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Eternalizing a Nation: Armenian Hishatakarans *in the Seventeenth Century*

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In 1514, the first battle between the Ottomans and the newly founded Safavid dynasty took place. The Battle of Chaldiran, as it came to be known, marked the beginning of a century-long struggle between the Sunni Ottomans and Shia Safavids that would draw to a close in 1639 with the Treaty of Zuhab.[1] The human toll of this ongoing warfare over the Caucasus and Mesopotamia would be exacted not just from the soldiers of each empire, but also from the different ethnic groups that inhabited these regions. Some caught in the midst of these conflicts had their towns and homes razed by these troops. Others were forced to relocate and resettle. The Armenians were one such group, trapped between these Muslim forces, whose material and non-material well-being was under threat. Armenians had been coping with foreign incursions for centuries. Historical Armenia had been invaded and often laid to waste by the Arabs in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries, the Byzantines in the eleventh, and the Mongols and Seljuks from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. In fact, an Armenian kingdom in ancestral Armenia had not existed since the eleventh century, leaving the people of Greater (or historical) Armenia without any native sovereignty and as a politically fragmented entity.[2] In the sixteenth century, historical Armenia had once again come to lie at the center of unremitting wars, this time fought between the Safavids and the Ottomans.

[1]For further reading on these wars, see Carl Marx Kortepeter, *Ottoman Imperialism During the Reformation: Europe and the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 1972); Adel Allouche, *Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict (906–962/1500–1555)* (Berlin: K. Schwarz Verlag, 1983); Michael Mazzaoui, *Safavid Iran and her Neighbors* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2003); Andrew J. Newman, *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006); Roger Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and Charles Melville, ed., *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society* (London: Tauris Parke, 1996).

[2]For a comprehensive discussion on this period of Armenian history, see Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian People: From Ancient to Modern Times*, vol. 1, *The Dynastic Periods: From Antiquity to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

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I. Armenia in the Seventeenth Century

Destruction and displacement, the inevitable consequences of war, reached a crescendo in 1604 when Shah Abbas I, forced to retreat, ordered a mass deportation of the inhabitants of central Armenia to Iran.[3] Nearly ten thousand people were moved from Julfa, an affluent trade center, and an estimated three hundred thousand from the Ararat valley, only half of whom survived the move.[4] The merchant community of Julfa was comfortably relocated to the suburbs of Isfahan, the new Safavid capital in central Iran, where they established New Julfa. The less fortunate communities were settled in Gilan and Mazandaran, located along the shores of the Caspian, where many would come to work in the production of silk. Julfa and the rest of the territories were then completely destroyed by the Persians, ensuring that the populations had nothing to return to. The Armenian nation, as it was so often referred to by contemporaries, was under siege yet again.[5] Deportation was a particularly effective military strategy that would be used repeatedly during the Ottoman-Safavid wars. The deportations of 1604, however, were the most harrowing: they were conducted with a magnitude that would not be repeated for the duration of the wars. How could this group of people, already dispersed across Eurasia, survive? How could it safeguard its group identity, its sense of belonging to one nation, and a collective understanding of itself and its past?[6] An extraordinary and

[3]The conditions under which the Armenians and other groups were deported and resettled have been a matter of debate. Some scholars such as Vartan Gregorian in his "Minorities of Isfahan: The Armenian Community of Isfahan 1587–1722," *Iranian Studies* 7, no. 3/4, Studies on Isfahan: Proceedings of the Isfahan Colloquium, Part II (Summer–Autumn 1974): 652–80; and Vera B. Moreen in "The Status of Religious Minorities in Safavid Iran 1617–1661," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40, no. 2 (April 1981): 119–34, argue that the Armenians were not treated as poorly as some contemporary sources would insist. Others, such as Vazken Ghougassian, *The Emergence of the Armenian Diocese of New Julfa in the Seventeenth Century* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), disagree.

[4]Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 78–79. These numbers are still debated. See Ghougassian, *Diocese of New Julfa*, 30–31, which estimates that at least four hundred thousand people were deported and three hundred thousand survived.

[5]One such contemporary was Arakel Davrizhetsi who made these references in his *Patmutiwn*. Davrizhetsi was a monk who studied under Catholicos Philip, the Armenian Supreme Patriarch, in Echmiadzin, which is the seat of the *catholicosate*. As a patriarchal legate, Davrizhetsi travelled across the Ottoman and Safavid Empires. Upon his return to Echmiadzin, he was asked by the *catholicos* to write a history of the Armenian people in the seventeenth century. The work was started in 1651 and first published in 1669 in Amsterdam. His approach to the ideas of nation and national identity are imperative to understanding Armenian ideas of self in the seventeenth century. Davrizhetsi uses phrases such as the "living Armenian nation" and the "ruined Armenian world," among others. Arakel Davrizhetsi, *Patmutiwn* [*History* or *Book of Histories*], ed. and trans. Varak Arakelyan (Erevan: Sovedagan Grogh, 1988).

