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Inga A. Druzhinina
Cand. Sci. (History), Senior Researcher
Institute of Oriental Studies of RAS, Moscow, Russia
Inga_druzh@mail.ru

Milana Yu. Iliushina
Doct. Sci. (History), Leading Researcher
Institute of Oriental Studies of RAS, Moscow, Russia
aspirant_vf@mail.ru

Inal B. Kabardov
research assistant
Institute of Oriental Studies of RAS, Moscow, Russia
inal-kabart@mail.ru

NOBILITY AND POWER IN 15TH-CENTURY KABARDA ACCORDING TO THE SOURCE “PRECIOUS NECKLACES CONCERNING MERITS OF THE STATE OF AL-ASHRAF AL-GHAWRI”

Abstract. The unpublished and previously unexplored by domestic caucasiologists source from the collection of Suleymaniye Yazma Eser Kutüfanesi (Istanbul) – the second volume entitled “*al-Uqūd al-Jawhariyya fī al-Mahāsin al-Dawla al-Ashrafiyya al-Ghawriyya*” (“Precious Necklaces Concerning the Merits of the State of al-Ashraf al-Ghawri”) reveals unique information regarding the history of North Caucasian peoples, particularly the Adyghe and Abazins, during the late 15th and early 16th centuries. This volume is part of an anonymous manuscript dedicated to the praise of the Mamluk sultan from the Burji dynasty (1382-1517), al-Ashraf Qansuh al-Ghawri (r. 1501-1516). The text of the source provides information on the territorial and political structure of Circassia, including the “countries” or “lands” of the Circassians – Karmuk, Kabak, and Kabarda – and their social structure. Moreover, it covers the origin and civil strife of the Circassian princes, their foreign policy contacts, and the ethnocultural and confessional situation in the North-West Caucasus and Central Ciscaucasia in the 15th century. The manuscript testifies to the formation of Kabarda under its own name, reflected in Arabic as قبادرا [Qabarda], at least by the beginning of the 1440s. The manuscript’s data is compared with information from 15th-century Arabic and Italian sources, as well as 16th and 17th-century Russian charters from the Ambassadorial Office, using retrospective analysis. To date, the anonymous work “Precious Necklaces Concerning Merits of the State of Al-Ashraf Al-Ghawri” is the only source that provides such comprehensive information on the formation of this Circassian principality, the genealogy of the first generations of Kabardian princes, the social structure – primarily the nobility – and the organization of power in Kabarda in the 15th century. This work focuses on the analysis of these topics.

Keywords: Kabarda; Circassians; Mamluks; North Caucasus; Middle Ages; written sources, source studies

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ИСТОРИЯ

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Исследовательская статья

Дружинина Инга Александровна,
к.и.н., старший научный сотрудник
Институт востоковедения РАН, Москва, Россия
Inga_druzh@mail.ru

Илюшина Милана Юрьевна
д.и.н., ведущий научный сотрудник
Институт востоковедения РАН, Москва, Россия
aspirant_vf@mail.ru

Кабардов Инал Бесланович
лаборант-исследователь
Институт востоковедения РАН, Москва, Россия
inal-kabart@mail.ru

ЗНАТЬ И ВЛАСТЬ В КАБАРДЕ XV СТОЛЕТИЯ ПО СВЕДЕНИЯМ РУКОПИСИ «ДРАГОЦЕННЫЕ ОЖЕРЕЛЬЯ В ДОСТОИНСТВАХ ГОСУДАРСТВА АЛ-АШРАФА АЛ-ГАУРИ»

Аннотация. В работе представлен анализ уникальных сведений, касающихся истории народов Северного Кавказа XV – начала XVI столетия, прежде всего адыгов и абазин, содержащихся в не опубликованном и ранее не используемом отечественными кавказоведами источнике из коллекции Süleymaniye Yazma Eser Kütüphanesi (Стамбул) – втором томе под названием *al-'Uqud al-jawharyya fi al-mahasin al-dawla al-Ashrafiyya al-Ghawiyya* (Драгоценные ожерелья в достоинствах государства ал-Ашрафа ал-Гаури) анонимной рукописи, посвященной восхвалению мамлюкского султана из династии Бурджи (1382–1517) – ал-Ашрафа Кансуха ал-Гаури (1501–1516). Текст источника предоставляет информацию о территориально-политическом устройстве Черкесии – о «странах» или «землях» черкесов – Кармуке, Кабаке, Кабарде и их социальном устройстве, о происхождении и междоусобицах черкесских князей и их внешнеполитических контактах, об этнокультурной и конфессиональной ситуации на Северо-Западном Кавказе и в Центральном Предкавказье в XV в. Рукопись свидетельствует о сложении Кабарды под собственным названием, отраженным на арабском языке – قبادا [Qabarda], уже, как минимум, к началу 40-х годов XV в. Сведения рукописи сопоставляются с информацией арабских и итальянских источников XV в., а также русских грамот Посольского приказа XVI–XVII вв., при сравнительном рассмотрении которых применен метод ретроспективного анализа. На сегодняшний день анонимный труд «Драгоценные ожерелья в достоинствах государства ал-Ашрафа ал-Гаури» является единственным источником, столь полно раскрывающим вопросы образования этого черкесского княжества, генеалогии первых поколений кабардинских князей, социальной структуры (главным образом, аристократии) и организации власти в Кабарде XV века. Анализу последнего блока вопросов и посвящена настоящая работа.

