

## Oversight, Influence and Mesopotamian connections to Armenia across the Sasanian and early Islamic periods

Dr Tim Greenwood (University of St Andrews)

In the eighteenth year of the reign of Kavadh I (505/6 CE) a small group of clerics arrived in the city of Dvin, the provincial capital of the *ašxarh* of Hayastan, the land of Persian Armenia.<sup>1</sup> A council of Armenian bishops and nobles was then in session in the city. Although this could be interpreted as a fortunate coincidence, it seems much more likely that they had travelled with the intention of attending this council. The visitors went to the head of the Armenian Church, the Catholicos Babgēn, and introduced themselves, giving both their names and where they came from.<sup>2</sup> Three of the group are identified in this way: Samuēl, priest of the community of Maharjoy from the province [*nahang*] of Karmikan;<sup>3</sup> Šmawon, a priest of Berdošmay;<sup>4</sup> and Axay, a priest from Perozšapuh, the city of the Arabs, in the *nahang* of Vehartašir.<sup>5</sup> A fourth individual, Maray, is defined by his role as scribe [*dpir*] and not where he was from, and there were also an unknown number of other companions.<sup>6</sup> That they had to introduce themselves suggests that none of them were known personally to Babgēn. On the other hand, they then attended the assembly and presented documents before it, so we can be confident that their visit was indeed planned. At the start of the sixth century, therefore, a group of

---

<sup>1</sup> This narrative is preserved in a document titled ‘Letter of the Armenians to the Orthodox [*ullap’ars*] of Persia’: *Girk’ T’yt’oc’*, 1901: 41–47, at 42; 1994: 147–156, at 148–149; translated in French in Garsoïan, 1999: 438–446, at 441.

<sup>2</sup> Babgēn I Ot’msec’i, Catholicos of Armenia between 491 and 516 CE.

<sup>3</sup> The province of Karmikan is Garmakān or Bēt Garmai, the province north of Ctesiphon, on the east bank of the Tigris, between the Lesser Zab and Diyala rivers. The monastery of Maharjoy is unknown.

<sup>4</sup> Although this location is unknown, the text first introduces the clerics as coming from the regions of Tesbon [Ctesiphon], Garmikan and Vehartašir. As Samuēl came from a monastery in Garmikan and Axay from Vehartašir, it follows that Bēt Aršam, from where Šmawon came, was presumably in or near to Ctesiphon. For further discussion, see Walker 2006: 176 and n. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Perozšapuh, the city of the Arabs, was located on the Euphrates and later called al-Anbār.

<sup>6</sup> The name and origin of one other member of the party is revealed at the end of the narrative; for his identity, see n. 36 below.

clerics from Mesopotamia travelled north to Armenia to meet with leading Armenian clerics. This might not seem very important but in fact it possesses great significance, not only for the study of Christian communities in Armenia and Mesopotamia in late Antiquity but also for what it reveals about dialogue and interaction between Christian communities within the Sasanian Empire as well as how those communities related to, and operated within, that political and cultural context.

Before going any further, it may be helpful to try and establish what is meant by “Armenia”. At the risk of oversimplification, all definitions of Armenia in late Antiquity fall into one of two categories. Firstly there is “l’Arménie imaginaire”, constructed in our literary texts, a conception of Armenia as it should be, whether a single people heroically defying oppressive imperial powers (as in Łazar P‘arpec‘i’s *History*);<sup>7</sup> or a community of believers, united around a single confession of faith and recognizing the spiritual authority of a single leader, (as in most of the surviving ecclesiastical documents and correspondence);<sup>8</sup> or in territorial terms, a vast swathe of territory in the Caucasus, far larger than ever existed at any one point in time, an Armenia stretched to impossible limits (as in a seventh-century geographical text, the *Ašxarhac‘oyc‘*).<sup>9</sup> Such projections of unity have proved to be very influential over the centuries in establishing and affirming the sense of a shared past, a common cultural identity. However the second category is “l’Arménie réelle”, the plural, contradictory and fluid Armenia of historical reality, the

---

<sup>7</sup> See Thomson, 1991, for an English translation, introduction and commentary.

<sup>8</sup> Primarily those preserved in *Girk‘ T‘t‘oc‘*, or *Book of Letters*, a collection of ecclesiastical correspondence and documents which was probably compiled, using the archives of the Armenian catholicosate, in the first decade of the seventh century, and then added to subsequently: Mahé, 1993: 464–465. The 1901 edition preserves the sequence, and hence the structure of the composition; the 1994 edition, whilst possessing superior readings, reflects a rearrangement of the individual items into strict chronological order, thereby preventing research into the development of the compilation through later accretions.

<sup>9</sup> Hewsen, 1992: 59–70A.

Armenia of rival local lordships, of different Christian confessions and religious beliefs, of multiple historical traditions and forms of spoken Armenian.<sup>10</sup> Many of our sources reflect both Armenias, always in dialogue and thus at tension with one another.

Recognizing the gap between imagined Armenia and actual Armenia is helpful when thinking about Armenian interaction with Sasanian Iran. For whilst the Armenian historical compositions often portray Armenia as fundamentally separate from Sasanian Iran – Christian not Zoroastrian, with its own princely families, aristocratic traditions and forms of cultural expression – we should always bear in mind that all but the western fringe of historic Armenia had been under Parthian and then Sasanian hegemony for centuries and had been thoroughly immersed in Iranian social and cultural traditions. In a seminal series of articles, Professor Nina Garsoïan unearthed multiple connections between the two, to the extent that no-one today would contemplate studying Armenia in Late Antiquity without appreciating the Iranian dimension.<sup>11</sup> Taking her meticulous research as its point of departure, this study explores the links between Christian communities in Mesopotamia and Armenia recorded in contemporary Armenian sources, when both regions were part of the Sasanian Empire. But whereas Garsoïan analysed these sources primarily for what they revealed about the theology and the episcopate of the Armenian Church, this paper investigates them for what they reveal about the development and the significance of this broader trans-regional confessional network.<sup>12</sup> It is structured around three separate episodes, dating from the start of the sixth century, the seventh century and the eighth century respectively, although the last of these receives the briefest of comments. This study is not by any stretch of the imagination

---

<sup>10</sup> See Greenwood 2008 and 2012 for elaboration and references.

