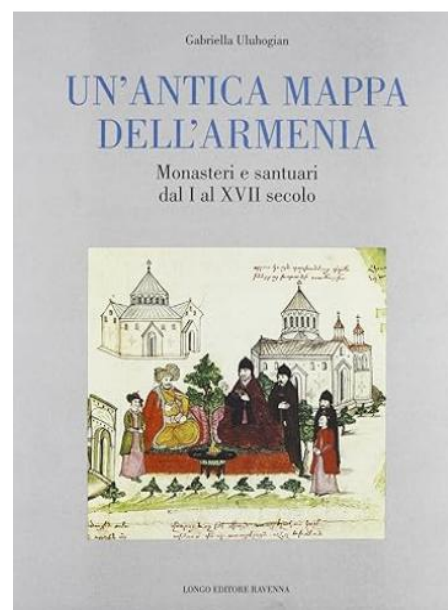


# Eremia Çelebi Keomurjian's “Geography”: its historic and symbolic value

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\* Translated by Hratch Tchilingirian from the original Armenian by the request of the author.



In 1991, when the University of Bologna was preparing an exhibit of old manuscript maps from its library collection, a previously unknown map, with Armenian script, was discovered. The Armenian map bore the Latin title of *Tabula chorographica Armenica*.

The map is prepared on paper and stretched on cloth; its extraordinary size is 358 cm in length and 120 cm in width, with a few white pages, and hundreds of miniature watercolour paintings and brief descriptions.

On the bottom of the map there is an extensive colophon (inscription), which indicates that the map was prepared in 1691, in Constantinople, by Eremia of Constantinople.

The map has been preserved in the large archival collection known by its founder, Lodovico Ferdinando Marsili ('Fondo Marsili', rot. 24). Marsili (1658-1730) was a famous Bolognese nobleman educated in various disciplines and with many interests. He was a scientist (a pioneer of the study of sea currents), a soldier, and later commander in the battles of the Hapsburgs against the Turks in the Balkans. He was also an avid researcher of the art of military strategy and battle plans, and, finally, a diplomat.

In his youth, Marsili had visited Constantinople for the first time in the years 1679-1680, along with the envoy of the Republic of Venice, where he had met with a number of representatives of the Armenian community. There are a number of documents to this effect in the collection bearing his name. For example, about Marsili's meeting with Catholicos Hagop of Julfa, who was in the capital of the Ottoman Empire at

the time. Marsili returned to Constantinople for the second time in the years 1690-1691, this time officially as the assistant to the British Ambassador. However, in reality, he was there for the purpose of conducting secret negotiations on behalf of the emperor of Austria with the Sublime Porte (government) of the Ottoman Empire. He had stayed in Constantinople for a few months.

Eremia writes about Marsili's visit to Constantinople in 1691 and explains that he was commissioned to prepare a map depicting the situation of the Armenian Church.

Starting in the 19th century, Armenologists had been familiar with the numerous writings of Eremia Çelebi Keomurjian (b. 1637), among them a "Geography" prepared upon the request of the 'Ambassador of the Almans' (Austrians). However, scholars who had made references to this "Geography" or map - such as Chamchian, Alishan, Aginian, Pambukjian - had not been able to locate it, as they were looking for it in Austrian archives. Their references were based on Keomurjian's notes in other manuscripts.

Also, the map had remained continuously unknown for three centuries because it had not been listed in the published index of Marsili's collection. It was discovered in Bologna only due to an accidental coincidence.

Keomurjian's work could be considered both a map and a specialised research, as it provides not only the location of places and symbolic depictions, but also extensive and diverse explanations.

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The map shows cities, provinces and localities which were part of baronies, pashaliks, beglerbegis (royal ranks) and dioceses, as well as monasteries, churches, chapels, places of pilgrimage, tombs of saints, hermitages, convents, the Hierarchical Sees of the Armenian Church (Ejmiatsin, Gandsasar, Aghtamar, Sis) and their dioceses.

The author not only indicates these places but also provides a wide range of important and valuable historical information, for example, about the Catholicate of Gandsasar in Karabakh.

In addition to religious and church institutions, the map also provides information about the political situation in the Ottoman Empire. For example, next to the name of each city, the corresponding official emblem or insignia of that city is depicted. The map indicates cities ruled by 44 barons, 18 pashas, and 15 beglarbeks.

It seems that Keomurjian's purpose was not to provide general geographical information to the person who commissioned the map, but to present the history of Armenians, which is virtually indistinguishable from the history of the Armenian Church, the bastion of the nation.

By following the network of monasteries and places of pilgrimage, Keomurjian also pays attention to localities outside the boundaries of Armenia, a large geographic area where Armenian communities existed: from the Sea of Marmara to the Caspian Sea, from the Black Sea to Jerusalem, even communities in as far as Cyprus, Poland, and Crimea. This highlights the multi-dimensional aspect of Keomurjian's work.

From a cartographic point of view, Keomurjian's map follows the structure of geographic conventions of medieval times, where a system of geographic coordinates is absent, i.e., there are no parallels, horizontals, or degrees. In Keomurjian's map, the East is situated on top, the West on the bottom, and correspondingly North and South are on the left and right sides of the map. And only the main geographical elements of the large area are depicted: seas (the Caspian, Marmara, and the Black seas) and lakes (Van, Sevan, Urmya). Among the rivers, only the River Kura and its streams Shamkor and Terter are indicated, the rest are mentioned only by name, for example, Euphrates, Arax or Tigris. Often springs and small rivers, which are plenty in Armenia, are mentioned for their healing attributes or their symbolic meaning as places of pilgrimage. Mountains are mentioned with great care, not only Ararat and Aragats, but all the mounts, which are associated with famous monasteries and holy places, such as Varak, Sebu, Tizapayt, Arayi Ler, etc.

