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## The Northern k'ustak administrative units of the Sasanian Iran in 6th century CE

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**Abstract:** *In the 6th century CE, the Sasanian empire was divided into four administrative units already during the second reign of Kavad I, however, it was during the time of Khosrov Anushirvan that these regions were transformed into the military-administrative units – k'ustaks, where the administrative power belonged to the padgospan and the military to the spahbed. The northern k'ustak or k'ust-i-Kapkoh was included the marzpanates: Armenia (divided into the three military-administrative units – Tanutirakan gund, Vaspurakan gund, Syunik'), Georgia, Albania and the šahrs: Adharbādhakān, Gīlān, Dlmunk', Zanjān, Ghazvīn, Ṭabaristān and Ray. This paper reviews the administrative of the northern k'ustak based on the Classical Armenian, Arabic and Persian primary sources.*

**Key words:** Sasanians, northern k'ustak, military-administrative units, Khosrov Anushirvan, Byzantine, the *marzpanate* of Armenia

### Introduction

The Sasanian empire from 226 till the 651ss had different borders and administrative divisions. The history of Ēranšahr (Iran) in 6th century CE, can be described like a long period of the war against the Eastern Roman empire (Byzantine).<sup>1</sup> During the reign of Khosrov I Anushirvan (531-579) son of the Kavad I (488-496, 498/499-531), Sasanian Iran became a centralized state. The reason was the tax and military-administrative reforms of the *šāhān šāh*. Earlier the military power in Iran belonged to the *Erānspāhbed*, who was the chief commander of the Iranian army. Realizing that how powerful was the *Erānspāhbed*, Khosrov Anushirvan eliminated the post of the chief commander of army and divided the military power between four *spāhbeds*.<sup>2</sup> According to Ṭabarī it becomes clear that Khosrov Anushirvan having ascended the throne sent letters to the four *pāyḡōspān*, who were the rulers of each part

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<sup>1</sup> Maksymiuk, 2015a; The Sasanian kings also forced against to Huns in the Transcaucasia and to the Hephthalites in the north-east of the Iran, see Pourshariati, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Ṭabarī 894; Maksymiuk, 2015b: 173-174.

of Iran.<sup>3</sup> The latest mention shows that the division of the country into the four sides was before Khosrov Anushirvan's reign. That is, the *šāhān šāh* introduced a military reform in accordance with the existing administrative division and appointed four spahbeds in each of the parts.<sup>4</sup> But it is possible that the king carried out some administrative changes, because he expanded the state borders.

The sources reports that in the 6th century CE (rather in the first half), Sasanian Iran was divided into the four large military-administrative units k'ustaks. These were divided into lands (*šahr*) and districts (*ōstān*).<sup>5</sup> These were the northern k'ustak (*kust ī Ādurbādagān* / arm. *Kapkoh*, the southern k'ustak (*kust ī nēmrōz*), the eastern k'ustak (*kust ī xwarāsān*) and the western k'ustak (*kust ī xwarbārān*).<sup>6</sup>

There are opinions that the number of k'ustaks was not four but five. According to the inscription (ŠKZ) of the *šāhān šāh* Shapur I (241-272) and the *Ašxarhac'oyc'* (the Armenian geographical treatise) the state form of government was carried out by the principle the *šāhān šāh* and by four kings. That is, separately from the southern k'ustak there should have been the Vostan (*ōstān*) of the Sasanian king. The Vostan of the king should have been a separate administrative unit, which was mistakenly included in the southern k'ustak.<sup>7</sup>

### Administrative division of the northern k'ustak

The sequence of administrative units included in the northern k'ustak is given according to three primary sources. Although in the *Shahnameh* or in other Arabic sources there are references to the units included in the northern k'ustak, but they either repeat the main ones or are indefinite. Therefore, these three sources were taken as the basis.

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<sup>3</sup> Ṭabarī 893.

<sup>4</sup> Pourshariati, 2008: 83-101.

<sup>5</sup> See commentary of Hewsen (1992: 227). It should be noted, that all the land were not called *šahrs*, the borderlands were called *marzpanates*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ašxarhac'oyc'*, 2157; *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, 13-16; Ṭabarī 893-894; *Arab matenagirner 9.-10. Darer*, 206-207, 437-438, 445-446, 449, 489-490, 514; The *Shahnameh*, 1047; The historicity of the k'ustaks as well as their military-administrative nature are confirmed by the Sasanian seals, which belong to the spahbeds of the k'ust-i Khorasan, k'ust-i Khwarbaran, k'ust-i Nimruz and k'ust-i Adurbadagan (Gyselen, 2007: 48; Daryae & Safdari, 2010: 5-13; Khurshudian, 2015: 213-217). In this case Alison Vacca (2017: 66) noted, that the second seal treats Armenia as separate from k'ust- ī Ādurbādakān. Since the seals do not explicitly define the province, they cannot be definitive proof of the veracity of the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* or *Ašxarhac'oyc'*.

<sup>7</sup> ŠKZ 25-26/20-21/48-49: "Vahrām, king of Gēlān; and Šābuhr, king of Mesene; and Ohrmazdardašēr, great king of Armenia; and Narsē, king of Sakestān"; Ohanyan, 2021: 238-261.

According to the extensive recension of the *Ašxarhac‘oyc‘*, K‘usti Kapkoh (the northern k‘ustak) consisted of fourteen *ašxarhs* (*šahrs*).<sup>8</sup>

Քուստի Կապկոհ, որ է կողմն Կապկասու լեռանց, յորում են աշխարհ երեքտասան. Ատրպատական, Արմն (որ է) Հայք, Վարջան՝ որ է Վիրք, Ռան՝ որ է Ադուանք, Բալասական, Սիսական, Առէ, Գեղան, Շանճան, Դլմունք, Դմբաւանդ, Տապրըստան, Ռւան, Ամլ...

“K‘usti Kapkoh, which is the region of the Caucasian mountains, in which there are thirteen lands – Atrpatakan, Armn [which is] Armenia, Varjan which is Iberia (Georgia), Rān which is Albania (Afluank‘), Bałasakan, Sisakan, Arē, Gełan, Shanchan, Dlmunk‘, Dmbawand, Taprēstan, Rwan, Aml...”

Arab historian Yakubi included into the northern k‘ustak following lands:<sup>9</sup>

“Ṭabaristān, al-Rayy, Qazwīn, Zanjān, Qumm, Işbahān, Hamadhān, Nihāwand, al-Dīnawar, Ḥulwān, Māsabadhān, Mihrajan-qadhaq, Shahrazūr, al-Şāmaghān, and Ādharbayjān”.

Another Arab historian Ibn Khordadbeh included following lands:<sup>10</sup>

“Armenia, Adharbādhakān (Azerbaijan), Rayy, Damāwand, Shalanba, Ṭabaristān, Rūyān, Amul, Sārya, Shalush, al-Lāriza, al-Shirgh (Shiriz), Ṭamīs, Dihistān, al-Qalab (Kalār), Jīlān, Badashwārjar,<sup>11</sup> al-Babr, al-Ṭaylasān, al-Khazar, al-Lān and al-Şaqālib”.

The order of the territories is given by the aforementioned sources, giving preference to the Armenian source in terms of reliability:

- ‘Atrpatakan’ – has been known since ancient sources, so the localization is clear. Its capital, the city of Gandzak Shahastan, was the center of the northern k‘ustak, which was known under the name of *kust-ī Ādurbādagān*.<sup>12</sup>
- ‘Armenia’ – i.e. the *marzpanate* of Armenia. Under Armenia, mentioned in the Arabic source, should be understand not only the *marzpanate* of Armenia,

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<sup>8</sup> *Ašxarhac‘oyc‘*, 2157; Vacca, 2017: 65-66. Unlike the two short recensions, the extended edition contains a more complete list. As we see there are mentioned not 13 but 14 names of the lands.

<sup>9</sup> *The Works of Ibn Wādiḥ al-Ya‘qūbī*, 477.

<sup>10</sup> *Arab matenagirner 9.-10. Darer*, 445-446; Vacca, 2017: 68.

<sup>11</sup> This is another name of Tabaristan (Kolesnikov, 1970: 101).

