

The Coins of Armenia

by Peter E. Lewis



View of Mount Ararat with the Armenian monastery, Khor Virap, in the foreground. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Diego Delso)



Figure 1 – Map of modern Armenia (Wikimedia Commons)

IN ancient times Armenia was the region around Mt Ararat, which is a snow-covered mountain currently in Turkey near its north-eastern border. Beyond the border is the modern Republic of Armenia. (**Figure 1 – map**) Its capital is Yerevan. (**Figure 2**)

For Christians, Jews and others the region is significant because in Genesis, which is the first book in the Bible, Noah's ark "came to rest on the mountains of Ararat." (Genesis 8:4) A great flood covered the earth but Noah survived by building a huge wooden boat. (**Figure 3**) A flood is recorded on clay tablets found in Mesopotamia. They are dated to the period 2000 to 1500 BC, and modern scholars think that there really had been a great flood. Some consider that it oc-

curred in about 6000 BC when the waters of the Mediterranean Sea burst through a barrier joining Europe and Asia at the Bosphorus and poured into the area now covered by the Black Sea.

For Christians Armenia is also significant because it was the first country to officially become Christian. The king of Armenia, Tiridates III (287-330 AD), converted to Christianity in about 301 and in about 314 Christianity was adopted as the state religion. This might come as a surprise to some readers who know that Constantine the Great was the first ruler of the Roman Empire to become a Christian, but until the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 he had worshiped the sun-god, Sol Invictus. (**Figure 4**) Christianity did not become the state

Figure 2 – View of Yerevan looking south-west with Mt Ararat and Lesser Mt Ararat in the distance (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Serouj Ourishian)

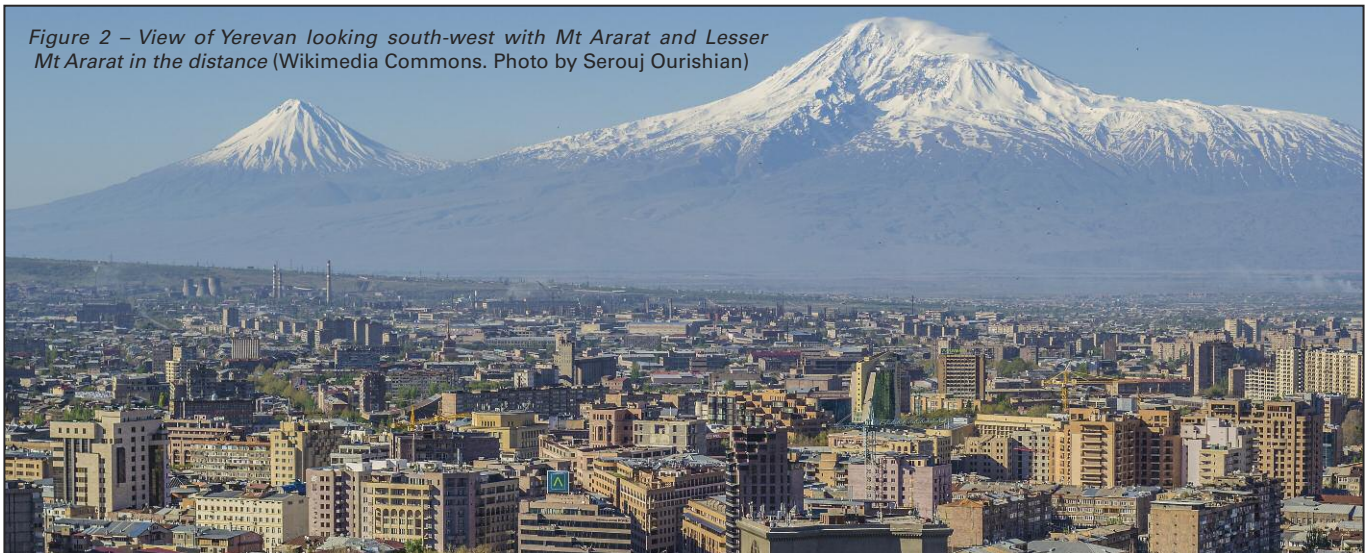




Figure 3 – 500-dram silver coin of Armenia minted in 2013. The emblem of Armenia is on the obverse and Noah's Ark on the reverse. The dove in the foreground is returning to the ark with olive leaves in its beak (Genesis 8:11). The tiny shield in the centre of the emblem shows the Ark on top of a mountain with floodwaters below. (Collection of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane)

