

“Van under the Mongol, Turkmen, Persian, and Ottoman Domination,” *Van, Historic Armenian Cities and Provinces*, vol. 1, Richard Hovannisian, ed. (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2000), pp. 78-93.

Van under Mongol, Turkmen, Persian, and Ottoman Domination*

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The history of Van and Vaspurakan from the fall of the Artsruni kingdom to the seventeenth century is reconstructed from a mass of miscellaneous materials.¹ Missing is a source dedicated to Van or the province of Vaspurakan such as Tovma Artsruni's on the ruling family in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries. In this paper no attempt will be made to present a complete and orderly progression of events in either the city of Van or the general region of Vaspurakan. Armenians there were living under the rule of Muslims: Mongols, Turkmen, Kurds, or from the sixteenth century on Persians and Ottoman Turks.² Chronology will be followed in retelling selected events, defining the various rulers, and describing how they interacted with Armenians or, perhaps more accurately, how Armenians viewed them. As much as possible I have chosen texts and events, which relate directly to the city of Van and the island of Aghtamar and only secondarily to other areas of the province Vaspurakan.

The sole full-length Armenian history of the period is by Tovma Metzopetsi who covered events from the 1380s up to the time of his writing in the 1440s.³ We are not, however, totally deprived of historical testimony thanks mostly to minor chronicles and a plentiful group of colophons or memorials from Armenian manuscripts.⁴ It is thanks to this latter material and European travel accounts that a history of Armenian Van can be pieced together. As we will learn shortly, Van became the most important center of manuscript production after the fall of the Cilician kingdom. The beginnings of the revival of local monasteries and their scriptoria can be traced to the late thirteenth

*Research for this paper was carried out with the aid of a grant from The Bertha and John Garabedian Charitable Foundation of Fresno, California. I would like to thank the Trustees and Grant Administrator for their continued support.

¹For a detailed discussion of primary and secondary sources of the period, see Dickran Kouymjian, "A Critical Bibliography for the History of Armenia from 1375 to 1605," *Armenian Review*, 41:1 (161), (Spring, 1988): 39-45. For Van see Paolo Cuneo, "Etude sur la topographie et l'iconographie historique de la ville de Van," *Armenian Studies/Etudes arméniennes: In Memoriam Haïg Berbérián*, D. Kouymjian, editor (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1986), 125-184, and more recently, "Van," in Sergey Vardanyan, *The Capitals of Armenia* (in Arm.), (Erevan, 1995), 7-46.

²For a general overview of the period, see D. Kouymjian, "Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom (1375) to the Forced Emigration under Shah Abbas (1604)," *History of the Armenians*, Richard Hovannesian, editor (New York: St. Martin Press, 1997), vol. 2, 1-50, and the earlier study, D. Kouymjian, "L'Arménie sous les dominations des Turcomans et des Ottomans (XVe-XVIe siècles)," *Histoire de l'Arménie et du peuple arménien*, G. Dédéyan, editor (Toulouse: Privat, 1982), 341-376.

³English translation, Robert W. Thomson, *Thomas Artsruni. History of the House of the Artsrunik'* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985).

⁴The colophons of Armenian manuscripts have been collected and published from the fifth century to 1660, except for those of the sixteenth century. They are conveniently listed by R. W. Thomson, *A Bibliography of Classical Armenian Literature to 1500 AD* (Turhout: Brepols, 1995), 105-106, to which should be added Vazgen Hakobyan, *Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts of the Seventeenth Century (1641-1660)*, (in Arm.), vol. III (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1984). Colophons specifically related to Near Eastern history in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries have been excerpted and translated by Avedis K. Sanjian, *Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts, 1301-1480* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

century, but it is only in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, that scribes and artists at Van and other localities around the Lake are intensively engaged in copying and illustrating manuscripts. Nearly 1,500 of these have been preserved.

The secession of the dynastic territories of the Artsruni kingdom to the Byzantine Empire in the 1020s was accompanied by the immigration of the nobility and some 14,000 Armenian families to the area of Sebastia/Sivas. By the 1070s, the Seljuk Turks had taken Vaspurakan from the Byzantines and kept control of the area in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, sharing power with local Islamic dynasties, especially Kurdish amirs. In the second and third decades of the thirteenth century, the area of Van-Vaspurakan and most of Armenia was devastated by the Khwarazmshah Jalal ad-Din, who was chased west by the Great Mongols. In 1231 he was murdered in a simple act of robbery by an anonymous Kurd south of Lake Van.

