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## **The Secret Meeting of Armenians on Lim Island in 1722** (Concerning the Possible Involvement of Western Armenians in an All-Armenian Liberation Movement)

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From August through October 1722 Russian troops, led by Peter the Great, invaded and for the first time occupied the Caspian littoral of what was then Iranian Transcaucasia. This constituted a historical turning point in Russian policy towards the Near East as well as a completely new strategic reality for the region. The new geopolitical setting that came to life in Transcaucasia (with Russia, Iran, and Turkey as competing regional 'superpowers') has remained strikingly close to its archetype up to the present.

The 1722 Russian occupation of part of the Caspian coast, accompanied by Peter's promises to provide military support for the liberation of Christian nations of Transcaucasia, created a real sense of euphoria among the Armenians and Georgians. In September, 1722, a combined Georgian-Armenian army of about 50,000, headed by Vakhtang VI, the king of Kartli (the Georgian principality within Iran), set out from Tiflis and camped near Ganja waiting for the promised advance of the Russians. It was promptly joined by 10,000 "crack and well-armed" fighting men from Karabakh, an Armenian-populated mountainous region (**Yesayi Hasan-Jalalian** 1868:48, cf. **Brosset** 1876: 216). At some time during the first days of September, Vakhtang allowed a 2,000-strong all-Armenian regiment to separate from his 50,000-man army and to march into Armenia toward Kapan under the command of his gifted Armenian general Davit-bek (**Aivazian** 1990: 76-85). Later, the Armenian armed forces, which were principally concentrated in the adjacent mountainous regions of Karabakh (ancient Artzakh, late medieval Khachen)<sup>1</sup> and Kapan (ancient Siunik, currently the southernmost region of the Republic of Armenia), succeeded

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in 1417 Matteos Monozon, a certain scribe writing in Gandzasar monastery, defined the

in preserving their military capability. Both Armenian and non-Armenian sources reveal that in the 1720s Karabakh and Kapan alone had standing forces ranging from 30,000 to 60,000 soldiers (**Aivazian** 1997: 7). Although at first opposed to Iranian rule, *after* the Ottoman invasion of Iran, the Armenians allied themselves with the Iranian forces without terminating their relationship with the Russians, and maintained a fierce resistance to the Ottoman Turks until the recapture of all of Transcaucasia by Iranian troops in 1735.<sup>2</sup>

This article examines the colophon written in 1722 in an earlier, sixteenth century Armenian manuscript gospel. The manuscript belonged to the Dashnaktzakan (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) activist Toros (Galoust Aloyan),<sup>3</sup> who bought it from a Kurd. Toros was killed in October of 1914 near Bayazet; since then the manuscript has been lost. The colophon was copied in April 1914 by Hayk Ajemian, a well-known Armenian cultural figure (an émigré in Iran since 1920), who published it in the Ashkhatank [ՀԹԷՅՅՅՅՅ] daily, Yerevan, Saturday, 10 February, 1918, #77 (177). The same colophon was republished by M. G. Nersisian in 1941 (see Addendum). Neither of these two publications, however, provides any detailed analysis or commentary.

This colophon is noteworthy in three major aspects. First, it presents in detail the usual pattern of preparatory steps that Armenian leaders considered and took in 1722 in anticipation of an all-Armenian liberation attempt, which, however, did not fully materialize. Second, it proves the Western/Ottoman Armenian involvement and sympathy to the liberation movement started in Eastern/Persian Armenia. And, finally, it demonstrates the intention of some Armenian leaders not to confine themselves to the liberation of Persian Armenia alone, but to seek the liberation of "all of Armenia," including regions under Ottoman domination. The mission to organize the Armenians of Vaspurakan for an all-Armenian liberation was assigned to an Armenian priest, Ter Nerses (see below), by the Armenian political and military leadership residing in Eastern Armenia. Below is a translation of the colophon (the Armenian original is published at the end of this article as an Addendum):

In the year 1171 of the Armenian Era [=A.D. 1722], in severely anxious and bitter times, I, the meek and humble friar Mekhitar of this sacred monastery, which is located on the island and is called Lim Anapat [=Lim cloister], witnessed with my own eyes at a time of spring regeneration, the convention that took place on this sacred island in

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region as "Artzakh, now known as Khachen"; see **Khachikian** 1955: 195.

