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HISTORY, POLITICS, PRIMARY SOURCE STUDIES

**New information about Iran-Georgia relations at the beginning of the
17th century According to the Iranian author, Fazli Beg Khuzani
Isfahani's Afzal al-Tawarikh:- Isa Khan Mirza and Shah-Abbas I¹²**

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Abstract

The historical work of the 17th-century Iranian historian Fazli Beg Khuzani Esfahani, "Afzal al-Tawarikh" (The Beautiful History), focuses on the reign of Shah Abbas I (1587-1629). This text represents the third part of Fazli's long-lost chronicle, which was later published in an academic edition in 2015. The "Afzal al-Tawarikh" provides a detailed account of 17th-century Iran-Georgia relations, offering significant insights into this complex dynamic. As an important source, "Afzal al-Tawarikh" contributes not only to the study of the Safavid

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era in Iran (1501-1722) but also to the broader historical understanding of Georgia and the Caucasus region. He appears as the author of many unknown and noteworthy information about Georgians. The above-mentioned work depicts certain vicissitudes of the history of Georgia in the XVI-XVII centuries in a completely new way.

Fazli Beg Khuzani Esfahani, the author of the chronicles of Shah Abbas, served as vizier to Peikar Khan, the ruler of Kakheti, during the Qizilbash period (1616–1625). As an eyewitness to many significant events involving Safavid Iran and Georgia, his firsthand accounts provide invaluable insight into the political, social, and military interactions of that era.

This article examines previously unknown episodes in the history of Georgia: Interactions between Shah Abbas I and Prince Isa Khan Mirza (grandson of Aleksandre of Kakheti (1574-1605 and the son of Giorgi)) who was a converted Muslim brought up in Iran.

Keywords: Isa Khan; Shah Abbas; Fazli Beg Khuzani Esfahani; Iran-Georgian relations.

Introduction

The Transcaucasian region served as the primary battleground for the prolonged conflict between Iran and the Ottoman Empire, which had been ongoing since the early 16th century. The specific phase of hostilities commencing in 1603 and concluding in 1639 was marked by Shah Abbas's strategic objective to reclaim territories ceded in the 1590 treaty of piece and to drive Ottoman forces out of Eastern Transcaucasia.

In the political agenda of Safavid Iran, particularly under the reign of Shah Abbas I (1587–1629), the matter of Eastern Georgia held significant strategic importance. At the edge of the 16th and the 17th century, Shah Abbas encountered a new and formidable rival in Georgia-namely, Russia, which had already extended a protective hand over Kakheti (Jamburia, 1973: 246).

Georgian nobility looked to Russia for assistance in resisting incursions by Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, Iran sought not only to counter the Ottoman presence but also to check Russian influence in the region. Thus, the resolution of the "Gurjistan issue"-namely, the complete conquest of Eastern Georgia-emerged as a primary objective for Shah Abbas in the newly initiated conflict (Berdzenishvili, 1967: 111–113).

This period represents one of the most challenging phases in Georgian history from political, economic, and social perspectives. Georgia was divided into separate kingdoms and principalities, Kings and nobles were constantly fighting each other. During this period, the political relations between Iran and Georgia have been documented and analyzed both in Georgian and Iranian, as well as other foreign sources (campaigns of Shah Abbas in Eastern Georgia, relations with Georgian kings, forcible emigration of Georgians to Iran, etc).

This Historical source is Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani's Afzal al Tavarikh (A Beautiful History) about the reign of Shah 'Abbas (1587-1629) – the third part of Fazli's chronicle, considered as lost for a prolonged period.]¹³

Afzal-al Tavarikh is an important source for studying not only the period of Safavid Iran (1501-1722) but also studying the history of Georgia and Caucasus, in general. The above-mentioned chronicle depicts certain vicissitudes of the history of the 16th- 17th centuries' Georgia in a completely new way. The chronicle introduces hitherto unknown facts for the history of Georgia. It also includes passages which informatively fill in already well-known events and presents them with different angle (Lekveishvili, 2022:103).

We have already had the opportunity to present to the scientific community certain episodes of this work and their analysis. In "Afzal

¹³ The source was found in Cambridge, at the Christ's college library by British Iranologist Prof. Charles Melville, at the end of the 20th century. An academic text of the work was published 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.

al Tavarikh" the important political role of the representatives of the Georgian royal families both in Georgia and at the court of the Safavids is clearly defined.¹⁴

This article examines previously unknown episodes in the history of Georgia: Interactions between Shah Abbas I and Prince Isa Khan Mirza (grandson of Aleksandre of Kakheti (1574-1605) and the son of Giorgi) who was a converted Muslim brought up in Iran.

