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Open for Business?

The Stylistic Choices and Symbolic Vocabulary of Post-Reform Armenian Mansions in Mardin and Bitlis

Styles, symboles et partis pris architecturaux d'hôtels particuliers arméniens à Mardin et Bitlis

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Open for Business? The Stylistic Choices and Symbolic Vocabulary of Post-Reform Armenian Mansions in Mardin and Bitlis

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Although portrayed by municipalities and governorates as set in place since “time immemorial”,¹ both Mardin and Bitlis – small-sized cities in the Ottoman East with picturesque medieval citadels – saw considerable changes in the nineteenth century. A-To captured a sense of excitement, writing that “Bitlis had a great role in the past and will have a great role in the future.”² Henry F.B. Lynch described Bitlis extending like “long feelers” from the “starfish” of the old castle,³ and missionary Grace Knapp added that this was “like an amphitheater, flat-roofed houses climbing tier above tier” (fig. 1).⁴ This essay investigates an aspect of this exciting (but little-known) nineteenth-century development of Bitlis and Mardin: flamboyant, stone-built mansions constructed by an ascendant Armenian bourgeoisie.

In Bitlis today, there remains an enigmatic street that was constructed at the end of the nineteenth century. A series of tall, double-storeyed residential buildings made of polished volcanic *tufa*, adorned with bold Armenian inscriptions are unique within Bitlis, but also within broader

1. K. Öktem, 2005.

2. A-To, 1912, p. 82.

3. H.F.B. Lynch, 1901, p. 146.

4. G. Knapp, 1919, p. 9.

Ottoman and Armenian built traditions. The mansions are inscribed with their dates of construction: one, for instance, is carved with 1889 in Latin numerals and Armenian letters (ՌՅԼԸ/1889) (fig. 2 and 3). Whilst inscribing a building with its date of construction was not unheard of, the method with which it was done here was unprecedented. The numbers were written with Armenian capital letters in a large script recalling *yerkat'agir* calligraphy, which was a mode created by inventor of the alphabet, Mesrop Mashtots (362-440), and became widely used in medieval inscriptions, like those of Ani. Called “iron script”, it was engraved in *tufa* with an iron point.⁵ Number-letters inscribed here signalled to the symbolic (and spiritual) character of the Armenian alphabet, an impact that was maximised by their monumentality. Indeed, these mansions were so striking that they caught the notice of Pulitzer Prize-winner William Saroyan, who visited in 1964 and marvelled at the houses in Tsabrgor District (ձապրկոր թաղ), now Sapkor. The street, he noted, was called Deebek Botch (տիպէք պաշ).⁶ There were several houses there that were inscribed with the same monumental inscriptions giving their dates, all dating from a period of the late 1880s to 1890.

In Mardin (fig. 4), another medieval “old city” constructed in stone (although further south towards the Syrian border), a different cluster of mansions capture the imagination of visitors and locals alike. These, too, were of grand proportions, but, unlike Deebek Botch, contained no outward markings of Armenian identity. Instead, they were conspicuous because of the way that they mirrored Italian Renaissance buildings in their design features, such as open *loggias*, corbelling and dramatic tumble-down staircases. The Çermeyan Mansion (fig. 5) (now Şahkulu Bey House), for instance, which was constructed 1906-1907 by the architect Serkis Lole for the Çermeyan Armenian family of merchants, has a particularly strong relationship to the Loggia dei Lanzi in Florence, built 1376 to 1382.⁷ The house manipulates the traditional feature of the *revak* (arcade) so that its open aspect became the central element of its façade – like the ground floor *loggia* and arcades of the Loggia dei Lanzi that were used for business and signing papers. Features like the *loggia* thus gave the mansions the unusual – and unprecedented (in a city where dwellings were based around interior courtyards) – appearance of

5. G. Uluhogian, 2011, p. 39.

6. B. Zobyanyan, 2003, p. 198.

7. T. Çerme, 2000.

permeating on to Mardin's main thoroughfare and the market district that lay beneath.

It is the contention of this article that these public-facing characteristics of the mansions in Bitlis and Mardin – their unusually large inscriptions and ostentatious design elements following Renaissance Italy – were a show of being “open for business” by the Armenian bourgeoisie, following rising tensions in their localities – namely, the growing power of the missionaries and Russian Armenian political presence in Bitlis, as well as the stresses of the (averted) Hamidian Massacres in Mardin. In both these cities, Armenian commercial elites had taken on a position of increased importance, had dominated trade networks feeding into the cities and their markets, and had become incredibly prosperous from trade in goods, particularly luxuries like gold. The prominence of these elites was particularly strong in small-sized cities like Mardin and Bitlis, where the mansions they constructed were in central zones and had a conspicuous degree of visibility.

This article also contends that elements showing otherness and outside connections – whether the monumental Armenian inscriptions of Deebek Botch or the Italianate *loggias* of Mardin – were always accompanied by a thorough coating in “indigenous” architectural features and carved motifs (meaning, here, features that were associated with that locality through the lasting imprint of a ruling power), which served to localise them. This coating in indigenous features was a practice that was seen throughout the Ottoman East and had functioned to present a unified civic image shared by Armenian foundations (especially churches) and Muslim and institutional architecture as a show of local loyalty by newly-prosperous Armenian elites.⁸ In Mardin and Bitlis, these indigenous features were especially striking as they consisted of a dense vocabulary of stone-carved motifs tied to the Islamic dynasties that made the cities their capitals, namely the Artukids at Mardin and the Kurdish dynasties of Bitlis (while also used on more recent Ottoman foundations). Thus, whilst including new characteristics in their homes that identified their wide-ranging networks and defined them as a bourgeoisie, these Armenians underlined their local loyalty and alliances with Ottoman authority through their stylistic choices and symbolic vocabulary. These stylistic choices echoed the roles that Armenians took in reformed local administrations.

This article proceeds by looking to post-reform Armenian elites in Mardin and Bitlis, arguing that commercial elites, or bourgeoisie, boomed due to the prime locations of their cities and their new position playing an active role in local government. In Bitlis, elites saw a highpoint in the early 1880s playing foil to the missionaries and incipient Russian Armenian political presence. In post-massacre Mardin, Armenians experienced a surge in confidence because violence had been averted and notables worked together to restore peace. The article argues that the style of mansions constructed in Mardin and Bitlis corresponded to this fraught social and economic context. They showed local solidarity through their uptake of indigenous building techniques and styles, specifically their carved stone motifs, that reflected their local alliances and their work in the new reformed councils – their commitment to being *Mardinli*, *Bitlisli* and, yet, Ottoman. However, their monumental inscriptions allying them with the medieval Armenian kingdom, or their echoing of features developed by the Medicis of Florence, also betrayed their wider connections and aspirations. The post-reform Armenian bourgeoisie in Bitlis and Mardin were thus both similar and different in their building and design processes.

A NEW ARMENIAN COMMERCIAL ELITE, OR BOURGEOISIE,
IN MARDIN AND BITLIS

In the provinces, the *Tanzimat* reforms sought to connect governmental centres to the ruling mechanisms of the modernized state.⁹

9. M. Çadırcı, 1991, p. 156.
 10. A. Hourani, 2004.
 11. N. Lafi, 2007, pp. 448-455.
 12. U. Bayraktar, 2016, pp. 159-160.
- One of the results in Kurdistan was local councils. Historically, Muslim notables had dominated local governance since they claimed to speak on behalf of local society and governors relied on their advice.¹⁰ After the reforms, this *ancien régime* morphed into new administrative councils (*idare meclis*) that included Muslims and non-Muslims.¹¹ Notables increased wealth through monopolies and taxes – in Diyarbakır, for instance, they “manipulated the reforms to the greatest possible extent”.¹²

Armenians started to play a stronger role in local governance. Moving away from the view that they were merely a “comprador class”, studies have shown how a growing Armenian participation in local councils was

matched by an ideological commitment: how they internalised the language of reform, used it to express loyalty, civic mindedness and tried to secure rights.¹³ This also translated into a commitment to urban modernization, with an Armenian business class maximising the opportunities available in provincial lands in the latter part of the century and using its wealth to reshape their cities. In Harput, for instance, businessmen like the Fabrikatorian Brothers, who built up a textile empire, enacted their vision of modernization at the expense of traditional Muslim notables, the Çötelizades.¹⁴ A related class emerged in Mardin and Bitlis.

