

Cilicia: A Historical Overview

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The plain of Cilicia, nestled neatly between the Taurus and Amanus mountain ranges on the southeastern edge of what is today Turkey's Mediterranean coast, provided a sanctuary and home for the Armenian people in need of a haven following the loss of the citadel of Ani and the destruction of the Bagratid kingdom¹ in the late eleventh century. This small corner of the Anatolian coast was to provide Armenians with a homeland for nearly three hundred years, and with the means to prolong the independent development of the Armenian people, unhindered by the oppression of neighbouring states. Ultimately Cilicia remains in the Armenian national conscience as a golden age, the last flourishing of an ancient people left to their own accord before being brutally propelled into modern politics. Cilicia, the last incarnation of an independent Armenian state for six centuries, remains for Armenians a fond memory of a people's former glory.

The kingdom of Cilicia or the kingdom of Little Armenia² as it is sometimes referred to in historical sources, is something of an oddity in history, and certainly a favourable interlude in the history of the Armenian people. The kingdom itself took over a hundred years to appear on the political map, prior to that the region had been overseen by several dynasties of competing Armenian chiefs, princes and lords. The most important of all these clans were the Rubenids who had emerged as the dominant Armenian family after several power struggles and through the accumulation of territory at the cost of their rivals. For centuries since the rise of Islam Cilicia had been a battleground, passing to and from Byzantine and Arab control until finally much of what was to later comprise the Armenian kingdom fell under the Byzantine sway during a series of reconquests in the period between 963 - 974 AD.

A resurgence in Byzantine power did not last long and soon thereafter in 1071 AD Alp Arslan (Brave Lion) the leader of the Seljuk Turkish host invaded Asia Minor, defeated the Byzantines at Manzikert near lake Van and went on to occupy the entire region of Armenia. This marked the entrance of the Turks into Asia Minor and the beginning of the end for Byzantium, which having lost much of its heartland and its Armenian borderlands began to feel insecure within its boundaries.

Nowhere was this insecurity more felt than in Cilicia which had always been threatened by the Muslim rulers of Damascus, but now also to the north by the Seljuk state known as the Sultanate of Iconium (Konya) or Rum. To compensate the Armenian nobles and Armenian Byzantine officers, who had been disenfranchised in the wake of the Seljuk invasion, Constantinople offered them administrative roles and positions in Cilicia. This shrewd move was also a calculated attempt to strengthen the Byzantine position in the area by flooding the region with Armenian warriors.

¹ The Bagratid Kingdom, named after the Bagratuni dynasty founded by King Ashot I in 884 AD, had consolidated its power in Greater Armenia following the decline of Arab power in the region. Ashot established his capital at Ani and it was not until 1054 with the Byzantine reconquest of Armenia that the kingdom ended. A branch of the Bagratuni continued to rule in Georgia until the Russian conquest.

² Greater Armenia being the lands comprising the Armenian plateau further north.

Cilicia had previously been an ethnically mixed area home to Jewish, Greek and Muslim communities. Smaller numbers of Armenians, and Italian merchants present in the coastal settlements of Adana and Tarsus. The plain itself was a hotch-potch of village communities, Christian for the most part of the Orthodox persuasion, but with a notable Armenian and Syriac presence stretching back to antiquity. Muslim communities, the legacy of Arab occupation, were similarly interspersed and not always ethnically Arab either. The Armenian community was however noticeably minimal and by no means close to resembling a majority.

This however changed with the extinguishing of an independent Armenia further north. Not only was there an influx of Armenian nobles eager to claim their compensation, but also with them came their retinues and courts. Clergy to serve the religious needs of the Armenian notables, soldiers in their employ migrated with their families in tow, guildsmen from the northern cities, all the necessary elements to provide a basis for the formation of a rudimentary state in exile. Perhaps most importantly of all was the influx of ordinary Armenian families who fearing Turkish oppression and Seljuk misrule followed their leaders southwards into the relative safety of the Cilician plain.

