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Research paper

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TARKHANISM IN MEDIEVAL GEORGIA AND ARMENIA: FEATURES OF THE TRANSCAUCASIAN FEUDALISM

Abstract. From the early Middle Ages, the term “tarkhan” found its way into the lexicon of the Transcaucasian peoples, initially associated with the Khazar realm. As the Mongol conquests unfolded, the word “tarkhan” and the phenomenon itself made their way into the historical narratives of Armenia and Georgia. In its early interpretation, “tarkhan” primarily signified exemption from taxes, though this was only one facet of its meaning. Over time, tarkhanism, as a form of immunity from various obligations and responsibilities, gained prominence within the evolving framework of feudalism. This article aims to collect and analyze information from diverse sources, including Armenian, Georgian, and Persian accounts, to understand the use and significance of tarkhanism within the Transcaucasian feudal systems. The study delves into the evolution of tarkhanism in medieval Georgia and Armenia through comparative analysis. Furthermore, it explores how the Georgian and Armenian churches became recipients of this form of immunity, shedding light on the conditions and terms associated with tarkhanism. Beyond a brief exploration of the term’s etymology and primary meaning, the article addresses several key questions: How was the concept of tarkhanism perceived in the Georgian and Armenian contexts prior to the Mongol conquest? What were the specific evolutions and implications of tarkhanism in these regions during the medieval period? Did tarkhanism encompass more specific privileges, such as tax exemptions? How and why did the church come to hold the status of tarkhanism? These questions collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of tarkhanism and its role in shaping the historical landscapes of Georgia and Armenia during the medieval era.

Keywords: Georgia; Armenia; Medieval Age; Tarkhans; Tarkhanism; Immunity; Taxes; Privileges; Georgian Church; Feudalism

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ИСТОРИЯ

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Исследовательская статья

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ТАРХАНСТВО В СРЕДНЕВЕКОВЫХ ГРУЗИИ И АРМЕНИИ: ОСОБЕННОСТИ ЗАКАВКАЗСКОГО ФЕОДАЛИЗМА

Аннотация. С Раннего Средневековья термин тархан проник в лексикон закавказских народов, первоначально связанных с Хазарским царством. По мере развития монгольских завоеваний слово тархан и само это явление прочно вошли в исторические повествования Армении и Грузии. В своей ранней интерпретации слово тархан прежде всего означало освобождение от налогов, но это было лишь одним из его значений. Со временем тархан как форма иммунитета от различных обязательств и ответственности приобрел известность в развивающихся рамках феодализма. Целью этой статьи является сбор и анализ информации из различных источников, включая армянские, грузинские и персидские источники, чтобы понять использование и значение тарханов в феодальных системах Закавказья. В исследовании посредством сравнительного анализа рассматривается эволюция тархана в средневековой Грузии и Армении. Кроме того, автор исследует, как грузинская и армянская церкви стали получателями этой формы иммунитета, проливая свет на условия и условия, связанные с тарханом. Помимо краткого исследования этимологии и основного значения этого термина, в статье рассматривается несколько ключевых вопросов: как концепция тарханства воспринималась в грузинском и армянском контекстах до монгольского завоевания? Какова была конкретная эволюция и последствия тархана в этих регионах в средневековый период? Охватывал ли тархан более конкретные привилегии, например, освобождение от налогов? Как и почему церковь получила статус тархана? В совокупности эти вопросы способствуют более глубокому пониманию тархана и его роли в формировании исторических ландшафтов Грузии и Армении в средневековую эпоху.

Ключевые слова: Грузия; Армения; Средневековье; тарханство; тарханы; иммунитет; подати; привилегии; грузинская церковь; феодализм

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Tarkhan: a historical overview

The term “tarkhan” is likely of Turkic origin [1, p. 105] and was prevalent among the highest nobility of Turkic peoples [2, p. 218]. Later, probably after the 11th century, the word appeared in the Mongol context in the form of “darkhan” or “darkan” with a shift in its semantic meaning. In this context, “tarkhan” primarily came to signify tax exemption or the right to tax exemption [3, p. 539]. The earliest references to “tarkhan” can be traced back to the 5th-6th century within the Khazar world. Tarkhans were, in all likelihood, individuals with privileged status within the Khazar military and political elite [4, p. 156; 5, p. 45; 6, p. 53].

