

ARTASHAT

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ON RESULTS OF EXCAVATIONS IN 1970—1977*

Summary

... a large and very beautiful city emerged, to which the king gave his name and proclaimed it the capital of Armenia.*

Those are Plutarch's words with reference to the foundation of the capital of ancient Armenia—Artashat or Artaxata, as the Greco—Roman authors used to call it.

What were the circumstances, that motivated the foundation of that city?

Following the downfall of the state of Urartu, that survived in the Armenian Highlands from the 9th to the beginning of the 6th centuries B. C., the Armenian state came into being which, however, passed under Median sway. From the mid-sixth century to the thirties of the fourth century B. C. Armenia formed part of the political system of Achaemenid Iran. Despite this adverse circumstance the ethnic formation of the Armenian people achieved its completion in the meantime, and with the collapse of the Achaemenid kingdom under the blows of the Greco-Mace-

* Translated into English by P. Mesrobian.

domian troops of Alexander the Great new state formations came into relief within Armenia Major, Sophene and Armenia Minor. At the close of the third century Armenia came for a while under Seleucid sovereignty. When the Romans landed on the Mediterranean coast of Asia Minor and defeated the troops of Antioch III, the Armenians rose in rebellion against the Seleucids and achieved the country's independence. Artashes, leader of the uprising, was proclaimed king of Armenia Major.

As a matter of fact Artashes I became the founder of the united kingdom of Armenia which, unlike the kingdoms of the ancient East, displayed a politically steady united ethnic composition.

Artashes I put an end to the kingdom of the hitherto ruling Yervanduni dynasty; however, he failed to settle in their capitals Armavir and Yervandashat, as the former was witnessing its decline while the latter (founded at the close of the 3rd century), squeezed among mountains and located way back from the trade routes, was deprived of any prospect of development.

To establish a new capital Artashes I chose the most fertile part of the plain of Ararat, crossed by the trade routes linking the East, the West and Armenia with its neighbouring countries.

Shortly Artashat turned into a prominent centre of craftsmanship, and trade, the focus of the economic, political and cultural life of ancient Armenia, playing this significant role for over five centuries.

As Artashat was the pivot in the country's life, it naturally shared the historical fate of the land. Enemy troops invaded the capital of Armenia, plundered and destroyed it many times. In the spring of 59 A. D. Artashat was razed to the ground and burned to ashes by the Roman legions under the command of Corbulo but soon the city was re-built. In 368 the same fate befell the capital. The troops of the Sassanid King Shapour II devastated and burned Artashat, while its inhabitants were driven to Iran. Thereupon the city ceased to be of consequence and the last reference to it was made in the 7th century as a fortress with a small population.

The excavation of Armenia's ancient capital, glorified by Greek, Roman and Armenian authors, is of paramount importance in studying the history, culture and way of life of the Armenian people, its economic and cultural relations with the countries of the ancient world.

In 1967 Latin inscriptions were discovered within the townlet on the tombstone of a soldier of the Italic legion, and the other was a detailed inscription made in 116 on behalf of Trajanus which enumerates the titulary of the emperor in connection with the erection of some construction by the fourth Scythian legion there.

Those findings encouraged the long premeditated excavation of Artashat, undertaken in 1970.

The citadel and the central quarters of the city were situated on nine hills along the left bank of the river Araxes, just in front of majestic Mount Ararat. The main part of the city quarters sprawled in the plain extending as far as the bank of the river.

Referring to Artashat Strabo notes: „This is a well-built modern city and capital of the country. It is located on a prominence similar to a peninsula, its walls girdled by a river save for the land before the isthmus which is bordered by a moat and a bank“. The old Armenian authors provide detailed information on Artashat.

Excavations and observations indicate that the city took up an area of about 450—500 hectares, i. e. much more extensive than was presumed before the excavation. All of the hills are surrounded by fortress walls ingeniously joined together to form a united and vast system of fortifications with a moat and a bank in front.

The defenders of the city made use of all types of weapons and defensive means including ballista and a mixture of fuel or simply black oil, the remnants of which have been discovered in several places inside the walls of the first hill.