<sup>11</sup> Garsoïan, 1976; Garsoïan, 1981. Garsoïan 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Garsoïan 1992; Garsoïan, 1999: 135–239.

comprehensive, nor is it intended to be so.<sup>13</sup> Rather, by highlighting the very real contacts between Armenian and Mesopotamian Christian elites, it introduces possible directions for future research.

Let us return to the first of these, the encounter at the council of Dvin in 505/6, as recorded in the *Girk' T'lt'oc'* or *Book of Letters*. When the visiting clerics came before the whole assembly, they began by presenting a letter which contained a profession of faith. Through this letter, they established their credentials, not merely as fellow Christians, but as Christians holding compatible theological, and more particularly Christological, positions. However they also claimed that their visit had been sanctioned by Kavadh himself: “they had received a royal decree, *t'agaworakan hrovartak*, from Kawat king of kings, in which they had obtained permission to undertake a search of the truth of Christianity...”<sup>14</sup> Thus the visitors were anxious to make clear from the outset that they had obtained written permission from the *šahanšah* before travelling to Armenia.<sup>15</sup> It is impossible at this distance to know for certain whether or not they had obtained royal consent, for the document is only referred to; it is not cited. On the other hand, the opening sentence of their address to the Armenian assembly confirms that they were eager to articulate their loyalty to Kavadh: “We are servants of Kawat king of kings and we are constantly concerned for the well-being of the king and those who are in his kingdom, beseeching God to the best of our ability for health and peace and long-life and

---

<sup>13</sup> It does not, for example, address the cluster of six documents dating from 552-553 CE which trace the correspondence between several Syrian clerics, including bishop Abdišoy, and the Armenian faithful, including Catholicos Nersēs II (c. 548–557 CE): *Girk' T'lt'oc'*, 1901: 52–69; 1994: 172–195; tr. Garsoïan, 1999: 457–473. In my view, they attest an engagement of a more local character, involving communities situated along the southern fringe of historic Armenia rather than in Mesopotamia, hence their omission from this study.

<sup>14</sup> *Girk' T'lt'oc'*, 1901: 42; 1994: 148–149; tr. Garsoïan, 1999: 441.

<sup>15</sup> The execution of Catholicos Bābowai for suspected treason with the Romans in 484 CE may well have heightened suspicions surrounding unexpected visitors: Gero, 1981: 97–109; Garsoïan, 1999: 169–170 and n. 99.

whatever benefits there might be so that he may be blessed by God.”<sup>16</sup> This reveals the attitude of Christians in Mesopotamia at the start of the sixth century, praying for the health and well-being of the king and his kingdom despite the fact that Kavadh was not himself a Christian. There is no hint of political dissidence; indeed the profession of loyalty is entirely conventional and similar expressions can be found in contemporary Christian literature written in other parts of the Sasanian Empire.<sup>17</sup> At the outset therefore, the visitors declare their confessional orthodoxy and political alignment. That these elements have been remembered in the Armenian record indicates that the confessional and political loyalties of strangers needed to be established from the outset.

The profession of political loyalty is more surprising when we appreciate which Christian communities this group represented. They were all miaphysites, those who had accepted the Christological position promoted by Cyril of Alexandria and had refused to acknowledge the definition of faith promulgated at the Fourth Oecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE. Indeed Šmawon of Berdošmay is none other than Simeon of Bēṭ Aršam, the famous “Persian debater”, the most prominent figure in the miaphysite community of Sasanian Persia at this time, and a fierce opponent of the Antiochene Christology being aggressively promoted across Mesopotamia by Barsauma of Nisibis and others.<sup>18</sup> The extract refers to the state of conflict between these religious communities, noting that those who were introducing the impurities of Nestorius, Diodore and Theodoret were causing “much trouble and distress” for the faithful

---

<sup>16</sup> *Girk ‘T’lt’oc’*, 1901: 43; 1994: 150; tr. Garsoïan, 1999: 442.

<sup>17</sup> For other expressions of loyalty from Christians to Sasanian monarchs, see Morony, 1984: 337–338. In 544, the second letter of the Catholicos Mar Aba began: ‘Au mois de tešri l<sup>er</sup> de l’aimable miséricordieux, bienfaisant Kosrau, Roi de Rois – qu’il soit conservé dans la puissance de son empire, la santé du corps, la joie de l’âme, dans la bonne volonté et les desseins miséricordieux, et qu’il soit protégé par la bonté divine!’: *Synodicon Orientale*, 1902: 540, 551.

<sup>18</sup> For Simeon, see Walker 2006: 175–177; for Barsauma/Bar Šawmā of Nisibis, see Gero 1981.

believers “before princes and judges”.<sup>19</sup> The statement that Barsauma and his supporters were assisted by the secular authorities against the miaphysite faithful is contentious. Gero has argued forcefully that Barsauma did not undertake “a campaign of violent persecution throughout the Persian empire against those who resisted Nestorianism”; he accused later miaphysite writers of constructing Barsauma as a “monstrous villain” for sectarian purposes.<sup>20</sup> Yet this Armenian evidence merits serious consideration. Whilst it does not lend any credence to the accounts of massacres of faithful priests and laymen remembered in later traditions, it does suggest that there was a sustained attempt to remove, or at least oppress, miaphysite believers, using the levers of the state. It was this “wickedness” which had prompted an appeal to the *šahanšah* and the issuing of the royal decree in the terms outlined above. It seems therefore that Kavadh intervened in the bitter confrontation within the Christian communities in his realm, encouraging the miaphysites to study the confessions of neighbouring churches with a view to resolving the Christological tensions. Even if this is some distance from what actually happened – we have no way of telling – this passage reveals how miaphysite Christians imagined the practical consequences of long-running conflict – in terms of legal proceedings and loss of office and resources rather than loss of life – as well as the intervention of the

---

<sup>19</sup> *Girk ‘T’lt’oc’*; 1901: 42–43; 1994: 149; tr. Garsoïan, 1999: 442–443. Those accused by the miaphysite visitors are specified as Akak, Barcuma, Mani, Yohanan, Pawlē, Mik’a and others. Acacius was Catholicos between 485 and 495/6 CE; Yohanan (note the Syriac rather than the Armenian form of his name, as observed by Garsoïan, 1999: 187) was bishop of Karka of Bēt Selōk (modern-day Kirkuk) and metropolitan of Bēt Garmai; Mik’a was bishop of Lāšōm; and Paul was bishop of Karka of Lēdan. The list implies that Acacius and Barsauma were acting in concert: see Wood, 2013: 95–99, for a study of their relationship and its complex refashioning by later writers.

<sup>20</sup> Gero, 1981: 94, 110–119.

*šahanšah* as a mediator. Although Gero may have cleared Barsauma of the most serious of the charges, he should not be completely exonerated.<sup>21</sup>

The contents of this Armenian text have been studied by others and I do not propose to examine these again here.<sup>22</sup> There are, however, two elements which merit further consideration. The first of these comprises the list of addressees at the start of the document. Some are named but others remain anonymous, called simply “the other holy Christian believers” in a particular province of Sasanian Iran:

“To our lords and holy brothers, colleagues in the faith, those who love holiness, truth and the holy faith, and especially servants in Christ: lord Daniēl bishop of K‘arma;<sup>23</sup> and the suffragan bishops [*k‘ovriskoposunk*] Malk‘ay and Šōtay and the priests [*eric‘unk*] Abay and Mari, the deacons [*sarkavagunk*] Mirhormizd and Ablahay, and the noblemen [*azat mardik*] Artašir and Bratok, and the other holy Christian believers {in the *šahastan* of Rēmban}<sup>24</sup> in the *šahastan* of Karmenanan, the province [*nahang*] of Garmekan;<sup>25</sup> Yohan, the chief-priest [*eric‘apet*] and the *azat mardik* and Varazpandak i Małokan, the guardian [*pahapet*] of the Arabs and Hart‘ay i Mušelean, and the other holy Christian

<sup>21</sup> Garsoïan, 1999: 170 and n. 99 argued that in his efforts to rehabilitate Barsauma, Gero had gone too far in the other direction to be convincing. Wood, 2013: 95–99, 106–108, notes in passing the blackening of his reputation by miaphysite historians.

<sup>22</sup> Garsoïan, 1999: 150–194.

<sup>23</sup> K‘arma: Probably the city of Karmē, on the east bank of the Tigris. Daniel bishop of Karmē attended the synod convened by the Catholicos Acacius in 486 CE, and signed and sealed its canons: *Synodicon Orientale*, 1902: 60, 307. Daniel also attended the synod convened by Mar Babai in 497 CE although its canons were signed and sealed by Aba, priest and scribe of Mar Daniel, bishop of Karmē, on his behalf, indicating his consent rather than adherence: *Synodicon Orientale*, 1902: 68, 316. It is likely that the priest listed above after the two suffragans named Abay is one and the same person as Aba. As Garsoïan observed, this implies that Daniel and Aba had changed their confessional position at some point in the intervening eight years: Garsoïan 1999: 192–193.

<sup>24</sup> This is unidentified. The repetition of *šahastan* suggests that the text has become corrupted at this point, rendering all solutions tentative. Rather than seeking to locate a second *šahastan*, I prefer to understand Rēmban as a corrupt form of the personal name Rabban, to be associated with the other *azat mardik* from Karmē.

<sup>25</sup> Karmenanan: this is another reference to the *šahastan* of Karmē. Garmekan, Bēt Garmai, the province north of Ctesiphon, on the east bank of the Tigris, between the Lesser Zab and Diyala rivers.

believers, those who are in Perozšapuh,<sup>26</sup> in the city of the Arabs; Yovnat'an the hermit and the other holy Christian believers in Asorestan<sup>27</sup> and in Xužastan and in Hert' and Nsnabarsadē;<sup>28</sup> Oriknī the hermit, and Sahak *k'ovriskopos* of the *šahastan* of Bład;<sup>29</sup> Yakob, Beł and Kat'ara and the other holy Christian believers in Mcbīn [Nisibis] in the province of {Asorestan}<sup>30</sup>; and Basadē i Mat'ean the hermit and the *azat mardik* Gniba and the other Christian believers in Ninuē in the province [*nahang*] of Noširakan;<sup>31</sup> and to all the bishops and to the suffragan bishops [*k'ovriskoposunk*'] and to the priests and to the deacons, to the hermits and to the laymen [*ašxarhakans*], to the *azats* and to the village headmen [*geljavags*], to the greatest and to the least,<sup>32</sup> to all the believers in the country of Persia, to you who are under submission to Kawat, king of kings.<sup>33</sup>