Ключевые слова: Кабарда; черкесы; мамлюки; Северный Кавказ; Средние века; письменные источники; источниковедение

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The Süleymaniye Yazma Eser Kütüphanesi collection (Istanbul) holds a two-volume anonymous manuscript, labeled as Ayasofya (AS) 3312 and 3313. The work's title, appearing in the first volume's introduction as "al-'Uqūd al-Jawhariyya fī al-Nawādir al-Ghawriyya" (Precious Necklaces in the Entertaining Stories of al-Ghawri) and slightly differently in the second volume as "al-'Uqūd al-Jawhariyya fī al-Mahāsin al-Dawla al-Ashrafiyya al-Ghawriyya" (Precious Necklaces Concerning the Merits of the State of al-Ashraf al-Ghawri), reveals its content and primary purpose: a panegyric of the Mamluk sultan al-Ashraf Qānsūh al-Ghawri (r. 1501–1516) of the Burji dynasty (1382–1517).

The manuscript is written in Arabic but contains several short passages in Turkish. According to the colophon, the first volume was completed in mid-Şafar 921/March–April 1515, and the second in mid-Rabī' I 921/April–May 1515. A detailed codicological description appears in Christian Mauder's monograph [1, pp. 187–214].

Until now, this manuscript has been considered solely as a valuable source on court life under the Circassian sultans [2, pp. 312–313; 1, pp. 194–214]. However, the second volume of this anonymous work contains unique information, previously unknown to Russian caucasiologists¹, on the history of the peoples of the North Caucasus in the 15th–16th centuries. This includes details on the territorial and political structure of Circassia — specifically, the "countries" or "lands" of the Circassians (Karmuk, Kabak, and Kabarda), their social structure, the origin and internecine conflicts of Circassian princes and their foreign policy contacts, and the ethnocultural and religious situation in the Northwest and Central Ciscaucasia in the 15th century.

Most importantly, manuscript AS 3313 is a crucial source for the history of Kabarda in the 15th and early 16th centuries. The text demonstrates that this Circassian "land" was already established under its own name, rendered in Arabic as قردا [Qabarda], by at least the early 1440s². The source describes the internecine conflicts among the Circassian nobility that resulted in the emergence of Kabarda. It details the genealogy of the early Kabardian princes and provides substantial material for studying the social structure (primarily the aristocracy) and the organization of power in 15th-century Kabarda. This work focuses on analyzing these latter topics.

AS 3313 allows us to distinguish three levels of the privileged class of 15th century Kabarda.

The Kabardian term for the highest nobility is *pshi*, reflected in the name of the 16th-century *murza* (son of the ruler) Psheapshoko (lit. "prince of the prince's son"), son of Kaituko (originally spelled Shopshuk, Shepshuk, or Shepshuk). While he is mentioned in documents from 1563–1567 from the Russian Ambassadorial Prikaz [3, pp. 11–13, 17; 4, p. 109], he is not found in the AS 3313 manuscript.

In AS 3313, the title of sultan is used in reference to the rulers of Kabarda, representing the highest nobility of this land. *Qirlysh* (قِرْلِش) and his brother *Min Bulad* (مِن بُولَاد) are referred to as sultans [F. 55 v]. This aligns with the Russian genealogical books of Kabardian princes and murzas compiled in the 17th century, belonging to A.M. Pushkin and A.I. Lobanov-Rostovsky [3, pp. 383–384], where they are identified as *Kirklysh* and *Minbulat*, respectively. The power that Min Bulad's brother, Jan Khud (*Yankhot* or *Yankhot* in 17th-century Russian genealogical books [3, pp. 383–385]), was unable to maintain is referred to as the "sultanate." The verb "تسلطن" is used in relation to Jan Khud's sons, meaning "took power" or "seized power." The text indicates: "Then his brother Jan Khud (جان خود) took power by force of the Tatar army (تتر). But he failed to manage the power (sultanate). And after him, the sons of Qirlysh became sultans — Qaban (قَبَان) and Yalbirdi (يَلْبِرْدِي), two sons of Qirlysh" [F. 55 r]. Moreover, the verb تسلطن is used in relation to the son of Kilak-Sultan [F. 56 r] (*Klekhstan* of the 17th-century Russian genealogical books) [3, pp. 384, 387].

