

1 | A New World of Encounters

The Life of Tamta Mqargrdzeli

The coming of this woman into the house of the sultans brought about much good.¹

Some said it was the fault of the horse, which went lame just as he tried to escape. Others blamed the rider himself: he was drunk and, ‘riding aimlessly’, came too close to the walls of the besieged city. Yet others praised the city’s defenders: they had dug a trap and carefully covered it in straw, and it was this that the horse blundered into.² All, however, agreed on what happened next. Ivane Mqargrdzeli, the commander of a combined Christian army of Georgians and Armenians, was captured outside the besieged walls of the Muslim-held city of Akhlat, on the north-west shore of Lake Van in what is now eastern Turkey. The year was 1210.

The consequences of Ivane’s capture would resonate for the next forty years, particularly for one person, his daughter Tamta. Tamta became one of the rewards in the ransom negotiations that followed Ivane’s capture and led to her diplomatic – forced – marriage to al-Awhad, the ruler of Akhlat, and a nephew of the Ayyubid Sultan, Saladin, the scourge of Christians. However, this was only the first in a series of defeats, marriages and rape that saw her passed between all the conquerors who eyed Anatolia in the first half of the thirteenth century. These encounters traversed a new world that stretched from the Mediterranean to Mongolia.

Tamta’s travels show the mobility of the medieval world. Her life links together the Georgians and the Armenians – the Christian peoples of the Caucasus – with the Ayyubids, Seljuk Turks and other Turkish emirates – the Muslim groups that dominated Anatolia and Syria. She was involved with the Crusader states in the Holy Land and Byzantium. She also connects all these eastern Mediterranean and Caucasian cultures with the Central Asian world of the Khwarazmians and the East Asian Mongols – both of whom

¹ Kirakos, 83 (trans. Bedrosian, 46).

² These varied explanations are recounted by Abu’l-Fida, 85; V. Minorsky, *Studies in Caucasian History* (London, 1953), 150 n.1 (citing al-Qazvini). Kirakos, 82; al-Dahabi, 193; M. F. Brosset, *Additions et éclaircissements à l’Histoire de la Géorgie* (St Petersburg, 1851), 272–3, notes the silence of the Georgian sources concerning this defeat.

invaded Tamta's world in the 1220s and 1230s; shocking new arrivals with radically different cultures and terrifyingly ferocious armies. She travelled between Christianity, Islam and the shamanistic and Buddhist religions of the Mongol world, and between the cultures of the Mediterranean, the Caucasus, Eurasia and Asia. We do not normally think that all these culturally diverse and apparently separate worlds could be experienced by one person, let alone by a woman, in the thirteenth century. Tamta lived amongst all these different groups and, between about 1236 and 1245, she even travelled to Mongolia. Although she has left no account of her travels, she was one of the first Christians to undertake such an arduous journey, and she returned before the first of the better-known western missionaries, the Friar John of Plano Carpini, had even set out on his travels. In the mid-1240s the Mongols returned Tamta to Akhlat and, if she had first entered the city as a prize of war, a victim, she now returned to it as the city's independent ruler and was to govern there for the last decade of her life. Tamta's shift from forced bride to female ruler represents one of the great transformations of a woman in the thirteenth century.

Tamta's life can only be pieced together from a few off-hand mentions spread across histories written by contemporaries in Georgian, Armenian, Arabic and Persian. For them, women were hardly the stuff of history. But those occasional, sparse appearances in the historical sources give enough information to sketch out her history, and that is the aim of this chapter. The following chapters examine the nature of the religious and cultural encounters that she enjoyed or endured, and the ways in which her identity changed in consequence. The different names, peoples and cultures that appear in this chapter, in many cases fleetingly and with only the briefest of descriptions, will be explored and explained at much greater length in the next. This book re-traces Tamta's life, the cultures she encountered and the role played by women in them.

Tamta's Life

Tamta's presence as a bargaining chip in the ransom negotiations for her father is the first that we know of her in any historical source. Her life before then is purely surmise. It is an inauspicious beginning for a biography: we do not know when she was born, and this is compounded by the fact that we do not know when her father, Ivane, was born either; nor do we have any information about her mother, beyond her name, Khoshak.³ The

³ She is named in Kirakos, 159, and in Vardan, 212, where Vardan claims that she was responsible for the conversion of Zakare's son, Shahanshah, to Chalcedonianism: C. Toumanoff, *Les*

Mqargrdzeli family owned great estates in the province of Lore, on the marchlands between Armenia and Georgia in the Caucasus, and it was in this area of high plateaux and deep river gorges that she must have spent her first years. We know that Ivane took on an active role at the court of Georgia from the 1190s, and that Tamta was clearly of marriageable age by 1210. If we assume that she was over thirteen at her marriage, and given that her death is placed in the year 1254, we might assume that she was born around 1195.⁴ Tamta had one brother, Avag, who was to succeed their father in his posts at the Georgian court in the 1230s, and who played an important role in Tamta's life in the decade before she died.

Tamta had been raised at a time when women seemed to be in the ascendant in the Caucasus. Her family held senior posts at the court of Tamar, the Queen of Georgia and the first woman to rule in her own name and in her own right in the region (r. 1184–1210). Taking advantage of internal power struggles all around Georgia among the Seljuk Turks, the Turkoman tribes in Anatolia and Azerbaijan, the Byzantines and the Armenians, Tamar's armies extended Georgian rule and influence through eastern Anatolia. By 1199 Georgia controlled most of Greater Armenia (the traditional name for the area comprising most of modern Armenia and parts of eastern Turkey), and by the end of the next decade it dominated many of the small Muslim emirates that lay beyond them. Tughrilshah, the Emir of Erzurum, acknowledged Tamar as his overlord and even placed a cross above his Islamic banners;⁵ and the Mengujekid ruler of Erzincan similarly acknowledged his vassalship to her. Muslim historians worried about Georgian expansionism in this decade: Tamar's troops raided far into Khorasan in eastern Iran, and one writer feared the Georgians' ambition to replace the Caliph in Baghdad with their Christian Catholicos, and to turn the city's mosques into churches.⁶ In 1210, then, Tamar's independent position as a woman ruler was secure, and, as her reign coincided with a period of Georgian territorial expansionism, it was already being hailed as a golden age, commanded by a living saint who was also the 'fourth member of the Trinity'.⁷

dynasties de la Caucasic chrétienne de l'Antiquité jusqu'au XIXe siècle. Tables généalogiques et chronologiques (Rome, 1990), 295, tab. 63:7.

⁴ From the eighth century the legal age for a girl to marry was thirteen: *Ecloga*, 72; for the reality see C. Hennessy, *Images of Children in Byzantium* (Aldershot, 2008), 16–17.

⁵ Ibn al-Athir, 3: 270.

⁶ Juvayni, 2: 426. However, this is something of a cliché in Islamic sources: the same appears in Husayni, 36.

⁷ Tamar was named as saint during her lifetime in the Vani Gospels (Tbilisi, National Center of Manuscripts, A-1335, fol. 272v): K. Sharashidze, *Sakartvelos sakhelmtsipo muzeumis kartul khelnatserta aghtseriloba: qopili saeklesio muzeumis khelnatserebi (A kolektsia)* vol. 4 (Tbilisi, 1954), 409; E. Taqaishvili, 'L'évangile de Vani', *Byzantion* 10 (1935), 655–63; Tamar as fourth member of the Trinity: *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, 239.

The Mqargrdzeli family played a formidable role in this expansion of Georgian power, although it was not itself a Georgian family.⁸ It had risen to prominence in the 1170s under Tamar's father, Giorgi III, as he looked for fresh courtiers to counterbalance the established but fractious nobility that constantly sought to subvert or limit his royal power. For new, loyal allies he had looked beyond Georgia's traditional borders to an Armenian family of Kurdish descent whose head, Sargis Mqargrdzeli, had proved himself in battle and at court. Sargis was followed by his sons Zakare and Ivane, and it was their loyalty to Tamar that enabled her to exercise independent power as ruling Queen in a world in which women were more normally expected to move from father to husband as meek and obedient chattels.

Tamta's background, then, must be found within the mixed Georgian and Armenian milieu of the start of the thirteenth century. Tamta's early life was spent in this double world – divided geographically between Armenia and Georgia, divided linguistically between the different languages each country spoke, and divided religiously between the two different Christian confessions that each nation professed. Her uncle Zakare adhered to the Armenian Apostolic Orthodoxy into which members of the family had been baptised, but in around 1200 her father converted to the Chalcedonian Christianity of the Georgians.⁹

Ivane's capture at Akhlat in 1210 took place during the annual Georgian summer raids that sought to extend Tamar's territory south and west into Greater Armenia and Anatolia, or south and east into Iran. Akhlat was an important military goal because of its strategic location between the Caucasus, Anatolia and the Jazira. One of the explanations for Ivane's seizure offered by Armenian chroniclers claimed that it was divine vengeance for his apostasy from the Armenian faith.¹⁰ The failed assault on Akhlat marked the high water mark of the Georgian adventurism that opened the thirteenth century. Two years later, soon after Zakare's death, Ivane set up a great public inscription around the entrance to the church at Haghartsin in northern Armenia in memory of his brother and to celebrate their joint successes:

By the will of God, this inscription is a monument in perpetuity, in memory of the sons of the Great Sargis, Zakare and Ivane, of the Bagratid family. When the bounty of God was upon his creatures and allowed us to enter into possession of the heritage of our fathers, he placed first in our hands the impregnable castle of Amberd and the royal city of Ani, then the

⁸ The family's origins are described in Kirakos, 81. ⁹ *Kartlis Tskhovbreba*, 263–7.

¹⁰ Kirakos, 82–3. His defeat at Garni in 1225 was similarly ascribed to his apostasy in the Sebastatsi chronicle: *Armianskiie istochniki*, 23.

fortress of Bjni and Marand as far as Gushank; Tevriz [Tabriz]; Karnukalak [Erzurum] as far as Akhlat; Shaki, the Shirvan; Barda as far as Beluqan, and many other countries with their frontiers which we regard as futile to mention. This God, who never angers, loved Zakare, the crown of our head, and called this powerful hero to him. So I, I constructed this oratory, in our hereditary monastery of Haghartsin, carved in stone, red in colour, at the gate of the church of St Gregory, and I gave it a vineyard, located at Yerevan, in memory of my brother. The servants of this place must celebrate, without interruption, a liturgy in the principal chapel; those who will do this, may they be blessed by God.¹¹

Given the fate of Tamta, the ‘as far as Akhlat’ appears particularly poignant. There is certainly no mention of his capture, or of Tamta’s, in this bombastic text.

The price of Ivane’s ransom in 1210 was high: a thirty-year peace in which the Georgians vowed not to launch new attacks to the south, the return of captured castles, the release of 5,000 Muslim captives and the payment of 100,000 dinars.¹² The final demand, the handing over of Tamta in marriage to the commander of the city, al-Awhad, was perhaps the most costly of all. Tamta’s treatment shows the limits and exceptionalism of Tamar’s hard-won position: the Queen may have eventually been able to determine her own fate, but her female subjects were not afforded a similar luxury.

Al-Awhad was one of the many nephews of al-Nasir Salah al-Din Yusuf, better known in the west as Saladin, the leader of the Ayyubid family that dominated the Muslim world in Syria and Egypt at the end of the twelfth century. Al-Awhad had only recently come into power in Akhlat. In the twelfth century the city had been an independent Turkish emirate, ruled by Muslim emirs who gave themselves the title of Shah-i Armen (King of the Armenians), but the years before Ivane’s capture were marked by internal strife within the city. The last of the Shah-i Armen dynasty, an unnamed son of Beg-Temür, had been forced out of the city by its inhabitants. His malicious and incompetent rule fed a revolt, and he was replaced by one of his *mamluks* (slave soldiers) named Balban. Al-Awhad was based in the nearby city of Mayyafariqin (modern Silvan) and his advance to the north was part of a concerted campaign organised by his father al-‘Adil (the brother and successor of Saladin) to expand Ayyubid power out of Syria and the Jazira and into south-eastern Anatolia and Greater Armenia. In the face

¹¹ Brosset, *Additions et éclaircissements*, 271; S. La Porta, “‘The Kingdom and the Sultanate were Conjoined’: Legitimizing Land and Power in Armenia during the 12th and early 13th Centuries”, *REArm* 34 (2012), 73–118, at 91.

