

# Ani

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Ani is a ruined medieval city situated on the Turkish side of the border between Turkey and Armenia, within Kars province. Often called the “City of 1001 Churches,” it became the prosperous capital of the Bagratid Kingdom of Armenia in 961. Straddling key trade routes that linked the Byzantine Empire, Persia, and Central Asia, Ani’s population is estimated to have exceeded 100,000 at its peak.

After the fall of the Bagratid kingdom, control of Ani changed hands repeatedly. The Byzantines seized it in 1045 but lost it to the Seljuk Turks in 1064. In 1072, the city passed to the Kurdish Shaddadid dynasty, who ruled as vassals of the Seljuks. Georgian forces captured Ani briefly in 1124, 1161, and 1174; a fourth, decisive conquest in 1199 placed the city under the Georgian-Armenian Zakarian (Mkhargrdzeli) princes, whose rule ushered in a final period of prosperity. The Mongols sacked Ani in 1236, and shifting trade routes after the mid 1300s accelerated its decline. By the late 1700s or early 1800s, the city was abandoned.

Ani became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1579 but became strategically important again only after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, when Kars province was ceded to Russia. In 1892, the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences initiated the first systematic excavations under Nikolai Marr, unearthing thousands of artifacts and publishing extensive studies. Fieldwork halted in 1917-18 as Russian archaeologists withdrew ahead of advancing Turkish forces, removing many portable finds; several of these are now housed in the History Museum of Armenia in Yerevan. Objects left on site were subsequently looted or destroyed.

Following the Turkish reoccupation of Kars province in 1918, the nationalist government demonstrated little interest in preserving Ani. Decades of neglect, treasure-hunting, and earthquakes caused further damage. Because the site lay within a sensitive frontier zone, public access was tightly restricted until 2004. Consequently, most Turkish citizens were unaware of its existence, while for Armenians, it remained a potent symbol of lost heritage.

Large-scale Turkish-led excavations commenced in 1995, followed by restoration projects starting in 1999; several of these initiatives drew criticism for departing from accepted conservation practices. Since the 1990s, blasting operations at a stone quarry on the Armenian side of the border have also threatened the already fragile monuments.

Recognition of Ani’s significance has grown in the early 2000s. Conservation standards have improved, international specialists have been invited to advise on emergency stabilization measures, and in 2016, Ani was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Nevertheless, many structures remain in urgent need of careful restoration and long-term protection.

## Further Reading List

Cowe, S. Peter (ed.). 2002. [Ani: World Architectural Heritage of a Medieval Armenian Capital](#). Peeters.

Edwards, Robert W. 1983. *Ani: A Forgotten City of the Christian Near East*. Caravan Books.

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