[6]The Armenians used the word nation to denote a tribe or a set of people, that is, something a person is born into. For the purposes of this paper, the word nation will be used in the same

underused body of sources allows us to address these questions. The *hishatakaran* (memorial or memoir) was a preeminent medium that sustained this national identity while contributing to the collective memory. The *hishatakaran*s served three purposes: to underpin the centrality of the Armenian Apostolic Church to the Armenian sense of self, to highlight the experience of exile and persecution, and ultimately to create an Armenian identity broader than the Armenian Church—a Christian identity that it shared with a handful of others in the region, against the common enemy, Islam.

Much like colophons, *hishatakaran*s provide information about the scribe, the patron, and the date the manuscript was completed, but they are also much more. They often include elaborate records of contemporary socio-political events, eyewitness accounts to many of these historical developments, and a local history that may have otherwise been lost. Their authors vary but include scribes, patrons, binders, illuminators, and even subsequent recipients of the manuscripts. Most often the scribes were members of the lower clergy and thus recounted the experiences of the general populace. Scholars such as Avedis Sanjian have highlighted the unique nature of these sources, calling them an Armenian tradition even a literary genre dating back to the fifth century.[7] Despite the crucial nature of these texts and the emphatic endorsement they have received from Sanjian, they have only played a minor role in most scholarly work. They have been used to corroborate historical events, but their importance and use in any other capacity has remained unexplored.

The material context of the *hishatakaran*s is also significant. Some were written in account books, others in historical narratives, but the majority was recorded in the sacred space of religious texts, such as the Bible, Gospels, Psalters, hymnals, books of sermons, and so forth. Some were written in contemporary copies, others in centuries-old manuscripts where future restorers, rebinders, and recipients added their own voice and story to those earlier *hishtakaran*s, perpetuating individual and local memories, and collectively creating a national memory.

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sense, not indicating a modern conception of a nation-state, but an ethnic group, cultivated and reinforced by a shared culture, language, history, descent, and for this group especially, a shared religion. The terms ethnic and national identity will be used interchangeably. Panossian, *The Armenians*, provides an excellent, lucid discussion of nation and nationality as it relates to Armenians.

[7]Avedis Sanjian, *Colophons of Armenian manuscripts, 1301–1480: A Source for Middle Eastern History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), preface, vii.

The *hishatakaran*s were reflective of the scribes' experiences and stylistic proclivities, but they also followed a standardized format. They virtually always commenced with a giving of thanks, often dedicated to the Trinity. These were more than mere formalities. References to the Trinity were proclamations of Trinitarian theology and were followed often by explicit references to the first three Ecumenical Councils, the only ones accepted by the Armenian Church.[8] Other testimonials of faith were found in the writer's supplication to the reader, where the scribe would ask that he and his soul be remembered in the reader's prayers. Apart from being statements of faith, these *hishatakaran*s were often long, descriptive accounts of the social, political, and economic conditions of the time, and an excellent example of how contemporaries emphasized the close connection between religion and ethnic identity. Consequently, these *hishatakaran*s constructed and disseminated a sense of self that was entrenched in the Armenian Church, and demonstrated a powerful awareness of a past that had brought them to this present. That Armenian churchmen were copying large numbers of religious manuscripts and including *hishatakaran*s at a time of deportation, and when the historical territory of Armenia was a constant and violent bone of contention, also indicates the prominent place that religion held in the lives of Armenians, both those displaced and those living on their historic lands.

Sanjian has indicated the strengths and shortcomings of *hishatakaran*s as historical sources. He writes that they tend to have a narrow perspective, concerning themselves only with those events that affect their environment. In addition, he holds that they tend to be overdramatic and embellished.[9] These limitations become irrelevant, however, when these texts are used as a means of understanding the Armenians—as they viewed themselves—during the early seventeenth century. The *hishatakaran*s draw attention to those events that the scribes and their communities considered significant and overarching in shaping Armenian identity. Furthermore, they can be read as a confluence of Armenian self-perceptions rooted in the past, present, and future. While a printed edition of these seventeenth-century *hishatakaran*s appeared in 1974, the author has consulted the manuscripts found in the Matenadaran Institute of Manuscripts in Erevan, Armenia, wherever possible.[10]

[8]Sanjian, *Colophons*, 7.
[9]Sanjian, *Colophons*, preface, xii.
[10]Vazken Hakobyan and Ashod Hovhannisyan, comps. and eds., *Hayeren Ceragreri 17-rd Dari Heeshadagaranner* [*Armenian manuscript memorials of the 17th century*], 3 vols. (Erevan: Haygagan SSR Gidoutiwneri Agatemiai Hradaragchoutiwn, 1974).

II. The Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian Nation

After the fall of the last Armenian kingdom of Cilicia in 1375—a kingdom that was not even located in the historic lands—Armenians lacked any semblance of secular self-government. Without a political leadership to unite and guide them through this difficult period, only the Armenian Church remained a source of institutional stability, with the Armenian religion becoming an unmistakable marker of the people and their culture.[11] Traditionally, the Armenian people had considered themselves a particularly devout group, an attribute that was linked to their early conversion to the faith. According to legend, the Armenian Gregorian or Apostolic Church was established in the fourth century, when King Trdat III declared it the official state religion, under the guidance of St. Gregory the Illuminator. The legend is brimming with lustful pagan kings and emperors, covert Christians, beautiful Roman virgins, the bizarre transformation of the Armenian king into a beast, and his miraculous re-transformation into a man. Claims to be the first state to adopt Christianity led many Armenians to consider themselves the Chosen People of God, much like the Children of Israel, a trope to which, as will be seen later, the Armenian scribes of the early modern period would continuously return. Politically, the decision to convert to Christianity set Armenia apart from its most formidable and influential neighbor at the time, Sassanid Persia. Similarly, Christianity, and the Armenian variant in particular, would play a decisive role in uniting the scattered Armenian population while differentiating it from its conquerors in the early modern period.