religion until much later. Tiridates issued no coins but in about 302 a cathedral was built near Yerevan. It was founded by St Gregory the Illuminator, Armenia's patron saint, and it would have been the oldest cathedral in the world. The original building no longer exists but the core of the Etchmiadzin Cathedral that now stands on the site was built in 483. (Figure 5) It is the mother church of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which claims the apostles, Thaddeus and Bartholomew, as its founders.

The first state in the area that eventually became Armenia was the kingdom of Urartu in the 9th century BC. It was centred around Lake Van which is today in north-eastern Turkey. The people known as Armenians are first mentioned as the inhabitants of the area in the 6th century BC. They probably migrated there from the west.

Armenia was at times independent and ruled by local dynasts, and at other times dominated by powerful neighbours. In the 3rd century BC the Orontid family began to rule in the region and a member of that family, Sames, founded the city of Samosata and issued bronze coins. (Figure 6) His descendants also issued coins, but when Antiochus the Great (223-187 BC) was the ruler of the Seleucid Empire the Orontid king of Armenia was killed and a local official called Artaxias appointed as governor. When Antiochus was defeated by the Romans at the Battle of Magnesia in 189 BC Artaxias declared Armenia to be an independent kingdom. He founded the city of Artaxata, which was 20 miles southwest of Yerevan, but neither Artaxias (190-160) nor his son Artavasdes (160-



Figure 4 – Bronze coin of Constantine the Great minted at Trier in 317 AD. The sun-god stands on the reverse with the inscription 'To the unconquered sun, comrade'. (Image courtesy of Marc Breitsprecher, vcoins.com)

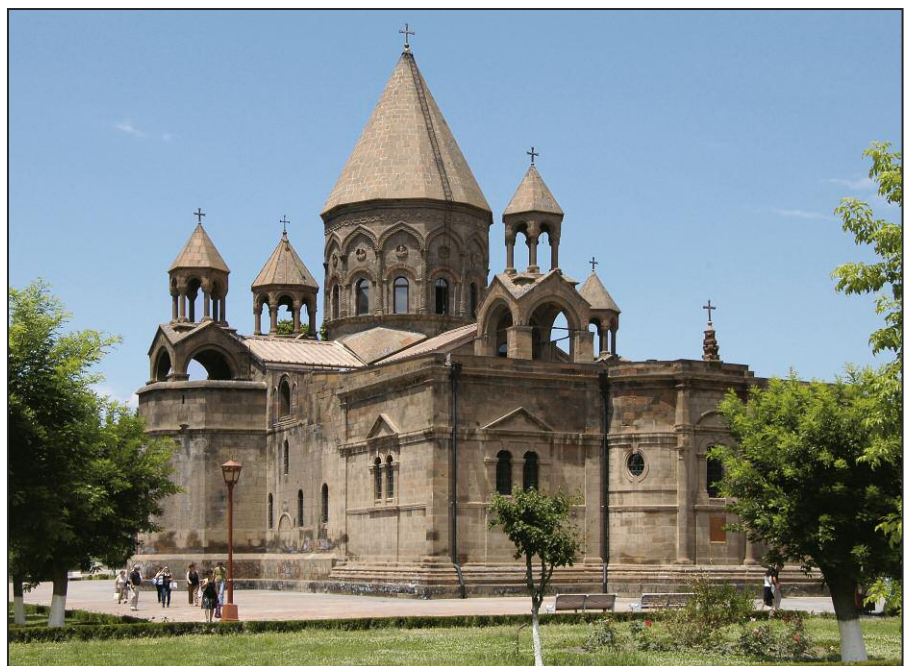


Figure 5 – Etchmiadzin Cathedral. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Areg Amirkhanian)



