

The *Vita Silvestri* and Its Armenian Versions in the Context of the Apostolic Foundation of the Patriarchates and Papacy

Manya Erna Shirinian
Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, Yerevan

Abstract The article is focused on issues connected with the spread of the Greek and Armenian versions of the *Vita beati Silvestri*, which so far seems to be underestimated. These versions are worthy to research, since they are also closely intermingled with many interesting topics, one of which is a question on apostolic foundation of the papacy and the patriarchates. The *Vita* also served as a source for the later forgeries made on a lore of its content (e.g. the *Donatio Constantini*, the *Letter of Love and Concord*). The research of the tradition and texts connected with Sylvester is *quaestio vexata* and it can be solved by involving all existing versions.

Keywords Vita beati Silvestri. Apostolic foundation. Patriarchates. Papacy. Forgeries. Armenian tradition. Letter of Love and Concord.

Summary 1 Research Topic. – 2 The Apostolic Foundation of the Papacy and Other Patriarchates. – 3 The Journey of the Armenian King Trdat and St. Gregory the Illuminator to Rome. – 4 Some Conclusions.



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1 Research Topic

This article sets to analyse the development of traditions associated with the Greek and Armenian versions of the so-called *Vita beati Silvestri*, without, however, going into the details concerning the editions and the history of research of the texts. Rather, I argue that the *Vita*, conventionally known as a forgery, and its different versions, had a strong bearing on questions related to the Apostolic foundation of the papacy and its relationship to other patriarchates. In this light, it is important to reveal the possible motivations for translating the *Vita Silvestri* from the Greek to Armenian. The information about the context of the emergence of the Greek *Vita* is sparse and one can only hypothesize that it was composed in the sixth century. Yet, questions of why, by whom and where - remain unanswered.

The Roman Pope Sylvester I (*sedit* 314-35) was known in Armenian sources (e.g. Agat'angelos, Ehišē, Movsēs Xorenac'i, *Book of Canons*, cf. Hakobyan 1964; Sebeos 1999) since the very beginning of the development of Christian literature in that language. Moreover, the Greek version of the legend of Sylvester was translated into Armenian quite early. Thanks to the preserved colophons,¹ the name of the translator and the exact date of the translation are known: in 678 by Grigor Jorap'orec'i. Later on this text was abridged and transmitted in manuscripts in combination with the adaptation of Socrates Scholasticus' *Ecclesiastical History*. The latter came to be commonly known as *Shorter Socrates* (cf. Shirinian 2003-4).

The fact that such a pro-Roman work as the Greek *Vita Silvestri* was selected for translation into Armenian is surprising. The Armenian translators usually chose works that were in concord with the Armenian confessional point of view or at least did not contradict it. Chalcedonian Armenians too produced their own writings, which never became popular (at least in Armenia) and, unfortunately, mostly disappeared except for two or three units (e.g. the *Narratio de rebus Armeniae* or *On the Difference of Nature and Hypostasis* by Eutychius of Constantinople, an interesting but little-studied work, which is extant only in an Armenian translation).² It is therefore

1 Concerning these colophons cf. Tēr-Movsēsian 1897, XVII-XIX, LXXXIII-XCIV; in more detail cf. Shirinian 1994, 156-63; Thomson 2005, 59-62.

2 There is an interesting passage in this writing which witnesses that in Armenia at that time there were tolerant clergymen, open-minded towards the disputes about one or two natures of Christ, like bishop Vrt'anes who said that he had learned from his predecessors that God is Ἅγιος and that he does not want to omit or add anything to it: λέγων ὅτι Ὁὶ μακαριώτατοι ἐπίσκοποι οἱ πρὸ ἐμοῦ ὁ τε Πέτρος καὶ Γρηγόριος οὕτως ἔλεγον τὸ Ἅγιος ὁ Θεός, ἐγὼ δὲ οὐτε προσθήσω οὐτε ὑφέλω' ("saying that: 'The blessed bishops, which were before me - Peter and Gregorios - said 'Holy God', and I won't add or subtract anything"; Garitte 1952, 38).

important to uncover the reasons why the translator(s) and the person who commissioned the translation were interested in the Greek *Life of Sylvester*, which, in fact, reflected the Chalcedonian doctrine. This, in turn leads to the conclusion that the *Vita* was thought to express shared interests of non-Chalcedonian, as well as Chalcedonian Armenians.

First among these reasons was the Armenians' interest expressed from time to time to reveal the historical relationship between Armenia and Rome, something discussed also below. Secondly, this work includes two episodes of great importance for the entire Christianity: the *Visio* of the Cross by Constantine and the *Inventio* of the Holy Cross by Helena.³ Indeed, the passages relating Constantine's miraculous apparition and the finding of the Holy Cross were later expanded in the Revision of the Armenian translation of the *Vita Silvestri*. In addition, for the Armenians Sylvester was connected with the Council of Nicaea (325), which had a special significance for them, since they were intent on establishing the preeminence of this Council over the other ecumenical ones. This was also one of the reasons why Emperors Constantine and Theodosius the Great were praised in the Armenian sources (Nève 1857).⁴ Besides, during the period of their rule Armenia did not have any major dogmatic differences with the rest of Christendom.

Last but not least, the text was of importance not only for Armenians but for all Christians due to pope Sylvester's relevance for the development of the liturgy, including his renaming or official acceptance of the days of the week by numerical instead of pagan names, and especially the designation of fasting and feast days.

