

A *Gusan* Gestalt Shift

Differing Perceptions of the Bard in Movsēs Daskhurants'i's History of the Caucasian Albanians

▼ **ABSTRACT** This paper seeks to reinscribe the debate regarding the Christianisation of the *gusans* (bards), from one concerned with an essentialised notion of “Christian-ness” to one which better accounts for the multifarious notions of “Christian” in medieval Armenia. That is, the contrary conceptions of the *gusan*, in literary and material sources, are surveyed and taxonomised. By way of a close reading of Movsēs Daskhurants'i's *History of the Caucasian Albanians*, supplemented by an exegesis of the *gusan* in other canonical Armenian histories, the *gusan*, as a polemical category in clerical literature, is shown to represent the antithesis of Christian piety. However, the spoor of a more general assimilation of the *gusan* into Christian society, specifically that of the gentry and laypeople, is evidenced by other material sources and texts. The intention of this paper is to offer a new approach with which to think about the *gusan*, and Armenia's pre-Christian heritage writ large.

▼ **KEYWORDS** *gusans*, Daskhurants'i, Caucasian Albania, oral tradition, Christianisation, pre-Christian Armenia.

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1. Introduction

Armenia's medieval historians were tightrope-walkers *par excellence*, their writings negotiating the tension of reliance between the two sources of the early Armenian historical record — epic tradition and church chronicle (Van Lint 2012, 187). The two tended toward contraries: oral vs written, pagan vs Christian, Iranising vs Hel-

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lenising, demotic vs haute.¹ As the fifth-century development of the written language by St Mesrop Mashtots' was coextensive with evangelisation efforts, early Armenian letters were of an unimpeachably Christian aspect (Thomson 1996, 495). Naturally, this corpus of literature was *partis pris*. In its piety, it was ill-representative of its own milieu, one still intimate with Parthian mores. And, in matters of strict chronology, it did not bear witness to pagan Armenia, nor to the century that followed King Trdat's conversion (Van Lint 2012, 180). The epic tradition, one that predated Christianity and continued to be cultivated by the *gusans* (bards or entertainers) long into the Middle Ages, was both a wellspring of pre-Christian and early Christian memory and reflective of Armenia's continued cultural proximity to Iran. Thus, historians, at once desirous of faithfully forging the image of the Armenian past, and heavily influenced by ecclesiastical narratives, were unsure whether and to what extent to make use of *gusan* odes.² Herein lies the tension of reliance. However, scholarship on the *gusans* has recently inverted this form of inquiry. Rather than investigating the extent to which medieval historians drew from bardic tales, an approach implicitly conceiving of the *gusans* as the fixed antithesis of ecclesiastical chroniclers, scholars have begun analysing the Christianisation of the *gusans* themselves (Van Lint 2012, 188–90).

In this pursuit, Movsēs Daskhurants'i's (Kaghankatuats'i's) lesser-studied *History of the Caucasian Albanians* has become the focus. A hybrid work, of which Daskhurants'i is the compiler and editor if not author, certain of its passages — the eponymous Juanshēr cycle — are conjectured to be products of *gusans* from the court of Mihrānid noble Juanshēr,³ dated to the mid- to late seventh century, with a *terminus ante quem* at 682 CE (Howard-Johnston 2010, 104).⁴ These sections, singing in the bard's voice, seemingly depart from *gusan*-calumniating literary tropes, both praising Juanshēr as an upright Christian ruler while also detailing his love for minstrelsy. They even include an acrostic lamentation (*oghbk'*) intoned over his grave, one heavy with Christian sensibility and attributed to a certain court-poet Dawt'ak. The Juanshēr cycle has been referenced as “the result of the Christianization of Armenian culture, having ‘sloughed off’ its ‘patrimonial culture’” — that is to say, the first Christianised *gusans* (Van Lint 2012, 190). This paper contends such a sublation of *gusan* and Gospel should be understood more tentatively. Through both a comparative analysis of the treatment of minstrelsy in *The History of the Caucasian Albanians* vis-à-vis other canonical histories, and a close reading of the Juanshēr cycle,

1 NB: These contraries are to be read with our own native skepticism. Of course certain sources, foremost the *Buzandaran*, defy such a basic taxonomy. However, this author maintains that these binaries have heuristic value and produce a more spruce and succinct language.

2 Perhaps the most famous instance of this ambivalence can be found in the section Ի Պարսից Առասպելաց in the final pages of book 1 of Movsēs Khorenats'i's *History*. The *Patmahayr* addresses his patron, writing Չի՞նչ քեզ առ այսոքիկ կարաւտուրիւն առասպելք սուտք, կամ զի՞նչ պէտք անմիտ եւ անհանճար բանից յարմարանք: Yet, in spite of his posturing, he continues to draw from these sung epics. See Movsēs Khorenats'i 1913, 89.

3 On confusion over the naming of the Mihrānid line in Daskhurants'i's *History*, see Vacca 2017, 130–32. Toumanoff clarifies the Albanian succession, the Mihrānid line of Gardman replacing the Arsacids in 628, with Varaz Grigor, the father of Juanshēr, ascending to the throne; see Toumanoff 1961, 99.

4 For a further discussion of dating Daskhurants'i's *History*, see Howard-Johnston 2020, 360.

it will be argued that Daskhurants' *History* actually reproduces church literature's caricature of the un-Christian *gusan*. That is, as a polemical category, the *gusan* has not been Christianised. However, the text's diversity of sources, and concomitant inconsistencies, make a unified hermeneutics of the *gusan* quite difficult. Thus, this paper's purpose is to reinscribe the debate concerning *gusans* from one treating their "Christianisation" in absolute terms, to one dealing with the complexities and contradictions manifest in medieval Armenian notions of what constitutes a Christian.

