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# FEUDALISM IN ANCIENT CAUCASIA? ON THE IBERIAN SERVICE NOBILITY IN THE 5TH TO 7TH CENTURIES*

FRANK SCHLEICHER

*Abstract.* The paper examines the applicability of the concept of feudalism to the South Caucasus region, focusing specifically on the Iberian nobility during the 5th to 7th centuries. It discusses the challenges of transferring the Western European concept of feudalism to the Caucasian and Iranian world, noting that while there are similarities, the term may not be entirely appropriate for the region. The study identifies two main forms of rule in the Caucasus: horizontal, where kings were seen as first among equals and dependent on the support of the nobility, and vertical, where powerful aristocrats maintained considerable autonomy within their clans. The paper argues that both structures were present in Iberia and Armenia, making comprehensive royal authority difficult. The main focus of the study is the impact of Sāsānian reforms, particularly under rulers such as Kavādh I and Ḫosrau I, in the South Caucasus. Here and there, they aimed to weaken the power of the dynastic nobility and introduce a service nobility loyal to the crown. The paper suggests that these reforms influenced the development of feudal structures in Iberia, although implementation varied from region to region and was often

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retrospectively attributed to specific kings, such as King Vaxtang I. In conclusion, the paper argues that while feudal elements did emerge in the Caucasus, they were closely linked to broader socio-political developments within the Sāsānian Commonwealth, of which the South Caucasian countries were a part, rather than being indigenous or entirely comparable to Western European feudalism.

## INTRODUCTION

This article aims to present some thoughts on the administrative development of the South Caucasus under Sāsānid suzerainty. A comprehensive examination of the development of Iberian and Sāsānid conditions cannot be undertaken here. The primary intention of the study is to provide impulses for a more intensive examination of the topic.

Since the term "feudalism" appears prominently in the title of this article, the starting point of the study must be a closer examination of this term. Transferring the essentially Western European concept of feudalism, for which there is no real definition, to Caucasian and Iranian conditions is not entirely unproblematic.[1] However, since the basic social structures and relationships are similar to those in some regions of medieval Western Europe, and for want of a better term, it cannot be dispensed with.[2] The analytical model of feudalism used here does not claim to be universally valid for this or that region, but it does describe elements that can be found in different societies in the Iranian and Caucasian regions.[3]

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[1] Rapp 2014, 76, n. 220. The use of the term for European conditions has also been criticised for some time. Since the 1970s, the term has been the subject of much criticism (Brown 1974; Reynolds 1994): the term would be an anachronism and would not be descriptive of early medieval conditions. On the transfer of the term to Iranian conditions, see Börm 2010; Wiesehöfer 1994, 194; Schippmann 1990, 84-86.

[2] Adontz (1908, 459-460) already recognised the similarities and used the terms. See also Adontz and Garsoïan 1970, esp. 327-328, and Widengren 1969. In fact, the term has so many uses that its meaning is often very limited.

[3] On the concept of feudalism and its application to the Sāsānid Empire in research, see Gariboldi 2006, 17-44.

BASICS

The problem with the concept of feudalism today is essentially a conflict between different ideas about the nature of rule in the early Middle Ages. Whereas it was once thought that rule was primarily vertical, from the top (the king) to the bottom (the vassals and sub-vassals), today the idea of the horizontal spread of rule has come to the fore, with an emphasis on consensus and community within a common social class.[4] It was impossible for the ruler to rule without the acceptance and support of the dynastic nobility.[5] In the region of the Caucasus, both of these categories of rule were important:[6]

1. Horizontal: The king was *primus inter pares* and depended on the support of at least large sections of the nobility.[7] The granting of offices and "fiefs" promoted consensus and bound the dynastic nobility to the kingship.[8]

2. Vertical: The powerful aristocrats, as heads of the family (*naxarar* or *mamasaxlisi*),[9] had their own significant clan possessions. Here the clan chiefs (Cyril Toumanoff refers to them as dynasts)[10] enjoyed full rights of rule. The king could only exercise very limited rule in these areas.

In both Iberia and Armenia, there were many such family estates, which made it difficult to exercise comprehensive rule. An example from the *Georgian Chronicles* shows how such an Iberian noble house was linked to the kingship:

An aristocrat called Pʿarnavaz,[11] is described as *spaspet* during the reign of King Pʿarsman Kʿueli. The king himself had grown up together with

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[4] Abels 2009, 1008.

[5] The dynastic nobility are those nobles who owned land over which they could exercise control. In the Caucasian region, this was generally a narrow social stratum of patriarchs. See Toumanoff 1963, 90-91, n. 128.

[6] Schleicher 2021, 240; Rapp 2014, esp. 265-267 and 281-283.

[7] Widengren 1976; 1969, 81, esp. for the Arsacid conditions. See also Schleicher 2021, 272.

[8] This was not the only means of bonding, but it was an important one.

[9] The term *mamasaxlisi* originally referred to any head of a noble clan (Javakhishvili 1905, 11-16; Toumanoff 1963, 91, n. 128).

[10] On the system of dynasticism as opposed to feudalism, see Toumanoff 1963, 34, 117; Pourshariati 2008, 53-56.

[11] For the Iranian form of the name, see Rapp 2014, 226.

Pʿarnavaz at his family's court. The two were therefore milk (foster) brothers.[12] Pʿarnavaz's family must have owned considerable property and, if they were given the right to raise the heir to the throne, they must have held an important position in the kingdom. The Iberian kingdom is said to have been divided between two kings during this period. When the king who reigned north of the Mtkvari, Mirdat[13], was overthrown by Pʿarsman, Pʿarnavaz was granted his former centre of power, Šida-Kʿartʿli, as his administrative district as *spaspet*. This district certainly included land, as the family's estate was not located in Šida-Kʿartʿli.[14] The allocation of office and land tied the aristocrat and his family even more closely to the king.

