

THE MISSION OF CONSTANTINE PATRIKIOS TO THE KARTVELIAN KINGDOM – DIPLOMATIC SCANDAL AROUND ARTANUJI FORTRESS

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ABSTRACT

The position of Byzantium in Transcaucasia was not always the same. From the 10th century onwards, as the Caliphate's influence declined, the Byzantine Imperial Court sought to reinforce its authority in the region. Byzantium had a little power on the political entities of Eastern Georgia. However, the Byzantine influence was very strong in the Kartvelian Kingdom (southeastern Georgian realm).

The policy of the Byzantine imperial court was consistently oriented toward the objective of maintaining influence and strengthening positions on a particular political entity based on the internal political turmoil. This policy was clearly demonstrated when the Byzantines occupied the fortress of Artanuji. During this period, there was a divergence of views between the members of the Bagrationi royal family. This was exemplified by a disagreement between Gurgen IV the Great and his father-in-law, Ashot IV Kiskas. Ashot IV Kiskas was the instigator of an initiative, which resulted in the Byzantines taking possession of the fortress of Artanuji. According to the accounts of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, Artanuji was a significant trading hub and he refers to it as "the key to Iberia (Kartvelian Kingdom – L. M.), Abkhazia and the Meskhetian country". Therefore, based on the importance of Artanuji, the Byzantine Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos (919-944) sent the Byzantine army with his representative – Constantine Patrikios. The Byzantines were able to capture the fortress of Artanuji, the citadel of the city, which caused a strong reaction. As a result, other representatives of the Bagrationi dynasty united against them. Gurgen IV and David II sent a threatening letter to the Byzantine Emperor. It is noteworthy that in their letter, the Bagrationi urged the Emperor to leave Artanuji fortress, otherwise they chose to side with the Caliphate, which was so alarming for the Emperor that he preferred to blame his representative Constantine as the author of this arbitrary action. If we observe the political processes in the Byzantine Empire and Kartvelian Kingdom, it should probably have happened in 923-924.

Keywords: Transcaucasia, Kartvelian Kingdom, Artanuji, Diplomacy, Byzantium, Arab Caliphate

INTRODUCTION

The term "Byzantine Commonwealth" was first introduced by the Russian Byzantinologist D. Obolensky. This term refers to the cultural-political unity created around Byzantium in a vassal state with the Byzantine Empire (Obolensky, 1971, p. 69). The aforementioned unity was predicated upon the recognition of the Emperor's supreme authority throughout the Christian world. The Georgian state unions, including the Kartvelian Kingdom, were included in the aforementioned Commonwealth. It is of interest to ascertain the form of the Kartvelian Kingdom's membership in this commonwealth and the nature of the relationship between the imperial court of Byzantium and the Bagrationi royal family of the Kartvelian Kingdom. In light of the hermeneutic study of the source, we will present the information that has been preserved regarding the relationship between the Bagrations and the Byzantine Imperial Court, as described by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. By employing the historical-genetic method, we can illustrate the evolution of the historical event, the factors that influenced the Byzantine emperor's policies towards the Bagrations, and what kind of relationship was between members of the Bagrationi royal family. Furthermore, we will examine the consequences of the diplomatic mission organized under Constantine Patrikios. To discuss the mentioned issue, we can follow the political processes that occurred during the first half of the 10th century.

At the beginning of the 10th century, against the background of the powerful policy of the Arab Caliphate, the Byzantine Empire tried to strengthen its position in the Caucasus. During the reign of

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Romanos I Lekapenos (r. 920-944), the Byzantines sought to seize control of the fortress of Keje belonging to the Bagrations, as the capture of this fortress would provide a strategic advantage for the return of Theodosiopolis (modern Erzurum). There is considerable debate among historians regarding the location of the Keje fortress, most of them consider it to be the Fortress of Kaji (Papaskiri, 2016, p. 231). However, the Bagrations did not relinquish control of the Keje fortress to the Byzantines and advised the Emperor that only his own official could be appointed to oversee the fortress (Porphyrogenitus, 1952, pp. 265-266). Despite the Byzantines' efforts to capture the fortress of Keje, their attempt was unsuccessful, and the independence of the Bagrationi dynasty was even more evident in the diplomatic scandal around the fortress of Artanuji.

The Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (r. 913-959), who is known in the history of Byzantine writing as the author of several original and compilation works, provides particularly interesting information in this regard. Of particular note to us is his historical work "De administrando imperio" in which Constantine addresses his son, Romanos, and informs him about all the peoples and states that surround the Byzantine Empire. In the mentioned work, a separate chapter is devoted to the story of the genealogy of the Iberians and the scandal around the fortress of Artanuji. The author used diplomatic documents while creating the work, at the same time, he used written essays and oral transmissions of those who knew the local people's lives. Of course, the subordinates would be involved in the creation of the works, but everything was personally arranged and formed by the author into one whole work. The primary objective of Constantine was to furnish his son with data regarding relations with neighboring communities. The introduction of the work commences with an appeal to the son (Kaukchishvili (1952): 220).

In the mentioned source, Constantine tells us in great detail about the diplomatic relations between the Byzantine Imperial Court and the royal family of Bagrationi. Before embarking on a discussion of the section that is of particular interest to us, it is necessary to provide an overview of the main center, namely Artanuji Fortress.

1. Artanuji Fortress

According to the Georgian source, the foundation of the city of Artanuji is connected with the name of Ashot I Kouropalates:

"The same Ashot' kuropalates discovered a rock in the forests of K'larjeti, where Vakht'ang Gorgasali had erected the fortress of Art'anuji and "the Deaf from Baghdad" had destroyed it. Ashot' restored and rebuilt that fortress and raised a city below the fortress. Ashot' built the church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul inside the fortress, prepared his own sepulcher and settled down in that fortress. Shortly thereafter Ashot' seized the lands up to the gate of the city of Bardav. And many times God granted Ashot' kuropalates victory and great glory in battles" ("The Life and Tale of the Bagrat'ionis," 2014, p. 214).

Constantine identifies the significant fortress and town of Artanuji as a hub for trade, noting the influx of various trade goods from diverse regions:

"The city of Ardanoutzin (Artanuji – L. M.) is very strongly defended, and has moreover a considerable suburban area like a provincial city, and the commerce of Trapezun and of Iberia (Kartvelian Kingdom – L. M.) and of Abasgia and from the whole country of Armenia and Syria comes to it, and it has an enormous customs revenue from this commerce. The country of the city of Ardanoutzin (Artanuji – L. M.), the "Arzyn", is both extensive and fertile, and it is a key of Iberia (Kartvelian Kingdom – L. M.) and Abasgia and of the Mischians" (Constantine Porphyrogenitus, 1967, p. 217).

It can be reasonably assumed that the fort's strategic location was the main reason for its promotion. Vakhtang Gorgasali highlighted the fort's advantageous geographical position and its strategic political context. The restoration and promotion of Artanuji, which was overthrown by Marwan the Deaf, were done with the same motives. Artanuji was located at the crossroads of important trade routes. This route connected Tbilisi with the cities of Byzantium, and thus it was of considerable strategic importance. The city of Artanuji constituted a key link in the network of routes connecting the eastern and western coasts of the Black Sea, and the eastern and western regions of Georgia. All of the aforementioned factors contributed to the city's prosperity. By the middle of the 10th century, it had already become one of the most important cities in Georgia. (Lortkipanidze & Papaskiri, 1998, p. 193).

It is conceivable that Artanuji needed suitable buildings to carry out economic relations; thus, the city was expected to have a reasonable number of commercial establishments, hotel buildings, as well as a large amount of customs duties from imported goods. This should have been one of the main sources of income for the city. It is not excluded that the sale of own products took place in the city. The extortion of merchants from foreign companies is a good market for Artanuji, which indicates the high economic level of the country. Artanuji must have been the first important point where Byzantine imported goods were introduced (Chilashvili, 1970, p. 109).

2. The Situation in the Kartvelian Kingdom Before the Diplomatic Scandal Around the Fortress of Artanuji

During this narration, also Sumbat David's son gives us quite accurate information about Bagrationi royal family, who was Erismtavari, Magistoros, Kourapalates, and he gives us exactly the years of birth or death of Bagrations, separates the opposing parties, and while describing all this, he separates two branches of Bagrations, starting from Ashot the Great Kourapalates, one of them was kings from Klarjeti, who were also "*Artanujelni*" (Owners of Artanuji fortress), and the second main branch was kings from Tao (Javakhishvili, 2012, pp. 109-110).

In the Kartvelian Kingdom, the fortress of Artanuji was initially owned by Gurgen eristavi of eristavis from the branch of Klarjeti. According to Constantine, Gurgen died without leaving any children, and thus the ownership of Artanuji passed to his brother Ashot IV, who was known as Kiskas (Constantine Porphyrogenitus, 1967, p. 215). Ashot IV is a familiar person in the History of Kartli (Kartlis Tskhovreba), the chronicler provides information about his death, although the name "Kiskas" mentioned by Constantine Porphyrogenitus is unknown. Kiskas is used in old Georgian as a definition of fast; it is conceivable that the mentioned name could also be based on Ashot's personal nature. If we take into account that there are often similar nicknames in the Kartvelian Kingdom, for example, Ashot "Kekela", and the term "Kekela" means beautiful.

The source indicates that Ashot IV Kiskas did not have a son, but rather a daughter who was married to Gurgen Magistros, a representative of a neighboring branch. Their relationship was characterized by a certain degree of tension. This is evidenced by the information recorded by Constantine Porphyrogenitus, which indicates that the son-in-law seized control of the fortress of Artanuji from his father-in-law and subsequently granted him Tirokastron and the land adjacent to the Ajara water, which bordered Koloria, as compensation (Porphyrogenitus, 1952, p. 276).

It seems reasonable to propose that Tirokastron should be considered the Greek translation of the Georgian term Kvelistsikhe (which had significant strategic importance due to its location on the border of Shavsheti, Adjara and Javakheti) (Constantine Porphyrogenitus, 1952, p. 276). However, Gurgen also took this territory after he had a confrontation with the King of Abkhazians and Ashot Kiskas chose the opposite position of his son-in-law. In the work of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, Gurgen is presented as a usurper who owns his father-in-law's property, while Ashot is presented as the legal owner of Artanuji fortress. Gurgen, who held the title of great eristavi of eristavis, received this title from his uncle, Ashot "Kukh", who did not have a son. The Georgian chronicler also places a corresponding emphasis on Gurgen eristavi

of eristavis. He notes that he demonstrated the greatest courage, endured the most battles against the fathers and conquered the surrounding territories:

"Gurgen the Great eristavi of eristavis, son of Adarnase, died in 161 of the koronik'oni (941 A.D.), on 14 February. He showed more valor in battles than his ancestors, bringing all neighboring lands under his sway. And he had no offspring" (Jones, 2014, p. 216)

Information about Gurgen's active politics is preserved in the work "History of Armenia" by Yovhannes Drasxanakertc'i, an Armenian chronicler working in the 9th-10th centuries. From 918, the year in which Gurgen's ascension commenced, he was a prominent figure during the conflict that raged around the Alvan region of Uti. Subsequently, he also confronted Adarnase the king of Kartvelian Kingdom and the Armenian king in the battle for the Uti district (Abdaladze, 1988, p. 155). It is possible to hypothesise that the union of Adarnase and the Armenian king was a result of a strengthening of Gurgen. He engaged in active conflict with the Armenian king Ashot Erkat for Kvemo Kartli, particularly with regard to Samshvildi. The high authority of Gurgen is indicated by the mention of him as a king by Masud, an Arab chronicler of the 10th century (Lortkipanidze, 1988, p. 197).

3. The Diplomatic Mission of Constantine Patrikios in the Kartvelian Kingdom

Before discussing the controversy surrounding the fortress of Artanuji, Constantine Porphyrogenetus provides a historical overview of the Bagrationi royal family, including their kinship ties and interdependence within the family. The text provides the reader with an overview of the significance of the fortress of Artanuji, including its history and the individuals who have held it. It then goes on to describe in detail the diplomatic journey of Constantine Patrikios.

In accordance with the order of Romanos I Lekapenos, Constantine Patrikios and Drungar of sailing were sent to elevate Gurgen eristavi of eristavis to the rank of Magistros. In light of his active policy, it is plausible that Gurgen initially demanded the title of Kouropalates, rather than Magistros, from the Byzantine Emperor (Tavadze, 2016, p. 75). This is also evidenced by the fact that the mission of Constantine Patrikios in the Georgian kingdom ends in 923-924, and Sumbat David's son Adarnase dates the death of the Georgian king to 923, which means that Constantine's mission ends after the death of Adarnase and the title of Kouropalates is vacant. Gurgen was the most attractive option for the mentioned title. In accordance with a prevailing perspective within the field of historiography, the conferral of the Kouropalates was a manifestation of benevolence and acknowledgment on the part of the Byzantine Emperor. Those who held the aforementioned title were the most influential figures in the Kartvelian Kingdom (Tavadze, 2016, p. 76).