Cilicia thus took on a distinctly Armenian flavour with the immigration of laymen, but more importantly the establishment of noble families in the area was to prove critical later on. For a time the leading figure in Cilicia was an Armenian Byzantine general, Philaretus who controlled much of the region, although by his death in 1092 Seljuk raids had destroyed much of his dominions. There came a scramble amongst the Armenian chiefs and nobles to establish suzerainty over the greater part of the plain, to harness support and gain power. Much of Philaretus' kingdom thus became divided between his lieutenants Gogh Vasil (Basil the Robber) and Abul-Gharib Artsruni³, who controlled the all important city of Tarsus, whilst a third officer, Thoros came to rule over Edessa (Urfa) and its environs.

The Rubenids, who were concentrated in the west of Cilicia around the fortress of Gobidara, which guarded the strategic Cilician Gates and the route north, became Cilicia's leading family. The head of the Rubenids, Roupen was a confidant of the last king of Ani, Gagahik II. To the east and south the Rubenids' main competitors, the Hetumids, named after King Oshin's son Hetum were the dominant faction controlling the Amanus Gates and the eastern entrance into Cilicia. The Hetumids pro-Byzantine stance was to renege them to the status of Cilicia's 'other' family, whilst the Rubenids willingness to challenge Constantinople and their flirting with the title *Ishkhan* (prince) eventually won them more acolytes than their competitors.

The independence of Cilicia came about in a highly convoluted manner, Abul-Gharib and Gogh Vasil; the two main chiefs eventually passed away. Most of their lands were to fall under the sway of either the Hetumids or Rubenids, who were upon the death of Philaretus' two lieutenants Cilicia's leading factions. In 1080 Lord Roupen declared his fiefdom independent of Byzantium following the murder in Constantinople of King Gagahik II in 1079. Roupen fabricated an actual Bagratid

³ The Artsruni or Arshakuni or even Arsacid family was the very same founders of the 3rd dynasty to occupy the Armenian throne during the kingdom. They were in fact Persian in origin, but through the course of time became inevitably 'Armenianised.'

family link and took the title of prince. Roupen (1080-95), his son Constantine (1095-1102) and grandson Thoros (1102-29) gathered together much of the lands of Cilicia at the expense of the other Armenian families and the Seljuks. The fact that the Rubenids continued to practice the Armenian Apostolic faith rather than convert to Greek Orthodox (as had been the trend amongst the Armenian nobility) won him renown and applause both amongst the Armenian population of Cilicia and Greater Armenia itself.

At this time Armenian events in Cilicia had become a microcosm of greater events occurring beyond Armenian control, namely the Crusades which had arisen in the wake of the Seljuk invasions and Byzantine pleas for help from Catholic Europe. The entrance of the Crusaders into the area had the dual effect of finally severing Cilicia from Byzantium and also promoting links between Armenians and Europe, a link that was to prove vital later on. The First Crusade in 1095 relied openly on the support and hospitality of the Cilician Armenians who represented a friendly community and allies for the Crusaders, whilst also at times acting as pawns in greater events. In Edessa, an Armenian ruled exclave of Cilicia, the unpopular Greek Orthodox Armenian king, Thoros, was ousted by his Armenian subjects and the Crusader noble, Baldwin of Bolougne.

The demise of Armenian rule in Edessa left the Rubenids in a much more favourable position, they became increasingly recognised as the dominant Armenian clan in Cilicia, and as its legitimate rulers by Crusaders and Europeans alike. During this time both the Hetumids and Rubenids were sucked into and took part in Crusader intrigues. More often than not it was the Rubenids who came out on top. The elapse of a century and three further Crusades were required before Lord Levon II (1187-1219); the 10th Rubenid lord could finally establish the kingdom of Cilicia.

