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Adurbadagan and Arran (Caucasian Albania) in the Late Sasanian Period

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Abstract

The article considers the Sasanian King Khusraw I Anushirwan (Pahlavi: Xusrō I Anōšīrvān) reforms to improve the empire's military and administrative architecture during the wars with Byzantium and the Turks. The author discusses the establishment of the region or kust-ī Ādurbādagān, which allowed the nomination of Arrān's general. The author believes that it was a key element in the Sassanian strategy to enforce both central and military power in the defense sensitive Caucasia challenged by the Byzantium and nomads. The reforms pulled Arrān (Albania) to be closer to the Sasanian crown, enforcing the dynastic ties between Sasanian shāhanshāh and Arrānshāh. These reforms facilitated the incorporation of Arranian (Albanian) troops into the Sasanian Army under Ādurbādagān's general command to shield Ērānšahr from the Khazar's and Turk's incursions. The author argues that the reform initiated the projecting of Ādurbādagān's name, military, and administrative functions in Arrān forming a strong interrelationship between the southern and northern sides of the Araxes as the entire Ādurbādagān šahr. Since Late Antiquity, Ādurbādagān and Arrān became interchangeable names and were in use on the northern bank of the Araxes.

Keywords: Sasanian, Adurbadagan, Arran, Caucasian Albania, Azerbaijan, Iran

Introduction

The Parthian and later Sasanian empires engaged in the centuries-long wars with Rome and Byzantium, respectively. The intense rivalry between the two great empires shaped the history and politics of that period, as the Greco-Persian wars did during early Antiquity. The permanent struggle with Byzantium to dominate the Near East prompted the Sassanids to rethink and redesign the empire's architecture to improve its military might and administrative stability. This strategic perception was realized not only because of the war with the Byzantines but also for the devastating invaders' incursions deep into Ērānšahr from the Darband pass in Caucasia. The Sasanians were involved in permanent struggle on two key fronts: in the northwest with the Byzantium empire and in the north with the Turks and Khazars in the Caucasus. This political and military reality forced the Sassanids to re-discover and re-evaluate the strategical importance of Arrān or Arrānšahr (Caucasus Albania), located in the north side of the Araz river.

In the 5th-6th centuries CE, Sasanian kings Kawād I (488-96, 499-531) and his son Xusrō I Anōšīrvān (531-579) ^[1] launched a fortification' improvement program ^[2] around the whole empire. They also initiated administrative reforms to upgrade the empire's defense, military, and power architectures ^[3]. Parallely, the reforms were aimed at strengthening the Zoroastrian religion in the lands challenged by the Christian Orthodox Byzantium.

In the Seleucid and Parthian eras, the province of Āturpātākān (Pahlavi: Ādurbādagān) played a central role as a stronghold against the spread of the Greek and Roman pantheons in Ērānšahr. Moreover, it is highly likely that Āturpātākān was the place where the prophet Zarathustra was born, and the Holy Avesta was kept in the sacred fire Ātur (Old Persian) or Ādur Gušnasp (Middle Persian/Pahlavi) temple (now Takht-e Solayman) ^[4].

Thus, in the Sasanian era, Ādurbādagān became the religious center of the empire preserving and expanding Zoroaster's faith. The chief Median sacred fire temple of Ādur Gušnasp was established sometime in the Parthian period on a hill nearby Āturpātākān's capital Ganzak. The Sasanians proclaimed Zoroastrianism as the imperial religion and Ādurbādagān occupied the role of the empire's religious core, holding the cathedral temple Ādur Gušnasp

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as the imperial sacred fire of the highest grade. Ādur Gušnasp continued to burn until the 11th century^[5].

Ādur Gušnasp - an Ataš Bahrām (Parthian: Ātaš-i- Wahram or Pahlavi: Ādur Bahrām - “fires of Victory,” Zoroastrian name of God of War and Victory) was the Zoroastrian most sacred or “cathedral” fire of the highest grade established in the late Achaemenid or Parthian era in Ādurbādagān. The temple was linked to the warrior class (arteshtar) to which the Sasanian dynasty belonged itself. Since the reign of King Bahram V (420-438 CE), all Sasanian kings after coronation pilgrimage to the temple providing royal gifts and celebrated Nowruz (No Ruz)^[6].