2. Literary Representations of the *Gusan*

Like their songs, the *gusans* have a history quite literally *avant la lettre*. The word *gusan* comes from the Parthian *gōsān*, and so too does the *gusan's* poetic inheritance, centuries of cultural exchange with Persia resulting in Iranian epic tales grafting onto the Armenian folk tradition. The meaning of the term *gusan* is slippery, and it is semantically misleading to understand it solely as "bard". As observed by Mary Boyce, medieval Armenian writers used *gusan* to refer to any "entertainer" — be it a singer, court-poet, or buffoon (Boyce 1957, 13). The earliest mentions of the word *gusan* in Armenian sources are from three Old Testament passages. Ecclesiastes ii, 8 reads, "I got me male-singers (*gusans*) and female-singers",⁵ Psalm lxvii, 26 follows, "the princes went forth, giving thanks, and in their midst [were] *gusans* and panegyrists",⁶ and 2 Samuel xix, 35 questions, "Can I hear any more the voice of singing-men (*gusanats'*) and women?"⁷.⁸ In the Bible, *gusans* are merely male troubadour-types. However, negative uses of the word, and less flattering representations of the *gusan's* vocation, soon followed. In Hovhannēs Mandakuni's *Admonitory Sermons* (*Ճարձկանական խոսքեր*) xiii, a fifth-century text, the author curses "dissolute and *gusan*-mad drunkards", cads who sacrifice salvation for *gusan* and grape (Boyce 1957, 14). Vardan Arewelc'i's *Commentary on Genesis* takes after Mandakuni, the exegete asserting that "the grandsons of Cain invented the art of the *gusan*, and the granddaughters rouge and Kohl" (Boyce 1957, 14). In both instances, the *gusan* signifies fleshpot and fleshly pleasure — the fallen world that exists beyond the cloister's walls. *Gusan*, then, is a rhetorical proxy, one used by clerical commentators to refer to those things in Armenian culture which are distinctly un-Christian and thus not becoming of the priestly class.

Boyce also notes that *gusan* was used by translators of the Hellenising School as a cognate for the Greek *μῦθος*. Its concomitant associations with the theater produce yet another genre of pejorative usage targeting lay-entertainment. In the *vita* of St Porphyrius, for example, the holy man is spoken of as a quondam "diabolical singer-*gusan*" (Boyce 1957, 14). His improbable ascent, from fallen *gusan*-hood to

5 Armenian Bible 1895: Արարի ինձ գուսանս եւ երգեցիկս.

6 *ibid.*: Կանխեցին իշխանք հանել զօրհնութիւն, ի մէջ գուսանաց եւ գովչաց.

7 *ibid.*: Կամ թէ լսիցե՞մ տակաւին զձայն գուսանաց եւ վարձակաց.

8 Only two of these Biblical pericopes were mentioned, those from 2 Samuel and Ecclesiastes, in Boyce 1957, 13.

divine glory, is what merits a hagiography. And such perspectives do not show signs of disappearing by the late medieval period, let alone by the time of Dawt'ak. As late as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, pastors were begging their flocks to repent with words such as these: "I have sinned by (attending) comedies, I have sinned by entertaining *gusans*" (Boyce 1957, 15).⁹ As a matter of foregrounding the discussion of Daskhurants'i, it should be noted that the writings of many churchmen, long after Juanshēr's reign and the collation of the *History of the Caucasian Albanians*, continued to position the *gusan* as someone antithetical to Christian values — a shibboleth of error.

The clergy's fear of the corruption caused by the *gusan* was not only expressed rhetorically, but also instantiated itself in canon law. Legal texts and thou-shalt-nots of such figures as the twelfth-century scholar Mkhit'ar Gosh sought to limit the presence of *gusans* within clerical precincts (Mxit'ar Goš 2000, 254). Referring to the rights of traveling squires to lodge at monasteries, Mkhit'ar groans, "with minstrels (*gusans*) and singing-girls they feast in the house of holiness and worship, which is horrible for Christians to hear, let alone see".¹⁰

Clearly, then, there is a disagreement between the church and the nobility regarding the place of *gusans*. The cleric makes it most evident that a *Christian*, however that may be interpreted, must forswear these diversions. Such wrangles between the aristocracy and the clergy seem to have been long standing. Deliberations at the Fourth Council of Dvin (648 CE) resulted in a similar writ prohibiting *azats* (lesser nobility) from living in monasteries and sullying them with *gusans*.¹¹ The drafting of these anti-*gusan* strictures not only reveals the church's belief in the ungodliness of the vocation but also their anxiety about the *gusans*' sustained popularity amongst the upper classes.¹² These seventh-century developments in Armenian canon law were directly relevant to the Caucasian episteme in which Juanshēr ruled,¹³ the Armenian primate possessing great influence over the Albanian See.¹⁴ They are also

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- 9 Also see Vardan Arewelts'i, above, and Mkhit'ar Gosh, below, for late medieval perspectives on the *gusans*.
- 10 Mkhit'ar Gosh 1975, 385: Եւ գուսանաւք եւ վարձակաւք ի սրբութեան եւ ի պաշտամանց տուոնն ընթրիլս ուտեն, որ սոսկալի է քրիստոնէից լսել, թող թէ տեսանել.
- 11 For information on the anti-*gusan* rulings at Dvin see endnotes in P'awstos Buzand 1989, 529.
- 12 It can be surmised that *gusans* appealed across social castes, illiterates enjoying the sung epics, and wealthy *nakharar* courts patronising *gusan* composition and performance. For information on the importance of *gusans* in *nakharar* courts see *ibid*.
- 13 A note here must be made of the ethnic situation in Albania in the fourth through eleventh centuries. Albania was heterogeneous, with the Kura River dictating (very roughly) its main ethnic divide, its right bank being majority Armenian-speaking and left bank being majority Albanian-speaking. The shift of the Marzpanate's administration from Chor (Derbend) to Partaw in 552 resulted in an Armenification of the Albanian elite. Furthermore, a textual analysis of "The Tale of Vach'agan" from Daskhurants'i, documents from the early Catholicosate of Partaw, and the Canons of Aghuen indicate that Armenian was long the primary language of the church hierarchy. The seventh century, that of Juanshēr, can be characterised by a de-ethnisation and Armenification of the remaining Albanian element on the Kura's right bank. A similar Georgianisation can be observed on the left bank during this period, a potential object of future study for this author; see Hakobyan 2023, 482–83.
- 14 Despite a brief schism in the sixth century between the Armenian See and the churches of Albania and Siwnik' (Syunik), the churches remained in dogmatic communion. Following the Arab invasions, that is, during the reign of Juanshēr, a detente occurred. The Albanian church officially returned to the bosom of the Armenian See with the 704 Council of Partaw. Furthermore, due to the region's complex ethnic and political make-up,

