
Historical Testimonies of the Presence of Armenian Monks in Holy Mount Athos in 9th-18th Centuries

Gevorg S. Kazaryan

Holy Mount Athos — one of the biggest centers of Orthodox monasticism, from the first days of its formation appeared to be the place of asceticism for Armenian monks as well. Thus, one of the first ascetics of Athos was St. Joseph Myroblyte (9th cent.) — Armenian by nationality. Further influx of Armenian monks to the Holy Mount is observed in the 10th and 11th centuries. The last testimony of activity of Armenian Hagiorites refers the second half of 18th cent. This article for the first time attempts to bring together and analyze historical evidences, in order to give a more general and a more comprehensive picture of Armenian monks' presence in Athos from 9th to 18th centuries.

Keywords: Holy Mount Athos, monasticism, Iveron, Orthodox Armenians, Chalcedonian Armenians, Armenia, Tayk.

Relationship and Activities: none.

Gevorg S. Kazaryan — PhD Student, Department of Church History, Faculty of Theology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Greece), Teacher of Ancient Armenian Language (Grabar) in Oriental Christianity Research Laboratory at the Faculty of Theology NKUA.

Corresponding author: dngevorg@gmail.com

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The Athos Peninsula, crowned by the mountain of the same name, from the 10th century and to this day was and is the largest center of Orthodox monasticism. The gradual formation of Athos as a place of monastic residence began as early as the 7th century, but the first reliable information about the residence of hermit monks on Athos dates back to the 9th century. The first mention of the Armenian presence on the Holy Mountain also belongs to this period¹. It is known that about 859 St. Euthymius the New (823-898), met a certain monk, Joseph. Scant, but valuable information about Joseph is reported by and Euthymius' disciple and biographer, the Basil III, Archbishop of Thessaloniki (904-?). According to his *Vita*, Joseph "came from the kind of Armenians" ("ἀπὸ Ἀρμενίων τὸ γένος κατήγετο") and "lived on Athos for a long time" [*Petit* 1904:28, 30]. Basil of Thessalonica characterizes Joseph as a man "not malignant, simple-minded, and guileless" [*Petit* 1904:29-30]. Euthymius and Joseph for some time pledged together on the Holy Mountain, but later, fearing an invasion of Arab pirates, they moved to the vicinity of Vrastama (modern: Vrasta) on the Halkidiki peninsula (northwest of Athos). Here approx. 875 Joseph died in his cave cell. Basil of Thessaloniki, as an eyewitness, testifies to the miracle of the incorruptible relics of Joseph. "And not only that," adds Basil, "but God created so that the fragrant ointment would flow from the temples of the saint when we were there. Miro was so abundant that from the sacred head, like a river, it reached his pure feet" [*Petit* 1904:37]. Because of the miracle described, Joseph is known as "Myrrh-streaming". His memory is celebrated on November 19th, and in Vrastam the cave of the Armenian hermit is still a place of pilgrimage [*Μωϋσῆς Ἀγιορείτης* 2008:127]. Thus, Joseph the Myrrh-streaming is the first Athos inhabitant — the Holy Mountain (ἁγιορείτης), about whom authentic historical evidence has been preserved (Fig. 1).

The flourishing of Athos monasticism is inextricably bound to the names of St. Athanasius of Athos (920/30-1004), Emperor Nicephorus II Phocas (963-969) and his nephew John I Tzimiskes (969-976)². Athanasius (his secular name was Abraham) was born in Trebizond. His father was from Antioch and his mother was from Colchis. He took monastic tonsure in 953 at the Kiminsk monastery of St. Michael Malein. Here Athanasius met the nephews of St. Michael — the brothers Nicephorus and Leo Fokami³, becoming

¹ For the first time, this topic was in depth highlighted by Acad. R. M. Bartikyan in two works dedicated to the Armenian presence in Byzantium [*Bartikyan* 2003:43-47; *Μπαρτικιάν* 1991:62-63, 77-79]. In our article, based on Bartikyan's research, an attempt is made to deepen the topic and take it beyond the chronological framework of the Middle Ages.

² Emperor Tzimiskes (in Armenian: Chmshik) came from the Kurkuas (Gurgen) family. About the representatives of this Byzantine aristocratic family of Armenian origin: [*Kazhdan* 1975:13-14]. As patron and benefactor of the Great Lavra, John Tzimiskes is considered its second patron after Nicephorus Phocas.

³ It should be noted that the Phokas family apparently had a mixed, Greek-Armenian origin. According to P. Kharanis, the paternal line of the Phokas was Greek, and the maternal line was of Armenian origin [*Charanis* 1965:39].



