T’oros Roslin:
The Sebastia Gospels as Armenian Identity
A Visual Analysis

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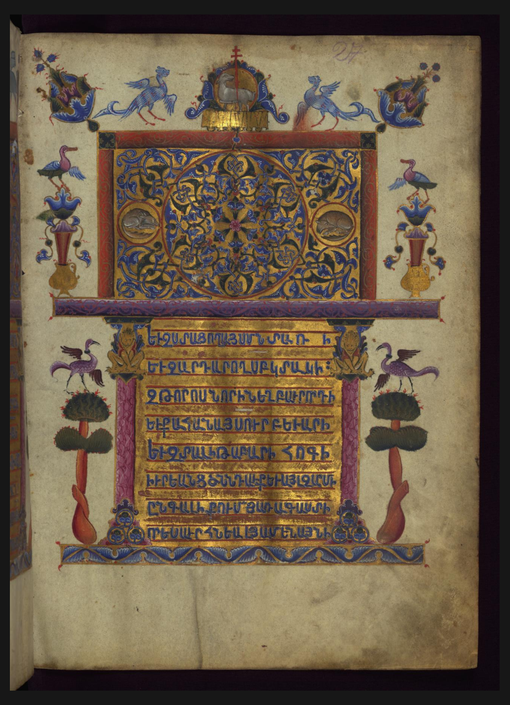
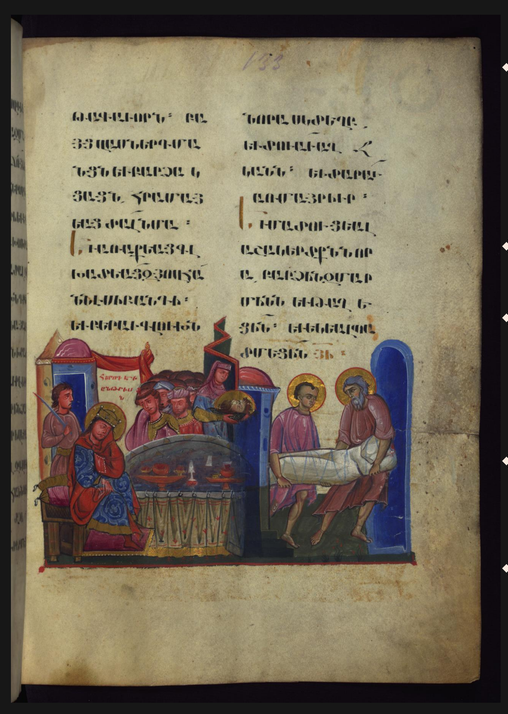


- This image is a dedication. The dedication and the remainder of the manuscript are essentially free of any errors, illustrating the time, wealth, care and precision needed to produce such high-quality work.
- The wolf figures in the geometric rosette designs imply the immenent threat and persecution posed by the Caliphates who surrounded Armenia.
- During this time, “beasts’ were assigned to specific ethnic groups threatening Armenia. The wolves are imagery used for Seljuk Turks.

Abstract

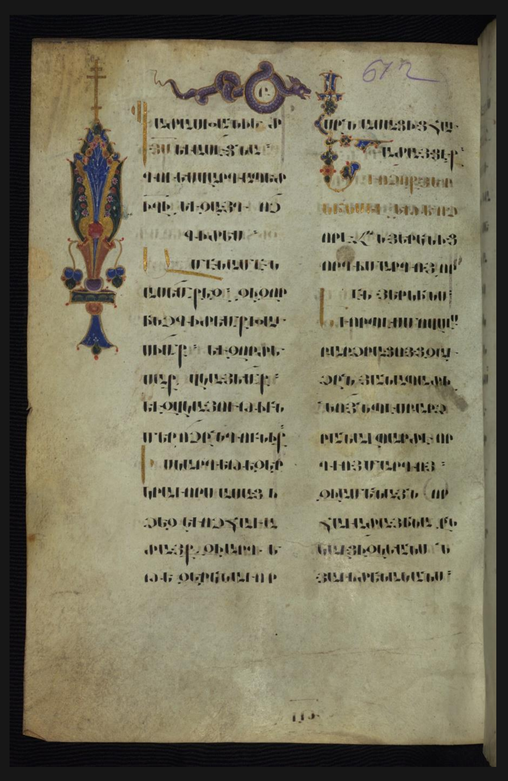
- The Sebastia Gospels were created at the monastic hermitage of Hromkla, Armenia, are the best-preserved example of an illuminated manuscript made by Armenians for an exclusively Armenian Apostolic audience.
- The Sebastia Gospels fuse western iconography with distinctly Armenian and eastern Mediterranean cultural heritage to celebrate and showcase the Armenian national and cultural perspective during the crusades.
- The creator, T’oros Roslin, is a mysterious figure who has seven known signed works.

- Though not original to the manuscript, the cover and binding of the Sebastia Gospels are a testament to the significance of Roslin’s work and the need to create an experience for viewers of the Gospels.
- Bound in 1643 at the Church of the Holy Virgin in Sebastia by a deacon, the cover is made of stamped leather decorated by a massive silver-gilt cross nailed directly into the leather cover, overtly mirroring Jesus nailed to the cross.
- The gilt cross is surrounded by four accompanying crosses and animal iconography as a reference to the four Evangelists.
- Prominently featured below the gilt cross is an Armenian inscription that reads, “This is the work of the deacon Mik’ayel. Whoever remembers, may he be blessed by God. Father, I have sinned.”
- The inside of the cover reads “The Holy Cross is a memorial for the soul in Mkrtitchm in the year 1092”, which dates the binding to 1643 in the modern calendar. *Mkrtitchm* means Baptist, a common given name among Christian Armenian men.



- Herod appears as a Mongol king, dressed opulently in patterned robes that differ from classical drapery used on the Apostles or even contemporary 13th century garb.
- The crown is reminiscent of Mongolian headwear
- His appearance as a Mongolian warlord alludes to fear and distrust of Mongolian forces arriving from the East.
- His long, thin mustache is a common element used in medieval Western art to characterize Mongolians
- In accordance with biblical text, Herod appears immensely sorrowful at John the Baptist’s beheading, despite ordering his death.

- This is a folio minature depicting a canon table headed with a portrait of Jonah, an Old-Testament prophet.
- The classical blue and white drapery and gesturing at text, which illustrates the core Christian belief that God can be found in biblical text.
- The quilt-like square is a design element borrowed from Persian culture, particularly visible in Islamic artwork.
- The Corinthian pillars are inspired by Greco-Roman architecture.
- The use of gold leaf to flatten and foreshorten perspectives is characteristically Byzantine and exhibits the wealth held in Hromkla.



- Scattered throughout the manuscript are dragons, phoenix and other mythological creatures with tails in knots.
- The knotted dragon at the top of this page is a remainder of a Syriac pagan religion and refers to a spell indicating that the words on the page are solidified or made stronger by its presence.
- Ethnocentrism and fear of imminent foreign conquest of Armenia led to a rise in what Europe referred to as iconographical idolatry. The melding of Christian mysticism and pagan elements was successful because it promoted experiential religion, familiar to all Armenians.

Research originally conducted at Towson University, Baltimore, MD in 2023.

The Sebastia Gospels are in the collection at The Walters Art Museum Baltimore, Maryland, USA