



By the Book

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Commemorating the 1,600th anniversary of the creation of the Armenian Alphabet the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, in cooperation with the Embassy of the Armenian Republic in Egypt, presented an exhibition of rare Armenian manuscripts in February. Inaugurated by Ambassador Taher Khalifa, Head of External Relations at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, and Rouben Karapetian, the Armenian Ambassador to Egypt, the exhibition was followed by a scientific conference entitled "Armenian-Egyptian Historical and Cultural Relations."

The exhibition offered a rare opportunity for visitors to see 19 Armenian manuscripts, eight originals and the rest facsimiles, from the Institute of Matenadaran, Yerevan. One of the oldest and richest libraries in the world, the Matenadaran, as the Armenian manuscript library in Yerevan, capital of Armenia, is known, is one of the world's leading repositories of ancient manuscripts. Its history dates back to the creation of the Armenian alphabet and its collection of over 18,000 manuscripts covers almost all areas of ancient and medieval Armenian culture and science, from history, geography, grammar, philosophy, law, medicine, mathematics, cosmography, alchemy-chemistry, to literature, chronology, art history, music and theatre. It houses manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, Greek, Syriac, Latin, Amharic (Ethiopian) and in some of the ancient languages of India and Japan.

With 300,000 other documents the Institute of Matenadaran's collection is unique, says Sen Arevshadian, its director. Presenting a paper -- "Alexandria and the Formation of Science in Medieval Armenia" -- during last month's conference, Arevshadian explained that while a large number of original texts were lost long ago their Armenian translations remain extant and are jealously preserved in the vaults of the Matenadaran where scholars, academics and researchers from all over the world come to consult and study.

The Matenadaran is not just a museum. It is also a centre of Armenian manuscript research and preservation where experts from many countries come to study. The Matenadaran's first catalogue, prepared by Hovhannes Shahkhutianian and prefaced by French academician Brosset, was translated into French and Russian and published in St. Petersburg in 1840 with details of 312 manuscripts. Later, a second and much larger catalogue was compiled by Daniel Shahnazarian, including a total of 2,340 manuscripts.

It is at the Matenadaran that one can find the largest book in the world, weighing 27.5 kilograms and measuring 70.5 cm by 55.3, placed alongside the smallest book in the world, weighing a mere 19 grammes. The Matenadaran also houses a large collection of rare illuminated manuscripts. Historically, illuminated manuscripts were produced by monks. These hand-produced books include drawn, painted and gilded decoration on pages made of vellum, an animal skin that was specially treated for this purpose. Simple manuscripts were adorned with calligraphic pen work while more lavish ones were embellished with initials, enlarged and colourful letters that often contained miniature representations of human figures or biblical scenes. As for the illuminated ones, they were painted in luminous colours and had gold highlights or backgrounds.

Some 14th-century Armenian illuminated manuscripts where colours and text are set against the decorative surroundings of architectural elements, birds and plants, demonstrate impressive artistry and craftsmanship. Because dangers of all kinds threaten manuscripts, most libraries like the Matenadaran have been induced to undertake the reproduction in facsimile of their most precious manuscripts. This great undertaking means that the valuable works of the artist, the scribe and the illuminator will be preserved.

"It's not every day you are invited to a 1,600th birthday party, let alone one for an alphabet," admitted Jeffrey Gettleman, New York Times columnist attending a similar celebration in New York, last December. It was an opinion shared by guests attending the ceremonies at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

A 1,600th anniversary for an alphabet may not be a common event, but then the Armenian alphabet is hardly commonplace. Linguists who have studied it think it one of the oldest in the world still in use. Recently James Russell, Mashtots Professor of Armenian Studies at Harvard, has said that when Mesrop Mashtots, the 5th-century court cleric, invented the Armenia alphabet in 405 AD he gave Armenians much more than an efficient system for rendering their language into written form. Mashtots gave the Armenian people a cultural and religious identity. These characteristics became the very instrument of survival for the Armenians and a shield against all challenges "despite," says Russell, "the efforts of larger and more powerful neighbours to subsume or destroy them."

While Mashtots created the alphabet in order to translate the Bible, the original 36 letters were to inaugurate the beginnings of a written

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Armenian literary tradition and play a key role in preserving Armenian cultural identity. The extensive oral culture that existed before the creation of the alphabet was transcribed by scholars, mostly from monastic academies, thus marking the beginning of a written culture in Armenian.

The original alphabet devised by Mashtots had 36 characters and it is only during the Middle Ages that two more characters -- representing the "O" and the "F" -- were added, thus bringing the number of characters in the present-day alphabet to 38.

An interesting element that has come to the attention of scholars and makes the Armenian alphabet stand out amongst all other Eastern alphabets of the time was Mashtots' deliberate decision to adopt the vertical form of script rather than the horizontal form used in most Eastern writing. According to Russell, he "reoriented the Armenian script and gave it a more western character."

The success of the Armenian alphabet is reflected in the limited number of changes, both in the letters and the spelling of words, it has undergone since its creation in the 5th century. While other languages have gone through many changes the Armenian alphabet has remained almost in its original form showing, says Russell, "the Armenian alphabet was already so perfect there was little reason for it to change." In creating the Armenian alphabet, Mashtots created a culture, a repository for both Eastern and Western traditions, and made Armenia a culture of the book , a "bibliocracy," as Russell puts it. It is this bibliocracy, this culture of the book, that visitors to the Armenian manuscript exhibition at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina came to see.

It is believed that the ancient Library of Alexandria was among the many places Mashtots visited while researching the Armenian alphabet. There he may have met with Hypatia, the learned lady mathematician, astronomer and philosopher, and he may have exchanged views and ideas with the philosophers, grammarians, scientists and historians who taught in Alexandria. Mashtot has now returned for a second visit to Alexandria, even if he is back only in spirit.

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