

The Context of Kingship: Armeno-Georgian Claims and Rule in the 12th-13th Centuries


▼ **ABSTRACT** This paper aims to examine the political situation in which the major Armeno-Georgian elite families of the later 12th and early 13th centuries held and maintained positions of power under the broad hegemony of the Georgian Bagratid dynasty. It reassesses some aspects of recent historical research and provides context based upon a brief analysis of other rulers within the Bagratid hegemony, especially in the case of the polity of Shirvan. The paper argues on the basis of these assessments that we should see claims of royal status by Armeno-Georgian elites as being accepted within the wider political frameworks of the Bagratids, rather than being a potential problem or threat to that system. Attempts to use royal and heroic ancestries not only helped secure their holders' claims to rule in particular regions, but were also visibly celebrated as reflecting positively on the Georgian monarchs as senior rulers. The necessity for such families as brokers between the Armenian highlands and the Georgian court created a situation, mirrored in some other relations between the Bagratids and their neighbours, where it made sense for both parties to secure those relationships by accepting and indeed expanding ancestry claims and noble titulature.

▼ **KEYWORDS** 12th-13th centuries, the medieval Caucasus, political history, Georgia, Armenia, prosopography, Zak'arean (Mkhargrdzeli), Ōrbelean, Bagratid.

▼ **ISSUE** Volume 1.1 (June 2024)

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper will be to consider the question of the relationship between the Bagratid monarchs of high medieval Georgia and the most senior among the Armeno-Georgian nobility of the 12th century, in particular the family known as

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Cite this article: James Baillie, 'The Context of Kingship: Armeno-Georgian Claims and Rule in the 12th-13th Centuries', *Matenadaran: Medieval and Early Modern Armenian Studies (MEMAS)*, 1.1 (June 2024), 139–156

<<https://dx.doi.org/10.1484/J.MEMAS.5.142267>>

DOI: 10.1484/J.MEMAS.5.142267

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the Zak'areans, Zak'arids, or Mkhargrdzeli in different historiographical traditions.¹ Broadly speaking, the term Zak'arean/Zak'arid is more associated with Armenian historiography and Mkhargrdzeli with Georgian, though this distinction is by no means always simple (Pogossian 2019, 248–253). For most of the 12th century and into the early 13th, the Bagratid court in Tbilisi was the centre of political life across the Caucasus, including for these families. This paper discusses the Caucasus in its broadest sense, including the South Caucasus or Transcaucasus between the upper and lower Caucasus range, parts of the North Caucasus that today sit within the Russian Federation, and the “Subcaucasus” region, a term proposed by B. L. Zekiyani, mostly denoting the Armenian highlands (Zekiyani 2008). All of these areas were tied closely in the high medieval period to the political fate of the South Caucasus, with a broad Georgian-led hegemony over the Caucasus regions between at least the 1120s and 1220s. It was in this environment that the Zak'arid dynasty came to particular prominence.

In general, the historical study of this period especially among Georgian scholars has tended to lean towards emphasising the role of class and material distinction, and downplaying the role of ethnicity, in the relationship between the 12th-century monarchs and Armeno-Georgian nobles. Mariam Lordkipanidze for example tends to portray Mkhargrdzeli actions as synonymous with those of a presumptively unified state, regarding victories attributed to them in chronicle material as simply those of “Georgian troops” (Lordkipanidze 1987, 151). Where Georgian-Armenian families gained power, in this reading, it was by pursuing integration and efficacy within a centralised Bagratid monarchy: the Armenian part of their identity is not treated as relevant. A zero-sum struggle for power at the expense of the monarchy is meanwhile often an assumed goal of the whole noble class in Georgian historical research (Lordkipanidze 1987, 127–133). In this understanding of the period, when elites challenged royal rule, it was in the role of an overmighty subject or separatist lord working on lines more determined by class than historical or ethnic identity.

Some scholars, notably in recent years the Armenologist Sergio La Porta, have given a considerably more fluid picture of the potential political outcomes. La Porta has very importantly and clearly brought into focus the question of the claims made by Armeno-Georgian princes and the context of Armenian societal fluidity in the 12th century. In this approach, he has argued that the political possibility of a fully separate and self-consciously Armenian kingdom was very real even in the later 12th century. Framing especially the Ōrbelean rebellion of the 1170s as an attempt at this goal (La Porta 2008–2009), he suggests that claims of Bagratuni ancestry and royal titulature made by the Ōrbelean (Orbeli) and Mkhargrdzeli clans effectively prepared the ground for the potential construction of an independent Armenian polity outside the Bagratid hegemony.

¹ Much of the following argument relies upon sections of the *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, which are dual referenced. KT has been used to abbreviate the English edition, *Kartlis Tskhovreba* 2013, and ქს, for the two-volume Georgian edition, *Kartlis Tskhovreba* 1955 and 59. For this paper as a whole, I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. John Latham-Sprinkle and Dr. Samuel Cook in helping with proof-reading and suggestions.

Both of these readings, whilst differing sharply in their interpretations of the actions of the Zak'arids, share certain assumptions. In particular, they both take as axiomatic the assumption that the Bagratids would have aimed to reduce and erode any alternative claims to royal power. Conversely, both readings tend to assume a *de facto* state where autonomous "independence" would have been a desirable goal for elite actors compared to their positions within a Georgian-led political world.

