

Armenian Medieval Architecture along Boundary Akhurian River

French Researches in Turkey and Armenia

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Abstract—The Shirak district, part of the province of Ayrarat, since the 8th century is the domain of the Bagratides, a noble family of Armenia, which rose to power after the Arab domination over the region. The first ‘Golden Age’ of Ani is interrupted when the armies of the Byzantine emperor Constantine IX capture the city in 1045. In spite of these conflicts, the territory remains prosperous and flourishing during the 12th and 13th centuries. Then, the decline of commerce in the region, together with the development of conflicts, leads to the gradual abandonment of the city. In 1921, the treaty of Kars defines the Akhurian River as the new border between Turkey and the Soviet Empire, thus splitting the ancient province in half. The goal of this brief article is to explain how the possibility given through about 15 years to a French archaeological team, including historians, archaeologists and architects, to work in the different parts of the ancient Shirak Region, torn apart by modern history, has made possible to rise new questions and to sketch new interpretations of his ancient history, based on the study of less considered or almost forgotten monuments, along the boundary river. This work focused on the results of investigation of several fortified sites and ruined churches in the Akhurian valley, Dashtadem and Aruch, and it has been the occasion for new collaboration with Armenian scholars.

Keywords – *Armenian medieval architecture; Shirak district; Ani; Akhurian River; French archaeologic team*

I. INTRODUCTION

Shirak district, part of the province of Ayrarat, is since the 8th century, the domain of the Bagratides, a noble family of Armenia, which rose to power after the Arab domination over the region. Its territory spreads on both sides of the Akhurian River, tributary of the Aras, between the great rival empires: the Byzantine Empire and the Abbasid Caliphate [1]. Being the arbitrator between the two powers, Ashot I, lord Bagratid, is appointed Prince of the Princes by the caliph, a title that endows him with a prevailing position among the Armenian nobility [2]. He then receives from the hands of the Caliph a royal crown, thus restoring in 886 an Armenian monarchy that had been abolished for four centuries. The seat of the Bagratide

power moves at the beginning of the 9th century between the cities of Bagaran, Shirakavan, still on the Akhurian River. Then, in 981, King Ashot III establishes his capital in Ani, the most congested part of the valley, which offers a naturally fortified place that he begins to strengthen with ramparts. It marks the beginning of the glorious history of the “City of a thousand churches”, which also becomes an important economic crossroads. King S’mbat II, son of Ashot III, considerably enlarges the city at the end of the 10th century, and provides it with a long and powerful rampart. He undertakes the construction of a vast cathedral, while the city is progressively filled with houses and shops, and surrounded by partly troglodytic suburbs.

The first “Golden Age” of Ani is interrupted when the armies of the Byzantine emperor Constantine IX capture the city in 1045. In 1064, the Seljuk army of Sultan Alp Arslan, coming from Central Asia, takes the city in turn, before continuing its progression in the Anatolian Peninsula [3]. The Sultan entrusts the province to the administration of the Shaddadid emirs, a group of Islamised Kurds already present on the territory [4]. Their ruling power will be challenged until the end of the 12th century by the Christian troops of Georgia, acting on behalf of King Georgi III and Queen Tamar. In his name, Generals Zakare and Iwane take the city in 1199 and manage to stay in place until the arrival of the Mongols in 1236.

In spite of these conflicts, the territory remains prosperous and flourishing during the 12th and 13th centuries. Then, the decline of commerce in the region, together with the development of conflicts, leads to the gradual abandonment of the city. The whole region is deserted and impoverished during several centuries because of the uninterrupted conflicts between the new Safavid and Ottoman Empires. The Russian Empire meddles in regional conflicts in the early 18th century: the Qajar power of Tehran is declining, and the Russian army advances several times in Turkish territory, past the limits of the historic Ayrarat Province. From the very beginning of the 19th century, many Armenian populations of Ottoman territories

migrate towards Russian Eastern Armenia. The movement resumes during the Genocide, at the beginning of the 20th century. At the same time, Muslim populations from the eastern side of the Akhurian are driven into Ottoman territory. In 1921, the treaty of Kars defines the Akhurian River as the new border between Turkey and the Soviet Empire, thus splitting the ancient province in half [5].

