

Christian Antioch and Edessa and the Sources of Armenian Christianity



King Abgar from Gaidzakian, Illustrated Armenia and Armenians (1898)

Today, we are going to discuss a different kind of **source**: a place. Source, as we have been using it in this column, a text or [inscription](#) or any kind of record for historical or other intellectual endeavor, is already a metaphor! Source, as a spring or a fountain, often the starting point of a river or a stream, is the concrete meaning from which all subsequent meanings are derived. So, a source is the place (or thing) from which something emerges. For Christians, God is the source of all creation, and His Son Jesus Christ is the source of life. We can say that Jerusalem, as the location of the “drama of salvation” is the source of that salvation. Yet in the history of Christianity, many other locations played an incredibly important role in the spread of Christianity and the development of Christian thought. These places were *sources*, founts from which a stream of Christian thinking emerges and to which we can still return—at the very least intellectually—to be refreshed and sustained. Pilgrimage is a practice that makes this return to places that are salvific sources concrete. Many of these places have inspirational histories and many have been foundational sources of Christian thinking. Antioch and Edessa, the present-day cities of Antakya and Urfa in Turkey, are just those kinds of places.

The Book of Acts tells us that “the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (11:26). Of course, many disciples of Christ had been teaching and preaching the Good News before then, but we can say that it was in Antioch, an important city in the Roman Empire with a sizeable Jewish population, where those disciples were recognized not merely as a Jewish sect, but as something new, as *Christians*. Antioch remained a crucial city for early Christianity, and this week, on Monday, the Armenian Church commemorates St. Lucian of Antioch. St. Lucian, who some sources say was educated in Edessa—making a nice connection between the two cities we are discussing— lived in the late 3rd and early 4th centuries and was ordained a presbyter (what we would today call a priest) in Antioch. Many of the details of his life come from Eusebius of Caesarea (an important early source of Church history mentioned before). Lucian was caught up in the theological controversies of his time, especially because the Bishop of Antioch, Paul of Samosata was one of the most

notorious heretics of the time. However, during Roman persecutions of Christians, he refused to renounce Christianity, dying as a witness and martyr to Christ.

St. Lucian also, according to some sources, founded a school in Antioch. Later scholars have made the connection to the later, very important **School of Antioch**, which produced some of the most important—and controversial—Christian thinkers of the 4th and 5th centuries. St. John Chrysostom, the revered Orthodox theologian whose writings were some of the first translated into Armenian, was perhaps the School’s most famous student. His teacher, Diodore of Tarsus, and his classmate, Theodore of Mopsuestia, while ultimately falling on the wrong side of the doctrinal arguments of the day, together are the source of one of the major forms of Biblical interpretation (**exegesis**). In fact, in late antiquity, two Christian centers, Antioch and Alexandria, became almost synonymous with two different ways of reading the Bible. We will discuss this in more detail in future columns, but very briefly, Antioch was associated with a **literal** reading of the Bible while Alexandria was known for its **allegorical** method. While the Christology—the theological understanding of *who Christ is*—of the Armenian Apostolic Church is closer to the school of Alexandria, the method of reading Scripture later developed by Armenian *vartabeds* has some resonance with the methods described by Diodore and Theodore. Antioch was thus the source of some of the most important theology of the early Church.

Recommended Source	Comments
East of Antioch: Studies in Early Syriac Christianity	A collection of essays about Syriac Christianity, describing the historic role of the cities of Antioch and Edessa.
The History of the Armenians	The classic Armenian history by Movses Khorenatsi, in a translation by Robert Thomson. Khorenatsi gives the story of King Abgar of Edessa, making him an Armenian!
Buzandaran	An anonymous early Armenian history, translated by Nina Garsoïan. Compared to other early Armenian histories, it gives more details about the Syriac influence on Armenian Christianity.

Further east of Antioch lies Edessa, modern-day Urfa (or Şanlıurfa), which had been a major center of the Seleucid Empire that emerged after Alexander the Great. At the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry, Edessa was the capital of a kingdom called Osroene. Eusebius is the first to report the story that King Abgar V actually carried out a written correspondence with Jesus, saying that he read the letter in the archives in Edessa. There is also a story that in addition to letters, Abgar received a cloth with a likeness of Jesus’ face on it, arguably the first icon of the Christian Church. After this correspondence, Abgar converted to Christianity, by some accounts making him the first Christian king. The Armenian Church remembers King Abgar every Sunday in the litany for the “devout kings” shortly before the Lord’s Prayer. The Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi elaborates on the story from Eusebius, making Abgar an Armenian!