Contemporaries of the Ottoman-Safavid wars eagerly alluded to the Armenian faith as an indispensable component of the Armenian nation. Arakel Davrizhetsi, an Armenian ecclesiastic and historian, related numerous incidents that reflected this constellation in his *Patmutiwn* (*History*). One such episode involved some relic-snatching Augustinians who had befriended the Catholic-leaning *catholicos* (patriarch of the Armenian Church), Melikset. In 1610, as a token of good will toward this nascent relationship, the missionaries were permitted to wander the grounds of Echmiadzin (seat of the *catholicosate*). During one of their perambulations, they exhumed the relics of St. Hripsime, one of the most venerated saints of the Armenian Church, who had played a crucial part in the conversion of the country. The Augustinians subsequently attempted to smuggle these relics

[11]Nina Garsoian, "The Byzantine Annexation of the Armenian Kingdoms in the Eleventh Century," in Hovannisian, *The Armenian People*, vol. 1, writes that apart from the institution of the Church, it was the succession of *catholicoi* (patriarchs of the Armenian Church) from the Pahlawuni house that provided a sense of continuity during the Middle Ages, even with the occasional anti-*catholicos*. The *catholicos* would continue to fill a similar role in the following centuries.

out of the country. The relics were divided, with some reaching the Dominican monastery in Nakhichevan and others the Augustinian monastery in Isfahan. Upon hearing the news of this theft, many Armenians rose in an uproar, "filled with anger, and [they] contrived a plot for revenge." An Armenian *khwaja*, Nazar, took action.[12] He reported these men to Shah Abbas I, who then issued a writ ordering an investigation into the matter. Soon thereafter, Roman clerics in Nakhichevan and Isfahan were tortured and their monasteries searched. Eventually, with the fortuitous assistance of an observant boy, the investigators found the relics which were then entrusted to Nazar.[13]

Even though St. Hripsime and the other martyrs who had played a seminal role in the country's conversion were of Roman origin, they had been adopted by the populace and incorporated into the Armenian pantheon of saints. Hripsime symbolized Armenia's proud conversion and its intrinsically Christian character. The relic-stealing was not only a desecration of sacred space but also an infringement upon an Armenian sense of self, heritage, and tradition.

Foreigners also noted the reverent, if at times colorful, piety of the Armenian people. John Cartwright, an English preacher traveling through the Ottoman and Persian Empires in the late sixteenth century, described Julfa. The preacher wrote of the town's "traffique of silkes, and other sorts of wares, whereby it waxeth rich and full of money," and remarked upon the population's penchant for wine. "When they are most in drinke, they powre out their prayers, especially to the Virgin Mary, as the absolute commander of her Sonne Jesus Christ, and to other Saints as Intercessors."[14] Religion and alcohol, sometimes in combination, other times apart, had a quotidian significance.

Gabriel de Chinon, a Capuchin missionary, recalled that he had never seen a group of people who were so unwavering in their Lenten fast. The people he came across "neither eat, drink nor consume any dairy during this time; at the same time they are obliged to abstain from wine." He added that the missionaries tried to persuade them that such austerity was unnecessary, but the Armenians were convinced that severe self-restraint was essential for the soul's salvation.[15] Even foreigners agreed that the Armenian Gregorian faith

[12]*Khwajas* were the most prosperous of the Armenian merchants in New Julfa. For more on *khwajas*, see Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, *The Shah's Silk for Europe's Silver: The Eurasian Trade of the Julfa Armenians in Safavid Iran and India (1530–1750)* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1999), 102–3.

[13]Davrizhetsi, *Patmutiwn*, 146–60.

[14]John Cartwright, *The Preachers Travels . . .* (London: Printed for Thomas Thorppe, 1611), 35.

[15]Gabriel de Chinon, *Relations nouvelles du Levant . . .* [*New accounts of the Levant*] (Lyon: Chés Iean Thioly, 1671), 236–38. The account was written in 1671, after a twenty-five-year mission in the region.

was a critical part of the people's lives. It became an especially effective cultural and political tool during taxing times: the glue that united far-flung Armenian communities, and distinguished them from their neighbors. As will be seen, the observations of Armenians and Europeans echoed what the *hishatakaran*s' emphasized repeatedly—the centrality of the Armenian faith to the Armenian sense of self. This in fact was the most significant feature of the *hishatakaran*s' definition of this people.

In 1607, Khachatour Khizantsi completed his lavishly illuminated copy of the New Testament.[16] His work is especially interesting in that it was started in Khizan, a city near Lake Van, taken along during the deportations, and completed in Isfahan. Khachatour's detailed and lengthy *hishatakaran* entry recalls the "toils, destruction, and ruin of the Armenian household."[17] He begins with the events that unfolded in 1604, and like many other scribes, dates the era by naming the three men who governed the Armenian people: the *catholicos*, the shah in the east, and the sultan in the west. The *catholicos*'—and more broadly the Armenian Church's—prominent role in defining and identifying a moment in history becomes immediately apparent in Khachatour's work.

