

Single-Sheet Engravings Depicting the Tortures of Saint Gregory the Illuminator in Early Modern Europe

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Abstract This article examines single-sheet engravings depicting the life and tortures of Saint Gregory the Illuminator printed in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Focusing on seven examples, it traces the formation and dissemination of a stable iconographic model through European workshops, Catholic missionary networks, patrons, and multilingual inscriptions. It also shows how later Armenian editions selectively adapted this model to emphasize the Christianization of Armenia, illuminating cross-cultural exchange between European print culture and Armenian Christian traditions.

Keywords Saint Gregory the Illuminator. Early modern Europe. European print culture. Armenian-European artistic exchange. Devotional prints. Confessional imagery. Catholic missions. Hagiographical iconography. Cross-cultural visual exchange. Armenian diaspora.

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1 Introduction

Beyond the borders of Armenia, among various works of art, Saint Gregory the Illuminator is by far the most frequently depicted saint of the Armenian Church. This prevalence is conditioned by two fundamental factors. First, Gregory the Illuminator is the first Patriarch of the Armenian people and stands at the very origins of the Christianization of Armenia. Second, he is the only pan-Christian saint of the Armenian Church, whose feast is celebrated by both the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches (*Kristonya Hayastan. Hanragitaran* 2002, 222).

The widespread veneration of the Illuminator among Armenian communities that had distanced themselves from the Apostolic confession has its own national-psychological explanation. Armenian Chalcedonians, though ecclesiastically separated from their compatriots, continued to rely on their national origins through the figure of Gregory the Illuminator, emphasizing that, despite their adherence to the Orthodox creed, they remained heirs of so great an Armenian. Likewise, Catholic Armenians, who in ecclesiastical matters stood in opposition to their compatriots, expressed their consciousness of national belonging by referring to Saint Gregory as their ‘father in faith’ (Devrikyan 2016, 242-3).

On these grounds, between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, both Armenians and Europeans uninterruptedly published single-sheet engravings depicting the life and martyrdom of Gregory the Illuminator.¹ These works – poster-like, relatively large-format images printed on paper and occasionally on parchment – were often hand-colored and displayed on the walls of homes as well as of churches.

With the exception of the first engraving, the central scene in the remaining six compositions depicts the Baptism of the Armenian royal family – considered the most sacred and significant act attributed to Saint Gregory – while the surrounding frame contains medallions illustrating the saint’s twelve tortures together with several additional scenes from his life. In the first engraving, the central position is occupied by the reception of Pope Sylvester.

To date, these single-sheet engravings have not yet received rigorous scholarly attention and no systematic or comprehensive

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1 The iconographic type of so-called ‘hagiographical icons’ originated in Byzantium at the beginning of the thirteenth century (Popova 2002, 69). Typically, the most significant event associated with the saint was depicted at the center, while other episodes from the saint’s life were arranged around it within a surrounding frame.

study has been devoted to them. Owing to their practical use, they were naturally worn, damaged, or lost over time; moreover, they were never preserved in a single repository, which rendered an holistic approach to the study of this material particularly challenging. It took us nearly four years to locate these seven prints across various Armenian cultural centers and private collections both in Armenia and abroad.

In this vein, the aim of this article is to clarify what are the reasons for iconographic and stylistic variations in the single-sheet engravings that we identified, by applying historical-comparative analysis to critical art-historical inquiry. Moreover, we intend to demonstrate how their iconography eventually acquired a canonical form that served as model for the creation of successive artifacts related to the figure of the Saint.

2 The Earliest Known Single-Sheet Engraving Representing the Tortures of Gregory the Illuminator

Single-sheet woodcut engravings depicting saints and martyrs are known from as early as the beginning of the fifteenth century, produced primarily in monastic settings by monks (Linton 1884, 11, 14). These autonomous prints, illustrating scenes from the Life of Christ and the lives of the saints, functioned as instruments of religious instruction for those who were unable to read, as well as for literate individuals who were unable to purchase expensive manuscripts. Consequently, these widely disseminated prints – often issued in multiple copies and frequently accompanied by prayers or brief hagiographical texts – conveyed the core teachings of Christian doctrine and the exemplary lives of male and female saints through a visual language (Linton 1884, 11).

The earliest single-sheet engraving known to us depicting the tortures of Gregory the Illuminator (paper size with border approximately 60 × 35 cm) was created by the renowned Italian engraver Luca Ciamberlano, commissioned by the nuns of the Monastery of San Gregorio Armeno (Saint Gregory the Armenian) in Naples [fig. 1]. Indeed, these nuns played a significant role in shaping and disseminating the visual representation and cult of the Armenian Patriarch within the Italian cultural milieu.

