Types of Hunting in Medieval Georgia

Macharashvili Tristan, PhD
The University of Georgia
Tamaz Beradze Institute of Georgian Studies
Tbilisi, Georgia

ORCID: 0009-0005-4367-8385

ABSTRACT

In medieval Georgia, hunting was regulated by the state. The planning of a hunting session called 'hunting campaign' was overseen by a board of the military department. In contrast, all matters related to 'royal hunting' were managed by a special unit with a large staff. Initially, this unit was led by a chief royal huntsman, and later by a chief falconer, whose rights and du-ties were strictly defined. Two types of hunting are recognized in Georgian historiography: "state hunting" and "common hunting". Additionally, a third type can be identified – "royal hunting". In feudal Georgia, the term "hunting campaign" referred to large-scale hunts organized by a king or a feudal lord. The entire population capable of using weapons participated in these hunts. It closely resembled a military campaign, and kings themselves viewed hunting in this way, resulting in similar treatment of campaigns and hunts in court reg-ulations. Participation in state hunting was seen as an expression of vassal loy-alty to the lord. This duty was referred to as "campaign-hunting" in Georgia. "Royal hunting" refers to the form of hunting where the king's hunters, under the direction of the chief huntsman, would hunt and supply the court with prey. There was a special office within the court dedicated to this task. In the 14th century, 260 houses of the king's hunters were spread across the country, all of which were subordinate to the chief huntsman. Throughout the year, these hunters primarily resided either at the court or in special palaces ar-ranged on the king's designated "hunting sites", where they were responsible for providing the court with game. "Common hunting" refers to hunting prac-ticed by representatives of the lower classes, typically targeting small animals and birds. While this form of hunting was not prohibited, it often required obtaining a hunting "permit," which was granted upon payment of a special hunting tax known as the "lord's tax."

Keywords: Hunting, chief huntsman, royal hunting, hunting campaign, lord's tax

DOI: https://doi.org/10.62343/cjss.2025.258
Received: May 15, 2024; Received in revised form: May 16, 2025; Accepted: October 27, 2025

INTRODUCTION

In Georgian historiography, medieval Georgian hunting practices are generally divided into "state hunting," also referred to as the "hunting campaign," and "common hunting." This study seeks to identify an additional form of hunting, "royal hunting." This distinction is particularly emphasized in K. Chkhataraishvili's work *"Essays on the History of Military Affairs in Feudal Georgia."* Accordingly, this discussion primarily relies on that work.

In Georgian historiography, Ivane Javakhishvili was the first to take an interest in hunting. Drawing on the *Regulations of the Royal Court*, he described the roles of the chief huntsman and rangers. Javakhishvili suggested that in feudal Georgia, hunting was viewed as "a certain kind of military and campaign training, where the human eye and hand became accustomed to skilful shooting, enduring hardships, and brisk action" (Javakhishvili, 1982, pp. 323-324). M. Tsurtsumia concurs with this opinion, noting that "in medieval times, hunting was a kind of 'school of war.' While hunting, participants not only became physically tougher but also tested weapons in real situations. They learned how to use weapons (especially the bow) and developed skills in interaction and communication with others" (Tsurtsumia, 2016, pp. 94-95).

A. Robakidze's work *Vestiges of Collective Hunting in Racha* holds significant value in the study of hunting. The author provides a brief overview of the history of hunting in Georgia and the natural environment in which it occurred. He investigates the material aspects of hunting, focusing on clothing, armament, traps, and other related items. Robakidze also discusses the organization of hunting and its significance for sport and education. Furthermore, the researcher emphasizes the connection between hunting and military affairs, viewing hunting as a state obligation (Robakidze, 1941, pp. 148-151).

In his works *On the History of Georgian State and Law* and *State Taxes in the Kingdom of Kartli at the Beginning of the 18th Century*, I. Surguladze suggests that "in feudal times, hunting was an activity of the ruling class, with both military and household/domestic significance."