Khachatour devotes much of his inscription to an exhaustive account of the Ottoman-Safavid battles. After imparting his detailed knowledge of recent events such as battle sites and soldier counts, he returns the focus of the *hishatakaran* to the Armenian people and his portrayal of them as exceptionally pious. "Thanks be to the grace of God, that this enslaved Armenian nation valiantly defends Our Lord Christ, that built a church in this place [Isfahan] and lavishly decorated it, and found a church bell-ringer who proclaimed the hour so loudly as to drown out the Muslim mullah."[18] The scribe insists that it is only because of the Church that traditions, inherently Christian and Armenian, have survived from the time of Gregory the Illuminator and King Trdat III. Khachatour describes the joyous but reverent atmosphere surrounding the consecration of the newly built church and the different people who came to witness this event. Apart from the two hundred priests who had gathered, there were also thousands of foreigners from "all different nations [who came] to see the holy cross and the blessing of the holy chrism; over 100,000 people from the Persian, Frankish [Roman Catholic], Indian . . . and other nations had gathered together as one to praise Our Lord Christ, and to beg him to preserve the glorious and unwavering faith of all Christians."[19]

[16]MSS 6785, fol. 327r–333v., Matenadaran Institute of Manuscripts, Erevan, Armenia.
[17]Ibid., fol. 329r.
[18]Ibid., fol. 330r.
[19]Ibid., fol. 330v.

Khachatour's *hishatakaran* is a testament to the significance that the conversion legend, and in particular, the figures of Trdat III and Gregory held for the Armenian people. Every time a church was consecrated, every time the chrism was blessed, every time a prayer was murmured, Armenians believed they were reliving and preserving 1,300 years of rituals. Religion came to be one of the most distinctive features of this newly resettled group, which as the above passage indicates, did not exist in isolation. The Armenians' unique practices and ceremonies set them apart, not just from Muslims, but also from other Christians. For this reason, it became imperative to the Armenian people, especially to the scribes and their clerical orders, to preserve this marker of the community. The *hishatakaran*s thus served to form and reinforce this national identity that was based in religion. Many of the *hishatakaran*s, such as Khachatour's, implored God to preserve the *catholicosate* and more curiously, the "tormented kingdom of my Armenian people."[20] For Khachatour, religion, piety, ritual, the *catholicosate*, and a native political institution were an integral part of the Armenian past. Through their maintenance and where necessary or possible, their revival, this people could preserve themselves as a coherent group.

III. The Early Modern Israelites and the Destruction of Their World

Some scribes constructed and hoped to preserve an Armenian identity centered on the Armenians' primary source of stability, the Church. Others emphasized the unique nature of the Armenian experience that shared striking similarities with one other ancient group, the Chosen People. Their suffering, their ongoing episodes of displacement, their long gone days of glory and long-term subjugation under foreign rule reminded many of the plights of the Israelites. In the *hishatakaran* of a 1608 collection of stories and histories, a troubled scribe bemoaning the age in which he and his nation live, comforts himself and his readers by comparing the Armenians to the Israelites.[21] He reminds his readers that they too had suffered a similar fate of exile in the seventh century B.C.E. "And so it was ordered that the Armenian nation would be dragged to the land of the Persians, just as in ancient times Nebuchadnezzar exiled the Israelites to Babylon."[22]

The scribe describes in detail how people were violently taken out of their homes, which were soon thereafter burnt following Shah Abbas's scorched

[20]MSS 6785, fol. 331r–v., Matenadaran.
[21]MSS 519, fol. 74 r–79r., Matenadaran.
[22]Ibid., fol. 74v.

earth policy. He recalls one eyewitness who explained to him a particularly distressing scene. The eyewitness and a few others had come across a group of women who had been slaughtered by the reckless Persian forces. Among this group of dead women, they found a child who continued to cling to his mother and attempted to suckle. Instead of milk however came blood. Finally the Armenians, or what was left of them, reached New Julfa; but the scribe wonders: to what end? For this scribe, only the words of the prophet Isaiah could capture and underscore the dire circumstances that the Armenians now found themselves in. "Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers."[23] Much like the Israelites, the Armenians were now left with nothing. Bereft of a homeland that had been scorched, they were now in a foreign land, with little or no prospects. "They are left homeless and displaced, starving refugees."[24]

The scribe continues to express his grief with a verse from the prophet Jeremiah. "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!"[25] In making ongoing references to the Israelites and summoning the Old Testament prophets, the scribe evokes a much-coveted comparison. He notes the parallel between the Armenians and the Israelites, thus raising them to a level of election that is on par, or near par, with the Chosen People of the Old Testament. The Armenians could thus rest with some ease; their suffering was not in vein, as it signified a state of election.

