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Sasanian Imperial Strategy and King Xusrō I Anōšīrvān's Reform: The Case of Ādurbādagān and Arrān (Caucasian Albania)

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Abstract

The article analyses the Sasanian imperial policy and strategy toward Ādurbādagān and Arrān (Caucasian Albania) as well as the impact of King Xusrō I Anōšīrvān's reforms on these regions. The author briefly overviews Ardaxšīr I's rise to power highlighting the Sasanian dynasty's political ambitions. The article discusses Shāpūr I's ideological and political reasons for declaring the Ādur Gušnasp fire-temple in Azerbaijan the empire's most sacred fire and proclaiming Zoroastrianism as the state religion. The author argues that Shāpūr I's decision transformed Ādurbādagān into the empire's Zoroastrian religious and ideological centre, increasing the province's strategic value. However, Ādurbādagān's proximity to the main war zones heightened its vulnerability. The author notes that King Xusrō I Anōšīrvān's reform enhanced Ādurbādagān's security by the establishment of the kust-i Ādurbādagān and Ādurbādagān's spāhbed (general) military command covering Arrān (Caucasian Albania). The article emphasizes Arrān's military and geostrategic importance in the Sasanian strategy to prevent Turkish incursions and contain Byzantine Christian advance in Caucasia. The reform tightened Albania's attachment to Azerbaijan increasing its military capacity and strategic value. Thus, in the late Sasanian period Ādurbādagān and Arrān became interchangeable names in the northern bank of the Aras River through the creation of the entire Ādurbādagān šahr shielding Ērānšahr.

Keywords: Sasanian, Khosrow Anushirvan, Adurbadagan, Arran, Caucasian Albania, Azerbaijan

Introduction

The Sasanian period occupies a significant part of the history of Iran. Some scholars consider the rise of the Sasanians as being a coup d'etat of Medes and Persians against the Parthian Arsacids. There is also an opinion that the Sasanian period was characterised by a Sasanian-Parthian confederacy ^[1]. Nevertheless, having Parthian roots as some scholars argue, the Sasanians proclaimed the restoration of the Truth and Persian Glory ^[2]. Intriguingly that instead of the fire-temple to Anāhītā in Pārs from where they rose to power, the Sasanians proclaimed the holy shrine of Ādur Gušnasp in Ādurbādagān the empire's most sacred fire attaching themselves to this highest victorious warriors class fire. Moreover, the Sasanians granted the rank of "cathedral" to the fire-temple Ādur Gušnasp, which was the last survived fire of the Great Fires of State established sometime in the Parthian period ^[3].

Indeed, there is interest in discussing the political, religious, and ideological reasons for this significant shift in Sasanian politics. The proclamation of Ādur Gušnasp of Media as the cathedral fire-temple demonstrates these further developments in Sasanian politics and strategy. It followed the transformation of Ādurbādagān into the religious "core" and ideological centre of the empire. This significant shift had administrative and military consequences that were addressed in Kawād I and Xusrō I Anōšīrvān's reforms.

Rise of the House of Sāsān: short overview

Following the struggle for power between different branches of the House of Arsacids in the late history of Parthia, the House of Sāsān rose in Iran as a result of internal Parthian struggles. There is evidence that a certain Sāsān, possibly a Parthian soldier or someone of Indo-Parthian origin, worked or was stationed in the house of Pābaq - the ruler of Istakhr in Persis/Pārs/Fārs. Some scholars indicate that Sāsān might have been a custodian of a great fire-temple to Anāhītā where Pābaq was a priest.

In this regard, the epic treatment in Firdowsi's masterpiece *Šāhnāme*, based on the Sasanian chronicle "*Xwādāy-namāg*", states that Pābaq's daughter (or Pābaq's wife as he had a vision of his wife giving birth to a great king)^[4] was married to Sāsān, and the princess gave birth to Ardashīr I^[5].

Indeed, the rise of the house of Sāsān and the origin of Ardashīr I remain mysterious, but most scholars follow Tabari's account as in the *Shahnameh*, that Pābaq's daughter married Sāsān^[6] and gave birth to Ardashīr.

When Ardashīr came to power, he proclaimed his official genealogy as "*ardaxšīr ī kay ī pābagān ī az tōhmag ī sāsān nāf ī dārā šāh*" - "Ardaxšīr the Kayānid, the son of Pābag, from the race of Sāsān, from the family of King Dārāy." However, as Turaj Darayee interprets this: "The Kayānid dynasty in the Avesta, the mysterious protective deity Sāsān, and the connection to Dārāy (probably the conflation of the Achaemenids, Darius I and Darius II, and the Persis kings, Dārāyān I and Dārāyān II) all suggest falsification of his lineage."^[7]

Nevertheless, Ardashīr I officially proclaimed himself as king of Persian origin and a descendant of the great Achaemenids^[8]. However, the hostilities and internal struggle for power between great Persian (Parsi) and Parthian (Pahlav) families (Houses) was resumed until the Muslims' conquest Iran^[9].

In 224 CE, on the same day of the decisive battle of Hormizdagān, Ardashīr proclaimed himself shāhanshāh, slaying the Parthian king Ardawān IV. Later, Ardashīr I officially had himself coronated in the captured Parthian imperial capital Ctesiphon, establishing the Sasanian empire^[10].

