

# VISIONS AND SYMBOLISM OF THE CROSS IN SOME EARLY ARMENIAN TEXTS\*

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*Abstract* — In his voluminous scholarly production, Fr. Boghos Levon Zekiyan has laid the groundwork for exploring numerous research questions within Armenian studies. His contributions to our understanding of medieval Armenian spirituality, theology, and ecclesiology are milestones in the field. The present article builds on his work and intuitions and seeks to look into the theology and symbolism of the cross in three late antique Armenian sources as a way of celebrating Fr. Levon's rich legacy in the field of Armenology and his unique stature as a spiritual leader. The present work will explore the multiplicity of experiences and narratives on the cross in late antique Armenia by focusing on the *Life of Maštoc'*, the so-called *Oft-Repeated Discourses (Yačaxapatum Čark')*, and Agat'angelos *History of the Armenians*, highlighting their shared themes, but also differences in their approaches to the multiple realities associated with the cross.

*Keywords* — Armenian spirituality; Veneration of the cross; Visions of the cross; Theology; Soteriology; Asceticism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

From a sign of 'scandal', the cross soon acquired multiple meanings in Christian theology, soteriology, spirituality, political theory and superstition. Armenian Christianity was part of this evolving and ever-transforming cultural processes. In one of his articles dedicated to the importance of the cross in Armenian Christianity — as a material object, symbol, and focus of spiritual and theological reflections — Fr. Boghos Levon Zekiyan has remarked on the

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intensità ben percepibile persino nella frequenza quantitativa della sua raffigurazione, senza dubbio insolita in altre culture cristiane, da rasentare, si direbbe, quasi l'ossessione.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the visual or material representations of the cross, as well as the gesture of crossing oneself as a theological/Christological symbol and mode of behaviour respectively, reached Armenia with the earliest Christian missionaries. Before the fifth century the different meanings of the cross must have been transmitted through oral teaching, while crossing oneself was part of the Christian baptismal catechesis. In fact, during the baptismal ritual, at different stages, either the candidate or the water and/or oil were blessed with the sign of the cross. The ceremony also included (and still does) an “explanation of the great mystery of the Cross and the burial”.<sup>2</sup> From the voluminous literary production of early Christian Armenia this article takes into consideration three sources as exemplary representatives and seeks to demonstrate the diversity of reflections on the cross in Armenia in late antiquity.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. THE CROSS: IMAGES, GESTURES, WORDS, PRACTICES

### 2.1 *Life of Maštoc'* and *Oft-Repeated Discourses (Yačaxapatum Čaik')*: Soteriology, Legitimation and the Ascetic Ideal

The earliest texts composed in Armenian are not unanimous in their approaches and understandings of the cross. This is true both qualitatively and quantitatively. Two of the texts selected for this study — Koriwn's *Life of Maštoc'* (c. 435) and an anonymous author's *Oft-Repeated Discourses* (late sixth century) — although separated from each other by more than a hundred years, exhibit shared interests and themes when evoking the cross. Firstly, both have surprisingly very few references to the cross. Secondly, when they do, these occur in contexts that denote calls for or exaltation of

<sup>1</sup> Zekiyān 2006, 63.

<sup>2</sup> Winkler 1982, 185 for the Armenian texts. On the various occasions where the cross is invoked in gestures, as well as explanations on the origin of the units in the ritual, see Winkler 1982, 111-2, 118, 139-41, 145, 148-9, 170-2, 442.

<sup>3</sup> This paper focuses on three written sources and their reflections on the cross. Nevertheless, one cannot but mention, at least in passing, that for the study of the cross in the Armenian culture the immense material/artistic legacy of *xač'k'ars* or 'cross stones' is fundamental. Although this article will not include a discussion of this crucial subject, the reader is directed to Petrosyan 2008 as a starting point on research into this unique artistic and spiritual heritage.

the ascetic way of life. In the latter case the influence of biblical verses in shaping both author's thought, particularly Gal 5:24, is noteworthy.

