

RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND PROSELYTISATION UNDER THE SASANIANS

1) HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Sasanian self-esteem and pride drew much strength from their self-imposed right to both the secular and sacred throne of the Persian Empire. Such a twin hereditary asset had not been possessed, or even claimed, by any of the three previous Iranian imperial dynasties. They considered themselves, with a degree of justification, as the rightful heirs to the Achaemenian Empire¹, and regarded the Parthians, with no justification at all, as the unworthy usurpers of the realm. In addition, they were probably members of an ancient priestly family, a theocratic tendency still in evidence even after they formed their own empire. Their emperors, for examples, were frequently addressed as *mōbad*², and the heirs to the throne were often chosen by a council of dignitaries in which the *Mōbadān mōbad* had the final vote³.

Once in power, they restored the national faith to its former glory, rectifying therefore, the catastrophes of the Macedonian onslaught and Seleucid rule, and reversing the five centuries of perceived religious decline under the philhellene Parthians⁴. These two strictly secular empires evidently allowed many foreign creeds to flourish in both eastern and western Iran. Parthians, moreover, witnessed the emergence of the hitherto unknown phenomenon of proselytisation by two alien faiths, first Buddhism, and later, Christianity. Indeed, by the end of that era many Iranians had given up their national faith in favour of these two religions.

Sasanians, soon to face the additional threat of the homegrown Manichaean heresy, tolerated neither apostasy, nor occasionally, even the mere presence of any alien faith in Iran. Indeed, they went as far as introducing yet another novel concept in religious intolerance: the systematic destruction of temples of alien worship, even those dedicated to Zoroastrian deities⁵. Sasanians, as well as being the local rulers of Persis under the Parthians, were also the hereditary guardians of the Great Temple of Anāhitā at the holy city of Istakhr. They are, therefore, the last people one would expect to initiate the first iconoclastic movement in history. Nonetheless, that is what they did soon

¹ Dio Cassius (Loeb 1969), LXXX.4.1 (p.483).

² Christensen (trans. 1972), p.285.

³ *ibid.*, p.287; apparently only five Sasanian emperors were able to choose their heirs: Ardashir I, Shapur I & I I, Cabades I, and Chosroes I; Tabari (trans. 1983), pp.589, 593, 606, 641, and 706.

⁴ Parthian love of Greek culture is often seen as an evidence of their impiety; such a view seems to be largely influenced by the Sasanian propaganda; see Boyce (1987) pp.81,117,126-127.

⁵ This practice was readily adopted later by Christians and Muslims, and wreaked havoc with the artistic heritage of many cultures conquered by these two faiths.

after defeating the Parthians and forming their own empire.

Such religious intolerance is graphically depicted in a lapidary inscription bearing the name of Kartir, their formidable high priest for much of the third century AD⁶: "In every province and place of the whole empire the service of Ohrmazd and the yazads was exalted, and the Mazda-worshipping religion and its priests received much honour in the land. And Ahriman and the Devs (were) driven out of the land and deprived of credence. And images were overthrown and the dens of demons were destroyed, and the places and abodes of the yazads (i.e. fire temples) were established". In fact, Sasanians at this relatively early stage, seem to have gone much further than merely restoring the faith to its former glory, they avowedly persecuted "Jews, Buddhists, Brahmans, Aramaic and Greek-speaking Christians, Baptisers and Manichaeans" as Kartir puts it.

Much has been written about Sasanian religious intolerance, mostly by the even less tolerant Christians. They were certainly more dogmatic than their predecessors, but for the first century of their rule, this may have been no more than a defensive policy against the successful conversions carried out by other faiths. This purely religious motive, however, was soon to be augmented by a far more earthly and practical incentive. The change was caused by the emergence of a novel form of political principle, hitherto unknown either in the Iranian, or in the Greco-Roman world.

