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**The Foundation of the Monastery of Sevan: A Case Study on Monasteries,  
Economy and Political Power in IX-X Century Armenia**

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# LE VALLI DEI MONACI

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a cura di

LETIZIA ERMINI PANI



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THE FOUNDATION OF THE MONASTERY OF SEVAN:  
A CASE STUDY ON MONASTERIES, ECONOMY AND  
POLITICAL POWER IN IX-X CENTURY ARMENIA

I. INTRODUCTION

The second half of the IX and all of the X century are considered to be one of the most splendid periods of cultural and economic flourishing in medieval Armenian history. Following a series of rebellions led by various Armenian and other Caucasian nobility against the Abbasid Caliphate between 850 and 855, those dynasties that emerged victorious and even stronger after the punitive expeditions of the General Bugha al-Kabir, notably the Bagratunis, the Arcrunis and the Siwnis, embarked on consolidating their political and economic might<sup>1</sup>. This consolidation

When transcribing Armenian names I use the standard Hübschmann-Meillet-Benveniste system. However, I have made some exceptions to this rule which must be explained. The toponym *Siwnik*<sup>6</sup> is spelled differently in Soviet Armenian historiography and should be transcribed as *Syunik*<sup>6</sup>. To avoid confusion, however, I will consistently use the traditional orthography (i.e. *Siwnik*<sup>6</sup>), even when transcribing titles of Armenian works which contain the alternative spelling. The name of the General Bugha (of Turkic origin) will be spelled as it appears here and not Bula, since the former is a more correct way of transcribing a Turkic name.

1. The rebellions of 850–55 take up a major part of Book Three of T'ovma Arcruni's *History of the House of Arcruni* (X century) cfr T'OVMA ARCRUNI AND THE ANONYMOUS CONTINUATOR, *Patmut'ivn tann Arcrumeac*<sup>6</sup> [History of the House of Arcruni], ed. V. VARDANYAN, Yerevan, 1985 (henceforth: TA, *History*), pp. 194–338, who focuses especially on the Arcruni family. For the English translation cfr THOMAS ARTSRUNI, *History of the House of the Artsrunik*, trans. R. THOMSON, Detroit, 1985 (henceforth: TAE, *History*). The same events are discussed also in YOVHANNĒS DRASKANAKERTC'I, *Patmut'ivn hayoc*<sup>6</sup> [History of the Armenians], Tiflis, 1912 (henceforth: YD, *History*), pp. 118–135 (also X century). For the English translation cfr YOVHANNĒS DRASKANAKERTC'I, *History of Armenia*, trans. K. MAKSODIAN, Atlanta, 1987 (Henceforth: YDE, *History*). For analysis see A. TER-LEVONDYAN, *Armenija i arabskij Xalifat*

took also the form of rivalry between these major houses, as well as between those and other, lesser nobility who continually demonstrated centrifugal tendencies. Expectedly, to soften such rivalries important marriage alliances were forged, among other measures. The IX century spelled trouble for the Abbasids both due to internal problems and the growing strength of the Byzantine Empire under the Macedonian dynasty in the second half of the century. As a result, the Caliphate was not in a position to curb the ascending power of the major noble houses of Armenia and preferred to follow a less belligerent strategy in containing them: it granted the Bagratuni Prince of Princes Ašot (V) the title of King Ašot I in 884 or 885<sup>2</sup>. Byzantine recognition of this elevation of status followed shortly. Subsequently, 24 years later his grandson (his daughter Sop'i's son) Gagik Arcruni became a rival king in the South, in the Arcrunid territories, in 908<sup>3</sup>. The Region of Siwnik', North-East of Vaspurakan and South-East of Bagratuni territories in Ayrarat also became a Kingdom, encompassing some but not all of the Region's traditional territories, either some time in 970s or around 987<sup>4</sup>.

[Armenia and the Arabic Caliphate], Yerevan, 1977, pp. 138-150; briefly also in N. GARSOĪAN, *The Arab Invasions and the Rise of the Bagratuni (640-884)*, in *The Armenian People From Ancient to Modern Times*, vol. 1: *The Dynastic Period: From Antiquity to the Fourteenth Century*, ed. R. G. HOVANNISIAN, New York, 1997, pp. 117-142, esp. pp. 140-142; B. MARTIN-HISARD, *Dominazione Araba e Libertà Armena (VII-IX Secolo)*, in *Storia degli Armeni*, ed. G. DĒDĒYAN, trans. A. ARSLAN and B.L. ZEKIYAN, Milano, 2002, pp. 149-71, esp. pp. 166-171; N. GARSOĪAN, *L'Indipendenza ritrovata: Regno del Nord e Regno del Sud (Secoli IX-XI)*, in *Storia degli Armeni* (cit.), pp. 173-175. For the economic revival in the second half of the IX, X and the first half of the XI centuries see H. MANANDIAN, *The Trade and Cities of Armenia in Relation to Ancient World Trade*, trans. N. GARSOĪAN, Lisbon, 1955, pp. 136-155 (henceforth: MANANDIAN-GARSOĪAN 1955) and for the X-XI centuries S. DER-NERSESSIAN, *Armenia in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries*, in *Proceedings of the XIII International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Oxford 5-10 September, 1966*, Oxford, 1967, pp. 421-431.

2. MARTIN-HISARD 2002, pp. 168-171 (note 1) and N. GARSOĪAN 2002, pp. 173-175 (note 1). Ter-Levondyan 1977 (note 1), p. 235 demonstrates that Ašot was called 'King' in Armenian inscriptions already in 874 and 879.

3. For a general overview of the relationship between the Arcruni and the Bagratuni Kingdoms cfr P. COWE, *Relations between the Kingdoms of Vaspurakan and Ani*, in *Armenian Van/Vaspurakan*, ed. R. HOVANNISIAN, Costa Mesa, 2000, pp. 73-85.

4. The first date is proposed by H. M. UT'MAZYAN, *Siwnik'e IX-X darrerum* [Siwnik' in the IX-X centuries], Yerevan, 1958, p. 134 and in T. HAKOBYAN, *Siwnik'i t'agawonut'yune patma-ašxarhagrakan aňumov* [The Kingdom of Siwnik' from a Historical-Geographical Point of

While the Bagratunis were the first ones to obtain the title of kingship, their effective centralising authority was often quite weak and frequently rested on the charisma and the political fortunes of the ruling King. To strengthen his power and create alliances with the other two important noble houses, the future King Ašot made clever marriage choices for his daughters. One of them – Sop'i – was married to the Prince of Vaspurakan Girgor-Derenik, while another – Mariam – was wedded to the Prince of the District of Gefark'unik' in Siwnik', Vasak Gabur'. Of the two alliances the one with the Siwni prince turned out to be more successful from a political point of view.

The belligerent activities between a victorious Byzantine Empire under Basil I and a weakened Abbasid state also caused a shift in international trade routes which now passed through Armenia – a neutral territory between the two warring super-powers – and had a significant effect on the growing of economic wealth in this country<sup>5</sup>. Along with the consolidation of power of some Armenian dynasties, as well as the accumulation of wealth of new type in their hands due to this transit trade, the second half of the IX century is also when the Armenian monastic culture experienced an unprecedented revival and expansion<sup>6</sup>. This movement will reach its high point in the X century. Some older congregations were greatly enlarged and grew in importance due to land donations and additions of new buildings sponsored by the nobility. There started to appear also numerous new monasteries founded and generously endowed by the local nobility, alone or in

View], Yerevan, 1966, p. 58, while Garsoïan gives 987 as a « probable date » in GARSOÏAN, 2002 (note 1), p. 197.

5. The subject is magisterially treated in MANANDIAN-GARSOÏAN 1955 (note 1), pp. 155-172.

6. J.-P. MAHÉ, *Essor et développement du monachisme arménien*, in Grégoire de Narek. *Tragédie. Matean olbergut'ean. Le Livre de Lamentation*, ed. et trad. A. et J.-P. MAHÉ (*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 583. *Subsidia* 106), Leuven, 2000, pp. 8-33, esp. pp. 9-13. Here Mahé provides a French translation of an important source on the rise of Monasticism in Armenia at the end of the IX and in the X centuries, i.e. an excerpt from STEP'ANOSI TARŌNEC'WOY ASOLKAN, *Patmut'ium tiezerakan* [*Universal History of Step'anos Tarōnec'i Asolik*], St. Petersburg 1885, (henceforth: *Asolik, History*) pp. 173-178; interesting observations on the foundation of X century monasteries in Armenia can be found also in K. MAKSOUDIAN, *A Note on the Monasteries Founded during the Reign of King Abas I Bagratuni*, in *Revue des Études Arméniennes* XXII (1990-91), pp. 203-215. Although the article explores the foundation of monasteries from a different point of view, Maksoudian provides thoughtful reflections on the significance of the foundation of the Monastery of Sevan, to be discussed in this paper, as the first of such projects which will be followed by numerous others at the end of the IX and throughout the X centuries.

conjunction with the royal house of the Bagratunis. For the Region of Siwnik' to be considered in this study, the first active period of new monastic foundations or re-foundations corresponds to a time of prosperity that went from the peace established after the expeditions of Bugha and the return of the imprisoned princes from Samarra c. 860 up to the belligerent activities initiated by the Governor of Azerbaijan Yusuf in the spring of 909<sup>7</sup>. The limits of space do not permit a comprehensive study of the vast and potentially fruitful topic of the relationship between the newly (re)established royal or aristocratic power to the modes and structures of territory control (and, obviously, the control of their economic resources), including by means of the establishment of monasteries, a central theme of most of the papers in this volume. Here I propose a case study on the Monastery of Sevan<sup>8</sup> located on the homonymous island (now a peninsula due to the lowering of the level of the Lake's water). Based on this example I will explore the kind of impact a monastic foundation could have on the contemporaneous politics, economy and religious affairs. Then, I will provide some general remarks on the significance of the IX-X century monasteries of Siwnik' from economic and political points of view in order to contextualise the case of Sevan better, having a broader perspective on the subject.

