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261 CE – Revolution in Caucasian Iberia

The Caucasian kingdom of Iberia had been, at first, relatively preserved from the profound mutations that accompanied the overthrow of Arsacids by the new Sasanian power in Iran¹. The builder of the new Empire, Ardaxšīr I (r. 224-242), did not interfere with the ruling dynasties in Media Atropatene, Armenia, Albania and the rest of South Caucasia. It was during the reign of his successor, Šāpūr I (r. 239-270), that the Sasanian revolution affected this part of Asia. The Roman Empire was again struggling with an Iranian expansionism much more assertive than under the last Arsacids. For Caucasian history, this period marked by profound upheavals remains quite obscure, not only due to the lack of sources, but also to the contradictions between divergent documents. However, some testimonies found in chronicles, epigraphy and archaeology are likely to cast new light on the events which changed Caucasus during the period that scholars have traditionally referred to as the “Third Century Crisis”².

Since the time when the Sasanian Ardaxšīr had dethroned the last Parthian king Ardavān IV in 224, the new Sasanian power had to contend with the offshoots of the Arsacid dynasty present in Caucasus. The lapse of the Iranian branch of Arsacid dynasty, following the advent of the first Sasanian sovereign, attracted to Iran the hostility of sister dynasties in the Caucasus, especially in Armenia, where since the 1st century CE, the Aršakuni held the throne³. In Albania, it is supposed by several scholars that a branch of Arsacids took the reins of royalty during the first or the second century CE and would have ruled continuously until 510, but this allegation is far from being certain insofar as very

¹ G. Melik'išvili and O. Lordkipanidze, *Очерки истории Грузии*, volume I, Tbilisi, 1989, p. 347-349.

² J.-M. Carrié and A. Rousselle, *Nouvelle histoire de l'Antiquité, 10, L'Empire romain en mutation*, Paris, 1999, p. 9-27, 89-98.

³ S. Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, Farnham, 2014, p. 240.

few names of Albanians kings are known⁴. In Iberia, an ancient dynasty, that had forged ties with the Aršakuni of Armenia and other noble houses in the Iranian world, occupied the throne for more than three centuries⁵. Since the first century BCE, Iberian kingdom had been one of Rome's privileged partners in Caucasian policy: despite their displayed taste for honorary titles and luxury goods imported from the Roman Empire, the ruling elites of Iberia had nonetheless managed to maintain a subtle diplomatic balance aimed at their own advantage during three centuries, until 260 CE.

The denunciation of the policy carried out by the Romans in Armenia brought the *šāhān šāh* Šāpūr I to break the peace which had been concluded in 244 with Philip the Arab⁶. By 252, the Iranian invasion of Armenia allowed the Sasanian to temporarily terminate the Arsacid power in this kingdom neighboring Iberia⁷. Winners of the Romans at the Battle of Barbalissos, the Persians

⁴ K. Trever, *Очерки по истории и культуре Кавказской Албании IV в. до н.э. – VII в. н.э.*, Moscow, 1959, p. 145, 217, 254, 289; C. Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, Washington, 1963, p. 83-84; C. Toumanoff, *Les Dynasties de la Caucasic chrétienne de l'Antiquité jusqu'au XIX^e siècle*, Rome, 1990, p. 568; S. Rapp, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 240. Movsēs Kałankatuač'i, *History of the Caucasian Albanians*, I, 4, describes how a legendary king of Armenia, Valaršak, appointed Aran, from the Sisakan family, at the head of the Albanian land. Kamilla Trever perceives this story as the proof that Armenian Arsacids would have managed to place one of their members on the Albanian throne in the middle or at the end of the 1st century CE. However, the first Vologases known in Armenian Arsacid kings' genealogy (r. 117-140), intervened far after the periods of activity of Albanian kings Oroibazes (r. c. 66 BCE) and Zober (r. c. 36 BCE) respectively attested in Appian, *Mithridatic War*, CIII, 480-482 and in Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, XLIX, 24, 1. The hypothesis of an Arsacid ramification in Albania is possible, but far from being certain due to the lack of testimonies.

⁵ The Arsacids are called *Aršakuni* (Արշակունի) in Armenian and *Aršakuniani* (არშაკუნიანი) in Georgian chronicles. According to the *Life of the Kings*, Simon Qauxč'išvili (ed.), 58, an Arsacid dynasty would have taken power at a date placed by Cyril Toumanoff in the end of the 2nd century CE: Valarš II (r. 180-191), Arsacid king of Armenia, would have acquired this position for his son Rev I. As his mother was the sister of former Pharnabazid King Amazasp II, Rev would have managed to unite the Arsacid and Pharnabazid houses. While the reliability of Georgian chronicles on the unfolding of events poses major problems, the idea of an Iberian dynasty related to the Arsacids of Armenia and Iran can be admitted at that time. C. Toumanoff, "Chronology of the Early Kings of Iberia", *Traditio*, volume 25, 1969, p. 17.

⁶ M.-L. Chaumont, "L'Arménie entre Rome et l'Iran", in H. Temporini and W. Haase (ed.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II, 9, 1, Berlin 1976, p. 169-176. B. Dignas and E. Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, 2007, p. 119-122.

⁷ B. Dignas and E. Winter, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 22. On the difficulty for establishing the chronology of the war between 253 and 256, see E. Kettenhofen, *Die römisch-persischen Kriege des 3. Jahrhunderts n. Chr. Nach der Inschrift Šāhpurs I. an der Ka'be-ye Zartošt [ŠKZ]*, Wiesbaden, 1982, p. 50-96; K. Schippmann, *Grundzüge der Geschichte des sasanidischen Reiches*, Darmstadt, 1990, p. 21-23; D. Potter, *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire: A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, Oxford, 1990, p. 189-196 and p. 290-297; K. Strobel, *Das Imperium Romanum im 3. Jahrhundert, Modell einer historischen Krise?*, Stuttgart, 1993, p. 220-256.

continued their campaign in Syria, taking especially Hierapolis and Antioch on the Orontes, destroying the market city of Dura-Europos, then advancing in Cappadocia between 253 and 255. Valerian's personal intervention to restore the situation, despite some successes carried out in 254 and 256, nevertheless turned to a disaster for Rome during the third Persian campaign in 260: the emperor, defeated near Edessa, was captured alive by the Persians⁸. The expansionist policy of Šāpūr I, then at its peak, reinforced the claims made by Ardaxšīr I to restore the ancient Achaemenid empire⁹. The Caucasus was to appear as the next target of the Iranian sovereign. According to the *Life of the Two Valerians*, part of *Historia Augusta*, after Valerian's capture in 260, the Iberians, together with other allied peoples, would have rejected the proposals of Šāpūr and proposed to the Romans to send them some troops to liberate the captive emperor.

The Bactrians, the Iberians, the Albanians and the Tauroscyths turned down letters from Sapor, but they wrote to the Roman generals, promising to send them auxiliary troops to release Valerian from his captivity.¹⁰

The Iberians are mentioned with three other peoples belonging to the Iranian commonwealth. The Bactrians designate the people inhabiting the plain of Bactria, located in the north of Hindu Kush and crossed by Amu Darya. The Albanians gathered various tribes of Eastern Caucasia near Iberia on its eastern border. The Tauroscyths are a people of Iranian culture, residing, according to Arrian, on the outskirts of Chersonesus¹¹, around the northern shores of the Black Sea, who participated with other nations in the attacks on the Bosporan kingdom in the 3rd century CE, as well as naval raids of looting on the shores of Colchis and Roman Empire¹². This configuration of strategic alliances seems to

⁸ E. Kettenhofen, *op. cit.*, 1982, p. 97-126, p. 220-256.

⁹ M. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London, 2009, p. 39-51.

¹⁰ *Historia Augusta*, "Life of the Two Valerians", IV, 1: «*Bactrani et Hiberi et Albani et Tauroscythae Saporis litteras non receperunt, sed ad Romanos duces scripserunt auxilia pollicentes ad Valerianum de captivitate liberandum*». Translation by André Chastagnol, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1994, slightly modified. My reading differs from Olivier Desbordes' choices (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2000), whose meaning appears more ambiguous: these nations «*received no letter from Sapor, but they wrote to the Roman generals, promising them help to liberate Valerian from his captivity*». Contrary to the meaning that this alternative translation might imply, the three nations' initiative should not be understood as a proposal for independent and peaceful mediation. The expression *non receperunt* suggests a voluntary refusal to receive the letters of Šāpūr, while the *auxilia* seem to refer here to the auxiliary troops that the allies sent to the Romans during their campaigns.

¹¹ Arrian, *Periplus*, § 30.