The city as Plutarch attests was built in line with a general lay-out; he ascribes the planning and the supervision of the building of the city to Hannibal banished from Carthage and supposedly given refuge by Artashes I.

The excavations of the first, fourth and eighth hills (as designated by the expedition) revealed the picture of a unified, elaborate planning of the city, combining local and Hellenistic traditions of city-building.

The buildings of the city are largely made of local reddish and gray stones, while the monumental constructions are erected of fine-grained limestone the layers of which lie buried in close proximity to the city.

White-stoned monumental buildings are provided with pillars. The interior of the buildings is bedecked with profiled white-lime cornices. Remnants of polychrome wall paintings, similar to those of the first Pompeian style, have been traced.

The excavations revealed that the buildings were made up of flat reedy roofs, in line with oriental tradition, and double-sloping tiled roofs that had first been introduced in Armenia in the Hellenistic period.

The municipal service of the city was of rather a high standard. Ceramic water-pipes were laid in the city, while in one of the quarters the relics of two bath-houses with hypocaust — a system of underground heating — have been uncovered, going back again to the Hellenistic era.

The chroniclers attest that the statues of various deities and ancestors of kings were erected in the temples and palaces of Artashat. In time

of excavations the fragments of statuettes and a small marble female statue of the late Hellenistic time were discovered, and the expedition named the latter the „Aphrodite of Artashat“. It forms part of the group of statues of the so-called attired young women, the sculptors of which claimed to approximate their works to the splendid masterpieces of Praxiteles and his school. Until recently four statues of this group have been known, preserved in the British Museum and the National Museum in Athens; the Artashat statue is the fifth. Elaborate workmanship coupled with eye-striking delicacy and a certain mannerism suggest the date of the Artashat statue—the close of the second and the start of the first centuries B. C. It was brought to Armenia probably from Asia Minor; to be more precise—from the islands of the Aegean.

Querns, millstones, mortars and other stone-made implements were widely used in the economy and workaday life of the people. It is common knowledge that querns have been met with in Armenia since the 4th millennium.

They have undergone no substantial changes throughout the centuries, but in the Hellenistic period a horizontal wooden handle was added to the upper stone for the thresher to turn to the left and to the right with one hand. Gradually the upper and the lower stones of the querns grew in size and assumed circular form; an aperture was bored on the upper stone for pouring grain; eventually it evolved into the millstone rotating round its axis.

All stages of transition—from stone querns to the ancient type of millstones—are available in Armenia—a land abounding in stones. Such transition exceeded by far their productivity and paved the way for the utilization of animals in flour-grinding and led eventually to the appearance of water-mills.

Apart from their application in flour-grinding, the querns and stone mills were also used to obtain refined salt, groats, clay, earthen colour ochre, to prepare paints as well as for crushing metallic ores for their concentration, etc.

Stone-made mortars, the utilization of which had also started in old days, were of no lesser consequence in everyday life.

The small-size portable mortars were supplemented with big immovable mortars of bulky productivity. Like the querns, the mortars were also used extensively. Small-size mortars made of granodiorite were discovered in Artashat as well as in ancient Armavir. They were presumably used in making sacred drinks and drugs.

Granite, basalt, sandstone and limestone were used to produce various vessels, vases and cups, specimens of which were dug out in Artashat.

Artashat was a notable centre of handicraft goods. Excavations testify to a high standard of artisanship. During spade work several blacksmith shops were uncovered on the first hill. Those shops contained various types of iron weapons—swords, daggers, spear heads, darts, as many as three thousand arrow heads of different types, tenons with three or four sharp edges to be thrown in the streets so as to prevent the enemy cavalry from entering the city.

Metallic objects, home and foreign made, were likewise discovered. Original in form and of appreciable artistic value are the bronze statuettes of eagles mounted on a stepped pedestal. One of them depicts an eagle perched on the head of a deer. They apparently symbolize performances associated with a large cult series of the sun and the moon, heat and life-giving moisture. Curiously, in a similar statuette uncovered in Armenia and now preserved in the Louvre, the eagle has perched on the head of the magnificent figure of a deer.