In 1236 the successors of Genghis Khan had seized Tiflis, making the Georgian Kingdom a vassal state. In 1243 at the battle of Köse Dagh, the Mongol armies of Chormaghun and Bayju-noyin defeated the Seljuks of Rum turning all of Islamic Anatolia into a Mongol protectorate. It was after this decisive victory that the Armenian kings of Cilicia made the far reaching decision of submission to the Great Khan and the forging of the Armenian-Mongol alliance. The steps were as follows: First, between 1247 and 1250, Smbat, the brother of King Hetum and commander of the Armenian army, made the long voyage to Karakorum, then the king himself made the historic trip in 1253-1256. During these same years, Hulagu, the brother of the new Great Khan Qubilai, marched west to claim the Near East as his personal territory. With the title Il-Khan, Hulagu seized Alamut, the great fortress of the Assassins, the dreaded Shi'ite Muslim sect, in 1256, and in 1258 took Baghdad, putting an end to the Abbasid caliphate (750-1258).

For nearly a half-century due to the Mongol alliance, Armenians lived in relative calm under the *pax Mongolica*. Van, like Erzinjan to the north, benefited by renewed trade and the possibility of secure travel. The relative peace and security in the western domains of the Mongol Empire (the Ilkhanids) allowed commercial and intellectual exchanges between Christians and Muslims under the hegemony of the Central Asian conquerors before their conversion to Islam. This revival of activity, which ultimately may be traced back to the late eleventh and the twelfth centuries, when Armenians seemed to be everywhere in the Near East from Egypt and Syria and to northern Iraq, was strong enough that it held up during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when the Timurids and the Black Sheep and White Sheep Turkmen dynasties fought each other for control of the Armenian plateau. The decline only took place in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries during which the protracted war between the Ottoman sultans and the Safavid shahs made Armenia a deserted no-man's land, the battlefield of the opponents.⁵

It is only after the Persian-Turkish peace of 1639 that a new prosperity returned to Armenian urban centers, especially the recently settled community of New Julfa in Iran, but also to cities like Tiflis, Erzerum, and Van. I have suggested elsewhere that the seventeenth century was the moment when the Armenians began to enter the modern era,

⁵On the decade by decade progression of the Turko-Persian wars, see Kouymjian, "Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom," 14-21.

due to the collapse of the earlier *nakharar* system and the importation of new technology, such as printing, and especially ideas from the west.⁶

As for Van itself, scribal memorials of Armenian manuscripts provide descriptions of isolated events both for the city of Van and the region during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. The work of weaving them together coherently remains to be done for Van as well as other regions of Armenian settlement during these long middle centuries between the decline of the Cilician kingdom in the fourteenth century and the revival of the late seventeenth century. One might add that our knowledge concerning Van and other cities in the pre-Mongol period, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as well as that for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remains vague.⁷

The fall of the Kingdom of Cilicia was a cruel disappointment to all Armenians, even if its jurisdiction never reached north of the mountains into Greater Armenia. Colophons of the thirteenth, and especially of the fourteenth, centuries from areas as distant as the Crimea, Ilkhanid Iran, Julfa on the Arax, Ayrarat, Siunik, Tiflis, Erzerum, Erzinjan, Sebastia, Bayburt, and the Lake Van region acknowledged the successive kings of Cilicia, but immediately after the destruction of the kingdom, colophons stopped citing Armenian rulers. Only in Siunik and Lori were local princes and barons, like the Orbelians, still mentioned. For the rest of Armenia, the Church remained the only permanent, widespread national institution. Its catholicoses, patriarchs, and bishops were unflinchingly referred to in the colophonic formulae.

