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# SCRIPTA CLASSICA ISRAELICA

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## A Byzantine Epitaph of Ioanes the Armenian from the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem

Yana Tchekhanovets

This report is dedicated to a Greek funerary inscription of Ioanes the Armenian, dated to the Byzantine period that was discovered in Jerusalem in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was later lost. The only documentation of the epitaph is a photography that survived in Russian collection and was never reproduced. The high quality of the photo allows us to interpret the inscription and to determine the circumstances and place of its discovery.

A photo of an otherwise unknown Greek inscription was discovered in the collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century Holy-Land photographs from the archives of the Russian Imperial Palestinian Orthodox Society, kept in the State Museum of the History of Religion (GMIR), in St. Petersburg. The collection includes over 7,000 pictures,<sup>1</sup> and contains the works of the well-known masters of the Holy-Land photography: J. Graham, the Bonfils family, K. Krikorian, the “American Colony” studio, etc., obtained by the Society between the years 1858-1917, and also photos by Fr. Antonin (Kapustin), the head of the Russian Ecclesiastic Mission in 1865-1894, works of Fr. Timon (Korotky), the official photographer of the Mission, and the works of visiting Russian photographers, both professional and amateur — I.F. Barshevsky, A.A. Gagarin and others, made in 1870s-1910s. Mostly unpublished are the pictures depicting the monuments of the Holy Land antiquities. These photos are sometimes the only surviving documentation of various artifacts that are lost today, as in the case of the grave stone of Ioanes the Armenian.<sup>2</sup>

### The Inscription (Fig. 1)

According to the reading of Leah di Segni,<sup>3</sup> the text reads as follows:

+ ΘΗΚΗ  
ΙΩΑΝΟΥ  
ΑΡΜΕΝΙΟ  
ΣΤΑΒ

Θήκη / Ἰωάνου / Ἀρμένιο[υ] / σταβ[υλαρίου]

Tomb of Ioanes Armenian, *stabularius*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The study of the collection became possibly with a generous assistance of Ekaterina Terukova, the deputy director of State Museum of history of religion (GMIR) in St. Petersburg, and Peter Fedotov, the collection curator. The collection is accessible online: <http://palestina.indrik.ru>

<sup>2</sup> GMIR photographic collection of the Russian Imperial Palestinian Orthodox Society, catalogue no. Π-2477.

<sup>3</sup> Deep gratitude should be expressed to Leah Di Segni of the Institute of Archaeology, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, for primary decipherment of the inscription.

According to Leah Di Segni, the epigraphic traits of the inscription are characteristic of the Byzantine epitaphs discovered on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Following this clue, the search for the background that appears in the photograph started, and soon it was identified: the decorative metal bars on which the stone leans, apparently belong to the window of the refectory of the St. Mary Magdalena Russian convent near Gethsemane, on the Mount of Olives (Fig. 2). Judging by the location chosen for the photograph, the inscription was probably discovered not far away from this spot.



**Fig. 1. Mount of Olives, the Greek burial inscription of Ioanes the Armenian, 1890s. Unpublished, courtesy of GMIR, collection no. II-2477.**



**Fig. 2. The window of St. Maria Magdalena convent refectory. Author's photo.**

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<sup>4</sup> Inn-keeper or groom.

### Russian Development of the Plot

Armed with this identification, it was possible to trace the inscription in the dispatches that archimandrite Antonin (Kapustin) sent to Russia in the 1890s.<sup>5</sup> Describing the construction work on the plot of St. Maria Magdalena church,<sup>6</sup> Kapustin, an amateur antiquarian and researcher himself,<sup>7</sup> wrote:

The society started the construction of two houses in the northern part of the plot, when the workers found two caves [...] The second cave is located to the east of the houses; its measures are from north to south 4 arshins [2.84 m], 2 3/4 arshins [ca. 2 m] wide, and 2 arshins [1.42 m] high. Inside a gravestone was discovered, of the size of a square arshin [0.7 by 0.7 m], of 4 vershki [18 cm] thick, with an inscription, which can be dated, according to the shape of the letters, to the 6<sup>th</sup> century: Ἀρμένιος Ταρ, i.e. an Armenian from the region of Taron.<sup>8</sup>

No photograph of the inscription is supplied, but the text leaves no doubt: the gravestone of Ioanes the Armenian was discovered in the rock-cut tomb on the northern part of the St. Maria Magdalena plot.

