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THE CAUCASIAN TERRITORIAL CHURCHES AND THE SĀSĀNID COMMONWEALTH

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Abstract: *At the beginning of the sixth century, the kingships in Caucasian Iberia and Albania were eliminated by the Sāsānids. Thus, the system of vassal kings that served well for centuries was suddenly replaced by direct rule across the board. In this study, we want to ask why this change suddenly became possible. For the Sāsānian administration always needed a central contact person in the countries who could control the local nobility. It is striking that the establishment of a strong church structure always preceded the end of kingship. This can be seen particularly well in the example of Armenia, whose kingship had already been eliminated a century earlier. It is therefore reasonable to assume that after the end of kingship in Armenia as well as in Iberia and Albania, the regional churches took over its central functions of cooperation with the Sāsānian central administration. Now the church served the administration as an important local power factor, and allowed it the control of the powerful dynastic clans. Despite occasional conflicts, the churches cooperated with the Sāsānids and they were able to benefit greatly from this cooperation. Their advantages consisted in access to financial resources and, above all, in strengthening their position of power vis-à-vis the leaders of the local noble clans. Ecclesiastical power reached its peak when the Katholikoi finally also led their countries politically, as Kiwrion did in the case of Iberia at the beginning of the seventh century. Thus, the church became the state-forming institution in the Caucasian countries.*

Keywords: Iberia, Albania, Church, Vassal, Sasanian history, Armenian history, Catholicos, Caucasus, Caucasian kingship.

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The settlement between the Roman emperor Theodosius I (379–395) and the Sāsānid *šāhān šāh* Šāpūr III (383–388) about the division of Armenia in 387 resolved the longstanding conflict over the Caucasian regions and laid the foundation for a peaceful cooperation in the fifth century [BP, 6, 1 (p. 233–Garsoian, 1989); Prok. aed., 3, 1, 9. See e.g.: Blockley, 1985; 1987, p. 222; 1992, p. 39. a. Toumanoff, 1963, p. 152]. The clear division of spheres of influence cleared the way for the establishment of permanent imperial dominion in the regions concerned. In this short study, we want to look at the administrative side of the exercise of power on the part of the Sāsānids, because they held the largest part of Caucasia with four fifths of Armenia, and all of Iberia and Albania.

At the beginning, the Sāsānids leaned on the traditional form of exercise of power, the vassal kingdom. However, they soon stroke a new path: First, the Armenian kingdom was abolished, and later also the kingdoms in Albania and Iberia. The indirect dominion had been superseded by direct dominion. Apart from periods of resistance, the new model was indeed successful and the dominion over Caucasia was secure until the seventh century. But why was this direct dominion suddenly possible and why was a local king no longer needed to control the powerful dynastic

clans of Caucasia? Apparently, the church had become an important pillar for the exercise of power and superseded the kingship as a central authority.

The basis for this study is a statement of the Arsen Sapareli (830–887), a Georgian bishop¹. The text of Arsen is a treatise justifying retrospectively the role of the Iberian church at the beginning of the seventh century with the schism of the Armenian church². There can be found the following statement:

Even more, certain Catholicoi and bishops were made sons by the king of the Persians and they were addressed by Kavādh and Ƙosrow adoptive sons. And they seized the rights of the state for their own benefit. They did not behave according to the canonical rule, but according to their own ideas. They did not spend the means of the church according to the law, but for themselves and for their own representation [Arseni Sapareli, 11, 3; Alek'size, Mahé, 2010, p. 115].

What makes this statement interesting is that several bishops – obviously only Armenian bishops – are said to be adopted sons of the *šāhān šāh*. This opened up the question if the Sāsānids had to use special instruments to work with the clerical authorities. How can the adoption be understood and what goal did the Sāsānids pursue?