It should be noted that the contribution of Armenian sources to the study of the above-mentioned topics (e.g. problems related to the legend of Sylvester, as well as the bearing of these legends on understanding the hierarchical structure of the ecclesiastical seats within the ancient Church), has been entirely neglected. In recent studies on Sylvester, even scholars pointing out the "lack of sources" (Canella 2018) do not even refer to the Armenian translation and its redaction.⁵ Yet, the Armenian versions of the *Vita Silvestri*, as well as oth-

3 About the Armenian versions, cf. data given by Sanspeur 1974, 307-9.

4 There are numerous passages dedicated to the praise of these emperors, and even special writings, e.g. the Armenian sacred chants, especially the so-called *ganjer* - highly embellished feast chants (cf., for example, the *ganjer* by Mxit'ar Ayrivanec'i [1230/1235-1297/1300]; Mxit'ar Ayrivanec'i 2005, 94-5). Constantine the Great was praised also for ending the Great Persecution of martyrs during his reign.

5 Cf., for example, Tessa Canella's quite a large number of publications (2006; 2013; 2018), which have raised the study of issues related to the Sylvester legend to an unprecedentedly high level but are surprisingly silent on the Armenian tradition. The same could be said concerning research by Starostin. Among laudable exceptions is a PhD dissertation by Di Rienzo (2018-19).

er sources that provide data on this Roman pope, appear to be rather crucial for elucidating many questions.

2 **The Apostolic Foundation of the Papacy and Other Patriarchates**

The *Vita Silvestri* is one of the rare sources where, instead of Pentarchy, the concept of Tetrarchy (τετραρχία – if it is possible to refer to it in this way)⁶ of the church is developed. This makes the *Vita Silvestri* and all of its versions important witnesses to the development of the tradition on the Apostolic foundation of the papacy and other patriarchates.

This subject of the Apostolic foundation of the papacy and the patriarchates seems to be a preeminent question of concern in all the versions of the *Vita*. Yet, the topic did not attract much attention in the Middle Ages (especially after the fall of the Byzantine Empire) and was not discussed. The situation was different for the Eastern churches, who refused to accept Byzantine claims to ecclesiastical supremacy based on the premise that the see of Constantinople was founded by St Andrew, the First Called of the apostles (as expressed in the treatise *Ad eos qui dicunt Romam esse Primam sedem* attributed to Photius).⁷

The issues and data associated with the apostolic sees in the early Church and its hierarchy, particularly the special attitude towards the Eastern churches, require a more thorough investigation than has been accorded thus far. One may well suppose that it was the first cornerstone for the development of schisms between churches. The argument of the apostolicity was one of the key issues that shaped the relationship between Rome and Constantinople (especially at the time of patriarch Photius), and persisted in the period of the Iconoclasm, affected Armeno-Georgian relations, etc. Further research of these problems is imperative given that some Armenian, Ethiopian and other sources preserve unexplored information on this question, viz. on the adaptation of the ecclesiastical organization to the administrative divisions of the empire. One can suppose that this data was eventually eliminated or even purposely destroyed in Greek or Latin, although, significantly, its traces are still visible in some sources, among them the *Vita Silvestri*.

6 Even though the technical term ‘Tetrarchy’ usually refers to a political system of governance based on four rulers, here it is used to designate the administration of the church by four patriarchal sees. For further research on this topic, cf. Shirinian 2009, 84-97; 2010, 90-9.

7 For a circumstantial survey on the history of the research in question, cf. Dvornik 1958; Starostin 2017.

Firstly, according to these sources, in the initial stages of the establishment of Christian churches they were administered by four sees, i.e. there was a time when universal Christendom was governed by the four patriarchal sees – a Tetrarchy, rather than a Pentarchy. Interestingly, the order of apostolic sees provided by the concepts of Tetrarchy and Pentarchy has not been the same throughout the centuries. The idea of a ‘classical’ Tetrarchy is visible in the *Adversus haereses* by Irenaeus, and the theory of the Tetrarchy presented in Armenian sources perhaps goes back to this older tradition. According to it, the four sees of the Tetrarchy were founded: by Matthew (because he preached in Hebrew) in Jerusalem, by Peter and Paul in Rome, by Mark in Alexandria, by Luke perhaps in Antioch, and by John in Ephesus.⁸ It is commonly accepted that the theory of Pentarchy was formulated in the legislation of the Emperor Justinian I (527-65), especially in his novella 131. This novella received a formal ecclesiastical sanction at the Council in Trullo (692), which ranked the five sees as Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem (cf. Canon XXVI).

Armenian sources present the most plentiful and earliest data on this topic. Astonishingly, these testimonies that give us unique information concerning the history of the early Church are rarely examined.⁹ In numerous Armenian sources, which will be discussed in more detail below, not only the information concerning the Tetrarchy

⁸ Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* in Harvey 1857, III, 1, 1-13 and I, 1, 6, 26; I, 1, 13, 53; I, 1, 17-18; I, 13, 2, 1 etc., especially III, 1, 1: ‘Ὁ μὲν δὴ Ματθαῖος ἐν τοῖς Ἑβραίοις τῆ ἰδίᾳ διαλέκτῳ αὐτῶν, καὶ γραφὴν ἐξήνεγκεν εὐαγγελίου, τοῦ Πέτρου καὶ τοῦ Παύλου ἐν Ῥώμῃ εὐαγγελιζομένων, καὶ θεμελιούντων τὴν ἐκκλησίαν. Μετὰ δὲ τὴν τούτων ἔξοδον, Μάρκος ὁ μαθητὴς καὶ ἑρμηνευτὴς Πέτρου, καὶ αὐτὸς τὰ ὑπὸ Πέτρου κηρυσσόμενα ἐγγράφως ἡμῖν παραδέδωκε. Καὶ Λουκᾶς δὲ ὁ ἀκόλουθος Παύλου, τὸ ὑπ’ ἐκείνου κηρυσσόμενον εὐαγγέλιον ἐν βίβλῳ κατέθετο. Ἐπειτα Ἰωάννης ὁ μαθητὴς τοῦ Κυρίου, ὁ καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ στήθος αὐτοῦ ἀναπεσὼν, καὶ αὐτὸς ἐξέδωκε τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, ἐν Ἑφέσῳ τῆς Ἀσίας διατριβῶν (Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/irenaeus-book3.html>).