In the *Life of Maštoc*' the cross is hailed as a symbol of glory or “the cross of glory” on the occasion of Maštoc's “conversion” to ascetic life.<sup>4</sup>

...եւ առեալ զխաչն պարճանաց՝ ելանէր զկնի ամենակեցոյց խաչելոյն: Եւ հանեալ հրամանացն՝ ի խաչակիր գունդն Քրիստոսի խառնէր, եւ անդէն վարվաղակի ի միայնակեցական կարգ մտանէր.

...and taking the cross of glory he followed the crucified redeemer of all. And conceding to the command, he mingled with the cross-bearing host of Christ and soon after entered the rank of the solitaires

Becoming an ascetic meant taking up the cross in an *imitatio Christi*. The solitaires whom Maštoc' joined were marked by the cross — they were “the cross-bearing host of Christ”.

Besides this context of ascetic lifestyle, the other occasion where the *Life of Maštoc*' mentions the cross is at the saint's deathbed. From the perspective of literary history this passage is significant since it is the first narration of a *Vision of the Cross* composed in Armenian. In the following centuries, there will appear more ‘native’ compositions on this theme, not to mention translations and adaptations of several *Visions of the Cross* that were extremely popular in all the languages of Christianity. Among them, Emperor Constantine's *Vision of the Cross* with its numerous variants was as widespread in Armenia as in many other parts of the late antique and medieval world.<sup>5</sup> In the *Life of Maštoc*' the saint raises his hands towards heaven before expiring and at that moment a cross-shaped vision of light shines above the palace where he rested, visible to all present. It is telling how the author Koriwn — a disciple of Maštoc' — substantiates the authenticity of this apparition. He insists that the witnesses saw the cross “for themselves” rather than being told by friends:<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Abelyan 1980, 86. See also the brief remarks of Uluhogian 2006, 99 on this excerpt, who thinks that this interpretation of the cross is in line with Gal 6:14. Other Pauline verses from the same Epistle — Gal 5:24 — are behind references to the cross and the ascetic lifestyle in the *Yačaxapatum Čarġk*'. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. I have opted for more literal translations for the sake of precision, at times at the expense of fluidity in English.

<sup>5</sup> On these visions and their translations into Armenia see in general van Esbroeck 1982. This subject is the focus of a forthcoming study by the present author: *Visions of the Cross and the Discovery of the True Cross: Translation, Reception, Composition in Armenian (V-VII centuries)*. On some later expansions and adaptations of *Visions of the cross* from the Constantinian period in Armenian sources, see Pogossian 2019, 142, 153, 155, 168, 196. See also note 26 for further bibliography.

<sup>6</sup> Abelyan 1980, 140.

Եւ մինչդեռ ձեռք սրբոյն ընդ երկինս կարկառեալ էին, տեսիլ սքանչելի խաչանման լուսաւոր շողաւոր ձեւ երեւէր ի վերայ ապարանիցն, յորում երանելիին վախճանէր, գոր ամենայն ուրում ինքնատես եղեալ, եւ ոչ առ յընկերէ պատմեալ.

And while the saint raised his hands to heaven, a wondrous luminous vision of rays in cross-like shape appeared above the mansion where the blessed one was dying, which everyone saw for themselves as opposed to friends telling them.

The luminous cross accompanies the funerary procession of Maštoc<sup>7</sup> as his body was transported to the village of Ōšakan for burial.<sup>7</sup> The appearance of the cross was one of the elements in this narrative that validated and confirmed Maštoc<sup>8</sup>'s sanctity — the main subject of this hagiographic composition. Although there are no overt verbal parallels with other early Christian texts on the apparitions or visions of the cross, this succinct formulation testifies that knowledge of such tales was anything but unfamiliar in the Armenian milieu and the motif had acquired its significance as a legitimising *topos*. Moreover, describing the vision itself was not enough to seal the sanctity of a charismatic figure such as Maštoc<sup>9</sup> but it had to be validated. Koriwn, thus, felt a pressing need to confirm the vision's veracity by appealing to numerous eye-witnesses rather than hearsay. Such religious-cultural references, where the vision of the cross played a crucial role in a hagiographical composition and the authentication of sainthood, were certainly not lost to the contemporary or future readers and hearers of his text.

The significance of the cross and Christ's death on the cross as a metaphor for asceticism is understandably highlighted also in *Yačaxapatum Čark'* or *Oft-Repeated Discourses*, a collection of homilies composed as exhortations for monks at the end of the sixth century.<sup>8</sup> Another fundamental and natural context where the cross is brought forth in this collection is the soteriological one. In some of the *Discourses* these two themes are intertwined.

