

The Anonymous Saint in the Armenian Tradition Alexi(an)os the Voluntary Pauper or the Anonymous ‘Man of God’?

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Abstract This paper will outline the Armenian tradition of the story of the Man of God who became known in Byzantium and the West as St Alexius (Alexis) the Man of God. The Armenian legend has been preserved in two main versions – as a short synaxaric text, such as the ones found in the synaxaries M1512, M1502 of the Matenadaran, and a fuller *Life*, preserved in fewer manuscripts (M789, M792). The article will also discuss some specific features of the Armenian text, such as its style, the conspicuous absence of personal names and other details that might allow us to trace the origins of this textual tradition, as well as the possible relations of the Armenian *Life* to the extant Syriac and Greek texts of the saint's *Life*.

Keywords Hagiography. Asceticism. Alexis. Man of God. Armenian translations. Manuscripts.


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1 Introduction

Veneration of the anonymous saint who first appeared in Syria as *gabra d'Alaha*, 'man of God', and from the 9th century became known in Byzantium and the West as St Alexius (or Alexis) the Man of God was widely spread throughout the Christian East, even as far as Ethiopia. Dramatic developments and transformations of his legend have been an object of scholarly interest since the 18th century - various parts and texts comprising his dossier in the Byzantine, Slavic, European, Ethiopic, and especially Syriac traditions have been published and studied, first by the Bollandists (Du Sollier et al.) in 1725, and later by Amiaud, Massmann, Paykova, Muraviev, and others (see final bibliography). However, the Georgian and Armenian versions of this legend, which, due to the geographic position and unique ties of their respective cultures to both the Greek- and Syriac-speaking worlds, could shed light on the development of the legend, have not so far received any particular attention. The present paper is not meant as a comprehensive essay on the topic, but rather as an introduction (laying the basis for further research) and an attempt to situate the Armenian tradition of the Man of God in the complicated sequence of transmissions and transformations of his dossier in the Christian East.

2 The Story of the Man of God

2.1 Brief Outline of the Legend

The story of the Man of God is a peculiar one; it is, as some might say, a disturbing one because the main protagonist seems to have divested himself of any 'normal' human attachment and emotion in his quest for higher vocation, and yet, it inspired generations of hagiographers and translators to keep it alive, adding more vivid details and transforming it along the way. In the earliest version of this legend (Syr I), preserved in three manuscripts kept at the British Museum dating from the 6th century,¹ the narrative goes as follows. A wealthy but childless family residing in Rome after many prayers finally are blessed with an heir; the child grows up a serious, quiet young man. At his coming of age, the parents arrange a wedding and

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1 British Museum Or. Add. 17177; Add. 14644; Add. 12160.

prepare a feast, in the middle of which the young man flees away, runs to the port and goes first to Seleucia, and then to Edessa. There he stays for 17 years, living among the poor at one of the churches, and his piety is spotted by one of the *paramonarii* (church wardens) who learns his story but keeps quiet, obeying the saint's request. After the death of the Man of God, said *paramonarius* reveals this to the bishop, who happens to be the famous bishop Rabbula.² The grave of the saint is checked by the clergy of Edessa only to be found empty with no trace of his body – a shocking and impressive spectacle which inspires the bishop to dedicate more of his resources and money to the care of the poor and strangers.

2.2 Further Development of the Legend

The later (second) Syriac version (Syr II)³ which appears in the manuscripts dating from the 9th century onwards presents a completely different storyline.⁴ The saint does not die but flees Edessa for Tarsus trying to escape unwanted fame. However, the ship is carried by adverse winds to Rome, his birthplace! The saint takes this as an omen and retreats to the house of his parents who do not recognise him. He settles as one of the paupers or clients of the household and lives there for another 17 years, abused and mistreated by the servants. Before his death the saint writes a letter (*chartion*) to his parents in which he reveals his identity and tells the story of his life. However, the father of the saint cannot remove the *chartion* from the saint's hands; it is solemnly taken from the hands of the deceased saint only by the emperors Honorius and Arcadius and by Innocentius, the bishop of Rome. The affair is revealed, the parents recognise their long-lost son, his bride – or rather, his wife – produces a ring and a veil that had been given to her by her fiancé on the eve of the wedding and which were described in the letter. The saint himself remains anonymous in both Syriac versions.