The statement of Arsen makes it probable that the bishops used certain rights of the state for personal interests. Thus, the adoption had to be related to mundane stately purposes. In this specific case, the embezzlement of financial means seems feasible, used for personal representation instead of their original purpose. Therefore, the bishops must have been responsible for the levy of certain dues. Their close relation to the *šāhān šāh* suggests that those were at least the dues that had to be paid to the Sāsānid central administration, in a sense of 'tribute'.³ In specific cases, the Armenian church, therefore, assumed the functions of the civil administration. As Armenia was at least formally under Sāsānid rule, this means nothing else than that the Armenian church has to be seen as part of the Sāsānid administration or rather had been utilized as such. As we saw, Arsen explicitly mentioned two Sāsānids: Kavādh I (488–531) and his son Ƙosrow I Anuširwān (531–579). Now both of these rulers are the ones connected to extensive administrative reforms in the Sāsānid empire. Apart from a comprehensive fiscal reform and a 're-measurement' of the country related to it as well as the establishment of a bigger standing army, this consolidation phase also contained a crucial shift in the administration of Caucasia [Pourshariati, 2008, p. 83]: The vassal kings that were in charge of the land before were exchanged for a direct rule. Armenia, where the kingdom ended already in 428, falls a bit out of alignment, but the Albanian kingdom had been abolished verifiably around 510 and the Iberian kingdom in the 530s.⁴ Temporarily, there was a transitional phase in which there could be found a Persian *marzpān*, a provincial governor, next to the king of Albania as well as of Iberia, respectively [Schleicher, 2019, p. 87]. The route from the vassal rule to a direct one was thus a long-term development and not a clear cut, but it stands in direct connection with the reforms of Kavādh I. that were carried on successfully by his son Ƙosrow I.

If one wanted to exert direct rule in the Caucasus, however, he would be confronted with the problem that all these regions were strongly dynastically shaped. The proper rule here lay always

¹ For Arsen and his living environment see the extensive introduction in: [Alek'size, Mahé, 2010, p. 62; Alek'size, 2018(1), p. 65].

² For the Iberian-Armenian schism see esp. [Alek'size, 2018(1)], who claims (p. 65) that Arsen's text is not a polemic one but rather an attempt to incorporate the (chalcedonic) Armenian people of Tao into the Georgian church. For the schism see e.g.: [Garsoïan, 1999; Martin-Hisard, 2005, p. 1293ff; *Essays on the History of Georgia*, 1988, p. 165].

³ This of course does not mean that they only levied these dues; definitely, charges for the upkeep of the churches had to be levied.

⁴ Albania: [Gadjiev, 2015], Iberia: [Schleicher, 2019]. The case of Armenia: in the same period, the short-lived *marzpānat* of the Mamikonean family ended on the command of Kavādh I [Grousset, 1947, p. 233].

with the powerful aristocrats and dynasts.⁵ The Iberian kingdom had, for example, never been the powerful central authority the medieval Georgian sources wanted to make us believe. The same holds true for Armenia and Albania. The king was always only *primus inter pares*, whose power depended on the number of noblemen he could muster behind him or if he was able to rely on an external power (Rome / Sāsānids / North Caucasians)⁶. However, the kingdom was at least the connecting central authority the *šāhān šāh* (or of course the Roman emperor) could call on to control the respective area formally. His function was especially firmly established in the traditional sense. The Armenian sources nicely show the difficulties the Persian *marzpāns* had to endure in the fifth century to assert themselves in the country or rather enforce the Sāsānid interests⁷. The situation was similar in Albania and Iberia.

If an external power wanted to control Armenia, Iberia or Albania, and exercise their rule, after the abolishment of the kingdom, another central authority would be needed to control the local nobility and communicate with them. The respective regional churches offered themselves as an alternative.

1. CHURCH AND KINGDOM

Before the church was able to serve as an administration instrument, it had to have a distinctive structure. The development of the respective regional churches in contrast to the kingdom shows that a strong church structure had been ordinarily established immediately before the end of the kingdom. At any rate, this is told by the – oftentimes not quite unproblematic – sources.

Thus, the last king Vač'agan III (487–510) reformed the Albanian church and strengthened its hierarchical system [Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 26 (Dowsett, 1961, p. 50–54); Mahé, 2013; Alek'size, 2018(2), p. 144; Trever, 1959, p. 295]. Especially the position of the bishops as opposed to the local nobilities had been strengthened. Formally, these were now above the secular aristocrats. The bishop had the right to punish them in the case of transgressions. It is admittedly doubtful that the secular princes always accepted a subordinate role, but with the reform that was carried out between 484 and 488, there had practically been established a new central authority next to the kingship. At first, this was based on its power, but it was exchangeable when an alternative offered itself.

A similar development can be observed in Iberia. Here the king Vaxtang Gorgasali (before 482 until 502) also implemented a church reform at the end of the fifth century [See e.g.: van Esbroeck, 1993]. It is more tangible regarding personal than substantial changes, but the 'promotion' of the Iberian head of the church to a Catholicos proves tellingly the strengthening of this position [K'art'lis C'xovreba, 1964; Thomson, 1996, p. 213]⁸.

A certain exception to this rule is Armenia, because the kingdom here had been abolished after a long time of the existence of a strict episcopal hierarchy. Here the gain in power of the Catholicos and the church itself is more of a natural development and not controlled by the crown. However, the role that the Catholicos Sahak played in and after the deposition of the last

⁵ Thus Movsēs Xorenac'i (3, 58, see at: [Thomson, 1978, p. 330] already stated: *The king of Persia, Bahrām (V), knowing that without the Armenian princes he could not hold the country, ...* For a detailed study of the dynastic structures in the roman part of Armenia see: [Adontz, Garsoïan, 1970].

⁶ For the nature of the Iberian kingdom see: [Rapp, 2014, esp. p. 265, 281ff]. Exemplary for the Parthian conditions see: [Widengren, 1969, p. 81].

⁷ How much the Persian Great King was dependent on the cooperation of the local nobility show the events prior to the Armenian uprising of 450/1 described by Łazar P'arpec'i [Łazar P'arpec'i, 25–31; Thomson, 1991, p. 84–101].

⁸ For the church reform of Vaxtang see: [T'arxnišvili, 1960, p. 116; Toumanoff, 1954, p. 167; Meyendorff, 1989, p. 106] and most recently [Shurgaia, 2012].

Armenian Arsacid Artasēs IV (422–428) proves the importance of his office also regarding the relations to the Sāsānid *šāhān šāh*.

It can certainly not be argued that the respective kings intentionally cut the branch they were sitting on, but it can be assumed that a strong and centralised structure of the regional churches was an important condition for the abolishment of the kingdoms. With it, the Sāsānid administration as well as the local nobility had a competent contact that could even reach the most secluded valleys. And when the church was as able (or unable) as the kingdom to control the nobility, the latter, that had for a long time been necessary to govern the vassal realm, became suddenly expendable.

The strength of the church made the kingdom as a central authority at last superfluous. This strength had been caused by the kingdom itself to weaken the nobility and strengthen its own position.

After these rather theoretical deliberations a few examples are needed to prove this proposition. At first, there are those that prove the leading position of the Catholicos in a realm without a king:

a) In the Martyrdom of Evstat'ī of Mc'xet'a, a delegation of Iberians negotiates with the Persian *marzpān* Arvand Gušnasp about the release of converts that had been arrested because of their conversion from Zoroastrianism to Christianity. The leading personality here is the Iberian Catholicos Samul flanked by the *mamasaxlisi* Grigor (supreme prince of Mc'xet'a) and the *pitiaxši* Aršuša (the prince of the fairly autonomous area of the Gogarene who commanded traditionally the Iberian contingents)⁹:

When the marzpān was setting out to go to the king the princes of Georgia assembled to say farewell to him. As the marzpān was mounting his horse the princes of Georgia, Samuel the Catholicos of Georgia, Gregory the mamasaxlisi of Georgia, Aršuša the pitiaxši of Georgia, and other scions of princely families, arose and said to the marzpān, 'We beg you to grant us the privilege of asking you one boon.' So he said to them, 'Tell me what it is you want. What have I failed to grant you?' [Martyrium Evstat'ī 10; Lang 1956, p. 99]¹⁰.

In the middle of the 5th century, Iberia had been governed, therefore, by a council of noblemen under the leadership of the Catholicos.

b) At the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 7th century, the Armenian and Iberian church had a quarrel. Prior to the Schism of 607, the Iberian Catholicos Kiwrion had an intensive correspondence with his Armenian colleagues¹¹. The conversation shows clearly that Kiwrion is the most powerful man in the Iberian state:

After consulting with my bishops and the superiors of my country, I concluded that it is lawful not to reject all those who wish to come back [to the fold] after they have acknowledged their faults and have repented [Uxtanēs 2, 3; Arzoumanian, 1985, p. 47].

The Armenian bishop Uxtanēs of Sebasteia (10th century), who is responsible for one branch of the tradition of these letters, accuses the Catholicos Kiwrion of using questions of faith to manoeuvre Iberia politically between the two big empires of late antiquity [Uxtanēs 2, 57;

⁹ For the *pitiaxši* see: [Sundermann, 1989, p. 142; Č'xeiže, 1999; Khurshudyan, 2015, p. 21–69]. For the *mamasaxlisi*: [Toumanoff, 1963, p. 90. n. 128]. For the relation between *mamasaxlisi* and the Armenian *tanutēr* see: [Javakhov, 1905, p. 51, 100–107, 121–128, 136].

¹⁰ Another triumvirate representing the state exists in Armenia in the early 7th century: Smbat Bagratuni (*marzpān* of Hyrcania (595–602) and maybe *marzpān* of Armenia (607–616/7); against this [Greenwood, 2017, p. 153, n. 136], Gig, the *sparapet* (his function corresponds to the *pitiaxši* Aršuša) and Vrt'anes Vardapet in the function of the Catholicos [Uxtanēs, 2, 55; Arzoumanian, 1985, p. 104]. In contrast to Iberia, the secular prince is in charge here, because the Armenian Catholicate was not occupied in this time.

¹¹ In recent times, Stephen Rapp [Rapp, 2000, p. 170] has figured it as the turning point of the formation of Georgian identity; whereas Nikoloz Alek'size [2018(1), e.g., p. 15] has claimed, that the schism as it is presented in the Armenian and Georgian sources, should be an invention of the 10th century.

Arzoumanian, 1985, p. 107]¹². It is also beyond dispute that Iberia, which had been divided into a Roman and a Persian part at the time, also approached the Romans politically:

Smbat, of whom we spoke, the marzpān of Armenia, was a good, pious, and loyal man; he was also a firm adherent to the orthodox faith. Although he knew that Kiwrion was in agreement with the Greeks, he was unwilling to report his complaints about Kiwrion to the Emperor or to the King [of kings], knowing well that they would serve no purpose. He had learned at one time of the Emperors will, that the latter was in accord with Kiwrion, and that he had given orders for (Kiwrións deviation) [Uxtanēs 2, 5, Arzoumanian, 1985, p. 50].

In the eyes of Uxtanēs, Kiwrion was the one who controlled the politics of Iberia¹³. What holds true for Iberia, probably holds true for all of Caucasia. However, especially in the case of Albania, the politics of the ecclesiastical princes were limited by the strong military presence of the Sāsānids.

The aspect of the division into a Roman and a Sāsānid sphere of influence is not quite negligible for the evaluation of the political importance of the Catholicate, because theoretically the church – respectively the Catholicos – was able to wield influence on both parts. A king would not be able to do that because he was either subordinate to the Romans or the Persians.¹⁴ Nevertheless, that the church was de facto as much divided as the state is proven clearly by the religious policy of the post-Justinianic emperors in the case of Armenia.

2. THE CHURCH AND THE SĀSĀNID ADMINISTRATION

As long as there was a king, he was responsible to appoint a Catholicos. With the abolishment of the kingdom, it was generally recognized in Armenia that this right for investiture had been devolved upon the *šāhān šāh*: The Sāsānids – who had no experience with this new administrative structure – experimented at first and appointed foreign Catholicoi. In practice this happened as follows: After the Armenian Catholicos Sahak, mentioned above, refused to play a role with the deposition of the last Armenian Arsacid Artāšēs IV he was discharged by the *šāhān šāh* Bahrām V (421–439) and a certain Surmak was enthroned in his place. Even though he was the candidate of the local nobility, he was expelled within a year and precisely that nobility asked the *šāhān šāh* for a new Catholicos. After that, Syrians have been predominantly entrusted with this office and these have of course not been praised by our Armenian authors. The nobility soon seems to have had enough from these foreign bishops [Movsēs Xorenac'i, 3, 64; Thomson, 1978, p. 340–342].

After the problems with the local noblemen that were caused by the dispatch of foreign Syrians, the tactics were probably quickly changed. In 607, at any rate, it was common that

¹² The denomination has been seen and used as a political instrument by the Armenians already in the seventh century, as a letter of the Smbat Bagratuni proves: *Since then (506 and the refusal of the decisions of Chalcedon) all hostilities ended and Christ God was glorified. And as the faith of our blessed fathers and holy doctors was confirmed, we all who are the subjects of the King of kings became united in one faith.* [Uxtanēs 2, 55; Arzoumanian, 1985, p. 104 = GT' 73, 322–324; Garsoïan, 1999, p. 551–553; Alek'size, 1993, p. 72–75]. The possibly fictional accusation that Movsēs of C'urtavi worked together with the usurper Bahrām Čōbīn [Shahbazi, 1988; Uxtanēs, 2, 564; Arzoumanian, 1985, p. 106 = GT' 74, 325–327; Garsoïan, 1999, p. 554–556; Alek'size, 1993, p. 76–79], confirms the possibility of the involvement in geopolitical proceedings. For the polemical purposes of Uxtanēs see: [Alek'size, 2018(1)].

¹³ In later times, as claimed by Uxtanēs [2, 57; Arzoumanian, 1985, p. 107], Kiwrion tried to switch again to the Persian side, because he feared that the *šāhān šāh* would help Smbat and interfere in Iberian matters. If this is true, the recent turn is not connected to a change in the dogmatic position. On the person Kiwrion see: [Alek'size, 2018(1), p. 177; Alek'size, 1968, p. 167–273; Akinean, 1910].

¹⁴ Thus, Smbat tries to motivate the bishops of Roman Armenia in 607 to attend a second synod. A clear statement about the effect of this inquiry is difficult, because the political events overtook the religious ones. In 608, Theodosiopolis fell to the Persians and with it the majority of Roman Armenia. The bishops were placed under Persian control [Sebeos 33; Thomson et al., 1999, p. 64]. Uxtanēs states only that the Roman bishops later accepted the Miaphysit faith of Abraham [Uxtanēs 2, 35; Arzoumanian, 1985, p. 81].

the Sāsānids contented themselves with the confirmation of the respective candidates of the Armenians, as the example of the election of Abraham (607) shows:

Then after Lord Movsēs, Lord Abraham became Catholicos of Armenia, from the district of Rštunik', from the village of Albathan, at the command of Smbat Bagratuni, who was marzpān of Armenia at the command of Kosrow (II) [Step'anos Taronec'i, 2, 2; Manukyan, 2012, p. 692; Greenwood, 2017, p. 153]¹⁵.

The confirmation took place only indirectly and was not even a concern of the King of kings himself, but of his officers. This, however, is not proof of his resignation, because especially this Smbat also interfered massively with the christological altercations of the Armenian church. This was accepted by the Armenians not at least because he was, apart from his work as a Sāsānid administration officer (*marzpān*), the most powerful Armenian nobleman of his time.

Even in this time however, the *šāhān šāh* was able to intervene in the nomination of bishops of the dioceses, even if this was more of a theoretical possibility that was seldom used in practice:

I (Smbat) told you (Movsēs) earlier that I am willing to write to the King of kings, who could give orders through his mercy for you to go back to your church and hold your office and administer to your people according to your beliefs [Uxtanēs 2, 59; Arzoumanian, 1985, p. 110 = GT' 76, 331f.; Garsoïan, 1999, p. 558; Alek'size, 1993, p. 82–84].

Movsēs had been bishop of C'urtavi¹⁶, the capital of the important principedom Gugark' / Gogarene and was thus subordinate to the Iberian jurisdiction, on which Smbat had no bearing. The *šāhān šāh*, however, could very well have intervened, but it seems that Smbat Bagratuni did not pursue these concerns. On Armenian territory, the matter played differently: here, Smbat intervened directly with the filling of the Catholicate by enforcing his candidate at a small synod of chosen bishops.

At this time and at this juncture Smbat marzpān of Hyrcania, after consultation with the naxarars (nobles) and the aristocrats of Armenia, convened a council of bishops in order to elect a [new] Catholicos for the Armenians [Uxtanēs, 2, 30; Arzoumanian, 1985, p. 77]¹⁷.

After this was done in March 607, a bigger synod was convened later in the year¹⁸, in which the Armenian church was represented as a whole:

Smbat, marzpān of Hyrcania, in fact, sent an edict with the consent of the princes and the naxarars of the country, inviting [the bishops] to convene in the majestic, illustrious, and famous capital city of Dvin in Greater Armenia, the designated place for the council [Uxtanēs, 2, 35; Arzoumanian, 1985, p. 81].

That Smbat had the power to enforce something like this (the patriarchal chair had been vacant for the three previous years), is certain proof for the dependence of the dioceses on the Persian administration. Nothing different happens of course on the Roman side, but this cannot be addressed here¹⁹.