<sup>2</sup> For a referenced and detailed account on the Armenian rebellion of the 1720s, see **Aivazian** 1997: VI+87 pp. (with a map and table).

<sup>3</sup> Toros was a participant to the famous Khanasor guerrilla operation in 1897 and also the author of the popular song on this affair (**Maghakia Ormanian** 1919: 32).

order to discuss, and consider, and identify the ways for the liberation of the [much] suffering and miserable Armenian nation. Among those who convened on this sacred sea-surrounded island, there were the bishops and the vardapets [i.e., doctors of divinity] and the priests and the noblemen of the strongly built city of Van, and the chiefs of the provinces of Vaspurakan, the *meliks* of the Kajberuni and Beznuni districts, and the village heads from all villages.

I, the humble monk Mekhitar, undeservedly retained in my memory those secret and clandestine talks. Ter Nerses, a famous and courageous vardapet from Rushtunik, described the condition of the entire Armenian nation in a very emotional and lamenting manner, then jubilantly declared that Davit-bek, a gentleman from Siunik, had started a military movement to oust our oppressors and offenders, **having in his mind the liberation of all of blood-drenched Armenia:**

Now, oh you, the kind and nation-loving men attending this meeting, go to your regions and animate your people, who are asleep in a deep ignorance and suffering, so that they would throw over the yoke of outrages committed by the infidels. And, as soon as we issue a battle-cry, let them rise up in arms against our cannibalistic and cross-abusing enemies.

At the end of this sweetly worded speech, those who were present at the meeting were extremely shaken and silently weeping.

Afterwards there were many speakers, numerous viewpoints, countless proposals. Finally, the noblemen, the chiefs, the *meliks*, and the village heads agreed to collect many brave and battle ready men, and to procure war supplies [such as]: carts and numerous horses, and various materiel, and iron, and ships,<sup>4</sup> and woolen stuff, and wheat, and sheep.

Every day, thrice, the deputies were honored with bread and salt and with excellent meals served by the monks of this sacred monastery. After this meeting, which convened thrice, on the seventh day, a ship arrived from the village of Avantz, and on a moon-lit night, the deputies mounted on board of this ship and headed for the sea-surrounded inaccessible island of Aghtamar, to the feet of the Right Reverend Catholicos [of the See of Aghtamar] Hovhannes Dzoretzi,<sup>5</sup> whom they informed of their profound undertaking. The divinely-elected Catholicos Hovhannes willingly agreed to deliver his will by blessing the deputies who sincerely agreed to sacrifice their lives for the liberation of the province of Vaspurakan from the yoke of despots, and of *pashas*, and of *beks*, and of *aghas*.

Let the Lord accomplish their endeavor, let Him grant them success in their actions and in the liberation of our sea-colored and picturesque province of Vaspurakan, where at this particular time there are still many monasteries, and cloisters, and churches, and chapels in good and vivid state, and numerous districts, and innumerable villages.

Those who would encounter this colophon, after reading it, please remember me, the humble monk Mkhitar *abegha* [=a rank of celibate priest], who wrote this with the hope in his heart and tears in his eyes, and say: "Let the Lord illuminate his soul now and for ever. Amen!"

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<sup>4</sup> According to a 1691 document, at the end of the 17th century "about 50 to 60 small and big ships were sailing "in the lake Van (**Uluhogian** 1994: 368).

<sup>5</sup> He was the Catholicos of Aghtamar from 1720 (at the latest) to 1725 (**Akinian** 1920: 145-146).

The island of Lim in the north-eastern corner of the Lake Van (in today's eastern Turkey) was then considered to be an impregnable fortress. It was also a prominent center of Armenian culture and education. In 1693, the Lim Cloister's library had 3124 Armenian manuscripts collected within 22 book-cases (**Mnatzakanian and Yeganian** 1984: XXI, *History of Armenian Bibliography* 1964: 62) (just to compare: the currently second largest collection of Armenian manuscripts in the depository of Armenian St. James monastery at Jerusalem has 3890 books).