Those statuettes have something in common with similar sculptures of an earlier period discovered in Anatolia. The local type and peculiar features of our statuettes are evident; they can be traced back to the 3rd—2nd centuries B. C.

The silver figurine of a goat combining the local and Hellenistic features excels in workmanship. A similar figure of a goat has been found out in Valakhia. Our statuette can be dated back to the 3rd—2nd centuries B. C.

Golden ware relating to funeral service has likewise been unearthed in Artashat; such as the golden wreath from the leaves of platan and olive-tree. One of the tombs contained a golden lip cover and celery leaves, usually applied in funeral service, golden ear-rings, with the head of the fertility Goddess in which the image was syncretized—a phenomenon typical of the Hellenistic period. Similar ear-rings, this time of silver, have been found out in Dura Europos on the Euphrates, in Cyprus and in Nessebr (Bulgaria).

The statuette of amor and the figurine of hyppocampus, both serving as handles of big silver vases, are typical Greek models (probably imported). The bronze figure of the hyppocampus adorns the rim of a low copper bowl, cylindrical in form.

Pottery was practised on a large scale in Artashat. The potters manufactured architectural ceramics—tiles, bricks, earthen pipes for water-mains and chimneys, earthen utensils, as well as large cask-like vessels, pithoi in which wine, beer and vegetable oil were stored. Aside from local traditional forms of ceramic ware new specimens and forms originated characteristic of the Hellenistic world, such as amphoras and amphorisks, spindle-shaped vessels, fish-plates, etc. Those varieties of articles were

introduced into Armenia from the Hellenistic world. A substantial part of the ceramic ware is paint-coated and is elaborately wrought with polishing.

Painted pottery is prominent in the manufacture of ceramic. This is not a new phenomenon, as painted pottery is met with since ancient times in Armenia. But many novel types and designs make their appearance. Small bowls, basins, dishes, oinochoe, flasks, craters, vessels with spouts, pithoi and other goods were painted. The ornamental designs were largely geometrical: concentric horizontal bands of wide and thin straight and wavy lines, hooks, oblique lines on the rims of bowls and dishes; in addition, dotted and other ornaments are also met with. Besides, floral motifs came into being: fir-tree patterns, palmettes, ivy boughs, favourite in antique times, and others.

The surface of the painted pottery is usually overlaid with colourful engobe or with a slip of red and pink hues, elaborated with polishing while the painting is done in dark red, black, brown, bluish and white colours.

The application of painted slip or engobe, polishing and paint brought pottery into prominence as a popular craft, in which traditional means, forms and motifs were coupled with new designs characteristic of Greece or the ancient world as a whole.

The manufacture of glazed ceramics with the application of blue, turquoise, green, grayish, silvery glaze gets also underway in Armenia during the Hellenistic epoch. Locally made glazed ceramics—amphoras, cups, plates, flasks reproduce the forms and the ornamental technique of glazed goods brought from Syria and Hellenistic or Parthian Mesopotamia.

The manufacture of terra-cotta statuettes was another novel phenomenon of ancient Armenia. True, in Armenia clay statuettes of the archaic pattern date back as early as the third millennium, however, terra-cotta statuettes discovered in Artashat are wholly associated with ancient coroplastic.

They were made locally, from local clay, but at the same time they are clearly divided into two groups, reflecting correspondingly the western and eastern trends. The statuettes of the first group reflect mainly the western types, occurring in profusion in the Greco-Roman world. Such are, for instance, the statuettes of Silenus, Aphrodite, undressing before bathing, women playing the cithara etc. On the other hand, the statuettes of the second group excel in local originality, while some of them have their parallels in Terra-cotta statuettes in the countries of the Hellenistic East, specially in Mesopotamia—Seleucia on the Tigris.