Therefore, there were very close relations between the churches and the Sāsānid administration. These did not limit themselves to the appointment of officials but lead to the direct integration of the churches into the administration of the ruled areas. In other words: the church was entrusted with certain tasks:

The most important task was the levy of dues²⁰: We have already seen, that the bishops and catholicoi were responsible for the levy of certain charges. Our Armenian sources connect this duty directly with the abolishment of the kingdom:

¹⁵ About the election of Abraham reports also [Sebeos 27; Thomson et al., 1999, p. 48].

¹⁶ For the localisation of C'urtavi see: [Plontke-Lüning, 2018, p. 193; Schleicher, 2017, p. 228, n. 6].

¹⁷ Hyrcania is a region on the Southeast coast of the Caspian Sea which was extremely important for the defences of the Sāsānid Eastern border.

¹⁸ On the 3rd council of Dvin see: [Alek'size, 2018(a), p. 100; Garsoïan, 1999, p. 283].

¹⁹ For the relation between church and state in Roman Armenia see: [Adontz, 1970].

²⁰ For the known kinds of taxes in Armenia see [Adontz, 1970, p. 363]. The levy of these charges was bound to the naxarar system [Adontz, 1970, p. 353]. Because the church arose from this system and was organised likewise,

He (Bahrām V.) gave the archiepiscopal throne to another Syrian, Samuel by name, so that he might be a rival and antipatriarch to Sahak, and he set as his duties: to assist the marzpān and to oversee the assessment of the required taxes, the law courts, and other secular institutions [Movsēs Xorenac'i, 3, 65; Thomson 1978, p. 343].

Further details are unknown²¹. From Sāsānid perspective it is understandable to use the churches for such a service, because they had mechanisms to collect charges that were due to them anyway. And that they were justified to levy them for themselves, is shown by the Kanones of Vač'agan III that were set by him during his church reform [Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 26; Dowsett, 1961, p. 50–54]²². However, regular charges to the church are also attested for Armenia in the fifth century, for which a system had to be in place [Elišē, 2 p. 23; Thomson, 1989, p. 77].

Another important function of the clerical institutions was the jurisdiction. Several areas of the jurisdiction had of course been exercised by church officials already before the abolishment of the kingdoms²³. Without the royal central administration, this sphere of duties, however, will still have gained importance.

He received the thanks and gratitude from all in view of the fact that despite the so many years of vacancy, [Vrt'anes] had left nothing undone during his vicariate; on the contrary, he had carried out his duties, doing justice perfectly and thoroughly to all and at all times while in office. He always defended the rights of the destitute, did justice to the orphans, and rendered the widow her right, following the words of the Prophet [Uxtanēs 2, 38; Arzoumanian, 1985, p. 85]²⁴.

An intervention of the Persians in this area was as grave as one in financial respects for the Caucasians. The Armenian bishop Elišē reports from the time of the great Armenian revolt of 450/51 that Yazdegerd II (438–457) sent a *marzpān* to Armenia who not only performed a census for the increase of the tax burden, but also brought with him a *chief-magus, as judge of the land, so that they might corrupt the glory of the church* [Elišē 2 p. 23; Thomson, 1989, p. 76]. For the Armenians a Persian interference in this area was worse than the financial pressure through the tax increase.

Because our sources connect these measures always with a general suppression of Christians, it can only be viewed as a temporary phenomenon. Most of the time the church will have exercised its functions mostly unrestricted and in all probability in collaboration together with the Sāsānid sovereignty. The Sāsānids were also interested in the smooth working of this system. The Armenian, Iberian or Albanian Catholicos certainly carried out his task to assist the Persian *marzpān* usually in an acceptable manner.

The Caucasian regional churches had to be interested in a collaboration with the Persian power at least because it was useful to them in many ways. Principally, the following always applies to Caucasia: the bishop is a nobleman who often held an appropriate estate. The diocese, too, generally held property, or rather the respective church [Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 26; Dowsett, 1961, p. 52]. The Armenian Catholicos, who followed in a sense in the footsteps of the Arsacid kings, held apart from an extensive 'crown dependency' also his own dominion²⁵. The interest of

it also adopted some of the functions: „The Armenian Church was feudal in structure; it reproduced the social and economic regulations customary in naxarar society, and preserved them in part after the disappearance of the secular feudal nobility” [Adontz, 1970, p. 366].

²¹ These charges were carried by the clerical institutions over the *marzpān* to the Persian central administration (as e.g. in the case of Vasak of Siwnik' who served as *marzpān* of Armenia until 452: *The tribute of all Armenia is under my control (...)* [Łazar P'arpec'i 45; Thomson, 1991, p. 129].

²² See also [Adontz, Garsoïan, 1970, 367].

²³ Clear descriptions of the responsibilities are hard to construct because the jurisdiction in Caucasia was based on tradition and custom and not on solid laws. Especially for Armenia see [Adontz, Garsoïan, 1970, p. 351–353]. There is no Armenian word for law, only an Iranian loan word [Sukiasian, 1963, p. 238–254, 381].

²⁴ Vrt'anes K'ert'ol filled the office of the Armenian Catholicos during the *sede vacante* prior to the election of Abraham 604–607. For his person see [Nersessian, 1945, p. 58].

²⁵ *He (Vrt'anes) then brought the deposit which he was entrusted with by Catholicos Movsēs of Armenia, just before he*

the individual in this dominion becomes tangible again in 428. After Sahak refused to ‘testify’ against the Armenian king, the nobility finds another ringleader, about whom is said:

Then Vram (Bahrām V) in anger held an enquiry in the great court. Paying no heed to Artāšēs he eagerly listened to his detractors, and most especially to the base words of Surmak. For the malicious and contentious princes had promised him the archiepiscopal throne, so in self-interest he had rendered his tongue into a murderous sword [Movsēs Xorenac’i, 3, 64; Thomson, 1978, p. 341].

Linked with the seat of the Catholicos was extensive property that had been confiscated from the degraded Sahak and that Surmak now had high hopes for²⁶. When one had obtained such a territory, it could be extended in a second step, or one could enrich himself through the function he exercised for the Sāsānid administration, as the accusation cited above claims.

The cooperation with the Sāsānids provided apart from the financial gain especially power political benefits. Especially in Armenia, the dioceses had originally been pegged onto the aristocratic families. The principle of the ‘court bishops’, however, had been common in the whole of Caucasia²⁷. The Persian power could be – as the Iberian bishop claims – used as a tool to gain independence.

From then on (after the death of Vahan Mamikonian around 510), Persian *marz-pāns* dominated Armenia, the Christian custom was despised, the government of the churches was destroyed, the authority of the dynasts was overthrown by the Persian *marz-pān*, the Catholicos and the bishops turned away from the truth. They received the Persian ‘license’ to oppose the dynasts. They raised for themselves the taxes of the provinces, because the enemy had entrusted the land to the bishops and choir-bishops and made them obedient to the kingship of the Persians [Arseni Sapareli, 11, 2; Alek’siz, Mahé, 2010, p. 114].

Even though the words of Arsen carry a lot of polemic, obviously the cooperation with the Persian sovereignty had to have been in the interest of the churches. Understandably, this is not really addressed in our Christian sources. Its existence can be seen, however, every time when it comes to fractions and when the cooperation does not work.

In summary, it can be said that, next to the kingdom, the church developed itself into another serious centralistic instance in the Caucasian states Albania, Iberia, and Armenia, with which the empires of late antiquity could collaborate. With the increasing power of the churches, in some cases supported by the monarchs, the kingdom itself become expendable. After the abolishment of the kingdoms, the churches undertook official functions like jurisdiction and the collection of taxes and they had to collaborate inevitably with the Sassanid administration. From this collaboration the churches profited immensely, in financial as well as power political aspects.

Fractions appeared when a *šāhān šāh* tried to substitute the clerical functions with an independent system (as in the case of Yazdegerd II). In our sources such phases appear as moments

died. It [included] the saving and life-giving cross of God and the relics of the holy apostles which St. Gregory had brought from Rome, given to him by the pious Constantine; also the throne and the crosier which were kept, honored, and adored, along with all the sacred vessels, such as, chalices, covers of the holy altar, curtains, censers, fans, the collar of the Catholicos, made of silk and adorned with precious stones and pearls, mounted in gold, and other garments and garbs of priests and deacons, reminding the specifications of the Prophet, such were the ones with a purple edge, and those bordered with purple, and still those which are specified before and after them. (The treasury) included also bright garments richly adorned: gold stuffs, fabrics, colorful purples in different shades and tints, all of which adorned and brocaded beautifully with patterns of colorful flowers. (Finally), there was the precious vestment of our pious King Trdat which was presented to the house of the Lord as a gift for sacred use which we have seen with our own eyes [Uxtanēs 2, 38; Arzoumanian 1985, p. 85].

²⁶ Finally, Vram ordered Artāšēs to be stripped of his crown and imprisoned, and all the possessions of his family to be confiscated to the court; that Sahak the Great [should be treated] likewise and the domains of the Catholicos be confiscated to the court; (...) [Movsēs Xorenac’i, 3, 64; Thomson, 1978, p. 341]; Łazar P’arpec’i [Łazar P’arpec’i, 14; Thomson, 1991, p. 59] also mentions the dispossession of the domains of the Catholicos. Surmak [HANjB 1972 s. v. Surmak] was a priest from Arckē (mod. Alilcevaz). Already in the 4th century, the Armenian church was in possession of estates in 15 districts [BP, 4, 14; Garsoïan, 1989, p. 139; Adontz, 1970, p. 100; Hewsen, 1992, p. 308–318].

²⁷ Ex. Varsk’en; the Canones of Vač’agan, at last also Movsēs of C’urtavi.

of the persecution of Christians or as attempts to spread Mazdaism forcefully. Actually, however, they were rather seen as assaults on their own power positions. Because of the strong local entrenchment of the regional churches, such phases, however, were always short-lived.

With the reforms of Kavādh's I and Kōsrow' I, a certain institutionalisation of the collaboration between the churches and the Persian empire can be found. The increasing spread of a direct Sāsānid rule is also based on this collaboration:²⁸ A fraction with the church, as happens at the end of the 560s [Evagr. HE 5, 7; Sebeos, 8, p. 68; Thomson, 1999, p. 7; Garitte, 1952, p. 175]; see also: [Turtledove, 1983, p. 299; Toumanoff, 1963, p. 379], is equivalent to the loss of the rule over the respective areas.

In conclusion, we want to return once more to the statement of the Arsen cited at the beginning, and the associated question regarding adoptions. This is not the only evidence for the function of adoptions in the collaboration between the Sāsānids and the regional churches. Photios, the patriarch of Constantinople (858-886) speaks about this in a letter, within the scope of a larger context covering the religious politics of the post-Justinianic emperors:

And the Persian king was happy about that. He was glad that the Armenians had withdrawn from the (Bishop's) consecration of the Romans. He praised Nerses and fulfilled the previously promised covenant and accepted him as the adopted son, and he confided to him and the bishops who sympathized with him the taxes of the Armenians [Photios, 1968, p. 67].

The details of the collaboration between the church and the administration and the legal situation of the adoption will have to be examined on the basis of Sāsānid law²⁹. The historical sources can only initiate further engagement with this subject. Further findings will enrich not only our knowledge about the organisation of the local churches but also about the Sāsānid administration itself.

ABBREVIATIONS

BP – Ps.-P'awstos. *Buzandaran Patmut' iwnk'*. St. Petersburg, 1883 (repr.: Delmar, NY. 1984) (in Armenian) [Ps.-P'awstos. *The Epic Histories*. St. Petersburg, 1883].

GT' – *Girk' T'lt'oc'*. Ed. N. Polarean. Jerusalem: St. James, 1994 [*The Book of Letters* Ed. N. Polarean. Jerusalem: St. James, 1994 (in Armenian)].

HAnjB – Ačařyan H. *Hayoc' Anjnanunneri Bařaran*. 5 vol. 2nd ed. Yerevan, 1972 [Ačařyan H. *Etymological Root Dictionary of the Armenian Language*. 5 vol. 2nd ed. Yerevan: Yerevan State University, 1972 (in Armenian)].

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²⁸ This of course holds true for Iberia and Albania as well as for Armenia. In a letter of Kiwrion to Abraham exists a passage in which he invokes the authority of the *řāhān řāh*: *Especially since in my humble self the Lord our God gave our church more splendor, and strengthened our faith more, and raised me even more by the King of kings in glory, and let me progress further than my fathers did, and especially as all my colleagues*. [GT' 78, 336–338; Garsořan, 1999, p. 562–565; Alek'size, 1993, p. 88–91]. Here Kiwrion appears as the vassal Kōsrow II (590–628). See [Markwart, 1931, p. 157]. There is, however, no talk of adoption.

²⁹ Maybe there is some connection with the fact, that financial officers must have been noble by birth [Christensen, 1947, p. 127]. On adoption by itself see e.g. [Christensen, 1947, p. 326].

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