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AN UNPUBLISHED SEAL OF MARIA OF KARS AND THE DAVIDIC DESCENT CLAIM OF THE HOUSE OF BAGRATUNI*

Keywords: Maria of Kars, House of Bagratuni, King Gagik of Kars, King Kiurike III of Lori, Davidic descent, Movsēs Xorenac'i, Sumbat Davitis-dze.

Introduction

Aristocratic families have always been jealous of their origins, from which they derived part of their prestige and legitimacy. This veneration for their origins was generally coupled with a dynastic cult, a situation that even led to the development of a true dynastic historiography.

The Jewish origin of the Bagratuni has been known since Movsēs Xorenac'i (*History of Armenia* I, 22) and was established as being linked to King David in the eleventh century. Until recently, this precision was attributed to the Georgian branch of the Bagratuni and to Sumbat Davitis-dze. The seal we are presenting today requires nuancing this position once formulated by C. Toumanoff.

I- Cult of the Origins

In medieval Armenia, after the fall of the Arsacid dynasty (428) and the invention of an Armenian alphabet (405–407), historians were often affiliated with a powerful dynastic family. If Koriwn, author of the first original work in Armenian, the *Life of Machtots*, or Agathangelos, author of the history of the conversion of Tiridates III by

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In this article, we take up part of our analysis of this important document of eleventh century Armenian-Byzantine history. We have studied this seal and the story of Marie de Kars in our forthcoming thesis, in order to assess whether she could be the Armenian princess who traveled to Portugal and established the Braganza lineage there. We came to the conclusion that this hypothesis should be dismissed (cf. Yevadian, *forthcoming*). This article was originally intended to be co-written with Hovann Simonian, who was to speak on the subject at our conference. Unfortunately, personal reasons prevented him from completing the project. We are publishing this paper and a short presentation of the Davidic question in Armenia, hoping to work on it together as soon as possible. We would like to thank Jean-Claude Cheynet for sending us Koususa' seal and his helpful suggestions and Françoise Stonehouse for her review of this article.

Gregory the Illuminator, have no obvious allegiance, they are, in fact, historiographers of the Grigorides lineage by praising either its founder (Gregory the Illuminator) or its last prelate (Sahak Parthev).

The *nakhararut'yun*, the Armenian aristocratic system, studied by (Adontz 1970), C. Toumanoff (Toumanoff 1963) and N. Garsoïan (Garsoïan 2012 B) in particular, consisted at the time of the “interregnum” of some seventy major aristocratic families who had their own courts, their own troops, own bishops (Garsoïan 2012 A), and a rank at the royal Armenian then Sassanian court, of which less than ten had the pre-eminence over the entire social body. These are the ones who developed a great dynastic history. Then the *Buzandaran* as well as the histories of Elishē and Łazar P'arpec'i are clearly pro-Mamikonean histories. Movsēs Xorenac'i, and we shall return to him, wrote a pro-Bagratuni history. In the central Middle Ages, after the decline in the number of aristocratic lineages due to the massacres perpetrated by the Muslims, the aristocratic families who played the leading role also had their historiographers, T'oma Arcruni for the Arcruni and Step'anos Ōrbēlean for the Ōrbēlean.

Among the elements aimed at enhancing the prestige of these lineages are their noble origins. Some lineages claimed an origin linked to a god of Armenian paganism. Quite often, a non-Armenian origin is invoked, whether historical or not. The Mami-conians, for example, are said to owe their ancestry to a certain general Mamgon from distant China (on this point, see Movsēs Xorenac'i. *History of Armenia* II, 81. Yevadian 2013, 134–138). An Asian origin is also claimed by the Ōrbēlean. Closer to the Armenian plateau, alliances with the Parthian aristocracy gave rise to several lineages. The Kamsarakan are said to descend from Kamsar, a Parthian nobleman who arrived in Armenia fleeing the Sassanid troops (Xorenac'i, *History of Armenia* II, 87). The Palhavuni and the Grigorides are also local branches of the Arsacids (Parthians) (Agat'angelos § 26. Xorenac'i, *History of Armenia* II, 68).

