

The Royal Chapel at Anavarza

by

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Anavarza is the modern Turkish version of Anazarbus, a city of Cilicia, for a time the metropolis of the Roman province and much later the capital of Little Armenia (Fig. 1). The classical city, whose walls survive, lay on a flat plain crossed by long aqueducts and by Roman roads; on the east it is dominated by the fantastic cliffs of a rocky massif. On a narrow ridge about a mile long stands the acropolis, which became a Byzantine, Arab and Armenian fortress.¹ Within the lower ward of this Castle there stood until this century the Royal Chapel of the Armenian kings, now in ruins.

The Armenians, driven southwards by the Seljuk Turks in the late eleventh century, took over Cilicia and Thoros I made Anazarbus his capital in AD 1100-02, and this it remained until 1184, apart from a period of Byzantine control from 1137 to 1144. The Mamelukes from Egypt finally destroyed the Armenian kingdom in 1375, and since then the site has remained deserted apart from the adjacent small Turkish village.²

On an extended holiday in Anatolia in 1970 I was induced to visit Anavarza for sentimental reasons: Anazarbus had been the birthplace of Dioscorides, author of the greatest of all herbals and fountain-head of botany for the whole Middle Ages. Living in the first century AD, Dioscorides is supposed to have issued his great work, in five books, sometime between AD 60 and 80. He was in the medical service of the Roman army, but practically nothing else is known of his life.³ The unrelated fact of the existence of the Armenian chapel was a bonus.⁴

The interest of the chapel, now in ruins after earthquakes in the middle of this century (and substantially devastated since Michael Gough's survey of 1949-51), is that it was built at the moment that Armenian architecture was moving from its basic 'Romanesque' phase into a form of pointed-arch building close to the nascent Gothic of the West. To recapitulate, refugee Armenian architects from Edessa (Urfa) built the city gateways of Cairo in 1087-92 in a fully Romanesque style, without any trace of the pointed arch. Parts of the Great Mosque at Diyarbakir were built after a fire in 1116 and have dated inscriptions of 1117-8 and 1124-5. These used pointed arches and mouldings of a proto-Gothic type. The Great Mosque of Bitlis, said to have been built or completed in AD 1126, is in an advanced pointed-arch style almost identical with that of the Cistercian abbey-church of Fontenay (Côte-d'Or, France), dated to 1139-47. Pointed arches of similar form had been employed in the western spans of the Tigris Bridge below Diyarbakir, dated by inscription to AD 1065, certainly

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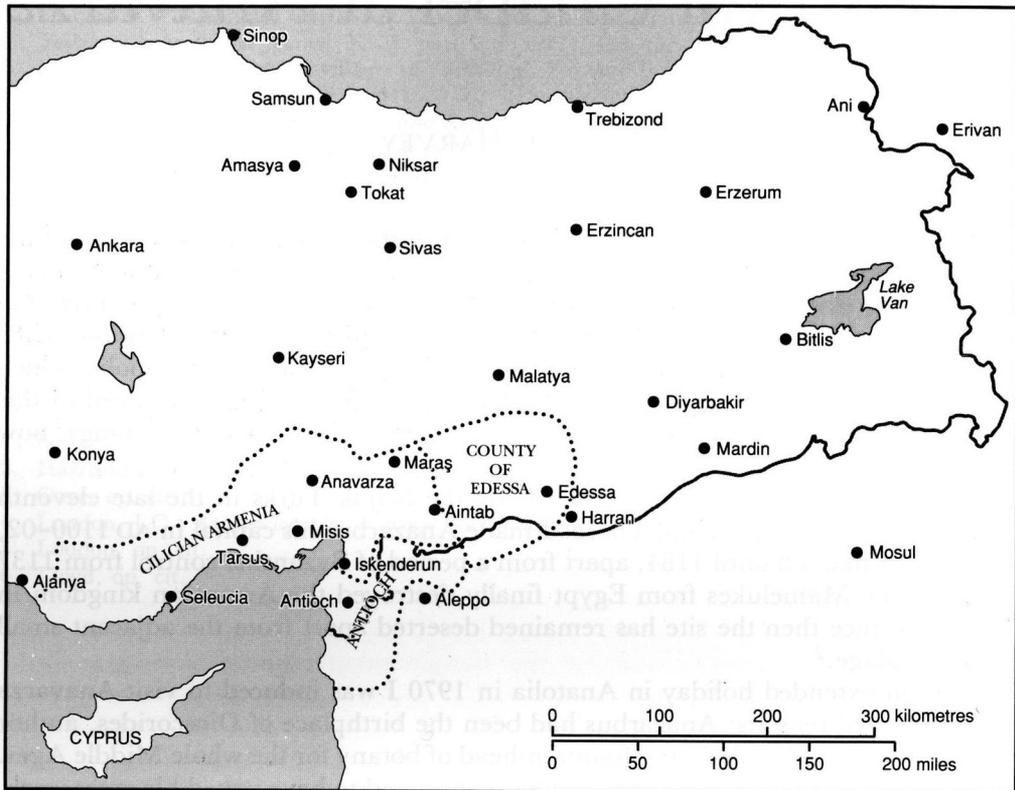