¹² C. Müller and *alii*, "Chronique des fouilles et découvertes archéologiques dans le Bosphore cimmérien (mer Noire septentrionale)", *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique*, volume 124, 2, 2000, p. 722-724.

be discernable in the marriage circa 292 between Mirian and Nana, the daughter of a dignitary from Pontus named Ulitos, Oligotos, Uhlatos or Uliotor in the different manuscripts of the *Life of the Kings*¹³. This Ulitos can be identified with Iulios Thothorses¹⁴, the king of Bosporan kingdom between 285 and 305 according to numismatic documents¹⁵. Several epigraphic evidences suggest the importance of an henotheist and syncretic spirituality which impregnated the minds of Bosporan elites¹⁶, from which is censed to be originary Nana, alleged Mirian's second wife, who would have played a major role in the conversion of Iberian kingship to christianism¹⁷. Alliance between Iberians and Tauroscythians could suggest a convergence of interests between peoples sharing a common basis in Iranian social structures, religious dynamics, and projects of expansion on Black Sea against the Roman Empire and its allies around Cimmerian Bosphorus and Colchian shores. These rivalries in Pontus have left an echo in the four wars which opposed the city of Chersona in Crimea and the Bosporan kingdom, known by a narrative tradition delivered by the Byzantine

¹³ *Life of the Kings (K'art'lis C'xovreba)*, Simon Qauxë'išvili (ed.), 66₁₋₈: "Oligotos" (ოლიგოტოს), "Uhlatos" (უჰლატოს) and "Uliotor" (ულოიოტორ). *Patmut' iwn Vrac' (K'art'lis C'xovreba)*, §41, Robert W. Thomson (transl.), p.77-78: "Ulitos" (ὐλιτῆστος). This hesitation of the handwritten tradition proves that this is not a pure invention, but that the transmission of this name goes back to remote times, explaining its corruption in its Georgian forms which make it difficult to recognize. The date of 292 is given by C. Toumanoff, *op. cit.*, 1969, p. 23-24: Mirian would married with Nana at the age of fifteen, and the beginning of this reign would have begun in 284 according to his chronological reconstitution, which have to be taken only with great prudence. The Georgian chronicler could probably have merged the marriage between an Iberian king and the daughter of Thothorses with another tradition about Mirian and Nana. Therefore, Ulitos' identifying with Ioulios Thothorses isn't to be considered as a definite proof of Mirian's reign during 290's.

¹⁴ C. Settiani, *Continuité des élites à Byzance durant les siècles obscurs*, Paris, 2006, p. 404-407. I disagree with C. Toumanoff, *op. cit.*, 1969, note 91 p. 23, who identified Ulitos with Aurelios Valerios Sogous Olympianos, governor of Theodosia in 306 according to a Greek inscription recensed in *Corpus Inscriptionum Regni Bosporani* (CIRB) 64.

¹⁵ N. Frolova, *The Coinage of the Kingdom of Bosporus A.D. 242-341/342*, Oxford 1983, p. 33. B. Nadel, "Literary Tradition and Epigraphical Evidence: Constantine Porphyrogenitus' Information on the Bosporan Kingdom of Emperor Diocletian Reconsidered", *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne*, volume 3, 1977, p. 95, proposes for Thothorses dates of reign ranging from 286 / 287 to 308 / 309 CE.

¹⁶ Y. Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods of the Bosporan Kingdom*, Leiden – Boston – Köln, 1999, p. 234-237, 241-254.

¹⁷ Perhaps under the influence of Jewish and then Christian communities, the Bosporan kingdom was invested from the 2nd-3rd centuries by syncretic cults professed by religious societies, the thiasis (θίασος), worshipping in particular, but not exclusively, "the Supreme God" (Θεὸς ὑψίστος). Y. Ustinova, *op. cit.*, 1999, p. 185-201; p. 216-217; p. 234-237. S. Mitchell, "The Cult of Theos Hysistos between Pagans, Jews and Christians", in P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford, 1999, p. 81-148.

author Constantine Porphyrogenitus, which remains valuable even if it lacks viability¹⁸.

The attitude of these three nations is contrasted by the *Historia Augusta* with the strategy of other actors in the region, who maintained an alliance with Iran: letters were supposedly written by a king of Armenia named Artabases and a certain Velenus, king of the Cadusians, in which these sovereigns ranked on the side of Šāpūr by warning him against the ability of the Romans to revenge¹⁹. Although the content of this passage in *Historia Augusta* contains many inventions and is much more of an anti-Sasanian rhetoric than an objective account of the geopolitical situation in 260 CE, it nevertheless offers a unique testimony on the choice of allegiance to which the Oriental kingdoms were confronted in the struggle between Rome and Iran.

Such an allusion to the existence of an anti-Sasanian coalition indicates networks of aristocratic alliances animated from the peripheral territories of the Iranian world. The use of missives to correspond with the Romans attest to the existence of royal chancelleries, including administrators endowed with a mastery of the languages of diplomacy, particularly of the Greek, and able to conduct a coordinated foreign policy between the different members of the coalition. The geopolitical weight of this alliance of nations is mainly defined by the privileged situation of its protagonists, located on the northern branch of the vast trade network known as the Silk Road. Bactria was located in a nodal point of the reticular frame of caravan tracks and step cities. The road, passing through Hecatompylos, could then either take the eastern route to Syria, or turn north towards the Caucasus, namely Albania and Iberia, then lead either to Anatolia or to Pontus Euxinus whose waters were furrowed by the ships of the North-Bosporan peoples²⁰. This alliance of kingdoms on the northern branch of Silk Road would testify to the willingness of these partners to take advantage of the troubled situation in Syria to promote the passage of merchant flows in their territory and to deprive the Sasanian power of any involvement in this trade (figure 1).

¹⁸ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*, LIII, for Chersona's story.

¹⁹ *Historia Augusta*, "Life of the Two Valerians", II and III. The Cadusians are a nation of Media living in the vicinity of the Caspian Sea, mentioned by Livy, *Roman History*, XXXVI, 48, 5. The authenticity of the royal names of Velenus and Artabades is far from assured.

²⁰ On trade interests in Romano-Sasanian conflict, B. Dignas and E. Winter, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 195-209.



Figure 1 – Iberians, Albanians and Tauroscyths on the Silk Road network around 260 CE

As a consequence, this coalition wasn't only the result of the circumstances, but was part of an ancient network of dynastic alliances nourished by centuries of Arsacid hegemony over the Iranian world. Sasanians could not tolerate this northern front that was set up against their own empire. Their intervention in the region was recorded by several sources, in a more or less explicit way. The time having widened the divergences and blurred the outlines of these testimonies, it remains difficult to identify the date as the exact circumstances of the Iranian intervention in the Caucasus. The closest source of the events affecting the Caucasus during the early 260's is the trilingual inscription of Šāpūr I. After celebrating his victories over Rome, culminating in the capture of Emperor Valerian in 260, Šāpūr then evokes, in half words, other successful expeditions: "*And by me many other lands were obtained, and many [deeds of] fame and bravery were accomplished, which are not written here.*"²¹ These nations are in fact quoted in another passage of the same inscription, listing the countries subject to the hegemony of the *šāhān šāh*.

I, the Mazdā-worshipping god Šāpūr, king of kings of Iran and Not-Iran, whose brood [is] of the gods, son of the Mazdā-worshipping god Ardašīr, king

²¹ ŠKZ § 31, translation by Jake Nabel adapted from P. Huysse, *Die dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. an der Ka'ba-i Zardušt (ŠKZ)*, London, 1999, 1, p. 44.

of kings of Iran, whose race [is] of the gods, grandson of the god King Pābag, am lord of Iran. And I possess the lands of Persia, Parthia, Xūzestān, Mēšān, Asūrestān, Nōdšīragān (Adiabene), Arbāyestān, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Wiržān (Iberia), Sīgān, Ardān (Albania), Balāsagān, up to the Caucasus mountains and the gate of the Alani, and the entire range of the Elburz mountains, Media, Gurgān (Hyrkania), Merv, Harēw, and all of Abaršahr, Kermān, Sakestān, Tugrān, Makrān, Pārdān, Hindestān, Kušānšahr up to Pešāwar (?) and until Kāšgar (?), Sogdiana and Taškent, and on the far side of the sea Mazūn (Oman). And I made Pērōz-Šāpūr D—shar (?) by name, and I made Ohrmezd-Ardašīr Šāpūr by name. And all these numerous lands and rulers and regions were made tributary and subject to me.²²

In the ŠKZ inscription, Šāpūr I uses the distinction between Iran and non-Iran to distinguish the regions temporarily conquered, namely Syria, Cappadocia and Cilicia, while he seems to have considered the territories formerly under Achaemenid obedience as part of Iran, particularly Armenia and South Caucasia²³. Šāpūr perceived Iberia as an integral part of his Empire: this territory is in the list of peoples belonging to the Sasanian domain. Amazasp's status as it appears in the inscription ŠKZ is far from negligible because this man was among the ruling elites of the Sasanian domain, occupying the rank of Prince of Empire (*šahrdārān*). Among the list of these dignitaries under the domination of Šāpūr I, the name of Amazasp, king of Iberia, after the kings of Adiabene, of Carmania and the queen of Mesene, remains in good stead among Sasanian king's relatives and loyal servants²⁴. While being subjected to the king of kings, the *šahrdārān* could claim the attributes of divine glory (*xwarrah*) and govern vast territories of the domain subject to the authority of the Sasanian sovereign²⁵.

