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Treason and Sovereignty in the Medieval Caucasus

In the medieval period, the Caucasus was invaded on multiple occasions by political entities with their origin in the Eurasian steppes, notably the Seljuk Empire in the 11th century and the Mongol Empire in the 13th century. Our contemporary Caucasian narratives emphasise the destruction these invaders wrought. For example, the Georgian *Chronicle of Kartli* (მატიანე ქართლისაჲ), part of the *Kartlis Tskhovreba* annals, dwells on the destruction of the Seljuk invasion of 1080, the "great Turkish time" (დიდი თურქობა).[1] In the 13th century, Georgian, Persian and Armenian sources likewise emphasise the destruction caused by the Mongol invasions of 1236 and 1238-40.[2] Much modern historiography repeats this general narrative, and by implication extends these reports of physical destruction to the state and societal structures of the medieval Caucasus. Broadly following the narrative of the next section of the *Kartlis Tskhovreba,* the *Life of David, King of Kings* (ცხოვრებაჲ მეფეთ-მეფისა დავითისი)*,* contemporary historiography frequently depicts the Seljuk invasions as a nadir for Georgia, prior to David IV's brilliant revival.[3] Even more emphatically, the Mongol invasions have been blamed for the demise of both the Alan kingdom of the North Caucasus, and for splitting the Georgian kingdom into multiple competing lordships.[4]

I certainly do not intend to challenge the basic facts of these invasions, or deny that the Seljuk and Mongol armies caused great physical destruction. However, I would like to argue that a focus on states in Caucasian historiography has led to a one-sided interpretation of these events, one which prioritises rulers and their nascent state apparatuses over subordinated aristocrats. For such aristocrats, and even for kings themselves, the arrival of a large, foreign army in the Caucasus could be as much as opportunity as a threat, providing a large, powerful potential ally which could be redirected against

[1] Met'reveli, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, pp. 290-294; Met'reveli, Jones, *Georgia*, pp. 159-162. In this article, the term 'Georgia' and 'Georgian' will refer to a) sources written in the Georgian language, and b) the united kingdom of Kartli and Apkhazeti, ruled by the Bagratid dynasty. The latter is distinguished from the Kingdom of Kakheti, which although culturally Georgian was not incorporated into the Bagratid Kingdom of Georgia until 1105.

[2] Met'reveli, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, p. 547, Met'reveli, Jones, *Georgia,* pp. 330-331; Kirakos Gandzakets'i, *History*, pp. 193-197; Juvaynī, *Tārīkh-i Jahān Gushā*, Vol. I, pp. 224-225, Juvaynī, *World-Conqueror*, Vol. I, pp. 268-270.

[3] Thus, for example, Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, pp. 80-84; Suny, *Georgian Nation*, pp. 34-35; Shengelia, *Georgia*, pp. 76-78.

[4] See for example Kuznetsov, *Alans*, pp. 332-341; Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, pp. 125-131; Lordkipanidze, *Georgia*, pp. 7-9; Suny, *Georgian Nation,* pp. 40-44; Shengelia, *Georgia,* pp. 112-118.

one's domestic enemies. Such actions are sometimes cast as destructive of unity, or even treasonous; yet these interpretations, I argue, project back in time a modern conflation of political structures and ethnicity, which prioritises loyalty to a state which is seen as an expression of popular will. This article will demonstrate this point with an examination of two incidents: the conversion to Islam of the Kiurikian King of Kakheti, Aghsartan I, in 1068-84, and the co-operation of North Caucasian Alanic princes with the invading Mongol armies in 1239-40.

As has long been argued, the identification of a person with the political entity within whose borders they are born is not a natural or automatic process; rather, it is a specifically modern historical one.[1] Conversely, we cannot assume that pre-modern states held sovereignty over people within their borders simply by virtue of 'their' people being born there – an assumption which underpins the modern world and its focus on citizenship. However, as Giorgio Agamben and Adam T. Smith have argued, certain aspects of the modern state's behaviour display continuities with pre-Enlightenment states, most notably the fact that sovereignty depends on defining people as citizens or subjects through demonstrations of power over their lives. By contrast with modern international law, in the pre-Enlightenment era sovereignty could not be assumed to be a persistent state of being, linked with the biological life of "the people", in whom post-Enlightenment liberal thought claims sovereignty is vested.[2] Rather, it had to be consistently asserted by a sovereign ruler, frequently through acts of violence, in order to be considered valid. So that we do not retrospectively project modern political conceptions into the medieval period, we therefore first need to examine how claims of sovereignty were made in Caucasian sources of this period.

For the Seljuk invasions and the Caucasian reaction to them, our most important sources are Georgian chronicles of the 11th century CE.[3] These sources concentrate overwhelmingly on the actions of their dynastic patrons, rather than expressing the sovereignty of a state in territorial terms.[4] In terms of a question, our medieval Georgian sources do not ask 'where is Kakheti (or Georgia, or Alania, or so on) and where are its borders?', but rather 'what did the King of Kakheti (or Georgia, etc.) *do*?*'* For example,

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1 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Corrigan, Sayer, *Great Arch*, pp. 1-7; Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 127-134; Shnirel′man, *Being Alans*, pp. 21-35, 75-76.

2 Smith, *Political Machine*, p. 6; Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* pp. 44-47, 63-67.

3 Aghsartan of Kakheti's conversion to Islam, the subject of this article, is also mentioned in Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī's late 12th- early 13th century Arabic chronicle, the *Akhbār al-dawla al-saljūqiyya.* However, this chronicle will not be extensively analysed here, since this article concentrates on Caucasian political conceptions. It is nonetheless interesting that this source also demonstrates Seljuk Sultan Alp Arslān's sovereignty by recounting his actions, namely the capture of fortresses, Aghsartan making a gesture of submission by kissing the sultan's foot, and the sultan giving gifts to Aghsartan and his nobles which the latter accept. See al-Ḥusaynī, *Akhbār*, pp. 54-56.

4 Rapp, *Landscape*, pp. 13-18.

the panegyric '*Life of David, King of Kings*' closing section enumerates the conditions for a king's sovereignty thus:

> „და ვითარ ვინ აღრაცხნეს, რაოდენნი საქმენი ეთხოვებიან მეფობასა, რაოდენნი მართებანი და განსაგებელნი? კიდეთა პყრობანი, ნაპირთა მჭირვანი, განხეთქილობათა კრძალვანი, სამეფოჲსა წყნარებისა ღონენი, ლაშქრობათა მეცადინობანი, მთავართა ზაკვისა ცნობანი, მჴედართა განწესებანი, საერონი შიშნი, საჴელოთა და საბჭოთა სჯანი, საჭურჭლეთა შემოსავალნი, მოციქულთა შემთხუევანი და პასუხნი, მეძღუნეთა ჯეროვანნი მისაგებელნი, შემცოდეთა წყალობითნი წურთანი, მსახურებულთა ნიჭ-მრავლობანი, მოჩივართა მართალნი გამოძიებანი, მოსაკითხავთა შესატყჳსნი მოკითხვანი, სპათა დაწყობანი და ღონიერნი მიმართებანი...“ ("And who can count how many things a man must do when he reigns; how many people he must govern, how many things he must put in order? A King has to conquer countries, reinforce borders, prevent revolts, ensure tranquillity in the country, launch campaigns, catch the intrigues of the *mtavaris* [subordinate nobles], command troops, take care of the people's affairs, appoint officials and judges, look after the treasury's income, receive envoys and give them answers, reward properly those who present gifts, instruct wrongdoers kindly, lavishly present servants, ensure the fair trial of the accused, demand reports, and organize armies for skilful raids").[1]

As we can see from this passage, sovereignty is defined by actions and processes, rather than being a pre-existing state of being within a given territory. While borders are mentioned in passing, it is only in the context of a king's action towards them, rather than being a pre-existing demarcation of the sphere within which his sovereignty operates. Given the overtly pro-dynastic inclination of Georgian historiography, these characterisations of sovereignty can be fairly said to reflect the messages which these dynasts wished to have sent.[2] In other words, sovereignty, according to these sources and those who commissioned them, is seen not as a persistent state, but a consequence of *action.*

When we see it in this way, our sources are packed with demonstrations of sovereignty, most notably through the collection of tribute or taxes, military campaigns, support of the church, and the seizure of fortresses. This is true from the foundational narratives of Georgian historiography onwards. For example, the original act of sovereignty in the *Kartlis Tskhovreba* is the mythic ancestor Haos' rejection of the world-

[1] Met'reveli, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, p. 335, Met'reveli and Jones, *Georgia,* pp. 184-185.

