

Prof. Andrzej Pisowicz

The mysterious inscription from the painting of the Armenian Madonna from Kamieniec Podolski (Kamianets-Podilskyi)

The subject in question is a painting which, for several centuries (with occasional interludes), constituted the altar centrepiece at the Church of St. Nicholas, an Armenian temple located in Kamieniec Podolski; a town hugged by one of the meanders of the River Smotrycz (a left tributary of the Dniestr), situated in an area once belonging to the Polish Crown and currently under the jurisdiction of an independent Ukraine. This aforementioned likeness of Madonna has been credited with multiple miracles. It was the subject of worship on the part of the three separate Christian ethnic denominations that resided in Kamieniec Podolski: Poles, Ruthenians and Armenians. Polish Armenians in the 17th century were to unite with the Catholic Church.

In 1820 this painting was viewed by Minas Bzheshkiants, a learned monk of the Armenian-Catholic Mekhitarist Congregation. In the year 1830, he published, whilst in Venice, a book written in Classical Armenian (also known as *grabar*) entitled *Chanaparhordutiwn i Lehastan* (= 'Journey to Poland'). In it he describes the settlements and temples of Polonised Armenians, ones located in lands that were at that time (that is to say, following the third partition of Poland in 1795) under Austro-Hungarian and Russian jurisdictions respectively. The annexed territories of the Austrian partition contained, amongst others, the towns of Lwów, Stanisławów and Kutu (now in Ukrainian: Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Kutu). After crossing the Austro-Russian border, Bzheshkiants was to subsequently visit those settlements of Armenian interest located within Russian occupied territory, the most prominent of these centres being the aforementioned Kamieniec Podolski. In 2019 the Böhlau Verlag Wien Köln Weimar publishing house issued a German version of Minas Bzheshkiants's book, bestowing on it the descriptive title of *Der Reisebericht des Minas Bžškeanc' über die Armenier im östlichen Europa (1830)*. The authors of the translation, introduction and footnotes being: Bálint Kovács and Grigor Grigoryan (in collaboration with Alexandr Osipian).

In paragraph 215 of Minas Bzheshkiants's work (pages 136-7 of the original 1830 publication) we can find that 'the miraculous image of the Kamieniec Podolski's Madonna is located in the centre of the altar. It is held in place by a brass window, which is open to the public every Saturday¹. And further on (*ibid.*):

¹ The term 'window' in Bzheshkiants's original is conveyed by the term *patuhan*, which etymologically means: 'opening, hole in the wall'. According to Dr. Jacek Chrzęszczewski, an architect and art historian, who deciphered the titular 'mysterious inscription' (see later fragments of the present article): 'The subject matter is, undoubtedly, the recess located in the altar of St. Nicholas, in which the painting was situated, enveloped by a brass frame and, perhaps, a covering which could be drawn back and forth, similar in fashion to the one covering the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, at Jasna Góra.'

‘This miraculous painting is square in shape. With each side being approximately an ell in length.² It is a work exemplary in its beauty [...] covered entirely in silver.³ Amongst all of this the visages of the Madonna and the Baby Jesus shine out with a glorious radiance.⁴ Amongst the rays encircling the Madonna’s face can be seen an inscription comprised of gilded letters. This message is as yet to be deciphered, with some believing it to be written in the Hebrew alphabet, while others believe it is of another (non-Judaic)⁵ origin. I [or, as Bzheshkiantz literally states ‘we’] have personally risen so as to personally (view the painting and) copy the inscription (which encircles the Madonna’s head). I have concluded that they are letters pertaining to the Classical Armenian alphabet, although recorded in a rather peculiar fashion, unusual to the normal way of rendering this language.”

Bezsheshkiantz, later on in his book, at the end of paragraph 215 (the top of page 137), includes a copy of the aforementioned inscription. He does not, however, venture as to its interpretation, a fact that would raise doubts as to the language in which it was assumed to be transcribed. Here is a reproduction of the aforementioned copy:

Only by the end of the 20th century did the Cracow architect and art historian Dr. Jacek Chrzyszczewski, an architectural engineer, in his book entitled *Ormiańskie świątynie na Podolu* (Armenian churches in Podolia),⁶ successfully decipher this cryptic message. He came to the conclusion that “Undoubtedly, the silver gown covering the majority of the picture has been the cause of the previous incorrect interpretations as to the inscription. Today its deciphering is no problem whatsoever! Letters, printed in Gothic minuscule record the introductory verses of this breviary antiphon: *Regina coeli laet[are] alleluia*,

² The ancient unit of measurement, known as the ‘ell’, occurring in Bzheshkiantz’s original as *kangun*. According to information obtained from Dr. Jacek Chrzyszczewski: “Around the year 1820, when M. Bzheshkiantz was visiting Kamieniec Podolski, the territories of the Polish Crown employed the measurement unit of the neo-Polish ell, equivalent to 288 Parisian lines, each of which measured 2 mm, making for a total measurement equal to 57.6 cm. It is uncertain, however, if this was in fact the measurement system adopted by M. Bzheshkiantz, as the height of the painting constitutes approximately two such ells. However, we do know that the painting of the Armenian Madonna is not square in shape, being rather a rectangle with a side to base ratio of 5 to 4.”

³ The fragment of text in Bzheshkiantz’s report, the one describing the portrait as “covered entirely in silver” is commented on as follows by Dr. J. Chrzyszczewski: “based on the archival photos known to us, the picture of the Madonna located in the Church of St. Nicholas was once adorned with dresses, crowns and a myriad of silver votive offerings. However, the original background of the painting was in fact gilded.”

