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ARMENIAN INSCRIPTIONS OF THE FIFTH CENTURY FROM NAZARETH

I

Introduction

In 1967 B. Bagatti published the results of his excavations on the site of the present Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth¹. In the course of these excavations, underneath the floor of a fifth-century church and monastery, Bagatti uncovered fragments of an earlier Christian building. Among these fragments were plastered stones, inscribed with graffiti². Bagatti recognized that certain of these were in Armenian and was conscious of the importance of this fact for the dating of the remains in Nazareth³.

A careful reassessment was made by Taylor of the evidence for dating the floor under which the graffiti were deposited and the considerations she adduces for the date seem compelling, combining as they do both the literary and archeological evidence⁴. According to her study, the earliest possible date for the building from which the graffiti stemmed would have been around 340 C.E. and it seems to have been utterly destroyed by the middle of the fifth century, perhaps in the earthquake of 447⁵. There seems to be no reason to doubt this dating, and since the Armenian graffiti were written before the destruction of the building, they date from the first half of the fifth century and are thus the oldest known Armenian inscriptions.

¹ BAGATTI 1967. The same was published in English in 1969 (BAGATTI 1969). We shall refer to the English language edition of this work.

² I had heard of these inscriptions many years ago, but am particularly indebted to Dr. Joan E. Taylor who rearoused my interest in these graffiti. She has published an article on one of them (TAYLOR 1987). She has also been gracious enough to send me a copy of the chapter dealing with Nazareth in her unpublished doctoral thesis, TAYLOR 1989, Chapter 12 "Nazareth", 316-375. I am heavily dependent on her careful analysis for that which relates to the dating of the floor under which the graffiti were found: see there, pages 349, 359-365. She discussed the inscriptions on pp. 365-371.

³ See BAGATTI 1969.

⁴ See TAYLOR 1989, 316-375.

⁵ TAYLOR 1987, p. 147.

In August 1989 I was able to re-examine and photograph the inscriptions in the Museum at the Basilica of the Annunciation which is maintained by the Franciscan fathers in Nazareth⁶. While there I was also able to photograph a number of other Armenian inscriptions of later vintage that are also carefully preserved by the Franciscan fathers there⁷. I am also able to announce here that I have identified two Georgian inscriptions among the Nazareth graffiti, which are thus among oldest surviving instances of Georgian writing⁸.

In the present article, I wish to present Fr. Bagatti's data on the Armenian graffiti. Then, I shall present the graffiti themselves, analyse their importance for Armenian paleography and discuss their relationship to certain other Armenian pilgrim graffiti in the Holy Land.

II

The Inscriptions

There are two stones exhibited in the Museum at the Basilica of the Annunciation upon which Armenian inscriptions are to be seen. One of these stones contains three words or partial words and the other, part of a single word. Bagatti describes the first stone as 30 cm. high, 64 cm. wide and 52 cm. deep. Its face is still covered in ancient, white plaster into which the graffiti have been scratched⁹. In his opinion, the Armenian inscriptions on this stone are the latest of the graffiti which have been scratched on it, overwriting other graffiti. He describes the Armenian graffiti as having three lines of writing, apparently regarding each word as constituting a single line of writing. Our judgment is different, regarding the first two words as forming a single line, and then the next three letters as the end of a second line. Bagatti reports a

reading of this inscription as "Anania' and the words 'garé mart', i.e. 'can man'"¹⁰.

The second stone is described as the base of a column with the plaster remaining on one face. Bagatti does not convey the overall dimensions of this stone, but notes that towards the middle of the base "there is a big cross which has on the sides two letters which seem to be Armenian; they are very well cut and very big (45-55 mm.)". He quotes a reading of this inscription as "keğanuish", i.e. beautiful lady¹¹. We will see below that this reading is mistaken.

Nazareth Arm 1 (Bagatti No. 1)

Below, we provide new photographs of the different parts of these inscriptions, together with a drawing of it.

