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## The role of religion in the foreign affairs of Sasanian Iran and the Later Roman Empire (330-630 A.D.)

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The role of religion in the bilateral relations of Sasanian Iran and Byzantium was influential. Both countries adopted a hard line in their religious policy, so that Zoroastrianism, as well as Christianity, became a strong element of national identity for the people of both empires.

The Byzantines used religion as a highly effective propaganda weapon that could serve their universal plans. They believed that the Roman Empire could assimilate Iran, in case the shah himself converted to Christianity.<sup>1</sup> It is true that New Rome came very close to the success of this plan. Several members of the Persian royal family were Christians, as Xusrō' I doctor and one of his sons, Anōš Āzād (Ἀνασώγαδος). The latter had escaped from Iran and risen in rebellion against his father, calling on all Christians, and specially those of Khuzistan, to join him.<sup>2</sup> Sebeos claimed that Xusrō I became Christian on his death bed,<sup>3</sup> and Socrates that the shah Yazdegerd I died shortly before being baptized.<sup>4</sup> Xusrō's II favorite wife, his chief tax collector Yazdin, as well as other high officials were also Christians.<sup>5</sup> During the reign of the emperor Maurice, Xusrō II himself was praised by Christians for deserting Zoroastrianism and allegedly converting to the faith of the Byzantines. By the time of the collapse of the Sasanid dynasty there were on the Iranian soil ten metropolitan sees (including the patriarchate) and ninety-six bishoprics.<sup>6</sup> Christianity became, next to Zoroastrianism, the second most powerful religious force in the Persian empire and, up to the end of the Sasanian era, never stopped spreading.<sup>7</sup>

### From Constantine to Justinian I

Eusebius Pamphili, Constantine's panegyrist, created the new ideology of the new Rome. He claimed that a new nation was born, "the Christian nation"<sup>8</sup> and identified the universality of the Orthodox Church with the universality of the Empire. The term *Greek or barbarian* changed to *Christian or barbarian*. The true distinctive mark of the "Romaioi" became his membership of the Orthodox Church and his allegiance to the Roman emperor, the vicegerent of God, while the pagan became synonymous to the *barbarian*. Once you accepted Orthodox Christianity you generally ceased to be a barbarian, whatever your race or the language you spoke.<sup>9</sup> Persian Christians also considered themselves *People of God* and following Eusebius' ideology, accepted that the world was divided, not between *Rhomye* and *Persaye*, but between the *People of God* and those outside.<sup>10</sup> Church historians without any hesitation called *pagans* and *foreigners* (ἄλλοφύλους) the Roman Emperors, accused of persecution of Christians. Eusebius believed that Valerian's humiliating

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<sup>1</sup> MOFFETT (1998) 93: "the fragile paintings of the Christians at conquered city Dura- Europos...are a reminder that not all conquest is by force of arms".

<sup>2</sup> Proc. *Bella* VIII 10.17-22; WIGRAM (1910) 207; JACKSON BONNER (2016) 160-161.

<sup>3</sup> Sebeos, chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> Socrates, 7.8.3-7.

<sup>5</sup> BROCK (1976) 3.

<sup>6</sup> WIGRAM (1910) 24; MOFFETT (1998) 222.

<sup>7</sup> Important work on the subject remains LABOURT's (1904). See also: WIGRAM (1910); BARNES (1985); MOFFETT (1998); ASSMUSEN (2008).

<sup>8</sup> Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.4.2-8; Procopius (*Bella* I 20.9) and Agathias (III 12.10), Byzantine historians of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, claimed that only people who have the same religion (τῆς δόξης ὁμόγνωμον) can be real friends and allies.

<sup>9</sup> OBOLENSKY (1963) 45-61.

<sup>10</sup> BROCK (1982) 1.

capture by the Persians in 260, was a divine punishment for his crimes against Christians,<sup>11</sup> and Theodoret bishop of Cyrus, called the Roman emperor Julian, *an accursed man* and *Pharaoh*, for his belief in paganism.<sup>12</sup> A similar behavior we can trace in Iran: The shah Yazdegerd I, was embraced hopefully by Christian writers as a *second Constantine* for the legalization of public Christian worship in Iran and protection of Christian minority, but in non-Christian, Perso-Arabic historical tradition, he was considered a notorious brutal oppressor of the Magian aristocracy, and a sinner who met a well-deserve tragic death, punished for his evildoings.<sup>13</sup>

In Iran the advent of the Sasanians produced a change towards the Zoroastrian faith. Sasanian Iran was Zoroastrianized to a greater extent than ever before in the country's history.<sup>14</sup> The Zoroastrian priests became very strong and powerful. The king of Kings Ardašīr I and his son Šāpur I, as well as his grandson Hormozd I, granted to the Zoroastrian clergy great privileges. Mobeds appeared by the side of the "Marzbans", or local governors, almost equal to the civil authority in power. Magianism as a religion received all the prestige that "establishment" could give it. The Byzantine historian Agathias wrote that under the Sasanian rule Zoroastrian priests became very strong and arrogant, and nothing could be done anymore in their country without their approval.<sup>15</sup> The doctrine of Zarathustra became the privileged religion and developed into a supporting pillar of Sasanian kingship. The empire's founder Ardašīr I is supposed to have given to his successor, Šāpur I, the following advice: "Know then, my son, religion and kingship are inseparable and mutually dependent brothers. For religion is the foundation of kingship and kingship is its protector. Whatever lacks a solid foundation is doomed to failure, and what is not well protected will vanish".<sup>16</sup>

It is worth to note that contrary to Christianity, Zoroastrianism was a national rather than a universal religion, and Zarathustra remained a national prophet in close connection with Iran's history and the customs of the Iranians.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless the Zoroastrian clergy insisted on imposing its own religion in regions conquered by the Persians, on people being under the shah's power, but as a rule Zoroastrianism was not a proselytizing religion.