Upon his arrival in Nicomedia, he was approached by the nun Agapi of Kimene (a monastic centre in Bithynia, on Mount Kimene). Having prayed in the holy city, she proceeded to Iberia and met Ashot Kiskas in the fortress of Artanuji. In his account of the meeting between Ashot Kiskas and the nun, Constantine Porphyrogenitus makes it clear that there was a history of conflict between Ashot and Gurgen. Consequently, Ashot sought the nun's assistance and handed over the fortress of Artanuji to the Emperor, requesting that he extend his power over the fortress. *"I adjure you, by God and by the power of the honourable and life-giving Cross, to go to Constantinople and tell the emperor to send and take over my city, and have it beneath his dominion"* (Porphyrogenitus, 1967, p. 217).

The nun proceeded to inform the Emperor of the entirety of the situation in question, who, in turn, promptly issued a decree that Constantine should immediately relinquish all his affairs and embark on a journey to Ashot Kiskas and he was to assume control of the aforementioned fortress.

"Our holy emperor commands that you leave all you are engaged upon and go in haste to the patrician Asotios, called Kiskasis, and take over his city of Ardanoutzin, since he has declared to our holy emperor, by the mouth of the monk Agapios, that a trustworthy and familiar servant should be sent to take some capable officers, whom

you know to be brave and trustworthy, and enter and take possession of the city" (Constantine Porphyrogenitus (1967): 219).

In the aforementioned passage, it is evident that Ashot Kiskas was acknowledged as the genuine proprietor of the fortress. Nevertheless, at the same time, Gurgen was already in control of the Artanuji fortress, or would soon be. Otherwise, it is unlikely that Ashot would have surrendered the castle in his possession to the Byzantines. Ashot's objective is evident: he sought to utilise the Byzantines against his own son-in-law. He was prepared to accept the Emperor's authority over the fortress of Artanuji rather than remain under Gurgen's control.

Upon the entry of Constantine Patrikios and his three hundred men into Iberia, the subsequent developments diverged from those that had transpired previously. He was captured by David, the son of Adarnase Kouropalates, and was subsequently asked by the latter which task of the Emperor he should fulfill with such a large army at his disposal. It is noteworthy that Adarnase Kouropalates had recently passed away, thereby creating a vacancy of the title of Kouropalates. David the son of Adarnase was made to think and fear by the mentioned circumstance that he gave Gurgen the title of Kouropalates. Furthermore, the children of Adarnase engaged in a dispute with their own cousin following their father's demise. However, Constantine elucidated that his sole objective was to bestow upon Gurgen the title of Magistros. Constantine Patrikios proceeded to present the gifts sent by the Emperor to David. He then proceeded to Gurgen, where he bestowed upon him the title and prepared to take the fortress of Artanuji (Porphyrogenitus, 1952, pp. 282-283).

In accordance with the terms of the agreement, Constantine Patrikios met with Ashot Kiskas. Constantine Patrikios presented the Emperor's flag to Ashot Kiskas, who in turn flew it over the fortress. This action led to the conclusion that Artanuji was a gift from Ashot Kiskas to the Emperor. Constantine Patrikios submitted two reports to the Emperor. The first of them related to the story of the granting of the title Magistros to Gurgen, in which the praise of Gurgen was emphasized, while the second report contained information about the capture of the fortress of Artanuji and the dispute between Ashot and Gurgen, so Constantine requested the sending of an auxiliary army to defend the fortress (Porphyrogenitus, 1952, pp. 284-285). The policy of the Byzantine Empire is interesting; they maintain good diplomatic relations with the representatives of both branches of the Bagrations. On the one hand, Constantine Patrikios gave Gurgen the title of Magistros, spoke positively about him, and on the other hand, Byzantines took action against him and established control over Artanuji.

Upon learning of the Byzantines' intentions to strengthen their position, Gurgen Magistros and David Magistros sent a letter to the Emperor, declaring their intention to prevent any further incursions by the Byzantines and if they did not withdraw the army, they would leave their vassalage and choose the side of the Arabs.

"If your imperial majesty approves this and enters our country, then we put off our servitude to imperial majesty and make common cause with the Saracens, since we shall have fighting and hostilities with the Romans and shall, perforce, move an army against the city of Ardanoutzin and its country, and against Romania itself" ("The Life and Tale of the Bagrat'ionis," 2014, p. 214).

