During the tenth and eleventh centuries, between Turks and Byzantines, Armenian kingdoms led a perilous life

Anthony Bryer

'We need stone cutters, by the thousand;
Gravel carriers, water carriers
By the hundred, by the thousand.
We need masons, plasterers
By the hundred, by the thousand;
We need wood carvers, masters and men
By the hundred, by the thousand.
Oh I am calling, let them come;
He who loves God, let him come.'

So demanded one of the heroes of the Armenian epic, The Daredevils of Sassoun, when they built the monastery church of Marouta's High Mother of God. The church was erected in seven days. Forty priests, forty archdeacons, forty deacons and forty candle-bearers came to consecrate the forty altars. It has been suggested that the foundation in Sassoun may have an echo in fact, for the building of King Gagik's monastery church of the Holy Cross on the island of Aghthamar in Lake Van was carried out on the same heroic scale — although it took nearly seven years of feudal corvées, rather than seven days of miracle, to complete. The church survives almost intact, the most beautiful and intricate achievement of medieval Armenian architecture. The marvellously blue lake, and the tall mountains that encircle it, still invest Aghthamar with the legendary quality of Armenian epic. The hermits, who once looked down from the mountains to the changing seasons reflected on the lake, called it an earthly paradise.
The heart of ancient Armenia, and of the medieval kingdom of Vaspurkan, lay in the triangle formed by three lakes, Van (now in Turkey), Sevan (now in Soviet Armenia) and Urmia (now in Iran). Hayk, legendary and eponymous father of the Armenian people, came to Van when the ancient Urartu held its great rock fortress. His descendants peopled the steep valleys of Armenia and looked with awe upon the peaks of Ararat. In 301 St. Gregory the Illuminator baptized King Tiridates of Armenia and the country became the world's first Christian state. But it was rarely united; and Armenians, who emigrated to more prosperous lands from earliest times, look upon their independent Church as tangible evidence of their national identity. Since it has formed the borderland of the Roman and Persian Empires, of Byzantium and the Caliphate, and of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, Armenia has always been the threshold of conflict, the scene of shifting spheres of influence. But for Muslim and Christian border barons, the capitals of Constantinople and Baghdad were equally remote and a local independence and accommodation of faith was often possible. Many Armenians made distinguished careers in the Byzantine Empire, but as monophysite Christians, those who stayed in Armenia often found the Muslims marginally less hateful than the Orthodox Byzantines. Armenian rulers usually looked to the Caliphate for political recognition and protection, but kept a wary eye on developments in Byzantium. Armenian princes competed for a precarious title to supremacy; the internal history of their lordships is of appalling complexity.

Unlike Byzantium, with its centralized bureaucracy, Armenia and Georgia shared a feudal, aristocratic, society. Armenian chronicles are animated genealogies, interspersed with tales of conquests from outside, followed by struggles to raise, or evade, tribute. Their ruling families learned early how to survive. The greatest, the Bagratids, first appear as lords of the fortress town of Ispir on the Akampsis (Çoroh) in northeastern Turkey, in the first century A.D. For several centuries they quietly assembled castles and estates along the Byzantine frontier, becoming coronants of Armenia. The family ramified, and eventually gave ruling dynasties to both Armenia and Georgia; the last Bagratid king in Georgia was not deposed until 1810. The Bagratids of Armenia achieved supremacy in 885 when Calif Motamid recognized Ashot the Great as 'King of Kings of Armenia'—but Ashot took good care to have his title ratified by the Emperor Basil I, for both the Byzantines and the Arabs regarded him as a sort of vassal viceroy in Armenia.

Ashot’s kingdom lay in north-eastern Armenia. Its centres were at Dvin (where the Supreme Catholicos of the Church resided), and at Ani (where he built a splendid walled capital overlooking a branch of the Araxes). But his independence and authority depended upon his maintaining a delicate balance between his Arab and Byzantine neighbours. Ashot’s son Smbat I (890–914) was not so astute; he adopted a pro-Byzantine policy at a time when the Byzantines could do little to help him against Arab vengeance. The Calif sent his Emir Yusuf to reduce the errant vassal. In 908 Yusuf deposed Smbat and offered the crown of the King of Kings of Armenia to Hachik-Gagik Artzruni.

The Artzruni estates lay to the south and east of Lake Van. Like the Bagratids, the Artzrunis had been building up their lordship from small beginnings. But they were never more than the second family in Armenia. Both dynasties regarded Hayk as too humble an ancestor, but where the Bagratids eventually claimed descent from David and Solomon and cousinship with the Virgin Mary, the Artzrunis were content to trace their genealogy back to Adremelech, parricide of Sennacherib, King of Assyria. In an age when Caucasian lords ruled as clan chiefs, such formal ancestry was important. In fact, the most famous Artzruni relative may have been the Byzantine Emperor Leo V. Their family name is derived from the high office that had supposedly been bestowed upon an ancestor, that of bearing a golden eagle before the Arsacid king. The eagle became the emblem of the Artzruni kingdom of Vaspurkan.