redolent of an anti-*gusan* canon recorded in book 1 of Daskhurants'i's *History*, from amongst those devised by the church of Albania at the Council of Aghuen (488 CE).¹⁵ The law, canon number twelve, reads: "Of those who mourn for the dead, let the head of the household and the *gusans* be bound, brought to the royal court, and punished; and let not their families dare to lament afterwards"¹⁶ (Movsēs Dasxurançi 1961, 52). This writ prohibits the employment of *gusans* as professional lamenters. Their histrionics-for-hire were frowned upon by the Albanian clergy. However, with illuminating irony, a few dozen pages later in the *History* one finds the court-poet Dawt'ak's elegy to Juanshēr. It is unlikely that there was a change in church law regarding minstrelsy in the intervening centuries between the Council of Aghuen and Juanshēr's reign, especially given the anti-*gusan* ruling at the Fourth Council of Dvin. This bare inconsistency within the text, anathematising those who grieve with *gusans* and then later including a *gusan*-penned lament, is a foretaste of the deeper epistemic complexities within *The History of the Caucasian Albanians*. Already, one must acknowledge that multiple, contradictory conceptions of "Christian" are at play within the work.

The *gusan* as a signifier of sin is a trope that recurs across the canonical Armenian chronicles. In *The Epic Histories*, a fifth-century text attributed to P'awstos Buzand, which narrates Armenian history from the death of Trdat (around 330 CE) to the division of Armenia in 387 CE, *gusans* appear three times. In each instance, they create a calamitous mise-en-scène. In the first, the two erring sons of St Husik — Pap and At'anaginēs — drink wine in the bishop's residence "with harlots, singing girls, *gusans*, and buffoon, scorning the holy and consecrated place and trampling it underfoot" (P'awstos Buzand 1989, 93–94).¹⁷ The two brothers, minutes into their reverie, are struck down by God. *Gusans*, like harlots, are marks of wickedness and augers of damnation. In another scene, Arshak, the king of Armenia who is captive of the Persians,¹⁸ sits upon a banqueting couch and is "gladdened with *gusans*" (P'awstos Buzand 1989, 199). However, this diversion soon agonises him, and he grabs a coring knife and commits suicide. Foregrounded are both the ignobility of the king, and the

and the strong presence of Armenians on the right bank of the Kura, particularly in Gardman and Partaw, the centers of seventh-century Albanian administrative and ecclesiastical authority, the Church of Albania can never be considered to have been completely out of the umbra of the Armenian church. Finally, Juanshēr himself, per Daskhurants'i, sought to consolidate the position of the Armenian Church in Albania, see Dum-Tragut 2023, 304, 312–13, 318.

15 The canons of the council of Aghuen, "Vach'agan's canons", bear strong resemblance to those of the Armenian councils of Ashtishat (356) and Shahapivan (444), indicating strong Armeno-Albanian ecclesiastical unity during the fourth and fifth centuries, see *ibid.*, 299.

16 Movsēs Kaghankatuats'i 2010, 132: Եւ այնք որ կոծ դնեն, գտանուտէրն եւ զգուսանսն կապեցսն եւ դուռն արքունի տարցն եւ պատուհաս ի վերայ դիցն, եւ ընտանիքն զհետ արտասուել մի իշխեցսն.

17 P'awstos Buzand 2003, 303: Եւ ըմպէին անդ զինի բոգաւք եւ վարձակաւք եւ գուսանաւք եւ կատակաւք, զսուրբ եւ զնուիրեալ տեղաւքն քամահեալ՝ կոխան առնէին. Such a scene recalls the law code of Mkhit'ar Gosh and the rulings of the Fourth Council of Dvin, suggesting that nobles cavorting with *gusans* in place of prayer was not an uncommon occurrence.

18 *ibid.*, 389: Եւ եղ առաջին նորա ընթրիս ըստ օրինաց թագաւորաց, եւ եղ առաջին նորա զինի որպէս օրէն էր թագաւորացն. սթափեաց զնա, եւ մխիթարեաց, եւ ուրախ առնէր զնա գուսանաւք.

uselessness of the ersatz-joy provided by the *gusans*' wine-song.¹⁹ In the final tableau of *The Epic Histories*, one redolent of Juanshēr's assassination in Daskhurants'i's narrative, the evil king Pap, having recently executed the God-fearing Catholicos Nersēs, sits with a Roman courtly assembly holding "a festive cup of wine in his hand" and gazing "upon the varied troop of *gusans*". Little does he know that he is caught in an intrigue, soon to be assassinated the minute he puts the cup to his mouth and fixes his eyes on the *gusans* (P'awstos Buzand 1989, 214).²⁰ Pap, under whose suzerainty the country "turned back to the ancient worship of demons" (212, in reference, perhaps, to his Arianism), is a victim of his own regime of voluptuousness. The *gusans* are again a centerpiece of the dramatic representation of the impious king. That is, they are a rhetorical trope, both marks of weakness and portents of woe.