Fig. 1. Reverend Joseph myrrh-streaming icon (author G. S. Kazarian), 2014.

their spiritual father. In 958 Athanasius moved to Athos, and in 961, immediately after the conquest of Crete by Nicephorus by Phoca, yielding to the admonitions of the glorious military leader, he proceeded to found the first large monastery on Athos, which received the name “Great Lavra”. Eight years after the founding of the Lavra, John Tzimiskes approved the first official charter (typicon) of Mount Athos — “Tragos”. The charter was signed by Athanasius and 55 Athonite abbots [*Παναγιωτάκης* 1962, Col. 866]. Soon the fame of the Great Lavra spread everywhere, so that, according to the biographers of St. Athanasia, many came to the Lavra “from various nations, languages, clans, cities ... from Rome itself, Italy, Calabria, Amalfia, Iberia, Armenia and even deeper (lands), and not only from unknown and rootless, but also from the respectable as wealth and family ...” [*Noret* 1982:74-75]⁴.

⁴ *Ibid.* — P. 176. By “Iberia” the author means the region of Taik.

Among the foreigners who arrived at the Lavra was Abulherit-John (c. 930-1005) — a former courtier of David Kuropalat (+ 1001), king of Taik⁵. Abulherit was born in the city of Artanuja in the province of Kgarjk (Georgian Klarjeti), distinguished himself in the military field, but retired from the world and took monastic vows in the Thai monastery Chordvank (in Georgian Otkhtaeklesia, in Turkish Derd-Kilisa), receiving the name John. Abulherit-John, nicknamed “the Iberian”⁶, arrived in the Great Lavra in about 972 and became one of the closest companions of Athanasius the Athonite. The former courtier bore the obedience of the monastery cook for two years, and in 976, on the instructions of Athanasius, John the Iberian went to Constantinople to see the emperor John, with whom he had a personal acquaintance. Tzimiskes confirmed the privileges of the Lavra, doubled the annual contribution of the monastery and increased the number of monks to 120 [*Παναγιωτάκης* 1962, Col. 867].

In 979/80 another Thayk nobleman arrived on Athos — a relative of John (brother or nephew of his wife) — Tornik (+ 984) with his brother Varazvache⁷. Tornik was the son of the Azat Zurvanel (ἄζάτος Ζουρβανέλης)⁸ mentioned by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos (913-920, 944-959). Together with his brother Varazvache, Tornik left his military career and took monastic vows at the Oshk (Oshkvank) monastery. It is noteworthy that both brothers received the name “John”, probably in honor of John the Baptist, to whom the monastery was dedicated. Between 976-979 Tornik erected a khachkar in the city

⁵ Taik is one of the 15 provinces of the state of Great Armenia and the feud of the princely family of Mamikonyans. During the domination of the Arabs Taik gradually passed into the possession of the central Bagratids. In the X century. The Bagratids, who established themselves in the neighboring province of Kgarjk, extended their power to Taik, forming a new state unit, which in Georgian sources is known as Tao Klarjeti. In the region from the IX century. the jurisdiction of the Catholicos of Eastern Georgia (Kartli) began to be established, services in Orthodox communities and monasteries were conducted in the Georgian language, although the overwhelming majority of the Taika population were ethnic Armenians. The Taika kingdom reached its highest prosperity under the local king David Kuropalat (961-1000). In the XI century. in the former kingdom, the power of the basileus of the Romans was established, and the theme of Iberia was formed here. On various issues related to the history and culture of Tayk [*Historical Tayk* 2019].

⁶ On the ambiguity of the term “Iberian”: [*Arutyunova-Fidanyan* 1973:46-67].

⁷ In presenting the main moments of Tornik's life, we rely on the research of N. Adonts, who has critically reviewed hagiographic and historical data [*Adonts* 1965:297-318].

⁸ According to N. Adonts, the homeland of Tornik was High Armenia, the Karin region, and the Tornikyan family (Greek “Tornikiev”) was a branch of the Taron Bagratids [*Adontz* 1965:309-310]. In the opinion of Fr. Nerses Akinyan Tornikians were a branch of the Mamikonyans [*Akinyan* 1938]. V. P. Stepanenko rejects the connection of the Tornik family with the Tornikians, but regarding its ethnic origin he concludes: “The family was most likely of Armenian origin, and the opinion of his contemporary Stepanos Taronatsi that Tornik considered himself already a Georgian is confirmed by the cultural activities of him and his relatives” [*Stepanenko* 1999:147]. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Taronatsi himself considers Tornik to be a Georgian (perhaps because of confessional reasons?). Without reporting anything about Tornik's self-identification. It should, of course, be borne in mind that inter-dynastic and therefore inter-ethnic marriages were accepted in aristocratic families, therefore, it is impossible to categorically exclude either Armenian or Georgian roots of the Thai nobles. But at the same time, if this or that aristocratic family had certain roots and remembered its pedigree, then could he abandon it as easily as it might seem at first glance? After all, to know always cherished her roots, because from it guaranteed the legitimacy of their feudal power and rights.