The two groups shared more than these persecutory experiences. The *hishatakaran*s asserted that the Armenians, like the Israelites, were a united people and it was this people as a whole that was being destroyed. Armenia as a coherent political entity had not existed since the fall of Cilicia. Yet, these scribes continued to refer to an Armenian nation or people, an "Armenian world," and at times, an Armenian kingdom. Even though many Armenians were scattered between the two sprawling empires, the scribes asserted that their people, regardless of their whereabouts, shared a history, one infused with grief and sorrow.

The 1608 *hishatakaran* that so eagerly drew comparisons between the Israelites and the Armenians also provides a detailed history of the recent occurrences in the region. Prior to recounting the ongoing battles between the Ottomans and the Safavids, the scribe prays for some holy intercession to relieve the Armenians of their troubles. "Pray, beg, and implore God to grant peace for his creations, especially to my dispersed and dislocated Armenian

[23]MSS 519, fol. 75r., Matenadaran; Isaiah 1:7.
[24]Ibid., fol. 75r.
[25]Ibid., fol. 78r.; Jeremiah 9:1.

nation . . . that have suffered through famine, mortal violence, slavery, untimely death, and a straining, heavy taxation."[26] Once he has painted this dismal and disheartening picture, he recalls the incidents that created this situation. The pages that follow provide a lengthy narrative of the conflicts between the Ottomans and the Safavids, leaving the reader with a strong grasp of the historical moments that shaped and defined the Armenians in the early seventeenth century.[27] He and many others recalled how Islamic forces wreaked destruction in Erevan, Nakhichevan, Van, Tabriz, and other cities in the hotly contested territory that divided the two empires.[28]

Similarly, other contemporary sources portrayed the deportations as nothing less than torturous. In his *Patmutiwn*, Davrizhetsi vividly describes the manner in which people were relocated to Persia.

> The pitiful people, looking ahead, beheld the boundless river [Arax], ready to drown them. And behind them were the Persian swords prepared to strike and kill. There was no means of escape. . . . At this point, our people were in desperate need of the ancient Moses and his pupil Joshua to save New Israel from the hands of this new pharaoh.[29]

The actual crossing of the river seems to have been only the beginning of their troubles. Soon thereafter, one of the consequences of hasty mass migration materialized. "There developed a horrible famine everywhere, so unbearable that people exhumed corpses from the cemetery to eat them. Parents devoured their children. . . . In the city of Arzrum, one could purchase human meat and oil. . . . All of Armenia was destroyed and dispersed."[30]

Some scribes tirelessly lingered over the deportations. Others hoped that a prayer from the reader might bring some solace and ease the unquestionable fury of the God who had condemned them to this destiny. In 1604, Hagop, the most recent owner of a manuscript of the Gospels dating from 1351, wrote a *hishatakaran* in the medieval work: "I, the blameworthy Hagop, wrote these words during a harrowing and difficult time, when Shah Abbas came . . . and ruined the Armenian world, from Arzrum to Shirvan. . . . He even enslaved the priest and his deacons." Much like the experiences of the

[26]MSS 519, fol. 74r., Matenadaran.

[27]The accuracy of his version of these events is questionable though. While his account is detailed and comprehensive, he, for example, incorrectly reports that Shah Abbas was in battle with Sultan Murad in 1604. The sultan at this time was Ahmed I.

[28]For instance, the scribe for MSS 519 claims to be aware of battles and incidents taking place in the region around Mount Ararat, Shirakan, Kars, Julfa, Tabriz, and elsewhere, indicating that there is a communication network in the region connecting cities and provinces that are over two hundred miles apart, and more importantly perpetuating a notion of a united "Armenian world."

[29]Davrizhetsi, *Patmutiwn*, 45. As noted earlier, his *History* was started in 1651, nearly fifty years after the deportations. It serves as a powerful reminder that the deportations held a prominent, disturbing, and haunting place in the Armenian past.

[30]MSS 519, fol. 77v., Matenadaran.

Chosen People of the Old Testament, Hagop's account details the sale of women and children, and the famine that resulted in "dark days for the Armenian people." Hagop like many others reverted to the notion of an "Armenian world," one that included scattered Armenian communities yet remained a world unto its own, retaining its identity, regardless of what transpired around it. For Hagop as for the other scribes, unity in self-definition came from memorials of persecution. The sorrowful narrative concludes with these imploring words: "I beg you, those who come across this work and read these words, please say a prayer."[31]

Who was to be blamed for all this torment and heartache? One priest named Parsegh who made a copy of the Gospel of Matthew in 1604, wrote in his *hishatakaran* that he had copied this work during "agonizing and sorrowful times, the fearful and confusing present, which is ensnared in a ruthless and excruciating fear of the destructive will of the Persians, Kurds, and Ottomans . . . my Armenian world, torn apart by two or even three different swords, these three Islamic groups."[32] The Ottomans and the Persians, and at times the Kurds, were considered responsible for ravaging the "Armenian world." An overwhelming number of Armenian scribes, though, explicitly blamed the Persians. In a frenzied moment, as they faced the possibility of defeat by Ottoman forces, the Persians had initiated the infamous scorched earth tactics creating a veritable inferno of what was once the homeland of large Armenian communities. The scribes unfailingly identified the leader of the culprits as Shah Abbas, referred to their land as Persia, even as Khorasan, a historical name attributed to the northeastern region, and to the perpetrators themselves as Persians. Intriguingly, they occasionally condemned specific tribes.

