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Armenia in Political and Military Activities of Ardashir I

Katarzyna Maksymiuk¹ 

Abstract

In first half of the third century Armenia was much more than an independent buffer state with no wider cultural context, simply placed between two superpowers of the era – Iran and Rome. The idea of the Iranian character of Arsacid's Armenia should be accepted without further doubts. Political situation of the kingdom changed with taking over the power in Iran by the Persian Dynasty of the Sasanians. Ardashir ī Pābagān utilised the weakening of the Arsacids and stood up against the Parthian dynasty. After defeating Ardashir IV in 224 he declared himself the šāhānšāh of Iran. One of the directions of the military actions of the founder of the new dynasty was an attack against the kingdom of Armenia which was, at the time, ruled by the last branch of the Arsacid royal house and became the last resort of resistance against new authority. Research literature usually limits the problem of early wars with Armenia to information that probably in the late 220s, Ardashir attacked Armenia. Occasionally, the topic is tackled as historical context of the relief from Salmās in Ādurbādagān. An interesting hypothesis based on the interpretation of the Salmās relief was put forward by Eshan Shavarebi, who assumes that between 240 and 242 there may have been an agreement between Ardashir and the Armenians. However, it seems that this hypothesis is built on too fragile foundations. The main motive of the initial actions of the first Sasanian ruler was an attempt to remove the opposition associated with the Parthian dynasty. This motive may be observed in context of Ardashir's military actions towards Arabic city of Hatrā.

Keywords: Armenia; Arsacids; Sasanians; Ardashir; Roman Empire; Wars.

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Introduction

For couple of centuries the interests of the Iranian Empire and *Imperium Romanum* clashed in the Kingdom of Armenia (Kettenhofen, 1998). This country had immense economic importance because of trade routes crossing there. However what is more important from military point of view, Armenia was perfect platform for launching any operations towards Roman Cappadocia, or on the other end, being a barrier securing from the possible incursions of nomadic tribes of the North (Movsēs Xorenac'i II.65; Wolski, 1980; Chaumont, 1987: 433; Jackson Bonner, 2020: 19–20).

The agreement between the Roman emperor Nero (r. 54–68) and the Iranian king Walāxš I (r. 51–78) assured the Armenian throne to the member of the Parthian royal house (Tacitus, *Ann.* XV.29.3–5; Dio Cassius LXIII.1–7; Stépanian 1975/1976; Wolski, 1983; 1987). The introduction of a member of the Arsacid dynasty to the throne of Armenia resulted in tightening the ties between this country and Iran.

A change in Armenian-Iranian relations occurred in the first half of the 3rd century AD. Utilizing the weakening of the Arsacids (Patterson, 2013), Ardashir ī Pābagān stood up against the Parthian (Pahlav) dynasty. Ardashir was a local sovereign of the province of Persis/Pārs/Fārs. It must be emphasised here that the origin of his family remains unclear even though he presents himself as a continuator of the Persian tradition surviving in Istakhr (coinage of Ardashir with the legend *r̥thštr MLK'*, see Alram, Gyselen 2003: 118). “The stories about Ardashir’s origins are so varied that they suggest a search for legitimacy via every tradition that had been passed down by the Persians” (Daryaei, 2010: 24; See also Olbrycht, 2016: 24–28; Jackson Bonner, 2020: 29–30).

After defeating of the armies of Ardashir IV (r. 216–224) in the plain of Hormzdgān, on 30 Mehr/28 April 224 C.E. (Sylvanne and Maksymiuk, 2018: 29–37), Ardashir declared himself the king of Iran: “There was great slaughter among Ardashir’s troops, and the survivors fled the field. It is said that Ardashir dismounted and trampled Ardashir’s head with his feet. On that day of battle, Ardashir received the title of ‘Supreme King’ (*Shāhānshāh*, literally ‘King of Kings’)” (Tabarī 819). One of the military actions of the founder of the new Persian dynasty was an attack against the kingdom of Armenia.

