

## AN EPISODE FROM THE HISTORY OF THE ARMENIAN STATE AND CHURCH RELATIONS IN CILICIA (1175-1187)

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### **Abstract**

This study thoroughly discusses the relations between the State and the Church during the period of the ruler of Cilicia, Ruben III (1175-1187). The research highlights Armenian-Byzantine ecclesiastical relations, focusing on the recent efforts made by Byzantium in unifying the churches, as well as the circumstances of the famous Hromkla (modern Rumkale) Church Council. Different views on the date of convening the assembly are examined, as well as the established decisions. The article introduces the Armenian-Catholic church-political relations and procedure, and presents the demands of the Roman Catholic Church to the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church. It focuses on the details of the cooperation between the Roman Catholic Church and the Armenian state of Cilicia on these important issues. In the framework of this study, the issues around the Armenian Churches in the Armenian Community of Egypt are presented. Are given details about the joint efforts of the Armenian Government and the Church of Cilicia in the process of preserving the Churches. In the article we have presented the circumstances of how the Ayyubid Sultan Salah ad-Din had tried to take the Armenian Churches of Egypt from the Armenians and give them to the Copts, but as a result of the joint efforts and discussions of the Armenian leadership and the Catholicosate of Rumkale, it was possible to return them to their rightful owner.

**Keywords:** Rome, Catholicosate, Cilicia, state, Armenian Church, relations, Byzantine Empire, The Holy See of Rome, Chalcedonism, Catholicism, clergy, bishop.

After the assassination of Prince Mleh in 1175, Ruben III became the new prince of Cilicia. During his reign, the cooperation between the state and the church continued to be active. During this time, the Armenian Church continued to be headed by Grigor IV Tgha, a modest and learned person. In the manuscripts written and illustrated during the reign of Ruben, we often encounter words of praise dedicated to the Armenian prince, such as the one copied in 1181 in the Gospel (London, Armenian manuscript 4). This manuscript was written in Drazark by a penman named Toros, and the illustrator is the priest Khachatur. The writer Toros glorified the Armenian Catholicos Grigor IV Tgha

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(Gregory the Young) (1173-1193) and Prince Ruben III in his memoir wrote: "And I wrote my illuminating Gospel during enlightening times, from the Creation times to our days (6606), during the times of Coming of Life Giving, (1183), also from the Persian Khosrov to our times (1181). And it was written in Drazark Desert by me, unwise the writer Toros, by the order of Ter Samuel, the leader of our congregation during the patriarchy of Armenian Catholicos Gregory and the authority of this province, faithful Prince Ruben. Thus, I supplicate to advert and pray for the Writer and Receiver, also the manuscript illuminator Khachatur sacrificial priest and all my alive and decedent cenobites."<sup>1</sup>

Anapatakan, who has studied the history of church-political relations, expresses the opinion that during the reign of Grigor IV Tgha, we are presented with two faces, as if to say.<sup>2</sup> Continuing his thought, the author believes that these are Greek and Latin union relations with the Armenians.<sup>3</sup> Let us first talk about Armenian-Greek relations. Thus, with the coming to power of the new prince of Cilician Armenia, certain changes were made in the country's foreign policy, and hopes again arose in the Byzantine Empire that it would be possible to raise the issue of the unification of the churches again. During the mentioned period, the Armenian Catholicos Grigor IV Tgha continued to maintain certain ties with various churches, including the Byzantine Church.<sup>4</sup> An interesting point of view regarding this issue is expressed by V. Vardanyan, according to which Byzantium, represented by the Armenians, wanted to acquire reliable allies against the Turks, which, of course, the Armenians were also interested in.<sup>5</sup> One can agree with V. Vardanyan's point of view, because no matter how much the Armenians were against the issue of the unification of the churches, they were concerned about the Seljuk-Turkish threat. Let us also add that during this same historical period, the Christian West also considered the Armenians one of their main allies, and bilateral negotiations were often carried out by representatives of the Catholicosate of Hromkla.

It is also interesting to note that if during the reign of Nerses Shnorhali, Grigor Tgha was his assistant, and a number of important matters of the Catholicosate were entrusted to him, now the Armenian Catholicos needed an assistant on whom he could trust. Grigor IV Tgha chose one of the prominent clergymen of Cilician Armenia, Nerses of Lambron, as his assistant. G. Hakobyan, who has conducted quite in-depth research into the history of the life and activities of Nerses of Lambron<sup>6</sup>, notes that he was ordained a bishop at the age of 23 due to his extraordinary abilities, although according

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<sup>1</sup> Matevosyan 1988: 231; Conybeare 1913: 4-6.