Imperial religion, ideology and Ādurbādagān

As one may interpret, Ardashīr I's official genealogy and the stone reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam represent not only his official origin but also his power's political essence: the re-enforcement of Zoroastrianism and re-establishment of the Glory of Persians following the restoration of Persian rule in previously Achaemenid' lands. In this respect, Ardashīr's official genealogy, highlighting that he was from the family of King Dārāy, was designed to support his reign's ideology that he was the descendent of the Achaemenids, emphasizing his ambition to follow and protect the Persian Glory.

In the meantime, it is safe to assume that the relief at Naqsh-e Rostam, showing Ardashīr I receiving the ring (seal) of kingship as shāhanshāh of Ērānšahr from Ahura Mazdā, propagates a divine blessing for his rule and demonstrates his duty to follow and enforce Zoroastrianism. In addition to this, the *Kārnāmag ī Ardashīr ī Pāpagān* (Book of the Deeds of Ardashīr, Son of Papak), through its propagandistic and ideological nature, supports and proclaims the legitimacy of Sasanian rule and ambitions^[11].

Indeed, the strategy Ardashīr I and his son Shāpūr I's focused on creating a centralised Sasanian empire in a Zoroastrian *oecumene*^[12] and on establishing Zoroastrianism as the sole religion of the state^[13]. Shāpūr I followed his father's policy and ideology, which could be confirmed by the rock-carvings at Naqsh-e Rostam showing Ardashīr I giving the ring or seal of rule to his son. Like his father, Shāpūr I expressed his devotion to fire as an icon of the religion and officially proclaimed Zoroastrianism the state religion^[14].

In this light, it can be assumed that Sasanian imperialism^[15] was the strategy of Shāpūr I's imperial policy which was based on Zoroastrian religion and Achaemenids' Glory. He was focused on enforcing a centralized Sasanian state in a Zoroastrian *oecumene*, eliminating the last signs of Hellenism that had survived the Parthian period. He used Sasanian imperialism as a tool to enforce Zoroastrianism and the central power in lands surrounding Ērānšahr. Thus, Shāpūr I established many Bāhram fires for his soul (Xusraw Šāhbūhr), his daughter (Xusraw Ādur-Anāhīd), and many others. He also established sacred fires and supported communities of priests in Syria, Cilicia, Cappadocia, and Armin (Armenia or Arminiya).

Politically and ideologically, the establishment of the sacred fires network was aimed at strengthening the power of the shāhanshāh and symbolized the unification of the state and the authority of the hierarchy of priests and the ubiquitous nature of the religion. Moreover, the early Sasanians categorised the fire temples, particularly three Great Fires of State, one of which, the fire of Ādur Gušnasp in Ādurbādagān, was declared the highest grade or warrior (*artēštār*) class fire^[16].

Interestingly, in the Seleucid and Parthian eras, the province of Ādurbādagān (Parthian or Arsacid Pahlavi: Āturpātākān) played a central role as a stronghold against the spread of the Greek and Roman pantheons in Iran. Moreover, it is highly likely that Āturpātākān was the place where the prophet Zarathustra was born^[17-18], and the Holy Avesta was kept in the holy shrine of the Ātur (Old Persian) or Ādur Gušnasp fire-temple in Šiz (now Takht-e Soleyman, Azerbaijan)^[19-20].

Ādur Gušnasp, an Ataš Bahrām (Parthian: Ātaš-i- Wahram or Pahlavi: Ādur Bahrām - "fires of Victory," the Zoroastrian name of the God of War and Victory), was most sacred or "cathedral" fire of the highest grade in Zoroastrianism, established in the late Achaemenid or Parthian era in Ādurbādagān in Media^[21]. Each new king, as Shāpūr I proclaimed, was obligated make a pilgrimage after coronation to Ādur Gušnasp, providing royal gifts and celebrating Nowruz (No Ruz).

Intriguingly, the Sasanians, despite their proclaimed Persian origin, followed the Parthian Arsacid tradition of donations to the Ādur Burzēn-Mihr fire. This was the second fire of the Great Fires of State, as the Sasanians categorised it. It was established sometime in the 5th- 4th century BC in Parthia (the northeast of Iran), but, at the time of the Sasanids, it had been occupied and destroyed^[22].

Ideologically, the proclamation of the Ādur Gušnasp fire of Media as the warrior's class fire to which the Sasanians attached themselves served to demonstrate Persia's superiority over Media and Parthia.

Next, aiming to secure themselves as the ruling dynasty, the early Sasanians' strategy was focused on putting the politically powerful and religiously and ideologically influential Zoroastrian clergy or Magi/Magus under the shāhanshāh's control. As some scholars believe, the Maguses (*maguš*) were a class of priests and tribe from Media^[23, 24], which played the cathedral role at the time^[25]. Igor Diakonoff believed that the Maguses supplied the Medes with court priests as early as under the last Median king Astyages^[26].

Thus, the early Sasanians, as followers of the Persian Achaemenid, attempted to control Maguses of Median and/or Persian origin considering it a high-priority political

and ideological task to secure the power of Persians over Media and Medes. The possibility should not be excluded that the Sasanians knew of Gaumāta's or the Maguses' / Medes' revolt ^[27].

In this regard, Ardaxšīr I and his son Shāpūr I, attempting to control the Zoroastrian clergy that was a key element of their imperial strategy, supported and promoted Kirdēr the herbed (priestly teacher) the famous and powerful religious leader of the time giving him a position close to the shāhanshāh's court and ordering him to categorise the Great Fires and ceremonial protocols. Shāpūr I granted Kirdēr the title of mobedān mobed (priest of priests). Kirdēr was affiliated with the fire-temple of Ādur Gušnasp in Azerbaijan and held the other name Kirdēr-Gušnasp ^[28]. The other highly influential and powerful mobedān mobed in the Sasanian king Šāpūr II's rein was Ādurbād-ī Mahrspandān ("Ādurbād, son of Mahrspand") who was also affiliated with Ādur Gušnasp ^[29].

Ideologically, by placing Zoroastrian priests close to the court, the early Sasanians focused on demonstrating the unity of State and Church, which were interconnected and mutually dependent. As Ardaxšīr I's chief priest Kirdēr stated, "Church and State were born of one womb." ^[30] The early Sasanians needed Zoroastrian priests to act as their counselors in religious affairs to support the dynasty's claim to legitimacy ^[31, 32]. Shāpūr I authorized Kirdēr - mobedān mobed and Zoroastrian fanatic - to eliminate the Mithraism along the Medes and Maguses of Media allowing him to establish the fire-temples around the empire and in Syria and Armenia to strengthen Zoroastrianism in the lands challenging by Christian Byzantium.

Next, it should not be excluded that the proclamation of Ādur Gušnasp as the empire's most sacred fire of the pērōzgar (victorious) warriors was the step of ideological distancing from the Macedonians' destruction of the fire-temple of Anāhītā, even though this temple played a role in the Sasanian rise to power. One can assume that the early Sasanians needed to demonstrate the ideological and political proof that they were the restorers of the Truth (which "must needs be restored by a man of true and upright judgment") and the Glory of Persians over the Medians and Parthians.

Thus, one may state that the distancing from the Anāhītā fire in Fārs to the Ādur Gušnasp warrior class fire in Ādurbādagān indicated a significant shift in the Sasanian ideology from their origin as restorers of the Truth to the protectors and fighters of the Truth as victorious warriors.

However, the proclamation of Ādur Gušnasp fire as the most sacred imperial sanctuary, possibly, had other additional grounds. The fire-temple of Goddess Anāhītā had been sacked and desecrated by Alexander of Macedon, who had burnt there the 12,000 ox-hides on which the original Avesta was written in golden lettering and which had been placed in the Fortress of Archives in the city of Istakhr in Pārs ^[33]. However, the other copy of the Holy Avesta,

copied on calf skins, was kept in the fire temple of Ādur Gušnasp in Ādurbādagān.

In this regard, it should be noted that King Darius III's General Aturpāt (Atropates), satrap of Media, was able to secure the holy fire in Ādur Gušnasp. In 324 B.C., Aturpāt pacified unrest against the Greeks and Alexander decided to keep him as king of the land, which later became the independent (or semi-independent, vassal of Arsacid Parthia) kingdom of Atropatena (Greek) or Āturpātākān (Parthian or Arsakid Pahlavi). Atropates' daughter was married to Perdikkas, a close ally of Alexander and commander of the Macedonian cavalry ^[34].

Thus, it is safe to assume that Shāpūr I's decision to declare Ādur Gušnasp, the sole survivor of the three Great Fires of State, as the empire's most sacred fire-temple had the logic of an ideological "clean up" of the Macedonians' destruction of the Anāhītā fire-temple and burning there of the Holy Avesta symbolizing Shāpūr I's full departure (political and ideological) from the vestiges of Hellenism surviving from the Parthian period and marked a policy of remedying the great impact that the Greeks had had on the country as the destroyers of the Achaemenids to whom the Sasanians attached their genealogy.

In the meantime, selecting Ādur Gušnasp as the cathedral fire-temple allowed Shāpūr I to secure direct control over the powerful Zoroastrian priests or Maguses affiliated with this temple. It also allowed him to keep the religious clergy within the official Sasanian policy, eliminating any avenue for anti-dynastic propaganda or even revolt of the Medes or Maguses.

Indeed, if the early Sasanians declared that their mission was the restoration of the Truth and Persian Glory, linking their genealogy to the Achaemenids, one may assume that the "pure clean" fire-temple never desecrated by the Macedonians should be selected as the empire's sacred cathedral fire.

Consequently, Ādurbādagān's Ādur Gušnasp fire-temple, which preserved the Holy Avesta, was proclaimed as the Sasanian Empire's most sacred fire of the highest grade holding the rank of the victorious warriors' class fire to which the Sasanians attached themselves. Moreover, the Sasanians, categorising Ādur Gušnasp (the last survived Great Fire of State) as the "cathedral" fire-temple, transformed Ādurbādagān into the empire's religious and ideological centre, with military and administrative consequences ensuing ^[35].

Finally, in the Sasanian era, Ādurbādagān became the religious centre preserving and expanding Zoroaster's faith. The chief Median sacred fire-temple of Ādur Gušnasp, which had been established sometime in the Parthian period on a hill near Āturpātākān's capital Ganzak, was declared the most sacred fire of the empire. Each new king, as Shāpūr I proclaimed, was obligated after coronation to make a pilgrimage there providing royal gifts and celebrating No Ruz (Nowruz) ^[36].



Fig 1: Caucasus in the Sasanian period (drawing by K. Maksymiuk)

Xusrō I Anōšīrvān's reform: kust-ī Ādurbādāgān and Arrān

There is no doubts that the fire-temple of Anāhītā in Pārs continued to occupy the heart of the Sasanian dynasty. Moreover, the Sasanians presented themselves as the guardians of the temple. However, it should not be excluded that the declared political and ideological ambitions of the early Sasanians reasonably dictated them to distance from the ransacked Anāhītā fire-temple following the proclamation Ādur Gušnasp of Media as the “cathedral” and the most sacred fire of the empire and classified it as the victorious (pērōzgar) warriors (artēštār) class fire.

Following the proclamation of Zoroastrianism as the state religion, this fundamental development pushed Azerbaijan to occupy the place and role of the empire's religious “core”. Khalil Hakimfar highlighted that when Maguses were converted to Zoroastrianism under the empire's chief priest (mobedān mobed) Kirdēr-Gušnasp of Ādur Gušnasp, Azerbaijan became an ideological centre of the propagation of the Zoroastrian religion^[37].

It is important to stress that Byzantium acknowledged the imperial, military, and religious value of Ādurbādāgān. In 623, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, during the last Byzantine-Sassanian war of 602 - 628 CE, occupied Azerbaijan and sacked Ādur Gušnasp aiming to crush the Sasanians' will and power to fight. As some scholars have argued, this war had the function of religious revenge^[38] indicating emperor Heraclius' letters before the war, as well as the Byzantines' return to Jerusalem of the Holy Cross, which was captured by the Sasanians in 614 and stored in Ādurbādāgān's capital Ganzak^[39]. Later, in 651, the Muslim Arabs, aiming to paralyze the Sasanians, also focused their final attack on Azerbaijan where Yazdegerd III attempted to collect his new army.

Ādurbādāgān's strategic military and logistical location

Ādurbādāgān, as with the whole of Media, held strategic and military value because of its geographical location, manpower, and fertile lands. Additionally, the province

enjoyed a highly developed network of roads. Since the Achaemenid empire, the Royal Road, crossing Ecbatana of Media, connected Persian Susa with Anatolia^[40]. In the Parthian period, Ādurbādāgān, and particularly its capital Ganzak, became a Zoroastrian stronghold and logistical hub^[41].

Indeed, the strategic roads, crossing Ādurbādāgān, connected the empire's inner parts and the capital Ctesiphon with the main war zones. The one road connected Pārs with Ādurbādāgān's Marāgha (Median Phraaspa/Phraata, which resisted Roman General Antony's siege in 36 BC)^[42] and lasted toward Artaxata in Armin (Armenia)^[43].

The next road, via the Ādurbādāgān's city Ardabil stretched toward Arrān (Caucasian Albania)^[44] up to the heavily fortified Darband Fortress in the Southern Caucasus and even toward the strategic Darial Pass in the Northern Caucasus. The other highway linked Eastern Albania with Ecbatana^[45].

The Great Khorasan Road was run from Baghdad connecting the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon via Ādurbādāgān's Ecbatana toward Nīšāpūr of Khorasan, founded or rebuilt by Šāpūr I^[46].

Surely, the Sasanians assessed Azerbaijan's sophisticated road network and its central Iranian geographical location, converting the province into a logistic hub of great military importance. The assessment of Ādurbādāgān's religious and ideological functions, manpower, and logistic potential pushed the Sasanians to attach to the province one of the key roles in the imperial strategy to fight the Byzantines and Turks. Thus, the Sasanians expanded Ādurbādāgān's religious gravity (as the empire's Zoroastrian center), administrative and military infrastructure under the kust-ī Ādurbādāgān umbrella far deep into the Caucasian lands challenged by the Turkish empire and Christian Byzantium.

Imperial reforms: kust-ī Ādurbādāgān and Arrān (Caucasian Albania)

The Imperium Parthicum was engaged in several wars with Imperium Romanum. The intense rivalry between these two

great empires shaped the politics of both ^[47]. The permanent struggle with Byzantium over domination of the Near East prompted the Sasanians, after the military setbacks of Kawād I ^[48], to re-think and re-design the empire's military architecture to improve its military might and administrative stability. This strategic perception was shaped not only because of the war with Byzantium but also by the devastating Turkish incursions deep into Ērānšahr from the Darband Pass in the Caucasus. This political and military reality as well as the partition of Armin (Armenia) ^[49] in 387 into Byzantine and Persian parts ^[50], forced the Sasanians to re-discover and re-evaluate the strategical importance of Arrān or Arrānšahr (Caucasian Albania), located on the north side of the Araz River.

In the 5th - 6th centuries CE, the Sasanian kings Kawād I and his son Xusrō I Anōšīrvān launched a fortifications' improvement program through the empire. They also initiated administrative reforms to upgrade the empire's defense, military, and power architectures. In parallel, the reforms were aimed at strengthening Zoroastrianism in the lands challenged by the Christian Orthodox Byzantium ^[51].

Thus, shāhanshāh Xusrō I abolished the one-person command of Ērān-Spāhbed, (išbahbadh al-bilād, Artēštārān sālār (chief of the warriors) ^[52], the office of the marshal or general of all Iranian forces) and replaced it with four generals reporting directly to the shāhanshāh. As a result of the reform, the kust-ī Ādurbādagān (region of Ādurbādagān) was created establishing the offices of the Ādurbādagān spāhbed (general) and later Ādurbādagān āmārgar (financial or tax/administrative officer) ^[53].

