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Caucasian Albanian Warriors in the Armies of pre-Islamic Iran

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Abstract: *Albania, an ancient country in the Caucasus, was turned into a Sasanian province by Šāpūr I (c. 253). The Albanians became increasingly integrated into the battle order of the Iranian army (especially cavalry). All along the Caspian coast the Sasanians built powerful defense works, designed to bar the way to invaders from the north. The most celebrated of these fortifications are those of Darband in Caucasian Albania. Albania remained an integral part of the Sasanian Empire until the Arab conquest of Iran.*

Key words: Iranian military, Albania, Sasanian Empire, Darband, the Caucasus

Introduction

The Greeks identified the Albanians as the *Albanoi* and the Georgians as *Rani*. The Iranian term for Caucasian Albania was Arrān (the Armenian was Ałuank' or Raneak')¹. The most comprehensive ancient work on the Albanians is by the Armenian historian Movsēs Dasxuranc'i who wrote of them from ancient mythical times to the 10th century CE. The region of Caucasian Albania, known in Islamic times as Albania and as the Caucasian khanates up to the early twentieth century, was to be

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¹ BOSWORTH 2011: 520.

re-named as ‘The Republic of Azerbaijan’ (ROA) in May 18, 1918². The article presents an outline of history of Caucasian Albania in the Sasanian Era.

The Albanians before the Sasanians

Archaeological expeditions in the ROA have revealed a significant Medo-Achaemenid archaeological presence in Albania. Excavations in the 1960s and 1970s have revealed Achaemenid influence in the form of cylinder seals and Persepolis-type column bases featuring palmette designs³. More recently, a team of archaeologists from Germany, Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia have discovered ancient ruins and monuments dating to the Achaemenid era at Garadzhamerli near the town of Shamkhir (located 350 kilometres west from Baku). According to the head of the archaeological team evidence of a 2500 year old building were found based on the Persepolis design featuring a 1000 square meter chamber surrounded by several smaller rooms⁴. This follows closely the plan of an Achaemenid palace featuring a symmetrical ground plan for the building as well as architectural sculpture. The pottery excavated from the floor of the structure closely follows Persian models from the Achaemenid era. Similar structures have been excavated from Sary Tepe (Republic of Azerbaijan) and Gumbati (Georgia). The Sary Tepe, Gumbati and Qarajamirli buildings may be interpreted as the residences of Persian officials who then departed from the region when the Achaemenid Empire collapsed. The team noted that this structure indicates that the ancient Albania region had been a significant Achaemenid centre in the southern Caucasus region.

The first classical citation of the Albanians occurs towards the end of the Achaemenid era, at the Battle of Gaugamela (331 BCE) in which the Achaemenid armies of Darius III (r. 336-330 BCE) made their last stand against the invading forces of Alexander (r. 336-323 BCE). The Albanians were under the command of Atropates, Satrap of Media, whose contingent at Gaugamela also included Medes, Saka or Sacae, and Cadusians⁵. While the sources cited identify the Albanians as distinct from the Medians during the Achaemenid era, it cannot be ascertained if they became subject to the succeeding Greco-Macedonian empire of Alexander, as the latter never launched expeditions into the Caucasian territories. Following the fall of the Achaemenids the Macedonian admiral Patroclus launched an expedition of the Caspian Sea in 286-281 BCE by apparently starting his exploration along the coasts of the Albanians and Cadusians⁶.

² Note that despite its recent nomenclature, the ROA is recognized by mainstream scholarship as having been distinct from the historical Azerbaijan in northwest Iran.

³ CHAUMONT 1985: 806; KHALILOV, BABAEV 1978: 173.

⁴ BABAEV, GAGOSHIDZE, KNAUß 2007: 31-45.

⁵ Arrian, *Anabasis* 3.8.4.

⁶ Pliny, *Natural History* 6.36; Strabo *Geographica*, 11.6.1.

The Albanians continued to field highly effective cavalry forces after the fall of the Achaemenids, with Strabo emphasizing the Albanian preference for heavy cavalry: ‘Not only do the Medes and Armenians, but the Albanians also, admire this kind of [armored] cavalry, for the latter use horses covered with armor’⁷

Strabo further avers that the Albanians were capable of fielding 22,000 cavalry and 60,000 infantry as early as the 1st century BCE:

‘They fight however on foot and on horseback, both in light and in heavy armor, like the Armenians...They can send into the field a larger army than the Iberians, for they can equip 60,000 infantry and 22,000 horsemen; with such a force they offered resistance to Pompey. The nomads also co-operate with them against foreigners, as they do with the Iberians on similar occasions...They use javelins and bows, and wear breastplates, shields, and coverings for the head, made of the hides of wild animals, like the Iberians.’⁸

The iron armor of the Albanian cavalry may have been a military feature borrowed from the Medes of Atropatene during the Parthian era⁹, however cultural and military contacts with other north Iranian peoples in the Caucasus most likely resulted in military influences as well.