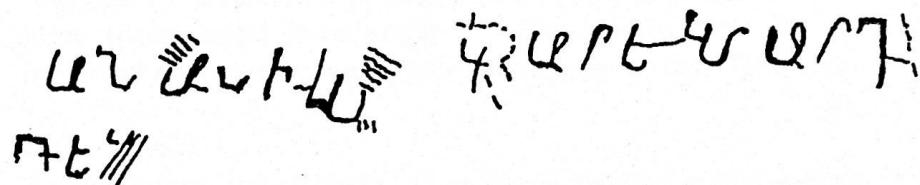


Figure 1
Drawing of the Armenian Graffito on Stone 1

Transcription

line 1: ANĀNIA · AREMARD
line 2:] ՐԵՆ

ԱՆԱՆԻԱ · ԱՐԵՄԱՐԴ
] ՐԵՆ

Translation

line 1: Anania . AREMARD
line 2:] REÑ

Description

The deeply incised inscription is in an uncial script, as is to be expected of its date. The script is very regular, with a slight slope to the right. The characters are evenly spaced. We were unable to measure the inscription but Bagatti records the height of the letters as 12-20 mm.

¹⁰ BAGATTI 1969, p. 148 quoting *Mamur Research Institute Bulletin* No. 2, Jan. 1961, p. 5.

¹¹ BAGATTI 1969, p. 156. His authority for the reading is Mons. Garmasaragan.

⁶ Abp. S. Ajamian assisted me in a number of respects in this undertaking, and A. Stone helped me in the field work.

⁷ Abp. Ajamian told me that he had, on an earlier occasion, also seen some Armenian tombstones in Nazareth, at the Church of the Annunciation, but we were unable to find them on this visit.

⁸ These will be published elsewhere. Strangely enough, though Bagatti observed that one of these inscriptions had a letter resembling one he had noted in another Georgian inscription, he identified the inscription as Armenian, on the basis of information from Mons. Garmasaragan: see BAGATTI 1969, 156, n. 73.

⁹ BAGATTI 1969, p. 148.

The inscription is imperfectly preserved. In our judgment, all three words were written by the same person.

The Material Reading

The first word is clearly to be read *ԱՆԱՆԻ*, i.e. the proper name "Anania". This is the normal form in Armenian. The left hand arm of the second *ayb* is partly lost, as is the left hand arm of the second *nu*. A cross intervenes between the *ini* and the following, third *ayb*. This latter character is incomplete. It is slightly below the rest of the word.

The second word is more difficult to decipher. The first sign, which Bagatti reported as a "g" (i.e. a *ken*), was probably misread by his informant. It seems unlikely to be a *ken* for three reasons. The first is the material reading, which we find quite uncertain. The drawing represents what we could see on the photographs and *in situ* and the identification of the character is unclear, to say the least. We have drawn those lines identified as a *ken* with unbroken lines, but nothing distinguishes, in our view, the loop to the right of the centre stroke in execution from the rest of the putative *ken*. Second, considering the regularity of the letter spacing of the rest of the inscription, the distance separating this from the following letter, which is equivalent to a whole letter space, makes it uncertain that the lines interpreted as *ken* belong to the second Armenian word at all¹². Instead, the unclear strokes on the other side of the supposed *ken* might be the debris of a letter. The third reason, a most compelling one, is that the right-hand stroke of those read as *ken* extends way below the bottom line of all the other letters. This is common enough, of course, for the right-hand stroke of *ken* in certain forms of later Armenian writing, but the oldest Armenian scripts seem to be characterized by a regular height of all letters, as is the present inscription¹³.

The reading of the letters *ԱՐԵՄ* is quite unambiguous. The centre, horizontal stroke of the *t* seems unnaturally long, contrasting with the second letter in the last word of the inscription. This may be related to

¹² The cross observed between the last two letters of "Anania" was surely there before the inscription was made.

¹³ It has been suggested to me that it is the remains of a *men*, of which the right hand arm and the horizontal stroke are partly destroyed. This reading is supported by some of the photographs, but not by others, and the upper, right-hand part of the letter is partly destroyed. We do not accept this interpretation either, and our suggested reading will be given below.

the odd hook found in the upper part of the following *men*, on its left hand arm, and both features may be part of the remnants of a graffito in another language, which underlies the inscription.

The head of the following *re* is abraded, but the reading seems certain and it is strengthened by a comparison with the same letter earlier in the word. The *da* seems certain. Following the last letter in this word, the *da*, there is an inclined stroke which does not seem to be the part of any Armenian letter. It is followed by a number of further signs, which also do not appear to be Armenian. In view of the state of the plaster, it is, of course, impossible to be absolutely certain that there were no more Armenian letters, but that seems to be the case from what can be observed today.