This assertion is substantiated by a mention of a Khazar general named Āstarkhān, who led the Khazar armies’ invasion in Transcaucasia in 762-764 [7, p. 261-262]: “*and they gathered an army and appointed a commander, known as Razhtarkhan*” [8, p. 190]. The title “tarkhan,” as illustrated by these examples, was appended to the name of the holder. In the same Khazar context, we encounter another name, “Hazartarkhan,” and, in the early 8th century, the leader of the Ephtalites, Nizak tarkhan, etc. [9, p. 299; 10, p. 28; 11, p. 84].

In the Avar Kaganate, a significant part of their social structure consisted of tarkhans. However, their exact role, whether as princes, tax collectors, or warlords, remains unclear [64, p. 252]. It is worth noting that the term “tarkhan” is also found in Dagestani languages with similar meanings. In the Avar language, “tarkh’an” (тархъан) means “free, at ease,” while in the Lak language, “tarkh’ana” (тархъана) signifies “to free a slave” [65, p. 143].

Tarkhan was included in the titulary of the Göktürks [12, p. 105-108], and it appears that this concept was also present among the Karakhanids [13, p. 132]. In a broader sense, one can say that in the early Turkic states, the term “tarkhan” denoted a distinct caste of individuals who enjoyed specific lifelong privileges [14, p. 266]. Evidently, the Mongols adopted the phenomenon of tarkhanism from the Turkic world [15, p. 451].

During the Mongol Empire, the concept and practice of “tarkhan” underwent some changes. In contrast to the Turkic tradition where individuals became tarkhans for life, in the Mongol Empire, tarkhanate became hereditary. The historian of the Mongol Empire, Juweini, provides a description of the tarkhans and their privileges as follows: a) tarkhans were exempt from mandatory taxes, b) they had the right to claim a portion of their military booty, c) they enjoyed judicial immunity, including exemption from capital punishment up to nine times [15, p. 451], d) they had the privilege to enter the court of the Khan, e) these privileges were inheritable for up to nine generations of succession [16, p. 27].

In the early period of the Chinggisids, “tarkhan” or “darkhan” could be understood in two ways: a) it was a legal document granting tax immunity, b) it referred to a person to whom tax immunity and other privileges were granted [17, p. 117]. Some scholars believe that during the Mongol rule, the essence of the right to be a tarkhan lay primarily in tax exemption. As a result, a privileged class emerged from the large landowners and the middle nobility. In the territories under the dominance of the Golden Horde, people who received the tarkhan enjoyed broader powers and privileges. The Tarkhan Decree outlined several conditions, including clauses that affirmed the legitimacy of granting the Tarkhan yarlik, the inviolability of the property of Tarkhan individuals and their subordinates, and exemption from taxes related to trade, travel, and other duties [18, p. 74].

The giving of the tarkhan was part of the Timurids' strategy, according to which, by offering some generals a tarkhan (in this case, the right to be exempted from taxes), they ensured the support of their power [19, p. 24].

In the late medieval Central Asian khanates, particularly in the Kokand khanate, tarkhanism took on the following forms: a) those who had tarkhan decrees were exempt from all taxes and duties paid to the treasury, did not share with their masters the booty acquired during wars, and were not prosecuted for their crimes [20, p. 125]; b) tarkhanate in the Khanate of Khiva implied not only exemption from taxes, but also from military service [21, p. 29]; c) in the Bukhara Khanate, tarkhanism involved exemption from taxation of the tarkhan's possessions, free access to the sovereign prince, and exemption from liability for nine crimes [22, p. 37].

To make a comparison, tarkhanism also existed in the Russian Empire. Before Peter I's reforms, tarkhans in Russia enjoyed tax exemption. However, on June 15, 1700, Tsar Peter I (1682-1721, 1721-1725) officially abolished the "Tarkhan decrees." He stated that "*tarkhans, from whom duties are not imposed, should be dismissed,*" and established equal taxation for all individuals [21, p. 59].

"Migration" of Tarkhanism to medieval Georgian and Armenian historical realities

The spread and practice of tarkhanism in Georgia seem to have been facilitated by the well-established practice of immunity during the 11th-13th centuries. Immunity in Georgia was manifested through the terms "tavisupleba" (tax immunity) and "sheuvaloba" (immunity) – the prohibition of royal officials from entering immune territories. During this period, these forms of immunity were also granted to the church, which had the right to judicial immunity [23, p. 5-20]. Historians suggest that the Georgian church gained recognition as a tax-exempt entity with judicial immunity as early as the beginning of the 11th century [24, p. 317-337]. This in turn may be linked to the resurgence of the Georgian kingdom, the inclination of Georgian kings to support the church, and the reciprocal support provided by the church in strengthening royal authority [25, p. 93-95].