This list supplies a fascinating snapshot of the miaphysite communities scattered across Mesopotamia in 505 CE, those who had survived the actions of Acacius and Barsauma after 484 CE, and the entrenching of Antiochene Christology within the Church of the East, first at the synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in February 486, and subsequently at the synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 497. There are several intriguing features, not all of which can be fully understood. The organisation of the list of entries, for example, remains opaque. It is not obviously geographical, moving from Karmē on

<sup>26</sup> Perozšapuh, al-Anbār, on the Euphrates, west of Ctesiphon. It is striking that one Yoħannan, priest, is listed as signing and sealing the canons of the Council of 497 CE on behalf of Mar Šama', bishop of Pērōz-Šabour: *Synodicon Orientale*, 1902: 67, 316. Could this be the same figure?

<sup>27</sup> Provinces of Asūrestān and Hūzestān, to the north and south-east of Ctesiphon. Again, material may have dropped out here but it is also possible that the names of the fellow-believers were not known.

<sup>28</sup> Hert'a, Hirt'ā, al-Hira, the Lakhmid capital on the Euphrates; Nsnabarsadē: unclear but clearly containing the name Barsadē, that is Bar Sahdē.

<sup>29</sup> Bład: Balad, north of Mosul, on the Tigris. Two bishops of Balad signed and sealed the canons of 497 CE, Hawah and Šubħališo': *Synodicon Orientale*, 1902: 67–68, 316.

<sup>30</sup> For Asūrestān, read Arbāyestān, where Nisibis is located; this also avoids the repetition of Asūrestān.

<sup>31</sup> Ninuē: Nineveh in the province of Nodšragān, also on the Tigris and close to the city of Balad but located at this time in a different province.

<sup>32</sup> This impersonal address was presumably to cover those who read the letter without having been addressed by name, at the time or subsequently.

<sup>33</sup> *Girk' T'ht'oc'*, 1901: 41; 1994: 147; tr. Garsoïan, 1999: 438.



the Tigris south-west to Perozšapuh, the city of the Arabs, on the Euphrates and then back north to Balad, Nisibis and Nineveh. Nor are the entries afforded equal treatment. The community of Karmē is given extended coverage, with its bishop, suffragans, priests, deacons, and nobles being identified by name. The faithful in the city of Perozšapuh are also defined in detail. It cannot be a coincidence that two of the delegation came from these locations, Samuēl from the province of Karmikan and Axay from Perozšapuh. This precision contrasts with the general address “to the holy Christian believers in Asūrestān and Hūzestān”. This anonymous quality could be because the leading miaphysites in these parts were not known individually or because the miaphysite hierarchy had been destabilised or displaced following the years of ecclesiastical conflict; on the other hand their inclusion suggests an expectation that the letter would eventually be sent there. The list also contains the names of significant lay figures, nobles with the status of *azat mardik*. We know that secular lords were involved in church politics at the Sasanian court and that nobles attended church councils in Armenia; indeed no fewer than fourteen are specifically named as present at this gathering in Dvin.<sup>34</sup> It is nevertheless striking to find them identified in this heading, confirming their importance within the Christian communities at the start of the sixth century. But it is also significant that the named *azat mardik* are all associated with urban centres, *šahastans*: Karmē, Perozšapuh and Nineveh. This seems to be telling us something about where nobles lived or how they identified themselves, or perhaps how they were defined by others. The exact meaning may be lost but the nuance seems clear, that the Christian lay elite were city-based. This connection between the elite and cities in Sasanian Iran is often assumed but it is extremely hard to

---

<sup>34</sup> Morony, 1984: 339–342 for the role of lay nobles in clerical elections elsewhere in the Sasanian Empire. *Girk ‘T’it’oc’*, 1901: 42; 1994: 148; tr. Garsoïan, 1999: 440–441.

prove; this provides one small piece of incontrovertible evidence. This list therefore provides important insight into the state of miaphysite Christian communities in Mesopotamia at the start of the sixth century. It also establishes the existence of an alternative ecclesiastical network stretching through the Sasanian Empire at this time, connecting Armenian clerics with fellow-believers throughout Mesopotamia in a cycle of mutual encouragement, support and prayer.

The final sentences of the document provide an intriguing coda to the whole episode.<sup>35</sup> When Babgēn the Armenian Catholicos and all assembled Armenian bishops, princes and *naxarars* had written and sealed the declaration of faith, one Sergis Abdišoyean, a merchant, *xužik* from the *šahastan* of Šoštri [Šuštar] in Khuzistan spoke up and requested a declaration of faith, *namak*, for his community.<sup>36</sup> This was written in both Armenian and Persian and then the document was sealed once again by Babgēn and all the bishops, along with Vard Mamikonean and all the princes and *naxarars*. Garsoian argued that the letter of faith was written in Armenian and Persian but not Syriac, from which she deduced that the council was held openly and officially in an exclusively Persian setting and context.<sup>37</sup> The double sealing of the letter however implies that the original document was indeed written in Armenian and Syriac, but that for Persian miaphysites in Khuzistan, a translation into Middle Persian was needed. Once this had been prepared, it was sealed again. Therefore the document preserved in the *Book of Letters* was the Armenian copy of this second, revised, version, which was taken to

---

<sup>35</sup> *Girk 'T'it'oc'*, 1901: 47; 1994: 156; tr. Garsoian, 1999: 446.

<sup>36</sup> Sergis Abdišoyean is not otherwise mentioned. Yazdegird bishop of Šuštar attended the council of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 497 CE and signed and sealed its canons: *Synodicon Orientale*, 1902: 68, 317. This suggests that there was a sharp division on confessional grounds within the Christian community of Khuzistan generally, and in Šuštar in particular.

<sup>37</sup> Garsoian, 1999: 193–194.

Khuzistan. Evidently this was a trilingual literary culture in which Armenian, Syriac and Middle Persian were all in use. Again this linguistic pluralism is often assumed but it is extremely hard to prove.

Let us now turn to the second of the encounters, from the start of the seventh century. This derives principally from another of the documents preserved in the *Book of Letters* although this one has never been translated and is little known.<sup>38</sup> The document opens in a sophisticated, rhetorical manner, asserting that what follows is precious treasure and perfect wisdom for the salvation of the world but concealing the identity of the writer or the context into which he was writing; there is no introductory protocol greeting the intended recipients or naming the author. The writer however reveals that he feels compelled to speak out for the sake of those outside, “those who are not in this court” and in the following sentence offers a quotation “I have spoken your testimony before kings and I was not ashamed”.<sup>39</sup> These imply a connection with a royal court. Although he then places himself and his flock firmly in the confessional tradition of the “honoured and holy Grigor, patriarch of the holy church of this country, *ašxarh*, of Hayastan”,<sup>40</sup> thereby associating himself with the leadership of the Armenian Church, it is only after a statement of that confession, a sequence of patristic citations, a synopsis of church history and a series of fifteen anathemas directed against particular heretics, that the identity of the author and the context of the composition are finally revealed. Nine bishops are described as orthodox in faith, deeds and confession and these sons and heirs of the Apostle Peter are named individually: “Kamyišoy, metropolitan, Pōlos bishop of

---

<sup>38</sup> *Girk' T'lt'oc'*, 1901: 212–219 ; 1994: 400–412.

<sup>39</sup> *Girk' T'lt'oc'*, 1994: 401–402 ; this is missing from the 1901 edition whose incompleteness was acknowledged by its editor.

<sup>40</sup> *Girk' T'lt'oc'*, 1901: 212; 1994: 403.

Aruestan, Gabriēl bishop of the Arabs, Yovhan bishop of Hert'a, Simon bishop of Ninuē, Gabriēl bishop of K'arma, Sabaisoy bishop of Kohonihorakan, Benjamin bishop of Srēnig, Step'anos bishop of Arzn and many other bishops, together with fellow-bishops and deacons and the covenant of the holy Church."<sup>41</sup> Furthermore they are addressed as "You who requested the faith of the Christ-loving Armenians, you who have come and are at the royal court. As a result of your request and at the command of lords, I, Komitas bishop of Mamikoneans, who have succeeded to the office of Catholicos of Great Armenia, I have given this deed wholeheartedly and with sure faith in the presence of many *naxarars* of Armenia and other Christian peoples, who had arrived and were at the royal court, especially in the presence of the great *tanutēr* called Xosrovšnum, whose name is Smbat from the line of Bagratunik'...".<sup>42</sup> In other words, the document was composed by Komitas, the Catholicos of Armenia between 610 and 628 CE, at the request of a group of leading clerics, all based in Mesopotamia. This statement of faith was given to them at the court of Khusro II and before many Armenian *naxarars*, including Smbat Bagratuni, whose long and successful career in service to the Sasanian *šahanšah* is recorded in the mid-seventh century *History attributed to Sebēos*.<sup>43</sup>

The precise circumstances in which such a statement of faith was sought and provided are not apparent from the document. It is only when we turn to the contents of a separate, but related, document preserved in the *History attributed to Sebēos* that these

---

<sup>41</sup> *Girk' T'lt'oc'*, 1901: 218; 1994: 412. Kohonihorakan: Kohi-Nihorakan, the western-most district of Parskahayk', overlaying the northern spur of the Zagros mountain range, to the south-east of Vaspurakan: Hewsens, 1992: 63 and n. 133. Srēnig: the town of Sinjar. Arzn: Arzōn, Aļjnik', the region on the east bank of the upper Tigris, south-west of Lake Van: Hewsens, 1992: 59.

<sup>42</sup> *Girk' T'lt'oc'*, 1901: 218; 1994: 412. Xosrovšnum: 'Joy of Khusro'.

<sup>43</sup> *Patmut' iwn Sebēosi*, 1979: 91–93, 96–104; tr. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, 1999: 38–40, 43–54; Greenwood, 2002: 347–358.

begin to emerge.<sup>44</sup> This asserts that Komitas took part in a formal debate at the court of Khusro II, convened to examine the confessional differences between the Christian communities. Khusro II eventually found in favour of the definition of faith supplied by Komitas, ordering that all Christians under his authority should hold the faith of the Armenians, and those who were of the same faith as the Armenians in the regions of Asorestan, including the metropolitan Kamyšov and ten other bishops as well as “the God-loving Queen Širin, the valiant Smbat [Bagratuni] and the great chief doctor [Gabriel of Sinjar]”.<sup>45</sup> Now the historicity of this account has been questioned by Flusin, amongst others, and with good reason, for whilst there clearly was a disputation at court in 612, convened by Gabriel and involving dyophysites and miaphysites, it is impossible for all the figures contained in the account preserved by Sebēos to have attended at the debate.<sup>46</sup> The narrative refers for example to the presence of Zak‘arias, the patriarch of Jerusalem even though Jerusalem did not fall to the Persians until 614, after which he was taken into captivity.<sup>47</sup> In the same way, it indicates the presence of philosophers taken captive from the city of Alexandria, which was taken by the Persian forces in June 619! Such interpolations undermine the accuracy of the version of events preserved in the *History attributed to Sebēos*, although by the same token they confirm that this document was crafted very deliberately for despatch to Constans II. They do not however

---

<sup>44</sup> *Patmut ‘iwn Sebēosi*, 1979: 148–161; tr. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, 1999: 114–132; see also Thomson, 1998, although Thomson does not discuss the document preserved in *Girk ‘T’lt’oc’*. Elsewhere Thomson noted that the two creeds are “totally different”: Thomson and Howard-Johnston, 1999: 125, n. 772.

<sup>45</sup> *Patmut ‘iwn Sebēosi*, 1979: 151; tr. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, 1999: 118. Sebēos refers to Kamišov and ten bishops rather than the eight bishops named in the actual statement of faith – *Girk ‘T’lt’oc’*, 1901: 218; 1994: 412 – suggesting that two names have dropped out of the latter.

<sup>46</sup> Flusin, 1992: II, 114–118, although Flusin concluded that there were two debates. The dyophysite submission from the Church of the East has been preserved: *Synodicon Orientale*, 1902: 562–598. This records that the debate was convened at the royal court in the twenty-third year of Khusro, son of Ormizd (22 June 611–21 June 612).

<sup>47</sup> *Patmut ‘iwn Sebēosi*, 1979: 116, 149, 151; tr. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, 1999: 69, 115, 117.

undermine the authenticity of the list of bishops preserved in the statement of faith composed by Komitas and cited above. Several of the figures mentioned obtain independent corroboration. The miaphysite Qamīshō‘ succeeded Aḥudemmeḥ as metropolitan bishop of the ecclesiastical province of Bēt ‘Arbāyē in 579 CE and occupied this office for at least thirty years.<sup>48</sup> Morony noted that a miaphysite bishop of the Arabs between c.600 and 620 CE was a man named John, who moved from ‘Aqola to Balad and finally Hira; it seems highly likely that this is Yovhan of Hert‘a.<sup>49</sup> Gabriel has been identified as the last Nestorian bishop of Karmē before it became a miaphysite see; this list therefore indicates that it was Gabriel himself who switched confessions.<sup>50</sup> Again therefore this list seems to be supplying a snapshot of the leading miaphysite bishops in Mesopotamia at the time of the disputation at the court of Khusro II. Moreover, their invitation to Komitas to compose a definition of faith implies a prior relationship, for it seems very unlikely that they would have done so without being fully aware of his own confessional position and without complete trust in his own orthodoxy. Indeed given the high stakes, we should envisage significant interaction between leading Armenian and Mesopotamian miaphysite clerics in the build-up to the debate, as well as prominent miaphysites at court, Gabriel of Sinjar, the convener of the whole debate, queen Širin and Smbat Bagratuni.

These sources reveal close ties between leading miaphysite figures in Sasanian Mesopotamia and Armenia, operating in concert at the royal court. On this occasion however, this is not the only evidence. A second document, transmitted by the twelfth-century Armenian historian Samuēl Anec‘i, records a visit to Dvin in the year 615/616

---

<sup>48</sup> Morony, 1984: 375.

<sup>49</sup> Morony, 1984: 376.

<sup>50</sup> Wilmshurst, 2011: 75.

CE by none other than Mārūthā, later established as metropolitan in Takrit by the miaphysite patriarch of Antioch, Anthanasios in 629 CE.<sup>51</sup> The document opens and closes as follows:

“In the 27<sup>th</sup> year of Apruēz Xosrov, king of kings, son of Ormizd, Marmarut‘a and Petros bishops in the regions of Asorestan, arrived in the Armenian metropolis [*mayrak‘alak*] of Dvin, on account of Komitas, the Armenian Catholicos, from whom this written statement of orthodox faith was obtained, of which this is a copy...And so that this letter of ours shall be certified for whoever reads it, we have sealed this letter with our ring in the presence of our orthodox companions, Elia and Sargis blessed priests [*k‘ahanayic*], and Kiwrakos and Łazar, deacons [*sarkawagac*], and Gēorg and Zinapay, monks [*uxtaworac*], and we have given [it] to the head and leader, Lord Komitas, Catholicos of Great Armenia...and have returned to our own holy churches.”

This document reveals that Mar Mārūthā visited Komitas in Dvin, probably after he had taken over the leadership of the monastery of Širin, close to the royal palace in Ctesiphon.<sup>52</sup> Once again, the visitors were required to supply a declaration of faith which was then authenticated through being sealed in the presence of six witnesses and handed over to Komitas. On this occasion, the purpose of their visit is not stated but one may speculate that it was connected in some way to the precarious position the miaphysites found themselves in following the death of Gabriel of Sinjar. It may also be significant that Komitas is addressed as head, *glux* and leader, *araj̄nord*, in addition to being Catholicos of Armenia. This could imply that Komitas was acknowledged as possessing a

---

<sup>51</sup> *Samuēli k‘ahanayi Anec‘woy Hawak‘munk‘*, 1893: 290–291. For a synopsis of the career of Mārūt‘ā, but omitting this episode, see Morony, 1984: 375, 377–378.