We can suggest that what happened in Iran during the third century and especially this close association between the shah and the clergy, served as a model for the Roman Empire, in which a similar evolution took place a century later.<sup>18</sup> It is of great importance to note, that just as the Sasanians rewrote history to make Zarathustra the prophet and guarantor of the national renaissance they aspired to bring about, similarly in Byzantium, Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea, through his writings attempted to unify the Christian Church and the Roman Empire in a single historical narrative and a new world order.

As a result of this policy following by both countries, Zoroastrian and Christian clergy became very powerful. Christian bishops had a direct involvement in diplomatic procedures and were used by the Byzantine emperors, as well as by the Persian shah, as diplomats. Marutha, the bishop of Martyropolis and the Armenian principality of Sophanene, visited more than once the court of the Persian king Yazdegerd I as an ambassador of the Roman Emperors Arcadius and Theodosius II, and acted as a mediator of peace and concord between East and West, while later (410) organized the first Synod of the Assyrian Church.<sup>19</sup> Greek sources focus on Marutha's mission to convert the Persian king, or at least to dispose him favorably toward Constantinople and the Christians on Iranian territory. On his second visit to Yazdegerd's court, Marutha asked him to permit the collection of the bones of all Christian martyrs from Iranian territory and transfer them to Byzantium.<sup>20</sup> With the blessing and the financial support of the Emperor Theodosius, Marutha built (ca 420) the village of Martyropolis (Maypherqat), in whose walls the bones of the martyrs were deposited.<sup>21</sup> The Christian bishop of Amida Acacius, used funds of the Church to liberate 5000 starving Sasanian prisoners

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<sup>11</sup> Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 4.11.2 ; see also CAMERON (1999) 157.

<sup>12</sup> Theodoret 3. 15; 3.19.

<sup>13</sup> MCDONOUGH (2008) 128-129.

<sup>14</sup> WISEHÖFER (1996) 200; BOYCE (2001) 101-117.

<sup>15</sup> Agathias II 26. 3-5. Agathias was well informed about Zoroastrian practices and customs by his friend Sergius, a leading interpreter, who on a visit to Persia specially transcribed for Agathias extracts from the Persian Royal Annals. See CAMERON (1969/1970) 69.

<sup>16</sup> Mas'udi, *Les prairies d'or*, 2.24 p.162; WIESEHÖFER (2010) 210-211.

<sup>17</sup> FOWDEN (1993) 82.

<sup>18</sup> FOWDEN (1993) 81; see also, WIESEHÖFER (2010) 211.

<sup>19</sup> GARSOIAN (1973/1974) 124; BLOCKLEY (1992) 49.

<sup>20</sup> *Vita Maruthae* 80-91.

<sup>21</sup> FOWDEN (1999) 55.

of war, something that impressed the Persian King Bahrām V, who immediately asked a meeting in order to have the pleasure of seeing and thanking the man.<sup>22</sup> Marutha's and Acacius' activities reflect a remarkably role of bishops, who repeatedly intervened in the political events of their times.

The Sasanian rulers also made use of Christian bishops as advisors and ambassadors, something that illustrates their privileged role at the Persian court. According Syrian sources, the Persian *Catholicos* Yahbalaha was sent as an envoy in either 418 or 419 from the king Yazdegerd I to Constantinople on a mission that appears to have been an attempt to address the deterioration of Roman-Persian relations.<sup>23</sup> He returned with many presents and money given to him in order to repair a Christian church in Ctesiphon and built a new one.<sup>24</sup> Baršawma, the Christian bishop of Nisibis who deserved the trust of the shah Pērōz and was a valued imperial servant, organized a meeting between the byzantine dux and the Persian commander of Nisibis, in order to find a solution for several problems existing between the two parts.<sup>25</sup> During the reign of Kawād II (628), and after the defeat of his father's army by the emperor Heraclius, the *Catholicos* Isho`yahb II, was asked by the Persian royal court to lead a peace delegation and discuss the conditions for the end of war with Byzantium. Isho`yahb was successful in concluding a peace between Persia and Constantinople, as was his mandate from the shaky Persian throne.<sup>26</sup>

It is true that the Zoroastrian clergy didn't openly participated in diplomatic missions, but their political influence is obvious in the internal affairs of the Sasanian state. The Sasanian monarchical ideology was based to a great extent on religion and the Archbishop of the Magi (*mubadanmubad*) participated in process for the election of the successor of the throne, and he was the one who placed the crown on the head of the new king.<sup>27</sup> The Magi kept neuralgic positions in the state and their duties were not only religious but also financial and juridical.<sup>28</sup>

Shortly before his death (337) Constantine planned to conduct a Persian expedition as a religious crusade. Bishops were to accompany the army, a Christian version of the Old Testament tabernacle was prepared also to accompany him, a giant tent was to be used as church, while he proclaimed his intention to be baptized in the River Jordan before invading Mesopotamia.<sup>29</sup> Christianity was brought into play as a political factor in relation between Rome and Persia. Throughout the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century, a great rivalry between Zoroastrian priests and Christian bishops was underway. Armenia and cities of Northern Mesopotamia became the theater of a religious confrontation between Christian bishops and Magian priests, both trying to impose their own religion to the Armenians and to the people of border cities, knowing that conversion to one's religion will be followed by political submission. Armenia up to the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century remained of intense heat for both the empires. The King of Kings Yazdegerd II strongly promoted along with the Zoroastrian priests, the policy of expansion of Zoroastrianism in Persarmenia and attempted, through Armenian nobles, to force Zoroastrianism on the mass of the people.<sup>30</sup> The shah Xusrō I tried to convert his own Christian subjects of Persarmenia, commanding even high clerics to renounce Christ and to worship the sun and fire.<sup>31</sup>

