

Studying the Concept of Titles in the Relationship between Armenians and the Qajar Government in Documents (Case Study of 96 Documents of the Persian Decrees of the Matenadaran of the Qajar Period)

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Abstract— This study investigates the function and significance of titles within the official documents of the Qajar era, focusing on Persian decrees (*farmāns*) addressed to the Armenian community. Through an analysis of 96 documents from the Matenadaran collection, this research demonstrates that titles transcended ceremonial honorifics to become instrumental in establishing power relations and political legitimacy. In the dynamic between the Qajar state and its Armenian subjects, titles served as markers of socio-political inclusion, precisely defining the status of Armenian religious and social leaders within the imperial hierarchy. A close examination of the lexicon and combination of these titles reveals a symbolic language through which the state simultaneously reinforced minority loyalty and delineated the boundaries of its authority. Conversely, the Armenian elite's acceptance and deployment of these titles represented a strategic form of cultural adaptation and negotiation with central power. This study concludes that titles in Qajar documents were carriers of complex political and social messages, functioning as a vital communicative mechanism for managing state-minority relations. The diversity and evolution of titulature in these decrees reflect the broader political, social, and cultural developments of the Qajar period.

Keywords— Administrative Titles, Royal Decrees (*Farmāns*), Qajar Bureaucracy, Armenian-Iranian Relations, Matenadaran Archive, Political Language, Imperial Legitimacy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Among historical sources, archival documents possess a superior degree of authenticity and reliability. Official decrees, orders, and letters are tethered to specific, real moments and events, maintaining a direct and organic link between the document and its author. Unlike narrative texts, they are generally free from subsequent alteration, revision, or reinterpretation, granting them inherent credibility and authority [1]. For the political, social, and economic history of Armenia in the medieval and early modern periods, the Persian documents of the Matenadaran manuscript archive in Yerevan constitute an invaluable resource, covering events from the 15th to the 19th centuries.

These Persian documents originated in the churches and religious centers of Eastern Armenia, where they were preserved before being consolidated first in the manuscript repository of the Etchmiadzin Cathedral and later transferred to the Mesrop Mashtots Matenadaran [2]. The collection is categorised into three principal groups: 1) royal decrees and orders from kings, khans, local emirs, and Muslim religious leaders; 2) court minutes from Iranian officials concerning property sales, endowments (*waqf*), and leases; and 3) documents related to inheritance disputes, inter-village conflicts, and customary rights.

The latter two groups are particularly crucial for studying land tenure and economic history, with some documents detailing irrigation rights and social structures [3].

The royal decrees, the focus of this study, are of paramount importance for examining feudal relations and social stratification. Most survive as originals or authenticated copies. The oldest document dates to 1449 CE, issued by Sultan Jahanshah Qara Qoyunlu, while the most recent is from 1848 CE. Seventeenth-century decrees are especially numerous, many pertaining to the reconfirmation of religious institutions' rights by new sovereigns. These texts vividly record oppressive taxation, violence, and the tax system in Eastern Armenia prior to the Russian annexation of the Caucasus, providing critical terminology for understanding contemporary socio-administrative issues [3].

This research employs a historical-analytical method to examine 96 Persian decrees from the Qajar period within the Matenadaran. It seeks to answer: What role did titles (*alqāb*) play in establishing the social and political status of individuals within Qajar decrees? What patterns of similarity and difference exist in titulature across various decrees? By analysing titles as a primary lens, this study moves beyond a purely linguistic or ceremonial reading to argue that they were a fundamental technology of Qajar statecraft—a mechanism for integrating the Armenian elite, articulating hierarchy, and projecting imperial legitimacy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND SCHOLARLY CONTEXT

To date, no independent, comprehensive study has analysed the concept of titles within the Matenadaran's Qajar decrees from a combined analytical and linguistic perspective. The foundational work remains Gostikian's *Farmin Matenadaran*, which primarily provides transcriptions and retellings of the edicts.