Figure 6 – Bronze coin of Sames I (c. 260 BC). Diameter 21 mms. On the reverse the thyrsos (symbol of Dionysus) is on crossed cornucopias (symbols of plenty). In the photo the reverse is upside down. Necessian 001. (Numismatik Naumann, Auction 42, Lot 344)



Figure 7 – Bronze coin of Tigranes I (123-96 BC). Diameter 18 mms. Zeus is seated on the reverse. Necessian 022. (Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 85, Lot 11. cngcoins.com)

123) issued coins. It was Artavasdes' brother, Tigranes I (123-96) who first issued coins and they are all bronze. (Figure 7) He is the only member of the Artaxiad dynasty whose bust faces left.

Collectors of Armenian coins need to have books that deal with these coins. *Armenian Coins and their Values* by Y.T. Necessian was published in 1995 and is a comprehensive catalogue but it does not include the coins of the modern Republic of Armenia, which began issuing coins in 1994. Another book is *Coinage of the Artaxiads of Armenia* by Paul Z. Bedoukian. It was published in 1978, but in recent years Frank L. Kovacs has made some changes to the attributions of Armenian coins and in 2016 his book *Armenian Coinage in the Classical Period* was published.

During the reign of Tigranes I the Parthians, who were based in Persia, became dominant in the region and Tigranes' son, Tigranes II, was taken hostage to Parthia. He was eventually freed and became king of Armenia in 95 BC. It was during his long reign (to 56 BC) that Armenia reached its greatest extent. It extended in a south-west direction to reach the Mediterranean Sea. Cilicia (the area south of the Taurus Mountains) came under Armenian control as did Syria and northern Mesopotamia. Tigranes II issued a large number of

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Figure 8 – Silver tetradrachm of Tigranes II (95-56 BC) minted at Antioch-on-the-Orontes in Syria. On the reverse the city-goddess Tyche sits on a rock while the river-god Orontes swims at her feet. Bedoukian 19. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 75, Lot 453)

silver and bronze coins. (Figures 8 and 9) He married the daughter of Mithradates VI, the king of Pontus, which was the northern part of what is now Turkey. Mithradates had fought against the

Romans and as a result they were opposed to Tigranes II. In 66 BC the Roman general Pompey invaded the territory of Tigranes II and compelled him to give up Syria and become an ally

of Rome. Subsequently the Romans were dominant in the region.

Tigranes IV ruled Armenia with his half-sister Erato from 2 BC and was to receive his crown from Augustus in Rome, but he was killed in 1 AD. On one of his coins the mountains of Ararat are shown as they appeared from Artaxata and as they appear today from Yerevan.



Figure 9 – Bronze coin of Tigranes II. Diameter 20 mms. On his crown a star is between 2 eagles. On the reverse Nike (Victory) holds a wreath. Bedoukian 117. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 151, Lot 78)



Figure 11 – Didrachm probably of the Roman emperor Claudius (41-54 AD) minted at Caesarea in Cappadocia. His brother Germanicus is on the obverse and Artaxias III is being crowned by Germanicus on the reverse. Necessian 185. (Fritz Rudolf Künker, Auction 153, Lot 8623)



Figure 10 – Bronze coin of Tigranes IV and Erato (2 BC – 1 AD) minted at Artaxata, which was 20 miles south-west of Yerevan. Diameter 19 mms. Tigranes and Erato are on the obverse. On the reverse the twin mountains of Ararat are shown as seen from Artaxata. Kovacs 180. (Leu Numismatik, Auction 2, Lot 142)



Figure 12 – Bronze coin of Tigranes V (6-12 AD). Diameter 22 mms. Tigranes V is on the obverse. On the reverse Hercules (known to the Armenians as Vahagn) stands holding his club. Kovacs 181. (Solidus Numismatik, Auction 9, Lot 274)

(**Figure 10**) In 18 AD the Roman emperor Tiberius sent his nephew Germanicus to crown Zeno, a prince of Pontus, as king of Armenia. He took the name Artaxias III (18-34 AD) and the Romans minted silver coins to commemorate the event. (**Figure 11**) They were minted at Caesarea in Cappadocia

but the date of minting is uncertain.