¹² Abu’l-Fida, 85.

of these Ayyubid advances on the city Balban allied himself with Tughrilshah, the Seljuk ruler of Erzurum (and occasional vassal of Georgia), the most powerful of the emirates in eastern Anatolia. This kept the Ayyubids at bay, but awakened Tughrilshah's own ambitions. He betrayed and murdered Balban, hoping to take control of Akhlat himself. Once more the people of the city rose against a potential ruler, refusing Tughrilshah entrance into Akhlat. But to keep him out they needed support from elsewhere, and were now forced to open their gates to al-Awhad, who was clearly seen as the lesser of two evils.¹³ Nevertheless, the Ayyubid ruler was not a popular choice and his garrison was virtually imprisoned in the citadel by the city's population.¹⁴ Underlying this fierce distrust was ethnic tension between the Turkoman elites of Anatolia and the Arabicised rulers of Syria. Al-Awhad had been warned to be careful in Akhlat, as its people 'are averse to the Arabs' (although as we will see, such ethnic distinctions are by no means clear cut, and the identity of the Ayyubids was complex).¹⁵

It was at this moment that the Georgian raid on the city ended in failure with such disastrous consequences, and led to Tamta's marriage to its Ayyubid ruler. The marriage was a minor affair – al-Awhad was one of the less important of the sons of al-'Adil, only trusted with a relatively insignificant territory to rule, a long way from the heartland of Ayyubid power in Syria and Egypt. Al-Dahabi dismisses him as 'unjust and deceitful'.¹⁶ Although the marriage had international ramifications in bringing Georgians and Ayyubids into contact with each other, it was essentially a border affair. However, this was to change very quickly, when Tamta found herself a widow after only a few months.¹⁷ Al-Awhad died, probably of disease, and his lands were rapidly taken over by his brother al-Ashraf Musa, who assumed control of his government, and also took over his treaty with the Georgians. He clearly inherited al-Awhad's Caucasian wife as well, and he immediately married Tamta to preserve the blood-link that underlay the peace.

The replacement of al-Awhad by al-Ashraf appeared seamless. Al-Ashraf stressed his continuity with his brother, maintaining his policies and even completing his buildings.¹⁸ But this appearance of continuity in fact disguised a radical change, as al-Ashraf was much more ambitious than his

¹³ Bar Hebraeus, 363–5. ¹⁴ Minorsky, *Studies in Caucasian History*, 149.

¹⁵ Ibn al-Athir, 3: 122. ¹⁶ Al-Dahabi, 198.

¹⁷ C. D'Ohsson, *Histoire des Mongols, depuis Tchinguiz-Khan jusqu'à Timour Bey ou Tamerlan* (Amsterdam, 1852), 3: 42.

¹⁸ As at the minaret extra muros at Mayyafariqin al-Ashraf completed in 1212 and that at al-Ruha: E. J. Whelan, *The Public Figure: Political Iconography in Medieval Mesopotamia* (London, 2006), 437–40.

brother, and sought to carve out a larger and more significant realm to rule. The second marriage moved Tamta into a very different league within the Ayyubid world: al-Ashraf, along with his older brothers al-Kamil and al-Mu'azzam, were the three major figures in their generation of the family and dominated its tensions, manoeuvrings and disputes over the next quarter of a century across the Jazira, Syria and Egypt. Initially, al-'Adil disapproved of his son's actions at Akhlat, fearing, with good reason, that it was evidence of his dangerous ambition, but al-Ashraf managed to persuade him of his loyalty to the family.¹⁹ This second marriage lasted for more than a quarter of a century, until al-Ashraf's death in 1237.

As a wife of al-Ashraf, Tamta was closer to the heart of the Ayyubid world, but she had to move carefully. On the one hand she now potentially had access to much greater wealth and influence than she had ever enjoyed before, but on the other her status as a Christian wife in a Muslim court made her vulnerable. Indeed, her future must have looked bleak. She was just one of many wives in al-Ashraf's harem, and by no means the most favoured. She had little family around her and no leverage among the court elite. We know more about the activities of her co-wives, who came from the most powerful Islamic dynasties to the west and east, including an unnamed sister of the Seljuk Sultan of Anatolia, Kaykubad I (1219–37), and Terkan Khatun, the sister of the Zangid ruler of Mosul, Arslan Shah I (1193–1211).²⁰ We also know more about her sisters-in-law, such as Dayfa Khatun, who was to go on in Aleppo to become the first Muslim woman to exercise independent rule.²¹ These other women were Muslims and allied to powerful families within the Ayyubid confederacy and its allies. Tamta had neither religious nor family ties to protect her. Akhlat was very much an outpost of al-Ashraf's pocket empire; it was separated from his heartlands around Harran and Raqqa in the Jazira by the Artuqids in Amid (modern Diyarbakir) and Mardin. And when, in 1229, he took control of the wealthy capital, Damascus, al-Ashraf relinquished control of most of his other lands in the Jazira, leaving the windswept lakeside town of Akhlat even more isolated.²²

It is not clear how al-Ashraf used his new wife, and she does not seem to have borne him any children.²³ However, she was not required to convert to

¹⁹ Ibn al-'Amid, 19.

²⁰ R. S. Humphreys, 'Women as Patrons of Religious Architecture in Ayyubid Damascus', *Muqarnas* 11 (1994), 35–54, no. 15.

²¹ Y. Tabbaa, 'Dayfa Khatun, Regent Queen and Architectural Patron', in *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies*, ed. D. F. Ruggles (Albany, 2000), 17–34.

²² Al-Dahabi, 224.

²³ J. Sublet, 'La folie de la princesse Bint al-Ašraf (un scandale financier sous les Mamelouks Bahris)', *BEO* 27 (1974), 45–50 suggests that Tamta may have borne him a daughter; but the identity of the mother is unknown.