The clandestine convention of the leaders of Vaspurakan Armenians on Lim took place some time during the spring of 1722, "at a time of spring convalescence." This means that Davit-bek was engaged in the intensive formation and preparation of Armenian armed forces in Siunik and Tiflis and probably elsewhere in Transcaucasia already several months in advance of his 2,000-strong regiment's entry into Armenia from Georgia in September, 1722 (Cf. **Aivazian** 1990: 83-84).

There is no specific evidence on the immediate follow-up to this meeting, except that no Armenian uprising in Ottoman Empire followed in the 1720s. A number of historical reasons were responsible for this outcome of which the two decisive ones were: (a) the Eastern Armenian leaderships' failure to expand effectively their political-military power beyond Karabakh and Kapan during the 1722-1724 period, and (b) the early concentration in the area of large Ottoman armies that started in August, 1722, that is - almost concurrently with the movement of Davit-bek from Georgia into Armenia (**Minasian** 1959: 43-46; cf. **Aivazian** 1997: 12). Further, the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, together with the influential class of the Armenian bankers and merchants, worked vigorously towards the restoration of their image as a "loyal nation." For example, in violation of several principles of the bylaws of the Armenian Church in February 1726 they elected in Constantinople a new Patriarch of All Armenians, Karapet Ulnetzi (1726-1729), an Ottoman Armenian cleric who unlike his predecessor was fully trusted by the Sublime Porte and was able to establish favorable relations with the new Ottoman administration of Eastern Armenia.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Ottoman Armenians continued to live in full compliance with the provisions of the *Millet* system, characterized by the superordinate-subordinate dichotomy between the ruling group and other ethnoreligious entities.

Nevertheless, later indirect information helps us to track down some of the results of this Western Armenian movement pursued in the name of "all Armenia's liberation." In October 1727, Armenian activists who had been on intelligence missions in Ottoman Empire reported that, "as

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<sup>6</sup> Astvatsatur I Hamadantzi (1715-1725) was actually one of the leaders of the Armenian liberation movement (of course, covertly) and kept secret communication with the Armenian troops; see Aivazian (2000), pp. 146-161.

agreed previously, our [secret] accord with the Assyrians and the Peziki [=the Pazuki, a Kurdish tribe]" about plans for joint activities was still in force (**Ioannisian** 1967: 298). On the margins of the contemporary translation of the same letter into Russian, the following was added before the words "the Assyrians and the Peziki" - "these nations live between Babelon and Ararat," (**Ioannisian** 1967: 301) - that is, in the regions immediately neighboring Vaspurakan on the south, south-east and south-west. Possibly, this Armenian-Assyrian-Kurdish alliance had been the direct aftermath of the Lim meeting.

Most interestingly, this covert coalition was reactivated in the 1760s. Thus, in a letter written in 1763, the Armenian leader of Mush-Sassun, a strategically important mountainous region to the west of the Lake Van, reported that "the [Nestorian] Assyrians and Yezdy Curds are likewise ready to join" 40,000 Armenian "fighting men" in a struggle against Ottoman oppression (**Emin** 1918: 235). Later, in 1767, "the Nestorian mountaineers... who inhabit high mountains almost inaccessible, and pay no tribute to any Mahomedan power," were ready to put into the envisaged joint Armenian-Assyrian rebellion 18,000 men (**Emin** 1918: 326), and in 1770 -- into joint Armenian-Assyrian-Georgian similar campaign -- some 20,000 men.<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted that the Assyrians were in close and, generally, good relations with the Armenians, especially in ecclesiastical and cultural aspects. For example, there is evidence that the Assyrian children attended the Armenian schools (**Movsisian** 1958: 302; **Ioannisian** 1945:145-154, 235-239, 285-289; see also **Grigorian** 1988: 181-187); periodically, the Assyrians were asking the Armenian leaders to protect their interests before the Sublime Porte, thus, actually, relinquishing a considerable portion of control over their communities' affairs to the Armenians; as illustrated in one archival document, on 6 August 1783, on their own request, the "nation of the Assyrians fell under our [the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople] authority" (**Bardakjian** 1982: 95, 99, n. 40).

