

Armenian architect monopolies and the remaking of local identities in eastern Anatolia in the Hamidian period

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Having written my first book on Armenian architects, specifically looking at the Balyan family's ability to dominate imperial building works in the capital over three generations, I had been somewhat blinkered in my approach to Ottoman architectural history and had never expected to find such rich material as I stumbled upon in eastern Turkey. Four years ago, I moved to Mardin Artuklu University, where I was to work for three years. I had seen the picture-postcard views and I did not regard the celebrated 'urban fabric' (as Füsün Alioğlu put it) as being particularly characteristic of the transformations of the 19th century. However, already when I arrived for my interview, a member of the audience enquired if I had heard about the local architect Serkis Lole, an Armenian who had built prodigiously in Mardin. This was an indication of the treasure trove of information that I was soon to uncover, not only in Mardin, but across the region.

Through fieldwork in Mardin and in neighbouring cities (Diyarbakır, Antep and Urfa) and short trips to the Prime Ministry Archives in Istanbul, I started to notice the recurring story of Armenian architects who became powerful through local building works in the decades of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period spanning the reign of Abdülhamid II. These Armenians won the contracts for the 'new building types' of the post-reform age: schools, municipal buildings, government houses, barracks, for instance. They were also responsible for rebuilding churches and mansions belonging to local notables. Their control of local construction extended to training apprentices in stonecutting and extracting stone. In many cases they were known as *mimarbaşı* (chief architect), a title preserved through oral history and Armenian 'memory-book' literature, although no such official position existed.

These architects are not only interesting because of the degree of their local power, but because of the stylistic choices they made. They did not follow the fashions of Constantinople; their works made reference to local ornament and some even included visual quotations from the iconic buildings of that city's past. However, this localness was presented through the structures of the capital: the neo-classical façade, the entrance inscription and the *tuğra* (sultan's imperial monogram) showed that these were firmly 're-made' products of the Ottoman 19th century.

The reign of Abdülhamid II has been portrayed as a time of tightening control over the populations of the Ottoman east; the sultan is thought to have used his policies to set Armenians and Kurds on a collision path. The historiography of the rise of nationalism has also tended to view the radicalisation of these populations as the significant intellectual current. The impact of the Armenian architects in

shaping the urban environment – and moreover their relatively independent agency in doing so – helps to bring to the fore the local dynamics behind the Hamidian-era and early 20th-century crises.

This summer, thanks to a study grant from British Institute at Ankara, I was able to extend my field of enquiry to border-zone towns in the northeast. This allowed me to make comparisons with areas under Russian control (Gyumri, Batum and Kars), and to ask whether the phenomenon of Armenian architect monopolies and the stylistic localism of towns in eastern Anatolia were characteristics only of Ottoman rule or if these architects (and their styles) travelled across imperial borders.

I spent one final month in the Prime Ministry Archives, where I focused my research on Van, Bitlis and Erzurum, and I also looked at what could be found about building works in Kars. I was, by now, not surprised to learn that in Bitlis, Van and Erzurum there were Armenian architects who played a dominant role in constructing the municipality and government-house buildings, as well as schools and mansions. However, I noted a number of initiatives to regain Muslim control of the construction industry in locales like Erzurum, which coincided with a greater emphasis on security-related architecture. I also noted the extent to which the new buildings became targets during times of communal discord.

Travelling through Van, Bitlis, Erzurum and Kars, and seeing many buildings with Armenian inscriptions corroborated my findings from the archives. These towns also made clear to me that the buildings that were constructed with Russian ties had a different relationship to style. Although style could often be a reflection of training, it was striking to see that, even in (eastern Anatolian) areas that did have high Russian cultural influence, Armenians built in a localised manner. In the future, I hope to draw out further how and why these architects played an important role in the Hamidian-era reconfiguration of their respective border towns.



The municipality building (*belediye*) in Bitlis, built by Arakil Kalfa in 1898