With their late perspective, the *Georgian Chronicles* mostly describe a feudal aristocracy with officials who could be appointed by the king. The respective official is called eristʿavi and administered his district of the kingdom on behalf of the king. The *spaspet* appears as the leading figure among the Iberian nobility. He was responsible for raising and commanding the Iberian cavalry. He also appears as the highest official and superior of the regional princes. As such, he could convene and lead the Iberian Council of Nobles. This body could make decisions and influence the succession to the throne in the event of a king's death.

> But when Aspʿagur went to Ossetia, death overtook him and he died there. Aspʿagur did not have a son but a single daughter. Then all the eristʿavis of Kʿartʿli gathered in the city of Mcʿxetʿa with the spaspet, who was called Maežan. […] Now this is my advice, that we present our submission to the king of Persia and request from him mercy; and that we ask him for his son as our king, and request that he marry his son to the daughter of our king Aspʿagur.[15]

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[12] On the system of foster parenthood and its importance for social cohesion, see Schleicher 2021, 267-273; Rapp 2014, 88-89. On the institution itself, see Parkes 2003.

[13] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 51 (61 Thomson).

[14] The division of the kingdom is said to have existed for several generations. The property of the Pʿarnavaz family must have been in Pʿarsman's part of the kingdom.

[15] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 62-63 (73-74 Thomson).

Maežan's proposal is subsequently implemented. According to this account, it is the *spaspet*, the supreme representative of the official aristocracy, who determines Iberian policy when the king is unable to do so.[16]

Consensus was important for the king to secure his own rule. Where this consensus and the support of the dynastic nobility was lacking or lost, rule was often unsustainable.

A particularly impressive example from the Iberian context is that of Pʿarnaǰom, counted as the fourth king in the *Georgian Chronicles*, who lost consensus with the Kʿartʿvelian nobility because of his religious policy. The majority of the nobles conspired because the king had promoted the cult of fire and disregarded that of the ancestors.[17] The nobles turned to the Armenian king and asked him to install a new ruler in Iberia: "Our king has abandoned the religion of our fathers [...] Now he is no longer worthy to be our king." The nobles alone were not strong enough on their own to overthrow the king because he could also rely on forces outside the kingdom, in this specific case Persia. By doing the same and relying on Armenian power, the allies could hope for success. Despite the attempt to rely on Persian forces, Pʿarnaǰom actually lost his rule as a result.[18]

When we speak of the aristocracy as a single entity, we do not mean that the Iberian nobility acted as a bloc with unified interests. Rather, it can be assumed that there were different factions within the aristocracy, each representing different interests and pursuing different goals. This is confirmed by the *Georgian Chronicle*, which describes a later dispute over the throne as follows: "The eristʿavis of Kʿartʿli did not accept the proposals of Mirvan; but they all turned to King Bartom. However, a few Georgians, not noble ones, went and joined

[16] On a possible Council of Nobility, see Schleicher 2021, 244-255. Lordkipanidze (1996, 215) does not believe that the Council of Nobility had the right to elect the king.

[17] Börm (2008, 428) observes for the Sāsānian Empire that religion was a bridge between nobility and kingship and that a kind of alliance could be established through the priesthood.

[18] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 29 (42 Thomson).

Mirvan."[19] Since it is unlikely that the common people had much influence on political events, the dissenters were more likely to have been aristocrats.[20]

Whether or not these kings were historical figures is irrelevant to our question; the sources here describe late antique structures. A king could rule by consensus with the local nobility, or he could rely on an external power to support him with military force (or the threat of it). The great empires were an obvious choice, but Armenia could also act as an external power.

The concept of feudalism combines many aspects, not all of which occur simultaneously, and even when they do, they can be weighted differently in different regions. For example, the Caucasian dynastic (hereditary) nobility enjoyed far greater autonomy in their rule than was probably the case for much of the Iranian landowning nobility, simply because of their geographical characteristics.[21]

For the purposes of the following analysis, feudalism is to be understood as the set of the institutions that establish and regulate the obligations of obedience and service owed by one free man to another free man, and the obligations of protection and maintenance owed by the lord to his vassal.[22] The central elements are military service, which the vassal was obliged to render to his lord in case of emergency, and the lord's obligation to maintain the vassal, which usually meant that the lord would give him a piece

[19] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 31 (45 Thomson).

[20] The *Historia Augusta* also indicates that, for example, pro-Roman and pro-Persian factions of the Iberian nobility were able to act in parallel in 260 (*Hist. Aug. Valer.* 4.1.). See also Schleicher 2021, 517; Hartmann 2019, 40-41.

[21] Toumanoff (1963, 39-40) considered Iran, like Western Europe, to be more feudal than the South Caucasus. However, the Iranian landowning nobility was also characterised by clearly delineated "family rule" (Pourshariati 2008, 28-29). Toumanoff started from Christensen's (now outdated) thesis (1944, 101-103) that the only group of dynastic aristocrats were the vassal rulers known as *šahrdārān*. However, Pourshariati has shown in her study that despite the sporadic efforts of the Sāsānid rulers to create a feudal and at times etatist socio-political system, the monarchy can best be seen as a dynastic regime.

[22] See Ganshof 1960 for an attempt at a definition.

of land, in scholarship often called a "fief," to use.[23] The fief was usually accompanied by the award of an office to be held on the lord's behalf.[24] This aspect in particular will be discussed below.

Researchers are certain that in late antiquity there was a service nobility in Iberia whose claims to the land were not hereditary.[25] In any case, the *Georgian Chronicles* are very interested in the subject of the hereditary nature of the rights to rule, which would not have been the case had there not been a service nobility with such interests:

> Then Bakur died; he left young children who could not govern the kingdom. Then the King of the Persians Urmizd [= Hormezd IV (579-590)] gave Ran and Movakan to his son, who was called Kʿasre Ambarvez [= Ḫosrau II (590-628)]. He came and resided at Bardav, and began to confer with the *erist'avis* of Kʿartʿli. He promised great benefits, and set in writing their ancestral rights as *erist'avis* from son to son. In this way, by flattery he seduced them; so the *erist'avis* rebelled, and each separately paid tribute to Kʿasre Ambarvez.
>
> [...]
>
> A few years after this there were great troubles in Persia. [...] Then Kʿasre Ambarvez abandoned Ran and Kʿartʿli, and went to assist his father. While the Persians were preoccupied in this manner, then all the

[23] Among the characteristics of feudalism, Widengren (1969, 12, n. 10) includes the presence of a specialised warrior class. This specialised warrior class also existed in the dynastic system. Military service was enforced by the fact that the vassal could be deprived of his fief if he failed to serve (Widengren 1956, 117). Even without this pressure, however, the nobility in the Iranian region was generally willing to respond to the king's call. Other mechanisms (such as the prospect of booty or honour) must have been decisive here. We rarely hear of the "King of Kings" being abandoned by his nobles. An impressive exception is the Arsacid king Vologaeses III, after the Battle of Dura-Europos (Hartmann 2022).

[24] Widengren 1956, 98.

[25] Rapp 2014, 316. According to Burney and Lang ([2]2001, 204), the feudal structures that had been widespread in Iran since the Achaemenids found their way to the South Caucasus in the 1st century A.D. during a phase of new Iranisation. Rapp (2014, 211-212) also sees similarities between the Eristʿavi *system* and Achaemenid and Seleucid conditions, although these need not be based on deliberate adoption. See also Toumanoff 1963, 443.

> *erist'avis* of Kʿartʿli, those of Upper and Lower Kʿartʿli, conferred. They sent an envoy to the king of the Greeks and asked that he choose a king from among the descendants of the kings of Kʿartʿli and that the *erist'avis* be (confirmed) without change each in his own principality.[26]

Researchers speak of feudal structures that existed alongside to the structures of the old dynastic nobility.[27] The question is whether, and if so when, structures were established in the South Caucasus – especially in Iberia – that could be categorised under this concept of feudalism. The passage quoted from the *Georgian Chronicles* has a historical basis, so it may well reflect conditions in the 7th century.

The thesis of this paper is that the development of feudal elements in the South Caucasus was closely linked to developments in the Sāsānian Empire. The South Caucasian structures can be better understood by comparing them with those in Iran in the 6th century, which is why the two must be considered together.

## PREREQUISITES

The development of feudal structures required a variety of different preconditions. However, since the main purpose of this study is to determine when feudal structures became widespread in Iberia, it makes sense to focus on this. For this reason, only the most important prerequisite for the development of feudal structures will be discussed here: the existence of royal lands that could be granted as fiefs to the service nobility.

Of course, as the head of a family clan, which he was as the representative of the dynastic nobility, the king could dispose of his own family's land. However, this land belonged to the noble house and could not be given to outsiders.[28] In addition, the king needed the estates to finance his household, his troops, and his family. Direct access to this land was what gave the king his position of power. Although the king was the largest landowner, he needed other estates in addition to the

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[26] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 217 (228-229 Thomson).

[27] Toumanoff 1963, 34-40. The clan structures in Georgia were only broken up by Davitʿ the Builder (Golden 1999, 59).

[28] Vashalomidze 2007, 112; Gogoladze 1986, 42-43. The king as the largest owner of land: Schleicher 2021, 229-231; distribution of estates: Schleicher 2021, 263.

hereditary estates, that the royal family could not or did not want to manage themselves.

Conquest is the main theme here. The *Georgian Chronicles* already provide a clear account of the mythical first king Pʿarnavaz:

> Pʿarnavaz advanced and captured the border of Greece, Anjianjora (Antioch) and returned from Eklecʿi. He went to Klarǰetʿi and captured Klarǰetʿi, then advanced on Mcʿxetʿa with great joy. To his own riches he added Azons wealth; thus his riches overflowed.[29]

We have already seen in the case of Pʿarsman Kʿueli that the property of a defeated rival could be confiscated by the victor. External conquest reinforced the accumulation of land in the hands of the king. The region of Gugarkʿ may have been one such external territory.[30] It was conquered by the Armenians in the 3rd century and is prominent in Georgian lore as one of the few really large territories that the king could grant as a fief. Another important area is the region Šida Kʿartʿli, which Pʿarsman Kʿueli is said to have seized from his co-king Mirdat and which became the domain of the Iberian *spaspet*.[31]

We are somewhat better informed about the situation in Iran than in Iberia. Even in an empire as large as that of the Sāsānids, the amount of land at the ruler's disposal was limited.[32] Šāpūr I himself says that the "King of Kings," for example, could only found cities on his own land, for example:

> And the people who (were taken) from the empire of the Romans, from non-Eran in plunder, within Ērānšahr, (namely) in Persis, (in) Parthia, Xūzestān, Asūrestān and (in) the other (lands), land by land, where We and (Our) ancestors and forefathers had crown estates, there (they were) settled.[33]

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[29] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 23 (33 Thomson).

[30] On Gugark', see Schleicher 2021, 113-118; Rapp 2014, 67-71; Toumanoff 1963, 185-191.

[31] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 51 (61 Thomson).

[32] Altheim and Stiehl 1954, 14-17; Wiesehöfer 1994, 252.

[33] *ŠKZ* parth. §30 (43 Huyse).

The concentration of city foundations in a few regions, especially in the early period of the dynasty, shows where the Kings of Kings owned land. They had acquired most of the land from the Arsacid "Party Kings" during the founding of the empire.[34]

There were conquered vassal kingdoms which were granted as fiefs in the broadest sense. These were the so-called secundogenitures. But there were few of these, and attempts were usually made to appoint members of the Sāsānian family as dependent rulers.[35] Imperial nobles often had little of it.[36]

In addition to these territories, there were regions within the realm that the king could claim after confiscation or the extinction of family lines, and which he could grant to loyal nobles. In my opinion, however, this should not always be seen as the granting of fiefs. Often, it was simply royal influence on the appointment of new family lines.[37] The royal land was called *ostān*. It was administered in the late Sāsānian period by a separate official, the *ostāndar*.[38] In the South Caucasus, too, evidence of such officials has been found.[39]

It is certainly no coincidence that the office of *ostāndar* is only documented with the increase in royal land after the disempowerment of the nobility and the reforms under Kavādh I (488-531) and Ḫosrau I (531-579). Royal land that could be granted to "servants" must have been scarce until the kings succeeded in disempowering at least large sections

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[34] *Ṭabarī* 1.815; Mittertrainer 2020, 48.

[35] Altheim and Stiehl 1954, 18.

[36] The Iberian kings with Gugarkʿ did something similar: *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 130 f. (146 Thomson): Peroz, the son-in-law of King Mirian III, had been installed by the latter in Rani. Later he received Samšvilde (Gugarkʿ) under Mirian's son Bakʿar.

[37] As a rule, even after the head of a house had rebelled against the crown, it was favoured that the property remained in the hands of the original family. Thus, even after the usurpation of Bahrām Čōbīn, the Mihranids remained in possession of their land. They also retained their influence over the policies of the "King of Kings" (*Ṭabarī* 1, 1001. Bagot 2015, 188).

[38] Daryaee 2009, 126; Gyselen 2004, pls. 37-39.

[39] Garsoïan 2004, 342; material in Gyselen 2001, 5-6, 16-17, 26, 32, and 44-45; 2002, 116, 132, and 176-177.

of the dynastic nobility and appropriating their land.[40]

A comparison of the lists of the royal secundogenitures of Ardašīr I and Šāpūr I in the inscription at the Kaʿba-ye Zartušt shows that the kings of kings could only dispose of relatively little royal land. If the territories of Babylonia and Susiana are disregarded, which, with the capital Ctesiphon, were considered the heartlands of the empire, the domains established under Ardašīr I for Sadārub, king of Abarēnag (in the district of Ardašīr-xwarrah), Ardašīr, King of Merv, Ardašīr, King of Kermān and Ardašīr, King of Sagestān. In addition, there are the secondary estates established by Šāpūr I for Ardašīr, King of Nodšērag (Adiabene), Ardašīr, King of Kirmān, Dēnag, Queen of Mesene, and for Hamazāsp, King of Wiruzān (Georgia).[41] Only in such regions could the kings of kings found cities.

## REFORMS IN THE SĀSĀNIAN EMPIRE

Such a development can be traced in the Sāsānian Empire. Arab and New Persian historical tradition attributes extensive reforms to Ḫosrau I (Anūšīrwān),[42] which led to a fundamental change in the mechanisms of rule in the Sāsānian Empire. On the basis of a new land measurement, the taxation of peasants was reorganised. Instead of estimating the tax burden based on the crops grown in the fields, a fixed amount of tax was now assessed based on the area of land under cultivation and the crop grown. From then on, the collection of the tax was supervised by royal officials rather than local nobles.[43] The dynastic nobility was deprived of the right to levy taxes at will. This gave the state a predictable budget for the first time, allowing it to maintain a large standing army, for example, and the landowning nobility could no longer enrich themselves at the expense of

[40] Theophanes (AM 6118) reports on the march of Herakleios towards Ctesiphon and describes large estates of Ḫosraus II. See Kennedy 2011. On the property of the royal family, see Bagot 2015, 91-92.

[41] Mittertrainer 2020, 49; Altheim and Stiehl 1954, 14.

[42] On the reforms, see in particular Rubin 1995 and Gariboldi 2006.

[43] *Ṭabarī* 1, 898 (157 Bosworth); 962-963 (258-262 Bosworth). Rubin (1995, 234-239) has collected all the sources on the new tax system.

the peasants.[44] What appears in the historical tradition as a single agenda was in fact probably a long-term process that began long before Ḫosrau.[45]

> The rulers of Persia before Kisrā Anūsharwān used to levy land tax (*kharāj*) on the administrative divisions (*kuwar*), a third or quarter or fifth or sixth [of their produce], according to the water supply and the degree of cultivation; and poll tax (*jizyat aljamājim*) according to a fixed sum. King Qubādh, son of Fayrūz ordered, toward the end of his reign, a cadastral survey (*masḥ alarḍ*), comprising plains and mountains alike, so that the correct amount of land tax could be levied on the lands.[46]

Ṭabarī thus shifts the beginning of the reforms to the time of Kavādh, precisely indicating this longer-term process. These changes would not have been possible without a previous massive weakening of the dynastic nobility.

As a result of this weakening – the reasons for which, closely linked to the Mazdakite movement, cannot be explained here – Kavādh and Ḫosrau were able to gain fiscal control of all the land in the empire: the land of the king and the land of the nobles. This deprived the landowning nobility of a major source of power and made them directly dependent on the "King of Kings." In addition to the old landowning nobility, Ḫosrau created a service nobility dependent on him. This new Iranian service nobility was responsible for collecting taxes from all the empire's lands – including those of the long-established dynastic nobility – and for providing the king with (permanent) troops.[47]

> Kisrā ordered the new tax assessments to be written down in several copies. One copy was to be kept in his own chancery close at his hand; one copy was sent to the land-tax collectors (*'ummāl al-kharāj*) for them to collect taxation on its basis; and another copy was sent to the judges of the administrative divisions (*quḍāt al-kuwar*). The judges were charged with the duty of intervening between the tax collectors and the people if the tax collectors in the administrative districts attempted to raise an additional

[44] Tax cuts had previously only benefited the nobility in the Sāsānian Empire (Altheim and Stiehl 1957, 17-18).

[45] Rubin 1995, 242.

[46] *Ṭabarī* 1, 960 (255-256 Bosworth).

[47] Daryaee 2009, 29; Altheim and Stiehl 1954, 143, 169-170; Rubin 1995, 228.

> sum above the amount laid down in the master copy of the tax assessment in the chancery, of which they had received a copy.[48]

The process was bound to meet with resistance. The fact that the land-owning nobility resisted the implementation of the new regulations is shown not least by the contemporary Procopius.[49] In order to succeed, Ḫosrau had to resort to massive violence. In the so-called *Karnamag Anūšīrwān*, a text dating back to the late Sāsānian period,[50] the fully developed system is summarised as follows:

> I assembled the governors and the people of the land (*ahl al-harāg*) and found a disorder so great that I did not believe I could remedy it except by restoring justice and fixing the tax for each country, region, district, village and man. I entrusted this task to persons whom I fully trusted and appointed an *amin* to the governor in each country to supervise him. I also appointed the judge of each country to look after the people of his country. I also ordered the inhabitants of the country to present the complaints they wished to bring before me to the judge to whom I had entrusted the supervision of their territory.[51]

The "King of Kings" therefore set up his own regulatory bodies in the regions to monitor the governors. It is particularly interesting to note that these regulatory bodies also extended to the territories of the vassal rulers:[52]

> When the delegates were in my presence, I granted them audience and heard them before the great ones of our earth, their kings, judges, nobles and aristocrats. When I took note of the reports and the injustices [noted by the judges], I saw that the extortions were the work of our governors, our chamberlains and the chamberlains of our sons, our wives and our courtiers.[53]

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[48] *Ṭabarī* 1, 963 (261 Bosworth).

[49] Procop. *P*ers. 1.23.3 (100 Greatrex): "The most active Persians, therefore, dissatisfied with his rule, had in mind to appoint for themselves another king of Kavādh's house."

[50] Grignaschi 1966.

[51] *Karnamag Anūšīrwān* 4 (Grignaschi 1966).

[52] The relationship between the vassal kings and the "King of Kings" in Ctesiphon was characterised by the same elements as that between the king of a small kingdom and his local nobles (Widengren 1956, 119).

[53] *Karnamag Anūšīrwān* 8 (Grignaschi 1966).

Here are the representatives of the "common people" who were listened to by Ḫosrau. The right to send delegates to the court at Ctesiphon also belonged to the people of the regions under the vassal kings. Armenian sources attest to the fact that the local nobility had the right to appeal to the "King of Kings."[54] It is conceivable that this right was also extended to the lower nobility, as the petty nobility were said to have become particularly supportive after the disempowerment of the old dynastic nobility.[55] Iberia was one of these vassal kingdoms and it can be assumed that the Sāsānid reforms also had an impact on its structures. This is true regardless of whether or not kingship existed here at the time.

STRUCTURES IN THE GEORGIAN SOURCES

The oldest part of the *Georgian Chronicles* (*K'art'lis C'xovreba*) describes the constitution of the Kʿartʿvelian state by the (mythical) first king Pʿarnavaz in the 3rd century B.C.[56] The central element in the organisation of the state is the appointment of a service nobility, dependent on the king and his power. The territory ruled by Pʿarnavaz was divided into districts, each of which was under the control of an official (*erist'avi*). Other sub-officials, the *spasalar(n)i,* are subordinate to this official in a hierarchical structure. The etymology of this term once again shows the Sāsānian origin of the institutions.[57] In each case, a lower military nobility is dependent on these officials. The *at`asist`av(n)i* appear in an important administrative role.[58] The superior of the regional officials was the *spaspet*, who in turn reported directly to the king.[59] The offices were granted

[54] This can be seen, for example, in its role as an independent political force in the deposition of the last Arsacid king of Armenia, Vramšapuh, in 428 (*Łazar P'arpec'i* 14, pp. 23-25 [58-60 Thomson] *Movsēs Xorenac'i* 3, 64-65 [340-341 Thomson]). The "King of Kings" receives the envoy of the Armenian nobility, listens to them and then even summons the king!

[55] Daryaee 2009, 29; Altheim and Stiehl 1954, 143, 169.

[56] On the origins of Iberian kingship, see Meissner 2000 and Schottky 2012.

[57] სპასალარი from Middle Persian *spāhsālār* (*spāh* = army and *sālār* = leader). Rapp 2014, 211; Andronikashvili 1966, 372; Toumanoff 1963, 96-97.

[58] ათასისთავი = leader of a thousand (*at'asi* = thousand and *t'avi* = head).

[59] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 24 (34-35 Thomson). See also Rapp 2014, 209-212.

by the king and were not hereditary (although descendants could of course be favoured).

When the Iberian kingdom came into being is a matter of controversy among scholars. In any case, in the early period, i.e. in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C., the structures attributed to Pʿarnavaz did not yet exist. The office of *spaspet* was not established until the Sāsānian period.[60] As in Armenia, the dynastic aristocracy would have been the mainstay of the state system in Iberia for a long time.[61]

For the centuries after Pʿarnavaz, the *Georgian Chronicles* use the terms, but in terms of content they describe a dynastic hereditary nobility.[62] The clan chief, known as *erist'avi* usually acted independently and may or may not have supported a king. In any case, there is no evidence to suggest that his own office was dependent on the kingship.[63] Even if the supported pretender loses a power struggle, he has nothing to fear. He can

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[60] The term has been borrowed twice into Armenian. The first time was in Parthian times and the term *(a)sparapet* is derived from the Old Persian *spāda-pati* (Hübschmann 1897, 240, no. 588). In a second phase, the Middle Persian *spāhpat* became the Armenian *(a)spahapet* in early Sāsānian times (Hübschmann 1897, 22, no. 18; see Huyse 1999, 207). If these terms first appeared in Armenia in the Arsacid period, they would not have been widespread in Iberia any earlier. The "classical" route by which Iranian loanwords reached Iberia was indirect transmission via Armenia, which had more direct communication channels with the Iranian region (Vashalomidze2007, 143; Widengren 1969, 73). However, especially in the Sāsānian period, there were very strong independent links between Iberia and Iran, so that a direct adoption of the office and designation is more likely to be assumed in this later phase. On this, see Schleicher, forthcoming.

[61] Toumanoff 1963, 112-129.

[62] The term *erist'avi* is composed of the Georgian ერი (*eri* = people or army) and თავი (*t'avi* = head). In the feudal system, the office refers to the governor of a state administrative unit. However, the *Georgian Chronicles* also use the term to refer to the heads of the great houses of the dynastic nobility. Cf. e.g., Rapp 2014, 67, nn. 173 and 201. The term does not (yet) appear in early texts such as the martyrdom of Šušanik and that of Evstatʿi. Here the head of a noble house is called *mamasaxlisi* (*Martyrium Evstati* 3 [34 Abuladze]).

[63] An impressive example of this is the Armenian Mušeł Mamikonian, who at the end of his life naturally handed over his office as head of the Mamikonian family,

simply switch his allegiance to the victor. It is said that after the 10th king Aderki had won the battle against Aršak II, he called upon the *erist'av(eb)i*, who had previously been loyal to Aršak, to recognise him as king, which they did: "The Iberians took Aršak's crown, placed it on Aderki's, and led him away."[64]

Structural changes only appear in the narratives about the reign of King Vaxtang I.[65] In the "novel" about his life, the author mentions the organisation of the Iberian state in two places, in a slightly different form (compared to the order of Pʿarnavaz).[66] The country was also divided into dioceses and bishops were appointed for each diocese.[67] Vaxtang's reign is therefore considered by the authors of the chronicles to be of particular importance for the constitution of the Kʿartʿvelian state. By the end of this king's reign, a system seems to have been established that included a strong feudal service nobility alongside the dynastic landed nobility.

Vaxtang is credited with sweeping reforms, particularly on the religious front,[68] but it seems unlikely that he had the power to break the local clans. So how did he manage to limit their power?

It is worth looking at the functions of the nobility as described in the Georgian sources. Although not particularly emphasised, a central function of the nobility was the collection of taxes and dues: The *at'asist'av(n)i* ("leaders of the thousands") were responsible for two types of tax, the

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as well as that of *sparapet* of the Armenian king, to his son Ardašīr. King Aršak is not asked (*Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk'* 5, 44 [228 Garsoïan]). It can be assumed that the Iberian nobility were also able to transfer the family estate without interference from the king.

[64] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 34 (49 Thomson).

[65] Shurgaia 2018, 262-264; Schleicher 2021, 278-279.

[66] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 147 (162 Thomson) and 186 (201-202 Thomson): The "Seven Great Houses" of Iberia appear here, an idea that is probably strongly Iranian in character. See Schleicher 2021, 278-279; Shurgaia 2018, 262-264; Rapp 2014, 314-318.

[67] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 198-199 (216-217 Thomson). See Schleicher 2021, 426-435; Shurgaia 2012. On the religious developments in Vaxtang's Iberia, see Shurgaia 2018, 297-535.

[68] Shurgaia 2018 and 2012.

royal dues (*xarki sameup'o*) and the *erist'avi* tribute (*xarki saerist'ao*).[69] Traditionally, taxes in Iberia were also collected hierarchically through the dynastic nobility, as the kingdom did not have its own administrative structures in this area. This was about to change. The shift of fiscal power to the royal service nobility and their military functions is almost exactly what happened in the Iranian Empire!

JOINT DEVELOPMENT

> Most importantly, as described in L(ist of) Kings, Kʿartʿvelian social structure and local royal imagery parallel those of Iran. LKings' first indigenous Kʿartʿvelian king Pʿarnavaz symbolises this relationship: he had an Iranian mother and a Persian name based upon the Iranian concept of *farnah* or "royal radiance"; [...] and Pʿarnavaz adopted an Iranian model for the administrative machinery of his realm.[70]

Although the structures in Iberia and Iran developed in a similar way, our sources place these developments in different periods. According to the Georgian evidence, the establishment of the feudal service nobility was completed by the end of the 5th century, while Arabic and Middle Persian sources place its beginning in Iran in the 6th century.

To resolve this discrepancy, there are several options, of which I consider the following two to be the most likely:

1. The Georgian sources, reporting from a distance of at least three centuries,[71] could no longer precisely locate the "reforms" in Iberia and attributed them to the already mythical King Vaxtang, even though they were carried out after the Iberian state had been integrated into the direct administration of the Sāsānian empire.[72]

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[69] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 25 (35 Thomson); Lordkipanidze 2000, 173.

[70] Rapp 2003, 204-205.

[71] On the dating of the oldest texts, see in particular Rapp 2003, esp. 197-242, where the earliest written record of the Vaxtang novel is dated to around the year 800.

[72] The conditions described in the section under Pʿarnavaz are certainly based on conditions in the 9th century. The basis here is the desire to mould Kʿartʿli and Egrisi into a common political unit (Rapp 2003, 145). That the structures described are of a much later nature is shown not least by the fact that Tbilisi is mentioned

2. The Arabic sources, which are even more distant in time, bundle a long-term development in the entire Sāsānian Commonwealth to the "reforms" of the overpowering king Ḫosrau I.[73] Late Sāsānian literature, which stylised Ḫosrau I as the ideal type of "King of Kings," had already encouraged this bundling.[74] However, this means that some of the structural changes had already taken place before his reign in the 5th century (in some regions?), but were attributed to Ḫosrau I in retrospect.[75] Both of these possibilities could be true.

The reforms had begun with Kavādh I and were already more advanced in some places in his time than historical tradition would have us believe. Since Kavādh I was particularly active in the South Caucasus and such developments affected the entire Sāsānian Commonwealth, the reorganisation of the Kʿartʿvelian state attributed to King Vaxtang can probably be linked to the Iranian developments. The reforms would have been noticeable in Iberia under Kavādh I in the late phase or shortly after the end of the Iberian kingdom as a whole following the death of Vaxtang I (in 502), and the structures were retrospectively transferred to the Iberian kingdom with its most important king in the later tradition. In Iran, too, the reforms were not implemented everywhere at the same time.

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(*Kʿart'lis Cʿxovreba* 25 [35 Thomson]) although, according to the *Chronicles* themselves, the city was not founded until much later (*Kʿart'lis Cʿxovreba* 136 [150 Thomson]). At the time of Vaxtang, the region was apparently a wasteland (*Kʿart'lis Cʿxovreba* 181 [198 Thomson]), and it was only after the death of this king that Tbilisi became a fortress and the seat of the local ruler (*Kʿart'lis Cʿxovreba* 205 [224 Thomson]) and even under Stepʿanos I and Persian rule (*Kʿart'lis Cʿxovreba* 223 [233 Thomson]).

[73] On the mythical exaggeration of Ḫosrau I in later times, see Frye 1984, 329.

[74] On *Ṭabarī* and his sources, see the introduction in Rosenthal 1989. On the oldest sources such as the *Karnamag Anūšīrwān*, which date from the late period of the Sāsānian Empire, see Grignaschi 1966.

[75] Cf. Rubin 1995, who assumes a reform in several stages, the results of which were repeatedly reviewed and adjusted. The economic problems of the peasantry were not a new development in Kavādh's time either. Balāš had already attempted to counteract the rural exodus with royal decrees (*Ṭabarī* 1, 883). It is not yet possible to speak of real reforms here.

They were initiated in the Sawād, and Kavādh was already able to demonstrably benefit from the fruits of the reforms there.[76] Given Kavādh's strong presence in the South Caucasus, it is not unlikely that new structures were established here just as early as well.

The Armenian tradition could also point to the introduction of reforms at the end of the 5th century. According to the historian Łazar Pʿarpecʿi, there was no evidence of a service nobility in 482:

> Arriving there, he gathered around him the ranks of apostates. Deceiving king Vaxtang and denying the oath on the gospel, they went to Hazarawuxt. Those who had been in concert with the "King of Kings" also gathered around him. To one he promised the throne, to another rank and honour and many presents, and to many others each one's needs. Having united the majority of the Georgians, he formed an army. When king Vaxtang saw that his own subjects had been false and had abandoned him for Hazarawuxt, he left Georgia and withdrew for a while to the land of Eger.[77]

It is unlikely that the offices to be conferred by the "King of Kings" were those of the Iberian service nobility; it is more likely that they were

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[76] Ibn Khordādbeh (*Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, ed. De Goeje, BGA, 6, 14), Ibn Ḥawqal (ed. De Goeje, BGA 2, 234) and Ibn Rustah (*Kitāb al-buldān*, ed. De Goeje, BGA 7, 104) who deal specifically with the Sawād, attribute the tax reform to Kavādh, not to Ḫosrau (see Rubin 1995, 242). The author believes he can trace the long-term historical developments that eventually led to the implementation of the reforms back to the time of Pērōz. Changes in the tax system are taking place here (*Ṭabarī* 1, 874 [112 Bosworth]). In the financial administration, there were changes due to the mass minting of drachmas on an unprecedented scale. Furthermore, it seems that taxes were now increasingly being levied in coins and not in kind as before (see Schindel 2004, 412; Gaube 1982, 115). Finally, thoughts of equality and communal ownership can already be seen in Pērōz's measures against the great drought: "He wrote further to them that anyone who had a subterranean food store (*matmurah*), a granary, foodstuffs, or anything that could provide nourishment for the people and enable them to assist each other, should release these supplies, and that no one should appropriate such things exclusively for himself. Furthermore, rich and poor, noble and mean, should share equally and aid each other" (*Ṭabarī* 1, 874 [112 Bosworth]).

[77] *Łazar. P'arpec'i* 80 (205 Thomson).

dignities of the Sāsānian Empire. There is also no mention of the perpetuation of existing offices. The nobles negotiating with the Persian general Hazarawuxt appear to have little dependence on the Iberian king; they have nothing to fear from his removal, and even hope to gain advantages from it. This is where the dynastic clan chieftains operate, one of whom even has his sights set on the crown. Łazar's statements could be interpreted to mean that Sāsānian structures were introduced here after the expulsion of the Vaxtang from Iberia. Some of the dynastic nobility may now have been transformed into a service nobility.

Finally, another passage in the *Georgian Chronicles* suggests that the introduction of the office of *spaspet* can be linked to the Sāsānids: it mentions that in the kingless period just before the reign of Vaxtang, a new *spaspet* named Juanšer was appointed by the "King of Kings" after the death of the previous incumbent, Saurmag, in Iberia.[78] Not only is this the first mention of the appointment of a *spaspet* after P'arnavaz, but it is also clear that we are not dealing with hereditary nobility at this point. Saurmag had a son named Artavaz, who later played an important role as Vaxtang's milk brother.[79] But this Artavaz was not appointed to succeed his father. The office of *spaspet* was not hereditary. The whole process is not particularly emphasised by the author, who takes it for granted. This could be an anachronism and, moreover, one that refers to the late period of the Sāsānian Empire, when Iberia was firmly integrated into the administrative structures. It is therefore conceivable that the institution of the *spaspet* did not exist under Vaxtang and was only introduced after his reign. Perhaps this happened as part of the reorganisation of Iberia mentioned by Łazar after the suppression of the Vaxtang rebellion.

## CONCLUSION

Iberia was also integrated into the structures of the Sāsānian Empire during the reign of Vaxtang I in the second half of the 5th century, and the Iberian king was a vassal of the "King of Kings." As such, he could also be given neighbouring territories to govern. Rani, for example, was given

[78] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 145 (160 Thomson).
[79] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 156 (171 Thomson).

to the Iberian kings as a fief to ensure the protection of the pass of Čor.[80] However, the structures of a service nobility, which can be described as feudal in the broadest sense, were probably not implemented by Vaxtang or any other Iberian king. It might have been possible with Persian support, but the Iberian kings did not have the power to curtail the rights of the dynastic nobility as massively as depriving them of the right to levy taxes. If the episode presented by Łazar Pʿarpecʿi shows one thing, it is that the Iberian nobility under Vaxtang I was powerful enough to pursue its own policies. In addition to the defectors – some of whom may have been coerced – there was also a group of nobles who had previously worked with the Persians. A section of the Iberian nobility had therefore been able to engage in open politics against their own king for some time.

It was only after the death of Vaxtang and the end of the Iberian kingdom that the Persians used their power to establish a service nobility.[81] What this might have been like can even be read in the *Georgian Chronicles:*

> He (the "King of Kings": FS) came to these terms with the Georgians: that all passes, fortresses and cities would be occupied by Persian troops, but there would be no other concentrations of Persians in the land of Kʿartʿli to mingle (with the Georgians), [...] The "King (of Kings": FS) departed and subdued all the valleys of the Caucasians. He appointed commanders (*mt'avarni*) everywhere and ordered them all to be obedient to his son Mirian.[82]

Although Leonti Mroveli places the events in the time of Mirian III and thus in the 4th century, the repeated mention of the Khazars in this context alone shows that we are dealing with anachronisms here. A chronological classification of this passage, as helpful as it would be for our topic, is therefore hardly possible.

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[80] For example, Mirian III (*K'art'lis C'xovreba* 65-66 [76-78 Thomson]): "He held Mcʿxetʿa, and he (the "King of Kings": FS) also gave him Kʿartʿli, Armenia, Ran, Movakan and Heretʿi. [...] But when the Khazars came to Daruband, then Mirian would march to aid Daruband."

[81] Genuinely older sources, such as the *Martyrdom of Evstat'i*, still used the term *mamasaxlisi* for the middle of the 6th century.

[82] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 65 (77 Thomson).

The Arab scholar Masʿūdī's account of Ḫosrau I's structural efforts in Albania fits into this:

> When Anūsharwān built the city of al-Bāb, whose wall extended into the sea and stretched over the land and the mountains, he settled various peoples and kings there, for whom he established ranks and special titles and defined their boundaries, following the example of what Ardašīr b. Bābak had done regarding the kings of Ḫorāsān.[83]

At the death of Hormezd IV in 597, the non-hereditary offices still existed. However, these rights were to become hereditary with the transition to Byzantine vassalage.

> They sent an envoy to the king of the Greeks, and asked that he choose a king from among the descendants of the kings of Kʿartʿli, and that the eristʿavis be (confirmed) without change each in his own principality.[84]

The fact that the holders of these offices wanted to be confirmed by the emperor shows that they were not hereditary. There must therefore have been an official nobility in Iberia in the 6th century.[85]

The power of the dynastic nobility in Iberia was curtailed at the beginning of the 6th century, but not broken. It was integrated into the feudal structures under Persian pressure. If the office of the *erist'avi* was to be filled, it was certain that a representative of the dynastic nobility would receive it. The offices thus also acted as a means of binding the nobles to the king. The rights were not initially hereditary without restriction, but it was only a matter of time before they became permanent.

Little is known about the organisation of the Iranian nobility after the great reforms. What we do know is that royal officials (governors), judges and tax officials were increasingly appointed. More is known about the

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[83] *Mas'ūdī* 17 (vol. 2, 3-4 Meynard).

[84] *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 217 (229 Thomson).

[85] The possibility that the duchies were not created until the Bagratid period should at least be mentioned here. A precise understanding of the circumstances of the system's development is made more difficult not least by the fact that the *Georgian Chronicles* use the term *erist'avi* rather uncritically to refer to dynastic princes such as the *pitiaxši* of Gugark', Iranian commanders and even Albanian princes (Rapp 2014, 67, n. 173; 2003, 311-312 and 326-327).

structures of the Iberian system, and one might be tempted to draw conclusions about Iranian conditions from this information. But that would be another topic.

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