

ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆԻ ՀԱՆՐԱՊԵՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ
ԳԻՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԻ ԱԶԳԱՅԻՆ ԱԿԱԴԵՄԻԱ
NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES
OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA

ԵՐԵՎԱՆԻ ՊԵՏԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՄԱԼՍԱՐԱՆ
YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY

ՀԵՐԱՅԻ ՏՈՒՐՅԱԿ ԱՐԴԻ ՎԻՃԱԿԸ
ԵՎ ՉԱՐԳԼՕՄԱԿ ՀԵՌԱԿԱՐՄԵՐԸ
ARMENIAN STUDIES TODAY
AND DEVELOPMENT
PERSPECTIVES

Միջազգային համաժողով
Երևան, 15-20 սեպտեմբերի, 2003 թ.
International Congress
Yerevan, September 15-20, 2003



Ձեկուցումների ժողովածու
Collection of papers



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 Caucasia – 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"¹. 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 Europe².

While the origin and the structure of the Armenian nobility in Ancient and Medieval times have been largely studied³, 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 Transcaucasia 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 Hewsen – 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 Armenians⁴. 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 heroes⁵. This reputation, however, was tightly connected with the Armenian nobility, whose mentality gave a fundamental meaning to the military values⁶. 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 Empires⁷”. It was not by chance that the Armenians continued to show the old military virtues precisely where – as in Zeyt'un 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', Arc'ax, and in some territories included in the kingdom of Georgia (Lori, Somxiti), 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 Turkmen and Persian sovereignty and played a fundamental role in defending the Armenian character of their country⁸.

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 kingdom⁹. 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 Georgians¹⁰, the most important peoples of “Christian Caucasia”. 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 towns¹¹, to the extent that in eighteenth century T'iflis (Tbilisi) was three-quarters Armenian¹². 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 bourgeois¹³. In Georgia there was an Armenian princely nobility as well¹⁴. 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” perspective¹⁵, 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, Ar³ut'ean/Argutašvili, Behbut'ean/ Bebutašvili (at the middle of the seventeenth century this family received the hereditary office of etnarch, *melik'*, of T'iflis), Begtabeğišvili, Melikišvili, Rusišvili, Sumbatišvili, Toreli-Javaxišvili, Tumanišvili, Xojaminasišvili, Xerxeulije¹⁶. Also among the lesser Georgian nobility (“sakhaso aznaurni”) there were some families of Armenian origin: Korganašvili, Enakolopašvili, Šanšiašvili, Arešišvili, Madatašvili, Lorismelikišvili, Saverdasšvili and so on¹⁷.

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 Transcaucasia 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 Nersês the Great - concerning the rebirth of an Armenian kingdom¹⁸. We can find a good example of the persistence of this ancient political and ideological myth in Israyçl Ôri's story¹⁹. Probably a member of the *melik'* Israyçlean family of Jraberđ²⁰, after unsuccessfully roving from 1680 in many European courts looking for help against the Muslim oppressors of his people, Israyçl Ôri gave rise to the pro-Russian orientation of the eastern Armenians. In 1699 he received from the *melik's* 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' mec Hayastaneac's iškank'ners ew melik'ners”)²¹. As we know, the young Russian sovereign was very interested and some years later sent Ôri on a diplomatic mission to Persia. During this mission, some rumours spread among Transcaucasian Armenians about the possible royal lineage of Ôri and his intention to ascend the throne of Armenia with Russian aid. According to the Polish Jesuit Kruúinski, the French ambassador in Persia warned the Shah that even the name of the Armenian nobleman revealed his hidden aspirations: “Ad majorem igitur animis Aulicorum faciendam impressionem, et quasi ad confirmandum male persuasae plebis rumorem, Monsieur Michel primo Ministro ex praesenti legati nomine Israiel Ory, Gallicorum anagramma obstruit Il sera Roy id est Ille erit Rex”²².

After Ôri'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 Persians²³. It was not by chance that the most remarkable leaders of this movement belonged to the Armenian nobility: in Ğaraba³ it was the *kat'o'ikos* Esayi of Ganjasar, a member of the princely house of Hasan-Jalalean, *melik's* of Xaè'çn, who took charge of the insurrection²⁴, while the hero of the glorious resistance in Siwnik' - Dawit' Bçk – probably belonged to a family of the lesser nobility²⁵.

