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Connected Histories in Late Antiquity: A Study of a Peace between the Roman and Sasanian Empires and Its Diverging Impacts on Christianity in Greater Armenia and Iran

Author

Honarchiansaky, Ani

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Connected Histories in Late Antiquity:
Study of a Peace between the Roman and Sasanian Empires
and Its Diverging Impacts on Christianity in Greater Armenia and Iran

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

by

Ani Honarchiansaky

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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A Study of a Peace between the Roman and Sasanian Empires

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Ani Honarchiansaky

Doctor of Philosophy in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Peter S. Cowe, Co-Chair

Professor Michael G. Morony, Co-Chair

The dissertation examines the impact of the peace Yazdgerd I (r. 399-420) maintained with the Roman emperor Theodosius II on the conditions of Christians in the Sasanian Empire and Greater Armenia under Sasanian suzerainty. The objective of this study is to create a broad, inclusive reconstruction of the situation of Christians in the Sasanian Empire during the fourth and fifth centuries. The developments of Christianity in Greater Armenia were parallel and interconnected with the situation of the Church in heart of the Sasanian Empire. It is my goal here to study the consequences that followed the peaceful reign of Yazdgerd I for the Christian communities of the Sasanian Empire and Greater Armenia over the next centuries into the early Islamic period.

Previous studies have represented the policies of the empire towards Christians as part of a deliberate, systematic plan to promote imperial centralization by defining Christians as a distinct religious group with related policies on their taxation, legal rights, and political status, a precursor to the *millet system*. Challenging this idea, this dissertation argues that even though Yazdgerd I permitted the Christians of the empire communion with the Roman Church and Roman centers of learning, it was the institutions which were organized during this peaceful juncture that helped the Christians of the empire retool themselves to weather the crisis that emerged in the fifth and sixth centuries.

The history of Christians in the Sasanian empire is diverse and complicated. It is not possible to trace a continuous line of policy, strategy, and ideology to understand the many narratives presented to us in our sources. However, by using both hagiographical and historiographical accounts in Armenian, Syriac, Arabic, and Greek I have tried to weave together a comprehensive account of the events preceding and following the reign of Yazdgerd I. The texts discussed in this dissertation reflect a decentralized empire that tried to achieve a level of unity especially at the time of war by constraining Christianity with heavy taxations, embarking on teaching/conversion projects led by the magi and sometimes by violence. The narratives about the encounters of the Sasanian authorities with the ecclesiastical leaders and military nobles of Armenia reflected in these accounts defined and distinguished the concepts of loyalty to the Empire and faith. In the case of the Church of the East, we encounter a Christianity that marks its place in the Sasanian Empire by rejecting the Christology of the Roman Church. The synods which were assembled to align the Church in the Sasanian Empire with the Roman Church were used to re-orient and distance itself from the "Western Fathers," and established themselves as the acceptable form of Christianity belonging to the Sasanian Empire.

The dissertation of Ani Honarchiansaky is approved.

Yona Sabar

Touraj Daryaee

Peter S. Cowe, Committee Co-Chair

Michael G. Morony, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2018

To my mother, Anoush

For my daughter, Mira

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VITA

2005	**B.A., Translation Studies,** Payame-Noor University Tehran, Iran
2008	**M.A., Translation Studies,** Tarbiat Moallem Tehran, Iran
2014	**M.A., Iranian Studies,** University of California, Los Angeles
2011	**Instructor of Persian Starttalk Program,** University of California, Los Angeles
2011-2015	**Teaching assistant/associate for NELC Department** University of California, Los Angeles

PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

Honarchian Ani and Politano Cristina. “Of Saints and Rulers: The Ideology of Hagiography in Late Antiquity.” Presentation at Medieval Ages in the Wider World Conference, April 2018.

Honarchian, Ani. “Of God and Letters: A Sociolinguistic study on the invention of the Armenian Alphabet in Late Antiquity.” In *Proceeding of Conference on Armenian Identity throughout the Ages.* Edited by Touraj Daryaee and Houri Bereberian, forthcoming.

_____. “The Rhetoric of Empire: The Battle of Avarayr and the Armenian Sources.” Presentation at North American Patristics Society, Chicago, Illinois, May 2018.

_____. “Lifting the Yoke of Taxation by Holy Cross: Taxation and Resistance in Sasanian Iran.” Presentation at the Workshop on Late Antiquity and Byzantium, University of Chicago, Illinois, April 2017.

_____. “The Maccabean Revolt: A Framework to Understand Taxation and Empire in Armenian and Syriac Texts.” Presentation at 227th Annual Meeting of American Oriental Society, Los Angeles, California, March 2017.

_____. “Transferring Relics in the Borderlands of the Sasanian and Roman Empire.” Invited lecture, Persian Circle, University of Chicago, Illinois, November 2016.

_____. “And they took away from them the bones of their own kings...: The Significance of Bones in Armenian, Zoroastrian and Early Christian Beliefs,” Presentation at Leeds Medieval International Conference, Leeds, UK, July 2016.

_____. “Armenian Alphabet as a Divine Gift: The Creation of an Alphabet in Late Antiquity.” Presentation at the 226th Meeting of the American Oriental Society, Boston, Massachusetts, March 2016.

_____. “Connecting Worlds: A Bishop from the Borderlands.” Presentation at the fourth Biennial Ancient Borderlands Conference, University of California, Santa Barbara, California, April 2014.

_____. “Mar Marutha and his Armenian and Greek *Vitae*.” Presentation at American Oriental Society, 224th Annual Meeting, Phoenix, Arizona, March 2014.

_____. “Astyages or Ardashir I: Looking for the Serpent-ruler Azi Dahak in Armenian and Persian Folktale.” Presentation at American Oriental Society, 222-nd Annual Meeting, Boston, Massachusetts, March 2012.

_____. “Persian Poetry and Colonial Translation Theory.” Presented at Translation Studies Conference at Chouaib Doukkali University, Al-Jadida, Morocco, May 2008.

INTRODUCTION

Synopsis

One of the defining characteristics of Late Antiquity, the period between the fourth and seventh centuries CE, was the emergence of communities who built their identity around their religion. The importance of religious matters meant that from the fourth century onward religious policies played a significant role in relations between the Sasanian and Roman Empires. The way each empire dealt with religious matters affected their neighbor's course of action.[1] Therefore, the acceptance of Christianity in the social and political circles of the Roman Empire during the reign of Constantine the Great complicated the relationship between the two empires and caused internal complexities within both empires. The military confrontation with Rome triggered internal turmoil and doubt about the loyalty of Christian subjects in Persia.[2] Šāpur II (309-379 CE) engaged in several rounds of persecution against Christians over a forty-year span. Later Yazdgerd I (r. 399-420 CE) ushered in an abrupt change for Syrophone and Armenian Christians and for the Jewish population of the Sasanian Empire.

This dissertation challenges recent scholarship that applies the situation in the Roman Empire onto events occurring in the Sasanian Empire, especially the concept of "centralization"

[1] An amendment was added to some peace treaties that relates to the situation of the Christians in the Sasanian Empire up until the sixth century. See Menander Protecotr, fig. 6.6 (FHG IV, frg. II, cited in Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity Neighbors and Rivals (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2007), 225. The treaty of 562 between the Sasanian King Khosro Anoshirvan (531-79 CE) and Justinian allowed Christians to build churches and engage in worship and sing hymns as long as they did not try to convert the followers of the Magian religion to Christianity. The treaty of the Empire addressed how a certain religious community should be dealt with shows the importance of the situation.

[2] Sebastian P. Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties," *Studies in Church History* 18 (1982): 1-19

as the main marker of the Sasanian's form of government differentiating it from that of their predecessors the Parthians.

The ideal is that instead of 'comparing' what was happening in different parts of the world at various timespans, we transcend from our frames of references and seek out the fragile threads that connected those histories together. It is the comparative history method that conceptualizes a centralized Sasanian Empire mirroring the situation of the other great empire of the Late Antiquity, Rome.

Hence, I propose approaching the period from a "connected history" perspective, a framework suggested by a pre-modern historian to study history in an interconnected context rather than through a national and regional prism.[3] Focusing on the history of Rome and the Sasanian Empire separately will blind us to perceiving the complex history of the world of Late Antiquity. The 'world history' approach allows researchers to be open toward the interaction between the regions involved.[4] I believe that to limit this study to the geographical borders of Rome, the Sasanian Empire, or the Armenian lands, would create an arbitrary boundary for the vast geopolitical range and interaction of these spheres.

In this dissertation, I demonstrate that mainly in order to keep peace with the Romans, Yazdgerd I changed his attitudes towards his Christian subjects. He ceased the persecution and allowed open communication with the Church of the Roman Empire. I argue that during this moment of openness and dialog, Yazdgerd I initiated and helped provide Christians with a building block, a base for later developments of great importance in their ecclesiastical and

[3] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 03 (1997).

[4] Global/world history is a reaction to nationalism in studying history. One can treat world history as studying all major civilization and their interactions, but I limit myself to the Roman and Sasanian Empires, which is arbitrary and it could be expanded to the whole world of late antiquity if necessary. However, the core of this approach is to understand that boundary lines are artificial and the interactions of civilizations transcend these borders.

hierarchical structure. Both Armenian and Syrian Christians benefitted from this period to weather the storm that would arise under kings such as Bahrām Gor (r. 420-438 CE), and Yazdgerd II (r. 439-457 CE) and would endure until the reign of Balāš.

I demonstrate that these developments were not possible without the agreement of Yazdgerd I, as he allowed the ecclesiastical authorities to organize, communicate, and establish their hierarchical orders. Bishops of the Sasanian Empire from then on could regroup and redefine their ecclesiastical and theological orientation against the social and political context of the Roman Empire.

In contract, Yazdgerd I's son, Bahrām Gor, undermined his father's policies. Bahrām Gor renewed hostilities with the Romans. In 421 matters reverted to the status quo ante. After the war, the loyalty of Christians fell into doubt and the persecution started again. In the synod of 424, the bishops of the Sasanian Empire announced that it would no longer welcome "Western Fathers" and from then on it cut its ties with the Roman Church but the impression is that they did so mainly to comply with Bahrām's policies, not from theological or other conviction. After his initial war with the Romans, Yazdgerd II (438-57 CE) turned his attention to the eastern frontiers of the empire and the Hephthalite onslaught. He had an even harsher attitude towards the Christian population of the empire and tried to impose Zoroastrianism on them, which was felt heavily by both Syrophone and Armenian Christians of the empire. Peroz (r. 459-484 CE) was also occupied with the Hephthalites and eventually lost his life in an unsuccessful battle against them. During his reign, he could not arrive at any agreement with the Armenians who were in revolt, but matters were emerging within the Church of the East to further distinguish themselves from the Church of Rome in Christological matters. Balāš, who reigned for a very short time after Peroz was an amicable king. He was in a difficult position due to the

Hephthalite's invasion and dealt with Christians with greater amity. According to the *Synodicon Orientale,* Balāš sent Barsauma, bishop of Nisibis, together with a *marzban*, to establish the borders between the Sasanian and Roman Empires,[5] a sign of his desire to avoid conflict with the Romans. His reign marked a period of ease for both Syrophone Christians and the Armenians. It was during Balāš's reign, in the Synod of 486, that the Church of the East accepted the doctrine of Theodora Mopsuestia as the foundation of its orthodoxy.

Balāš eventually came to an agreement with the Armenian nobles who had been in revolt for decades, and let them keep their faith while being loyal subjects of the empire. Additionally, in 486, the Church of the East separated itself from the Church of the Roman Empire in Christological tenets and temporarily changed its approach to the matters of celibacy for all the ecclesiastical ranks. The acceptance of Theodore of Mopuestia's doctrine made the Church heretical in the eye of the Church of the Roman Empire. The doctrine of duality of natures in Christ together with the ease on marriage restrictions for bishops and monks brought the church closer to the tenets of Zoroastrianism, rendering it into the Church of Persia.

Sources

Concerning the political relationship between the Romans and Sasanians in the fourth and fifth centuries there is more information on the Greco-Roman side.[6] Unfortunately, contemporary Sasanian sources are very scarce and rarely engage with the issue of Christianity.[7] Nevertheless, where possible, I will try to include material composed in Middle Persian about Zoroastrian theological and exegetical literature, such as *Denkard* and writing on the Zoroastrian schools

[5] *Synodicon Orientale*, 529-30, tr., 536-37.

[6] Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, Procopius, *De Bello Persoco*. Agathias, Amminus Marcellinus.

[7] For instance, the last imperial inscription (*Šapur's Kaabe Zardust/ŠKZ*) was written by order of Shapur I. The kings after him did not produce inscriptions even though there is numismatic evidence for many of them.

such as the *Herbadestan.* These materials are a compilation of oral material in written form from the early Islamic period.

For information on the religious communities and complexities with the Armenians, I rely on the political and spiritual stances accounts in Armenian and Syriac. This dissertation provides a close reading of the historiographical and hagiographical accounts such as the *Martydom and History of Simeon bar Ṣabba'e* and *Martydom of Pusai*, the *History* of Łazar Parpec'i and Ełiše's *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*. In order to better understand Sasanian policies towards the Christians, one should review the events like the mass persecution in Karka de Beth Slouk and persecutions of some Zoroastrian converts. The former was directly related to Persian military affairs and discomfiture on the eastern frontier. I analyzed two Syriac hagiographies: the *History of Karka de Beth Slouk* and the *Martydom of Pethion, Adurohrmazd, and Anahid*.

These sources were means for the Christian community to articulate and preserve the history of their churches, cities, and lands. At the same time, they are a window on the intentions, worldviews, and ideologies of the ecclesiastical authorities. To study the period, I focused on how those narratives shaped the self-perception of Christians in the Sasanian Empire. Whenever the Christian sources attach a religious meaning to imperial actions, I try to incorporate the Sasanian Zoroastrian worldview. I demonstrate that the conflicts over taxation, education, and loyalty were more nuanced than purely fiscal, cultural, and military issues for the empire, contesting recent studies of Christian historiography and the persecution of the Syriac-speaking Christians that seek secular explanations for religious matters.[8]

[8] See Richard Payne, *State of Mixture*.

Filled with exaggerations, repetition, and certain topoi, the Christians sources, especially martyrologies, depict the victim as victorious in God, trying to hold a mirror to the violence of kings and the conspiracy of the magi. They are stories of victims who possessed agency and demanded death to show their love to God.[9] The emphasis is on the similarity of the acts of the martyr to events in the life of Christ. Delehaye's analysis of martyrdom is still valid: "From the very first lines, the author draws attention to the suffering Savior, and he returns to it discreetly later. He draws morals and praises the martyrs who do not hesitate to accept suffering."[10]

I investigate, elaborate, and complicate existing scholarship on the dynamics between the Christian authorities and the Sasanian kings. I try to cut across linguistic, and academically institutionalized borders in an interdisciplinary investigation highlighting the interconnectedness of the history of Christianity to the history of both the Roman Empire and the Sasanian Empires. In exploring the rationalization advanced by the hagiographical and historical accounts of the period written by the defenders of the Christian martyrs, I study the mindset, values, friendship and animosity between the leaders of the Christian communities and the kings in constructing their religious, social, and political space within the Sasanian Empire. While the Empire was striving to keep its peace, unity, and cohesion and blur the line between the Christian communities and the Sasanian state, these accounts reminded their audience about the importance of community boundaries.

[9] Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie *in Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity* have shown that the genre is older than Jewish or Christian traditions and in fact it can be traced to accounts of encounters between (stoic) philosophers with tyrants and their triumph in face of torture. Depicted Laertius, *Lives of Philosophers* or Plato's *Apology.*

[10] Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les Passions des Martyrs et les Genres Littéraires* (Brussels, 1921), 14-5.

Šāpur II (309-379 CE)

It was during the early fourth century and through the efforts of the fist bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Papa, that the supremacy of the bishop of the winter capital over the other bishops of the Empire was claimed. Papa took his seat perhaps around 280. He claimed supremacy over other bishops because of the location of his see at winter capital of the empire. His claim to supremacy was opposed by other ecclesiastical figures. Accused of tyranny and oppressing other bishops, he eventually lost his position. Even Simeon bar Ṣabba'e who was his archdeacon at the time was one of his opponents. For a while Papa was removed from his position, but he reclaimed his place by appealing to "Western" bishops, to the Bishop of Sada in Edessa. The accusations against him were annulled, and Papa was reinstalled. After his death Simon took his place peacefully.

It was not until the time of bishop Simeon around the mid-fourth century that we hear about the persecutions of the Christians in the empire. Christianity became an issue for the Sasanians after the escalation of political and military confrontations with the Roman Empire, which by that time had a Christian emperor. Šāpur II, therefore, imposed heavy taxes on his Christian subjects and demanded that the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Simeon bar Ṣabba'e, collect them. The increased tax was viewed as a huge burden on the people who were mostly decedents of Roman captives, resettled there during the wars between the two empires.[11] The bishop welcomed martyrdom in lieu of obeying the imperial order to collect taxes and worship the sun. Šāpur had massacred many Jews who wanted to go to Palestine to rebuild the temple in

[11] Eric Kettenhoffen, "Deportation, ii. In the Parthian and Sasanian Periods," in *Encyclopædia Iranica,* VII, (Costa Mesa : Mazda Publishers, 1996), 297-308.

Jerusalem by the order of Julian. This could have been the result of wars between the two empires and the issue of the loyalty of the Jews.[12]

The complex relationship between religion and loyalty not only related to Christians in the Persian sphere of the empire, for Šāpur II was concerned with the loyalty of the Armenians. The Armenians had internal autonomy, and their siding with Rome over Persia was an important factor, especially during time of war. It was a common political practice for the Armenians to play both empires against one other and change alliances. Hence, the loyalty of king Aršak II of Greater Armenia (currently under Persian suzerainty), had to be verified. After the defeat and death of Julian in his campaign against Persia in 363, Jovian made a hasty peace with Šāpur II and promised that Rome would not interfere in the affairs of Armenia. Complications arose as the Armenian side appealed to Rome. Given that the Sasanian king doubted Aršak's allegiance, as he offered his support to both sides at different points, the latter was summoned to the Sasanian court. He was arrested by order of Šāpur II and was sent to the "castle of oblivion," where he eventually committed suicide. Even before this event, many noble families (*tun*) rebelled against Aršak and went to the Byzantine emperor. Others pledged allegiance to the Sasanian King. Meružan Arc'runi confirmed his loyalty by abandoning Christianity and accepting *Mazdaism*. He promised that if he returned to his *tun*, he would first build an *atrushna* (fire temple) in his '*sepakan tun.'* Meružan then convinced his uncle Vahan Mamikonean to approach the king, comply with his wishes, and apostatize. King Šāpur held Vahan dear and gave him his sister in marriage, exalted him in front of his troops, and promised him great properties. King Šāpur II's relationship with the Jewish population of the empire was reported negatively.

[12] See Geo Widengren, "The Status of the Jews in the Sassanian Empire," *Iranica Antiqua* 1, (1961), 133.

In chapter one of this dissertation, therefore, I explore King Šāpur's perception of religion and loyalty. More attention is given to the hagiographical sources, such as martyrdom the bishop of the Seleucia-Ctesiphon, because there the religious nuances are more pronounced. The goal is to understand what the king intended to achieve by imposing heavy taxation on a certain group of people; how religious unease was punished by a fiscal burden; and how the anonymous editor of the Persian act writing in the reign of Yazdgerd I in the early fifth century contested the imperial order. The encounter between the bishop and the king resulted in the display of a different understanding of what religion, ritual, and belonging to the land meant for the parties involved. It is obvious from the dialog between the bishop and the king that internal fiscal shortage was not the core issue, as the king repeatedly tells the bishop that if he worships the sun he would set him and his people free. My aim is to revisit the material on the martyrdom of Simeon bar Sabba'e in order to study the social and political status of the Christians in the fourth century Persia and how it was reassessed under Yazdgerd I.

Apart from the Romans, Šāpur II had to be concerned about the assaults of the Huns who were becoming a problem on the eastern frontiers of the Sasanian Empire. Their presence was felt throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, and Šāpur II's successors also had to reckon with them. Even though we don't hear about them in the reign of Yazdgerd I, Bahrām V, Yazdgerd II, Peroz, and Balāš all had to face the difficulties arising in the eastern part of the Empire.

After Šāpur II came the short rules of Ardashir II (379-383 CE), Šāpur III (383-388 CE), and the rule of Bahrām IV (388-99 CE). It was during the reign of Šāpur III, that Armenia was divided between the two great empires by an agreement he signed with Theodosius II.[13] After 387, the kingdom of Greater Armenia passed under Sasanian suzerainty, Her and Zarhavand

[13] The foundation of this divide was laid back under Shapur II especially after the treaty of 363.

became part of the Sasanian Empire, and Gugark was administered by Iberia.[14] Aršak III ruled on the Roman side, and when he died, his lands were annexed by the Roman Empire and were eventually absorbed within the empire.[15] On the Persian side, however, Xusru IV ruled, until by the order of the next king of Persia Bahrām IV, he was replaced by his brother Vramšapuh (392-415 CE).

Yazdgerd I (r. 399-420)

Scholars of Christianity in the Sasanian Empire all agree that Yazdgerd I's reign was on the favorable period for the ethno-religious population of the empire. I go into further detail on this period in chapter two, but it is worth observing that recent historiographical research increasingly complicates our understanding of Yazdgerd's reign. Each historian, building previous work elaborates and sometimes exaggerates how beneficial it was for the reign to include Christians in the administration of the empire, which thereby became more and more centralized.[16] It has been argued that in return Yazdgerd I was counting on the favor and support of the Christian community.

One of the earliest historians of the Church of the East, Jérôme Labourt, states that by showing favor to Christians Yazdgerd entered into friendly relations with the Romans. To offer official protection to Christians, Labourt correctly states, the king must have generated some opposition among the powerful and intolerant magi and the aristocracy, and risked the tranquility

[14] Cyril Thoumanoff, Introduction to Christian Caucasian History II, States and Dynasties of the Formative period, *Traditio* 17 (1961), 38.

[15] See Gregory E. Areshyan,. "Sasanian imperialism and the shaping of Armenian identity (interdisciplinary verification and ambivalence of empire-nation relationship," In *Empires and Diversity: On the Crossroads of Archaeology, Anthropology, and History*, ed by Gregory E. Areshyan, (Los Angeles: The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2013)

[16] On the topic of centralization of the Sasanian Empire see Parvaneh Pourshariat, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (I.B.Tauris, 2017)

of his empire, his own throne, and perhaps his life.[17] Arthur Christensen's argument that there were political reasons behind Yazdgerd's spirit of conciliation with the Christians so that by securing peace with the Roman Empire, he could concentrate his efforts on consolidating royal power, [18] gradually led astray subsequent scholarship on this topic. Basing himself on the latter's argument, Ze'ev Rubin argues that Yazdgerd relied on the favorable attitude of this significant minority to keep his nobility at bay. [19] I believe these scholars may have compared Yazdgerd's policies in some way to those of Constantine. Firstly, to think of Christians in Persia in the early fifth century as a 'significant' minority is inaccurate, as we do not know how large or influential they were. Secondly, it is uncertain how valuable their service was compared to that of magi and nobles. In *History of Ancient Iran* Richard Fry claims that Yazdgerd's regularization of relations between church and state formed the matrix out of which the later *millet* system emerged in Islamic times, and that from then on Christians were regarded as a recognized minority and given state protection.[20] To consider the emergence of a 'recognized' religious minority in this period laying the foundation of a proto-*millet* system is somewhat of an anachronism. Furthermore, if Christians were a reliable and somehow equal force to challenge the power of the nobility, there would be no reason for future kings like Bahrām Gor not to benefit from their friendship and the foundation built by his father to incorporate them. Furthermore, in Yazdgerd I's time, the number of Zoroastrian converts to Christianity was not many. Most Christians were descendants

[17]Jérôme Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans l'empire Perse: sous la dynastie Sassanide (224-632)* (V. Lecoffre, 1904),104.

[18] Arthur Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen, 1936), 270.

[19] Ze'ev Rubin, "Diplomacy and War in the Relations between Byzantium and the Sassanids in the Fifth Century AD," in *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East: Proceedings of a Colloquium Held at the University of Sheffield in April 1986,* eds. Philip Freeman and David Kennedy (Oxford, 1986), 679.

[20] Richard Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran* (Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlags-buchhandlung, 1984), 318.

of Roman captives, their socio-economic place in the empire was not stable, and their patronage would not benefit the king internally especially against the magi and nobles.

Scott McDonough's study treats the reign of Yazdgerd I specifically and comes to the conclusion that the King's policies helped lay the groundwork for bishops of the Church of the East to serve in the imperial administration. He adds that the relationship was mutual as the king benefited from bishops' friendship instead of relying on the magi.[21] Building on his work, I argue that the evidence relating to sporadic responsibilities assigned to certain bishops individually is insufficient to sustain an argument for bishops' regular participation in the affairs of the empire. The hierarchs were already recognized as heads of their communities by previous kings. The innovation in 410 was to invite a Roman bishop to help organize Christianity according to the structure of the Church in the Roman Empire, and the importance of the accepting the Council of Nicaea which was very important in creating a sense of communion between bishops in the Roman Empire and among their counterparts in the Sasanian Empire. The gathering was held in the context of an improving relationship with Rome.

The evidence we have on the king's perception of his imperial agenda reinforces the special relationship Yazdgerd I developed with the Roman Empire and his Christians subjects. The numismatic and historical evidence of his reign is revisited by Touraj Daryaee, who argues that the complete title on Yazdergd I's silver coinage (*drahm*) should be read as *yazdgerd rāmšahr,* a title not used by any of the preceding kings. The translation should be "Yazdgerd, who maintains peace in (his) dominion." *Rām* translates as peace, ease, joy, and satisfaction.[22]

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[21] Scott McDonough, "Power by Negotiation: Institutional Reform in the Fifth Century Sasanian Empire," 140-1; Ze'ev Rubin, "Diplomacy and War in the Relations between Byzantium and the Sassanids in the Fifth Century AD," 679.

[22] Touraj Daryaee, "History, Epic, and Numismatics: On the Title of Yazdgerd I (RĀMŠAHR)," *American Journal of Numismatics (1989-)* 14 (2002): 89-95. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43580250.

For Yazdgerd I to strike coinage with this title reflects his self-perception of as peace-maker in contrast with the epitaph he earned in Persian and Arabic sources as the Sinner. In the *Shahnameh* Yazdgerd I was called "*bazahgar*" or "the Outcast, Outlawed," while in Tabari, he is "the Sinner." [23] Yazdgerd had a reputation that he would not tolerate any opposition to his word or will, and would only listen to advice "when it came from foreign envoys." [24]

Under Yazdgerd I, there was a boost in East Syriac literary production. Many of the *Acts of Persian Martyrs* were redacted during this period. Some have attributed the collection of these martyrdom stories to bishop Marutha of Mesopotamia and bishop Ahai alongside their efforts to collect relics.[25] Apart from those martyrdom accounts, around 414 a school was developing near Seleucia-Ctesiphon, known as school of Abda. The institution had a reputation as a missionary center and played a significant role in education and religious proselytism in the region around Ctesiphon. [26]

Even though at the end of his reign he responded to the aggressive advances of some Christians' destroying fire temples in their missionary zeal,[27] those Christians, perhaps

[23] Shapur Shahbazi in citing M. Minovi, "Yaki az fārsiāt-e Abu Nawās," *MDADT* I/3, 1954, 62-77, "Yazdgerd I," Encyclopædia Iranica, available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/yazdegerd-i (accessed online at 25 August 2017).

[24] Ibid.

[25]See Gernot Wissner, *Untersuchungen zur syrischen Literaturgeschichte, I: Zur Màrtyrer ûberlieferung aus der Christenverfolgung Schapurs II* (Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, philologisch-historische Klasse, Dritte Folge, Nr. 67.); and Levon Ter-Petrossian, "L'Attribution du receuil des passions perse a Maroutha de Maypherqat," *AB 97* (1979) 129-30. Wissner argues that to attribute these martyralogies to Marutha is baseless.

[26] Philip Wood, *Chronicle of Seert: Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23.

[27] Lucas Van Rompay, "Impetuous Martyrs? The Situation of the Persian Christians in the Last Years of Yazdegerd I (419-20)," in *Martyrium in Multidisciplinary Perspective*. *Memorial Louise Rechmans,* eds. M. Lamboigts and P. van Duen (Louvain, 1995), 363-75.

emboldened by the king's customary tolerance, refused to rebuild the temples. Yazdgerd I 's approach is to be viewed more as punisher for breaking the law rather than a persecutor.

The peace between Yazdgerd I and Theodosius II enabled the evolution of the long-term structures that facilitated the endurance of Christianity not only in the Sasanian Empire but also in the Greater Armenia. Just as the organization of the Church in Persia helped it expand, develop, and defend itself in later periods, the introduction of a new writing system in Greater Armenia provided means of communication and structure among the ecclesiastical and royal ranks. There is no reference to Yazdgerd's reign in Armenian sources. The tolerance he displayed in the ecclesiastical matters of the Greater Armenia facilitated the development of Christianity there.

The focus of the third chapter is on the situation in Greater Armenia. There the emphasis will be placed on the hagiography of Maštoc', who invented the Armenian alphabet with the support of the chief bishop Sahak. The development of a writing system in Armenia paralleled the emergence of centers for 'Christian' education in the Sasanian Empire such as the School of 'Abda. These innovations reflect the emergence of centers for learning more generally in Late Antiquity. Armenian lacked a standard, distinctive, and linguistically appropriate writing system, but after the invention of the Armenian alphabet bishops were able to communicate, send orders, and receive reports from the far corners of their jurisdiction. The Armenian alphabet was created when it was relatively easy for people in Greater Armenia to travel to Roman territory and benefit from educational centers in Edessa and Amida.

Yazdgerd I also acted in favor of the Jewish population of the empire for most of his reign.[28] As a result, it stood out in contemporary sources as a peaceful period for Jews. In the

[28] Geo Widengren, "The Status of the Jews in the Sassanian Empire," *Iranica Antiqua* 1, 1961, 117-62. Ze'ev Rubin, "Diplomacy and War in the Relations between Byzantium and the Sassanids in the Fifth Century AD," 677-95.

Šahrestanihi-i-Eran-šahr, it is stated that Yazdgard's wife and the mother of the next king Bahrām Gor was the daughter of the *Reš galuta*, the king of the Jews.[29] Jacob Neusner believes that although attributing a Jewish wife to Yazdgerd I cannot be grounded in reality, these stories explained the king's kindness towards Jews, and how his benevolence was reflected in Jewish circles.[30] According to Neusner, there are many positive references concerning Yazdgerd I in rabbinic literature. Some even claimed that he was aware of and interested in Jewish Scripture. The rabbinical school flourished in this period, which was essential for the education of the rabbis', who functioned as the legal authorities in Jewish society. The rabbinical academy was a combination of a law school and a contemporary monastery.[31] The school was dedicated to studying those parts of the Torah that could be applied to everyday life when judicial opinion was necessary. Studying was a natural action and entailed learning, executing, and embodying those teachings.

Bahrām V (r. 420- 438 CE)

Yazdgerd I's son Bahrām Gor or Bahrām V (420- 438 CE), was sent to be raised at the court of the Lekhmids at al-Hira. Despite having Arab support, he needed the clergy and nobles on his side to consolidate power at court. First, he waged war with the Romans and, even though he did not change his father's policies towards the Jewish population, for the Christians, matters reverted to the status quo ante. The pretext for war was that the Christians in Persia had been badly treated and fled to the Romans from various punishments and tortures. Atticus, bishop of Constantinople, gave them refuge. Moreover, the Persians were unwilling to hand back the

[29] Touraj Daryaee*, Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr: A Middle Persian Text on Late Antique Geography, Epic, and History* : With English and Persian Translations (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, 2002). 20.

[30] Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, vol. V (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965). 11-13.

[31] Jacob Neusner, "The Phenomenon of the Rabbi in Late Antiquity," *Numen* 17, no. 1 (1970)., 1.

Roman gold-diggers whom they had hired.[32] During the war the loyalty of the Christians in the Persian Empire fell into doubt, provoking a new wave of persecutions. Dadišo, bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, who was embroiled in some disputes and accused of sympathizing with Rome. Around 422, when peace was achieved with Theodosius II, Dadišo was freed. He wanted to retire to his monastery but in the Synod of 424 he was convinced by the bishops and metropolitans to resume his office.[33]

Meanwhile anti-Roman sentiment persisted. The Synod of Markabta in 424 reflects this environment. Agapit, bishop of Beth Lapat, took the stage and recalled the role of the western bishops at the previous two synods, but added that the situation had now changed, with the consequence that it was crucial for the Church in the Persian Empire to make its own decisions without inviting western bishops to participate in the synods. Ironically, Agapit used the example of Papa who laid his case in front of the "Western Fathers" to establish his supremacy over other bishops, to explain why the ties with Rome should be cut. Agapit remarked that since the "Western Fathers" could no longer look after them, like their good heirs they should support themselves.

Bahrām Gor deposed the Armenian king, Artašeš, son of Vramšapuh, in 428. Bahrām replaced him with a *marzban,* putting an end to the Arsacid dynasty in Greater Armenia. Soon after, in the same year, Sahak, the chief bishop of Armenia, was deposed by his order from his universal administration over Greater Armenia and reassigned to his personal bishopric. The historian Movses Xorenac'i states that Sahak was first replaced with an Armenian bishop, then

[32] Soc. *HE*. VII. 18 (363.2-365.24)

[33] Wilhelm Baum and W. Winkler Dietmar, *The Church of the East: A concise History*. Vol. 1. (Routledge, 2003.), 19.

by two Syrians.[34] The Syrian bishops were appointed by the Persian king, thereby reinforcing the Armenian Church's communion with Iran and reinforcing its relation with the Church of the East that had recently confirm its autocephaly and equal status to the Church in the Roman Empire in the Synod of 424.

After their demise, it seems that bishop Sahak resumed his previous functions. This lasted very briefly, as, after a year Maštoc' succeeded him, also for a short period of time.[35] Thereafter the Armenian Church elected Yovsep', a disciple of Maštoc', after the death of the Maštoc'. Designated by Maštoc', since he was his student, the Armenian church did not seek his ratification from Bahrām V, since the Armenian side knew its request would be rejected by the Sasanian authorities. There was the risk of imprisonment and worse had Yovsep' gone to the Sasanian Empire for this end. These developments undermined Greater Armenia's civil and ecclesiastical autonomy.

Yazdgerd II (r. 439-457 CE)

Yazdgerd II was remembered well by the magi, but adopted an aggressive approach towards Christians and Jews. Immediately after he took up the throne, he waged war on the Romans., which was quickly deflected with the Roman side paying a sum of money to the Persian King. The onslaught of the Hephthalites did not allow the Persians further engagements with Rome. After the synod of 424, no further conclave of the Syriac Church was held during the reigns of Bahrām Gor and Yazdgerd II.

According to Armenian historical accounts Yazdgerd II tried and failed to bring the whole empire under one religion. Using the title "Mazdaean Majesty Kay" for the first time,

[34] Moses Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978)., 344-5.

[35] Peter Cowe, "An Armenian Job Fragment from Sinai and Its Implication," *Oriens Christianus* 72 (1992),123-57.

Yazdgerd II connected his image with the Avestan dynasty of the Keyanids, the primordial kings of Iran.[36] His approach to Christianity was to undermine it even more radically than his father Bahrām V. He tried to weaken the church structure in Armenia by increasing taxes, imposing magi as instructors for the Armenian noble families, and forcing conversion on the population. The process of solidifying the operation of the Church of the East made it more appealing to a number of the Zoroastrian converts, among them members of the noble families, hence it could be assumed there were more convert to Christianity from Zoroastrian families in this period.

Benefiting from scholarship on religious violence in Late Antiquity, especially the work of Michael Gaddis,[37] I will revisit the portrayal of the encounters between Armenian nobles and Sasanian kings. Granted their religious and political weight, imperial demands eventually led to the Battle of Avarayr in 451. Through a close reading of Armenian sources, I will explore how Armenian historical narratives tried to define their place as Christian subjects of the Sasanian king. They were responding to vigorous attempts by the empire to integrate Greater Armenia by sending magi to educate and instruct the noble families in Zoroastrianism, increasing taxes, and by demanding conversion as a sign of loyalty from its nobles. The Armenian sources record that the Sasanian king considered that observing the ritual of sun worship and making pacts with the Armenian nobles would be a mark of their loyalty in the military sphere, therefore making the empire invincible against the Romans.

Yazdgerd II ‘s reign also left a negative memory in the Talmudic sources.[38] Although Yazdgerd II banned reading of the *Shama’*, rabbis swallowed it in the midst of every *Qedushah*

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[36] Touraj Daryaee, “National History of Keyanid History? The Nature of Sasanid Zoroastrian Historiography,” *Iranian Studies* 28 (1995): 129–141.

