

Byzantium and Its Neighbours
Religious Self and Otherness in Dialogue
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Theological and Political Reasons in the Anti-Armenian Polemics in Byzantium (Ninth-Twelfth Centuries)

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Abstract Byzantium had an ambivalent attitude towards the Armenians. On the one hand it aimed to condemn the alleged Monophysitism of the Armenian Church, based on theological considerations consolidated by polemical writings. On the other hand, however, Byzantium sought points of conciliation also due to the importance of the Armenian ethnic element, both within the empire and on its borders. My contribution aims to highlight the evolution of the Byzantine positions towards the Armenian Church, from the time of Photios until the twelfth century. Byzantium was careful to affirm its orthodoxy, but also to avoid increasing the reasons for friction and disputes with the Armenians. In the twelfth century, however, the tendency to find points of contact and conciliation emerged, in order to affirm the ties between Byzantium and the Armenians both of Cilicia and Greater Armenia.

Keywords Armenian Church. Byzantine Church. Official Epistles. Polemical Treatises. Political Reasons. Theological Debates.



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1. The polemics against the Armenians was a characteristic feature of Byzantine religious identity. Armenians were predominantly pre-Chalcedonian Christians (or 'Monophysites'),¹ and while on the one hand Byzantium bowed to *Realpolitik* and admitted liturgical and religious differences, on the other, it did not fail to underline the need for Armenians to accept the Chalcedonian creed and adopt Greek liturgical customs (such as using leavened bread or adding water to wine at Eucharist).²

An echo of this controversy is found during the age of patriarch Photios, and later on in the ninth-tenth centuries.³ For example, in the letters addressed to the Armenians, Photios, consistent with the topical themes used by Byzantines in the polemics against this Eastern Church, constantly targets its alleged monophysitism, although he especially insists on the elements of agreement and above all on the *φιλία* 'friendship' that binds him to the Armenian princes of the Bagratuni dynasty.⁴ In the *Epistle* 284,⁵ written during his first patriarchate (858-67), Photios addressed Ashot - the *princeps* who would be later nominated by Basil I ἄρχων τῶν ἀρχόντων (Arm. *išxanac'* 'prince of princes')⁶ - with a series of *Anreden* of classical ancestry, designating him as μεγαλοπρεπείας καὶ γενναιότητος ἄγαλμα 'image of magnificence and nobility',⁷ or even as βέλτιστε 'excellent'.⁸ At the same time, the patriarch refuted all the objections of Armenian theologians opposed to the adoption of the dogma of Chalcedon. Interestingly, Photios employs a whole series of scriptural *exempla* and quotations borrowed from Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzos, and above all from Cyril of Alexandria, which he had already collected in two *codices* of his *Bibliotheca*, namely 229 and 230, dedicated to the writings of Ephraim of Antioch and Eulogios of Alexandria.⁹ He also writes to the Armenian *katholikos*, to whom he addresses the *Epistle* 285.¹⁰ In his letter, he points out that an incongruity would follow if the first three councils were accepted while rejecting the fourth. As a matter of fact, he states that the latter was intimately

1 Cf. Garsoïan 1996.

2 In the Mass, Armenians used unleavened bread, like the Latin Church, cf. Kolbaba 2013; 2020, 124-5.

3 Cf. Dorfmann-Lazarev 2004, 87-91; Greenwood 2006; Stopka 2016, 93-7.

4 Cf. Shirinian 2010.

5 Photios, *Epistle* 284, ed. Laourdas, Westerink 1985, 1-97. Kolbaba 2020, 131.

6 Ashot became king of Armenia in 885, as Ashot I, cf. Dorfmann-Lazarev 2004, 82.

7 Photios, *Epistle* 284, ed. Laourdas, Westerink 1985, 4 l. 26.

8 Photios, *Epistle* 284, ed. Laourdas, Westerink 1985, 4 l. 32.

9 Photios, *Bibliotheca* 229, ed. Henry 1965, 126-74; *Bibliotheca* 230, ed. Henry 1967, 8-64.

10 Photios, *Epistle* 285, ed. Laourdas, Westerink 1985, 97-112. Kolbaba 2020, 130.

connected to the preceding three as it constituted, so to speak, their *sphragis*.¹¹

These two epistles were written, at least according to the chronology established by Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev,¹² during the first patriarchate of Photios, and provide a testimony of the negotiations that should have led, in the intentions of the interlocutors, to the reunification of the two Churches. In the *Epistle 2*, Photios acknowledged that the Armenians had abandoned τὴν μακρὰν ἐκείνην πλάνην ‘that great deviance’,¹³ but apparently, the *quaestio* was still not solved, since during the second patriarchate (877-86) he wrote to Ashot in order to resume the knot of the negotiations interrupted by his exile. In the *Epistle 298*, which has been transmitted to us only through an Armenian translation,¹⁴ on the one hand, he reaffirms the bonds of friendship with the sovereign, expressing gratitude for the support shown to him during his exile, on the other hand, he emphasises the elements of unity, even when he speaks of differences:

