

On Ancient Tracks in Eastern Anatolia

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Photographs by Ruth Harold

Glance at a map, and you are apt to see the Anatolian peninsula as a bridge that links Asia with Europe; and it has served that purpose many times, most notably in giving passage to the Turks. Look more closely, and you will notice that Anatolia is corrugated with mountains, the eastern portion in particular, and makes for rough traveling. Eastern Anatolia has always been remote country, the frontier between empires and home to fractious and independent-minded peoples; and so it remains today.

Such were the hazards of travel out there that long-distance traders preferred the sea-lanes across the eastern Mediterranean whenever possible. In Roman and early Byzantine times, for instance, a bolt of silk might make its way overland from one oasis to the next all the way from China, but would probably travel the final leg of its journey by sea. It would first be carried on camelback across the Syrian Desert to Antioch (today Antakya, in Turkey's Hatay); or perhaps skirt the desert to the north via Nisibis (Nusaybin) and Edessa (now Sanliurfa, or plain Urfa); and then it would be loaded aboard a ship bound for Rome or Constantinople. For much of that period, eastern Anatolia was a zone of conflict between Romans and Parthians, Byzantines and Sassanians, with Kurds and Armenians thrown in. All the same, established trade routes did traverse those highlands, and when the sea-lanes turned unsafe or the tolls too high the caravan tracks came into their own.

We are quite well informed about the Anatolian trade routes

in Ottoman times, thanks in the first place to the scholarly labors of Franz Taeschner eighty years ago (Taeschner 1924-1926), and there is every reason to believe that those routes recapitulate in outline (albeit not in detail) trails in use for centuries before. The map of the trade routes in the 17th century [Fig. 1] has been simplified so as to highlight the chief overland tracks and their connections with the high roads of Iran and the Arab lands. Several branches, deviations and connectors have been omitted for clarity. To make sense of the Anatolian road-net, think of three major cords: the diagonal route, linking Istanbul to Tarsus (Adana), Antakya, Damascus and ultimately to Mecca in faraway Arabia; a central route passing through Sivas, Malatya and Diyarbakir en route to Mosul and then to Basra on the Persian Gulf; and a skein

of northeastern tracks to Erzurum, the Caucasus and Iran.

The diagonal was the spine of the system, its most ancient element and the only one that continued to function through the turbulent centuries of the Arab and Turkish conquests. Portions of the diagonal paralleled the Royal Road of Achaemenid times, which linked Susa in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains with Sardis near the Aegean shore. Roman, Byzantine and later Arab armies marched that way. For the Ottomans, the diagonal served as the military road that connected Istanbul with the important seaports of Tarsus, Adana and Payas. When Sultan Selim ("The Grim") set out in 1514 CE to annex eastern Anatolia, his army followed that well-trodden track all the way to Eregli before turning northeast for Sivas, Erzurum and the Iranian frontier (Taeschner 1924). In early Ottoman times merchant caravans, too, relied on the military road, but with the return of centralized government trade reverted to the more direct central route to the east. Yet the diagonal lost none of its significance, for it carried the Hajj,

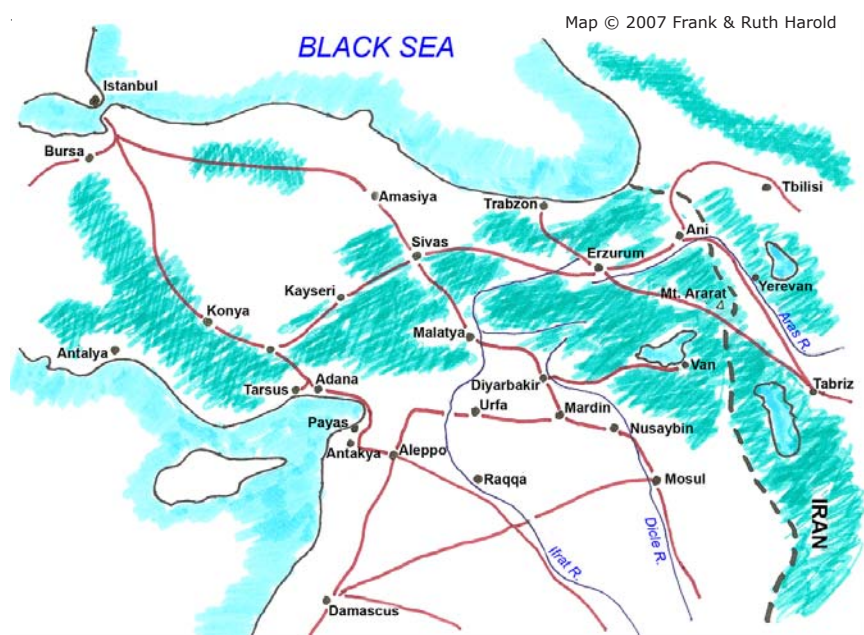


Fig 1. Towns and trade routes of Anatolia in the 17th century.

the annual pilgrim caravan from Istanbul to Mecca.

The central route, well established in Byzantine times, led through settled country with ancient and populous cities such as Amasiya (classical Amaseia) and Sivas (Sebaste). Turning more to the south, it passed through Malatya (Melitene), Diyarbakir (Amida) and Mardin, towns that later came to mark and defend the frontier of Byzantium. The route crossed onto the Syrian plain at Nusaybin (Nisibis), and then followed the river Dicle (Tigris) south to Baghdad and the Gulf.

The northeastern route branched off at Sivas and marched eastward to the frontier stronghold of Erzurum (Theodosiopolis; the contemporary name comes from the Arabic for "Land of the Romans"). But east of Erzurum the country grows wilder, and the information sparser. Taeschner is of no help here, for his inquiries stopped at Erzurum. Fig.1, drawn from several sources (Le Strange 1905; Brice 1981; TAVO 1994), shows two main routes. One ran through Ani (near today's Kars), down the valley of the Aras River, past Yerevan to Tabriz in Iran; the other corresponds to what is today the main road, from Erzurum via Dogubeyazit to Tabriz. Some maps show a third route, from Erzurum southeast to Lake Van and on to Tabriz, but this has been omitted as the mountain crossing appears to have been a minor track. Note also the spur that leads from Erzurum northwest to the port of Trabzon (ancient Trebizond) on the Black Sea. In practice, trade routes from Iran and Central Asia were likely to terminate at Trabzon, from where goods were shipped to the capital by sea.

By the 17th century CE the glory days of the caravan trade were long past, and the protracted warfare between the Ottoman Sultans and the Safavid Shahs of Iran had left eastern Anatolia impoverished and depopulated. The country was in much better

state in earlier centuries, when its trade routes formed part of that larger net that we designate as the Silk Road. The Anatolian silk trade goes well back into classical times. For example, despite the frequent wars that pitted the Byzantine Empire against Sassanian Iran, the Emperor Justinian I was pleased to negotiate a treaty that designated fixed ports of entry where silk could be purchased from Persian merchants: Nisibis (Nusaybin) on the Syrian plain, Raqqa on the Euphrates River and Artaxa on the Aras, near modern Yerevan (Boulnois 2004).

The Byzantine port city of Trebizond (modern Trabzon) holds a prominent place in the annals of Anatolian trade. We learn of a Sogdian embassy in 509 CE, which traveled there overland from Central Asia via the Volga River and clear around the Caucasus Mountains, with the object of bypassing the rapacious Persians by establishing direct commercial links with Constantinople. The Emperor responded with a mission of his own, but little came of it at the time (Boulnois 2004). A century later, the situation changed dramatically. The Muslim armies burst out of Arabia, overwhelmed Sassanian Iran, drove the Byzantines out of the lowlands (contemporary Syria and Iraq), and disrupted the familiar sea-lanes. The caravans were forced northward, reaching Trebizond from Central Asia either by way of northern Iran or else around both the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus. Trebizond in the 8th through 10th centuries was a major transit port, where silk, paper, perfumes and spices from eastern lands were exchanged for western linens, woolens, medicinal substances and especially gold and silver coins. Incidentally, those were not camel caravans: mules and donkeys were preferred for the stony tracks of Anatolia. The carrying trade was chiefly in the hands of the Armenians, who played a large role in the commercial and cultural life of

Anatolia until they were massacred and expelled at the beginning of the 20th century.

The ancient Christian kingdom of Armenia, intermittently independent, lay astride the trade routes of eastern Anatolia, from the Pontic Alps in the north to Lake Van in the south. Armenia reached its zenith of power and prosperity in the 10th and 11th centuries, as the ruins of its capital city Ani (a few miles from Kars) still attest. The safest route between Erzurum and Iran passed through Ani, and the city continued to flourish even after its capture, first by the Byzantines and then by the Seljuk Turks (1064 CE). The 13th century, however, brought misfortune: the Mongol conquest, a devastating earthquake and eventually the realignment of the trade routes southward. Ani was not destroyed in war, but rather abandoned by its inhabitants in the 14th century. They left behind the imposing and evocative shells of churches, palatial houses and vast defensive walls.

