

A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE ARMENIAN PEOPLE

(From Ancient Times to the Present)

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Fifth Edition, Completely Revised

Mazda Publishers, Inc. Costa Mesa California 2006

Online:

<http://ac.aua.am/Library/Books/A%20History%20of%20the%20%20Armenian%20People%20Ancient%20times%20to%20AD%201500.pdf>

Pages: 93-105

CHAPTER 10

East Meets West

The Cilician Kingdom of Armenia

(ca. 1075-1375)

THE CILICIAN period, culminating in the establishment of a new Armenian kingdom in 1199, represents a unique chapter in the history of the Armenian people. For the first time Armenians created an independent state in lands outside their historic homeland. It is also the first time that Armenians were in a region with direct access to the sea and came into close contact with the emerging nations in Western Europe and the Roman Catholic Church.

Cilicia is a wide plain on the Mediterranean coast of Asia Minor. Surrounded by three mountain chains (the Taurus to the northwest, the Anti-Taurus to the northeast and the Amanus to the east), Cilicia offered a secure enclave, for the narrow mountain passes, most famous of which are the Cilician Gates, were easily defended against invaders. The coastline and the navigable rivers, as well as a number of trade centers made the region ideal for those Armenians who were forced to leave Armenia in the eleventh century

Armenians in Cilicia

Cilicia had been under Byzantine control since the mid-tenth century. After re-conquering it from the Arabs, the Byzantines had expelled the Muslims and had brought in Christians, especially Armenians from Lesser Armenia, to repopulate the land. Following the Byzantine and Turkish invasions of Armenia, more Armenians arrived in Cilicia, bringing their families and retinues. After the fall of the Bagratid kingdom, the Byzantine Empire assigned a number of Armenian military commanders to Cilicia. The Byzantines gave them the duty of protecting this corridor to the heartland of Byzantium from Turkish and Arab attacks. Having lost their own fiefs, being somewhat distant from the center of Byzantium, and protected by mountains, a number of Armenian lords were able to achieve some level of autonomy.

Among these chieftains, two houses, the Rubenids and Hetumids, emerged as dominant forces and, by the end of the eleventh century, rivaled each other for the control of the plain. The Rubenids, who later claimed

to be related to the Bagratunis, challenged Byzantine authority early on and controlled the mountainous region east of the Cilician Gates, with the fortress of Vahka as their headquarters. The Hetumids remained loyal vassals of Byzantium and maintained the fortresses of Lambron and Baberon as their power base. The Rubenids soon sought to extend their control southward to the lower plain with its trade routes and ports. This aggressive policy brought them into conflict with the Hetumids. It is at this time that an event occurred that helped Rubenid ambitions, the arrival of the West European forces of the First Crusade (1096-1099).

The Crusades and the Armenians

The Crusades were an outlet for the political, religious and economic ambitions of the West. In 1010, the Fatimid ruler of Egypt, al-Hakim, abrogated the spirit of an agreement reached in 807 by Harun al-Rashid and Charlemagne, which permitted pilgrimages to Christian sites in Jerusalem. Al-Hakim's persecution of Christians and the destruction of many churches, combined with armed conflicts among Muslim adventurers for the control of Syria and Jerusalem, made pilgrimages extremely difficult. The Seljuk conquest of Jerusalem in the late eleventh century actually brought some order, but the years of suffering had left a negative impression in Europe.

In 1095, the Byzantines, who were under attack by the Seljuks, asked Europe for military aid. One of their goals was the restoration of Jerusalem to Christian control. Since the Greek and Roman churches had split in 1054, a crusade into former Byzantine lands would give Rome leverage in any future discussions of terms for a reunion. Byzantium's call, therefore, was too tempting for Pope Urban II to resist. Moreover, the Papacy had been involved in a bitter struggle with the German emperors over the leadership of Christian Europe. If the pope could convince other European principalities to send armies under the Church's banner his position would become paramount.

In 1095 in Clarendon, France, the pope called for a holy war. The result was the creation of a large army of lords and knights, clerics, and adventurers. Kings trying to establish order found the crusade an outlet to rid themselves of troublesome groups. Younger and landless members of noble families who hoped to gain fiefs in the Middle East embraced the cause, while others sought financial rewards from supplies and commerce. For the pious, the assurance of a plenary papal indulgence was the primary motivation.

