



ARCIDIACONE DI
SALERNO - CAMPAGNA - ACERNO



Segni di un Cammino

*L'antica iscrizione armena
sul portale del Duomo di Salerno*

PREFACE

I am very pleased that the Office for Culture and Art of the Archdiocese of Salerno-Campagna-Acerno, with its Director - theologian Lorella Parente - has promoted this beautiful initiative, concerning the translation of an inscription placed on the left jamb of the stone frame of the central portal of our Metropolitan Primatial Cathedral of St. Mary of the Angels, St. Matthew and St. Gregory VII, written in Armenian, probably the work of a pilgrim devoted to Matthew - the 'holy apostle' - whose remains rest in the Cathedral itself.

The obviously complex work of transcription and translation is due to the profound competence of Prof. Don Matteo Crimella, professor of Sacred Scripture at the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy in Milan, to whom I would like to express my warm thanks and those of the entire Archdiocese.

Undoubtedly, this work offers a further element of knowledge and enhancement of that priceless heritage of art, spirituality and culture to which our Cathedral has been a fascinating custodian and witness for almost two millennia and which we intend to make even more accessible not only to the faithful of Salerno, but also to the ever more numerous tourists and visitors who will have the opportunity to experience directly this treasure chest of Christian memory.

Finally, we would like to thank the *Alfano I* Foundation for having edited the publication of these precious and culturally significant pages.

+ Andrea Bellandi

Archbishop of Salerno-Campagna-Acerno

SIGNS OF A JOURNEY

Among the details that capture the attention of the most attentive visitors of the Cathedral of Salerno is the engraving on the left jamb of the stone frame of the median portal. Few know that it is an inscription in the Armenian language, containing the supplication of a pilgrim.

The Armenian alphabet was coined by the monk and theologian Mesrop Mashtots (about 361-440), who, at the beginning of the 5th century A.D., brought a hitherto only spoken language into written form. His main intention was to make the sacred texts known to the population, accustomed to liturgical worship in Greek and Syriac, incomprehensible to most Armenian worshippers.

The oldest tradition of this people traces its origins back to the biblical character of Hayk, a descendant of Japhet, one of Noah's sons who landed after the universal flood on Mount Ararat, which is a symbolic place in Armenia. In fact, the nation's name in the original language is

Hayastan, ‘land of Hayk’. ‘Armenia’ is the name that neighbouring peoples have always given it.

The Armenian state, in the period from 95 B.C. to 65 B.C., at the height of its power, stretched from the North Caucasus to the entire eastern part of present-day Turkey, from Lebanon to north-western Iran. Over the centuries, it was ruled by various rulers, from the Persians to the Byzantines, the Arabs to the Mongols, the Mamluks to the Ottomans.

The conversion to Christianity marked a historical, social and cultural turning point for this country that would make it one with its faith until modern times. Armenian tradition reports the apostolic origin of its church, described as the “seat of the Apostle Thaddeus”.

It is interesting to recall that Armenia officially embraced the Christian religion as early as the year 301 (traditional date), following the conversion of the rulers of the time, which took place thanks to the preaching of Saint Gregory ‘the Illuminator’, in the sense of ‘great evangeliser’: we, in Campania, know him well as ‘San Gregorio Armeno’, for the characteristic street in Naples dedicated to the shepherds of the nativity scene, where the church of the same name is located and that houses the saint’s relics, which arrived in the 8th century brought by some

Basilian nuns fleeing the iconoclastic repression of the East.

We do not know the exact date on which the Armenian pilgrim to Salerno wanted to carve - but more likely had a stonemason carve - his prayer on the doorpost of the cathedral, but we can assume that he was here to venerate the relics of the Holy Apostle Matthew, kept in the crypt since the year 954. In the early Middle Ages, the main destinations of Christian pilgrimages were four, according to the trinomial *Homo, Angelus, Deus*, which included visits to the tombs of the apostles St Peter and St Paul in Rome and St James of Compostela (*Homo*); to the Sanctuary of St Michael the Archangel on the Gargano (*Angelus*); to Jerusalem, the Holy Land (*Deus*).

