



Fig. 1. Front cover of a gospel book, text dated 1419, with bosses forming a border, crosses, a crucifix, eye-shaped metal amulets, and one repoussé metal face (lower left). Matenadaran MS 3714.

Protection against the Evil Eye? Votive Offerings on Armenian Manuscript Bindings

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Introduction

The tradition of attaching precious-metal plaques with religious motifs onto the covers of sacred Christian manuscripts began as early as the fourth century. This custom was mentioned in a letter by St. Jerome in 384, in which he expressed his disapproval of such ostentatious manuscripts that appeared to have been privately owned.¹ Usually called "treasure bindings," because these valuable objects formed part of a church's treasure, they may be sumptuously embellished with gold, silver, pearls, ivory, colorful enamel, and/or gems.² Although these plaques, as well as other luxury objects, were clearly meant on one level to glorify God and the Church, and thereby proclaim the donor's piety, they also conspicuously demonstrated his wealth and power.

Armenians also practiced the custom of decorating their sacred books with precious-metal plaques, a custom that has endured up to modern times. Although most extant Armenian manuscript bindings consist of blind-tooled leather-covered wooden boards, some manuscripts have survived with their precious-metal plaques still attached to them. These plaques will normally be decorated with Christian religious motifs and may be further embellished with jewels or colored enamels. Thanks to the Armenian tradition of adding colophons and inscriptions to their manuscripts, as well as to many of their religious artifacts, we can determine the date and place of production of most Armenian manuscripts, and often their silver covers. The earliest known dated Armenian silver covers are found on an Armenian gospel book copied in 1249 and subsequently covered with gilt-silver repoussé plaques in 1255.³ This manuscript and its covers were commissioned by the Catholicos, Konstantin, the supreme head of the Armenian Church.⁴

Most of the surviving Armenian examples of decorative-metal covers date from the seventeenth century or later. One important workshop of Armenian silversmiths existed in

1. Paul Needham, *Twelve Centuries of Bookbindings: 400–1600* (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1979), 21.

2. Needham, *Twelve Centuries of Bookbindings*, 21–23, 27–29.

3. Repoussé is a method of working metal in which the silver is placed on a malleable surface such as wax or pitch. Using special tools, the main motifs and figures are pushed out from the back. The details in the figures are further worked on the front.

4. MS 7690 in the Matenadaran Mesrop Mashtots' Institute of Manuscripts, Erevan, Armenia (hereafter referred to as the Matenadaran); see *Armenia Sacra* (Paris: Somogy, 2007), Cat. 115.



Fig. 2. Blind-tooled binding dated 1697 with bosses arranged as a cross. Gospels, text 1161. MS 141, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

Kayseri (central Anatolia) between the mid-seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. These silversmiths produced many plaques that were used to embellish sacred manuscripts, as well as other liturgical and household objects.⁵ Many of the plaques produced in this workshop, for use on sacred books, were inscribed on the spine piece with the name of the silversmith, the place, the year the plaque was produced, and sometimes the name of the person who commissioned it. A number of them included precious or semiprecious jewels and colored

5. For information on this workshop, see Helen C. Evans and Sylvie L. Merian, "The Final Centuries: Armenian Manuscripts of the Diaspora," in *Treasures in Heaven: Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. Thomas F. Mathews and Roger S. Wieck (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1994), especially 115–123. For the most recent publications on this workshop, see Sylvie L. Merian, "Newly-Identified Armenian Silver Plaques from Kayseri in the Fitzwilliam Museum," *Manuscripta* 51, no. 2 (2007): 261–269; "Notes on Two Pairs of Armenian Silver Plaques from Kayseri in the Musée Arménien de France," *Manuscripta* 55, no. 1 (2011): 109–122; and "The Armenian Silversmiths of Kesaria/Kayseri: Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Armenian Kesaria/Caesarea and Asia Minor*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian, UCLA Armenian History and Culture Series, Historic Armenian Cities and Provinces, 12 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda), forthcoming 2013.

Fig. 3. Upper board of a gospel book with central cross and gems, crucifixes, and four corner pieces with symbols of the evangelists. Gospels, text dated 1262, binding 1626(?). MS W.539, Walters Art Museum.



enamels. These plaques were sometimes produced to adorn much older manuscripts, an undertaking that would have been considered a pious act by the donor.

Another way Armenians embellished their blind-tooled leather manuscript covers was to include metal bosses or studs to form a decorative design over the blind tooling. In some cases, see Fig. 1, overleaf, the hemispherical bosses just form a border on the edges of the boards. In other cases, they may create a design, such as the one in Fig. 2, in which the bosses form a central cross in addition to a border.⁶ Other types of metal decoration might consist of nailing four corner pieces and a central cross to the covers; sometimes, a Crucifixion or Resurrection scene may be placed in the center instead. Fig. 3. For example, the front board of the Walters Art Museum MS W.539, an Armenian gospel book dated 1262 with a seventeenth-century binding, includes metal border pieces over which four corner pieces have been nailed (each with the symbol of one of the four evangelists); a large central jeweled cross on a stepped pedestal; and four smaller crucifixes. Two of these crucifixes are inscribed

6. This manuscript, a gospel book copied in 1161 in Edessa, was rebound in Amasia/Amasya in 1697. Special Collections Library, University of Michigan, MS 141; see *Treasures in Heaven*, Cat. 3, 146.



Figs. 4–5. Left: Silver plaque with crucified Christ and gems on front cover of a gospel book dated 1643 from Constantinople. Right: Back cover with crosses given by various donors; cross in upper right inscribed by the donor, T'at'ēos the priest. MS Armenian 11, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

with the date, 1643. The objects have been placed symmetrically on the cover, although some overlap onto others.

Equal-armed crosses are common and are often randomly placed on the binding, sometimes inscribed with the name of the donor and/or the date. A beautifully illuminated parchment gospel book produced in Constantinople in 1643 was decorated with a full-silver plaque on the front with the body of Christ in the center and twenty-three raised settings that hold semiprecious stones (one stone now lacking).⁷ Figs. 4–5. The back cover includes four metal equal-armed crosses, three of them further embellished with semiprecious stones. The cross in the upper right is inscribed: “This holy cross is in memory of the soul of Pali, by the hand of the priest T'at'ēos.” The large central piece consists of two layers; the round lower gilt piece is inscribed in Armenian with the abbreviations for “Lord God Jesus Christ,” and a repoussé silver cross has been placed above it. It is not known if T'at'ēos donated just this inscribed cross or all the crosses, and/or the silver plaque on the front. Metal crosses, crucifixes, the symbols of the four evangelists, crucifixions, and the depiction of other biblical events are all Christian motifs appropriate for embellishing gospel books or other religious texts, and it is not surprising to find them on the covers of sacred texts.

During decades of research on Armenian bindings, I began to notice a number of other, rather peculiar bindings. In addition to the expected crosses or crucifixes, these manuscripts, as well as some printed books of religious works, are decorated with an amazing variety of bizarre objects nailed onto the leather-covered wooden boards. These items include small

7. MS Armenian 11, Houghton Library, Harvard University. See *Treasures in Heaven*, Cat. 18, 159.

repoussé metal pieces of different shapes; jewelry; coins; carved mother-of-pearl decorations; small, silver charms; and, in one case, what appears to be pieces of a belt. Most of these objects are nailed onto the manuscripts' covers without any regard to design or pattern, and often they overlap each other, almost in layers. Occasionally, the objects are even attached to the spine or fore-edge flap. Bindings with such nailed-on objects were mostly found on gospel books (both manuscript and printed), but sometimes other texts were so decorated. Most seem to be rather late additions; those that include dated or datable objects all appear to be from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. These curious bindings do not convey the impression of wealth and ostentatious display, like the luxurious silver or jeweled plaques mentioned earlier. Instead, they seem like a hodgepodge of unrelated and incomprehensible objects randomly attached onto the covers. Such bindings were rarely mentioned in Armenian-manuscript catalogs, and if they were referred to at all, the attached objects were not described in detail, nor were any explanations proposed for them.⁸ (It is therefore extremely difficult to search for them using those catalogs.) What were they? What exactly was the purpose of attaching these unusual, and often very personal, objects onto the covers of sacred Christian manuscripts and books? These questions do not have one simple answer. There seem to be multiple meanings on numerous levels, which I explore in this article.

The evidence: Bindings

The manuscripts and printed books decorated with the unusual embellishments are Christian religious texts, mostly gospel books. A small number are ritual books, containing the rituals and prayers used to celebrate the sacraments. Among the identified examples are some books in private hands, and for these I do not have complete information on the texts, but they were definitely sacred Christian texts.

Besides crosses, the most common type of object attached to these bindings consists of small almond- or eye-shaped metal pieces, usually silver and sometimes gilt, each typically about 2 to 4 cm long. A few are diamond shaped. These were typically made in repoussé and often have a central raised “dot,” with smaller “dots” surrounding the central one, ranging from four to nine or more smaller dots. These are most often found on bindings with other objects too, such as crosses, crucifixes, and so on. Fig. 6, overleaf. For example, Matenadaran MS 3602 includes a large central cross over a stepped pedestal with an additional crucifix nailed or welded to it; four silver corner pieces, each engraved with the symbol of an evangelist, angel (Matthew); lion (Mark), in this case, two facing lions; ox (Luke); and eagle (John); another cross, engraved with the instruments of Christ's passion, hanging from an attached chain; and

8. Thus far, I have found only one manuscript-catalog description that briefly describes a silver plaque dated 1791 from which hung a number of chains with crosses and one finger ring. The author stated that these were offerings from the pious made in fulfillment of a vow, that is, votive offerings. Hrach'ey Achar'ean [Hratchia Adjarian], *Ts'uts'ak hayerēn dzeragrats' T'awrizi* [*Katalog der armenischen Handschriften in Täbris*] (Vienna: Mkhitar'ean Tparan, 1910), Cat. 1, 70.



Fig. 6. Front cover of Gospels dated 1655 with large central cross, crucifix, four corner pieces with symbols of the evangelists, a cross hanging from a chain engraved with the instruments of Christ's tortures, and three large eye-shaped metal amulets. Matenadaran MS 3602.

three eye-shaped metal pieces.^{9, 10} Matenadaran MS 3714 (see Fig. 1), includes crosses, a crucifix, bosses, eye-shaped pieces, and a repoussé piece in the lower left that seems to be a face. Many of these objects overlap. Both the front and back covers of a gospel book in San Lazzaro, MS 1478, include crosses, crucifixes, and many eye-shaped pieces.¹¹ Figs. 7–8. Because of their abundance on the covers, the eye-shaped objects overlap each other on the boards and, presumably because they ran out of room, were also sewn onto the fore-edge flap of the book. A few of these seem to have fallen off or been removed from the flap.¹² Fig. 9. Some of the bindings were exclusively covered with the eye- or diamond-shaped repoussé metal pieces, such as Mat. 6386. Figs. 10–11.

9. This stepped cross (or graded cross) symbolizes the place of the Crucifixion on the hill of Golgotha or Calvary.

10. The facing lions are derived from the Armenian uppercase S that looks like the Roman uppercase U and is the first letter of Mark's Gospel in Armenian. This incipit letter is traditionally formed of two facing lions, using Mark's symbol of the lion.

11. Manuscripts designated as being from San Lazzaro are from the collection of the Mekhitarist Congregation on the Island of San Lazzaro, Venice, Italy, an Armenian Catholic monastery founded in the early-eighteenth century.

12. The fore-edge flap of an Armenian manuscript is always a separate piece of leather, lined with cloth, and glued or pasted to the back board. There is no wooden or pasteboard core below the leather.



Figs. 7–9. Above: Front cover of Gospels manuscript, text 1652, layered with eye-shaped metal amulets, large central cross and five crucifixes. Above, right: Back cover with layers of eye-shaped pieces and a cross. Right: Eye-shaped amulets sewn onto fore-edge flap. Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro, MS 1478.