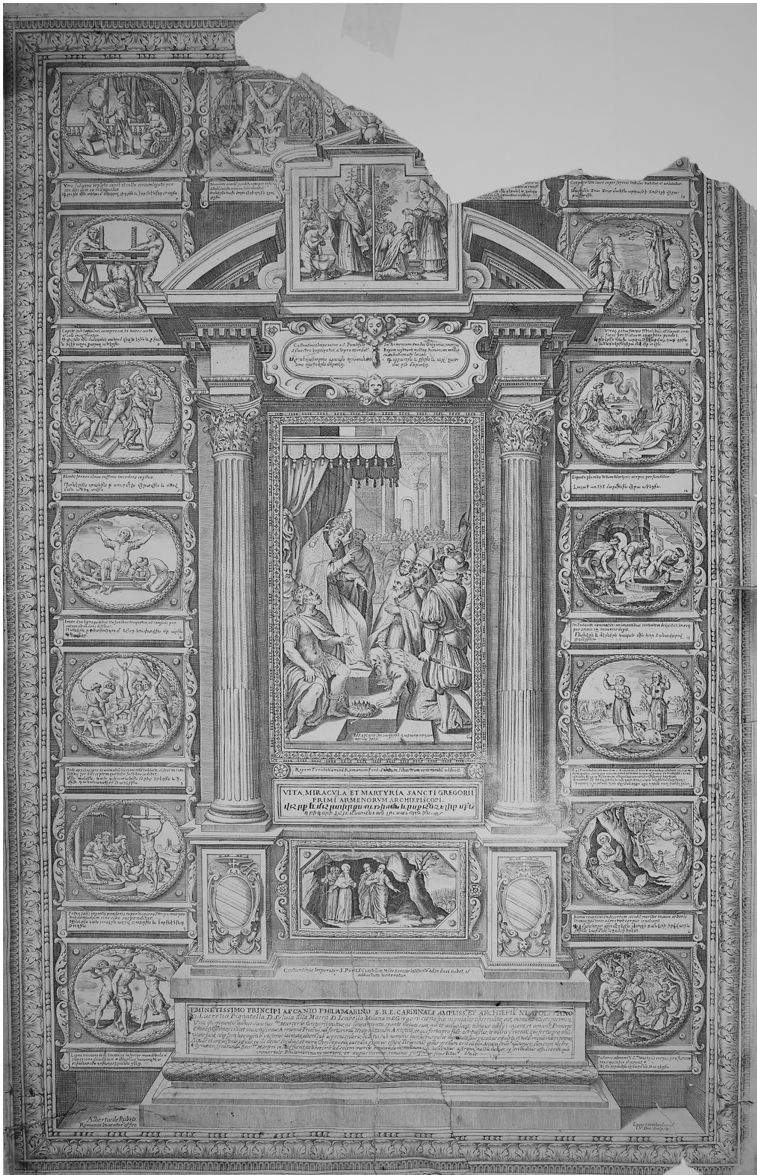


Figure 1 Luca Ciamberlano, scenes from the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. 1641. Engraving on paper, approx. 60 × 35 cm. Venice, Mekhitarist Congregation. Commissioned by the nuns of the Monastery of San Gregorio Armeno in Naples. Photo by Father Hamazasp Vardapet Keshishian, © Mekhitarist Congregation, Venice

This engraving has remained outside scholarly circulation until very recently. We encountered it in the collection of the Mekhitarist Congregation in Venice.²

According to the signature in the lower right corner, the work is by the renowned Baroque-period Italian engraver and painter Luca Ciamberlano (Lucas Ciamberlanus). The precise year of Ciamberlano's birth is unknown; he was very likely born in the 1580s in Urbino, Italy. His earliest known work dates from 1599. From that point onward, he lived and worked primarily in Rome, where he eventually died in 1641 (Nagler, Andresen, Clauss 1871, 274). Consequently, it is evident that the engraving under consideration must have been executed before that date, though its exact year of creation is not specified on the print itself.

During the first decade of his artistic career, Ciamberlano devoted himself primarily to producing engraved reproductions after celebrated Italian masters – including Raffaello Sanzio, Federico Barocci, Annibale Carracci – as well as after his own paintings (Brockhaus, Efron 1903, 70). Until roughly 1620, he continued to refine his mastery of human anatomical proportions in engraving (Merz 2008, 7). His command of these skills is clearly manifested in the image under discussion.

In the first two lines of the inscription at the top of the engraving, there is a reference to the Archbishop of Naples, Cardinal Ascanio Filomarino:

EMINETISSIMO PRINCIPI ASCANIO PHILAMARINO S.R.E.
CARDINALI AMPLISS., ET ARCHIEPISPO NEAPOLITANO. D.
Lucretia Pignatella, D. Sylvia dlla Marra, D. Isabella Milana
in S. Gregorii cenobio moniales obseruatie sue monument, et
specimen.

To the most eminent Prince Ascanio Filomarino, illustrious
Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church and Archbishop of Naples. The
nuns of the Monastery of Saint Gregory – D. Lucretia Pignatella,
D. Sylvia della Marra, and D. Isabella Milana – offer this work as
a testament and demonstration of their devotion.³

The remainder of the inscription expresses the nuns' reverence for the cardinal and glorifies Saint Gregory, whom they describe as a living martyr who bravely endured tortures for the sake of the faith.

2 We express our sincere gratitude to Father Hamazasp Vardapet Keshishian of the Mekhitarist Congregation in Venice for his kind support.

3 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Authors.

Ascanio Filomarino, originally from Naples, later moved to Rome, where he served as tutor to the young nephew of Pope Urban VIII (Moroni 1840, 303-4). In 1641 he was consecrated both cardinal and Archbishop of Naples. Like other members of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, he undertook active missionary efforts among non-Catholic populations – including Armenians – to advance the spread of Roman Catholic doctrine (Moroni 1840, 303-4).

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Vatican began to show increasing interest in the peoples of the East, including the Armenians, with the aim of extending the influence of the Catholic confession across the Eastern Christian world. To this end, in 1622 Pope Gregory XV established, within the Vatican, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide), whose mission was to disseminate the Roman confession among all non-Catholic nations – among them the Eastern Christians – who, in the eyes of the Roman Church, were regarded as schismatic in a manner comparable to the Protestants (Ishkhanyan 1977, 327; Heyberger 2025, 49).

With regard to the Monastery of Saint Gregory mentioned in the inscription, tradition holds that the skull of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, preserved in Constantinople along with several other relics, was taken to the Italian port city of Naples at the end of the eighth century (Ashchyan 2000, 106), during the period of Iconoclasm, by a group of nuns. There, they deposited the relics in an already existing monastic community (Devrikyan 2016, 258-66). In the sixteenth century, the monastery's small medieval chapel was replaced by an elegant Baroque church (Spinosa, Pinto, Valerio 2013, 112), which not only survives to this day but also remains active (Devrikyan 2024b, 54-77).