Research literature usually limits the problem of early wars with Armenia to information that probably in the late 220s, Ardashir attacked Armenia. Or occasionally the topic is tackled as historical context of the relief from Salmās in Ādurbādagān (Shavarebi, 2014: 128; Maksymiuk, 2017a).

The following research aims to discuss Ardashir’s actions towards Armenia based on the surviving source accounts.

Armenia in Ārānšahr

It must be pointed out that in first half of the third century Armenia was much more than an independent buffer state with no wider cultural context, just placed between two superpowers of the era. The idea of the Iranian character of Arsacid’s Armenia should be accepted without further doubts (Tacitus, *Ann.* XII.1; Garsoian, 1976; Pourshariati, 2008: 386–395; Rapp, 2014).

In the inscription of Šābuhr I (r. 242–272) on the Ka’be-ye Zartošt at Naqš-e Rostam, Armenia was mentioned within the boundaries of Ārānšahr: “[I] am ruler of Ārānšahr, [I hold?] the lands: Pārs, Pahlav, Xūzestān, Mēšān, Āsūrestān, Nodšeragān, Arabestān, Ādurbāyagān,

Armin..." (ŠKZ 1-2/2/2-3). Also Armenian sources describe close relations with Iran: "Xosrov, King of Armenia - who was second in the realm of the Persians" (Agathangelos I.18). Only in the inscription of Kartir Armenia was placed outside of *Ērānšahr*: "And also in the land Anērān where the Horses and men of the šahan šah reached -...the land of Armenia" (KKZ V.14-15), which is however justified by the struggle for power in late third century Iran Warahrān II (r. 276-293) wanted to secure the succession to his son while the counter-candidate was Narseh the king of Armenia and the last living son Šābuhr I (Weber, 2016).

Background to the conflict

The change of the dynasty was perceived in the Empire as a potential threat for the position of Rome in the Near East. "The entire continent opposite Europe, separated from it by the Aegean Sea and the Propontic Gulf, and the region called Asia he wished to recover for the Persian empire...He [Ardašir] asserted that it was therefore proper for him to recover for the Persians the kingdom which they had formerly possessed." (Herodian VI.2.2; See also Dio Cassius LXXX.3.4).

It is important to note that the Herodian and Dion texts were not written long after the discussed events; in fact, they depict the mood of the people of the Roman East at the time of the change of dynasty in Iran (Blois, 2019: 34). Of course, an entirely separate problem is the interpretation of Ardašir's actual goals, as they cannot be determined based solely on the sentiments of the Roman chroniclers.

If this was the mood in the empire, it seems that the strongest perturbation must have arose on the royal court of Armenia, closely related to the Arsacids. Written sources unanimously

state that after the battle on the plain of Hormzdagān, the sons of Ardashān found shelter in Armenia where they were preparing for further struggle with Ardašir. "Here he suffered a reverse at the hands of the natives, some Medes and the children of Medes, and the children of Artabanus, and either fled (as some say) or (as others assert) retired to prepare a larger expedition." (Dio Cassius LXXX.3.3); "Then when he marched against Armenia, he was defeated by the Armenians and Medes who were joined in an attack upon him by the sons of Artabanus" (Zonaras XII.15).

Movsēs Xorenac'i informs that only the Arsacids of Armenia and the Kārin clan took up fights against Ardašir I. The other Parthian dynastic families recognized the authority of the Persian usurper: "After Artashir, son of Sasan, had killed Artavan an gained the throne, two branches of the Pahlav family called Aspahapet and Surēn Pahlav were jealous at the rule of the branch of their own kin, that is, of Artashēs, and willingly accepted the rule of Artashir, son of Sasan. But the house of Karēn Pahlav, remaining friendly toward their brother and kin, opposed in war Artashir, son of Sasan." (Movsēs Xorenac'i II.71). Olbrycht (2016: 28) wrote: "The House of the Gondopharids or Indo-Parthians, represented by Farn-Sāsān, as it seems, had an alliance with Ardashir I, resulting from blood ties and, more importantly, a common political interest based on the intention of defeating or even destroying the western Arsacids."

