

FOURTEEN PARAGRAPHS ABOUT ASIA MINOR, aka ANATOLIA**Text and photos by João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira**Senior Professor of the Tércio Pacitti Institut
of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*Great deeds are usually wrought at great risks.*

Herodotus

*I am indebted to my father for living, but to my
teacher for living well.*

Alexander the Great

*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord
and believe in your heart that God raised him
from the dead, you will be saved.*

Saint Paul the Apostle

1 If we consider the proportion between territorial size and concentration of historical and archaeological treasures, we will be forced to admit that the term “Asia Minor” is paradoxical, not to say contradictory in such sense, given the fact that, in the entire Near East, we will not find a territory that rivals Asia Minor in this proportion. Asia Minor has never ceased to offer us many ancient cities, many stories, many legends, many unanswered questions, and many answers that raise new questions.



Cappadocia, at the heart of Asia Minor

2 It all began about 2.6 million years ago, with the volcanic eruption of Morte Argaios, responsible for the formation of ash and soft rocks made of lava, which are inviting for subtractive architecture, all of them covering an area of 20,000 square kilometers. Such is the geological origin of Cappadocia, as well as its houses, monasteries, and Byzantine churches – whose beautiful paintings were, most of them, destroyed by the medieval Greeks themselves during the Iconoclastic Crisis that lasted the 8th and 9th centuries, or by the Islamized invaders, who came later and ended up to dominate the whole region until our days.



Cappadocia and one of its few surviving religious frescos

3 The first time I was in Cappadocia was in the winter of 1998, four years after my first visit to Asia Minor. At that time, in 1994, I had not been able to visit that part of the world inhabited by “very strange rocks”, as a Japanese traveler I met on the train from Istanbul to Athens told me.



Cappadocia in Wintertime

4 My second experience in Cappadocia was in the summer of 2002, shortly before the outbreak of the Iraq War, a result of the Islamic attack on the Twin Towers in New York. It was my last long trip to the Near East, which was never the same after that crime against mankind perpetrated by Islam.



Cappadocia in Summertime

5 Cradle of a myriad of saints (Paul of Tarsus, Irenaeus, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Nicholas, Cosmas, and Damian...), Asia Minor became a “Turkish” land over 500 years ago. Constantinople, the second Rome, became Istanbul, and the Christians, once masters of that enchanting land, were reduced to the status of *dhimis* (i.e., sub-citizens, in effect, slaves), often subject to extermination. The genocide of the Armenians in Asia Minor, perpetrated by the Islamized Turks and ignored by the Western powers, which occurred about 100 years ago, inspired Adolf Hitler to perpetrate the genocide of the Jews and the Slavic peoples. Franz Werfel’s *The 40 Days of Musa Dagh* is a book that gives us a fairly accurate idea of the ordeal of being a non-Muslim in “the best of all possible worlds” raved about by the “prophet” of Mecca in the first half of the 7th century.



Carmen, a Christian girl with a Christian name in Istanbul... so far, so good.

6 Built in the rising mountains of the Taurus range (where the famous Tigris and Euphrates rivers originate), in southeast Asia Minor and, at the same time, in northwest Mesopotamia, Mount Nemrut evokes, by its name, the biblical character Nimrod, great-grandson of Noah, who “became a mighty one on the earth” (Gen 10,8) and reigned over Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar – that is, in what would become Sumer, the land where the Tower of Babel was built. At 2,150 meters, Mount Nimrod houses, at its summit, the tomb of one of the Hellenistic royal families that reigned over the small Greco-Persian kingdom of Commagene, a remnant of the enormous Alexandrian Empire. In this case, it is the family of Antiochus I (king from 86 to 31 BC), considered by his subjects as “a just and eminent god, friend of the Romans and friend of the Greeks”. Replete with fragments of statues made on a gigantic scale, shattered by earthquakes and the natural erosion of that seismically active region, the site has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1987.



Nemrut Mountain (in Armenian, Նեմրուժ լեռ)

7 Located in Ephesus, birthplace of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus and recipient of one of the Letters of Saint Paul, the Library of Celsus – a Roman senator of Greek origin and patron of literature and the arts – was built in the early 2nd century AD. Considered an architectural marvel, the building is one of the few evocative records of the great libraries of the Greco-Roman world, surpassed only by those of Alexandria and Pergamum.



Library of Celsus, in Ephesus

8 On the outskirts of Ephesus, we find the house where Our Lady lived after the Crucifixion of Jesus, in the company of Saint John the Evangelist, doing justice to what is narrated in the Gospels: “When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near her, He said to His mother, ‘Woman, behold your son!’ Then He said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her home as his mother.” (Jn 19,26-27).