The statuettes depicting mother and child, though of extensive occurrence, are the more typical patterns. This was, for instance, the

presentation of Artemis, Aphrodite, Cybele and Anahit. The Artashat statuettes of the nursing mother depict with unquestioned certainty Anahit, that was the most respected goddess in Media and Persia, but Strabo tells that „the cult of Anahit supercedes all the others with the Armenians...“ As the father of Armenian historiography Movses Khorenatsi attests, the bronzecast gilded statue of Anahit brought from Asia Minor stood in the temple of Artashat.

The fifth century Armenian sources call Anahit „the great lady“, „the glory and wet-nurse of our people“, „the mother of wisdom, benefactress of all men“, „the donor of life and protector of our land Armenia“.

The golden statue of Anahit stood in the main temple in the locality of Yerevan, on the bank of the Euphrates in the province of Ekiesene. This is possibly the reason why it was called „goldbearing“ or „golden pro-mother“. Anahit was also the protector of Artashat—the capital of ancient Armenia.

Peculiar is also the statuette depicting horsemen, women playing cithara and others.

The list of crafts developed in ancient times included glass making. It is commonly known that in former days glassware was manufactured by rolling and stamping; however, the invention of blowing, on the borderline of the old and new chronicles, brought about a technical revolution in glass-making. The glassware was manufactured both by free blowing and inflation in forms that resulted in the subtly patterned, at times profusely adorned, colourful articles.

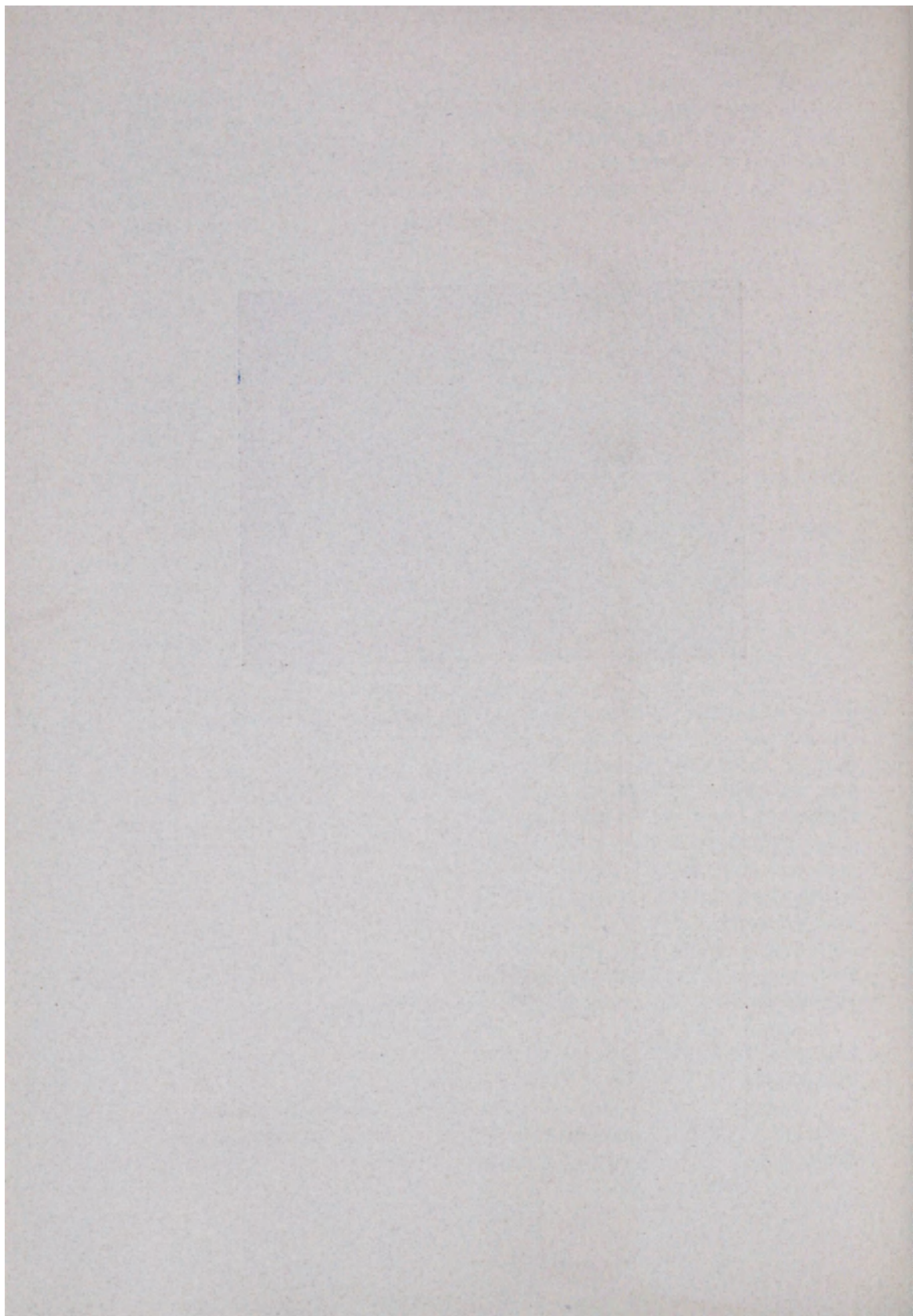
During the excavation of Artashat pieces of glass flasks and phials wrought by old technique in the 2nd and 1st centuries B. C. were discovered, along with fragments and unbroken flasks manufactured by free blowing and inflation in forms. The glass of Artashat as well as the specimens unearthed in Garni, Vagharshapat and other areas of ancient Armenia, had been in the main imported. They were brought over from Syria, partly from Alexandria, probably via Syria, Mesopotamia and Asia Minor. However, glassware was made in Armenia in the Hellenistic period as well as during the first centuries of our era. It should be noted that the local production reproduced the basic types and forms of imported glassware along with their ornaments. Thus the glassware of ancient Armenia forms an essential part of ancient glass and its local features are hard to discern.