Even worse than the legendary destruction of the Mongol invasion, were those of Timur Leng a century later. In September 1387, Timur on his way back to the east, laid siege to Van, then under the control of the Yezdin, a Kurd with Armenian sympathies, who may have been Armenian by origin. For 26 days the fortress was under attack. Without regard to age or race Timur punished all inhabitants. Men were separated from the women and children, tied up in groups, and cast off from the high ramparts of the Van fortress. In a versed colophon Grigor of Akhlat reports that the pile of bodies at the base became so high that the later victims, when they were thrown down from the height, did not all die because they were cushioned by the mound of corpses.⁸ The continuator of the *History* of Samuel of Ani reports that 7,000 were killed at Van in this way.⁹

This was Timur's second campaign of destruction in Armenia, after which he returned to his capital Samarkand loaded down with booty and slaves. But the consequences were not over, because the effects of these two years of ravaging was to leave the countryside in a permanent state of disorder, fields were uncultivated and in 1388 one of a number of major famines hit Armenia and the Van area. One scribe wrote, "*Shatk i sovu meran ev aylk, shun ev katu keran*," (Many died of famine while others ate dogs and cats). During Timur's third raid in 1397, his forces attacked all of Vaspurakan, seized the leader of the Hakkari Kurds and imprisoned him at Aghtamar, after which they

⁶D. Kouymjian, "From Disintegration to Reintegration: Armenians at the Start of the Modern Era, XVIth-XVIIth Centuries," *Revue du Monde Arménien*, I (1994), 9-18; reprinted as "Armenia at the Start of the Modern Era, XVIth-XVIIth Centuries," *Bazmavep*, 153 (1995), 218-229.

⁷This conference on Van and others scheduled in the UCLA series will serve to fill in the gaps.

⁸Levon Khachikyan, "The Political Condition and Socio-economic Relations of Armenia in the 14th-15th Centuries," *History of the Armenian People* (in Arm.), IV (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1972), 26-27; Vardanyan, *Capitals*, 15.

⁹Khachikyan, "The Political Condition," 27.

then went on to pillage all of southern Vaspurakan, "burning homes, eating their stores, and searching out anything of value."¹⁰

Five years later at Ankara, Timur put a temporary stop to Turkish expansion toward the east by defeating Sultan Bayazid and destroying the Ottoman army. He then rushed off to Central Asia to die in battle. But the Timurids had not renounced claims on the region. Timur's son Shah Rukh led three campaigns in the next fifteen years against the Kara Koyunlu. These are described in detail in Tovma Metsopetsi's *History*.¹¹ In 1420, Shah Rukh marched toward Vaspurakan. The chief of the Black Sheep confederation, Iskender the son of Kara Yusuf, met him with an army of 150,000, but retreated to the south to Mardin and Mosul until Shah Rukh left the area after pillaging Van and the surrounding region. The worst was a plague of locusts in the following year, which according to one colophon was so thick that they "covered the plains and the mountains, the peaks and the valleys, like a sea," causing again a general famine.¹²

According to other Armenian colophons, Iskender's reign was perceived to be as harsh as any. A scribe writing in Aghtamar in 1425 reports, "Armenia was subjected to devastation and plunder, to slaughter, and captivity. ... [F]or a whole year the wicked tyrant Iskender ... a Turk by race, has seized ... Vostan and ... made uninhabitable the regions of Aghbak ... and Vostan ... as far as Bitlis. The Inhabitants of these regions took refuge abroad, naked, barefooted, and famished. And some, who had escaped to this God-protected island [of Aghtamar] and placed their trust in God, ... escaped from the evil captivity of the wicked tyrant."¹³ Another from the following year says, "He made the Armenian homeland like a desert."¹⁴ Several colophons attest to the siege and fall of Van in the same year. At Khizan, Karapet the scribe complains that, "[Iskender] seized our [Kurdish] Amir Sultan Ahmad, and arriving with numerous troops he besieged our impregnable fortress of Van for fifty days."¹⁵ Another colophon is more eloquent, "I, Khoja Astuacatur ... bought this Narek, which was held in bondage by the Turkmen in the year when Iskender captured the citadel of Van from the Kurds in 1425. And they committed much destruction, and they carried off all the sacred effects. And I saw this [manuscript] book of Narek when they brought it to Monastery of Veri Varag; and I purchased it with my honestly earned assets and offered it to the holy monastery of Veri Varag, where it had been before."¹⁶ Petros the scribe writing in Berkri the following year adds: "This is the third annual arrival of Iskender son of Kara Yusuf; each time he plundered and carried off captives from our regions of Van and Vostan. He then captured the citadel of Van and all of us -- bishops and *vardapets*, monks, priests, *tanuters*, and

¹⁰According to the scribe Grigor: L. Khachikyan, *Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts of the Fourteenth Century* (in Arm.), (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1960), 621; Khachikyan, "The Political Condition," 29.

