

IRAN AND THE CAUCASUS

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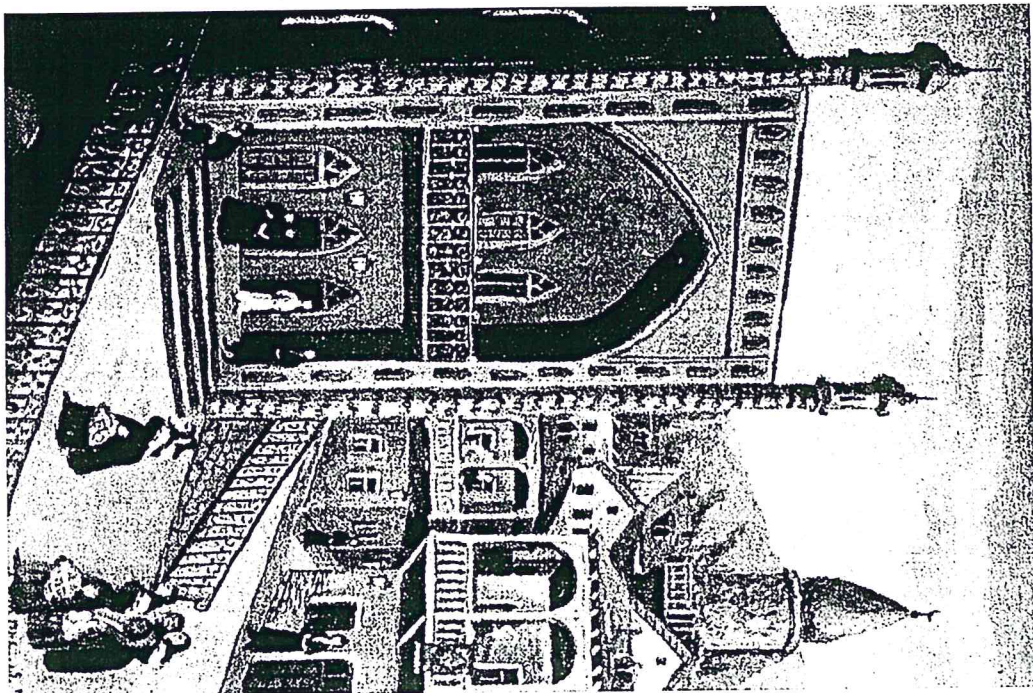


Figure 4. Muslim Quarter of Tiflis
(V. Elibekyan, *ibid.*)

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 burghesses, 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 still neglected in comparative research on nobility; even by those focussing upon Eastern Europe.²

While the origin and the structure of the Armenian nobility in Ancient and Medieval times have been largely studied,³ much work has still 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 (11th century) and in Cilicia (1375) led to the almost complete extinction of the nobility;

¹ C. Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, Georgetown, 1963: 144.

² See for instance I. Bannac, P. Buskovitch (eds.), *The Nobility in Russia and Eastern Europe*, New Haven, 1983, and H. M. Scott (ed.), *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. II. Northern, Central and Eastern Europe*, London-New York, 1993.

³ See N. Adonc, *Amovinyt' v epoxu Justianiana. Političeskoe sostojanie na osnoze naxararckogo stroya, Sankt-Peterburg*, 1908 (*Amovinyt' in the Period of Justinian*, translated with partial revisions; a bibliographical note and appendices by N. Garsoïan, Lioba, 1970); H. Manandyan, *Fundicizna hin Hayastanum: Arakunianeri en marzpetut'yan styan*, Erevan, 1934; E. Khervumian, "Esquisse d'une féodalité oubliée", *Vostok. Cahiers d'histoire et de civilisations arméniennes*, 1948-1949, n. 1: 7-56; A. G. Sukyasyan, *Obščestvenno-političeskij stroy i pravo Armani v epoxu ranego feodalizma*, Erevan, 1963; C. Toumanoff, *op. cit.*; idem, *Manuel de géographie et de chronologie pour l'histoire de la Caucase chrétienne*, Roma, 1976; idem, *Les dynasties de la Caucase chrétienne de l'antiquité jusqu'au XIX siècle. Tables généalogiques et chronologiques*, Roma, 1990; S. Kikyašaryan, "Naxararckn u naxararut'yunner hın Hayastanum", *Traber*, 1978, n. 10: 60-75; G. Sargoyan, "Lovses Xorenacu naxararckan tohmeri 'cank'o", *Palma-kavkazskan handes*, 1996, n. 1-2: 73-70.