Armenian merchants were central to Bitlis's economic life in the second half of the nineteenth century. There were four caravanserais in 1837.¹⁵ Situated between Van and the Mesopotamian plain, Bitlis lay on the busy caravan route to Siirt and connected Diyarbakır to Mosul, with other roads extending to Aleppo, Baghdad and Trabzon. The prosperity of these routes reached a peak in the late nineteenth century so that by 1901 their modernization was a priority. British observers were watching keenly: Earl Percy described the Bitlis-Diyarbakır road as being constructed by "a capable engineer"¹⁶ and Consul Satow noted the *chaussee* was built from the Muş plain towards Siirt and Diyarbakır.¹⁷ The sources of the prosperity were varied: local products included gall-nuts and gum, walnut wood for veneering,¹⁸ red canvas/*Baghesh Shilah*,¹⁹ while tobacco was also a major export.²⁰ The Muş plain was productive and grain was sent to Bitlis's merchants to store. Grain was also transported from centres like Mosul to Bitlis.²¹

Grain was also a source, or indicator, of the demise of the market – in the late 1890s, British consuls note that there was no longer any grain store.²²

In addition to their role as merchants, Bitlis's Armenians played a key role in crafts. According to the *salname* (provincial yearbook), there were 1334 *dükkan* (shops) in 1892-1893, while A-To gives a figure of 1,000.²³ Many were owned by Armenian tradesmen, such as *Temirci* Hachó, *Firinci* Aran, *Çalkacı* Tigran, *Binayapıcı* Hagop, *Binayapıcı* Garbijan, *Bakırcı* Arso, *Marangöz* Levon and his brother Harutiun.²⁴ Armenians

13. M. Ueno, 2013, p. 93.
14. A. Sipahi, 2015, p. 151
15. Lt. Col. Shiel, 1837, p. 201.
16. Earl Percy, 1901, p. 137.
17. Foreign Office [FO] 195/1944, Bitlis, May 27th 1901, Satow.
18. H.F.B. Lynch, 1901, p. 151.
19. A-To, 1912, p. 82.
20. Lt. Col. Shiel, 1837, p. 201.
21. F. Lawson, 2011, p. 74.
22. FO 195/2021, Bitlis, April 30th 1898, Monahan.
23. E. Yaşar-Azap, 2017, p. 221; A-To, 1912, p. 82.
24. B. Zobyán, 2003, p. 203.

were crucial in opening the bazaar to imports, as British explorer Isabella Bird noted in Van in 1891: “Fifty years ago Venetian beads were the only articles imported from Europe. Now, owing to the increasing enterprise of the Armenians, every European necessary of life can be obtained, as well as many luxuries.”²⁵ By 1891, Bird stated (of Bitlis) that “its markets are among the busiest in Turkey.”²⁶ Lynch ascribed Bitlis’s prosperity to its position as provincial centre, whilst A-To noted its trade links and mountain pass.²⁷ Vali Tahsin Pasha carried out public works to maximise trade. In 1893, only shortly before overseeing the massacres, he ordered the construction of roads connecting Bitlis with surrounding areas and a spate of works to improve the functioning of the bazaar, such as widening the street.²⁸

In Mardin there was an equivalent business dynamic with Armenian families dominating long-distance trade. Families imported luxury materials, but also worked these materials – as jewellers, silver/goldsmiths and *telkari* (filigree) masters. Çermeyan, Atamyan, Kendiryan, Şenhuryan, İncemyan and Tüfenkçiyân were leading names (as documented by Yves Ternon, Sait Çetinoğlu and Tomas Çerme). A number of these families were Catholics.²⁹ The Çermeyans, for instance, were silversmiths and transported luxury materials and the Atamyans were known for *telkari*.³⁰ Most families lost their businesses after 1915; the Çermeyan *dükkan*, for one, was transferred to new owners.³¹

Mardin was unusual, however, in that tradesmen, bankers, and merchants there were known to work in consort with Arab notables. As Consul Trotter, visiting Mardin in 1879, noted: “the Moslems and Christians of Mardin [...] especially amongst the wealthier classes, are on much more equal and friendly terms than in any other place”. Trotter explained that “[t]here are a great many wealthy Mohammedans who, in preference to trading themselves, hand over their capital to their Christian neighbours who work the money for them and keep half the profits.”³² Ternon, too, implies that relations between Catholic Armenian, Muslim and Kurdish elites were warm.³³

The Armenians of Mardin and Bitlis were not a typical bourgeoisie in that their trade was not involved in a capitalist form of investment

or network. Nevertheless, they were united with their cosmopolitan compatriots in the port cities in a commitment to the institutions of reform. Like those Armenians studied by Uneno and others, they were not a “comprador” class or “national” elites but should be understood through a complex set of inspirations and attachments that included the local and regional, as well as their better-known international (and dependent) networks.³⁴

The Armenians in Mardin played a strong role in reformed institutions. In 1895, the court for trade (*ticaret mahkemesi*) included Catholics Cercis Kassar Efendi, Yosef Efendi and Sait Kendiyer Efendi, as well as Protestant Karagüllüzade Yosef Efendi. Armenians were involved in the administrative council.³⁵ Çetinoglu argued that whilst scholars such as İbrahim Özcoşar have underplayed the roles Armenians held, the *salname* lists 23 Christians in its first volume, 28 in its second, 53 in its third and 73 in its fourth.³⁶ Iskender Atamyan, member of the administrative council in 1900, was a leading figure in the community and was awarded an official rank for his service.³⁷ These bourgeois families not only played a formal role in the new institutions but also played a crucial informal negotiating and intermediary role on behalf of the community. Atamyan and Çermeyan bargained with Muslim notables during 1894-1895 and supplied Miskeviye and Mandalkeviye (Arab) notables with guns to defend the city.³⁸

In Bitlis, similarly, the municipal council was populated by the Armenian bourgeoisie. In 1876, Boğos Ağa and Ohannes Ağa were the two Armenians. By 1892 they were Kendiryan Agop Ağa as member and Alekyan Pavli Efendi as *tabib* (scribe). By 1899-1900 and 1900-1901 this increased to three Armenian members: Beşiryan Murat Ağa, Haçmanukyan Agop Efendi, and Basmacıyan Haçmanuk Efendi.³⁹ Beşiryan was also member of the *Vesait-i Nakliyye Komisyonu* (the commission concerning issues of transportation), 1898-1901.⁴⁰

New Armenian elites that could be considered bourgeois also included architects. They held important positions and often played a leading role in determining what the new institutions of the state should look like at local level. The Municipality of Bitlis was constructed in 1898 by

34. E. Eldem, 2014.

35. İ. Özcoşar, 2009, pp. 150-156.

36. Y. Ternon, 2013, pp. 4-6.

37. BBK (Ottoman Prime Ministry Archive), DH.MKT, D:2205, G:151, 1317.M.11 and DH.MKT, D:2300, G:94, 1317.L.3.

38. Y. Ternon, 2013, pp. 178-179.

39. E. Yaşar-Azap, 2017, p. 145.

40. E. Yaşar-Azap, 2017, p. 168.

Arakel Kalfa (*belediye kalfa*/municipal architect).⁴¹ In Mardin, according to oral accounts passed down by his descendant Jozef Lole Ertaş, his

41. BBK, DH.MKT, D: 1612, G:31, 1306.S.1 (1)/1898.

42. T. Çerme, 2000 and 2008; correspondence of this author with Liliane Ibrahim of Sydney, Australia.

43. A. Sipahi, 2015, p. 152.

44. L. Nalbandian, 1963, p. 99.

45. L. Nalbandian, 1963, pp. 51-52.

46. G. Bournoutian, 1998, p. 445 (document cited: Report from the Russian Vice Consul at Van, 29 April 1880, AVPR, Records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Armenian folder, file 115, f. 18).

former apprentice Abdülcelil Kao Ildoğan and his great-granddaughter, the *mimarbaşı* (or chief architect, as he is known in local lore) Serkis Lole's legacy includes institutions, mansions, churches and mosque repairs.⁴²

Mansions constructed in Bitlis in the 1880s and early 1890s and in Mardin in the 1890s and 1900s represented the rise of the post-*Tanzimat* Armenian bourgeoisie. This had been seen in Harput, Ali Sipahi stating that the Fabrikatorian Brothers constructed “arguably the most gorgeous building of the entire region: a quintuple mansion composed of five identical two-storey residences attached side-by-side in a straight line”.⁴³ Like the Fabrikatorian mansions, those in Mardin and Bitlis had ostentatious and public-facing aspects. However, they were not just associated with one family but formed a group, and their building came not in the immediate aftermath

of the reforms but at quite different times for local social relations.