This same notion of the un-Christian *gusan* exists in less overt ways in other histories. Through detecting these more subterranean critiques of the *gusan*'s practice, one can better grasp the signifiers that refer to, or connote, the *gusan*. In the mournful conclusion of Movsēs Khorenats'i's *History*, a work of much-debated provenance, limning Armenian history from Creation down to the death of Mesrop Mashtots' in 440, the writer complains that the post-Gregoriid clergy, in addition to being proud, slothful, frivolous, etc., are "lovers of buffoonery" (*katakergut'eants'*) (Moses Khorenats'i 2006, 348).²¹ *Katakergut'iwn*, commonly translated as "comedy", connotes the madness of burlesque theater. For Khorenats'i, it is a profane pastime, one wholly improper for the God-fearing clergy. This excoriation of lay-entertainment, as glossed by Boyce's philological syzygy of *gusan*/μῦθος, reflects the image of the un-Christian *gusan*.²² Meanwhile, Ghazar P'arpets'i's *History*, written around the turn of the sixth century but chronicling the events of the fourth and fifth centuries, has an even more subtle invective. In one scene, the Mamikonean nobleman Vasak, having finished spying on the Persian army, pointedly mocks the *shahanshah*'s soldiers for being "donkey-driving poetasters" (*k'ert'ak'agh ishavarean*),²³ pagan yokels who spend their time story-telling instead of preparing for battle (Łazar P'arpec'i 1991, 178). Redolent of the negative connotation of the term *katakergut'iwn*, this inventive passage goes even further, suggesting the Persians' lack of *k'ajut'iwn* ("valiancy, daring")²⁴

19 Such scenes represent the nobleman's loss of *p'ark'* (փառք) and *k'ajut'iwn* (քաջութիւն), terms under the umbra of Persianate influence, which signify an individual's divine right to rule. Roughly, *p'ark'* (like the *farr* of the *Shahnameh*) corresponds to glory and *k'ajut'iwn* to valiancy, daring. For glosses of those words and a brief commentary on their pre-Christian inheritance, see Garsoïan's endnotes in P'awstos Buzand 1989, 534–35, 552.

20 P'awstos Buzand 2003, 402: Եւ մինչ ղեռ թագաւորն Պապ զուրախութեան զինին ունէր ի մատունս իւր, եւ նայէր ընդ պէսպէս ամբոյս զուսանացն, ահեակ ձեռամբն յարմուկն՝ յոր յեղեակ բազմեալ էր, ունէր տաշտ ոսկի ի մատունս իւր, իսկ աջ ձեռնն եղեալ էր ի դաստապան նրանին, զոր կապեալ էր յաջու ազդերն իւրում. եւ մինչ ղեռ բերանն ի բաժակին էր յըմպելն, եւ աչաւքն յառաջ կոյս պշուցեալ հայեր ընդ պէսպէս ամբոյս զուսանացն, հրաման լինէր ականարկելով զաւրացն Յունաց.

21 Movsēs Khorenats'i 1913, 364: Վինակաւորք հպարտք, դատարկակացք, գրարանք, ծոյրք, ատեցողք, արուեստից եւ վարդապետական բանից, սիրողք վաճառաց եւ կատակերգութեանց.

22 Cf. the grouping of the *katak* ("jokester" or "buffoon") with the *gusan* by Buzand (footnote 17). Also note the occurrence of the term *katakagusan* ("comedic bard", "jongleur"), see Acharyan 1977, vol. 1, 598.

23 Ghazar P'arpets'i 2003, 2318: Եւ եկեալ քաջն ի գունդն հայոց՝ պատմեաց նոցա, թէ գունդ բազում է, բայց յորովք ի նոսա անպիտանք են եւ քերթաքաղ իշաւարեան.

24 Cf. footnote 19.

and foreshadowing their defeat. Across these various canonical histories and church documents, the caricature of the *gusan* unfolds: a portrait of impiety, indolence, and foreign influence. With this genealogy of the image of the un-Christian *gusan* in Armenian literature, and a philological precis of corresponding polemical vocabulary (comedy, burlesque, etc.), one can better undertake an archeology of their representation in Movsēs Daskhurants’i’s work.

3. Daskhurants’i’s *History of the Caucasian Albanians*

Daskhurants’i’s *History of the Caucasian Albanians* is an assemblage of texts, which preoccupies itself with the regional history of Caucasian Albania, a Christian kingdom whose lands lay on the east and west banks of the Kura River.²⁵ However, as a work of prose, Daskhurants’i’s *History* self-consciously constitutes itself within the Armenian literary milieu, explicitly responding to past works of Armenian historiography (Dowsett 1962, 263).²⁶ The text itself was well-known to later Armenian writers.²⁷ While it was compiled anywhere between the late tenth and early twelfth centuries, it includes many excerpts written in the seventh century (Howard-Johnston 2010, 106). Among these seventh-century passages is the Juanshēr cycle, which comprises part of the contents of book 2. Aleksan Hakobyan argues that one can distinguish between the Juanshēr cycle and the other portions of the text on the basis of genre. Where the rest of the *History* is written in the desiccated prose of the chronicler, the Juanshēr cycle is mannered, romantic, and digressive. Yet, although there is a continuity in theme and sensibility across the Juanshēr cycle, there are also noticeable stylistic variations within it. One section makes liberal use of simile, another biblical quotation, yet another classical allusion. Thus, Hakobyan splits the romance into four “clusters”, each by a different author, of whom one, Dawt’ak, is named (Howard-Johnston 2010, 108–09).²⁸ This paper will not concern itself with distinctions between these clusters. However, one must recognise the fragmentary nature of Daskhurants’i’s collation, both within the Juanshēr cycle and across the entire *History*. Indeed, in

25 Albania also had its own autochthonous language, known only by a few inscriptions and two palimpsests from St Catherine’s Monastery, which reveal Biblical pericopes. The pericopes for the most part indicate a heavy reliance upon the Armenian Bible — for example, a mirroring of the peculiar rendering of the three languages of the cross as Hebrew, Dalmatian (as opposed to “Roman” in the Greek, Syriac, and Georgian versions), and Greek. The relative lack of Albanian textual sources indicates that Armenian remained the primary language of clerical and administrative affairs, especially after the shift of power from Derbend to Partaw and Gardman in the sixth century; see footnote 15 and, for more on the Albanian language specifically, Gippert 2023, 99, 111–12.

26 Daskhurants’i liberally draws from the Armenian historiographical tradition, following Eghishē, Khorenats’i, the Armenian version of Hippolytus, and epitomising Agat’angelos; see Movsēs Dasxuranc’i 1961, 1, 9, 21 (the footnotes), and Howard-Johnston 2020, 353.

