


The First of Early Modern Armenian Diplomats: Rethinking Abgar Dpir's Contribution to Armenian National History*

▼ **ABSTRACT** This article addresses the understudied field of early modern Armenian diplomacy, specifically focusing on the overlooked case of Abgar Dpir's delegation to Rome in 1562. The delegation marked a turning point in Armenian religious history, triggering Vatican's aggressive intervention and exacerbating the confessional division between Catholic and Apostolic Armenians. This paper aims to unravel the motives behind Abgar's mission, acknowledging the diverse goals of those involved. As such, the article claims that Abgar Dpir was not of royal origin. This background was invented by Etchmiadzin leaders to fit Abgar within the Western "society of princes" and to give his delegation a fighting chance. Additionally, the author states that Abgar's printing activity was a cover-up for his diplomatic mission. Rooted in the "new diplomatic history" paradigm, this article contributes to the understanding of non-elite intermediaries in Mediterranean cross-confessional diplomacy during the early modern period.

▼ **KEYWORDS** Abgar Dpir, Sultanshah and his letter, Vatican, age of confessionalisation, new diplomatic history, Armenian printing, early modern history.

▼ **ISSUE** Volume 2 (June 2025), issue 1

* This article is based on a public lecture titled "A Perfect Ambassador? Abkar the Clerk and the History of Armenian Printing Press in Istanbul" that I gave at Boğazici University in April 2022, <https://hist.bogazici.edu.tr/events/perfect-ambassador-abkar-clerk-and-history-armenian-printing-press-istanbul> [last accessed: 19.12.2023]. I would like to express my gratitude to the faculty of History Department at Boğazici University and especially Rachel Goshgarian for the invitation.

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Cite this article: Flora Ghazaryan-Abdin, 'The First of Early Modern Armenian Diplomats: Rethinking Abgar Dpir's Contribution to Armenian National History', *Matenadaran: Medieval and Early Modern Armenian Studies (MEMAS)*, 2.1 (June 2025), 97–115
<<https://dx.doi.org/10.1484/J.MEMAS.5.152568>>

DOI: 10.1484/J.MEMAS.5.152568

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1. Introduction

Examples of early modern Armenian diplomacy as well as general Armenian diplomatic history are very few. This is a new and unexamined field for Armenian scholarship. Detailed analyses have been done only on Israel Ori and Joseph Emin, Armenian diplomatic envoys, who in 1717 and 1760s respectively visited Armenian communities in the Ottoman Empire, Europe, India, and Russia, as well as representatives of Western states and the Russian tsar to make allies in their program of Armenian state creation (see Emin 1918; Aslanian 2012; Essefian 1979, and Panossian 2006).

However, one of the earliest examples of Armenian diplomatic history is Abgar Dpir's delegation to Rome. Famous as a printer, Abgar is neglected as a diplomat in historical studies. This negligence is one of the reasons why current scholarship overlooks the origins as well as the main problem of religious history of the Armenian communities, i.e., their confessional division into Catholic and Apostolic denominations. Even though Catholic Armenians existed in the Cilician Kingdom and Nakhijevan diocese, they were not significant in number and the two Armenian confessional groups co-existed in relative peace. It is due to and after Abgar's visit to Rome that Vatican started to intervene majorly into the religious affairs of Armenians. By sending missionaries and printing Armenian books that preached Catholic doctrine, Vatican used Catholic Armenians of Istanbul and other cities with considerable Armenian population as tools to weaken the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal states from within.¹ It is during the age of confessionalisation and after Abgar's delegation that the clashes between these two Armenian confessional groups peaked to the point of mass arrests and exiles.

The aim of this article is to give insights into Abgar's delegation, questioning the reasons behind it. As the following pages show, various people involved in the organisation of the delegation had different goals. Due to the lack of primary sources, the conclusions drawn here should be understood as hypotheses and not as historical facts. In order to position Abgar's delegation in its historical context, the article is divided into four parts. The first part is an introduction to the historical background of Armenia Proper divided between the Ottomans and Safavids in the mid-sixteenth century. The second part gives biographical insights about Abgar Dpir and his activity after the delegation. The third is a translation of selected parts of a letter written by Abgar's son,² where he describes the meeting between his father and the Roman Pope. This letter is one of the rare sources describing the event under discussion and up to now is available only in the Armenian original. The excerpts translated here aim to put the history of Abgar's delegation within the wider diplomatic history of the period. The last part is an analysis of the delegation. It discusses hypothetically the interests of various people involved in the meeting. Building on the paradigm of

¹ The following studies on this subject should be mentioned: Seth 1897, 23–65; Aslanian 2011; 2018, 85–129; 2019, 150–69, and 2023, 30–50, 81–90, 230–50, 333–34; Chaudhury 2014, 149–71; Santus 2019, 34–38 and 2022; Ohanjanyan 2022, 489–513 and 2020, 8–48; Tournebize 1920–21, 145–61, 249–79.