Fig. 2. The ruins of the tower in place of the Athonite monastery of Armenian (photo G. S. Kazarian).

of Arzn with an Armenian inscription [Adontz 1965:309]. Another khachkar with a similar inscription was known at the Ani church of St. Gregory the Illuminator, built by Tigran Onents. The inscription of the Ani khachkar was previously attributed to Varazvache, but after reading the inscription by S. Barkhudaryan, it can also be attributed to Tornik, “the son of Chortvanik” [Orbeli 1966:64].

In 978, Varda Phokas sent the Osh monk John Tornik as an intermediary to David Kuropalat in suppressing the uprising of Bardas Skleros. On March 24, 979, Tornik, at the head of the Armenian-Georgian army of the Couropalatos, defeated Skleros on the Pankalei field. After that, the warrior-monk departed for Athos.

The image shows a handwritten signature in two lines. The top line is in Greek script, reading 'ΑΘΩΣ ΠΡΟΤ ΘΕΟΚΤΙΣΤΗΣ'. The bottom line is in Armenian script, reading 'Աթոսի պրօտ թեօկտիստի' (Athos prot theoktist).

Fig. 3. Signature of Athos prot Theoktist in Greek and Armenian.

Abulkherit-John and Tornik with their compatriots, by permission of Athanasius of Athos, left the Great Lavra and in 979-984. on the site of the deserted monastery of Clement they founded their own monastery, called Μονή Ἰβήρων, i.e. monastery of Iberians. Tornik is considered the main teacher of Iveron, and the initial core of the brethren was about 6-7 people. Gradually, the Iveron Monastery expanded, not only “Iberians” — Orthodox Georgians and Armenians, but also Greeks were admitted to the number of brethren. At the very beginning of the life of the monastery, monks from Italy also worked here.

By 1005, the number of brethren was over 200. In that year, after the death of John the Iberian his son Euthymius (955-1028) became abbot, known primarily as a translator from Greek into Georgian church literature⁹. Thus, a new translation of the Gospel, carried out by the still young Euthymius, was sent as a gift to David Kuropalat. Later, Euthymius, at the invitation of Kuropalat, visited Taik and Georgia, where he spent four years.

Iveron's flourishing continued during the years of the abbes of John Iber's nephew — George I (1044-1065), whose monastic path began in the Taik monastery of Khakhy (Georgian: Khakhuli).

Remarkable is the manuscript that has come down to us from the beginning of the 11th century, created in Iveron and containing those translated as early as the 7th-8th centuries (probably in Taik or Hereti) into the Georgian language of the lives of Armenian saints, unknown or little known in Byzantium (Virgin Sandukht, Nerses the Great, Vardan Mamikonyan, etc.) [Muradyan 2008]. According to P. M. Muradyan, the Iberonian manuscript was obviously created to meet the spiritual needs of the Armenian monks of the monastery, who had already lost their native language. Another argument for the presence of Armenians in Iveron is that during the abbes of Euthymius, an imperial Armenian

⁹ Interestingly enough, according to the Georgian life of John and Euthymius of Athos, John gave his son, who had previously lived with his maternal grandfather Abukharb in Constantinople, to study Georgian and Greek. It follows from this that Euthymius did not speak Georgian. Moreover, the life reports that the boy began to speak Georgian fluently after the miraculous healing of the Mother of God [Vita 1917-1919:32-33]. The fact that Euthymius did not know Georgian even at a colloquial level suggests that Euthymius's mother tongue was exactly Armenian. Consequently, even if we categorically exclude the Armenian roots of John the Iberian himself, then at least from the maternal side, Euthymius of Athos was of Armenian origin. To this can be added the fact that Tornik was a relative of Euthymius precisely from the maternal side.



Fig. 4. Athos monastery of St. Dionysius, 2014 (photo G. S. Kazarian).

dignitary arrived in Iveron with his nephew, who converted to Orthodoxy (through baptism) with the name Arseny [Vita 1917-1919:50]. Obviously, the choice of Iveron as a dignitary was determined by the fact that among the brethren of the monastery there were also Armenians.