It is worth noting that the institution of "sheuvaloba" or immunity appears to have been in practice in Georgia as early as the 6th century. Instances of tax-exempt properties donated to the Zarzma monastery by George Chorchaneli [26, p. 134-147] and the donation of four villages to the Shio-Mghuime monastery by King Parsman are dated to the 6th century, which indicates that the church had possessed properties with tax immunity in Georgia since that time [27, p. 193].

According to M. Lordkipanidze, "sheuvaloba" became more widespread in Georgia during the 11th to 12th centuries, with the church being the primary beneficiary of property rights. However, it's important to note that it wasn't as extensively employed in Georgia during this period as it was in Western Europe or the Byzantine Empire [28, p. 21]. Major landowners, including the church, continually sought to secure exemption from taxes from the king, resulting in the income from taxes remaining under the control of feudal landlords [29, p. 254].

In medieval Georgia, a tarkhan could be a vassal or serf who enjoyed full or partial exemption from taxes and tax obligations. Tarkhans could also lose their privileges and revert

to the status of common serfs, necessitating the payment of all taxes once again [30, p. 114-115]. Interestingly, the term “tarkhan” (თარხანო) was brought into the Georgian language, where various forms of this word can be found, such as “tarkhneba” (თარხნება) – to grant the right to tarkhan, or “tarkhnoba” (თარხნობა) – the very phenomenon of tarkhan, etc. [31, p. 554].

The phenomenon of tarkhan in Georgia has been subject to various interpretations. For example, P. Iosseliani concludes that tarkhans were: 1) those who were exempted from taxes and duties, 2) those who could freely choose where to live, 3) those who had free access to the royal court, and 4) those with judicial immunity [32, p. 5-6]. S. Bagaturov, on the contrary, divides the meaning of tarkhan into categories: 1) immunity from certain taxes, and 2) exemption from all possible state taxes and tax obligations [33, p. 17]. L. Babayan divides the tarkhan class into two degrees: 1) Great Tarkhans, who were free both from personal dependence and from taxes, and 2) tarkhans, who were free from taxes but were personally dependent [34, p. 55-65].

It's important to note that the term “tarkhan” was not as commonly used in the historical context of medieval Armenia as it was in Georgia. This can be explained by the fact that in the Armenian context, the term “maaf” (distorted *maaf*, *maghaf*, derived from the Arabic *mu'af* – immunity or exemption from taxes) was more prevalent [36, p. 418-419].

As early as the second half of the 13th century, documentary records of the economic history of medieval Armenia already feature the term “tarkhan” with the meaning of exemption from taxes. For instance, in the epigraphic record of a cross-stone found in the cemetery between the villages of Martz and Ahnidzor in the Lori region, there is mention that “through tarkhan,” the village of Martz was exempted from the water tax [37, p. 420].

The 13th-century Armenian historian Stepanos Orbelian also provides one of the earliest references to the appearance of “tarkhan,” as in “tarkhan of all taxes” [38, p. 19].

Church as a holder of Tarkhan in Georgian and Armenian historical context

The exemption of the church and its possessions from taxes was also practiced in Georgia and Armenia during the period of Mongol rule. According to records preserved in the “Kartlis tskhovreba,” the order of Mangu Khan exempted Georgian and Armenian clergymen from taxes following the general census of Argun in Transcaucasia, “*but do not impose [any tax] on the clergy*” [40, p. 215-216]. Kirakos Gandzaketsi also confirms this by stating that “*but no tax was taken from the clergy because they had no order from the Khan*” [39, p. 211].

Tarkhanism was granted to the Catholicosate of Mtskheta and other monasteries, along with their properties and serfs. For instance, in 1540, Luarsab I granted a tarkhanate to Sion Monastery and renewed the deed, and in 1716, the same monastery was granted immunity by King Vakhtang VI [49, p. 31].

The Alaverdi monastery was granted a tarkhanate in 1651 by King Rostom, who, interestingly, was a Muslim. In 1694, the Safavid Shah Abbas II granted tarkhanate to the serfs of the villages of Keisi and Kondoli, which belonged to the Alaverdi monastery [41, p. 14]. Similarly, tarkhanate was granted to Tsilkani and Urbnisi churches in various years: in 1632 by King Teimuraz, in 1648 by King Rostom, in 1668 by King Shahnavaz, and in 1798 by

Erekle II. Kvatakhevi church received tarkhanate in 1530 from King Luarsab, and the donation was renewed in 1550 [42, doc 1372].