In this paper, I wish to set out an alternative, third proposition, based in particular on comparison between the Armeno-Georgian nobility and Georgia's interactions with its other neighbours in Shirvan and the North Caucasus. The case I wish to make is that the Armenian cultural traits of the Ōrbeleans and Zak'arids, and probably also their ancestral and royal claims, were a necessary and useful feature not just for them but also for the Georgian monarchs they served. In this reading, we should not see cultural homogenisation as innately desirable for Georgian monarchs or their subjects, and nor should we necessarily equate the public presentation of rulership on the part of the Bagratids' immediate vassals as in some way subverting or weakening the efficacy of a senior monarch's rule: indeed these were very probably positives for both parties.

Few of the key terms in this discussion are without contest. Ethnic identity in ancient and medieval Caucasian contexts has often been derived backwards from modern nation-states, in an attempt to fit medieval peoples neatly into modern boxes and decide which state's history should own particular concepts or figures (Zekiyan 2008, 329; Rapp 2017, 16). This paradigm, in turn, has led to a counter-view that insists upon the essential fluidity of ethnic identity and emphasises how certain families were able to change their presentation in different circles over the decades, as Antony Eastmond argues for the Armeno-Georgian families (Eastmond 2017, 22–23). Alison Vacca, discussing the early medieval Caucasus, similarly emphasises fluidity along with the importance of local concerns and the lack of overarching identity categories forming a unified base for political mobilisation (Vacca 2017, 72). This malleability, however, was not unbounded, nor were cases of change as simple as moving between identity groups wholesale. Pogossian, in discussing Eastmond's work, suggests that there is a certain modernity in the use of "fluidity" as a concept framework for discussing identity in the medieval Caucasus (Pogossian 2019, 247). Though the modernity of the term does not necessarily negate its utility, and we should not be too quick to assume that limited evidence and a less modern technological landscape inherently mean a less fluid social world, Pogossian's caution towards an unbounded notion of fluidity is very valuable. In particular, in using ideas of fluidity we need to account not only for the potential in shifting between identity groups and presentations, but also the barriers and costs to doing so, and the ways in which identities could be leveraged in interactions with power structures and elite networks. As we shall see, claiming certain identities was a matter upon which serious social and political efforts were expended, and therefore it was perhaps comparatively difficult outside elite circles.

Here I aim to discuss ethnicity with a recognition that the concept *itself* is somewhat fluid but at the same time integral to understanding the premodern Caucasus.

Rather than the way medieval peoples in the Caucasus approached these identities being truly malleable, it perhaps makes more sense to think of identity as layered, with certain layers becoming more or less prominent and certain traits contributing to them more or less critically depending on the observer and circumstance. Producing or changing those various traits – claimed ancestry, language, faith, home locations, cultural practices, political allegiances – that contributed to observations of ethnicity could however require social, political, and financial investment. Less common mixtures of these traits did not necessarily lead to a truly fluid or unclear sense of ethnic identity, but could sometimes be a desideratum or lead, not to an overall fluidity, but to sharper specific situational variation in how certain layers were emphasised. The aim of chroniclers in deploying such terms was nonetheless often not a matter of precise description, especially in describing groups: for example, when Kirakos Gandzakets'i says that "all the Georgian troops" along with Ivanē and Giorgi Lasha mourned Zak'arē, he can only plausibly mean all the troops in the army, including Armenians, Ossetians, and other ethnic groups: a term can be a shorthand for a political structure or ethnic identity alike (Kirakos Gandzakets'i 1986, 149). In general, I therefore aim to take a broad view of the appropriateness of certain terms: when considering a given ethnonym or identity, I take an inclusive view of who it could have meant and consider potential presentations and interactions with power structures, rather than trying to produce more restrictive sets of criteria.

Such a viewpoint is especially important to understanding power relations. When evaluating the power structures and social claims around medieval elites, a purely genealogical approach or the presentation of a noble house or individual's initial background can only be part of the picture. Changes in presentation and cultural traits over time were not merely facades laid over an unchangeable "real" core identity, and even some clearly outlandish ideas in medieval texts should, as we will see, be taken seriously as socio-political claims (even if they should not be taken literally as genealogical statements). Our understanding of identity for these purposes is, therefore, intended to be an investigation into the ways particular elites would have culturally appeared to their contemporaries, rather than an attempt to ascertain their families' ultimate genealogical origins. In any case, such origins can rarely be put together with any sort of completeness especially because of the poor records of women in these families. This should be taken into account with regard to terms like "Armeno-Georgian" that here indicate a mix of relevant social, political, and cultural traits for the families broadly conceived, rather than being a purely genealogical statement.

The intersection of ethnicity and power lies at the core of this paper's considerations, and we should recognise that these two complex concepts modified one another. Power – in the sense of historical actors' capacity to influence the world around them – was shaped by, and shaped in turn, how elite ethnicities and claims interacted with the networks of other power brokers and actors that formed their political worlds. Some thoughts on how a more complex subdivision of power might influence our framing of this period are offered towards the end of this paper. Perhaps the most important initial observation to make is that the mechanisms of

power in this period were more centred on persons and connections, and less on formal rule, law, and political infrastructure, than we as modern observers are used to imagining. This tends to lead to a focus on “states” over other elite actors (cf. Latham-Sprinkle 2022, 50). It is partly to avoid imported assumptions that I refer to the Bagratid-centric systems of power in the 12th-century Caucasus as a hegemony and a polity, rather than as a country, state, kingdom, or nation: these terms provide, in my view, a reasonable sense of overarching political structure whilst carrying fewer assumptions likely to be imported from the common usage of terms like “state” elsewhere.

