

## BOOK REVIEW

Heghar Zeitlian Watenpaugh, *The Missing Pages: The Modern Life of a Medieval Manuscript from Genocide to Justice*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019, 436 pp.

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On 15 December 2005 the Prelate of Northern Iran's Armenian Church received an emergency alert from a border guard and hastened to the bank of the river Araxes. Across the river, in Nakhichevan, Azerbaijani troops wielded sledgehammers as they demolished a vast field of ornately carved medieval Armenian cross-stones, the irreplaceable legacy of historic Armenian Djulfa. Bishop Nshan Topouzian videotaped the atrocity in order to bear witness to the world.<sup>1</sup> Even before Raphael Lemkin's neologism *genocide* was legitimated in the 1948 *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*,<sup>2</sup> the Polish-Jewish jurist understood the mass destruction of humanity as encompassing both "acts of barbarism" and "acts of vandalism." Lemkin's early formulations of "offenses against the law of nations" recognized works of art as defining elements of a people and identified the "systematic destruction of works of cultural heritage" as an international crime and a grievous loss to all humanity.<sup>3</sup> His cultural genocide framework, "vandalism," was ultimately excluded from the ratified 1948 UN Convention, but the need for legal and reparative frameworks remains urgent.<sup>4</sup> In *The Missing Pages: The Modern Life of a Medieval Manuscript from Genocide to Justice*, Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh advances a new approach to reconsidering that omission, mobilizing Toros Roslin's lavishly illuminated thirteenth-century Zeytun Gospels as the subject of a biography and the nexus of a web of social relations and ethical perspectives. In narrating the life story of the Gospels Book from its creation in

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1 Simon Maghakyan and Sarah Pickman, "A Regime Conceals Its Erasure of Indigenous Armenian Culture," Hyperallergic blog, 18 February 2019, at <https://hyperallergic.com/482353/a-regime-conceals-its-erasure-of-indigenous-armenian-culture/>, accessed 18.06.2020; Geospatial Technologies and Human Rights Project, *High-Resolution Satellite Imagery and the Destruction of Cultural Artifacts in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan* (Washington: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2010), at [https://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/s3fs-public/reports/Azerbaijan\\_Report.pdf](https://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/s3fs-public/reports/Azerbaijan_Report.pdf), accessed 12.07.2020.

2 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention) 1948, in *United Nations Treaty Collection* 78, 277, at <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%2078/volume-78-i-1021-english.pdf>, accessed 12.07.2020..

3 Raphael Lemkin, "Acts Constituting a General (Transnational) Danger Considered as Offences against the Law of Nations," Additional Explications to the Special Report presented to the *5th Conference for the Unification of Penal Law in Madrid* (14-20 October 1933), at [www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/madrid1933-english.htm](http://www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/madrid1933-english.htm), accessed 10.07.2020.

4 For two thoughtful analyses of Lemkin on the subject of cultural destruction, see Peter Balakian, "Raphael Lemkin, Cultural Destruction, and the Armenian Genocide," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 27, no. 1 (2013): 57-89; Leora Bilsky and Rachel Klagsbrun, "The Return of Cultural Genocide?" *European Journal of International Law* 29, no. 2 (2018): 373-396.

1256 through its current state - sundered between two continents - Watenpaugh revivifies the historic Armenian communities that commissioned and venerated it and interrogates broader issues of patrimony, art trafficking, and the place of purposeful cultural destruction in contemporary definitions of genocide.

Watenpaugh begins her account of the Zeytun Gospels with a lawsuit from 2010, *Western Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America v. J. Paul Getty Museum*. That litigation, brought by the Armenian Church in Los Angeles, sought restitution of the eight missing pages of the Gospels' Canon Tables, severed from the manuscript during the mayhem of the Armenian Genocide and sold privately to the Getty in 1994. Media reports brought the case to her attention. A professor of art and architectural history at the University of California, Davis, specializing in the urban history of the medieval Middle East, Watenpaugh steeped herself in the arguments. While the case was in progress, she published an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* proposing a solution that recognized the Canon Tables as both the precious liturgical object of a dispossessed people and an exquisite work of art worthy of study by a wide audience.<sup>5</sup> Watenpaugh analogized the case to other legal settlements of looted art and argued that the Canon Tables could be displayed in a way that honored both its religious and aesthetic functions. She suggested that the museum's provenance statement and didactic materials should reflect the history of violence and mutilation the pages endured.