## 2. SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

It is undeniable that for the study of monasteries, their role in the local economy and control of the territory archaeological evidence is of utmost importance, as most of the papers in this volume amply demonstrate. My own contribution here is hampered by the lack of

7. УТ'МАЗЯН 1958 (note 4), p. 106. This does not mean that previously there was no interest in monastic foundations. On the contrary, the re-foundation and rise of prestige of the celebrated Monastery of Tat'ew started already in 830's as shall be seen below. But a whole series of new monasteries were founded from the 860's on. Tat'ew itself will reach its apex towards the end of the IX century. After a brief halt due to repressive policies and raids of Yusuf, the country will again enjoy a period of peace and prosperity from the second quarter of the X century on.

8. The transcription of the Lake's name according to the HMB system is Sewan, but I will consistently use the modernised variant Sevan in this paper.

such data. However, thanks to the work of the late XIII century historian Step'annos Ōrbēlean, we possess an important written source for the history of the Region of Siwnik', including crucial information on some monastic foundations in this area<sup>9</sup>. Colophons of manuscripts – one of which is of particular importance as will be seen – and epigraphic material are also available<sup>10</sup>. The Monastery of Sevan, along with other monasteries of the basin of Lake Sevan, has been studied also from an art-historical/architectural point of view<sup>11</sup>.

### 3. THE POLITICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

The establishment between 871 and 874<sup>12</sup>, and the subsequent history of this Monastery is a good case for demonstrating the relationship between politics, economy and a monastic foundation. As the first monastery to be sponsored both by the Siwni nobility of Gełark'unik'

9. STEP'ANNOSI ŌRBĒLEAN ARK'EPISKOPOSI SIWNEAC', *Patmut'iw nahanġin Sisakan* [History of the Region of Sisakan by Step'annos Ōrbēlean Archbishop of Siwnik'], Tiflis/Tbilisi, 1910 (henceforth: SŌ, *History*).

10. For colophons cfr *Hayeren jeġagrerġ hišatakaranner: E-ŹB dd* [Colophons of Armenian manuscripts: V–XII centuries], ed. A. MAT'EVOSYAN, Yerevan, 1988 (henceforth: *Colophons*). Numerous inscriptions were copied and transmitted by Step'annos Ōrbēlean in the XIII century in his *History*. His work is ever more precious since not all of the inscriptions survive. There is also a modern publication of epigraphic material from this region. Cfr S. BARXUDARYAN, *Divan hay vimagrut'yan, Prak IV, Gełark'unik': Kamoyi, Martunu ev Vardeniš šġanner* [Corpus of Armenian Inscriptions, vol. IV, Gełark'unik': Districts of Kamo, Martuni and Vardenis], Yerevan, 1973.

11. *Sevan: Hayravank'/Noraduz/Batikian/Hatsarat/Masnuts Anapat/Shoghagavank'/Vanevan/Kot'avank'/Makenotsats*, eds S. MNATSAKIANIAN, H. VAHRAMIAN et al. (*Documenti di architettura armena*, vol. XVIII), collana diretta da AGOPIK E ARMEN MANOUKIAN, Milano, 1987. For the Monastery of Sevan cfr esp. pp. 11–12; and P. CUNEO, *Architettura Armena*, Roma, 1988, pp. 360–361, No. 175.

12. The date 871 is supported by the *Colophon* of the scribe Step'annos, a monk from the Monastery of Sevan, written in 893, according to his own testimony 22 years after the construction of the Monastery. Cfr *Colophons* (note 10), p. 43. On the other hand, according to *Sevan* (note 11), pp. 11–12 there is an inscription in the Church of the Mother of God, once part of the Monastery of Sevan, according to which it was founded in 874. The inscription is not reproduced in this volume. MAHĒ 2000 (note 6), p. 8; MAKSOUġIAN 1990–91 (note 6), p. 213 and p. 214, and others accept the date of 874. The two dates may indicate the start and the end of the building activity.

and the royal Bagratuni house<sup>13</sup>, the context and modes of its foundation can be viewed as a model of future such establishments in Siwnik', some of which involved both dynasties in different ways and were possibly a way of releasing potential tensions for the control of the relevant territory and its resources<sup>14</sup>.

We are lucky to have diverse sources about the Monastery's foundation and the persons involved, all of whom are of the highest caliber. These include the future King Ašot I Bagratuni who was the 'Prince of Princes' at that time, his daughter Lady Mariam who was the widow of the Siwni Prince of the Gełark'unik' District Vasak Gabuř, and a renowned ascetic Maštoc' who will become Catholicos for several months (897-8)<sup>15</sup>. As if this constellation of personages were not enough, the foundation also involved the bestowing of a precious Byzantine cross by the Prince of Princes Ašot which was given to him by the founder of the Macedonian dynasty Emperor Basil I, as well as donations of villages, orchards and other real estate and revenues.

The District of Gełark'unik', spelled also as Gełak'unik', bordered on the Bagratuni domains which lay to the North of it. According to various reconstructions, the territories under the lords of Gełark'unik' in the second half of the IX century encompassed almost all of the basin of Lake Sevan, known also as Lake Gełark'uni because of its location in the

13. Maksoudian 1990-91 (note 6), pp. 213-214 goes even further by proposing that the case of Sevan can be viewed as the 'initiator' of a whole movement of new monastic foundations all over medieval Armenian territories in the IX and X centuries.

14. The subject of the mutually beneficial relationship between secular nobility and the new monastic foundations, especially from an economic point of view and as a part of efforts aimed at improving the use of land resources is considered in G.M. GRIGORYAN *Siwnik'i vanakan kalvacatirut'yune IX-XIII darentum* [Monastic Estates of Siwnik' in the IX-XIII centuries], Yerevan, 1973, pp. 64-67 and p. 70; on pp. 100-126 he provides details about the most typical economic activities in which the monasteries engaged. While these analyses are quite pertinent, the author does not propose any chronological periodisation but treats the IX-XIII centuries as one whole, without attempting to trace changes within more specific, shorter time-limits. This is unfortunate since monastic economies of the IX century were much different from those of the XIII, not to talk about transformations in the relationship between monasteries and the nobility of the territories in question. Moreover, the scope of Grigoryan's study did not include the analysis of the establishment of monasteries as a way of releasing tensions for territory control between the royal power and independent-minded local nobility.

15. I will consistently translate the word 'gawar' for Gełark'unik' as 'district'. Cfr UT' MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), pp. 31-2, pp. 306-7 and pp. 75-77 on the growing importance of the Gełark'unik' District in the 830s and its alliances with the Bagratunis of Širak.



homonymous District (See Figs 1, 2 and 3). Only the Northern tip of the Lake's basin belonged to the Region of Ayrarat then under the control of the Bagratunis of Širak<sup>16</sup>. Gełark'unik' was part of the historical Region of Siwnik'. It became an independent unit c. 821 under Prince Sahak who was the son of Vasak (I), the first well-attested ruler of the Region of Siwnik' in the early IX century<sup>17</sup>. Vasak Gabuř (Sahak's grandson) was one of the two main rulers of Siwnik'', his reign lasting from 851–859<sup>18</sup>. The other branches ruled over territories that lay to the South and East of Gełark'unik'.

The policy of Ašot I Bagratuni (855–884 as Prince, 884–890 as King) and his son King Smbat I (890–914) was aimed at cultivating good relations with their Siwni neighbours and reigning in any potentially rebellious tendencies against the kings' centralising efforts. The marriage of Ašot's daughter Mariam to Vasak Gabuř was one of its manifestations. This alliance turned out to be quite a successful one. This becomes clear when looking at the relationship of Ašot with both of his sons-in-law. While Mariam was married to Vasak Gabuř, the other daughter Sop'i became the wife of Grigor-Derenik Arcruni, the most influential prince in the southern region of Vaspurakan. Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i (X c.) testifies in his *History* that at the beginning (of their respective marriages) both were faithful to Ašot. However, Grigor-Derenik Arcruni ceased to follow the advise of his father-in-law at some point and, thus, contends Drasxanakertc'i: « he no longer enjoyed the same success »<sup>19</sup>. Grigor-Derenik's independent-minded policy, to be continued by his son Gagik who will eventually become a rival king, stands in contrast to that of Vasak Gabuř who remained loyal to his father-in-law. It is likely that this loyalty was rewarded by bestowing on him the title of the Senior Prince of (all) Siwnik', as

16. Cfr R.H. HEWSEN, *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*, Chicago-London 2001, maps 87, 91 and 98, reproduced here in Figs 1, 2 and 3.

17. This happened at the death of Vasak (I). UT'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), pp. 30–31 on Vasak's activities, on pp. 286–333 the author discusses each member of the Siwni family one by one. On the division of the territory of Siwnik' between the branches of the ruling family cfr UT'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), pp. 31–34; HAKOBYAN 1966 (note 4), pp. 52–6; briefly in GARSOĪAN 2002 (note 1), p. 196. HEWSEN 2001 (note 16), pp. 121–122 discusses all the branches of the Siwni family, including those that gained importance later, beyond the period of interest here.

18. UT'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), pp. 310–311.

19. YD, *History* (note 1), pp. 135–7; YDE, *History* (note 1), p. 127.



Fig. 1 - from R.H. HEWSEN, *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*, Chicago-London 2001, map 98.



Fig. 2 - from R. H. HEWSEN, *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*, Chicago-London 2001, map 87.



Fig. 3 - from R.H. HEWSEN, *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*, Chicago-London 2001, map 91.

proposed by Ut'mazyan<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, the backing from the Bagratunis of Sirak may have spared the District of Gełark'unik' from the devastating raids of the General Bugha in 852–55<sup>21</sup>. The title of seniority remained with the Prince of Gełark'unik' Vasak until the return of the other Siwni princes from imprisonment in Samarra, some time between 856 and 860. A possible fratricidal war between the two branches of Siwni princes for the title of seniority was averted not only because of Vasak's close ties to his father-in-law Ašot Bagratuni, the most potent Armenian prince at the time, but also by his death at a young age in 859<sup>22</sup>. This death may have also prevented any friction between Vasak and his mighty father-in-law who became the Prince of Princes of Armenia shortly afterwards, in 862, receiving also the privilege and responsibility of collecting the taxes of Armenia for the Caliphate<sup>23</sup>.

