

THE ARCHIVES OF ARTASHAT- THE CAPITAL OF ANCIENT ARMENIA

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Summary

Artashat was founded in 189/188 B.C. by the Armenian king Artashes I as 600 years the capital of the united Armenian kingdom. The city was built in the Ararat valley, right in front of the beautiful Ararat mountain, on 12 large and small hills; they lay on the peninsula formed by the crossing of the rivers Metzamor and Araks. Artashat was situated on the East-West and North-South transit trade roads, and was immediately drawn into the economical, political and cultural sphere of the period.

The Armenian and foreign historical sources mention Artashat as a beautiful and great city¹. It occupied an area of 400 hectares and was densely populated (nearly 150 thousand inhabitants)². The city was built on a regular plan: the blocks, orientated East-West, had decent roads. The numerous artifacts and architectural monuments which were found during the excavations are a testimony of the great development in antique times of different handicrafts, trade and building in Artashat.

The sealings were discovered on the hills V and VIII (the hills have been numbered by us). On the south-east direction, right in front of the western gates of city, while digging a layer 0.60-1m thick, we discovered one of the city's blocks and a road which led from north to south (1.80 m wide). The entrance to the big room where we found the sealings is on the south-west corner and leads to a 2 m long corridor giving access to a smaller room. We suppose that right in front of the city's gates was a large open square. The majority of the sealings were mixed

¹ M. Khorenatzi, *A History of Armenia*, Yrevan, 1968, II, 49; Plutarch, *Luc.*, XXXI; Srtabo, XI, 14, 6; Tacitus, *Ann.*, XIII, 39.

² J. D. Khachatryan, *Fortifications in Ancient Armenia*, *Historical-Philological Journal*, Yrevan, 4, 1987, p. 158-170.

with ashes, spread irregularly upon the floor of the big room. The layer had a thickness of 10-15cm. Some bullae were also found at the south-west corner of the room, on the surface of the clay ground (40 bullae). A couple of sealings were discovered in the débris of the southern wall. On the clay ground which belonged to the 2nd layer of the sealings, two coins were found: one minted at Artashat by Tigranes II and a coin of Augustus minted in Antioch in the 1st century B. C. The sealings belong to the 1st layer (189/188 B. C.-59 A.D.).

Their total amount is 8000, 6000 of which survive in fair condition, with clear impressions. The sealings reached us safely and unbroken because they were baked in the fire which destroyed the building. Therefore their colour is dark, the clay is soft, with cracks. That means that when the city was rebuilt in 60 A.D., some sealings of the archives were already on the clay floor or in the débris of the wall. The sealings were probably more numerous, but not all of them survived to this day.

The second archive was found on the hill VIII, in a building on the eastern part which was constructed on the road № 0.5. On the clay ground of a small room we found 25 sealings, 15 of which were in good condition. The house was destroyed by the sudden fire, and because of it the bullae had been baked. This archive also belongs to the first layer of the site. Thus the discovery of the sealings of Artashat proves that it is one of the richest Hellenistic collections known today.

The sealings were made of a very delicate clay and have a sparkling surface. Each one bears impressions of various seals, from 1 to 4: most of them have one impression and are flat, 68 have two seal impressions, 42 have three seal impressions, and four have 4 seal impressions. Judging by the impressions, the seals were round-shaped, square, triangular, ovoid, multi-sided. Some were made of (semi-precious) stones or glass, with flat or concave surfaces. Some of the impressions, undoubtedly, were made by metal rings. Sometimes the impressions were not easy to decipher, because very often the stamps were not impressed well.

Probably the clay did not have the necessary softness, or the stempers were worn. The bullae have from 1 to 6 horizontal holes for fastening the thread. Some bullae have carved lines on their surface. A couple of sealings has holes for threads and two grooves of various length and depth (0.5-1.8 cm). That is the result of affixing the ribbon or the thread to the clay.

On the surface of some bullae we notice two narrow straight lines which are sometimes squashed. That proves that they were struck on leather or on documents. Some bullae were stuck right on the knots of the strings or between the two knots. The edges of some bullae were higher than the surface, because they were hanged. In any case, the sealings found at Artashat were stuck or hanged on documents or packages, or attached on papyri and parchment envelopes.