During the sixth century, no less than before, dealing with religious matters formed an important part of Byzantine-Sasanian relations; religion could bear an impact in armed conflicts and was the subject of agreements and treaties between the powers. Heretics were a great political problem for the internal and external affairs of Byzantium. According to the *Codex Theodosianus* as well to the *Codex Justinianus*, Assyrian Christians, Nestorians and Monophysites, considered *personae non gratae* in Byzantium. But these rules and laws against Nestorian or Monophysite Christians had to do only with the interior affairs of the Empire. Justinian's policy against Monophysites of the eastern provinces was not aggressive and there is no evidence that Monophysites or Nestorians were ever treated as harshly as other heretics.<sup>32</sup> The treaty

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<sup>22</sup> Socrates 7.21.1-6; ПАТОУРА (1994) 24.

<sup>23</sup> Evagrius 1.19; GARSOIAN (1973/1974) 124; BLOCKLEY (1992) 56.

<sup>24</sup> LABOURT (1904) 100; CHRISTENSEN (1944) 271.

<sup>25</sup> GERO (1981) 35; GARSOIAN (1973/1974) 123.

<sup>26</sup> MOFFET (1998) 252, 263, n. 94.

<sup>27</sup> KHAVARI (2000) 49.

<sup>28</sup> VENETIS (2003) 50, 51; DARYAEE (2009) 43.

<sup>29</sup> Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 4.56.

<sup>30</sup> WIGRAM (1910) 140.

<sup>31</sup> Lazare de Pharbe 281, 282; Elisée, 187.

<sup>32</sup> EVANS (2000) 249: "John of Ephesus, Monophysite though he was sent by Justinian in 542 to Asia Minor on a rural mission with instructions to convert unbelievers".

of 562 illustrates Justinian as the protector of the Nestorian Christians of Persia. He demands that they should be allowed to build churches, engage in worship without fear, sing their hymns of praise and bury their dead in graves.<sup>33</sup> It is worth to mention that Nestorians and Monophysites living inside the Roman Empire didn't have these rights.<sup>34</sup> Political considerations must have led Xusrō I to consent to these "Christian rights", proposed by Justinian. Nevertheless the fact that Xusrō granted these substantial privileges to a religious minority reflects a tolerant attitude and lack of fear, in contrast with his opponent's attitude. This decision and toleration of Xusrō was probably the result of a political calculation. After the Synod of Chalcedon (451) many Nestorian Christians took refuge in Persia. Xusrō followed the principal "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". An East or West Syriac Christian (Monophysite or Nestorian), could expect a certain degree of toleration from the Persians, which Byzantium as a rule refused to grant.

During Xusrō I reign numerous Christians employed in the royal court. The shah's personal physician, interpreters and secretaries for affairs of state, as well as one of his own sons and wives, but the political power of Christians remained minimal and isolated as they were a circumscribed group set apart from normal subjects of the empire. They might have some influence but not authority.<sup>35</sup> In Byzantium Justinian I used religious propaganda in extent. Coins as well as visual art were used as allegory of contemporaneous politics. The Evangelical reference to the *proskynisis* of the Magi in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-12) and the famous image of the Adoration of the Magi, turned them to a symbol of subordination to the Roman emperor and to the Roman religion. The depiction of the *proskynisis* (prostration) of the Magi on the royal *chlamys* of the empress Theodora, in the famous San Vitale presbytery mosaic in Ravenna, asserted the subjection of the Iranian religion to the earthly representative of Christ.<sup>36</sup>

### **Persecution of Christians in Iran: a response to Christian propaganda**

Until the days of the Sasanids (224) no persecution of Christians ordered by the government took place in Iran. Under Arsacid kings, persecution being local and sporadic, and partly personal at times in its origin, it could often be checked by personal influence. As Christianity spread in Iran before the days of Constantine, the later appearance of a Christian emperor in the West gave to Persian Christians hopes and expectations, while they saw the Roman Emperor as their protector. After the conversion of Constantine and the adoption of Christianity as the official faith of the Roman Empire, Christians became politically suspect for the Iranians, as they did serve as a supply pool for spies.<sup>37</sup>

It is true that there was no formal persecution in the East until the day it was over in the West. Valerian's persecution of Christians in the eastern provinces had led Šāpur I to treat the large numbers of Christians in 260 with considerable favor to such an extent indeed, that one chronicler states that the prisoners were better off in their captivity than they had been beforehand. The problem of Christians in the Sasanian Empire was governed from the beginning by the course of international politics.

The Syrian author Aphrahat, shortly before 337 wrote: "The people of God have received prosperity and success awaits the man who has been the instrument of that prosperity (Constantine); but disaster threatens the army which has been gathered together by the efforts of a wicked and proud man puffed up with vanity (Šāpur).. The (Roman) empire will not be conquered, for the hero whose name is Jesus is coming with his power, and his armour will uphold the whole army of the empire."<sup>38</sup> Aphrahat expected Constantine to invade Persia and to conquer the area in which he lived and warned his own king Šāpur II (309-379) of the futility of attacking the Romans. He argued that God had ordained the defeat of Persia and predicted that the Roman Empire will exist till the end of the world. Aphrahat belonged to the *People of God*, he, as well as all Christians all over the *oikoumeni*, belonged to the *Christian Nation* and had one Lord: Jesus in heaven and the Roman Emperor on Earth. Aphrahat's fifth Demonstration is a clear proof of how the Christians of Persia stood completely on Rome's side with their sympathies. Therefore as a result Šāpur, regarded his Christian subjects as a potential fifth column.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Menander fr.6.1.