This paper seeks to comment on and reframe more recent historical research, and to bring in comparisons from Georgian and international English scholarship. The discussion will thus use certain exemplifying authors, rather than provide the full sweep of 20th-century historical study. If this leaves certain lacunae, especially in consideration of the Armenian and Russian language scholarship or if there are pertinent epigraphic or colophon materials regrettably absent, then hopefully the following discussion will nonetheless provide a framework for other scholars to bring those materials into the study of the Zak’arid period.

2. The Armeno-Georgian Families

We must start not with the Zak’arids, but with their predecessors, the Ōrbelean family: these two families dominated Georgian-Armenian relations between the 1120s and 1220s, and had a number of shared characteristics. First among these are the families’ identities, which have a number of further impacts on their position among the elites of the Caucasus. Both show a mixture of Georgian and Armenian cultural traits, and should be classified accordingly. There has been a tradition in Georgian and Armenian scholarship classifying these families as Georgian or Armenian respectively, but attempts to place them into a single, precise ethno-national category have been largely unconvincing unless one sees their identity solely as a matter of *longue durée* genealogical background. Even then an attempt based on pure genealogy often relies upon the lack of recorded relationships via the women of the region’s elite families, who may have crossed between cultural contexts more often for marriage as notably happened in the case of Ivanē’s daughter T’amt’a (Kirakos Gandzakets’i 1986, 128). We see some elite families having feet in multiple worlds from the 13th-century evidence of Step’annos Ōrbelean’s *History*, which explicitly notes that through marriage ties the Ōrbelean family took names from both Georgian and Armenian traditions, though he ultimately regards their origins as Chinese (Step’annos Ōrbelean 2015, 197).

Here we should give a brief aside on the “Chinese” origin tale of the Ōrbeleans. This story is essentially a copy of the similar and better known tale about the Mamikoneans, and may be an attempt to imply a shared lineage (La Porta 2012, 90–91). In Step’annos’ conception, the term “Chenk” did undoubtedly mean China: he gives a very clear description of where he believes the country to be, east of Khazaria,

and as Bedrosian has noted, this is in line with other Armenian descriptions and terminology that explicitly reference China (Bedrosian 1981). An alternative theory that this was a garbling of a toponym for a region near Lazica has been raised (see, for example, Pagava 2020, 48). This cannot be entirely dismissed as a distant origin for the Mamikoneans' tale, but it is clear that by the time of Step'annos the tale referred to China itself.

Fabulous ancestry was a tool for the Mkhargrdzelis as well: they are given Kurdish (possibly meaning Median), Achaemenid, and Arsacid origins by different chroniclers (La Porta 2012, 78–80; KT, 275; յԾ II, 110). Some scholars have taken the claim of Kurdish ancestry as literal: in the middle of the last century, the Georgian scholar Shota Meskhia presented the Mkhargrdzeli as a family of Georgianised Kurds (Shah-nazaryan 2001). Much like the Mamikonean story, we can never entirely disprove or discount the possibility that there is a grain of truth beneath these statements (Eastmond 2017, 22). However, we lack records of the family far back enough to substantiate such a claim, and as discussed below there are a variety of reasons why such an identity may have been adopted for political reasons. Therefore, we should primarily regard both these ancestries as intentional, politically useful constructions (Pogossian 2019, 247–248; Margaryan 1997, 40). Later, the Zak'arids adopted progressively more Bagratuni titulature until eventually claiming ancestry from that family in their inscriptions (La Porta 2012, 90–91).

The exoticised ancestries of these families likely had significant political motivations, drawing parallels with other regional elites. The Georgian Bagratids, too, had their own ancestry tale, claiming to hail from the line of David (KT, 257, 249; յԾ II, 69, 50). Their heroic ancestry, however, was biblical and therefore provided a clear aura of religious legitimacy: there is no similar line to be drawn from the Kurdish Mkhargrdzeli or Chinese Örbelean backgrounds. Rather, these backgrounds tapped into literary and cultural tropes regarding ancient or distant peoples as sources of authority, and prowess-driven ideas around familial legacies of conquest and adventure. Another purpose, which these ancestries would also have served, may have been to elide questions of origin that would pigeon-hole them as “purely” Armenian or Georgian, improving their ability to operate and use legitimating rhetoric across both cultural contexts by placing themselves outside of either.

Coming back to consider the question of their ethnicities more widely, then, we see both families utilising heroic origin stories whilst functioning across primarily Kartvelian and Armenian cultural and linguistic contexts. As we shall see later, this may in fact have been a significant source of power for both families. It is also important to recognise that their identities may have been subject to both chronology and circumstances, especially when we consider the Zak'arids' identities. Hayrapet Margaryan has argued that the Zak'arids were initially Armenian minor nobility, and La Porta's suggestion that they were of *azat* origin and rose through military service seems very likely (Margaryan 1997, 40; La Porta 2012, 81–82). It is worth noting, however, that by the end of the century the family had been integrated into the upper tiers of Georgian noble society for quite some time, which must have included linguistic and cultural integration with the Georgian nobility and, by the end of

Tamar's reign, religious conversions. That their ancestors might have been treated as solely Armenian rather than Georgian need not lead us to suggest that in the late 12th century. Zak'aria or Ivanē Mkhargrdzeli were seen in precisely the same light as their grandparents or great-grandparents or that they had the same level of reliance upon other actors for their positions.