² A photocopy of Sultanshah's letter as well as its printed version can be found in Zardarean, vol. 2, 256–58, 266, cf. Santus 2022a, 207.

“new diplomatic history” coined by Paul W. Shroeder in the late twentieth century, this article is part of a literature that focuses on non-elite and less commonly known intermediaries in Mediterranean cross-confessional diplomacy of the early modern period (cf. Shroeder 1994; Craigwood and Sowerby 2019; Krstić and van Gelder 2015, 93–115; Hennings 2016).

2. Historical Background: “The Age of Confessionalisation”

The years between the Peace of Augsburg (1555) and the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) are a period of confessional polarisation in Europe. The political conflicts during the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century were marked by a religious or simultaneous religious-political character. As early as 1958, Ernst Walter Zeeden had proposed this term to describe how “during the second half of the sixteenth century, Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism started to build modern, clearly defined confessional churches, each of which centered on a confession of faith” (Lotz-Heumann 2012, 34). This process was part and parcel of early modern European state formation beginning roughly in the 1520s and culminating in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when Europe witnessed the emergence of centralised states defined largely around clearly demarcated confessional lines and with populations that were socially disciplined and confessionally homogeneous and uniform.³ Alluding to Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s “connected histories” approach to writing global history, the Ottomanist Tijana Krstić contended that confessionalisation was one of the “linchpin trends (with local manifestations) shared among inextricably connected polities on different continents” (Krstić 2011, 16). She asserted that one of confessionalisation’s central tenets, “*cuius regio, eius religio*” (“whose realm, his religion”), led to the tighter politico-religious integration as a basis for community and state building.

The same applies to the Ottoman-Safavid conflicts, which were taking place at the exact same period (Lotz-Heumann 2012, 25). Religious conflicts of early modern period did not only affect the churches and religions, but also the states and societies. The process of modern state formation was tied to the development of religious confessions and church doctrines. Confessionalisation during the Ottoman-Safavid conflict, for example, brought about the consolidation of Sunni-Ottoman and Shi‘a-Safavid establishments in the sixteenth century. The Peace of Amasya concluded between the Ottomans and Safavids in 1555 coincided with the Peace of Augsburg. The Peace of Amasya brought to an end what can be called the Twenty-Three Years’ War (1532–55) (Lotz-Heumann 2012, 34 and Bishara 2021, 62).

Krstić engaged with the confessionalisation thesis in the history of the early modern Muslim world by arguing that the hardening of confessional distinctions between Catholics and Protestants in Europe had its parallels as well as counterparts in early modern Ottoman and Safavid Empires. For Krstić, confessionalisation in

³ For more on the subject, see Headley and Hillerbrand 2004.

the Ottoman realm triggered a shift in Ottoman religious politics at the beginning of the sixteenth century from one comfortable with “confessional ambiguity” to one increasingly concerned with defining and enforcing a particular understanding of “correct” belief and practice (Krstić 2011, 16 and 2022, 25–90). Another prominent proponent of the confessionalisation thesis is Derin Terzioğlu whose close study of Turkish *‘ilm-i hāl* manuals showed similarities with their Christian counterparts, that is, catechisms, of the period (Terzioğlu 2013, 107). The two authors highlight the role that the Kadızadeli and Şeyhulislam Feyzullah Efendi played in the Ottoman confessionalisation process. In his article “Şeyhulislam Feyzullah Efendi and the Armenian Patriarch Awetik’”, Cesare Santus further demonstrates that Feyzullah Efendi was also heavily involved in the Armenian confessional dynamics and helped to channel Ottoman-style confessionalism into Armenian communities (Santus 2022b, 233–54, cf. Frazee 1983, 179). The “age of confessionalisation” was, in fact, an early modern trend that went beyond the Europe-Ottoman-Safavid triangle.⁴ As Sebouh Aslanian states, detached from its “*cuius regio, eius religio*” scaffolding but maintaining its emphasis on “social disciplining” by agents who were not always operating “top-down” at the behest of the state apparatus, confessionalisation is a useful heuristic tool to understand the early modern confession-building among Armenians and other Orthodox Christians (Aslanian 2023, 17).

The political state of the Armenian people during the sixteenth century was complicated and, in many instances, disorderly. Divided between the Ottoman and Safavid empires, the Armenian population of these territories was suffering from continuous wars, which were taking place on the soil, considered, and continuously referred by Armenians as historical Armenia. People both willingly and forcefully were leaving their houses to go as far as possible from the war zone. As Garegin Levonyan writes, “the Ararat valley was completely deserted and left abandoned” (Levonyan 1944a, 47). In such times when there was no state to regulate the Armenians, the church stood as an institution to protect its “herd”. Under the rule of sultans and shahs and in-between their constant rivalry, which devastated the region of Anatolia and beyond, the Armenian Catholicosate in Etchmiadzin turned its gaze for the protection of Armenians to the West. From this moment on starts a long period of Western confessional influence on territories inhabited by Armenians, which continued until the beginning of the twentieth century.

