

**R**eturning to a  
Great Excavation  
of the Past

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*a new joint project  
in Armenia*



**L**ocated in the Ararat Plain in Armenia, Dvin is one of the largest archaeological sites of the Central Near Eastern Highlands that include the territory of modern northeastern Turkey, the Caucasus, and northwestern Iran. Spreading over an area that exceeds four square kilometers, with its Citadel Mound rising to the height of 30 meters, the site contains remains of many civilizations dating back to at least the beginning of the third millennium BC, may be even substantially earlier. It occupies a location on the left bank of Azat River that is a left tributary of the Arax and comprises four distinct terraces formed by ancient remains: the Citadel Mound, the Lower Fortress, Midtown, and the Outer City.

*Opposite Page:*  
Mount Ararat looms over  
the site of Dvin. Photo  
by Gregory Areshian.

*Above:*  
Map of Armenia circa 1000  
A.D., showing the location of  
Dvin. Image courtesy of Ivan  
d'Hostingue (alias Sémhur),  
Wikimedia Commons.



**I**t was one of the first archaeological ruins in that part of the world that attracted the interest of European travelers and explorers. While the Ararat Plain still was a part of the Persian Empire ruled by the Qajar Dynasty, Dvin was visited in 1817 by Sir Robert Ker Porter on his way to the illustrious court of the Iranian Shahanshah ("King of kings") which was followed by his explorations at Persepolis and in Babylonia. Ker Porter left to posterity a sketch plan of

Christian antiquities of the Near East. The second theme brought them to Dvin where four small attempts at excavations have been made during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries which yielded only one important result: the location of a very large Christian cathedral with a mosaic floor was identified.

For obvious political reasons the Armenian national archaeological tradition has grown starting from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century within the Russian school of archae-

Dvin became the pivot and the longest continued excavation in Armenian archaeology. Its excavations started in 1937 as a large-scale project conducted by the Armenian Academy of Sciences with a participation of other Soviet scholars from archaeological institutions of Saint Petersburg (Leningrad). Four generations of archaeologists worked there with only a brief interruption during World War II until 1994 when the fieldwork completely froze because of absent funding in an environment of socio-economic turmoil...

the whole city of Dvin which nowadays has become an invaluable source of information since most of Dvin's Outer City has been absorbed by modern villages and their agricultural activities in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Thus, not surprisingly, after 1828 when eastern Armenia, including the Ararat Plain, was conquered by the armies of the Czars, Russian antiquarians and, later, archaeologists came to Dvin. The Caucasus was the only area within the borders of the Russian Empire where Russian archaeologists could excavate Ancient Near Eastern sites and, from that perspective, two themes had become predominant on their research agenda: the cuneiform civilization of Urartu and

ological thought and continued flourishing as a part of Soviet archaeology through the end of the 1980's. By that time three salient features were determining the trajectory of Armenian archaeology: (1) a tremendous amount of fieldwork in progress; (2) solid institutional development; (3) theoretical and methodological eclecticism. The latter was a specific blend of approaches derived from: (a) primitive social evolutionism, (b) intellectual nationalism, (c) historicism, (d) culture history, (e) systems theory as applied to analysis of sites and artifacts. Dvin became the pivot and the longest continued excavation in Armenian archaeology. Its excavations started in 1937 as a large-scale project conducted by the Armenian Academy of Sciences with a participation of other Soviet scholars from archaeological institutions of Saint Petersburg (Leningrad). Four generations of archaeologists worked there with only a brief interruption during World War II until 1994 when the fieldwork completely froze because of absent funding in an environment of socio-economic turmoil that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the re-emergence on its ruins of independent nation-states.

From 1937 to 1994 the excavations at Dvin had followed a single historicist-nationalist agenda. Its explicit and, sometimes, implicit goals were three-fold: (a)

*Below:  
Stone relief from a 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup>  
century church. Photo  
courtesy of the National His-  
tory Museum of Armenia.*





to illustrate major historical events with archaeological finds; (b) to complement the historical records with archaeological data concerning those areas of human activities which were not reflected in written texts; (c) to study and present the results of the excavations from a specific perspective of Armenian history. The historical focus of Dvin excavations was fully understandable – there hardly is another archaeological site in the Caucasus region which is mentioned so many times in Byzantine, Arabic, Armenian, Persian, and Georgian historical texts from Late Antiquity to the High Middle Ages, and almost all the excavations carried out during the five decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were concentrated on the site's later levels related to those sources.