<sup>34</sup> Just. *Novellae* 131.14 p. 662-663; GUILLAUMONT (1969/1970) 50.

<sup>35</sup> MOFFETT (1998) 221-222.

<sup>36</sup> CANEPA (2009) 118-120.

<sup>37</sup> KAEGI (2003) 154.

<sup>38</sup> BARNES (1985) 130, 133,134; BROCK (1984) 8.

<sup>39</sup> BARNES (1985) 136; LABOURT (1904) 43, 104.

During the reign of Constantius II, Šāpur II suffered humiliating defeat outside Nisibis and Aphrahat's unashamed words were a good excuse to find a scapegoat. Once Šāpur II started a war with Rome, started also persecution of Christians in Iran (344) as they were considered Roman sympathizers.<sup>40</sup> When Simeon (Shimun bar Saba'i) bishop and *Catholicos* (Archbishop) of Seleucia<sup>41</sup> refused to comply with the exertion of higher taxes, the Sasanian king feared a Christian revolt against his rule and initiated systematic persecutions of Christians in the entire Sasanian Empire.<sup>42</sup> Christians of Persia were accused of disloyalty and Simeon was arrested as traitor, while all Christians thereafter were ordered to pay double taxes, as they were considered politically suspect and friends of Persia's enemy. Simeon was executed and with him no less than a hundred martyrs, including bishops from Susiana and Adiabene, regions where Constantius' campaign was successful. Persecutions of Christians lasted for forty years and numerous acts of martyrs from this period have been preserved.<sup>43</sup>

However Sasanian kings didn't consider the Christian community an enemy, and, as a rule, basically violent persecution took place only during wars with the Roman Empire. Persecution on a large scale took place notably under Šāpur II, Yazdegerd I (right at the end of his reign), Bahrām V and Yazdegerd II. Destruction of a *pyreion* (Zoroastrian fire sanctuary) at the end of the reign of Yazdegerd I, resulted to the destruction of almost all churches in the Persian Empire.<sup>44</sup> Obviously for political reasons Yazdegerd's image was not blacken by his persecution of Christians. The Byzantine Church historian Socrates wrote, that in no way Yazdegerd caused trouble to the Christians in his dominions and that only his death prevented his conversion to Christianity.<sup>45</sup> Theophanes claimed that Yazdegerd was deceived by the Magi and stirred up a great persecution of the Christians in Persia.<sup>46</sup> Christian historians and Martyrologists accused the Zoroastrian Magians and not the Persian Kings as responsible for these pogroms and tortures of Christian minority, as the Magi were striving continuously for the destruction of the non Zoroastrian religions and conversion to the *Good Religion*.

The official Persian attitude to Christianity, is characterized alternately by toleration and even occasional favoritism mostly to counterbalance the increasing influence of the Magian clergy.<sup>47</sup> The position of the Archbishop of Iranian Christians called *Catholicos* was important and potentially useful to the Sasanian government.<sup>48</sup> He was used occasionally as ambassador to the Romans. It is interesting that in several cases—most notably in that of the *Catholicos* Aba (+552) the shah Xusrō I does his best to protect him from the zeal of the Zoroastrian clergy.<sup>49</sup> Indeed on more than one occasion the shah issued specific orders that Christians were not to be molested by Magians.<sup>50</sup> Martyrdoms of Iranian Christians were much more apt to occur when a shah had to rely on Magian support for his position, as in the case of Bahrām V.<sup>51</sup> It is of a crucial importance to note that the abandonment of Nisibis by the Byzantines (363) as part of the peace treaty concluded by the Roman emperor Jovian in 363, had not as a result the extermination of the Christian population of the city. The ecclesiastical organization of this frontier city suffered no major disruption because of the change of masters. Baršawma, Bishop of Nisibis, in a letter to *Catholicos* Acacius (Aqaq) expresses his fear that the emperor Balāš (484-488) will put out a decree against Christianity due to the rebellious behavior of the Christians of Nisibis. In 502 probably most of the inhabitants of Nisibis were Christians since they refused to fight against the Romans.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> BROCK (1982) 7: "Times of war were times when persecution was apt to break out, while political peace meant peace for the church".

<sup>41</sup> Simeon succeeded the *Catholicos* Papa who died in 328, and ruled peacefully for some years. He actually had the royal favour and considered *persona grata* at the court of the young king Šāpur [WIGRAM (1910) 56].

<sup>42</sup> ASMUSSEN (2008) 940; DIGNAS, WINTER (2008) 221.

<sup>43</sup> DIGNAS, WINTER (2008) 220.

<sup>44</sup> Theodoret 5.41.

<sup>45</sup> Socrates 7.8.50.

<sup>46</sup> Theophanes Confessor, A.M.5906.

<sup>47</sup> The shah Kawād I, is specifically remembered as very tolerant towards Christians, as he allowed the construction of churches and monasteries in Iranian territory. It is said that he rather persecuted the followers of Mani as well as the Mazdakites, than Christians. See: GERO (1981) 20-21; WISEHÖFER (2010) 206.

<sup>48</sup> GERO (1981) 15.

<sup>49</sup> PEETERS (1946) 94.

<sup>50</sup> BROCK (1982) 6.

<sup>51</sup> Socrates 7. 18

<sup>52</sup> BLOCKLEY (1992) 28; GREATREX, LIEU (2002) 70.