Thus, the single-sheet ceremonial print discussed here appears to have been offered as a gift from the nuns of the monastery to the newly appointed Archbishop-Cardinal of Naples. It is worth noting that Filomarino enjoyed great respect and affection among the monastic communities of Naples, for he frequently found himself in conflict with secular authorities in his efforts to defend the privileges of the Church and the clergy (Spinosa, Pinto, Valerio 2013, 23).

Since, as noted above, Filomarino was consecrated Archbishop in 1641, and the engraver Luca Ciamberlano also died in the same year, it is reasonable to conclude that the engraving was produced in 1641.

The engraving is executed in highly ornate and elaborate Baroque style. The arches, columns, capitals, and pilasters evocative of Greco-Roman temples, together with the ornamental frames enriched with vegetal and geometric motifs, lend the engraving a monumental and celebratory character.

The individual scenes within the composition bear inscriptions in both Latin and Armenian, each enclosed within its own frame. The Armenian letters appear to be written with an unsteady and

unpracticed hand. It is evident that the engraver was unfamiliar with the language and merely copied the characters provided to him. The mistakes and irregularities within the Armenian words further suggest that the author – or authors – of these inscriptions did not possess a firm command of the language.

For this reason, we may hypothesize that the inscriptions were composed by the nuns of the Monastery of Saint Gregory themselves. It is well known that throughout the Middle Ages many Armenians made pilgrimages to this monastery in veneration of the Armenian Patriarch (Bonucci 1717, 134-5), and through their interaction with these visitors, the nuns likely acquired a conversational knowledge of Armenian. At the same time, however, their knowledge of the language does not appear to have been sufficiently deep or systematic to prevent the elementary spelling errors displayed in the inscriptions.

At the center of the engraving, within an ornamental frame, we read the solemn inscription:

VITA, MIRACVLA, ET MARTYRIA SANCTI GREGORII PRIMI
ARMENORVM ARCHIEPISCOPI.

Beneath it, in Armenian:

Վարք և մարտիրոսութիուն և ըսքանչելիք սրն. Գրիգորի
Հայեաստանեաց Լուսաւորչին.

The Life, Miracles, and Martyrdom of Saint Gregory the Illuminator
of Armenia.

Other inscriptions identify King Tiridates of Armenia, Gregory the Illuminator, Emperor Constantine, and Pope Sylvester.

Of particular interest is the central scene, where the inscription inside the frame reads:

Սբ. Գրեգոր Լուսավորիճ դաքսոր Տրդատ Հրոմա ի քեր.

Saint Gregory the Illuminator brought King Tiridates to Rome.

The narrative of these four historical figures meeting in Rome derives from the apocryphal document known as the *Dašanc' t'ult'* (The Letter of Love and Concord), a non-authentic text intended to symbolize the unity between the Armenian and the Catholic Churches (Poghossian 2010). According to this source, King Tiridates III and Gregory the Illuminator traveled to Rome, where they were received with great honor by Emperor Constantine and Pope Sylvester (Devrikyan 2024a, 135-49).

The document recounts that, upon hearing of Constantine's conversion, Tiridates III set out for Rome with Saint Gregory and a large retinue, seeking an audience with both Constantine and Pope Sylvester. In Rome, the monarchs and pontiffs of the two nations forged a covenant of love and brotherhood; Tiridates received lavish honors from the emperor, and Gregory, too, was venerated as a living martyr (Bartikyan 2004, 65-116).

This tradition was periodically revived – not only by Armenians, in difficult political circumstances when assistance from Rome was sought, but also by the papacy, which sought thereby to extend its authority in the East (Shirinyan 2006, 57). Thus, as noted, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when Rome renewed its efforts to bring Armenians into communion with the Catholic Church, the *Dašanc' t'utt'* once again acquired contemporary relevance (Hovhannisyan 1957, 74).

In the central scene of the engraving, Pope Sylvester, dressed in ornate vestments, is shown enthroned on the papal seat. To his right stands Constantine in imperial attire, wearing the cloak and crown characteristic of Roman emperors, while Saint Gregory, dressed in patriarchal garments, stands to his left. Tiridates is depicted kneeling before Constantine, who raises his hand in a gesture of blessing, while the Armenian king's crown and scepter lie on the ground nearby.

In a number of Armenian artworks depicting the Conversion of Armenia, Tiridates' crown is shown lying on the ground as a symbol of humility and the unconditional acceptance of the new faith. In this engraving, the royal crown and scepter are likewise placed on the ground; however, their placement at the feet of Constantine visually suggests that the symbols of Armenian sovereignty are subordinated to imperial authority. This was likely an intentional artistic decision intended to emphasize the supremacy of Rome for the viewer.

Below this scene is a medallion inscribed:

Costantinus Imperator S. Pont. Siluestru in Mote Soracte latitante
ad se duei iubet, et adductum ueneratur.

Emperor Constantine orders that Pope Sylvester – who was hiding on Mount Soracte – be brought to him, and venerates him when he arrives.

Here, the engraving represents the tradition according to which Saint Sylvester withdrew to Mount Soracte; meanwhile, Constantine, afflicted with a grave illness as punishment for his earlier cruelty toward Christians, sent messengers to summon the saint (Benham 1900, 69). The print depicts Pope Sylvester with the

imperial envoy, while another figure gestures toward the distant army escorting them.

Above the central composition is a decorative bipartite cartouche. The first section reads:

Սբ. Սեդակաորոս պապն Ղուստանսինոս զախսերն մկրտեց.

