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AGULIS ON THE CROSSROADS OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE THROUGH CAUCASUS IN 17TH-18TH CENTURIES

Abstract. Agulis was an Armenian old settlement in Naxiĵevan province, mentioned in sources since 11th century. The 17th-18th century history of Agulis is well attested in contemporary Armenian and foreign sources: travel-notes of European authors, Ottoman Turkish and Persian documents. Many issues of its history are considered within researches on the history of Armenia as well as Safavid and Afsharid states of Iran. Yet many problems of the 17th-18th century history of Agulis still need a careful investigation, which may be supplemented on the basis of the data contained in the unstudied archive documents of the Matenadaran. One of the problems researched in the article is the status of the settlement as a khāṣṣ estate during the rule of Qarā Quyūnlū Iskandar and later Safavid period. This status has been considered by the authors as a reason for the survival of the settlement during forced migrations of the people of Transcaucasus and Naxiĵevan organized by shah ‘Abbās I. The later growth of the settlement to a trade-economic centre and populous town in Naxiĵevan is discussed on the basis of historical sources, and with the consideration of existence of an Armenian kalāntar in late 17th century and the beginning of 18th century. The article considers the trade ties of local merchants with Ottoman, Russian and European states, and their importance for the economic development of the town. The existence of a major group of Armenian Catholics there and the state of the town’s Apostolic eparchy in Safavid period, the situation there during Nādir Shāh’s rule and its decline after the attacks of Āzād Khān Afghān in 1752-1754 are among the issues elucidated in the article.

Keywords: Agulis; Transcaucasus; trade-routes; tamghā; silk; khāṣṣ; kalāntar; Armenian merchants; khoja.

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АГУЛИС НА ПЕРЕСЕЧЕНИИ ПУТЕЙ МЕЖДУНАРОДНОЙ ТОРГОВЛИ НА КАВКАЗЕ В XII-XVIII ВЕКАХ

Аннотация. Агулис – одно из древних армянских поселений Нахичеванской провинции, которое отмечено в источниках, начиная с XI в. История XVII-XVIII вв. хорошо засвидетельствована в армянских и иноязычных источниках того периода: путевых заметках европейских авторов, в османских и персидских документах. Многие вопросы его истории освещены в рамках исследований по истории Армении, а также Сефевидского и Афшаридского государств Ирана. Но многие проблемы истории XVII–XVIII до сих пор нуждаются в более подробном изучении, в том числе на основе неисследованных документов Матендарана. Одна из проблем, исследованных в статье, статус этого поселения как хасского владения в период правления в Кара-Коюнлу Искандара и позднее – Сефевидской династии. Этот статус рассматривается авторами как основная причина его нетронутости во время насильственных массовых переселений населения Закавказья и Нахичевана, инициированных шахом Аббасом I. На базе исторических источников также изучен вопрос дальнейшего развития этого поселения как торгово-экономического центра и многолюдного города Нахичевана, учитывая появление там нового должностного лица, армянского калантара в конце XVII – начале XVIII в. В статье рассматриваются торговые отношения местного купечества с Османским, Российским и Европейскими государствами и их значение для развития города. Освещены также вопросы существования там большой группы армян католиков, состояние апостольской епархии города в Сефевидский период, ситуация, сложившаяся в период правления Надир-шаха и упадок вследствие атак со стороны Азат-хана Афганского в 1752–1754 гг.

Ключевые слова: Агулис; Закавказье; торговые пути; тамга; шелк; хасс; калантар; армянские торговцы; ходжа.

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Until recently the attention of many scholars has been focused mainly on the commercial activities of the Armenian merchants of New Julfa, who played an important role in the foreign trade of Safavid Iran in the 17th century. However, the start of their activities should be considered from its cradle – Old Julfa, on the bank of Araxes River and neighboring Armenian villages, which had been passed under the rule of Safavid state from the times of its formation.