In *Discourse 2, 6, 9* and *15* the cross is the instrument of salvation first and foremost. It led to Jesus' crucifixion which was the supreme act for the deliverance of the human race and victory over death, as well as

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Yačaxapatum Čark'* 1838. The *Yačaxapatum* have been translated to English with a thorough commentary by Abraham Terian 2021. I have adopted his translation of the title as *Oft-Repeated Discourses*. On the dating of the core of this collection to between 485 and 510, see Zekiyan 2005. However, Terian's detailed study and identification of the sources of *Yačaxapatum*, among which the *Teaching of St Gregory*, convincingly date them to the end of the sixth century. See Terian 2021, 41-7.

reconciliation with the Father. The cross will perform this soteriological function also at the Second Coming.<sup>9</sup> In *Discourse 5, 9, 10, 11* and *13*, the ascetic rejection of the world is associated with the crucifixion of the body and the practitioner is engaged in an admirable *imitatio Christi* to the point of being considered as “co-crucified” with Him.<sup>10</sup> In *Discourse 5* the negation of all physical needs and desires as a path to the Kingdom of Heaven is placed against the background of the main purpose of true Christians as defined by Apostle Paul: “Զի որ քրիստոսեանքն են, ասէ առաքեալ, զմարմինս իւրեանց ի խաչ հանին կարեաւ եւ ցանկութեամբ հանդերձ (Gal 5:24) / The Apostle says: *Those who belong to Christ have raised their flesh on the cross with its passions and desires (Gal 5:24)*”.<sup>11</sup> *Discourse 9* similarly connects the rejection of evil through baptism to joining “virgins and saints”. These are then explicitly linked to the idea of the “crucifixion of the flesh” as per Gal 5:24 once more. *Discourse 11* considers the ascetics as “co-crucified” (խաչակից եղեն) with Jesus. We find Gal 5:24 again alluded to in *Discourse 13*.<sup>12</sup> There is, thus, a consistent leitmotif according to which asceticism took its inspiration from Gal 5:24 and that verse encapsulated the notion of crucifying one’s body for the sake of Christ through ascetic practices.

The *Life of Maštoc’*, too, had established a link between Maštoc’'s choice of asceticism and the crucifixion. While the underlying concept in these two sources is similar or even the same, the verbal formulations are different. This precludes a literary dependence of the *Discourses* on the *Life of Maštoc’*. At the same time, the shared theme implies the diffusion of this ideal in early Christian Armenia where the *Life of Maštoc’* and the *Oft-Repeated Discourses* stand as independent witnesses. Considering that almost two centuries separate the composition of the two texts, their shared views on asceticism indicate the longevity and persistence of such ideas. We can, thus, safely state that the cross acquired and over the centuries maintained a crucial symbolic value within ascetic communities as an instrument leading towards an ideal lifestyle of rejecting the world. The cross, thus, instilled a profound spiritual meaning to the nascent and developing monastic movement, endowing the monks with the allure of being engaged in a voluntary crucifixion of one’s body in an *imitatio Christi*.

<sup>9</sup> *Yačaxapatum Čaik’* 1838, 18, 49, 84, 155.

<sup>10</sup> *Yačaxapatum Čaik’* 1838, 44, 78, 94, 118, 122, 137-8.

<sup>11</sup> *Yačaxapatum Čaik’* 1838, 37-8.

<sup>12</sup> *Yačaxapatum Čaik’* 1838, 78, 118, 137-8.

## 2.2 *Agat'angelos: a Bedazzling Multiplicity of Symbolism and the Materiality of the Cross*

The depth, richness and especially the range of reflections on the cross set *Agat'angelos History of the Armenians* quite apart from the *Life of Maštoc'* or the *Oft-Repeated Discourses*.<sup>13</sup> Such quantitative and qualitative differences cannot be underestimated. Moreover, as is well-known, under the enigmatic name of *Agat'angelos* we have a composite text, with different narrative units that were brought together c. 460s.<sup>14</sup> It is, thus, not surprising to find an internal diversity within *Agat'angelos*, with varying approaches to the cross, not to mention the very different theological or even philosophical rigor in formulating relevant ideas throughout the entire text.