Fig. 1

Cilician (Lesser) Armenia, with the County of Edessa and the Principality of Antioch, about AD 1120. The earlier kingdom of Greater Armenia extended from Lake Van and Bitlis to include Erzerum and the old capital Ani, as well as a large area of north-west Persia and southern Transcaucasia



Fig. 2

The Royal Chapel in foreground, with the Armenian keep of 1188 and upper ward of the Castle, to right
Gertrude L. Bell, 1905



Fig. 3
Royal Chapel from East
Gertrude L. Bell, 1905

an Islamic work. On the other hand, the mosque built at Ani, the old Armenian capital, was using only round arches by 1073.⁵ Since pointed arches had been used extensively in Syria, Iraq and Iran from about AD 700 onwards, it can be regarded as certain that the origins of Gothic are not to be sought in Christian Armenia, which was devoted to the round arch until the end of the eleventh century. Clearly the change of style, and the introduction of the pointed arch to Europe, are to be associated with the events of the so-called 'First Crusade' of 1097-9 and the Frankish control of the county of Edessa (Urfa) from 1098 to 1144. This lay immediately to the East of Little Armenia and was in uneasy alliance with it against the Seljuk Turks.

It is evident that any buildings of known or approximately-known date within the region are of crucial importance for the transmission of the pointed arch to the West. There are very few positively-dated works and few of them are of capital importance beyond those at Diyarbakir and Bitlis. Of especial interest is the Royal Chapel at Anavarza, since it was certainly dedicated in the time of Thoros (Theodore) I, the third Rupenid baron of Armenian Cilicia (Fig. 2). It is on record that he made Anavarza his capital about 1100-02, and the *terminus post quem* for the Chapel can be brought forward to 1111-12 or later, since the chroniclers place its construction after the murder of the sons of Mándala, a notorious event of that year. The reign of Thoros I ended in 1129, so that the building of the Chapel can be placed with a high degree of certainty, within a period of seventeen years.⁶ Since a Muslim army had occupied the district of Anavarza in 1110-11, it is probable that the foundation of the Chapel was later, after the departure of the invaders, who carried off 'innumerable prisoners and booty'.⁷ This dating is perhaps confirmed by the end of the Armenian inscription near the south angle of the west front, which may have read (in Armenian letters used as numerals) '561', corresponding in the Armenian era to AD 1113, though this is very doubtful.⁸ In view of the poor state of the inscription when it was copied in 1852 and its fragmentary condition now, it seems unlikely that a precise date for the building can ever be confirmed.



Fig. 4
Interior of Chapel looking north-east
Gertrude L. Bell, 1905

Fig. 5
Interior of eastern apses, 1970





Fig. 6
Armenian inscription
and scalloped tym-
panum above central
east window, 1970

In spite of this degree of uncertainty, the Chapel is a building relatively closely dated, to the very period of the rebuilding of the Great Mosque at Diyarbakir. The contrast between the tentative style of the Chapel and the developed and finely-moulded work of the Mosque is marked, and shows that even at the highest level, the progress of style at the Armenian Court remained behind that of neighbouring Islam.

The Chapel, as judged by the ruins which survived in 1970 and by Gertrude Bell's photographs of 1905, was built in dressed ashlar of the highest quality. This fully bears out the reputation of Armenian stonemasons of the period and confirms the building's high rank as a sanctuary of the royal family. The exterior was extremely simple, forming a rectangular block of 13.35m by 9.80m (about 43ft 10in by 32ft 2in), with a low-pitched roof, hipped over the three (internal) apses at the east end (Fig. 3). The plan is simple, consisting of a central nave with side aisles of three bays. The east-west internal dimension from the west wall to the extremity of the central apse is exactly one-and-a-half times the overall internal width; and the width of each aisle, from the inner face of the outer wall to the centre-line of the arcade, is exactly half the width of the nave between the centre-lines of arcades.