To appreciate more accurately the readiness of the Vaspurakan Armenians to take up arms for the national cause in 1722, we need also to provide a brief historical account for the earlier period. After the collapse of Armenian sovereignty, Vaspurakan was among a few Armenian provinces, which managed to retain certain national armed force. In this respect, two extraordinary historical facts deserve to be mentioned here.

Chronologically, the first one is a skillful military operation on Lake Van, executed on 26 February 1459 by Zakaria III (1434-1464), the warrior-Catholicos of the Aghtamar See of the Armenian Church. When a certain Seyid-Ali, the chief of the Ruzaki Kurdish tribe from the

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<sup>7</sup> The original letter in Syriac with the contemporary Georgian and Russian translations is available in the Russian archives (**Ioannisian** 1945: 287).

province of Hakkari, prepared two rafts to attack the island of Aghtamar, Zakaria suddenly attacked him with his own armed force and effectively seized these rafts:

[Seyid-Ali] plundered the region of Gavash [south coast of the Lake Van] and despoiled the Christians of their possessions... After sending for two rafts from the village of Aghuna, he made preparations to land on the impregnable [island of] Aghtamar. He also threatened to put everyone there to the sword, to spill their blood in the sea, to demolish the holy churches, and to carry off the holy objects. But... the venerable and most virtuous Catholicos, the Lord Zakaria [III of Aghtamar], **marched forth like a valiant general... to wage battle against the infidels. He seized the two rafts and brought them to Aghtamar**, and thus the Christians were delivered from [the hands of] the infidels, who returned to their own places in shame (**Sanjian** 1969: 263-264; **Khachikian** 1958: 117; **Hovhannissian** 1957: 449).

The second piece of evidence is of an even more outstanding nature. In 1465 Stepanos IV (1464-1469), the nephew and successor to Zakaria's office, went as far as to anoint his brother Smbat as the king of Armenia, "since" -- according to one contemporary -- "for a very long time the Armenian nation hasn't seen a king" (**Akinian** 1920: 111; **Khachikian** 1958: 239; **Hayrapetian** 1994: 64-65).

By this act Stepanos implemented his uncle's long-cherished dream of the restoration of an Armenian kingdom. Smbat's sovereignty lasted for only a few years and incorporated only the Island of Aghtamar -- which was at that time larger than now<sup>8</sup> -- as well as some other coastal territories. Nevertheless, Smbat stands in the history of Armenia as its last anointed and crowned King. On the other hand his consecration itself suggests the perseverance of a substantial Armenian military force in this region in the second half of the 15th century. These traditions positively had a profound ideological impact on the future generations of Vaspurakan Armenians. Seen against this background, their active stance in 1722, at the very start of the liberation campaign undertaken in Eastern Armenia, was nothing less than a natural development.

A final comment should be made about the words of the colophon shown above in bold face: **having in his mind the liberation of all of blood-drenched Armenia**. These words were written down in the manuscript with red ink. Such practice was usual for the Armenian scribes: they did so when they wanted to underscore an important piece of information. A similarly worded desire for the liberation of all Armenia is found in "The Lamentation over the Country of Armenia by Ghazar Jahketzi, a prominent Armenian archbishop and poet, the All-Armenian Catholicos from 1737 to 1751:

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<sup>8</sup> According to a Venetian traveler-merchant, in the beginning of the 16th century there was a city of *Arminig* on the Aghtamar island. It was two miles in circumference and had 600 households with an exclusively Armenian population (**Hakobian** 1932: 300-301; *The History of Armenian People* 1972: 44-45).

