

Civilization Lost and Re-discovered, International Efforts for Advocacy and Conservation of Ani Archaeological Site

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Abstract

Located in modern-day eastern Türkiye, Ani was the ancient capital of the prosperous Armenian Bagratid period in the Middle Ages renowned as the “City of 1,001 Churches”. Unfortunately, due to a series of massive earthquakes, shifting trade routes and periodic conflict, Ani’s great buildings were abandoned before the 17th century, leaving the expansive ruins of the city unattended and exposed to the elements. World Monuments Fund (WMF) has maintained a presence at the site in Kars Province, Türkiye since its inclusion on the 1996 World Monuments Watch, which raised international awareness of the need for protection of this significant built fabric. The decades-long project has integrated professionals from Türkiye, Armenia, Iran, Russia and the United States, making the preservation of Ani a truly international endeavor and establishing a model for project-focused international collaboration. This paper sets forth some of the key considerations and components in the establishment of a collaborative preservation that facilitates regional coordination, international cooperation, and global cultural exchange.

Keywords

Ani Archaeological Site, World Monuments Fund, Cultural Heritage Conservation, International Efforts.

Ani in Historical Context

Located in modern-day eastern Türkiye, Ani was the ancient capital of the prosperous Armenian Bagratid Dynasty (885-1095 CE) and renowned as the “City of 1,001 Churches”. Flourishing as a branch of the Silk Road, Ani had a population of well over 100,000, earning a reputation that rivaled that of Constantinople. Ani’s churches, monasteries, mosques, citadels, palaces, bridges and towers represent traces of a multi-cultural meeting place of Medieval Armenian, Byzantine, Seljuk, Georgian, and Islamic cultures, among others.

The Ani Archaeological Site presents a uniquely holistic view of the evolution of medieval Armenian architecture through examples of almost all the different architectural innovations of the region between the 7th and 13th centuries CE such as the Kamsaragans Palace and the ruins of Palace Church within the area of citadel as well as the Cathedral of Ani (Fethiye Mosque), the Church of the Holy Redeemer (Surp Amenap’rkitch), the Fire Temple, the Virgin’s Monastery, the Georgian Church, the Rock-Cut Chapel, the Tigran Honents Church in the walled City of Ani¹. Among them, Ani Cathedral and the Church of the Holy Redeemer, the two most significant and sacred extant heritage buildings stand out from the prosperous Armenian Bagratid period.



Fig. 1 Ani Archaeological Site, the World Heritage Site, 2022 (Photo: WMF)

Founded in c. 989 C.E, Ani Cathedral was constructed by Queen Katramide and designed by Trdat, one of the most celebrated architects of the time, who went on to supervise the reconstruction of Hagia Sophia following its partial collapse a few years later. The Church of the Holy Redeemer was built by Prince Abulgharib Pahlavuni as a reliquary for a fragment of the True Cross, completed in 1035. These two heritage buildings showcase early examples of a style of religious architecture that some consider a precursor to the European Gothic style. They are geometrically sophisticated, innovative, and skillfully crafted, and many of the decorative exterior surfaces and surviving sections contain Armenian inscriptions that preserve precious insight into political, economic, religious, and social history.

Complex Interaction and Shared Cultures

Unfortunately, once renowned for its splendor and magnificence, Ani began a long decline due to massive earthquakes that flattened the city, shifting trade routes and periods of conflict, eventually leading to abandonment that left the expansive city unattended and exposed to the elements for centuries. Despite their poor state of conservation, Ani Cathedral and the Church of the Holy Redeemer continued to serve as spiritual havens and important pilgrimage sites for Armenians – as well as Zoroastrians, Christians, and Muslims – for centuries after the end of the Bagratid Dynasty.

In the centuries since, the landscape of ruins has often been viewed romantically as the site of a lost civilization by writers and travelers². Sadly, much of the city's historic records and artifacts were destroyed or looted and public access to the site was officially prohibited by the government of Türkiye as a military zone until recently. Meanwhile, numerous historic structures in the archaeological zone continued to deteriorate: the dome of Ani Cathedral totally collapsed during the 19th century and the eastern half of the Church of the Holy Redeemer was lost in the early 20th century when lightning struck the building.

