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In the Traces: Reflections on Fieldwork in the Region of Ani

Christina Maranci

I study the medieval Armenian monuments—churches, monasteries, fortresses, palaces, and more—in what is now eastern Turkey (what many call western Armenia). For me, this region is at once the most beautiful, and most painful, place on earth. I am the grandchild of survivors of the Armenian Genocide of 1915–22, in which Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire suffered mass deportation and extermination: a crime that still goes unrecognized by the Turkish state.¹ Scholars have characterized the Armenian monuments in Turkey as physical traces of their lost homeland.² While my scholarship addresses these sites as historical and architectural/artistic phenomena, that work does not often capture the moods and emotions I feel when I am there.³ I hope to offer here a sense of the more personal dimensions of firsthand work with the buildings and their landscapes.

Many important medieval Armenian monuments stand on and around the closed international border between the Republics of Turkey and Armenia. Some of them are accessible to tourists, while others, like the church of Mren, remain forbidden, as they lie within or too close to the military zone. Dated to circa 638, and once part of the princely territory of the Kamsarakan family, Mren became the summer residence of the royal Armenian Bagratids in the tenth century.⁴ Once surrounded by a network of buildings, vineyards, and roads, now the church stands alone. Figure 1 illustrates the Armenian high plateau: deforested from antiquity, it is a rocky tableland lacerated by gorges and ringed with mountain chains. Summers are hot and dry, and in winter it snows daily. For me, there is nothing more intoxicating than a morning trip out onto the plateau, inhaling the chilled, highly oxygenated air combined with the heady fumes of benzine.



Figure 1 The Church of Mren, ca. 638 (old Armenian Shirak province; modern Kars region, Turkish Republic). Photo courtesy of Christina Maranci.

One gets to Mren by walking from the nearest village of Karabağ: this is a rough hike down into a valley, through a river, and back up again, for about forty-five minutes. One can sometimes arrange a tractor with wagon hitch from the village (a regular vehicle, and even an all-terrain one, gets torn up driving over the craters seen here). A military watchtower stands on the hills to the south of the church. For these reasons and more, I do not travel alone in the region. Visits to Mren require bravery, stealth, and luck.⁵ Figure 1 was taken my third time there, in October 2013, when I went with a working group organized by the World Monuments Fund, the Norwegian Cultural Heritage Institute (NIKU), and Anadolu Kültür, an NGO headquartered in Istanbul.⁶ We were a group from all over the world, including Turks, Armenians, Norwegians, and Americans (among others).

In this shot, my Armenian colleague was visiting Mren for the first time. We got to the site late in the day as the sun was setting. It was a race against time to get photographs. Our wagon was too slow for him; he got out and ran. He glances to the right, but seems drawn in the direction of the church. Mren, most often unaccompanied, seems to have risen up to greet him. I was once at an event on cultural heritage, talking about the Armenian monuments of Turkey, when a famous anthropology professor asked me a provocative question: how are these buildings any different from drones used in strikes? I took her to mean that one



Figure 2 Mren in the late afternoon, facing west. Photo courtesy of Christina Maranci.

should privilege human lives above inanimate objects. For me, her question was not only callous but inherently wrong. What about the working teams who quarried and cut the stones of Mren, the builders who designed and made it? What about the noble family who paid for it, the generations of congregations who worshipped within it, and all those now who claim it for their own, but can only watch its deterioration through online images? What about its consecrated ground, its archive of lapidary inscriptions, and the carved and painted faces on its walls, paying homage to centuries of use? Mren is not inanimate; on the contrary, it is overcrowded with lives. I took Figure 2 in late June as the sky was clearing, the sun setting over warm ashlar revetment, playing up the pink and gray stones. With the weather, time of day, and season, Mren changes: it glistens and it preens, it sulks and it smolders.