The second line of the inscription preserves two letters completely, a *ra* followed by an *eč'*. After these two letters, the top, right-hand hook of a *nu* may also be clearly discerned, although the rest of the letter has been lost by abrasion. The plaster has been broken before the *ra* and more letters could have originally existed here. After the partially preserved *nu*, however, no further letters seem to have followed.

Interpretation

To judge from the character of all the Armenian graffiti known from the Holy Land, all three words here inscribed are probably names. As already stated, the first word is the name *ԱՆԱՆԻ* "Anania". The second word is more difficult. If the first sign of this word is a *men* (see note) then we might interpret the first five letters as MAREM, i.e. a form of Miriam. The from MAREM is found in compound names only and of a later vintage. Moreover, no compound such as MAREMARD is known to exist nor is the meaning of such a name obvious¹⁴.

The three letters in the second line seem to be the end of a word, probably a name, but no name comes immediately to mind¹⁵.

¹⁴ A more speculative possibility is to restore the first sign as a *B* which has been overwritten, abraded or otherwise defaced. The word might then be a man's name BAREMARD, comparable to the names BARETIKIN and BAREMANOWK: see AČAŘYAN, *AnjB*, Appendix, s.v.

¹⁵ One possibility is the name *փանիք* which is attested in fifth century. Note, however, that it is written with an *ē* and not with an *eč'*, which latter is found in our text. This is an Iranian name, see AČAŘYAN, *AnjB*, s.v. Of course, such an alternation of letters would not be expected in the early fifth century.

Paleography

Since this is perhaps the oldest Armenian writing to survive, the letter shapes, even if unremarkable in terms of the overall development of the uncial Armenian script, should be carefully documented.

U ayb is notable in two respects. The loop on the right hand arm takes in the top two thirds of the height and the bottom of the loop is connected to the rest of the letter by a single line. This particular form of the loop is quite unusual and may prove to be a dating criterion. Second, the tail to the right of the letter comes from the bottom of the letter, scarcely following the right hand arm up at all. It does not descend below the base line of the letters.

q da has a square head, with the left hand descender coming down to about one half of the height of an ordinary letter. It is longer than the descender of the right hand stroke of the adjoining *re*. The horizontal right hand stroke is at about two thirds of a normal letter height. The right hand descender is rather long.

b eč' is like a *nu* without the hook on the left hand upright and with its horizontal stroke extending to the right. To judge from the example on the second line, which is clearest, the horizontal stroke is over two-thirds of the way up the letter, and is quite short¹⁶.

U men is quite distinctive. Both verticals are of equal length, but the right-hand one curves inwards and then flares at the top. This right hand arm has not yet turned down, to form the characteristic downwards hook of later, uncial *men*¹⁷. This form of the right hand vertical seems to be older than other surviving forms.

U nu is characterised by the loop at the top of the left-hand arm. This is at the very top of the arm, and is formed of a small hook or tick, joined to the letter by a horizontal line. The right hand vertical line is quite short, and tends to slope to the right.

N ra The horizontal stroke is straight, with no hook at the end. It extends beyond the right hand vertical, but it is uncertain whether that is intentional.

P re has a short, rounded head, the right hand line of which does not ever achieve a position parallel to the left hand leg.

Nazareth Arm 2 (Bagatti No. 8)

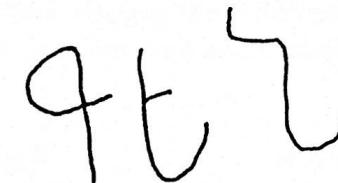


Figure 2
Drawing of the Armenian Graffito on Base of Column

Transcription

BAB]GEN

ԲԱԲ]ԳԵՆ

Translation

Bab[gen

Description

The inscription is not deeply incised. The letters, as Bagatti remarked, are very large. They are written by a large cross, and are probably later than it since the end of the left hand arm of the cross traverses the bottom of the *nu*. Only three letters have survived, and they are those at the left hand side of the cross. Those signs which Bagatti's informant read as Armenian, at the right hand side of the cross, are in fact Georgian. They are incised less deeply than the Armenian letters, are on a different level than them and seem to us to be contemporary with the cross.