There is no direct evidence as to whom the island of Sevan belonged in 871 or before it when the ascetic Maštoc' decided to move there. It was certainly in a border zone between the territories under the Bagratunis and the Siwnis of the Gełark'unik' District and potentially could be a contested area. Moreover, even beyond any possibility of conflict, the Bagratuni desire to have some kind of control in a border area is more than understandable. The active role of Princess Mariam in the foundation of the Monastery may imply that the Island was under her jurisdiction, that is it belonged to the District of Gełark'unik'.

20. UT'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), pp. 86–87 with source analysis.

21. Ibid.

22. For the date of Vasak's death, cfr UT'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), p. 311.

23. UT'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), p. 90 for the date, who cites YD, *History* (note 1), p. 133. Here it says that Ašot was responsible for collecting taxes of Armenia. The terms used for the taxes are *zsaks hayoc'* which can be loosely translated as 'Armenian taxes' and the *bekar ark'uni* or royal *bekar* the latter a technical term for one type of royal tax. YDE, *History* (note 1), p. 125 partially translates the terms generically: « the taxes (sak) of Armenia and all the royal *bekar* ». According to Manandian, the Bagratunis were quite irregular in their payment of taxes. Not only, while the economic and the monetary wealth of the country grew, the total amount of the taxes remained the same. The accumulation of this wealth, according to Manandian, was one of the factors that stimulated the extensive building activity (including monastic buildings, of course) from the second half of the IX century on. Cfr MANANDIAN-GARSOĪAN 1955 (note 1), p. 140. The fact that the circulation of money grew in Armenia is also proved by the fact that a greater amount of taxes paid to the Caliphate in the X century was in money rather than in kind, compared to earlier centuries. Cfr A. TER-GHEVONDĪAN (Levondyan), *Les impôts en nature en Arménie à l'époque Arabe*, in *Revue des Études Arméniennes* XI (1975/6), pp. 313–321.

However, Mariam was also a Bagratuni Princess and the foundation and endowments made to the Monastery involved both noble houses. Mariam's key role in the establishment of the Monastery on the island was politically and symbolically important on more than one ground. If there was any ambiguity as to who had jurisdiction over the Island of Sevan, Mariam's participation could satisfy both sides, since she belonged to both families and could serve as a personal link and mediator between the two. The interest of Ašot Bagratuni in this monastic foundation underscores the strategic importance of its position and indicates Ašot's desire to have his hand in its fortunes in the guise of a magnanimous patron. Presumably, any territorial donations bestowed upon the monastery made them politically neutral, at least theoretically. By establishing a monastery, Mariam and her father Ašot, who blessed the enterprise, created a neutral territorial unit in a border area between the two political entities, thus preventing or attempting to prevent possible future tensions. But this was not all. Ašot Bagratuni made important donations to the Monastery which could serve two further inter-related purposes. On the one hand Ašot became a patron of the Monastery and, by implication, hoped to create a faithful client. On the other hand, the Monastery (and the territory under its control) entered the sphere of economic relations between the Geğark'unik' District and the Bagratuni domains and could help to strengthen these ties. This is evident when one considers the endowments made by Ašot to the Monastery.

#### 4. THE FOUNDATION OF THE MONASTERY AND ITS FIRST ABBOT

There are two more or less detailed sources about the foundation of the Monastery of Sevan: a *Colophon*, which is a *Biography of Maštoc'* written in 893 by a monk – Step'anos – a disciple of Maštoc' and a member of the Congregation of Sevan, only about twenty years after the event<sup>24</sup> and the *History of the Region of Sisakan* composed by the

24. *Colophons*, pp. 40–43 (note 10). I will refer to this source as the *Biography of Maštoc'* in the body of the paper. Maksoudian in YDE, *History* (note 1), p. 9 identifies this Step'anos with Catholicos Step'anos III of Sevan (968–972) who was a relative of Maštoc'. If this identification is correct, Step'annos must have become Catholicos at a very old age. If we presume that he wrote the above-mentioned colophon from 893 when he was a young monk, hypothetically 18–20



already mentioned late XIII century historian Stepannos Ōrbēlean<sup>25</sup>. Their comparison reveals that Step'annos Ōrbēlean mostly depends on the latter, yet, there are accretions in his testimony compared to the earlier source that indicate how the foundation legend of the Monastery had developed. According to the *Biography of Maštoc'* the holy man came from the village of Eḷivard and belonged to a « priestly dynasty » members of which were « among the heirs of the congregation named after [St.] Tēodoros »<sup>26</sup>. According to the monk Step'anos, when he wrote the *Biography Maštoc'* was a bit less than 60 years old, had been leading an ascetic life for 33 years, while the construction of the Monastery had taken place 22 years before<sup>27</sup>. This means that Maštoc' was born c. 834/5. His father emigrated to the District of Sot'k' – the centre of power of the Geḷark'unik' Princes – because of the « tyranny of the Tačiks »<sup>28</sup>. Here he got married and had sons and daughters, among whom « the beautiful dove of Christ », Maštoc'. His father was the first teacher of Maštoc' in « divine matters »<sup>29</sup>. After the father's death, Maštoc' grew up under the tutorship of a certain cleric T'ēodoros; then he « became skillful in the Holy Scriptures » in the most renowned Monastery of not only Geḷark'unik' but medieval Armenia in general, the Monastery of Mak'enoc', South of Lake Sevan<sup>30</sup>.

Step'annos Ōrbēlean adds more details to this picture, some of which seem to be aimed at attaching greater prestige to the various events in Maštoc's life. He specifies that the name of Maštoc's father was Grigor and that it was he who sent Maštoc' to the Monastery of

years old, then he must have been circa 93 years old when he became Catholicos and was almost 100 years old at his death. While not impossible, this chronology and the presumed age of the Catholicos raise some doubts about the identification of the two Step'anoses.

25. SŌ, *History* (note 9), p. 173. For a French translation of the relevant excerpts cfr A. KHATCHATRIAN, *Inscriptions et histoire des églises arméniennes (Ricerca sull'architettura armena 8)*, Milano, 1974, pp. 80-81.

26. *Colophons* (note 10), p. 41. According to Khatchatrian this refers to the VII c. church known also as the Church of St. Zoravar or Zoravor near the present-day village of Elvard, East of Lake Sevan. The name « Theodore » for this church appears in the *Biography of Maštoc'* and in another colophon found in a Gospel codex from 1197. Cfr KHATCHATRIAN 1974 (note 25), pp. 40-41.

27. *Colophons* (note 10), pp. 40-41.

28. This ethnonym designated the Muslims, in this case Arabs.

29. *Colophons* (note 10), p. 41.

30. On the Monastery of Mak'enoc' cfr *Sevan* (note 11), p. 17; CUNEO 1988 (note 11), pp. 378-379, No. 191. For the inscriptions cfr BARXUDARYAN 1973 (note 10), pp. 289-294.

Mak'enc' to be trained by its Abbot Step'annos<sup>31</sup>. Furthermore, according to Ōrbēlean, Maštoc' was ordained as priest by the Bishop of Siwnik' Davit' (839-857)<sup>32</sup>. This historian also tells us that Maštoc' moved to another monastery known as the *Artawazdi Aparan*<sup>33</sup>, literally the 'Palace (or dwelling) of Artawazd' and, finally, settled on the island of Lake Sevan<sup>34</sup>. It seems that Ōrbēlean's extra information is aimed at demonstrating that there were close links between Maštoc' and other high-ranking clergy and monks, such as bishops and abbots, from the earliest years of his life. We do not know whether Ōrbēlean himself makes these additions or, most likely, he is dependent on his sources or even oral tales about the Monastery of Sevan and its founder, nor can we make any uniform evaluations (positive or negative) about the historicity of such details.

It is not possible to determine the exact dates when Maštoc' joined the Monastery of Mak'enc' or when he moved from there to the *Artawazdi Aparank'*, if he was there indeed. Since both texts imply that he went or was sent to the Monastery of Mak'enc' as a young boy we can hypothesise that this occurred around 844/5 when he was about ten years old. When applying this information to the history of the Monastery of Mak'enc' interesting information emerges which warns us to use the written sources on monastic history with caution. Thus, according to Movsēs Kałankatuac'i the « metropolis of Mak'enc' » where presumably the renowned monastery was located, was sacked by Babak the Khurramite in 827. Kałankatuac'i specifies that Babak burned

31. SŌ, *History* (note 9), p. 173-174. Ōrbēlean's information on the father of Maštoc', i.e. that he sent his son to the Monastery of Mak'enc', contradicts that of the *Biography*. Since the latter was written by someone who knew Maštoc' personally, it is a much more trustworthy source and we have good reason to believe that Ōrbēlean presents later accretions/versions of the events.

32. The date of 840 for Davit's first year of tenure found in N. POLAREAN, *Hay grolner* [Armenian writers], Jerusalem, 1971, p. 131 does not seem to be correct, since this Bishop started works on the renovation of the Monastery of Tat'ew already in 839.

33. It is possible that this monastery was located near what is known as Artawazavank' today, of which only remains of a small, early Christian church with a cross-in-square plan survive. Cfr N. THIERRY, *Répertoire des Monastères Arméniens (Corpus Christianorum 2)*, Turnhout, 1993, p. 119 No. 667 and CUNEO 1988 (note 11), p. 149. Cuneo dates the church to the VII century. It is situated north-east of Lake Sevan. Only Stēp'anos Ōrbēlean provides the name of the Bishop of Siwnik' who ordained Maštoc', as well as gives these details about Maštoc's stay at *Artawazdi Aparan*. The *Biography of Maštoc'* is curiously silent on both points.