<sup>12</sup> *Şahrestānihā ī Erānšahr*, 16; Gyselen, 2007: 48; Shahinyan, 2016.

but also Iberia and Albania.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that in the second half of the 6th century CE, as a result of the reforms of Khosrov Anushirvan, the *marzpanate* of Armenia was divided into the three military-administrative units – Tanutirakan gund, Vaspurakan gund and Syunik‘.<sup>14</sup>

- ‘Varjan’ – Iberia, which from 428 had the *marzpanate* status, although the royal power preserved. Only in 523 in fact, and in 532 de jure, the Sasanians abolished the royal power and completely put the country under the marzpan ruling.<sup>15</sup>
- ‘Rān’ – i.e. the *marzpanate* of Arrān/Albania. Here it is represented by the following borders – proper Albania and the Armenian regions of Utik‘ and Arts‘akh. The Trans-Caspian territories that were part of the *marzpanate* of Albania, are mentioned separately, which was called Bałasakan. The Trans-Caspian part of the *marzpanate* of Albania in the 6th century CE included two district: Vostan-i-Marzpanan (Chor) and Dasht-i-Bałasakan (Bałasakan).<sup>16</sup> The capital of the *marzpanate* of Albania from Chora was moved to the new city of Peroz-Kawad or Partaw. The Catholicosate was also moved here, which can be dated back to the 510s.<sup>17</sup>
- ‘Bałasakan’ – which were situated on the left bank of the lower stream of the river Kur. In the first half of the 6th century CE as an administrative unit reached to the Derbent.<sup>18</sup> As Bazgun, in the Syriac source is also represented separately from the Arrān/Albania, which extended “to the Caspian Gates and sea, the Gates in the land of the Huns”.<sup>19</sup> The fact that the land to the east of proper Albania was called Bałasakan is also evidenced by the Middle Persian seal belonging to the Great Catholicos of Albania and Bałasakan “kust-ī Albān ud Balāsagān wuzurg kātolikōs”, dating from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 6th centuries CE.<sup>20</sup>
- ‘Sisakan’ – is the province of Siwnik‘ (Syunik‘), which as a result of the reforms of Khosrov Anushirvan, became an independent military-administrative unit within the *marzpanate* of Armenia.<sup>21</sup> Although here are mixed the information, that

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<sup>13</sup> Ter-Ghevondian, 1958, 74; Also the Syrian source (Zachariah of Mitylene, 328) notes that Georgia or Iberia and Albania were under Armenia: “Further Gurzan a country in Armenia..., Further the country of Arrān in the country of Armenia”. This explains only the mention of Armenia in the source.

<sup>14</sup> Khachatryan, 2018: 72.

<sup>15</sup> Shahinyan, 2011: 46.

<sup>16</sup> Harutyunyan, 2012: 70.

<sup>17</sup> Yakobean, 2020: 105.

<sup>18</sup> Yakobean, 2020: 167.

<sup>19</sup> Zachariah of Mitylene, 328.

<sup>20</sup> Khorikyan, 2014: 366.

<sup>21</sup> Zachariah of Mitylene (328) mentions the country of Sisakan after Gurzan and Arrān, which in our opinion was connected with the division of the *marzpanate* of Armenia into the three military-administrative units. The correct date of Zachariah’s death is unknown, but it is considered that he must have been dead no later than 553. So he couldn’t meant the division of Sisakan (Siwnik‘) from the *marzpanate* of Armenia in 571.

of in 571 Sisakan was separated from the *marzpanate* of Armenia and was included in the census of Atrpatakan.<sup>22</sup>

- ‘Arē’ – In two short recensions of the *Ašxarhac’oyc’* it’s given in the form of Rē.<sup>23</sup> Given the fact that Arabic sources mention Rayy or al-Rayy, it can be argued that Arē is a distorted form of al-Ray.<sup>24</sup> Ray is located a few kilometers southern from the modern Tehran. Given the central location of the province, bordering with the Tabaristan in the north and Ghazvin in the west, it can be assumed that Ray, as a province, was part of the northern k’ustak.