⁹ From rare research dedicated to this subject, one may mention Dvornik 1958, who relied on the evidence of Armenian sources among others. Yet, his access to them was limited due to the language barrier and he used the Armenian sources thanks to the help of Der-Nersessian, who was a fine expert in Armenian miniature, but not necessarily of the Armenian tradition on apostolic sees. However, it appears that Dvornik, or scholars who wrote reviews on this book (e.g. Runciman 1959), did not consider that ‘apostolicity’ played any role in the organization of the church. The most recent study on this topic is an impressive essay by van Esbroeck, which deals with all these questions and examines different traditions (e.g. Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian) and for the first time draws on the data of the Armenian sources (1991). It is important to stress that van Esbroeck was convinced of the existence of the theory of governing the universal

and Pentarchy is presented, but also some points connected with them are elucidated. For example, the rank of the patriarchates at different times is explicated: it is explained why in the beginning it was decided that there should be four apostolic sees. The main question, concerning the transferring of the patriarchal see from Ephesus to Constantinople (including the time when it was done and the persons who did it), is clarified too. The issues connected with what led to this action among the Eastern churches and those of China and India are discussed as well.

Obviously, the Tetrarchy presented in Armenian sources goes back to older Christian traditions, for example, to Irenaeus quoted above, who associates the four apostolic thrones with the main symbols of the Tetrarchy – the four evangelists (and with the four rivers of Eden). According to some Armenian sources, we have Matthew (because he preached in Hebrew) in Jerusalem; Mark in Alexandria; Luke in Antioch; and John in Ephesus. This listing is somewhat rare in the Armenian sources, and a more ‘classical’ ranking seems to be a vision of the Tetrarchy according to which Peter and Paul were linked to Rome; Mark to Alexandria; Luke to Antioch; and John to Ephesus. Jerusalem was mentioned as an honorary see.¹⁰

Information present in the Greek text of the *Vita Silvestri* and its Armenian versions, i.e. the literal translation and its reworking in *Shorter Socrates* (Shirinian 2003-4), which starts with the *Vita* (1997), is an important source regarding the question of the Tetrarchy. The same could be said concerning Socrates Scholasticus’ *Ecclasiastical History* – the Greek original and its Armenian versions.

Scholarly opinion on the question of when the patriarchates were established is divided. There is a general agreement that the metropolitan sees were instituted at the Council of Nicaea and that the patriarchates were established at the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (381).¹¹ Such a consensus seems justified for several reasons. Firstly, the word *πατριαρχία* (as well as the concept of the ‘patriarchate’) had possibly not been mentioned before the Council of Constantinople. Two canons of this council are worthy of discussion here: Canon II deals with the administration of Church affairs in the dioceses, stressing “let no bishops go beyond their dioceses” and Canon III says that “The bishop of Constantinople is to be honored

Christendom by the four patriarchal sees and he considered that this goes back to the fourth-fifth century (cf. especially 505, 509-10, 518).

10 This is too large a problem to treat here at length; the issue and the Armenian data (with almost all sources) on this topic are discussed in Shirinian 2009; 2010; 2016. More details on the question will appear in the *Introduction* to the forthcoming edition of the *Vita Silvestri*.

11 Erickson 1991, 94; Anastos 2001; Pheidias 2005, 65-75; Kauffman 2016, 10-12; cf. also Adontz, Garsoian 1970, 278 ff; Castellano 2006.

next after the bishop of Rome; because Constantinople is the New Rome".¹² In fact, the word πατριάρχια is not attested in the canons of this synod either. The most interesting fact is that πατριάρχια is attested in Socrates Scholasticus' *Ecclesiastical History*: the first testimony could be doubtful for a very critical reader, since it is reconstructed in accordance with the Armenian translation and with the context of the Greek original; but in the case of the second one everything is clear. The first evidence is found where Socrates speaks of the affairs of the Second Universal Council. In particular, concerning the administration of the Church, he says the following:

ἔβεβαίωσάν τε αὐθις τὴν ἐν Νικαίᾳ πίστιν, καὶ πατριάρχας κατέστησαν διανεμῆμενοι τὰς ἐπαρχίας, ὥστε τοὺς ὑπὲρ διοίκησιν ἐπισκόπους ταῖς ὑπερόριος ἐκκλησίαις μὴ ἐπιββαίνειν. (Hansen 1995, 280, lines 20-22)

They also again confirmed the Nicene Creed, and constituted the **patriarchs** and the provinces, so that bishops do not transgress any jurisdiction over other churches out of his own diocese. (Author's transl.; bold added)

In this place, the Armenian translation of Socrates' *Ecclesiastical History* has հայրապետութիւն (patriarchate).¹³ This means that in the

¹² Labbe 1671, II: 945. Interestingly, in the Armenian *Book of Canons*, the canons of the Council of Constantinople contained only three chapters (Hakobyan 1964, 273-6); in the second chapter, Canons II and III of the Council of Constantinople are combined (i.e. in the Armenian translation only the first four canons are reflected). It is known that the number of canons accepted by this council is doubtful. Scholars enumerate seven (in accordance with the preserved Greek manuscripts and the twelfth century commentaries by Balsamon and Zonaras) or, following the old Latin translations, they accept only the first four canons of the Greek text (cf. more details in Héfélé 1869, II: 351). The fact, however, that the old Latin translations were made from much older Greek codices (than the ones that reached us) seems to prove that the other canons were not in the old version of the Greek text. As a result, one might think that these last three canons did not really belong to the Second Ecumenical Council, but were later interpolations. To this, one must add the Armenian translation of these canons (fifth century), which was also made from much older Greek manuscripts than the extant ones, and which does not contain the fifth, sixth, and seventh Canons either. Moreover, as another proof that there were only four canons, one can bring forward the testimonies or the description of matters at the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople provided by Socrates Scholasticus (Hansen 1995, 280, lines 20-22), which includes the content of these four canons. It is worthy of note that the work of Socrates Scholasticus, which was of great interest to Armenians, had a connection to the Armenian *Book of Canons* too, since the latter includes passages from this work, viz. *Ecclesiastical History* (cf. Hakobyan 1964, 131-2; 1971, 290-2).