Hence, we have carefully undertaken teaching you the truth, especially having discovered that your country is guarded by divine grace and is united with the universal holy church in everything, except for one, that is, because you considered the fourth Council adverse to God and contrary to the truth.¹⁵

This exchange of letters shows that, in its renewed expansionist drive, Byzantium makes use of religious themes in order to reaffirm its cultural superiority as well as its right, in the name of respect for orthodoxy, to provide indisputable guidance to all Christian peoples. It is worth noting that Armenia had been the first Christian nation of the world,¹⁶ and was an important bulwark in the sub-Caucasian provinces, as well as across extensive areas of eastern Anatolia, predominantly inhabited by Armenians. It should also not be forgotten that Armenians constituted a prominent ethnic group within the Byzantine empire,¹⁷ and provided it with several emperors

11 Photios, *Epistle 285*, ed. Laourdas, Westerink 1985, 104 ll. 197-205.

12 Cf. Dorfmann-Lazarev 2004, 87-91.

13 Photios, *Epistle 2*, ed. Laourdas, Westerink 1983, 41-2.

14 As for the Armenian text, cf. Akinean 1968. A Latin translation by Bernard Outtier is found in Photios, *Epistle 298*, ed. Laourdas, Westerink 1985, 167-72. For a French translation, cf. Dorfmann-Lazarev 2004, 25-32. In general, cf. Kolbaba 2020, 129.

15 Author's translation, based on the Latin version. Cf. Akinean 1968, 443-4. Photios, *Epistle 298*, ed. Laourdas, Westerink 1985, 169 ll. 67-9; Dorfmann-Lazarev 2004, 28. Cf. Kolbaba 2020, 132.

16 Cf. Thomson 1997; van Esbroeck 1982.

17 Cf. Garsoïan 1998.

and many aristocratic γένη 'families'.¹⁸ Establishing and maintaining favourable relations with Armenian princes and rulers was therefore crucial for Byzantium, particularly from an anti-Arabic perspective. All of which explains the attitude of Photios, who was resolute in affirming orthodoxy, but also careful to avoid increasing the reasons for friction and contention with the Armenians.¹⁹

2. The periods of intense dialogue that had occurred during the ninth and tenth centuries under the patriarchate of Photios, and then during that of Nicholas I Mystikos (901-07, 912-25),²⁰ already from the mid-eleventh century and later under the Komnenoi gave way to conflicts and mutual suspicions,²¹ which arose on account of doctrinal themes, but also – as one might surmise – from factors of a distinctly political and cultural nature.²²

In this regard, sources are numerous, on the Greek as well as on the Armenian and Syriac side. We might start from the testimony of Anna Komnene, daughter of Alexios and author of the most famous *Alexias*. However, we should also consider a polemical anti-Armenian treatise written by the emperor Alexios I Komnenos himself.²³ Anna Komnene dwells on the Armenians in a passage of the tenth book of the *Alexias* when she recounts the trial against the Calabrian monk Neilos.²⁴ The latter had arrived in the Capital and dedicated

18 Cf. Charanis 1963; Kazhdan 1983. Cf. also Brousselle 1996; Shirinian 2010; Augé 2017.

19 Cf. Kolbaba 2020, 137.

20 Cf. Strano 2005a; 2005b.

21 The Byzantine anti-Armenian polemical literature, and more generally, against Christians of other 'confessions', becomes particularly abundant under the Komnenoi. As regards the age of Alexios, who himself was the author of an anti-Armenian treatise (for which see *infra*, fn. 23), notable is the work known as *Dogmatic Panoply* by Euthymios Zigabenos (*PG* 130, coll. 20-1360; *RAP* 11348). This compilation, commissioned by Alexios, constitutes a patristic anthology against the numerous heresies within the empire. The anti-Armenian section is found in coll. 1173-89. We must also recall the treatise of Eustratios of Nicaea, edited by Demetrakopoulos 1866, 160-98. In the *inscriptio* (160), it is mentioned that the work ἐξεδόθη δὲ μετὰ τὴν γενομένην διάλεξιν παρὰ τοῦ βασιλέως Κυρίου Ἀλεξίου τοῦ Κομνηνοῦ πρὸς Ἀρμένιον τὸν Τιγράνην 'was published after the debate between the emperor *kyr* Alexios Komnenos and the Armenian Tigranes': see *infra*, fn. 26. Regarding the literature on religious controversy in the Komnenian age, cf., among others, Augé 2001. However, it is important to note that the period of the Komnenoi witnessed the final major attempt at reconciliation between the Byzantine Church and the Armenian Church, spearheaded by the emperor Manuel and the *katholikos* Nersēs Šnorhali. On this topic cf., among others, Zekiyan 1986. See also *infra*.

