

DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH THE CHURCHES OF ARMENIA UNDER THE MONGOL RULE

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Abstract: *This study delves into the religious relationships between the Mongols and Armenians in the 13th century, comparing them to the ties between Byzantine, Georgian Christians and Armenian Christians. By focusing on key figures such as the priests of Apostolic Church, Prince Awag of Greater Armenia, King Hetum of Cilicia and Mongolian Nestorian aristocrats, it uncovers how religious diplomacy and political alliances formed. The research also examines how the Mongols' legal systems, such as the El Tamgha decree and the Yasaq of Chinggis Khan, provided certain freedoms and protections for Armenian Christians. These policies not only safeguarded Armenian religious practices but also encouraged collaboration between Mongolian Nestorian leaders and Armenian clergy. This comparison offers insight into how Mongol-Armenian religious relations were distinct from those with Byzantium, reflecting the Mongols' pragmatic approach to governance and religion.*

Keywords: *Mongols, Armenian Christianity, Diplomacy, Church*

Research Methodology

Kirakos's personal life and historical events involving the Mongols were analyzed using Armenian historical sources and examined through an interpretive method. Based on this account, the state activities of Armenia, Georgia, and Mongols were reviewed, leading to some conclusions regarding their religious and historical interactions.

The Armenian Apostolic Church in the 13th Century

Armenia, the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion in 301 AD, was shaped by Christian beliefs and values. The creation of the classical Armenian script in 405 AD initiated the first golden age of Armenian language and culture, during which Greek classical works and numerous religious texts were translated. (Foot, 2012, p. 180) Interestingly, a second golden age of Armenian literature emerged during the westward expansion of the Mongol Empire.

12-14th centuries formed one of the richest periods in Armenian historiography. It produced more than ten historians and chronologists: Samuel Anets'i, Mkhitar Anets'i, Matheos Urhayets'i, Mkhitar Ayrivanets'i, Vardan Arevelts'i, Kirakos Gandzakets'i, Grigor Aknerts'i, Vahram Rabuni, Smbat Sparapet, Het'um Patmich', Step'annos Orbelian and others. (Bayarsaikhan, 2010, p. 597)

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In addition to the clergy, the Armenian Church includes lay people and women who had access to education in writing and scripture an advanced practice, even by modern standards. (Chahin, 2001, p. 267) Many of these individuals recorded events firsthand or gathered information from primary oral sources to create their works.

At the beginning of the 13th century, Armenia was divided into two regions: Cilician Armenia in the west and Greater Armenia in the east. With the decline of Byzantine influence and the collapse of the Great Seljuk Empire, the Kingdom of Georgia emerged as a leading power in the Christian East. Under Georgian authority, Greater Armenia was governed by the Zakarids, who controlled a territory stretching from the Caucasus through northern Iran and eastward into Asia Minor. (Bayarsaikhan, 2011, p. 33)

The emergence of Christianity added religious dissensions to political discord. The Armenian Holy Apostolic Church was opposed to the Greek Orthodox⁴ no less than to the Mazdaism of Persia, or the Mohammedanism of the Arabs. The hatred inherent in those religious differences and dogma was one of the most important causes of centuries of warfare and bloodshed. (Chahin, 2001, p.261)

Armenians and other Christians

The Byzantine emperor was pondering how to bring Armeno-kilikia, as it was named that time, under obedience, when the advent of the First Crusade upset his plans. (Chahin, 2001, p. 243) Godfrey de Bouillon, leader of the Crusade, having crossed to Asia in 1097, entered Cilicia. The Armenians looked upon Godfrey de Bouillon as a savior. The crusade as it was conceived and organized by the Pope was something that the Byzantine emperor had not anticipated. The liberation of Jerusalem was for him only a pretext. His real purpose in sending an embassy to Piacenza was to prevail upon the pope to help him recruit troops for his contemplated offensive affairs for the recovery of Asia. (Charanis, 1952, p. 127) Constantin I⁵, aware of the vast project devised by the Crusaders, saw in this a unique opportunity for deliverance from Byzantine suzerainty. (Chahin, 2001, p. 267)

Scholars remain divided on Pope Urban's motives for sending the Crusaders eastward, as the original text of his proclamation at Clermont has not survived. Nevertheless, researchers have formed several hypotheses based on his actions: firstly, to encourage pilgrimage and secure safe passage to Jerusalem; secondly, to support Eastern Christian allies; thirdly, to redirect internal European conflicts toward Islam; and fourthly, to counter Greek "schism" and unite the Christian world under Rome's authority. (Charanis, 1952:127) However, Armenian leader Constantine I of Cilicia and his successor Thoros I, recognizing the shifting dynamics of the Middle East, seized