2.3 The Saint Receives a Name

In the second half of the 9th century St Joseph the Hymnographer composed in Constantinople a canon in honour of the saint, and it is

² On Rabbula and his connection to the Man of God see Drijvers 1982 and 1996.

³ Edited by Amiaud (Amiaud 1889) on the basis of Brit. Mus. Add. 14655.

⁴ Amiaud insisted that the second Syriac version was not based on the early (first) legend, but must have used some other base text, probably Greek (Amiaud 1889, introduction). Paykova disagrees, cf. Paykova 1986, 168-9.

only then that this saint is identified by name - Alexis (also Alexius, Alexios). This is also the first time when this name enters the Greek world and gains immense popularity both in Byzantium and in the West (five Byzantine emperors, starting with Alexios I Komnenos [1048-1118], bore this name). Some scholars suggest that there must have existed a Greek translation of the Syriac text, probably produced in Constantinople in the early 9th century, which became the basis for Joseph's canon, while others think that the Greek text was used as the base text for Syr II (Muraviev et al. 2001, 9). The Greek canon and the Greek *Lives* of St Alexis in some instances coincide verbatim with Syr II, but it is not possible to establish the direction of this textual transmission (Paykova 1986).

2.4 Multiple Versions of the Saint's *Life*

In the 10th century we witness an explosion of interest in this saint. This is attested by the appearance of a number of Arabic versions of his *Life*. These either try to present a composite story, eliminating all contradictions (as in the so-called *karshuni* version), or simply follow the Greek Constantinople version (the second Arabic version, Ar II). A metaphrastic Greek version also appears in the 10th century. At the same time, a Latin tradition begins to develop in Rome; it connects the saint, now firmly established as Alexis or Alexius, to the Aventine hill where the house of the saint's parents was allegedly situated. In 1216 the inhabitants of the monastery proclaimed that they had found the relics of St Alexis and this led to a quarrel with the clergy of St Peter's Basilica who also claimed to have his body. Some parts of his relics surfaced throughout the Middle Ages in different parts of the Christian *oikoumene* - his head in Agia Laura in Peloponnesus, his right hand in Novgorod, St Sophia Cathedral (Muraviev et al. 2001, 9).

2.5 Amalgamation / Confusion with St John the Recluse

The legend of (Alexis) the Man of God very much resembles that of St John the Recluse (known also as Calybites or the Hut-Dweller) who lived in Constantinople in the 5th century and left his parents' house to lead an ascetic life in an unnamed monastery. John returned disguised after six years of absence and then lived unrecognised near his parents until the time of his death. Some scholars have suggested that these two saints are in fact the same person, but this hypothesis is not universally accepted. However, St John and St (Alexis) the Man of God frequently appear together in the iconography of ascetic saints and their lives are often placed together in various collec-

tions and synaxaria. The similarity between these saints sometimes led to the confusion of their iconographic representations which will be discussed later.

2.6 Hymnography

The liturgical commemoration of St Alexius the Man of God is witnessed in the *Typicon of the Great Church* (10th-11th centuries), in the verse *Prologos* of Christopher of Mytilene and in the Studite *Typicon* of the 11th century (Muraviev et al. 2001, 10). It would be useful to look for hymns in his honour in the languages of the Christian East outside the Byzantine tradition - if found, they might provide new evidence for this cult and might solve some riddles, notably the mystery of the saint's name and the development of his tradition between the 6th and the 9th centuries.⁵