The theory that they were in a category of "military" families who the Bagratids sought to promote as opposed to "older noble" ones who they sought to rein in feels somewhat difficult to fully substantiate (La Porta 2012, 81–86). Whilst it is true that we most often see the Mkhargrdzelis in command roles, the fundamentally military nature of the Georgian nobility reflected in the chronicle records means this is just as true for members of families with long-standing positions in the upper aristocracy. The "History and Eulogy of Monarchs" in *Kartlis Tskhovreba* makes it clear that the noble *eristavis*, who usually held their offices in a semi-hereditary way, were key to the raising of troops (KT, 249; jḡ II, 50). Nor can we argue backwards and suggest that the Mkhargrdzeli allegiance to the Bagratids was based on their lack of a strong noble claim to fall back upon: whilst some members of older elite families clearly were in tension with the Bagratids in this period, in cases when allegiances became visible during rebellions, it is equally true that many *eristavial* families did support their monarchs. La Porta rightly and importantly comments on the erosion of *naxarar* systems in Armenia leading to new possibilities for families of the lower noble rank such as the Zak'arids, and we do see a significant social fluidity in Georgia too (La Porta 2012, 77). However, the effect of this on noble-royal relationships was complex, with trade-offs whereby traditional Georgian nobles probably gained both stability for their lands and potential sources of loot from Georgian interventionism, even if this meant a greater diversity of potential holders of certain elite offices. The Georgian material provides few clear indications of the sort of general incursions on noble rights that might indicate a broader opposed policy or struggle between statist/royal and oligarchic/noble factions.

In line with the introductory discussion above with regard to identity being situational, we can see that different aspects of the identities of these families could be emphasised or not in different circumstances. For example, the Armenian religious identity of the Mkhargrdzelis is most clearly forefronted in the Georgian chronicles in Ivanē Mkhargrdzeli's conversion narrative. Conversely, it is rarely mentioned in passages related to their military victories (KT, 264–265; jḡ II, 85–89). Upon the death of Zak'aria, his wealth, bravery, holdings, and the status of his mourners are all foregrounded, with a side-mention of his faith coming rather later (KT, 275; jḡ II, 110).

This leads us back to the more general question of how the Zak'arids operated with regard to their power: as Armenian scholars have concluded, they operated with significant autonomy in certain respects such as military actions, but without being treated as fundamentally sovereign (Shahnazaryan 2022). As we shall see later, the concept of essential sovereignty and total autonomy of action as an expectation for the power aims of such elite families may translate poorly to the 12th-century context. Zak'arid activities during the 12th and early 13th centuries covered a wide

range of governance functions in Georgia itself, but militarily their own conquests tended to focus on regions that were largely Armenian by both language and faith. A list of their conquests in the Georgian material includes Dvin, Amberd, Bargushat, Bjinisi, and Gelakun, whereas Vardan Arewelts'i lists Shirak, Anberd, Ani, Bjni, Dvin, Kars, Getabakk', and Ch'arek' in that order (KT, 203; յԹ I, 368; Vardan Arewelts'i 2007, 82). These conquests formed most of the basis of some sort of political entity that answered directly to the Zak'arids. There was at least one exception: Kars was surrendered directly to Tamar, but perhaps the fact that this had to be explicitly negotiated suggests that in general the Zak'arids had been capable of taking and holding other areas much more in their own right (KT, 301; յԹ II, 143–144).

Indeed in Zak'arid governance we see a reflection of some features of royal rule, such as the appointment of ministerial-style positions and hearing petitions at court (Step'annos Ōrbelean 2015, 185). We cannot say whether this was a common feature of many nobles' courts in this period, but it certainly indicates that the Zak'arids' power was in certain spheres held locally rather than being integrated into a system running through the Bagratids themselves. Appointments to offices in the Zak'arid domains, meanwhile, quite probably did still include some degree of nominal oversight from the senior monarch: both Giorgi Lasha and Ivanē Mkhargrdzeli are jointly mentioned by Step'annos Ōrbelean as appointing Liparit Ōrbelean in Siwnik' and Vasak Xach'enets'i in Vayots' dzor (Step'annos Ōrbelean 2015, 205). We should not take this as necessarily meaning that the Georgian monarch had a significant role in choosing candidates for such a role, but it could simply mean that endorsement from the senior ruler was still a nominally important legitimising feature.

We can also note that these Armeno-Georgian rulers were certainly not treated simply as Georgian *eristavis*, the regional “dukes”. This system of governance was not expanded or regularised outside Kartvelian-speaking regions, and if anything, our sources hint at a tendency to retain local elite structures within the Bagratid hegemony. For example, when Tamar appointed Ivanē of Akhaltsikhe as ruler of Kars, he was given the title of emir which probably continued existing local titulature, as opposed to being made an *eristavi* (KT, 267; յԹ II, 92). These differences were probably not just in name only: given the varied cultural positions and resources of different political units, and that the capacity for central oversight was limited anyway, it may have made strategic sense to vary the terms under which land could be held.