22 Cf. Bartikian 1986.

23 Edited by Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1891, 116-23.

24 *Alexiad* 10.1.1-5, ed. Kambylis, Reinsch 2001, 281-2. For details regarding the Neilos *affaire* including its chronology and doctrinal contents, cf. Gouillard 1967, 202-6; cf. also Buckler 1929, 324-30; Angold 1984, 477-8; Smythe 1996, 249-53. Gautier 1980, 123-4 and 365, suggests the identification of Neilos with the homonymous monk who is

himself to the study of the Sacred Scriptures, but he had completely misunderstood the meaning, since, she writes, he “ignored the Hellenic culture” and “the art of reasoning”.²⁵ Neilos’ error concerned the mystery of hypostatic union in the Person of Christ, and he had come to decidedly heretical positions. Anna takes care to inform us that in Constantinople a significant number of Armenians resided, among whom Neilos had become a stimulus to impiety, also due to his continuous talks with two eminent representatives of the Armenian community in Byzantium, Tigranes and Arsakes.²⁶ Realising the expansion of heresy, Alexios decided to put an end to it by convening a synod to condemn Neilos and his followers. This synod, in the presence of the patriarch himself, Nicholas Grammatikos, “cast on Nilus an eternal anathema and solemnly proclaimed the hypostatic union in accordance with the tradition of the saints”.²⁷

In the Neilos *affaire*, two aspects emerge as particularly noteworthy:

1) the fact that Anna tells us that he had gathered a group of disciples of notable standing, and that he had integrated into prominent families as a teacher;

2) the attempt at persuasion made upon Neilos directly by Alexios who, refuting him, “taught him exactly what constituted the hypostatic union between the humanity and the divinity of the Word, and demonstrated the way of mutual communication of their properties, and taught with grace coming from above how the assumed human nature had been deified”.²⁸

In this context, it is pertinent to point out the elements which precisely link the accusations made in the *Alexias* against Neilos and

the recipient of a poem by Theophylaktos of Ohrid, in which the archbishop requests his intervention with the *sebastos* (perhaps John Komnenos, duke of Dyrrachion) against Michael Antiochos. However, it is likely that this monk was simply – a conclusion Gautier himself eventually seems to accept – a monk from the region of Illyricum.

25 *Alexiad* 10.1.1: ἀμύητος δὲ πάσης ἑλληνικῆς παιδείας ὣν καὶ μηδὲ καθηγητὴν τινα ἐσχηκῶς ἀρχῆθεν τὸν ὑφαπλοῦντα τοῦτ’ αὖ τὸ τῆς θείας γραφῆς βᾶθος ἐνεκεκίφει μὲν τοῖς τῶν ἁγίων συγγράμμασιν, ἄγευστος δὲ πάσης παιδείας λογικῆς ὣν ἐπεπλάνητο περὶ τὸν νοῦν τῶν γραφῶν, ed. Kambylis, Reinsch 2001, 281 ll. 8-12.

26 *Alexiad* 10.1.4: εἶχε δὲ τότε καὶ πολλοὺς τῶν Ἀρμενίων ἢ μεγαλόπολις, οἷς τῆς ἀσεβείας ὑπέκκαυμα ὁ Νεῖλος ἐκεῖνος ἐγένετο. Ἐντεῦθεν διαλέξεις τὲ συχναὶ πρὸς τὸν Τιγράνην ἐκείνον καὶ τὸν Ἀρσάκην, οὓς ἐπὶ πλέον τὰ τοῦ Νεῖλου δόγματα πρὸς ἀσεβείαν ἠρέθιζε, ed. Kambylis, Reinsch 2001, 282 ll. 30-3. Tigranes was an opponent of Alexios and Eustratios of Nicaea during the theological debates promoted by the sovereign against the Manichaeans and the Armenians of Philippiopolis, cf. Skoulatos 1980, 298.

27 Author’s translation of *Alexiad* 10.1.5: ἡ σύνοδος... αἰωνίῳ τοῦτον καθυπέβαλεν ἀναθέματι καὶ τὴν καθ’ ὑπόστασιν ἔνωσιν κατὰ τὰς τῶν ἁγίων παραδόσεις ἐμφανέστερον ἀνεκέρυξε, ed. Kambylis, Reinsch 2001, 282 ll. 44-7.

28 Author’s translation of *Alexiad* 10.1.3: τὴν τε καθ’ ὑπόστασιν ἔνωσιν τοῦ θεανθρώπου λόγου τρανώς ἐδίδασκε καὶ τὸν τῆς ἀντιδόσεως τρόπον παρίστα καὶ ὅπως ἐθεώθη τὸ πρόσλημμα μετὰ τῆς ἄνωθεν ἐδίδασκε χάριτος, ed. Kambylis, Reinsch 2001, 281-2 ll. 24-7.

the polemical motives used against the Armenians by the same Alexios. Indeed, the Komnenos composed a polemical discourse in which he refuted the (alleged) Armenian monophysitism,²⁹ affirming that the union of the two natures of the *Logos*-Christ does not imply the annulment of human nature, since τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ‘the human element’ is made divine τῆ καθ’ ὑπόστασιν ἐνώσει ‘by the union in the hypostasis’. In order to illustrate the coexistence of the two natures in a single hypostasis, Alexios resorts to the fitting example of iron and fire, each of which has their own nature: if iron comes into the proximity of fire, it becomes fiery (σίδηρος πεπυρακτωμένος)³⁰ and thereby participates in the splendour and power of fire. However, this does not mean that it becomes fire, or that fire changes its nature: both natures remain unchanged while being intimately united.³¹ In the same way, we can speak about the *Logos*-Christ of εθεωμένη σάρξ ‘deified flesh’, without implying *ipso facto* that human nature is made divine. This is an *exemplum* with a long-standing tradition; for instance, it is used by Maximos the Confessor (*Disputation with Pyrrhos* [CPG 7698] 187) and by John of Damascus (*Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* [CPG 8043] 59), to explain the presence of two energies in the incarnate Christ: the divine and the human.³² It is therefore reasonable to surmise that Alexios employed against Neilos exactly the same arguments (perhaps, along with the very example of the natures of fire and iron) that he would then express in his aforementioned writing specifically addressed *contra Armenos*, composed most likely in 1114. Such a reuse is certainly not an unusual aspect, as the imperial writings were destined for a wide circulation and

