

«HAVING PASSED ARMENIAN DESERTS NOW»: MARLOWE'S *TAMBURLAINE THE GREAT*

Shakespeare mentions Armenia only once. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Caesar says of Antony,

His sons he there proclaimed the kings of kings;
Great Media, Parthia, and Armenia
He gave to Alexander; to Ptolemy he assigned
Syria, Cilicia, and Phoenicia.¹

Here Armenia is lumped together with some other places to give a vague impression that it is somewhere in the east. Shakespeare probably knew more than that, though. He could have seen Armenia represented in maps by Ortelius and others, and some elements of *Othello* suggest that he might have heard of Caterina Cornaro, last queen of Cyprus, whose full title was Queen of Cyprus, Jerusalem and Armenia.² Above all, he was certainly familiar with Marlowe's two-part play *Tamburlaine The Great*. The *Tamburlaine* plays, which are deeply imbricated in the story of the Ottoman-Safavid War of 1578-90, are bookended by references to Armenia, which lay as a buffer zone between the two warring powers and whose modern capital Yerevan changed hands fourteen times between 1513 and 1737; Dickran Kouymjian notes that «[Sultan] Murad decided that no major attack on Persia could be undertaken if the Ottoman border areas were not firmly secured. Therefore, in 1582 he ordered the repair of the fortresses of Erevan and Kars. By 1584 the Ottomans had stabilized their control over northern Armenia, Georgia,

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- 1 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Antony and Cleopatra*, edited by John Wilders (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), 3.6.13-16. Later Caesar, speaking of Antony, refers briefly to 'his Armenia / And other of his conquered kingdoms' (3.6.36-7).
 - 2 See LISA HOPKINS, *Greeks and Trojans on the Early Modern English Stage* (De Gruyter, 2020), chapter seven.

Shirvan, and Dagestan».³ Both parts of *Tamburlaine* were performed in 1587, by which time Armenia had been on a war footing for five years, and this sense of being a dangerous frontier territory is crucial to Marlowe's three mentions of it.

In Part One of *Tamburlaine*, the Persian king Cosroe's titles include «Great lord of Media and Armenia» (I.i.163) and Meander says that the Persian troops have

... passed Armenian deserts now
And pitched our tents under the Georgian hills,
Whose tops are covered with Tartarian thieves
That lie in ambush waiting for a prey. (2.2.14-17)

There is a double time perspective here, for Armenia was not a «desert» *before* Tamburlaine had crossed it: Simon Payaslian notes that «In the spring of 1386, his forces marched from Tabriz to Siunik, captured Nakhevijevan, and thereafter advanced to Erzerum and Georgia ... as he continued his conquests in the name of Islam until his death on February 18, 1405 the city of Van and most Armenian cities across the land were devastated»,⁴ while Dickran Kouymjian cites a 1426 Armenian record which says that Iskandar, chief of the Kara Koyunlu, «made the Armenian homeland like a desert».⁵ Marlowe might conceivably have been thinking of this damaged Armenia of the early fifteenth century, but it is more likely that his language is coloured by the Ottoman-Safavid conflict, for that is clearly in his thoughts throughout both the *Tamburlaine* plays, which are as much about the sixteenth-century present as the fifteenth-century past. There is doubleness at work in another way too: Meander implies that the Persians are taking the fight to the «Tartarian thief» Tamburlaine, but at the end of Part Two, Tamburlaine himself recalls how

Here I began to march towards Persia,
Along Armenia and the Caspian Sea,

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- 3 DICKRAN KOUYMIJIAN, «Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom (1375) to the Forced Emigration under Shah Abbas (1604)», in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, edited by Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), vol. 2, 1-50, 18.
 - 4 SIMON PAYASLIAN, *The History of Armenia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 105.
 - 5 KOUYMIJIAN, «Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom (1375) to the Forced Emigration under Shah Abbas (1604)», 4.

And thence unto Bithynia, where I took
The Turk and his great Empress prisoners. (5.3.127-30)

In both parts of the play, Armenia is thus an edge territory, a gateway between East and West, specifically between both Persia and Turkey but also implicitly between Persia and Russia.

Russia, broadly speaking, is where Marlowe understands Tamburlaine as coming from. In Richard Knolles's influential *The Turkish History*, first printed in 1603, Tamburlaine is simply «the great Tartarian Prince Tamerlane»,⁶ and on Abraham's Ortelius 1570 map *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, which we know Marlowe used, «Tartaria» is written a little way above «Moskow» and «Volga fl.» (i.e. fluvius, meaning river). A little further down from those sits Armenia, coloured green in some editions to show that it is a separate territory,⁷ which is shown as having borders with Asia, the Caspian Sea, Persia, Arabia, Anatolia, and the Black Sea as well as access to the Persian Gulf, and also as including Trebizond and Soria, both of whose kings are enslaved by Tamburlaine.



