



New Evidence on Two Female Members of the Georgian Royal Family at the Safavid Court of Iran According to the Work of Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani (First Quarter of the 17 th Century)¹³

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Abstract

The newly discovered third volume of **Afzal al-Tawarikh**, a work by the 17th-century Iranian historian Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani, covers the reign of Shah ‘Abbas I (1587–1629).

As a highly significant source, it is valuable not only for the study of Safavid Iran (1501–1722), but also substantially enriches the broader understanding of the history of Georgia and the Caucasus region. The author, who lived and worked in Georgia for an extended

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period, provides valuable and previously unknown information about Georgia and the Georgians.

Based on Fazli Beg Khuzani's chronicle, the article discusses the role of two Georgian royal women of this period—Lela-Elene, sister of Luarsab II (1606–1615), and Elene, sister of Teimuraz I (1606–1648)—whose influence is clearly visible in political life both in Georgia and at the Safavid court.

Keywords: Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani; Shah 'Abbas I; Georgian women; Elene; Lela-Elene.

Introduction

The notable role of Georgian women at the Safavid court has repeatedly become a subject of scholarly research. Georgian, Iranian, and Western scholars note that Georgian women held a special place in the harem of the shahs of the Safavid and other dynasties.

“Shah 'Abbas I did not limit himself to territorial conquests and the resettlement of his population in newly acquired lands; he strengthened Safavid positions in the Caucasus and more closely tied the local elite to the Safavid state through dynastic marriages. Even before Shah 'Abbas's accession to the throne, a tradition of marriage between Safavid shahs and Georgian kings had already been established, which Shah 'Abbas continued” (Maeda 2012: 477); “Georgian women played an important role in the Shah's dynastic marriage policy, and by the end of Safavid rule, an entire network of such relationships had already been formed” (Matthee 2001: 493–496); “The rivalry between Georgian and Circassian women in the shah's harem led to dynastic confrontations and conflicts based on ethnic motives — a phenomenon previously unknown to the Safavid state” (Savory 1986: 363).

Pietro della Valle notes that the number of Georgians enslaved in Persia was so great that “there was not a single household in all of Persia that was not filled with such Georgians, both men and women. There is no nobleman there who would not wish all his women to be Georgian, for they are beautiful” (della Valle 1879: 49).

There are quite many similar accounts emphasizing the beauty of Georgian women and their importance at the royal court of the shahs; however, historical sources that document their involvement in political vicissitudes, as well as evidence of their strength and influence, are indeed rare. It is precisely such a historical source containing unique information that is represented by the third volume of **Afzal al-Tawarikh**¹⁴ by the Iranian historian Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani¹⁵.

Afzal al-Tawarikh is an important source not only for the study of the Safavid period Iran (1501–1722), but also researching the history of Georgia and the Caucasus region, more broadly. The above-mentioned work presents certain vicissitudes in the history of Georgia during the 16th–17th centuries in an entirely new light. It contains

¹⁴ Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani served as the vizier of the ruler of Kakheti, Peykar Khan, during the period of Qizilbash domination, and appears as an eyewitness to many of the contemporary events in Safavid Iran and Georgia.

¹⁵ The historical work of the 17th-century Iranian historian Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani, "Afzal al-Tawarikh" (The Beautiful History), focuses on the reign of Shah Abbas I. This text represents the third part of Fazli's long-lost chronicle, which was later published in an academic edition in 2015 (A chronicle of the reign of Shah Abbas"; Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani, Edited by Kioumars Ghereghlou. With an introduction by Kioumars Ghereghlou and Charles Melville. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2015). The information concerning Georgia was published in 2025 - 'Pazli Khuzani Espahanis tsnobebi sakartvelos shesakheb' (Informatin of Fazli Khuzani Isfahani about Georgia). Translated from Persian, with study and commentary by Tamar Lekveishvili. Ilia State University, 2025.

numerous facts previously unknown to Georgian historiography (Lekveishvili, 2022: 103).

Based on Fazli Beg Khuzani's work, the article examines the role of two Georgian royal women of this period—Lela-Elene, sister of Luarsab II (r. 1606–1615), and Elene, sister of Teimuraz I (r. 1606–1648)-whose influence is clearly visible in politics at both - Georgian and Safavid court.

Method

In the course of preparing this article, comparative method of the historical research was employed, which involves identifying cause-and-effect relationships, highlighting the main characteristics of processes, and analyzing them. It also includes the comparison and reconciliation of data from primary and secondary sources in order to draw overall conclusions.

Discussion

Lela-Elene was the daughter of Giorgi X, the King of Kartli (1600–1606), and the sister of Luarsab II (King of Kartli 1606–1615). In Georgian sources, she is often called Tinatin.¹⁶ The chronicler Beri Egnatashvili writes: 'And when little Luarsab became king, then Shah 'Abbas requested Tinatin as a wife. And he gave Tinatin as a wife to Shah 'Abbas' (Beri Egnatashvili 1954: 383).

According to the account of Vakhushti Bagrationi, Shah 'Abbas asked King Luarsab for his sister Tinatin as a wife, and then brought this girl with great honor¹⁷ (Vakhushti Bagrationi 1973: 420). It should also be noted that in 1605, Russian ambassadors requested Lela-

¹⁶ See: K. Kekelidze (1957). *Kartveli Kalebi Shah-Abaz Pirvelis Karze. Etiudebi Dzveli Kartuli Literaturis Istoriidan 4*. Tbilisi: Tbilisis sakhelmtsipo Universiteti.

¹⁷ Korneli Kekelidze notes that this is a case of error: Luarsab's sister was not named Tinatin, and the reference here is in fact to Lela. The name Tinatin belonged to the sister of Teimuraz I of Kakheti, who was married to Safi I of (1611–1642) and whom Teimuraz himself had sent to him (Kekelidze 1957: 220).

Elene's hand for the son of Boris Godunov, King of Russia. They asked King Giorgi: 'Will you give your daughter to the Russian prince? How old is your daughter? What does she look like?' (Белокуров 1889: 470). From the history of Georgia, it is known that this marriage did not take place.

According to Parsadan Gorgijanidze (he correctly indicates this woman's name), "King Giorgi had two daughters, the older – Lela, whom the Shah named Sultan Begum and married (Kakabadze 1926/25: 20). It is known for the history of Georgia that in 1622, Lela-Elene was given to Paykar Khan by Shah 'Abbas (Alasania 1980: 85; Jamburia 1973: 277).

Another Georgian royal princess is Elene, the daughter of Davit I (King of Kakheti, 1601-1602) and the sister of Teimuraz I (1606-1648).

In August 1604, Russian envoys also arrived in Kakheti. They demanded Prince Giorgi to swear allegiance to the Tsar of Russia and, at the same time, were tasked with selecting a bride for the son of Boris Godunov, as well as a suitable groom for his daughter. For this purpose, they intended to take Prince Teimuraz to Russia. However, Giorgi refused to comply with the envoys' demands.

At that time, the shah's envoy, Mohamad Beg, had already been in Kakheti for several months and was attempting to take Teimuraz I of Kakheti and his sister Elene to Iran. A large part of the Kakhetian nobility also opposed alignment with Russia. Aleksandre, too, recognized the complexity of the situation and sought a solution. With his consent, Giorgi sent Teimuraz and Elene to Iran; according to the Russian envoys' account, Elene was married to Shah 'Abbas (Belokurov 1889:492). However, the same source also states that in 1604 the Shah raped the granddaughter of King Aleksandre (Belokurov 1889:

500). The fact that Elene was at Shah ‘Abbas’s court in 1604 is also supported by Fazli’s chronicle, which we will discuss below.

According to Vakhushti Batonishvili, because of the death of his wife in 1610, “Teimuraz experienced great sorrow and mourning”, after which still-grieving Teimuraz appeared before the Shah at the request of the latter and “handed over his brother, captives and his sister” (Batonishvili Vakhushti 1973:584). It was during this visit, which can be dated as 1611 (as K. Kekelidze suggests (Kekelidze 1957: 218)), that Elene appeared at a Shah’s court for the second time.

Fazli Khuzani describes the events of 1604 and 1611 and recounts how the women of Teimuraz’s family were taken to the Shah.

