

Frontier Governance and Regional Power in the South Caucasus: The Childir Eyalet in Ottoman Caucasian Policy during the Eighteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the place and role of the Childir vilayet (pashalik) in the Caucasian policy of the Ottoman Empire during the eighteenth century. The aim of the study is to determine the functions performed by the Childir vilayet in the exercise of Ottoman political, military, and administrative influence, and the governance mechanisms through which the empire ensured control over the borderland and the preservation of regional stability. The research is grounded in historical-comparative, source-critical, and analytical methods, and draws upon Georgian, Ottoman, Russian, and Western historiography. Particular attention is devoted to the geopolitical significance of the South Caucasus, the administrative organization of the Childir vilayet, its fiscal and military-economic mechanisms, as well as the practice of cooperation with local ruling dynasties — the Khimshiashvilis, the Jaqelis, and the Abashidzes. The study demonstrates that the effectiveness of Ottoman rule in the region rested not solely on centralized administration, but was determined to a significant degree by the combination of military security, fiscal resources, administrative flexibility, and cooperation with holders of local power. In conclusion, it is shown that the Eyalet of Childir constituted a distinctive institutional model of Ottoman frontier governance, one that played a significant role in the political development of southwestern Georgia and the South Caucasus as a whole during the eighteenth century, and laid the foundation for the region's subsequent historical transformation.

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სასაზღვრო მმართველობა და რეგიონული ძალაუფლება სამხრეთ კავკასიაში: ჩილდირის ვილაიეთის ადგილი ოსმალეთის კავკასიურ პოლიტიკაში XVIII საუკუნეში

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ოსმალეთის

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მმართველობა.

აბსტრაქტი

სტატიაში შესწავლილია XVIII საუკუნეში ჩილდირის ვილაეთის (საფაშოს) ადგილი და როლი ოსმალეთის იმპერიის კავკასიურ პოლიტიკაში. კვლევის მიზანია დადგინდეს, თუ რა ფუნქციებს ასრულებდა ჩილდირის ვილაეთი ოსმალეთის პოლიტიკური, სამხედრო და ადმინისტრაციული გავლენის განხორციელების პროცესში და რა მმართველობითი მექანიზმებით უზრუნველყოფდა იმპერია სასაზღვრო სივრცის კონტროლსა და რეგიონული სტაბილურობის შენარჩუნებას. კვლევა ეფუძნება ისტორიულ-შედარებით, წყაროთმცოდნეობით და ანალიტიკურ მეთოდებს და ეყრდნობა ქართულ, ოსმალურ, რუსულ და დასავლურ ისტორიოგრაფიას. განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება ეთმობა სამხრეთ კავკასიის გეოპოლიტიკურ მნიშვნელობას, ჩილდირის ვილაეთის ადმინისტრაციულ მოწყობას, ფისკალურ და სამხედრო-ეკონომიკურ მექანიზმებს, აგრეთვე ადგილობრივ მმართველ საგვარეულოებთან - ხიმშიაშვილებთან, ჯაყელებთან და აბაშიძეებთან - თანამშრომლობის პრაქტიკას. კვლევა ადასტურებს, რომ ოსმალეთის ხელისუფლების ეფექტიანობა რეგიონში მხოლოდ ცენტრალიზებულ მმართველობას არ ეფუძნებოდა; იგი მნიშვნელოვანწილად განისაზღვრებოდა სამხედრო უსაფრთხოების, ფისკალური რესურსების, ადმინისტრაციული მოქნილობისა და ადგილობრივი ძალაუფლების მფლობელებთან თანამშრომლობის ერთობლიობით. დასკვნის სახით ნაჩვენებია, რომ ჩილდირის ვილაეთი წარმოადგენდა ოსმალეთის სასაზღვრო მმართველობის გამორჩეულ ინსტიტუციურ მოდელს, რომელმაც მნიშვნელოვანი როლი შეასრულა სამხრეთ-დასავლეთ საქართველოსა და მთლიანად სამხრეთ კავკასიის პოლიტიკური განვითარების პროცესში XVIII საუკუნეში და საფუძველი შეუქმნა რეგიონის შემდგომ ისტორიულ ტრანსფორმაციას.

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Introduction

The eighteenth century constituted a decisive phase in the historical development of the South Caucasus. Located at the intersection of the Black Sea basin, Eastern Anatolia, the Iranian Plateau, and the North Caucasus, the region became one of the principal arenas of imperial rivalry. Throughout the century, the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and, increasingly, the Russian Empire competed for political influence, military superiority, and control of the communication and commercial routes linking Europe with Western Asia. Consequently, the South Caucasus evolved into a frontier region whose political development depended not only upon warfare but also upon the ability of competing empires to establish effective provincial administrations and secure the loyalty of regional political forces (Aksan, 2007; Faruqi, 2004).

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Within this geopolitical environment, the Çıldır Eyalet occupied a distinctive place in the Ottoman provincial system. Governed from Akhaltsikhe (Ahıska), it was far more than an ordinary frontier province. Its strategic position enabled the Ottoman government to defend the eastern frontier, maintain political influence in the South Caucasus, regulate relations with regional power holders, and respond to the changing balance created by Ottoman–Persian rivalry and the gradual expansion of Russian influence. Accordingly, the history of the Çıldır Eyalet should be understood not simply as that of an Ottoman administrative province but as an essential component of the political transformation of the eighteenth-century South Caucasus (Svanidze, 1998).

The political history of the Çıldır Eyalet and Ottoman South-Western Georgia occupies a prominent place in Georgian historiography. Among Georgian historians, Mikheil Svanidze holds a central position in the scholarly study of Ottoman Georgia. Through a series of monographs and numerous studies—most notably *Sakartvelo–Osmaletis Istoriis Narkvevebi* (XIV–XVIII ss.) - together with his research on Georgian–Ottoman relations and Ottoman documentary sources, he transformed the study of Ottoman South-Western Georgia from a predominantly descriptive political narrative into a source-based analysis grounded in Ottoman archival evidence. Svanidze demonstrated that Ottoman rule in the South Caucasus cannot be understood solely in terms of conquest or territorial expansion. Instead, he interpreted Ottoman authority as a multidimensional frontier system combining provincial administration, military organisation, fiscal institutions, diplomacy, and cooperation with regional political elites. His research established the historiographical foundation for interpreting the Çıldır Eyalet as an institutional component of Ottoman Caucasian policy rather than merely a provincial administrative unit (Svanidze, 1998; Shengelia, 1974). Nodar Shengelia further strengthened this field through a systematic analysis of Ottoman administrative institutions based primarily upon Ottoman archival documentation. His monographs and numerous scholarly publications substantially expanded knowledge of the administrative organisation of the Çıldır Eyalet, provincial government, fiscal administration, land tenure, military institutions, and the functioning of Ottoman authority in South-Western Georgia. A distinctive feature of Shengelia's scholarship is his reconstruction of Ottoman administrative institutions and his careful analysis of the relationship between imperial authority and Georgian ruling families. He demonstrated that Ottoman rule depended not only upon formal administrative hierarchy but also upon negotiated forms of governance through which provincial officials incorporated influential local elites into imperial structures. His work established one of the principal methodological foundations for subsequent research on Ottoman frontier administration in the South Caucasus (Shengelia, 1974).

Recent scholarship by Zaza Shashikadze and Mirian Makharadze, together with the collective volume *Studies in the History of South-Western Georgia: Adjara* (Vol. II), has further expanded Georgian historiography through the systematic use of Ottoman archival materials and the re-examination of provincial administration, fiscal institutions, and regional political developments. These studies have strengthened the institutional interpretation of Ottoman frontier governance established by earlier scholarship and remain fundamental to the study of Ottoman South-Western Georgia.

International scholarship has primarily examined the subject through the broader framework of Ottoman provincial administration and frontier governance. İnalçık (1973) established the institutional foundations of the Ottoman provincial system, while Faruqi (2004) demonstrated the dynamic interaction between imperial authority and provincial society. Barkey (2008) emphasised the negotiated relationship between the imperial centre and regional elites, whereas Aksan (2007), Quataert (2005), Agoston (2005), and Darling (1996) further developed the military, fiscal, and administrative dimensions of Ottoman frontier government.

Taken together, Georgian and international scholarship provides a substantial foundation for understanding the political and administrative history of the Çıldır Eyalet. Georgian historians have contributed detailed regional research based on Ottoman archival materials, whereas international scholarship has developed broader interpretations of Ottoman provincial administration and frontier governance. Nevertheless, these historiographical traditions have rarely been integrated within a single analytical framework. Consequently, the

Çıldır Eyalet has generally been studied either as part of Georgian regional history or within the institutional history of the Ottoman Empire, while comparatively limited attention has been devoted to its role as a frontier institution that combined military security, fiscal administration, provincial government, and cooperation with regional ruling families. This article addresses that historiographical gap by examining the Çıldır Eyalet as an integrated frontier institution whose effectiveness depended upon the interaction of imperial administration, military organisation, fiscal management, and regional political participation. By combining Georgian and international historiography with Ottoman documentary evidence, the study offers a comprehensive interpretation of the Çıldır Eyalet as one of the principal mechanisms through which Ottoman authority was maintained and adapted to the changing geopolitical realities of the eighteenth-century South Caucasus (Studies in the History of South-Western Georgia: Adjara, Vol. II, 2011; Svanidze, 2002; İnalçık, 1973; Faroqi, 2004).

Methodology

This study employs a comparative historical approach combined with historical analysis, source criticism, and contextual interpretation to examine the role of the Çıldır Eyalet in Ottoman policy toward the South Caucasus during the eighteenth century. It reconstructs the political, administrative, military, and fiscal functions of the province within the broader framework of Ottoman frontier governance and regional power relations.

The research draws upon Georgian, Ottoman, Russian, and Western historiography together with published documentary sources on the political history of the South Caucasus. Particular attention is devoted to Ottoman provincial institutions and the relationship between imperial authority and regional political elites. Georgian scholarship, especially the works of Nodar Shengelia and Zaza Shashikadze, provides the principal regional framework and is analysed alongside major studies of Ottoman historiography to integrate regional and imperial perspectives.