RISING TENSIONS: BITLIS IN THE 1880S

Bitlis, as a city on the frontier that had seen fighting first-hand, was particularly affected by the post-war status-quo. Russians tried to retain a foothold in the border area. Hunchakian historian of “the revolutionary movement” Louise Nalbandian remarks how Russian consuls stayed behind and served as agitators, such as Major Kamsaragan (Russian acting vice-consul in Van), who provided training in arms and tactics at the Normal School.⁴⁴ She also notes that further political incursions included benevolent societies founded from 1880 for the education of Armenian compatriots – for instance, *Tebrotzasiratz Arevelian*, founded in 1876, was focused on Bitlis, Muş and Diyarbakir.⁴⁵ Russian contemporary voices heralded the impact of these activities, such as when the Russian vice-consul in Van wrote in April 1880 that “a very strong national movement” was spreading, financed by Russians.⁴⁶ Whether or

not the Russians did win the support of locals (and in most cases it seems they did not, with Kévorkian, for instance, stating that the ARF had no network in Bitlis),⁴⁷ the result was that Ottoman authorities became sensitive about Russian inroads, in response restricting contact and banning Russian-language publications. In Bitlis by the 1890s, there were clearly tensions. Bird noted Armenians were subjected to “deprivations and restraints”, distrusted by the government, searched for arms and their gunsmiths arrested. Funerals were under police guard because of a suspicion that guns were being buried in coffins.⁴⁸

The authorities mistook political activity for separatism and wilfully ignored that love for *patria* could be concomitant with Ottoman loyalty. Dzovinar Derderian argues that in the 1860s *The Eagle of Van* and *The Little Eagle of Taron*, published under priest-intellectuals Miğirdiç Khrimyan and Karekin Srvandziant, expressed a variation of Ottomanism, developing a conception of homeland as tied to the region and its future.⁴⁹ These activities were misconstrued and by the 1890s, everything referring to Armenia was suspicious. For example, a Bitlis woman was accused of possessing “a seditious paper” in 1898; that paper was none other than *The Eagle of Van*.⁵⁰

Tensions exacerbated by the growing impact of the missionaries were equally important in stimulating building works in Bitlis. One family of American Protestants, the Knapps, based in Bitlis from 1858 to 1895, had taken on a dynastic presence.⁵¹ Protestants, amidst problems with locals, started to focus on education (over conversion) and established a large college.⁵² By 1873 Mount Holyoke Girls’ Seminary was “an elegant two-story building” and George C. Knapp Academy was the boys’ school.⁵³ The mission became a large cluster outside Bitlis. As Hans Lukas Keiser argues, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) had “extended and cultivated what were prosperous missionary ‘islands’”, consisting of schools, hospitals, printing houses and churches.⁵⁴ Avel Meydan was nestled in hills in the city’s southern limits, along with the British consulate.

47. R. Kévorkian, 2011, p. 337.

48. I. Bird, 1891, pp. 354-355.

49. D. Derderian, 2014.

50. FO 195/2021, Bitlis, July 12-13th 1898, Monahan.

51. J. Salt, 1993, pp. 31-32.

52. H.F.B. Lynch, 1901, pp. 153-154.

53. R. Russell, 2016, “Bitlis - Missionaries” (available on www.houshamadyan.org).

54. H. Keiser, 2010, p. 57.

Missionary buildings were an affront to populations and state officials if they included rival symbols of flags, clock towers and minarets. Emrah Şahin describes how requests to add bells to churches met with reluctance, plus prescriptions regarding the size of those bells and how and when they could be used, along with other stipulations.⁵⁵ Tensions could be reflected

55. S. Deringil, 1998; E. Şahin, 2018, p. 93.

56. A. Layard, 1854, p. 61.

57. E. Şahin, 2018, pp. 84-85.

58. Papers Related to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Legation of the United States, Constantinople, 11 July 1881, Inclosure 3 in No. 451; Mr. Heap to Assim Pasha (available on <https://history.state.gov>).

59. Papers Related to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Legation of the United States at Constantinople. Sublime Porte, Inclosure 4 in No. 451. November 18, 1884, 818-19 (available on <https://history.state.gov>).

in attacks. When describing the Tiyari massacre (1843), British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard noted the subversive stature of the missionary school and dwelling house, which he thought had provided a provocation: “These buildings had been the cause of much jealousy and suspicion to the Kurds. They stand upon the summit of an isolated hill, commanding the whole valley.”⁵⁶ Compounds suffered during 1894-1896. For instance, Euphrates College in Harput, one of the most impressive schools, was attacked by a Kurdish Muslim mob and burned down.⁵⁷

In the mid-1880s, Missionary-(Apostolic) Armenian relations indicate that the latter had a strong position in Bitlis. One incident sheds light on this status. Between 1880 and 1885, correspondence from the Constantinople Legation of the United States records a dispute between Ottoman subject Serkis Kurkdjian and Reverend Knapp. Kurkdjian claimed that Knapp was unlawfully given his father’s property by the Ottoman Government. Kurkdjian persisted with court cases against Knapp from 1869, failing to obtain a favourable verdict until 1882. The turnaround happened when in July 1881 “a judge recently appointed at Bitlis opens the question again, and declares the property to have been illegally sold”. At the time, Knapp was being molested by locals, indicating some degree of popular support for the ruling.⁵⁸ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs remained on the side of the Bitlis government and Kurkdjian, stating in a reply to the Legation in November 1884 that the judgement was final and “in matters of property, foreign intervention is not permitted.”⁵⁹

In 1884 Knapp was robbed and attacked by Kurds led by warlord Moussa Bey. In April 1885, Kurkdjian tried to repossess Knapp’s property

through an order for execution he had gained. Again, the trial took on a popular dimension when “the claimant [...] appeared before the house in dispute with a hundred men to have delivery of the possession.”⁶⁰ Reverend Royal M. Cole, a fellow missionary and associate of Knapp, also mentioned that a group of Armenians stormed the mission in early 1885. Although further American pressure resulted in fresh proceedings finding in Knapp’s favour, this incident reflects several points at which local Armenians were supported by central and local authorities.

By the late 1880s, Cole suggests that missionaries and Armenians were closer. In the 1890s, a reversal in State-Armenian relations had begun. Owen Miller argues that a further case involving Moussa Bey (specifically, the kidnap and rape of an Armenian girl) alienated Armenians around 1889 and they began to turn to revolutionaries.⁶¹

Another significant shift was the appointment in 1891 of new Bitlis governor Tahsin Pasha, who became notorious for imprisoning wealthy Armenians and extracting money on charges of sedition.⁶² The cessation of Armenians building mansions around 1889 may reflect this change of climate.

THE IMPACT OF THE MASSACRES IN BITLIS

The 1894 Sasun incident caused a Christian-Muslim split, replacing cordial relations between Armenian and Kurdish peasants, Armenian and Turkish artisans, and notables.⁶³ Rumour circulated that Armenians were in revolt, due to Sasun and the Hunchaks demonstrating in Constantinople.⁶⁴ This was followed in the autumn of 1895 by a sequence of massacres.⁶⁵

A central target of the 1894-1895 violence was the Bitlis bazaar. A-To noted in the early twentieth century how Bitlis’s trade was in Armenian hands, “even though they had been under attack”.⁶⁶ The massacres caused a complete halting of trade, with the British consul reporting his concern that bazaars would be closed when “the suspension of business is

60. Papers Related to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Legation of the United States, Constantinople, April 6, 1885. No. 651. Mr. Wallace to Mr. Bayard, received April 23, 1885, 846 (available on <https://history.state.gov>).

61. O. Miller, 2015, pp. 49-50.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

63. S. Duguid, 1973, p. 149.

64. J. Verheij, 2018, p. 74.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

66. A-To, 1912, p. 82.

ruining the town”. Merchants recognised that they were under threat and requested government assurance of security from plunder so that they might reopen their shops.⁶⁷

In the aftermath, Bitlis’s Armenian elites (including merchants, a vicar and dragoman) were arrested, accused of intrigues, imprisoned and tortured.⁶⁸ Chief Armenians were asked to sign *mazbatas* (official reports) accusing foreigners of interference.⁶⁹ Armenian notables telegraphed the Sultan expressing gratitude for maintenance of order.⁷⁰ A statement in March 1898 by the Bishop of Bitlis asked the addressed “leading men of the community” to help the government seek out revolutionists.⁷¹ A

67. FO 195/1887, Van, Dec 3rd 1895, Hallward.

68. FO 195/1944, Muş, March 19th 1896, Hampson.

69. FO 195/1944, Muş, April 8th 1896, Hampson.

70. FO 195/1944, Muş, August 9th 1896, Hampson.

71. FO 195/2021, Bitlis, March 25th 1898, Monahan.

72. FO 195/2021, Bitlis, August 1st 1898, Letter signed Yeghishe Vartabed, 18th June.

73. Y. Sayan and S. Öztürk, 2001, pp. 12-20.

letter dated August 1898 from the Bishop to the Patriarch stated that “[w]e never believe that the most merciful Ottoman government allows such people to go and torture its faithful subjects [...] all these unjust practices in the villages and abuses of officers, contrary to conscience and humanity doing barbarous deeds, are to be ascribed to the lead officers and not to the government.”⁷²