The Material Reading

The reading is absolutely clear. We differ from Bagatti's informant as to the third letter which he read as a *lat*. It is indubitably a *nu*, as is also clear from the *nu* in the previously discussed inscription. The inscription is incomplete. No Armenian followed it, but it was apparently preceded by some letters, which have been lost. We have restored these as BAB ԲԱԲ for reasons which we will explain below¹⁸.

¹⁶ On the horizontal stroke of the *eč'* in the first line, see the description of the material reading.

¹⁷ Note a very similar *men* in H Arm 6.

¹⁸ Bagatti's drawing (Figure 108) is not accurate in showing the stroke of the *eč'* connected to the top of the *nu*. In fact, as our drawing shows, the upwards hook of the *nu* can be discerned clearly and it is not connected to any other letter.

Interpretation

The word is a personal name. The basis for Bagatti's "sweet" is apparently the letter "a" of the Georgian inscription, which bears a superficial resemblance to the last letter (*č*) of the Armenian word *ԱՆՅԵ* "sweet". The other letters of this word are nowhere to be seen on the stone. The reference to the beautiful lady or the Blessed Virgin thus disappears completely.

Paleography

These letters have a rounded form, contrasting with the rather angular shapes of the letters in Nazareth Arm 1. The upwards slant and shortness of the horizontal stroke of the *t eč'* are particularly notable. The *u nu* has the same basic shape as in the previous inscription.

III

Epigraphic Significance

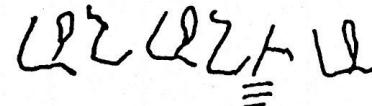
The importance of these inscriptions in themselves for Armenian paleography and epigraphy is quite notable since they are the oldest inscriptions with a certain date. The Armenian script, traditionally invented in 404 C.E., must have been only two or three decades old when some pilgrims scratched their names on the plaster in a shrine in Nazareth. The oldest dated Armenian inscription surviving is the Tekor inscription of the end of the fifth century¹⁹. The next one is the dedication of S. Hripsimē Church of 618 C.E. Consequently, the very existence of these inscriptions takes the direct evidence for Armenian writing back by half a century or a little more.

It has been our good fortune to be able to identify inscriptions by two of the persons from Nazareth also in the corpus of material we published previously from Wadi Haggag. Both Anania and Babgen who were in Nazareth visited the Sinai as well. Both left inscriptions on Rock III of Wadi Haggag. Moreover, Babgen was a keen inscriber of his name, for he left it on Rock V of Wadi Haggag in addition. These are reproduced here, in drawings taken from the publication of the

¹⁹ There are in fact differences of opinion about the date of this church. The inscription mentions Yovhannēs Catholicos, who could be the first one of that name, who served from 478-490. The other historical references in this inscription also indicate a date towards the end of the fifth century.

Wadi Haggag inscriptions, alongside the drawings of the Nazareth graffiti²⁰. In the course of comparison of the inscriptions from Nazareth with those from Wadi Haggag the difference in media should be borne in mind. Plaster is softer and more easily worked even than sandstone.

H Arm 6



N Arm 1

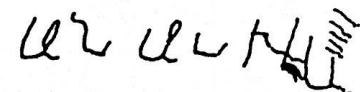


Figure 3
The Two Anania Inscriptions

The identity of the hand writing these two inscriptions seems to us to be quite incontrovertible. Note particularly the form of the looped *ayb*, and the stance of the right hand arm of the *nu*. The last *ayb* of both inscriptions is set off from the main line of writing, lower and at an angle. This may have been an idiosyncratic feature of the signature of this particular individual. H Arm 6 is preceded by two fragmentary letters, ME, in which the M is also exactly like that in Nazareth Arm 1. These may now perhaps be considered part of H Arm 6, although we gave them the number H Arm 5. As to date, we said about H Arm 6: "Old uncial script; date cannot be determined precisely". The archeological context of Nazareth Arm 1 now enables us to date H Arm 6 to the first part of the fifth century.

The identity of the hand in the three Babgen inscriptions is undeniable. Note the shared, rounded shapes of the letters, the upwards direction of the stroke of the *eč'* in two of them and the elongated hook of the *nu* in all three. It was on the basis of this similarity that we identified the three letters in Nazareth Arm 2 as the last three letters of the name Babgen. The fact that Babgen left his name twice in Wadi Haggag marks him as a keen writer of graffiti and makes his leaving his name in Nazareth as well even more probable.