Albanians in the Sasanian Era

By 252-53 CE Ardašīr I’s successor Šāpur I (r. 242-272) had consolidated the southern Caucasus by incorporating Armenia, Iberia and Albania into the Sasanian Empire. Šāpur’s trilingual inscription at Naqš-e Rostam clearly identified Albania as within the realm of the newly consolidated Sasanian Empire¹⁰. In the inscription on the Ka’be-ye Zartošt at Naqš-e Rostam, Albania was mentioned within the boundaries of *Ērānšahr*: ‘[I] am ruler of Ērānšahr, [I hold ?] the lands: Pārs, Pahlav, Xūzestān, Mēšān, Āsūrestān, Nodšēragān, Arabestān, Ādurbāyagān, Armin, Viruzān, Segān, Arrān...’¹¹. Only in the inscription of Kartīr (early-mid 3rd century CE) Arrān was placed outside of *Ērānšahr*¹², which is however justified by the struggle for power in late third century Iran Bahrām II (r. 276-293) wanted to secure the succession to his son while the counter-candidate was Narseh the king of Armenia (r. 272-293) and the last living son Šāpur¹³. It is notable that Ammianus Marcellinus (a primary

⁷ Strabo *Geographica*, 11.14.9.

⁸ Strabo *Geographica*, 11.4.4-5.

⁹ CHAUMONT 1985: 806-807.

¹⁰ Note that the Parthian Pahlavi term for Albania (*Ardān*) had been transformed to *Arrān* in Sasanian Pahlavi.

¹¹ ŠKZ 1-2/2/2-3:

¹² KKZ V 14-15.

¹³ WEBER 2016.

Classical source of the 4th century CE), defines the Caucasian and Iranian provinces of the Sasanian empire as separate¹⁴.

The Sasanian *Spāh* fought a number of wars against the Romano-Byzantine Empire in the Caucasus, notably in Armenia, Viruzān (Georgia; Ἰβηρία) and Arrān (Ἀλβανία)¹⁵. It was in this capacity where Āturpātākān (Ādurbāyagān; Ἀτροπατηνή) became a ‘key military stronghold’ of the Sasanian Empire¹⁶ acting as the *Spāh*’s staging area for its offensives into the Caucasus or westwards against the Romans. Albania, like Āturpātākān and Armenia, was of vital strategic importance to the Sasanian Empire. This region guarded the empire’s northwestern flank against nomadic invasions from the northern Caucasus and flanking attacks by Romano-Byzantines.

Rome attempted to dominate Albania and the southern Caucasus, making inroads after the victories of Galerius in 298 (later emperor in 305-311) against King Narseh (r. 293-305)¹⁷. The peace treaty concluded in 298, due to which Narseh withdrew from Armenia and renounced his claim to the Trans-Tigritania and established Roman protectorate in Iberia¹⁸.

The Albanians became increasingly integrated into the battle order of the *Spāh*. Ammianus Marcellinus reports the Albanians as having supplied military forces (especially cavalry) for the armies of Šāpur II (r. 309-379) during his battles against the Romans, especially during the siege of Amida (359)¹⁹ in which the Sasanian army has been described as having stood at 100,000 troops²⁰. The Albanians were evidently accorded a rank of honor with respect to being along Šāpur II’s esteemed military allies:

‘Close by him [Šāpur II] on the left went Grumbates, king of the Chionitae, a man of moderate strength, it is true, and with shrivelled limbs, but of a certain greatness of mind and distinguished by the glory of many victories. On the right was the king of the Albani, of equal rank, high in honour.’²¹

While Ammianus emphasizes the elevated rank of the Albanians, he does not provide information as to the armaments and tactics of their cavalry during this campaign. One viable hypothesis it is that these would have been equipped (combat gear, armor and helmets) much like their western (Armenian) and southern (Sasanian)

¹⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus, XXIII 6. 13; XXVII 12. 17.

¹⁵ MAKSYMIUK 2015a.

¹⁶ GHODRAT-DIZAJI 2007: 88.

¹⁷ MOSIG-WALBURG 2009, 91-121; MAKSYMIUK 2015a: 48-49.

