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Zaroui Pogossian

## Princes, Queens, Bishops, Sultans: Seljuks in Syunik' and the Rise of the Monastery of Noravank'<sup>\*</sup>

### *Introduction*

The monastery of Noravank' in the region of Vayots' Dzor, Syunik' (Siwnik') province of Armenia is one of the jewels of medieval Armenian architecture. Although the complex is comprised of different buildings erected at various points in time, its most famous structure is the iconic Church of the Mother of God (Figs 1 and 2) commissioned by the Ōrbēlean prince Burt'el (r. 1302-1348), whose architect is thought to have been the celebrated Momik<sup>1</sup>. The voluminous literature on Noravank' has mainly focused on its artistic and architectural features. The purpose of the present work is to contribute to our understanding of the context and reasons for the emergence of this location as a major religious site in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, eventually becoming the seat of a bishopric within a splendid monastic complex.

In this article I argue that the rise of Noravank' reflects the dynamics of regional struggles for power and territory control after the Seljuk conquests and domination of Armenia. Seljuk incursions overturned previous notions of legitimacy and sources of authority, and created a fragmented political landscape where indigenous Armenian élites, religious or secular (men and

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\* Research towards this paper was carried out under the auspices of the European Research Council (ERC)-funded Consolidator Grant *Armenia Entangled: Connectivity and Cultural Encounters in Medieval Eurasia 9<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Centuries (ArmEn)*, at the SAGAS Department of the University of Florence (grant agreement n° 865067), under European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. In this article I transcribe Armenian names and words according to a slightly modified Library of Congress transliteration system. An exception is made for the names of modern/contemporary Armenian scholars who have published in Western languages; in these cases I follow the spelling of the names chosen by the authors themselves in these publications. I would like to thank my colleagues Sara Nur Yildiz and Alison Vacca who read an earlier version of the paper, providing valuable comments and constructive criticism. Naturally, I alone am responsible for any error of fact or judgment.

<sup>1</sup> The art historical significance of Noravank' is an important topic, but is beyond the scope of the present article. Nor is it possible to cite the voluminous specialist literature here. The reader may find a good bibliography in Adriano Alpago-Novello, Giulio Ieni, Murad Hasrat'yan, *Amaghu Noravank'* (Documenti di architettura armena / Documents of Armenian Architecture, vol. 14), Milan, 1985; Karen Matevosyan, *Noravank'i vimagrera ev hishatakaranera* [The Epigraphy and Colophons of Noravank'], Yerevan, 2017. For Momik, see Karen Matevosyan, *Momik*, Yerevan, 2010 (bi-lingual English-Armenian, with further bibliography).

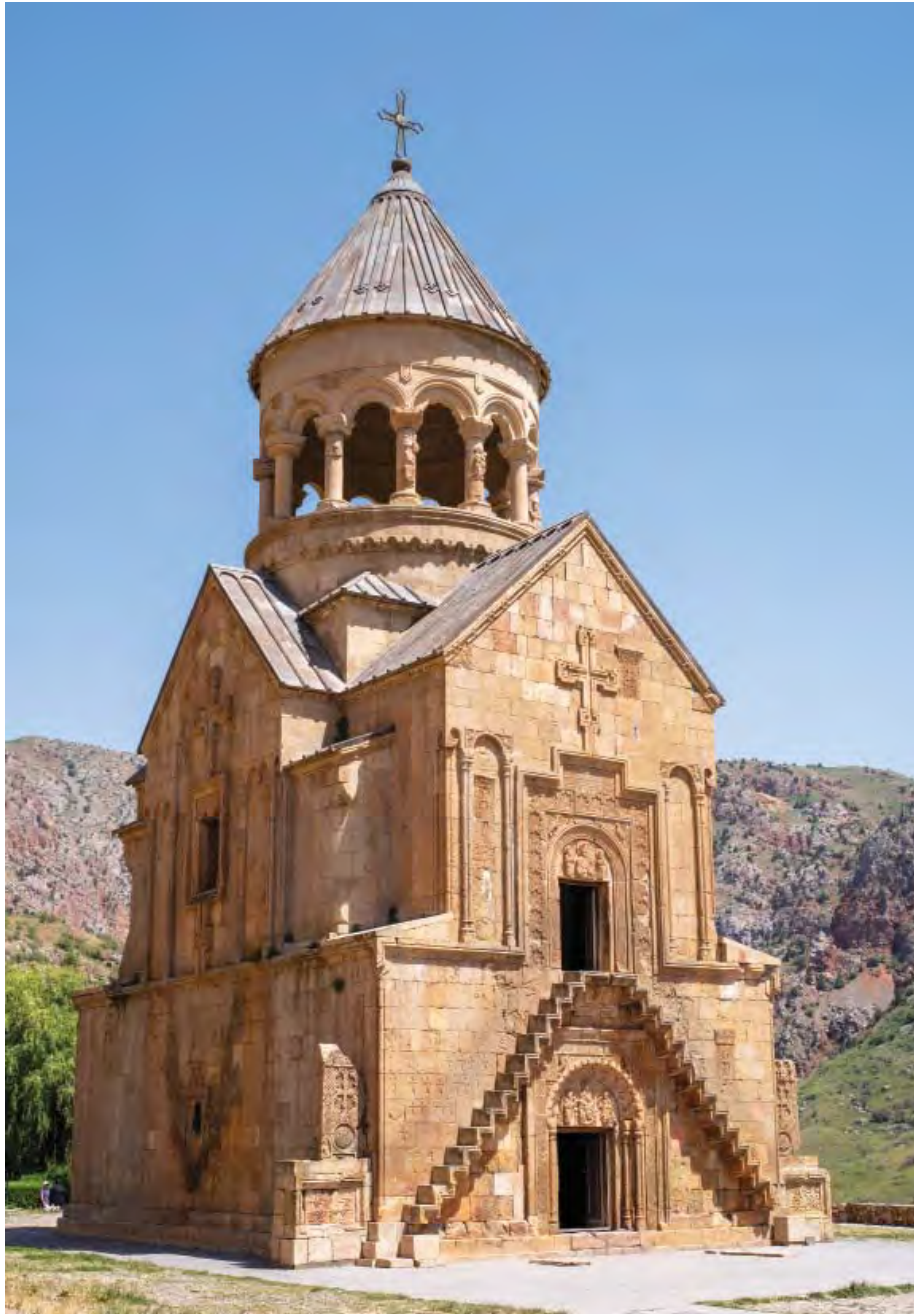


Fig. 1: Monastery of Noravank, Church of the Mother of God, photo courtesy of Hrair Hawk Khatcherian.



Fig. 2: Monastery of Noravank', a general view, photo courtesy of Hrair Hawk Khatcherian.

women), had to compete with the new military men in some way associated with the Seljuks. Moreover, these regional players had to negotiate or fight for their own standing or legitimacy not only between each other but within an overarching imperial power and its pretensions. The creation of a special status for the lands where Noravank' stood took place in the interstices of conflicts between local actors and their maneuverings within imperial agendas. The chronological ark covered in the present work goes from one of the most celebrated Great Seljuk Sultans — Malikshāh (1073-1092) — to a period of a weakened sultanic power under the rule of Malikshāh's grandson Maḥmud b. Muḥammad Tapar (1118-1131). The regional Armenian élites, in this study Syunik's nobility and religious leaders, variously relied on the military, legal, and spiritual resources at their disposal, as well as the advantages that the familiarity with the specific geographical areas and conditions allowed them. In the case of Noravank' it was the Bishop Hovhannēs from the town of Kapan (Hovhannēs Kapants'i, c. 1103 – d. before 1168; see Map for Kapan) who laid the groundwork for a local

holy site to make a qualitative leap and become a monastery of regional and, eventually pan-Armenian significance. The analysis of his capable dealings and negotiations with the Seljuk Sultan Maḥmud b. Muḥammad Tapar, as well as their meaning for the larger picture of social processes set in motion since Seljuk conquests of Syunik', are the main subject of the second and concluding part of this paper.

However, to understand the rise of Noravank' and what that snapshot represents in a longer process of socio-political transformations, I start the article by undertaking a locally-oriented investigation of the Seljuk conquest of Syunik', presenting a rarely explored regional perspective and therefore contributing to the few studies that have been conducted on such a scale<sup>2</sup>. Laying out the main temporal and territorial markers of this extended and uneven process, taking place while new or altered concepts of legitimacy to titles, land tenure and authority were underway, will allow us to appreciate some of the imperial choices made regarding regional forces given the difficulties that Syunik's mountainous terrain presented when it came to its control. This remained a concern for the sultans regardless of whether specific smaller units were in the hands of indigenous Armenian lords, members of the Armenian clergy or were claimed by often unidentified warlords, presumably Türkmén in some way linked to the Seljuks, as well as Seljuks' vassals. Besides military resistance, the last Syuni kings and nobility sought to prevent the fragmentation of Syuni territory and assert their *de facto* ability to its control via the stipulation of monastic endowments and by ensuring their inalienability. King Senk'erim of Syunik's (1072-1094/6) legacy in this respect is emblematic and its analysis will provide important clues for appreciating the activities of Bishop Hovhannēs Kapants'i and his successor Step'anos III (1168-1216) in the next generation. Yet, the discussion of episodes from Senek'erim's activities will also lay bare the limits of regional strategies of accommodation, which presumably led to Senek'erim's very death, as well as highlight once more the perils of fierce competition on the local level more generally. Bishops Hovhannēs and Step'anos lacked the military capacity that Senek'erim possessed. They, therefore, had to compensate this absence with other means. The evidence discussed below will highlight the importance of the written record for all the players involved and the bishops' ability to access it and use the written memory as a legitimizing tool. This was yet another strategy of resistance and accommodation, as well as a bid for controlling land and its resources on the local level. In my analysis of Hovhannēs Kapants'i's

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the work of Sergio La Porta, "The Kingdom and the Sultanate were Conjoined: Legitimizing Land and Power in Armenia during the 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries", *Revue des Études Arméniennes* 34 (2012), 73-118.



and Step'annos III's relationship and interaction with the Seljuk sultans and Eldigüzid *atabegs*, I argue that a key aspect of these prelates' activities was their knowledge of and reliance on types of legal instruments that were understandable both to Christian and Muslim audiences.

In the present work I bring forth also elite women's real or presumed participation in these processes and their ability (at least in the written sources, but likely also in certain real-life situations) to bestow legitimacy and access to territory control. Their actual or potential role in the dynamics of power struggle between local and imperial agents sheds further light on the modalities of Seljuk conquest, as well as (imperial) women's capacity as arbiters in regional power struggles.

The paper, thus, sets to unpack the multiple facets of the social, religious, political and military impact of Seljuk rule in Armenia and set the emergence of one important monastic complex and holy site — Noravank' — in this context.

1. *The Seljuks and the fall of the Kingdom of Syunik': New conquerors, a new modus vivendi*

Symbolically, the most significant date marking the Seljuk conquest of Armenia was the capture of Ani by Sultan Alp Arslan in 1064. However, this was preceded by at least a decade-long period punctuated by waves of different types of military action: Türkmen raids not always under the direction of the Seljuks, armies commanded by Seljuk sultans, and contingents of smaller military units led by members of the Seljuk family with or without the sultans' approval<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, by 1064 the Bagratid (Bagratuni) Kingdom with its center in Ani, which claimed pan-Armenian supremacy, had ceased to exist for twenty years and Ani had been under Byzantine rule since 1045. The other major Armenian polity in the region — the Kingdom of Vaspurakan — had been terminated even earlier, in 1022, when the last of its Artsruni rulers Hovhannēs-Senek'erim, together with his sons, exchanged their ancestral lands, significantly bar monastic estates, with territories in Byzantine Cappadocia, taking up residence in Sebastea (modern Sivas)<sup>4</sup>.

The fate of Syunik' which, unlike the Bagratuni and Artsruni kingdoms,

<sup>3</sup> Sargis Bořnazyan, *Hayastanə ev seljuknerə XI-XII dd.* [Armenia and the Seljuks, 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> cc], Yerevan, 1980, 32-34; Andrew C. S. Peacock, "Nomadic Society and the Seljuk Campaigns in Caucasia", *Iran and the Caucasus* 9/2 (2005), 205-230; Idem, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, Edinburgh, 2015, 42-82.

<sup>4</sup> Bořnazyan, *Armenia and the Seljuks*, 34-124; Hrach Bartikian, "La conquête de l'Arménie par l'Empire byzantine", *Revue des Études Arméniennes* N.S. 8 (1971), 327-340; Gérard Dé-déyan, "L'immigration arménienne en Cappadoce au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle", *Byzantion* 45 (1975), 41-117. Werner Seibt, "Die Eingliederung von Vaspurakan in das byzantinische Reich", *Handēs Asōreay* 92 (1978), 49-66.

maintained its status of kingdom throughout the eleventh and a great part of the twelfth century, was different. Its kings still had the ability to muster an armed host of certain importance, whose constituent parts were provided by their local nobility — the *azats*. However, when Sultan Malikshāh launched a major attack in the Caucasus in 1080, king Georgi II Bagratid of Georgia (r. 1072-1089) and Kyurikē II Bagratid of Lori (r. 1048-1089) travelled to Isfahan and submitted to the sultan. Scholars date this to 1080s<sup>5</sup>. The last sufficiently autonomous king of Syunik' Senek'erim undertook a similar voyage to Isfahan earlier — c. 1076 — not long after Malikshāh's accession<sup>6</sup>.

Senek'erim's parents were the king of the neighboring Aghuank' — Sewada — and his wife queen Sop'i. He ascended the throne of Syunik' through his sister Shahandukht (d. 1116), who was the queen of Syunik' through her marriage to king Grigor I Syuni (r. 1051-1072)<sup>7</sup> (see Appendix

<sup>5</sup> The voyage of Georgi and Kyurikē is recorded by various historians whose dates do not always agree and modern scholarly opinion is equally divided on the issue. Samuēl Anets'i [and Continuators], *Zhamanakagrut'iwn* [Chronicle], ed. by Karen Matevosyan, Yerevan 2014, 197, writing at the end of the twelfth century, places it in the year 1082, but his continuators (on whom see *Ibid.*, 401 note 287) provide other dates, such as 1080 or 1086. Mkhit'ar Ayrivanets'i, *Patmut'iwn hayots'* [History of the Armenians], Moscow, 1860, 60, says 1081. Sergio La Porta, "You say Albanian, I say Armenian': Discourses of Ethnicity and Power around an Albanian King of Armenia", in *Caucasian Albania: An International Handbook*, ed. by Jost Gippert and Jasmine Dum-Tragut, Berlin, 2023, 515-536, 523 dates the invasion and the voyage of Georgi II and Kyurikē II to Isfahan to 1080. I would like to thank my friend and colleague Sergio La Porta for having allowed me access to this article prior to its publication. For a basic narrative with chronology for Georgia see Heinz Fähnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, Leiden-Boston, 2010, where on 195-196 the author dates the submission of Georgi II to 1083. Bořnazyán, *Armenia and the Seljuks*, 200 mentions three raids to Georgia by Malikshāh in 1075, 1078 and a final conquest in 1080. He dates Kyurikē's arrival in Isfahan to 1088 (*Ibid.*, 203). For the chronology of Seljuk rulers see Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The Islamic Dynasties: A Chronological and Genealogical Handbook*, Edinburgh, 1980, 115; Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 323. On Malikshāh see Clifford Edmund Bosworth, "Malik-Shāh", in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 6, ed. by Clifford Edmund Bosworth, Emeri van Donzel, et al., Leiden, 1991, 273-276; more generally on his rule: Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 58-71.

<sup>6</sup> Step'anos Orbēlean provides the details of Senek'erim's travel and favorable reception at Malikshāh's court in Isfahan: Step'anos Orbēlean, *Patmut'iwn nahangin Sisakan* [History of the Region Sisakan], Tiflis, 1910, 319, 332-333. Bořnazyán, *Armenia and the Seljuks*, 171-177, rightly remarks that Malikshāh was busy fighting for his throne between 1072-1075, and was not present in Isfahan. Thus, Step'anos Orbēlean's dating of Senek'erim's meeting with the sultan in Isfahan c. 1076 is plausible. Senek'erim was not the last king of Syunik'. He was succeeded by his son Grigor II (1094/96?-1166?) on whom we have scarce information and whose reign is dated to a suspiciously long period, a problem whose discussion lies beyond the scope of this paper, and Grigor's son-in-law Hasan Geřak'arets'i (1166-1170). See a chronological list in Grigor Grigoryan, "Syunik'i t'agavorut'yunā (X-XII darer)" [The Kingdom of Syunik' (X-XII cc.)], *Patmabanasirakan handes* 2 (2006), 134-145, here 144, as well as Appendices 1 and 3 of the present work.

<sup>7</sup> Step'anos Orbēlean, *History*, 318-319; Grigoryan, "Kingdom of Syunik'", 138-142. Sha-

1 for a genealogical tree). She was, thus, Senek'erim's legitimizing link to the position of king of Syunik'. According to Step'anos Orbēlean, our main and precious source for the history of medieval Syunik', Senek'erim was favorably received in Isfahan, enjoyed Malikshāh's hospitality at a banquet, and the sultan's protection upon his return. The prime importance of the banquet in Eurasian political cultures, including Seljuk court etiquette, is a well acknowledged phenomenon. Among its various functions was the assertion of the ruler's authority, lavish display of his 'generosity', crystallization of hierarchies/submissions, and the reassurance of his subjects' loyalty<sup>8</sup>. Yet, as often happened, the banquet had also fateful consequences for Senek'erim. Step'anos Orbēlean supplies the details later in his narrative, as we shall see below.

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handukht and Grigor I of Syunik' (1051-1072) did not have an heir and, hence, decided to bequeath the title of king of Syunik' to Shahandukht's brother, in an interesting, but far from unique, succession through the female line. The geographical areas associated with Aghuank' (Ahuank') of Armenian sources and Arrān of Islamic ones are sometimes seen as overlapping. Yet, this view is misleading. Moreover, within each tradition (Armenian or Islamic), these concepts changed over time. These questions are discussed for the Abbasid period in Alison Vacca, "*Buldān al-Rān: The Many Definitions of Caucasian Albania in the Early Abbasid Period*", in *From Albania to Arrān: The East Caucasus between the Ancient and Islamic Worlds* (ca. 330 BCE – 1000 CE), ed. by Robert G. Hoyland, Piscataway, 2020, 37-84. There is no study of a comparative historical geography for later periods, such as Shaddādīd and Seljuk which are discussed in this paper. Beyond geography, one should also explore what the offices, such as 'king of Aghuank'' vs. 'amir (or malik) of Arrān' implied in late 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, and whether the titles carried any territorial claims and of what kind. Unfortunately, these issues cannot be discussed in the present paper, but I will simply cite the titles as they appear in the sources without commenting on their possible territorial significance or the exact nature of the offices in question.

<sup>8</sup> To the best of my knowledge there exists no overarching, comparative study on banquetting in the political cultures of premodern Eurasia through millennia. For the Armenian case with a focus on Late Antiquity and connections with Iranian traditions of *bazm*, see Nina Garsoian, "The Locus of the Death of Kings: Iranian Armenia – The Inverted Image", in *The Armenian Image in History and Literature*, ed. by Richard G. Hovannisian, Malibu (CA), 1981, 27-64, esp. 46-64. Banqueting remained important for the Armenian nobility and royalty throughout the Middle Ages, making it a familiar setting for them also in the Seljuk period. For the Seljuks, see Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 174-176; Carole Hillenbrand, "Aspects of the Court of the Great Seljuqs", in *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society and Culture*, ed. by Christian Lange and Songül Mecit, Edinburgh, 2011, 22-38, although the banquet setting is discussed only very briefly on 27; for visual representations of these feasts and objects used, see *Court and Cosmos. The Great Age of the Seljuqs*, ed. by Sheila R. Canby, Deniz Beyazit, Martina Rugiadi, Andrew C. S. Peacock, New York—New Haven—London, 2016, 72-79, 109, 110, 112-113, 115. Various aspects of the banquet in Roman/Byzantine political culture are discussed in Simon Malmberg, "Dazzling Dining: Banquets as an Expression of Imperial Legacy", in *Eat, Drink, and be Merry (Luke 12:19): Food and Wine in Byzantium*, ed. by Leslie Brubaker and Kallirroe Lindarou, Aldershot, 2007, 75-91, with a good discussion of the symbolism and function of a banquet applicable to other societies.

### 1.2 *Safeguarding the control of land via monastic donations*

Having secured peace in exchange for tribute, King Senek'erim, with the support of his sisters Shahandukht (d. 1116) and Kata, on occasion with their mother Sop'i (d. 1081), as well as his nobles, set to consolidate his authority, reinforce and expand his control over territories in the south-eastern part of Syunik', and adopt strategic measures for securing the immunity and inalienability of land resources in his domains given the uncertainties of time. One well-tested means to achieve these goals was to endow monasteries with estates, either expanding or reinstating earlier deeds of land grants. Two symbolically charged sites received particular attention among several others, if we follow the extant inscriptions and the testimony of Step'anos Orbēlean (see Map). One was Hovhannavank' or Vahanavank' near the central fortress Bagh (the residence of Syuni kings) built in 911 by prince Vahan Syuni and the burial ground of some of Syunik's and Aghuank's kings, as well as bishops and *catholicoi* of Aghuank'<sup>9</sup>. The other was the most prestigious of Syunik's monastic complexes and the seat of the metropolitan bishop of Syunik' — the monastery of Tat'ew (Figs 3 and 4), about which Step'anos Orbēlean not surprisingly provides far more detailed information. This was understandable since one of his bishopric seats was at Tat'ew, the other one being Noravank'. Step'anos eventually united these two monasteries under one bishop. Tat'ew had housed graves of Syuni princes since the 9<sup>th</sup> century and was home to numerous precious relics, including two of the True Cross. The first two Syuni kings were also buried there. Around 1045 Tat'ew was sacked by an "Ismaelite" army that crossed the river Arak's (Araxes) and attacked it from the south, looting its riches and burning some of its buildings. These could be Türkmens, but one cannot exclude other possibilities, such as Shaddādids, or others. It was, nevertheless, reconstructed rapidly and rather lavishly by kings Smbat II (r. 1040-1051) and his brother (and future king) Grigor I (r. 1051-1072) of Syunik', whereas the bishop of Syunik' Hovhannēs VII (1006-1058) commissioned a luxurious reliquary studded with gems for one of the True Cross relics<sup>10</sup>. This attests that the secular and religious

<sup>9</sup> Step'anos Orbēlean, *History*, 238-241; T'adevos Hakobyan, *Syunik'i t'agavorut'yunā* [The Kingdom of Syunik], Yerevan, 1966, 118-121; Grigoryan, "The Kingdom of Syunik", 138-141; Grigor Grigoryan, *Syunik'i vanakan kalvatsatirut'yunā IX-XIII darerum* [Monastic estates of Syunik' in 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries], Yerevan, 1973, 50-52.

<sup>10</sup> On the rise of Tat'ew in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, its religious and political significance, as well as its relics, see Zaroui Pogossian, "The Foundation of the Monastery of Sevan: A Case Study on Monasteries, Economy and Political Power in IX-X century Armenia", in *Le Valli dei Monaci: Atti del Convegno internazionale di studio, Roma-Subiaco, 17-19 maggio, 2010*, ed. by Letizia Ermini Pani, Spoleto, 2012, 181-215; Grigoryan, *Monastic estates*, 36-40; Hakobyan, *The Kingdom of Syunik'*, 142-152. A turbulent period in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century



Fig. 3: Monastery of Tat'ew, photo courtesy of Hrair Hawk Khatcherian.

lords of Syunik' could tap into considerable resources in the middle of the eleventh century. The next bishop Grigor IV (1058-1116) too is credited for having undertaken constructions and improvements at Tat'ew, under king Senek'erim (see Appendix 3 for a chronological list)<sup>11</sup>.

The earliest of king Senek'erim's and his sister Shahandukht's donation charters to Tat'ew, copied in the historical work by Step'anos Ōrbēlean, is dated to 1085, thus, about ten years after Senek'erim's submission to Malikshāh. The charter documented the endowment of the village Arit to the monastery. On this occasion Senek'erim called himself "king of Armenia" a title that went well beyond his real political reach, although he also speci-

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led to Syunik's bishops' refusal to accept the hierarchical supremacy of the Catholicos of Armenia. They were, therefore, excommunicated for about four decades. Tat'ew's privileges as a Metropolitan See were reinstated by the Catholicos Sargis I of Sevan in 1106, through the mediation of king Gagik I's wife Kata, a Syuni princess herself. Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 308-311, contains Catholicos Sargis's encyclical letter to this effect. On the sacking of the monastery c. 1045, see Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 312-316.

<sup>11</sup> Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 321-322.



Fig. 4: Monastery of Tat'ev, photo courtesy of Hrair Hawk Khatcherian.

fied that he lived “in this land of Sisakan and Baghakan”<sup>12</sup>. Another nobleman at his command, Hasan son of Grigor, testified that after having liberated the village Norashinik and the monastery of Dzerati that had originally belonged to Tat’ew from the “tachiks” (i.e. Muslims), he too bequeathed them to Tat’ew at Senek’erim’s request in 1086. Interestingly, among those Hasan had fought he mentions one “*amir P’atlun*” which could be Faḍl II (1067-1073?) or Faḍl III known also as Faḍlūn (r. 1073-1075, d. 1091) Shaddādid. We will meet a Faḍl in connection with Senek’erim’s murder, too<sup>13</sup>.

The very act of documenting monastic donations in writing underscores not only Senek’erim’s perception (or pretensions) of his *de jure* authority and rights to certain lands, either directly or through his vassals, but also the importance of leaving a written trace of these deeds as a legitimizing tool, even as major super-powers on the scene changed. This and other donations implied that the villages or erstwhile monastic estates that had belonged to Tat’ew since at least two centuries had changed hands more than once after Seljuk incursions. Once Senek’erim had stipulated a peace agreement with Malikshāh, one of his tasks was to employ different strategies of securing their integrity and inalienability.

Senek’erim’s directive to his other subordinates reinforces the points made above. He demanded that “the great prince Mahewan and another nobleman (*azat*) Gēorg” return two villages (Berdkanerech’ and Harzhis) and river Ts’ur to Tat’ew. Prior to this, these were “captured from the holy church” presumably by a Seljuk-related person or group, then taken by (and kept in the possession of) Senek’erim’s men — the very same Mahewan and Gēorg to be precise. To validate Tat’ew’s claims to these estates Senek’erim examined “old letters which were given by pervious kings with unchangeable conditions”<sup>14</sup> to the monastery, produced as proof by its abbot, Bishop Grigor. This practice of verifying land tenure rights through older documents and the value of the latter as authoritative legal and legitimizing instruments in the contemporary culture speaks eloquently for Senek’erim’s own motives when drawing up his charters for the posterity. The episode also hints at the fact that Mahewan and Gēorg did not immediately agree to cede their new acquisitions to its erstwhile owner — the monastery of Tat’ew — and that there was need to persuade and pressure them through

<sup>12</sup> Step’anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 322-326, 322 for his title and 325 for the date. La Porta, “Discourses of Ethnicity and Power”, 518-521 on this document and Senek’erim’s self-representation as ‘king of Armenia’.

<sup>13</sup> Step’anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 326; Vladimir Minorsky, *Studies in Caucasian History*, London, 1953, 67-68.

<sup>14</sup> Step’anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 328-329: *Եւ առաջի արկանէ զհին նամականին, որ տուեալ էր առաջին թագաւորացն անխախտ պայմանաւ.*

the power of original documents, besides possible other means, such as appeals to royal authority or force. Thus, despite Step'anos Ōrbēlean's projection of some form of unity in the political landscape of south-eastern Syunik' under Senek'erim, it may have been more fractured and wrought with tensions than the historian Ōrbēlean may be ready to admit.

Nevertheless, these donations or restoration of land and water resources to the monastery leave the impression that in the 1080's and possibly beyond Senek'erim did manage to hold the helm over the lesser Armenian nobility in this south-eastern part of Syunik' and compete successfully with regional Seljuk claimants. The assertion of Senek'erim's presence and authority in these region through monastic endowments, among others, must have tempered the possibility of small-scale conflict on the local level by having 'neutralized' these lands as monastic possessions. In parallel, this patronage strategically created enclaves of untaxed land in his domains, which would presumably have the status of a *waqf* from the point of view of Islamic jurisdiction. Interestingly, members of the Armenian nobility from regions beyond Tat'ew, too, thought it advantageous to bequeath orchards, fields and villages to Tat'ew throughout the 1080's that speaks for Tat'ew's continued prestige beyond Syunik'.<sup>15</sup> Keeping a record of villages, productive sites (i.e. orchards), and other resources (i.e. water) donated to a monastery as inalienable property was both typical of the Armenian tradition, and appeared comparable to a *waqfiyya* in the Islamic cultures<sup>16</sup>.

This assertion is not without problems given the date of our documents, i.e. originally written at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century but copied at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup>. Nevertheless, there are grounds to believe that this hypothesis is plausible. It is true that the specific term *waqf* does not appear either in the inscriptions or the endowment charters of Senek'erim or his entourage. However, we have evidence from the second half of the twelfth century that the concept was far from alien to Armenian élites and was likely familiar to them from a much earlier period given their five centuries of close interactions with different Islamic polities. The first attestation of the term *waqf* in the form of *vakhm* (*վախմ*) in Armenian is dated to 1173, found in an inscription by Iwanē Ōrbēlean at the church of the Mother of God in the monastic complex of Sanahin, in northern Armenia<sup>17</sup>. Indeed, efforts to secure

<sup>15</sup> Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 330-332.