On some sealings we notice one or several impressions. They stamped probably that way documents which were confirmed by the judge. 1035 different seals were used. Thirty of them have Greek and Aramaic inscriptions and monograms with or without impressions. For instance, on one (and unique) sealing, is impressed a bee; on the right side of its head is the letter «A E» (VII₇₅₃). As far as the bee is concerned it symbolizes the Ephesian Artemis. Should we interpret these two letters as an abbreviated form of "Ἀρτεμις Ἐφεσία"? On another seal (X₁₀₁₉) we can read a Dorian name Ἡρόνδρα [ς] according to Y.G.Vinogradov. There is too an abbreviated Aramaic inscription on one bulla: «...son's seal» (V. Livchits). The name of the father is not mentioned (VII₇₄₉). The same name is repeated on two other bullae, impressed by seals representing bees (VII_{749, 751}). The bee was the symbol of the Susa's mint. That is explained by the fact that the largest part of the population of Susa was from Ephesos and continued to adore Artemis.³

³ E.T. Newell. The coinage of the Eastern Seleucid Mints from Seleucus I to Antiochus III, New-York, 1938, p. 115-123, 475-476; W. Tarn, The Greeks in Bactria and India, Cambridge, 1952, p. 6; G. A. Koshelenko, Monetnoe delo Partii pri Mitridate I, Numismatica i epigraphica, M., 1972, p. 90.

The geography of Artashat's bullae is extensive. It includes the area from Parthia to Rome, from southern Russia to Egypt. The iconography is quite rich and illustrates all aspects of ancient life: kings, politics, fauna and flora, theatrical and circus personalities, generals, portraits, symbols of the faith of different people.

Several art schools of the Hellenistic period and their specific styles are attested on the sealings. Plenty of sealings have a special additional meaning, because most of the seals are lost and their impressions have reached us just on sealings.

One of the ancient sealings bears an interesting motive- a line of prisoners-stamped by a cylinder. During the 5th century, new types of seals were used because it was difficult to stamp with a cylindrical seal. But sometimes they continued to use such items during the Hellenistic period: as shown by this example (III₉₂) the five prisoners wear Sogdian garments similar to those we see on the Persepolis walls.⁴ Other sealings of the same date as the one mentioned above, bear impressions of chariots, hunting scenes (III₉₄), Median horseman (III₁₁₀), pedestrian in Persian garments (III₁₂₄), deers, lions, boars, etc (III₁₁₀, 122, VII₆₃₀, IX₈₉₄). Most of the bullae bear themes about the civil wars which occurred during the 3rd quarter of the 1st century B.C. (II₈₇, IV₂₄₇, 342, VI₄₉₂, VII₈₆₀, IX₉₃₃, 995). It shows that Armenia was drawn-against her will-into the quarrels that burst between Antonius and Octavian. According to the Roman custom, during the political struggle, the images of the leaders were shown not only on coins, but on seals as well. They were duplicated on glass and distributed to the soldiers and people.⁵ This kind of propaganda was used by Antonius and Augustus in their political activities in the East. Antonius came to the East not only to get means, but also to

⁴ E. F. Schmidt, *Persepolis I*, Chicago-Illinois, 1953, pl. 43, n. 17; M. V. Gorelink, *K etnicheskoj identifikatsii personazhei, izobrajennikh na predmetax Amudarinskogo klada. Khudozhestvennye pamiatniki i problemi kultury Vostoka*, L., 1985, p. 38, pl. II, 3.

⁵ M.L. Wollenweider, *Verwendung und Bedeutung der Porträtgemmen für des politische Leben der römischen Republik*, *Museum Helveticum* 12, 1955, p. 96; O. Neverov, *Roman portrait gems of the period of the civil wars (1st century B.C.)*, *Reports of the Hermitage Museum*, L., 1971, p. 60-64.

realize Caesar's dream to organize a Parthian war as a new Alexander and, after uniting the East and West, to reorganize a great empire. To fulfill his dream he needed means and army. Of course, Octavian was going to disturb him, that is the reason why Antonius turned his attention to the Armenian king Artavazd. Dio (XLIX_{41,5}) confirms that Augustus had secret ties with the Armenian king Artavazd and prevented him from having connections with Antonius or from helping him. The only alternative to Artavazd was to take no part in the Parthian march. When the Parthian war was over, the financial situation of Antonius went worse. He tried to find new sources of income. At that time Armenia was allied with the Romans, but was, in fact, independent and wealthy, with its own army - a very good one. Therefore Antonius cast his eye on Armenia. He imprisoned the Armenian king Artavazd and his family, except his eldest son Artashes, and robbed the country and its temples. Armenia became one of the provinces of Rome and the throne was given to the 6 years old son of Antonius and Cleopatra. The army and plenty of Roman merchants invaded Armenia, extending the sphere of their influence. Nevertheless, Artashat as a capital and as a transit centre remained a good source of income. Armenia played an important role in the trade with the East. Numerous sealings found at Artashat symbolize Eastern provinces of Rome: for example, the palm tree with fruit represents Palestine (VI₄₈₀₆), a bunch of grapes, Asia Minor (VI₄₈₈), fishing scenes, the coastal provinces of the Empire, amphoras Greece, and so on (VI₄₄₀^a, 314, IX₉₂₀).