Where are our glorious princes... who would fight for our sake, free all the enslaved, **and save all our nation together with all of Armenia?** (**Ghazar Jahketzi** 1737: 240)

In the period of Catholic persecution against the Armenian Church in Poland, an anonymous Polish Armenian poet of the middle of the 17th century was also writing thus:

Where are our native lands, where are the Seats of our Patriarchs, where are the Thrones of the Kings Trdat the Great and Arshak? We became scattered around the world in the alien countries too far off [from Armenia]... (**Alishan** 1896: 212. cf. **Chopanlian** 1922: 13).

The prototype of this often posed question by the Armenian medieval and early modern authors can be traced perhaps to the following sentence in Aristakes Lastivertzi's *History*, which was written as early as 1079 AD:

Where are the thrones of our kings? They are seen nowhere. Where are the legions of troops that massed in front of them like clouds, varicolored as the flowers of spring, and resplendent in their uniforms? They are nowhere to be seen... Where is our great and marvelous pontifical throne? ...Today it is vacant, deprived of its occupant, denuded of its ornaments, filled with dust and spiders' webs, and the heir to the throne removed to a foreign land as a captive and a prisoner. The voices and the sermons of the priests are silent now. ...The chandeliers are extinguished now and the lamps dimmed, the sweet fragrance of incense is gone, the altar of Our Lord is covered with dust and ashes. ...Now if all that we have related has befallen us because of our wickedness, then tell heaven and all that abide in it, tell the mountains and the hills, the trees of the dense woodlands, that they too may weep over our destruction (**Aristakes Lastivertzi** 1971: 68; cf. **Diana Darke** 1990: 292).

This theme of Armenia to be liberated and free, sooner or later, given the prevailing historical circumstances of perpetual struggle for national reassertion and survival, was pivotal in the vast medieval and early modern Armenian literature. The three testimonies cited above typify just how intensive was the communication of Armenians through time and space concerning the fate and liberation of their homeland.

## ADDENDUM

As has been already said, this colophon was published by M. G. Nersisian in 1941 (Nersisian 1941: 73-75). I used the latter publication in my "The Time and Circumstances of David-bek's Coming to Armenia," *Patma-banasirakan handes* 130:3 (1990), p. 83. However, later I discovered that Nersisian's publication abounds in spelling errata. Below the colophon is fully republished in precise accordance with Hayk Ajemian's original publication (*Ashkhatank*, daily, Yerevan, Saturday, 10 February, 1918, #77 (177)).

Ի թուականութեան հայկազեան տունարիս ՌԵՅԱ (1722) յոյժ դառնակսկիծ եւ նեղ ժամանակիս, ես, սուտանուն եւ անարժան կրանաւոր Մխիթար միաբան արեղայս սուրբ մենաստանիս, որ ի վերայ ծովապատ կղզոյ, Լիմ Անապատ կոչելոյ, աչաւք իսկ իմովք տեսի, թէ գարնանաբեր կենսանորոգ յեղիմակիս, թէ որպիսի հաւաքումն կատարեցաւ ի վերայ սուրբ կղզոյս՝ խորհելոյ եւ մտածելոյ եւ ճարճարնանք գտանելոյ վասն ազատութեան տառապեալ եւ ողորմելի ազգիս Յայոց:

Առաջնորդք եւ վարդապետք եւ քահանայք եւ իշխանք ամրակառոյց քաղաքիս Վանայ, մեծամեծք գաւառաց Վասպուրականի, Մելիքք յերկրաց Քաջբերունեաց եւ Բզնունեաց, գիւղապետք համայն գիւղօրէից հաւաքեալ եղեն ի ծովապատ սուրբ մենաստանս:

Ես, սուտանուն Մխիթար արեղայս, անարժանաբար ի միտս առի գրոյցք գաղտնի եւ ծածկախորհուրդս: Քաջահամբաւ եւ արիասիրտ վարդապետ մի յերկրէն Ռուշտունեաց՝ Տէր Ներսէս անւանեալ, յոյժ յուզեալ եւ լալազին պատկերացոյց դառնակսկիծ վիճակս համօրէն ազգիս Յայոց եւ յայտնեաց ցնծագին՝ թէ այր մի յերկրէն Սիւնեաց Դաւիթ բէկ անուանեալ, զօրաշարժութիւն արարեալ իցէ վասն հալածելոյ նեղիչք եւ կշտամբիչք մեր, **միտս ունելով ազատագրելոյ արիւնածուխ գաշխարհն Յայաստան:**