Except of Armenia North-Western provinces of Iran and Ādurbādagān ('Ατροπατηνή) stood up in defense of the Arsacid royal house (Zonaras XII.15), Agathangelos (I.19) lists the countries of the Caucasus region Arrān (Albania, Ἀλβανίαν) and Viruzān (Georgia, Ἰβηρία)

and the Huns allied with them: "Khosrov king of Armenia began to raise forces and assemble an army. He gathered the armies of the Albanians and the Georgians, opened the gates of the Alans and the stronghold of the Chor; he brought through the army of the Huns in order to attack Persian territory".

What is clear from the written sources is the fact of taking of military actions and their explanation. King of Armenia pointed that he and Ardashān were closely related by the blood-bonds "remaining friendly toward their brother and kin" (Movsēs Xorenac'i II.71); "in order to seek vengeance from the blood of Artavan...For because of his family relationship to that dynasty...He honored the sites of the ancestral worship of his Arsacid family" (Agathangelos I.19, 20, 22).

Blood-ties were very important in Iranian tradition, especially in case of the royal family, Ṭabarī (823) wrote that in line with the will of Sāsān, Ardashīr was to slaughter all members of the house of the Arsacids "When Ardashīr b. Bābak had attained the royal power, he wrought great slaughter among the Arsacids (al-Ashākaniyyah), to whom belonged the 'Party Kings', until he had exterminated them, in accordance with an oath which Sāsān ..., had sworn: that, if at some point, he should attain the royal power, he would not spare a single one of the progeny of Ashak, son of Khurrah. ... not to leave alive a single one of the Arsacids if they should succeed to power".

According to Iranian concept of royal power the legality of his claim to power over Ērānšahr was assured only by the divine royal glory, *farr(ah)/x'arənah* (Choksy, 1988; Gnoli, 1999; Huff, 2008) which was transferred through blood ties and included all family members (NPi 3.1, 65, 68, 70, 80, 82).

The importance of this ideology is also attested in Armenian sources, *The Epic histories* in description of the events in, already Christian, Armenia in 4th century states "[The Persians] opening the tombs of the first Armenian kings, the valiant Arsacids, removed their bones and carried them off as trophies so that the glory (p'afk') and the fortune (baxt)... of these kings should pass with their remains to ... [the Persian] land" (P'awstos Buzandac'i IV.24).

Military action – attempt of reconstruction

After the battle in the plain of Hormzdagān 224, Armenian king asked for help the Roman emperor Severus Alexander (r. 222–235) "And immediately He made haste to inform Philip (sic!), the Roman emperor, seeking help from him.... But he helped him by means of a letter ordering that he be given assistance from every region.... Having acquired such a multitude [of troops] he marched against Artashir" (Movsēs Xorenac'i II.71–72) and stated to maintain anti-Persian coalition "But at the start of the next year Khosrov king of Armenia began to raise forces and assemble an army... in order to attack Persian territory" (Agathangelos I.19). The identification of the ruler of Armenia at this time is problematic. Both Agathangelos and Movsēs Xorenac'i give the name Khosrov/Chosroes (I). However, it seems appropriate here to agree with the idea of Toumanoff (1969: 250), who stated that the mentioned Khosrov was "a hyperbolic memory preserved by the Armenian tradition", while the king of Armenia was Trdat II, 'brother' of the Parthian king Ardashān IV (Dodgeon and Lieu 1991: 298, n. 10).

The plan included the attack of allied forces on Āsōristān and reaching Ctesiphon "invade Asorestan as far as the gates of Ctesiphon" (Agathangelos

I.19). The Armenian sources inform us about the battle in Āsōristān in course of which Ardashīr was defeated and which should be dated according to Armenian sources to 225/226: "And when the Persian king..., advanced against them in battle array. However, he was unable to resist them, and fled before them" (Agathangelos I.21); "Khosrov ... marched against Artashir, and giving battle put him to flight; he took from him Assyria and the other lands where he had a royal residence." (Movsēs Xorenac'i II.72).