This retention of local structures probably created significant opportunity for a family like the Zak'arids, as it relied upon effective communication between the Georgian Bagratid centre and the other regions within the hegemony of the Georgian monarchs. Where there was a cultural and linguistic divide between the Georgian monarchs and their nominal subjects, this meant that effective and reliable brokers of power and information were vital. Having subordinate rulers who were in a better position to negotiate with, and perhaps be accepted by, local lords across parts of the Caucasus and Subcaucasus was probably a far more efficient way of projecting authority than any attempt to produce a more integrated system of governance. Medieval polities lacked systems of mass education, rapid communication, or indeed fully centralised monopolies of force. It was therefore important to work with existing

understandings of culture and legitimacy, rather than to impose particular norms consistently across a political sphere. Given the linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity of regions within the Bagratids' hegemony, being able to reach across those boundaries was of paramount importance. Thus, families who could place themselves as brokers between the court and localities were able to turn their brokerage into an effective source of power.

This situation of brokerage as power, however, does not *prima facie* explain why both the Ōrbeleans and Zak'arids were so keen to claim royal titulature and ancestries, especially of the royal Armenian dynasty of the Bagratuni. The answer is important for understanding whether those families were keen to obtain independence from Georgian rule. The Ōrbelean inscriptions from the period do prominently use the title of *spasalar*, indicating that whilst their claims of Bagratuni ancestry mattered for their legitimacy, perhaps so did their claims to high status within the Georgian Bagratid system. Determining what wider political programme this indicates, however, requires examination of the political situations these families found themselves in the late 12th and early 13th centuries.

The Ōrbeleans' use of Armenian royal attributes is tied by La Porta to their rebellion of the 1170s (La Porta 2008–2009). It probably happened in 1177, and this date appears consistently in our sources, although there are some difficulties with how 1177 corresponds to the deaths or ages of majority of certain important figures, leaving an outside alternative of 1174 (Baillie 2022). La Porta suggests that the rebellion was largely driven by the Ōrbeleans' aim of independence, and that Giorgi III's behaviour was probably a crucial trigger point (in the first half of the 1170s, he had frustrated their ambitions of rulership in the city of Ani and sided with an alternative faction around the city's bishop Barsegh) (La Porta 2008–2009, 138–139). The Ōrbelean faction eventually took up arms, nominally in favour of Demna, Giorgi's nephew and son of his elder brother David V. In Georgian studies, it is also suggested that the Ōrbeleans were essentially seeking independence (e.g., Lordkipanidze 1987, 131).

This reading poses two questions: first, why Demna was necessary at all, and second, why the source material lacks clear indications that the Ōrbeleans were seeking to achieve independence. Demna was still a young man at this point, in his early twenties: whilst neither the Georgian material nor Step'annos Ōrbelean's pro-Orbeli account has much incentive to talk much about any of his virtues, we certainly know that he had a very good claim to be king and one arguably better than Giorgi III, his uncle. If the Ōrbeleans wanted full independence, it might have been an odd move to attempt to enthrone someone whose rule would be at least as legitimate as Giorgi's and who as a young man might have been in a very good position to solidify his reign without the Ōrbeleans' help. It is true that the Georgian court chronicles and Step'annos' much later account might have an incentive to downplay the idea of a Bagratuni-realm separatism, but a motive to downplay separatism does not necessarily prove that such separatism existed. La Porta's suggestion that the "half the kingdom" demanded according to a contemporary Armenian colophon must refer to the Bagratuni regions is plausible, but is also speculative (La Porta

2008–2009, 150). Given that Demna’s rebellion clearly had notable support in the eastern regions of Georgia, Ivanē could equally have been negotiating for that eastern part of the Georgian realms rather than for the Bagratuni regions. This would be a much more conventionally understood halving of the Bagratid kingdom at this point, as references to the “Imiers and Amiers” either side of the Likhi ridge were a phrasing used several times in the Georgian material covering this period. Whilst the thesis that the Ōrbeleans wished to be kings of a separate polity cannot be ruled out on the basis of the sources, it is nevertheless far from the only available reading.

The Ōrbeleans’ defeat, besides condemning the family to a crushing fall from power, led to significant changes in the upper echelons of the court. The Georgian monarchs had a strong tendency throughout this period to give senior court roles to the Ōrbeleans and Zak’arids (perhaps most especially the senior military post of *amirspasalar*), but two figures without Zak’arid or Ōrbelean lineages held the role in the years after 1177: the Kipchak general Q’ubasar who was appointed during the 1177 rebellion, and Gamrek’eli, appointed early in Tamar’s reign. However, by the end of the 1180s the Zak’arid family held the *amirspasalar* role again and would do so along with several other key offices throughout the rest of Tamar’s reign and beyond. This may well indicate that ensuring the loyalty and cohesion of the combined Bagratid forces was assisted by having leaders who could communicate effectively and be seen as legitimate by both the Armenian and Georgian military contingents. This may also be in recognition of the Zak’arids’ relative seniority within the overall Bagratid hegemony: as the primary brokers in the Armenian highland regions, they may have been given a visible seniority over for example the regional *eristavis*.

From the 1170s, the mantle of Georgia’s primary broker in the Armenian highlands (as well as of other core political offices) thus moved to the Zak’arids. The most notable members of the family in this period were Sargis and then his sons Zak’aria and Ivanē, though other branches of the family also attained a degree of prominence. The Zak’arids undoubtedly put considerable effort into establishing their legitimacy and visibility across much of the Armenian highlands. This may have been developed with greater claims over time: late in Giorgi III’s reign, the name of Sargis appears alongside the king’s as a sponsor of the monastic church at Haghartsin, suggesting that already at this point some concerted work to establish the family’s presence was ongoing (Chitishvili 2018). A generation later, by 1215, his son Ivanē was able to present himself as heir to the royal Bagratuni line in his own right (La Porta 2008–2009, 159).