During the late Sasanian period, shāhanshāh Xusrō I Anōšīrvān launched the military and administrative reforms^[7] and accelerated the building of fortifications in the empire’s defense-sensitive areas, particularly in Caucasus Albania. The reform was designed to strengthen the empire’s military operational and defense capacity following the establishment of four quarters or regions (kust) reported to the assigned trustworthy general (spāhbed) for each region^[8].

King Xusrō I abolished the one-person command of Ērān-Spāhbed^[9, 10], (išbahbadh al-bilād, Artēštārān sālār, the office of the marshal or general of all Iranian forces)^[11] and replaced it with four generals reporting directly to shāhanshāh. As a result of the reform, the kust-ī Ādurbādagān (quadrant or region of Ādurbādagān) was established holding Ādurbādagān’s spāhbed (general)^[12] and, as will be indicated later, Ādurbādagān’s āmārgar (financial or administrative officer) as well^[13].

The establishment of the kust-ī Ādurbādagān holding the specially assigned general was designed to improve the empire’s military and defense capabilities strengthening the central power of the shāhanshāh and Zoroaster’s faith in the lands contested by Christian Byzantium, particularly in Caucasia. The Sassanids considered the kust-ī Ādurbādagān to be the most important region for its military potential and strategic location as well as for its logistical closeness to the empire’s core – Ādurbādagān province – a power, military, and Zoroastrian center^[14].

However, the closeness of the war zones to the key Ādurbādagān province, holding the principal and foremost fire Ādur Gušnasp, made the province vulnerable, which needed to be secured by strengthening its defense. Thus, the security of the empire’s core regions of Media and Azerbaijan had to be guaranteed and both Sasanian and Zoroastrian influence were to be projected far afield from Ādurbādagān^[15]. The Sassanids were focused to ensure the safety Ādurbādagān, as the Zoroastrian core, from the ideological and religious contamination generated by Christian Byzantium and infiltrating from Caucasia. The Sassanids addressed this challenge by establishing the kust-ī Ādurbādagān holding the centralized office of the supreme military command (isbahbadh) of Azerbaijan with specially assigned Ādurbādagān’s spāhbed covering Ādurbādagān itself and the surrounding lands of Arrān (Albania) and Armin (Arminyaya or Armenia)^[16, 17].

It should be noted that the Byzantines, the Sasanian archenemies, acknowledged the imperial, military, and religious values of Ādurbādagān province. In 623, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, during the last Byzantine-Sasanian war of 602-628CE, occupied Ādurbādagān and sacked out the fire temple Ādur Gušnasp, aiming to crush the Sassanids’ will and power to fight^[18, 19].

Thus, the kust-ī Ādurbādagān included the province of Ādurbādagān (a power and religious center of the empire) and all adjoining lands in the north and west from the Araz River up to the Khazar lands in the Caspian Sea. The establishment of the kust Ādurbādagān allowed for the re-design of the Sassanian military and power architecture in this part of the empire. It initiated the Ādurbādagān province’s military command (spāhbed) and administrative functions such as the office of tax/revenue (āmārgar) to the north from the Araz River up to the Darband fortress in Caucasia. The recently discovered Sasanian kust-ī Ādurbādagān spāhbed seal in Azar Goshnasp (now Takht-e Solayman)^[20] and the Pahlavi official inscriptions on the Darband fortress walls (now Derbent) confirm the extension of šahr (region or country in Pahlavi) Ādurbādagān to the Caucasus^[21].

The Sasanian reforms’ strategy was pragmatic and effective, allowing an increase in the empire’s capacity to fight its enemies. It strengthened the empire’s defense and military capabilities by incorporating Arranian (Albanian) troops into the Sasanian Imperial army under Ādurbādagān’s spāhbed command. The projection of Ādurbādagān’s military and administrative functions to the north from the Araxes was of a paramount significance to the Sassanids, enforcing both the central shāhanshāh’s power and Zoroaster’s faith in Albania challenged by the Orthodox Byzantium (Caucasus Albania was re-baptized into Nestorian Orthodox Christianity at the beginning of the 7th CE). Generally, this strategy increased the gravity of the Zoroastrian religion and the importance of the province Ādurbādagān, cementing the Sasanian power and Zoroaster’s faith (as the unique imperial religion) on the northern bank of the Araxes (under the entire Ādurbādagān šahr umbrella)^[22], where the military and religious rivalry with the Orthodox Byzantium were in the stages of war.

Indeed, the sign of the Moon, as a key Zoroastrian symbol that was exposed on top of the principal Sassanian fire temple Ādur Gušnasp in Ādurbādagān, was indicated as the moon-chariot on Arrānshāh Aswagen’s state seal^[23].

