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**Tarkhanism in Medieval Georgia and Armenia: Features of "Caucasian" Feudalism**

**Abstract**

Since the early Middle Ages, a new term "tarkhan" entered the literary stock of the peoples of Transcaucasia, which was mainly associated with the Khazar world. Later, especially with the beginning of the Mongol conquests, the word "tarkhan" and the phenomenon itself was introduced into the historical environment of Armenia and Georgia. The meaning of tarkhan in the early period was mainly interpreted as exemption from taxes, but this was only part of the meaning of the term and the phenomenon. Moreover, tarkhanism as a phenomenon of immunity (from taxes, from liability, as a form of privilege) began to evolve actively in the fertile environment of developing feudalism. The aim of this article is to collect and analyze information from sources (Armenian, Georgian, Persian, among others) about the use and significance of tarkhanism in the Transcaucasian feudal system, in particular, to study the phenomenon of tarkhanism in medieval Georgia and Armenia by means of comparative analysis. In addition, the consideration of the Georgian and Armenian churches as recipients of immunity, i.e. tarkhanism, is of no small interest for this study. After briefly outlining the etymology and meaning of the term tarkhan, the article focuses on such questions as: What was the perception of the phenomenon of tarkhan in the Georgian or Armenian environment before the Mongol conquest? How did the phenomenon of tarkhanism evolve in medieval Georgia and Armenia? Did tarkhanism mean something more specific (e.g. tax immunity) or what were the conditions and terms of tarkhanism? Why and how did the church become a holder of tarkhanism? This is not an exhaustive list of the questions addressed in the paper[[1]](#footnote-1).

***Keywords:*** ***Georgia; Armenia, Medieval, Tarkhans, tarkhanism, immunity, taxes, privileges, Georgian Church; feudalism.***

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**Тарханство в средневековой Грузии и Армении: особенности "Закавказского" феодализма**.

***Аннотация***

Начиная с раннего средневековья в литературный запас народов Закавказья вошел новый термин "тархан", что в основном было связано с хазарским миром. Позднее, в особенности с началом монгольских завоеваний, слово "тархан" и само явление ввелось в историческую среду Армении и Грузии. Значение тархана в ранний период в основном трактовалось как освобождение от налогов, однако это было лишь частью значения термина и явления. Кроме того, тарханство, как явление иммунитета (от налогов, от ответственности, как форма привилегий) начало активно эволюционировать в плодородной среде развивающего феодализма. Целью данной статьи является сбор и анализ информации источников (армянских, грузинских, персидских и т.д.) об использовании и значении тарханства в закавказской феодальной системе, в частности, изучение явления тарханства в средневековой Грузии и Армении с помощью сравнительного анализа. Кроме того, немалый интерес для изучения представляет рассмотрение грузинской и армянской церкви как получателей иммунитета, т.е. тарханства. В статье после краткого изложения этимологии и значения термина тархан, в фокусе исследование находятся такие вопросы как: каково было восприятие явления тархан в грузинской или армянской среде до монгольского завоевания? Каким образом эволюционировал феномен тарханства в средневековой Грузии и Армении, означало ли тарханство что-нибудь конкретнее (например, налоговый иммунитет) или каковы были условия и сроки тарханства? Почему и как церковь становилась тарханом? И это далеко не полный список вопросов, к которым обращается статья.

***Ключевые слова:*** ***Грузия; Армения, Средневековье, тарханство, тарханы, иммунитет, податьи, привелегии, грузинская церковь; феодализм.***

**Tarkhan: brief historical review**

Most likely, the word tarkhan is of Turkic origin [1, p. 105] and was common among the highest nobility of the Turkic peoples [2, p. 218]. Later, probably after the 11th century, the word appeared in the Mongol environment in the form of darkan or darkan, and even changed its semantic meaning, with tarkhan primarily denoting tax exemption or the right to tax exemption [3, p. 539]. The first mentions of tarkhan date back to the 5th-6th century from the Khazar world. Tarkhans were some, in all likelihood, the privileged members of the Khazar military and political elite [4, p. 156; 5, p. 45; 6, p. 53].

This is confirmed by a reference to a Khazar general named Āstarkhān, who led the invasion of the Khazar armies in 762-764 in Transcaucasia [7, p. 261-262]: "and they gathered an army and gave a commander, who was called as Razhtarkhan" [8, p. 190]. The title tarkhan, as will be seen from the examples, was attached to the name of the bearer, and from the same Khazar world, for example, we find another name "Hazartarkhan", or in early 8th century also known as the leader of Ephtalites, Nizak tarkhan, etc. [9, p. 299; 10, p. 28; 11, p. 84].

In the Avar Kaganate, a noteworthy segment of Avar social structure consisted of tarkhans. However, their precise role as either princes, tax collectors, or warlords remains unclear [64, p. 252]. It should be noted that the term tarkhan appears in Dagestani languages with comparable meanings. Specifically, in Avar language, tarkh'an (тархъан) means "free, at ease," and in Lak language, tarkh'ana (тархъана) means "to free a slave" [65, p. 143].

Tarkhan was also present in the titulary of the Göktürks [12, p. 105-108]. Apparently, the phenomenon of the tarkhan was also present among the Karakhanids [13, p. 132]. Generalizing, one can say that in the early Turkic states the tarkhan meant a specific caste of people who enjoyed certain privileges for life [14, p. 266]. Apparently, the Mongols borrowed the phenomenon of tarkhan from the Turkic world [15, p. 451].

At that time, in the Mongol empire, the meaning and application of the tarkhan changed to some degree. In contrast to the Turkic realities where people became tarkhans for life, here the tarkhanship was hereditary. Historian of the Mongol empire, Juweini, describes the tarhans and their privileges as follows: a) the tarhans were exempt from mandatory taxes, b) they had the right to claim a part of their military booty, c) they had judicial immunity (exemption from capital punishment nine times) [15, p. 451], d) they had the right to enter the court of the khan, е) their privileges were passed on through 9 generations of succession [16, p. 27].

In the early period of the Chinggisids, tarhan/darkhan could be understood in two senses: a) a legal document granting tax immunity and b) a person to who tax immunity and other privileges were granted [17, p. 117]. Certain researchers believed that during the Mongol rule, the essence of the right to tarkhan lay precisely in tax exemption. As a result, a privileged class emerged from the large landowners and the middle nobility. Later, the people who received the tarkhan in the territories of the domination of the Golden Horde had broader powers and privileges: the Tarkhan Decree was provided for several conditions: clauses stating the legitimacy of the award of the Tarkhan yarlik, inviolability of the property of Tarkhan persons and their subordinates, and exemption from taxes on 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 late medieval Central Asian khanates, in particular the Kokand khanate, tarkhanism had the following form: 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]. Tarkhanate in the Khanate of Khiva implied not only exemption from taxes, but also from military service [21, p. 29]. 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 compare, later, tarkhanism also exist in Russian kingdom also. 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", stating that "tarkhans, from whom duties are not imposed, should be dismissed" and that all individuals should be taxed equally [21, p. 59].

**“Migration” of Tarkhanism to medieval Georgian and Armenian historical realities.**

The spread and use of tarkhanism in Georgia was apparently facilitated earlier (in the 11th-13th centuries) by the already well-known practice of immunity there. The immunity in Georgia was expressed in the terms tavisupleba - tax immunity and sheuvaloba - immunity, the prohibition of royal officials to enter the immune territories. Moreover, these forms of immunity during this period were granted to the church as well, which also had the right to judicial immunity [23, p. 5-20]. Historians believe that the Georgian church was known as a structure exempt from taxes and endowed with judicial immunity in the beginning of the eleventh century [24, p. 317-337]. This in turn could be related to the revival of the Georgian kingdom, the tendency of Georgian kings to help the church, and, in turn, the help of the church in helping to strengthen royal power [25, p. 93-95].

However, it should be noted that, apparently, the institution of sheuvaloba or immunity was already in practice in Georgia in the sixth century. The cases of tax-exempt properties donated to the monastery of Zarzma by George Chorchaneli [26, p. 134-147] and four villages donated to the monastery of Shio-Mghuime by King Parsman are dated to the 6th century, which means that the church has had property properties in Georgia since the 6th century [27, p. 193].

According to M. Lordkipanidze, sheuvaloba became widespread in Georgia in the eleventh to twelfth centuries, and the church primarily benefited from the right to property, but it was not as widely used in Georgia during this period as it was in Western Europe or the Byzantine Empire [28, p. 21]. The major landowners, including the church, constantly tried to obtain the right to exemption from taxes from the king, as a result of which the income from taxes remained under the control of the feudal landlord [29, p. 254].

Thus, in medieval Georgia, a tarkhan could be a vassal or serf who was fully or partially exempted from taxes and tax obligations. Tarkhans could also lose their privileges and again become a common serf and pay all taxes [30, p. 114-115]. Interestingly, the word tarkhan (თარხანი) was fluently borrowed in the Georgian language, where one finds different forms of this word, such as tarkhneba (თარხნება) - to give the right to tarkhan, or tarkhnoba (თარხნობა) - the very phenomenon of tarkhan, etc. [31, p. 554].

There are various interpretations of the phenomenon of tarkhan in Georgia. For example, P. Iossleiani concludes that tarkhans 1. were those who were exempted from taxes and duties, 2. were those who could freely choose where to live, 3. were those who had free access to the royal court, 4. were 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: a) Great Tarkhans, who were free both from personal dependence and from taxes, and b) tarkhans, who were free from taxes but were personally dependent [34, p.55-65].

It should be said that the term tarkhan itself was not as widespread in the historical environment of medieval Armenia as it was in Georgia. This can be explained by the fact that in the Armenian environment, apart from the term tarkhan, the word maaf (distorted maaf, maghaf, from Arabic mu’af - immunity, exemption from taxes [35, p. 1177]) was more common [36, p. 418-419].

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

The Armenian 13th-century historian Stepanos Orbelian also uses one of the first references to the apparition of tarkhan as in "tarkhan of all taxes" [38, p. 19].

**Church as a holder of Tarkhan in Georgian and Armenian historical milieu**

The practice of exempting the church and its possessions from taxes was also used in Georgia and Armenia during the Mongol rule. In accordance with the record preserved in the "Kartlis tskhovreba", the order of the Mangu khan exempted Georgian and Armenian clergymen from taxes after the general census of Argun in Transcaucasia, *"but did not impose [any tax] on the clergy”* [40, p. 215-216]*. This information is also confirmed by Kirakos Gandzaketsi: "but no tax was taken from the clergy because they had no order from the Khan."* [39, p.211]*.*

Tarkhanism was given to the Catholicosate of Mtskheta and to other monasteries, their properties and serfs. For example, in 1540 Luarsab the 1st gave Sion Monastery a tarkhanate and renewed the deed; then in 1716 the same monastery was granted immunity by king Vakhtang VI [49, p.31].

The Alaverdi monastery was granted tarkhanate in 1651 by king Rostom (who was a Moslem, by the way), and in 1694 the Sefevid shah Abbas II gave tarkhanate to the serfs of the villages of Keisi and Kondoli, which belonged to the Alaverdi monastery [41, p.14]. Similarly, tarkhanate was given to Tsilkani and Urbnisi churches in 1632 by King Teimuraz, in 1648 by King Rostom, in 1668 by King Shahnavaz, in 1798 by Erekle II, and to Kvatakhevi church in 1530 by King Luarsab, and in 1550 renewed the donation [42, doc 1372]. It is interesting to observe whether or not the privileges of the tarkhans were respected by their officials. It seems that the authorities often tried to encroach on immune property or land. For example, when in 1768 royal officials in Gori tried to collect taxes from one church serf, Bishop Besarion complained to King Erekle II, and after that, by order of the king, they were exempted from all state taxes [41, p. 51].

XVIII century Safavid Firmans demonstrate that the Shahs also guaranteed the immunity privileges of the Church, recognizing the Catholicosate as the rightful holder of the Church's properties and thereby recognizing 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 and ordered not to collect any more taxes from them in Wjuhat, Malojihat, Bahrache, Bigar-Shigar, Ulagh-Ulam and to release them from other obligations [44, p. 74-75]. In 1640, King Rostom of Kartli (1633-1658) exempted the monk Grigor from all government taxes: "And by the grace of Christ We bestowed the letter of tarkhanship upon the Monk Grigor" [45, doc 2]. In 1771, King Heraclius II of Kartli (1762-1798) exempted all serfs of Echmiadzin Catholicosate: "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].

One can also observe that the tax immunity of the Church was applied in Armenia as well, and there too, local princes could give the Church a tarkhan. In 1237, the provincial prince Marzpan gave immunity to the Church: *"And Shikaykar Church of the Holy Virgin made tarkhan along with its lands*" [46, p. 905]. The memorial record of an Armenian manuscript dated 1358 says that the church of the Holy Virgin of 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 tarkhanship was both partial and complete, which is confirmed by the immunity decrees mentioned below. Examples of partial exemption from taxes are the following : when in 1540 King of Kartli Luarsab I (1534-1556) exempted the church of Sion from the gala tax (tax on millet) or when the King of Kartli Iese in 1715 exempted the church of Manglisi from the bazieri tax (tax for the benefit of falconer) [49, p. 7, 31]. A very interesting case of partial exemption or partial tarkhanism is the case when the king of Kartli Simon exempted the church of Manglisi from the sabalakho tax (a tax for grazing cattle)[50, p.53], but if the cattle grazed not on lands belonging to the church, the tax would be levied in favor of the state [41, p. 55].

A vivid example of complete exemption from taxes, i.e., tarkhanship, is the deed granted to the Mtsketh Catholicosate in 1392, where it says *"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 Somkheti and in other places, which have been gifted or have been since ancient times, by this charter we give tarkhanship from all state taxes and renew (reconfirm the decree ))" *[42, doc 1371]*. Over the course of the 15th-16th centuries, this charter was updated and reconfirmed several times *[51, p. 176-181; 52, p. 158]*.

Note that, interestingly, not only was the church the holder of tarkhanate, but the High clergy itself gave it. For example, 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 villagers of Manglisi and exempted him from the tax ghala *[41, p. 10]*.

**Duration of tarkhanship**

Both in Georgia and Armenia the tarkhanship was temporary. 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. This is illustrated by the decrees for the renewal of the privileges granted by the kings of Kartli Teimraz and Rostom to a certain Beru Dzhandzhashvili in 1631 and 1651 *[42, doc 14661 ab]*. On the other hand, often the tarkhanship was granted for a certain period of time. This is also evidenced by this record from an Armenian manuscript of the 15th century, which says 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 also happened that the possessions or villages passed to another feudal lord, and then, of course, the tarkhanship privilege could not be transferred to a new owner of the property. In this regard, the charter of King Irakli I of Kartli (or Nazar Ali Khan, 1688-1692, 1695-1703) is of great interest which indicates that some villages mentioned as the property of the Kvatakhevi Church no longer belong to it and the king renewed the decree and gave tarkhanship to the serfs of the church *[54, p. 385-426]*.

**Tarkhan as a proper name**

Tarkhan also became known as the proper name or name of a locality. An example of this is from the period of Arab conquests in Central Asia where we found the name of the conqueror of the Fergana (in 739 ) Arslan Tarkhan *[55, p. 3-29]*. Interestingly, in the future, the same phenomenon would be observed in the Georgian and Armenian environments, where tarkhan would become a proper name or turn into a family name.

As already mentioned, the tarkhanate in Georgia was also given to private persons, such as princes. In 1692 and in 1697, king George XI of Kartli gave 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 tarkhanship *[56, p. 16]*.

This can be illustrated by the granting of tarkhanate to the Georgian family of Saakadze. According to one version, Simon the 1st gave tarkhanate to George Saakadze and the surname was later called Tarkhnishvili (line, children of tarkhans in literal translation) *[57, p. 200]*.

According to another view, it was the king of the Kartli-Kakheti, Rostom (1633–1658) who gave the son of Giorgi Saakadze Ioram a tarkhan, in gratitude for the support of the latter of Rostom during the rebellion against the king, after which his heirs began to be named Tarkhnishvili *[58, p. 71]*. The name Tarkhan was widespread in medieval Armenia since the 15th century, and, curiously enough, this name could be both masculine and feminine *[59, p. 285]*. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the title tarkhan was also transformed into a proper name in the Armenian milieu. Thus, in 1710, a certain Tarhan Kananyan was mentioned among the Armenian merchants *[60, p. 173]*.

Tarkhan might also be part of geographical name: the medieval name of the present Astrakhan is Hájj Tarkhán and this name was known to us already in the 14th century *[61, p. 151]*. Parallel with this, when a part of the name of the territory was Tarkhan, in medieval Georgia for example, the properties, the lands of the Tarkhnishvili family were respectively named Satarkhno (the lands of Tarkhans) *[62, p. 156]*.

**Some conclusions**

In drawing conclusions, we would like to note that in diachronic analysis the term tarhan may have implied, the following:

* immunity from taxation (partial or total);
* juridical immunity;
* free (person or possession) as well as liberty;
* a privileged stratum, an elite that could simultaneously hold the above privileges all at once or part of them;
* tarkhanship could be held temporarily for a short period, or posthumously, or could be inherited.

One might think that the transfer of the privilege of tarkhanship from suzerain to vassal was not beneficial to the suzerain or the one who granted it, as he was deprived of income and taxes (in part or in full), labor force or enlisted soldiers (in the case of exemption from military service), jurisdictional rights, etc. In the long run this was the case, as the phenomenon of the granting immunity led to a strengthening of the vassals and a weakening of the suzerain and central authorities (be it the Georgian kings, the rulers of the Turkmen tribes of Aq Qoyunlu or Qara Qoyunlu, the Safavid shahs, or others). On the other hand, in the short run the rulers tried to find social support among their subjects, their vassals or to obtain the necessary encouragement from the church by granting the privilege of the tarkhan.

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