Saint Sylvester the Pope baptized Emperor Constantine.

The second states:

Դաքաորն և քիրն և այլ շատ մարթ մկրտեց.

[He] baptized the king, his sister and many other people.

Agathangelos (fifth-century Armenian historian) describes the miraculous column of light that descended during the baptism: “A wondrous miracle appeared from God, for the waters of the river stood still and turned back” (Thomson 1976, 367).

The cycle of tortures begins in the lower left corner. Each scene is accompanied by Latin and Armenian captions describing the specific torture, and these inscriptions correspond closely to the details transmitted by Agathangelos concerning the sufferings of the Illuminator. The Armenian captions, however, contain numerous errors and irregularities.

Agathangelos describes the first torture as follows: “He had his hands bound behind him, and a muzzle put in his mouth; and he had a block of salt hung on his back and a noose placed round his chest, and cords put round and tightened on him”.⁴ This torture is represented in two separate scenes. In the first, two attendants tighten a gag before Gregory, who is tied to a tree; in the second, he is shown suspended from a beam with a heavy sack of salt on his back, while the attendants struggle to lift and add two more sacks.

The remaining torments follow Agathangelos’s account with striking fidelity.

The second torture – “He was hung up-side down from one foot and beaten while dung was burnt beneath him” – depicts four robust attendants striking Gregory, whose head hangs near rising smoke and ash.

The third – “Blocks of wood were tightened around his legs” – shows the Illuminator with arms outstretched in prayer, while one attendant looks on in astonishment at his endurance.

⁴ All descriptions of the tortures are taken from Thomson 1976, 79-131.

The fourth – “Nails were driven through his feet and he was made to run” – illustrates two servants pushing Gregory forward, with Tiridates appearing in several of these scenes.

The fifth torture – “He was buffeted on the head” – depicts the saint constrained between wooden beams, his head unnaturally bent.

As noted earlier, Ciamberlano had mastered the rendering of accurate and harmonious human proportions; even in these small medallions the figures are muscular, balanced, and elegantly composed.

The sixth torture – “Salt, borax and vinegar were poured down his nose” – is omitted, likely to avoid exceeding the traditional number of twelve scenes, since the first torment had already been represented in two parts.

The seventh – “A bag of cinders was fixed over his head” – shows Gregory kneeling before the king, the large sack tied around his head.

The eighth – “He was held upside down while water was poured into his bottom” – is depicted according to the inscription.

Because the engraving is slightly torn at the top, the ninth torture (“He was torn with iron scrapers”) and the tenth (“He was rolled on iron thistles”) are now missing, though they were almost certainly included originally, corresponding to the captions.

The eleventh – “He was suspended with iron leggings on his knees and was struck with hammers” – shows Gregory hanging from a tree with iron attachments affixed to his legs.

Perhaps the most somber is the twelfth torture, described as “Molten lead was poured over his body”. In the medallion, a cauldron is placed over flames, and an attendant pours its contents over the saint while the astonished king looks on.

In the next scene, Gregory’s battered body is cast into the pit in the presence of Tiridates.

Another medallion unites two temporally distinct episodes: in the distance, a crowd is seen raising Gregory from the pit of Khor Virap; in the foreground, the saint stands before the swine-transformed Tiridates, gesturing toward heaven, as if indicating that the king’s affliction is a divine chastisement.

The final two medallions depict Gregory’s withdrawal to the cave of Manē on Mount Sepuh and his death. According to tradition, Gregory spent his last years in solitary asceticism. Movsēs Xorenac’i (fifth-century Armenian historian) recounts:

Saint Gregory lived in seclusion in the Cave of Mane for many years and on his death was transposed to the ranks of the angels. Shepherds found him dead and buried him in the same place without knowing who he was. (Thomson 1978, 249)

Another tradition relates that the shepherds, guided by divine will, found him seated as if alive, facing the East with his right hand raised in benediction. In the medallion, the heavenly Father appears from an opening in the clouds, directing the shepherds toward Gregory (Akinyan 1950, 15). The next scene reads: “The shepherds took the holy body and buried it”. The skull depicted in the ascetic’s cave suggests the saint’s soul has already passed into the heavenly realm and may have been included at the request of the nuns, alluding to the relic of the Illuminator preserved in their monastery.

The captions accompanying the medallions clearly demonstrate that the Italian engraver was familiar with Agathangelos’s *History* or with some hagiographical source recounting the life of Saint Gregory, for he adhered with remarkable precision to the narrative.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Gregory’s tortures shows evident parallels with depictions of the torments of other European martyrs, such as Saint Sebastian, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, Saint Erasmus of Formia, and Saint Lawrence. It is reasonable to conclude that Ciamberlano drew upon established European iconographic models in shaping his cycle of Gregory’s tortures.

Thus, this engraving is the earliest datable example known to us and, as will be seen, its composition and iconography became the foundational model for subsequent single-sheet engravings representing the tortures of Saint Gregory the Illuminator.

3 The ‘Armenianization’ of the Engraving Cycle Depicting the Tortures of Saint Gregory the Illuminator

Chronologically, the next engraving known to us was printed in Venice in 1692 [fig. 2]. Information about this print comes from the volume *Hay girk’ə 1512-1800 t’vakannerin* (The Armenian Book in the Years 1512-1800) (Voskanyan, Korkotyan, Savalyan 1988). The Armenian-American collector Haroution Kyurtian (1901-1976), having owned this engraving in his private collection (Ter-Vardanyan 2012, 70-117), sent its description to the editors in Yerevan; however, for a long time we were unable to locate the engraving itself.

Kyurtian’s testimony indicates that the composition followed the European artistic manner, while the Armenian inscriptions suggest a later adaptation or contextualization of the print for Armenian devotional use.