⁴ Referring to M. Bzheshkiantz’s report of the “visages of the Madonna and Child appearing radiant”, Dr. J. Chrzyszczewski affirms that “The heads of both Mary and Christ are encircled by radiant nimbuses.”

⁵ The “circular inscription”, mentioned by M. Bzheshkiantz is, according to Dr. Jacek Chrzyszczewski: “Located in the vicinity of the radiant nimbus surrounding the Madonna’s head and is comprised of lettering in the gothic style.”

⁶ J. Chrzyszczewski, *Ormiańskie świątynie na Podolu* (Armenian churches in Podolia), Ormiańskie Towarzystwo Kulturalne (Armenian Cultural Society), Kraków 1998, pp. 37-39, footnote no. 136; see also the English summary on p. 61, footnote no. 3.

quia quem meruisti portare all[elui]a [= Queen of the Heavens rejoice, be joyful alleluia for you deserve the right to bear This alleluia]. Along the bottom edge of the image, the following message can be seen: *O Maria mater cristi virgo* [= Oh Mother Mary, Christ's Virgin].”

With this same footnote (located on page 39 of the 1998 edition of the book) Dr. J. Chrzęszczewski (assisted by Professor J. Gadomski) informs one that the painting from Kamieniec Podolski depicting the Armenian Madonna was eventually relocated to the National Museum of Western and Eastern Art in Kiev (inventory no. 168). In 1995 the painting underwent conservatory work, which was conducted at the studio of the Ukrainian Conservation Centre for Paintings in Kiev.

The adjoining page of the aforementioned publication (page 38) features a black and white reproduction of the painting in question, created on the basis of a postcard dating prior to the year 1918. The painting itself is poorly visible as a result of the presence of numerous votive offerings, therein obscuring it from view. Illustration no. 25 (located further on in Chrzęszczewski's 1998 publication) depicts the likeness in its entirety, this time without the votive offerings. This reproduction is a copy of the one that appears in A. Prusiewicz's work.⁷ Information on the subject in English, and entitled “The Picture of the Armenian Holy Mary,” containing an English language translation of the Latin sentences featured earlier in this text, was to find its inclusion in a lengthy English summary included in the aforementioned book by J. Chrzęszczewski.⁸ These same pieces of information pertaining to the inscription contents located on the portrait of the Armenian Madonna, have been replicated in the subsequent publication (*Kościoły Ormian polskich* = Churches of the Polish Armenians) of the aforementioned Cracow architect and art historian, he who undertook the task of deciphering them.⁹ These inscriptions are the most prominently visible on the colour illustration no. 134, featured in the 2001 edition of the book.

Here I am drawing attention to such details as a result of the unjustified omission of both of J. Chrzęszczewski's works on the part of the authors of the aforementioned German translation of Minas Bzheshkiant's book. Furthermore, footnote no. 253 of this publication (to be found on page 210) features an alternative (!) version of the inscription that encircles the head of the Madonna as described on page 136 of M. Bzheshkiant's *Journey to Poland*.¹⁰ The sentences being as follows: *Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus*

⁷ A. Prusiewicz, *Kamieniec Podolski. Szkic historyczny* (Kamieniec Podolski. A historical sketch), Kijów-Warszawa 1915.

⁸ J. Chrzęszczewski, op. cit. (1998), p. 61, footnote 3.

⁹ J. Chrzęszczewski, *Kościoły Ormian polskich* (Churches of the Polish Armenians), Catalogue of Armenian relics, vol. 1, Res Publica Multiethnica, Warszawa 2001, p. 42, footnote 68 as well as illustrations 20-22, 134 (the last one being in colour).

¹⁰ Մ. Բժշկեանց, *Ճանապարհորդութիւն ի Լեհաստան*, Վենետիկ 1830 (= M. Bzheshkiant, *Journey to Poland*, Venice 1830; published in classical old Armenian); translated into German: *Der Reisebericht des Minas Bžškeancc über die Armenier im östlichen Europa (1830)*, herausgegeben von B. Kovács und G. Grigoryan unter Mitarbeit von A. Osipian; Böhlau Verlag, Wien Köln Weimar 2019.

tecum (translated into the German as: „Gegrüßet seist du, Maria, voll der Gnade, der Herr ist mit dir”) and *O Marie mater Dei Christi* (= „O Maria, Mutter des Gottes Christus”).

This consequently raises the following question: what possibly could be the reason for interpreting the original Latin text in such a different (conflicting) manner? Dr. Jacek Chrzęszczewski unambiguously informs us that the reason for interpreting the inscription as *Regina coeli* ... (the initial verses of the breviary antiphon) was the detailed analysis of the overall appearance of the painting depicting the Madonna with Child, and which at present resides in the archives of the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko National Museum of Arts in Kiev (the present-day name for the previously known National Museum of Western and Eastern Art).

B. Kovács and G. Grigoryan give no such sources whatsoever that would justify their alternative reading of the (and here admittedly hard to decipher) inscription. They merely cite at the conclusion to their footnote two publications, neither of which contain any Latin quotes referring to the painting in question.¹¹

Translated from Polish into English by Guy Torr

¹¹ The publications are as follows: I. Hayuk, *The Unknown about the Well-known: the Issue of the Attribution of Some Armenian Wonder-working Icons from the Cathedral of Assumption of the Holy Virgin in Lviv*, “Series Byzantina. Studies on Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art” (Warsaw), 15, 2017, pp. 107-121] and W. Deluga, *Studies on Armenian Art in Poland at the Turn of the 19th Century*, in: *Die Kunst der Armenier im östlichen Europa*, herausgegeben von M. Dmitrieva, B. Kovács, Köln – Weimar – Wien 2014, pp. 27-34.