The impact of 1894-1895 can be seen in mansion patronage. A greater concentration of fine stone houses can be linked to Muslim notables. Arabic and Ottoman inscriptions adorn houses of leading notables, with most built in the latter half of the 1890s: İsa Kalkan *Evi* (İsa Kalkan House), 1897, Yusuf Paşa *Konağı* (Yusuf Paşa Mansion), 1899, Zeki Nasır *Evi* (Zeki Nasır House), 1895.⁷³ Many

inscribed buildings were in the Zeydan neighbourhood and Muslim-owned (as indicated by religious invocations in Arabic). They were, externally, stylistically similar to the Armenian mansions of Deebek Botch in that they were tall, two storeyed and constructed from *tufa*, with large rectangular windows and a small projecting eave, as well as subtle details like carved external *muqarnas* (stalactite carving) trims and niches, such as at İsa Kalkan *Evi* (the house of the Muslim notable Ahmed Ağa). The few interiors that survive are heavily decorated, their features including woodwork with floral-painted and gilded panels. Yet, the inscriptions on these houses were in style much more typical of an Islamic setting, with lines of Arabic script set in plaques over entrances. The inscription on

İsa Kalkan *Evi* was framed by carved star, flower and plant motifs, thus drawing attention to the doorway. However, here, on the Muslim house, there was not the same element of conspicuous public display as in the Armenian homes.

The stylistic choices of Kurds in the urban setting remains uncertain. Küfrevi Mausoleum (**fig. 6**), an 1898 complex devoted to a Nakşbandi Sheikh, reflects some Kurdish patronage. It was the work of an Italian architect with Greek stone masons (identified by Alkan as ‘Anberto’ and ‘Mais Biçaçı’, respectively)⁷⁴ and its Italianate style is fundamentally different from the Armenian and Muslim mansions. Küfrevi Mausoleum’s Italian architect and Nakşbandi dedication were, perhaps not coincidentally, a precursor to the more famous example of the Sheikh Zafir Complex in Istanbul (1905), designed for Abdülhamid II by Raimondo D’Aronco.⁷⁵ The Nakşbandis were a rising group on the urban scene in Bitlis and they filled the gap between the Kurdish emirs and the state’s provision until the First World War.⁷⁶ There are some indications of changing sensibilities in Bitlis. The British consul describes a “Kurdish Gentleman”, his neighbour in the Christian quarter, who, after the murder of the Chief of Police (when visiting an Armenian brothel), was induced “by the advice of some Sheikhs” to move to a Muslim quarter.⁷⁷ Certainly, negative feelings between Armenians and Kurds were provoked by Hamidiye regiments (Arshak Safrastian, British vice-consul in Bitlis, stated that before the Hamidiye they had “had an unwritten pact of friendship”).⁷⁸ Religious tensions were also enflamed by preachers. In 1902, for instance, Kurdish notables headed by Fethullah, Mufti of Bitlis, sent a petition to the Sultan “complaining that it was impossible for them to live any longer in harmony with the Christians”.⁷⁹

Conditions were clearly not favourable for the building of mansions after 1894-1896. Yet the decline had already begun; in 1889-1891, Tahsin Pasha’s extractions had fundamentally changed the situation of Armenian elites and the Moussa Bey incident had alienated – even radicalised – many. There are few Armenian traces in Bitlis that date from between 1889 and 1897-1898 (when the Municipality and Government House were built and there was a resurgent Armenian presence).

74. A. Alkan, 2015, p. 72.

75. D. Barillari and E. Godoli, 1996.

76. M. Van Bruinessen, 1992, p. 296, pp. 337-338.

77. FO 195/2021, Bitlis, March 25th 1898, Monahan.

78. J. Joseph, 1984, p. 91.

79. FO 195/2125, Bitlis, January 29th 1902, Freeman.

MARDIN AND THE MASSACRES:
SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND CATHOLIC POWER?

In Mardin in 1894-1896, the massacres were prevented. According to missionaries J. Rendel and Helen B. Harris, “one very powerful Kurdish family or tribe, which lives here, who, though thieves themselves, are friendly with the missionaries, and for their sakes saved the Christians of the city.”⁸⁰ Edwin Munsell Bliss includes an eyewitness account of

80. J. R. Harris and H. Harris, 1897, p. 106.

81. E. M. Bliss, 1896, p. 475.

82. E. M. Bliss, 1896, p. 476.

83. D. Gaunt, 2018, p. 13.

84. Y. Ternon, 2013, pp. 178-179.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 179. Although Ternon’s text does not include a footnote, the editor of the Turkish edition, Sait Çetinoğlu, has pointed to Armalé’s source to support the account, with the text given as “İşak Armalé, *Al-quşara fi nakabat al-naşara*, 1919 (1970 Arapça)”. A Turkish translation of Armalé’s text is included by Çetinoğlu in the appendix (pp. 641-646) and this indeed discusses the same points. The reference there is spelt slightly differently (perhaps due to its being Arabic transliterated into Turkish): “Piskopos İşak Armalé, *Al-quşara fi nekebet en-naşara* (Hıristyanlar Başına gelen Felaketler) (Arapça) 1919. *Nisibin Mecmuası* 46/9 sayısından alınmıştır. 1987 Södertalje- İSVEÇ.”

what happened over 9-10 November 1895 at Mardin: “The Kurdish tribes on every side were determined to attack Mardin after finishing their destruction of the villages. Meanwhile the local government was actively preparing for defense and the leading men of the city, both Moslems and Christians, in a most fraternal spirit, joined their efforts to those of the government to prevent a repetition of what had occurred at Diarbekir.”⁸¹ The witness states that the Kurds “were obliged to draw off with severe loss” and “[w]hen the Kurds realized that the government and city were a unit for the common defense, they drew off and the tide of attack swept further east, taking Nisibin and some twenty Christian villages in its sway.”⁸² *Mardinli* Syriac Catholic priest Jarwe Habib described how on 9 November Kurds gathered to the west of Mardin. Muslim notables the Miskeviye and Mandalkiye marched out to stop them, and the authorities also called on loyal inhabitants to arm themselves against the Kurds.⁸³ Ternon (via the account of Syriac-Catholic priest İşak Armalé) adds that the Muhallemi (Arab *aşirets*) Miskeviye and Mandalkiye protected Christians, each defending one side of the city.⁸⁴ Notables worked with Armenians (namely Atamyan and Çermeyan, who provided them with guns), and were accused by other Muslims of having “sold the city to the Armenians.”⁸⁵

Tensions in Mardin were apparent (and had been rising) – despite the relative victory of the averted massacres. Enis Paşa, Mardin *mutasarrıf* in 1890 and 1891-1894, exerted hardships on Capuchins and was thought to have ordered the plundering of Armenian shops that accompanied a fire in the bazaar in 1892.⁸⁶ Following the massacres, government-directed soldiers and Kurds ransacked the bazaar.⁸⁷ Ternon (via Armalé) describes how two Miskeviye chiefs passed by Iskender Atamyan’s house and sent word to Archbishop Nazaryan about a conspiracy masterminded by Şeyh Muhammet Said. Again, it seems that close relations with Arab notables were significant in preventing violence – and figures like Atamyan served as intermediaries.⁸⁸

At the time of the massacres, Catholic power was reaching a peak in Mardin. Although the presence of French Capuchins dated back to 1685, with Carmelites establishing a base in 1770, nineteenth-century expansions included a Franciscan school opening in 1876.⁸⁹ Large-scale conversions took place, with Mardin’s Armenians mainly Catholic by the end of the century.⁹⁰ The Apostolic Armenian Cathedral, Sourp Kevork (founded in 420), was used as the Armenian Catholic Bishop’s residence.⁹¹ Jacobites, too, were under the influence of the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants found less success. The Presbyterian ABCFM established their church at Mardin in 1858, while British Anglicans appeared from the 1860s.⁹² Protestants found Mardin challenging due to linguistic factors – the use of Syriac and Arabic – and the presence of two patriarchs and two bishops as rival authorities.⁹³ Catholics also enjoyed imperial sanction that boosted their position; while Protestants were “the main ideological enemy” of Abdülhamid II, the Catholic mission “was not seen in the same way” as it “had earned the reputation of being loyal to the government” as well as gaining from diplomatic thawing with the Pope in the 1880s.⁹⁴

Armalé was a Syriac-Catholic priest and secretary to the Archbishop, hence he was a close witness of the events. His account has recently been translated and published in German. Interestingly, Munsell Bliss’s “eyewitness”, similarly to Armalé, claims that the Kurds persisted that a ferman for the killing of the Armenians had been given but that “the Christians of Mardin had bribed the government to conceal it and defend them”. Bliss is also very openly anti-Kurdish throughout his account. E.M. Bliss 1896, p. 476.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

90. R. Kévorkian and P. Paboudjian, 2012, p. 417.

91. Z. Biner, 2020, p. 77.

92. Y. Ternon, 2013, p. 170.

93. J. Joseph, 1984, p. 178.

94. H. Keiser, 2010, p. 35 and p. 57.

The result of this situation was that Mardin's Catholic Armenians were buffered in the 1890s by warm relations with Arab notables, imperial favour, and some degree of solidarity between the Latin churches based in (and around) Mardin. They embarked on a flurry of construction activity, commissioning a singularly talented and productive master-mason and architect (who was also an Armenian Catholic), Serkis Lole, to construct a series of lavish mansions, including the Çermeyan Mansion. These mansions, like those in Bitlis, combined newly open displays of wealth and status with conspicuous references to an indigenous style.

