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NOBILITY AND MONARCHY IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ARMENIA. PRELIMINARY REMARKS TO A NEW STUDY

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Introduction

The role of the nobility in Armenian and in Christian Caucasian history is certainly remarkable. According to Cirill Toumanoff, "..., the dynastic aristocracy of Caucasus - and not the Crown, not even the Church, nor the gentry, nor the burgesses, nor the peasants - were the natural and unquestioned leaders of the community, the creative minority that set for it the pattern of behaviour, the style of life". In spite of the studies of Toumanoff and other scholars, mainly of Armenian or Georgian origin, the importance of this Caucasian perspective is yet neglected by the comparative studies on nobility, even by those concerning Eastern Europe.

While the origin and the structure of the Armenian nobility in Ancient and Medieval times have been largely studied, much work has yet to be done on the evolution of this social class in modern times. Such a lack of attention can be partially understood if we consider that the fall of the national kingdoms in the motherland (eleventh century) and in Cilicia (1375) led to the almost complete extinction of the nobility, i.e. of the class that previously had been the political and social core of the Armenian people. As far as Transcaspia is concerned, some families of the ancient nobility played a major social and political role until the Russian conquest. The nobility in modern Armenian history has been largely neglected. In the West the few scholars who studied the Armenian nobility in modern times - Cirill Toumanoff and Robert Hewson - gave their studies a prevalent genealogical character. In Soviet Armenia, the historical interest toward this subject greatly suffered from the ideological conditioning that forced the scholars to look at the nobility as an exploiting class within the fixed pattern of the "feudal" society.

A new study on this subject promises to be very fruitful. It could reduce the excessive identification of the Armenians with a merchant and cosmopolitan image that does not correspond to their general social structure even after the fall of national kingdoms. However remarkable were the successes of the Armenian merchants in XVI-XVIII century world trade, they represented only a small and diasporic part of this people, whose overwhelming majority remained bound to the motherland. Such excessive focusing on the diasporic and commercial dimension of Armenian society somehow corresponds to the negative bias of "greed and cowardice" often associated in modern times with the Armenians. Such a bias is really astonishing if we remember the former fame of this people. For example, Peter Brown, the well-known historian of ancient Christendom, says that "...like the Swiss Landesknechten or the
Scottish Highlanders of later times, Armenians were prominent in the armies of both empires [Byzantine and Persian]. They came from a culture that relished heroes. This reputation, however, was tightly connected with the Armenian nobility, whose mentality gave a fundamental meaning to the military values. The bias of “greed and cowardice” actually arose only after the near destruction of the noble houses that embodied the martial virtues of the Armenians and the emergence among them of a new commercial and financial attitude, that made this people famous all over the world, though not always loved and respected. Another scholar remarks that “... stereotypes regarding Armenian commercial abilities have overshadowed their past accomplishments as warriors in the service of not only their own princely families, but in the service of the Roman, Sasanian, and Byzantine Empires”[1]. It was not by chance that the Armenians continued to show the old military virtues precisely where – as in Zeytun and in some regions of Eastern Armenia – for different reasons the national nobility was able to survive, maintaining both the traditional warlike character and the capability of leading the people.

Armenian princes and melik’s in eighteenth century Transcaucasia

My work in progress on Armenian nobility in modern times takes into account only Transcaucasia. Here, the survival of certain houses of the ancient nobility in the north-east of historical Armenia, mainly in Siwnik, Arcax, and in some territories included in the kingdom of Georgia (Lori, Sosmtx), made these regions something unique in modern Armenian history. The chiefs of these families – the so called melik’s – succeeded in maintaining part of their former power under Turkmens and Persian sovereignty and played a fundamental role in defending the Armenian character of their country.[8]