The first early modern Armenian negotiator who turned his sight to the West and went to Europe for the search of help was the Armenian Catholicos Stephan of Salmas (1545–67).⁵ He appointed Michael of Sivas (fully functioned as Catholicos during 1567–76) as a co-Catholicos before his departure. Stephan’s journey started in 1547 with a visit to Istanbul. From here he left for Venice and afterwards to Rome, Germany, Poland, Russia, and through Crimea back to Etchmiadzin in 1551. History

4 American colonies, Great Britain, and even China went through similar processes of confession building or confessionalisation. For more on these cases, see Ó hAnnracháin, 2021; Lehmann 2006, 313–22; Standaert and Dudink 2006.

5 Salmas is a city in the territory of modern Iran, 160 km west of Tabriz.

is silent about the period Stephan spent in these countries and whether he succeeded or not in his mission (Alishan 1896, 328–30 and 1901, 591–93).

After Stephan of Salmas' "empty-handed" return from Europe, Michael of Sivas went to his hometown Sivas in 1562 to establish relations with Europe from there.⁶ Here he organised a synod with bishops, where a decision was made to send a delegation to the Roman Pope. The Catholicos hoped that with the Pope's mediation he would get support from European princes to liberate Armenians from the Safavid rule. Abgar Dpir, son of Amirbek from Tokat (T'okhat'), who was also known by the name "Safar", headed this delegation.⁷ Learned from the previous mistakes, this delegation was better prepared for their diplomatic mission. First, the delegation as a representative of the Armenian Catholicos was supposed to agree on the unification of the Armenian and Catholic churches. Second, the delegation brought to Roman Pope holy relics of St Thaddeus as a sign of good will, golden liturgical objects and two letters bearing the date of the synod (1562). One of these letters stated the loyalty of the Armenian church to the Catholic church, whereas the second one was a document recognizing Abgar Dpir as the Armenian prince and candidate for the crown. It was signed by the members of the synod, giving Abgar authority to stand in front of the European state representatives as equal (Levonyan 1944a, 47–48).

3. Abgar Dpir: Biographical Insights on His activity before and after the Delegation

The biographical information on Abgar Dpir is very scarce. The only sources describing his life are the colophons of the books he printed, an interrogation he gave in Rome, and his son's letter to Etchmiadzin with detailed description of their delegation. While the analysis of the delegation is a concern of the following section, this sub-section, based on the mentioned sources, tries to recreate Abgar's activity apart from the delegation. Such insights into Abgar's persona will help to better understand his actions and his role as a negotiator.

The dates of Abgar's birth and death are unknown, so is the case with his education. However, from his title *dpir* ("scribe", "scholar" or "clerk" in English) one can conclude that he had a monastic education, probably near his birth city Tokat. "Clerk" or "scribe" were titles given to literate people during the medieval and early modern period in Armenia. However, Ghewond Alishan suggests that in the case of Abgar this title meant that he was trained in rhetorics. The only information about Abgar's education currently under scholars' disposal is that he wrote in coded script which, as his son mentions in his letter, could read only Abgar himself (Alishan 1863, 217).

Knarik Korkotyan in her research refers to a questionnaire that Abgar filled in and presented to the Pope before their meeting (Korkotyan 1964, 6–7). This is

⁶ Sivas is a city in modern Turkey, in the region of Central Anatolia, previously known as Sebastia.

⁷ Tokat is a city in the Black Sea region in modern Tukey, 100 km north of Sivas.

supposedly the interrogation Abgar gave concerning the faith of the Armenians, which produced a written confession of faith. It was translated into Latin in November 1564. There was, however, a subsequent interrogation in February 1565 to all the members of the embassy, where the focus was on the reasons for their arrival to Rome (Santus 2022a, 207).

In this document, Abgar describes the Armenian confession of faith and speaks about the Armenian Catholicos and the reasons for his visit. He informs that ten years prior to his arrival he already had the idea of going to Rome and taking his elder son with him. Abgar states that he wanted his elder son to learn Catholic doctrine in Rome. However, as Korkotyan notes without citing the source, Abgar's elder son died, and his travel was cancelled. The synod of 1562 in Sivas and the Catholicos' offer became a good reason for Abgar to visit Rome and to take his other son, Sultanshah,⁸ with him for his delayed pilgrimage (Korkotyan 1964, 6–7).