The royal residence mentioned in the text of Moses Khorenats'i might be Hamadān in Media. Nevertheless the possibility that Khosrov/Trdat had a control over Media should be refuted as this is not confirmed even by Agathangelos himself who wrote that after the battle with Ardashīr, Khosrov/Trdat withdrew to Armenia: "After this great slaughter the Armenian king joyfully and victoriously returned with much booty to the land of Armenia, to the province of Ayrarat and the city of Valarshapat" (Agathangelos I.21). Conversely, we might come to conclusion that it was Ardashīr who captured Media: "Then he went from there to Hamadhān and conquered it by force of arms" (Ṭabarī 819). Also according to Dio Cassius Iranian armies after failed attempt of capturing Ḥatrā took the positions in Media (according to Dodgeon and Lieu 1991: 298, n. 9, in hands of Ardashīr remained Media Atropatene).

At the beginning of 226, when Ardashīr carried the war in Arabian Peninsula "as also the mountain region (al-Jabal)" (Ṭabarī 819), the allied forces under command of Khosrov/Trdat plundered Āsōristān "Then at the beginning of the next year he gathered a great army, summoning the same troops; and with even more than these, because the forces

of the Tachiks had come to his support, he spread his invasion over the regions of Asorestan. They plundered the whole land and victoriously returned to their own countries" (Agathangelos I.23). After withdrawal to Media which followed failed attempt of capturing Ḥatrā in 226/227, "(After killing Artabanus, Artaxerxes) made a campaign against Hatra which he endeavoured to take as a base for attacking the Romans...; he transferred his position to Media" (Dio Cassius LXXX.3.2).

In 227/228 (Chaumont, 1969: 32; Wiesehöfer, 1986: 372). Ardashīr moved with his army from Media with intention to invade Armenia "Of this district (Media), as also of Parthia, he acquired no small portion, partly by force and partly by intimidation, and then marched against Armenia" (Dio Cassius LXXX.3.3) and Ādurbādagān "and conquered it by force of arms...Azerbaijan" (Ṭabarī 819). According to western sources the armies of Ardashīr were defeated by the forces of the coalition (Dio Cassius LXXX.3.3; Zonaras XII.15).

The localization of the battle is unknown, however Shavarebi (2014) may assume that it must have taken place in vicinity of modern Salmās because of the royal relief placed there. Additional confirmation of this localization could be the fragment of The *Nihāyat al-Irab*, which mentions the battle at the border of Ādurbādagān and Armenia "All its [Armenia's] kings assembled to fight him [Ardashīr] and they joined battle there, between Ādurbāgān and Armenia and fought a violent fight, until the killed were numerous on both sides. But the victory remained with Ardašēr and they asked him for safety. And he gave them safety and pandered them" (*Nihāyat al-Irab* in Widengren, 1971: 770, cf. 721), what attracts attention, the Author, contrary to

other sources states that the battle ended with Ardashir's victory.

Ṭabarī does not mention the battle at all, he just lists Armenia and Ādurbādagān among the countries controlled by Ardashir (Ṭabari 819).

Armenian position towards Ardashir in following years was strengthened by the alliance with Rome. This alliance is confirmed by the military actions taken by Severus Alexander in the course of the war in years 231-233 (Maksumyuk, 2015: 29-31), when part of the Roman army attacked Iran from the north through the mountains of Armenia. "One army he ordered to overrun the territory of the Medes and to reconnoitre the northern regions and pass through Armenia, which seemed to favour the Roman cause" (Herodian VI.5.1), and when Persian campaign ended up with defeat, part of the army withdrew the same way. (Herodian VI.5.5-8; VI.6.2-3). The alliance is further confirmed by the employment of Armenian troops by Severus Alexander in Germania in 235 (HA, *Sev. Alex.* 61.8).

In 238/239 Ardashir began another campaign in nothern Mesopotamia (Kettenhofen, 1995 dates a possible capture of Nisibis and Carrhae to 235/236), in course of which, after two years of siege he finally captured Hatra (Maksumyuk, 2017b). There is no information about the actions of the Armenian army during the Persian invasion.

