

THE ARMENIAN PRINCELY SYSTEM IN VASPURAKAN DURING THE STRUGGLE OF THE ARMENIAN PEOPLE AGAINST THE ARAB CALIPHATE'S DOMINANCE (THE 8th CENTURY)

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Since ancient times the lordly right had been retained in Vaspurakan, the 8th province of Great Armenia¹. The Vaspurakan principedom was a part of the Armenian statehood's system. In the first half of the 8th century the leading forces of the province were the Artsruni, Rshtuni and Bagratuni princes and free nobility of Vaspurakan unified around them. In Vaspurakan's neighbouring province of

Mokk' ruled a branch of the Bagratuni princely family. The princes of that family also dominated in Turuberan's Taron district. Thus it became possible to protect Vaspurakan and the other southern districts of Armenia from invasions of alien forces².

At the beginning of the 8th century was finally formed the extensive Arab Caliphate by the conquests of Caliph Abd-al-Malik (685-705). In 701 was formed *Arminia* province which was included into the Northern Viceroyalty of the Caliphate³. *Arminia* with the centre in Dvin included Armenia, Iberia, proper Atuank and the cis-Caspian regions⁴. Arab historians and geographers traditionally divided *Arminia* into four parts. Armenia was included within III and IV *Arminia*⁵. The Caliphate disregarded the hereditary rights of the Armenian princes and also started religious persecutions against the Armenian people.

In 703 Armenians under the command of the prince of Armenia, the son of Varaztirots, Smbat Bagratuni rebelled against the Caliphate's oppression and defeated the Arab regiment in the battle of Vardanakert⁶. Rebellion spread to different regions of Armenia, particularly to the district of Rshtunik in Vaspurakan where Armenian forces

¹ Երեմյան Ս., Հայաստանը ըստ «Աշխարհացոյց»-ի, Երևան, 1963, էջ 108-109:

² Պատմութիւն Ղևոնդեայ Մեծի վարդապետի Հայոց, Ս. Պետերբուրգ, 1887, էջ 18: In the 8th century Smbat Byuratsyan Bagratuni also had a leading position in Vaspurakan (ibid, p. 23):

³ Тер-Гевондян А.Н., Армения и арабский халифат, Ереван, 1977, с. 151.

⁴ Ibid. p. 74.

⁵ Արաբական աղբյուրներ Գ: Արաբ մատենագիրներ Թ-Ժ դարեր: Ներածությունը և բնագրերից թարգմանությունը Ա. Տեր-Ղևոնդյանի, Երևան, 2005, էջ 448:

⁶ Тер-Гевондян А.Н., op. cit., p. 75.

concentrated under the command of Smbat Bagratuni⁷ (the son of Ashot) and Vard Rshtuni. The battle took place near the village of Gukank and the Arab regiment was defeated⁸.

The Arab governor (*ostikan*) of *Arminia* decided to punish the Armenian princes that had rebelled against him. Thus, the princes that had defeated Arabs in Vardanakert, learning about his decision, left for Byzantium, whereas Vaspurakan's rebellious forces remained in their native land. In 705 Smbat Bagratuni returned from Byzantine with an auxiliary regiment. Armenians under the command of Smbat and with the help of the Byzantine regiment fought against the Caliphate's forces in the district of Vanand, near the village of Drashpet, but the Armenian-Byzantine forces lost the battle⁹.

In 705 Kasim¹⁰ ordered to annihilate the Armenian nobility. He invited Armenian princes to Nakhijevan with "insidious trickery" as if to register them in the court chancellery for receiving salary Artsruni, Amatuni, Bagratuni and other princes, mainly those from Vaspurakan¹¹. The princes arrived in Nakhijevan, the famous city of Vaspurakan. As Ghevond Vardapet (the 8th c.) writes with pain, the princes, ingenuously following the law, arrived in Nakhijevan in haste, but were disarmed. Then they were taken into the local and neighbouring Khram settlement's churches and burnt alive¹². Arab chroniclers Balazuri, Yakubi, Taghriberdi, Muhammad al-Kufi, Byzantine historians Theophanes, Michael the Syrian and others also write about the Armenian princes being burnt alive. After this tragedy the princely system of Vaspurakan rather weakened.

⁷ This Smbat who is remembered as "a prince from Vaspurakan" (Ղևնդ, էջ 27) is different from Smbat Byuratsyan who defeated the Arabs in Vardanakert in the same period of time. But they were often identified. While Smbat Byuratsyan was the son of Varaztirots, the other Smbat was the son of Vaspurakan's prince Ashot Bagratuni ("patric") (see: J. Marquart, *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge*, Leipzig, 1903, S. 443-449).