¹⁸ Petrus Patricius, frag. 13-14; Ammianus Marcellinus, XXV 7. 9; DIGNAS, WINTER 2007: 122-130; MOSIG-WALBURG 2009: 122-157.

¹⁹ FARROKH, MAKSYMIUK, SÁNCHEZ-GRACIA 2018: 33, 47, 106; MAKSYMIUK 2018a: 87-97.

²⁰ LENSKI 2007: 222.

²¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, XVIII 6. 22.

Savārān cavalry of the period. Like the Chionites, the Albanian cavalry were to play a decisive role during the siege of Amida²². Upon the arrival of the *Spāh* at Amida, Šāpur proceeded to encircle the city by blocking its gates facing north, south, east and west. The Albanian cavalry faced the northern gates, with the elite *Savārān* corps and Šāpur being stationed towards the southern gates. The Central Asian Chionites faced the eastern gates with Amida's western gates confronted by the Sakastān cavalry. The siege was hard-fought and costly for both the Sasanian and Roman forces, but Šāpur II succeeded in entering the city. While no specific details are provided with respect to nature of hand to hand fighting involving the Albanian cavalry at the northern gates, these most likely also incurred heavy casualties, notably during the final stages of the siege, as – overall casualties are reported at 30,000²³ (or almost a third of the Sasanian and allies forces²⁴).

Roman success (in 298) proved ephemeral, as the Sasanians were to eject the Romans from the region. The sack of Amida and the peace agreements of 363 had important ramifications for the position in the Caucasian region. The treaty demanded the withdrawal of Rome's backing for Armenian rulers²⁵. Acquisition of four-fifths of South Caucasus region to Iranian sphere of influence gave Iran clear strategic advantage²⁶. Rome and Sasanian Iran were to partition Armenia in 387²⁷ with the entire right bank of the Kura River up to the Araxes River being transferred to Albania.

The Iranian element in the Albanian Leadership

The Albanian king was a high-ranking vassal of the *Šāhānšāh* in Ctesiphon. The court of the Albanian monarchy was apparently a mixture of Iranian and Armenian traditions. The terms *Hazārpet* (Parth. *Hazārpat*, Mid. Pers. *Hazārūft*, leader of one thousand)²⁸ and *Hramantar* (Mid. Pers. *Framādār*, commander)²⁹ for example indicate Iranian influence with *Azatk* (Parth., Mid. Pers. *Āzād*, freemen, nobles) showing an Armenian (i.e. *Azat*) legacy and *Azgapetk* (chieftains of clans) indicative of an Armenian heritage³⁰. While the exact functions of the Albanian titles are open to speculation Chaumont suggests that the *Hazārpet* was most likely subordinate to the Sasanian *Marzbān* with the *Hramantar* having possibly been the equivalent of the Sasanian 'prime minister' or *Wuzurg Framādār*³¹. In practice the real authority in

²² Ammianus Marcellinus, XVIII 6. 21; XIX 2. 3.

²³ WHITBY 2013: 436.

²⁴ LENSKI 2007: 222.

²⁵ Ammianus Marcellinus, XXV 7.

²⁶ HOWARD-JOHNSTON 2013: 872.

²⁷ GREATREX 2000.

²⁸ KHURSHUDIAN 2015: 21-68, 101-119; FARROKH, KARAMIAN, MAKSYMUK 2018: 14-15.

²⁹ CHAUMONT 2000: 126.

³⁰ These terms are cited by Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 1.26.

³¹ CHAUMONT 1985: 809-810. Note that the *Hazarapet* is also mentioned during the reign of Yazdegird II in the 5th century CE by Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 2.2.

military, legal and religious domains rested with the local Sasanian *Marzbān*³² who were ensconced in P'artaw, the capital of Albania (especially from mid-late 5th century CE)³³ in Sasanian times³⁴. While the term P'artaw is derived from Old Armenian *Partaw*³⁵, the latter term is itself based on the Iranian original of *pari/tāva* [*pari*=cavity of, around; *tāv*=to hurl; to pile up]³⁶. P'artaw had been rebuilt by Albanian king Vačē (r. 444-463) by the command of Sasanian monarch Pērōz (r. 459-484) who Christened this as Pērōzabād³⁷ (city of victory) and subsequently fortified by his son Kavād (r. 488-496, 498-531) who re-Christened the city as Pērōzkavād (victorious Kavād). P'artaw was to become a major commercial and artistic hub in Albania.