<sup>2</sup> Anapatakan 1981: 93.

<sup>3</sup> Anapatakan 1981: 93.

<sup>4</sup> Nerses Shnorhali 1865: 291.

<sup>5</sup> Vardanyan 2005: 85.

<sup>6</sup> Already in 1175, Nerses of Lambron was ordained as an archbishop and was given the bishopric of Lambron and Tarson, two important territories of Cilician Armenia, and the leadership of the monastery of Skevra.

to church regulations in the Armenian Apostolic Church at that time a clergyman of at least 30 years old could be ordained a bishop.<sup>7</sup> The latter later also became an advisor to the Armenian King Levon the Great, one of the important figures of the state, and played considerable role in the relations between the Catholicosate of Hromkla and the Armenian state of Cilicia. In addition, the latter, as evidenced by a number of medieval historians, repeatedly headed the delegations of the Catholicosate of Hromkla and the Cilician kingdom and conducted negotiations with the spiritual structures of different countries on important issues and defended the doctrine of the Armenian Church. Indeed, the choice of Nerses of Lambron was successful, since the latter was a person of considerable knowledge and could bring great benefit to the Armenian Catholicosate of Hromkla and state-church relations. During this period, the Byzantines actively continued the policy of unification of churches with the goal of eliminating the independence of the Armenian Church and assimilating the Armenian people to the Greek element. It is quite natural that Grigor IV Tgha could not solve this important problem alone.

A. Bozoyan, referring to the relations between the state and the church of the aforementioned period, believes that the princes of Cilicia were trying to gain the trust of both the Holy Roman and Byzantine empires from a political point of view, and the Armenian Church, using state resources, was trying to emphasize the autonomy and self-governance of its own hierarchal system before the Papacy of Rome, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and the Jacobite-Assyrian churches.<sup>8</sup> Continuing his idea, the author believes that in order to accomplish the task, the Catholicosate cooperated with both the Hethumid and Rubenid authorities<sup>9</sup>, which, in our opinion, was the right policy. It could not have been otherwise.

In 1176, the famous Battle of Myriokephalon took place, which was to decide the fate of many countries and peoples of the region. In the battle, the Byzantine army was defeated by the Sultanate of Iconium, after which it weakened considerably and was no longer able to conquer new territories in the region and become a dominant state. On the other hand, the weakening of the empire was also very favorable for the Principality of Cilicia, which sought to turn into a kingdom and gain international recognition. In addition, the efforts of the Byzantine Empire to unify the churches would also weaken, although according to medieval historians they continued to a certain extent. A. Bozoyan expresses a point of view on the above-mentioned topic, according to which after the Battle of Myriokephalon, the Rubenid principality of Cilicia finally threw off its subordinate dependence on the Byzantine Empire.<sup>10</sup>

In the same 1176, the issue of unifying the churches was again raised by the Byzantine Emperor Manuel. In such conditions, under the leadership of the Armenian

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<sup>7</sup> Hakobyan 1971: 55.

<sup>8</sup>; Bozoyan 1988: 196-228; Bozoyan 2022: 7.

<sup>9</sup> Bozoyan 2022: 7.

<sup>10</sup> Bozoyan 2022: 6.

Catholicos and with the participation of Nerses of Lambron and other bishops, they decided to convene a national-ecclesiastical council to respond to the proposals of the emperor and the patriarch. For the sake of justice, we must say that this time the capabilities of the Byzantine Empire were less, and the Armenians were also aware of this fact. We also consider it necessary to emphasize that the Armenian Catholicos was constantly in contact with the clergy of Cilicia, the ruling elite and a number of church dioceses of Armenia itself, since he could not make a decision on such an important issue alone. However, a number of high-ranking clergy demonstrated a fierce oppositional stance. Among them, the spiritual fathers of Haghpat and Sanahin should be mentioned. Therefore, Catholicos Grigor IV, in consultation with the leadership of the Cilician state, decided to convene a council and listen to the opinions of all sides. The preparatory work for the aforementioned council was carried out for quite a long time.