It should be noted that paradoxically Byzantine secular historians wrote not a word about persecution of Christians in Persia. It is strange enough that historians did not mention anything about the religious policy of Theodosius II or Justinian I. Information about barbaric tortures and persecution of Christians are given only by Church historians of the fifth century, namely Socrates (380-449), Sozomen (400-ca.450) and Theodoret (393-ca.466),<sup>53</sup> as well as by Syriac martyrologies. Nevertheless the complete silence of historians, like Procopius, Agathias and Menander, about Christian persecutions in such an extent, raises doubts. Procopius and Agathias ignored Yazdegerd's relations with his Christian subjects entirely, instead Procopius related the story that the emperor Arcadius appointed Yazdegerd I as the guardian (ἐπίτροπος) of his son Theodosius II, a story with a strong political message, which Procopius warmly approved.<sup>54</sup> The opinion of secular historians about the Magi doesn't seem to be hostile. Agathias considered them philosophers,<sup>55</sup> and Ammianus Marcellinus recorded that the Magi were respected priests, lived in Asia Minor in their own communities, under their own laws and customs: “..villasque inhabitants, nulla murorum firmitudine communitas, et legibus suis uti permissi, religionis respect sunt honorati”<sup>56</sup>

Reciprocally it is likely that persecutions of Zoroastrians took place in the Roman Empire. Although no direct evidence exists, it is reasonable to assume that devotees of the fire cult no longer enjoyed official benevolence in Roman territory after 414, when the empress Pulcheria, the predominant person of the Roman political scene, took charge of the Byzantine State, during the minority of her brother Theodosius II. In the previous years under the administration of Anthemius, praetorian prefect of the East, who deserves credit of good relations with Yazdegerd I, Byzantium reciprocated by tolerating fire cult in Roman territory. Christians in the Persian Empire had been granted the freedom to practice their religion, and the Zoroastrians in turn were guaranteed the same privileges in the byzantine Empire.<sup>57</sup> Later after the end of the war of 421/422, Theodosius II and Bahrām V it is likely that they reached a mutual agreement about religious minorities living in the two countries. In the treaty of 422/423 a term about minorities was included: The Persian side agreed to end persecution of Christians in its territory, and - although Socrates does not admit it - the Romans also agreed to return to the policy of toleration and protect fire worshipers in Roman territory. Nevertheless at the end of the reign of Theodosius II and under the influence of his sister Pulcheria, astrologers and those dealing with magical ceremonies were sentenced to death. Zoroastrians were persecuted by the Roman authorities as pagans and astrologists and the Magi probably were exterminated.<sup>58</sup> The information given by the byzantine historian Priscus that a Sasanian embassy to the Byzantine emperor Leo I, around 465, complained that the fire cult of the Magians who lived on Byzantine territory was impaired, is a proof of the Roman obligation: “The embassy alleged that the Romans wishing to turn the Magi from their ancestral customs, laws and form of worship, harassed them and did not allow the fire, which they call unquenchable, to be kept burning continually according to their law”.<sup>59</sup> It is interesting that in the treaty of 562 contrary to the previous treaty of 422/423, not a word was included about Zoroastrians living in the Byzantine Empire. It is only recorded that Christians should not attempt in any way to convert the followers of the Magian religion to Christianity.<sup>60</sup> However Ṭabarī points out, referring to the agreement of the *foedus* of 562, that the Byzantine emperor had promised to treat the Sasanians in the Roman Empire

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<sup>53</sup> Socrates and Sozomen continued the Church History of Eusebius and filled in gaps left by him. Their works display the further development of the Eusebian historiographical tradition in the fifth century. They were not bishops or ecclesiastical officials but *scholastici*, (lawyers) as most of the early Byzantine historians. Their history is considered a reliable source, includes numerous documents, resolutions of Councils and other information. Theodoret bishop of Cyrhus in Syria lived also during mid 5<sup>th</sup> century and composed his Church History from Constantine to 428. He became a monk and later bishop of the city of Cyrhus and his history focused on the Arian Controversy. See: CHESNUT (1977) 191-206.

<sup>54</sup> Proc. *Bella* I 2.7. Procopius underlined the distinction between the honorable Yazdegerd and his villainous successor Xusrō I.

<sup>55</sup> Agathias, II 29.11; Cameron (1969/70) 95: “For Agathias as for Procopius and Menander the Magi are simply priests and as such represent the sassanian religion as a whole”.

<sup>56</sup> Amm. Marc. XXVI 6.33-36.

<sup>57</sup> BLOCKLEY (1992) 57-58; HOLUM (1977) 162-168.

<sup>58</sup> Theodoret 5.20; VENETIS (2003) 61.

<sup>59</sup> Priscus, fr.41.1. Blockley suggests that the word “*Magi*” may concern the whole of Zoroastrians in Roman soil. The Persian embassy came certainly during the shah Pērōz's reign. Pērōz (459-484) is known that exerted his influence to secure freedom of worship for Zoroastrians settled in Byzantine territory [GERO (1981) 16].

<sup>60</sup> Menander 6.1.405.

well and to allow them to establish fire sanctuaries.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless there is evidence that the persecution of astrologers continued during Justinian's era<sup>62</sup> and so we can assume almost with certainty that by the end of the sixth century all Zoroastrian communities, which existed in Minor Asia as well as in the eastern parts of Mesopotamia from the time of Pausanias,<sup>63</sup> had been exterminated.