Watenpaugh is herself a descendant of Armenian Genocide survivors, some of whose ancestors hailed from or passed through regions she describes. In the "Prologue," she recounts a research trip to eastern Turkey to the site where Toros Roslin's manuscript had been created and notes the deliberate effacement of crosses and other symbols of the Armenian Christians who had once thrived there. It is in the intersection of these roles - historian, documentarian, and descendant - that Watenpaugh introduces into her discourse novel terms such as "mother manuscript" and "orphaned fragment," which personalize the reader's connection to the holy book. In her telling, the manuscript continues to be a living entity with agency, as it was during the long centuries of its sacred function. Watenpaugh also reflects on the responses of individuals under calamitous assault, noting that many Armenian survivors not only struggled to preserve themselves, but instinctively carried family Bibles, house keys, and photographs into flight - relics that would bind them to place and heritage. Offering this context for the book, she layers her narrative around the idea of the Zeytun Gospels as a "survivor object," a rescued material trace that endured the attempted extermination of the culture that produced it. Balancing art historical and ethnographic detail, Watenpaugh recreates for the reader the lost Armenian worlds that were the homelands of her biographical subject.

*The Missing Pages* also enters into a welcome dialogue with the currently flourishing "history of the book" and "biography of things" subfields and their vibrant convergences. Alongside Beatrice Greundler's *History of the Arabic Book* (Harvard University Press, 2020), Seth Jacobowitz's *Writing Technology in Meiji Japan: A Media History of Modern*

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<sup>5</sup> Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh, "When Art and Religion Collide," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 July 2010, at <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-jul-19-la-oe-watenpaugh-bible-20100719-story.html>, accessed 02.10.2019.

*Japanese Literature and Visual Culture* (Harvard University Press, 2020), Marina Rustow's *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue* (Princeton University Press, 2020), and Edgar Garcia's *The Signs of the Americas: A Poetics of Pictography* (Chicago University Press, 2020), *The Missing Pages*, like these other multimodal studies, broadens the literature of non-European book and cultural production and object mobility.

Chapter 2 begins in Hromkla (currently Rumkale), in the scriptorium of the “God-protected castle,” at the moment of the Gospels Book’s creation. Once perched above the Euphrates River, the ruins of the Hromkla fortress and monastery are now half-submerged - the consequence of a Turkish dam project. This once militarily important stronghold, strategically poised at the intersection of international trade routes, sheltered the seat of the Armenian Catholicos for the Kingdom of Cilicia from the mid-twelfth century. Watenpaugh chronicles the history of Cilician Armenians in cooperation and conflict with Crusaders, Seljuks, and Mamluks. Armenian nobles formed networks of alliances through diplomacy, mastery of languages, and marriages with Crusaders, Byzantine royalty, Mongols, and even sultans of Aleppo. Stretched across the fertile northern Mediterranean coast, the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia suffered frequent invasions, punctuated by brief periods of stability and prosperity. Watenpaugh observes that Hromkla’s location also enabled aesthetic interchange, especially with Europe.

Armenian artists played an honored role in Hromkla’s religious sphere. Under generous royal and religious patronage, scribes and craftspeople produced luxurious liturgical objects, Bibles, and Gospel Books, which commanded exceptional reverence as materializations of the holy word. Elaborate colophons recorded the genealogy of patrons and circumstances of the commissions. Subsequent marginalia noted lineage of ownership, invasions and earthquakes, as well as anathemas and exhortations. Roslin’s 1256 Gospels Book, the subject of *The Missing Pages*, was commissioned by Catholicos Constantine of Partzrper. The resplendent pages were filled with Toros Roslin’s beautifully executed calligraphy, with portraits of saints, angels, palm trees, peacocks, and roosters rendered in lush, color-saturated mineral pigments, silver, and gold. A dazzling crucifix and precious ornaments adorned its binding. As custom dictated, the Canon Tables’s concordance lists nestled columns of numbers within architectural forms. Somewhat unusually for the period, the Canon Tables also featured some of the manuscript’s most exuberant ornamentation. The Zeytun Gospels represents Roslin’s earliest signed manuscript -one of only seven affirmed extant examples of his work.

The Mamluk sack of Hromkla in 1292 devastated Armenian monastic life, but by then, Toros Roslin’s glittering pages had already begun their long peregrination. During a sojourn in the monastery of Furnus, it was rebound and adorned with sacred relics, before that city too, was overrun. The Furnus priests, devastated and impoverished, sold the manuscript to one Mahdesi Hagop. By his hand and perhaps others, the holy book eventually reached Zeytun sometime in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. In Chapter 3, Watenpaugh resurrects with vivid specificity the distinctive urban fabric, religious traditions, and intercommunal tensions of the once-thriving Ottoman Armenian world of Zeytun (currently Süleymanı). Perched high on a crag and dubbed the “Eagle’s nest,” the overwhelmingly Christian city

had boasted some eight Armenian churches, a monastery, and as many as 20,000 Armenian residents on the eve of WWI. During the manuscript's life in Zeytun, the Gospels Book, along with other surviving relics of medieval Armenian Cilicia, was closely guarded, removed from its hiding place only on ceremonial occasions. Priests and parishioners believed it possessed protective powers of its own. However, not even the sanctified Gospels Book, it seemed, could protect Zeytun from the first waves of violent Ottoman mass expulsions in early April of 1915.