*Agat'angelos* adduces a whole gamut of descriptions and functions of the cross as a symbol and material object: crosses appear in visions, they indicate or rather sanctify *a priori* locations where churches are to be erected; cruciform gestures are performed by the protagonists of the *History*, for example during the baptismal ceremony of King Trdat and his people; St Gregory the Illuminator employs physical crosses during his evangelising mission often epitomising the victory of the new faith and the demise of 'idolatry' in Armenia. *Agat'angelos* skillfully unfolds the complex interplay between the cross as an abstract symbol and the physical cross as representing the (new) concept of divinity. Furthermore, he insists that the reverence for the material object in the shape of a cross should not be confused with the veneration of idols, a warning that is articulated via a speech by St Gregory the Illuminator himself. *Agat'angelos'* meditations on the cross as a visual and spiritual symbol of the new faith and a detailed theological exposition on the precise workings of this change are noteworthy and I will dwell on them at greater length than other notions expressed in this text.

One of the most celebrated visions narrated in *Agat'angelos*, which is of notable relevance to this paper, is the *Vision of St Gregory* (§§731-756). According to the text of the received Armenian tradition (Aa) and translations dependent on it, Gregory was granted the vision while he was in Vałaršapat. Indeed, the town took its later name Ējmiacin — literally "[where] the Only Begotten descended" — precisely due to this very

<sup>13</sup> The bibliography on *Agat'angelos* is vast. For an overview of its various versions and translations cfr. Winkler 1980 and Eadem 1982, 84-94.

<sup>14</sup> On inconsistencies in Thomson's dating of the *Teaching* to the latter part of the fifth century, but allowing the possibility of seventh century up-dates, see now Terian 2021, 10-11, fn 17.

vision. On the other hand, the Greek version of the *Life of St Gregory* (Vg), which is based on an earlier but no longer extant Armenian *Vorlage* claims that the *Vision of St Gregory* took place in Artašat.<sup>15</sup> The diversity of locations, if not due to a confusion in the Greek text, may signal a multiplicity of traditions that were later silenced or forgotten, where more than one site competed for preeminence as the centre of Armenian Christianity. It is important to remark that the *Vision* occurred after king Trdat's conversion but before his baptism, during which yet another vision of the cross is reported.

In the first part of the *Vision of St Gregory* he sees “cross[es] of light” (խաչ լուսոյ) appearing in heaven on top of one large and three smaller pillars indicating the location of the future Cathedral Church (or the Mother Church) — the *kat'otikē* — of Vaŋaršapat (Ējmiacin) and the three *martyria* dedicated to Saints Hrip'simē, Gayanē and their thirty-five companions respectively. The other details in this part, regarding lambs and wolves, are less relevant to the discussion at hand. The second part is dedicated to the explanation of the *Vision*.<sup>16</sup>

Scholars have long noted that the topography of the crosses in the *Vision* of Gregory in the Armenian Agat'angelos (Aa) reflected the already existing sanctuaries in Vaŋaršapat, seeking to endow them with a new sacred meaning.<sup>17</sup> A comparative topographical study of the Golgotha complex in Jerusalem and the sanctuaries of Ējmiacin, juxtaposed to the Armenian and Greek renderings of the *Vision*, has led Garibian to hypothesise that the main — *Kat'otikē* — Church and the *martyria* of Vaŋaršapat were positioned in such a way as to recreate a *New Jerusalem* in Armenia. This legitimised the status of Vaŋaršapat as the centre of the Armenian Church in parallel to Jerusalem as the centre of Christianity.<sup>18</sup> In Aa,

<sup>15</sup> On possible reasons for this change, including earlier bibliography, Thomson 2010, 18. He also clarifies that Vo and Vs omit all reference to the vision. Thomson 2014, 292 implies that Artašat is the result of a confusion in Greek (and the dependent Arabic texts). Thomson 2014 gives a good overview of this *Vision*, including allusions to it or citations from it in later texts.