Other locales of note include ancient Kabala (Arm. Kapałak) in which excavations have uncovered a 5-6th centuries CE fortress and accompanying walls³⁸ an indication of its strategic importance in Sasanian times. Albania appears to have had another *Marzbān* based at Darband (Arm. Čor/Čoł) by the time of Yazdegerd II (r. 438-457)³⁹. Albania's financial affairs were according to inscriptions discovered at Darband, administered in Āturpātākān by that province's *Āmārgār* (tax-collector). An indication of Sasanian governance in Albania is provided by the find of a Sasanian-style silver metalwork dish dating possibly to the mid-300s CE, during the reign of Šāpur II. The dish depicts a hunting scene being partaken by an Iranian nobleman, which may possibly be a Sasanian *Marzbān*⁴⁰.

The Sasanians did not view the practice of Christianity within their empire as a threat at first, but this gradually changed. Religious policy of Constantine I (r. 306-337) influenced the status of Christianity in Iran⁴¹. The Emperor in his letter directed to Šāpur II appeared as guardianship of Christians as well as of Iranian ones⁴². This soon led to Sasanian fears of their own Christian subjects becoming a potential pro-Roman anti-Zoroastrian fifth column against their empire. This culminated in the Sasanian king Yazdegerd II issuing a proclamation in 449 obliging all of the empire's Christian citizens to convert to the Zoroastrian faith⁴³. Yazdegerd's edict failed in its purpose, resulting in the uniting of the Christian faithful of Albania, Armenia and Georgia against the Sasanians. This resulted in the battle of Avarayr (451) in which the Armenians and their Albanian and Georgian allies suffered defeat at the hands of

³² KHURSHUDIAN 2015: 76-95.

³³ HÜBSCHMANN 1969: 275, 277, 343.

³⁴ Local silver coinage was also minted by the 5th and 6th centuries CE (TREVER 1959: 251).

³⁵ POURSHARIATI 2008: 116, n. 613.

³⁶ PÉRIKHANIAN 1982: 77-80.

³⁷ Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 1.15.

³⁸ TREVER 1959: 255.

³⁹ Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 2.2.

⁴⁰ KHALILOV 1976: 146-149.

⁴¹ Lactantius, XLVIII 2-12; DECRET 1979: 91-152; JULLIEN 2009: 119-131.

⁴² BARNES 1985: 131-132; VIVIAN 1987; FRENDO 2001: 57-69.

⁴³ ROSE 2011: 41.

the Sasanian army⁴⁴. Nevertheless, Yazdegerd II's anti-Christian policies were moderated during the subsequent reigns of Balāš (r. 484-488) and Kavād. It was during the reign of Xusrō I Anōšīrvān (r. 531-579) when the base of the Albanian Catholics was dispatched to P'artaw in 552⁴⁵.

Rise of the Mihranids

With the death of king Vačē in the mid 5th century CE the Arsacid dynasty of Albania came to an end, leaving the country without a king for three decades. The Albanian monarchy was then restored to the country by Sasanian monarch Balāš who appointed Vačagan as the country's new king. The latter was Vačē's brother as well as the son of Yazdegerd II⁴⁶. By the early 5th century CE, however, the Albanian Arsacid dynasty had come to an end. As narrated by Movsēs Dasxuranc'i this was due to the assassination of all of their high-ranking nobles by Vardan the Brave, a descendant of an ancestor named Mehrān⁴⁷: 'he [Vardan the Brave] invited the Eranšahiks as if to a banquet. ... at that feast of their own blood he beheaded sixty men. He spared only Zarmihr Eranšahik'

This allowed for the rise of a new dynasty of Iranian origin, the Mihranids whose king adopted the title of *Arrānšāh*. Movsēs Dasxuranc'i describes the Mihranids as being related to Sasanian King Xusrō I Anōšīrvān⁴⁸ and even described Varaz Grigor (r. 628-637?) as 'being himself a noble of the family of Artasir [Ardašīr I (r. 224-242)]'⁴⁹. Historians however, have questioned the notion of the Mihranids being of Sasanian extraction in favour of their actual origins having been of the Pahlav-Mehrān clan⁵⁰. There are also reasons to doubt the testimony of Ferdowsī who suggests that the House of Mehrān originated from Mihrak, the king of Ardašīr-Xorra, the opponent of Ardašīr and the grandfather of Hormozd I (r. 272-273),⁵¹ however it seems that the mention of Ray in accounts of Ṭabarī and Dīnavarī in relation with the text of ŠKZ is of utmost importance and it confirms the origin of the clan from North-Western parts of the empire, most probably Gūrgān⁵².

⁴⁴ AYVAZYAN 2016.

⁴⁵ Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 2.4.

⁴⁶ POUSSHARIATI 2008: 200, n. 1725: 'Vačē was a nephew of the two sons of Yazdgerd II, Hormozd III and Pērōz. Movsēs Dasxuranc'i maintains that the daughter of Yazdgerd II's sister was the mother of Vačē whom he had married'.