As mentioned above, according to the Russian envoys, Shah ‘Abbas “violated” Elene. K. Kekelidze notes: “She is undoubtedly the daughter of Davit, King of Kakheti, and without doubt Teimuraz’s sister. There is also no doubt that the Russian envoys meant this very sister, Elene, since Teimuraz apparently had no other sister. Most likely, this unfortunate woman was first sent to the Shah in 1604, and he demanded her again in 1611” (Kekelidze 1957:218).

Iskander Beg Monshi writes that in the year 1013 AH (1604/1605), Teimuraz and his brother Keshish, together with some women of their family, came to the royal camp in service of the Shah (Puturidze 1969:44). He also notes that in the same year, Aleksandre’s “other children and the women of this family who were in the royal camp received permission to depart and traveled together with the father and son to their homeland” (Puturidze 1969:46).

According to Fazli Beg Khuzani, the events of the year 1013 AH (1604/1605) are described as follows: ‘In accordance with the royal command, Konstantine Khan and Zulfiqar Khan, having been honored with the Shah’s gracious favor, went from Tabriz to Ardabil. The

son of Giorgi, ¹⁸Teimuraz Khan (*Tahmuras Khan*), the elder brother of Konstantine Khan, appeared before His Majesty together with the girl (his sister) who had been brought as a bride for His Majesty.’ (Fazli 2015:372).

Fazli Beg Khuzani also recounts the events of the year 1019 AH (1610/1611). He describes how, by the order of Shah ‘Abbas I, Allah-verdi Khan Undiladze hosted the Georgian nobles, where “His Majesty — the exalted one of the world, the sphere of the heavens and the shadow of Allah — would arrive at the place of their feast upon returning from the hunt,” and where Teimuraz’s sister, the Queen’s daughter, appeared once again (Fazli 2015:545).

The banquet is described at considerable length and in great detail: “These people were received splendidly and incomparably in the royal tent, and together with them, along with her daughters and other accompanying women, entered the mother of Teimuraz Khan (Queen Ketevan).

At this gathering, alongside with precious Georgian wine, there was also pure Shirazi wine. There were musicians, Georgian singers, and jesters. This paradise-like feast was a sight to behold for everyone ...

And after beholding the mother of Teimuraz Khan, the Queen, as well as the Georgian women and girls accompanying her — some of whom were already in the service of His Majesty — it was decided that all Georgians, whether long present or newly arrived, were to sit in the Khan’s banquet and, according to Georgian custom, sing, dance, and conduct the festivities” (Fazli 2015:545).

¹⁸ The author is mistaken: Teimuraz I of Kakheti was the son of Davit I of Kakheti, while Giorgi was his uncle.

As already noted:

a) According to Iskander Beg Monshi, in 1604 “the women of King Aleksandre’s family” appeared before the Shah. Based on this passage, it may be assumed that Elene herself may have been among the “women of King Aleksandre’s family.”

b) According to Fazli Beg Khuzani, in 1604/1605 Teimuraz Khan appeared before His Majesty and gave his sister in marriage. According to Fazli’s work, Elene was still the Shah’s wife in 1614:

“Teimuraz Khan, the Vali of Georgia, is a vassal of this exalted dynasty. And since his sister is the wife of His Majesty, he (His Majesty) came to hunt in his (Teimuraz’s) Velayat” (Fazli 2015:635).

c) According to the work of Kamal ben Jalal Monajjem Yazdi as well, in 1604/1605 Teimuraz gave his sister in marriage to Shah ‘Abbas I (Yazdi 1397:236).

A noteworthy and highly important account is found in the work of Jalal al-Din Monajjem Yazdi regarding the year 1013 AH (1604/1605): “The son of Davud Khan, Teimuraz Khan — who was also called Bedve Mirza — arrived together with his cleric brother Abash Parva, his mother, and his sister. On the second night, the girl was given to His Majesty in a **sigheh** (temporary marriage). Sheikh Baha al-Din Mohammad performed the **sigheh** ceremony” (Yazdi 1366:268).

If we take the **sigheh** marriage into account, it may be assumed that the “violation” reported by the Russian envoys refers precisely to this event. In this particular case, the differing attitudes toward the

same fact may be explained by the authors' differing worldview perspectives in interpreting the event. The issue is that the Russian author evaluated this instance of "temporary marriage" (**sigheh**) according to the standards of an Orthodox Christian. From the perspective of Christian ethics, such a practice was unacceptable to the Russian deacon and was regarded as equivalent to an act of violence ("having dishonored her, he sent her away" (*опозорив, отослал от себя*)). For the Persian Shi'i author, however, **sigheh** was a lawful form of marriage consistent with the norms of Sharia, essentially no different from the principal form of marriage.

As can be seen from the work of Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani, Elene was in Iran from 1604/1605 onward and, as already noted, is mentioned several times up until 1620 as the Shah's wife.

In the year 1029 AH (1620), Fazli Beg Khuzani writes: "The honor of becoming a son-in-law was also granted to the Beglar-begi of Karabakh, Mohammad Quli Khan, and he took as his wife the sister of Teimuraz Khan" (Fazli 2015:790).

In his chronicle, Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani also writes about Lela-Elene and Elene in a different context. Here, the author emphasizes the strength and influence of these two women. Similar information is not found neither in Georgian, nor other foreign sources: "The sister of Tahmuraz Khan, who belonged to the ranks of the noble ladies of the Shah's harem, became strongly determined to rescue her brother and the Georgians of Kakheti from Paykar Khan, to incite rebellion, and to direct affairs toward the capture of Van" (Fazli 2015: 889).

As for Luarsab Khan's sister, Lela-Elene, Fazli Beg Khuzani emphasizes the significant role of hers and recounts the great respect she commanded from the Shah: "Because Luarsab Khan had a long-standing enmity with the Qazakhlar Sultans, who were the rulers of

the velayats of Lur and Panbak, despite the order that the seeds of hostility and discord should be removed and love and goodwill established between them, Luarsab nevertheless invited Mohammad Qazakhlar to a banquet in Tbilisi and killed him. And although the death of Khan Mohammad provoked His Majesty's displeasure, this incident did not create significant tension because Luarsab Khan's sister held an honorable position in the Shah's harem," (Fazli 2015: 610). This occurred in the year 1021 AH (1612/1613).

"...It is possible that Teimuraz Khan, who has been removed from power for twelve years and is waiting in the Ottoman lands for an opportune moment, may gather an army, summon the sultans, and return to his own territory. When the Georgians see that Teimuraz Khan has arrived, it is not unlikely that, together with the sultans of the valley of the Qipchaq, with whom he has long-standing friendship, love, and kinship, they may initiate a rebellion. In that case, Paykar Khan can no longer remain in that region. And if Luarsab Khan's sister, who belonged to the glorious harem, becomes angry with Paykar Khan and the Qizilbash, she will surely provoke Georgians and Around 20,000 families from the Igrimi Durt or other tribes who are in the service of Paykar Khan may be attacked, captured, and possibly even displaced, which would cause turmoil and chaos" (Fazli 2015: 889).

In Fazli's chronicle, we also encounter the following account: "He (Giorgi Saakadze) declared that before the Khans and sultans returned from the campaign in Kakheti, he would kill the commander-in-chief, seize the fortress, and the sons of Muslim leaders—Simon Khan himself, a Muslim, and the Mazandaranian tofangchis—would not be able to harm them in the least. He would bring him (Simon Khan) out of the fortress together with other tofangchis, and send them into Ganja disarmed and naked. Then he would take control of

these lands, kill the commander-in-chief, bring Luarsab Khan's sister _Paykar Khan's wife, and place her on the throne of Simon Khan _ her grandfather" (Fazli 2015: 901).

It should also be noted that, according to Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani's work, the date of Lela-Elene's marriage to Paykar Khan is the year 1029 AH _1620, and not 1622 as commonly recorded in Georgian history, as was mentioned above. It is also noteworthy that in that same year, he gives Elene (Teimuraz Khan's sister) to the Beglar-begi of Karabakh: thus, both of the royal family's Georgian wives are simultaneously "removed" from the scene (Fazli 2015: 790).

Another passage from the same chronicle reflecting the strength and significant role of Luarsab Khan's sister reads as follows: "Mourav Beg apparently thinks that the noble Queen, the sister of the King of Kartli, Luarsab Khan, whom His Majesty gave in marriage to Paykar Khan, might be in Kartli. When Paykar Khan learned this, he thought: God forbid that this queen should be the instigator of a rebellion! She may have sent the man to that treacherous Mourav and Georgians of her region to stir up disorder and revolt and they might destroy me!" (Fazli 2015: 890). It is noteworthy that when Paykar Khan asked Luarsab Khan's sister whether she knew anything about such a plan, "the Queen, who was the wisest woman of her time, upon hearing this, ordered, 'Saddle horses for me and my maidservants—we are leaving from here! After that, do whatever you wish!' She took a sword and a dagger, wrapped a headdress around her head, donned an embroidered silk cloak and enraged *ran out of the house like a tigress* as Sheikh Nezami had said" (Fazli 2015: 906).

