

# Sasanian Reflections in Armenian Sources

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The deep impression of Iran upon all aspects of early mediaeval Armenia has long been recognized. Although linguists may have taken the lead in tracing this influence, scholars in all disciplines, particularly historians and theologians, have unearthed multiple parallels and connections between the two cultures. The penetrating studies by Garsoïan and Russell over the past four decades have proved to be particularly influential, to the extent that no scholar today would seriously contemplate studying early mediaeval Armenia without acknowledging its Iranian heritage.<sup>1</sup> Indeed such is the degree of unanimity over the level of Iranian influence upon all aspects of Armenian society and culture that the contention has begun to operate in the opposite direction. Armenian sources have been exploited to shed light upon Iranian, and specifically Sasanian, history. Pourshariati's recent study of Sasanian Iran exemplifies this approach, making extensive use of one Armenian text in particular, namely the History attributed to Sebeos.<sup>2</sup> Taking this process a stage further, she also considers theoretical reconstructions of mediaeval Armenian society and applies them to the wider Sasanian world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> N.G. Garsoïan, 'Prolegomena to a study of the Iranian aspects in Arsacid Armenia,' *Handes Amsorya* vol. XC, 1976, col. 177-234; repr. in N.G. Garsoïan, *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians*, Variorum, London, 1985, no. X; N.G. Garsoïan, 'The Locus of the Death of Kings: Iranian Armenia – The Inverted Image', *The Armenian Image in History and Literature*, ed. R. Hovannisian, UCLA Studies in Near Eastern Culture and Society 3, Chico CA, 1981, pp. 27-64; repr. in Garsoïan, *Armenia*, no. XI; N.G. Garsoïan., 'The two voices of Armenian mediaeval historiography: The Iranian Index,' *Studia Iranica* vol. 25, 1996, pp. 7-43; repr. in N.G. Garsoïan, *Church and Culture in Early Mediaeval Armenia*, Ashgate Variroum, Aldershot, 1999, no. XI. J.R. Russell, 'Armenia and Iran: III Armenian Religion,' *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, vol. II, 1987, pp. 438-444; J.R. Russell, *Armenian and Iranian Studies*, Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies 9, Cambridge MA, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> P. Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2008, especially chapter 2 and the first three sections of chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, pp. 53-56, drawing extensively upon C. Toumanoff's long study 'The Social Background of Christian Caucasia' which was published in his *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, Georgetown University Press, Georgetown, 1963, pp. 33-144.



This is certainly not the occasion on which to embark upon a comprehensive review of the relationship between Iran and Armenia in the mediaeval period, nor to offer some meticulous historical reconstruction. The following is intended to serve as no more than an introductory survey of relevant Armenian sources for the study of Sasanian Iran. Particular attention will be paid to three Armenian historical texts. In addition, several other Armenian sources will be highlighted whose significance for Sasanian scholarship has not perhaps been sufficiently appreciated. Finally, material evidence, specifically two relevant inscriptions, will be introduced.

Before embarking on this exercise, however, a wider interpretative framework needs to be sketched within which the individual sources may be analyzed. This comprises four general propositions. Firstly it seems that Iranian influences upon Armenia were multiple and varied, ranging from long-established social and cultural ties to brief episodes of conflict and confrontation. It may therefore be more appropriate to think of different levels or layers of Iranian influence operating across Armenia simultaneously, some deep-rooted, others ephemeral. Their combination will have altered over time. Secondly, it seems very probable that these influences engendered different responses in different regions of Armenia. To take one example, Siwnik', or Sisagan, is repeatedly presented in Armenian sources as the domain of perfidious princes whose commitment to the Armenian cause was inherently suspect.<sup>4</sup> Yet the degree to which Siwnik' perceived itself to be Armenian remains very open. If there was a separate Siwni language, as Zachariah of Mitylene maintained,<sup>5</sup> and if the *diwan* of Siwnik' could be transferred from Dvin to the city of P'aytakaran at the request of prince Vahan of Siwnik', 'to put the city in the *šahrmar* of Atrpatakan (Middle Persian *Adurbādagān*) so that the name of Armenian would no

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<sup>4</sup> The treachery of Vasak prince of Siwnik' is a central theme in Łazar P'arpets'i's description of the Armenian revolt of 450/451 CE. Łazar attributes the immediate cause of the rebellion to a dispute between Vasak and his son-in-law and successor, Varazvałan. Strikingly, both are condemned in no uncertain terms by the author. Vasak may be malicious (*č'arakhorhurd*), impious (*anōrēn*) and treacherous (*nengawor*) but Varazvałan is malevolent (*č'arimats'in*), impure (*piłts*) and insane (*khelats'nor*). See Łazar P'arpets'i, *Patmut'iwn Hayots'*, ed. G. Tēr Mkrtč'ean and S. Malkhasean, Tiflis, 1904; repr. Delmar NY, 1985, pp. 39-86; English translation by R.W. Thomson, *The History of Łazar P'arpec'i*, Occasional Papers and Proceedings 4, Scholars Press, Atlanta GA, 1991, pp. 75-132.

<sup>5</sup> Zacharias of Mytilene, *Chronicle*, ed. by E.W. Brooks, *Historia ecclesiastica*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium vol. 84, Scriptorum Syri tome 39, Louvain, 1953, xii.7, p. 214; English translation by F. J. Hamilton and E. W. Brooks, *The Syriac chronicle known as that of Zachariah of Mitylene*, Methuen & Co., London, 1899; repr. New York, 1979, p. 328.

longer be applied to them,<sup>6</sup> there are good grounds for supposing that the very status of Siwnik' as Armenian was a matter of contention. This illuminates why its engagement with Sasanian Iran was so often out of step with the rest of Armenia. This introduces a broader issue, specifically the degree of uniformity – social, cultural, linguistic – within Armenia. Although it is generally assumed that all the princely houses of Armenia operated in the same way in terms of inheritance, land-holding and that nexus of mutual rights and responsibilities through which social relations were structured, what if there were slight differences between them, if what can be demonstrated within one family cannot be predicated for all of them? This has implications for wider comparative studies between Armenia and Sasanian Iran, not least because the great noble houses in Iran might themselves have possessed a similar range of individual traditions, making it harder to determine what is representative and what is anomalous and unique. Thirdly the degree to which Iranian influences were themselves conditioned and modified by exposure to other traditions and circumstances operating across Armenia needs to be established. It is not hard to envisage how the reception of these influences and their adoption was accompanied by alteration. And finally, the evolutionary nature of the relationship between Iran and Armenia deserves greater stress. There is every reason to suppose that the relationship developed and changed very significantly over time. The character of that relationship in the middle of the fifth century had altered dramatically by the start of the seventh century. The projection of a valiant Christian nation bravely resisting an impious Sasanian oppressor – described so vividly but also so differently by Łazar and Elišē<sup>7</sup> – may be the most familiar expression of their engagement, at least from an Armenian perspective, but it needs to be set against the remarkable confessional repositioning which occurred under Xusrō II (Armenian *Khosrov*), with miaphysite clerics, including Armenian churchmen, now very much preferred over members of the Church of the East.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately something

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<sup>6</sup> Sebeos, *Patmut'iwñ Sebeosi*, ed. G.V. Abgaryan, Erevan, 1979, pp. 67.32-68.2; English translation and commentary by R.W. Thomson and J.D. Howard-Johnston, *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, Translated Texts for Historians 31, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1999, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Elišē, *Elišēi vasn Vadanay ew Hayots' Paterazmin*, ed. E. Tēr Minasyan, Erevan, 1957; English translation by R.W. Thomson, *Elišē: History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies 5, Cambridge MA, 1982. For a novel assessment of this work, see S.P. Cowe, 'Elišē's "Armenian War" as a metaphor for the spiritual life,' in *From Byzantium to Iran*, ed. J-P. Mahé and R.W. Thomson, Scholars Press, Atlanta GA, 1997, pp. 341-359.

<sup>8</sup> For the positive reception of the Armenian Catholicos Komitas, see T.W. Greenwood, 'The Armenian Church in the Seventh Century,' in *A History of the Armenian Church*, ed. K. Bardakjian (Wayne State

of the changing character of the relationship can be traced within the body of Armenian materials discussed below.

For scholars of Parthian and Sasanian Iran, the two best known Armenian sources remain the so-called *Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk'*, or *Epic Histories*, and *Patmut'iwn Hayots'*, or *History of Armenia*, compiled by Movsēs Khorenats'i.<sup>9</sup> Both have been quarried by Garsoïan and Russell for their multiple reflections of Iranian, and specifically Parthian, tradition. It is worth noting that both texts were compiled long after the events they describe. The *Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk'*, which records exclusively fourth-century Armenian history, was probably composed in the last third of the fifth century; Garsoïan argues persuasively for a date in the 470s.<sup>10</sup> The date of composition of the *History* of Movsēs Khorenats'i remains contentious. Although its coverage extends from Noah to the death of Mesrop Maštots' in 440 CE, there is a considerable body of credible evidence which collectively suggests that it was composed at the very end of the seventh century or at the start of the eighth century.<sup>11</sup> Once more therefore there is a significant gap between the chronological limits and the putative date of composition. Whilst this gap does not undermine the centrality of these texts for the study of deep-seated Iranian influence within Armenia, and the persistence of Iranian traditions, it may distend their recollection of contemporary conditions prevailing within, and attitudes towards, Sasanian Iran. Such a gap can have a distancing effect, causing later phenomena to be retrojected back into the past and episodes to be modified in the light of subsequent developments and events. The risks of anachronism and conflation are substantial, with perceptions and details which may never have existed concurrently jumbled together in a single narrative.