INDIGENEITY OF STYLE

Art historical studies in Turkey long tried to Turkicize the heritage of Mardin and Bitlis, whether by stressing the legacy of the Turkmen Artukids as the natural ancestors of modern-day Turks, or by describing Bitlis's architecture as a Seljuk Renaissance.⁹⁵ Formal comparisons were invoked: the distinctive tear-drop (*damlâ*) motif, seen across buildings in Mardin, for instance, was linked to much older models such as that in the *mihrab* (prayer niche) of the Kızıltepe Great Mosque and Artukid objects

95. A. Altun, 1978 and 1971; A. Oluş, 1971.

96. G. Mesara, 2010.

97. A. Alkan, 2015.

98. F. Alioğlu, 2000, pp. 59-99.

99. S. Aydın and K. Emiroğlu, 2000, pp. 117-118.

in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art.⁹⁶ Studies on Bitlis's architecture also tended to emphasize continuity with Seljukid Ahlat.⁹⁷ In the study of residential architecture, art historians emphasized Mardin's vernacular style. Alioğlu identified the re-use across building types, but particularly on local houses, of floorplans, layouts, façades, window and door types and carved stone motifs and patterns.⁹⁸

Features of this formula have been viewed as an inheritance from Artukid models, with little changes under Ottoman rule or even in the nineteenth century.

The Artukid reign (early twelfth to early fifteenth century) was indeed, in some sense, when Mardin took on the status of a political centre and capital, and when its physical layout came into being and its style was crystalized.⁹⁹ The legacy of Artukid architecture represented Mardin's 'golden age' due to the volume of buildings constructed that are now inseparably linked to the city, such as the Sultan İsa (1385), Kasımiye (1407) and the Latifiye (1371) medreses. Their lavish decorative repertoire

encompassed layers of ornament, including carved trilobed portals and polychrome inlaid voussoirs with characteristic motifs such as the *damlâ* repeated alongside eight-pointed stars and *muqarnas*. However, as Deniz Beyazit has argued, the Artukid imprint was, in fact, not a Turkish style but a thoroughly hybrid one that borrowed from Late Antique/Early Christian architecture, regional Islamic powers (the Zangids, Ayyubids, Mamluks, Seljuqs and Ilkhanids), as well as the Caucasus.¹⁰⁰ Ruins like the sixth-century Roman fortress city Dara and the numerous monasteries of the Tur Abdin nearby meant that the Late Antique/Early Christian architectural legacy was particularly strong in Mardin, and this was equally important in the revival of local styles in the works of Serkis Lole.

Bitlis's architecture, likewise, represented a melting pot of dynastic and regional styles – those of the Turkish Dilmaçoğulları dynasty, the Kurdish *emirs* who shaped nearby Ahlat and Adilcevaz, and the Armenian province of Aghdznik,¹⁰¹ to name just a few of the diverse styles that fed in to local material culture. Characteristic buildings included the Şerefiye Mosque (1529) and İhlasiye Medrese (1589), which showcased an associated stone-carved architecture to Artukid Mardin with motifs such as *damlâ*, interlocking stars, octagons, *muqarnas*, trilobed arches, and polychrome voussoirs.

Ottoman complexes indexed authority through a round, leaded dome resting on a cube-shaped base with pendentives.¹⁰² Architecture adapted to decorative and structural traditions indicative of the dialogue between “centre” and “provinces”,¹⁰³ but Bitlis and Mardin retained indigenous forms to an unusual degree.¹⁰⁴ Zal Pasha Mosque in Adilcevaz – with its twelve domes and distinctive Ahlat stone (and which, according to Evliyya Çelebi, dates from 1538) – has few indications of Ottoman-ness aside from its rounded minaret and domes. In Mardin, the Reyhaniye Mosque (built in 1756) does not depart from the *Mardinli* onion-domed square, with octagonal minaret and open *iwan* (vaulted hall). Mansions in Bitlis and Mardin draw heavily on this language of tradition. Vernacular style in Mardin's mansions has been viewed as reflecting the strength of craft tradition.¹⁰⁵ However, innovative aspects – namely, monumental inscriptions on Bitlis houses and Renaissance features on

100. D. Beyazit, 2016.

101. T. Sinclair, 1989, Vol I, p. 299.

102. H. Zeitlian-Watenpaugh, 2004; Ç. Kafesçioğlu, 1999.

103. H. Zeitlian-Watenpaugh, 2004.

104. F. Özdem, 2005; see also B. Açıkyıldız-Şengül, 2018.

105. See B. Açıkyıldız-Şengül, 2018.

Mardin's mansions – offer visual clues towards the non-local connections and networks of their patrons and architects.

BITLIS MANSIONS IN THE 1880s:
WRITING ON THE WALLS

Although 1876-1878 has been associated with an exodus – the *hammal* (porters) of Constantinople were overwhelmingly from Bitlis and Muş – mansions built in the 1880s show that Armenians not only stayed on but carved out a substantial presence. In 1879, Ottoman official newspaper *Tercüman-ı Efkâr* (No.583, 12th June) voiced Armenians' objections to the title 'Consul for Kurdistan' given to the British consular post for Erzurum, Diyarbakır, Harput, Muş and Van. The consul concluded that the post might indeed be changed to 'Armenia and Kurdistan', putting forward that this was "since the cooperation of the Armenians is essential to carrying out reforms in the region" and that it concerned a point on which they were "extremely sensitive". He also added that:

There is no doubt whatever that the Armenians in these provinces are anxious to take a more active part in public affairs than has hitherto been allotted to them [...] the Armenian of today is a very different individual to what he was before the war. He is much bolder and less submissive and is bent on apparently securing rights and privileges which have hitherto often very unfairly been denied him.¹⁰⁶

This was a time of rebuilding for Bitlis. Originally a *sancak* of Erzurum Province, Bitlis became its own province, with a *salname* issued from 1880.¹⁰⁷ Armenians actively established the provincial capital as their mansions were constructed in central zones at this time.

Armenian letters carved in *yerkat'agir* on the houses of Deebek Botch mainly date from the 1880s. Monumental street-facing Armenian

106. FO 195/1211, Erzurum, July 15th 1879, Trotter.

107. E. Yaşar-Azap, 2017.

108. Y. Strauss, 2011, p. 126.

109. H. Kuruyazıcı, 1999.

inscriptions were unheard of in Ottoman domains. Although commercial signs formed the cosmopolitan "linguistic diversity" of cities like Constantinople¹⁰⁸ and inscriptions on apartments recorded architects' names in small plaques,¹⁰⁹ Armenian inscriptions in bold capitals were exceptional and their appearance in Bitlis constitutes a "public text" – a "socially and politically intensified

use of writing”¹¹⁰ – and a public expression of Armenian identity. As Irene Bierman writes, a sign in a “foreign” (i.e. unfamiliar) language could be read differently by various observers; it could mean “a group identity that has as its index a written sign in the public space”, thus supporting cohesion, but it could also be alienating.¹¹¹ Armenian, as a holy script like Arabic, was believed to have been passed down from God.¹¹² As Benedict Anderson states, “[a]ll the great classical communities conceived of themselves as cosmically central, through the medium of sacred language linked to a super terrestrial order of power”.¹¹³ Use of this sacred language could be read as a marker of Armenian superiority (a chosen people) as well as indicating group membership.