With the Christianization of the country, the link to the Hebrew tradition took on a particular importance, and in order to share the same origins as their Savior, some aristocratic Armenian lineages claimed to have Jewish origins. The Amatouni, for example, claimed such origins (Xorenac'i, *History of Armenia* II, 28). In addition, the Bagratuni were reputed to descend from Šambat' (Shambat), a Hebrew who came to Armenia from Babylonia and was therefore a descendant of the elites of the kingdom of Judah exiled by Nebuchadnezzar after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC (Xorenac'i, *History of Armenia* I, 22).

Once Armenian Bagratuni were crowned (885), they developed and strengthened this claim, which will end up being a direct link with King David. Modern historians such as the late Cyril Toumanoff believed that it was the Georgian branch of the family that added the claim of Davidic descent, as it was first mentioned in the mid-eleventh century *Life and Tale of the Bagratuni* chronicle by Sumbat Davitis-dze.

II- The Seal of Mary of Kars

However, a recent discovery leads us to revise both the geography and the chronology of this claim. It is a seal of Maria, daughter of Gagik, the last king of Kars. Women of the Byzantine elite used seals, but to an infinitely lesser extent than men. Nearly 100,000 seals have been preserved to date, but Jean-Claude Cheynet estimates that only a few hundred were used by women. These women claimed their own titles or, more often, those of their husbands (Cheynet 2008, 175–195). To date, only three women from the Armenian aristocracy have used seals that are known to us.

These are Koususa, widow of the last king of Vaspurakan, Senek'rim, who declares herself to be the mother of David, the head of the family at that time:

Obverse: Bust of the Virgin Mary, indistinct, MP-Θν. Invocative legend around the edge: ...

ΘΕΙΤΗΧΗΔΟΥΛΗ (θειτθηχηδουλη)... -- |

Reverse: [Θ(εοτό)κε βοήθει τῇ σῆ̄ δούλῃ Κουσούσα ζοστη μητηρ Δα(δι)δ μα[γ]ίστρου τ(οῦ) [Σ] εναχέρημ

Mother of God, help your servant, the widow Koususa, mother of Magister David [son] of Senakerim.

BnF, Inv. Zacos, n° 567, ed. in Seibt 1997, n° 21, cf. Cheynet 2006, 221.

Diam.: /

A second seal is that of Mariam, daughter of Gagik of Kars.

Obverse: bust of the Virgin, orans, the medallion of the Christ child on her breast, in the field, in Armenian: տ[էր] ա[sunniawdadh] – Holy Théothokos, circular legend in Armenian: ... + ՄԱՐԵՄ Է [... ԿՈՐՈՒՊԱԼԻՍՏԻՍՄԱՐԻԱՄ – Mariem ... [the courapala]tissa

Reverse: + Θεοτόκε βοήθει Μαρία κοροπαλατίσσα τῇ θγυάτερᾳ Κακικίῳ τε Καρσιώτῃ τὴν ...

Mother of God, help your servant, the koropalatissa Mariam, daughter of Gagik of Kars, from

...

Spink, Action no 132, 25 May 1999, lot 120, Collection Zaros, exp. J.-Cl. Cheynet. Diam.: /

The end of the legend is illegible and was interpreted in various ways (cf. Dédéyan I, 2003, 300, n. 7. Garsoian, 1998, 112).

The last example is from a second Marie who claims to be the daughter of Gagik of Ani. In 1974, A. Kashdan published a short note to correct the reading of two Armenian names from Byzantine history. The first correction concerns an undated seal published by I. K. M. Konstantopoulos (Athens 1917, n° 603a, re-edited in Stavrakos, 2000, p. 70, n° 16.)

First copy (Athens). Diameter: 24 mm.

Second copy (Dumbarton Oaks' Collection).

Diameter: 25 mm (BZS.1958.106.5639)

Text: “Μαρία θυγάτηρ Κακική / τοῦ Ἀνιώτου-Mariam, daughter of Gagik of Ani.”