The Mongols get a bad press and deservedly so, for wherever the hordes galloped they left little but smoking ruins in their wake. Baghdad was sacked and burnt in 1258 CE, and the Abbasid Caliphate collapsed in chaos. Yet subsequent Mongol Khans ruled an empire that stretched from China to Syria, peaceful and orderly and hospitable to commerce. Eastern Anatolia was open to traffic as never before. Marco Polo is only the best known of the travelers who passed this way, riding from Sivas to Tabriz and clear across Iran to Hormuz on the Gulf in 1271 CE, on his way to the court of the Great Khan. It is not altogether clear just where the high road then ran, for Marco Polo's account is quite vague. However, Marco's failure to mention either Ani or Lake Van, coupled with his specific description of Mount Ararat, suggest that he may have passed not far from today's Dogubeyazit. Trebizond continued to flourish as

the chief port for trade between Constantinople and Khanbalik (contemporary Beijing). It even enjoyed a spell of autumnal glory in the 13th and 14th centuries, when it was the capital of a diminutive independent empire that left us the Byzantine monuments that visitors come to admire. Annexed to the Ottoman Empire in 1461 and renamed, Trabzon remained a significant port and provincial capital, where crown princes were sent to learn the art of governing. But with the decline of the caravan trade it lost its pre-eminence as the seaport of Inner Asia.

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Travelers to Eastern Turkey leave behind the celebrated Greek and Roman ruins, the mosques and palaces of the Ottoman Sultans, and also the swarms of tourists. Instead, they can savor an older Turkey: slower, traditional in dress and manners, intensely Muslim, conservative and ethnically diverse. On these marches of the Ottoman Empire, the minorities come to the fore: Syrian Christians, Alevis, Armenians, Kurds, Georgians. The remoteness of eastern Anatolia is one of

its prime attractions, yet facilities for visitors are entirely adequate and for the time being the country is quiet. The map [Fig. 2] shows our itinerary for a three-week journey in the spring of 2006. We arranged it as a private trip through Geographic Expeditions (geoEx.com), with our own vehicle (quite indispensable). Our guide, driver, and mentor was Serdar Akerdem, an archaeologist and native of the region, intimately familiar with its places and peoples (not to mention the local delicacies); we could not have wished for better company.

Adana is a large commercial city of little antiquarian interest. But Antakya is the ancient Antioch, one of the four great cities of the classical world (with Rome, Constantinople and Alexandria), and a terminus of those branches of the Silk Road that traversed or skirted the Syrian Desert [Fig. 1]. Antakya today is a lively and livable city with a Mediterranean ambience, ethnically as much Arab as Turkish. Christians, Muslims and Alevis mingle in the streets in apparent amity (Alevis are a somewhat secretive sect, an

offshoot of Shiism, with their own unique beliefs and places of worship). Of ancient Antioch little remains above ground, apart from the superb mosaics displayed in the local museum; they come from Daphne, once a wealthy suburb in the foothills of the Ammanus Mountains. An hour's drive away are the ruins of Seleucia ad Piera, Antioch's port in classical times until silting rendered it unusable.

Gaziantep is a prosperous and forward-looking city of about a million, which boasts a medieval citadel and an archaeological museum dedicated to the marvelous Roman mosaics recovered from the ruins of Zeugma on the Euphrates River. A major crossing and the staging post for military expeditions eastward, Zeugma was destroyed by the Sassanians in 252 CE; the site is now largely drowned by the lake rising behind the Birecik Dam. Gaziantep is also the starting point for an excursion to the castle of Rumkale, whose ruins brood over those same waters. Rumkale is quite accessible but not mentioned in any of the guidebooks that we have consulted, and well worth a detour for that reason alone. About 30 km northeast of Gaziantep is the small town of Halfeti, half-drowned by the waters, where one hires a boat for the short journey upstream. The castle consists of a large fortified enclosure atop a narrow rocky ridge, bounded by cliffs and reinforced with walls; at its base, a great fosse cut into the rock makes Rumkale an island in the sky. Fortunately, a placard in English supplies the basic facts: built by the Byzantines, occupied by Arabs and then Crusaders, sold to the Armenian Kingdom of Little Cilicia which made it a bishopric as well as a citadel, later held by the Mamelukes and at last taken by the Ottomans. The ruins of a church and of several monasteries date to the Armenian phase (12th – 13th centuries CE).

