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## THREE ARMENIAN OBJECTS IN JERUSALEM

### I

#### AN ARMENIAN APOTROPAIC RING

In the exhibition catalogue, *Images of Inspiration: the Old Testament in Early Christian Art*<sup>1</sup> there is a description of a “Ring Decorated with a Mandrake Plant” bearing an Armenian inscription, which is dated to 550-600 C.E. and located in the Eastern Mediterranean. The dimension are: diametre of bezel, 0.9 cm., thickness of bezel 0.2 cm. and the band fragment is .05 x 1.4 cm. The provenance of the object is unknown and it belongs to a private collection in Jerusalem. It was bought in London.

The catalogue’s dating of the ring is based on the dating of another ring in the same exhibition, no. 64 in the catalogue, which bears the name of Solomon in Greek, and what Rahmani describes as “eulogia” or blessing tokens<sup>2</sup>.

The present writer claims no expertise in the magical symbolism of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, but he must note that the Armenian ring is most interesting and is, as far as we know, unparalleled. What we have is a text, in Armenian uncial letters, reading *ՄԱՐ ՍԱՐԳԻՍ* “Mar Sargis”. This is clearly not a seal as is indicated both by its tiny size and by the fact that the writing is not inverse. This is indicative but not decisive. It seems to have been an amulet or apotropaic ring of some sort.

The word *Mar* is unusual in Armenian. The *New Dictionary of the Armenian Language* (Venice: 1836) says “Mar: in Syriac ‘Lord.’” It gives only two examples of use of the word, one of which is *Ուր է աստուածն քո մար սարգիս* “Where is your God, Mar Sargis.” As source for this, it cites two manuscript Čařentirs “Collections of Homilies” without further indication of folio number or source. These must have been in the Mechitarist Library in Venice. H. Ačaryan in his *Etymological Dictionary of the Armenian Language*<sup>3</sup> gives the same etymology and cites the same source. Both lexicographic works note that the word is a component of the names “Martha” and “Maroutha”. In the Venice *Lives of the Saints* of 1811 we find the title “Mar” used three times in the Mar-

<sup>1</sup> J.G. WESTENHOLZ, 2000, p. 96. Appreciation is expressed to Ms Westenholz for making this ring known to me. It is published here by permission of the Wolfe Family Collection.

<sup>2</sup> L.Y. RAHMANI, 1999, 92-104.

<sup>3</sup> Vol 3, 273.

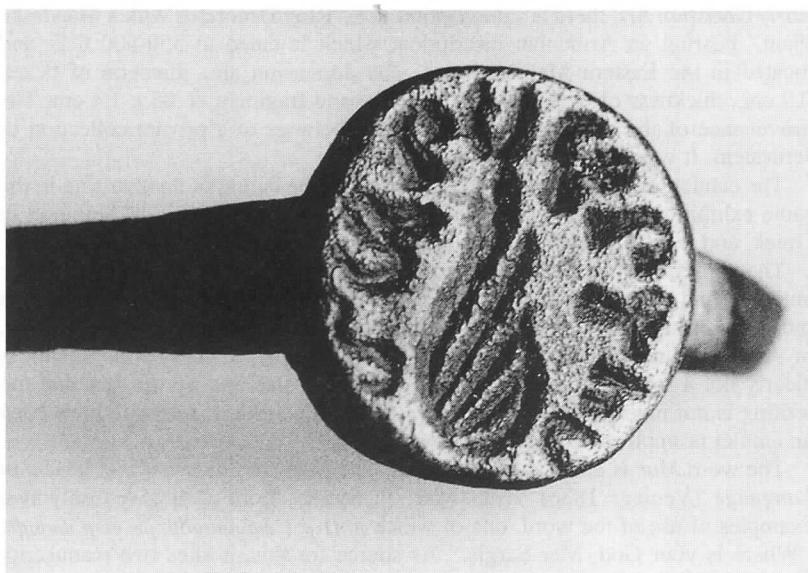


Fig. 1 — Apotropaic Ring.

tyrdom of St. Sargis, on p. 116, col. 1, the name of Martiros, Sargis' son, is given a false etymology as Mar Tiwron, i.e., Mar + tiron, i.e., Latin *tiro* "new recruit"; on p. 117, col. 2, Sargis is addressed by Persian troops under his command as "Mar Sargis"; and p. 122, col. 2, Sargis is addressed by the Devil as "Mar Sargis,"<sup>4</sup> though not with the same words as in the text quoted by Aucher. In Syriac, "Mar" is a title given to saints.

In other words, this is a Syriac saint's title which is very rare in Armenian<sup>5</sup>. The one substantial instance cited in both lexicographical works is with the same personal name as on the ring, i.e., Sargis (Armenian of Sergius). In Armenian hagiography a major role is played by the equestrian saint, Sargis Zoravar "Sargis the General" who was martyred with his son Martiros. St. Sargis plays a prominent role in Armenian apotropaic magic, parallel to that of St. George, and is referred to in his vita as "Mar Sargis."<sup>6</sup>

In view of these considerations we may conclude that:

1. This is an apotropaic ring and not a seal.
2. The Mar Sargis is Mar Sargis the General, and that his role is apotropaic. The use of the title Mar seems particularly attached to him and his role is not in doubt.