The respect for the privileges of the tarkhans was not always guaranteed by the officials. Authorities often attempted to encroach upon immune property or land. For instance, in 1768, royal officials in Gori tried to collect taxes from one church serf. Bishop Besarion complained to King Erekle II, and as a result of the king's order, they were exempted from all state taxes [41, p. 51].

The Safavid Firmans of the 18th century demonstrate that the Shahs acknowledged and guaranteed the immunity privileges of the Church. They recognized the Catholicosate as the rightful holder of the Church's properties, thus confirming their immunity [43, p. 127-128, 148, 156].

In Eastern Georgia, tarkhanate was granted not only to the Georgian church but also to the Armenian priests and serfs of the Armenian church. In 1594, King Simon the Kartli granted immunity to the Armenian priests in the city of Gori, instructing that no more taxes be collected from them in Wjuhath, Malojihat, Bahrache, Bigar-Shigar, Ulagh-Ulam and releasing them from other obligations [44, p. 74-75]. In 1640, King Rostom of Kartli (1633-1658) exempted the Monk Grigor from all government taxes, stating, "*And by the grace of Christ We bestowed the letter of tarkhanate upon the Monk Grigor*" [45, doc 2]. In 1771, King Heraclius II of Kartli (1762-1798) granted exemption to all serfs of Echmiadzin Catholicosate, stating, "*By the grace of Christ We, the son of God, anointed King Taimuraz Heraclius... we bestow this letter of gift upon the serfs of Echmiadzin so that you may be exempt from state royal taxes and customs duties and that you may remain free and tarkhan as you were in the past*" [45, doc 1].

Tax immunity for the Church was also applied in Armenia, and local princes had the authority to grant the Church a tarkhan. In 1237, the provincial prince Marzpan granted immunity to the Church, stating, "*And Shikaykar Church of the Holy Virgin made tarkhan along with its lands*" [46, p. 905]. A memorial record from an Armenian manuscript dated 1358 mentions that the church of the Holy Virgin in the village of Bdjni was exempted from taxes, and "*we made the church and priests free and tarkhan from all taxes and obligations*" [48, p. 330-331].

It can be concluded from the above that tarkhanism could be either partial or complete, as confirmed by the immunity decrees mentioned below. Examples of partial exemption from taxes include: in 1540, King Luarsab I of Kartli (1534-1556) exempted the church of Sion from the gala tax (tax on millet); in 1715, King Iese of Kartli exempted the church of Manglisi from the bazieri tax (tax for the benefit of a falconer) [49, p. 7, 31].

A noteworthy case of partial exemption or partial tarkhanism occurred when King Simon of Kartli exempted the church of Manglisi from the sabalakho tax (a tax for grazing cattle), but if the cattle grazed on lands not belonging to the church, the tax would be levied in favor of the state [50, p. 53] [41, p. 55].

A vivid example of complete exemption from taxes, i.e., tarkhanism, is found in the deed granted to the Mtsketh Catholicosate in 1392. It states: "*და რაც ქართლს, კახეთს ანუ სომხეთს და სხვა ადგილთა ყმანი და მამულნი აიან შეწირულნი და ყოფილან, აწ ჩუენ გუჯრითა ამით განვაახლეთ და ვითარხნეთ ყოვისა სამეფოსა ხარჯისაგან*" (*and what serfs and possessions are in Kartli, Kakheti, or Somkhethi and in other places, which have been gifted or have been since ancient times, by this charter, we give tarkhanism from all*

state taxes and renew the decree) [42, doc 1371]. This charter was updated and reconfirmed several times during the 15th-16th centuries [51, p. 176-181; 52, p. 158].

Interestingly, not only was the church the holder of tarkhanate, but the high clergy itself also granted it. For instance, in 1692, Archbishop Gabriel granted the serf Shoshitashvili immunity from all taxes [41, p. 9], or in 1712, Archbishop Arseni Dolenjashvili gave partial tarkhanate to the villagers of Manglisi and exempted them from the ghala tax [41, p. 10].