Next, the establishment of Ādurbādagān’s command (isbahbadh) under a specially assigned general^[24] increased the effectiveness of military operations up to the Darband fortress on the frontier with the Turks and Khazars in Caucasia. Despite Darband, at the time, being within the semi-independent or vassal Arrān country (Arrān šahr), the Sassanids maintained huge military garrisons under the direct supervision of Ādurbādagān’s spāhbed. They strongly believed that Arranian (Albanian) forces alone were not sufficient to shield the invaders’ incursions via the Darband passage deep into Ērānšahr.

The Sasanian kings and kings of Arrān improved Darband’s fortifications by constructing double walls and the Narin Gala citadel on a hill. The fortified defense line was erected to protect a narrow passage between the Caucasus Mountains and the Caspian Sea, blocking the invasion of Turks and Khazars.

It is noteworthy that Azerbaijani and Dagestani scholars translated many Pahlavi inscriptions on the Darband walls. One of the inscriptions confirms Darband’s subordination to šahr Ādurbādagān’s āmārgār (tax or revenue officer). The Pahlavi Darband’s wall inscription “en ud az en abarbar Darius-i Ādurbādagān āmārgār” was translated as: “This and higher than this made by Dariush, Ādurbādagān’s revenue/tax collector^[25].”

It can be assumed that the Darband walls’ Pahlavi Ādurbādagān inscription and the Sasanian garrisons^[26]

presence in Arrān's fortresses (Darband, Torpakh kala or Saharestan Yazdagerd, Beshbarmag, in the Gilgilchay Defense Wall)^[27] under Ādurbādagān's spāhbed command as well as the kust-ī Ādurbādagān marzpan (administrative officer) location in Ardebil (at the time Ādurbādagān's capital city) clearly confirm the projecting of the province Ādurbādagān political, military and administrative functions to the north over the Araxes to Arran forming the entire Ādurbādagān šahr^[28].

It is not surprising that Ādurbādagān's name, military and administrative functions were projected onto Arrān (Albania). The local Arranian (Albanian) nobility was close to the Sasanian crown. Since the rein of Arrānshāh Urnayn (350-375), one can speak of the establishment of close dynastic ties with the shāhanshāh's family. Thus, King Urnayn was married to the daughter of shāhanshāh Šāpur II (309-379) and Arrānshah Aswahan (415-440) was the son of the sister of Šāpur III (383-388) and the husband of the daughter of shāhanshāh Yazdagird II (439-457). Arran Shah Vache II (440-462) was the son of the sister of shāhanshāh Hormizd (457-459) and Peroz (459-484)^[29].

Undoubtedly, the close family ties between the Sasanian Kings and the Kings of Arran were a key element in the Sasanian strategy to enforce central and military power as well as Zoroaster's faith which were eroded by the Orthodox Byzantium in strategically important Arrānšahr. One can state that Arrānshāh and his court were close to the Sasanian, using Pahlavi as the official language.

Following shāhanshāh Xusrō I Anōšīrvān's reform, one can assume that it facilitated the integration of Arranian (Albanian) troops into the Sasanian army under the command of Adurbadagan's spāhbed. Although Caucasus Albania^[30] was an independent (from time to time) or semi-independent state, the defense was under Ādurbādagān's spāhbed command. During the late Sasanian period, the commander was the famous Iranian military and political hero – spāhbed Rostam Farrokhzad of Ādurbādagān. General and Prince of Ādurbādagān Rostam Farrokhzad was a member of the Pahlav clan of Ispahbudhan family (House) - one of the Seven Great (wuzurgān) Houses of the Sasanian Empire claiming its descent to the Arsacids of Parthia.

At the same time, the King of Arrān Varaz Grigor (628-637), a Zoroastrian name that may have been Gadvsnasp before his second baptizing into Dyophysite Orthodox Nestorian Christianity, was adopted as the title of Arran Shah. He was a member of the wuzurgān Mehrān family (a Pahlav noble- family, separated or branch of the Ispahbudhan House). Moreover, Arrānshāh Varaz Grigor was related to the Sasanian shāhanshāh Xusrō I Anōšīrvān or even "being himself a noble of the family of Ardashir I" and Prince Javanshir (Juansher) of the Caucasus Albania (Arrān) was a son of Varaz Grigor. The Pahlav House of Mehrān held high-ranking positions in the Sasanian hierarchy and occupied high command over the frontline in the north, leading the negotiations with the Khaqān of Turks^[31].

