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FEATURES OF TRANSLATION OF THE COMMENTARY ON THE REVELATION OF SAINT JOHN BY NERSĒS LAMBRONATS'Ī

Abstract. The article discusses Nersēs Lambronats'ī's (1153–1198) translation and adaptation of the commentary on the Book of Revelation. It reveals the motivations that prompted Nersēs to undertake the translation, which holds significant value within the Armenian Apostolic Church legacy. As a source for his translation Lambronats'ī used the Greek original by Andrew of Caesarea (AD 563–614). In his colophons, Lambronats'ī notes that he delivered the Greek original to the Catholicos of Rumkale, Gregory IV Tgha (1173–1193), who entrusted with its translation the metropolitan of Hierapolis, Constantine. It was with Constantine that Lambronats'ī made the initial translation of the Commentary. But why is the translation now attributed only to Lambronats'ī in Armenian literature? The fact is that Constantine was Greek, most likely had not mastered Classical Armenian, and so turned the original text into the colloquial Armenian of that time. Subsequently Lambronats'ī himself revised the translation and adapted it to the patterns of literary Armenian. Furthermore, he made many changes to the text, adapting it to Armenian religious thought, so that the Armenian text is valuable as an almost independent work. This research highlights the textual discrepancies between existing printed versions and ancient manuscripts, justifying the necessity for a new critical edition of the text.

Keywords: Nersēs Lambronats'ī, Nersēs Shnorhali, Constantine of Hierapolis, Andrew of Caesarea, commentary, Book of Revelation, translation, adaptation, Armenian tradition

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ОСОБЕННОСТИ ПЕРЕВОДА НЕРСЕСОМ ЛАМБРОНАЦИ КОММЕНТАРИЯ К ОТКРОВЕНИЮ ИОАННА БОГОСЛОВА

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются перевод и адаптация комментария к Откровению Иоанна Богослова, выполненные Нерсесом Ламбронати (1153–1198). Раскрываются мотивы, побудившие Нерсеса приступить к переводу, который имеет большое значение в наследии Армянской апостольской церкви. В качестве источника для перевода Ламбронати использовал греческий оригинал Андрея Кесарийского (563–614). В колофонах Ламбронати отмечает, что он передал греческий оригинал католикусу Григорию IV Тга (1173–1193), поручившему его перевод митрополиту Иераполиса Константину, с которым Ламбронати сделал первоначальный перевод комментария. Автор задается вопросом, почему в современной армянской литературе перевод приписывается только Ламбронати, и уточняет, что Константин был греком, скорее всего не владел классическим армянским языком и перевел оригинал на разговорный армянский язык того времени. Впоследствии сам Ламбронати пересмотрел перевод и адаптировал его к образцам литературного армянского языка. Тем не менее он внес в текст много изменений, адаптировав его к армянской религиозной мысли, так что армянский текст ценен как почти самостоятельное произведение. В исследовании подчеркиваются текстовые расхождения между существующими печатными версиями и древними рукописями, что оправдывает необходимость нового критического издания текста.

Ключевые слова: Нерсес Ламбронати, Нерсес Шнорали, Константин Иерапольский, Андрей Кесарийский, комментарий, Откровение Иоанна Богослова, перевод, адаптация, армянская традиция

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Archbishop Nersēs Lambronats‘i¹ is one of the outstanding Fathers of the Armenian Church, who left a vast literary legacy of both spiritual and secular works. He was a prominent figure in church, welfare, public, state and national activities and a skilled writer of panegyrics, hymns, Armenian spiritual songs (*sharakan*), sermons, commentaries and translations.

Nersēs (baptismal name Smbat) was born in 1153 in the castle of Lambron, in the northwest region of Cilicia². His father, Oshin, from the Hetumid princely dynasty, the descendants of which ascended the throne of the Cilician kingdom in 1126, was the Lord of Lambron (ca. 1125–1170). His mother, Shahandukht, was niece of the Catholicos Grigor III Pahlavuni (1113–1166) and Nersēs IV Shnorhali (1166–1173). Lambronats‘i grew up in a monastic environment, receiving profound spiritual and ecclesiastical knowledge. He was fluent in Greek, Latin, and Syriac. According to his first biographer, Samuel Skewrats‘i, he learned Greek from an early age with the help of his mother [Mat‘evosyan 1988: 257].

Nersēs Lambronats‘i was ordained as a priest by Nersēs Shnorhali when he was only 16 years old, and after 6 years, in 1175, Catholicos Grigor IV Tgha consecrated him bishop of the dioceses of Lambron and Tarsus. As ambassador to Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (r. 1155–1190) and later to Alexios III of Byzantium (r. 1195–1203), he pursued the ecumenical initiatives of Nersēs Shnorhali for the unity of the universal Church [Nersēs Lambronats‘i 2022: 102].

Within the vast literary legacy of Nersēs Lambronats‘i, translations hold a unique place. His translations from Greek, Latin, and Syriac aimed to fill gaps in knowledge within both spiritual and secular spheres and held significant educational value. The civil and military lawbooks he translated were extensively used in Cilicia.

Let us now find out the reasons that prompted Nersēs to undertake the translation of the Commentary on the Book of Revelation. According to the *Catalogue of Armenian Manuscripts of the Bible*, as documented and studied by Archbishop Shahe Adjemian, the earliest known appearance of the Book of Revelation is in manuscript N5607 of the Matenadaran, dated to the 12th century [Adjémian 1992: 5]. It is not a Bible, but a miscellany of theological works with an emphasis on biblical commentaries. Revelation is never mentioned in any of the lists of canonical books found in the proceedings of church councils prior to the time of Nersēs. Some scholars consider Nersēs Lambronats‘i to be the translator of the Book of Revelation. Others, taking into account the fact that Armenian authors from the fifth to the tenth century, including Agat‘angeghos, Eznik Koghbat’s‘i, Ghazar Parpets‘i, T‘ovma Artsruni, Grigor Narekats‘i and others, have many direct and indirect quotations from the Book of Revelation, express the opinion

¹ The transliteration of Armenian words follows the Library of Congress Armenian Romanization Table (<https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsa/romanization/armenian.pdf>).

² Cilicia is a district of southern Anatolia, bounded on the north and west by the Taurus Mountain Range, on the east by the Anti-Taurus, and on the south by the Mediterranean Sea. In the 12th century an Armenian kingdom was established in Cilicia by the Armenian Rubenid dynasty. The Rubenids ruled first as barons and then, from 1199 to 1226, as kings of Cilicia. Thereafter the family of Oshin, another Armenian noble, ruled as the Hethumid dynasty until 1342.

that the Armenian translation of this book was made long before the twelfth century [Ter-Movsisean 2018: 221–224]. But this is not a strong argument, because most of the Armenian writers knew Syriac and Greek and they would have been familiar with many texts not yet available in Armenian. The view that there was another translation before Nersēs is supported by Lambronats‘i’s colophon to his translation of the Commentary: “Following in their steps, we have handed on to the children of Holy Church this book, that it may be ranked among the apostolic books as a truly apostolic revelation. But it was made accurate, being revised from the Greek in translation by myself, the humble Nersēs; and with it I have introduced into the Armenian Church a critical interpretation of the same” [Conybeare 1907: 62]. This means, that possessing an ancient manuscript of the translation, Nersēs undertook its editing through comparative analysis with the Greek original and subsequently incorporated it into the list of canonical books [Ter-Movsisean 2018: 206]. In another colophon Lambronats‘i mentions that after reading the Book of Revelation, he searched a lot for its commentary in Armenian, but couldn’t find it, and that is why he set about to find and translate the commentary from another language [Nersēs of Lambron 1855: 322].

In his search for a commentary on the Book of Revelation Lambronats‘i went to Antioch, where he succeeded in finding a variant of the commentary written in the Lombard language. However, he couldn’t find anyone who knew that dialect and could translate it into Armenian. Then, in one of the monasteries outside the city, he found what he needed, written in Greek by a hermit named Basil. Nersēs took the manuscript and brought to the Catholicos of Rumkale³, Gregory IV Tgha (1173–1193). Gregory entrusted the task of translation to the metropolitan of Hierapolis, Constantine, who was there at that time. Lambronats‘i states that Constantine would dictate his translation and he would write it down. He further notes that the translation was completed in 1179 in Rumkale. Subsequently Lambronats‘i himself edited the translation while residing in the hermitage of St. George, located in the Taurus Mountains [Nersēs of Lambron 1855: 321–324].