### Towards a “national church” of the East

The theological strife between Christians and Zoroastrians was the expression not only of politics but also of nationality. The heretics of any variety underlined and followed their own customs and historical tradition. Persian Christians had conscious of belonging to a particular ancient linguistic group, knew their ancient history and were proud of it. The liturgical language of Persian Church was Greek or Syriac for a considerable time, but from the late fifth century onwards Middle Persian replaced Greek. It is important to notice that Persian *Catholici* and bishops as well as Christian Persian Martyrs didn't adopt Christian names after baptism, but kept their own Persian names, e.g. Dadhiso, Barsauma, Bobowai, Abha, Elisha, Golindouch, Yazovit.<sup>64</sup>

The Christian Church of Persia was officially recognized during the reign of the Great King Yazdegerd I in the Synod of 410,<sup>65</sup> but although Christianity was recognized as a religion, remained a religion of an inferior race and soon there was a law of the State that to win a convert from Zoroastrianism to Christianity was a crime punishable with death for both teacher and disciple.<sup>66</sup> Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the shah's winter residence, became the particular metropolitan see, possessing some sort of primacy and the King Yazdegerd himself ordered the subordination of the other bishops to the *Catholicos* of Seleucia.<sup>67</sup> The Synod of 410 convened with the shah's authorization and later synods specifically refer to the shah's initiative in the internal affairs of the Persian Church. From the first Synod of the Persian Church in 410 on, the shah repeatedly interfere in the election of the *Catholicos*. Those Archbishops accused as sympathizers of the Romans were arrested beaten imprisoned and occasionally condemned to death.<sup>68</sup> We find Xusrō I imposing his own nominee in 552, namely his doctor, while in 609, in the end of Sasanid rule, Xusrō II, angered because an earlier synod had passed over his own candidate for patriarch, forbade the election of any further patriarch. The vacancy of the see lasted until Xusrō's own death in 628.<sup>69</sup>

In 424 took place the third Synod of the Persian Church which proclaimed its independence from Constantinople and equality in patriarchal jurisdiction. The Church of the East refused to accept any authority above its own *Catholicos*.<sup>70</sup> The reasons for the separation were rather political than theological. Christians of Persia tore down the bridge with Byzantium by officially embracing the Nestorian creed, eliminating the slightest suspicion of a conspiracy with the Romans and thus preventing renewed persecutions. At the synod of Beth Lapat in 484, and later at the synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 486, it was decided that the only Christian doctrine would be that of Nestorianism.<sup>71</sup> No oriental ruler who is strong enough to prevent it will have his *rayats* subject ecclesiastically to a foreign king. In the Synod of 424 the *Catholicos* Dadisho' had already declared formally the independence and supremacy of the Assyrian

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<sup>61</sup> Tabarī 314.

<sup>62</sup> Proc. *Secret History*, 11.38.

<sup>63</sup> Pausanias, v. II, 5.27.5; LEE (1993) 103. It is likely that all pagans had been exterminated from the time of the emperor Theodosius II. The emperor Theodosius had proclaimed in 423 that “The regulations of constitutions formerly promulgated shall suppress any pagans that survive, although We now believe that there are no more” [EVANS (2001) 65].

<sup>64</sup> DEVOS (1966) 229-238.

<sup>65</sup> *Synodicon Orientale*, 254-275. The synodal acts, emphasize Yazdegerd's friendly relations, with the Roman Empire, and his close rapport with Christian bishops, in particular Marutha, bishop of Martyropolis and Isaac (Ishaq) the metropolitan bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The Christian bishops styled their patron Yazdegerd as *victorious, friend of peace, glorious and powerful*.

<sup>66</sup> θάνατον εἶναι ζημίαν...ὡς θέμις Πέρσας ποιεῖν τοῖς τὰ μάγων ἀθετήσασι δόγματα (Theophylactus Symocatta, E.12).

<sup>67</sup> *Synodicon Orientale* 256-257.

<sup>68</sup> WIGRAM (1910) 121-122, 151.

<sup>69</sup> WIGRAM (1910) 210, 246-264.

<sup>70</sup> *Synodicon Orientale* 285-298.

<sup>71</sup> LABOURT (1904) 143-152; WISEHÖFER (2010) 202.

Church and their patriarch the supreme head of this Church.<sup>72</sup> At the Synod of Beth Lapat in 484 the bishop of the metropolitan see of Nisibis Baršawma told the Persian King Pērōz (459-484): “unless the confession of Christians in your territory is made different from that in Greek (=Roman) territory, their (Persian Christians) affection and loyalty towards you will not be firmly fixed.”<sup>73</sup>

By the end of the fifth century Christians of Persia were obliged by the decisions of Synods that took place in Sasanid Iran, to follow the customs of the Zoroastrians and to prove their obedience to the shah. At the Synod of the Assyrian Church of 576 the following order was included : “It is right that in all the churches of this exalted and glorious kingdom, that our lord the victorious Chosroes , king of kings, be named in the litanies during the liturgy. No metropolitan or bishop has any authority to waive this canon in any of the churches of his diocese and jurisdiction”<sup>74</sup> *Catholicos* was also forced to escort the Persian king on campaigns,<sup>75</sup> and according the decisions of the synod of 486 celibacy for bishops was strictly forbidden.<sup>76</sup> Even *Catholicos*, the head of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Eastern Church, should contract marriage. Nestorian Christians of Iran had to be different from orthodox Romans, to have more common with their co-citizens, than with the citizens of the Roman Empire. Xusrō II, grandson of Xusrō I, realized that divisions between Monophysites and Chalcedonians could be exploited: on capturing Edessa in 609/10 he demanded that the Christians could remain in the city if they became Monophysites or Nestorians, in case they refused they would be killed.<sup>77</sup>