Public expression of Armenian identity was generally muted in Ottoman domains: domes, bell towers and other religious symbols were prohibited before the *Tanzimat* and continued to be regulated and monitored. The Armenian language was used as internal expression: letters signifying Christ adorned church apses and domes, portal inscriptions or gravestones within walled compounds. This contrasted with historical Armenian architecture, for, as Gabrielle Uluhogian states, “[e]pigraphic inscriptions are an integral part of medieval Armenian architecture and are almost always found on the façades of buildings, as well as on khachkars, and are generally written in *yerkat’agir* style.”¹¹⁴

The closest contemporary parallels to the Bitlis inscriptions are from Russian-held Kars and Gyumri at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century (fig. 7 and 8). In those cities, inscriptions give the date of construction in Armenian letters, often accompanied by Latin numerals (sometimes also Russian or Greek), but only form small elements of the façade. In such locations, surrounded by *fin de siècle* Russian buildings, Armenian letters in keystones, small corners and pediments did not stand out. Yet, the inscriptions on Deebek Botch also recall the medieval capital of Ani and its endless churches with *yerkat’agir*. They manage to blend the monumentality of the medieval inscriptions with the functional content of those of the Russian territories.

That these Bitlis Armenian inscriptions indeed drew the attention of passers-by is indicated by Saroyan’s account. His guide Cemal Papir, a friend of his father (a missionary-educated Presbyterian minister, who

110. I. Bierman, 1998, p. i.

111. *Ibid.*, p. xi.

112. J. Russell, 1998, p. 149.

113. B. Anderson, 1983, p. 13.

114. G. Uluhogian, 2011, p. 55.

left Bitlis in 1904),¹¹⁵ took him to Deebek Botch and pointed out that one large house belonged to the Karaoğlans and was inscribed with the date ՌՅԼԷ (1888). This turned out to be Saroyan's grandmother's house. Saroyan observed that the house was of similar quality to another nearby, also inscribed with its date ՌՅԼԹ (1890).¹¹⁶

Saroyan appreciated the houses, noting they had two storeys and were made of polished stone.¹¹⁷ Bitlis houses were often noticed by travellers. Isabella Bird in 1891 stated that “[t]he massiveness of the houses is

remarkable [...] all are at a considerable height, and every house looks as if it could stand a siege.”¹¹⁸ Lynch in 1901 noted “solid walls” and “substantial masonry”, with “blocks of hewn stone, broken by a layer or two of thick beams”.¹¹⁹ Another feature was volcanic brownish-red stone.¹²⁰ Lynch called it “yellow lava weathering to the warm grey”.¹²¹ Locally described as Ahlat stone or *tufa*, it was widely employed in Armenian architecture.

The mansions were marked by subtle references to Bitlis's medieval buildings. *Muqarnas* formed a characteristic motif of Islamic architecture and dominated Bitlis's medieval buildings, such as the Şerefiye (1529), İhlasiye (1216/ repaired 1589) and Emir Bayindir (1481). On the İhlasiye, for instance, a frieze encircles the structure, and on the Şerefiye its windows. *Muqarnas* was not unheard of in Armenian architecture: it can be seen at the Selim or Orbelian Caravanserai (1332). Its appearance on Bitlis mansions was something of an anomaly. On the house dated to 1889, it is applied to the exterior in a frieze adorning the lower lintels (fig. 9). Its cross-cultural usage elsewhere in Bitlis was so striking that Lynch made note of it in 1901, stating that “the influence of the Arab style” could be seen not only in mosques but also in churches, which contained “a partiality for Arab stalactite ornament”.¹²² This use of *muqarnas* may have reflected the association of Armenians with stone cutting in Bitlis.¹²³

Armenian mansions of the 1880s were designed according to a formula: prominent Armenian inscription, large blocks of smooth *tufa*, *muqarnas* friezes. They had basements for stabling and storage (which were not really basements but mainly on, or just under, ground level),

115. N. Balakian, 1998, p. 43; B. Zobyanyan, 2003, p. 192.

116. B. Zobyanyan, 2003, pp. 198-199.

117. B. Zobyanyan, 2003, p. 199.

118. I. Bird, 1891, p. 350.

119. H.F.B. Lynch, 1901, p. 147.

120. R. Kévorkian and P. Pamboudjian, 2012, p. 471.

121. H.F.B. Lynch, 1901, p. 147.

122. *Ibid.*, pp. 154-156.

123. A. Alkan, 2015, p. 72.

and then two living levels,¹²⁴ which gave a loftiness in contrast with the norm of two levels. External ornament included round-arched entrances and casement windows with pediments. Lynch mentions window glass brought from Europe.¹²⁵ Yet, further features grounded the mansions in the locality, such as a tiny projecting eave below roof level mirroring that on İhlasiye. This range of characteristics was echoed on Karmirak Church.

Karmirak/Sourp Nshan (fig. 10) was “the most renowned” church of Bitlis according to A-To in 1912.¹²⁶ It was situated close to Baş Mahalle and Gök Meydan, the residence of the governor, and the Meydan Camii. Karmirak had an important religious status because part of the cross stained with Christ’s blood was protected there.¹²⁷ It was also the seat of the Bishop. The Armenian Bishop had a key role in post-1878 Bitlis, being a member of the provincial council alongside the governor, the *müftü*, the president of the civil and religious tribunal, the head accountant, the secretary general and two Muslim and two Christian notables.¹²⁸ A date of 1884 (ԹՅԼԳ) (1885 in Latin numerals) was carved into the side of Karmirak in the same manner as the Armenian houses. The church echoed their lofty scale, volcanic stone, the regularity of their façade elements with large round arches, and eave-trimmed roofs.

Lynch, unimpressed, stated that Karmirak was “an unpretentious building of four plain stone walls, with two rows of three stone pillars in the interior, crowned by a small dome”.¹²⁹ However, a dome was still a restricted element in the late nineteenth century – as Patriarch Malachia Ormanian wrote in 1910, such “national traditions” were not allowed “until lately” and even then “such an architectural taste cannot be indulged in without a special authorization”.¹³⁰ The domed nature of the church, therefore, indicated the Bishop of Bitlis had substantial status.

Investment in Karmirak came when the most prestigious religious buildings – the monasteries – were under pressure. Monasteries had been insecure since the war: when Lynch visited the notable medieval Armenian monastery Sourp Garabed in nearby Muş in 1901, six monks were in residence and six away (one in prison), new buildings (a library

124. Y. Sayan and S. Öztürk, 2001, p. 12.

125. H.F.B. Lynch, 1901, p. 148.

126. A-To, 1912, p. 82.

127. R. Kévorkian and P. Paboudjian, 2012, p. 472.

128. V. Cuinet, 1891, vol. 2, pp. 525-526.

129. H.F.B. Lynch, 1901, p. 152.

130. M. Ormanian, 1955, p. 165.

and printing press) had never been used (with the press banned), Kurds had pillaged the library, and books confiscated.¹³¹ Subsequently, monastic settings became associated with revolutionaries, such as when Andranig of Sivas occupied Arakh (in the region of Van, another important medieval monastery) in January 1902.¹³² In contrast, city centre churches were a feature of the reforms. Articles 94–98 of the Armenian Constitution (1863) stipulated that the *aradjnord* (primate) was head of the local national administration in the provinces and chairman of Spiritual and

131. H.F.B. Lynch, 1901, pp. 177–179.

132. FO 195/2125, Bitlis, January 7th 1902, Freeman.

133. Y. Cora, 2016, p. 344.

134. S. Aydın and K. Emir-oğlu, 2000, pp. 124–125.

135. H. Takahashi, 2018.

Civic Assemblies in their dioceses, and that they had to be based in the diocese centre, not in a monastery.¹³³

The judgement in favour of Kurkdjian over Knapp in 1884 indicated that this was a period of strength for Bitlis's Apostolic Armenians. Karmirak remained the main Armenian foundation, as Lynch (c.1901) and A-To's (c.1912) observations show. In light of his statement after the massacres, the Bishop of Bitlis evidently saw it as his representative responsibility both to defend his community and uphold Ottomanism. Karmirak was an equivalent announcement in architecture, and it served as a compliment to the mansions of Deebek Botch in the rebuilding of Bitlis as a provincial centre.

MARDIN MANSIONS IN THE 1890S-1900S: MEDICIS OF THE EAST

In Mardin, the 1890s were a decade of ascendance marked by a wealth of building works. The 1890s saw a major shift in settlement patterns. Armenians started to build mansions in the market district. This central area, where the mosques, *mescits* (smaller neighborhood mosques), *hamams* and markets were situated, was populated with Muslim quarters. Non-Muslims tended to settle closer to the castle.¹³⁴ Although the government quarter constructed at the end of the street was also a significant change, the mansions, forming a cluster next to the bazaar, had an important impact on dynamics.

Mardin's Catholics were chiefly responsible for building in central areas. The Capuchin church, school and old peoples' home were built in 1884.¹³⁵ The Capuchin buildings were later adjoined by the Syriac

Catholic Patriarchate, built in 1895, now Mardin Museum, and the Franciscan monastery. Armenian Catholics had Sourp Varvara Monastery, outside of Mardin, dating from at least the mid-seventeenth century¹³⁶ and they constructed the city-centre church, Sourp Hovsep, in Cami-i Kebir Mahallesi in 1884.