i. e. of the class that previously had been the political and social core of the Armenian people. Anyway, at least as far as concerns Transcaucasia, some families of the ancient nobility played a major social and political role until the Russian conquest. Nevertheless, the focus of nobility in modern Armenian history has been largely neglected. In the West the few scholars who studied the Armenian nobility in modern times—I mean Cyrill Toumanoff and Robert Hewsen—focused on matters of genealogy. In Soviet Armenia, historical interest in this subject greatly suffered from the ideological conditioning that forced scholars to regard the nobility as an exploiting class within the fixed pattern of “feudal” society.

Therefore, a new study on this subject promises to be very fruitful. First of all, I would suggest, 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 the achievements of Armenian merchants in the 16th-18th centuries may have been for world trade, they concern only a small and diasporic part of this people, whose overwhelming majority remained bound to the motherland. I dare say that such excessive focussing on the diasporic and commercial dimension somehow corresponds to the negative bias of “grecized and cowardice” often associated in modern times with the Armenians.¹ Such a bias is really astonishing if we remember the former fame of this people. For example, Peter Brown, the well-known historian of the 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”.² This reputation, however, was tightly connected with the Armenian nobility, whose mental structure accorded a fundamental importance to military values.³ The bias of “grecized and cowardice” could actually arise only after the almost complete extinction of the noble houses that embodied the martial virtues

¹ On this topic see R. G. Suny, “Images of Armenians in Russian Empire”; R. G. Hovhannisyan (ed.), *The Armenian Image in History and Literature*, Malibu (Ca.), 103-137; A. Ferrati, “L'eroe, il mercante, il sovversivo: figure dell'Armeno nella cultura russa pre-rivoluzionaria”, A. Parvan, G. Girardo (ed.), *Le minoranze come oggetto di storia*, I, Padova, 2001:180-188.

² P. Brown, *The Rise of the Western Christendom. Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, Cambridge (Ma.), 1996: 169.

³ One can read many charming examples of this mentality in E. Khrenniam, *op. cit.*: 35-40; G. Deklyan, “Le cavalier arménien”, J.-P. Mahé, R. W. Thompson (ed.), *From Byzantium to Iran. Studies in Honour of Nina G. Garsoïan*, Atlanta (Ge.): 197-228; A. Avetisyan, *Hay zimordaniut'yan son-kakanova, 2-5-nd darsn*, Erevan, 2000.

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”.⁴ It was not by chance that the Armenians continued to demonstrate the old military virtues precisely where—as in Zeytun and in some regions of Eastern Armenia—for different reasons the national nobility could survive, maintaining both its traditional warlike character and the capability to lead 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', Arçax, and in some territories included in the kingdom of Georgia (Lori, Samxiti), made these regions something unique in modern Armenian history. The chiefs of these families—the so called *melik's*—succeeded in maintaining a measure of their former power under Turkmen and Persian sovereignty and played a fundamental role in defending the Armenian character of their country.⁵

Beside 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.⁶ The existence of an Arme-

⁴ See R. G. Krikorian, “From Swords to Plowshares ... back to Swords: the Reconstruction of Armenian Martial Identity”, *The Journal of the Society for the Study of Caucasica*, (6-7) 1994-1996: 29.