### The Dream of a Christian Shah

In 590 the emperor Maurice decided to give a military support to Xusrō II to face the usurper Bahrām Čōbīn, a capable general from the ancient Iranian royal line of the Arsacids. After Bahrām’s defeat Xusrō grateful for the Romans help, handed over Martyropolis and the city of Dara (591) to Byzantium, as he had promised.<sup>78</sup> For the first time the two rivals, the Byzantine Emperor and the Persian King, became partners and allies, although they never met each other. Maurice’s policy was crowned with success, nonetheless he was criticized for having treated with respect a major enemy and, what was worse, for having wasted money and lives of Christian soldiers on the infidel.<sup>79</sup> Voices friendlier to the Emperor tried to apologize for his actions, and circulated stories of Xusrō having been secretly converted to Christianity, finding proof of this in the King’s alleged favoring of St Sergius.<sup>80</sup> For the appeasement of the Church and the army it was important that Xusrō should be presented by official propaganda as a faithful Christian, to whom help could not be refused. The Byzantine historians Theophylact Simocatta and Evagrius Scholasticus, nicely illustrated through remarkable episodes the pro-Christian attitude of Xusrō II, but eastern sources do not confirm Xusrō’s convert to Christianity. It is rather obvious that Theophylact as well as the church historian Evagrius proceeded to a religious mythmaking in order to justify the military help to an infidel enemy. Evagrius stated that it was the God of the Christians who guided Chosroe to the Roman soil as a petitioner,<sup>81</sup> additionally

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<sup>72</sup> WIGRAM (1910) 125.

<sup>73</sup> BROCK (1982) 9.

<sup>74</sup> *Synodicon Orientale*, 121.

<sup>75</sup> *Catholicos* Sabriso escorted Xusrō II in his campaigns, while Christian bishops, since the time of Constantine, accompanied Roman emperors to war; *Catholicos* mar-Aba was sent to prison by the shah Xusrō I because he refused to follow his king in campaign against the Romans [Garsoian (1973/1974) 122, 132].

<sup>76</sup> *Synodicon Orientale* 304, 305. Zoroastrians regarded with horror the profession of the celibate life. Even today Muslim states simply refuse to accept male celibasy.

<sup>77</sup> WHITBY (1988) 214.

<sup>78</sup> Theophylact Simocatta 4.13; WHITBY (1988) 297-304.

<sup>79</sup> SHLOSSER (1994) 69.

<sup>80</sup> Evagrius *Ecclesiastical History* 6.21; Theophylactus Simocatta 5.1, 5.13-14. In the fifth century the shrine of St Sergius, who was beheaded during the persecutions of Diocletian and buried in Rusafa in the upper Euphrates valley, some 100 kilometers east of the city of Beroia (Aleppo), developed into a pilgrimage site called Sergiupolis and was known throughout the whole Mediterranean region. Sergiupolis became a metropolitan see and was walled in during the reign of Justinian. It was destroyed in the Mongol invasion of 1258. The shrine, which lay within the Byzantine Empire, had a great appeal for Christians of the Persian Empire. See: FOWDEN (1999) 77-100.

<sup>81</sup> Evagrius 6.17.

Theophylact stated that the Persian shah no longer sought refuge in Mithra, but rather in the God of the Christians.<sup>82</sup> For a Zoroastrian king, this attitude is difficult to accept.

At the end of the sixth century religious propaganda continued to play a great role in the Byzantine-Persian foreign relations. Xusrō's II beloved wife, Širin, regarded as Roman and Christian by the Byzantine authors, persuaded the shah to build churches in Persia dedicated to Virgin Mary and Saint Sergius, thanking them for helping her to become pregnant.<sup>83</sup> According to Evagrius, Xusrō, following his victory over Bahrām Čōbīn and his return to the throne in 591, dedicated a cross, decorated with gold and jewels, to the shrine of Saint Sergios in Rusafa (Sergiopolis), on which he engraved in Greek a letter to the saint, calling him *the most venerable and memorable martyr*. Later Xusrō sent also another gift to the temple, including a golden plaque, on which he engraved among others the following: "When I happened to be in Bersamaï, I earnestly desired that you, St. Sergius, come to my aid, in order that my wife Shirin might become pregnant. Because Shirin was a Christian and I a pagan, and our law did not allow marriage to a Christian, I nevertheless overlooked this law .."<sup>84</sup> Evagrius' report represents the only information which unquestionably belongs to the sixth century, and so it is of central importance. Theophylact wrote the same story in the seventh century and the question naturally arises whether he was familiar with Evagrius' report or not. Anyway it is extraordinary and seems unlikely that the Zoroastrian shah turned to a Christian shrine which lay within the Byzantine Empire calling himself "a pagan". In the *Šāhnāme* a story is written about a Byzantine prince who once tried to trick Xusrō II into compromising his religion. The Persian king is represented as crying out: "God forbid that I should abandon the faith of my fathers, chosen and pure lords of the earth, and go over to the faith of Christ not take the vag while eating, and become a Christian!"<sup>85</sup>

In Byzantium, church officials had doubts about Xusrō's respect for Christianity. The bishop of Melitene Dometian during the festivities for the return of the city of Martyropolis under the Roman rule, confronted Xusrō as an infidel and called him *Babylonian tyrant* and *Pharao*. Dometian sang a triumphal hymn composed for the occasion, in which he praised the Iranian martyrs as champions against Iran: "This, martyrs, is your offering from the Babylonian tyrant and foreigner, the fugitive from his own kingdom who is now obedient to the Romans rather than hostile: for such great deeds have you executed against your enemies".<sup>86</sup> The bishop's speech was in complete contrast with the official policy of the Byzantine state, and a proof that for the Christian Church Xusrō remained a non Christian and a dangerous foreigner. Dometian's speech reflects the triumphant and religious atmosphere of Byzantine victory over Xusrō II.<sup>87</sup>