⁸ Ղևնդ, էջ 26-27:

⁹ Тер-Гевондян А.Н., *op. cit.*, p. 77.

¹⁰ On the basis of analyzes of Arabic numismatic data A.Ter-Gevondyan supposed that Kasim was either the ruler, or deputy ruler of *Arminia* or a functioner (Тер-Гевондян А.Н., *op. cit.*, p. 77, 271).

¹¹ Ստեփանոսի Տարօնեցոյ Ասողկան Պատմութիւն տիեզերական, Ս. Պետերբուրգ, 1885, էջ 125: Սամունլիք քահանայի Անեցոյ Հաւաքմունք ի գրոց պատմագրաց, աշխատութ. Ա. Տեր-Միքէլեանի, Վաղարշապատ, 1893, էջ 85:

¹² Ղևնդ, էջ 33-34: Falsifying history Z. Buniatov located the killing of Armenian princes not in the city Nakhijevan and Khram, but in the village Nakhijevan of Kars district [З.Буняттов, Об одном историческом недоразумении («Доклады АН Азерб.ССР», т. 33, N2 Баку, 1977, с.67-69)] which, of course, is groundless. The village of Nakhijevan of Kars district (Հակոբյան Թ.Խ., Մելիք-Բախշյան Ստ. Տ., Բարսեղյան Հ.Խ., Հայաստանի և հարակից շրջանների տեղանունների բառարան, հ. 3, Երևան, 1991, էջ 955) was within the boundaries of the Kamsarakan princely family's lands in the 8th century, whereas they had not been referred to among the Armenian princes killed in 705, meanwhile those from Vaspurakan had been mentioned. It was unnatural that Kasim should invite the princes not to his residence but to a village of the same name rather far from them. In his work "Geographical word-book" (volume 1) Arab chronicler Yakut writes: "Nashava that is Nakjuan, and is the capital of Basfurjan (Vaspurakan - V.V.)" (Արաբական աղբյուրները Հայաստանի և հարևան երկրների մասին, կազմեց Հ. Նալբանդյան, Երևան, 1965, էջ 18). This circumstance also could be the reason to invite the princes of Vaspurakan to that city. Moreover, Nakhijevan and Khram are mentioned as neighboring places. But contrary to the historic sources, the falsificator Z. Buniatov tries to delete the Armenian trace of the tragedy in Nakhijevan of Vaspurakan.

In the 720s the tax yoke became much heavier in the countries subject to the Caliphate¹³. In 725 the poll-tax was enforced instead of hearth money in Armenia. It made heavier the pressure of tax pressure. At that time the Bagratuni princely family had a more stable position in Armenia. In 737 when the Arab armies were fighting against Khazars in two directions (through Darial and Derbent passes), defeating them, the Armenian cavalry with the Arab forces was also fighting there headed by the Prince of Armenia, Ashot Bagratuni (732-749)¹⁴. Then Ashot Bagratuni went to Syria to caliph Mrvan who re-established Ashot in the position of the Prince of Armenia.

In 748-749 Grigor Mamikonyan's rebellion found its reflection in Sasun-Khut district where during 749-752 Hovhan headed the rebellion. Due to the rebellion Sasun district (in ancient Armenian Aghdznik, the 3rd province of Great Armenia), which during the previous decades of the 8th c. had been included within Jazira province (Northern Mesopotamia), joined *Arminia*.

In January 750 the Omaiads were defeated by the Abbassides¹⁵. With the establishment of the Abbassid dynasty on the throne of the Caliphate the oppressions in Armenia intensified¹⁶. Despite the heavy losses Vaspurakan had retained its autonomy headed by the Artsrunis, around whom the other princely families or their remnants united (also including some members of the Rshtuni family that had disappeared and now bore the family name of Artsruni¹⁷).

In 757 Hamazasp and Sahak Artsruni (Vahan's sons) countered the Arab regiment which invaded Vaspurakan¹⁸. Though they fell in an unequal battle, Vaspurakan's cavalry, headed by their brother Gagik, destroyed the enemy, killing their commander as well¹⁹. Of course the imminent threat for Vaspurakan remained. Thus, Gagik Artsruni fortified his position in the Nkan castle (in Vaspurakan's Tornavan district) "consolidating around him the princes of the province with their cavalry"²⁰. He subjected Zarevand district of Norshirakan (Parskahayk, the 7th province of Great Armenia) "and some other neighbouring districts"²¹.