⁵ The old texts of Kafti (*Kamsgr melik'ut'ranora*, 1600-1827. *Naxer hayot' nor jalmut'ean harnat*, Tbilis 1882; idem, *Etkori ziboretz*, IX, Erevan, 1987: 417-625), A. Beknazareanc' (*Golubki-Landoli*, Sankt Peterburg, 1886), Avakel Vardapet (*Naxer hay melik'ut'ran masin. I jruk. Diziki melik'ut'ranuz*, Valax'skaja 1913) and Karapet Episkopos (Ter Minssian), (*Hay melik'ut'ran masin. II jruk. Dopyeak' av melik' Sahnazaranuc' Egniacin*, 1914) are still very useful in spite of their many mistakes. Among the few works dedicated to the *melik's* in Soviet time see S. Barsudaryan, “Gekarkunik'i melik'ut'ran u tannerezo ast Tatevi vank'i mi p'sarat'it'i”, *Baibler. Matenadaran*, 8 (1967): 191-227; M. Saqsyun, “Melik'akan banketi hamkatayec' Tol avannun'”, *Palma-bonatsionan handes*, 1987, n. 3: 132-140. This subject has been largely studied by R. H. Hewsen in a number of excellent articles: “The Meliks of Eastern Armenia: A Preliminary Study”, *Revue des Etudes Arméniennes*, 9 (1972): 285-329; “The Meliks of Eastern Armenia II”, *ibid.*, 10 (1973-74): 282-300; “The Meliks of Eastern Armenia III”, *ibid.*, 12 (1975-76): 219-243; “The Meliks of Eastern Armenia IV”, *ibid.*, 14 (1980): 459-470; “Three Armenian Noble Families of the Russian Empire [The Meliks of Eastern Armenia V]”, *Hask*, 1981-1982: 389-400; “The Meliks of Eastern Armenia VI: The House of Aghamalanc'”, *Bazmashp.*, 1984: 319-333.

⁶ On the Georgian nobility see J. Karst, *Copius juris ihero-caucasicae: I. Codex georgianus de rei Vaskhang Vt. II. Commentaire ou Précis du Droit ihero-caucasien*, I, Strassburg, 1935-1937; N. A. Berdzoništ'ili,

nian nobility in the kingdom of Georgia is an interesting and little-studied episode of the millennial historical and cultural relations between Armenians and Georgians,¹⁰ the most important peoples of "Christian Caucasia". After the fall of the national kingdoms under the pressure of Byzantines and Seljuks in the 11th century, many Armenians moved to Georgia, where life was safer. In the following centuries many of them dedicated themselves to trade and handicraft, becoming the most numerous and active element of Georgian urban life,¹¹ to the extent that in the 18th century T'iflis (Tbilisi) was three-quarters Armenian.¹² In these centuries the two peoples had been living in a situation of fruitful social and economic complementarity: the Georgians were nobles and peasants; the Armenians, mainly bourgeois.¹³ Anyway, in Georgia there was an Armenian princely nobility, too.¹⁴ Without taking into account the question of the ethnic origin of the royal dynasty of the Bagratids (Bagrationi-Bagratuni), which is not

Orteli iz istorii razvitiia feodal'nykh otnoshenii v Gruzii (VIII-XV vv.), Tbilisi, 1938; C. Toumanoff, "La noblesse géorgienne: Sa genèse et sa structure", *Revue asiatique*, 34 (1936), n. 9, 260-273; G. Chavchavadze, *Introduction à l'étude de la féodalité géorgienne (Le Code de George le Brillant)*, Paris, 1911; G. A. Melikishvili, *Politicheskie otnosheniia feodal'nykh Gruzii i melkomykh voprosy razvitiia feodal'nykh otnoshenii v Gruzii*, Tbilisi, 1973; B. Martin-Hisard, "L'aristocratie géorgienne et son passé: tradition épique et références bibliques (VIIe-XIe siècles)", *Buletin karlistic. Revue de karlistologie*, XLII (1984), 13-32; J. Ferrand, *Les familles princières de Géorgie: essai de reconstitution généalogique (1380-1983) de 21 familles reconnues princières par l'Empire de Russie*, Paris, 1983; C. Toumanoff, *Les maisons princières géorgiennes de l'Empire de Russie*, Roma, 1983; Yu. K. Cikovanj, S. V. Dumit, *Devojskie rody nasyjloj imperii. II. khačaturjancaia gruzinskaja*, Moskva, 1999.

¹⁰ On the necessity of a balanced approach to the historical and cultural Armenian-Georgian relations see B. L. Zekiyan, "Prémises pour une méthodologie critique dans les études arméno-géorgiennes", *Biznatchb. CLXIX* (1981): 460-469; idem, "Il contesto storico della presenza armena a T'iflis", *Quaderni del Seminario di Istanbul. L'Armenologia dell'Università degli Studi di Firenze*, n. 22, (Giugno 1983): 63-66; idem, "Le croisement de cultures dans les régions limitrophes de Géorgie, d'Arménie et de Byzance. Premières méthodologiques pur une lecture sociologique", *Annali di Geografia Orientale* 17, XXX, 3 (1986): 81-96; idem, "Lo studio delle interazioni politiche e culturali tra le popolazioni della Subcaucasia: alcuni problemi di metodologia e di fondo in prospettiva sincronica e diacronica", *Il Caucaso: rivista per culture dal Mediterraneo alla Persia secoli II-VI. Atti della Quarantesima Settimana di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto medioevo (aprile 1995)*, v. II: 427-482.