⁴ The Byzantine version of Christianity

⁵ Costantin I was the second lord of Armenian Cilicia from 1095 to until about 1099. (Ghazarian, Jacob G., 2000).

this opportunity to break free from Byzantine influence. In the Taurus Mountains⁶ Constandin I provided support to the starving Frankish troops, supplying them with provisions. Priests from the Black Mountain⁷ (Amanus) also contributed food and aid. By earning the trust of the Franks, the Armenian prince formed strategic alliances with Godfrey of Bouillon, who liberated Antioch with the princes of the County of Edessa. (Chahin, 2001:245)

The Crusader leaders maintained various relations with the emerging Armenian princes. Meanwhile, the Byzantine emperor, seeking to counter the Armenians and the Franks, even forged temporary alliances with Turks and Arabs. The Crusaders utilized Armenian-built roads to move troops, exchange envoys, and establish feudal alliances near the frontier. Despite a shared goal of combating common enemies Turks, Arabs (Saracens), and Byzantines tensions occasionally led to clashes between the Crusaders and the Christian Armenians themselves. (Kurkjian, 1958, p. 227)

Greater Armenia under Georgian rule

For over a century, Greater Armenia existed as a vassal state under Georgian rule, during which Armenians faced both religious and political pressure. The Georgians struggled to convert the Armenians to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, often resorting to oppressive measures against Apostolic Christianity. For this, two leading Armenian princes, Zak'are and Iwane, were rewarded with the highest titles after the king. Iwane, eager for power and recognition, abandoned his faith and converted to Georgian Orthodoxy, receiving the prestigious title of *atabeg*⁸(second in rank after the king). Zak'are, however, remained in his Apostolic Christian faith and was granted the title of *amirspasalar*⁹, the third highest rank. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2022)

Under Georgian rule, their influence expanded throughout Greater Armenia. Georgians were not taxed throughout the country and also Georgians in Jerusalem after they made peace with the Sultan of Egypt. With external threats subsiding, the Georgian religious influence started to spread by the construction of portable churches across the land and the collection of donations during religious celebrations. The Armenians, who had ceased using portable churches due to the threat of Ismaili attacks, were forbidden by the Georgians from accepting offerings or conducting collections. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2022, p. 185)

Faced with increasing pressure, Prince Zak'are sought counsel from leading Armenian Catholicos and priests, even appealing to King Levon I¹⁰ of Cilicia for guidance. Understanding Zak'are's precarious position and his risk of succumbing to Georgian Orthodoxy like Iwane, King Levon issued a nine-point decree to guide and support Zak'are. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2022, p. 187)

⁶ The Taurus Mountains are in southern Turkey, separating the Mediterranean coastal region from the central Anatolian Plateau.

⁷ Mount Amanus is a mountain in the Nur Mountains in the Hatay region of southern Turkey.

⁸ The *atabeg* of Georgia was a vizier and a Lord High Tutor to Heir

⁹ Commander in chief of Georgian army

¹⁰ Levon I unified the Cilician Armenia as a powerful Christian state. Ruling from 1187 to 1219, Levon was the first king to be crowned in 1198/9.

Despite geographical separation and external oppression, the shared Apostolic faith fostered a strong sense of unity between the Armenians.

Even though Muslims caused the main threat to Christianity, the Georgians and Armenians were unable to form a close alliance. During the attack of Sultan Jalal al-Din in the Caucasus, the Georgian king agreed with *atabeg* Iwane that if Georgian troops defeated the sultan, he would forcefully convert all Armenians to the Orthodox faith while executing the others for rebelling. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 41) Interestingly, Armenian historian Kirakos later blamed the Georgians for being afraid to fight the Jalal al-Din's army and causing many Christian casualties but praised the Sultan Ala al-Din of Rum for defeating him. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 49) Additionally, when the Qipchaqs came seeking refuge with the Georgians, they were turned away disrespectfully. However, the Armenians of Gandzak city welcomed and fed the Qipchaqs, hoping to use them against the Georgians. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, pp. 7-9)

Mongols and Armenians

The Mongol generals Sübedei and Jebe pursued the Khwārazm-Shāh westwards, bringing the Mongols to Armenia in 1220. (Bayarsaikhan, 2011, p. 42) At the time, no one foresaw that these unexpected invaders would drastically change the future of Greater Armenia. Jebe and Subedei's invasion was not intended to establish Mongol control but rather to pursue the fleeing Qipchaks and Khwārazmians. Nevertheless, they ended up defeating the combined Georgian-Armenian army in 1220, leaving the region vulnerable to external power shifts.

