

АРМЯНСКАЯ ЦЕРКОВЬ МЕЖДУ ПЕРСИДСКОЙ И ВОСТОЧНОЙ РИМСКОЙ ИМПЕРИЯМИ: ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ АРМЯНСКОЙ АВТОКЕФАЛЬНОЙ ЦЕРКВИ

В статье рассматриваются некоторые аспекты ранней истории армянского христианства. Находясь между Сасанидской державой и Восточной Римской империей, Армения, для сохранения своей политической и культурной независимости, стремилась достичь баланса во взаимоотношениях с этими двумя могущественными державами региона. Однако усилия армянской политической элиты не всегда приводили к желаемому результату, что неотвратимо вело Армению к потере государственности. В этой ситуации основным и весьма эффективным инструментом для сохранения идентичности и формирования средневековой нации стало христианство. В статье рассматривается политика Армянской церкви по отношению к Сасанидам, так и к Империи Ромеев. Именно эта политика стала определяющей в армяно-иранских и армяно-византийских отношениях, она предопределила дальнейшие этапы формирования Армянской апостольской церкви.

Ключевые слова: *Армянская церковь, Сасаниды, Церковь Востока, Халкидонский собор, Константинопольский престол*

The formation of the Armenian Church took place in difficult times for the country. Armenia was struggling to preserve its independence between the Roman Empire – later, the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantine) – on the one hand, and Sasanian Iran on the other. Eventually, in 387, the country was divided between the two empires, with the main part of Greater Armenia coming under the control of Sasanian Iran.

The preserved sources relating to the history of early Eastern Christianity under the reign of the Sasanians are mostly Armenian and East Syrian hagiographical and historical texts, with an emphasis on the persecution of Christians in the Persian Empire. From them we learn about the severe persecution of Syrian Christians and adherents to other religions in the Sasanian Empire during the reign of Shapur I (241–70), Hormizd I (270–71) and Wahram I (Bahram I) (271–74), which most likely were inspired by mowbed Kerdir, who served the three successive kings and had a major influence on the domestic politics of the empire. We also have detailed descriptions of the persecution of Christians during the reign of Shapur II (309–79), which were preserved in the Syriac literary tradition known as the *Acts of Martyrs* and in the *Chronicle of Se'ert* of Bishop Maruta of Maiferqat. They attested to the persecution of Syrian Christians between 340 and 379, primarily by Zoroastrian priests.¹ Vivid images of the persecution of Armenian Christians and the rebellion for the preservation of the faith during the reign of Yazdgerd II and Peroz I are preserved in historical works of Armenian historiographers. These accounts have found their reflection in modern historiography and have shaped an image of intolerance towards Christians in the Sasanian Empire.

¹ Daryaei 2020: 36.

However, the policies of Sasanian kings of the Persian Empire regarding Christians were never unambiguous, at least from the fourth century, ranging as they did from severe persecution to toleration of Christians and the recognition of their rights. Sometimes, in the same period, a policy was heterogeneous with regard to various Churches: one Church would be supported and another persecuted, depending on political calculations. When considering the Sasanian policy regarding Christians, we should bear in mind that both Syrian and Armenian sources propagating the ideology of Syrian and Armenian Churches usually produced unilateral and subjective histories; thus, we need to evaluate them critically.

From the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth centuries, the most far-seeing Sasanian rulers understood the necessity for a balanced policy regarding their subjected Christians, especially given that the Christians had great importance in the domestic and foreign policies of the empire. Syrian and Armenian merchants played a crucial role in trade along the Silk Road. Syrians brought Christianity to India, China and Ethiopia and established communities there. The Syrian Christian merchants were followed by Armenians, who also played an important role in international trade. The colonies ensured their significance in trade with Persia for centuries.