Islam, as the Christian brides of other Muslim rulers around her were often forced to. It seems unlikely that she accompanied her new husband on his journeys between the cities he controlled. Instead, the one source that takes an interest in the marriage suggests that she mostly resided in Akhlat. This is the Armenian historian Kirakos Gandzaketsi's comment on the aftermath:

The coming of this woman into the house of the sultans brought about much good, for the lot of the Christians under their domination improved, especially in Taron since the monasteries which were there and had been under taxation, had the rate of their taxes lowered, and half of them had the whole tax discontinued. [The Muslims] ordered those under their domination not to despoil or trouble travellers going to Jerusalem for pilgrimage. The Georgians especially expanded [their influence], for Ivane was misled to the doctrine of Chalcedon (through which the Georgians were lost); for he loved the glory of man more than the glory of God. He became charmed by the queen named Tamar, daughter of Giorgi, while Zakare remained true to the orthodox confession of the Armenians. Therefore they honoured the Georgians even more, for they were not taxed in all their cities, and in Jerusalem as well. [Ivane's daughter] was named Tamta.

Thus was friendship and unity achieved between the Georgian kingdom and the sultans' lordship.²⁴

Kirakos, who was probably writing on behalf of a Mqargrdzeli patron, is our main source for Tamta's life.²⁵ He was a contemporary of Tamta and began writing his history in 1241. His assessment of Tamta's influence is clearly a retrospective view, so we must assume that it was these concerns with monastic and city taxation and freedom of travel that occupied her over the next decades; for she is mentioned in no source for the next fifteen years. Akhlat itself was administered by a governor installed by al-Ashraf, his *hajib* (chamberlain), Husam al-Din 'Ali, so any influence that Tamta might exert had to be exercised through him. As we will see, where women did rule in the Muslim world, they had to do so through a façade of male governors. Taron, the fertile agricultural plain to the west of Lake Van, clearly came under her purview. This province was still largely populated by Christians, mostly Armenian, but also Greeks and Syriacs, despite having been under Muslim rule for more than a century; and it was among the Christians living here that Tamta was able to have most impact. The two achievements that

²⁴ Kirakos, 83 (trans. Bedrosian, 46). When fighting broke out between the Georgians and Akhlat, the Georgians were able to appeal to al-Ashraf to restore the peace, which he did: Ibn al-Athir, 3: 242–3.

²⁵ B. Dashdondog, *The Mongols and the Armenians (1220–1335)* (Leiden; Boston, 2010), 13.

Kirakos lists for Tamta, the reduction in taxation and support for pilgrimage, were key state activities in the thirteenth century, and both indicate her active role in the government of the region. Tax exemptions and records of pilgrimages were frequently noted in inscriptions on Armenian churches and city monuments to provide a permanent record of their existence, but the Christian monuments of Taron are almost all now destroyed.

In 1220 al-Ashraf gave Akhlat to his brother al-Malik al-Muzaffar Ghazi to rule as part of a redistribution of fiefs among the Ayyubid clan, and so this is the one period when Tamta may have travelled south with her husband into the Jazira and Syria. Ghazi himself tried to replicate the Georgian alliance by demanding to marry Rusudan, the daughter of Queen Tamar (and now sister of the ruling King, Giorgi IV Lasha), but the negotiations came to nothing.²⁶ By 1224 al-Ashraf was fed up with his brother, who had started to conspire against him with al-Mu‘azzam, their more powerful sibling in Damascus, and he returned to capture and rule the city once again.²⁷ Tamta was certainly back in the region, without her husband, when Akhlat changed hands once again in 1230, suggesting that once more al-Ashraf left her in the city as his regent.

Tamta’s reappearance coincided with the appearance of a new threat to the society of eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus. It came from the east: the Khwarazmians, a Turkic–Persian people from Central Asia, based to the south of the Aral Sea (modern Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). The first phase in the expansion of the Mongols in the 1210s and 1220s had forced them to retreat to the west, where the Khwarazmian ruler, Jalal al-Din Minguburnu, carved out for himself a new kingdom in Iran, Azerbaijan and the Caucasus. The Khwarazmian invasion of eastern Anatolia began in 1225, when Jalal al-Din set out from Tabriz. It was in the course of this invasion that Tamta re-emerges from obscurity; and once again her fate can, in part, be laid at her father’s door. Jalal al-Din’s freedom to establish a new realm in the region came from his crushing defeat of a Georgian–Armenian army under Ivane’s control at the battle of Garni in 1225. Ivane had underestimated the power of the Khwarazmians, thinking them a spent force after their defeats by the Mongols; his army was massacred and he fled the battlefield, leaving Tamta’s brother Avag to sue for peace on humiliating terms.

In 1225 Tamta is recorded as being in command of the castle of ‘Aliabad; a site which Jalal al-Din passed by but spared on his way to capture the

²⁶ *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, 205.

²⁷ Ibn al-Athir, 3: 247–8; Minorsky, *Studies in Caucasian History*, 150.

Georgian capital, Tbilisi.²⁸ This castle was probably located somewhere on the modern frontier between Armenia and Azerbaijan, suggesting that Tamta was still associated with the politics of her family in Armenia at this time, as well as exercising power in Akhlat on behalf of her husband.²⁹ However, on 14 April 1230 she was in Akhlat again when the city was finally captured by Jalal al-Din – three-and-a-half years after his first attempt in November 1226 had been rebuffed by the *hajib* Husam al-Din ‘Ali.³⁰ The siege was a long and brutal one: ‘The people of Akhlat ate the sheep, then the cattle, then the buffaloes, then the horses, then the donkeys, then the mules, then the dogs and cats. We heard that they were catching rats and eating them. They showed endurance that nobody could match.’³¹ Jalal al-Din attacked with giant mangonels that hurled burning naphtha into the city. It was still remembered as the most traumatic episode in the city’s history as late as the 1890s when the Anglo-Irish traveller H. F. B. Lynch visited Lake Van.³² With the city captured, Tamta was taken prisoner by Jalal al-Din himself, who then ‘enjoyed his rights with her that very night.’³³ In other words, he raped her.