The piers were square, of coursed ashlar, with a hollow-chamfered abacus supporting the slightly pointed arches seen in Gertrude Bell's photograph (Fig. 4). The pointed face-arches of the three apses still survived in 1970 (Fig. 5). According to Gertrude Bell, who inspected the chapel in 1905, the nave and aisles were vaulted in brick. Decorative features were few and slight. The windows are square-cut rectangles, surmounted externally by a scalloped tympanum of segmental form (Fig. 6). The south doorway had a pierced pointed tympanum, but was made up largely of re-used pieces of late classical mouldings, and is therefore not stylistically significant.⁹ The most important decorative features are two shallow niches on the outer face of the east wall, between the windows (Fig. 7). These are surrounded by shallow mouldings carried round a very slightly-pointed head with an ogee quirk at the apex (Fig. 8). This is surmounted by a small fleuron or poppy-head worked in



Fig. 7
Remains of east end, 1970

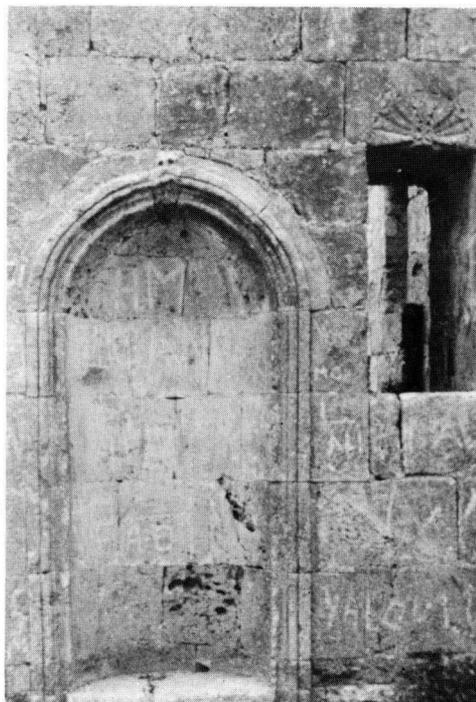


Fig. 8
Northern niche and east window of northern apse,
1970

relief, along with the mouldings, on the ashlar. As these niches form an integral part of the wall of coursed masonry, there can be no question that they are original features.

What is significant in the Anavarza Chapel is that it presents, even if in a rudimentary form, several features of Gothic architecture and detail at a date (at the very latest 1128–9) some years earlier than the appearance even of Cistercian ‘Gothic’ in western Europe. It is one of several recognizable stepping-stones by which style was on the move from the Middle East towards the shores of the Atlantic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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It is necessary to explain the long delay (1970–91) in publishing the results of this research. This has been largely due to pressure of other work, but the difficulty of obtaining accurate translations of the Armenian sources led to long pauses, and one of nine years (!) was occasioned by loss in the post (in England).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For Anazarbus see Michael Gough, ‘Anazarbus’, *Anatolian Studies*, II, 1952, 85–150. The Royal Chapel (Church of the Armenian Kings) is dealt with at pp. 125–7, with a scale plan and elevations (Fig. 20). For the background of Armenian studies see: R. Fedden and J. Thomson, *Crusader Castles* (London 1957); H.A. Manandian, *The Trade and Cities of Armenia in relation to ancient world Trade*, translated by Nina G. Garsoian (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon: Bertrand, 1965); E. Utudjian, *Armenian Architecture*, translated by Geoffrey Capner (Paris: Morancé 1968); Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *The Armenians* (London 1969); T.S.R. Boase (ed.), *The Cilician Kingdom of Armenia* (Edinburgh 1978).
2. Above, note 1, p. 98.
3. *The Oxford Companion to Gardens* (1986), 142.
4. *Anatolian Studies*, XXI (1971), 43; J.H. Harvey, ‘Geometry and Gothic Design’, *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, 30 (1986), 43–56, at p.49.
5. ‘The Origins of Gothic Architecture’, *Antiquaries Journal*, XLVIII (1968), 87–99, at p.96.
6. Victor Langlois, *Voyage dans la Cilicie* (Paris, 1861), 434–43, at p. 441. E.H. King, ‘A Journey through Armenian Cilicia’, *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, XXIV (1937), 234–46. See also Michael Chamich, *History of Armenia*, translated by Johannes Avdall (1827), II, 172; L.M. Alishan, *Sissouan* (1885; French edition, Venice, 1899), 276–7. Professor Der Nersessian kindly provided an English version (from the Armenian of 1885, p. 239) of the Anavarza inscription: ‘By the will of the most holy Trinity, I Theotos . . . Sebastos, son of Cosdantine son of Rupen, I built the church . . . (for) the salvation of my soul and in memory of my parents and for the life (?) . . . with the intercession . . . Remember Theotos, my son Cosdantine in your holy and meritorious prayers to Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. In the year . . .’.
7. Matthew of Edessa, chapter 205, events of AD 1110–11.
8. Professor Charles Dowsett, *in litt.*, 2 November 1985.

9. See Gertrude Bell's photograph reproduced in *Revue Archéologique*, 4 S., t. VII (1906), 1-29, Fig. 21 at p. 25. See also Winifred C. Donkin, *Catalogue of the Gertrude Bell Collection* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1960). For details comparable to those of the Chapel at Anavarza, see Utudjian, *Armenian Architecture* (note 1 above), Figs 33, 34, 70-72, 95, 194, 219.