34. SŌ, *History* (note 9), p. 173.



everything, leaving only the water-mill <sup>35</sup>. Mxit'ar Ayrivanec'i (XIII c.) and Step'anos Ōrbēlean, the latter obviously depending on Kałankatuac'i, take this information to refer specifically to the Monastery of Mak'enoc' and some modern scholars have followed this interpretation <sup>36</sup>. Moreover, Ōrbēlean even says that the monks had been forewarned about the attack and had left the Monastery prior to Babak's raid <sup>37</sup>. Yet, if the monastic school was still functioning c. 844, the place could not have been as deserted after the sack of Babak as the sources want us to believe. Alternatively, it was restored to a certain degree between 827 and prior to approximately 844. Without archaeological excavations, this is the most one can infer. Both Mxit'ar Ayrivanec'i's brief reference and Ōrbēlean's more detailed notices, obviously take a retrospective view. This is probably dictated by the fact that shortly before 900 the Monastery of Mak'enoc' was restored in grandiose style by Grigor Sup'an, on which see below. This restoration completely overshadowed any other partial revival of the monastery that might have occurred in the second half of the IX century.

Maštoc's *Biography* recounts that he had lived a life of asceticism since 860 which is not necessarily the date when he moved to the island of Sevan. We have no exact information on when he settled there or whether there was already some kind of an ascetic community on the island. The *Biography* emphasise Maštoc's ascetic feats: « by the Grace of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by his own wishes he turned away from the earth to the heaven, that is [he turned away] from our

35. MOVSĒS KAŁANKATUAC'I, *Patmut'ivn aluanic' ašxarhi* [History of the Country of [Caucasian] Aluanians] (henceforth: MK, *History*), Yerevan, 1983, pp. 326-327.

36. MXIT'ARAY AYRIVANEC'WOY, *Patmut'ivn hayoc'* [History of the Armenians of Mxit'ar Ayrivanec'i], ed. M. ĒMIN, Moscow, 1860, p. 51; SŌ, *History* (note 9), p. 159. As rightly noted by GRIGORYAN 1973 (note 14), p. 43 fn 85, Mxit'ar gives a mistaken date for the destruction of the Monastery. GRIGORYAN 1973, *ibid*, himself accepts 827 as the date when the Monastery was destroyed. Maksoudian 1990-91 (note 6), p. 213 and Mahé 2002 (note 6), p. 9 rightly state that the Monastery of Mak'enoc' survived the troubled years of the VIII and IX centuries, without giving specific source analysis, however.

37. SŌ, *History* (note 9), p. 159. Ōrbēlean reports that after this date the Monastery was in ruins until its reconstruction by Grigor Sup'an. It is curious, that despite this information Step'anos Ōrbēlean himself reports that Maštoc' was a member of the Congregation of Mak'enoc' (obviously, prior to the reconstruction of Grigor). Apparently he did not notice the incompatibility of these two pieces of information. Perhaps Ōrbēlean wished to mark the familiarity of Maštoc's father with the Abbot of the Mak'enoc' Monastery.

unnecessary needs, and accepted a life of fasting, virtue, eating of pulse, irreproachable [comportment] and love of truth » and implies that the choice of the island was dictated by its isolated location<sup>38</sup>. He further informs us that c. 871 Lady Mariam sought Maštoc' for her monastic project and, in the words of Step'anos, the « one who loved silence » was « compelled by the multiple supplications » of Mariam to cede to her wishes, that is to found the Monastery for the soul of Mariam's late husband Vasak Gabur<sup>39</sup>. He agreed with the reasoning that « if it is God's order, I will not resist [it] »<sup>40</sup>. Throughout the *Biography* we can detect an effort on the part of the author Step'anos to emphasise that Maštoc' longed for a solitary life of extreme asceticism and was only compelled to give in to the establishment of a congregation of brethren because of Mariam's request. Step'anos insists that after the foundation of the Monastery and especially after the donation of the cross by Prince Ašot, Maštoc' ever increased his ascetic regime.

The most interesting additional information that Ōrbēlean provides about Maštoc' is related to the foundation legend of the Monastery. While the monk Step'anos clearly indicated that the project of the foundation was Lady Mariam's and Maštoc' conceded to her wishes reluctantly, Ōrbēlean tells us a different story. He gives the precedence to Maštoc', rather than Princess Mariam, and assigns him the main responsibility for this monastic foundation. Thus, he tells us that after much spiritual labours Maštoc' had a vision of the Twelve Apostles on the Lake which he interpreted as an order to build a church in their name and establish a monastery. But then Step'annos affirms that « moved by a higher force, the great queen Mariam, the wife of Vasak [Gabur] Siwni, came to the holy Maštoc and with multiple supplications » convinced him to agree and approve of the project to construct the two churches dedicated to the Mother of God and the Holy Apostles. This

38. *Colophons* (note 10), p. 41.

39. This was not Mariam's first or last pious investment. In the middle of the IX century together with her brother (future king) Smbat Bagratuni she commissioned the translation of a *Commentary on the Gospel of John* by Nana the Syrian. Cfr *Colophons* (note 10), pp. 34-37, p. 37 fn 1 on the date and GAREGIN A. KAT'OLIKOS YOVSEP'EAN, *Hišatakarak' jeragrac'* [Colophons of manuscripts], Antilias, 1951, cols 59-71. She founded at least another church (Šolwaga) and a Monastery (of Vanevan) the latter with her other brother Šapuh Sparapet before the turn of the century.

40. *Colophons* (note 10), p. 41.

leads one to believe that despite Ōrbēlean's (or his sources') likely revision of the sequence of events, the initiator of the project was Mariam and she needed Maštoc's approval and spiritual support to carry it out. If it were Maštoc's idea from the start, there would be no reason for Mariam to entreat Maštoc to agree to her plan. It is also possible that they jointly thought out the project but the *Biography of Maštoc* wished to emphasise the holy man's love for anchoretic, solitary asceticism, presumably valued as a higher form of monastic practice, and thus presented him as if resisting to accept a new coenobitic foundation. It would be logical to suppose that already by 871 Maštoc was not a minor figure or only a locally-known learned ascetic since Mariam would hardly choose someone with little spiritual authority for a foundation that was to be 'for the soul' of her late husband Vasak Gabuī.

There are two other pieces of information about Maštoc that can be roughly dated. We know that some time after the accession of the Catholicos Geworg Gaṛnec'i, i.e. after 877, Maštoc, now the Abbot of the Monastery of Sevan, had a serious disagreement with him on the issue of the Council of Chalcedon. As a result of this conflict, Maštoc was anathematised by Geworg but later repented and the two men were reconciled. Such information can be gleaned from Maštoc's own *Letter to Abas* preserved in the *History of Yovhannēs Draxanakerc'i* <sup>41</sup>. We also know that Prince Ašot visited him in Sevan in 882, since the *Biography* says that Maštoc had lived in the Monastery for 11 years before he received the « great gift », i.e. the Byzantine cross, from Ašot <sup>42</sup>.

The *Letter to Abas* was written in 890, after the death of King Ašot I, upon which the succession to the throne was disputed between his son Smbat I (the legitimate heir, reigned 890–914) and Ašot's brother, the above-mentioned addressee of the *Letter*, Abas the *Sparapet* <sup>43</sup>. Catholicos Geworg Gaṛnec'i acted as a mediator between the two contestants, but

41. YD, *History* (note 1), pp. 148–157 for the *Letter*, p. 150 on Maštoc's admittance of his error and justification of the anathema against him by Catholicos Geworg. Maksoudian suggests, without making any definitive conclusions, however, that one may suspect whether this letter was authentic or fabricated by Yovhannēs Draxanakerc'i in order to clear any suspicions about the sincere repentance of Maštoc – Yovhannēs' spiritual mentor and relative – from his Chalcedonian temptations. Maksoudian states, in the end, that there is no conclusive evidence for either of the hypotheses. Cf. Maksoudian's comments in YDE, *History* (note 1), pp. 35–36; for the English translation of the *Letter to Abas*, Ibid, pp. 133–137.

42. *Colophons* (note 10), p. 42.

43. This was the highest military office in medieval Armenia.

since he supported Smbat's coronation, Abas decided to turn to another influential ecclesiastical leader to further his own cause. That leader was Maštoc', the Abbot of the Monastery of Sevan, to whom Abbas allegedly promised the Catholical seat should he win the dynastic conflict. Abbas' turning to Maštoc' may indicate that the reconciliation between Maštoc' and Geworg was not complete, thus he could be thought of as a possible rival to the Catholikos<sup>44</sup>. Not only, by 890 he had acquired even more fame and could influence ecclesiastical and state affairs on the highest level. To Abbas' disappointment Maštoc' did not side with him, but, on the contrary wrote an admonishing letter to the rebellious brother of the dead king. Eventually, the conflict came to a peaceful end, as Abbas was not able to rally enough support. There is no hint in the *Letter to Abbas* that Maštoc''s relationship to Smbat's late father King Ašot I and the benefits he received for his new Monastic foundation had anything to do with his decision, but one can legitimately state that Ašot I had made a reliable ally in Maštoc'. Another point is evident here. While the *Biography* of Maštoc', as well as numerous other later sources emphasise Maštoc''s love for solitary ascetic life, following a well-known hagiographical *topos*, a closer look at his activities reveals that he was involved in crucial political and ecclesiastical affairs, including those that dealt with questions of the state. While I hypothesised that Maštoc' was already a famous ascetic before becoming the founder and the first abbot of the Monastery of Sevan, the latter role gave him greater visibility and an institutional status, guaranteed by the involvement of the King himself. In fact, his conflict with Catholikos Geworg on the issue of the Council of Chalcedon also occurred while he was Abbot. The *Biography* vaguely alludes to other « false brethren » as well as outsiders « both significant and insignificant » who troubled Maštoc', but he endured all afflictions with forbearance. This may be a tacit reference to the conflict with the Catholikos and other similar situations. Unfortunately, not much more can be said about this aspect of Maštoc''s life. Yet, the fact that Ašot's brother Abbas turned to him in search of an ally against the Catholikos of Armenia demonstrates, among others, that as an Abbot of a well-endowed monastery Maštoc' had a strong enough power-base to potentially compete even with the Catholikos. Maštoc'

44. Such analysis are proposed by Maksoudian in YDE, *History* (note 1), p. 35.

was honoured with this title in 897, upon the death of Geworg, yet he lived only several months after his accession.