<sup>16</sup> Rudolf Peters, Doris Behrens Abouseif, et al., "Wakf," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, ed. by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis et al., vol. 11, 59-99. Consulted online on 30 May, 2023. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_COM\\_1333](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1333). For other examples of monastic donations in Armenia with analysis see Pogossian, "The Monastery of Sevan"; Sergio La Porta, "Kingdom and Sultanate," 89-99.

<sup>17</sup> La Porta, "Kingdom and Sultanate", 96 with reflections on the political significance of this inscription.



the inalienability of newly conquered land-holdings by means of monastic endowments, whose abbots then often belonged to the same families, were undertaken also by (newly established and upwardly mobile) military élites in northern Armenia a century after Senek'erim, such as the Ōrbēleans (who will become the most potent dynasty of Syunik' from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onward) and the Zak'arids (Mkhargrdzeli in Georgian sources), among others. There is more evidence on the use of the word *waqf*, transliterated variably into Armenian, as a technical term from a later period, especially 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>18</sup>. Significantly, the Armenian word *hayrenik'* (patrimony) came to acquire a meaning close to that of the Islamic *waqf* at least since the latter half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, when making donations to monasteries Armenian princes certainly counted on a mutual comprehension of these landholdings as untaxed and inalienable territory, by Christian or Muslim claimants alike.

In the late 12<sup>th</sup> century the Ōrbēleans and the Zak'arids operated in different circumstances. Whereas in the 11<sup>th</sup> century the princes of Syunik' were acting under Seljuk rule, the Ōrbēleans and the Zak'arids lived in the context of an increasingly strong Kingdom of Georgia<sup>20</sup>. Yet, Syunik's nobility or clergy at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century faced the same problem of ensuring their 'perpetual' ownership of land and resources in the face of tense local competition, as the Ōrbēleans or Zak'arids did later, regardless of whether the central or centripetal (at least in intention) encroaching power was Muslim (e.g. Seljuk) or Christian (Georgian). The concluding 'anathemas' and protective curses of Senek'erim's endowments clearly show that they addressed not only a Christian but also a Muslim audience, something already present in foundation inscriptions or charters at least since the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>21</sup>. Along with the typical anathemas against transgressors that appealed to Christ, the Mother of God or greatly revered saints, as well as compared the violators to Arius, Judah or other biblical villains, Tat'ew's 12<sup>th</sup>-century donation deeds, like its foundation charter of 906, included appeals to the Prophet Muḥammad and curses befitting a Muslim audience. This was expressed also through an entangled

<sup>18</sup> To date the most relevant work on the subject remains Levon Khach'ikyan, "Ntēsakan gortsark'neri masin gra'umnerə hayeren je'ageri mej ev nrants' aghbyuragitakan nshanakut'yunə" [Records on economic transactions in Armenian manuscripts and their significance for source-critical studies], *Banber Matenadarani* 5 (1960), 21-42.

<sup>19</sup> La Porta, "Kingdom and Sultanate", 99. See also Boynazyan, *Armenia and the Seljuks*, 232. Talking about the expansion of ecclesiastical landholdings in the Seljuk period, Boynazyan too thinks that they fell under the category of *waqf* of the Islamic jurisdiction.

<sup>20</sup> La Porta, "Kingdom and Sultanate", 96-99.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the foundation charter of the Monastery of Tat'ew from 906 in Stepanos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 233.

language where words of Persian or Arabic origin transcribed in Armenian were employed to address potential Muslim violators, such as:

... if a *tachik*<sup>22</sup> ruler changes and intends to seize [this land] may he be *apizar*<sup>23</sup> from his faith, and may his *p'eghambar*<sup>24</sup> be abandoned and disgraced! And may 1000 *nalat*'s<sup>25</sup> remain upon him<sup>26</sup>.

Nor were secular lords alone in following such practices in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Clergy likewise took a leading role in negotiating tax exemptions on monastic and other ecclesiastical lands, especially in those areas of Armenia where the military might of the local nobility was much less weighty or was non-existent compared to the situation in Syunik'. This was the case with the bishop of Shirak, then *Catholicos* Barsegh of Ani (as *catholicos* 1087-1113, partially overlapping with Grigor Vkasasēr), an offspring of the Pahlawunis and nephew of the *Catholicos* Grigor II Vkasasēr (s. 1065-1105). He, like kings or princes, such as Giorgi II of Georgia, Kyurikē II of Lori and Senek'erim of Syunik', travelled to 'Persia' in 1090 to negotiate tax exemptions on ecclesiastical lands with Malikshāh. Matt'ēos Urhayets'i enumerates the gifts that Barsegh took to the sultan — gold, silver and precious clothes — which must have added a considerable persuasive power to Barsegh's embassy. Upon this "the God-loving sultan" "honored him greatly and fulfilled everything that he asked." This meant a tax-free status for all the "churches, monasteries and priests" for which the sultan gave a "writ of freedom [from taxes] and royal edicts" (*զիր ազատութեան եւ հրովարտակք*)<sup>27</sup>. Indeed, such important privileges had to be fixed in writ-

<sup>22</sup> Used here to refer to Muslims in general.

<sup>23</sup> From Persian رازي *bizār* — "free, clear; absolved; healed; wearied, disgusted", used in a verbal combination with the meaning: "*bizār shudan* — to have an aversion, loathe, abhor, detest". See Francis F. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English dictionary, including the Arabic words and phrases to be met with in Persian literature*, London, 1892, 220. In Armenian anathema *formulae* the word has the sense of 'being cast away'. I would like to thank my colleague and friend Alison Vacca for her precious help in sorting out the Persian and Arabic vocabulary and the nuances of meaning as they were borrowed into Armenian.

<sup>24</sup> From Persian پايغام *paighāmbar* — "a messenger; a prophet, apostle; an ambassador, envoy, legate", in this formula clearly referring to Prophet Muḥammad: Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English dictionary*, 268.

<sup>25</sup> From Persian (and Arabic) لعنة *la'nat* — "imprecation, curse, anathema; objurgation, reproach": Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English dictionary*, 1124.

<sup>26</sup> Step'anos Orbēlean, *History*, 327: *Եթէ տաճիկ աւագութիւն փոխի եւ յափշտակել խորհրդի լիւր հաւատէն ապիզար եղիցի. եւ զիւր փեղամբարն թողեալ եւ անարգեալ լիցի. 1000 նալաթ ի վերայ նորա մնասցէ*. Similarly, *Ibid.*, 330, 331.

<sup>27</sup> Matt'ēos Urhayets'i [and Grigor Yerets'], *Zhamanakagrut'yun* [Chronicle], ed. by Mambre Melik'-Adamyán and Nersēs Ter-Mik'ayelyan, trans. to modern Armenian and notes by Hrach Bartikian, Yerevan, 1991, 258-260 on the description of Barsegh's embassy and his reception. The 11<sup>th</sup>-century author Hovhannēs Sarkawag, whose historical work has not sur-

ing. These deeds earned Malikshāh the admiration of medieval Armenian authors, all clerics, who eulogized the sultan for his piety, magnanimity, love of God, love of peace, just rule, universal (*տիեզերական*) realm and even handsome appearance<sup>28</sup>. Such praise was in no small measure due to his policy of tax exemptions granted to monastic estates which by implication confirmed the continuous legitimacy of their possessions of those lands.

Malikshāh's cousin Ismail b. Yaquti, whose sister Zubayda was Malikshāh's wife (see Appendix 2), is the other comparably lavishly glorified Seljuk leader. He too was extolled for his policy of liberating churches from taxes, protecting all Christian clergy and causing Armenia to flourish. Matt'ēos Urhayets'i and Vardan Arewelts'i explicitly credit him for the policy of exempting all ecclesiastical lands from taxes which triggered the 'rebirth' of Armenia<sup>29</sup>. Senek'erim's policies and actions in safeguarding the ownership of land and its inalienability also via monastic donations, were, thus, part of a more general pattern of Armenian secular and ecclesiastical élites coming to terms with Seljuk rule, and finding effective modes of asserting their authority on and possession of land resources.

### 1.2 *Limits of Senek'erim's strategies: a banquet, a failed marriage and a murder*

Senek'erim's consolidation of power, including through his monastic endowments, took place in a complex and multi-religious setting wrought with challenges by other local potentates. This compelled him to diversify his strategies of *modus vivendi*. His death stands witness to the limits that he faced despite his best efforts, especially as a weakened sultanic power after Malikshāh's death intensified the local or regional competition for territory and its control, and military confrontations came to replace possible non-violent means of competition. Besides revealing the volatility of the political-military situation of the time — a veritable mosaic of alliances and betrayals between Christian and Muslim local to imperial rulers — the two episodes analyzed below serve as reminders of difficulties one faces when reconstructing the history on the ground and disentangling the legendary

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vived but which served as a source for the *Chronicle* of Samuel Anets'i also extols Malikshāh for his just rule and hints at Barsegh's glorious reception in 1090: Samuēl Anets'i, *Chronicle*, 199 and 402, note 297. See also Vardan Arewelts'i, *Hawak'umn patmut'ean* [Historical Compilation], Venice, 1862, 96, 107.

<sup>28</sup> See the authors cited in the previous note.

<sup>29</sup> Matt'ēos Urhayets'i, *Chronicle*, 260; Vardan Arewelts'i, *Historical Compilation*, 108; Bořnazyan, *Armenia and the Seljuks*, 207.

from the factual, the narrative strategies from actual strategies pursued by political-military actors.

Our story starts with Malikshāh's death in Baghdad in 1092, rumored to be caused by poisoning. Senek'erim, whose power as we saw was bolstered through his submission to Malikshāh, had to pay a high price<sup>30</sup>. Sources testify that Senek'erim's territories were attacked and he was besieged in the stronghold of Bagh (Baghaberd) in 1094 (or 1096) (see Map). During the siege he was lured to exit Baghaberd with promises of a peaceful settlement, upon which he was assassinated. Attempts to reconstruct the exact sequence of events and the protagonists involved have remained inconclusive because of divergences in our sources. It is worth reviewing them once more because the real or presumed identities of the actors are yet another testimony to the highly fractured political landscape and regional power struggles vs imperial agendas, including the limits of each.

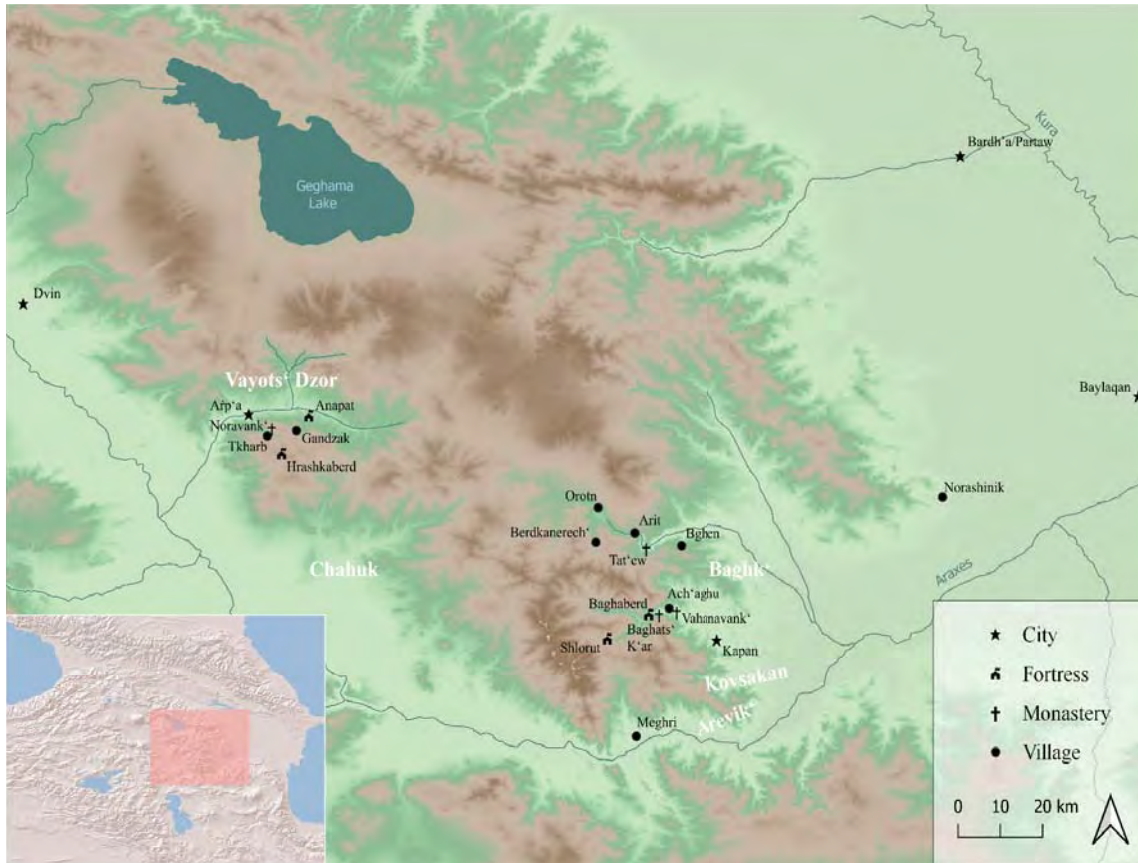
According to Step'anos Ōrbēlean, the best informed but temporally farthest removed from the events compared to the other reports, the aggressor was an unnamed "amir of Partaw, Rān and Gandzak" (ամիրայն Պարտաւայ եւ Ռանայ եւ Գանձակայ) and the ruse involved "the prince of Shirak Grigor Apiratean" (Շիրակայ իշխանն Գրիգոր Ապիրատեան) qualified also as "Grigor prince from Ani" (Գրիգոր իշխանն Անեցի)<sup>31</sup>.

Yet, earlier historians, such as Vardan Arewelts'i and Mkhitar Ayrivanets'i identify Senek'erim's adversary respectively as "the amir of Gandzak P'atlun" (Փատլուն ամիրայն Գանձակայ) or simply "amir P'altun" (ամիր Փալտուն), i.e. a Shaddādid. Under this name they could mean either Faḍl II (1067-1073) or his son Faḍlūn (known also as Faḍl III, r. 1073-1075, d. 1091)<sup>32</sup>. One of them was Senek'erim's vassal Mahewan's rival, as we saw above. Yet, if one accepts Vardan's and Mkhitar's identification of the amir as Faḍlūn and presumes it is Faḍl III (otherwise the timing would be even less fitting), then the incident must have happened

<sup>30</sup> On the intricate palace politics connected with the death of Malikshāh see Carole Hilenbrand, "1092: A Murderous Year", in *Proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants*, ed. by Alexandre Fodor, Budapest, 1995, 281-296.

<sup>31</sup> Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 320. Note that Ōrbēlean is employing the Arabic denomination for the region of Arrān as Rān.

<sup>32</sup> Vardan Arewelst'i, *Historical Compilation*, 103; Mkhitar Ayrivanets'i, *History*, 60. For discussion see: Bořnazyan, *Armenia and the Seljuks*, 203-204, 248; Minorsky, *Studies*, 72-74, 81-82; Grigoryan, "The Kingdom of Syunik", 144; Hayrapet Margarian, *Hyusisayin Hayastani ev Vrastani ŽB dari patmut'yan mi k'ani harts'er* [Some questions on the history of northern Armenia and Georgia during the 12<sup>th</sup> century], Yerevan, 1980, 46, fn 4; and most recently La Porta, "Discourses of Ethnicity and Power". All these scholars, bar Minorsky and La Porta, accept the identity of the emir as the Shaddādid Faḍlun (= Faḍl III). Minorsky leaves the question open; La Porta (pp. 530-531) considers a Shaddādid from Dvin or Ani, such as Faḍl III's brother Manūchir another possible candidate.



Map: prepared by Leonardo Squilloni, University of Florence.

c. 1073/74 when Faḍl III was still in power, or, at any rate, before 1091 when he died in Baghdad. Yet, both Vardan and Mkhit'ar date the murder to 1094 which indicates that their sources or their own interpretation and arrangement of the events suffer inaccuracies.

Between 1093 and 1105 the governor of Ādharbaydjān, Arrān and Armenia was Sultan Malikshāh's son Muḥammad Tapar (rather than a Faḍl/Faḍlūn), who later became the Great Seljuk sultan (r. as sultan 1105-1118)<sup>33</sup>. His predecessor was Ismail b. Yaquti — the first Seljuk *malik* of Ādharbaydjān, Arrān, and Armenia, ruling from Gandzak/Ganja (r. 1083-

<sup>33</sup> Clifford Edmund Bosworth, "Muḥammad b. Malikshāh", in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 7, ed. by Clifford Edmund Bosworth, Emeri van Donzel, et al., Leiden, 1991, 408; Idem, *Islamic Dynasties*, 123; Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 323.

1095) and a cousin of Malikshāh<sup>34</sup> (See Appendix 2). As we saw above, his favorable depiction by Armenian authors is next only to Malikshāh's, whereas Muḥammad Tapar is unflatteringly presented as a "beastlike man" by Matt'ēos Urhayets'i<sup>35</sup>. Interestingly, other members of the Seljuk family descending from Yaquti generally appear as positive figures in Armenian historiography. Take Muḥammad Tapar's half-brother and rival Berkyaruq (d. 1104), whose mother Zubayda was Yaquti's daughter (and hence Ismail's sister, see Appendix 2)<sup>36</sup>. Step'anos Ōrbēlean connects the downfall of the kingdom of Syunik' to Berkyaruq's death<sup>37</sup>. He, thus, implicitly associates the start of a period of decay and intensification of local in-fighting in which the Armenians participated as well, to the death of a Seljuk who descended from Yaquti through his mother. We will see below another gloriously depicted female descendent of Yaquti — his grand-daughter and Ismail's daughter Gawhar khat'un, the ill-fated wife of Muḥammad Tapar. Although there is nothing explicit in the sources, we are left with a lingering impression that Yaquti's branch of the Seljuks, with at least *de jure* control over parts of Armenia, may have struck a special deal with the Armenian nobility in parallel or beyond the Great Seljuk sultan's jurisdiction. This may explain why several of its members are so sympathetically treated in Armenian sources. It also points out, once more, the complex dynamics of power struggles not simply between 'provincial' and 'central' (sultanic) players, but the ambiguous role that different branches of the Seljuk family, including its female members, played in these dynamics.

Coming back to Senek'erim's murder and having excluded, or at least problematized, Yaquti's descendants as culprits, we are left with Muḥammad Tapar. Was he Step'anos Ōrbēlean's unnamed "*amir* of Partaw, Ṙan and Gandzak"? And are Vardan and Mkhitar (or their source) wrong and/or simply anachronistic in naming him Faḍl/Faḍlūn because they mentally associated 11<sup>th</sup>-century Gandzak with a Shaddādid ruler? These are all possibilities, albeit not certainties. Lastly, it is also plausible that Step'anos Ōrbēlean's "*amir* of Partaw, Ṙan and Gandzak" was not necessarily a recognized ruler, but a claimant to these lands or titles. He was perhaps a

<sup>34</sup> For the office of *malik* within Seljuk hierarchy see Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 93-94.

<sup>35</sup> Matt'ēos Urhayets'i, *Chronicle*, 372, where Matt'ēos describes Muḥammad's assassination of his wife Gōhar (Gawhar) khatun. Vardan Arewelts'i, *Historical Compilation*, 118 on the same episode.

<sup>36</sup> On Zubayda see Ann Lambton, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia: Aspects of Administrative, Economic and Social History, 11<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> Century*, Albany, 1988, 238; see also Eric Hanne, "Women, Power, and the Eleventh and Twelfth Century Abbasid Court", *Hawwa* 3/1 (2005), 80-110, esp. 104-105.

<sup>37</sup> Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 333.

disenchanted Shaddādid, a last scion of the house even with the name Faḍl or Faḍlūn who is otherwise unrecorded. If so, like many other Christian or Muslim local lords he may have seen his chance at the death of Malikshāh and the ensuing internecine struggle among the Seljuks.

The unidentifiable *amir*'s Armenian 'ally', Grigor Apiratean, whom Step'anos Ōrbēlean qualifies as a "prince of Shirak" or Ani, whereas Vardan and Mkhit'ar confuse with "Vasak Pahlawuni, son of Grigor Magistros" was an offspring of a well-known 11<sup>th</sup>-century notable from Shirak Grigor-Apirat Hasanean<sup>38</sup>. Our Grigor Apiratean was likely the latter's grandson, while his connection to the celebrated Grigor Magistros Pahlawuni was via his maternal line. Significantly, Grigor Apiratean was a close associate of the Shaddādid Manūch'ir (Manuch'e in Armenian sources), who ruled Ani since 1072 (until c. 1118). On the other hand, we know nothing about Grigor's relationship with Muḥammad Tapar — if we take the latter to have been the unnamed "*amir* of Patraw, Rān and Gandzak", let alone their possible alliance. Grigor's role in the ruse against Senek'erim is ambiguous, too. In a linguistic-philological analysis of the episode La Porta points out that rather different interpretations of the course of action are possible and it is not at all certain whether Grigor acted on behalf of or against king Senek'erim<sup>39</sup>. A Shaddādid challenger, however, would explain Grigor Apiratean's behavior in light of his earlier links to this family.

The factional struggle that comes to light when zooming into the events that led to Senek'erim's murder, despite many lingering dark spots, was endemic for this period. As the Seljuk family members plunged into a warfare for dynastic succession, individuals and groups at the local level fought to increase their own territories, influence, and internal autonomy. Before his assassination Malikshāh had bequeathed the control of Gandzak and the title *malik* of Arrān, Ādharbaydjān and (parts of) Armenia to his cousin Ismail b. Yaquti (r. 1083-1092), whose sister Zubayda was Malikshāh's wife. Malikshāh's son (from a different wife) Muḥammad Tapar (as *malik* 1092-1105, as sultan 1105-1118), on the other hand, had married Ismail's daughter Gawhar Khatun, whom he eventually assassinated<sup>40</sup> (see Appen-

<sup>38</sup> Federico Alpi, *Messaggi attraverso il confine: l'Armenia e il confine orientale di Bisanzio nelle Lettere di Grigor Pahlawuni Magistros (ca. 990-1058)*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Bologna, 2014, 74-77. It is worth noting that already in 1040s an anti-Shaddādid alliance saw the ruler of Syunik' in the same camp as the Bagratids of Lori-Tashir (connected to the Shaddādids through matrimonial alliances) and king Yovhannēs-Smbat Bagratid of Ani, but neither Yovhannēs-Smbat's rival and brother Ashot Bagratid, nor the Pahlawunis were involved (*Ibid.*, 92-93). Could Grigor Apiratean have continued a family tradition of good relations with the Shaddādids also in his anti-Senek'erim action?

<sup>39</sup> La Porta, "Discourses of Ethnicity and Power", 527-528.

<sup>40</sup> Matt'ēos Urhayets'i, *Chronicle*, 372 and Vardan Arewelts'i, *Historical Compilation*, 118,

dix 2). At Malikshāh's murder conflict broke out between his cousin Ismail and his son Muḥammad Tapar, ending with the victory of the latter<sup>41</sup>. Not surprisingly, Ismail joined Muḥammad Tapar's rival — his nephew (his sister Zubayda's son) Berkyaruq, Muḥammad's half-brother. Soon, however, Muḥammad's men assassinated Berkyaruq<sup>42</sup>. All of these murders, alliances and counter-alliances, had an impact on regional affairs.

A local Muslim author whose writings are dated between late 1090s and 1111, Mas'ud ibn Nāmdār, who filled various administrative posts for Seljuks and rulers of Shirvan at the town of Baylaqan in Arrān (see Map), presents a similar picture of highly competitive and factionally divided society, with an elevated level of violence<sup>43</sup>. He describes continuous infighting among hostile urban groups, which included Jews and Christians taking different sides, or between the city population and external forces. Interestingly, Mas'ud cites a special tax privilege or immunity granted to the Armenian inhabitants — *bara'a* — which, he adds bitterly, was tantamount to “leaving the right faith”<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, in a letter he copied, purportedly written from the *diwan* of the ruler of Shirvan to an otherwise unattested *amir* Abd al-Jabar who had besieged Baylaqan, Abd al-Jabar's pretensions to control Baylaqan are questioned on account of his lack of dynastic legitimacy: “You are not from the lineage of Yazid, nor are you a

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who claim that Muḥammad Tapar wished to prevent her marriage to his brother. ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī, *Nuṣrat al-fatrah wa-‘uṣrat al-ḥiṭrah*, ed. ‘Isam Mustafa ‘Ukla, vol. 1, London, 2019, 439 also reports Gawhar khatun's assassination by Muḥammad Tapar but accuses her of witchcraft (*Ibid.*, 378, 422). I would like to express my gratitude to my colleague Andrew Peacock with whom I have discussed this episode and who kindly drew my attention to this source and its important, albeit stereotypically charged, evidence that corroborates that of Armenian sources.

<sup>41</sup> Bořnazyán, *Armenia and the Seljuks*, 219.

<sup>42</sup> Matt'ēos Urhayets', *Chronicle*, 264, dating this to 1094.

<sup>43</sup> Vladimir Minorsky and Claude Cahen, “Le Recueil transcaucasien de Mas'ūd b. Nāmdār (début du VI<sup>e</sup>/XII<sup>e</sup> siècle), *Journal Asiatique* 237 (1949), 93-142, esp. 115-119; V. M. Bejlis, “Masud ibn Namdar i gorodskoje naselenije Bajlakana” [Masud ibn Namdar and the urban population of Baylaqan], *Izvestija AN Azerbaidzhanskoj SSR. Serija istorii, filosofii i prava* 3 (1966), 50-63; Mas'ud ibn Nāmdār, *Sbornik rasskazov, pisem i stikhov* [Collection of Tales, Letters and Poems], facsimile edition, introduction and comments by V. M. Bejlis, Moscow, 1970. Some authors have identified the city of Baylaqan with P'aytakaran of Armenian sources. Hewsén has been an outspoken critic of this view. See *The Geography of Ananias of Širak (Ašxarhac'oyc')*, ed., trans. and comm. by Robert Hewsén, Wiesbaden, 1992, 254-255, with the relevant bibliography. On the *region* P'aytakaran, south of the river Kura, in various Armenian sources see Vacca, “Buldān al-Rān”, 44-46.

<sup>44</sup> V. M. Bejlis, “Iz nabljudenij nad tekstom i terminologiej *Sbornika rasskazov, stikhov i pisem* Mas'uda ibn Namdara (ok. 1111 g.) [Observations on the text and terminology of the *Collection of Tales, Letters and Poems* of Mas'ud ibn Nāmdār (c. 1111)], in *Pis'mennyje pamjatniki vostoka. Istoriko-filologičeskije issledovanija. Ezhegodnik 1968* [Written monuments of the East. Historical-philological research. Annual 1968], Moscow, 1970, 17-31, here 20.



descendant of Rawāddids, nor from the heritage of Shaddādids”<sup>45</sup>. Thus, even as late as the first decade of the 12<sup>th</sup> century the Shaddādids bore an aura of legitimacy as rulers of Arrān, at least by an author, such as Mas‘ud ibn Namdār, who identified himself as a Kurd and was living in the region.

To summarize, whatever interpretation one may adopt regarding the motives, main players and the sequence of actions leading to king Senek‘erim’s assassination, the relevance of the episode for this study lies elsewhere. This is one of many emblematic cases that allows us to reconstruct the impact of Türkmen and Seljuk presence on the already complex, volatile and often violent dynamics between small to medium-size rulers and dynasties in Armenia and southern Caucasia. The local players each pushed their agendas and this became even more fierce when it was felt that an overarching authority, i.e. the sultanic hegemony, was weak or potentially weak, especially in moments of transition between one ruler and another. The narrative also sheds light on the personalized style of governing that is thought to be a typical feature of Seljuk political culture<sup>46</sup>. Senek‘erim, like his peers Georgi II of Georgia and Kyurikē II of Lori, travelled to Isfahan to negotiate peace directly with the Great Seljuk sultan. After the death of Malikshāh, these agreements fell apart for his Christian and Muslim supporters and/or adversaries alike. The boundaries between landholdings, titles, privileges and legitimizing principles had to be, thus, constantly renegotiated, using all available tools, from weapons to written records.

### 1.3 *A fractured landscape, a lost dowry (?) and the first assault on Syunik‘*

The murder of Senek‘erim did not spell the end of the Kingdom of Syunik‘. The succession struggles unleashed upon Malikshāh’s death kept the Seljuks occupied and Syunik‘ was certainly not a priority for them. In the event, there does not seem to have been active military engagements in that territory based on our sources. Eventually, the conquest of the kingdom was not the result of one major, well-planned onslaught, but proceeded slowly and unevenly, with occasional raids and plunder, as well as resolute efforts at besieging and storming strategic strongholds and towns, like Kapan in 1103 or, at the end of this process — the fortress of Bagh surg-

<sup>45</sup> Bejlis, “The urban population of Baylaqan”, 62. Bejlis identifies the sender of the letter as Fakhr al-Dīn Fariburz. This figure does not appear in Bosworth, *Islamic Dynasties*, but the question deserves a more detailed study. For the complex relationship between the Muslim rulers of Shirvan and Arrān in this period see Minorsky, *Studies*, 58-59. On the Mazyadids, Rawāddids and Shaddādids see respectively in Bosworth, *Islamic Dynasties*, 51-52, 88-88, 90-91.

<sup>46</sup> Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 192.

ing in front of Kapan from the west, across the river Oghji, in 1170<sup>47</sup> (see Map). It is not always easy to reconstruct the protagonists of these raids and battles. Even when we know the names of some Muslim (Türkmen?) military leaders, their identity remains obscure. This is not surprising, for as Peacock has remarked “plenty of *amirs* are known to us only from a single reference, or are completely nameless”<sup>48</sup>. We may observe a similar state of affairs when it comes to identifying persons — rebels, military leaders or bureaucratic officials — that Mas‘ud ibn Namdār brings forth in his description of the struggles and military conflicts in and around the town of Baylaqan. The commanders responsible for conquering various areas of Syunik‘ that Step‘anos Ōrbēlean names are likewise mostly unknown figures. Moreover, hardly all were sanctioned by the sultanic government (which itself was hotly contested at different intervals in the period after Malikshāh’s death) and at least some must have acted on their own initiative in a time of turmoil, unclear hierarchical arrangements, and uncertainties regarding authority and legitimacy, as transpires also from Mas‘ud ibn Namdār’s writings. Another layer of difficulty is added by the narrative strategies in the description of past events, where the separation of fact and fiction, presumed agreements vs imagined alliances, are rarely clear-cut. The causes of the first attacks on Syunik‘ and their relationship to king Senek‘erim’s policies, in this case an apparently failed strategy of resistance as described by Step‘anos Ōrbēlean, pose exactly this kind of interpretative challenges.

The commander who stormed Kapan in 1103, starting from its Jewish quarter as per Step‘anos Ōrbēlean, was one Ch‘ort‘man, Malikshāh’s erstwhile cupbearer. Step‘anos claims that he held a grudge against king Senek‘erim since that fateful banquet in 1076 mentioned above. Allegedly, Ch‘ort‘man served copious wine to Senek‘erim in order to extract the promise of his daughter’s hand. The king refused to go ahead with this marriage plan once he returned to Syunik‘<sup>49</sup>. Step‘anos Ōrbēlean quotes from a letter of bishop Step‘anos II of Syunik‘ (1116-1143) to the priest and historian Mkhit‘ar Anets‘i, where he attributes Senek‘erim’s refusal to his self-confidence in the strength of his fortresses. The narrative appears to encapsulate a veiled criticism of Senek‘erim and underscores the limits of his strategies of resistance and accommodation. Firstly, the whole complex chain of events leading to a disaster in 1103 may be attributed to Senek‘erim’s lack

<sup>47</sup> Hakobyan, *Kingdom of Syunik‘*, 121-130. On the Seljuk strategy of attacking fortified towns and strongholds, as well as the danger the latter represented for nomadic groups, which lead to their deliberate destruction, see Peacock, “Nomadic Society”, 214-216, 225.

<sup>48</sup> Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 231.

<sup>49</sup> Step‘anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 332-333; Grigoryan, “Kingdom of Syunik‘”, 142.

of self-control due to his drunken state in 1076, regardless of the accuracy of Step'anos Ōrbēlean's report on Senek'erim's behavior at the Seljuk court. Although Ch'ort'man is cast as the instigator of the unpleasant situation, the story still did not place Senek'erim in a positive light. Moreover, he renegeed on his promise, thus setting himself up for a justifiable revenge and could be even accused of *hubris*.

Whether Senek'erim's promise of his daughter's hand to Ch'ort'man is historically accurate or not, and despite the eventual cancellation of the wedding, its very possibility in Step'anos Ōrbēlean's narrative underscores the importance of women in political alliances, particularly when these crossed religious lines. This will remain a vital strategy of easing tensions and preventing conflict also in the following centuries<sup>50</sup>. These types of inter-faith marriages are generally ignored in histories of women in the Seljuk period where the lion's share of research on matrimonial alliances has focused on those that cemented the relationship between the reigning sultan and the caliph<sup>51</sup>. Yet, this and other evidence from Armenian sources highlight their importance.

Although any secure conclusions are impossible at this stage of research, one wonders what Ch'ort'man expected to acquire in terms of land possessions or legitimization of his status in Syunik', as well as what function the bride's dowry would play had this union come to life. If we take a brief look at different possible situations within Syunik' and Armenia, as well as outside, it becomes clear that such a marriage too would be part of a complex network of alliances in a fragmented political landscape, as well as competition for power and control of territory. Thus, at the turn of the first millennium the Bagratid king Gagik I formalized his *de facto* conquest of the region of Vayots' Dzor in Syunik' through his marriage to the Syuni princess Kata, whose dowry included Vayots' Dzor<sup>52</sup>. Donation inscriptions on monastic buildings in Syunik', many copied by Step'anos Ōrbēlean, and

<sup>50</sup> For other examples, see the valuable articles by Hayrapet Margarian: Hayrapet Margarian, "Mahkanaberdt's'ineri (Saduneanneri) ishkanakan tunə ZhB-ZhD darerum [The princely house of the Mahkanaberdt's'ineri (Saduneans) in the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries], *Haykazean hayagitakan handēs* 18 (1998), 9-36; Idem, "Şāhib-divān Şams al-din Muḥammad Juvaini and Armenia", *Iran and the Caucasus* 10/2 (2006), 167-180. See also Zaroui Pogossian, "Women, Identity, and Power: A Review Essay of Antony Eastmond, *Tamta's World*", *Al-'Uşūr al-Wusṣā* 27 (2019), 233-266; and Sara Nur Yildiz, "More than Just a Princess: Gurji Khatun in Thirteenth-century Seljuk and Mongol-dominated Anatolia" [forthcoming]. I thank my friend and colleague Sara Nur Yildiz for allowing me access to her unpublished article.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Carol Hillenbrand, "Women in the Seljuq Period", in *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800*, ed. by Guity Nashat and Lois Beck, Illinois, 2003, 103-120, here 187-188; or Eric Hanne, "Women, Power".

<sup>52</sup> Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 300; on the *de facto* Bagratid annexation of Vayots' Dzor and its date see Hakobyan, *The Kingdom of Syunik'*, p. 63.

dated between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, imply that Syunik's noblewomen disposed of economic and land resources independently, as their personal property, which they could choose to donate to a religious establishment<sup>53</sup>. Admittedly, women's economic agency based on a study of property rights, inheritance law or customs, including those of the dowry, and tapping into the invaluable evidence provided by monastic foundation or donation deeds, is a rather neglected field of enquiry in Armenian studies. Therefore, any discussion in the present work is meant to indicate ways for future research and remain at the state of hypotheses, rather than provide answers. A systematic investigation remains a *desideratum*.

In the case of inter-faith marriages the situation was necessarily more complex, and one must study its nuances, diachronic changes, but also *motifs* and *topoi* in the respective narratives with great caution. We must understand, perhaps on a case-by-case basis, which inheritance law was applied and when. Indeed, a Muslim woman's dowry did not formally become the property of her husband (at least throughout the Middle Ages)<sup>54</sup> and one wonders if this principle would be upheld also in case of a Christian woman marrying a Muslim, and how this would play out in the specific context of Syunik'. Would, in this instance, Senek'erim's daughter have maintained the legal rights and full control of her dowry, possibly land or other economic resources, had she married Ch'ort'man? If we take the embellishments of the story away, how could this marriage fit (or not fit) Senek'erim's overall strategies of accommodation or resistance? Conversely, what were Ch'ort'man's expectations? Did he hope to legitimize his power in Syunik' or even reach the throne of the kingdom itself through his future wife? In light of more than one occasion when the crown of Syunik' passed through a female succession line this would not be too fanciful a prospect. Indeed, Senek'erim himself had become king through his sister Shahandukht — the wife of King Grigor I and queen of Syunik'<sup>55</sup>.

Legitimizing conquest through intermarriage to local women, moreover, was hardly confined to this corner of Armenia or to Ch'ort'man<sup>56</sup>. In our

<sup>53</sup> See examples analyzed in Pogossian, "The Monastery of Sevan".

<sup>54</sup> Siwan Anderson, "The Economics of Dowry and Brideprice", *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21/4 (2007), 151-174.

<sup>55</sup> For other cases see Zaroui Pogossian "Vayots' Dzor, Syunik' and the World: Global Transformations and Local Dynamics between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries", in *Medieval Yeghegis (Armenia): Local Multiplicities and Global Connections of a Rural Centre on the Silk Road*, co-edited with M. Nucciotti [forthcoming].

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, the case of the Muslim conquest of Iberia where according to Simon Barton: "Intermarriage with the indigenous Christian population of Iberia constituted another important mechanism by which the Muslim invaders consolidated their authority over the Peninsula". He goes so far as to consider "sexual mixture", either through marriage or by taking slave concubines, as "a vital element in driving the process of social and cultural change

case, Ch'ort'man's tactics backfired and none of these possibilities materialized. Yet, we can surely imagine more than one reason why Ch'ort'man continuously filled Senek'erim's cup at that banquet in Isfahan. As to why Senek'erim may have considered it advantageous but then refused to follow up with the marriage plan in 1076, one may think of several reasons. Granted that the story is true or verisimilar, and based on our knowledge of Seljuk elite women holding property, their own courts and even armed contingents, Senek'erim's daughter's marriage to a Seljuk official would be another way of maintaining Syuni lands in the hands of Syuni nobility, in this case through the female line, perhaps as a last resort measure. An eventual monastic donation could open other opportunities of maintaining control of the land via a proxy institution. When it comes to Senek'erim's eventual refusal of the project, besides the good state of Syunik's strongholds, to which Step'anos Orbēlean attributes Senek'erim's disdain for Ch'ort'man, the latter was likely restrained also by his lord Malikshāh who probably did not wish to alienate Senek'erim. Senek'erim's confidence or perhaps overconfidence in his own forces were such that he saw no advantages in allying himself with Ch'ort'man and sealing it through his daughter's marriage.

It would appear that after Malikshāh's death Ch'ort'man acted on his own initiative, trying to achieve a long-cherished goal by his own military means, rather than following a well-planned, let alone centralized conquest effort under the leadership of a sultan. On the contrary, Step'anos Orbēlean associates Ch'ort'man's storming of Kapan in 1103 with the death of Berkyaruq (r. 1092-1105), which he erroneously dates to 1100, and thus to a moment of disaggregation of any greater-than-regional power<sup>57</sup>. Step'anos considers Berkyaruq's demise as marking the beginning of the "destruction of this land" and enumerates the other areas that Ch'ort'man took in Syunik': Orotn (1104) on the north and Bghen (1105) on the north-east (see Map). We are not informed on how Ch'ort'man ruled these territories and their resources, as well as what happened to the town of Kapan once the dust from its sack settled.

#### 1.4 *A slow and uneven conquest*

An apparent lull of two decades in Syunik' (c. 1105-1126) corresponds to the rule of Muḥammad Tapar as sultan (1105-1118) and partially that of

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in postconquest Iberia". Simon Barton, *Conquerors, Brides, and Concubines. Interfaith Relations and Social Power in Medieval Iberia*, Philadelphia, 2015, 14-17. I would like to express, again, my gratitude to Sara Nur Yildiz for having discussed this complicated topic with me and suggested helpful bibliography. More general on marriage and conquest see the classic Julian Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem or the Politics of Sex: Essays in the Anthropology of the Mediterranean*, Cambridge, 1977.

<sup>57</sup> Step'anos Orbēlean, *History*, 333; see also Vardan Arewelts'i, *Compilation*, 140-141.

his son Maḥmud (1118-1131). Whether this is due to the selective reporting of events in the sources or the situation on the ground was calm, is hard to assert. The latter case would certainly be surprising in view of what we know about different *amirs*' infighting during Muḥammad Tapar's rule and his own policy of setting particularly independent-minded *amirs* against each other<sup>58</sup>.

The next attack Step'anos Ōrbēlean reports is by an *amir* named Harun (spelled as Haron by Step'anos Ōrbēlean) who seized the region Arewik' in 1126. The leaders of the following conquests, taking place a good three decades later, are not named. We only learn that "the crafty nation of the Turks" captured (lit. stole)<sup>59</sup> the fortress Shlorut in 1151, Meghri in 1157, and the fortress of Bagh (Baghaberd) — central and symbolically charged for Syunik's kings — in 1170 (see Map). The historian compares the conquest of Bagh to the fall of Jerusalem. In the meanwhile, Eldigüzid *atabeg* Shams al-Dīn had come to wield the real power in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the submission of numerous fortresses is credited to him<sup>60</sup>. We can, thus, assert that Syunik's conquest by various named or unnamed military men took place against the background of a declining sultanic power which was paralleled by the rise of regional Muslim lords eager to carve out new territories. Different arrangements were put in place to contain this centrifugal fracturing of the territory. The case of Vayots' Dzor presents one of those *ad hoc* and far from systematic approaches for maintaining some control of land and territory via clients, even as the Great Seljuks' heyday was coming to its end.

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Precious as Step'anos Ōrbēlean's account is for our knowledge of Syunik's conquest, it remains sketchy at best, focusing almost exclusively on the territory of the kingdom and ignoring other regions that were traditionally part of the 'land of Syunik'. Vayots' Dzor, for example, is left out almost completely except for the one small corner of this mountainous terrain — the gorge of the Noravank' monastery — that is the focus of the rest of this paper. This long-drawn and uneven process lasted eight decades (if we count from Senek'erim's submission to Malikshāh) and its impact must have been varied on the local population. The response of the Armenian nobility was variegated, too, and included both resistance and accom-

<sup>58</sup> Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 81-82.

<sup>59</sup> Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 335: զՇլորուտ բերդ գողացան հնարաւոր ազգն թորքաց.

<sup>60</sup> Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 335.

modation to the new dominant power, with various strategies of holding on to their authority to own and be able to dispose of landholdings. The king of Syunik' Senek'erim submitted directly to the Sultan Malikshāh and presumably was responsible for paying taxes directly to the sultan's *diwan* rather than to any regional *amir* or *malik*. This probably guaranteed him immunity from encroachment or raids by the latter, as well as any nomad groups and their chieftains, and other local contenders to power, be those from the Syuni family itself or new military men, i.e. the lesser nobility (*azats*) who appear to have become Senek'erim's vassals. This patron-client relationship, thus, created a modicum of local, internal stability as long as the parties — Senek'erim and Malikshāh in person, rather than a bureaucratic body or local representatives of an abstract sultanic court — were alive and stayed true to their very personal arrangement.

Holding the Syuni fortresses under his rule meant that Senek'erim controlled them and contained the movement of any armed groups. Although Senek'erim led his own military contingent and counted other nobles (*azats*) under his command, his forces could certainly not match the Great Seljuk might. If we believe Step'anos Ōrbēlean, Senek'erim felt to be strong enough to refute the marriage alliance between his daughter and Ch'ort'man in 1076, but not after the death of Malikshāh.