My hiking boots still have thorns in them from my last “work trip.” Studying medieval Armenian monuments inevitably means climbing, sliding, and wading, wildlife and birdsong, and barging in on the daily schedule of animals and their caretakers. The high plateau has been famous since antiquity for its grazing land. Figure 3 illustrates the Monastery of Hořomos, just a day’s walk from the city of Ani. Hořomos was the burial place for members of the royal Armenian Bagratid dynasty (ninth to eleventh centuries).⁷ It features some of the most spectacular architecture I have ever seen, as well as an archive of medieval inscriptions. The monastery consists of an upper complex on the ridge opposite this picture and, on



Figure 3 Hořomos Monastery, tenth to thirteenth centuries (old Armenian Shirak province; modern Kars region). Photo courtesy of Christina Maranci.

a seasonal island below, a lower complex, the ruins of which appear in the background. In the distance are the ruins of three churches of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The tomb of Ashot III (953–977) survived into the early twentieth century but was subsequently destroyed.⁸

Like Mren, visits to Hořomos are officially forbidden. If anyone needed further persuasion, a sign posted on the path to the monastery warns visitors of landmines. When I visited in 2013, I walked with my colleagues in strict single file to the site, barely breathing, matching my footsteps exactly in the tracks of the person ahead of me. Grazing cows offered us reassuring indications of safe ground. When my colleagues and I are in historically Armenian lands, we stare at stone walls, village houses, piles of rubble, and (of course) the ground. Figure 4 shows a handful of ceramic shards from the ancient and medieval city of Bagaran (modern Kılıttaşı), near Digor, in the Kars province region.⁹ This is an impressively large ruined site built in terraces against a hill. It has never been excavated, but it is mentioned in early Armenian sources as a pagan cult center.¹⁰ Today, the ground of Bagaran is covered in ceramic shards—signs, perhaps, of better times: of manufacturing, trade, busy kitchens, and feasts.



Figure 4 Ceramic fragments from Bagaran (modern Kalittaşı, Kars region). Photo courtesy of Christina Maranci.

Figure 5 shows a photograph of the mosque of the village of Varlı, formerly known as Zepni (Arm. Ձպնի), near the town of Digor (Kars province, Turkey). This structure started life as an Armenian church, probably of the seventh century, and was dedicated to the Mother of God (Surb Astuatsatsin).¹¹ In plans and photographs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (such as Figure 6), the church appears as a cruciform structure with a south portal, its central bay surmounted first by a dome and then, after its collapse, a pitched roof. The superstructure was destroyed in the mid-twentieth-century and subsequently rebuilt as a mosque. During my visit of 2013, the mosque lay within a lightly wooded area and formed part of a precinct of built structures covered by a single corrugated metal roof. The interior walls and ceiling were sheathed in wooden paneling, possibly concealing inscriptions, sculpture, and/or painted plaster.

Exploring the outside of the church, I discovered the passage of carving seen in Figure 5 (and which I have located on Fig. 6 with a square). The photograph highlights the technique of Armenian medieval wall construction: carefully-cut and squared facing stones (recently patched with cement) sandwiching a mortar core. The engraved marks are easy to miss (particularly now that the area is mostly in shade). There is an Armenian inscription on the stone that reads ԱՅ ԾԱՌԱ ՏԵԱՅՈՒ ՊԵՏՐՈՍ (“Servant of Lord God, Petros”).¹² Above this is a bird, perhaps a dove, its wings outstretched and its tail incised with hatch marks.



Figure 5 The Church of Zepni (begun in the seventh century?), now Varlı Köyü Camii (Varlı Village Mosque), Kars region. Photo courtesy of Christina Maranci.

In Armenian literary and visual tradition going back at least to the fifth century, birds are associated with the souls of the deceased.¹³ In the Armenian church liturgy, as practiced even today, bird imagery is associated with death and resurrection and invoked in prayers for the repose of souls. In the prayer for the dead, the choir sings of the “supernal Jerusalem,” where “Enoch and Elijah live old in age like doves, worthily glorified in the Garden of Eden,” then beseeching the “Merciful Lord, have mercy on the souls of those of us who have fallen asleep.”¹⁴ While we do not know when the bird was carved into the stone, the imagery harmonizes with the written memorial of Petros.