The territories that are supposedly included in the northern part of the country reported by the Armenian source:

- ‘Gelan’ is the Gilan.
- ‘Shanchan’ is the Zanjan.
- ‘Dlmunk’ was a Daylams settlement, which is now the mountainous part of the Gilan.<sup>25</sup>
- ‘Dmbawand’ is the current Damavand, the city of the district of Damavand, which enters to the province of the Tehran. To the north of the Damavand, in Mazandaran, there is Mount Damavand.
- ‘Taprēstan’ is the Tabaristan (Mazandaran).
- ‘Rwan’ (Ruan) is the city of Ruyan, which is located in the current Mazandaran. According to V. Barthold, the composition of Deylem (Dlmunk’) originally included the mountainous region of Ruyan (it included also the city of Shalus), occupies a territory immediately to the north of Rey.<sup>26</sup> He also notes, that only in the 8th century the province was given to the Tabaristan. It seems that at that time Ruyan was not an independent administrative unit, because it was part at the first of Dlmunk’ and then of the Tabaristan.
- ‘Aml’ is modern Amol, which was the capital of Tabaristan.<sup>27</sup>

As can be seen from the above mentioned, there are only four coincidence at the *Ašxarhac’oyc’* and the Yakubis report: Taprēstan – Ṭabaristān, Arē – al-Rayy, Shanchan – Zanjān, Atrpatakan – Ādharbayjān.

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<sup>22</sup> *Patmut’iwn Sebēosi*, 67-68.

<sup>23</sup> *Ašxarhac’oyc’*, 2190.

<sup>24</sup> Kolesnikov, 1970: 101.

<sup>25</sup> Barthold, 2003: 199; Kolesnikov, 1970: 101.

<sup>26</sup> Barthold, 2003: 217; Aliy Kolesnikov (1970: 101) agreed that in the time of the Sasanians, the region of Ruyan was part of the Dlmunk’.

<sup>27</sup> Kolesnikov (1970: 101) mentions that in 553 Gilan and Amol formed one Nestorian diocese.

According to the *Ašxarhac‘oyc‘* and the Ibn Khordadbeh’s report there are eight: Armn – Armenia, Atrpatakan – Adharbādhakān, Aīē – Rayy, Dmbawand – Damāwand, Taprēstan – Ṭabaristān, Rwan – Rūyān, Aml – Amul, Geḷan – Jīlān.

According to Yakubi, the next territory was:

- ‘Ghazvin’ – Based on the geographic location of the Ghazvin, it must have been part of the northern k‘ustak, since Zanjan (to the northwest) and Ray (to the southeast) were entered.
- ‘Qumm’ – is the modern city Qom, which today is located about 150 km southwest from the Tehran on the same name river. It is believed that during the Sasanian period it was one of the districts of Isfahan.<sup>28</sup> The Arab historian Omar Ibn Rusta states in the chapter of his work the *Parts of Iranshahr*, that: “Qom is one of the provinces of Iraq”.<sup>29</sup> Iraq with the adjacent regions would certainly have been part of the western k‘ustak, that is, Qom was not included in the northern region.
- Isfahan, Hamadan, Nihawand (about 65 km southwest from Hamadan), al-Dinawar (northeast from modern Kermanshah), Khulvan (a Kurdish village in the modern Kurdistan region of Iran, about 54 km southwest from Sanandaj), Masabadan, Mihrajan-qadhaq, Shahrazur (in the province of Sulaimaniya of modern Iraq),<sup>30</sup> Dihistan, the provinces-cities are known for their geography and were also not included in the northern region.<sup>31</sup> For example can be noted the mention of the Arab chronicler Ibn Rusta that “The regions of Jabal are these: Masabadan, Mihrajan-qadhaq, Mah al-Qufa, Mah al-Basra, Hamadan”.<sup>32</sup> The province of Jabal or Jibal belonged to the Hamadan region, therefore the cities of Hamadan, Masabadan, Mihrajan-qadhaq, Nihavand, al-Dinawar, Khulvan, Shahrazur should have been part of the western region, Isfahan in the south, and Dihistan, being north of Vrkan (Hirkaniya), was not at all belonged to the Sasanid state.<sup>33</sup>
- ‘Shalanba’ – (Shalambeh) is located in the province of Tehran, 73 km eastern from the city of Tehran. That is, it was part of the province of Rey.
- ‘Shalush’ – is the modern city Chalus in the Mazandaran. As noted the Shalush entered to the region of Ruyan.