However, the proximity of the war zones to Ādurbādagān,

holding the principal Ādur Gušnasp fire, made the province militarily vulnerable. The wars with the Byzantines and Turks pushed the Sasanians to realise that the security of the empire's core territories like Persia, Media, and Azerbaijan particularly had to be guaranteed and that Sasanian influence should be projected far afield ^[54].

The Sasanids, one may assume, addressed this challenge by the establishing the kust-ī Ādurbādagān holding the centralised office of the supreme military command (išbahbadh) of Azerbaijan with the specially assigned Ādurbādagān spāhbed (Figs.2 and 3), which covered Ādurbādagān province itself and the adjoining lands of Arrān (Albania) and Armin (Armenia or Arminyaya) ^[55].

It would not be an overestimation to consider the kust of Ādurbādagān one of the most important regions for the empire due to its military and manpower potential as well as for its geostrategic location and logistical proximity to the main war zones. All these qualities supported the kust's functions to shield Ādurbādagān province - the imperial ideological and Zoroastrian centre.

Indeed, the Sasanian strategy was pragmatic: to project both military power and Zoroastrian influence far afield from Ādurbādagān, ensuring its military and ideological security from Christian Byzantium. The establishment of the Ādurbādagān spāhbed's military command allowed them to realise this strategy, thereby improving the empire's military and defense capabilities as well as strengthening the shāhanshāh's power and Zoroaster's faith in the lands contested by Christian Byzantium and the Turks, particularly in the Caucasus.



Fig 2: The Sasanian Military Commander's seal: Gōrgōn ī Mehrān ... ud hujadag Xusrō wuzurg ērān - kust ī Ādurbādagān spāhbed ^[56]



Fig 3: The Sasanian Military Commander's seal: Sēdhōš ī Mehrān šahr asābed ud hujadag Xusrō wuzurg ērān - kust ī Ādurbādagān spāhbed ^[57]

Interestingly, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius assessed the fragility of Azerbaijan's security and thereby saw Armenia's and Albania's strategic importance. In 623, he used Armenia as a foothold to occupy Ādurbādagān. As Tim Greenwood mentioned, Heraclius had recognised the potential for striking at the central Ādurbādagān province of the Sasanian empire from the north, using Armenia as a bridgehead. Heraclius marched via Armenia and turned south, destroying Naxcawan (now Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan) and devastating Ādurbādagān's capital of Ganzak where the Holy Cross was stored. He ruined the great and most sacred fire-temple of the Sasanians, extinguishing the fire in Ādur Gušnasp and polluting the water of the lake in the fire complex (now Azargoshnasp in Takht-e Soleyman) with corpses. Later, Heraclius occupied Arrān (Albania) and encamped near its capital of Partaw (now Barda, Azerbaijan), calling Armenian, Albanian, and Iberian princes, and governors to join his service ^[58]. In Arrān, he attempted to recruit new troops for his army shrinking the Sasanian manpower from Caucasia, and enforcing Christianity in the region.

It is safe to assume that the Sasanians realised the strategic importance of the Caucasus and Armin (Armenia) and Arrān (Albania) in particular. In the late 220s, Ardaxšīr I, aiming to secure his power, intervened in Armenia to overthrow the local Arsacid dynasty with military help from Arrān. In 252, Shāpūr I conquered Armenia, proclaiming himself lord of Armenia ^[59], and fortified Ādurbādagān into a military and religious bastion against Byzantine and Christianity ^[60].

However, the problems became more tangled when the King of Arsacid Armenia, Tiridates III and protégé of the Romans, converted to Christianity in 301, which jeopardized Sasanian interests and changed the regional balance of power. Shāpūr II tried to reverse the trend and restore the fortune of the Sasanians and Zoroastrianism, or

at least to stop or slow down the military and religious advance of Christian Byzantium. Thus, in 371, clearly realizing the importance of securing Arrān on the Sasanian side, Shāpūr II together with Arrān shāh Urnayr fought against the joint Roman-Armenian force in the battle of Bagavan ^[61].

Nevertheless, a significant geopolitical shift occurred in 387 when Armenia was divided between Byzantium and the Sasanian Empire. By implementing this policy to maintain Armenia in a state of dependency, the Sasanians installed the Armenian marzpanate ^[62] extending Albania over Arts'ax and Utik; later, in 428 they expanded Ādurbādagān to include regions of Parskahayk and Paytarakan ^[63].

It is difficult to overestimate the complete abolishment of Arsacid Armenia in 428 by the Sasanians following the nomination of the marzbān for the military administration ^[64]. This historical event shifted the geopolitics in the Caucasus and the Byzantine-Sasanian frontline. The Eastern Roman empire became within striking distance of the Sasanian religious center of Azerbaijan, shaking Zoroastrianism through the whole Ērānšahr. The new geopolitical shift increased Arrān's strategic and military for the Sasanians, pushing them to strengthen the region as a bulwark shielding Azerbaijan from the Byzantines and Turks.

In this light, the establishment of kust-ī Ādurbādagān with the specially assigned Ādurbādagān spāhbed (general) could be considered a measure addressing the new geopolitical reality. Thus, Xusrō I's reform allowed the re-design of the Sasanian military and power architecture in this corner of the empire through the creation of the Ādurbādagān military command (spāhbed) and administrative functions such as the office of tax/revenue (āmārgar) in Arrān (Albania). It also strengthened the empire's defense and military capabilities by incorporating Arrānian (Albanian) troops into the Sasanian imperial army under the Ādurbādagān

spāhbed’s command.

