

ARMENIA



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# IMPRINTS OF A CIVILIZATION

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## VI. The Cultural Flourishing of the Armenian Communities in India and Around the Indian Ocean and the Development of Their Social and Political Thought in the Eighteenth Century

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One of the most dynamic developments in early modern Armenian history (1500–1800) was the flourishing of Armenian communities throughout the Indian Ocean basin and in South Asia. The most important diasporic communities in this respect were in Madras, Calcutta and, to a lesser extent, Surat and Bombay. These communities and others like them scattered across the Indian Ocean littoral were all offshoots of the Armenian mercantile suburb of New Julfa (Isfahan, Iran), the global hub of one of the largest trade networks of the early modern world. Though the presence of Armenians in South Asia can be traced back to the early part of the sixteenth century, Armenian settlements on the subcontinent only began to experience an economic and cultural efflorescence with the arrival of Armenian merchants from New Julfa in the early seventeenth century, accelerating in the mid-eighteenth century with the looting and destruction of New Julfa by Nader Shah in 1747, when many Armenian mercantile families from the Isfahani suburb sought refuge in English East India Company settlements in places such as Madras and Calcutta. Though their numbers never surpassed a few hundred individuals in any given settlement before the nineteenth century, the Armenian communities in India played an immensely significant role in Armenian history both economically and culturally (Aslanian 2011, ch. 3).

With a total Armenian population that does not seem to have exceeded about 250 members in the 1770s, Madras became the cradle of Armenian printing in South Asia. Hakob and Shahamir Shahamirian, two wealthy merchants who had migrated to Madras in the wake of the destruction of New Julfa in 1747, established an Armenian printing press there in 1772, five years before its first English-language equivalent was founded in Calcutta (Ogburn 2007, p. 205). The press published a total of seven or eight titles between 1772 and 1783 (Irazek 1986, pp. 47–96). In 1789 Shahamirian's fonts and printing materials appear to have been passed on to Harut'iun Shmavonian, an Armenian from Shiraz (Iran) who had recently settled in Madras and used the press to publish the world's first Armenian newspaper, the monthly periodical *Azdarar* (1794–95) as well as other works, including an *English-Armenian Dictionary* (1803).

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the centre of gravity for Armenians in India had shifted north to Calcutta, mirroring the transfer of British power to Bengal. Demographic figures for Armenian communities in India and around the Indian Ocean, as was the case for Armenians in Europe and the Mediterranean basin, have generally been inflated by Armenian scholars, with Mesrop Seth and Arshak Alpoiyachian (Alboyajian) providing exaggerated numbers of close to 20,000 Armenians living in India, at one point or another, before 1800. The evidence culled from census reports compiled by the All Saviour's Monastery in New Julfa in the 1870s, when the Armenian population in India had reached its peak, indicates that Calcutta had 622 Armenian residents, compared to 96 for Madras during the same period (Irazek 1986, pp. 13–14; Ghougassian 1999, pp. 241–42, n. 1, Aslanian 2011, p. 259, n. 51). Despite their small numbers, the Indo-Armenians in Calcutta played a disproportionately important role in the city's economy as well as in the cultural revival then unfolding across the Armenian world, both in the diaspora and the homeland. The first Armenian printing press in Calcutta was established in 1796, and a series of other printing establishments, often supported by voluntary cultural associations or by individual merchants, was set up in the same city in the first half of the nineteenth century. Like Madras, Calcutta continued the tradition of publishing Armenian newspapers in the early nineteenth century, including *Hayeli Kalkat'ian* (1820), *Shtemaran* (1821) and, most notably, *Azgasēr* and *Azgasēr Araratian* (1845–52), both edited by one of the most pre-eminent Armenian intellectuals of the nineteenth century, Mesrop Taghiatian (T'aghiadian) (Irazek 1986, pp. 465–94). It is likely that the first Armenian printed play in the world, *The Physiognomist of Duplicity* (*Kbtradimay Drzhoghbut'ian*, 1821) (Zekiyan 1975), written by Mkrtich' Martirosian, was also published in Calcutta (Irazek, pp. 228–30), as was arguably the first Armenian novel, Mesrop Taghiatian's *Vep Varsenkan* (1847). What eventually became the first de facto Armenian national anthem (*Tēr kets'o Du zHays* or "Lord Sustain the Armenian Nation") was also published in Calcutta's *Hayeli Kalkat'ian* (1820); republished by Taghi-

