

## **KNOWLEDGE OF HISTORICAL-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE TRANSMITTED BY ARMENIAN SCRIBES OF HAMSHEN (XV-XVII CENTURIES)**

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**Abstract:** The present article focuses on the XV-XVII century scribes of the District of Hamshen, whose service to future generations cannot be overestimated. Founding their own centers of writing, they conveyed invaluable historical and cultural information, keeping to the traditions of Armenian writing, and demonstrating their profound knowledge of the spiritual and religious conventions of the time. The colophons they left in the manuscripts fill the gaps in the history of the District, proving that Hamshen was a spiritual diocese and sacred place for Armenians. They avail future scholars of an opportunity for interdisciplinary insights into the region in question. The thematic coverage of the reviewed colophons by Hamshen scribes, the miniature details and illumination irrefutably evidence that Hamshen was a unique center of Armenian spiritual life and Armenian writing.

**Keywords:** manuscript, colophon, medieval Armenia, Armenian scribes, Khakhtiq (Chaldia), Hamshen, historiographic genre, spiritual center

### **1. Introduction**

It is well known, that education is a major factor for preserving the identity of a nation. Thus it was in medieval Armenia, where even under complicated historical and political conditions, Armenian spiritual centers spared no efforts to continue educating, adhering to the teaching methodology that had come down from ancestors. In medieval Armenia, after the fall of the Armenian statehood in the XI century and the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia in the XIV century, monasteries took over the task of education. Some of them were treated as institutions of higher learning, were called *universities* or

*seminaries*, and had specially developed education programs. Upon completion, the students received the rank of Archimandrite and carried out spiritual-preaching and teaching activities, passing on their knowledge to future generations in Armenia and beyond. Armenian monasteries were centers of writing (Sahakyan 2020; cf. also Gasparyan, Sahakyan 2023) where, in keeping with the requirements of the time, the art of copying manuscripts and entering colophons was mastered.

As trustworthy historical documents, the colophons filled up the gaps in historiographic sources while concurrently reflecting the then existing artistic style and thinking. On the whole, the creators of colophons should be regarded as disseminators of knowledge rather than mere copyists. That is what makes the colophons of the manuscripts copied in Hamshen particularly valuable. They reveal facts about the history of the region in general and Hamshen District in particular, like, for instance, the information regarding the tax and ethnic policies pursued by the Ottoman rulers.

## **2. Objectives and Methodology**

The research aims to study the content coverage of the colophons, and the role of Armenian scribes of Hamshen in the development and dissemination of medieval spiritual knowledge. The main goal of the research is achieved through the employment of the historical-philological approach. Implementation of the comparative and restorative methods helps us study these important sources and reveal the valuable historical-cultural information imbedded in the colophons created by Hamshen scribes in the XV-XVII centuries. The research has been carried out on the basis of our observations made in a variety of valuable manuscripts stored in the Matenadaran in Yerevan, in the manuscript depositories of the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem, the Mekhitarist Congregations in Venice and Vienna.

It is pertinent to note that in Armenian historiography information regarding Hamshen is far from being consistent. The gaps are filled with the colophons of the manuscripts from the XV-XVII centuries, copied by Armenian scribes of Hamshen in the scriptoria of Hamshen monasteries. The information they provide enables the scholars to conduct interdisciplinary research and restore the panorama of the Armenian District of Hamshen back in those days. Some of the colophons entered in these codices were described and analyzed fragmentarily or cursorily by various scholars (Archim. Tashian 1980, pp. 65-73; Edwards 1988, pp. 403-422; Voskian 1951, pp. 183-187; Cowe 2005, pp. 151-152; Khachikyan 2017, pp. 171-182).