Thus, the position of the rulers who were in power in Kabarda at least since the 1440s is correlated in AS 3313 with the status of the Circassian Mamluk sultans, which reflects the perception of Kabarda, at least in Cairo, as an established state entity. Significantly, the title "sultan" is not applied to the rulers of Karmuk — Kurtibay (كِرْتَبَاي) and his sons Taktamysh (طَقْمَش) and Ishbai (Ashaba — عَشْبَا) in AS 3313. This is noteworthy because other Arab authors (Ibn Taghriberdi and as-Sakhawi) also refer to the mid-15th-century ruler of

1. The authors of the present work have prepared for publication a translation and commentary on the "North Caucasian block" of the source text.

2. AS 3313 states that the Sultan-to-be Qansukh al-Ghawri was born in 1444 in Kabarda.

Karmuk as Kurtibay, likely the same individual mentioned in AS 3313, but identify him as the “emir of the Country of the Circassians.” [5, vol. 1, p. 170; 6, vol. 2, p. 182]. Al-Malati describes Kurtbay as originating from the *Country of the Circassians*, a member of the nobility, and a ruler controlling parts of this region [7, vol. 5, p. 296]. This account is corroborated by the Venetian Josaphat Barbaro, who identifies Kurtbay (rendered as Kertibey in Italian) as the *ruler* of Kremukh (Karmuk) [8, pp. 128, 153].

The elevated status attributed to Kabardian rulers in AS 3313 may be connected to the fact that Sultan al-Ashraf Qansukh al-Ghawri himself was of Kabardian origin. Other references within the text that highlight the special position of the Kabardians among the Circassians [F. 52r; F. 63r] could be interpreted similarly.

This difference in status might also stem from the distinct political organization of Kabarda compared to the Western Circassian traditions. While Western Circassians adhered to tribal relations governed by customary law (later known as *Adygekhabze*), Kabarda developed a principality structure on new territory. This necessitated the creation of *Uerkhabze*, a specific normative code regulating the ruling class – the primary beneficiaries of the Kabardian political system. A key distinction between the Western and Eastern Circassian political systems, exemplified by this divergence, was the order of succession to the throne (see below).

Later, in 16th-17th century Russian documents from the Ambassadorial Prikaz, the Kabardian upper class are referred to as *knyazjya* (princes). The Nikon Chronicle for 1558 even refers to Temryuk Idarov (Aidarov), the future father-in-law of Tsar Ivan IV, as a “bolshoi knyaz from Kabarda” [3, p. 7].

All Kabardian princes were related and traced their lineage to a common ancestor. This is corroborated by 17th-century Russian genealogies of Kabardian rulers [3, pp. 383–387] and the genealogy in AS 3313. Later European sources, such as Jacob Reinnegs (18th century), also note that the princely title was inherited strictly by blood right [9, p. 157].

The manuscript offers valuable information about a ruler whose 15th-century rise to power in Kabarda appears exceptional. AS 3313 records that Min Bulad, who held a “humiliated position in the state” [F. 54 r], became the Kabardian prince by decision of the council of elders. Qansukh al-Gawri’s father, based on status and chronology, should have participated in this council. In Kabardian society, this status belonged to the *tumeh* – illegitimate children of princes born from unions with women of non-princely lineages. The 17th-century Russian sources refer to them as children of princes from *menshits* (women of non-princely origin) and *sluzhish* (slaves) [4, p. 109]. The *tumeh* could not claim princely rank and were not considered equal to those of pure blood [9, p. 159].

According to AS 3313, the princes engaged in warfare, including internecine conflicts, raids³, and hunting⁴. However, it provides little information about the lengths of their reigns. Only two reigns have specific durations mentioned: Qirlysh ruled for seven years, and his brother, Min Bulat, for sixteen years and sixteen days.