3 The Man of God in the Armenian Tradition

3.1 Dating the Cult

It is not yet possible to determine exactly when the Man of God - either in his anonymous personification or under the name of Alexi(an)os - was added to the list of saints venerated by Armenian Christians. The legend of the Man of God does not appear in the earlier synaxaria, but it features in some collections of the *Lives of Saints* (e.g. M792), homiliaries, and in the later versions of the *Synaxarium* (e.g. M789, M512, M1502). His commemoration was incorporated into the annual liturgical calendar not later than the 14th century and was celebrated on the 17th of March (9th of Areg) as is witnessed in synaxaries of the 14th century, for example, in the *Synaxarium of Ter Israel* (ՅԱՍՍԱՆԱՆՈՒՐՔ).⁶

⁵ One of the anonymous reviewers has helpfully pointed out the existence of a hymn by Yovhannēs T'lkuranc'i (14th-15th centuries) called Տաղ սրբոյն Ալեքսիանոսի (Song of St Alexianos). This will constitute a possible line of inquiry for future research.

⁶ Bayan (1930, 171-5), who published it, used a 14th century manuscript from the collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS BnF 180 (= P 180). In this version the name of the saint is Alexios (Ալեքսիոս), not Alexianos. The present Author is aware that a more recent edition of the ՅԱՍՍԱՆԱՆՈՒՐՔ, with an English translation, exists, although she has not been able to consult it: for the life of St Alexis see Mathews 2016, 100-5.

3.2 The Two Versions of the Legend

The synaxaric (abridged) Armenian tradition of the Man of God (Arm I) at first glance appears to be following the Greek (Byzantine) one: the saint has a name, the parents of the saint are not anonymous either (the Greek name Euphemianos appears in variant forms), the storyline coincides with the one found in the Greek sources. The rubrics of these texts present the Man of God as Alexianos the Voluntary Pauper, Ալէքսիանոս կամաւոր աղքատ (for example, M792, f. 262a; M1502, f. 348; this version will be further referred to as Arm I).⁷ It is striking that this special title, կամաւոր աղքատ, is also used for St John the Recluse whose story appears in the same collections, thus M1502, f. 246a refers to John as Yovhannès the Voluntary Pauper, Յովհաննէս կամաւոր աղքատ. Their iconography in some Armenian manuscripts also reflects a degree of confusion. The regular iconographic attribute of John the Recluse, the Gospel book that he is normally holding in his hands,⁸ appears in the miniature accompanying the story of Alexianos.⁹ It might be suggested that the similarities between the accounts of the two saints confused the compilers of these collections who applied the same title to both Alexianos and John which, in turn, misled the artists who illuminated the manuscripts, but this problem requires further investigation.

However, the Armenian tradition has also retained a different version of the legend. The main characteristic of this version is the total anonymity of the Man of God and all other *dramatis personae* apart from the bishop of Edessa, Rabbula. Moreover, the title of the *Life* literally defines the main character as an ‘anonymous son of the king of the Romans’, անանուն որոյ թագաւորին Յոռոնց.¹⁰ This version will be referred to as Arm II and will be discussed below.

3.3 Editions of the Text

Since the synaxaric versions (Arm I) rely on the Byzantine tradition and have very minor differences from what one sees in the Greek text (apart from the name, which has the peculiar form Alexianos rather than Alex-

⁷ The Author would like to express her deep gratitude to Armine Melkonyan (Matenadaran) for providing the accession numbers for these manuscripts and for notifying her of the accompanying miniatures.

⁸ An example of such standard iconography might be found in a miniature of St John in the Եաշոց (Lectionary) of King Hetum II, M979, f. 47a.

⁹ M1502, f. 348b.

¹⁰ M789, f. 525b: ‘Պատմութիւն եւ վարք կամաւոր աղքատացելոյն վասն Քրիստոսի՝ անանուն որոյ թագաւորին Յոռոնց (Story and Life of the Voluntary Pauper for Christ’s Sake, the Anonymous Son of the Roman King).

ios), they have not yet attracted any scholarly attention and have not been studied separately.¹¹ The second version was published by the Mekhitarists in 1855 in their collection of the *Lives of the Holy Fathers*. It is a long text, much longer than both Syriac versions (Syr I and II) and slightly longer than the metaphrastic Greek version. The Mekhitarists' edition was based on unspecified manuscripts, which makes tracing the original text rather difficult. However, the differences between their edition and M789 are relatively few, which supports the contention that there must exist a number of manuscripts containing the same version. In any case, the relation between this edition and the existing manuscript versions of Arm II will require further investigation.

