

The Armenian Connection of the Lusignan Dynasty

By Greg Balagian

The Lusignan family originated in the Poitou Lusignan in western France in the early tenth century. By the end of the eleventh century, they had risen to become the most prominent petty lords in the region (*after the 1st Crusade - IG - Fig. 2*) from their castle at Lusignan (fig.1) The castle was built and rebuilt several times until it was dismantled in the 18th century to give place to public park. I was able to obtain two covers postmarked in the modern town of Lusignan (fig. 3 & 4).

In the late twelfth century, through marriage and inheritance, a cadet branch of the family came to control the Kingdoms of Jerusalem and of Cyprus (fig. 5)Lusignan Coat - of - Arms of Cyprus), while in the early thirteenth century, the main branch succeeded in the Counties of La Marche and Angouleme. As Crusader princes in Latin East, they soon established connections with the Hethoumid rules of the Kingdom of Cilicia (Fig 6- Coin of Hethoum I), which they inherited through marriage in the mid-fourteenth century.

The Armenian and Cypriot branches of the family eventually merged and the dynasty died out after the Ottoman conquest of their Asian Kingdoms.



Fig. 2 - First Crusade



Fig. 6 - Coin of Hetoum I

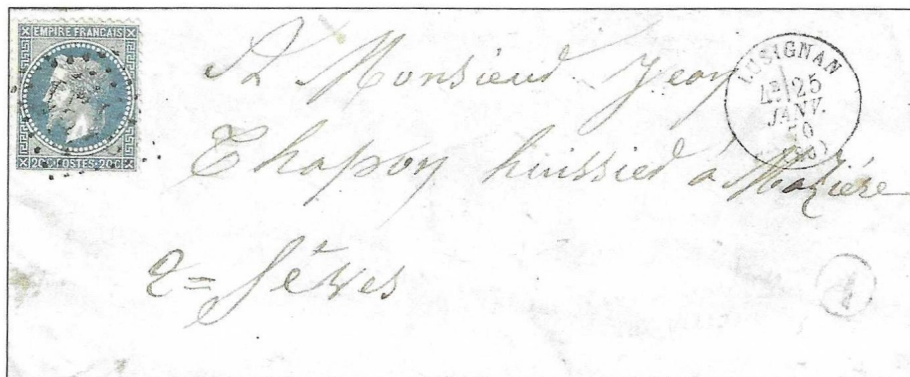


Fig. 3 Lusignan town cancellation



Fig. 5 - Lusignan coat - of - arms of Cyprus - Specimen

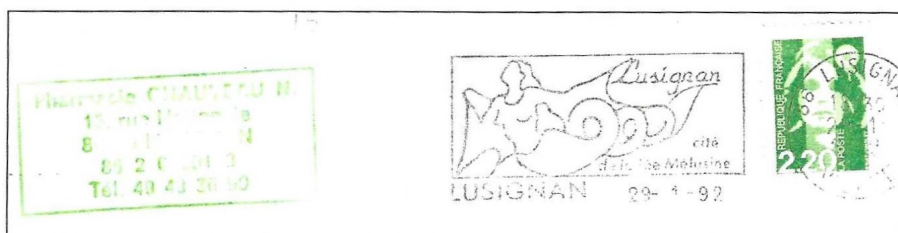


Fig. 4 - Another Lusignan cancellation

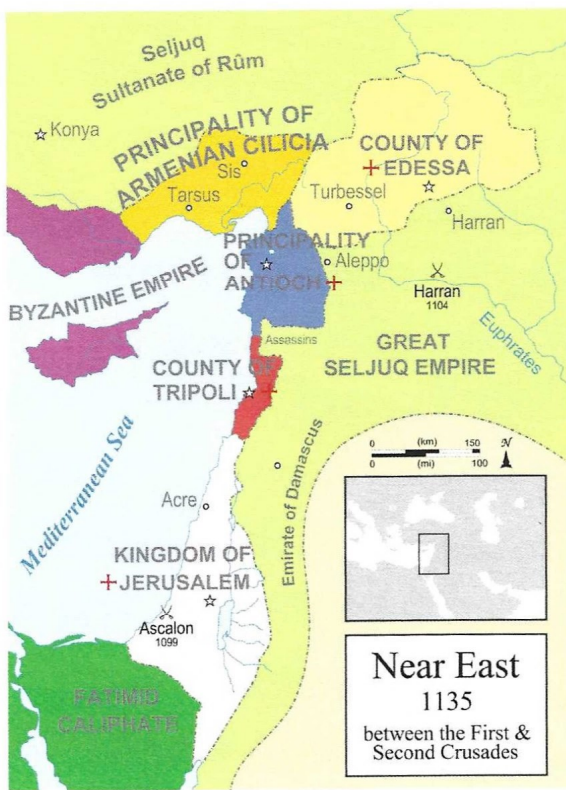


Fig. 7 - Map of Crusader States

The Lusignan dynasty ruled at the edge of Europe, where the European space encountered the Muslim space. However, they did not forge close cultural links with the world around their Crusader states (Fig. 7). Rather, they were as disdainful of non-Catholic Christianity as of Islam. The Crusades are remembered in Muslim world as Christian aggression, as an attempt to destroy Muslim civilization. In the twentieth century, the term "crusade" was revived by some Muslims as a description of what they regard as a Christian-Jewish campaign to destroy the Muslim world. Attacks on Muslim states by majority-Christian Western powers in the early twenty-first century have been compared to the Crusades. Both are depicted as wars of aggression. The Lusignan family shared the assumptions of their day : Europe stood for *light* ; the Muslim space for *darkness*. Some people, even in the Crusading states, began to question these assumptions, opting for different modes of relating with the religious and cultural Other. (Other is a technical phrase in writing about Alterity, study of the "other" Venice, which controlled Cyprus after their rule ended, for example, was a major conduit for cultural exchange between Europe, Africa and as far East as China. The achievements of the Lusignans in ruling their European outposts for such a lengthy period is to be admired. However, with reference to promoting greater understanding between cultures, faiths and people the Lusignans might just as well have ruled a French county or duchy.

