

# A Forgotten Voice: Giuseppe Cappelletti and *L'Armenia*

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**Abstract** In 1841, Giuseppe Cappelletti (1802-1876) published in Florence a three-volume work titled *L'Armenia*, aiming to offer a comprehensive description of the country's history, geography, and culture grounded in Armenian historical sources. Despite being the first major Italian-language study of Armenia – and among the earliest of its kind in Western Europe – the work has been largely overlooked in subsequent scholarship. This article reassesses Cappelletti's contribution, situating his oeuvre within its broader socio-political and intellectual context, restoring a long-forgotten voice into the history of Italoophone Armenian studies.

**Keywords** Giuseppe Cappelletti. *L'Armenia*. Armenian studies. Venice. San Lazzaro degli Armeni. Mekhitarist Congregation. House of Savoy.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 *L'Armenia*: An Overview from the Outside. – 3 The Mekhitarists, a Catholic Priest, and the Savoy Crown. – 4 "Controversy Was His Muse". – 5 Conclusions.



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## 1 Introduction

Throughout much of the nineteenth century,<sup>1</sup> Western engagement with Armenia and its culture remained sporadic and largely confined to ecclesiastical history. After all, the country was rarely visited – especially following the outbreak of the Crimean War [fig. 1] – and occupies a marginal space even in the few travel accounts that mention it, where it appears only as a brief stopover on broader Orientalist itineraries through the East (Laycock 2009, 66-105).<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1 Cappelletti, G. (1841). *L'Armenia*, vol. 1. Frontispiece. Florence: Fabris

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**1** The first draft of this article was prepared in 2022 as a partial outcome of the international project *Cultural Interactions in the Medieval Subcaucasian Region: Historiographical and Art-Historical Perspectives*, directed by Ivan Foletti and Michele Bacci. The final results of the project have been published in a two-volume monograph: Foletti, Bacci 2023. We would like to express our gratitude to the editorial board of *Armeniaca* and to the peer reviewers for their insightful and constructive feedback. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Authors.

**2** For more information about the conflict, see Arnold 2010 and French Blake 1972. Broadly, on orientalism: Said 1978.

Against this backdrop, *L'Armenia* [fig. 2], a three-volume work published in Florence in 1841 by the Venetian priest Giuseppe Cappelletti (1802-1876), stands as an unusual and ambitious attempt to provide the public with a comprehensive treatment of Armenian history, geography, and culture. It is arguably the first such study in Italian and one of the earliest in any Western European language (Cappelletti 1841a).<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 2** Franz Roubaud, *Siege of Sevastopol*. 1904. Detail. Oil on canvas, 14 × 115 m.  
Sevastopol: Panorama Museum on the Siege of Sevastopol

Yet despite its broad scope and pioneering nature, the work has been largely neglected by contemporary historiography; Cappelletti himself – as Sona Haroutyunian has recently noted – has yet to receive sustained scholarly attention (Haroutyunian 2018, 27-41).<sup>4</sup>

This article wishes to address this oversight by reassessing Cappelletti's contribution within the history of Italophone Armenian studies. It does so by examining his work, the motivations behind it, as well as the political and intellectual context in which it was conceived.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the work has the year 1842 on the cover, but 1841 on the frontispieces of the volumes.

<sup>4</sup> On 26 March 2009, in the frame of the *III Giornata di Studi Armeni e Caucasici* in Venice, Tamara De Valerio – at the time a Ph.D. student at the University of Rouen – delivered a paper titled “Cappelletti: un armenista veneziano dell'Ottocento”. To the authors' present knowledge, however, there is no publication centred on his oeuvre.

## 2 **L'Armenia: An Overview from the Outside**

"To the ab. Giuseppe Cappelletti, nature was a mother and fortune a stepmother," wrote Rinaldo Fulin (1824-1884) in his obituary of the Venetian priest, "and in this contrast between the gifts of nature and the distress of fortune lies the reason why this man could not truly show what he was worth" (Fulin 1876, 225-6, esp. 225).<sup>5</sup> Despite having authored over fifty volumes primarily devoted to ecclesiastical and Venetian history, Cappelletti died on 2 February 1876 in financial hardship, largely forgotten by the public, and shadowed by a controversial reputation. This neglect stemmed partly from his divisive personality (as we shall explore) and partly from recurring criticisms of his historical work, frequently deemed inaccurate and lacking in philological and methodological rigor (Cappelletti 1844-70; 1848-55).<sup>6</sup>

Yet between the 1840s and 1860s, Cappelletti enjoyed a certain degree of popularity, emerging as a particularly active figure in Venetian religious life. More relevantly for this study, he played a fundamental role in introducing Italian-speaking audiences to a relatively uncharted field: the history and culture of Armenia. His long association with the Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro, which began in 1827 when he was just twenty-five years old, served as the catalyst for this engagement.<sup>7</sup> There, supported by the Congregation and granted access to its renowned library and printing press, Cappelletti began studying Classical Armenian and undertook the Italian translation of foundational historical texts, including the works of the fifth-century historian Movsēs Xorenac'i and his contemporary Elišē. He also provided the first Latin translation of the oeuvre of Saint Nersēs Klayec'i, further contributing to making Armenian sources accessible to a wider readership (Cappelletti 1841b; 1840; 1833).