In 1605, another scribe, Mekhitar, wrote in his *hishatakaran*: "And the Qizilbash came to Van and committed many acts of murder and bloodshed, but God knows the entire world is troubled and suffering. Only Christ, the sole source of light during such times of darkness, can bring some hope to the world."[33] Qizilbash was an Ottoman Turkish word literally translated as

[31]MSS 2745, fol. 1r., Matenadaran.

[32]MSS 1282, fol. 261v., Matenadaran. The illuminations found in this manuscript are particularly noteworthy, as they reflect years of Islamic domination and Armenian absorption of certain aspects of Islamic culture. The illuminations are not restricted to typical Armenian manuscript imagery but also include images of mosques. While as a group they seem to have retained a rigid understanding of self, it is apparent from this manuscript and the eventual development of the New Julfa style of manuscript illumination that identity as well as its visible markers were fluid and dynamic, or rather had to be to some extent in order to survive in this setting. For more on this new style, see Thomas Matthews and Roger Wieck, eds., *Treasures in Heaven: Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts* (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1994). For a later example of the New Julfa style, see MSS 204, Matenadaran, that dates from 1658.

[33]Hakobyan and Hovhannisyan, *Heeshadagaranner*, 1:191–92.

red head, and often used to denote Shia Turkmen militants who wore red turbans and constituted at least half of the Safavid armies. Even members of the seemingly insulated "Armenian world" adopted certain idioms and phrases used by their Muslim conquerors, revealing the permeability of their identity.

Regardless of who was at fault, these deportations earned an unequivocally lamentable place in Armenian memory, and their perpetrators, a place of dread and anger.[34] One scribe, Hovhannes, writing a *hishatakaran* in a copy of the Bible dating from 1464 asks his reader to remember these grievous days when they come upon his words. In his 1606 entry, Hovhannes recalls: "For the past three years we have been trembling at the thought of the Persian shah just as we would fear an infected tumor. . . . No words can express the destruction of Armenia and the dark cloud looming over the Church. I implore God to grant my world peace, the shah's love, and unity."[35] Unlike a tumor that harmed an entity from within, the shah was a danger from without. They could not simply excise him as they might an Armenian. Instead, they had to seek out a way of securing his protection, as the shah's favor was the best if not only means of ensuring some temporal security.

Hovhannes's world was in shambles, yet he continued to hope for the union and revival of the Armenian nation, and the preservation of the Armenian Church. During the deportations, hundreds of Armenian clerics, including bishops, monks, priests, and even the *catholicos*, were forced to Persia, disrupting the internal networks of the Church.[36] The damage was further exacerbated by the infighting between the *catholicos*, David, and his coadjutor, Melikset, which would be complicated later by the appearance of another competitor, Sahag.[37] Hovhannes believed there was a supernatural explanation for these dark days. The Armenian nation in fact was dealing with the wrath of God that had manifested itself in the form of the shah. Of course their own anger and frustration could not be directed at the God who they had somehow wronged. Instead they directed their tired exasperation at the shah, the Persians, and all the invaders.

[34]For more examples, see MSS 1282, 6785, 519, 5345, Matenadaran; Hakobyan and Hovhannisyan, *Heeshadagaranner*, 1:168–69, 180–81, 181–83, 206–7.

[35]Hakobyan and Hovhannisyan, *Heeshadagaranner*, 1:236–37.

[36]Ghougassian, *Diocese of New Julfa*, 83.

[37]McCabe, *Shah's Silk*, 58. For more on Armenian Church History and these internal disputes, see Ashod Hovhannisyan, *Drvagner Hay Azatagrakan Mtki Patmutyan* [*Episodes from the History of Armenian Liberation Ideology*], 2 vols. (Erevan: Haygagan SSR Gidoutiwneri Agatemiai Hradaragchoutiwn, 1959); Henri Francois Tournebize, *Hayastan ev Hay Ekeghetsagan Patmutiwn* [*Armenia and Armenian Ecclesiastical History*] (Venice: San Lazarus, 1930). Chapters 18 and 19 from Davrizhetsi, *Patmutiwn*, also report on these struggles.

In a *Ganonakirk* (a rule book) completed in 1611, one scribe chose to use the medium of verse in his *hishatakaran* to convey the recent events that had come to pass.[38]

> But Armenia, so eradicated,
> That not one hint of civilization remains,
> From Tabriz to Istanbul,
> There is not one rock that still sits upon another.
> Instead, all have fled,
> Spread, dispersed across different countries,
> The city of Istanbul is overflowing,
> All the way to Poland they have gone.[39]

This *hishatakaran* stands out from the others, not simply because the writer chose to use verse rather than the more typical prose, but also because the scribe is cognizant of an Armenian diaspora and its far reaches that stretch out to Poland and beyond.[40] The *hishatakaran*s thus became a means of cementing a sense of unity, even when the communities of the diaspora were in distant parts of the world. His final stanzas reflect back to the Armenian kingdom that once was.

> They have deceived our kings,
> and left us bereft of protection and of leader.[41]

He like many of the other scribes remains fixated on the extinct Armenian kingdom and the consequences of foreign domination. Without any secular authority of their own, they must rely wholly upon God to rescue them. Even if they continue to suffer on this earth, he writes, perhaps they can be heartened spiritually.