In the district of Her Gagik Artsruni was attacked by Arab forces headed by Ruh and Museh. The latter ruled in Mesopotamia before, subjecting the population to cruel tax²². For about a year the Arabs kept besieged the Nkan castle but were not able to

¹³ Michel le Syrien Chronique, t. II. Ed. et trad. en français par J. Chabot, Paris, 1901, p. 490.

¹⁴ In this period about the relations, on the one hand, between Bagratuni and Mamikonyan and, on the other, Mamikonyan and Artsruni in Vaspurakan see А.Н.Тер-Гевондян, ук. соч., с. 90-92.

¹⁵ Shaban M., The Abbasid Revolution. Cambridge, 1970, p.167.

¹⁶ Daghabaschean H., Gründung des Bagratidenreiches durch Ashot Bagratuni, Berlin, 1893, S. 56.

¹⁷ Ցուցակ հայերեն ձեռագրաց Վասպուրականի, I, կազմեց Ե. Լալայեան, Թիֆլիս, 1915, սյունակ 318:

¹⁸ Markwart J., Südarmenien und die Tigrisquellen nach griechischen und arabischen Geographen, Wien, 1930, S. 80.

¹⁹ Ղևոնդ, էջ 130-131, Ասողիկ, էջ 132:

²⁰ Ղևոնդ, էջ 134:

²¹ Ibid.

²² Michel le Syrien, Chronique, t. II, p. 526.

conquer it. And only by conspiracy they could arrest Gagik Artsruni who died in prison. His sons Hamazasp and Sahak united Vaspurakan's princes against the invaders²³.

According to Ghevond, during the 770s Armenia was in a grave state because of heavy taxes and various persecutions²⁴. In the existing conditions Vaspurakan's Artsruni (Hamazasp and his brothers) and Amatuni princes rebelled with their troops fortifying themselves in the fortresses of the region²⁵. Then they called Vasak Bagratuni (Ashot's son). As well as Smbat sparapet's brother for help with their troops. The rebels' forces first concentrated in the settlement of Berkri in Vaspurakan's Arberani district, and then headed by Hamazasp Artsruni they moved onto the city of Artchesh²⁶. The army sent against the rebels ambushed near it. The rebels of Vaspurakan were trying to push away the Arab element from Lake Van area and to ensure the safety of the district from the north-west. But the forces were unequal, thus the Vaspurakan forces did not succeed, after which they rather weakened, but managed to retain cavalry.

The decisive battle between the Armenian rebels and Caliphate's troops took place on the bank of the Aratsani River near the village of Ardzni in the district of Bagrevand of Ayrarat (the 15th province of Great Armenia) on April 25, 775. Encouraging each other Armenians said: "Let's die for our land and our nation" and they fought heroically, but there were not sufficient rebellious forces and many of them died. Smbat Sparapet and Sahak from Bagratuni family, commander Mushegh and Samuel from Mamikonyan family and many other princes and common people sacrificed their life for the freedom of the Motherland.

After the rebellion Ashot Bagratuni was assigned Armenian prince (775-780). Prince Tatchat Andzevatsi left for Byzantium in 775 and was assigned commander by the Emperor Leo IV (775-780)²⁷. According to Theophanes the Confessor he was appointed the strategos of the theme of Bucellarion²⁸, but because of the disrespectful attitude of the Empress Irene towards him he turned to Harun, the governor of Northern and Western districts of the Arab Caliphate, to obtain a guarantee and return to the Motherland²⁹. Harun gave his consent and Tatchat returned to the Motherland with his family. Harun assigned him as the Prince of Armenia (781-785).

During this period the hostility of Arminia's Arab governor against Tatchat and Artsruni princes increased. In 785³⁰ the *ostikan* sentenced to death Hamazasp and

²³ Ղևոնդ, էջ 134-135:

²⁴ Ibid, 135-136, 139: As B. Spuler noted, this testimony of Ghevond related also to Persia and other countries subject to the Caliphate (B. Spuler, Iran in Früh-islamischer Zeit, Wiesbaden 1952, S. 461):

²⁵ Ղևոնդ, էջ 146:

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ղևոնդ, էջ 155:

²⁸ Բյուզանդական աղբյուրներ, Դ. Թեոփանես Խոստովանող: Թարգմ. քնագրից, առաջաբան և ծանոթագրություններ Հր. Բարթիկյանի, Երևան, 1983, էջ 163:

²⁹ А.Н.Тер-Гевондян, ук. соч., с. 111.