The goal of this brief article is to explain how the possibility given through about 15 years to a French team, including historians, archaeologists and architects, to work in the different parts of the ancient Shirak Region, torn apart by modern history, has made possible to rise new questions and to sketch new interpretations of his ancient history, based on the study of less considered or almost forgotten monuments, along the boundary river.

II. HISTORY OF THE STUDY OF ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF ANI

From the last years of the 19th century until World War One, a group of Armenian-Russian historians studied the archaeological site of Ani, and part of the surrounding region. The team, directed by Nikola ĭMarr [6], is composed of Iosif A. Orbeli, David Kipchidze and the architect Toros Toramanian, amongst others. Their work is interrupted by the conflict, and the publication of their research remains largely incomplete. The new border places Ani in a military zone, out of reach. The Karabakh War, in late 20th century, leads to the closure of the border between Turkey and Armenia. It has remained closed ever since.

Because of this political situation, the study of the region is very difficult throughout the 20th century, while modern methods of art history and archaeology are developing elsewhere. Historians of Armenian art often have to settle for old and imperfect plans in order to work on monuments they cannot reach. Most of the studies deal with Christian religious heritage, whereas fortified, civil, economic, urban heritages are often neglected. On both sides of the border, national ideologies may influence research as well as preservation and restoration processes. The Armenian heritage in Turkey was the target of several campaigns of voluntary destruction throughout the 20th century.

At the end of the 20th century, the French government was made aware of the situation of the archaeological site of Ani and enlisted a group of experts to consider its designation as UNESCO World Heritage Site (finally obtained in 2016). A French archaeological mission was therefore created in 1998 and was able to conduct its work on site until 2005, in the form of field sessions of three to four weeks a year. Professors Nicolas Faucherre (University of Aix-en-Provence), Cécile Treffort (University of Poitiers) and Jean-Pierre Mahé (Institut de France) successively led the mission. The presence of the French team was possible thanks to the cooperation of Pr. Beyhan Karamagarali, of Hacettepe University of Ankara, who was the official scientific manager of the site for the Turkish authorities until 2005.

III. FRENCH ARCHAEOLOGICAL TEAM'S WORK FOCUSES

The French mission devoted itself, on the one hand, to verifying and updating the old information on the religious buildings of the site and on the numerous epigraphic documents that had been preserved. At the same time, part of the team, among which were topographers, architect and archaeologists, undertook a global survey of all the fortifications of the city "Fig. 1", and a precise study of the great northern rampart, which had not been analysed at the beginning of the 20th century. The survey and the archaeological analysis of the built heritage were enriched by the data of studies in stratigraphy of the subsoil [7]. The main interest of this rampart is that it shows elements of structures built throughout at least four successive campaigns of construction and modernisation. It enables the identification of the forms, the building techniques, and even some decorative patterns that were used between the end of the 10th century and the middle of the 13th century. Their dating can be determined with the help of literary sources, epigraphic testimonies visible on the monument, and their state of stratigraphic connection, which can be easily interpreted. Thus, the information collected on the northern rampart of the city constitute a solid frame of reference to facilitate the interpretation of other elements of the defensive structure of the city, but most of all of other monuments located in the same region, often deprived of written sources.



Fig. 1. Ani, Turkey. North Western rampart. Photograph by Ph. Dangles, Mission Française d'Ani.

The French team was allowed to visit several sites contemporary to the city in Turkish territory: the Tignis Fort, the fortified city of Tunçkaya – Keviran Kalesi, the monasteries of Xckonk, Karmir Vank and so on. But some essential monuments, as the fortified site of Mahasberd, and the cities of Mren and Bagaran, have long remained out of reach because of the militarization of the border.