Another evidence of the Armenian presence on Mount Athos in the late 11th — early 12th centuries. is a short canonical prescription written by the Patriarch of Constantinople Nicholas III the Grammaticus (1084-1111) to the Protos of the Holy Mountain (“Nicholas, the Holy Patriarch of Constantinople, Composition to the Protos of the Holy Mountain, as if the Typikon in order”), in which the patriarch

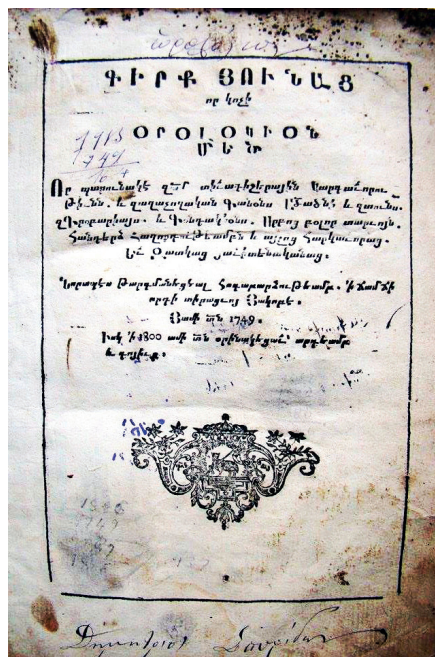


Fig. 5. Title page of an Orthodox book of Hours in Grabar (Constantinople, 1800).

condemning the custom of some laymen and monks to break the fast on Wednesday and Friday in the third week before Great Lent (i.e. from the week of the prodigal son to the week of meat-eating)¹⁰, leaves an exception for (new converts) Orthodox Armenians [Νικολάου 1863:404]¹¹.

Approximately in the second half. X century. in the Athos town of Xirokastron (Ξηρόκαστρον), Μονή Ἀρμενίου (Armenian monastery) or Ἀρμενίων (Armenians) was founded. According to its location, the monastery was also called “Ksirokastru”. The monastery dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy (Ἐλεοῦσα) may have been founded by the Taronian monks who arrived on the Holy Mountain after 967/968 [Nastase 1985:280]. Like all the first monasteries of Athos (except for the Lavra), the Armenion Monastery was a simple one-story building with few cells. It is known that in 980 a representative of the monastery Theodore signed one bill of sale [Χρήστου 1987:68].

At the end of X — beginning XI century in the deserted monastery of Armenians, the Lavra monk Savva settled. Uncle Savva acquired part of the territory of the monastery from a certain monk Theodosius Sidirokavst, while the other part was donated by the monk Basil. At his own expense, Savva built a church and cells in the Armenian monastery, together with his novices Georgy and Ignatius, planted a vineyard. Nikita, a monk and presbyter of an Armenian monastery (“τον Ἀρμενην” (sic), signed one Athonite document of 1021 [Archives de l’Athos 1985:232]. Between 1023–1038 the already sick Savva gave Moni Armeniou the possession of the Great Lavra with a deed of gift, which ensured the further life of the monastery [Actes de l’Athos 1969:4–7].

In 1045, the abbot of the monastery Nikephoros, among other abbots, signed the new Athonite Typicon of Constantine IX Monomakhos (1042–1055), and in 1087 Abbot Ksirokastru Savva held the position of proto Athos [Παπαχρυσάνθου 1992:351].

Between 1169–1259 the monastery was again transferred into the possession of the Great Lavra, and until 1513 it passed to the Zograf monastery [Χρήστου 1987:68]. According to other sources, the monastery was abolished (it is not known when) and transferred to the Constamoni monastery, which erected a defensive tower (pyrg) on the site of the former monastery [Δωρόθεος μοναχός 1986:431]. Today, the majestic ruins of this tower, located between the marinas of the Zograf and

¹⁰ In the third week before Great Lent, in the tradition of the Armenian Apostolic Church, a strict five-day Forward Fast (Armenian: Arajavork) is celebrated, which ends on Saturday with the feast of St. Sargis Stratilatos. In the Middle Ages, within the framework of the Byzantine-Armenian dogmatic and liturgical polemics, the issue of the local fasting of Armenians incomprehensible to the Byzantines, having absorbed all kinds of popular rumors and compromising legends, became one of the most burning topics for the clash of two church traditions. Patriarch Nicholas, thus, allows the Armenian monks-agiorites to break the fast in the designated week in order to avert suspicions from them about their Orthodoxy.

¹¹ Migne published this work under the name of Patriarch Nicholas I the Mystic (901–907, 912–925), but in fact its author is Patriarch Nicholas III Grammaticus [Κωνσταντινίδης 1967:130–131].

Konstamoni monasteries, greet every pilgrim who enters the Athos land¹² (Fig. 2).