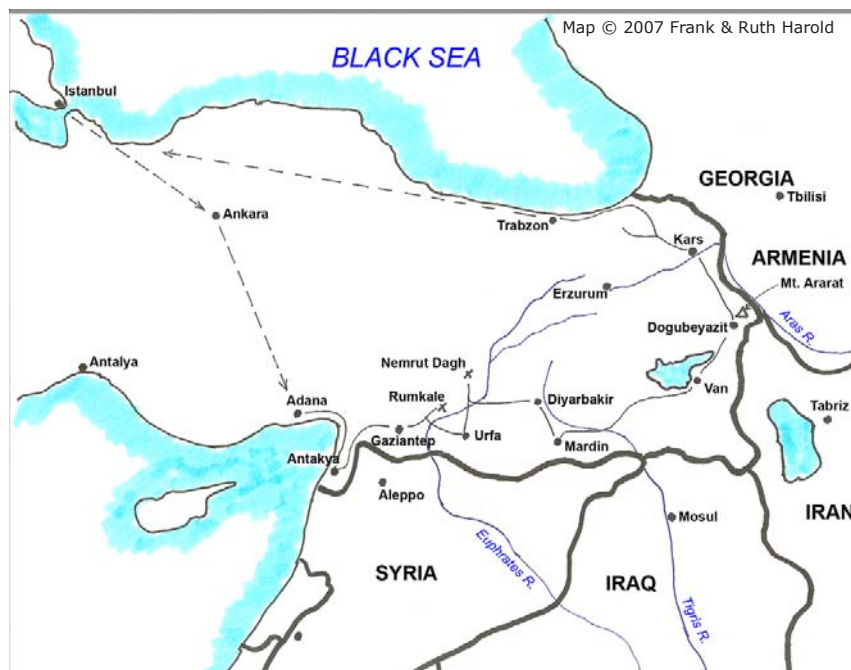


Fig 2. Itinerary of a journey in eastern Anatolia, spring 2006.

Still on the western side of the Euphrates is the astonishing funerary extravaganza of Nemrut Dag. In the first century B.C.E. this region made up the independent kingdom of Commagene, which grew rich on its fertile soil and on the proceeds of trade along the route that skirted the Syrian desert [Fig. 1]. King Antiochus I (64 – 38 BCE) had himself buried beneath a gigantic tumulus atop Mount Nemrut at 7100 feet; terraces flanking the tumulus bore statues of the king and his relations, including Zeus and Herakles, whose heads now stand on the ground. The kingdom did not long outlast the king: Commagene was annexed by Rome, and the sanctuary on the mountaintop lay utterly forgotten until rediscovered by a German surveyor in 1881.

Once across the Euphrates River we are fairly into eastern Anatolia, and there is no better place to savor Turkey in the Middle East than the ancient city of Sanliurfa (usually called by its old name, Urfa). Memories are long in a place that can trace its history back for 3500 years, and tradition has it that that Urfa was the birthplace of Abraham; pilgrims come here in droves to pray at Abraham's cave, and to feed the carp in the sacred pool [Fig. 3]. Alexander conquered Urfa,



Fig. 3. Pilgrims at the sacred pool, Urfa.



Fig. 4. A coppersmith in the bazaar, Urfa.

Romans and Byzantines held it and the Crusaders made it the County of Edessa; much of the citadel is thought to date to their reign. Urfa was destroyed by the Mongols in 1260 CE, and never really recovered; it was absorbed into the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century. Urfa's bazaar is a wonder, a maze of alleys, courtyards and old Hans, where craftsmen still ply their trades [Fig. 4], and a visitor catches glimpses of an earlier day when caravans traveled from here to Aleppo and Baghdad.

Heading east we enter basaltic lands, harsh and poor. This is largely Kurdish country, and Diyarbakir is their capital. Here is another city of a l m o s t unimaginable antiquity, whose foundations go back nearly 4000 years. In Roman and Byzantine times it was Amida, a strong-

hold in the endless wars against the Sassanians of Iran; the modern name comes from the Arabic ("Home of the Bakr" tribe). Subsequently, the fortress was held by Seljuks, Turkomans and Ottomans. All of them contributed to the massive black walls that still ring most of the old city. Within are narrow, crowded streets, a bazaar, mosques, churches and Hans built of bands of black and white stone (you can stay in one, converted into a hotel). Diyarbakir has long since burst the confines of its ancient walls; now a city of more than two million, swollen with refugees