The versatility of those historical references is truly amazing. They range from a description of the construction of a royal hunting castle in the 330's – 340's AD, which happened after a three century-long hiatus in occupation, to quotes from the city charter, to the description of international trade relations, to imperial ordinances concerning the city, to estimates of the number of its inhabitants, to references concerning its gradual decline in the 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Here are only few examples.

Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi describes the foundation of a royal residence at Dvin by Armenian Arsacid king Khosrov the Little (330's – early 340's AD), son of Tiridates, in the following paragraph of his Armenian History:

*"Khosrov ascended the throne during the eight year of sovereignty and with the help of Constantius and in the second year of the Persian king Ormizd1. ... He didn't display courage and didn't deserve good remembrance: his preoccupation was parading, hunting fowl and other game. For that purpose he planted by Azat River a forest that until today has his name on. He transfers the royal court to the hill above that forest where he built a palace cool (inside), which in the Persian language is called Dwin, which is translated as 'hill'." (G.E. Areshian's translation)*

Dvin became the capital of Armenia during the last three decades of the 5<sup>th</sup> century



Above:  
*Remains of the cathedral of St. Gregory the Illuminator, 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries. Photo by Aram Kalantarian.*

AD. Describing it in relation to the Byzantine military campaign of 543 AD against Persia Procopius of Caesarea, the famous Byzantine historian of Emperor Justinian, presents a picture drastically differing from images of crowded Mediterranean and Near Eastern cities of Late Antiquity:

*"Doubios (i.e. Dvin) is a land excellent in every respect, and especially blessed with a healthy climate and abundance of good water; ... In that region there are plains suitable for riding, and many very populous settlements*

Below:  
*Operation on the southern slope of the Citadel Mound. Photo by Gregory Areshian, 2007.*



1 This paragraph contains an anachronism: Hormizd II (303 – 309 AD) ruled before Constantius II (337 – 361 AD).





Top:  
Byzantine gold coins from  
an 11<sup>th</sup> century AD hoard  
found at Dvin. Photo cour-  
tesy of the National History  
Museum of Armenia.

Below:  
Corner of 4<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century  
AD monumental build-  
ing at Dvin. Photo by  
Gregory Areshian, 2007.

are situated in very close proximity to one another, and numerous merchants conduct their business in them. For from India and the neighboring regions of Iberia (i.e. Georgia) and from practically all the nations of Persia and some of those under Roman sway they bring in merchandise and carry on their dealings with each other there. And the priest of the Christians is called “Catholicos” in the Greek tongue, because he presides alone over the whole region.” (H.B. Dewing’s translation)

Procopius thus presents Dvin of his times as an agglomeration of commercial and

(as we know archaeologically) manufacturing towns within one metropolitan area centered around the Holy See of the Armenian Church and the residence of the Sasanian imperial governor who may have been either a representative of the senior Armenian aristocracy or a Persian appointee of the great King of kings of Iran.

The dramatic destruction of Dvin during the great earthquake that happened in December 893/January 894 (the month of Shawwāl of the Muslim calendar) is depicted by Tovma Artzruni (early 10<sup>th</sup> century):

*“The city of Dwin, place of the royal seat, full of people, enclosed in walled ramparts, with its spoiled traders and various sins ... was collapsed [by God] to the ground; he widely opened its [Earth’s] mouth like the hell throwing many into the chasm. Even the houses of some of those became graves for them. ... But it was because of the stone-like hearts of the Dwin citizens that he did not spare them. He also inflicted the earthquake damage upon the houses of prayer in sacred places, the walls of which were torn by shaking. ... And it has been said that the number of people killed from the earthquake was more than seventy thousand souls.”* (G.E. Areshian’s translation).

Arab historian Ibn al-Athīr (1160 – 1234) further dramatizes those indeed horrible events, but without reference to divine intervention:

*“And the moon of Shawwāl was darkened and the people of Dābil (i.e. Dvin) and of the country remained in darkness, and the darkness remained until evening when a black wind blew and lasted until the third hour of the night. And at the third hour of the night the city shook and was destroyed and barely a thousand houses were left standing. After that it shook five times and the number of those removed from under the ruins was one hundred and fifty thousand and all of them dead.”* (A. N. Ter-Ghewondyan’s and N. G. Garsoïan’s translation)