⁴⁷ Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 2.17.

⁴⁸ Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 2.17.

⁴⁹ Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 2.18.

⁵⁰ TOUMANOFF 1969: 22.; CHAUMONT 1985: 806-810; BOSWORTH 2011: 520-522.

⁵¹ Ṭabarī 817. 832.

⁵² MAKSYMCIUK 2015b: 170.

The Wall of Darband

The strategic importance of the Caucasus for both Iran and Byzantium became apparent when the Hunnic tribes arrived there⁵³. The threat was first and foremost realised by the kings of Iran, who, in cooperation with the Empire, wanted to build a fortress that would block the passage through the Caucasus Pass. Because of Rome's difficulties in the west, the burden of securing the Caucasus Pass fell on Iran. It seems that talks about the participation of the empire in the costs of defending the Caucasus were initiated during the reign of Šāpur II⁵⁴.

The first attempt by the Caspian authorities to close the road along the Caspian coast took place under the rule of Yazdegerd II⁵⁵, but already in 450, during the uprising of Armenia and Albania, defensive fortifications were destroyed⁵⁶. Sources confirm the temporary occupation of the city by the Hunns, commanded by Ambazuk, during the reign of Pērōz⁵⁷. During the reign of Kavād, the potential military danger posed by the invading tribes led to the construction of the Wall of Darband⁵⁸. Kavād initiated the construction of the wall after his expulsion of the invading tribes back into the northern Caucasus⁵⁹ by building upon previous structures already built by Yazdegerd II. Construction of the wall continued well past the reign of Xusrō I into the late 6th century CE. This resulted in the Darband Wall stretching from the Caucasian mountains to the Caspian Sea. Highly formidable, the Darband Wall featured five walls in total, boasting a total length of (approximately) 70 kilometers with wall thickness reaching up to 8 meters at certain points⁶⁰. The objective of the Sasanians was to construct powerful defensive works capable of repelling barbarian invasions from the northern Caucasian marches of their empire.

The building of the wall necessitated the manning of its defenses with Iranian garrisons as noted by post-Islamic sources⁶¹. These Sasanian frontier troops known as the *Siāsījiya/Siāsījin/Siāsīkin* and *Nišāstag*⁶² were provisioned with 'soldier's fiefs', a practice in place by the time of Xusrō I⁶³. The arrival of Iranian settlers into the Caucasus would explain names of locales such as Baylaqān, Sharvān, etc., an indication that the arrivals had arrived from Iran's northern regions, notably Gīlān. The Iranian arrivals partially absorbed the indigenous (Caucasian) peoples with

⁵³ JACKSON BONNER 2017: 93-101.

⁵⁴ MAKSYMIUK 2016: 149-157; DARYAEE 2016: 79-88.

⁵⁵ KUDRYAVTSEV 1978: 243-258.

⁵⁶ Ehišē I 287.

⁵⁷ Procopius I 10. 9-12.

⁵⁸ KETTENHOFEN 1994: 13-19; GADJIEV 2017a; MAKSYMIUK 2018b.

⁵⁹ KRAMERS 1936: 613. The expulsion of the Khazars possibly took place sometime in 489-490.

⁶⁰ The northern Wall 34-35 km and southern Wall 29-30 km; FARROKH 2017: 232-234.

⁶¹ Consult for example reports of the garrisons being entirely Persian (KRAMERS 1936: 616).

⁶² MASHKOOR 1366/1987: 2. 836; GADJIEV 2017b.

⁶³ WIESEHÖFER 2001: 198.

unspecified numbers of the latter then being pushed further to the north of the Caucasus⁶⁴.

The late Sasanian era

The Caucasus and Āturpātākān remained as important frontier regions for the Sasanian Empire in the latter times of their dynasty. The Caucasus was vital to the empire's northern marches against invasions from nomadic warriors of the steppes (esp. Khazars⁶⁵) as well as flanking attacks by Romano-Byzantines through the southern Caucasus (Armenia and Albania) into Āturpātākān. The latter region was in turn vital in defending against Romano-Byzantine thrusts from eastern Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia into northwest Iran or even further south as strategic circumstances dictated at wartime.