Cappelletti's interest in this field culminated in 1841 with the publication of *L'Armenia*, this time an original work whose declared aim was "to refute the innumerable fabrications introduced by those who had previously written on the subject" and to provide a more accurate description of the country in every respect (Cappelletti 1841a, 1: 1).<sup>8</sup> Cappelletti's initial jibe targeted, on the one hand, the travel accounts of the previous century and, on the other

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5 "All'ab. Giuseppe Cappelletti la natura fu madre e la fortuna madrigna: e in questo contrasto fra i doni della natura e le angustie della fortuna è da ricercare la causa per cui quest'uomo non poté veramente mostrare quanto valesse."

6 For a biography of the author, see Preto 1975, 225-6.

7 About the monastery, see, amongst other contributions: Peratoner 2006; Maguolo, Bandera 1999.

8 "Un'opera sull'Armenia, il cui scopo è smentire le innumerevoli falsità introdotte da quanti scrissero intorno questo argomento e far conoscere la verità qual è in se stessa".

hand, Antoine-Jean Saint-Martin (1791-1832), who had previously published his renowned *Mémoires historiques et géographiques sur l'Arménie* in Paris in 1818 (Saint-Martin 1818-19). Specifically, Cappelletti accused the French scholar of having conducted his study without sufficient knowledge of the Armenian language, thereby perpetuating errors rather than correcting earlier ones. In response, he proposed a thorough revision of the subject based on the direct consultation of Armenian primary sources. This approach echoes the rationale expressed in the preface to the English translation of Mik'ayēl Č'amč'ean (1738-1823) *History of Armenia* by Johannes Avdall, which likewise identified Western scholars' lack of proficiency in Armenian as a major obstacle to historical accuracy (Avdall 1827, 1: XVII). Yet, although Cappelletti did cite ancient sources, his work appears to draw heavily upon secondary materials produced by the Mekhitarist Fathers – especially the historical and geographical treatises of Łukas Inčičean (1758-1833) – which exhibit notable similarities with his writing. The result is a systematic compilation structured into three volumes: the first covers geography, the second addresses history and culture, and the third focuses on religion.

A closer reading, however, suggests that Cappelletti's goal was not merely to correct earlier inaccuracies, but rather to underscore Armenia's significance across all these domains. The second volume is particularly emblematic of this agenda: in the subchapter devoted to the *Arts and Literature that flourished in Armenia*, in fact, Cappelletti asserts that the country was in no way inferior to European nations in cultural achievement and, in certain respects, had even taken the lead (Cappelletti 1841a, 2: 231). He attributes to Armenia a central role especially in the fields of history and medicine, writing that “the Armenian nation, in the historical discipline, surpasses any other nation as regards the number of the writers and their competence in reporting historical facts” (196),<sup>9</sup> and that medicine was “born in Armenia; and from Armenia, it spread to all other nations” (208).<sup>10</sup>

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**9** “La nazione armena nel ramo storico primeggia sopra qualunque altra nazione, sì per la copia degli scrittori, sì per la loro ingenuità nel riferire le cose”.

**10** “In Armenia, dunque, ebbe principio la medicina; e dall'Armenia si diffuse a tutte le altre nazioni”.

### 3      **The Mekhitarists, a Catholic Priest, and the Savoy Crown**

Cappelletti's celebratory portrayal of Armenia invites closer scrutiny of the underlying motivations for his publication and, more broadly, of his intellectual engagement with the subject. These motivations, we argue, are most clearly articulated in the final paragraph of his work, devoted to the prevailing situation of the Armenian people. Here, Cappelletti highlights the consequences of their fragmentation, a condition that threatened the very survival of their culture:

The arts and sciences are not neglected by the Armenians, but as it now stands, their culture is propagated only by a few existing colleges here and there outside of Armenia; [...] In all of these colleges, young Armenians are educated free of charge in literature, the philosophical sciences, drawing, music, European languages, and other useful knowledge, thanks to which, when they return to their motherland, they can hopefully propagate the light of culture to their compatriots and awaken them from their sleep. (Cappelletti 1841a, 3: 166-7)<sup>11</sup>

