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## **THE TRADING-CRAFT CLASS, THE CHURCH AND THE PECULIARITIES OF FEUDALISM IN EASTERN GEORGIA IN THE XVI-XVIII CENTURIES**

*Abstract.* Since the Early Middle Ages, it had been characteristic for the countries with feudal social system that not only the great secular rulers, but also the cleric power acted as major feudalists. This refers to the Georgian reality as well, where the Georgian Church was especially developed, and acted as one of the major feudal lords in the Late Middle Ages. The Georgian Church, represented by the Catholicosate of Mtskheta, possessed a large number of various immovable property (villages, lands, gardens, oil mills, etc.), and at the same time acted as a major serf owner. The Georgian Church enjoyed the favor and support of the Georgian royal houses and sometimes foreign rulers, such as the Safavid shahs, which was often expressed by giving donations to the church, or more importantly, by granting the church a partial or full tax exemption. The latter circumstance was especially important for the church serfs: as a result, they gained tax reliefs and a privileged status. This was very important giving the fact that in the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Georgia, like Armenia, was divided into eastern and western parts, between Iran and the Ottoman Empire respectively, and of course, the heavy tax burden of the foreign domination would hinder the development of trade and crafts. In light of this, the tax benefits and a relatively privileged status that could be obtained by becoming a church serf would have been a desirable condition for merchants and craftsmen. The purpose of this article is to examine the question of whether the Georgian Church could be observed as a powerful aegis and a desirable patron by the trading-craft class, whether the church, in that case, would have shown some interest in replenishing the ranks of serfs with merchants and craftsmen, what ethnicity could those serfs be and other related matters.

*Keywords:* Georgia; Georgian Church; feudalism; serfs; privileged status; trading-craft class; trade.

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## ТОРГОВО-РЕМЕСЛЕННОЕ СОСЛОВИЕ, ЦЕРКОВЬ И ОСОБЕННОСТИ ФЕОДАЛИЗМА В ВОСТОЧНОЙ ГРУЗИИ В XVI-XVIII ВЕКАХ

*Аннотация.* С Раннего Средневековья для стран с феодальным общественным строем было характерно, что в качестве крупных сеньоров выступали не только светские правители, но и церковная власть. Это относится и к грузинской позднесредневековой исторической реальности, где грузинская церковь выступала в качестве сильного и крупного феодала. Грузинская церковь в лице Мцхетского Католикосата обладала богатой разнообразной недвижимым имуществом (сёлами, землями, садами, маслобойнями и т.д.), но и в то же время выступала как крупный феодал и сюзерен, владеющий множеством вассалов и крепостных. Грузинская церковь в основном пользовалась благосклонностью и поддержкой грузинских царских домов, а иногда и господствующих иностранных правителей (например, Сефевидских шахов), что часто выражалось в пожертвованиях в пользу церкви или, что еще важнее, в предоставлении церкви частичного или полного освобождения от налогов. Последнее обстоятельство было особенно важно для церковных крепостных: в результате этого они получали налоговые льготы и привилегированный статус. Это очень важно также с той точки зрения, что в XVI-XVIII веках Грузия, как и Армения, была разделена на восточную и западную части между Ираном и Османской империей и, конечно, тяжелое налоговое бремя иностранного господства препятствовало развитию торговли и ремесел. В свете сказанного, налоговые льготы и сравнительно привилегированный статус, который можно было обрести, став церковным крепостным, был для торгово-ремесленного класса желаемым явлением. Цель данной статьи – рассмотреть вопрос: не могла ли грузинская церковь рассматриваться торгово-ремесленным сословием как мощный и востребованный покровитель? Проявила ли церковь со своей стороны интерес к пополнению рядов своих крепостных купцами и ремесленниками? Какой этнической принадлежности могли быть эти крепостные и другие вопросы.

*Ключевые слова:* Грузия; грузинская церковь; феодализм; крепостные; торгово-ремесленное сословие; привилегированный статус; торговля.

### ***Church-state relations in the XVI-XVIII centuries (brief overview)***

It is widely known that the Georgian Church used to be both the pillar of the Georgian statehood and the scales that balanced the secular power. The Georgian Church was able to influence political decisions and orientations, to interfere into the affairs of the royal family, to organize embassies and delegations, and to carry out embassy missions. The fact that the Georgian Church and its leaders had a leading position in the armed forces or in the administrative system indicates the significant role of the latter in the political life. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century and onwards, the four strategic districts in Kakheti – the Sadroshos, – were ruled by bishops, who were given the Sadrosho coat of arms and the right to lead the army. The Georgian kings assisted the church in collecting taxes from monastic estates, punishing disobedience, encroachments on church property, and further resolution of such issues [1, p. 2].

On the other hand, it should be noted that the secular power, represented by monarchs, was dominant in Georgia and sought to keep the church under its control, mainly by reserving the right to appoint a Catholicos. This can be seen in the following examples: when, for instance, King Rostom of Georgia (1632-1658) executed Catholicos Evdemoz Diasamidze [2, p. 120], who had been accused of plotting against him, and then appointed Christopher Urdubegishvili as the new Catholicos [3, p. 66-67]. Similarly, in 1703, Vakhtang VI convened a church meeting, dismissed Catholicos Evdemoz II Diasamidze (1700-1703), and appointed his brother Domenti IV (1704-1725, 1739-1741) as the new Catholicos who was an accomplice of his brother and a supporter of his policy [4, p. 38].

After Eastern Georgia came under the rule of the Safavids, the Georgian Church sought to influence and interfere in its internal affairs, including also the interests of Iran. Shah Suleiman or Sefi II (1666-1694) was the first to interfere in the affairs of the Georgian Church. He dismissed Nikoloz Amilakhori and appointed Ioan Diasamidze as the new Catholicos [5, p. 84; 6, p. 86-87]. Or in 1701, Shah Hussein I (1694-1722) confirmed Evdemoz II Diasamidze (1700-1705) as Catholicos, ordering to recognize and respect the Catholicos he had appointed [6, p. 111]. Despite all this, Iran sought to maintain close relations with the leaders of the Georgian Church, realizing their weight and role in the internal affairs of the country.

It should be also noted that these questions are provided in detail in our article on the same subject, but we shall limit ourselves here to only mentioning it briefly [7, p. 181-196].

### ***The trading-craft class and the peculiarities of the church serfs***

Serfs were a constituent part of property belonging to the monastery in Eastern Georgia. Georgian serfdom had distinctive features and did not fully correspond to the classical understanding of the term “serf”. Along with the development of the

feudal system, various strata of serfs formed, which differed not only in economic opportunities, but also in the types of obligations to their masters, their rights, and position in society. The serfdom is usually defined with the terms *glekhi* or *kma*, based on their types. There were the following strata of serfs: *msakhuri*, *kma*, *glekhi*, *bogano*, *khizani*, *mojalabe*, *natskalobevi*, *mkvidri* etc. All strata of the serf class were included among the serfs of the church. The number of serfs belonging to the monastery was replenished in different ways: for instance, with those born from an illegitimate marriage, whose future was in the hands of the church as well, and it was entitled to get those serfs marry as soon as they became adults [8, p. 101-102]. It is true that the serfs belonging to the monastery could be purchased; however, it was no longer possible to sell or buy the church serfs and, if we add to this the fact that cleric leaders increased the number of serfs in their turn [9, p. 22], it becomes clear that the serfs belonging to the monastery should have formed a significant number in Eastern Georgia. In addition, the ranks of the serfs belonging to monastery were supplemented by *nebieri*, people who dedicated themselves to voluntary servitude [10, p. 207-242].

The Georgian church had serfs among both the rural and urban populations<sup>1</sup>. The serfs belonging to the monastery of the urban population mainly included merchants and craftsmen from the class of *mokalakes* – “honorary citizens” of the urban population. The most noticeable ones were the *mokalakes* of the Catholicos, who often did not concede to the serf *mokalakes* of the king in their position and wealth. The number of churches which had *mokalakes* was not large and mainly the wealthy churches, which had a large number of serfs and estates, owned *mokalake* serfs [12, p. 175].

The Catholicosate of Mtskheta had a large number of merchant and craftsmen serfs in Tiflis and in other cities. According to the population census conducted in Tiflis in 1783, the Catholicos owned 198 serf families, most of whom were merchants and craftsmen [12, p. 150]. Merchants with their property and trading stalls belonged to the Mtskheta Catholicosate in Gori [13, p. 264]. The catholicos of Mtskheta, in their turn, sought to increase the number of merchants under their control, buying them from other serf holders [13, p. 264]. Other dioceses and monasteries of Eastern Georgia had merchants and craftsmen in Tiflis, such as David Gareja Monastery (10 houses), Manglisi Cathedral (6 houses), Rustavi Cathedral (6 houses), Rustavi Church (18 houses), Ruisi Church (2 houses), St. Nino Church (3 houses), etc [13, p. 151]. The merchants' belonging to the church, as well as other monastic property, was reaffirmed from time to time and given back to the church by royal edicts, by sigels and gujars. Thus, in 1552, King Luarsab established the stalls belonging to the Sioni Monastery in Tiflis as an estate and granted them to the church [14, p. 18], and at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, King Simon II of Kartli (1619-1625) stated in the

1 It should be said that the privileged status of the serfs belonging to the monastery was not a unique phenomenon. If we compare the situation in the Russian Empire, we will see that monastic serfs in Russia was a huge number, too. For instance, before the abolition of the monastic class in 1761 by Empress Catherine II, the number of villager serfs in 1762 was about 1 million [11, p. 549-555].

edict given to the Sioni Monastery that the monastery had merchants and stalls in Tiflis and the king reaffirmed the belonging of those in Tiflis and in the Baratashvili estate to the monastery, entrusted the monastery the management of the income from them, ordered his subordinates not to interfere in the affairs of the monastery, but only to assist [15, p. 16]. In Tiflis the merchants of the monastery were exempted from taxes levied on trade, providing that they would import and sell only their goods, otherwise they would have to be taxed sevenfold [12, p. 192]. In such a way, King Alexander II of Kakheti exempted the merchants of the Ninotsminda Diocese from the tax “tamgha” in 1591, which was charged from the obligation to pay in the amount of one sapalne (one burden) of silk [14, p. 18].

Among the serfs of the church, their status of being church serfs was very favorable to the representatives of the trading-craft class: in this way, the latter appeared under the aegis of the church and were exempted from royal taxes [16, p. 102]. The church serfs were exempt from taxes partially or fully, particularly from heavy commercial taxes, such as the tamgha. In addition to tax immunity, the merchant and craftsmen serfs of the church could either provide their work and services to the church, or be obliged to pay the church a certain amount of goods annually, such as candles, threads, incense, etc. Thus, in 1703, King Heraclius I established that the serf merchants Gogijanishvili, Maminashvili, and Mamulashvili, gifted to the Kvatakhevi monastery, had to give the monastery two liters of candle and incense, and two bundles of cotton thread per year [12, p. 207]. For instance, (M)Khitarov – an Armenian who had emigrated from Persia, –dedicated himself to the monastery of Sioni and undertook to pay  $1^{1/2}$  liters of candle and incense, worth 1 charek ( $2^{1/4}$  pounds) [17, p. 55]. P. Zubov perfectly describes how the mokalakes of the Georgian church, the representatives of the trading-craft class, used the church’s aegis for their activities: “The ancestors of the present day church mokalakes acted with the utmost wisdom, promising to provide some service to the Church annually, services of little value, for instance, in the size of a palm and a few pounds of wax candle from one family, so that they could make use of the most important advantages, particularly, not to pay taxes, to tax farmers for all the food and goods they import from and export to Tiflis and not to pay taxes to the King” [16, p. 102]. For comparison, in the Russian empire these monastic serfs had a rather privileged and profitable status; for example, by becoming a monastic serf, people avoided heavy state taxes and duties (тягло – cess), received a certain amount of money from the church to create an economy or to make it prosper [18, p. 141-143]. Similarly, craftsmen were a significant number among the serfs of the Russian Church. For instance, the Yaroslavl Spassky Monastery had 27 serf houses, where there were 27 monastic craftsmen. Their products were used not only for the needs of the church, but also for sale [18, p. 148].

The serfs of the Georgian church were not homogeneous in ethnicity, that is, Georgians as well as Jews, Caucasian Tatars, and Armenians could be serfs. Thus, according to a list of serfs belonging to the monastery of 1797, the Alaverdi monastery

had 68 Tatar serf families<sup>2</sup> in Mughanlu village [17, p. 20]. In addition, some of the Tatar inhabitants were the serfs of the Catholicos [17, p. 20]. Svetitskhoveli church in Mtskheta owned Jewish serf families who were dedicated to the church with the edict of Catholicos Domentius [20, p. 198]. Armenian merchants belonged to Sioni Church in Tiflis, who dedicated themselves to the church and voluntarily became church serfs in 1619 [12, p. 158]. Another document of 1705 provides important information about the Armenian serfs of the Georgian Church, according to which, Catholicos Domentius IV bought a certain Margar in Tsintskaro and resettled him in Tiflis, the craftsmen sons of whom – carpenter Georgi, the blacksmith Avetis, carpenter Hovsep and furrier Aslamaz, – were the serfs of the Catholicosate as well. Moreover, the sons of Margar were exempted from taxes from the church, providing that the church would not pay them for their work and the latter would be obliged to give a candle or other income to the church. Additionally, if the latter ceased crafting, they would lose their right to tax exemption [13, p. 642-644; 21, p. 156-168].

Another edict listing all the estates and property belonging to Mtskheta can give the idea of the monastery merchants belonging to Catholicosate in the XVI c. This edict has a controversial dating. It is dated 1397/1398, and is considered to have been given by King Alexander of Imereti<sup>3</sup> to Catholicos Domentius. According to this edict, 27 houses of Armenian and Jewish merchants in total belonged to the Catholicosate [22, p. 368; 15, p. 1].

It is interesting to note that in Eastern Georgia the Armenian Church was also an owner of serfs, in this case – particularly serf merchants and shops, whereas in Armenia itself, the serfdom almost did not exist in its classical sense, and the Armenian Church did not act as a serf owner in Armenia. From the work “Jambr” of Catholicos Simeon Yerevantsi we learn that the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin had serfs in Tiflis, most of whom were merchants and craftsmen. Besides, Etchmiadzin owned 8 shops here, in Tiflis [24, p. 207-208]. In “Jambr” 3 of the 23 Tiflis serfs of Etchmiadzin were merchants: 2 *bazazs* (drapers – traders of linen and cloth) and 1 *bakhal* (grocer), and 8 of them or their sons were craftsmen (*ghalaytchi* – tinsmiths, tinmen; *basmatchi* – masters of book printing or pattern printing on cloth; *dabagh* – tanners) [24, p. 209].

## Conclusions

In Eastern Georgia during the Late Middle Ages and also in the early Modern Times, a large number of the Georgian church serfs were merchants and craftsmen.

2 The Turkic peoples in Georgia called themselves “Mussulman” or sometimes “Turk”, although they were called “Tatar” by the local Christian population [19, p. 92].

3 The fact that he was considered the king of Imereti probably originated from the fact that in the edict Alexander calls himself the king of Kartli, Kakheti, Shaki and Shirvan, as well as the king of Imereti, Guria, Samtskhe, Odishi, Svaneti. However, in 1397-1398, a king named Alexander did not rule Imereti, George VII reigned in Imereti during 1395-1405 [22, p. 45]. On the other hand, the first Catholicos of Mtskheta named Domentius is known to us from the 16th century. M. Brosset does not trust such a dating as well and considers that it was given not in 1398, but in 1498 by King Alexander I of Kakheti (1490-1511) [23, p. 680].

The privileged status of the church, the phenomenon of exempting the church from taxes and its entitlement gave the opportunity to the serfs representing the trading-craft class, to gain the influential patronage of the church and have a privileged status by avoiding many taxes, often avoiding the very commercial taxes, such as tamgha<sup>4</sup>, by means of providing certain services or giving the goods demanded by the church in the form of a “tax”, and accordingly to have the opportunity to act more freely. The ranks of the church serfs from the representatives of this class were supplemented in two ways – either the merchants and craftsmen could dedicate themselves to the church, to the servitude, and become subordinate to the church, or the church itself could buy serfs in the face of merchants and craftsmen. These serfs of the Georgian Church (merchants and craftsmen) were multi-ethnic: apart from Georgians, there were also Armenians and Jews. The Armenian Church also acted as a serf holder in Eastern Georgia. In the 17-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin in Tiflis was a serf holder, whose serfs were exclusively Armenians and more than half of the serfs belonged to the trading-craft class.

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4 In Iran, Armenia and Georgia since the 13th century one of the major taxes on the trade was called the tamgha, a toll on commercial goods, as well as a license for commercial acts. The collector of the tamgha was called tamghachi, for he put a tamgha (seal) on goods for sale [25, p. 114; 26, p. 97]

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