A comparison between these two excerpts provides us with a good insight into the processes of creation and transformation of historical narratives during the High Middle Ages and stresses the epistemological value of archaeology. First, the perception of the magnitude of the disaster had changed over time: it demonstrates a clear bias toward augmenting the supposed number of casualties thus exacerbating the feeling of tragedy. Artzruni was a contemporary of the earth-



quake, whereas Ibn al-Athir wrote three centuries later and they obviously used different sources. Second, differences between the two paradigms of historical writing are conspicuous. Artzruni focuses on the concept of inevitable punishment for committed sins,

in the Precinct which include the Cathedral of St. Gregory the Illuminator, a single-nave church, and two palaces of the patriarchs of the Armenian Apostolic Church: the earlier built in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century and destroyed in 572 AD, and the later – con-

## References to Dvin become very cursory toward the end of the High Middle Ages, which most likely reflects the decline of its role in the regional and international political, military, and economic developments.

while Ibn al-Athir's writing method is based on building emotional pressure through a detailed rendering of specific events, such as the month and the hour of occurrence (not recorded in Artzruni's text), the number of houses remaining after the initial shock, the number of aftershocks. But it is only the future archaeological work that will allow us to make a reasonably objective judgment concerning the real size of Dvin's population at that time and the consequences of the earthquake for the subsequent development of the city and the whole region. At this time it must be mentioned that previously conducted excavations had already revealed multiple traces of that powerful earthquake.

References to Dvin become very cursory toward the end of the High Middle Ages which most likely reflects the decline of its role in the regional and international political, military, and economic developments. Telling the story of the war of one of the last Great Seljuqs, Sultan Arslan b. Tughril (1160 – 1176) against the Georgians, a Persian chronicle *Saljūq-nāma* by Zahir al-Din Nishāpūrī (late 12<sup>th</sup> century) mentions Dvin two times:

*"The Sultan became ill on the road to the city of Dūwīn. There was a halt for two or three days. ... The illness of the Sultan was prolonged, and they came from the castle of Al.k.yā to the fortress of Dūwīn which they now call the Fortress of Ādhar. Forty days later they arrived at the banks of the Aras (Arax River)."* (K.A. Luther's translation)

Previous excavations had indeed provided ample archaeological evidence that allows us to clarify and complement the historical sources. In Midtown the Sacred Precinct of the Holy See of the Armenian Church established here in 470's–480's AD was discovered. Several monumental architectural assemblages have been partially excavated with-

structed at the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The second was occupied by Byzantine Emperor Constans II during his military campaigns in the East. On the summit of the Citadel Mound and on its western slope the remains of several blocks of residential buildings and workshops dating to the 10<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries were excavated, underneath which were uncovered the remains of 8<sup>th</sup> century palace of the governor appointed by the Umayyad Caliph. The excavations of earlier levels on the Citadel Mound discovered a tri-nave Christian basilica dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD which overlaid the building remains of a Hellenistic settlement (2<sup>nd</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC). A distinct hiatus separates the latter from the underlying level of conflagration that marks the end of a very large Early Iron Age settlement (11<sup>th</sup> – early 8<sup>th</sup> century BC) which has not been excavated yet to any substantial degree. We may also infer from accidental finds originating from different parts of the ancient city that the remains of a very large Early Bronze Age settlement (roughly pre-dating 2400 BC) exist beneath the levels of the Early Iron Age.



Above:  
Charlie Steinmetz wielding a  
bronze sword from the Final  
Bronze Age, 1300–1000 BC.  
Photo by Gregory Areshian.



*Top:*  
Gold earrings with pearls,  
9<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century AD. Photo  
courtesy of the National His-  
tory Museum of Armenia.

*Below:*  
Faience cup, imported from  
Iran, 10<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century AD.  
Photo courtesy of the National  
History Museum of Armenia.

Enormous collections containing tens of thousands of artifacts, some of which documented better than others, have been gathered throughout the decades of Dvin excavations. Those are kept at the National Museum of History of Armenia in Yerevan, at the National Museum of Ethnography at Sardarapat, and at the dig-house built at Dvin after World War II. Sculptures, jewelry, faience, glass, and pottery, architectural details and stucco decorations, weapons and tools, and several thousand coins discovered at Dvin reflect sociopolitical, economic,