In this challenging context, the Mekhitarist Fathers emerged as a cultural vanguard, as they translated, published, and disseminated Armenian historical and religious texts in an effort to preserve national consciousness beyond the borders of their lost homeland. In light of these premises and given Cappelletti's long-standing ties with the Congregation in Venice, it seems likely that the author's ultimate goal in publishing *L'Armenia* was to amplify the visibility of the country and its people – while at the same time drawing attention to the issues they were facing – by foregrounding their historical and cultural legacy. In this sense, it is also tempting to think that the Venetian Mekhitarist Order directly commissioned the work and possibly helped the author in the writing process. Support for this hypothesis comes from an anonymous polemical pamphlet titled *Il Mechitarista di San Lazzaro di Venezia* [fig. 3], as it accused Cappelletti of serving as “a tool and even the direct voice of the Mekhitarists

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**11** “Le arti e le scienze sono affatto neglette nell’attuale stato dell’Armenia; né d’altronde si sparge la cultura che dai nazionali collegi esistenti qua e colà in vari paesi fuori d’Armenia; [...] In tutti questi collegi sono educati gratuitamente i giovani armeni nelle belle lettere, nelle scienze filosofiche, nel disegno, nella musica, nelle lingue europee, e in altre utili cognizioni, per le quali, ritornati che siano al suolo nativo, giova sperare, che spargeranno la luce della coltura nei loro connazionali e li scuoteranno dal funesto letargo in cui sono immersi attualmente”.

from Venice" (*Il mechtarista di San-Lazzaro di Venezia* 1852, 23).<sup>12</sup> While conclusive evidence of formal collaboration is lacking, archival sources preserved at San Lazzaro may yet shed some light on the nature of this relationship.<sup>13</sup>

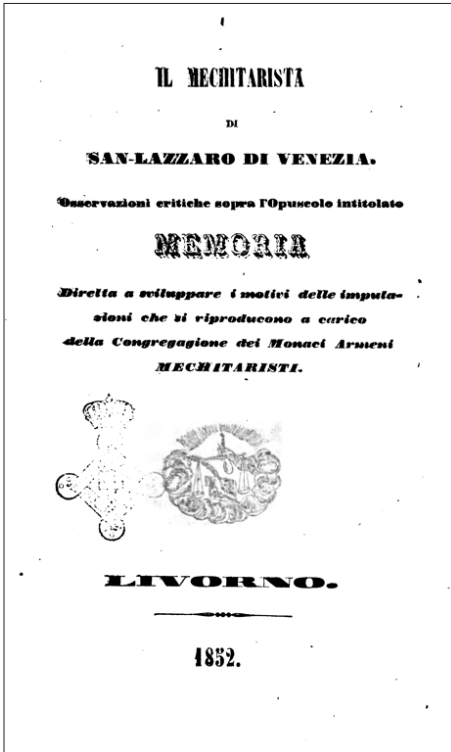


Figure 3

Anonymous [Malachian, P.: Azarian, S.] (1852). *Il mechtarista di San-Lazzaro di Venezia: osservazioni critiche sopra l'opuscolo intitolato memoria diretta a sviluppare i motivi delle imputazioni che si riproducono a carico della Congregazione dei Monaci Armeni Mechitaristi*. Frontispiece. Leghorn: s.n.

A second key factor must also be taken into account: since the Mekhitarists were at that time searching for alliances with European powers that might offer symbolic recognition or tangible protection, Cappelletti's decision to dedicate *L'Armenia* to Carlo Alberto (1798-1849), King of Sardinia [fig. 4], takes on added significance

<sup>12</sup> "Strumento canale e quasi direi bocca dei Mechitaristi di Venezia. [...] Ed in questo caso capisco anche io, che citando il Prete Cappelletti in favore della Comunità di S. Lazzaro era lo stesso che citare varii PP della stessa Comunità in suo favore". Fulin also acknowledges, in the Cappelletti's obituary, that he often wrote "on behalf of others". See Fulin 1876, 225-6: "ma col suo nome o senza il suo nome, ed anche a nome e per conto altrui, vagò trattando questioni d'ogni maniera".

<sup>13</sup> In the future, we hope to pursue this line of enquiry further by examining Cappelletti-related documents in the Archives of the Mekhitarist Congregation in Venice.



(Uluhogian 2006, 495-514, esp. 503). More than a simple honorific gesture, Cappelletti explicitly styled Carlo Alberto as “King of Armenia,” printing the title in bold (Cappelletti 1841a, 1: 1). The title, a merely formal one transferred to the Savoy family through Carlotta of Lusignan (1444-1487), had rarely been used in the official documentation of the Savoy Kingdom and was associated exclusively with the territory of the former Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, conquered by the Mamluks in 1375 (e.g., De Mas Latrie 1855, 3: 82-152). Nevertheless, in a rhetorical flourish in the second volume, Cappelletti urges Carlo Alberto to revive the title in his formal documents, as “it would be sweeter for the unfortunate Armenians to see at least the title of their ancient sovereignty formally restored after four centuries and a half” (Cappelletti 1841a, 2: 61).



**Figure 4** Pietro Ayres (1794-1878), *Portrait of Carlo Alberto of Savoy*, ca 1832. Oil on canvas, 117.85 × 86.6. Racconigi Castle, Piedmont, Italy

This symbolic investment had a precedent, as, in 1828, the Armenian diplomat Deodato Papasian (1808-1868) already made a similar appeal in his *Illustrazione d'alcune antichità armene esistenti in Piemonte*, dedicated to Carlo Alberto's predecessor, Carlo Felice (1765-1831):<sup>14</sup>

**14** The history of the manuscript is quite travailed as explained by Alishan 1899, 114-15 and Carrière 1883, 170-213. See also the more recent Bais 2010, 19-23.



Sire, since the Armenian crown has belonged to the Royal House of Savoy for four centuries, I am glad, oh Sire, to be the first Armenian to be included amongst the subjects of Your ancient throne! Because of this given grace, I plead Your Majesty to let me express my gratitude publicly, by offering You the illustration of some Armenian documents that I made during my time in Piedmont. (Papasian 1828)<sup>15</sup>

This work – of which only a few manuscript copies are known (one held at the Biblioteca Reale in Turin, one at the Library of San Lazzaro, and another in the Fondo Papasian at the Biblioteca Comunale Ariostea in Ferrara) – is particularly significant for its effort to introduce Armenian culture to the House of Savoy through a description of the few Armenian artifacts preserved in Piedmont at the time. Among these is the famous thirteenth-century Skevra triptych-reliquary, then preserved in the Dominican Convent of Santa Croce e Ognissanti in Bosco Marengo and currently in the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg.<sup>16</sup>

While Papasian's text constitutes an early attempt to remind the king of the historical relationship between Armenia and the House of Savoy, Cappelletti's appeal is far more ambitious, as the author seems to attribute to Carlo Alberto not only jurisdiction over the former Armenian kingdom of Cilicia but the entire historical region, investing the sovereign with the role of protector of Armenian literature:

Armenia should have in your majesty a new protector, oh Sire, if not of the land at least of the literature of the country; as Armenia is a fulgid gem of your illustrious crown. (Cappelletti 1841a, 1: 5-6)<sup>17</sup>

This rhetorical maneuver, aimed to bestow upon Carlo Alberto the formal (and moral) responsibility for safeguarding the Armenian

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**15** "Sire, Da quattro secoli che la corona d'Armenia appartiene ai Reali di Savoia, qual gloria per me, o Sire, d'essere il primo tra gli Armeni ai piedi di V.M. ammesso nel novero dei servitori del vostro antichissimo trono! Ad una di tanto insigne grazia, supplico la M.V. di aggiungere quella di concedermi ch'io renda pubblica la mia riconoscenza, col fare omaggio alla M.V. della illustrazione da me fatta durante il mio soggiorno in Piemonte, d'alcuni documenti Armeni". The quote is taken directly from the transcription by Uluhogian 2006, 505-6. For the manuscript see: Turin, Biblioteca Reale, Fondi Manoscritti, Illustrazione d'alcune antichità armene esistenti in Piemonte. Opera dedicata dal Barone Adeodato Papasiany segretario interprete di S.M., MS 301.

**16** The reliquary was first described by Papasian and, later, by Promis 1883.

**17** "Abbia perciò [l'Armenia] nella Maestà Vostra, o Sire, anche ai di nostri un nuovo Protettore, se non il suolo, almeno la letteratura di Armenia; giacché il nome di Armenia è una fulgida gemma della Vostra insigne Corona".

people due to his status as King of Armenia, echoes the notorious attempt by Charles DuCange (1610-1688) to invest the French King Louis XIV (1638-1715) with the task of taking back Constantinople from the Turks by presenting him as the legitimate heir of the Byzantine emperors (Shawcross 2021, 143-80, esp. 176-80). Cappelletti reprises this theme also in his subsequent *Storia del Cristianesimo*, this time dedicated to Queen Maria Teresa of Tuscany (1801-1855) (Cappelletti 1842-46). In the dedication, in fact, Cappelletti reminds the sovereign that she had acquired the title of Queen of Armenia through marriage with Carlo Alberto, reiterating his wish that the title be reintroduced into official usage.