The rise of Salah al-Din and the Kurdish Ayyubids as a counterbalance to the Crusader states along the Levantine coast had led to the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem and the restriction of the Crusader states to the coastal enclaves of Tyre, Acre, Antioch and their environs. Byzantine power had likewise declined with a wave of renewed Turkish attacks. The Christian position was further confounded by the failure of the Third Crusade, which included such personas as Richard the Lionheart (at whose wedding on Cyprus a Rubenid was best man) and Frederick Barbarossa.

These events and others elsewhere left Cilicia as the sole substantial Christian presence in the Middle East. Cilicia thus became a palace of intrigue, Byzantium, the Holy Roman Empire, the Papacy and even the Abbassid Caliph all competed and vied for influence over the state and each raced to be the first to recognise Levon as the rightful king. Eventually Levon, who was crowned on January 6th 1199 in Tarsus was granted not one, but two crowns. One, emanating from Constantinople and the other from the German Emperor. The coronation was attended by representatives from across Christendom and a number of Muslim states thus highlighting the importance that had become attached to Cilicia. Shortly thereafter the royal court and capital was established at Sis.

The reign of Cilicia's first monarchs was also its golden age; Levon was able to marry many Rubenid noblewomen to Crusader barons and European noble families alike, in doing so strengthening Cilicia's position in the Levant and the world at large.

Carefully manoeuvring between Crusaders and Salah al-Din, Levon expanded Cilicia to its greatest extent; though failing in his objective to gain Antioch he had nevertheless placed Cilicia as an important regional player.

Levon's reign was however tainted by a question that was to plague and ultimately contribute to Cilicia's demise, the issue of liturgical and religious practice. Recognition by the Papacy of Levon as king had come attached to the hope that Levon might concede the Pope as being the head of the Armenian Church. Levon's unwillingness to do this was mirrored by his people's abhorrence of such a proposal, the clergy's adamant refusal and a general sense of patriotism. Although through doing so he denied Cilicia the full support of Catholic Europe

Levon's throne passed to his daughter Zabel (1219-52) who became, and was to remain, Cilicia's only ever female ruler. She co-ruled with King Hetum I (1226-70), who became the first Hetumid noble to rule Cilicia and thus gained the kudos of uniting Cilicia's two leading families. Hetum I was Cilicia's longest serving monarch, his rule with Zabel was known as a period in which the arts, literature and science all flourished despite an increasingly volatile political situation. Constantinople had fallen in 1204 to the Fourth Crusade, sending Byzantium along the route of terminal decline and encouraging the Seljuks to entertain even loftier ambitions. The Ayyubids with their Mamluke army was looming in Egypt and Syria, Turkish and Kurdish cross border raids increased thereby damaging Cilicia further. Two serious invasions in 1233 and 1245 devastated the kingdom, and yet nonetheless Cilicia persevered.

It was during the reign of King Hetum I that the Mongols entered the political scene. Hetum instantly recognised the Mongols as a valuable ally and lost no time in approaching them. He personally visited the Great Khan Mangu (Mongke) in his capital of Karakorum to legitimise a treaty signed by his brother Smbat in 1247 which established Cilicia as a Mongol ally, and a champion of Christianity in the Mongol Empire. On his way back Hetum became the first Cilician monarch to visit Armenia proper. It was with Cilicia as an intermediary that led Europe to entertain dreams of turning the Mongols into an ally in its duel with the Muslims for control of the Levant, here too can be traced, in part, the origin of the myth concerning Prester John.

This period of peace afforded by the Mongol presence allowed for both the advancement of Cilician society, economy and arts as well as having a positive effect on the wider Armenian conscience. The close links cultivated between Cilician Armenians and Europeans born of shared interests led to a two-way trade in ideas. Feudalism was imported to Cilicia and eventually adopted as the system of administration. A consequence of which was the introduction of the French word 'Baron' into the Armenian lexicon where it remains with the current connotation of sir or mister.