The presence of Armenian monks on Mount Athos was not limited only to the monasteries of Iveron and Armenion. Thus, the most ancient document of the Athonite monastery Esphigmen (Esfigmenou), dating back to 1001, was signed by its abbot Theoktistus the Armenian. Theoktistus was a very active and authoritative person, from 1035 to 1040. was the prototype of the Holy Mountain [*Bartikyan* 1973:68-71]¹³.

In the Athos document of 1035 Theoktistus left his own handwritten signature in Greek and Armenian. The Greek signature reads † Θεόκτηστος μ [ο] ν [α] χ [ός] († “Theoktistus the Monk”), and the Armenian one reads “Իմ ձեռքս գրեցի Թեոկտիստսն մն¹⁴ 14 †” (“He wrote with his own hand — Theoktist m [ο] n [ah] †”) (Fig. 3). Another Athos protagonist with Armenian roots is Gregory, who descended from the Dzundzuluk family (from the Armenian ճնճղնկ — sparrow) and lived at the turn of the XI-XII centuries [*Bartikyan* 2000:146].

In the late Byzantine era, there is no information about the residence of monks, who came from Armenia, on Athos. This, perhaps, is explained not so much by the difficult times in the life of the Holy Mountain itself, as by the difficult circumstances of Armenian history, as a result of which the number of Orthodox communities in Armenia has sharply decreased.

The later mention of the Armenian presence on Athos dates back to the 2nd half of the 18th century. We are talking about a monk Arsenius, originally from the village of Vank, Akn region (Western Armenia, now — the territory of Turkey). Vank and the nearby villages — Dzorak, Shrzu and Mushegka — were known as a place of compact residence of Orthodox Armenians, the so-called. khai khorum (Armenian-Greek)¹⁵. Monk Arsenius was the son of a priest from Vank Mark and lived in the Athonite monastery of St. Dionisius (Fig. 4). On September 12, 1762, Arsenius began to rewrite the Armenian translation of the Orthodox Book of Hours, made with the Greek translator Hakob Chamchioglu in 1749-1757. Arsenius was helped by the monk Margar, providing him with the necessary materials and providing support. It is known that the worldly name of Margara was Mark, he was the son of a certain Aslan and, apparently, came from the same village of Vank. The works of the two monks ended five years later — on May 12, 1767. The Orthodox Book of Hours in Armenian based on the manuscript of Arsenius

¹² The tower, called the “Old” (Παλαιόπυργος), was apparently built before 1475. Description, surviving historical evidence and images of the Old Tower, see: [*Οι πύργοι* 2002:146-149].

¹³ It should be noted that in the article Abbot Esfigmen and Proto Athos Theoktist the Armenian is confused with the Abbot of the Great Lavra Theoktist. The latter served as hegumen of the Lavra for only one year — in 1010 [*Δωρόθεος μοναχός* 1986:227]. Also, the word “monk” is missing from the decoding of Theoktist’s Greek signature.

¹⁴ The letters մն can be deciphered as մ [hwlǝ] ն or մ [nlwqn] ն, i.e. “monk”. R. Bartikyan seems to have missed this detail as well.

¹⁵ About this remarkable sub-ethnic group of the Armenian people, see: [*Kazaryan* 2016; *Kazaryan* 2019].

Dionysiatius was published in Constantinople in 1800 [*Akinyan* 1951:249-252] (Fig. 5).

Thus, the Armenian presence on Mount Athos is attested from the very beginning of monastic activity on it. If at the initial stage these were individual ascetics, like St. Joseph the Myhrer, then in the X-XI centuries. there is a more organized influx of Armenian devotees to the Lot of the Mother of God. This phenomenon is connected, on the one hand, with the rapid flourishing of Hagiorite monasticism, and on the other hand, apparently, with an increase in the number of Orthodox communities in Armenia, which took place in parallel with the spread of the power of the Basileus of the Romans (Roman-Byzantine emperor) in the country in the designated century. During this period, as we have already seen, the presence of Armenian monks is attested in the Great Lavra, in Iveron, in Esphigmen, and also in the monastery of Armenians. Unfortunately, the paucity of sources does not allow us to have a more detailed and comprehensive idea of the activities of Armenians on Athos. It is also noteworthy that, although with a large chronological gap, the Armenian presence on the Holy Mountain continued until the second half of the 18th century. It is especially noteworthy that for centuries the Armenian Hagiorites, represented by their representatives such as Proto Pheeoktistus or the monk Arsenius Dionisiatus, were tied to their mother tongue, signing documents in it and rewriting the liturgical texts in Armenian.

Relationship and Activities: none.

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