lint 2013, 248.

¹⁸ Стерлигова 2000, 29.

¹⁹ Hahn 2012, 24; Kilgore 2017, 14.

²⁰ Բաբայանյան 2013, 97:

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Both the Arm reliquaries preserve the relics of John the Baptist²¹. After Saint Gregory the Illuminator enshrined the relics of John the Baptist in the Innakyan (St. Karapet) monastery of Mush, the saint began to be seen as the heavenly protector of the Armenian world²². So it is not at all surprising that the relics related to him prevail in the Armenian Church.

Contrary to examples made by the Armenian masters and preserved in the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, as well as in other museums, the arm reliquary of the Holy Archangels Church in Bucharest is not rich in its design (ill. 1, 2). It is not known for certain whether the craftsman who made the arm was an Armenian or not²³. Perhaps we can only assume judging from the Armenian writing. However, the reliquary could have been made by one craftsman and the inscription written by another. According to the inscription, the object was donated in 1892. It is not mentioned which church it was dedicated to, but *Iprail*, the present-day city of Braila in Romania, is mentioned, where the Armenian Saint Mary Church is still functioning.

The restrained decoration of the Dexter, presented in a blessing gesture typical of the Armenian church, is complemented by overlapping silver plates in the wrist and elbow areas, which are chased with a stylized simplified baroque-shaped floral ornament. The wrist plate depicts a Latin cross on the palm side, as the center of the composition. The donative inscription placed between the plates completely covering the outer surface of the forearm, also plays a designing role. The circular relic cavity, covered with a crystal glass and displaying the relic, is placed on the forearm. In addition to the relic, grains of pearl and green stone, perhaps emerald, can be seen in the cavity. The master worked out the fingers and nails in detail, giving them as realistic a look as possible. Although the use of arm reliquaries is not widespread in the Romanian church²⁴, as in the Armenian or Western churches, and in this case it is not known who the master is, the quality of the work shows that the latter was well acquainted with the principles of making the arm reliquaries.

²¹ There is no indication of the contained relic on the object. The information about it was provided by Bishop Datev Hakobian, head of the Diocese of Armenian Church in Romania.

²² Օրմանեան 2001, 44:

²³ The information about Armenian silversmiths or jewelers in Romania is fragmentary and unclear.

²⁴ Reliquaries in the form of right and left hands of 1641–1646 are known. See: Dobjanschi, Cernea, Tănăsioiu 2008, 182–183.

Chased ribbons, the donative inscription and the cavity of relics, create a rhythm and balance on a smooth, detail-free surface, serving as the main means of expression alternating with each other.

The donative inscription placed horizontally is perhaps a unique demonstration among the Armenian arm reliquaries. Anyway, we don't know any other example yet. In addition to the form of installation, it plays a major role in the composition, which is also not typical for arm reliquaries. In the compositions of the examples known to us, the inscriptions, as a rule, play a secondary role, giving way to either scenes from the life of the saint or luxurious designs. Most likely, the master followed the opinion of the donor in choosing the place of the donative inscription.

In general, the decoration of the object is completely influenced by the local culture and has moved away from the characteristic features of Armenian art. The artistic design of the arm reliquary, with its free, flat surfaces and relatively few ornaments, represents the style that became characteristic of Romanian silversmithing in the 19th century, when the emphasis began to be placed on the form of the object, defeating the ornament²⁵. This style followed the post-Brancovian* style characterized by luxurious, lush floral motifs, introducing new, fresh artistic preferences, influenced by the Empire style popular in Europe²⁶.

Conclusion

Summarising, we can record that the arm reliquary preserved in the collections of the Armenian diocese of Romania despite its simple artistic solutions, comes to complete another link in the range of similar reliquaries with various designs of the Armenian Church. Although the master is not known, and

²⁵ Simion 1997, 35–36.

* In the second half of the 17th century, significant changes were also made in the local Romanian art, as in the art of the territory of Ottoman Empire, Iran, Russia and Christian East in general. The Brancovan style was a combination of Renaissance and Byzantium, Baroque and Orientalism, echoes of Western rococo and borrowings of iconographic models from the Balkans or from Russia and Ukraine. Lush plant and floral motifs became characteristic of the artistic interpretation of decorative-applied art samples. This manifestation of art and culture entered the history of Romanian art called "Brancovian style", named after the Wallachian Prince Constantin Brancovianu of the same period, and the subsequent slightly simplified phase – "post-Brancovian". See: Văetiși A. Brancovan Art https://www.academia.edu/20315722/Brancovan_Art_The_last_synthesis_in_Romanian_Art. 7, 33, 140 (seen 21. 03. 2021).

²⁶ Simion 1997, 35.

the influence of the local Romanian art is evident in the artistic solution of the object, the example fully complies with the canon of the Armenian Church. The fact that the arm reliquary appears in these collections, indicates that, despite being in a Christian country where similar objects do not occupy a place in the ritual, the Armenian church has preserved the accepted series of ritual objects typical of itself, without assimilating into the local tradition.

As for the appearance of Arm reliquaries, having found their permanent place in the ritual of the Armenian Church, they are the result of the influence of the Western Church, introduced not earlier than the Cilician period. Before that, as we conclude, other, most likely Byzantine or unknown local traditions of presenting the right hands of saints* were followed.