Figs. 10–11. Below: Front and back boards with eye-shaped metal amulets, some gilt, on a gospel book dated 1381. Matenadaran MS 6386.

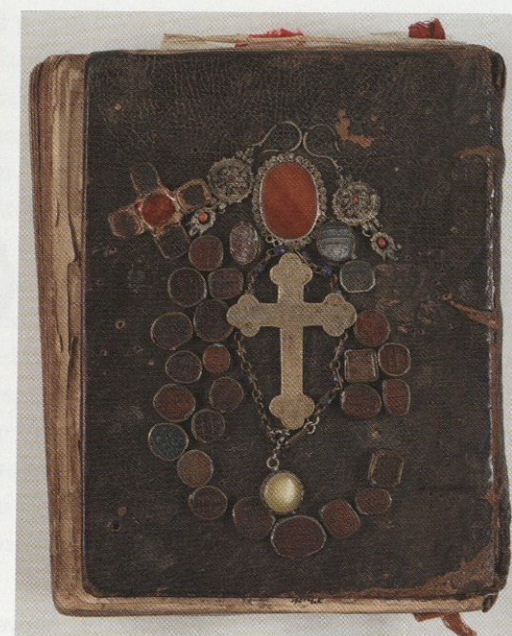




Fig. 12. Detached binding (no manuscript remains) fully covered with metal plaques, engraved metal borders, and layers of crosses, crucifixes, eye-shaped metal repoussé amulets, and some repoussé faces. Note also the carnelian stones. Amulets have also been attached to the spine and flap. Gandzaton MS 282, Holy Etchmiadzin, Museum; Etchmiadzin, Armenia.



Left: Fig. 13. Eye-shaped repoussé amulets, hand amulets, and a cross with gems on a fourteenth-century Gospel book. The inscription on the cross reads (in abbreviation) "Lord God Jesus Christ." Matenadaran MS 6305. Right: Fig. 14. Back cover of a Ritual manuscript covered with hundreds of early-nineteenth-century Ottoman coins, crosses, a crucifix, hand amulet, crescent moon with face, and five engraved seal stones. Text: seventeenth century. Barkev Kassardjian Collection, Beirut.



Figs. 15–16. Left: Front cover of Gospels, text ca. 1675–1725 (reused binding); includes a leather pocket embroidered with silver thread, two Seljuk silver coins attached to a blue, red, and white enameled pseudocoin, carved mother-of-pearl decorations, and a chain with dangling ornaments. Right: Back cover with cross, earrings, chain, two medallions of semiprecious stones, and thirty engraved seal stones. The Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.1149.

In addition to the eye-shaped pieces, other unusual metal objects nailed on the covers include repoussé faces, as in Figs. 1 and 12, and hands, as seen in Figs. 13–14, and 31. Coins were attached to two manuscripts: (1) Morgan Library MS M.1149, a gospel book with two thirteenth-century Seljuk coins and (2) a ritual book in which the back board is completely covered with early-nineteenth-century Ottoman coins, as well as with metal crosses, a hand, a crescent moon with a face, and engraved seal stones.^{13, 14} Figs. 14–15. Besides the coins, Morgan Library MS M.1149 also includes a leather pocket embroidered with silver thread; a necklace-like piece that was probably a dangling ornament that originally hung from a woman's headpiece; carved mother-of-pearl decorations; a pair of earrings; a cross; and thirty engraved seal stones (from signet rings).¹⁵ Figs. 15–16. One of the most puzzling manuscripts

13. MS M 1149 was bought by the Pierpont Morgan Library in 2006; Christie's *The History of the Book: The Cornelius J. Hauck Collection of the Cincinnati Museum Center* (New York, 27–28 June 2006), Lot 169.

14. Ritual book, see Sotheby's *Western Manuscripts and Miniatures* (London, 26 November 1985), Lot 160. This manuscript was formerly MS 13 of the Haroutune Hazarian Collection, and it is now in the collection of Mr. Barkev Kassardjian (Beirut, Lebanon).

15. There were originally thirty-one seal stones on the binding, but one fell off at the sale and was subsequently lost. Note that the covers of this binding were actually recycled from another manuscript and do not quite fit the text block.



Figs. 17–19. Above, left: Front cover of Ritual manuscript dated 1446, covered with an embroidered chemise and pieces from a metal-covered leather belt. Above, right: Fig. 18. Back cover. Left: Fig. 19. Spine. Cod. Armen. Add. 2, The Oriental Collection, The Royal Library, Copenhagen.

was covered with a beautifully worked embroidered chemise upon which were sewn pieces of a metal-covered leather belt.¹⁶ Figs. 17–19. Each of these objects will be discussed in more detail in this essay.

The importance of the gospel book in Armenian traditions

Before attempting to explain the meaning and purpose of the curious objects attached to

16. Cod. Armen. Add. 2, The Oriental Collection, The Royal Library, Copenhagen, Denmark.

these bindings, the importance of the sacred gospel book in the Armenian Church and in Armenian Christian traditions needs to be clarified. The Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, are by far the most common text to have come down to us in manuscript form in the Armenian tradition, and the text continued to be copied up to the eighteenth century. Then, printed versions became more common. The Gospel is read as part of the liturgy, it is raised at certain points in the service, and priests process with it around the altar. A gospel book belonging to a church is usually covered with a decorative-metal plaque and handled with a cloth, as a sign of respect. It is not only considered sacred but is also venerated, as shown by the ongoing custom of inviting the congregation to kiss it after the service. The custom of Armenians prostrating themselves before the sacred gospel book and kissing it has been attested to since the seventh century.¹⁷ Oaths are sealed on gospel books, and it is read at burials, betrothals, childbirths, visitations to the sick, and at the blessings of homes, fields, graves, crosses, and wells.¹⁸ Gospel books were almost considered to be human, and there are numerous colophons in which it is recorded that the book had been “kidnapped” by infidels, held for ransom, and that the community got together to pay the ransom and “free” the book from capture.¹⁹

Sacred books as protective objects

Gospel books or other religious objects could also be privately owned and might be regarded by an Armenian family as their *tan surb*, that is, the “Saint of the Home” or the “Holy Object of the Home.”²⁰ A *tan surb* can be anything deemed to be holy and powerful: a religious manuscript or printed book, a fragment of a stone cross, a sacred image, or some other venerated holy object. Sometimes, a corner of a room in a home, or even an entire room, functions as a special sacred space or shrine for the *tan surb*. Often reverently wrapped in an embroidered cloth and placed in a special box, it may be worshipped by making offerings to it and lighting candles before it.²¹ It functions as a talisman to protect a home, family, and perhaps even the entire village from hardship, sickness, and catastrophes.²²

17. These practices are mentioned in a seventh-century treatise on the defense of images by the cleric Vrt'anēs K'rt'ogh. See Sirarpie Der Nersessian, “Une apologie des images du septième siècle,” in *Études Byzantines et Arméniennes*, 2 vols. (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste, 1973), I:385; originally published in *Byzantion* 17 (1944–1945): 58–87.

18. Fr. Krikor H. Maksoudian, “The Religion of Armenia,” *Treasures in Heaven*, 34–37.

19. One renowned manuscript records just such an event. The family that owned the famous Glajor Gospels (now at UCLA) “rescued” the manuscript from its Mongol captors between the years 1393 and 1404, and donated it to the Monastery of Geghard (also known as Ayrivank'), commemorating this event in its colophon. See Thomas F. Mathews and Avedis K. Sanjian, *Armenian Gospel Iconography: The Tradition of the Glajor Gospel* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1991), 7, 191.

20. Harutyun Marutyan, “Home as the World,” in *Armenian Folk Arts, Culture, and Identity*, ed. Levon Abrahamian and Nancy Sweezy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 93.

21. Marutyan, “Home as the World,” *Armenian Folk Arts*, 93; Hamlet Petrosyan, “Writing and the Book,” *Armenian Folk Arts*, 58.

22. Maksoudian, “The Religion of Armenia,” 36–37.



Fig. 20. A grandmother and her adult granddaughter in Noratus village, Armenia, holding their family's *tan surb* (Saint of the Home), a printed religious book. Photography by Hrair Hawk Khatcherian, March 2010.



Fig. 21. Young girl in Noratus village, Armenia, holding one of her family's *tan surbs*, a printed gospel book bound in traditional Armenian style and further embellished with bosses and a cross with carnelian and other stones. Photography by Hrair Hawk Khatcherian, March 2010.

These beliefs are still evident today in some Armenian villages in both Armenia and Georgia. For example, an Armenian gospel manuscript privately owned by an Armenian family in the village of Djala, Republic of Georgia, is embellished with fragmentary silver covers inscribed in Armenian and one cross. This village has a population of ninety-six families of which approximately ninety are Armenian, most of whose ancestors were from the region of Erzurum. The manuscript is believed to protect the entire village from misfortune and disaster.²³ In villages in Armenia, many families own protective Saints of the Home. In Martuni village (province of Gegharkunik, Armenia), the Soghoyan family keeps their sixteenth-century manuscript, wrapped in an embroidered cloth, in a place of honor in a special room of their traditional home. This room is replete with candles, crucifixes, hanging textiles with embroidered or cloth crosses sewn over them, as well as reproductions of the Virgin Mary, the crucifixion, the virgin and child, and various saints that hang on the walls and on the furniture.²⁴ The manuscript is known as Sogho's Red Gospel.

In Noratus village (also in Gegharkunik), one family owns two books, at least one a gospel that they consider their protective *tan surb*, which they graciously unwrapped and

23. I thank Hrair Hawk Khatcherian for this valuable information. In 2009, he visited this village, interviewed the owners, and photographed the manuscript.

24. Marutyan, "Home as the World," 94–95, Plate 3.5.

permitted to be photographed and published in 2001.²⁵ Two other families in Noratus also own protective books that function as "Saints of the Home," which, in 2010, they proudly showed a visitor, allowing him to photograph them holding their family's *tan surb*. In these cases, they are printed books, not manuscripts. One is a well-worn, somewhat tattered religious book (text unknown) with plain leather covers over wooden boards. Fig. 20. The other is a gospel book modestly decorated with bosses and crosses, reverently held with a protective cloth by a young girl in the family. Fig. 21. In both instances, the bindings are quite humble—a powerful talismanic book does not need to be luxurious.²⁶ Colleagues have told me about families in some Armenian villages being asked to lend their manuscripts for exhibitions, but these requests were refused by the owners as being too dangerous for the well-being and health of the village. They did not want to be held responsible for some calamity because they allowed the protective talisman to leave the village, even temporarily.²⁷

Some gospel books were (and still are) considered to have miraculous powers that could cure the sick, ward off illness, or dispel evil. Even today, people make pilgrimages to particularly famous gospel books in villages in Armenia to seek their powerful help and to venerate them.²⁸ Some of these miracle-working gospel books have been called *Karmir Awedaran* (Red Gospels), as is the Soghoyan family's gospel mentioned above, although the origin of this terminology is unclear.²⁹ Other well-known Armenian manuscripts have also been nicknamed Red Gospels, such as Mat. 8772, copied in 1350, and later repaired and illustrated by the artist Tserun in 1391. A colophon written in 1371 describes this Gospel's miraculous rescue from a kidnapper—its location revealed in a dream to the colophon writer four years after its disappearance—and its subsequent miracle-working and healing powers that cured Christians, Kurds, and Turks alike.³⁰

University of Chicago MS 949, copied before 1237 and rather damaged, is also called Red Gospels, although it has been assumed (perhaps, incorrectly) that this was because of the red pigment used in the illuminations.³¹ It should be noted that, in some cultures, the color red is associated with good luck and healing, and therefore, red is the preferred color of

25. Petrosyan, "Writing and the Book," 58–59, Plate 2.4.3.

26. Hrair Hawk Khatcherian photographed the volumes in 2010 and interviewed the owners, and I thank him for generously sharing his information and photographs.