¹¹ See R. G. Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, Bloomington, 1994: 87. On the social and economic role of the Armenians in the kingdom of Georgia in the second half of the 18th century, see S. A. Meskhi, *Gonada i gonodskij stroj v feodal'nykh Gruzii XVIII-XVIII vv.*, Tbilisi 1939; V. Martirosyan, *Hayra Irastani arechtatsebian bank'yun (18-nd dari ekrand kas)*, V. B. Baxvadarcan, Z. Ekharcan (eds.), *Ėger hay gult'acayeri pamut'can*, Erevan, 1996: 147-159.

¹² See S. Chelentia, *Tbilisi v XIX stoleti*, Tbilisi, 1942: 143.

¹³ See R. G. Suny, "Russian Rule and Caucasian Society, 1801-1856: The Georgian Nobility and the Armenian Bourgeoisie", *Nationalities Papers*, VII/1 (1979): 53-78.

¹⁴ See A. Ferrari, "Note sulla nobiltà armena in Georgia alla vigilia della conquista russa", *Rassegna Armenica Italiana*, V, 2002: 10-13; P. Murad'yan, "The Armenians as part of the Georgian Nobility and Commercial-Industrial Elite in the Nineteenth Century", *The International INTAS Conference "Tijis in the Nineteenth Century. History and Culture"*, Venice 26-28 June 2003, unpublished.

susceptible to solution in a modern "national" perspective,¹⁵ I will mention here the princely families of Armenian stock in the kingdom of Eastern Georgia at the end of the 18th century: Abamehik-Lazarean, Amatum, Artu'can/Argutashvili, Behbut'can/Bebutashvili (at the middle of the 17th century this family received the hereditary office of emarch, *Melik*, of T'iflis), Begrabegishvili, Melikishvili, Rusishvili, Sumbatishvili, Toreli-Javaxishvili, Tumanishvili, Xojaminashvili, Xerculijic.¹⁶ Also among the lesser Georgian nobility ("saxaso aznaurni") there were some families of Armenian origin: Korghanashvili, Enakolopashvili, Shansiasvili, Arreshishvili, Madatashvili, Loris-melikishvili, Saverdashvili 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". As a matter of fact the whole movement of national liberation during the 18th century was led by members of these Armenian noble houses.

Since the beginning of the 18th century, the fundamental aim of the Armenian nobility of Transcaucasia was the establishment of national statehood under the protection of the Russian Empire. It is very remarkable that such an aim had a monarchical character. This circumstance must be considered without 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 the prophecy—traditionally bound up with the authority of Nerses the Great—concerning the rebirth of an Armenian kingdom continued to play a role.¹⁸ We can find a good example of persistence of this ancient political and ideological myth in Israyel Ori's story.¹⁹ Probably a member of the Melik' Israyelcan family of

¹⁵ See B. L. Zekiyan, "Lo studio delle interazioni politiche e culturali...", 451-452.

¹⁶ See above all C. Toumanoff, "Les maisons princières géorgiennes...", Yu. K. Cikovanj, S.

V. Dumit, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ See P. Murad'yan, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ See A. Hovhannisyan, *Dracguer hay azatagrdakan melik' pahmut'yan*, I, Erevan, 1959: 18-33.

¹⁹ On this figure see A. Johannisjan (A. Hovhannisyan), *Israyel Ori und die armenische Befreiungskämpfe*, München, 1913; H. Harut'yunyan, *Israyel Ori*, Erevan, 1945; A. Hovhannisyan, *Dracguer hay azatagrdakan melik' pahmut'yan*, II, Erevan, 1959: 227-64; Y. K. Cikovanj, *Israyel Ori*, Venetia-San Lazzaro, 1999.