The significance of the Matenadaran's Persian documents for Armenian history was recognised early by Catholicos Simeon Irvantsi (1763-1780), who incorporated analyses into his work *Jamber*. The most significant scholarly contribution is Hakob Papazian's 1968 publication of a major corpus of these documents, translated into Armenian and Russian with extensive commentary. Numerous studies have since utilised these decrees. For instance, Fatemeh Orji investigated "Abbas Mirza's Relations with the Church of Etchmiadzin Based on Archival Documents," highlighting Iran's diplomatic efforts in the Caucasus [4]. Alam, Avagyan, and Eghbal examined "The Role of Etchmiadzin in Relations between Armenians and Qajar Monarchs," focusing on the institution as a mediating body [5]. Research by Sam on "Edict Writers in the Qajar Era" detailed the bureaucratic apparatus behind decree production, noting the roles of officials like the *Mustafi al-Mamalik* and *Munshi al-Mamalik* [6].

While these studies engage with the content and context of the decrees, a systematic examination of titulature—the system of titles itself—as a primary object of analysis remains absent. This gap is critical because titles are not mere ornamentation but are constitutive of the social and political order they represent. Analysing them is key to reconstructing administrative hierarchies, understanding the performance of power, and deciphering the nuances of state-minority relations. A focused case study of the Matenadaran documents is therefore essential to map the diversity and evolution of Qajar titulature and to reinterpret this facet of Iran's socio-administrative history.

III. METHODOLOGY AND SOURCE CHALLENGES

This study is based on the historical-analytical examination of 96 Persian-language decrees from the Qajar period housed in the Matenadaran. The analysis proceeds through: 1) identifying and categorising all titles attributed to the decree issuer (Shah, Crown Prince), addressee (Armenian Caliph, community leaders), and other named officials; 2) correlating these titles with the subject matter of the decree (e.g., tax exemption, dispute resolution, appointment); 3) tracing patterns and variations in titulature over time and across different royal reigns.

Working with these documents presents specific challenges, including: vague dating or undated documents; discrepancies between title and content; determining the dominant language in multilingual texts; and limited prior research on individual scribes or precise provenance. Despite these challenges, such documents are invaluable, containing data on: administrative correspondence; socio-economic reforms; property and legal systems; official conduct; geographical and ethnographic details; and the evolution of Persian paleography and diplomatic forms, including seals (*tamgha*) and signatures [7].

IV. THE ANATOMY OF A QAJAR DECREE: STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS

The composition of a Qajar decree (*farmān*) followed a formal structure, each part serving a distinct purpose. The introduction (*dībācha*) showcased the secretary's literary artistry and was tailored to the addressee's rank, employing elaborate compound phrases and epithets. For Armenian caliphs, these included "His High Position," "The Caliph of the Christian Caliphs," and "The Chief of the Christian Bishops" [8, p. 361].

Structurally, a decree comprised three core pillars:

1. **The Introduction:** Containing the titles and address to the recipient.
2. **The Text (*matn*):** The main body, stating the command or decision (also called *ḥāl* or *sharḥ-i ṭn*).
3. **The Conclusion (*khatima*):** Containing instructions to officials, benedictions, and the execution clause (*mas'ūl-i farmān*).

Additional formal elements included the *tuḡhrā* (royal cipher), marginal notes (*hāshiya*), and the date. The text's style often employed intricate metaphors and allusions, making precise interpretation demanding [8, p. 481].

V. ANALYSIS OF TITULATURE IN THE MATENADARAN CORPUS

5.1 The Issuer and Addressee:

A fundamental element is the identification of the decree's issuer (the Shah or Crown Prince) and its addressee (e.g., the Caliph of Etchmiadzin, a bishop, or a Qajar governor). The addressee's name follows the *tuḡhrā*, preceded by a cascade of honorifics. A typical example begins: "Decree that His Eminence, the high seat of sobriety and understanding... the chief of the Christian caliphs, Narcissus Mehrasia, should know..." [8, pp. 520-521]. This structure immediately establishes a hierarchical dialogue between the sovereign and a specifically titled subordinate.

5.2 The Shah's Titles and the Nature of Authority:

In the Qajar political structure, the Shah was the fount of all authority. His titles reflected this absolute status: *Shāhanshāh* (King of Kings), *Zill Allāh fi'l-Ard* (Shadow of God on Earth), *Qibla-yi Ālam* (Focus of the World). Fath-Ali Shah Qajar employed an especially lavish array, including *Khāqān-i A'zam* and *Shams al-Mulūk* (Sun of Kings) [9]. This autocratic system, largely unbound by legal constraints, meant the granting of titles was often a matter of royal favour rather than regulated merit, as seen when Naser al-Din Shah bestowed the title *Farugh al-Saltana* on a favourite courtier [10].