Inscriptions on the two buildings and other structures in the Archaeological Site attest to the various communities that lived within or passed through Ani, written not only in Armenian but also Greek, Arabic, Georgian,

Turkish, and Persian. These buildings speak to the shifting but shared cultures of Ani, preserving traces of a dynamic and diverse urban center. The site's history is truly multicultural, and the memory, accomplishments, and culture of Ani should be valued and passed on to future generations.

International Efforts for Advocacy and Conservation

For decades, Ani suffered from neglect and stood as an abandoned ruin within a closely guarded military zone. This changed with the newfound international attention, and particularly the advocacy and intervention of the World Monuments Fund (WMF) and its local and international partners. Since the Watch announcement in 1996, WMF has worked closely with Turkish and Armenian governments to galvanize support for the site and its preservation, simultaneously raising awareness globally about the importance and urgency of the Archaeological Site of Ani. These efforts attracted funding and technical support that made the decades-long project at the site possible.

Re-discovery and recovery of Ani's invaluable cultural heritage is international and local joint efforts. WMF partners with ICOMOS Armenia, the Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research (NIKU), Anadolu Kültür and Association for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in Türkiye for exploration of Ani to develop a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the architectural heritage of the region. Meanwhile, WMF works directly with the Turkish government's Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Directorate General for Cultural Heritage and Museums (KVMGM) for conservation and promotion of Ani Archaeological Site, sponsoring by U.S. Department of State's Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation, International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas, American Express among others.

Through its consecutive Watch listings in 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2002, WMF conducted a series of field missions, including site survey and structural assessment. In 2010, WMF built partnerships with the Turkish authority by signing a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding, and jointly launched a conservation project to conduct site documentation, excavation, emergency stabilization, restoration and promotion for Ani Cathedral and the Church of the Holy Redeemer. In addressing urgent conservation issues, this project follows the Strategic Conservation Master Plan and the Management Plan³ to ensure the interventions are in accordance with appropriate conservation science and guidelines.

In partnership with a multidisciplinary professional team, WMF jointly held an international workshop, "Ani in Context" in 2013. This workshop extended beyond the Ani Archaeological Site to include other important heritage sites in the region and to consider their relationship to Ani⁴. Based on the outcomes of the workshop, the team proposed the first-ever complete survey of the region and developed an inventory of once lost and lesser known heritage sites: the Sılk Road, a significant religious focal point of the Bagratid Kingdom as its summer palace, holding extraordinary significance for world history and art⁵. WMF included the Cathedral of Mren on its 2014 Watch and conducted preliminary documentation and analysis, including a full 3D laser scan of the structure, and created the initial outline of an emergency conservation plan.



Fig. 2 WMF's Technical Control Team inspecting damage of Ani Cathedral, 2009 (Photo: WMF)



Fig. 3 Ani Cathedral in the process of stabilization and restoration, 2022 (Photo: WMF)



Fig. 4 The Church of the Holy Redeemer in dire condition (before physical intervention), 2009 (Photo: WMF)



Fig. 5 The Church of Holy Redeemer in the process of excavation and restoration, 2022 (Photo: WMF)

Later, the work at Ani continued and the emergency stabilization of the Church of the Holy Redeemer was completed in 2018. Since then, masonry interventions such as infill and reconstruction have been carried out to stabilize the west wall of the church. Completion of this work is planned for the summer of 2023. At Ani Cathedral, emergency stabilization has included the installation of a temporary steel support structure inside and outside that also provides access for masonry work throughout the 2022 and 2023 work seasons.