[2] For the dynastic orientation of the *Kartlis Tskhovreba,* see Rayfield, *Literature,* pp. 62-69.

king Nebroth's tribute, and him defeating Nebroth in battle.[1] This account, while ancient in origin, was re-edited in the 1060s and was thus clearly still considered relevant in the period under study.[2]

A consequence of this action-oriented conceptualisation of sovereignty was that a certain geographical area or point could be the subject of multiple different claims of sovereignty. As we will see, this conception is implicit in our Georgian sources of the high medieval period; however, it can be compared to a more explicit passage in an Armenian source of the same period, Book III of Movses Dasxuranci's *History of the Caucasian Albanians* (c. 944). This briefly describes the political situation in Caucasian Albania in the early 8th century. However, rather than a single suzerain, it describes a situation where three different outside powers – the courts of Byzantium, the Umayyad Caliphate, and the Khazar Khaqanate – all demand tribute from Caucasian Albania.[3] As Alison Vacca has argued, the demanding of tribute in Armenian sources of the 8th-10th century should be seen as a sign of suzerainty.[4] This passage therefore implies that it was possible for a given region to be simultaneously the object of multiple suzerainities – or rather, for multiple different elite actors to attempt to claim suzerainty over it.

The actual historical truth of this account is less significant, in this context, than its high medieval historiographical representation. It is therefore notable that it describes a situation of imperial conflict over the Caucasus as leading to ambiguity and disruption in patterns of sovereignty. Indeed, this text laments the situation, longing for a single, more predictable suzerain, the Sassanian Empire, as opposed to tax exactions – backed up by the threat of military force – by multiple putative sovereigns.

In this context, we can understand the significance of direct military intervention by an outside power, such as the Seljuks and Mongols. This could create a space of ambiguity in sovereignty, whereby even if a local ruler acknowledged the suzerainty of an outside empire, he could also assert his own sovereignty over a given area, as demonstrated by tax exactions or military prowess. This last point could, at times, be directly backed up by the army of that outside empire, its ruler recognising a subordinate's rule over a particular territory – or rather, as we will see, the right to forcefully make a claim of sovereignty over it.

The basic point that Caucasian dynasts sometimes depended on and utilised the power of outside empires is fairly well-established. While it is not generally foregrounded in studies of the Seljuk and Mongol periods, it is a standard part of another period's historiography: that of Sassanian, Umayyad and 'Abbāsid dominion over

[1] Met'reveli, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, pp. 27-28, Met'reveli and Jones, *Georgia,* pp. 14-15.
[2] Rapp, *Historiography*, pp. 157-168.
[3] Dasxuranci, *Caucasian Albanians*, p. 202.
[4] Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces*, pp. 180-209.

the Armenian and Georgian principalities. Between 485 and 885-3, with several interruptions, hegemonic power within the South Caucasus lay with presiding princes appointed by their southern imperial neighbours.[1] Such a broad-stroke and discursive continuity masks, of course, considerable changes in this institution, not least between ruling families, the territories they claimed hegemony over, and the extent of imperial central control. However, it is notable that it was sometimes considered not only pragmatic but also acceptable to actively utilise the military force of these princes' imperial overlords, even in ecclesiastical disputes. One particularly striking example is provided by Movses Dasxuranci. Under the *History of Caucasian Albania's* entry for the years 703-5, it mentions an appeal by a group of rebellious bishops of Caucasian Albania to the Armenian catholicos, Elia, for help in suppressing Chalcedonian Christianity. This had been instituted in the country by the Albanian catholicos, Nerses, with the support of the queen, Spram.[2] However, rather than limiting this dispute to Christian powers, Elia then wrote to the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān, claiming that Nerses' moves towards Chalcedonianism showed the Albanians were trying to ally with the Byzantine Empire. As a result, 'Abd al-Malik sent an army to Albania, which suppressed the independent Albanian church and instituted full Armenian ecclesiastical control over the region.[3]

