

The Armenian Silk Road: An Economic and Politico-Cultural Landscape*

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1. Introduction

Essentially landlocked¹ between the Eastern Mediterranean, Caspian, and Black Seas, historical Armenia (roughly between 37° and 49° East and 37.5° and 41.5° North), which covered a vast expanse estimated at 116,000 sq mi / 300,000 sq km, was strategically located for overland trade between Asia and Europe. This geographic characteristic of the Armenian homeland was, no doubt, one of the major reasons why, from the earliest times to the close of the early modern period, international/intercontinental trade had assumed a central place in the economic life of the Armenian people. Studies of ancient, medieval, and early modern trade testify to the thriving commercial relations that Armenians have enjoyed with many world civilizations².

* I am indebted to Winchester Jordan for his skilful mapping of the Armenian Silk Road and to Williford Weston for sketching the Armenian cultural landscape ("landscape" defined as a way of seeing).

¹ Armenia has not always been a landlocked country. At various times in its long history, albeit for very brief periods, Armenia has bordered on the sea. From around 1050 to 1375 CE, for example, the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia bordered on the Mediterranean. In 1271, Marco Polo, the famed Venetian traveller and trader, set out for China on the fabled Silk Road from Ayas in Cilicia. This port town on the Gulf of Alexandretta was then a busy emporium, the centre of East-West commerce.

² V. H. P'ap'azyan, *Hayastani arevtrakan ughinere mijazgayin arevtri olortum. XVI-XVII darterum* [The Trade-Routes of Armenia in International Trade, 16th-17th cc], (Erevan, 1990); Nina G. Garsoian, "Trade, Armenia," in Joseph R. Strayer (ed.), *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, (New York, 1989); Babken N. Arak'elyan, *K'aghak'neré ew arbestneré Hayastanum IX-XIII darterum* [The Cities and Crafts in Armenia during IX-XIII cc], 2 vols., (Erevan, 1958-1964); H. A. Manandian, *The Trade and Cities of Armenia in Relation to Ancient World Trade*, trans. N. G. Garsoian, (Lisbon, 1965).

In the early modern period (16th-18th CE)³, the merchants of Ararat (in Armenian historiography, “Ararat” is often used as a metaphor for Armenia) rose, once again, on the international/intercontinental trade scene. As early as the second half of the sixteenth century they had established successful relations both with the East and the West. For the next two centuries, they would continue to enjoy, though under considerably altered circumstances, even greater success and prosperity. The seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries epitomize the economic and financial influence that the Armenian merchant community exerted in the region.

The artery of this overland trade is designated here as the Armenian Silk Road. The term “road” is being used in a collective sense, denoting the many routes that taken together served to move the goods from east to west, as well as north, and conversely. Furthermore, the term “road” is qualified as “silk road,” akin to its predecessor, the Ancient [Chinese] Silk Road⁴, because, given the unsaturated European demand for this commodity during the early modern period, raw silk remained the single most important and coveted article flowing from Persia to Europe. Finally, the justification for referring to the “silk road” as the Armenian Silk Road lies in the fact that the exportation of raw silk from Persia to Europe was exclusively in the hands of the Armenian merchants of New Julfa in Persia or, as the famed seventeenth century traveller, Sir John Chardin, has put

³ Robert H. Hewsen, *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*, (University of Chicago Press, 2001). The author, on p.7, contends that the early modern period of Armenia starts from the fall of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia in 1375 and lasts until the rise of the Armenian Question in 1878. He subdivides the period into (a) post-Ilkhanid / Turkoman period (1335-1478), (b) the Ottoman-Safavid period—early, middle, and late (1478-1722)—and (c) the period of Russian expansion into Caucasia (1722-1878).

⁴ This famed, though often perilous, Silk Road linked Asia to Europe from as early as the Bronze Age (4th millennium BCE) until the Ottoman conquests in Anatolia (XIVth century CE). It traversed a barren crust of earth through treacherous mountains and deserts across the vast expanse of Central Asia. Approaching the Caspian Sea, it divided, one branch turning north-west into Russia and the Balkans, and the other continuing south-west into Iran and ultimately reaching the Eastern Mediterranean coast passing through Armenia. Among the later travellers on the Silk Road was Marco Polo (1254-1324?), a Venetian trader, whose experiences in China (then called Cathay) and other Asian countries, including Armenia, were later compiled and published under various titles. For a modern, readable, and dependable translation into English, see *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. and with introduction by Ronald Latham, (London, 1992).

it, "The Armenians manage alone the whole European trade"⁵. Aside from this, the routes taken by the caravans ran through historical Armenia and Armenian-populated cities, towns, and villages.