Hachik-Gagik Artzruni seized the bait of a crown and, as Yusuf had planned, civil war ensued, allowing the Emir to conquer Bagratid Armenia with ease. Smbat was martyred in 914. Gagik was regarded by many Armenians as an anti-king and traitor, but any pangs of conscience
he may have had were doubtless quelled when Yusuf placed on his head:

'a crown of pure gold and artistic workmanship, adorned with precious jewels ... He clad him in a tunic woven with gold and girt him with a belt and a sword resplendent with gold ornaments beyond imagination and description. Mounted on a horse with gilt trappings, he shone like the sun amid the stars; large companies of soldiers, armed from head to foot, stood to the right and to the left; the weapons clashed, the swords glittered, the trumpets resounded the horns blared, the flutes shrilled, the lyres gave forth melodious sounds; psalteries and banners preceded and followed him, and the soldiers of the royal army let out a mighty shout which shook the earth. With such pomp he was installed.'

The description is that of Gagik’s relative and court chronicler, Thomas Artzruni.

In 915 the Byzantines moved at last, defeating the Emir Yusuf and restoring much of the Bagratid kingdom to Ashot II. In 917 Empire and Caliphate signed a five-year truce. But in Vaspurkan, Gagik kept Yusuf’s golden crown and used those five years’ respite to build a magnificent palace, church and administrative centre to enhance his new royal dignity. But Gagik was still unsure of himself and chose as his capital the tiny island of Aghthamar on Lake Van, safe from Arab, Byzantine or Bagratid attack.

The island lies two and a half miles from the southern shore of the lake and is little more than a third of a mile long. The western half is a rock rising 350 feet from the lake, leaving a platform of about 400 by 100 yards at the eastern end. The minute size of this, the only flat part of the island, must be remembered when we turn to Thomas Artzruni’s grandiose account of what Gagik built upon it. The platform seems to have been levelled by the King, for, according to our chronicler, he first ‘summoned thousands of workers and a huge crowd flocked to break up the massive and heavy rocks, rolling them into the depths of the waves’. Gagik then built a port, part of whose
moles can still be seen in the clear, dead waters of the lake, and encircled the island with walls.

In 915:

'The king, endowed with sublime intelligence, began to draw with his own hands (and with the help of a number of experts) the designs and plans of his pleasure domes at the foot of the rock which forms one end of the island, which would be worthy as a palace for his majesty. Beneath the wall he laid out streets, made cultivated terraces along the cliff-sides, built houses for his officials, planted orchards and gardens of sweet-smelling flowers in hidden valleys... He planted groves of trees which were watered by the never-failing stream which sprang in the centre of the island, which would be worthy as a palace for his majesty. Beneath the wall he laid out streets, made cultivated terraces along the cliff-sides, built houses for his officials, planted orchards and gardens of sweet-smelling flowers in hidden valleys... He planted groves of trees which were watered by the never-failing stream which sprang in the centre of the island, which would be worthy as a palace for his majesty. Beneath the wall he laid out streets, made cultivated terraces along the cliff-sides, built houses for his officials, planted orchards and gardens of sweet-smelling flowers in hidden valleys... He planted groves of trees which were watered by the never-failing stream which sprang in the centre of the island, which would be worthy as a palace for his majesty. Beneath the wall he laid out streets, made cultivated terraces along the cliff-sides, built houses for his officials, planted orchards and gardens of sweet-smelling flowers in hidden valleys... He planted groves of trees which were watered by the never-failing stream which sprang in the centre of the island, which would be worthy as a palace for his majesty. Beneath the wall he laid out streets, made cultivated terraces along the cliff-sides, built houses for his officials, planted orchards and gardens of sweet-smelling flowers in hidden valleys... He planted groves of trees which were watered by the never-failing stream which sprang in the centre of the island, which would be worthy as a palace for his majesty. Beneath the wall he laid out streets, made cultivated terraces along the cliff-sides, built houses for his officials, planted orchards and gardens of sweet-smelling flowers in hidden valleys... He planted groves of trees which were watered by the never-failing stream which sprang in the centre of the island, which would be worthy as a palace for his majesty. Beneath the wall he laid out streets, made cultivated terraces along the cliff-sides, built houses for his officials, planted orchards and gardens of sweet-smelling flowers in hidden valleys... He planted groves of trees which were watered by the never-failing stream which sprang in the centre of the island, which would be worthy as a palace for his majesty. Beneath the wall he laid out streets, made cultivated terraces along the cliff-sides, built houses for his officials, planted orchards and gardens of sweet-smelling flowers in hidden valleys... He planted groves of trees which were watered by the never-failing stream which sprang in the centre of the island, which would be worthy as a palace for his majesty. Beneath the wall he laid out streets, made cultivated terraces along the cliff-sides, built houses for his officials, planted orchards and gardens of sweet-smelling flowers in hidden valleys... He planted groves of trees which were watered by the never-failing stream which sprang in the centre of the island, which would be worthy as a palace for his majesty. Beneath the wall he laid out streets, made cultivated terraces along the cliff-sides, built houses for his officials, planted orchards and gardens of sweet-smelling flowers in hidden valleys... He planted groves of trees which were watered by the never-failing stream which sprang in the centre of the island, which would be worthy as a palace for his majesty. Beneath the wall he laid out streets, made cultivated terraces along the cliff-sides, built houses for his officials, planted orchards and gardens of sweet-smelling flowers in hidden valleys... He planted grove
the five Artzruni kings of Vaspurkan who followed him are shadowy figures. Vaspurkan was fragmented into appanages until 1003. The Bagratids swiftly recovered their supremacy and lured the supreme Catholicos Ananias of Moks from Aghthamar to Ani in 946.