How effective were Senek'erim's policies and actions in the dynamics of regional power struggles vs wider imperial pretensions of the Seljuks? If the story of Ch'ort'man's aspirations to marry Senek'erim's daughter and the disastrous consequences of Senek'erim's eventual change of heart on this matter were historically accurate, then he did not excel in the field of using the tool of matrimonial alliances. On the other hand, arguably one of Senek'erim's most successful strategies with long-term consequences was the restoration and confirmation of the inalienability of ecclesiastical land resources. Senek'erim, like élites in other parts of Armenia, tapped into a shared Christian and Muslim practice of pious donations and their subsequent protected status. Endowing monasteries was akin to the creation of a *waqf*, while endowment charters resembled the Muslim *waqfiyya*. Thus, Senek'erim, perhaps unintentionally, refined the legal tools available to him and their compatibility within Islamic jurisdiction that turned out to be vital for his descendants. It eased local competition for power and control of land via an institution that was comprehensible to all parties involved. The next generation of Syunik's religious leaders, that were not always backed by a local Christian military class, employed exactly this kind of instrument. It is this course of action that led to the eventual rise of Noravank' in Vayots' Dzor as a major monastic complex, bishopric seat, and holy site that housed many precious relics.

## 2. *The Rise of the Noravank' Monastery*

The transformation of a corner of Vayots' Dzor into a thriving religious site and eventually a bishopric seat, where the monastic complex of Noravank' (lit. 'New monastery') emerged, was due to the active and politically savvy Bishop Hovhannēs Kapants'i (Hovhannēs of Kapan). He laid the ground for a process that continued to mark the history of Syunik' for the next three centuries at the least. As his name indicates, the original homeland of Hovhannēs was the town of Kapan, sacked by Ch'ort'man in 1103. Hovhannēs' father was Hasan, one of the donors of the monastery of Tat'ew in 1086, whom Step'anos Ōrbēlean describes as a "glorious prince of Baghk' ... who had authority over all the nobility of that kingdom and who was the son of great Hamtun"<sup>61</sup>. Hovhannēs had become the bishop of the monastery of Vahanavank' mentioned above, while his brother who bore their grandfather's name Hamtun, pursued a military career. Hovhannēs, thus, belonged to the top military and religious tier of the kingdom of Syunik' and witnessed its demise.

Indeed, the erosion of old dynastic ties of the Armenian nobility or of their real power, well underway even during Senek'erim's tenure, had now been exacerbated. The fall of the town of Kapan to Ch'ort'man signaled a further turning of tables in Syunik's regional military-political landscape in favor of Seljuk or Seljuk-related military men. This must have deteriorated Hovhannēs' (and his brother's) ability to hold on to their possessions of land in south-eastern Syunik'. Thus, after some wandering, Hovhannēs decided to settle in Vayots' Dzor c. 1105. His engagement with the contemporary Seljuk military and administrative leaders opens a window through which we can see how the clergy assumed new agency, struck political and economic deals, and made the best of the situation as subjects of a weakened and divided Seljuk Empire<sup>62</sup>. Hovhannēs' efforts and use of non-military means at his disposal was a fundamental factor in this process and his story adds another tassel to our understanding of the history of Syunik' under Seljuk domination, complementing the picture drawn above based on the actions of the military élites.

<sup>61</sup> Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 347: որդի մեծափառ իշխանին Բաղայ Հասանայ, որ ունէր ընդ ձեռամբ զամենայն ազատս թագաւորութեանն այնմ. եւ էր որդի մեծին Համտունոյ.

<sup>62</sup> There are other examples of the clergy assuming an active political role in Armenia in the wake of Seljuk conquests, although an overarching study is a *desideratum*. See Bořnazyan, *Armenia and the Seljuks*, 206. See also *supra* on the embassy of Barsegh of Ani to Sultan Malikshāh in 1080 to negotiate tax exemptions.



### 2.1 Bishop Hovhannēs Kapants'i and a local holy site

When Hovhannēs first arrived at the gorge of the river Gnishik, there was a holy site of local importance marked by a small church of Surb Karapet (Holy Precursor, i.e. John the Baptist), a structure dedicated to Patriarch Phocas, and an adjacent miraculous spring<sup>63</sup>. Although no specific study has been dedicated to this saint, a cult of Patriarch Phocas in Armenia, presumably referring to the first-century bishop of Sinope who was martyred under emperor Trajan, is barely attested in Armenian sources<sup>64</sup>. This is an intriguing *datum* regarding the limited geographical dissemination of St Phocas' cult.

In the absence of a local Christian ruler or patron Hovhannēs appealed to the Seljuk sultan, in Orbēlean's words "the king of the Persians Mahmut" who must be Maḥmud II b. Muḥammad (1118-1131), for protection<sup>65</sup>. In doing so, Hovhannēs followed a pattern established by his forefathers, both blood-relatives and spiritual peers. Moreover, Hovhannēs circumvented the presence of local *amirs* and appealed directly to the sultan, like king Senek'erim or Catholicos Barsegh Anets'i had done a generation before. From the sultan Hovhannēs received a *p'arman* (*farmān*) and a *manshūr* regarding the possession of "that location", i.e. the "deep and narrow" gorge<sup>66</sup>. The choice of Persian and Arabic technical terms reveals, once more, the knowledge and use of Muslim legal vocabulary and instruments in managing monastic lands and ensuring their special status.

Then, Hovhannēs expanded the confines of the area belonging to the church to incorporate estates that he took from the nearby villages of Tkharb and Gandzak (see Map). Unfortunately, we have no idea of the administrative situation of the villagers of Tkharb and Gandzak, as well as others in Vayots' Dzor. Did they pay taxes to some Seljuk representative, such as an *amir*? Had sultans granted these villages as an *iqṭā'* to anyone and if so when?<sup>67</sup> Or had they enjoyed a period of self-rule and freedom from taxes due to their relative isolation after the fall of the Bagratids, the withdrawal of Byzantine forces and a possible power vacuum during the Seljuk period? These questions can be answered only partially by our

<sup>63</sup> Step'anos Orbēlean, *History*, 346.

<sup>64</sup> For this identification see Stéphanos Orbélian, *Histoire de la Siounie*, trans. M. Brosset, St. Petersburg, 1864, 198, fn 2. Saint Phocas was the bishop of Sinope martyred at the time of Emperor Trajan c. 100. His feast was celebrated on September 22.

<sup>65</sup> Clifford Edmund Bosworth, "Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad b. Malik-Shāh", in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 6, ed. by Clifford Edmund Bosworth, Emeri van Donzel, et al., Leiden, 1991, 63-64; Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 90-95. See also note 69 below.

<sup>66</sup> Step'anos Orbēlean, *History*, 346.

<sup>67</sup> On such a practice see, for example, Bořnazyan, *Armenia and the Seljuks*, 227-228, 238; and Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 79-80.

sources; the study of the local dynamics of economic and political power are still an uncharted territory of research for this period and region. Step'anos Ōrbēlean's narrative alludes to some unwanted 'local elements' such as "women and insolent men" whom Hovhannēs Kapants'i wished to keep away by placing crosses as boundary-markers of the ecclesiastical territory he delineated. This implies that the alienation of land from the inhabitants of Gandzak and Tkharb was not necessarily welcomed by all, and the bishop needed a further official endorsement. Moreover, Bishop Hovhannēs needed the sultan's formal recognition of his rights to the jurisdiction of these lands as ecclesiastical, tax-exempt property also against at least two Muslim potentates. They controlled two fortresses in the area. Their connection to the Seljuks is uncertain.

According to Step'anos Ōrbēlean one of them was "Khazrik of Khorasan" possibly a Khorasani military man, who "caused trouble ... and wished to assassinate" Hovhannēs after the latter managed to get privileges from the sultan<sup>68</sup>. He could be one of the Khorasani men (or their descendant) placed by Malikshāh's famous *vizier* Nizam al-Mulk in various localities, although this must remain a hypothetical suggestion. This Khazrik had captured the fortress Hrasek (known also as Hrashkaber, see Map) not far from the gorge with the two churches where Hovhannēs had settled. Again, we do not know what the basis of Khazrik's claim to ownership of the fortress and settlements in the valley below were, but they directly clashed with bishop Hovhannēs' own plans on this same territory. Moreover, Khazrik must have been weary of the land becoming a *de facto* monastic endowment and free of taxes that would otherwise go to his coffers.

The behavior of both the military Khazrik and bishop Hovhannēs fit what I have repeatedly emphasized regarding the intensive competition on the local level. Step'anos Ōrbēlean allows us to enter a microworld of conflicting claims and identify agents of this competition, like Mas'ud ibn Namdār did for Baylaqan. Not only military or administrative élites, but also religious leaders, such as bishops and heads of monasteries, mobilized various means to control pockets of land and resources. How Hovhannēs solved the conflict he faced is interesting as another testimony of the kind of instruments Christian prelates had at their disposal to receive the sultan's backing and survive the local power-struggle, as well as of their adjustment to new political contexts, including new language skills. Step'anos Ōrbēlean was writing more than a hundred years after the events, surely

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<sup>68</sup> On the Khorasanians in the Seljuk army, administration, and among religious élites, see Bořnazyan, *Armenia and the Seljuks*, 200, 243; Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 9, 39, 201-202, 269-272; David Durand-Guédy, *Iranian Élites and Turkish Rulers: A History of Işfahān in the Saljūq Period*, London – New York, 2010.

summarizing oral traditions with which he must have been intimately familiar as a member of the clergy and then the bishop of Noravank' and Tat'ew (which he united under one seat). By then, the narrative was embellished with hagiographical elements that added a flavor of the miraculous and emphasized divine intervention<sup>69</sup>.

## 2.2 *A healing miracle at the court, land tenure in the provinces*

The opposition that bishop Hovhannēs faced compelled him to undertake another journey to Isfahan and on this occasion, we learn further revealing details about the social realities of the time and Hovhannēs' ability to take on multiple roles and act according to different 'hidden transcripts' to use James Scott's apt definition<sup>70</sup>. To travel to Isfahan unbeknownst to Khazrik of Khorasan, Hovhannēs Kapants'i dressed himself as a "Persian" by which our source means as a "Muslim". This was not hard for him, because, as Step'anos Ōrbēlean affirms, he was fluent "in their language", most likely Persian, although the term could refer to any language associated with Muslims, such as Arabic or Turkish. Once in Isfahan, a series of miraculous events came to his aid.

First, his arrival coincided with a moment of distress at the court. The sultan's son, whose name is not specified, was afflicted with an incurable ailment and bedridden. Then, upon Hovhannēs' entry to the city the sul-

<sup>69</sup> The story is narrated in Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 348-350. In order not to overburden the notes I will refrain from footnoting the same page on each occasion when I quote from the narrative. Grigoryan's affirmation that Khazrik of Khorasan wished to force bishop Hovhannēs to convert to Islam finds no corroboration in the source. See Girgor Grigoryan, *Syunik'ē Ōrbelyanneri ōrok' (XIII-XIV darrer)* [Syunik' under the Ōrbēleans (13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries)], Yerevan, 1981, 187. Grigoryan's identification of 'Sultan Maḥmud' as Shams al-Din Eldigüz's son Jahān Pahlavān Muḥammad (1175-1186) is erroneous, too. Bořnazyān (Bořnazyān, *Armenia and the Seljuks*, 231), on the other hand, identifies 'Maḥmud' with the previous sultan (and Maḥmud's father) Muḥammad Tapar (1105-1118). However, Step'anos Ōrbēlean gives the name 'Maḥmud' and not 'Muḥammad'. Although the historian Vardan Arewelts'i calls all sultans named either Muḥammad or Maḥmud as 'Mahmut', others, such as Samuēl Anets'i and Matt'ēos Urhayets'i refer to Muḥammad Tapar only as 'Tapar'. Matt'ēos Urhayets'i, *Chronicle*, 260 erroneously 'Sap'ar', but elsewhere (*Ibid.*, 324, 360, 372, 380-382) 'Tap'ar'; Vardan Arewelts'i, *Historical Compilation*, 108 again misspells the name as 'Sap'an' perhaps a sign that he and Matt'ēos Urhayets'i accessed the same source, possibly Hovhannēs Sarkawag. Vardan names Muḥammad 'Mahmut' (*Ibid.*, 96); at *Ibid.*, 97 both Muḥammad Tapar and his son Maḥmud appear as Mahmut/Mahmud, and at *Ibid.*, 113 he employs only the name 'Tapar'. Considering Step'anos Ōrbēlean's close knowledge of the local history of Noravank' and, in general, his penchant for accuracy, I take his indication of the name 'Mahmut' to be correct and to refer to Maḥmud II b. Muḥammad Tapar.

<sup>70</sup> On the 'hidden transcript' as a weapon of subversion on the part of the dominated, but also an indication of thorough familiarity and a shared culture between the dominated and the dominant see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, 1990.

tan's mother had a vision which informed her that the 'stranger' (այլընօրսար) who had come to Isfahan was a bishop with the name Hovhannēs. He alone possessed the power to heal her grandson, the vision concluded. Thus, rather than seeking audience with the sultan, the story designs a situation where it was the sultan at the bequest of his mother who sent a searching mission to the city to find the bishop. Moreover, once Hovhannēs entered the court, the sultan recognized him and 'prostrated to' or 'venerated' him. Yet, the choice of the words to express this 'veneration' — երկիր եպագ, literally 'he kissed the ground' — leaves room for interpretation regarding the level of intensity of the honors Hovhannēs received. Did the readers or hearers of the story imagine the sultan prostrating in front of this Armenian bishop? Such imaginative reconstructions would heighten Hovhannēs' role in the narrative and the fame of his sanctity.

In any event, the idea of a direct meeting with the sultan, whether real or invented, emphasizes once more the profound personal aspect of relationships at the Seljuk court and the importance of having established a prior connection with the sultan. Furthermore, the element of illness creates a suspended unit of time and space, a moment of liminality, where the reversal of political hierarchies was not only possible but necessary<sup>71</sup>.

Örbēlean's description of Hovhannēs' miracle of healing continues in the vein of highlighting his supernatural powers, his ability to make the most of the crisis situation and the beneficent effects of its resolution. The narrative employs, once again, most daring language: the bishop eased the child's pain "through apostolic powers" (առաքելական զօրութեամբ) and raised his moribund body from the bed by commanding "like God" (աստուածաբար). For a Christian audience such verbal formulations unmistakably traced a parallel between Hovhannēs' and Jesus' healing of a paralytic (Mark 2:1-12). But it also emphasized, once more, the superiority of the bishop's spiritual faculties over the sultan's secular jurisdiction and ability to grant land and villages. The sultan hardly came out as the dominant figure of this *historiola* or of this specific historical moment.