¹¹Tovma Metsopetsi, *History of Lank-Timur and His Successors* (in Arm.), edition, S. Shahnazarean (Paris, 1860), partial French trans., F. Nève, "Exposé des guerres de Tamerlane et de Schah-Rokh dans l'Asie occidentale d'après la chronique arménienne inédite de Thomas de Medzoph," *Acad. Royale des sciences ... de Belgique, Mémoires couronnés*, II (1861), no. 4.

¹²Sanjian, *Colophons*, 145.

¹³Sanjian, *Colophons*, 166.

¹⁴Sanjian, *Colophons*, 170.

¹⁵L. Khachikyan, *Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts of the Fifteenth Century*, I (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1955), 328; Sanjian, *Colophons*, 167.

¹⁶Khachikyan and Sanjian, *ibid.*

ladies -- took to flight and wandered about in foreign lands and became strangers."¹⁷ In 1427, Tovma Metzopetzi himself, writing at the Monastery of Metzop, complained that the divine liturgy had not been performed for six years.¹⁸

Iskender also attacked many of the Kurdish chiefs around Lakes Van and Urmia. In 1426 he put an end to the fiefdom of Artaz in the Maku area of Vaspurakan, ruled by Armenian Catholic feudal lords, much to the joy of the Orthodox Armenians, who, in one colophon, praise the Muslims for allowing them to make repairs on an Apostolic church, which had been forbidden them by the Catholics.

By the third quarter of the fifteenth century, the Kara Koyunlu, now under Jihanshah, were subject to continual attacks by the rival Ak Koyunlu or White Sheep Turkmen dynasty, who had begun moving up from their lands around Mosul. Attacks against the Lake Van area resulted in heavy reprisals by Jihanshah, who laid waste Taron and Mush in 1467. The end was near, however, for the Kara Koyunlu dynasty. The charismatic Ak Koyunlu leader Uzun Hasan slaughtered Jihanshah and his most loyal forces in 1467 and became ruler of Armenia. But there was no peace for Armenians in Van; the following four decades were marked by continual struggles with opposing Turkic dynasties in Iran to the east and in Anatolia to the west.¹⁹

Determined to stamp out all semi-independent authority in his lands, Uzun Hasan attacked Bitlis, the decades-old stronghold of Kurdish emirs who controlled that area of Lake Van. Bitlis, Akhlat, and lands to the south were taken, but after a series of further victories against the Greek Pontic state and the Karamanids in central Anatolia, Uzun Hasan was soundly defeated by the Ottomans.

The Ak Koyunlu ultimately submitted to the pressures of the Ottomans and the Safavids. The latter began their rise under Ismail, who as a child was closely bound to Van, especially Aghtamar. According to the early sixteenth century traveler Giovanni Angiolello, Ismail, the son of the Sheikh Haidar of Tabriz, sought refuge from the Ak Koyunlu ruler Rustum on the island of Aghtamar in the 1490s. While there at age thirteen he was crowned king at the hands of an Armenian priest after which he fled with his father to Karabagh and then on to Tabriz,²⁰ which he captured in 1502 and by that act started the Safavid dynasty.

The major competing forces for the control of Van/Vaspurakan and the rest of Armenia were now the Ottoman Turks under Sultan Selim, known as the Grim, and the Safavids under Ismail. Selim won the first battle of a war that was to last for 125 years by defeating the Safavids at Chaldiran, not far from the Avarayr, in 1514, after which he conquered Egypt, but did not succeed in gaining full control of Van or Armenia. The Safavids almost immediately struck back invading Georgia and Shirvan in 1516, establishing a pattern of attack and counterattack for the entire sixteenth century.²¹ The first of the three Ottoman campaigns into Armenia and Georgia by Sultan Süleyman,

¹⁷Sanjian, *Colophons*, 171.