In an attempt to avoid these pitfalls, this survey advocates a different approach, one which is focused upon the potential historical contribution of those Armenian texts which attest contemporary

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University Press) (Forthcoming) and below. For confessional repositioning, see B. Flusin, *Saint Anastase le perse et l'histoire de la Palestine au début du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 2 vols., Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Paris, 1992, II, pp. 106-118.

<sup>9</sup> Buzandaran, *Patmut'iwn Hayots'*, Venice, 1933; English translation by N.G. Garsoïan, *The Epic Histories (Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk')*, Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies 8, Cambridge MA, 1989. Movsēs Khorenats'i, *Patmut'iwn Hayots'*, ed. M. Abelean and S. Yarut'iwnean, Tiflis 1913; repr. Delmar NY, 1981; English translation by R.W. Thomson, *Moses Khorenats'i: History of the Armenians*, Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies 4, Cambridge MA, 1978; repr. and revised Caravan Books, Ann Arbor MI, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Garsoïan, *Epic Histories*, pp. 6-11.

<sup>11</sup> For a brief summary, see Thomson, *Moses Khorenats'i*, pp. ix-xvii and 55-60.



Armenian attitudes towards, and experience of, Sasanian Persia. Three such texts have been identified. The first of these, the *Patmut'iwñ Hayots'*, or *History of Armenia*, composed by Łazar P'arpets'i, was written around 500 CE, and is best-known for its account of the Armenian uprising against Yazdgerd (Armenian *Yazkert*) II in 450/451 CE, extending across the first two books. Its final third book, however, is focused largely upon the events of the 480s and concludes with the appointment of Vahan Mamikonean as *marzpan* of Armenia in 485 CE.<sup>12</sup> This has not received the sustained scholarly attention that it merits. The *Patmut'iwñ Sebēosi*, or *History* attributed to Sebeos, was completed in 655 CE, with three updating notices being appended to the original conclusion no later than 661 CE.<sup>13</sup> Its coverage of Sasanian history, as well as Sasanian engagement with Armenia, extends from 572 CE down to the death of Yazdgerd III. As will be proved below, this text affords significant historical purchase upon the late Sasanian world. Finally book II of the so-called *Patmut'iwñ Ałuanits'*, or *History of Ałuanġ'*, variously and wrongly attributed to either Movsēs Daskhurants'i or Movsēs Kałankatuats'i, contains a plethora of detail commenting upon Sasanian Iran in the seventh century.<sup>14</sup> The general consensus of opinion among scholars is that the rich, detailed historical narrative embedded in Book II derives from contemporary or near-contemporary sources which have not been repeatedly revised or rewritten, although there remains significant disagreement over the vehicle in which this material was preserved. Some scholars have argued forcefully for the existence of a single postulated source and even gone so far as to give it a separate name; others remain unconvinced.<sup>15</sup>

Let us turn briefly to each of these texts. Book III of Łazar's *History* is the longest section of the work and engages with near-contemporary events and conditions. It is centered upon the career of Łazar's sponsor, Vahan Mamikonean, and specifically the circumstances in which he rebelled against Pērōz (459-484 CE) and came to terms with his successor Walāxš (Armenian *Valarš*) (484-488 CE). The text

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<sup>12</sup> Łazar, pp. 107-182; Thomson, *History of Łazar*, pp. 158-245.

<sup>13</sup> For a recent study of the whole text, see T.W. Greenwood, 'Sasanian Echoes and Apocalyptic Expectations: A re-evaluation of the Armenian History attributed to Sebeos,' *Le Muséon* vol. 115.3/4, 2002, pp. 323-397.

<sup>14</sup> Movsēs Kałankatuats'i, *Patmut'iwñ Ałuanits' aškarhi*, ed. V. Arak'elyan, Erevan, 1983, pp. 106-180; English translation by C.J.F. Dowsett, *The History of the Caucasian Albanians by Movsēs Dasxuranci*, London Oriental Series 8, Oxford University Press, London, 1961, pp. 61-116.

<sup>15</sup> For a helpful summary of this debate, see J.D. Howard-Johnston, 'Armenian historians of Heraclius: an examination of the aims sources and working methods of Sebeos and Movses Daskhurantsi,' in *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*, ed. G.J. Reinink and B.H. Stolte, Peeters, Leuven, 2002, pp. 41-62; repr. *ibid.*, *East Rome, Sasanian Persia and the End of Antiquity*, Ashgate Variorum, 2006, no. V.

provides a sustained study of the relationship between Armenia and Sasanian Iran over a narrow window of time, specifically 482-485 CE. It offers considerable insight into a wide range of subjects, including Sasanian military hierarchy, provincial administration and political culture. Yet it remains the least-studied section of the text. In an attempt to redress this, the following three case studies illustrate its historical potential.

Lazar records that the Armenian revolt was initiated in 482 CE, when both Georgia (Armenian *Virk'*) and Albania (Armenian *Ałuank'*) were experiencing political unrest.<sup>16</sup> At that time, unspecified Armenian forces were stationed in Albania under the overall command of Zarmihr *hazarawuxt* (Middle Persian *hazārufft*); they had been sent there to quell unidentified rebellious garrisons. These forces then returned to Armenian territory and attended before the *marzpan* of Armenia Atrvšnasp Yozmandean and the *hazarapet* (Middle Persian *hazārbed*) of Armenia, Vehvehnam. It is very tempting to interpret this encounter, between Armenian troops returning after service elsewhere and the local governor, as a regular, established tradition, designed to foster ties and develop relations at the local level. On this occasion however, it served as the occasion for the fomenting of rebellion. Moving forward in time, when Vałarš (Walāxš) resolved to seek a negotiated settlement with Vahan Mamikonean in 484 CE, he dispatched Nikhor Všnaspdat, a 'calm and judicious man, concerned for the welfare of the land.'<sup>17</sup> First contact was made with Vahan by a delegation which included Šapuh *khorrhrdean dpir*, 'secretary to the council,' and Mihr-Všnasp Čuaršats'i.<sup>18</sup> When Vahan went to meet Nikhor in person, he was met by a second party, comprising Bazē, *šahap* (Middle Persian *šahrab*) of Atrpayakan, Vehnam, the *hazarapet* of Armenia, Ners-Šapuh, the brother of Mihran who had previously served in Armenia, and five other senior Persians.<sup>19</sup> The use of *šahap* in combination with a single province supports Gyselen's recently-published reflections on this provincial office.<sup>20</sup> What is exceptional is that this appears in a late fifth-century source, for all other references to this position occur in primary sources dating from the third

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<sup>16</sup> Lazar, pp. 118-119; Thomson, *History of Lazar*, pp. 171-173.

<sup>17</sup> Lazar, p. 159; Thomson, *History of Lazar*, p. 219: 'zayr hez ew mtats'i ew aškarhašēn.'

<sup>18</sup> Lazar, p. 160; Thomson, *History of Lazar*, p. 220.

<sup>19</sup> Lazar, p. 164; Thomson, *History of Lazar*, pp. 224-225: 'zhing ews ayr ayl awag Parsiks'.

<sup>20</sup> R. Gyselen, *Nouveaux matériaux pour le géographie historique de l'empire sassanide: Sceaux administratifs de la collection Ahmad Saedi*, *Studia Iranica Cahier 24*, Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, Paris, 2002, pp. 75-77 and pp. 106-110; R. Gyselen, *Sasanian Seals and Sealings in the A. Saedi Collection*, *Acta Iranica 44*, Peeters, Leuven, 2007, pp. 35-42.





and fourth centuries. The involvement of Vehvehnam at the start and the end of the rebellion is also notable. His participation in the negotiations which produced the final settlement looks deliberate. Not only did he have recent experience of service in Armenia and hence knowledge of the Armenian leadership; his presence may also have inspired confidence on the part of those leaders – here was someone with whom they were personally acquainted. Therefore in spite of the Armenian rebellion, in the course of which his colleague, *marzpan* Atrvšnasp Yozmandean, had been killed, it seems that Vehvehnam had managed to hold on to his office.<sup>21</sup> However, as we shall see below, failures by servants of the Sasanian state were not always tolerated.

