

Arms and Armour of Bagratid Armenian Noblemen (late 9th – mid 11th centuries)

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The history of early medieval Armenia (7–9 centuries) is often studied in the context of struggle between Byzantine Empire and the Arab Caliphate for Armenia and the Caucasus in general. The strengthening of Byzantium and the Arabs weakening in the second half of the 9 century led to the change of geopolitical situation in the Caucasus, which allowed Armenians to create an independent Bagratid state (884/886–1045/1064) which in reality continued to be under influence of these Empires.

Many historians avoid general questions about the army's role in the state and economy. So, our mission is to draw attention to some problems of Armenian military history which was not the subject of a separate study, but only as a part of Byzantine or Islamic Arab world.

As a continuation of the poster this summary examines some types of weapons and armors by analyzing written sources. So, we decided to use one large citation from Tovma Artsruni's (10 c.) work (*History of the House of Artsrunik*) which characterizes medieval weapons and armor. This description of the battle between Abbasids army under the command of the general Bugha against Vaspurakan's troops ruled by ishkhani Ashot Artsruni (approx. 852)²:

¹ This summary has links to poster where you can find illustrations to this article – https://www.academia.edu/36769320/Poster_presentation_ARMS_AND_ARMOUR_OF_BAGRATID_ARMENIAN_NOBLEMEN

² Despite the fact that is description of Abbasid army we believe that the same armament existed in Armenia (even because Armenian chronicler knows these armaments and armor).

“[Muslim] warriors were armed with different types of spears³, straight and light curved swords⁴, axes and clubs, ballistas, shields⁵ and halberds⁶...

Also, their horses were equipped with a set of armor⁷ made by plates from different types of metal which protected face, neck, chest, crupper [hind quarters], legs [greaves]. Shoulders were protected by iron armor; Horse's belly was covered by small rectangular copper plates which looked like small shields⁸....

Cavalrymen had helmets⁹, vambraces, plates that covered the thighs, greaves, metal footwear and shield which covered a back¹⁰. Also, horseman kept sword, spear, quiver with arrows and a bow...

³ Please note that some terminology problems exist in Russian translation. Firstly, in Russian translation “*spear and pike*” were mentioned. We believe that it was not traditional European pike of late Middle Ages. Perhaps, it was a long spear.

Length of this weapon was approx. 3 meters, so warrior could hold it with two hands (see picture 5–6). Second type – short spear (approx. 1–1,5 meters) which was used by cavalry, who was holding a spear in one hand, and the second was used to ride a horse (see picture 12). Moreover, infantry could use short type of spear in one hand, and shield in another (see picture 7, 13).

⁴ In Russian translation we found “*basket-hilted sword* (palash)”. Polish historian Piotr Grotowski notes that is a single-edged blade (maybe a little bit curved) which can be interpret as a proto-saber. – Grotowski P. *Arms and Armour of the Warrior Saints. Tradition and Innovation in Byzantine Iconography (843–1261)*. Transl. from Polish by R. Brzezinski. Leiden, 2010. pp. 357–360.

⁵ At the plate of 11 c. found in Armenia (see picture 13) warrior keeps *spear* and *kite-shaped shield* which generally was regarded as a European development for cavalry, but may have appeared in Near East like infantry shield. It is a good example of spreading of military traditions from East to West. – Nicolle D. *The Armies of Islam 7–11 centuries*. Oxford, 1995. pp. 19, 30.

⁶It is a terminological problem because *halberd* appeared in late Middle Ages so we cannot use this term for Armenian weapons. So, better to say: “*a long spear with specific hook, which was used by infantry against cavalry*”. Length of this weapon was 3 meters, so warrior could hold it with two hands (see picture 5–6).