So, Edessa, like Antioch, was a crucial early center for Christianity. While Antioch was initially more prominent, one of the five recognized patriarchal centers of the early Church, in the history of Christianity in the East, Edessa has perhaps been a more lasting

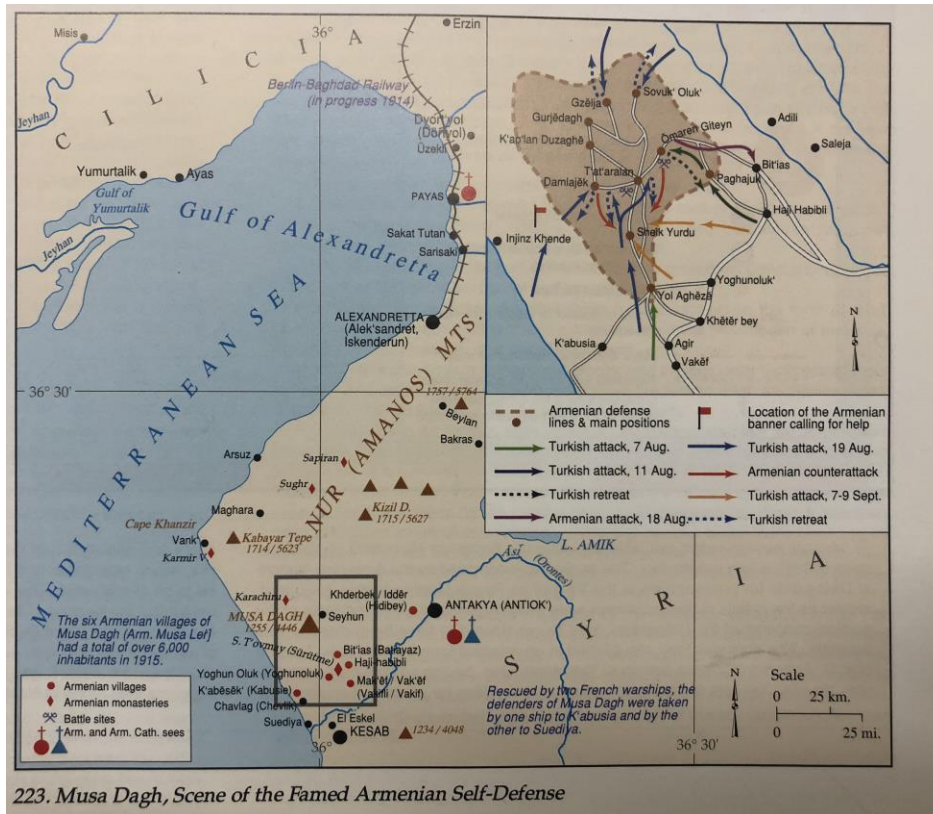
source of spiritual nourishment. Antioch maintained its position as patriarchal center for our Sister Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church, but Edessa was home to many inspiring theologians. Most prominent among these was Ephrem the Syrian, whose beautiful and theologically rich poetry (among other genres) has inspired countless Christians in both the East and the West. Translations of his work appeared early in Armenian and there are Armenian hymns attributed to him! The *Peshitta*, an important Syriac translation of the Old Testament, was probably translated around Edessa. In fact, the Syriac language, still the liturgical language of the Syriac Orthodox Church, is the dialect of Aramaic from around Edessa. Syriac Christianity, centered in Antioch and Edessa, was one of the major strands of early Christianity.

This Syriac Christianity was perhaps the earliest Christian influence in Armenia. Following Agathangelos, the Armenian Church recognizes St. Gregory as the Illuminator of Armenia. Raised in Caesarea in Cappadocia (today's Kayseri in Turkey), St. Gregory demonstrates the importance of the Greek Cappadocia for Armenian Christianity. Yet the other, "southern" influence of Syriac-speaking Christian missionaries and thinkers was also crucial in the formation of early Armenian Christianity. Other historians, such as Movses Khorenatsi, and especially the book of history known as the *Buzandaran*, place more emphasis on this Syriac Christianity and its place in the Armenian Christian tradition. That Syriac Christianity has as its source the city of Edessa.

Recommended Source	Comments
Armenian Tigranakert/Diarbekir and Edessa/Urfa	Edited by Richard Hovannisian, a collection of essays about the region including Edessa/Urfa.
Patmut'wn Matt'ēosi Urhayets'woy	The medieval history offering an Armenian perspective on the Crusades and Crusader Kingdoms. In Armenian.
The Armenian Prayers Attributed to Ephrem the Syrian	Translated by Edward Mathews, these are prayers attributed to Ephrem the Syrian found only in Armenian.
The Forty Days of Musa Dagh	The classic novel by Franz Werfel, based on the true story of the defense of the villages clustered on Musa Dagh, a coastal mountaintop outside Antioch.

These two cities, Antioch and Edessa, have been major sources of Christian thinking, spiritual poetry, and Biblical commentaries. The Bible and early Christian histories tell us that saints walked the streets of these ancient cities. As such, they should be a source of inspiration to us. These two cities continued to play a role in the history of Christianity, as well as in the history of the Armenian people. During the Crusades, Edessa became a County and Antioch became the capital of a Crusader kingdom. After Edessa was captured in 1144, St. Nersess Shnorhali wrote a *Lament for the Fall of Edessa*. Armenian historians, such as Matthew of Edessa, wrote about the Crusader era from the perspective of Armenians. Armenians lived in and around both of these cities until the Genocide. In fact, one of the mountains outside of Antioch is one of the most famous mountains in Armenian history: Musa Dagh, the site of the resistance immortalized in Franz Werfel's novel *The*

Forty Days of Musa Dagh. Today, Vakifli, on the slopes of the mountains, is the last remaining Armenian village in Turkey. Antioch and Edessa can continue to be sources of inspiration and learning for us!



A map detailing the defense of Musa Dagh, from Hewsen (2001).

Don't forget to check out the Zohrab Information Center's Instagram [@zohrabcenter](https://www.instagram.com/zohrabcenter) for pictures from Antioch and Vakifli taken by the Director.