¹⁸Khachikyan, *Colophons of the Fifteenth Century*, I:361; Sanjian, *Colophons*, 172.

¹⁹Details on these dynasties can be found in the respective articles in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* and the *Islam Ansiklopedisi*. See also Kouymjian, "A Critical Bibliography," 43, and John Woods, *The Aqqyunlu. Clan, Confederation, Empire. A Study in 15th/19th Century Turko-Iranian Politics*, (Minneapolis & Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1976).

²⁰The information comes from Italian travellers G. Angiolello and K. Geno, for which see H. Hakobyan, *Travel Accounts* (in Arm.), I (Erevan, 1932), cf. Vardanyan, *Capital Cities*, 16.

²¹Details in Kouymjian, "Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom," 14-21.

known in the west as the Magnificent, against Shah Tahmasp began in 1533 when Ibrahim Pasha, the Grand Vizier, was ordered to seize the fortress of Van, which was taken in the next year. Süleyman received the obedience of various Georgian princes as well as the Kurdish Khan of Bitlis, who ceded his fortresses south of Lake Van. The Kurds, however, were not brought completely under control until the seventeenth century. The outcome of the campaign gave little more to the Ottomans than the area around Van. But the Safavids immediately laid siege to Van once again causing death by famine and the sword of 16,000 inhabitants.²² For the next hundred years Van and Erzerum were to be the main staging points for Ottoman thrusts against Persia.

The second Ottoman campaign of 1547-1548, begun again with the seizure of Van, was led this time by the Persian Shah Tahmasp's own brother, Alqaz Mirza, who had defected to the enemy side. Süleyman was so pleased about taking Van back that he sent a letter to King Henry II of France in which he spoke of the "impregnability of the fortress which reached to the sky."²³ The French ambassador and military advisor to the sultan, d'Armon, referred to Van as the most famous and impregnable Persian fortress.²⁴ About this siege, the Ottoman chronicler Solakzade gives a circumstantial account of the thousands of troops and the canons used against the weaker parts of the fortifications as well as the work of sappers who undermined the foundations of the ramparts. Only after ten days of incessant bombardment did the city fall. Solakzade also praised the unusual quality of the Armenian architects and builders of the Van citadel. "This fortress," he wrote "is the key to Persia ...(about which) the wicked Shah boastfully said 'As long as the yellow rock [of Van] is under my command, what need have I to fear the Ottoman Sultans?'"²⁵

In the next year, 1549, the Georgian army was destroyed, and the western part of the country, along with Armenia, began to be considered as part of the Ottoman Empire. During the three years that followed, Shah Tahmasp made vicious counter raids against Basen, Bardzr Hayk, Vaspurakan, and Turuberan. Süleyman reacted by officially turning Van and Diyarbekir into separate provinces among the twenty-one that constituted his empire. During this phase of the bitter rivalry over Armenia and Georgia, the sources concur that the Christian inhabitants preferred as a group the Persians to the Ottomans. In Armenia proper, the immediate consequence of the war of 1547 to 1552 was a severe famine in the years 1552-1553. The lack of foodstuffs was the result of both the reluctance of the peasants to go out to distant fields for fear of their lives and the forced requisitioning by opposing armies and irregular troops of whatever was available.

Just prior to Süleyman's third eastern campaign, Tahmasp in 1553 seized the fortresses of Akhlat and Arjesh and the country around Basen, as well as lands to the north and east. Erzerum, Van, and Artzke were laid waste. Shah Tahmasp embarked on a deliberate scorched-earth policy in order to retard an army he could not beat on its

²²Abgar Hovhannisyan, "The Political Situation of Armenia under the Hegemony of Safavid Iran and Ottoman Turkey (in Arm.)," *History of the Armenian People*, IV:83, quoting a colophon from a manuscript in Venice.

²³M. Zulalyan, *The Jelali Movement* (in Arm.), (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1966), 118; Vardanyan, *Capital Cities*, 17.