Xusrō II Parvēz (r. 590-628) secured his victory against Bahrām Čōbin (who had usurped the Sasanian throne) in Āturpātākān with the aid of Emperor Maurice (r. 582-602), in 591⁶⁶. Both Albania and Āturpātākān would play decisive roles in the upcoming Sasanian Romano-Byzantine wars of the early 7th century. Following the assassination of Emperor Maurice by Phocas in 602, Xusrō II launched a major invasion of the Romano-Byzantine Empire. Sasanian armies were successful in ejecting Romano-Byzantine forces from Cappadocia, Syria, Palestine and Jerusalem by 613-614 and Egypt by 619⁶⁷. Emperor Heraclius (r. 610-641), however, began to rebuild the shattered Romano-Byzantine armies from c. 622 to then launch a successful attack into the Sasanian portion of Armenia, defeating a Sasanian force⁶⁸. Heraclius then withdrew towards Western Anatolia as the Avars from the Balkans began attacking the Byzantine Empire from its western (European) flanks. From his staging post in Cappadocia Heraclius returned to Armenia in 624, wheeling into Naxčevān and Dvin to then thrust from the southern Caucasus into Āturpātākān. Heraclius advanced towards Ganzak, scattering a Sasanian force of 40,000 troops⁶⁹. In Āturpātākān the Roman army profaned the Ādur Gušnasp temple⁷⁰. Heraclius withdrew across the Araxes River into Albania. In response, Xusrō II ordered the Albanian noblemen to vacate P'artaw to take refuge in fortified defenses. By this time Heraclius had been sending appeals to the Khazars north of the Caucasus, to join him in a military alliance against the Sasanians⁷¹. Movsēs Dasxuranc'i describes the army of Šahrapłakan⁷²

⁶⁴ MINORSKY 1958: 14.

⁶⁵ SHAPIRA 2015.

⁶⁶ MAKSYMIUK 2015a: 26.

⁶⁷ MAKSYMIUK 2015a: 86-91; MAKSYMIUK 2019.

⁶⁸ Theophanes, AM 6113, 304.13-18.

⁶⁹ HOWARD-JOHNSTON 1999: 16.

⁷⁰ MAKSYMIUK 2017.

⁷¹ SHAPIRA 2015: 52-54.

⁷² Gr. Σαραβλαγγῆς; *PLRE* 3: 1141.

joining another Sasanian force (led by either Šahrwārāz or Šāhēn?)⁷³ in the Caucasus which then ejected Heraclius into Anatolia⁷⁴. Šahrwārāz then joined Šahraplakan to pursue and destroy Heraclius. He, however, emerged victorious over the combined force. Šahraplakan was killed but Šahrwārāz managed to escape. Sebeos' account is different as he reports Šahrwārāz having joined Šāhēn instead resulting in a total of 30,000 troops who were defeated by Heraclius (encamped at Uti) wielding 'an elite force of 20,000 men'⁷⁵. Šahrwārāz then deployed into Western Anatolia apparently in an effort to join the Avars, now menacing the Byzantines in the Balkans.

Sasanian armies led by Šahrwārāz besieged Constantinople supported by their Avar allies in 626 but proved unable to breach the city's defenses⁷⁶. In that same year, Jebu (Khāqān of the Khazars), having sealed an anti-Sasanian alliance with Heraclius, was ready to attack Albania. In response Gayšak, was dispatched by Xusrō II to act as the governor and prince of Albania. Gayšak was tasked with fortifying the city of P'artaw, an undertaking supported by local Albanian nobles and common citizens. The decades-long war between the Sasanian and Romano-Byzantine empires had reduced the former's military capacity to adequately protect its Caucasian marches against a Khazar invasion. The Khazars breached the Darband Wall and broke into Albania, inflicting heavy civilian losses⁷⁷. The Sasanians, now in military disarray against the combined Khazar/Romano-Byzantine alliance, were powerless to prevent the Khazars from imposing their ascendancy in the region.

Further blows against Sasanian authority materialized in a new Khazar invasion of the Caucasus, resulting in great destruction to the inhabitants of T'p'ilisi (Tiflis) in 627.⁷⁸ Šat, a nephew (brother's son) of the Khāqān, invaded Albania and sent a request for an audience with the *Marzbān* and prince of Albania, Sema Vštnas (Gošnasp?), and Viroy, the Catholicos of Albania (596-630). The *Marzbān* refused but Viroy arrived at the Khazar military camp at Uti. Khazar power was demonstrated when Šat declared himself as the ruler of Darband and Albania⁷⁹. In that same year Heraclius engaged in a renewed invasion of Āturpātākān by marching to the west