The story of the Zak’arids’ rise is often portrayed as one of the promotion of loyalists, with an abstract conception of loyalty appealed to as a mechanism for explaining their consistently strong alignment with Giorgi III and his successors after abandoning the Ōrbelean cause. Lordkipanidze for example explicitly mentions members of the family as being “loyal” or “faithful” on multiple occasions (Lordkipanidze 1987, 143, 163). This, however, jars somewhat with any suggestion that the Zak’arids’ progressively more expansive claims to be the heirs of Armenian kings might have pointed to independence. Certainly, we see no indication of separatist murmurings or mistrust of the Zak’arids in the Georgian chronicles, despite their having both

greater material assets than their Ōrbelean predecessors and a monarch whose military presence was heavily limited by her gender. This, too, points to the need for a reconsideration of how the use of titulature interacted with the wider political structures of the Caucasus.

To return to our initial premise, then, we have a picture where the Zak'arids succeeded and extended the position of the Ōrbeleans as key court officials to the Bagratids and key brokers between their court and the nobility of the Armenian highlands. There was one rebellion where power was directly and militarily contested, but whether it represents an attempt at "separatism" in the sense of creating a polity that did not nominally answer to the Bagratids court is very far from clear. Much of the question, as a result, depends on whether we see the power claims of the Zak'arids and Ōrbeleans as *inherently* pointing towards the groundwork for an independent state. To this end, it is instructive to consider not just the Bagratid-Zak'arid dynamics, but also the Bagratid political world more widely and how the Georgians in this period seem to have interacted with other neighbours, subordinates, and satellites.

3. A Wider Picture: Other Bagratid Satellites

The Armenian highland was not the only area under a broad Georgian hegemony in the 12th century. At various times rulers in the eastward river plains of Arran and Shirvan, Muslim *beyliks* to the south most notably in Erzurum, and North Caucasus leaders were all tied into a social-political hegemony centred on Georgia. Georgian military adventuring stretched even further, with armies reaching well into northern Iran on some eastwards expeditions and as far as the western Pontus when intervening in the Byzantine civil wars after 1204. This wider network of regional ties would have been very familiar to the Armeno-Georgian families who are the focus of the present paper, and can provide some useful additional context on how the social-political systems of the time could form particular arrangements and understandings of sovereignty and rulership.

Shirvan, the predominantly Muslim polity in the lowlands north of the Kura and Araxes, is perhaps the most sizeable parallel available. Whilst there is far less extant material on the relationship between Shirvan and Georgia than on Georgian-Armenian relations, the broad picture is that a Georgian-Shirvan alliance was formed maritally early in the 12th century, and that after a brief Georgian occupation of Shirvan in the mid-1120s, the subsequent rulers of both polities tended to maintain a state of alliance. The Georgians intervened militarily on behalf or at the behest of the shahs on certain occasions, most notably during Giorgi III's reign when the Georgians campaigned in the Derbent region and then during Tamar's reign when the shah brokered an alliance between Tamar and the Eldiguzid Amir Miran, attempting to set him up as ruler of Ganja in Arran, between the Kura and the Araxes (KT, 255; ȳȳ II, 63). It is likely that Shirvani soldiers also fought in Georgian armies, though this is recorded only in occasional very general statements (KT, 202; ȳȳ I, 367).

The Shirvani-Georgian relationship differed in a number of clear ways from that with the Zak'arids. The rulers of Shirvan never integrated as heavily into the Bagratid court – none of them ever took up a formal post as one of the *ukhutsesis*, the Georgian vizier-level titles (whereas the Ōrbeleans and Zak'arids practically dominated the list of these positions). Their intermarriage with the Bagratids early in the century might have been repeated given Shah Aghsartan's apparent status as a marriage candidate for Tamar early in her reign, although this was dismissed both on grounds of religion and consanguinity – nonetheless the seriousness with which the suit is taken in the Georgian material may indicate a relatively strong sense of potentially equal royal status, which we do not see clear examples of for the Zak'arids (KT, 247; ჯგ II, 45). These differences have led some scholars to represent Shirvan as an allied polity and the Zak'arid domains as being “within” medieval Georgia, although in reality we should probably think of this more as a matter of degree in the relationships than essential difference in kind.

Despite these differences, there are some extremely interesting points of comparison when we consider the question of territories and claims. In particular, the issue of titlature arises. The Georgian chronicles are very clear that the shahs of Shirvan were known and understood as such, indeed tending to use Shirvanshah or similar terms instead of the personal names of the shahs in many cases (KT, 254; ჯგ II, 61–62). However, the charters of Georgian monarchs also use the term Shirvanshah as a standard part of their titlature (*Georgian Historical Documents* 1984, 77). This appears to present an immediate problem: if the Georgian monarch was claiming to be the shah of Shirvan, then this would represent a direct challenge to the actual Shirvanshah's authority and control over that title, leading to direct tensions or even contests over who could hold the role. This problem, however, may be more apparent than actual: we see no indications in major late 12th or 13th century sources that anyone at the time actually considered it an issue. The Georgian-Shirvani alliance remained reasonably secure throughout the 12th century, and we see a claim that Giorgi III considered the Shirvanshah Aghsartan as being equivalent to one of his *didebulis*, a general category term for the most senior of the upper nobility (KT, 235; ჯგ II, 17).