27. I thank Anna Leyloyan-Yekmalyan for this information. Apparently, the inhabitants of some Greek villages also believe in the protective power of the gospel book. Regina Dionisopoulos-Mass relates a 1970s event on a Greek island during which a young, Greek couple eloped against their parents' wishes and, along with other protective talismans, brought along a tiny gospel book to dispel evil. Regina Dionisopoulos-Mass, "The Evil Eye and Bewitchment in a Peasant Village," in *The Evil Eye*, ed. Clarence Maloney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 58.

28. Marutyan, "Home as the World," 93.

29. Marutyan, "Home as the World," 94–95, Plate 3.5.

30. For a translation of the relevant colophon written in 1371, which describes these events, see Avedis K. Sanjian, *Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts 1301–1480* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 98–99.

31. *Treasures in Heaven*, Cat. 24, 163–164.

a protective amulet.³² In Romania, wearing something red by new mothers, infants, and even young animals is believed to protect them from the evil eye.³³ In Armenia, it is not unusual to see sacred trees with hundreds of rags and threads hanging from them.³⁴ These are often red (exposure to the elements has often faded them to pink or white), although other colors are also found, and they are hung on the trees as ex-votos. The sacred tree is always associated with a nearby sacred site, such as a church, monastery, shrine, *khach'k'ar* (carved-stone cross), or other holy place.³⁵

These observations suggest one probable explanation for the objects attached to these bindings—they might have been votive offerings made by grateful pilgrims to miraculous or miracle-working sacred books.³⁶ A votive offering, or ex-voto, is some type of gift made to a deity, saint, holy person, or sacred object in fulfillment of a vow and as thanks for a healing, miracle, rescue from some type of calamity, curing of infertility, emotional turmoil, or other request. It may also be given in anticipation of having the request fulfilled. Donations of ex-votos date back to antiquity and may take many forms depending on local customs.³⁷ The gifts may range from the modest to the costly to the spectacular: from humble offerings such as food, candles, or flowers, to more valuable gifts like jewelry or other precious objects, to dramatic offerings, such as the building of shrines or other impressive monuments. One extraordinary modern example is the founding of St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, by the late entertainer, Danny Thomas, in fulfillment of a vow he made to build a shrine to the saint for helping him through difficult times early in his career.³⁸ Votive offerings may also be made to objects that substitute for the saint or deity, or that

32. Louis C. Jones, "The Evil Eye among European-Americans," *Western Folklore* 10, no. 1 (Jan. 1951): 11–25, especially 12–13.

33. A. Murgoci, "The Evil Eye in Roumania, and Its Antidotes," in *The Evil Eye: A Casebook*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 126–127.

34. Susie Hoogasian Villa and Mary Kilbourne Matossian, *Armenian Village Life before 1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982), 129, 131. These trees are popularly called *murazi tsar* (wishing tree).

35. This custom is also associated with an Armenian New Year's Eve ritual for bringing good luck. Hripsime Pikichian, "Festival and Feast," in *Armenian Folk Arts*, 222, Plate 6.2.2. See also G. D. Edwards, "Items of Armenian Folk-Lore Collected in Boston," *Journal of American Folklore* 12, no. 45 (April-June 1899): 100. Muslims also tie rags to sacred trees; see Michael W. Dols, *Majnun: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 235.

36. Hrach'eay Acharean seems to be one of the few manuscript catalogers to have recognized that these objects are votive offerings; see Acharean, *Ts'uts'ak*, Cat. 1, 70.

37. The classic work on this subject is W. H. D. Rouse, *Greek Votive Offerings: An Essay in the History of Greek Religion* (1902; Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1976).

38. St. Jude Thaddaeus is considered the patron saint of hopeless causes. The hospital opened in 1962; see <http://www.stjude.org/dannyspromise>. See also Leonard Norman Primiano, "Catholiciana Unmoored: Ex-Votos in Catholic Tradition and Their Commercialization as Religious Commodities," in *Graces Received: Painted and Metal Ex-Votos from Italy; The Collection of Leonard Norman Primiano*, ed. Rosangela Briscese and Joseph Sciorra (New York: John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College, CUNY, 2012), 17–18.

are deemed sacred themselves: painted icons of the Orthodox churches come to mind, as do statues, such as that of the child Jesus (Santo Bambino) in the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli in Rome. These are often covered with ex-votos, especially jewelry.

The votive offerings on Armenian bindings incorporate explicitly Christian symbols, such as crosses, but other personal objects valuable to the donor may have been offered in thanks for prayers answered or illnesses cured, or in anticipation of having their requests granted. This would also explain the additive quality and haphazard arrangement of the objects, that is attachment with no particular concern for design or pattern because they would have been added over a long period of time by different people as ex-votos.

The evil eye

Although many of the objects attached to Armenian manuscripts were probably votive offerings, that may not have been their only purpose. Crosses and crucifixes are easily understandable in this context, as well as personal objects such as jewelry. But what is the significance of the other objects, such as the almond- or eye-shaped metal pieces, hands, or other charms? The resemblance of some of these metal objects to eyes is what led me to research the evil eye.³⁹

What exactly is the evil eye? In the United States, the phrase is usually used to describe someone glaring at another person in anger, and one might say, for example, "That woman is giving me the evil eye." But the original concept is more complicated. The basic premise is that the evil eye is a power possessed by some people, over which most of them have no control, and which is primarily provoked by envy. Through their eyes, they can impart harm, illness, or injury to people, animals, fruit trees, or other objects. Being struck by the evil eye has variously been called bewitchment, fascination, or overlooking, depending on the culture. Pregnant women, infants, and small children are thought to be particularly vulnerable to the dangers of the evil eye. For this reason, even today, in some cultures it is not appropriate to compliment a beautiful baby, and it is considered especially dangerous if the compliment is given by a childless woman, who, undoubtedly, must be envious of that baby. She might unknowingly give the evil eye to the child, causing it to suddenly and inexplicably become ill, even die. Complimenting someone's possessions, such as their cow, or just glancing at the cow by someone who has the evil eye could cause the cow's milk to dry up or even cause it to suddenly drop dead, a devastating event for a family who relied on this animal for their livelihood and food.⁴⁰

39. A standard text in English on the subject is Frederick Thomas Elworthy, *The Evil Eye: The Classic Account of an Ancient Superstition* (1895; Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 2004). Other publications include: *The Evil Eye*, ed. Clarence Maloney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976) and *The Evil Eye: A Casebook*. Individual articles from these two books will be cited below.

40. Alan Dundes has written a fascinating article on the connection between beliefs that the evil eye causes a drying-up of some life force (a mother's milk or an animal's milk, fruit trees shriveling up and dying, male impotence, etc.) with the many protective or curative rituals that often consist of a liquid (e.g., spitting on a child to protect it, rituals to diagnose or cure the effect of the evil eye involving

Belief in the evil eye is ancient and is prevalent in most cultures worldwide except for Native American, sub-Saharan African, and aboriginal Australian and Oceania.⁴¹ It is particularly common in the Near East, Middle East, and Mediterranean basin, and it probably spread from that region to Northern Europe. (Belief in the evil eye in Central and South America is due to Spanish influence.) It has been mentioned in ancient Sumerian cuneiform clay tablets from the third millennium BCE, and it is widely attested to in the Greco-Roman world.⁴² For example, the first-century Greek historian-philosopher Plutarch, in his famous *Moralia*, included a lengthy discussion on the evil eye, titled "On those who are said to cast an evil eye."⁴³

The evil eye is referred to in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, for example Proverbs 23:6: "Eat thou not the bread of him that hath an evil eye." In the New Testament, one of multiple examples is found in Mark 7:20–23:

20. And He said, "That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. 21 For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, 22. thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: 23. all these evil things come from within and defile the man."⁴⁴

Islamic *hadith*, which are traditions or sayings of the prophet Mohammed and his companions, include many references to the evil eye, for example:

Ibn Abbas reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: the influence of an evil eye is a fact; if anything would precede the destiny it would be the influence of an evil eye, and when you are asked to take bath (as a cure) from the influence of an evil eye, you should take bath.⁴⁵

water or eggs). See Dundes, "Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye: An Essay in Indo-European and Semitic Worldview," in *The Evil Eye: A Casebook*, 257–312. Dundes also includes an extensive bibliography on the subject.

41. Dundes, "Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye," 259, 315.

42. E.A. Wallis Budge, *Amulets and Talismans* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1961), 358 (first published in 1930 as: *Amulets and Superstitions*); Marie-Louise Thomsen, "The Evil Eye in Mesopotamia," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51, no. 1 (January 1992): 19–32, attests to Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform tablets mentioning the evil eye, as well as describing means of protection against its harmful effects, but she is not convinced that it was a very widespread belief; Alan Dundes, "Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye," 259.

43. Plutarch, *Moralia*, Vol. 8, "Table-Talk [or Quaestiones Convivales]," Book V, Question 7. English translation by Paul A. Clement and Herbert B. Hoffleit, Loeb Classical Library 424 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 417–433.

44. Both Biblical examples are from the King James version. Some other versions translate "evil eye" as "envy." See also Fr. George R.A. Aquaro, *Death by Envy: The Evil Eye and Envy in the Christian Tradition* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2004), 20–70.

45. Sahih Muslim Book 026, Hadith Number 5427; Sahih Muslim Book 26. On Salutations and Greetings; Chapter: Medicine and Spell. Cited in: <http://hadithcollection.com>; accessed 28 July 2012. See also "Ayn" [evil eye], *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 786.

There is ancient evidence for the Armenians' belief in the evil eye. The earliest Armenian historian, Movsēs Khorenats'i (Moses of Khoren), described King Eruand (ca. fourth century BCE) as having the evil eye. It was said that he could split stones through the malevolence of his glance and harm those he wished to by simply looking at them.⁴⁶ Between the seventh and fifteenth centuries, a number of Armenian clerics wrote texts against magical practices including sorcery, spells, divination, the making and use of talismans, and so on. Sergio La Porta has summarized and analyzed a number of these medieval texts to demonstrate the Armenian Church's condemnation of magical practices from the fifth-century origins of Armenian written literature.⁴⁷ These practices include the use of augurs, talismans, amulets, spells, and potions, among others. For example, the seventh-century Yovhannēs Mayragomets'i's text "Letter concerning conjurers' spells and impious makers of talismans" lists numerous Armenian magical practices and condemns them.⁴⁸ Dawit' Gandzakets'i's twelfth-century work "Canonical Advice" for priests describes many of these practices in Chapter 95, "Concerning Various Methods of Divination and Evil Custom[s]." He specifically mentioned the evil eye multiple times in this chapter; for example:

Also they make passes with the hand over their young children, and say "Let there be no pain in their bodies." And they rub the spittle of their mouths on them with their hand, and say "The evil eye is upon him, he has become sick, may he not attract the evil eye."⁴⁹

Dawit' denounced the various rituals used to counteract the evil eye and then described the various punishments that should be given to those who continue carrying out these despicable practices.

The fourteenth-century cleric Grigor Tat'ewats'i's famous "Book of Questions" is a handbook of theology for the Armenian Church. In Volume 6, section 64, of this work, he defined (and condemned) magical practices, including the use of various charms and talismans.⁵⁰ The fact that there are multiple Armenian texts denouncing these customs strongly suggests the wide embrace of these beliefs and the use of specialized rituals and talismans to counteract the evil forces.

46. Moses Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, trans. and commentary by Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), Book II 42, 183–184. Some scholars believe that Moses Khorenats'i wrote in the fifth century ce, while others assign an eighth-century date. In any case, he certainly did not exist during the time of King Eruand, but his statements on the evil eye indicate that, whether fifth or eighth century, the concept of the evil eye was known to Armenians quite early.

