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Prostitution and its perception as a social and economic phenomenon in Iran and the Caucasus in the late Middle Ages

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Abstract: *The connection between the Iranian world and the Caucasus is longstanding and encompasses various areas, including history, culture, language and religion. The objective of this article is to investigate the prevalence and taxation of prostitution in late medieval Iran from the inception of the Mongol period (Ilkhanate) to the decline of the Safavids. Prostitution was increasingly perceived as a form of trade and was therefore subject to taxation in the same way as other forms of trade. Notwithstanding the efforts of secular authorities to eradicate it and in spite of the fact that in Muslim Iran prostitution was deemed a breach of Islamic law, the practice endured on a notable scale.*

Key words: Prostitution, Middle Ages, Iran, Caucasus, Ilkhanids, Safavids, Tamgha

Introduction

The perception of prostitution in Christian and Muslim contexts is characterized by a multifaceted and nuanced approach. While both religions condemn prostitution as a violation of divine commandments and moral principles, there may be differences in their approaches and emphasis.

In the Christian tradition, prostitution is regarded as an act that contravenes the tenets of the divine commandments. Christian ethics is founded on the principles of purity, morality, and the sanctity of marriage. Consequently, prostitution is considered to violate ethical norms. The Bible frequently condemns adultery and fornication, which can be interpreted as opposing prostitution. For instance, the *Book of Proverbs*

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(23:27) states, “For a prostitute is a deep pit, an adulteress is a narrow well”. In Islam, prostitution is also considered a sin that violates moral and religious norms. Islamic law (*sharia*) is particularly strict on morality and prohibits any form of prostitution. The Quran (Surah 17:32) describes adultery as a sinful act that violates moral standards. Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of adhering to these norms. Therefore, prostitution, along with other forms of violation of moral norms, is prohibited.

The objective of this article is to investigate the prevalence and taxation of prostitution in late medieval Iran from the inception of the Mongol period (Ilkhanate) to the decline of the Safavids (the 19th century could have been included, but given the political upheaval in the region, the connection between Iran and the Caucasus region was severed by the early 19th century). Prostitution was increasingly perceived as a form of trade and was therefore subject to taxation in the same way as other forms of trade. Notwithstanding the efforts of secular authorities to eradicate it and in spite of the fact that in Muslim Iran prostitution was deemed a breach of Islamic law, the practice endured on a notable scale. A further key issue is the extent to which the mores of the Ilkhans and Safavids influenced the Christian countries under their rule (e.g. Armenia and Georgia). It is necessary to ascertain whether the values of the ruling elites were imposed on the Armenian or Georgian populations, or whether this phenomenon exerted a mere influence upon them. The study of this phenomenon is of interest from both a social and economic perspective of the region (e.g., prostitution as a form of trade was taxed by *tamgha*). The study will present a comparative analysis of the perception of prostitution within the state and urban life of one and the same state (e.g. in the states of Aq Qoyunlu, Safavid, etc.) of the Islamic and Christian worlds. This will be achieved by examining the views of Muslims, Iranians and Turkomans on the one hand, and those of Christians, Armenians and Georgians on the other.

Taxation of Prostitution: Economic Implications in the Iran-Caucasus Region

It is well documented that religion has played a significant role in social organization, both historically and in more modern times, as evidenced by the influence of religious beliefs and practices on social norms and structures. Despite the fact that both Islamic and Christian doctrines vehemently criticize the phenomenon of prostitution and the presence of brothels, prostitution did in fact occur in its various forms in many of these countries and states. This included the regions of the South Caucasus and Iran that we have studied, where prostitution took place in the form of brothels, houses of “Sodom”, legal and illegal prostitution, as well as being subject to taxation.

At the end of the 12th century the socio-economic life of late medieval Iran acquired one distinctive feature. During the Ilkhan dynasty’s rule (1258-1335), the state apparatus began to view prostitution and brothels as a potential source of revenue through taxation. It is a documented fact that during the reign of Oljeitu Khan (1304

-1316), brothels, along with all commercial and industrial facilities, were subject to the tamghā tax.¹ Tamghā was used as a tax in Iran, Armenia and Georgia, from the end of the 13th century during the Ilkhanid dynasty. According to Nasir al-Tusi, tamghā (*māl-i tamghā: the tax of tamgha*) was to be levied on the rich and merchants, but in reality tamghā was a tax on all kinds of trade (including prostitution), customs, and commercial and industrial establishments.

Furthermore, during the reign of Oljeitu's son and successor Abu Said (1316-1335), the total amount of taxes on taverns and brothels reached 10,000 dinars.² The phenomenon persisted throughout the 15th century, during the tenure of the Turkoman tribal confederacies Ak Koyunlu (White Sheep) and Kara Koyunlu (Black Sheep). In one record from Shiraz (1450), in addition to the other taxes mentioned, it is noted that brothels (*beyt al-lotf*) were also subject to taxation.³ J. Woods discusses the prevalence of deviant social norms, including prostitution and sodomy,⁴ in the state of Kara Koyunlu. V. Fluhr notes: "Uzun Hasan not only had 'good' relations with prostitutes, but also undoubtedly needed the income that was collected from them".⁵

There is also abundant information about prostitution and the taxation of prostitution during the Safavid rule in Iran (from the early 16th century to the first quarter of the 18th century), which is preserved mainly in the travel notes of European travellers.

First of all, prostitution in Iran is mentioned in the 19th century book called *The History of Prostitution*, where the author confirms that prostitution, particularly taxed prostitution, was widespread in Iran, especially during the Safavid period. According to *The History of Prostitution*, there were 30,000 prostitutes in Isfahan alone, paying an annual tax to the authorities in order to operate.⁶

Anonymous Venetian merchant records from the 16th century contain intriguing information about the taxation of prostitution in Iran. These records indicate that the tamghā tax, which was levied on brothels, had a significant negative impact on trade. The tax was charged at 5% for Muslims and 10% for Christians. In the context of the report on the tax on trade, the anonymous author also discusses this type of trade, namely prostitution, and in particular the taxation of prostitution. Additionally, prostitutes, who were often found in public places, were required to pay according to their physical beauty. The more attractive they were perceived to be, the higher the fee they were expected to pay. In this city (Tabriz) there was also a "school of Sodomism" and they too paid a tax in accordance with perceived physical beauty. They (the prostitutes) had to pay the whole amount to the tax collectors and there was no difference

¹ Minovi & Minorsky, 1940: 755-789; Alizade, 1955: 51-63; Petrushevski, 1960: 386; Papazyan, 1984: 113-122; Lambton, 1991: 86.

² Bartold, 1911: 34; Zarinebaf, 2011: 102.

³ Limbert, 2004: 72.

⁴ Woods, 1999: 106.

⁵ Floor, 2008: 191.

⁶ Sanger, 1895: 417.

between the prostitutes, whether they were of Muslim or Christian faith⁷. In his travel notes about the city of Qazvin, the German traveller Adam Olearius, who visited Iran in the 30s of the 17th century, also notes that prostitution is quite widespread there.

Olearius relays important information: prostitutes were called *cahbeha*

*and covered only by a veil, they were seated in a specific order behind the procurer, who was referred to as “delal”, or “the one who makes the mattresses”.*⁸

The function of the *delal* was to hold a lit candle and, one by one, lift the veils from the faces of the girls. When a client chose one, she would then send the couple to her house, where conditions for coitus were already prepared. Acting essentially as intermediaries were often older women, who initially introduced clients to the girls and then collected payment after selection.⁹ The term *cahbeha* is also used by Robert Ker Porter, a Scottish traveller, diplomat and artist who visited Iran in the early 19th century. In his notes, he translates the term as worthless sympathetically about the unenviable and miserable life of prostitutes in Iran.¹⁰ Subsequently, the term *cahbeha* is employed by 19th-century researcher William Sanger, who, however, postulates that it was prostitutes who were subject to taxation who were referred to as “*cahbeha*”.¹¹ *Cahbeha* is a word of Arabic origin (“*qahbat*”– prostitute, “*qahbanat*”– prostitution)¹² and apparently was borrowed to Persian; interestingly the word is also found in Armenian with the same meaning *laghpa*.¹³

In his second voyage to Persia (1672), the French traveller Jean Chardin provides further details in his travel notes. Chardin reports that in Isfahan alone there were 12,000 prostitutes who paid taxes and calls them “*couchées sur l’Etat*”. The author, however, also notes the existence of those who “were free from it (did not pay taxes)”. According to William W. Sanger’s findings, there were 30,000 prostitutes in Isfahan alone, paying an annual tax to the authorities in order to operate.¹⁴ The amount of tax collected from prostitutes was 8,000 tumans (measure of Iranian money), which equates to approximately 360,000 French livres.¹⁵ In addition to European sources, Armenian chronicler Hovanisik Tsarec’I reports that prostitutes “seduced” people in

⁷ *A Narrative of Italian Travels in Persia*, 172.

⁸ Olearius, 1666: 461.

⁹ Sanger, 1895: 417-418.

¹⁰ Ker Porter, 1821: 350.

¹¹ Sanger, 1895: 417.

¹² Catafago, 1873: 897.

¹³ *Hayoc’ lezvi barbarayin bararan*, 2004: 346.

¹⁴ Sanger, 1895: 417.

¹⁵ Chardin, 1735: 47.

public and paid taxes to the Shah's court, which is also important in the context of the taxation of prostitution in Safavid Iran¹⁶.

Comparing all these facts, one may observe that the taxation of prostitution 'legalised' it and served as a basis for its unhindered prosperity and existence, yet despite the implementation of such a phenomenon, there was a constant struggle against prostitution during the period under study.¹⁷ First of all, it is necessary to note the measures taken by Ilkhan Ghazan Khan (1295-1304). Ghazan Khan forbade forcing women into prostitution and tried to limit the spread of prostitution.¹⁸ During the reign of his son Oljeitu, as mentioned above, prostitution was taxed, and by the middle of the 14th century the measures taken by Ghazan Khan were no longer in force, which is confirmed by a report by the chronicler Fasih Khawafi. Fasih cites an interesting incident: one of the leaders of Sebzevar, Hoja Ali Shams al-Din, demanded that a certain Heydar Kassab pay the tamga, but when he did not pay, Hoja Ali offered Heydar to take his wife to a brothel so that Heydar could pay the tax with the money she earned.¹⁹

In Iran, the fight against the spread of prostitution was particularly fierce during the Safavid period. There is evidence that 300 prostitutes were executed in Tavriz on the orders of the first Safavid shah, Ismayil (1502-1524).²⁰ According to the chronicle of Hovanisik Tsaretsi, Shah Tahmasb (1524-1576) took particularly severe measures to eradicate prostitution: prostitution was punishable by death.²¹ However, even these measures were ineffective and the phenomenon continued. This is confirmed by the struggle of Shah Abbas I, who ordered the expulsion of prostitutes from the holy places in the city of Ardabil.²² Attempts to eradicate prostitution continued into the 17th century. In the mid-17th century, the Grand Vizier Khalifa Sultan launched a campaign against alcoholism and prostitution, which resulted in the closure of many taverns and brothels.²³ The records of the French travellers Jean Chardin and Jean Tavernier provide interesting information on how prostitutes were executed during the reign of Shah Sefi II the Second (1666-1694). According to J. Chardin, prostitutes, wrapped in their own clothes, were thrown from a high tower.²⁴ According to J. Tave-

¹⁶ *Manr zamanakagrowt'youwner*, 241.

¹⁷ The fight against drunkenness and prostitution in medieval cities was carried out by muhtasibs – an official who kept order in the city, especially in the bazaar, in meeting places and on the streets, and who also pursued and arrested drunkards, prostitutes and other troublemakers (Petrushevski, 1966: 196).

¹⁸ Rashid-ad-Din, 316.

¹⁹ Mudzhmal-i Fasixi, 82.

²⁰ Jahandideh & Khaefi, 2011: 137-143.

²¹ *Manr zamanakagrowt'youwner*, 241.

²² Semerdjian, 2008: 100.

²³ It should be noted, however, that the vizir himself had a weakness for alcoholic beverages, and as part of this struggle the persecution of the Armenian merchants of Isfahan began (Matthee, 2011: 45).

²⁴ Chardin, 1711: 301.

rnier, prostitutes were executed by throwing them to dogs that had been previously prepared for such an execution, which killed them.²⁵

[Shah Tahmasb] also purified the state of thieves and robbers. And also shameless women and harlots who sat in the streets or in taverns and engaged in public prostitution and paid taxes to the kings – [the Shah] eradicated prostitution (literally – destroyed all prostitutes) in his kingdom²⁶

How this influenced situation in Armenian and Georgian milieu

It is also possible to consider the Armenian and Georgian late medieval realities. A question arises whether this phenomenon was unique to these regions. In Armenian medieval realities, procuring is also subject to criticism. In his writings, Nerses the Blessed compares pimps and procurers to the serpent of Satan.²⁷ He describes them as offering unwise women and men fruit for temptation, which, he says, will be sweet at first but will then become bitter like bile. It is notable that even in the Middle Ages, as evidenced by the message of Nerses Shnorhali, the use of cosmetics was perceived as a sign of moral decline and a gateway to fornication. This was particularly evident in instances where women were accused of “hanging the colour of their faces with foreign poisons”. According to the laws of Gosh, it was forbidden for the servants in a priest’s house to be from the ranks of prostitutes.

It is necessary to determine whether there were brothels in existence, and if so, whether prostitutes and brothels were subject to taxation. It is possible that the relative freedom of manners observed in the Mongol Empire and the Byzantine Empire may have influenced the Armenian and Georgian environments. It is evident that particularly in major Armenian cities and in light of the expansion of trade and economic activity, the phenomenon of prostitution and brothels was inevitable. Moreover, Armenian historian Stepanos Orbelian (13-14th centuries) corroborates this assertion. In his work, Orbelian describes the disputes between the Armenian Catholicos Constantine and the King of Cilician Armenia, Hetum II (1289-1307). Among the 30 charges brought against Constantine was one alleging that he was guilty of collecting taxes from the brothels of Hromkla. Constantine did not deny that he had collected taxes from the brothels, but justified this action by stating that he was not collecting taxes for the church, but rather directing the funds to beneficial causes, such as the payment for the soldiers of the Hromkla garrison. Furthermore, Constantine made a noteworthy observation, suggesting that the prevalence of brothels was a common feature of both

²⁵ Tavernier, 1679: 682-683.

²⁶ Zak‘aria K‘anak‘erc‘i, 10.

²⁷ Shnorhali Nerses, 207-208.

Greek (Byzantine) and Armenian cities. This peculiar message may provide a solution to the question which is discussed.

The situation is similar to that in Armenia as far as the Georgian historical environment is concerned. Despite Christian mores preventing the spread of the phenomenon as such, one cannot state that prostitution did not exist here, or that the freedom of morals from the Ilkhans to the Safavids could not but have had an effect. However, in Georgian and Armenian environments, prostitution and adultery were perceived differently from the legal point of view. In the Armenian environment, a husband never had the right to kill his wife; murder was punished regardless of whether the adultery was the fault of the husband or the wife: “If anyone kills his wife for adultery, it should be known that (for this) he has no right to kill, but can only divorce”.²⁸

In Georgian environment, if a man left an innocent wife, he paid her half of the siskhli and returned her dowry in full. If he left her because of adultery, he still returned her dowry, because if she was an adulteress, her dowry was also part of adultery.²⁹ If a woman committed adultery (the husband), if he wished so, would leave her, so that neither in this life nor in the Hereafter would he be questioned, but if he wished, he would not leave her – both were in the power of the man (husband).³⁰ If a woman procured a friend or neighbour in her own house, and it was discovered, then (according to) what kind of procurer she was, she had to give half of her siskhli (bloodwit) to the patron of that woman.³¹ Moreover, if she could not give it, she was to be punished in this way: a rope was to be tied round her neck, and she was to be led through the village naked, with the rope round her neck, in her underwear.³²

If there were no pandering, there would be no law to punish it. In addition, it is interesting that there are no remarks or laws on this subject in the *Trial Laws of Beka and Agbugha*, and in the 17th and 18th centuries, suddenly a need for such a law arose. This may indicate that in the Georgian context, the influence of the general trend and mores of the Safavid state, including the emergence of prostitution through procuring, may have contributed to the emergence of the law punishing pimping.

In Georgia in the same period (14th-15th centuries) if a man caught his wife in adultery and killed her, neither her brother nor relative had the right to demand the siskhli (price of blood).³³

²⁸ Smbat Sparapet, 93-94.

²⁹ *Sudebnik Beka i Agbuga*, 46.

³⁰ *Zakony Vaxtanga VI*, 88.

³¹ *Zakony Vaxtanga VI*, 88.

³² *Zakony Vaxtanga VI*, 89.

³³ *Sudebnik Beka i Agbuga*, 75.

Conclusions

The findings of this study challenge the pervasive assumption that traditionalism was the dominant force in the Middle Ages within these regions of Orient (Iran and Caucasus), regardless of whether it was in a Muslim or Christian context, and that society as a whole was guided by strict religious moral principles. In fact, this assumption is inaccurate, as our findings demonstrate. One of the central questions concerns the impact of the Ilkhanid's and Safavid's moral standards on Armenian and Georgian societies. This study aims to ascertain whether there was a change in the perception of prostitution in medieval Armenian and Georgian societies. A question thus arises as to whether prostitution or moral freedom became widespread in these societies. Based on the complaints of church fathers, descriptions of morals in sources, as well as law collections and codes, it can be confidently assumed that such an influence existed. For example, evidence of this can be seen in the copying of the "institution of the procuress" in Georgian and Armenian societies. However, it cannot be asserted that the phenomenon of prostitution was entirely absent in medieval Armenia or Georgia. Indeed, in the Armenian example, prostitution was even taxed. Thus, the influence of external morals on local customs did occur, as confirmed by various sources and legal documents of that time.

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