⁷ The depiction of horse armor can be found in the upper part of the wooden door of the Arakelots Church (12 c.) where 4 cavalrymen armed with round shields, spears and swords. Unfortunately, author did not draw warriors clearly but we can assume that they are dressed in lamellar armor. – Kamsar A. *Armenian studies sketches*. Yerevan, 1979. pp. 206–207. (in Arm.).

⁸ Less detailed description of horse armor can be found in the chronicle of Michael Attaleiates (11 c.): “*Meanwhile, in the east, the Abasgians [Abkhazians] were growing restless, opposed themselves to the emperor, and openly rebelled, taking courage not only in their numbers but also in the most powerful defense provided by their arms, given that not only they themselves but their horses too were armored to the hilt and impregnable, caparisoned on every side*”. – Michael Attaleiates. *The History*. Transl. by A.Kaldellis and D.Krallis. London, 2012. pp. 427.

⁹ Sometimes, iron helmet could cover nose and protect neck, if iron plates were added to the sides of a helmet. – Arakelyan B. *Cities and Crafts in Armenia 9–13 cc.* (in Arm.). Available at: <http://rma.zorakn.org/24>

¹⁰ Almost the similar description of the battle in 919 was mentioned by Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi in his "History" (10 c.): “*When the sun rose, flashes of light sparkled from the multitude of unsheathed [Armenians] swords, helmets, brazen plates, that protect the back and the flanks, and the plates that cover thighs and arms [vambraces]*”. – Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i's. *History of Armenia*. Transl. by K. Maksoudian. Atlanta, 1987. pp. 212.

*Banners and pennants fluttered, trumpets sounded, lyrs rang, drums buzzed... Everybody is shouted, preparing themselves for battle*¹¹.

No less interesting is the description of Liparit's Orbelian armor in the battle against Seljuk Turks in 1049 made by Stephen Orbelian (13 c.): "*Thus armed, he mounted his Arabian steed. He threw aside his shield with its gold designs and, taking a flexible javelin in his powerful left hand and a broad two-edged steel sword in his right hand, with his formidable mace like a blacksmith's malet or a rock cutter's sledgehammer hanging at his side. [Liparit] bravely cross the line of fighters, from one side to the other. His golden breastplate and helmet glittered like the sun*"¹². Please note that we have to use this source carefully because author of this chronicle lived in the 13th century when Armenian military organization had another level of development.

Below we analyzed some types of arms and armor:

Sword

We examined that in Armenia there were approximately 18 types of weapons (swords, bows, slings, javelins, daggers and different types of hammers, clubs, maces, axes, spears with varied spearheads (e.g. hooks), etc¹³. The most mentioned in the written sources weapon is sword¹⁴.

According to the righteous remark made by Bulgarian historian Valeri Yotov: "*the typology of swords is often a typology of the sword-guards*"¹⁵. We can suggest that in Armenia three types of swords were popular:

1. The straight double-edged sword. Quillions (cross-guard) are turned down towards the blade (*see picture 1*). Sword with the similar cross-guard was

¹¹ TovmaArtsruni. *History of the House of Artsrunik*. Transl. by M. Darbinyan-Melikyan. Yerevan, 2001. pp. 175–176. (in Rus.).

¹² Step'annos Orbelean. *History of the State of Sisakan*. Trans. by R. Bedrosian. Long Branch, N.J., 2012. pp. 195.

¹³ Arakelyan B. *Cities and Crafts in Armenia 9–13 cc.* (in Arm.). Available at: <http://rma.zorakn.org/24>

¹⁴ Despite the fact that the sword is most often mentioned in the sources, the most popular (and the cheapest!) weapon was a spear.

¹⁵ Yotov V. A New Byzantine Type of Swords (7th–11th centuries). *Niš and Byzantium*. Niš, 2011, 9. pp. 115.

founded in Georgia (*see picture 3*). Moreover, at the Harbaville triptych (middle of 11 c.) depicted the same cross-guard¹⁶. Also, you can find bad example of Goliath's cross-guard redrawing from Aghtamar church (first part of 10 c.) made by David Nicolle. This picture became really popular among some historians (e.g. V. Yotov¹⁷) which in turn interferes making sword's typologization correctly (*see picture 4*).