IV. Adopting a Broader Identity

Once the horrors of the deportations had ended and the Armenians had settled in New Julfa, the *hishatakaran*s were more varied in their portrayal of the current state of affairs. In 1615, one scribe writing in his copy of the Bible related an optimistic outlook on the new settlement.[42] He explained that

[38]Hakobyan and Hovhannisyan, *Heeshadagaranner*, 1:437–50.
[39]Ibid., 449.
[40]His use of verse is not unique, but it is unusual. Furthermore, his verse resembles a lengthy lamentation rather than a flowery means of conveying information about the manuscript. For other scribes who chose to include verse for their *hishatakaran*s, see ibid., 40, 41–42, 68–70, 163–64, 332–33, 638–39, as a few examples.
[41]Ibid., 449.
[42]Ibid., 560–70.

while the deportations had been undoubtedly disastrous, once the Armenians had reached Isfahan they had been provided for handsomely. He even seems to have developed a certain fondness for his new city, as within the first few sentences of his entry, he writes how the manuscript was copied in "my land of Isfahan."[43] Ten years after the deportations, some Armenians had come to forgive the Persians their past transgressions.

Their physical and material situation seems to have improved, but within the Islamic empire, royal and local pressures to assimilate and convert endangered their ethnic and national well-being. The affluent Armenian merchants of New Julfa were allowed to practice their Christianity freely; the religious freedom of the rest of the Armenian population, though, was always at risk.[44] The same scribe continued his entry with an example of just such a threat. According to him, the residents of the city, envious of the royal acts of kindness bestowed upon the newcomers, had cast a spell upon the shah, transforming his love for the Armenians into enmity.

> The Armenian nation was plagued with a great and ferocious anger, an anger that no one had witnessed before. The shah forced over 1000 Armenians to convert to Islam and thus was the torment of the Christians. He and his forces then went to Georgia and destroyed it, enslaving the population and forcing them to migrate to Persia. They then proceeded to Echmiadzin where they demolished the foundation of faith.[45]

The persecutions were no longer restricted to the Armenians. The Georgians, too, were victims of similar brutalities, and the *hishatakaran*s and their writers sympathized with them. As early as 1615 then, the Armenians were beginning to identify with other Christians in the region, but they continued to be confronted with ordeals of their own. According to this *hishatakaran*, some Armenians were financially indebted to the shah who was now requesting that they repay their debt or convert to Islam. A wealthy Armenian local, *usta* Mardiros, the patron of this copy of the Bible, whose role in this matter was most likely exaggerated, appeared at the shah's palace, attempting to assist his fellow Armenians in overcoming this seemingly impossible

[43]Hakobyan and Hovhannisyan, *Heeshadagaranner*, 1:569.

[44]See Davrizhetsi, *Patmutiwn*, chapter 5 for an example of religious freedom. For an example of religious persecution, see Davrizhetsi, *Patmutiwn*, chapter 14 where Arakel describes how the shah sent *mudarris* (teachers) into Armenian villages to teach the inhabitants about Islam. The shah's tolerance of the Christian segment of the population continues to be debated among scholars. Some scholars, such as McCabe and Ghougassian, insist that his reign was noted for its toleration and only occasionally interrupted by persecution. Gregorian, "Minorities of Isfahan," describes Shah Abbas's policy as "violent theoretical opposition towards Sunnis coupled with a narrow intolerance and periodic persecution of Zoroastrianism and Jews, and a relatively benevolent attitude towards and a comparatively less harsh treatment of Armenians and Georgians" (654).

[45]Hakobyan and Hovhannisyan, *Heeshadagaranner*, 1:570.

obstacle.[46] It remains unclear if he paid off the entire debt or convinced the ruler, with his impressive piety, to free the detained Armenians, but according to the scribe he managed to do so with the following words: "And with God's grace let us repay the debt we owe the king, so that we may not apostatize." This statement silenced and stunned the shah and his advisers, who then released the three hundred or so captives who had been waiting to be ransomed.[47]

Other accounts, both Armenian and European, confirm the occurrence of this and similar incidents. According to these sources, once the Armenian population had reached Persia, Shah Abbas I had offered monetary aid to his recently deported subjects. The aid, in the form of a loan, was forgotten for some time, until the shah asked for its repayment in 1613. If the borrowers were unable to repay their debt, they would be forced to relinquish their children, who would then be raised as Muslims. If anyone refused to part with their children, the entire population would be forced to adopt Islam.[48]

Upon reaching Persia then, the physical threat to the Armenian community may have subsided, but now a greater peril emerged. The community was confronted with sporadic intimidations to convert and consequently assimilate into Persian religion and culture. Once the religion was under assault, so were the people who the *hishatakaran*s and their writers were striving to protect. Earlier *hishatakaran*s had described the damage done to the more palpable or material aspects of the religion, including the murder of priests, deacons, and bishops, and the destruction of churches and monasteries.[49] While these alarming incidents had horrified the scribes, attacks on the faith of individuals—on their consciences—were equally if not more terrifying. Once all remnants of the Armenian faith had been obliterated, the eradication of the Armenian nation would be close at hand. As the bastion of national identity—the Armenian religion—came under threat, the scribes and their *hishatakaran*s accordingly looked beyond the Armenian faith for a marker of identity, thus revealing their adaptability to changing historical circumstances. They came to recognize that they were not the only group forced to choose between their loyalties to their faith and the shah, between their souls and their lives. Whereas earlier in the century the *hishatakaran*s had focused solely on Armenian experiences, portraying their nation as a uniquely persecuted people, they now found communion with other Christian groups, especially the

[46]*Usta* is a title ascribed to a master craftsman.