and cultural processes, and the daily lives of Dvin's citizenry from Late Antiquity through the High Middle Ages. Some groups of artifacts, such as sealings, glass, and coins found before the late 1970's have been meticulously investigated and published in Armenian and Russian languages in a number of monographs. Other groups of finds still require further study and publication. General summaries of excavations carried out through the early 1980's are presented in the books by K.G. Ghafadaryan and A.A. Kalantaryan. Scholars that had studied Dvin during the 20<sup>th</sup> century made important contributions toward a construction of artifact typology and the understanding of chronology. Their research has vastly complemented the data from the historical records especially with regard to crafts and international commerce. Moreover, studies of the excavated evidence allow us to unveil essential errors in historical accounts. For example, the archaeological finds unambiguously refute historical chronicles that ascribe the complete destruction of Dvin and its final abandonment to the Mongol conquest in 1236. No traces of destruction related to the Mongols have been uncovered so far. To the contrary: glazed pottery dating to the late 13<sup>th</sup> century together with Anatolian (Rumi) Seljuq and Georgian coins of Kay Khusrau II (1242 – 1243) and David Ulu (after 1247) were found which tells us that urban life, although in a state of decline, continued at Dvin for several decades after the Mongol conquest.

That was the state of researches by 1994 when the excavations at Dvin were interrupted. Since then, the Armenian and several Western archaeological institutions have contemplated the possibility of resuming the studies of Dvin, yet only in August 2006 Dvin became the focal point of the cooperation agreement signed between the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA and the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia.

Resuming the study of such a major site that has a long history of previous excavations is a very challenging task. In the process of designing the plan for a new long-term project we have to take into account the uniqueness of the research situation. The new strategic approach derives from several imperatives: (A) the nationalistic research agenda must



be replaced with a new theoretical vision that would allow us, using Dvin as a basis, to formulate and explore such research questions which can contribute to an understanding of socio-cultural processes on a regional and global scale; (B) the major disproportions between the studies of different parts of the site and between different chronological periods must be corrected; therefore substantial efforts must be devoted to the study of stratigraphy, the excavations of Early Iron Age and earlier remains, and the exploration of the settlement dynamics which will require substantial work in the Outer City; (C) contextual studies of complete assemblages have never been done at Dvin, therefore they become top priority (D) not a single major architectural complex has been completely excavated and published so far together with its stratigraphic record and related artifacts; the completion of studies of those complexes is another important goal; (E) a new system of field recording that would allow for a computerized processing of information must be introduced; (F) the vast collections of artifacts gathered during the 20<sup>th</sup> century fieldwork must be re-studied; (G) conservation works must become an integral part of future explorations. Reaching these goals would allow us to create an archaeological reconstruction of an anthropological regional history which, in its turn, should become an independently developed component of an interdisciplinary history.

Several major research topics that may be developed at Dvin already are clearly visible. First, as one of the largest Early Bronze Age sites (first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC) in the Central Near Eastern Highlands Dvin may contain many clues for an understanding of the trajectory of transformation of a unique civilization which has been known as the Early Transcaucasian or Kura-Arax culture. Spreading from the Dagestan in the Russian Federation in the northeast to Palestine in the southwest (whence the re-

Ancient Near East during the times of Early Dynastic Mesopotamia. Since we may hypothesize that Dvin was one of the principal centers (if not the capital city) of the Early Iron Age (11<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> centuries BC) political-military confederacy of Etiuni, the study of respective levels may shed light on the issue of differences and commonalities in the processes of primary and secondary state formation in the northern part of the Ancient Near East. As one of the cities that have played a crucially important role in the relations between Byzantium and Iran (4<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) Dvin presents us with a unique opportunity to develop an archaeology of sociopolitical dynamics in the borderlands between the superpowers of Late Antiquity. A historical-archaeological study of Dvin may become a major contribution to the study of collective identities during the periods from Late Antiquity through the High Middle Ages. As the capital city of Armenia for 500 years (from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> through the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) Dvin and its population had been at the center of the processes of transformation of the Armenian national identity, the formation of which begun no later than the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. From a broad anthropological-archaeological-historical perspective this direction of our researches at Dvin may clar-



*Above:  
Glazed bowl depicting a  
stork killing a snake, 9<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup>  
century AD.*

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cently suggested term “Dagestan-Palestinian archaeocultural area” – DPAA) it was the largest cultural-geographic entity in the

ify the subject of emergence and transformation of ethnic, and broadly conceived, social identities in frontier situations. And