The whole area was rich in archaeological finds, and during the construction works the builders discovered numerous tombs. According to Kapustin, in the lower part of the plot, bordering Gethsemane, many square dark openings were seen, leading to Byzantine graves. Digging the foundation trenches for the church, in five or six occasions the workers found hewn tombs. Some were discovered collapsed and covered by earth, and some “preserved the remains of burial couches, in a shape of garden beds, separated by high frames.”<sup>9</sup> Some of the graves were blocked and preserved; others were leveled and covered by earth. The remains of Byzantine tombs can be seen in the photographs documenting the construction of St. Maria Magdalena church (Fig. 3). A few Byzantine funeral inscriptions, dated on paleographic ground to the fifth–early seventh centuries were discovered on the plot, and all were published.<sup>10</sup> The systematic survey of the plot carried out recently by the author, revealed a dozen tombs dated to the Byzantine period, mostly blocked-up in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>

According to the Russian records, some archaeological finds that were revealed from the tombs were preserved in the small museum of the monastery. The brief list of the

<sup>5</sup> Kapustin (1892), 355-356; (1895), 284-285.

<sup>6</sup> For an account of the construction of St. Maria Magdalena church, see Vach, Vzdornov and Lisovoi (2006).

<sup>7</sup> For archaeological activity of Fr. Antonin Kapustin, see Beliaev (2007), 43-55; Beliaev, Butova and Lisovoi (2009), 46-57.

<sup>8</sup> Kapustin (1892), 355-356. Taron — historical district in Eastern Armenia, modern Muş province in Turkey.

<sup>9</sup> Kapustin (1895), 355-356.

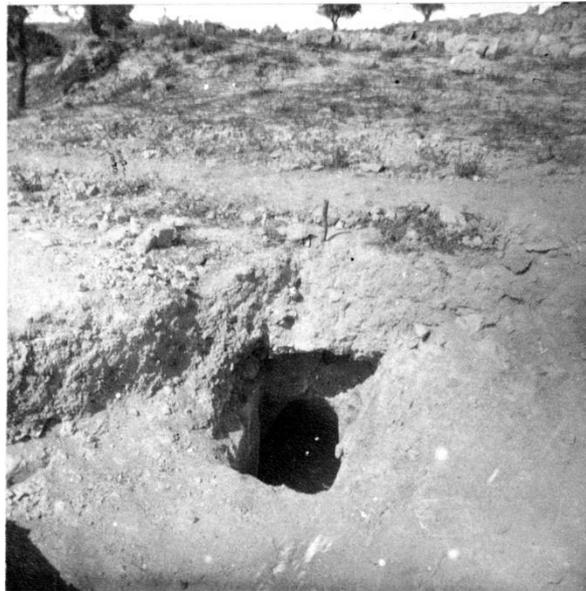
<sup>10</sup> See Di Segni (2012), *CIIP* I/2: tomb of Mamas of Gades, no. 912 (late 6<sup>th</sup>–early 7<sup>th</sup> c.); tomb of Theodulus and Petrus, no. 913 (5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> c.); tomb of Stephanus, no. 914 (5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> c.); tomb of Ioanes the tanner, no. 989 (5<sup>th</sup> c.).

<sup>11</sup> The survey was carried out in March 2014, with the kind permission of the mother superior of the St. Maria Magdalena Monastery for women of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, hegumene Elizaveta (Schmelts).

finds was compiled by the Russian Church authorities after the death of Fr. Antonin Kapustin in 1894. It includes:

two skulls, glass vases, clay lamps and stone fragments; stone sarcophagus; ten small crosses and one larger cross; thirty-four ancient coins. [...] In the cellar there are three stone slabs with ancient inscriptions.<sup>12</sup>

Shortly after the death of Kapustin, the finds were transferred to the main repository of “Russian antiquities” on the Mount of Olives. There they became part of the general collection, and no identifying documents were left. The further destiny of the inscription of Ioanes the Armenian and its present location remains unknown.



**Fig. 3. Mount of Olives, Byzantine tomb at the construction site of St. Maria Magdalena church, 1890s. Unpublished, courtesy of GMIR, collection no. II-2479.**

### Discussion

The epitaph is a supplement to existing corpus of evidences related to the Armenian presence on the Mount of Olives during the Byzantine period and Early Islamic period. The presence of Armenian clergy on the Mount of Olives is attested by literary sources: the Armenian *List of Armenian monasteries* (2) of Anastas vardapet, dated to the sixth–seventh centuries,<sup>13</sup> and Latin *Commemoratorium de casis dei vel monasteriis* (19, 24)

<sup>12</sup> Zelenina and Belik (2011), 166.