Cappelletti's perspective, however, seems, in both cases, disenchanted. Although it cannot be excluded that he genuinely supported the idea of Armenia's political annexation to the Savoy realm, he appears aware of the impracticality of such ambitions. Nevertheless, given his close relationship with the Mekhitarists – and assuming that he spoke for them – we must conclude that the Congregation itself harbored a certain interest in cultivating Savoy patronage. From this perspective, Cappelletti's decision to publish *L'Armenia* not through the Mekhitarist typography but with Antonio Fabris (1790-1865) in Florence may reflect a deliberate political calculation: issuing a work dedicated to the King of Sardinia in a city still under Habsburg control and with the direct involvement of the Mekhitarist Congregation would have placed the latter in an awkward, if not precarious, position (Issaverdenz 1879, 9).<sup>18</sup> Cappelletti's broader publishing behavior supports this interpretation, as he seems to have been, on the contrary, quite unreserved in the distribution of his texts. This is evidenced by an incident in 1844, when his book *Osservazioni critiche storiche teologiche di Giuseppe Cappelletti prete veneziano sulla tragedia Arnaldo da Brescia di Gio. Bat. Niccolini* was censured by the Austrian Revision and Censorship Office (*Carte segrete* 1852, 3: 49-50). The Office observed that Cappelletti had proclaimed his text in the manner of a large-print poster displayed in a public setting. In the case of *L'Armenia*, he employed a comparable strategy but

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**18** Cappelletti might have met Fabris in Venice since the latter sculpted the bust of Abbot Mekhitar in 1833 and displayed it in the Library of Manuscripts in San Lazzaro degli Armeni. See Issaverdenz 1879, 9.

chose to do so in Milan, where he published a detailed manifesto of his forthcoming publication (Kojrighiantz 1840, 242-5, esp. 246).<sup>19</sup>

The specific reasons why the Mekhitarists may have indirectly supported Italian political unification are still unclear, especially since the Habsburgs had been giving concessions to the monastery since the beginning of the century, when Emperor Francis II (1768-1835) had greatly enlarged the dimensions of the island.<sup>20</sup> It is conceivable that, amid the shifting ideological landscape of the Risorgimento, the Congregation saw an opportunity to secure political sponsorship by appealing to the House of Savoy's latent claim to the Armenian crown. Viewed in this light, their apparent support for the Savoy cause may have been less an expression of anti-Habsburg sentiment than a calculated gesture of political expediency.

To our knowledge, there are no accounts of any reaction to Cappelletti's publication on the sovereign's part, nor political initiatives supporting the Armenian community in this period. The only documented reaction is a formal letter of gratitude from the king, which Cappelletti proudly reproduced in the preface to the first volume of his *Le chiese d'Italia* (1844) (Cappelletti 1844-70, 1).<sup>21</sup> This lack of initiative 'from above' that Cappelletti wished for might also be due to his combative personality, which reportedly spoiled many of his professional relationships as well as damaged his reputation (Preto 1975, 225-6).<sup>22</sup>

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**19** "Più estesamente e con assai più di erudizione che non abbia saputo io fare, scrisse sull' Armenia il prete Giuseppe Cappelletti: e ben ce lo promette il dettagliato manifesto, ch'egli l'anno scorso pubblicò qui in Milano. L'Opera, se non è già stampata, dev'essere certamente sotto il torchio: e l'Italia tutta desidera di vederla e di leggerla per rettificare ormai le false idee, che finora ha avuto su questo argomento, seguitando alla cieca guide cieche e inesperte".

**20** Francis I, Emperor of Austria, is often styled with his previous title (held from 1792 to 1806) of Francis II, Holy Roman Emperor, to avoid confusion with his grandfather Francis I, Holy Roman Emperor.

**21** The letter, signed by the private secretary of the King, is attached at the beginning of the volume.

**22** Examples include Gliubich 1860, 3: "Signore! Ebbi il libello, che m'addrizzaste colla posta, né mi recò stupore ritrovare in esso trafuso tutto il pestifero fele del vostro inquieto animo, ché già m'era noto abbastanza per altri vomiti di simil genere. Qui sembra però, che avete superato voi stesso, giacché, cosa rara, ci rappresentate il vostro individuo qual è in suo pieno lume di nudità e d'abbiezza" (Sir! I have the pamphlet that you sent me by mail. I was not surprised to find all the pestiferous bile of your restless soul in it, as I already knew it for other similar vomits of yours. However, you surpassed yourself here because, as rare as it is, you showed yourself in the light of your bareness and vileness); and Casarini 1873, 27: "Mi riservo poi il diritto che mi accorda la legge di muover querela contro il Giornale la Stampa e contro il signor Pr. Cappelletti per le ingiuriose espressioni contenute nel pubblicato Articolo [La Stampa, 10 July 1873, n. 186]" (I reserve the right, as accorded by law, to sue the newspaper la Stampa and the Priest Cappelletti for the vituperative expressions he used in his article).

