



BAGRATIDS

BAGRATIDS, possibly the most important princely dynasty of Caucasia (Bagratuni in Armenia, Bagrationi in Georgia), attaining to the kingly status in the ninth century and retaining it in Georgia to the nineteenth. Like the House of Artsruni they were an offshoot of the Orontids, Achaemenian satraps and, later, kings of Armenia (ca. 400-ca. 200 B.C.), originally appanaged in the old Orontid fief of Bagrevand (ca. 5,000 km²) in Ayrarat, in north-central Armenia, and, like the Orontids, they claimed descent from a solar deity. On Armenia's conversion to Christianity in 314, this claim was abandoned in favor of a descent, together with the majority of the Armenian princes, from the once-divine (astral), but now merely heroic, mythical primogenitor of the Armenians, Hayk'. Later still, under biblical influences, the Bagratids claimed a Hebrew origin, which was further elaborated by the end of the eighth century as the celebrated legend of their descent from King David of Israel. Bagadates (Bagadāta; in some MSS Magadates), strategus of Tigranes the Great of Armenia and his viceroy of Syria and Cilicia in 83-69 B.C. (Appian, *Syriaca* 11.8.48-49; cf. Toumanoff, 1963, pp. 320-21), appears to have been the earliest-known member of this house; it is not impossible that both the family's chief patronymic and its Hebrew legend may have been connected with the memory of this renowned ancestor (see [Table 12](#)).

Historically, the Bagratids appear in 314 reigning, no longer in Bagrevand, but in Sper (ca. 6,000 km²) with the great castle of Bayberd (modern Bayburt) in the valley of the C'oruh, in northwestern Armenia; their history has continued to the present day and their uninterrupted genealogy dates from ca. 555.



Subsequently they reigned also in Kogovit, east of Bagrevand, dominated by the castle of Dariunk' (modern Doğu-Bayazıt), and in Tmorik in the southernmost part of Vaspurakan, in southern Armenia. They also held the hereditary offices of Coronant (*ṭ'agadir*) of the kings of Armenia and of Guardian of the Caucasian (Moschic) Mountains and bore in addition the gentilitial title of *aspet* (see [asped](#) ii), whence their other short-lived name of Aspetuni. The political weight of this house is evidenced by its military potential: a force of 1,000 horse was the feudal aid the Bagratids owed to their suzerain, the King of Armenia.

The partition of Armenia in 387 into an Iranian and a Roman vassal state, then the annexation of the Western kingdom by the Empire, and finally the abolition of the East Armenian Monarchy in 428, which ended the perennial tension between the Armenian Crown and the insubordinate dynastic princes who were its vassals, placed these princes in the necessity of choosing between the two rival imperial allegiances. The Bagratids proved successful in maneuvering between the two powers. They were immediate vassals of the emperor in Sper, in the years 387-532 (before Justinian I annexed it), whereas, in their Persarmenian princedoms, they were, from 428, like the rest of the East Armenian princes free at last from the local king's overlordship, immediate vassals, under the supervision of an Iranian viceroy (*marzpan*), of the distant Great King. Partition and annexation did not, however, save Armenia from tension. In West Armenia, the princes, who chafed under Byzantine bureaucratism and espoused anti-Byzantine theological views, flirted with the court of Ctesiphon; while those East Armenian princes who took their Christianity seriously looked, despite theological divergences, to the court of Constantinople for aid, when resisting recurrent Iranian outbursts of an anti-Christian policy.

