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ΑΝΑΘΗΜΑΤΑ ΕΟΡΤΙΚΑ
Studies in Honor of Thomas F. Mathews

Edited by Joseph D. Alcherms
with Helen C. Evans and Thelma K. Thomas



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346 pages with 203 figures; 34 color plates

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The Armenian Right Arm Reliquary of St. Nicholas

Dickran Kouymjian

The right arm reliquary or dexter (*aġ* in Armenian) is probably the most characteristic of Armenian relic containers; some fifty have been identified, more than half of them in the various museums of Holy Etchmiadzin.¹ They preserve relics of the most important Christian and Armenian saints. Only two of them belong to women, both to St. Hrip'simē, whose martyrdom in the first quarter of the fourth century led to Armenia's adoption of Christianity.² Beside St. Gregory the Illuminator (five known arm reliquaries),³ founder of the Armenian Church (first quarter of the fourth century), there are only a handful of other Armenian figures honored by an arm reliquary, and most of them are directly involved in the conversion: St. Hrip'simē; Step'annōs, a priest of the Hrip'simeanc'; St. Aristakēs, son and successor to St. Gregory (two dexters). The others are St. Sahak Partew, catholicos at the time of the invention of the Armenian alphabet in the first years of the fifth

century; Levond the priest, martyred in Persia just after the battle of Vardananc' (451), who struggled in the same century to preserve Christianity in Armenia; and Suk'ias of the Suk'iaseanc' family, martyred in the early second century. The last three reliquaries are known only through an inventory of 1445 of the relics and reliquaries preserved at Holy Etchmiadzin.⁴ The dexters of these seven figures, a total of twelve, represented fewer than a third of such reliquaries. The majority encase the bones of the apostles and non-Armenian saints. The arm reliquary of St. Thaddeus the apostle is one from this group;⁵ other apostles so graced in Armenia include St. Andrew,⁶ St. James, St. James the Less, St. Thomas, St. Paul, and St. Ananias, to which we might add St. John the Baptist (three dexters),⁷ St. Stephen the Protomartyr, St. Nicholas (two dexters), and St. Sylvester.⁸

As has been pointed out, the dexter of St. Nicolas and other Armenian arm reliquaries have no real bases and

¹ On Armenian reliquaries in general, see Dickran Kouymjian, "Reliques et reliquaires. Comment les Arméniens honorent leurs saints," in *ARMENIACA 2. La culture arménienne hier et aujourd'hui*, Actes du Colloque "La culture arménienne hier et aujourd'hui, 1600 ans après la création de l'alphabet," Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, March 16–17, 2007, ed. Robert Dermerguérian and Patrick Donabédian (Aix-en-Provence, 2008), 171–82. See also Kouymjian, "L'orfèverie liturgique en Arménie," in *Ors et trésors d'Arménie*, Musée des tissus et des Arts décoratifs and Musée d'art religieux de Fourvière, March 22–July 15, exhib. cat., ed. Maria-Anne Privat-Savigny and Bernard Berthod (Lyon, 2007), 78–89, especially 80–84 on reliquaries.

² Both are discussed in Dickran Kouymjian, "No. 5, Bras-reliquaire de sainte Rhipsimé," in *Armenia sacra: Mémoire chrétienne des Arméniens (IVe–XVIIIe siècle)*, Le Louvre, 21 February–21 May 2007, exhib. cat., ed. Jannic Durand, Ioanna Rapti, Dorota Giovannoni, (Paris, 2007), 34.

³ Details in Dickran Kouymjian, "The Right Hand of St. Gregory and Other Armenian Arm Relics," in *Les objets de la mémoire. Pour une approche comparatiste des reliques et de leur culte*, ed. Philippe Borgeaud and Youri Volokhine (Geneva, 2005), 230–34.

⁴ Babgen Kiwlēsērian (Gulesserian), *Patmutiwn kat'oghikosac' kilikiy (1441-en minch'ew mer ḡrerā)* (History of the Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1441 to the Present), (Antelias, 1939), 1299–1300.

⁵ Kouymjian, "No. 190 Bras-reliquaire de saint Thaddée," in *Armenia sacra*, 420.