²⁴Vardanyan, *ibid.*

²⁵Excerpts of Turkish primary sources have been collected and translated by Aram Safrastyan, *The Turkish Sources on Armenia, the Armenians, and Other Peoples of Transcaucasian* (in Arm.), 2 (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1964), 142; Vardanyan, *Capital Cities*, 17.

progress through Armenia.²⁶ On May 29, 1555 at Amasia, this phase of a senseless war was concluded with the first treaty of peace between the Safavids and Ottomans. Süleyman received or kept Mosul, Marash, Van, Bayazid, and western Georgia. During the next twenty-three years, the Ottomans used Armenians and Kurds -- according to a colophon of 1566 -- to construct or reconstruct forts in Van and Arjesh and probably elsewhere. Shortly after, in the area from Van to Khoy, that is Vaspurakan, the Ottomans encouraged a Kurdish rebellion against the Safavids. To weaken the Persian state, which was in this period perceived as an important rival for eastern trade, the Ottomans planned to seize all of Armenia and Caucasia at any auspicious moment.

Hostilities only ended in 1639 when the Treaty of Qasr-i Shirin finally stopped a century and a half of war. The treaty gave the Ottomans Iraq, with Baghdad and Mosul, the Van area, and Armenia up to Kars. Erevan, Shirvan, and Tabriz went to the Safavids. But Van was not yet exempt from suffering. In 1648 a devastating earthquake hit the city and the surrounding area. The earthquake's force was such that even the enormous ramparts of the inner fortress collapsed and others which did not, were torn down.. Arakel Tavrizhetsi describes in detail the death and destruction. "Innumerable houses, merchandise, and edifices were destroyed," he laments, "and under them were trapped men and animals. The dead were so many they were taken out of the city. The survivors could not dig enough graves, but in the open cracks in the ground, wrapping eight to ten bodies at a time in cloth, they dumped the corpses into the fissures and covered them with earth."²⁷ Among the miracles that parallel closely the recent Armenian earthquake of December 1988, Arakel tells the story of two youths who survived forty days under the ruins. What is noteworthy in his long description is the way the Armenians of Van started to rebuild both the city and its fortifications "immediately after the dust settled" (his expression). In this project wealthy Armenian merchants of Van, the *khoja* class, played a major role.²⁸ In order to secure permission to rebuild the many collapsed churches, Khoja Rahijan went to Constantinople to see the Sultan from whom he got a firman to proceed. Then he and Khojas Akhijan, Adomian and others systematically financed the rebuilding of the churches in Van and even in the neighboring monastery of Varak.²⁹

The history of this post-war period, much beyond the chronological limits set for my topic, reveal both the wealth that had accumulated in the early seventeenth century among Armenians of Van, principally through trade, and show the power they had in controlling their own destiny. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Armenians had a good deal of autonomy in the city, and at times were responsible for most of Van's administration, as was the case in New Julfa, too.³⁰ The major clans were

²⁶Shah Abbas was to use the same tactic fifty years later in the face of an invading Ottoman army, but with the more extreme measure of deporting totally the local Armenian population in 1604 to Iran, especially his capital Isfahan.

²⁷Arakel Tavrizhetsi, *History* (in Arm.), edition (Vagharshapat: Holy Echmiadzin, 1884), chap. 35, "About the Earthquake Which Struck Van and the Regions Surrounding It," 378-381.

²⁸On the importance of the *khoja* class in the seventeenth century, see Kouymjian, "From Disintegration to Reintegration," *passim*.

²⁹Arakel, *History*, 381.

³⁰The details of the governing council of New Julfa are found in Y. Ter-Yovhaneants, *History of New Julfa in Isfahan* (in Arm.), 2 vols. (New Julfa: All Saviors Monastery, 1881-1882, reedition, New Julfa: All Saviors Monastery, 1980). This material has been carefully analyzed by Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, "Silk and

also armed and in a position to defend the city should the sultan's officials fail. But that is a subject for the later history of the city.

Trade and Culture

During these centuries many Armenians in the western cities like Erzinjan, Sivas, Kayseri, and towns around Lake Van, and farther to the east, Julfa on the Arax,³¹ took advantage of moments of peace to engage in trade, benefiting from commercial contacts with the diasporan communities of the Crimea, Poland, Holland, and Italy.