This is all the information available at this point about Abgar before the delegation. The rest is related to his career as a printer. The scholarship divides into two parts regarding Abgar's printing activity. Historians of printing press, such as Korkotyan and Ishkhanyan, state that Abgar's journey as diplomat was just a cover for him and that his real goal in Rome was to establish a printing press (Ishkhanyan 1981, 39–41 and Korkotyan, 7). Whereas historians such as Öрманean, Alishan, and Zardarean note that Abgar started printing activity in Venice to hide the real reasons of his visit from the Ottoman Empire. It is important to emphasise that all the authors write about the Ottoman state's concerns regarding Abgar's stay in Rome (Öрманean 1914, 2251–52; Alishan 1901, vol. 1, 592; Zardarean 1911, vol. 2, 259). Levonyan adds that the state was informed about Abgar's political mission: as soon as he arrived at Istanbul in 1567, he was arrested and put in jail (Levonyan 1944a, 51).

Istanbul was among the first cities where Armenian incunabula were printed. In this respect, among Istanbul's communities Armenians were second only to Jews who established the first printing press in the city already in the late fifteenth century (1493). The Armenian press in Istanbul started in 1567 with the efforts of Yot'or (Եոթոր) or Yodor (Եոդոր) and Abgar Dpir, which means that he spent less than a year in jail.

Knowing that the Ottoman state is aware of his political mission, moreover, having been arrested upon his arrival in Istanbul, Abgar most probably used the printing press as a way to hide his real activity from them. He was informed about the first Armenian incunabula printed in Venice and could have started a printing activity himself prior to his arrival to Ottoman domain as an alibi in front of the Ottoman authorities for the reasons behind his visit to Italy. In Venice he ordered new matrix for Armenian letters and printed a Civic Calendar in 1565. On both sides of the Calendar, there are engravings (see Figs. 1 and 2) depicting Abgar and his son in front of a) Pope Pius IV, and b) the Venetian doge respectively (afterwards, he reprinted these engravings elsewhere; see below). To be able to start a printing activity, Abgar needed both the Pope's and the doge's permissions. Therefore, the

⁸ For a detailed study on Shultanshah's identity and his fate, see Santus 2022a, 195–223.

first engraving is interpreted by Ishkhanyan and Korkotyan as Abgar's second visit to Rome in 1565 (Ishkhanyan 1981 and Korkotyan 1964, 8), but in the overall picture of events this does not seem real. The explanation of this statement is provided in the following section, as it is strongly connected to the events that happened right after the delegation's meeting with the Pope.

In 1566, Abgar Dpir left Venice for Istanbul, where, after being released from jail, he negotiated with the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul to establish his press in a building near the Saint Nicolas church. According to Vahan Zardarean, Abgar founded his printing press near the Saint Nicolas church of Kefeli quarter. This was one of the churches shared by Crimean Armenians and Dominicans.⁹ The first published book (1567) was the *Little Grammar or Primer* («Փոքրիկ քերականութիւն կամ այբբենարան»). The original book is lost and the only descriptions of it are recorded by Mekhitarist monks in the second half of the nineteenth century. Korkotyan notes that in two different descriptions in the colophon of this *Little Grammar*, Yot'or or Yodor, the person who put stamps on it, is described in different ways.¹⁰ According to Maghak'ia Jevahirjean's version, he only stamped the book. As opposed to this, Garegin Zarphanalyan's quotation of the colophon suggests that the book was both printed and stamped by him (Korkotyan 1964, 11–12).

It is unknown who this person was. However, the inscription of his name in the first Armenian printed book from Istanbul raises a question whether Abgar was indeed the first Armenian printer of Istanbul or there was this man before him. The ethnicity of Yot'or / Yodor is unknown. The name (pronounced as Hot'or / Hodor) is unusual for a person of Armenian descent. It is possible that he was not an Armenian but a foreigner who helped Abgar with the printing of his book in Istanbul. On the other hand, perhaps another Armenian printing press, of which no books have survived to our days, already existed in Istanbul, and was regulated by this person before Abgar's arrival.

The books published in 1568 in Istanbul bear the name of Abgar Dpir as well. The last book supposedly published by him is a missal from 1569. It is unknown how and why he terminated his business. Korkotyan offers two views on this issue. According to the first, it was destroyed by the fire of Saint Nicolas church, while the second possible explanation is that during the confessional struggles between Armenian clergy for the Patriarch's throne in the sixteenth century, the printing press became a target of conservative Apostolic monks' prejudices. They saw the printing as "Catholic innovation", and the press was closed (Korkotyan 1964, 15).

After Abgar Dpir, a hundred-year period of inactivity followed in Istanbul's printing business, which was continued in 1677–78 by Eremia Ch'elebi K'ëömurch'ean. The following printers did not use Abgar's woodcuts as well as his types. Their fate was a mystery until Cesare Santus' recent article where he compares Abgar's types with a newly found printed page from Typographia Gabiana. This new specimen, as

⁹ Later the church was converted into a mosque. For more on this, see Zardarean 1911, vol. 2, 261.

