

ARMENIA AND IRAN: THE BIRTH OF TWO NATIONS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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Abstract: This paper discusses the idea of Armenian and Iranian identity in 3rd century CE. It is proposed that the bordering region of the Armeno-Iranian world, such as that of the Siwnik' and its house saw matters very differently from that of the Armenian kingdom. The Sasanians in return had a vastly different view of Armenia and Georgia as political entities, and used their differences to the benefit of their empire.

Keywords: Siwnik', Sassanian empire, Ērānšahr, Ka'be-ye Zardošt, Paikuli, Zarrbed.

The Aršakuni dynasty (54–428 CE) that was ruling over the territory which was identified with Armenia, was part of a large alliance with Arsacid Empire (247 BCE–224 CE) in the 2nd century CE. Through dynastic marriage with the Kingdom of Albania, and the Aršakuniani family ruling over the Kingdom of Iberia (189–284 CE),¹ the Caucasus and the Iranian Plateau had come together as one collaborative system at the beginning of late antiquity. This pan-Arsacid world, with its mothership, the Arsacid Empire had brought together numerous noble houses, and kingdoms together which expanded into Mesopotamia, Levant and Central Asia. In many instances some of these local nobility and rulers were powerful enough to challenge their king. However, when it came to the existence of their realm in the face of foreign threat, these nobles tended to band together under the command of their king. Armenia is the best example of such narratives of internal conflict and cooperation with the Armenian king during the Aršakuni period, where the *naxarars*, though not the highest group became the main source of power and prestige.²

At some periods in the history of the Aršakuni kingdom, we are in the dark, for example for the 3rd century CE, as we are presented with a list of rulers (Khosrov I

¹ Rapp 2014, 193.

² Toumanoff 1963, 115.

(191–216 CE) and Trdāt II (217–252 CE). Cyril Toumanoff rightly doubted that only two kings could not have ruled over the Armenian world for a century at this time, hence he attempted to provide other rulers with the same names, with three Trdāts, and two Khosrovs. Hence a Trdāt III (287–293 CE) was posited before the coming of Trdāt the Great, whose lore is tied to the Christianization of Armenia.³

How powerful were these Armenian kings in the early centuries of the Christian era? Again, Toumanoff and other scholars of Armenian history have stated that in Armenia and in Kartli, the dynastic princes, i.e., the *naxarars* were more powerful than the King of Great Armenia, and that the *naxarars* acted independently vis-à-vis the centralized tendency of the monarch.⁴ Their self-interest appears to have been kept above all things when it came to the internal politics of the Caucasian world. Hence, modern notions of nation-State for neither Georgia,⁵ nor Armenia, or Iran should be considered at this period in the history of these great people.

As for the Iranian world, there may have been a sort of communal identity, at least since Darius I,⁶ but we cannot say that prior to 224 CE, an Iran as a political body existed. It is only with Ardaxšīr I in 224 CE that we begin to encounter terms such as *Ērānšahr* (Kingdom of the Iranians), or simply *Ērān* which not only became used as an ethnonym “Iranian,” but also truncated form for *Ērānšahr*.⁷ It is not the purpose to discuss how this notion of Iran came about, rather what was the effect of the creation of *Ērānšahr* vis-à-vis Armenia in the 3rd century CE. It is contended here that indeed the creation of a political entity in the name of Iran, pushed for the creation of a distinct Armenia in about a century after the formation of the Sasanian Empire. We have several royal inscriptions from the 3rd century which are important for understanding the idea of *Ērānšahr* or Iran, and also for Armenia, and where it stood as a political entity in the 3rd century CE.