The appearance of Iberian King Amazasp in the inscription of Šāpūr I in Naqš-i Rostam with other sovereigns gravitating into the orbit of Iran leads to analyze the role played by a princely confederation resulting from the association of great Parthian families Razz, Sūren, Kāren, Mihrān and Varāz, which was one of the essential supports of Sasanian power. The domains of these

²² ŠKZ § 1-5, translation by Jake Nabel adapted from P. Huyse, *op. cit.*, 1999, 1, p. 22-25, modified.

²³ B. Dignas and E. Winter, *op. cit.*, 2007, note 18 p. 57.

²⁴ P. Harper and P. Meyers, *Silver Vessels of the Sassanian Period, I. Royal Imagery*, New York, 1981, p. 16 as well as R. Frye, "Notes on the early Sassanian State and Church", in *Studi Orientalistici in onore di Giorgio Levi Della Vida*, volume 1, Rome, 1956, p. 335, consider Amazasp as a member of the Sasanian royal family. D. Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, Oxford, 1994, p. 240.

²⁵ P. Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, London – New York, 2008, p. 48.

princes would have been integrated into Sasanian Empire in the form of semi-independent states, and their fidelity assured to the *šāhān šāh* was rewarded by the maintenance of their privileges and curial dignity, as well as by the devolution of the autonomous management of their territories²⁶. The integration of Iberia into the system of Iranian alliances between 261 and 298 would have been effected by the association of the new ruling dynasty, allegedly issued from the house of Mihranids, to this confederation of Parthian princes whose weight allowed it to impose on the Sasanian power the recognition of its prerogatives. Although the new ruling elites of Iberia were integrating the Sasanian orbit into this alliance, they nevertheless retained a certain flexibility in their political action. The complex Caucasian ground as well as the instable balance of power solicited in all points this mode of devolution of power to the princely houses able to adapt their allegiances according to changes of hegemony.

Šāpūr's inscription thus presents a first assessment of the Sasanian conquests made in Orient, where the Caucasus mountains appeared as the new frontier reached by Iranian hegemony. This first-hand source unfortunately remains silent on the modalities of this Sasanian intervention in South Caucasia. However, other documents have kept track of this campaign. The most explicit source, but not the most precise, is in a passage from the Chronicle of Arbela, a Syriac document composed in the 6th century CE.

From the first year, he [sc. Šāpūr I] had a war with the Chorasmians and the Medes of the mountain and defeated them in a deadly battle. From there he went to subjugate the Gelians, the Dailumians and the Gurganians, who inhabit the mountains near the last sea [sc. Caspian].²⁷

Despite the problems of chronological reliability posed by this chronicle, it can be accepted that the *šāhān šāh* Šāpūr I undertook a vast operation of conquest of the territories bordering the Caspian Sea. The Gurganians clearly refer to the Hyrcanians, while the Gelians recall another people of the Caucasus, the Gelai, whom Strabo ranked among Scythian peoples in the vicinity of Albania (figure 2)²⁸. The Chorasmian land, also called Khārezm, Khwārazm, or Kho-rezm, is situated on the lower Oxus, or Amu Darya, near the Aral Sea. This as-

²⁶ P. Pourshariati, *op. cit.*, 2008, p. 50.

²⁷ *Chronicle of Arbela*, Alphonse Mingana (ed.), p. 110, adapted translation.

²⁸ Strabo, *Geography*, XI, 5, 1: Gelai and Legai (Γήλας [...] καὶ Λήγας) are Scythian tribes living between Albanians and Amazons who dwell in Caucasian mountains. According to Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, XXXV, 6, Gelai and Leges (Γέλαι καὶ Λήγες) were separating Albania from Amazonian territory near Caspian Sea. The land of Gelai can probably be situated in Dagestan.

sociation of South Caucasia and Central Asia territories in the same movement raises the question of the links that could unite their sovereigns. The mention of Gurganians, Gelians and Chorasmians in the Chronicle of Arbela, which is in addition to that of Iberians, Albanians and Bactrians in the *Life of the Two Valerians*, could indeed corroborate other indications from Armenian sources, mentioning in particular a coalition formed around the Armenian king Xosrov.



Figure 2 – Caucasian isthmus

But at the start of the next year Xosrov, king of Armenia, began to raise forces and assemble an army. He gathered the armies of the Albanians and the Iberians, opened the gates of the Alans and the stronghold of the Chor²⁹; he brought through the army of the Huns in order to attack Persian territory and invade Asorestan as far as the gates of Ctesiphon³⁰.

²⁹ The stronghold of the Chor corresponds to the toponym Choray pahak, a pass near Derbent. R. Thomson, *Agathangelos: History of the Armenians*, Albany, 1976, note 4 p. 455.

³⁰ Agat'angelos, *History of the Armenians*, §19: „Արդ, ի միւս եւս ի գլուխ տարւոյն սկսանէր Խոսրով թագաւորն Հայոց գունդ կազմել եւ զօր բովանդակել, գումարել զգօրս Աղուանից եւ Վրաց, եւ բանակ զդրունս Ալանաց եւ զճորայ պահակին, հանել զգօրս Հոնաց, ասպատակ դնել ի կողմանս Պարսից, արշաւել ի կողմանս Ստրեստանի, մինչև ի դրունս Տիսփոնի:“ Translation from Robert W. Thomson, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976, p. 37, with modifications.

There is at least one anachronistic detail in this passage. The Huns are designated here by the ethnic Honk', and assimilated to the Kūšāns in § 20: this ethnicity remains imprecise and reveals a datable composition of the 5th century³¹. A confusion is clearly made with the Hunnic invasion which managed to cross the Alan Gates in 395-397³². Except this point, it can be admitted that this narrative refers to an Arsacid coalition against the Sasanian in the 3rd century. The whole issue remains in the dating of the war led by the Armenian king Xosrov and its comparison with the rest of the indications given by the *Life of the Kings* about Asp'agur³³. This Xosrov, according to Agat'angelos followed by Movsēs Xorenac'i³⁴, would have sought various peoples to resist Iran, including Iberians and Albanians, as well as members of his relatives residing in the land of the Kūšāns³⁵, even if the latter, in contrast to the nations of the Caucasus, did not rally to him. These pieces of evidence, testifying of a transnational association of Eurasian sovereigns united by political and family ties to various Arsacid branches, allow to measure the impact of the upheavals caused by the advent of the Sasanian of Iran, a swirl whose long wake marked the history of the Caucasian peoples for the following centuries.

³¹ R. Thomson, *op. cit.*, 1976, note 5 p. 455.

³² A. Giardina, "Roma e il Caucaso", in *Il Caucaso*, Spoleto, 1996, p. 119-142.

³³ Agat'angelos, *History of the Armenians*, §18-36. Stephen H. Rapp Jr. believes possible a reconciliation between on the one hand the record about Asp'agur appearing in the *Life of the Kings*, and on the other hand the narrative of Agat'angelos. S. Rapp, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 242 and note 306 p. 243 for the bibliography on the circulation of Agat'angelos' work in Georgia. According to S. Rapp, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 243, these similarities are the effect of narratives circulating in Caucasian circles by an oral tradition, even if the *Life of the Kings* (*K'art'lis C'xovreba*), 59, evokes as a source a *History of Persia* whose tenor appears quite mysterious.

³⁴ Agat'angelos, *History of the Armenians*, §20; Movsēs Xorenac'i, *History of the Armenians*, II, 67.

³⁵ It seems possible to identify here the Bactrians in *Historia Augusta* with the Kūšāns of Agat'angelos and Movsēs Xorenac'i. The migration of a Central Asian people, the Kūšāns (Kushans or Kušāna), led to the formation of an empire that brought together Bactria and northern India to the 3rd century CE. The development of communications, a contemporary extension of the Silk Road to the Augustean Empire, enabled Kūšāns to base their power on the control of commercial and intellectual networks transiting Central Asia. In order to base their legitimacy, the sovereigns of the Kūšāns assimilated the Hellenic culture and the government practices inherited from the Maurya Empire, in particular by promoting Buddhism. The third century India saw the two eroding empires in place, the Kūšāns occupying the northern Peninsula, around the Indus and Ganges valleys, while the Andhra Satavahana held the centre of the subcontinent (now Andhra Pradesh). The domain of the Kūšāns had not been able to reduce on its western border the autonomous satrapies held by two local lineages, one Pallava (Parthian), the other Saka (Scythian). After 124 and until 395, the dynasty founded by Chatahana, heiress of the Saka lineage of the Kardamaka, dominated the west of India (Gujarat and Kathiavar Peninsula). The Saka of the Malwa and the Mahārastra were thus at the head of independent states. However, the expansionist policy of the Sasanian greatly weakened the Kūšān Empire: Persia seized Bactria, Arachosia and Kabūl region, thus controlling the ways of Silk Road. North India found itself fragmented in various potentates: a tribal confederation was established by the Nagas implanted in Mathura, Padmavati and Ahichatra, whose chiefs were called the Barashiva. A. Daniélou, *Histoire de l'Inde*, Paris, 1983, p. 168-179.