47. Sergio La Porta, "Sorcerers, Witches, and Weasels: Grigor Tat'ewac'i's Definitions of the Magical Arts," *Revue des Études Arméniennes* 28 (2001–2002): 171–213.

48. La Porta, "Sorcerers, Witches, and Weasels," 172–173, 185.

49. Dawit' of Alawkey, *The Penitential of David of Ganjak*, ed. and trans. C.J.F. Dowsett, 2 vols. (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1961), II:67–68. (The spelling "Gandzak" uses the Library of Congress transliteration system for Armenian, which is the transliteration used throughout this article; it is spelled "Ganjak," using the *Revue des Études Arméniennes* transliteration system.)

50. La Porta, "Sorcerers, Witches, and Weasels," 173–208.

In fact, hundreds of Armenian prayer scrolls known as *hamayil*, or phylacteries, dating from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, have survived. These scrolls functioned as talismans to protect their owners. They include prayers, sacred poems, extracts from the Gospels and other sacred texts, as well as spells and rituals intended to prevent harm from all types of illnesses, catastrophes, and evil, including the evil eye.⁵¹ Attesting to their continuing popularity, printed versions (amazingly, still in the form of a scroll) were produced in the eighteenth century. The very first Armenian printed book, the *Urbat'agirk'* or "Friday book," a codex printed in Venice in 1511 or 1512, contains many of the same texts as these prayer scrolls and includes a spell against the evil eye.⁵²

Modern evidence for the ongoing belief in the evil eye and other unseen malevolent forces by Armenians has been documented. Working in the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century, the Armenian ethnographer E. Lalayan recorded many beliefs and practices still actively performed in modern times that are similar to those described by Grigor Tar'ewats'i.⁵³ Based on interviews from the 1970s in Detroit of people born in western Armenia who survived the 1915 Armenian Genocide, belief in the evil eye by Armenians was still strong in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵⁴ In an extraordinary study conducted by Jamal Karam Harfouche, a medical doctor and professor of maternal health care in Beirut, Lebanon, in the early 1960s, 379 patients (roughly one-third were Armenian, one-third Christian Maronites, and one-third Sunni Muslim) were surveyed. Dr. Harfouche well understood the various ethnic and religious backgrounds of his patients and the prevailing superstitions in the region, as well as the differences between these cultures, and he hoped his study would assist health care workers to better understand and treat their patients. For this reason, he included interview questions to determine the mothers' beliefs in the evil eye and its possible effects on their health, the health of their infants, and their ability to nurse.⁵⁵ When asked whether the evil eye might have an effect on infant health, 74 percent of the Armenian mothers said yes. Of the Maronites, 83.8 percent believed it could

51. Frédéric Feydit, *Amulettes de l'Arménie Chrétienne* (Venice: St. Lazare, 1986), passim. Feydit has translated the texts of many scrolls, including prayers and spells against the evil eye.

52. A facsimile of the *Urbat'agirk'* and another text known as the *Tagharan*, with which it was sometimes bound, was printed in 1975: *Urbat'agirk' Tagharan* (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1975). The spell against the evil eye is the last text in the unpaginated *Urbat'agirk'* facsimile. For an Italian translation of the spell, see Alessandro Orengo, *Ourbat'agirk' (Il Libro del Venerdì)* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1991), 465–466. For further information on this book and its printer, see Raymond H. Kévorkian, *Catalogue des "Incunables" Arméniens (1511/1695)*, ou, *Chronique de l'Imprimerie Arménienne* (Geneva: Patrick Cramer Éditeur, 1986), x–xiii, 23–24.

53. La Porta, "Sorcerers, Witches, and Weasels," 176. Lalayan's work was not available to me, but it is highly probable that, in his studies, he encountered many who believed in the evil eye and practiced the use of charms, spells, and rituals to counteract its effects. His name is also spelled Lalayan.

54. Villa and Matossian, *Armenian Village Life*, 147–150.

55. Jamal Karam Harfouche, "The Evil Eye and Infant Health in Lebanon," in *The Evil Eye: A Casebook*, 86–106. The original study was published as Jamal Karam Harfouche, *Infant Health in Lebanon: Customs and Taboos* (Beirut: Khayats, 1965).

adversely affect their baby, as did 86.5 percent of the Sunnis.⁵⁶ Anecdotal evidence from the past fifty years indicates widespread belief in the evil eye by Armenians, in Armenia as well as in the diaspora, especially by elderly Armenian women.⁵⁷

Many Jews, Christians, and Muslims still believe in the evil eye. Different cultures and regions have developed distinctive methods of averting its power or curing someone or something suffering from its malicious effects, although these remedies often share similarities. These remedies include all types of spells, prayers, and rituals, as well as the use of many types of apotropaic (protective) devices to ward off the evil. The devices, rituals, and spells used to cure afflictions caused by the evil eye, or to prevent its harmful effects (variations of which were also commonly performed by Armenians),⁵⁸ include saying something formulaic, putting a smudge of dirt on a child (to make him imperfect and therefore not enviable), or performing other negative or unattractive actions after an admiring comment. For example, after a compliment, a parent may touch the child, spit on him, scratch him, utter something formulaic, such as a short prayer or *Inshallah* (Arabic for "God willing") or its equivalent, or say something negative about the child. Scratching one's buttocks immediately after a compliment is thought to protect against the evil eye.⁵⁹ Many rituals have developed that incorporate liquids, such as dripping melted wax, lead, or another melted metal into a bowl of water.⁶⁰ Depending on the local beliefs, the shapes thus formed either indicate who put the evil eye on the afflicted person or how to remove it, or dropped wax or lead that rises or sinks indicated whether the person will be healed or survive. Splashing water on people at the threshold of your home as they leave will protect them on their travels.⁶¹ The use of incense or other fumes to repel the evil eye is also common.⁶² Many publications describe the rituals, spells, and amulets used in different cultures to repel or dispel the evil eye.⁶³ Our

56. Harfouche, "The Evil Eye and Infant Health," 90.

57. Personal communication with Father Krikor Maksoudian, Arlington, MA, May 2012.

58. Harfouche, "The Evil Eye and Infant Health," 99–105.

59. Father Maksoudian relates that, during his childhood in Beirut, this ritual, as well as water-based curative and diagnostic rituals, were commonly performed by Armenians. His family, which immigrated to Beirut from Adana (Cilicia) after surviving the Adana massacres of 1909, brought these customs along. The custom of scratching the buttocks to avert the evil eye after a compliment is also mentioned in Villa and Matossian, *Armenian Village Life*, 149.

60. This ritual was mentioned as being performed by Armenians in the twelfth century by Dawit' Gandzakets'i, *The Penitential of David of Ganjak*, II:68. This procedure was in use up to at least the mid-twentieth century, as Father Maksoudian remembers having seen this done during his childhood. Christian-Arab immigrants from Syria and Lebanon in the 1960s also carried out similar rituals; see Alixa Naff, "Belief in the Evil Eye among the Christian Syrian-Lebanese in America," *The Journal of American Folklore* 78, no. 307 (January/March 1965): 46–51, esp. 50.

61. Prof. Nina G. Garsoian, of New York City, states that her aunt in Erevan, Armenia, always performed this ritual each time she left to return to the United States. This is another example of a prophylactic ritual against the evil eye involving liquid, as postulated by Alan Dundes in "Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye."

62. Harfouche, "The Evil Eye and Infant Health," 101–104.

63. See the various articles in Dundes, ed., *Evil Eye: A Casebook*, and Maloney, ed., *Evil Eye*.

concern here will be the type of talismans that came to be used as protective devices, the materials and forms of objects considered efficacious for this purpose, and specifically, why they might have been used to embellish Armenian bindings.

What protects against the evil eye?

CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS

For Christians, an obvious apotropaic device might be a cross, crucifix, or image of a saint that would protect them from all forms of malevolence, sickness, and other ills, not necessarily just the evil eye. Such devices would obviously be acceptable to the Church to display the donor's piety, safeguard the donor, or perhaps even protect the gospel book itself, and it is not surprising that they are commonly found on Armenian bindings. Since early Christian times, crosses were carved on doorways, windows, and lintels, sometimes with inscriptions, to protect the inhabitants from evil. Some of these inscriptions explicitly state that the cross protects the home from the evil eye.⁶⁴ Armenians also have amulets and rituals associated with doors, chimneys, and thresholds to protect the home's inhabitants from evil, including the evil eye.⁶⁵ Among other talismans used by Armenians, the gospel book itself sometimes functioned as a protective device used against the evil spirits that could enter through these vulnerable thresholds, especially during childbirth.⁶⁶

EYE-SHAPED OBJECTS

There are also many ancient pre-Christian amuletic objects still in use today in many parts of the world that are believed to avert evil and/or attract good fortune. One of the most common and ancient devices is an eye-shaped object. "Fighting fire with fire" is one theory underpinning this idea. To cure the poisonous effects of an insect bite, for example, one would apply an amulet shaped like that insect.⁶⁷ Therefore, since ancient times, one way to avert the evil eye was to use an amulet shaped like an eye, which may take various forms.⁶⁸ In the Mediterranean basin and the Near East, a common amulet, available today to protect against the evil eye, is a round, usually blue, glass charm that resembles an eye, often called *nazar*. These are particularly widespread in Greece and Turkey, where they have also become popular items to sell to tourists. They are also readily available in jewelry stores and even supermarkets in Greek neighborhoods in the United States, and they may be incorporated

64. William K. Prentice, "Magical Formulae on Lintels of the Christian Period in Syria," *American Journal of Archaeology* 10, no. 2 (April/June 1906): 137-150; Eunice Dauterman Maguire, Henry P. Maguire, and Maggie J. Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 19.

65. Marutyan, "Home as the World," 86-89; Paul Essabal, "The Door and Threshold in Armenian Folklore," *Western Folklore* 20, no. 4 (Oct. 1961): 265-273.

66. Essabel, "The Door and Threshold," 266.

67. Ruth Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons: The Protective Power of Visual Motifs and Themes*, 2 vols. (Los Angeles: Ruth Mellinkoff Publications, 2004), I:46-47.

68. Elworthy, *Evil Eye: The Classic Account*, 126-143.



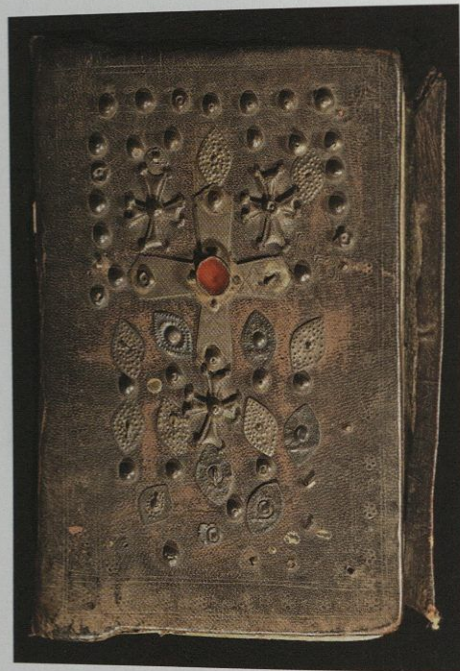
Left: Fig. 22. Blue glass eye beads and amulets in various forms: earrings, necklace, bracelets, worry beads, hanging amulets, and as a motif on a silk scarf with eye beads hanging from each corner. Notice plain blue bead on black cord necklace at left. Right: Fig. 23. Modern binding with blue eye amulet on a blank book sold as a tourist souvenir in Turkey, 2010. Photograph by Mindell Dubansky.

into bracelets, necklaces, brooches, key chains, cufflinks, rings, worry beads, even small baby-shower favors shaped like baby bottles. The same blue-eye design may be found on scarves, dresses, embroidered on hand towels, and just about anything else imaginable. Fig. 22. The latest evil eye souvenirs made for tourists in Turkey are blank books with one large blue eye amulet in the center of the binding, resembling a terrifying, scarred Cyclops.⁶⁹ Fig. 23.