The official seals depict Great Men of these times: Mithridates Eupator and various Eastern kings, some with monograms; we also notice the portraits of Lepidus, Antonius, Cleopatra, etc. The bulla № 8 with an image of the Hellenistic king is a perfect masterpiece of art. It is supposed to depict the Armenian king Artashes the II. Most of the other sealings are private ones, made by glass seals and small in size.

Thus, what kind of archives do we have from the hill V of Artashat? An Armenian historian of the 5th century⁶ remarks that in antique period Armenia had several kinds of archives: royal archives, temple archives and taxation (fiscal) archives. Artashat had, of course a custom house and probably an archive which belonged to the city's community. The archive of the hill V Artashat does not belong to the king or high-ranking officials, because it would have been located at the citadel (Hill II) where the palaces and other official buildings were concentrated. It does not belong to the temples, because that again would be located on the hill VI, where the temples were built. None of the sealings is connected with the tax collector. Thus, we have every reason to assume that it is a personal archive, where were kept various types of documents. The fact that we found two archives confirms that the city had a business-like life and a developed and lively documentation institute. Therefore Artashat might have been a great centre of the Hellenistic archive practice. Bullae have been found also in other Hellenistic sites of Armenia such as Beniamin, in Shirak region (1st century B.C.-1st century A.D.), with examples to be used for sealing of the flask-mouths. The preliminary acquaintance allows us to assume that Armenia had very close economical, cultural and political connections with other Hellenistic countries of the Near East, Egypt, Greece, etc.

The tradition to keep documents in archives is attested in Armenia since the 8-7th centuries B.C. Economical archives were found at Teishebaimi, Van and Bastam.⁷ Sealings of the 5-4th centuries were discovered in Arnavir, Sasanian and later sealings were found in Dvin.⁸ The Artashat archives can be situated

⁶ M. Khorenatzi, II, 33, 38.

⁷ B. B. Piotrovski, *Karmir Blur*, I, Yrevan, 1950, p. 75-77, fig. 48; B. B. Piotrovski, *Karmir Blur*, II, Yrevan, 1952, p. 47-48; B. B. Piotrovski, *Iskustvo Urartu VIII-VI v. do n. e.*, L., 1962, p. 107; I. M. Diakonov, *Urartskie pisma i dokumenty*, M.-L., 1963, p. 7-11; U. Seidl, *Die Siegelbilder. Bastam I*, Berlin, 1979, p. 137-149, pl. 33-42; U. Seidl, *Die Siegelbilder. Bastam II*, Berlin, 1988, p. 145-154, pl. 19-35; W. Kleiss, *An Urartian Citadel Complex of the Seventh Century B.C.*, *AJA* 84/3, 1988, p. 299-304.

⁸ A. A. Kalantarian, *The early medieval sealing from Dvin*, *Archeologicheskie pamjatniki Armenii*, 13, 1982, p. 61-68.

chronologically between those two kinds of archives and they prove that the tradition of preserving documentation by sealings was kept. Artashes the I. accepted the structure and the language of the Ervandids' court. In the offices of Armenia of the II-I centuries B.C. the works were held in Aramaic and Greek languages.⁹ So the archives of Artashat, which were typical for common Hellenistic world, were not an accidental phenomenon in Armenia.

To conclude, the archives give us plenty of information about the ancient, very scarcely investigated, late Hellenistic Eastern gems; they allow us to put in evidence the liveliness of this glyptic tradition, to distinguish various schools and the ties which remained between them. The archives also have a very important political significance. They are a testimony of the civil wars in which the East was involved. And of course the archives are a very important source about the Romano-Armenian relations during the rule of Antioch's and Augustus, when Armenia and the king Artavazd became the victims of the Roman policy. Therefore, the bullae help us to interpret the policy of Artavazd, a problem which was always discussed in the historical science.¹⁰

The diversity of the thematic of the archives found makes it possible to divide the material into ten groups, with their subgroups, in particular – portraits, figures, animal images, groups of historical and mythological contents etc. The bullae are classified also according to artistic styles and ways of their preparation and present the following lands and artistic centers: Italy and Rome, Egypt, Armenia, Iran, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Syria, Bosphorus and Pontic regions.

⁹ G. Kh. Sarkisyan, *O provintsiyakh i provintsialnykh kontselyariyakh drevney Armenii*, *Drevniy Vostok i Mirovaya Kultura*, M., 1981, p. 100.

¹⁰ Z'ores Khachatryan, *The archives of sealings found at Artashat (Artaxata)*, *Bulletin de correspondance Hellénique*, supplement 29, p. 365-370, fig. 1-43.