The Mongols, with their experience in conquest and distinctive approach to statecraft and religious policy, quickly absorbed smaller kingdoms like Armenia and Georgia. Armenian subjugation to Mongol rule brought certain advantages compared to Georgian domination. Since the Mongols' military affairs, taxation, and administrative systems are well studied, future analysis is tried to focus on their interactions with the Armenian Churches.

In matters of Realpolitik, Chinggisid diplomacy built upon a complex mix of establishing kinship ties and economic domination, building a hierarchy of foreigners by giving interest to some and ignoring others. This was achieved by including a multitude of people from different ethnicities and backgrounds, languages, and rituals in the medieval Mongols' system of diplomacy. (Fiaschetti, 2020, p. 175) In this way, priests of the Apostolic Church played a vital role in Armenian-Mongol relations.

In 1230, under the orders of the Great Khan, commander Chormaghan established himself in Azerbaijan, expanding Mongol influence in all directions. His primary objectives appeared to be the subjugation of the Sultanate of Rum and the capture of Abbasid Baghdad. The lands he controlled in Iran and Transcaucasia later paved the way for the Chinggisids to establish the Il-

Khanate in the 1250s. (Bayarsaikhan, 2011, p. 51) His campaigns created a distinct political and religious landscape in Armenia.

During the Mongol siege of the Kayean fortress, the son of *atabeg* Iwane, Awag attempted to appease the invaders by offering his daughter as a gift, but this gesture failed to end the siege. Chormaghan declared that the siege would only be considered broken if Prince Awag surrendered in person. Awag eventually complied, becoming the first Armenian prince to personally negotiate terms with the Mongols. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 95) This act marked a turning point, as he transitioned from being a Georgian vassal to a direct subordinate of the Mongol Empire. In doing so, Prince Awag became *de facto* ruler of Armenia under the Mongols. (Bayarsaikhan, 2011, p. 73) Similarly, during their pursuit of the influential Armenian prince Vahram, the Mongols attacked several key locations, including Terunakan, Ergevank, and Charenk. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, pp. 7-9) Vahram, unable to resist the Mongol advance, fled from city to city, leaving the people without leadership. In the village of Lorut, those who left without their prince sought refuge in a cave, led by an elderly *vardapet*¹¹ named Vanakan. However, the forces of Molar-*noyin* surrounded the cave and demanded their surrender. With no access to water in the scorching summer heat, the desperate townsfolk turned to the *vardapet*, Vanakan, for guidance. Resigned to the situation, Vanakan agreed to surrender. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 73)

Molar-*noyin* received Vanakan and said: *When you heard the news of our coming to your borders, why did you not come before us in peaceful friendship so that I could command that all that is yours be left unharmed, great and small? The vardapet replied: "We knew not of your good intentions, but out of dread of you we were seized with fear and trepidation. We did not know your languages, and no one came from you to summon us. Now when you called, we came before you.* (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 75)

The Mongol commander said to Vanakan, do not be afraid and invited him to sit before him. The Molar-*noyin* questioned Vanakan about the whereabouts of Prince Vahram and the fortresses. Initially, the Molar-*noyin* mistook the *vardapet* for the prince and ruler of the region. However, after Vanakan shared all the information he knew, the Mongol commander realized he was not a prince. The Molar-*noyin* then ordered the people hiding in the fortress to come out without fear. He assured them of their safety, promising that his guards would protect them. Furthermore, he pledged to allow the people to remain in the area and to establish villages and cultivate fields under his name, offering them stability and a semblance of peace. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 77)

In the early stages of Armenian-Mongol relations, a significant challenge was the lack of mutual linguistic understanding. Recognizing this issue, the Mongol generals began to place great importance on writers and linguists. One individual recruited by Molar from Vanakan to serve as

¹¹ Head teacher of church in Classical Armenian.

a scribe and translator was Kirakos. Initially, Kirakos endured hardship as a prisoner of the Mongols; however, his writing skills earned him respect and trust. He studied Mongol customs and translated 55 common words from Mongolian to Armenian, incorporating them into his book, marking the first such instance among historians of the Empire. Additionally, Kirakos was well-versed in the Mongol taxation system, laws, particularly the *Yasaq*, which reflects his higher position. When Vanakan and Kirakos asked the commander for his release, Molar-noyin refused, stating that he could not afford to lose someone skilled in writing letters. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, pp. 80-83)

The Deepening of Mongol-Armenian Relations

The success of Awag Prince, who gained honor and wealth by aligning with the Mongols, set an example for other leaders to follow. By supporting the Mongols military and participating in joint campaigns, many churches were liberated from Islamic domination.