Some have suggested that Armenia in the 3rd century was sometimes thought to be part of *Ērānšahr*; and then at times not. I do not think in any point in time Armenia was considered to be as part of *Ērānšahr* and was always thought to be non-Iranian. We first come to see the political landscape of the Caucasus from the Iranian perspective with the inscription of Shapur I at Ka’be-ye Zardošt, engraved sometime after 260 CE. This was the time when the king of *Ērānšahr* had killed the Emperor Gordian at Mishik in Babylonia, made Julius Philippus (Arab) a tributary and had captured Emperor Valerian. Shapur I, in a heroic manner states that with his own hands, near the city of Edessa, he captured the Roman Emperor.⁸ In his inscription, Shapur I claims that his realm is as such (ŠKZ I.1-3 / Parthian version):

Ērānšahar xwadāy ahēm ud dārām šahar: Pārs, Parθaw, Xūzestān, Mēšān, Āsūrestān, Nōdšīragān, Arabāyestān, Ādurbādagān, Armin, Wiržān, Sīgān, Ardān, Balāsagān yad fraxš ō Kaf kōf ud Alānān bar; ud hamag Parišxwār kōf, Māδ, Wurgān, Mary, Harēw, ud hamag Abaršahr; Kermān, Sagestān,

³ Toumanoff 1969; Toumanoff 1986; Garsoïan 2004, 72.

⁴ Toumanoff, 1963, 126.

⁵ Rapp 1999, 84.

⁶ Frye 1993, 143–146.

⁷ Gnoli 1989; MacKenzie 1998a.

⁸ Coloru 2017, 146–147.

Tūyṛān, Makurān, Pāradān, Hindestān, Kūšānšahar yad fraxš ō Paškabūr ud yad ō Kāš, Suyd ud Čāčestān marz, ud az hō ārag zrēh Mazūnšahar

I am the ruler of Ērānšahr and hold these regions: Persia, Parthia, Xuzistān, Mēšān, Assyria, Adiabene, Arabia, Āzarbījān, Armenia, Georgia, Sigān, Albania, Balāsagān, up to the Caucasus Mountains and gates of Alans and all of the mountain chains of Peshāwar, Media, Gurgān, Marv, Herat and all of Abaršahar, Kermān, Sistan, Turan, Makran, Paradene, India, Kušānšahar up to Peshawar and up to Kasgar, Sogdiana and to the mountains of Tāškent, and on other side of the sea, Oman (Huyse 1999, 22–24).

This imperial list of kingdoms (*šahrs*) includes Armenia (Armin), but other regions which are not to be associated with *Ērānšahr*. If we keep in mind that Shapur I in his inscription and coinage took the title of (Middle Persian) *Māzdēsn Bay Šābuhr šāhān šāh Ērān ud an-ērān kē čīhr az yazdān* / “Mazdaworshipping Majesty, Šāpūr, King of Kings of Iran and non-Iran, whose lineage is from the gods,”⁹ then we can see why this list means the empire that Shapur I holds went far beyond the realm that was considered Iranian. In two or three decades after Shapur I, the Zoroastrian priest, Kerdīr who has left us four inscriptions,¹⁰ in detail discusses his actions and the regions that along with the king of kings of Iran traversed to establish fire-temples, promote Mazdaworshipping rites and supporting Magian priests in the Near East and the Caucasus. In his inscription Kerdīr states that he established many sacred fires throughout the empire, where he first mentions the land of Ērān (Kerdīr 14 / Middle Persian):

w-m was ādurān ud mowūn anadar šahr ī Ērān, Pārs ud Pahlaw, Xūzestān ud Asūrestān ud Mēšān ud Nōdšīragān ud Ādurbādagān ud Spāhān ud Ray ud Kermān ud Sagestān ud Gurgān ud Marw ud Harēw ud Abaršahr ud Tūrestān ud Makurān ud Kušānšahr tā frāz ō Paškabūr padēx kerd.

and many fires and magians in the empire of Ērān—Persia, Parthia, Khuzistān, Asurestan, Mešān, Nōdšīragān, Adurbādagān, Sepāhān, Ray, Kermān, Sagastān, Gurgān, Merv, Herāt, Abaršahr, Turestān, Makran, the Kušān country up to Pešāwar—I have made prosperous (MacKenzie 1989b, 54–55).

Kerdīr has done us a favor by stating where the non-Iranian lands were where he established fires and Mazdean priests (Middle Persian 15):

*u-m pad-iz Anērānšahr ādur ud mowmard čē pad šahr ī Anērān būd kū asp ud mard ī šāhān šāh rasīd—Andiyōk šahrestān ud Sūriyā šahr ud čē abar Sūriyā nahang, *Tersōs šahrestān ud Kilikiyā šahr ud čē abar Kilikiyā nahang, Kēsariyā šahrestān ud Kapōdakiyā šahr ud čē abar Kapōdakiyā nahang tā frāz ō *Grāykiya šahar ud Arman šahr ud Wiruzān ud *Alān ud Balāsagān tā frāz ō Alānān dar.*

and also in the land of Anērān, the fires and magians which were in the land of Anērān where the horses and men of the king of kings reached—the city of Antioch and the land of Syria and what is attached to the province of Syria, the city of Tarsos and the land of Cilicia and what is attached to the province of Cilicia, the city of Caesarea and the land of Cappadocia and what is attached to the province of Cappadocia, up to the land of Graecia (Pontus?) and the land of Armenia and Iberia and Albania and Balāsagān up to the Gate of the Alans (MacKenzie 1989b, 58).

⁹ Daryae 2008, 61.

¹⁰ Gignoux 1991, 22–23.

It is clear that the Caucasus is not considered to be as part of *Ērānšahr*, but part of the larger Sasanian imperial milieu. This fact becomes clear, again from our third Sasanian inscription, that of King Narseh at Paikuli dated to 293 CE.¹¹ This inscription is in many ways important for understanding Iranian views of the Caucasus and the power-politics of the late 3rd century CE, at a period in which the history of the region is ambiguous.¹²

The story of King Narseh, the son of King Shapur I, is given in the first-person description in the Paikuli inscription, in modern day Iraqi Kordestan. Narseh had been bypassed by brothers and finally his grandnephew, Wahrām III for the throne of the Sasanian Empire, i.e., rulership over *Ērānšahr*. He held the title of *Wuzurg-Arminān-Šāh*, the “Great King of Armenia,” like his younger brother, Hormizd-Ardaxšīr. This title was thought to signify the importance of Armenia vis-à-vis the Sasanian Empire, where the crown prince of the Sasanians would be sent to rule, until the sitting king passed away. This scenario is somewhat also hinted in the Paikuli inscription, but important issues in regard to Armenian and Iranian territories is provided in a passage in the inscription as “We had set out from Armenia towards *Ērānšahr* and had mobilized an army of *Ērānšahr*” (Paikuli 18). Hence, the importance of *AYK LN MN 'rmny OL 'ry'n-štry / az Armany ō Ērānšahr* (From Armenia to *Ērānšahr*), clearly suggests that in the late 3rd century, Armenia was not thought to be a part of *Ērānšahr*. Thus, the inscription of the Zoroastrian priest Kerdīr and that of king Narseh demonstrate that in no time Armenia was thought to be part of the Iranian realm, when the Sasanian Empire was created. However, we now have to somewhat be cautious about the unique position of Armenia, where the Persian king-to-be resided. This scenario had been already established in the Arsacid period, where the Arsacid crown prince would reside in Armenia.¹³ Based on new evidence from Bactria / Balkh we have a seal with the following title; *oa(z)-arko ko(šanoš)[ao]* “Great King of Kūšān,” which matches that of the *Wuzurg-Arminān-Šāh*.¹⁴ Indeed, some of the later Sasanian princes who would-be-kings, resided in the northeastern holdings of the Sasanian Empire as well. There is the possibility that as Armenia became a place of contention from the 5th century, the Sasanian princes were sent to the Kūšān kingdom to wait for their rule over *Ērānšahr*.

More importantly the manner in which the Caucasus and Armenia was seen by the Sasanians in the 3rd century is of utmost importance for understanding the political identity of this region. By comparing the inscription of Shapur I in the 260s and Narseh’s Paikuli inscription in the 280s, we can see a change in the political landscape of the Caucasus. This is made clear by the list of the regions mentioned under the rule of Shapur I and the kings and lords from the Caucasus who are said to have come join Narseh in his bid for the Sasanian throne of *Ērānšahr*. In relation to the Caucasus, Shapur state that he holds the following place (ŠKZ 2):

Ādurbāyagān, Armin, Wiruzān, Sīgān, Arrān, Balāsagān tā fraz ō Kaf kōf ud Alānān dar ud hamag parišxwār kōf.

¹¹ Weber 2016.

¹² Kettenhofen 1995, 48–50.

¹³ Lang 1983, 517.

¹⁴ Daryae 2017, 87–88.

Azarbāijān, Armenia, Iberia, Sīgān, Albania, Balasagān to the Caucasus Mountain and the gates of Alans, to the Alborz Mountain (Huyse 1999, 23).

Here, six toponyms are enumerated in Shapur I's list for the Caucasus. For Narseh, the following lords and kings came to his support from the Caucasus (NPai 44):

[W..]('n)[..] M[LKA W ----]k'n MLKA W mskyt'n MLKA W 'byr'n MLKA W syk'[n ML](K)A W tyldt MLKA

..., and the King of [Gurgān/[Balāsa]gān, and the King of Mskyt'n and the King of Iberia, and the King of Sīgān and King Tirdād. (Humbach – Skjærvø 1983 (3,1), 71)

Balāsagān is clearly designated as a region located for the most part south of the lower course of the rivers Kor and the Aras (Araxes), bordered on the south by Atropatene and on the east by the Caspian Sea, which is later identified with Dašt-e Moyān (Plain of Moyān). Evidence suggests that Balāsagān was somewhat independent of Albania/Arrān, and that under Ardaxšīr I the Balāsagān šāh had gave his alliance to the Sasanians.¹⁵ On the other hand the toponym *Mskyta* has posed problems in terms of its identification. Humbach and Skjærvø in their edition of the Paikuli inscription suggest that this location is to be identified with the people of Massagetae, a tribe of Alans mentioned by Patswos Buzand as living in Balāsagān, and its location correspond to Parthian *Ardān* / Greek Albania, later known in the Islamic times as Arrān).¹⁶ As for *Abyrān*, it has been pointed out that the Greek toponym Iberia was used in various ways and for a region that had more geographical divisions, and used by differently by Greek authors and texts for the Caucasus region.¹⁷ While it cannot be for certain, but this toponym may read for Georgian Mtskheta, the first capital of the kingdom which later came to be known as Georgia. Could we be seeing the mention of the King of Mtskheta from the Kakheti which was an independent principality that only came to be incorporated into the Georgian kingdom in the 11th CE? Thus, could we have a Mskyta, while Abyrān stand for Iberia. May the Sasanian king of kings have been looking at what came to be “Georgia,” as two separate kingdoms in the 3rd century?

The next two kings may support a similar scenario in dealing with historical Armenia. This brings us to the king of *Sīgān*, correctly identified by W.B. Henning and earlier by the first scholar to work on the Paikuli inscription, E. Herzfeld. *Sīgān šāh* is the king of Siwnik' which in Armenian is called *išxan Siwneac*, which in the Armenian Geography is Sisakan and Sīsagān in the appendix to Zachariah of Mytilene, the country on the left bank of the lower Araxes.¹⁸ Of course in Armenian historical tradition from the 5th century onward, reflecting on the past and present, the house of Siwnik' has always been treated as outcasts and traitors to the Armenian cause. It has been pointed out that Siwnik''s relations to the Sasanians was somewhat different vis-à-vis other Armenian noble houses.¹⁹ This begs the question of what the Siwnik''s thought of themselves in the 3rd century CE, in a changing world of territorial and identity politics of the Caucasus.

¹⁵ Chaumont 1988.

¹⁶ Humbach, Skjærvø 1983 (3,1), 124–125.

¹⁷ Rapp 2016, 21.

¹⁸ Henning 1952, 512.

¹⁹ Greenwood 2008, 3.

Even in the 5th century CE, the important figure in Armenian history, Vasak Siwnik' was a committed person to the Mazdean tradition and the Sasanian king, and in his territory fire-temples kept on existing. While commanding the Armenian forces in the great war of Armenia and the Sasanian Empire, he opted to join the Sasanian army at the Battle of Avrayr in the 5th century CE.²⁰ This loyalty of the Siwnik' to the Sasanian realm, was not a temporary event, and it continued into the 6th century CE. In 571 CE Vahan Siwnik' broke away from the former Arsacid Armenia and took northeast Armenian highlands and across eastern Caucasia, to receive the position of (Middle Persian) *Shahrdār* from Khosrow I for his domain, becoming a king within the Sasanian Empire.²¹



Fig. 1. Salmās Rock-Relief

I think it is only with such kingdoms as Siwnik's that we can understand the nature of an important Sasanian rock-relief in Salmās, close to Lake Urumia.²² On one side stand two horsemen, mostly likely Ardaxšīr I, the founder of the Sasanian Empire and his son, Shapur I. But who are the other two men, certainly not common people, receiving a diadem from the two horsemen? While more recently it has been suggested that we may be looking at 4th century rulers,²³ I would suggest that we may be looking at the

²⁰ Russell 1987, 137–138.

²¹ Areshian 2013, 156.

²² Hinz 1969; Luschej 2011.

²³ Maksymiuk 2017, 108–109.

naxarars from the house of Siwnik' who early on chose the new power on the Iranian Plateau on their side as opposed to other Armenian noble houses who attempted to follow the Arsacid house. It should be mentioned that according to Zachariah of Mytilene (Chronicle, xii.7), the Siwni language was somewhat separate from Armenian.²⁴ Hence, there may have been a separate identity, or an identity which was vague at best vis-à-vis both Armenian and Iranian, thus, explaining the vexing and wavering of the house of Siwnik' between the Aršakuni's and the Sasanians.

That the Sasanians saw Siwnik' separate from Armenia is not only clear from the inscriptions of Shapur I at Ka'be-ye Zardosht and Narseh at Paikuli, but also in the administrative division which the Sasanians later imposed, during the Marzpanate period in the 5th century CE. The gold mines of Armenia were very important, and no doubt a further cause for the Roman and Sasanian warfare. The recent bulla find and publication by R. Gyselen is instructive in this matter, where the only office of (Middle Persian) *Zarrbed* (Chief of gold), belongs to such a region *Armin ud Ardān ud Wirōzān ud Sīsagān ud Marz-ī-nēsawān*.²⁵



Fig. 2. Seal imprint of the Zarrbed

Thus, in this late Sasanian or post-fifth century administrative bullae, five toponyms are mentioned, where again Armenia is placed separately from that of Sīsagān. Then it should be made clear that what we think of Armenian and Iranian “nation” in late an-

²⁴ Greenwood 2008, 2.

²⁵ Gyselen 2002, 226–227.

tiquity was somewhat different from what at least the Sasanians saw as territories with which they dealt with. What the Siwink' house thought of itself and its kingdom vis-à-vis the Armenians and Iranians, provides such example of ethnic and territorial complexities of late antiquity. The Iranian Plateau and the Caucasus had been culturally and dynastically weaved together very differently before the coming of the Sasanians in the 3rd century CE. I do not think there was any sense of an *Ērānšahr* (Land of the Iranians), prior to the 3rd century, although just like the Armenians, there may have been notions of common ethnicity. With the Sasanians and the creation of the idea of *Ērānšahr* with its boundaries, a rupture took place in the Caucaso-Iranian world.

The Sasanians who knew of this deep connection of Arsacid Iranian world and the Aršakuni Armenian world (pan-Arsacid), or what has been called the "Parthian Commonwealth",²⁶ attempted to annex and put an end to Armenian Aršakunis at any cost, sometimes working with the *naxarars* against the king of Armenia, and sometimes intervening directly to this end. We should go back to the beginning of this essay and heed the words of Toumanoff about the independence and importance of the *naxarars* and noble houses, which was also true on the Iranian Plateau. It appears that identities and territories as we think of it, was not solidified in the 3rd century, until the Sasanian Empire created a notion of *Ērānšahr*. This new identity formation on the Iranian Plateau, pushing other kingdoms in the Caucasus to decide to choose the new empire, or face a difficult time. While many of the *naxarars* in the Caucasus came together and banded with the Aršakuni king, those on what can be called the borderlands of the Armenia and Iranian world, still were unsure and wavered between the two sides. The noble house of the Siwink' is the best example of complexities of identity formation at the time of empire building in late antiquity in Iran and the Caucasus.

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²⁶ Jong 2015, 127.

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