<sup>52</sup> That he is titled bishop in this text is hard to interpret, since he is not attested as holding episcopal rank before 629 CE.

wider authority, one which extended beyond Armenia. This however remains conjectural. As noted above, Mar Mārūthā subsequently became the head of the miaphysite believers in Mesopotamia but he did so without recourse to the Armenian hierarchy, which is rather surprising given the terms of the above document. Indeed there is no evidence of contact between Mar Mārūthā and any Armenian clerics from the time of his elevation to metropolitan in 629 until his death in 649. Although arguments from silence are notoriously problematic, it is striking that the death of Komitas in 628 ushered in a period of ecclesiastical turmoil and confessional reorientation across Armenia. His immediate successor, K'ristop'or, was deposed after two years in office. The *History attributed to Sebēos* asserts that he was a proud and haughty man whose tongue was like a sharp sword and who provoked tensions within the elite.<sup>53</sup> One suspects that he may have been the victim of political infighting as much as its cause. His successors, Ezer I P'aražnakertac'i (630-641) and Nersēs III Išxanc'i (641-661), both reached accommodation, if not outright union, with the imperial Church, as Byzantine influence extended eastwards. Arguably therefore the Armenian confessional ties with the miaphysites of Mesopotamia were severed, at least at the level of the Catholicos, when Ezer and Nersēs III endorsed the monothelete compromise promoted by the emperor Heraclius and perpetuated under his grandson, the emperor Constant II.<sup>54</sup>

Thus far, this paper has explored aspects of two specific encounters between Christians in Mesopotamia and Armenia in Late Antiquity, establishing the existence of a broad confessional network at the start of the sixth and seventh centuries. The wider

---

<sup>53</sup> *Patmut'iw n Sebēosi*, 1979: 129; tr. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, 1999: 87. K'ristop'or was related to a recent Catholicos, Abraham I (607-610/11) who himself had previously been bishop of Rštunik'.

<sup>54</sup> This is a development which remains little studied. See Mahé, 1993: 468-474, and most recently Garsoïan, 2012: 58-68.



cultural implications of this network must await further study. Nevertheless there are two dimensions that merit brief comment at this stage. In the first place, there can be little doubt that the document composed by Komitas for the formal debate at the court of Khusro II in 612 CE was partially recycled in the document preserved in the *History attributed to Sebēos*.<sup>55</sup> The second document was drafted in the expectation that it would be sent to Constans II and displays many points of difference.<sup>56</sup> This has prompted me to wonder if the connection between the two documents should be understood in terms of the similar contexts for which they were prepared, in other words, that a document submitted to a religious disputation in the presence of the Sasanian *šahanšah* provided the basis for a document to be submitted to Constans II in the context of ongoing religious turmoil following the Lateran Council of 649 CE. The similarities are therefore of form and context rather than content, with the second document being heavily reworked to respond to the contemporary controversies. But this in turn leads into the second dimension, namely the developing culture of disputation in the late Sasanian Empire and its philosophical underpinning. Walker discussed this phenomenon in his study of the *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, noting its prominence and arguing for the development of a “shared academic language of proof and persuasion acceptable to all the competing parties”, one that was “grounded in the study of Aristotelian logic”.<sup>57</sup> He traced three routes for the diffusion of Aristotelian studies into the Sasanian Empire:

---

<sup>55</sup> The sequence of Mesopotamian bishops proves this relationship; the significant divergence in terms of content shows that the later document reflects substantial reworking and should not be treated as a reliable source for the miaphysite arguments advanced at Ctesiphon in 612 CE. The earlier document however seems to be a reliable source for what was argued by the miaphysites in 612 CE and how it was proposed. Although beyond the boundaries of this study, it merits comparison with the rival submission: *Synodicon Orientale*, 1902: 562–598.

<sup>56</sup> As noted above, n. 44, Thomson described the two creeds as being “totally different” and this holds true for other elements as well.

<sup>57</sup> Walker, 2006: 164–205, especially 180.

through the multiple contacts between Syrian Christian scholars of Byzantium and their colleagues in the Sasanian Empire; through royal patronage, both of individual philosophers and translations of philosophical treatises; and through the Eastern Syrian educational system, and its stress on ‘Question and Answer’ and controversy literature.<sup>58</sup> On the basis of the two episodes outlined above, it is clear that Armenian clerics participated in religious debates within the Sasanian Empire, indirectly at the start of the sixth century when encouraging the scattered miaphysite communities of Mesopotamia and Khuzistan, directly at the start of the seventh century through the contribution of Komitas to the formal debate at the royal court. It follows therefore that late Antique Armenian ecclesiastical correspondence and documentation should be considered in this wider context, of religious disputation within the Sasanian Empire. Does it reflect the common language of proof and persuasion derived from training in Aristotelian dialectic which Walker found in the Syrian sources? And if it does, should we add a fourth route for the dissemination of Aristotelian ideas, through Armenia, via this confessional network? Or did the process work in reverse, Armenian clerics deriving their ideas from their Mesopotamian correspondents? Either way, it seems that contemporary Armenian letters, documents and treatises should not be treated as singular, but isolated, expressions of belief, but rather can be fitted into much broader traditions of thought and debate within the Sasanian Empire.

By way of a coda, it is striking that there is no evidence for confessional ties between Armenia and Mesopotamia in the decades after the Islamic conquest. When the Armenian Catholicos Yovhannēs III Ōjunec‘i engaged with Syrian miaphysites at the Council of Manazkert in 726, he met with six bishops from sees in former Roman

---

<sup>58</sup> Walker, 2006: 181–190.

territory under the Jacobite patriarch of Antioch; no Mesopotamian representatives were present.<sup>59</sup> Whilst we should always be wary of arguments from silence, it seems that the cross-cultural network between Armenia and Mesopotamia outlined above was no longer functioning.