2) IMPACT OF POLITICAL CHRISTIANITY

With the arrival of the Byzantine era new and dramatic factors emerged in the balance of power between Iran and her western adversary, the Roman Empire. From the early decades of the fourth century AD onwards, and for the first time in the history of the two opposing powers, religion became a dominant factor in shaping their foreign policies. Until then, the Iranian national faith, now the state religion, had been jealously guarded from the threat of proselytisation, whether by the home-grown Manichaean heresy or by the imported Buddhism and Christianity, without any serious challenge from an external power. Such an immunity from outside interference, however, was soon to come to an end. Christianity, when it became effectively the state religion of a hostile foreign power, proved to be a lasting factor in shaping the Iranian attitude towards incursions from any faith. Now the Christian threat was physically supported by an empire antagonistic towards the Sasanians, their empire and their faith. This inevitably created an atmosphere of mutual intolerance, and a political, as well as religious animosity. Such an atmosphere predictably highlighted the

⁶ See below, "Reported cases of retaliatory proselytisation" and n.8.

incompatibility of the two religions in many fields, especially in their respective laws governing marriage, purity rituals and funerary practices. Henceforth, intolerance, in varying degrees, proved to be a permanent feature of both empires. Yet, in the case of the Sasanians, it was probably still motivated more by political events than religious zeal. Persecution of Christians, for example, did not begin in earnest until Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and Armenia. Even then it was considerably moderated in Persia when the Nestorian church was established there, independent of, and even hostile towards Constantinople.

3) REPORTED CASES OF RETALIATORY PROSELYTISATION

From the earliest history of Zoroastrianism in western Iran until the closing decades of the 20th century, barely thirty years ago, any active promotion of the faith outside the existing community, even amongst the willing Muslim-born Iranians, was never a serious issue. There is hardly any convincing and irrefutable evidence to the contrary. This stands in stark contrast to the large volume of Christian material vilifying many other aspects of the Iranian faith. Zoroastrianism, unlike Christianity, is a non-proselytising faith⁷. Being inexorably linked with the Iranian culture throughout its long history, it is regarded as the exclusive property of that nation. As a result, there are very few recorded cases of non-Iranian peoples being converted to the Iranian faith, none before the Sasanian times. Even during that era, there are only a few reported cases of half-hearted and unsuccessful attempts. Numerically, these cases are so insignificant that one is tempted to include even the most dubious claims from virtually any available source. Bearing in mind this important factor, there seems to be only a handful of reported attempts by the Sasanians to impose their religion on others, some of which clearly refer to the reconversion of lapsed or heretic Zoroastrians:

1) Conversion of the “many people who had not believed and many who had held the religion of the devs” by Kartir, when the chief priest of Shapur I (240-270 AD), in the newly-conquered territories of Syria, Cilicia, Cappadocia, Armenia, Georgia, Albania and Balasagan up to the Gates of Alans (northern parts of modern, ex-Soviet Azerbaijan)⁸.

2) Three attempts to reconvert the Armenians by Shapur II (309-379)⁹, Yazdgird II (438-

⁷There is no religious mandate to convert the non-believers; in the *Rivāvāys* of Kāūs Māhyār and Narimān Hōshang (Dhabhar, 1932, pp.275-6), however, some individual cases of conversion are allowed; nonetheless, any mass proselytisation seems out of character with the Iranian religion.

⁸From the inscription of Kartir on the Ka'ba-yi Zardusht; Boyce (1984) pp.112-113; here Kartir is clearly referring to re-conversion of the descendents of the Achaemenians, who during the five hundred years of Greco-Roman rule, had gradually acquired alien rituals or even forgotten their national faith.

⁹Russell (1987), pp.129-136.

457)¹⁰, and Chosroes I (531-579)¹¹. These shall be dealt with in more detail later.

3) An attempted conversion of the Colchis (Georgians) by Cabades I (488-531)¹².

4) The establishment of missionaries amongst the Khazars by Chosroes I “to teach the young Turks Zoroastrian beliefs and rituals”¹³.

5) The dubious claim by Theophanes that Chosroes II’s (590-628) reply to the offer of peace by Heraclius was: “I will never grant you peace till you deny the Crucified One, whom you called God, and worship the sun (Ahura Mazda)”. There seems to be no substance to this claim¹⁴.