Thus, a great church council took place in the fortress city of Hromkla, about which there are different and contradictory opinions in modern historiography. They can be divided into three parts. Thus, Anapatakan, referring to the above-mentioned issue, speaks about Armenian-Byzantine relations, as well as the establishment and details of the Hromkla council, but does not clearly indicate in which year it took place.<sup>11</sup> A similar view is also expressed by L. Dallakyan.<sup>12</sup> Another researcher who has touched upon the Hromkla church council and its details is G. Mikayelyan, who, in his valuable work, referring to the Hromkla church council, notes the year of 1179.<sup>13</sup> Another researcher who supports the view of the eminent scientist is Archimandrite Y. Movsisyan, who notes that the Hromkla council took place in 1179 on Easter<sup>14</sup>, as well as N. Melik-Tangyan<sup>15</sup>, M. Ormanyán: “The Council of Hromkla convened during the Easter of 1179, but the events that took place during that time are not known to us”.<sup>16</sup>

As we have mentioned, a large group of researchers date this important council to 1179. In contrast to the above-mentioned view, A. Bozoyan, who has studied Armenian-Byzantine church relations in considerable depth, expresses the opinion that it took place in 1178.<sup>17</sup> A. Bozoyan’s opinion is also shared by modern researchers A. Hovhannisyán<sup>18</sup>, V. Vardanyán<sup>19</sup>, A. Ghazaryán<sup>20</sup> and others. So, the views of researchers regarding the date of the aforementioned council differ.

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<sup>11</sup> Anapatakan 1981: 95.

<sup>12</sup> Dallakyan 2017: 372.

<sup>13</sup> Mikayelyan 2007: 140.

<sup>14</sup> Archimandrite Y. Movsisyan 2008: 216.

<sup>15</sup> Melik-Tangyan N. V. 2003: 372.

<sup>16</sup> Ormanyán 2001, column 1716.

<sup>17</sup> Bozoyan 2022: 12; Bozoyan 1988: 121-126.

<sup>18</sup> Hovhannisyán 2018: 66.

<sup>19</sup> Vardanyán 2002: 159; Vardanyán 2005: 87.

<sup>20</sup> Vardanyán 2002: 639.

We believe that 1178 can be considered more correct, since the Byzantine Empire, which was weakening after the battle of Myriokephalon, should have tried to resolve the issue of the union of the churches as soon as possible, so that it would have a new and reliable ally in the person of the Armenian state of Cilicia.

Finally, the aforementioned council was held on April 9, which was chaired by the Armenian Catholicos Grigor IV Tgha. According to information, 17 bishops from Armenia itself and 16 from Cilicia and neighboring countries were present at the council, for a total of 33. And this was so indeed, since the number of bishops who signed the council was 33. Among the bishops who participated in the council were Archbishop Nerses of Tarsus, Bishop Hovhannes of Anarzaba, Bishop David of Mamestia, Archbishop Barsegh of Ani and many others.<sup>21</sup> G. Hakobyan, referring to this council, expresses the opinion that Catholicos Grigor IV Tgha, Grigor Apirat and Nerses of Lambron played a decisive role in it. We can agree with the researcher's opinion, since the three clergymen mentioned above were the most prominent and renowned clergymen of the Catholicosate of Hromkla and the Armenian state of Cilicia at that time.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the Armenian clergy, among the participants of the aforementioned meeting were also representatives of the Assyrian Church, which once again testifies to the Armenian-Assyrian church unity, as well as Catholicos of Aghvank, Stepanos, numerous archimandrites, great Armenian princes, monks and many others. The majority of the clergy of Cilicia, the bishops and scholar-monks of the eastern regions of Armenia, especially the abbot of the Sanahin Monastery Grigor Tuteordi, Archbishop Barsegh of Ani, Mkhitar Gosh of the Nor-Getik Monastery, the abbots of the Haghartsin, Khorakert, and Haghpat monasteries were against making doctrinal concessions to Byzantium, were against the rapprochement of the churches, which, we believe, was an absolutely correct approach and stemmed from the interests of our church and people<sup>23</sup>. It is also interesting to note that the names of the Armenian princes of Armenia proper and especially of the state of Cilicia are not mentioned in the council of Hromkla, although one circumstance is obvious: the decisions to be made there could not have been implemented without the agreement of the latter, since it had pan-Armenian significance. Unfortunately, no information has been preserved in the works of medieval historians about how long that council lasted. Although one circumstance is clear, it took place in a rather sharp and tense atmosphere.

Finally, as M. Ormanyan assures, the participants in the church council of Hromkla made insignificant doctrinal concessions to the Byzantines, which could not serve as a basis for the unification of the churches.<sup>24</sup> Contrary to Ormanyan, Hakobyan notes that the Armenian delegates at the council of Hromkla did not make any concessions and rejected the demands of the Greeks, remaining faithful to the doctrine of the Armenian

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<sup>21</sup> Chamchyan 1984: 132.