In 2005, the Turkish authorities put an end to the cooperation with the French team, which decided to continue its work on the territory of the Republic of Armenia, in the eastern half of the Shirak and on the southwestern side of Mount Aragats (currently located in the Aragatsotn Province). Under the direction of Professor Jean-Pierre Mahé

and then Professor Isabelle Augé (University of Montpellier), in close collaboration with those responsible for the heritage of the Shirak and the Archaeological Museum of Gyumri (Larissa Eganian et Hamasasp Khatchatrian), we have explored the different fortified sites of the region and we have undertaken their study, from 2006 to 2012. This work will be published in France in 2018.

This work focused on:

- The Akhurian valley, upstream from Gyumri: fortified sites and ruined churches of Vaghramaberd and Tirashen, close to the monastery of Marmashen;

- The middle valley of the Akhurian, south from Gyumri: churches and fortifications of Akhurik and Erazgavors “Fig. 2”, small fort of Gusanagyugh “Fig. 3” [8];
- The complex fortified site of Dashtadem, linked to the group of churches of Talin;
- The fortified site of Aruch, also linked to the same ecclesial ensemble [9].



Fig. 2. Erazgavors, Armenia. General plan of the church and the fortifications. Topography by Ph. Sablayrolles, M. Arbelet; drawing by Ph. Dangles, Mission Française d’Ani.



Fig. 3. Gusanagyugh, Armenia. Team at work inside the fortress. Photograph by M. Dupin, Mission Française d'Ani.

This work has been the occasion for new collaboration, especially with the archaeologists of the Institute of Archaeology of the Republic of Armenia, Diana Mirijanian and Astghik Babajanian, on the site of Dashtadem.

An important part of these sites had been the subject of several studies, or clearance and restoration work by Armenians teams of archaeologists in the 1970s and 1980s, but they often have not been finished, or entirely published, or archived properly. They are currently being taken over by a new generation of archaeologists, sometimes as part of international cooperation.

The research we were able to do convinced us of the need:

To approach the sites in their own context and complexity: church buildings cannot be isolated from elements of defence, housing, or facilities linked to economic activity, which surround them, and without which they cannot be understood.

To approach – beyond difficulties – the historic region in its entirety, overcoming the many constraints due to the political situation between the two countries, and to the tribulations of the academic field of them both.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the early 11th century to the early 14th century, the region experienced great prosperity, along with great instability. Beyond the walls of Ani, we know very little about the relationship between the city and its territory. Armenian historiography values the productions of the Bagratid Kingdom of Ani, which maintained for 80 years, but probably minimizes the importance of the Shaddadid Era (more than 130 years) during which the prosperity of Ani was as high as before: two mosques are built in Ani, Dashtadem becomes an important fortified place in order to secure the territory [10], the old fortification of Aruč is renovated, and so on. The effects of the rivalry between the Georgians and the Shaddadids are still poorly evaluated: they fight for control over the capital and the whole region for over half a century, which probably sees the construction – by whom? – of the twin forts of Tignis and Gusanagyugh,

the restoration of the fortress of Ca'kar, close to Mahasberd, etc. For the time being, we cannot attribute the construction of the fortified sites of Tirashen and Vaghramaberd, designed originally without any place of worship. How can we understand the development of the sites of Erazgavros and Akhurik, whose ancient church was probably at first protected by a small outer wall, and then destroyed and turned into a fortified post?

The last period of prosperity of the region must also be taken into account. Studies underline the role of the Georgian generals, but their footprint should be of more importance in the region than in the city, where they hardly managed to rule for 40 years. On the other hand, one should not minimize the role of their Shanshanian heirs, vassals of the new Mongol authority, who completely renovated the ramparts of the city, but also worked on a wider territory, as shown by the epigraphy of Dashtadem.

Our work on these different sites made us fully aware of the extent of the disruptions that occurred in the region in the modern era, which has witnessed important population movements, the wrecking of Armenian collective memory on the Turkish side, the creation of new villages for western populations on the Armenian side, the abandonment of several villages, of places of worship and burial of Muslim communities that used to live there, the adoption of new toponyms to replace the foreign-sounding names and so on.

We must therefore be able to cross the border, but also go through the filters of modern history to catch a glimpse of the complexity of the ancient history of settlement on this coveted territory.

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