But why blue? In this part of the world, most people have brown eyes. One hypothesis is that evil and danger were brought over by foreigners, who often have blue eyes. The color blue is also considered to be apotropaic, especially in the Near East. Therefore, simple blue beads, even if they do not resemble eyes, are also considered effective against the evil eye; see the necklace with the plain blue ceramic bead in Fig. 22. A turquoise gem, therefore, would also be protective.

I have not yet found such blue-eye-like beads on Armenian manuscripts. Besides crosses, the most common eye-like objects found nailed onto the covers of these religious books are the repoussé-metal pieces under discussion. They may be found in combination with other objects, such as Mat. 7563, which includes crosses, eye-shaped pieces, and bosses. Fig. 24, overleaf. In other cases, the book might be covered with only these metal pieces, of different sizes and forms, but always eye-, almond-, or diamond-shaped. Sometimes the metal pieces have fallen off or been removed, but they have left their outlined shapes on the leather because the exposed leather has darkened, while that underneath the metal has retained its original, lighter color. Fig. 25, overleaf. They are usually placed randomly on the covers, but in one case they were carefully nailed over the blind-tooled stepped cross on the front cover. Fig. 26, overleaf.

69. I thank Mindell Dubansky and Sherry Lindquist for pointing these out and providing me with photographs of these books taken on their independent trips to Turkey in 2010 and 2011.



Left: Fig. 24. Eye-shaped metal amulets, bosses, and four crosses (large central cross with what is probably a carnelian stone) on front cover of a Gospels copied in 1497. Matenadaran MS 7563. Right: Fig. 25. Front cover of a Gospel book, text copied in 1469, which formerly included dozens of eye-shaped amulets. They were removed and now only their outlines and attachment holes remain as evidence. Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro, MS 1591.



Fig. 26. Eye-shaped metal amulets nailed onto front cover in the form of a cross, thereby covering most of the blind-tooled stepped cross below. On a Gospels manuscript, text probably copied before the sixteenth century. Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro, MS Kurdian 51.

In another example, the amulets are not actually nailed onto the covers of the gospel book but are hanging from a metal chain that has been attached (probably soldered) to the edge of the manuscript. Fig. 27. This manuscript, Mat. 6775, dated 1669, was fully covered by a silver plaque with a central crucifix on both the front and back; perhaps the donor did not want to damage the smooth (and costly) silver by nailing other objects over it.

It seems logical that the common eye-shaped repoussé metal pieces found on so many of these bindings, with their close resemblance to eyes, probably had an apotropaic function to protect against the evil eye. Thus far, I have found no evidence that these metal amulets were used for any other purpose by Armenians, nor is there any mention of them in the literature. They do not seem to have been used as amulets in the home, or worn by children or adults, although a blue bead or eye bead pinned on a baby's clothing is quite common. I have also found no mention of eye-shaped amulets used in traditional adult clothing or women's headpieces.⁷⁰

In one case, an explanation has been proposed for putting these eye-shaped metal pieces on an Armenian binding. In the collection of the American Bible Society/Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA), there is a beautifully illuminated Armenian gospel book from the late fifteenth century, which was rebound in the village of Hapusi in 1649, according to its colophon.⁷¹ Figs. 28–29, overleaf. The objects on this binding were apparently randomly fastened on the covers, often overlapping, which probably indicates that they were also votive offerings attached at different times. Bosses and crosses are also found on the front cover, but most striking are the dozens of eye-shaped metal pieces nailed on both the front and back covers. This gospel book has an intriguing history. It was given to a Protestant missionary who was sent to Turkey and stationed in the town of Kharpert in the mid-nineteenth century.⁷²

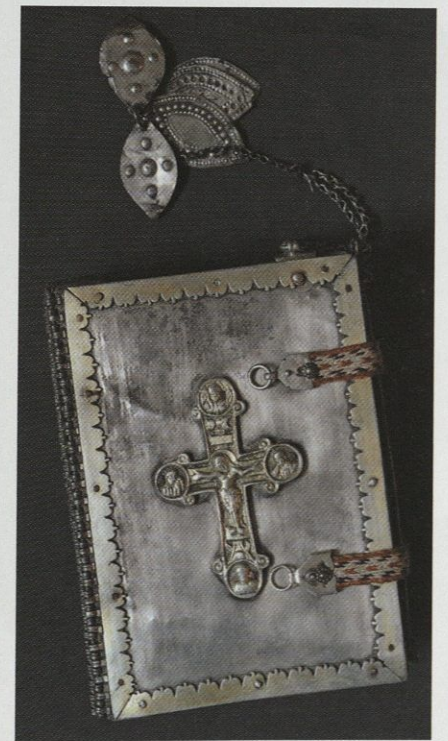


Fig. 27. Silver eye-shaped amulets on a chain attached to edge of silver plaque with crucifix. Front cover of a Gospels manuscript, text copied in 1669. Matenadaran MS 6775.

70. On Good Friday, Armenian blacksmiths make special protective crosses and crescent-shaped amulets for children. In addition, they make "sparkling bits of metal to be sewn into their dresses or caps." The shapes of these talismans are not mentioned, however. See Aghasi Tadevosyan and Hamlet Petrosyan, "The Blacksmith," in *Armenian Folk Arts*, 214.

71. *Treasures in Heaven*, Cat. 47, 180–181 and Plate 45.

72. Through organizations such as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions



Figs. 28–29. Left: Front cover with eye-shaped amulets, bosses, and crosses on a late-fifteenth century Gospels, rebound in 1649. Right: Back cover. MS 1816, American Bible Society/MOBIA (Museum of Biblical Art), New York; Courtesy of Rare Bible Collection @ MOBIA.

He, in turn, gave it to the American Bible Society in 1864. The missionary, C.H. Wheeler, left a hand-written note in the manuscript, which includes the following heartbreaking statement: "The silver crosses and other ornaments on the cover are the gifts of mothers whose children have died unbaptized and are supposed to suffice as Baptism to secure the salvation of the infants." This is an extraordinary explanation for the purpose of these "other ornaments." Although using a cross as a baptism substitute might be considered logical or appropriate, neither crosses nor any other kind of object would be accepted as canonical in the Armenian Church for this purpose. Dawit' Gandzakets'i discussed the dilemma of a child who dies unbaptized in his book of canonical advice (see Chapter 44). He states that this child has already received baptism in part, since his parents are Christian, and he is of their body. He may therefore be buried beneath a cross in a Christian cemetery.⁷³ Nowhere

(ABCFM), many American Protestant missionaries went to Turkey and other parts of the Near East in the nineteenth century, opening schools, hospitals, and churches. They were not very successful in converting Muslims to Christianity, but they did have some success converting some Armenians to Protestantism. Armenian-Protestant congregations still exist today, whose parishioners are often descendants of these converts.

⁷³ Dawit' of Alawka, *Penitential of David of Ganjak*, II:33–34. He goes into further details about how to treat miscarriages and stillborn babies (and the response depended on whether they were male or female), where they may be buried, etc.

does Gandzakets'i mention that some type of amulet, let alone an eye-shaped object, could substitute for the sacrament of baptism. In addition, many crosses found on these bindings are inscribed, and thus far I have never seen one mentioning a deceased infant. They usually memorialize a living person, the donor.

It has been observed that, on a Greek island in the early 1970s, unbaptized Greek Orthodox children commonly wore charms and beads as protective amulets because they were not allowed to wear a cross until after they had been baptized.⁷⁴ In the American Bible Society's Armenian manuscript, the statement about these eye-shaped pieces functioning as a type of baptism substitute most likely reflects folk beliefs in this village. It does not necessarily negate the possibility that they might also have functioned as protective amulets, but it is an interesting explanation regarding how they may have been perceived by the faithful in that region by the mid-nineteenth century. To substitute as a sacrament, these amulets must have been considered quite powerful, perhaps also functioning as apotropaic devices to protect the deceased infants from evil in the afterlife.

HANDS

Objects shaped like hands are ancient protective talismans against the evil eye and are still commonly used in many parts of the world.⁷⁵ In the Near East, Middle East, and North Africa, the *khamisa* (also spelled *khamseh* or *hamsa*) is a flat, open-palmed, usually symmetrically-shaped hand that is believed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike to protect against the evil eye.⁷⁶ The name comes from the Arabic word for "five," presumably for the five fingers, and is often called the hand of Fatima by Muslims, the hand of Miriam by Jews, and the hand of Mary by Christians. In modern objects, it may be further embellished with a blue bead or a red carnelian stone, and it may even have an eye engraved in the center of the palm. Fig. 30.



Fig. 30. Modern hand-shaped amulets. Top row: *Khamisa* with blue beads; silver hand amulet (brooch) with heart charm. Bottom row: Silver *khamisa* with carnelian, engraved eye, and Hebrew (or pseudo-Hebrew?) inscription; pair of *mano fica* (thumb-in-fist) earrings (front and back); silver filigree *khamisa* medallion and *mano fica* charm on a chain.

⁷⁴ Dionisopoulos-Mass, "The Evil Eye and Bewitchment in a Peasant Village," 49.

⁷⁵ Elworthy, *The Evil Eye: The Classic Account*, 241–254.

⁷⁶ J.-H. Probst-Biraben, "La main de Fatma et ses antécédents symboliques," *Revue Anthropologique* 43 (1933): 370–375; "Les Talismans contre le mauvais oeil: erreurs et vraisemblances," *Revue Anthropologique* 46, no. 4–6 (1936): 171–180; Mohamed Lahbib Nouhi, "The Hand and the Eye in Moroccan Amulets," in *Faith and Transformation: Votive Offerings and Amulets from the Alexander Girard Collection*, ed. Doris Francis (Santa Fe: Museum of International Folk Art; Museum of New Mexico Press, 2007), 90–91; Mohamed Lahbib Nouhi, "Materials, Techniques, and Symbols of Moroccan Amulets," in *Faith and Transformation*, 86–87.



Figs. 31–32. Left: Hand amulet, thumb-in-fist amulet, engraved crosses, and Venetian(?) glass bead on upper cross, with metal repoussé object of indeterminate size and shape under the crosses. Front cover of manuscript containing extracts of Gospels, protective prayers, and poems. Text copied in seventeenth century. Right: Diamond-shaped metal pieces (an abstract eye shape?) and a central cross with gem, back cover. Kalfayan Family Collection, MS KP2.

Open hand-shaped flat objects that are not symmetric are also common and are believed to protect against the evil eye. Hand-shaped metal objects were found on at least three Armenian bindings; see Figs. 13–14, and 31. The hand amulets on Matenadaran MS 6305 (see Fig. 13) strongly resemble modern hand amulets from Iran; it is not very surprising to find similar talismanic objects from this neighboring region.⁷⁷ In Iran, it has been recorded that a mother of a frail baby boy makes a vow, that, if her baby's health improves, she will take him to a ritual parade during the month of Muharram. As proof that the vow is being fulfilled, the baby will wear a silver or brass hand.⁷⁸

PHALLIC SYMBOLS (MANO FICA)

Another type of hand amulet, albeit of vulgar form, is the *mano fica*, also called thumb-in-fist.⁷⁹ This obscene gesture consists of the thumb placed between the index and middle fingers, symbolizing the sex act. Charms and amulets of this form are especially common

77. Parviz Tanavoli, "Parts of the Body in Shi'a Islam," in *Faith and Transformation*, 110–113.
78. Bess Allen Donaldson, *The Wild Rue: A Study of Muhammadan Magic and Folklore in Iran* (London: Luzac and Co., 1938), 32.