The comparative method examines the Çıldır Eyalet within the broader geopolitical transformation of the eighteenth-century South Caucasus by analysing the interaction of Ottoman, Persian, and Russian policies. Source criticism is employed to evaluate documentary evidence and historiography within a common analytical framework.

Conceptually, the study approaches the Çıldır Eyalet not simply as an Ottoman administrative province but as a frontier institution integrating military security, fiscal administration, provincial government, and cooperation with local ruling families. This perspective explains how Ottoman authority adapted to the political realities of the eighteenth-century South Caucasus.

1. The South Caucasus in the Geopolitical System of the Eighteenth Century

During the eighteenth century, the South Caucasus emerged as one of the principal geopolitical regions of Eurasia, where the strategic interests of the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and Russia increasingly converged and collided. Situated between the Black Sea and the Caspian basin and linking Eastern Anatolia, the Iranian Plateau, and the North Caucasus, the region occupied a pivotal position in the political geography of the early modern Near East. Its significance derived not only from its location but also from its role as a strategic corridor connecting military frontiers, commercial networks, diplomatic communication, and regional centres of power. Political developments in the South Caucasus therefore influenced the wider balance of power across both Eastern Europe and the Near East (Aksan, 2007; Faroqi, 2004).

Its strategic importance was reinforced by an extensive network of commercial and communication routes connecting Trebizond (Trabzon), Erzurum, Akhaltsikhe (Ahıska), Tbilisi, Ganja, Yerevan, and Tabriz. These routes facilitated the movement of merchandise, armies, diplomatic missions, fiscal resources, and political influence. Ottoman administrative practice regarded their security as a fundamental responsibility of frontier government, while Georgian historiography has likewise demonstrated that the prosperity of South-Western Georgia depended largely upon the stability of these communications (Shengelia, 1974; Faroqi, 2004). Expanding trade in silk, cotton, leather, metals, livestock, and agricultural products further enhanced both the

economic and strategic value of the South Caucasus within the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian political systems (Quataert, 2005).

The physical geography of the region further strengthened its strategic role. The Greater and Lesser Caucasus mountain systems, together with their river valleys, passes, and fortified settlements, formed both natural defensive barriers and essential military corridors. Effective control therefore required more than the occupation of major urban centres; it depended upon continuous supervision of mountain passes, frontier fortifications, and transport routes linking Eastern Anatolia with the interior of the Caucasus. Ottoman military planning consequently regarded these geographical features as integral elements of frontier security rather than merely natural obstacles (Ágoston, 2021; Aksan, 2007).

Within this geopolitical setting, the Ottoman government increasingly viewed its eastern frontier as a cornerstone of imperial security (Studies in the History of South-Western Georgia: Adjara, Vol. II, 2011). Frontier centres such as Akhaltsikhe, Kars, and Ardahan formed an interconnected defensive system that protected Eastern Anatolia while sustaining Ottoman political influence in the South Caucasus. Georgian historiography likewise emphasises their importance within Ottoman frontier administration (Svanidze, 2002; Shengelia, 1974). Under these conditions, the Çıldır Eyalet gradually developed into one of the Ottoman Empire's principal frontier provinces, integrating military command, provincial administration, and regional political management into a coherent institutional structure (Ágoston, 2021; İnalçık, 1973).

1.2. Ottoman–Persian Rivalry and the Transformation of the Regional Balance of Power

Persia regarded the South Caucasus as an indispensable component of its north-western frontier system. Throughout the Safavid period, the region functioned not only as a defensive buffer protecting the Iranian Plateau but also as a strategic corridor linking the Caucasus with north-western Iran and as a principal sphere of influence over the Georgian kingdoms and neighbouring Caucasian polities. Ottoman–Safavid rivalry therefore extended beyond territorial disputes, reflecting competing concepts of frontier security, regional administration, and imperial authority. Georgian historiography likewise emphasises that this prolonged conflict profoundly influenced the political development of the Georgian kingdoms, placing them at the centre of a broader imperial struggle for dominance in the South Caucasus.

During the early eighteenth century, however, the Safavid Empire entered a period of accelerating political decline. The weakening of central authority, factional conflict, administrative fragmentation, and the erosion of provincial control substantially reduced the state's ability to govern its frontier territories. As Safavid institutions lost their capacity to project authority, the South Caucasus ceased to represent a relatively stable frontier and became an arena in which the regional balance of power could be fundamentally reconfigured (Matthee, 2012).

The capture of Isfahan by Afghan forces in 1722 marked the culmination of this crisis and effectively ended Safavid political predominance. The collapse of central authority created an unprecedented redistribution of power across the South Caucasus. For the Ottoman Empire, it offered an opportunity to expand military and political influence into territories previously controlled by Persia. Between 1723 and 1727 Ottoman armies occupied extensive parts of the region and sought to consolidate their gains through administrative reorganisation and military occupation (Axworthy, 2006; Aksan, 2007). These campaigns represented not merely another phase of the Ottoman–Persian wars but a broader geopolitical transformation in which the weakening of one imperial system enabled the temporary expansion of another. Georgian historians likewise identify this period as a decisive turning point in the political reconfiguration of the South Caucasus.

The decline of the Safavid dynasty, however, did not permanently eliminate Iranian influence. The rise of Nader Shah restored Persia's military capacity and temporarily re-established its authority over much of the South Caucasus. His campaigns demonstrated that Iran remained capable of challenging both Ottoman expansion and the growing ambitions of Russia. Yet this recovery depended primarily upon Nader Shah's personal military leadership rather than the reconstruction of durable administrative institutions. Following his assassination in

1747, political fragmentation re-emerged, once again destabilising the region and reopening opportunities for Ottoman and Russian intervention (Axworthy, 2006; Lockhart, 1938; Matthee, 2012).

The decline of Safavid power and the rise of Russian influence transformed the geopolitical balance of the South Caucasus, significantly increasing the strategic importance of the Çıldır Eyalet as an institutional instrument of Ottoman frontier policy.

I.3. Russian Expansion and the Reconfiguration of the South Caucasus

While Persia struggled to preserve its traditional position, Russia increasingly emerged as a decisive actor in Caucasian affairs. During the seventeenth century, Russian foreign policy had focused primarily on northern and western Europe, but the reign of Peter I marked a strategic reorientation toward the south. The Caspian Campaign of 1722–1723 represented more than a temporary military expedition; it inaugurated a coherent policy aimed at establishing a permanent Russian presence in the Caucasus and securing access to the commercial and strategic networks linking the Caspian basin with the Middle East (Sunny, 1994; Aksan, 2007).

For the Russian Empire, the South Caucasus possessed significance extending beyond its geographical position. Control of the region strengthened access to the Black Sea–Caspian corridor, facilitated political engagement with the Middle East, and created favourable conditions for continued imperial expansion. During the second half of the eighteenth century, successive Russo–Ottoman wars and the gradual development of relations with the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti fundamentally altered the regional balance of power. This process culminated in the Treaty of Georgievsk (1783), which established a new legal and political framework for Russian influence in the South Caucasus. More than a bilateral agreement, the treaty marked the institutionalisation of Russian Caucasian policy and reshaped the strategic calculations of both the Ottoman Empire and Persia (Sunny, 1994).

The growing Russian presence transformed the geopolitical environment in which the Ottoman Empire operated. By the mid-eighteenth century, the defence of the eastern frontier could no longer rely solely upon military superiority. Russian expansion, continuing rivalry with Persia, and the fragmented political landscape of the Caucasus required a more adaptable system of frontier administration that combined military preparedness with effective provincial government. Ottoman frontier policy consequently evolved from a predominantly defensive system into a broader administrative strategy integrating military security, fiscal organisation, and political cooperation with regional centres of power (İnalçık, 1973; Faroqi, 2004; Barkey, 2008).

I.4. The Emergence of Ottoman Frontier Governance and the Strategic Role of the Çıldır Eyalet

The transformation of the regional balance of power during the eighteenth century fundamentally reshaped Ottoman frontier policy in the South Caucasus. Unlike the period of rapid territorial expansion that had characterised earlier centuries, Ottoman strategy increasingly focused on preserving authority within an unstable frontier environment. Russian expansion, continuing rivalry with Persia, and the fragmented political landscape of the Caucasus demonstrated that military superiority alone could no longer guarantee imperial security. Frontier administration therefore evolved into an integrated system combining military organisation, provincial government, fiscal administration, and political negotiation (İnalçık, 1973; Faroqi, 2004).

The Çıldır Eyalet became the principal expression of this transformation. Owing to its strategic position between Eastern Anatolia and the South Caucasus, it functioned simultaneously as a military frontier, an administrative centre, and a diplomatic contact zone. Ottoman governors were responsible not only for organising frontier defence but also for preserving political stability, supervising fiscal administration, and adapting imperial policy to regional political conditions. The effectiveness of provincial government therefore depended upon institutional flexibility rather than administrative centralisation alone.

A defining feature of this frontier system was cooperation with influential Georgian ruling families, including the Khimshiashvili, Jaqeli, Abashidze, and other regional dynasties. Rather than replacing established local authorities with centrally appointed officials, the Ottoman government generally incorporated

them into the provincial administration. Their participation facilitated taxation, maintained public order, protected communication routes, and enabled the rapid mobilisation of military forces when frontier security required immediate action (Shengelia, 1974).

This policy reflected a deliberate strategy of frontier governance rather than administrative weakness. Modern Ottoman historiography has shown that imperial authority proved most effective when reinforced through cooperation with established regional power structures instead of relying exclusively on bureaucratic centralisation (Barkey, 2008; Faroqhi, 2004). In the politically and geographically complex environment of South-Western Georgia, negotiated authority enhanced administrative resilience while allowing provincial governors to respond more effectively to changing military and political circumstances.

The Çıldır Eyalet exemplified this transformation by integrating military security, provincial administration, fiscal management, and cooperation with regional elites into a single frontier institution. Understanding this transformation is essential for explaining the historical significance of the Çıldır Eyalet. More than a provincial administrative unit, it functioned as the principal institutional mechanism through which the Ottoman Empire exercised and adapted its authority in the South Caucasus. The following chapter therefore examines the internal administrative organisation of the Çıldır Eyalet and its role as a distinctive institution of Ottoman frontier governance.

II. The Çıldır Pashalik as an Institution of Ottoman Frontier Governance

The Çıldır Pashalik was one of the most distinctive institutions of Ottoman frontier administration in the South Caucasus. Although formally organised as an eyalet within the Ottoman provincial hierarchy, its political significance extended far beyond that of a conventional administrative province. Unlike the interior eyalets, whose primary responsibilities centred on taxation, judicial administration, and provincial government, the Çıldır Pashalik combined military, diplomatic, fiscal, and political functions shaped by the changing geopolitical environment of the Caucasus. Its development therefore reflected both the administrative principles of the Ottoman state and the strategic demands of one of the empire's most contested frontier regions (İnalçık, 1973; Faroqhi, 2004).

Modern Ottoman historiography has generally interpreted frontier provinces through the evolution of imperial administrative institutions. While this approach has significantly advanced our understanding of Ottoman provincial government, it does not fully explain the political character of the Çıldır Pashalik. Georgian historiography offers an important complementary perspective by demonstrating that Ottoman authority in South-Western Georgia developed through continuous interaction between imperial institutions, regional political realities, and the long-established authority of Georgian ruling families. Accordingly, the Çıldır Pashalik should be understood not simply as an Ottoman province but as a frontier political system in which imperial administration and regional political traditions became institutionally integrated (Shengelia, 1974; Svanidze, 1998).

The origins of this system lay in the geopolitical transformation following the Ottoman–Safavid War of 1578. The incorporation of Samtskhe-Saatabago and neighbouring territories fundamentally reshaped the empire's eastern frontier. Situated between Eastern Anatolia, the Georgian kingdoms, and the Safavid state, these newly acquired lands required a form of administration capable of combining military command, provincial government, fiscal organisation, and political supervision within a single frontier institution (Jikia & Shengelia, 2010; Shengelia & Makharadze, 2008). From its establishment, the Çıldır Eyalet functioned less as a territorial division than as a strategic instrument of Ottoman Caucasian policy (İnalçık, 1973).

During the eighteenth century, this institutional role became even more pronounced. The pashalik included Akhaltsikhe, Adjara, Ardahan, Oltu, Shavsheti, Klarjeti, and neighbouring districts, although its territorial boundaries changed in response to successive Ottoman–Persian wars and shifting regional power relations. These adjustments did not alter its fundamental purpose. Throughout the century, the Çıldır Pashalik remained the principal Ottoman mechanism for defending Eastern Anatolia, supervising the approaches to the South Caucasus,

and preserving imperial influence along the eastern frontier. Its historical significance therefore derived not from the extent of its territory but from the strategic functions it performed within Ottoman frontier policy (Shengelia & Makharadze, 2008).

Georgian historians have consistently observed that Ottoman incorporation of South-Western Georgia did not eliminate existing regional political structures. Instead, imperial institutions were gradually adapted to local conditions through political accommodation rather than uniform administrative centralisation (Shengelia, 1974). This interpretation explains both the durability of Ottoman authority and the distinctive character of the Çıldır Pashalik, whose stability depended upon integrating imperial administration with regional political traditions instead of replacing them outright (Svanidze, 1998).

Akhalsikhe formed the administrative and strategic centre of this frontier system. More than the provincial capital, it served as the operational headquarters of Ottoman authority in the South Caucasus. Located at the intersection of the principal routes linking Eastern Anatolia, South-Western Georgia, and the interior of the Caucasus, the city enabled provincial governors to coordinate military operations, supervise communications, regulate trade, and respond rapidly to regional political developments. Akhalsikhe consequently functioned as the principal strategic centre through which Istanbul implemented its eastern frontier policy (Shengelia, 1974).

III. Fiscal and Military-Economic Mechanisms of the Çıldır Pashalik

3.1. The Transformation from Timar to Iltizam: Fiscal Adaptation and Frontier Sustainability

Although the timar system remained an important component of Ottoman provincial administration during the eighteenth century, it gradually lost the financial and military flexibility required by the empire's changing strategic environment. The increasing scale of warfare, prolonged military campaigns, expanding standing forces, and the rising costs of frontier fortifications altered Ottoman fiscal priorities. A system based primarily on land revenues assigned in return for military service could no longer generate sufficient resources to sustain frontier defence. Consequently, Ottoman fiscal policy increasingly relied upon mechanisms capable of providing immediate monetary income to the imperial treasury, most notably the expansion of the iltizam system (Quataert, 2005).

Through tax farming, iltizam transferred the right to collect specified revenues to private contractors in return for advance payments to the treasury, substantially improving fiscal liquidity. Modern Ottoman historiography interprets this development not as evidence of institutional decline but as an adaptive response to the military and economic challenges of the eighteenth century (Genç, 2000; Darling, 1996). In the Çıldır Pashalik, where permanent military readiness was essential, the growing importance of iltizam reflected the strategic requirements of frontier government rather than the simple replacement of one fiscal institution by another.

The transition did not eliminate the timar system. Throughout much of the eighteenth century both institutions operated simultaneously while fulfilling different functions. Timars continued to support the traditional provincial cavalry and remained part of the frontier defence structure, whereas iltizam increasingly supplied the monetary resources necessary for military logistics, provincial administration, and the maintenance of strategic infrastructure. Their coexistence illustrates the adaptive character of Ottoman fiscal policy, which modified rather than abandoned earlier administrative institutions (Shengelia & Makharadze, 2008).

Georgian historiography highlights the regional specificity of this transformation. South-Western Georgia differed markedly from the major agricultural provinces of Anatolia and the Balkans. Mountainous terrain, fragmented settlement patterns, seasonal pastoralism, and limited arable land constrained the fiscal potential of the classical timar system, while the strategic importance of the frontier demanded greater military expenditure. These conditions encouraged a more flexible fiscal structure in which tax farming, customs duties, and commercial taxation assumed increasing importance alongside traditional land revenues (Shengelia, 1974).

Fiscal administration in the Çıldır Pashalik was inseparable from military policy. Provincial revenues financed not only civil administration but also frontier garrisons, fortifications, roads, bridges, and

communication networks linking Eastern Anatolia with the South Caucasus. These expenditures served strategic purposes by ensuring the rapid movement of troops, supplies, administrative correspondence, and fiscal resources across the frontier zone. Accordingly, taxation functioned as an essential component of Ottoman military planning rather than merely as an instrument of provincial finance (Ágoston, 2021; Aksan, 2007).

This interaction between fiscal administration and military organisation illustrates the adaptive character of Ottoman frontier governance, in which provincial resources were systematically transformed into administrative stability and military capability (Quataert, 2005; Barkey, 2008; Shengelia, 1974).

The fiscal organisation of the Çıldır Pashalik should therefore be understood as more than a provincial taxation system. It constituted a specialised model of frontier governance through which the Ottoman Empire transformed local economic resources into military capability, administrative stability, and political authority. The interaction of the timar and iltizam systems demonstrates that fiscal adaptation formed one of the principal institutional foundations of Ottoman rule in the South Caucasus and explains the resilience of the Çıldır Pashalik within the wider Ottoman frontier system.

3.2. The Economic Characteristics of South-Western Georgia and Their Influence on Ottoman Fiscal Policy

The fiscal organisation of the Çıldır Pashalik reflected the economic diversity of South-Western Georgia. Differences in geography, settlement patterns, agricultural production, pastoral resources, and commercial communications required a flexible fiscal system adapted to regional conditions rather than a uniform model of taxation (Jikia & Shengelia, 2010; Shengelia, 1974; Svanidze, 1998).

Adjara's economy reflected the environmental conditions of a mountainous frontier region. Narrow river valleys, abundant forests, a humid climate, and limited arable land constrained large-scale grain cultivation but encouraged a diversified economy based on livestock breeding, small-scale agriculture, orchards, viticulture in suitable microregions, and forest resources. Georgian historians have emphasised that agricultural production remained closely connected with seasonal movement between highland and lowland zones, while fragmented settlement patterns favoured mixed subsistence rather than extensive cultivation (Shengelia, 1974; *Studies in the History of South-Western Georgia: Adjara*, Vol. II, 2011).

Shavsheti and Klarjeti possessed one of the most diversified regional economies within the Çıldır Pashalik. Fertile valleys supported grain cultivation, viticulture, fruit growing, and animal husbandry, while surrounding highlands provided extensive pastures and forest resources. Their position along the communication corridors linking Artvin, Ardahan, Erzurum, Akhaltsikhe, and the Black Sea further increased their fiscal significance by generating customs duties, transit charges, and market revenues. Ottoman taxation therefore reflected the productive diversity and commercial importance of these districts rather than applying a uniform fiscal model (Shengelia, 1974; Svanidze, 1998).

Ardahan possessed an economic profile distinct from that of Adjara, Shavsheti, and Klarjeti. Its high-altitude plateau, harsher climatic conditions, and extensive pastures favoured livestock breeding, horse raising, and seasonal pastoralism, whereas agricultural production remained constrained by environmental conditions. Consequently, the region derived its economic importance primarily from pastoral resources and its strategic position between Eastern Anatolia and the South Caucasus. Livestock, horses, wool, hides, dairy products, and related commodities formed the basis of both local production and regional exchange.

Its pastoral economy supplied transport animals, cavalry horses, and provisions for frontier forces, while taxes on livestock, seasonal pastures, and migration strengthened provincial revenues, making Ardahan an important component of the military-fiscal system of the Çıldır Pashalik. Akhaltsikhe occupied a fundamentally different position within the economy of the Çıldır Pashalik. As the provincial capital, it served simultaneously as the principal administrative, military, and commercial centre of the region. Its market linked the agricultural and pastoral production of South-Western Georgia with the wider commercial networks of Eastern Anatolia, the Black Sea basin, and Iran. Grain, livestock, leather, wool, wine, fruit, timber, textiles, metal goods, and imported

commodities circulated through the city, generating customs duties, market fees, commercial taxation, and other monetary revenues that complemented the province's agrarian fiscal base.