This paper aims at providing a groundwork for mapping the Armenian Silk Road. In doing so, it also suggests that there are many and varied contexts in which the Silk Road may be cast. The present study places it against a backdrop of the geopolitics of the times as well as the cultural heritage of those Armenian merchants who championed the east-west overland trade. The selection, organization, and shaping of the phenomena portraying the Armenian Silk Road are based primarily on Armenian, English, and French historical sources.

2. The Geopolitical Setting

After the fall of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia in 1375, Armenia was ravaged by Turko-Tartar hordes from Central Asia led by Tamerlane, a Turkicized Mongol. These invasions caused unprecedented destruction and death. Armenia was now reduced to rubble. Finally, with the Ottoman capture of Constantinople in 1453, Armenia was cut off from Europe and thus sank back into a state of total desolation. The Armenian homeland, which in the past had been at the forefront of east-west commercial and cultural exchanges, was now completely isolated from the outside world⁶.

With the rise of the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century and the establishment of the powerful Safavid Dynasty in neighboring Persia at the turn of the sixteenth century, the stage was now set for a long and

⁵ Sir John Chardin, *Travels in Persia, 1673-1677*. (New York, 1988), p. 281.

⁶ Hewsen, *Armenia*.

The author points out on p.145 that while the Armenian homeland was isolated from the world at large, "The Armenians were not in ignorance of what was going on in the outside world. Already at the end of the fifteenth century, scarcely a generation after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks, an Armenian monk, noting the emergence of Christian Russia from Mongol domination, wrote of having beheld 'the great white queen of the North.' ... Later, Katholikos Step'annos (1544-1546) journeyed to Venice, Rome, Vienna, Poland, and thence to Moscow, reaching out to Christian powers. A secret meeting was convoked by the katholikos Step'anos V at Ejmiatsin in 1547, another by Mik'ael I in 1562, and yet a third by Hagop IV at Ejmiatsin in 1679 to seek aid from the Christian West."

brutal rivalry. Throughout the sixteenth century and into the first decade of the seventeenth, Armenia had fallen prey to the geopolitical ambitions of these two superpowers serving as a military borderland, a theatre of savage wars. Yet, despite the incessant wars, the merchants of Ararat somehow managed to emerge on the international scene during the second half of the sixteenth century and build a reputation as brokers and representatives of European commercial firms and interests in the silk and cloth trades. The most notable of these merchants were situated in Julfa on the Araxes River⁷.

This reputation had not gone unnoticed by Shah Abbas I of Persia who ruled from 1587 to 1629. With full knowledge of the important role the Armenian merchants could play in the advancement of Persian trade and commerce, the Shah had long wanted to move them from their homeland to his newly established capital of Esfahan. In 1604, violating the 1590 treaty with the Ottoman Empire, Shah Abbas invaded the Ottoman domains in South Caucasia⁸. During this protracted campaign the Shah forcibly moved the Armenian population from Caucasian Armenia to Persia proper, leaving behind scorched cities and villages⁹.

⁷ Edmund M. Herzig, "The Rise of the Julfa Merchants in the Late Sixteenth Century," in Charles Melville, ed., *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, (London, 1996). The author notes on p.305 that "The sudden rise of Julfa, a small Armenian town near the Ottoman-Safavid border, in the last decades of the XVIth century presents a historical paradox. The town itself had until then remained more or less obscure, certainly not one of the major centres of the region, and the period was one which saw some of the most ferocious campaigns of the Ottoman-Safavid wars as well as the outbreak of the Cclali (Persian jalali) revolts. It is generally viewed as one of the bleakest and most turbulent episodes in the whole of Armenia's often bleak and turbulent history, not a time in which the emergence of a thriving new commercial town might be expected."

⁸ A descriptive term adopted by the Society for the Study of Caucasia. It replaces the term Transcaucasia which reflects the view of the region from Russia (trans-, across, beyond; Caucasus, a mountain system lying between the Black and Caspian seas).