Despite its focus on structures that are significant places of worship, the map presents a wealth of illustrations of the physical world. Both the churches and civil structures (princely houses and castles) are not illustrated in their true forms, but according to their primary models, i.e., plans with central domes.

Numerous are the depictions which have both strong symbolic meaning and documentary value, for example, the images of Ejmiatsin and Lake Van on the map. The first draws attention with its vivid details. The Mother Cathedral and three local churches are drawn with great care. The meeting of the Catholicos and the Persian Khan (governor) of Yerevan is displayed in bright colours. The entire image, the long garments of the characters, and their posture convey the idea of nobility. The other churches of Ejmiatsin, although illustrated with care and delicate style, do not entirely represent their true structures, but underline their metaphorical meaning. A closer look also reveals interesting historical details. A belfry is depicted on the western entrance of the Mother Cathedral of Ejmiatsin, while the Church of St. Hripsime does not have one. Indeed, the reason is purely historical, as the first was erected in 1682 and the second, at St. Hripsime, in 1790, a century after the date of our map.

The mixture of metaphorical-symbolic and factual elements is also noticeable in the depiction of Lake Van. The central position of the Lake and its distinctly larger illustration compared with the other images on the map, underline the importance of the province: this was the heart of Armenia, from the beginning until the times of Keomurjian. It was here, in Taron province, where, according to the oldest tradition, the first churches were built. It was here, where Armenian villages, even in the time span of the author's life, were filled with active life. Here, the ancient customs of the Armenians were alive; monasteries were still ministering their mission of faith and culture. It is obvious that the depiction of Lake Van has an extremely strong symbolic meaning, which draws attention from the moment one opens the map.

At the same time, however, there are details in the map, which also indicate the level of attention given to objects in the natural world - for example, the depiction of birds and their eggs on the isle of Ardez, the sailing vessels and their sailors. On the opposite side, the high towers of the fortress of Aghtamar, a royal seat, although artistically illustrated with great care, metaphorically, they express the idea of a strong dominion.

Beyond the written explanations, it is the beauty of the decorations that draws one's attention

to this work. In terms of illustrations, the concept and scope of Keomurjian's map is an exceptional phenomenon in Armenian cartography and in the field of manuscript studies in general.

In order to fully grasp the value of this work, it is important to say a few words about its sources. This work could be viewed, without exaggeration, as an encyclopaedia of medieval Armenian life, both by the information it provides and the organisation of life it depicts.

In the manuscript no. 910 of St. Lazzaro (Venice), Keomurjian himself discusses the issue of sources in describing his difficult work. He explains his difficulty: a) "I had not seen the boundaries of the monasteries, although I had heard their names; b) whomever I asked, they were simply not able to indicate the boundaries; c) I could not determine the right and the left of the borders, as I could not observe the world's east and west, the north and south, which made me sweat greatly". But, in addition to information the author received from eyewitnesses, he utilised the literature left behind by Armenian historians, which constitutes the work's cultural resource. Among Keomurjian's sources were the works of Agathangelos, Pawstos Buzand, Elishe, Ghazar Parpetsi, Movses Khorenatsi, Movses Kaghankatvatsi, Arakel Davrizhetsi and others. However, his key source was Vardan Areveltsi's "Geography", from which there are verbatim quotations in the map.

Finally, it is important to note that this work is an expression of the author's strong feelings of patriotism and pride, as underlined by his own words in the above-mentioned manuscript. Indeed, such a masterpiece not only brings pride to the author, but also to the entire Armenian nation, which witnessed a cultural renaissance starting in the 17th century, thanks to individuals such as

Eremia Çelebi Keomurjian or Mkhitar Sebastatsi, who was almost the same age.

Still, there are unresolved questions. Let us mention just a few of them. 1) Eremia Çelebi indicates that Marsili had asked him for other maps as well. However, there are no traces of these maps in Marsili's archival collection. A question arises whether such maps had been produced or they simply remained unfulfilled requests. 2) Eremia mentions that the completion of the map was received with great joy by the commissioning nobleman and his colleagues who 'expressed interest' to translate it into Latin. Again, there are no traces of such a translation in Marsili's collection. 3) What is the real purpose of Marsili's commission (or request)? Marsili did not know Armenian. Was it simply curiosity that enthused him to obtain this exceptional document or were there reasons, yet unknown to us, that played a role? One should bear in mind that Marsili was engaged in many diplomatic positions, and not all of them have been clarified. Could it be that Marsili wished to present Keomurjian's magnificent map to someone else? Why is it that Marsili, who often speaks about the people he had met, does not mention Eremia Çelebi's name anywhere (at least based on the results of our investigation carried out so far)?

As we see, it is necessary to conduct further research in the future in various directions.

The map was recently published through our efforts [*Un'antica Mappa dell'Armenia. Monasteri e santuari dal I al XVII secolo* (Ravenna, Longo Editore, 2000)]. Thus, the original work has become available to everyone and provides opportunities to various scholars and specialists to conduct further investigations of the historical content, the artistry, cartography and geography it presents.