It is likely that the pilgrim, on his way to or from one of these holy places, wanted to stop in Salerno (Salernum), known for the presence of the relics of one of the Twelve Apostles and Evangelist, Matthew Levi, to whom he addressed a personal supplication. The inscription has been there ever since, in an indelible manner, bearing witness to a pilgrimage dimension of faith that is universally experienced.

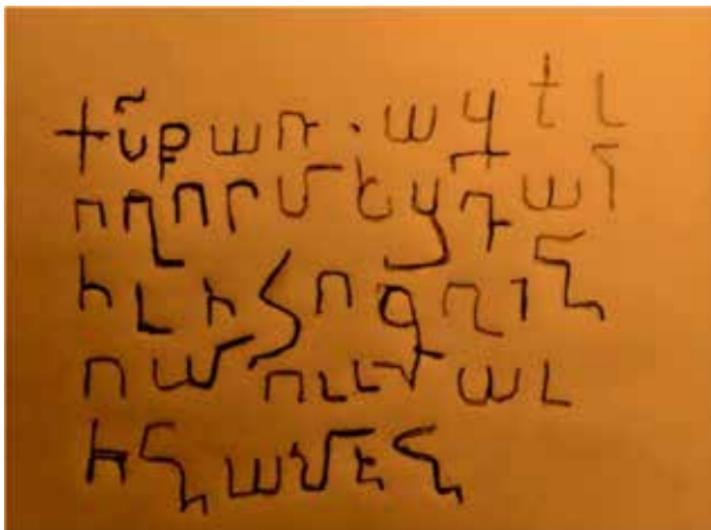
Several researchers have been interested in its origin and meaning. The best known study is that of the Jesuit Raffaele Garrucci (1812-1885),

author of *The History of Christian Art in the First Eight Centuries of the Church* (vol. 6, Prato 1873-1881) and founder of the *Neapolitan Archaeological Bulletin* (new series, Naples 1851 ff., together with G. Minervini). His analysis of the Armenian text is collected in the volume entitled *Intorno ad alcune iscrizioni antiche di Salerno*. Illustrations by Father Raffaele Garrucci of the Society of Jesus (Naples 1851), and specifically on pp. 32-35, where he presents a possible translation of the inscription, namely: 'May the Holy Apostle have mercy on the soul of him who hopes. Amen'. The Jesuit emphasised the difficulty of distinguishing some letters, due, according to him, to various imperfections in the material execution of the engraving.

In recent times, several specialists have conducted research on the adventitious inscription: in 2008, Levon Chookaszian, an Armenian art historian, and Gabriella Uluhogian (who passed away in 2016), the first professor to hold the chair of Armenian language and literature in Italy, in Bologna; in 2010, prof. Michael Edward Stone, Professor Emeritus of Armenian Studies and Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; in 2014, Prof. Ioanna Rapti, from the University of Chicago, one of the leading institutions for

Armenian studies in the United States.

In 2020, the Salerno-born architect Renaldo Fasanaro personally carried out a graphic survey on site, using a special method - already used for deciphering linguistic and cultural artefacts on erratic boulders in Friuli, Belluno and Veneto - that consists of superimposing a sheet of parchment paper on the stone surface and the subsequent drawing 'by contrast' with graphite of the underlying inscription.



Relief with overlay on parchment paper of the negative of the Armenian inscription.

Thanks to this relief, one can see the *signum crucis* at first, which is very present in medieval inscriptions and also as a single engraving: in the cathedral in Salerno, there are six of the most visible ones, positioned on the jambs of the central portal. The cross was in use among Christians from the earliest years of the church's life and veneration for its sign dates back at least to the end of the 2nd century. This is a relevant confirmation of the recognition of the cross not only as an instrument of torture, but in its unique and singular connection to the life, mission and work of the Redeemer. The custom of pilgrims to carve crosses on doorposts symbolically testifies to the entrance, or rather, the passage from an external, secular space to a sacred, cultic area.