The manuscript provides significantly more detail about individuals vying for supreme power in Kabarda, or princes who lost it. In their struggles for dominance, these contenders frequently sought military support from foreign rulers. For instance, *Kilak-Sultan* sought patronage from both the Ak-Koyunlu Sultan Yakub (1478-1490) and the Shirvanshah Farrukh Yasar I (1441-1500) against his political rival, *Kituk*. Three contenders for the position of supreme prince at once – *Jan Khud*, *Bur*, *Kituk* – left for the Great Horde and returned to Kabarda “with the army of Tatars.” Here it evokes a parallel from the mid-16th century: the embassies of the Western Circassians (“Zhazhen Circassians”) in 1552 and 1555, followed by the Kabardian princes in 1557, to the court of Ivan IV. Both sought military aid – the Western Circassians against the Ottoman Sultan and the Crimean Khan, and the Kabardians against the Shamkhal – in exchange for military service: “...so that their sovereign would show mercy, order them to serve him and make them his servants (kholops), and also so that the sovereign would help them in the fight against Shamkhal and order the Astrakhan governors to provide them with support” [3, p. 5].

AS 3313 also mentions a noble class referred to as “emirs,” a term meaning “prince” in Arabic. The man-

3. The manuscript provides vivid scenes from one of the raids: “The army was busy plundering, and Min Bulad remained alone and went into the shade under a tree” (F. 55 v).

4. The source reports that Kirlysh was killed during a hunt. The scale of this hunt is demonstrated by the manuscript’s information that, together with Kirlysh, “seventy people from among the nobility in his domains and those who formed the support of his state” were killed (F. 54 r).

uscript describes them as “those who form the pillars of the state in the country of Kabarda and its nobility.” It is important to note that the phrase “pillar of the state” in Arabic during the Mamluk period typically referred to anyone playing a key role in governance. Therefore, AS 3313 likely refers to the second tier of the highest Kabardian nobility, the *līak’uel’esh*, known as *tlyakotleshi* in Russian historiography. This term derives from *līak’ue*, meaning clan (literally “sons of one man,” from *līy + ku’e*), and *l’esh*, meaning “strong.” This social stratum, like the *pshi* princes, was a closed caste accessible only by right of blood. The prefix *lesh-* attached to the word “clan” suggests not just a blood relation, but potentially a brotherhood of multiple clans within a single class-clan structure. Sultan Khan-Girey described a similar tradition of sworn brotherhoods among the Shapsugs, an Adyghe sub-group. He referred to these groups as *clans* or *unions* [10, p. 166], effectively male unions [11, p. 71].

It is also worth noting that scholars of Adyghe socio-political history in the 16th–19th centuries [4, p. 110; 9, p. 185; 12, p. 261] include the *dyzhynygyue* (meaning “silver covered with gilding,” lit. “yellow silver” [13, p. 59]) alongside the *tlyakotleshi* within the second tier of Kabardian nobility. From the late 17th to the 19th centuries, this social group expanded to include children of princes from unequal marriages – *tumeh* – and members of noble families from neighboring regions who entered the service of Kabardian princes [14, p. 114].

The *tlyakotleshi* clans were few in number. In Kabarda, only the Anzorovs, Kudenetovs, and Tambievs, known in Russian sources since the 16th century, were counted among them [4, p. 110; 9, pp. 185–186]. The political influence of this social group is clearly demonstrated by the 1589 characteristic of Khotov Anzorov given by Terek governor A.I. Khvorostinin: “Khotov is a distinguished man in Kabarda. All Kabardian princes, murzas, and uzdens obey him in everything. Without him, no one can be placed on the throne” [3, p. 57].

AS 3313, predating Russian sources by a century, mentions an emir who was likely the founder of another *tlyakotleshi* lineage. The manuscript states that Sultan Min Bulat “went to an emir named Qudinet (قدينيت) and accepted Islam from him and married the daughter of this emir, who was called Aykildi (ايكلدي)” [F. 55 v]. Based on the chronology reconstructed from the source, these events occurred in the latter half of the 1450s.

AS 3313 indicates that Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri’s father also belonged to the privileged class in Kabarda: “Know that the origin of the noble ruler [al-Ashraf Qansuh al-Ghawri] is from Kabarda. And they are the Qurayshites of the Circassians. His father was among the emirs of the rulers of Circassia (امراء ملوك الجركس), from the tribe of al-Bayziryya⁵ (قبيلة البازيرية)” [F. 63 r].

The reference in AS 3313 to the Kabardians as the “Qurayshites of the Circassians”⁶ likely served multiple purposes. It enhanced the political and religious legitimacy of the sultan’s origins and early life. This resonates with scholars who examined works containing biographies of the Mamluk sultans as a means of the political language of the Mamluk rulers and as one of the instruments of state ideology [15; 16, p. 69–75; 17]. One can mention an ideological tradition that emerged in the 15th century and attributed an Arab origin, specifically a connection to the Qurayshites, to the Circassian Mamluks. While al-Aini’s 15th-century genealogy, linking Circassian sultans to the Prophet Muhammad, aimed to legitimize their rule through sanctified lineage [15, pp. 70–71, 74], the comparison of Circassians to the Quraysh in the 16th-century AS 3313 seems to have a different purpose. It suggests an attempt to bolster the authority of the Mamluk elite, particularly Sultan al-Ghawri, within Arab society. This likely served as a response to the escalating crises faced by the Sultanate, both internally and externally.

Secondly, AS 3313 presents unique information regarding the Kabardian nobility’s conversion to Islam. This account stands in stark contrast to Giorgio Interiano’s depiction of Christianity’s spread among Western Circassians, where even the nobility seemed to hold a rather superficial understanding of the Christian faith. He writes: “The nobles do not enter the temple until they are sixty years old, for, living, like all of them, by robbery, they consider this unacceptable, so as not to desecrate the churches; after this period, or

5. This name likely refers to the “Baazitsky Circassians” known from Russian documents of the 16th century (KRO, 1957. P. 22).

6. For more details, see: Druzhinina I.A., Ilyushina M.Yu. A new source on the history of Kabarda in the 15th century. *Vestnik Arhivista*, 2024 (in press).

about that time, they leave robbery behind and then begin to attend the divine service, which in their youth they listen to only outside the church and without getting off their horses” [18, p. 47]. Considering this, the comparison between the Kabardians and the Qurayshites likely stemmed from the author’s (or al-Ghawri’s) intent to highlight the significant role of Islam within the political and ideological landscape of the Kabardian aristocracy.

Interestingly, AS 3313 reveals multiple pathways through which Islam entered Kabarda. For instance, Prince Min Bulad, “five years after his reign ... went to an emir named Qudinet (قدینت) and accepted Islam from him” [F. 55 v]. The events and circumstances surrounding Min Bulad’s conversion to Islam, and where *Emir Qudinet* himself embraced the faith, remain unknown. However, it is clear that by the mid-15th century, members of the Kabardian nobility were converting to Islam within Kabarda. Furthermore, two other examples indicate that the Kabardian nobility, in seeking both political alliances in internal conflicts and religious guidance, looked to the dominant military and political powers in neighboring regions. For instance, Prince Kituk, after losing power, converted to Islam within the Great Horde: “Kituk went to the Tatars, accepted Islam from them and came with the Tatars” [F. 56 v]. His political rival, on the other hand, converted in Shirvan: “Then he [Kilak-Sultan] returned to Shirvan and accepted Islam from its sultan” [F. 56 r]. There is no doubt that the Mamluk Sultanate influenced the spread of Islam among the Circassians [19, pp. 166–176]. However, for those Circassians who chose to leave their homeland for Cairo, this influence was delayed. A Mamluk career began in slavery, requiring purchase by a sultan or emir from a merchant. This presented a problem due to the prohibition against selling co-religionists, even though adherence to this ban was often inconsistently applied in practice [see more: 20, pp. 152–162].

Thirdly, the comparison to the Qurayshites likely aimed to highlight the honorable status and possibly the antiquity of the Kabardian princes’ lineage among the Circassian clans. This was particularly significant because Kabarda’s formation and subsequent history occurred in a new territory, a destination for Circassian migration. The connection between the Kabardian princes and the ancient Karmuk clan, as evidenced in manuscript AS 3313, is therefore especially noteworthy.

The source details another segment of the privileged class, the largest portion, which comprised the primary military force of the Kabardian princes and *tlyakotleshi*. This group is identified as *uzdens* in 16th–18th century Russian sources [4, p. 110]. The absence of the Kabardian term *warq* in AS 3313 is notable. This term, referring to the social class in question, lacks a direct Adyghe translation and may be of Arabic origin. A likely etymology points to the Arabic word ورق [waraq] meaning “paper; sheet; document.” The Mamluk Sultanate provides historical context for the emergence of this term for a social group whose rights, privileges, and status were documented (i.e., *recorded on paper*), as indicated by sources [21, p. 186; 5, vol. 2, p. 538]. Ibn Taghriberdi recounts how a rebellious Mamluk justified his defiance of Sultan al-Ashraf Inal (1453–1461) by stating: “We are the freed slaves of al-Malik al-Zahir and were taught by him. I cannot be a freed slave of al-Ashraf Inal [only] by ورق [waraq]” [5, vol. 2, p. 538; 22, p. 98; 23, pp. 235–239]. The context clearly reveals the meaning of “waraq” as a type of document that proved a mamluk’s affiliation with a particular emir or sultan.

The absence of the word *warq* in AS 3313 suggests that the time period of the 15th–16th centuries serve as a *terminus post quem* for the development within Kabarda’s socio-political landscape of the conditions and/or the social group that resulted in the adoption of a foreign, likely Arabic, term for the largest segment of the nobility – the very foundation of Kabarda’s political system.