⁹ George A. Bournoutian, *A History of the Armenian People*, vol. II, (Costa Mesa, California, 1994). The autor notes on p.33 that "European sources of the seventeenth century portray [Shah] Abbas as a great benefactor of the Armenians, who secured them from the Turks and who made them wealthy in New Julfa. Armenian historians of the time, however, such as Arakel of Tabriz, view Shah Abbas' deportations and the Turko-Iranian conflict in Armenia as a major catastrophe, during which the land and the people suffered terribly, with the resulting depopulation making the Armenians a minority in most of their historic land." H. Papazian [D. H. Papazyan], "Armenia and Iran vi. Armeno-Iranian Relations in the Islamic Period," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, II, pp.471-2; Roger Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, (Cambridge, 1980).

The Armenian peasantry was taken primarily to the silk-growing provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran, while the professional merchants and artisans were settled in a new suburb, adjacent to the capital. This suburb, which was named New Julfa (Armenian *Nor Jugha*), grew to become a self-governing township and the centre of world-wide Armenian commercial activities throughout the seventeenth and well into the eighteenth century.

With their ready capital and commercial contacts in Asia and Europe, the Armenian merchants were well placed to help Shah Abbas with his economic objective: the transformation of his newly-founded capital city of Esfahan into a major trade centre. Indeed, Armenian entrepreneurial expertise soon helped to dramatically develop Persia's foreign trade in raw silk, create new markets and products, and expand the scope of trade routes¹⁰. This economic prosperity continued until the invasion of Persia by the Afghans in 1722.

While the frontiers of Eurasian overland trade were expanding, the northern and western European nations, such as Portugal, Holland, England, and France, who unlike the Italian city-states, profited little from the growing Mediterranean trade with the East, began to seek new routes to the Orient. At the turn of the sixteenth century Portugal spearheaded the drive by rounding the Cape of Good Hope and sailing into the waters of the Indian Ocean. In this vast region, specifically in the Persian Gulf, the west coast of India, and the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago, Portugal established a rich commercial empire. A century or so later, it was the

¹⁰ See, among others, Rudolph P. Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran, Silk for Silver, 1600-1730*, (Cambridge, 1999); Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, *The Shah's Silk for Europe's Silver: The Eurasian Trade of the Julfa Armenians in Safavid Iran and India, 1530-1750*, (Scholars Press, 1999); Michel Aghassian and Kéram Kévonian, "The Armenian Merchant Network: Overall Autonomy and Local Integration," in Sushil Chaudhury and Michel Morineau (eds.), *Merchants, Companies and Trade*, (Cambridge University Press, 1999); K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, (Cambridge, 1985); Michel Aghassian and Kéram Kévonian, "Le Commerce arménien dans l'Océan Indien aux 17^e et 18^e siècles," in D. Lombard and J. Aubin (eds.), *Marchands et hommes d'affaires asiatiques dans l'Océan Indien et la Mer de Chine XIII-XXe siècles*, (Paris, 1988); K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, (Cambridge 1985); Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism: 15th-18th Century*, trans. Sian Reynolds, (New York, 1984); Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, (Cambridge, 1984).

turn of the Dutch and the English East India Companies to make inroads into the region and eventually dominate the maritime trade in the Orient. Somewhat later, there appeared the French and thereafter a large number of minor East India Companies.

Despite the rich and profitable commerce generated by the European companies in the Indian Ocean, the traditional overland trade which ran through south-west Asia (modern-day Iran, Turkey, and Syria), never lost its importance. On the contrary, alongside the oceanic trade, it continued to thrive well into the eighteenth century. Among the many and varied goods transported overland was the bulk of the highly-prized Persian raw silk. The Armenian merchants of New Julfa who over the years had consolidated their hold on the country's commerce, carried the raw silk by land to the Levant on the Mediterranean Sea. There they sold it to European merchants partly for bullion and partly in exchange for English cloth and other European manufactures. It was this silk trade that both the English and the Dutch East India Companies tried hard, but without success, to divert from the Levant to the Persian Gulf and into their own hands.