Who was Constantine of Hierapolis and why did the catholicos order him to translate the Commentary on Revelation? At different times the Armenian and Byzantine churches had made attempts of unification, but in the 12th century issues related to unification were discussed quite seriously. In his letter addressed to Emperor Manuel Comnenos, catholicos Nersēs Shnorhali stated that the unification of churches should not take place as of ‘master and servant’, but by equal rights, and if there are found ritualistic and theological deviations, they must be corrected jointly [Bozoyan 2022: 322–323]. After the death of Nersēs Shnorhali (1173), Grigor IV Tgha tried to bring the union issues to a final solution. The Armenian Catholicosate had its allies in the ranks of the Greek clergy,

³ Rumkale is a ruined fortress on the Euphrates, located in the province of Gaziantep in Turkey. The site was occupied by various Byzantine and Armenian warlords during the Middle Ages. During the 12th century, when the castle was known as Hromgla, it also became the seat of an Armenian bishop. From 1203 to 1293 it served as the residence of the Armenian Catholicos.

with the help of which it aimed to settle these questions. One of those clerics was the Greek Metropolitan Constantine of Hierapolis, who, opposing the policies of the Byzantine Church, was allied with the Armenian Catholicos. In his book, *Documents on the Armenian-Byzantine Ecclesiastical Negotiations*, Azat Bozoyan mentions that by the order of Catholicos Gregory IV Tgha Constantine and Nersēs Lambronats‘i translated not only the Commentary on Revelation, but also a number of other works that were important for the regulation of relations between the Byzantine and Armenian churches [Bozoyan 1995: 170–181].

It is worth to note that this tradition of joint translations was not new in Armenia. Starting from the 8th century, we have evidence of foreign translators who, in cooperation with Armenian authors, translated various Christian bibliographic works into Armenian⁴. The foreign native speakers often did not master Classical Armenian and turned the original text into the colloquial Armenian of that time. After that Armenian authors revised the translation and adapted it to the patterns of literary Armenian.

It is remarkable that in the 11th–12th centuries, Catholicos Gregory II the Martyrophile (Vkayaser) initiated the great translation movement in Constantinople with the method mentioned above, which was aimed at strengthening the positions of the Armenian Church [Gevorgyan 2022: 93–112].

It is precisely this way of translation that was widespread in Cilician Armenia also in the 12th century. It was employed before Nersēs Lambronats‘i did so: thus, for example, Nersēs Shnorhali translated several bibliographic works jointly with Abraham Gramatikos and with the priests Grigor and Michael [Bozoyan 2010: 277–280].

The Greek source for Lambronats‘i was the *Commentary on the Book of Revelation* written by Andrew, bishop of Caesarea (6th–7th cc.). It is the oldest Greek commentary on Revelation written by a recognized Father of the Church. An expanded version was edited around 895 by Aretas, also a bishop of Caesarea. Robert Thomson notes that Nersēs used only Andrew’s version, though Aretas’s name appears alongside Andrew’s, presumably because Aretas’s version was well known in later times and the double authorship was used by default [Nerses of Lambron 2007: 15].

Nersēs’ text has many discrepancies from the Greek original. As mentioned above, after the joint translation with Constantine, Lambronats‘i edited the result in the hermitage of St. George. He added, removed, or entirely reinterpreted several paragraphs, adapting them to align with the doctrines of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Thomson mentions almost all places where the Armenian text differs from the Greek. Our study based on these data shows that the additions and changes made by Nersēs make up more than a quarter of the text. There are some commentaries in the Armenian version absent from the text of Andrew, for example chapter 7 verse 4, some quotes from Apostle Paul’s Epistle to the Phi-

⁴Step‘anos Siwnec‘i (685–735), with the help of Davit‘ Hypatos, translated the corpus of works attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite (in Constantinople between 712 and 717), the treatise *On Human Nature* by the 4th century Greek physician and philosopher Nemesius of Emesa (in Constantinople in 717), etc.

lippians, chapter 2 number 10, etc. When translating the commentary, Nersēs often personally refers to various early patristic writers, mentioned by Andrew, who had studied the Book of Revelation: Dionysius, Irenaeus, Gregory Nazianzenus, Cyril of Alexandria, Methodius and Hippolytus, and gives his own interpretation, instead of translating. In his additions he mainly refers to the Old and New Testaments, often using the prophecies of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel.

The addition of many notable passages into the text illustrate Lambronats‘i’s tendency to remain faithful to the tradition of the Armenian Church, e. g.:

The Greek original

...τοὺς δὲ πόδας καὶ τὸν χαλκολίβανον σημαίνειν τὴν τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν τοῖς σωζομένοις εὐωδίαν τοῦ νοητοῦ μύρου καὶ τὴν ἀτμητον καὶ ἀσύγχυτον ἔνωσιν θεότητός τε καὶ ἀνθρωπότητος· αὕτη γὰρ ὡς πεπυρακτωμένη τῷ θείῳ Πνεύματι, τοῖς ἀνθρωπίνους λογισμοῖς ἐστὶν ἀψηλάφητος [Schmid 1955: 32].