The narrative, thus, was fashioned in such a way as to turn around the roles of the grantor and the grantee: from a powerless subject of the sultan, with no military might or backing to press his case, in search of protection and legitimacy over land tenure, bishop Hovhannēs emerges as the main agent of the events. It was only after the performance of the miracle that the sultan asked the reason for his stay in Isfahan and when Hovhannēs brought forth his complaints, he had already established the moral upper hand thanks to his wonderworking. Hovhannēs, thus, shaped the events

<sup>71</sup> Victor Turner, "Betwixt and between: the liminal period in *rites de passage*," in Idem, *The Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca—London, 1967, 93-111.

both via practical action and miraculous healing powers granted to him by God and through the tradition of the apostolic charisma that a bishop ‘naturally’ possessed. Before asking for any favors from the sultan, he had established himself at the giving end of a future deal. The effect this sequence created in readers’ or hearers’ minds was the impression that it were the sultan and his mother who needed the bishop’s help rather than the other way round.

In fact, their gratitude (rather than a grant) was generous: upon the healing of the sultan’s son Hovhannēs received not only the fortress Hrasek that was the Khorasanian Khazrik’s property, but also another stronghold in the vicinity called Anapat with its twelve villages (see Map). This was conceded to him by the sultan’s mother, as Step’anos Ōrbēlean affirms. Previously, Anapat was controlled by another Seljuk subject, an unnamed *ghulām*<sup>72</sup>. He is the only other Muslim lord mentioned specifically as a local potentate. Bishop Hovhannēs returned from this second successful mission to sultan Maḥmud with another *farmān* and *manshūr*, as well as a *sigel* from the sultan’s mother, accompanied with soldiers who killed Khazrik’s family and dismantled the fortress Hrasek. Thus, Hovhannēs came out victorious from a regional struggle for the control of a specific patch of land which saw at least two other contenders. His success was due to the intrusion of the sultanic power, including of the sultan’s mother’s backing if we believe Step’anos Ōrbēlean, into the local power dynamics in favor of Hovhannēs. The latter’s role, however, was anything but negligible or submissive in the negotiations and Step’anos Ōrbēlean’s narrative took every efforts to emphasize this and Hovhannēs’ spiritual superiority.

Step’anos Ōrbēlean affirms that he himself had seen those ‘royal letters’ (արքունական նամակս) brought from Isfahan. They were rectified with multiple oaths and numerous anathemas against transgressors, whose verbal formulations are closely reminiscent of the anathemas we met in monastic endowment charters, aimed at a Christian and Muslim audience simultaneously. On this occasion too Step’anos cites such terms as *nalat*‘ (curse, anathema) and *apizar* (being cast away), hinting at the fact that these had become a part of a legal language in Syunik’ which Christians and Muslims shared. Moreover, his parallel use of the label *sigel*, obviously of Latin origin but mediated via Byzantine σιγίλλιον into Armenian, reveal

<sup>72</sup> Step’anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 349; Yeghiazaryan localizes the village Anapat and its fortress in an abandoned site in Agarakadzor: Yeghiazaryan, *Monuments*, 37. On the Seljuks’ control of conquered territories through various trusted *ghulāms* or dynasties that accepted, at least nominally, their overlordship, see Andrew Peacock, *Early Seljūq History. A New Interpretation*, London, 2010, 148; Bořnazyán, *Armenia and the Seljuks*, 242.

the entangled nature of legal concepts<sup>73</sup>. The Armenian bishops, familiar with previous and current practices and terminology acted as cultural brokers who needed and *could* ‘translate’ them into a new code. This continuous harmonizing of old and new will feature also in the next episode from the history of Noravank’, now under Hovhannēs’ successor — bishop Step’anos III. Thus, another element of struggle for authority and its legitimation that this episode sheds light on is, once more, the ability to use the written record and legal instruments as a tool in the competition between power holders and claimants to land.

### 2.3 *Hagiography, history, and recovering ‘invisible’ women*

The miraculous elements in the narrative of bishop Hovhannēs’ travel and deeds at the sultan’s court should not obstruct our view from the real-life, historical significance of his mission to Isfahan, as well as what the story can tell us about the Seljuk court and court politics and their reverberations on events and processes far away from the Seljuks’ center of power. Revealing the role of female actors, in other words recovering the ‘vanishing lady’, in this kaleidoscope of stake-holders — the sultan’s mother to be precise — in the *historiola* is a necessary task as well<sup>74</sup>.

Although there has been some disagreement among scholars as to the identity of the sultan, on both visits it must have been Maḥmud II (1118-1131), whose name is correctly recorded by Step’anos Ōrbēlean<sup>75</sup>. We cannot be certain who Maḥmud’s mother was and her part in the narrative is undeniably half-fictional. However, her active role in the story, including her ability to send an armed guard to help bishop Hovhannēs, as well as her possession of independent wealth, such as landed estates, that she could bequest to someone else, correspond well to what we know about Seljuk elite women, regardless of the historical accuracy of this particular episode. Although scholars have mined almost exclusively Islamic sources to reconstruct the history of Seljuk women<sup>76</sup>, Armenian material complements and completes them. Thus, even if we cannot identify the sultan’s

<sup>73</sup> Nicolas Oikonomides, “Sigillion”, in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 3, ed. by Alexander Kazhdan, New York – Oxford, 1991, 1893-1894.

<sup>74</sup> I am indebted to Kimberly LoPrete for her insights on the ‘vanishing’ lady — not as invisible in medieval sources as is generally presumed, but a great deal so in modern and contemporary scholarship, although the situation has certainly improved in the last few decades. Kimberly A. LoPrete, “Gendering viragos: medieval perceptions of powerful women”, in *Studies on Medieval and Early Modern Women 4: Victims or Viragos?*, ed. by Christine Meek and Catherine Lawless, Portland, 2005, 17-38; Eadem, “‘The Lady Vanishes’: Medieval Texts, Modern Historians and Lordly Women”, *Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae* 19 (2014), 55-110.

<sup>75</sup> See note 69.

<sup>76</sup> Lambton, *Continuity and Change*, 258-296; Hillenbrand, “Women in the Seljuq Period”; Hanne, “Women, Power”; Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 178-181.

mother, we can compare her to what we know about one of Muḥammad Tapar's (Maḥmud's father's) wives: Gawhar Khat'un. She was the daughter of Ismail b. Yaquti — a cousin of Malikshāh and of the first Seljuk *malik* of Ādharbaydjān, Arrān, and Armenia, who was as much favored in Armenian sources as Malikshāh, as we saw above. According to Matt'ēos Urhayets'i when Sultan Muḥammad Tapar felt his death approaching, he ordered to assassinate Gawhar Khatun. Then, scandalized Matt'ēos tells us with a tinge of regret that she was “a highborn [lady] who possessed a large host” (*մեծազգի եւ բազում զորաց տէր*) and held a lavish court that brought together “four hundred virgins — beautiful girls from all nations, who waited on her adorned in amazing beauty, with gems, pearls and Arabic gold, and crowns on their heads and braids of their heads embellished with gold and all sorts of splendid jewels of multiple colors, [who] shone in front of her”<sup>77</sup>. The typical description of a lavish court owned and run by a sultan's wife (or mother) finds parallels in other sources and seems to reflect the realities on the ground. Then, Matt'ēos Urhayets'i explains that Muḥammad wished to prevent Gawhar Khatun's marriage to one of his brothers after his death, bringing the latter to the throne to the detriment of Muḥammad's sons. This appears to be entirely plausible given the practice of levirate marriage among the Seljuks. The historian Isfahani, on the other hand, stereotypically accuses Gawhar Khatun of witchcraft and attributes her assassination to her own misdeeds<sup>78</sup>.

Matt'ēos Urhayets'i's testimony confirms what we know about élite Seljuk women who commanded their own military forces, possessed independent wealth, and *iqṭā*'s, thus combining their role in the center of imperial power with their ability to impact local politics. A sultan's mother's capacity to send soldiers to recover land was not a farfetched claim. If it were Gawhar Khatun who sustained Bishop Hovhannēs, given her father's and brother's jurisdiction over conquered Armenian territories, she herself could have owned land in Armenia, including in Syunik' or even Vayots' Dzor. This, however, is a speculation and cannot be taken any further than a possible hypothesis. If this story were to represent a real situation, then we would have to hypothesize the sultan's mother's involvement in regional affairs and her displeasure with a local *amir*, such as Khazrik, who controlled the fortress Hrased or the *ghulam* who owned the fortress Anapat.

<sup>77</sup> Matt'ēos Urhayets'i, *Chronicle*, 372: *եւ սա յամենայն ազգաց գեղեցիկ աղջկունս էր ժողովեալ՝ կուսանս շորս հարիւր, որ կային յոտն առաջի նորա զարդարեալ գեղեցիկ զարմանալեօք, յականց եւ ի մարգարտաց՝ հանդերձ արաբացի ոսկւով, եւ թագ ի գլուխսն, եւ հիւսեակ գլխոյն զարդարեալ ոսկւով եւ ամենայն սքանչելի զարդարանօք ի գոյնս գոյնս, փայլէին առաջի նորա.*

<sup>78</sup> See note 40.

She gave preference to a harmless Christian bishop than a potentially rebellious military man. To be fair, such very specific details are hypothetical, especially because Matt'ēos Urhayets'i asserts that Gawhar Khatun died childless. Nevertheless, the general contours of the story have all the elements of being realistic.

Sultan Maḥmud's last regnal year serves as a *terminus ad quem* for the creation of a special status in this corner of Vayots' Dzor due to Hovhannēs Kapants'i's activities. Like in the case of king Senek'erim's monastic endowments to Tat'ew, also here bishop Hovhannēs must have achieved the status of *waqf* for his seat and its landholdings, making them inalienable and immune to pretensions from Muslims or Christians. Because during the second visit Maḥmud is said to have had a son whom Hovhannēs healed, it must have taken place some years after the sultan's accession which occurred when he was fourteen. This would take us to 1120s and we may interpret Sultan Maḥmud's conciliatory attitude to Hovhannēs as due to his worries elsewhere, i.e. fighting the ever-growing power of the Georgian Bagratid King David IV the Builder (1073-1125) or his own family members contesting his authority. Due to dynastic strife and power struggle between members of the Seljuk family Maḥmud held only the title 'Sultan of Iraq', while his uncle Sanjar (1118-1157) was declared the senior sultan, based in Khorasan<sup>79</sup>. Perhaps this is why Maḥmud was willing to retaliate against a Khorasani military man who had established himself in the fortress of Hrased<sup>80</sup>. The storming of Syunik's fortresses in 1120s that we saw above, possibly carried out by military men or nomadic chiefs that felt no loyalty or allegiance to the sultan, could well have been yet another of Maḥmud's worries and reason for his preference to support Hovhannēs. The two Seljuk subjects who were the adversaries of the bishop are not attested elsewhere and their identity remains unknown. We therefore cannot establish with any further precision Maḥmud's (or his mother's) motives when siding with bishop Hovhannēs Kapants'i beyond what has been said above. A Christian bishop was clearly less of a threat to a sultan's supremacy than various, possibly unruly, Seljuk *amirs* who nested in the mountains of Armenia.

<sup>79</sup> Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 90-107.

<sup>80</sup> Margarian, *Northern Armenia and Georgia*, 56. Clifford Edmund Bosworth, "The Political and Dynastic History of the Iranian World (A.D. 1000-1217)", in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 5, *The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*, ed. by John A. Boyle, Cambridge, 1968, 1-202, here 119-121; and Ann Lambton, "The Internal Structure of the Saljuq Empire", in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 5, *The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*, ed. by John A. Boyle, Cambridge, 1968, 203-282, here 221-222.



#### 2.4 Bishop Hovhannēs' successor and the continued importance of Noravank'

Hovhannēs died before 1168, despite another notice in Step'anos Ōrbēlean's *History* that places it impossibly too late, i.e. in 1214<sup>81</sup>. His successor Bishop Step'anos III (1168-1216) continued the policy of expansion and consolidation of his bishopric's hold on territories in Vayots' Dzor, now dealing with the powerful *atabeg* Shams al-Dīn Eldigüz (1136-1175). Step'anos Ōrbēlean specifies that their relationship started when the *atabeg* had married the "mother of the sultan", i.e. the widow of Sultan Tughril II of Iraq and western Persia (r. 1132-1134). After marrying her Shams al-Dīn brought to the throne her son and his *protégé* Arslan Shah (Mu'izz al-Dīn Arslan, 1161-1176)<sup>82</sup>.

To assert his authority and legitimacy over his bishopric's landholdings, Step'anos produced the *manshūr* that his predecessor Hovhannēs had received from Sultan Maḥmud, yet another reminder of the crucial value of written record, and acquired a new one from the *atabeg*. Now, in addition to the gorge of Noravank', he was granted also the gorge of Agarak and confirmed the possession of all the "land, water, the orchard, the village and the fortress of Anapat" in perpetuity and free of taxes. Subsequently, these privileges were confirmed also by the Armenian *Catholicos* Grigor Tghay (1173-1193) whose seat was in faraway Hromkla (Rumkale), in the Cilician realm<sup>83</sup>.

Bringing all the dates into synchrony, Step'anos III's activities regarding the status of his bishopric upon his accession took place in the first five years of the 1170s, thus immediately following the fall of the fortress Bagh. The socio-political and ecclesiastical circumstances required him to adopt two modes of securing the ecclesiastical jurisdiction and control of landed estates. He not only acknowledged a double authority — of the sultan and the Armenian *catholicos* — but also met the need to address a double audience with different even if overlapping conceptions of legitimation: the local Muslim and Christian pretenders to the same land. This is reflected also in the narrative details reported by Step'anos Ōrbēlean. On the oc-

<sup>81</sup> Step'anos Ōrbēlean gives two different dates of Hovhannēs Kapants'i's death. On one occasion he implies that the latter was dead before 1168 (Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 342), but on another occasion he says that he passed away in 1214 (Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 354). Given this incongruity the modern translator and commentator of this historical work A. Abrahamyan suggested that Step'anos Ōrbēlean conflated two different Hovhannēs, but that the celebrated Hovhannēs Kapants'i must have been dead by 1168. See Step'anos Ōrbēlean [Ōrbēlean], *Syunik'i patmut'yun [History of Syunik]*, trans. and comm. by Ashot Abrahamyan, Yerevan, 1986, 493 note 1042, and 498 note 1099.

<sup>82</sup> Bosworth, *Islamic Dynasties*, 115; Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 112.