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<sup>28</sup> Kolesnikov, 1970: 102.

<sup>29</sup> *Arab matenagirner 9.-10. Darer*, 515.

<sup>30</sup> In the work of Kudama Ibn Jaafar it is said that “And then Mosul and its districts follows: Shahrzur, Samghan and Darabad” (*Arab matenagirner 9.-10. Darer*, 550). This evidence shows that Shahrazur was located near the Mosul, which suggests that it must have been part of the western region. At the same time, it should be noted that on the territory of modern Iran, in the province of western Azerbaijan, there is a village called Shahrezur or Shahruz. However, they should not be identified, since the latter, being an ordinary village, was part of the Atrpatakan.

<sup>31</sup> Kolesnikov, 1970: 102-104.

<sup>32</sup> *Arab matenagirner 9.-10. Darer*, 515. The *Ašxarhac‘oyc‘* (2157) puts the Maymasptan (Masabadan) and Mihrank‘atak (Mihrajan-qadhaq) into the western k‘ustak.

<sup>33</sup> The Map of Sāsānid Persia (Ērānšahr) c. 500-590, by I. Mladjov.

- ‘Sārya’ – (Sari) also was in Tabaristan-Mazandaran.
- ‘Tāmīs’ –was between Tabaristan and Vrkan.<sup>34</sup>

Concluding the consideration of the countries of the northern k‘ustak, we can note that most of the mentioned names were cities, at least five of which were part of the Tabaristan-Mazandaran, therefore they were not separate administrative units.

### Conclusion

Thus, Sasanian Iran was divided into four administrative units already during the second reign of Kavad I, however, it was during the time of Khosrov Anushirvan that these regions were transformed into the military-administrative units – k‘ustaks, where the administrative power belonged to the padgospan and the military to the spahbed.<sup>35</sup> These administrative units were created, generally, with the aim of protecting Iran from the threats of the nomads from the Derbent and the Darial passages. The administrative unit of the Arab Khaliphate “Arminiya” served the same purposes as the northern k‘ustak.

It is believed that the division of the Sasanian Iran into the military-administrative units did not lasted a long period<sup>36</sup>, that is, in particular, after 591 it had to be liquidated. Of course, after the partition of 591, the north-western part of the northern k‘ustak, as well as some parts of the western k‘ustak, passed to the Byzantine Empire. However, one of the Sasanian seals, which belonged to Pirag Shahrvaraz<sup>37</sup>, a spahbed of the southern k‘ustak, who was probably Khorem-Shahrvaraz<sup>38</sup> the general of Khosrov II (590, 591-628) Parvez, suggests that the k‘ustaks, as an military-administrative units nevertheless preserved. Although it is clear that in the 7th century the k‘ustaks could not have the former territory and the administrative borders were to be changed. During the Persian-Byzantine wars, the borders of the powers either expanded or contracted, so it is difficult to say what the exact administrative boundaries of the k‘ustaks were.

Summing up, it can be noted, that the northern k‘ustak or k‘ust-i-Kapkoh was a military-administrative unit. They were created by Khosrov Anushirvan in the first half of the 6th century CE by the security reasons of the Persian Empire. The northern k‘ustak was included the *marzpanates*: Armenia (divided into the three military-administrative units – Tanutirakan gund, Vaspurakan gund, Syunik‘), Georgia, Albania and the *šahrs*: Adharbādhakān, Gīlān, Dlmunk‘, Zanjān, Ghazvīn, Ṭabaristān and Ray.

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<sup>34</sup> Barthold, 2003: 216.

<sup>35</sup> Dmitriev, 2008: 58; Ghodrat-Dizaji, 2010: 76.

<sup>36</sup> Khurshudian, 2015: 212.

<sup>37</sup> Gyselen, 2007: 49.

<sup>38</sup> Gyselen, 2007: 50; Pourshariati, 2008: 102; Dashkov, 2008: 186-187.

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