3. Armenian Cultural Heritage: An Aperçu

Despite the untold invasions and devastations of the Armenian homeland over the centuries, the creative genius of the people has time and again sprung up to transform the trials and tribulations into abiding works of art: architectural monuments, literary texts and poetry, painting, sculpture, music, and a host of minor arts. Even though the specific works of art were unquestionably the product of individual creative minds, they, nevertheless, bespoke of a trans-individual world, for they were responses to the authentic psychological needs of the people. Seen in this light, these works of art were embedded in and engendered by the vitalities of the Armenian people and, in turn, have evoked stirrings toward a greater civilized life.

To be sure, this is not the place, nor do I have the inclination, to discuss any specific works of art. Instead, I shall attempt to portray in broad brush strokes those areas of Armenian culture that are generally

believed to constitute the core of Armenian heritage¹¹. Deeply ingrained in the psyche of the Armenian people, these areas of scholarly and artistic expression compress in them the spiritual vitality of this ancient people—a spiritual vitality which has illuminated their path through the contingencies of history.

Literature and Learning As in all cultures, in Armenian culture, too, learning and literature occupy a very special and critical place. In the words of the Armenian poet Hmayeak Shems, “Every nation has its soul. Every nation expresses its soul through all of its creative works—through all those things upon which the hands touch and the mind labours. But most of all, it is through literature that a nation’s soul finds its clearest expression”¹².

Now while there was no written Armenian literature until the turn of the Vth century of the Christian Era, there was also no dearth of Armenian intellectuals and scholars in the Greek-speaking world. Artavazd II (55-35 BCE), the son of Tigran the Great, for example, had gained a reputation both as a playwright and historian. Be that as it may, during the Pagan era there developed also a rich oral literary tradition in the Armenian vernacular. Regrettably, precious few fragments have reached our hands from this period. However, the few that have reached us through the *gusans* or minstrels speak eloquently of the creative spirit of pagan Armenia. One piece of work that adorns like a jewel the literary pages of Armenian antiquity relates to the birth of Vahagn, the Sun-God [“Heaven and earth were in travail / And was in travail the crimson sea ...”]¹³.

Among the various oral transmissions, there is a fair number of ballads and love songs, as well as a group of epic poems that tell us something of the ethos of the Armenian people. “While the epic poems of many

¹¹ Thomas J. Samuelian, ed., *Classical Armenian Culture: Influences and Creativity*, (University of Pennsylvania, Scholars Press, 1979); Thomas J. Samuelian and Michael F. Stone, eds., *Medieval Armenian Culture*, (University of Pennsylvania, Scholars Press, 1982).

¹² Hmayeak Shems, *Patmutun Hay Grakanutean* [History of Armenian Literature] (Yerevan, Armenia, 2002), p. 23.

¹³ For the full text, see: Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *The Armenians*, (New York, 1970), p. 82.

nations glorify the violent deeds and the palatial life of their kings," writes Shems, "the Armenian epic poems mirror in an exalting manner the Armenian working people's love for freedom, their struggles and revolts, their sense of justice, their human compassion and magnanimity"¹⁴. The oral tradition did not, however, come to an end with the introduction of the written literature. It continued to flourish alongside the written literature and the ever-expanding range of learning. Learning remained in the forefront in medieval Armenia. The many monasteries that served as intellectual centres were filled with scholars in mathematics, the sciences, music, philosophy, and theology, as well as other disciplines. On the rosters we also find the names of gifted miniaturists and skilful scribes.

Armenian written literature itself, which began early in the Vth century of the Christian Era, is inextricably tied to Armenia's conversion from paganism to Christianity. The vision of a fledgling religion, later come to be known as Christianity, had begun to take hold in the hearts of many an Armenian as early as the first century; but it was not until the year 301 that Christianity became the official religion of the land. This momentous event has, unquestionably, marked a watershed in the history of Armenia, for it turned the country sharply away from its Irano-Greek form of paganism toward a new spiritual destiny: a life of brotherhood among nations, considering human life as the highest value.