²⁹ See *supra*, fn. 23.

³⁰ Ed. Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1891, 117.

³¹ Ed. Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1891, 116-17: ὅταν οὖν εἴπωμεν τὸν ἀπανθρακωθέντα σίδηρον “πεπυρακτωμένον σίδηρον”, διὰ τοῦτο λέγομεν “πεπυρακτωμένον” ὅτι περιεχώρησεν ἐν ὄλῳ τῷ σιδήρῳ τὸ πῦρ καὶ μετέσχεν οὗτος τῆς τοῦ πυρὸς λαμπρότητος καὶ τῆς καυστικῆς δυνάμεως, οὐχ ὅτι δὲ φύσει γέγονε πῦρ ὁ σίδηρος, οὔτε μὴν πάλιν ὅτι τὸ πῦρ σίδηρος γέγονεν· ἀμφω γὰρ αἱ φύσεις, ἢ τε τοῦ πυρὸς καὶ τοῦ σιδήρου, ἀναλλοίωτοι μένουσι καὶ λέγομεν τὸ ὅλον σίδηρον “πεπυρακτωμένον” διὰ τὴν ἐν αὐτῷ περιχώρησιν τοῦ πυρὸς, ἐκατέρου τὰ κατὰ φύσιν οἰκεία ἔχοντος καὶ ἐνεργούντος διὰ τὴν τῆς φύσεως ἑτερότητα.

³² John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 59, writes: Καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς πεπυρακτωμένης μαχαίρας ὡσπερ αἱ φύσεις σφύζονται τοῦ τε πυρὸς καὶ τοῦ σιδήρου, οὕτω καὶ αἱ δύο ἐνεργεῖαι καὶ τὰ τούτων ἀποτελέσματα. Ἐχει γὰρ ὁ μὲν σίδηρος τὸ τμητικόν, τὸ δὲ πῦρ τὸ καυστικόν, καὶ ἡ τομὴ μὲν τῆς τοῦ σιδήρου ἐνεργείας ἐστὶν ἀποτέλεσμα, ἡ δὲ καύσις τοῦ πυρὸς· καὶ σφύζεται τὸ τούτων διάφορον ἐν τῇ κεκαυμένῃ τομῇ καὶ ἐν τῇ τετμημένῃ καύσει, εἰ καὶ μήτε ἡ καύσις τῆς τομῆς δίχα γίγνεται μετὰ τὴν ἐνώσιν μήτε ἡ τομὴ δίχα τῆς καύσεως· καὶ οὔτε διὰ τὸ διπλὸν τῆς φυσικῆς ἐνεργείας δύο πεπυρακτωμένως μαχαίρας φαμέν οὔτε διὰ τὸ μοναδικόν τῆς πεπυρακτωμένης μαχαίρας σύγχυσιν τῆς οὐσιώδους αὐτῶν διαφορᾶς ἐργαζόμεθα. Οὕτω καὶ ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ τῆς μὲν θεότητος αὐτοῦ ἡ θεία καὶ παντοδύναμος ἐνεργεῖα, τῆς δὲ ἀνθρωπότητος αὐτοῦ ἡ καθ’ ἡμᾶς (ed. Kotter 1973, 148 ll. 104-15).

constituted – as well as the elaborations coming from the pen of the court rhetoricians – the official point of view on religious, cultural and *sensu lato* political topics.

3. These brief considerations are intended to demonstrate once again how, under the reign of Alexios, the invectives and polemics against the Armenians took force and were strengthened. As a matter of fact, relations had become increasingly sour by the eleventh century,³³ when a free Armenia no longer existed, being now annexed to the Byzantine empire.³⁴ Constantine X Doukas had ordered that Armenians residing in the capital or in other parts of the empire be converted, otherwise they would be expelled.³⁵ The same intransigence characterised the reign of Romanos IV Diogenes, so much so as to alienate him from the support of the Armenian populations of Anatolia.³⁶ We might add that Alexios persecuted both Bogomils and Armenians; he was obviously able to distinguish the various heresies, but his interest was to stand as a defender of orthodoxy against all enemies of the faith, be they Armenians or Manichaeans. He went so far as to order – according to the testimony of Matthew of Edessa – that Armenians should be re-baptised before being admitted to the Orthodox Church.³⁷

Such harshness, perhaps more ostensible than real, finds its motivations both in factors related to the internal order of the empire and in others that were dependent on international contingencies. Alexios became a champion of orthodoxy³⁸ and harshly attacked, in addition to the heretics, also the Armenians. However, this does not mean that he did not make use of their military skills or that he did not surround himself with Armenian collaborators, but it was important – especially in the eyes of the Church – to convey the image of a religious conduct marked by intransigence, which, in a period of crisis and uncertainty on several fronts, could be a factor of political and social cohesion.³⁹

33 Cf. Cheynet 1996.

34 Cf. Garsoïan 1997. Cf. Hamada 2023.

35 Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle* 15.2 (Fr. transl.: Chabot 1905, 166-8). Cf. Mahé 1999, 545-7.