¹⁰ Until the end of the eighteenth century, most Armenian printed books, like manuscripts, had colophons at the end of the text.

Santus calls it, was printed in 1593 in Rome. On this basis he assumes that at some point Abgar's matrices returned to Rome, or they never left Italy, and Abgar used another set of types cast from the same matrices in Istanbul (Santus 2022a, 211–14). Santus' assumptions come to reinforce my hypothesis that Abgar's printing activity in Italy and Istanbul was indeed a cover-up for his diplomatic mission.

As mentioned above, the two reoccurring engravings incorporated in Abgar's books illustrate his meetings with Pope Pius IV and the Venetian doge. Scholars of Armenian printing history suggest that these engravings illustrate Abgar's second visit to Rome and Venice, when he applied to get permission for his printing activity in Venice. I suppose that at least one of them in which Abgar stands with his son in front of the Roman Pope shows the moment of their delegation's arrival. It would have two targeted audiences: first, the censorship offices of post-Tridentine Catholic church and second, the Ottoman state. This can explain the appearance of the same engraving in the books printed by Abgar in Venice. For the censorship offices it would mean Pope's approval of Abgar's diplomatic and printing activities, whereas for the Ottoman state it would have been a perfect explanation and proof for Abgar's visit to the Pope.¹¹

4. Excerpts from the Letter of Sultanshah (Marc Antonio) about His Father's Diplomatic Visit to Pope Pius I¹²

[...] ¹³ Այժմ ունկն արա ծառայի ... եկեալ եմ առաջի քո և խոստովան ... յանձն առնեմ քեզ զամենայն, ոչ թէ ի հպարտութիւն գա... իմ յերկինս է որ քննէ զսիրտս և զերկամունս զի ի ծածուկ է ... և ի բազմաց լուեալ ես որ մեր ... ի Հռոմ, եկեղեցի առնուլ Հայոցն, սպիտալ լինել, որ է հիւրանոց [...] հնարեմ օգնել և աջողել ազգիս իմոյ վասն Աստուծոյ և հաւատոյ զի ի ազգէ միոջ եմք և ի հօտէ լուսաւորչին ... Հայաստանեայց:

[...] Չի տեղեակ և զիտակ են ամենայն ազգն Հայոց յերկիրն մեր որպէս ի Թուխաթ ի Սեւապ ի Համասիա և այլ տեղիս գոր Եպիսկոպոսքն վկայեն, յորում զանուն ի տեղուջն իւրում տամք: Ի ժամանակ Միքայէ կաթողիկոսին որով եկն Սեւաստ և արար ժողով բազում Եպիսկոպոսաց և երիցանց և փարթամաց և իմաստնոց հանճարաց, կոչեցին զհայրն իմ անդ զՍաֆարն որով Աբգար կոչիւր ի Հայ լեզու: [...] Չի տրոք քննելով սկիզբ առնելով Հայոց թագաւորութիւն [...], և մի ըստ միոյ աճելով գորդիս որոյոց թագաւորագնեա հասցուցեալ ի Տրդատ, և ի նմանէ յԱբգար [...] որդին Սահղասի Ամիրպէկին [...]

Արդ երբ ստուգիւ յայտնեցաւ բանն, և ի թագաւորագն է գտեալ զազգս մեր [...] կամ եղև ժողովոյն առաքել զմեզ ի Հռոմ [...] Եւ առաքեցին զմեզ ի Հռոմ վասն պատճառացս այսոցիկ. նախ զի յիշեցուցէ զառաջին դաշինս և զառաջին երդմունքն, երկրորդ զի ... զմիտս Հռոմեացոց թէ որպիսի կան ընդ Հայս. երրորդ զի յօժարեցաւ ...

11 In this light, one can also see the reason and explanation for Abgar's relocation of his printing press from Venice to Istanbul, that is, the intensified disciplining employed by the post-Tridentine Catholic Church.