An interesting hypothesis based on the interpretation of the Salmās relief is proposed by Eshan Shavarebi (2014: 129).

"Thus, the relief is probably illustrated at the time of Shapur's co-regency in his father's kingship, which was begun between April and September 240. ... Thus it is assumed that the relief of Salmas represents Ardashir's probable peace with Armenians at that time."

The basis of his interpretation is the assumption of the co-regency of Ardashir and Šābuhr in 240-242.

The argument supporting the idea of the co-regency Ardashir and Šābuhr is a fragment of the biography of Mani from *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis* (P. Colon. Inv. 4780): "When I was twenty[-four] years old, in the year in which Dariadaxir, the king of Persia, subjugated the city of Hatra, and in which Sapore, his son assumed the mighty diadem [διάδημα μέγιστον] in the month of Pharmuthi on the [eighth] day according to the moon". However, there is no mention of co-regency in the text. Ṭabarī (820) attests that "and he [Ardašir] had his son Shābūr crowned within his own lifetime". Mas'udi (219) mentions the abdication of Ardashir. According to Bal'amī (884), Šābuhr was crowned twice, for the first time he was crowned by Ardashir "with his own hand placed his personal crown upon Šāpūr's head", while when he ascended the throne "he crowned himself [anew]" (886).

The arguments allowing abolishment of the idea of the alleged co-regency can be found in Iranian tradition. In this place we need to revoke the idea of the 'royal fire' and the mode of instigating of the new kings. The Iranian šāhānšāh started a 'royal fire' at his accession. The ascendant was allowed to ignite his own fire only three days after predecessor's death (Shahbazi, 1980: 131-134). The absolute condition to ignite the royal fire is thus the death of the predecessor. This procedure is confirmed by the inscription at Bišābuhr: "The month of Fravardin, the year 58, (which is) the year 40 of Ardašēr's Fire, (and) the year 24 of Šābuhr's Fire" (ŠVŠ).

It seems that the main argument to refute the idea of the co-regency is Iranian tradition which rejected such an option.

Based on the above, the hypothesis of possiblem "Ardashir's probable peace with Armenians" cannot be sustained. It must be emphasized that no written sources mention this event.

Conclusion

The main motive of the initial actions of the first Persian *šāhānšāh* Ardashir was an attempt to remove the opposition associated with the royal dynasty in Ctesiphon. It should be pointed that the Parthian rule was not entirely been broken. Walāxš (VI) minted the coins in Seleucia (Simonetta, 1956; Sellwood, 1971: 290). The alliance of Ḥaṭrā with Rome, where the associations of the local aristocracy with the Parthian royal family was the reason for declaration of the city against Ardashir (Potter, 1987: 154; Wiesehöfer, 1982: 441; Maksymiuk, 2017b). And, first of all, survival of the Arsacids on the throne of Armenia were clear and present dangers for new Persian dynasty. It could ba assumed that the goal of war waged Severus Alexander could be re-establishing of the the Arsacids on the

throne of Iran.

The importance of Armenia in Iranian policies can be attested by the conditions of the peace treaty of 244 when Šābuhr I, despite defeat in Roman army in the battle of Pērōz Šābuhr and extremely difficult situation of Philip I the Arab (r. 244-249) did not rise any territorial claims towards *Imperium Romanum*. He was satisfied with the declaration of the emperor that Rome would refrain from any ingeration in the Armenian affairs (Winter, 1988: 97-107). Armenia was conquered by the Sasanian forces only in 252/253, and what is especially vague Šābuhr I gave his son Hormozd-Ardashir the title of *Wuzurg Šāh Arminān* 'Great King of the Armenians' (ŠKZ 23/18/40-41).

Here one should agree with the opinion of Ursula Weber (2016), who believes that: "His [Ardashir I's] fruitless attack on Armenia was based on his claim to overcome the last branch of the Arsacid royal house and to become its successor."

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