36 Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle* 15.2 (Fr. transl.: Chabot 1905, 169). Cf. Cheynet 1996, 68-71; Dédéyan 1975, 114-15.

37 Matthew of Edessa, *Chronicle* 3.228 (En. transl.: Dostourian 1993, 224-5). Two additional Armenian sources, Vardan the Great and Samuel of Ani, report the news of the second baptism imposed by Alexios on the Armenians, attributing, though, the responsibility to the sovereign's mother, Anna Dalassene, who, as is known, exercised a strong influence over her son, cf. Sharf 1995, 257.

38 Kolbaba 2020, 122.

39 As observed by Augé 2002, 135-6: "Si Alexis s'attaque aux chrétiens 'monophysites' de la capitale, en faisant fermer leurs églises, son fils Jean, lui, s'en prend aux Arméniens

The Armenians were dispersed across the empire's territory, but during the eleventh century, they established domains in Cilicia, a region between the Taurus and ancient Syria. Here, some of the princes declared themselves to be independent lords while others continued to be, at least nominally, obedient to Byzantium.⁴⁰ The most prominent warlord among the Armenians was Philaretos Brachamios,⁴¹ a former general of Romanos IV Diogenes, who built between 1078 and 1085 a principality that included Cilicia and Edessa and stretched from Melitene to Antioch.⁴² Among others, emerged Rouben, who was close to Gagik II, the last ruler of the Armenia's Bagratuni dynasty.⁴³ Thus, under the leadership of Rouben and his descendants, known as the Rupenids, the Armenian principality (and the future kingdom) of Cilicia was established.⁴⁴

4. Armenian *katholikoi*, who belonged to powerful aristocratic families, held a special place in the Armenian society and their role inevitably assumed political relevance. Such was also the case of the *katholikos* Nersēs Šnorhali,⁴⁵ who took over as the Armenian Church's supreme authority after his brother, the *katholikos* Gregory, associated him to catholicosate.⁴⁶ Before his appointment, Nersēs encountered the nephew of the Byzantine emperor Manuel, Alexios Axouch, at Mamistra.⁴⁷ Axouch had a theological debate with Nersēs and,

de Cilicie, lors de sa première expédition en Orient, dans les années 1136-1138. [...] Les empereurs, que ce soit dans leur capitale ou dans les territoires qu'ils tentent de reconquérir, usent donc de la manière forte, en fermant, voire en détruisant les lieux de culte”.

⁴⁰ Cf. Evans 2001.

⁴¹ Skoulatos 1980, 263-5; Koltsida-Makre 2017.

⁴² Cf. Yarnley 1972.

⁴³ Cf. Toumanoff 1976, 110; Pogossian 2010, 9-10: “Moreover, to strengthen the link between this last Armenian king, Gagik II, and the Rubenids, Matthew of Edessa mentions twice in his Chronography that the founder of the Rubenid dynasty was a soldier in Gagik's army, while on one occasion his text, at least in some manuscripts, it states that Ruben was ‘one of the sons’ of Gagik. However, more than sixty years ago the Armenologist Adontz demonstrated that historically there is no hard proof for the Bagratid origin of the Rubenids and that the mention of Ruben as ‘one of the sons’ of Gagik is almost certainly a scribal error. More recently, it has been suggested that the homeland of the Rubenids was probably South-Western Armenia. Yet, the connection with the Bagratids survived in Armenian historical sources, such as the work of Samuel Anec'i, and was repeated with some variations by others as well, such as Vahram Rabun, Het'um Patmič' and a short anonymous history of the Rubenids, but, significantly, not by Smbat Sparapet”.

⁴⁴ Dédéyan 2002, 242ff.

⁴⁵ Cf. Ananian 1967.

⁴⁶ Strano 2022. Gregory III, however, from a formal point of view, did not resign, but associated his brother in the government of catholicosate, and transferred to him part (or all) of his powers.

