



EJMIATSIN

EJMIATSIN (or Echmiadzin; Arm. Eĵmiacin; Tk. Ūč Kelīsā), currently designation of three separate but interrelated entities: the cathedral and monastic complex which forms the residence of the supreme patriarch and catholicos of all the Armenians, the city in which this complex is located, and the district of which the latter is the administrative center. The name means “The Only-begotten descended” and is associated with a vision vouchsafed to the first primate of Armenia, St. Gregory the Illuminator, soon after the Christianization of the court in 314 C.E., generally dated to the 460’s. In it Christ appeared to the prelate and indicated with blows of a gold hammer the site where the cathedral church (*kat’olikē*) should be constructed (Agathangelos, p. 276, tr., p. 277). Since the Middle Ages the term has been used to designate the church and was further applied to the city and the surrounding district in 1945.

Located in the central sector of the plain of Ararat in what was the Aragacotn district of the Ayrarat region and favored with a mild climate, the area has yielded up a variety of antiquities from the stone, bronze, and iron ages indicating early habitation. From the first through the early fifth centuries it was royal domain of the Arsacid dynasty branch of the Parthian royal house of Persia. It is probable that the city itself was established by King Vałarš I (117-40 C.E.), as its original name Vałaršapat implies. A somewhat embellished description of its foundation is recorded by a later Armenian historian now generally dated to the eighth-ninth centuries (Moses of Khorene, pp. 199-200, tr. Thomson, pp. 210-211). In 163 it was proclaimed capital of Armenia by the



Romans under the designation *Kainēpolis* (New city), by which it is also known in certain early Armenian writings (Koriwn, pp. 98, 118, 140, tr., pp. 280, 288, 297). Latin inscriptions testify to the Romans strengthening its defense works and garrisoning a *vexillatio* (a cavalry force of 600 horsemen) of the XV Legion Apollinaris there.

The city appears to have been the residence of the Arsacid dynasty during the fourth century, but seems never fully to have recovered from its sack and the deportation of its population under Šāpūr II (after 363), apart from a period under King Vramašpuh (ca. 392-414). After Dvin became a capital in the second half of the fifth century, Ejmiatsin's status remained primarily religious. In addition to its association with Gregory the Illuminator it gained prestige from being the locus of the martyrdom of Sts. Hrip'simē and Gayanē and a group of virgins who, according to the sources, had accompanied them from Rome at the turn of the fourth century (Agathangelos, pp. 296, 298, tr., p. 297, 299). Soon annual feast days were appointed and martyria constructed in their honor, which became a source of pilgrimage. The existence of three prominent churches in the city prompted its Turkish title of *Ūč Kelisā*. In 1694 the *melik* Ałamal Šořot'ec'i endowed a fourth, the *Šořakat'*. Excavations in 1955-56 and 1959 by the Institute of art in Erevan revealed that the cathedral had been constructed over an Iranian fire temple. Its fourth century basilica structure was damaged during Yazdegerd II's campaign of 449-51 and was rebuilt in the cross-in-square design which it still retains by the *sparapet* Vahan Mamikonean in 483 (Łazar P'arpec'i, p. 157, tr., p. 217). As the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia was subjected to increased Mamluk pressure at the end of thirteenth century and contemplated various accommodations to Latin faith and order to gain support from the pope and Western powers, a movement of civil and religious leaders in Greater Armenia began to press for the seat of the catholicate (currently in the Cilician capital of Sis) to be transferred to Ejmiatsin. This is embodied in the evocative lament of 1304 by Step'annos Ōrbēlean, in which the cathedral is personified as a widowed mother mourning the loss of her children. Finally, through efforts of Yovhannēs Hermonec'i and Tovama Mecop'ec'i a council was convened at Ejmiatsin in 1441 which created a new supreme catholicate, the jurisdiction of Sis thereafter being of purely local significance. Catholicos Grigor X Jalalbekeanc' (1443-65) then purchased the city and surrounding district which remained under ecclesiastical control until the establishment of Soviet orders in 1920.