Artaxias III issued no coins. Actually no coins were minted in Armenia after the reign of Tigranes V (6-12 AD). He was the grandson of Herod the Great, the king of Judaea, and he was appointed king of Armenia by the Roman emperor Augustus. (**Figure 12**) His bust

appears on the coins and is significant because images of descendants of Herod the Great are rare.

After the rise of Islam in the 7th century the situation changed in the Middle East. In the 11th century the Seljuk Turks invaded what is today eastern Turkey, and the Armenian territory was

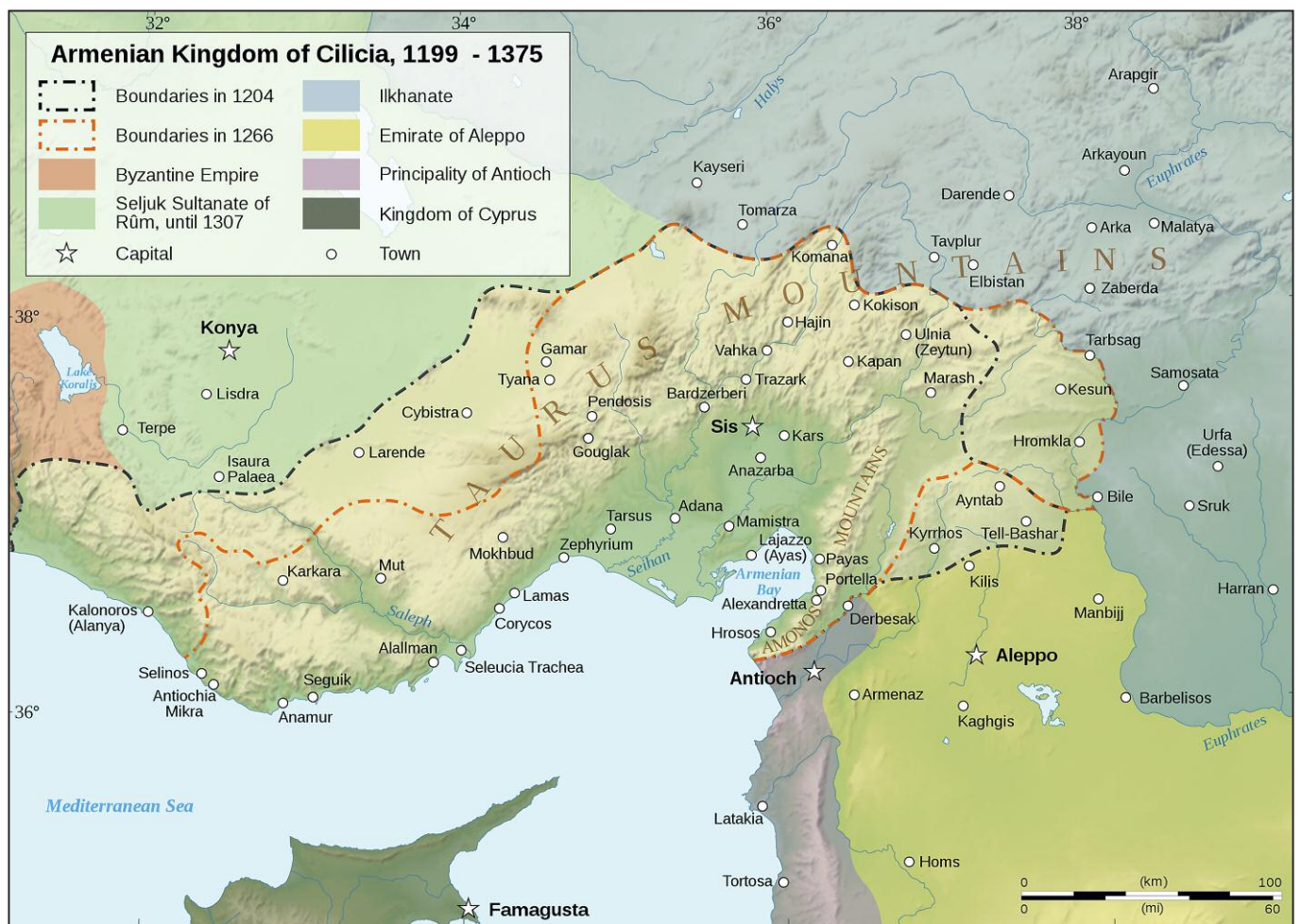


Figure 13 – Map of Armenian Cilicia. (Wikimedia Commons)