A century later, yet another remarkable event was to take place in the life of this people. One among them, a learned cleric by the name of Mesrop Mashtots, after several years of painstaking research and study, invented a script for Armenian, which was by now a highly developed language. In his efforts, he was supported by Catholicos Sahak, supreme head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and King Vramshapuh. The newly-invented Armenian script, which had 36 letters, was well adapted to the requirements of the spoken Armenian language. In the XIIth-XIIIth centuries, two additional characters, o (the omega) and f (phi) were borrowed from Greek and placed at the end of the alphabet to

¹⁴ Hmayeak Shems, *Ibid.*, p. 33.

accommodate the transliteration of loan words. The invention of the alphabet greatly facilitated the unity of the Armenian nation and church and the forging of a greater cultural independence. The inventor, Mesrop Mashtots, who was later canonized, is buried in the crypt of the church at Oshakan, not far from Ejmiatsin, the spiritual centre and most sacred shrine of the Armenian people. Today, in the town of Oshakan there stand twin high-rise commemorative tablets on which are chiselled the letters of the Armenian alphabet.

And now a Herculean task lay ahead: the translation of the Holy Scriptures¹⁵, a large body of Christian literature, as well as works in history, rhetoric, philosophy, theology, geography, astronomy, and other secular subjects¹⁶. To undertake this task, Mesrop sent his students to centres of learning, such as Edessa, Antioch, Caesarea, Athens, and Alexandria, with instructions to bring back select manuscripts. In the meantime, he founded schools around the country. Upon his students' return from study abroad, they set out to generate a new religious and secular literature in the Armenian vernacular. The work of this brilliant group of scholars was to lay the foundation of Armenian literature. For all these accomplishments, the fifth century has been christened as the Golden Age (*Vosketar*) of Armenian literature. This welding of the Armenian Church and the Armenian language has echoed in the literature ever since. In the XIXth century, Khachatur Abovian (1809-1848), the father of modern Eastern Armenian literature and author of *Wounds of Armenia*, would write: "The sole guardian of a nation is its language and its faith; if we were to lose them, woe unto us!"

If literature and learning are the clearest expression of a nation's soul, other forms of art are no less expressive of the culture from which they take their rise. Of the wide range of artistic expressions, attention is turned here briefly to music, architecture, sculpture, and painting.

¹⁵ For an account of the development of the Bible in Armenia, see: Vrej Nersessian, *The Bible in the Armenian Tradition*, (London, 2001).

¹⁶ Robert Thomson, "Armenian Literary Culture through the Eleventh Century," in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian People: from Ancient to Modern Times*, vol 1, (New York, 1997); Peter Cowe, "Medieval Armenian Literary and Cultural Trends (Twelfth-Seventeenth Centuries)," in Hovannisian, *ibid.*; Kevork B. Bardakjian, *A Reference Guide to Modern Armenian Literature, 1500-1920*, (Detroit, 2000).

Music. In Armenian cultural life, music occupies an important place. Both instrumental and vocal music in Armenia have a long history going back for several millennia. In early medieval Armenia, *gusans* or minstrels entertained the royalty as well as the commoners with their songs, accompanied by drummers, pipers, trumpeters, and harpists. Over this period, we also see the development of the vocal music of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the writing of religious poetry that serves as its texts. Characteristic Armenian melodies appear in traditional folk and art music as well as the vocal music of the Armenian Church. We find the traditional melodies often utilized in contemporary compositions written in the mainstream of Western art music. Armenian music today includes operas, ballets, and orchestral and chamber pieces¹⁷.

Architecture. In the visual arts, Armenians have particularly excelled in architecture, relief sculpture, and painting. While Armenian architecture can be traced to pagan times, it best manifests itself in the churches that were erected from the IVth to the XIVth centuries. It was during this period that Armenia became the innovative architectural centre that it was. Throughout those centuries, Armenian architects sought to solve and successfully solved in a variety of ways the structural problems of domed stone buildings and created the centrally-planned churches so distinctive in Christian architecture. Of the many architectural marvels, perhaps mention should be made of the circular church of Zwartnots (built between 641 and 666) in Ani¹⁸, the city of a thousand and one churches, and the royal chapel of Aghtamar (built between 915 and 921)¹⁹ on an island of the same name in lake Van. Because of the originality of its forms and the inventiveness of its technical methods, Armenian

¹⁷ On Armenian music, see: "Armenia," in Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. 2, (New York, 2001).

¹⁸ S. Peter Cowe, *Ani: World Architectural Heritage of a Medieval Armenian Capital*, (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2001).

¹⁹ J. G. Davies, *Medieval Armenian Art and Architecture: the Church of the Holy Cross, Aghtamar*, (London, Pindar Press, 1991).

architecture holds today a highly respectable place in the history of medieval art²⁰.