27 Daskhurants’i’s history was known amongst other Armenian historians, including Ukhtanēs, Step’anos Ōrbelean, Mkhit’ar Gosh, Mkhit’ar Ayrivanets’i, and Kirakos Gandzakets’i, with Gandzakets’i and Gosh disagreeing over the author’s toponymic, Kirakos referencing him as Kaghankatuats’i, and Mkhit’ar as Daskhurants’i; see Movsēs Dasxuranc’i 1961, xvii–xviii.

28 Ultimately from Hakobyan 1987, 203–07.

its kaleidoscopic form, it might be better reflective of the manifold perspectives on Christianity and minstrelsy in the medieval Caucasus.

As exemplified by the inconsistency between the dictate of the twelfth canon of the Council of Aghuen and Dawt'ak's public lamentation over Juanshēr, the hermeneutics of the *gusan* in Daskhurants'i's *History* is knotted. Although the Juanshēr cycle's voice is that of the bard, it, ironically, replicates the anti-*gusan* comportment of church scrivenings and canonical histories. Various situations meant to illuminate the piety of Juanshēr do so by forging his image contra that of the *gusan*-lover. Tired of fighting on behalf of the Persians, Juanshēr writes to Constans II in the hope of becoming a vassal of Rome (Movsēs Dasxurançi 1961, 113–16). Receiving the emperor's blessing, he treats the news circumspectly. Rather than indulging in "immoderate speech or drunken orgies or comedies (*katakergut'iwink'*)", he opts for "discrete entertainments" (117). That is, he "shuts himself in [his room], passing the night without sleep, and meditating on the good of his country".²⁹ As encountered in Khorenats'i's *History*, the word *katakergut'iwink'* includes in its semantic umbra diverse notions of lay-entertainment (signifying vaudeville theater and the *gusan*/μῦθος). Juanshēr rejects these amusements, and instead whispers prayers alone. It is through fashioning his image in opposition to that of the banquet-goer and *gusanaser* (*gusan*-lover) that he is cast as a virtuous Christian ruler. These scenes do not describe the "Christianisation" of the image of the *gusan*, nor the sloughing of patrimonial culture. The text reads similarly to polemics and church histories, using the *gusan* and the broader notion of minstrelsy as the antipode of Christian kingliness.

The romance of Juanshēr concludes with his assassination. And, like the murder of Pap, the event is foreshadowed by Juanshēr's lapse into lubricious attitudes. Late in his reign, the Cross of Mashtots' (which he had fashioned with his own hands) is discovered in the province of Gis (Movsēs Dasxurançi 1961, 141). Such a find, although auspicious, carries with it insinuations of religious deviance in the realm. The text relates that around the time of the discovery, members of the Albanian aristocracy were going against church dictates and engaging in marriages which polluted the bloodline (137).³⁰ Thus, when the cross is unearthed, its symbolic import as the tool "with which Mashtots' converted Albania from erring idol-worship"³¹ seems one of contemporary as well as historical significance. In this anxious environment, preparations are made for the consecration of the cross. Juanshēr, attendant elsewhere in the Caucasus, requests that the clergy wait for his arrival to carry out the ceremony. However, displaying odd behaviour for an allegedly devout ruler, Juanshēr "idles" for too long and the patriarch decides to go ahead with the proceedings in his absence

29 Movsēs Kaghankatuats'i 2010, 238: Անդ այնուհետև ոչ լինէր գործ անկարգ խաւսից կամ արբեցութիւնք կամ կատակերգութիւնք, այլ չափաւոր վայելմունք: Որ եւ զգիշերն զայն փակեալ զինքն ի քնոյ՝ անցուցանէր խորհելով զաշխարհին իւրոյ զաւգուտն:

30 Catholicos Ukhthanēs, at a later period, also curses this race-polluting behavior of the Albanian *nakharrars*, see Movsēs Dasxurançi 1961, 229.

31 Movsēs Kaghankatuats'i 2010, 281: գոր սրբոյն Մաշտոցի իւր իսկ ձեռամբն արարեալ էր, որով դարձուցանէր իսկ զաշխարհն Աղուանից ի կոյնն մոլորութենէ:

(141).³² The narrative then further contorts. Juanshēr travels to Sisakank' (Siwnik'), ignoring the prelate, who, fresh from consecrating the cross, is "revengefully" driving out "deceptive errors" (142). Periphrastic as the narrative may be, these two parallel events certainly gesture at some infraction or infidelity on the part of the truant Juanshēr. Why is the patriarch suddenly "revengeful", and the purportedly pious leader so apathetic about the miraculous occurrence in his kingdom?³³

This is the turbulent context in which the reader then glimpses Juanshēr's celebrated coterie of *gusans*: the king enjoying the annual festivities "land-surveying in the company of skilled minstrels (*gusanawk'*)" (Movsēs Dasxurançi 1961, 142).³⁴ Rakish behavior of this type seems the obvious reason as to why the patriarch has grown so peeved. And the text suggests as much, relating two lines later that Juanshēr is stripped of "his glories by the snares of vice, for he transgressed the commandments of the Lord".³⁵ In a country beset by the incursions of Islam, Juanshēr is passing his days surrounded by *gusans*. These lines, when properly contextualised, read as a legible castigation of Juanshēr. The king's misdemeanor, never explicitly referenced, can reasonably be attributed to his indifference to church affairs and generally languorous behavior — one punctuated (rhetorically or otherwise) by his cavorting with *gusans*. Juanshēr suffers for these wrongdoings, succumbing to the assassin's blade while walking in his garden one night because "the power of the Most High had abandoned him" (144).³⁶ Was his death, like that of Pap, the result of a fall into decadence? It is quite plain that Juanshēr's sudden indolence and explicit love for *gusans* is a large part of the text's reconstruction, and post hoc rationalisation, of his murder. Indeed, the development of the *gusan*'s un-Christian image is central to the rhetorical structure of the *History*. On the evidence of these pages, the *gusans* remain a polemical category, their "Christianisation" far from complete.³⁷

4. A Separate Hermeneutics

This argument, and this hermeneutics of the *gusan*, however thorough, are still haunted by the opposite tug of the tension of reliance. The dialectic's other extreme is seen, intermittently, across the Armenian literary canon. Khorenats'i, despite his rearticulation of the caricature of the *gusan*, did not solely portray oral tradition as a

32 *ibid.*: Այլ նորա հեղգական ծուլութեամբն ոչ ժամանէին հասանել յամբոկ գործոյն.