These three women identify themselves in relation to the most famous member of their lineage, even in relation to a former ruler.

1 The word Կըրապալատ (Kurapalat) is attested here only by the last four letters, but it is quite legible on the coins of the Armenian Kiurike II of Lori and on the new published seal of Maria of Kars. A second word is attested by a single letter Է [... and it may be a corrupted form of Կ. Considering the attested letters, we don't think there is room for more than twelve to fourteen letters after Mariem's name. The word Կըրապալատ already has twelve letters, so a third word between the two is not impossible but unlikely. An abbreviated name seems highly unlikely.

A new element can be added to this group. An unpublished seal has been discovered. It is the seal of Maria, daughter of Gagik, last king of Kars, ruler of Camndav (Մամֆոսալ – Tzamandos), after the fall of this kingdom, around 1065–1069 (Dédéyan 1975, 68, 7, 83–85. Dédéyan I, 2003, 299–301).

Gagik of Kars seems to have been born between 1000 and 1010, and his daughter could have been born between 1020 and 1040 (Settipani 2006, 87, n. 1). A portrait of the royal family of Kars can be seen in manuscript 2556, fol. 135v, of the patriarchate of Jerusalem (Mutafian, 2012, I, 266–267 and II, illustration, n. 17, with bibliography). Maria is depicted as a young girl in the center of the scene, between her two parents. Unfortunately, as the manuscript is not precisely dated, it is not possible to specify the age of this princess. She is also mentioned in the colophon of an Armenian manuscript copied in 1077–1078. In that colophon, it can be read that the manuscript was achieved under the “reign over the Greeks of Michael, son of Dukas, and under the curopalate of the pious and powerful Maria, daughter of our patron.” (Yovsep’ian 1951, n° 116, c. 251–252. Mat’evosyan 1988, n° 130, 109–110, quoted with analysis in Dédéyan 2003, I, 251, 300). That is the last mention of this woman.

This new, fully legible seal is:

Obverse: MHP-ΘΥ – Facing bust of the Virgin Mary, orans, wearing chiton and maphorion, holding medallion with a facing bust of the infant Christ.

Reverse: + Θ(εοτό)κε β(οή)θ(ει) Μαρία θυγατρι του κουροπαλάτου Κακικίου του Καρσιώτ ου τῆ ἐκ φυλῆς του Δαβίδ – Maria, daughter of the Kuropalate Kakikios Karsite, from the lineage of David.

Diameter: 32 mm

Nomos, Obolos 19 (8 may 2021), lot 1114 and mentioned in CHEYNET, 2023, 158.

This seal, which may have been issued in the middle third of the eleventh century, appears to be the earliest evidence of the presence of the Bagratid dynasty in the country, which claimed to be related to David’s lineage, a claim requiring a study in itself.

Outside the Armenian world, the link between the Davidic lineage and the Armenian elites was confirmed by the Muslim geographer Yaqût (†1229), who wrote about the time of Armenian King Levon I (1198–1219):

“The Catholicos who has ruled the patriarchate since ancient times is always a descendant of David (greetings to him!). The sign showing that he is a descendant of David is, according to them, the length of his arms, his hands reaching beyond his knees when he stands with his arms outstretched; his hands reach beyond his knees when he’s standing with his arms outstretched.” (Translated by Berberian, 1966, 241).

The origin of this statement is unclear, and this text has no equivalent in Armenian literature. Everything suggests that it is fanciful, unless it is an echo of the Bagratuni’ claim?

Let us now turn to the best-known author concerning the Davidic origin of the Bagratuni. Indeed, one has to wait for the *Life and Tale of the Bagratuni* a short chronicle by Sumbat Davitis-dze (in 70 paragraphs). The following passage is of interest to us:

§ 5, *“Samoel ... a descendant of David ... arrived with his Jewish brothers ... had come from (their) captivity in the land of Palestine and were baptized ... Three of*

them changed their names ...and one Bagrat, who is the father of the Bagratuni.” (Rapp 2003, 352).