Sculpture. Extensive church construction gave rise to a tradition of relief sculpture²¹. If Byzantine churches are known for their mosaics, the Armenian churches excel in bas-relief. Figurative and ornamental relief sculpture on church facades bestow upon Armenian churches yet another mark of distinction separating them from Byzantine and other Christian churches. Close to basilican churches, one also finds *khatchkars* (cross-stones) in large numbers. These cross-stones take the form of a rectangular slab with a large cross carved in the central panel. The cross is often shown entwined with elaborate carvings of birds and flowers, leaves and animals, and Biblical scenes. The carving produces the overall effect of a delicate lace-work.

Painting. Alongside architecture and sculpture, illuminated manuscripts occupy a very special place in Armenian art²². The sumptuous colouring and harmonious blending of naturalistic figures into an imaginative stylized ornamentation constitute the core of these illuminations. Equally captivating are the gently penetrating dark eyes of the human and divine personages. It is estimated that more than 20,000 illuminated manuscripts survive today and are mainly kept at the Matenadaran in Yerevan, the British Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Mekhitarist Congregations in Venice and Vienna, the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the All Savior's Monastery of New Julfa in Persia (Iran since 1935), as well as in private collections.

4. The Cultural Legacy of the Armenian Community of New Julfa

The men, women, and children who were forcibly moved by Shah Abbas I in 1604-1605 from their homeland in Armenia to Persia proper,

²⁰ Adriano Alpaço Novello, *The Armenians: 2000 Years of Art and Architecture*, (Paris, Bookking International, 1995); Edouard Utudjian, *Armenian Architecture*, (Paris, Editions A. Morance, 1968).

²¹ Jean-Michel Thierry, *Armenian Art*, (New York, 1989); Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *ibid.*, pp.117-135.

²² Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *ibid.*, pp. 136-154.

carried among their possessions a life-sustaining resource: their distinctive culture. Their culture was their spiritual wealth. It was upon this culture that they rebuilt their lives. Despite the political vicissitudes over the ensuing centuries, the Armenian community was able not only to maintain its identity, but also contribute significantly to the culture that nurtured it²³.

In the seventeenth century, under the patronage of the wealthy Armenian merchants of New Julfa, the Armenians in Persia established a separate ecclesiastical unit with their own bishop appointed by the Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church at Ejmiatsin. The relative political stability of the region during this period gave rise not only to a vigorous commercial activity, but also a cultural revival. The construction of some thirty-five churches in New Julfa and Esfahan, as well as the establishment of the All Savior's Monastery, attest to the fervour with which the Armenian community had embarked upon the task of recovery. Aside from its spiritual and administrative functions, the Monastery also served as a centre for a variety of cultural activities. A programme of higher education and a scriptorium dedicated to literary studies, painting, and printing constituted the cornerstone of this cultural reawakening.