⁶ Kouymjian, "No. 186 Bras-reliquaire de saint André," in *Armenia sacra*, 414–15.

⁷ Kouymjian, "No. 122 Reliquaire de la main de saint Jean-Baptiste," in *Armenia Sacra*, 279–80.

⁸ The latter two, both preserved in the Cilician Museum of the Catholicosate of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon, are well illustrated in Hermann Goltz and Klaus E. Göltz, *Rescued Armenian Treasures from Cilicia: Sacred Art of the Kilikia Museum Antelias, Lebanon*, exhibition held at the State Gallery Moritzburg Halle, Art Museum of Saxony-Anhalt, September 2–November 12, 2000 (Wiesbaden, 2000), 90–91, and Anna Ballian, ed., *Armenian Relics of Cilicia from the Museum of the Catholicosate in Antelias, Lebanon*, exposition at the Benaki Museum, October 30–December 10, 2002 (Athens, 2002), 74, 85. The Cilician Catholicosate also has one of the two most important dexters of St. Gregory, illustrated in both volumes. There is a second St. Nicholas dexter in the Treasury of the Armenian Patriarchate of St. James, Jerusalem, dated 1704.

were not intended to be placed upright on the altar.⁹ This is quite in contrast to European examples, which have very sturdy bases and are almost always displayed upright. This pronounced difference probably arises from the function of these objects in the respective churches. In the West, the arm relic, showing the hand of the saint or bishop to whom it belonged, making the sign of the cross, was placed on the altar and symbolically, the saint, now in Heaven, provided a benediction directly from God to the congregation. The presiding priest, when not a bishop, would hold the dexter before the faithful at the end of the mass and with it make the sign of the cross as benediction to those present.¹⁰ In Armenia this practice is unknown. Arm reliquaries were used during certain services and are indispensable for some of them. Dexters are sometimes still used to dedicate new altars, also a common practice in the early centuries in Europe¹¹ and Armenia;¹² relics of saints were sometimes incorporated within the structure. They are also used for consecrating baptismal altars and fonts and corner stones of churches and monasteries. These practices are, however, limited because there exist few arm reliquaries outside of the four patriarchal centers: the catholicosates of Etchmiadzin and Cilicia/Antelias, and the Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Constantinople/Istanbul. Unlike Europe, where the remains of local saints were graced with arm reliquaries, only the most important figures of early Christianity and the founders and defenders of the Armenian Church are so honored. On the other hand, the most important arm reliquaries, particularly that of St. Gregory the Illuminator, are used for specific rites: the consecration of the catholicos and at times bishops and the elaborate liturgical ceremony of the blessing of the St. Chrème (*Surp Miwron*).

The right-hand reliquary of St. Nicholas the Thaumaturg (COLORPLATE XXIV) is kept in the Cilician Museum of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon. According to one of its five inscriptions, it was restored (or possibly made) in 1315 in Sis, then the capital of the Armenia kingdom of Cilicia and the residence of the Catholicos of All Armenians.¹³ The partially gilded silver arm reliquary has beaten, chased, and embossed ornamental bands and plaques with gemstones and inscriptions. The length is 47.5 cm and the width at the palm is 6.3 cm. The hand is opened with the four fingers perfectly straight forming a single block; the thumb is slightly separated from the block of fingers.¹⁴ The fingernails and the wrinkles of the knuckles are carved or incised. The hand represents about one-third the length of the reliquary. In the center of the back of the hand is a carefully executed circular medal-