3.4 Special Features of Arm II

3.4.1 Names and Titles

Throughout the text the saint is referred to as 'the blessed one', երասնելի. Other appellations include the aforementioned 'voluntary pauper', կամաւոր աղքատ, and 'the son of the king of Rome', որի թագաւորին Յռոնց. However, in the second part of the story that is situated in Edessa the saint acquires a different title - այր աստուծոյ / այր տէառն, 'Man of God' or 'Man of the Lord', which is the calque of the Syriac *gabra d'alaha*.

There are no other names in Arm II apart from the name of the bishop of Edessa, the famous Rabbula. Even the parents of the saint remain the anonymous 'king' and 'queen', which suggests that this text is not based on the later Syriac version (Syr II) or on the Greek metaphrastic version. The 'Alexianos version' (Arm I) has the same names as the Greek text. As has been shown by Drijvers (1982), this type of "anonymous holiness" was a trademark of early Syrian asceticism, which suggests at least some, if not direct, influence of the Syriac *Vorlage* on this Armenian text.

11 Some of the Arm I versions of the Alexi(an)os legend are included in the concordance edition of the lives of saints published by Holy Ējmiacin (Petrosyan et al. 2010, 182-9). This edition presents parallel versions with manuscripts from various collections (W1048, M4512, M4683, M4684, V7433, and others), but does not focus on the analysis of the narrative and its features. However, it will be a useful tool for the further study of the Alexi(an)os tradition in Armenia, especially in the Arm I version, and thanks are due to one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing it to the Author's attention.

3.4.2 Other Features

The Arm II version has other features that set this text apart from both the Syriac and Greek versions and raise a number of new questions. The most striking differences are the following: a great number of additional details (such as lengthy descriptions of different objects or the ascetic endeavours of the saint); many dialogues between the characters; a number of soliloquies (internal monologues) attributed to the main protagonist. The style feels heavy and unnatural with many excessive, repetitive phrases and frequent usage of substantive infinitives with a chain of objects piling on each other.

Some episodes in Arm II do not correspond to the Syriac or Greek at all. By way of illustration, the lengthy depiction of the wedding garments¹² of the saint is not found elsewhere; moreover, one of these wedding garments unexpectedly ends up in the hands of the ship owners as a fare for his journey to Seleucia,¹³ not in the hands of his bride, as in the Greek version and other texts stemming from it.

Furthermore, Arm II contains a remarkable episode that does not appear in any other version. This comprises a dialogue between the priest (բահաւսայ, not the *paramonarius* of the other versions) in the church of Edessa and the Man of God in which the saint insists on remaining anonymous because his name is not worthy of any commemoration.¹⁴ This particular emphasis on anonymity is something we encounter in the Syriac ascetic tradition; it is very interesting that the editor or author of the Armenian version decided to stress this point.

4 Conclusion

Thus, taking into account the main features and specific elements of both Arm I and II, some preliminary observations on the duality of the Man of God in the Armenian tradition may be advanced. As it appears, the longer version (Arm II) reflects the older, likely Syriac layer of the legend (the anonymity of the saint and other characters being a convincing if not quite decisive argument), while the shorter 'Alexianos versions' (Arm I) are most likely based on the Greek version of the legend, judging by the coincidence of the storyline and personal names. This would allow us to set the *terminus post quem* for the Arm I versions as the 9th century, when the Greek canon in honour of St Alexios the Man of God was composed by Joseph the Hymnographer. Meanwhile, the Arm II version - perhaps not the extant text,

¹² Vark' srboc' haranc' 1855, 372; M789, f. 526b ff.

¹³ Vark' srboc' haranc' 1855, 373; M789, f. 527a.

¹⁴ Vark' srboc' haranc' 1855, 380; M789, f. 530a.

but its *Vorlage* – might be seen and studied as an important witness to the development of the early Syriac legend outside the Constantinopolitan tradition.

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