The most thriving center of Armenian culture in the fifteenth century, and perhaps in the sixteenth century, too, was around Lake Van. The cities and monasteries along and nearby its shores were both individually and as a group the most dynamic of any in Armenia. The region had its own Catholicos, established at Aghtamar in 1113. An anonymous Venetian merchant who passed through between 1510 and 1520 says of Aghtamar, "On the Island there is a small city, two miles in circumference. The city's limits are equal to that of the island. The city is called Armenik, very populous (about 600 houses) with only Armenians, with no Muslims and many churches."³² It should be remembered that the water level of Lake Van has gradually risen since then and the island was substantially bigger than it is now.

During the early fifteenth century, the Catholicos of Aghtamar (reconciled earlier with Echmiadzin), benefited by his geographical position in the center of Armenia. Closer to the Armenian population and the remaining semi-autonomous centers in the north of the country than the Catholicos of All Armenians resident at Sis, he took advantage of the sporadic protection of Kurdish emirs and the Kara Koyunlu rulers by asserting an authority on the Armenian Church and nation beyond the immediate confines of the Van region. From the 1434 to 1464, Catholicos Zakaria of Aghtamar, through his ceaseless activity, was a major force in national affairs. As a leader in the events surrounding the re-establishment of the catholicosate in Echmiadzin in 1441, he was later, with the support of the Kara Koyunlu, Jihanshah, able to assume the office of Catholicos of All Armenians and was even resident at Holy Echmiadzin for a time, as was his relative and successor Ter Stepanos IV, Catholicos from 1465 to 1489. Both men were from the Sefedinian family who claimed direct descent from the Artsrunis. The struggle for local autonomy in Van/Vasparakan led by the Sefedinians bore fruit for a short time when in 1466 Stepanos Catholicos was able, if only for two years, to consecrate at Aghtamar his own nephew Smbat as King of Armenia. The title was even recognized by Jihanshah, and Smbat established his royal residence, like the Artsrunis before him, at Aghtamar. Colophons of the period from various areas around Lake Van and even beyond refer to Aghtamar as the both the Catholicosal See and a royal seat. The

Silver: The Trade and Organization of New Julfa at the End of the Seventeenth Century," *Revue des Etudes Arméniennes*, 25 (1994-1995), 389-416. Though Baghdiantz McCabe makes no mention of Van, one cannot help imagining that the Armenians of Van had a similar city council made up of the leading merchant families.

³¹Sixteenth century trade at old Julfa on the Arax has been discussed by J. Baltrušaitis and D. Kouymjian, "Julfa on the Arax and Its Funerary Monuments," *Armenian Studies/Etudes arméniennes: In Memoriam Haïg Berbérian*, 9-53.

³²For which Hakobyan, *Travel Accounts*, I:300-301, partially quoted by Khachikyan, "The Political Condition," 44-45, and Vardanian, *Capital Cities*, 15.

exploits of Catholicos Zakaria contained in a long colophon or 1462 from Arjesh provide one of the most vivid early accounts we have of life in the city of Van. Supported by Jihanshah, Zakaria rescued from Echmiadzin the right arm (*adj*) of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, the holiest relic of the Armenian Church, along with the famous processional banner depicting Gregory with King Trdat, and traveled with it to Van and finally Aghtamar. I quote parts of the passage on Van from Avedis Sanjian's translation:

"He entered the city of Van with numerous bishops, vardapets, and priests and multitudes of people with horses and horsemen. The priests, who walked both in front of and behind the banner, sang sweet melodies.