Neither the Muslims nor the Byzantines were prepared for such a group of devout Christians, able warriors, and plunderers. The Byzantine emperor immediately punished any looting and reminded the knights that any territory recovered was to revert to his control. The Muslims were distracted by a Shi'i-Sunni struggle between the Fatimids of Egypt and the forces of the Caliph in Baghdad, and by the divisive ambitions of local emirs, who aspired to independent rule. Upon arrival in Cilicia, the corridor to Syria and Jerusalem, the Crusaders sought out Armenians as guides, purveyors of supplies or soldiers.

By 1099 Jerusalem had fallen to the Christians, who massacred the Muslim and Jewish inhabitants. The death of the papal legate left the region in the hands of the feudal barons, who soon carved out the Crusader or Latin states of Tripoli, Edessa, Antioch, and Jerusalem. Neither the Byzantines nor the Arabs were strong enough to resist the newcomers. The Rubenids befriended the Crusaders or "Franks" as they were called by the natives, and soon became the dominant power in Cilicia.

From the very beginning, the Armenian and Crusader leaders had to deal with their own territorial ambitions. Edessa, which was controlled by an Armenian, for example, was taken over by Baldwin of Boulogne, who assumed the title of Count of Edessa. Other minor Armenian, Byzantine and Arab chiefs soon lost their lands to the ambitious crusading lords of Antioch and Tripoli. The Rubenids and the Hetumids

remained the only Armenian lords to control their own territories. Taking advantage of the situation, the Rubenids expanded at the expense of the Byzantines. Toros (1102-1129) captured the fortresses of Bardzberd and Anazarba from the Greeks and made it the center of Rubenid rule. His brother, Levon or Leo (1129-1137) expanded the Rubenid domains to the sea. A number of alliances with the Latin rulers, especially with Count Raymond of Antioch, kept the Rubenid position secure. In 1137, the Byzantine emperor, John Comnenus, after restoring Byzantine power in Serbia and Hungary, invaded Cilician Armenia on the way to Antioch, which was to have been turned over to Byzantium by the Crusaders. The Hetumids cooperated with the emperor in capturing Rubenid fortresses and Antioch.

Levon, his wife and two sons, Ruben and Toros, were taken captive to Constantinople, while Count Raymond was left in Antioch as a vassal of Byzantium. Levon, his wife and Ruben all died in captivity; but Toros (subsequently Toros II) managed to escape. He returned to Cilicia where a few years later he succeeded in restoring Rubenid power. His task was facilitated by the death of John Comnenus in 1143 and by the fall of Edessa to the Zangids, which prompted the unsuccessful Second Crusade in 1147-1149. The Armenians of Edessa escaped to Cilicia and Antioch, and the County of Edessa was divided among the Byzantines and the Muslims. Around this time the fortress of Hromkla (Rum Qalat) located on the Euphrates River, was granted to the Armenian catholicos by a noblewoman. Despite the fact that for most of that time it was deep in Muslim-held territory, it became the Holy See of the Armenians for the next one hundred years.

Toros II (1144-1169) reclaimed his father's domain and, when the Byzantine-Antioch rapprochement suffered a setback, made an alliance with Count Reginald of Antioch. Emperor Manuel Comnenus, however, demanded the submission of Cilicia as a vassal state and invaded the region. Baldwin, now king of Jerusalem and related by marriage to the Byzantine Emperor, mediated and Toros kept his land as a nominal vassal.

The rise of the Zangid State and its capture of Damascus under Nur al-Din forced the Christians to abandon their differences and to seek common alliances. Toros managed to keep peace by remaining on good terms with both the Byzantines and the Muslims. He even tried an unsuccessful marriage alliance between the Rubenid and Hetumid houses. His diplomacy and alliances created a strong Rubenid state recognized by the Byzantines and the Latin principalities.

Toros died in 1169 and his brother Mleh, who may have converted to Islam, killed Toros' son, allied himself with Nur al-Din and ruled Rubenid Cilicia. The death of the Zangid chief left Mleh powerless, and he was ousted in favor of Toros' nephew Ruben II (1175-1187). Ruben struggled with the Hetumids and the new Count of Antioch, Bohemond. He was not an able ruler and abdicated in favor of his brother, Levon, who took over the family fortunes in 1187. Once again external events catapulted the Rubenids into a favorable position.

