

The meliks

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In Siunik and Artsakh some families of the ancient Armenian nobility survived to foreign invasions and managed to create some islands of partial self-government. Their authority was recognized in the mid-15th century by Jehan Shah, chief of the Turcoman tribe of the Kara Koyunlu, and then reconfirmed by the Safavids. The leaders of these small semi-independent principalities – the so called *meliks* – played a very important role in defending the Armenian character of their territories. The *meliks* were direct heirs, albeit impoverished, of the ancient Armenian aristocracy although it is not easy to establish whether they descended from princely or small noble families. However, the five *meliks* of Karabakh (Giulistan, Jraberd, Khach'ēn, Varanda, Dizak) and those of some territories incorporated by Georgia (Lori and Somkhiti) probably belonged to the first category. The other *meliks* of eastern Armenia were presumably of noble but not princely origin. Their social condition was essentially that of village leaders and landowners. Apart from the *meliks* of Karabakh, the most important of these noble families of eastern Armenia is probably that of the Aghamalian, who were *meliks* of Erevan until the Russian conquest. In this case, however, the title of melik indicated the head of the Armenian community of the city, in which a Persian governor still had his residence.

The power of the *meliks*, exercised through customary laws, was hereditary, although it had to be confirmed by the shah or the governor of Erevan. Their functions were administrative, judicial and military. They also collected tribute, keeping part of it for themselves and passing the rest on to the Persian government. It is possible to believe that in this function of tax collectors they operated in a relatively preferable manner to that of foreign agents. In times of peace the *meliks* maintained a small guard, while in case of war they could raise from one thousand to two thousand soldiers. The title melik was reserved for the head of the family, while other brothers and sons added the title bek to their name. The *meliks* – especially those of Karabakh – enjoyed numerous privileges and considerable prestige. Warlike and susceptible, hospitable and devoted to the Church, with a strong sense of honor, they retained the typical characteristics of the ancient Armenian *nakharars* (Garsoïan 2005), albeit on a scale reduced by historical circumstances.

Although strictly local, their role was notable. Protectors – certainly within their cultural and economic limits – of the arts (restorations and commissions of churches, khachkar and manuscripts), defenders of national and religious identity, the *meliks* considered themselves the true leaders of the Armenian nation. The political weight of the *meliks* actually appears to be significant throughout the 18th century. To the Israyelian family of Jraberd (descendants of the Proshians) belonged Israyel Ori who, after having wandered unsuccessfully through Europe in search of help for his people against the Muslim rulers, initiated the pro-Russian orientation of Armenians of the Caucasus. In 1701 he arrived in Moscow and presented a petition to Peter the Great on behalf of the “...princes and *meliks* of Greater Armenia”. After Ori's death in 1711 Peter the Great organised the first Russia's expedition into Transcaucasia (1722–1723), which encouraged a large uprising of the Armenians against Turks and Persians. It was not by chance that the most remarkable leaders of this movement belonged to the Armenian nobility: in Karabakh it was the Catholicos Esayi of [Gandzasar](#), a member of the house of the [Hasan-Jalalian](#), *meliks* of Khach'ēn, who led the insurrection, while the hero of the glorious resistance in Siunik, Dawit' Bek, probably belonged to a family of the lesser nobility.

This “liberation movement” of the years 1722–1730, however, marked a sort of swansong for the Armenian *meliks*, who experienced a rapid decline in the following decades. Although their privileges had been reconfirmed in 1736 by the new Persian ruler, Nadir-shah, in the second half of the 18th century the position of the *meliks* was seriously affected by the establishment of the new Muslim khanate of Shushi in Karabakh. The divisions that emerged among the *meliks* contributed significantly to the rapid decline of their ancient authority and power, as complained by the nineteenth-century Armenian novelist Raffi, author of an important text on the *meliks* of Karabakh.

The *meliks* suffered another hard blow from the disastrous invasions of Transcaucasia carried out in 1795-1796 by the founder of the Qajar dynasty in Persia, Aga-Mohammed Khan. Finally, in 1799, the *meliks* of Karabakh placed themselves under Russian sovereignty. The limited recognition of their noble status by Russia partially compromised the social position of the *meliks*. Anyway, it is important to observe that many of them gave an important contribution to the Russian Empire in the military sphere, in the wake of a thousand-year-old tradition. In fact, a large number of officers of the Russian army had an Armenian origin, mainly noble, and often achieved high ranks and great fame. A particularly interesting case is that of Valerian Madatov (Rostom Mehrabents, 1782-1829), originally from Karabakh, who obtained the rank of lieutenant-general thanks to his exploits in the Napoleonic and Caucasian wars.

The agrarian reform, which took place in the Caucasus starting from 1870, further decreased the traditional incomes of the *meliks*, accelerating their inclusion in state service or even in commerce, industry and the liberal professions. It is interesting to observe how some families played a prominent role in the capitalist development of the South Caucasus in the second half of the century: Melik-Azarian, Melik-Parsadanov, Melik-Step‘anian and so on.

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