Being buffer states between the Persian and Eastern Roman empires, both Syria and Armenia were also of great importance in trade and foreign policies. The lines of demarcation between Persia and Byzantine created by the end of the fourth century along the borders of Syria and Armenia were discontinuous, not hermetic. They were not supported by a system of continuous fortifications such as those prevailing in Britain or on the German *limes*. The borders between Persia and the Eastern Roman Empire were bridges between them, rather than borders. Except during war, they were mostly open. Exemplifying this is the journey of Mesrop Mashtots, who freely crossed the Persian border from Persian Armenia to the imperial Mediterranean cities of Edessa, Amida and Samosata-Melitene, to the metropolis of Roman Armenia II, and subsequently to the imperial court itself. Hence, the borders between the classical and oriental worlds might well be drawn much further west, on the coast of the Black Sea, along the eastern border of Cappadocia.²

The above testifies to the absence of cultural boundaries, with interaction and reciprocity along the frontiers very strong. In this situation, the well-defined cultural and political environments, both nationally and regionally, were extremely important. Moreover, the Sasanians came to realise that they were incapable of forcing Syrians and Armenians to abandon Christianity and that persecution tempered the Churches rather than weakened them. Therefore it was considered beneficial to support national Armenian and Syrian Churches that could serve as a counterbalance to the See of Constantinople. Thus, the shrewdest Sasanian kings sought to maintain the balanced co-existence and cooperation with the more powerful eastern Churches, though

² Маргарян 2017: 23–25; Garsian 2018: III, 330, 332; Margaryan Ye. 2020: 28.

when the stability was violated, the response could be harsh, as was the case during the first insurrection in Armenia in 450–51 and the second in 481–84.

In the early period of spreading Christianity, the Sasanians prioritised the Syrian Church, taking into account its influence and leading potential over other Eastern Churches, as well as its role in Syrian society in the absence of statehood. Persian kings aspired to integrate Syrian ecclesiastical leaders into Iranian political structures, where they might operate as intermediaries with provincial populations. In *The Myth of Zoroastrian Intolerance*, Richard E. Payne demonstrates that the so-called ‘Great Persecutions’ undertaken by Shapur II were an aftermath of his failed policy of incorporating Syrian ecclesiastical leaders into the imperial fiscal system.³

This same policy was later adopted by Yazdgard I (399–420), whose reign is seen in Sasanian history as the beginning of a restoration. Modern scholars commonly refer to him as the Second Constantine due to his policy regarding the Christians in his empire. The acts of the Council of Seleucia-Ctesiphon of 410 convoked by Yazdgard I are usually identified with Constantine’s Edict of Milan of 313, whereby Christianity was recognised as a *religio licita*. The council was an attempt to organise the Christians of the Persian Empire into a single structured Church, the Church of the East. The King of Kings prioritised the important role of a monarch in the administration of Church affairs by convening a Church council, as did Constantine. Indeed, the *Synodicon Orientale*, a chronicle of councils held by the Church of the East, established the primary function of the synod of 410 as the confirmation of acts of the Council of Nicaea, bringing the Church of the East into harmony with the faith of the West, though independent from the Roman Church. The King of Kings initiated a lasting tradition of mutual aid and interaction between Christian ecclesiastical leaders and the monarchy.⁴ Interestingly, the creation of a strong Eastern Church to unite all Christians in the Persian Empire, the Persian State Church of the Orient, was a project of the Zoroastrian king that was later failed by Syrian ecclesiastical leaders, who tore the Church asunder.

Reformation of the Armenian Church by St Mashtots and St Sahak

Simultaneously, Yazdgard did not interfere with important political and cultural processes in Armenia that were intensified by the Armenian Church. His goal was to improve relationships with the Roman Empire so as to ensure his country’s peaceful development. In this regard, he prioritised the significant role of Christians living on the border. The Armenian historiographer of the fifth century, Movses Khorenatsi, in his *History of Armenia*, asserts that the Armenian King Vramshapuh (389–414) was sent by King Wahram to Mesopotamia as a mediator in the war between Persians and Greeks and to ‘settle order and judge the authorities of both sides’.⁵ This event was supposed

³ See Pain 2015: 39–42.

⁴ McDonough 2008: 128.