Djiraberđ,²⁰ after unsuccessfully travelling, from 1680 on, to many European courts looking for help against the Muslim oppressors of his people, Israyel Ori 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 Greater Armenia" (*"Ml'k' meč Hagnalaneč's išk'nik'ners ew melik'ners"*).²¹ As we know, the young Russian sovereign was very interested and some years later sent Ori on a diplomatic mission to Persia. During this mission, some rumours spread among Transcaucasian Armenians about the royal lineage of Ori and his intention to ascend the throne of Armenia with Russian aid. According to the Polish Jesuit Krusinski, 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 facendam impressionem, et quasi ad confirmandum male persuasac plebis rumore, Monsieur Michel primo Ministro ex praesenti legati nomine Israiel Ory, Gallicorum anagramma obstruit Il sera Roy id est Ille erit Rex".²²

After Ori's death in 1711 and the end of the long war against Sweden, Peter the Great organised the first expedition of the Russians into Transcaucasia (1722-1723), which encouraged a large uprising of the Armenians against Turks and Persians.²³ It was not by chance that the most remarkable leaders of this movement belonged to the Armenian nobility: in Karabakh it was the kat'olikos Esayi of Ganjasar, a member of the princely house of the Hasan-Djalalean, melik's of Xac'än, who led the insurrection,²⁴ while the hero of the glorious resistance in Siwnik—Dawit' Bek—probably belonged to a family of the lesser nobility.²⁵

In the first part of the 18th century the noble families of Eastern Armenia still maintained a large part of their former political, social

zaro, 1960; A. Eschlan, "The Mission of Israel Ori for the Liberation of Armenia", *Recent Studies in Modern Armenian History*, Cambridge (Ma.), 1972: 1-10.

²⁰ R. H. Hewsen, *The Meliks of Eastern Armenia: A Preliminary Study*, 323.

²¹ *Ampyano-nasikek' otnoseniya v persoj treti XVIII veka. Sbornik dokumentov*, Erevan, 1964, v. I, doc. 69: 183.

²² Th. J. Krusinski, *Tragedia verentis belli persici historia*, Leopoli, 1740: 262.

²³ As far as concerns these events see P. T. Arutyunyan, *Osobolitel'noe dviženie ampyanogo naroda v persoj četverti XVIII veka*, Moskva, 1954, and the introduction to my Italian translation of the history of Dawit' Bek, written in 1736-1737 by the Melikharist Lukas Sobasrac'i, *La guerre di Dawit' Bek, un eroe amano del XVIII secolo*, Milano, 1997: 11-45.

²⁴ R. H. Hewsen, *op. cit.*: 317-318.

²⁵ See S. Orbelkjan, "Dawit' Bekin egunabanut'yan harci masin", *Banber Hayastani Armineri*, 2 (1972): 72-85.

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-shah, in the second half of the 18th century the position of the melik's was deeply jeopardised by of the rise of the Muslim khannate of Shushi, in the heart of Karabakh. 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 *Xamsayi melik'ut'immer* by Raffi.²⁷ If in Ori's and Dawit' Bek's times the movement of national liberation could still take advantage of the ability of the melik's to rule and to make ready for war some regions of Eastern Armenia, at the end of the 18th century the situation was quite different. For instance, in a very interesting letter dated 10 January 1780, the rich and influent Armenian merchant Yovhannes Lazarean—close to the court of Saint Petersburg and on the way 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 otryx ampyanskix vladet'cev kak sobstvenno dlja sebjia, tak i dlja vsej nacji, delat' ix bez-poleznyimi*).²⁹

Perhaps, this lack of political prestige contributed to the failure of the important project presented in 1783 to the Russian court by Yovsep Artut'ean (1743-1801), Archbishop of the Armenians in Russia.³⁰ Himself a member of a famous Armeno-Georgian princely family, Artut'ean was the key figure of the Armeno-Russian and Armeno-Georgian political relations in the last twenty years of the 18th century. Yovsep Artut'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 displayed by many members of the Armenian people, at least for a large part of modern history.³¹ One can also note that, unlike the brave but uncul-

²⁶ See A. N. Khachatryan (ed.), *Ampyanskoje vozroždenie. Iz istorii ampyano-nasikogo vorenogo soderžitel'nogo faksidokonyia i dokumenty*, Erevan, 1968.