The implications of this material for the history of Armenian writing

FUF qtr
OF qtr qtr

Figure 4
The Three Babgen Inscriptions

H Arm 26
H Arm 65

Nazareth Arm 2

is notable. In the Tekor inscription the loop of the *ayb* extends all the way to the bottom of the right hand arm, while the tail is moving down below the line. There, however, the *men* still has the form it has in Nazareth Arm 1 and in H Arm 5, i.e. it is like an English U, except that the right-hand arm is pinched in towards the top, forming a flaring shape. This has not yet developed into the distinct loop which appears later. In the Tekor inscription the upwards turn of the hook of the *nu* is only visible in a few instances, and it is even flatter than in the Nazareth ones²¹.

If this is correct, then it is possible to establish these as additional criteria for the dating of Armenian hands. What was impossible on the basis of the Tekor inscription alone, has now become possible. In view of this, perhaps we should revise the dates of certain of the Wadi Haggag inscriptions. It seems to us now likely that H Arm 24, H Arm 49, H Arm 73 and perhaps H Arm 71 should also be set into the fifth century. I have prepared tables of the script of all these inscriptions which are given here. With a corpus of nine or ten inscriptions of the fifth century, our knowledge of this earliest stage of Armenian writing is much enriched.

²¹ This may be a matter of the poor photograph available, or else of the different medium and the crowded character of the Tekor inscription. What is certain is that the horizontal part of this hook served, in the fifth century, as the identifier for this letter. The best photograph of the Tekor inscription, although it does not show all of it, is in DER NERSESSIAN 1977, plate 32.

	N1	H6	H24	H49	H73	H71	N2	H26	H65
u	ւ	ւ	ւ	ւ	ւ		ւ	ւ	ւ
թ								թ	թ
գ								գ	գ
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IV

Historical Significance

Taylor has made a good summary of the information available about pilgrimage to Nazareth in the early centuries²². The Bordeaux pilgrim did not visit the town in 333 C.E., presumably because the church was not yet built: that happened about 340 according to some information conveyed by Epiphanius (*pan.* 30.11.9-10)²³. Egeria visited Nazareth in 383 and says of it: "There is a big and very splendid cave in which she [that is, Holy Mary] lived. An altar has been placed there, and there, within the actual cave, is the place from which she drew water"²⁴. This cave was, apparently, surmounted by a church which was unspectacular, since it was not mentioned in connection with Paula's visit to the site in 404 (Jerome, Letter 108 to Eustochium). Although the church must have been built by then, it is first mentioned only by the Piacenza Pilgrim (570)²⁵.

As far as Armenian pilgrimage is concerned, the earliest sources seem to refer to the middle of the fourth century. The first pilgrim known is Eutactus of Satala, who visited the Holy Land shortly before 361 C.E.²⁶ Macarius, Bishop of Jerusalem corresponded with Catholicos Vrtanēs of the Armenians who held the seat of St. Gregory between 333 and 341. This must imply travel between the two centres even before Eutactus made his visit²⁷. Subsequently, such visits became regular, and Armenian pilgrim activity was a complement to the notable presence of Armenians in the monasteries of the Holy Land²⁸.

This picture of active Armenian participation in pilgrimage, reverence of the holy places and in monasticism, curiously lacks any detail of Armenian presence in or visits to the north of the country. The only

²² TAYLOR 1987, 147-148.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Peter the Deacon probably citing Egeria in the translation of John WILKINSON 1981, 193-194.

²⁵ WILKINSON 1977, 79; see also Adomnan quoting Arculf (*ibid.* 109) who refers to "two very large churches". See further information in Wilkinson, *ibid.*, Gazetteer, s.v. "Nazareth".

²⁶ STONE 1984, 173-178. The other information about Armenian pilgrims is assembled in our article: STONE 1986.

²⁷ References in STONE 1986, 93-94.

²⁸ Sources are given in STONE 1986, 95-97.

early source, and it is in a certain measure an indirect one, emerged from Pseudo-Eliše, *On the Transfiguration*. In this text, first drawn to the attention of scholars by R.W. Thomson, we find reflected the impressions of an Armenian visitor to Mount Tabor perhaps in the early seventh century²⁹.