33 *ibid.*, 282: զպատրանաց ինչ ցնորս վիժխնդրութեամբ վանէր.

34 *ibid.*, 283: Եւ եղև ի ժամանակին յայնմիկ խաղալ, գնալ մեծի իշխանին Ջեւանշերի ի կողմանս լեռնականացն ի զբաւսանս բոլոր տարեկան աւուրց հրճուականն անցուցանելով երկրպագութեամբ, յոգնայարդար գուսանաւք ներբողեալ տարփողականն Ջեւանշեր՝ զօրապետն տենչահասակ.

35 *ibid.*, 283: Բայց ապա ըղձալի հոշակաւորն ի ձեռն խարդաւանող ախտին, զի ընդդէմ Աստուծոյ երկասիրէր պատուիրանին, թափուր եւ ունայն գոլով եւ մերկ ի յայնցանէ երեսէր փառաց.

36 *ibid.*, 285: Բայց զի զաւրութիւն Բարձրելոյն հեռացեալ էր ի նմանէ.

37 Another reading of this, should we accept Zuckerman's surmise, is that this bipolar treatment of Juanshēr is a result of these two episodes being by different hands. The "Juanshēr's Elegy", which comprises of the scenes leading up to the murder, is heavily laudatory, while the "History of 684", which includes the account of Juanshēr's assassination, is apocalyptic and dark, see Zuckerman 2007, 406–08.

devilish millstone. In his *History* he relates that accounts of Parthian Armenia “were collected ... from ballads [*i gusanakanēn*] and are found in the royal archives”, this active preservation of *gusan* odes indicating an interest in the medium within writerly (and thus, inevitably, clerical) circles (Moses Khorenats’i 2006, 92).³⁸ Not only does he attest to these archives, he also transcribes the pagan song of Vahagn, and liberally references the storytellers of Goght’n (187). Ghazar P’arpets’i, in an interesting volte-face of his own, narrates a confrontation between Vahan and the Persian potentate Shapuh. Shapuh, by way of a complement, likens the exploits of the Armenian leader not to “those of men of these times”, but to “those of the earlier heroes ... in epic stories [*vēpk’*]” (Łazar P’arpets’i 1991, 216).³⁹ P’arpets’i’s audience, Christian as they may have been, surely understood the import of Shapuh’s words: like the brave men of Persian fable, Vahan possesses the highest trait of daring (*k’ajut’iwn*). As seen in both Khorenats’i and P’arpets’i, aspects of the oral tradition remain legible to Armenia’s Christian readership, and, more intriguingly, retain a positive valence. As in Khorenats’i, *gusans* are also referenced as reliable historical sources in the *Primary History*, the gnomic writings at the beginning of Sebēos’s *History*, which the compiler claims are by the hand of “Agat’angelos the scribe” (Hewsen 1975, 91–92). In one of the passages, a legate from the Chinese emperor comes to Khosrov’s court and converses with the narrator, assuring him of the Chinese lineage of the Mamikoneans: “The minstrels [*gusank’*] of our country also reference in their songs Mamik and Konak as being two brave men and foremost blood brothers, sons of the *nakharar* Kaṛnam, who was second in the kingdom of China”.⁴⁰ Here too, in a passage attached to an ostensibly pious *History*, *gusans* hold a distinguished position as repositories of cultural memory.

Perhaps the most complex and complete picture of the *gusan* arises in the anonymous tales by Pseudo-Shapuh Bagratuni (more accurately referred to as the Anonymous Story-teller). In this peppy work, Pseudo-Shapuh includes the tale of Derēn, an Artsruni prince whose largesse and folly result in the loss of his noble standing. Minstrels are a central part of the portrait of Derēn’s dissipation: “When it was morning the habitues used to come: trumpet-players, lyre-players, harp-players, and actors, and they played before him. He had no thoughts or care for his nobility like his ancestors, but only ate and drank” (Thomson 1988–1989, 204). Yet, the tale should not be read as an excoriation of Derēn, nor of the *gusan*. Indeed, his love of minstrelsy, and desire to share these delights with others is conceived of as his most imperial quality. Dispossessed of his lands in Vaspurakan, Derēn comes to Mosul where he chances upon a group of wealthy men who have heard about his famous hospitality, and that he “has many singers and bards [*gusans*] perform until evening,

38 Movsēs Khorenats’i 1913, 47–48: ի փոքունց ոմանց եւ յաննշանից արանց, ի գուսանականն այս գտանի ժողովեալ ի դիւանի արքունեաց.

39 Ghazar P’arpets’i 2003, 2350: որոյ իւր իրք եւ արարածք չեն որպէս զայսր ժամանակի մարդկան, զոր մեր տեսեալ եւ գիտեմք, այլ իբրեւ զառաջին քաջացն, զոր ի վէպսն պատմեն եւ խեմք.

40 The translation is by the hand of the author, from Sebēos 2005, 461: Ասեն ... գուսանք և ի մերում աշխարհին յերգս իւրեանց զՄամիկն և զԿոնակն, արս երկուս լեալ քաջս և զխաւոր եղբարս հարազատս, որոյիք Կանոնամայ նախարարին, որ էր երկրորդ ի թագաւորութեանն Ճենաստանի.

and does not permit anyone to go home. Such is his custom". They are astonished and say, "How does he have the means to do that?" (206). It is his generosity and spendthrift nature that brings Derën to unwittingly giving succor to the future caliph, an act that results in his return to the throne of Vaspurakan. The comportment of this *Anonymous Tale* is slightly askew of the other histories referenced in this work. As Thomson noted, it is unlearned, even pop (181). The stories are to be read for their flash and pithy exchanges, not for their slavish rendering of *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*. In this way, a rare lay-perspective of the *gusan* is accounted for. It is not, perhaps, wholly positive. As a raffish character, Derën is, before all else, meant to entertain, not edify. Indeed, later in the *Tale*, a newly-married Derën woos the emir of Hēr's daughter, an action which results in his murder (221). Yet, one can see, squatting behind the rambunctious caricature, an admiration for his *joie de vivre*, one associated with his love of minstrelsy.