House of the Virgin Mary

9 Here we are, at the entrance to the archaeological site of Ilium, in northwestern Asia Minor, Ilium, at the gates of Balkanic Europe. It is believed that ancient Troy existed there, whose war against the victorious Greeks was narrated by the poet Homer (9th century BC), the father of Western culture, in the incomparable verses of the poem called *Iliad*.



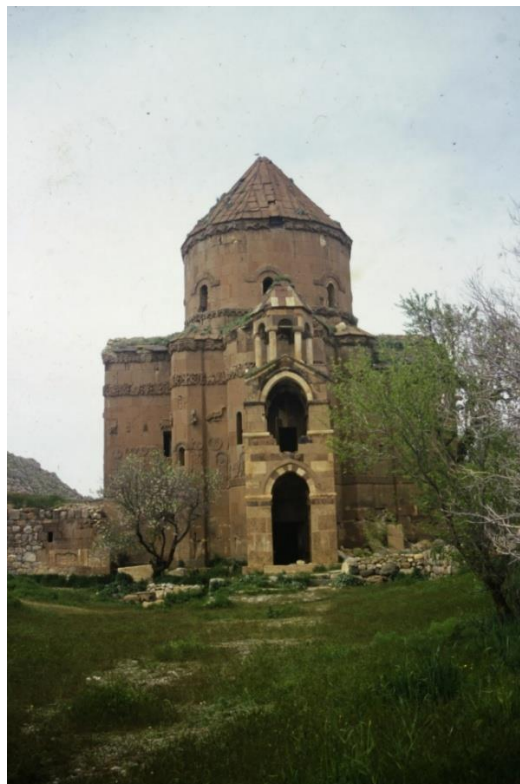
Ilium, in Northwestern Asia Minor

10 We may never know for sure whether the “Troy VII” discovered by the self-taught archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann (1822-1890) is, in fact, Homer’s Troy, which featured heroes such as Ulysses, Achilles, and so many others, whose historical existence has not been proven to this day. What cannot be denied is the occurrence of the Trojan War, as well as the fact that Schliemann found some remarkable ruins in that region! As for the argument concerning believing in the content of Homer’s narrative, let us repeat with Schliemann: “What Homer says there is too beautiful to be a lie!”.



Ilium

11 Built between 915 and 921, at the eastern end of the Anatolian Peninsula (which, in practice, coincides with what we usually call “Asia Minor”), the Church of the Holy Cross is a record of the survival of Armenian culture, a victim in a territory made hostile by Islamic invaders.



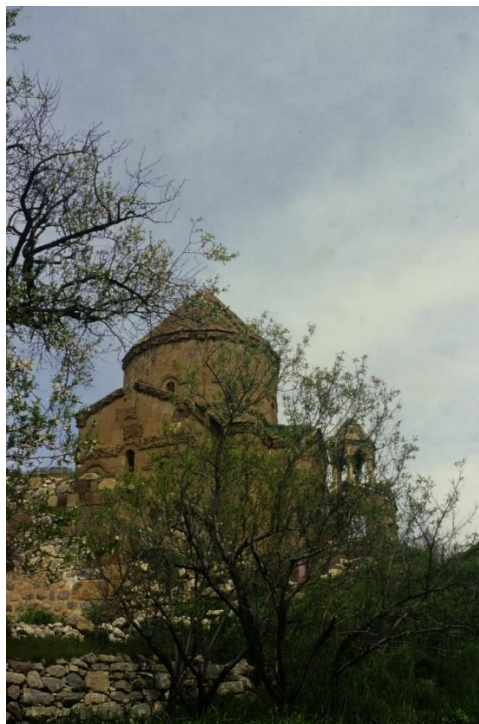
Church of the Holy Cross

12 In the sculptural relief below, we see David facing Goliath, a scene whose symbolism speaks for itself.



Church of the Holy Cross

13 Now at the gates of Mesopotamia and the rest of Asia Major – let us call it that –, the Church of the Holy Cross is a metaphor in stone for the tenacity of the Armenian people, whose ever-vulnerable territory has never ceased to attract aggressors: from the ancient Zoroastrian Persians to modern-day Muslim Azerbaijanis.



Church of the Holy Cross

14 In the reliefs of that same Armenian church, we see Jesus Christ evoking, through the symbolism originating from the Council of Nicaea, held in 325 at the Asia Minor city of Nicaea, the Dogma of the Holy Trinity. At the same time, the Savior seems to be reminding us of what he said to Saint Peter on the occasion of the founding of Christ's own and only Church: "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." (Mt 16,18).



Church of the Holy Cross