The Sasanian strategy was effective: to project imperial influence far afield via the expansion of Ādurbādagān’s military and administrative functions in Albania. It also held paramount significance in enforcing both the shāhanshāh’s central power and the Zoroastrian faith in Albania against the challenge of Orthodox Byzantium (Caucasian Albania was re-baptized into Nestorian Orthodox Christianity at the beginning of the 7th CE) [65].

In summary, this strategy increased the gravity of Ādurbādagān as the center of Zoroastrianism cementing Sasanian power and Zoroaster’s faith (as the unique imperial religion) on the northern bank of the Araxes, where the military and religious rivalry with Orthodox Byzantium and the Turks were in the stages of war.

It is therefore that the establishment of the Ādurbādagān command (isbahbadh) under a specially assigned general increased the effectiveness of the Sasanian military operations up to Darband Fortress on the frontier with the Turks in Caucasia. Despite Darband, at that time, being within the semi-independent or vassal Arrān šahr [66], the Sasanids maintained a huge military garrison under the direct supervision of the Ādurbādagān spāhbed. They strongly believed that Arrānian (Albanian) forces alone were not sufficient to shield the invaders’ incursions via the Darband Passage deep into Ērānšahr.

Notable, discovered and translated official Pahlavi inscriptions on the walls of Darband confirm Darband’s subordination to the šahr Ādurbādagān amārgār (tax or revenue officer). The Pahlavi Darband wall inscription “en ud az en abarbar Dariuš-i Ādurbādagān amārgār” was translated as: “This and higher than this made by Dariush,

Ādurbādagān’s revenue/tax collector” (Fig. 4) [67]. Thus, it can be assumed that the Darband’s official Pahlavi inscription by the Ādurbādagān tax collector and the Sasanian heavy military presence (up to 20,000 men) in the east Caucasian fortresses (Darband, Torpakh kala or Saharestan Yazdagerd, Beshbarmag, Gilgilchay Defense Wall or Apzut Kawāt wall, Fig. 5) [68] under the Ādurbādagān spāhbed’s command as well as the location of the kust-ī Ādurbādagān marzbān in Azerbaijan’s city of Ardebil confirm the projection of Azerbaijan’s political, military, and administrative functions to Arrān to form the entire so-called Ādurbādagān šahr on the both banks of the Araxes [69].

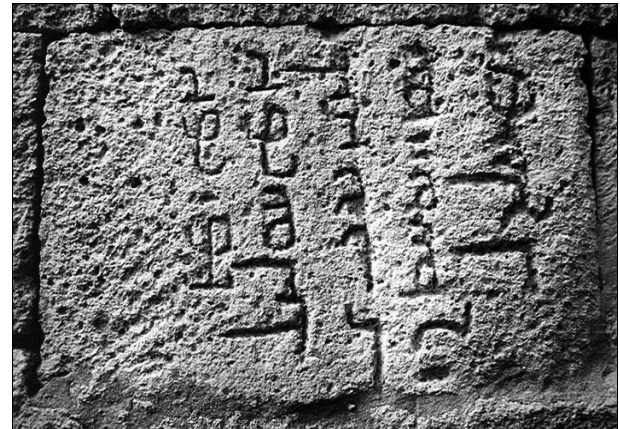


Fig 4: The official Pahlavi Darband wall inscription “en ud az en abarbar Dariuš-i Ādurbādagān amārgār” was translated as: “This and higher than this made by Dariush, Ādurbādagān’s chief fiscal officer” [70]