<sup>22</sup> Hakobyan 1971: 74.

<sup>23</sup> Mikaelyan 2007: 141.

<sup>24</sup> Ormanyan 2001 vol.2: column 1717.

Apostolic Church. Finally, H. Mirzoyan, who claims that the letters addressed on behalf of Grigor IV Tgha to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenos and the Patriarch of Constantinople Michael III Anchialos, did not reach their addressees due to circumstances.<sup>25</sup>

We think it is more likely that the Armenians did not make any concessions, since the weakening Byzantine Empire was no longer capable of suppressing the Armenians in any way.

On September 27, 1180, the Byzantine Emperor Manuel died, with whose death the movement for the union of the Armenian-Byzantine churches essentially ended. In addition, in 1181, when the Prince of Cilicia, Ruben III, married Isabel Toronatsi, the daughter of the Frankish Prince of Jerusalem, a certain warming towards the Catholic world was observed.

In fact, it can be noted that during the reign of Ruben III, the Armenian Catholicosate also rejected the Byzantine proposal to unify the churches, but maintained certain relations with the latter, which, we believe, was the right decision.

We also consider it important to note that during this same historical period, the Catholicosate of Hromkla, in cooperation with the Armenian state of Cilicia, also established active relations with the Christian West, in particular with the Papal See and its representatives, Popes Lucius III (1183-1185) and Clement III (1187-1191), as well as with the German emperors, which at that time also stemmed from their interests, since during the aforementioned period regular Crusades were underway, and for the latter the position of the Armenian state of Cilicia was very important. The Armenian state of Cilicia, in cooperation with the Armenian Catholicosate of Hromkla, tried to take advantage of the favorable situation and resolve the issue of recognition of independence. According to Y. Movsisyan, after the union case remained pending, the Greeks began to persecute the Armenians more fiercely, especially noticing their sympathy for the Crusaders.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, it should be noted that on the eve of the next Crusades, the role, cooperation, and joint and accurate decision-making of the Armenian state of Cilicia and the Catholicosate of Hromkla were even more important.

Thus, in 1184-1185, Armenian-Catholic church relations became quite active. In particular, the Armenian Catholicos Grigor IV Tgha sent a delegation to Pope Lucius III, led by Bishop Grigor of the Armenian Church in the city of Philippopolis (Plovdiv, in Bulgaria).<sup>27</sup> Historians do not mention almost anything about whose instructions and for what purpose this visit took place, although one could guess what it was about. They were received with great honor and promised to help, as well as suggesting that the Armenian Church unite with the Roman Catholic Church. Continuing his thought, the researcher expresses the opinion according to which the Armenian Catholicos and the

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<sup>25</sup> Mirzoyan 2008: 57.

<sup>26</sup> Archimandrite Y. Movsisyan 2008: 217.

<sup>27</sup> Bozoyan 1995: 215-216.

bishop leading his delegation confess “all the correct confession of faith” and in general the Catholic Church pursued only some ritual concessions.<sup>28</sup> One of the researchers of the history of the Armenian Church, Archimandrite Y. Movsisyan, in his study brings the requirements of the Roman Catholic Church in full:

- a) to mix water with the communion cup,
- b) to celebrate the Nativity on December 25,
- c) to bless St. Myrrh every year on Maundy Thursday and to sprinkle it on Sunday with the water of baptism, during sealing and ordination,
- d) to perform the ordination of the bishop on Sunday and anoint the head; to perform the ordination of the priest and other lower officials on Saturday and to anoint the priest’s hands.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, it can be noted that if before Prince Ruben III the Armenian Catholicosate of Hromkla and the Armenian state of Cilicia were actively communicating mainly with the Byzantine Empire and struggling against the Chalcedonian policy, then after the Battle of Myreokephalon and in particular from the 1180s, Armenian-Catholic church relations also became more active, and the Armenian Church began to resist the Papal See of Rome. Finally, in the last quarter of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, both the Chalcedonian Church of Byzantium and the Roman Catholic Church were trying to win the Armenian Church over to their side, since our church was of great importance to both sides. Naturally, at that moment, the cooperation and joint decision-making of the Cilician state and the Catholicosate of Hromkla would be very important. If years later the Armenian Church showed willingness to make certain concessions to the Byzantine Church, in this case the orientation of the Armenian state of Cilicia and the Catholicosate of Hromkla is changing towards the Christian West, the Papal See of Rome.

