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The religious factor in commercial activities of Armenian merchants (15th-18th centuries)

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Abstract: *This paper examines the significant impact of religious identity on the commercial activities of Armenian Christian merchants operating in Muslim spaces between the 15th and 18th centuries. Drawing on primary sources including Armenian chronicles, colophons of Armenian manuscripts, and European travel accounts, the study examines how religious identity created both obstacles and opportunities for Armenian merchants. The results show that Armenian merchants faced systematic disadvantages and challenges compared to Muslim merchants on the one hand, including higher customs duties, vulnerability to confiscation of property and physical threats based solely on religious identity, and on the other hand compared to European merchants who operated largely under state protection or within large trading organizations such as the East India Companies. We have categorized these problems into three main groups: physical harassment and violence, economic discrimination through differential taxation and pressure to convert. At the same time, the Christian identity of Armenian merchants sometimes facilitated diplomatic missions and trade relations with European powers. However, unlike European merchants who enjoyed protection in the form of surrender treaties and the support of trading companies, Armenian merchants largely lacked institutional support in Muslim territories. This study contributes to the understanding of the intersection of religion, trade networks and cross-cultural commercial relations in the pre-modern Middle East by emphasizing that religious affiliation served as both a burden and a strategic asset for minority merchant communities.*

Key words: Armenian Merchants, Religious Persecution, Trade Networks, Ottoman Empire, Safavid Iran, Economic Discrimination, Diplomatic Relations, Religious Conversion, Cross-Cultural Trade

Introduction

It is well known that religion played a significant role in public life in both Western Europe and, more notably, in the Middle East, especially during the Middle Ages and prior to the advent of modernity. The religious factor was equally influential in trade and economic life. For instance, Muslim merchants paid only half the customs duty known as *tamgha* compared to local Christian merchants. Christian traders occasionally converted to Islam due to severe persecution by Muslim powers, or for economic motivations. More frequently, however, under the active influence of

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Catholic missionaries, Armenian merchants abandoned the Armenian Apostolic Church and adopted the Catholic faith, which naturally facilitated their relations with the Catholic states of Europe. The aim of this study is to investigate how religious affiliation affected the commercial activities of Armenian Christian merchants in the early modern period – what kinds of difficulties arose from their religious identity, or conversely, how religious factors facilitated the expansion of trade contacts and commercial success. This research employs a comparative historical analysis to examine primary and secondary sources related to the activities of Armenian merchants from the 15th-18th centuries. The methodology includes critical evaluation of Armenian chronicles, European travel accounts, diplomatic correspondence, and manuscript colophons to identify instances in which religion influenced commercial operations. These sources are analyzed through a comparative framework, which examines the experience of Armenian merchants across various political entities (the Aq Qoyunlu empire, the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Iran etc.) and temporal settings in order to detect recurring patterns and regional variations in religiously motivated treatment. The methodology focuses on categorizing documented cases into three principal groups: physical persecution and threats, economic discrimination, and religious pressure to convert. The wide range of sources used in this study provides a unique perspective on the religious dimensions of Armenian commercial activity. Armenian chronicles and colophons recount instances of persecution and economic hardship from an insider's perspective, while European travel accounts offer external observations on the treatment of Armenian merchants in Muslim-controlled territories. Diplomatic correspondence from European archives documents the role of Armenian merchants as intermediaries between Muslim states and European powers. Autobiographical narratives, such as that of Ełia Karnetzi Mushełyan, reveal the complex religious dynamics, including tensions between Armenian merchants and Catholic missionaries regarding the organization of trade in Safavid Iran. Economic and trade documents detailing differentiated taxation based on religious affiliation offer quantitative evidence of systemic discrimination. These sources together make it possible to analyse how religious factors shaped the commercial experience of Armenian merchants across various regions and historical contexts. The novelty of this study is the systematic analysis of the dual role of religion in the lives of Armenian merchants – as a source of vulnerability and as an instrument of diplomatic and trade integration. In addition, for the first time, little-studied primary sources (chronicles and colophons of Armenian manuscripts) are introduced into the scientific turnover, which makes it possible to identify regional peculiarities of religious discrimination in the Muslim empires of the early modern period.