2. Straight sword from Ani (10 c.) (*see picture 2*) with a small cross-guard which was a little bit wider than the blade. This type of sword was similar to Byzantine *spatha*¹⁸.

3. Straight sword with straight cross-guard and a big pommel for balance (*see picture 9*)

Generally, the weight of these swords was about 1 kg. and length approx. 1 m.¹⁹ Mostly swords were used for slashing because they had non-tapering blade and rounded end. Sharp points of the swords were not popular at that time because thrusts could not penetrate mail armor. Only in the next centuries (where armor became much heavier) masters began to produce swords with sharp point.

Also, territory of Armenia was rich for bulat – it is a quality iron with high carbon content which was used for production of bulat steel. According to the Matthew of Edessa's Chronicle (12 c.) some of the swords could cut the enemy's armor: "*He put seven coats of mail one on top of the other and struck them with his sword, breaking off pieces of the iron mail*"²⁰. Moreover, Sempad the Constable (13 c.) wrote that Armenian king Ashot IV (1021/1022–1039/1040) broke the helmet of

¹⁶ *The Glory of Byzantium: art and culture*. Edited by Helen C. Evans. New York, 2006. pp. 133–134.

¹⁷ Yotov V. Cross-guard of the sword from Chersonesus. *Antiquity and Middle Ages*. Yekaterinburg, 2009, 39. pp. 252, 257. (in Rus.).

¹⁸ Grotowski P. *Arms and Armour of the Warrior Saints. Tradition and Innovation in Byzantine Iconography (843–1261)*. pp. 347, 351.

¹⁹ Tsurtssumia M. Medieval sword and sabre from the Georgian National Museum. *Acta Militaria Mediaevalia*. Sanok, 2015, 11. pp. 159, 169.

²⁰ Armenia and the Crusades, ten to twelfth centuries: the Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa. Trans. by A. Dostourian. Lanham, 1993. pp. 65.

some Georgian nobleman with a sword during the battle²¹. Note that even main hero of medieval Armenian epic David of Sassoun (8–10 cc.) had bulat steel sword²².

Armor

The best armor was **lamellar**, which consisted of small rectangular plates of iron or bronze laced into horizontal rows. From the end of the 10 century craftsmen started using rivets (instead of laces) for fastening plates, which greatly simplified their production and improved impact resistance²³ (*see picture 12, 15*). This fact was mentioned by Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi: “Subsequently, in 921 king of Egrisi [Abkhazia] gave Ashot II (914–928/929) much assistance, and having gathered numerous forces with winged steeds, **iron-studded armor** [in Russian translation: “**plates were fastened by rivets**”²⁴], and fearful helmets, iron-studded breastplates and strong shields, weapons, ornaments and spears, he handed them over to him, so that with their help he might exact vengeance on his enemies”²⁵.

Also, the miniature “*Hovhannis Protospatharius presents the Gospel to the Virgin*” (1007) is interesting because the lamellar plates on the sleeves were much larger than in the area of the torso, because the warrior had to bend and move constantly, and the small size of the plates should not interfere (*see picture 15*)²⁶. The disadvantage of the lamellar armor was that while riding a horse the plates were raised, which made the rider vulnerable to hostile attacks, especially from the bottom.

²¹ Sempad the Constable. *Chronicle*. Transl. by A. Galstyan. Yerevan, 1974. pp. 5. (in Rus.).

²² Daredevils of Sassoun. *Armenian national epic*. Transl. by L. Mkrtychyan. Yerevan, 1989. pp. 186–188. (in Rus.).

²³ Tsursumia M. The Evolution of Splint Armour in Georgia and Byzantium: Lamellar and Scale Armour in the 10th–12th centuries. *Byzantina Συμμεικτα*. Athens, 2011, 21. pp. 69–71.