Here we begin to gain a more sober assessment of the position of elite women and the fragility of their position. The successful, independent reigns of Tamar in Georgia or Dayfa Khatun in Aleppo were exceptions that few other women could equal. Contemporary chroniclers presented Jalal al-Din’s assault on Tamta as an act of retribution against Malika, one of his wives. Malika was the daughter of Toghril Shah III, the last Great Seljuk ruler of Iran, and had been married to Muzaffar al-Din Özbek, who, with the title of *atabeg* of Azerbaijan, dominated the government of Iran.³⁴ Malika seems to have been the effective ruler of Tabriz when Jalal al-Din first moved west, and she negotiated the surrender of the city to him in 1225. She then engineered an excuse to force a divorce from her husband (condemned as cowardly and incompetent) in order to marry the Khwarazmshah. This looks very much like an attempt to jump horses to the new power in the region. She moved with Jalal al-Din to the city of Khoy, but fell out with her new husband and escaped to Akhlat, where she incited the *hajib* Husam

²⁸ Juvayni, 2: 430–31; al-Nasawi, 295.

²⁹ On the location of ‘Aliabad see Minorsky’s note in Juvayni, 2: 431 n. 20.

³⁰ J. A. Boyle, ‘Dynastic and Political History of the Il-Khāns’, in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 5: *The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*, ed. J. A. Boyle (Cambridge, 1968), 303–421, esp. 327–33.

³¹ Ibn al-Athir, 3: 298.

³² H. F. B. Lynch, *Armenia: Travels and Studies* (London; New York, 1901), 2: 295–6: ‘the event still forms the centre of the slight historical knowledge which is possessed by [even] the least educated of the present inhabitants’.

³³ D’Ohsson, *Histoire des Mongols*, 3: 42. ³⁴ Juvayni, 2: 424.

al-Din 'Ali to attack the Khwarazmians in Azerbaijan.³⁵ Her fate when Jalal al-Din took Akhlat is unknown, but she seems to have escaped, and Jalal al-Din took out his anger on Tamta instead: 'He entered the palace where he passed the night in the company of the daughter of Ivane, who was the wife of Malik Ashraf, and so assuaged his anger at the elopement of Malika [his former wife].'³⁶ As one woman evaded retribution, another suffered in her place.

Jalal al-Din then formalised his treatment of Tamta by forcing her to marry him.³⁷ In the light of her rape, this next act served to prolong Jalal al-Din's humiliation of Tamta. Perhaps more surprisingly, the marriage hints at a more positive assessment of Tamta's position. Jalal al-Din had no need to marry Tamta, and so the fact that he did indicates that she had attained some form of local authority that the Khwarazmian deemed wise to harness to his own benefit. The legality of the marriage was dubious at best given its coercive nature and the fact that al-Ashraf was still alive and had never divorced Tamta.

The Khwarazmian invasion of Iran, the Caucasus and eastern Anatolia proved to be only short-lived, although it managed to deliver extraordinary devastation during that time. The destruction was caused as much by the Khwarazmians' reputation as by their army: in 1226 the invaders burned down all the churches in the city of Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia ('to the joy of all Muslims', says the chronicler Ibn al-Athir).³⁸ However, the complete destruction of the city, which is lamented in Georgian histories, was actually carried out by the Georgians themselves the following year. They pre-emptively razed the city to the ground as they feared they could never hold it against the Khwarazmians, who could then use it as a base against them.³⁹ With the capture of Akhlat, Jalal al-Din announced his further intentions in a *Fatihname* (victory proclamation):

By this auspicious action a clime of this splendour has been added to the realms acquired and inherited by us (may God increase their extent!), as sooner or later the realms of Syria and Rum [i.e. Seljuk Anatolia] will likewise fall into the hands of the servants of our house (may God perpetuate it and grant it victory!).⁴⁰

Such a proclamation forced the different powers of the region to ally against the Khwarazmians. In August 1230 the Seljuk ruler of Anatolia, Kaykubad,

³⁵ R. S. Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols: the Ayyubids of Damascus, 1193–1260* (Albany, 1977), 216.

³⁶ Juvayni, 2: 445. ³⁷ Kirakos, 113. ³⁸ Ibn al-Athir, 3: 269.

³⁹ Ibn al-Athir, 3: 283; al-Nasawi, 209. ⁴⁰ Juvayni, 2: 448.

joined with al-Ashraf to fight against the Khwarazmians.⁴¹ They were joined by Georgian and Armenian troops. All were united – for once – by the fear of continued Khwarazmian expansion. The Ayyubids may possibly also have been driven by the desire to redeem the mistreatment of al-Ashraf's wife; but no sources mention such a motive.⁴² The armies met at the battle of Yassiçemen, near Erzincan on the north of the Anatolian plateau. Jalal al-Din's initial successes were gradually whittled away, and after three days of fierce fighting he was forced to retreat back to Khoy in Iran. Al-Ashraf was able to occupy Akhlat again, although Tamta was no longer there as she had been taken off to Azerbaijan by Jalal al-Din on his retreat.⁴³ She was released as part of the peace negotiations that followed; her third marriage had lasted just four months.

The battle weakened Jalal al-Din, but it did not destroy him. This was only achieved by his old foe from the east, the Mongols. It was the Mongol invasion of Khwarazm in the 1210s that had forced Jalal al-Din to seek new lands to rule to the west, and it was the second phase of Mongol expansionism under Ögödei Khan, son of Genghis (Chinggis) Khan, in the 1230s that now sealed his fate. The arrival in Azerbaijan of the Mongol general Chormaqan made escaping the Mongols Jalal al-Din's main preoccupation. He and his army were pursued around the south of the Caspian Sea throughout the winter of 1230–1. Finally in August 1231 he was cornered by the Mongols near Amid. Abandoning his army and fleeing his enemies he escaped in disguise into the mountains where he was captured by two Kurds. His brief, violent reign came to an equally brutal end when they murdered him, either simply for his clothes and his horse or, according to a second source, in revenge for his killing of one of their relatives.⁴⁴ His fearsome reputation was such that even two decades later rumours circulated that he had somehow survived and was planning a new campaign, leading to the torture and execution of at least one possible pretender to his name.⁴⁵

The Khwarazmian invasion ended with Tamta restored to her previous husband, and returned to her invisibility in the historical record. The Mongol attack of 1230–1 was not followed up for six years, after which they returned with a permanent force. In the brief, uneasy interlude that this created the local rivalries around Akhlat resumed once more. This time the city was captured by the Seljuk Sultan Kaykubad I, whose *perwane* (chief minister), Kamyar, took possession soon after Jalal al-Din's death.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Al-Dahabi, 227. ⁴² The closest hint comes in Ibn al-'Amid, 40.