Secondly, the settlement reached between Nikhor and Vahan Mamikonean included a provision that the native (Armenian *bnik*) Armenian cavalry should be dispatched to join the army being raised against Zareh, son of Pērōz.<sup>22</sup> The civil war between Zareh and Vałarš is not mentioned by any other Armenian source. It is instructive to note that Vahan raised and equipped the cavalry force and placed it under the command of Vrēn Vanandats'i, although his nephew Grigor also took part. Within a year of the Armenian revolt, therefore, erstwhile rebel Armenian troops were serving Sasanian interests outside Armenia. It is tempting to interpret this as a return to a normal state of affairs after a temporary hiatus rather than constituting a radical departure from the previous course of dealing. This may also be inferred from the immediate appointment of another Persian *marzpan*, Andekan, over Armenia.<sup>23</sup> Andekan's subsequent recommendation to Vałarš, however, is decidedly atypical.<sup>24</sup> He advised that Vahan Mamikonean himself be appointed the next *marzpan* of Armenia. Andekan justified his opinion on two grounds, both of which are revealing. Firstly he argued that Armenia was a large country and that two or three years was insufficient time to acquaint oneself with the affairs of the land and its inhabitants. This implies that a *marzpan's* term of office was relatively short, fixed at two or three years. Presumably this prevented them from developing a web of personal ties and affiliations which might be exploited for subsequent political advantage. Secondly, Andekan noted that sending a Persian (Armenian *parsik*) *marzpan* would involve sending his wife, children, household, friends and servants,

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<sup>21</sup> For these events and his death at the hands of Vasak Mamikonean and Babgēn of Siwnik', see Łazar, pp. 118-124; Thomson, *History of Łazar*, pp. 172-179.

<sup>22</sup> Łazar, pp. 171-172; Thomson, *History of Łazar*, pp. 232-233.

<sup>23</sup> Łazar, p. 177; Thomson, *History of Łazar*, p. 239.

<sup>24</sup> Łazar, pp. 177-178; Thomson, *History of Łazar*, pp. 239-240.



all at the considerable expense of the ‘lord of the Aryans,’ a phrase used repeatedly for the Sasanian king. Andekan then described the alternative, that if the *marzpan* and his entourage were sustained by the country, this would do considerable damage to its inhabitants. By appointing Vahan, therefore, Vałarš would benefit the royal treasury by saving on the cost of appointing a Persian. It seems that in 485 CE, *marzpan*s could be remunerated in one of two ways, either directly through the payment of a stipend, or by being allowed free reign over the territory to which they had been appointed.

Finally, prior to the revolt itself in 482 CE, Vahan Mamikonean became embroiled in a dispute over gold mines.<sup>25</sup> Łazar reports that Vahan had an associate (Armenian *gortsakits*‘) called Vriw, ‘of insignificant family and inexperienced, the son of a Syrian.’ Being unable to conduct the business of the royal treasury, he attended before Pērōz (459-484 CE) and accused Vahan of preventing him from undertaking his duty in the gold mines. Furthermore, he claimed that Vahan had seized the gold for himself and was planning to go either to the emperor or to the land of the Huns, seeking troops with which to mount a rebellion. Vahan in turn attended upon the king of kings and defended himself, principally it seems by presenting Pērōz with a very large sum of gold. He was placated and Vahan returned to Armenia. What should we make of this episode? Evidently the gold mines in question were located on land controlled by Vahan, for this would explain how he could prevent Vriw from gaining access to them. It seems that Vriw was responsible for the extraction of these gold reserves on behalf of the royal treasury; this is both asserted in the text and can be inferred from the complaint delivered before Peroz at the royal court. On the other hand, Vahan clearly had a role of some kind in the enterprise, for the act of presenting the gold before Pērōz was deemed sufficient for the accusation to be dismissed; there is no suggestion that he was acting beyond his remit. One possible solution is to envisage that Vriw and Vahan were jointly responsible for the extraction of gold from these reserves within Armenia, Vriw as the treasury official and Vahan as the land-owner. It is therefore highly significant that Gyselen has recently identified two near-identical seals which refer to the office of *zarrbed* of Armin, Ardān, Wirōzān, Sīsagān and Marz ī [Nēsawan], literally ‘head of the gold of Armenia, Ałuank’, Georgia, Siwnik’ and the march of Nesawan’.<sup>26</sup> Although the date of these seals is unclear, the reference to Sīsagān as a separate province may offer some assistance, because it may be

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<sup>25</sup> Łazar, pp. 117-118; Thomson, *History of Łazar*, pp. 170-171.

<sup>26</sup> Gyselen, *Nouveaux matériaux*, p. 31, pp. 91-93 and pp. 120-122; Gyselen, *Sasanian Seals and Sealings*, p. 44 and seals I/165 and I/166.





connected with the administrative separation of Siwnik' from Armenia, mentioned above. There is some evidence to suggest that this occurred during the 550s; it had certainly happened by 571 CE. Of course, it is impossible to know whether Vriw held the office of *zarrbed*, nor how responsibility for gold bullion within Sasanian-controlled Armenia was first devolved, nor how it developed over time. Nevertheless the coincidence between the two categories of evidence provides another demonstration, if any were needed, of the historical value of Łazar's *History* for the study of the Sasanian world in the late fifth century.

Although the *History* attributed to Sebeos does not offer such a detailed snapshot of Sasanian government and administration at one point in time, it too possesses great significance. Its importance is historiographical as much as historical in character. The single manuscript preserving the whole text includes an original heading made up of three elements: 'Chronological Work (Armenian *Matean žamanakean*); 'Royal History (Armenian *Patmut'iwon t'agaworakan*); and 'Aryan narrative (Armenian *Vēp ariakan*).<sup>27</sup> Given the predominantly Sasanian focus of the first two-thirds of the text, viewing events through the lives and actions of successive Sasanian kings from Pērōz (459-484 CE) to Yazdgerd III (632-651 CE) in increasing detail, there are good grounds for supposing that the compiler exploited an anterior composition which recorded Sasanian dynastic history.<sup>28</sup> Several characteristics of this 'Royal History' may be discerned. It was structured around the Sasanian royal line, adopting a biographical rather than annalistic framework. Lineage, personality and internal political affairs predominate, with conspicuous attention paid to times of succession and political turmoil. Similar themes are developed across those accounts of Sasanian history which are preserved in ninth and tenth-century compilations, both in Arabic and Persian. But since there are also numerous differences between the versions, both in terms of content and attitude, the simplest solution is to treat all of these texts as reflecting the same Sasanian historiographical tradition. They cannot be traced back to any single work of history. In this respect, the *History* attributed to Sebeos has a particular value. There is no doubt that this Armenian text was compiled in the middle of the seventh century. It therefore predates all the later Arabic and Persian accounts of Sasanian history by at least two centuries. Moreover its rapid obsolescence ensured that it was never reworked or updated. Its reflection of Sasanian 'Royal History' is therefore likely to be

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<sup>27</sup> Sebeos, p. 72; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> For a full exploration of this contention, see Greenwood, 'Sasanian Echoes,' pp. 327-347.



close to the original. It seems that this genre of royal Sasanian history blended fact, anecdote and imaginative reconstruction, rather than depending upon historical records or genuine eye-witness accounts. In other words, Sasanian royal histories were lively literary compositions, fusing fact and fiction to create a dynastic epic. They explored the personalities of the major participants in the historical drama and their interactions; they recorded confrontations with one's opponents, whether in single combat or by way of exchanges of letters or envoys; they described something of Sasanian courtly culture.

Instead of seeking a Pahlavi original underlying the version of Sasanian history preserved in the *History* attributed to Sebeos, it seems more probable that it was composed in Armenian. At various points, it betrays Armenian and Christian tinges. Thus in 591 CE, Xusrō II's rival for the throne, Wahrām Čōbīn (Armenian *Vahram Merhewandak*), offers the leading Armenian prince of the day, Mušet Mamikonean, great swathes of Armenian territory in return for his support.<sup>29</sup> Thomson has observed that this territorial outline bears an uncanny resemblance to the area purportedly converted by St Grigor the Illuminator.<sup>30</sup> Or again, the provocative letter allegedly sent by Xusrō II to Heraclius in 624 CE is in fact based upon several pertinent biblical passages, notably Isaiah's description of Sennacherib's ultimatum to king Hezekiah.<sup>31</sup> Evidently this genre was fluid and could accommodate local sensibilities and attitudes, even those that were Christian. We should perhaps envisage a basic Sasanian narrative focus, onto which could be grafted regional or rival interests, especially those of the greatest Persian families. The past was essentially plastic, to be appropriated and modified as necessary.

Aside from the postulated 'Royal History', the *History* attributed to Sebeos contains one other source of possible Persian provenance, namely a list of the Persian commanders and governors appointed to Armenia.<sup>32</sup> The consistent structure and language of four separate sequences indicates that this list originally extended from the Armenian uprising of 572 CE down to the crushing reverses suffered at

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<sup>29</sup> Sebeos, pp. 77-79; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, pp. 20-22.

<sup>30</sup> Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, p. 21 and n. 151.

<sup>31</sup> Sebeos, p. 123; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, p. 80 and nn. 496 and 498.

<sup>32</sup> Greenwood, 'Sasanian Echoes,' pp. 358-360.



the hands of the emperor Heraclius in 627 CE.<sup>33</sup> These sequences were not integrated into the surrounding passages, thereby disrupting the chronological progression of the narrative. It is striking to note that those who undertook military campaigns within Armenia obtain much greater coverage than those who held the office of *marzpan* during periods of peace. The sixteen years from the appointment of Hratin Datan as *marzpan* in 586 CE is covered by a bare list of seven names. These figures are called *sahmanakalk'*, literally 'holders of a border or frontier.' It is tempting to interpret this as an Armenian calque on the Middle Persian *marzpan*. Once more, the list implies that *marzpan*s were appointed for a fixed term of two or three years. The military commanders however were evidently not *marzpan*s. What offices did they hold? Again the recent sigillographic research undertaken by Gyselen throws up a very intriguing coincidence.<sup>34</sup> One of the seals reveals that one *ērān spāhbed* of *kust ī Adurbādagān*, that is Aryan Commander of the Northern Quarter, bore the name Gōrgōn Mihran as well as the honorific title or epithet of '*hu>adag-Xusrō*', 'well-omened Xusrō'.<sup>35</sup> It is very significant that, according to Sebeos, the Persian commander appointed in 573 – and so during the reign of Xusrō I (531-579 CE) – was named Goḥon Mihran.<sup>36</sup> It seems highly likely therefore that Goḥon Mihran and Gōrgōn Mihran *ērān spāhbed* of *kust ī Adurbādagān* are one and the same. If so, it is conceivable that the list of commanders preserved within the *History* attributed to Sebeos is a sequence of *spāhbed*s holding this very command, of the Northern Quarter, *kust ī Adurbādagān*. The list points to a rapid turnover in those holding this senior command, suggesting close supervision on the part of Xusrō I and his son Hormizd IV (579-590 CE). It is not obvious from the list preserved in Sebeos' *History* that they all came from the same noble house.<sup>37</sup>

The *History* attributed to Sebeos also preserves passages from several princely biographies which recorded the lives prominent Armenian nobles.<sup>38</sup> Of these, it is the thirty-year career of Smbat Bagratuni in first Roman and then Persian service which obtains the greatest coverage. Once again, his

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<sup>33</sup> Sebeos, pp. 70-71; 105; 111 and 113; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, pp. 10-12, 56, 63-64 and 66-67.

<sup>34</sup> Gyselen, *Sasanian Seals and Sealings*, pp. 46-52 and 248-277.

<sup>35</sup> Gyselen, *Sasanian Seals and Sealings*, seals III/27 and III/28.

<sup>36</sup> Sebeos, pp. 68 and 70; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, pp. 7 and 10-11. This connection has also been argued by Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, pp. 101-104.

<sup>37</sup> *Contra* Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, p. 104.

<sup>38</sup> Greenwood, 'Sasanian Echoes,' pp. 347-358 for a full study. The biography of Smbat Bagratuni is discussed at pp. 347-352.



biography is a complex combination of apparently authentic and demonstrably fabulous episodes, enabling Smbat to be presented in a number of carefully-crafted contexts. These passages illustrate how an Armenian noble at the end of the sixth century wished to be seen. Smbat is projected as a fearless warrior in single combat, as a pious Christian, and as a loyal servant of Xusrō II. The broad coincidence with Sasanian dynastic historical writing outlined above is self-evident. The passages recording his career in Sasanian service are precise and dispassionate, recording his appointments and promotions, his campaigns against the enemies of Xusrō II, both internal – notably Wistahm (Armenian *Vstam*) – and external – K’ushans and Turks. They also describe in remarkable detail the material and honorific rewards he received from a grateful sovereign on four separate occasions.<sup>39</sup> These included a new name for himself, *Khosrov Šum*, ‘Joy of Xusrō’, and for his son, *Javitean Khosrov*, ‘Eternal Xusrō.’<sup>40</sup> Intriguingly, Smbat is not accorded a perfect record as a commander. His campaigns against the K’ushans in 614/615, although ultimately successful, included a sharp defeat in a village called Khrokht. This prompted an official investigation by a royal intendant, titled Šahrapan Bandakan in the Armenian text but evidently a transliteration of *šahrab Anbandakan*; he exonerated Smbat but accused the commander of a relief force, Datoyean, who was taken back to court and executed.<sup>41</sup> It seems that by the seventh century, a sophisticated system of regulation and supervision was in place, which scrutinized military failure and punished those responsible. Previous good conduct or success counted for nothing, for Datoyean had previously enjoyed a notable victory over Roman forces in the Armenian district of Širak in 607.<sup>42</sup>

This Armenian composition should therefore occupy a central place when approaching the late Sasanian period. Not only does it preserve unmistakable traces of late Sasanian historical writing, refracted through an Armenian lens, as well as documents reflecting Sasanian administrative practice; it also offer a wealth of relevant detail, particularly on the reign of Xusrō II (590-629 CE), the long years of warfare with the Roman Empire, the political infighting which followed and military responses to the Arab incursions, including that of Rostom (Rustam) son of Khorokh Ormizd (Farrox Hormizd) who

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<sup>39</sup> Sebeos, pp. 96, 99, 101 and 103-104; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, pp. 43-44, 47-48, 49-50 and 53-54.

<sup>40</sup> Similar honorific titles have been identified on seals, including for example *hujadag Xusrō*, ‘well-omened Xusrō’ and *hujadag Ohrmazd*, ‘well-omened Hormizd’: see Gyselen, *Sasanian Seals and Sealings*, pp. 47-53.

<sup>41</sup> Sebeos, pp. 101-102; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, pp. 50-52.

<sup>42</sup> Sebeos, p. 108; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, pp. 59-60.

is titled ‘prince of Atrpatakan’ (surely *spāhbed kust ī Adurbādagān*).<sup>43</sup> Moreover the full potential of this text has yet to be realized. Two instances will suffice. Firstly, Gyselen has recently deciphered two sealings which bear the seal of the *gund-ī kadag-xwadāyan-framādār* of Armin, literally, ‘the commander of the army of the house-lords of Armenia’.<sup>44</sup> This seal therefore renders in Middle Persian the Armenian *tanuterakan gund*. It is significant that in both the *Histories* of Łazar and Sebeos, the title of *tanutēr* is always awarded by the Sasanian king. In 484 CE, Vahan Mamikonean sought from Vałarš (Walāxš) the office of *tanutēr* for a member of the Kamsarakan house, which was granted, and for a member of the Artsruni house, which was refused, pending the performance of some worthy service that was ‘useful for the land of the Aryans.’<sup>45</sup> Smbat Bagratuni obtained a similar recognition from Xusrō II, as did his son Varaztirots’ from Kawād II in 628 CE.<sup>46</sup> There is therefore a clear distinction between *tēr*, that is lord, and *tanutēr*, a lord who has been officially recognized as such by the Sasanian king. But who could the commander identified on the seal have been and how did he fit into the Sasanian military hierarchy? Although contentious, this seal appears to record, in Pahlavi, the Sasanian equivalent term for the Armenian title *sparapet*, or commander in chief, who exercised a quasi-independent military authority over the other Armenian princely families. Arguably this seal designated that Armenian prince who exercised leadership over those Armenian lords who were recognized clients of the Sasanian king. Secondly, and more briefly, a passage in Sebeos’ *History* refers to the *Vasपुरakann hamarakarn*, translated by Thomson as ‘auditor of Vasपुरakan’.<sup>47</sup> It seems far more likely that this is an Armenian transliteration of *Wāspuhragān-framādār*, ‘commander of *wāspuhragān*’, an office expressed on six different seals.<sup>48</sup> The *History* attributed to Sebeos refers elsewhere to the *Vasपुरakan gund*, and distinguishes it from the *Tanuterakan tun* when describing the territorial

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<sup>43</sup> Sebeos, p. 130; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, p.89: *or ēr iškhan kotmants’ Atrpatakani*.

<sup>44</sup> Gyselen, *Nouveaux matériaux*, pp. 31 and 116, where Gyselen makes a similar observation. See also Gyselen, *Sasanian Seals and Sealings*, pp. 44, 58-59 and seals I/100 and I/101.

<sup>45</sup> Łazar, pp. 175-176; Thomson, *History of Łazar*, p. 237.

<sup>46</sup> Awarded to Smbat Bagratuni: Sebeos, p. 101; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, p. 49; awarded to Varaztirots’: Sebeos, pp. 128; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, p. 86.

<sup>47</sup> Sebeos, p. 87; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, p. 32 and n. 206.

<sup>48</sup> Gyselen, *Nouveaux matériaux*, pp. 31 and 119-120; Gyselen, *Sasanian Seals and Sealings*, p. 44 and I/164.



concessions made by Xusrō II to the emperor Maurice in 590 CE.<sup>49</sup> It is possible that this term, *Vaspurakan gund*, was employed at that date to represent that part of Armenia which remained under direct Sasanian control after the concession. It seems that there is much of significance for scholars of the Sasanian world within the *History* attributed to Sebeos which has yet to be uncovered.