<sup>16</sup> Agat'angelos 1983 §736-8 (all references to Agat'angelos are to paragraph numbers so as to facilitate consultation in any edition); Garitte 1946, §58-9, §77-8 for Vg. Parallel translations of Aa, Vg and Va in Thomson 2010, 340-1. According to Hultgård 1982, the vision of luminous crosses incorporates details from Zoroastrian symbolism of light and fire associated with a theophany, passed on to Armenian Christianity. See also Thomson 2014 on the *Vision* and its use in later sources.

<sup>17</sup> Kazaryan 2014, with earlier bibliography.

<sup>18</sup> Garibian de Vartavan 2009, 207-55 and esp. 249-55 on the influence of Jerusalem on the theophanic *Vision* of Gregory and the newly emerging sacred topography of Vaŋaršapat. The latter theme is developed also in Garibian 2014. This idea deserves further exploration in view of the fact that, surprisingly, the association between Vaŋaršapat and Jerusalem is not

Gregory's theophanic vision came to confirm the preeminence and uniqueness of Vałaršapat vis-à-vis other competing religious centres. This indicates the need to reinforce a unified institutional structure that was particularly urgent after the Battle of Awarayr in 451 AD.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Agat'angelos' account of the Christianisation of Armenia expresses the so-called northern — Greek or more precisely Cappadocian — substrate of the Armenian Christianity represented by St Gregory the Illuminator. Yet, it never succeeded in replacing or obfuscating the older — southern or Syriac — wave of Christianisation and cultural substrate, whose centres of spirituality and holy sites were located in the region of Tarōn, such as the 'mother church' of Aštišat.<sup>20</sup> The *Vision of St Gregory* came to seal the centrality of Vałaršapat at the end of the fifth century in a post-Awarayr context vis-à-vis this ancient and revered site in southern Armenia. The text was, thus, aware of the significance of the cross and a vision of the cross as a vehicle and means of legitimation. By relying on such a symbolically charged narrative it launched a powerful call towards a unified Armenian church with one unambiguous centre in a period when the demise of the Arsacid monarchy (428 AD) and the feeling of disorientation after the Battle of Awarayr (451 AD) made this an acute necessity, at least for some secular and religious leaders.<sup>21</sup>

A different function of the cross comes to the fore in another *Vision of the Cross* reported in Agat'angelos. This appeared during the baptismal ceremony of Trdat and all the people in Bagawan (§833). The relevant excerpts in Agat'angelos encapsulate perfectly the two currents that were crucial in the formation of Armenian Christianity — Greek and Syriac. On one hand, the *Vision of the Cross at Bagawan* echoes one of the earliest Greek texts about a heavenly vision of the Cross: the appearance of the cross in Jerusalem on May 7, 351 AD, described famously by Cyril of Jerusalem in his *Letter to [Emperor] Constantius (II)*.<sup>22</sup> On the other

made explicit in Agat'angelos and is at best only implicit. See also Garibian 2013, esp. 443-445 on the influence of the *Vision of Constantine* and his conversion story on Agat'angelos and this specific *Vision of the Cross*.

<sup>19</sup> La Porta 2014 and Thomson 2014 on the importance of the post-Awarayr context for understanding different aspects of the *Vision of St Gregory*.

<sup>20</sup> On the Christianisation of Armenia in at least two waves — earlier Syriac and later Greek (Cappadocian) — as well as the consequences of these two-way interactions on the Armenian culture and spirituality, cfr. Tēr-Minaseanc' 1908; Thomson 1994; Garsoian 1999; more explicitly and succinctly in Eadem 2004.

<sup>21</sup> On a similar conclusion but based on analysis of different elements of the *Vision of St Gregory* see La Porta 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Agat'angelos §832-3; Garitte 1946, 100, §167. Van Esbroeck 1982, 83-4, explores the echo of Cyril of Jerusalem's *Letter to Constantius* which included the *Apparition of the Cross*



hand, structurally, the location of the *Vision* — an epiphany — within the baptismal ceremony of Trdat, after the anointing of the head and before the immersions into water, are typical of the earliest structure of the baptismal rite originating in the Syro-Mesopotamian realm, testified also through such texts as the Syriac *Acts of Thomas* and *Acts of John*. According to these the pre-baptismal anointing, rather than the immersions, was the central act of the rite and to reinforce its key importance it was accompanied by narrations of miraculous visions.<sup>23</sup>