#### 4 “Controversy Was His Muse”

Cappelletti's reputation as a controversial figure is well-documented,<sup>23</sup> starting from accusations of superficiality stemming from an unfortunate incident in which he purportedly published material from the archives of Venice regarding some diplomatic documents of the Jesuits, believing them to be unpublished (Fulin 1873, 372-5). However, the primary reason for this can be found within the well-known tensions between the Mekhitarists of San Lazzaro, the Holy See of Rome, the Propaganda Fide, and the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople that inflamed the nineteenth century (Dermarkar 2022, esp. fig. 21).<sup>24</sup> By the 1850s, these tensions were increasingly expressed through public pamphleteering, and Cappelletti, ever combative, was both participant and target (Dermarkar 2022).<sup>25</sup>

In 1850, a pamphlet was published in San Lazzaro's typography under the title *Memoria diretta a sviluppare i motivi delle imputazioni che si riproducono a carico dei monaci armeni Mechitaristi*; the text recounted the history of the Congregation, explained its intrinsic value for Armenian society and religion, and defended its positions and rites (*Memoria diretta* 1850). In particular, the pamphlet underlined the attempts to stop their mission in the territories of the Ottoman Empire and alluded to Monsignor Anton Hassun (1809-1884), archbishop of Constantinople of the Armenians, as the motor of these attempts (Dermarkar 2022).<sup>26</sup>

Two years later, in 1852, a second pamphlet was published in Livorno, the aforementioned *Il Mechitarista di San Lazzaro di Venezia. Osservazioni critiche sopra l'opuscolo intitolato memoria diretta a sviluppare i motivi delle imputazioni che si riproducono a carico della Congregazione dei Monaci Armeni Mechitaristi*. The author, who opted to remain anonymous, composed a series of 248 pages of inflammatory rhetoric directed towards the Mekhitarists, whom they held responsible for the disorders that had befallen the Armenian Catholic Church. The pamphlet is replete with expressions of calumny, including such terms as 'schismatics' and 'heretics', and advocated the expulsion of the Mekhitarist missionaries from

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**23** The quote is from Fulin 1876, 225-6.

**24** Zekiyani 1993, 234. See also the fundamental text of Santus 2022, esp. 169-96, 305-428 (Third part: Le conseguenze dell'apostolato cattolico tra i cristiani orientali: il caso armeno). Sirinian 2010, 149-88.

**25** Part three, chapter four, section “La tempête du libelle ‘Il Mechitarista di San Lazzaro di Venezia’ (1852-1854)”.

**26** Part three, chapter four, section “La tempête du libelle ‘Il Mechitarista di San Lazzaro di Venezia’ (1852-1854)”.

the Ottoman territories and the dissolution of the order altogether (Dermarkar 2022).<sup>27</sup>

Although the publication was originally issued in Livorno, it was suspected already in the same year of originating from Constantinople and potentially being authored by the Latin priest Gaspare Crisostomo Vuccino (Bigoni 1852, esp. 7). An inquiry by the Apostolic Vicar of Constantinople, Julien-Marie Hillereau (1796-1855), revealed that Vuccino had initially claimed to be the author but had finally admitted to being the editor (Dermarkar 2022; Hillereau 1852).<sup>28</sup> The authors were ultimately revealed to be Armenian priests Paolo Malachian and Stefano Azarian, the secretary of Monsignor Hassun (Hillereau 1852; Santus 2022, 194-5, fn. 65). In a letter dated 27 May 1852, from Malachian to Vuccino, revealed during the inquiry, the former indicated he had read Cappelletti's work and found a number of significant errors on the part of the priest and went on to state that they discovered "really big things, absolutely inexcusable from a Catholic mouth" (Hillereau 1852, 18-20).<sup>29</sup> Malachian even sarcastically suggested that the pamphlet might be more suitably entitled *Il Mechitarista di San Lazzaro. Osservazioni critiche sopra Cappelletti etc.* (Hillereau 1852, 19). In fact, the pamphlet attacked both the Mekhitarists and Cappelletti in decidedly strong and sarcastic tones:

Does everyone has the right to ask me what is the purpose of this answer direct for the anonymous and indirect to Cappelletti? Without Mekhitarist tergiversation, without professions of faith of being a most docile son of the Catholic Church, which have no place here; I will briefly explain what led me to undertake this work. In the first place, I wrote to dictate to Armenian Catholics the norm of right belief, and to disabuse many of them who unwittingly find themselves in error. Secondly, to convince the anonymous writer of the aforementioned pamphlet "Memorie" of imposture, all those who praise the Academy of S. Lazzaro more than they should. Third, to

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**27** Part three, chapter four, section "La tempête du libelle 'Il Mechitarista di San Lazzaro di Venezia' (1852-1854)".