<sup>83</sup> Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History*, 354-355; Boynazyan, *Armenia and the Seljuks*, 231, places the event in 1174 which is likely.

casation of bishop Step'anos III's reception of a "writing with a *tughra*<sup>84</sup>, a *farman* and a *manshur*", he specifies that this is "what we call *sigel*", i.e. a *sigillum*. This explanation affirms once more not only the ability but also the necessity of harmonizing different but comparable legal traditions with their specific terminology. In this process the bishops were the cultural brokers that could negotiate and take advantage of convergences between these traditions. Bishop Step'anos successfully employed all his diplomatic skills, appealing both to the force of earlier agreements and his personal connections to secure the landholdings of his seat. As the real power was now in the hands of the Eldigüzids, the old agreements had to be ratified once more. Whether because he was better equipped to push his case with the Eldigüzids vs Hovhannēs Kapants'i at the Great Seljuk court, or the Eldigüzids were less secure of their legitimacy to hold power and wished to gratify local clients in symbolically more enticing ways, Step'anos also received the honorific title of "Fakhrelmseh" (Fakhr al-Masiḥ), or "glory of Christ (Messiah)"<sup>85</sup>. In addition, this was a sign of his willingness to integrate and rely on a Seljuk or Seljuk-inspired court culture and titulature. Step'anos III will continue to shape the history of Syunik' in a completely altered situation, when the Zak'arids from northern Armenia expanded their control over these lands. He will play a key role in supporting a new ruling dynasty in Syunik' — the Orbēleans. Well aware of the importance of women and matrimonial strategies as a political tool, particularly for the establishment of new claimants in a local landscape and possibly wishing to rein them in, he arranged the marriage between his sister Khat'un and Elikum Ōrbēlean. It will be Step'anos to aid their young son Liparit escape Nakhichevan, settle in Vayots' Dzor and become the effective forefather of the Armenian branch of the Ōrbēleans whose rule marked the apex of Late Medieval Syunik'<sup>86</sup>. This, however, is a different story.

### 3. Conclusions

Thanks to the *History of the Region of Sisakan* finished c. 1297, authored by the erudite bishop of Syunik', the active political and spiritual leader Step'anos Ōrbēlean, it is possible to reconstruct a local history of Syunik' as part of Eurasian transformations set in motion upon the arrival of the Seljuks on the historical scene and place the rise of the Noravank' monas-

<sup>84</sup> In the Seljuk period the *tughra* was a stylized bow and arrow representing the Sultan's name. Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 127-128 with further bibliography.

<sup>85</sup> Step'anos Ōrbēlean, *History of Sisakan*, 342.

<sup>86</sup> The history of the Ōrbēleans in Syunik', with a particular focus on Vayots' Dzor, is the subject of a forthcoming article by the present author: Pogossian, "Vayots' Dzor".

tery from a nucleus of holy sites to a major religious center in this context. Unlike the rulers of the Kingdom of Vaspurakan in south-eastern Armenia or the Bagratids in the north who had abdicated and bequeathed their territories to the Byzantine Empire, Syunik's kings were able to take a different path. Their remoteness from Constantinople meant that Byzantine forces did not manage to expand that far to the east of Armenia in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, before or during Seljuk incursions. This allowed the kings of Syunik' to maintain their titles and armed contingents longer, and therefore to continue to play a meaningful role in the regional politics. This included both military resistance and diplomatic maneuvering, which could be viewed as accommodation, between new small- to medium-scale, regional challengers in some way associated with the Seljuks and the Seljuk court, in a bid to maintain their territories, titles and legitimacy against their competitors. Like the Bagratid kings of Georgia Giorgi II or of Lori Kyurikē II, the King of Syunik' Senek'erim too traveled to Isfahan to negotiate a deal with Sultan Malikshāh. The peace agreement may have included a marriage alliance between Senek'erim's daughter and a Seljuk court official (the cup-bearer Ch'ort'man), which was yet another tool in the fierce political and military competition at the local level. Although the marriage did not materialize, this and other evidence allows us to reinstate the elite women, Armenian or Seljuk, in the various processes of the time, from their role in economic transactions as donors of monasteries, to their centrality in political alliances and as agents of legitimation via marriages. As a byproduct the article highlights the significance of Armenian sources and what they can tell us about women's involvement in the Seljuk court.

Furthermore, the paper emphasizes that in a post-conquest context and fractured political landscape monastic endowments acquired a whole new significance. This is key for appreciating the specific situation that led to the expansion of monastic lands belonging to or acquired by Noravank' in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and its emergence as a major religious center, eventually becoming the seat of a bishop. While in those parts of Armenia where in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century there lacked strong local military elites bishops took on the responsibility of negotiating tax exemptions for ecclesiastical landed estates and dealt directly with the Great Seljuk sultans, in Syunik' this policy was initially carried out by the king. Monastic donation charters issued at the time of King Senek'erim discussed in the paper are vital sources for reconstructing this history and appreciating the impact of Senek'erim's and his dependents' donations, as well as the long-term consequences of this practice. However, once Senek'erim was murdered — an event precipitated by a breakdown in a complex web of alliances between Muslim and Christian lords upon Sultan Malikshāh's death — the

task of securing land grants or privileges, and becoming local land-owners competing for territory control, fell to monasteries and bishops also in Syunik'. In this paper I traced the active engagement of Bishop Hovhannēs Kapants'i, as well as the efficacious continuation of his policies by his successor Bishop Step'anos III, aimed at establishing a distinct, protected status in a valley in Vayots' Dzor, Syunik', in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and securing the landholdings of Noravank's monastic estates through sultan edicts.

When viewing these bishops' religious-political activities one is struck by their versatility in conversing with different audiences and moving between diverse linguistic, cultural, religious, and legal milieus. They were comfortable at the court of the Great Seljuk sultans and their *atabegs*, just as they were naturally at home within the hierarchy of their native Armenian church. They used different legal instruments, as well as spiritual resources they possessed, such as miraculous healing powers, to confirm their jurisdiction over the estates of their bishoprics/monasteries and even expanded them. Although like in the case of the endowments to the monastery of Tat'ew by Senek'erim, his sister, and his vassal Hasan, Step'anos Ōrbēlean does not use the term *waqf* regarding Noravank', this must have been the legal status granted to this institution and its landholdings by Seljuk authorities. This juridical condition and the successful negotiations at the Seljuk then Eldigüzid courts by Bishops (and abbots) Hovhannēs and Step'anos III explain why in 1170s when the Seljuk conquest of Siwnik' was completed, many Armenian princes or prelates, including bishop Hovhannēs' own brother Hamtun, fled to Vayots' Dzor. A 'renaissance' of late medieval Syunik', due to the newly arrived dynasty of the Ōrbēleans will start precisely from this small gorge in Vayots' Dzor — the gorge of the Monastery of Noravank'.

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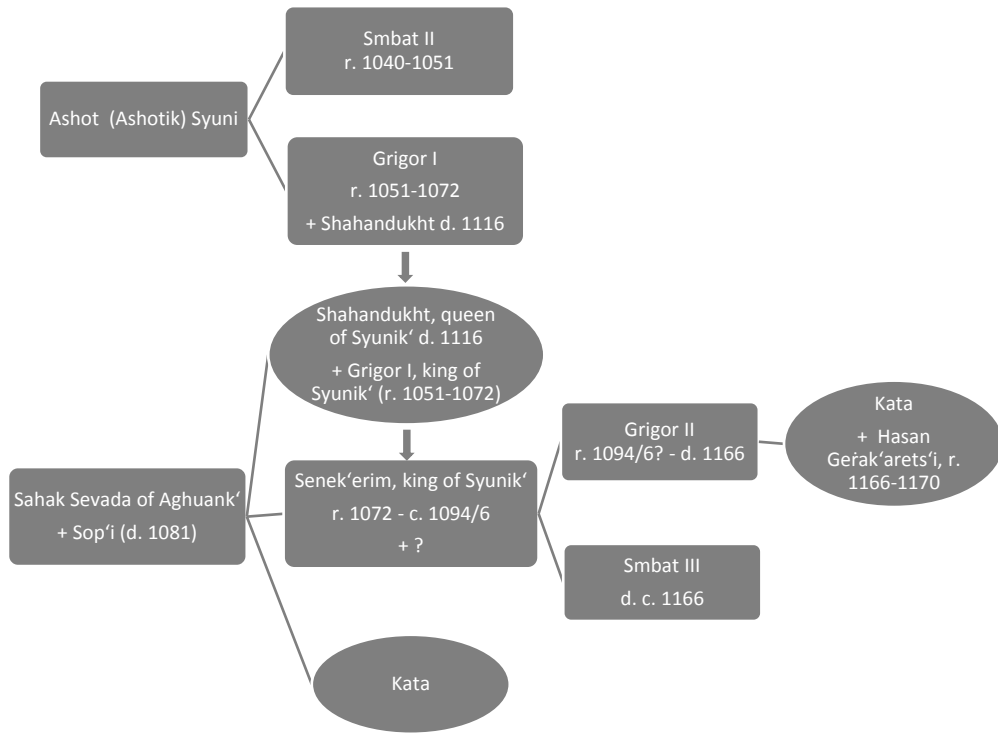
#### SUMMARY

The article analyzes the rise of the Noravank' Monastery in Vayots' Dzor (region of Syunik', Armenia) as a major holy site in the period of Seljuk incursions and conquest of Armenia in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries. This political-military context, on the one hand, caused a highly competitive, volatile, and often violent dynamics between the local Armenian nobility and the newly arrived military men in some way connected to the Seljuks. On the other hand, there were put in place strategies of accommodation and containment of violence, among them

partially overlapping legal practices regarding pious foundations. I argue that the patronage and land grants to monasteries by Armenian military and religious élites were one of the strategies of resistance and accommodation to Seljuk rule, efforts to maintain the inalienability of land and control of territory, as well as a means of positioning themselves in the factional struggles at the local and/or regional level versus the Seljuk court in Isfahan. In the first part of the paper this hypothesis is tested through a detailed study of the actions and death of king Senek'erim of Syunik' (1072-1094/6), his relationship to the sultan Malikshāh (1073-1092), and his endowments to the monastery of Tat'ew that are compared to the Muslim tradition of *waqf*. In the second part, I look at bishop Hovhannēs Kapants'i's efforts to establish a tax-exempt status on and expand the lands belonging to the monastery of Noravank' with the support of the Seljuk court. This is done through the analysis of a *historiola* reported by the 13<sup>th</sup>-century historian Step'anos Ōrbelean. It details Hovhannēs Kapants'i's voyage to Isfahan, his miraculous healing of the sultan's son, and his use of the written record in establishing rights to land-control and its use. Hovhannēs' actions eventually led to the transformation of a local holy site to the major religious center of Noravank'. Lastly, the article highlights the importance of élite women (Armenian or Seljuk) in situations of contested authority and legitimacy of titles, as well as their role as economic agents.

Key words: medieval Armenia, Syunik', Seljuks, monasteries, *waqf*, women's history

Appendix 1

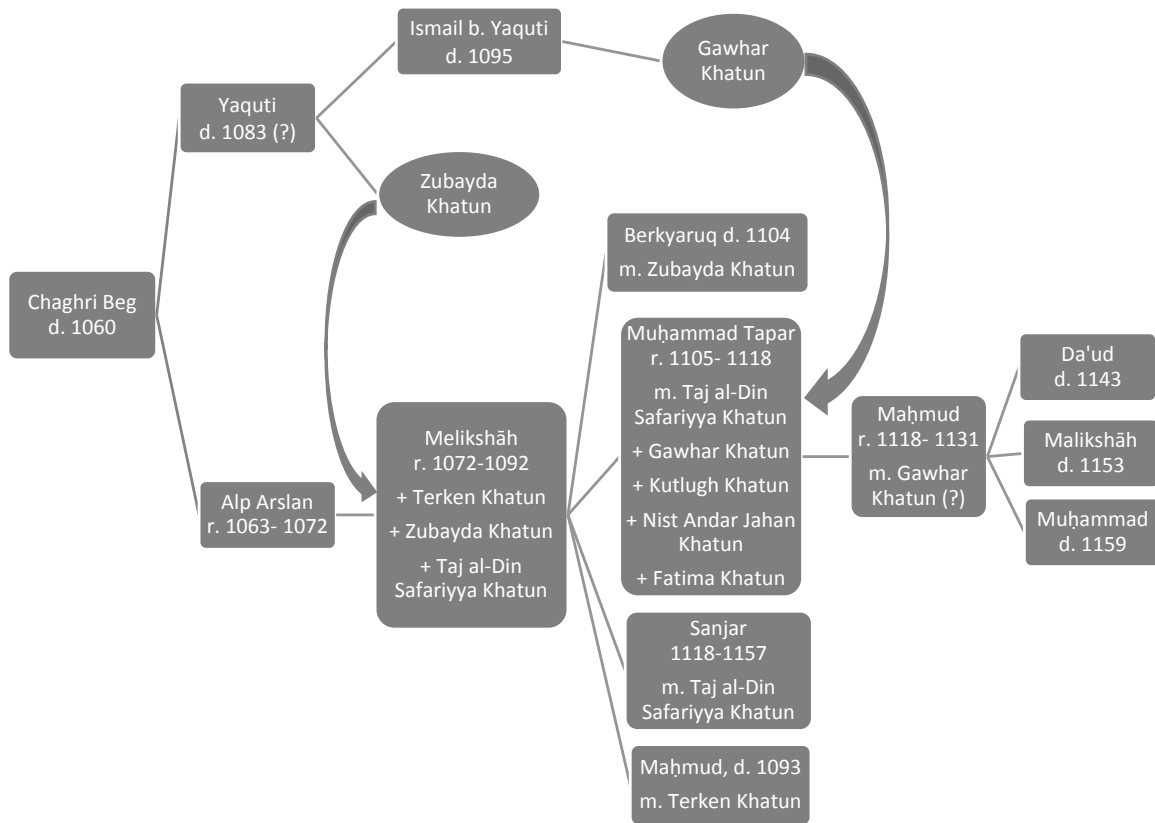


Genealogical Table of the Kings of Syunik'

- + spouse
- r. years of rulership
- d. year of death

NB: The table does not aim to be complete. The information and persons included are those that are relevant for the discussions in the article.

Appendix 2



Genealogical Table 1: A Simplified genealogy of the Seljuk family

+ spouse  
 r. years of rule  
 d. year of death  
 m. mother

NB: The table does not aim to be complete. The information and persons included in the chart are those that are relevant for the discussions in the article.

## Appendix 3

**Kings of Syunik'**

Senek'erim	1072-1094/96
Grigor II	1094/06-1166 (?)
Hasan Gerak'arets'i	1166-1170

**Seljuk Sultans**

Malikshāh	1073-1092
Muḥammad Tapar	1105-1118
Maḥmud b. Muḥammad Tapar	1118-1131
Sultan Tughril II of Iraq and western Persia	1132-1134

**Maliks or amirs** of Arrān, Ādharbaydjān and (parts of) Armenia

Amir Sawtegin	1075-1085
Malik Ismail b. Yaquti	1083-1092
Malik Muḥammad Tapar	1092-1105

**Eldigüzids**

Shams al-Dīn Eldigüz	1136-1175
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**Bishops/abbots**

Hovhannēs VII, bishop, abbot of Tat'ew	1006-1058
Grigor IV, bishop, abbot of Tat'ew	1058-1116
Step'anos II, bishop, abbot of Tat'ew	1116-1143
Hovhannēs Kapants'i, bishop, abbot of Vahanavank'	
Re-founder of Noravank'	1105- c. 1168
Step'anos III, bishop, abbot of Noravank'	1168-1216