With the exception of the accounts given by Kartir and Procopius (1 and 3 above), hardly any of these alleged attempted conversions is based on an unbiased and reliable evidence. Indeed, many early Armenian, so called, "contemporary eye-witness accounts" clearly derive from a much later oral reports of the events. These attempts, moreover, being clearly motivated by political requirement rather than religious passion, probably lacked the priestly zeal necessary for a successful conversion. This is evidenced by the fact that they were abandoned as soon as the political expediency required the authorities to do so¹⁵.

It must borne in mind, that, apart from their emphatic unreliability, these alleged cases of attempted conversions were usually provoked by the wholesale apostasy of Zoroastrians, especially in Armenia. They were also prompted by the political necessities of the time, but above all, they were an outcome of the general atmosphere of mutual intolerance between the two religions, brought about mainly by the political hostility of the two empires. It is also fair to state that the mainstay of virtually all Christian vilification of the Iranian religion, especially when it comes to proselytisation, are inexorably linked with the Zoroastrian cult of the disposal of the dead.

4) PROMINENCE OF THE RITE OF EXPOSURE UNDER THE SASANIANS

A remarkable manifestation of the Sasanian religious intolerance was the unprecedented prominence given to the rite of exposure during that era. For the first time, we hear of state legislation forbidding burials and imposing the death penalty for the violation of these laws. Non-Zoroastrian

¹⁰ Lazar, 43, [Thomson (1982), pp.255-256]; Elishē, 9, [ibid, pp. 22-27, 63, 75-80].

¹¹ John of Ephesus (trans. 1860) II.19; Evagrius (trans. 1854) v, vii, & n.1.

¹² Procopius (Leob 1914) I.xii.4.

¹³ Grignaschi (1966) pp.19-20.

¹⁴ apud Rawlinson (1875) p.168, n.3., Mango & Scott (1977) "The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor".

¹⁵ The position of the Armenians, however, may have been different; they were probably considered as “honourary Iranians” because of their centuries old adherence to the Iranian faith, and also because of their having an Iranian royal family; Garsoïan, *Penarolegomena* (1989), col.194-195; Elishē, op. cit., 9, p.64, n.11; Russell, op. cit., pp.89-93.

client kingdoms were sometimes forced to abandon burial and adopt the rite of exposure¹⁶. Christian communities in Persia were frequently forbidden to bury their dead, and even those buried for years were not always allowed to remain so¹⁷. This rule was only relaxed during the reign of a particularly tolerant emperor, or after peace treaties with the Armenians or with the Byzantine Empire. Until the early decades of the Sasanian era, the funerary laws and rituals advocated by the faith seem to have co-existed both with the old western Iranian practice of interment, and with the funerary customs of other faiths. This stands in stark contrast to the Christian funerary policy which was emphatically opposed to any practice other than burial. Sasanian interference with the funerary customs of the non-Zoroastrian peoples was occasionally specific acts of retaliation against similar limitations imposed by the Byzantines and Armenians on the funerary practice of their own Zoroastrian communities. Moreover, the importance attached to the rite of exposure at that time, could have been due to the fact that it clearly represented a conspicuous difference between the funerary practices of the Zoroastrians and Christians.

The prolonged animosity between the two religions, however, seems to have altered the natural course of the evolution of the Zoroastrian funerary cult. This, apart from consolidating the power of the clergy, seems to have had a lasting effect on Zoroastrian attitudes towards the disposal of the dead. Not only it may have actually encouraged a stricter observance of the laws of the *Vendidad*, but it may have also influenced the interpretation of some of those funerary laws. It should be appreciated that there may have been some difficulty in banning Christian burials in Persia purely on religious grounds. Under an extraordinary section of the Zoroastrian funerary laws, (*Vendidad*, XII,21-24.), the degree of the pollution produced by the corpse of a dead man is directly related to his religious rank: a dead priest, for example, produces the most potent *nasu*, a warrior or a husbandman less¹⁸, but an Ahrimanic creature produces none¹⁹. There is clear evidence that non-believers were in this respect treated as Ahrimanic creatures; their corpses, therefore, could not pollute the sacred elements. This edict, in spite of the apparent clarity of its message, seems to have been generally ignored by the clergy and the kings alike. For example, the Zoroastrian chief priest is reported to have complained to Shapur

¹⁶ See below.

¹⁷ See below.

¹⁸ *The Vendidad*, V, 27-38, VII, 6-9.

¹⁹ The *Vendidad* seems clear on this point which, has also been confirmed by Darmesteter (1880, p.xci) and Gray (1913, pp.50-1); Boyce (1987 p.44), however, has come to an exactly opposite conclusion; she states: "dead khrafstra (Ahrimanic creature) was even more polluting than the live one".

II that "we cannot cleanse the earth because of the Nazarenes"²⁰. This is evidently a reference to the custom of burial by the Christian subjects of the empire. In the following example the religious justification for the condemnation of burials is expressed even more emphatically: Yazdgird II is reported to have reproached two Armenian dignitaries for their custom of burial, in terms which would seem only to be relevant to Zoroastrians: "you have ignorantly gone astray from our true religion and have dishonoured the gods; you have killed the fire and defiled water; you have buried the dead in the ground and corrupted the earth." (Elishē, 46). The above two statements clearly go further than can be justified by the *Vendidad*. Such an attitude towards Christian burials may have in fact influenced the interpretation of this particular law by the later generations of the clergy. The *Persian Rivāyāts* state, for example, that the *nasu* of a non-believer is polluting²¹. The Sasanian dogmatism in respect of the rite of exposure, and their apparent fervour in trying to promote it, does not, however, seem to have effected their views on royal burials; the royal family were exempted from the observance of this ritual.

5) THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF THE RITE OF EXPOSURE

The generally accepted theory as to the importance attached to the rite of exposure under the Sasanians may have been strengthened by the frequency with which the Byzantine, Syrian and Armenian writers referred to it. These Christian sources, like the classical ones before them, provide virtually all the extant contemporary material on this subject. There is, however, a significant difference between these two groups of authors: whilst at least some classical writers wrote primarily to satisfy their objective curiosity, hardly any Christian writer seems to show such intellectual impartiality. It appears that they often wrote primarily to demonstrate their distaste for Zoroastrianism in general, and its funerary practices in particular. This is evidenced by the fact that almost every reference to the cult of exposure in their works exhibits malice and religious animosity.

The first hundred years of the Byzantine era produced very little Christian writing on the rite of exposure. The surviving material from that period, moreover, has little historical value: much of it is a verbatim reproduction of classical works, presented in an arbitrarily Christianised form. Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, 330 A.D., is one such example. Borrowing heavily from Porphyrius' account of the funerary traditions of various Iranian peoples, he makes the following comment:

²⁰ Braun, I (1915).

²¹ Dhabhar (1932), pp.151-2 (Dastur Barzoi); see, however, Dhabhar's n.8 on p.256, where he indirectly contradicts this.

The Persians, now converts to Christ, no longer cast the bodies of relatives to dogs and the birds. The Massagetae and the Derbices were wont, in anticipation of nature, to sacrifice and to serve up as a feast, those of their dearest friends who had passed the flower of their age. The Hyrcani and Caspians cast to the dogs and birds, the former people the living, the latter the dead. The Scythians buried alive, and slew on funeral piles, those whom the departed especially loved. The Bactrians cast to the dogs old people when alive. These were the practices of ancient times, but now the like prevails not, since the salutary law of the power of the Gospel hath abolished entirely such brutal and inhuman disorders. *The Evangelical Preparation*, I, 16-17.

Significantly, the indignation felt against these alleged Iranian funerary traditions is still expressed in general terms, and unlike subsequent works, the author does not concentrate solely on the cult of exposure. It seems that at this early stage, the denunciation of this practice was still a legacy of the age-old Greek and Semitic horror of unburied corpses²²; a horror becoming gradually fortified by the uncompromising Christian attitudes on the subject of funerals. Eusebius' account of the exposure of the bodies of Christian martyrs executed by the Romans expresses similar indignation and horror²³. Unlike the learning displayed by their classical predecessors, the early Christian writers exhibit a clear unfamiliarity with the religious traditions of their contemporary Persians. It may well be that the lack of interest in Zoroastrian funerary customs during the first century of the Byzantine era is not unconnected with the absence of any clear evidence of restrictions on Christian burial in Persia at that time. From the early decades of the fifth century onwards, however, there is a marked upsurge in the volume of writing on the cult of exposure. These works demonstrate an intense animosity towards this ritual. They also give graphic details of the hardship and martyrdom suffered by those brave enough to practise burial in Persia.

6) FREEDOM OF BURIAL DURING THE PERIOD OF RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

During the long reign of Shapur II (309-379), Constantine the Great made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in all but name. Moreover, Armenia, which together with many western provinces had been lost to the Romans during the reign of Shapur's grandfather, Narseh (293-302), gave up Zoroastrianism, and became possibly the first Christian country. Henceforth Christians, whether at home or abroad, were identified with the enemies of the Sasanian Empire. These events inevitably led to an intensification of the persecution of the Christian population of Persia. This harassment was also pursued in Armenia when Shapur invaded that country, and made a serious

²² e.g., Iliad (Leob, 1957), XVIII, 175-185, XXII, 335-350, XXIII, 20-25.

²³ See below "Christian martyrs and their holy relics".

attempt to reconvert those who had renounced the religion of the Mazda. This attempted mass proselytisation, the first recorded in the history of Zoroastrianism, involved pulling down churches and places of Christian worship "in all the regions of Armenia, province by province and region by region"; and many men were persecuted, "whom they forced to renounce the worship of God and to turn to the service of the Mazda-worshippers"²⁴.

The next phase of persecution followed the peace treaty after the death of Julian the Apostate (363), when Shapur regained the lost western provinces of the empire, and was able to consolidate his control over Armenia²⁵. He then inflicted severe hardship and prolonged persecution on the Christian communities of his newly regained territories. Yet in spite of the severity of these measures, there is no clear evidence of any restrictions imposed on Christian burial, except in some cases relating to the bodies of the Christian martyrs.

Persecution of the Christians has been described in great detail in the Acts of the Syrian and Persian martyrs²⁶, and in many Armenian writings. Some of the Syrian writings go back to the fifth century, but most of the Armenian works were written much later. Nonetheless, some of the most important Armenian sources give blatantly retrospective "eyewitness" accounts²⁷. Many of the stories described in these works clearly belong to the realm of fantasy rather than fact. No doubt the authors of these chronicles felt it to be their religious duty to record every detail of Christian suffering at the hands of the Persians. Nonetheless, the first report of any prohibition on the burial of ordinary Christians (as opposed to the martyrs) does not appear until the reign of Bahram V (420-438)²⁸.

It seems that state interference with funerary customs was at any rate uncommon until that reign, as both the Sasanians and the early Byzantines apparently had a fairly relaxed attitude towards the disposal of the dead until the early decades of the fifth century.

7) CHRISTIAN MARTYRS AND THEIR HOLY RELICS

There are several reported martyrdoms in Persia and Armenia during the reign of Shapur, and

²⁴ Buzand (Garsoïan, 1989), V.43; Russell (1987), p.129.

²⁵ Shapur, and Julian's successor, Jovian, agreed to respect the neutrality of Armenia; neither of the two opposing powers, however, seem to have had any intention of honouring this accord; political upheavals in the Byzantine Empire during the next fifteen years gave Shapur an even freer hand in Armenia.

²⁶ See Bedjan (trans. 1894); see also Braun (1915).

²⁷ e.g. Agathangelos and Elishē; see Thomson (1982), pp.19ff.

²⁸ Gignoux, communication dated 9/9/1992.

at least one during the reign of his father, Hurmazd II (302-9)²⁹. The Zoroastrian authorities in Persia and Armenia did not bury the bodies of these martyrs, and they were often left exposed at the place of execution³⁰. This act, although probably carried out to observe the traditional funerary customs, was nonetheless, unnecessary in the strict religious sense: bodies of non-believers, as we have seen, could not have polluted the earth, and were often in fact, allowed to be buried. Reports of casting the dead bodies of some of the martyrs into fire and water, which seem so contrary to the laws, may also be rationalised on similar grounds³¹. When the Armenians martyred the Zoroastrian clergy, they also threw out their bodies "as carrion for the birds and beasts"³², yet it is hard to imagine that this was done out of respect for the Zoroastrian funerary tradition. The exposure of the Christian martyrs, however, cannot be described as acts of spite. The majority of the exposed bodies were usually allowed to be buried by their fellow Christians³³. In some exceptional cases when the martyr was an important religious personality, his body was kept under guard for the fear that the remains would be taken away and distributed amongst the faithful as sacred relics³⁴. In most cases such fears proved justified. Guards were either bribed³⁵, or prevented by supernatural phenomena³⁶, from carrying out their duties. Bodies were frequently taken away, carved up, and distributed amongst the faithful³⁷.

The Christian preoccupation with honouring various parts of dead bodies of their saints as sacred relics, earned them contempt from classical scholars. For the Zoroastrian clergy, however, these "dead matters" provided a double source of discomfort: first, they were used as the focus of an unwelcome devotion; secondly, some of them, at least, may have been considered as *nasu* in spite of coming from the corpses of non-believers. This is because not all of the relics were desiccated bones, and hence regarded by some as no longer polluting. Various other parts of the human body, such as hair, nails, teeth, skin, and even some bloodstained clothes were also preserved as objects of

²⁹ *Elishē* (Thomson, 1982), 29, p.83, and n.1.

³⁰ Bodies of Christians martyred by the Romans were also often not buried and "became food for wild beast"; see Eusebius (trans. 1927), *Ecclesiastical History*, VII, 12, "The Martyrs of Palestine", IX, 9-13.

³¹ Gray (1913-14), pp.50-53.

³² *Elishē*, op. cit., 77, p.129.

³³ Labourt (1904), pp.62-3.

³⁴ *ibid*; *Elishē*, op. cit., 179-82, pp.225-9; Lazar (Thomson, 1982), 87-8, pp.302-4; 101-2, pp.317-9.

³⁵ Labourt, loc. cit.

³⁶ *Elishē*, loc. cit.; Lazar, loc. cit.; these Armenian accounts of the martyrs sounds suspiciously similar to the narrative of "The Martyrs of Palestine" who were executed by the Romans; Eusebius (op. cit.), also reports that the exposed bodies were placed under guard to prevent them from being stolen by the faithful (IX, 9) and the supernatural phenomenon of the pillars of the city actually weeping for the exposed bodies (IX, 12).

³⁷ *ibid*.

revelation, or for their alleged healing powers³⁸. These sometimes included moist bones freshly extricated from the executed corpses of the martyred saints³⁹. It is said that by the end of Shapur's reign 160000 relics had been amassed in Persia, Asorestan (northern Mesopotamia) and Armenia⁴⁰.

Sacred relics remained a contentious political and religious issue between the Christians and Zoroastrians for at least another century. They were debated in important negotiations with the Byzantines during the reigns of Yazdgird I and his grandson, Yazdgird II. It is noteworthy that all information on these relics come from Syrian and Armenian sources which were written long after the alleged events, and which are not corroborated by contemporary Greek writers such as Ammianus.

8) AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS (b. 330, d. after 391)

Shapur's campaigns in the West were chronicled by the Greek historian Ammianus, who is possibly the last of the great classical writers whose scholarly and objective works are totally free from religious prejudice. Although he does not mention the rite of exposure in describing the funerary practices of the Persians, this in itself is significant, especially in the case of such an observant writer. He was with Julian on his fatal campaign in 363 against Shapur, but before that, he was one of the defenders of Amida during the famous siege of 359 A.D, where he gives an eyewitness accounts of the cremation of the son of Grumbates of the Chionites (White Huns), a vassal kingdom under the Sasanians (XIX.i.7-11). Although there is enough evidence to support that the first wave of Huns did indeed practice cremation⁴¹, it is still extraordinary that this act of gross blasphemy should ever have been allowed to take place, in the full view of the members of the royal family, the Sasanian nobility, Zoroastrian clergy and the rank and file of the Persian army, especially as it happened during one of the most intolerant reigns in Sasanian history.