⁵ Խորենացի 1913: III ԾԱ, 325.

to have taken place around 403.⁶ However, given the date and the evidence, it would appear to have been an initiative of Yazdhard I, not of Wahram. The doubtful historicity of the event might be considered attributable to the patriotism of the author. Nevertheless, Movses Khorenatsi's *History* does reflect the realities of that period, mentioning the mediatory and peacekeeping roles of Armenians and of Vramshapuh himself, who was a Persian official before he was appointed Armenian king by the Sasanian court.

Khorenatsi also provides interesting evidence of the authority of Armenian Katholikos Sahak Partev. According to Khorenatsi, Sahak appealed to King Vramshapuh to appoint his son-in-law Hamazasp Mamikonyan as Sparapet (սպարապետ) (commander-in-chief) of Persian Armenia. The newly ascended king was reluctant to make any political decision that might displease Iran, and so declined to make the appointment himself. Instead, he sent the Katholikos with a letter to the King of Kings Wahram, and the latter fulfilled Sahak's request.⁷ Moreover, the domains of noble families of the Kamsarakan and Amatuni that had been taken from them were returned. Later, the Katholikos' influence on foreign and domestic policy continued to grow.

To strengthen the position of Christianity, which was preached in Armenia primarily in Greek and Syriac, and to make it comprehensible to all layers of Armenian society,⁸ the translation of holy texts into Armenian was undertaken by St Sahak and St Mesrop Mashtots. The first step was the creation of the Armenian alphabet. King Vramshapuh, though well known for his caution vis-à-vis his Persian superiors, openly supported the initiative. The prevailing opinion in modern historiography that the mission of Mashtots was undertaken and fulfilled against the will of the Persian government⁹ has been shaped by later events – that is, the persecutions during the reign of the King of Kings Yazdgard II. There is no evidence of any obstruction of the mission by the Sasanian king or even by Zoroastrian priests. Judging by the sources, Mashtots faced resistance inside Armenia rather than beyond it. Most probably the obstructions were mounted by the Syrian clergy, which had a significant influence in the country at that time, as well as by the Armenian clergy, which was divided into pro-Syrian and pro-Buzandian factions.

In 403 Mashtots, 'according to the king's order and with consent of St Sahak, took a group of youth with him'¹⁰ and went to Edessa and Amid, major scientific and educational centres of that time. He separated his pupils

⁶ Մկրտչյան 2005: 144.

⁷ Խորենացի 1913: III ԾԱ, 322–3.

⁸ On that occasion the Armenian historiographer Gazar Parpersy testifies 'Only few, who were more or less familiar with Greek or Assorian/ Syriac literature, understood that [religion]. And those who lacked the art of literacy... could keep in mind or understand nothing, not a single thing they heard.' Միայն քերթ, որոնք փորթ ի շատե ծանոթ էին հունական կամ ասորական գրագիտության, հասկանում էին այդ [հավատը]: Իսկ որոնք գրագիտության արվեստից զուրկ էին ... ոչ մի բան, ոչ մի նշույլ իրենց լսածներից չէին կարող մտրում պահել կամ հասկանալ' (Բուզանդ 1968: 29)

⁹ Իսահական 1991: 549–52.

¹⁰ Крюн 1962: 7, 90.

into two groups, one to learn Greek in the city of Samosata and the other to learn Syriac in the city of Edessa. Those pupils, having studied both classical and oriental cultures, would become pillars of Mashtots' mission to spread enlightenment in the country: the traditions of the new Armenian Church were built on the base of Hellenistic culture.¹¹

By 405 Mashtots had created the alphabet. Returning to Armenia, he was honoured as a national hero. His first undertaking in his homeland, around 406, was the translation of the Bible. Through the efforts of Mashtots and Sahak Partev, a foundation was laid for the educational system in Persarmenia. Youths from various places in Armenia were brought to the capital to learn the Armenian alphabet and Holy Scripture in Armenian, as well as masterpieces of Christian theology. Despite its national orientation, the Armenian Church created by St Sahak and St Mashtots sought to remain part of the universal Church and its developing theology. By the order of Katholikos Sahak, the Nicene Creed and the Creed of the First Council of Constantinople were translated into Armenian, together with other creeds of important Church councils and the most important works of the Church fathers, particularly the works of Epiphanius of Cyprus, Basil of Caesarea and Cyril of Alexandria. Texts were not only translated but also interpreted by Armenian thinkers, and translated into the Armenian way of thinking. Lives of the saints and a number of leading texts from the Greek patristic works gradually enriched Armenian literature.¹²

Mashtots and Sahak aspired towards the creation of a strong Armenian Church and the spread of enlightenment not only in Persian Armenia but also in the western part of their homeland. Simultaneous with their activity in Eastern Armenia, they prepared the grounds for the establishment of an educational system in the western part of Armenia. This was important in maintaining cultural unity and political ties between both parts of Armenia. However, they encountered difficulties. According to Movses Khorenatsi, Katholikos Sahak was not accepted in accordance with his honours and merits in Western Armenia when on a political mission.¹³ Khorenatsi cited a letter of Sahak to Emperor Theodosius II in which the Katholikos complains that he tried to spread illumination in Western Armenia but that the local authorities – indigenous princes – failed to accord him appropriate respect and did not accept the letters offered by Mashtots.¹⁴ This citation evidenced, on the one hand, the growing gap between the two parts of Armenia and, on the other, that Byzantine probably did not appreciate the mission in its subordinate territories. In fact, the establishment of the new Armenian Church in Western Armenia and the establishment of the Armenian language as ecclesiastical and equal to Greek was not in the interests of the See of Constantinople. However, contradictions within the See of Caesarea – which still claimed its

¹¹ Маргарян 2021: 139–40

¹² Атиуа 2019: 325–6.

¹³ Խորենացի 1913: III, ԾԷ, 333.

¹⁴ Խորենացի Ibid.

position as metropolitan see over Armenia – as well as the negotiation process with Armenians at various levels, with time led to Emperor Theodosius II revising the policy regarding the mission.

After the above-mentioned Sahak's letter was sent to the emperor, Mesrop Mashtots and Vardan Mamikonyan, a grandson of the Katholikos, were sent to Constantinople to negotiate with the emperor and Archbishop Atticus; this must have been before 425. According to Koryun, as the reputation of Mashtots reached Constantinople, they were welcomed warmly there.¹⁵ Having persuaded the emperor and the archbishop that their mission would be also beneficial for Byzantine, they received approval and empowerment for their mission. The emperor recognised Armenian as the ecclesiastical language of the Armenian Church as an established fact and sought to take advantage of the situation by widening the gap between the Armenian Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church. Also, as remuneration for the permission to open schools in Western Armenia, Mashtots was obliged to extirpate heretical movement of Borborites in Western Armenia.

Sahak and Mashtots, however, were prudent enough to proceed very cautiously so as not to provoke Yazdgard's discontent, nor risk the position of the Armenian Church in Eastern Armenia, which constituted the main part of the country. As we can see, Mashtots and his followers did not just cross the border with the Roman world; according to Armenian sources, they openly negotiated with the emperor and the Constantinopolitan archbishop. Their reasons were similar to those of the Byzantian emperor: the Armenian-speaking Church would be less exposed to the influence of the Roman world. From this perspective, the spread of Armenian writing to Western Armenia and the maintenance of the influence of the Armenian Church there was beneficial for the Iranian government. Using the favourable political situation, Mashtots not only spread Armenian writing in both parts of Armenia, but also went to Iberia and Albania, and created the national alphabets for the Iberian and Albanian languages and helped translate the Bible into those languages. He contributed to the spread of Christianity in those countries and laid a solid foundation for their national Churches, thus securing the leading position of the Armenian Church over them. Here again, he acted openly, meaning that he had either publicly or privately the permission of the Sasanian King of Kings for his missions.

The Armenian Church evolves from a persecuted Church to one supported by Sasanian kings

However pragmatic and logical the calculations regarding Armenia of both Eastern and Western Empires, in the following centuries in its domestic and foreign policy the Armenian Church prioritised its national interests only, especially after the fall of the Armenian Arshakid dynasty. Before that event, the policy of the Armenian Church often conflicted with Armenian national interests because of differences with Armenian kings: more than

¹⁵ Корюн 1962: VII, 64.

once the Church and the *nakharars*' (great nobles') power structure did not support Armenian kings in their war against Persian invaders, leaving them virtually alone in the fight to preserve the country's independence. However, following reorganisation of the educational system and cultural life and the creation of Armenian historiography and literacy, a new outlook and Armenian self-identification were shaped, the best indicator of which was the great rebellion headed by Vardan Mamikonyan in 450–451, which was inspired by the Armenian Church. It was caused by the short-sighted policy of Yazdgard II, who failed to understand new realities in Armenia. Motivated by the overthrow of the weakened royal dynasty of Arshakids two decades earlier, he decided to deprive Armenia of its autonomy, and to that end needed to weaken the Armenian Church and curtail its privileges, as well as those of the *nakharars*. His actions sparked a huge rebellion, which was the first war for the Christian faith in history. Armenians did not receive the help promised by Byzantine, and the rebellion was suppressed. Nevertheless, the King of Kings was forced to revise his policy towards Armenians.¹⁶

In that same year, 451, the ecumenical Council of Chalcedon took place. The pronouncement of the council would have put Constantinople on the same level as Antioch and Alexandria, which already claimed oversight over Churches of the East. This decision contradicted the pronouncement of the synod of 410, which accepted the supremacy of Katholikos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon over forty episcopal sees located in the Persian Empire, particularly the Armenian Church. Armenian clergymen from Persian Armenia did not participate in the Council of Chalcedon¹⁷ as they were still busy handling the situation inside the country; neither did the Armenian Orthodox Church later accept the decisions of the Council, thus remaining loyal to creeds and canons of the first three councils. The theological reasons for this will not be discussed here; rather, the political reasons will be considered, as these were most decisive in this complicated situation.

Following the above-mentioned military conflict, there was a normalisation of the political situation within the country. The acceptance of the Chalcedonian Creed would have displeased the Sasanian court and could have caused renewed persecutions. The Armenian rebellion – which was declared a sacred war for the Christian faith – had not been supported and was even ignored by the Christian world, particularly by Byzantine. That demonstrated once again that, in order to survive, the Armenian Church should follow its national interests. However, it did not officially condemn the formula of the council up to the beginning of the seventh century so as not to be torn away from the Ecumenical Church.

Persian kings, who followed Yazdgard II, again tried to interfere in the internal affairs of the Armenian Church, which sparked a new mass rebellion

¹⁶ Ormanyan 2018: 54.

¹⁷ However, some bishops from Western Armenia, such as Manasses of Theodosiapolis, Constantine of Melitene and Jhon of Arke, had been presented at Chalcedon (Garsoyan 1999: 252).

in 481–484. Having emerged victorious in these wars, the Armenian Church not only established its undeniable supremacy over Armenia¹⁸ Persecutions against the Armenian Church were over, and it had an opportunity for unhindered development and strengthening. Armenian high clergy strengthened a united Church that disseminated its cultural and political influence in the Euphrates-Kur region.

From the fifth century a reverse process took place in the Syrian Church: it was mired in theological controversies and divided, which caused a weakening of its position in the Christian world. The Church of the East is labelled the Nestorian Church and, according to prevailing opinion, was supported by Persian kings in order to weaken the Christian world. We cannot agree either with the labelling of the Church of the East as Nestorian – a ‘lamentable misnomer’, according to Brock¹⁹ – or with the idea that Persian kings who continued to support Syrian Christians were patronising heretics. The synods of Beth Lapaz (484) and Seleucia-Ctesiphon(486) have sometimes been considered to be the route by which the Church of the East officially adopted Nestorianism. However, the creeds of these synods can be identified only as a strict form of Antiochene Christology, while the teachings of Nestorius – who first appears in the synodical records of the Church of the East in 612 – seem to have had no theological significance.²⁰ In addition, a heretical Church with an anti-imperial complexion would not have been able to fulfil the functions expected of it by the Sasanians. Also, it was not able to play the role of mediator within the Roman world as it had no legitimacy in the eyes of the Christian world. Therefore, the supposed promotion of Nestorians by the Sasanians does not correspond with reality.