There are structural and symbolic parallels between Gregory's *Vision of the Cross in Bagawan* and Cyril of Jerusalem's celebrated *Apparition of the Cross in Jerusalem*.<sup>24</sup> For example, in both texts the Cross appeared during daylight, was seen by many (as opposed to an individual vision) and its brilliance overshadowed the sun. Both Aa and Cyril report conversions *en masse* inspired by the vision or apparition of the cross. These details are absent in Vg, where the pillar itself has the shape of the cross (rather than the cross appearing on top of a pillar as in Aa). Moreover, in Vg the appearance of the pillar made the witnesses "more steadfast in the orthodox faith" rather than inspired new conversions. Vg also cites Emperor Constantine's *Vision of the Cross*, and a military victory linked to it, without, however, specifying its location or the exact battle in question. Contrary to this, the Armenian version (Aa) chose to remain silent on this imperial vision, possibly in order not to overshadow the theophanies of Gregory the Illuminator or to lessen the tenor of King Trdat's own experience of conversion.<sup>25</sup>

There are also important differences between Aa and Cyril's *Letter* which preclude direct dependence of Aa on the latter. They suggest that

*in Jerusalem* both on the Greek (Vg) and Armenian (Aa) recensions of Agat'angelos. According to Inglistean Cyril of Jerusalem's *Letter to Constantius* was translated to Armenian in the seventh century, in the so-called hellenising style. Cfr. Inglistyan 1965, 1-2. However, the oldest versions of the Armenian Lectionaries studied by Renoux all include the Feast of the Apparition of the Cross. The *Letter of Cyril to Constantius* is among the readings assigned for that day. Renoux 1971, 332. These lectionaries were based on the fifth-century Jerusalem lectionary and were translated not long after 439. Renoux 1971, 170-2. This must mean that Cyril's *Letter* and his description of the *Apparition of the Cross* could be known in Armenian through liturgical texts, prior to the possibly seventh-century translation of Cyril's full *Letter*. Uluhogian 2006, 103 thinks that the letter "was probably translated" in the fifth century but does not elaborate. The matter certainly deserves a more minute scrutiny.

<sup>23</sup> Winkler 1982, 111, 137-9, 147-8, 153 and especially 412-3.

<sup>24</sup> This is noted *en passant* in van Esbroeck 1982, 83-4, but he does not elaborate on the similarities or differences between the two texts. He rightly notes, however the Aa is closer to Cyril's *Letter* than Vg. For the relevant texts see Agat'angelos 1983, §833; Inglistean 1965, 8-9; Garitte 1946, 100.

<sup>25</sup> Garitte 1946, 113.

Agat'angelos was shaping his own story with a background knowledge of diverse *Visions of the Cross* that by the fifth century circulated in all Christian cultures of the Mediterranean. For example, the cross in Aa appears on the pillar of fire, while Cyril describes the cross in Jerusalem as stretching from the Mount of Olives to the Golgotha. This implies a completely different imagery than a column. Even in the parallel description of the brightness of the cross that outshines the sun the two texts employ different wording. It is certain that the Armenian redactor of Agat'angelos knew Cyril's *Letter*, but he did not cite its extant Armenian version verbatim. One should not exclude the possibility that the *Apparition of the Cross in Jerusalem* was well-known through oral recitations. Indeed, it must have been repeated year after year during liturgical celebrations assigned for May 7<sup>th</sup>, a feast inherited in Armenia from the Jerusalem Lectionary. Thus, the use of similar imagery without direct quotations of a text would be more than imaginable.<sup>26</sup> Agat'angelos, thus, signals that apparitions and visions of the cross known in various languages of the Christian east were making their way to Armenia and shaping the understanding of the cross and its symbolism in Armenia in various ways. Parallel to this, we know that different versions of Constantine's *Vision of the Cross* circulated in Armenian, translated from Greek and Syriac.<sup>27</sup>

Agat'angelos' reflections on the cross in the context of the Incarnation of Christ and soteriology, as well as its veneration as an antidote to idol-worship, are particularly fecund. One of St Gregory's tortures was to be hung upside down from one foot for seven days, during which he pronounces a long prayer and supplication to God, a profession of faith and an explanation of Divine mysteries, including that on the significance of the cross.<sup>28</sup> The cross as a wooden object is qualitatively opposed to any previous objects of worship.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the theme of the cross as an

<sup>26</sup> Renoux 1969 and see note 21.