⁴³ D'Ohsson, *Histoire des Mongols*, 3: 45. ⁴⁴ Juvayni, 2: 459.

⁴⁵ Bar Hebraeus, 421–2. ⁴⁶ C. Cahen, *Pre-Ottoman Turkey* (London, 1968), 130–2.

Nothing is recorded of Tamta's whereabouts or her position during these years. However, we can deduce that she was not with her husband, al-Ashraf. In 1229, on the death of his brother al-Mu'azzam, al-Ashraf had succeeded in taking control of Damascus, the spiritual capital of the Ayyubid dynasty. He took the city from under the nose of al-Mu'azzam's heir, al-Nasir Dawud, but had to give up all his lands in the Jazira to maintain the fragile overall family peace.⁴⁷ He retained control only of Akhlat, but this was now isolated from his main landholding and al-Ashraf made no effort to recapture the city after it fell to Seljuk control. He seems to have lost interest in the city and the Armenian–Georgian wife who had come with it. From then until his death in 1237 all his energies were directed to his life in the capital of Syria. We know that Tamta was not with him at the outset of this period as she was besieged in Akhlat; and we know again that she was not with him in 1236 when she faced the next calamitous disruption to her life: her capture by the Mongols. The circumstances around her capture are now obscure, but she was probably staying with her brother Avag in his castle at Kayean, in northern Armenia. It is doubtful that she was still in Akhlat, as this was only captured by the Mongols in 1245.⁴⁸ In 1236 the castle at Kayean was besieged by the Mongol general, Chormaqan, who had returned to the Caucasus, but now with a much larger and more determined army, which set out permanently to conquer the region.⁴⁹ Avag was unable to withstand the siege, and quickly had to surrender his castle (and his daughter) to the Mongols. It is likely that Tamta became their prisoner at the same time. Soon after this happened Tamta became a widow for the third time when, in 1237, al-Ashraf died.

It was at this point that Tamta entered the most extraordinary period in her long and difficult life. She was sent by Chormaqan to his Mongol overlords in Karakorum, an overland journey across the steppes of Asia of some 5,000 kilometres.⁵⁰ It was while she was at the Great Khan's court in Mongolia that Akhlat changed hands for the final time in the thirteenth century. The battle of Köseadağ in 1243 saw the comprehensive defeat of the

⁴⁷ Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols*, 193–206.

⁴⁸ Sebastatsi in *Armianskiye istochniki*, 26.

⁴⁹ Here I follow M. F. Brosset, *Histoire de la Géorgie depuis l'antiquité jusqu'en 1469 de J.-C.* (St Petersburg, 1849), 515 (n.4, carried over from p.514), borrowed by Minorsky, *Studies in Caucasian History*, 156. Brosset seems to base his scenario on Kirakos' account of Avag's siege at Kayean, but this makes no explicit mention of his sister: Kirakos, 126–7 for his capture, 129–31 for him being sent to the Great Khan.

⁵⁰ Minorsky, *Studies in Caucasian History*, 156, giving no source. Brosset, *Histoire de la Géorgie*, 505–6, n.1, argues that Tamta only went as far as Batu's camp on the Volga, but this contradicts what we know of the travels of all the other rulers from this region under Mongol rule.

Seljuks, Georgians and Armenians by the Mongol army. In its aftermath the Mongols took over the structures of the Seljuk state and placed puppet governors under a puppet sultan in all the cities they now controlled.

It was into this new political system that Tamta entered when she returned to Akhlat nine years after her capture.⁵¹ Her journey to Mongolia is not recorded, but we know she was there because the new Queen of Georgia, Rusudan (r. 1223–45), daughter of Queen Tamar, requested her return:

Rusudan, queen of the Georgians, sent prince Hamadola as an envoy to the Khan, and when he was to return Hamadola requested Tamta from the Khan. He brought her with him with orders from the Khan that whatever had been hers while wife of Malik al-Ashraf be given back to her.

They obeyed the commands of their king and gave to her Akhlat and the districts surrounding it.⁵²

Rusudan's request for Tamta's release was probably arranged by Avag, who now dominated the Georgian court as *atabeg*, and played a leading role in its politics in the first decades of the Mongol invasion. Tamta's life had come full circle as she returned to rule Akhlat thirty-five years after she had first entered the city as the queen of its ruler. Now, however, she was the city's ruler in her own right, administering the region on behalf of her Mongol overlords.⁵³ This was exactly the same position as that in which the kings of Georgia, the Byzantine Emperor of Trebizond, the Seljuk rulers of Anatolia and the Lu'lu' id rulers of Mosul all found themselves. After spending so much of her life in the Ayyubid world, this last decade returned her to the politics of Anatolia and the Caucasus. The Mongols' failure to invade Syria created a border that ran roughly along the line of the modern Turkish–Syrian frontier, and which cut the links that had previously tied Akhlat and its region with the Jazira.

Tamta seems to have had a decade in power in Akhlat before her death, probably in 1254.⁵⁴ The Mongols' acknowledgement of Tamta confirmed her status and position in Akhlat, but those final years were by no means easy. Ruling as a vassal of the Mongols placed enormous burdens on all those that had submitted to them, and this made Tamta's role a difficult and

⁵¹ Her return in 1245 is recorded in Sebastatsi: *Armianskie istochniki*, 26, yr 694/1245.

⁵² Kirakos, 145.

⁵³ A slightly different account is reported in Sibte ibn al-Jawzi's *Mir'at al-zaman*: Sublet, 'La folie de la princesse'. This will be investigated in a later chapter.

⁵⁴ This is the year of her death reported by Toumanoff, *Les dynasties de la Caucasic chrétienne*, 296, tab. 63:8, but with no primary source cited. I have been unable to track down a date.

unpopular one: whilst before she had been known as a reducer of taxation, now she had to fulfil the Mongols' oppressive demands for money, tribute and goods.