The rest of the Armenian inscription - also visible to the naked eye, albeit with some less defined features - is composed of words that form a supplication text, analysed for us in the following pages by the biblical scholar and Armenian language scholar, Prof. Matteo Crimella. The content of his translation reads: "Holy Apostle, have mercy on the soul of Daniel and on me a pilgrim. Amen".

Taking a moment to stand 'in awe' of this ancient engraving, knowing its meaning, can restore to each of us a profound sense of

belonging to the humanity of all times, always in search of its own fullness and happiness. In the history of the Christian faith, then, this search takes place in the light of the hope of eternal life, shown by God in Jesus, risen from the dead.

The written testimony of the Armenian faithful becomes, then, also the sign of a “hope on the way”, because it tells of a pilgrim people that entrusts its own destiny and that of its deceased loved ones to Christ and to his saints and martyrs within the Church, a reality of communion that St John Chrysostom contemplated precisely as a “journey together” (*synodos*) on the way of the Lord.

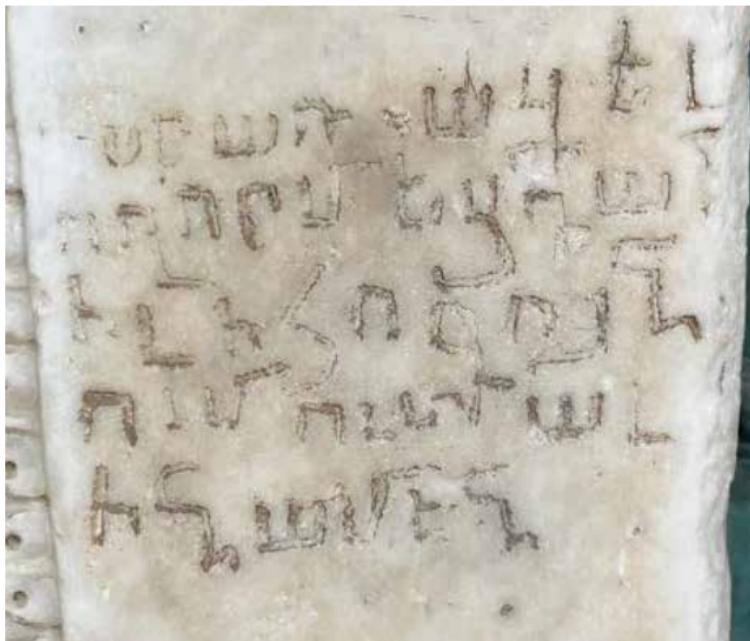
Lorella Parente

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THE ARMENIAN INSCRIPTION IN THE CATHEDRAL OF SALERNO

The portal on which the Armenian-language inscription is found dates back to the time of Robert Guiscard (1076-1085). It has highly ornamented jambs with phytomorphic and zoomorphic whorls and a rich architrave. The inscription is on the left jamb.

It is carved into the marble of the jamb. It consists of five lines and shows a slight upward trend. The inscription can be enclosed within a rectangle measuring 13.5 centimetres wide and 11 centimetres high. The letters are not all the same size: identical letters (e.g. the Armenian ս [a]) have slightly different shapes, a sign that the engraver worked with an awl and a chisel, but did not draw a guiding grid on the jamb surface. The shape of the letters is clear, indicating that the engraver was familiar with the language.



Although it is not easy to read all the letters, the following transcription can be assumed, line by line:

սբ առաքել	sb árák'el
ողորմեց դան	ołormec' dan
իլի հոգլոյն	ili hogwoyn
ու մ ուխտաւ	u m uxtaw
ին ամեն	in amen

By transcribing the text in full and integrating a few letters (the green letters), one can understand this sentence:

Սուրբ Առաքեալ ողորմեաց Դանիէլի Քոգւոյն ու իմ ուխտաւորին. Ամեն.

In transcript: Surb Ařak'eal ołormeac' Danieli hogwoyn u im uxtaworin. Amen.

Literally: 'Holy Apostle, have mercy on Daniel's soul and on me a pilgrim. Amen'.