In this context, therefore, the presence of Armenian graffiti in Nazareth forms a major contribution to our knowledge. In the first part of the fifth century, some Armenians made a pilgrimage of the Holy Places, leaving graffiti in two sites at least. One site was in Nazareth, while the other was Wadi Haggag in the Sinai, an important camping spot on the way to the area of Mt. Sinai³⁰. This Armenian pilgrimage was underway a century before Justinian built his fortress monastery at the foot of Jebel Musa, reputedly in the years 556-557 and certainly between 548 and 565.

These Armenians visited the Holy Land about the same time as the group of 400 Armenians who went to see St. Euthymius, also an Armenian, at his monastery, on the way to Jericho³¹. This evidence combines nicely with the implications of the inscriptions to witness Armenian pilgrim activity in the first part of the fifth century.

Of course, Armenian presence and activity in the Holy Land in the fifth century is more broadly attested, particularly as relates to their role in the monastic movement³². It is often said that there was an Armenian scriptorium in Jerusalem in the fifth century³³. The direct evidence cited for this is not very impressive in its own right. Thus, X.A. Gurian, in an article entitled "The School of Jerusalem" repeats chiefly the material adduced by Fr. N. Akinian in his book on the Vienna Mechitarist School's contribution to the formation of Classical Armenian³⁴. Akinian talks of translation activity in Jerusalem from the second half of the fifth century, but the evidence for this is rather thin. More convincing evidence for Armenian contacts with the Holy City at that time is drawn by Ch. Renoux from his numerous studies of the

²⁹ See THOMSON 1967; STONE 1986, 105-106. The whole text of this homily has been recently translated by L. LELOIR 1986-7. He ventures nothing about the date of the descriptions of Mount Tabor.

³⁰ On possible reasons for the central role of Wadi Haggag, see STONE 1982, 44-49.

³¹ See Cyril of Scythopolis, *vita s. Euthymii* 27:8ff (A.-M. FESTUGIÈRE, 1982, 81; cf. STONE 1986, 95-97).

³² The evidence is summarized by STONE 1984, 177-178.

³³ See e.g. SANJIAN 1965, 4 and note 16 on page 314.

³⁴ GURIAN 1940; AKINIAN 1932, 69-72. In Armenian.

Armenian lectionary tradition. In a recent article he shows that the *čašoc'* (typicon), long known to be an Armenian translation of the Jerusalem Church's practice in early days, must reflect the text used between 417 and 438-9³⁵. Naturally, this is not necessarily the date of the translation, but Renoux suggests that it was Catholicos Sahak (d. 438) who may have been responsible for the Armenians' adoption of the ritual of the Church of Jerusalem³⁶. This was probably in the first part of the fifth century, and although it is impossible to establish whether the translation itself was done in Jerusalem, it provides clear evidence for strong Armenian connections with and sentiments towards the city at that time.

Archbishop Norayr Bogharian has suggested that it may be possible to identify the Anania and Babgen involved. He points out that Anania was, because of his biblical name, most likely to have been a cleric, while Babgen may well have been a layman. Yet, though a layman, his literacy at this early stage of Armenian writing may be an indication of a high social standing, such as to have enabled him to receive an education in the new alphabet. One person named Anania is known from the fifth century, Anania, Bishop of Siwnik' who was alive until 468. He is mentioned by Eliše (sect. 2, ed. 1859, p. 22), by Koriwn, who describes his ordination by Maštoc' (chap. 14), by Łazar P'arpec'i (chap. 23), and by Xorenac'i (3.54). As for Babgen, Bogharian points out that there was a Babgen, prince of Siwnik', who was imprisoned in Persia in 452. He is referred to by Eliše (sect. 8, ed. 1859, p. 150) and by Łazar P'arpec'i (chap. 47, 68-9, 71, 74). It is possible that these two dignitaries of Siwnik' travelled together to the Holy Land, even though this is not mentioned in the sources. The coincidence of names is certainly striking³⁷.

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³⁵ RENOUX 1986-7, particularly 125-126. These dates are reached because the death of John of Jerusalem figures in the oldest manuscripts (417), while the situation of the celebration of St. Stephen implies a date before the Empress Eudocia built a church in his honour north of Jerusalem in 438-9.

³⁶ RENOUX 1986-7, 129.

³⁷ Personal conversation, June 7, 1990. Further details and later references to these individuals are to be found in AČARYAN, ANjB, s.vv.

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