The *warqs* accompanied the prince-*pshi* on military campaigns against external enemies and in interne-cine conflicts, as well as participating in raids. For their service, they received what 18th- and 19th-century documents term *warqtyn* – a “warq gift” consisting of weapons, horses, peasants, and land. Their right to use the land, however, was contingent upon their continued service to the prince. Following E.N. Kusheva, it is important to emphasize that 16th- and 17th-century sources contain no information about the allocation of land plots to the *uzdens* [4, p. 114]. Typically, the *warqtyn* was returned upon transfer of military service to another prince [9, pp. 182–183; 12, p. 93].

AS 3313 recounts an incident in which some of Min Bulad's nobles intended to defect to another ruler, Ishbai (Ashaba), but reconsidered after Min Bulad's victory: "Ishbai (Ashaba – عشبا) retreated, and the army of Karmuk was defeated. He [Min Bulad] then summoned those who had gone over to Ishbai (Ashaba – عشبا), but they did not join his side" [F. 55v]. This right of the *warqs* to move from one *pshi* to another, documented in the *adats*, can be traced back to the 16th century according to Russian sources [4, pp. 111–112]. For example, in 1589, one of Sholokh Tapsarukov's *uzdens* warned the prince: "How can I not serve you, sir... I can go to another prince" [24, p. 137]. The source demonstrates the right of emirs or *uzdens* to change allegiance to another ruler as early as the 15th century. The AS 3313 incident is particularly noteworthy because the nobles attempted to transfer their loyalty from a Kabardian *pshi* to the ruler of a different Circassian "country" – Karmuk.

As V.K. Gardanov notes, "Even powerful Adyghe overlords such as princes avoided antagonizing their vassals, particularly the principal *warqs*, as the departure of the latter would result in the depopulation of entire auls" [9, p. 185]. According to the 19th-century author K.F. Stahl, such "movements of nobles were rare, and a *tlyako-tlyazh* who lost a nobleman and did not attempt reconciliation suffered reputational damage and ostracization from other noble families within their aul" [25, p. 150]. It is reasonable to assume that similar concerns also applied to the Kabardian nobility of the 15th century.

In this context, the question arises concerning the attitude of Kabardian, and more broadly, Circassian rulers, toward the voluntary emigration of their subjects to the Sultanate. AS 3313, using the example of Sultan al-Ghawri and his relatives, offers compelling information regarding the relocation of an entire generation of a noble family to the Sultanate. According to the source, Qansukh was orphaned by the age of 15, losing his mother at 12 and his father three years later. He was the middle son among three brothers and also had eight sisters. Qansukh was the first of his siblings to depart for Cairo in 1467 at the age of 23, and his brothers and sisters subsequently followed him. At the same time, Qansukh's elder brother couldn't have left for Cairo any sooner than six years after Qansukh himself⁷, as he left children behind in Kabarda, including his son, the future Sultan Tumanbai, born in 1473. Significantly, Qansukh's elder brother, wishing to relocate his family to Cairo, was required to obtain "the permission of the late Sultan [Qaitbay] to travel to Circassia (جرکس) and retrieve his children. [The Sultan] granted this permission. He traveled to Circassia, retrieved his children, and intended to return to Egypt, but died – may God have mercy on him – on the day of his planned departure. His son subsequently arrived in Egypt and attained the esteemed position of Tumanbay (طومان بای), the chief dawadar [F. 64v]. This migration of Qansukh al-Ghawri's elder brother's children to Cairo likely occurred during the reign of Prince Bura, son of Min Bulad, in Kabarda. It is noteworthy that the manuscript twice emphasizes the permission granted by the Mamluk Sultan Qaitbay for these noble Kabardians to migrate to Cairo, while omitting any mention of permission from the Kabardian prince.

AS 3313 provides information about a traditional Adyghe institution of power: the council of elders (اکابر جرکس), known in oral tradition as *khasa*, but not previously attested under this name in written sources. The manuscript indicates this council consisted solely of noble representatives: "And the rest of those who formed the support of the state in the country of Kabarda and its nobility held the council." This information from the source is crucial for understanding the nature, structure, and functions of the *khasa*. It is particularly relevant to scholarly debates [see: 26, pp. 8–17] concerning the tribal and feudal *khasa*, and the emergence of its "third chamber" – the "assembly of elders of the black people" – as documented in sources from the latter half of the 18th century.

The manuscript AS 3313 describes the council of elders as having the authority to decide on the transfer of power from one prince to another, effectively electing the prince. This power extended even to situations where the chosen candidate might not have a clear claim to the role: "And those who remained from among those who formed the support of the state in the country of Kabarda and its nobility, held a council on the transfer of power to the brother of Qirlysh, whose name was Min Bulad. In the state of his brother,

7. By this time, Qansukh al-Ghawri was a jandar in the Sultanate. The jandar asked the sultan for permission for emirs and officials to enter, brought them into the audience room, handed over mail to the sultan along with the dawadar and personal secretary, and was also in charge of the penal service. In the first half of the 15th century, there was a gradual decline in the status of the jandar emir. Even warriors who did not have the title of emir were appointed to this position. Only under Sayf al-Din Khushqadam, in 868/1464, was an emir again appointed to this position. Qansukh al-Ghawri received the title of emir only in 1484.

he occupied a humiliated position” [F. 54 r]; about the division of power between the two princes (“And then the elders of the Circassians (اکابر جرکس) said to them: ‘Half of Circassia⁸ (جرکس) is yours, and the other half is his’ [F. 56 v]; “Then the matter came to an agreement, and they decided thus: ‘Half of Circassia (جرکس) is yours, and the other half is his’” [F. 56 r]; and about participation in military conflicts (“And he [Min Bulad] opposed [the council’s decision to elect him as the main prince] and refused. He was asked: ‘What is the reason for your refusal?’ He answered: the battle with Ishbai (Ashaba – عشبا). They said to him: ‘for the battle with Ishbai (Ashaba – عشبا) we vouch.’ And they entered into confrontation. And he retreated Ishbay (Ashaba – عشبا), and the army of Karmuk was defeated” [F. 54 r].

It goes without saying that this represents the earliest documented mention of a council of elders in Kabarda. Significantly, the term *khasa* itself does not appear in AS 3313. Current etymological proposals linking the term to the Adyghe and Ossetian languages remain unconvincing. Similarly, theories regarding the origins of this traditional Adyghe institution of power, including speculative connections to the Hattians, lack strong supporting evidence. Meanwhile, this word is translated from Arabic as “special”, “peculiar”, and also “chosen”, “select”, “noble” [27, pp. 40–45]. In the Mamluk Sultanate and other Muslim states, the word “khasa” had a broad meaning, akin to the modern concept of “elite”, extending beyond the political sphere.

Of particular interest is the manuscript’s information on the order of succession to the throne in Kabarda. According to AS 3313, the *lestvitsa* system (seniority) was in effect in Kabarda. In this system, inheritance rights were passed horizontally within one generation, from elder brother to younger brother. Once all brothers in a generation had ruled, succession then moved vertically to the next generation, where it again proceeded from elder to younger brother.

Under this inheritance system, the princely estate in Kabarda was the collective property of the entire ruling family. Russian sources from the 16th century suggest that this estate represented “not so much a specific territory as a population dependent on the prince and murza – comprising *uzdens* and peasants – along with the lands used for cattle breeding and agricultural activities” [4, p. 115].

AS 3313 also documents several instances where legitimate claimants had to forcefully defend their right to power. For example, Jan Khud, the last in the line of succession among the sons of Inal and Tabulda, enlisted the aid of the Tatars to secure his position on the Kabardian throne; however, this proved insufficient to maintain his hold on power: “Then his brother Jan Khud (جان خود) took power by force of the Tatar army (تتر). But he could not manage with [governance] of the state. And after him, the sons of Qirlysh became sultans – Qaban (قبان) and Yalbirdi (یلبردی), two sons of Qirlysh” [F. 55 r].

This second example illustrates another instance of struggle for power, now between Mirza, the son of Kilak-Sultan, and his uncle Tau-Sultan. The manuscript mentions that “Kituk had a brother among the Tatars” [F. 56 r]. Despite the decision of the council of elders to divide power between him and Mirza (“And then the elders of the Circassians (اکابر جرکس) said to them: ‘Half of Circassia (جرکس) is yours, and the other half is his’”), Tau-Sultan killed Mirza and “began to rule the entire country of the Circassians⁹ (مملکت جرکس)” [F. 56 r].

It is noteworthy that in both cases the contenders for power – both Jan Khud and Tau-Sultan – were associated with the Tatars of the Great Horde.

The division of Kabarda between two princes on two separate occasions by the council of elders is also of interest. The joint rule of Yalbirdi and Qaban, sons of Qirlysh, may exemplify this dual power. The near simultaneity of their deaths, described in the account of their confrontation with the son of Min Bulat – “Yalbirdi was killed, and Qaban died of anxiety” [F. 55r] – suggests they reigned concurrently.

Crucially, AS 3313 indicates [F. 49v] a distinct, direct principle of inheritance – from father to son (majorat) – among the Western Circassians in Karmuk. Furthermore, AS 3313 suggests that during the internecine conflict, the line of Kabardian princes originated from this Karmuk clan. The reasons for the shift in Kabarda’s succession practices require further investigation. It is worth noting, however, that these changes occurred roughly contemporaneously with, albeit slightly later than, similar shifts in the

8. Here and in the following example, Circassia refers to Kabarda

9. Here, the term “entire Circassian country” refers to Kabarda.

succession practices of the Circassian Mamluk Sultanate. The first Circassian sultan, az-Zahir Barquq (1382–1389, 1390–1399), broke the established order, under which the sultans in Bahri Egypt were representatives of one family – the children and grandchildren of Sultan Saifuddin Qalawun (1280–1290), achieved the removal of the last Qalawunid and took the throne himself. After the unsuccessful attempt to establish a new dynasty by az-Zahir Barquq (his son an-Nasir Faraj (1399–1404; 1405–1412) was killed), the further political development of the Circassian Sultanate led to the consolidation of the tradition of nominating a new ruler to the throne on the basis of both blood relationship and a specific “Mamluk pseudo-kinship” – belonging to a particular faction, whose members were raised from early youth in the “house” of one master. At the same time, a significant role in deciding the issue of choosing a new sultan belonged to the council of emirs [28, p. 424].

When examining the succession practices in Kabarda, it is essential to consider the role of women in legitimizing power, a feature that also resonates with the political traditions of the Circassian Mamluks. Manuscript AS 3313 offers unique insights into this aspect of Circassian society. For example, following the account of the council of elders’ decision to select Min Bulad as the supreme *tumeh*-prince, the narrative states, “He [Min Bulad] took the wife of his brother Qirlysh and married her.”

The second instance of a politically significant marriage involves Kilak-Sultan marrying the mother of his cousin and rival, Kituk. After years of feuding, they briefly shared power in Kabarda. However, Kilak-Sultan soon eliminated Kituk and “took possession of the entire country of the Circassians” [F. 56 r].

These matrimonial marriages are mentioned precisely in the context of reports about the transfer of power from one ruler to another, and, apparently, can be considered as an instrument for legitimizing the powers of the new ruler. In this regard, the report of the Genoese Giorgio Interiano about one of the customs of the Circassian nobility appears in a different light: “It often happens among the nobles that relatives kill each other along with a large part of their brothers. And as soon as one of the brothers dies, the next night the other takes the deceased’s wife, his daughter-in-law, for they are allowed to have even several wives, all of whom are considered legitimate” [18, p. 48]. This custom can be traced in sources up to the 17th century [see: 4, p. 126].

Parallels to this tradition are clearly visible in the political practices of the non-dynastic succession of the Burji Sultanate. During the Burji period, sixteen sultans came to power as a result of a decision taken by a council of emirs. Of these sixteen sultans, fifteen were matrimonially connected to the families and “houses” of their predecessors: they married the daughters, relatives of the wives, former concubines, or widows of previous sultans. In a number of cases, the circumstances of such marriages confirm the importance that was attached to matrimonial ties in the Mamluk society [28, p. 424].

It is noteworthy that references to the political system of the Sultanate of the Circassian Mamluks in the study of socio-political relations in Kabarda, and more broadly among the North Caucasian Circassians of the 15th century, are deliberate. The Circassian Mamluks’ ascent to power in Cairo in 1382 and their subsequent rule of the Sultanate until their defeat by the Ottomans in 1517 served as a significant catalyst for the development of the political culture of the peoples of the Northwest Caucasus. During the years of the Burji dynasty’s rule in Cairo, Arab and Western European sources from the 15th century document a notably active period of political genesis in the history of the North Caucasian Circassians, particularly among the Adyghe and Abazins. Rather than referring to the tribes of the Northwestern Caucasus as they did in the 14th century, these sources began to name “countries,” “regions,” or “lands” of the Circassians, such as Kabak, Karmuk (Kremukh), and Kabarda. This process, however, did not culminate in the formation of a single centralized state within the Circassian ethnocultural environment. The collapse of the Sultanate significantly slowed and altered the trajectory of political development among the peoples of the Northwest Caucasus. In the 16th to 18th centuries, Russian, Turkish, and European authors once again referred to “tribes” when discussing the Circassians. The exception to this pattern was the Principality of Kabarda, which did not undergo a prolonged evolution from a tribal union. Instead, it emerged in the 15th century as a distinct political entity, from which two Mamluk sultans successfully arose.

The examination of the influence exerted by the Mamluk Sultanate on the socio-political history and culture of the peoples of the North Caucasus is still in its early stages, with the manuscript “Precious Necklaces Concerning the Merits of the State of Al-Ashraf Al-Ghawri” providing a key source for this research.

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