FIGURE 1: Abraham Ortelius, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*

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- 6 RICHARD KNOLLES, *The Turkish History, from the Original of that Nation, to the Growth of the Ottoman Empire* (London: Forgotten Books, 2018), 144.
- 7 PAUL BINDING, *Imagined Corners: Exploring the World's First Atlas* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2003), inside cover.

Looking at this map, Marlowe would have thought of a Tamburlaine who emerged through Armenia as being able to choose from at least four directions in which he could advance: into Persia, into Arabia, into Anatolia, and towards Egypt, which is shown as being nearly contiguous to Armenia, and hence into Africa. He could even have moved down into India, or across to China. Historically, the real Timur the Lame did all of those things: emerging from his native Samarkand through modern-day Iran, he captured everywhere he could reach before dying on his way to China, and as Kouymjian notes he «marched through Armenia three times on campaigns of terror and destruction as he passed from his base in the distant east to the shores of the Aegean».⁸ In Marlowe's play, though, he focuses first on Persia. Matthew Dimmock suggests that there is a typically Marlovian refusal of orthodoxy at work in this: «By focusing upon the Persian and Ottoman, Marlowe crucially inverts the prevailing tenets of late Elizabethan foreign policy».⁹ Marlowe certainly had form in opposing state-sponsored priorities, but I want to suggest that he also has other concerns, and that the fact that the plays open and close with references to Armenia is a crucial part of his project.

In the first place, I think Marlowe is, as so often in his work, engaging with the legacy of the Bible, and with subsequent dramatic representations of some of the material it contains. A search for «Armenia» on Early English Books Online (<https://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>) makes it clear that there were two things everyone in early modern England knew: that Noah's ark came to rest there, and that it had a heroic king called Tigranes. Tamburlaine is a little like Tigranes, but his three sons and his travels mean he is more like Noah, a figure familiar to early modern audiences from both the Bible and mystery plays. Edward George Cole notes that at least two mystery plays which do survive pun on Armenia/harmony,¹⁰ and «harmony» occurs twice in the *Tamburlaine the Great* plays, first when Tamburlaine says Zenocrate's speech is «more

8 KOUYMJIAN, «Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom (1375) to the Forced Emigration under Shah Abbas (1604)», 3.

9 MATTHEW DIMMOCK, *New Turkes: Dramatizing Islam and the Ottomans in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 138-9 and 141.

10 Edward George Cole, «Obedience, Disorder and Grace in the Noah Mystery Plays», unpublished MA thesis, McMaster University, 64. Online: <https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/11375/9231/1/fulltext.pdf>,

pleasant than sweet harmony» (Part One, 3.3.121) and secondly when he laments her imminent death:

And in this sweet and curious harmony
The god that tunes this music to our souls
Holds out his hand in highest majesty
To entertain divine Zenocrate. (Part Two, 2.4.30-3)

Of course Marlowe might have been drawn to the word for other reasons, but it is not inconceivable that he was aware that «harmony» could be connected to Armenia. Noah was a survivor, a man associated with the dove of peace, but also a figure of division, since his three sons were understood as the fathers of three different races. Colin P. Mitchell notes that Noah was not an exclusively Biblical or implicitly Christian figure:

one of the more popular Prophetic traditions - among both Shi'ites and Sunnis ... whereby the Prophet stated: «Behold! My Family are like the Ark of Noah, whoever embarked in it was saved, and whoever turned away from it was drowned».¹¹

To speak of Noah thus reminds us that while Armenia and Georgia were Christian from a very early period, their neighbours were not. In the fraught corridor between Russia, Persia, Turkey and India any mention of «God» must inevitably beg the question of which God, and the same question is also implicit in *Tamburlaine*, especially when we wonder whether or not to read Tamburlaine's death as a consequence of his offending Allah. Finally, Noah raises the question of the relationship of humans to the countries in which they live. That Armenia famously has a diaspora larger than its population is not a new phenomenon: Boghos Levon Zekiyan observes that already by the mediaeval period «the combination of progressive Turkish (and Kurdish) immigration and Armenian decline ... changed the demographic balance ... Armenians ceased to constitute the majority of the population. Armenian emigration swelled the number of Armenians in the diaspora, in the Byzantine Empire, Cyprus and other centres on the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts».¹² At the same time, though, Razmik Panossian suggests that

11 COLIN P. MITCHELL, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, Religion and Rhetoric* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 36.