Despite its complexity, Tamta's life can be summarised in one sentence. Of Armenian birth, she was raised at the Georgian court before being married to two Ayyubid rulers, raped and then married by the Shah of the Khwarazmians, captured by the Seljuks, transported by the Mongols, before finally returning to the city of Akhlat as its ruler for the last decade of her life.⁵⁵

Medieval Biographies and their Limitations

Having outlined her life, we must now begin to understand who Tamta was, and how she was changed by the many events that she underwent in her tumultuous life. Given how little we know about Tamta, we cannot answer this question through the traditional concerns of biography. We have no internal evidence of thoughts or beliefs, no inner life. We can only guess at her emotions, actions or psychology at any point in her life; they are not recorded. Everything we know about her comes from the outside – the brief observations of the events that affected her. Instead, we must build up a picture of her life in different ways: by situating her in the cultures in which she lived and understanding their concerns and expectations, and the positions and choices available to women in them. We must also see the ways in which the movements and changes she witnessed could affect what she was able to do: her access to power, influence and patronage, and the ability to exercise these. Rather than a study of Tamta's internal character and personality, which can only ever remain surmise, this is a study of the public, outward display of her personality. Through acts of patronage women were able to present aspects of themselves in public, particularly concerning their grasp of power and wealth, the details of their beliefs and piety, and the nature of their education and cultural aspirations. These could all be conveyed through the buildings and other works of art that they commissioned, and the styles, languages and materials that they adopted. These features that we can study are not intrinsic qualities; like clothes, they can

⁵⁵ An excellent parallel account of Tamta's life and her family background has been published by S. La Porta, 'Re-Constructing Armenia: Strategies of Co-Existence amongst Christians and Muslims in the Thirteenth Century', in *Negotiating Co-Existence: Communities, Cultures and Convivencia in Byzantine Society*, eds. B. Crostini and S. La Porta (Trier, 2013), 251–72, esp. 264–5.

all be manufactured, contrived and altered. Their appearance can develop and change depending on when and where they are expressed, and different facets can be displayed simultaneously to different audiences. They reveal not so much personality as identity.⁵⁶ What identities did Tamta have, and how were they transformed and manipulated as she moved between cultures? What was Tamta, what did she become, and how did she change over the course of her life?

Tamta provides the narrative focus of this book; she is a figure who witnessed and so unites all the different cultures that this book explores. However, she is often invisible at its centre – Hamlet without the prince. In order to understand the world in which she lived, we have to exploit three parallel sets of evidence which can be overlaid to build up a picture of Tamta and her world. The first is the limited, but important, evidence that concerns Tamta herself. This amounts to no more than half a dozen references to her in chronicles written in Armenian, Georgian, Arabic and Persian (and even here, the mentions can be allusive and indirect). It is on these that the chronology of her life is based.

The second is the more frequent (but still by no means abundant) evidence about other court women in the thirteenth century. Here we can turn to the evidence about queens, princesses and noblewomen across the region. Like Tamta, these women were involved in diplomatic marriages that forced them to move between cultures and religions, often against their will. Like Tamta they had to find ways to establish themselves within the power structures of the new court and find ways to exercise authority to defend their own interests and those of their children; occasionally some, like Tamta, even came to rule in their own right. We are able to see the options and possibilities that were open to them and the limitations that restricted what they were able to achieve. They allow us to see how such women adapted their identities in the new settings in which they found themselves through marriage, and how they presented these new faces to the people around them.

In a world in which women's lives were closely circumscribed and their public appearances limited and constrained, the means open to them to give themselves a public presence were restricted. Personal appearances were curbed by social expectations that women should remain in the house (or palace) and only appear in public with due modesty and deference to the men around them. Women's own bodies, then, were largely hidden from sight. In their place, women found a substitute to give them an enduring presence by commissioning substantial public monuments, which had a

⁵⁶ L. Safran, *The Medieval Salento: Art and Identity in Southern Italy* (Philadelphia, 2014), 3–5.

permanent place in the city or countryside, an ever-visible reminder of their founders. These buildings – monasteries, mosques and madrasas; baths and bridges, caravanserais and city walls – became ciphers through which women could express their piety, their virtues, their wealth and their power. The buildings and objects introduced in this book provide the closest we have to first-hand evidence from these women – none has left any writings to reveal their character, temperament or desires.

Religious foundations allowed women to show their piety and their adherence to the faith of their fathers or husbands; the secular foundations also demonstrated their concern for the welfare and defence of their subjects and their desire to increase the wealth and prosperity of their lands. At the same time all these buildings provided other forms of self-advertisement: who was able to build reveals shifts in the balance of power within the regime, as some women prospered at the expense of others. They were the arena in which rivalries were fought out. Buildings celebrated dynastic victories and mourned the murdered victims of the succession disputes that erupted within the royal harem on the death of a ruler. The choice of materials and craftsmen could demonstrate the wealth and geographic reach of their builders as rare marbles and stones were imported from distant lands and prestigious craftsmen were sought from neighbouring states. Although the majority of foundations of all these building types were made by men, a significant minority were erected by the women who feature in this book. How the foundations of women related to those of their male relatives reveals much about the independence they could claim within the social structure of the family. The appearance of the buildings could act as a marker of identity: the revival of building types from older regimes allowed their builders to situate themselves within networks of power as the inheritors of older kingdoms with the implications that followed of innate legitimacy as well as the claim to a particular historic set of territories, usually rather larger than the land currently under their control. The importation of styles used by more powerful neighbours provided a means to display forms of allegiance to some of the major political, cultural and military players in the region, and this could easily slip over into forms of appropriation as the styles were adopted as a means to claim dominion beyond normal boundaries. These visual languages were reinforced by the textual languages of the inscriptions carved on to the buildings. The dedicatory and other texts that appear on almost all the monuments provided the most direct means by which a founder could put her own words in the public domain, setting out her status, piety, wealth and ambition. However, they could only be read by an educated minority in each country (and in the case of some particularly

complex inscriptions not even by them), but most people would be able to recognise the alphabet used and the implications of culture and religious affiliation that went with that.

In addition to magnificent buildings we can also look at the smaller-scale objects that surrounded women at court: metalwork mirrors, basins and ewers, manuscripts and scientific instruments, tiles and ceramics. Whilst these were mostly commissioned by men, they show the ethos and beliefs of the court and the place it allotted to women. The range of building types and objects that this book explores – from Christian churches to Islamic Sufi hospices, from rural monastic complexes to great city mosques, from urban palaces to tented Asian encampments, from books of poetry to astrolabes – reflects the diversity of situations and cultures in which Tamta lived during her life as she moved between Christian, Muslim and shamanistic societies.