To the left of this inscription is a sundial, a southern-facing protractor dial divided into twelve sectors marking each of the liturgical hours. At its midpoint was once a metal rod or *gnomon*; its hole is now patched with cement. Medieval Armenian sundials are instruments for measuring time and appear with regularity on Armenian churches.¹⁵ They are important not only for the history of science and astronomy but also for social, liturgical, and theological understandings of time, its passing, and its eventual end. Below and to the right of the dial, a modern visitor has carved the star and crescent of the Turkish flag, quite literally inscribing Turkish authority into the walls of the Armenian church, and offering, perhaps, a final comment on the ephemerality of life. Figure 7 shows a view of the city of Ani, located, like Mren, just within the modern Turkish side of the closed border



Figure 6 The Church of Zepni, from the 1910s, after Samvel Karapetyan, Եղեռն՝ Եղեռնից Զետոն [*Another Genocide after the Genocide*] (Yerevan, Armenia: Researches on Armenian Architecture, 2015), 73. Photo courtesy of Christina Maranci.

with Armenia. Ani was a royal Armenian capital in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and a bustling trade city under successive Byzantine, Seljuk, Georgian, and Kurdish rule. By the fifteenth century, the population had dwindled, and by the nineteenth, Ani was a ghost town.

There are ghosts inside and outside the buildings at Ani. Figure 8 shows an untouched photograph of the interior of the eleventh-century church of Saint Gregory “Abughamrents,” at Ani, which I took in 2016. The wall is whitewashed, flaking, and might not seem to merit a second glance, let alone reproduction in an essay. But look closer at the center of the image. There is a face: the dark tones of the skin stand out, the columnar neck, the pointed jaw, the nose, the almond eyes. Even closer inspection reveals that below this face are two more creatures in profile: a lion looking to the left, and a bull looking to the right. I wonder whether this is the trace of a tetramorph, as described in the book of Ezekiel, which formed part of a throne vision.¹⁶ Conservation, documentation, and software will, I hope, reveal answers. Until that time, tourists walk in and out of the church, ignoring, for the most part, the creature watching them.



Figure 7 The city of Ani (Kars region), view from the south. Photo courtesy of Christina Maranci.



Figure 8 A ghost at Ani. Photo courtesy of Christina Maranci.



Figure 9 The Church of Saint Gregory “Abughamrents” at Ani, eleventh century. Photo courtesy of Christina Maranci.

Figure 9 shows the exterior of the same church. It is a petite, elegant marker of the eastern edge of Ani. I took this picture while standing in the dry gorge below. This church, relatively well preserved compared with many other buildings at Ani, is usually one of the last monuments that visitors see during their time at Ani, before they leave through the main gates.

As tourists return in the evening to Kars, back to their hotels for a shower and dinner, Ani begins another life. Figure 10 shows villagers from neighboring Oçaklı. A man climbs over the locked side gate of the city, while a woman and small child look on. Why is he entering? Perhaps to fetch animals that have spent the day grazing in the ruins of the city? His feet seem to know well every crevice of the wall; I imagine this is part of his daily schedule.

I admit it: part of me feels resentful. Why is he allowed to live with this city, when I can only go occasionally? Why do I have to go “home,” when he can experience the change of seasons with these monuments and know them better than any visitor? At the same time, this image gives me comfort. The man, his family, his neighbors, will keep the monuments company; they will hear and know everything that happens at Ani.

Nighttime in eleventh-century Ani was also lively. Look beyond the gate in the distance, at the ruins: this was the royal palace church of Gagik. It was a



Figure 10 Entering the Kingdom. Photo courtesy of Christina Maranci.

three-tiered, circular structure, with a central dome, and featured a larger-than-life statue of Gagik himself holding a model of the church.¹⁷ At night this church would have resounded with song. Chronicles tell us that Gagik loved to sing the night service—a special liturgical office in the Armenian church sung from night until the dawn.¹⁸ From where the villagers are standing, one would have been able to hear the sounds of singing and watch the church windows glow with light from chandeliers.¹⁹

One needs at least an entire day to see the monuments of Ani, to walk along its fortifications, and to see its citadel and caves. After visitors enter the main gate, tours usually begin with the cathedral, shown in Figure 11. But this picture, from 2016, was taken at the end of the day. It shows something rare in photographs of the cathedral: the north facade bathed in the early evening light.

So much of what I do on-site involves getting a good shot with the right light, angles, and the most visual information. Photographing architectural monuments can sometimes feel like a forced march toward completion: first a general view, then north, south, east, west; next interior; then inscriptions, sculpture, and painting. What one sees in Figure 11, instead, is a private affair between the cathedral and me. I have taken a backward glance, before leaving, to record the feeling of resting, rather than working, with the monument. I remember trying to capture the light, and the sound of the breeze rustling through the long grasses—as if the



Figure 11 *Taking leave*. Photo courtesy of Christina Maranci.

city were exhaling after a long day of posing for pictures. For a moment I felt no fear, no anxiety, just the intense softness of the end of the day.