**28** Part three, chapter four, section "La tempête du libelle 'Il Mechitarista di San Lazzaro di Venezia' (1852-1854)".

**29** "Dietro una lettura più attenta e una ricerca maggiore del Cappelletti, noi veniamo a scoprire delle cose veramente grosse, inescusabili assolutamente in una bocca cattolica".

make once clear the frauds, the lies, the errors of the Mekhitarists of Venice. (*Il mechtarista di San-Lazzaro di Venezia* 1852, 239) <sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, the authors dedicated the entirety of the seventh chapter to Cappelletti, describing him as a “malicious, lying, and ignorant” person (*Il mechtarista di San-Lazzaro di Venezia* 1852, 204-11, esp. 209). In their estimation, Cappelletti exhibited a degree of veneration for the Mekhitarists that bordered on slanderous rhetoric directed at the Apostolic vicars and the Propaganda Fide, which was particularly evident in the last volume of the briefly aforementioned *Storia del Cristianesimo* (*Il mechtarista di San-Lazzaro di Venezia* 1852, 208-9).<sup>31</sup>

The text represents the concluding installment of a series of four volumes edited by Alcide Parenti between the years 1842 and 1846, where Cappelletti purported to extend Antoine Henri de Bérault-Bercastel’s (1720-1794) famous oeuvre *Histoire de l’église* to his present day (Cappelletti 1842-46; Bérault-Bercastel 1778-90). The preceding three volumes, however, were merely translations of Bercastel’s texts, yet expanded by Cappelletti with a historical account of the Armenian Church. Particularly interesting is the editor’s preface to the first volume, in which Parenti emphasizes Cappelletti’s status as a leading expert in the field, referring to him as the “only Italian Armenist” (Cappelletti 1842-46, 1: XII).

The space given by Cappelletti to the Armenian Church and the Mekhitarists was interpreted – and arguably twisted – by the authors of the derogatory pamphlet of 1852 as anti-Roman, in a clear dichotomy that was out of place at a time when the most extremist positions were moving towards a more moderate stance in favor of recognizing the validity of the Eastern rites, as long as they were dependent on Rome (Santus 2022, 193-6). The rhetorical question posed to Cappelletti is telling: “Cappelletti, have you forgotten to

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**30** “Ogni uno ha il diritto di domandarmi quale è lo scopo della presente risposta diretta all’anonimo indiretta al Cappelletti? Senza tergiversazioni Mechitaristiche, senza professioni di fede di esser figlio docilissimo della Cattolica Chiesa, che qui non hanno luogo; esporrò brevemente ciò, che mi induceva a intraprendere questo lavoro. In primo luogo, io scrissi per dettare agli Armeni Cattolici la norma di retta credenza, e disingannare molti di essi che inavvedutamente si trovano in errore. 2<sup>a</sup> per convincere di impostura l’anonimo scrittore dell’Opuscolo Cit. Mem. e tutti quelli che lodano più del dovere l’Accademia di S. Lazzaro. 3<sup>a</sup> per fare una volta palesi le frodi, le menzogne, gli errori dei Mechitaristi di Venezia”.

**31** “Un Prete latino non dovrebbe vergognarsi dire simili insolenze contro i suoi confratelli Sacerdoti? Ma questa è la carità fraterna che il Cappelletti ha imparato nel convento di S. Lazzaro! Lasciati i semplici Missionarii attacca Vicarii Apostolici [...] parla brutalissimamente della Propaganda” (Shouldn’t a Latin priest be ashamed to utter such insolences against his fellow priests? But this is the fraternal charity that Cappelletti learned in the convent of St. Lazarus! Leaving the simple Missionaries behind, he attacks Apostolic Vicars [...] he speaks most brutally of the *Propaganda*).

be a Priest and a Christian due to your love of the convent of San Lazzaro?" (*Il mekhitarista di San-Lazzaro di Venezia* 1852, 109).<sup>32</sup>