J. Schultz, *Portrait of an Armenian Gentleman from Amsterdam*, detail, San Lazzaro (cat 60b)

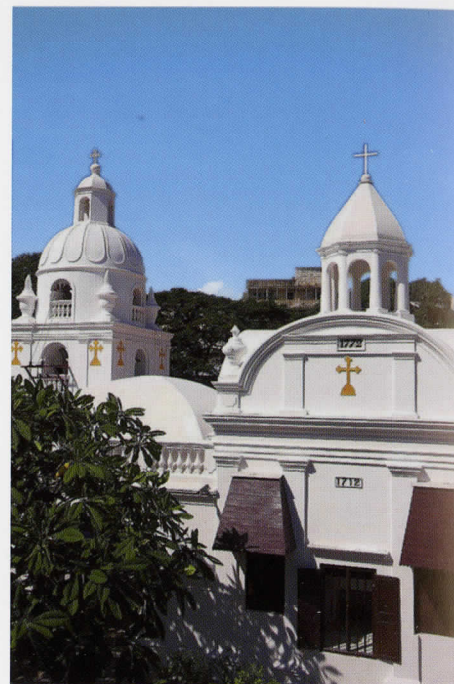


atian in *Azgasēr* (1847), it was later adopted and popularized by Mik'ayel Nalbandian in the pages of his Moscow-based periodical *Hiusisap'ayl* (1859) before being set to music (Tölölyan 1999, pp. 80–81).

One of the leading centres of Armenian higher learning in the world, the *Mardasirakan Chemaran* or the “Armenian College”, as it is still known in English, was also founded in Calcutta in 1821, through the generous bequest of a Julfan merchant, Mnatsakan Vardan, with the intention of “awakening the Indo-Armenian diaspora from the fatal slumber of its carelessness” (Irazek 1986, p. 42). That all these accomplishments were made possible by the cultural patronage of Julfan Armenian “Khoja capital” is well known (Leo 1934, and Yeremian 1951). However, the extent to which the cultural efflorescence of the Armenian communities in India was also the by-product of the Armenians’ interaction with global developments and cultural flows connecting the area around the Indian Ocean with urban centres in Europe or larger developments unfolding in “Islamicate” Eurasia is a question that has only recently been broached (Aslanian 2012, but see also the earlier studies by Leo 1986, pp. 557–71, and Hovannisyan, appendix). Armenian cultural producers in Madras and Calcutta certainly did not operate *exclusively* within an Armenian tradition indifferent to and separated from larger global flows around them, as certain recent works seem to suggest (Hamardzumian 1999). Their cultural work was in part a creative response to their *interactive* relationship with the networks of global exchange, stretching from Europe to South Asia, that brought with them not only commodities, capital and European military personnel to the hubs of early modern globalization such as Calcutta and Madras, but also cultural and “mental constructs” that circulated from Europe to India across the maritime space of the Indian Ocean (Aslanian 2012).

