

Erzindjan en Turquie (Erzenga en Arménie occidentale)

The gravestones, which have Armenian cross-stones (*khachkars*) and letters on them, together with human bones, have been removed and scattered around the area for years. Some locals told Agos that there is also an Armenian church in the city, though it has largely been destroyed over the years. Today only the church's foundation remains.

Erzincan (Yerznka): A Historical Background

Erzincan, or Yerznka in Armenian, is a city in the Armenian highlands in eastern Turkey. It was absorbed into the eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire following the formal division of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. In the eleventh century, the Turks invaded the region. Coming from the steppes of Central Asia, Seljuk Turks targeted Anatolia and started conquering it with the Battle of Manzikert or Malazgirt in 1071. Even under foreign rule, the city remained predominantly Armenian for centuries.

The Venetian traveler Marco Polo, who visited Erzincan in the second half of the thirteenth century, **describes** "greater Hermenia" [Armenia]:

"This is a great country. It begins at a city called Arzinga [Erzincan], at which they weave the best buckrams in the world. It possesses also the best baths from natural springs that are anywhere to be found. The people of the country are Armenians, and are subject to the Tartar. There are many towns and villages in the country, but the noblest of their cities is Arzinga, which is the See of an Archbishop."

In his geography, the *Mu'jam al-Buldan* (compiled around 1224-8) Yaqut al-Hamawi **describes** Erzincan:

"Erzincan is one of Armenia's most beautiful, famous, pleasant, active and populated cities... The majority of the population is Armenian. There are also Muslims, who are the local elite (*a'yan ahliha*). Wine-drinking and inappropriate behavior are open and widespread. I do not know of anyone of note from this city."

The scholar Rachel Goshgarian **explains**: "It should come as no surprise that an Arabic-speaking Muslim traveler to Erzincan might not have come into contact with (or might refrain from elaborating on) the

active Armenian, Christian intellectual life of the city. During the 13th century, the region of Erzincan had several active monasteries (with scriptoria), including those at *Avag, Lusavoric, Surb Kirakos, Surb Minas, Surb P'rkic* and *Tirašen*. Because of its geographical position, its importance as a city of trade, and perhaps simply due to the fact that there were so many Armenians and Armenian monasteries there, Erzincan was an important Armenian intellectual center in the 13th century.”

The Islamic invasion of Asia Minor was completed by the Ottomans. And Erzincan was seized by Ottoman Turks in 1514. Armenians as well as other Christians and Jews became “**dhimmis**”, third-class, barely “tolerated” people in their dispossessed land, under the Ottoman rule. The demography of the region was changed through methods including forced conversions to Islam or pressures such as heavy taxation from non-Muslims, called the *jizya* tax. However, the city still had a sizable Armenian community.

The Armenian Genocide

According to book *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* by Professor Raymond Kévorkian, Erzincan had 66 Armenian villages and a total Armenian population of 37,612 before the Armenian Genocide.

“The district’s Kemah gorge served as a killing field... The April 1915 order to collect arms was executed with extreme violence and accompanied by torture, bastinado, and arrests. None of the villages on the plain of Erzincan were spared these operations. On Sunday, 16 May, the last service was celebrated in the cathedral of Erzincan.... the authorities had confiscated three of the city’s four churches. Erzincan’s Armenian quarter was now transformed into a veritable chaos; its schools and churches were systematically pillaged. The men from the households on the plain were methodically killed on Sunday, 23 May, and Tuesday, 25 May, while the women and children were sent to Erzincan’s Armenian cemetery... The men were then executed in small groups—they were either shot or had their throats cut in trenches that had been dug in advance,” Kévorkian writes in his book.

Forced conversion to Islam was also a common method used to destroy the Christian Armenian identity. But in many cases, even conversion to Islam was not enough to save Armenians. Professor Matthias Bjørnlund **writes** in his article “‘A Fate Worse Than Dying’: Sexual Violence” during the Armenian Genocide:


“Naturally, conversion to avoid persecution or destruction was not a desirable option as it evoked fears of divine punishment and social exclusion among the usually very religious Armenians, where martyrdom, not surrender, was highly valued. But as the examples show, they had little choice. That choice, however, was far from always offered; in fact, the authorities often turned down desperate requests to convert, preferring to have the Armenians killed. Missionaries Wedel-Jarlsberg and Elvers witnessed and described just how desperate the situation was for the surviving Armenian women in Erzincan, telling about a woman shouting to them in the street that, ‘We want to become Muslims. We want to become Germans, whatever you want, just save us, they are about to take us to Kemagh and slit our throats’.”

1916 Battle of Erzincan

The battle of Erzincan took place between the Russian Caucasus Army and the Ottoman Third Army on the Caucasus Front in July 1916. "Erzincan is located in Turkish Armenia about a mile from the Euphrates River," writes the author Anthony J Schmaus. "The Russian advance reached Erzincan on 25 July 1916, and took the city in only two days... The capture of Erzincan also provided proof of the execution there of Armenians by the Turks."

But when the Russians arrived, the genocide was already completed. Professor Kévorkian writes:

"According to a conscript who survived the massacre, when the Russians arrived in the area in spring

 1916,...