Maštoc's family background and ties are also important for evaluating the significance of the Monastery of Sevan for the Armenian Church and society in general. The historian and catholicos Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i informs in his *List of Catholicoi* that Maštoc' was his « blood relative »<sup>45</sup>. Although no direct evidence exists about the economic position of Maštoc's specific family nucleus, this testimony may allow us to infer that the house to which both Maštoc' and Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i belonged was economically well-off. Thus, from the *History* of Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i we learn that he owned large estates, as well as a « small fortress » in Biwrakan<sup>46</sup>. The problem is that we do not know the level of co-sanguinity between Maštoc' and Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i, nor anything more specific about how wealthy was Maštoc' or his branch of the family. Yet, a literate priest, as Maštoc's father was, who could give a primary education to his son does imply a level beyond poverty.

If we cannot say anything definitive about the fortunes and the spiritual authority of Maštoc's family prior to him, we can clearly observe that he inaugurated a line of ecclesiastical leaders belonging to his stock, whose career often started at the Monastery of Sevan. Three of its members were raised to the highest ecclesiastical and spiritual office of the Armenian Church, i.e. that of the Catholicos. Those are Maštoc' (897-8) himself, his successor and « blood relative », the historian Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i (898-924) who was probably educated by Maštoc', Step'anos III of Sevan (968-972) who was the abbot of the Monastery of Sevan prior to his accession just like Maštoc' and, possibly, Sargis of Sevan (992-1019). The nephew of Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i (his brother's son) Yakob (918-958) was ordained as Bishops of Siwnik' by his uncle himself<sup>47</sup>. Another Bishop of Siwnik' Yovhannēs (981-987)

45. This list is published at the end of SAMUĒLI K'AHANAYI ANEC'WOY, *Hawak'munk' i groc' patmaqrac'* [Compilation from the writings of historians by Samuēl, Priest of Ani], Valaršapan/Ejmiacin, 1893, p. 272 and pp. 276-277. Cf. also Maksoudian in YDE, *History* (note 1), pp. 9-11 on this relationship, as well as a French translation with comments in P. BOISSON-CHENORHOKIAN, *La Liste des Patriarches Arméniens par le Catholicos Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i (Xe siècle)*, in *Revue des Études Arméniennes* XXII (1990/91), pp. 185-202.

46. YD, *History* (note 1), p. 336.

47. This reconstruction is based on Maksoudian's study in YDE, *History* (note 1), pp. 9-10.

was ordained by Sargis of Sevan and was his relative too <sup>48</sup>. Thus, if Maštoc' did not already belong to an influential family with strong ties to the upper circles of religious authority, he did initiate an important phase in his family's ecclesiastical fortunes, even establishing a sort of monastic/ecclesiastical dynasty members of which occupied the seat of the Armeian catholicos or the Bishop of Siwnik'. But the relationship between these representatives of Maštoc''s family and the establishment of the Armenian Church was not always an easy one. We saw above Maštoc''s own troubles with Catholicos Geworg Gaineç'i. Yovhannēs Draxanakertç'i may have been ordained as the Patriarch of the See of (Caucasian) Albania without the consent of the same Catholicos Geworg <sup>49</sup>. The Bishop of Siwnik' Yakob had the longest and most violent disagreements with the reigning Catholicos, which earned him the title of « Yakob the Rebel ». He openly rebelled twice against the authority of Catholicos Anania Mokac'i <sup>50</sup>. As a response to the second rebellion the latter destroyed Yakob's power base, the great Monastery of Tat'ew in Siwnik' in 949 <sup>51</sup>. The situation was improved only decades later by yet two other relatives of Maštoc' with connections to the Monastery of Sevan. One was a monk of Sevan who became Catholicos – Sargis of Sevan – and the other one was Yovhannēs Bishop of Siwnik', his relative. Upon Yovhannēs' accession (981) and his peaceful collaboration with Sargis, all the privileges of the See of Siwnik' were reinstated <sup>52</sup>.

For the family ties of Yovhannēs Draxanakertç'i and Bishop Yakob (I) cfr SŌ, *History* (note 9), p. 253. The dates of the Bishops of Siwnik' are based on UT'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), p. 277 n. 2.

48. SŌ, *History* (note 9), p. 303.

49. The information is found in Movsēs Kalankatuac'i: MK, *History* (note 35), p. 346. The latter gives the name Yownan and not Yovhannēs. The identification of this Yownan with the historian and Catholicos Yovhannēs Draxanakertç'i is quite likely, even if the evidence is not conclusive. Cfr Maksoudian's analysis in YDE, *History* (note 1), pp. 10-13.

50. SŌ, *History* (note 9), pp. 274-277. Yakob may have been a sympathiser of the Chalcedonian doctrine. Step'annos Siwnec'i considers such accusations brought against Yakob as slanderous talk based on no real facts. According to UT'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), pp. 126-131 the disagreement between Bishop Yakob and Catholicos Anania was an economic one. Yakob, as the head of one of the wealthiest bishopric seats in Armenia, no longer wished to be subject to the Armenian Catholicos and share his revenues with him, according to this interpretation.

51. SŌ, *History* (note 9), p. 283.

52. *Ibid* p. 285 and pp. 303-308.

Among his various accomplishments, Maštoc's name is also closely associated with the creation of the Armenian book of ecclesiastical rituals, so much so that any codex with such content would simply be called *Maštoc' girk'* or *Maštoc' Book* for centuries to come<sup>53</sup>. Moreover, the use of the *Rules of St. Basil* is attested for the first time in Armenian sources in connection with the Monastery of Sevan and its first abbot Maštoc'<sup>54</sup>.

This overview indicates that the Monastery of Sevan, its abbots and its monks, played a key role in cultural, political and ecclesiastical life of the Armenians throughout the end of the IX and the X centuries, as well as beyond.

##### 5. THE ENDOWMENTS TO THE MONASTERY AND ITS STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

The *Biography of Maštoc'* reports that the Prince Ašot Bagratuni came to the shores of Lake Sevan right in front of the island after a punitive expedition against certain 'bandits' on the banks of the River Kur near the territory of Georgia<sup>55</sup>. This happened c. 882, only a couple of years prior to Ašot's coronation<sup>56</sup>. We can only guess what could have been the purpose of this visit and if Ašot's imminent accession to kingship, Maštoc's fame and, perhaps uncomfortable conflict, with Catholicos Geworg Gañec'i (who will anoint Ašot at the coronation ceremony) were issues discussed by the two men. Leaving conjectures apart, we can draw other conclusions with more confidence. The *Biography* is our most precise source to indicate the great significance that the future

53. Cfr POLAREAN 1971 (note 32), pp. 131-133.

54. Asolik, *History* (note 6), p. 160. This does not necessarily mean that the *Rules* were not used previously, since their translation in the early VI century. One could suppose, for example, that Maštoc' had become familiar with the *Rules* during his stay at the Monastery of Mak'enoc'. This point needs further research but is not directly pertinent to this study. On the Armenian version of the *Rules of St. Basil* cfr BASILIO DI CESAREA, *Il Libro delle Domande (Le Regole)*, a cura di G. ULUHOGIAN (*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 536 and 537. *Scriptores Armeniaci* 19 and 20), Leuven, 1993, vol. 1 p. XII and vol. 2 pp. VII-IX for dating of the translation.

55. *Colophons* (note 10), p. 42.

56. It says that Maštoc' had been living in the Monastery for eleven years when he received the gift of the Byzantine cross from Prince Ašot. Since Step'anos gives the year 871 for the foundation of the monastery, Ašot's visit must have taken place in 882. Cfr *Colophons* (note 10), p. 42.



King attached to the Monastery. This source also provides details on Ašot's relationship with Maštoc'. We are told that upon his arrival Ašot asked to be seen by Maštoc', inviting the latter to his encampment, called *Բանակաստեղի* /*Banakatehi*, literally 'army post'. The meeting is described in glowing terms:

*Որ իբրև տեսին զիր[ե]արս, բազում ուրախութիւն լինէր երկօրունցն: Ապա յոյժ սիրեալ մեծարեաց և մեծապէս ընկալեալ ըզնա բարեպաշտ իշխանն Հայոց Աշոտ, որ և թագաւոր իսկ եղև քնոյ: Ապա շնորհէր երանելի հաւր[ն] Մաշտոցի զլոյսն մըշտընջեանաւոր զոր արձակեալ էր նմա արքային Յունաց Վասլի: Յոտն կացեալ և արտասոււաւք հանդերձ առեալ քնքն զսուրբ խաչն, զոր պնդեալ էր ոսկով և զարդարեալ գեղեցկազան գործով ըն[դ]ելուգեալ մարգարտով, և առեալ եղ ի վերայ աչաց իւրոց և համբուրեաց զնա: Եւ երկիր պագեալ զիշխանն զաջն նորա, համբուրէր և զերեսն վառւաւորս, և ևս բազումս խաւօսեցեալ առ միմեանս զհաւատոց և զաչոց բազում իրաց, ապա հրաժարեցին ի միմեանց, իշխանն զնաց ճանապարհ իւր և նա դարձաւ ի մենաստան իւր:*

When they saw each other, both were rejoiced. Then greatly loving [him] the pious Prince of the Armenians Ašot, the one who later became king, treated him with great honours and received him as a great man. Then he [Ašot] gave him to the blessed father Maštoc' the eternal light that was sent to him [Ašot] by the King of the Greeks Basil. Standing up and full of tears, taking to himself the holy cross, which was gold-clad and embellished with pearl[s] mounted by splendid craftsmanship, [he/Maštoc'] put it over his eyes and kissed it. And the Prince prostrating himself to his [Maštoc''] right arm, kissed also his glorious face, and they spoke much with each other about faith and multiple other things, then [they] bode each other good bye; the Prince went his way and he returned to his monastery<sup>57</sup>.