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 role²⁶, while in the following decades they rapidly declined. Although their privileges were reaffirmed in 1736 by the new Persian sovereign, Nadir-šah, 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 Šuši, in the heart of Ğaraba³. The rivalries 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 Raffi Xamsayi *melik'ut'iwinner*, which I am translating into Italian²⁷. In Ôri's and Dawit' 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 Yovhannçs Lazarean – close to the court of Saint Petersburg and bound to become a Russian nobleman²⁸ - remarks that because of their ignorance the *melik's* could not be useful either to themselves or to their nation (“...neznanie onych armjanskich vladel'cev kak sobstvenno dlja sebja, tak i dlja vsej nacii delaet ich bezpoleznymi”) ²⁹.

Perhaps this lack of political prestige contributed to the failure of the important project presented in 1783 to the Russian court by Yovsçp Arùut'ean (1743-1801), archbishop of the Armenians in Russia³⁰. Himself a member of an important Armeno-Georgian princely family, Arùut'ean was the key figure in Armeno-Russian and Armeno-Georgian political relations in the last twenty years of the XVIII century. Yovsçp Arùut'ean 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 history³¹. One can also note that, unlike the brave but uncultivated *melik's* of £araba³, he could not only have good personal relations with the highest Russian and Georgian personalities of the time (Catherine II, Potemkin, Suvorov, king Erekle of K'art'l-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 Georgievsk³², 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” ones³³. The former was written in Russia by Arùut'ean, the latter in India by Šahamir Šahamirean, the leader of the Madras group³⁴.

Šahamirean'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, Arùut'ean's project is more concrete and tightly linked with the historic and religious memories of Armenia³⁵: the capital would have been Va³aršapat, 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, Arùut'ean foresaw a new Armenian kingdom, whose sovereign was to be chosen by the Russian empress, among either Armenians or Russians (“Minè' amena³ormac ew ôgostap'ar kaiseruhi kami ôgnut'iwn arnel tatabaxt ašxarhi meroy i korcaneal t'agn norogel, êntrut'iwn t'agavorin meroy kaxeal linec'i i kamac' nora mayn, et'ç yazgç mermç ew et'ç dran iwroy hawatarmac”) ³⁶, in a line of monarchical continuity with the dynasties of the past, from the Aršakunis to the kings of Little Armenia (P'ok'r 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 Šahamirian (3 September 1786), Arùut'ean 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” (“...ancanôt' ç noc'a zôrut'iwn, ew barut'iwn, or cackeal kay i cerakanutakan iôxanut'ean”). Moreover, he thought that Russia would certainly give Armenia a form of government according to the “law of the kings” (“êst ôrin t'akaworac”) ³⁷.

The acknowledgement given to the families of the Armenian nobility (“Yazgç arajnoy naxarac'n meroc' ew išanac”), which could prove their noble ancestry, of the right

of regaining the ancestral lands is another sign of the conservative orientation of this project.

Arghutean'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 sovereignty³⁸. 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*” (“...vozobnovit' v Azii christianskoe gosudarstvo, schodstvennoe vysoèajšim v. i. v. obešëanijam, dannim èrez menja armjanskim melikam») ³⁹.

As Leo wrote, “Russia made promises, but without making the ingenuity of signing a treaty of alliance” ⁴⁰. 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 Arùut'ean wrote to Šahamirian 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'agawork' ênd t'agaworac' karen dnil zdašins, azgi jerum ov ç t'agawom, or hamarjagic'i zdašins xndrel?”) ⁴¹.

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 Šuši imprisoned the pro-Russian *melik's* Abov Beglarian of Giwlistan, Mejlum Israyçlean of Jraberd and Baxtam Awanean of Dizak and even killed the *kat'o'ikos* Yovhannçs (Hasan-Jalalean) of Ganjasar ⁴². Abov Beglarian and Mejlum Israyçlean managed to escape, temporarily fleeing together with their families and followers from Ūarabaù, 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 Persian Qajar dynasty, Aga-Mohammed Khan, invaded and ravaged Transcaucasia. In 1799, the *melik's* of £araba³ recognised Russian sovereignty⁴³: the emperor Paul I recognised their *status*⁴⁴, 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, £araba³ 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 £araba³), proved to be unattainable. It was a kind of swan-song of the political, social, and cultural structures of ancient *naxarar* 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.