Besides the melik’s, in Transcaucasia there were also some noble Armenian houses, sometimes of princely status, well integrated into the aristocracy of the Georgian kingdom. The existence of an Armenian nobility in the kingdom of Georgia is an interesting and scarcely studied episode of the millenary historical and cultural relations between Armenians and Georgians[10], the most important peoples of “Christian Caucasus”. After the fall of the national kingdoms under the pressure of the Byzantines and Seljuks in the eleventh century, many Armenians moved to the safer Georgia. In the following centuries many of them dedicated themselves to trade and handicraft, becoming the most numerous and active element of the Georgian towns[11]. To the extent that in eighteenth century Tbilisi (Tbilis) was three-quarters Armenian[12]. In these centuries the two peoples had been living in a state of fruitful social and economical complementarity: the Georgians were nobles and peasants, and the Armenians mainly bourgeois[13]. In Georgia there was an Armenian princely nobility as well[14]. Without taking into account the question of the ethnic origin of the royal dynasty of the Bagratids (Bagrationi-Bagratuni), which is unsolvable in a modern “national” perspective[15], I will mention the princely families of Armenian stock in the kingdom of Eastern Georgia in the end of the eighteenth century: Abamelik-Lazarean, Amatuni, Ar’tu’ean/Arguta’ev, Bhebut’ean/ Bubuta’ev (at the middle of the eighteenth century this family received the hereditary office of etnarch, melik’, of Tbilis’, Begtabe’ev, Melikbey’ev, Rusu’ev, Sumbate’ev, Toreli-Javakhate’ev, Tumane’ev, Xo’jambe’ev, Xerxe’le’ev[16]. Also among the lesser Georgian nobility (“sakhoso azaunr’n”) there were some families of Armenian origin: Korgana’ev, Enako’ev, Shan’sa’ev, Are’ev, Madaka’ev, Lorismelikis’ev, Saverda’ev and so on[17].

Looking for an Armenian kingdom

The survival of an important part of the ancient social structure, dominated by the nobility, not only gave the Transcaucasian Armenians the chance of maintaining self-government, though under Persian or Georgian sovereignty; it also made possible a kind of “foreign policy”. The whole movement of national liberation during the eighteenth century was led by members of these Armenian noble houses.

Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, the fundamental aim of the Armenian nobility of Transcausasia was the establishment of a national state under the protection of the Russian Empire. It is quite remarkable that such an aim had a monarchical character. This circumstance must be considered with no ideological bias, but merely as a direct consequence of the survival among Transcaucasian Armenians of strong remnants of the ancient social, political, and cultural order. In particular it continued to be conducive to the prophecy – traditionally bound up with the authority of Nesershe the Great – concerning the rebirth of an Armenian kingdom[18]. We can find a good example of the persistence of this ancient political and ideological myth in Israyçl Ör’s story[19]. Probably a member of the melik Israyçl family of Jaberd[20], after unsuccessfully trying to help the Russian Empire conquer Persia in 1808-1809, he became involved in the Persian war looking for help against the Muslim oppressors of his people. Israyçl Ör gave rise to the Russian orientation of the Eastern Armenians. In 1699 he received from the melik the task of going to Russia and in 1701 he presented to Peter the Great a plea signed by the “...princes and melik’s of the Great Armenia” (“Menk mek Hayastaneac išxan’ner ew melik’n’ers”)[21]. As we know, the young Russian sovereign was very interested and some years later sent Ör to the Russian capital with a diplomatic mission to Persia. During this mission, some rumours spread among Transcausacian Armenians about the possible royal lineage of Ör and his intention to ascend the throne of Armenia with Russian aid. According to the Polish Jesuit Kruüinski, the French ambassador in Persia warned the Shah that even the name of the Armenian nobleman revealed his hidden aspirations: “Ad majorem iturus animis Aulicorum faciendum impressionem, et quasi ad confirmandum male persuasae plebis rumorem, Monsieur Michel primo Ministro ex praesenti legati nomine Israel Ory, Gallicorum anagramma obtulit illa Reo ind est lile ent Rex”[22].

After Ör’s death in 1711 and the end of the long war against Sweden, Peter the Great organised the first entry of the Russians into Transcaucasia (1722-1723), which encouraged a large uprising of the Armenians against the Turks and Persians[23]. It was not by chance that the most remarkable leaders of this movement belonged to the Armenian nobility: in Eraraa it was the kal’ot’kos Esayi of Ganjasar, a member of the princely house of Hasan-Jalalaa melik’s of Xal’ç’bn, who took charge of the insurrection[24], while the hero of the final resistance in Siwnik - Davit’ Bçk – probably belonged to a family of the lesser nobility[25].

