

ON THE INTERNAL POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS OF CILICIAN ARMENIA IN THE 1320s

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Abstract

The work is dedicated to one of the most complex and difficult periods in the history of Cilician Armenia – the 1320s. This was a time when the Mongols were no longer allies, and the Armenian kingdom was fighting alone against the surrounding Muslim states. Drawing upon information provided by medieval primary sources, as well as considering the viewpoints present in modern scholarly literature, the author attempts to present the internal political events and the details of the power struggle in Cilician Armenia during this crucial period. Particular attention is paid to the murder of the regents by the Armenian king in Adana on January 27, 1329, the details of the event, and the individuals involved. The author seeks to substantiate all the reasons that led to this brutal crime, after which Levon IV began to rule the Cilician Armenian kingdom single-handedly.

Keywords: Cilicia, state, regent, murder, king, queen, sparapet, governance.

Medieval historians provide different, contradictory information regarding the number of Levon IV's regents. According to Abu'l-Fida, Levon IV had only one regent¹, although he does not mention his name. According to the chronologies of Hetum, Lord of Korikos, and Marajakht Vasil, the number of Oshin's regents was two: "On Thursday, June 19, 1320, the God-loving King Oshin died. His son Levon succeeded him, for whom Payl Oshin of Korikos and Baron Hetum of Akhtuts were appointed as regents for a period of 10 years".²

As we can see, this information is significant because it not only mentions the names of the Armenian king's regents but also informs us that the regency was to last for ten years. In other words, until the king came of age.

In contrast to the aforementioned accounts, one of the authors of the 14th-century Armenian manuscript colophons³ and one of the continuators of Samuel Anetsi's work⁴ consider the number of Oshins' regents to be three. These three mentioned individuals

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¹ Nalbandyan 1965: 247.

² Matevosyan 1963: 192.

³ Khachikyan 1950: 209.

⁴ Samuel Anetsi 1893: 157.

were Oshin, Lord of Korikos, his brother Constantine, and Hetum of Nghir. However, the viewpoints on the number of regents do not end here, and the 14th-century author Hovhannes Dardel mentions four regents, probably also including Marajakht Baldwin.⁵

As we observe, medieval historians provide different, contradictory information regarding the number of King Levon IV's regents, and it is naturally difficult to give a clear assessment of which historian's information is the most accurate. We believe that the information provided by one of the continuators of Samuel Anetsi's work and the author of one of the colophons, according to whom the number of regents was three, may be the most likely, as according to tradition, there was always more than one regent, and these three individuals were very active figures in the Cilician Armenian kingdom. L. Ter-Petrosyan has addressed the researched issue, expressing the opinion that the appointment of several regents aimed to create a mechanism of mutual control to exclude the possibility of one of them seizing power.⁶

It is very natural that in the early years of Levon's reign, the king did not have real power in the country. In the initial period, Oshin, in particular, showed great activity, and by assuming the position of payl, he concentrated all power in the country in his hands. His power increased even further when he married the widowed Queen of Cilicia, Jeanne, in 1320, and the following year he married his daughter Alice to King Levon IV, as evidenced by the medieval historians, one of the continuators of Samuel Anetsi's work⁷, one of the continuators of Smbat Sparapet's work⁸, and Hovhannes Dardel: "He married his daughter Alice to the king".⁹ Although his actions did not end there, a clear proof of which is the fact that he gave the position of sparapet in the Cilician Armenian kingdom to his brother, thus securing the army's support for himself. Indeed, Oshin's actions consolidated his absolute power in the kingdom. This situation continued until the Armenian king came of age.

Becoming approximately 20 years old, King Levon IV decided to get rid of his regents and remove from the scene those who, in all probability, would not give him power.

Thus, on January 27, 1329, a murder was carried out by Levon IV, which claimed the lives of the Armenian king's father-in-law and regent Oshin of Korikos, his brother, the sparapet Constantine, and Queen Alice. One of the minor chroniclers notes the following: "King Levon, son of King Oshin, killed Lord Oshin of Korikos, who was his father-in-law, and his brother".¹⁰

⁵ Hovhannes Dardel 1891: 28.

⁶ Ter-Petrosyan 2007: 397.

⁷ Samuel Anetsi 1893: 157.

⁸ Smbat Sparapet 1856: 128.