Sumbat Davitis-dze is certainly an eleventh-century author who lived and published his chronicle before the *Chronicle of K'artli'li* (1072/1073) and the fall of Ani (1064) (Rapp 2003, 339). It is difficult to be more precise, and several hypotheses were advanced. The earliest dates are 1030 (Toumanoff) or 1050–1060 (Goneli Araxamia), but, in the absence of convincing arguments, we will retain the middle of the eleventh century as the most likely time of reference when this chronicle was written (Rapp 2003, 339). Under these conditions, the chronicle was published either at the same time or shortly after the use of Marie de Kars' seal.

Conclusion

The seal presented in this study is one of three preserved female seals from an Armenian-Byzantine background.

It concerns a historical figure already known and documented by an early seal with a legend in Armenian and Greek: Maria, daughter of Gagik of Kars. The main interest of this seal is its mention of the Davidic origin of the Bagradite line. Until now, the earliest assertion of this claim was made by Sumbat Davitis-dze, author of *Life and Tale of the Bagratuni*, composed around the middle of the eleventh century.

The seal studied in these pages is either contemporary with Sumbat Davitis-dze, or slightly earlier, and shows that the Davidic origin of the Bagratuni is also attested in the branch of Greater Armenia.

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ԵՎ ԲԱԳՐԱՏՈՒՆԻՆԵՐԻ ՏԱՆ՝ ԴՎԿԻԹՅԱՆ ԾԱԳՄԱՆ ՀԱՎԱԿՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ

Հիմնաբառեր. Մարիամ Կարսեցի, Բագրատունյաց տուն, Կարսի թագավոր Գագիկ, Լոռվա թագավոր Կյուրիկե 3-րդ, Դավիթյան ծագում, Մովսես Խորենացի, Սումբատ Դավիթիսաճե:

Այս ուսումնասիրության մեջ ներկայացված կնիքը հայ-բյուզանդական ծագման երեք պահպանված կանացի կնիքներից մեկն է: Խոսքը վերաբերում է մի պատմական անձի՝ Գագիկ Կարսեցու դուստր Մարիամին, ով արդեն հայտնի է հայերեն և հունարեն գրությամբ վաղ շրջանի կնիքով:

Այս կնիքի հիմնական հետաքրքրությունը Բագրատունիների տոհմի Դավիթյան ծագման մասին հիշատակումն է: Մինչ այժմ այս մասին ամենավաղ պնդումն արել է «Բագրատունիների պատմությունը» գրքի հեղինակ Սումբատ Դավիթիսաճե: Գիրքը կազմվել է մոտ տասնմեկերորդ դարի կեսերին:

Այս ուսումնասիրության մեջ ներկայացված կնիքը կամ ժամանակակից է Սումբատ Դավիթիսաճեին, կամ փոքր-ինչ ավելի վաղ, և ցույց է տալիս, որ Բագրատունիների Դավիթյան ծագումը վկայված է նաև Մեծ Հայքի ճյուղում:

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НЕИЗДАННАЯ ПЕЧАТЬ МАРИАМ КАРСЕЦИ И ВЕРОЯТНОСТЬ ДАВИДОВСКОГО ПРОИСХОЖДЕНИЯ ДОМА БАГРАТУНИ

Ключевые слова: Мариам Карсеци, Дом Багратуни, Карсский царь Гагик, Лорийский царь Кюрике 3-й, Давидовское происхождение, Мовсес Хоренаци, Сумбат Давитисдзе.

Представленная в данном исследовании печать является одной из трех сохранившихся женских печатей армяно-византийского происхождения. Речь идет об исторической личности, уже известной по ранней печати армянской и греческой графикой, Марии, дочери Гагика Карсеци.

Главный интерес этой печати — упоминание о Давидовском происхождении династии Багратуни. До сих пор самое раннее заявление об этом сделал Сумбат Давитисдзе, автор книги «История Багратунис». Книга была составлена примерно в середине одиннадцатого века.

Печать, представленная в этом исследовании, либо современна Сумбату Давитисдзе, либо немного раньше, и показывает, что Давидовское происхождение Багратунис также засвидетельствовано в ветви Мец Айк.