Figure 2 Unknown European engraver, scenes from the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. 1692. Engraving on paper. Armenia, private collection. Commissioned by the members of the Confraternity of Saint Gregory the Illuminator in Venice. Photo by Lusine Sargsyan

Lacking access to Haroution Kyurtian's collection, we searched for another copy of this engraving for nearly three years in numerous Armenian cultural centers: the Mekhitarist Congregations of Venice and Vienna, the archives of the Monastery of San Gregorio Armeno

in Naples, the libraries of the Armenian dioceses of Romania, Iran, and Lebanon, the Manuscript Library of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, various private collections, and digital repositories. Eventually, a copy was located in Armenia, preserved in a family collection.⁵ The lower half of the engraving had been attached to an Armenian manuscript as a protective cover.

Unfortunately, only one quarter of the engraving survives. Four of the medallions depicting the tortures are fully preserved, two appear partially, and three lines of the inscription survive only in half. The lower portion of the central medallion is also visible. Even this fragment, however, when compared with the earlier engraving, reveals that the cycle of tortures was reproduced almost exactly – yet with one essential modification. Whereas the central scene of the previous engraving depicted the meeting of Pope Sylvester and Emperor Constantine with Saint Gregory and Tiridates, here the central image represents the Conversion of Armenia – the baptism of the royal family by Gregory the Illuminator.

It is also clear that the decorative frame and some other ornamental elements differ from the prototype. A tendency toward iconographic stability combined with variations in decorative design is observable in other engravings of the cycle as well.

The inscription on the print reads in Italian:

SCUOLA DI S. GREGORIO LUMINATTOR DELLA NAZION
ARMENA 1692.

Below, an Armenian text states that the engraving was printed in honor of the Armenian Church of the Holy Cross in Venice, invoking Gregory the Illuminator's blessing and protection for Armenian merchants (Voskanyan, Korkotyan, Savalyan 1988, 786). The text further informs that the engraving was commissioned by representatives of the Armenian confraternity dedicated to Saint Gregory the Illuminator in Venice, and was likely offered as a gift to the Church of the Holy Cross – perhaps on the occasion of its renovation or reopening.

The Church of the Holy Cross is one of the oldest Armenian churches in Europe. For the sizable Armenian colony in Venice, the nobleman and doge Marco Ziani established a monastic residence in the mid-thirteenth century (Zekiyan 1978, 886-7). A chapel was erected there in 1434, and in 1688 the noble merchant Guerak Mirmān (Mirmanyan) received the permission to enlarge it and transform it into a full church, which subsequently became an important

5 The photograph of the engraving was kindly provided by art historian Lusine Sargsyan, to whom we express our sincere gratitude.

institution for the community (Lusso 2013, 64-5). The church has three altars and a small side chapel. The main altar is dedicated to the Discovery of the Holy Cross; the right altar to the Dormition of the Mother of God; and the left to Saint Gregory the Illuminator.

In the altar dedicated to the Armenian Patriarch, there is a painting depicting once again the tortures of Saint Gregory and the baptism of Tiridates III. According to its inscription, it was accomplished in 1714 [fig. 3]. Here, too, the tortures follow the same iconographic pattern, though the central scene, executed in a fully Baroque style, differs noticeably from our engravings: the figures are more dynamic and display more complex poses.



Figure 3
Painting of the Altar of Saint
Gregory the Illuminator.
Scenes from the Life of Saint
Gregory the Illuminator.
1714. Venice, Church of the
Holy Cross (Santa Croce).
© Church of the Holy Cross
(Santa Croce), Venice

4 **The 1714 Engraving Commissioned by the Armenian Catholic Missionary Oxendio Virziresco and Its Confessional Context**

The next engraving known to us that follows this iconographic type (paper size with border: 58.5 × 48 cm) is dated 1714 and was commissioned by the Armenian Catholic missionary of Transylvania, Oxendio Vrzaryan (Virziresco) (1654-1715) [fig. 4]. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, Virziresco had undertaken efforts to convert the Armenians of Transylvania to Catholicism,⁶ efforts that were met with strong resistance from the local Armenian population (Nagy 2019, 101-21; Kovács, Pál 2013, 17-26).



Figure 4
Unknown engraver, scenes
from the Life of Saint
Gregory the Illuminator.
1714. Engraving on paper,
58.5 × 48 cm. Budapest,
Armenian Catholic Parish.
Commissioned by Oxendio
Virziresco (Vrzaryan).
© Armenian Catholic Parish,
Budapest

6 Oxendio's missionary activity continued the Catholic union movement previously initiated among the Armenians of Lemberg under Archbishop Nikol Torosowicz (1603-1681) (Kovács, Pál 2013, 19; Ouzounian, Stopka 2025, 68).

The papacy made strategic use of the idea that the Armenian Church ought to return to the ecclesial unity that had supposedly existed in the time of Pope Sylvester I and Gregory the Illuminator (Kovács, Pál 2013, 20). Within this ideological framework, Virziresco's commission of an engraving depicting Saint Gregory was logical: on the one hand, it emphasized that his actions did not signify a break with the Armenian Church and appealed to Armenian national sentiments; on the other hand, it underscored that, in seeking union with the Roman Church, he was continuing the mission of Saint Gregory himself (Devrikyan 2016, 272).

After decades of unsuccessful attempts, Virziresco departed for Vienna in the summer of 1712 to attend to property matters concerning the Armenian-populated city of Armenopolis (Gherla) (Kovács, Pál 2013, 25). There, in 1714, he published a single-sheet engraving reproducing exactly the iconography and composition of the previously discussed 1692 print. Thanks to this engraving, we are able to reconstruct the complete appearance of the earlier Venetian print: even the smallest visual details of the Venetian engraving are copied faithfully in the Viennese version.