The image projected by our 10th century source is not one of marauding Arab Muslims being opposed by Christian Armenians and Albanians. Rather, we see diverse political actors seeking support from outside political entities: the Albanian bishops appealing to the Armenian catholicos; the Armenian catholicos using the power of the caliphate to further his own church's position. It is particularly significant that Movses Dasxuranci does not censure the Armenian catholicos for involving the caliphate in this dispute, even though the intervention of a Muslim-led army led to the death of a senior churchman, Nerses of Albania.[4] This is especially surprising, since the same book of his history starts with a standard anti-Muslim polemic, describing the Prophet Muhammad as a fraud.[5] But rather than continuing in this vein, the story of the return of Albania to Armenian orthodoxy is told via primary source documents: a set of letters with a commentary that even describes 'Abd al-Malik as "virtuous."[6] I would argue that this treatment of the Armenians' Umayyad overlords is, nonetheless, consistent with the political situation in the tenth century, when Movses Dasxuranci was writing. As Nikoloz

[1] In general see Toumanoff, *Armenia and Georgia*, pp. 600-613; for a more detailed analysis, see Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces,* pp. 124-133.

[2] Dasxuranci, *Caucasian Albanians,* pp. 189-191.

[3] Dasxuranci, *Caucasian Albanians,* pp. 191-192.

[4] Dasxuranci, *Caucasian Albanians,* p. 192.

[5] Dasxuranci, *Caucasian Albanians,* pp. 186-188.

[6] Dasxuranci, *Caucasian Albanians,* p. 197.

Alexidze has argued, by the tenth century the primary driver in Armenian ecclesiastical historiography had become the schism between Armenian miaphysite orthodoxy and Chalcedonianism.[1] In this context, the real struggle in Movses Dasxuranci is against the spread of this heresy, rather than a proto-national struggle against foreign invaders.

I would argue that the Seljuk and Mongol periods saw similar uses of outside military forces by Caucasian dynasts and aristocrats against their regional enemies. The case of Aghsartan I, Kiurikian King of Kakheti and Hereti from 1058 to 1084, demonstrates this point clearly. Kakheti had intermittently been under Bagratid overlordship in the preceding century and a half, but had become fully independent under its first king, K'virik'e III (r.1010-39). During the reigns of K'virik'e's successors Gagik and Aghsartan I, however, the region of Hereti had been gradually coming under Bagratid control.

Our most prominent source for the case of Aghsartan I is the Georgian royal annals, the *Kartlis Tskhovreba.* This describes the invasion of Seljuk Sultan Alp Arslān in 1068 in apocalyptic terms:

> „და დაყო ექუსი კჳრაჲ, და იწყო ოჴრებად და ჴოცად კაცისა... და მოისრა ურიცხჳ სული ქრისტიანეთაჲ და ტყუე იქმნა; და იქმნა საძაგელ ქუეყანაჲ ქართლისაჲ სახილველად კაცთა. მოოჴრდეს ყოველნი ეკლესიანი და სიმრავლითა მძორისაჲთა არღარა დაედგმოდეს ქუეყანასა თუალნი. და ცოდვათა ჩუენთა მოსაგებელსა რისხვასა ღმრთისასა ზეცით ცაჲ წამებდა, და სისხლის მწჳმელი ღრუბელი აღმოსავლეთით მოეფინა ქართლსა ზედა. და იქმნა ღამე უკუნი, ვითარცა ნათელნ დღისაჲ“ (“The Sultan stayed six weeks, and he began to ravage and slay the people… A countless number of Christians were slain and taken prisoner. The land of Kartli was abominable for men to see: all the churches were devastated and one could not set one's eyes on the ground for the number of dead bodies. The sky above bore witness to God's wrath for our sins, and a blood-raining cloud covered Kartli in the east, and the light of the day changed into a dark night".)[2]

Of course, this is a standard set of apocalyptic imagery, which cannot be taken literally. However, this passage becomes extremely interesting in the context of the one that immediately precedes it. This mentions that Aghsartan of Kakheti, "a man of modest substance" (მცირედითა საქონლითა) renounced his Christian faith and had himself circumcised, in order to gain the Seljuks' support against the kings of Georgia.[3] Moreover, the *Kartlis Tskhovreba* claims that Aghsartan's forces actively co-operated with those of the Seljuk Sultan, marching out alongside them in order to take posses-

[1] Aleksidze, *Schism*, pp. 129-135.

[2] Met'reveli, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, p. 291, Met'reveli and Jones, *Georgia,* p. 160.

[3] Met'reveli, *Kartlis Tskhovreba,* p. 290, Met'reveli and Jones, *Georgia,* pp. 159-160.

sion of fortresses granted to him by Alp Arslān. The effect of juxtaposing these two passages is to further condemn Aghsartan's apostasy, and to implicitly delegitimise his claims to kingship. It is notable, in this context, that the *didebulis* (lords) of Hereti, to the south-east of Kakheti proper, are described as being "loyal" (ერთგულ) to Bagrat' IV, King of Georgia. This is despite the fact that Hereti was not fully integrated into Georgia, but rather was contested between the Bagratid rulers of Georgia and the kings of Kakheti. The implication is that, to Leonti Mroveli, author of this section of the *Kartlis Tskhovreba,* the only proper loyalty is to the kings of Georgia – an unsurprising assertion, given that his chronicle was commissioned by Bagrat'.[1]

I would like to warn against taking Leonti Mroveli's pro-Bagratid interpretation of loyalty too much at face value, and therefore seeing Aghsartan as a traitor against Georgian unity. We are fortunate that we do have traces of an alternative, pro-Kiurikian royal historical tradition, preserved in Vakhushti Bagrationi's *Life and Deeds of Kakheti and Hereti* (ქმნულება და ცხოვრება კახეთისა და ჰერეთისა). This 18th century account appears to have utilised an older chronicle sympathetic to the Kakhetian kings, particularly K'virik'e III, one of several sources utilised by Vakhushti which no longer survive.[2] It is therefore notable that it treats Aghsartan's embrace of Islam without any of the judgement levied by the *Kartlis Tskhovreba,* but rather simply reports these events. Moreover, it explicitly states that this led to the re-unification of Kakheti and Hereti, implicitly condoning Aghsartan's actions through comparison with the great K'virik'e III, who also had re-unified the two kingdoms.[3]

This pro-Kiurikian text thus treats Aghsartan's act as just another pragmatic act of statecraft, rather than a betrayal bringing about a demi-apocalypse. This pragmatic interpretation is supported by the text of the *Life of David, King of Kings*, which provides an example of both the Georgian *and* Kakhetian kings seeking the support of outside rulers to enhance their own positions, and of the disconnect between Georgian claims to suzerainty and reality. This depicts Giorgi II, Bagrat' IV's successor as King of Georgia, agreeing to pay tribute (*kharaj*) to the Seljuk Sultan Malikshāh in c. 1081, and thus implicitly to accept his suzerainty.[4] In return, Malikshāh is claimed to have granted Giorgi rulership over Kakheti and Hereti. However, in practice, this merely seems to

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1 On the authorship and date of the *Chronicle of Kartli,* see Rayfield, *Literature*, p. 69.

2 Vakhushti, *History*, pp. 8-11. One telling piece of evidence is that Vakhushti at one point adds a marginal note to add further information to his account (specifically, that Ilarion, Catholicos of Georgia, was from Kakheti, and was contemporaneous with *khorepiskopos* Gabriel of Kakheti); this implies that the remainder of the basic text of the account was copied from a pre-existing source without much alteration, in a manner comparable to Vakhushti's history of Georgia, which is a close paraphrase of the *Kartlis Tskhovreba.* See Qaukchishvili, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Vol. IV, p. 558; Vakhushti, *History*, p. 126.

3 Qaukchishvili, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Vol. IV, pp. 562-563; Vakhushti, *History*, p. 129.

4 Met'reveli, *Kartlis Tskhovreba,* pp. 304-305, Met'reveli and Jones, *Georgia* pp. 172, 193.

have been the right to attack Kakheti, since the chronicle next records a Georgian siege of the Kakhetian fortress of Vezhini. In response, Aghsartan once again accepted Islam (having apostatised in the intervening 13 years since his last submission to the Seljuks). He thus regained Malikshāh's support as ruler of Kakheti and – as the *Life and Deeds of Kakheti and Hereti* adds, but the *Kartlis Tskhovreba* does not – Hereti.[1] This incident once again shows the pitfalls of relying solely on the *Kartlis Tskhovreba's* pro-Bagratid account, since it is clear that both Bagratids and Kiurikids sought out Seljuk support where necessary, with historical traditions alternately condoning or condemning this action, depending on which family is being supported.

Moreover, a further examination of both the *Kartlis Tskhovreba* and *Life and Deeds of Kakheti and Hereti* show that just as Aghsartan was capable of bringing in outside support against his Bagratid rivals, so were his vassals, the nobility of Hereti. This is made particularly clear by the deposition of Aghsartan's namesake grandson, Aghsartan II, in 1105.[2] Both sources confirm that Aghsartan was captured and overthrown by the *didebulis* of Hereti, Arishian and Baram, who themselves sought support from the new Georgian king, David IV. In this we see the key to the *Kartlis Tskhovreba*'s previous description of the *didebulis* of Hereti as loyal to King Bagrat' IV and the Bagratids. Rather than this being a case of a rebellious principality split between those remaining loyal to the Bagratids and those disloyal to them, we instead see a layered conceptualisation of sovereignty, with aristocratic leaders at different levels seeking the support of those more powerful than themselves in order to enhance their own positions. A village in Hereti in the 1080s might therefore be the subject of claims of sovereignty by a local Heretian *didebuli*, King Aghsartan I of Kakheti, King Giorgi II of Georgia, and the Seljuk Sultan Malikshāh, all at the same time. In sum, rather than a simple picture of a single, legitimate Georgian, Christian king, fighting against a single, Muslim, outside invader, we have a picture of multiple, overlapping conceptualisations of sovereignty, with adherents of each conceptualisation seeking the support of outsiders against their own immediate neighbours, overlords, and subordinates.

Another example of Caucasian elites supplementing their own power with that of outsiders comes from the Mongol period – specifically, the invasion of the Central North Caucasian region of Alania in 1238-9. While not nearly as well-documented as 11th century Kakheti and Hereti, this shows similar patterns of action, whereby an outside military power (the Mongols) authorised and supported local claims of sovereignty by Caucasian princes. Moreover, the fact that these events are recorded by non-Cauca-

[1] Qaukchishvili, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Vol. IV, p. 563, Vakhushti, *History*, p. 129.

[2] Qaukchishvili, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Vol. IV, p. 563, Vakhushti, *History*, pp. 129-130; Met'reveli, *Kartlis Tskhovreba,* p. 311, Met'reveli and Jones, *Georgia,* p. 175.

sian sources goes to show that this is not just a pattern of literary representation, but a consistent theme in the politics of high medieval Caucasia.

Alania was, in the 10th-12th centuries, home to the most powerful kingdom in the North Caucasus, its kings being overlords of the region covered by the modern autonomous republics of Karachai-Cherkassia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, and Ingushetia, and parts of Chechnya, Stavropol' Krai and Krasnodar Krai.[1] However, by the 1230s, it seems that the Kingdom of Alania had collapsed, with its former lands comprising a network of autonomous clans and villages, as most clearly described by Riccardus' account of Julian of Hungary's travels.[2] As with the South Caucasus, much of the current historiography of this region dwells on the Mongols as an outside, destructive force, with claims that the Alan state and even its (entirely hypothetical) written tradition were destroyed by them.[3] However, our best source for the events of this period present a more complex picture.

This source is quite a curious one – the Chinese annals of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, the *Yuan-Shi.* In it, there are a number of biographies of Alan noblemen, who took service with the Mongols and eventually founded noble families in China. However, the opening passages of these biographies tell us about how these families came to submit to the Mongols during their invasion of the North Caucasus. These give us a rather more nuanced picture. Whilst there are some strongholds which resist the Mongols, most famously the former Alan capital city of Magas, a large number of Alan nobles appear to have sided with the Mongols; indeed, one of them, Mataersha, rose to fame through his bravery in attacking Magas.[4] Two such princes, Aersilan (Arslan) and Hanghusi, were successively appointed as rulers of all or parts of Alania by the Mongols.[5] These leaders and their families prospered from the advancement and material rewards that the Mongol state could offer – not least, the extension of a regularised tax system to a region which previously had possessed no such institution.[6] In this way, it was possible to utilise the Mongol state and its war-making capacities to regularise and formalise tributary obligations, and to legitimate violent attempts to assert suzerainty over other coalitions. Moreover, in all likelihood these Alan princes were able to directly utilise the Mongol army to support them against their rivals. Indeed, both Arslan's son, Asanzhen, and Hanghusi himself were killed in fighting against other North Caucasians, the latter's conflict being continued by his wife, Waimasi, and son, Anfapu.

1 In general, see Beletskii, Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz and Senty*, pp. 10-65.
2 See Theiner, *Monumenta,* p. 152.
3 For example, Bliev, Bzarov, *Treasure*, p. 11; Kuznetsov, *Rekom*, pp. 131-132; Gadlo, *Ethnic History*, pp. 164-165.
4 See 'Yuan-Shi', in Alemany, *Alans,* p. 415.
5 Alemany, *Alans,* pp. 408-412.
6 de Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, pp. 205-206; Allsen, *North Caucasia*, p. 33.

This phenomenon was undoubtedly much more widespread, since the *Yuan-Shi* only records the deeds of individuals whose descendants became prominent military figures in Yuan China; thus, princes and who joined the Mongols but were not deported to China, or whose families did not become influential there, would not have been recorded.

In this case most of all, we see an atomised situation, with no overarching authority or overt attachment to ethnicity or kingdom. Rather, we see a relatively polycentric social structure, with individual leaders with smaller or greater numbers of followers – between 20 and 1,000 – either supporting or opposing the Mongols (or perhaps both, at different times) in order to further their own positions, and those of their clans and families.[1] In this case, the arrival of a powerful invading army could be as much an opportunity as a threat.

Rather than dismissing this kind of action as collaboration, it might be fair to call it an alternative method of dealing with powerful outsiders.[2] In the same way that a martial artist can redirect the force of a threat to their own advantage, we can understand all of these anomalous cases – Aghsartan I, and Hanghusi and Aersilan – as examples of 'political judo throws' – the (mis)direction of a potential adversary to aid their own positions.

The image of politics as martial art is, however, an appropriate one, since the deployment of violence was instrumental to these political strategies. In this context, we can perhaps begin to rethink the Seljuk and Mongol invasions of the Caucasus from the point of view of subordinated peasant communities, the church, and the lower aristocracy. Given the ambiguity over sovereignty that these could create, the direct destruction caused by Seljuk or Mongol raids, and attempts by local Caucasian aristocrats to violently demonstrate their sovereignty over a given area, there was great potential for physical violence to befall the members of these communities, particularly if customary aristocratic protection of a religious or secular community was withdrawn.[3] Moreover, in this ambiguous situation, any or all of their self-proclaimed overlords could attempt to levy taxes from a given community, such as the hypothetical village in Hereti that we imagined above. Multiple suzerainty might well have provided a space for those with power to better their own advantage, but it was undoubtedly ruinous for some of the communities subjected to these competing claims of suzerainty.

Therefore, rather than seeing the destruction of the Seljuk and Mongol invasions as being a purely external factor to Caucasian history, this implies that we should see

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1 Alemany, *Alans,* pp. 416, 409 respectively.

2 On issues with defining collaborationism, see Hoffmann, *Collaborationism.*

3 As happened in 1236 to the Armenian chronicler Kirakos Gandzakets'i, who was left with a group of other clergy as guardians of a group of Armenian villagers while local aristocrats withdrew to their fortress (See Kirakos Gandzakets'i, *History,* pp. 206-214).

this, to a certain extent, as being a continuation of existing Caucasian political conceptions and trends. This is not to deny that Seljuk and Mongol armies directly devastated parts of the Caucasus. Rather, the point we should take is that as well as being physically destructive, these invasions also produced uncertainty, ambiguity and disruption in patterns of sovereignty, opening space for ambitious local elites to violently assert control over contested subordinated communities and other aristocrats. Co-operation with an empire outside the Caucasus, was, in this context, just another tool that aristocratic and dynastic leaders could use in these domestic fields of political competition. In essence, if we see a given society as a series of interlocking, contradictory and ongoing projects, rather than a steady state of being, then we can see that the Seljuk and Mongol invasions of the Caucasus opened up a space of ambiguity in which ambitious elites' projects of sovereignty could be authorised and pursued.[1]

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[1] See Graeber, *Value,* pp. 254-259.

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