12 Zardarean 1911, vol. 2, 256–58.

13 An ellipsis in brackets indicate my omissions, without brackets, a lacuna in Zardarean's text.

ի փրկութիւն վտարանդեալ Հայոցս. Չորորդ միջնորդ լինել և ճանապարհհորդել հայրապետացն մեր ի Հռոմ:

[...] Արդ այս բանիւս հասեալ մեզ ի Հռոմ թարգմանեալ զգիրս և զմուրհակս և յայտնի կացուցեալ Ս. փափուն և իբրև տեսեալ Ս. Փափն փիռուս ի մեծ ցնծութիւն լեալ և արար համագումար հանդէս և առաջի խումն ամբողջին համբուրեալ զերեսս հոր իմոյ ասելով թէ ի Հայոց թագաւորն գտի ոմն մի: Եւ հանուրց ցնծութեամբ և ուրախութեամբ խորհուրդ արարեալ Ս. Փափն Առաքել զհայրն իմ ի յետս ասելով զհայրն իմ, ի նմանէ թագաւորագն եկիր առ իս, և այժմ փառաւորեալ իբր արքա առաքեմ զքեզ առ պատրիարզն զի բերցես զնա առ մեզ, զի իմ բերան առ բերան խօսելով իմացից զանցս Հայոցն. զի դու եղեր միջնորդ ընդ ... ընդ Հայք: Եւ զիս Ս. Փափն որդեգիր առնելով իւրն, և ոչ թողով ընդ հորն իմ ի պատճառս ի յետ չորբելոյ հորն իմոյ ի Հայոց: Եւ ...րասա... հորն իմոյ նորընձա Եպիսկոպոս ոմն ...եաց վասն զի զիտելով փոքր ի շատէ ի լեզուաց աշխարհին մերոյ, և բազում ընչիւք և պարզւօք յուղի անգեալ զայով ի Հայս...

[...] Գրեցաւ ի թուականութիւն Հայոց մեծաց ի ՌԼԲ ի Մեծն Հռոմ ի դուռն զիսաւոր Առաքելոցն Պետրոսի եւ Պօղոսի ձեռամբ Հոկտեմբեր իս օրն շաբաթ օր:

Վերասացեալ Մեղաւոր Սուլթանշահ Մարգանտօնիս

[...] Now listen to your servant ... [I, Abgar,] have come before you [Pope Pius IV] and offer my confession ... I undertake everything, not out of pride ... for it is Heaven that examines what is hidden in my heart and soul ... And you have heard from many that we ... in Rome, so that Armenians acquire a church to become a hospital, that is, hospice [...] I endeavor to succeed in helping my nation for the sake of God and the faith, for we are of one nation and of the flock of the Illuminator".¹⁴

For the entire Armenian nation is informed and aware in our land; [in places] such as T'okhat', Sebastia, Amasia, and other locations, as testified by the bishops, whose names we mention in their proper place. In the time of Catholicos Mikayel, when he came to Sebastia and convened an assembly of many bishops, priests, magnates, and wise intelligents, they summoned there my father Safar, who is called Abgar in Armenian. For they examined with them¹⁵ and traced back the origin of the Armenian kingship [...], and from one [generation] to the other, they led the royal lineage of sons and grandsons down to Trdat and from him to Abgar [...], son of Mahtesi Amirbek.¹⁶ [...] Now when this was clearly revealed, and it has been found out that our lineage is of royal origin, the meeting's decision was to send us to Rome [...] And they sent us to Rome for these reasons: First, to recall the original treaties and the original oaths;¹⁷ Second, to [bring] to the Romans' minds in what kind [of relations] they are with the Armenians; Third, that there was willingness

14 All underlinings are mine. The reference is to Gregory the Illuminator.

15 I.e., the participants of the meeting.

16 In the following passage, Sultanshah mentions other Armenian kings after Trdat (who accepted Christianity in the early fourth century) and brings the lineage down to the name of his father.

17 He refers to a legendary meeting and agreement between the Emperor Constantine and King Trdat and between Gregory the Illuminator and Pope Sylvester. This legend was foundational for the relationship between the Armenian Church and the Church of Rome; see Pogossian 2010, 1–3, 29.

[...] for the salvation of exiled Armenians;¹⁸ Fourth, to be mediators and messengers on behalf of our patriarchs to Rome.

[...] Now with these documents we arrived in Rome, translated the texts and deeds, and made them known to His Holiness the Pope. And when thy Holy Pope Pius saw them, he was filled with great joy and convened a public assembly. In front of the gathered multitude, he kissed the face of my father, saying: "Among the Armenians, I have found a king". Then, with public joy and celebration, the Pope held counsel and sent my father back, saying to him: "From him [the Patriarch] you have come to us as one of royal origin; now I send you forth in glory, as a king, to the patriarch, so that you may bring him to us, so that I may speak with him face to face, and come to know the affairs of the Armenians. For you have been the mediator between [us] and the Armenians. And me the Holy Pope adopted as his own son and did not allow me to [go] with my father, because my father was returning to Armenia. And [...] he [sent] a newly ordained bishop with my father, because he knew to some extent the languages of our land, and, with many goods and gifts, he [was going] to pass the way and come to Armenia.¹⁹

[...] Written in the year 1032 of Great Armenia [i.e. 1583 AD], in Great Rome, at the main threshold of the Apostles Peter and Paul, by hand, on the 11th day of October, Saturday.

The afore-mentioned sinner, Sultanshah Margantonis.