¹³ Tēr-Movsēsean 1897, 419. Let us stress that this text as well the *Vita Silvestri* are translated in the Hellenizing style, i.e. they are very literal translations (Shirinian 1996; 1997). It should be noted here that the words հայրապետ and հայրապետութիւն are exact calques of the corresponding Greek terms; հայրապետ and պատրիարք (which is just a

Greek text (that the Armenian translator had in his hands) instead of πατριάρχας there was πατριαρχίας (so, the translation should be “the **patriarchates** and the provinces”; bold added). This reading was accepted by the editor of the new critical edition of the *Ecclesiastical History*, Günther Christian Hansen,¹⁴ who brought forward grammatical, prosorythmical, and other proofs that the context here seems to back to the reading πατριαρχίας. Indeed, the context itself speaks in favour of this reading because the passage following it says:

Καὶ κληροῦται Νεκτάριος μὲν τὴν μεγαλόπολιν καὶ τὴν Θράκην· τῆς δὲ Ποντικῆς διοικήσεως Ἑλλάδιος ὁ μετὰ Βασίλειον Καισαρείας τῆς Καππαδοκῶν ἐπίσκοπος, Γρηγόριος ὁ Νύσσης ὁ Βασιλείου ἀδελφός, (Καππαδοκίας δὲ καὶ ἦδε πόλις,) καὶ Ὀτρήϊτος ὁ τῆς ἐν Ἀρμενίᾳ Μελιτηνῆς τὴν πατριαρχίαν ἐκληρώσαντο. (Hansen 1995, 281, lines 1-6)¹⁵

To Nectarius therefore was allotted the great city and Thrace. Helladius, the successor of Basil in the bishopric of Cæsarea in Cappadocia, obtained the patriarchate of the diocese of Pontus in conjunction with Gregory, Basil’s brother, bishop of Nyssa in Cappadocia, and Otreius bishop of Melitina in Armenia. To Amphilocheus of Iconium and Optimus of Antioch in Pisidia, was the Asiatic diocese assigned.¹⁶

transliteration from the Greek) are used in Armenian sources to designate the ‘patriarch’. As is obvious from the previous footnote, this rendering was used in the Hellenizing translation of Socrates *History* (Têr-Movsêsean 1897, 419, 420, 651). Somehow van Esbroeck considers that the word ‘patriarch’ was transliterated from the Greek into the Armenian but did not recognize it as an equivalent of հայրապետ (1991, 515). Even if հայրապետ has a much broader semantic spectrum than պատրիարք, such an opinion seems unambiguous, since it needs further research and it is closely connected with the topic in question. In any case, there are attestations that these words have the same meaning; cf. the phrase by Maštoc’ Ešivardec’i from the *Letter to Catholicos Georg*: նոյնպէս եւ ի ներքին խորանի զահաւորեցան պատրիարք, որ են հայրապետք (likewise, patriarchs, which are *hayrapets*, were enthroned in the inner *xoran* [altar]) (Xač’atryan, K’oseyan 2003, 295). Cf. also almost the same usage by Anania Sanahneč’i: պատրիարք որ է հայրապետն (a patriarch, which is a *hayrapet*); and Mxit’ar Goš: պատրարքք, որք թարգմանին է հայրապետք, որք ունին զաթոռ չորից անտարանչացն (patriarchs, which are translated as *hayrapets*, which hold the Sees of the four Evangelists) (Awetik’ean, Siwrmêlean, Awgerean 1836, 624).

¹⁴ Perhaps, such a statement on my part is somewhat inappropriate, since Hansen is no longer with us to support my words. But I was told that he discussed this question with his colleagues. As far as I know, the discussion happened online after the new critical edition appeared among scholars who joined in an Internet group called ‘Eusebia’ or ‘Eusebeia’ (cf. Shirinian 2003, 89-90 fn. 73).

¹⁵ Cf. this excerpt with the one in *Shorter Socrates*, where it is quite expanded (Têr-Movsêsean 1897, 420-1); for English translation cf. Thomson 2001b, 146-7.

¹⁶ Transl. on <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/26015.htm>.

As we see from this passage, the word πατριαρχία is used for the second time in the same context, explaining the same matter of things. Hence, it could mean that already in the beginning of the fifth century the term πατριαρχία was in use to designate patriarchal sees. Consequently, one can suppose that patriarchates were established at the end of the fourth century. At least in the beginning of the fifth century the words ‘patriarch’ and ‘patriarchates’ seem to have specific ecclesiastical meanings because Theodosius II used in his letter the word ‘patriarch’ as a Christian title of honour for Pope Leo I (Mansi 1960-1, 6: 68) and the word ‘patriarchate’ is testified by Socrates Scholasticus in his *Ecclesiastical History*. The citation above is noteworthy because it reflects Canon II of the Second Council of Constantinople, which proves, together with Canons IV and VI of the Council of Nicaea that formerly all the Metropolitans of the dioceses (e. g. Pontus, Asia, and Thrace) were autocephalous in their provinces and were ordained by their own synods. The situation was changed by Canon XXVIII of the Council of Chalcedon (451) and the dioceses of Pontica, Asiana and Thrace lost their autonomy forever:

As a consequence of this canon the patriarchal prerogatives of the see of Ephesus and Caesarea were lost and they lost their importance forever. The negative attitude of Armenians toward the Council of Chalcedon derives from this fact. The schism came about on a basis of hierarchy and not over the dogma, as implied by later sources. (Adontz, Garsoïan 1970, 280)

These words by Adontz express the real picture of the events, which were later on explained via disagreements on confessional grounds. Interestingly, the honour of being autocephalous was transmitted to the other churches: the Church of Cyprus received it at the Third Ecumenical Council (Canon VIII), and the Church of Iberia (Georgia) at the Sixth (Canon XXXIX).