The increasing tendency of Armenian nobles to be fluent in French, Latin and Greek alongside Armenian and the adoption of certain phrases and words led to two additions to the Armenian alphabet the sounds and symbols for 'O' and 'F'. It is arguable that through this emerging multilingualism one can trace the origin of the Western Armenian dialect, but certainly modern Armenian as a whole. Intermarriage and a readiness to convert saw an emigration of Armenian nobility to Europe and vice versa, allowing the small kingdom to punch above its own political weight.

There was an increase in Armenian literature which was readily translated into Latin, French, Arabic and Greek and made available to a wider non-Armenian audience, as was literature from the above mentioned languages made available to literate Armenians. Mekhitar Gosh wrote his one hundred and ninety fables, which gained him, popularity across Armenian lands and in Europe. Gosh went on to write a comprehensive law book in Armenian which subsequently became the basis of jurisprudence for the early Diaspora and also the basis of *millet* law during the Ottoman period.

The Armenian nobility and intelligentsia of Cilicia became familiar with the Latin texts of ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, ideas propagated by Plato and Marcus Aurelius were debated amongst the learned of Sis. Theology, philosophy, rhetoric, medicine and mathematics were all taught, studied and expanded upon.

Interaction and competition between Orthodoxy and Catholicism in Cilicia led to debate occurring amongst the Armenian clergy as to the merits of the various Christian denominations. The renaissance of the Armenian Church and its need to fend off competitors saw the rise of Thoros Roslin the master illuminator, the best known of a series of Cilician miniaturists and illuminators who produced beautiful manuscripts from this era in a bid to capture popular imagination. Nerses Shnorhali and other like minded clergy wrote extensively on the nature of the Armenian Church and of its pros and cons. One can see a reformation of sorts occurring within the Armenian Church during this period as it attempted to fight its own against Catholicism and Orthodoxy whilst also remaining appealing to parishioners. The church thus addressed issues that were not to be considered in Europe until the coming of Luther and Calvin.

The Armenian historian Kirakos became the main chronicler for Christendom of the Mongol invasion of the Middle East. His writings, which were translated into Latin and French provided the foundations for much which is known in the west of the Mongol period. Similarly an Armenian monk, Hayton, dictated his memoirs in French to Nicholas Falcon in 1302. The subsequent book entitled *La Flore des estoires de la Terre D'orient* is an invaluable mediaeval account of the rise and coming of the Mongols. Mathew of Edessa became a mediaeval name synonymous with historical writings concerning the Levant.

The good relations between Mongols and Armenians is perhaps best highlighted by the presence of Armenian priests and a church in Karakorum, Armenian monks travelled the length and breadth of the Mongol Empire converting people to the Christian faith. The apogee of this was the building of an Armenian Church by a wealthy Armenian matron in the area of Quangzhou, China. The church, according to records, was subsequently entrusted to the Bishop of Zeitun, Gerard Albuini.

Queen Zabel established a hospital in Sis, which became a meeting ground for physicians and medical theories emanating from the ancient Greeks, Europe and the Arabs. The hospital at Sis provided Armenians with the means to study European medicine, which led to the rise of such thinkers as Mekhitar Heratzi. An Armenian physician he wrote, *Comfort for the Feverish*, in which Mekhitar distinguished a

number of fevers and wrote about what was then essentially the ‘theory’ of infection and the concept of contagion. This text travelled back to Europe where it contributed to modern medicine and won Mekhitar Heratzi the acclaim of being one of the first doctors to recognise the importance of human contact in the spread of contagion.

Grigor Kiliketsi compiled a tome consisting of three hundred and thirty entries on various drugs and the ailments, which they relieved. Archbishop Hovannes wrote *The Secrets of Women* in which he elaborated upon issues such as contraceptive methods, malformations during pregnancy and the nature of the embryo to name but a few of his discourses. Cilicia as a centre of medical study also became one of the earliest centres of gynaecology. Through this association either the word *ginik* meaning woman in Armenian passed into its vocabulary or the word gynaecology has an Armenian root.