These attacks were vehemently rejected by the Venetian clergy and also by Cappelletti himself in a fiery response pamphlet (*Congregations of the Venetian Clergy* 1853; see also Ferrari 2016, 41-2), which was then added to the list of banned books by the Sacred Congregation of the Index, along with the pamphlet of 1852, further cementing the author's reputation as a polemicist (Cappelletti 1852; Pope Leo XIII 1881, 44).<sup>33</sup> In the encyclical *Neminem Vestrum* of 2 February 1854, Pope Pius IX [fig. 5] mentioned the pamphleteering as such:<sup>34</sup>

This discord of souls, never sufficiently deplored, became so seriously inflamed when both dissident parties, with writings in the vernacular language, began to discuss the religious questions of the people in a public manner. These writings were written with hostile and harsh words, which are contrary to Christian charity and are contrary to what is required to defend mutual harmony; came to light without the knowledge and against the will of this Apostolic See. (Pope Pius IX 1854)<sup>35</sup>

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**32** "Cappelletti, per amore del convento di S. Lazzaro vi siete dimenticato di esser Prete e Cristiano?".

**33** Cappelletti 1852; Pope Leo XIII 1881, 44. See also Martínez De Bujanda 2002, 188, 603.

**34** Apparently, the Holy See of Rome had asked Carlo Vercellone an opinion on the derogatory pamphlet, see *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*. The text was written both in Italian and Armenian and concluded that the Mekhitarists had "Integrity of faith and unblemished and blameless conduct". See Vercellone 1852, 24.

**35** "Questa discordia degli animi, mai abbastanza deplorata, così gravemente si infiammò quando ambedue i partiti dissidenti, con scritti in lingua vernacola, cominciarono a discutere delle questioni religiose del popolo in forma pubblica. Tali scritti furono redatti con parole ostili e durissime, che sono contrarie alla carità cristiana e sono contrarie a quello che si richiede per difendere la mutua concordia; uscirono alla luce all'insaputa e contro il volere di questa Sede Apostolica".





**Figure 5** Chromolithograph of Pope Pius IX, in Triepi 1879

However, he goes on to write that to eliminate all controversy and suspicion, the Mekhitarists of San Lazzaro should have sent a profession of their Catholic faith and doctrine and a signed declaration (Pope Pius IX 1854). Although the issue seemed to have been forcibly resolved, the disagreements would only intensify in the following years, culminating in a series of clashes that were exacerbated after the First Vatican Council (1869-70), when two Mekhitarists opposed the thesis of papal infallibility (Zekiyan 1993, 239). In 1873, some monks who were deemed schismatic were even excommunicated (Martina 1990, 88). Cappelletti died shortly after, in 1876, and Fulin wrote in his obituary:

he wandered around, dealing with questions of every kind, erudite, literary, political, juridical, and also, let's admit it, personal: for controversy was his inspiring muse; an unwise inspiration that oftentimes dragged Cappelletti where he then regretted having passed. Fortunately, these writings were destined to die with the passions that had inspired them; but we regret not knowing whether the mighty works, which Cappelletti courageously wrote

which he almost entirely completed, will have a long life at the end. (Fulin 1876, 225-6)<sup>36</sup>

When reading these words, it is difficult not to think of the Mekhitarist question. His association with the monastery had placed Cappelletti in the orbit of various controversies that lasted more than a century, in which he was little more than an easy quarry, given his combative character and the generally polarizing academic esteem he received during his lifetime. Regardless, Cappelletti's texts dedicated to Armenia constitute some of the earliest examples of interest in Armenian literature, history, and culture in the Italian peninsula.

## 5 Conclusions

At the end of this overview, we can conclude that Cappelletti's *L'Armenia* has great value in its attempt to assert the relevance of Armenian identity in the challenging political landscape of nineteenth-century pre-unitarian Italy. Such an effort to study and disseminate Armenian culture could be interpreted as the result of the collaboration between the priest and the Mekhitarists of San Lazzaro, ultimately aimed at improving the social condition of the diasporic Armenian communities scattered throughout the territory. Although Cappelletti's reputation and his involvement in various disputes led to the marginalization of his work, *L'Armenia* remains the first comprehensive study on the subject written in Italian and, as such, needs to be finally acknowledged within the history of Armenian studies.

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**36** “vagò trattando questioni d'ogni maniera, erudite, letterarie, politiche, giuridiche ed anche, confessiamolo, personali: giacché la polemica era la sua musa ispiratrice; sconsigliata ispiratrice, che talvolta trascinò il Cappelletti ove poi si pentiva d'esser trascorso. Fortunatamente, queste scritture erano destinate a morire colle passioni che le avevano suggerite; ma ci duole di non sapere se avranno vita lungamente durevole i poderosi lavori, a cui il Cappelletti coraggiosamente die' mano e quasi tutti condusse a fine”.

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