The hypothesis of a high dating for Xosrov's war, which is supposed to occur shortly after the advent of the first Sasanian *šāhān šāh* Ardaxšīr in 224, seems a priori to respond to the relative chronology of Agat'angelos, who considers the murder of the Arsacid Ardavān IV (r. 213-224) as the explicit reason for the war that was supposed to have been triggered against Iran by Xosrov, Arsacid king of Armenia³⁶. However, the continuation of the narrative tends to negate this hypothesis. After some time that Agat'angelos did not specify much, this king Xosrov was assassinated with a large part of his family by the Parthian prince Anak³⁷. Survived then of the massacre one of the sons of Xosrov, Trdat still a child, whose life was saved thanks to his exile in Roman Empire³⁸. An ellipse then occurs in the history of Agat'angelos: the narrative takes place in Trdat's adulthood allegedly contemporary of Licinius' reign in Roman East (308-324), around eighty years after Ardaxšīr's advent³⁹. However, all this narrative finds no answer in the context of the years 220-240, no Sasanian intervention against Armenia appeared to have occurred before the reign of Šāpūr I (r. 239-270)⁴⁰.

The possibility of a middle dating, which would place the conquest of Armenia by the Persians around 252-253, following this war of Xosrov, is defended notably by Marie-Louise Chaumont⁴¹. She thinks possible to identify the escape of the young Trdat welcomed in the Roman Empire with the grievance reproached to the Romans by Šāpūr I about Armenia, and which provides the *casus belli* to his second campaign against the Empire⁴². However, the Sasanian occupation of Armenian territory around 252 would have been realized by the creation of a province entrusted to a viceroy, Hormizd-Ardašīr, the son of Šāpūr I, mentioned with the title of "Great King of Armenia" in the royal inscription of Naqš-i Rostam⁴³. Agat'angelos perhaps confused this Hormizd-Ardašīr, who succeeded his father for a short reign (r. 270 / 272-273), with Ardaxšīr I (r. 224-242). It would therefore be necessary, according to this hypothesis, to iden-

³⁶ Agat'angelos, *History of the Armenians*, §18.

³⁷ Agat'angelos, *History of the Armenians*, §25-34.

³⁸ Agat'angelos, *History of the Armenians*, §36.

³⁹ Following a victory against the Goths, and receiving the support of Licinius, Trdat was then established king of Armenia. Agat'angelos, *History of the Armenians*, § 37 ; § 39-47. About Licinius in Roman history: J.-M. Carrié and A. Rousselle, *op. cit.*, 1999, p. 208-217, 219-232.

⁴⁰ B. Dignas and E. Winter, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 22.

⁴¹ M.-L. Chaumont, "Conquête sassanide et propagande mazdéenne (III^{ème} Siècle)", *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, volume 22, n. 4, 1973, p. 685.

⁴² ŠKZ §9. A. Maricq, « Classica et Orientalia. 5. Res Gestae Divi Saporis », *Syria*, volume 35, fascicle 3-4, 1958, p. 295-360, here p. 308; P. Huyse, *op. cit.*, 1999, 1, p. 28.

⁴³ ŠKZ §33. A. Maricq, *op. cit.*, 1958, p. 316-317; P. Huyse, *op. cit.*, 1999, 1, p. 46. For an examination of Šāpūr I's intervention in Armenia, see M. Schottky, "Dunkle Punkte in der armenischen Königsliste", *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, 27, 1994, p. 231-232.

tify the Xosrov of Agat'angelos with the Arsacid king of Armenia deposed by the Sasanians in 252, and the *šāhān šāh* K'asre with Šāpūr I (r. 239-270).

The hypothesis of a low dating, which would place the war of Xosrov around the years 280, is based on the fact that Agat'angelos' narrative on the war against Xosrov is taken up in its main lines by the *Life of the Kings*, which explicitly places this war in the end of Asp'agur's reign (r. 265-284?). This position, defended by Cyril Toumanoff⁴⁴ and Stephen H. Rapp Jr., the latter identifying Kosaro with Xosrov II (r. 279 / 280-287) and K'asre with Bahrām II (r. 274-293)⁴⁵, however, doesn't take into account the probable date of installation of Trdat, son of the deceased Xosrov, on the throne of Roman Armenia under Diocletian, commonly placed around 287 for Western Armenia under Roman influence, and around 298, or after the peace of Nisibis, for the rest of Armenian kingdom⁴⁶. By counting the years of education in exile supposed to precede his advent, this late dating leaves little time to establish the interreign separating Xosrov's fall and the advent of his son Trdat described by Agat'angelos.

Some details diverging from the narrative of Agat'angelos with the notice contained in the *K'art'lis C'xovreba* invite to further investigate the question of the tale building of Asp'agur's reign in the *Life of the Kings*, which probably mixes information from different sources. The notice on Asp'agur begins curiously by a lapidary indication: "*This Asp'agur built the fortified city of Ujarma*"⁴⁷. Ujarma is a name of a little town with its castle in the Iori Valley, controlling a passage leading to the mountains of T'ianet'i, and that the Table of Peutinger seems to mention under the name of Ugubre as a step on a road connecting Albania to Iberia⁴⁸. Then begins a digression, recalling the idolatry of the K'art'velian kings since Alexander, then the Sasanian advent in Iran. Following this, a short passage, which seems to be inspired by chapter 19 of Agat'angelos' *History of the Armenians*, reports the K'art'velian alliance with the Armenian king

⁴⁴ C. Toumanoff, *op. cit.*, 1969, p. 19-21.

⁴⁵ S. Rapp, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 242.

⁴⁶ In 280, an agreement between Probus and Narsēs had given rise to a partition of Armenia, the western part being under the protection of the Romans, and the eastern part under the Sasanian domination. R. Thomson, *op. cit.*, 1976, p. xxxv. For the date of Trdat's advent, Movsēs Xorenac'i, *History of Armenia*, II, 82, indicates that this man "*ascended to the throne the third year of Diocletian*" (adapted from the translation by Annie and Jean-Pierre Mahé, Paris: Gallimard, p. 233). B. Dignas and E. Winter, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 27, propose the date 290 for the restoration in West Armenia; p. 180 for his reign on the whole Armenian land after the peace of Nisibis.

⁴⁷ *Life of the Kings* (in *K'art'lis C'xovreba*), Simon Qauxč'išvili (ed.), 59₅: „ამან ახვედურ აღაშენა ციხე-ქალაქი უჯარმა.“ Translation by Robert W. Thomson, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 69.

⁴⁸ R. Hewsens, *Armenia. A Historical Atlas*, Chicago 2001, map n. 59.

Kosaro (Xosrov) against Iran. The narrative then abruptly interrupted with a closing sentence: “*Then the kings of the K’art’li descended from P’arnavaz came to an end.*”⁴⁹ After this sentence, a long development narrates King Xosrov’s assassination by the Armenian prince Anak, at the instigation of the Sasanian sovereign, which appears to have been taken from Agat’angelos⁵⁰, even if no direct evidence confirms or invalidates the hypothesis that the Georgian chroniclers of the pre-Bagratid era had direct or indirect access to the work of the Armenian historian. Once recalled Trdat’s exile in the Empire, the chronicler of the *Life of the Kings* diverged from Agat’angelos by not mentioning the subsequent campaigns of the *šāhān šāh* pursuing the Romans on their borders, but by reporting a new narrative, according to which K’asre allegedly invaded the K’art’li, forcing Asp’agur to retire to Ovset’i (Ossetia), reduced to organizing the defense of his kingdom, until his death suddenly occurred. Some elements are reminiscent of the beginning of the notice which mentioned the fortification of Ujarma, probably because of this war against Iran.

The writer of the *Life of the Kings* seems to have reworked a primitive record of Asp’agur’s reign by adding a development inspired by Agat’angelos. The mention of Iberians with other Caucasian peoples coalition against the Persians in this Armenian source could have provided an opportunity for the editor to assimilate this offensive war of the Armenian king Xosrov, probably conducted in the 240’s or at the beginning of the 250’s⁵¹, with the defensive war of the Iberian king which appears to have occurred later, more towards 260 than

⁴⁹ *Life of the Kings* (in *K’art’lis C’xovreba*), Simon Qauxč’išvili (ed.), 59₁₈: „ხოლო დაესრულნეს მეფენი ქართლოსანი ფარნავაზიანნი.“ Translation by Robert W. Thomson, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 70.

⁵⁰ Agat’angelos, *History of the Armenians*, §34. In the ensuing chaos, Anak’s two sons and his brother were put away from power by being supported by their adoptive parents. One of Anak’s two sons was Gregory the Illuminator. By the intercession of Gregory, Trdat would have converted to the Christian faith around a controversial date, in 314 according to S. Rapp, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 243.