As to the information concerning the apostolic sees, the *Vita Silvestri* testifies in the very beginning of the text that¹⁷

τούτων δὲ τῶν πόλεων καὶ ἀποστολικῶν θρόνων τὴν ἀρχιερωσύνην ἐπεσπάσατο, τούτέστιν τῆς μεγάλης τῶν πόλεων Ῥώμης, Ἀλεξανδρείας τε καὶ Ἀντιοχείας, τῆς κοινῆς ἕνεκεν ὠφελείας. (Combefis 1660, 258-9)

and of these cities and apostolic thrones, that is, of the great cities of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch, the high priesthood was seized of the common benefit. (Author’s transl.)

17 The fact that this question is discussed in the very beginning of the writing speaks of its importance for the matter at hand.

This is the reading of the manuscripts used by Combefis in *Illustrium Christi martyrum* for his edition, but the text here is corrupt because it speaks only about three apostolic sees. Indeed, there are *variae lectiones* as in the Greek text, as well in the Armenian versions. For this place, some Greek manuscripts belonging to the B recension¹⁸ have an addition - Ἐφέσου καὶ Ἱεροσολύμη (or vice versa). The Armenian translation here differs from the original. It is in accordance with the mentioned Greek manuscripts and renders the same information literally, where Ephesus and Jerusalem are indicated as well:

Այսոցիկ յայտ է քաղաքաց որչափ ըստ առաքելականն աթոռոց զքաւչապետութիւնն առ ընդունողաց՝ այս է մեծին քաղաքի բոլոր քաղաքաց Հռովմայ, Աղէքսանդրացւոց, [Անտիոքայ],¹⁹ Եփեսոսի եւ Երուսաղէմի: (Tēr-Movsēsean 1897, 692)

And it is obvious from these cities, that is, of the greatest city (*sic*) of all cities - Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, and Jerusalem, how the high priesthood was accepted according to the apostolic throne.

Thus, the Greek text of the *Vita Silvestri* and its literal Armenian translation delineate the following order of dignities in a Tetrarchical arrangement: Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus and Jerusalem.²⁰ Note that there is no mention of Constantinople since this pro-Roman composition claims to reflect the situation and the time when Constantinople was not yet founded by Constantine on the site of Byzantium. Interestingly, in the adaptation of the Armenian Hellenizing translation this passage has some divergences and Constantinople is already present. Rome stands in the beginning of the first sentence as superior in honour compared to all others, separated from them as the “see of the patriarchate of Peter and Paul” (Tēr-Movsēsean 1897,

¹⁸ Cf., for example, the following manuscripts from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France: C (= Grec 1449, eleventh c.), 37v; D (= Grec 501, twelfth-thirteenth c.), 164r; K (= Grec 808, sixteenth c.), 279r; G (= Grec 1508, twelfth-thirteenth c.), 17v. Concerning these Greek manuscripts it should be noted that Starostin, who has published three articles on the topic, brings forward a testimony about the Greek manuscript Messanensis 87 discovered at the end of nineteenth-beginning of twentieth century by Krashenikov, which contains this redaction (Starostin 2008, 128; 2012, 126; 2017, 123). My comparison of the Armenian Hellenizing translation with some Greek manuscripts held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France has shown that this version in general is part of the tradition of the manuscript group CDK, and is especially close to D (= Grec 501, twelfth-thirteenth c.), 164r-188r, with which the Armenian translation coincides word for word (except in rare cases). If Starostin had used the Armenian versions, they would have been helpful for his conclusions.

¹⁹ This word is added from the Jerusalem manuscript; cf. Xapaeen 1898, 89.

²⁰ Let us not forget that Jerusalem was considered as an honorary see: it was mentioned but not accounted for in the case of the Tetrarchy, nor of the Pentarchy.

692). Then, the other important centres are listed and Constantinople is added in the end:

որ կոչեցաւ յատոռ հայրապետութեան Պետրոսի եւ Պաւղոսի մեծ քաղաքին Հռովմայ, որ յոլովս ունի պատմութիւնս, որ եւ զառաքելոցն վերագրեաց զվկայութեանց նահատակութիւնս եւ զհայրապետաց, եւ զվկայից, եւ զխոստովանողաց, զարանց եւ զկանանց, որք արիացան ընդդէմ հալածչացն յաղագս ի Քրիստոս հաւատոցն, որ եւ յայլ քաղաքս եւ յականաւորս յայտնի է՝ յԱղէքսանդր, եւ յԱնտիոք, եւ յԵփեսոս, եւ յԵրուսաղէմ, եւ ի Կոստանդնուպօլիս: (Tēr-Movsēsean 1897, 692-3)²¹

The order of precedence of the Apostolic sees in these quotations is quite similar, except for Constantinople, which, according to the Canon III of the Council of Constantinople, was placed in the second place according to dignity as the New Rome (after the Old Rome).