In 1242, when Chormaghan was injured in battle and became deaf, Baiju commander succeeded him as the *tamgachi* by the order of the Great Khan. Upon his arrival, Baiju dispatched forces to retake the Armenian cities under occupation by the Sultanate of Rum. (Bayarsaikhan, 2011, p. 60) One of the first cities targeted was the densely populated city of Karin. When the city's defenders insulted the Mongols for demanding surrender, the Mongols responded by demolishing the city walls with catapults then capturing easily. Because many Christians lived in the city, Armenian princes Awag, Shahnshah, and Aghbugha bought the Christians from the Mongols then set free. The highly valuable scriptures from the city were sold cheaply to Christian soldiers from the Mongols and subsequently distributed to Armenian monasteries and cities. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 131)

In 1243, Armenian princes were able to liberate many Christian citizens from the cities of Eznka, Caesarea, Sebastia, and Divrigi, which the last two cities had surrendered without resistance and was not harmed. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, pp. 137-139)

Upon witnessing the victory of Prince Baiju over the sultan of Rum, the Armenian king of Cilicia, Het'um I, dispatched an envoy to request peace. The Mongol general and his queen Eltina khatun (Queen Altuna, wife of commander Chormaghan) demanded the sultan's mother, wife, and daughters, who had sought refuge in Cilician Armenia. When Hetums order was executed without objection, the Mongol commander and queen expressed their satisfaction and provided the envoys with provisions to survive the winter, ensuring their safe return to their homeland in the summer. As a result, the two nations established friendly relations, formalized by the written ordinance known as the *el tamgha*. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 141)

Tamgha

The *el tamgha* decree appears to have been authorized by the *tamgachi noyin* of the Mongols. By the example of Eltina khatun, who temporarily governed in place of her husband, when the commander Chormaghan became deaf and unable to rule, she had the authority to issue the *tamgha*. In addition to Hetum, the Armenian king of Cilicia, the vardapet Nerses of Aghbania and the Syrian Rabban Samma also received the *tamgha* from Eltina khatun.

As a Nestorian Christian, Eltina khatun extended her support to fellow Christians. Rabban Samma, who received the *tamgha* from Eltina khatun, was entrusted with religious affairs, a responsibility that granted him significant authority. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 151) He oversaw the restoration of Christian churches in Tabriz and Nakhchavan, regions where Christianity had been heavily suppressed in Iran. Additionally, he was able to perform Christian rites and funerals, while also condemning those who opposed such practices. The Mongols, witnessing his power and influence, did not resist his authority and came to regard him with great respect. Merchants bearing the *tamgha* as Rabban, enjoyed free passage throughout the country, and his seal allowed them to send letters without hindrance. Rabban's reputation grew so immense that he was able to persuade many Mongols to convert to Christianity. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, pp. 125-127) While the full extent of these accounts may be exaggerated, other sources confirm that Rabban, having received the seal from Eltina khatun, was granted safe travel from the Caucasus to Iran, overseeing the construction of churches and other religious structures.

When Patriarch Nerses of Aghbania visited Eltina khatun, he was accorded great honor and was seated at the head of the guests during her son's wedding. In recognition of his importance and to ensure his safety, Queen Eltina provided him with a *tamgha*, accompanied by gifts, and arranged for a Mongol escort to accompany him on his return journey. This gesture freed him from earlier troubles when Muslim attacks had prevented him from leaving the country. With the protection of the Mongols, Nerses was once again free to travel. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 151-153)

Nestorian Christian Mongols did many favors for local Christians. For instance, Nestorian Chagatai commander, personally intervened to defend the prince Awag from a life-threatening situation. In addition to Eltina khatun, Dokuz khatun, the wife of Hülegü Khan, played a key role in protecting Christians in Baghdad and other cities under Mongol control.

Restoration of the Church

The Catholicos¹² of Cilicia took major steps to restore the Church of the Apostle of Thaddeus in Greater Armenia, which had been destroyed by Turks and Georgians. To fund the repairs, they sent a large sum of gold. Vardapet Yovsep, who was overseeing the region and residing nearby, sought assistance from Anagurag *noyin* (Angarag). (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 161)

¹² The Patriarch of the Armenian or the Nestorian Church.