### 3. Notes on the District of Hamshen and the Hamshen Scribes

The District of Hamshen<sup>23</sup> was part of Armenian statehood and played a key role in Armenian history. In the Graeco-Roman and Armenian primary sources reliable facts are documented which confirm that various tribes and ethnicities had left their historical and cultural traces in the basins and gorges of the Kajkar range of the Parkhar (Pontic) mountains<sup>24</sup>. The part Armenians played in the military, political and cultural life of the region is considerable. This set the stage for the formation of the Armenian Principality of Hamshen in the north-eastern outskirts of the region. The Greeks called the region *Chalib*, or *Armenochalib*; the inhabitants were called *Armenochalibs*. The Roman historian Pliny the Elder called the District of Khakhtiq *Country of Armenians* (Pliny the Elder 1938, p. 350; Cf. also Adonts 1971, p. 72). In reality, the Khakhtiq people were widely known iron manufacturers. Greek historians characterized them as discoverers of iron, and used the word *Khakhtiq* (*Chalib*) not as an ethnonym, but to designate the occupation of the people whose source of subsistence was iron processing (Ksenophont 2011, p. 124).

Because of the burdensome taxation in Eastern Armenia, back then under the Arab rule (end of VIII c.), Armenian princes Hamam and Shapuh fled Eastern Armenia with their families and 12 thousand of population and resettled in the inaccessible mountainous Tayk Province of Greater Armenia and the neighboring Khakhtiq District in 788-789 (Ghevond 1887, pp. 168-169). In the north-east of the Khakhtiq (Chaldia) theme of the Byzantine Empire Hamam Amatuni founded a semi-independent Armenian Principality and named it after himself – Hamamashen, i.e. created by Hamam (Mamikonyan 1989, p. 113). The Principality of Hamshen existed seven hundred years and only from the year 1489, due to the raids of Turkmen tribes and the invasive policy of the Ottoman Empire ceased to be Armenian (Avetaran 1489, p. 314b, p. 315ab).

The colophons in the Hamshen copied manuscripts shed light on the historical and political events taking place during that period. All the facts provided by the scribes, including the personal names and

<sup>23</sup> Today Hamshen District is incorporated into Rize Province of Turkey.

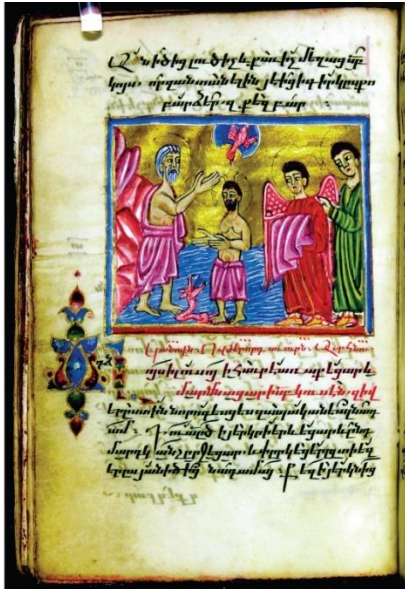
<sup>24</sup> The Parkhar, or Pontic mountains run along the Black Sea coastline, beginning in the lower Chorokh (Akamsis) River in the east, and stretching as far as the valley of the Iris River. Different parts of the range are named differently. Thus, the eastern part with the Kajkar summit (3,937 m.) is called variably East-Pontic, Khakhtiq, Parkhar.

toponyms, are documentary confirmation about the existence of the Armenian Principality of Hamshen, and that even under oppression, Hamshen did not cease to be Armenian in spirit, and remained faithful to Armenian traditions.

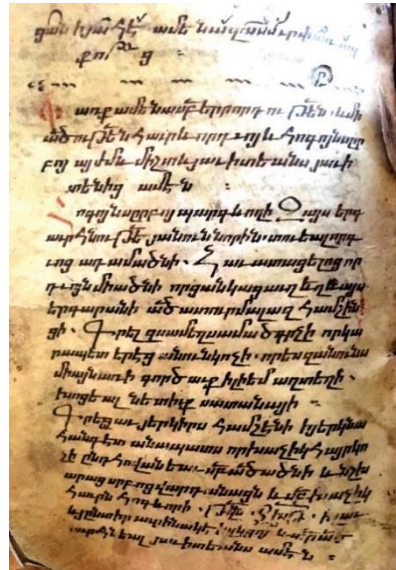
#### **4. Hamshen Scribes and the Thematic Coverage of the Colophons Created by Them**