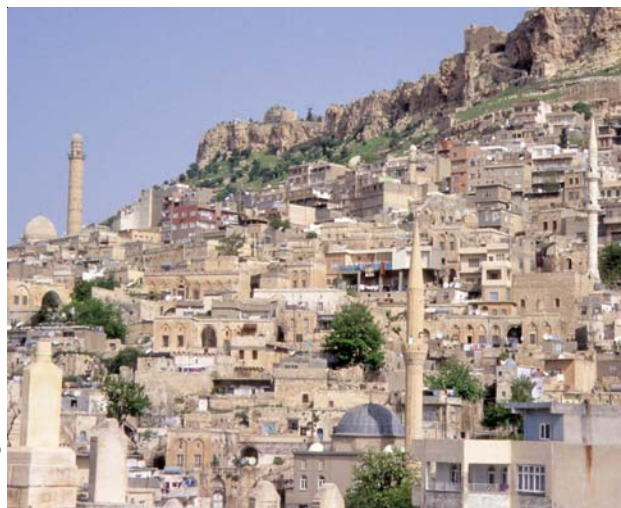


Fig. 5. A view of Mardin.

displaced by the civil war of the 'nineties, Turkey's ethnic tensions are palpable here even to the most innocent of travelers.

Mardin has charm to enhance its interest, and will be a highlight on any tour of eastern Turkey. The town extends in tiers along the slope of a steep hill; stairs and narrow alleys, buttressed with arches, connect one level to the next [Fig. 5]. The summit is crowned by a large fortress, unfortunately a military zone and closed to visitors, which held off the fearsome Mongols in the 13th



Fig. 6. The 15th-century tomb-tower (türbe) at Hasankeyf.

century (it fell to Tamerlane a century later). Mardin overlooks the Syrian plain; it was always a citadel rather than a trading mart, and served as the capital of the local Artukid dynasty from the 12th century to the 14th. Syrian Orthodox Christianity has long had a strong presence in the city; the community has shrunk in recent years but several churches survive, and the Christian imprint on Mardin's architecture is quite visible.

Mardin is the gateway to the Tur Abdin, the "Mountain of the Servants" (of God), historically a Christian district but now predominantly Kurdish. Several of the grand monasteries remain active, notably Mor Gabriel, parts of which date back to Byzantine times. The bleak, stony plateau, dotted with flocks of sheep, leads eventually to Hasankeyf, built on a rocky spur overlooking the Dicle (Tigris) River. A Roman and then Byzantine frontier post, it contains remains from the Seljuk, Artukid and Kurdish occupations. Down by the river stands the tomb-tower (türbe) of a 15th century prince, covered in colored tiles, that would

not be out of place in nearby Iran [Fig. 6]; it will be drowned if the planned dam is built.

Continuing eastward we leave the last echoes of the Mediterranean world, cross the high Taurus Range and climb onto the Anatolian plateau. Lake Van, surrounded by snowy peaks, is wild and lonesome. Historically, all this country was occupied by Armenians who were violently driven out between 1915 and 1918; most of the inhabitants today are Kurds. The numerous Armenian churches in the hills are falling to pieces, but one exception is the splendid Akhtamar church on an island in the lake, built in the 10th century CE and decorated with stone reliefs [Fig. 7]. At the time of our visit the interior was closed for restoration. The road from Diyarbakir through Bitlis to Van was an important trade

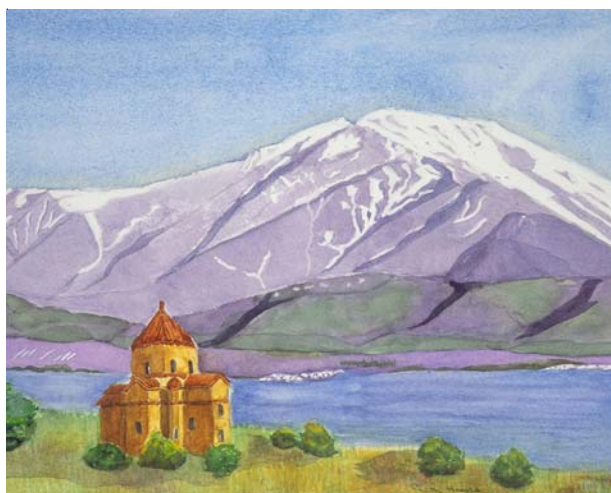


Fig. 7. The 10th-century Akhtamar church on Lake Van (watercolor by Ruth Harold).

route in Ottoman times; a fine 15th century caravanserai testifies to that. And just in case you had forgotten, the name of the road entering Van will jolt your memory: Ipek Yolu, the Silk Road.