Kings of Cilician Armenia

In the thirteenth century, the Lusignans intermarried with the royal families of the Principality of Antioch and the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. The Hethoumids ruled Cilicia until the murder of Leo IV in 1341, when his cousin Guy de Lusignan (who took the name of Constantine II of Armenia) was elected king. The Lusignan dynasty already had a foothold in the area, the Island of Cyprus (fig. 8 - 1 pound Cyprus stamp with crests of Byzantium, the Lusignans, Ottoman Empire and Venice). They had always been close relations between the Lusignan Cyprus and Armenians. However, when the pro-Latin Lusignans came to power in Armenia, they tried to impose Catholicism and the European way of life. Although Armenian leadership largely accepted this, the peasantry opposed the change. Eventually, this laid way to a civil strife.

Here is the list of the Lusignan kings of Cilicia (Armenia) :

- Constantine IV of Armenia (1342 - 1344)
- Constantine IV of Armenia (1344 - 1362)
- Constantine IV of Armenia (1362 - 1373)
- Leon V of Armenia (1374 - 1393)



Fig. 8 - Enlarged right upper corner of the stamp with Lusignan Crest



Fig. 8 - Lusignan Crest alongside with that of Ottoman Empire and Venice on Cyprus 1 pound stamp

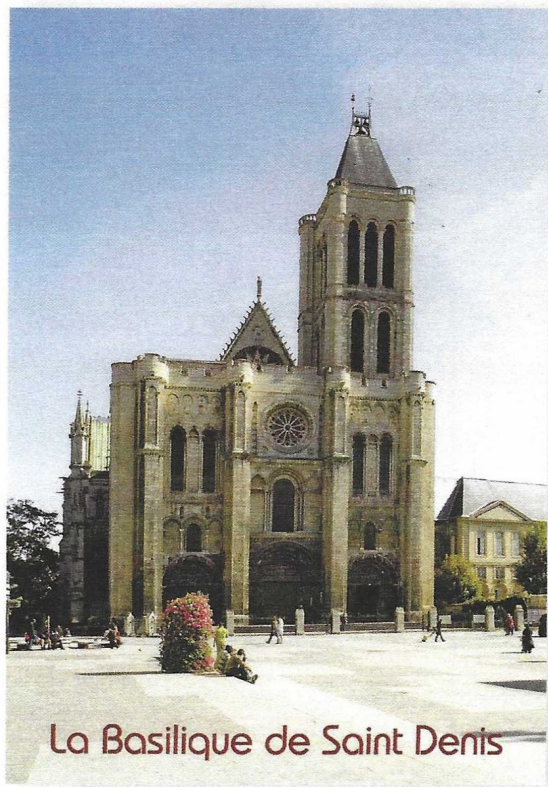


Fig. 10 - Basilia of Saint - Denis postcard



Fig.11 - Back of the Basilia de Saint-Denis postcard

In the late fourteenth century, Cilicia was invaded by the Mamluks. The fall of Sis in April 1375, put an end to the kingdom; spending some time in Spain and England, he returned to Paris calling in vain for another Crusade. Leon V continued to bear the title of the King of Armenia, but never recovered his throne; he died in Paris in 1393. His remains were laid to rest in the Couvent des Celestins (Convent of the Celestines), near Place de la Bastille in Paris. Fig. 9 shows his original tomb; the tombstone bears the following inscription in old French :

Here lies the right noble and excellent Prince Leon de Lusignan V, Latin king of the kingdom of Armenia, who passed away in Paris on the 29th day of November of the year of the Grace 1393. Pray for him.

It was the second most important burial site for French royalty. When the Convent was desecrated during the French Revolution, new mausoleum was constructed for him at Basilica Saint-Denis. (Fig. 10) presents a postcard with general view of the Basilica, mailed in 2009 from

Paris, France to Glendale, CA. The 2f40c stamp on the back of the postcard (Fig. 11) depicts part of the archway of the Basilica. (Fig.12) shows the cenotaph (empty tomb) that was erected for Leon V.

After the death of Leon V his title was claimed by his cousin, James I of Cyprus, uniting it with the titles of Cyprus and Jerusalem. The last royalty to carry the Armenian title was Katherine Comaro who inherited the title after the death of her husband King James II.

The last fully independent Armenian entity of the Middle Ages was thus decimated after three centuries of sovereignty and bloom.



Fig.12 -
Cenotaph of
Leon V