The manuscripts and colophons copied in Hamshen reveal that until the forcible mass Islamization of the Armenian population in the XVIII century (Inchichian 1806, p. 397; Haykuni 1895, pp. 239-24) Hamshen was closely connected with Armenian spiritual and cultural centers and preserved Armenian identity. The role Armenian nobility of Hamshen played in it is of major importance. They commissioned local scribes to copy manuscripts, which were of applied relevance to spiritual life. No less significant for those who ordered – princes, members of the higher clergy, well-to-do families and common villagers was that the codices would pass down to their descendants. The scribes of Hamshen were clerics. Through copying manuscripts, they retained for generations the centuries-long traditions of Armenian writing and spiritual values. They were thereby disseminators of knowledge, since the colophons they added to the manuscripts also reflected immediate historical and linguistic realities.

The unique evidence, contained in the manuscripts and colophons copied by Hamshen scribes, indubitably proves that in the Diocese of Hamshen, the art of copying followed the principles of unity of Armenian spiritual culture, tradition of creating colophons, preservation of the Armenian language. The Hamshen scribes had a clear, beautiful handwriting, knew well the nuances of the medieval art of copying, the linguistic and grammatical rules of the Armenian language. In summary, they possessed all the necessary knowledge and skills that had been perfected and refined for centuries by the masters of Armenian illuminated book (Khacherian 1998, pp. 397-448).



Mashtots Matenadaran. Manuscript N° 7056, “Hymn”, Koloneia (Shabin Karahisar), Scribe and Miniaturist – Monastic Hayrapet from Hamamashen region.



Venice. Manuscript N° 2062, “Hymn”, Hamshen, village Eghnovit, Surb Khachik Hor Monastery, Colophon created by Scribe Priest Karapet in 1500.

Colophons in Hamshen manuscripts cover more than two hundred years – from 1422 through 1630 – a period rich in serious geopolitical developments in Armenia and the adjacent regions. These included the formation of the Ottoman Empire, occasional Turkmen inter-tribal clashes and Turko-Persian wars, just to name those that had left the most tragic imprint on the destiny of the Armenian people. From the colophons of Hamshen scribes it becomes obvious that the invasions of the Turkmen tribes of Kara Koyunlu and Kizilbashs and the aggressive policy of the Ottomans did not bypass the District of Hamshen (Khachikyan 2017, p. 172; Hay zhoghovrdi ... 1972, p. 35). Thanks to the information gathered from the scribes’ notes, it is possible to make the chronology of the reign of Armenian princes in Hamshen in the XV century, to find evidence that Hamshen Armenians were and remained loyal to their faith and the Armenian Apostolic Church.

It is hard to overestimate the significance of historical-cultural facts and household details found in the colophons. We learn that in the Surb Khachik Hor Monastery kept were the relics of the Saint Vardanants Martyrs (Sharakan 1512, p. 325b) – those who had gone to history for their boundless valor at the V century liberation war against

Persians (Yeghishe 2003, p. 114), and that several other sacred relics lay in the Khuzhka Monastery, a fragment of the Lord's Cross being one of them (Mashtots 1440, p. 228ab).

These scribes, wholeheartedly devoted to their cause, stood out for their zeal and humbleness. As it was accepted in the Armenian medieval writing tradition, they accompanied their names with words of self-humiliation, in spite of the fact that the manuscripts, copied or illuminated by them (Maranci 2007), were and still are examples of craftsmanship of the highest value.

In the XV century, among the spiritual figures of Hamshen particularly revered was the Supreme Mentor Hovhannes Hamshentsi. The son of a Hamshen baron, descendant of a "royal family" (Archim. Tashian 1980, pp. 42-49) he enjoyed boundless love and authority and occupied a leading position in the ranks of Armenian Archimandrites. Within the period from the 1440s to the 1490s he was able to establish two schools by the type of medieval higher educational institutions: in Avag Monastery of Daranaghyats District and, later, in Kapos Monastery in Yerznka District (Voskian 1951, p. 13-18; Qristonya Hayastan ... 2002, p. 122). This Mentor educated dozens of students, passed on to them his own vast knowledge and instilled high spiritual values (Karozgirk ... 1422-1425, p. 161a; ZZH dari hayeren dzeragreri hishatakaranner 1967, p. LXXXVI). His students named those educational institutions Universities and were proud to be taught by Hovhannes Hamshentsi whom they described as an enlightened, adamant, courageous and invincible orator.