⁵¹ Movsēs Xorenac’i, *History of Armenia*, II, 72, seems to confirm this hypothesis of dating by positioning one of the campaigns of Xosrov under the reign of Philip the Arab (r. 244-249), and in appearing to place assassination of Xosrov by Anak under the reign of Valerian (r. 253-260). In II, 73, Valerian is indeed the last emperor quoted among those who may not help the Armenian king; in II, 76, this same Valerian is the one to which the Armenian dynasts would have turned to resist Iran after the assassination of Xosrov. The long reign of 48 years that Movsēs Xorenac’i attributed to Xosrov (II, 74) poses new chronology problems. Despite the resulting temporal dilution effect, Movsēs Xorenac’i nevertheless seems to commit confusions in the diachronic distribution of events. Thus, in II, 77, the Armenian historian evokes a peace between Probus (r. 276-282) and a *šāhān šāh* named Artašir. However, it seems according to Mahé 1993, note 4 p. 376, that this passage makes an anachronistic reference to occupation of Armenia by Šāpūr I (r. 240-270) and his son Hormizd-Ardašir (r. 270-271). About Philip the Arab in Movsēs Xorenac’i’s work, see G. Traina, “L’Armenia nel III secolo : note di lettura”, *Electrum*, 7, 2003, p. 131-143, here p. 131-136.

circa 280. Despite its anachronism, this addition finds a logical explanation, since Agat'angelos as well as the editor of the *Life of the Kings* wished to explain how Sasanian Iran jostled the former Arsacid preeminence in Caucasus. On the other hand, it is hardly certain that the last Iberian sovereign who ruled before the advent of the Mihranid was actually named Asp'agur, since no contemporary source of events attests to this name for an Iberian king.

The new Iberian dynasty which came to power is traditionally called Mihranid or Chosroid in historiography, by reference to Mirian presented as the son of the Persian king Xusrō in the Georgian chronicle *Life of the Kings*⁵²: this princely house is one of the most important Parthian families of Sasanian Iran, akin to the royal family⁵³. Under the Sasanians, the Mihranids and other lines of Parthian nobles exercised their power over a large northern part of the Iranian world: thus competed the houses of the Kārin, Ispahbudān, Sūrēn and Kanārangīyān⁵⁴, controlling more or less the provinces of Ādurbādagān and Xwarāsān. As a consequence, South Caucasia could appear for the Mihranids as an extension of the kūst-i Ādurbādagān. These Parthian dynasts implanted with non-Iranian populations seem to have tended to assimilate into the dominant ethnic group: the adoption of Mazdaism in its K'art'velian form, followed by Christianity during the fourth century, constituted the religious aspect of this phenomenon of acculturation. Parthian elites actively contributed to nurture a religious life marked by the hybridization of Jewish, Manichaeans and Christian contributions with an indigenous Mazdean background⁵⁵. Like the other aristocratic families of the Caucasus, the Mihranids weaved fruitful matrimonial alliances, which sometimes extended even to the Sasanian dynasty.

Establishing in South Caucasia a branch of this Iranian princely house would have resulted, according to Georgian chronicles, in the new dynasty of Chosroids or Xosroiani (ხოსროიანი): this appellation comes from the fact that these K'art'velian kings claimed to descend from a certain Xusrō, the *Life of the Successors of Mirian* assimilating explicitly Sasanians to Chosroids⁵⁶. However,

⁵² *Life of the Kings (K'art'lis C'xovreba)*, Simon Qauxč'išvili (ed.), 64.

⁵³ S. Rapp, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 244-245.

⁵⁴ N. Garsoïan, *The Epic Histories Attributed to P'awstos Buzand (Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk')*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989, s. v. "Kamsarakan" and "Karēn", p. 382-383.

⁵⁵ S. Rapp, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 245.

⁵⁶ *Life of the Successors of Mirian (K'art'lis C'xovreba)*, Simon Qauxč'išvili (ed.), 136₁₈: «[...] ძველთა ხუხროვანთა», «[...] the [Persian] kings descendants from Xusrō». In Georgian sources, Xusrō is both a proper name and a generic term to designate Sasanian *šāhān šāhs*. S. Rapp, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 41-42 and note 317 p. 245. C. Toumanoff, *op. cit.*, 1963, note 105 p. 83-84.

in the Sasanian genealogy known in epigraphy, namely the inscription ŠKZ of Šāpūr I in Naqš-i-Rustam (262) and the inscription NPi from Narsē in Paikuli (293), no trace of a Mirian among the royal princes is identifiable. The only contemporary testimony that can attest to the historicity of this sovereign is the mention of a king of Iberia named Meribanes in Ammianus Marcellinus, for the winter of 360-361, during the reign of Constantius⁵⁷. The testimony of Movsēs Xorenac'i, although later, remains reliable to some extent: the Armenian historian mentions in his narrative a Christian prince named Mihran and who ruled Iberia during the first decades of the fourth centuries⁵⁸. However, none of these sources attests the assumption that this Mihran or Mirian would have been the first Mihranid king during the last decades of third century. If Šāpūr I's trilingual inscription testifies to the advent of a new Iberian dynasty, then the first Mihranid king of Iberia would be Amazasp.

Attempts to identify Amazasp in ŠKZ with an homonymous sovereign of the Georgian chronicle *Life of the Kings* have been advanced by several scholars. This text redacted between 790 and 813 was the last step of an epic tradition transmitted throughout centuries by songs elaborated by court minstrels (*mgosanni*) and the official writings of the Iberian chancelleries⁵⁹. Two Amazasps appear in this chronicle – an Amazasp I diarch with his coregent Derok⁶⁰, on the other hand an Amazasp II, Arsacid king censured to have reigned at the end of the second century⁶¹. This Amazasp II is said to have won a war against Ossetians with Armenian support, before changing his political line by an alliance with Persia⁶². Becoming unpopular owing to his haughty mind and his purges among K'art'velian aristocrats, Amazasp II faced with a rebellion that led to a war against Armenians, Romans (called Greeks in the chronicle), Ossetians, Megrelians and seditious K'art'velians, which finally caused king's death in his defeat⁶³. Even if traditional chronology doesn't support the hypothesis identifying this Amazasp II and ŠKZ's Amazasp, it is possible that some reminiscences from the reign of this last character had been transmitted into this notice with a high quantity of fictional inventions. A nutshell of truth can be extracted about

⁵⁷ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, XXI, 6, 6-8.

⁵⁸ Movsēs Xorenac'i, *History of the Armenians*, II, 85-86.

⁵⁹ S. Rapp, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 12.

⁶⁰ *Life of the Kings (K'art'lis C'xovreba)*, Simon Qauxč'išvili (ed.), 50. C. Toumanoff, *op. cit.*, 1969, p. 15-16 attributed to this king a reign between 106 and 116.

⁶¹ C. Toumanoff, *op. cit.*, 1969, p. 17 proposes as dates of reign: 185-189 CE.

⁶² *Life of the Kings (K'art'lis C'xovreba)*, Simon Qauxč'išvili (ed.), 54-57.

⁶³ *Life of the Kings (K'art'lis C'xovreba)*, Simon Qauxč'išvili (ed.), 57.

some details: a twist in diplomatical policy through an alliance with Persians, a war between two coalitions involving Persia, Romans, and Caucasian peoples, heavy losses in Iberian aristocracy and royal house. On the other side, it is as well possible to consider that this notice of Amazasp II might be related to other sources remaining unknown and that the similarities with the ŠKZ's Amazasp could be only pure coincidences. If echoes of the Mihranid revolution could be present in Georgian sources, however the memory of Amazasp as the founder of a new royal lineage did not perpetuate, insofar as K'art'velian chroniclers preferred to attribute to the first Christian king of the K'art'li, Mirian, the honor of founding the dynasty to which he belonged. The first K'art'velian historiography clearly retained the major event of a dynastic change in Iberia during the third century, but forgot the name of the first king, probably Amazasp figuring on Šāpūr I's inscription.

Despite profound distortions affecting Caucasian sources, it is possible to raise the idea of a dynastic change at the head of the Iberian kingdom between 260 and the middle of the years 280. The actual change of allegiance of the Iberian power in favor of Iran, the mention of an expedition of Šāpūr I directed against the allies of Iberia and having pushed at least to the southeast part of Caucasia, as well as the account of the founding of a new Mihranid dynasty by the will of a Sasanian king narrated in the *Life of K'art'li*, are all clues that allow to advance this interpretation. None of these sources reported an invasion of Iberia, but it is probable that this Sasanian expedition directed against the allies and neighbors of the Iberian king also had serious consequences for this Caucasian kingdom. It is possible to imagine that Šāpūr I, after submitting the peoples of the Caspian Sea, either pursued its victorious campaign in Central Caucasus, or obtained by diplomacy the formal submission of Iberians and other Caucasian nations mentioned in the inscription on the Ka'ba of Zoroaster.