The loss of such a strong ally and the weakening of influence in the Caucasus was a wake-up call for the Emperor, so he revoked his decree regarding the capture of the fortress of Artanuji and presented it all as an arbitrary and independent decision of Constantine. The decision made by the Emperor was due to the fact that royal family of Bagrationi were appeased. For more persuasiveness, a threatening order was sent separately to Constantine to leave the fortress immediately, bring Ashot, the son of the deceased Adarnase, with him, so that the honor of his father as Kouropalates could be transferred to his son (Porphyrogenitus, 1952, p. 287). The Emperor chose a rather cautious diplomacy in dealing with the royal family. Constantine immediately left the fortress and entered the country of Gurgen Magistros and David Magistros.

The Bagrations separately focused on the unusual behavior of Constantine, how he quietly tried to take the fortress of Artanuji against the Emperor's will, and he did all this only at the request of Ashot Kiskas. Constantine Porphyrogenitus does not write anything about the exact answer that Constantine Patrikios gave to the Bagrations, only that he returned a suitable answer and only then brought the son of the deceased Adarnase the Kourapalates to be given the title by the Emperor. When narrating the mentioned episode, it is interesting to focus on the issue of the relationship between the royal family of Bagrationi. On the one hand, in the beginning it was Ashot Kiskas who used the power of the Byzantines against his own son-in-law, and on the other hand, when there was already a real danger that the Byzantines could take possession of the main fortress, they united against the Emperor at a critical moment and pushed the Byzantines back.

Thus, despite the obvious political weight of the Magistros title, its transfer could not be a compensation for the transfer of either the strategically important fortress-city of Artanuji or any other land to the Byzantine Emperor. The rulers of the Byzantine Empire in many cases gave these Byzantine courtier titles more importance than they had in reality, thus trying to satisfy both the ambitions of foreign rulers and the desire of the local Byzantine elite to gain superiority at the imperial court (Tavadze, 2016, p. 76).

CONCLUSION

Thus, the relationship between the Georgian kings and the Byzantine Emperors was not uniform and fluctuated in accordance with the prevailing circumstances. The Emperor's rights in Georgia were consistently upheld and he was never granted the right to interfere in the domestic affairs of the Kartvelian Kingdom. However, it was often the policy of the Byzantine Emperors to bring down envy among the Bagrations by granting titles. This was very well shown during the scandal around the fortress of Artanuji. As Ivane Javakhishvili points out, "the right of the emperor in Georgia has never gone beyond simple patronage and influence. He did not have the right to interfere in domestic affairs of the kingdom" (Javakhishvili, 2012, p. 108).

At the same time, there was a complicated political situation in the Byzantine Empire during this period. In 913-927 there was a war between Byzantium and Bulgaria. King Simeon of Bulgaria aimed not only to capture Constantinople, but also to conquer the entire Byzantine Empire. The Bulgarians again defeated the Byzantines at Katasyrtai in 917, Pegae in 921 and Constantinople in 922. After that, the creation of a possible alliance between the Bulgarians and the Arabs was a kind of threat for Romanos, because Simeon needed a fleet to take Constantinople. Simeon was aware that he required naval support in order to conquer Constantinople. Consequently, in 922, he dispatched emissaries to the Fatimid caliph Ubayd Allah al-Mahdi Bilah at Mahdia with a view to negotiating the assistance of a powerful Arab navy. The caliph consented to dispatch his own representatives to Bulgaria with the objective of negotiating an alliance. However, his ambassadors were apprehended by the Byzantines off the Calabrian coast on route to their destination. Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos managed to avoid the Bulgarian-Arab alliance with generous gifts from the Arabs (Runciman, 1969, pp. 84-100). Therefore, the loss of an ally in the Caucasus and its destruction on the side of the Arab Caliphate would be really unacceptable for the Byzantine Emperor. In addition, it is evident that the empire was incapable of extending its territory to the east (Nakada, 2014, pp. 40-41).

Regarding the fact that the Bagrations were recognized as sovereign rulers, it is also confirmed that Constantine, the Byzantine ambassador to the Georgian kingdom, holds the position of "Patrikios" with a high official rank. Sending such a high-ranking representative should indicate the complete independence of the leaders of Tao-Klarjeti (Lortkipanidze & Papaskiri, 1998, p. 201)

With regard to the matter of dating, Ivane Javakhishvili places the capture of Artanuji fortress by the Byzantines at 923-924 (Javakhishvili, 2012, p. 112). The basis for this is Constantine Porphyrogenitus's reference to the fact that at the time of the Artanuji incident, Ashot Bagrationi had not yet received the Kourapalates and the sons of the deceased Adarnase still had a dispute with their cousin Gurgen for the title.

Ashot's arrival in Constantinople and the conferring of the title takes place right after Constantine Patrikios leaves the fortress of Artanuji.

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