Manuscripts and colophons, created in the period from 1499 to 1528 by another outstanding religious figure, the prolific Hamshen scribe priest Karapet, have also come down to us. The information gleaned from them sheds light on the events the scribe witnessed during the mentioned time span.

There is a noteworthy detail about the District of Hamshen in the large "Book of Psalms" impeccably executed by Bishop Karapet Jughaetsi in the Surb Khachik Hor Monastery of Hamshen in 1630. In his colophon, he calls the district "Khacheqar Diocese" (Saghmosaran 1630) which is yet another proof of the fact that, after falling under Ottoman domain, Hamshen still retained its status of a diocese in 1630 and continued to operate as a center of writing. However, following the Islamization of the population of Hamshen in the XVIII century, the scriptoria stopped functioning. The last manuscript known to us was copied in 1812.

Having first appeared in Armenian manuscripts in the V century, further on the colophons included in them developed into a

historiographic genre of great source-study value which flourished in the XIII-XV centuries and lasted up until the XVIII century.

In accordance to the style, established throughout centuries, the scribes traditionally noted in the colophon the time and place of copying the manuscript, the names of the customer and receiver and the persons immediately involved in the process of copying and illuminating the manuscript. Yet the necessity to adhere to these norms restricted the scribes and led to uniformity of the narration. However, the renowned scribes deviated from the rules to provide various unforeseen pieces of information, to give an account of the circumstances in which the copies were created. Thereby, they expounded the frames of the notes and delivered inestimable source material to future researchers (Papazyan 1956, pp. 115-120).

Typically Armenian in Hamshen colophons can be considered the listing of quite a few personal names of men and women representing the copyist's extended family and those who in this way or another participated in the creation of the given manuscript. The note normally ended with a request to the reader to remember in their prayers all the mentioned persons' names. As a result of this, a vast list of male and female personal names (*David, Stepanos, Yohannes (Hovhannes), Astvatzatur, Norlusin, Shahanush, Yasimin, Yeghisabet, Marem (Mariam)*, etc.), popular in Medieval Armenia, has come down to us and presents interest from a linguistic perspective. It is important that, judging by the number of female names, in the Armenian society of the historical period at issue women were not disrespected. Valuable are also the toponyms (*Kushiva, Koshtents, Khuzhka*, etc.), especially with the root *khach* ("cross" in Armenian): *Khachivanq, Khachapit, Khachovid*, etc.

The colophon as a historiographic genre is a written monument on its own, its content does not relate to the content of the manuscript in any way. As was mentioned, there were scribes who did not keep to the accepted norms and patterns of writing colophons. So, they added their own prayers, occasionally in a poetic form, thereby approximating their writing to Christian hymns. This certainly enriched the expressive means of colophon writing.

Hamshen scribe Hovannes Malaz in one of his colophons seemed to have foreseen the calamities that awaited Armenians of Hamshen and urged his people to be dedicated to their faith: steadfastness – to *believers*, coming to faith and orthodoxy – to *doubters*, readiness to defend themselves – to those *in danger of assault*, and – *may Christ the Lord grant peace and safety to Christians* (Avetaran 1523, p. 286b). The scribe's call was justified as in the 1520s-1530s, a census (*tahrir*) was

conducted in Hamshen, which was under the total administrative and political domination of the Ottoman Empire. The villages and taxable population were registered (387 Numaralı Muhâsebe-i Vilâyet-i Karaman ve Rûm Defteri (937/1530)... 1997). From the remembrance note made in 1531, only 11 years after the census taking, we learn that neither had Hamshen escaped the Ottoman practice of *devshirme* – forcible recruitment of young adolescents from Christian families to replenish the ranks of *yanychars* (Zulalyan 1980, p. 330).

Tadeos Sebastatsi, a contemporary of those events, wrote in 1531 a poem, *Lament for the boys sent to Istanbul as captives*, truthfully describing the disaster that befell upon Armenians:

Tears poured down the mournful faces  
Of parents and brothers and sisters,  
Days of sorrow and sobbing set in,  
Words are unable to relate this.