The conclusion of Amasia treaty in 1555, after a long period of wars, stimulated the development of handicraft production and trade in Naxiĵevan region where those settlements lived. Both Safavid and Ottoman states admitted the importance of economic improvement and development, and had similar laws guaranteeing it during the periods of peace, which are important circumstances for trade. Shah Isma'īl established a number of silk and cotton cloth manufactories, Shah Tahmāsb had wells dug in caravanserais, standardized weights and measures [1, p. 66]. The abolition of the tamghā, the main tax paid for trade and handicrafts, by the firman of Shah Tahmasb I in 1565 [2, p. 302], gave an additional impetus for the development of trade and economy in the Safavid state and Transcaucasian regions under Safavid rule. The importance of the region of Naxiĵevan and Old Julfa and attention of Safavid Tahmasb I on the region is evident from his special edict on tamgha's abolition addressed to the governors and high officials, "the local tamghāchīs and 'āmils of Julāh, Nakhīchavān, Gyukchah dangīz, Qāqzmān and Shūragil". This decree is now kept in the museum of St. All Saviour's church in Isfahan. It was studied and introduced for the first time by the Armenian scholar V. Papazian [3, pp. 133-135], then it was published in the collection of the Safavid decrees of the museum [4, p. 268].

The early Safavid shahs Isma'īl I and Tahmāsb I were kindly disposed toward their Armenian subjects [5, p. 63]. They were treated with more tolerance than Sunnis so that they were able to gain their share in the Iranian trade.

More efficient for the development of trade were the measures taken by Shah 'Abbās I, who built a great number of guest-houses (caravanserais) on the trade-routes and strengthened their security [1, p. 67]. Shah 'Abbās was not only tolerant towards its Christian subjects, but also considered them as suitable agents for the development of Iran's foreign trade, since they were more admissible in Europe for their faith and at the same time they had language and trading skills.

Agulis was one of the old Armenian settlements. It was mentioned as Argulik' for the first time at the beginning of 11th century by Sarkis Catholicos [6, p. 325]. Stepannos Orbelian also names it Argulik' [7, p. 263]. But in the colophons of the Armenian manuscripts of the 14th century it already appears as Agulis [8, p. 517].

The first quarter of 15th century was a hard period for Armenia and the region as a whole: there were the campaigns of Tamūr Lang, struggle for predominance between Timurids, Jalayirids, Qarā Quyūnlūs and Āq Quyūnlūs, and years of famine, locust and other disasters [9, p.129-139]. According to the information of an Armenian manuscript colophon already in 15th century Agulis had considerable economic significance, as Iskandar Qarā Quyūnlū (1420-1436) turned it into his khāṣṣ

property and made it tarkhān (freed from all taxes) for one year [10, p. 114-122]: «նր (Իսլանդարը) զի յոյժ նորմաճ էր ազգիս Հայոց, եւս առաւել մեր գեղիս Ագուլեաց, իւր իսսս արար, և մէկ տարի թարխան արար» [11, p. 337]:

In 17th century Zak'aria Agulec'i also stated, that "Agulis like its nearby settlements of Me'ri, Sho'ot, Lehram (or Nehram) and Astapat were among the khāṣṣ lands belonging to the Safavid court [12, p. 134], that is the domain of shah's family [13, p. 108]: Khāṣṣ villages had special privileges and usually were more prosperous. These villages were under the direct control of Safavid central power and were more protected from tax extortion and unlawful demands of local officials [13, p. 110]. This means that Agulis kept its significance as an important economic and trade centre in 15th-17th centuries.

After the establishment of Ottoman rule over Transcaucasus at the beginning of the reign of Shah 'Abbās I, a part of the population of Dasht (or Sahra) district of Agulis moved to Isfahan because of the hard taxes levied during Ottoman predominance [14, p. 63-64].

According to the Ottoman tax register of Yerevan province of 1590, the number of male adults in Agulis was 149, of which only 9 were Muslims . If we take out of this, the number of those, who were not married (single), 14 males, the rest would be 125 adults who had families . This is a very small number for Agulis, which shows the demographic situation there under Ottoman rule, most likely after the emigration of the people of Dasht to Isfahan. Also, possibly many of the local inhabitants being merchants avoided registration being in other regions for commercial affairs.

At the beginning of 17th century the villages and towns of Naxiĵevan suffered from the hard blow of new Ottoman-Safavid wars and especially the forced migrations of its inhabitants by the order of Shah 'Abbās I.