12 BOGHOS LEVON ZEKIYAN, «Christianity to modernity», in *The Armenians: Past and present in the making of national identity*, edited by Edmund Herzig and Marina Kurkchian (London: Routledge, 2005), 41-64, 46.

«Being autochthonous to the land is one of the most important themes in nationalist discourse. In this respect Armenians do indeed go very far back. The date accepted by mainstream historians for the existence of a distinct Armenian collective is the sixth century BC».¹³ But even without historical warrant, no one could possibly be more autochthonous than the descendants of Noah, since according to the terms of the myth there were no humans living anywhere other than Mount Ararat in the years after the flood; by definition, then, indigenous Armenians were more closely tied to their territory than any other nation on earth, and thus present a stark contrast to Tamburlaine, who roams far away from his birthplace. Like Noah and his sons, Tamburlaine too can be seen as the subject of a tripartite division, being simultaneously understandable as Scythian, Russian, and Greek; like Noah helplessly afloat in his ark and unsure where he will find land, he thus becomes an emblem of geopolitical and religious uncertainty.

Tamburlaine and his victorious army respect none of the established borders of his world. In the second part, his follower Theridamas announces,

Thus have we marched northward from Tamburlaine,
Unto the frontier point of Soria;
And this is Balsera, their chiefest hold,
Wherein is all the treasure of the land.¹⁴

Theridamas has reached a place he recognises as a frontier point, but he is clearly not proposing to pause meekly at it and invite the border guards to check that his paperwork is in order; instead he obviously intends to pillage it, with the clear implication that it will soon cease to be a frontier post at all and become part of Tamburlaine's rapidly expanding empire.

However, Tamburlaine is also a figure who puts a particularly revealing kind of pressure on the edges of early modern Christendom. Historically, Timur the Lame was an Uzbek warlord who lived from 1336 to 1405, but Marlowe's Tamburlaine is repeatedly said to be a Scythian. However his ostensibly Scythian identity blurs into three others. To a

13 RAZMIK PANOSSIAN, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 33.

14 CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE, *Tamburlaine the Great*, in *The Complete Plays*, edited by Mark Thornton Burnett (London: J. M. Dent, 1999), Part Two, 3.3.1-4.

certain extent, he is a Turk. Jerry Brotton observes that the Ottomans were «misunderstood as descendants of the Trojans or Scythians»,¹⁵ and among Tamburlaine's challenges to borders is his envisaging of a proto-type Suez canal (Part Two, 5.3.132-5); Roger Crowley notes that the vizier Sokollu Mehmet «ordered the construction of a Suez canal» and that one of the Sultan's titles was «Distributor of Crowns to the Rulers of the Surface of the Earth»,¹⁶ a term which would also fit Tamburlaine. He is also repeatedly associated with Russia. The goods and trade routes associated with Tamburlaine are those which Marlowe's audience would associate with Russia, and Marlowe also suggests parallels between Tamburlaine and Ivan the Terrible, who was described by the English emissary Jerome Horsey as «a right Scythian».¹⁷ When Tamburlaine is termed «the rogue of Volga» (Part Two, 4.1.4), the play unequivocally pronounces him Russian, and yet Richard Wilson suggests that what he really embodies is not Muscovy itself but the (English) Muscovy Company: «the hero's campaign "to march towards Persia, / Along Armenia and the Caspian Sea" ... accords exactly with Company goals».¹⁸ One of the things Tamburlaine promises Zenocrate is that «Thy garments shall be made of Median silk» (Part One, 1.2.95); «"For the silk of the Medes to come by Muscovy into England is a strange hearing," exclaimed the English ambassador in Paris, when he learned of the new passage to Asia»,¹⁹ making exactly the same connection. Before it got to Russia, though, it had to travel through Armenia: Kouymjian notes of the late 1570s, «Earlier Süleyman had banned the trade of silk from Persia. It was just at this troubled moment that much of the silk trade was taken over by Armenian merchants».²⁰ (We know that Marlowe was interested in silk, since one of the goals of Doctor Faustus is to «fill the public schools with silk».)²¹ Tamburlaine is, then, both Russian (in that he is

15 JERRY BROTTON, *This Orient Isle* [2016] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2017), 51.

16 ROGER CROWLEY, *Empires of the Sea: The Final Battle for the Mediterranean 1521-1580* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 206 and 194.