We believe that the policy adopted by the Armenian Church was correct and stemmed from the interests of the Armenian people. In turn, the Roman Catholic Church was also very interested in such a course of events, and the latter assumed the patronage of the Armenian Church, and according to their observation, during these years the Roman Catholic Church did not demand doctrinal and ritual concessions from the Armenian Church but indirectly imposed the provision of loyalty.<sup>30</sup> Probably, in this way, they were trying to finally cut off the Armenians from the Byzantine Empire.

It should also be noted that during the reign of Ruben III, the Catholicosate of Hromkla, along with the state of Cilicia, maintained certain ties with the Ayyubid Sultanate of Egypt and, in particular, with Salah ad-Din, since the Armenian Catholicosate of Hromkla continued to operate under their rule. This is evidenced by the following fact.

In the first half of the 1180s, certain problems arose in the Armenian community of Egypt and, in particular, with the Armenian churches operating there. N. Aghazarm

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<sup>28</sup> Bozoyan 1995: 215-216.

<sup>29</sup> Archimandrite Y. Movsisyan 2008: 218.

<sup>30</sup> Archimandrite Y. Movsisyan 2008: 218.

expresses a certain opinion on this<sup>31</sup>, according to which, in parallel with the dispersal of the Armenian military forces in Egypt, Armenian notables were subjected to persecution and were simply expelled from the country, while Mamur Fatimi notes that the problem of aggravation of Armenian-Egyptian relations was conditioned by the fact that the Armenian prince of Cilicia, Ruben III, had married Isabel Toronatsi, the daughter of the archenemy of the Muslims.<sup>32</sup> E. Kassouni also believes that when there were no Armenians left in Egypt, the Copts received the two Armenian churches operating in that country.<sup>33</sup> The view that it was possible that there were no Armenians left in Egypt is a bit doubtful. We think that the researcher has some confusion. The more likely version may be that in those years, the Ayyubid Sultanate of Egypt was indeed waging wars with the Crusaders and considered the latter as hostile countries. Therefore, the marriage of the Armenian prince Ruben III and the establishment of in-law ties with the Kingdom of Jerusalem may not have pleased the Ayyubid ruler. However, the Armenian Catholicosate of Hromkla and the prince Ruben III of Cilicia immediately decided to intervene in this important matter. The latter appealed to the ruler of Egypt, Salah ad-Din, with a request that the Armenian churches in Egypt be returned to the Armenians. Soon a delegation was sent to the latter, consisting of one bishop and three priests. Abusahl Hay speaks about the delegation's visit and the details.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the Armenian delegation that arrived in Egypt was given a rather warm welcome. Sultan Salah ad-Din decided to satisfy the Armenians' request and return the Armenian churches of Egypt to their legal owners. A. Israelyan also expressed his opinion on these important events, according to which the Sultan did indeed return the Armenian churches to the Armenians.<sup>35</sup> His opinion was also supported by G.Msrlyan.<sup>36</sup> Soon the Armenian delegation brought with it the Sultan's decree addressed to the Viceroy of Egypt, Melik Takiatti that the churches of Aygestan and Zuhri should be returned to their legal owners, and the order of the Ayyubid ruler was carried out.

How can we explain such behavior of the Sultan of Egypt? We believe that the Ayyubid ruler, being one of the most powerful leaders of the time, did not want to deepen the hostility with the Armenian state of Cilicia and the Catholicosate of Hromkla, also understanding that new crusades would be in the future, and it would be important that the Armenians do not completely turn to the side of the Christian West.

In fact, in this important issue for the Armenians of Egypt, the Armenian Catholicosate of Hromkla and the Armenian state of Cilicia acted together, which contributed to the settlement of the problem. After this incident, until the death of Ruben

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<sup>31</sup> Aghazarm 1911: 13.

<sup>32</sup> Fatimi 1930: 325; Grousset 2005: 337; S. Ter-Nersisyan calls this same person Humphrey III Toronatsi, Ter-Nersisyan 2005: 394.

<sup>33</sup> Kassouni 1987: 76.

<sup>34</sup> Abu Sahl Hay 1933: 29-30.

<sup>35</sup> Israelyan 2013: 23.

<sup>36</sup> Msrlyan 1947: 159.



III, no significant events were recorded in the relations between the Armenian state of Cilicia and the Catholicosate of Hromkla, otherwise they would be focused on by modern authors.

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