⁷³ Ṭabarī lists three commanders of Xusrō II Parvēz active on the Western front. Rumiyūzān was sent to Syria and Palestine, Šāhēn was to capture Egypt and the lands of Nubia, the third was Farruhān (Farrukhān). According to Ṭabarī (1002) Farruhān 'was of Šahrwārāz rank' and led the expedition against Constantinople. As far as identity of Šāhēn is clear, identification of the remaining commanders is disputable. It is believed that Rumiyūzān should be identified with Šahrwārāz who undoubtedly captured Jerusalem in 614 r. Bosworth in his comment to Ṭabarī identifies Šahrwārāz with Rumiyūzān and Farruhān (1999: 318-319, n. 745, n. 749). Basing on Sebeos 115, Thomson (1999: 63, n. 391) assumes that the commanders listed in Armenian sources: Razmiozan and Khoream, are in fact Šahrwārāz; Pourshariati (2008: 142-149) has no doubts that Gorāz (Gurāz) mentioned in *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsi must be identified with Šahrwārāz ('boar of the empire'),

⁷⁴ Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 2.10.

⁷⁵ Sebeos, 125; Movsēs Dasxuranc'i (2.12) however corroborates Heraclius' victory.

⁷⁶ HOWARD-JOHNSTON 1995.

⁷⁷ Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 2.11.

⁷⁸ Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 2.14.

⁷⁹ Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 2.14. SHAPIRA 2015: 54-57.

of lake Urmia in the direction of Ganzak⁸⁰. The Khazars, supporting Heraclius' invasion, appear to have wavered due to determined resistance by the locals of Āturpātākān and soon withdrew in haste northwards across the Araxes River. According to Theophanes⁸¹: 'But the Turks, seeing the winter and the constant attacks of the Persians, could not bear to toil together with the emperor and started, little by little, to slip away, and (eventually) all of them had left and returned home'.

Stratos sets the date of the Khazar withdrawals in March 628⁸². Nevertheless, Khazar authority in the southern Caucasus did not disappear, as exemplified by the edict of the Khazar leadership in 629 demanding that the fishermen of the Araxes and Kura rivers pay taxes in silver coins as adjusted 'in accordance with the land survey of the kingdom of Persia'⁸³. In that same year the Khazars also seized control of Armenia⁸⁴, but as noted by Howard-Johnston 'the Turks unexpectedly withdrew of their own accord from Transcaucasia in 629'⁸⁵. Despite this, the Khazar presence must have remained significant at the eve of the Arabo-Islamic invasions of the Sasanian Empire. This is indicated by Ṭabarī's allusion to the Arabs having had to conquer Darband from the Khazars who were ensconced there in c. 642⁸⁶. Sasanian authority in turn had not been terminated in Albania as a result of the recent Khazar invasions. Sasanian *Spāh* garrisons remained present in the region even after the battle of Qādesiya (636 or 637)⁸⁷ when the Sasanian Empire was being invaded by the Arabo-Muslims.

The Southern Caucasus and Fall of the Sasanians

Viroy, the Catholicos of Albania, had bestowed upon Varaz-Grigor (a member of the Mehranids), the title of 'Prince of Albania'. In the meantime, the balance of military power was shifting to the Arabo-Muslim armies poised to invade both the Sasanian and Romano-Byzantine empires just 10 years after they had signed a peace treaty ending the decades long war between them. Grigor dispatched his son Juanšēr with an Albanian contingent to act as his representative to the Sasanian throne in Ctesiphon. Juanšēr was then greeted in a designated meeting place by the commander of Iranian army Rostam Farrokhzād and the Armenian *Sparapet*. Rostam and his armies escorted Juanšēr and the Albanian contingent to Ctesiphon to be received by the new (and last) Sasanian monarch, Yazdegerd III (r. 632-651). Juanšēr was then conferred the title of *Sparapet* of the Albanian contingents by Yazdegerd

⁸⁰ GREATREX, LIEU 2002: 213.

⁸¹ Theophanes, AM, 6118, 317.11-26.

⁸² STRATOS 1968: 206-208.

⁸³ Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 2.16.

⁸⁴ HAREIR, MBAYE 2011: 486.

⁸⁵ HOWARD-JOHNSTON 2010,

⁸⁶ Ṭabarī 2663-2667; KETTENHOFEN 1994: 19.

⁸⁷ About the chronology, LEWENTAL, 2011: 232-247.

III⁸⁸, who soon deposed Varaz Grigor as king of Albania⁸⁹ especially after his conversion to Christianity in 637.