⁹ Dardel 1891: 28.

¹⁰ Hakobyan 1951: 88. According to G. Mikayelyan, at that time the Armenian king was only 19 years old (Mikayelyan 2007: 461).

In other words, the king got rid of his regents and wife, who would hardly allow his full rule in the future. According to researcher D. Tinoyan, the murder was organized in such a way that neither Payl Oshin nor Sparapet Constantine were aware of the planned arrest and execution.¹¹ One can agree with the researcher's viewpoint, because if Payl Oshin and Constantine knew about the planned conspiracy, they would hardly have left with only five people.

There are different viewpoints in scholarly literature regarding this atrocity.

Thus, according to K. Mutafyan, Levon poisoned his father-in-law and queen¹². In contrast to this viewpoint, the renowned Armenologist René Grousset expresses the opinion that the young king arrested and executed his regent¹³. Researchers G. Mikayelyan¹⁴, D. Tinoyan¹⁵, and others also agree with René Grousset's opinion. We believe that the second viewpoint is more likely, as it is supported by the information of a number of medieval historians, among whom we can single out Samuel Anetsi¹⁶, the continuator of Smbat Sparapet's history¹⁷, Hovhannes Dardel¹⁸, one of the minor chroniclers of the 13th-18th centuries¹⁹, and other medieval authors.

In fact, it can be stated that the king was so dissatisfied with the regents' rule that he killed them all at once. Here, the fact that Levon also removed his wife from the scene is also interesting, perhaps fearing that if she remained alive, she might seek revenge on the king in the future. Regarding the queen's murder, G. Mikayelyan expresses the opinion that she was also accused of infidelity.²⁰ Unfortunately, the researcher does not provide any other details about this nor does he indicate the primary source he used. Although Mikayelyan does not indicate the primary source he used, we find similar information in one of the continuators of Samuel Anetsi's work: "The queen was also killed for her unworthy and numerous shameful deeds".²¹ And it is not excluded that the renowned researcher used this very author.

In fact, the information provided by the continuator of Samuel Anetsi's work substantiates the real reason for the king's murder.

We should also note that King Levon IV, nevertheless, must have had a sufficiently serious reason and political support to carry out such an atrocity.

¹¹ Tinoyan 2011: 41.

¹² Mutafyan 2001: 464.

¹³ Grousset 2005: 345.

¹⁴ Mikayelyan 2007: 461.

¹⁵ Tinoyan 2011: 41.

¹⁶ Samuel Anetsi 1893: 158.

¹⁷ Smbat 1856: 123-124.

¹⁸ Dardel 1891: 30-31.

¹⁹ Hakobyan 1951: 88.

²⁰ Mikayelyan 2007: 461.

²¹ Samuel Anetsi 1893: 158.

Now let's examine the real reason for this murder and who the participants were. Medieval historians provide some information about this assassination. In particular, one of the continuators of Samuel Anetsi's work informs us that before the murder, nobles dissatisfied with Oshin's policies had gathered in the royal court and advised Levon IV to get rid of his regents.²²

Information regarding the aforementioned issue is also provided by the continuator of Smbat Sparapet's work, who notes that the nobles were also complaining that years ago, Levon's regent had seized many territories and fortresses in the country, of which he was not the rightful owner.²³ In other words, taking advantage of temporary successes, the payl had committed illegalities. Hovhannes Dardel also provides some information about this, noting that the nobles had told the king about all the evil and illegalities that his father-in-law and regent had committed in previous years: "And when King Levon IV ascended the royal throne, various nobles and people told the Armenian king all the evil and treachery that Oshin had committed and how he had married the king's mother, Hovhannes".²⁴

The fact that, taking advantage of absolute power, Oshin and his brother could have allowed themselves a number of illegalities may be close to reality, and the opposition nobles, taking advantage of the king's coming of age, tried to inform the latter about this and turn him against the regents.