Lying at the end of the Silk Road produce from Europe passed into Asia through Cilicia’s ports; likewise Cilicia was the main importer of Cypriot copper which was sold across the Asian continent. Dyes, spices, silk, cotton, pearls, cloth, kilim and all manner of produce emanating from India, China, Persia and Arabia passed through Cilicia and onto the great Italian trading ships to be sold in the markets of Europe. From here the Armenian presence in Venice can be traced and the existence of the Armenian library at San Lazzaro testifies to the wealth of Cilician literary culture. The exporting of rugs from Cilicia has left a lasting legacy in European vocabulary. Rugs originating from Kharput exported to adorn the homes of European nobles became known as ‘carpets’ in deference to their place of origin.

Such an epoch of trade, culture and vitality was not to last. The forces of intrigue and suspicion brought to an end the Rubenid-Hetumid dynastic alliance, which expired in 1341 with the murder of Levon IV (1320-41), and the absence of a worthy heir. The throne subsequently passed to Guy de Lusignan the half-Armenian nephew of Hetum II (1289-1307). Upon his assumption Guy was renamed Constantine II. Being more Frankish than Armenian his reign was notably short.

The Lusignan dynasty was to provide Cilicia with a four more kings, the last being Levon V (1363-64, 1374-75) who took the throne at a time when the Crusades had petered out into a regrettable mistake, Europe was becoming more insular and inward looking. The Mamlukes based in Egypt and the successors to the Ayubids were coming to dominate Cilicia’s fringe. The Mongols, defeated in 1260 by the Mamlukes at Ayn Jalut, retreated eastwards, converted to Islam, abandoning Cilicia and their erstwhile Armenian allies to their fate. Meanwhile in the north a young and dynamic Turkic state ruled by the Ottoman dynasty had arisen. Despite numerous territorial and economic concessions, the Mamlukes appetite for Cilicia’s annihilation was insatiable. In 1375 the Mamluke warlord Ish-Timur invaded Cilicia. Despite a brave resistance at Sis and pleas for help directed to Europe, which came to no avail, Cilicia succumbed to its inevitable demise. The royal family was taken into captivity to Cairo.

Levon was eventually ransomed and he travelled to Europe, touring the royal courts and begging assistance to liberate his lost kingdom. He was granted a rich sum by the king of Navarre and the Golden Rose by the Pope after being informed that the Crusader zeal was redundant. Levon received little practical support and eventually

retired to Paris where he was pensioned by the French King Charles V, whom he taught to play chess. Levon's services were employed by England and France to act as an intermediary during the Hundred Years War, on several occasions he was able to secure intermittent peace, but failed in anything more permanent.

Levon V died in 1393 he was buried in the church of St. Denis alongside the other French kings. The title 'King of Armenia' passed to Levon's relative King John I of Cyprus, and then later to a branch of the Lusignan family, which married into the House of Savoy. The Savoy's continued to use the title well into the nineteenth century though ostensibly the title died with any real meaning in 1510 following the death of Catherine Cornaro, the last Cypriot Lusignan.

Cilicia was to remain under Mamluke rule until the sixteenth century when in 1516 it fell to the Ottoman Turks. Zeitun in the Taurus Mountains retained a level of independence throughout Mamluke and Ottoman rule and maintained its own princely or *Ishkhan* leadership, its autonomy was compromised only with the increase in Ottoman authoritarianism. Cilicia remained a part of the Ottoman Empire until the First World War when the remaining Armenian population was subjected to the horrors of the Genocide. With the end of the war in 1918 Cilicia fell within the borders of French mandated Syria, though they too were to abandon Cilicia to Kemal Ataturk. In popular Armenian sentiment the memory and nostalgia for Cilicia and its legacy lives on in the emotive words of Nahapet Roosinian's song of the same name.