Van is an ancient place, but the old town was completely destroyed in the fighting of 1915. What survives is the Castle of Van on its whaleback of a rock, crowned with ruins that reach from the Urartian period to the Ottoman. In the surroundings are a number of Urartian sites, and my personal Ultima Thule: the Kurdish castle of Hoshap on the high mountain road into Iran [Fig. 8]. Truck drivers love Hoshap; gas is uncommonly cheap there, just don't expect a receipt.

From Van northward the road traverses bleak but magnificent volcanic country to the frontier town of Dogubeyazit ("affectionately dubbed 'doggie biscuit' by tourists over the years"; Rough Guide), just a short hop from the Iranian border. Agri Dag, Mount Ararat (17,000 ft) looms over the town, and may (or may not) condescend to peek out of the clouds. Of antiquarian interest is the fantastic palace of Ishak Pasha, built in the 18th century by a local grandee on a plateau overlooking Dogubeyazit; it blends all the regional styles into a most charming potpourri [Fig. 9, next page]. Dogubeyazit straddles the main road into Iran, once again named Ipek Yolu; this route seems only to have become prominent after the Mongol conquest, replacing the older route via Ani.



Fig. 8. The Kurdish castle of Hoshap.



Fig. 9. The 18th-century palace of Ishak Pasha overlooking Dogubeyazit.

A few more hours' drive, north across glorious rolling plateau with views into the green valley of the Aras, brings one to the small city of Kars. Though notorious for its chilly and damp climate, Kars is an attractive and relatively liberal town. Held in turn by Armenians,

Fig. 10. The fortress of Ani.



Seljuks, Georgians and even Russians, it still keeps its large grey castle. But the reason for coming out here is to visit the melancholy ruins of Ani, capital of the Armenian state from 961 to 1045 CE (until recently, this was a somewhat hazardous excursion, requiring military permission, but is presently quite routine). The city was built on a triangular plateau bounded by deep and rugged ravines, and defended at the base by a massive wall reinforced with bastions [Fig. 10]. With a population of over 100,000, Ani in its heyday was said to rival Baghdad and Constantinople. It was certainly a flourishing city that did well on the trade along the Silk

Road between Erzurum, Yerevan and Tabriz. Today the frowning walls (restored), and the exquisite ruins of the cathedral and of several churches, accentuate the lonesome landscape and the sweeping views. Though Ani ceased to be a capital in the 11th century it continued to prosper, and the finest of its surviving churches [Fig. 11] was built as late as the 13th century. Few places speak so eloquently as Ani

of the transience of all human achievement.

North and west stretch the Pontic mountains, and yet another culture. The "Georgian Valleys" hold numerous churches dating from around 1000 CE, when this country was the home of the Georgian state before the capital was moved to Tbilisi. It is sad to see these splendid buildings falling into ruin, with almost nothing being done to arrest the decay. The country is mountainous and beautiful, laced with large rivers, and turns progressively greener as we proceed north. By the time we reach the Black Sea, the landscape feels almost like home (except for the tea plantations): a narrow, densely populated coastal strip, painfully green and relentlessly damp.

The Towers of Trebizond have haunted my imagination ever since I read Rose Macaulay's novel by that title thirty years ago; and even though Trabzon is a modern commercial city, I was not disappointed. There has been a settlement on the Trapezus, the narrow tableland between two steep ravines, at least from the time of the Greeks. Trebizond was a flourishing port in Byzantine times, and after the sack of

Fig. 11. The 13th-century Church of St. Gregory at Ani, commissioned by a merchant, Tigran Honents.





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Fig. 12. The Monastery of Sumela.

Constantinople it became the capital of a successful commercial state on the Black sea (1205 – 1461 CE). Its emperors left us a clutch of monuments: the dignified cathedral church of Haghia Sophia, several smaller churches now serving as mosques, the magnificent monastery of Sumela plastered onto a cliff in the mountains [Fig. 12], and yes, a few fragments of walls and battlements that recall a more martial past. Modern Trabzon belongs to our time — workaday and up to date and frantic with traffic. But if you give rein to your imagination you may still hear the clip-clop of hooves in the shopping streets, and catch a glint of sunlight on what remains of the fabled towers of Trebizond.

About the authors

Frank and Ruth Harold are scientists by profession and travelers by avocation. Frank was born in Germany, grew up in the Middle East and studied at City College, New York, and the

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