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Crossing Armenia at the Time of Marco Polo:

The Silk Roads Landscape in Vayots Dzor

by *Michele Nucciotti*

The end of the thirteenth century, the period when Marco Polo traversed Armenia, featured intriguing forms of rural landscapes along the Silk Roads in Western Asia. A noteworthy territorial sample is found in Vayots Dzor, one of the southern provinces of the present Republic of Armenia, serving as a crossroads that the Polos might have utilized during their return journey from Tabriz to Trebizond between 1292-95, although available sources do not provide precise indications of their itinerary. The major transportation routes in that region were structured along directions defined by the main river valleys, particularly those of the Arpa River, a tributary of the Araxes, and the Yeghegis River, in turn, a tributary of the Arpa. The road network in Vayots Dzor, accessible from Tabriz through Nakhichevan/Naxçıvan, the former capital of the Eldiguzid territories between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, facilitated long-distance connections to the north, passing through the ruins of the ancient city of Dvin, and to the east, skirting the southern side of Lake Sevan towards the Caspian Sea, through Artsakh, Arran and Azerbaijan.

From a landscape perspective, within a polygon roughly delimited by the centers of Areni, Noravank, Eghegis, and Selim, rich in villages, monastic foundations, fortresses, and ancient palaces of Armenian aristocracy (the latter well-documented in written and epigraphic sources), the arrival of the Mongols in the 1230s and the formation of the Ilkhanate of Persia two decades later triggered a fertile process of globalization of the habitat and local societies. It is a rare example of a conglomerate of rural settlement reflecting the Eurasian cosmopolitanism of the time.

The landscape of Vayots Dzor in the late thirteenth century responded to apparently (and potentially) conflicting needs expressed by rural communities settled there for an extended period, monastic complexes, notably the episcopal seats of Tatev and Noravank, as well as Armenian princely families such as the Orbelian and the Proshian, and, finally, the Mongol Ilkhanid imperial administration. Surprisingly, each of these entities ended up occupying its own geographical and cultural space within the region, giving rise to a territorial scenario that was both composite and organic, whose peculiarities have been highlighted by recent historical-archaeological research.¹

In light of these studies, Vayots Dzor in Marco Polo's time showed clear signs of a long and deep settlement stratification, evidenced by ruins and structures dating back to the ninth century. Already at that time, the princes of Syunik strategically and politically centralized the region by establishing the Tatev monastery with an episcopal see, and by making Yeghegis their residence. Both sites were still prominent in the thirteenth century. In the tenth century, when Vayots Dzor, crossed by the road from Dvin to Partav/Bardha'a, had to resist the expansionism of the emirate of Dvin, Prince Smbat had a large fortress built in Yeghegis, where in 923 he resisted the attack of Emir Yusuf ibn Abu al-Sadj. The same fortress, known as Smbataberd, controlling the road from Arpa/Areni to Lake Sevan through the Selim Pass, still dominated the landscape in the thirteenth century.

However, at its feet, contemporary travelers of Marco Polo could have had access to updated imperial infrastructures, such as bridges and 'new' caravanserais, like those built at the request of the Mongols in Selim² and Aghnjadzor. In this direction, the traffic of goods and people would have reached its peak mainly in the warm season when agricultural products cultivated in the fertile valley could supply markets for caravans in transit, and the abundant winter snow would not have slowed or hindered their passage.

1. Reference is made in particular to the projects "The Making of the Silk Roads in Vayots Dzor" (Nucciotti, Petrosyan *et al.* 2015, Nucciotti, Pruno 2021 – promoted by Università di Firenze, Yerevan State University and Ministero degli Affari Esteri e Cooperazione Internazionale); "Vayots Dzor Silk Road Survey" (VDSRS – Babajanyan – Franklin 2018); "Armenia Entangled: Connectivity and Cultural Encounters in Medieval Eurasia 9th – 14th Centuries" (ArmEn – ERC Consolidator Grant 865067 – Pogossian 2023 and 2024/c.s.).

2. The first phase of Selim caravanserai, with the large three-naved hall, dates to this period, while the vestibule with *muqarnas* decorated portal would have been built in the 1320s-30s, by will of the Ilkhan Abu Sa'id and the Armenian prince Cesar Orbelian.

The village of Areni, called Arpa in the Middle Ages, closed the road network coming from the Selim Pass (and caravanserai) to the west. Recent excavations have highlighted the economic vitality of this center between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, documented by both local ceramics and a wide circulation of glazed and enameled productions from Persia and the East. A tangible sign of international connections through Vayots Dzor. It is not surprising that the flourishing period of Arpa/Areni starts in the twelfth century. It is from that time that the foundation of the great Noravank monastery (near Areni) dates, whose territory was early on placed under the protection of the Seljuk Sultan Mahmud II (c. 1105-1131) by the Armenian bishop Hovhannes of Kapan, inaugurating an enlightened policy of collaboration and cultural and administrative integration between the Sunni imperial dynasty and local aristocracies (including Hovhannes' successor, Stepanos III: 1168-1216).