Religious Factors Affecting Armenian Merchants: Cases of Bullying, Physical Punishment, and Physical Threats

Armenian merchants were frequently subjected to physical violence, punishment, property theft, and ridicule because of their Christian faith. Although sometimes these cases weren't solely based on religious beliefs, in most cases we've studied, sources indicate that the violence was perpetrated based solely on faith. The following examples illustrate this tendency.

> They slandered at Ibrahim Pasha (Grand Vizier of Sultan Suleiman) that Khoja Kokjan has ties with the Franks (Europeans) and remains Armenian (i.e. faithful to the Armenian Church): "In that year (1536), Khoja Kokjan was captured and executed for his faith in Christ; his tongue was cut off and he was put on a stake so that the stake came out of his mouth".[1]

The attitude towards Armenian-Christian traders is described also in the memorial record of a manuscript, specifically the Bible of the 17th century (1607), where the scribe Khachatur from Khizan reported that the muslim Perisans subjected them to public humiliation and physical violence, often resulting in death "when the infidel Persians (meaning Iranians Muslims) catch in Isfahan Armenian-Christian merchants, they spit on their faces and kill them."[2]

Another example is when a relative of the Shah attacked and harassed an Armenian merchant simply because of his religious difference. This is a clear example of how the religious factor affected the fortune of an Armenian merchant who ended up in prison, and of course his business did not benefit, to say the least.[3]

For the sake of fairness, it should be said that religious affiliation became a reason for theft of property not only in Safavid Iran and Ottoman Empire, but also in Europe, in particular, consider this example, where in Wallachia, the authorities, especially ruler of Moldavia Ștefan VI Rareș (1551-1552):

> forced Armenians to renounce their faith, then they caught many merchants and killed them, among them was Karapet of Cafa, and the rest (of those killed) were not numbered.[4]

The Armenian poet of the 16th century, Minas Tokhateci (1510-1621, also known as Minas Polish), in his poem *Lament for the Armenians of the Land of Wallachia*, confirms this information provided by the anonymous Armenian chronicler.

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[1] *Minor Chronicles*, 1: 170.
[2] *Colophons*, 1974: 259.
[3] Shoberl, 1828: 96.
[4] *Minor Chronicles*, 1: 134.

And Ştefan arose — the wicked one,
An abode of demons, a lord of darkness.
And he cried out among the Armenian people:
"O people, hear me all!
What is this faith in which you believe?
Your path is false, your faith is false.
Abandon your own, and accept ours!"[5]

Armenian merchants from Eastern Armenia, who were subjects of Safavid Iran, faced significant difficulties in conducting trade within the Ottoman Empire's territory. One of the most serious challenges was the threat of property confiscation, as the legal status of foreign merchants remained undefined and local authorities insufficiently protected their rights. In particular, in cases of serious illness or imminent death, merchants found themselves in a complete social and legal vacuum: those around them avoided contact, fearing accusations of misappropriating the merchant's possessions after death. A striking example is the case of an Armenian merchant from Iran named Shakar. During a caravan stop near Aleppo, he fell ill and was abandoned by all his companions.[6] Realizing the severity of his condition, they chose to leave him without any assistance, fearing possible persecution by the local authorities. According to established custom, if a merchant died while traveling with a caravan and no son or brother was present, all of his possessions would be transferred to the local prince or governor.

Following the establishment of Ottoman control over Western Armenia in the 1st half of the 16th century, repression against the Christian population intensified, including against Armenian merchants who had played a key role in the region's economy. Another 17th-century chronicle entry reports the use of torture by Ottoman authorities to extract wealth from Armenian merchants: "They beat the merchants and gave each of them 400 lashes."[7]

Economic Disparities

Cases of economic discrimination linked to religious affiliations are visible, like the imposition of different tariffs, taxes, or unwarranted charges. These practices frequently violated legal boundaries.

Italian travelers to Persia of the 15th century writes that the Aq Qoyunlus have the tariff on trade (called *tamgha*), of which the Christians pay ten per cent, on every

[5] *Minor Chronicles*, 1: 134; Akinyan, 1921: 57-114; Toramanyan, 1981: 211-223; Hacikyan *et al*., 2002: 757.
[6] Febure, 1682: 262-263.
[7] *Minor Chronicles*, 2: 419.

kind of merchandise from whatever quarter it may come. And the Mussulmans only pay five per cent, on everything; and if they do not sell in Tabriz, and the goods are in transit, they do not pay percent.[8] According to Charles Claude Peysonnell, who was French consul in the Ottoman Empire, the same principle seems to have been applied in the Ottoman empire and in the Crimean Khanate, where it is no secret that a significant part of the merchants were Armenians. Muslims paid 3 percent of the tax on imported goods, and the rest – Christians, including Armenians – 5 or 6 percent.[9]

Corruption and harassment of lower and middle class officials in Iran posed a challenge to the free trade practices of Armenian traders, as these officials attempted to collect illegal taxes, percentages, or fees in exchange for allowing trade. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as *šilt'ağ*. The *šilt'ağ* was employed to indicate slanderous oppression in a letter from Armenian Catholic merchant Ełia Mushelian to his French colleague Porécar in Isfahan. Ełia Mushelian was the representative of the French East India Company in Tabriz.[10] In 1715, he wrote to Porécar, requesting assistance to obtain a guarantee in Isfahan, to ensure smooth transportation of his tobacco load without any hindrance. In his letter, he mentioned that people in Isfahan were engaging in *šilt'ağ*,[11] a practice of slanderously and on various pretexts trying to take away the goods, or at least to extort a fine or a bribe.

Religious Persecutions and Conversion Pressure

Armenian merchants faced religious criticisms that transformed them into objects for disseminating different religious doctrines. These included Islamization or the acceptance of the Catholic faith. The adoption of the Catholic faith was more likely to be realized than Islamization. The province of Nakhijevan is an illustrative example, where a strong and prosperous Catholic community was founded by Armenian merchants and artisans, particularly in Agulis.[12] As an example, François Piquet recorded that the Agulis community had the power to banish individuals from the town who refused to abandon their religion.[13] One of the more famous cases of influential and wealthy Armenians being forced to change their faith concerns Khoja Mirak, also known from European sources as a Mirat.

Two Armenian hagiographies and chronicles mention the fact that both Khoja Mirak's father, who was also a merchant, and Khoja Mirak himself were forced and oppressed to convert to Islam. However, despite the fact that his father converted to

[8] Barbaro, 1873: 173.
[9] Peysonnell, 1787: 204, 321.
[10] Arqper, 1972; Chougaszian, 1983.
[11] Margaryan, 2022.
[12] Margaryan, Kostikyan & Tovmasyan, 2021.
[13] *La Vie de Messire François Picquet*, 1732: 24, 405.

Islam, Khoja Mirak refused to change his faith, and in 1486, the Ghazis (i.e. fighters for Islam) came to Mirak's shophouses and demanded to "bow to their (religious) leader" (*Qadī*), but Mirak refused and was immediately beheaded.[14]

According to Excerpt from the chronicle of Armenian scribe and chronicler Grigor Arjishec'i (15th century):

> He voiced, "In Jesus Christ,
> I stand strong and free",
> An infidel's blade fell,
> Silencing Khodja's plea.[15]

The story of an Armenian merchant from New Julfa named Khoja Sultenon is also noteworthy. He was a highly respected individual who enjoyed the personal favor of Shah Safi I (1629-1642). Their relationship was so close that the Shah would occasionally dine at his house. However, after a lavish banquet hosted by the Armenian merchant, the Shah fell ill. He attributed his illness to a lapse in observing Islamic norms, possibly linked to religious notions of ritual impurity or the perceived inappropriateness of sharing food and drink with non-Muslims. For several days, the Shah consumed only bread and water and spent his time in prayer. Soon, rumors began to circulate that the Shah had been poisoned at the Armenian's banquet. Upon hearing these accusations, Khoja Sultenon, realizing that he would likely face punishment or revenge should the Shah die, took poison and died. The Shah eventually recovered and was reportedly deeply saddened by Khoja Sultenon's death.[16] This incident illustrates how precarious the position of an Armenian Christian could be, even when he was part of the inner circle of the Safavid court. Another example of how Armenian merchants were persecuted for religious reasons is also a case described in the travel notes of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier. Once, when an Armenian merchant was sitting among Turkish merchants and was about to stand up, a Turk sitting behind him hid his fez, took a white turban, and placed it on the merchant's head. Everyone began to congratulate him on accepting Islam. The Armenian, shocked by what had happened, tore off the turban, threw it to the ground, and trampled on it. This act of defiance enraged the Turks. They immediately seized him and took him to the pasha, where, in the end, he was forced to accept Islam.[17]

Religious persecution of Armenian merchants often led them to convert to Catholicism in order to gain the protection of the Roman Church or of European powers, while still remaining in the East. Conversion, however, sometimes resulted in

[14] Alishan, 1896: 182-189.
[15] *Colophons*, 1967: 80-82.
[16] Tavernier, 1679: 516-517.
[17] Tavernier, 1679: 420-421.

the loss of ethnic and confessional identity. A notable example of this occurred in the 1730s-1740s, when a group of Armenian Catholics (primarily merchants) left Nakhichevan and resettled in Smyrna under the leadership of the Dominican priest Thomas Issaverdens.[18] Most of these "Persian" Armenians in Smyrna sought the protection of European consulates. Those under consular protection were no longer required to pay the *jizya* (poll tax) and could at any time appeal to a consul for assistance.

Adopting the Catholic faith may have served as protection for Armenian traders who were of the Catholic denomination. For instance, during the invasion of Iran by Afghans, and the following Ottoman-Iranian conflicts, a portion of the Armenian community residing in Nakhijevan moved to the Ottoman Empire. This occurred with the population of Khochkashen village, where the residents moved to Smyrna. According to Mari Carmen Smirneli, Armenian traders were in control of the trade route between Erzrum, Tokat, and Sivas. The aforementioned Catholic Armenians made attempts to ensure that they were also protected by the capitulation treaties (referred to as akhtiname), which could guarantee their safety and protection of property.[19]

Religion as a Diplomatic and Commercial Asset

The religious factor undoubtedly played an essential role in enabling Armenian merchants to establish contacts with Europe, especially if they were adherent to the Catholic faith.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between European states and the Aq Qoyunlu confederation in the mid-15th century was driven by mutual interests. On one hand, European powers (especially Venice and Genoa) sought to expand trade relations with the East.[20] On the other hand, both Europe and the Aq Qoyunlu viewed this alliance as a strategic counterbalance to the Ottoman Empire, which, after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, had become a significant threat to Christian states and a dangerous neighbor to the Aq Qoyunlu realm. It was during this period that visits by Italian merchants and diplomats to Iran and the South Caucasus (territories under Aq Qoyunlu control) became more frequent. In 1470, as part of these developing relations, Uzun Hasan, the ruler of Aq Qoyunlu, dispatched a prominent Armenian merchant named Khoja Mirak on a diplomatic mission to Europe. His itinerary included visits to Rome and Venice, with the goal of forming an anti-Ottoman coalition.

The choice of Khoja Mirak as a diplomatic envoy was no coincidence. As an influential merchant with extensive connections in Europe, he was ideally suited for

[18] Smyrnelis, 1995: 29-30
[19] Smyrnelis, 1995: 33-34.
[20] Barbaro, 1873; Contarini, 1963; Rota, 2017: 121-122.

the task. Italian archival sources confirm his diplomatic activities, referring to him as "Mirat, of Armenian origin" (Mirat, de nazion armeno).[21] Notably, Khoja Mirak enjoyed significant prestige at the courts of both Uzun Hasan (r. 1468-1478) and his successor, Sultan Yaqub (1478-1490).[22]

The rulers of Iran understood this well and sent Christian merchants as diplomats and ambassadors to Europe. Examples such as the embassy of Khoja Mirak to Venice and the Vatican in 1469-1470 or the embassy of Khoja Shiosh from Julfa to Venice in 1607 demonstrate this point.[23]

Nevertheless, things are not as straightforward and clear-cut as they appear, as evident from the autobiography of Ełia Karnetzi Mushełyan (manuscript no. 980, Mkhitaryan Brothers' archive), who served as the actual representative and head of the East India French Company's affairs in Tabriz during the beginning of the 18th century. Just from the autobiography's title, it becomes apparent what it is about: "My Brief History of Ełia Asvatsaturian Mushełyants about the troubles that came upon me from the people of the Franks,[24] especially from their clerics, falsely called friends and brothers." In his autobiography, the author provides numerous instances of how the Jesuits and Porekar mentioned in our text misled him, belittled him, and often offended his national and religious sentiments.[25]

Another noteworthy case in which religion played a central role is the story of Ethiopia at the end of the 15th century. The Armenian Apostolic Church is doctrinally close to the Ethiopian Church, and the significance of this affinity is emphasized in *Histoire du Christianisme d'Éthiopie et d'Arménie*, written by Mathurin Veyssière de La Croze (a former professor of philosophy, librarian, and antiquarian) to the King of Prussia, Frederick William I.[26] Empress Helena of Ethiopia, known for her profound knowledge of Christian doctrine, initiated active diplomatic negotiations with Portugal. As part of these contacts, she dispatched an Armenian merchant named Matteos (also referred to as Mattio) on a diplomatic mission to Portugal. He represented the long-established Armenian community in Ethiopia.[27]

[21] Malipiero, 1843: 68; see also Zekiyan, 1978: 357–367.
[22] *Colophons*, 1967: 80-83, 109.
[23] Berchet, 1865: 207.
[24] The term "Frank" was commonly used in oriental sources to refer broadly to Catholics, regardless of their specific national origin.
[25] Karapetyan, 2009: 375-476.
[26] Veyssière La Croze, 1739: 74.
[27] L'vova, 2002: 109.

Conclusions

The analysis conducted allows us to draw several key conclusions regarding the position of Armenian merchants in Muslim countries during the period from the 15th-18th centuries. Unlike their European counterparts, Armenian merchants did not enjoy the support of their homeland or trade companies such as the East India Company, which was the case for the French and English merchants, among others. This put Armenian traders at a distinct disadvantage in the face of competition from Europe. This disadvantage deprived Armenian merchants of the privileges granted to European merchants under the capitulations in Iran and the Ottoman Empire. The religious aspect exerted a dual influence on the lives of Armenian merchants. On the one hand, their adherence to Christianity established connections with European Christian culture, which at times facilitated the expansion of trade and diplomatic ties with European powers. However, on the other hand, these religious disparities placed Armenians at a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis Muslim authorities and various Catholic institutions, occasionally leading to instances of violence and persecution. In an attempt to safeguard their well-being, a segment of the Armenian population embraced Catholicism, resulting in mass emigration to European lands. In comparison to their Muslim counterparts, Armenian merchants encountered substantial challenges. They lacked any assurance of their personal safety or the security of their possessions, rendering them vulnerable to the predatory actions of local authorities who were not hesitant to exploit their position and impose unlawful levies. Furthermore, Armenian and other non-Muslim traders were subject to significantly higher tariffs, exacerbating their economic plight. Thus, religious affiliation had a significant impact on the economic and legal circumstances of Armenian merchants in the Islamic world. Systematic economic oppression, manifested through double taxation and threats to their security, created substantial obstacles for them. Nevertheless, religion also allowed Armenian merchants to leverage their ties with European Christian nations, enabling them to forge diplomatic relations and establish trade networks. This highlights the adaptability and resilience of Armenian merchants, who, despite facing external constraints, demonstrated remarkable endurance in the face of systematic discrimination.

To sum up, religion played a pivotal role in the commercial interactions of Armenian merchants, influencing not only their legal standing and economic prospects but also their capacity to endure and adjust in the intricate political and socioeconomic milieu of the Islamic realm.

Fig. 1. An Armenian merchant portrayed by Giovanni Grevembroch in the 18th century. Museo Correr in Venice [Public Domain; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:An_Armenian_merchant.jpg].

Fig. 2. An Armenian Merchant. portrayed by Nicolas de Nicolay (1517-1583), after *Histoire générale des Turcs*, trans. Blaise de Vigenère. Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1662, Appendix, p. 34.

Fig. 3. An Armenian merchant portrayed by Johann Christoph Weigel in the 17th century. [Public Domain; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Armenian_Merchant_Johann_Christoph_Weigel_17th_century.jpg].

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