Արդ, ով բարեմիտ եւ հայրենապաշտ ժողովականք, շրջեսցէք գաւառս եւ ի կողմանս յերկրին ձերոյ, խրախուսեսցէք ժողովուրդս ձեր, որ մրափեալ է ի խոր խաւարի եւ տանջարանաց, զի թոթափեսցին զլուծ անիրաւանց բռնութեանցս, եւ յորժամ մեք առաքեսցուք զիրաւէր մարտի, բառնան ձայն ապստամբութեան ընդդէմ մարդակեր եւ խաչահալած թշնամեաց մերոց:

Ձկնի աւարտման զայս քաղցրալուր ճառասացութեանս՝ ժողովականք յոյժ վշտացեալ արտասուէին լռելեայն: Եւ եղեն զրուցանողք բազումք, կարծիք



բազմազանս, առաջարկս անհամարս: Յետ այնորիկ՝ իշխանք եւ պարոնք եւ Մելիքք եւ տանուտէրք յօժարեսցին վասն պատերազմի հաւաքելոց զառնս բազունք քաջակորով եւ կռուարար, եւ հայթայթելոյ ուտեստս կռուապաշարոյ, սայլք եւ մժոյգս բազունս եւ պիտոյս բազմազանս, դամուրս (իմա՝ երկաթ, Ա. Ա.) եւ նաւս եւ բուրդս եւ ցորեանս եւ ոչխարս:

Ամենայն [օր] երիցս [ան]գամ միաբանք սբ. մենաստանիս մեծարեն պատգամաւորս աղու հացիւ եւ ընտիր ուտելեօք: Ձկնի զայս հաւաքման, զոր կատարեցաւ երիցս, յօթներորդ օր՝ նաւ մի եկեալ ի գեղջէ Աւանց կոչեցելոյ եւ գիշեր մի լուսնակազարդ՝ պատգամաւորք տեղաւորեսցին ի մէջ նաւին եւ ուղեւորեսցին զծովապատ եւ զանառիկ կղզին յԱղթամար՝ առ ոտս վեհապատիւ Տէր Յովհաննէս կաթողիկոսի Յայոց Ձորեցւոյ, որում յայտնեալ իցեն զմեծախորհուրդ ձեռնարկս իւրեանց: Աստուածընտիր կաթողիկոսն զՏէր Յովհաննէս համաձայանաբար յօժարեալ իցէ շնորհել զկամս իւր, օրհնելով զպատգամաւորս, որք առաքինաբար զոհելոյ յանձն առեալ իցեն զկեանս իւրեանց, վասն ազատելոյ յաշխարհս Վասպուրական ի լուծոյ բռնաւորաց եւ փաշաներաց եւ բեկերաց եւ աղաներաց:

Տէր Աստուած կատարեսցէ զգործս ձեռաց իւրեանց, տայցէ յաջողութիւն նոցա գործելոյ եւ ազատելոյ ծովազարդն եւ գեղատեսարան զաշխարհն մեր Վասպուրական, յորում յայսմ ժամանակի շէն եւ պայծառ մնացեալ են բազուն վանքս եւ մենաստանս եւ եկեղեցիս եւ մատուռս, բազուն գաւառս եւ անհամար գիւղօրայս:

Արդ, որ հանդիպիք զայս յիշատակարանիս, զկնի ընթեռնելոյ՝ յիշեցէք սուտանուն կրոնաւօրս, Մխիթար արեղայս, որ գրեաց սա յուսոյ սրտի եւ լալոյ աչաւք, եւ ասացէք՝ «Աստուած լուսաւորեսցէ զհոգին իւրոյ այժմ եւ միշտ եւ յաւիտեանս յաւիտենից. ամէն»:

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