lion (fig. 1), the lower ends of which cross to form simple vegetal motifs with a single loop and an extended stem. The bust portrait of St. Nicholas shows his face in very high relief. He holds a book in his left hand and offers a two-finger benediction with the right. The top of his perfectly circular, plain halo touches the round frame. His bald head has a small lock of hair high up in its center. An omophorion decorated with simple quatre-foil buds is wrapped around his upper chest and hangs down the center; the book cover has a single slender lozenge on it. To the left and the right is a high relief inscription in *erkat'agir* (uncial) identifying the saint: S[UR]P NIKAWL[AY], St. Nikōl[ay], an abridged form of Armenian *Nikōlayos*, or perhaps a Latin (Crusader) rendering of the name. There follows what appears to be the main inscription in six bands of equal width around the slightly oval wrist and forearm. The script is in a monumental rounded *erkat'agir* of thick embossed letters against a background of pointed punches. The gilding on the lower two bands is worn away and the relief is much lower. The lowest band seems to have a reworked inscription with no relief. The plain wide filets separating each band are doubled in the second and third row from the top. The inscription is full of ligatured letters: "I, Constantine Catholicos, received this dexter of St. Nicholas as my heart desired and had it fashioned/restored as a memorial to myself and the [Holy] See of St. Gregory, during the reign of King Ōšin and his son Levon. 1315."¹⁵

Below is an attached gilded band of low relief, embossed geometricized floral design. Further down on the plain polished sliver of the arm is a six-line inscription, the last line of which in modern *bolorgir* (minuscule), reads: "It was restored in 1926." Just below that is a thin gilded plaque with a three-line inscription in a crude repoussé *erkat'agir*. Directly underneath is a rectangular gilded plaque (fig. 2) of blind filigree work placed vertically. It is made up of a simple series of loops of twisted wire arranged geometrically. There are

⁹ Kouymjian, "L'orfèverie liturgique," 83.

¹⁰ Cynthia Hahn, "The Voices of Saints, Speaking Reliquaries," *Gesta* 36, no. 1 (1997): 22.

¹¹ C. Walker Bynum and P. Gerson, "Body-Part Reliquaries and Body Parts in the Middle Ages," *Gesta* 36, no. 1 (1997): 3.

¹² Kouymjian, "The Right Hand of St. Gregory," 223.

¹³ Full inscriptions in Kouymjian, "No. 120 Bras-reliquaire de saint Nicolas," in *Armenia sacra*, 276–77.

¹⁴ Open hand or arm reliquaries are much rarer in both the occident and Armenia than the more common variety with the hand showing the sign of benediction; see Kouymjian, *Armenia Sacra*, 280.

¹⁵ Kivlēsērian, *History*, 1327; Kouymjian, *Armenia sacra*, 276.



Fig. 1 Detail of medallion with portrait of the saint and six-line inscription of 1315, St. Nicholas dexter

five paste glass stones fitted in simple raised mounts. At the very bottom of the polished arm is attached another gilded repoussé band made up of a series of very delicately worked wreath roundels in relief attached one to the other at the tangential point by a wide ring. In the open space between circles, above and below, is a flower with three narrow pointed leaves. In the roundels are a series of birds, some fabulous, in an oriental or Fatimid style. The end or the bottom of the arm (fig. 3) has a Latin inscription in three lines: "Sanctus Lucas," St. Luke, with the symbol of the Evangelist, a haloed ox or bull holding an Evangel. The diversity of styles in the various parts of the object suggests the accretion of heterogeneous elements over the centuries.

St. Nicholas, the Miracle Worker, was the famous fourth-century bishop of Myra in Lycia, who is believed to have attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 and died shortly after. In the Armenian Church he is celebrated on November 6. His relics were taken from Asia Minor by Italians and brought to Bari in 1087.¹⁶ The date in the sixth line of the wrist inscription is extremely hard to read; the first digit is virtually nonexistent, but must be *cha*, 700, given the dates of the people mentioned in it.



Fig. 2 Detail of gilded filigree plaque, St. Nicholas dexter



Fig. 3 Detail of base with an ox, the symbol of St. Luke, and inscription "Sanctus Lucas," St. Nicholas dexter

The final digit, *da*, 4, is clear, but the all important second digit looks to me like *ken*, 60, rather than *ha*, 70, for a reading 1315. This would allow us to identify Ōšin as the king of Armenia, 1308–20, son of King Levon II and brother of Het'um II, and the Levon of the inscription with his young son and successor, the future King Levon IV, 1320–42. The katholikos, who is responsible for the reliquary, would be Constantine III, 1307–22. Babgen Kiwlēsērian and those following him read the inscription as 1325, which would also satisfy all three names, though the katholikos would then be Constan-

¹⁶ Details on the translation of the relics can be found in Charles W. Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra, Bari and Manhattan: Biography of a Legend* (Chicago, 1978).

tine IV, 1323–26, and Ōšin, the uncle and regent of the young Levon IV, assassinated when the latter became of age in 1329. The inscription, however, seems to read “in the time of King Ōšin and his son [*ordwoy nora*] Levon,” ruling out a reference to the regent Ōšin.