79. Elworthy, *Evil Eye: The Classic Account*, 242, 255–258; Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons*, I:123–143. Alan Dundes also discusses phallic symbols and the evil eye in "Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye."

in Italy and Malta and are widely available for purchase.⁸⁰ See Fig. 30 for a modern pair of thumb-in-fist earrings and a necklace charm. But how does an obscene gesture repel the evil eye? There are at least two theories. One explanation is that, because obscene things are disgusting or frightening, even evil spirits (including the evil eye) will be repelled by them. The other theory is that the obscene item will distract the evil-eye bearer's malevolent gaze away from the object of envy, thereby offering protection to the wearer of the amulet. Remarkably, one such thumb-in-fist amulet has been found on a ca. seventeenth-century Armenian manuscript binding, Fig. 31, attached next to a flat open-handed charm (mentioned above). Traditional crosses inscribed with the names of the donors are also found on this binding; the upper one includes a multicolored glass bead in the center, which looks very Venetian and somewhat eye-like, and others include semiprecious stones. The two hand-shaped charms may have been imported from Europe, perhaps Italy, in view of the Venetian-style bead. There are also the familiar repoussé eye-shaped metal pieces on the back cover, Fig. 32. It is particularly interesting to note that the text of this manuscript consists of protective prayers or incantations against catastrophe, sorcerers, and evil, along with portions of the Gospels and extracts from the famous Armenian Book of Lamentations by St. Grigor of Narek.⁸¹ Many of these texts are reminiscent of those found in Armenian prayer scrolls, although, in this case, they have been transcribed in the form of a codex instead of a scroll. These objects were certainly placed on this manuscript as apotropaic devices against the evil eye, perhaps as votive offerings, and seem particularly appropriate for this manuscript because of its content.

FACES

Thus far, I have found two manuscripts with metal repoussé faces nailed onto them (see Figs. 1 and 12), and one in which the face is in profile within a crescent moon (see Fig. 14). Repoussé-metal faces are found on a door of a mosque in Tabriz in northern Iran.⁸² Their purpose is not immediately apparent, although it has been hypothesized that these metal amulets on the door might be votive offerings in request to heal certain parts of the body, as is done with Greek *tamata* (embossed metal ex-votos offered to icons in the shape of ailing body parts—hands, faces, knees, feet, legs, breasts, torsos, etc.). As I have never seen any metal amulets shaped like body parts on Armenian bindings (except for the hands and these faces), it seems unlikely that they had this same purpose in an Armenian context. Although many eye-shaped amulets exist, of course, they are always more abstract and are not faithful reproductions of eyes, and they were probably not made as ex-votos for curing eye diseases. It is an ancient belief in many cultures that a hideous, grotesque face will protect against

80. Leonard W. Moss and Stephen C. Cappannari, "Mal'occhio, Ayin hara, Oculus fascinus, Judenblick: The Evil Eye Hovers Above," in *The Evil Eye*, ed. Clarence Maloney, 8, 10, 12.

81. *Aspects of Armenian Art: The Kalfayan Collection; Temporary Exhibition June 11–October 10, 2012, Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki, Greece*, ed. Stamatios Chondrogiannis (Thessaloniki: Museum of Byzantine Culture; Kalfayan Galleries, 2010), 94–97.

82. Tanavoli, "Parts of the Body," 113.



Fig. 33 Two crescent-shaped metal objects, two eye-shaped amulets, and broken four-lobed metal cross(?) nailed onto front cover of printed Gospels in Armenian, printed by Michelangelo Barboni for Oskan Agulets'i, Venice, 1685. Kalfayan Family Collection.

Armenians to protect from the evil eye, and blacksmiths make crescent-shaped amulets for children on Good Friday; both wooden and metal amulets in the shape of crescents seem to have had the same function.⁸⁶

PROTECTIVE SUBSTANCES

Talismanic objects made from certain materials are believed to be particularly efficacious in averting the evil eye. In many cultures throughout the world, silver is a metal that is believed to be powerful in this respect.⁸⁷ Perhaps its reflective properties are thought to deflect the

evil, probably by frightening away the evil spirits.⁸³ The Armenian examples are not particularly ugly, however, and it is unclear why these were placed on the bindings.

CRESCENT SHAPES

Crescent moons, horns, and horseshoes, all of which are more or less crescent-shaped, are believed in many cultures to protect against evil, especially the evil eye.⁸⁴ One manuscript binding included a metal (silver?) crescent moon with a human face in profile in the concavity (see Fig. 14), and another, an Armenian gospel book printed in Venice in 1685, had two small metal (perhaps iron?) crescent-shaped objects nailed onto the front cover, as well as two typical eye-shaped metal pieces.⁸⁵ Fig. 33. Holes on the front board of this book are evidence of bosses and other pieces that were once nailed onto it, no longer extant. Wooden amulets, carved into a crescent shape, are used by

power of the evil eye. In Iran, a neighbor to Armenia, charms mounted in silver are believed to be especially potent.⁸⁸ In Armenia, iron and the blacksmith who works it have great importance in the community, and, as mentioned earlier, among his other products, he also creates protective iron amulets often in the shape of crescents and crosses.⁸⁹ Some Armenians believed that these metal objects attracted the "vibrations" from evil spirits and the evil eye, thereby deflecting them from humans.⁹⁰ Most of the metal objects found on the bindings, however, seem to be silver, some of which were also gilt.

Carnelian, a reddish-brown or orange stone, sometimes embellishes the crosses nailed onto the covers; see Figs. 1, 13–14, and 24. Engraved carnelian seal stones are also found on some bindings (discussed further later in this essay). Carnelian and its opaque form sard are believed by many in the Near East and Mediterranean basin to be powerful amulets against the evil eye.⁹¹

Mother-of-pearl, another shiny substance, is believed to protect against the evil eye, especially in Iran, which borders Armenia and where Armenians have lived for centuries.⁹² It is usually carved and cut into fancy shapes. Two rectangular carved mother-of-pearl plaques, as well as smaller carved dangling ornaments, are found on the front cover of Morgan Library MS M.1149; see Fig. 15. Shells, especially cowry shells, are also believed to be protective, but thus far I have not found any on any Armenian bindings.⁹³

Other ex-votos attached to Armenian bindings

Other unusual objects were attached to or included with some of these bindings, such as coins and pseudocoins. Many items appear to be votive offerings of a particularly personal nature, such as inscribed seal stones, jewelry, embroidered textile fragments, and parts of a belt. Some of these were probably also considered to be apotropaic; each example is discussed in the following pages.

is believed to reflect away evil. Laurann Gilbertson, "To Ward Off Evil: Metal on Norwegian Folk Dress," in *Folk Dress in Europe and Anatolia: Beliefs about Protection and Fertility*, ed. Linda Welters (New York: Oxford, 1999): 199–210.

88. Donaldson, *Wild Rue*, 154–155.

89. Tadevosyan and Petrosyan, "Blacksmith," 207–215.

90. Villa and Matossian, *Armenian Village Life*, 148–149.

91. Budge, *Amulets and Talismans*, 310, 324.

92. Donaldson, *Wild Rue*, 20; Budge, *Amulets and Talismans*, 70–73, also mentions mother-of-pearl amulets from the coasts of the Red Sea and Palestine, some made specifically for Christians because they were carved with Christian themes.

93. Donaldson, *Wild Rue*, 20. An Armenian headscarf from Mersin (on the Mediterranean coast) decorated with tiny dangling shells attached to its edging can be found in the collection of the Alex and Marie Manoogian Museum (Southfield, MI), accession no. 1988.669. See *Testimony to a People: A Legacy of Armenian Treasures from the Galleries of the Alex and Marie Manoogian Museum* (working title); forthcoming 2013.

83. Elworthy, *Evil Eye: The Classic Account*, 158–167; Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons*, I:103–110.

84. Elworthy, *Evil Eye: The Classic Account*, 181–232; Campbell Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets: Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), 98–99. Budge, *Amulets and Talismans*, 213, discusses ancient Hebrew amulets in crescent form.

85. Swann Galleries, *Early Printed Books including Armenian Books* (New York, 11 April 2011), Lot 11. Now in the Kalfayan Family Collection, Thessaloniki and Athens.

86. Marutyan, "Wood," 109, and Tadevosyan and Petrosyan, "The Blacksmith," 214, both in *Armenian Folk Arts*.

87. In Norway, the traditional *solje* brooch is usually silver—considered to be a powerful metal—and

COINS

Two of the manuscript bindings examined had coins attached to them. The back cover of a ritual book, probably copied in Constantinople (Istanbul) in the seventeenth century, is completely obscured by hundreds of Ottoman silver coins, mostly dated to the early-nineteenth century (see Fig. 14).⁹⁴ The front cover of the Morgan Library's Gospel MS M.1149 includes two thirteenth-century silver coins from the Seljuk period attached to a colorful enameled medallion with text in Ottoman Turkish (see Fig. 15).⁹⁵ The text that was written on the medallion copies, word for word, the text found on a coin of the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II, who reigned from 1808 to 1839.⁹⁶ This medallion functions as a kind of pseudocoin connected with a powerful ruler. Coins, medallions, and pseudocoins, especially ancient coins with images of a ruler, were believed to have apotropaic powers from the late antique period and in medieval Byzantium.⁹⁷ Their use on these Armenian bindings might be vestiges of similar beliefs from that region, surviving in the nineteenth century. Although coins are not normally believed to protect specifically against the evil eye, they are widely considered to bring about good luck and prosperity. In some regions, it is an Armenian custom to bury coins for good luck at a new home; perhaps the use of coins as votive offerings on religious manuscripts was another way of averting evil and attracting good fortune.⁹⁸

SEAL STONES

These are flat stones engraved in mirror image so that they could be used as stamps or seals, and they were originally set into rings. Most were cut into an octagonal or oval shape. The stones were removed from the rings and placed into a flat metal setting that firmly held the stone. One or two metal shanks extended from the bottom of the setting that were inserted through a hole drilled through the board, and then they were spread open on the inside of the board, thereby attaching the seal and its setting to the cover. The inscription usually includes the owner's name with a religious formula and sometimes a date. Three manuscripts, thus far, have been found with seal stones attached to them: Matenadaran MS 6531 (see Fig. 34) has one cracked, inscribed (but illegible) seal stone placed in the center of a large cross; a ritual book (see Fig. 14) has five seal stones arranged in a cruciform shape; and Morgan Library MS M.1149 (see Fig. 16) has thirty extant seal stones.⁹⁹ I will focus on this last manuscript as it

94. Sotheby's, *Western Manuscripts and Miniatures*, Lot 160.

95. The silver coins are thirteenth-century Turkish coins of the Seljuk Sultan Kai-Khusraw II, who reigned between the years 1236 and 1246. For more information on these coins, see Gary Leiser, "Observations on the 'Lion and Sun' Coinage of Ghiyath al-Din Kai-Khusraw II," *Mésogéios* 2 (1998): 96–114.

96. I gratefully thank Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, who translated the text of the enameled medallion and identified its coin source.