The central scene once again presents the Conversion of Armenia, and the cycle of tortures follows the same order as before. Unlike the earlier version, however, here the medallions include both Latin and Armenian explanatory inscriptions. Moreover, the lower part of the print contains a ten-line Latin inscription summarizing the life of the Illuminator. It recounts that Saint Gregory, born into the Parthian royal line of the Arsacids and son of Anak, was saved from danger in his youth by a Christian nurse and brought to the Roman Empire, where he was baptized and educated in the Christian faith. Remaining steadfast in confession and preaching, he endured severe trials and sufferings under King Tiridates III – depicted in the engraving. Rescued by divine intervention, he ultimately converted the same king and, by the power of God, enlightened both Greater and Lesser Armenia with the light of faith, for which he is called the Illuminator of the Armenians.

The next part of the inscription, written first in Armenian and then transliterated into Latin script, refers to the *Dašanc' t'ult'*, stating that Gregory traveled with the Armenian king to Rome to meet Pope Sylvester I and the newly converted Emperor Constantine the Great. There, he confirmed ecclesiastical orders pertaining to himself and then returned to Armenia.

The inscription concludes by stating that Gregory baptized many people, performed miracles, and ordained bishops, for which reason

the Greeks called him Gregoros.⁷ He served thirty years on the patriarchal throne; then, in old age, leaving the catholicos see to his son, he withdrew to the cave of Manē on Mount Sepuh.

Below the Latin inscription appear the initials of Virziresco and the date of publication.

The engraving is executed with considerable artistic skill and refinement. While its iconographic scheme replicates the earlier examples, its stylistic features are distinct.

In the central medallion, we see several of the details mentioned in the inscription. Gregory the Illuminator, depicted in full patriarchal vestments and holding a cross-topped staff, appears comparatively large and occupies the central position in the composition.

Unlike the previous prints, the faces of Saint Gregory and King Tiridates here are individualized, with delicate features. Their expressions reflect Christian humility and unquestioning acceptance. This representation of the baptism of the Armenian royal family is borrowed from one of the two medallions above the central scene in Luca Ciamberlano's engraving, previously discussed in the first part of this article.

In the background of the composition, the Illuminator is also shown withdrawn in ascetic solitude within the cave of Manē. Above, a column of light appears, suffused with the radiant beams of the Holy Spirit, depicted in the form of a dove.

A comparison of this engraving with the preceding examples discussed in this article reveals that the scenes of the tortures repeat precisely those of Luca Ciamberlano's engraving. We may therefore conclude that the Italian master succeeded in devising an iconographic cycle that so accurately expressed the Life of the Illuminator that it was accepted, cherished, and ultimately canonized as the standard model for numerous subsequent representations of Saint Gregory.

⁷ The Greek equivalent of the name 'Gregory' derives from the verb *grēgoreō* (γρηγορέω), meaning 'to be awake' or 'to keep watch'.

5 **The 1731 Engraving Commissioned by Hakob, Son of Mahtesi Hovhannes of Erzurum: Iconographic and Stylistic Developments**

The artistic pinnacle of the single-sheet engravings under examination is the print published in Vienna in 1731 by Hakob, son of Mahtesi⁸ Hovhannes, an Armenian notable from Erzurum (paper size with border: 72 × 48.5 cm) [fig. 5] (Gharibyan, Yenokyan 2016, 114). Among all the works studied, it is the one that presents the greatest number of hagiographical details. The central scene and the cycle of tortures once again follow the established models; however, in accordance with medieval artistic convention, the background of the image juxtaposes several events from different periods on a single compositional plane. All medallions bear concise Latin inscriptions and more extensive Armenian explanatory captions.

In the upper-left corner of the central composition appears the martyrdom of the virgins Hrip'simē, Gayianē and their companions (generally called 'Hrip'simian Virgins') at the winepress of Vałaršapat. The young virgins, interwoven with green vine branches, undergo martyrdom by the order of the King. This striking collective martyrdom scene is, to our knowledge, the earliest known depiction of this subject in an artwork of this type.

Three churches are shown in the engraving; according to the inscriptions, the largest represents the Mother Cathedral of Etchmiadzin, while the other two correspond to the churches of Saint Hripsimē and Saint Gayianē. It should be noted that, like the creators of the earlier prints, the engraver – apparently European – was not familiar with Armenian ecclesiastical architecture and thus depicted the churches as European-style rotundas and basilicas.

On the right, the baptism of the Armenian people in the River Arac'ani by Gregory the Illuminator is shown. Those already in the water are unclothed, while their garments lie at the feet of those waiting their turn on the riverbank.

Another scene depicts Saint Gregory in ascetic retreat within the cave on Mount Sepuh, kneeling in prayer before a wooden cross.

⁸ *Mahtesi* refers to an Armenian Christian who has made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and prayed at the Holy Sepulchre. The title literally implies someone who has 'seen the holy places' and completed a sacred journey.



Figure 5 Unknown engraver, scenes from the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. 1731. Engraving on paper, 72 × 48.5 cm. Venice, Mekhitarist Congregation. Commissioned by Hakob, son of Mahtesi Hovhannes of Erzurum. © Mekhitarist Congregation, Venice

A novel element in this cycle is the inclusion of the episode in which Patriarch Hakob of Nisibis (Mc'binec'i) receives a relic of Noah's Ark. Two principal reasons may explain its addition. First, according to hagiographical tradition, Hakob belonged to the Parthian line and was a cousin of Saint Gregory (*Kristonya Hayastan. Hanragitaran* 2002, 521). Second, as Vardan Devrikyan observes,

The three principal sacred treasures of the Armenian Church are the relic of Noah's Ark, the Holy Lance bearing the life-giving blood of Christ, and the Right Hand of Gregory the Illuminator. A profound spiritual logic underlies this triad. (Devrikyan 2007, 27)

These objects represent, respectively, the renewal of human life after the Flood, the spiritual rebirth of humanity through Christ's Passion and Resurrection, and the national conversion of the Armenians under Gregory (Devrikyan 2007, 27).