Two dating possibilities can be advanced on the date of Mihranid revolution in Iberia. The high hypothesis, in my opinion, most probable with regard to the available sources, would be to place the advent of this new dynasty following Šāpūr's campaign in South Caucasia. The date of this expedition is problematic: it is placed by the *Chronicle of Arbela* in the first year of the reign of Šāpūr, around 240-241⁶⁴. This source is, however, far from reliable on chronology, and if this indication was accurate, it would then be difficult to reconcile it with *Historia Augusta* which attests that the Iberians were in the Roman alliance

⁶⁴ *Chronicle of Arbela*, Alphonse Mingana (ed.), p. 110.

twenty years later, at the time from the Valerian's capture in 260. Fortunately, a *terminus ante quem* is clearly fixed by the inscription ŠKZ on the date of 262, when the king of Iberia Amazasp affirms his allegiance to the *šāhān šāh*. This date of 262 can be deduced from the fact that Šāpūr's inscription doesn't mention any event posterior to this moment, particularly Odaenathus' successful campaign against Persians in Mesopotamia (262-264)⁶⁵. If it is not excluded that ŠKZ be composed later in Šāpūr's reign, until his death in 270, nevertheless the idea of a date which corresponds to the highest point of Šāpūr's domination on the Near-East has my preference. As a consequence, 261 CE could be a satisfactory date to locate in time this Iberian revolution.

During Zenobia's reign on Palmyra (r. 267-272), which ended with the defeat of this Palmyrenian queen captured by Aurelian (r. 270-275), the Sasanian power chose not to intervene directly⁶⁶. However, the presence of Iberians among the captives appearing in Aurelian's triumph in 274 might suggest that the king of Iberia had sent some military support to Queen Zenobia⁶⁷. If this was proved, then it would be an effective testimony to the reversal of the alliance made by the Mihranids against Rome, even if the *Historia Augusta* also ranks the Iberians in a list of oriental peoples who would have Aurelian as a god on earth⁶⁸. Should there be excessive exaggeration, or the mark of a resumption of diplomatic relations between the Iberian kingdom and the Roman imperial power? The lack of reliability affecting this source compounded at the end of the fourth century does not allow to go beyond the stage of the hypothesis. It remains that this set of testimonies suggests that in 270 at the latest, a complete reversal of the Iberian royalty had led to a change of alliances for Sasanian ben-

⁶⁵ B. Dignas and E. Winter, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 159-160. P. Huyse, *op. cit.*, 1999, 1, p. 10-14, argues that the inscription must have been engraved probably between the capture of Valerian during the summer of 260 CE and the beginning of the war with Odaenathus of Palmyra circa 262.

⁶⁶ B. Dignas and E. Winter, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 25.

⁶⁷ *Historia Augusta*, "Life of Aurelian", XXXIII, 1, 4 : «[...] *praeter captiuos gentium barbararum, Blemmyes, Exomitae, Arabes Eudaemones, Indi, Bactrani, Hiberi, Saraceni, Persae cum suis quique muneribus, Gothi, Alani, Roxolani, Sarmatae, Franci, Sueui, Vandali, Germani, reli-gatis manibus, captiui utpote*» ; «[...] *not to mention the prisoners of barbaric peoples, Blemmyes, Exomits, the inhabitants of Arabia Felix, Indians, Bactrians, Iberians, Saracens, Persians, all with their gifts, Goths, Alans, Roxolani, Sarmatians, Franks, Suevi, Vandals, Germans, with tied hands, since they were prisoners*». Adapted from the translation of François Paschoud, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1996.

⁶⁸ *Historia Augusta*, "Life of Aurelian", XLI, 10 : « *Illum Saraceni, Blemmyes, Exomitae, Bactrani, Seres, Hiberi, Albani, Armenii, populi etiam Indorum ueluti praesentem paene uenerati sunt deum* » ; « *He is the man that Saracens, Blemmyes, Exomites, Bactrians, Seres, Iberians, Albanians, Armenians and even the peoples of India venerated almost like a god descended on Earth* ». Adapted from the translation of François Paschoud, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1996.

efit. The idea of a dynastic revolution seems probable in view of rupture in archaeological documentation and distorted echoes of Mihranids' advent in the Georgian chronicles.

The alternative hypothesis of low dating is privileged by supporters of a fideistic approach on Georgian sources, seeing in Mirian the first king of this dynasty established by the Sasanian power. The advent of the new Iberian king would thus be likely, according to Cyril Toumanoff, to be connected to the unsuccessful offensive of Carus (r. 282-283)⁶⁹. In an Iranian world crossed by internal rivalries, the pro-Roman elites ruling Armenia and Iberia would have taken advantage of Probus' preparations (r. 276-282) for his expedition to Mesopotamia, implemented by Carus, to range against the Persians. Following the death of Carus and the withdrawal of the Roman army decided by Numerian (r. 283-284), the supporters of Bahrām II (r. 276-293) supposedly resumed the initiative in Iberia and placed at the head of the kingdom a protégé of the *šāhān šāh*, who allegedly inaugurated the Chosroid or Mihranid dynasty⁷⁰. Bahrām II would therefore have led a policy of strengthening the Iranian presence in South Caucasia, which passed through the control of the strategic crossroads of Mc'xet'a. The problem with this low hypothesis is that it is not explicitly corroborated by any contemporary epigraphic testimony to events or any literary source. The only indication in favour of this hypothesis would be the resumption of Roman currencies imports in Iberia with Carus' coinage (figure 3), but the vagaries of monetary finds invite caution in interpretation. Even the *Life of the Kings* evokes nothing about the reign of Asp'agur that can be akin to Carus' expedition. Due to the lack of additional elements and taking into account the uncertainty of this dating, this choice of the years 260-262 will be held to date the dynastic change in Iberia and the entry of this country into the Sasanian orbit.

With the end of internal dissension during the reign of Narsē (r. 293-302), the Sasanians attempted to revive an expansionist policy. In 296, this Iranian sovereign took advantage of the fact that the Romans were busy suppressing a revolt in Egypt to invade the Roman part of Armenia⁷¹. It is possible that on this occasion the participation of the Iberians alongside the Persians was sought, since an anonymous king of Iberia is among the sovereigns subject to the *šāhān šāh* on the inscription of Narsē in Paikūlī (NPi) erected between 293 and 296⁷².

⁶⁹ C. Toumanoff, *op. cit.*, 1969, p. 21-22.

⁷⁰ B. Dignas and E. Winter, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 25-26.

⁷¹ B. Dignas and E. Winter, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 28.

⁷² *Inscription of Narsē in Paikuli* (NPi) §91-94, Helmut Humbach and Prods O. Skjærvø (ed.), part 3.1, 1983, p. 70-73.

The inscription of Paikuli distinguishes two lists, one composed of kings and sovereigns of consequent territories, the other mostly composed by lords and small potentates. In the first list, kings are quoted according to the geographical position of their kingdoms, in an order from east to west. This inscription mentions, in particular, Trdat, Arsacid king of Armenia, and includes the king of Iberia preceded by the king of the Mskyt'n, who could designate the Massagetes⁷³ or Moschians, and followed by the king of Syk'n, perhaps Machelones⁷⁴. The rest of the list shows sovereigns and potentates in a lower position than Iberian king. The clarifications made by Narsē closing this list clearly establish the link between these local leaders and the practice of embassy at the Sasanian Court acknowledging *šāhān šāh*'s supreme domination. Narsē therefore considers the Iberian king as one of his allies and dependent on his suzerainty, crowned only with his assent. Despite the return of a formal Roman protectorate on Iberia with the Treaty of Nisibis concluded in 298 between Diocletian and Narsē⁷⁵, in which the king of Iberia should receive the insignia of his power from the Romans⁷⁶, the Mihranid dynasty could remain on its throne and keep its links with the Iranian world.

The consequences of the Mihranid revolution in Iberia are particularly visible in archaeological data. A deep cut appears in our sources during the second half of the third century CE. In excavation reports, the Greek and Aramaic official epigraphy disappeared, while Roman currencies vanished from the monetary circulation (figure 3), to the benefit of coinages representing the Iranian sovereigns (figure 4). The princely steles of Armazi were removed from their sites to disappear or serve, such as those of Pitiaxes Šargas and Princess Serapeitis, of reused stones for graves⁷⁷. These material evidences suggest a major dynastic change, culminating in the advent of a new ruling elite wishing to mark its rupture in terms of political identity with ancient Iberian kings.

⁷³ H. Humbach and P. Skjærvø, *The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli*, 1983, 3. 2., p. 126.

⁷⁴ D. Braund, *op. cit.*, 1994, p. 241, identifies the Syk'n with the Machelones. Walter Bruno Henning defended an alternative thesis by assimilating Syk'n with the province of Siunik' or Sisakan, located in Eastern Armenia south of Lake Sevan. H. Humbach and P. Skjærvø, *op. cit.*, 1983, 3. 2., p. 126. P. Huyse, *op. cit.*, 1999, 2, p. 23-24.

⁷⁵ B. Dignas and E. Winter, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 122-130. D. Braund, *op. cit.*, 1994, p. 246.