Intriguingly, the see of Constantinople does not appear in the second place also in a very interesting and important document written by the Georgian Catholicos Kiurion, where there is a reference to the Pentarchy. In his second letter to the Catholicos of Armenia Abraham (late sixth century) the Catholicos Kiurion, speaking about the concordance between Armenians and Georgians at the time of Gregory the Illuminator when they “were unanimous with each other sharing the faith of Jerusalem”, concludes:

Իսկ այժմ ո՞ստի եղն. Հռովմայ հայրապետն ի սրբոյն Պետրոսի ատոռն նստի, եւ Աղէքսանդրացին՝ ի սրբոյն Մարկոսի աւետարանչի, եւ յԱնտիոքցին՝ ի սրբոյն Դուկասու աւետարանչի, եւ Կոստանդնուպալսեցին՝ ի սրբոյն Յովհաննու աւետարանչի, եւ Երուսաղէմացին՝ ի սրբոյ Յակովբայ՝ եղբարն Տեառն: (*Girk' t'it'oc'* 1994, 337)

And now where are they? The patriarch of Rome sits on the throne of Peter, and of Alexandria on [the seat of] St. Mark the Evangelist, and of Antioch – on [the seat of] St. Luke the Evangelist, and of Constantinople – [on that] of St. John the Evangelist, and of Jerusalem [on that] of St. Jacob, the brother of the Lord. (Author’s transl.)

This is quite an interesting excerpt because of the unusual order of the five apostolic sees – Rome (the seat of apostle Peter), Alexandria (St. Mark the Evangelist), Antioch (St. Luke the Evangelist), Constantinople (St. John the Evangelist), and Jerusalem (St. Jacob = St. James, the brother of the Lord). It is noteworthy that the see of Constantinople is presented by the Evangelist St. John and not by St. Andrew.

²¹ For an English translation cf. Thomson 2005, 68.

It should be stressed that these testimonies (except the reworking of the Armenian translation of the *Vita Silvestri*) coincide with the traditions outside of Armenia: one is pro-Roman, and the other is Georgian. In the meantime, in the Armenian tradition of the sixth-seventh centuries there are texts, mainly translations, where the theory of the Pentarchy is transmitted according to the Canon XXXVI of the Council in Trullo. For example, in the Armenian translation of a text attributed to Epiphanius of Salamis entitled Ἐπιφανίου ἀρχιεπισκόπου Κύπρου Ἐκθεσις πρωτοκλησιῶν πατριαρχῶν τε καὶ μητροπολιτῶν,²² the canonical order of the Pentarchy appears as: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. It is noteworthy that in this work there are passages, that have reached us only in the Armenian translation (Fink 1902, 16, 52).

As to the question of why the theory of the Tetrarchy in the hierarchical organization of the Church has survived in the Armenian *milieu*, one can add the following considerations. Firstly, we can hardly suppose that the Armenian sources were the only ones to transmit this idea. Numerous Armenian authors testified that this concept derived from the Greek tradition. In fact, this theory is implied in the Canons VI and VII of the Council of Nicaea. The Canon VI deals with the exclusive authority exercised by three of the most important cities at the time – Alexandria, Rome and Antioch.²³ According to the Canon VII special honour was granted to Jerusalem. The Council of Nicaea dealt with only four sees that were significant at the time. Perhaps that is why according to Eastern ecclesiology, the established order of the apostolic sees was Rome, followed by Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. Interestingly, the canons of the Council of Nicaea do not mention the patriarchal see of Ephesus at all, while, as it was noted above, it is referred to in the *Adversus haereses* of Irenaeus and is present always in the versions recorded by Armenian sources.²⁴ It seems that the existence and then the transfer of this patriarchal see to Constantinople, as well the replacement of the Evangelist St. John by St. Andrew, was a rather controversial topic for Armenian Church officials too.

Secondly, Armenians were interested in the version of the Tetrarchy where the Roman see was included since there existed an historical tradition related to an alliance between Armenia and Rome. According to this tradition the Armenian king Trdat (Tiridates) visited Rome with St.

22 The editor of this work displayed on the cover of this small book the Greek title: Ἐκθεσις πρωτοκλησιῶν [...]. The Armenian title reads as follows: Եպիփանու եպիսկոպոսի Կիպրացոց վասն նախապատիւ եկեղեցեաց իւրաքանչիւր աթոռոց մայրաքաղաք (Fink 1902, 4).

23 Note that Alexandria comes first.

24 These sources are too many to be listed here. Some of them, including the *Book of Canons*, Solomon Mak'ēnac'i, Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i, Vardan Aygekc'i, and Kirakos Gandzakec'i, will be dealt with in another study.

Gregory the Illuminator to meet the Emperor Constantine after his conversion. In Rome, the Bishop of the city Sylvester I took an active part during this visit. Scholars who reject the authenticity of this tradition suggest that it was an adaptation of the visit of Trdat I to the court of Nero in Rome in the first century AD (e.g. Hovhannisyan 1957; Thomson 1997). Taking into account all the historical circumstances,²⁵ this tradition does not seem to be entirely spurious. At any rate, it is well attested in numerous Armenian sources since the fifth century.²⁶

Moreover, judging from some Armenian sources, it is even possible to think that there was an agreement that should also be a patriarchate in Armenia and that Nersēs the Great was the one who was elected to be a patriarch (Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc’i 1987, 84; 1996, 48). But then, he was sent with the delegation to Byzantium to confirm the treaty of peace and unity between Armenia and the emperor. The negotiations with Valens were not successful because he was an Arian (and many Armenian writers do not even consider him as a Christian), so Nersēs was exiled.

In reality, after the failure of expectations concerning the patriarchal see, Armenia was in political excommunication, because, as it is rightly noted by Adontz, “the schism came about on a basis of hierarchy and not over the dogma, as implied by later sources” (Adontz, Garsoïan 1970, 280). Perhaps, by supporting the Pope’s claims of their supremacy, the Armenians hoped that they could also restore the historical tradition dating to back to the early fourth century, when Armenia was more powerful and, due to its alliance with Rome, had experienced a more peaceful and flourishing period:

In Armenia, the reign of Trdat, a contemporary of Constantine, was a time of glorious national revival. The Roman government then, and for some time after, supported the Armenian kingdom against the Persians, and the country had a breathing spell before its final political dismemberment (Coleman 1914, 157).