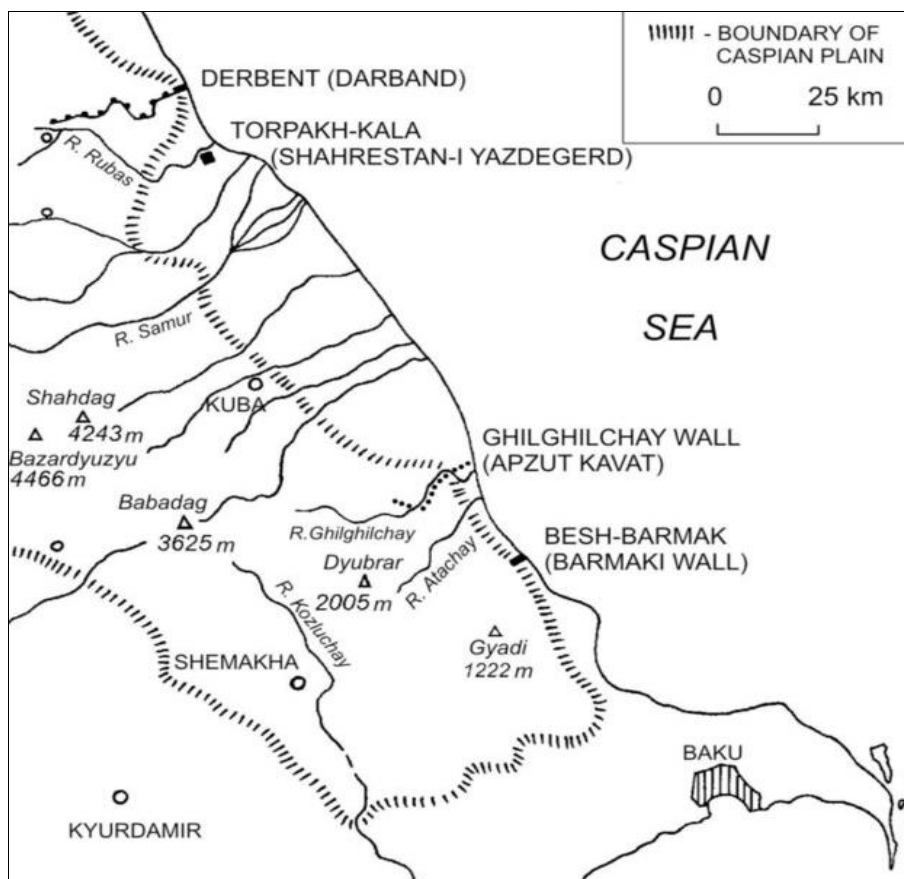


Fig 5: A map of the Sasanian era fortifications in the eastern Caucasus (Arrān, Caucasian Albania) [71]

Notably, the marzbān was based in Azerbaijan's city of Ardebil, where it was responsible for supporting the Ādurbādagān spāhbed's troops on the Caucasian and Armenian fronts. The command also ensured the security of the great fire-temple of Ādur Gušnasp^[72].

It is not surprising that the name, military and administrative functions of Azerbaijan were projected onto Arrān. The local Arrānian (Albanian) nobility was close to the Sasanian crown. Since the reign of Arrānshāh Urnayr (350 - 375), one can speak of the establishment of close dynastic ties with the shāhanshāh's family. King Urnayr 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). Arrānshāh Vache II (440-462) was the son of the sister of shāhanshāhs Hormizd III (457-459) and Peroz I (459-484)^[73].

The Sasanian strategy toward Arrān included the establishment of blood-ties between the ruling dynasties on the shah's level. In parallel, they supported close ties on the regional elite level between the military and noble families (Houses) of Ādurbādagān and Arrān, which were members of the Pahlav Ispahbudhan House and Pahlav Mehrān House, respectively. This strategy promoted a closer and stronger attachment of Arrān to the Sasanian empire, thereby preventing or minimizing the Byzantine's influence. After the partition of Armenia, the Sasanians could not afford to lose Arrān (Albania), a strategic kingdom shielding Ērānšahr and Ādurbādagān from the north.

In this light, the King of Albania Varaz Grigor (628-637), a Zoroastrian name that may have been Gadvšnasp^[74] before his second baptism into Dyophysite Christianity^[75], adopted the title Arrānshāh. He was a member of the wuzurgān Mehrān family (a Pahlav noble-family, separate or a branch of the Pahlav Ispahbudhan House). Moreover, Arrānshāh Varaz Grigor was related to Xusrō I Anōšīrvān was even "himself a noble of the family of Ardaxšīr I," and Prince Javanshir (Juanšer) of Caucasian 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 Khaqan of the Turks.

Interestingly, General Rostam Farrokhzad of Ādurbādagān escorted and introduced Prince Javanshir to the last Sasanian King Yazdagird III (632-651) in Ctesiphon. Although Caucasian Albania was occasionally independent or semi-independent state, its defense was under the command of the Ādurbādagān spāhbed, who in the late Sasanian period was Rostam Farrokhzad of Ādurbādagān. General and Prince of Azerbaijan Rostam Farrokhzad was a member of the Pahlav House of Ispahbudhan.

Next, in the battle of al-Qadisiyyah between the Sasanians and Muslim Arabs (November 16 - 19, 636), Prince Javanshir was the commander (spāhbed) of the Arrānian (Albanian) troops which were an integral part of the Sasanian Imperial Army under the command of spāhbed Rostam Farrokhzad. For his gallantry and valor at al-Qadisiyyah, Javanshir was rewarded with villages as well as military and court insignia and was promoted to the rank of marzbān. In 637, with 3000-4000 troops, Javanshir helped arrange shāhanshāh Yazdagird III's evacuation from the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon besieged by the Muslims. Yazdagird III awarded Javanshir two golden spears and shields and acknowledged his bravery, awarding him a flag,

- the Standard of Jamshid (Derafsh-e Kavian) which was the highest honor for loyalty and bravery.

Before the final defeat of the Sasanian army in the Battle of Nahāvand in 642, Javanshir arrived in Ādurbādagān. One may assume that he planned to resume command of the Sasanian Ādurbādagān military in the wake of Rostam's death in accordance with Yazdagird's strong will to collect a new army in Media to fight the Muslims. However, Rostam's brother Farrukhzad was appointed spāhbed of Ādurbādagān and Javanshir fled back to the Albanian capital Partaw.

Intriguingly, there was confirmed evidence that after the collapse of the Sasanian Empire, the Muslim Arabs offered Arrānshāh Javanshir to become the ruler of the entire Ādurbādagān šahr, but he refused it for an obscure reason. Soon after, Javanshir was murdered during Christian service at Partaw's Albanian church.

The close family ties between the Sasanian Kings and the Kings of Albania (Arrān) were a key element in the Sasanian strategy to enforce central and military power as well as the Zoroastrian faith, which had been eroded by Byzantium in the strategically important region of Arrān. Arrānshāh and his court were close to the shāhanshāh, using Pahlavi as the official language and practicing the Sasanian jurisprudence^[76].

