

Dionysius the Areopagite and Armenian Mystagogy



Mystagogy, derived from **mystery**, is indeed a mysterious word, describing an uncommon genre of literature. The mystery of mystagogy refers to something quite specific, to which the Armenian Christian has a clue in the first hymn of the Divine Liturgy, the *Badarak, Khorhurt Khorin*, “O, Mystery Deep!” In the hymn, the mystery is the *Badarak* itself, and in early Christian writing, the “mysteries” were those practices and teachings in which only the baptized, initiated Christians were allowed to participate. “Mystery,” as used by the early Church, was nearly synonymous with what we would call today **sacraments**. Mystagogy was the initiation into those mysteries, a process of teaching and explanation after baptism. It developed as a genre of interpretation and later blossomed into the highly specialized genre of interpretation of the sacraments and specifically the liturgical services of the Church. And as V. Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan notes, “among the Eastern churches, the Armenians possess perhaps the richest tradition of liturgical exegetical literature.” Armenian mystagogy is a rich subset of Armenian Christian literature, as there are several commentaries on the Divine Liturgy and other liturgical services, texts that set out to explain and comment on not only the text of the services, but to interpret the movements, the songs, even the smells of the incense.

What does all this have to do with Dionysius the Areopagite, whom the Armenian Church commemorates this Thursday? We first hear about Dionysius the Areopagite in The Book of Acts, 17:34. After St. Paul delivers a long sermon in Athens, known as the Areopogas Sermon due to the area in Athens where he gave it, St. Luke mentions that “some men joined him and believed,” among them one Dionysius the Areopagite. Later Christian tradition of both the East and the West says that he went on to become the first Bishop of Athens. More importantly for our purposes, he was eventually identified with a corpus of writings that were incredibly influential throughout Christendom. While the identification of the author of these works with the convert and bishop mentioned in Acts is highly unlikely from the perspective of modern scholarship (and not only modern scholarship: the very first mention of the texts in any language also questions their identification with St. Dionysius the Areopagite), the Armenian Christian tradition

throughout the centuries did not question the authenticity of the texts written by the author now usually called “Pseudo-Dionysius.”

Recommended Source	Comments
Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works	The definitive English translation of the collected works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. With informative introductions.
The Armenian Version of the Works Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite	The Armenian translation of the Dionysian corpus has subtle but important differences from the Greek. Robert Thomson has translated the Armenian version into English, paying attention to those differences. At the St. Nersess Library.
Indices to the Armenian Version of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: Greek-Armenian and Armenian-Greek	A dictionary of technical and philosophical terms found in the Armenian translation of Pseudo-Dionysius, comparing the Greek with the Armenian. Compiled by Robert Thomson. At the St. Nersess Library.

The Dionysian corpus consists of four texts and a collection of letters. The texts are *The Divine Names*, *The Mystical Theology*, *the Celestial Hierarchy*, and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. It is difficult to overstate how important this set of texts has been in Christian thinking overall and for Armenian Christians specifically. The author of these texts (and this is a major reason why it is difficult to maintain the identification with Dionysius the Areopagite) is immersed in the philosophical world of **Neo-Platonism**, a strain of philosophical thought that re-read both Plato (hence, Neo-Platonism) and Aristotle together, as well as other important Greek philosophy. Inspired in large part by the account of the movement of the soul in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, thinkers like Plotinus, Porphyry, and Proclus developed a theory of knowledge and the soul dependent on ascent and descent to and from a conception of the Divine characterized first and foremost by its Unity, its Oneness. Later Christian thinkers found this Neo-Platonic framework helpful, and we can see the influence of this philosophical tradition throughout Christian intellectual history: in the Armenian case, you might recall from last week that David the Invincible Philosopher, in addition to writing *The Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy* also composed a commentary of Porphyry’s *Isagoge*.

Dionysius the Areopagite, in his corpus, makes extensive of this pattern of ascent and descent to describe how and to what extent a human can have knowledge of God, the order of angels, and even the earthly church hierarchy (Dionysius actually coins the word “hierarchy” from “hierarch,” an older term for a bishop or other prominent church leader). While the discussion of knowledge of God and the pattern of ascent were the parts of the Dionysian corpus that eventually exercised the most influence on Western Christianity, providing a framework for the mystical theology of John of the Cross or Bonaventure’s *Journey of the Mind Into God*, the mystagogy of *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* was also a major influence for Armenian theologians. In *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysius describes the various “mysteries,” such as baptism (which he calls “the rite of illumination”), communion or the Divine Liturgy, and ordination, then using his philosophical framework to explain these sacraments.

While there are some early references to Dionysius in Armenian theological writing, it was Stepanos of Siunik (Step'anos Siwnec'i), Bishop of Siunik in the eighth century who made the first translation into Armenian that survives. Later historians give the details of the life of this incredible scholar and devoted bishop, most prominently Bishop Stepanos Orbelean, whose history we mentioned last week as also providing biographical details about David the Invincible Philosopher. According to Orbelean, Stepanos of Siunik travelled twice to Constantinople. During his first visit, between 712 and 718, with the help of the imperial consul David, he made the translation of Dionysius into Armenian. It is no coincidence that this scholar who translated *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, with its commentary on the various sacraments, also wrote his own commentary on the Daily Offices (the *Jamerkutyun* services). This commentary, an interpretation of the meaning of the Hours, was important for the development of this genre of Armenian mystagogy, and in it we can see the clear influence of the writings of Dionysius. In fact, almost all later Armenian commentaries on liturgical services, such as the rich tradition of Armenian commentary on the *Badarak*, exhibits the influence of the Dionysian corpus. Khosrov Andzevatsi, the father of Gregory of Narek, wrote a famous commentary on the Divine Liturgy, which provided the framework for later authors such as Movses Yerzingatsi and Hovhannes Arjishetsi. All of these commentaries are part of the rich tradition of Armenian mystagogical literature, texts that seek to interpret the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, ultimately with the hope that we may participate more fully in that life.

Recommended Source	Comments
The Commentary on the Armenian Daily Office by Bishop Step'anos Siwnec'i	Bishop Stepanos of Siunik, who translated the corpus of Dionysius the Areopagite into Armenian's commentary on the daily services of the Armenian Church. Translated with commentary by V. Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan.
Commentary of the Four Evangelists	A commentary on the Gospels by Bishop Stepanos of Siunik, translated by Michael B. Papazian. We can develop a more complete picture of his methods of interpretation by looking at his different commentaries.
Commentary on the Divine Liturgy	By Xosrov Anjewac'i, translated by S. Peter Cowe. One of the most influential of the Armenian commentaries on the liturgy.