25 Firstly, Armenia, as a country that officially accepted Christianity in the beginning of the fourth century, should have had quite close relations with Rome until confessional disagreements, which were in fact political ones. Indeed, both Gregory the Illuminator, a ‘living martyr’ of Armenia, and king Trdat were installed on their thrones with the help of Rome. Furthermore, after a successful battle in 297, when the Roman and Armenian armies together defeated the Persians, they signed an alliance of peace in Nisibis in 298/299, which lasted for 40 years (cf. Adontz, Garsoïan 1970, 349). For the Romans, from a political perspective, it was vital to turn Armenia to an ally during the heated wars with Sassanian Iran. On the other hand, Armenia too needed Rome not only as an ally in the wars against Iran, but also against incursions of ‘Barbarian’ tribes from east and northeast.

26 Armenian sources on this pact are cited in the translation of Agat’angelos by Thomson (Agat’angelos 1976) and in Thomson 1997 (cf. also Elishē 1982, 123 fn. 6). Let us recall that Movsēs Xorenac’i mentions in mere two phrases that “Trdat went to Rome to Saint Constantine” (Moses Khorenats’i 1978, 235), and that there was a “sworn covenant” between Trdat and Constantine (257).

3 The Journey of the Armenian King Trdat and St. Gregory the Illuminator to Rome

If we accept the authenticity of the visit of king Trdat and Gregory the Illuminator to Constantine, a few words should be said about when it could have happened. Judging from Greek and Armenian sources as well as taking into account the historical context, the most probable date would be 313 or 314. This date is based on the testimony of Eusebius of Caesarea, who tells that “the Armenians [...] had been from ancient times friends and allies of the Romans” (*Hist. Eccl.* 9.8.2, in Schwartz 1903). This quote could serve as a *terminus ante quem* for dating the friendship and alliance between Armenians and Romans to before 324, when this work was composed. A dating between 313-14 and 324 is then justified by another piece of evidence. According to Eusebius, Maximinus “the tyrant [...] was compelled to go to war with the Armenians, who had been from ancient times friends and allies of the Romans” (*Hist. Eccl.* 9.8.2-4, in Schwartz 1903) and this caused problems for Armenians to travel safely to the West. It should be also noted that Maximus was defeated by Licinius after 313-14.

In any case, this alleged or real journey was reworked to compose a ‘document’ of a completely legendary character titled *Dašanc’ t’utt’* (Letter of Love and Concord), whose authenticity has rightly been criticized.²⁷ Based on historical and legendary elements, this forged document declares a number of times that Sylvester recognized Gregory’s see to be “equal in dignity to his own and those of Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria” (Šahnazareanc’ 1862, 24-5, 28, 30). These lines prove that the question of apostolic succession was of crucial importance. It was imperative to emphasize this within a pact of ‘love and concord’ between Armenia and Rome and that is why this tradition was sealed in shape of such a forgery.

The *Letter* was based not only on the historical tradition but also on the Armenian translation of the Greek *Vita Silvestri*, as we already noted. For example, forged additions such as the *Donatio Constantini* were also taken into account.²⁸ Perhaps, one can even say that the *Letter of Love and Concord* is sort of an Armenian version of the *Donatio Constantini*.²⁹ The Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia at the time of the Crusaders hoped to find support in this forgery by demonstrating the

²⁷ Or ‘peace’: Latin *concordia* also means ‘peace’. For more information about the *Letter* cf. Thomson 1997; 2001a; Uluhogian 2003; Shirinian 2003; 2005, 84-100; 2006a; Bart’ikyan 2004; Pogossian 2010.

²⁸ A large literature exists on the subject; among the most recent studies, the following articles can be referred to: Levine 1973; Raspanti 2004; Leppin 2006; Fried 2007; Gandino 2009; Goodson, Nelson 2010; Cadili 2013.

²⁹ It would be interesting if someone would carry a comparative analysis on these two forgeries.

ancient connection between the Catholic and the Armenian Churches and the close ties between them and their secular leaders at the time of the formation of their churches.

As to the date of the *Letter*, scholars have expressed different opinions, but all agree that this was a forgery composed in Cilician Armenia, between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.³⁰ Moreover, a close re-reading of an excerpt by Kirakos Ganjakec'i concerning the *Letter*, suggests quite convincingly that this author provides a clear date of the journey of Trdat and Gregory, as well as the name of its initiator:

Իսկ սբանչելի հայրապետն Գրիգորիս օր ըստ օրէ յաւելոյր ի բարեգործութիւն ի պայծառութիւն եկեղեցւոյ: Եւ Էր սիրեցեալ նա յամենայն ազգաց: Եղև նմա գնալ ի սուրբ քաղաքն Երուսաղէմ, զի երկրպագեսցէ նա սուրբ տեղեացն տնօրինականաց: Իբրև եհաս նա ի քաղաքն Անտիոք, ել ամենայն քաղաքն ընդ առաջ նորա ջահիւք եւ յապտերօք եւ մեծաւ պատուով տարեալ նստուցին գնա յաթոռն Պետրոսի առաքելոյն: Եւ իբրև եհաս նա յԵրուսաղէմ, ազգն ֆռանկաց, որ իշխողք էին քաղաքին, եւ պատրիարք նոցա առաւել սէր հաստատեցին ընդ ազգիս մերում վասն նորա, զի Էր նա բարի տեսլեամբ եւ զիտութեամբ սուրբ գրոց զարդարեալ. **զիին դաշինսն Տրդատայ եւ սրբոյն Գրիգորի եւ Կոստանդիանոսի կայսեր եւ Սեղբեստրոսի հայրապետին վերստին նորոգեցին առ սովա:** (Melik'-Ōhanjanean 1961, 157-8; bold added)