17 RICHARD WILSON, «Visible Bullets: Tamburlaine the Great and Ivan the Terrible», *ELH* 62 (1995): pp. 47-68, 47.

18 WILSON, «Visible Bullets», 50.

19 WILSON, «Visible Bullets», 48.

20 KOUYMIJIAN, «Armenia», 18.

21 CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE, *Doctor Faustus, A text, in The Complete Plays*, edited by Mark Thornton Burnett (London: J. M. Dent, 1999), 1.1.92.

like Ivan) and not Russian (in that he shares the aims and trajectory of the Muscovy Company), another aspect of the way in which he is the stranger whom we see in the glass.

Tamburlaine is also Greek, in ways which stress the permeability of the border between East and West. His enemies are the enemies of Greece: Bajazeth says Tamburlaine «thinks to rouse us from our dreadful siege / Of the famous Grecian Constantinople» (Part One, 3.1.6) and refers to himself as «conqueror of Graecia» (Part One, 3.1.24). Tamburlaine himself, by contrast, is repeatedly associated with Greece. He swears «by the love of Pylades and Orestes, / Whose statues we adore in Scythia» (Part One, 1.2.241-2), and Menaphon says Tamburlaine has «a knot of amber hair / Wrappèd in curls, as fierce Achilles' was» (Part One, II.i.23-4). Achilles is a Greek hero, but Herodotus, listing the rivers of Scythia, notes that «The Hypacyris, the sixth river, flows from a lake right through the territory of the Scythian nomads, and reaches the sea near Carcinitis, leaving Hylaea and the place called Achilles' Racecourse to the right».²² The stretch of land known as Achilles' Racecourse is in modern Ukraine, a place whose name translates as «on the edge» and whose twenty-first century history has tragically illustrated its liminality, so Achilles is also a figure who can be geographically distanced from Greece.

With this in mind, I want to go back to the *Tamburlaine* plays' two mentions of Armenia. Armenia has a strong claim to be regarded as the world's first Christian country. Tamburlaine's own religious identity is unclear; one might assume him to be godless, but a Babylonian citizen tells the governor that it is worth appealing to Tamburlaine's mercy because «Yet are there Christians of Georgia here / Whose state he ever pitied and relieved» (Part Two, 5.1.31-2). Dimmock notes that that religious uncertainty is much more prominent in Part Two and that «Marlowe begins to interrogate a Muslim side to his hero in this second part».²³ I think this is partly because Part Two is overtly positioned as trembling on the edge of Christendom. Very early on, Uribassa declares,

King Sigismond hath brought from Christendom
More than his camp of stout Hungarians,
Slavonians, Almaines, Rutters, Muffs, and Danes. (Part Two, 1.1.20-3)

²² Herodotus, *The Histories*, 258.

²³ DIMMOCK, *New Turkes*, 151 and 155.

Clearly we are out of Christendom, since these troops have come «from» it, but equally clearly we are within travelling distance of it for a large and diverse army. There seems to be only one well-understood border between what is Christendom and what is not, and that is the Danube. Sigismond declares,

Orcanes, as our legates promised thee,
We with our peers have crossed Danubius' stream
To treat of friendly peace or deadly war. (Part Two, I.i.78-80)

Gazellus says «We came from Turkey to confirm a league» (Part Two, 1.1.115) and Frederick replies, «And we from Europe to the same intent» (Part Two, 1.1.118), clearly implying that both parties understand themselves to be at the farthest edge of their respective territories.

Everyone knew that the Turks hoped ultimately to press on to Rome, but the Danube is where they have currently been halted: Orcanes refers to himself as «He / That with the cannon shook Vienna walls» (Part Two, 1.1.86-7), but the city did not fall. The river does however also bespeak recent Ottoman advances, as suggested by the presence of the King of Trebizond among the *dramatis personae*, for the empire of Trebizond fell in 1461, eight years after Constantinople. Orcanes figures Trebizond as crucial to the two-way traffic between Europe and Asia:

Danubius' stream, that runs to Trebizond,
Shall carry, wrapped within his scarlet waves,
As martial presents to our friends at home,
The slaughtered bodies of these Christians. (Part Two, 1.1.33-36)

Just as Tamburlaine himself trembles on the edge of different identities, so the two plays about him show us the edge of Europe shifting, and they use his Scythian identity to do it, since it helps us to recognise that where the border between Europe and Asia, once thought of in geographical terms as being marked by the Don, is now understood politically and is marked by the Danube.