A remarkable text espousing modern Armenian political thought and constitutional thinking published in Madras in the late 1780s provides us with tantalizing clues that help answer these questions (for the controversy on the proper dating of this work, see Aslanian 2004, p. 69, n. 144). The text in question is entitled *Girk' anuaneal Vorogayt' p'arats* or *Book Entitled the Snare of Glory*, by Shahamir Shahamirian and his son Hakob, who, as we have already seen, opened the first Armenian printing press in India. The work represents a revolutionary breakthrough in Armenian history because it contained a fairly elaborate proto-constitutional treatise with a republican constitution for a future Armenian state that would not exist on the map for approximately another 130 years. Written on the heels of the collapse of the global network of Julfan trade and at a time when the prospects of Julfan commercial prosperity in India were bleak, *Vorogayt' P'arats* outlined a bold vision for an independent Armenian state in the form of a mercantile republic, with its own elected parliament or *Hayots' tun* (“the Armenian House”), to use their own terminology. The father-and-son team of wealthy Julfan merchants who authored the text were prominent residents of the English East India Company settlement of Fort Saint George or Madras. Consequently, they had long been accustomed to the legal benefits and property rights that Madras and other British settlements in India had to offer to the Asian merchants who had flocked to the Company’s settlements, following the long decline of Mughal power in South Asia and the concomitant insecurity this created for both property and person. Their constitutional treatise thus reflected the ethos of the rule of law in Madras and blended ideas of European statecraft and social contract theory that must have circulated to southern India across the early modern networks then linking Europe to the Indian Ocean. In addition to containing 521 constitutional articles for an imaginary Armenian republic, the Shahamirians’ text also contains a 73-page historical introduction in which the authors build upon their earlier radical analysis of the causes for the collapse of Armenian statehood, which they attribute to monarchical despotism characterizing Armenian political history and not to providential wrath against a “sinful” people, as a certain trend in Armenian traditional historiography had previously asserted (for their diagnosis of Armenian history and the collapse of Armenian statehood, see their 1773 work, *Hordorak*, ch. 5). The loss of independent statehood in the south and north of Greater Armenia under Byzantine pressure, respectively in 1021 and 1045, followed by the collapse of 1375, when the offshoot kingdom of Cilician Armenia fell to the Mamluks, deprived the Armenians of their national homeland and turned them into “vagabonds and drifters in foreign lands, dispersed from their homeland like brushwood and reeds in the wind, and scattered across the face of the world” (Shahamirian 1787, p. 133).

The historical preamble of *Vorogayt'* is a fascinating text that gives us a rare glimpse into the inner cultural world of Julfan merchants living on the edge of empire, and witnessing one of world history’s most momentous shifts. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the great Muslim empires of Eurasia (Safavid, Mughal and Ottoman) that had once supported Julfan prosperity and expansion had succumbed to what Chris Bayly calls a “hollowing out” from within: one after another they had “declined” and, in the case of the Safavids and Mughals, collapsed (Bayly 1988, 1989). In South Asia the glory that had once been Mughal power had effectively vanished, leaving the empty shell of an imperial edifice in the centre at Delhi, unable to reign over the upstart provincial seats of power or the English East India Company, which just twenty years earlier had become a territorial power further north in the rich province of Bengal, with Calcutta as its hub. The Julfan authors of this treatise had witnessed their ancient trade privileges under the Mughals



Armenian Church of Surb Astvatzatzin, Madras (Chennai), India

Armenian Church of Surb Nazaret', Calcutta (Kolkata), India







slowly whittled away as British commercial and political power rose at the expense of both the Mughals and the “nawabi” states that had filled the vacuum of Mughal rule. One of the few remaining bulwarks against the Company’s unfettered dominion in South Asia was the southern kingdom of Mysore under Haider Ali Khan and his successor Tipu Sultan, but it too collapsed a little over ten years after the publication of *Vorogayt’*, when the Company’s forces seized the Mysorean capital of Seringapatam in 1799 (Jasanoff 2005, ch. 4). The Julfans had also witnessed the triumph of the north-western European joint-stock companies and their state-chartered monopolies over rival Asian merchants, including themselves (Herzig 2008, Aslanian 2011, ch. 8). At the cusp of the Industrial Revolution and “great divergence” (Pomeranz 2000) that set Europe on a different path of development from Asia, one thing must have struck the Julfans as unquestionably clear: having the strong backing of a centralized and powerful national state made a difference in the cut-throat rivalry of early modern Indian Ocean trade. It was a small step from this observation to the conclusion reached by the Julfan authors of *Vorogayt’*: that the solutions to their miseries were to be found in resurrecting and inventing an Armenian national state with foundations similar to those that had made the conquering Europeans, and especially the constitutional monarchy of Great Britain, successful in Asia.

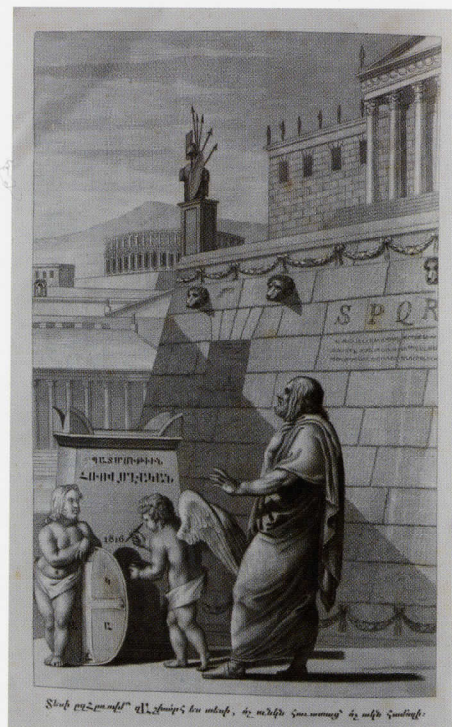
In this context, the exemplary histories of nations and exceptional national heroes, discussed by the authors as role models to be emulated by their Armenian readers, include Nader Shah of Iran, Haider Ali Khan of the kingdom of Mysore, whose forces had once pushed as far as the suburbs of Madras in 1781, and George Washington, whose successful rebuff of the British Empire in North America had led to the birth of a new republic. News of the latter had obviously travelled with commodities and merchants to European settlements in India and was thus fresh in the minds of the Julfan authors of *Vorogayt’* (Aslanian 2012). It is in this context that the authors invoke the ancient Romans and elaborate what they see as the secret of their success. Following a brief and less-than-credible account of the feats of “Romulus and Remus”, they arrive at the conclusion that what made Rome a great world power was her early republican constitution and “unshakeable laws”, corresponding to “man’s rational nature”. The authors argued that the laws and constitution of the Romans “for which the entire world praised their deeds” could be understood “only through reading their history” (Shahamirian 1787, p. 42). The Shahamirians thought it extremely necessary to translate the history of the Romans, from the beginning until their decline, into Armenian, just as all European nations had done in their own languages. “And whoever among the Armenians becomes the cause of the publication of this translation will have his memory remembered among us” (Shahamirian 1787, p. 42).

This astonishing and entirely overlooked passage raises two significant issues that I can touch upon only briefly here. First, the idea of Roman republicanism, at the heart of an Armenian constitutional treatise written in India towards the end of the eighteenth century, and references to George Washington and the American Declaration of Independence indicate that at least some of the core ideas inspiring the republican vision of the Shahamirians were not necessarily Armenian or locally confined to Madras, but were part of a wider global network of circulation that connected the Indian Ocean to Europe and beyond to the trans-Atlantic. In this connection, it would be useful to heed Bayly’s suggestion that “it is important to appreciate that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were already ideologies and political languages that operated at a global level, to which people of different major civilizations had contributed” (Bayly 2004, p. 263). One such global ideology for Bayly was “the form of the ‘righteous republic’ and the dangers to good government posed by corruption and tyranny . . . a widespread theme throughout Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas” (Bayly 2004, pp. 285–86, emphasis mine). *Vorogayt’ P’arats* and its ideas could thus be seen as an early and global echo across the Indian Ocean of the concern with the idea of the “incorruptible virtuous republic” already operating on a global scale, and also an early illustration of what David Armitage has called the “contagion of sovereignty” that “spread globally after the American Declaration of Independence” (Armitage 2007, p. 103, Bayly 2010, p. 213).

The second significant issue raised by the passage quoted above is the possibility that ideas of Roman virtue and classical republicanism could have occupied a more important and widespread place in the cultural and mental universe or *mentalité* of the Armenians in India during the late eighteenth century than has been acknowledged by previous scholarship. It bears remembering here that at around the same time that the Shahamirians were exhorting their compatriots in India to finance an Armenian translation of a history of Rome in order to familiarize their readers with the classical republican virtues associated with Roman history, another wealthy Julfan benefactor, also residing in Madras and possibly operating independently from the Shahamirian circle, had already commissioned the translation of exactly such a work. This individual was Edward Raphael Gharamiants, a Catholic Armenian merchant originally from Julfa but residing in the French settlement of Pondicherry in southern India and later in Madras. Gharamiants had developed a life-long obsession with Roman history and classical republicanism after reading Charles Rollin’s *Histoire romaine depuis la fondation de Rome jusqu’à la bataille d’Actium, c’est à dire jusqu’à la fin de la République* (1739) in a Catholic missionary school in Pondicherry in the 1750s. What had probably resonated most in his read-



Inscription in three languages dedicated to Khoja Petros Voskan, who built a bridge over the Adyar River in 1728 Madras (Chennai), India



Frontispiece of the Armenian translation of *Roman History* by Charles Rollin (1816)



ing of Rollin's great work were the classical ideals of "constitutional government, patriotism, zeal for unity and so forth", as he describes in one of his letters from 1785 (T'ëodorian 1866, p. 29). It was most likely the same concerns for Roman republicanism and "constitutional government" noted in the work of the Shahamirians that made the Armenian translation of Rollin's work the precondition in Gharamiants's last will and testament of 1791, bequeathing a large fortune to open an Armenian college "on European soil" for the education and enlightenment of Armenian youth. This college was none other than the Collegio Armeno Moorat-Raphaël in Venice, whose doors were nudged open only after the erudite monks on San Lazzaro fulfilled Gharamiants's lifelong obsession (and by extension also the dream of the Shahamirians) by translating Rollin's *Histoire Romaine* into Classical Armenian in 1816 (see Aslanian 2012 for more details and T'ëodorian 1866 for Gharamiants's letters).

As our brief comments above suggest, despite its importance and due largely to a "terracentric" focus on the Armenian plateau rather than the equally – and sometimes more – significant sea-borne Armenian diasporic communities, the Indian Ocean has not received much attention from Armenian historians. In the few cases in which it is perfunctorily acknowledged, it is largely treated as a static background and not as a dynamic network of circulation and exchange that enabled Armenians in South Asia to interact with and creatively to borrow "mental constructs" (Subrahmanyam 1997) such as the idea of Roman republicanism in its various forms.

The foregoing analysis also suggests that, beginning in the early modern period, the most generative changes in Armenian history took place not so much on the Armenian plateau but in the various flourishing Armenian communities, among which those of Madras and Calcutta played a pivotal role at the turn of the eighteenth century. Indeed, most of them played a key role in worldwide Armenian commerce, from Venice to Amsterdam, and from Marseille, Constantinople and Astrakhan to South Asia, and especially Madras and Calcutta.

Consider, for instance, the achievements we have already discussed, from the first published proto-constitution for an imagined Armenian state (Madras, 1780s) to the first novel in Armenian (Calcutta, 1846/47). One of the main factors in such a pivotal role was the bulk of the capital, in the form of silver currency, earned by Julfan merchants in Canton, Manila and South Asia, most of which originating from New World mines in Peru and Mexico. Alongside capital from other mercantile Armenian centres, it contributed to the publication of Armenian books in Venice, Amsterdam and elsewhere (see the insightful survey in Zekiyan 1975, Yeremian 1951, and the discussion in Aslanian 2012). The cultural patronage for the construction of some of the most important centres of Armenian higher learning in the nineteenth century (the Collegio Armeno Moorat-Raphaël in Venice, the Lazareff College in Moscow and the Armenian College of Calcutta) was the achievement of Julfan capital that flowed across the globalized networks of the Indian Ocean.

For all these reasons, one could argue that the slippery surface of the Indian Ocean, of which the Armenian communities of Madras and Calcutta were an integral part, is of the greatest importance to understanding early modern Armenian history.