The feet and the glowing brass mean the fragrance of the spiritual “myrrh of Christ in those who are saved” and the indivisible and unconfused union of divinity and humanity. For this union, ignited by means of the divine Spirit, cannot be grasped by human reasoning [Andrew of Caesarea 2011: 69].

Armenian version

«Եւ ոտքն պղնձի ծխելոյ», նշանակէ զանդամոցն Քրիստոսի զանուշահոտութիւնն, այլ եւ զինանալի անուշահոտութիւնն յանբաժանելի եւ յանշփոթ աստուածամարդոյն ի մեզ բուրեալ, ի յոր մարմինն հողելէն հրացաւ աստուածային խառնմամբն, զի մարդկային խորհրոց եղիցի անշաւափելի: [Nersēs of Lambron 1855: 50].

“And feet of smoking bronze” indicates the sweet odour from the indissoluble and unconfused God-man exhaled on us, in whom the earthly body flamed through the divine mingling, so that it might be unattainable to human thoughts) [Nerses of Lambron 2007: 59].

Nersēs Lambronats‘i avoids obvious Chalcedonian formulations, such as the formula of the union of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ, which has reminded Armenian theologians of the formulation of the rapprochement of the two natures in the one person of Christ, attributed to Nestorius of Constantinople. With the formulation “God-man” he wants to show that it is not that the divine and human natures were united in the person of Christ, but that Christ himself is God and man simultaneously, that is, he is indivisible and unconfused in his nature. By using the term *kharnumn* (Greek: *μίξις*), Lambronats‘i reinforces the emphasis of the doctrinal formulation of the Armenian Church on the oneness of nature, following his teacher, Saint Nersēs Shnorhali.

In another passage Nersēs changes the word *χριστοκτόνοις* ‘slayers of Christ’ to *astuatsaspan* ‘slayer of God’ [Nersēs of Lambron 1855: 100], which clearly expresses the Christological approach of the Armenian Church that Christ is God. By this he tries to avoid an intention of dividing Christ into two separate natures, which means

that only a human, not God died on the cross. Thus, the translation and adaptation of the Greek Commentary on the Revelation by Andrew of Caesarea made by Nersēs is close to being called an independent work where he rewords the theological passages in order to reflect the Armenian tradition [Nerses of Lambron 2007: 13].

Although there are more than 90 Armenian manuscripts on the translation of Commentary, still we have only one printed version in Armenian, published in Jerusalem in 1855. The main source for it was a manuscript written in the city of Karin, which was copied from the manuscript of Yovhannēs Erznkats'ī (Ms M2520, copied in 1306), the other two manuscripts were written in Bursa, copied from the same original. Thomson has made an English translation of the Armenian text with remarkable annotations and an Introduction. But despite the large number of surviving manuscripts, for the translation he used mainly the printed version while also mentioning his use of Ms M1422, copied in 1284. A comparison of the printed text and the English translation with earlier manuscripts reveals plenty of different readings. I have started preparing a critical edition of the Armenian text using the earliest surviving manuscript from the Venice collection (MS V1529, copied in 1271, fol. 615–786), one from Vienna (MS W571, copied in 1283, fol. 24^r–157^r), and 4 from Matenadaran (MSs M1418, copied in 1280, fol. 1^r–125^r, M1422, copied in 1284, fol. 4^r–144^v, M2520, copied in 1306, fol. 256^r–343^r, M4086, copied in 1323, fol. 100^r–189^r).

In summary, Nersēs Lambronats'ī was the first among Armenian authors to initiate the translation of the Commentary on the Revelation of Saint John. It was primarily aimed at meeting the spiritual needs of those in the church, ensuring that the Book of Revelation, which had already been included in the canon of the Armenian Church, would be understandable to them. This work can be considered a unique continuation of the large-scale translation movement that commenced in the 5th century following the creation of the Armenian alphabet. Although the commentary of Andrew of Caesarea served as the main source for Lambronats'ī's translation, the translator nevertheless made so many changes to the text, adapting it to Armenian religious thought, so that the Armenian text has the value of an almost independent work.

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