⁴⁷ Magdalino 1993, 107. Alexios was the son of John Axouch, the *mezas domestikos* of the Byzantine army. He married Maria Komnene, niece of Manuel.

captivated by the prelate's kindness, requested him to write down the Armenians' statement of faith.⁴⁸ The most intriguing aspect of this statement of faith is the boost to reconciliation between the Armenian and the Greek-Byzantine positions.⁴⁹ In fact, it is clear from Nersēs' formulations that Armenian monophysitism was only ostensible, and the differences with the Greek doctrinal tradition were terminological, rather than substantive, because the Armenian Church strengthened the literal acceptance of the sentence written by Cyril of Alexandria, who, in his book of comments *Against Nestorios*, proclaimed:⁵⁰ "One is the nature of the Incarnate Word, in the way the Fathers also taught us".⁵¹

The emperor read the letter favourably and then requested that the *katholikos* Gregory send his brother to Constantinople so that theological debates might continue.⁵² However, Gregory had already associated his brother Nersēs as *katholikos*,⁵³ and this made it impossible for the new head of the Armenian Church to reach Constantinople.⁵⁴ The Byzantine emperor (and the synod) dispatched an embassy to the catholicosate's see at Hromklay on the Euphrates river, 50 kilometres north-east of Edessa.⁵⁵ The mission was led by the theologian Theorianos⁵⁶ and the Armenian abbot of Philippopolis, John Atmanos.⁵⁷

The debates began in May 1170, and were documented by Theorianos in two treatises that are not an exact reproduction of the sessions, but do reflect the substance of the dispute as well as the terminological disparities between the two traditions.⁵⁸ At the end of

48 *Endhanrakan t'ult'k' Srboyn Nersisi Šnorhalwoy* 1871, 87-107. Italian translation with Armenian critical text by Bozoyan, Pane 2023, 40-105. A French translation is offered by Augé 2011, 95-114 (= *Epistle* 1). A Latin translation can be found in Cappelletti 1833, 173-94 (= *Epistle* 4).

49 Pogossian 2010, 32.

50 Cyril of Alexandria, *Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only-Begotten*, PG 75, coll. 1369-412.

51 *Endhanrakan t'ult'k' Srboyn Nersisi Šnorhalwoy* 1871, 96: Ասեմք մի բնութիւն ի Քրիստոս, ոչ շփոթմամբ ըստ Եւսեփեայ, այլ ըստ Կիւրղի Աղէքսանդրացւոյ՝ զոր ի գիրս Պարսպմանցն ասէ ընդդէմ Նեստորի, եթէ "Մի է բնութիւն Բանին մարմնացելոյ, որպէս և հարրն ասացին"; Bozoyan, Pane 2023, 72-5; Augé 2011, 103 (= *Epistle* 1); Cappelletti 1833, 182 (= *Epistle* 4).

52 Cf. Ananian 1967, 751.

53 Gregory died shortly thereafter.

54 Nersēs suggests that the emperor come to the East, so that they can conclude their talks: Mardoyan 2020, 125. See also Bais 2023.

55 Cf. Hellenkemper 1976, 51-61.

56 Cf. Kirmizi 2002; Augé 2008, 150-1.

57 Cf. Zekiyān 1988.

58 Cf. Ananian 1967, 751; Zekiyān 1980, 432-3. Cf. Pogossian 2010, 32: "The Byzantine theologian Magister Theorianos also made a report on the discussions that were

the first treaty, Theorianos stated that he had persuaded Nersēs to recognise the Armenians' errors.⁵⁹ The matter is, however, contentious and debatable.⁶⁰ According to Theorianos, the *katholikos* Nersēs would have accepted communion with Constantinople to the point of declaring himself *Rhomaïos*, i.e. Roman (Byzantine). It is possible that Theorianos sincerely believed in Nersēs' complete allegiance to the Greek Christology, while the latter continued to be a firm believer in the orthodoxy of the Armenian Church.⁶¹

Theorianos and Atmanos returned a second time to Hromklay, delivering one letter from the Byzantine patriarch Michael III Anchialos, two letters from the emperor Manuel, and nine chapters with the conditions for the union of the Churches.⁶² *Katholikos* Nersēs answered that without the Holy Synod of Armenian bishops, he could not agree to those nine points. Since it was winter, the Holy Synod would be summoned the following summer (1173).⁶³ It was a way to buy time and to involve the assembly of bishops, whose support the *katholikos* needed, on the theme of unity.⁶⁴ However, the negotiations were interrupted by the death of Nersēs, on 13 August of the same year.

5. After Nersēs Šnorhali died, his nephew⁶⁵ Gregory IV Tlay became *katholikos* and resumed the debates with Manuel.⁶⁶ In his letter to the

held at the catholical residence of Hromklay. His description equally concentrated on theological-Christological debates, first and foremost".

59 Theorianos, *Disputation with the Armenians*, PG 133, coll. 209-10. Cf. Stone 2005, who revisits the question in light of contemporary Greek *enkomia*.

60 Some scholars contend that the Armenian *katholikos* genuinely adhered to the Chalcedonian doctrine, cf., e.g., Tournebize 1910, 246; Ananian 1967, 752. Others argue that Theorianos' narrative is biased, tending to fully endorse the Greek point of view, cf., e.g., Ormanian 1954, 49-50: "L'ouvrage connu sous le titre de Disputations entre Théorianus et Nersés, écrit par Théorianus après son retour à Constantinople, met dans la bouche de Nersés des expressions que contredisent absolument les documents incontestables qui nous sont parvenus, ce qui prouve que Théorianus a voulu masquer sa défaite". Cf. Tekeyan 1939, 25.