* * *

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Notes

¹ See Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011); and Thomas De Waal, *The Great Catastrophe: Armenians and Turks in the Shadow of Genocide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

² Peter Balakian, “Raphael Lemkin, Cultural Destruction, and the Armenian Genocide,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 27, no. 1 (2013): 57–89, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dct001>; Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh, “Preserving the Medieval City of Ani: Cultural Heritage between Contest and Reconciliation,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 73 (2014): 528–55, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2014.73.4.528>.

³ See, e.g., Christina Maranci, *The Art of Armenia: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), which also gives an overview of the field.

⁴ For a recent, comprehensive, and English-language discussion of Mren, see Christina Maranci, *Vigilant Powers: Three Churches of Early Medieval Armenia* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2015), 23–112.

⁵ For an account of my experiences, and failures, trying to get to Mren, see Christina Maranci, “Symbols of Power and Fragility: Medieval Armenian Architecture,” *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* 32/33 (2016/2017): 43–71.

⁶ Anadolu Kültür, founded by the philanthropist and business man Osman Kavala, and a dear friend, has been imprisoned since 2017 on political charges invented by the Turkish state.

⁷ For a comprehensive study of this site, see Edda Vardanyan, ed., *Hořomos Monastery: Art and History* (Paris: Centre d’histoire et civilization, 2015).

⁸ See *ořomos Monastery*, 64–65.

⁹ Samvel Karapetyan, *Եղեռն՝ Եղեռնից Ջետն* [*Another Genocide after the Genocide*] (Yerevan, Armenia: Researches on Armenian Architecture, 2015), 78–83.

¹⁰ Moses Khorenatsi, *History of the Armenians*, translated by Robert W. Thomson (Ann Arbor, MI: Caravan Books, 2006), 179.

¹¹ See Karapetyan, *Եղեռն՝ Եղեռնից Ջետն*, 74–75.

¹² I believe this inscription is first published here.

¹³ For recent discussion and bibliography of avian imagery in an Armenian funerary context, see Maranci, *Vigilant Powers*, 220–28.

¹⁴ See https://www.stnersess.edu/uploads/2/3/7/7/23772132/the_divine_liturgy.pdf, accessed July 27, 2020. See also Helen E. Evans, “Nonclassical Sources for the Armenian Mosaic near the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem,” in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, edited by Nina G. Garsoïan, Thomas F. Mathews, and Robert W. Thomson (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 219.

¹⁵ Christina Maranci, “Sundials and Medieval Armenian Architecture,” in *The Armenian Apocalyptic Tradition: A Comparative Perspective; Essays Presented in Honor of Professor Robert W. Thomson on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, edited by Kevork B.

Bardakjian and Sergio La Porta (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 553–71, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004270268_025.

¹⁶ This and additional evidence from frescoes will be published by this author in the following study: “Visions of Ani: Software-Recovered Painting from the Apse of the Cathedral and the Church of Saint Gregory ‘Abulamrenc,’” *Revue des études arméniennes* (forthcoming).

¹⁷ This statue is now lost, although preserved in archival photographs: [see http://virtualani.org/gagikstatue/index.htm](http://virtualani.org/gagikstatue/index.htm), accessed July 27, 2020. The fragment of an elbow most likely belonging to this statue has also been identified: see Giorgi L. Kavtaradze, “The Problem of the Identification of the Mysterious Statue from the Erzurum Museum,” *Caucasica* 3 (1999): 59–66.

¹⁸ Step‘anos Tarōnec‘i (Asolik), *Patmut‘inn Tiezerakan [Universal History]*, edited by Gurgēn Manukyan, *Matenagirk‘ Hayoc‘*, tenth century, bk. 2, vol. 15 (Antelias, Lebanon: Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, 2011), 617–829 at 808. For an English translation, see *The Universal History of Step‘anos Tarōnec‘i*, translated by Tim Greenwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 293.

¹⁹ See Christina Maranci, “Sights and Sounds of the Armenian Night Service as Performed at Ani: A Collation of the Archaeological, Liturgical, and Historical Evidence,” in *Icons of Sound*, edited by Bissera Pentcheva (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, forthcoming), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003007463-3>.