<sup>27</sup> The translation, reception and reshaping of imperial *Visions of the Cross* in Armenian is a subject that deserves further study. Some of these issues are tackled in the present author's forthcoming article (see note 5). It is noteworthy that like in other languages, also the Armenian preserves knowledge of Constantine's *Vision of the Cross* on the banks of the Danube, as well as at the Milvian Bridge. The circulation of these texts was often parallel to that of the narrative cycle on the *Invention of the Cross* by either Empress Helena or 'Protonike' (Patronike in Armenian sources), the latter personage appearing only in Syriac and Armenian. See Drijvers, Drijvers 1997, 1-12; Sanspeur 1974a; Sanspeur 1974b.

<sup>28</sup> Agat'angelos 1983, §74-98; the profession of faith in Agat'angelos 1983, §80 includes numerous archaic elements originating in the Syriac milieu. It is discussed in minute detail in Winkler 2000, 33-4, 322, 351-3.

<sup>29</sup> Agat'angelos 1983, §81-5. This part of the text is not found in the Greek *Life of Gregory* (Vg).

instrument of Salvation is developed with great mastery and is worth quoting extensively. Reflections on its cosmic, mystical significance are skillfully interwoven to its materiality as a wooden object, moving effortlessly from allegory to a literal description. The author's most urgent concern is to reinforce the belief that the material, wooden cross came to replace old idols, taking the worship of an object to an entirely new metaphysical level because of the Crucifixion:<sup>30</sup>

<p>Եւ վասն սովոր էին մարդիկ երկիր պագանել անունչ պատկերաց մեռելոց՝ եղև ինքն մեռեալ պատկեր ի վերայ խաչին. եւ մեռավ եւ անշնչացաւ, զի ընդելականան զնոսա արագ արագ հնազանդեցուցէ իւրում պատկերին. իբրև զկարբ երեսեցուցեալ զխաչն, եւ զմարմին իւր ատէր կերակուր տիեզերաց. զի այնու որսացէ յարժունական սեղանն, մշտնջենաւոր արքայութեանն աստուածութեանն իւրոյ.</p>	<p>and because people were used to bowing down to lifeless and dead images, He became a dead image on the cross. And he died and became breathless so that with a familiar [sight] he may hastily make them obedient to his image. He displayed the cross as a bate and made his body food for the universe so that with it he could attract [them] to the royal table, to the eternal kingdom of his divinity.</p>
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This juxtaposition of old and new, of wooden idols vs a wooden cross, is reiterated in the subsequent four paragraphs. The insistence of the author that the veneration of the wood of the cross was a means of drawing people away from their previous beliefs due to a familiar (yet qualitatively very different) form of worship has an apologetic tenor and was likely intended to dispel any doubts as to the legitimacy of the veneration of the cross as an object. Thus, the text dwells on the cross as a means of venerating the Saviour Himself.<sup>31</sup>

<p>Եւ փոխանակ դրօշելոց փայտիցն՝ զխաչ իւր կանգնեաց ի մէջ տիեզերաց, զի որ սովորն իցեն երկիր պագանել փայտի՝ սովորականաւ ընդելականան հաւանեսցին երկիր պագանել խաչին փայտի եւ որ ի վերայ նորա պատկերն եւ մարդադէմն իցէ.</p>	<p>And instead of engraved wooden [images] he implanted his cross in the middle of the universe, so that those who were used to bowing down to wood, because of habit and familiarity would concede to bow down to the wooden cross and to the human-shaped image on it.</p>
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Moreover, even the Incarnation in “the human-shaped image” (պատկերն [եւ] մարդադէմն) by the Son of God is explained as a necessity for reverting

<sup>30</sup> Agat‘angelos 1983, §81: For the technical term պատկեր (image) and the way it was employed in the earliest Armenian creeds cfr. Winkler 2000, 341-55.