Armenian-Catholic *murabhas* (delegate) Melkon Efendi requested an additional church due to the growth of the community to more than five hundred houses and the “insufficient capacity” (*istiyah kâfi olmadiğından*) of current buildings. Land of around 20 metres in length and width was taken into possession (*müstemlekat*). The foundation included a *tahsisat* (assignment) of *evkaf* property (*emlak*) and land (*arazi*).¹³⁷ The Archbishop of Mardin Melkon Nazaryan (1830-1901) (the ‘delegate’ of the Ottoman document) was ordained in 1864 and his leadership saw an expansion of the community. Sourp Hovsep was equipped with a *divanhane* (meeting room) as diocese centre.¹³⁸

Despite this growth of the community and its political voice – and the threat to other populations that this might entail – Sourp Hovsep underlined a sense of loyalty through structural and stylistic choices. As was the tradition in Mardin, Sourp Hovsep did not have a street presence but was within an enclosure. The stone-carved decorative vocabulary of the church also expressed local continuity. Arabesques, eight-pointed stars, lotus, corbels, ribbed and knotted geometric patterns carved on the portal (**fig. 11**) were characteristic of medieval Mardin buildings, such as the Kasimiye Medrese (1407). Rounded Roman arches, classicizing framing devices, cornices, shell niches, Corinthian columns, dentil, egg-and-dart, palmettes, interlocking diamonds and acanthus can be traced to local Early Christian traditions. The grape vine, distinctive of the Deyr-ül-Zaferan Monastery, is carved on Sourp Hovsep’s altarpiece. Yet, in contrast with the other churches of Mardin-centre (the Syriac ones and the fifth-century Apostolic Armenian Sourp Kevork), Sourp Hovsep had an impressive interior space. Groin vaulting and pointed arches likened it to a Gothic cathedral, while Italianate fixtures and paintings completed the hybrid aesthetic (**fig. 12**).

Sourp Hovsep was part of a resurgence of carved ornament in Mardin under Serkis Lole. Related carvings can be seen on Christian-tied works:

136. F. Alioğlu, 2000, p. 45.

137. BBK, I.DH., D:949, G:75124, 1302.B.18/ 1884.

138. S. Aydın and K. Emir-oğlu, 2000, p. 452.

the tombstone of Hovsep Kendiryan at Sourp Kevork (1889) is framed by the same knotted columns, as is a relief outside Kırklar Syriac Church and Deyr-ül-Zaferan's bell tower. Lole's decorative repertoire also adorned new institutions and Muslim buildings. The grapevine was a prominent motif and adorned Mardin barracks (1890) and the Great Mosque minaret (dated by inscription to 1888-1889).¹³⁹ A common pool of ornament seen on symbolically important buildings, along with Armenian churches and mansions, indicates that this was a conscious

revival of Mardin's past – and a statement of belonging.

139. S. Aydın and K. Emir-oğlu, 2000, p. 431; T. Sinclair, 1989, Vol. III, p. 209.

140. Ç. Maner, 2006, pp. 119-120.

141. S. Çetinoğlu, 2013.

142. A. Gabriel, 1940, pp. 41-43.

143. For old photographs of the street and square, see D. Bekin, 2015, pp. 81-82.

144. T. Çerme, 2000.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Tüfenkçiyân Mansion (built 1897), Kendiryan Mansion (now Maridin Hotel), Kasparyan Mansion (1890, later the PTT and Şahtana House), Dikran Mükellefi Mansion (1907, later Beyt Cebbure, now Gazipaşa İlkokulu),¹⁴⁰ Incemyan Mansion (now Abdülkadir Paşa Konağı), and many more Armenian residences were constructed.¹⁴¹ United by their construction dates (many were the work of Lole) and town-centre locations, they faced onto the

main street, close to the market. Although, unlike Sourp Hovsep, these mansions merged Mardin's traditions (carved *muqarnas*, round arches with multiple vousoirs), with something new – unmistakable quotations from Italian Renaissance architecture applied to their exteriors.

The Çermeyan Mansion (**fig. 5**), now Şahkulu Bey House, constructed 1906-1907 by Lole, is the most conspicuous example. Austrian formalist Albert Gabriel linked it to Lole in 1940, based, most likely, on local informants with whom Gabriel had conversed.¹⁴² Gabriel published a plan of the building and description, despite it dating well beyond his interests. The mansion is indeed worthy of attention, situated where the main street peaks, adjacent to Republic Square (formerly the Capuchin and Franciscan complexes) and the Syriac Catholic Patriarchate. To its other side was the Atamyân Mansion.¹⁴³

Tomas Çerme, a descendant of the original owners of the mansion, was the first to identify the Loggia dei Lanzi in Florence (**fig. 13**), built 1376 to 1382, as the source of the design.¹⁴⁴ It is not clear whether this attribution was made on stylistic grounds or based on family stories or

interviews with relations of Lole. Art historians have ignored Çerme's suggestion and related the house to Mardin's traditional architecture. Elements are emphasized as features with a long genealogy, even dating to Neolithic Mesopotamia, showing adaptations to the local climate and geography.¹⁴⁵ However, 'local' features such as the *revak* (arcade) are manipulated in the house to an extent that its open aspect resembles no other Mardin residences but instead an Italian *loggia*.

The Çermeyan Mansion's *loggia* brought a new element of display to Mardin. Mansions had been compound-like, opening on to a courtyard, yet the Çermeyan Mansion had its reception room emptying on to the street. Likewise, the *loggia*, an open court, signalled a move away from sequestered tower houses in Renaissance Florence, towards a public residence. Merging indoor and outdoor, they were accompanied by balconies, large windows on upper floors and outside staircases.¹⁴⁶ They functioned as a ceremonial negotiation space for commerce, with ground floor *loggias* and arcades used for business, signing papers and hearing legal cases. It was key that they were partially outside and visible from the street.¹⁴⁷ The Loggia dei Priori (later renamed dei Lanzi after the Medicis), was the archetypal *loggia*. Situated on the main square, Piazza della Signoria, adjacent to the town hall and magistrate's office, it "functioned as a grand civic stage".¹⁴⁸

The *loggia's* design maximised its openness. It consisted of five wide round arches, with three on the main façade and two on either end. The arches opened on to bays covered with cross vaults, supported by columns. Ornate capitals and keystones with carved trefoils of the virtues of Fortitude, Temperance, Justice, and Prudence communicated the symbolism of the building. The Çermeyan Mansion repeated the three wide arches on the street façade and vaulted interior bays, but it fused Renaissance and *Mardinli* carved decoration with zig-zag friezes on pointed arches, calligraphic Arabic medallions in tear-drop motifs, decorative corbels and balustrades.

145. B. Açıkyıldız-Şengül, 2017, p.31. Açıkyıldız-Şengül states, for instance: "Since the Neolithic Period houses with courtyards have continuously been used in Mesopotamia and their development is also documented by archaeological findings". Citing: Alev Erarslan, "Mezopotamya Konut Mimarisinde Merkezî Avlu Plan Tipinde Mekân Kullanımı (MÖ3000-562)", *Türk Arkeoloji ve Etnografya Dergisi*, vol. 10, 2010, pp. 1-15.
146. D. Watkin, 1986, p. 199.
147. D. Friedman, 1989, p. 189.
148. M. Trachtenberg, 1997, pp. 106-107.

Mansions in Mardin were, like *palazzo* in Renaissance Florence, not only residences but shows of social status and places of official business. Traditionally, the chief room (*baş oda*) would be decorated to display wealth through architectural and decorative features (elaborate vaulting, carved motifs), while also containing hospitality-facilitating elements (alcoves for coffee cups, for example).¹⁴⁹ The Çermeyan Mansion, through its external *loggia*, transplants this function of a space for hospitality to a public show of business activity. The mansion was opposite the bazaar and, like several mansions along the main road, was situated on a platform above shops at street level. Clients could be invited inside for refreshment and further bargaining (without advancing too far into the home). The open nature of the mansion reflected the status of the family, not only as business leaders but also as participants in local councils, communal spokespeople, intermediaries and defenders.