We should not view the overlap of titlature as a problem, and we might instead see it in a few different ways. First, nominal hierarchy resolves the issue in part, with the Georgian monarch being in a sense the shah of the shah of Shirvan. This ties with the Georgian rulers' title of *mepe mepisa*, which is to say “ruler of rulers” – *mepe* being an ungendered term for a regnant monarch. Second, kingship itself need not necessarily be cleanly understood as confined to a single individual: if kingship is a *state of being* more than a legal entity, a status of a person as much as an office that they hold, then this produces more possibilities for such actions to be shared in certain respects. Third, rather than as staking out certain defined territories or legalistic statements of fact, we might see titlature as producing a claimed scope within which actions could take place. A Georgian claim to the title of Shirvanshah might not be realistic for direct rulership of Shirvan, but it certainly provided theoretical cover for any intervention in that region that a Georgian ruler might want to effect at any point.

We also see a wider tendency to attribute royal status to Georgian satellite rulers. Even during the expedition to the North Caucasus that the Georgian chronicles place late in Mepe Tamar's reign, where the peoples involved probably covered less territory than an average Georgian eristaviate, the Durdzüks are said to have not only one but multiple kings, whilst still being clearly shown as subordinate (KT, 276; *ႂႃ* II, 111).

In addition to these specific cases, we have some general statements in the Georgian chronicles suggesting that the power of vassals was largely talked up as something positive, rather than a threat to stability. We have for example a statement that, in Tamar's reign, "landowners ... became *aznauris*, *aznauris* became *didebulis*, and *didebulis* became rulers" (KT, 242; *ႂႃ* II, 34). This again suggests that the Bagratids did not have a strong position against the claims of higher titlature by subordinates. Rather, it might have been beneficial for them to present themselves as having the nominal allegiance of as many surrounding rulers as possible. It also suggests the active promotion of subordinates to higher rank rather than presenting them in the most subordinate position. A related sentiment was more specifically applied to rulers as well in another pertinent quote, when the Georgian chronicles list a number of subordinate polities that were "granted independence" by Tamar and whose "kings reduced to poverty she helped to acquire wealth" (KT, 303–304. *ႂႃ* II, 147). Whilst Armenia is not specified in the list, which perhaps indicates its greater integration into the polity, the general promotion of neighbouring rulers' co-option into the Bagratid system does further suggest a system in which active promotion of subordinates and their claims was seen as a positive-sum interaction for both parties.

This politics of recognition may have had multiple benefits to the Bagratids. In a world where being able to broker relationships with localities was important when drawing resources from those places, elevating the status of the brokers both painted the Bagratids in a stronger light as their sovereigns and secured those brokers' status in the areas where the Bagratids needed them to act on their behalf. The prominent presence of a wide variety of ethnic and cultural groups owing them allegiance may also have been a stabilising factor, which ensured that all major ethnic groups had routes to broker communication with the court and that the monarchs had diverse potential sources of military manpower outside an over-reliance on any single ethnic group. This may well have been crucial during the 1170s rebellion, when Giorgi III appointed the Kipchak general Q'ubasar as his senior military commander, probably to ensure the loyalty of the Kipchak troops that he needed for securing his reign. Considerations of this kind were also important to make rebellions less likely as a whole.

What we can suggest, considering the Georgian material and relations with other political units within the Bagratid hegemony, therefore, is that there was a tendency to accept and indeed promote royal claims by subordinate rulers. This makes more problematic the issues around whether the Ōrbelean claims in the 1170s were a separatist political programme, and how we should see the Zak'arid equivalent claims in the following decades. Political programmes these undoubtedly were, but we may

need to reconsider the role they played given what this wider picture suggests about the goals of different political actors.

4. A Re-Assessment

Having considered the other neighbours of Georgia in this period, we can return to our core question and rethink a little the relationship between the Bagratid court and its most prominent brokers in the Armenian world.

The concepts of statehood, polity formation, and independence, in this period, are somewhat complex. We should not necessarily assume a legalistic framework that precluded overlapping claims or prevented those claims from being acknowledged. The Georgian rulers' claimed status as kings of kings should perhaps be taken not just as an aggrandising term, but also as a statement about how they expected their rule to function and to be seen. This was a model of overlordship different from Byzantine imperial models, and one much more suited to the diverse ethno-political landscape that the Bagratids sought to rule.

From the perspective of their subordinates, we should also not assume that "independence" in the sense of not acknowledging any higher ruler or interacting with their court and social-political structures was necessarily desirable even if kingship *per se* was a desideratum. There were multiple facets to holding power in these societies: the level of *autonomy* of action, which we can here define as the ability to act without reference to other political actors, was only one of them. Autonomy of action should also be considered alongside the extent of *impact* of action, which is to say the scale upon which actions could be taken, and alongside *security* of action, the extent to which actions could be taken without endangering the recognition and resources that an actor needed to wield power. Indeed, it might be reasonably argued that in the 12th century prioritising security of action was the first and foremost concern of both rulers and their subordinates, followed by the extent of impact of action, with total autonomy of action being a more abstract and less direct concern. We see very few steps taken by Bagratid rulers or their subordinates that were clearly designed to maximise their autonomy of action. For rulers, this could have meant a more integrated approach to governance, in which powers or succession were more centrally controlled. As mentioned earlier, however, the Georgian system of *eristaviates* was not expanded into primarily Armenian speaking or primarily Muslim regions.