61 Zekiyani 1980, 432; cf. also Stone 2005, 197-8.

62 Theorianos, *Second Disputation with the Armenian Katholikos Nerses*, PG 133, col. 269; cf. *Endhanrakan t'utt'k' Srboyn Nersisi Šnorhalwoy* 1871, 156-7.

63 Tekeyan 1939, 30. Cf. Strano 2022, 152.

64 Mardoyan 2020, 127: "Catholicos Nerses, though, had no intention of conveying a meeting. He was careful enough to wait and see how things were going to develop. He sent a certain priest, named Stepannos, to inform the bishops and the honorary sees about the development of the unity efforts and the suggested nine points".

65 Cf. Frazee 1976, 177: "At the catholicate in Hromgla the aging Nerses the Gracious was ready to turn over his office to another. The nepotistic tradition that the Pahvalouni family should hold the position of catholicos was honored once more".

66 Cf. Zekiyani 1982; Mardoyan 2020, 127-8.

emperor (*Epistle* 12),⁶⁷ he referred to his predecessor Nersēs' role in the unification of the Churches, but also to his own specific desire to continue the work in this direction, despite the hostility of the clergy of Greater Armenia.⁶⁸ Gregory alluded to a (lost) letter from the *basileus*, who evidently requested a statement of faith. During the same period, the archbishop of Tarsus, Nersēs Lambronac'ı, a close collaborator of *katholikos* Gregory Tlay, delivered his renowned *Synodal Discourse* (in 1175 or 1178).⁶⁹ Furthermore, in his *Chapters*,⁷⁰ he also replied that if the Byzantine sovereign were to gain the authority to designate the Armenian *katholikos*, then it would have been up to the latter to appoint the patriarch of Antioch.⁷¹ It is also to be believed that these requirements motivated Nersēs Lambronac'ı to translate, with the assistance of Constantine of Hierapolis, a Greek priest, Neilos Doxapatres' book on church hierarchy (*Order of Patriarchal Chairs*).⁷² This was a Greek work dedicated in 1142-43 to king Roger II of Sicily, whose topic pertains to the origin and evolution of the five patriarchal sees (the ancient pentarchy), with specific attention to the Roman primacy and the contrast between the Latin Church and the Greek Church for ecclesiastical jurisdiction over Southern Italy.⁷³

Indeed, several passages of the Armenian translation stressed the independence of the Armenian *katholikos*,⁷⁴ similar to the autocephalous Church of Cyprus. As a matter of fact, we read:

It should also be known that there are very great lordships in the East, which we call Greater Armenia, which has many cities and many villages in the lands of various provinces. Their *katholikos* being autocephalous fills the sees of the East with bishops according to each country and city, because Saint Gregory was the autocephalous archbishop of Greater Armenia and his seat remained autocephalous until today. Receiving consecration from his [own] *vardapets*, the see of the *katholikos* succeeds. The same as the

⁶⁷ Here, the Author adheres to Augé's numbering of the letters, as set by in Augé 2011, 172-3.

⁶⁸ Cf. Pogossian 2010, 33: "The correspondence with the Roman and especially the Byzantine Churches raised suspicions in Greater Armenia, particularly in the celebrated monasteries of Northern Armenia - Halpat and Sanahin. Northern monks doubted the sincerity of the other side, considering any attempts at unification of Churches as a challenge to the autonomy of the Armenian Church and an offence to its orthodoxy. They feared that their ancestral traditions were being betrayed and altered".

⁶⁹ Cf. Augé 2011, 21.

⁷⁰ Palčean 1878, 260-6. French translation in Augé 2011, 245-56.

⁷¹ Cf. Augé 2011, 254. Cf. Cowe 2006, 413-14.

⁷² Finck 1902.

⁷³ Cf. von Falkenhausen 1992. On Neilos Doxapatres, cf. Neiryneck 2014.

⁷⁴ Pogossian 2010, 35.

island of Cyprus, because it too is autocephalous and has pre-eminent bishops in the metropolis of Constantia, in Kourion, Paphos, Arsinoe, Salamis, Pithos (= Lapithos), Kyna (= Kyrenia), Basus (= Amathus), Kytis (= Kition), Tremithus, Karpasia, and in the way Greater Armenia is autocephalous, so is the see of Cyprus. The archbishop is ordained by his *vardapets*, because was found in it (in Cyprus) the apostle Barnabas who had the Gospel of Mark in an ark on his heart. Therefore, being autocephalous, [Cyprus] did not obey the other sees.⁷⁵

This was not a ‘neutral’ assertion, because it aimed to reaffirm the independence of the Armenian Church in the face of the Byzantine claims.