Watenpaugh underlines this pivotal moment for the Gospels, as it was removed for the last time from its religious function and began a long transformation from sacred talisman to fragmented masterpiece of medieval art. In the fourth and fifth chapters, she traces the movement of the holy book through the bloody Battle of Marash. The Gospels Book, wrapped in a paisley shawl, was dropped in a wrenching moment of flight. By the time the book reappeared in Armenian hands, the chain of learned custody - the succession of Armenian notables, intellectuals, and humanitarians who understood the priceless nature of the medieval volume - had been broken. Precious ornaments had been stripped from the binding, the eight pages of the Canon Tables amputated from the mother manuscript. From here forward, Watenpaugh's meticulous reporting follows each appearance of the mutilated holy book - in testimonies, articles, archives, and interviews - as it winds its way through Aleppo, Istanbul, and ultimately to Yerevan and the United States. As she charts the book's passage from hand to hand, she portrays the figures who interacted with it and ushered it into the art historical record. She pays particular homage to art historian Sirarpie Der Nersessian, a seminal figure in the establishment of Armenian art history as a discipline, and the scholar who discerned the connection between Toros Roslin's fractured Canon Tables and the mother manuscript.

In Chapter 5, "Aleppo," Watenpaugh details the legal processes of Armenian deportation as well as the seizure and destruction of moveable and immovable properties. She emphasizes that the arrest and deportation of church leaders in the early waves of the genocidal process ensured religious institutions and their congregations would be shorn of leadership. Then, churches were often destroyed or repurposed by the state; the sight of a church engulfed in flames signified conquest as well as brutal cultural destruction. The Ottoman Young Turk "Abandoned Properties" laws of 1915 required that liturgical objects, paintings, and holy books, icons, and furniture be recorded and safeguarded; in reality, precious treasures of the Armenian church were never seen again. Watenpaugh estimates that as many as thirty thousand religious manuscripts might have been lost in this period - maimed, used as wrapping materials, or sold on the black market. Much of the material heritage of the medieval Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia was destroyed in this manner. The rare remaining objects, such as the Zeytun Gospels, thus became even more powerful repositories of memory - simply by virtue of their survival. Watenpaugh recounts other "survivor objects," such as the Mush Homiliarium, rescued through heroic feats of ordinary Armenians who recognized that in saving the heirlooms of their culture and religions, even while under unimaginable duress, they would also be saving themselves.

Although *The Missing Pages* gives primacy to the Zeytun Gospels as the central "survi-

vor object,” in the narrative, Watenpaugh unspools multiple storylines in this ambitious and multifaceted book. In the closing chapters, she pays tribute to many Armenian individuals who recognized the urgency of salvaging all possible traces of Armenian intellectual, spiritual, and artistic life as they fled. Asadur Surenian-Basilosian, a descendant of one of the Zeytun’s princely clans, spirited the manuscript to Marash. Artin Der Ghazarian secreted it from Turkish troops and then deputized his sister to deliver it from Marash, even as his own family faced barbaric violence. Later, leaders such as Boghos Nubar and Avedis Aharonian pressed for reparations at the Paris Peace Conference. Other intellectuals, Archbishop Artavazd Surmeyan among them, rescued dispersed fragments of Armenian legacy, publishing a magisterial, three-volume account, *The History of the Armenians of Aleppo*.<sup>6</sup> Notably, a number of American missionaries, scholars, and humanitarians also aided in the effort - James Lyman, Ernest Partridge, Frances W. Kelsey, Mabel Elliott - rescuing valuables and bearing witness. Watenpaugh’s closing chapters movingly recount stories of individuals, often survivors of depredations themselves, who exhibited tremendous fortitude in saving Gospels, prayer books, icons, and other artifacts. By memorializing the actions of these Armenians to rescue their national cultural heritage, under conditions of horrific violence, she forges her own work of memory and witness and introduces a new model for art historical monographs as social histories and material studies. In reconstituting Toros Roslin’s Zeytun Gospels as a living entity with spiritual power and agency, she compels us to consider this “survivor object” not only as artistic masterpiece, but also as surrogate for countless other works - lost, disfigured, stabbed, vandalized - all of them the patrimony of humankind and all worthy of an internationally recognized system of norms.

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<sup>6</sup> Artavazd Surmeyan, Պատմություն Հալեպի Հայոց [History of the Armenian Aleppo] (Paris: Éditions Araks, 1950).