As the principal redistribution centre of the province, Akhaltsikhe connected the economies of South-Western Georgia with Erzurum, Trabzon, Kars, and other regional markets, where commercial exchange, customs duties, and market revenues substantially reinforced the fiscal capacity of the provincial administration (Shengelia, 1974). The Erzurum and Trabzon routes formed the principal communication corridors of the pashalik, linking South-Western Georgia with Eastern Anatolia and Black Sea commerce. They carried trade, military supplies, official correspondence, and fiscal revenues, making secure communications indispensable for both commercial exchange and frontier defence. Forest resources constituted an important component of the frontier economy, particularly in Adjara, Shavsheti, and Klarjeti. Timber was indispensable for fortification repair, bridge construction, roads, military installations, transport, and domestic building, while forests also supported local crafts and regional trade. Although the taxation and regulation of woodland resources varied across districts, their strategic value extended beyond ordinary fiscal income. The availability of timber reduced the cost of maintaining frontier infrastructure and generated additional provincial revenue, making forest resources an integral element of Ottoman military-economic planning.

Viticulture and fruit cultivation further diversified the regional economy. In fertile valleys and lower-altitude districts, vineyards and orchards produced wine, grapes, fruit, and related commodities that entered local and regional markets. Georgian historiography has rightly emphasised that these branches of agriculture preserved a remarkable degree of continuity despite successive political and administrative transformations, demonstrating that Ottoman fiscal administration adapted to an already established productive landscape rather than creating an entirely new economic order (Shengelia, 1974).

The fiscal organisation of the Çıldır Pashalik reflected the economic diversity of South-Western Georgia by adapting revenue collection to regional patterns of agriculture, pastoralism, commerce, and transit exchange. Effective administration depended upon cooperation with local authorities and influential Georgian ruling families, whose knowledge of regional conditions facilitated both taxation and frontier governance. Through this flexible integration of local economies and provincial institutions, the Ottoman administration transformed regional resources into fiscal stability and military capacity (Shengelia & Makharadze, 2008).

Accordingly, the fiscal system of the Çıldır Pashalik should be understood not as a uniform provincial taxation regime but as a regionally adapted model of frontier governance. Ottoman authorities adjusted fiscal policy to the economic diversity of South-Western Georgia, transforming local agricultural, pastoral, commercial, and natural resources into military capability, administrative stability, and political authority. The province's fiscal resilience therefore derived not only from its diversified economic base but also from the cooperation of local political actors who implemented and sustained this frontier system. The role of Georgian ruling houses within this military-fiscal structure is examined in the following section.

3.3. Georgian Feudal Houses within the Military-Fiscal System of the Çıldır Pashalik

The effective functioning of the Çıldır Pashalik's frontier administration depended not only on Ottoman provincial institutions but also on the active participation of the influential Georgian ruling houses of South-Western Georgia. By the eighteenth century, the Khimshiashvilis, Jaqelis, Abashidzes, and other regional families had become integral components of provincial government through which the Ottoman state mobilised military forces, collected revenues, protected strategic communications, and maintained frontier security. Their political importance therefore derived less from hereditary privilege alone than from the institutional responsibilities they exercised within Ottoman frontier administration (Shengelia, 1974).

The incorporation of influential Georgian ruling houses reflected the geographical and political realities of South-Western Georgia, where effective frontier administration depended upon cooperation with established regional authorities rather than exclusive bureaucratic control.

Among these families, the Jaqelis occupied a particularly significant position. As the former ruling dynasty of Samtskhe-Saatabago, they possessed deep political legitimacy, extensive territorial influence, and long-established networks of regional loyalty. Their incorporation into the Ottoman administrative order ensured institutional continuity between the medieval political traditions of Samtskhe and the frontier administration of the Çıldır Pashalik. Although Ottoman rule transformed the legal framework within which they operated, the Jaqelis retained their importance as intermediaries whose knowledge of regional society and authority over local communities strengthened provincial government (Svanidze, 1998).

Ottoman recognition of the Jaqelis facilitated the integration of regional authority into the provincial administration while allowing the family to retain its traditional influence within the new imperial framework (Shengelia, 1974).

The Khimshiashvilis assumed a similarly important role in the mountainous districts of Adjara and neighbouring regions. Their influence derived from control of strategically significant territories, military resources, local loyalties, and the ability to mobilise armed retainers. In frontier districts where the authority of provincial institutions weakened beyond the principal administrative centres, the Khimshiashvilis supplied the Ottoman government with military manpower, regional intelligence, and practical knowledge that centrally appointed officials could not easily replace (Svanidze, 1998).

Beyond their local authority, the Khimshiashvilis protected strategic communication routes and supported the mobilisation of troops, supplies, and fiscal resources, thereby strengthening the military and administrative capacity of the Çıldır Pashalik (Svanidze, 1998). The experience of both the Jaqelis and the Khimshiashvilis demonstrates that Georgian ruling houses functioned not outside the Ottoman provincial system but within it. Their authority rested upon the interaction of hereditary legitimacy, local social influence, recognised military obligations, and officially sanctioned fiscal responsibilities. Ottoman frontier governance therefore depended not on the elimination of regional political traditions but on their institutional incorporation into the military-fiscal framework of the Çıldır Pashalik. This integration significantly strengthened the administrative flexibility and strategic resilience of Ottoman rule in the South Caucasus.

The Abashidzes occupied an important position within the political landscape of South-Western Georgia by linking the frontier districts of the Çıldır Pashalik with the wider political developments of western Georgia. Like the Jaqelis and the Khimshiashvilis, they combined landed influence, military resources, and established networks of political loyalty. Although their role varied according to changing regional circumstances, their principal importance lay in mediating between local communities, provincial authorities, and neighbouring political centres. Their participation further illustrates that Ottoman frontier administration relied upon the incorporation of existing regional power structures rather than their replacement.

One of the principal institutional mechanisms through which this cooperation was organised was the timar and zeamet system. Revenue assignments linked fiscal income with military and administrative service, enabling the Ottoman government to incorporate influential local families into the provincial hierarchy without transferring sovereign ownership of land. Holders of timars and zeamets received conditional rights to collect specified revenues in return for military obligations and service to the state. In South-Western Georgia this arrangement provided recognised positions for local ruling houses while preserving their traditional influence over territories and communities with which they had long-standing political connections.

Although the Ottoman state retained legal ownership of assigned lands, frontier conditions frequently combined fiscal, military, and administrative responsibilities within the same office, enabling timar and zeamet holders to support provincial governance while preserving imperial authority.

Fiscal mediation represented an important administrative function through which Georgian ruling houses facilitated taxation and strengthened provincial administration in frontier districts. The effectiveness of Ottoman frontier administration therefore depended upon sustained cooperation between provincial authorities and regional ruling houses.

Military mobilisation constituted a second essential component of their institutional role. Georgian ruling houses mobilised local forces and logistical resources during Ottoman–Persian wars, Russian expansion, and regional crises, thereby reinforcing the operational capacity of frontier administration. Their military service formed an integral component of Ottoman frontier governance, linking hereditary regional authority with the administrative and fiscal objectives of the provincial government.

Georgian ruling houses also contributed to the protection of strategic roads and frontier fortifications, supplying manpower, transport, provisions, timber, and local intelligence required for the effective operation of Ottoman frontier administration. Their participation strengthened both the logistical capacity and military resilience of the Çıldır Pashalik.

This cooperation found its political expression in the relationship between the pasha and the regional ruling houses. The pasha exercised supreme provincial authority on behalf of the sultan, directing military command, fiscal administration, and public security. Yet the practical implementation of these responsibilities depended upon cooperation with influential Georgian families capable of mobilising manpower, collecting revenues, preserving communications, and maintaining regional stability. Provincial government therefore functioned through reciprocal obligations rather than through unilateral command.

The balance between the pasha and regional elites remained dynamic. Strong governors could reinforce provincial discipline, redistribute military and fiscal responsibilities, and limit excessive local influence. Conversely, periods of external war, internal unrest, or weak provincial leadership often enhanced the political importance of families able to provide troops, logistical support, and control over strategically significant territories. Ottoman authority therefore rested upon continuous adjustment between imperial priorities and regional political realities rather than upon rigid bureaucratic centralisation.

This pattern reflects the broader principle of negotiated frontier governance. The Ottoman government retained legal sovereignty and the authority to appoint provincial officials, while Georgian ruling houses preserved their hereditary legitimacy, regional influence, and local social authority. Neither side exercised unrestricted power. Provincial administration depended upon institutional cooperation in which imperial administration and regional political traditions became mutually reinforcing components of frontier government. Georgian historiography has been particularly important in demonstrating that this relationship represented neither the survival of an independent feudal order nor the complete subordination of local society, but the gradual incorporation of Georgian ruling houses into Ottoman provincial institutions (Shengelia, 1974; Svanidze, 1998).

From this perspective, the Khimshiashvilis, Jaqelis, Abashidzes, and other Georgian noble families should not be regarded simply as intermediaries or provincial elites. They simultaneously exercised military, fiscal, administrative, and political functions that connected local communities with provincial government and imperial authority. Through timar and zeamet assignments, revenue collection, military mobilisation, and the protection of strategic communications, they transformed regional authority into an institutional component of Ottoman frontier administration.

The experience of the Çıldır Pashalik demonstrates that Ottoman power in the South Caucasus rested not solely upon garrisons, fortifications, or centrally appointed officials. Its durability depended equally upon the integration of Georgian ruling houses into the military-fiscal structure of the province. Rather than dismantling existing political traditions, the Ottoman government selectively incorporated them into its frontier administration, creating a flexible system capable of combining imperial sovereignty with regional political participation. This institutional synthesis constituted one of the principal foundations of Ottoman resilience in South-Western Georgia throughout the eighteenth century.

4.1. Delegated Authority and Political Integration

Delegated authority constituted one of the principal mechanisms through which Ottoman administration governed the South Caucasian frontier. Within the Çıldır Pashalik, imperial sovereignty was exercised through

recognised Georgian ruling houses, whose institutional responsibilities linked provincial government with regional political authority (Barkey, 2008; Faroqi, 2004).

Although the Ottoman government retained full sovereignty through the authority of the pasha and the provincial administration, effective frontier government depended upon the delegation of administrative responsibilities to recognised regional ruling houses.