5. Analysis of Abgar's Delegation

Abgar's delegation consisted of himself, his son Sultanshah, and a celibate priest named Alexander, supposedly the secretary. As mentioned above, the undeclared official purpose of Abgar's delegation was to establish relations with the Roman Pope for the liberation of Armenian lands from the Safavids and Ottomans. Apart from this, Abgar supposedly had his own interest in going to Italy, which was to leave his son in Rome to be educated in Catholic doctrine. After Abgar left Rome to go back to Etchmiadzin, Sultanshah stayed in Rome, where according to his own witness, he was adopted by the Roman Pope and given the name Marc Antonio.

It took one and a half year for the delegation to reach Rome. Their first stop was in Cyprus, from where Abgar Dpir sent a letter to Michael of Sivas, informing that soon they were to take a ship to Rome. Taking off to Venice first, the delegation reached Rome in 1564. Prior to the meeting with Pope Pius IV, as it is known from the interrogation document of inquisition records and Sultanshah's letter, Abgar

¹⁸ The territory of historical Armenia at that time was divided between Persia and the Ottoman Empire. Armenians were also asking the Pope for material aid, including economic support to those who were fleeing their motherland and seeking refuge in the West, especially in Rome. For more details, see Santus, 2020, 252–53.

¹⁹ To convert Armenian lands to Catholicism.

submitted a confession of faith on the doctrine of the Armenian church. Vardan Devrikyan's study of this treatise, as well as the inquisition record suggest that the doctrine of the Armenian church was highly adapted to the Catholic confession in both documents (Devrikyan 2012, 158).

The motives of the Armenian church in sending the delegation have been discussed by scholars. It has been insisted that the Armenian church never planned to change its confession. Thus, the whole delegation, as well as Abgar's "royal origin" was a pretext to convince the Roman Pope to start a "crusade" against the Muslims in the East and to play a diplomatic game on equal footing (Levonyan 1944a, 51).

After analyzing Pope Pius IV's decisions following the delegation, it becomes clear that he was not convinced by Abgar's arguments. The fact that he called the Armenian Catholicos to Rome to further discuss their activity and the question of the Armenian church's confession shows that Pope Pius IV wanted to force the Armenian Catholicos to convert in front of him without delays. Another fact proving this hypothesis is that the Roman Pope kept Sultanshah in Rome. Sultanshah was not adopted, as he claims in his letter; rather, he was a diplomatic "hostage". Keeping him in Rome was a guarantee for the Pope that Abgar would put his all efforts in bringing Catholicos Michael to Rome. The fact that Sultanshah was a kind of hostage also shows up in his letter from 1583, where he writes, "and thus the Roman Pope adopted me and did not allow to go with my father to Armenian lands". Pope Pius IV appointed cardinals to educate Sultanshah and teach him Latin. This can suggest two things: a) either the Roman Pope saw him and not Abgar as the future Armenian king, b) or Sultanshah was a perfect "tool" for Vatican in its preparations for missionary activity among the Eastern Christians of the three Muslim empires. The last seems to be the case given Sultanshah's activities in Rome after Abgar's departure. By keeping the only officially recognised heir of the Armenian crown next to him and training the latter in Catholic doctrine, the Pope also made sure that, if needed, he could use "the future Armenian king" to complete the confessionalisation of Armenian regions. In other words, the fate of the future Armenian kingdom would remain within the strong grip of Vatican popes.

Pope Pius IV appointed a bishop who was expected to go to Etchmiadzin with Abgar and start the conversion of the Armenian church. On the road back, when Abgar was informed about the concerns of the Ottoman state regarding his activity, he sent this bishop to Cyprus, where they were supposed to meet after a short time. However, while Abgar was dealing with his printing press as a cover-up in Venice, the bishop died in Cyprus without reaching Armenia.²⁰

With Abgar's arrival to Istanbul, imprisonment, and the beginning of printing activity his involvement in the Armenian diplomatic history comes to an end, giving way to Sultanshah's activity. In the 1570s, the new Pope Gregory XIII (1572–85) involved Sultanshah in his programme of converting the "Easterners".²¹

²⁰ Levonyan 1944, 50; Santus 2022a, 206.

²¹ Levonyan 1944, 52–53; Ms. Vat. Lat. 6380, *Letters to Pope Gregory XIII by Khatchatur Catholicos of Sis* (1575), Vatican Apostolic Library, see <https://digi.vatlib.it/mss/detail/81> [last accessed: 22.07.2023].

The history of this diplomatic mission ends here. Sultanshah stayed in Rome and worked for the Catholic church as a translator and proofreader for books printed in Armenian. These books' targeted audience was the Armenian population of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires. It is important to note here that Abgar never changed his confession. He stayed Apostolic and printed books according to Apostolic Armenian doctrine, whereas Sultanshah became Catholic after his father's departure.