The line-by-line scheme is as follows:

Սուրբ Առաքեալ	Surb Ařak'eal	Holy Apostle,
ողորմեաց Դան	ołormeac' Dan	have mercy on Dan
իէլի Քոգւոյն	ielih hogwoyn iele	iel's soul
ու իմ ուխտաւ	u im uxtaw	and on me a pil-
որին. Ամեն.	orin.Amen.	grim. Amen.

Armenians throughout the centuries have left traces of their passage, scattering carvings of crosses, small drawings, prayers spread everywhere. In Jerusalem, for example, in the Holy Sepulchre, in the chapel dedicated to Saint Gregory the Illuminator, there are thousands of small crosses carved in the rock. In Ain Karem, on a wall of the Lower Church of the Visitation, there are inscriptions in the Armenian language, as the building was owned by them until around 1480. There are also signs of the Armenian presence on Italian soil.¹ It is

known, for instance, that between the 13th and 14th century, there was an Armenian monastery in Salerno, to which a hospice for pilgrims² was attached; such a presence indicates the passage of people belonging to the Armenian people.

Regarding the inscription on the jamb of the median portal of the cathedral of Salerno, it can be assumed that an anonymous ‘pilgrim’ wished to leave an indelible sign of his passage, addressing a supplication to Matthew, the ‘holy apostle’ and praying for ‘the soul’ of a fellow named ‘Daniel’ (presumably deceased) and then entrusting himself (‘me’), perhaps on his way to a holy place. Where the pilgrim was going is impossible to specify (Rome, Holy Land, St. Michael’s?).

The inscription remains a sign of devotion engraved in stone.