Method

This article employs the comparative method of historical research, which involves identifying cause-and-effect relationships, presenting and analysing key features of historical processes, and comparing data from primary and secondary sources to formulate comprehensive conclusions.

Discussion

It is known from the history of Georgia that in 1606, Shah Teimuraz I (King of Kakheti-1606-1648; King of Kartli-Kakheti-1625-1632) was approved as the king of Kakheti, while Luarsab II (reigned 1606–1615) was confirmed as king in Kartli. Despite the establishment of Christian monarchs in Kartli-Kakheti and the expulsion of Ottoman forces from the fortresses of Kartli, both Kartli and Kakheti continued to function as vassal states under Iranian suzerainty. "The Shah remained dissatisfied with the vassal stance of the kingdoms of Kartli-Kakheti, viewing their "loyalty" with considerable scepticism, particularly in the case of Teimuraz" (Jamburia, 1973: 262).

Teimuraz repeatedly demonstrated distrust and "disobedience" toward Shah Abbas, signalling a rejection of vassal allegiance to the Shah of Iran. For instance, Iskander Munshi recounts that Teimuraz and Luarsab, who were expected to accompany Shah Abbas to Mazandaran for a hunting expedition, failed to appear as instructed. "Each

¹⁴ Lekveishvili, T. "Information in the Fazli Beg Khuzani's work about Georgia during the Rule of Shah Abbas I"; New materials about Georgia in the archives and libraries of Iran. Iliia state university, 2022, 102-115.

of them deferred their departure, attributing it to the other's delay, thereby postponing their attendance for a later time" (Puturidze, 1969: 80).

In 1613, Shah-Abbas moved towards Georgia, and in the spring of 1614, he invaded Kakheti. Teimuraz was compelled to send his mother, Queen Ketevan, along with his children, as hostages to the Shah. This was followed by a skirmish near Jalet, in which the Georgian forces ultimately retreated. Even Kartli was unable to mount a successful resistance, compelling Teimuraz and Luarsab to seek refuge (Jamburia, 1973:264-265).

During this period, Shah Abbas appointed Isa (Isa-Khan), a nobleman who had been raised in Iran and converted to Islam, as the ruler of Kakheti. "And Shah Abbas gave Kakheti to Nodar Jorjadze and Davit Aslanishvili. Kartli was without a ruler" (Kaukhchishvili, 1959: 400). "Kakheti was given to the grandson of Aleksandre, Iase, and Davit Aslanishvili was appointed as a Vakil";¹⁵ "The Kakhetians also brought Teimuraz, and Isa khan was kicked out" (Kakabadze, 1925:23).

Malik Shah-Husein Sistin writes briefly on the same issue: "Alexander's grandson, Teimurazi's cousin, was appointed as the ruler of Kakheti, which was followed by an indescribable celebration" (Смирнова, 2000: 393). In his work, Seyyed Ahmad Husain Khalifa briefly refers to the transfer of rule over Kakheti to Isa Khan, with Davud (Davit Aslanishvili) serving as his Vakil (Ahmadi, Fesharaki, 2021: 516).

In contrast to the previously mentioned sources, Iskander Beg Munshi provides a detailed account of Isa Khan's ascension to the throne of Kakheti in his work "Tarikh-e Alam-Ara-ye Abbasi", which is regarded as the most comprehensive chronicle of Iran-Georgia relations during this period. It is noteworthy, however, that Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani's "Afzal al-Tavarikh" proves to be equally extensive,

¹⁵ A responsible high official, trusted by the king.

if not more so, in documenting Iran-Georgia relations of the same period.¹⁶

"Following the retreat of the unfortunate Teimuraz to Bashi-Achuk (Imereti), the Ruler of the Universe granted the governance and dominion of Georgia to Isa-Khan Mirza, son of Giorgi-Mirza, grandson of Alexander, and cousin to Teimuraz. As a child, Isa Khan was brought to the court of the esteemed Shah, where he was raised under the Shah's guidance and converted to Islam. Daud-Beg,¹⁷ a Georgian nobleman, was appointed as Isa Khan's Vakil. In accordance with Georgian custom and protocol, Isa Khan was installed on the throne as ruler of the kingdom, with ceremonial gold coins scattered over his head. By his Majesty's directive, Kizilbash dignitaries, along with Georgian nobles, showered Isa Khan with gold and silver coins, using golden cups in this ceremonial act. Georgian dignitaries, except those loyal to Teimuraz, gathered with Isa-Khan and pledged their allegiance to him" - writes Munshi (Puturidze, 1969: 84-85).