For a while, Sasanian kings continued to support the Church of the East following the tradition established by Yazdegerd I, but as the passionarity of the Syrian Church went into decline, it lost its leading position among Eastern Churches. In that situation, Sasanians changed their political orientation and prioritised the role of the Armenian Church – a role it coped with quite well. This process was progressive: Eastern Churches, including immediate neighbours such as the Iberian and Albanian Churches, as well as Syrian Orthodox Christians, were seeking patronage of the Armenian Church. The latter, which had developed mechanisms for the preservation of national identity, sought harmony between Eastern Churches and the Constantinopolitan See.

In 482 Goths reached the walls of Constantinople, threatening the existence of the empire. Emperor Zeno issued the Henotikon, which aimed to establish unity between the empire and the Eastern Churches. This document was advantageous to the Armenian Church as it corresponded with its views. However, the Church was not able to accept the document in light of the renewed war between Persia and the Eastern Roman Empire, and so waited for a suitable moment to do so. The policy of toleration regarding Eastern

¹⁸ Маргарян 2007: 59–71.

¹⁹ Brock 1996: 23–36.

²⁰ Winkler 2019: 121.

Churches was continued by Emperor Anastasios I, which was considered by the Armenian Church fathers as a policy aimed at supporting the theological approaches of Eastern Churches so as to protect their apostolic purity.²¹ The suitable moment for the acceptance of the basis of the Henotikon was the end of a subsequent Persian–Byzantine war and the signing of a seven-year covenant in 506.²² Presumably in the same year, Katholikos Babgen I Umsetsi convened the First Council of Dvin (Duin).²³ The accepted purpose of the council was to condemn Nestorianism in defence of Orthodoxy. But the real reason was to determine the Armenian Church's own position regarding theological disputes that had swept the world. The Church, which had devised its own methods to preserve its national culture and identity, was now seeking to bring unity to the Eastern and Western Churches. The following quote from the Book of Letters, 'Romans and we Armenians... have this belief' ('Չայս հավատ Հոռնք և մենք Հայք... ունինք')²⁴ testifies to the Council of Dvin accepting the basis of the Henotikon, yet for Armenian theologians it was identical with Nicaean belief, which means that the acceptance of the edict did not define a new confessional course. The council was appointed to improve relationships and ties with Byzantine, but its decisions were also acceptable to Iranian authorities as they had an anti-Chalcedonian orientation. Although a century later Armenian Katholikos Abraham testified that in this council the Armenian, Iberian and Albanian Churches 'in unity [they] condemned the Council of Chalcedon and the Calendar of Leo' ['Անիծավն ի նոցանն միաբանությամբ ժողովն Քաղքեղոնի և տոմարն Լևոնի'],²⁵ it is not likely that the Council of Dvin canonically condemned the creed of Chalcedon, as the earlier sources regarding national Church councils confirmed that the council was appointed against Nestorian heresy.²⁶ Fathers of the Albanian and Iberian Churches accepted decisions of the Dvin Council and recognised the Armenian Church's supremacy. The Council of Dvin firmly laid a cornerstone of the Armenian Church. The Constantinopolitan See later retreated from the principles of the Henotikon, while in subsequent years the Armenian Church developed them.

The influence of the Armenian Church in the Persian Empire continued to grow. Due to the influence of Armenian preachers, Christianity became widespread in Albania and Georgia, significantly strengthening its position there. Church services were conducted mainly in Armenian; sacred texts (including Georgian ones) were written in Georgian-Mashtots scripts; and most of the clergy were either Armenians or Iberians who had been educated in Armenian theological schools.²⁷

²¹ See Գիրք Թղթոց 1901: 277–8.

²² Մկրտչյան 2005 :237.

²³ Adalian 2010: 120; Esler 2000: 334.

²⁴ Գիրք Թղթոց 1901: 34.

²⁵ Զիրք Թղթոց 1901: 183.

²⁶ Կարինն Մեկիքյան 2016: 186.

²⁷ Mapp1905: 117, 149.

The prominence of the Armenian Church above the Eastern Churches reached its peak during the reign of King Khosrow II (590–628). From 602, the King of Kings undertook a series of campaigns against the Eastern Roman Empire that resulted in the fall of Syria, Palestine and Egypt, as well as significant portions of Anatolia, into the hands of the Sasanians. Thus, the number of Christians living in territory subject to the Sasanians increased significantly. Khosrow decided to bring to life Yazdvard's project of the creation of a united Church, but this time under the supremacy of the Armenian Church. Thus, he planned to incorporate the Christians who lived under the Persian Empire as well as Christian communities recently annexed to his empire into the imperial political structure. For that purpose, a new council was convened in Ctesiphon by King Khosrow. According to the eleventh-century historiographer Stepanos Asoghik, the council took place after the conquest of Jerusalem, so this must have been after 614 – probably 615.²⁸ Many Christian clergymen of various confessions arrived in Ctesiphon, including Chalcedonians, Nestorians, Monophysites and so on.

Following the example of Yazdvard I, King Khosrow not only participated in the council with other retinue political figures, but was also active in decision-making during theological disputes. The king appointed as council overseers Prince Smbat Bagratuni and the Miaphysite royal physician Gabriel, who enjoyed significant influence in the Sasanian court, especially through the Christian Queen Shirin.²⁹

According to the king's order, the council examined only the creeds of the first four councils, avoiding discussion of heretical movements. After long discussions, the Council of Ctesiphon made a decision to denounce the creeds and canons of Chalcedon and reaffirmed the creeds of the first three councils. The Armenian belief became the only supported confession for Christians of the Persian Empire, with all Eastern Churches obliged to turn to the Armenian Katholikos to solve theological disputes. The Iberian Church which separated from the Armenian Church when it accepted the Council of Chalcedon while Kyursion was Katholikos,³⁰ soon had to accept the superiority of the Armenian Church again and renounce the Creed of Chalcedon. The See of Jerusalem also had to rely on the Armenian Church's patronage, denying the earlier accepted Chalcedonian orientation.³¹ King Khosrow issued an order that 'All Christians who are under my govern to preach Armenian belief'.³² The Armenian Church preserved its privileged position among Eastern Churches up until the Arab conquests.

Achieving a privileged and leading position required the Armenian Church to officially condemn the Council of Chalcedon, which marked the final break between the Armenian and Western Churches. Even before the

²⁸ Ասողիկ 2011: 697.

²⁹ Տեր-Գրիգորյան 2018: 99.

³⁰ See Джавахов 1908.

³¹ Տեր-Գրիգորյան 2018: 99.

³² Себеос 1826: XXIX, 136.

Council of Ctesiphon, the lines of antagonism had been clearly drawn between the Armenian Church and the Imperial Church of Byzantine, dating to when the Armenian Church had commenced its struggle for the expansion of its influence in the Euphrates region. Following the Council of Ctesiphon, Church fathers from both sides engaged in open and sharp debates in which they condemned one another as heretics: the Imperial Church declared Armenians to be Monophysite heretics, while the Armenian Church identified Chalcedonians as Nestorians.³³

Those who abandoned the Armenian Church were perceived as traitors by contemporaries because it had been considered the guardian of Armenian identity and autonomy since the times of Mashtots. The Armenian Church could not be as powerful in Western Armenia in the domain of Byzantine, so many Armenians – including nakharars and clergymen – accepted Chalcedonian belief so as to preserve their positions and domains. Armenian historiographer of the seventh century, Sebeos, observed that ‘The Emperor [Mauritius] issued a new command to preach the Council of Chalcedon in all Armenian churches... But the faithful sons of the Armenian church fled to foreign countries and wandered there. Many, ignoring the command of the king, remained motionless in their place; others, urged by ambition, partook and united with them in faith.’³⁴ The Arab conquest of the Armenian Highlands and control of much of Eastern Anatolia brought a brief pause to hostility between the two Churches by shifting the imperial frontiers westward of Armenian territories. However, soon after Byzantine resumed its expansion towards Armenian territories, the hostility was resumed up until the fall of the empire.

Conclusion

Being at the crossroads of different political and cultural systems, the Euphrates zone was the birthplace of specific cultures. The formation of Churches along the frontiers of the Roman and Persian empires differed from that process in territories of Pax Romana. Armenia was divided between the Eastern Roman Empire and Sasanian Persia at the end of the fourth century. Developing in this hostile environment, the Armenian Church had to demonstrate flexibility and stamina to fulfil multiple goals: the preservation of national identity and the integration of Armenia into global cultural and political processes.

The ideological and political foundations of the Armenian Church were laid in the fourth century by Mesrop Mashtots and his supporters. Due to the translation and interpretation of the Bible and the development of Armenian literacy, the influence of Syrian and Byzantine Churches on the Armenian Church was greatly reduced. But arising from the translation of major theological works of the time, the Armenian Church became involved in the process of the global theological development of the Universal Church.

³³ Garsoian 2017: XIII, 68, 70.

³⁴ Себеос 1826: 59.

Early medieval Armenian Christian culture was based on Hellenistic traditions, combining classical, oriental and national components. That made it possible to play the role of a mediator between the Eastern Roman Empire and Sasanians Persia, together with the Syrian Church.

The important role of Christians in domestic and foreign affairs led to the Sasanians revising their initial policy of the persecution of Christians. Yazdgard I established a lasting tradition of mutual aid and interaction between Syrian Christian ecclesiastical leaders and the monarchy. The leading role of the Syrian Church of the East was prioritised by the Sasanians in a mission to incorporate all Christians into the imperial political structure. However, from the sixth century, theological disputes led to a weakened Syrian Church relinquishing its leading position among Christians of the Persian Empire as it yielded to the Armenian Church. The latter, having been victorious in two rebellions against the Sasanians in the fifth century, attained a stronger position with regard to domestic policy and within Eastern Churches.

Sasanian kings realised the importance of the Armenian Church as a counterbalance to the Byzantine Church and changed their policy regarding Armenia. The important role of the Armenian Church in domestic and foreign policy was prioritised through the Churches of the Sasanian Empire, especially by King Khosrow Anushirvan.

For centuries, the Armenian Church maintained a non-conflict policy with regard to the Constantinopolitan See, and was mindful of the Sasanian rulers so as not to cause renewed persecutions. In this situation the Armenian Church did not accept the creed of the Council of Chalcedon but also avoided official condemnation of it. In the decades following the fourth ecumenical council, the Armenian Church gradually developed an anti-Chalcedonian theology, accepting only creeds of the first three councils.

Despite its aspiration to maintain a non-conflict situation, heading Eastern Churches, the Armenian Church had to officially condemn the Chalcedonian Creed in the Council of Ctesiphon in 615. It appeared to be the final break between the imperial Byzantine Church and the Armenian Church, and from the seventh century they entered an open confrontation that lasted up to the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire.

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The Armenian Church Between the Persian and Eastern Roman Empires: The Formation of the Armenian Autocephalous Church

The article deals with some aspects of the early history of Armenian Christianity. Being situated between the Sasanian state and the Eastern Roman Empire, Armenia sought to strike a balance in relations with these regional powers in order to maintain its political and cultural independence. However, the Armenian political elite ultimately failed in this endeavour, leading to Armenia's loss of statehood. In this situation Christianity became the primary and very effective tool for preserving Armenian identity and forming a medieval nation. The article discusses the policy of the Armenian Church towards the Sasanians and the Roman Empire. This policy was decisive in Armenian–Iranian and Armenian–Byzantine relations, and influenced further stages in the formation of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Keywords: Armenian Church, Sasanians, Church of the East, Council of Chalcedon, See of Constantinople

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