57. *Colophons* (note 10), p. 42. The information on the donation of the cross is found also in SÖ, *History* (note 9), p. 174 who, however, does not mention that the Cross came from the



The *Biography* transmits the message that Ašot deeply revered Maštoc'. Even when taking into account any rhetorical exaggeration, we are entitled to state that Ašot wanted to impress Maštoc' and establish good relations with him and his monastery. Moreover, the gift of a Byzantine cross, luxuriously clad in gold and precious stones, not only affirmed the Bagratuni interest in and approval of this monastic foundation but also gave it significant prestige, including an aura of imperial patronage transmitted through Ašot.

But Ašot did not limit himself to this symbolic gift, however precious that might have been. He also donated five villages, the revenues from the hunt of the location Krakcin<sup>58</sup>, as well as orchards in Gaini, Ērevan and in other, non specified, locations<sup>59</sup>. The villages were on the banks of Sevan. These either belonged to the Bagratunis and logically must have been across the lake to the North, facing the island, or Ašot bought them from their Siwni (more precisely Gełark'uni) overlords and turned them over to the Monastery<sup>60</sup>. On the other hand, he also donated orchards in Gaini and Ērevan which were undoubtedly located in Bagratuni territory and not so near to the Monastery itself. Even if we have no records as to how these orchards were administered by the Monastery, one thing is clear: they presented an economic link between the territory of Gełark'unik' and the Bagratuni domains.

The Monastery, thus, acquired the means for strengthening its position as a spiritual centre and becoming an important player in both ecclesiastical, political and economic affairs. Another piece of information from Ašot's visit is revealing. We learn that he arrived there with a retinue and encamped in a place on the shores of Lake Sevan called

Byzantine Emperor. This is interesting, since Step'annos Ōrbēlean does not shy away from admitting that other crosses, specifically True Crosses that were preserved in the Monastery of Tat'ew came from the Byzantine Emperor. Thus, he may have viewed the imperial origin of Sevan's cross as uncomfortable information, perhaps for reasons of competition with his own Bishopric seat, i.e. the Monastery of Tat'ew.

58. For analysis of this toponym cfr Ut'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), p. 161.

59. SŌ, *History* (note 9), p. 174.

60. None of these possibilities finds any direct reference in the sources and both are equally probable. There is a later case when King Smbat (Ašot's son) purchased several villages from their lords in Siwnik' and donated them to the Monastery of Tat'ew. See SŌ, *History* (note 9), pp. 228–229. This important example of another joint Bagratuni–Siwni involvement in a monastic establishment and endowments will be discussed below.

*Banakateḷi*, literally « army post »<sup>61</sup>. We are entitled to suspect that the toponym indicated something about the general function of the place. This may have been a usual location on the banks of the Lake where armies encamped. In fact, the King reached *Banakateḷi* with an armed force. Even though the *Biography* does not indicate how large it was, this information means at least that *Banakateḷi* was located on a road that was important enough and had good enough conditions to allow the movement of troops. This point is strengthened if we remember that the island of Sevan once possessed an important fortress which was conquered and destroyed c. 701-702 by the General Mohammad ibn Marwān who enacted a programmatic destruction of « all Armenian fortresses »<sup>62</sup>. Significantly, the fortress resisted for three years before it fell. It is likely that the ruins of the fortress were still visible when Maštoc' moved there and may have been re-used in the construction of the future monastery<sup>63</sup>. The defensive potential of the island of Sevan would acquire its importance once more due to the foundation of the Monastery. This is where its founder Princess Mariam and her two sons Sahak and Vasak will try to flee from the armies of the Governor of Azerbaijan Yusuf in 910<sup>64</sup>. Eventually, as the island was besieged, the Princess and her sons left it at night, crossing the lake by boats, and fled to the district of Miap'or, where the aged Princess died, possibly giving in to the hardships of such a situation. The army of Yusuf thoroughly plundered the Monastery.

The military significance of the island was obvious to Ašot. Moreover, if it was located not far from a road which could serve not only armies but also traveling merchants, its economic potential must have been

61. *Colophons* (note 10), p. 42.

62. YD, *History* (note 1), pp. 93-94; YDE, *History* (note 1), pp. 106-107, Ibid p. 257 for the date of 693 or 696/697, while Ter-Lvondyan 1977 (note 1), p. 73 dates the expeditions to conquer Armenian fortresses to 701-702. Movsēs Kalankatuac'i testifies that the island adamantly resisted for three years before giving in, cfr MK, *History*, p. 318 (note 35), even though Ter-Lvondyan 1977, Ibid says that the resistance lasted for only two years.

63. To prove this hypothesis archaeological excavations would be crucial. T'ovma Arcruni recounts a similar case when the Arcruni Prince (later King) Gagik re-used a former civil building (abandoned at his time), a 'walled palace' in the village of Mahrašt that once belonged to the noble clan of Rštunis, to establish a monastery. Cfr TA, *History* (note 1), p. 394. It is significant that here Gagik had special buildings constructed for travelers. A systematic research is bound to reveal more such examples.

64. YD, *History* (note 10), pp. 228-230. Analysis in UT'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), pp. 109-111.

quite evident as well. In fact, the crucial trading route that connected Partaw (Berdaa in Arabic) to Dwin (Dabil in Arabic) lay to the East of Lake Sevan<sup>65</sup>. The Monastery of Sevan or the others built by Grigor Sup'an towards the end of the IX century, such as Mak'enoc' or Kot'avank', were all located on or near important caravan routes that connected the Valley of Ararat to the Region of Arc'ax and the lower basin of the River Kur. Moreover, various trade routes crisscrossed each other from one end of Gefark'unik' to the other, circumventing Lake Sevan (see Figs 4 and 5)<sup>66</sup>. In the context of the growing trade in the late IX and X century Armenia, the expansion of monastic foundations, many of them located near trade routes, underscores the significance of these institutions in international trade. It would be logical to think that trade by means of navigation was also carried out on the Lake and the Monastery of Sevan must have played a crucial role in this case as well. The Monastery of Sevan, thus, had everything needed to become an important player in the local or wider economy. In fact, the donation of villages and orchards to it imply that it had sophisticated enough organisational structure and man-power (congregation members or outsiders connected in some way to the Monastery) with expertise to exploit such precious resources.

Unfortunately, no sources exist to help us untangle the numerous questions that can be asked regarding these issues. It is imperative, however, not only to note the lack of sources but also ways in which they can be misleading. It was mentioned above how both Step'annos Ōrbēlean and the monk Step'annos – the author of the *Biography of Maštoc'* – emphasise the abbot's yearning for the ascetic lifestyle and solitude and his reluctance to form a coenobitic congregation. Yet, if he administered a monastery which was bound to be economically engaged after Ašot's donations, he must have had at least some worldly skills and connections<sup>67</sup>. Moreover, the site of the island of Sevan may not have

65. UT'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), p. 243-4. For the wealth and importance of these cities in international trade based on Arabic sources, cfr MANANDIAN-GARSOĪAN 1955 (note 1), pp. 143-144 on Dwin/Dabil and pp. 146-147 on Partaw/Berdaa; for the outline of the trade route from Dwin to Partaw cfr Ibid, pp. 159-163.

66. For the description of these commercial roads cfr BARXUDARYAN 1973, p. 7-8.

67. Of course, Maštoc' could have been only the spiritual leader of the monastery, while the economic duties were delegated to a steward. We do not possess enough data on the Monastery of Sevan for this specific period in order to make any conclusions beyond conjectures.

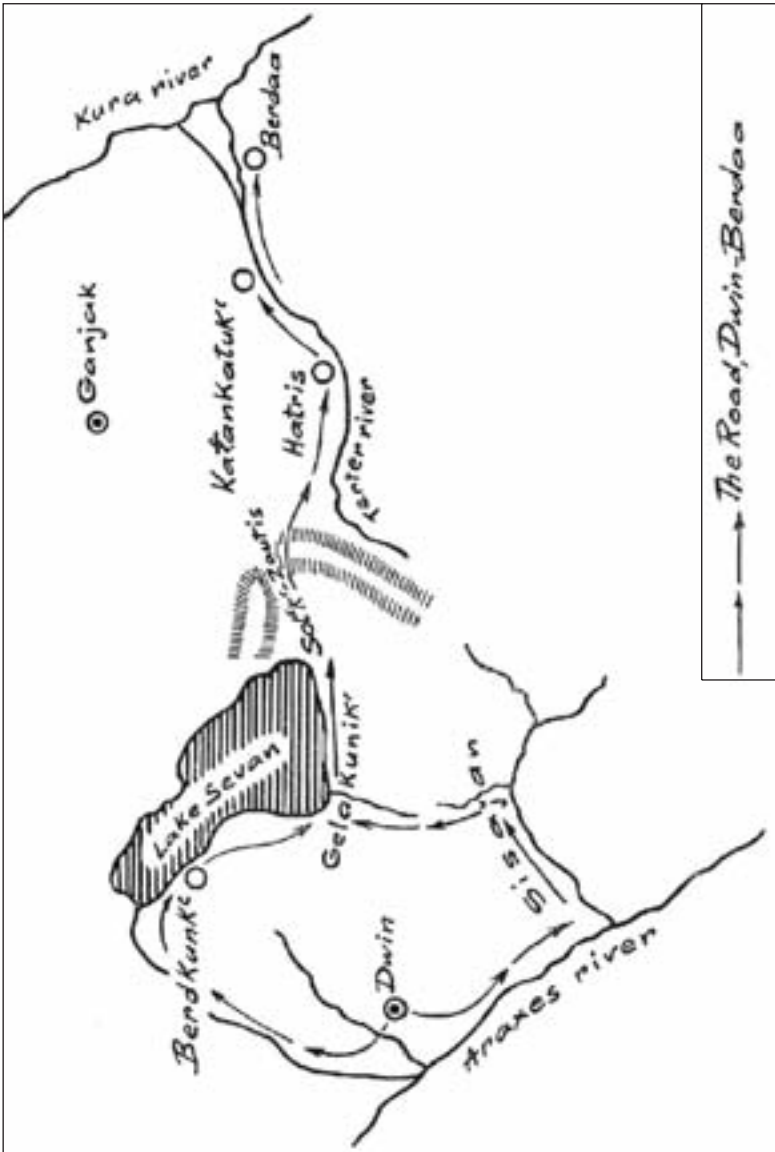


Fig. 4 - from H. MANANDYAN, *The Trade and Cities of Armenia in Relation to Ancient World Trade*, trans. N. GARSOÏAN, Lisbon, 1955, p. 161.