In this field of tension, the Bagratids chose to remain prudently non-committal. Accordingly, they abstained from taking part in the heroic insurrection of the princes, led by the Mamikonid dynasty, against Iranian religious aggression in 451. In fact, Tiroc' I, prince of the Bagratids (to give him the official title of the heads of the house) actually adhered to the policy of collaboration promoted by Vasak I, Prince of Siunia. Yet, during the next insurrection, in 482, Isaac II Bagratuni joined the Mamikonids, was even chosen by the princes to be viceroy of Armenia, and lost his life in a battle. Most often, though, the politic Bagratids succeeded in combining the two allegiances. Of this Smbat IV presents an outstanding example. At first,



together with his Mamikonid confrere, he led Armenian troops as auxiliaries in Emperor Maurice's European wars; and at the imperial court knew both disgrace and favor: the Emperor, in sign of suzerainty, adopted him (Eusebius, chap. 10). But next he appeared as a favorite at the court of Ctesiphon: he was appointed to be *marzpan* of Gorgān (Hyrkania) in the years 595-602, was decorated with the epithet of *xosrō-šnūm* (joy of Ƙosrow), and led Iranian troops in the defense of the eastern frontier. His son and successor, Varaz-Tiroc' II, in his youth a cup-bearer to the great king and recipient, in his turn, of the epithet of *javitian-xosrō* (eternal Ƙosrow), was named to be *marzpan* of Armenia in the years 629-ca. 631. But soon thereafter he passed to the side of the emperor, became involved in palace conspiracies at Constantinople, was pardoned and made presiding prince of Armenia in 645, when, after Heraclius's war on Iran, the empire came to control practically the entire country.

Imperial control of Armenia meant that, in lieu of the former Iranian viceroy, one of the local princes was appointed to preside over the others as ruler of the country for the emperor. Thus was born the office of presiding prince. However, within a quarter of a century, the rising caliphate destroyed the weakened Sasanian monarchy and, becoming largely its successor, proceeded to supplant the empire in the exercise of suzerainty over that perennial apple of discord. This was the first instance of a Christian vassal state of the Islamic empire. The office of presiding prince of Armenia (or its equivalent: ruling high constable) was maintained, in the gift of the caliph. But the empire did not abandon its claims to Armenia, and the country continued, as before, to be a battle-ground of its imperial neighbors. Thus its presiding princes were now the caliph's vassals, now the emperor's. Those who obeyed the latter would receive the Byzantine dignity of patrician or even the higher one of curopalate (reserved at that time for the emperors' brothers and nephews), while those of the caliph's were called *batrīq*, an Arabic rendering of "patrician."

During this period of Armenian history, while the rival Mamikonids began to decline, the power and importance of the Bagratids waxed. Though on the whole pro-Arab, they occasionally resorted to their traditional policy of interchangeable allegiances. Thus, Smbat VI was presiding prince for the emperor, with the dignity of patrician, in 691-97; then for the caliph in 697-700; and finally again for the emperor, with the dignity of curopalate, in 700-11. During the period of the principate, twelve Bagratid princes held the office of presiding prince (or its equivalent), three with the dignity of



curopalate. Only once did the dynasty exchange its policy of prudence for one of heroism, and quite disastrously for itself. In 774-75, the Armenian princes, still led by the Mamikonids, rose in revolt against the caliph; and Smbat VII Bagratuni, the then ruling high constable, joined them. The result was defeat and again death in battle of the Bagratid (see *Histoire des arméniens*, ed. G. Dédéyan, Toulouse, 1982, p. 194). Along with the other insurgents the Bagratids suffered territorial losses, as Kogovit, Tmorik, and the momentarily controlled territory of Vaspurakan passed to the more consistently prudent Arcrunis. However, on the imperial frontier, the Bagratids still held Sper, with its silver mines; and this proved a source of wealth and power. Then, the recent insurrection having broken the might of the Mamikonids, the Bagratids possessed themselves of their principalities of Taraun, southern Tayk', Bznunik' and, subsequently, Bagrevand, which had once been their own; later they purchased from the **Kamsarakans** those of Aršarunik' and Širak with the cities of Bagavan and Ani (which became, successively, Bagratid capitals); and they also acquired that of Mokka' (Moxoene), though it soon passed to the Arcrunis. Within less than a century after the disaster of 775, they regained and increased their political importance, and then reigned over a powerful and consolidated west-central Armenian state. Since this disaster had ruined and weakened many princely houses, which were reduced to dependence on a few others, the might of those few who had survived the ruin was vastly increased. Armenia thus came to be divided into only just three big political formations: the Arcrunid state in the south, the Siunid state in the east, and the Bagratid state which proved the most successful. Cautiously maneuvering, as they had always done, between, on the one hand, the caliphate, which was on the decline now and breaking up into a number of succession states, and, on the other, the empire, which was concentrating upon a struggle with these, the Bagratids monopolized the office of presiding prince and then, in 884, converted it into kingship. Recognition was easily obtained from caliph and emperor. The Armenian monarchy, abolished in 428, had been restored.

With this, Bagratid family history becomes the history of the restored kingdom of Armenia. There followed a period of greatness, cultural and economic, no less than political, a "Bagratid renaissance." Yet it contained seeds of decay. Disintegration soon set in resulting in weakness, which, in turn, proved an invitation to external foes to put an end to it. The Bagratids had largely themselves contributed to the ruin of Armenia. They failed to keep their state consolidated by apportioning it among their several branches. Next to the kings of Armenia at Ani (bearing the title of king of kings), there thus arose the



kings of Kars (962-1064) and the kings of Lorī (982, surviving until ca. 1101); there were the princes of Taraun (826-966/7), dispossessed by the Byzantines, but continuing in the empire as the houses of the Taronitae and the Tornicii. Not to be outdone, the rival, but hitherto dependent, Arcrunis and Siunis proceeded to assume, in their turn, the royal style.

The invitation this dissolution provided was soon accepted. Saljuq Turks began attacking Armenia from the east early in the 1000s. The terrorized Arcrunid king of Vaspurakan soon ceded his state to the empire, in 1021-22. Then, in 1045, the last king of Armenia, Gagik II, was inveigled into Constantinople and there bullied into abdicating in favor of the emperor, his host. He was given lands in Cappadocia, a palace in the capital, the dignity of magistros, and was murdered by the Byzantines in 1079-80. In 1064, the king of Kars ceded his state to the emperor. Most of Armenia lost independence becoming part of the empire. This was followed by the emigration of a number of princes, followed by their vassals, either to Georgia or to the empire itself, especially to Cilicia. The country was left quite leaderless and, owing to the then Byzantine policy of disarmament, quite undefended. A void was created which the Saljuqs soon filled. The Byzantine attempt to counter ended in the defeat at Manjikert in 1071, after which not only Armenia, but also Anatolia were lost to the empire.

The Armenian Bagratids (of the house of Lorī) disappear from history in the thirteenth century; the Byzantine Bagratids (Taronitae), in the fourteenth. The still flourishing Georgian line of the Bagratids is descended from Vasak, younger brother of Smbat VII, who passed to Georgia after 775. The Georgian Bagratids were kings of Central Georgia from 888, of United Georgia from 1008, partitioned in their turn the country into three kingdoms at the end of the fifteenth century, and were dispossessed through the Russian annexations in the nineteenth century. The history of this line is inextricably bound with that of Georgia.

The Bagratids contributed largely to the cultural aspect of the “Bagratid renaissance” of Armenia. Their capital of Ani, a great economic no less than political center, acquired in the ninth and tenth centuries also an imprint of this cultural activity. A city of “40 gates and 1001 churches,” with a population of possibly 50,000, it contained many splendid edifices, including the Bagratid palace-fortress (reared upon the Kamsarakan foundations), the magnificent cathedral (built in 998-1000) and the round church of Gagik I (ca. 1005-10), both built by the celebrated architect Trdat (Tiridates). The Bagratids founded the abbeys of Halbat and Sanahin that were to become important centers of



learning; and they raised the great castle of Amberd, later enlarged by the Kamsarakan-Pahlavunis (q.v.) to mention but a few examples of their building activity. They, moreover, were patrons of the letters, and the historians Eusebius (Sebēos) in the seventh century, Ps. Moses of Khorene, and Leontius (Ļevond) in the eighth, and Šapuh Bagratuni (d. 912, himself a member of the dynasty, a son of King Ašot I, whose work has not reached us) were their adherents and protégés. The Georgian Bagratids, on their part, contributed, even more than their Armenian kinsmen, to the flowering of civilization in their own country of Georgia.

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