During the late tenth century, Byzantium became the dominant power in Armenia. Basil II the Bulgar-slayer (976-1025) aimed to annex the Armenian kingdoms outright, rather than maintain them as useful buffer states against enemies from the East. The Seljuks were on the horizon before he died. They were a new and terrifying threat: ‘They live in the wilderness, they worship the wind . . . they have no noses,’ one traveller reported. The Armenians were equally disturbed: ‘Up to then no one had set eyes upon Turkish cavalry. Facing the enemy the Armenians saw these strange men, armed with bows and having flowing hair, like women. They were not used to shielding themselves against such infidel arrows,’ bewails Mathew of Edessa. In 1018 Sennacherib John, last Artzruni king of Vaspurkan, heard at Vostan of the utter defeat of his son David at the hands of the Seljuks. He is said to have recalled a prophecy of St. Nerses that a thousand years after Christ’s mission a barbarian people would bring calamity. Despairingly he offered his kingdom to Basil II.

It is difficult to make out how voluntary this gift was, for Sennacherib John in fact left Aghthamar in 1021 in the midst of the old Emperor’s last great campaign in Armenia. The Bagratid king of Ani was also induced to will his state to Byzantium. These annexations may have looked fine on the map, but in a very few years they brought disaster to Byzantine and Armenian alike.

Basil II gave the Artzrunis the city and surroundings of Sebasteia, four hundred miles west of Lake Van, as an alternative and safer lordship, and they moved there with a number of their subjects. The continuator of Thomas Artzruni states that Sennacherib John and his four sons were accompanied by 14,000 men, but modern Armenian historians have interpreted this figure as 40,000 or even 400,000 refugees. The short-lived Byzantine province of Vaspurkan inherited eight towns, seventy-two fortresses and 4,000 villages. Clearly the majority of Sennacherib John’s people stayed in Vaspurkan, but the migration to Sebasteia marks the beginning of the Armenian diaspora in the face of Seljuk invasion, whose most famous Armenian kingdom in exile was to be Cilicia, in southern Anatolia. Sennacherib John died in Sebasteia in 1027, but was taken back to Vaspurkan to be buried beside his queen Khoshkhosh in the Artzruni mausoleum, the Holy Cross monastery at the foot of Mount Varag, near Van. Local Armenians remembered the King who had abandoned them with disgust and his tomb was stripped of its ornaments by a nationally-minded nineteenth-century Catholicos.

Sennacherib John’s sons, David and then Adam and Abusal, succeeded him in Sebasteia. Over the next half century, more refugees fled to the Artzruni fief. In 1050 came the supreme Catholicos St. Peter I Guetedarts. He had caused a sensation in 1022, when Basil II was in Trebizond, by holding up the waters of the local river Pyxites. Contact with the Armenian homelands was now more perilous and in 1058 St. Peter was buried not in Vaspurkan, but in the new monastery of the Holy Cross in Sebasteia, built in imitation of Varag. In 1064 Bagratid Ani fell and the Seljuks began to close in. Next year, Adam and Abusal temporarily abandoned Sebasteia after Seljuk raiders had sacked it for eight days.