Saladin, a Kurd who had risen in the service of the Zangids, captured Cairo from the Fatimids in 1171, united it with Syria and established the Ayyubid dynasty. In 1187 he captured Jerusalem and although he spared Christian lives, his action launched the Third Crusade (1189-1192). This crusade, despite efforts of the pope, was primarily a lay and royal affair. The German ruler, Frederick Barbarossa, Richard I (the Lion-Hearted) of England, and Philip II Augustus of France led a great host of knights who managed to capture Acre but failed to retake Jerusalem. Frederick's formidable force disintegrated after he drowned in Cilicia. Saladin's favorable position and the rivalry between Richard and Philip, as well as the eventual departure of the European monarchs, left only the narrow strip of coastal states of Antioch, Tripoli and Tyre in Christian hands. Although the Third Crusade was a failure, one result of this episode was the capture of Cyprus by Richard and its sale to Guy de Lusignan, whose family would later become rulers of Cilician Armenia.

The Emergence of a New Armenian Kingdom

With the Latin states left vulnerable, Cilicia now assumed a new strategic importance, and European secular leaders requested its military and financial assistance to the crusading forces. Levon sought to use the situation to his advantage by seeking a royal crown. There is some evidence to indicate that Frederick Barbarossa had promised a crown to Levon in exchange for his assistance during the Third Crusade. After some correspondence, Levon finally received a crown from Frederick's successor, the German Emperor Henry VI. He was crowned as King Levon I (Leo I) on 6 January 1199 in the Cathedral of Tarsus before the Rubenid, Hetumid, and Crusader nobility. He was anointed by the catholicos and received the royal insignia from the papal and imperial legate, Conrad, Archbishop of Mainz. A second crown arrived from the Byzantine Emperor as a reminder that Byzantium still viewed Cilicia and its ruler as her vassals.

Levon's coronation began a crisis, which continued throughout the life of the kingdom: the question of religious unity with the Roman Catholic Church. Levon's crown came from the Holy Roman Emperor and was blessed by the pope, whom Western Europe viewed as the head of Christendom. There is no evidence of Levon agreeing to the supremacy of the Roman Church prior to his coronation. After the event, however, he asked the Armenian clergy to make a minor change in the Armenian liturgy and to concede a "special respect" to the pope as the successor of St. Peter. A move towards closer ties with Rome received the support of some of the clergy, such as Bishop Nerses of Lambron, but after the latter's death in 1199, the Armenian clergy rejected any compromise. The rift was to weaken the dynasty and was exploited by both the papacy and the Crusaders.

Levon's elevation to the rank of king and his recognition by Europe put Cilicia on European maps, where it was referred to as "Petit Armenia." It also enabled Levon to gain the control of the Cilician plain and its ports. He broke the power of the Hetumids, established a new capital at Sis (see map 16), and managed to create a number of important marriage alliances with Cyprus, Antioch and Byzantium. One such alliance, with Antioch, proved problematic. Levon's niece, Alice, had married the son of Bohemond of Antioch, but was soon widowed and left with a son, Raymond-Ruben. After Bohemond's death, Levon wanted for an Armenian regent to take over Antioch and unite it with Cilicia, which would result in an even stronger and more important Armenian state. The pope and the emperor initially supported Levon's plan, but the Italian merchants of Antioch and Bohemond's younger son, who ruled Tripoli, objected, and, after a three-year war, ousted the young heir, Raymond-Ruben.

Such problems notwithstanding, Levon's rule created a kingdom that was to last for almost two centuries. His relationship with the nobility was not based on the Armenian nakharar system, but on the Western feudal one of sovereign to vassal. Western feudal law was used to judge cases involving the court and nobility. In fact, the Assizes of Antioch, the main code of law used in the Crusader states, has survived only in its Armenian translation. Nobles were knighted in the European tradition, and jousts and tournaments became popular. Latin and French terms of nobility and official titles soon replaced their Armenian equivalents; for example, paron (baron) instead of nakharar, and gonstapl (constable) rather than sparapet. French and Latin became accepted languages at court. Even the Armenian alphabet was extended to accommodate the new sounds of "o" and "f," introduced by European languages. Western feudal dress became the norm, and French names became common among the courtiers and their wives. Finally, following the European custom of alliances, Armenian noblewomen married into European and Byzantine noble houses. Conversions to Catholicism or the Greek Orthodox faith became common among the nobles. The rest of Armenian society did not imitate these pro-Western tendencies, however. Armenian merchants intermarried far less frequently, and the population at large, led by the Armenian Apostolic Church, was

decidedly anti-Western. The catholicos, with the aid of at least fourteen bishops, supervised the religious affairs of Cilicia from Hromkla. A number of Armenian monasteries were founded as well.

The most notable result of Levon's successful rule was the growth of commerce. Cilicia was a link for several trade routes from Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. Armenian merchants made contact with other traders and opened trading houses in China and Europe. European missionaries recorded that at this time Armenian churches were being built as far away as China. The port of Ayas, on the Gulf of Alexandretta, later became a main center of East-West commerce and is mentioned by Marco Polo as the starting point of his trip to China. Its bazaars sold dyes, silk, spices, cotton, wine, raisins, carpets and pearls. Cilician goat-hair cloth, salt, iron, and timber were exported. Levon signed agreements with the Italian city states of Genoa, Venice and Pisa, granting them tax exemptions in exchange for trade. The ports of Tarsus, Adana and Mamistra were soon large cities full of foreign merchants, dominated by the Italians, who according to agreements had their own trading establishments, churches and courts. Italian soon became the secondary language of Cilician commerce.

Levon died in 1219, leaving one of his daughters, named Isabelle or Zabel, as his heir. At Levon's death, the situation in the Middle East was very different from the previous century. The Fourth Crusade (1202-1204), led by the Venetians, had not attacked the Muslims, but had captured and looted Constantinople, considerably weakening the Byzantine Empire. Saladin's dynasty, the Ayyubid, was now a major force in Egypt, prompting the unsuccessful Fifth Crusade (1218-1221). The half-Armenian prince Raymond-Ruben, who had been driven out of Antioch, assumed the throne of Levon with the support of the pope, but was immediately ousted by the Armenian nobles, led by the Hetumids, who saw their chance of assuming control. Zabel was then married to Philip of Antioch with the understanding that he would adopt Armenian customs and become a member of the Armenian Church. Philip, however, disdained Armenian customs and spent most of his time in Antioch. The Armenian nobility decided to end the marriage; Philip was arrested and eventually poisoned. The Hetumid regent, Constantine now arranged the marriage of Zabel to his own son, Hetum. Zabel, who seems to have been fond of Philip, fled the kingdom and even after her marriage to Hetum refused to live with her husband for some time. By 1226, however, the two were crowned at Sis and the Rubenid-Hetumid line was born.

Zabel and Hetum reigned from 1226 to 1252. Their joint reign was commemorated in coins bearing both their images; only the second time the image of a woman had appeared on Armenian coinage. After Zabel's death, Hetum continued to rule until 1270, the longest rule of any Cilician king. Hetum's brother, Smbat, served as constable and was an intimate and wise counselor to the king. Although the Ayyubids, and later the Mamluks, as well as the Seljuks, made periodic sorties against Cilicia, the era is known for its flowering of the arts. The most important political event of this period, however, was the arrival of the Mongols in the Middle East.

The Mongols and Cilician Armenia

Genghis Khan, who managed in a short time to conquer a large part of Asia, united the Mongols in 1206. Following his death in 1227, his son and grandson completed the conquest of China and Russia, and entered Eastern Europe, where they defeated Western armies in Poland, Hungary and Germany, and reached the Adriatic Sea. Such an empire was obviously too large and diverse for one ruler, and the Mongols eventually divided their empire into four units. The first group ruled Mongolia, western Siberia, and Central Asia. The second, known as the Ilkhanids, controlled Persia, Armenia, Georgia, and the Middle East. The third, called the Golden Horde, occupied Russia, Ukraine, and parts of Poland, while the fourth moved to China and

formed the Yuan dynasty under Kublai Khan, who acted as the leader of the Mongols and did much to promote international trade (see map 17). The Ilkhanids, who were mostly shamanists, fought the Muslim Seljuks and Mamluks in the Middle East. The Papacy, the Crusaders, and the Armenians, therefore, made every effort to gain an alliance with the Ilkhanids and at the same time convert them to Christianity.