Notably, the famous Sasanian general Rostam Farrokhzad of Ādurbādagān escorted and introduced Prince Javanshir to the last Sasanian King Yazdagird III (632-651) in Ctesiphon, the Sasanian capital. In 16-19 November 636, in the famous Battle of al-Qadisiyyah between the Sasanians and Muslim Arabs, Prince Javanshir was the commander (spāhbed) of the Arranian (Albanian) troops, which were part of the Sasanian Imperial Army under the command of

spāhbed Rostam Farrokhzad of Ādurbādagān. For his gallantry at al-Qadisiyyah, Javanshir was rewarded with villages as well as military and court insignia^[32].

In 637, Javanshir with 3000-4000 troops, helped arrange King Yazdagird III's evacuation from the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon sieged by Muslims. Sasanian King Yazdagird III awarded Javanshir two golden spears and shields and acknowledged his bravery, awarding a flag – the Standard of Jamshid (Derafsh-e Kavian) which was the highest honor for loyalty and bravery^[33]. Before the final defeat of the Sasanian army in the Battle of Nahavand in 642, Javanshir arrived in Ādurbādagān. One can assume that he planned to resume command of the Sasanian Ādurbādagān military in the wake of Rostam's death and because of Yazdagird's strong will to collect a new army in Media to fight the Arabs. However, Rostam's brother Farrukhzad was assigned Ādurbādagān's spāhbed and Javanshir fled back to the Albanian capital Partaw (now Barda)^[34].

There was confirmed evidence that after the collapse of the Sasanian Empire, Muslim Arabs offered to Arrānshāh Javanshir to become the ruler of the entire Ādurbādagān šahr, but he refused it for obscure reasons. Soon after, Javanshir was killed during Christian service at Partaw's Albanian church^[35].

Conclusion

In the 5th-6th century, the Sassanids, particularly King Xusrō I Anōšīrvān, implemented reforms aimed at improving the empire's architecture to lead a long-lasting rivalry with the Orthodox Byzantium to dominate the Near East. The devastating incursions of the Turks and Khazars via Darband pass in Caucasia as well as Arsacids Armenians turned towards the Byzantium prompting the Sassanids to re-evaluate and recognize the strategic and military importance of Arran (*Caucasus albania*) located on the north bank of the Araxes.

Sasanian King Xusrō I Anōšīrvān established the region or kust-ī Ādurbādagān, holding Ādurbādagān's general (spāhbed) command covering all lands in the north and northwest of the Araz River. Including Arrān (Arrānšahr). The Sasanian strategy aimed to strengthen both the central power and Zoroaster's faith as unique imperial religion eroded by Christian Byzantium in Caucasia. The establishment of the kust-ī Adurbadagan spahbed allowed the incorporation of Arranian (Albanian) troops into the Sasanian Imperial Army under Ādurbādagān's general command containing the Byzantines and Turks, as well as enforcing the defense of the empire's power and the religious core province of Ādurbādagān holding the cathedral fire temple Ādur Gušnasp.

The reform pulled Arrānšahr closer to the Sasanian crown supported by the establishment of dynastic or family ties between the families of shāhanshāh and Arrānshah. The recently discovered Arrānshah Aswahan's state seal clearly confirms the closeness of Arranian (Albanian) nobility to the Sasanian crown using Pahlavi as the official court language.

Thus, the Sassanids reorganized the empire's architecture, expanding Ādurbādagān's military and administrative functions to Arrānšahr to form the entire Ādurbādagān šahr on both sides of the Araz River to contain the Byzantium and Turks. It was a turning point to project Ādurbādagān's name and functions in the northern bank of Araxes, particularly on Arrān. The establishment of the kust-ī Ādurbādagān with specially assigned Adurbadagan's general strengthened both Sasanian power and Zoroastrianism up to Darband fortress in Caucasia forming

entire Ādurbādagan šahr on both sides of the Araxes. Finally, since Late Antiquity, particularly as a result of the reforms of the Sasanian King Xusrō I Anōšīrvān, names Arrān and Ādurbādagān became interchangeable in the north bank of the Araxes, facilitating of the strengthening of the empire's central military, administrative and religious power to contain Byzantium. The following historical developments demonstrate that term Arrān (Albania) lost its political functions, surviving as a geographical or toponymical term. However, Ādurbādagān evolved into the Turkified form of Azerbaijan.

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