5.3 Titles for the Armenian Caliph:

The titles granted to the Armenian Caliph of Etchmiadzin were carefully chosen to denote a respected but subordinate position within the imperial order. Common honorifics included:

- *'Ālijāh* (High Position)
- *Maqām-i 'Ālī-i Jamāl* (The High Position of Majesty)
- *Ra'īs-i Ikhwān-i Masīhī* (Chief of the Christian Brethren)
- *Khalīfat al-Khalā'if al-Masīhī* (Caliph of the Christian Caliphs)

A decree typically opens: "Decree that His Highness, the High Position of Glory... the Chief of the Great Christian... the Caliph David, should consider..." [8, pp. 361-362]. These titles simultaneously honoured the Caliph's religious authority and framed it as embedded within the Shah's sovereignty.

5.4 Titles for Qajar Military-Administrative Officials:

Generals and governors (*beglarbegs*) also received specific titulature, blending military and administrative prestige:

- *'Ālijāh, Maqām-i 'Ālī-i Dawlat* (High Position of the State)
- *'Izzat-i Jalāl-i Nizām* (The Honoured Majesty of the [Military] Order)
- *Amīr al-Umarā* (Commander of Commanders)

A decree to Hussein Khan, the *Beglarbeg* of Yerevan, begins: "Decree that '*Ālījāh*, the high position of honour and courage... the conscious Amir of the great princes... Hussein Khan... should know..." [8, p. 481]. This formal language reinforced the chain of command from the Shah, through his provincial agents, to the Armenian leadership.

VI. THE FUNCTION OF TITLES: CORRELATION WITH DECREE SUBJECTS

The conferred titles were directly relevant to the decree's purpose. Analysing the 96 documents reveals key subjects and their titular context:

1. **Tax Exemption & Economic Privilege:** Decrees confirming property rights or tax exemptions for the Church or individuals used titles affirming the recipient's loyalty and high standing, making the privilege a reward for fidelity.
2. **Dispute Resolution:** Orders settling intra-Armenian or Armenian-Muslim conflicts invoked the Caliph's titled authority as the sanctioned mediator, recognising his jurisdiction as derived from the Shah. E.g., a decree concerning a water dispute references the "Chief of the Peers of the Christian Caliphs" as the arbiter [8, pp. 389-390].
3. **Appointments and Ecclesiastical Authority:** Decrees affirming the Caliph's right to appoint nobles (*azādān*) within the Armenian community explicitly tied his internal authority to royal sanction: "the determination of the great and the small... is subject to the determination and appointment of His Highness" [8, p. 417].
4. **Symbolic Exchange and Legitimation:** Decrees concerning the exchange of gifts or the formal allegiance of the Caliph employed the most elaborate reciprocal titles, performing a ritual of mutual recognition that bolstered the legitimacy of both parties.

VII. CONCLUSION

This analysis of 96 Qajar decrees from the Matenadaran demonstrates that titles (*alqāb*) were far more than ceremonial tools; they were sophisticated political and social mechanisms for regulating power. In the context of state-minority relations, they performed a dual function: integration and control. The bestowal of Persianate titles upon Armenian elites formally integrated them into the Qajar hierarchy, granting recognised status and often concrete privileges. This created a vested interest in maintaining loyalty to the state.

Conversely, these titles were conditional markers, perpetually reminding the recipients that their authority and position were contingent upon and subordinate to the Qajar sovereign. The titles acted as a symbolic language of domination, delineating the boundaries of tolerated autonomy. The protective function of a decree was often activated precisely through the invocation of the recipient's official title, turning it into a shield against lower-level encroachment by other state agents or local powers.

The evolution and variation in titlature reflect the shifting political and economic strategies of the Qajar state towards its Armenian subjects across the long nineteenth century. Therefore, the study of titles provides a crucial index for understanding the dynamics of imperial legitimacy, minority management, and the intricate interplay between language and power in Qajar Iran. The Matenadaran decrees reveal that titlature served as an essential bridge—a bridge that facilitated Armenian participation within the imperial system while simultaneously reinforcing the structure of Qajar authority that framed it.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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