Duration of tarkhanism

In both Georgia and Armenia, tarkhanism was of a temporary nature. This is confirmed by the fact that from time to time the holders of tarkhan privileges tried to reconfirm their privileges and renew the tarkhan decrees granted to them. Note that privileges and decrees were subject to renewal, both those granted as a gift to the Church and those given to individuals. An example of this is the decrees for the renewal of privileges granted by the kings of Kartli, Teimraz and Rostom, to a certain Beru Dzhandzhashvili in 1631 and 1651 [42, doc 14661 ab]. Additionally, tarkhanism was often granted for a certain period. This is also evidenced by the following record from an Armenian manuscript of the 15th century, which states that the ruler of Qara Qoyunlu Iskandar (1420-1436) gave the town of Agulis, known for its developed trade, the right of tarkhan: “*and (Iskandar) because he was very gracious to our Armenian people, and especially to our town Agulis, made his khas and for one year made him tarkhan*” [53, p. 337]. It was also possible for possessions or villages to change ownership, in which case the tarkhanism privilege could not be transferred to the new owner of the property. An interesting example is found in the charter of King Irakli I of Kartli (or Nazar Ali Khan, 1688-1692, 1695-1703), which indicated that some villages previously mentioned as the property of the Kvatakhevi Church no longer belonged to it and the king renewed the decree and granted tarkhanism to the serfs of the church [54, p. 385-426].

Tarkhan as a proper name

The term “tarkhan” also evolved into a proper name or the name of a locality. An example from the period of Arab conquests in Central Asia is the conqueror of Fergana in 739, known as Arslan Tarkhan [55, p. 3-29]. Interestingly, this phenomenon was later observed in the Georgian and Armenian contexts, where “tarkhan” would become a proper name or turn into a family name.

As previously mentioned, tarkhanate in Georgia was also granted to private individuals, such as princes. In 1692 and 1697, King George XI of Kartli issued immunity decrees to Javakhishvili's Paremuz [42, doc 2521], where the latter's serfs and properties were exempted from taxes of codis-puri, sabalaho, piristavi, nakhiristavi, lashkar-nadiroba, sauri, among others, and received full tarkhanism [56, p. 16].

A notable example of this evolution is the granting of tarkhanate to the Georgian Saakadze family. According to one version, Simon I granted tarkhanate to George Saakadze, and the surname was later changed to Tarkhnishvili, which literally translates to “line, children of tarkhans” [57, p. 200].

Another perspective suggests that it was King Rostom (1633–1658) of Kartli-Kakheti who granted tarkhan status to the son of Giorgi Saakadze, Ioram, in appreciation for his support during the rebellion against the king. Following this, Ioram's descendants began to be known as Tarkhnishvili [58, p. 71]. The name “Tarkhan” was widespread in medieval Armenia since the 15th century, and interestingly, it could be both a masculine and feminine name [59, p. 285]. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the title “tarkhan” also transitioned into a proper name in the Armenian context. For example, in 1710, a certain Tarhan Kananyan was mentioned among the Armenian merchants [60, p. 173].

Furthermore, “tarkhan” could be part of a geographical name. The medieval name for the present-day Astrakhan was “Hájj Tarkhán,” a name known as early as the 14th century [61, p. 151]. Alongside this, when the name of a territory included “tarkhan,” as seen in medieval Georgia, the properties and lands of the Tarkhnishvili family were correspondingly named “Satarkhno” (the lands of Tarkhans) [62, p. 156].

Conclusions

In a diachronic analysis, the term “tarkhan” may have implied the following:

immunity from taxation, either partial or total;

juridical immunity;

freedom, either for a person or possession;

membership in a privileged stratum or elite that could hold one or more of the above privileges simultaneously;

tarkhanate could be held temporarily for a short period, posthumously, or could be inherited.

It's worth noting that transferring the privilege of tarkhanism from suzerain to vassal was not beneficial to the suzerain or the one who granted it, as it resulted in a loss of income and taxes (partially or fully), a reduction in available labor force, and a decrease in the number of enlisted soldiers (in the case of exemption from military service), as well as a reduction in jurisdictional rights, among other things. In the long run, this led to a strengthening of the vassals and a weakening of the suzerain and central authorities, whether it was the Georgian kings, the rulers of the Turkmen tribes of Aq Qoyunlu or Qara Qoyunlu, the Safavid shahs, or other rulers. However, in the short run, the rulers often used the granting of the tarkhan privilege as a means to secure social support among their subjects, vassals, or to gain favor and support from the church.

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