In fact, over the years, Payl Oshin and his brother had managed to acquire a considerable number of enemies. At this point, it was advantageous for the Armenian king to gain new allies, and it is not excluded that these murders were carried out with the help of a part of the nobles. In addition, according to the same source, King Oshin had set the term of office for the regents of his ten-year-old son for a period of ten years: "The land of Cilicia was to be ruled by regents who would help the underage heir and serve honestly for a period of ten years. After the ten years were completed, they were to hand over the royal throne and the governance of the state to Levon IV".²⁵ Consequently, the ten years had already passed, and if the king had not carried out this murder, perhaps the regents would have killed him and completely seized power in Cilician Armenia. It is not excluded that the political opponents of Oshin and his brother tried to use this circumstance with the king as well. Although it does not entirely fit into logic, M. Ormanian points this out, offering an interesting viewpoint that is also worthy of attention. The great researcher expresses the opinion that if Payl Oshin had wanted to get rid of King Levon, he would hardly have waited ten years for him to come of age.²⁶

One can agree with this viewpoint as well, because in the previous ten years, power in Cilician Armenia was entirely in the hands of the regent brothers, and it would

²² Samuel Anetsi 1893: 158.

²³ Smbat Sparapet 1856: 123-124.

²⁴ Dardel 1891: 30.

²⁵ Dardel 1891: 30.

²⁶ Ormanian 2001: 2159.

not have been difficult for them to eliminate the underage king, which was not done. Naturally, after that, power in Cilician Armenia would have remained with his daughter, who was the Armenian queen at that time.

According to the same M. Ormanian, Payl Oshin used violence against royal figures during the regency, even against the king's aunt Zablun and her children, whom he even had imprisoned²⁷, which could also have aroused the king's displeasure. These accounts of the latter are also confirmed by information reported by medieval historians. The basis of this policy of Payl Oshin was, of course, the fear of losing his power, and the king's aunt and her sons could have had more rights by law than they did.

And finally, Hovhannes Dardel provides an interesting account, according to whose testimony the regents had killed the Armenian king's father, King Oshin, years earlier by getting him drunk and poisoning him.²⁸

As we can see, Hovhannes Dardel provides quite interesting information, but the latter's account is not confirmed by any other historian. Although that does not mean that this information may be far from the truth. Although on the other hand, according to D. Tinoyan, Oshin had already been ill for several months before his death, and he himself had appointed Oshin of Korikos as the regent for his son²⁹. If the king was indeed ill and he himself appointed Oshin of Korikos as the regent for his son and the kingdom, then in such a case, the viewpoint related to the king's poisoning, according to us, is negated.

In addition, as we can see from the author's accounts, Oshin had married the Armenian king's mother, which may also not have been to Levon IV's liking, and it is not excluded that he had done so forcibly. And if King Levon IV could not stop Payl Oshin's aspirations in his minority, then after coming of age, a different situation arose, and he tried to punish the regent.

Thus, King Levon IV, having come of age, waited for a convenient moment to punish the latter, and finding allies, got rid of his regents and wife, whom he probably did not love or trust, and that marriage was more of a political nature. The fact that the continuator of the historian Smbat's work spoke above about Oshin's past illegalities and the seizure of fortresses, and now blames the entire fault of the murder on slanderers, is also interesting.³⁰ No matter how much the slanderers tried to convince the Armenian king to commit such a murder, nevertheless, King Levon IV must have had a sufficiently weighty justification for such an act. We believe these were the following:

1. The most serious hypothesis is that perhaps the king had information that the regents were preparing to kill him and completely seize power in Cilician Armenia, but the

²⁷ Ormanian 2001: 2148.

²⁸ Dardel 1891: 30.

²⁹ Tinoyan 2011: 43.

³⁰ Smbat Sparapet 1856: 124.

king made a preemptive move. There is direct evidence of this in one of the continuators of Samuel Anetsi's work.³¹

2. King Levon took into account the dissatisfaction of a part of the Cilician nobles and tried to punish the regents who had previously committed illegalities.
 3. It is not excluded that the Armenian king was prompted to take this step by his mother, the queen, whom the regent Oshin had forcibly married, and the queen was also dissatisfied with the regents' policies, especially with Payl Oshin.
 4. The ruler of Cilicia could not tolerate the disrespectful treatment and betrayal by his wife.
 5. Having the support of a number of nobles and his mother, Levon, by killing the regents, wanted to single-handedly carry out the governance of Cilician Armenia.
- Finally, it should be noted that as a result of the murder of the regents and the queen on January 27, 1329, in the Cilician Armenian kingdom, a palace coup took place, and the ten-year sole rule of the regents came to an end, and the entire governance of the country passed to the young King Levon IV.

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³¹ Samuel Anetsi 1893: 158.

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