²⁷ I am preparing the Armenian translation of this important work by the Armenian writer of the 19th century. For another point of view on these events see G. A. Bourmoutan's translation of the Persian chronicle *A History of Qandagh, An Annotated Translation of Mirza Jamal Taramsiti Qandaghli's "Tarih-e Qandagh"*, Costa Mesa (Ca.), 1994: 45-108.

²⁸ See V. Dilyan, *Lazaryaneri hasarakakan-k'it'ak'ikan government'yan palmut'yunt's' (XVIII dari et'k'and ksj)*, Erevan, 1966.

²⁹ See *Ampyano-nasikek' otnoseniya v XVIII veka, 1760-1800*, v. IV, Erevan, 1990, doc. 88: 51.

³⁰ See Lčo, *Tovšp' kat'obhos Artut'ean*, T'bilis, 1902.

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

tivated melik's of Karabakh, he not only had good personal relations with the highest Russian and Georgian personalities of the time (Catherine II, Potemkin, Suworov, king Erekle of Kartl-Kakheti) but also possessed sufficient historical and cultural learning to design a large political project.

It is well known that in 1783—the same year of the treaty of Georgievsk,³² 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.³³ As a matter of fact the former was written in Russia by Arht'ean, the latter, in India by Shahamir Shahamirian, the leader of the Madras group.³⁴

Shahamirian's republican project, deeply influenced by 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, Arht'ean's project is more concrete and is tightly linked with the historic and religious memories of Armenia:³⁵ the capital would have been Valarshapat, 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, Veronika'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. As for the form of the government Arht'ean foresaw a new Armenianian

kingdom, whose sovereign was to be chosen by the Russian empress, among either Armenians or Russians (*Mlin'e' amenaobornac ewo zgotsh'at' kaizeruhi kani ognut'ien anel tarabaxi asxarhi meroy i korcanael t'agn norogel, anut' t'ien t'agavorin meroy kavael line'i i kamae' nora miqyn, et'e' yazge' mernē ewo et'e' dran ixroy' kaxatammac'*),³⁶ in a line of monarchical continuity with the dynasties of the past, from the Arshakunis 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 Shahamirian (3 September 1786), Arht'ean stressed the impossibility of any republican project as far as concerns Armenia: the Armenians, he says, “... do not know the force and the dignity of the parliamentary system (... *ancanul' ē na'e'a zōrut'ien, ewo bantut'ien, or cackael kōp i cerdikakan ixxanul'ean*). Moreover, he thought that Russia would certainly give Armenia a form of government according to the “law of the kings” (*ast' oñn t'agavorac'*).³⁷

The acknowledgement to the families of Armenian nobility (*yazge' aigroy' nararac'n meroc' ewo ixxanac'*) which could prove their ancestral right to regaining their ancestral lands is another sign of the conservative orientation of this project.

Arht'ean's letters show that he intended the liberation of all Armenia, both the eastern regions under Persian sovereignty, and the western ones under Ottoman sovereignty.³⁸ For a while, mainly in the early 1780's, the rebirth of an Armenian kingdom under Russian protection seemed to be possible, most likely with Potemkin as 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 (... *vazobnovit' v Azii xristianskoe gosudarstvo, svodstvovanie vysočeyšim V. I. V. obeščanyam, dannyim čerez meynya armyanskim melikam*).³⁹

Anyway, as Leo wrote, “Russia made promises, but without the ingenuity of signing a treaty of alliance”.⁴⁰ One must consider that unlike the Georgians, who still had weak but independent statehood, the

³² See V. Martirosyan, *Georgieskij dogovor 1783 goda i amnyan*, Erevan, 1983.

³³ See *Jamyano-nuskic' oboščenyja v XVIII veka, 1760-1800*, doc. 176; also H. Černazyan, V. Hakobyan, “Hay azatagrakan galap' amret' erku keron c'v erku cragir XVIII dari erkrort' kesiñ”, *Čsanbheri' giakan dšakut'jumeri zōbaca*, 1941, n. 3: 71-161; L.Ē. Patmut'yan *kyoç'*, v. III, Erevan, 1973: 834; G. Gričovyan, *Hay anqicor karat'akan-k'atakakan mič'i patmut'juner' (XVIII dari et'had keç)*, Erevan, 1957; A. Mnac'kanyan, “XXIII darun g'rauc' hay' ruskac' čhasnigr' harc'i šağ”, *Tekigir'*, 1958: 139-160; A. Arak'čyan, *Hay zōboron'i mašak'oy'i zangac' man patmut'jyun*, v. II, Erevan, 1964: 161-173; V. Diloyan, *op. cit.*: 161-163; V. Barxudaryan, “Russiani c'v Hndkassami haykakan gadut' nerç XIII dari verjin k'arordi hay' azatagrakan šaržumnerum”, *V Barxudaryan (ed.), XVI-XVIII darvi hay' azatagrakan šaržumnera ev hay' gult'aczayera*, Hovavnerci zōborac'u, Erevan, 1989: 213-214.