This emphasis on the Danube raises one last possibility about the play. In recent years growing attention has been paid to Marlowe's visual sensibility.²⁴ In particular, Emrys Jones draws a comparison be-

24 See for instance DAVID KECK, «Marlowe and Ortelius's Map», *Notes and Queries* 52.2 (June 2005), 189-90, 189; EMILY C. BARTELS, «The Double Vision of the

tween Marlowe's attitude to space and that visible in some contemporary paintings, and mentions specifically the Danube School, distinguished by its high viewpoint, which included the Wittenberg-based Cranach the Elder.²⁵



FIGURE 2: Albrecht Altdorfer, *The Battle of Issus* (1529), from a typical high vantage point.

Doctor Faustus testifies to the fact that Marlowe was interested in Wittenberg, so it is not out of the question that there is an influence here, and perhaps there is therefore one last connection to suggest. Shakespeare may mention Armenia only once, but he does it in a way which seems to echo Marlowe: *Antony and Cleopatra*'s «Great Media, Parthia, and Armenia» surely recalls *Tamburlaine*'s «Great lord of Media and Armenia». When he names Armenia, then, Shakespeare may perhaps be deliberately not only evoking a specific geographical territory, but also more generally a way of talking about geographical territories which in-

East: Imperialist Self-Construction in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine, Part One*», *Renaissance Drama* 23 (1992), 3-24, 9; DAVID THURN, «Sights of Power in *Tamburlaine*», *English Literary Renaissance* 19 (1989), 3-21; and AVRAHAM OZ, «Faces of Nation and Barbarism: Prophetic Mimicry and the Politics of *Tamburlaine the Great*», in *Marlowe: Contemporary Critical Essays*, edited by Avraham Oz (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 66-95, 73.

25 EMRYS JONES, «"A World of Ground": Terrestrial Space in Marlowe's "*Tamburlaine*" Plays», *The Yearbook of English Studies* 38.1/2 (2008), 168-82, 181.

vites audiences to consider questions about the relationship of peoples to the lands they inhabit, of the potential porousness of borders, and of geopolitical change.

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Ամփոփում

«ԱՅԺՄ Կ՛ԱՆՑՆԻՄ ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆԻ ԱՆԱՊԱՏՆԵՐԷՆ»
ՄԱՌԼՈՅԻ ՄԵԾՆ ԼԵՆԿ-ԹԻՄՈՒՐԸ

ԼԻԶԱ ՀՈՊԿԻՆՍ

Շէյքսպիր միայն մէկ անգամ Հայաստան կը յիշէ: Անտոնիոս եւ
Կղէոպատրայի մէջ, Կեսար կ'ըսէ Անտոնիոսի մասին:

Իր զաւակները արքայից արքայ հռչակեց.

Մեծն Մարաստան, Պարթևաստան եւ Հայաստան

Տուաւ Աղեքսանդրի. Պտղոմէոսին յատկացուց

Սուրիան, Կիլիկիան եւ Փիւնիկէն:

Այս հատուածին մէջ, Հայաստանը յիշուած է ուրիշ վայրերու հետ,
անորոշ տպաւորութիւն մը ստեղծելու համար, որպէս ընդհանուր արեւ-
ելեան երկիր մը: Հաւանաբար, սակայն, Շէյքսպիր Հայաստանի մասին
աւելի գիտէր: Կրնայ Հայաստան տեսած ըլլալ Որտեւիոսի քարտէզնե-
րուն վրայ:

Օթելլոյի որոշ տարրեր մտածել կու տան, որ լսած էր Կիպրոսի
վերջին թագուհի՝ Կատարինէ Կոռնարոյի մասին, որու պաշտօնական
տիտղոսն էր Կիպրոսի, Երուսաղէմի եւ Հայաստանի թագուհի:

Անկասկած, սակայն, ծանօթ էր Մառոյի Մեծն Լեմկ-Թիմուր երկու
արարնոց թատերախաղին, որ սերտօրէն կապ ունէր 1578-1590ի Օսմա-
նեան-Սէֆեան Պատերազմին եւ որու մէջ յիշատակուած է Հայաստանը:
Այն ժամանակ, Հայաստան արգելակ հողամաս մըն էր երկու հակառա-
կորդ պետութիւններուն միջեւ. 1513էն մինչեւ 1737, Երեւանի՝ իր այ-
սօրուայ մայրաքաղաքը ձեռքէ ձեռք խլուած է տասնըչորս անգամ: