

The Ruins of Armenia: Cultural Documentation and Destruction in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Photography

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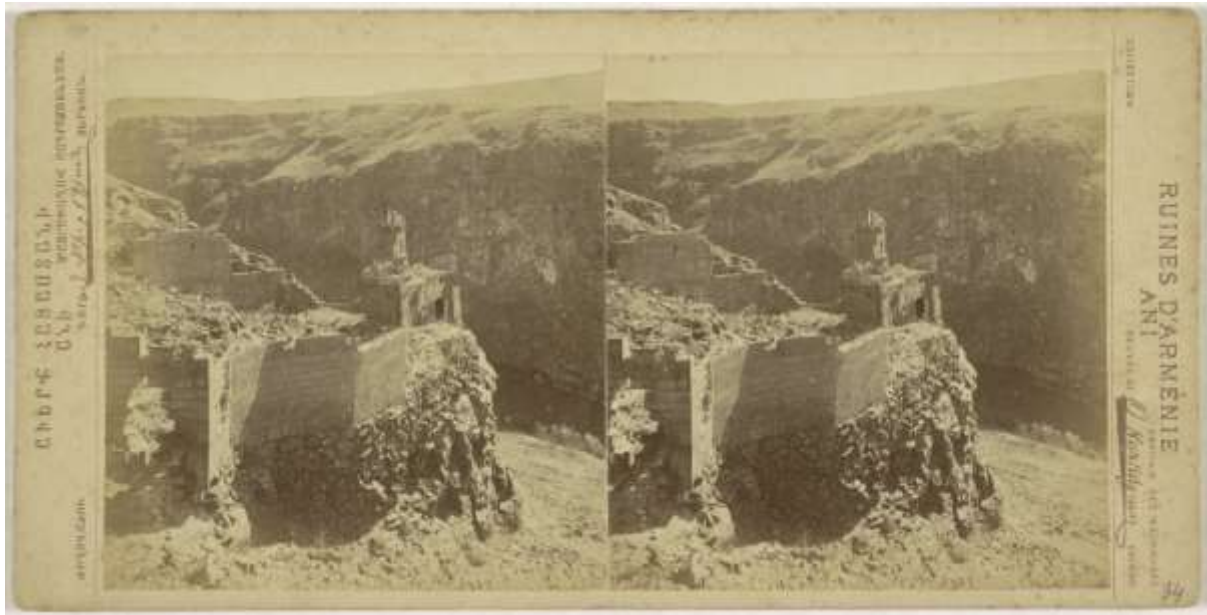


Fig.1, Ohannes Kurkdjian, *Ruines d'Arménie: Ani*, c.1880, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

I begin with a stereoscopic image as it provides, I believe, an apt symbol of the multiplicity of those things I will be speaking of this evening, photography and the ruins of the built environment.

Stereographs were composed of two near identical photographs made from very similar positions separated only by a space that was designed to mimic the space between the human eyes. The principle was that the separate images would merge into one and appear as three-dimensional when seen through a special viewer. But as we see them now, without the aid of the viewing apparatus, the images stand divided.

We might first speak of the multiplicity of place that the stereoscope and other forms of photography provided, allowing people in one corner of the world to imaginatively travel to and around other parts. The Boston physician and writer Oliver Wendell Holmes described how through

¹ With thanks to Krikor Moskofian and the Programme of Armenian Studies

a 'small library of glass and pasteboard ... I scale the huge mountain-crystal that calls itself the Pyramid of Cheops. I pace the length of the three Titanic stones of the wall of Baalbec ... I sit under Roman arches, I walk the streets of once hurried [sic] cities ... I pass, in a moment, from the banks of the Charles to the ford of the Jordan, and leave my outward frame in the arm-chair at my table, while in spirit I am looking down upon Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives.'² Photography participated in the shrinking of the world in the nineteenth century. It was particularly a means by which the west could look eastwards at parts of the world previously beyond its gaze. Through photographs, armchair voyagers such as Oliver Wendell Holmes could express and satisfy their yearning for far flung corners, and as his words suggest, great interest was exhibited in what were seen as the older spaces of the world and the vestiges they carried of previous societies, civilisations and empires.

Just as they provided a means of viewing other places, images of ruins also provoked contemplation of different times. Gazing upon ruins was not simply, however, an act of looking back through time, for the viewer seemed presented with an invitation to contemplate their own present and look towards the future. The mind is rarely still before such scenes, but is propelled off in numerous different directions, with ruins becoming the focus for meditations on the nature of time itself, ideas of transience and permanence, cycles of rise and fall; birth, death and, indeed, rebirth. As Diderot described his own feelings of Ruin Lust in the eighteenth century: 'Everything vanishes, everything perishes; the world alone remains, time alone continues ... I walk between two eternities'.

The dual images of the stereoscope also provide an apt symbol for different perspectives, the variety of ideas to be found in stone by those that gaze upon them. Shifts occur with changes in circumstances and contexts, and in accordance with the particular outlooks of those doing the looking. Meaning is not, as it were, set in stone, but is instead open to constant interpretation and reinterpretation. Ruin itself is not arrested but an ongoing, variable process. Interpretation and reinterpretation might be imaginative processes but they are not always confined to the imagination. They escape the mind and become physical acts. Sites are restored and rebuilt on the one hand, left to decay further on the other. At its extreme end deterioration can be active, brought about by human hands in destructive acts of iconoclasm. Only recently we have been seeing in the Middle East how in times of great violence, the built environment is targeted for destruction alongside people. ISIS attacks on the ancient sites of Nimrud and Hatra in Iraq and, in recent weeks, fears for the safety of Palmyra in Syria, show us that such destruction is not simply an unfortunate by

² Oliver Wendell Holmes, 'The Stereoscope and the Stereograph' [1859], <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>

product of fighting, but is calculated and deliberate. In the words of the architectural writer Robert Bevan, the destruction of buildings might be seen as ‘a crazed and dusty reflection of the fortunes of people at the hands of destroyers’.³ It is this and other ‘reflections’ - the projected correspondences between people and ruins – that I here consider.

Through these stereoscopic images we look upon a place long ruined, the city of Ani, under Ottoman rule for centuries until the lands upon which they stood were drawn into the Russian Empire in 1878, upon the conclusion of the Russian-Ottoman war. The three political treaties that were signed at this time - the Treaty of San Stefano, the Cyprus Convention, and the Treaty of Berlin - marked the shifting of political boundaries and influence, developments that brought the lands and people of the Near East into sharp focus, making them the subject of writers and image-makers alike.



Fig.2, John Thomson, *Ruins at Famagusta*, 1878, from *Through Cyprus with the Camera, in the Autumn of 1878* (1879)

³ Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (Reaktion, London, 2006), p.8

I jump for a moment, to the West and the island of Cyprus, toured by the peripatetic British photographer John Thomson mere months after it passed from Ottoman to British hands, a reward for the British throwing their weight behind the Ottoman cause at peace negotiations. However, such political support had little bearing upon a popular anti-Ottoman stance, one that can be read in photographs and texts that appeared in the two-volume work Thomson published upon his return, *Through Cyprus with the Camera* (1879), a book that presented an image of an island that had been 'woefully wrecked by Turkish maladministration'. Thomson's eye often lingered on the ruins of the island, such as at Famagosta. 'The city', he writes, 'was overthrown by the Turks in 1571, and was so left by the invaders that its siege appears to have been an event of yesterday. It is a place of ruins, a city of the dead, in which the traveller is surprised to encounter a living tenant.'⁴

Thomson read into the landscape the nature of Ottoman rule, a rule that was seen as having been for centuries the source of ruin. Yet the lands of Famagosta, he observed, 'may yet be used in the erection of a new city', and with this he looked to the future. Just as he saw his photographs as supplying 'incontestable evidence of the present condition of Cyprus', so too did he intend them to 'afford a source of comparison in after years, when, under the influence of British rule, the place has risen from its ruins.'⁵ Cyprus, having been removed from the Ottoman sphere and placed in the hands of the 'right' kind of imperialism, was seen as poised between a dark past and a bright future, with Thomson establishing a photographic baseline by which subsequent developments could be measured and judged.⁶ We can clearly see Thomson creates through his treatment of ruins a contrast between different forms of imperialism, what he saw as the destructive, malign Ottoman imperialism on the one hand and the helping constructive hand of the British on the other.⁷

We return now to the other side of the Ottoman Empire, and the ruins of Ani, the medieval Bagratuni kingdom's last capital and the fabled site of a thousand and one churches, and like Cyprus removed from Ottoman power in 1878. By the dawn of the twentieth century, it had become the focus of great activity. We see, for example, Aram Vruyr working in and around the site of Ani to uncover and document an Armenian past. Churches above all provided powerful symbols, seen as standing for the cultural distinctiveness of Armenians following their fourth century conversion to Christianity, and the survival of that identity through the ages. Looking upon these ruins was, above

⁴ John Thomson, *Through Cyprus with the Camera, in the Autumn of 1878* (Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1879), two volumes

⁵ John Thomson 1879 Vol.1, pp.v-vi

⁶ Joan M Schwartz, 'The Geography Lesson: Photographs and the Construction of Imaginative Geographies' *Journal of Historical Geography* Vol.22 No.1 January 1996, pp.16-45, at p.31

⁷ James R Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Reaktion Books, London, 1997), p.70

all, an act of tracing Armenian lineage, representing not simply Armenian identity and the historic Armenian presence on these lands, but a history of Armenian rule.

Working alongside Russian archaeologist Nikolai Marr as part of the first organised and detail excavation project based in and around Ani, Vruyr documented sites such as Horomos, a nearby monastery that was purportedly the final resting place of King Ashot III, also known as Ashot the Merciful, the medieval Armenian ruler who had turned Ani from a small fortress town to a majestic capital city when he transferred his court there from Kars to in 962. Vruyr thus might be placed amongst those Armenians who had become interested in the site as a particularly Armenian place, a national monument. Indeed, the idea of an Armenian nation was once again taking hold amongst some Armenians. Ani and its churches, as stated by Nikolai Marr, became the ‘focus for historical reveries’, imaginatively linking early twentieth century Armenians to medieval forebears.⁸

Activities at Ani sometimes seem all too concerned with gazing back through time, and to such ‘historical reveries’ there is some sadness. This is evident above all in the images of the Yerevan-based Armenian photographer Ohannes Kurkdjian. Working in the 1880s, he was amongst the very first to photograph Ani.



Fig.3, Ohannes Kurkdjian, *Ruines d'Arménie: Ani*, c.1880, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

⁸ N Marr, 'Ani, la ville arménienne en ruines, d'après les fouilles de 1892-1893 et de 1904-1917', *Revue des études arméniennes*, Vol.1 (1921), pp.395-410

Always foregrounded with stones, rubble, and the varied detritus of the years, his are melancholic national monuments. This notion of terrible cataclysm is further reinforced by the sight of others gazing upon these scenes, their presence in the landscape shaping our own emotional response to the scenes.

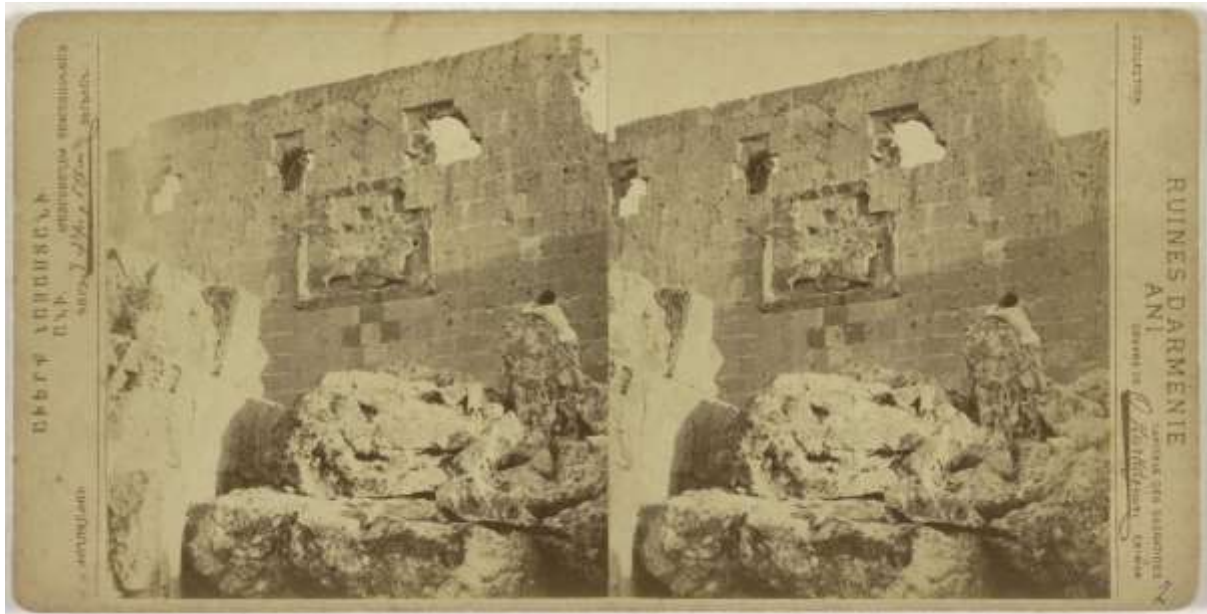


Fig.4, Ohannes Kurkdjian, *Ruines d'Arménie: Ani*, c.1880, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Many adopt recognisable poses associated with Western *Ruinenlust*, held mesmerised by the great scenes of decay with which they are presented. They contemplate the fleeting, impermanent nature of earthly splendour: *Sic transit Gloria mundi*. Yet, we might see how these figures also fix their eyes and minds upon a more specific decline, with the figure here gazing wistfully upon the city's Lion Gate, with the lion being the symbol of the Bagratuni Dynasty, and of a wider Armenia. It is the decline of Armenia that holds the thoughts of this man and provide the basis for his mournful repose. These are altogether more sorrowful scenes than those from Cyprus. In strong contrast to John Thomson photographing that island's ruins with a belief in better days to come, looking forward from a desolate present into a shining future, Ohannes Kurkdjian at Ani looks back, reading the vestiges of a glorious past that survived into a bleak modern era. Ani, in essence, provided ruins without the redemption.

The treaties of 1878 also made provision for the protection of Ottoman Armenian populations, to be supervised by the Great Powers. This era saw the start of an evolution of a public consciousness in the West concerning the Armenian Question, one that we can see develop in the British press, including this piece from the illustrated magazine *The Graphic* that utilised Kurkdjian's photographs.

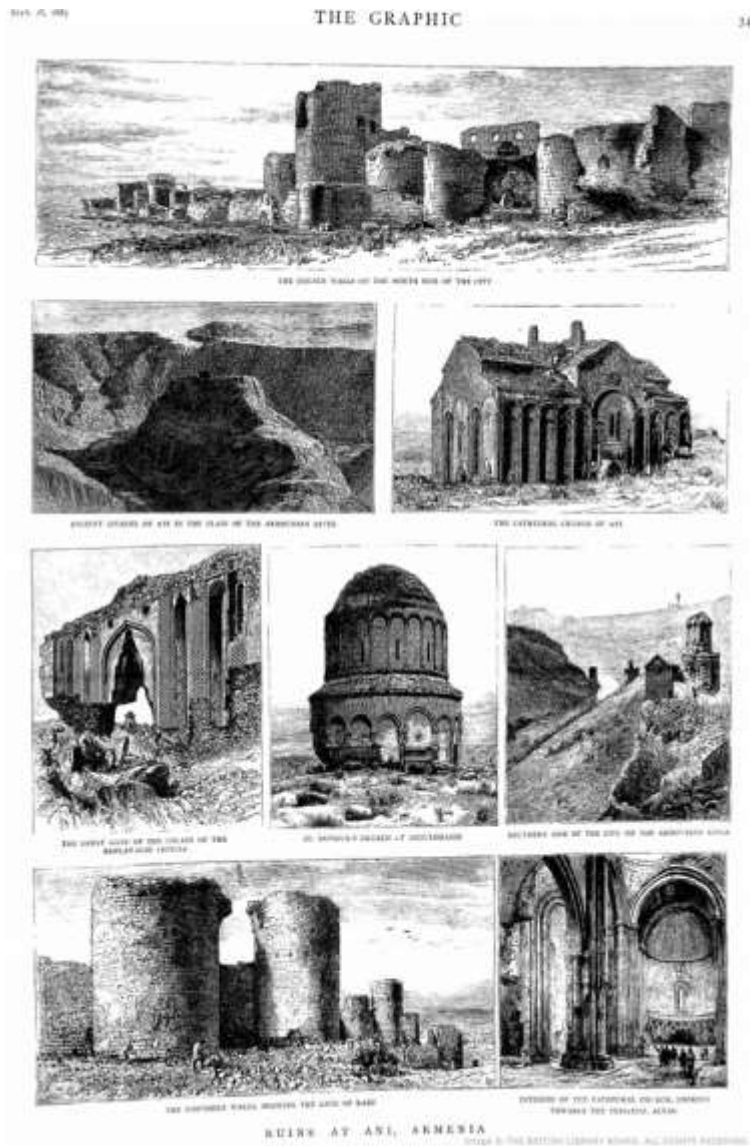


Fig.5, *The Graphic*, 26 September 1885, p.345

The Graphic was perhaps an appropriate place for such pictures to be published, for it was a periodical which had developed a reputation for taking an interest in social issues, particularly that of the plight of the Victorian underclass. Attention paid to the Armenian people within its pages helped to secure a similar position for them in the liberal imagination. Thus, viewers of these

photographs might have been automatically inclined to make the association between these scenes and the lived lives of people. Indeed, an accompanying text helps make the leap, with Ani described as ‘the capital of Greater Armenia, when that nationality attained its greatest extent and development’. The text continues by describing how ‘Armenia ... was successively occupied by Georgians, Tartars, and Ottoman Turks’, and the ‘inhabitants suffered such miseries that some of them at last resolved to seek safety in emigration’.⁹

The stones of Ani, thus, stand as the lonely remnants of a defeated and dispersed people, testaments to past glory offering little hope for the future. Demonstrated here is a belief that these ruins would not be revived and Armenia was not to return any time soon, with the final paragraph of the piece explaining that ‘[a]fter the conclusion of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, when Ani passed into the hands of Russia, the late Armenian Catholicos ... desired to restore the churches and other public buildings, and to repopulate the city with Armenians. The work was begun, but the Russian Government objected, and therefore the design had to be deferred to a more favourable opportunity.’

In the British mind set, the power shift in the eastern Ottoman Empire was a far more complex prospect than that in the western empire. Russian power did not offer the hope that had seemingly been provided by British power. And yet amidst the despair we can perhaps discern some hope. After all, images such as these were actively used by activists to drum up interest in the Armenian cause and look to the future. The photographs had been supplied to *The Graphic* by the London-based Armenian activist Garabed Hagopian. One can find records of him making speeches in Britain, telling his audiences about the ‘entombed treasures of the fallen cities of Armenia’ that demonstrated Armenians’ ‘mental calibre and martial valour’. It is as part of this campaign that Kurkdjian’s photographs were used.

In time, with interest in Armenia aroused by the likes of Hagopian, Westerners were not simply receiving images of the Armenian provinces, but taking to the road themselves. Of these, perhaps the most famous is HFB Lynch, who made two journeys to the region in the 1890s, exploring both Russian and Ottoman Armenia. It was the architectural heritage of these lands for which he had a particular eye. He wrote of his encounters and conversations with various people along his route, but seemed interested, above all, in the tales told by stones.¹⁰

⁹ *The Graphic*, 26 September 1885, pp.345-6

¹⁰ HFB Lynch, *Armenia: Travels and Studies* (Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1901), two volumes

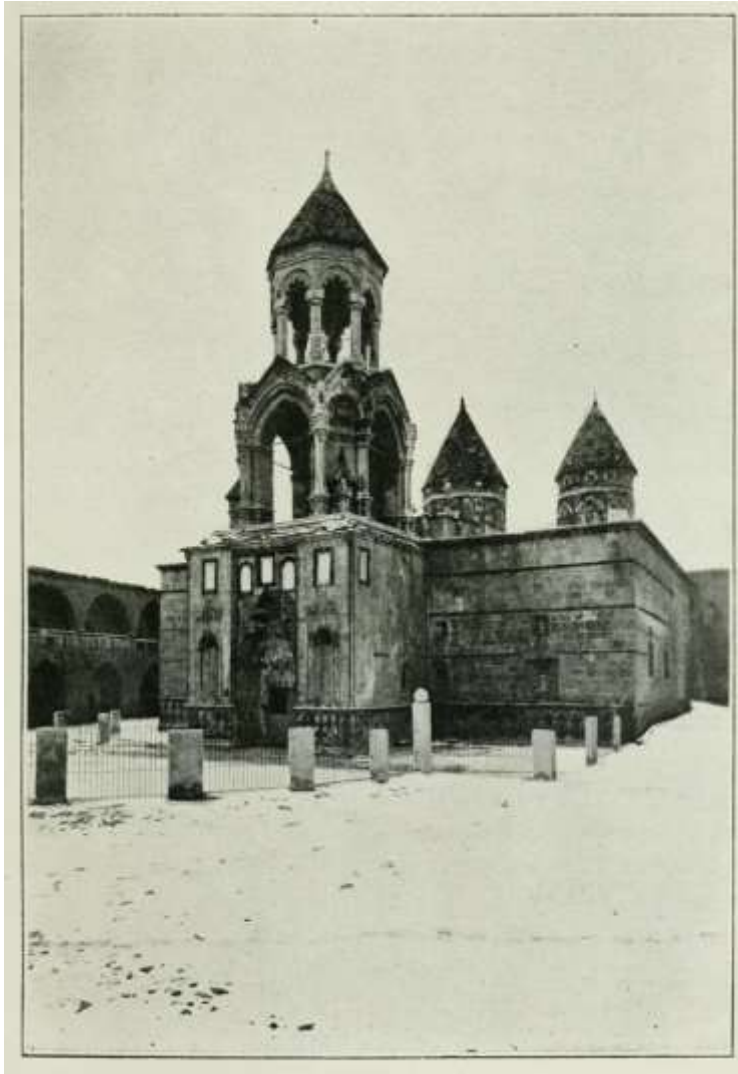


Fig.6, HFB Lynch, *Church of Surb Karapet from South-west, 1890s*, from *Armenia: Travels and Studies*, volume 2 (1901)

At Surb Karapet, the monastery near Mush, Lynch writes of the founding of the site by St Gregory the Illuminator, and describes the stone slabs that ‘cover the graves of princes and warriors, of whom we read in the pages of Armenian historians.’ But the contemporary site was much changed from the days of yore, and Lynch continued: ‘What with the Kurds and the suspicions of the Turkish Government this once flourishing monastery has been stripped of much of its glamour ; indeed the monks are little better than prisoners of State.’¹¹ From princes to prisoners: this is the story of the Armenians that Lynch frequently reads in their buildings.

¹¹ HFB Lynch 1901 Vol.2, p.179

For Lynch, the decaying remnants of Armenian churches provided evidence of a unique culture. At Ani, he highlighted particular structures that he believed exhibited ‘the Armenian style at its best’: the Cathedral, which he praised for its ‘Extreme simplicity of design’, purity of forms and blending of ‘elements of Byzantine and Gothic art’, qualities he also admired in the smaller Church of St Gregory of Tigran Honents.¹²

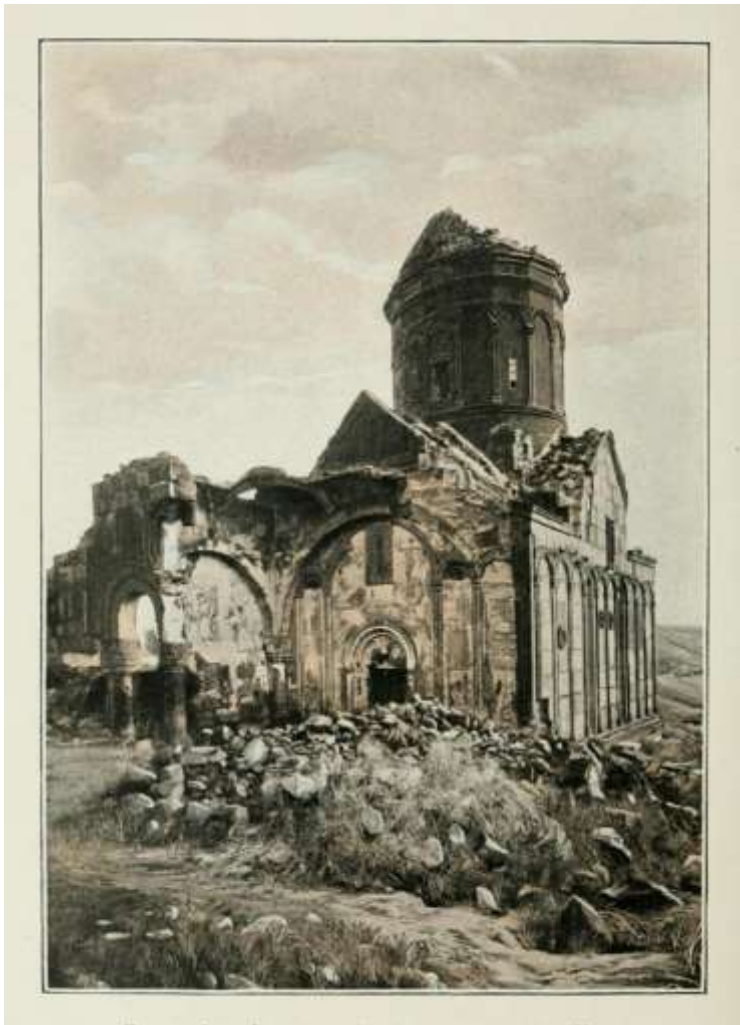


Fig.7, HFB Lynch, *Church of St Gregory of Tigran Honents*, 1890s, from *Armenia: Travels and Studies*, volume 1 (1901)

He declared that at Ani a ‘lesson of wider import, transcending the sphere of the history of architecture may be derived ... from the study of the living evidence of a vanished civilisation which is lavished upon the traveller within her walls’. Ani, Lynch declared, was evidence that the Armenian

¹² HFB Lynch 1901 Vol.1, p.381

people 'may be included in the small number of races who have shown themselves susceptible of the highest culture.' And yet the place stood for not only the greatness of the Armenians but their decline also, for 'during the long centuries which have elapsed since the Seljuk conquest, the genius of [the Armenians] has been exploited by the semi-barbarous peoples of Asia, while their abilities and character have progressively declined and become debased'.¹³

Ruins tended to represent for Lynch the waning of Armenian civilisation under Turkish rule. His pronouncement at upon seeing what remained of the medieval town of Melazkert in in Muş Province somewhat typifies his outlook: 'the crumbling towers and churches of the ancient fortress are the melancholy landmarks of the progressive ruin of the Armenian inhabitants.'



Fig.8, HFB Lynch, *Melazkert from the North, Sipan in the background*, 1890s, from *Armenia: Travels and Studies*, volume 2 (1901)

The place presented 'a strangely pathetic spectacle of fallen greatness ... more touching by the contrast with the blank of the present, by the sufficiency and eloquence of the monuments that remain. We are by them enabled to reconstruct the splendour of the citadel, ... the stateliness of the double walls with their picturesque towers ; the frescos of the churches, the magnificent bridge, the broad, paved road. An Armenian genius produced these works, and a Turk destroyed them.'¹⁴

¹³ HFB Lynch 1901 Vol.1, p.391

¹⁴ HFB Lynch 1901 Vol.2, pp.274-5

Lynch used ruins, as Thomson did in Cyprus, to construct a contrast along racial and religious lines between those deemed to be creators and those seen as destroyers. His assessments were clearly rendered through the lens of an entrenched nineteenth-century Western Orientalism and its associated pejorative view of Ottoman Turks. Yet his vision of an Ottoman Turkish brand of destruction was informed not only by age old stereotypes, but also by the events of the era in which he lived and wrote. Here, then, it is important to place his work in its specific context, for it was one that saw a great rise in Ottoman state violence, and in the interval between his journeys of the early 1890s and the late 1890s, there occurred the widespread massacres. These claimed hundreds of thousands of Armenian lives, and also wreaked a particular variety of destruction that Lynch would have been sensitive to, assaults on Armenian cultural sites. These were, above all, churches, with the destruction exemplified by the 1896 burning of the cathedral at Urfa.

The result is that Lynch's book, written up in the late 1890s and published in 1901, is clouded by the shadow of massacre and haunted by the spectre of further loss and disappearance, with there being on display a clear authorial propensity for the reading of Turkish destruction into Armenian ruins. Yet there was also another lesson for Lynch in those ruins, for their condition represented for him a certain disconnectedness between modern Armenians and their past, such as when he describes in Melazkert how 'some forty Armenian families grovel among the ruins of a past which they ignore.'¹⁵ Lynch had also come to fear the loss of an Armenian collective memory. As Lynch saw it, the ruins that lay as vestiges of a glorious and vital past were being lost to those that would wilfully destroy them and those that would neglect them. He thus endeavoured to perform his own kind of rescue. In part, this took the form of appeals, such as that at Ani where he suggests that 'a special duty devolves upon the traveller to address a pressing appeal both to the Armenians and to the Russian Government for the preservation of these monuments.'¹⁶

Lynch's photographic work appears to have been an extension of this preservation process, and we find him writing of 'perpetuating' through his lens the remnants of Armenian culture he encountered. This was John Thomson's notion of the photographic baseline set in reverse. In contrast to Thomson's stated hope that the ruinous views he recorded in Cyprus would disappear with British progress, HFB Lynch used the camera out of a fear that what he witnessed was in danger of vanishing under misrule, neglect, and the forces of nature.

¹⁵ HFB Lynch 1901 Vol.2, p.274

¹⁶ HFB Lynch 1901 Vol.1, p.391

A parallel link between people and architecture seems to have evolved in the minds of the Ottoman authorities, for interest shown in Armenian buildings signalled to them a dangerous interest in the Armenians themselves. At the ruins of Varzahan, on the road from Erzurum to Trebizond, probably dating from the twelfth century, Lynch describes the following:

Upon its snow-clad surface was placed an Armenian village with three fine buildings, now in ruins, a relic of the old times. What an eloquent memorial those shapely forms and that finished masonry still preserved to a cultured and beneficent race! ... but we had again been placed under surveillance, and it was impossible to perpetuate the image of these decaying remains.¹⁷

Lynch's is but one of many accounts in travelogues of official state monitoring of visitors, particularly those wielding cameras. Photographic activity tended to be a closely supervised affair, with visiting image-makers having to seek permission for their activities and some being escorted by government officials who would secretly record and file reports on anything perceived to be suspicious behaviour. Inspecting Armenian ruins, it seems, was highly suspicious.

The camera became associated in the late nineteenth century with surveillance, espionage and, more generally, an unwelcome Western interest in the Armenians. However, it was not only Westerners that provided cause for concern, for the camera was also seen as a potential instrument of sedition amongst local populations, and it was not simply the Ottoman authorities that showed themselves to be wary of the threats, both real and imagined, posed by photography. It is rumoured that Ohannes Kurkdjian's photographs aroused the suspicion of the Russian authorities, who saw in those scenes something nationalistic and subversive – a not entirely unreasonable reading, as we've seen.

The Russians had their own ideas of what the ruins of Ani meant. Anyone who saw the early silent films that were recently shown at the BFI under the title 'Touring the Ottoman Empire' will have seen a short film dating from the early twentieth century.¹⁸ As in the work of Kurkdjian, figures in the landscape give the viewer a sense of what it would be like to wander the ruins of the deserted city. And yet in the film, the figures are in Russian uniform. As they gaze off into the distance, seemingly in a westerly direction towards the Ottoman Empire, the images seem to be about

¹⁷ HFB Lynch 1901 Vol.2, p.233

¹⁸ *Ani, La Città Dalle Mille Chiese* (1911), shown at BFI Southbank in May 2015 as part of the 'Touring the Ottoman Empire' presentation, itself part of the season 'The Ottoman Empire: from the Birth of Cinema to Gallipoli'.

Russian conquest and the dream of further expansion, the stones of the city as the spoils of war and symbols of victory.

Returning to Kurkdjian, it is said that it was the attentions of the Russian authorities that prompted his departure from Yerevan, and he is next found working in Dutch Java, where his photographs show a continued concern with the smallness of humanity in the face of natural forces.

Interestingly, while Kurkdjian seems to have fallen foul of the Russian authorities, we find him serving power in Dutch Java, advertising himself as the photographer to the Queen of Holland and photographing the queen's state visit in 1898.¹⁹ At that very moment, other Armenian photographers were working to similar ends in the Ottoman Empire, producing official images of the German Kaiser's tour. Ruins consistently acted as suggestive theatrical backdrops against which the Kaiser was photographed, with Baalbek, for example, providing 'a reminder of the power and glory of ancient cultures', as asserted by the official account published in Germany the following year.²⁰ Modern leaders saw themselves as the inheritors of such 'power and glory', and no empire was complete without constructed associations with the classical world.

The rule of Abdülhamid, however, was on the wane and lasted for just another decade. The rise of the Young Turks in 1908 immediately brought with it a wealth of hopes: that the decline of the Ottoman Empire might be halted, that the lots of its constituent communities might be improved, especially those that had suffered under Hamidian rule.

Just as the photographic prohibitions of the old regime were taken as a sign of wider despotism, so too was the lifting of censorship and the proliferation of photography under the Young Turks taken as a sign of a new, free Ottoman Empire. Noel Buxton, the British MP of the Gladstonian Liberal tradition, wrote new hopes in an empire where 'Armenians from Russia may be found travelling for pleasure, taking photographs, and writing up local archaeology.'²¹ The following is an image that aspires to growth and rebuilding, something we see in the Sarrafian Frères' photograph of the new steeple of Surb Giragos in Diyarbekir. This is once again photography as a baseline, the means by which progress might be measured. These are, in my view, optimistic images, sharing a belief that the resurgence of a people might be read in the growth of a building.

¹⁹ VirtualANI, <http://www.virtualani.org/kurkdjian/index.htm>

²⁰ *Das Deutsche Kaiserpaar im Heiligen Lande im Herbst 1898* (Ernst Siegfried Mittler, Berlin, 1899)

²¹ Noel Buxton & Harold Buxton, *Travel and Politics in Armenia* (Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1914), p.110



Fig.9, Sarrafian Frères, *Surb Giragos, Diyarbakir*, c.1910

However, buildings also went in the other direction, most notably in Adana in April 1909. There, the destruction of buildings was the clearest sign of the fate of a community, a destruction photographed by many outside observers, including the American missionary William Nesbitt Chambers, who made these before and after photographs of the city. It was unclear at the time however, what exactly these ruins meant. The question that Armenians asked themselves at the time, explains Raymond Kévorkian, ‘was whether the massacres represented the last gasp of the old regime or were rather the inaugural act of a new policy of extermination’.²² Was this a sign of the past or the future? Today, with hindsight, Adana appears as the latter, a foreshadowing of the cataclysm to come.

²² Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (I.B. Tauris, London, 2011), p.71

The destruction of Armenian communities during the genocide was accompanied by the destruction of churches and other buildings associated with those communities. When Raphael Lemkin started to formulate his concept of genocide in the 1930s, a field of study directly inspired by the fate of the Ottoman Armenian population and their huge cultural losses, he wrote of two related strands of destruction: what he on the one hand termed barbarism - mass killing—and on the other vandalism - the destruction of culture.²³

We might think of some of the reasons why buildings were targeted. They were places of shelter, as in the case of Urfa cathedral, and also social centres, the sites around which communities cohere, and therefore just as necessary in terms of long term survival. We might also think in terms of symbolic capital, and in terms of what I have been discussing, this last is of the most interest. If churches constituted a unique historic vestige of a people and a sign of their culture, as Lynch and others asserted, then this provided ample grounds for their destruction when those people became unwanted. And sure enough, just as buildings were powerful symbols to those that sought the destruction of the Armenians, so were they to those that became concerned with their rescue.

It was at this time, at the very moment of their disappearance, that Armenians became most visible to the West. Providing a summary of Armenian history for the British Foreign Office 'blue book' on the subject of the ongoing slaughter, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*, the historian Arnold Toynbee declared that 'it is one of the strangest ironies of war that it fuses together and illuminates the very fabric it destroys'. It was this idea of illumination that allowed Toynbee a sanguine moment as he dwelt on the possibility of a future rebirth, choosing to describe Armenian society as a building, a labyrinth that might be restored:

the various parts of the labyrinth fall in one by one, the light goes out of them, and nothing is left but smoke and ashes. This is the catastrophe that we are witnessing now, and we do not yet know whether it will be possible to repair it. But if the future is not so dark as it appears, and what has perished can in some measure be restored, our best guide and inspiration in the task will be that momentary, tragic, unique vision snatched out of the catastrophe itself.²⁴

²³ Peter Balakian, 'Raphael Lemkin, Cultural Destruction, and the Armenian Genocide', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* Vol.27, No.1 (Spring 2013), pp.57–89

²⁴ James Bryce & Arnold Toynbee (eds.), *The Treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-16: Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon by Viscount Bryce* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1916), p.593

This was a catastrophe that HFB Lynch did not live to see, having passed away in 1913. And yet his photographs lived on and had a role to play. His negatives passed into the hands of his good friend Sir Martin Conway, a fellow explorer and climbing enthusiast. From 1915 onwards Conway produced a series of pieces for *Country Life* magazine focusing upon theatres of war and threatened buildings, monuments and cultural artefacts.



Fig.10, *Country Life*, 19 February 1916

In February 1916, Conway produced a piece on Armenian churches, using the photographs of just those buildings at Ani that his friend Lynch had valued above all others, the Cathedral and the Church of St Gregory of Tigran Honents. He writes: 'The destruction of Louvain and Rheims ... [are]

horrors ... generally realised and deplored; but how many are conscious of the danger that has threatened remoter architectural treasures? Some of them of an almost unique importance and the more to be deplored because the threatened buildings have not been thoroughly studied, planned and photographed; so that if destroyed their loss would be total'.²⁵ So here was Conway speaking in similar terms to Lynch, seeing photography as the means by which threatened cultural sites might be 'perpetuated'.

He likewise sees correspondence between people and their environment: 'These little churches belong essentially to the land of their origin. There on its bare plains and beside its rock-bound ravines and rivulets they are at home. They match the soil out of which they grow and the rocks from which they are hewn'. He continues: 'Fortunately, where Russia has spread her protecting hand over the Armenians their long persecution comes to an end. Even Russia, however, has only recently begun to learn that it is useless to try and alter this tough race. They cannot be Russified any more than they could be Ottomanised.'

Conway here sets up this complex relationship between architecture and people and the earth from which they rose. They are seen to belong inextricably to these lands, inheriting the qualities of strength and permanence from the natural world that surrounds them. And each might rise again, ruined churches and people alike, with Conway's final declaration that: 'The recent achievements of the Grand Duke Nicholas in the Caucasian theatre of the world war encourages the hope that the Turkish policy of exterminating the Armenian may soon be checked. If peace thus descends upon the stricken plains after the war, the little villages and cities will rise again from their ruins, and the old churches may be repaired and saved for future generations. They are well worth saving.'²⁶

Conway's hope is that the rescue of people might lead to the restoration of churches. As ever, the fate of the two stand entwined. So, despite having begun his piece with a warning with regards to the threat of the possibility of the vanishing of Armenian culture, akin to his friend Lynch, Conway ends on a hopeful note.

We see much the same imagery employed by relief groups in the immediate post-war period, most notably Near East Relief. There follows a fairly typical image, one employing architecture to suggest human ruin and the promise of rebuilding and restoration works by Western philanthropy and political action.

²⁵ Sir Martin Conway, 'Churches of Northern Armenian' *Country Life* Vol.xxxix No.998 19 February 1916, p.245

²⁶ Sir Martin Conway, 'Churches of Northern Armenian' *Country Life* Vol.xxxix No.998 19 February 1916, p.246



Fig.11, Near East Relief, 'Amid the ruins of an ancient civilization, child derelicts of war and deportation were given new life under the protection of the American flag', c.1920s, from James L Barton, *The Story of Near East Relief, 1915-1930* (1930)

However, Ottoman lands remained unstable, particularly in the east, and had largely been so since the October revolution of 1917 put paid to Martin Conway's hope that a Russian advance would rescue Armenians and the products of their culture. Instead the Ottoman lines had advanced into territory lost in 1878.

Ani had lain neglected on Ottoman lands for centuries yet upon its recapture in 1918 there was substantial plundering and destruction. In the years between 1878 and 1918, Ani and its churches had acquired a new cultural currency and its ruins had now become a target. This all might be seen as a destructive reflection of – and perhaps indeed destructive response to - previous efforts to document and preserve the site. This is suggested by a 1921 account by Nikolai Marr in which he states his belief that these acts might have been carried out by the same Muslim villagers that he

had employed as workers on the site.²⁷ If true it would mean that some of those that had uncovered Ani's past were also responsible for destroying it.

As well as attacks on church structures, the storehouse museums and their contents were largely destroyed. It is here interesting to note that Aram Vruyr's glass plate negatives that remained on site were smashed, with one commentator describing how as late as the 1990s the remains of these could be found scattered on the ground.²⁸ If we consider how Vruyr had been in the business of asserting an Armenian past through photographing the monuments of Ani, then the destruction of those photographs might be seen as part of an inverse process, the removal of historic markers.

1920 saw similar actions as the Kemalist forces signalled their rejection of the treaty of Sèvres with an advance through the young Armenian Republic. The Ottoman Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Riza Nur soon after went as far as to recommend that 'the relics and traces of the monuments of Ani be wiped from the face of the earth'.²⁹ This is of special significance when we consider that Riza Nur served as an envoy to the Turkish delegation at the Lausanne conference of 1922. The treaty that resulted recognised the new Turkish Republic and, uniquely, advanced the borders of a defeated power. Within the treaty's text, as Churchill wrote in his account of the Great War, 'history will search in vain for the word 'Armenia.'"³⁰ The destruction of churches and other Armenian buildings might be viewed as a complimentary act of erasure. At its simplest level, this was a purging of land and of memory, the removal of the signs of a people's historic existence. This attempt to wipe the slate clean and to forget a people was substantially helped by the West's own willingness to forget, the promised new order failing to rise from the ruins of war.

Surviving churches appeared at times the final traces of the vanished and forgotten ... Travelling through the region in the 1950s, Lord Kinross found himself reminded of those people 'whose ruined conical chapels I had seen here and there, up the mountain valleys'. Kinross encounters such reminders and alludes at various stages to an air of amnesia that sits about the land. And yet this is an amnesia in which he seems happy to participate. At Ani he states that 'The Turks are still sensitive on the topic of the Armenians: unnecessarily, since the massacres of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are now a matter of past Ottoman history.' He moves, without a trace of irony, to a description of the city within what he calls those 'great, forgotten walls, glowing darkly in

²⁷ N Marr, 'Ani, la ville arménienne en ruines, d'après les fouilles de 1892-1893 et de 1904-1917', *Revue des études arméniennes*, Vol.1 (1921), pp.395-410; VirtualANI, <http://www.virtualani.org/marr/index.htm>

²⁸ VirtualANI, <http://www.virtualani.org/marr/index.htm>

²⁹ Vahakn N Dadrian, 'The Role of Turkish Physicians in the World War I Genocide of Ottoman Armenians' *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* Vol.1 No.2 1986 pp.169-192 at p.192 n.82

³⁰ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis: The Aftermath* (Thornton Butterworth, London, 1929), p.408

their solitude against the rolling golden grassland.’ It is a description perfectly matched by the accompanying photographs by Violet Gordon, with distant views accentuating the isolated nature of Ani.³¹

The West’s engagement with Armenia was largely at an end. Those churches that survived acted as lingering spectral remnants, at least to those few that would see them. Standing in stark contrast to Lord Kinross, the fictional travellers of Rose Macaulay’s 1956 novel *The Towers of Trebizond*, who consciously journey in the footsteps of HFB Lynch, appear as the final possessors of a fading Western memory of Armenia. One passage describes a ‘little Armenian church stood on the steep hill-side, grown about with trees and shrubs, and branches pushed through the roof, and yellow lilies stood about, smelling very sweet. The moon rose from behind the hill and shone on the further rim of the lake below, but the church was still in shadow, a black haunt of murdered Armenian ghosts’.³²

And ghosts seem to be what we are left with. The disappearance feared by HFB Lynch has come to pass. It is owing to the sort of photographic perpetuation that he believed in that we still have traces of what once stood in some of these places. As suggested by Lynch and by his friend Martin Conway, that which has been captured by the lens is not completely lost. Through Lynch’s photographs, we might gaze upon Surp Karapet, but the place itself has now gone. Horomos Monastery is now almost completely destroyed. There is little of the main structure left and the purported tomb of King Ashot photographed by Aram Vruyr is nowhere to be found. At Ani, the fabled Lion Gates once gazed upon by Kurkdjian’s melancholic figure look quite different. They have not been demolished but instead built up, the subject of conservation works that resemble a full blown construction project. Nowhere amongst the clean stones of the new tourist of attraction at Ani will the visitor find any reference to an Armenian past, and what has happened there shows that destruction takes varied forms.

We ourselves now resemble Kurkdjian’s figures; we are the watchers among the ruins and the historical reveries are ours. Through photographs we dream of a lost world and commune with what once was. But again, ruins point us not simply back towards the past but invite us to think of the present and the future also. The khachkars of Julfa in Azerbaijan were once photographed by Aram Vruyr. More recently, images were made from across the Iranian border of the destruction of those khachkars. We need only think of these to know that iconoclasts are still at work, and the destruction of Armenian culture is ongoing. Lynch’s project of perpetuation is perhaps as vital today as it ever was. However, other photographs point us in a different direction. Surb Giragos in

³¹ Lord Kinross, *Within the Taurus: A Journey in Asiatic Turkey* (John Murray, London, 1954), pp.69-71

³² Rose Macaulay, *The Towers of Trebizond* [1956] (Flamingo, London, 1995), p.117

Diyarbakir, the church that the Sarrafian Freres pictured reaching towards the heavens, was brought low during the genocide. Recently, however, it has been restored through cooperation between local Kurds and Armenians in Istanbul and in the diaspora and reopened in 2011. These images serve as a final reminder of what it is that ruins can mean. Ruins invite us to not only look back but to reach forwards, to mourn for the past while we hope for the future.