How Renaissance designs migrated to Mardin remains a mystery. Armenians had long been educated in Venice and Catholics of Mardin had strong connections with Italy,¹⁵⁰ as evidenced by Sourp Hovsep's paintings. Networks of *Mardinli* Armenians were far-reaching, extending to Lebanon and Egypt (Gertrude Bell in 1911 noted the recent return of Archbishop Maloyan from the latter).¹⁵¹ Çerme suggests Armenian

architects went to Venice's San Lazzaro Monastery for their education but admits there is no evidence of Lole attending.¹⁵²

Renaissance references punctuate Lole's other works. The dramatic staircase leading to the Syriac Catholic Patriarchate (1895) (**fig. 14**) mimics Michelangelo's Campdoglio, Rome (1537), and the Laurentian Library in Florence (1524). The Kasparyan Mansion (1890) also included a monumental staircase. Lole's high school (1898) showcased a similarly theatrical ascent, topped by a ceremonial gateway, with a façade that quotes the mid-sixteenth-century Florentine Loggia del Mercato Nuovo. Cornices and corbels on Lole's mansion (**fig. 15**) are reminiscent of Alberti's Palazzo Rucellai, Florence (1446-1451).

A related fad for the Renaissance was noticed in not-so-distant Aleppo by British Foreign Office functionary Mark Sykes (circa 1906):

149. B. Açıkyıldız-Şengül, 2017, p. 35.

150. T. Çerme, 2008; Y. Ter-non, 2013.

151. Newcastle University, Gerty Archive, Diaries, 18 April 1911.

152. T. Çerme, 2008, p. 19.

The Renaissance designs of the modern Latin architect have been appropriated and iron girders have been made use of; but the artistic spirit of Syria – flamboyant, nay, perhaps a little vulgar if you will – remains. The dividers, T-square, and drawing board of the French engineer have been unable to crush out the originality of the illiterate Syria Arab. The native mason grasped the fact that classic forms and Saracenic intricacy might be made to blend, and he seized the new basis of design and moulded from it the creatures of his imagination.¹⁵³

Lole did work in Aleppo and Sykes could have been describing his buildings. Like the “native mason” Sykes talks rather patronisingly of, Lole was indeed not likely to have been formally trained but rather, as oral traditions tell, served an apprenticeship under his father. Lole did not use elevations but drew plans in the sand.¹⁵⁴ However, his fusion of the Renaissance with the *Mardinli* (and for this, read: Artukid, Late Antique/Early Christian, and Ottoman) was sophisticated, and this account indicates that it could have been translated slightly differently in Aleppo and other locations in which he worked. Sykes’ account shows that Renaissance revival was palpable, but also perhaps that it was regional – potentially a style that connected these Armenian networks.

153. M. Sykes, 1915, p. 299.

154. Correspondence of this author with Liliane Ibrahim of Sydney, Australia.



Architecture was a strategy used by Bitlis and Mardin’s new Armenian bourgeoisie to show wealth and status at the times of their strength. Luxurious mansions constructed by these merchants showed that they were “open for business” in the wake of the Russo-Turkish War and the (averted) massacres, respectively. Stylistic features of these mansions showed this confidence through uniquely public-facing aspects: exterior Armenian inscriptions in Bitlis and *loggias* as façades in Mardin. These stylistic choices were unprecedented in their localities and yet showed connections to Armenian medieval tradition, to usages in Russian-held territories, as well as to Italian Renaissance fashions that may have become popular with these (Catholic) Armenians through their trade and religious and educational networks.

At the same time, the symbolic vocabulary displayed by the mansions reaffirmed their patrons' commitment to their localities. In Deebek Botch, mansions incorporated *muqarnas*, *tufa* stone and projecting eaves that had become associated with Bitlis through the architectural inheritance of Kurdish *Beys*, Turkmens, Armenians and other local powers. At the Çermeyan Mansion, stone-carved zigzags and teardrops – motifs of Islamic ancestry – were central aspects of the façade. These visual symbols echoed the roles that these wealthy Armenians were playing in new local institutions of governance, as well as in informal spheres of social protection.

Muslim mansions in Mardin and Bitlis did not have public-facing elements – their inscriptions were, as per tradition, positioned above entrances, and façades were never as exposed as the Çermeyan Mansion. They, did, however, include lavish decoration on interiors – such as at Bitlis's İsa Kalkan Evi. Armenian Churches in Ottoman domains had reflected a related merging of stylistic features, especially in places like Antep, where the Sourp Asdvadzadzin Cathedral had incorporated a rounded Ottoman-style dome on pendentives, alongside a local vocabulary of *ablaq* and red *çarpın taşı* stone, as well as neo-Renaissance and neo-Gothic elements from current Constantinopolitan architecture.¹⁵⁵ Institutional buildings, such as Hamidian-period schools, employed the local decorative vocabulary with display of Ottoman imperial symbols.¹⁵⁶ Indigeneity of style united all these buildings. What was unique to the mansions in Mardin and Bitlis was the merging of the local decorative language of tradition with a new desire for public display, which linked to the social status of the patrons, as well as their networks.

Urban dynamics in Bitlis and Mardin determined when mansions were built. In Bitlis, (Apostolic) Armenians held a strong position in the 1880s as a foil to missionaries and Russian-founded political parties – and they were hopeful about the future of their new provincial capital. In the

1890s, Mardin's Catholics oversaw mass conversions and achieved Hamidian favour, but also developed strong relations with local Arab notables. In both locations, elites became affluent through trade in

155. A. Wharton, 2014.

156. B. Fortna, 2000.

luxury materials, exotic commodities and grain, and they constructed flamboyant homes in the vicinity of the market. Mansions corresponded to the prosperity of the city, but also communicated enthusiasm for the

new *Tanzimat* and post-war institutions, and the roles of Armenians as civic, as well as communal, representatives and negotiators.

Images

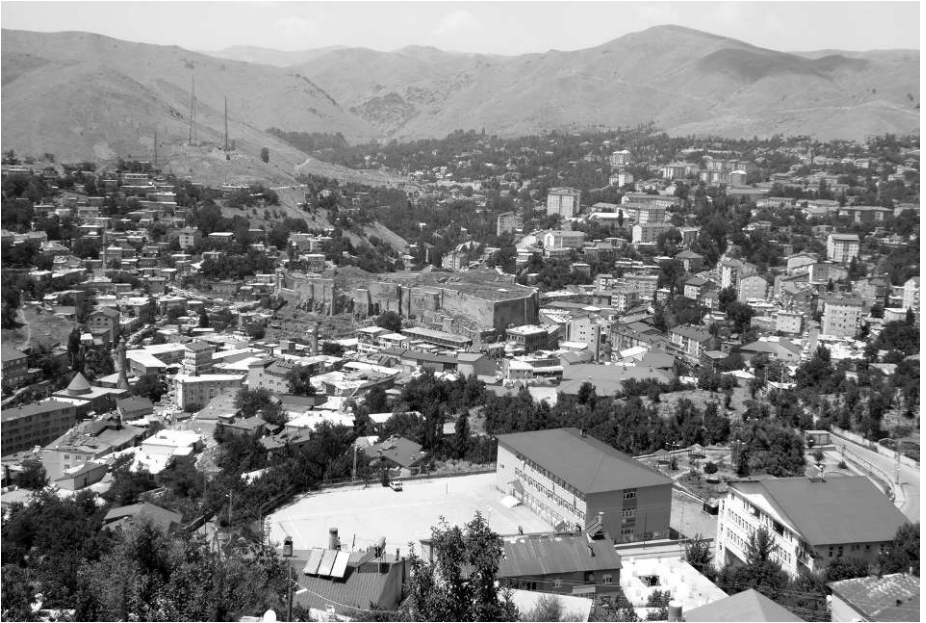


Figure 1 View of Bitlis
Photograph by Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan



Figures 2-3 Bitlis Mansion, Deebek Botch, 1889
Photographs by Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan



Figure 4 View of Mardin
Photograph by Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan



Figure 5 Çermeyan Mansion (now Şahkulu Bey Mansion), Mardin, 1906-07
Photograph by Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan



Figure 6 Küfrevi Mausoleum, Bitlis, 1889
Photograph by Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan



Figure 7 Building with Armenian inscription, Kars
Photograph by Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan



Figure 8 Building with Armenian inscription, Gyumri
Photograph by Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan



Figure 9 Bitlis mansion, detail of inscription and *muqarnas* frieze
Photograph by Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan



Figure 10 Karmirak Church, Bitlis, 1884-85
Image courtesy of Nazlı Evrim Şerifoğlu



Figure 11 Sourp Hovsep Church, Portal, Mardin, 1884-94
Photograph by Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan



Figure 12 Sourp Hovsep Church, Interior, Mardin, 1884-94
Photograph by Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan



Figure 13 Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence, 1376-1382
Photograph by WKnight94, GNU Free Documentation License



Figure 14 Syriac Patriarchate, now Mardin Museum, Mardin, 1895
Photograph by Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan



Figure 15 Serkis Lole Mansion (now privately owned), Mardin, late 19th c.
Photograph by Alyson Wharton-Durgaryan

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