[37] Michal Gaddis, *“There is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ”: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[38] Isaiah M. Gafni, "Exilarch," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*.

in order that it should not be absent from children's mouths.[39] Gafni comments that *Sedar 'Olam Zuta,* a chronicle written in the ninth century, identifies the period at the end of the fifth century as a harsh time for Jews in the Sasanian Empire

Peroz (r. 457-484 CE)

Yazdgerd II had two sons, Hormizd III (457-459 CE) and Peroz (457-484 CE). Hormizd III ruled for a short time and was removed from power by his brother Peroz. Like his father, Peroz had to deal with the attacks of the Hephthalites in the eastern frontiers. After many campaigns against them, Peroz was defeated and had to pay them a heavy tribute. The situation in the east was too dire for the king to wage war with the Romans, so the peace Yazdgerd II made with Theodosius II was honored by Peroz. In 484, he was killed in a war against the Hephthalites and his son Kavad was taken hostage. Later Kavad returned and assumed the throne from Balāš.

The Armenian revolt which had started in 451 continued throughout Peroz's reign. Vahan Mamikonean, nephew of Vardan Mamikonean, and the King of Kings had not come to any agreement. The king was not ready to acknowledge Armenian demands for recognition of Christianity as their religion.

During Peroz' reign Barsauma, bishop of Nisibis, realized that the Church of the East would fare better if there was no doubt about its alliance with the Sasanian state. Hence, he pressed for the reorientation of the theological tenets of the Church by accepting the doctrine of Theodore Mopsuestia, the views of whom were continued by his student Nestorius who was recently condemned in the Council of Ephesus 431.

[39] Jacob Neusner, A History of the Jews in *Babylonia*, V. 61.

In 484, after a hiatus of almost sixty years the bishops of the empire assembled in Beth Lapat (Syriac name for Veh Antiok Šapur, later Gundešapur). The assembly was convened by Barsuma, who then announced his discontent with catholicos Baboawi. It was uncommon for a bishop to call a synod and strive to dismiss the catholicos. Soon after this gathering, but perhaps for a more serious reason, Peroz put Baboawi to death. He was accused of being in contact with the Romans. This gathering was not considered as one of the thirteen synods. We have to wait until the reign of Balāš to witness the first synod of the East after almost sixty years.

The religious persecution that marked Peroz's reign was directed against Jews mostly, especially in regard to rabbinical schools. The exilarch and leading rabbis were imprisoned and sentenced to death. This was followed by a decree that Jewish affairs should be administered by Persian law.[40] Gafni argues that the decrees issued against the observance of the Sabbath and the closure of some schools was a strike against the legal foundation of the Jewish court system. Closng these schools would result in subjecting the Jewry to Iranian rather than Jewish law.[41] Neusner adds after the year 470 when the exilarch was put to death, the office remained vacant until the eve of the Islamic period.[42]

Balāš (r. 484-488 CE)

Balāš, Peroz's brother, made peace with the Hephthalites and agreed to pay a heavy tribute. During his reign, the synod of 486 nullified the decisions of the previous conclave that had been approved through the influence of Barsauma. The synod was presided over by the next bishop of the Seleucid-Ctesiphone, Acacus, who had been selected by Balāš and held in Seleucia-

[40] Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, Leiden, 1965-70; repr., Atlanta, 1999: Vol. I, ... The Parthian Period, 1965; 2nd printing, rev., 1969; 3rd printing, Chicago, California, 1984; tr., *Histoire des Juifs de Babylonie. Tome I. L'epoque parthe*. Paris, 1997; Vol. V, ... Later Sasanian Times, 1970.

[41] Isaiah M. Gafni, "Exilarch," in *Encyclopædia Iranica.*

[42] Ibid.

Ctesiphon after an interval of six decades. It was in this synod that the Church of the East composed a creedal statement displaying their Antiochene Christology, asserting that Theodore of Mopsuestia maintained the correct biblical, Nicean faith in his writings. In addition to this theological development, which rendered the Church heretical from the perspective of the Church in the Roman Empire, the tenets of asceticism were also revisited. As asceticism was opposed to the Zoroastrian beliefs of Sasanian society, the synod of 486 allowed clergy of all ranks to marry again if the first wife should die.[43] In addition, the duality of natures in Christ was closer to the tenets of Zoroastrianism. The dualism in Zoroastrianism is a not between spirit and matter but rather between two spirits, who epitomize truth and falsehood between the forces of Ohrmazd and Ahriman. [44]

In its efforts to distinguish and define its stance in the matter of Christology the Roman Empire treated issues of heresy very seriously. Barsauma knew that by accepting a dualist Christology not only would the Church in Iran be vilified by the Romans as heretical, but criticism of the Roman formula by the Church of the East would be justified in the Sasanian Empire, and their brand of Christianity would garner favor especially in Persian political circles. Furthermore, as the synod of 486 accepted marriage in all the ecclesiastical ranks, it rendered the faith more attractive to Zoroastrians. From that date on, they became the Church of Persia and the recipients of imperial support against the Romans.

Barsauma then turned his attentions to founding the School of Nisibis. The School of Edessa was shut down by the order of the emperor Zeno in 489 for teaching a dualist creed which by then had been labeled heretical. Consequently, many of its teachers and students

[43] Arthur Vööbus, "Barsuma," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Vol. III, Fasc. 8, p. 824

[44] Gherardo Gnoli, "Dualism," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, VII/6, 576-582; available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/dualism (accessed on 28 January 2018).

traveled to Nisibis and added luster to the school. Barsuma selected Narsai, a renowned teacher and administrator at the School of Edessa to direct it. In this way the School of Nisibis' most significant development was the acquisition ofthe a larger teaching staff rather than being centered around a single teacher as before. [45]

Balāš also restored the peace with Vahan Mamikonian, allowing Armenians to practice Christianity freely and eventually assigning him as *marzban* of Armenia instead of his Persian predecessor. The first leg of the negotiation took place in the village of Nuarsak near the province of Her. Nixor, the Persian envoy, received the three conditions Vahan demanded from the King:

1. Allowing free observation of Christian rites.
2. Honoring the wise and honorable and spurning the worthless and foolish, who mostly gained their position by converting to magism even though they were disrespectful toward the fire and ashes held in their houses.
3. For the king to be direct, open, and honest with his subjects instead of employing intermediaries whose reports lead to distortion and lies.[46]

The requests were forwarded to the king who held another hearing in his court and learned about these demands in person. Vahan was granted the rank of *sparapet* of Armenia in return for his worthy service to the land of Aryans, his loyalty, and his honest concern for the land's welfare.[47]

[45] Adam H. Becker, "The Comparative Study Of "Scholasticism" in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians." *AJS Review* 34, no. 1 (2010): 95. 91-113.

[46] Łazar, 228-9.

[47] Łazar, 237.

Aftermath…

Christians' political and social status changed during the later Sasanian and early Islamic period. In the seventh century, the Arabs conquered a large portion of Byzantine territory and the whole of the Sasanian Empire. Constructing a separate religious authority to oversee the ecclesiastical hierarchy had not occurred to the Muslims. They were newcomers to the region and governed their conquered lands differently. Armenia together with Iberia and Caucasian Albania was part of the largely Christian lands of the Arab empire. Muhammad ibn Marwan was the *ostikan* (governor) of these lands, establishing his headquarters at the Armenian capital of Dvin. Aram Ter-Ghevondyan has shown that Armenia's situation under the Umayyad Caliphate differed from that under the 'Abbasids. The Umayyads were essentially an Arab caliphate, which had to deal with non-Arabs who might or might not be Muslim. Armenians thus shared this quality with many other recently conquered peoples. The Persian element under 'Abbasid rule altered the situation. For the 'Abbasids, ethnicity was not the prime issue, but rather religion. During the 'Abbasid period, the Armenian aristocratic Mamikonean family died out in many rebellions they lead. With no more male heirs to continue the legacy of the family and many other princely houses migrated to Byzantium.[48] Christians' social background in Persia changed gradually. No longer did they consist mostly of descendants of Roman captives, but rather of Zoroastrian converts from distinguished families.

The Church of the East continued to thrive under Islam. In the early Islamic period, Christians outnumbered Muslims in Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia. Nisibis and Gundishapur functioned as important centers for training teachers and translators. Between the seventh and eleventh centuries about half of the catholicoi were selected by the Islamic rulers. Umar, the

[48] Aram. N. Ter-Ghevondyan, *The Arab Emirates in Bagratid Armenia* (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation : Distributors, Livraria Bertrand, 1976).

second caliph, promised Ishoyahb II that no church would be turned into a mosque, Christians did not need to fight to demonstrate their loyalty. Later, during the Abbasid period, the Byzantine emperor Leo IV gained some victories against Caliph al-Mahdi who in his anger destroyed some churches. It was explained to the caliph by his East Syrian physician, Isa, that the Greeks hated the East Syrians more than the Jews. The caliph asked a prisoner about the issue and learned that "Nestorians" could hardly be called Christians and were closer to Arabs than Byzantines.[49] Through affinity to the caliphate, the East Syrian Church dominated all other forms of Christianity. Nevertheless, their numbers decreased eventually by attrition through conversion to Islam.

[49] Wilhelm Baum and W. Winkler Dietmar, *The Church of the East*, 60

CHAPTER I-Taxing Christians and Belonging to the Land of Iran

The first chapter relates to the situation of the Christian community in the Sasanian Empire during the reign of Šāpur II (r. 309-379 CE). I focus on one complex issue that King Šāpur II faced regarding the Christians of the empire: their duty to pay taxes. I will show that excessive taxation was used coercively to put pressure on the Christian population. This will be discussed further in chapter four, where I will treat the tax increase in Armenia initiated by Yazdgerd II (r. 439-57 CE), and how it was introduced to discourage the population from practicing Christianity.

More recent scholarship has downplayed the religious aspect of the clash between king Šāpur II and the bishop of Ctesiphon, Simeon bar Ṣabba'e, claiming that increasing taxes was a measure to solve a fiscal burden and provide the empire with the finances necessary in time of war between the Romans and Sasanians.[1] The sources confirm, however, that king Šāpur II enforced taxes not just for fiscal gain but to reduce the number of Christian subjects within the empire. Bishop Simeon reminded the king that "for the sake of taxes [I] won't submit [my] people to the yoke of servitude" that would eventually and gradually "quash the worship of God and lead them astray from the path of truth."[2]

Shaping of the Identity of Christian Communities

Source material on the emergence of the Christian population in the Sasanian Empire is rather scarce. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that Christianity spread in Persia earlier, perhaps during the Parthian period, when it was still a persecuted religion in the Roman Empire. In the *Acts of*

[1] Philip Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, 21; Richard Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christian, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (University of California Press, 2015), 43.

[2] *Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 14.

Mari, a late-sixth century account, the time of the missionary activates of Mari was placed in the first century. Mari, a disciple of Addai, went on a mission to convert Nisibis, Arzun, Arbela, Assur, and Dadbhar in Beth Garami, and eventually Ctesiphon. The mission ended in Khuzestan, where Mari found out through merchants traveling to Edessa that these cities had already been converted.[3] The story, like any origin legend, tries to push back the time of conversion of the population in Mesopotamia and Babylonia.

Eduard Sachau and Marie-Louise Chaumont argue that there must have been a Christian presence especially in the borderlands of the two empires. However, substantial communities of Christians are not mentioned in texts before the third century.[4] The existence of Christianity in Mesopotamia can further be asserted by referring to Mani and especially his father, who apparently belonged to a baptismal community of *mogtasela*. Mani lived during the reign of Šāpur I (240-270 CE), for whom he wrote a book entitled the *Shabuhragan*.[5]

One can assume that Christianity came to Persia from Edessa and the environs of Nisibis around the second century. The first Christians might have lived in Jewish communities.[6] There is a possibility that merchants who traveled the trade routes brought the faith with them to the Persian Gulf and spread it to Asia and China. Both Edessa and Antioch were on trade routes from the Mediterranean.[7]

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[3] A. Harrak, *The Acts of Mar Mari the Apostle* (2005). Syr. with English translation.

[4] See Eduard Sachau "Vom Christentum in der Persis," Sitzungsberichte der koniglichen preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaft en—*Sitzung der philosophisch-historischen Klasse* 39 (1916): 958–80, 961-5; Marie-Louise Chaumont, *La christianisation de l'empire iranien: Des origines aux grandes persecutions du IV Siecle* (Leuven: Peeters, 1988), 54-160.

[5] Werner Sundermann, "Mani," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2009, available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mani-founder-manicheism (accessed on 20 September 2016).

[6] Wilhelm Baum and W. Winkler W. Dietmar. The Church of the East, 7-8.

[7] Ibid.

Scholarship has tied the history of Christian communities in the Sasanian Empire to the history of deportation of the population from cities on the Roman frontier to a great extent.[8] Samuel J. Lieu asserts that, as the Sasanian state was developing during the reign of Šāpur I in the third century, it became necessary to acquire both skilled artisans and unskilled workers. Lieu believes that Šāpur I's deportation and relocation of the population of the conquered lands was an effective way to acquire this much-needed labor.[9] Morony states that skilled craftsmen would join the palace organization that produced articles for the ruler and his court, especially in the metal and textile industries.[10] Morony argues that, rather than looting the Roman territories once or obtaining these objects through purchase, Sasanians kidnapped the producers, and thereby enjoyed the fruit of the labor of the deported population for a longer time.[11] From Šāpur's inscription, the total number of captives who were relocated in the third century cannot be examined, but it was stated in the inscription that 70,000 soldiers were captured together with the emperor Valerian.

This is mainly based on accounts in the *Chronicle of Seert* and the *Act of Pusai*. According to the former, an eleven-century Christian Arabic text, after Šāpur I defeated Valerian he returned with captives and resettled them in cities that his father, Ardašīr I, had built. Christians proliferated because of this and monasteries and churches were built.[12]

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[8] Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert*, 221-2; *Inscription of Ka'abe Zartusht, (ŠKZ);* Michael Morony, "Population Transfers between Sasanian Iran and the Byzantine Empire," in *La Persia e Bisanzio: Convegno internazionale, Roma 14-18 Octobre 2002*, ed. Antonio Carile et al (Rome: Accademia dei Lincei, 2004), 179.

[9] Samuel Lieu, "Captives, Refugees, and Exiles: A Study of Cross-Frontier Civilian Movements and Contacts between Rome and Persia from Valerian to Jovian," in *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East: Proceedings of a Colloquium Held at the University of Sheffield*, eds. Philip Freeman and David Kennedy (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1986), 479.

[10] Michael Morony, "Population Transfers between Sasanian Iran and the Byzantine Empire,"162.

[11] Ibid., 168-9.

[12] *Chronicle of Se'ert, Histoire Nestorienne in édite*, Text arabe avec traduction française ed. Addai Scher and tr.

Pusai's family was settled in Beh Shapur (modern Boshehr) by Šapur II.[13] Pusai was appointed to a highly skilled position, embroidering gold on silk material. He was married to a Persian woman who converted to Christianity and had children whom he baptized and educated in Christianity. Later his whole household was moved to Karka de Ledan by order of Šāpur II. There he was given a residence, gifts, and a title. According to Pusai's *Martyrdom,* a few days after he was given his title, he was sent to another city from Karka de Ledan to visit other craftsmen, at which time he encountered the crowd accompanying Simeon bar Ṣabba'e.

Hugh Kennedy, who has studied the creation of new cities from Sasanian times until after the rise of Islam, notes that Sasanian social elites were absent from the urban scene. They lived outside in their rural areas on fortified estates close to the Zoroastrian ritual sites. Similarly, the kings dwelt in the countryside. The cities lacked any monumental buildings or public statues. Drawing from Talmudic texts and excavations at Marv and Ctesiphon, Kennedy argues that building in the cities extended to the roads and workshops and markets.[14]

The main function of cities was to accommodate artisanal production and trade. They were, as discussed, populated with relocated craftsmen from the conquered regions of the Roman Empire during the reign of Šāpur I. The conflict between the Roman and Sasanian empires was not significant during the reign of Šāpur's successors until the time of Narseh (r. 293-302), when in a surprise attack, Galerius, a general under Diocletian, inflicted a major defeat on Narseh which led to the captivity of the royal family, including his wives and children. Following this, the Treaty of Nisibis was negotiated. The main source of information about this peace treaty of

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Addai Scher, R. Griveau et al., Patrologia Orientals, Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1908-19), Chapter I, 9.

[13] *Martyrdom of Pusai*, in *Acta martyrum et sanctorum II*, ed. Paul Bedjan, (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1891), 209.

[14] Hugh Kennedy, "From Shahrestan to Medina," *Studia Islamica* 102 (2006): 5-35.

298 is the account of Peter the Patrician (c. 500-64). The latter explains how the Roman side raised the issue of the emperor Valerian's captivity by Šāpur I and how the treatment of Persians in tricking and detaining the Roman emperor in captivity was unfair; in contrast, Romans "follow the footsteps of their own ancestors, and spare their subjects."[15] According to this treaty, in exchange for the return of the royal family, the recovered Mesopotamian city of Nisibis would become the central place for trade between the two empires; in the eastern regions the Romans would receive Ingilene and Sophene, Arzanene, Karduene, and Zabdikene; and the river Tigris would become the boundary between the two states. Zinitha, located at the border of Media, became the marker for the border of Armenia; further, the king of Iberia would submit to Roman suzerainty.[16] The conditions of the treaty of Nisibis did not change until the Roman defeat under the emperor Julian in 363.

The resettlement of these populations in the newly founded cities of the Sasanian Empire has indeed been suggested as the main factor behind the emergence of Christianity in the Sasanian Empire.[17] Kettenhofen states that this population was located in cities such as Beit Lapat/Gundishapur (also known in Middle Persian as Weh-Antiyōk-Šāpūr and Khūzestān, Ērān-Xwarrah-Šāpūr /Šuš and Ērānšahr-Šāpūr), located in the southwestern belt of the empire, near the first capital, Seleucia-Ctesiphon.[18] Morony, however, believes that the deportation of people from the borderland to the Sasanian cities should not be perceived as the main source for the

[15] Peter the Patrician, *frg.* 13-14, 181-91.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Samuel N.C. Lieu, "Captives, Refugees and Exiles: A Study of Cross-Frontier Civilian Movements and Contacts between Rome and Persia from Valerian to Jovian," in *The Defense of the Roman and Byzantine East*: *Proceeding of a Colloquium Held at the University of Sheffield in April 1986* eds. Philip Freeman and David Kennedy, (Oxford: 1986), 475, 505; Philip Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert,* 16; Richard Payne, *A State of Mixture,* 64-9.

[18] Eric Kettenhoffen, "*Deportation,* ii. *In the Parthian and Sasanian Periods,"* in *Encyclopedia Iranica,* VII (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1996), 297-308.

emergence of Christian communities. He argues that if the percentage of Christians in those cities was a reflection of the Christian population in the Roman Empire by the third century, around 7% to 10%, then not many of the deportees were Christians. There is however the possibility that while the deportees were not initially mostly Christians, they could have become Christian after their relocation.[19]

Given Christianity's missionary potential and the notion that people who were deported might have felt more in common with each other rather than with the rest of the people of the empire, it is reasonable to think that they were drawn to Christianity after deportation.

The founder of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardašīr I (?-242 CE) and his son Šāpur I (r. 239-70), were indifferent towards the Christians of the empire.[20] Except for the years when Kartir, the prominent Zoroastrian priest, exercised his influence on some religious groups, the third century was overall a peaceful time for Christians. The reigns of Hormizd I (r. 272-3), Bahrām II (276-93), and later Narseh (r. 293-302 CE) were too short and sometimes too chaotic for Christians to be an issue of imperial concern. In contrast, the reign of Šāpur II (r. 309-79 CE), son of Hormizd II, was a long and difficult time for the Christians of the empire. The fact that almost two-thirds of the seventy martyrs' accounts composed in the fifth century relate to events of Šāpur II's reign demonstrates that Christians endured serious hardships under this king.[21]

By the fourth century a community was emerging in the Sasanian Empire that was defined by its religion instead of by social status, occupation of its members, their language, or

[19] Michael Morony, "Population Transfers between Sasanian Iran and the Byzantine Empire."

[20] W. Stewart McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1982), 112.

[21] Kyle Smith, introduction to *The Martyrdom and History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), xxii.

geographical location.[22] Morony describes the factors indicating the existence of religious communities as follows: 1) spread of primarily religious personal identity and way of life, especially among Jews and Christians; 2) leadership within communities which was enforced by religious law and reinforced by religious education, especially in the case of the Jewish community; and 3) the structure of communities dependent on the dynamic between religious leaders, bishops, and exilarchs and the Sasanian state.[23]

It is difficult to ascertain the mindset of the Christians of the Sasanian Empire, or how exactly they felt about their situation or status within the empire, because of the lack of sources. But the fact that some Syriac-speaking Christians, who once lived on the frontier of the Roman Empire, still referred to themselves as Roman captives or "sons of captives," generations after their deportation, shows that they still thought of themselves as outsiders. Payne maintains that the term "captive" became an interchangeable with Christian.[24] It is true that Christians of the Sasanian Empire "*bani šebya"* used the term captive to assert their distinctive identity as Christians, but how widespread the term was or if later Zoroastrian converts called themselves captives is not very clear. For instance, in the *Acts of Pethion*, the protagonist, a Zoroastrian convert, was not referred to as a captive; yet in the same *Acts* some Christians who venerated him were called sons of captives *(Ordik' gerwt'ean*).[25] Payne adds that in the *Martyrdom of*

[22] Michael Morony, "Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 17:2 (1974): 113-35.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Christians of the Empire might have borrowed the reference to the Babylonian captivity of Jews in their exile and displacement in Psalms 137.

[25] *Martyrdom of Holy Pethion* (Armenian version) 436.

Pusai and *Martyrdom of Captives*, the term, which was potentially derogatory, was used with a sense of pride in east Syrian hagiographical accounts.[26]

The martyrologies portray Persian martyrs as not belonging to the Sasanian Empire. In the *Herbadestan*, a guideline for religious studies (a text that is impossible to date since it has both Sasanian and post-Sasanian material and functions), *agden* (infidel) and *aner* (non-Iranian) have both been used to refer to people who are not *Wehdēn* (of Good Religion).[27] Pusai, for instance, was introduced as a descendant of a Roman man captured by Šāpur II. He was resettled in the empire, and the king tried to facilitate his assimilation.[28] The anonymous author of the *Martyrdom of Pusai* explains that by encouraging deportees like Pusai to marry and settle down, the king hoped that "family and love would become their shackles."[29] The "discourse" created through the accounts of bishops and martyrs such as Simeon bar Ṣabba'e, Pusai, Marta, Shahdost, and others was a unifying element for the Christian community and a wedge between them and other-non-Christians.

The historicity of these accounts has been correctly called into question. They contain exaggerated stories, and generic and repetitive *topoi* in addition to a strong and blatant agenda. All typically paint their subjects as exemplary persons, which leads to a legitimate skepticism regarding the accuracy of these works. Even the viewpoints attributed to the martyrs in these texts cannot be guaranteed to be reliable. Nevertheless, these stories, oral and written, circulated among the Christians of the Sasanian Empire and created a kind of social discourse between the

[26] Richard Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 64-9.

[27] Firoze M. Kotwal and Philip G. Kreyenbroek (with contributions by James Russell), eds. and trans., *The Hērbedestān and Nērangestān I: Hērbedestān, Studia Iranica* (Cahier 10: Paris, 1992), 60-65.

[28] *Martyrdom of Pusai*, AMS II, 209.

[29] Ibid.

saint and the listener/reader. Perhaps one relating more to fifth century perspectives than the fourth, i.e. the era of writing.

Hippolyte Delehaye, an early twentieth-century Bollandist, edited, complied, and studied many hagiographical materials. He explained that via the transformation of the lives of saints these works frequently become the object of public devotion, and hagiographers attempted to respond to this interest in writing their works. However, Delehaye reminds us of the ancient understanding about the role of the historian, who holds a place midway between a rhetorician and a poet, thereby reminding us about the unconscious mental process that manufactures stories of saints' lives. Certain hagiographers tried to point to a moral principle through parables or tales like an ancient story-teller. The goal was to please the reader and to present a figure who maintained the faith and thereby became an object of emulation for the community, not purely for pleasure through an attractive narrative outlining a saint's life.[30]

The preservation and transmission of those narratives among the Syriac-speaking Christians of the Sasanian Empire helped shape an understanding of what being Christian should mean. One can argue that a sense of belonging to a community was constructed through the reading of such works. Even a small group of literate people within a religious setting could be instrumental in spreading a certain mindset and a sense of belonging to a community. It is true that "readers" were not numerous in comparison with the illiterate majority of the population, however, as the situation in the Roman Empire shows, not everyone had to be literate to listen to hagiographical account.

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[30] Père Hippolyte Delehaye, S.J., Bollandist, *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography* trans. V. M. Crawford (University of Notre Dame Press 1961), 61-2.

The Syriac tradition of martyrological writing benefited from its counterpart. A short book of *Martyrs in Palestine*, dated to 411 and written by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, was one of the earliest works translated into Syriac. The work contains short stories of confession and of Roman martyrdoms collected by Eusebius; the Greek and Latin versions of the collection have not yet been found. Evidence to support the claim that the work was originally written in Syriac by Eusebius, which he knew from living in a Syriac-speaking region, is lacking, since there is no other work of Eusebius in the Syriac language. [31]

To study the relationship of the Sasanian kings to the Christian community of the empire, we have to rely mostly on sources written by anonymous Christian authors. Even though accounts such as the *Acts of Persian Martyrs* cannot be read as reliable historical documents, the collective memory generated by these accounts confirms that the reign of Šāpur II (309-379 CE) was a particularly difficult time for the Christians of the empire.[32] The fact that historians sometimes struggle to make sense of these stories or believe their historicity is perhaps due to the fact that it is not common to have access to the discourse of a group of persecuted people. The history of the Christians of the Sasanian Empire at least during the fourth century is shaped by a worldview dominated by stories of martyrdom and persecution. In the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat (ca. first half of the fourth century), there is a section under the title of persecution which notes that persecution was the result of their sins. Aphrahat did not talk about any specific persecution in the Sasanian Empire, and used biblical analogies about various persecuted figures.

[31] Eusebius, of Caesarea, *History of the Martyrs in Palestine: Discovered in a Very Ancient Syriac Manuscript* ed. *W. Cureton* (London and Edinburgh, Paris: Williams and Norgate: C. Borrani, 1861), v.

[32] Sebastian Brock, "A Guide to the Persian Martyrs Acts," In *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in with a Guide to the Persian Martyrs Act* (Piscataway; Gorgias Press, 2008), 77-125.

If he was mentioning specific instances of persecution he did it subtly without any obvious reference to any Sasanian authority.[33]

Recent studies of the historiography of persecution have revisited the "intolerance" theory with two different objectives. In the first category, we encounter scholars who try to justify persecution by trying to establish the secular reasons behind it: the desire to create a centralized government, war with the Romans, fiscal problems in the empire, failure of the bishops to alleviate interreligious tensions between Christians and Zoroastrians, etc.[34] The second group is more concerned with the historicity of the hagiographies and the discourse in these accounts about the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great. Phillip Wood and Richard Payne belong to the first category of scholarship. They both argue that persecution was a natural and expected reaction by king Šāpur II. After the king failed to achieve his goal in turning Christians into compliant subjects, and the bishop refused to collect his communities' taxes, retribution was to be expected. Payne goes further in his argument, insisting that Šāpur II's mass persecution was a myth.[35] I agree with Payne that the persecution was not systematic, mostly addressing the leaders of the Christian community, and it was an outcome any bishop or person might suffer if they disobeyed the King of Kings.[36] It is true that during persecution bishops were the ones who were martyred and not the whole Christian population, presumably because the Sasanian authorities recognized them as the leaders of their communities, which made them special targets. But I disagree with Payne as to whether bishop Simeon bar Ṣabba'e failed to see the

[33] Aphrahat, "On Persecution."

[34] Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, 21; Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 43.

[35] Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 40-42.

[36] Ibid.

opportunity Šāpur II was offering him to collect taxes for the empire and to be a part of the royal administration.

The other approach seeks to investigate the Persian Acts to establish the historicity of the hagiographical accounts, and gauge how close to reality the image of Constantine is in the account of Simeon bar Ṣabba'e. In giving greater weight to assessing the image of the Roman emperor, Smith fails to investigate the complex issue at hand—the excessive taxation of the population—and focuses on a peripheral question. Smith analyzes the *Acts* of bishop Simeon bar Ṣabba'e and comes to the conclusion that the sources construe an imaginary Constantine whose death allowed Šāpur II to show aggression towards the Christians.[37] In the *History*, Constantine was referred to as blessed and as an angel of peace, but the text contains no claim about him doing anything for the Christians of Persia nor even if he knew about their persecution. Given the fact that the text mentioned very early on that the persecution started after the death of blessed Constantine, it would have been pointless for Christians to put their hopes in the emperor's actions on their behalf. Smith does not ask the more crucial question: that is, why in the *History* of Simeon bar Ṣabba'e does the community of Christians living in the Sasanian Empire even need a savior? What were the issues that were complicating the lives of the Christian in the Sasanian Empire that made them reconstruct and see an "imaginary" savior in the Roman emperor, Constantine I?

Both of these approaches downplay the fact that these accounts are religious texts dealing with a religious conflict. This type of scholarship sometimes does not consider certain attitudes of the Sasanian kings as religious behavior. Often in the hagiography it is attested that the conflicts between Sasanian kings were instigated by the Zoroastrian clergy rather than by the

[37] Kyle Smith, *Martyrdom and History of Blessed Simeon*, xiiv.

king's own religious zeal, but to argue that clashes over religion were not in fact about religion, that rather they were about class struggle or ethnic issues, is reductionist. The conflict about religion was a conflict over loyalty.[38] Religious conflicts, persecution, and many wars were first and foremost about religion, therefore, religious behavior should be studied based on the view that inspired it, not by reductionist social, political, anthropological, or cultural-theoretical explanations.

Taxation: The Primordial Debt

In Syriac and in Armenian languages the idea of tax, duty, and obligation is combined. The Armenian word for tax is *hark,* a borrowing from Parthian and Middle Persian *hrg/xrg,* which MacKenzie translates as tribute, work, effort, and duties.[39] In Syriac the word *mks,* which is also used in Armenia, has the dual meaning of obligations and taxes; the word used throughout Syriac hagiographies is *mdata,* which means tribute, with a secondary meaning of fine or penalty.[40] I will focus here on the religious aspect of tax and debt.

There are two narratives of Simeon bar Ṣabba'e, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.[41] There is also an account in Classical Armenian, which is a close translation of the *Martyrdom*.[42] The date of the primary manuscript for both the *Martyrdom* and *History*, Vat. Syr. 160-161, is

[38] Sebastian Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A case of Divided Loyalties," *Religion and National Identity,* ed. Stuart Mews (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 1–19.

[39] D. N. MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (Oxford, University of Oxford Press, 1971), 43.

[40] J. Payne Smith (Mrs. Margoliouth), *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), 251.

[41] Kyle Smith translated these accounts under the titles Martyrdom and History.

[42] *Patmutiwn Varuts Srboyn Shmawoni Episkoposi ew chaṛ i Vkaysn Arewelits,* in Sop'erk' Haykakank' series. No. 20 (Verenttik: Tparan Mkhit'areants', 1854), 8-158. (BHO 1118).

disputed. Assemani suggests a tenth-century date, which Van Rampey believes is too late; a certain part of the manuscript, he argues, should be dated to the sixth century.[43]

Kyle Smith has translated the Syriac from the critical edition published by Michael Kmosko in 1907. Smith agrees with Kmosko's dating of both accounts, thereby dating the *Martyrdom*, which is a shorter account filled with biblical analogies to Maccabees, to the fourth century and prior to *History,* which is a longer account and, according to Kmosko and Smith, was composed after the synods of the Church of the East in the fifth century.[44] The title given to Simeon in the *History* is "the archbishop and catholicos of the Church of the East," while in the *Martyrdom* he is referred to as the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Smith concludes that this places the *History* later, possibly after the synod of 424. But the addition of the title could simply have been a later scribal gloss updating the title of the catholicos which therefore would not impact the integrity of the work as a whole.

The analogical account of the *Martyrdom* draws strong links between Judas Maccabeus and Simeon. Judas was ready to kill for his faith, while Simon was killed for his faith, both struggled on behalf of their communities, both challenging powerful kings. It seems to me that the shorter *Martyrdom* is a poetic interpretation of the events of the fourth century. Unlike that of *History,* the anonymous author of the *Martyrdom* does not feel the necessity to list the chronological events that led to the persecution, somehow assuming their audience to be aware of it. Right at the beginning the *Martyrdom* gives with an account of the Maccabees and draws

[43] J. Bidez and G. C. Hansen, Sozomenus, kirchengeschichte (GSC 50; 1960), 61-65 (II. 9-10). Lucas Van Rompay, Shem'on bar Ṣabba'e, *Gorgias Encyclopedia Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, eds. Sebastian Brock, Aaron Butts, George Kiraz, Lucas Van Rompay (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 373-4.

[44] Kyle Smith, "Constantine and Judah the Maccabee: History and Memory in the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 12 (2012): 16-33. Michael Kmosko, *Saint Simeon Bar Ṣabbā'ē: Martyrium et Narratio*, PS 2 (Paris, 1907), 690-713

similarities between Simeon and Judas. The author was more concerned with molding the events to echo the closest biblical equivalent. The *History*, on the other hand, is a more nuanced account that shows a better understanding and awareness of the contemporary events in regard to the reasons behind Simeon's disobedience and persecution by Šāpur II.

Smith follows Kmosko's conclusion and argues that the *Martyrdom* is the basis for the account reflected in Sozomen.[45] I, however, would propose that it was the *History* or a text close to it that was known to Sozomen who added it to his *Ecclesiastical History* (II. 9-10), written in 445. The main focus of the *Martyrdom*, as I said, was to interpret and analyze the events from the martyrdom of the bishop to the acts of Maccabees; this crucial element is missing in Sozomon's account. In parallel with the narrative in the *History*, Sozomen records that the Christians were levied "excessive" taxes. In the *History* double taxes were what Simeon refused to "collect" or expect his people to pay, but he had no objection to pay taxes *per se*.[46] In the *Martyrdom* it is the payment of any taxes which is deemed excessive, since Jesus freed Christians from taxes and from servitude to any earthly king.[47]

In the *Martyrdom* Simeon was compared to Judas Maccabeus for his resistance to the imperial force and his eagerness to put his life in danger for the benefit of his community:

> O priest and priest, Judah and Simeon! One saved his people in battle, the other saved his people in death. One was glorified while conquering, the other excelled while being conquered. They become high priests and prelates clad with the ephod of the sanctuary, holier serving the altar, admired, honoring the holy service, justly purifying with water, boldly displaying the blood of grapes, eagerly encouraging their people terrifyingly bearing arms, confidently calling out to death, valiantly summoning the blade, nobly being baptized in blood, joyfully drinking the cup, blessing and distributing gifts, fittingly

[45] Smith, *The Martyrdom and History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, xxxiv-xxxviii.

[46] *History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 9.

[47] *Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 10: 22.

> dispensing crowns, scrupulously upholding the commandment of their Lord, purely keeping the law of their God. For one fulfilled the law uprightly in that he killed a "soul for a soul" and by being killed, saved and the other cared for (the law) by submitting himself, for, in response to "if anyone hits you on the cheek" he stretched out his neck to the sword. One was avenged while avenging, the other humbled while being humbled.[48]

The demand for collecting taxation from the Christians was compared to the cruelty towards the Maccabees.

> Suffering came upon our people and they were oppressed by taxes… And Judah, after he was exalted in victory, in you did he descend in order to stand and be absolved as high priest through his own blood. And Simeon, after he had fallen in triumph, in you did he stand in order to bow down and be purified as high priest through his own blood.[49]

The account time and again repeats that "true shepherds" and "wise leaders" should give themselves for their flocks so that they would not perish, emphasizing the place of Simeon within his community as "victorious in Jesus, the son of God," who "withdrew his people's taxes from the servitude of the king of Persia and Syria."[50] The duty placed upon Simeon was similar to that borne by Jesus, who was the "King of Kings."[51] Therefore, as the head of the community of believers, he would not put the yoke of subjugation upon their shoulders. Simon declared to the king that "Our God is the creator of your gods, He commanded us, 'do not acquire gold or silver for your purses,' thus we have no gold to give you, nor money to bring to you for taxes. His apostle warned us, 'you were ransomed for a heavy price, so do not become servants of men.'"[52] His task as a bishop therefore was to follow Jesus, who "liberated his church through his

[48] *Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 18.

[49] *Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 20.

[50] Ibid.

[51] *Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 22.

[52] [1 Cor 7: 23]: *Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 20.

death, set his people free through his blood, relieved those who carry heavy burdens through his passion, and lightened the yoke of the subjugated through his cross." [53]

The narrator juxtaposes Simeon and Šāpur II's approach to the community to show the depth of Simeon's commitment to his "flock". The anonymous author states, through the conspiracy of the Jews and magi, Simeon together with two of his priests were chained and brought to the king's court. The presence of Jews in the court as the trial against Simeon was being held could be a hagiographical topos that tried to shape the event as much as possible to evoke the trial of Jesus. The magi announced that a refusal to pay taxes was a rebellious act against the kingdom.[54] The king, however, put the issue of taxes to one side and commanded Simeon to worship the sun god or else he would be killed.

The discussion between the bishop and the king about taxation turns into a theological argument. The hagiography sets its audience up for a moment of violence: the king who failed to discipline the bishop enacts a public punishment of him, displaying his body to a wide audience. The issue is that Christians, who started as a persecuted community in the Roman Empire, had turned being killed into a victory, a triumphal martyrdom, and an accomplishment. The discourse of a subordinate group such as the Christians in the Sasanian Empire thereby demystifies, delegitimizes, and deconstructs the established norms. The discourse turns into a form of "force"[55] that transforms simple power into legitimate authority by mystifying the inevitable inequities of any social order and winning the consent of those over whom power is exercised.

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[53] [Mt 11:28-29]: *Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 22.

[54] *History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 120.

[55] Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 4-5.

The accounts of violence toward the bishop, who saw himself as the spiritual leader of his community, are a reminder of the moment when an imperfectly integrated community of Christians recognized their corporate distinctiveness from the Empire. The double taxation was a punishment for a community whose loyalty was doubted. It was not apparent to the King of Kings whether the community was allied with him or with the Caesar. In the *History*, the king complains that "For to us gods, there are tribulations and wars, while to them is rest and luxury. They dwell in our land and yet they are of one mind with Caesar, our enemy, and we fight, but they enjoy quiet."[56] In the *History*, Šāpur's persecution starts after the death of Constantine the Great. The reason for the persecution was a war with the Christian sons of Constantine and hatred towards the Christians of the empire. The Caesar of the East, Constantinus II, had seen his father's intentions in preparing war against the armies of Šāpur II. The religious component of the war is implicit. The following year Constantinus led an enormous force against Šāpur to halt the king's activities in Mesopotamia and Armenia. The war began in 338 and involved a series of military conflicts with no significant gains for either side. Šāpur II's main objective must have been to reverse the outcome of the war of 299, when Narseh lost Nisibis, Amida, and Singaria to the Romans in exchange for the return of the royal family the Romans had taken hostage. Eventually Constantinus II sent ambassadors to Šāpur II asking for peace. Šāpur demanded that Rome return Mesopotamia and Armenia, whose king's loyalty was not certain especially since he was Christian. Julian's war, his defeat, and death in 363 finally resolved the issue between the two empires as Rome returned the lands in dispute and agreed to not get involved with Armenia.[57]

[56] *History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 76.

[57] Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity, Neighbors and Rivals*, 89-91

For bishop Simeon to prove his loyalty meant becoming a tax-collector for his people; to do so he would need to exceed the limits of his responsibilities as a bishop and become a civil servant under the king. The account shows that being given the task of collecting the taxes was in and of itself a punishment. Simon said to the king:

> Our bodies are servants of your majesty, and our houses and all our possessions are yours, King. For we have nothing in this land of tribulation. Let my lord King issue a command, if it please him, and take them, because truly I say that I will not oppress my people and subject them to taxes because of their faith—even if your mighty majesty commands that my skin be flayed from my body. For I would rather my own skin be peeled from my body than be made to strip the clothes from a pauper and oppress those who were freed by my Lord.[58]

Simeon's resistance of in refusing Šāpur's order was not because he couldn't see the opportunity to be a part of the royal administration, but exactly because he did not want to change his place within the community nor to "give them away" to the King of Kings. But being expected to give his flock away for the sake of taxes to the king was part of the punishment by which Simeon himself became a secular subject of the king. In the *Martyrdom,* Simeon becomes the mouthpiece of Jesus, freeing his people from any sort of tax and servitude. But in the *History* the answer is much more nuanced. The officials transcribing Simeon's response to Šāpur warned him that his Scripture would compel the payment of taxes to a governing authority. Simeon explained that Scripture did not agree with double taxation. Nevertheless, in both accounts the king concluded that Simeon was trying to incite Christians to rebel against him and to serve the Roman Caesar.[59]

David Graeber, an economic anthropologist, reexamines the complex topic of debt and taxation in his book *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. Graeber explains how Christ was seen as the

[58] *History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e,* 122.

[59] *History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e,* 76.

one who redeems his people from their debt. In the books of the Old Testament, especially in Exodus, one can see a trace of the people who were defeated and exiled but waiting for redemption.[60] Graeber ties redemption to a release from a burden of sin and guilt. Here the importance of Christ as a redeemer becomes obvious. Redemption was the matter of destroying an entire system of accounting, to literally break the tablets where the financial records were kept. Similar to what Christ would have done, Bishop Simeon bar Ṣabba'e reacted to the command to collect taxes from his people by saying:

> Jesus died on behalf of the whole earth and freed it, and I will die for these few people whom I shepherd. For the sake of taxes I will not give my flock over to you willingly…(Far be it from me) to make my body joyful through the bodies redeemed by the killing of Jesus! Certainly, I will neither spare my feet from walking the way of death such as his, nor I will restrain myself from the sacrifice through which the true high priest was sacrificed.[61]

From the king's point of view, to pay double taxes was both a sign of loyalty to the empire and a punishment for them being of one mind with Caesar and for their allegiance to him. But for the bishop his allegiance was not to any worldly king—Roman or Sasanian—but to the heavenly God. To pay egregious taxes because they were Christians was simply not acceptable to the bishop, since he thought they could be both loyal to the king and believe in one true God.

In the *Martyrdom* taxes become religious. The bishop resorts to religious discourse to justify his resistance, drawing on the seemingly odd idea that Jesus paid all Christians' taxes with his blood. Nietzsche in *Genealogy of Morals* explains how the issue of debt was resolved in Christianity:

> We find ourselves face to face with that paradoxical and frightful expedient which afforded at least temporary relief to tortured humanity, that master-stroke of Christianity: God himself sacrificing himself for the guilt of man; God himself making himself paid; God

[60] David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years,* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville House. 2011), 82-4.

[61] *Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e,* 25.

> being alone able to redeem man from what for the human, what for man himself, has become impossible to redeem—the creditor himself sacrificing himself for the debtor, from love for his debtor![62]

So, the martyrdom of Christ is a way of reversing this debt, and bishop Simeon was just following his Lord's example. For the King of Kings, the debt was to Ahuramazda and the *yazdan,* who were in an everlasting mutual gift-exchange with the humans. The interaction between the king and the bishop attested to in these accounts becomes a debate to clarify who owed what to whom.

It is difficult, with the limited number of sources we have, to pin down what the beliefs of the Sasanian kings were, but I will attempt to show that their perspectives regarding debt toward the gods can be traced in what remains of their accounts. In the Achaemenid period, kings used cosmology to define their place in the cosmos as the gods' representatives in the world. As pointed out by Prod Oktor Skjærvø, based on the Old Persian inscriptions of Darius, the relationship between god, the king, and his subjects was one of indebtedness, obligation, and ownership:

> Ahuramahzda is the great god who set in place this earth, who set in place yonder sky, who set in place man, who set in place happiness for man, who made Dārayawahush king over many, one, commander over many.
> I am Dārayawahush, the great king, king of kings, king over lands of many, king over this earth, son of Wishtāspa, a descendant of Hakhāmanish.[63]

In the Sasanian period, we have at the conclusion of an inscription of Šāpur I (ŠKZ) a statement that confirms this idea of exchange between the *yazdans* and the king. The inscription states that the fortune of the land depends on good service toward the gods (*yazdan ir ud kerdagan*), which Huyse translates as cult-service toward the gods. Šāpur I comments that the

[62] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *A Genealogy of Morals*. ed. Alexander Tille (New York: Macmillan, 1897), 118.

[63] Prods O. Skjaervo, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism,* (New Haven: University of Yale, 2011), 44.

gods would help future kings just as they aided him and make them their helpers, or—as Skjærvø translates *dastgerd*—their "property".

> Now, in the same manner that We exerted Ourselves in the matters and services of the gods (yazdan) and are the property (dastgerd) of the gods, so that with the help of the gods, We sought and held all these lands and obtained great fame, in the same manner, let him who comes after us and is fortunate also exert himself in the matters and services of the gods, (yazdan ir ud kerdagan) so that the gods many help him, too and make him their property (dastgerd). [64]

There is no existing inscription that clarifies how Šāpur II understood the cosmological order that would bring prosperity to his realm. But, for bishop Simeon, his and his communities' debt to God was paid and forgiven by the sacrifice of Christ. Šāpur II approached such obligations differently; for him the *yazdan* were the ultimate source of his and his kingdom's prosperity. In exchange for all the land and the great fame the king was offered, he was to return the favor and pay his dues by performing rituals for the gods (*yazdan ir ud kerdagan*).

If we [see] the payment of taxes as a sign of acknowledging obligations toward the ultimate creditor—who for Šāpur II were the *yazdan*, and who for bishop Simeon was God who had already forgiven his debt—we will understand why the king's reaction to the bishop's refusal to collect or pay taxes was so harsh. To focus on the fiscal component of Simeon's refusal only masks this fundamental difference between the bishop and the king.

Taxation of the Others

To clarify why these excessive taxes were especially oppressive for Christian communities, we should consider how increased taxation could become a significant issue due to the particular position of these communities in the empire's economy. From the *Martyrdom of Pusai* one can conclude that beside Pusai himself other deportees and subjects were sent to the

[64] Philip Huyse, Die Dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. an Der Ka'ba-I Zardušt (ŠKZ) 3:1; Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1999); Skjaervo*, The Spirit of Zoroastrianism,* 223.

empire, mostly as skilled workers. Morony explains there were several ways that the economy would have benefitted from the deported population. First, they were part of the organization of the palace engaged in the production of articles desired by the ruler and the court; beyond that Šāpur II settled craftsmen and built workshops in the newly founded cities. Second, their presence increased the tax base since more labor benefitted the urban economy. Lastly, they would produce in the Sasanian territories whatever they had been producing on the Roman side.[65]

Hugh Kennedy, who has studied the creation of new cities under the Sasanian rulers until after the rise of Islam, notes that in Sasanian society elites were absent from the urban scene. They lived outside the cities in rural areas on fortified estates close to the Zoroastrian ritual sites. Similarly, the kings dwelt in the countryside, while the cities lacked any monumental buildings or public statues. Drawing from Talmudic texts and excavations at Marv and Ctesiphon, Kennedy argues that building in the cities extended to the roads, workshops, and markets.[66]

Sasanians achieved their goal of uniting different regions through the "foundation" of cities, which were mostly preexisting towns that were redefined as cities under the direct royal authority. In this manner, these cities could generate revenue.[67] Since powerful nobles remained outside the control of the government, and the burden of taxation fell on the rest of the population, the creation of these cities helped assure revenue for the state.[68]

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[65] *Martyrdom of Pusai*, in Acta martyrum et sanctorum II, ed. Paul Bedjan (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1891), 209; Oscar Braun, Märterkten Ausgewählte Akten persicher Märtyrer (Bibliothek der Kirchenväter, I Reibe, Band Kempten, Munich, 1915), 59; Michael Morony, "Population Transfers between Sasanian Iran and the Byzantine Empire," 162.

[66] Hugh Kennedy, "From Shahrestan to Medina," Studia Islamica 102 (2006): 5-35.

[67] Ryka Gyselen, "Economy in the Sasanian Period," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Vol. VIII, Fasc. 1, 104-107; available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/economy-iv (accessed online at 17 July 2017).

[68] Ibid.

These cities formed a belt in the southwestern regions of modern Iran. It has been suggested that Ardašīr planned to benefit from the seafaring maritime trade in the Persian Gulf. According to Tabari, new cities were also built in lower Mesopotamia, on the other side of the Persian Gulf.[69] Ardašīr had occupied Sasinu Charax on the Shat-al Arab or Arvandrud and threatened the trading metropolis and Roman colony of Palmyra, a great trade hub that provided access to important trade centers of the Late Antique world.[70]

These royal estates, as Gyselen explains, were under the direct authority of the Sasanian kings. The word *dst…*, which is translated as royal estates in the Parthian text, stands for *dastkart*. The phrase after *dst[krt]* states these lands were established by the father and forefathers of Šāpur I, which explains why Kettenhofen translates the word as royal estate. They were not noble lands. The full Parthian text and its translation according to Huyse is as follows:

> Ud mardōhmag čē až Frōmāyīn šahr až Anērān pad āwār wāst, pad Ērānšahr, pad Pārs, Parθaw, Xūzestān, Asūrestān ud any šahr ō šahr, kū amā ud pidar ud niyāgān ud hasēnagān dast[gerd] būd, ōδ nišāst.[71]

> And the men, who from the land of the Romans, from Anērān were deported in Iranshahr, in Persis, Parthia, Khuzestan, Asurestan and from land to land, which were established by my father, and my forefathers and ancestors, there, they were settled.[72]

Even as there was a spectrum of status and ranks in the upper hierarchy of any empire, the same can be seen at the lower end. Moses Finley defined members of that group as

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[69] Al-Tabarī, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk,* trans. by C. E. Bosworth as *The History of al-Tabarī,* vol. V, *The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen,* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 16.

[70] Geo Widengren, "The Establishment of the Sasanian Dynasty in the Light of New Evidence," in *La Persia nel Medioevo* (Rome: Atti del Convegno Internazionale, 1971), 754-5.

[71] ŠKZ.

[72] ŠKZ.

"dependent labor," a label which describes anyone who worked involuntarily due to debt, capture, birth into the class of dependents, or any other situation.[73] Some measure of freedom was removed for a long time or for life, from people deported in this manner.[74]

Of course, the skill and craft of these deportees were honored and valued—as in the case of Pusai—but they were not indispensable to the empire. To complicate the matter, taxes levied on craftsmen depended on the cost of their labor, which itself depended on factors such as the level of their skills or the amount of time they spent finishing a product, and was difficult to calculate. Since these factors were not easy to measure, the price of the material produced was not set in stone. It is this flexibility in pricing that would allow the craftsmen some margin of profit. However, what made the case for deportees like Pusai different was that their products were commissioned and demanded by the court and the king. If the king was willing to pay more for the same product, then the increase in taxation could be worked out. But since the king also might not agree to pay more for the same product, taxation might soon impoverish the Christian population.

Finley, who studied taxation in Classical Greece and in the Roman Republic and Empire, declares that taxation was a sign of servitude and that heavy taxation could lead to unimaginable difficulties. In Classical Greece, as Finley asserts, any form of direct tax on citizens was considered tyrannical. The poll tax, a very obvious direct tax, was the degrading mark of the outsider.[75] In the Roman state the provinces, which were conquered and added to the empire, were the main source of tax revenue. Provincial governors and tax collectors in charge of their

[73] Moses Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 69.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid., 164.

own regions during the Republic remained under the emperor afterward. Finley believes that the trend in the Roman Empire was to encourage more and more imperial aristocracy to be provincialized.

David Goodblatt studied the Jewish population of the Sasanian Empire based on the references to taxation in the Babylonian Talmud. Goodblatt argues that the poll tax was a considerable sum. If the rate was low, selling movables would cover the amount, but enslavement for nonpayment could also happen.[76] In an account from the fourth century, Papa (d. 378) asks Rava (d. 352), "Does the master see those of the house of Papa b. Abba who pay *zuzim* for the poll tax of people and enslave them?" The house, as Goodblatt explains, belonged to a wealthy Babylonian Jewish family. Rava replies:

> The documents of these [people seized for poll tax delinquency] are on deposit in the archive of the king, and the king says he who does not pay poll tax is enslaved to who pays the poll tax [of the former]. [77]

Since the tax was already high, one can imagine how a community would feel about double taxation. It is true that during the reign of Šāpur II Romans and Sasanians were at war, and the cost of these wars might fall on the population. Richard Payne emphasizes that taxes would have helped pay for the war. He adds, moreover, that Šāpur II could have benefitted from the organizational power of the bishop Simeon in two regions that were most important to the court, Mesopotamia and Khuzestan, during preparation for war with Rome. Payne interprets the killing of Simeon and his companions in the 340s not as a strike against their Christianity but as punishment for not cooperating with the extension of the fiscal system. He believes the

[76] David M. Goodblatt, "The Poll Tax in Sasanian Babylonia: The Talmudic Evidence," Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 22:3 (1979): 23-95.

[77] Yev. 46a= BM 73b. cited in David M. Goodblatt, "The Poll Tax in Sasanian Babylonia"

punishment was justified since they refused the Šāpur II's invitation "to participate in the administration of the empire."[78]

The idea of a bishop as tax-collector in the Sasanian Empire perhaps arose from studies of the responsibilities of bishops in the Roman Empire, who had more practical roles in the administration of the empire, especially after the fourth century. Claudia Rapp has shown that since most Roman bishops in Late Antiquity came from the municipal elite—the *curiales*—the task of collecting taxes for the territory fell on them. Bishops of *curial* status were an early phenomenon. Rapp mentions the father of Marcion, leader of the Marcionite heresy, who was born in 85, as one of the first examples of such bishops. Estimates indicate there were around 250,000 *curiales* in the late fourth century among whom there were plenty of suitable candidates for the episcopate. In the imperial legislation, most recruits for ecclesiastical ranks at all levels from deacon to bishop were *curiales*. [79]The social background of most bishops in the Sasanian Empire was not of administrative families. It is confirmed by the *Persian Martyr Act*s that most of the Christians martyred were from artisan families. Simeon bar Ṣabba'e was a son of a family that dyed wool for "the impious kingdom," for example.[80] Pusai, mentioned in both Simeon's *Martyrology* and the *History of Simeon,* had the title *quragbed,* "head of the artisans."

Furthermore, reading the *Synodicon Orientale*, which lists the various responsibilities of the bishops, deacons, and monks of the Church of the East, confirms that there is no reference to their obligation to collect taxes. The Jewish exilarch, as David Goodblatt has shown, similarly had no such responsibility. According to Goodblatt, taxes were collected not by the exilarch but

[78] Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 41-3.

[79] Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 183-4.

[80] *Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 7.

by an imperial agent, referred to as head of the canal- *ryš nhr'*. To review the title of the tax collector Goodblatt refers to Sanh. 25b-26a, about the father of R. Zera, a little-known figure, as follows:

The father of R. Zera engaged in tax collection (gbywt') for 13 years. Whenever the "head of the canal" (ryš nhr') came to town, he would say to the masters when he saw them, "Come my people, enter your chambers [and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the wrath is past-Isaiah 26:20]. When he saw the townspeople, he would say, " the head of the canal has come to town, and now he will slay the father by the mouth of the son, and the son by the mouth of the father" And everyone would hide. When he [head of the canal] came, he [the father of Zera] said to him, "From who can we collect?"

Goodblatt's work has shown that it is a misconception that taxes were collected by the exilarch. He argues that reference to tax-collecting agents cannot be found in the Babylonian Talmud. The suggestion that the exilarch collected taxes is an analogical construct based on the assumption that this had become the responsibility of Christian bishops.[81] Ironically the role of Simeon, who preferred to die rather than to become a tax-collector of his people, was used in support of the argument that bishops collected taxes. The poll tax, according to Goodblatt, was collected from town to town. Jewish tax collectors were not the agents of the local community or the exilarch, but such a role was assumed since a bishop like Simeon was ordered to collect taxes on behalf of his community. The collectors mentioned were government agents and not exilarchs as Newman, Krauss and Neusner believed.[82]

Ritual, Power and Violence?

The other figure present in both the *History* and *Martyrdom* is an old eunuch named Gushtazad, the tutor of the king, who denied being a Christian at the beginning and worshiped the sun, but

[81] David M. Goodblatt, "The Poll Tax in Sasanian Babylonia," 250.

[82] David M. Goodblatt, "The Poll Tax in Sasanian Babylonia," 233-95.

immediately repented. When he confessed his faith before the king, the latter ordered his execution. Gushtazad was concerned about what his fellow Christians would think of this, so he demanded that it should be announced that he was being killed for his faith, not for betraying the king or the kingdom. Simeon heard about the death of Gushtazad and prayed to receive martyrdom himself. The next day he was given one last chance to bow in front of the king or worship the sun, but he refused. The hagiography ends when the bishop together with one hundred other bishops, priests, deacons, and *bnay qyama*[83] from various cities and towns of Persia were led to the place of execution and killed.

In the *Dadestan-I Minoy-I Khrad* (Judgment of the Spirit of Wisdom), a collection of questions and answers from the Spirit of Wisdom, it is advised that prayer should be said facing the sun and Mithra (in Avestan) or Mihr (in Pahlavi). Miθra/Mihr is a deity identified with Venus,[84] overseeing agreements. Venus precedes the sun at dawn, therefore the prayer was said to both deities these celestial bodies represent.[85] The prayer could be said facing the moon and the fire-temple, or the fire in the fire-temple. One should repent before the sun, and Mihr, and the moon, and Hormezd.[86] The general invocation to the gods involved offering gifts and praises so a boon would be granted. Most prayers in the Yashts were concerned with victory in battle, heroes, and fast horses.

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[83] This was the term for a community of ascetic individuals gathered in a pre-monastic organization in the fourth century. Celibacy and poverty were not required, however zealous fasting and prayer were recommended. The word is frequently used to refer to the whole Syriac Christian community. See R. A. Kitchen, Bnay Qyama, Bnat Qyama, *Gorgias Encyclopedia Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage,* eds. Sebastian Brock, Aaron Butts, George Kiraz, and Lucas Van Rompay (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 84-5.

[84] Antonio Panaino and David Pingree, "Saturn, the Lord of the Seventh Millennium," *East and West* 46:3/4 (1996): 235-50. http://www.jstor.org/stable/29757277.

[85] Skjærvø, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 16.

[86] *Dânâk-u Mainyô-i Khrad; Pahlavi Pazand and Sanskrit Texts*, ed. T. D. Anklesaria, n.p. (Bombay), 1913, Chapter 53.

An oath-swearing ritual is attested in the Khorde Avesta in the Yašt of Rašnu. Rašnu is the son of Ahura Mazda and Amaiti, and the brother of Sraoša, Miθra, Aši, and the Daena. Miθra is virtually identified with Rašnu (*Yt.* 10.79-81). In the Rašnu Yašt, Rašnu is called to be present at the oath ceremony or ordeal (*varah*), which takes place before the fire and with other ritual requisites (*Yt*. 12.3):

> O thou, holy Rašnu! O most true Rašnu! most beneficent Rašnu! most knowing Rašnu! most discerning Rašnu I most fore-knowing Rašnu! most far-seeing Rašnu I Rašnu, the best doer of justice! Rašnu, the best smiter of thieves;
>
> The uninjured, the best killer, smiter, destroyer of thieves and bandits! in whatever part of the world thou art watching the doings of men and making the account... (obscure).[87]

In *Vendidad* 4.54-55 if a suspect was to perjure himself by contradicting Rašnu, the judge, and deceiving Miθra, the contract or promise, he would be severely punished.[88]

In *History,* Simeon refuses to collect double taxes on behalf of King Šāpur II (309-79). In *Martyrdom*, he declines to collect taxes at all. Why did the authors of these texts need to remind their coreligionists of the turbulences they faced under Šāpur II? These accounts show how bishop Simeon among many others did not bow to the will of the king. They helped to define a "proper" pattern of relationship between the secular ruling power and the spiritual power of bishops. These accounts are the source of the legitimacy of the church fathers as supposedly "powerless" bishops who opposed and frustrated the demands of the ruling order and defended the community that trusted them as their patrons.

Understanding the means by which religion powerfully promotes social cohesion opens up a space that will lead us to appreciate the complexities of integrating the Christian community

[87] Yt. 12.7-8

[88] Hanns-Peter Schmidt, "Mithra I. Mitra in Old Indian and Mithra In Old Iranian," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2018, available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mithra-i (accessed on 8 February 2018).

into the Sasanian Empire. For instance, the qualities of kingship were central to Zoroastrian cosmology:

> The king said, "Had you confessed the living god, you would have an excuse. But in fact you believe in a crucified god, as you have said. Now then, obey me and worship the sun here, in whose rising all creation lives, and I will give you the most resplendent gifts and amass numerous presents for you, I will make you great and powerful throughout my whole kingdom."[89]

The king's reaction to Simeon's refusal to pray to the sun and the link he made between showing reverence to the gods and loyalty towards the kingdom shows that he saw religious ritual such as this both as an act that could bring in the help of gods, and as a powerful and important ritual which could bridge the gaps and reduce the tension between different groups in the empire.

The ritual of worshiping the sun could be seen as an instrument to "cloak the fundamental conflicts." Some scholars say rituals help groups and individuals to forget their disagreements for a time so that some measure of good will and stability can emerge.[90] Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* argues:

> The systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain "political economy" of the body; even if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment, even when they use "lenient" methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body that is at issue—the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission… The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies to emit signs.[91]

The hagiography boasts about how the bishop was not willing to hide under the "cloak" of ritual. The power that tried to direct his body in a ritual of bending to the sun shifted and

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[89] *Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 14.

[90] Max Gluckman and Forde Daryll, *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962), 40.

[91] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trs. Alan Sherdian (New York: Vintage Books Division of Random House, 1977), 25.

displayed itself in the public execution of the bishop and his followers.[92] The juxtaposition between the bishop and the old Christian eunuch Gushtazad in the royal court, who temporarily agreed to participate in the ritual but regretted his deed and welcomed martyrdom in the account, is a reminder for the audience to stay steadfast in their faith.

> Gushtazad again sent word for second time and said to him [Simeon] "Forgive me this sin this time and never again will I commit it!"
>
> Simeon answered and sent word to him: "This is not a sin for which I can absolve you, nor is it an offense for which I can forgive you. You have committed sacrilege, not a sin! You have denied your God—who can forgive you? You have turned from Christ who gives you life—what mortal man is able to give life to your mortality?... You deserve an evil punishment because your sight was terrified by transient glory but you did not fear the one who was glorious and holy, the hidden being, the king of all ages…[93]

The exaggerated account of Gushtazad's apostasy, even though temporary, was given as an example to elicit similar behavior from readers in future. It is plausible that lay Christians would value their life more than their faith, since not everybody was ready to be martyred. Chances are that more people would "temporarily" pay tribute to a deity to preserve their life, which is exactly the issue the hagiography wants to clarify. Apostasy for any length of time for any reason even to preserve life is an unforgivable sin, a sin which could only be forgiven if the apostate set the records right by offering his life in martyrdom.

In the case of Simeon and Guštazad, the "cloak of ritual" of sun worship that the king demanded be worn for a short time instead of covering the fundamental cleavage between the Christian community and the kingdom, tore it apart and exposed the conflict. As Lincoln puts it, this is how a previously established level of integration was undone in a society. The integration of communities, which is necessary for the smooth, harmonious functioning of society, depended

[92] *History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 95.

[93] *History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 32.

on numerous overlapping systems and mechanisms: law, pedagogy, etiquette, aesthetics, and ideology, particularly religious ideology.[94] This urge is visible in the *Martyrdom* when the king says to Simeon, "now let's leave aside the taxes. But in this I advise you that you should worship the sun god with me today and you and all your people will live."[95] But as essential as the matter was for the king, it was doubly crucial for the bishop, who adhered to a monotheistic creed not to revere any God but the True God.

In situations like this when segments of the population were estranged from one another (due to religious, political, economic, geographical, moral, aesthetic, or cultural differences) normal, less dramatic, and less bloody means of maintaining social integration fail. Instead the breach widens and costs human lives.

Conclusion

Written in the fifth century, the *Persian Acts* reflect what a bishop was entitled to do and capable of in the fourth century. This work presents what was deemed to be the proper perspective of the Christian community in the fifth century, and the place and the status of a bishop vis-à-vis his community and the empire, as well as the manner in which a Christian should live his or her life. These narratives reinforced and recreated an expectation of maintaining the distinction in the future. The boundary shaped by these accounts, separated us—Christian, captives, persecuted, martyred—from them—the imperial authorities, the king, the magi, and the Jews. The process of identity formation was developed in opposition and in response to the violence applied by the king. The king required a religious observance: sun-worship, a ritual that, if performed by the bishop, could free his community from the punishment

[94] Ibid, 89.

[95] *Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, 17, 32.

awaiting them. The performance of the ritual was more important than the issue of taxes, which the king demanded not because of their fiscal importance, as I have shown, but because it was symbolic of a much sought-after unity in the empire. The bishop and his companions who resisted this unity were treated as rebels and troublemakers, and their public execution was meant to create an image to circulate among the people witnessing their pain to discourage similar disobedience. However, the manifestation of violence and hardship imposed on the bishop of Ctesiphon, was echoed in the Syriac sources as a display of his virtue and was extolled as an act similar to the deeds of Jesus and Judas Maccabeus.

CHAPTER II-Peace between the Two Empires

In the previous chapter the focus was on the Christians of the Sasanian Empire under the reign of Šāpur II. The discussion in the previous chapters developed around the hagiographical account of bishop Simeon bar Ṣabba'e and his refusal to collect an excessive amount of taxes from his own community. The bishop refusing to obey the King 's command to be an oppressor of his people was glorified in the text as a martyr "vicarious in Jesus." The martyrologies of Simeon justified the bishop's resistance by using a discourse of persecution to challenge imperial force and violence. Šāpur II sought imperial cohesion and saw no reason not to use coercive powers to punish and bring in a community whose loyalty was suspect due to their illicit communication with the "Caesar." The reign of Yazdgerd I (r. 399-420) marks a considerable change. Both Roman and Sasanian Empires were under the onslaught of the Huns, who by that time were moving west. The Huns came dangerously close to the Persian royal capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 395/7 CE. Meanwhile, Rome was under onslaught by Gothic tribes and would eventually fall in the year 410 CE. Theodosius II reigned from Constantinople, and both empires greatly benefited from peace between them. Because of this peace supported by Yazdgerd I, Theodosius II managed to hold onto his throne. Furthermore, Yazdgerd reduced tension within the Christian community by allowing them to benefit from communion with the Church in the Roman Empire without challenging their loyalty to the Persian king. Bishops in the East Roman Empire welcomed this development since they could align their eastern brothers with Nicene orthodoxy, especially important now that the western Roman Empire was lost to the Goths who had adopted Arianism. A portion of this chapter will focus on Sophene, a region in

the borderland of the East Roman Empire, which was the bishopric of Marutha, a Roman emissary to the Sasanian court. This section will help us understand the development and changes brought by the peace between the two empires at the micro level.

Since there are very few sources on the reign of Yazdgerd I, I have to rely on those that mention him, such as in the work of classical historians Procopius and Agathias (sixth century and later); the writings of Church historians such as Socrates and Theodoret of Cyrrhus (both fifth century);[1] the hagiography of bishop Marutha in Greek and Armenian (sixth century and early seventh century)[2]; the Martyrologies of Abda[3] and Narsai[4] (mid-fifth century); and the *Synodicone Orientale*[5] (ninth century, accounts of the thirteen synods of Church of the East complied under patriarch Timothy I). In later Arabic sources Yazdgerd is mentioned under the entry for Isaac, bishop of Seleucid-Ctesiphon. These accounts are preserved in the work of

[1] Theodoret, *HE.* 5.38.

[2] The Greek *Vita Marutha* (Short version): is listed under *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca (BHG)* 2265, and was dated to the end of the fifth century or later. The longer Greek *Vita* is listed under *BHG* 2266. Both of these hagiographies are translated and commented on by Jacques Noret. The Armenian *Vita* was dated as a sixth-century account translated from now lost Syriac version.[2] An edition published in *Vark' ew vkayanut'iwnk' srboc' hatentir k'alealk' i carentrac'*= Vitae et passiones sanctorum edited by Łewond Alishan. In addition to these Vitae, Arthur Vööbus attributed a collection of sources to Marutha in Arabic and Syriac.[2] The collection contains some letters by Marutha to Mar Isaac, the head of the first Synod of Ctesiphon, as well as other texts: "On Monasticism," "On Persecution," and "On Heresies." The manuscript is from an undated and incomplete copy kept in Mosul. The first volume of Vööbus' book contains the introduction and the Syriac text and the second volume contains the letters and English translation of the texts mentioned, but it is difficult to attribute these writings to Marutha.

[3] *Acts of Mar Abda,* in *Acta martyrum et sanctorum IV,* ed. Paul Bedjan (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1894), 250–53; Braun, Oskar, in *Das Buch der Synhados nach einer Handschri des Museo Borgiano* (Stuttgart: J. Rothsche Verlagshandlung, 1900), XIV, 139-141.

[4] *Acts of Narsai,* in *Acta martyrum et sanctorum IV,* ed. Paul Bedjan (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1894), 170–81; Braun, Oskar, in *Das Buch der Synhados nach einer Handschri des Museo Borgiano* (Stuttgart: J. Rothsche Verlagshandlung, 1900), XV, 142-149.

[5] *Synodicon Orientale Ou Recueil Des Synodes Nestoriens*, Translated and edited Jean Baptiste Chabot, (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902).

historians of the Church of the East Mari ibn Sulayman (twelfth century) and ‘Amr b. Matta (fourteenth century).[6]

It will be quickly become apparent that the overlapping reigns of Yazdgerd I (r. 399-420) and Theodosius II (r. 408-450) were marked with many innovations in the relationship between the two empires. To study the period chronologically one has to start in the East Roman Empire. Theodosius I (r. 379-395), the grandfather of Theodosius II, initiated some important transitions that changed the political and social situation of the Roman Empire and eventually resulted in its further division. First, in 378 Theodosius I agreed to settle Goths in Roman territory under their own laws and chieftain. The Goths had previously adopted an Arian form of Christianity since the emperor at the time, Vales (364-78 CE), supported it. Theodosius I reversed the trend started by Constantius II and Vales and withdrew any support for Arianism.[7] His vision is stated in Theodosian code 16 1.2, issued in 380:

> It is Our will that all the peoples who are ruled by the administration of Our Clemency shall practice that religion which the divine Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans, as the religion which he introduced makes clear even unto this day. It is evident that this is the religion that is followed by the pontiff Damasus and by Peter, bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic sanctity; that is, according to the apostolic discipline and the evangelic doctrine, we shall believe in the single Deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, under the concept of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity. We command that those persons who follow this rule shall embrace the name of Catholic Christians. The rest, however, whom we adjudge demented and insane, shall sustain the infamy of heretical dogmas, their meeting places shall not receive the name of churches, and they shall be smitten first by divine vengeance and secondly by the retribution of our own initiative, which we shall undertake in accordance with the divine judgment.[8]

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[6] ‘Amr, *Kitab al-magdal,* in ed. Henri Gismondi, *Maris, Amri, et Slibae, De patriarchis Nestorianum Commentaria I: Amir et Salibae textus arabicus et verso Latina* (Rome, 1899), 30-6; Mari ibn Sulayman, *Kitab al-magdal,* in ed. and tr. Henri Gismond, *Maris, Amri, et Slibae. De patriarchis Nestorianum Commentaria II: Maris textus arabicus et verso Latina* (Rome, 1899), 23-9. See Scott McDonough, “A Second Constantine? The Sasanian King Yazdgard in Christian History and Historiography,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1, no.1 (Spring 2008): 127-140.

[7] Noël King, *The Emperor Theodosius and the Establishment of Christianity* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1961), 71-86.

[8] Cod. Theod. 16.1.2. (28.ii.380), trans. Clyde Pharr, (Princeton, New Jersey: The Princeton University Press, 1952).

In addition to adopting a harsher policy against Arianism, Theodosius put an end to the tolerance of paganism. Even though previous Roman emperors favored Christianity, except for Julian, they still tolerated paganism.[9] This changed under Theodosius I. He banned incense burning, animal sacrifice, and any form of pagan worship by issuing a series of laws in 391-92 CE.[10] Policies supporting the Nicene orthodoxy, banning heresies, and curbing paganism lasted well into the reign of Theodosius II.

In the year 395, Theodosius I divided the Roman Empire between his two sons, a practical arrangement. Arcadius (r. 395-408) ruled from Constantinople, and Honorius (r. 393-423) from Rome. They both bore the title "Augustus." Theodosius II was born in 401 CE in Constantinople. After Arcadius' death in 408, the seven-year-old Theodosius bore the title of "Augustus." In 414 CE, his older sister Pulcheria joined him as a coregent. Theodosius II ruled the Eastern Roman Empire until 450.[11]

According to Procopius, Arcadius asked Yazdgerd to be guardian of young Theodosius. In the *History of the Wars* Procopius writes:

> When the Roman Emperor Arcadius was at the point of death in Byzantium, having a male child, Theodosius, who was still unweaned, he felt grave fears not only for him but for the government as well, not knowing he should provide wisely for both. For he perceived that, if he provided a partner in government for Theodosius, he would in fact be destroying his own son by bringing forward against him a foe clothed in the regal power, while if he set him alone over advantage, as they might be expected to do, of the helplessness of a child, these men would make themselves tyrants without difficulty, since the boy had no kinsmen in Byzantium to be his guardian. For Arcadius had no hope

[9] Alan Cameron and Jacqueline Long, *Barbarian and Politics at the Court of Arcadius* (Oxford, University of California Press, 1993), 1.

[10] Noël King, *The Emperor Theodosius and the Establishment of Christianity* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1961), 71-86.

[11] Fergus Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire: Power and Belief under Theodosius II (408-450)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 3.

that the boy's uncle, Honorius, would succor him, inasmuch as the situation in Italy was already troublesome. [12]

Procopius didn't think very highly of the wisdom of Arcadius in other matters, but he believed that by assigning Yazdgerd I as a guardian of Theodosius II, Arcadius saved both his child and his throne.[13] Agathias, however, was suspicious of the account of Procopius, since the other sources do not mention this pact. He comments "I have not found this in any document or any of the histories, and the only exception is the works of the rhetorical writer Procopius. It is not surprising, I think that he, who was very learned and had read practically every historical work there is, included a tale that someone else had written up earlier but that I (who knows very little if anything at all) have not come across it anywhere."[14] Despite his doubts because young Theodosius' guardian was a "foreigner," a "barbarian," and "the ruler of the most hostile people," whose "attitude to trust and justice was unknown and who has strange opinions in religious matters," Agathias thought that if anyone should be complimented for the peaceful transition of power to the young Theodosius II, it should be the King of the Persians, not Arcadius.

The Western Roman Empire was in turmoil as Theodosius II took the throne in Constantinople. The Goths wandered through the West Roman Empire in the process of which slowly new groups, such as the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths gradually formed. The Visigoths absorbed outsiders from German tribes and lived outside the Roman frontier. They eventually sacked Rome in 410. As the Roman army was occupied in Italy, the Huns crossed the Darial Pass and advanced as far as Edessa and Antioch and pushed Alaric's Goths further into the

[12] Procopius: *Histroy of the Wars I-II,* trans. Dewing H. B., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press; W. Heinemann, 1914). 8-9.

[13] Ibid., 10-11.

[14] Agathias IV. 26.3-7.

Roman Empire. The Huns affected Armenia, Cappadocia, Syria, and the Persian part of Mesopotamia. They caused trouble for both Yazdgerd I and Theodosius II. According to the Chronicle AD 724, the Huns had advanced as far as the "royal city of the Persian," near the banks of the Euphrates and Tigris.

If the Huns were problematic during the reign of Šāpur II, they became a matter of the utmost concern during the reigns of Yazdgerd II and Peroz, who lost his life in a battle against them. However, Yazdgerd I exercised better control over the Hunnic invasions and was even able to help the Roman captives in the hands of Huns, a testimony to his good will towards Rome. The *Chronicle of 724* regards Yazdgerd I very highly. It states:

> Christians too and ascetics have related these things: and junior clerics themselves have reported about the good deeds the captives said were performed for them, and about their gratitude toward the good and clement king Yazdgerd, a Christian and blessed man among kings. May his memory be blessed and his last days nobler than his first; (for) throughout his days he did good things for the needy and wretched. [15]

The Eastern Roman Empire had only two vulnerable frontiers, near the Sasanian border in Mesopotamia, and along the Danube. The Huns entered the eastern borders near Arzanene, Martyropolis, and Amida. Cooperation between Yazdgerd I and Theodosius II halted their onslaught at least temporarily.

The situation in Sophene, where Marutha was bishop, offers a window on Roman policy in its distant borderlands. This region was located north of the Tigris River, not far from Lake Van, along the roads connecting Armenia and Upper Mesopotamia. The area was of great strategic importance for both the Sasanians and Romans. In 298 CE, a treaty was concluded between Diocletian and the Persian King, Narseh, according to which the latter agreed that in exchange for the release of his family he would set the Tigris as the border between the two

[15] Ibid, 32.

empires. The territories west of the Tigris were given to Rome, among them the region of Sophene. The Upper Mesopotamia was lost to the Romans until 363 CE. But in that year, after Julian's defeat in his campaign to invade the Sasanian Empire, the terms of the treaty of 298 changed. Ammianus Marcellinus gives a comprehensive account of the treaty, [16] but does not list Sophene and Ingilene among the regions returned to the Sasanians. This means that after 363 CE, and at the time that bishop Marutha was born, the region was still part of the Roman Empire. We know very little about the structure of the Roman administration in Sophene. The Greek Vitae say that Marutha's grandfather and father were τοπάρχησ, the governors of a district. The term is used by Eusebius, Procopius, and Josephus mostly in reference to the governors of an ethnos like those of the Jewish population and Macedonians. Governors of cities like Edessa and Cilicia were also referred to as τοπάρχησ.[17] Grigor, the translator and probably redactor of the Armenian Vita, correctly remarks that Marutha's name in Syriac means lordship, and Marutha was in fact the lord of the region.[18]

Everett Wheeler, who wrote a comprehensive work on Sophene as a Roman frontier region, believes that the Romans were in charge of foreign policy and military activities without interfering with the region's internal government.[19] Cyril Toumanoff confirms that princely houses of the region, known as Syrian March or Gentes, continued to function under the Roman

[16] Amm. XXV.7.9-14

[17] According to the online Thesaurus Linguae Graecae almost no classical author used the word. The earliest usage of the word was by Josephus in the first century of the common era. I assume the title was created as the Roman Empire was expanding and delegating power to governors of small districts.

[18] *History of Blessed Marutha*, ed. Łewond Alishan, *Vark' ew vkayabanut'iwnk' srbots'* (Venice, 1874), 17-32, 18.

[19] Everett L. Wheeler, "Southwestern Armenia as a Roman Frontier: Sophene, 188 B.C.-299 A.D.," in *Armenian Tsopk/Kharpert,* ed. Richard. G. Hovannisian (Mazda Pub, 2002).

Empire as *civitates foederatae*.[20] Since they had not entered under Roman rule as a result of conquest, they were bound to the empire by an agreement or treaty.[21] Marutha's family must be the princely house that continued their "lordship" over Sophene.

As noted above, policies towards pagans and heretics underwent dramatic changes from the reign of Theodosius I. By the time of Theodosius II, one law attested in 417 maintains that "Pagans shall not become administrators or judges. In fact, they may not enter the imperial service at all."[22] Hence, one may very likely conclude that Marutha's grandfather suffered for his religious inclination. Both Greek and Armenian hagiographies explicitly state that bishop Marutha's forefathers were pagan and the lords of Sophene.[23]

In the Armenian account the noble lineage and importance of the family are emphasized. It is common in Armenian hagiographical tradition to give weight to a saint's genealogy and lineage by making a connection with noble families, which confirms further that the source is not just a translation of the lost Syriac hagiography but probably a redaction of the original. Since it was of significance for the Armenian audience to have a positive image of Marutha himself, the family status of his Armenian grandmother was elevated. In contrast, the Greek *Vitae* do not emphasize the role of any woman beyond mention of an encouraging wife, or dwell much on the

[20] See Cyril Toumanoff, "Introduction to Christian Caucasian History II: States and Dynasties of the Formative Period," *Traditio* 17 (1961): 1-106. Toumanoff explains that from 528 a new office was created under the title of magister militum per Armeniam et Pontum Polemoniacum et gentes. Thereafter six trans-Euphratensian principalities which Sophen was part of were functioning under two duces et gentes, one commanding from Citharizon in Asthianene and the other at Martyropolis in Greater Sophene.

[21] Ibid., 22.

[22] Fergus Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire: Power and Belief under Theodosius II, 408-450,* vol. 64 (University of California Press, 2006), 116-23. Cod. Theod. 16.10.10. 21.

[23] *History of Marutha* (Armenian) 17-32, 18; *History of Marutha* (Greek) 77-103. The Armenian hagiography gives the title krmapet to explain the religious position of Marutha's grandfather, who was also lord of the region. The word consists of a Syriac-Hebrew component for Kumra or Komer. The two consonants are reversed in Armenian. Kumra i.e. pagan chief priest, plus the Iranian suffix ped (head).

lineage of the family. Marutha's grandmother Mariam is described as giving alms to poor as she arrived in Jerusalem on a pilgrimage.[24] Her role in Marutha's birth and upbringing is suggested, as she is described as praying for a means to cleanse her husband's sins; her prayers were answered by the Maccabean martyrs when she spent the night in their chapel in Antioch.[25] She was also praised in the hagiography for her efforts in building a church and a small monastery.

The depiction of Mariam has many parallels in Late Antiquity. Her contemporary Pulcheria, the older sister of Theodosius II, is an excellent example of a pious and politically powerful woman who engaged in building churches and endowing them with many gifts and relics. She welcomed the arm of St Stephen, built churches to house the relics of the Roman martyr Lawrence, the prophet Isaiah, the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, and the bones of St. John Chrysostom. Before Pulcheria, women like Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, the empress Eudoxia, and Olympias, exercised their power in religious spheres.[26]

Christianity did not only shape the boundaries of the Christian community in this period; by defining a new class of recipients of charity, as Peter Brown explains, it shaped a new class of giving-women.[27] Giving alms and gifts; donating money for building churches; endowing monasteries; and supporting the poor and the sick, the clergy, and bishops; were acts of politics,

[24] The pilgrimage to Jerusalem in this period was more common among Armenian and Georgian Christians.

[25] The Chapel must have been dedicated to the seven Maccabees brothers and their mother, who were tortured under Antiochus Epiphanes. Their martyrdom was revered both in Judaism and Christianity, cf. Julian Obermann, "The Sepulcher of the Maccabean Martyrs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 50, no. 4 (1931), 250-265. In the article, Obermann explains at length why Antioch could not be the place where the relics were actually buried, but since it is where the trial was taken place, Jews and later Christians built martyrdom for Maccabean martyrs there, as well as in Rome, and Jerusalem. He adds that the martyrs' cult began to be acclaimed by the Christian Church more than by Judaism. Probably, Rabbinic tradition wanted to disclaim any association between a synagogue and a tomb.

[26] Jan Willem Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding the True Cross* (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1992), 109-113.

[27] Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 46.

a domain reserved for men. However, as Brown argues, women too became active in politics via the Christian Church.[28] Women were able to participate in charitable acts in their own name. Unmarried and widowed women who were in control of their "animal passion" even more so than men could provide economic resources to the Church and were turned into exemplary figures.

Mariam's pilgrimage to Jerusalem, spending the night praying for her husband's redemption at the martyrs' chapel in Antioch, built in honor of the Maccabees—all were done in accordance with the newly found power of women in this period. Upon her return, she was informed that she had a grandson. By assigning her selected priests and ministers to the church, and by becoming patron of a future bishop, Marutha's grandmother played a major role in the politics of the city.[29]

According to Socrates' *History*, which is a contemporary source for the period, it was the Roman emperor who sent the bishop to the Persian king.[30] Socrates adds that the visit was in the spirit of mutual exchanges between the Romans and the Persians at that time.[31] Furthermore, Marutha is mentioned in the ninth letter sent by John Chrysostom to Olympias:

> Do not cease to pay attention to Marutha the bishop, as far as it concerns you, so as to lift him up out of the pit. [956] For I have special need of him on account of the affairs in Persia. And ascertain from him, if you can, what has been accomplished there through his agency, and for what purpose he has come home, and let me know whether you have delivered the two epistles which I sent to him: and if he is willing to write to me, I will write again to him: but, if he should not be willing, let him at least signify to your prudence whether anything more has taken place there, and whether he is likely to accomplish anything by going thither again. For on this account I was anxious to have an interview with him. Nevertheless let all things, which depend on you be done, and take care to fulfill your own part, even if all men are rushing headlong to ruin. For your

[28] Ibid.

[29] *History of Marutha* (Armenian version), 19.

[30] Socr. *HE.* (vii. 8. 1-20).

[31] Ibid.

> reward will thus be perfected. By all means therefore make friends with him as far as it is possible. I beseech you not to neglect what I am about to say, but to pay diligent heed to it.[32]

John Chrysostom's letter continues, listing deacons who were sent to the Goths and mentioning his optimism that the King of the Goths was about to ask for a bishop to be sent to them. Marutha's mission coincided with this interest to promote Christianity beyond the borders of the empire and among the Goths.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of archeological evidence, it is difficult to assess the validity of Socrates' statement about rebuilding churches in this period. Both sides were interested in maintaining the peace, most likely to aid to each other against attacks by the Huns. Yazdgerd I helped ransom around 1330 Roman captives of the Huns and sent them back to their land, but 800 of them decided to stay in Persia.[33]

To facilitate peace between the two empires, both Yazdgerd I and Theodosius II sponsored building projects in Marutha's see of Sophene. The funds and skilled labor came from the Roman Empire and the gold was sent by Yazdgerd I.[34] In addition, as a reward for his service, bishop Marutha received relics of martyrs from both Theodosius II and Yazdgerd I. Thereby bishop Marutha established "Martyropolis." The renewed city of Martyropolis integrated Sophene within the religious and political map of the East Roman Empire.[35]

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[32] John Chrysostom, *Writings of John Chrysostom. Letters to Olympias*, trans. by Rev. W. R. W. Stephens, M.A., Prebendary of Chichester Cathedral, and Rector of Woolbeding, Sussex. (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1886), Letter IV.

[33] *Chronicle 724* (136.20-137.9) cited from Michael Dodgeon, Samuel Lieu, and Geoffrey Greatrex, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 363-628* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), 17.

[34] *History of Marutha* (Armenian version), 32.

[35] In addition to translating relics to Sophene, according to the Armenian Vita, Marutha initiated building a shrine for the Persian Martyrs near Ctesiphon, the capital of the Sasanian Empire. Richard Payne argues that this set a

Recent scholarship on the reign of Yazdgerd either compares his period to the reign of Šāpur II or deems Yazdgerd's policies to be a continuation of Šāpur's. The argument is that both kings extended their patronage to bishops of Seleucia-Ctesiphon; Šāpur II by giving bishop Simeon the task of collecting extensive taxes from his community, and Yazdgerd I by being the "patron" of the church to gain some legitimacy among Christians, and for expecting bishops to control interreligious conflicts.[36] This argument is built on a previous study that assumed Yazdgerd's policies were transforming bishops into a new aristocratic class.[37] Both of these studies give similar weight to persecutions that occurred during the reign of Šāpur II and at the end of the reign of Yazdgerd I. Similarly, they claim both kings initially started as patrons of Christians, however matters fell apart when the bishops failed to return the favors and keep their side of the deal. During the time of Šāpur II, Simeon became rebellious and refused to collect double taxes; during the last year of Yazdgerd I, the bishop of Hormizd-Ardashir, Abda, and a priest from Ray by the name of Narsai destroyed some fire temples.[38] To juxtapose these cases and view them as comparable to the situation of Christians under Šāpur II is misleading. Šāpur II was actively oppressing a Christian population whose loyalty was in doubt, while Yazdgerd I was reacting to a specific case of disobedience in a judicial capacity.

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precedent for the bishops of the Sasanian Empire to bury bishops of the Empire there. See Richard Payne, "The Emergence of Martyrs' Shrines in Late Antiquity," in *An Age of Saints? Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity*, eds. Peter Sarris, Matthew Dal Santo and Phil Booth, (Leiden, Brill), 89-113.

[36] Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, 21.

[37] McDonough, "Power by Negotiation: Institutional Reform in the Fifth Century Sasanian Empire," 253-4.

[38] *Acts of Mar Abda*, in *Acta martyrum et sanctorum* IV, ed. Paul Bedjan (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1894), 250–53; Braun, Oskar, in *Das Buch der Synhados nach einer Handschri des Museo Borgiano* (Stuttgart: J. Rothsche Verlagshandlung, 1900), XIV, 139-141. *Acts of Narsai, in Acta martyrum et sanctorum* IV, ed. Paul Bedjan (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1894), 250–53, 170–81; Braun, Oskar, in *Das Buch der Synhados nach einer Handschri des Museo Borgiano* (Stuttgart: J. Rothsche Verlagshandlung, 1900), XV, 142-149.

It could be that the harsh treatment of certain Christians during the last year of Yazdgerd I appears as a continuation of a previous king's policies because previous studies presented a very unrealistic depiction of Yazdgerd and his policies. Scott McDonough acknowledges the tolerance of Yazdgerd I to an extent in that his study describes the king as actively integrating bishops within his government, part of a larger plan to centralize the imperial administration. McDonough claims that it was Yazdgerd I's plan to assign each religious community a leader that had an administrative/bureaucratic function; thereafter the Sasanians gradually co-opted the leaders of the primary religious communities as their clients: magi, exilarchs/rabbis, and bishops. This led to the creation of new aristocracies within these communities, and this system ensured the stability and preeminence of the Sasanian monarchy as a political institution.[39] While McDonough's approach opens up our perspective to include the empire's internal matters, nevertheless, it nonetheless reads too far into these developments. The notion that Yazdgerd I was planning to create a third power base against the increasing influence of the magi and nobles cannot be verified. In revisiting the sources, I argue that developments in the situation of the Christians of the Sasanian Empire from Šāpur II to Yazdgerd I did not result from a continuation of Sasanian state policy, but rather, from Yazdgerd's attempts to keep the peace within his empire and between the two empires. The main thrust of his approach was to permit communion between bishops in the Sasanian Empire and their counterparts in the Roman Empire.

If McDonough's theory about Yazdgerd I's policy of making alliances with subordinate groups such as Christians and Jews were correct,[40] we would expect to find the contemporary

[39] McDonough, "Power by Negotiation: Institutional Reform in the Fifth Century Sasanian Empire," 253-4.

[40] Ibid., 271, Ze'ev Rubin, "Diplomacy and War in the Relations between Byzantium and the Sassanids in the Fifth Century AD," 677-95; François Decret, "Les Conséquences Sur Le Christianisme En Perse De L'affrontement Des Empires Romain Et Sassanide. De Shâpûr I Er a Yazdgard I Er," Recherces Augustiniennes Et Patristiques 14, no. 1 (1979): 91-151.

sources referring to their involvement in the civil service. Furthermore, Yazdgerd's successors did not consider using this third power base. Time and again, Tabari talks about magi and grand noble families supporting different kings, but we never hear of ecclesiastical ranks being active in court politics.

Contemporary sources confirm that there was a palpable change in Yazdgerd's approach to Christianity. The hostile reputation that filled Christians writers' historiographical accounts of some other Sasanian Kings would not characterize their accounts of Yazdgerd I.[41] Outsiders such as Socrates remembered his reign favorably. In his *Ecclesiastical History* Socrates records:

> He [Yazdgerd I] commanded that the tribe of the magi should be decimated…He permitted Marutha to erect churches wherever he wished: and from that time the Christian's religion was diffused among the Persians…For the Romans as a nation he [Yazdgerd I] had much regard, and entered into an alliance with them. Nay, he was on the point of embracing the Christian faith himself, after witnessing another miracle by Marutha...But the death of Yazdgerd prevented his making an open profession of Christianity. The Kingdom then devolved on Bahrām his son, in whose time the treaty between the Romans and Persians was violated…[42]

Yazdgerd I saw the magi and their meddling as an obstacle to political and religious concord. His approach did not sit well with the nobles and magi, as he earned himself negative epitaphs in different Persian and Arabic sources. In Tabari's accounts, Yazdgerd was called "the Sinner." In the *Shahnameh* he was "*bazahgar*-the Outcast, Outlawed."[43] Šāpur Shahbazi notes that Yazdgerd had a reputation that he would not tolerate any opposition to his word or will, and would only listen to advice "when it came from foreign envoys."[44]

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[41] McDonough, "A Second Constantine? The Sasanian King Yazdgerd in Christian History and Historiography," *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 1, no. 1 (2008), 127-140.

[42] Soc. *His.* Chapter VIII-341-2.

[43] Shapur Shahbazi is citing M. Minovi, "Yaki az fārsiāt-e Abu Nawās," *MDADT* 1, no. 3 (1954), 62-77, "Yazdegerd I," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/yazdegerd-i (accessed online at 25 August 2017).

[44] Shahbazi, Shapur, "Yazdegerd I," *Encyclopædia Iranica*.

Yazdgerd I, as Tabari confirms, was concerned about the external policies of the empire, hence his following the advice of foreign envoys. The peace and friendship between the two empires depended on the acceptable treatment of the Christians in the Sasanian Empire. Before the synod of 410, the Church of the East was loosely organized; the synod's goal was to apply the more structurally developed organization of the Church of the Roman Empire to the ecclesiastical structure in Persia. From the synod of 424, and the complaints of Agapit, bishop of Bet Lepat, we hear that:

> The primacy of the high priesthood... was re-established over the Christian people, … —troublesome men and agitators, (who had become) corrupt in their evil deeds, who at the time were called bishops, ventured to raise up a faction against Mar Isaac the catholicos... They complained against him to the king as well…
>
> This too was reported to the fathers in the West, and with letters, and with their agreement, and with the command of the Christian kingdom as well, Mar Maruta the bishop was sent to Yazdgerd, the King of Kings, and he came and appeared before him with the great honoraria which he brought with him. Then, by the command of Yazdgerd, the King of Kings, a council of bishops took place, and Mar Maruta, through diligent examination, shut up the insolent under judgment and re-arranged all those things which had been brought into confusion through the disobedient bishops.[45]

The *Synodicon* confirms that not everyone accepted the primacy of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon before 410, and that the bishops of different areas would complain to the king about the ecclesiastical situation. The "Western" Fathers' king then heard about this discontent and sent Marutha to the king to organize the Church's internal matters and align it with their orthodoxy. The account of the synod of 410 reveals that indeed Marutha brought a letter from the "Western" Fathers, signed by Porphyry of Antioch, Acacius of Aleppo, Pakida of

[45] *Synodicon Orientale*, 293. The English version translated by M.J. Birnie (Unpub)

Edessa, Eusebius of Tella, Acacius of Amid, and others. Most of the signatories were bishops of cities near the Eastern frontiers of the Roman Empire, who were perhaps known to bishops in the Sasanian Empire. Bishop Marutha and bishop Isaac first showed the translation of the letter "secretly" to the king and received his approval. The king then ordered the *mazbans* of forty cities to dispatch the local bishop to the capital. The king himself was absent from the assembly.[46]

The letter contained three main recommendations for the assembled bishops. The letter was translated from Greek and read to their peers in the Sasanian Empire and king Yazdgerd I.[47] The following were suggested: 1) that each city have only one bishop ordained by three bishops who were either metropolitans or head bishops; 2) that feasts such as Easter, Lent and Epiphany should be celebrated on the same days; and 3) that the creed of the Council of Nicaea should be the basis for Christianity in Persia.[48]

In the same synod the see of Seleucia was given primacy over the other sees. Before the canons of the synod Yazdgerd I was exalted as the king who terminated the persecution of the Christians. The synod's first action was to announce the end of the formal persecution of the Christians, and the second was a decision to bring order to the manner of ordination of bishops.[49] The synod regulated the structure of the Church and was meant to stop quarrels, divisions, and schisms.[50] Additionally, the manner of ordaining bishops, the behavior of the clergy, the duties of

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[46] *Synodicon Orientale*, 253.

[47] Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (New York; London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 15.

[48] Ibid.

[49] *Synodicon Orientale*, 259-273.

[50] This was an issue previously fought for and settled by Papa, but apparently each bishop of Seleucia, Isaac, and later Dadišo had to establish their primacy over all the other bishops.

archdeacons, and the celebrations of various feasts were clarified. The account concludes with the assignment of various bishops as metropolitans over different provinces and closes with the participants' signature.[51]

The next issue was to regulate the day-to-day regulation of different ecclesiastical matters such as discipline in the Church; the qualifications and responsibilities of bishops, archdeacons, priests, female housekeepers, and clerics; and the manner of their appointment. The canons concerning bishops and their responsibilities show with which issues bishops were expected to be involved with. Questions as mundane as whether it was permissible for clerics to be summoned for banquets or if they could demand a portion of food at funeral wakes were also addressed. Reviewing these canons shows that there is no mention or invitation of any bishops to be a part of the administration of the Sasanian Empire by offering them tasks such as tax-collector or judge. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the organization and establishment of the Church of the East, as McDonough argues, helped "Sasanian monarchs co-opt and cultivate hierarchies and elites among the religious leadership of their subject populations."[52]

After the synod of 410, Yazdgerd I asked bishops Ahai and Yahballaha to represent him in two different missions. Ahai, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (410-414), investigated the case of a shipment of pearls from India and China that was captured by pirates. Yahballaha (414-420), bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, was asked to represent Yazdgerd I at the court of Theodosius II.[53] McDonough argues that those bishops' diplomatic missions were a means of creating patronage among the heads of the "Christian Church."[54] This means that as the bishops

[51] *Synodicon Orientale*, 273.

[52] McDonough, "Power by Negotiation: Institutional Reform in the Fifth Century Sasanian Empire," 286.

[53] Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert*, 35.

[54] McDonough, "Power by Negotiation: Institutional Reform in the Fifth Century Sasanian Empire," 259.

owed the king because he supported them in their position, the bishops in return were expected to provide him assistance and represent him on different occasions. Far from being a patronage deal, however, these assignments for the bishops were made without any promise of permanent administrative roles for the bishops of the empire. Of course, the bishops' knowledge of Greek, and being co-religionists of the emperor, came into play when Yahballaha visited Theodosius II, but other than being an emissary for the king, it is not obvious what he could have gained in return.

In the historical imagination of the Christian community of the Sasanian Empire, ideal bishops side with their community and sometimes even die on behalf of it rather than be the servant of the King of Kings. As observed in Chapter I, Simeon bar Ṣabba'ae (329-41) was killed by the order of Šāpur II since he did not want to oppress his people and subject them to taxes because of their faith. The anonymous author of his *History* says that the bishop stated "even if your mighty majesty [Šāpur II] commands that my skin be flayed from my body… I would rather my own skin be peeled from my body than be made to strip the cloths from a pauper and oppress those who were freed by my Lord."[55] Similarly, but in a less elaborate manner, in the martyrdom of Shahdost[56] (341-3) and Barba'shemin[57] (343-6) it is attested that these bishops preferred death over accepting Šāpur II's honors and gifts.[58] Those accounts were mostly written

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[55] *History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabba'e*, Chapter 40, 122.

[56] *Martyrdom of Shahdost,* in *Acta martyrum et sanctorum II,* ed. Paul Bedjan (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1891), 276–81; Braun, Oskar, in *Das Buch der Synhados nach einer Handschri des Museo Borgiano* (Stuttgart: J. Rothsche Verlagshandlung, 1900), 93-96.

[57] *Martyrdom of Barba'shemin,* in *Acta martyrum et sanctorum II,* ed. Paul Bedjan (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1891), 296–303; Braun, Oskar, in *Das Buch der Synhados nach einer Handschri des Museo Borgiano* (Stuttgart: J. Rothsche Verlagshandlung, 1900), 100-104.

[58] Martin J Higgins, "Chronology of the Fourth-Century Metropolitans of Seleucia-Ctesiphon," *Traditio* 9 (1953): 48.

during the fifth century, after Yazdgerd provided the conditions for it by his tolerance. The important message of these accounts was that an "ideal bishop" should act as an unyielding force against the oppression of the Sasanian monarchs and not be an extension of his administration into their community.

The next synod of the Church of Persia was held in 420 under the senior Metropolitan Yahballaha I (415-20) in Veh-Ardashir. Since Marutha died in 420, Acacius of Amida represented the Roman Church. In his presence, the decisions of the previous synod were reconfirmed once again. The canons were signed by Yahballaha, Acacius of Amida, the metropolitans of Beth Lapet and Nisibis, and eight bishops. This synod is important because it was the last one held under Yazdgerd I.

Furthermore, while the synod of 410 established the Nicene Creed as the metric of their orthodox Christology, the synod of 420 ratified the additional synods of Ancyra (314?), Neocaesarea (314-325), Gangra (343), Antioch (341), and Laodicea (365). Accounts of the synod of 420 closely reflected and reacted to political and theological events in the Roman Empire. The Synod of Laodicea condemned Novatianists, Photians, Quatrodecimans, and Montanists, whose ideas were not spread beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. Baum and Winkler claim that accepting the previous local synods of the Roman Empire in the synod of 420 in totality, without being adapted to the situation in the Sasanian Empire, appears "strange and senseless."[59] On the contrary, I see the acceptance as a continuation of the interchange in ecclesiastical matters between the two empires: the council of Nicaea was as local as the Synod of Laodicea with regard to the concerns of the Roman Empire. If these Churches were going to be in communion it was necessary to establish what is orthodoxy (hence Nicea) and what is

[59] Baum and Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, 18.

heresy (local or widespread). As I will explain later, these developments were initiated and supported by Theodosius II while Yazdgerd I simply tolerated this interchange.

To mistake Yazdgerd's tolerance toward the Christian population of the empire, and to exaggerate the extent of patronage in the manner of McDonough, makes it difficult to understand the king's actions in the last year of his rule., which is marked by two events. Attested in the *Persian Acts of Martyrs* are two *Acts of Abda*, bishop of Hormizd-Ardashir, and *Acts of Narsai,* a Christian man from Rayy (a city near modern day Tehran).[60] Both *Acts*, according to Paul Devos, are composed by the same person, a monk by the name of Abgar, who was contemporary with the acts and lived in a monastery near Ctesiphon. The relics of those monks were gathered from the same site 'Silq Harbta' and moved to the monastery where Abgar served.[61] There is an account in Theodoret of Cyrrhus' *Ecclesiastical History* that refers to some aspects of these incidents.[62]

Acts of Narsai incorporates a long court dispute, in which Narsai had many occasions to avoid his punishment but to no avail, as he asks for martyrdom.[63] The *Acts* starts by explaining how Narsai gave legal advice to his friend, a priest by the name of Šāpur. Šāpur had healed a Zoroastrian man who then converted to Christianity and offered him a piece of his own land. The priest agreed to accept the land and asked for documentation. After receiving the proof that he now owned the piece of land, he built a church there. The news of this transaction came to the

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[60] *Acts of Mar Abda,* 250–53; Braun, 139-141.

[61] Paul Devos, "Abgar: un hagiographe perse méconnu," *AB* 83 (1965), 303–28, explains who summarizes and translates large sections of these lives. See especially pp. 325–6 for his list of stylistic parallels.

[62] Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *HE*. 5.38.

[63] *Acts of Narsai*, in Acta martyrum et sanctorum IV, ed. Paul Bedjan (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1894), 170–81; Oskar Braun, in Das Buch der Synhados nach einer Handschri des Museo Borgiano (Stuttgart: J. Rothsche Verlagshandlung, 1900), XV, 142-149.

attention of a magus who dragged Šāpur to court before Yazdgerd on the accusation that Zoroastrians were converting to Christianity and giving their property away.[64] "All the great and nobles have left the religion and become Christians. Give us permission to dissuade them from the Christianity that they have accepted." The king commanded, "You have the authority to dissuade them through intimidation and several blows, but not by execution."[65]

The main dispute was over land ownership. Šāpur was advised by Narsai to not give away his certified document, the proof of ownership by the church, and to leave the region so that after some time the issue would be resolved on its own. After a while Šāpur went away with the document and while he was away the church was turned into a fire temple, presumably by the magi. Narsai returned and saw the fire inside the church. He cast out the fire. His response to the magi who were shocked by his actions was "I found impurity in the house of God, which is anathema and alien to his honor." The magi beat him violently, threw him in chains, and brought him to Seleucia-Ctesiphon, where the king was. The king was reasonable. He gave Narsai the legal punishment for extinguishing the fire. The penalty for Narsai was to rebuild the altar as it was and return the fire there.[66] According to *Šāyest Nē Šāyest*:

> Whoever shall extinguish a fire, by him ten fires are to be gathered together, by him ten punishments are to be endured, by him ten ants are to be destroyed, and by him holy-water (zohr) is to be presented to the sacred fire (Atash-i Warharan).[67]

In his zeal Narsai refused to obey the order of the King and was sent to prison for nine months, then he was released and sent to a monastery nearby. When King came back from his

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[64] *Acts of Narsai*, 170; Braun, 142.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid., 181; Braun, 144.

[67] *Šāyast nē šāyast, A Pahlavi Text on Religious Customs,* ed. *and* tr., J. C. Tavadia, (Hamburg: Friedrichsen, de Gruyter and Co., 1930), Chapter 7.9

summer capital, he ordered the governor to review Narsai's case. The governor told Narsai that he knew he didn't extinguish the fire. In this encounter Narsai displayed the same fervor as before.

A long back and forth explaining how fire has no place in a house of God ended as Narsai was ransomed but then summoned to answer further questions. The king had already given the order to release him when Narsai confessed that he extinguished the fire and declared that a death for God's sake is better than living wrapped in sin. He was taken to his place of execution thereafter.

What can be understood from this "martyrdom" is that it was a dispute over a piece of land, brought by magi to the court of Yazdgerd I. If anything, the magi were out of line in demanding to reverse a transaction that was legally arranged. The Christian man who saw the fire being set in the Church did not raise his case with Yazdgerd I and complain against the magi; he took matters into his own hands. Second, we don't see any bishops, who were supposed to be patrons of Christians, in court. The king was neither too harsh nor very forgiving. His order to the governor was as follows:

> Release those imprisoned in prison. Those guilty of death should die. Those who deserve a chastisement should be punished. Narsai, the Nazarene, let me come before you. If he denies extinguishing the fire and ripping out the stove in which it was, he will be released. If he professes to have torn it out and cast it out, let him go, gather fire from three hundred and sixty-six places, bring it in and lay it down in that house whose hearth he tore out, and whose fire he extinguished.[68]

In this account, there is no pressuring Narsai to convert to Zoroastrianism, nor was his Christianity challenged or presented as a case against his loyalty toward the state. In the *Acts of Mar Abda* we read that he was brought to court with two priests Hashu and Isaac, a scribe, and

[68] *Martyrdom of Narsai*, Braun, 146.

some laymen. The *Acts* says that magi complained to the king that the Christians were transgressing his commands, that they mock fire and water and tear down and destroy fire temples. Yazdgerd I asked Abda as a chief over the Christians to answer why his people despised his reign, and destroyed prayer houses that were bestowed on him by his forefathers. Abda said that the magi were lying and slandering them and that they had done nothing wrong. While the king was saying he heard it from his own authorities and they are not false accusers, the priest Hosea interrupted.[69] Hashu said "We did not attack the building of God and we did not go against a holy altar." Yazdgerd I replied "I did not ask you for your answer. I was talking to your leader." Hashu then in his zeal said that "he did attack the fire and quenched it and a fire temple is not a house of God nor is fire a daughter of God, they are the servants of kings and the poor and they are generated from wood."[70] The account is unfinished in the Syriac version, therefore I follow the ending from Theodoret of Cyrrhus's *History.* Theodoret relates that in response to destroying the fire, the king slew the holy bishop and then demolished the churches. He sees that these actions, even though admirable, were mistimed. He gives the example of apostles who, when they arrived in Athens and saw idolatry, did not destroy the altars but through discourses with the citizens proved the idiocy of idolatry.

Both Narsai and Abda were brought to Yazdgerd I's court to answer similar accusations. Perhaps emboldened by the king's tolerance, they destroyed fire temples. These two incidents recorded in these acts first show how emboldened Christians had become under twenty years of rule by Yazdgerd I. Second, they reveal a level-headed king who reacted to a legal situation brought to him by magi who demanded assertive responses. These accounts yet again show that

[69] *Acts of Mar Abda,* 250; Braun, 141.

[70] Ibid.

Yazdgerd was not following a greater strategy to become a patron of Christians as McDonough has presented him, one who could benefit from a third power base provided by Christians and use them against the magi.[71] It reflects that the king simply displayed some level of tolerance and did not benefit from altering the whole administrative structure nor creating a new aristocracy. Even though Yaszdgard's final year has been presented as a confusing and complex turn of events, it does not represent another episode of "mass persecution".

These two cases are compared with the acts of contemporary Christian zealots who at the instigation of a local bishop set fire to a synagogue in Callinicum, Mesopotamia, in 388. Although as noted above, the Roman Empire under Theodosius I was becoming increasingly intolerant of non-Christians, Jews, and pagans, they still allowed Jews to practice their religion. Certainly, destroying their properties was illegal. The matter therefore should have proceeded as usual against those Christians. Theodosius I ordered that the people involved should be punished and that the bishop should rebuild the synagogue. Somehow, Ambrose, bishop of Milan, became involved and wrote a letter to Theodosius I. There Ambrose pleaded on behalf of the bishops and monks involved not to side with Jews against Christians, lest Jews write on their synagogue "The temple of impiety erected from the plunder of Christians."[72] Ambrose wanted Theodosius I to side with religion rather than offer a show of discipline. Theodosius I gave in and allowed the bishop and monks to go without punishment.[73]

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[71] Scott McDonough, "Bishops or Bureaucrats? Christian Clergy and the State in the Middle Sasanian Period," in *Current Research in Sasanian Archaeology, Art and History,* ed. Derek Kenneth and Paul Lu (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2008), 89.

[72] Ambrose *Ep.* 40.

[73] See Claudio Morino, *Church and State in the teaching of St. Ambrose* (Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1969) and Neil McLynn and Hagith Sivan," Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital." *History: Reviews of New Books* 24, no. 1 (1995): 27-27.

However, matters changed after the death of Yazdgerd I when his son Bahrām Gor (V) ascended the throne. Bahrām's access to power was not given and, when he gained the throne, he left the court officials, magi, and nobles with a significant amount of authority.[74] Upon assuming power he immediately waged a war against the Romans. This was the first war between Theodosius II and the Sasanian Empire. It ended in a stalemate a year after it started in 422. Socrates, the church historian, thought that the war started because Bahrām was persuaded by the magi to resume persecution against the Christians, and as a result of which some Christians fled to the Roman Empire; when the Persian King sent ambassadors and demanded their return, the Romans answered that by no means would they return the refugees. Another cause, according to Socrates, was that the Persians were unwilling to return the gold-diggers whom they had hired from among the Romans, and they were also seizing the wares of Roman merchants.[75] After the war, Arcacius, bishop of Amida, who had already visited the Sasanian Empire for the synod of 420, helped the Persian prisoners captured by the Roman soldiers. Socrates mentions that the prisoners, who might have numbered around 7000, were perishing of hunger. Arcadius gathered the clergy under his authority and convinced them to acquire many gold and silver treasures from the devotees of the church and rescue and feed these prisoners by melting cups and dishes and paying their ransom to the Roman soldiers.[76]

Communion between the bishops of the Sasanian Empire and the Roman bishops was declared untenable in the fourth year of Bahrām Gor's reign at the synod of 424. The war waged by Bahrām Gor and the new series of persecutions persuaded the bishops to reassess their

[74] O. Klíma, "Bahrām V," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, III/5, 514-522, available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bahram-05 (accessed on 7 January 2018).

[75] Socr. *HE*. 7. 18 (363.2-363.24).

[76] Socr. *HE*. 21. 1-6 (367.10-368.2).

position in regard to relations with the "Western" bishops. The synod was held in Markabata. No bishop from the "West' was invited, not even Acacius of Amida, who was present at the previous synod four years prior and performed a great service in ransoming Persian soldiers from the war of 422. At the Synod Dadišo announced that he was about to retire from his position as bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Dadišo averred that he was tired of ongoing accusations against him. The accusers were excommunicated members of the Church who had been removed from their priesthood and sought refuge among the foreign rulers. Dadišo records that they questioned his judgment and his title as the catholicos, saying:

> We do not accept the judgment of Dadišo, for he did not receive the catholicate; but a certain man who called himself a bishop consecrated him and irregularly titled him 'catholicos'." They further said, "In writing he certified to the Magians, 'I am not the head of the Christians, and I do not make bishops, presbyters, and deacons.' Also he affirmed that he venerated fire and water. He has forsaken all observances of Christianity, wallowing in much fornication and enriching himself with much money through usury. The churches and monasteries are despoiled by him, and he performs ordination for a large bribe. He cheats many men by the bribes which he takes and the unjust judgments which he makes. He is a man who is false in all his ways. Since temporal instruction has not come near him and he does not know how to read books, he is stupid and ignorant, and this persecution which is happening to Christians at this time is due to his own incitement."[77]

At this point the bishop of Beth Lapet, Agapit, took the stage and endorsed Dadišo's position, comparing his situation with what happened to Papa and Miles. By manipulating the story Agapit somehow managed to defend Dadišo's case. In Agapit's interpretation of events, Papa was the bishop of Seleucia who wanted to set the primacy of that bishop over all the other bishops, but Miles, being naïve and ignorant, accused him of tyranny. Ironically, Agapit had to

[77] *Synodicon Orientale*, Chabot, 288 cited from the English translated by M.J. Birnie (Unpub)

somehow contort the story because Papa raised his case with a bishop in Edessa who approved him and condemned the actions of his accusers. According to the *Synodicon Orientale*, Agapit said:

> You, yourselves know, our fathers, that every time there was schism and strife among us the western Fathers were supports and stays to this fatherhood, to which all of us disciples and children are bound and affixed as members of an entire body to the head, the king of the members. They have also saved and delivered us (from) the persecutions which rose up against the fathers and us because of the Magians, through an ambassador they have sent to us from time to time.[78]

Agapit commented that the issue of the supremacy of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon had been raised previously. Some rebellious bishops had complained to Yazdgerd I about bishop Isaac, so the king asked Marutha to help with the hierarchical arrangement of the Church. Later Yahballaha was accused, therefore in the synod of 420 and with the help of outsiders, his position was confirmed. Agapit added that now they were constrained to act independently of the foreign bishops, calling Dadišo "Our Peter." In the *Synodicon* it is attested that Agapit said:

> Now, in the same way, persecution and affliction has become grievous against us, and the era does not permit them to take care of us as before. But we, as beloved sons and diligent heirs, are ourselves obliged to take pains to support and help one another through the primacy which is over us. For if, God forbid, we fall from the height of the headship, we (shall) perish without mercy.[79]

The reason for cutting ties was a change in the situation of Christians in the Sasanian Empire, as Bahrām started an era of hostility. Three cases of persecution were recorded in the *Acts of*

[78] Ibid., 294.

[79] Ibid.

Persian Martyrs under the *Acts of Jacob the Intercisus, Acts of Peroz,* and *Acts of Jacob the Notary.* The *Acts of Jacob the Intercisus* is the account of a general by the name of Jacob from Bet Leipat (GundiŠāpur).[80] He converted from Christianity, to Zoroastrianism. His Christian mother and wife were disappointed in him and wrote him a letter to express their dissatisfaction. The general decided to convert back to Christianity and the news of this development upset Bahrām Gor, who asked him to apostatize or else he would be killed. Jacob resisted and confessed his faith even more forcefully. The king ordered his torture and execution, the form of which was suggested by someone at the court:

> … spread him on his hands and feet and cut off his ten fingers and toes one at a time; then cut off his hands and feet, sever his arms, and cut off his thighs from his knees. After his limbs are cut off one by one, cut off his head.[81]

The long martyrology then expands in graphic detail on the various tortures Jacob endured as each of his limbs was removed, until eventually he was killed. Unlike the previous martyrologies, this is an account of true martyrdom. Jacob was forced to apostatize, then tortured brutally, and the torments that his body endured were displayed for the public to observe.

The next martyrdom also happened in the first year of Bahrām Gor. The martyr Peroz was a man from a good family from the city of Beth Lapet. The *Acts of Peroz* hints at the fact that Bahrām Gor had to yield to the magi and the nobles in his court who had crowned him instead of his brother.[82] The account refers to Yazdgerd I, who undid all the good work he had done during his reign with his harsh treatment of Christians in the last year of his life. Bahrām

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[80] *Martyrdom of Jacob the Intercisus,* in *Bedjan* 539–5; Braun 150-62.

[81] Ibid., in Braun, 154.

[82] *Martyrdom of Peroz,* in *Acta martyrum et sanctorum IV,* ed. Paul Bedjan (Paris: Otto Har- rassowitz, 1894), 253–62. Braun, Oskar, in *Das Buch der Synhados nach einer Handschri des Museo Borgiano* (Stuttgart: J. Rothsche Verlagshandlung, 1900), XVII, 163-9.

Gor's approach, according to the *Acts of Peroz*, was to eradicate Christians from his realm and send them off to faraway regions to perish. Bahrām ordered the destruction of churches and martyred believers, and because of all these hardships many Christians renounced their faith. Mihr-Shapur the chief-magi advised the king:

> O king, command that the Nazarenes turn away from their religion. They are Roman co-religionists and their cause is the same as theirs. When a war arises, the Nazarenes are a stake in war, and by their deceit they undermine your power.[83]

Peroz became the immediate victim of the chief-magus' accusation; however, unlike many who gave up their faith, Peroz was steadfast and did not deny his faith and died by the order of the king.

The next account, the *Acts of Jacob the Notary,* is about a young man from the city of Karka de Adsha?,[84] who at the age of twenty was arrested along with fifteen other notaries. The cause was their refusal to deny their Christianity; their assets were confiscated and their homes were sealed and they were ordered to work as elephant keepers all winter. After that punishment, they were told to repair a road for the king for six months. The king asked them again to apostatize and save themselves from all these hardships. The long martyrology ends when, after many orders from the king, Jacob refuses to apostatize and accepts his death.

The martyrdoms in these three texts mostly occurred in Bahrām Gor's early years. In the *Acts of Peroz*, it is stated that since Bahrām was indebted to the magi and nobles for his ascendance to power he allowed the oppression of Christians.[85] In the very first year of his reign

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[83] *Martyrdom of Peroz,* Braun, 166.

[84] *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary,* in *Acta martyrum et sanctorum IV,* ed. Paul Bedjan (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1894), 189–200; Braun, Oskar, in *Das Buch der Synhados nach einer Handschri des Museo Borgiano* (Stuttgart: J. Rothsche Verlagshandlung, 1900), 170-8.

[85] *Martyrdom of Peroz*, translated from Braun, 163.

Bahrām Gor ended diplomatic relations with the East Roman Empire. He then waged a war that affected the relationship of the bishops with their peers in the Roman Empire. The synod of 424 announced the independence of the Church of the East from the involvement of the "Western" Fathers. This time, unlike the previous two synods, there was no bishop from the Roman Empire present. The conclave was not held in or near the capital but in Markabata of Arabs. It was decided there that the Church's internal issues should not be settled by appealing to hierarchs from outside the Sasanian Empire.

Baum and Winkler argue that the Church of the East had never claimed to be dependent on the Western Church and that it had been autonomous since 410, which is true in the sense that because the Church was not within the Roman realm it was never dependent on a see in the Roman Empire.[86] Morony, on the other hand, argues that the announcement of independence happened gradually as the Church was trying to prove its loyalty to the Sasanian Empire.[87] Based on the synods of 410 and 420, the Church of the East was affiliating increasingly through accepting Roman Christology and organizational structures. The synod of 424 therefore represented a change of direction which could not be predicted from the previous synods.

Conclusion

The synods of 410 and 420 were assembled and organized by representatives of Theodosius II, however, if king Yazdgerd I had not been invested in the matter, none of them would have been possible. The previous approach adopted by Šāpur II, in contrast, was resisted by some leaders of the Christian community and was undermined by some bishops' willingness to be martyred. Yazdgerd I's claim to be a bringer of peace to the east and west was recorded in

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[86] Baum and Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, 19-21.

[87] Michael G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 338-9.

the synod of 410; according to the *Synodicon Orientale*, the king affirmed that "The East and the West shall be one empire under the authority of my rule."[88]

Yazdgerd I's peace with the Romans encouraged the communion of the Church of the Roman Empire with the Christian Fathers of the Sasanian Empire. The second synod held in 420 continued the previous development, which rendered Christianity in Persia more integrated and functional and aligned with the Roman Church.

The audacity of some extreme Christians in destroying fire temples was brought to the attention of the king, who interestingly does not involve the bishops of the cities where the disobedience had occurred. Yazdgerd I punished the wrongdoers according to the Zoroastrian code of conduct and did not act in their favor. The change of attitude from the reign of Šāpur II is obvious; firstly, the king reacted to a case of misbehavior, unlike the aggressive approach of Šāpur II. Secondly, the actions of those extreme Christians did not lead to the whole population's being targeted for increased taxation or physical punishments.

A comparison of the situation of the Church in the Sasanian and Armenian lands can help us understand the unfolding of Yazdgerd I's policies. In the next chapter I will discuss the manner in which the network of bishops in Persarmenia was developed. I believe the Armenian bishops could not unite in a functional manner before the widespread use of the Armenian alphabet. Previously, the Armenian language lacked a standard, distinctive, or linguistically appropriate writing system. After the invention of the alphabet, bishops used letters written in Armenian to send orders to the corners of their jurisdiction. The Armenian alphabet was created when it became relatively easy for people in Persarmenia to travel to the Roman territories and benefit from educational centers in Edessa and Amida. The freedom to appeal to the Roman

[88] *Synodicon Orientale*, 256.

Emperor (i.e. Theodosius II) for his support in the dissemination of the alphabet offers proof that peace between the two empires facilitated the development of Armenian literary culture. Creating the alphabet would have been an impossible task had conflict between the Romans and Sasanians prevented cross-border travel.

CHAPTER III-Literacy and Learning Culture in Greater Armenia: Christianity and Zoroastrianism

In Greater Armenia, Christianity spread through word of mouth. The liturgy and communication was conducted in either Syriac or Greek. Learning Syriac and Greek was only necessary for the higher ecclesiastical ranks. A century after the official conversion of the Armenian court in the early fourth century the Armenian alphabet was created. Up until the fifth century the need for an alphabet to spread Christianity among the Armenian speaking population was not felt. However, by the early fifth century, Christianity started developing a widespread

structure of authority where literacy and power intermingled. It was then that a writing system became a necessity.

A couple of decades after the invention of the Armenian alphabet, with the agreement of some Armenian nobles, and as a grand imperial act, king Yazdgerd II (r. 439-57 CE) sent a group of magi to Armenia. These magi were given orders to educate Armenian noble families in Zoroastrianism, which generated a negative reaction among certain ecclesiastical and secular leaders in Armenia. While Yazdgerd II attempted to introduce the Armenians to the Good Religion, a group of Armenian bishops actively emphasized the contrast between their teachings and the rituals and teachings of the magi. Armenian accounts emphasized that participating in psalm singing or reading Christian texts was highly esteemed; the teachings the magi were mocked and condemned as the false speech of snake-charmers and ventriloquists.[1]

In order to study the emergence of literacy in an Armenian context, I will examine the life of a holy man who invented the Armenian alphabet, Maštoc' (362-440? CE). I will demonstrate *how* the creation of the alphabet was presented. Furthermore, I will expand the scope of my study to place it within the learning culture of Late Antiquity. Comparing the emergence of Christianity and the learning culture in East Syria will reveal the larger issue at hand: the conflict Christian teaching had caused with imperial Sasanian plans.

In Greater Armenia under the Sasanians, Vramšapuh (reg. 401-417) supported the development of the Armenian alphabet. On the Roman side, the approval of Theodosius II (401-450) was obtained.[2] Even though the Sasanian King, Yazdgerd I (399-410), was not directly involved in this innovation, his peaceful reign provided the context for exchange and travel

[1] Łazar, 93.

[2] *Life of Maštoc',* Chapter XVI.

between Sasanian Armenia and Roman territories, factors that were integral to the invention of the alphabet.[3] Armenian literary culture would probably have had a different beginning or would not have immediately blossomed if it were not for the interaction with the schools of Edessa and Amida on the eastern borders of the Roman Empire. The peace between the two empires was made possible via diplomatic exchanges and the efforts of Bishop Marutha. It facilitated the traveling of people like Maštoc‘ and his pupils between Greater Armenia and the Romans.

Before he started his peripatetic journey in Greater Armenia, Maštoc’ held a position in the office of the *hazarapet* in the royal secretariat. However, he left his position and embarked on a special task to spread Christianity in Greater Armenia. Maštoc‘’s perception of his own work and the crisis that his work encountered can be studied in the account of his pupil, Koriwn.[4]

According to Koriwn, Maštoc‘ was not a member of the organization of the Church nor was he working under any bishop. He independently started reading the scriptures in Greek, then gathered a group of pupils around himself. Together they dwelt in caves living an ascetic life.[5] His student Koriwn tells us that Maštoc‘ experienced many kinds of hardships with the goal of achieving spiritual discipline: solitude, mountain-dwelling, hunger, thirst, and living on herbs in dark cells, clad in sackcloth, with the floor as his bed. He travelled to uncultivated regions such as Gołtn and tried to spread the word of Christ among the natives and turn them into Christians. However, he was not very successful, and Koriwn explains that this was because the Armenian language had not yet developed a writing system. Maštoc‘ brought up his concerns with the chief bishop of Armenia, Sahak, who provided him with some support. Together they approached

[3] Krikor H. Maksoudian, *The Origins of the Armenian Alphabet and Literature* (New York: St. Vartan Press), 58-9.

[4] One of the other useful sources is Movses Xorenac‘i (Movses of Xoren), *History of Armenians*, trans. and comm. Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge, Caravan Books: 1978).

[5] *Life of Maštoc‘,* Chapter III.

King Vramšapuh. The King provided Maštoc‘ with further aid first by introducing him to a writing system, referred to as the Danielian letters. Later when those letters were not deemed sufficient for the Armenian language, the king, with the consent of the chief bishop Sahak, allowed Maštoc‘ to travel to the cities Edessa and Amida on the Roman side. There Maštoc‘ was able to create a suitable alphabet which was latter refined by a Greek scribe to be pleasing to the eye.[6]

The root of Maštoc‘’s desire to create the Armenian alphabet lay in a combination of the difficulty of spreading Christianity in Armenia and his devotion to be of service to the land.[7] Therefore, much scholarship on the history of the invention of the Armenian alphabet focuses on attributing its invention to religious or nationalistic motivations. These works rarely place the issues of literacy and education within the wider context of Late Antiquity. Other research focuses on questions such as *when* exactly the alphabet was created.[8] I will try instead to explain *how* this alphabet was presented, justified, and understood against the backdrop of the fifth-century Late Antique world and within the Christian discourse of the period.[9] The reality is that we cannot know exactly what the origin of the Armenian alphabet was or how Armenian

[6] *Life of Maštoc‘,* Chapter VI-IX.

[7] *Life of Maštoc‘,* Chapter V, Maštoc‘ wandered around in the Greater Armenia and the region of Gołt’n in particular.

[8] Artašes Martirosyan, *Maštoc‘, Patmakan Tesut‘yun* [Maštoc‘: Historical View] (Yerevan, 1982); M. Minasian, “Koriwni grk‘i ‘ams erkus‘ ev verjabane [The ‘Two Years’ of Koriwn’s Book and its Epilogue],” *Handes Amsoreay* 7:12 (1983); Hagop J. Nersoyan “The Why and When of the Armenian Alphabet,” *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 2 (1985): 51-72.

[9] To ponder if the Armenian alphabet is similar to Greek or it was closer to the Syriac alphabet, even though interesting, would not lead to fruitful results. See Serge Mouraviev, *Erkataguir ou Comment naquit l’alphabet arménien: Les Trois Secrets de Mesrop Machtots ou la Genèse des Alphabets paléochrétiens du Caucase, 1,* (Sankt Augustin: Academia-Verlag, 2010).

speakers received it, but, as previously stated, we can come to know how this alphabet was promoted through a close reading of the *Life of the Maštoc'*, written by his disciple, Koriwn.[10]

Some studies on the emergence of Armenian literary culture tend to apologize for the heavy Christian discourse that colors the accounts of the Armenian author. Hagop Nersoyan remarks that when Koriwn talks about the creation of the alphabet his account is infused with a mixture of "devout exuberance" and a "sense of victory."[11] Nersoyan complains that Koriwn was not detached from the event as an objective "historian".[12] Similarly, in the introduction of the English translation of *Life of Maštoc'*, Bedros Norehad encourages the "average reader" to ignore the beginning paragraphs, which are filled with "biblical allusions and quotations."[13]

Abraham Terian, meanwhile, believes that the text is an *encomium*, a genre that he believes Koriwn would have been familiar with as a student of Greek literary composition. He explains that the text embodies the pattern of an encomium: the *Life* describes the origin, family, birth and upbringing, accomplishments, and deeds of Maštoc'. Drawing on biblical examples, Koriwn exalts Maštoc' and compares him to Moses, the Apostle Paul, and some other notable figures commonly found in the genre.[14]

Ed Mathews disagrees with Terian's conclusion and argues instead that the patterns in the text would be common to any biography written about an important person. They are a chronological narrative that tells the reader about the life events of Maštoc', his birth, missions,

[10] Manuk Abełian's critical edition is generally preferred by scholars. My references are from Abełian's edition and I used Bedros Norehad's translation.

[11] Hagop J. Nersoyan, "The Why and When of the Armenian Alphabet."

[12] Ibid.

[13] *Life of Maštoc',* 7.

[14] Abraham Terian, "Koriwn's Life of Maštoc' as an Encomium," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 3 (1987): 1-14.

and death. Even though Koriwn was writing full of admiration for his teacher, the work does not possess the polished rhetoric of an encomium.[15] Mathews highlights the use of the word *Life* vs. *History* in the manuscript tradition and by other early writers. He argues this is a sign that the work was never considered a panegyric or encomium. The six elements that Terian thinks shape the structure of the text, according to Matthews, are scattered throughout the work. For example, the comparison typically occupies the penultimate place in an encomium before the epilogue, but that is not the case in the life of Maštoc‘. According to Mathews, Łazar Parpec‘i also refers to the text as a "History," and in the later *History of the Caucasian Albanian*s Koriwn's writing is introduced as a "Narrative Account."[16]

The works of Terian and Mathews open a new avenue for studying the *Life*. The concern of this chapter however is not to determine the genre Koriwn was writing in, even though I agree with Mathews that the *Life* is not a panegyric or encomium; it is Koriwn's attempt to write an account explaining how and why Maštoc‘ invented the alphabet. The writing contains some hyperbole about the deeds of Maštoc‘ and the importance of the invention of the alphabet for the Armenians. Koriwn wrote in a certain discourse as he elevated the place of the inventor of an alphabet, Maštoc‘, to exceed the level of Moses. The discourse therefore provides a framework for explaining and promoting the importance of Maštoc‘'s invention; Koriwn's rhetoric can be traced across literary cultures of most accounts written in the Late Antique period. Indeed, understanding the Christian discourse within the text is important for unpacking how the creation of the Armenian alphabet was justified and why Maštoc‘ was considered holy for his role in this invention.

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[15] Edward Mathews, "The Life of Maštoc‘ as an Encomium: A Reassessment," *Revue Des Etudes Armeniennes*, 24 (1993): 1-26.

[16] Ibid.

The work starts with an introduction to Maštoc''s life before his vocation to create the Armenian alphabet and it ends with his death and burial scene. It was first and foremost a promotion of the alphabet rather than of Maštoc' specifically. William Smalley, who was involved with the invention of a writing system for the Hmong language, thinks cultural, social, political, and ideological factors each play a major role in the acceptance or rejection of a writing system, even more than linguistic matters.[17] The use of a particular script for a specific language—for instance, Arabic script for Persian or Latin for Modern Turkish—is a convention and subject to change. Some languages use several scripts as a norm and their users have a certain amount of flexibility in choosing between them; such is the case for Kashmiri, for which the users can choose between Devanagari, Perso-Arabic, and Śāradā scripts.[18]

The Greek and Syriac scripts could not be used for the Armenian language without a great number of adjustments. The Greek alphabet contains twenty-four characters and Syriac has twenty-two, but the Armenian sound system requires thirty-six characters. The studies of Sebastian Brock and Hidemi Takahashi point to the difficulties of using the Syriac script to write Armenian. The gap between the phonetic systems of the two languages posed major issues.[19] Similarly, the Pahlavi script with twelve letters was very awkward and not very appealing for widespread use. Derived from the Imperial Aramaic writing system, Pahlavi was not even sufficient for Middle Persian. The main problem was using identical letters for different sounds,

[17] William A. Smalley, "How Shall I Write This Language?" *The Bible Translator* 10:2 (1959): 49-69.

[18] Unseth, Peter "Sociolinguistic Parallels between Choosing Scripts and Languages." *Written Language and Literacy* 8, no. 1 (2005): 19-42.

[19] For examples see Sebastian Brock, "Armenian in Syriac Script," in *Armenian Studies/Études arméniennes. in Memoriam Haïg Berbérian*, ed. Dickran Kouymjian (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1986), 75–80; also see Hidemi Takahashi, "Armenian Garshuni: An Overview of the Known Material," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 17:1 (2014),87-122.

which led to using diacritical marks and other orthographic conventions.[20] However, it is likely that Armenians were using other languages and their respective scripts in different settings. Middle Persian must have been used in communication with the Sasanian court, and Greek and Syriac were necessary to deal with religious matters. Furthermore, apart from the linguistic factor, the social value of the script has to be considered, which can explain Maštoc''s decision to reject the Danielian script and create an original form. In choosing a side to align with, i.e. Greek (Rome) or Syriac (Persia), Maštoc' largely leaned toward the Greek. Koriwn explains that Maštoc' rejected the alphabet suggested by a Syrian bishop named Daniel, after he tried teaching it for some time (either two years or two months) to young students. Koriwn believed that this alphabet was insufficient to form the Armenian syllables and added that it was an alphabet "buried and then resurrected from other languages."[21] Russell suggests that the phrase points to an attribution of the letters to Daniel, which made them impossible to use because they were linked to the Manichean Armenian writing system. This alphabet was in use by the third century AD/CE but it was "buried" after Christianity became more dominant. Considering the interest Armenians showed in refuting Manicheism and in translating the works of others who refute it, Russell thinks that the Danielian script could have been Mani's adapted script for his own religion. However, Russell himself thinks this argument cannot be proven without further evidence.[22] In any case, Koriwn thought that this script was to be used for other literature and other purposes.

[20] Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "Iran vi. Iranian Languages and Scripts (3) Writing Systems," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, XIII/4, 366-370, available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/iran-vi3-writing-systems (accessed on 30 December 2017).

[21] *Life of Maštoc',* Chapter VI.

[22] James R. Russell, "On the Origins and invention of the Armenian Script," *Le Museon* 107:3-4 (1994): 317-33.

According to Koriwn, Maštoc‘, in his quest to perfect the alphabet, went to Samosata, where a scribe of Greek literature, a Syrian by the name of Hrop‘anos, helped him with the design. The visual similarity of the Armenian script with Greek could be the result of these scribes’ efforts, not to mention that the order and the ductus of the Armenian alphabet follows Greek. The desire to have a script graphically similar to one language or dissimilar to another, logical or not, is a social factor that influences the success of a writing system.[23] The Greek alphabet was used in communications with the Roman Church and a resemblance to it could have been considered prestigious. The Greek alphabet influenced Georgian, Coptic, and the ductus of Ethiopic. Cyril and Methodius used a similar approach, building on Greek for Slavonic.[24] Maštoc‘ adapted the main Christian writing system and fit it into the particular needs of Armenians.

Koriwn presented the Armenian alphabet as a writing system created for the Armenian language. This was in accordance with the Armenian self-perception as a distinct nation, who belonged to the land of Armenia and had a common ancestry. Koriwn states:

> I had been thinking of the God-given alphabet of the Azkanazian nation and of the land of Armenia *(Zazgkanazian azgi yev zhayasdan ashkharin asdvasta-pargev groyn*) when in what time, and through what kind of man that new divine gift had been bestowed, as well as luminous leaning and angelic.[25]

Koriwn promised that the new writing (*noragir*) would be a bond between the Armenian people, their land, and their language. Having a common ancestry (Azchanazi), in this case with

[23] William A. Smalley, “How Shall I Write This Language?”

[24]“Major Alphabets of the World: Cyrillic and Glagolitic Alphabets,” *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2008). The two early Slavic alphabets, the Cyrillic and the Glagolitic, were invented by St. Cyril, or Constantine (c. 827–869), and St. Methodius (c. 825–884). These men were Greeks from Thessalonica who became apostles to the southern Slavs, whom they converted to Christianity.

[25] *Life of Maštoc‘*, Chapter I. In the genealogies of the Hebrew Bible, Ashkenaz was the first son of Gomer (Genesis 10:3, 1 Chronicles 1:6), and Gomer was the grandson of Noah through Japheth. Koriwn speaks of the Armenian alphabet as a divine gift given to Azchanazian nation and the land of Armenia (*Zazgkanazian azgi yev zhayasdan ashkharin asdvasta-pargev groyn*). The Armenian nation is called Ashchenazian or Japhetic, based on a passage in the Bible: “Call together against her the kingdom of Ararat, Minni, and Ashchenaz.” Jeremiah 51:27.

a biblical connection, and a land (*Hayastan ašxarh*), helped to define ancient Armenians as a distinct people and through the alphabet this connection became even more solid.

The second element that Koriwn emphasizes is the sacredness of the Armenian alphabet. He refers to Maštoc‘ as a vehicle of God through whom the alphabet took life, “[taking] with him letters of good tiding”; Koriwn continues, “God’s gracious gift…passing many hostilities, and with profound joy, arrived in Armenia.” [26] According to Koriwn, Maštoc‘ was filled with spiritual consolation and a confident eagerness to meet those who were to be recipients of his alphabet, much like Moses bearing the tablets with the Commandments. [27] Koriwn set the place of Maštoc‘ among the biblical teachers. Knowledge about God was passed on as a chain starting with Moses, Jesus, and Paul, and eventually was received by Armenians via the efforts of Maštoc‘.[28]

Considering a script God-given, sacred, and blessed is not unique to Armenians. Ancient Egyptians called their script *mdw·w-nṯr* (*medu-netjer*) “god’s words.” This was a writing system used as monumental art and was never used for any other language but Egyptian. In the rabbinic tradition, the Hebrew script was believed to go back to the Creation. In the Mishnah, it is stated that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as well as the art of writing were created on the twilight of the first Shabbat, right when the creation was completed. In Chapter five of Piekei Avot, dated between the third and eighth centuries, it is written that: “Ten things were created on the eve of the [first] Shabbat at twilight… the letters; and the writing; and the tablets [all of the latter three, of the Ten Commandments].”[29] Letters were thus created right before creation ended at the end

[26] *Life of Maštoc‘,* Chapter IX.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid., Chapter II.

[29] M. Avot 5:6 it is not possible to date this section of Piekei Avot because it was not attributed to any rabbi.

of the sixth day. According to the Jewish tradition, God himself with his finger wrote on the stone tablets given to Moses on Mount Sinai. God is literally keeping a heavenly book, inscribed with people's names, to which he adds or from which he erases, thereby inscribing people's eternal fate.

The Qur'an is referred to as a "Register well-protected," which "None may touch except the purified. [It is] a revelation from the Lord of the worlds."[30] The phrase "Register well-protected" has been translated as a hidden, concealed, well-guarded Book that, as Cook explains, could be an archetypical Book located in heaven.[31] Furthermore, on the subject of the importance of writing, we read in the Qur'an that two angels, kiraman katibun ("two noble writers"), are responsible for recording a person's actions and thoughts: "Over you stand watchers, noble recorders who know what you do…" [32] In the Islamic tradition the Qur'an as a Holy Book has a significant place. As Michael Cook states, the Qur'an is not only a respected book of the Muslim religion but is a sacred object, a sacred codex. Non-Muslims should not touch the Quran, and the majority of Muslim warriors in this period would not take the Qur'an with them to a non-Muslim territory, dreading that it might fall into hands of the unbelievers.[33] These examples illustrate the longstanding connection between writing systems and holiness.

Syriac emerged as a language of Christianity much earlier in the East Roman Empire and in the Sasanian Empire, and in Armenia as the liturgical language. For Syriac-speaking Christians, the Syriac language, specifically the Syriac dialect of Edessa, became a source of

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[30] *The Qur'an* 56:77-80.

[31] Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 56.

[32] Al-Infitar (Torn Apart) 82: 10-13, English Translation: *The Qur'an*. Trans. by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, (Oxford University Press, 2005), 412.

[33] Cook, *The Koran*, 59-60.

identity and gave a sense of belonging to the community of Christians who used it in ecclesiastical settings.[34]

Koriwn describes the power of the Armenian alphabet as a tie that will bind the Armenian people together. First, Koriwn talks about the alphabet as a shared property that will benefit all Armenians who share a common ancestry (*Azchanazi*) and who live in Armenia (*Hayasdan ašxar*). Moreover, Koriwn speaks about the Armenian alphabet as a divine gift given to the Azchanazian nation. The term Azchanazian is based on a passage in the Bible "Call together against her the kingdom of Ararat, Minni, and Ashchenaz" in Jeremiah 51:27. In the genealogies of the Hebrew Bible, Ashchenaz was the first son of Gomer and Gomer was the grandson of Noah through Japheth.[35] Furthermore, Koriwn emphasizes the binding nature of the Armenian alphabet, describing it as connecting God to the land and the Armenian nation. When Koriwn explains the benefits that will emerge after Maštoc' invention of the Georgian alphabet, he says:

> And thus they who had been gathered from among so many distinct and dissimilar tongues, he bound together in one nation (*mi azgi kabial*) with one divine commandment, transforming them into one nation and glorifiers of One God. [36]

In this passage, Koriwn is again advocating for the potential of the alphabet as a force that binds people together. [37] They came to him because they were in the Persian realm.

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[34] Philip Wood, *We Have No King but Christ: Christian Political Thought in Greater Syria on the Eve of the Arab Conquest (400-585)* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.

[35] Genesis 10:3; 1 Chronicles 1:6.

[36] *Life of Maštoc'*, Chapter XV.

[37] These are mostly people who lived in the Eastern Georgia (Kartli and gagheti) western region; where the people of Lazika or Abasgia lived is not mentioned. These two spheres were only united in the eleventh century to become modern Georgia.

Robert Thomson argues that the development of Armenian literature solidified the ties between Armenian noble families of varied size and power, each with their own military force. It seems that the voice of the Church authorities spoke for broader interests within the Armenian territories.[38] This form of the Armenian language, which Maštoc‘ committed to writing, was one of the many dialects spoken in Greater Armenia. Most likely it was the dialect spoken in the court of the Arsacids with which Maštoc‘ was familiar. Koriwn refers to some other dialects in passing. Koriwn explains the attitude of Maštoc‘ toward the people of the "region of Medes" who were located near the borders of the Sasanian Empire:

> He obtained permission from the King [Vramšapuh] to undertake in the savage regions of Medians, who were difficult to communicate with, not only because of their devilish, satanic, and fiendish character, but also because of their very crude, corrupt, and harsh language. Undertaking to refine them, they made them, offspring of many generations, intelligible, eloquent, educated, and informed of godly wisdom. Thus they became immersed in the laws and commandments to the extent of becoming distinguishable from their fellow natives.[39]

Linguistic standardization requires political and social control over writing, which functions as an administrative and communicative tool. In order for this tool to work it has to be unified across different dialects of a language. After all, as Max Weinreich once said, "a language is a dialect that has an army and a navy." In the case of the Armenian language, a crucifix was added to the equation.

Similar to the situation in the Roman Empire, in Armenia the spoken word and not the written text must have been integral to the spread of Christianity among the population. Most Christians were converted not by reading books but by listening to the "Words of God." Koriwn

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[38] Robert W. Thomson, "Armenia in the Fifth and Sixth Century," in *The Cambridge Ancient History: Empire and Successors, AD 425-600*, vol. 14, ed. Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Michael Whitby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 667.

[39] *Life of Maštoc‘,* Chapter X. Robert Hewsen explains that it is difficult to understand the Armenio-Media frontier but what Armenian Arsacid held in Media were the regions on the east of the lake Urmia near the border of the Sasanian Empire.

was emphatic that Moses, Paul, and the Gospels of Christ became *hayaxos* (Armenian-speaking), even though before the invention of the alphabet the sermons were in Armenian and the Bible was translated before the audience right after it was recited in Greek or Syriac. I argue that for the acceptance of an alphabet, linguistic capacity and cultural properties should come together. The creation of the Armenian script was a tool for defining the place of the Armenian people within the bigger Christian world of the Late Antiquity.

An issue I would like to expand upon here is why an alphabet had to be invented for a religion whose members were not expected to actually read its Holy Book? And why would the invention of this alphabet have the support of both the court and the Church of Armenia? The invention of the alphabet made it possible to read and write in the Armenian language, but it did not result in an immediate spread of literacy. It is hard for a learner to achieve literacy when s/he is not literate in any language whatsoever. Learning the shapes of the alphabet and their respective pronunciations within weeks is quite possible, but becoming literate demands years of education, and without social value attached to the practice of literacy, there is little motivation for its acquisition.

The hierarchy of the groups that received the new alphabet shows the importance of writing for certain groups and not the whole population. According to Koriwn, the King, his aristocratic entourage (*azatagound banak)*, and a prominent noble family of the Mamikonean were instructed first.[40] Examples of natural and divine knowledge holders, according to Koriwn, are Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon, who were both advisors of mighty kings and aware of worldly affairs, an allusion to the close links between Maštoc‘, Patriarch Sahak, the Armenian

[40] *Life of Maštoc‘,* Chapter XII.

court, and King Vramšapuh (reg. 401-417).[41]

The second regions that were still pagan were instructed in the new alphabet.[42] Koriwn explains that the mission was mostly to preach the Gospels and to establish learning centers for monks. These centers became institutes to spread Christianity and to educate monks who would have remained illiterate otherwise. Nina Garsoïan has shown that during the fourth and fifth centuries there were no settled and permanent monastic communities. Ascetic groups were held together by a common covenant or purpose at the service of a particular saint or a shrine.[43]

Explaining how Bishop Sahak and Maštoc' managed to spread Christianity in other regions of Armenia, Koriwn states:

> The task of preaching Christ by sending to different part and provinces of Armenia their apostles of truth, [deeming] those of us who had completed their training as qualified to teach others. To them they offered their labor as an example and guide rules, bidding them to stay within those rules.[44]

One of the main contributions of Maštoc' to the Church after the invention of the Armenian alphabet was to make centers for monks to learn how to read and write, even though Garsoïan argues that these centers were not permanent. Koriwn relates that in Siwnik', Maštoc' gathered the youth from more "brutal, barbarian, and fiendish regions and cared for them and instructed them as a teacher, educated and advised them, ordained bishops as overseers from

[41] *Life of Maštoc',* Chapter II.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Nina Garsoïan, "Introduction to the Problem of Early Armenian Monasticism," in *Revue des Études Arméniennes* vol. 30 (2005/07), 217.

[44] Ibid.

among those barbarians…and filled the region of Siwnik‘ with the places for monks (*vanakanc‘)*.”[45]

In order to have a better idea of how Christianity became a factor in the ways that people learned how to read and write, I will cast a broader net and survey the education and learning culture of the Roman Empire after the emergence of Christianity. The wok of Hernri I. Marrou , who has studied the effects of the emergence of Christianity on the history of Greco-Roman learning culture shows that Christianity left the education system unaltered.[46] Traditional Classical learning with its focus on rhetoric continued to be taught after the emergence of Christianity.

However, Church reaction to Classical education was not static during this time. On the one hand the Church was aware of the scholarly aspect of Christianity, which made it essential for the faithful to have a literary culture, but at the same time the Church was critical of this type of education because of the “paganism” within it. Nevertheless, even an uncompromising figure such as Tertullian allowed children to go to school as a matter of necessity, but only if they were aware of the poison that came with pagan education.[47] Primary and secondary schools were not Christian, but more advanced schools for the teaching of Christian theology came into being in the middle of the second century.[48] Since teaching the doctrine of Christianity could not be done at the level of a simple catechism, schools of sacred science soon emerged, which were the

[45] *Life of Maštoc‘,* Chapter XIV.

[46] Hernri I. Marrou, *History of Education in Antiquity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 1982), Chapters I.7 and II.1, 6, 7, 10.

[47] Tert. *Idol*., 10.

[48] Marrou*, History of Education in Antiquity*, 326.

equivalent of the pagan philosophical circles.[49] In the fourth and fifth centuries the great bishops like Basil, John Chrysostom, and Augustine all achieved a remarkable level of personal Christian culture, which they spread abroad by preaching and by example, but this never turned into a system of education like the Classical schools.

Glen W. Bowersock points out that Julian was the only emperor who was convinced that these two systems of education could not work together because there was disagreement between them.[50] Julian wanted Christian teachers to change their attitude about Greek works or stop teaching them altogether. The word "Hellenism" was used to refer to the culture of Greeks who still believed in their own gods, and of people who were assimilated to Greek culture and indulged in it. In language, myth, and image Greek culture helped incorporate various local traditions into a universally comprehensible expression.[51] However, Hellenism in the Christian empire of Late Antiquity developed another meaning: pagan. For Libanius, Hellenism continued to mean to "live as a Greek" or "to be civilized in a Greek way." Greek-speaking Christians now had to defend their inclination to Greek culture by separating it from paganism. The point that Bowersock wants to make is that Julian knew that Christian thinkers like Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea, and other great theologians before them, had been too steeped in Greek culture and that separation from it seemed impossible. Hence, Gregory of Nazianzus argued in favor of separating two distinctive meanings within "Hellenism": as pagan and as civilized.

[49] Ibid., 161.

[50] Glen Warren Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, vol. 18 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 8.

[51] Ibid., 9.

Therefore "Hellene" could refer to a Christian who was educated and civilized but was not by any sense a hypocrite or weak in his Christian faith.[52]

Christian learning did not replace Classical education, but developed its own curriculum alongside Classical learning for the ecclesiastics of higher ranks. The intellectuals of the second and third century, such as Justin Martyr and Origen, were mostly in charge of small circles of disciples. Their role was similar to the role of a philosopher or a rhetor. Their students already had received a primary and secondary schooling and were willing to join them for further education.[53] Meanwhile, Egyptian monasticism was loath to accept the need for faith to be taught via Greek *paideia,* that is, using a philosophical approach. They argued that people should be taught by God, the *theodidaktos*, instead of requiring philosophers to explain the faith.[54]

The *paideia* was a shared Greco-Roman culture, and an indication of a certain status that demonstrated access to education in a canon of Classical texts, which made its holders suitable candidates for political activity within the Empire. The educational system of the Roman Empire of the second and third centuries produced elites who could be part of the imperial administration; however, by the fifth century and through the gradual Christianization of the empire, *paideia* was neither the most fruitful nor the exclusive means for members of the aristocratic class to find their way into the administrative body of the Roman Empire. Peter Brown's *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity* has shown that by that time, bishops—some of whom were already from curial backgrounds—had taken over roles previously held by the curial

[52] Ibid., 12.

[53] Marrou, *History of Education in Antiquity*, 326.

[54] See Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 187.

classes, represented their communities, and engaged in diplomacy on behalf of their cities.[55] More recent scholarship has shown that most bishops already derived from curial backgrounds. Sixty-eight identifiable bishops in the fourth century were already from the urban middle class.[56]

William V. Harris argues that not more than 10% of the population of the Roman Empire was literate, and after Christianity the numbers decline. Harris explains that in the first three centuries of the new religion's emergence, the main means of furthering the missionary effort was not through writing.[57] He adds that it was accepted for the lay poor to remain illiterate, and it was not the concern of the Church to spread education beyond its established boundaries. Harris argues that crucial factors like industrialization, urbanization, the rise of elementary schools, and the involvement of the state with the education of the public were all crucial for mass literacy. The main argument against Harris lies in his minimalist estimation of the literacy of the population of the Roman Empire, which has been challenged by scholars who believe many forms of employment required some level of literacy or that some people could read in their native language but not Greek.[58] In *Books and Readers in the Early Church,* Harry Gamble also argues against the oral nature of early Christianity. He says production, translation,

[55] Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 148.

[56] Frank Gillard, "The Social Origin of Bishops in the Fourth Century," (PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1966). See also Claudia Rapp, Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition. vol. 37. (California: University of California Press, 2013).

[57] William Harris, *Ancient Literary* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 22, 30, 282, 285.

[58] Nicholas Horsfall, "Statistics of State of Mind?" in *Literacy in the Roman World*, ed. Mary Beard et al., Journal of Roman Archeology Supplementary Series (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 136-40; Ann Ellis Hanson, "Ancient Illiteracy," in ibid., 159-198.

dissemination, collection, and use of Christian literature should be a testimony to the emphasis on literacy in Christianity.[59]

At the beginning of the fourth century, two decades after Constantine I (280? -337 CE.) allowed Christianity to be practiced freely in the Roman Empire, a huge project was initiated. Constantine the Great ordered Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea, to prepare fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures. This was to aid in distributing the Holy Scripture all over the Roman Empire. In *Life of Constantine,* Eusebius explains that the Emperor wanted the books to be "written on prepared parchment in a legible manner, and in a convenient, portable form, by professional transcribers thoroughly practiced in their art."[60] Constantine thought that fifty copies of Scripture would be enough to spread Christianity throughout the entire Roman Empire. These books were to be sent to churches in the major cities and were not meant for the public, but in the fourth century simply hearing the holy words was considered good enough for the laity.

A century after this grandiose project, John Chrysostom, the archbishop of Constantinople, gave a sermon reproaching Christians for their lack of interest in reading the Holy Scriptures. He complained that among the Christians there was no one who had memorized even one of the Psalms, let alone read the Gospels. His criticism addressed those people who offered excuses for not reading the Gospels and who argued that was a task for monks. John Chrysostom found it unacceptable for people to say: "I am not one of the monks, I have both a wife and children, and the care of a household." He wondered why the laity supposed that reading the divine Scriptures appertains only to monks, when ordinary people needed it more.[61]

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[59] Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 30.

[60] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine,* Book IV, Chapter 36.

[61] *Homily II on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, for further discussion see Adolf Harnack*, Bible Reading in the Early Church*, trans. J. R. Wilkinson (Williams & Norgate: 1912), 118-9.

Adolf Harnack mistook the bishop's disdain for his congregation's lack of interest in reading and memorizing the Psalms for an actual practice of teaching them.

Robin L. Fox's article "Literacy and Power in Early Christianity" addresses the paradox between the arguments of Harris and Gamble: if Christians placed a high value on texts, why didn't Christianity help spread literacy among its followers? Fox believes that for Christians sacred literacy was a highly authoritative and powerful means to conduct Christians' ideas. Ordinary people absorbed the faith by listening, singing, and looking. It encouraged some readers to read more but Christianity did not turn an ordinary illiterate population into readers. Fox further explains that for Christians who were not content to be ordinary, literacy gained a new power. The same Christians who strove to read and meditate on the text were the ones who wielded some power over their fellow-Christians. Their literacy was linked to prestige and spiritual merit.[62] The monastic community hosted and contained the Christians who strived to be nearer to God and His will, but there is little evidence that the Christian clergy were agents of teaching illiterate Christians to read. Even though reading the Gospels was what the Church fathers would have expected an "ideal" Christian to do, it was not actually what an ordinary Christian would do, at least not in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Robert Thomson points out that Sahak, the chief bishop of Armenia, and Maštoc' were the sponsors of this literary movement. They started the project, then trained and dictated to their pupils what to study and which texts to translate. By the fifth century, the Church had developed a widespread structure of ecclesiastical authority where literacy was necessary. Matters of discipline, hierarchy, and organization of the Church were among the concerns of the first Council of Nicaea in 325. For this ecclesiastical structure to function, its members had to

[62] Robin L. Fox, "Literacy and Power in Early Christianity," in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, ed. Alan K. Bowman and Greg Woolf (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 148.

communicate and to this end literacy was crucial. Literacy became a means for the Church to get involved in the details of the lives of its community, to send orders, and to demand reports. If another medium were available, the Church would have used it instead for circulating its orders and news.[63]

Schools of Syriac Learning

The Syriac centers shared a certain resemblance with the Greek paideia, because they were mostly in cities near the Persian border. Understanding the East-Syriac learning culture can give us a perspective on the development of learning centers in Armenia.

The East-Syriac schools benefited from the Classical texts and ideas brought from Mediterranean intellectual centers. Recently scholars have attempted to trace the Classical tradition in Syriac works such as Bardaiṣan's pieces on philosophical dialogue like the *Book of Laws of the Countries*, which was written in the model of the Platonic dialogues. Works of Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), and even of Aphrahat the Persian sage, all show traces of the Hellenization of Syriac literary culture.[64]

The title "school" must refer to the broad intellectual activities in the city of Edessa. Adam Becker contends that modern scholarship has attributed greater significance to the school than it deserves, expanding its history to the time of Bardaisian (d. 222), or accepting Vööbus' claim [65] that commentaries on Aristotle were studied there. Becker disapproves of the scholarly tradition that has developed, which imagines Ephrem as a teacher in the School of Edessa or even as the founder of the school. The sources that talk about the school in Edessa, "The Cause

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[63] Ibid.

[64] Kathleen McVey, "Were the Earliest *Madrashe* Songs or Recitations?" in *After Bardaisan: Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honour of Professor Han J. W. Drijvers*, eds. G.J. Reinink and A.C. Klugkist, (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 185-99; Ute Possekel, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writing of Ephrem the Syriac* (Lovanii: Peeters: 1999).

[65] Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis.*

of the Foundation of the Schools" and the "Ecclesiastical History," both attributed to Barhadshabba (post 489 CE), belong to a period after the school was already closed. The other sources, Becker states, reflect the controversy among the West Syrians who thought of the school as the source of heresy, and see it as the predecessor of the School of Nisibis. In either case, most of these sources possess a hazy knowledge of the institution of the school.

According to Becker, the spread of Syriac schools throughout Mesopotamia was not homogeneous and not all learning centers offered their students the same level of education. He divides these schools or learning centers into three categories: 1) independent schools, which were separated and somehow independent from a local church or monastery. These centers provided both elementary literacy and higher learning. 2) monastic schools that were centers for learning based in monasteries, and 3) village schools that provided elementary lessons in reading and church service and higher forms of learning.[66]

Christianity in both Syrian and Armenian contexts was presented as a form of discovery of the self and the universe through learning. Conversion to Christianity was presented as accepting one school of learning and rejecting the others' "untrue" teachings. Becker gives an example of this from the Pethion-Adurhormizd-Anahid cycle in the *Acts of Persian Martyrs.* An Armenian version of this cycle is presented in the *Vark'ew Vkayanut'iwnk' srboc' hatentir k'alealk' i carentrac*.[67] The cycle, as Becker explains, concerns a grandiose magian Persian (*pars)* family perhaps during the time of the Sasanian king Yazdgerd II. The head of the family, Mihryar, had two sons, Yazdin and Dadgushnasp. As Yazdin was about to receive his education in his ancestral magian setting (*mogwtiun hayrenadur),* he refused to comply, and instead went

[66] Adam Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 159.

[67] *Vark'ew Vkayanut'iwnk' srboc' hatentir k'alealk' i carentrac*, ed. Łewond Alishan, 430-7.

to a church in a nearby town and asked for divine baptism. The members of the church who knew his father refused to baptize him, so he traveled to another region, near a city called Soulq, to a monastery called Beth Sahde, and there he was baptized by a bishop named John. He received his education in Holy Scripture and Psalms and was diligent in fasting and prayers. After these events, he returned to his hometown and converted his brother and nephew Pethion, whom he takes as a disciple. Years later Yazdin died and Pethion healed a young Zoroastrian woman who then converted to Christianity, followed by her father, a high-ranking Zoroastrian official. They were both martyred, and the cycle concludes with the martyrdom of Pethion.

The Syriac version contains more details about how Yazdin's father Mihryar found out about his son's conversion and beat him severely and sent him back to the Zoroastrian school, from which Yazdin escaped again. After the death of Mihryar, according to the Armenian version, Yazdin clothed his nephew Pethion in a religious habit, i.e. made him a monk. Together they cured many of the believers in Zoroastrianism. After Yazdin's death, Pethion moved into his teacher's cell, devoted himself to the ascetic life and followed his healing practice. The text then tells of their martyrdom and of the great magus's accusation against Pethion, who told him "You are teaching against our *Den*" and accused him of being the head of the Nazareans, a sorcerer.[68] Pethion defended his education as divine knowledge and a guide and path to life. After several instances in which Pethion was protected from various tortures set by the magus—including dropping him shackled into the river, setting him on fire, and throwing him over a cliff—Pethion was finally beheaded.[69]

[68] *Martyrdom of Holy Pethion*, (Armenian version), 431.

[69] Ibid., 432-7.

The text demonstrates a clash between Zoroastrian and Christian ideas about learning. The goal of the account is to show the superiority of Christian priestly training, arguing that Christianity time and again proved to be the correct religion, with proof being the marvelous protections bestowed by God to save Pethion and help him heal non-believers. The power behind this teaching helped Pethion to such an extent that the magus accused him of sorcery.[70]

Understanding Christianity as a form of learning that should be transmitted from master to student with God as the central topic connects the intellectual and social realms and is at the core of both East Syrian and Armenian learning culture. The Armenian script was a tool for learning about the world and to map the place of Armenia within that world. New knowledge about regions unknown to Armenia would be bestowed on Armenians, a development that would take Armenians beyond their boundaries and connect them to a Christian commonwealth, where "wonderful divine acts" were performed. It would reveal a new dimension to knowledge that included the past and future. Once the Holy Scripture was understood, as Koriwn hoped it would be, the whole universe would be as an open book for Armenia.[71]

The contrast between the promise of what Christian authors called true knowledge and its realization was tested in the mid-fifth century when a large group of magi was sent to Greater Armenia to train Armenians. Their reaction to Zoroastrian teaching is described in Ełiše's *History of Vardan and the Armenian War.* According to Ełiše, Mihrnarseh sent a letter to the Armenians on behalf of Yazdgerd II saying "you must know that every man who dwells under heaven and does not accept the Mazdian religion is deaf and blind and deceived by the demons

[70] Becker, *Fear of God*, 35.

[71] *Life of Maštoc',* Chapter XI, 34.

of Haraman."[72] The letter, according to Ełiše, goes on to explain Zoroastrian teachings about the Cosmic Order, Zurvan, Orhmazd, and the demons. Mihrnarseh's concern was that he and the Sasanian King, Yazdgerd II, had to give an account for Armenians before the Lord.[73] A letter from the chief bishop of Armenia, Yosēp, on behalf of his colleagues, was composed in response and sent in the format of a dispute. The letter called the religion of the magi false and explained the complex issues of God and creation. In the letter, Mihrnareh and Yazdgerd II were called upon to "study the divine Scripture so that they may escape the torment and scorn hell and avoid the inextinguishable fire."[74] The two groups in conflict urged each other to learn and appreciate each other's teachings. Nevertheless, Yazdgerd II initiated a project to teach Armenians about "Zurvanism" by sending a group of magi to instruct them.

But first the king summoned some leading Armenian nobles to the court in person. They could not convince Yazdgerd II that they were loyal to him in every aspect while keeping their religion, hence they resorted to deception to save their lives by accepting Zoroastrianism and performed the ritual the king demanded, albeit unwillingly. Following this event, Yazdgerd II sent back the nobles together with a host of seven hundred teachers of the Zoroastrian religion, who were tasked with the conversion of the Armenians. The project was grand and included other regions such as Iberia, Albania, and the land of the Lp'nik.[75] The responsibilities of these teachers according to Ełiše were manifold. The *History* states that church service was suppressed, the doors of holy temples were closed and sealed, sacred vessels were taken to the court, and the singing of the psalms was silenced. Priests were banned from instructing people in

[72] Ełiše, 78.

[73] Ibid., 80.

[74] Ełiše, 82-93.

[75] Ełiše, 102; Łazar, 93.

their own homes, and Christians who lived in monasteries were expected to change their monastic garments to regular clothes *(kargk')*. The magi's instruction was aimed at the wives of the princes, and the sons and daughters of both the nobility and peasantry. These teachings included the laws of matrimony and encouraged men to take many wives instead of one. They also recommended marriage between daughters and fathers, sisters and brothers, and mothers and sons.[76] Furthermore some laws related to food, sacrificial deeds, and cleaning rituals were imposed and expected to be enacted within a year among the Armenian people.

The magi's mission stirred both clergy and laymen. Their main opposition was led by the priest, Łewond, and his supporters. Physically attacking the magi, bishops, and even lay men and women, they caused such great distress that the magi begged for their lives and asked to be sent back to the court. Ełiše mentions that the chief-magus pressed the *marzban* to inform the king that this endeavor should be abandoned, because not even gods could come to their aid and establish the religion of Zoroaster in Armenia. According to the chief-magus, the Armenians did not fear prison or torture, they did not care about money, and they preferred death over life. The chief-magus added that the project of trying to stop the spread of Christianity had started during the reign of Šāpur, but it bore no fruit; by this time Christianity had even expanded to the land of the Kushans and to India. Seeing this project fail, the king ordered the magi and the chief-magus to leave people undisturbed, be they Zandik, Jew, or Christian, or other sects. He hoped that this would bring security to the Persian Empire. In order to convince the *marzban* to side with him in halting the project, the chief-magus added that if the king agreed to leave these people alone according to his previous edict and let them act according to their will, they would gradually become accustomed to the religion of Zoroaster and accept the royal command willingly. He

[76] Ełiše, 102-3.

reasoned further that this land was on the border and its population could spread and scatter into foreign lands; if it became depleted then it would be cause greater problems for the court.[77] The *marzban* supposedly was in agreement with the chief-magus but he had no desire to heed him. The *History* does not inform us further about the fate of the magi and chief-magus in Armenia. Scholars who study this period in Armenian history usually do not pay enough attention to the teaching aspect of the conversion, nor Yazdgerd II's efforts to introduce the religion of magism by sending teachers to Armenia. However, I believe it is important to focus more on the tradition of Zoroastrian education, however scarce the sources we can amass may be, and try to understand Yazdgerd II's strategies.

Not much evidence can be found on the topic of education in the Sasanian period. Ahmad Tafazzoli thinks that while princes, nobility, clergy and administrative secretaries received education, peasants were mostly illiterate, while urban merchants were perhaps educated in writing and calculation. *Xusraw ud Redag* is a text about the son of a noble and his education, which mostly consists of writing, religious instruction, physical education, and most importantly, about behaving in court. In the *Wizirkard* meanwhile it is attested that a child should attend school (*fra-hangestan)* between five and seven years and that by the age of fifteen this education should be completed. In school, the writing and memorization of various prayers were taught. Astrology was part of this education, as well as perhaps learning to play a musical instrument, singing, games such as chess and backgammon, and some general information about food, flowers, animals—but this was for noble education. Three terms for schools are mentioned in Pahlavi: (1) *farhangestan*, a place of education; (2) *dibirestan*, a school for training scribes and secretaries; and (3) *herbedestan*, a school for religious studies. Two passages of the account, *Herbedestan* and *Nerangestan*, list various issues that could occur in the Zoroastrian learning

[77] Ibid., 110-14.

tradition and their solutions. When one attends the *Herbedestan,* and studies diligently, and acquires certainty from it regarding the faith of the yazdan, then one can save one's soul *(ruwan boxtan*).[78]

From this passage in the *Denkard IV* (a summary of tenth-century knowledge of the Mazdean religion), one can conclude that the *herbedestan* was mostly a place for teaching faith not limited to the priestly class alone, as another passage indicates it is the life of people (*zindagih mardoman)*. Even women and in some cases the children of infidels could attend the *herbedestan,* however the length of their studies would have been shorter than that which future clergy were required to undergo. The *Herbedestan*, a text that was originally transmitted orally and was committed to writing at an unknown date,[79] covers in a limited manner various topics related to education, such as caring for one's property while away on study, the duration of studies, the distance one should travel to pursue religious studies, matters regarding female students, and so on.

Chapter twelve of the *Herbedestan* addresses the question of the duration of studies with a teacher. The ideal period was a year, which in the case of teaching the Armenian people was reduced to six months. In his history, Ełiše says that the magi were planning to stay "From Navasard to Navasard" in "every place under the authority of the great king," in order to accomplish their project. Few passages in the *Herbedestan* refer to Christian adults, if at all. In one, however, the chance to receive a religious education was given to the child of an infidel. If I understand the text correctly, even though an infidel child was not worthy of this type of

[78] Aḥmad Tafażżolī, "Education ii. In the Parthian and Sasanian Periods." *Encyclopædia Iranica* , available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/education-ii

[79] See Firoze M. Kotwal and Philip G. Kreyenbroek (with contributions by James Russell), eds. and trans., The *Hērbedestān and Nērangestān I: Hērbedestān* (Studia Iranica, Cahier 10: Paris, 1992)]; II: Nērangestān, Fragard 1 (Studia Iranica, Cahier 16, Paris, 1995); III: Nērangestān, Fragard 2 (Studia Iranica, Cahier 30, Paris, 2003); IV: Nērangestān, Fragard 3 (Studia Iranica, Cahier 38, Paris, 2009).

education, if he were aware of his status (i.e. being Christian?), if his father did not confirm his status within a generation, then the son of an infidel could be allowed to join the *herbedestan*

> 12.2) For a period of three springs he shall study the religious wisdom.
> Let him absorb the wisdom of the righteous for three *zamaem* periods.
> [But) the case of the son of one who is in state of mortal sin or the son of a non-Iranian is different, to the extent that, if he knows (the status of his father), then he is not worthy, and (the principle of) it eradicates does not apply to him. Abarag said:" when the father has not reaffirmed his conversion to Christianity, then one should allow his son to come (to pursue religious studies). Abarag said: (if he has not reaffirmed it) for the duration of one generation.[80]

The passages that refer to the education of an infidel (*agden*) are limited and their approach differs regarding an adult infidel (*agden)* and his offspring:

> 12.5 if a minor who is an infidel non-Iranian comes to seek refuge, then he is definitely evil according to the Law, and his father is in a state of mortal sin. (margarzan lit. worthy of death). Thus, we declare that the former is in a state of mortal sin for fifteen years and the latter for the duration of his life, because they are to be regarded as exiles (*uzdehigahiha*).[81]

One can conclude that the magi's initial project, which started with training the wives of Armenian princes and was meant to reach out to the sons and daughters of the nobility, could be collapsed into one year, which was perhaps enough time to memorize the Zand and some passages of the Avesta.

> 13) On learning to recite sacred texts
> 13.1) If inside that period he recites (correctly) and (then) regresses and omits (part of the text)
> If inside that period he recites and then regresses
> 13.2) then at that time he should seek out another priestly teacher and then he should seek out a third, and likewise he should seek out a fourth.
> Then even at that time let him attend a second one, thus let him attend a third and similarly let him attend a fourth

[80] Ibid., 12.2.

[81] Ibid., 12.5.

> 13.3) if he knows that, and realizes that within that period he will recite and afterwards he will not omit
> if he knows thus: if I see [that priestly teacher], I shall recite inside that period, and afterwards I shall not offend, shall not misrecite. That is, if he has sinfully misrecited. If he still sinfully misrecited the fourth time, at that time it is permissible for him to attend a new teacher if he knows that he will memorize it and not misrecite.[82]

This process could be repeated four times or more if a student did not show sufficient skills. Łazar is more vocal concerning the magi's mission than about their teaching methods. He explains that a group of magi was sent by order of king Yazdgerd II to accompany the magnates and nobles of Armenia, Iberia and, Albania.

> They dispatch with them a host of false teachers, whom they call magi, exhorting them to learn their ridiculous breathings and mimicking, murmuring speech-like that of snakes-charmers and ventriloquists. They commanded that in the three lands schools of deceit be established and that everyone equally, men and women, be instructed in the teaching of the magi.[83]

Łazar indicates some crucial differences in Christian and Zoroastrian teaching, such as the site of the ritual and what was considered the correct manner of moving the body while studying. Adam Becker encounters a similar disapproval against studying ritual in the *Life of Išoʻsabran,* composed by Catholicos Išoʻyahb III (647/50-57/8). In the *Life,* Išoʻsabran, who is a Zoroastrian, converts and is baptized as a Christian. For fear of persecution, he decides to flee his hometown, travel into the wilderness, learn from ascetic holy men, and perform miracles. Finally, he decides that as a Christian he has to learn how to read scripture. He seeks help from a local village where the son of a priest whom he has adopted agrees to teach him how to read. Išoʻsabran can recite the first ten psalms from memory, but the boy explains that the correct

[82] Ibid., 13.1.

[83] Łazar, 93.

sequence in studying is first to learn the alphabet, then the pronunciation of the letters, and after that to repeat the psalms. Išoʻsabran followed this order and was finally able to read the psalms, after which he proceeds to their interpretation. Išoʻsabran asks the boy to recite Scripture for him so he can memorize it. This is the approach to teaching the sacred text in a Zoroastrian setting: "because he was accustomed to take from the mouth the murmuring of Magianism—for the accursed learning of Zoroaster is not written in letters of speech." The boy agrees, but draws the line when Išoʻsabran moves his neck like a magus as he is trying to read the Scripture. The boy tells him: "Do not do as the Magi do, but rather, while you are at peace speak solely with your mouth." [84]

These two passages from the *Life of Išoʻsabran* and Łazar PʻarpecʻI*'s* history both demonstrate that the difference subsisted not only in the intellectual and conceptual aspects of teaching and learning, but also in the clash between the performative and practical features of the two learning cultures. The "breathings, mimicking, and murmuring speech" the magi teachers were accustomed to, and the silent reading of the Christian instructor of *Išoʻsabran*, were all part of creating what Catherine Bells calls "a ritualized body." She explains that the ritualized body is a body produced by ritualization through the interaction of the body with a structured and structuring environment.[85] More importantly Bell argues that ritualization translates into domination by operating on the human body and ordering and controlling the movements of that body, such as constant recitation and movement of the head and neck in the case of Zoroastrian teaching, or silent reading in the case of the Christian training method. The human body is the fundamental site of ritualization in both cases. Bell explains that by impressing upon the bodies

[84] Becker, *Fear of God*, 206.

[85] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 99.

of participants sources of power and order the ritualized person, in turn, could generate a scheme and values that can appropriate or dominate other sociocultural situations as well.

The story furthermore reminds us that being educated to read and write Holy Scripture needed perseverance and enthusiasm that the lay poor usually would not demonstrate or could not afford despite the possibilities literacy could offer. The monastic and ascetic life that was demanded in return for education made this deal less appealing. Harris thinks that ordinary Christians were encouraged to read scripture for themselves but literacy would not occur in the social classes that were normally illiterate.[86]

Conclusion

Since understanding Koriwn's work depends on analyzing the statements that create his language, it is important to be aware of the way he represented and narrated the events that led to the creation of the Armenian alphabet. The world of Late Antiquity, which Koriwn belonged to, offered something new to men like him: an intellectual universe. Peter Brown explains how a Christian man found the concept of "God of the Universe" appealing, since through it the whole universe was explained to him. Men like Augustine, John Chrysostom, Basil of Caesarea, and Symeon Stylites who believed that Christianity could provide an intellectual universe, and that through belief the unknown world would make sense, marked the world of Late Antiquity.[87] He adds that the need to receive a divine blessing from the "One God," a belief that encouraged men like Maštoc' to act as "servants" of this "One God" and depend on the supernatural for guidance and direction, was the "new mood" of Late Antiquity.[88] Koriwn believed that by the grace of the

[86] Harris, *Ancient Literacy,* 315.

[87] For more on the emergence of holy men in Late Antiquity read Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61(1971).

[88] Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61(1971), 52.

Armenian alphabet, a door would open for Armenians that would become a point of entry to a bigger, more sensible world. The moment Armenians understood this "Biblical world," the knowledge of the past and the future would be revealed to them. Koriwn elaborated on the sacredness of Armenian alphabet. The emphasis was on the importance of the written word for the Christianization of Armenia, which justified the force placed behind the standardization of the language.

CHAPTER IV-Attempts for Religious Unity and its Aftermath

In this chapter, many of the issues forming the central focus of previous chapters will reemerge. The coercive force adopted by Yazdgerd II (r. 439-57) was meant to bring the peoples of Southern Caucasia, especially the Armenians, into an alliance; however, each stage of his plans created a reaction among them. Yazdgerd II devised tactics such as imposing excessive taxation,[1] forced conversion of the Armenian nobles, and sending magi to instruct the Armenians in the Mazdyasnian religion. The backlash of some Armenian laity and members of various ecclesiastical ranks against those activities was viewed as an offense to the King of Kings, who already doubted the Armenians' loyalty. Eventually Yazdgerd sent his troops to confront the rebellious Armenians, defeating the Armenian troops under Vardan Mamikonean and taking hostage the rest of the army that included many nobles and some bishops.

A few years after the Battle of Avarayr in 451, the Sasanian troops experienced a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Hephthalites on their eastern frontier. I argue that it was in fact this latter war in the East that led to the persecution of the Armenian prisoners from the war of 451, the mass punishment of the magi, and retributions against Christians in Mesopotamia, including bishops and the heads of respected Iranian families who had converted to Christianity. Within a year, according to post-Sasanian Rabbinical sources, Yazdgerd II ordered the

[1] Double taxation of the Christians executed by Shapur II in the third century was repeated in the fifth century by the order of Yazdgerd II (r. 439-57). This time it was forced on Armenians. For the Armenians, this was understood as a means to pressure them into converting to Zoroastrianism. The same issue was raised in the *Martyrdom of Simeon bar Ṣabba'e* addressed in chapter one.

abrogation of the Sabbath and imposed further hardships on the Jewish population of the empire.[2]

Drawing on scholarship of religious violence in Late Antiquity, especially the work of Michael Gaddis,[3] I will revisit the portrayal of the events that led to the Battle ofAvarayr and its aftermath. Unfortunately, other than the Armenian sources, there is no comprehensive treatment of the war between the Armenian nobles and the Sasanian army. Łazar P‘arpec‘i’s history written by order of Vahan Mamikonean, the general and the *marzpan* of Armenia, is our most reliable work. By the time the book was written (early sixth century), Vahan was already the leading figure of the noble family of Mamikoneans; thus, the book may be read as a tribute to that family.[4] Łazar places his book after the work of Agatangełos, which was devoted to the conversion of Armenia to Christianity, and after that of P‘awstos Buzand, which relates the history of Greater Armenia from the early fourth century until its division in 387.

The other source, the *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, was written by Ełiše. In seven sections, the account describes the rebellion of Vardan against Yazdgerd II, his defeat at Avarayr in 450-451, and the outcome of the battle for the Armenian noble families and people. The *History of Vardan and the Armenian War* is believed to be the work of an author no later than the sixth century. Ełiše molds the events of the battle of Avarayr a to fit the genre of martyrology, emphasizing that the account depends on eyewitness testimony (a typical

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[2] Jacob Neusner, “Jews in Iran.” In *The Cambridge History of Iran: Seleucid Parthian*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1983. Chapter 3:909–23, doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521246934.009.

[3] Michal Gaddis, “*There is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ”: Religion Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[4] The landholding family of Mamikonean controlled northwestern province of Tayk‘ and the southwestern region of Tarawn. Due to the marriage of Hamazasp Mamikonean with the only daughter of Sahak, the patriarch of Armenia, the family also held the patriarchal estates of Bagrewand, Daranalik‘, and Ekełeac‘in the west. They were the greatest landholders in the realm of Armenia. More importantly Mamikoneans were commander-in-chief (*sparapet*) of the entire Armenian army.

martyrological claim). Peter Cowe argues that Ełiše's work is a "spiritualizing commentary" on the *History* of Łazar. On this reading, Ełiše portrays events as representing an outworking of divine providence rewarding "holy love" and punishing "vainglory."[5] Cowe then points out that in his introduction the author indicates that his work belongs to the genre of ban (discourse) more conducive to philosophical or theological disquisition rather than history per se.[6]

To better understand the policies of the Sasanian king within the empire I have reexamined the *History of Karka de Beth Slouk* (Kirkuk in modern Iraq). Th*at work* has not yet been thoroughly studied by Syriac scholars, therefore it is difficult to draw any further conclusions without knowing the circumstances of its composition. The narrative, however, encourages martyrdom and zealous adherence to doing the will of God and never falling into apostasy. The message of the hagiography is that even if apostasy guarantees life and prosperity, it is better to be killed in the name of God than worship the sun. The date that the account records is problematic. It asserts that Yazdgerd II went against the "Huns" in the eighth year of his reign, and then describes the aftermath of the defeat. Even though the date given does not match the time Yazdgerd II's great war against the "Huns" occurred, the text nevertheless describes events after the war, which is valuable for this study. The Armenian accounts which were written closer to the events point to the sixteenth year after the king's ascent, which would bring us to the year 454 CE.

Arabic sources on Yazdgerd II's reign are scarce. Tabari sums up his reign by commenting that after his ascent, the king reassured the great men and nobles of the empire that

[5] Peter Cowe, "Eliše's 'Armenian War' as Metaphor for the Spiritual Life," in *From Byzantium to Iran: Armenian Studies in Honour of Nina G. Garsoïan*, eds. Nina Garsoïan, Jean-Pierre Mahé, and Robert W. Thomson (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1997).

[6] Ibid.

he would deal with them in the same manner as his father, Bahrām Gor. He assigned his father's trusted general Mehr-Narseh, son of Burazahas, as his *vizir*. Tabari adds that Yazdgerd II humbled his enemies but behaved with gentleness and benevolence to his subjects and troops.[7] Immediately after this short passage, Tabari turns to the rivalry between Yazdgerd II's two sons, Homizd and Peroz.

As discussed in chapter two, Yazdgerd I had kept the peace between the two empires, but his son, Bahrām Gor, opened hostilities with the Romans. In 421 Mehr-Narseh, the general of the Sasanian army, had led his forces against the army of Theodosius II. That war ended quickly, without an exchange of territory. A peace treaty was signed that gave freedom of religion to practice Christianity in the Sasanian Empire, the same permission was given to Zoroastrians who lived in the Roman Empire.[8]

Yazdgerd II came to power in 439 as the son of Bahrām Gor (r. 420-438) and grandson of Yazdgerd I (r. 399-420). During his reign, ever-increasing onslaughts of Hephthalites forced the king to pay attention to his eastern frontiers. He even settled in Vrkan, modern Gurgan, in order to acquire better control of the East.[9] On his coins Yazdgerd II used the title of *kdy.* The full title is *mzdysn bgy kdy* "The Mazda- worshipping majesty, the Keyanids."[10] The title could be a reflection of the king's desire to be associated with the Keyanids, a mythical Avestan dynasty.[11]

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[7] Tabari, 106-7.