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Տն. Ներսեսի Լամբրոնացոյ Տարսնի եպիսկոպոսի Ատենաբանութիւն եւ թուղթ եւ ճառք. 1838, Ի Վենետիկ, Ս. Ղազար, 244 էջ:

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ՎԱՐԴԱՆՅԱՆ Մ.

Ամփոփում

Քանայի բառեր¹ հայկական գաղթօջախներ, Ռումինիայի հայոց թեմ, ծիսական իրեր, մասանց պահարաններ, մասանց աջ-պահարաններ, աջեր, Կիլիկիա:

Հայոց եկեղեցում մարմնի մասերի ձև ունեցող մասանց պահարանները լայն գործածություն չունեն: Միայն աջերն են, որ միշտ կիրառվում են տարբեր ծեսերի ժամանակ: Հայտնի է, որ դրանց գործածությունը ձևավորվել է արևմուտքում, թերևս IX դարի վերջից, բայց առավել կարևորում է ստացել միայն XII–XIII դարերից սկսած:

Քանի որ աջ-պահարանների գործածությունը բնորոշ էր Արևմտյան եկեղեցուն, այս երևույթը ենթադրաբար մեր եկեղեցի է ներթափանցել արևմտյան ազդեցության արդյունքում: Այս առումով, մասանց նմանատիպ պահարանների տարածումն Արևմուտքում վերաբերում է այն ժամանակաշրջանին, երբ կաթոլիկամետ քայլեր սկսեցին դիտվել Հայկական Կիլիկիայում՝ արդեն XII դարի վերջին և XIII դարի սկզբին: Վերոհիշյալ հակվածությունների համատեքստում փոփոխություններ տեղի ունեցան Հայոց եկեղեցու սպասավորների ծիսական հագուստի մեջ՝ փոխառվեցին Լատին եկեղեցու բազմաթիվ տարրեր: Հետևաբար աջ-պահարանի ներմուծումը նույնպես հնարավոր էր այս շրջանում, մանավանդ, որ հստակ թվագրությամբ աջ-պահարանների ամենավաղ պահպանված օրինակները նույնպես պատրաստվել են Կիլիկիայում՝ XIV դարում:

Ռումինիայի հայոց թեմում պահվող՝ XIX դարում պատրաստված աջն ամփոփում է Սուրբ Հովհաննես Կարապետի մասունքը: Ըստ արձանագրության, առարկան նվիրաբերվել է 1892 թվականին: Հայտնի չէ աջը պատրաստող վարպետը, սակայն ակնհայտ է որ վերջինս քաջաձանոթ է եղել աջ-պահարանների պատրաստման սկզբունքներին: Առարկայի հարդարանքն ամ-

բողջվին կրում է տեղական մշակույթի ազդեցությունը և հեռու է հայ արվեստի ավանդույթներից: Աջ-սահարանի գեղարվեստական ձևավորումը իր ազատ, հարթ մակերեսներով, համեմատաբար քիչ զարդանախշերով ներկայացնում է XIX դարի ումինական արժաթագործությանը բնորոշ ոճը, երբ շեշտը սկսեց դրվել առարկայի ձևի վրա:

РЕЛИКВАРИЙ-ДЕСНИЦА ИЗ СОБРАНИЯ АРМЯНСКОЙ ЕПАРХИИ РУМЫНИИ: О ЛОКАЛЬНЫХ ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННЫХ ВЛИЯНИЯХ

ВАРДАНЯН М.

Резюме

Ключевые слова: армянские колонии, армянская епархия Румынии, ритуальные предметы, реликварий с Десницей, реликварии, Десницы, Киликия.

Реликварии в виде частей тела не получили широкого распространения в Армянской церкви. Во время различных ритуалов использовались только Десницы. Известно, что они стали использоваться на западе примерно с конца IX века, но большее распространение получили лишь с XII–XIII веков.

Поскольку это было характерно для западной церкви, предполагается, что наша церковь ввела в обиход данный тип реликвариев в результате западного влияния. Распространение подобных реликвариев на Западе совпадает с периодом, когда в Армянской Киликии уже в конце XII и начале XIII веков стали соблюдаться прокатолические традиции. В контексте указанных тенденций произошли изменения в одежде служителей Армянской церкви, многие элементы были заимствованы из латинской церкви. Поэтому использование Десницы в церковных ритуалах также было возможно в этот период, тем более что сохранившиеся самые ранние образцы Десницы с четкой датировкой также были сделаны в Киликии в XIV веке.

В Деснице XIX века, хранящейся в Армянской епархии Румынии, находятся мощи святого Иоанна Крестителя. Согласно дарственной надписи, Десница была преподнесена в дар в 1892 году. Мастер, изготовивший

Arm Reliquary from the Collection of the Armenian Diocese of Romania...

Десницу, неизвестен, но очевидно, что он был хорошо знаком с принципами изготовления подобных предметов. Элементы декорировки Десницы нехарактерны для армянского искусства. Художественный замысел Десницы с ее свободными, гладкими поверхностями и сравнительно небольшим количеством орнаментов характерен для румынского серебряного дела XIX века.



**No. 117. Arm
reliquary, 19th
century (before
1892), Romania.
Armenian Church of
Holy Archangels,
Bucharest, Romania.
Photo: Armenian
Archbishopric of
Romania.**

**No. 117. Arm
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Armenian Church
of Holy
Archangels,
Bucharest,
Romania.
Reverse side.
Armenian
Archbishopric of
Romania.**