K. Chkhataraishvili dedicated a special chapter to the study of the history of hunting in his work *Essays on the History of Military Affairs in Feudal Georgia*. In this chapter, he highlights the place and role of hunting as both a vassal duty and a military activity, examining its significance in the organization of military affairs in a feudal state.

In the study of hunting in Georgia, significant contributions have also been made by N. Shoshitaishvili, R. Gujejiani, S. Chanturishvili, M. Tsurtsumia, E. Bzarashvili, A. Narimanishvili, Z. Kinkladze, and others.

METHODS

The study relies on research methods widely accepted in historical scholarship, including content analysis of sources, the historical-comparative method, critical reflection on empirical material, and analysis and collation.

RESULTS

In medieval Georgia, hunting was under state control. The organization of the 'hunting campaign' was supervised by the military body, while all matters related to royal hunting were managed by a special unit with a large staff. This unit was initially headed by the chief huntsman and later by the chief falconer, whose duties were clearly defined.

Two types of hunting are recognized in Georgian historiography: "state hunting" and "common hunting". Additionally, a third type can be identified – "royal hunting".

"Royal hunting" refers to the practice in which the king's hunters, under the direction of the chief huntsman, would hunt and supply the court with prey.

DISCUSSION

In Georgia, as in medieval Western Europe, state hunting, or the "hunting campaign," was distinctly separated from "common hunting." Additionally, another type can be identified, "royal hunting."

In medieval Georgia, the planning of the "hunting campaign" was overseen by the board of the military department (Chkhataraishvili, 1979, p. 157). Meanwhile, all matters related to "royal hunting" were managed by a special unit with a large staff, headed by a chief royal huntsman, whose rights and duties were strictly defined (Dolidze, 1965, p. 302).

In feudal Georgia, the term "hunting campaign" referred to large-scale hunts organized by the king or a feudal lord. Participation was open to people from across the country who were eligible to bear arms. The preparation for hunting closely resembled that of a military campaign. Kings viewed hunting as a form of campaign, and the court regulations treated both military campaigns and hunting affairs similarly: gathering the army, dividing it into units, marching the army before the hunt, and so on (Surguladze, 1952a, p. 342).

As a rule, participants went hunting armed as if preparing for a campaign. Basil, the royal housekeeper, notes that when border guards informed Queen Tamar of the need for a military campaign while she was away hunting, she permitted them to depart and immediately dispatched them to war (Kaukhchishvili, 1959, p. 130). This account indicates that the campaigners were fully prepared for battle and would proceed directly to war without delay.

Pridon's hunts in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* serve as a clear example of a hunting campaign. His entire army participates in the hunt; they lay siege to a field, and Pridon climbs a hill in the field with forty archers, from where they shoot at the game (Rustaveli, 1938, p.178).

Archangelo Lamberti provides a detailed description of state hunting in the Odishi Principality. Although this account dates from the first half of the 17th century, the rules of hunting are likely to have been similar in earlier centuries as well: "The ruler invites all the nobles of Odishi, who arrive for the occasion mounted on the finest horses and dressed in their best attire. The day before, they bang drums, and all the hunters gather, heading into the woods

with their dogs to lay siege. They frighten the game with noise and the barking of the dogs, driving it far from the designated hunting site… On the following day, the chief huntsman assigns positions to the hunters, who wait for the driven game with bow and arrow… When the game approaches, each hunter gallops forward, draws the bowstring, and shoots an arrow… This is how they hunt until evening." (Lamberti, 1938, p. 59; Chkhataraishvili, 1979, p. 160).

The "hunting campaign" was a vassalage duty, and all campaigners, regardless of their rank or title, were obliged to participate. Given its significance, the king never excused anyone from this obligation, except for the elderly and those physically incapable of participating. Failure to participate in the state hunt was equated with avoiding a military campaign and was regarded as desertion, a punishable offense (Chkhataraishvili, 1979, p. 157).

Throughout the Middle Ages, the population of Georgia was required to participate in hunting. The letter laying out the Shiomghvime tax, compiled between 893 and 918, states: "One day each year is designated for hunting, with the tax being two dishes, two loaves of bread, and two jugs of wine per person" (Dolidze, 1965, p. 4). Once a year, during the hunt, the village was obligated to provide the hunters with the food and drink specified in the document. Additionally, participation in the hunt was mandatory, as stated in the 1562 deed of King Alexander: "All of the young men from Kartli, Kakheti, and Imereti are obliged to accompany you both in campaigns and hunting" (Dolidze, 1965, p. 191). The compulsory participation in the hunt, viewed as a form of tax, remained common in Georgia for the following centuries as well.

As noted in Georgian historiography (Chkhataraishvili and others), alongside Rustaveli and Archangelo Lamberti, the hunting campaign is also described in the *Rusudaniani* and in the works of Parsadan Gorgijanidze, Archil, Peshangi Khitarishvili, Vakhtang VI, Teimuraz II, Sekhnia Chkheidze, Papuna Orbeliani, and Vakhtang Batonishvili.

The hunting campaign was no longer organized after the reign of Teimuraz II (Batonishvili, 1914, p. 9). K. Chkhataraishvili attributes this to the obsolescence of the feudal army and the emergence of the concept of a regular army. In fact, with the creation of a standing army, regular training began, and as a result, the hunting campaign lost its previous significance.

State hunting was widely popular in Western Europe and some countries of the East, where kings and great lords organized hunts that resembled military events – a campaign. Such hunts often lasted for days or weeks. "Everywhere, in Europe and in the Far East, hunting and military affairs were inseparable" (Tsurtsumia, 2016, p. 95). Participation in hunting was an expression of the vassalage relationship with the patron. In Georgia, this duty was referred to as "campaign hunting." When King Alexander II of Imereti subordinated the lords of Samegrelo and Guria, he obliged them to participate in state hunts alongside military campaigns: "He subordinated the Dadianis, Gurielis, and other nobles, to serve him in campaigns, hunts, and other services" (Vakhushti, 1973, p. 807). This account indicates that, in addition to participating in military campaigns, the lord was also required to take part in hunting. Avoiding this duty was seen as a denial of the king's sovereignty and authority.

Participation in the state hunt was also mandatory for church serfs, who were often exempt from other state obligations and taxes. King Alexander's book of obligations for the

Mtskheta division, dated to the 16th century, states that the Catholicosate serfs were required to accompany the Catholicos and stand under the king's flag during both campaigns and hunting (Dolidze, 1965, p. 191). The same is mentioned in the Svetitskhoveli deed of Alexander II, which specifies that church serfs were exempt from all duties except for participating in campaign hunting and watching the enemy (Dolidze, 1965, p. 201).

State hunts were often organized in honour of distinguished guests. Hunting played an important role during the visits of foreign ambassadors. For instance, Queen Tamar arranged a hunting session specifically to honour Mutafradin (Kaukhchishvili, 1959, p. 429) and Sharvanshah (Kaukhchishvili, 1959, p. 420).

"Royal hunting" refers to a form of hunting in which, at the order of the chief huntsman, the king's hunters would hunt and supply the court with game. Game meat formed an important part of the royal court's menu and was provided regularly. Consequently, the organization of the royal hunt was the responsibility of the chief huntsman.

The organization of the hunting unit is outlined in the *Regulations of the Royal Court* (Dolidze, 1965, pp. 80, 88). The position of the head of the unit, the chief huntsman, was highly respected and came with special privileges. During the New Year ceremony, the chief huntsman had the exclusive right to dress the king: "No one else can dress the king except for him" (Surguladze, 1970, p. 32). The chief huntsman would cover the king's head and neck with a yellow cloak and place a tall, tight upon him (Dolidze, 1965, p. 80).

Based on the account from the *Regulations of the Royal Court*, which states, "they were seated on a tall chair in front of the wine cellar, and a table with a boiled boar's head on it was placed in front of them" (Surguladze, 1970, p. 32), some Georgian historians (Chkhataraishvili, 1979, p. 173, and others) suggest that the chief huntsman occupied a prominent place at the New Year table – seated in front of the wine cellar, at the head of the table. However, the tall chair in front of the wine cellar was actually designated for the king, not for the huntsman. The huntsman would take a piece of barbeque from the table, return to the king, and ask where he would like the hunters to go the following day. After receiving the king's instructions and drinking a glass of wine offered by him, the huntsman would eat the meat, drink the wine, and only then take his seat (Dolidze, 1965, p. 80). It turns out that the table was placed for the king, rather than for the huntsman, who was assigned a seat elsewhere. However, the huntsman's role at the New Year table was distinct. Rangers and the king's hunters occupied seats near the chief huntsman, indicating their special position. It was during this time that they were registered to confirm whether all had arrived to serve the king. The royal hunts were always organized in connection with the New Year's celebration. According to the *Regulations of the Royal Court*, at the New Year's feast, the chief huntsman would ask where to hunt the following day, and the king would indicate his preferred location (Dolidze, 1965, p. 80).

In Georgia, accounts about the king's hunters have been preserved both in historical sources and through oral tradition. The earliest account that has reached us dates from the 12th century: "Our hunters are not allowed to stay in any other village, as our father Demetre secured the village of Kanda from the Shio Mghvime Monastery to serve as the hunters'

encampment. Instead, we will provide the monastery with other territories. The village of Kanda is where the hunters' encampment is located." (Dolidze, 1965, p. 23). As it appears from the deed, hunters had been present with King Demetre I even earlier. The village of Kanda served as the accommodation for hunters. It should be presumed that such hunters existed in early medieval times as well.

In the 14th century, the chief huntsman was responsible for 260 houses of royal hunters across the country: "there are hunters in Kakheti and Imereti, a total of 260 houses" (Dolidze, 1965, p. 88). These were professional hunters, and the fact that they are mentioned separately highlights the special necessity of their occupation, which they were paid for from the state budget (wages): "They were paid three tetri each upon release and, in addition, were given six skins on Meat Sunday" (Dolidze, 1965, p. 88). They were also entitled to a share of the obligatory payment, which took the form of a tax.

According to I. Javakhishvili, "Kakheti and Imereti were famous for their hunting areas… hunters were chosen from these two regions" (Javakhishvili, 1982, p. 323). However, this likely refers to the entire country, as Kartli also had equally rich hunting grounds. David's chronicler notes: "The river-bank groves of Kartli were full of deer and boars" (Kaukhchishvili, 1955, pp. 324-325). In fact, it was not just the groves that were renowned for their abundance of game in Kartli; other such sites likely existed as well.

The king's hunters held the title of servant-campaigners and "were not involved in farming: hunting requires special knowledge and skills, and it continues throughout the year." As a result, they would not have had time for agricultural work, although their family members would have been occupied with household tasks. Hunters served kings or feudal lords personally. The position of hunter, along with their estate, was passed down to their successors, and they were exempt from agriculture-related taxes. K. Chkhataraishvili suggests that they were subject to a special, distinct judicial procedure – due to their status and their close relationship with the ruler, the price of life for hunters and other officials in this role would have been high (Chkhataraishvili, 1979, pp. 180, 183).

At the order of the chief huntsman, the king's hunters would gather at the royal court annually, in late fall, on the day of St. George (November 23) and remain there until spring, until the first Saturday of Lent. During this time, they likely went hunting, particularly after the Christmas celebration, once the fast had ended. In addition to hunting, the hunters were occupied with taking care of the dogs and other related tasks. They were provided with food and were given the skins of the game killed at the royal court. On St. Theodore's Day (the first Sunday of Lent), "they were paid three tetri each upon release and, in addition, were given six skins on Meat Sunday."