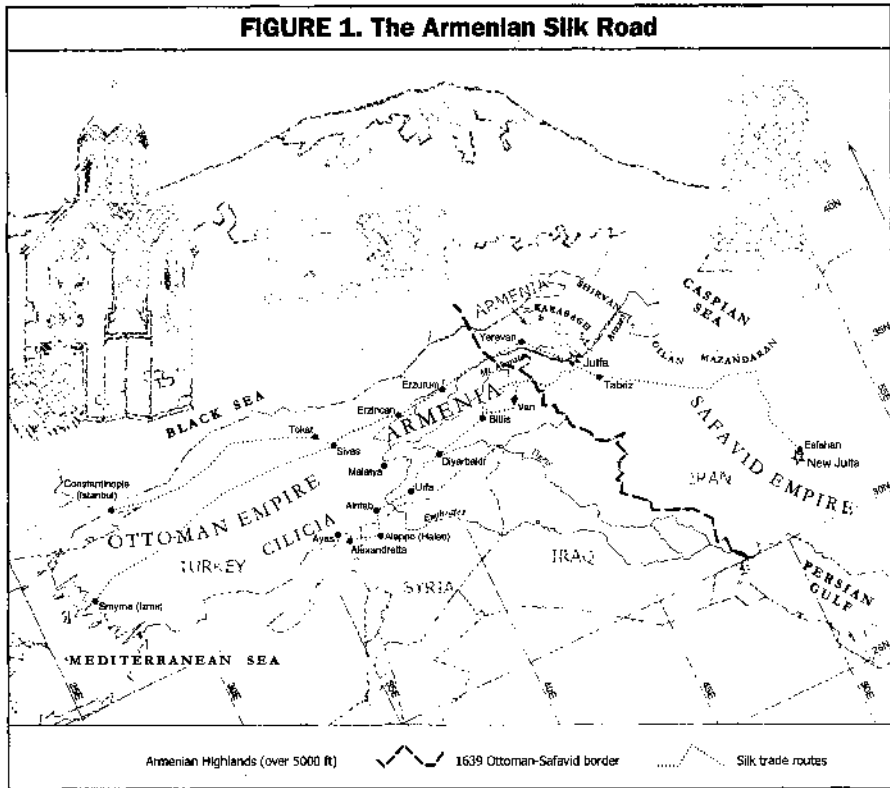
As early as the 1620s, the Primate of New Julfa was fully aware of the urgent need for a printing press. It was obvious to him that this technology was not only critical for the publication of literary works, but also as an effective tool for keeping the widely scattered Armenian community in Persia closely bound together. The invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century had spread widely and rapidly throughout Europe in the following century. The first printed Armenian book appeared in 1512 in Venice. Others followed in Rome, Milan, and Paris. Despite the absence of this technology in the Middle East, the All Savior's Monastery was able to secure and operate a printing press in 1636. The first printed book from the Monastery appeared two years later.

²³ This section primarily draws on Vazken S. Ghougassian, *The Emergence of the Armenian Diocese of New Julfa in the Seventeenth Century*, (Atlanta, 1998).

Several generations of students studied, researched, and engaged in the creative arts under the hospitable arches of the Monastery. The areas of study included rhetoric, philosophy, mathematics, the sciences, music, poetry, as well as theology and the exegesis of the Old and New Testaments. A respectable number of those students became well-known scholars in their own right and one among them, Hakob Jughayetsi, rose to become Catholicos of all Armenians at Ejmiatsin, serving in this position from 1655 to 1680. Among the many and varied schools in the Diocese, there was also one renowned for its business curriculum. Established by a former monk and author of a business handbook, the school provided training for young men who aspired to enter the global trading market.

During their travels in Europe, the Armenian merchants had acquired a fairly large number of paintings for their private collection. Aside from such purchases, they commissioned paintings from European painters residing in New Julfa. The Armenian merchants also patronized local Armenian artists who were engaged in decorating the churches with murals, paintings on wood and canvas, as well as ceramic tile and stucco. However, being against iconography, Armenian churches have made limited use of such decorations. The Armenian artistic talent has best revealed itself in the production of illuminated manuscripts. These works were mainly for use by the churches, the clergy, and wealthy individuals. A large number of the New Julfan manuscripts, however, were destroyed as a result of the Afghan invasion of Esfahan in 1722. Today, a mere three hundred and fifty of them survive. They are mainly in the custody of the All Savior's Monastery and the Mesrob Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (*Matenadaran*) in Yerevan.

The cultural legacy of the seventeenth-century Armenian community of Persia is at once clear and eloquent. It points not only to the creative genius of a people but it also proudly proclaims that *culture is not only what people live by, but also what they live for*. The Armenian people's love of their culture coupled with their deep desire to see it enriched from generation to generation gives ultimate meaning to their collective existence. In the parlance of modern scholarship,



the life of the Armenian people has been embedded in an ideology of cultural nationalism.

5. Mapping the Armenian Silk Road

Today, there is a considerable number of (and still growing) works on the Armenian merchant community of New Julfa. In contrast, there is a marked absence of *creative* maps. Existing maps are either freehand sketches or, at best, simple representations of the relative positions of cities and towns, with connecting lines indicating routes. While these maps have had their usefulness, there is a need for state-of-the-art maps that are at the same time historically enriching. In all mappings, the possibilities are limited only by the imagination of the historian and the ultimate constraints placed upon it by the cartographic technology. Creative mapping draws out realities

previously unseen or unimagined bringing them to the surface of our consciousness.

