
Reviewed by Elyse Semerdjian

An illuminated Armenian manuscript containing the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John rests in an archive in Yerevan, Armenia, while its missing eight pages of canon tables—concordance lists of passages that connect related episodes within the gospels—are housed at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The dismembered Zeytun Gospels is the topic of *The Missing Pages*, Heghnar Watenpaugh’s biography of a manuscript and the history of the people to whom it belongs. The story begins with the manuscript’s creation by master painter Toros Roslin in 1256 in Zeytun, a pristine rural enclave in Cilicia prior to the campaign to exterminate Ottoman Armenians that would eventually send the manuscript into exile. The Zeytun Gospels offers us an important lesson to consider the fate of stolen antiquities in Syria, including the future legal battles over provenance and custodianship. The Armenian manuscript drew attention in 2010 during a lawsuit initiated by the Armenian Western Prelacy against the Getty Museum in Los Angeles over provenance and ownership of stolen Armenian heritage. Watenpaugh unfurls the mystery of how the manuscript was cleaved in two and how its legacy spread across seven countries concluding with a lawsuit that left eight missing pages in Los Angeles.

Watenpaugh’s study will be appreciated by audiences hungry for excellent story telling. The chapters skillfully unravel the mystery of the *Missing Pages* as it travels from the Hromkla fortress where they were composed to Zeytun where the gospels were held in an iron box within the Church of the Holy Mother of God and later moved to Marash by Dr. Artin Der Ghazarian before it was cleaved into two. Who stole the missing pages will not be spoiled in this review, but the reveal is sure to surprise readers. While the mother manuscript made its way to the Matenadaran Repository of Manuscripts in Yerevan, the eight missing pages of canon tables were held for seventy years by the Atamian family and eventually sold to the Getty in 1994.

The Zeytun Gospels are a potent metaphor for the pillaged and dispersed Armenian Community of the Ottoman Empire that fell victim to genocide in 1915. Watenpaugh effectively ties the fate of what she calls the “survivor object,” to the fate of the Armenian community exiled from their ancestral homelands in Anatolia (40). Torn and disappeared from their original context, both the community and its sacred text lay dismantled in diaspora. These interactions are brought into relief within a brief epilogue where the author places herself in the narrative among Armenian pilgrims visiting the Getty Center in Los Angeles who interact with their sacred object within the church-like museum, a “gleaming white citadel of art” that mirrors in awe-inspiring wonder the “God-protected castle” of Hromkla where Toros Roslin originally ornamented the pages in luxurious jeweled colors and gold leaf, the finest materials available to him in the thirteenth century.

Noteworthy is how Watenpaugh’s talents as a scholar of material culture allows her to skillfully read the material traces of exile on the manuscript’s surface. A vivid description of the large crease in the looted pages prompts her “to imagine how, at some point, unknown hands removed the Canon Tables from the mother manuscript, how they folded it, perhaps tucked it in a pocket or in the folds of a fabric belt like the ones men worse in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire” (22). With such engaging analysis and rich prose, Watenpaugh prompts the reader to imagine just how the Canon Tables were snatched from their original locale and buried in the smuggler’s clothing. Furthermore, the author’s personal relationship to the Getty controversy prompts her to embrace both a role as a public intellectual and a more personal narrative style in this work—a refreshing break from the conventions of history writing that is sure to invite a broader audience to the conversation.
It’s important to emphasize that *The Missing Pages* is really a work that only an historian like Watenpaugh, whose work straddles Syrian Studies, Ottoman Studies, and Armenian Studies, can undertake. The multicultural, polyglot world within which the text emerged is unearthed through a masterful reading of Arabic, Turkish, and especially Western Armenian texts. UNESCO has listed Western Armenian, the dialect spoken by the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, as an endangered language slated for extinction—the Armenian Genocide’s final victim. Pre-genocide Zeytun and Marash are brought to life through Watenpaugh’s close reading of Armenian histories accessible only because of the prolific writing culture Armenians brought with them from Ottoman lands to their new homes in diaspora. From these sources, she captures a moving image of Aleppine historian and Armenian Archbishop Ardavast Surmeian “choking” when he observed a vender in Erzurum wrapping olives in a page of Armenian manuscript containing medieval *vergatakir* script (181). Armenian books, like the Armenian people, were subjected to both ritualized and casual violence as they were stabbed, defaced, and circulated clandestinely throughout the region during the Genocide. She estimates that these un-inventoried and missing Armenian manuscripts could number as high as 30,000, affirming once again why the survival of the Zeytun Gospels is so meaningful to the Armenian community.

Watenpaugh’s narrative is also enhanced by the vivid ethnographic writing documenting her experience as an Armenian inside post-genocide Turkey. In those moments, she interacts with current residents of Zeytun—the descendants of those who perpetrated the killings and deportations that left the region without a single Armenian. As an Armenian visitor, she describes both the warm and awkward exchanges she experiences with those living among Armenian ruins they don’t recognize due to a state policy that largely expunged public memory of the Armenians who once lived there a century ago. She offers a description of how the now-flooded plain that surrounds the citadel where the manuscript was created continues the process of erasure that began in 1915. The author analyzes defaced inscriptions on barely accessible architectural ruins helping the reader grasp how the Gospels is but one example among thousands of disappeared, erased Armenian heritage. The destruction of heritage as an act of genocide was a project genocide scholar Raphael Lemkin started but did not include in his final draft of the UN Convention for the Prevention of Genocide (1948). Watenpaugh effectively resuscitates his project making the case for heritage as a human right and the destruction of art as an act of cultural genocide.

The Taliban’s destruction of the Bamyan Buddha statues, ISIS’s destruction of Palmyra, Syria coupled with the gruesome execution of Syrian archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad, and recent threats by the US president, Donald Trump, to target Iranian heritage with military strike (though he later promised to “be very gentle with Iranian cultural institutions”) are all examples of how heritage is targeted by political extremism and war. The questions raised by the destruction of the Zaytun Gospels are ones that will continue to haunt the Middle East well into the future as war threatens to erase the heritage that importantly once supported the public memory and unified communities. Watenpaugh’s ethnographic sections demonstrates just how fragile public memory is and how it can be lost when monuments are obliterated, heritage looted, and people erased. *The Missing Pages* is a biography of a manuscript which is, by extension, the history of a people cut down by violence and scattered across the earth like the pages of a looted sacred text. Watenpaugh’s approach to looted Armenian heritage is certain to attract the attention of scholars outside her field promising to usher forth a conversation about the relationship between cultural heritage and human rights.

*Elyse Semerdjian is a professor of Islamic World/Middle Eastern History at Whitman College. She teaches a broad range of courses on the subject of gender, sexuality, social history, culture, and politics of the Middle East. A specialist in the history of the Ottoman Empire and Syria, she authored “Off the Straight Path”: Illicit Sex, Law, and Community in Ottoman Aleppo (2008)*
as well as several articles on gender, non-Muslims, and law in the Ottoman Empire. She received her MA in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor and her PhD in History from Georgetown University. Her dissertation earned both distinction from Georgetown University and the Syrian Studies Association Best Dissertation Prize in 2003. She currently serves as the President of the Syrian Studies Association.
The Missing Pages
The Modern Life of a Medieval Manuscript
From Genocide to Justice

Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh