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Armenian merchants in local administration of the Caucasian regions incorporated in the Safavid state of Iran

In the period from 16th to 18th centuries with short intervals the major part of the Transcaucasian regions had been incorporated in the Safavid state of Iran. Although the Shiite Islamic laws on the whole did not allow Non-Muslims (or dhimmis) hold high offices in the state administration, however there were some posts where the representatives of local Armenian elite: the meliks and merchants managed to be confirmed without conversion to Islam. The meliks although being big landowners, received a significant portion of their incomes from trade, a fact reflected also in the royal decrees confirming their rights. The posts supposing close ties with trade were that of the kalāntar, the head of the town community and neighbouring Armenian villages; the heads of the mints (zarrābkhānah), the road-guards' and toll-house (rāhdārkhānah), also the post of the girākyarāq, the official in charge of the purchase for the households of shah and khans of the regions of Transcaucasia.

These officials in the provinces of Yerevan and Naxījevan were strongly connected with the transit trade conducted through the Caucasus and their posts were very useful for their own trade activities as well as that of their companions.

The research on the various sources of the period allows us discover the name and identity of some of those persons, who had filled such posts in the towns of Yerevan, Agulis, Tiflis, etc.

clear up also some details referring to their life and activities. The study of these details also helps us supplement the definitions of the functions of some of those officials and the peculiarities of the trade and economic relations in the region in general.

The highest post ran by the Armenian wealthy merchants in the towns and administrative centres of the Caucasus, was that of the *kalāntar*. This official appointed the heads of the handicraft guilds and the elders of the town blocks, regulated civil matters and problems, allotted the taxes of the artisans, merchants and trade companies. The *meliks* of the Armenian villages and some regions, being big landowners, and at the same time engaged in trade, also were subordinated to the *kalāntar*. Contemporary sources have kept information on the *kalāntars* of Yerevan, Agulis, Tiflis, Jugha, Zagam and Lori, who being outstanding Armenian merchants filled the post bearing the title of “*khvājah*” and “*melik*”.

In Safavid state as well as in Ottoman Empire, often Armenian wealthy people engaged in trade and having close ties with merchandise, managed the work of mints. The post of the head of the mint (*zarrābī bāshī*) in Yerevan was also closely connected with transit trade through Caucasus, as the coins circulating in other countries needed to be reminted into local coins. We have Zakaria of Agulis's detailed information about the Armenian *zarrābī bāshīs* of the Yerevan mint in the second half of the 17th century which is supplemented with the data of the Armenian epitaphs. This information and data witness that the mint house had been mainly in the hands of the outstanding representatives of the Armenian merchants' class in the second half of 17th century.

According to Zakarya of Agulis his brother Šmavon was the head of not only the mint in Yerevan in 1658-1670, but also the

rāhdārkhānah and at the same time had been the khan's girākyarāq. Thus the latter had been a unique person among Armenian Christian merchants, who had much opportunity and privileges for successful trade operations. However, he had to face the religious pressure to adopt Islam and he died in Isfahan in unknown circumstances, leaving great debts. This could be happened in result of religious persecution exercised by Safavid government, who had become more intolerant in the period.