These events coincided with the rise of the Arabian tribes and their invasion of the Sasanian Empire. After their defeat at Sasanian hands in the Battle of the Bridges (636)⁹⁰, the Arab-Muslim armies resumed their invasion of the Sasanian Empire, leading to the decisive Battle of Qādesiya⁹¹. The military exploits of Juanšēr and the Albanian contingent fighting alongside the Sasanian armies against the Arabo-Muslim invaders, has been detailed by Armenian historians Sebeos and Movsēs Dasxuranc‘i⁹². Juanšēr is described as having played a major role in the destruction of a large Arab force at the canton of Vēh Kavād across the Tigris River, just days before the Battle of Qadissiyah in which the commander, Rostam was killed. Juanšēr proved an exceptional warrior in that battle, having received wounds as a result of his daring exploits. Other Caucasian nobles of note supporting the Sasanian army at the Battle of Qādesiya were the Armenian *Sparapet* Mušel III Mamikonean (who was killed during the battle) leading 3000 troops and prince Grigor of Siwnik‘ (in Armenia) at the head of 1000 troops. Yazdegerd III is then described as having rewarded Juanšēr with several gifts including ‘two golden spears and two shields chased in gold... a belt of gold studded with pearls, a sword of wrought gold.’⁹³. Juanšēr then engaged in further successful battles against the Arabs besieging Ctesiphon, his actions contributing to Sasanian efforts in evacuating Yazdegerd III from the city.

Before the final defeat of the Sasanian army at the battle of Nehāvand (642), Juanšēr arrived at Āturpātākān, and from there he retired to his Albanian homeland. Juanšēr who had evidently lost hope with the collapsing Sasanian Empire, engaged in correspondence with Romano-Byzantine emperor Constans II (r. 641-668). An alliance was struck between Juanšēr and Constans II who bestowed the title of *Patrikios* (Patrician) on his Albanian ally. Shortly after this alliance, Juanšēr joined forces with the Iberian ruler, Adarnase⁹⁴, to storm the Sasanian stronghold in Albania, sometime before the Sasanian Empire’s final stand against the Arabs in the Battle of Nehāvand⁹⁵. This allowed Juanšēr to expand his rule from Darband to the Araxes River. These successes proved ephemeral as the invading Arabs conquered Āturpātākān by c. 643⁹⁶ during the reign of Caliph Omar ibn Khattab (r. 634-644). The Arabs were now poised below the Araxes River to storm into the Caucasus.

⁸⁸ Movsēs Dasxuranc‘i, 2.18.

⁸⁹ TOUMANOFF 1962: 366.

⁹⁰ DANIEL 2001: 66; DONNER 1981: 192.

⁹¹ BENJAMIN 1888: 276; DANIEL 2001: 66; MATOFI 1378/1999: 188-189.

⁹² Sebeos, 137; Movsēs Dasxuranc‘i, 2.18.

⁹³ Movsēs Dasxuranc‘i, 2.18.

⁹⁴ M. Pers. Ādurnarsēh.

⁹⁵ *PLRE* 3:13-14.

⁹⁶ MINORSKY 1965: 190. The Arabian historian Ahmad Ibn Yahya al-Baladhuri’s (died 892) who wrote the text *Kitabi Futuh ul-Buldan* (Book of the Conquests of the Countries) states the following with respect to the Arabo-Islamic conquest of Iran’s Āturpātākān region: ‘Hussein ibn Amru of Ardabil relates that

The Arab conquest of Albania

The Arab conquest of Albania was completed by the 650s CE during the reign of the Caliph Uthman ibn Haffan (r. 644-656). The Arabs were now in control of the region from the Araxes river to Darband, with Juanšēr allowed to retain his rule under Muslim suzerainty. In the meantime (in c. 661 or 662), Juanšēr appears to have beaten back yet another Khazar invasion of Albania⁹⁷. It is generally agreed that the brief Turkic occupation of Albania did not result in any permanent settlements⁹⁸, with only a single Khazar settlement (in Kabala situated between Širvān and Šakki) being reported in Albania in early Islamic times⁹⁹. The Mihranids dynasty was to survive under the Caliphate's rule until 821-822¹⁰⁰.

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Omar ibn Khattab appointed Hadhifat bin al-Yaman the ruler of Azerbaijan...when al-Hadhifat after receiving this appointment travelled to Ardabil, the main city of Azerbaijan, where the collector of taxes, Marzban [local ruler] resided, the Marzban had already gathered an army of followers from the towns of Bajerwan, Meymand, Narin, Sarat(b), Mianj [Mianeh] and other cities of Azerbaijan, who offered stiff resistance to al-Hadhifat's Islamic forces' (Baladhuri, 1866, 325-326).

⁹⁷ Movsēs Dasxuranc' i, 2.23.

⁹⁸ GOLDEN 1992: 385-386.

⁹⁹ MINORSKY 1953: 504.

¹⁰⁰ MADELUNG 1985: 226.

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