The issues remaining are those of the date and of the strange sign in the middle of the ring. These two are connected by Westenholz, and the Armenian ring is dated on the basis of the Greek evidence. Clearly, the Armenian script would provide a far more secure basis for dating, could it be precisely placed. On grounds of its general aspect, we speculate that it may well be from some time in the latter part of the first millennium C.E. Notable is the form of the *men* in which the right-hand arm is not looped down, thus being reminiscent of fifth and sixth century forms found on stone inscriptions and graffiti. More cannot be said securely since our knowledge of script on this type of object is very limited.

As to the image on the ring itself. Behind the conclusion drawn in the exhibition catalogue lie two assumptions. First, that the object depicted on the ring is the same as that reproduced in some of Rahmani's British Library blessing tokens; and second, that that object is a mandrake root. We do not wish to challenge this second conclusion, leaving that determination to experts. However, from examination of the examples adduced, we are led to doubt the first conclusion. The similarity is only very general. Furthermore, we can find no parallels in Armenian art to the object pictured<sup>7</sup>. Experts consulted have proposed that it is a wing (of an angel) or a leaf, or some other object. It does not appear in published apotropaic material in Armenian, though that is admittedly rather later, nor do any of the items associated with St. Sargis suggest an interpretation.

<sup>4</sup> B. AUCHER (AWK'EREAN), 1811, vol. 2. I am grateful to J.J.S. Weitenberg who has provided me with considerable assistance in this respect.

<sup>5</sup> The pseudepigraphic author Mar Abas Katina in Movses Xorenac'i is said to be a Syrian, and he has the same title.

<sup>6</sup> See FRÉDÉRIC FEYDIT, 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks are expressed to Dr. Nira Stone for counsel on art-historical matters.



Fig. 2 — St. George Plaque (1703).

## II

## A PLAQUE WITH THE IMAGE OF ST. GEORGE

In the Museum of St. Anne's in Jerusalem is a copper plaque. The plaque is 17 cms. high and 12.9 cms wide. It is 2 mm. thick. The dimensions of the written fields are 1.2 x 4.5 cms (upper) and 1.2 x 6.4 cms (lower). The bottom of the plaque is damaged, which has affected the inscription somewhat, but it is still completely legible.

In its centre is a picture of St. George, mounted on a horse, spearing a dragon with a cross-headed lance. The horse is rearing up and its two forefeet are in the air. The picture, like the inscriptions, is in relief. In the fields to the right and left of the saint's head are two decorative crosses; that on the right is larger than that on the left. Above and below the figure are Armenian words, and above the upper words the date, in Latin numerals, 1703. The Armenian words are written in uncial letters. The picture and inscriptions are in a frame, the top of which forms a pointed arch. Above the point of the arch are two small holes. The inscription above the saint's head is within a frame, while that under his feet is not.

The inscription is as follows:

1703  
*ԱԲ ԳԵՂԻ*  
*ՎՐՊԾ ՄՏՐՒ*  
*1703*  
*ԱՊՀՐԲ ԳԵՂՊ*  
*Վար(Դա)պետ մարտիրոս*  
*1703*  
*St. George*  
*var(da)pet Martiros*

The reading has two notable points. The first is that the craftsman made a mistake and abbreviated *գեղը* to *gegr* instead of *gerg*. The second uncertainty is whether the abbreviation *vrpt* stands for *varpet* (craftsman, expert) or *vardapet* "doctor (i.e., of the church)," a rank of celibate priesthood. In any case, clearly the object is for personal or home use and not for church use, as is witnessed by its size. Considering the role of St. George in popular religious belief, this object may be considered to be a private devotional or apotropaic piece. No hint may be gathered as to its provenance, although the western date is noteworthy<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> This object is published by permission of R.P. Roger Meceran, M. Afr., Musée de Sainte Anne, Jerusalem and the assistance of the Fathers of St. Anne's in location of the object is acknowledged. A similar plaque is to be observed in the museum in St. John's Armenian Church in Southfield, Michigan, U.S.A., but of silver not copper. The photographs are by Yoav Loeff.



Fig. 3 — Silver Plaque (1477).

## III

## A SILVER PLAQUE OF 1477

The writer purchased a small, round silver plaque in the market in Istanbul. This piece is 4 cms in diameter. It has an Armenian inscription around the edge and a complex decorative design in the centre: see illustration. The inscription is in Armenian uncial letters, measuring 0.3 cms in height. The back is plain. A silver loop was soldered onto the round plaque at a later time, turning it into a pendant. The inscription reads:

Ճիւթեզսի Սեղանս ԶեռԱՄԲ ԿՈՒՇՅԻ ՎԱՐՊԵՏԻ Ի ԹՎԻՍ ԶԻԶ  
Ճիւեցաւ սեղանս ձեռամբ կուտճի վարպետի ի թվիս ԶԻԶ

This altar / table was made by the artisan (*varpet*) Kuřč in the year 926  
[A.E. = 1477]

There are three problems in this decipherment. The first is minor: the *n* of the first word has been covered completely by the secondary soldering of the silver loop. The second is the name we have transliterated, in West Armenian form, as Guřč (Kuřč in Eastern transliteration). We regard this as a form of the name "George", and even if this interpretation is not accepted, the word is clearly a genitive of a proper name.

The third problem is the word *սեղան*. This word means "altar" or "table". It does not seem plausible that it refer to the plaque itself. Consequently, the object must be designed to be attached to an altar or table and to commemorate the name of the artisan who manufactured it.

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