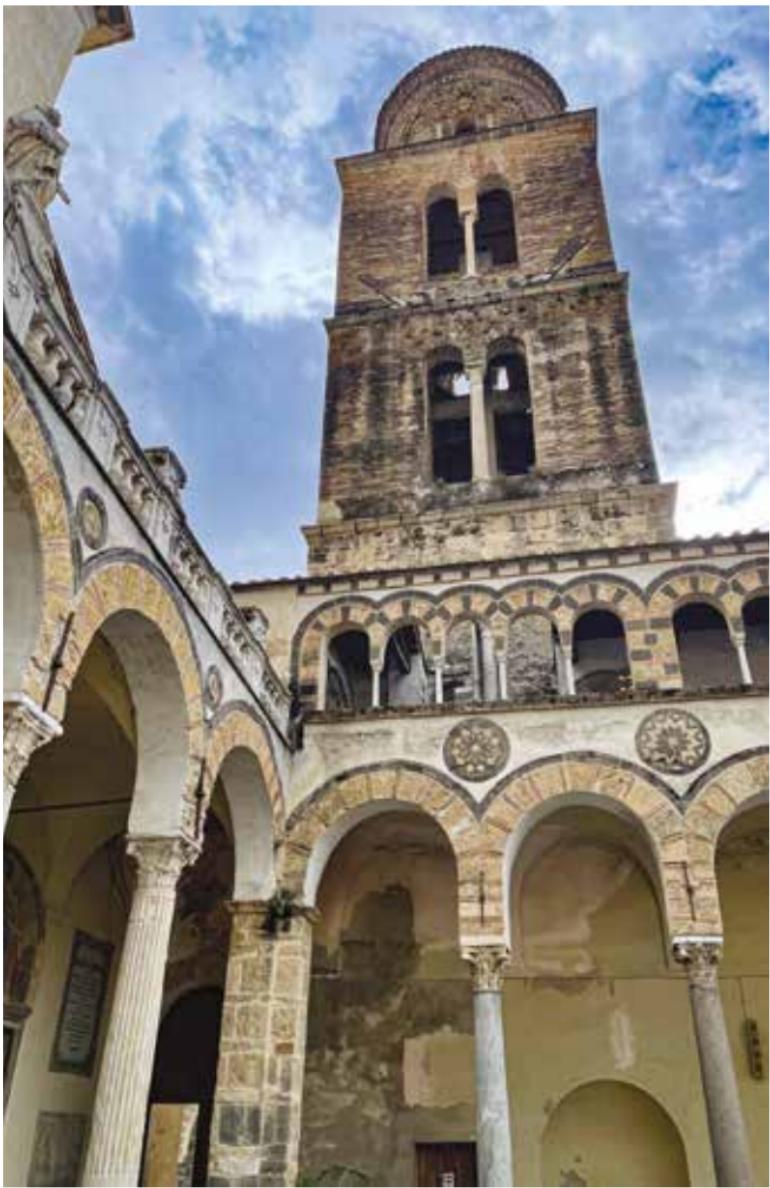
Don Matteo Crimella
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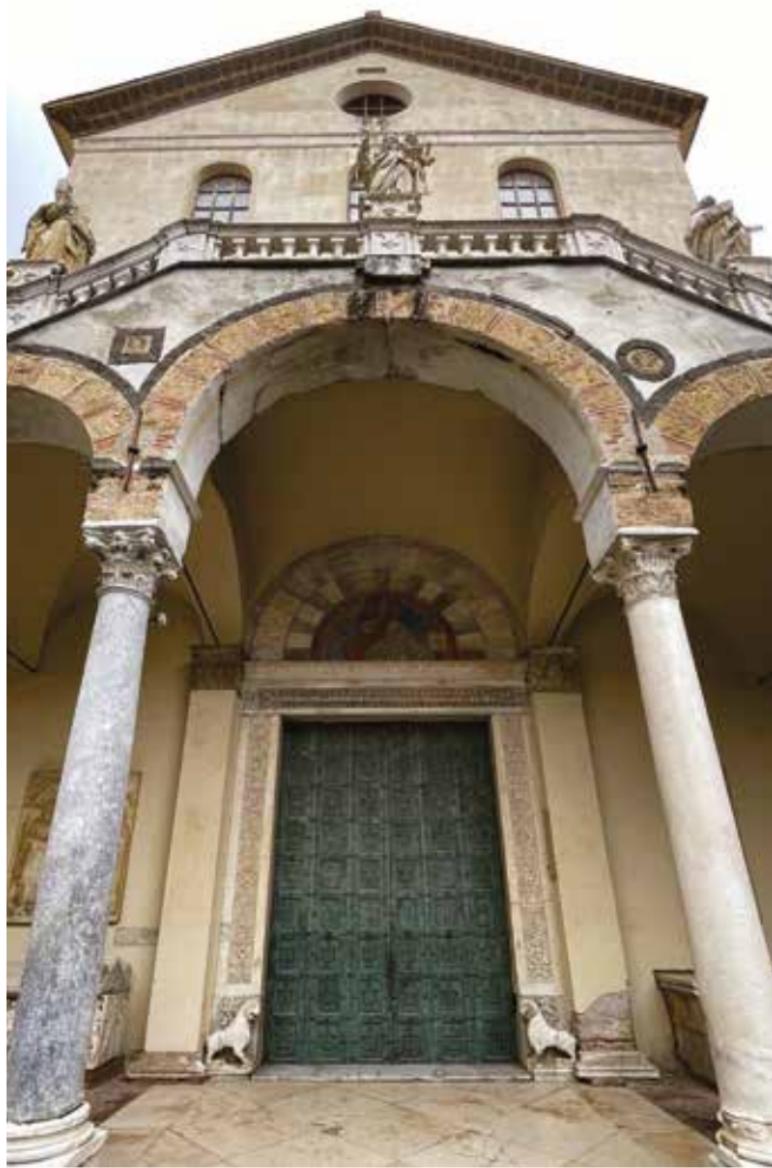
¹ Cf. G. CASNATI, «Presenze armene in Italia. Testimonianze storiche e architettoniche», in B.L. ZEKIYAN (by) *Gli Armeni in Italia*, De Luca, Roma 1990, 28-39.

² Cf. *Storia degli armeni*, by G. DÉDÉYAN, Italian edition by A. ARSLAN – B.L. ZEKIYAN, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2002, 314.

Traduzione in inglese a cura di
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Vianetti, Cripta di Salerno, acquerello, 1846

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