Architectural writing and material culture also participate in this separate hermeneutics. T'ovma Artsruni, a man of the early tenth century, describes in a lush passage the ornamentation of Gagik's palace on Aght'amar (Thomson 1997, 228).⁴¹ The palace, as seen by the admiring T'ovma, "is extraordinary and astonishing ... For [the pictures] include gilt thrones, seated on which appears the king in splendid majesty surrounded by shining young men ... and also lines of minstrels [*gusans*] and girls dancing" (Thomas Artsruni 1985, 357–58).⁴² Evidently, the depiction of royals cavorting with *gusans*, a scene identical to that in the Juanshēr cycle, does not negate the palace's kingly and edifying qualities. Indeed, T'ovma celebrates the scene as one indicative of Artsruni pomp, akin to that of the House of David. As with most of the Aght'amar complex, Gagik's palace no longer stands. However, other depictions of *gusans*, these from the late medieval period, have been preserved. In the town of Shōsh (Fig. 1) near modern day Shushi in Arts'akh, there is a group of fifteenth-century cross-stones (Russell 2004, 1142–1143, 1162). Incised into one is a portrayal of two horsemen bearing aristocratic oriflammes, returning from the hunt, opposite a group of seated women preparing *harisa* for a feast. In the center of the scene is a cross legged bard, a *gusan*. This scene, of hunting, feasting, and minstrelsy, is of the echt-Persian type. James Russell, writing of the Shōsh cross-stone, by way of explanation, notes a greater persistence of Mazdean iconography in Arts'akh compared to other regions of Armenia (Russell 2004, 1142). Yet the cross-stone, sitting in a church graveyard, does not seem to have been quarantined for its impiety or lack of Christian rectitude. Neither of these two depictions of *gusan* and gentry seem to manifest contradicting notions of Christian-ness — Gagik remains a Solomonic king and the Shōsh *khach'k'ar* a pious headstone. Perhaps this is in part because both works, a royal palace and a squire's tomb, are more representative of the worldview

41 For further reading on Gagik Artsruni's self-referential art on Aght'amar see Jones 2007, 53–95. For a *tour d'horizon* see Pogossian and Vardanyan (eds) 2019.

42 T'ovma Artsruni 2010, 289: Եւ է կարգ շինուածոյ տաճարին ահեղ իմն եւ զարմանալի ... Վասն զի եւն ի նմա ոսկեզարդ զահոյք, յորս բազմեալ երեսի արքայ նագելի ճոխութեամբ, շուրջ զիւրեաւ ունելով պատանեակս յուսատեսակս, սպասաւորս ուրախութեան, ընդ նմին եւ դասս գուսանաց եւ խաղս աղճկանց զարմանալոյ արժանիս:



Fig. 1: Tombstone from Shōsh. Photo by Hrair Hawk Khatcherian (from Khatcherian 1997, pl. 45).

of the second estate than that of the first. But irrespective of this, in both instances the *gusan* can be seen to be reinscribed into a separate, more favorable notion of Christian-ness.

Daskhurants'i's text, too, has traces of evidence that allow a reading more sympathetic to the notion of a Christianised *gusan*. An appropriate place to begin this more textured approach, yet again, is the Council of Aghuen. In the *History*, the council is framed as the means of resolving a dispute that arose in the late fifth century among "bishops and priests and nobles", indicating that the power to shape the normative notion of "Christian" was restricted to certain privileged groups (Movsēs Dasxurançi 1961, 54).⁴³ Reading the anti-*gusan* stricture in this context, then, obviates the fact that such negative comportments toward minstrelsy were not reflective of society-wide beliefs. There is little means of investigating lay-religion in Caucasian Albania, however, so such an assertion will necessarily remain broad. Daskhurants'i's text also elides the conceits of Persian epics with a Christian sensibility. One such circumstance arises in book 1, when the champion of the Armenians, Babik, is given a warrant with the royal sign of the boar (associated with the deity Vahagn⁴⁴ and the transmutation of king Trdat) and through it is invested with Christ's divine glory (Movsēs Dasxurançi 1961, 64). Later, partaking in the Persian pastime of the hunt, he sinks into the mud and miraculously discovers a church (65). Within the Juanshēr cycle itself, lyrical phrasing recalls pre-Christian metaphor and styling, such as the line "swift to strike as an eagle" (110), one reminiscent of the song of Artashēs —

43 Dum-Tragut emphasises the political nature of this conference, and its role in setting a first vs second estate wrangle, see Dum-Tragut 2023, 299.

44 For an analysis of the representations of Vahagn in early Armenian literature, see Garsoïan 1982, 151–74. Caucasian Albania, to a greater extent than Armenia, was oriented toward Iran, see Toumanoff 1959, 35–36.

“crossing the river like a swift-winged eagle” (Hacikyan et al. 2000, vol. 1, 53). James Russell, writing of Movsēs Khorenats’i’s and T’ovma Artsruni’s own imitation of this pre-Christian chanson, surmises that historians were influenced stylistically by listening to *gusan* odes (Russell 2004, 157–58, 161). These techniques, together with the Juanshēr cycle’s pious diction (Juanshēr always going into battle knowing “that the Lord was with him” [Movsēs Dasxurançi 1961, 110]), syncretise the aforementioned contraries between oral tradition and church chronicle.