²⁴ Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi. *History of Armenia*. Transl. by M. Darbinyan-Melikyan. Yerevan, 1986. pp. 217. (in Rus.).

²⁵ Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i's. *History of Armenia*. pp. 216.

²⁶ Gospel of Adrianopolis (1007). *Library of San-Lazzaro* (Venice). Ms 887, fol. 8.

Also, the same characteristics has **scale** armor only with one difference, that plates had oval form, attached to each other, and to a backing of cloth or leather, in overlapping rows (like fish scale). The weight of scale and lamellar armor was almost the same. A complete set of 1–1.5 mm thick armor weighs 14–16 kg. It is 1.5–2 times as heavy as mail²⁷. Of course, mentioned above types of armors were very expensive, so only honored warriors (named *azats*) could buy it²⁸. Armenian warriors often used less expensive **mail**, which consisted of small metal rings, linked together in a pattern, to form a mesh (*see picture 14*).

Knights-azats were professional warriors who had to be in a good physical shape because they worked out much in order to wear heavy armor and be maneuverable at the battlefield. For example, Aristakes Lastivertsi (11 c.) wrote that Armenian king Hovhannes-Smbat (approx. 1020–1040) was so fatty that he could not get on a horse what was a shame for the king²⁹.

By comparison, Byzantium army had similar armament and armor. For example, in the miniature “*The defeat of the Georgian king George I (1014–1027) in the war against Emperor Basil II (976–1025) in 1021*” from “*Synopsis of Histories by John Skylitze*” (11 c.) we can see horsemen dressed in lamellar armor and helmets, which have metal plates for the neck protection (*see picture 12*). They were armed by spears and shields (round or kite-shaped). Maybe Basil II and George I had greaves (and some metal boots?)³⁰.

Despite all above mentioned good characteristics of armor we have to notice that Armenian armors had some weaknesses. For example, when Seljuk Turks first came to Armenia in 1016, they had a battle against Vaspurakan king Senekerim Artsruni (1003–1021). Matthew of Edessa (12 c.) described this battle in the following way: “*The infidels [Seljuks] shooting arrows, hit and wounded many of the*

²⁷ Tsurtsunia M. The Evolution of Splint Armour in Georgia and Byzantium: Lamellar and Scale Armour in the 10th–12th centuries. pp. 67, 69–71.

²⁸ Some military units were dressed in the clothes of same color (e.g. in 988 unit of Kars king Abas was dressed in “red uniform”). – Stepanos of Taron (Asohik). *The general history*. Transl. by N. Emin. Moscow, 2011. pp. 182 (in Rus.).

²⁹ Aristakes Lastivertc'i's. *History*. Transl. by R. Bedrosian. New-York, 1985. pp. 9.

³⁰ Having lived in Constantinople for some time, John Skylitzes could be acquainted with Byzantine military sphere which in several moments was similar to Georgian and Armenian. – *Synopsis of Histories by John Skylitze. Biblioteca Nacional de España* (Madrid). – f. 195v. Available at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

*Armenian troops. Seeing all this, Shapuh [Armenian commander] said to David [son of Senekerim] – Turn back, O king, from before the enemy, for the greater part of our troops have been wounded by arrows. Let us withdraw and defend ourselves against these weapons we see in the hands of infidels by preparing other types of **garments** which will resist their arrows*³¹.

We think that better to say “light armor” than “garments” because the last one has another meaning (synonym to the word “clothes”). We believe that the majority of warriors (ordinary soldiers) and militia used popular and cheap leather armor, which had very bad protecting properties. Obviously, only noblemen (azats) had a good armor (lamellar, scale) but even these body armors were not ideal protection against arrows. We believe that projectile weapons as a battlefield weapon were not popular in the Caucasus region so while making armor Armenians didn’t pay much attention to protective functions of the armor against arrows (maybe little cracks were between plates)? It was one of the reasons of rapid Seljuk conquest of the Caucasus, and victory over Byzantine army in the battle of Manzikert in 1071.