97. Harry Maguire, "Magic and Money in the Early Middle Ages," *Speculum* 72, no. 4 (Oct. 1997): 1037–1054.

98. Marutyan, "Home as the World," 86–87.

99. Ritual book: the seal inscriptions are unfortunately illegible in the only available photograph of this binding.



Fig. 34. Engraved seal stone (cracked) in center of large cross, with bosses, crosses, and crucifix on front cover of a Gospel, text 1489. The three large floral-shaped metal pieces on the right are closures for three straps. Matenadaran MS 6531.

was possible for me to study the seal stones in more detail.¹⁰⁰

On the Morgan Library manuscript, all but one of the seal stones were engraved in mirror image so that they could be used as stamps. Nineteen of them are in Armenian, two in Greek, and nine in Ottoman Turkish, Persian, or Arabic.¹⁰¹ Each seal is engraved with a name, often with a religious formula, such as "Servant of God" in Armenian or Arabic, to show the owner's piety.¹⁰² A few are dated, ranging from the early eighteenth to late nineteenth century. Most of them seem to have been made from the semiprecious stone carnelian, as we have seen long believed to be defensive against the evil eye, especially in the Near East and Mediterranean regions.¹⁰³ Almost all of these seals were cut in an octagonal shape. Perhaps this is insignificant, but it is worth noting that, in sixth-century Byzantium, an

octagonal ring hoop was considered apotropaic and believed to prevent colic.¹⁰⁴ Seal stones were extremely personal—they include the owner's name and, throughout the Near East, were used for stamping one's name on documents or to prove ownership.¹⁰⁵ These were *not*

100. I am preparing an extensive article on the binding of this manuscript, in which each seal stone will be reproduced and translated. Little has been written on Armenian seal stones and rings; for two articles in English, see Paul Z. Bedoukian, "Armenian Ringstones," *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, n.s. 20 (1986–1987): 481–492; Levon Vrtanesyan, "An Armenian Signet Ring from Afion Karahissar," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 17 (2008): 207–210. For a silver stamp seal, see Levon A. Saryan, "An Armenian Silver Seal from the Holy Land Dated 1805," *Armenian Numismatic Journal* 5 (35), no. 1 (March 2009): 19–21.

101. I thank Sheila Blair, Jonathan Bloom, and Wheeler Thackston for translating the inscriptions on the Turkish, Persian, and Arabic seals, and Nadezhda Kavrus-Hoffmann for translating those in Greek.

102. These religious invocations are not necessarily an indication that the owner of the seal was a cleric. I thank Father Krikor Maksoudian for this information.

103. Budge, *Amulets and Talismans*, 310, 324.

104. Maguire et al., *Art and Holy Powers*, 9.

105. It is not unusual to find such marks stamped in ink on the pages of Armenian manuscripts.

possessions to be given away frivolously. It is possible that their purpose was not only as a votive offering of gratitude or supplication to the Gospel, but also as a "substitute" for the owner, functioning as a contact relic. Might the donors have believed that their personal seal stone's physical contact with a powerful gospel book could render some of the book's miraculous healing powers back to the person whom it represented?

Even more curious is the addition of Muslim seal stones to this Christian gospel book. The seals in Turkish, Arabic, or Persian were definitely Muslim owned, as indicated by the names inscribed on them, such as Umar or Muhammad son of Ali. Although it is unclear why they might have been put on the binding of this Christian manuscript, the mere fact that it includes so many votive offerings strongly suggests that this gospel book was considered a miracle-working one. Perhaps these were given by severely ill Muslims who, in their desperation, appealed to it in search of a cure. This may not be as strange as it first seems—Christians, Muslims, and Jews often perform pilgrimages to the same holy sites. Michael W. Dols has stated:

Down to the twentieth century, there has been in the Middle East an interchange of religious healing between Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the form of visitations to each other's religious sanctuaries, venerating each other's saints, and wearing each other's amulets and talismans.¹⁰⁶

An Armenian genocide survivor, originally from the village of Akor in Kharpert province, related that the miraculous church of that tiny village was renowned for curing paralysis, and he recalled that Turks and Kurds as well as Christians made pilgrimages to it.¹⁰⁷ Another example concerns the town of Ephesus, Turkey, in which a stone house is believed to be the final home of the Virgin and the place of her death. The Virgin Mary is respected in Islam as the mother of the prophet Jesus. The building, thought to be her home, is now a place of pilgrimage for both Christians and Muslims, and it is especially revered and cherished by women who are suffering from fertility problems.¹⁰⁸

Seal stones are also sometimes considered to have apotropaic powers. The person commissioning the ring might choose a specific type of stone based on its protective properties, as well as the formulaic phrase to be engraved on it. Those seals in mirror image were certainly used as personal stamps for the owner, but they also represented the owner, and their presence on these bindings might have been to function as a kind of surrogate for or intermediary between the person and the holy object.¹⁰⁹ Some scholars believe that

by their owners. Jean Chardin (Sir John Chardin), a seventeenth-century French traveler to Persia, mentioned in his book (in which he wrote extensively about the Armenians in Persia, especially in Isfahan) that in Persia, they sign all documents with their personal seal in the presence of witnesses. Chardin, *Travels in Persia 1673–1677* (1927; New York: Dover, 1988), 283.

106. Dols, *Majnun*, 233.

107. Villa and Matossian, *Armenian Village Life*, 132.

108. I thank Helen Evans for informing me about this pilgrimage site.

109. I have seen many Armenian manuscripts with pages stamped in ink by such seals, thereby establishing personal ownership of the manuscript. For a database of Islamic seals stamped in ink

those not engraved in mirror image (and therefore directly readable) were probably only talismanic, as they could not be used as a stamp.¹¹⁰ Muslim seal stones were sometimes engraved with illegible marks and magical squares, usually taken to be magical symbols or formulae.¹¹¹ More research is needed on Armenian seal stones to determine their function on these bindings, but it seems clear that they must have been personal ex-votos.

JEWELRY

The binding of Morgan MS M.1149 (see Figs. 15–16) also includes pieces of feminine jewelry: a pair of long silver earrings with small red beads (coral or carnelian?) on the back, and on the front a silver chain with thirteen dangling ornaments each with three small red beads. Although this last item has been described as a necklace, more likely it was the ornamental decoration placed on a woman's headpiece. It is also possible that the carved mother-of-pearl decorations on the front cover might have decorated a woman's headpiece. The most likely explanation for the placement of these objects on this binding is that they were personal votive offerings.

EMBROIDERY

Pieces of embroidered cloth of varying sizes were inserted throughout Morgan Library manuscript M.1149. It is possible that these may have been intended to protect the sacred images within, a kind of "curtain" that is a phenomenon found in Western European, Armenian, and other manuscript traditions, especially for luxury manuscripts with spectacular illuminations.¹¹² This late seventeenth- to early eighteenth-century manuscript is by no means a lavish one, however, and the illuminations were executed by a competent, but not exceptionally skilled, artist using a very limited palette.

If this manuscript was considered a miracle-working one, even though it is not sumptuous, perhaps it was felt that the sacred images needed more physical protection. It is also possible that these embroidered fabric pieces might also have been votive offerings, perhaps substituting for the maker or owner. Embroidery was an important skill learned by all young girls in the Ottoman Empire, regardless of their ethnic or religious background, and the usage of embroidered fabrics in everyday life, as well as for special occasions, is

in Islamic manuscripts at the Chester Beatty Library (Dublin, Ireland), see www.cbl.ie/islamicseals.
110. Ludvik Kalus, "Gems," in *Islamic Rings and Gems: The Benjamin Zucker Collection*, ed. Derek J. Content (London: Philip Wilson, 1987), 233–244. Only one seal on Morgan Library MS M.1149, in Greek, was not in mirror image.

111. None of the Armenian seals on Morgan Library MS M.1149 seems to have any magical symbols engraved on it. For Muslim examples, see Venetia Porter, *Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 2011), 166–180.

112. Christine Sciacca, "Raising the Curtain on the Use of Textiles in Manuscripts," in *Weaving, Veiling, and Dressing: Textiles and Their Metaphors in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Kathryn M. Rudy and Barbara Baert (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 161–190. San Lazzaro MS 1594, an early-seventeenth-century Armenian Gospel manuscript, includes red-silk curtains that cover and protect the full-page illuminations.

ubiquitous from the eighteenth to the early-twentieth century. It would not be surprising that these might have been offered as personal ex-votos to the gospel book.¹¹³

BELT

The Royal Library, Copenhagen, ritual book, covered with a beautifully embroidered chemise, which also may have been a votive offering, was sewn over the leather-covered wooden boards. It was further embellished with pieces of what appears to be a gilt-metal-covered leather belt with dangling ornaments. The belt fragments were sewn onto the embroidered cloth, even wrapping around the spine (see Figs. 17–19). At first, the inclusion of this particular object on a binding was extremely puzzling. Research on nineteenth-century Armenian traditions regarding costume and jewelry provided some clues, however. In some regions, a woman was given a gift of a silver belt by her husband at their wedding, indicating her newly married status. It was regarded as one of her most treasured possessions. In addition to its symbolic significance and its practical use as a belt, it was also considered as an amulet to protect her against evil and to encourage her fertility.¹¹⁴ Perhaps it is significant that this belt was placed on a ritual book, which contains the blessings, prayers, and rites performed by the priest to celebrate the sacraments, including the sacraments of marriage and baptism.¹¹⁵ Although we cannot be sure whether this belt was owned by a man or woman, it is possible that it may have been offered by a woman who was unable to conceive a child, with the hope of improving her fertility. The belt, as well as the embroidered chemise, may have been votive offerings of a particularly personal nature given in thanks for prayers answered.

A brief comparison of Armenian gospel books with Orthodox painted icons

In a number of ways, the veneration of Armenian gospel books parallels that of painted icons in the various Orthodox churches, including Greek, Russian, Bulgarian, and Georgian. Although a thorough study of this subject is beyond the scope of this essay, it may be instructive to identify briefly the similarities between these objects of religious veneration. Some painted icons of Christ, the Virgin, and countless saints are believed by the faithful to be endowed with miraculous powers to cure illness, infertility, psychological turmoil, or other problems.¹¹⁶ As we have seen, similar miracle-working powers have been attributed

113. In Byzantine culture, embroidered veils were sometimes given as votive gifts to miraculous icons believed to have performed a healing. It was also believed that the miracle-working power of the icon could be transmitted to the veil itself, which therefore acted like a contact relic. See Alexei Lidov, "Miracle-Working Icons of the Mother of God," in *The Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (New York: Abbeville, 2000), 56.

114. Svetlana Poghosyan, "Costume," 186, 188, and Hrachya Margaryan, "Jewelry," 200; both in *Armenian Folk Arts*.

115. Malachia Ormanian, *A Dictionary of the Armenian Church*, trans. Bedros Norehad (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1984), 71.

116. The published literature on the subject of icons is vast. For two recent articles, see Thomas F.

to some Armenian gospel books (or other sacred Armenian texts) by pious believers. It is a long-standing custom, still practiced today, to donate personal items, often valuable, as votive offerings to these painted icons as thanks for prayers answered or in anticipation of them being answered. These offerings may include all types of jewelry, gold coins, watches, and *tamata*, or silver or gold revetments made to fit over parts of the icon or its frame. This appears to be the same reason for attaching disparate and often personal objects to the bindings of Armenian religious manuscripts and printed books.

One modern example of the continuing practice of venerating icons can be found in New York City today. The church and Greek Orthodox monastery of St. Irene Chrysovalantou in Astoria, Queens, is particularly famous for its icon of Saint Irene. This small icon, painted in the early twentieth century by a monk in Mount Athos, is considered to be miraculous—it is said to cry tears—as well as miracle-working. Until recently, the website of this church and monastery included signed testimonials from the faithful describing their gratefulness to St. Irene for answering their prayers and curing their illness, infertility, or various other hardships.¹¹⁷ The icon itself is covered with gold, silver, diamonds, and other jewels in the form of bracelets, necklaces, charms, earrings, rings, crosses, watches, and gold coins, as well as some blue eye charms and metal *tamata*, all offerings and gifts from the pious. Other larger icons in the same church, such as two of the Virgin and Child, are equally bedecked with jewelry, gems, *tamata*, gold, and silver. This phenomenon is not confined to Eastern Christian traditions, however. In some Roman Catholic Churches, along with requests for aid, offerings of jewelry and gold are made to statues, such as the famous statue of Santo Bambino in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Aracoeli, Rome.¹¹⁸

Believers still venerate these icons today and wish to have physical contact with them in some way, in the hope that their miraculous healing powers will be transmitted to the person who offers a personal ex-voto to it. For some visitors, the exhibition "Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai," held at The J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles in 2006–2007, became a pilgrimage site, and many prayed before the icons. One visitor from the Chicago area left a note for the priest in charge of the holy relics. The note included a lock of hair of a friend who was unable to travel because of a serious illness, and a request to the priest to pray for her friend before the icon, or at the relics of Saint Catherine, the friend's patron saint. The

Mathews, "Early Icons of the Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine of Sinai," in *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Kristen M. Collins (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006), 38–55; Lidov, "Miracle-Working Icons," in *The Mother of God*, 47–57.