³⁴ On the Armenian communities in India see A. Arak'čyan, *op. cit.*: 151-150, 161-174; V. Barxudaryan, *op. cit.*: 187-216; H. Siruni, “Le role des arméniens de l'Inde dans le mouvement d'émancipation du peuple arménien”, *Acta et Studia Orientalia*, 1967, vv. 5-6: 302-336; G. J. Libaridian, *The Ideology of Armenian Liberation: The Development of Armenian Political Thought before the Revolution (1639-1935)*, UCLA 1987 (PhD dissertation, unpublished); 55-68; V. Ghoukassian, “Quest for Enlightenment and Liberation. The Case of the Armenian Community of India in the Eighteenth Century”, *R. G. Hovhannissian, D. N. Myers (eds.), Enlightenment and Diaspora: The Armenian and Jewish Cases*, Atlanta (Ga.), 1999: 145-180; A. Ferrari, “L'occidente illuminismo armeno. Le colomnie dell'India nella seconda metà del XVIII secolo”, *Annali di Ca' Foscari*, XXXVIII, 3, 1999 (Serie orientale 30): 105-131.

³⁵ V. Barxudaryan, *op. cit.*: 213.

³⁶ See *Jamyano-nuskic' oboščenyja v XVIII veka, 1760-1800*: 275.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 339. On this topic see also A. Lukasyan, “Haykakan t'agavorut'yan verakannjan harc' s' Hovsep' Adharyani šragrut'yumnerum c'v nanaškerum”, *Palma-danastakan handes*, 1995, n. 2: 173.

³⁸ *Ibid.*: 168.

³⁹ *Jamyano-nuskic' oboščenyja v XVIII veka, 1760-1800*, doc. 148: 241.

⁴⁰ See L.Ē. Patmut'yan, *op. cit.*: 826.

Armenians were not a reliable political partner for Russia. As the same Artutan wrote to Shahnuren 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?" (... *tygacork' and tygacorcac' karen dil zdashins, azgi jetun ov ē tygacorn, or hamaygic' y zdashins xndrel?*).¹¹ These words clearly express the inadequacy of the nobility of Transcaucasia to act as suitable political representatives of the Armenians to the Russian Empire, above all after the dramatic decline of the melik's of Karabakh in the last decades of the 18th century.

In 1784 Ibrahim-khan of Shushi imprisoned the pro-Russian melik's Abov Beglarian of Givlistan, Mejlum Israyelean of Djaberd and Baxtam Awanean of Dizak and even killed the Kat'olikos Yovhannes Hasan-Jalalean of Ganjasar.¹² Abov Beglarian and Mejlum Israyelean managed to escape, temporarily leaving Karabakh together with their families and followers. They returned later on, but did not recover their former authority. In 1795-1796 the melik's suffered another significant misfortune when the founder of the Persian Qajar dynasty, Agha-Mohammad Khan, invaded and ravaged Transcaucasia. In 1799, the melik's of Karabakh put themselves under Russian sovereignty.¹³ The emperor Paul I recognised their status,¹⁴ but the question of an independent Armenian kingdom was no longer on the political agenda.

Conclusion

Largely because of the weakening of the melik's during the 18th century, Karabakh 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 Karabakh, 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 18th century.

I think, that the subject represented by the Armenian nobility in the 18th century and the political project of an independent kingdom deserve a new historical study, based not only on mere genealogical criteria, and free from old and new ideological conditioning.

¹¹ *Janyvano-russkij otnošeniya*, doc. 228: 339.

¹² See R. H. Hewsen, *Russian-Armenian Relations, 1700-1828* (Cambridge (Ma.): 22.

¹³ See *Janyvano-russkij otnošeniya*, doc. 348: 501.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, doc. 353: 507.