If women are the main protagonists of this book, there is one other actor of almost equal importance: this is the third strand. It is the city of Akhlat. Tamta's fate throughout her life was inextricably linked to this city. It is now a remote and sleepy small town which sits largely unnoticed on the northern shore of Lake Van. Its modern appearance (or lack of it) belies its strategic importance in the Middle Ages. Tamta's three marriages were all as much about control of Akhlat as they were about Tamta herself, as was the decision of the Mongols to return Tamta to the city as its governor in the last decade of her life. Like Tamta, Akhlat was a site of interaction between cultures and religions as different regimes and populations took control, and the fate of the city ran parallel with that of Tamta. Although little survives in the city itself beyond tombstones and tomb towers (the few other buildings that survived the succession of Khwarazmian and Mongol attacks in the 1230s were destroyed in two terrible earthquakes in 1246 and 1276), we can piece together much about the city by looking at the development of other towns in the region. These shared similar fates to that of Akhlat, and the move between different rulers, religions and cultures is reflected in the changing monuments that were commissioned and built. Thus, like Tamta, the identity of the city could change as it moved between different rulers; and it could present different identities to different viewers – defenders and invaders took different messages from city walls; Christians and Muslims structured their encounter with the city around different sets of monuments – mosques and madrasas or monasteries and churches – and viewed those of rival religions in different ways. From these we can build up a picture of the ways in which identities were mapped onto the urban fabric of the city. In other cases, we have more direct evidence of what the buildings in Akhlat may have been like: a number of sites in Turkey preserve

monuments built during Tamta's lifetime by architects and masons who named themselves as coming from the city of Akhlat. These show us the skill and versatility of the men who trained in Akhlat, their technical accomplishments as well as the diversity of the stylistic motifs that they incorporated in their work showing evidence of knowledge of contemporary buildings in Turkey, Armenia, Iran and Syria. Studying the motifs allows us to recreate the network of cultures with which Akhlat engaged during Tamta's lifetime. Cities had identities too, and the parallel development of the identity of the city and that of Tamta each enrich our understanding of the other.

One obvious sign of Akhlat's multiple populations and its multiple identities is the number of names that the city has. Each community adapted the town's name to their own language. The modern Turkish name, Ahlat, is just one of many. To the Georgians it was Akhlat, and in Persian, Armenian and Arabic sources, it was Khlat or Khilat; to the Byzantines it was Khliat or Khaliat. The same is true of Tamta and her family. Georgian sources always give them the surname of Mqargrdzeli (Georgian for 'Longarm'), but this is not a name that is employed anywhere in the Armenian sources. These use no surname; but conventionally they are given the family name of 'the sons of Zakare' – the Zakarians. There is no consistency even within one language: Zakare is so named in Armenian chronicles, but in the Armenian-language inscriptions he ordered carved into the monasteries he supported he is called Zakaria or Zakharia (the same as the Georgian spelling of his name). To succeed in this world required formidable linguistic skills. Ibn Bibi reports that in around 1200 the *hajib* of the Seljuk sultan Kaykhusraw I, Zakariya (probably a Christian given his name – Zacharias), was 'fluent in the five languages of Anatolia' – Greek, Persian, Turkish, Armenian and Arabic; and that ignored Georgian, Syriac and Hebrew.⁵⁷ As new conquerors appeared, the requirements changed, and in the 1260s the Armenian nobleman Smbat Orbelian was reported to be 'unbeatable in discussions at court since he spoke five languages: Armenian, Georgian, Uighur, Persian and Mongolian'.⁵⁸

Equally, every community gave its own date to events: for the Georgians in Ivane's army, the handing over of Tamta took place in *koronikon* 430,⁵⁹ whereas for the Armenian soldiers in the same army it was 658 of the

⁵⁷ R. Shukurov, 'Harem Christianity: The Byzantine Identity of Seljuk Princes', in *The Seljuks of Anatolia: Court and Society in the Medieval Middle East*, eds. A. C. S. Peacock and S. N. Yıldız (London; New York, 2013), 115–50, at 131–2.

⁵⁸ Stepanos Orbelian, 228.

⁵⁹ A paschal cycle of 532 years, beginning in AD 780: V. Grumel, *Traité d'études byzantines*, vol. 1: *La chronologie* (Paris, 1958), 151–3.

Armenian era,⁶⁰ the Ayyubid and Turkish troops opposing them regarded the year as *hejira* 608. Any Syriac Christians in Akhlat recognised it as the year 1522, taking a longer world view that originated in Alexander the Great's conquest of Babylon in 312 BC, and the Greek population of Anatolia used a chronology looking back even further to the creation of the world: this was *etos kosmou* 6719. The Syriac chronicler Bar Hebraeus, one of the main sources for the history of this region, was conscious of the diverse readership of his writings, and often cross-references between the different calendars, at one point using three of these systems on one page.⁶¹ The arrival of the Mongols brought a new way of counting the years: the Georgian chronicle explained the cycle of twelve years and twelve animals beginning with the mouse and the cow that the new invaders used.⁶² Only a Latin Crusader looking north from Acre might have dated Ivane's capture according to the incarnation of Christ, *anno domini* 1210, the basis of the Common Era dating I have used throughout for consistency.

Given the multiplicity of names, dates and languages, it is clear that identities were slippery things, hard to define, and easy to shift. This book explores the shifting nature of identity in this region in the thirteenth century. Tamta provides the spine around which it is focused, but as her life was subject to such change and fluctuation, the transformations of her identity are central. How then can we define who Tamta was? How was she perceived by those around her, and how did she see herself? What were the worlds of encounters between which she moved and how did these change her? Akhlat lies at the intersection of three of the medieval world's major economic and cultural blocs – between the Mediterranean, the Middle Eastern and the Asian circuits – and Tamta embodies the extraordinary results of the meeting of these many worlds.⁶³

⁶⁰ A solar calendar beginning in AD 552: Grumel, *Chronologie*, 140–5.

⁶¹ Bar Hebraeus, 375: the Hejira, the Syriac (which he calls the 'of the Greeks'), and the Armenian.

⁶² *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, 318–19.

⁶³ J. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250–1350* (Oxford, 1991), fig. 1.