But the baron who occupied the fortress of Semiramis, that is the citadel of Van, namely Mahmut Bek, Jihanshah's foster brother, witnessing the prosperity of the Christians, wished to see the holy right arm, and he sent for it. When the great pontiff, ... entered the gate of the uppermost part of the citadel, the tyrant Mahmut Bek came out to greet him with all his chieftains and their families and with his sons. They fell down before the holy right arm and kissed it; and they offered supplications. ... The multitudes of the city and of the canton arrived every day with numerous gifts and offerings, and prostrated themselves before the holy right arm and greeted the pontiff. ... [L]ater he obtained ... permission to proceed to his ancestral seat at Aghtamar. When he left the city, multitudes of bishops, vardapets, and priests and all the corps of noble *khojas* of Van accompanied him, with their horses and armed horsemen. They arrived near the coastal city of Vostan. All of its inhabitants, priests and multitudes of people of all ranks, came out to greet them with incense and candles and resounding melodies; so much so that there were more than a thousand men in front of and behind the great pontiff. The ecclesiastical banner was carried in front, and the golden cross affixed on the top shone like a light....When the Muslim inhabitants of Vostan witnessed this rejoicing, they were deeply aggrieved by the splendor and by the forwardness of the pontiff ... and they plotted against him, but he fled ... and took the right arm of the Illuminator and boarding a boat, went to ... the God-inhabited island of Aghtamar."³³

But glory was not to last. The northern clergy were hostile to the Catholicosate of Aghtamar and the growing influence of Vaspurakan. By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Aghtamar's authority began to shrink, becoming once again a strictly regional patriarchate bearing the title catholicos.

Conclusion

From the thirteenth to the mid-seventeenth century Van and the surrounding region maintained its Armenian character despite constant incursions by Seljuks Turks, Mongols, Turkmen, Kurds, Persians, and Ottoman Turks. Suffering was the lot shared in the early period with the other inhabitants of the city, Muslim and Christian alike. Nevertheless, the fifteenth century was a time of relative prosperity for those engaged in trade with the rise of a powerful middleclass led by the merchant-*khojas*.

In the Mongol and Timurid period the large monastic complexes were the major patrons of art and learning outside of Cilicia. They were the only institutions that had the means to carry out even the relatively reduced quantity of material culture that has

³³Sanjian, *Colophons*, 274-275.

survived from these centuries. Colophons and inscriptions of donation record numerous examples of how churches and monasteries began to be enriched. Already in the fifteenth century it became common for surviving noble families to give property -- villages, orchards, fields -- to monasteries to avoid having them pass to Muslim civil authorities. In the Van area at the Theotokos Monastery at Bitlis and at Aghtamar itself, the practice is regularly recorded.

The famous monastic universities of the late fourteenth century associated with Hovhannes Vorotnetsi, Grigor Tatevatsi, and others continued a precarious existence in the north in the first decades of the fifteenth century, to fall into eclipse in the latter part of the fifteenth and the entire sixteenth century. Among those which played the most active role in the earlier period was Metzop in the Van area. The locus of Armenian artistic activity had by then shifted to the more stable Van area.³⁴ The monasteries of Kadjberuni, Khizan, Bitlis, Metzop, Aghtamar, Arjesh, and Varag flourished during the early part of the century. Throughout the sixteenth century, however, these institutions struggled simply to survive. In the first half of the seventeenth century, a perceptible resurgence of monastic institutions, concomitant with the general flourishing of Armenian life, took place. The most active centers of manuscript production were almost entirely in the Lake Van area, and only later in Jerusalem and Aleppo. The second half of the sixteenth century, however, also shows the Van region in decline, giving way to Constantinople and eventually to New Julfa.

The sixteenth century was the worst moment for Van and all of Armenia because of the unrelenting war between the Ottomans and the Safavids. Yet, even through those years the Armenians of Van seemed to be preparing for the post-war peace, which, despite the devastating earthquake of 1648, brought renewed prosperity to the urban classes. Beginning in the sixteenth century, western and Muslim travelers began to take notice of Van and its unique fortress. For both Persians and Turks it was an important prize, but the Armenians continued to regard the city and the region around Lake Van as their own. The building and rebuilding of the city's ramparts no doubt inculcated a certain pride in its inhabitants and a self-confidence that has prevailed into our time. As adversity regularly followed prosperity during these centuries, the tenacity and determination of Van's inhabitants was forged with the strength of its famous rock.

³⁴On the artistic production of the Van school of miniaturists see, Hravard Hakobyan, *The Miniature Painting of Vaspurakan* (in Arm.), 2 vols. (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1976, 1982); *idem*, *Armenian Miniature Vaspurakan* (Armenian, Russian, English text), (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1978), an album of 100 color plates; Lilit Zakaryan, *Iz istorii vaspurakanskoi miniatiuri* (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1980).