The ongoing projects aim to provide a conservation, management and maintenance model for protection of other historic structures at Ani Archaeological Site and across Eastern Anatolia and the Southern Caucasus, with the



Fig. 6 The deteriorated condition of Mren Cathedral, 1990s (Photo: WMF)



Fig. 7 Collapse and urgent structural threat at Mren, 2022 (Photo: WMF)

Technical Control Team, an unprecedented international collaboration integrating preservation professionals such as seismologist, conservator, architect, engineer, mason, historian among others from Türkiye, Armenia, Iran, Russia, Macedonia and the United States. This team's members are assigned by WMF and KVMGM, who are responsible for making suggestions and evaluations concerning specification and quality throughout implementation phases of the work at site.

After two decades of continuous international efforts, the World Heritage Committee inscribed the Ani Archaeological Site on the World Heritage List in 2016. The increasing number of local and international tourists and improvement of tourism infrastructure brings unprecedented opportunity not only for economic activities but also social and cultural communication. Ani Archaeological Site has transformed from a seat of conflict and geopolitical instability to a center of cultural tourism that promotes cultural exchange and historical insight.

Conclusion: World Heritage Site as Vehicle for Sustainable Development and Regional Cooperation

Ani's invaluable cultural heritage represents both the triumph of human achievement and the tragedy of conflict. This former Armenian capital city is now located within the Republic of Türkiye and, therefore, the conservation of ruins and their interpretation are subject to political influences and relations between the neighboring countries. Ani needs sustained, long-term attention that WMF and its partners are in a vital position to facilitate communications and cooperation between the stakeholders, working together so that all voices are heard during the process.

When inscribing Ani Archaeological Site on the UNESCO World Heritage List, the 40th Session of the World Heritage Committee Member States highlighted⁶:

[...] the cosmopolitan setting of medieval Ani is a potential model for the improvement of the contemporary international relations in the region, starting from the involvement of the international community in the efforts to preserve this exceptional multi-cultural archaeological site.

The involvement of WMF and its partners serves as the role of a shared platform for activating the facilitation,



Fig. 8 Armenia mason Arayik Avetyan (left) and Turkish site manager Ömer Özger (right) developed brotherhood relationship during this collaborative project (Photo: WMF)

design and implementation of a conservation project while enabling the site to function as an accessible, sustainable tourist destination to benefit the local population through international and local joint efforts.

Kars Province is largely agrarian and a center for raising cattle. Due to a lack of continuous employment and educational opportunities, young people and their families often leave Kars, and the Oçaklı village near, Ani in particular, for larger cities. Over the course of nearly two decades of conservation and promotion of Ani Archaeological Site, the region has transitioned from a protected military zone with limited public access to a popular cultural tourism destination.

Thanks to the authority's investment in infrastructure and opening to visitation, the number of domestic and international tourists to the ancient city of Ani has increased significantly to include visitors from Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and other European countries. The development of tourism in the area has directly benefited local residents, creating new employment opportunities and building local capacity for business and heritage site management.

Ani Archaeological Site conservation project represents an important lesson in building a viable, collaborative model for the preservation of a remarkable World Heritage Site, and in facilitating regional collaboration, international cooperation, and global cultural exchange.

¹ *Virtual Ani*. <http://www.virtualani.org/> (accessed Sept 28, 2022)

² VERONICA PARKES, *Ani: The Ghost City of 1001 Churches*, Ancient Origins: Reconstructing the Story of Humanity's Past. <https://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-asia/church-ruins-ani-ghost-city-008435>, July 23, 2021 (accessed Sept 28, 2022)

³ The plans were prepared by Turkish government's Ministry of Culture and Tourism, based on the preliminary research, survey and assessment conducted by the joint efforts between WMF and KVMGM.

⁴ The publication of Ani in Context Workshop at Ani Archaeological Site can be access via <https://www.wmf.org/publication/ani-context-workshop>, with three languages including English, Turkish and Armenian.

⁵ MARANCI, CHRISTINA. *Field Report on World Monuments Fund Ani Mission, July 31 to August 9 2022*, Aug. 20, 2022, pp 2-5

⁶ *Archaeological Site of Ani was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List*. <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/archaeological-site-ani-was-inscribed-unesco-world-heritage-list> (accessed Aug. 28, 2022)