Georgian historiography interprets the incorporation of hereditary ruling houses as a process of institutional adaptation through which dynastic authority was transformed into recognised fiscal, military, and administrative responsibilities within the Çıldır Pashalik (Studies in the History of South-Western Georgia: Adjara, Vol. II, 2011; Shengelia, 1974; Svanidze, 1998).

Delegated authority extended the practical reach of provincial government into districts where permanent bureaucratic supervision remained limited. Regional ruling houses assumed recognised responsibilities in taxation, judicial mediation, military mobilisation, and the protection of communications, while the pasha retained supreme provincial authority. This division of responsibilities strengthened frontier administration and facilitated cooperation between provincial institutions and local society (İnalçık, 1973; Barkey, 2008).

Ottoman authorities likewise incorporated existing communal institutions into the provincial administration, recognising that local customary practices facilitated effective governance in the mountainous frontier districts (Barkey, 2008).

Although communal institutions retained limited regulatory functions, they remained subordinate to Ottoman sovereignty and operated within the provincial administrative framework. Their incorporation strengthened administrative efficiency while preserving established local practices.

Accordingly, delegated authority and political integration formed complementary principles of Ottoman frontier governance. By combining formal sovereignty with recognised regional authority, the Ottoman government created a flexible administrative structure capable of adapting imperial institutions to the geographical, political, and social conditions of the South Caucasus. This institutional synthesis became one of the principal foundations of the durability of the Çıldır Pashalik throughout the eighteenth century.

Administrative Accommodation and Negotiated Frontier Governance

Administrative accommodation enabled the Ottoman authorities to reconcile imperial objectives with the political and social realities of the South Caucasian frontier, adapting provincial administration to regional conditions rather than applying uniform bureaucratic practices (İnalçık, 1973).

Fiscal administration reflected this adaptive approach by adjusting revenue collection to regional conditions and relying upon recognised local intermediaries, thereby preserving both frontier stability and long-term provincial revenues (Darling, 1996).

Military administration likewise relied upon cooperation with Georgian ruling houses, whose military resources and local knowledge reinforced provincial defence while integrating regional authority into the Ottoman administrative framework (Aksan, 2007).

The protection of strategic communication routes likewise depended upon cooperation between provincial authorities and regional ruling houses, demonstrating that frontier security rested upon institutional coordination rather than direct military control alone.

Administrative accommodation also extended to judicial and political mediation. Local intermediaries initially resolved disputes according to customary practice, while the pasha retained final judicial authority whenever conflicts affected provincial stability. This combination of imperial jurisdiction and local mediation strengthened both administrative efficiency and political legitimacy.

These arrangements created a dynamic balance of power in which the Ottoman government utilised regional authority without permitting political autonomy, while Georgian ruling houses preserved their influence within the provincial framework. The relationship remained flexible and evolved according to changing military and political conditions.

This evolving relationship is best understood through the concept of negotiated frontier governance. Ottoman sovereignty remained legally indivisible, yet its practical implementation depended upon continuous negotiation between imperial institutions and recognised regional authorities. Provincial administration operated through appointments, fiscal settlements, military obligations, judicial mediation, and political compromise rather than uniform bureaucratic command. As Georgian historiography demonstrates, this model represented a distinctive form of frontier government in which imperial institutions and regional political traditions became mutually reinforcing (Shengelia, 1974; Svanidze, 1998).

Accordingly, administrative accommodation constituted one of the principal foundations of Ottoman authority in the South Caucasus. By adapting imperial institutions to the political and geographical realities of the frontier, the Ottoman state preserved strategic control while incorporating regional elites into provincial administration. The durability of the Çıldır Pashalik therefore depended not upon bureaucratic uniformity but upon the successful integration of imperial sovereignty with negotiated regional participation.

4.1 Transformation of Georgian Regional Authority

Dynastic Legacies and Institutional Adaptation

The incorporation of South-Western Georgia into the Ottoman Empire transformed the institutional foundations of regional political authority without eliminating the influence of hereditary Georgian ruling houses. Rather than dismantling existing political structures, Ottoman administration incorporated them into the provincial organisation of the Çıldır Pashalik, redefining hereditary authority through military service, fiscal responsibility, and administrative office. The transformation of Georgian regional power therefore reflected institutional adaptation rather than political discontinuity, preserving established centres of influence while integrating them into the strategic framework of Ottoman frontier government (Shengelia, 1974; Svanidze, 1998).

Although the Jaqelis, Abashidzes, and Khimshiashvilis all became integral components of provincial administration, each occupied a distinct position within the political structure of the pashalik. The Jaqelis embodied the historical continuity of Samtskhe-Saatabago. Their authority rested upon dynastic legitimacy, long-established territorial influence, and enduring political prestige, which enabled the Ottoman administration to incorporate the historical traditions of Samtskhe into the provincial order. Their institutional value therefore derived less from military strength than from their capacity to provide political continuity and regional legitimacy during the consolidation of Ottoman rule.

The Abashidzes represented a different model of regional authority. Their influence depended primarily upon extensive kinship networks, landed interests, and political connections extending beyond the formal boundaries of the Çıldır Pashalik into western Georgia. These relationships enabled them to mediate between neighbouring political centres, facilitate regional cooperation, and maintain communication across frontier zones. Consequently, their importance lay not only in provincial administration but also in their ability to connect Ottoman-controlled territories with the broader political environment of western Georgia, reinforcing the flexibility of frontier governance.

By contrast, the Khimshiashvilis emerged as the principal military house of the eighteenth-century frontier. Their authority developed through the control of strategically important mountain districts, communication routes, and fortified positions, particularly in Upper Adjara. Unlike the older dynastic legitimacy of the Jaqelis or the extensive political networks of the Abashidzes, Khimshiashvili influence rested primarily upon military effectiveness, frontier defence, and the capacity to mobilise local armed forces. Their rapid rise demonstrates that Ottoman frontier administration increasingly rewarded practical military service alongside hereditary prestige.

Despite these differences, the three families shared a common institutional transformation. Under Ottoman rule, hereditary authority ceased to function as the basis of independent regional sovereignty and instead became incorporated into the provincial administration through recognised military obligations, fiscal responsibilities, judicial mediation, and political cooperation. Their regional influence was neither abolished nor preserved

unchanged; it was redefined within an imperial administrative framework that linked local legitimacy with provincial government.

This transformation fundamentally reshaped the political structure of South-Western Georgia. The Ottoman administration did not apply a uniform model of cooperation but adapted its relationship to the historical traditions, territorial resources, and political capacities of each ruling house. Dynastic prestige, cross-regional networks, and military leadership were therefore utilised in different ways according to the strategic requirements of frontier administration. Georgian historiography has demonstrated that this differentiated approach explains both the durability of Ottoman authority and the continued prominence of the principal Georgian ruling families throughout the eighteenth century (Shengelia, 1974; Svanidze, 1998).

Accordingly, the transformation of Georgian regional authority should be understood as one of the defining characteristics of Ottoman frontier governance. The Jaqelis, Abashidzes, and Khimshiashvilis were not merely incorporated into the provincial administration; they became institutional components of a frontier system that combined imperial sovereignty with established regional political traditions. Their differing historical legacies and complementary political functions strengthened the administrative flexibility of the Çıldır Pashalik and contributed significantly to the resilience of Ottoman rule in the South Caucasus.

Military Resources and Regional Political Influence

Military capacity constituted one of the principal foundations of regional political authority within the Çıldır Pashalik. In the eighteenth-century South Caucasus, the ability to mobilise armed men, protect strategic communications, and control mountainous terrain determined not only the effectiveness of frontier defence but also the political standing of regional ruling houses. Military resources therefore represented far more than an instrument of warfare; they formed the institutional basis through which Georgian noble families exercised authority within Ottoman provincial administration (Aksan, 2007; Ağoston, 2021).

Although the Jaqelis, Abashidzes, and Khimshiashvilis all participated in the military organisation of the province, their contributions reflected their different historical positions. The Jaqelis reinforced Ottoman authority through their established political prestige and their ability to mobilise support across the former territories of Samtskhe. The Abashidzes strengthened frontier security by maintaining extensive political and kinship networks that facilitated cooperation across the western Georgian frontier. The Khimshiashvilis, by contrast, emerged as the principal military leaders of the mountainous districts, where control of strategic passes, fortified positions, and local armed contingents became indispensable to provincial defence. Together, these complementary roles created a diversified military structure that increased the resilience of Ottoman frontier administration.

The effectiveness of these regional forces derived primarily from their familiarity with the geographical environment of South-Western Georgia. Mountain passes, densely forested valleys, and difficult communications limited the operational capacity of regular imperial troops, whereas local contingents possessed detailed knowledge of the terrain, seasonal routes, and regional conditions. Their ability to operate rapidly in frontier districts significantly enhanced Ottoman military flexibility while reducing the need for large permanent garrisons throughout the province.

Military service also reinforced political authority. Families capable of providing reliable armed support acquired greater influence within provincial administration through appointments, fiscal privileges, and recognised responsibilities. Conversely, military obligations imposed continuing political accountability. Regional authority therefore depended not only upon hereditary prestige but equally upon the capacity to contribute effectively to the defence and stability of the frontier. Military service became one of the principal mechanisms through which local legitimacy was transformed into recognised provincial authority.

The Ottoman administration deliberately incorporated these regional military resources into its frontier strategy. Local contingents protected communication routes, reinforced frontier fortifications, accompanied military expeditions, and responded rapidly to internal disturbances or external invasion. This cooperation

enabled the provincial government to combine imperial military organisation with locally available resources, creating a more adaptable defensive system than could have been achieved through centrally stationed forces alone (Aksan, 2007).

At the same time, military power required careful political management. Families commanding substantial armed forces could strengthen provincial security, yet excessive regional concentration of military influence also posed potential challenges to Ottoman authority. The pasha of Akhaltsikhe therefore sought to preserve a balance in which local military leadership remained indispensable to frontier defence while continuing to operate within the institutional framework of provincial administration. Recognition, appointments, fiscal privileges, and the distribution of responsibilities formed essential instruments for maintaining this equilibrium.

From this perspective, frontier leadership should be understood as an institutional rather than purely military phenomenon. The leading Georgian ruling houses combined military command with fiscal administration, political mediation, and regional governance, linking imperial objectives with local social structures. Their authority rested upon the interaction of military effectiveness, recognised political legitimacy, and administrative responsibility rather than upon force alone.

Accordingly, military resources constituted one of the principal mechanisms through which Ottoman sovereignty was exercised across the South Caucasian frontier. By integrating the military capacities of the Jaqelis, Abashidzes, and Khimshiashvilis into provincial administration, the Ottoman government transformed regional armed power into an institutional component of frontier governance. This integration strengthened both the operational effectiveness of the Çıldır Pashalik and the long-term stability of Ottoman rule in South-Western Georgia.

Akhaltsikhe and the Management of Regional Elites

Akhaltsikhe occupied a pivotal position within the political organisation of the Çıldır Pashalik. As the provincial capital, it functioned not only as the administrative headquarters of Ottoman authority but also as the principal centre through which relations with the leading Georgian ruling houses were organised and supervised. Appointments, fiscal rights, military responsibilities, and political recognition were administered from Akhaltsikhe, making the city the institutional link between the imperial government and regional centres of power (Shengelia, 1974).

The relationship between the pasha and the principal Georgian families was characterised by reciprocal dependence rather than unilateral authority. The provincial administration relied upon the cooperation of the Jaqelis, Abashidzes, Khimshiashvilis, and other influential houses to mobilise military forces, collect revenues, secure communication routes, and preserve political order in districts where direct bureaucratic administration remained limited. In turn, these families depended upon provincial recognition to legitimise offices, maintain fiscal privileges, and reinforce their regional authority. Ottoman frontier administration therefore operated through institutional cooperation that combined imperial sovereignty with recognised local leadership rather than replacing regional political structures.

This relationship required the continuous maintenance of a political balance among the principal ruling houses. Their historical traditions, territorial influence, and military capabilities differed considerably, and the provincial government adjusted its policies accordingly. The Jaqelis derived authority primarily from the dynastic legacy of Samtskhe; the Abashidzes strengthened provincial influence through extensive kinship and political networks extending into western Georgia; while the Khimshiashvilis increasingly assumed responsibility for the defence of strategically important mountain districts. Ottoman administration utilised these complementary strengths without permitting any single family to dominate the political life of the province.

Competition among regional elites therefore became an integral component of provincial politics rather than merely a source of instability. Rivalries over offices, fiscal privileges, military responsibilities, and territorial influence created potential tensions, yet they also enabled the pasha to preserve equilibrium by distributing appointments and responsibilities among several influential houses. Recognition of one family could moderate

the ambitions of another, reducing the likelihood that regional authority would become concentrated in a single political centre. Georgian historiography has emphasised that this differentiated policy represented a deliberate mechanism for preserving both frontier stability and imperial control (Shengelia, 1974; Svanidze, 1998).

Negotiation consequently became one of the defining practices of frontier administration. Questions concerning taxation, military obligations, territorial jurisdiction, succession, and political precedence were frequently resolved through compromise rather than direct confrontation. Such accommodation reflected the practical realities of governing a strategically sensitive frontier, where prolonged conflict among regional elites could weaken military preparedness, disrupt fiscal administration, and threaten the security of the province. Negotiated settlements therefore served not as evidence of administrative weakness but as an institutional instrument for preserving effective provincial government.

The Ottoman administration nevertheless established clear limits to regional autonomy. Families that fulfilled military obligations, protected strategic communications, and supported fiscal administration generally retained provincial offices and political privileges. Conversely, attempts to obstruct taxation, ignore military responsibilities, challenge the authority of the pasha, or undermine frontier security could provoke administrative sanctions, the redistribution of offices, or military intervention. Cooperation remained conditional upon compatibility with the strategic interests of the Ottoman state.

From this perspective, Akhaltsikhe functioned as more than the administrative capital of the Çıldır Pashalik. It represented the political centre through which Ottoman sovereignty was translated into practical frontier governance. By balancing cooperation, competition, and negotiated accommodation among the principal Georgian ruling houses, the provincial administration integrated regional political authority into a coherent system of military, fiscal, and administrative government. The stability of the Çıldır Pashalik therefore depended not upon direct bureaucratic control alone but upon the successful management of regional elites within an institutional framework that reconciled imperial objectives with local political realities.

4.3. Adjara and South-Western Georgia in the Eighteenth Century

Administrative Integration and Regional Continuity

During the eighteenth century, Adjara and South-Western Georgia occupied a distinctive position within the political organisation of the Çıldır Pashalik. Situated between Eastern Anatolia, the Black Sea coast, and the interior of the South Caucasus, the region possessed strategic importance that extended beyond its geographical location. Mountainous terrain, fragmented settlement patterns, hereditary authority, strong communal organisation, and the persistence of Georgian cultural traditions distinguished it from the more centralised provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman administration therefore relied upon institutional adaptation rather than the uniform application of provincial models developed elsewhere (Faroghi, 2004; Barkey, 2008).

The incorporation of Adjara, Shavsheti, Klarjeti, Machakhela, and neighbouring districts into the Çıldır Pashalik transformed the political and administrative framework of the region while preserving important elements of regional continuity. Ottoman sovereignty introduced new fiscal obligations, military structures, and provincial institutions, yet these changes did not eliminate established forms of local authority or communal organisation. Instead, imperial administration gradually incorporated existing political and social structures into the provincial system, producing a frontier order in which institutional integration and regional continuity developed simultaneously.

Georgian historiography has made a particularly important contribution to understanding this process. While general studies of Ottoman provincial administration emphasise institutional integration, Georgian scholars have demonstrated that regional authority, customary regulation, communal organisation, and Georgian cultural traditions continued to shape the practical operation of Ottoman government in South-Western Georgia. The region was therefore not simply incorporated into an existing imperial structure; its historical and social characteristics actively influenced the manner in which Ottoman institutions functioned (Shengelia, 1974; Svanidze, 1998).

Administrative integration remained uneven because it was conditioned by geography, communications, and the influence of local ruling houses. Although the provincial authorities in Akhaltsikhe exercised formal authority through taxation, military mobilisation, appointments, and the supervision of strategic routes, direct bureaucratic administration remained limited in many mountainous districts. Ottoman governance consequently depended upon recognised local institutions that continued to regulate communal affairs, land use, seasonal pastures, customary obligations, and the resolution of local disputes. This coexistence of imperial administration and local practice created a layered system of authority in which provincial regulations operated alongside long-established regional institutions (İnalçık, 1973).

Accordingly, the administrative incorporation of South-Western Georgia represented a process of negotiated institutional adaptation rather than administrative uniformity. Ottoman sovereignty expanded through cooperation with established regional institutions, allowing local political traditions and communal structures to acquire new functions within the provincial system. This interaction produced a distinctive frontier administration that combined imperial authority with regional continuity and contributed to the long-term stability of Ottoman rule in South-Western Georgia.

Economic Reorientation and Frontier Networks

The incorporation of South-Western Georgia into the Ottoman provincial system significantly reoriented the regional economy without fundamentally altering its productive foundations. Agriculture, livestock breeding, viticulture, forestry, and local exchange had long sustained the economy of Adjara, Shavsheti, Klarjeti, Machakhela, and neighbouring districts. Ottoman administration did not create these economic activities but integrated them more closely into the commercial and fiscal networks of the Çıldır Pashalik. Economic transformation therefore consisted primarily of reorientation rather than replacement, linking established regional production to broader provincial and imperial markets.

This process was closely connected with the development of frontier communications. Roads linking Akhaltsikhe, Ardahan, Artvin, Erzurum, Trabzon, and the Black Sea coast became essential components of the Ottoman military-economic system. These routes carried commercial goods together with tax revenues, administrative correspondence, military supplies, and imperial forces, making economic exchange inseparable from frontier security. The protection of communications, customs stations, bridges, and mountain passes consequently became both a fiscal necessity and a strategic priority of provincial government (İnalçık, 1973).

Within this network, Akhaltsikhe occupied a central position. As the administrative capital of the Çıldır Pashalik, it also functioned as the principal commercial centre through which the agricultural and pastoral production of South-Western Georgia entered wider Ottoman markets. Livestock, grain, timber, fruit, wine, leather, and wool from the surrounding districts were exchanged for textiles, salt, manufactured goods, military equipment, and imported commodities arriving from Eastern Anatolia and the Black Sea. The concentration of customs duties, market taxation, and commercial activity substantially strengthened the fiscal resources of the provincial administration while reinforcing the strategic importance of the city.

The commercial corridors leading toward Erzurum and Trabzon further integrated the frontier economy into the wider Ottoman world. Erzurum connected the province with one of the principal administrative, military, and commercial centres of Eastern Anatolia, whereas Trabzon provided access to Black Sea maritime trade and long-distance commercial exchange. These routes redirected regional production toward imperial transport systems and enlarged the economic significance of South-Western Georgia without eliminating local patterns of production or exchange.

Economic integration, however, remained geographically uneven. Mountain communities continued to depend largely upon subsistence agriculture, seasonal pastoralism, forestry, and local markets, while participation in long-distance commerce varied according to accessibility, security, and political stability. Ottoman frontier administration therefore managed several interconnected economic systems simultaneously rather than imposing a single commercial model across the province. Georgian historiography has demonstrated that this differentiated

economic structure reflected both the geographical diversity of South-Western Georgia and the adaptive character of Ottoman provincial administration (Shengelia, 1974; Svanidze, 1998).

Accordingly, the incorporation of South-Western Georgia into the Ottoman provincial economy created an integrated frontier system in which commercial exchange, strategic communications, and fiscal administration became closely interconnected. Through the interaction of Akhaltsikhe, the Erzurum and Trabzon corridors, regional markets, and local production, the province evolved into one of the principal military-economic zones of Ottoman frontier administration while preserving the economic diversity of its mountainous districts.

Islamisation and Cultural Continuity

One of the most significant transformations in eighteenth-century Adjara and South-Western Georgia was the gradual expansion of Islam. This development, however, should not be interpreted as the direct consequence of conquest or as the result of a uniform state policy. Rather, Islamisation evolved through a long-term process shaped by political integration, fiscal obligations, military service, social mobility, and the incorporation of regional society into the institutional structures of the Çıldır Pashalik. Religious change therefore formed part of the broader transformation of frontier society rather than an isolated confessional phenomenon (Faroghi, 2004; Barkey, 2008).

Participation in the Ottoman administrative and military system often created practical incentives for conversion. Muslim affiliation facilitated access to provincial offices, military careers, patronage networks, and, in certain circumstances, more favourable fiscal conditions. At the same time, influential Georgian ruling houses that entered Ottoman service played an important role in this process. Their conversion encouraged similar developments among dependants, military followers, and local communities, although the pace and extent of religious change continued to vary according to local political, social, and geographical conditions.

Islamisation nevertheless remained uneven across South-Western Georgia. Mountainous terrain, dispersed settlements, enduring kinship structures, and the persistence of customary life moderated the pace of religious transformation, particularly in Adjara and neighbouring highland districts. Islamic institutions expanded gradually, while many elements of earlier communal practice continued to shape everyday life. Religious change therefore proceeded through adaptation within an existing social environment rather than through the abrupt replacement of established cultural traditions.

This process is central to understanding the relationship between religious affiliation and Georgian identity. Georgian historiography has consistently demonstrated that the spread of Islam did not eliminate the Georgian ethnic and cultural character of the population. The Georgian language remained the principal medium of everyday communication, historical memory preserved awareness of regional origins, and customary institutions continued to regulate family life, communal relations, and local traditions. Religious transformation and cultural continuity thus developed simultaneously rather than as mutually exclusive historical processes (Shengelia, 1974; *Studies in the History of South-Western Georgia: Adjara*, Vol. II, 2011).

Language played a particularly important role in preserving this continuity. Although Ottoman Turkish became increasingly significant in administration and Islamic religious practice introduced new terminology, Georgian remained dominant in local society and oral communication. Through language, communities preserved collective memory, local traditions, place names, genealogies, and patterns of social organisation that connected them with the historical development of South-Western Georgia.

Cultural continuity was equally evident in customary law, kinship organisation, settlement patterns, seasonal economic practices, domestic architecture, and everyday social customs. These traditions gradually adapted to the changing political and religious environment without disappearing. Ottoman institutions influenced regional society, yet they did not erase its historical foundations. Instead, local communities incorporated new religious and administrative practices into an already established cultural framework, producing a distinctive regional society shaped simultaneously by imperial integration and historical continuity.

Accordingly, Islamisation in eighteenth-century South-Western Georgia should be understood as a differentiated frontier process shaped by regional conditions rather than a uniform policy of religious transformation. While Ottoman political integration expanded Islamic institutions and participation in imperial administration, Georgian linguistic, cultural, and communal traditions remained resilient, producing a frontier society in which religious change and cultural continuity developed simultaneously. Social Transformation and Frontier Society

The incorporation of South-Western Georgia into the Ottoman provincial system reshaped the social organisation of the region without eliminating its historical foundations. Administrative integration, economic reorientation, military obligations, and the gradual spread of Islam transformed the distribution of authority and created new opportunities for political participation and social advancement. At the same time, communal institutions, kinship structures, customary practices, and Georgian cultural traditions continued to influence everyday life. The resulting frontier society therefore emerged through the interaction of institutional change and regional continuity rather than through the replacement of one social order by another.

A defining feature of this transformation was the emergence of a layered social hierarchy. At the provincial level, authority was exercised by the pasha and the administrative institutions of Akhaltsikhe. Beneath them, Georgian ruling houses—including the Khimshiashvilis, Abashidzes, Jaqelis, and other regional notables—performed military, fiscal, judicial, and political functions on behalf of the provincial government. Village communities, kinship leaders, religious figures, and customary institutions retained important responsibilities in regulating local affairs. Authority therefore operated simultaneously at imperial, provincial, regional, and communal levels, creating a frontier society characterised by institutional interdependence rather than administrative uniformity.

Within this structure, local elites assumed increasing importance. Their influence no longer depended exclusively upon hereditary status but also upon their ability to fulfil military obligations, collect revenues, supervise communications, mediate conflicts, and cooperate with provincial authorities. Service within the Ottoman administrative and military system became an important mechanism of social mobility, enabling individuals and families to strengthen their political and economic position while reinforcing the stability of frontier administration. Georgian historiography has emphasised that this process transformed rather than displaced the traditional social order of South-Western Georgia (Shengelia, 1974; Svanidze, 1998).

Adjara illustrates these developments particularly clearly. The region's mountainous geography, strategic communications, and influential ruling families fostered a social structure in which imperial institutions and local authority remained closely interconnected. The expansion of military responsibilities, commercial exchange, and provincial administration increased the political significance of regional elites, while village communities and customary practices continued to shape social organisation. Consequently, Adjara became one of the clearest examples of the adaptive character of Ottoman frontier governance in the South Caucasus.

These developments produced a frontier society that differed both from the neighbouring Georgian kingdoms and from the more centralised provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Imperial administration, local political authority, communal organisation, economic integration, and gradual religious transformation did not function as competing systems but became mutually reinforcing elements of regional governance. Ottoman institutions acquired greater flexibility through cooperation with local society, while regional traditions adapted to new administrative and political conditions.

Accordingly, the eighteenth-century development of Adjara and South-Western Georgia illustrates a distinctive model of Ottoman frontier governance in which political integration, social transformation, economic adaptation, religious change, and cultural continuity evolved simultaneously. The durability of Ottoman rule rested not upon uniform centralisation but upon the successful integration of regional elites, communal institutions, and established local traditions into the provincial system.

V. The Çıldır Pashalik at the Turn of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: Political Legacy and Historical Transformation

5.1. Geopolitical Transformation and the Russian Challenge

By the closing decades of the eighteenth century, the Çıldır Pashalik entered a fundamentally new geopolitical environment. For more than two centuries, its strategic role had been shaped primarily by the Ottoman–Safavid rivalry, serving as one of the principal frontier institutions through which the Ottoman Empire defended Eastern Anatolia, maintained influence in South-Western Georgia, and safeguarded the eastern approaches of the empire. The gradual expansion of Russian political and military power, however, transformed the strategic logic upon which this frontier system had been built. The principal challenge to Ottoman authority no longer originated from Persia but from a rapidly expanding empire seeking permanent influence in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region (Aksan, 2007).

This transition represented more than a change in external rivalry. It marked the emergence of a new geopolitical order in which the South Caucasus became an arena of Ottoman–Russian competition extending beyond the traditional frontier. The region was increasingly integrated into wider strategic developments linking the northern Black Sea, the North Caucasus, Eastern Georgia, and Eastern Anatolia. Consequently, the Çıldır Pashalik ceased to function merely as a defensive province on the Persian frontier and became one of the principal Ottoman positions confronting Russian expansion.

The transformation became particularly evident after the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774), which fundamentally altered the balance of power in the Black Sea basin. Although the treaty did not directly determine the future of the South Caucasus, it demonstrated Russia's growing military superiority and weakened the strategic position of the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman frontier policy increasingly shifted from territorial expansion toward the preservation of existing influence, requiring the eastern provinces to assume greater military and political responsibilities (Aksan, 2007).

The Treaty of Georgievsk (1783) further accelerated this transformation by placing the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti under Russian protection. For the first time, Russian influence acquired a permanent institutional foundation within Eastern Georgia, substantially changing the regional balance of power. Ottoman authorities now faced a strategic challenge extending directly toward the eastern approaches of the Çıldır Pashalik. Akhaltsikhe, Ardahan, Kars, Adjara, and neighbouring frontier districts consequently assumed increased importance as defensive, administrative, and diplomatic centres (Lang, 1957; Suny, 1994).

The emergence of this new geopolitical order required a corresponding adjustment in Ottoman frontier policy. Provincial security could no longer depend solely upon fortresses, regular garrisons, and the established administrative hierarchy. Effective defence increasingly relied upon cooperation with regional ruling houses capable of mobilising military forces, protecting strategic communications, maintaining local political loyalty, and responding rapidly to external threats. The institutional flexibility that had characterised Ottoman frontier governance throughout the eighteenth century therefore became even more significant under the growing pressure of Russian expansion (Faroqi, 2004; Barkey, 2008).

At the same time, Russia sought to cultivate its own political networks throughout the Caucasus by combining diplomacy, military protection, and alliances with Georgian rulers. Local elites increasingly found themselves operating within a competitive geopolitical environment in which both empires attempted to secure their cooperation. Questions of political allegiance, military support, and regional authority thus acquired broader international significance, linking the internal politics of South-Western Georgia with the wider imperial rivalry unfolding across the Caucasus.

Accordingly, the final decades of the eighteenth century should be understood as a decisive turning point in the history of the Çıldır Pashalik. The province did not lose its strategic importance; rather, its frontier functions were fundamentally redefined. Institutions originally developed to manage the Ottoman–Persian frontier were progressively adapted to confront the geopolitical realities created by Russian expansion. This transition

established the political framework that would shape the military, administrative, and diplomatic history of South-Western Georgia during the opening decades of the nineteenth century.

5.2. Internal Political Transformation of the Çıldır Pashalik

The changing geopolitical environment of the late eighteenth century profoundly affected the internal organisation of the Çıldır Pashalik. As Russian expansion intensified the strategic importance of the South Caucasus, Ottoman frontier administration increasingly relied upon institutional flexibility rather than greater bureaucratic centralisation. The province continued to operate under the formal authority of the sultan and the pasha of Akhaltsikhe, yet the effective implementation of imperial policy depended more than ever upon cooperation with regional ruling houses, fiscal intermediaries, and local military leaders. Internal political transformation therefore reflected adaptation to new strategic conditions rather than the weakening of Ottoman sovereignty (Faroghi, 2004; Barkey, 2008).

Within this evolving system, the Khimshiashvilis, Jaqelis, Abashidzes, and other influential families assumed an increasingly important role in provincial government. Their authority rested not only upon hereditary prestige but also upon their capacity to mobilise military forces, secure communication routes, collect revenues, provision frontier fortresses, and maintain political stability. The Ottoman administration relied upon these regional resources because the mountainous terrain, dispersed settlements, and growing external pressures limited the effectiveness of direct bureaucratic control. Consequently, local ruling houses became institutional partners in the exercise of frontier governance rather than merely auxiliary supporters of provincial administration.