The excavations of Artashat enabled us to establish the fact that the manufacture of blown glass appeared in Armenia not earlier than the second half of the first century A. D.

Coins minted by Armenian kings and sovereigns of other countries have likewise been uncovered in Artashat. Of great consequence is the



8. Терракотовые статуэтки.
Terra-cotta statuettes.



discovery of the hoard of money of Tigrane II the Great consisting of 28 silver coins. Observations reveal that there have been about ten stamps for mintage which shows that the coin was issued in considerable quantities. It was issued in three cities — Artashat, Tigranakert and Antioch. Actually the mintage of coins in Antioch started after the conquest of the Seleucid capital by Tigranes II in 83. B. C.

Copper coins minted in Artashat during the reigns of Tigrane II and Artavazdes II have also been discovered. Later on, in 183 A. D. a city coin was issued in Artashat in recognition of urban administration and self-government, typical of Hellenistic cities.

The coins of other cities and the imported objects found out in Artashat, are of major importance in studying the commercial-economic and cultural relations of Armenia with the ancient world.

Suffice it to mention that the coins of eight countries have been found out in Artashat — Seleucia, Parthia, Cappadocia, Rome, Athens, Pontus, Petra and Phenicia.

In addition to sculptures, metallworks, a plate of lapis lazuli with Arameic inscription, stone alabasters, various types of ceramic- and glassware were also imported to Armenia from Asia Minor, Syria, Mesopotamia, Iran, Egypt, Greece and Rome. Like Nisibin and Callinicum Artashat also was an officially acknowledged center of transit trade of the Near East. All of this testifies to fairly close and extensive economic and cultural contacts of Armenia with the countries of the ancient world.

The unearthed finds of Artashat and other areas provide good reason to conclude that the material production and culture of ancient Armenia had attained rather a high standard of development. An all-round intense development of the culture of ancient Armenia was based on the further organic evolution of old traditional culture, oriental in form; it was also grounded on the second, western main trend that originated during the Hellenistic period and led to an enrichment and radical changes in the form and nature of the country's culture.

It should be pointed out that the intense economic and cultural bonds of the country were in large measure due to the existence of rather a powerful Armenian statehood and the close contact of Armenia with the countries of the ancient world.

Armenia had become a constituent part of the eastern Hellenistic—ancient world economically, as well as culturally and politically.