[47]Hakobyan and Hovhannisyan, *Heeshadagaranner*, 1:570.

[48]Chinon, *Relations nouvelles du Levant*, 302–4; Davrizhetsi, *Patmutiwn*, 123–35; Herbert Chick, comp. and trans., *A Chronicle of the History of the Carmelites in Persia and the Papal Missions of the XVIIth–XVIIIth Centuries*, 2 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1939), 1:207. Sources agree that the Augustinians and Carmelites played a crucial role in hampering the shah's attempts to convert the Armenians to Islam.

[49]MSS 519, Matenadaran; and Hakobyan and Hovhannisyan, *Heeshadagaranner*, 1:316–17.

Georgians. In doing so, they created a broader yet clearer dichotomy between the Christians and Muslims.

In 1615, a monk named Sarkis wrote in his *hishatakaran*: "There are no words that can describe the destruction of my Armenian world and of Georgia, and the enslavement of my Armenian nation and the Georgians."[50] From 1614 to 1617, Shah Abbas launched several campaigns against Kakheti, a province in eastern Georgia. Just as he had razed towns and monasteries across eastern and central Armenia during the earlier part of the century, he did the same in Georgia. Some two hundred thousand Georgians were removed from the region and resettled in Persia.[51] Sarkis was thus responding to these events, expressing a certain affinity with not simply a fellow Christian neighbor but a group that had been subjected to a similar fate.[52]

The scribes continued to make distinctions between Ottomans and Safavids, but for this scribe as for most others, the conflict was in its most elementary form a struggle between Christians and Muslims, with the latter committing an endless assault on the Christian population, be they Armenian or Georgian. As the battles between the two Islamic powers raged in the 1610s, so too did the *hishatakaran*s' overwhelming concerns about the Christian populations. One clerk of the Church, Melkon, continued the tradition of lamenting the consequences of these ruthless military campaigns.[53] Living in Hamid, over four hundred miles northwest of Isfahan, Melkon wrote in his *hishatakaran* of the Ottoman captivity of the "Christian nation" under Sultan Ahmed I, who he asserted was "Muslim and lawless."[54] According to Melkon, it was only by the grace of God that the Armenians had managed to survive all of these tribulations. These events of the early seventeenth century had marked another bloody page in Armenian history. With the help of the Church, its servants, and these *hishatakaran*s, the page and the memories it represented might outlive the troubles of the time.

V. Conclusion: *Hishatakaran*s as Forgers and Preservers of Identity

The early years of the seventeenth century were a straining period for the Armenian people. They found themselves in the middle of what amounted to

[50]Hakobyan and Hovhannisyan, *Heeshadagaranner*, 1:563–65. This excerpt is from 564.

[51]Alexander Mikaberidze, *Historical Dictionary of Georgia* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 2007), 26–27.

[52]The handful of *hishatakaran*s that mention the Georgians were written after 1614.

[53]Hakobyan and Hovhannisyan, *Heeshadagaranner*, 1:628–29. The *hishatakaran* was written in 1617.

[54]Ibid., 629.

a constant battleground, suffering the consequences of battle and deportation. Yet, throughout this period they succeeded in perpetuating their understanding of the Armenian nation and the identity they associated with it through different media, particularly the *hishatakaran*. These *hishatakaran*s asserted that Armenian identity was interlaced with the Armenian religion. It was after all this religion that had distinguished the Armenians from all their neighbors in the fourth century and continued to do so.

The *hishatakaran*s written during this period constructed an Armenian sense of self that emphasized the torments of the people, depicting them as the perennial victims of foreign aggression. This self-image already haunted the Armenian psyche and would continue to do so for years to come. Being as ill-fated as they considered themselves to be, they likened themselves to another downtrodden but blessed people, the Israelites. This comparison highlighted their hapless existence but also attempted to explain away their misfortune as indicative of their election. As the deported population settled in the suburbs of Isfahan and was confronted with difficult choices surrounding apostasy and assimilation, the *hishatakaran*s adapted to these developments and identified the Armenian nation as part of a larger Christendom, united against the Muslim enemy.

Curiously, the "Armenian world" that mourned countless losses was not restricted to one particular region of the world. Rather it was comprised of communities dispersed across Eurasia and beyond, forming a nation constituted by birth and birthright. The *hishatakaran*s narrated events to other Armenians, but also provided these oft-disparate communities with a shared and singular sense of identity rooted in a collective understanding of their past, and coupled with a culturally embedded religion. These *hishatakaran*s are the family album of the Armenian people, filled with images of the past, interpretations of the present, and prayers and hopes for the future. The historic bedrock of Armenian identity cannot be understood without these *hishatakaran*s.