This transformation produced a system of negotiated hierarchy. Formal authority remained concentrated in the office of the pasha, who retained responsibility for military command, fiscal administration, judicial oversight, and political appointments. In practice, however, the implementation of provincial policy required continuous cooperation with regional elites whose local legitimacy and military capabilities extended Ottoman authority beyond the principal administrative centres. Provincial governance therefore functioned through reciprocal obligations, political negotiation, and the distribution of responsibilities rather than through uniform administrative command.

The same adaptive logic characterised fiscal administration. Growing military expenditure, the maintenance of fortresses, and the defence of an increasingly contested frontier required more flexible methods of revenue mobilisation. Tax farming, customs income, local contributions, and the participation of provincial intermediaries acquired greater importance alongside the traditional fiscal institutions of the empire (Darling, 1996). These developments strengthened the economic position of regional ruling houses, whose involvement in taxation, provisioning, transport, and local administration linked fiscal resources directly with the strategic needs of frontier defence.

Fiscal adaptation was inseparable from a broader military-fiscal transformation. Military security depended increasingly upon locally mobilised resources rather than solely upon regular imperial forces. Frontier fortifications, transport networks, mountain passes, supply routes, and regional communications required continuous logistical support that provincial authorities could provide only through cooperation with local society. Military obligations, fiscal responsibilities, and political authority thus became progressively integrated within a single institutional framework, reinforcing the resilience of the Çıldır Pashalik under conditions of mounting external pressure (Aksan, 2007; Ágoston, 2021).

This system nevertheless contained inherent tensions. The increasing reliance of the Ottoman administration upon regional intermediaries enhanced their political influence while simultaneously limiting the capacity of provincial authorities to impose direct bureaucratic control. Families that commanded military manpower, controlled strategic territories, and administered important fiscal resources acquired greater leverage within provincial politics. Yet their authority remained conditional upon imperial recognition, official appointments, and continued service to the Ottoman state. The relationship between provincial government and regional elites therefore remained one of institutional interdependence rather than political autonomy.

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Accordingly, the internal transformation of the Çıldır Pashalik should be understood as an adaptive response to the changing geopolitical realities of the late eighteenth century. Ottoman provincial administration preserved imperial sovereignty while reorganising the practical distribution of political, military, and fiscal responsibilities through cooperation with regional ruling houses. The integration of negotiated hierarchy, fiscal adaptation, and military-fiscal organisation enabled the province to maintain strategic resilience at a time when the balance of power in the South Caucasus was undergoing fundamental change.

5.3. Regional Power, Frontier Society, and Historical Legacy

The transformation of the Çıldır Pashalik at the turn of the nineteenth century reshaped not only the political organisation of the province but also the wider structure of frontier society in South-Western Georgia. Although external pressures increasingly originated from Russian expansion, the institutional foundations of Ottoman rule remained deeply rooted in the regional administrative, military, and fiscal system that had developed throughout the eighteenth century. The resilience of the province therefore depended upon the interaction of imperial institutions with established regional centres of authority rather than upon military force or bureaucratic administration alone.

Within this system, Akhaltsikhe retained its position as the political and administrative centre of the pashalik. The city coordinated provincial government, military command, fiscal administration, and diplomatic relations while linking the frontier districts with the wider institutions of the Ottoman Empire. As geopolitical competition intensified, Akhaltsikhe increasingly functioned as the principal centre from which Ottoman authorities organised frontier defence, supervised regional elites, and coordinated strategic communications across South-Western Georgia.

The surrounding frontier districts acquired complementary strategic functions. Adjara became increasingly important because of its mountain passes, local military resources, and control of communications between the Black Sea coast and the interior of the pashalik. The growing influence of the Khimshiashvili family reflected the broader strategic significance of the region within Ottoman frontier policy. Ardahan, together with neighbouring districts, strengthened the eastern defensive system through its fortifications, transport routes, pastoral resources, and connections with Kars and Erzurum. These regional functions demonstrate that the effectiveness of the Çıldır Pashalik derived from the coordinated operation of several interconnected frontier zones rather than from the predominance of a single administrative centre.

This regional organisation rested upon institutions developed over generations of frontier administration. Military mobilisation, fiscal adaptation, delegated authority, negotiated cooperation, and the integration of Georgian ruling houses had become structural elements of provincial government. These institutions enabled Ottoman authorities to respond flexibly to changing geopolitical conditions while preserving administrative continuity in a strategically sensitive borderland. Georgian historiography has demonstrated that such arrangements represented enduring characteristics of Ottoman rule in South-Western Georgia rather than temporary responses to political crisis (Shengelia, 1974; Svanidze, 1998).

The political legacy of the Çıldır Pashalik therefore extended beyond its formal administrative existence. Regional ruling houses strengthened under Ottoman rule continued to influence the political development of South-Western Georgia during the nineteenth century, while the institutional practices of negotiated authority, military cooperation, fiscal mediation, and local participation shaped subsequent relations between imperial governments and regional society. The province thus transmitted a durable political culture in which imperial sovereignty operated through institutional partnership with recognised local authority.

This legacy also characterised the frontier society that emerged in South-Western Georgia. Ottoman administrative structures, Islamic institutions, Georgian cultural traditions, hereditary leadership, and communal organisation did not develop independently but became mutually reinforcing components of regional life. The resulting political order differed both from the central provinces of the Ottoman Empire and from the

neighbouring Georgian kingdoms, reflecting the distinctive historical experience of a frontier region situated between competing imperial systems.

Accordingly, the historical significance of the Çıldır Pashalik cannot be measured solely by its territorial extent or military role. Its principal legacy lay in the institutional model of frontier governance that it developed and sustained. By integrating provincial administration, military organisation, fiscal adaptation, and regional political authority within a single administrative framework, the pashalik created a flexible system capable of responding to profound geopolitical transformation. This institutional synthesis connected the Ottoman–Safavid frontier of the early modern period with the Ottoman–Russian confrontation of the nineteenth century and constituted one of the principal mechanisms through which Ottoman authority shaped the historical development of South-Western Georgia and the wider South Caucasus.

Key Findings

1. The Çıldır Pashalik functioned as a distinctive institution of Ottoman frontier governance that integrated military defence, fiscal administration, provincial authority, and cooperation with regional ruling houses into a coherent system of imperial control.
2. Ottoman authority in the South Caucasus rested primarily on institutional adaptation rather than direct bureaucratic centralisation. Frontier stability was maintained through negotiated cooperation in which Georgian ruling families became integral participants in provincial government, military organisation, and fiscal administration.
3. The strategic role of the Çıldır Pashalik evolved in response to changing geopolitical conditions. Originally established to secure the Ottoman–Safavid frontier, by the late eighteenth century it had become one of the principal Ottoman institutions confronting Russian expansion in the Caucasus.
4. The province's military-fiscal organisation demonstrates that frontier governance depended upon the integration of economic resources with military preparedness. The interaction of the timar system, expanding iltizam practices, customs revenues, and regional resource mobilisation provided the financial foundations of Ottoman frontier security.
5. The historical development of Adjara and South-Western Georgia demonstrates that imperial incorporation did not eliminate regional institutions. Ottoman administration strengthened frontier governance by adapting existing political structures, communal organisation, and local leadership to the requirements of provincial administration.
6. The Çıldır Pashalik demonstrates that frontier regions should be understood as dynamic political systems rather than passive imperial peripheries. Their development resulted from the interaction of imperial institutions, regional elites, and changing geopolitical conditions, making frontier governance a central mechanism of Ottoman state adaptation in the South Caucasus.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Çıldır Pashalik was far more than an Ottoman provincial administration. Throughout the eighteenth century, it functioned as a distinctive institution of frontier governance through which the Ottoman Empire integrated military security, fiscal administration, provincial authority, and cooperation with regional ruling houses into a coherent system of imperial control. Its historical significance therefore derived not simply from its administrative status but from its capacity to adapt imperial governance to the political and geographical realities of the South Caucasus.

The analysis confirms that the geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus resulted from its position at the intersection of the Black Sea, Eastern Anatolia, Iran, and the Caspian basin. As the regional balance of power evolved from Ottoman–Safavid rivalry to increasing Ottoman–Russian competition, the strategic functions of the Çıldır Pashalik were fundamentally redefined. Rather than declining in importance, the province adapted to a changing international environment and became one of the principal Ottoman institutions responsible for managing the empire's north-eastern frontier.

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The study further demonstrates that Ottoman authority in South-Western Georgia depended upon institutional flexibility rather than bureaucratic centralisation alone. Cooperation with influential Georgian ruling houses—including the Jaqelis, Khimshiashvilis, and Abashidzes—formed an essential element of provincial government. Their participation in military mobilisation, fiscal administration, judicial mediation, and regional governance strengthened frontier stability while enabling imperial institutions to operate effectively within a geographically complex borderland. At the same time, the interaction of the timar legacy, expanding iltizam practices, customs revenues, and local resource mobilisation provided the military-fiscal foundations that sustained Ottoman authority throughout the eighteenth century.

A further conclusion of this research is that the incorporation of Adjara and South-Western Georgia into the Ottoman Empire should not be understood as a process of simple administrative integration or cultural replacement. Ottoman rule developed through the selective adaptation of existing regional institutions, communal structures, and local political traditions. Administrative change, economic reorientation, religious transformation, and cultural continuity evolved simultaneously, producing a frontier society in which imperial sovereignty and regional authority became structurally interconnected.

The principal scholarly contribution of this article lies in its interpretation of the Çıldır Pashalik as an institutional model of frontier governance rather than as a conventional Ottoman province. By integrating Georgian historiography with contemporary scholarship on Ottoman provincial administration and borderland studies, the research demonstrates that frontier provinces functioned as dynamic political systems in which imperial institutions, regional elites, military-fiscal organisation, and international geopolitical change continuously interacted. This perspective contributes not only to the history of Ottoman South-Western Georgia but also to broader debates on imperial governance, frontier societies, and state adaptation in the early modern Caucasus.

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