The third key Armenian text in this survey is the *Patmut'iwon Ałuanits'*, or *History of Ałuank'*, whose authorship remains contentious. In the absence of any new evidence, a conclusive identification of the compiler is impossible and so he should be styled anonymous. His decision to focus upon the territory of Ałuank', that is Caucasian Albania (Ardān/Arran) to the east of historic Armenia, suggests an affinity with that country, although the work itself is entirely in Armenian. There is strong evidence for the proposition that the text is homogeneous in the sense of being a single composition pieced together by a single editor. Therefore the text as a whole is a product of the tenth century. Moreover it is highly likely that it was compiled at the very start of the tenth century, probably before 914 CE and certainly before 919 CE.<sup>50</sup> This being so, there can be no direct reflection on contemporary affairs as found in the two other compositions. However close study of the work as a whole indicates that the compiler did not rewrite the material available to him but chose to paste together passages from his underlying sources without amendment. Although this produced internal contradiction, it also enables the individual sections to be discerned.

For the purposes of this survey, book II has the greatest significance. Seven chapters record the confrontation between Xusrō II and Heraclius in the years 624-628 CE and its impact upon Ałuank', including the devastating impact of Turkic forces from the north and the efforts of the Catholicos Viroy to negotiate a settlement with them.<sup>51</sup> The focus then shifts to the notable deeds and virtuous conduct of a prince of Ałuank' named Juanšēr. No fewer than thirteen chapters are devoted to his career, of which the first two hold significance for this study.<sup>52</sup> This began with loyal service to Yazdgerd III and military action at the battle of Qadisiyya, in the course of which he was wounded. Subsequently, he was rewarded with valuable items and rich clothing. He then participated in a civil war between two

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<sup>49</sup> Sebeos, p. 84; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>50</sup> T.W. Greenwood, *A History of Armenia in the seventh and eighth centuries*, D.Phil Thesis, Oxford, 2000, chapter 3. Howard-Johnston accepts the identification of Movsēs Daskhurants'i as compiler and prefers a late tenth-century date: see 'Armenian historians', pp. 50-51.

<sup>51</sup> *Patmut'iwon Ałuanits'*, pp. 127-166; Dowsett, *History of the Caucasian Albanians*, pp. 75-102.

<sup>52</sup> *Patmut'iwon Ałuanits'*, pp. 172-181; Dowsett, *History of the Caucasian Albanians*, pp. 109-116.





generals in Media and Hamadan, following which he was rewarded by one of them, named Khorazat in this text and Khorokhazat in the *History* attributed to Sebeos.<sup>53</sup> This is none other than Rustam's brother, Khorrzad (Xwarrahzād/Farrukhzād). After seven years of loyal service and 'hard-fought battles' in the course of which he sustained eleven serious wounds, Juanšēr retired northwards to Atrpatakan (Adurbādagān). Here he was importuned by the Persian general, almost certainly the same figure, the *spāhbed kust ī Adurbādagān*, Khorrzad, to marry his sister but he declined and returned to Aḷuank'. He found himself engaged in a bitter struggle against Persian forces (Armenian *k'ajk'n Parsits'* and *gundn Parsits'*) moving north from Atrpatakan.<sup>54</sup> Evidently the text is describing the fragmentation of the Sasanian empire and it seems that Juanšēr was pitched against his erstwhile commander, Khorrzad. If Juanšēr entered the service of Yazdgerd III in the autumn of 637 CE and retired seven years later, these engagements against Persian forces from Atrpatakan began in 644 CE and lasted for at least a year. In one of the battles, in the district of Šakašēn, Juanšēr killed *hazarawors* with their contingents; again this seems to be indicating the commanders holding the rank of *hazārbed/hazāruft*.<sup>55</sup> The outcome of this warfare is not reported in the text but the very fact that Juanšēr recovered control of Aḷuank' and retained it for the next two decades at least implies that Khorrzad failed in his attempt to expand northwards.

On the other hand, if we advance into Book III, we find that the signatories to a set of ecclesiastical documents dating from c.704 CE included the following:

'Bab i Hrahatean [descended] from the princes of Atrapatakan who settled in Kapitalak and in Kołt'; Vahan i Varaz Yohanean, [descended] from the families of Madianats'ik' [inhabitants of Madā'in, that is Ctesiphon], in faith Yakobit [Jacobite, that is Syrian Orthodox, miaphysite Christian] who came and settled in Kambičan; Rostom i Varaz Ak'oyean, [descended from those] from Stahr in the province Pars, settled in the province of Uti in the town of Kałankatuk'; Zarmihr i Varaz K'ordakean and Mahmat i Šeroyean, sons of the lords of Dīmunk', they were settled on Dīmahoł, [land] given by the king, in this country of Aḷuank'...'<sup>56</sup>

These figures were evidently descended from displaced Persians; there is no obvious geographical or social pattern to this group. What is surprising is that they all continued to define themselves by reference to their Persian ancestry and origin, suggesting that they continued to think of themselves as

<sup>53</sup> *zōravarn Khorazat: Patmut'iwon Aḷuanits'*, p. 176.3; *zōravarn Khorokhazat: Sebeos*, p. 137.22.

<sup>54</sup> *Patmut'iwon Aḷuanits'*, p. 177; Dowsett, *History of the Caucasian Albanians*, p. 113.

<sup>55</sup> '*zhazarawors handerdz iwreants' gndiwon: Patmut'iwon Aḷuanits'*, p. 179.1-2.

<sup>56</sup> *Patmut'iwon Aḷuanits'*, pp. 304-305; Dowsett, *History of the Caucasian Albanians*, pp. 197-198.

Persian. One asserted a connection with Adurbādagān and another with Diŕumn, districts to the south and east of Aŕuank', but two retained memories of an urban origin, Ctesiphon and Stahr respectively. Could they have been involved in the evacuation of Ctesiphon undertaken by Khorrzad in 639 or 640 CE?

This brief outline illustrates the considerable value that this text possesses for seventh-century Sasanian history. As mentioned previously there has been disagreement among scholars over the exact form in which these passages were transmitted. Howard-Johnston accepted Akopyan's proposition, that the seventh-century material arrived in the hands of the anonymous compiler in a single composition.<sup>57</sup> This postulated source, designated the *684 History* by Akopyan, is renamed the *682 History* by Howard-Johnston.<sup>58</sup> Both infer that the abrupt conclusion to the work was caused by the irruption of the Khazars across the Caucasus in 685 CE. Zuckerman and Greenwood have adopted a more conservative approach, defining clusters of material but shying away from bundling them all into a late seventh-century compilation.<sup>59</sup> For the purposes of this survey, however, two postulated sources can be identified, examples of which have been encountered previously. The first is a work focused upon Sasanian dynastic history to which an Aŕuan tinge has been imparted, probably through combination with a biography of the catholicos Viroy. This possesses many similarities to the so-called 'Royal history', which, it was argued above, can be dimly discerned within the *History* attributed to Sebeos. The second is a heroic biography of Juanšēr. In content and character, again this is remarkably close to the biography of Smbat Bagratuni, which was exploited extensively in that historical compilation. In the light of these parallels, ideally the *History* attributed to Sebeos and the *History of Aŕuank'* should be examined together when studying the late Sasanian era. They often corroborate, and sometimes complement, one another.

These then are the three Armenian texts which should form the basic framework for any sustained analysis of Sasanian Iran. Admittedly they do not cover the third and fourth centuries and there is an

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<sup>57</sup> A. Akopyan (Hakobyan), *Albaniia-Aluank v greko-latinskikh i drevnearmianskikh istochnikakh*, Yerevan, 1987, pp. 190-201; Howard-Johnston, 'Armenian historians', pp. 54-55.

<sup>58</sup> Howard-Johnston, 'Armenian historians', pp. 55-56.

<sup>59</sup> Greenwood, *A History of Armenia*, chapter 3 and C. Zuckerman, 'The Khazars and Byzantium: The First Encounter,' in *The World of the Khazars: New perspectives*, ed. P.B. Golden, H. Ben-Shammai and A. Róna-Tas, *Handbuch der Orientalistik 8 Abteilung Handbuch of Uralic Studies 17*, Brill, Leiden, 2007, pp. 399-432.



unfortunate lacuna for the first seven decades of the sixth century. On the other hand, collectively they hold out the prospect of allowing political and institutional development to be detected. To offer two examples, Łazar refers repeatedly to the office of *hazarapet* of Armenia; Sebeos and the *History of Aġuanġ'* do not mention this office, at least not in an Armenian or Aġuan context. Why not? Or again, in Łazar's *History*, the city of Dvin is called the *bnakan ostan* of Armenia, the capital.<sup>60</sup> Despite this, the impression one gains from the text is that this is a settlement which is not heavily fortified. The *marzpan* Atrvšnasp and the *hazarapet* Vehvehnam flee to the fortress (Armenian *berd*) of Artašat on the river Araxes when fleeing from Vahan Mamikonean rather than to Dvin.<sup>61</sup> There is no account of any military action on the part of Vahan for possession of the city. Yet it clearly served as Vahan's base of operations; he returned to Dvin after attending upon Vaġarš.<sup>62</sup> If we move forward a century, and the *History* attributed to Sebeos, Dvin is clearly fortified. In 572 CE, the Armenian rebels attacked the city of Dvin and expelled the Persian troops following a siege.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, when Smbat Bagratuni attempted to rebuild the Church of St Gregory in 608 CE, the Persian commander of the fortress complained to Xusrō II that it would be too close to the fortress and would jeopardize security.<sup>64</sup> Thereafter Dvin is both fortified and a principal target, attested by the first Arab raid into Armenia in autumn 640 CE.<sup>65</sup> When and why did Dvin develop into a key defensive position? Is it a reaction to the extensive program of Roman fortification along the frontier undertaken during the reign of Anastasias or Justinian? Or could it be linked with the network of sixth-century Sasanian defences in the Caucasus, of which the great wall at Derbend, guarding the Caspian coast against incursion from the north, is the best-known example.

What of other Armenian sources? Rather than giving an exhaustive list, the following offers brief comments upon individual passages of particular significance found in two other texts, as well as the potential contribution of a large collection of letters and documents known in Armenian as the *Girk' T'ġt'ots'* or *Book of Letters*. Separate translations of the two passages appears as appendices to this study.

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<sup>60</sup> Łazar, p. 141; Thomson, *History of Łazar*, p. 199.

<sup>61</sup> Łazar, p. 121; Thomson, *History of Łazar*, p. 175.

<sup>62</sup> Łazar, p. 176; Thomson, *History of Łazar*, p. 239.

<sup>63</sup> Sebeos, p. 67; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, p. 6 and n.32 and pp. 162-163.

<sup>64</sup> Sebeos, p. 100; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>65</sup> Sebeos, pp. 138-139; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History attributed to Sebeos*, pp. 100-101.



The first passage (Appendix I) is found in a seventh-century Armenian geographical compilation known as the *Aškarhats'oyts'*.<sup>66</sup> For a long time, this work was associated, erroneously, with Movsēs Khorenats'i, but it is now attributed, on stronger but far from compelling grounds, to a seventh-century Armenian polymath, Anania Širakats'i.<sup>67</sup> This passage is located towards the end of the so-called Long Recension of that text and defines the four divisions of the Sasanian empire, along with their constituent provinces.<sup>68</sup> The disruption caused by this passage to the flow of the surrounding description, together with another, older description of Iran shortly afterwards, confirm that it is an interpolation, extracted from another source which does not otherwise contribute to the text. Crucially, it employs Middle Persian terms for the four divisions, each of which have been transliterated into Armenian and which are qualified by an Armenian translation: hence, for example, 'K'ust i Khoraban, which is the side of the west, in which there are nine provinces (Armenian *aškarhk'*, strictly 'countries' but read as Pahlavi *šahr*, province). The fourth of these appears unfamiliar because the text reads 'K'ust i Kapkoh, which is the side of the Kawkas mountains, in which there are thirteen *aškhahr*...' However the list which follows totals fourteen. The first province to be mentioned is Atrapatakan. In my opinion, the text has become slightly corrupted at this point, with Atrapatakan being misplaced in the list of provinces and the anomalous Kapkoh, itself deriving from Kawkas, taking its place. The original would have read as follows: 'K'ust i Atrapatakan, which is the side of the Kawkas mountains, in which there are thirteen *aškhahr*'. Furthermore, we find that the Persian names for particular Caucasian provinces again require Armenian equivalents: 'Armn (which is) Hayk', Varjan, which is Virk', Ran which is Ałuank'...'. The need to define these, especially Armn, is very striking. In my view, there can be little doubt that this administrative summary was originally in Pahlavi. Although the circumstances under which it was translated into Armenian cannot be determined, its inclusion within the *Aškarhats'oyts'* demonstrates that Pahlavi documents were available and accessible to Armenian writers. It offers a powerful reminder that Middle Persian would have been widely known across

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<sup>66</sup> *Aškarhats'oyts' Movsesi Khorenats'woy*, ed. A. Soukry, Venice, 1881; repr. with a facsimile of the unique manuscript upon which it was based, in *Ashkharhats'oyts'*, ed. R.H. Hewsen, Delmar NY, 1994. English translation and commentary in R.H. Hewsen, *The Geography of Ananias of Širak (Ašxarhac'oyc') The Long and Short Recensions*, Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients, Reihe B, Nr. 77, Wiesbaden, 1992.

<sup>67</sup> Hewsen, *Geography*, pp. 7-15.

<sup>68</sup> *Aškarhats'oyts'*, p. 40; Hewsen, *Geography*, p. 72.



Armenia in the late Sasanian period, although almost no trace of it can be found in the surviving texts. To this end however it is interesting to note that Catholicos Virov of Aġuank' is described in the *History of Aġuank'* as being particularly fluent in translating the Persian language, a consequence of having been detained for twenty-five years at the Persian court.<sup>69</sup>

The second short passage appears in a late seventh-century Armenian text, commonly known as the *Ananun Žamanakagrut'iwon* or *Anonymous Chronicle*.<sup>70</sup> It comprises a Sasanian king list. It extends from 'Artšir i Sasanean (Ardaxšir), fifty' to 'Khosrov Ormzdean (Xusrō II), thirty-nine'.<sup>71</sup> Although the sequence is not complete, and some of the figures for the duration of individual reigns are now hopelessly wrong, it does not derive from any extant Armenian historical text. It includes several very short-lived kings: 'Ormzd i Šaphean (Hormizd I, 271-272 CE), four'; Artšir i Šaphean (Ardaxšir II, 379-383 CE), four' and Zamasp i Perozay (Zāmāsp, 496-498 CE), two'. Moreover, as can be seen from the individual entries already cited, every king is identified with his patronymic, the name of his father. Each one of these is found to be correct. Therefore, in my opinion, this free-standing list of Sasanian kings also reflects a Pahlavi original; there are several indications in the linguistic forms of the names that the list was transliterated into Armenian from Pahlavi rather than translated. The full list appears as Appendix II.

At first glance, the Armenian collection of ecclesiastical correspondence known as the *Girk' T'it'ots'* or *Book of Letters* is not an obvious choice for inclusion in this survey.<sup>72</sup> The letters, inevitably, are predominantly theological in character and have little direct bearing upon our knowledge of Sasanian

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<sup>69</sup> *Patmut'iwon Aġuanits'*, p. 150; Dowsett, *History of the Caucasian Albanians*, p. 93.

<sup>70</sup> *Ananun Žamanakagrut'iwon*, ed. B. Sargisean, Surb Lazar, Venice, 1904, pp. 1-80; *Anania Širakats'u matenagrut'yunē*, ed. A.G. Abrahamyan, Matenadarani hratarakč'ut'yun, Erevan, 1944) pp. 357-99. This text has never been translated in full but an extended analysis of the text has been published recently: see T.W. Greenwood, "'New Light from the East": Chronography and Ecclesiastical History through a late seventh-century Armenian Source', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* vol. 16.2, 2008, pp. 197-254.

<sup>71</sup> *Ananun Žamanakagrut'iwon*, p. 30; *Anania Širakats'u matenagrut'yunē*, pp. 375-376. See Greenwood, 'New Light', pp. 221-222.

<sup>72</sup> *Girk' T'it'ots'* (*Book of Letters*), ed. Y. Izmirants', Tparan T. Rōtineants' and M. Šaratsē, Tiflis, 1901; second edition, N. Połarean, Tparan Srbots' Hakobeants', Jerusalem 1994. A substantial number of these letters have been translated into French by Garsoïan: see N.G. Garsoïan, *L'Église arménienne et le grand schisme d'Orient*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium vol. 574, Subsidia tome 100, Louvain, 1999, pp. 411-583.



Iran. Nevertheless there are several important exceptions whose value has not perhaps been fully appreciated. Two groups of material in particular repay close attention.

The first, comprising of two letters, trace the circumstances and decisions of the first Council of Dvin in 505/506 CE.<sup>73</sup> This was attended by a delegation of Persian clerics from outside Armenia. They had obtained a royal decree (*t'agaworakan hrovartak*) from Kawat, king of kings (Kawād I 488-496, 498-531 CE) to address the synod and examine their confession of faith. One of the letters records the names of these visitors and from where they came, including Ctesiphon, the province of Karmikan [Garmēgān] and the town of Perozšapuh [Pērōz-Šāhpūr] in the province of Vehartašir. The delegation is recorded as stating:

'We are the servants of Kawat, king of kings, and for the sake of the well-being of the king and all who are under his sovereignty, we devote ourselves to the best of our abilities, constantly imploring God [to grant them] health, peace and long life and all similar blessings.'<sup>74</sup>

We also learn that the reply to this letter was written in both Armenian and Persian and sealed with the seals of the Armenian catholicos, Babgēn, all the Armenian bishops as well as Vard Mamikonean, then *marzpan* of Armenia and the assembled princes and nobles. Clearly these letters repay careful scrutiny for what they reveal about the organization and loyalties of Christian communities across Iran at the start of the sixth century as well as the intervention of the Sasanian government in overseeing doctrinal debates within its territories.

A second cluster of letters and documents dating from the start of the seventh century offers similar possibilities. No fewer than twenty-seven letters trace the progressive break-down in relations between the Armenian and Iberian churches, ending in permanent breach.<sup>75</sup> Several contentious issues were raised and then developed, ranging from specific grievances – the disciplining of the dissident, and irascible, bishop Movsēs of Ts'urtaw; the worship of the relics of St Šušānik in Armenian – to broader doctrinal confrontation.<sup>76</sup> It is striking to note that after 606 CE the quarrel gained a political dimension.

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<sup>73</sup> The two letters: see *Girk' T'ht'ots'*, Tiflis, 1901, pp. 41-47 and pp. 48-52; *Girk' T'ht'ots'*, Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 147-156 and pp. 157-162. French translation: see Garsoïan, *L'Église arménienne*, Appendix II, pp. 438-450. For a full analysis of this Council, see Garsoïan, *L'Église arménienne*, pp. 135-195.

<sup>74</sup> *Girk' T'ht'ots'*, Tiflis, 1901, p. 43; *Girk' T'ht'ots'*, Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 149-150; Garsoïan, *L'Église arménienne*, p. 193 and Appendix II, pp. 441-442.

<sup>75</sup> See Garsoïan, *L'Église arménienne*, Appendix VI, pp. 506-583.

<sup>76</sup> For a full study of this correspondence, see Greenwood, 'Armenian Church' (Forthcoming).



The Armenian catholicos Abraham I informed his Iberian counterpart Kiwrion that ‘it is impossible for servants of the king of kings to be of one faith with servants of foreign kings and to detach themselves from co-religionists of their own country.’<sup>77</sup> Kiwrion fashioned a very subtle reply, arguing that ‘our fathers and yours were servants of the king of kings and they adhered to the faith of Jerusalem,’ just as Iberians were continuing to do.<sup>78</sup> He continued:

‘For just as the sky and the earth exists, there has not been any lord who has permitted each people to have its own religion as this lord [ie the king of kings] has tolerated, especially the faith of other Christians such as ourselves, and our country as freely as any other...And the king of kings is lord of the Romans as much as the land of the Aryans, and they are not, as you have written, two distinct kingdoms.’<sup>79</sup>

In other words, not only does Xusrō II permit freedom of worship; he is in fact lord of the Romans and so Abraham’s premise, that the Roman and Sasanian kingdoms are distinct, is invalid. This offers a remarkable insight into contemporary Sasanian political theory at the start of the seventh century, or rather its expression and elaboration in a Caucasian context.

Finally two letters associated with the Armenian Catholicos Komitas (610-628 CE) illustrate something of the favor shown by Xusrō II towards an expanding miaphysite confession and away from the Nestorian Church of the East which had previously enjoyed a privileged position. This first was addressed to a group of nine clerics from the Church of the East who wished to embrace the miaphysite confession practiced by the Armenian Church under Komitas.<sup>80</sup> It comprises a remarkable confession of faith, supported by patristic authorities, a version of church history and fifteen anathemas. The circumstances in which this occurred are outlined towards the end of the letter:

‘With the same, the gates of the kingdom of heaven were entrusted to him, to bind and to set free in heaven and on earth, to which you shall become sons and heirs of his throne, through orthodox faith and deeds and confession, Kambišoy, metropolitan, Pōtos bishop of Aruestan, Gabriēl bishop of Tačik’, Yovhan bishop of Herit’ [Hīrt’ā], Simon bishop of Nineveh, Gabriēl bishop of K’arim, Sabasisoy bishop of {Kohi}ni[k]horakan, Benjamin bishop of Srēnig, Step’anos bishop of Arzin and many other bishops,

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<sup>77</sup> *Girk’ T’it’oc’*, Tiflis, 1901, p. 165; *Girk’ T’it’oc’*, Jerusalem 1994, p. 317; Garsoïan, *L’Église arménienne*, p. 549.

<sup>78</sup> *Girk’ T’it’oc’*, Tiflis, 1901, p. 166; *Girk’ T’it’oc’*, Jerusalem 1994, p. 320; Garsoïan, *L’Église arménienne*, pp. 550-551.

<sup>79</sup> *Girk’ T’it’oc’*, Tiflis, 1901, p. 167; *Girk’ T’it’oc’*, Jerusalem 1994, p. 321; Garsoïan, *L’Église arménienne*, p. 551.

<sup>80</sup> *Girk’ T’it’ots’*, Tiflis, 1901, pp. 212-219 (incomplete); *Girk’ T’it’ots’*, Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 400-413. No translation of this letter has been published.

together with fellow-bishops and deacons and the covenant of the holy Church, you who have requested the faith of the Christ-living Armenians, you who have arrived at the gate of the king.

From your demand, at the command of lords, I Komitas, bishop of the Mamikoneans who have succeeded to the office of kat'ulikos of Greater Armenia, I have given this deed wholeheartedly and with sure faith before many *nakharars* of Armenia and other Christian peoples, who had arrived at the royal court, especially before the great *tanutēr* called Khosrovšnum, whose name is known, Smbat from the line of the Bagratunik'.<sup>81</sup>

The second, dated to the '27<sup>th</sup> year of Xosrov Abruēz, king of kings, son of Ormizd', comprises a short declaration of faith made by two bishops from Asorestan, Mar Marut'a and Petros, on the occasion of a visit to Dvin.<sup>82</sup> Their doctrinal orthodoxy is coupled with an open acknowledgement of the ecclesiastical oversight and authority of Komitas.

By way of conclusion, this survey will outline the contribution of two Armenian inscriptions. Full translations of these appear in Appendix III.<sup>83</sup> The earliest of these inscriptions used to be located in the architrave above the tympanum of the western entrance to the church at Tekor. Unfortunately it was destroyed along with the church at the start of the twentieth century, but not before it had been photographed and impressed. The inscription is not only cramped but has clearly been inverted, so that it makes sense when read in reverse, starting with the last line of text and moving upward. Furthermore a close reading of the inscription suggests that it is in fact composite, formed from two separate inscriptions. The first refers to the action of Sahak Kamsarakan building a martyrium of St Sahak; the second describes how this site was founded by the catholicos of Armenia Yohan. Evidently the two inscriptions derive from separate structures or from distinct elements within a single structure. The key question however is which catholicos Yovhannēs is being referred to: Yovhannēs I Mandakuni, catholicos between 478 and 490 CE, or Yovhannēs II Gabelean, catholicos between 557/8 and 574 CE? The reference to Manan *hazarapet* is of particular significance for the dating of this inscription. As argued above, this office is a consistent feature of Łazar's *History* but is not found in early seventh-century Armenian texts. Therefore it seems more probable that the text of this part of the inscription

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<sup>81</sup> *Girk' T'tt'ots'*, Tiflis, 1901, p. 218; *Girk' T'tt'ots'*, Jerusalem, 1994, p. 412.

<sup>82</sup> The letter is found in the *Historical Compilation or Chronography* of Samuel of Ani: see *Samuēli k'ahanay Anets'woy Hawak'munk' i grots' patmagrats'*, ed. A. Tēr-Mik'eleian, Tparan Ejmiatsin, Vałaršapat, 1893, pp. 290-291.

<sup>83</sup> For a full study of these and other seventh-century Armenian inscriptions, see T.W. Greenwood, 'A corpus of early Medieval Armenian Inscriptions, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* vol. 58, 2004, pp. 27-91.

dates from the end of the fifth century. It is worth remembering that Vahan Mamikonean was appointed as *marzpan* of Armenia in 485 CE. It is therefore conceivable that Manan *hazarapet* was also Armenian who served in Vahan's administration, rather than a Persian. If so, the inscription would date from the period between 485 and 490 CE.

The second inscription at the church of Bagaran has also been destroyed. It encircled the exterior of the whole building, being carved as a single line of text onto the topmost row of prepared masonry blocks located immediately below the level of the roof. Towards the end of the inscription, it seems that the carver reverted to two lines of text, probably due to lack of space. Again this suggests that the inscription comprises two parts, the second of which necessitated the switch to two lines. For the purposes of this study, the significance of this inscription lies in its dating formula, for it employs the regnal years of Xusrō II. The church was founded in 'the thirty-fourth year of King Khosrov' and its founder, lord But Aruelean, was murdered in his thirty-eighth year.<sup>84</sup> Sasanian regnal years were used consistently to locate events in time throughout the three principal Armenian texts discussed above.<sup>85</sup> There is even a solitary extant colophon preserved in a thirteenth-century miscellany inviting the reader to remember Eznak who translated this book, in 'the twenty-ninth year of Khosrov king of kings, son of Ormizd'.<sup>86</sup> Sasanian regnal years were employed throughout the ecclesiastical correspondence preserved in the *Girk' T'it'ots'* or *Book of Letters*. For example, a profession of faith obtained by Smbat Bagratuni from a gathering of bishops was made 'in the seventeenth year of Khosrov Apruēz, king of kings, in the month of Mareri,' i.e. between 25 March and 23 April 606 CE.<sup>87</sup> On occasion however it seems that the dating formula could be even more sophisticated. One mid-sixth century letter records the construction of a church by Nestorians in Dvin itself: 'In the seventeenth year of Khosrov king of kings (548 CE), during the *marzpanate* of Nihorakan, they constructed a building in the name of Manačir Ražik.'<sup>88</sup> This synchronism, correlating a Sasanian regnal year with a provincial

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<sup>84</sup> Year 34 of Xusrō II: 19 June 622 CE – 18 June 623 CE; year 38: 18 June 626 CE – 17 June 627 CE.