Therefore, one may assume that Arrān was close to the crown experienced the deep-seated Iranian influence that generated a specific political environment to project Ādurbādagān's military and administrative functions up to Darband on the Caspian Sea. Thus, in the late Sasanian period, Ādurbādagān and Arrān became interchangeable names^[77] creating entire Ādurbādagān šahr on both banks of the Araz River.

Conclusion

Official propaganda presented the rise of the Sasanians as the restoration of truth and Persian glory and rule in the lands that previously belonged to the Achaemenian dynasty. The Sasanians portrayed themselves as the successors of the Achaemenid Persians. The early Sasanians strove to eliminate the Parthian era remnants of Hellenism and re-enforce Zoroastrianism as the only religion of Ērānšahr. King Shāpūr I declared Zoroastrianism the imperial religion, proclaiming the last surviving Great Fire of State, Ādur Gušnasp in Ādurbādagān, the most sacred fire and granting it the rank of "cathedral". Shāpūr I thus attached the Sasanians to Ādur Gušnasp, which was classified as the warriors' class fire of the highest grade. This significant shift had fundamental political, religious, and ideological reasons.

Ideologically, the Sasanians' declared political and ideological ambitions encouraged them to distance themselves from ruined and desecrated the fire-temple of Anahitā where Alexander had the Holy Avesta burned. The last surviving Great Fire of State in Ādur Gušnasp, which had never been destroyed by the Macedonians and where the copy of Avesta in golden lettering was kept untouched, was possibly the only religiously and ideologically convenient fire-temple for the Sasanids' declared ambitions. Politically, by attaching themselves to the Ādur Gušnasp warrior's class fire, the early Sasanians presented themselves to the whole Ērānšahr and the neighboring states as great warriors. Even keeping the Anahitā fire in their hearts and guarding it as the temple of their rise to power,

the early Sasanians, nonetheless, obligated every new shāhanshāh to make a pilgrimage and donate royal gifts to Ādur Gušnasp temple, thereby signify its highest rank.

It should not be excluded from consideration that by declaring of Ādur Gušnasp the empire's cathedral fire, the Sasanians reacted to internal politics demands. By this step, they established direct political control via the mobedān mobed (priest of priests) with over the powerful, rich, and influential Zoroastrian priesthood of Persian and Medes origin. The highest priests Kirdēr-Gušnasp and Ādurbād-ī Mahrspānd, both affiliated with Ādur Gušnasp, were close to the crown and advised the shāhanshāhs. Thus, by declaring Ādur Gušnasp as the empire's most sacred and "cathedral" fire, the early Sasanians transformed Ādurbādagān into the religious "core" of the state and the centre of imperial Zoroastrian propaganda.

Notably, Azerbaijan was a province controlled by the Parthian Pahlav House of Ispahbudhan, which had close relations with the other powerful Pahlav House of Mehrān, the shāh's dynasty in Arrān (Albania). Both families were influential in Sasanian internal politics, recalling that shāhanshāh Xusrō I's mother was a noblewoman of Ispahbudhan and Sasanian military elite was mostly from both the Ispahbudhan and Mehrān Houses. Thus, keeping "an eye" on the Ādurbādagān and Arrān noble families' politics was a high priority of the House of Sāsān in their attempt to reduce the great feudal lords' power in the empire's internal politics. Moreover, by controlling the nobles' activity, the House of Sāsān focused on preventing any possible Pahlav Houses revolt or coup d'etat, though General Bahrām Chōbīn of Mehrān did briefly become shāhanshāh Bahrām VI.

The transformation of Azerbaijan into the religious center of the empire was of benefit to the Sasanian ideology, military, administration, and internal politics. However, its proximity to the empire's war zones rendered the province vulnerable, which was noted by both the Sasanians and their enemies. This challenge was partially addressed within the widely targeted reforms of Xusrō I Anōšīrvān.

King Xusrō I reform's strategy, regarding the discussing regions, aimed to ensure the security of Ādurbādagān and the surrounding lands, particularly Arrān, by strengthening both Sasanian central power and Zoroastrianism as the unique imperial religion, which had been eroded by Christian Byzantium in Caucasia, adjoining Ādurbādagān lands.

In particular, the establishment of the kust-ī Ādurbādagān spāhbed military command, covering Arrān/Arrānshahr (Albania) facilitated the incorporation of Arrānian (Albanian) troops into the Sassanian Imperial Army under the Ādurbādagān spāhbed command. The reform expanded Ādurbādagān's military (spāhbed) and financial-administrative (āmārgar) functions in Albania up to Darband.

The reform pulled Arrān closer to the Sasanian crown, that was cemented by blood ties between the ruling dynasties of shāhanshāh and Arrānshāh. The discovered Arrānshāh Aswāhen's state seal confirms the closeness of the Albanian nobility to the crown by using Pahlavi as the official language applying the Sasanian administrative and juridical practice.

Finally, Xusrō I Anōšīrvān's reform re-organized the political and military architecture of this corner of the empire, expanding Ādurbādagān's functions onto Albania to

form Ādurbādagān šahr and strengthening of the religious, military and administrative power to contain Byzantium and the Turks.

Since late Antiquity, particularly because of Xusrō I Anōšīrvān reforms, the names Arrān and Ādurbādagān became interchangeable on the north bank of the Aras River, facilitating their further rapprochement.

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