The principal inscription in the first person says, “I had this [dexter] made or restored.” The verb *kazmel* can mean to bring together, thus bind, but also to restore. Previous authorities interpreted it as meaning a restoration. There are a number of indications supporting this supposition. There are two inscriptions attached to the case (nos. 3 and 4), which seem to be unrelated to the relic of St. Nicholas. One (no. 4) was copied on the newly fashioned silver forearm during its consolidation in 1926. It mentions the right-hand relic of St. Stephen and a certain Bishop Sahak in the year 1179, if my reading is right.¹⁷ Anna Ballian, who studied the reliquary for exhibitions in Athens (2002) and most recently the remarkable Byzantine exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (2004), says, following Kiwlēsērian: “Both the reliquary of Saint Stephen and the name Bishop Sahak are unknown in the literature.”¹⁸ In fact, there exist two Armenian dexters of St. Stephen, one belonging to the priest Stephen, associated with the Hrip’simian martyrs of the fourth century, in the collection at Holy Etchmiadzin, and another of St. Stephen the Protomartyr, first century, now in the Armenian cathedral in Tabriz. As for Bishop Sahak, more than one is known, including a Bishop Sahak involved in the Armenian-Greek theological disputes of the 1170s and Sahak, Archbishop and Patriarch of Jerusalem (1152–80), who attended the Council of Hromkla in 1179.¹⁹ The inscription, though a twentieth century copy, shows every indication that it was faithfully copied from an earlier one. Its paleography satisfies a twelfth-century date because it appears to have been originally written in a mixed *erkat’agir-bolorgir* script, characteristic of the period.²⁰ Such mixed script is rarely found in Cilicia, rather it is characteristic of Greater Armenia, suggesting the reliquary it once belonged to was not of Cilician origin. The object on which it was originally found, a hand reliquary of St. Stephen, could have been presented by Sahak Patriarch of Jerusalem to the Holy See on the occasion of his visit in 1179. St. Stephen the Protomartyr was of course stoned to death in Jerusalem, and even though there is a strong tradition of the translation of his relics to Constantinople in the fifth century, this would not present an insurmountable argument for further remnants of the saint surviving in the Holy Land. The case for this band being from a dexter reliquary of St. Stephen is further strengthened by the interesting oval end (fig. 3) of the actual reliquary with the name and

symbol of St. Luke. It was Luke who recorded so carefully the speech of St. Stephen at his trial in chapter 6 of the Acts of the Apostles. The style and iconography of St. Luke’s symbol, the ox or bull holding his Gospel with head turned away to the left, is strikingly close to the same symbol in incipits (figs. 4a–b) of St. Luke in later twelfth-century Armenian manuscripts mostly originating in Greater Armenia.²¹ The orthography of the name NIKŌL also points to a pre-thirteenth century date when the classical *AW* diphthong gave way to the *Ō* in Cilician manuscripts, a borrowing from the West. It is likely, therefore, that the inscribed band mentioning St. Stephen and the oval end piece with “Lukas” were part of a lost arm relic of the Protomartyr brought to Cilicia from Jerusalem.

The other inscription, no. 3, on a band just above the filigree-decorated rectangle was apparently at one time part of a hand reliquary of St. Gregory the Illuminator. The words “St. Gregory’s hand” are clear, but the first line and especially the third line are difficult to decipher. If the reading Tēr T’eodorus proposed by Kiwlēsērian is correct,²² his suggestion that the reference is to Katholikos T’eodorus II (1382–92) would be a logical choice. The style of the script in a rounded *erkat’agir* is acceptable for that date.