<sup>85</sup> For example, of twenty specific dates found in the *History* attributed to Sebeos, no fewer than fourteen are based exclusively upon Sasanian regnal years.

<sup>86</sup> A.S. Mat'evosyan, *Hayeren jerageri hišatakaranner(5-12 dd)*, Erevan, 1988, no. 19. Twenty-ninth year: 20 June 617 CE – 19 June 618 CE.

<sup>87</sup> *Girk' T'it'oc'*, Tiflis, 1901, p. 149; *Girk' T'it'oc'*, Jerusalem 1994, p. 296; Garsoïan, *L'Église arménienne*, p. 512.

<sup>88</sup> *Girk' T'it'oc'*, Tiflis, 1901, p. 72; *Girk' T'it'oc'*, Jerusalem 1994, p. 200; Garsoïan, *L'Église arménienne*, p. 228 and n. 283 and pp. 476-477.

governor, imparts a local provincial character to the dating formula. Likewise, when the church of Bagaran was completed, probably on 8 October 629, when the Sasanian world was engulfed by political flux, it is telling that the foundation inscription also elects to use the *marzpan* of Armenia, in this case Varaztirots' Bagratuni, son of Smbat Bagratuni, as the principal chronological marker. This combination, of Sasanian regnal year and provincial official, supports two separate contentions, advanced previously, that lists of Sasanian kings and their reigns and lists of provincial governors were maintained and used to orientate and calculate time. By implication, Armenian writers were conscious that they lived in Sasanian time; there is no hint of the local Armenian era developing before the middle of the seventh century and the final demise of the Sasanian dynasty.

The above survey illustrates the considerable potential of Armenian sources for the study of the Sasanian world. Three Armenian historical compositions have been highlighted as deserving particular attention, although the value of other sources, including several little-exploited works, has also been noted. This material has been introduced and considered in the context of a broader interpretative framework which stresses the need to privilege certain sources over others and to pay attention to dissonance and development over time. If the relationship between Armenia and the Sasanian world was as fluid as this survey have suggested, we can expect to find traces of those changes, however faint, within the surviving source material.

## Appendix I

### The Four Divisions of the Sasanian Empire as recorded in the Long Recension of the *Geography* (*Aškarhats'oyts'*) of Anania of Širak

This translation has been made from the only published edition of the long recension of the *Geography* attributed to Anania of Širak: *Géographie de Moïse de Corène d'après Ptolémée*, ed. and tr. A. Soukry, Venice 1881, p. 40. It was published at a time when the text was still considered to have been compiled by Movsēs Khorenats'i, hence the otherwise confusing title. Hewsen re-examined the single manuscript of the long recension, Venice 1245, when preparing his own English translation and commentary on both recensions: for his translation, see R.H. Hewsen, *The Geography of Ananias of Širak (Aškarhac'oyc') The Long and Short Recensions*, Wiesbaden, 1992, p. 72. Hewsen supplies a full introduction, translation and commentary, although this passage received little analysis, save in one important respect. At p. 13, Hewsen argues that the *terminus ad quem* for the long recension cannot be later than 636 CE for this was 'the year in which the Persian Empire was destroyed by the Arabs'. This seems an unnecessarily firm date, and implies a degree of foresight on the part of the author, that the collapse of the Sasanian Empire was inevitable and that its provincial organization was therefore redundant. This seems unlikely. Only after the death of Yazdgerd III in 651 CE does the compiler of the *History* attributed to Sebeos comment on the end of the Sasanian line. Arguably therefore, this passage could have been inserted at any time before 651 CE, when recognition of their demise is first asserted in a contemporary Armenian text. The separation of Armn and Sisakan also points to a date before 655 CE. Moreover, since the rhythms of institutional change are slow, it seems overhasty to envisage the sudden and complete collapse of the Sasanian provincial network at the outset of the Arab campaigns. The omission of this passage from the Short Recension need not point to an immediate revision after those events. I remain unconvinced that there was a radically different provincial government in place over the erstwhile Sasanian Empire before the end of the seventh century at the earliest.

29. The country of Persia. The country of Persia is divided into four, as follows:

K'ust i Xoraban, which is the side of the west, in which [there are] nine provinces: Maymaspatn, Mihrank'atak, K'arškar, Parmakan, Eran [a]san K'ar-Kawat, Notartay, Širakan, Maydzinēsteh

K'ust i Nmroj, which is the meridian side, which is the south, in which [there are] nineteen provinces: Pad, Xužastan, Aspahan, Mielnhagar, Anatršir, Kurman, Turan, Magwian, Sndasrman, Spet, Vašt, Sakastan, Zaplastan, Ger, an island in the sea, Mēšmakhik, this too is an island, Maazun, Xužihrtan, Spahl, taken from the Indians, Debuhěl, likewise taken from the Indians.

K'ust i Xorasan, which is the side of the east, in which [there are] twenty-six provinces, namely what I say: Ahmadan, Košm, Varkan, Apršahr, Mrv, Mrot, Hraw, Katašan, Nsai, Mianakabžin, Tałkan, Gozkan, Andapd, Vept, Hrumazamb, Paroz, Nahrčir, Dzinazak, Varčan, Mašan, Gčakstan, Bahlibamik, Drmatavariman, Kanšer, Ibamikan, Gozbon.

Kust i Atrapatakan, which is the side of the Caucasus mountains, in which there are thirteen provinces: Armn [which is] Hayk', Varjan, which is Virk', Ran, which is Ałuank', Balasakan, Sisakan, Arē, Gełan, Šančan, Dlmunk', Dmbawand, Taprěstan, Rwan, Aml, which we are going to relate.



## Appendix II

### Sasanian King List

This freestanding list of Sasanian kings is translated here for the first time from a late seventh-century Armenian source, known variously as the *Anonymous Chronicle* or the *Chronicle of Anania of Širak*. It has been published twice: B. Sargisean, *Ananun Žamanakagrut'iwñ*, Venice, 1904, p. 30.1-18; and A.G. Abrahamyan, *Anania Širakats'u matenagrut'yuně*, Erevan, 1944, pp. 375.29-376.2.

### Sasanian Kings of Persia

Artšir i Sasanean, fifty  
Šapuh yArtšrean, seventy-three  
Nerseh i Šaphean, ten  
Ormzd i Šaphean, four  
Šapuh yOrmzdean, seventy-three  
Artšir i Šaphean, four  
Vram i Yazkertean, eleven  
Yazkert i Vramean, twenty-one  
Vram i Yazkertean, twenty-two  
Yazkert i Vramean, nineteen  
Peroz i Yazkertean, twenty-seven  
Vaľarš i Yazkertean, four  
Zamasp i Perozay, two  
Kawat i Perozean, forty-one  
Xosrov i Kawatean, forty-seven  
Ormzd i Xosrovean, twelve  
Xosrov Ormzdean, thirty-eight

## Appendix III

### Two Armenian Inscriptions

The following inscriptions have published recently, with full Armenian transcription, bibliography and photograph: see T.W. Greenwood, 'A Corpus of early Medieval Armenian Inscriptions,' *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 58, 2004, pp. 27-91, at pp. 79-81 and figs. 1 and 3.

#### Tekor

Sahak Kamsarakan built this martyrium of Saint Sargis for his intercession and of his whole family and wife and children and loved ones and...

And this site was founded by means of Yohan of the office of kat'olikos of Armenia and Yohan bishop of Aršarunik' and Tayron elder of the community of Tekor and Manan *hazarapet* of Uran Horom [---]

#### Bagaran

In the thirty-fourth year of king Xosrov, the blessed Lord But Aruelean set out the foundations of this holy church. In the thirty-eighth year Gobt'i and Xumat' killed But and three years after the death of But, Annay the wife of But completed this holy church in the month Trē, on day 20 [---] in the office of *martspan* (= *marzpan*) of Varaztirots' *aspet* of Armenia, in the lordship of Vahan Arielean, in the (spiritual) oversight of [---] brother's son Ewserk. May God remember and have mercy on the daughters of Grigor Vanandats'i, the husband of Ašanuš Kamsarakan, Annay and the little children G[...]han, Hrahat and Tiarwand [and] Šušan, princess of Sahak sahasi