117. The letters were published in a monthly newsletter, *The Voice of Orthodoxy*, a pdf of which was formerly available on St. Irene's website www.stirene.org. Although the newsletter is no longer available on the site as of 2012, the monastery does state on its site that they still receive letters of thanks from people grateful for St. Irene's miraculous interventions; see <http://www.stirene.org/miracles-of-saint-irene.html>; accessed 18 July 2012.

118. Arduino Colasanti, *S. Maria in Aracoeli* (Rome: Casa Editrice "Roma," Libreria Mantegazza, [192–?]), Fig. 32. The original fifteenth-century statue was stolen in 1994 and has been replaced with a copy. Miraculous cures have been attributed to both.



Figs. 35–36. Painted icon of the Holy Mother of God “who wards off evil” (*Surb Astuatsatsin Charkhapan*), in The Holy Cross Church of Armenia (New York, NY). Painted in 1986. Detail of *Charkhapan* icon with votive offerings including *tamata*, jewelry, and a hair barrette. The votive offerings are behind a sheet of Plexiglas to protect them from the candles.

hair functioned as an extremely personal offering whose physical contact with the holy icon would act as a substitute for the absent supplicant, functioning as a type of contact relic.¹¹⁹

Although the veneration of painted icons is not currently a custom in the Armenian Church, there seem to be a few modern-day exceptions.¹²⁰ The Holy Cross Church of Armenia in uptown Manhattan proudly displays its icon of the Mother and Child, painted and consecrated in 1986, known as *Charkhapan Surb Astuatsatsin* (Holy Mother of God who “wards off evil” or “deceives evil”).¹²¹ Fig. 35. This 1986 painting was inspired by a famous seventeenth-century painted icon of the Virgin and Child also known as *Charkhapan*, in Armash near Istanbul, from a photograph of it taken before 1915, after which it was lost or destroyed. Another icon, possibly from the fifteenth century and also known as *Charkhapan*, still belongs to the Holy Archangels Church in the Balat section of Istanbul, to which Armenians and Muslims alike make pilgrimages.¹²² Miraculous cures have been attributed

119. I thank Kristen M. Collins, Associate Curator in the Department of Manuscripts, The J. Paul Getty Museum, for providing me with this information.

120. Note that a seventh-century treatise by the Armenian cleric Vrt'anēs K'rt'ogh, in which he defended the use of images and icons, strongly implies that painted icons were also venerated by Armenians; none have survived, however. See Der Nersessian's translation of the treatise “Une Apologie des Images du Septième Siècle,” I:379–403 (cited in n.17); and Thomas F. Mathews, “Vrt'anēs K'rt'ol and the Early Theology of Images,” *Revue des Études Arméniennes* 31 (2008–2009): 101–126.

121. Also spelled “Charkhapan Soorp Asdvadzadzin.”

122. This information comes from the commemorative booklet published by Holy Cross Church of Armenia for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the consecration of the icon, and the eighty-second



Figs. 37–39. Above, left: Painted icon of St. Irene with votive offerings (protected by Plexiglas), supported on special platform in preparation for the annual procession in Astoria, Queens, New York, which occurs during the celebrations for her feast day, July 2012. Above, right: Procession of icon of St. Irene for her feast day. The priest seen in front holds a gospel book.

Right: After the procession, the faithful pass under the platform holding the icon of St. Irene and touch the platform to receive blessings transmitted by the icon.



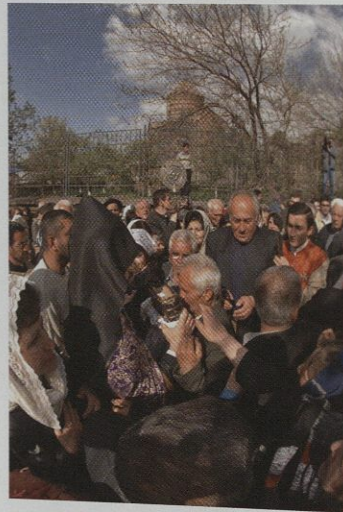
to both *Charkhapan* icons in Armash and Balat, and the modern version in Manhattan is considered to be protective to the parish. The Manhattan icon has been further embellished with silver revetments and ex-votos from the faithful, consisting of lit candles, jewelry, *tamata*, and even a fancy hair barrette, all of which hang before the painting today. Fig. 36.

Similar rituals were also conducted by pious believers with these sacred objects: Orthodox painted icons and Armenian sacred manuscripts. Armenians were known to carry miracle-working gospel books to battle as a palladium, just as some Byzantine emperors carried sacred icons and manuscripts for the same purpose.¹²³ Processions with miracle-working icons have occurred for centuries in the Orthodox churches.¹²⁴ Vestiges of some of these traditions continue today. In Astoria, Queens, at the above-mentioned church and monastery of St. Irene Chrysovalantou, there is a yearly procession of her miraculous

anniversary of the church itself, 18 September 2011. The pre-1915 photograph of the icon and the new 1986 icon by artist Simon Samsonian are presented on the cover of the booklet. I thank Lola Koundakjian for providing me with information on the icon's history and for facilitating my visit to the church.

123. Der Nersessian, *The Chester Beatty Library: A Catalogue of the Armenian Manuscripts* (Dublin: Hodges Figgis, 1958), I:xxi.

124. Nancy Patterson Ševčenko, “Icons in the Liturgy,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991): 45–57.



Figs. 40–41. Above: Crowds of pious Armenians trying to kiss or touch the Gospel book held by the priest during the procession at the Church of *Surb Gēorg* (St. George) in Mughni, Armenia, on 23 April 2006 (the feast day of St. George). The church is visible in the background. Above, right: Young boy kissing the Gospel book during the procession at Mughni.

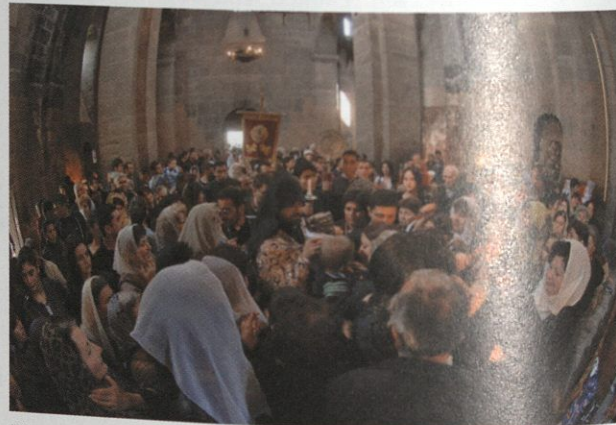


Fig. 42. Inside the Church of St. George where the devout touch and kiss the sacred Gospel book to venerate it and receive blessings. Photography by Hrair Hawk Khatcherian.

icon on or around 28 July, her feast day. The icon (with the votive offerings) is placed on a portable platform held by four to six men. Figs. 37–39. The ranking clerics walk in front of the icon, the first priest holding a gospel book. The congregation follows behind the icon in procession. After processing around the block and returning to the church, the devout line up in order to pass under the icon and platform held aloft by the men and to touch the base to receive blessings and venerate it. They cannot touch the icon itself, which is protected by bullet-proof Plexiglas, but touching the platform holding it is considered sufficient.¹²⁵

A similar event amazingly occurs annually through the auspices of the Matenadaran, Mesrop Mashtots' Institute of Manuscripts in Erevan, Armenia. Once a year, the director

¹²⁵. This icon was stolen by armed robbers in December 1991; the gold and jewels were taken, but five days later the icon itself was anonymously returned in the mail. See <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/25/nyregion/faithful-pray-for-new-miracle-to-aid-stolen-weeping-icon.html> and http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl/1991_831148/stolen-icon-returned-minus-diamond-frame.html; accessed 6 June 2012.

of the Matenadaran gives special permission to remove a fifteenth-century silver- and gem-covered gospel book (MS 10599) from the institute and bring it to the town of Mughni—about forty kilometers northwest of Erevan—in order for the residents to conduct a procession with it at the Church of St. Gēorg (St. George) on his feast day, 23 April. Hundreds of people participate, and the faithful crowd around it both during the procession and inside the church, touching and kissing it to receive its blessings.¹²⁶ Figs. 40–42. The connection between miracle-working Armenian books and Orthodox painted icons is a subject that deserves further study and analysis.

It should be noted that my research, thus far, has indicated that (probably) no other culture makes votive offerings to its sacred books. To my knowledge, bindings with these types of unusual attached objects do not appear to exist in other Eastern Christian manuscript traditions, including Greek, Russian, and Syriac, nor on Western European Christian manuscripts, nor Islamic manuscripts.¹²⁷ Offerings are given to painted icons, as we have seen, or to statues, but not to manuscripts or printed books of sacred scripture.

To date, I have identified only two exceptions.¹²⁸ The first is seen on the upper cover of a Christian manuscript in Arabic in the collection of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. The cover has been decorated with a central cross, silver cherubs in each corner, and six silver eye-shaped pieces with raised repoussé dots that are arranged symmetrically around the cross. This manuscript, an Arabic translation of the Gospel of Matthew, was copied in the town of Kolomna (near Moscow) by an Arab-Christian scribe who was in Russia in 1654 with his father, the patriarch of Antioch Macarius. The binding is believed to be contemporary with the copying of the manuscript, and it is said to have been made with the help of Russian craftsmen.¹²⁹ Thus far, however, I have not seen any other published Russian bindings with such eye-shaped decorations.

The second exception known to me is a Georgian manuscript at the National Centre of Manuscripts in Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia.¹³⁰ This manuscript (no. A 501) is a sixteenth-

¹²⁶. My thanks to Hrair Hawk Khatcherian for drawing my attention to this event and for sharing his photographs.

¹²⁷. In addition to published works on bookbinding, I also consulted with colleagues who are specialists of these different manuscript traditions. I thank Nadezhda Kavrus-Hoffmann, Sheila Blair, Jonathan Bloom, Marianna Shreve Simpson, James Coakley, and Sebastian Brock for their insights.

¹²⁸. Robert Milevski's article on Latvian peasant bindings includes a nineteenth-century binding consisting of a diamond-shaped centerpiece with repoussé dots, which is reminiscent of some of the eye-shaped pieces seen on the Armenian bindings under discussion. These Latvian bindings with metal pieces are believed to have been produced to protect the books from wear. They are found only on religious books, but there is no indication that the metal pieces functioned as ex-votos, and they seem to be utilitarian objects produced in various decorative shapes. See Robert Milevski, "Reading the Bible, Preserving the Precious Text: Latvian Peasant Metal-Clad Bindings," *Library History* 24, no. 2 (June 2008): 128–142, Figs. 1a. and 5f.

¹²⁹. Accession no. B-1214. Yuri A. Petrosyan et al., *Pages of Perfection: Islamic Paintings and Calligraphy from the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg* (Lugano: ARCH Foundation, 1995), Cat. 48, 255.

¹³⁰. The front cover of this manuscript, number A 501, has been published in Maia Karanaze, *K'art'uli*