The supposition that relics of more than one saint, including St. Gregory, St. Stephen, and St. Nicholas, might have once been included in a single reliquary, in this case a hand reliquary, seems to me to have little merit. Though in the Latin West there are hand or arm reli-

¹⁷ Kiwlēsērian, *History*, 1327; there is a typographical error of 1279, even though Kiwlēsērian read the Armenian letters used for dates correctly as 1179. This has led several scholars astray by a century.

¹⁸ Ballian, *Armenian Relics of Cilicia*, 88–90; Anne Ballian, “72. Arm Reliquary of Saint Nicholas,” in *Byzantium: Faith and Power* (1261–1557), ed. Helen C. Evans, exhib. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 2004), 137n2.

¹⁹ Hračia Ačařian, *Hayoc’ anjanunneri pařaran* (Dictionary of Armenian First Names), 4 (Erevan, 1948), 364, nos. 106–7.

²⁰ Michael E. Stone, “The Mixed Erkat’agir-Bolorgir Script in Armenian Manuscripts,” *Le Muséon* 111 (1998): 293–317; see also Michael Stone, Dickran Kouymjian, and Henning Lehmann, *Album of Armenian Paleography* (Aarhus, 2002), for examples.

²¹ Several examples, all of the second half of the twelfth century, have been published, notably Jerusalem, J1796, f. 142, Bezalel Narkiss, Michael Stone, Avedis Sanjian, *Armenian Art Treasures of Jerusalem* (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1979), 43, fig. 59; Erevan, ms. M7737, f. 335, V. O. Kazaryan and S. S. Manukyan, *Matenadaran* (Moscow, 1991), 88, fig. 174; Erevan, Gospels of 1166, M7347, f. 165, *Matenadaran*, 93, fig. 183.

²² See Kiwlēsērian, *History*, 1327; and Kouymjian, *Armenia sacra*, 276, for all five inscriptions.



Fig. 4a Detail of the Incipit St. Luke. Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate, ms. J1796, fol. 142

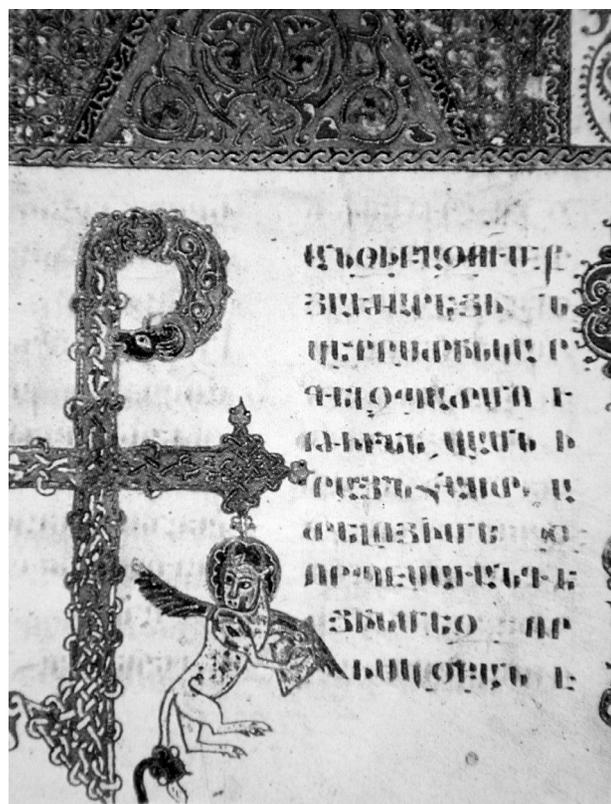


Fig. 4b Detail of the Incipit St. Luke. Erevan, Matenadaran, ms. M7737, fol. 335

quaries with the relics of more than one saint and among Armenian reliquaries, there are many with the remains of more than one saint, I know of no Armenian arm reliquary among the dexters I have cataloged that contains the remains of more than one person. Furthermore, since dexters of St. Stephen exist and several of St. Gregory, it is probable that the inscriptions were once part of these. Finally, considering the importance of the right hand of St. Gregory, founder of the Armenian Church, and its use in the blessing of the Holy Chrism, it is hard to imagine his arm relic being combined with those of another's in the same receptacle.