This theological and symbolic condensation likely motivated the detailed rendering of the scene. Indeed, following the implications of Devrikyan's observation, we find all three symbols present within the composition: Gregory's baptism of the Armenians, the transmission of the relic of the Ark, and the divine Trinity manifested above – with Christ shown bearing His cross.

At the summit of Mount Ararat stands Noah's Ark. Below, an angel holds a plank from the Ark and delivers it to the sleeping Patriarch Hakob, along with the divine instruction never again to ascend the sacred mountain. According to P'awstos Buzand's (fifth-century Armenian historian) *History of the Armenians*, a spring of clear water miraculously burst forth at this spot through Hakob's prayer (Malk'hasyanc' 1987, 39); this detail, too, is depicted in the engraving.

The rays emanating from the Holy Trinity descending upon the dome of the Mother Cathedral of Etchmiadzin bear the inscription:

When the great light was revealed to Patriarch Gregory, he joyfully recounted it to the believing king. It is fitting that we build here the holy altar of light, for here the Only-Begotten descended in glory from the bosom of the Father.

These lines pertain to the vision of the foundation of Etchmiadzin, in which Christ appears to Gregory with a golden hammer and strikes the spot where the Mother Cathedral of the Armenian Church was to be built.⁹ Gregory recounts this vision to the king, who then orders the church's construction.

It is noteworthy that among the seven engravings studied, only this example includes verses referring to the divine revelation of the foundation of Etchmiadzin – a detail of clear ecclesiological and confessional significance.

These single-sheet prints, as we see, incorporate numerous episodes: the martyrdom of the Hripsimian Virgins, the tortures of Gregory, his casting into the pit, the conversion of Armenia, the baptism of the people in the Arac'ani River, Saint Gregory's ascetic

⁹ The figure of Divine Providence was later interpreted as Christ.

practices in the caves of Manē, the discovery of the relics, and more. Yet one of the most central episodes of Gregory's Life – the Vision of the foundation of Etchmiadzin – is absent in the other prints. Its omission is understandable: depicting this vision would have elevated the sanctity and authority of the Armenian Church and the See of Etchmiadzin – an emphasis not advantageous within non-Apostolic contexts (Devrikyan 2016, 267).

Beneath the entire composition, outside the frame, four columns of text are devoted to the Life of Gregory the Illuminator: two in Latin and two in German. The inclusion of Latin follows the canonical structure established by earlier engravings; the German text reflects the print's production in German-speaking Vienna and ensured accessibility for both locals and Armenians assimilated into the region.

Along the entire bottom margin we read the Armenian dedicatory inscription:

O victorious, long-suffering, valiant martyr and confessor of Christ, holy Gregory the Illuminator of the Armenians, pray for the believing Armenian people. I also entreat you, though unworthy and humble. I, Hakob, son of Mahtesi Hovhannes of Erzurum, caused this wondrous image of your tortures to be printed in this imperial capital of Vienna in the year of the Lord 1731 October 16, to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Between the upper and lower medallions depicting the tortures is a poetic encomium praising the saint. This engraving¹⁰ differs from the earlier one in a significant conceptual way. Based on the purely informative and laudatory nature of the Latin and German inscriptions, as well as the explanatory captions of Gregory's life episodes, we may conclude that it was created explicitly for the broad dissemination and didactic presentation of the Life of Saint Gregory. The composition thus brings together events from different periods in a manner not previously encountered in works of this kind.

10 In contrast to the three preceding engravings, of which only a single example of each is known to us, several impressions of this engraving have survived and are preserved in various Armenian and European cultural centers, as well as in private collections.

6 Later Engravings and the Iconographic Impact of the Single-Sheet Tradition on Other Media

Chronologically, the next engraving (dimensions with frame: 67 × 50 cm) was printed in 1749; however, it bears no indication of the printing house or place of publication [fig. 6]. We assume that it was likewise produced in Vienna, as it repeats the iconography of the preceding example almost exactly, though it is inferior to it in terms of artistic execution.



Figure 6 Unknown engraver, scenes from the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. 1749, probably Vienna. Engraving on paper, 67 × 50 cm. Venice, Mekhitarist Congregation. © Mekhitarist Congregation, Venice

The figures are characterized by coarser, heavier, and less harmonious facial features. Their bodies, modeled in dark tonalities, the garments articulated through deep and voluminous folds, and the dramatic expressiveness of their facial expressions are fully in keeping with the visual language of the late Baroque period.

Here the decorative frame reaches a new artistic level: it is conceived in imitation of a metal picture frame, with sculptural allegorical figures placed at the corners. In this engraving, Baroque aesthetics appear not in their earlier refined and balanced splendor, but rather in a densely charged and heavy form.

Unlike the earlier examples, this engraving contains no inscriptions in foreign languages; all texts are in Armenian. Beneath the scene of the tortures, the date of execution is recorded (1749). On either side appears a rhymed, two-stanza poem in Armenian in which the patron, while praising the Illuminator, implores his intercession on behalf of Armenians in distress:

Even the words of the wise are insufficient to praise you,
nor can the pens of rhetoricians fully describe you,
for heaven itself bears witness and proclaims the glory of your
[sufferings.