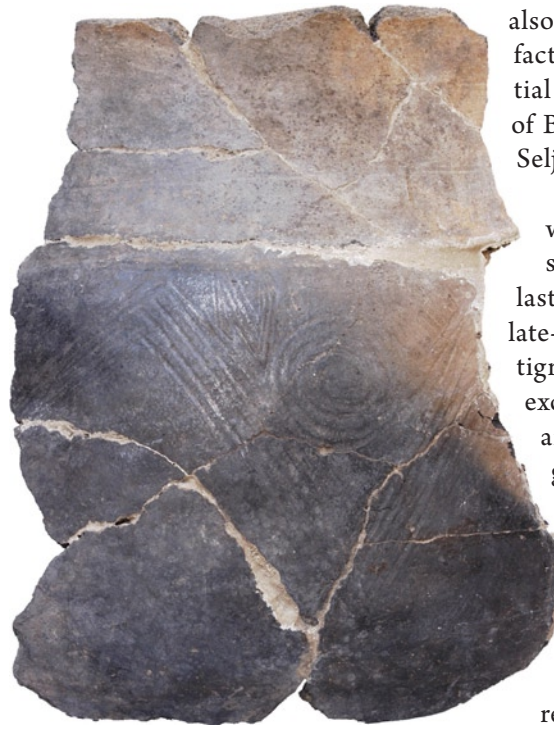
*Top:  
Fragment of a black burnished  
pythos, Early Bronze Age circa  
2700–2500 BC. From the Citadel  
Mound. Photo courtesy of the Na-  
tional History Museum of Armenia.*

*Middle:  
Stone box and lid from a similar  
box. Pre-7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Photo  
by Gregory Areshian, 2007.*

*Bottom:  
Stucco decoration from the 11<sup>th</sup>–  
12<sup>th</sup> century palace in the citadel.  
Photo courtesy of the National  
History Museum of Armenia.*

*Opposite Page Top:  
Waste from a dumpster at a pot-  
tery kiln. 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.*

*Opposite Page Bottom, left to right:  
Aram Kalantarian, Charlie Stein-  
metz, Charles Stanish, and Gregory  
Areshian in the exhibit hall of the dig  
house at Dvin. September 2007.*



also we should not underestimate the fact that the site has a very substantial potential from the perspectives of Byzantine, Iranian, Caliphate, and Seljuq studies.

With this long-term view in mind we conducted the first excavation season of the joint project which lasted from the end of August through late-October 2007. Studying the stratigraphy of the site and completing the excavations of previously discovered architectural complexes will be the goal of the first several campaigns, which later will be complemented by an extensive survey of the Outer City. In order to link previous excavations with our new fieldwork, the 1937 grid established by Nicholas Tokarskii was restored by the architect of our expedition Koryun Ghafadaryan. The excavations were carried out in six loci of the site. Two of those loci included squares started at the southern (top of the Citadel Mound, supervisors Frina Babayan and Gayane Kocharyan) and northern (foot of the Lower Fortress tell, supervisor Irena Kalantarian) ends of the stratigraphic step-trench. We think that the approximately 50 meter-long step-trench, when completed (which may require 12 – 15 field seasons), may reveal the stratigraphic sequence of the northern part of the Citadel Mound from its top to the virgin soil level beneath the tell. The work in two loci on the southern edge of the Lower Fortress terrace (supervisor Aghavni Zhamkochyan) opened the upper part of the southwestern corner of the monumental Arsacid or Sasanian (presumably palatial) plastered building, and the overlying remains of the later, 10<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries habitations which must be excavated during several coming seasons and removed in order to excavate the monumental building itself. In the Sacred Precinct located in Midtown excavations were carried out in the southwestern part of the First Patriarchal Palace (supervisors Nyura Hakobyan and Diana Mirijanian) where a tri-dimensional stratigraphic sequence consisting of five superimposed layers that cover the period from the 4<sup>th</sup> – early 5<sup>th</sup> through the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD was clearly identified. Finally, at the western edge of the Citadel Mound





top a small area with the deposits of the Hellenistic Period was excavated (supervisor Gayane Kocharyan) beneath the remains of the palace of the Caliphate governor.

Simultaneously with the excavations Hans Barnard collected pottery samples for the natural-scientific residue analyses in order to identify the content of ancient vessels. This kind of research is conducted for the first time in this part of the Near East. The Dvin Expedition was very pleased to host the Cotsen Institute Director Charles Stanish and the Institute Director's Council Member Charlie Steinmetz who actively participated to the fieldwork and discussed with us and our Armenian colleagues many aspects of future US – Armenian cooperation in archaeology and related fields of the social sciences and the humanities. We look forward to the coming excavation and study seasons at Dvin and related sites in Armenia. ■



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