6. A synod of thirty-three hierarchs, including Syriac representatives and the *katholikos* of the Caucasian Albania Stepannos, finally met at Hromklay in 1178.⁷⁶ The affirmations and the proposals of the Greek side were considered perfectly consistent with the teachings and doctrines of the Fathers, but this ‘conciliatory’ attitude did not have concrete results.⁷⁷ Manuel died in 1180, and the *vardapets* of Greater Armenia chastised Gregory Tlay for accepting the Greeks’ statement of faith, which they continued to regard as contrary to their tradition.⁷⁸

75 Author’s translation of the Armenian text edited by Finck 1902, 10: Գիտելի լիցի եւ այս, զի է մեծամեծ իշխանութիւնք յարեւելս, գորս կոչեմք Մեծ Հայք, որ ունի քաղաքս, աւանս բազումս ի կողմանս գաւառաց գանազանս. Սոցա կաթողիկոսն եղեալ ինքնագլուխ լնու գաթոռս արեւելից ըստ իւրաքանչիւր աշխարհաց եւ քաղաքաց եպիսկոպոսարք: Չի սուրբն Գրիգորիոս Հայոց Մեծաց եղև ինքնագլուխ արքեպիսկոպոս. Եւ մնաց ինքնագլուխ աթոռն նորա մինչև ցայսար. Յիւրոց վարդապետացն առնելով զձեռնադրութիւնն յաջորդի կաթողիկոսին աթոռոյ որպէս եւ կղզին Կիպրոսի, զի եւ սա ինքնագլուխ է. եւ եպիսկոպոսս ունի նախապատուեայն ի նմա մայրաքաղաքն Կոստանդիա, զԿիւրիոն, զՊանփոս, զԱրսեւիա, զՄալալիա, զՊիթոս, զԿինա, զԲասուս, զԿիթնիս, զՏրիմիթոս, զԿարապետոս եւ այսպէս ըստ որում եւ մեծն Հայք ինքնագլուխ է աթոռն Կիպրոսի եւ յիւրայնոցն ձեռնադրի վարդապետաց, քանզի գտաւ ի նա առաքեայն Բառնաբաս, որ ունէր ի վերայ սրտին ի տապան իւր գաւետարանն Մարկոսի. Որ եւ յաղագս այսորիկ ինքնագլուխ եղեալ ոչ հնազանդեցաւ այլ եւս աթոռոց.

76 Cowe 2006, 413-14.

77 Frazee 1976, 178: “The decisions reached at Hromgla were purposefully vague [...]. Before the letters from Hromgla reached Constantinople, however, Manuel Comnenus was dead. In Cilicia the results of the council were politely ignored; in the north, several bishops broke relations with Hromgla”.

78 Cf. *Endhanrakan t’ult’k’ Srboyn Nersisi Šnorhalwoy* 1871, 307-12; cf. Augé 2011, 223-7 (= *Epistle* 18). As observed by Tekeyan 1939, 43: “Ils reprochent au catholicos d’être entré en pourparlers avec les Grecs sans les avoir consultés: la tête ne fait rien sans les membres principaux. S’il y avait quelque chose à corriger dans l’église arménienne, le catholicos est suffisamment intelligent pour faire la réforme tout seul, sans recourir à l’étranger”.

The *katholikos*, on his part, continued to insist⁷⁹ on the significance of the dialogue with the Greeks, arguing that it would be better to negotiate with them and resolve any potential disputes, especially since many Armenians lived in Byzantine empire's territory.⁸⁰

All these testimonies demonstrate that the Byzantine authorities (both patriarchs and emperors) and the Armenian *katholikoi* clearly understood the historical significance of their negotiations, but also indicate that their attitude changed over time.⁸¹ As Sirarpie der Nersessian wrote,

one can discern certain differences between the earlier and later periods. Before the twelfth century there is a very rigid attitude on both sides, each one interpreting the doctrine of the other in its most extreme terms [...]. In the second period, that is, in the twelfth century, there is a notable change. The Greeks concede that the Armenians do not follow Eutyches, but they still want them to discard the formula of one nature. The Armenians accept their explanations; they no longer accuse the Greeks of Nestorianism and avoid references to the council of Chalcedon.⁸²

Actually, however,

though the attitude of the catholicoses of Cilicia is more conciliatory and reveals a desire to reach an understanding with the Greeks, there is no change as far as their doctrine is concerned.⁸³

All attempts at agreement obviously involve the problems of peaceful confrontation and the desire for unity: this unity can be achieved – as Nersēs Šnorhali hopes – while respecting liturgical and dogmatic differences, but, on the Byzantine side, it aims to guarantee the maintenance of Byzantium's superiority over other peoples and nations.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Cf. *Endhanrakan t'ult'k' Srboyn Nersisi Šnorhalwoy* 1871, 312-29; cf. Augé 2011, 227-43 (= *Epistle* 19).

⁸⁰ Cf. Tekeyan 1939, 45.

⁸¹ Cf. Augé 2002, 149-50.

⁸² Cf. der Nersessian 1945, 50-1.

⁸³ Cf. der Nersessian 1945, 50-1.

⁸⁴ According to Zekiyan 1982, 336: “[L]es conditions de l’union telles qu’elles étaient envisagées par Šnorhali, Grigor Tlay et Lambronac’i offraient toutes les garanties possibles pour la parfaite conservation de l’identité ethnique, culturelle et ecclésiastique du peuple arménien, à l’exception d’éventuelles impositions violentes de la part des autres ou de capitulations trop faciles de la part des Arméniens, comme il est parfois arrivé”. Cf. Bais 2023.

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