⁷⁶ Peter the Patrician, fragment 14 (*Fragmenta historicorum graecorum*, IV, 189) : "The main points of the ambassador's message were the following: [...] that the king of Iberia should owe his royal status to the Romans", translation from B. Dignas and E. Winter, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 124.

⁷⁷ A. Ap'ak'ize and alii, *Мухета: итоги археологических исследований I. Археологические памятники Армазис-Хеви по раскопкам 1937-1946 гг.*, Tbilisi, 1958, p. 72.

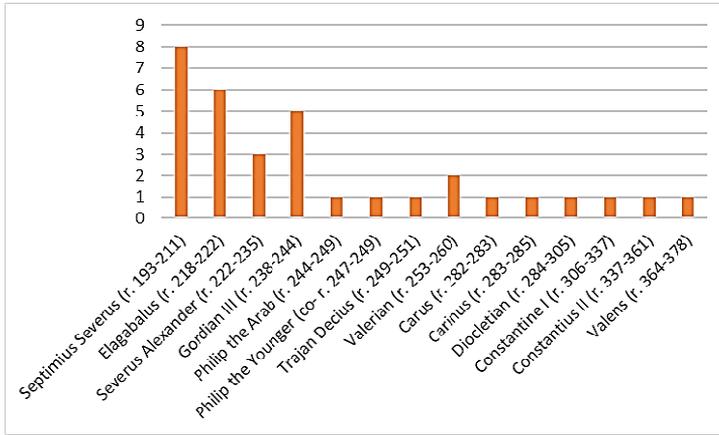


Figure 3 – Finds of Roman coins in Iberia for the 3rd and 4th centuries CE⁷⁸

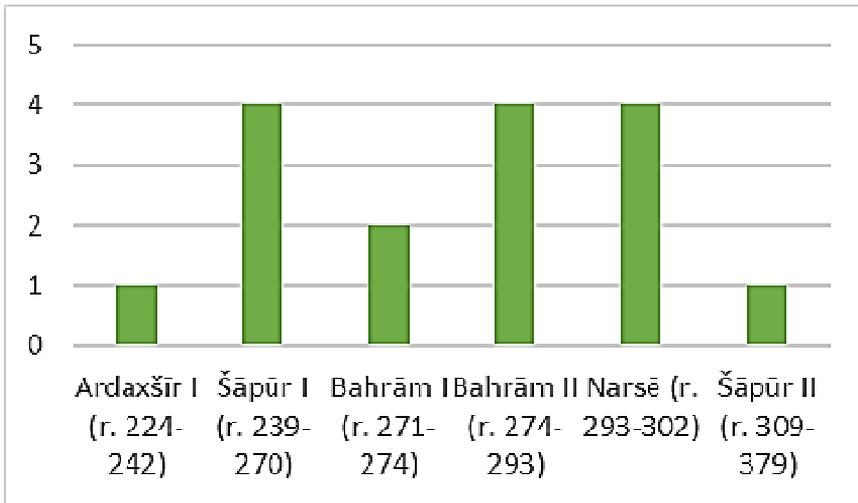


Figure 4 – Finds of Sasanian coins in Iberia for the 3rd and 4th centuries CE⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Number of coins found in the excavations of Mc'xet'a, Aġaiani, Nastakisi, Zġuderi (Kareli region), Erco, Magranet'i, Kušanaant Gora (T'ianet'i Region) and Jinvali (Dušet'i Region). Source: "Money circulation in Kartli/Iberia in the 1st-4th cc. A.D.", Tbilisi State University, 2013, last consultation: 20/07/2018. URL: <http://geonumismatics.tsu.ge/en/catalogue/types/?type=28>.

⁷⁹ Source: M. Tsotselia, "A General Survey of Coinage in Georgia in AD 221-626 (based on the Georgian State Museum collection)", in C. Asins, C. Alonso and P. Morán (ed.), *XIII Congreso Internacional de Numismática, Madrid, 2003: actas-proceedings-actes*, volume 2, Madrid, 2005, p. 1678.

Dynastic change has been accompanied by profound social and political changes, insofar as the former Iberian elite was visibly decimated by the ravages of Persian intervention in 261. On the site of Zğuderi, in Šida K‘art‘li, the last sarcophagus deposited in the aristocratic cemetery dates from about 250 CE⁸⁰. The excavations of Zğuderi were able to make known an example of regional aristocracy having lived in this locality of Iberia inland during the first half of the 3rd century CE: Kabrias and Matrōna⁸¹, a certain Gellos or Geminos, whose portrait follows the conventions of representations for the Greek philosopher⁸², Euphrates, Atropates and Khed[...]⁸³. The aristocratic goods exhumed from the excavations of Zğuderi tend to attest to this cultural hybridization of the Iberian ruling elite. Several silver dishes from tomb n. 3 were engraved with the names of their owners: one of them bears the name of Euphrates in Armazian and Greek letters⁸⁴, another one is Atropates in Aramaic⁸⁵, while a silver spoon carries in Greek and Aramaic the abbreviation of the name of its holder⁸⁶. The bilingualism of the Iberians princes was thus openly claimed and displayed in the insignia of their prestige. The pro-Roman orientation of these princes of Zğuderi is particularly apparent in the currencies of the Antonine and Severan dynasties found here⁸⁷. The rich Iberian city was perhaps looted, given the contrast between, on the one hand, the sumptuous burial material of the three aristocratic tombs dated from the end of the second century and the first half of the 3rd century, and, on the other hand, the two tombs of the fourth century, whose inventory proves to be very meagre⁸⁸. The Iranian intervention in 261 CE would have operated a purge in the pro-Roman milieu of the Iberian aristocracy. Because of the looting and confiscation of property, the former elite of the kingdom saw its economic power vanishing with its political power. The new Mihranid rulers had to find their own way to legitimate their domination, and this borrowed path was Christianity.

The Iberian revolution of the third century was also religious: the period experienced a efflorescence of Zoroastrian, Manichaean and Christian missions

⁸⁰ D. Braund and alii, *The Treasures of Zghuderi (Georgia)*, Tbilisi, 2009, p. 16-17. An aureus minted by Gordian III around 240 allows to date the grave to the middle of the third century CE.

⁸¹ D. Braund and alii, *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 30-31.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 44-45.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 74-79.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76-77.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74 : XHΔ / דעך.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15 : aurei of Antoninus Pius, Faustina the Elder, Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Caracalla, Elagabalus and Severus Alexander have been found in aristocratic graves excavated in Zğuderi or near them.

⁸⁸ D. Braund and alii, *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 28.

in South Caucasia. Some fragments of Manichaean texts, including mission stories preserved in the Turkestan desert, attest to the existence of a Manichaean mission in Waručan or Waruzān, a country ruled by King Haβzā or Hamazasp. Thanks to the comparison with the 3rd century Sasanian inscriptions, the Waručan or Waruzān can be identified with K'art'li. Haβzā or Hamazasp is certainly the king appearing on the Greek inscription of Šāpūr I to Naqš-i Rostam: an identification seems possible with the Amazasp supported by Sasanians to the Iberian throne⁸⁹. The M216b fragment from a Manichaean text in Central Asia reports a theological dispute organized at the Court of King Haβzā of Waručān or Amazasp of Iberia⁹⁰. Although this fragment M216b does not identify the name of the Manichaean missionary, it is certain that the latter was in theological confrontation with the representatives of rival religions, a debate attended by Haβzā. The king of this country had a vision of Mani, before inviting the prophet to come and explain his faith, as a result of which the sovereign granted his support to Manichaeism, perhaps going so far as to convert himself to this new religion⁹¹. These fragments are a remarkable testimony to the spiritual boiling that pervaded the atmosphere during the second half of 3rd century CE. This encounter between an Iberian king and a missionary can be compared with Mani's coming to the court of Šāpūr I at his coronation around 242 or 243⁹². As first Iberian ruler in place after the Persian intervention in South Caucasia between

⁸⁹ T. Mgaloblishvili and S. Rapp "Manichaeism in Late Antique Georgia?", in J. Van den Berg, et alii (ed.), *"In Search of Truth"*, Leiden – Boston, 2011, p. 263-290, here p. 272-275; C. Toumanoff, *op. cit.*, 1969, p. 18-19.

⁹⁰ M216b, text from T. Mgaloblishvili and S. Rapp, *op. cit.*, 2011, p. 269-270: «... [he saw] the figure of the Apostle [Mani] and fell on his face and became unconscious. The people were [amazed]. Thereupon [they] prayed: 'To us ... Jesus ... we shall ...' ... he overcame the teachings of the [other] religions by their own evil. Hβz [sc. Haβzā], the Waručān-Šāh, [says]: «What is all this take about?». They said: «It is ... but ... Hβz' ...». The authors based on W. Henning, "Waručān-Šāh", *Journal of the Greater India Society*, 11/2, 1944, p. 85-90, here p. 85-86 for the translation of M216b, reprinted in W. Henning, *Selected Papers: encyclopédie permanente des études iraniennes / 2*. Acta Iranica, 15, Leiden, 1977, p. 225-226. See also W. Sundermann, *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts*, Berlin, 1981, p. 24-25. This fragment is described in M. Boyce, *A Catalogue of the Iranian Manuscripts in Manichaean Script in the German Turfan Collection*, Berlin, 1960, p. 16. The fragment M216c relates to Mani's proselytism in Seleucia (Vēh-Ardašīr), before the dispatch of "Bishop Adda" to Byzantium: J. Asmussen, *Manichaean Literature*, Delmar, New York, 1975, p. 21.