If the inscription of 1315 was one of restoration, when would the original reliquary have been fashioned? St. Nicholas became popular as a saint in the Latin and Byzantine Churches in the eleventh century, but there is little evidence that the cult became popular in Armenia before the mid-thirteenth century. The first Armenian representation of the saint is in a medallion on the Skevra triptych reliquary of 1293 now in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg.²³ The name is virtually unknown in Armenia before the 1240s but becomes very popular to-

ward the end of the thirteenth and in the fourteenth centuries. This was the time of the first Franciscan Pope, Nicholas IV (1288–92). During this period the king of Armenia was Het'um II, who is shown kneeling on the lower part of the inner right flap of the same Skevra reliquary. King Het'um himself was a Franciscan monk. The medallion of St. Nicholas on back of the dexter is of the standard St. Nicholas type, as we see in Byzantine and later Russian art; it is roughly similar to the portrait on the Skevra reliquary, though more finely carved. However, there is a difference in the identifying inscriptions of the two objects: S[OUR]P NIKAWLIOS in 1293 and S[OUR]P NIKAWL [NIKÖL] on the dexter of 1315. The oldest attestation of Nicholas as an Armenian first name is in this form, Niköl, the brother of a scribe working in Cilicia in 1241. Chronologically the next two occurrences of the form Niköl occur in the fifteenth century in a western context, that is in Poland and in the

²³ The St. Nicholas medallion was published as a detail in Alvida Mirzoyan, *Le reliquarie de Skevra* (New York, 1993), 80, unnumbered color reproduction.



Fig. 5 Old photo showing three dexters: St. Gregory the Illuminator, St. Sylvester, St. Nicholas. Photo taken in Aleppo after rescue of the relics from Sis in 1915 but before the restorations of 1926

Crimea.²⁴ Using the L instead of the more correct Armenian Լ (*GH*) suggests a clear Latinizing or Westernizing influence. Based on these considerations, I would date the original arm reliquary of St. Nicholas to the second half of the thirteenth century, but again as suggested above, the inscription of 1315 could also justify the fashioning of the reliquary at that time.

As to how the Armenian Church got the relics of St. Nicholas, though no direct evidence exists, it was probably from Italians trading in Cilicia, or even directly from Bari, where Armenians were settled and active from as early as the late tenth century.²⁵

The dexter of St. Nicholas was in part radically restored after its rescue from Sis. A photo (fig. 5) belonging to the Cilician Catholicosate taken in Aleppo after the reliquary was rescued from Sis along with other treasures before the advancing Turks at the moment of the genocide of 1915, but before the renovation of the three dexters, allows a comparison of the reliquary before and after its 1926 restoration (fig. 6). The principal six-line inscription on the wrist seems to be visible in the same place it is today. It is the lower part that has been reconstructed, or rearranged with the various pieces visible on the upper part of the dexter. The arm itself is now a single piece of dark silver, which was part of the original reliquary, because the rectangular object (called a window by Ballian) decorated with filigree and five colored stones is approximately, perhaps exactly, where it was on the old photo. The vertical three-line inscription band, which can be read with difficulty on the old photo, is now wrapped around the arm just above the rectangular ornament. The latter cannot be considered a



Fig. 6 Dexter of St. Nicholas before and after restoration

window, like those in European dexters, showing the relic bone underneath, because such usage is otherwise unknown among the fifty or so existing Armenian arm reliquaries.²⁶ The new inscription of restoration has been engraved on the silver body, just above this band. Finally, the upper floral band could be either the original band at that spot or one of the two long vertical bands (the one to the right on the old photo, fig. 6), recycled here, while the band at the bottom of the restored object seems to be the vertical segment to the left of the photo. The original bottom band seems to have

²⁴ Ačarian, *Dictionary*, 4, 76–77, nos. 1, 17, 21.