Before leaving the palace, the hunters would register and distribute the dogs. "A clerk would set aside three or four dogs for the king. Then, they would select one – either a Berdzuli or a greyhound. Twelve dogs would be assigned to three hunters for feeding, and another twelve to three other hunters. Afterward, the hunters would be released from the palace." (Dolidze, 1965, pp. 88-89).

The document does not specify the total number of dogs or their ownership. However, one thing is clear: the clerk would select three or four of the best dogs for the king, keeping one for himself as payment for his services, while six hunters were allotted twenty-four dogs to care for. It is likely that the overall number of dogs was much higher, but the ownership and caretakers of the remaining dogs remain unclear. Furthermore, the purpose of the dogs selected for the king is intriguing. Since no hunters remained at the court to use them, it is likely these dogs were assigned to guard the entrance.

Before leaving, on the Monday after St. Theodore's Day, before dawn, hunters would present "lamps" to the king, queen, their children, viziers, and treasurers. In return, the king, queen, viziers, and other officials would offer them bread, wine, and meat. The hunters would then approach the official in charge of gifts and wine (Dolidze, 1965, p. 89). If they were hosted correctly, the hunters would not offend the official; however, in other cases, they would not hesitate to swear at them (Dolidze, 1965, p. 89).

Afterward, the hunters performed a round dance and concluded the farewell ceremony with a feast. The feast does not appear to have been held at the royal court; it was likely arranged at a specially designated location, where the "offering" was transferred. Royal hunters probably went from the court to special accommodations arranged for them near the palace.

"Such palaces were built at royal hunting grounds, and kings stayed there during the hunting season." Fenced hunting areas, known as *philopats*, were located near these palaces (Kaukhchishvili, 1955, p. 64). There was also a designated area for gathering the game. The *Vita* of Serapion of Zarzma mentions that when Serapion inquires about a woody and rocky site, his guide responds: "This is a place for gathering the game, and it is called *bakta* (a compound for carts)" (Chanturishvili, 2011, pp. 70-73).

The king's hunters, hunting dogs, and birds of prey were provided with food by the population of the villages allocated to the hunting palaces. Kanda was one such village. However, it seems that hunters also stayed in other villages, which is why the king specifically emphasized that they were to stay at Kanda, where their accommodations were, rather than in other villages (Dolidze, 1965, p. 23). This indicates that the king found it necessary to explicitly instruct the hunters to remain at the designated locations, rather than at other places. It suggests that the hunters were quite insolent, as further evidenced by the Regulations of the Royal Court. In particular, during the court farewell ceremony, when performing the round dance, officers who failed to make offerings were cursed and sworn at: "Those who have not made offerings are sworn at" (Dolidze, 1965, p. 89).

The king's hunters played a crucial role in the hunting campaign, as they were professionals always ready to perform any task related to hunting. However, their primary duty was to provide the royal court with game. Extensive accounts in the *Regulations of the Royal Court* clearly demonstrate that having the king's hunters at the court was considered essential.

State hunting ("hunting campaign") and "royal hunting" can be considered forms of "high hunting." At the same time, in earlier times, so-called "common hunting," as well as hunting with traps and hawks, was also very popular in Georgia.

A similar situation existed in other countries: common, or lowly, hunting was reserved for the lower classes. Anyone could hunt small animals and birds, although complete bans on hunting were also frequently imposed.

Apparently, in Georgia, the appropriation of hunting areas and the prohibition of free hunting began in the 10th century. Basil of Zarzma describes an incident in which Giorgi Chorchaneli, while hunting in the Tskhrocha woods, was surprised to see smoke rising from the forest and remarked, "Who dares hunt for the game?" (Abuladze, 1963, p. 325). This suggests that no one was allowed to hunt in his domain without permission.

According to the same Basil of Zarzma, at the time, favorable hunting grounds on the territory adjacent to Goderdzi Pass were in common ownership, and everyone could go hunting there: …because at the time, hunters gathered here from various estates and villages." (Abuladze, 1963, p. 325).

According to Archangelo Lamberti, in Samegrelo, "hunting woods are distributed in such a way that each lord has their own hunting grounds, where no one can hunt without their permission. Even though the lord is the ruler of all, he himself cannot hunt in others' lands, as he has established a strict law prohibiting hunting in his own woods, and no one dares to break the law."

A special payment – the "hunting tax" or "lord's tax" – was introduced to obtain permission for hunting in protected hunting grounds. In Imereti and Guria, lords did not forbid their serfs from hunting and fishing on their estates, but the peasants were required to give a portion of their catch to their ruler. The right to hunt in church woods was owned by the church, but peasants belonging to the church were allowed to hunt in these woods for a certain payment (Chkhataraishvili, 1979, pp. 190-191).

In Western Europe, breaking hunting regulations was strictly punishable: offenders could be executed or have a hand amputated, among other penalties. However, there are no accounts of such punishments in Georgia, and it is likely that cases were resolved through fines, either in products or money. Compensation through labour cannot be excluded either.

In feudal Georgia, hunting was an auxiliary branch of the economy and, in the 11th -15th centuries, it served as a significant means of subsistence for the population.

The meat of the game was primarily consumed raw, but curing was also standard, especially in the highlands. The meat of mountain goats, Alpine chamois, deer, wild boar, and other animals and birds was typically cured.

In addition to its role as an auxiliary food source, game meat served various purposes after being processed. Bear skins were used to line mattresses or cover other items, while bear fat was applied to grease weapons and treat scabies. Gall mixed with water was used to treat gastrointestinal diseases. Scabies was also cured with wolf fat. The smoked and dried gullet of a wolf was used as a remedy for swine plague. Knife and sword handles, as well as drinking vessels, were made from the horns of the prey. According to Vakhushti, similar to the population of Mtiuleti, the people of Gudamakari made bows from the horns of mountain goats and oxen (Vakhushti, 1973, p. 354; Robakidze, 1941, p. 142).

CONCLUSION

Thus, in medieval Georgia, hunting was under state control. The organization of the 'hunting campaign' was supervised by the military body. In contrast, all matters related to royal hunting were managed by a special unit with a large staff, initially headed by the chief huntsman and later by the chief falconer, whose duties were clearly defined.

Participation in state hunting was seen as an expression of vassal loyalty to the lord. This duty was referred to as "campaign-hunting" in Georgia.

Two types of hunting are recognized in Georgian historiography: "state hunting" and "common hunting". Additionally, a third type can be identified – "royal hunting".

In feudal Georgia, the term "hunting campaign" referred to large-scale hunts organized by a king or a feudal lord. The entire population capable of bearing arms participated in these hunts. It closely resembled a military campaign, with kings viewing hunting as such, and both campaigns and hunts being treated similarly in court regulations.

"Royal hunting" refers to the practice where the king's hunters, under the direction of the chief huntsman, would hunt and supply the court with prey. There was a special office within the court dedicated to this task. In the 14th century, 260 households of the king's hunters were distributed across the country, all subordinate to the chief huntsman. Throughout the year, these hunters primarily resided either at the court or in special palaces arranged on the king's designated "hunting sites", where they were responsible for providing the court with game meat.

"Common hunting" refers to hunting practiced by the lower classes, typically targeting small animals and birds. While this form of hunting was not prohibited, it often required obtaining a hunting "permit," which was granted upon payment of a special hunting tax known as the "lord's tax."

Ethics Approval and Conflict of Interest

This study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical standards. The authors declare that there are no financial, personal, professional, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the design, conduct, interpretation, or publication of this work.

Financing

The research was carried out without financial support.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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