At the command of Anagurag *noyin*, Yovsep oversaw the rebuilding of the church, its cleansing, and the celebration of a grand reopening ceremony, which was attended by numerous priests. The Mongol *noyin* took further measures to ensure the church's protection, expanding the roads leading to it and ordering his soldiers to allow pilgrims to approach the church without fear of harassment. These soldiers treated the Cross and the church with the utmost respect, presenting gifts and showing no disrespect. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 161) There was an absence of hostility between the Mongol soldiers and the local Christian population, highlighting the Mongols' pragmatic and tolerant approach toward religious practices.

Although many cities had been devastated during the Mongol invasion, they were eventually rebuilt. For example, during the Mongol conquest of Gandzak, the city's Muslim inhabitants set fire to their buildings to prevent their property from falling into Mongol hands. However, the Mongols reconstructed the city after four years except for the city walls. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 61)

King Hetum's Visit to Möngke Khan

In 1250, Het'um I, the Cilician king, personally visited Möngke Khan and secured numerous privileges for his people. As a deeply religious Christian, king Het'um I obtained *tamgha* that guaranteed religious freedom for Christians throughout Mongol-controlled territories from Möngke Khan. Upon returning to Greater Armenia, king Het'um I sent Möngke Khan's ordinance to Batu Khan, thereby solidifying the rights of Christians by two Mongol rulers. (Kirakos Ganzakets'i, 2023, p. 141) At this time, both Byzantium and the Pope were making efforts to influence the Armenians of Cilicia, attempting to draw them into their respective religious spheres of influence. King Het'um I made a decision that greatly aided Cilician Armenia. On the one hand, he faced possible problems from Rome, as the papacy questioned the legitimacy of his marriage and insisted on his formal submission to the Roman Catholic Church. In response to these external pressures, Het'um I made a pragmatic decision to support the Mongol rulers. (Bayarsaikhan, 2011, p. 65)

The category of male adults exempt from registration was the clergy. The Armenian sources state this explicitly. By not being included in the rolls, the Armenian clergy exercised a great deal of freedom from corvée and military obligation and received immunity from poll tax. This situation was common elsewhere in the Mongol Empire and can be considered a political tool for the Mongols to attract ecclesiastics to cooperate with them. (Bayarsaikhan, 2011, p. 109) In relation to this policy, the Armenian *vardapet* Vardan noted:

The yasax is what they themselves call the prohibitions set by Chingiz-Khan: not to lie, not to steal, not to commit adultery with another's wife, to love one's own like oneself, never to use or know abusive words, to let live the land and city willing to surrender to them, to free

from taxation and to honor the designated houses of God and those called His servants of whatever persuasion they be. Hulegu also ordered this kept, and it was kept. (Vardan Arevelts'I, 2007)

Unfortunately, the full scripture of the Yasaq (Yasa) has not been preserved, references to it appear in multiple historical sources, and its rules were put into practice across the Mongol Empire. It can be analyzed that the core of Mongol diplomacy and governance was based on Chinggis Khan's Yasaq, which functioned as a comprehensive legal system throughout the empire.

Conclusion

The Armenians, as one of the oldest Christian nations, have a long and complex history. Situated at the crossroads of powerful empires and civilizations, they have rarely known peace. During the Islamic Golden Age, Armenians suffered under the Turks and Iranian rule and endured a long period of oppression. While the First and Second Crusades briefly revived Armenian prospects, they were ultimately subdued by their co-religionists, the Byzantines and Georgians. However, the Mongol invasion from the east brought a period of relative religious freedom for the Armenians, offering them greater autonomy than that granted by either the Pope or the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Nestorian Mongol leaders in Asia Minor, including Eltina khatun, Doquz khatun, Chagatai *noyin*, and non-Christian Anagurag *noyin*, provided significant support to Armenian churches. Inspired by Prince Awag other Armenian lords followed the Mongol rule and liberated many Christian cities that had been lost to the Sultan of Rum, restoring them to Armenian control.

Armenian sources related to the Mongol Empire are abundant and rich in detail, providing valuable insight into the religious policies of the empire towards the peoples in its conquered territories. This study primarily draws from the *History of the Armenians* by Kirakos Gandzaketsi, and it offers a broader understanding of the Mongol Empire's approach to political, cultural, and religious policy towards Armenians. However this subject remains far from fully explored and offers numerous opportunities for further study, particularly through comparative analyses of other historical sources.

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