In conclusion, what do these encounters reveal and where do they point in terms of future research? They reveal the existence of confessional connections between the miaphysite communities of the Sasanian Empire. These were considered important. It is fascinating to find that both Simeon of Bēt Aršam and Mārūt'ā, two of the most significant figures in the miaphysite movement in Mesopotamia, were prepared to travel to Dvin to meet with the head of the Armenian church, a century apart from one another. These extracts also tell us something about the workings of the Sasanian state and the structure of Sasanian society, as well as miaphysite loyalties in that world. Finally they supply a bridge between the ecclesiastical and intellectual cultures of Armenia and the wider Sasanian Empire in late Antiquity, and hence a hitherto unrecognized means by which theological, political and philosophical discourses could be transmitted.

---

<sup>59</sup> *Girk' T'lt'oc'*, 1901: 220–233, at 224; this remains untranslated: “Certain men came to us, 6 bishops from the house of Jacob, for the sake of entering into unity of confession with us whose names are these: the first, bishop Constantine, the second the *Metrapōlit* of the city of Urha, the third Šmawon bishop of Xařan, the fourth T'ēodos bishop of Gardman, the fifth lord At'anas bishop of Np'rkert, the sixth T'ēodoros bishop of Amasia.” Urha: the Armenian name for Edessa; Np'rkert: the Armenian name for Martyropolis.

## Bibliography

- Flusin, B., 1992: *Saint Anastase le Perse et L'Histoire de la Palestine au début du VII<sup>e</sup> Siècle*. Le monde byzantin. 2 vols. Paris : Éditions du Centre National de la recherche scientifique
- Garsoïan, N.G., 1976: "Prolegomena to a Study of the Iranian Elements in Arsacid Armenia". *Handes Amsorya* XC, 177–234. Reprinted in Garsoïan, N.G. 1985: *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians*. London: Variorum Reprints, no. X.
- 1981: "The Locus of the Death of Kings: Iranian Armenia—the Inverted Image." In R. Hovannisian (ed.): *The Armenian Image in History and Literature*. Studies in Near Eastern Culture and Society 3. Malibu, CA: Undena, Pp. 27–64. Reprinted in Garsoïan, N.G. 1985: *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians*. London: Variorum Reprints, no. XI.
- 1992: "Quelques précisions préliminaire sur le schisme entre les Églises byzantine et arménienne au sujet du concile de Chalcédoine : III. Les évêchés méridionaux limitrophes de la Mésopotamie". *Revue des Études Arméniennes* 23, 39–80. Reprinted in Garsoïan, N.G. 1999: *Church and Culture in Early Medieval Armenia*. Aldershot: Ashgate, no. V.
- 1996: "The Two Voices of Armenian Mediaeval Historiography: The Iranian Index," *Studia Iranica* 25, 7–43. Reprinted in Garsoïan, N.G. 1999: *Church and Culture in Early Medieval Armenia*. Aldershot: Ashgate, no. XI.
- 1999: *L'Église arménienne et le grand schisme d'Orient*. CSCO 574. Subs 100. Louvain: Peeters.
- Gero, S., 1981: *Baršauma of Nisibis and Persian Christianity in the Fifth Century*. CSCO 426. Subs. 63 Louvain: Peeters.
- Girk 'T'it'oc'*, 1901: Ed. Y. Izmirian. Tiflis: T. Rawtinean and M. Sharadze.
- Girk 'T'it'oc'*, 1994: Ed. N. Polarean. Jerusalem: St James Press.
- Greenwood, T.W., 2002: "Sasanian Echoes and Apocalyptic Expectations: A Re-evaluation of the Armenian History attributed to Sebeos". *Le Muséon* 115 3-4, 323–397.
- 2008: "Armenian Neighbours (600–1045)". In J. Shepard (ed.): *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire c. 500–1492*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Pp. 333-364.
- 2012: "Armenia". In S.F. Johnson (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*. Oxford University Press, Pp. 115–141.
- Hewsen, R.H., 1992: *The Geography of Ananias of Širak*. Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients Reihe B (Geisteswissenschaften) Nr. 77. Wiesbaden: Dr Ludwig Reichert Verlag.
- Mahé, J.-P., 1993: "L'Église arménienne de 611 à 1066". In G. Dagron, P. Riché, A. Vauchez (eds.): *Histoire du Christianisme des origines à nos jours*, t. IV, *Evêques, moines et empereurs* (610–1054). Paris: Desclée, Pp. 457–547.
- Morony. M.G., 1984: *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Patmut' iwn Sebēosi*, 1979: Ed. G.V. Abgaryan. Erevan: Haykakan SSH Gitut'yunneri Akademiayi Hratarakč'ut'yun.

- Samuēli k'ahanayi Anec 'woy Hawak'munk'*, 1893: Ed. A. Tēr-Mik'elean. Vałaršapat: Ējmiacini Taparan
- Synodicon Orientale*, 1902: Ed. J. B. Chabot. Paris : Imprimerie nationale
- Thomson, R.W., 1981: *The History of Lazar P'arpec 'i*. Occasional Papers and Proceedings 4. Atlanta GA: Scholars Press.
- 1998: "The Defence of Armenian Orthodoxy in Sebeos". In I. Ševčenko and I. Hutter (eds.): *ΑΕΤΟΣ. Studies in Honour of Cyril Mango*. Stuttgart and Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, Pp. 329–341.
- Thomson, R.W. and Howard-Johnston, J.D., 1999: *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*. Translated Texts for Historians 31. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Walker, J.T., 2006: *The Legend of Mar Qardagh. Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq*. The Transformation of the Classical Heritage XL. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Wilmshurst, D. 2011. *The Martyred Church. A History of the Church of the East*. London: East and West Publishing Ltd.
- Wood, P., 2013: *The Chronicle of Seert. Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq*. Oxford Early Christian Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press.