Hetum was the first ruler who realized the importance of this new force in the area and sent his brother Smbat to the Mongol center at Karakorum. Smbat met Kublai's brother, Mongke Khan and, in 1247, made an alliance against the Muslims. On his return, Smbat passed through historic Armenia, the first time that any Cilician leader had seen his ancestral homeland. In 1254, Hetum visited Karakorum himself and renewed the alliance. The alliance helped Cilicia initially but, in 1260, the Ilkhanids were defeated by the Mamluks and retreated to Persia. The Mamluks then attacked and devastated Cilicia. In 1269 Hetum abdicated in favor of his son Levon II (1269-1289), who was forced to pay a large annual tribute to the Mamluks. The Mamluks continued their attacks during the reign of his son, Hetum II, and sacked Hromkla in 1292, prompting the Holy See to move to Sis. Hetum's sister married into the Lusignan family of Cyprus, and her children later inherited the Cilician throne. Hetum II, a devout Catholic, sought a closer union with Rome. His efforts did not materialize, and he abdicated first in favor of his brother and later of his nephew, Levon III. Although Cilicia enjoyed a measure of economic prosperity under the Hetumids, the troubled reign of Hetum II caused a sense of political instability in the kingdom at a time when a strong effective leadership was badly needed to deal with the Muslim threat. For it was at this time that the Ilkhanid Mongols adopted Islam, the religion of the majority of their subject people. Hetum, now a Franciscan monk, together with Levon and forty Cilician nobles, made one more attempt at a Mongol alliance against the Mamluks. Upon their arrival at the Ilkhanid headquarters in northern Syria, all forty-two were put to death.

The Collapse of Cilician Armenia

Yet another brother of Hetum, Oshin, assumed the throne and convened the Church councils at Sis in 1307 and Adana in 1316 where a number of Armenian clergy and nobles, hoping to receive military aid from Europe, agreed to conform to Roman liturgical practices and recognize the pope. The Armenian population, however, rose against this decision. Oshin died in 1320. His son Levon IV, who was even more strongly pro-West followed. When he died in 1341 there were no direct descendants of the Rubenid-Hetumid line left, and the throne changed hands between the Lusignans of Cyprus and the Hetumid nobles.

Guy de Lusignan and the Hetumid Constantine III and IV ruled for a relatively short time and made concessions to the Mamluks in exchange for periods of peace. They were removed by rivals or by Armenian leaders suspicious of their pro-Western sentiments. The last Cilician king, Levon V of the Lusignan line, was crowned at Sis in 1374. He was captured a year later by the Mamluks, who took him to Cairo from where he was ransomed by his European relatives. Levon attempted to revive the Crusader spirit in Europe, but died in France in 1393 and was originally interred in the Celestins Convent. The tomb was ransacked with the rest of the monastery during the French Revolution. Levon's empty tomb was recovered and is at present in the Church of St. Denis, the resting place of French monarchs. Ironically Levon's title of King of Armenia passed to John I of Cyprus, whose descendants then passed it on to the House of Savoy; they used the title as late as the nineteenth century. The Cilician Armenian nobility eventually left for Byzantium, Armenia and Georgia, while Armenian merchants immigrated to France, Holland, Italy and Poland. A century later Cilicia became part of the Ottoman Empire and its Armenian towns and villages came under Turkish rule.

Arts and Culture

Despite its Armenian majority, Cilicia was home to a variety of peoples, all of who contributed to the richness of Cilician culture. Greeks, Syrian Jacobites, Arabs and Jews lived in the region, each supporting their own religious institutions. Italian merchants and European knights made their home in or frequented the ports of Cilicia. The French language and customs had spread among the Armenian nobility and most of the merchants spoke Italian.

European works, including histories, written originally in Latin, found their way into Armenian translations. As noted, the Assizes of Antioch, the code of law used in the Crusader states, has survived only in its Armenian translation. A number of original works of this period are significant as well. The earlier history of Cilicia is recorded in the Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa. The Chronicle of Constable Smbat, the brother of Hetum I, is the most valuable account of the Cilician Kingdom. His revision of the medieval Armenian law code of Mkhitar Gosh and the account of his trip to the court of the Mongols, are important as well. Hetum, Prince of Cyprus, a nephew of Hetum I, offered another valuable account.