The present effort is an attempt at producing a map that casts the Armenian Silk Road against a backdrop of the political world and the centuries-old Armenian culture. To create the political world, we have superimposed three thematic maps one upon another bringing the seventeenth-century political scene into close association with historical Armenia, on the one hand, and the modern-day states, on the other. On the cultural side, we have provided select images of Armenian national identity. The purpose of the latter is to give the reader a sense of the Armenian presence in the region. With its distinct philosophical position and analytical concepts, the politico-cultural landscape of the Armenian Silk Road presented here claims to bring a qualitative change over its predecessors.

Geographically, historical Armenia, which includes the modern-day Republic of Armenia, is set on a plateau ranging from 3,300 to 6,600 feet high. This physical setting is often seen as an "island." However, the presence of lofty mountains, averaging from 9,900 to 13,200 feet, at its northern (the Pontus) and southern (the Taurus and several other mountain ranges to its east) peripheries give this land yet the look of a "fortress." The biblical rivers of Euphrates and Tigris, which run from north to south emptying conjointly into the Persian Gulf, take their rise in the rugged mountains of the Armenian Highlands. Here, these rivers are actually mountain torrents rushing through all-but-inaccessible canyons. A third river, the Araxes, flows from west to east to join the Kura before both empty into the Caspian Sea.

In mapping the Armenian Silk Road, we have taken the original home of the famed Armenian merchants – Julfa on the Araxes River – as our focal point. This decision was driven both by historical and cartographic considerations. Next, we have identified four silk-growing areas – Shirvan, Karabagh, Gilan and Mazandaran – and two major trade routes over which the raw silk, among other goods, was moved from Persia to Aleppo, Smyrna, and Constantinople for transshipment to Europe. Shipments to Russia were often made by boat from the port

of Anzali on the Caspian coast in Persia to Astrakhan in Russia on the northern end of the Caspian Sea. While historical sources provide us with a fairly large number of names of cities, towns, and villages through which the caravans passed, for the purposes of the present map, we have confined ourselves to a select few.

The two main silk routes which crossed historical Armenia running from east to west were an integral part of a trade route which in ancient times originated in China, crossed Central Asia, and rounded the southern border of the Caspian Sea to reach Tabriz in northwestern Persia. Throughout the long history of this trade route, Tabriz served as a gateway for European trade. With its numerous public facilities and caravanserais, Tabriz was well placed in the early modern period to receive the silk produced in neighbouring provinces to be carried across Anatolia to Aleppo, Smyrna, and Constantinople.

The first of these routes ran southwest from Tabriz to Aleppo by way of Marand, Khoy, Van or around the northern coast of Lake Van—Berkri (Muradiye), Ercis, Akhlat, Tatvan—to Bitlis, Diyarbakir, Urfa (Sanliurfa), and Aintab (Gaziantep). Alexandretta on the Mediterranean Sea served as port of embarkation for the silk brought to Aleppo. The second route went northwest from Tabriz to Sivas via Marand, Julfa, Nakhichevan, Yerevan, Kagizman, Horasan, Hasankale (Pasinler), Erzurum (*Karin*), Erzincan. At Sivas, the route divided into two: one continued west-south-west to reach Smyrna (Izmir) and the other, west-north-west, to Constantinople by way of Tokat. Occasionally, merchandise was also routed from Erzincan to Aleppo via Kemah, Malatya, and Aintab. Other routes led to Trebizond, Kars, Tiflis, and Shamakhi²⁴.

Throughout the preparation of this map, we have been guided by principles of simplicity and elegance. To achieve simplicity, we have reduced the complexity of the design environment to a level where

²⁴ For detailed itineraries through Armenia, see: Jack Lewis Vartoogian, "The Image of Armenia in European Travel Accounts of the Seventeenth Century," Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1974; Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Les six voyages de Monsieur Jean Baptiste Tavernier ...*, (Paris, Pierre Ribou, 1713), Tome I, Livre Premier; Zak'aria Agulets'i, *Oragrut'yun* [Diary], (Yerevan, 1938); Kostand Jughayets'i, *Vas'n norabas munkants ew eritasardats kb'rat*, (New Julfa, 1685).

unwanted information has been completely eliminated; relevant information has been cut to a bare minimum; and, finally, the critical characteristics of features have been emphasized or enhanced. To attain elegance, we have adjusted the graphic character of cartographic marks to create a pleasing arrangement and texture. It is hoped that the viewer will find the final product communicative, aesthetically appealing, and thought-provoking.

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