6. Conclusions

Combining all the arguments given, we can draw the following conclusions. Abgar Dpir and his son Sultanshah were trans-imperial intermediaries from a middle-class family. The Armenian church used an imposter as an heir to the Armenian crown. Royal lineage would give Abgar a chance to fit into the early modern Western "society of princes". This suggests that even symbolic dynastic legitimacy was a powerful form of soft power diplomacy and that the Armenian church used royal genealogy as a currency of legitimacy, strategically invoking royal ancestry to gain recognition, favor, and protection from larger powers. However, Abgar and his son never made it to meet any Western state representatives as recognised princes. Additionally, the only way Rome would agree to get involved in the liberation of Armenia apart from conversion to Catholicism was if a royal bloodline existed to claim the throne. The Armenian church did not intend to convert into Catholicism, as can be seen from their passive policy after Abgar's delegation. The Catholicos never converted, the delegation did not present any sufficient document signed by the Catholicos regarding the confessional issues apart from a very vague mentioning of Armenian church's loyalty to the Catholic one. Conversion of the Armenian church was part of the negotiations brokered by Abgar alone while he was on the mission in Rome. The two church leaders never formally ratified the issue of conversion. Finally, after the delegation failed, the Armenian church did not seem to care about the destiny of its delegates. The only letter where Etchmiadzin showed its concerns about the diplomats was written to Rome in 1563 before the delegation arrived in Rome. If Abgar and his son were indeed the heirs of the Armenian crown, the church would have intervened to get them back. However, neither when Abgar was in prison, nor when Sultanshah was left as a hostage in Rome the Armenian church supported its representatives.

The intentions of Vatican and the Roman Pope are also quite transparent. In times of the religious instability created by Luther and his followers and after the Council of Trent, the Pope put all his efforts into the conversion programme. The flow of Catholic missionaries to the Caucasus started before Abgar's delegation. However, it presented a good opportunity for the Pope to convert masses with minimum effort. Whether the Pope meant to support Armenian liberation or not is questionable at least given the recent rise and expansion of the Ottoman Empire under Suleyman the Magnificent (r. 1520–66).

Abgar's and Sultanshah's intentions are less transparent compared to those of the Armenian church and the Roman Pope. So far, the arguments show that their only intention and hope was to get the Armenian crown or at least gain prestige by being officially recognised by both churches as heirs of once fallen kingdom and crown. This recognition would open many doors for them at least within the Armenian diaspora communities. Probably, he already enjoyed diasporan recognition of his royal bloodline, which can explain the financial support that Abgar got from the Armenian wealthy merchants in Venice to run his printing press. As for Sultanshah, it was due to the circumstances and personal interests that he converted to Catholicism in Rome; although he was kept as a "hostage", the Popes gave him a residency, monthly stipend, and appointed him as a translator and proofreader of printed Armenian books. During the reign of Gregory XIII, he also became the leader of the Armenian community in Rome.

To conclude, early modern diplomacy relied not only on formal envoys but on interstitial actors, such as Abgar Dpir and his son, who embodied multiple identities and were able to operate across linguistic, religious, and imperial boundaries. Considering this, Abgar's delegation emerges not simply as a failed mission or a naïve plea for Western aid, but as a deeply strategic act of trans-imperial negotiation. As stated, it illustrates how Armenian ecclesiastical leaders attempted to fabricate royal legitimacy to insert themselves into the Western "society of princes" and thereby secure attention within the confessional and political logic of the post-Tridentine world. The delegation's presentation of documents, ritual performance before the Pope, and the symbolic adoption of Sultanshah reflect a highly theatrical diplomatic language rooted in early modern norms. The story of Abgar's delegation exemplifies how non-state actors, particularly from stateless or semi-autonomous Christian communities, used symbolic capital, such as lineage and faith, to broker political relevance in a world increasingly structured by confessional boundaries and imperial hierarchies. Far from marginal, Abgar and his son operated at the heart of Mediterranean diplomatic theater, embodying the complexity of early modern cross-confessional negotiations, where diplomacy was a religious, political, and performative act.



Fig. 1: Abgar Dpir and his son Sultanshah in front of Pope Pius IV. Engraving and colophon from the *Psalter* printed by Abgar Dpir in 1565–66 in Venice. <http://greenstone.flib.sci.am/gsd/cgi-bin/library.cgi> [last accessed: 10.05.2024].



Fig. 2: Abgar Dpir in front of the Venetian doge Hieronymus Priulus (Gerolamo Priuli, 1486–1567). Engraving and colophon from the *Psalter* printed by Abgar Dpir in 1565–66 in Venice. <http://greenstone.flib.sci.am/gsd/cgi-bin/library.cgi> [last accessed: 10.05.2024].

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