³⁰ Ղևոնդ, էջ 164-165: Ghevond dates the martyrdom of Artsruni princes in 784. The year of 785 mentioned by Asoghik is more precise (Ասողիկ, էջ 133: About this see E. Dulaurier, Recherches sur la chronologie Arménienne.

Sahak Artsruni (Gagik's sons) princes receiving the consent of the Caliph beforehand. Their younger brother Mahruzhan³¹ was saved from being beheaded at the price of apostasy. Later David Mamikonyan killed Mehruzhan.

Since Tatchat was an experienced Byzantine commander, Arminia's *ostikan* wanted to use him against the enemies of the Caliphate. In 785 in order to protect Derbend mountain pass (Dzorapahak) an Armenian detachment headed by Tatchat Andzevatsi was sent to help the Arab regiments fighting against Khazars. Many of the Armenians died there including Tatchat, sparapet Bagarat Bagratuni and Nerseh Kamsarakan³². The Arab governor hoped to weaken the Armenian princes this way, to exclude the possibility of their new rebellion and to strengthen his power in Armenia.

During the last quarter of the 8th century the Caliphate intensified its pressure in Armenia and particularly in Vaspurakan where the princes had preserved their autonomous rights to some extent. At the same time a part of the nobility of Vaspurakan's Artaz district had to move to the limits of the Byzantine Empire, theme of Chaldia/Khaghtik, as a result of persecutions by neighbouring Arab emirates³³. According to Ghevond, the number of the migrants (including women and children) was 12 thousand led by Shapuh Amatuni, his son Hamam and some other Armenian princes³⁴. It is known that the Amstunis ruled in Artaz, and in 336 for the victory against Iranian tribes of Mazkuts (Massagetae) in Oshakan of the Ayrarat province's Aragatsotn district, Armenian king Khosrov III Kotak (330-337) gave them this settlement as an award for the courage displayed by Vahan Amatuni³⁵. Of course it did not mean that the princely family had completely moved from Artaz to Ayrarat³⁶.

Establishing themselves in Khaghtik the migrants called the land they populated Hamshen (Hamamashen) after the name of prince Hamam Amatuni, and they bore the name Hamshenians.

During the rebellion of 774-775 the Gnunis adhered to the Bagratunis. At the end of the 8th century, pressed by the Arabian Utmanik tribe, the Gnuni princely family had to leave Vaspurakan's Aghiovit district. They turned to Ashot *Msaker* Bagratuni (790-826) for help against the Utmaniks and he went to Aghiovit district with a detachment and helped to remove the Gnuni family to the province of Tayk³⁷, which was then the Bagratunis' domain³⁸.

Paris, 1859, p. 251, J. Markwart, *Südarmenien*, S. 85, R. Grousset, *Histoire de l'Arménie des origines à 1071*, Paris, 1947, p. 337. A.Ter-Ghevondyan mentioned the beginning of 786 (А.Н.Тер-Гевондян, *ук. соч.*, с. 112).

³¹ See also Հաւաքումն Պատմութեան Վարդանայ Վարդապետի, Վենետիկ, 1862, էջ 76:

³² Ղևոնդ, էջ 159-160:

³³ Ղևոնդ, էջ 168:

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Մովսիսի Խորենացոյ Պատմութիւն Հայոց աշխատութ. Մ. Աբեղեան և Ս. Յարութիւնեան, Տփղիս, 1913, էջ 267:

³⁶ Researchers consider that the mentioned migration was made from Ayrarat (see Ն. Ակինեան, Պահլավունի և Լամբրոնի Հերմեանց ազգաբանութիւնը, «Հանդէս Ամսօրեայ», 1954, էջ 13; Լ. Խաչիկյան, Էջեր համշինահայ պատմությունից. «Բանբեր Երևանի համալսարանի», 1969, №2, էջ 117-118):

³⁷ Վարդան Վարդապետ, էջ 77:

³⁸ Ibid, p. 76.

The acts of violence by the Abbassids and the resettlement policy of the Arab tribes threatened to distort the demographic image of Armenia. However, thanks to the Armenians' national vitality and commitment to the Homeland and its holiness, and of course, due also to a unanimous and self-sacrificing struggle against invaders, several Armenian princely families and, particularly, the Bagratunis and the Artsrunis mainly retained their princely autonomy and power.

***Translated from Armenian by
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