Further insights into Isa Khan's appointment to Kakheti are provided in the writings of Fazli Beg Khuzani: "Following the decree, the Georgian kings seated Isa Mirza upon the royal carpet and scattered gold over his head. His Majesty took the Georgian custom into account, whereby their kings are seated upon the carpet of the House of David, and all nobles and dignitaries present bestow gold upon the newly anointed king. Following this, they partake in a ceremonial cup of wine, offered from the king's hand. Using this same cup, they pledged their loyalty to the ruler; accordingly, Georgian nobles, both Muslim and non-Muslim, swore allegiance to Isa Khan" (Fazli Khuzani Isfahani, 2015:646).

In contrast to Munshi, Fazli provides a detailed account of this feast: "A grand celebration took place on that day. Isa Khan was seated upon the throne of his ancestors. His Majesty ordered the preparation

¹⁶ See: Lekveishvili, T. Fazli Beg Khuzani ... 2022, 102-1155.

¹⁷ Same Davit Jandieri, Aslanishvili.

of a tent made of white felt, measuring 35 zerai¹⁸ in length and 24 zerai in width, intricately embroidered with gold thread and woven in Kerman. One carpet and a felt cloak, along with these items, were the exquisite handiwork of Kerman artisans, specifically the carpet weaver Mirza Ali and the master of felt crafting, Mohammad Hossein. The tent poles were crafted from Ebony (*ebenus*) wood, while the gold chains were designed in such a manner as to allow for easy disassembly and reassembly during transport. Twelve pairs of doors and windows were placed in the tent so that it opened on all sides, and together with the rest of the tents for him [his Majesty] gifted to Isa Khan, ordered it to be pitched on the royal side. Isa Khan proceeded from His Majesty's presence to the tent of victory. The Kizilbash sultans and the victorious army extended their congratulations to him. His Majesty granted 1,000 tomans to Kakheti. Additionally, Equerry Mahdi Quli Beg presented Isa Khan an Iraqi horse with adorned bridle and saddle. The aforementioned Khan bid farewell to his companions for three days. He issued decrees for Kakheti, appointing Daud Beg (the same Davit Aslanishvili mentioned earlier) as Isa Khan's Vakil, and the latter was granted mercy (Fazli Khuzani Isfahani, 2015:646-47).

In addition to providing details not found in any other sources, with exacting specifics such as the expressions of respect, the exchange of gifts, and the acknowledgment of more than mere formalities and traditions, this passage also reflects the nuanced relationship between Shah Abbas and Isa Khan. Here, the attitude of the Safavid dynasty toward Davit Jandieri, as well as the "orbit of the Georgian dignitaries," becomes clearly evident.

It is noteworthy that, according to Fazli's chronicle, the Shah instructs the Khan to punish the corrupt nobles of Kakheti (Fazli Khuzani Isfahani, 2015: 647). In our view, this can be explained by Isa Khan's desire to gain the favor of the local population, as previously discussed. Iskander Munshi writes that the fear and vigilance of the ruler safeguarded the property of the Georgians, stating that "not a

¹⁸ Unit of length which equals to 104 cm. This unit was mostly used by cloth merchants.

single man could take even a piece of boxwood from a peasant. And when "a few foolish and ill-fated men" began looting the empty houses of Georgians, they have punished them, and "they cut their bellies" (Puturidze, 1969: 85).

We find similar information in "Futuh-at-e Gitisetan" (Ahmadi, Fesharaki, 2021: 516), yet, unlike Fazli Khuzani, other historians do not mention such a specific task, namely that Isa Khan took measures to correct the corrupt nobles of Kakheti. According to Munshi, there was a group in Kakheti that had not submitted to Isa Khan until recently (Puturidze, 1969: 86). Additionally, the nobles of Ertso and Tianeti "showed stubbornness, did not come to Isa-Khan, and did not submit to the army of Islam," which led the Shah to issue an order for their dispersal (Puturidze, 1969: 87-88). According to Munshi, Isa Khan, having been "ennobled by [accepting] Islam," displayed little respect for the Christian cross and the clergy. Georgians were upset with him because of his conversion. Isa Khan, fearing that he might be killed in the absence of Shah Abbas' forces, fled the governorship and sought refuge in Ardebil. Subsequently, Isa Khan sought forgiveness from Shah Abbas, who moved by compassion, granted him mercy and received him with favor in the most esteemed inner circle (Puturidze, 1969:92).

Fazli Khuzani provides a comprehensive account of the disobedience of the Kakhetians to Isa Khan. Similar to Munshi, Fazli notes that the Kakhetians resisted being governed by a Muslim ruler, as they believed it was contrary to their customs. Consequently, they were unwilling to submit to Isa Khan, whose Muslim identity conflicted with their traditional practices. It is worth noting that Fazli emphasizes that on this matter, letters of complaint against Isa Khan and his sultans were received daily (Fazli Khuzani Isfahani, 2015: 649).

According to this information, in addition to the unacceptability of a traditionally Muslim ruler, which, as we have already mentioned above, is also emphasized with Munshi, and we often encounter such examples in Iranian and non-Iranian sources, we are also dealing with

other factors limiting local approach: The population of Kakheti appears to have expressed grievances regarding specific actions of Isa Khan and his close associates.

Our assumption is can be further supported by the information provided by Fazli Khuzani: "His Majesty knew that if the Qizilbash obeyed Isa Khan, then the population would also obey the latter. Therefore, it was essential for them to maintain confidence in all matters, ensuring that "God would not be angered", and that, like his uncle Constantine Khan, Isa Khan's actions would not lead to disorder and upheaval (Fazli Khuzani Isfahani, 2015:649). Konstantin Khan, according to Fazli's writings, really tried to harass the population.¹⁹ Fazli notes that Isa Khan preferred not to have the Qizilbash intervene in the matter, asserting that he would personally bring his people into submission through kind and conciliatory treatment. Despite the disobedience of the local population, Isa Khan exhibited patience and caution, demonstrating a willingness to take all necessary actions for the welfare of the country (Fazli Khuzani Isfahani, 2015:649).

This passage reflects a recognition of Isa Khan's mistakes. In the subsequent chapter of "Afzal al-Tawarikh", we observe a continued emphasis on Isa Khan's mistakes, coupled with a certain degree of tolerance extended to him by the Shah. They rebelled against Isa Khan and hid in the forests. And since the latter could not cope with them, he was forced to go to Ganja to kiss the threshold of the magnificent palace, and there he found refuge. Although His Majesty ordered him to return to his domain, he replied: "If you order and make Kizilbash follow me, then retaining control over this domain may still be possible. Otherwise, I shall remain here, devoted to your service (Fazli Khuzani Isfahani, 2015: 659). Notably, when Isa Khan killed several noble relatives, the Shah disapproved of his actions; however, he refrained from openly expressing his anger (Fazli Khuzani Isfahani, 2015: 659). Iskander Munshi records that the Shah refrained from appointing a fully legitimate ruler in Kakheti, stating that if Teimuraz

¹⁹ See: Lekveishvili, T. Fazli Beg Khuzani... 2022. 109.

"cleanses the stain of his transgressions with the pure waters of loyal and devoted service," he would be reinstated as ruler of Kakheti (Puturidze, 1969: 92). Fazli Khuzani Isfahani highlights that "although the Kakhetian people were left without a ruler, His Majesty refrained from appointing a dignitary from the Qizilbash" (Fazli Khuzani Isfahani, 2015: 659).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that Fazli Beg Khuzani's "Afzal al-Tavarikh", which provides considerably more detailed information on the relationship between Isa Khan and Shah Abbas than other contemporary sources, emphasizes the following factors:

- Elements of the policy carried out by Isa Khan in Kakheti (be it wrong steps or an attempt to correct them);
- close relationship between Shah Abbas and Isa Khan;
- The Shah's kindness towards the Georgian prince and in certain cases (beyond political calculations) taking tolerant steps towards Isa Khan.

All of the above probably fits well within the framework of Shah Abbas's policy towards Eastern Georgia - strengthening Iran's position in the region through loyal representatives of the local feudal elite.

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