<sup>31</sup> Agat‘angelos 1983, §82.

the idol-worship of humans to the veneration of the cross. Consequently, Christ's death on the cross in the *human body* was the only possible path to Salvation.<sup>32</sup> Salvation through the death of the Son of God is, needless to say, highlighted in numerous other locations in the text, of which let me cite another intriguing excerpt:<sup>33</sup>

<p>Եւ քանզի ուտէին եւ ըմպէին մարդիկ զարիւն զոհից անասնոց զիցապաշտութեան՝ վասն այսորիկ եհեղ զարիւնն իւր ի վերայ փայտին. զի փայտն ընդ դրօշալ փայտիցն, եւ ինքն ընդ մարդադէմ պատկերացն պղծութեան...</p>	<p>And because men ate and drank the blood of immolation of animals for the worship of idols, for this reason He spilled his own blood on the wood, so that this wood [would replace] wooden [images] and He the impure human-shaped images.</p>
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In the long catechetical part of *Agat'angelos* — the *Teaching of Gregory* — which was known also to the author of the *Of-Repeated Discourses*, yet another type of theology of the cross is developed. It is presented as an anti-type of the tower of Babel “with the consequent scattering of all peoples”. On the contrary, the cross united and eternally unites all man and “brings them back to God”.<sup>34</sup> The four-fold wings of the cross are compared to the four-angled altar, as well as the four corners of the world, thus becoming a symbol of the whole universe.<sup>35</sup> Finally, when the Kingdom of Armenia and its people converted to Christianity, the cross — both as a symbol and a material object — came to embody the victory of the new faith. In fact, Gregory is told to have implanted crosses where some other pagan symbols had stood previously, reshaping the sacred landscape and marking the territory of Armenia by a new sign of victory not only over death but also over any other kind of divinity and its veneration.<sup>36</sup>

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

It is often affirmed that the cross as a symbol, an image that gave rise to a rich artistic repertoire not least in the form of *xač'k'ars*, and an object of spiritual contemplation occupied a special place in Armenian Christianity.

<sup>32</sup> *Agat'angelos* 1983, §83.

<sup>33</sup> *Agat'angelos* 1983, §85.

<sup>34</sup> Thomson 2001, 10-1; *Agat'angelos* 1983, §581, 585-6. On the knowledge of the *Teaching of St Gregory* by the author of the *Of-Repeated Discourses*, see Terian 2021, 41-7.

<sup>35</sup> *Agat'angelos* 1983, §488, 490-1.

<sup>36</sup> *Agat'angelos* 1983, §§768-770, 782, 784, 785, 813; Hultgård 1985, 18.

However, the development of such symbolism and spirituality in the written sources over the centuries is only occasionally undertaken and an overall study is still lacking. This short paper indicates that there was a great variety of approaches to and reflections on the meaning and function of the cross in Armenian literature and spirituality from early on. In this study three texts were taken into consideration — Koriwn's *Life of Maštoc'*, the *Oft-Repeated Discourses* and Agat'angelos *History of the Armenians*. A comparison between them indicates that Agat'angelos stands out in terms of the variety and complexity of discussions, as well as of the importance, functions, spiritual meanings, and narrative representations of the cross. Considering that the *Oft-Repeated Discourses* postdate Agat'angelos one may not speak of a chronological development, but rather a synchronic diversity over time. In the *Life of Maštoc'* a luminous apparition of a celestial cross appears to legitimize the sanctity of Maštoc'. Furthermore, this text conceives Maštoc''s ascetic vocation as a bodily crucifixion, in line with the Pauline Epistle to the Galatians. The *Oft-Repeated Discourses* too frequently cited or alluded to Paul, specifically Gal 5:24, when praising or encouraging the adoption of an ascetic life-style by individuals. The latter source also includes evocations of the soteriological function of the cross. In Agat'angelos reflections on the cross are incomparably more thorough and variegated. It has multifarious meanings and functions, ranging from its eternal salvific role manifested in human history through Old Testament types or anti-types, culminating with the Crucifixion, to a qualitatively novel and highest form of an object of worship. It embodies the divinity, seals one's conversion through baptism, and, finally, appears as a symbol of victory, both spiritual and worldly. The legacy of all these streams of reflections will be maintained and developed in medieval Armenian literature for centuries to come.

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