In the first part of the eighteenth century the noble families of Eastern Armenia still maintained a large part of their former political, social and military role[26], while in the following decades they rapidly declined. Although their privileges were reaffirmed in 1736 by the new Persian sovereign, Nadir-Sah, in the second half of the eighteenth century the position of the melik’s became highly jeopardised because of the rise of the Muslim khanate of Süji, in the heart of Eraraa[27]. The rivalry among the five melik’s greatly contributed to the fall of the ancient authority and power of these noble Armenian families, as we can see in the important – though not always reliable – work of Rafii Xamsa’i melik’ut’iwinner, which I am translating into Italian[28]. If in Ör’s and Davit’ Bçk’s times the movement of national liberation could still take advantage of the capability of the melik’s to rule and prepare for war some regions of Eastern Armenia, at the end of the eighteenth century the situation was quite different. For
instance, in a very interesting letter dated 10 January 1780, the rich and influential Armenian merchant Yovhanıç Lazarean — close to the court of Saint Petersburg and bound to become a Russian nobleman 29 — remarks that because of their ignorance the melik’s could not be useful either to themselves or to their nation (“...neznanje onych armajanskich vladel’cev kak sobstvenno disa sebja, tak i disa vsej nacii delaet ich bezpoleznymi”) 30.

Perhaps this lack of political prestige contributed to the failure of the important project presented in 1783 to the Russian court by Yovscp Arut’uean (1743-1801), archbishop of the Armenians in Russia 31. Himself a member of an important Armeno-Georgian princely family, Arut’uean was the key figure in Armeno-Russian and Armeno-Georgian political relations in the last twenty years of the XVIII century. Yovscp Arut’uean staunchly worked for the ideal of Armenian national liberation, but at the same time he embodied a kind of cultural polyvalence coming from both the multinational tendency of the nobility in general and the multidimensional identity shown by many members of the Armenian people, at least for a large part of modern history 32. One can also note that, unlike the brave but uncultivated melik’s of Earaaba 33, he could not only have good personal relations with the highest Russian and Georgian personalities of the time (Catherine II, Potemkin, Suworov, king Erekle of Kart’i-Kaxet’i) but also a sufficient historical culture to design a large political project.

It is well known that in 1783 - the same year of the treaty of Georgievsk 34, which put Georgia under the protection of Russia - a similar alliance concerning Armenia was proposed by two different projects, called by the Armenian historical tradition “northern” and “southern” ones 35. The former was written in Russia by Arut’uean, the latter in India by Sahamir Sahamirean, the leader of the Madras group 36.

Sahamirean’s republican project, deeply influenced by the European Enlightenment, is very interesting from a cultural point of view, but it appears quite alien to Armenian historical tradition and political reality. On the contrary, Arut’uean’s project is more concrete and tightly linked with the historic and religious memories of Armenia 37, the capital would have been Va’arasapat, Ani or some other suitable city in the Ararat region, while as national emblems he proposed Noah’s ark, the image of Gregory the Illuminator, Vronika’s handkerchief sent to king Abgar, a lion’s head to symbolise pre-Christian Armenia, a lamb for Christian Armenia and the two lions for the kingdom of Cilicia. Concerning the form of the government, Arut’uean foresaw a new Armenian kingdom, whose sovereign was to be chosen by the Russian empress, among either Armenians or Russians ("Mine a amena aormac ew egospat’ ar kaiserui kami ognut’ iwm arnel tataxat ašxharı meroy io kemecal l’agn norogel, t’ar mar meroy kaxal lineci i kamač’ nora mayn, et’ça yazqıc xermq ew t’o dran iwoy hawatarmac") 38, in a line of monarchical continuity with the dynasties of the past, from the Aršakuni to the kings of Little Armenia (P’or’ Hayastan).