The marvellous patriarch Grigoris daily increased his good works for the glorification of the Church. He was loved by all people. It happened that he went to the holy city of Jerusalem to revere the sites of the Incarnation of [108] the Lord. As soon as he reached the city of Antioch, the entire population came out before him bearing torches and lamps. With great honour they took him and seated him on the throne of the Apostle Peter. As soon as he reached Jerusalem, the Frank people (who were ruling the city) and their patriarch more deeply established love between our peoples [g117], on account of Grigoris. For he was pleasing in appearance and adorned with knowledge of the holy Scriptures. According to tradition, **the old agreement of Trdat and Saint Gregory, of Emperor Constantine and the patriarch Sylvester, was restored.** (Kirakos Ganjakets'i 1986, 117-18; bold added)

It seems that this passage explicitly stresses that Grigor III Pahlavuni (1093-1166) renewed the old alliance that existed between Trdat and Saint Gregory from one side, and Emperor Constantine and the

30 E.g. cf. Shirinian 2003; 2006a, 68-9; Pogossian 2010, 119-25.

patriarch Sylvester from the other, but this time instead of Sylvester it was Pope Innocent II, and Grigor III Pahlavuni instead of Gregory the Illuminator. Since Grigor III died in 1166, this date could be taken as a *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the *Letter* in question (Shirinian 2021, 186; 2006b, 449; cf. Pogossian 2010, 119-20). Moreover, another more certain *terminus ante quem* could be brought forward. It is known that Catholicos Grigor Pahlavuni enjoyed great respect among the Latins: he was twice invited to the Councils convened by them – in 1141 to Antioch and in 1145 to Jerusalem. Besides, there is evidence that he corresponded with Pope Innocent II. Taking into account that Innocent II died in 1143, the *terminus ante quem* should be this date. It is curious that in both in the first union and in this one were involved Catholicos with the same name Gregory (Gregory the Illuminator and Gregory III), and both were Pahlavuni (since Gregory III was also considered to be of the Pahlavuni family). The eponymity of the Catholicos may also have had a symbolic meaning. Interestingly, a century earlier, another Catholicos with the same name, Grigor II Vkasaser Pahlavuni, also had correspondence with Pope Gregory VII. As for the initiative for composing such a forged document, some investigators agree that it could be even understood as mutual attempts from both sides on several different occasions, especially during the Crusades (cf. Hovhannisyan 1957, 76; Shirinian 2003, 89, 97-8; 2006a, 71).

It is noteworthy that the *Letter of Love and Concord* provides a partial explanation for the appearance of the Greek *Vita Silvestri*. In fact, we are dealing with the same story adapted to the Armenian *milieu* of different periods. All these sources, then, can be seen as a part of the same interconnected web of texts. They all originated in a non-Armenian but a pro-Roman tradition, based on the Latin *Vita beati Silvestri*, which in the beginning of the sixth century served as a basis for various improvisations and forgeries, the first and foremost of which was the Greek *Vita Silvestri*.

4 Some Conclusions

Let us summarize the information given above. The first issue to address is why *Vita Silvestri* and Sylvester himself were so popular in the Armenian *milieu*, and what motives caused the Armenians to translate this particular text from a large corpus of pro-Roman sources. I argued above that the significance of this writing for the Armenians lay with its reference to patriarchal sees. Greek and Armenian sources indicate that various controversies among the Armenian and Byzantine churches were due to the disagreements on the meaning and ranking of patriarchal sees.

When translating the Greek *Vita Silvestri*, the Armenians may have found it significant also because the story of Constantine's conversion

was very similar to that of the conversion of the Armenian King Trdat, as van Esbroeck has persuasively shown (1982, 94-5).³¹

Given that all conclusions regarding such a complex text as the *Vita Silvestri* must be tentative, we should also ask why the Armenian sources are important for its comprehension. The answer to this question must also be held in abeyance. There are too many obscure and contentious issues relating not only to Armenian, but also to early Byzantine historiography. For example, some scholars have expressed doubts about the authenticity of such a well-studied work as the *Vita Constantini* of Eusebius.³² Testable hypotheses are often met with a sceptical or hypercritical attitude. Such suggestions may sometimes make the paradigm more complex, but at the same time they contribute to the development and advancement of scholarship, even though they are hypothetical.³³

Two main points about the Armenian translation of the *Vita Silvestri* should be emphasised. Firstly, the Armenian translation confirms that the legend of Sylvester was widespread in the seventh century. Furthermore, there are numerous references to Sylvester in the Armenian historiography before and after the appearance of the Armenian translation of the *Vita Silvestri*. So, his memory was quite vivid in Armenia, while in the West "Sylvester's relics did not gain much attention until the middle of the eighth century" (Manarini 2021, 76). The second important point is the relevance of this text for our understanding of the development of theories on apostolic sees. The concept of Tetrarchy, which must have been the dominant paradigm in the early church, was almost completely consigned to oblivion after the sixth century and Justinian. In fact, by developing the theory of the Pentarchy, Emperor Justinian caused a significant change both in the state and ecclesiastical policies. Even if the memory of the administration of the universal Church by four patriarchal sees lingered on in different traditions (cf. Van Esbroeck 1991), it is best preserved in the Armenian sources. Thanks to these we can today form an idea about this ancient tradition, something preserved also in the *Vita Silvestri*.

To conclude, one can say that the information brought forward in these documents can be valuable not only when researching the ties between Roman and Armenian Churches but also for elucidating many political problems that existed in Christendom starting from the early centuries until the time of the Crusades.

31 But this is not to imply that the Armenians developed this topic in the Armenian translation (although this is partly true for the shorter version), because what they did was an exact translation of the Greek spurious - if not forged - writing.

32 From the beginning of the 1930s, a number of such articles were written by Grégoire (cf. 1938).

33 E.g. in the case of *Vita Constantini* an interesting dispute arose between Grégoire and Baynes (Baynes 1972, IV-VI).

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