Most telling, however, is the *mise-en-scène* of the Juanshēr lament. Soon after the assassination, Albania’s notaries gather and hold a public funeral, during which “an orator (*chartasan*) called Dawt’ak” addresses the crowd.⁴⁵ Dawt’ak is clearly an established figure in Juanshēr’s retinue, one who “had spent a long time at the royal court”. He is admired for his mastery of the *gusan*’s craft, being an “expert in imaginative exercises” and “advanced in declamatory poetry”. His elegy, sung “in acrostic form”,⁴⁶ is thick with Christian allusion. In the weft of the poem’s first lines one sees the Christianisation of the poet’s vocation, Dawt’ak asking the “inventive spirit of the word of God” to compose with wisdom his “melancholy song”⁴⁷ (145). God is now breathing afflatus into the *gusan*. Throughout the lament, Biblical and epic tropes intertwine: Isaiah and Cain are invoked; the noble Persianate ideal of *p’ark’* is twice referenced (146, 148). A Christian self-abasement also recurs, one line bemoaning how “we angered the Creator by our deeds, and He plunged the supreme power [of the land] into predation” (146),⁴⁸ another how “we learned the vanity of fame and how none may remain on earth”⁴⁹ (148). Both *gusan* and king alike are sinners, equal in Christ. However, other lines recall Juanshēr’s loss of divine favor in more pointed terms, the elegy reading “his protectors abandoned him and help from above departed him”⁵⁰ (146). A puckish exegete would see in these lines not Christian self-abnegation, but rather a subterranean reference to Juanshēr’s impious habits and his *gusan* galère (thus the self-abnegation could be read as Dawt’ak’s self-criticism of his own *gusan*-hood). This interpretation, however, is tentative to the point of self-indulgence, and all such arguments should be ancillary to a more profound recognition: that in Daskhurants’i’s *History*, for the first time, a *gusan*’s words are reshaping the terms of scholarly debate. While a thoroughgoing textual analysis does

45 Movsēs Kaghankatuats’i 2010, 287: Յայնժամ ճարտասան ոմն ի մէջ անցեալ, որ տեղեակ էր արհեստական իմաստից, Դաւթակ անուն կոչեցեալ, հնարագիւտական վարժիւք յաջողակ եւ վերժանական քերթութեամբ յառաջադէմ: Որ եւ յառատաբար ի բանիցն պանդունս ճարտարութեամբ նուագէր, քաջապէս հրատարակող լեզու ունելով նման երագագիր գրչի: Սա յօլովիւք աւուրբք ժամանեալ յամէր ի դրան արքունի.

46 *ibid.*: ըստ ալփափետաց գլխակարգութեանց.

47 *ibid.*, 288: Աստուածային բանին արուեստաւոր հոգի, // Յարիներա՛ իմաստիւ գտխրական երգմունս.

48 *ibid.*, 290: Բարկացուցաք զԱրարիչն գործովք մերովք, // Եւ մատնեաց ի կորուստ զնախագահ տէրութիւնն.

49 *ibid.*, 293: Քեւ զսնոտութիւն նորին նոր ուսեալ, // Թէ չունի երբէք ումեք աստ մնալ.

50 *ibid.*, 290: Ի բաց մեկնեցան ի նմանէ պահապանքն, // Եւ աւգնութիւնք վերնայինք հրաժարեցան ի նմանէ.

not support the notion of a “Christianised *gusan*”, in the lament of Juanshēr its spectre still haunts the text, inviolate if not irrefutable.⁵¹

5. Conclusion

As with the reading of any medieval Christian text, the to-what-extenting of a group’s “Christian-ness” is a difficult business. The “un-Christian *gusan*” as a rhetorical trope, one illuminated through an archeology of Armenian church polemics, canonical histories, and canon law, remains present in Daskhurants’i’s *History*. This trope is even used to rationalise the downfall of Juanshēr — something modern historians attribute to his breaking of an *omertà* with the caliph after involving himself in the assassination of Constans II (Howard-Johnston 2010, 119–20). As also noted, there is ample evidence of the subsumption of Christian symbolism into the *gusan* ode. Yet, what Daskhurants’i’s text begs is not a maximalist or absolutist reading, but rather a microscopist’s approach and a microscopist’s heedful conjecture. *The History of the Caucasian Albanians*, in its tangle of narratives, presents the caricature of the un-Christian *gusan* and nothing coherent to the contrary. However, it also begs a reinscription of the debate itself. The best means of elucidating this point lies within Daskhurants’i’s *History*, in the passages proceeding the Juanshēr cycle. In the years after the king’s death, further attempts are made to convert the “Huns” of the northern Caucasus, whose pagan praxis includes tree-worship and the creation of small devotional objects. In one episode, after subduing the Huns, Albanian missionaries cut down a sacred tree and manufacture it into a cross (Movsēs Dasxurançi 1961, 163–64). They then seize the objects of faith and crush them “into the shape of the Lord’s cross” (165).⁵² It is an uncomfortable scene, the felling of trees and pulverising of talismans demonstrating a coercive approach to conversion. However, it also offers an honest picture of “Christianisation” — the new faith, one evangelised by force, is of the same substance as the old.⁵³ A transmuted belief retains the spoor of things past, something apropos of Hunnic Christianity and the *gusan*. What is compelling about Daskhurants’i’s *History* is not only its recreation of the rhetorical category of the unholy *gusan*, but also the cacophony of voices in which it speaks. And maybe some of them, however quietly, have begun to reinscribe the very terms of this discourse.

⁵¹ Another useful insight, albeit one which is beyond the scope of this paper, are the ways in which Juanshēr is consciously associated with Sasanian power structures by Daskhurants’i. Perhaps his appetite for the hunt and love of minstrelsy are devices, like his much emphasised relationship with Yazdegerd, by which to position him as an heir to Iranian authority. For a further discussion of this point, see Vacca 2017, 131–32.

⁵² Movsēs Kaghanatuats’i 2010, 324: եւ ինքն իւրովք ձեռաւքն խորտակէր յանդիման ամենեցուն անելով եւ զայս նշան տէրունական խաչին.

⁵³ This theme of syncretism, in Armenia’s case that of Iranian influence, is dealt with at length in Russell 1987, 515–28. See also Garsoian 1982.

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