divided into Cilician Armenia and Greater Armenia in the north. (Figure 13 – map) Still no coins were minted in Greater Armenia which had been under the control of powerful neighbours, but the Armenian rulers of Cilician Armenia were prolific in minting gold, silver and bronze coins. The first of these to call himself king was Levon I (1198-1219). On almost all of his coins the inscriptions are in the Armenian script which was devised by Mesrop Mashtots in 405 AD. (Figure 14) The longest reign of all the rulers of Cilician Armenia was

that of Hetoum I (1226-1270). He had married Levon's daughter, Zabel, and she appears with him on some of his coins. (Figure 15)

In the 12th century the Crusaders had established states in the Middle East and they often cooperated with the Armenians, but by the end of the 13th century the Crusaders had been driven out and in 1375 Cilician Armenia was overrun by the Mamelukes from Egypt. In the 16th century all of the former Armenian territory was incorporated into the Otto-

Continued overleaf



Figure 14 – Silver coin (double tram) of Levon I (1198-1219). Diameter 28 mms. On the obverse the Armenian inscription means "Levon king of all the Armenians". On the reverse it means "by the will of God". Nercessian 268. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 155, Lot 376)



Figure 15 – Silver coin (tram) of Hetoum and Zabel. Diameter 20 mms. On the obverse the Armenian inscription means "By the will of God". On the reverse it means, "Hetoum king of the Armenians." Nercessian 336. (Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 85, Lot 102)



Figure 16 – 1000-dram coin commemorating the 1700th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity in Armenia. On the reverse is the Church of St Gregory of Abughamrentz at Ani. Ani is an ancient and ruined Armenian city near Kars in Turkey.

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Figure 17 – Photo of the Church of St Gregory of Abughamrentz at Ani. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Martin Lopatka)



Figure 18 – Reverse of a banknote commemorating the 1700th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity in Armenia. It shows Etchmiadzin Cathedral (See Figure 5). There is a holographic strip on the left. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 19 – Reverse of the banknote in Figure 18. St Gregory the Illuminator and King Tiridates III hold a model of Etchmiadzin Cathedral. A cross-stone (khachkar) is on the right. These elaborately carved stones are typical of medieval art in Armenia. (Wikimedia Commons)

man Empire, but with the expansion of the Russian Empire in the 19th century the eastern section of the territory came under Russian control in 1828.

During World War I the Armenians in Turkey west of the border between Russia and Turkey were considered by some ministers in the Turkish government to be a danger as they were a Christian minority in a predominantly Muslim country, and in 1915 these Turkish Armenians were driven south into the desert. About a million of them died, and this atrocity has been called the Armenian genocide. Australians were involved in sending relief to the survivors as recorded in the book *Armenia, Australia and the Great War* by Vicken Babkenian and Peter Stanley. It was published by the University of New South Wales Press in 2016. Professor Stanley was the Principal Historian of the Australian War Memorial from 1980 to 2013. Notable Australians with Armenian heritage include Gladys Berejikian, the Premier of New South Wales, and Joseph Hockey, a former Treasurer of Australia and Australian Ambassador to the United States of America.

In 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union the Armenians east of the border with Turkey declared themselves to be an independent republic. They have issued coins illustrating aspects of their culture and bearing inscriptions in Armenian and English. To commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity in Armenia they issued a series of coins (Figures 16 and 17), banknotes (Figures 18 and 19), and stamps. It is amazing to think that despite all the hardships that the Armenians have experienced during those years they have been true to their Christian faith.

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