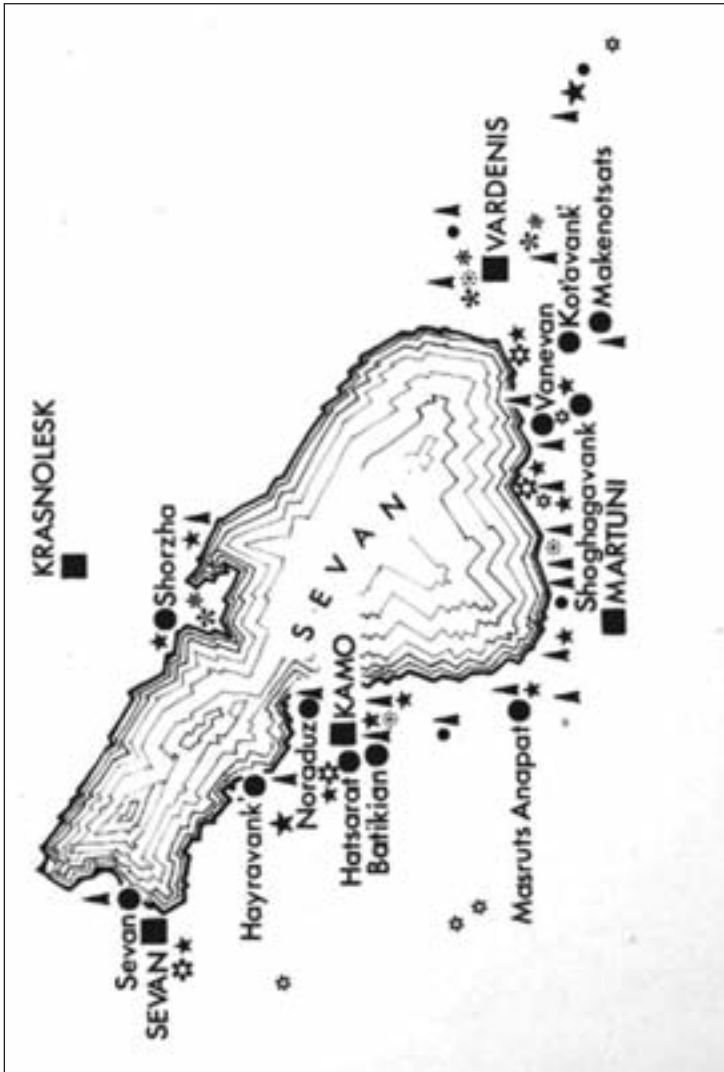


Fig. 5 - from *Sevan: Hayravank' / Noraduz / Batikian / Hatsarat / Masruts Anapat / Shoghagavank' / Vanevan / Kof'avank' / Makenotsats*, eds S. MINATSAKIAN, H. VAHRAMIAN et al. (*Documenti di architettura armena*, vol. XVIII), collana diretta da AGOPK E ARMEN MANOUKIAN, Milano, 1987, p. 11. Monasteries are indicated with ● sign.

been as deserted as described, if there was once a fortress there and a military/commercial road which led right to the shores of the lake right in front of the island. Whether there was still a small, less impressive settlement there after the destruction of its fortress and before the foundation of the Monastery is a hypothesis that can be tested only through archaeological excavations. Lastly, Maštoc's engagement in the political conflict related to royal succession further underscores his active role in the high society of his time.

#### 6. THE MONASTERY OF SEVAN IN LIGHT OF OTHER MONASTIC FOUNDATIONS IN SIWNIK'

The Monastery of Sevan was the earliest of the new monastic foundations sponsored by Princess Mariam – a key person in this case – and her son Grigor Sup'an (II) that will soon dot the basin of Lake Sevan (Figs 4 and 5)<sup>68</sup>. It is significant because this was the first important foundation which ostensibly implied a Bagratuni-Siwni cooperation (if not competition). But it was not the first monastic re-foundation in the Region of Siwnik'. That honour belonged to the Monastery of Tat'ew, in the south of Siwnik' (outside the borders of the Gełark'unik' District) whose significance will grow throughout the X century (See Figs 1 and 2 for the location of Tat'ew). The foundation of Sevan's Monastery could be considered as an attempt at creating a different religious power-base in Siwnik', able to compete with Tat'ew and geographically closer to the Bagratuni domain, thus, more easily controllable. A review of the rise of Tat'ew may be helpful in better appreciating this point<sup>69</sup>.

The spiritual centre of Siwnik' was traditionally considered to be the Monastery of Mak'enoc' in Gełark'unik' with its celebrated school of Biblical exegesis<sup>70</sup>. This is where Maštoc' was educated. The monastery

68. The foundation of the other monasteries are described in SÖ, *History* (note 9), pp. 177–183. Archaeological and art-historical surveys of some of them can be found in *Sevan* (note 11), *passim*.

69. Interestingly, while several of Sevan's monks became Catholicoi in the X century, none did from Tat'ew. On the contrary, Bishops of Siwnik', with their seat in Tat'ew, often challenged the authority of the reigning Catholicos.

70. On the Monastery of Mak'enoc's history see briefly in GRIGORYAN 1973 (note 14), pp. 41–42.

lost its significance at the end of the VIII century due to a split in the community and was greatly damaged by Babak the Khurramite in 827, even though the level of destruction is difficult to assess as was suggested above. While the significance of Mak'enc' was waning, the fortunes of the Monastery of Tat'ew were on the rise. According to Step'anos Ōrbēlean there was an ancient church at the location of the Monastery (he dates it to the times of « Nersēs and Sahak », thus the IV-V centuries) and a community of anchorites lived nearby, practicing extreme asceticism. At some point – Step'annos is vague about this and confesses not to have sources with exact chronology – bishops of Siwnik' moved their residence there <sup>71</sup>. He then enumerates various precious relics that were moved to the church, among which two pieces of the True Cross <sup>72</sup>. If this information is historically correct, it indicates that the bishops who collected such relics had a patent interest in increasing the reputation of Tat'ew as a holy place and creating a new religious centre. Step'annos Ōrbēlean further specifies that one of the pieces of the True Cross was brought to Siwnik' by the « first princes [of Siwnik' who took it] from the land of the Greeks ». The statement aims at proving the antiquity of the tradition of possessing a True Cross <sup>73</sup>. The chronology or the historical reliability of this information is difficult to assess given the distance of some three hundred years between the events recounted and the date of Ōrbēlean's *History*. Moreover, these issues are only of side-interest to this study. Thus, I will not discuss the significance of this foundation legend, as well as exactly what relics were believed to be transferred and preserved in Tat'ew which is quite significant. Let us reiterate that while Step'annos is specific about the « Greek » provenance of one of Tat'ew's pieces of the True Cross, he says nothing about the imperial origin of the Byzantine cross to the Monastery of Sevan. What is relevant for the argument at hand is the enlargement of the Monastery of Tat'ew and its establishment as the spiritual centre of Siwnik' starting c. 839, involving the Bishop of Siwnik' Davit' and the

71. *Colophons* (note 4), p. 160 dates the move of the Bishopric of Siwnik' to the Monastery of Tat'ew to the time-period between 728 and 828, « probably in the second half of the VIII century ».

72. *SŌ, History* (note 4), pp. 202–214 is dedicated to the history of the Monastery of Tat'ew, including its re-foundation charter, various donors' acts and inscriptions copied by the historian. A French translation of parts of this text can be found in Khatchatrian 1974 (note 25), pp. 83–89.

73. *SŌ, History* (note 4), p. 203.

Siwni Princes P'illippē and Grigor Sup'an (the grandfather of Grigor Sup'an II mentioned above) <sup>74</sup>. The process continued also by their respective successors. According to Step'annos Ōrbēlean the Bishop Davit' desired to enlarge the domains of the monastery and thus bought villages adjacent to the Monastery from Prince P'ilipē. On this occasion, P'ilippē agreed to exempt the land acquired by the Monastery from all taxes <sup>75</sup>. Five years later, in 844 P'ilippē decided to take a more direct role in the economic fortunes of the Monastery, making lavish gifts to it, including the village of Tat'ew « with all its borders, mountains and fields, orchards and walnut trees, meadows and mills » <sup>76</sup>. Other, lesser princes of Siwnik' hastened to contribute to the Monastery as well. P'ilippē also built a new church near the original ancient church and was buried there upon his death <sup>77</sup>. Another event that raised the significance of Tat'ew beyond the borders of Siwnik' was the « finding » of another piece of the True Cross by Bishop Sołomon, successor of Davit', which boasted to have signs of Christ's blood. Sołomon commissioned a luxuriously decorated reliquary for the Cross in 881 <sup>78</sup>. Tat'ew continued to expand its estates, increasing both its economic and religious significance throughout the X century. But the culminating symbolical and material manifestation in its ascent was the construction of its main Church, the *kat'olikē*, dedicated to the Apostles Peter and Paul, started in 895 and inaugurated in 906 <sup>79</sup>. The dedication of the church attracted a most illustrious assembly of persons, including the Catholicos Yovhannēs Draxanakertc'i with numerous bishops, King Smbat Bagratuni and the future King Gagik Arcruni with their retinue of nobles and churchmen, as well as the Catholicos of (Caucasian) Albania Simēon <sup>80</sup>. Step'annos Ōrbēlean enumerates endowments made to the Monastery by various princes and the establishment of the exact borders of the territory that belonged to it.