According to Gouveia, 17th century European traveler, Agulis was easily conquered by the troops of shah 'Abbās I immediately after the conquest of Ordubad, from where shah moved to Juĵa and after three days' stay there shah moved to town Naxiĵevan, which at that time was entirely inhabited by Armenians [15, p. 138-9]. This European traveler mentions Agulis as one of the chief Armenian towns alongside with Yerevan, Naxiĵevan and Šarur [15, p. 148, 268].

Agulis was one of those rare settlements in Naxiĵevan region which most likely avoided the forced migration during Shah 'Abbās's rule, or else recovered very soon after it.

We have two decrees issued one in 1604, which was the first year of the forced migration of the people of Transcaucasus, and the other – in 1606 by Shah 'Abbās I on account of the taxes of the vaqf mulks of St. Tovma monastery. The decrees order to include it into the whole sum of the taxes levied from the community of Agulis [16, doc. 4, 6]. It is possible that Agulis was freed from the forced migrations due to its being a khāṣṣ (a royal domain), as it is known that shah 'Abbās was paying special attention to his family land property. He had even ordered that the tiyuls were granted to the soldiers and noblemen only from the divani (state) lands [13, p. 109].

Thus, the decrees as well as the evidence of the sources about Shah 'Abbās's visit to Agulis in 1606 [17, p. 428] and 1617 [14, p. 287-9] witness that the latter had no intention to destruct the settlement and move its population. At the same time the destruction of Juła and other settlements led to the further economic growth and development of Agulis.

The Armenian settlements of Naxiĵevan region were specialized in the production of raw silk and various handicrafts [18, p. 31-33]. The province of Naxiĵevan with the towns of Old Juła, Naxiĵevan and Ordubad, like the regions of Yerevan, Tiflis and Shamakhi was outlined for silk production in the works of English travellers of 1500-1600-s [19, p. 93]. As Ľevond Ališan notes, the main production exported by the merchants of Agulis was silk, the result of their mulberry trees [6, p. 333].

In many manuscripts of the 15th-17th centuries Agulis is called "gyułakalak" – a settlement, a semi-village or a semi-town in Armenian [11, p. 605; 20, p. 683, 684, 739, 744, 769, 826].

The 17th century was the period of rise for Agulis. Tavernier states in his travel notes describing his visit to Agulis (Ecclesia) in 1630s, that the richest Armenians lived there and "they drive a great trade in silk" [21, p. 17].

For the history of Agulis in the 17th century we have the diary of Zak'arya Agulec'i as a source, which draws the vivid picture of his life, trade activities, and at the same time gives much information about the settlement. Apart from this there are the epigraphic sources [22] and the Persian and Ottoman Turkish documents of Shari'a courts on different activities of local merchants which supplement the history of the settlement and its inhabitants in 17th-18th century. The data of the Ottoman Turkish documents referring to the Armenian merchants of Agulis, who carried their activities in the territory of Ottoman Turkey was studied and introduced by the Turkish scholar Çakmak Ömer [23, ss. 157-179]. The latter reveals some details about their problems there and how they withstood the difficulties.

There are a considerable number (about 150 units) of Persian documents referring to the activities of the Agulis Armenian merchants in their homeland in the 17th-18th centuries. These documents were given with the estates to St. Tovma monastery by the leaving merchants who migrated from there. Thus, the documents appeared in the archive of the monastery and then – in the archive of Catholicosate of Matenadaran. The documents contained information about the eminent khojas of the town, their activities, land property and problems occurred in transmission of their property to their heirs in result of the law of Imām Ja'far [24].

In the 17th century down to the mid-eighteenth century the economic role of Agulis in the region increased. Based on the evidence of Zak'arya of Vagharshapat, Ľevond Ališan mentions that Agulis had a population consisted of about 8000 houses in the 17th century [6, p. 325].

V. Papazyan in his research on the trade routes of the times of Zak'arya Agulec'i and other sources shows that a range of settlements in Naxiĵevan province, like Kark'abazar, Lehram (Nehram), Yayĵi, Juła, Azat and Agulis were connected to the main transit trade route passing through town Naxiĵevan with a secondary way. The

transit trade route itself connected Tabriz with Aleppo, Constantinople and Izmir [3, maps].

François Picquet, who visited Agulis in April 1682 during his travel to Safavid Iran [25, p. 145-157], states that it was the biggest town on his way, had remarkable geographical position and its inhabitants were wealthy and all Christians. Whenever somebody converted to Islam, they expelled him from the town and only they had such a right [26, p. 406]. This evidence of the French traveler witnesses a kind of autonomy, that town community had in its inner affairs.

Picquet speaks about special courtesy conducted in his respect by the town's elite and that the majority of the town's population was Catholic «ces bons Catholiques» [26, p. 24, 405]. Picquet's mention about the Catholic inhabitants of Agulis is supplemented by another source of the period, which states about the destructed situation of the Apostolic eparchy of Agulis: "Archbishopric of Agulis in 15 lieu distance from Nax-ijevan is ruined, hardly five monasteries still survived" [27, p. 8].

However, it is worthy to note that the monastery of St. Tovma belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church was repaired in the second half of the 17th century owing to the efforts of its religious leader Petros Vartapet, who also built several guest-houses near it, a high wall around the monastery and brought water inside the wall [12, p. 78]. According to a Persian document of 1671 containing Shari'a court examination carried out because of the complaints of neighbouring Muslims on the repair and enlargement of the monastery, its community and a religious leader were able to protect the monastery and its new constructions [28, doc. 15].

The northern trade route which stretched by Caspian Sea or Eastern Caucasus to Astrakhan and Russia and from there to England and Netherlands [19, p. 8] was not secure in the 17th century and served as an alternative way in cases when the main land routes were unfit for use (Ottoman-Safavid wars, Jalali rebellions, epidemics and famine) [29, p. 44].

From the beginning of the rule of Shah Sulayman and the worsening economic climate in Iran the volume of trade between Iran and the Levantine ports started to decrease [1, p. 174]. No wonder that from 1660s many of the local Armenian merchants of Agulis, like Zak'aria Agulec'i withheld from travels with commercial purpose and preferred to put their money into commercial dealings and lend for usury [18, p. 20-22].

The insecurity on the roads and caravan robberies [5, p. 33], frequent outbreaks of plague and other epidemics were the circumstances which affected the trade on the Caucasian routes in the end of the 17th century. The situation deteriorated at the beginning of the 18th century in result of the later decline of the Safavid state during the reign of Shah Sultan Huseyn and its final fall in result of Afghan conquest of Iran. From the beginning of the 18th century there was a substantial increase in custom-tolls, tax extortions and other unlawful deeds of local governors and their officials in the period witnessed by Eġia Karnec'i, an Armenian Catholic author involved in commercial activities and also other sources of the period [30, p. 14, 18; 1, p. 205-206].

From this period the northern transit trade route through Eastern Caucasus started to liven up at the expense of the southern continental routes.

The merchants of Agulis seem to be much flexible and answer the challenges of the time, turning the direction of their activities to the north. This is evident from the trade and economic state of Agulis and the presence of local merchants in the towns and trade centres on the northern transit trade route.

At the beginning of the 18th century Krusinski speaks about “the town of Agulis as one of the most considerable that the Armenians possess in Persia” [31, p. 110].

According to another source of the period, in 1720s Agulis was already a town with a population consisted of 10000 houses (families) [32, p. 176]. Although there had been doubts concerning the correctness of this large number noted already at the end of the 19th century by A. Araskhanyan, this opinion was refuted by another Armenian scholar A. Ayzazyan. The latter states that “if we consider the number of houses in all districts of the ruined Agulis, this number is not far from truth” [22, p. 14].

Another evidence of the growth of the settlement into a big town is the appearance of the office of kalāntar among the local high officials. Kalāntar was a high official of Safavid administration in big towns like Isfahan, Tabriz, Yerevan. He appointed the wardens (kadkhudā) of the [town] wards and the elders of the guilds [33, p. 81] and kept control over their activities.

We don't know about existence of such an official in Agulis till the year 1678. At that time according to Zak'arya Agulec'i, the local inhabitants decided to have their own kalāntar in order “to avoid any interference of other kalāntars into the affairs of Agulis and Dasht. They composed a mansar and gave it to Melik Ovi (Ovanes), so that he obtained a royal edict ordering that this office were held by the melik of Upper and Lower Agulis [12, p. 139]. Although Zak'arya Agulec'i does not say about the results of this undertaking, we have other evidence of later period that Melik Ovi had succeeded in gaining this post. There is a Persian document of 1711 where we find the name of Ovi signed with the title of kalāntar and we have also the inscription on the front entrance wall of the monastery of St Thovma, repaired in the second half of the 17th century, where we read: «Յ(Ի)Շ(Ե)Ց(Ե)Ք ԱԳՈՒԼԵՑԻ ՔԱԼԱՆԹԱՐ ՈՎԱՆԵՍՆ. ՎԱՆՔԻՍ ՎԷՔԻԼ ՀԱՅՐԱՊԵՏՆ...» (Remember Kalāntar Ovanes Agulec'i, Hayrapet, the wakil of the monastery...) [22, p. 66].

1720s marks a period of misfortunes and disasters for Agulis and its population.

Minas Vartapet in his report of 1723 describes the severe treatment of shah Tahmāsb II with the people of Agulis, when the latter attacked the town, and killed a number of its inhabitants [34, p. 33]. Most likely this was the main reason why a major portion of the Armenians of Naxiĵevan later chose Ottoman predominance. The fact is that while the Armenians in Yerevan, Syunik' and Arc'ax showed strong resistance to the Ottoman troops, Ordubad was easily occupied in 1724 and then the whole province of Naxiĵevan was conquered [35, p. 105-108].

Nadir shah's rule over Naxiĵevan and other regions of Transcaucasia, established after a series of battles against Ottoman troops in 1735 brought no improvement into the social-economic life of Iran. The facts about his unfair treatment with the

merchants in his country are mentioned in many sources of his time. Abraham Yerevanc'i describes how he appropriated all the goods of the Armenian merchants in Hamadan and let them go [36, p. 53]. Most characteristic for his rule is the miserable state of the merchants of New Julfa, reflected in his edicts addressed to them and other contemporary sources [37, p. 649; 38].

The heavy taxes, tax extortion and abuses of local officials were frequent during his reign and the facts about such practice exercised regards Armenian merchants of Agulis may be traced also in the Persian documents referring to them. One of them is the decree obtained by Khoja Hovhannes from Nadir Shah at the beginning of 1743, which according to the petition of this merchant forbade levy the same tax more than once in the regions of Iran and demand goods, which he did not have .

The state of the Armenians in Naxiĵevan province worsened after Nadir Shah's death, especially during the rule of Āzād Khān Afghan over the region. Agulis suffered his hard attack when the local inhabitants refused him to pay the demanded extra-taxes. According to Č'amč'yan in 1752 Āzād Khān's afghan troops invaded the town, completely devastated it, killed many inhabitants and took some of them prisoners [39, p. 853-4]. There is also another information in the record of Catholicos Simeon Yerevanc'i, stating about the invasion of Āzād Khān into Naxiĵevan province and attack upon Agulis in 1754 [40, p. 220]. These reports supplement one another about the events around Agulis in 1750-1754 and reveal why the second half of the 18th century became a period of decline for the town.

There started the migration of many merchants of Agulis from their birthplace in mid-eighteenth century, which was stimulated by their ties with other countries. Local inhabitants began to leave it in masses for Constantinople, Italy, Shushi, Astrakhan, etc [22, p. 17]. No wonder that henceforth the information about those who originated from Agulis in various places of the world increased.

However, in spite of the hard blows received in the mid-eighteenth century, Agulis kept certain extent of its economic power till the late 19th century. Charles de Peyssonnel although stresses the troublesome situation in Iran, Armenia and Georgia in 1751-1752, but at the same time mentions that the war affairs did not harm trade, and caravans were moving freely from Gilan to Erzerum [42, p. 130].

Under the rule of the Russian empire, the people of Agulis already were processing the silk produced there and wove textile, although according to Ališan the local manufactories were inferior to those of Ordubad. Apart from silk, Agulis was famous for its cotton, calico and honey. There were 100 trade-handicraft shops in Agulis, and among them those of calico makers and carpenters were famous [6, p. 325]. However, as Ališan states, the local production in the 19th century "is incomparable with its success and wealth in previous period" [6, p. 333].

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