But we, your Armenian children, speak with our humble words:
ever-watchful Illuminator, your name truly befits you;
be the intercessor for your Armenian sons in their hardship,
O compassionate Father.

The next engraving (dimensions with frame: 72.5 × 49 cm) likewise bears no indication of the printing house, place of publication, or even the year [fig. 7]. On the basis of its stylistic features, we assume that it was produced toward the end of the eighteenth century, most likely in Italy. This image strongly recalls academic painting and, in comparison with the other works discussed, appears to be less directly influenced by the earliest engraving. Although the overall iconographic scheme remains essentially the same, a noticeable reduction in the density of details and a modification of the figures' poses are evident.



Figure 7 Unknown engraver, scenes from the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. Probably late eighteenth century, probably Italy. Engraving on paper, 72.5 × 49 cm. Venice, Mekhitarist Congregation. © Mekhitarist Congregation, Venice

In all previous images, according to the inscriptions, Tiridates is accompanied by his sister Khosrovidukht; here, however, an additional female figure has been introduced – Queen Ashkhen. We therefore suggest that the newly introduced female figure represents

Khosrovidukht within the established iconographic scheme, while the crowned woman in elaborate attire should be identified as Queen Ashkhen. Unlike the earlier engravings, this print also includes several clerics attending Saint Gregory.

Beneath the central medallion appears the Armenian inscription:

Saint Gregory the Illuminator baptizes King Tiridates and the royal household.

Here, the column of light has been transformed into an actual architectural column, though the radiant beams of light and the Holy Spirit have been retained.



Figure 8
Unknown engraver, scenes from the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. Probably late eighteenth century, Rome. Engraving on paper, 20.6 × 13.6 cm. Isfahan, Archive of the Holy Savior Monastery (Surb Amenap'rkē'i Vank'). Commissioned by Lebanese clerics. Photo by Tovma Galstanean, © Archive of the Holy Savior Monastery, Isfahan

In terms of structure and composition, our final engraving (dimensions with frame: 20.6 × 13.6 cm) is closely related to the preceding example. According to its inscription, it was printed in Rome by Lebanese clerics [fig. 8]. Although no date is indicated, we again assume that it dates to the late eighteenth century. This engraving is preserved in the archive of the Armenian Holy Savior Monastery

(Surb Amenap'rkč'i Vank') in Isfahan, Iran.¹¹ For this reason, the paper border of the engraving is decorated with animal and vegetal motifs characteristic of Persian art.

These single-sheet engravings, owing to their accessibility and portability, circulated widely across the world. They reached Armenia as well as various Armenian diasporic communities, and in subsequent centuries numerous other images based on this iconographic model were produced in books. The same model also served as the basis for other artistic media, including painted icons [fig. 9], church curtains and banners [fig. 10], as well as liturgical vessels and reliquaries [fig. 11].



Figure 9
Painted icon with scenes
from the Life of Saint
Gregory the Illuminator.
First half of the eighteenth
century. Gherla, Church of
the Holy Trinity. © Church of
the Holy Trinity, Gherla

11 The photograph of the engraving was kindly provided by Tovma Galstanean, archivist of the Holy Savior Monastery in New Julfa, to whom we express our sincere gratitude.



Figure 10
Church banner with scenes from the Life
of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. 1808.
Vienna, Mekhitarist Museum.
© Mekhitarist Museum, Vienna



Figure 11
Reliquary with scenes from the Life
of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. 1765,
Antakya. Antelias, Catholicosate of the
Great House of Cilicia. © Catholicosate
of the Great House of Cilicia, Antelias

In these works, Gregory the Illuminator is depicted wearing the hooded mitre (*mitra*), which became part of Armenian patriarchal and episcopal vestments from 1184 onward, when the pope presented Latin patriarchal insignia to Catholicos Gregory IV T'la (Ormanyan 1992, 87).

Each of these works, employing different artistic approaches and levels of execution, reiterates the same iconography of Saint Gregory's inhuman tortures. In these engravings, the faces of the persecutors are filled with intense energy, as if striving to inflict the utmost cruelty upon the saint. In contrast, in every scene the Illuminator is portrayed with a calm and detached expression, thereby aligning him with other pan-Christian saints – and with the Only-Begotten Son of God – who endured suffering through divine power.

7 Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the engravings discussed above, it becomes evident that the elaboration of this iconographic type was initiated by the Italian artist Luca Ciamberlano. The visual cycle he created adhered so closely to Agathangelos' account and presented the Life of Saint Gregory with such narrative precision that it soon acquired a canonical character and was transmitted across centuries.

As demonstrated, the single-sheet images depicting Saint Gregory – particularly through their inscriptions – were, in certain cases, commissioned by Catholic patrons and served explicit propagandistic and confessional purposes. By contrast, those produced within the Armenian Apostolic milieu primarily sought to glorify the saint, invoke his blessing, and present in an accessible visual form the life and sanctity of the first Patriarch of the Armenians. At the same time, given the complex political and confessional realities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Armenian communities were divided over the question of union with the Church of Rome, these engravings may also have conveyed an opposing confessional message, affirming the Armenian Apostolic tradition in response to pro-Catholic tendencies.

As noted above, unlike manuscripts, painted icons, or large printed volumes, these engravings were likely far more affordable and, due to their portability, easily transported by travelers. Consequently, they spread widely across Armenian-populated centers throughout the world and became iconographic foundations for new works created locally. At the same time, precisely because they were single-sheet prints, they were inherently more vulnerable; as a result, most of them have survived either in unique copies or in a damaged condition.

It is possible that further details regarding the production of these engravings and related issues will come to light in the future.

However, our primary objective has been to present these works in a systematic manner and to introduce previously unpublished images into scholarly circulation by situating them within their appropriate art-historical and historical contexts.

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