This winning strategy, which had made Vayots Dzor a *locus amoenus* in Seljuk Armenia, was indeed replicated in the thirteenth century by the new Armenian princes of the region, the Proshians and (especially) the Orbelians. The latter, descendants of an ancient Georgian lineage, locally established themselves starting from 1190 (the date of the marriage of Elikum Orbelian with Khatun, sister

Tombstone with inscription
Jewish cemetery in the village of Yeghegis
(Vayots Dzor, Syunik, Armenia)

Prince Tarsayich Orbelian and his wife Mina Khatun
Tympanum of the portal of the Orbelian residence in Yeghegis, 1278



of Bishop Stepanos III) and, by placing their military force at the service of the Mongols, governed Vayots Dzor until the fourteenth century in the dual role of imperial officials and Armenian dynasts. Of this ideological fusion between Armenian and Mongol culture, the Orbelians became excellent interpreters, as demonstrated, for example, by the chivalric iconography they promoted, in which the Armenian aristocracy was depicted with typical features of the Mongol élites, or the customs of their court. Indeed, when, from the mid-thirteenth century, the Orbelians transferred their main political center from Areni to Yeghegis, renewing the splendors of a site that, as seen earlier, had hosted the court of the Syuni princes between the ninth and tenth centuries, they surrounded themselves with a multicultural entourage, following the Ilkhanid model. Noteworthy, for example, is the presence in Yeghegis of a Jewish community largely from Persia, known thanks to its fascinating medieval cemetery discovered in 2001.³

Simultaneously, however, the Orbelians and the Proshians also invested in the promotion, perpetuation, and development of Armenian culture for themselves, supporting the theological originality of its Christianity and the training

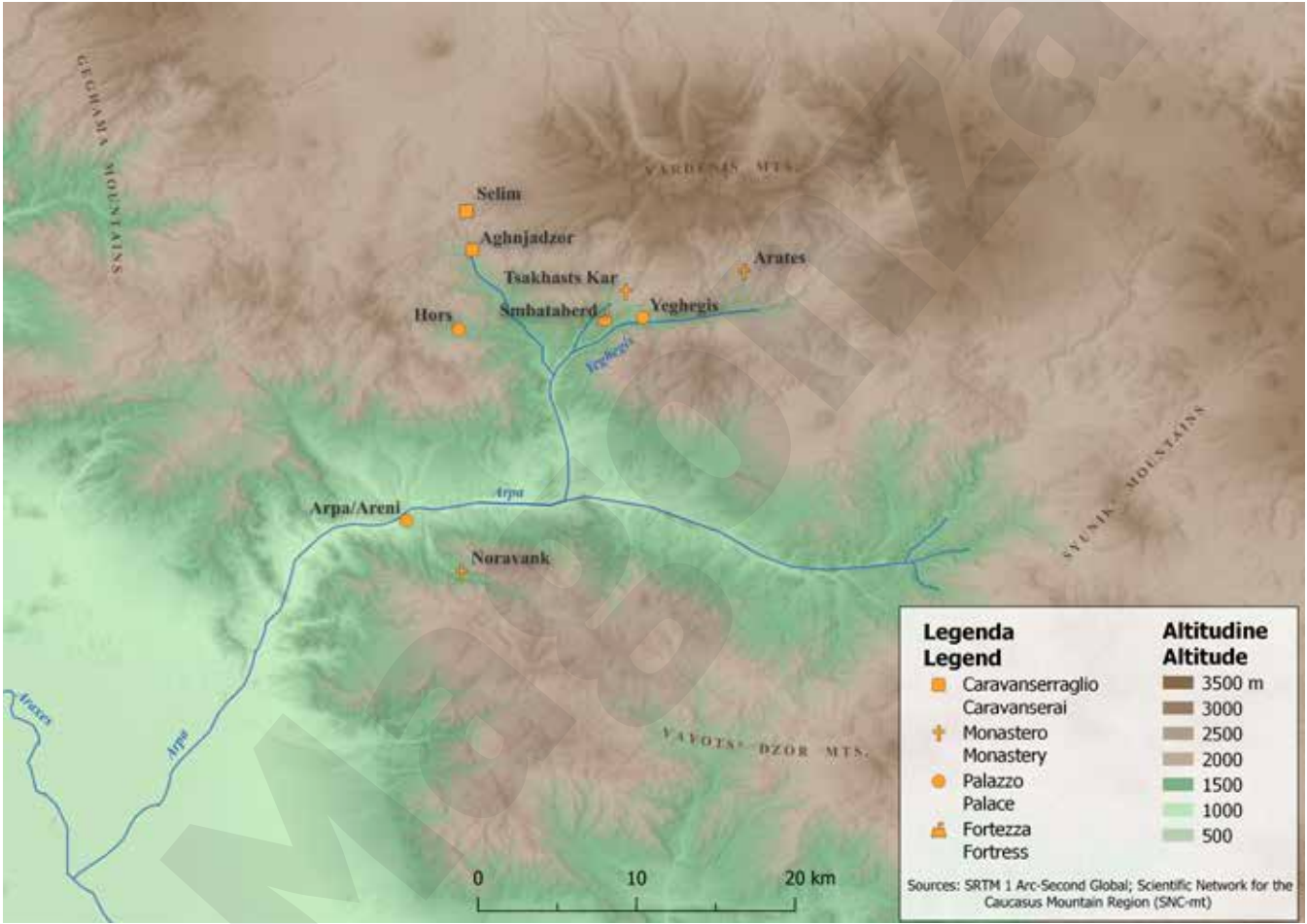
of local leadership. They did so through the creation of dynastic mausoleums (mainly at Noravank and partially at Yeghegis for the Orbelians), by expanding the land and monumental assets of family monasteries, and finally by supporting cultural institutions connected to these religious entities. This, if you will, is the other legacy, in addition to the built landscape, that medieval Vayots Dzor has bequeathed to posterity. A heritage well exemplified by the productions ascribed to the University of Gladzor,⁴ the major Armenian cultural institution of the period, founded and sponsored by the Proshan and custodian of extraordinary theological, philosophical, and artistic traditions still able to evoke unanimous admiration today.



3. Stone, Amit 2002, 2006, 2011; Nucciotti 2023.

4. Although the site is still unidentified, the most convincing suggestion places it near Yeghenadzor, about 20 km south of Yeghegis, on the northern bank of the Arpa River.

MAP OF THE SILK ROAD STRETCH IN VAYOTS DZOR



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