²⁵ Notarial acts from the tenth to the twelfth centuries mentioning Armenians in Bari, including several with signatures in Armenian, are preserved in archives in Bari, the Vatican, and other Italian libraries. Five of these are reproduced with explanation and bibliography in Claude Mutafian, *Roma-Armenia*, catalogue of an exhibition in the Vatican, March 24–July 16, 1999 (Rome, 1999), 200–201, 203. There is some suggestion that it was Armenians from Bari who were behind the translation of the relics from Myra; see C. D. Fonseca, “Tra gli Armeni dell’Italia Meridionale,” *Atti del Primo Simposio internazionale de Arte Armena (Bergamo, 28–30 Giugno 1975)* (Venice, 1978), 184–85.

²⁶ The single known Armenian example actually proves the point. What I have referred to as the fifth right-arm reliquary of St. Gregory the Illuminator, kept in the treasury of the church of San Gregorio Armeno in Nardo, Italy, has such a window through which a large slice of bone is visible. But of course this is a silver reliquary of Italian manufacture for an Italian church, with a proper stand to keep the dexter upright on the altar. It has a strange open hand in the Italian manner; see Kouymjian, “The Right Hand of St. Gregory,” 246, fig. 10. A similar Italian dexter with an open hand like a claw, on a stand and with a window, is of St. Davino Armeno, an eleventh-century pilgrim who died in Lucca. The reliquary, in the church of San Michele in Foro in Lucca, was fashioned in 1424 but has an eighteenth-century base; see Mutafian, *Roma – Armenia*, 240, fig. VIII, 5.

disappeared, for the old photo shows raised gem holders for stones. Pieces from the other side of the arm would also be missing. The old photo shows these various plaques almost hanging loose, giving the impression that the part of the arm relic starting after the wrist inscription was larger than the upper part, like that of St. Sylvester's reliquary (fig. 5) next to it, where the sleeves of a garment, as we see in medieval Western dexters, are intended.

There is a precious and moving description of the arm reliquary of St. Nicholas before restoration given to Coadjutor Katholikos Babgen Kiwlēsērian (1931–36) by Katholikos Sahak II (1902/3–39):

Letting St. Illuminator's dexter rest in peace, we freed [those of] Sts. Sylvester and Nicholas by stripping them of their rotten shrouds – their fetters and chains... St. Nicholas's dexter was crushed ..., patched, covered with crude nails and damaged – a true example of the suffering Armenian nation. After all, why should the sacred objects venerated by the Armenians have remained exempt from the perennial misery endured by the Armenian people! Like us, the dexters too have barely survived, going from one mountain to another, from one fortress to another, and then exiled to the deserts, reaching the brink of death.²⁷

How nice it would have been if Sahak Katholikos had ordered the jewelers in Aleppo responsible for the

restoration of all three dexters to open the casings, look inside them, record and perhaps even photograph what they found. But Katholikos Sahak was reluctant to touch what he considered sacred objects. Earlier, when Bishop Babgen (later Katholikos) had asked Sahak to remove the cloth shroud that wrapped the right arm reliquary of St. Gregory the Illuminator, the latter replied: "The many-layered covering or shroud of St. Illuminator's dexter is sealed in a few places with an illegible seal. Scruples do not permit touching and undoing it. Besides, I suspect that it is in a crushed state like that of St. Nicholas, accounting for its being carefully wrapped and tied thus. If we dare undo it and my suspicions prove correct, we will not be able to have it photographed."²⁸

It would be just as nice if today His Holiness Aram I, Katholikos of the Great House of Cilicia, would allow the three arm reliquaries to be x-rayed.²⁹ That would give us both an idea of the construction of objects and also some notion of what bones might be inside. So far he has refused, but he is still young.

²⁷ Kiwlēsērian, *History*, 1326; unpublished partial English translation of the last part of the *History* kindly supplied by Aris Sevag, typescript, 52.

²⁸ Kiwlēsērian, *History*, 1328; Sevag, trans., 53.

²⁹ An x-ray of a European arm reliquary from Hildesheim, ca. 1195, with the bone very apparent can be seen on the Cleveland Museum of Art Web site (June 17, 2008) at www.clevelandart.org/exhibcef/consexhib/html/howar.html.



Colorplate XXIV. Right arm (dexter) Armenian reliquary of St. Nicholas. Antelias, Cilician Museum of the Armenian Katholosate of Cilicia