Dressed in greyish sackcloth rags ,  
Sprinkled with ashes they sat,  
Weeping stricken with dread,  
Envyng those long ago dead.

When like lambs from their nursing ewes  
Torn were they from dear and loved ones,  
Wail and howl deafened the skies,  
Those were times of woe and cries (Zulalyan 1980, p. 331).

In the added prayers the scribes asked the Lord for the fertility of the soil, safety of the forests and pastures, sheep and cattle, barns and hives, thereby giving us some idea about the occupations in Hamshen in the period in question: they did farming, sheep and cattle breeding, bee keeping, etc. (Akhtarakan bshkaran 1499, pp. 106b-108a).

Curious are the prayers and spell-formulas intended to ward off demoniacism and evil spirits, diabolical forces, witchcraft and illnesses. The scribes believed that only through the Lord's power, through prayers and fasting is it possible to get rid of evil obsessions. An example of incantation against fever is the following, where the scribe addresses the demonic soul that caused the illness, in the meantime showing his respectful attitude to other religions:

If you are Armenian, I conjure you by the name of Jesus Christ,  
if you are Turkish – by the names of Ali and Muhammad, if  
Jewish, I conjure you by the names of Moses and Aaron, if any

other, I frighten you by the name of your king... (Akhtarakan bjskaran 1499, p. 64b).

The language of folk prayers is specific. It notably deviates from grammatical norms and is rhymed with the use of repetitions and puns, which often cause difficulty to understanding. Here is an example:

Azi, Mazi, Zarekhi, Zmrukhi, went to the valley tzirani<sup>25</sup>, herded in the valley, took out cheese hankkhats<sup>26</sup>, those who saw – marveled, those who ate – burst into the air, so will all with an evil eye before God's servant (Akhtarakan bjskaran 1499, p. 68ab).

From times immemorable, various beliefs and spells are firmly instilled in everyday life of Hamshenians. The scribes, by including folk prayers into their colophons, sought to entwine them with Christian canonical prayers.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of the conducted study of the colophons by Hamshen scribes confirm that the Armenian Principality of Hamshen and the eponymous District were a spiritual and cultural center with a status of a Diocese. The Hamshen colophons are of great historiographic and cultural value, for they reflect truthful details of historical events, patriotic feelings and personal emotions of the scribes, their thoughts about the future and the destiny of their own people. They enrich the treasury of Armenian culture and hold their deserved place in the history of Armenian people and the region as a whole.

This comprehensive examination of the surveyed colophons from the hands of Hamshen scribes, along with the detail present in these illuminated manuscripts, irrefutably demonstrates Hamshen as a unique center of Armenian spiritual life and its written expression. Yet, the heavy blows of history abruptly changed the fate of Hamshen and Hamshen Armenians.

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<sup>25</sup> Tzirani – bright, beautiful. There was also a dye called *tzirani karmir* – tzirani red, produced in age-old times from shells; later on it was replaced by *vordan karmir* – Ararat cochineal (Malkhasents 2010, p. 339).

<sup>26</sup> Hankkhats – cheese without rennet (Nor bargirk haykazean... 1836, p. 911).

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**ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЙ ЗНАЧИМОСТИ, ПЕРЕДАВАЕМЫЕ  
АРМЯНСКИМИ ПИСЦАМИ АМШЕНА (XV-XVII ВВ.)**

В настоящей статье изучается деятельность писцов Амшенского округа XV-XVII веков. Служение писцов будущим поколениям невозможно переоценить, так как создавая собственные центры письменности, они передавали бесценную культурную и историческую информацию, сохраняя традиции армянской письменности, и демонстрируя глубокое знание духовных и религиозных традиций того времени. Колофоны, оставленные ими в рукописях, заполняют пробелы в истории района, доказывая, что Амшен был духовной епархией и священным местом для армян. Они предоставляют будущим ученым возможность понимания рассматриваемого региона с междисциплинарных позиций.

**Ключевые слова:** рукопись, колофон, средневекковая Армения, армянские писцы, Хахтик (Халдиа), Амшен, историографический жанр, духовный центр.