The district remained under Persian rule from 1502 to 1827 as a component of



the Khanate of Erevan (q.v.). In order to retain a powerful Armenian presence in Persia in the aftermath of his widespread deportations, Shah 'Abbās I (996-1038/1588-1629, q.v.) determined to dismantle the cathedral stone by stone and have it reconstructed in New Julfa in the suburb of Isfahan. However, upon reflection he contented himself with its primary elements, the four corner stones, the altar, stone of Christ's descent, baptismal font, right hand of St. Gregory utilized in consecrating bishops, etc. From the 1630's until the end of the century a succession of pontiffs supervised the edifice's repair and extension and the provision of auxiliary buildings, such as a belltower, bakehouse, refectory and enlarged retaining wall as well as irrigation canals and artificial lakes. Expenses for these operations were provided by the Armenian *kojas* of New Julfa, who enjoyed great influence in the election of the *catholicoi* at this period, and *čelebīs* of Constantinople. The century also witnessed the foundation of a school of higher theological studies at Ejmiatsin where secular subjects were also taught, in part in order to combat Catholic missionaries. The latter seem to have had a special devotion toward St. Hrip'simē, whose relics one of them attempted to purloin from their shrine (Ghougassian, p. 168).

Two other councils convoked at Ejmiatsin were directed against Persian rule over the eastern provinces of the Armenian homeland. Since the catholicos was recognized as ethnarch in both civil and religious affairs he has the obligation to take the initiative in such measures. Consequently, Catholicos Step'annos Salmastec'i summoned both clerics and lay representatives to the first in 1547 which planned overtures to Venice and the the Pope to institute the new crusade. Subsequently, the catholicos approached Emperor Charles V and Sigismund II of Poland. However, his death in 1552 brought the episode to a close. The second, which was destined to end in similar fashion, was organized by Catholicos Yakob Julayec'i in 1677. Hearing about its purpose, the khan of Erevan attempted to obstruct it, but the catholicos managed to escape to Georgia where he enlisted the support of Giorgi XI, King of Kartli, before continuing to Constantinople. There he entered into correspondence with Jan Sobieski of Poland, but died before much progress was made. One delegation, Israel Ori, son of one of the *meliks* (secular lords) of Siwnik', attempted single-handedly to pursue negotiations but with no success.

The skillful diplomacy of Catholicos Abraham Kretac'i (1734-37) kept Ejmiatsin out of the Turko-Persian war and was rewarded by a visit of Nader Shah to the city in June 1735, during which he granted the catholicate various



privileges (Marvī, p. 411). The pontiff's history of his times was published in 1870 at the monastery press established by Simēon Erevanc'i in 1771. The eighteenth century saw a steady improvement in the complex's situation maintained by his successors' political conservatism. Between 1715 and 1799 various members of the renowned Yovnat'anean family were commissioned to paint different parts of the cathedral in the Persian style. The monastery built a hospice in the 1730s, opened a paper factory in 1776 to supply the press, and invested in a cotton production plant.

During the first Russo-Persian War (1804-13) Ejmiatsin was threatened by 'Abbās Mīrzā's forces, until relieved by General Tsitsianov who transported some of the monastery's treasures to Tiflis for safe keeping. The city was again taken by Russian troops in September 1806, but was ceded to Persia by the Treaty of Golestān. In the prelude to the second Russo-Persian War (1826-28) both 'Abbās Mīrzā and Ḥosaynqolī Khan Īravānī tried unsuccessfully to win the support of Nersēs Aštarakec'i, the pro-Russian candidate for the pontifical office. He responded that he would consider Persian rule only if the church's large debt repayments were reduced to small installments and Ejmiatsin were solely responsible to 'Abbās Mīrzā, thus creating a small autonomous Armenian enclave under royal protection. Subsequently, the cleric raised Armenian militias which participated in the Russian advance on Ejmiatsin and fostered plans to encourage Armenians from the north of Persia and the Ottoman empire to immigrate to the Erevan region, many of whom settled around the city.

During the nineteenth century more amenities were added to the monastic complex, especially under the catholicate of Gēorg IV Kostaninupolsec'i (1866-82). In addition to inaugurating *Ararat*, the first periodical in Armenia, and opening a museum and reading room, the latter founded the only institution of higher learning in the Erevan province, which achieved renown under his name as the Gēorgean Jemaran (academy). It counted a number of celebrated cultural figures among its teaching staff and student body, e.g., Komitas, Y. Yovhannisean and M. Abelean. After the revolution of 1905 it developed social democrat and later bolshevist cells until its closure in 1917.

During Soviet rule the Ejmiatsin district underwent a marked degree of industrialization and became one of the most densely populated areas of the Armenian Republic. The main plans for the modern city were laid in 1939-46 under architect S. Manukyan. After reaching a nadir with the murder of Catholicos Xorēn Muradbekyan on April 4, 1938 in Ejmiatsin the church



experienced a partial easing of its position after the Second World War under the long reign of Vazgēn I Palčyan (1955-94). Since 1988 both city and district have given shelter to numerous refugees from the ethnic conflict in Azarbaijan.

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