She said:

'Although I am a woman, I am not powerless;

I understand the intricacies of this world as well.
And if I am a lioness and you are a lion, we both strike alike when
the time comes'.¹⁹

According to Fazli's work, in the year 1034 AH (1624/25), Lela-Elene leaves her husband. The author emphasizes the courage and pride of the Bagrationi princess, who, because of her noble lineage, granted herself the right to take such an action. It should also not be forgotten that at this time her brother King Luarsab was already murdered, and Lela-Elene's rage is clearly reflected in this account.

This particular passage is also interesting in a sense that Fazli, in his work, employs an aphorism from Nezami Ganjavi, which is equivalent to the famous aphorism in **The Knight in the Panther's Skin** (**Vepkhistqaosani**): "the lion's whelps equal (alike lions), be they male or female" (Rustaveli 2025:12). Originally referring to Tamar in Rustaveli's poem, whereas Nezami Ganjavi applies it to the heroic Queen and the commander of Barda Nushabe in Ganja. In Fazli, all of this is focused on the figure of Luarsab's sister, who is regarded as a queen, and, as we have already noted, according to the source, it anticipates her future role as a ruling queen.

In general, the name of Queen Tamar appears not only in Persian sources but also in the literary and folkloric traditions of other countries.²⁰ Tamar is also connected to the passage mentioned above: "I will bring Luarsab Khan's sister, who is Paykar Khan's wife, and

¹⁹ Koliat khomse-i Nezami, Vol.2, Eskander-Name, Entesharate Rad, Tehran, 1374,1047; Низами Гянджеви, Шараф-Намэ, Издательство академии наук Азербайджанской сср, Баку 1947, 261-262; Kobidze, D. (1978). Kartul-Sparsuli Literaturuli Urtiertobani III, Rustaveli da Nizamis Shemokmedebis Sakitkhebi. Tbilisi: Tbilisis Universitetis Gamomtsemloba.

²⁰ See: Г. Берадзе, Легенды о царице Тамар в Персидском историческом сочинении "Ихйа Ал-Мулук". Источниковедение и текстология средневекового и Среднего Востока. Издательство "Наука", Москва 1984.

place her on the throne of Simon Khan, her grandfather.”²¹ It should also be noted that Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani, an official residing in Georgia, frequently emphasizes his knowledge of Georgian historical events. In this particular case, Queen Tamar, her deeds.

“This woman several years earlier had embraced Islam and was honored for her reading of the Quran. Distinguished by her conscientiousness, intelligence, honesty, determination, and charitable deeds, she annually gave 3,000 tomans from her own funds for clothing and other necessities for the poor”— Fazli Khuzani characterizes Lela-Elene (Lekveishvili 2025: 26).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that one of the notable features of Fazli Khuzani’s work is the inclusion of Georgian women—specifically, in this case, members of the royal family, Lela-Elene and Elene—within the existing political vicissitudes. Fazli’s accounts further reinforce the fact that Georgian women held significant roles at the royal court of Iran. The episodes we have examined demonstrate how prestigious the presence of a Georgian woman was considered at the royal court of Safavid Iran, and it can be said that, from a pragmatic perspective, it likely served as a highly facilitating factor in resolving certain issues for the Georgian royal court.

Fazli’s work provides invaluable information about the distinguished Georgian women of this period, indeed. The Iranian author presents the role of Georgian women quite clearly within the highly

²¹ Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani also writes about Elene Atabagi, daughter of Simon I of Kartli and wife of Manuchar II, Atabagi of Samtskhe: “Since the Atabeg Khan was still a child, the Queen placed jeweled crown upon her own head in accordance with the old Georgian custom. Crown—the symbol of the strength of the state and the governance of the country” (Lekveishvili 2025: 26).

complex and often contentious relations between Iran and Georgia during this time.

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