<sup>13</sup> Sanjian (1969), 265-292; Terian (2016), 267-282.

dated to 808.<sup>14</sup> On the summit of the mountain, a large monastic complex was exposed in 1871-1873, during construction work that was carried out by the Russian Church authorities.<sup>15</sup> The complex contains numerous mosaics, as well as Greek and Armenian dedicational and funerary inscriptions. In addition, there is a tombstone, discovered in 1870 by Ch. Clermont Ganneau in Qasr Abed ed-Dhanaf, above the Garden of Gethsemane and kept today in the Louvre Museum. The stone slab of the tomb was found in the modern house which was built beside the hewn tomb that was decorated with paintings of Christian motifs: crosses, doves, palms, A and Ω etc.<sup>16</sup> The Greek inscription set in tabula ansata mentions “Charate, hegumene of the chaste monastery of the Armenian women.”<sup>17</sup>

Of a special interest is a choice of Greek language for the burial inscriptions of Ioanes and hegumene Charate. Exceptionally for the practice of international monastic communities of the Holy Land, which spoke and prayed in Greek, the Armenians, and also Georgians, could celebrate the liturgy in their own languages (*Vita Theodosii* 18, 45-46; *The Typikon of the Great Laura*, 4). The epigraphic finds attributed to these communities provide the earliest known examples of national scripts.<sup>18</sup> However, some of the inscriptions attributed to Armenians or Georgians are written in Greek. The study of the inscriptions attributed to the Caucasian Christian communities raises a number of questions regarding the use of language as a marker of self-identification, especially in the context of foreign linguistic environment.<sup>19</sup> Particular difficulty is posed by Armenians who came to the Holy Land from Melitene in Asia Minor and were, most probably, mainly grecophone.<sup>20</sup>

Two Greek epitaphs from Mount of Olives discussed here mention Armenians; three others, also from Jerusalem, relate to Georgians: the tombstone of bishop Samuel, discovered at YMCA site,<sup>21</sup> an inscription in the tomb of hegumene Thecla in Acedama,<sup>22</sup> and the tombstone of Deacons of Anastasis, found near Gethsemane.<sup>23</sup>

Deacon Ioanes the Armenian and Stephanos the Iberian are mentioned among the Greek inscriptions with the names of the monks, buried in the caves beside the Choziba Monastery in Wadi el-Qilt.<sup>24</sup> Keeping in mind the existence of numerous epitaphs in the Armenian and Georgian languages, it may be suggested that the choice of Greek was motivated by the rank of the deceased themselves, or of the institutions they represented.

<sup>14</sup> McCormick (2011).

<sup>15</sup> Dmitrevsky (1885[2006]); Loukianoff (1939); for reconstruction of the complex, see Tchekhanovets, forthcoming. For epigraphic finds from the site, see Riess (1885); Germer-Durand (1892), 572-573; Séjourné (1893); Guthe (1895); Clermont-Ganneau (1896), 326-345, and recently Di Segni (2012) *CIIP* I/2, nos. 836, 1006; Stone (2012), *CIIP* I/2, nos. 837-839, 925-929.

<sup>16</sup> Clermont-Ganneau (1896), 325-326.

<sup>17</sup> Di Segni (2012), *CIIP* I/2, no. 909.

<sup>18</sup> Tsereteli (1960), 67-68; Stone (2002), 77-105.

<sup>19</sup> Geiger (2002), 223-246.

<sup>20</sup> See Stone (1984), 194-202.

<sup>21</sup> Iliffe (1935); for updated discussion see Di Segni (2012), *CIIP* I/2, no. 1000; Tsafirir (2013).

<sup>22</sup> Macalister (1900), 237-241; for updated discussion see Di Segni (2012), *CIIP* I/2, no. 962.

<sup>23</sup> Di Segni (2012), *CIIP* I/2, no. 977.

<sup>24</sup> Schneider (1931), 297-333, nos. 7 and 180.

Charate and Thecla were hegumenai, in charge of the monasteries of Armenian and Bessian women; Samuel was the bishop of the Iberian Monastery; the tomb of the Deacons of Anastasis was probably jointly owned with the brethren of the same Iberian Monastery. However, the *stabularius* Ioanes does not fit into the category of people of high clergy rank. Possibly in this case, the man was a native of Greek-speaking Melitene, representing some equine transportation service in Jerusalem, or being in charge of pilgrim's hostel in Jerusalem, private or owned by some church institution.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Voltaggio (2011), 198-202.

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