[8] Both Malalas and Procopius report on the peace and agree that King Bahrām's desire to make peace quickly could be due to the trouble in the eastern frontiers of the empire caused by the rise of the Hephthalites. See John Malalas XIV.23; Procopius, *The Persian Wars 1. 2*. 11-13. See Dignas and Winter, *Roma and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 137.

[9] Dignas and Winter, *Roma and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 36.

[10] Robert Göbl, "Sasanian Coins," in *The Cambridge History of Iran III/1*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1983), 330.

[11] Touraj Daryaee, "Yazdeged II," *Encyclopædia Iranica*. available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/yazdegerd-ii

More recent studies by Khodadad Rezakhani, however, have shown that the title could have been a borrowing from the last Kushano-Sasanian ruler, a title known to the eastern dynasties such as Kidarites.[12] The Hephthalites borrowed the title from the Kidarites and revived it and used as their own.[13] Yazdgerd II, therefore, was responding to the increasing power of Hephthalites by assuming their royal title.

Yazdgerd II's war against the Romans, who were under military pressure after losing Carthage to the Vandals, resulted in an agreement by which the Romans paid the Sasanians to defend the Caucasus, securing their frontiers from further wars.[14]According to Ełiše, it was Yazdgerd II's military success against Theodosius II that encouraged the king to listen to the magi and bring all the people of his empire to one faith.[15]

Previously, credit for creating a commonwealth by incorporating cultural and religious unity over vast areas was restricted to the Romano-Byzantine and (later) Islamic empires.[16] It was generally thought that the Sasanians were incapable of such a unifying project because of their religious exclusivism: Zoroaster remained a national prophet and Mazdaism a religion for Iranians only. In *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* for example, Garth Fowden presents Islam as the paradigmatic successful empire. In Islam, religious and political authority were combined in a single state, much like what Christianity allowed

[12] Khodadad Rezakhani, *ReOrienting the Sasanians: East Iran in Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 97.

[13] Frantz Grenet, "Regional Interaction in Central Asia and North-West India, in the Kidarite and Hephthalites Period," *in Indo-Iranian Languages and Peopl*e, ed. Nicholas Sims-Williams (London, 2002), 203-224.

[14] Michael Dodgeon, Geoffrey Greatrex, and Samuel Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 363-628* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), 44.

[15] Ełiše, 62.

[16] Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: University Press, 1993), 33.

Constantine and other Roman emperors to do; however, the same practice failed in the Sasanian Empire because Sasanian kings promoted neither a monotheistic nor a universalist religion. He adds that while the Sasanians were universalist on a political level, on the cultural and religious levels they were not missionary, even though they persecuted non-Mazdian groups from time to time.[17]

I disagree with Fowden's description of Zoroastrianism as non-missionary and non-monotheistic. Neither of these criteria were true for the Sasanians' interpretation of Zoroastrianism, and even if these criteria were applicable to the faith, they were not the cause behind Yazdgerd's failure to convert the empire into a commonwealth.

First, I argue against the idea that monotheistic religion is a necessity for this pursuit. Before Yazdgerd II, in the Roman Empire, Julian the Apostate tried and failed to reverse the tide of Christianity by forcing the empire to become pagan. Julian's approach to paganism, a non-monotheistic and non-missionary belief system, was in effect missionary.[18] Much like Julian, who tried to copy the most successful features of the Christian priesthood in his own "Church," Yazdgerd II tried to incorporate the magi to transform the empire into a land blessed by the glory of Ahura-Mazda, hence sending them to educate the wives of the nobles and the young members of their families.[19]

The reason for the failure to convert the empire, as Gherardo Gnoli states, could have been that Sasanian Zoroastrianism was simply unfit to address the spiritual anxieties present at that specific period of time. With its ritualistic approach, Zoroastrianism was a religion not much

[17] Ibid.

[18] Glen Warren Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 79-94.

[19] Łazar, 102-15. Ełiše, 80-2.

inclined toward the devotional and mystical spirit of Late Antiquity; Christianity, however, had that appeal. Numerous conversions to Manichaeism and Christianity signaled the barrenness of the faith that the Sasanian Empire was promoting.[20]

From the many references to Yazdgerd II's mindset in Łazar's *History,* one can conclude that the king's pretext for bringing Armenians into the Good Religion was his special concern for the salvation of the "souls" of all of his subjects (p*ʻrkowtʻiwn amenecʻown hogwocʻ*). Furthermore, the king's actions were based on the idea that converting Armenians could help create a united Sasanian empire, a project with administrative and cultural aspects. This project would build an invincible empire against Byzantium, undivided by religion. If we can trust Łazar's account, the king's goal was, as Mehr-Narseh, his grand general (*wuzurgfarmnādār*), articulates:

> Now if you render them familiar with our religion, and they were to accept it and be able to recognize that up to then they were in error but now were on the right road, then indeed they would love you and the land of Aryans, and would reject and draw away from the emperor and his religion and empire. Thenceforth their land would be in close friendship and unity with ours. And when the Armenians are intimate with us, then the Georgians and Albanians will be ours too. [21]

The reasons behind the acts of religious devotees, be they powerful kings or vulnerable bishops, cannot be comprehended without understanding their worldview. Even without direct evidence in contemporaneous Zoroastrian religious accounts for the king's behavior, one can see the foundations of Yazdgerd's worldview within Zoroastrianism. Łazar does not present the king's initial motive as vengeance or anger; rather he listened to the magi's advice about his paternalistic responsibility for the peoples of Southern Caucasia. The edict sent on behalf of

[20] Gherardo Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran: An Essay on its Origin* (Rome: Istituto italiano per ilmedio ed estremo Oriente, 1989), 158.

[21] Łazar, 79.

Yazdgerd II to Armenia shows the king's anxiety about Armenians not worshiping the *yazdans*. They were not only depriving themselves of divine benefits, but their acts of disobedience added further to the evil in the universe and amounted to a detriment to the whole world. To "deflect malediction" from the people of Armenia, Yazdgerd II was advised by his magi and other Aryan nobility to send the following edict:

> I do not know whether it was because of other great preoccupations or because they did not consider such weighty and significant matter, that the earlier kings who were my predecessors before me and occupied this royal throne paid no heed to this business. But I have considered and have been informed by the magi and other wise and great men of this Aryan land, that as we enjoy the profits and subjection of those who are under our authority, so we must even more care for and ensure the salvation and safety of all their souls (*pʻrkowtʻiwn ew ənd giwt amenecʻown hogwocʻ hogal ew gtanel*). And if we are unexpectedly discovered to be remiss in such a great responsibility, we have been informed by our religion that we shall suffer severe punishment from gods. Now if we were to be punished for not warning any one of you, you should be even more fearful that if you are slothful with regard to each one's spiritual welfare you will be punished by us and the gods. Therefore, we have written down our infallible and just religion and have had it brought to you. And we wish that as you are a useful country and dear to us, you should study and accept our just and balanced religion and not serve that religion which—it is clear to all of us—is false and profitless. [22]

Saving the soul, *bōzišn ī ruwān* or *bōxtārīh ī ruwān*, can ineptly be translated as salvation.[23] In the Old *Avesta*, human bodies are constituted from two main parts: "bones" (*ast*) and life breath (*ushtāna*). Few aspects of the body are discussed in the *Avesta*, but it is appropriate to say that each man has three souls: *farwashi*-pre(existing)-soul; *urwan* or (Pahlavi *ruwan)*, -breath-soul, and daēnā Pahlavi (den)-vision soul. At death the (breath-)soul, *ruwan,* leaves the body and goes to the beyond to be judged.[24] The daēnā allows the man to see the world of thought. Daēnā appears to man at death in the form of a woman representing one's thoughts,

[22] Łazar, 80.

[23] In Christianity God would forgive the sins of the wrongdoers by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God. In Zoroastrianism, salvation is not given if humans fail in the final judgment and their evil deeds prove heavier than their good ones; their judgment is final.

[24] Prods Oktor Skjaervo, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, Chapter 6.

words, and deeds in life. She takes the soul to the Ford of Accounting (*Chinwad* bridge). There the soul's thoughts and deeds are weighed on a balance. If the good deeds are heavier, the soul will cross the bridge, which widens to allow it to pass, and proceed to the Best Existence (*pahlom axwān)*, becoming "one with Order." If the bad deeds are heavier, the bridge becomes narrow as a razor, and the soul plummets to hell, becoming the guest of the "House of the Lie."[25]

The desire to bring the world into one religion is mentioned in the post-Sasanian *Dēnkard* 3.172 as Zoroaster's initial mission. If all humans confess the Good Religion (*Wehdēn)*, evil will be destroyed and entire felicity (*hamāg xwārīh)* will reign on earth.

> Dadar [the Creator] desires every man to have faith in the good religion and gives commands regarding it. For; if men, in this world, put faith in the good religion they will be able to diminish the Blemish-Giver. And if they be not connected with the good religion they will not be able to live (in this world), without (being exposed to) danger, in purity and with every happiness. Superior to those who make inquiries regarding religion with pleasure are those persons who, having a knowledge of the good religion, live with sincere faith in it.

If every man has faith, much benefit will accrue to the Creator, but a sinful man would be a source of harm. One can argue that the Good Religion was not exclusive to Iranians but, as Marco Frenchkowski explains, Zoroastrian revelation is for "all humans."[26]According to *Dēnkard* 5.31.14:

> 14. (1) And the Creator Ohrmazd sent this religion (for) its proclamation not only in the country of Iran, but in the whole world, (and) among all races (of mankind), and has caused (it) to be propagated in the entire world whatever (there were) purities and (even) wherever (there were) impurities; spiritually through (its) surpassing philosophy and truthful thoughts and truthful words, and materially through truthful deeds. (2) In each (of those countries and tribes) it (became) so current that even as to him who was the most

[25] *Mēnōg ī Xrad* 86-On Death. *Bundahisšn* 30-On the Chinwad Bridge and Souls of Departed, *Yasna* 49.

[26] Marco Frenchkowski, "Christianity," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, eds. Michael Stausberg and Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 473.

> skeptical person this religion with (its) sublime essentials, became current with all purities extraordinarily in that life of corruption. [27]

The work is a post-Sasanian collection of Zoroastrian thought. It reflects the mindset of Zoroastrian authorities and their anxieties and hopes for the future of the faith and its believers after the coming of Islam. Nevertheless, one can see that according to the *Dēnkard*, the individual human is not separated from the universe; and Zoroastrianism is not designed for Iranians only, but for everyone living in the universe. Therefore, humans were demanded to actively participate in promoting Ahura Mazda's cosmological act.

In Zoroastrian cosmology, Ahura Mazda, the all-knowing Lord, with the aid of other deities, as well as the humans who offer him sacrifices, acts as the guardian of the cosmic Order. Other deities and evil beings, among them the agents of the "Lie", the cosmic deception, who reject the supremacy of Ahura Mazda, are agents of Chaos.[28] A man can make the choice to be on the side of Order or Chaos. After the decision is made, man and god become "linked by bonds of mutual possession." The relationship is not terminated after the first sacrifice: an unending mutual gift-giving between Ahura Mazda and his followers commences and continues until the end of time and the triumph of the Good.[29] It is with the constant aid of a sacrificing human that Ahura Mazda can establish the cosmic Order and overcome the forces of darkness and Evil. According to Zoroastrian ethics, the individual human is thus the most important component in the battle between good and evil. The salvation of individual humans is entirely interdependent with the salvation of the world as a whole.

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[27] *Dēnkard V*, *Le cinquième livre du Dēnkard: Transciption, traduction et commentaire ,* ed. and trans. Jaleh Amouzgar and Ahmad Tafazzoli (Paris: Association pour avancement des études iraniennes, 2000), 31.14.

[28] Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "TAHĀDĪ: Gift, Debts, and Counter-Gifts in the Ancient Zoroastrian Ritual," in *Classical Arabic Humanities in Their Own Term*, eds. R. Gruendler and Michael Cooperson (New York: Brill, 2008), 495.

[29] Ibid., 497.

Armenian accounts display the zeal with which Yazdgerd II endeavored to encourage the cause of Zoroastrianism. At each step, his actions caused an equally passionate response from some Armenian bishops and nobles, ultimately resulting in the nullification of Yazdgerd's attempt to introduce Zoroastrianism to the peoples of his empire. [30]

To convert the population of Greater Armenia to Zoroastrianism, Yazdgerd II did not use force initially. Each stage of his plan was calculated based on the reaction of the nobles and bishops there. Ełiše affirms that Yazdgerd II first imposed a heavy taxation on the Armenians, and replaced the governor with a Persian magus, hoping that driving the Armenians into poverty would compel them to convert.[31]

> He[Denshapuh] came at the royal command, bringing the great king's greetings, and made a census of the whole land of Armenia with soothing hypocrisy [as if] for the alleviation (*t'ołlut'iwn*) of taxes (harkk') and the lightning of the burden of the cavalry. Although outwardly he dissimulated, yet within his plans were revealed as evil.
> First: he cast the freedom of the church into slavery (the term "freedom" [azatut'iwn] here has the connotation of untaxed patrimony).
>
> Second: he included in the same census the Christian monks living in monasteries.
>
> Third: he increased the tax burden on the country.
>
> Fourth: by slander he pitted the nobility against each other, and caused dissension *(Xrovut'iwn*) in every family. He did all this in the hope of breaking their unity, scattering the clergy (uxt: it is not always clear from the context whether the meaning "covenant" or the narrower meaning "clergy" is intended) of the church, driving away the monks, and wearing out the peasants *(šinakank'*), so that in their great poverty they might unwillingly turn to the religion of the magi.[32]

Ełiše claims the excessive taxation did not cause any harm to Armenians since it did not challenge the Church's freedom. Afterwards, the king summoned the heads of the Armenian

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[30] Ełiše, 102, Łazar, 80, P. Bedjan ed., *Acta Martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (Leipzig, 1891) 2.522-3 [History of Karka de Beth Slouk in AMS 2.507-35]; Oskar Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer Bibliothek der Kirchenväter 22* (Kemten and Munich, 1915) 179-87 [BHO 705]

[31] Ełiše, 76.

[32] Ibid.

noble families and forced them to convert. This episode is recorded with different emphasis in the Armenian sources: while Łazar elevates the place of Vardan Mamikonean among the nobles and elaborates on his piety and greater resistance, Ełiše is concerned with the Holy Covenant and the pact and unity between the families. Encountering the Armenian nobles, Yazdgerd II reproaches them and says that he cannot even accept their taxes:

> I consider it harm to receive into the royal treasury the tribute of your land, and your valiant deeds are useless. For you have ignorantly gone astray from our true religion and have dishonored the gods; you have killed fire and defiled water, you have buried the dead on the ground and corrupted the earth, and by not performing pious duties you strengthen Haraman, (Ahriman)...[33]

The religious aspect of taxation is once again on display here. The king could not accept taxes that were not paid with good intention and belief in the Good Religion. As I explained in chapter one, to pay one's taxes was more than just paying one's fiscal dues: it was to demonstrate loyalty and submission. While the king is busy with taxes, the gods value the salvation of souls. [34] Taxes to the king were like sacrifices to the gods.

In addition, the king was unhappy that the Armenian nobles ignored humans' two main duties according to Zoroastrianism—that is, avoiding death and impurity and preserving life by engaging in agriculture and producing offspring—since both were in serious opposition to the worldview of Christianity. Yazdgerd II complains that Armenians "do not regularly approach their wives," hence the "demons" have great joy when they disregard or do not observe other rituals of the faith.[35]

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[33] Ełiše, 97.

[34] Łazar, 79.

[35] Ibid.

Yazdgerd II was advised by either the magi or Mehr-Narseh that he would be acting with the best of motives if he could convert the Christians of Armenia to Zoroastrianism. The process of bringing the people to the "right" path was a task that had long been neglected by Sasanian kings. Mehr-Narseh reminded the king that "heaps of gifts and honor from the gods" are in order for his good deed, as an ample warrant to reassure him of his righteousness. Furthermore, according to Łazar, Mehr-Narseh said that, if left on their own, the souls of these people will perish, therefore reassuring the king that a forced conversion was not motivated by selfish reasons or for the profit of the empire, but by genuine concern for the greater good of his subjects, regardless of whether or not they appreciated it.

Based on his authority and responsibility, Yazdgerd II was giving Armenians a chance to be a force of good in the world, to help strengthen the Order in the universe; however, he was not rewarded with a display of obedience or even a slight sign of appreciation from his subjects. The Armenian bishops did not feel bound by this transaction. Therefore, they sent a letter to Yazdgerd II as follows:

> As for the salvation or destruction of our souls, let that concern not trouble you at all. And as for the gifts and punishments you fear from your gods on account of our souls, as you explained, any such advantages or punishments as fall from God will fall upon our own selves and souls. You need only keep silent about these matters and excuse us. For as it is impossible for human nature to change the providence of heaven to a different view, so it is impossible for us, who from the beginning have been instructed and confirmed in this religion, to obey and accept such a command as yours-which we cannot even bear to hear mentioned, for we wish to have nothing to do with it. [36]

There was a divergence between the bishops' response and the more practical and accommodating manner by which the nobles handled the issue of conversion. To refer to the

[36] Ibid., 84.

words of Marcel Mauss, as Yazdgerd II felt "the obligation to give gifts,"[37] to the Armenian nobles. The nobles were in turn obliged to receive the gift, which is equally constraining.[38] After long internal negotiations, the nobles decided to deceive Yazdgerd II into believing that they had accepted his request. Yazdgerd II threatens the nobles that, if they continue in the same mind and in their false religion, he would disregard their services and annihilate them, along with their wives, children, and nation. Therefore, they went to the "house of ashes" and bent their heads according to Zoroastrian tradition. Łazar explains that the nobles' fake conversion was necessary because otherwise they would not be allowed to return to their countries. Following is a scene from the nobles' departure:

When the Persian king and all the court magnates and magi saw this, in great joy they offered various oblations to the gods. On that day they celebrated a great and joyous festival, reckoning that day to mark the unshakeable reestablishment of their kingdom and that from then on they would live in peace, no longer frightened of their enemies. They dressed and adorned in royal garments the magnates and nobles of the three countries…and showered on them all numerous and varied gifts and honors, villages and estates, according to each one's need; then they dismissed them and sent them back in haste to each one's country. They dispatched with them a host of false teachers, whom they called magi. [39]

The Sasanian King, based on the act of gift-exchange that was supposed to create a bond between himself and the nobles, felt assured of their pact. Bonds made by gift-exchange are not limited to Ahura Mazda and humans, but are reflected in the deals, pacts, and contracts between

[37] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Wilfred Douglas Halls (London: Routledge, 1990), 39.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Łazar, 93.

men. In *Videvdad* IV, such agreements are divided into six categories. These categories depend on the level of initial security offered, starting with a mere verbal agreement, then a handshake, then by some number of sheep; the fourth type is a contract based on an ox, the fifth based on a number of men, and the sixth based on an number of fields (property). The penalty for breaking each of these contracts (Avestan- Mithra.druj-, Middle Persian- Mehr--druzih) was to pay the amount required by higher category of contract; however, breaching these agreements even if they were contracted with foreigners and unbelievers was an offense that not only affected the initial infringer of the contract, but could be extended to his progeny. Indeed, his soul was held responsible in the afterlife from six hundred years up to a thousand years, depending on the grade of the contract.

In the encounter scene, an agreement was made, a festival was held, and gifts such as estates and garments were given to the nobles to solidify the contract. The outcome of the encounter as far as the Sasanians were concerned was positive. From that moment on there would be peace and order in the kingdom and its enemies would be kept at bay. But, if we trust the Armenian sources, for the nobles, and especially for Vardan, the scene was understood as a desperate moment of deceit.

As Yazdgerd II tightened his grip on the nobles, he issued further instructions in support of his religious convictions, sending a group of magi back with the Armenian nobles to instruct the rest of the population in the Good Religion. In chapter three, I discussed the magi's mistreatment in Armenia. Suffice it to say here that teaching in Late Antiquity was not a secular act but a deeply religious matter, hence it is not surprising that the reaction to the magi's instruction was intense.

The panic and defiance which awaited the Armenian nobles on their return is attested in Łazar, a testimony to the severity of the act of apostasy:

> But now one could hear the sound of weeping and the sound of lamentation, the cry of mourning and the noise of wailing. Anxious children fled from their fathers' bosoms in consternation, thinking them transformed; and, not seeing the familiar figures, they were terrified. Looking steadfastly at the faces of their mothers, they saw them continually wailing and shedding torrents of tears. So the children too burst out weeping; no one was able to quiet them, neither nurse nor tutor. When those who had deceitfully and not in truth apostatized saw this, they immediately wished to arise and thrust a sword into themselves; they preferred not to live a moment longer than to see and endure such misery. [40]

Łazar indicates that the magi expected to instruct the nobles' wives, but the women did not even set eyes on them, nor allow their sons and daughters to go near them. The Armenian nobles would not eat bread with them, and eventually a number of them were killed by more zealous Christians in Zarehawan. Ełiše reports on the unifying force among the men and women of Armenia against the forced conversion when he speaks of "warriors" in the battle: "for all together put on the same armor and donned the same breastplate of faith in Christ's order."[41] According to Ełiše, those Armenians cast away gold and silver and any precious garments and adornments. They regarded themselves as dead corpses, and dug their own graves. The voices of minsters reading the divine Scripture never paused. In their devotion, the Armenians razed houses for fire-worship and cleared away all signs of idolatry.[42] They erected the salvific cross in place of the vain pagan elements, and installed deacons and priests in those places. Matters did not stop there. Ełiše reports that bishop Yovsēp' and many others, together with the nobles, sent a letter to Theodosius II asking for assistance. According to Łazar, some magi tried to inform

[40] Łazar, 95.

[41] Ełiše, 118. This imagery was in reference to a letter of Apostle Paul who used the concept in the tenth book of the New Testaments in Letter to the Ephesians. Ephesians 6:11: "Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." (King James Version)

[42]Ibid., 119.

Yazdgerd II about their situation, and warn him that the Armenians were preparing a rebellion. The desire to destroy pagan temples and hurt the magi Yazdgerd had sent did not remain unanswered. These were punishable acts. As we will see later in the chapter, Łewond, Sahak, and the chief-bishop Yosēp' were held responsible for those acts and had to pay for them.

Ełiše and Łazar both defended the war against the Persians and presented it as martyrdom, since the lapsed Christians were eager to clear their name from the deadly sin of apostasy. The authors present the idea that war with the Persians and martyrdom would undo the effects of the lapse. The oppositional mentality of some Armenian nobles and bishops, much like other bishops of Late Antiquity, was "grounded in Christianity's early experience as a marginalized and persecuted cult, [which] derived its legitimacy, authority and authenticity from the actual or perceived suffering of its spiritual role models."[43] It is important to give due weight to the impact of authors like Ełiše and Łazar elaborating on how great a sin apostasy is. This can explain why the Mamikonean family and nobles, who had stronger ties with the bishops and a more intense understanding of Christian piety, could not live with their sin and tried to efface it through rebellion and war against the Persians.

The Armenian sources time and again point out that the nobles and bishops were ready "for every contrivance of torments, torture, and even death at the king's order" but they were unwilling to worship the sun and fire. To no avail, king Yazdgerd II threatened the Armenian nobles that he would send them and the other Christians in his army into exile in cruel bondage to Sagestan (Sistan) through roadless parts. The few to survive the heat and the torments of the journey would be thrown into fortresses and inescapable prisons. To their country he would send

[43] Gaddis, *There is No Crime*, 6.

an infinite army with elephants, dispatching their wives and children to Khuzestan. Next he would destroy their churches and martyria, *vkayarank'*. [44]

Events before the war were presented as divine providence that would grant martyrdom to the soldiers and generals gathered around Vardan, loyal to the oath of the Covenant. Whether they killed or were killed, their intention was to bear witness to the faith. Łazar presents the zeal for martyrdom as the joy of joining Christ, the Bridegroom, in His heavenly feast, where the Armenian troops would feast with the angels.[45] Compared to the scene of encounter between the nobles of the three lands and Yazdgerd II, where the pact between the parties involved was celebrated in a great festival followed by numerous honors and gifts that included villages and estates, the banquet of Christ was enjoyed with a "frugal meal," which was the feast.

The army now enjoyed not only the bishops' and priests' moral support by praying for the soldiers' victory, but Łewond reminds them that "today bishops, priests and deacons, singers of psalms and readers of Scripture, each in his own canonical rank, like armed men ready for battle, wish to attack with you and smite the enemies of the truth. Even if they are killed, yet they are not afraid of that because they prefer to die rather than to kill." As this statement illustrates, the desire for martyrdom fueled the participation of the clergy. An attempt at martyrdom could establish a credential for these bishops by linking their source of holiness, which was more ascetic, to the holiness of a martyr. These bishops encouraged the general and soldiers to embark on a holy war, a battle against the army of Satan.[46] Battle against the Sasanian army was an appropriate answer to the shame they had to endure from the charge of apostasy.

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[44] Ełiše, 98.

[45] Ibid., 111.

[46] Ibid., 164.

By volunteering to wage war against the Persian army, the Mamikonean family together with their companions went down in history not as lapsed Christians but as martyrs and heroes who acted preemptively to prevent severe damage to Greater Armenia and its people. The scenes before the war, when Vardan Mamikonean and the priest Łewond awakened the Armenian army's religious zeal, were particularly moving. But before dealing with the war of 451, it is important to revisit how the bishops reacted to the change brought to Armenia by the "lapsed" Christian nobles. Their desire to be martyred was emphasized by the Armenian authors in order to set a future example for instances of lapse and severance from the Holy Covenant. Ideal Christian, even if they lapsed, would cleanse themselves from sin by generating their own martyrdom or by dying as heroes. Martyrdom in Christianity has its roots in Jewish piety and was inspired by the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV (173-164 BCE). The Maccabean narrative inspired many later hagiographical accounts. The heroes of the Maccabees were fighting to preserve their ancestral law and they were idealized as martyrs. They preferred to die rather than give in to the imperial command and sacrifice at an altar of idols. Statements about martyrdom and suffering can be found in the New Testament. Christians should confess, and, if needed, suffer for their faith. "Whoever shall confess before men, him will I confess before my Father which is in Heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I deny before my Father which is in Heaven" (Mt. 10: 32-33). Christ himself is the paragon of the persecuted prophet for any martyr. In hagiographies, Christ's Passion was often used as a model for the death of a martyr.

The nobles' death could not be considered martyrdom if the cause for their struggle was anything other than defending their faith. Łazar emphasizes the divine oath that could not be broken, yet hints that breaching the oath with the king was forgivable. The sin of apostasy would

be cleansed by martyrdom. Hence, the author states that before embarking on the war the nobles and commoners swore the following:

> You, Holy Father, maker of heaven and earth, and your only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the holy vivifying Spirit, the indivisible and inseparable unity of the Trinity, we confess to be creator of heaven and earth, of things visible and invisible…and we testify and confess you to be God of gods and lord of lords, God the expiator of our sins-we who have denied you and repented, who have transgressed and taken refuge in your mercy, who have fallen and been raised up. Receive us as the apostate son, we who have squandered and soiled the robe of holy baptism, whom you had adorned with the font of cleansing; in dissolute impiety, we have wallowed in the mire of apostasy like a herd of pigs.[47]

Being steadfast in proving their faith to God, after finishing their prayers many of the common soldiers (*ramik*) without their supervisors' order took the brazier (*krakaran)* and threw the fire into the water. At dawn they slew nine of the magi whom they had been guarding. From the manner these deeds were described by Łazar, it is obvious that even he tries to make these deeds appear as the impulsive acts of some soldiers without their generals' authorization. Eventually, after these events and prince of Siwinik' Vasak's betrayal, the battle between the leg of the expedition led by Vardan Mamikonean was defeated by the Persian army.

This Armenian rebellion resulted in the Persian Empire losing control of the "gate" near Caucasian Albania that kept the Hephthalite Huns from pouring into the Sasanian Empire. The gate, which was also known as Čol or the Caspian Gate, was located in the city of Darband (in Arabic Bāb al-Abwāb).[48] After the war of 451, Yazdgerd II gathered his troops and the Armenian prisoners and nobles to join his march against these Hephthalites. The king settled in Niwšapur, a city in the north east corner of the empire to be closer to the battle scene. The Syriac *History of*

[47] Łazar, 103. Lk. 15-21.

[48] Eric Ketenhoffen, "Darband," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, available on http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/darband-i-ancient-city

Karka de Beth Slouk [49]is an important witness confirming the Armenian sources' description of events after the war with the Hephthalites.

Ełiše confirms the account of the *History of Karka de Beth Slouk* that Yazdgerd II scattered many Christians of the Sasanian Empire with threats, imprisonment, torture, and confiscation of their possessions.[50] In *History of Karka*, Yazdgerd II goes to the land of Čol, and builds a city there called Šahrestan-i-Yazdgerd. According to Ełiše, Yazdgerd had previously gathered all the soldiers of the empire from Southern Caucasia and many parts of the empire to advance against the Hephthalites. After his humiliating defeat, the king decided to punish whomever he deemed responsible. The poison of his venom affected three major groups: 1) magi, who promised him the gods would be on his side, and that he would be invincible if he converted all his subjects to the One Good religion; 2) the Bishops in Armenia who urged and encouraged the nobles to act out of their Christian zeal and rebel against the king; and 3) the bishops and nobles in Mesopotamia whose loyalty was doubted.

According to Ełiše, the magi claimed that the defeat in the war resulted from failure to sacrifice to and gratify the gods, "who in anger were unwilling to assist the king" particularly since "the offenders of the gods were still alive."[51] The magi were referring to the chief-bishop of Armenia, Yosēp', Sahak, bishop of Rštuni and Łewond, who were imprisoned with some nobles in a fortress in Niwshapur. Mehr-Narseh kept them in prison while their interrogation was postponed until Yazdgerd II could hear their arguments, but the war in the east delayed the process. The magi had every reason to blame the Christians for failure in the campaign against

[49] *History of Karka de Beth Slouk and Its Martyrs,* in A*cta martyrum et sanctorum II,* ed. Paul Bedjan (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1891), 507-35; Oskar Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer Bibliothek der Kirchenväter* 22 (Kemten and Munich, 1915), 179-87.

[50] Ełiše, 62.

[51] Ełiše, 193-4.

the Huns/Hephthalites, since the king was looking for someone to hold accountable for the loss. According to the *History of Karka*, after the war, a great number of magi were castrated, during which process many of them died. Whoever survived the castration was placed in service of the king. [52]

According to the *History of Karka*, Yazdgerd then expelled many Christians from the army, since he believed that they were the cause of his defeat. Next, he sent TahmYazdgerd, a reliable magus, together with three other officials of the empire, to set up a station in Karka de Beth Slouk to deal with the Christians' situation. These officials were supposed to cover four Mesopotamian regions: Nisibis, Arzun (an area near Seerrt), Adiabene, and Bet Garmai.

First John, bishop of Karka de Beth Slouk, was imprisoned and segregated from his community. Then TahmYazdgerd gave orders to the soldiers to bring the Christians from neighboring regions to Karka for judgment, among whom were the heads of many respected families who, based on their names, were probably Zoroastrian converts. The Metropolitan of Arbel, the Metropolitian of Shargard or Bet Gramai, the bishop of Nuharda and Maalta, Johanna of Karka, and the bishops of Lashom, Mahoze der Arwan and Habat glal, and Dara near the little Zab, all arrived at Karka. TahmYazdgerd sat in a place called Bet Titta, and repeated Yazdgerd II's command to these Christians. To be forgiven, they had to either worship the sun, and honor the fire and water, or they would be tortured by sixteen elephants and crushed by them. Many chose to be martyred rather than to apostatize.

The Syriac and Armenian sources each engaged with their respective internal issues after referring to the war. The Syriac source is concerned with justification of Karka de Beth Slouk as the metropolitan, and continues the narrative to include the story of a young man who offered to

[52] *History of Karka*, Braun, 179.

take the blame for the Metropolitan of Bet Gramai if they agreed that Karka could become one of the metropolitans. [53] As for the Armenian sources, they take up the events that occurred after the war of 454 to deal with the persecution of the Armenian bishops who were taken with Yazdgerd II's army to the eastern borders. Łazar expands on the story about how these martyrs' relics were safeguarded by a certain Christian man from Khuzestan, etc.

The first round of interrogation of Armenian prisoners of war was begun by Mehr-Narseh, but it was left incomplete until after the battle. Łazar explains that the king set Denshapuh in charge of the second round of interrogation; he separated the bishops and priests and removed them from prison, leaving the Armenian nobles behind. Denshapuh addresses the ecclesiastics:

> You have committed innumerable evil deeds and are responsible for much damage to the Aryans. For if you had been the cause of the death of merely two, three persons, that would still be a serious matter and you would not be worthy of living- let alone [destroying] such a great country as is Armenia and causing so much blood to be shed there. Of all this you are guilty, and it was accomplished by your actions and advice.[54]

In addition to being responsible for destroying the fire-temples built in Armenia, extinguishing many "fires which the gods bestowed on the Aryan land to preserve it from evil and harmful events," these men also were accused of encouraging the killing of some of the magi sent to Armenia; but their gravest sin was deluding Vardan by their sorcery. Many times, these figures encouraged Vardan and other soldiers to kill or to die for their faith. The martyr's reward would be more than enough to pay for any other sin committed previously, including even their temporary fake apostasy. Martyrs were idealized as fighters in a supernatural combat.

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[53] After killing a great number of their population, the magi sent for the heads of the community, but neither the metropolitan of bet Garmi nor the bishops of Lashom, Mahoze, Harbgalal and village of Dara would yield. However, a young son of a widow said that if the fathers were terrified of death Karka would take their tortures from them. In the next synod held in 486 the rank of the bishop of Karka de Beth Slouk was metropolitan.

[54] Łazar, 146.

Łazar explains those men's point of view by pointing to the idea that personal annihilation was a form of sacrifice made to the altar of God. They accepted their punishment and welcomed their martyrdom. For instance, at the moment of Sahak's death he states: "Receive, Lord, this willing sacrifice whereby I have offered myself totally to you, and enroll me in the ranks of your holy soldiers.'[55] Yosēp' and Łewond uttered similar words as they were being martyred at the same time and in the same place. Other bishops and priests were accordingly killed. Denshapuh set some measures to prevent their bones being found or their place of martyrdom from being turned into a holy shrine.

The religious impulses of the empire with its emphasis on following the Good Religion and distinguishing between false and true loyalty based on religious inclination, meant the continual narrowing of its political vision. Imposing this worldview from the center fueled Christians' actions and inspired rhetoric and future acts of martyrdom. With their martyrdom, the Christians proved their faith was true and set their boundaries as a community of believers who would rather die than comply with the imperial order and apostatize. In his article "A Question of Faith? Persecution and Political Centralization in the Sasanian Empire of Yazdgerd II (438-457 CE)," McDonough, who has studied the outburst of persecution in the Sasanian Empire during the reign of Yazdgerd II (438-457), seeks to investigate the issue from the perspective of the Sasanian state. His objective is to achieve this without becoming entangled in the polemical Christian hagiographical narratives, a difficult task since these "polemical" accounts are our only sources. McDonough argues that the Sasanian king had to deal with both Christians in Armenia and in the Sasanian Empire, and with the Jews of Babylonia as a part of a "systematic centralization program," which was intended to gain the loyalty of non-magians. But matters got

[55] Ełiše, 224.

out of hand and ended in bloodshed and violence. In downplaying the Christian sources, McDonough misses what he calls the "true intention of Yazdgerd II."[56] Instead of ignoring the sources, it is important to come to terms with what they refer to as the real intention behind the hostilities of Yazdgerd II. Resorting to secular incentives and assuming that any action of the king was part of a "systematic centralization program" conceals many of the cultural and political intricacies of the Sasanian state.

As I have shown, there were two categories of power on display in our sources: religious zeal and passion emanating from the center -from the king and Mehr-Narseh-and from the periphery, from the overpowered Christian bishops of Greater Armenia. According to Gaddis, violence in powerless groups is usually displayed as devotion and zealous anger.[57] The problem with applying Gaddis' theory of violence to the conflicts in the Sasanian Empire is that, firstly, Christian zealots under the Sasanians felt even more justified in their zeal since they contrasted themselves with a "pagan" empire. Secondly, there is the assumption that there was room for tolerance in Zoroastrianism since it was not a missionary religion. However, as I have demonstrated, whenever necessary, Sasanian kings would tap into a religious discourse that portrayed themselves as agents of their gods, acting based on a righteous devotion, which justified punishing evildoers. As I have shown, every action of Yazdgerd II was met with a reaction from some of the Armenian bishops, and, as he was tightening his grip on religious issues in order to unite the Sasanian Empire, he was causing more dispersion and conflict among

[56] Scott McDonough, "A Question of Faith? Persecution and Political Centralization in the Sasanian Empire of Yazdgerd II (438-457 CE)," in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perspectives and Practices*, ed. Harold A. Drake, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 69-71.

[57] Ełiše, 7.

his subjects. For Yazdgerd II the idea that loyalty could be separated from religion would not have been comprehensible.

Yazdgerd II's death resulted in a dynastic war between his two older sons, Hormizd III (r. 457-9) and Peroz (r. 459-84). Peroz overcame his brother, but lost his life fighting against the Hephthilites. He did not manage to come to an agreement with the Armenian nobles, the majority of whom were still in rebellion. Łazar dedicates the last and longest part of his history to his patron, Vahan Mamikonean, whose revolt coincided with Peroz 's reign.

Vardan's rebellion in 451 jeopardized the family's hereditary position as *sparapet* of Armenia. All the Mamikonean family's male population was sent to the Sasanian court as hostages. Vardan's sons, like his nephew Vahan, were brought back by Ašuˇsay lord of Gugark'.

Vahan Mamikonean claimed that his family's status be restituted by the Sasanians. According to Łazar, by the 480s more people of "despicable character" were able to buy estates from the Persians by apostatizing from Christianity. The historian complains that those worthless princes were of unworthy and unknown ancestry and could not be compared to the sons of the Mamikonean martyrs, who were supported by the intercession of the holy blood of their ancestors.[58] Vahan apparently converted to Zoroastrianism after visiting Peroz' court. However, as the author explains, he subsequently repented of his conversion:

> He[Vahan] had no peace of mind all the time because of the ill repute of his apostasy, which like his martyred fathers he had performed as a pretense and not in truth, on his return from the court with even greater renown he was anxious lest perchance, being tricked into the glory of this world, he weaken, forget the fear of the world to come, and perish. Being thus continually distressed in his mind, he revealed his worry to his dearest friends, and ceaselessly prayed and sought from the Savior Christ that he would grant him an opportune occasion...[59]

[58] Łazar, 163.

[59] Ibid., 171.

The occasion was turbulence in Georgia, as Vaxt‘ang, king of Georgia, killed his bdeašx Vazgen. Vaxt’ang asked the Armenian nobles to join his revolt. The Armenian princes knew Vahan was in distress and anguish over his reputation due to the rumors about his conversion to Zoroastrianism. Łazar explains his desire for martyrdom was an occasion for redemption, hence he thought to himself:

This moment would be very favorable for salvation, both for us and for him, for him, to be free of the remorse of his mind, and for us, to escape the continuous doubts and perpetual afflictions to which we are subject from the exigency of suffocating envy...with the Georgians perhaps we may be able for a while to harass the Persians.[60]

Vahan eventually agreed with their proposal, hoping to secure his reputation as a Christian. Together with other Armenian princes, Vahan worshiped God, asked for the support of the holy martyr Gregory and all the saints, and the virtue of the Christ-loving Armenian martyrs, and the holy cross. After two years of battles and skirmishes both sides reached an impasse. The Persian army could not capture or defeat Vahan, and Vahan could not gain any significant victory against the Persians.

Eventually the death of Peroz in battle against the Hephthalites changed the situation. The rest of the *History* is mostly devoted to the negotiations between Bałaš, Peroz’ brother, who ascended the throne through the counsel of the Persian nobles and Vahan. Balāš, a man of moderate temperament, responded to the dire situation by finally acquiescing to the Armenian requests. Their requests were forwarded to king Bałaš who held another hearing in his court and learned about the demands in person. Vahan was granted the rank and title of *sparapet* of

[60] Ibid., 172.

Armenia. In return, king Bałaš asked for worthy service for the land of Aryans in return for his loyalty and honest concern for the land's welfare.[61]

In 484, by the above agreement at Nuarsak, Vahan Mamikonean, representative of the Armenian nobility, consented to return to the service of the King of Kings like his forefathers, if the king would not challenge the Armenians' loyalty because of their faith. Łazar does not shy away from delivering Vahan's words of gratitude to the king as follows:

> For you have forgiven our wrong, honored us with rank and titles; you have raised us up from the dead, and restored anew a land that had been prostrated and ruined, as you in godlike fashion resurrected me from death, raised me up, and stood me in your midst...[62]

This statement exhibits a quiet change of tone in the Armenian general's address to the Persian King. Later, at the recommendation of Andekan, who was the *marzban* of Armenia, the position of *marzban* was given to Vahan.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to reorient and integrate Armenian and Syriac sources to improve our understanding of Yazdgerd II's reign. I have shown how the king tried to blur the ideological lines that separated the empire, while the narratives from the Armenian side try to emphasize the rift between the Armenians and the Sasanians. The Sasanian king calculated that if the religious divide were overcome, the empire might be greatly advanced, especially on the military front.

The Armenians' response to Yazdgerd's plan differed enormously. The heads of the noble families were more eager to engage in practical negotiations with the Sasanian kings both in political and religious matters; however, some Armenian bishops had more extreme reactions

[61] Ibid., 237.

[62] Ibid.

to imperial interference, especially in religious matters. Those bishops actively promoted the contrast between themselves as 'pious Christians,' and the others as Sasanian, non-Christians. Some of them even engaged in various sacrilegious acts such as disrespecting the fire, destroying fire temples, and throwing stones at the magi.[63] Not all reaction to imperial involvement in Armenia were unsympathetic, but the bishops, who reacted more exceptionally were presented in the sources as the true ecclesiastical representatives of the Armenian people, while some Armenian nobles and other bishops who were more welcoming of the imperial orders are portrayed as "helpers of Satan" and "traitors."

Here, I have tried to make some sense of the chronology of events in the Syriac and Armenian sources, which reveal that Yazdgerd II's persecution actually occurred after the war. Secondly, I have shown that the king was in pursuit of a grand project to unite the Sasanian empire by means of one religion. The plan was executed in a series of staged events, each causing due reactions. The center's forcefulness was matched by the vehemence of a group of bishops and nobles. The final blow to counteract those bishops' zeal did not come right away, however, the king lost patience with their zealous behavior after losing the war with the Hephthalites. The bishops were held responsible because they encouraged the rebellion of the nobles who perished in the battle of 451.

The events that have been described in the works of the Armenian authors engaged heavily with the battle of Avarayr in 451. While the battle was important for the Armenian side, since it alienated the Armenian army from the Persians and drew a wedge between important noble families like the Mamikoneans and the Sasanian king, it was not as significant for the Sasanians as the war with Hephthalites. The latter wreaked havoc on the Sasanian army and

[63] Łazar, 221-3.

caused great anguish. Łazar engages with the war of 454, revealing its significance for Yazdgerd II and emphasizing the king's humiliation after his defeat, but he does not cover the full range of the king's venom, which affected the magi who pressed for an unattainable policy of unity over the empire, as well as, the bishops of Armenia and Mesopotamia whom the king found guilty of discouraging the nobles to join him in the battlefield.

EPILOGUE

The aim of this dissertation was to show how the peaceful years of Yazdgerd I's reign helped develop the ecclesiastical structure of the Church in Persia and the Church of Greater Armenia. Yazdgerd's reign was exceptional in both the internal and external politics of the empire. It was due to the tolerance that Yazdgerd showed towards the Christians of his realm and the efforts of Marutha of Mesopotamia that organization was introduced to the structural framework of the Christian communities in the empire. During the initial synods of 410 and 420, with the guidance of ecclesiastical representatives from the Roman Empire the bishops of Persia aligned their doctrine with the Nicaean creed. However, soon after Yazdgerd I's death, as his son, Bahram Gor, campaigned against Theodosius II 's army in 421, the bishops of the Sasanian Empire sensed that they should formally accommodate their position in regard to the Church of the Roman Empire to the king's policies. Accordingly, to distance themselves from the 'Western Fathers,' in a synod of Dadisho held in 424, the bishops declared their independence from the Roman Church.

Besides campaigning against Theodosius II, Bahram Gor's son Yazdgerd II had to deal with the attacks of the Hephthalites on the empire's eastern borders. The king's strategy was to tighten his grip over the four territories in the north-east; Greater Armenia, Iberia, Caucasian Albania, and Upper Mesopotamia. He demanded troops from these regions join the royal army and defend the pass located in the city of Čol, (Mid. Pers. Virōi-pahr, Arb. Bab al-Abwāb). According to Armenian and Syriac sources, before his campaign against the Hephthalites, Yazdgerd II followed the advice of the magi and his grand-commander, Mehr-Narseh, to unite

the Sasanian Empire around one cause by erasing the religious pluralism that separated the Christian regions from the imperial heartland. Nevertheless, in the late 450s the Sasanian army suffered a severe defeat at the hands of the Hephthalites. Armenian and Syriac historical and hagiographical accounts testify to the harsh treatment meted out to the nobles and bishops who hesitated to join the imperial forces and were therefore perceived as having caused the humiliating defeat. The same sources mention how the magi, too, became victims of the king's anger perhaps for their ill advice and their failure to execute the imperial plan.

Yazdgerd II's son Peroz continued the Hephthalite war until his eventual death on the battlefield. The next king, Peroz's brother Balāš, however, tried to reestablish peaceful relations with the Christian populations of those regions. First, he made peace with Vahan Mamikonean and allowed Christianity to be practiced in Greater Armenia by his edict in Nuarsak in 485. Next, after a hiatus of four decades, the Church of the East held two synods in Persia within two years: in 484 in Beth Lapat and in 486 in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. At those synods, the Church formally accepted the doctrine and teaching of Theodore of Mopsuestia. This stand further exacerbated the religious breach with the Church of the Roman Empire. At the same time, perhaps it improved the Church's status in the eyes of the Sasanian authorities who were assured of the loyalty of the Christians of the empire. Over the course of the fifth and sixth centuries most synods of the Church of the East profess the Diophysite Christology expounded in the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia.

Kavad (r. 488-497, 499-531 CE) seized the throne from his uncle Balāš in 488 and displayed tolerance toward the Christians. After his father Peroz's unsuccessful campaign the empire had to pay tribute to the Hephthalites, an obligation that passed to Kavad, who was kept hostage with them until the debt was paid. Kavad eventually escaped, but remained indebted to

the Hephthalites. It was during his reign that the imperial administration underwent a series of changes. Parvaneh Pourshariati argues that the irrational attempts of Kavad and Khusrow I (531-579 CE) broke apart the terms of the confederacy among the Parthian and Sasanian families.[1] She adds that centralizing the empire and strengthening the king's power by those reforms induced the Parthian families to rebel and shook the polity over the late sixth century. Thereafter the days of the empire were numbered.[2]

Pourshariati's scholarship correctly points out that the process of centralization started under Kavad and Khusrow I, not under Yazdgerd I. Her work thus helps further our understanding of the dynamics of the empire. Previously, many scholars followed the paradigm set by the studies of Arthur Christensen whose work has been the authoritative voice on the Sasanian Empire. An expanded version of Christensen's earlier work written in 1907 was published under the title *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* in 1936.[3] It was Christensen who established this view that the Sasanians created a centralized structure that overcame the 'weak' decentralized Parthians. The idea of a powerful king who had command over his subjects and the military was appealing to the early twentieth-century Danish historian, who was apparently impressed by the idea of the nation-state which he considered more advanced in its political organization.[4]

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[1] Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: the Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (IB Tauris, 2017), 90-9.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Arthur Christensen, *L'Iran Sous Les Sassanides* (Copenhagen, 1936).

[4] Arthur Christensen, *Politics and Crowd-morality: A Study in the Philosophy of Politics,* tr. A. Cecil Curtis (London: Williams and Norgate, 1915), 260.

Christensen's theory of a centralized Sasanian Empire has marked much of the more recent scholarship on the situation of Christian communities in the Sasanian empire. Building on his work and assuming that centralization is equivalent to the proper functioning of the state, Scott McDonough argues that beginning from in the fifth century the Sasanian King Yazdegerd I pursued the creation of centralized Christian institutions to function as the king's power base in order to counterbalance the increasing power of the magi and nobility.[5]

The image of the bishop in the Sasanian Empire as the head of a Christian community with pragmatic functions was created by applying the situation in the Roman Empire to the situation in Persia. Expanding on McDonough's work, later scholars have concluded that the administration of the Sasanian state became increasingly centralized precisely because of the authority gained by Christian bishops.[6] Unfortunately, there are not enough sources to prove firstly, that such a centralization occurred under Yazdgerd I, and second that bishops actually functioned as that kind of power base in the empire. Rather, the impression deriving from extant sources is that imperial policy-making depended on the decisions of the noble families and, on occasion, on the advice of the magi.

Pourshariati states that as long as the empire was decentralized and subsisted through the strong alliance of different families, the kingship was protected. The tax reform Kavad initiated was executed by his son Khusrow I (531-579 CE), who levied taxes on the estates of numerous nobles. However, the latter refused to participate in what they perceived as a debt resulting from Peroz's wrong decision to go to war with the Hephthalites against their better judgment.[7] In the

[5] McDonough, "Power by Negotiation."

[6] See Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, 39; Payne, *State of Mixture*, 22.

[7] Łazar, 214. "Peroz was intending to march against the Hephthalites. He formed the plan alone and asked no other man, worthy or unworthy…Every mouth openly complained."

military, an army with fixed wages was organized directly under the king's command. In the sphere of provincial organization, sigillographic data indicate that the command structure was altered by dividing the empire into four sections under a *sparabet* acting under the King's direct command.[8] Khosrow I lost his legitimacy by introducing those policies which upset the balance and collaboration between the Pahlav and Parsig families.[9] In dividing the realm into four regions, the king uprooted some of those dynasties from their traditional territories, adding to that was the heavy taxation that was demanded from these nobles families who were previously exempt from taxes. [10]

Disaffection among the nobility provoked an insurgency under Khosrow I's son Hormizd IV (r. 579-90 CE) led by Bahram Čobin of the Mihran family, a chief commander of the Sasanian army. That was the first time in the history of the Sasanian state that the dynasty's legitimacy was questioned by a Parthian family. The lack of aristocratic support is evident from the fact that Khosrow I's grandson Khosrow II, son of Hormizd IV, had to regain the throne from Bahram Čobin not by relying on the families of the empire but by appealing to the Roman Emperor Maurice (582-602 CE). In 591 the latter signed a pact providing the young king with troops and support to quash the rebellion. As a token of his gratitude, Khosrow II then ceded a large part of Greater Armenia and Iberia to Maurice in the same year.

Since the 430s the priority in Greater Armenia theologically had been to maintain a clear opposition to Nestorianism. This was the purpose of the synods of 505 and 555 in Dvin in light

[8] Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, 90-9.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

of the orthodoxy of the Council of Ephesus.[11] However, now Maurice now applied standard Byzantine practice in enforcing Chalcedonian Christology in the area under his control and sent Armenian troops to fight in the Balkans, where many of them perished. To promote this aim he called a Council of Union and installed a Chalcedonian anti-catholicos at Awan so that the two catholicoi had to face each other across the Persian border, creating religious schism and antagonism in Armenia.

As the result of Byzantine oppression, Armenian noble families continued to rebel and relocate to the Persian side. Among them the career of Smbat Bagratuni is worth mentioning since he became favorable to the king of kings Khosrow II. Thanks to his service to Khosrow, Smbat became *marzban* of Armenia and was then able to press for a new synod to be assembled at Dvin in 607. Benefiting from the king's support, the Church of Armenia condemned the Council of Chalcedon officially on the argument that the *Tome of Leo I* on which the council was based was tainted with Nestorianism. The more concrete issue, which led to the synod's convocation was the separation of the church in Iberia from communion with the Armenian Church in the previous year in favor of Byzantine Chalcedonianism.

Finally, in 628 Khosrow II was killed by his son Shiruye as part of a plot, which permitted Heraclius to reconquer the territories retaken by Khosrow II. Unable to secure their dynastic power, five kings and two queens in Persia succeeded Khosrow in less than four years. Although Khosrow II had hesitated to assign a bishop to the Primatial See, after his death Isho'yahb II of Gdala, bishop of Balad (628-46 CE), became patriarch of the Church of the East. Queen Boran needed to secure the situation in the empire and sought a peace treaty with the emperor Heraclius. Isho'yahb II and some metropolitans of the Sasanian empire were sent to

[11] For more information on Armenian Chalcedonian literary sources see Peter Cowe, "An Armenian Job Fragment from Sinai and Its Implications," *Oriens Christianus* 72 (1992), 140.

represent the Queen and met the Byzantine Emperor in Aleppo. Peace with the emperor meant some compromise in political and religious issues as the debates between the two parties turned into a discussion about religion. In the *Chronicle of Seert,* there is a letter that claims Isho'yahb II compromised the Christological positon of the Church of the East during the peace negotiation with Heraclius.[12]

Heraclius' desire to reign over a united Byzantine Empire both in religion and political matters also caused complications for the Church of Armenia. Heraclius summoned the Armenian catholicos Ezr (630-641) to a council at Karin/Theodosioupolis in 632, which was intended to attract the Miaphysite churches of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt to support Byzantium against the invasions of the Avars and Slavs.[13] It represented a desperate measure by the emperor to create a compromise in Christological matters in order to achieve unity with the Coptic, Syriac, and Armenian Churches to sustain the empire's eastern borders with their support and participation.[14] As Mahé notes, Heraclius himself would find a Monenergist or Monothelitist formula acceptable, but the reality is that such half-measures were unacceptable in Constantinople.[15] Later Armenian sources blame Ezr for signing a doctrinal declaration out of ignorance, being beguiled by the Greeks as the more learned theologian Yovhannes Mayragomec'i was absent from the council.[16]

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[12] See Louis. M. Sako, Lettre christologique du patrarche syro-orental Isho'yahb II de Gdala (1983), 228. Sako argues that the letter is not genuine.

[13] Andrew J. Ekonomou, *Byzantine Rome and the Greek Popes: Eastern influences on Rome and the Papacy from Gregory the Great to Zacharias, AD 590-752* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 52.

[14] Ibid., 82.

[15] Mahé, "L'Église arménienne de 611 á 1066," HC-IV (1993), 469-471.

[16] Nina G Garsoïan, *Interregnum: Introduction to a Study on the Formation of Armenian Identity (CA 600-750),* (Lovanii: Peeters, 2012), 82. Note that the issue in sources of signing a Chalcedonian creed, which is unhistorical.

That a pro-Chalcedonian community existed in Greater Armenia is attested by the composition the *Narriato de rebus Armeniae* (Account of the Affairs of Armenia). Chalcedonian Armenians also carried their movement abroad, as indicated by an Armenian parchment leaf discovered in Sinai. The discovery of the fragment is a significant source since the Chalcedonian Armenians were few in number and in opposition to the 'national' church. Their subsequent social demise meant that their literary productions were not copied and preserved in Armenian and in Armenia.[17]

Throughout the sixth and seventh centuries Armenians sustained their country's political and ecclesiastical structure. This was more obvious when the situation is compared to that of Lesser Armenia, which under Justinian's legislation saw the destruction of its social and ecclesiastical institutions. Following earlier Roman precedent, the Byzantines continued to remove local cadres and replace them with officials from the center of the empire. This is one of the crucial contrasts between the Sasanian and Roman approach to the administration of recently occupied territories. Sophene, the region that was once governed by the local family of bishop Marutha, was assimilated and integrated into the Eastern Roman Empire. René Grousset noted that the difference in the system of government between the Byzantines and the Sasanians was reflected in their relations with the Armenians. He explains that while Persia was a 'feudal' monarchy, which allowed Armenian nobles to create a place for themselves among other Iranian grandees, the Byzantine Empire was a rigorously unitarian, centralized state which demanded the Armenians' religious conformity.[18]

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[17] Peter Cowe, "An Armenian Job Fragment from Sinai and its Implications," *Oriens Christianus* 72 (1992), 132.

[18] René Grousset, *L'empire des steppes: Attila, Gengis-Khan, Tamerlan* (Paris: Payot, 1939), 260-61. See also Gregory Areshian, "Sasanian Imperialism and the Shaping of Armenian Identity: Interdisciplinary Verification and Ambivalence of Empire-Nation Relationship," in *Empires and Diversity: On the Crossroads of Archaeology, Anthropology, and History*, ed. Gregory Arashian (Los Angeles: The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2013), 146-163.

In the middle of the seventh century the Sasanian Empire fell under the impact of the Arab Invasion. This process meant that for the first time since 387, Greater Armenia and the Armenian lands on the Byzantine side were reunited. The Armenian prince T'eodoros Rštuni was appointed by Constans II (641-668), but he and Catholicos Nerses II shifted their allegiance to the Arabs. The designs of Constans II and Justinian II to re-establish Byzantine domination over Armenia failed as the growing power of the Caliphate and the efforts of the Umayyad Muawiyah put an end to their attempts. As a result, the Armenian nobles rebelled in 653, transferring their allegiance from Byzantium and submitting to the Caliphate. The Arab expansion throughout the Near East in the mid-seventh century changed Armenian history. With Arab domination in the region, Armenia was no longer involved in the many battles between the two great empires. Furthermore, there was no line to separate Armenian territories previously divided between the two empires in 378 and 591. By the seventh century, most of the Armenian plateau together with Iberia and Caucasian Albania were incorporated as the province of Arminiya and functioned within the Umayyad administrative system in which they were known as the Umayyad "North."[19] In this way Armenia preserved its autonomy even though it paid a moderate amount of tribute to the Arabs. Moreover, Armenia also escaped the installation of a foreign governor and the garrisoning of Arab troops in Armenia.[20]

The Umayyads (661-750 CE) fell to rebel 'Abbasid troops from eastern Iran in 750. Being essentially Arab, the Umayyad Caliphate had to deal with non-Arabs who may or may not have been Muslim. Armenians therefore shared this status with many other recently conquered

[19] For more information on the Umayyad North see Michael Bates, "The Dirham mint of the northern provinces of the Umayyad Caliphate," *Armenian Numismatic Journal* 15 (1989): 89.

[20] Aram Ter-Ghevondyan, *The Arab Emirates in Bagratid Armenia* (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation: Distributors, Livraria Bertrand, 1976), 19-22.

peoples.[21] The ‘Abbasids moved the capital to Baghdad, which became the headquarters of the army and the bureaucratic wing of their power. Soon the city developed into the cultural capital of the Muslim world. With the increasing number of conversions to Islam, for the ‘Abbasids religion rather than ethnic identity became a more important concern.[22]

From the end of the seventh century and throughout the eighth fundamental aspects of the creed of the Armenian and East Syrian Churches- their constitution, administration, and canons- became solidified. The social and cultural changes after the Arab conquest led to new developments in regulating the Church of the East and the Church of Armenia. Under the Caliphate the Armenian Church did not have to concern itself with the continuing attempts by the Persians and Byzantines to impose their creed on the Armenians. The Church of the East also enjoyed recognition under the Arabs. During this same period Islam was also defining its distinctive doctrinal and legal structure. Consequently, it was under the ‘Abbasids that the institutions and doctrine of Islam were shaped; the rise of the *ulama* (religious authorities), the clear distinction between Sunnis and Shi‘ites, the importance of *hadith,* the development of Islamic jurisprudence, and the emergence of schools of law. The early ‘Abbasid period was also one in which the authorities and elites of the Caliphate pursued translation projects from Greek to Arabic especially in the fields of science and philosophy, in which Syriac translators were active participants.[23] Aristotelian logic was popularized via the translation movement, which became the common intellectual framework for Christians and Muslims to use in religious

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Dimitri Gutas*, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsid Society 2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries* (London/New York: Routledge, 1998); John Watt, “Greek Philosophy and Syriac Culture in Early ‘Abbasid Iraq,” in *The Christian Heritage of Iraq*, ed. Hunter, 10-37.

debates.[24] Thus, it is reasonable that both the Church of Armenia and the East Syrian Church responded to these developments.

Later Christological discussions up to the tenth century conducted in Armenian monastic academies benefited from the higher degree of philosophical engagement with the works of Aristotle and to a lesser degree those of Plato. The debates and arguments used against the Council of Chalcedon were drawn from the translation of seminal Greek works in the eighth century.[25] Yazdgerd I's reign during which the Armenian alphabet was created also marked later developments in Armenian literary culture. Soon after the creation of the alphabet ecclesiastical books were translated from Greek and Syriac and became greatly instrumental in providing a means for the ecclesiastical ranks to communicate and organize the Church's internal affairs and gradually elaborate the church's doctrinal position. The ability of the ecclesiastical ranks to engage with the religious and philosophical material in their native language empowered them to debate with the Church of the Roman Empire and with their Muslim interlocutors. Eventually in the seventh and eighth centuries an ecclesiastical polity was created in Armenia that was distinctive in its canonical discipline, liturgical worship, and doctrine. Now that Armenian had become the liturgical language, Armenians gained a better understanding of their faith, and hence could better identify with Christianity. Nevertheless, emphasis was still placed on the oral aspect of comprehending the message of Christianity, hence the importance Koriwn gives to the Bible's become *hayaxos* (Armenian-speaking) with emphasis on the spoken word. [26]

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[24] Sidney Griffith, "The Monk in the Emir's Majlis: Reflection on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologies in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period," in *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounter in Medieval Islam*, ed. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999)

[25] Ibid., 32.

[26] Ibid.

The two important synods of the eighth century held at Dvin in 719 and at Manazkert in 726 were summoned by the order of catholicos Yovhan Ōjnec'i. It was Ōjnec'i who achieved a further development for the Armenian Church in compiling the first *Armenian Book of Canons,* which, as Mardirossian has shown, redacted an earlier version produced by Mayragomec'i or his circle.[27] It was during these synods held over a century after the previous synod of 607 that an explicit resolution to the dogmatic crisis among the Armenian bishops was reached. Peter Cowe explains that it was during these synods that Church of Armenia, which had already rejected the Nestorians and Chalcedonians, distinguished itself further by opposing the Christology of both the Serverians and Julianists, a branch of the West Syrian communion that resided near the Armenian border.[28]

The hierarchical structure of the Church of the East, modeled after the Church of Rome in the Synod of 410, evolved on its own terms until it assumed its classic shape under the leadership of Timothy I (780-823 CE). The latter helped maintain Christian identity while remaining respectful of Islamic sensibilities.[29] His literary achievements included an *Apology to the Caliph* that circulated in Syriac, Arabic, and Armenian.[30] The disputations presented in the *Apology*, were used in part to inform the Muslim caliph about intra-Christian theological disputes.

[27] For a more detailed study of the position of Yohan Ojnec'i and his contemporary Xosrovik T'argmanič' see Peter Cowe, "Armenian Christology in the Seventh and Eight Centuries with Particular Attention to the Contributions of Catholicos Yovhan Ōjnec'i and Xosrovik T'argmanič'," Journal of Theological Studies55 (2004), 30-54. For a better understanding of the Christological position of Church of Armenia and West Syriac Church See Peter Cowe, "Doctrinal Union or Agreement to Disagree? Armenians and Syrians at the Synod of Manazkert (726 CE)," in *Bridging Times and Spaces, Festschrift for Gregory E. Areshian on the Occasion of his sixty-fifth Birthday*, P.A. Avetisyan and Y.H. Grekyan (eds.), Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing, 2017, 61-83.

[28] Ibid., 49.

[29] Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert*, 227.

[30] Peter Cowe, "Preliminary Investigation of the Earliest Extant Version of the Dialogue between Nestorian catholicos Timothy 1 and Caliph al-Mahdī," *Sion: Mère des Églises. Mélanges liturgiques offerts au Père Charles Athanase Renoux*, eds. Michael Daniel Findikyan, Daniel Galadza, and André Lossky, (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2016), 79-90.

According to the text, even a Muslim could see that Miaphysite and Chalcedonian Christians were blasphemous heretics while the dyophysite position of East Syrian Christology could resolve many scriptural dilemmas.[31]

The eighth-century developments in the Church of the East parallel those of the Armenian Church, when its canonical and disciplinary expressions were formulated. It was also by Timothy's order that the accounts of the previous synods of the Church of the East were compiled, including the last synod held by Timothy himself in 790. The collection known as the *Synodicon Orientale* together with the codification of 'civil law' solidified the authority of the catholicos and institutional structures such as monasteries and schools, mostly now relocated to Baghdad. Moving the Church center from Ctesiphon to Baghdad was yet another of Timothy's strategies to be close to the cultural and political capital of the 'Abbasids. Alongside these developments in the East Syrian Church, under the support and guidance of Yovhan Ōjnec'i Armenian canon law was compiled, comprising translations of canons from early church councils in Greek alongside original Armenian councils. Those events together with the two synods Ōjnec'I himself summoned, regulated the doctrinal and legal issues of the Church of Armenia.

From the mid-eighth century to the mid-eleventh century the East Syrian Church was the dominating Christian presence in Babylonia (Iraq) and Assyria. Timothy I maintained good connections with the caliphs al-Mahdi and his son and successor Harun-al-Rashid. As a result, under the 'Abbasids the Church of the East expanded its missionary activities to India, China, Turkestan, and Yemen. The employment of Syriac physicians by the court benefited the Church as they could use their wealth and connections to help their community. Furthermore, Syriac

[31] Michael Philip Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015) 132-3.

slowly gave way to Arabic in the ecclesiastical matters of the Church of the East. The Syriac-speaking population had observed that to further their careers they needed to use the Arabic language, so that slowly Arabic replaced Syriac,[32] a process beginning with the Chalcedonian Melkites who were even more geographically dispersed.

In order to observe the unfolding of the main issues that this dissertation addressed such as taxation, education, and the social and political situation of Christians in the fifth century, I traced these issues into the Umayyad and ʻAbbasid periods. In broader scope, it was during the sixth and seventh centuries that Armenian literary culture transitioned from translating scriptural and ecclesiastical texts to the production of historical, grammatical, and philosophical works. The tradition of translating from Greek and Syriac started during the fifth century under the supervision of Maštocʻ and Sahak, the patriarch of Armenia was maintained over the following generations. Most intellectual development, granted the nature of literacy in Late Antiquity, came from the church hierarchy, so that the catholicate was either the patron or the producer of such undertakings.[33] Those included figures like Anastas I (661-667 CE) who sought the assistance of the prominent seventh-century mathematician Anania of Širak to reform the Armenian calendar. The development of the historiographic tradition was advanced by historians such as Movsēs Xorenacʻi, Pseudo-Sebeos, Łewond, Yovhannes Katʻolikos and Tʻovma Arcruni. Those historians, especially Pseudo-Sebeos, broadened their predecessors' scope and situated the history of Armenia in a wider context.

In her study of the taxation of the "North," Alison Vacca sees less of an actual continuity of Sasanian-era fiscal policies into the later period, but more of the cultural norms and the legacy

[32] See Sidney H. Griffith, "From Aramaic to Arabic: The Languages of the Monasteries of Palestine in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers 51* (1997): 11-31. doi:10.2307/1291760.

[33] Nina Garsoïan, *Interregnum*, 50.

of the Sasanians, which was assumed by the 'Abbasids especially in the administration of the empire.[34] As I have argued in chapter one of this dissertation, taxation was not just a solution to the fiscal problems of the Sasanian Empire; while religion played an important role in the economy of the empire. Thus, in the fourth century, we encounter a Christian bishop who tried to refuse to collect taxes from his community, an act that he believed amounted to a sign of their social inferiority, rendering them servants of King Šapur II. In the fifth century, double taxation was amongst the first strategies that Yazdgerd II executed to pressure the Armenian population into converting to Zoroastrianism. Adding insult to the injury was that King Yazdgerd II did not then accept the nobles' taxes since they were not religiously committed to him. As a result, their taxes would be a source of harm to his treasury, possibly a reference to the religious aspect of taxes as, according to Yazdgerd II, in disrespecting the mores of the Zoroastrians, the Armenian nobles could not be benefiting the empire.[35]

Milka Levy-Rubin has shown how treaties between the Arabs and their vassal territories were formulated in correspondence with the agreements that previously existed between the representative of those lands and their Sasanian overlord, rendering the non-Muslims a social class that corresponded to the peasantry in the Sasanian period.[36] Comparing the Sasanian and Muslim taxation systems, Tabari states that since the three upper strata of Sasanian society (the nobles, high military, and religious classes) were exempt from taxation, the fourth social stratum was then taxed according to their ability. Umar then applied this tax system to the land of Persia

[34] Alison Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces Under Early Islam: Islamic Rule and Iranian Legitimacy in Armenia and Caucasian Albania* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 204.

[35] Ełiše, 97-99.

[36] Milka Levy-Rubin. *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 143.

when he conquered it, ordering the collection of taxes from *Ahl-al-Dhimma*,' the non-Muslims.[37] Tabari believed that the tax exemption of the upper stratum of society put too much weight on the 'Abbasid fiscal system, so that when it was imposed later and the nobles refused to pay it, that brought an end to their reign.[38]

Daniel Dennet has shown that most of the peace treaties relevant to the "North" require *Jizya* as a form of asserting the payee's political and especially military inferiority.[39] The idea that paying taxes is equivalent to humiliation (*ṣaghār*) is attested in the Qur'an (Q9: 29) and is the most common complaint against taxation. For example, before Sebeos lists the terms of agreement between Muawiya and T'eodoros Rštuni around 630 he writes:

> Our tribute to you will be the military assistance we render you and our carrying out whatever you desire. But do not humiliate us with tribute, so that you render us weak against your enemy.[40]

To rely on Greater Armenia, Iberia, and Caucasian Albania to provide cavalry as service in lieu of taxation was a Sasanian policy. By the late fifth century, as negotiations between Vahan Mamikonean and Balaš indicate, this term was revisited with the addition of an amendment that exempted Armenians from conversion to Zoroastrianism. Freedom to practice their religion was part of the treaty between Armenians and the Caliphate too.

Nevertheless, the taxes on Armenia, as Ter-Ghevondyan has demonstrated, were not heavy. Vacca has shown that when Armenia and Albania changed their status from vassal states to a caliphal province in the later period of the Marwanids under ʿAbd al-Malik (646-705 CE),

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[37] Al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, vol. III, 1390-1.

[38] Ulrika Mårtensson, ""It's the Economy, Stupid": Al-Ṭabarī's Analysis of the Free Rider Problem in the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 54, no. 2 (2011): 203-38. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41305807.

[39] Daniel Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam* (New York: Arno Press, 1950), 15.

[40] Pseudo-Sebeos, 143.

reforms were introduced in their mode of tax payment. This development was aligned with Iranian social mores, especially with regard to imposing taxes as a sign of submission and humiliation now utilized as a way to distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims. It was in this period that, as Vacca notes, Łewond the historian mentions practices such as the taxpayers' neck-sealing as a means of differentiating between Muslims and non-Muslims.[41]

As noted in the introduction, a goal of this research has been to develop a method for studying the world of Late Antiquity. To counter narrowly conceived methods of studying cross-border relations between the two empires, Sasanian and Roman, I have used the theoretical framework of "connected histories."[42] Focusing on the history of Rome and the Sasanian Empire separately could blind us to a fuller understanding of the complex interconnectedness of the two empires. One of the issues that this type of study raised was the long scholarly trajectory of interpreting the Sasanian empire as a 'centralized' state. This image of the Sasanian Empire as a centralized polity reflects political and religious developments in the Roman Empire, where a centralized state with Christianity as its official religion incorporated bishops within its administration. The perception of the existence of powerful bishops in the Sasanian Empire who in addition to their spiritual position in their community fulfilled practical roles in the administration of the empire derives from this problematic approach. This misrepresentation of Sasanian society and government was highlighted only a decade ago by the studies of Pourshariati.

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[41] To learn more about, ghiyar, as an act of differentiating between Muslim and Non-Muslim see Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces Under Early Islam*, 206. Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire*, 167. For more on the precedence of the practice see Walter Kaegi. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 36-8; Chase Robinson, "Neck-Sealing in Early Islam." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, no. 3 (2005): 401-41. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25165107.

[42] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 03 (1997).

It was the intention of this dissertation to follow the development introduced by Yazdgerd I into the Umayyad and ‘Abbasid periods. The means these developments permitted were not to exploit bishops as pawns to run the empire. Nevertheless, the organization of the synods initiated during Yazdgerd I’s reign provided tools for bishops to reorient and redefine their Christology, politics, and affiliations in later periods. In Greater Armenia, it was the alphabet created during Yazdgerd I’s reign that became instrumental in defining the creed and orientation of the Church in Armenia. As mentioned, both these Churches consolidated their creedal and legal elements in the eighth century under the ‘Abbasids, when Islam was finding and defining its administrative and intellectual structures.

In this epilogue, I have tried to situate the history of Greater Armenia, the Church of the East, and the Roman and the Sasanian Empires at the critical juncture between social and political praxis by studying the clashes between different understandings of the themes of taxation, religion, literacy, and loyalty. Scholars of Sasanian social history have long commented on the limitation of source materials. The Armenian and Syriac sources, though relevant, were considered polemical and were therefore criticized for perpetuating a view of a history with undue focus on the interests and worldview of their Christian authors. This research suggests otherwise, and argues rather that these works significantly fill the gap left by Middle Persian, Greek, and Arabic sources.

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