Non Christian sources, as the patriarch and chronicler Eutychios, Dionysius of Tellmahre, Michael the Syrian and Tabarī, reported, probably for propaganda reasons, that Maurice had his daughter Maria married to Xusrō.<sup>88</sup> Arguing against this however, is the fact that Theophylact, who knew Maurice best, said nothing of this. It is unthinkable that he would withhold such information from the public. It is also unimaginable that the Byzantine emperor would have given a daughter to a non Christian shah who already possessed a harem of women. The *Chronicle of Seert*, which was made up primarily of the *Vitae* of saints, records that Xusrō married Maria, the emperor's daughter, but another remark in the Arabic text indicates that "*the others*" (The Romans?) call the bride Shirin!<sup>89</sup>

During Heraclius reign, Xusrō II was no more portrayed as a possible believer of Christian faith. The Byzantine dream of a Christian shah was over forever. The war which broke out between the two empires, described by some scholars as "holy war", transformed Xusrō to Θεομάχος and Θεομίσητος (he who hates God and fights Him), while Xusrō himself called the Byzantine emperor his wretched slave.<sup>90</sup> Heraclius panegyrist George of Pisidia, in jubilant biblical tone announced the message: the historical triumph of Heraclius over Xusrō, the enemy of God, was the triumph of Christ over the Zoroastrian Persians. Byzantine coins were once more used for propaganda purposes. The cross on steps struck on the reverse

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<sup>82</sup> Theophylact Simocatta 4.10.

<sup>83</sup> Theophylact Simocatta 5,13. From Firdausi's *Šāhnāme* we know that at the time of his flight to Byzantium, Xusrō was already married to the Christian Širin. Pseudo-Sebeos reported that Širin came from Khusistan, today's southwestern Iran [BAUM (2004) 25].

<sup>84</sup> Theophylact Simocatta 5.14.

<sup>85</sup> BOYCE (2001) 139.

<sup>86</sup> Theophylact Simocatta 4.16.

<sup>87</sup> It has to be noted that Theophylact wrote his history after the tragic death of Maurice and during Heraclius reign.

<sup>88</sup> BAUM (2004) 26.

<sup>89</sup> BAUM (2004) 27.

<sup>90</sup> HOLM (1977) 155.

of Heraclius' silver hexagram, reappeared during his Persian campaign after almost thirty years.<sup>91</sup> The depiction of the Christian cross over the steps of a broken Zoroastrian altar, probably symbolized the triumph of Christianity over Zoroastrianism. The coin imitated Sasanian coins of similar depiction with the sacred fire on top of steps.<sup>92</sup> Heraclius celebrated his victory with a triumph in Constantinople. In his letter to the Senate wrote that he felt proud for having annihilated God's enemy: "And let all we Christians ... give thanks to one God... For fallen is the arrogant Chosroes opponent of God".<sup>93</sup> The Byzantine triumph over Persia and the humiliation of the Persian ruling family soared hopes for the conversion of all Persians to Christianity and even to Orthodox Christianity. It was an era of great expectations that endured very little.

Heraclius' triumph proved to be a *Pyrrhic* victory. Soon after the end of the Perso-Byzantine war, Muhammad the prophet of a new religion, who transformed a religious movement into a political and military empire, would shake the world. A new enemy in the form of a religion, much more dangerous and strong than Zoroastrianism, would threaten Byzantium and eventually enslave it.

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<sup>91</sup> The cross on steps was first struck on the solidi of Tiberius II but soon disappeared, see: ERICSSON (1968) 150.

<sup>92</sup> ERICSSON (1968) 152-153.

<sup>93</sup> *Chronicon Paschale* 183.

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## Summary

The role of religion in the foreign affairs of Sasanian Iran and the Later Roman Empire (330-630 A.D.)

Religion's role was prominent in the foreign relations of Byzantium and Iran. The religious element prevails throughout the entire struggle with Persia. The two empires were not just rivals on the battlefield. Along with the real war an ideological war was conducted between them, as both tried to convert people to their own religion. Zoroastrian Magi and Christian bishops became rivals in a war of propaganda where all means were used. When Constantine became Christian he created a golden opportunity to unite a wholeheartedly universalist religion and its abundance of scriptural authority and missionary impetus, with empire's forces of political, military and economic expansion in order to create a genuine world empire. Constantine the Great was the first to use religion as a weapon to assimilate people to the Roman Empire. The dream of global domination could become a reality through the spread of Christianity.

During the Sasanian era Iran was Zoroastrianized in great extent. The doctrine of Zarthustra became the privileged religion and developed into a supporting pillar of Sasanian kingship. Persecutions of Christians in Iran followed Constantine's the Great proclamation of being the leader of all Christians in the *oikoumeni*. Church historians accused the Zoroastrian priests called Magi in the West as responsible for tortures and death penalties against the Christians of Iran, while Martyrologies illustrated them as having diabolical forces and immoral practices in their private lives. On the contrary secular Byzantine historians praised them as simple priests and holy men who lived in peace following their own customs. Roman propaganda, through history writing, presented the shahs Yazdegerd I, Xusrō I, and Xusrō II as having converted to Christianity or at least as Christian sympathizers.

The impossibility of Persian subjects existing under the rule of any Roman prelate, had decreed the independence of the Persian Church. It was a common belief that Christian Orthodoxy was loyalty to the Roman Emperor, not to Christ, and heresy was not the display of a special variety of unchristian spirit, but an offence against the Roman State order. Christians of Persia were soon obliged to follow the customs of their own country. The King of Kings would always have the last voice, and frequently the first also in the choice of *Catholicos*.

Byzantine historians often proceed to a religious mythmaking to justify the emperors' policy towards the Persian rulers. During the sixth and seventh centuries religion propaganda was used in extent by both countries. In Byzantium during Heraclius' reign we can trace a tendency to interpret events in terms of biblical prototypes.

**Keywords:** Sasanians, Later Roman Empire, Iran, Byzantium, Christianity, Zoroastrianism