74. SŌ, *History* (note 4), p. 203 and GRIGORYAN 1973 (note 14), pp. 36-40; on the growth of the economic might of Siwnik' cfr also UT'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), pp. 162-167.

75. SŌ, *History* (note 4), p. 205.

76. *Ibid*, 206-7.

77. *Ibid*, p. 211.

78. *Ibid*, p. 216.

79. *Ibid*, p. 222-228 gives a detailed description of this event. Cfr also UT'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), pp. 162-167 and Grigoryan 1973 (note 14), pp. 36-40.

80. SŌ, *History* (note 4), p. 226.



That the Bagratunis wished to be actively involved in the monastic establishments of Siwnik' beyond the Gełark'unik' District is evident in this most celebrated case of re-foundation. According to Step'annos Ōrbēlean, once the ceremony of the dedication of the main church ended, King Smbat Bagratuni did not immediately leave Siwnik' with everyone else but remained there to « honour the place » even more. Apparently he did not want to have been only a spectator of the event but wished to be counted among the patrons of the monastery. Thus, he bought villages and other types of settlements in the territory of Eastern Siwnik' and Gełark'unik' and donated them to the Monastery of Tat'ew declaring them free of taxes. Furthermore, he donated real estate in the Gorge of Gaini, a move that seems similar to the donation of gardens in the same area to the Monastery of Sevan and always implying the creation of economic ties between the Bagratunis of Širak and the Region of Siwnik'.

When the Monastery of Sevan was founded, Tat'ew was not yet at its height of power and the other prestigious spiritual centre of Gełark'unik', the Monastery of Mak'enoc' no longer enjoyed the spiritual supremacy it did prior to the raid of Babak. Thus, the foundation of the Monastery of Sevan could have been an attempt at establishing a spiritual power base in the District of Gełark'unik', if not for the entire Siwnik', and, significantly, in a location which was a border area between the Bagratuni domains and the Gełark'unik' itself. This rival power base could boast a Bagratuni-Siwni joint foundation, including the presence of a symbolically important gift of a Byzantine cross, a respected and highly learned ascetic as its founding father, and endowments which ensured its economic well-being. Moreover, it was strategically placed on an island which was well-connected due to maritime and land transportation systems which circumvented the Lake<sup>81</sup>. On the other hand, as the Monastery of Tat'ew was being gradually enlarged and richly endowed by the Siwni princess, the Bagratuni King hastened to make his presence felt there as well. While the Monastery of Sevan never acquired the economic might of Tat'ew, it, nevertheless, played a significant role in religious and secular politics of the end of the IX and X centuries, including several *catholicoi* who were members of its congregation.

81. Maritime transportation on Sevan was utilised by the fleeing Lady Mariam and her sons. Cf. YD, *History* (note 1), pp. 229–230.

The cooperation, not to say competition, between the Siwnis and the Bagratunis in the foundation of the Monastery of Sevan must have been beneficial for both sides. The subsequent history of monastic foundations in the Gełark'unik' District demonstrates that the royal house never lost interest in this region. Shortly after the construction of Sevan's monastery, Lady Mariam built a church dedicated to St. Peter in the village of Šołwagay. She bought two villages from their Muslim overlords with her own money and donated them to the Church and its « religious » declaring them free of all « worldly taxes »<sup>82</sup>. She was buried there upon her death while fleeing Governor Yusuf in 910. Always before the turn of the century Mariam's son Grigor Sup'an founded a church and a monastery in the village of Kot' and made extensive land donations to them, declaring those to be free of « all royal taxes », employing the same word for royal taxes – *bekar* – that was used by Yovhannēs Draxanakertc'i when describing Prince Ašot's obligations of collecting this tax for the Caliphate<sup>83</sup>. Thus, Grigor Sup'an must have had a prior agreement with Ašot's son – King Smbat – when exempting the members of this new foundation from such taxes. Moreover, the geographic position of the monastery near an important trading centre – Kot'<sup>84</sup> – is significant and underlies its connection to the local and wider economy.

The reconstruction of the Monastery of Mak'enoc' before 900 was another significant re-foundation, not the least because of its location on the Patraw-Dwin trading route<sup>85</sup>. Symbolically this reconstruction was also important as Mak'enoc' was one of the most celebrated monasteries of medieval Armenia prior to the IX century. Similar to the Monastery of Sevan, but even more richly endowed, the re-founded Mak'enoc' Monastery received « villages, farms and orchards in Ērevan, Gaini, Ełegis and in other locations »<sup>86</sup>. The re-foundation charter is quite

82. SÖ, *History* (note 4), p. 174.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 178. The term 'bekar' used here is the same used by Yovhannēs Draxanakertc'i who told that Ašot Bagratuni was responsible for their collection. The words used are 'yark'unakan canrut'unē ev i bekarē'. The latter word is used by YDE to define the taxes of Armenia which Ašot was supposed to collect from the other princes for the Caliphate.

84. *Sevan* (note 11), p. 14.

85. UT'MAZYAN 1958 (note 4), pp. 243-234 and MANANDIAN-GARSOĪAN 1955 (note 1), pp. 143-147 and pp. 159-163.

86. SÖ, *History* (note 4), p. 179.

specific. It provides details that Grigor Sup'an gave, among others, monetary donations, « 5 shops in Ani <sup>87</sup>, 5 orchards in Ērevan, 500 brook orchards <sup>88</sup> in the town of Gairi and 2 orchards in Ełegis » <sup>89</sup>. Livestock was not forgotten either. The shops in Ani, the orchards in Ērevan and Gairi were all in Bagratuni territory. Thus, the model of economic cooperation initiated by the Monastery of Sevan, where a Siwni religious institution received jurisdiction over territories or economic units in Bagratuni domains must have worked to the benefit of both sides and the following foundations were even more lavish and explicit in this regard.

By the turn of the X century Lady Mariam, the founder of the Monastery of Sevan, must have acquired unparalleled skills in overseeing new monastic foundations. In fact, in 903 her brother Šapuh Bagratuni, the Sparapet of Armenia, turned to her for yet another project – the Monastery of Vanevan on the Southern shores of Lake Sevan <sup>90</sup>. The territorial question is interesting here as well. There is no doubt that the southern shores of Sevan were fully within the Gełark'unik' District. It is, thus, evident that Šapuh Bagratuni must have acquired the land before donating it to the future monastery. Moreover, the fact that Šapuh Bagratuni decided to sponsor the construction of a monastery outside of his own family domains cannot be viewed simply as another example of symbiosis between the Bagratunis and the Siwnis of Gełark'unik'. Here again we are likely witnessing competition between patrons, which implies competition for territory control by means of monastic foundations and endowments. Yet, here again, the involvement of Lady Mariam, belonging to both princely houses, must have been a decisive element in softening any tensions or dispelling any doubts. The enumeration of the villages, various other revenues from land and rivers given to the Monastery of Vanevan is quite detailed and attests, once more, the growing role of these institutions in the local and wider economy.

87. Ibid, the word used in *kulpak* which indicates a small shop or a counter.

88. I have translated the expression *airu aygi* literally. I suppose these denoted a specific type of orchards, perhaps near brooks.

89. SÖ, *History* (note 4), p. 179.

90. Ibid, pp. 181–183.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The establishment of the Monastery of Sevan marks the beginning of an active period of monastic foundations in Armenia. The study of diverse sources related to the monastery and its subsequent history allows to draw several conclusions that may be applicable for other cases of monastic foundations in the IX and X century Armenia. On the one hand, there exist sources that retell the so-called ‘foundation legend’ of the Monastery, including a biographical work about its founder Maštoc’ which borders on hagiography. These sources emphasise the isolation of the island of Sevan and, because of this, its suitability as an ideal location for a holy ascetic – Maštoc’ – and his future congregation. The involvement of Princess Mariam is presented as an act of piety and devotion to the memory of her late husband Vasak, later blessed also by her father Prince Ašot Bagratuni. While all of these factors undoubtedly played a role in the foundation of the monastery, other considerations also influenced such decisions as the choice of the location of the monastery or of its first abbot. A closer look into the history and geography of the area reveals that the Island of Sevan was an important strategic spot on the border between Bagratuni and Siwni domains. Moreover, it once had an impregnable fortress which was destroyed c. 701-702. The ruins of the fortress were probably still extant in the IX century when Maštoc’ moved there. The island had a prime position also from an economic point of view. It was near trade-routes that circumvented the Lake and could also be involved in communication on the Lake through navigation. Various types of real estate and other economic units donated to it by Ašot indicate that the Monastery and its monks could manage a sophisticated economy and serve as links between the District of Gełark’unik’ and other regions of Bagratuni Armenia, such as Ayrarat. The future King, thus, attracted the Monastery to his sphere of influence. The Monastery of Sevan played a significant role also in the religious life of Armenia, being home to several monks who became *catholicoi* of the Armenian Church. In fact, it is possible that the founders of the monastery hoped to create a spiritual centre in Gełark’unik’ which could replace the Monastery of Mak’enoc’ or act as counter-weight to the expansion of the Monastery of Tat’ew in the South of Siwnik’. Last but not least, the first abbot of the Monastery Maštoc’ was an influential churchmen and cultural figure who left an important mark, among

others, on the formalisation of the Armenian book of rituals which carries his name to this date.

Of course, many questions still remain open both with respect to Sevan and Armenian monasteries of the IX–X century in general. We do not know, for example, how Sevan's abbot and monks managed the large estates donated to them both institutionally and as far as the people involved are concerned, not to talk about the evolution of relevant institutions in time. Nor can we talk about the exact forms and modes of participation of this and other monasteries in trade, both local and international. What can be stated without hesitation is that the Monastery of Sevan or others founded in *Getark'unik'* at the end of the IX and X centuries became important economic units for the region and beyond. Further studies, especially if coupled with archaeological excavations, will undoubtedly give new and fresh insights into all of these issues.