The Byzantines had long pursued a policy of settling awkward minorities far from their homes, and the pathetic Artzruni court at Sebasteia was no more out of place than the Slav villages that Basil I and II had planted elsewhere in Anatolia. Sennacherib John built the conventual cathedral of St. Nishan in Sebasteia and placed in it the Artzruni throne which he had brought from Aghthamar. Until 1916, when it was lost in the atrocities, the throne was one of the most precious relics of the Armenian people. But the Crooked Bridge, which Sennacherib John’s daughter built over the Halys, seems to have survived. Mary, another daughter, left for Georgia where she married George I Bagrat (1014-27).

Neither Seljuks nor Byzantines were particularly welcome to the Armenians. Nicephoros Comnenos, Byzantine governor of Vaspurkan, alienated his Armenian subjects who became the hapless victims of a greater conflict. Some
Armenian leaders accepted the Seljuks almost with relief, regaining their authority under the Turkish conquerors. Some took advantage of the chaos to erect transitory principalities. But for most Armenians these years were filled with misery:

‘Who can describe in detail the tribulations of the Armenian people, her sorrows and tears (asked Mathew of Edessa), for all that they have suffered under the Turks, these wild animals, blood drinkers, when our kingdom lost its true rulers who had been deposed by their false protectors, that impotent, effeminate, ignoble nation of Greeks. They destroyed our national throne and scattered our defences. Their claim to glory lies in the speed with which they ran away from the Turks, like cowardly shepherds who think only of themselves when the wolf comes.’

At the opening of the campaign season of 1071, Romanos IV Diogenes passed through Sebasteia on his way east. The Artzruni princes welcomed him, but local Greeks whispered that ‘These Armenians hate us; they are more pitiless than the Turks themselves.’ Romanos deposed the princes. A few months later, he met his own devastating defeat by the Seljuks at Mantzikert in Vaspurkan. To the Artzrunis it must have appeared as appropriate and divine judgement upon their clumsy Byzantine overlords, prompted (it must be added) by mass Armenian desertion on the battlefield of Mantzikert. In the next few years, the Seljuks casually overran the whole of central and eastern Anatolia. Adam and Abusal Artzruni fled to Constantinople where they were put to death in 1080. In those years all the last dispossessed Armenian rulers died: Gagik II Bagrat of Ani in 1079, his namesake of Kars in 1080, and George II of Lori in about 1082. But in Cilicia the Roupenians were setting up a final Armenian state in exile.

Sebasteia became Sivas, first in Seljuk and then in Danishmend hands. It flourished as a trading city and its Armenians seem to have prospered under both régimes. Something of the tolerance of early Muslim rule in Sivas can be seen in the fact that a Franciscan convent was built there in 1279, in the same decade as its great mosque. The Armenians were particularly susceptible to Catholic evangelization. But the final disaster came in 1400 when Timur took Sivas after a twenty-day siege. He dealt with the city with characteristic ruthlessness. Until recently, travelers were shown ‘the Black Earth’ in Sivas, the
In Vaspurkan a descendant of the Artzunis led local resistance against the Seljuks from Aghtamar and from Amiuk fortress above Van, for some years after 1071. With the fall of Ani, the little island became prominent once more and some of the most precious relics of the Church were brought there for safety. In 1113 David Thornikian, Archbishop of Aghtamar, mindful of the days when the supreme Catholicos of his Church had lived on Aghtamar, proclaimed himself Catholicos in the church of the Holy Cross. In vain two thousand five hundred clerics gathered in Cilicia under the supreme Catholicos to condemn him. Aghtamar became the first and smallest local Catholicosate within the Armenian Church and the island a notable pilgrim centre.

In 1894 H. F. B. Lynch visited the last Catholicos, Khachatur, and found him making elaborate preparations for his own funeral. He had already set up his tombstone, which still stands near the church:

‘I approach thee, O fair grave, with a greeting; my secrets to tell I have no tongue ... Whatever I may leave behind me — the holy oil, the library, the cowl, the stole, the staff — I leave to serve as a memory of me for my successors. Lastly I entreat my people to be loyal to Sultan Hamid ... Pray for me weekly for a while and forget me not.’

Khachatur died in 1895 when thousands of his flock, accused of disloyalty to Sultan Hamid, were massacred. His stole and staff went to no successor and the Catholicosate was abolished in 1916. In that year the remaining Armenians of Vaspurkan were deported or massacred. The liturgy had been celebrated in Gagik’s church of the Holy Cross for exactly one thousand years when Aghtamar fell silent.

Few travellers have been able to visit Aghtamar in this century, but three years ago restrictions were lifted and, with a little determination, the island can now be reached. Almost miraculously the church has survived, but it has been uncared for over half a century and is deteriorating rapidly. It is to be hoped that the interest shown by visitors will lead to its repair and protection from vandals, for Gagik’s church on Aghtamar can be counted among the finest of all medieval monuments.