⁹¹ H.-J. Klimkeit, "Manichaean Kingship: Gnosis at Home in the World", in M. Heuser and H.-J. Klimkeit, *Studies in Manichaean Literature & Art*, Leiden – Boston – Köln, 1998, p. 212-228, here p. 215.

⁹² G. Casadio, "Mani versus Mazdak: The prophet and his king in pre-Islamic Iran", in L. Martin (ed.), *Religious Transformations and Socio-Political Change: Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Berlin – New York, 1993, p. 41-60, here p. 41-43. Mani's missionary activity is located in the years 242-274.

260 and 262, Amazasp had to set new foundations for the new dynasty established in Iberia on the rubble of the former pro-Roman power. Since Mani succeeded in converting two brothers of the *šāhān šāh* before reaching Šāpūr himself, an Iberian king who owed all his power to the will of the Iranian sovereign had every interest in integrating himself into the same denominational obedience as his protector. The alliance with an expanding religious community could connect the sovereign into a transnational network throughout the Orient. By appearing in the entourage of the king, the missionary conferred a religious legitimacy on royal power, while displaying his own privileged position in the Court, in relation to the other denominational parties. This double quest for religious and political favor created a situation of emulation, in which new religious denominations with their own networks emerged.

This Manichaean progression was carried concomitantly with a thrust of Iranian Zoroastrianism driven by Sasanian power. It was at the end of the years 280 that the inscriptions of the Magus Kirdīr, also called Kartir, were engraved on the Ka'ba of Zoroaster at Naqš-i Rostam. The first narrative tells the different stages of a priest's career, through the reigns of four successive kings who fill him with honors and titles. The magus justifies his ascent by the vigorous action he led in favor of Zoroastrianism, by the development of liturgy, temples and staff attached to them, while seeking to reduce the influence of rival cults, growing Manichaeism as well as Christianity, and to put back in the right path those among priests who took them at their ease in the practice of ritual or doctrine. Kirdīr seems to have also transformed pagan places of worship into Zoroastrian shrines⁹³.

And a lot of fires and magi in the countries of Ērān, in Fārs, Parthia, Babylonia, [...] Mesene, Adiabene, Azerbaijan, Isfahān, Ray and Kirmān, Seistan, Gurgān, [...] up to Pešāvar, I made them prosperous, and in the countries of Anērān also, the fires and magi that were in the countries of the Anērān, where the horses and men of the King of Kings had reached, in the city of Antioch and the country of Syria and what depends on the province of Syria, the city of Tarsus and the land of Cilicia and what depends on the province of Cilicia, the city of Caesarea and the country of Cappadocia and what depends on the province of Cappadocia, up to the border of the country of Greece, and the country of Armenia, and Iberia, and Albania and Balāsagān up to the door of the Alans, [that]

⁹³ M. Sprengling, "Kartīr, Founder of Sasanian Zoroastrianism", *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, volume 57, n. 2, April 1940, p. 197-228. M. Sprengling, "From Kartīr to Shahpuhr I", *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, volume 57, n. 3, July 1940, p. 330-340.

King of Kings Šāpūr, with his horses and his men, had beaten, and that he had plundered, burned by fire and ruined. Here too, on the order of the King of Kings, I was the one who organized the Magi and the fires in these countries, I did not allow any damage or looting, and what was plundered, I even took it and I returned it to his own country⁹⁴.

Kirdīr proclaims that the fire altars as well as Zoroastrians priests were settled in the countries of Iran and non-Iran. With other territories under Sasanian domination, such as Armenia and Albania, Iberia is explicitly included in non-Iran, along with the localities of Roman provinces, including the cities of Syria, Cappadocia and Cilicia, occupied during Šāpūr's campaigns around 260. Kirdīr's inscription thus accredits the thesis of a Sasanian invasion in South Caucasia. The concept of non-Iran was not political, but ethnic in Kirdīr's eyes. Indeed, although Iberia and Caucasus are distinct from Iran, these territories are, however, under political and religious dependence of the Sasanian Empire⁹⁵.

In such a Mazdean soil the forms of Caucasian Christianity gradually grew. Although the arrival of the first Christians in Caucasus remains plunged into obscure origins, it is nevertheless possible to place in the third century the development of a visible Christian influence in the adoption of new modes of burial and in the appearance of new symbols in funeral material⁹⁶. Before the last third of the fourth century, the Christianization of Iberia did not seem to have greatly interested its contemporaries⁹⁷. In fact, archaeological evidences attest in the Iberian kingdom to a first hybrid monotheism, tinted with esotericism⁹⁸, of which it is not known whether it was more of Judaism than of Manichaean influences or even Hypsistarianism, due to Iberian connection with

⁹⁴ Adapted from P. Gignoux (ed.), *Les Quatre inscriptions du mage Kirdīr, textes et concordances*, Paris, 1991, p. 71, modified. Translation from the compilation of three inscriptions of Kirdīr: a first one on the Ka'ba of Zoroaster (KKZ, § 15) appearing below ŠKZ; the second one in Sar Mašhad (KSM, §23-24); and finally the copy of KSM to Naqš-i Rostam appearing to the right of the great relief of Šāpūr I's victory (KNRm, §46-48).

⁹⁵ M.-L. Chaumont, *op. cit.*, 1973, p. 684.

⁹⁶ W. Tabbernee (ed.), *Early Christianity in Contexts. An Exploration across Cultures and Continents*, Ada, 2014, p. 116-133 ; G. Kučuxize / გ. კუჭუხიძე, "At the Sources of Conversion of Kartli to Christianity", / „ქართლის გაქრისტიანების სათავეებთან“, რელიგია, n. 3, 2010, p. 17-24.

⁹⁷ The first literary testimony about Christianization of Iberia appears only with Bacurius' story transcribed by Rufinus in his *Ecclesiastical History*, I, 10, edited at the beginning of the fifth century: N. Preud'homme, "Bacurius, the Man with Two Faces", *იბერია-კოლხეთი / Iberia-Colchis*, 13, 2017, p. 166-192. The expansion of the new religion in Caucasia during fourth century scarcely appeared among contemporary Christian literature, not very sensitive to the particular variations of the process in concerned territories: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, I, 8, 2-4.

⁹⁸ T. Mgaloblishvili Tamila and I. Gagoshidze, "The Jewish Diaspora and Early Christianity in Georgia", in T. Mgaloblishvili (ed.), *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, Surrey, 1998, p. 39-58, here p. 53-58, about esoteric documents found in Georgia.

Cimmerian Bosphorus. The new Christians of the second and third centuries were recruited in all pagan groups and blurred the borders between communities, more than did mixed marriages between pagans of various ethnic groups. There was no single process of Christianization of Iberia, but a series of spin-offs that operated from several missionary clusters and adopted the peculiar characteristics of their receiving milieus.

During the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, these various religious tendencies bathed in an emulating atmosphere: with Mirian, the king of Iberia converted by the Christians, as with Haßzā, the “king of Waručān” approached by the Manichaeans. On the other hand, diverse forms of Zoroastrianism remained very influential in South Caucasia. These different beliefs shared common concerns for the protection of individuals, through the emphasis on health, the assurance of resurrection and a life in the hereafter; these objectives involved a struggle against the forces of evil, the emergence of new ascetic practices, and the quest for a community of worshippers enlarged by proselytism. This spirituality was particularly interested in the cosmopolitan milieus of urban centers in Kura Valley and, if it would have found followers among the aristocrats, it is unlikely that it could in that time, however, constitute a decisive factor influencing Caucasian policies. This religious revolution of Iberia was indeed without questioning the existing social and political structures, which remained shaped by the Iranian model. Aristocratic values appear through the royal legitimacy of *farr* or *xwarrah*, duels, hunting, nurturing by foster parents, marriages and vengeance have not disappeared with Christianization⁹⁹. Religious change could not have happened without finding an appropriate way of adapting to the reception context.

Caucasus in Late Antiquity has been therefore the product of encounters between transcultural phenomena and a diversity of reception environments in emulation, due to a context worked by political and religious dynamics. The particularities and deep originality shaping Caucasian history have been paradoxically the fact of the very large openness of its societies to foreign influences, dynamic combined with profound capacities to adapt to these changes on the local level. During the third century, political changes in Iberia where a new pro-Iranian dynasty came to the throne recovered long-time mutations in religious sensibilities. During the following centuries, these needs of refounded legitimation expressed by royal powers found their expression in officialized forms of Christianity, bound to cement union between Caucasian sovereigns, princes and peoples, with their own national clergies, liturgies and writings.

⁹⁹ S. Rapp, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 227-231, 238-240.