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24 See **R. H. Hewsen**, The Meliks of Eastern Armenia: A Preliminar Study, p. 317-318.

25 See **S. Orbelyan**, Davit' Bekin cagumabanut'yan harc'i masin, in "Banber Hayastani Arxivneri", 2 (1972), pp. 72-85.

26 See **A. N. Chaèatrjan** (ed.), Armjanskoe vojsko v XVIII veke. Iz istorii armjano-russkogo voennogo sodružestva. Issledovanija i dokumenty, Erevan 1968.

27 For another point of view on those events see **G. A. Bournoutian's** translation of the Persian chronicle A History of Qarabagh, An Annotated Translation of Mirza Jamal Javanshir Qarabaghi's "Tarikh-e Qarabagh", Costa Mesa (Ca.), 1994, pp. 45-108.

28 See **V. Diloyan**, Lazaryanneri hasarakakan-k'a³ak'akan gorcuneut'yan patmut'yunic' (XVIII dari erkrord kes), Erevan 1966.

29 See Armjano-russkie otnošenija v XVIII veke, 1760-1800, v. IV, Erevan 1990, doc. 88, p. 151.

30 See **ԼՅՓ**, Yovs³p' kat'ouikos Aruut'ean, T'iflis 1902.

31 On this subject see **B. L. Zekiyani**, The Armenian way to modernity. Armenian Identity between Tradition and Innovation, Specificity and Universality, Venezia 1997, pp 86-87.

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33 One can find these documents in Armjano-russkie otnošenija v XVIII veke, 1760-1800, doc. 176. See also **H. Ut'mazyan, V. Hakobyan**, Hay hazatagrakan ga³ap'arneri erku kentroni ev erku cragir XVIII dari erkrord kesin, in "Usano³neri gitakan a³xatut'yunneri žo³ovacu", 1941, n. 3, pp. 71-161; Leo, Patmut'yun hayoc', v. III, Erevan 1973, p. 834; **G. Grigoryan**, Hay arajavor hasarakakan-k'a³ak'akan mtk'i patmut'yunic' (XVIII dari erkrord kes), Erevan 1957; **A. Mnac'akanyan**, XVIII darum grvac hay rusakan da³nagru harc'i šurj, "Te³ekagir", 1958, pp. 139-160; **A. Arak'elean**, Hay žo³ovordi mtavor mšakoyt'i zargac'man patmut'yun, v. II, Erevan 1964, pp. 161-175; **V. Diloyan**, Lazaryanneri hasarakakan-k'a³ak'akan gorcuneut'yan patmut'yunic' (XVIII dari erkrord kes), Erevan 1966, pp. 161-163; **V. Barxudaryan**, Rusastani ev Hndkastani haykakan ga³ut'nerê XIII dari verjin k'arordi hay azatagrakan šaržumnerum, in idem (ed.), XVI-XVII dareri hay azatagrakan šaržumnerê

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35 **V. Barxudaryan**, Rusastani ev Hndkastani haykakan ga³ut'nerê XIII dari verjin k'arordi hay azatagrakan saržumnerum, p. 213.

36 See Armjano-russkie otnošenija v XVIII veke, 1760-1800, p. 275.

37 Ibidem, p. 339. On this topic see also **A. Łukasyan**, Haykakan t'agavorut'yan veragangman harc'ê Hovsepi Ar³utyani ôragrut'yunnerum ev namaknerum, "Patma-banasirkan handes", 1995, n. 2, p. 175.

38 Ibidem, p. 168.

39 Armjano-russkie otnošenija v XVIII veke, 1760-1800, doc. 148, p. 241.

40 See **Leo**, Patmut'yun hayoc', v. III, p. 826.

41 Armjano-russkie otnošenija v XVIII veke, 1760-1800, doc. 228, p. 339.

42 See **R. H. Hewsen**, Russian-Armenian Relations, 1700-1828, Cambridge (Ma.), p. 22.

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44 Ibidem, doc. 355, p. 507.