Known as the Little Chronicle and written in 1307, it contains a historical and geographical survey of Asia, followed by a history of the Mongols, focusing in particular on the conflicts between the Ilkhanids and the Mamluks, and concluding with a plan for a new crusade. Catholicos Nerses, known as Shnorhali (the Gracious), left his Lamentations on the Fall of Edessa, as well as many sharakans or hymns used in the Armenian mass.

Poetry, including poems on love and other secular themes, appeared in the last two centuries of Cilician Armenia. Those of John of Erzinga (Hovhannes Erzingatsi) were written in the early Armenian vernacular, sometimes referred to as Middle Armenian.

In the realm of science is Mkhitar of Her (Khoi), the founder of classical Armenian medicine; whose knowledge of Arabic, Greek, and Persian enabled him to write specific works on several branches of medicine. Other major literary figures are Nerses of Lambron and Vardan the Great (Vardan Areveltsi). The former was a versatile philosopher, translator, orator, and musician; while the latter visited the Mongol court in Central Asia and befriended Hulagu in Persia. His Historical Compilation is a rich historical source, especially on the Mongol rule in Armenia and Persia.

What has survived of Cilician architecture resembles Crusader castles and fortresses and copies Byzantine and Western edifices of the period. Although no significant sculpture has survived from Cilicia, reliquary and silver bible bindings from the thirteenth century display the craftsmanship of Cilicia's silversmiths. The glory of the period, however, is undoubtedly its illuminated manuscripts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Humans, animals, flowers and geometric designs are depicted in rich colors and glittering gold. The most renowned are those of Toros Roslin, who used contemporary costumes and naturalism in biblical themes and combined both Asian and European motifs.

There are a number of reasons for the rise and fall of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. The geographical position of Cilicia, the arrival of Armenian feudal families and the temporary weakness of Byzantium permitted the rise of the Rubenids and Hetumids. The coming of the crusades gave the Armenians sufficient political, economic and strategic importance to form first, a principality and later, a kingdom. However, the failure of successive crusades; division among the Christian forces; the refusal of the Armenian Church to accept Roman suzerainty; the rise of the Ayyubid and Mamluk states; the fall of the last Crusader bastion in 1291; and the conversion of the Ilkhanid Mongols to Islam, all contributed to the fall of the Armenian Kingdom. By the fourteenth century, Europe had become involved in its own state-building. The expulsion of the Muslims out of much of Spain spelled the end of the crusading spirit, and Europe largely abandoned its interests in the Christians living in Asia. This was to have major repercussions for the West, for the

Ottoman Turks would soon destroy Byzantium and enter Eastern Europe, where they would remain for some four centuries.

The Armenian Community of Jerusalem

One of the consequences of the rise of the Cilician Kingdom was a new prominence for the Armenian secular and religious community of Jerusalem. An Armenian presence in that city can be traced back as far as the first centuries of the Christian era. By the seventh century numerous Armenian monasteries had been built there. After the break with the Greek Orthodox Church, Armenians were subject to discrimination by the city's Byzantine rulers.

Following the Arab conquest in 638, control over the Christian holy places of Jerusalem became the avenue to and symbol of power for the city's Armenian and Greek communities. Although the Armenians in Jerusalem numbered fewer than the Greeks, they enjoyed better relations with the Arabs, who saw the Byzantines as their common enemy. The Armenian Church was, therefore, initially granted custodianship of a number of important Christian shrines, although disagreements between the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Churches over their control continued through the years.

The arrival of the Crusaders improved the Armenian position considerably and enabled them to acquire a site from the Georgian Church over which they build the cathedral and monastery of St. James and founded the monastic order of the Brotherhood of St. James. St. James became the heart of Jerusalem's Armenian community, providing accommodations for pilgrims and visiting merchants. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the St. James Brotherhood refused to accept the Latinophile policies of the Catholicosate of Cilicia and proclaimed its leader and the guardian of the Armenian-controlled Holy Places to be the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem. After the Muslims retook Jerusalem under Saladin, the Armenians retained their favored status and were exempted from the jizya. During the Mamluk period the Armenians managed to forestall attempts by the Georgian Orthodox Church to retake the site of St. James, but were forced to share custodianship of parts of the Holy Sepulchre with the Georgian and Greek Churches.