What do we need to discuss?

The mission of this presentation is to attract attention to some problems of Armenian military history which was not studied in historiography in a proper way. Some of them are mentioned below:

1) Originating in Asia saber reached Europe via the Avars, Hungarians, Bulgars in early Middy Ages³² but was the **saber** popular in Armenia in 9–11 c.? Due to the lack of evidence we cannot make any conclusions. There exists an interesting situation with this problem in Georgia, where one medieval saber was found. Georgian historian Mamuka Tsurtsunia thinks that curved swords or saber

³¹ Armenia and the Crusades, ten to twelfth centuries: the Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa pp. 44–45; Also, in Sempad the Constable’s *Chronicle* similar information was found. – Sempad the Constable. *Chronicle*. pp. 15. (in Rus.).

³² Grotowski P. *Arms and Armour of the Warrior Saints. Tradition and Innovation in Byzantine Iconography (843–1261)*. pp. 358.

appeared in Georgia in 12–13 c. thanks to the influences of nomad tribes³³. On the other hand, Irakli Bakradze believes that saber existed in Georgia even in 10–11 c.³⁴.

We think that problem is in research methodology: What is a saber? If a blade is a little bit curved, is it a saber? These issues require further study and clarifications.

2) What types of **bows** (long, composite etc.) were popular in Armenia? The problem is that any detailed description in written sources or in miniatures was not found. Despite this, arrowheads are known by archeological excavation in Dvin (*see picture 11*). Half of them are sharp-edged which were used to break through armor³⁵.

In Armenian historical sources from 9–11 c. bow was mentioned very seldom. We had only one detailed description of using bow written by Hovhannes Draskhanakertsi, where Armenian archers, on the boats, had won the sea battle on the Lake Sevan against Sajid's army in 921: "*But when the latter noticed the advent of such a powerful force at his threshold, [Armenian king Ashot II] immediately launched eleven ships, with seventy of the azats and his servants embarking on board of these. The latter were brave men armed with **well-bent bows**, and well-versed in archery, so much so that they did not miss their mark even by a hair's breadth. Finally, he also went on board with them, and they set sail in order to meet the enemy on sea. Putting to use their skill in archery, they maimed the eyesight of some of the enemy, and inflicted serious wounds on many others, or killed them. Thus they cut their way across the multitude of the enemy forces, and fled*"³⁶. Believe that Armenian archers performed only auxiliary functions in the battle, but they served on the fleet and in castles as guard service.

3) In fact, the complexity of the study of medieval weapons lies not in the lack of source material which is subjective (but it is also a problem) but in the methodology of research. The fact is that each researcher de-facto interprets the

³³ Tsurtsunia M. Medieval sword and sabre from the Georgian National Museum. pp. 167–169.

³⁴ Bakradze I. Arms and armory of Georgian warriors during the 10–11 cc. (according to the archaeological and written sources). *Works of the Institute of the History of Georgia*. Tbilisi, 2011, 4. pp. 71–74, 89. (in Geo.).

³⁵ Arakelyan B. Cities and Crafts in Armenia 9–13 cc. (in Arm.). Available at: <http://rma.zorakn.org/24>

³⁶ Yovhannēs Draxanakert'i's. *History of Armenia*. pp. 232.

characteristics of one or another type of weapon in his own way (especially when there are only one or two examples of these weapons, as in the case of Armenia in the 9–11th centuries).

What are solutions of the problems?

1) Use different types of historical sources (written and archeological sources, miniatures, reliefs, etc.)

2) Analyze history of Armenia as a territory of cross-cultural influences (from Byzantine Empire, Muslim world and especially, after 11 century, from Seljuk Turks).

3) Look at the problem in the context of social-economical and political history.