For the Bagratids' subordinates, we see almost no attempts to establish autonomy of action by actually breaking out of the Bagratid system as opposed to trying to change who was in charge of that system. The rebellions or plots of the Ōrbeleans, of Iuri Bogolyubsky's supporters in the 1180s, or of Ivanē Abuletisdze in the 1130s, all focused first and foremost on who would rule the system, not on trying to break it. Claimants who were the focal points of rebellion generally had strong familial claims to rule and most of them might plausibly have been seen as at least as potentially strong as those they were replacing. The prize of ruling any imagined

tiny independent polity was unlikely to be worth the cost of losing access to the Bagratid court and assurances of military support, beside the huge personal risks of rebellion. The closest example we see is Guzan T'aoskareli's attempt to pull parts of southwestern Georgia into the orbit of the Sokmenids of Khlat (KT, 251; յԾ II, 55–56). The necessity of the Sokmenid element in the plans suggests the importance of having an alternative power structure to move towards, rather than simply becoming independent in itself, and this would not have been a possibility for elites whose bases of power were not close enough to another potential ruler. His failure illustrates the stark risks as well: the fact that he was only blinded rather than executed was presented in chronicle materials as a merciful outcome (KT, 262; յԾ II, 81).

The extent of impact of action was also a factor in favour of avoiding system disintegration. "Independence" would mean sacrificing the potential for advancement within the Georgian system, and therefore the ability to draw upon resources and support from within that system. The Zak'arids held Georgia's most senior military posts for most of the final decade and a half of the 12th century and the first decades of the 13th, giving them access to significant additional military manpower. It is likely that the Zak'arids drew upon formal Georgian military resources significantly for the conquests of their own domains in the Armenian highlands, and even were this not the case, having a large secure border to the north had obvious strategic advantages. For major campaigns such as the one into northern Iran late in Tamar's reign, leadership of Georgian forces enabled the Zak'arids to project power in ways that would have been closed to them as independent rulers (KT, 274; յԾ II, 107). This leadership within the Georgian hegemony, therefore, gave them the ability to access loot and wider regional prestige that would in fact have been less accessible outside the Bagratid system. This is likewise true for their Ōrbelean predecessors – hence the importance of Demna, whether or not one regards him as a puppet, for he was the key to retaining access to the wider elites and resources of the Caucasus while still removing his uncle from power. Being a poorer and more isolated ruler with nominally complete autonomy might very well have been a step down, not up, from being a ruler who could exchange allegiance to the *mepe mepisa* for a very significant increase in land, expansion prospects, social prestige, and overall security.

Conversely, as we have seen, not being "independent" in the sense of not acknowledging any higher sovereigns did not necessarily mean sacrificing the ability to hold royal styles and titulature. It did not even necessarily require varying those things heavily according to context: the examples of royal titulature we have covered are largely taken from the Georgian material.

This, then, brings us back to the thesis advanced in the introduction. Rather than thinking of independence in the form of maximised autonomy being an assumed necessary or even likely goal of political leaders in this period, we should focus first on their maintenance and scale of power. These were goals which tended to run counter to maximising their autonomy of action, both for Bagratid monarchs, whose power ran through networks of regional power-brokers, and for their subordinates, for whom that brokerage provided access to resources and prestige available within the Bagratid political world.

5. Conclusions

This paper has briefly suggested some thought tools and frameworks that might better explain the Zak'arids' position within the hegemony of 12th-century Georgian rule. Rather than seeing them as either entirely joined to Bagratid power, or seeking an imagined autonomy as an assumed goal, we should instead focus on their actions in securing and extending, more than deepening, their ability to project power in the region.

The use of royal status by the Zak'arids was not necessarily a threat to the royal status of others, and did not necessarily preclude subordination within a hierarchy of rule. Indeed, it may have been beneficial for the Bagratids to be able to strengthen their own claims to the role of *mepe mepisa* by having the Shirvan shahs, Zak'arids, and other regional rulers recognise their position at the head of a social hierarchy whilst also acting as brokers and guarantors of Bagratid rule. This allowed both the Bagratids and their subordinates to maximise the extent of impact of their power and to best ensure its stability. These were likely more important goals than the abstract notions of total hegemony or autonomy.

The concept of brokerage as a core part of the political structures of the medieval Caucasus is one that has considerable further potential beyond the specific areas covered in this paper, especially in its application to eristaviates and further neighbouring polities. Also, approaching epigraphic evidence from this point of view may provide some interest in explaining the selection of titlature used therein, and when applied to literary materials may help explain how the idealised relationships that they represent fit into the context of their composition. The relevance of brokerage may extend, too, beyond the period covered by this paper: the fracturing of the Bagratid system after the Mongol conquests of the 13th century may have been influenced by the Mongols' interactions with these existing networks.

As a final note, this paper suggests the importance of treating elite families in the context of the wider Bagratid political world, one where in many cases they had significant influence over matters of policy and central roles in the socio-political structures. The less nakharar-centred systems of the Armenian highlands in the 12th century meant that, in the absence of traditional political structures, potential regional rulers may have found a mixture of foreign and local sources of legitimacy more valuable than was the case previously. Looking at how social networks could provide power and agency in a fluid system helps us to move beyond the heavy concept frameworks of state and formal power that have been the focus of 20th century historical research, and provide a stronger and more diverse picture of contemporary political agency in the 12th and 13th centuries.

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