This monarchical preference reflects not only the personal attitude of the aristocratic archbishop, but also the political reality of the time. In an important letter to Sahamirean (3 September 1786), Arut’uean stressed the impossibility of any republican project concerning Armenia: [The Armenians], he says, “...don’t know the force and the dignity of the parliamentary system” (“...ançanöç ç noc’a zört’ iwm, ew barut’ iwm, or çakek kay i cerkanutakan i’dxanat’ iwm”). Moreover, he thought that Russia would certainly give Armenia a form of government according to the “law of the kings” (“ést orn̄ t’akaworac") 39.

The acknowledgement given to the families of the Armenian nobility ("yazqı arajnøy naxaran ci meroc’ ew išxanac’"), which could prove their noble ancestry, of the right of regaining the ancestral lands is another sign of the conservative orientation of this project.

Arut’uean’s letters show that he aimed at the liberation of the whole of Armenia, both the eastern regions under Persian sovereignty and the western ones under Ottoman sovereignty 40. For a while, mainly in the early 1780s, the rebirth of an Armenian kingdom under Russian protection seemed to be possible, with Potemkin as the likely sovereign. In a letter to Catherine II of 19 May 1783 Potemkin spoke about the project of “...restoring in Asia a Christian state, according to the high promises of your Imperial Majesty, transmitted through me to the Armenian melik’s (e... vozobnovît’ v Azii christianskoe gosudarstvo, schodstvenno vysõeajšim v i. v. obešaniam, dannim èrezmenja armajanskim melikam) 41.

As Leo wrote, “Russia made promises, but without making the ingenuity of signing a treaty of alliance” 42. One must consider that, unlike the Georgians, who still had a weak, but independent, state, the Armenians were not a reliable political partner for Russia. As the same Arut’uean wrote to Sahamirean in the already quoted letter of the 3 September 1786, the Russian authorities refused even to consider an official treaty of alliance with the Armenians: “...the kings can enter into an alliance with the kings, but where is in your people the king who will dare ask for an alliance? ("...t’agaworac’ iwm dnl zdašins, azgi jerum ov’ça t’agawom, or hamanjagic’i zdašins xndrel’?)” 43.

These words clearly express the inadequacy of the minor nobility of Transcaucasia to be a suitable political representative of the Armenians in front of the Russian Empire, above all after the dramatic decline of the melik’s of Larabal in the last decades of XVIII century. In 1784 Ibrahim-xan of Śušî imprisoned the pro-Russian melik’s Abov Beglarian of Gwistan, Mejum Israycleian of Jaberb and Baxtan Awanean of Dizak and even killed the kató’ıkos Yovhanıç (Hasan-Jalalean) of Ganjasar 44. Abov Beglarian and Mejum Israycleian managed to escape, temporarily fleeing together with their families and followers from Urarseab, where they returned to later on, but without recovering their former authority. In 1795-1796 the melik’s suffered another strong misfortune when the founder of the Qajar dynasty, Aqa-Mohammed Khan, invaded and ravaged Transcaucasia. In 1799, the melik’s of Earaaba 45 recognised Russian sovereignty 46, the emperor Paul I recognised their status 47, but the question of an independent Armenian kingdom was no longer on the political agenda.

Conclusion

Therefore, largely because of the weakening of the melik’s during the eighteenth century, Earaaba 48 failed to become the Piedmont or the Prussia of Armenia. The project of the rebirth of an independent kingdom, thanks not only to Russian aid, but also to the forces of the last national noble houses (mainly of Earaaba 49), proved to be unattainable. It was a kind of swan-song of the political, social, and cultural structures of ancient naqaran Armenia that survived in some Transcaucasian regions until the end of the eighteenth century.

In conclusion, I believe that the issue posed by the Armenian nobility in the eighteenth century and the political project of an independent kingdom deserves a new historical study, based not only on mere genealogical criteria, and free from old and new ideological prejudices.
Literature

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36 See Armjano-russkie otnosheniya v XVIII veke, 1760-1800, p. 275.
38 Ibidem, p. 168.
40 See Leo, Patmut'yun hayoc', v. III, p. 826.
42 See R. H. Hewsen, Russian-Armenian Relations, 1700-1828, Cambridge (Ma.), p. 22.
44 Ibidem, doc. 355, p. 507.