It is surprising that Ammianus has not given any account of the traditional Zoroastrian funerary custom, especially as he accompanied Julian up to the gates of Ctesiphon, and into many other Persian cities which were conquered on the way. It can only be assumed that, unlikely as it may seem, he did not actually witness any exposures. The Persians may have assumed a more relaxed attitude towards some funerary rituals during a campaign, even to the extent of permitting a public cremation,

³⁸ Lazar, *op. cit.*, 88, p.304; several human relics in many present day Catholic and Orthodox churches would support this assumption; for the healing power of the relics see Zachariah (trans. 1899), IX, vi.

³⁹ Lazar, *op. cit.*, 103, p.320.

⁴⁰ Persia: 80000, Armenia: 60000, Asorestan: 20000; See Marutha (Marcus, 1932), 31, p.68.

⁴¹ Harmatta, *apud* Fettich (1953), p.105.

performed admittedly by a non-Iranian client king.

During Julian's invasion of Persia, Armenia was an active ally of Rome. Shapur's retaliatory measures against that country included the capture and life imprisonment of her king. The Armenian accounts of this campaign accuse Shapur of desecrating their royal necropolis in Ani⁴². This report, which is not corroborated by contemporary historians such as Ammianus, claims, *inter alia*, that the Persians prised open the royal sarcophagi, removed the bones, and held them to ransom. In spite of the fact that there are reports of similar deeds supposedly committed by other Persian emperors⁴³, such acts appear to have been considered a grave sin comparable to destroying a fire-temple. Sasanian emperors are said to have proclaimed during their traditional biennial court of justice: "when a king strays from the path of justice his subjects would feel free to destroy fire-temples, and tombs"⁴⁴.

9) THE TOLERANT REIGN OF YAZDGIRD I

Shapur's long reign was followed by three short ones, during which Armenia was officially partitioned by the two opposing powers, with the larger (eastern) part going to Persia. It was in the context of mutual understanding and peace between the Sasanians and the Byzantines that the tolerant reign of Yazdgird I (399-420) began. Yazdgird's pro-Christian policies earned him the epithets of "sinner" and "deceiver" from the Zoroastrian clergy⁴⁵. He freed Christian prisoners and rebuilt their churches which had been pulled down during the previous reigns. He allowed in a religious mission sent by the Byzantine emperor, Theodosius II (408-50). This mission was headed by Marutha, the Armenian bishop of Maipherkat, a city just on the Byzantine side of the frontier. Marutha obtained the king's approval to convene the first ever synod in Persia. This was inaugurated in 410 with a prayer for the Shāhanshāh's health⁴⁶. Yazdgird's toleration of the Christians, however, seems to have been due to calculated political expediency rather than any love for their religion⁴⁷. He is reported for example, to have handled the awkward question of Christian relics with the judicious skill of a shrewd politician. The 160000 such relics, which had been amassed in Armenia and Mesopotamia during the reign of Shapur, were highly prized by the Christians, but held in contempt by the Zoroastrians. With great prudence, Yazdgird entrusted them to Bishop Marutha, who took them out of Persia to his see in

⁴² Buzand (Garsoïan, 1989) IV, 24; Russell (1987), pp.131, 336-40, 365-5.

⁴³ Cambyses; Bahram V; Chosroes II, apud Rawlinson (1875), p.180 & n.3, p.192.

⁴⁴ Jahiz (1970), p.162; Christensen (trans. 1972), pp.324-5.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p.293 & n.2; Tabari (trans. 1983), p.607.

⁴⁶ Christensen, *op. cit.*, p.294.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.295.

Maipherkat, which was then renamed Martyropolis⁴⁸. This act, no doubt, must have pleased both the Christian and Zoroastrian clergy.

Persecution of Christians was resumed in Persia towards the end of Yazdgird's reign. This fact and the mysterious event of his death⁴⁹ have been combined in a later story concerning the martyrdom of a Christian during the reign of Yazdgird's son, Bahram V. The story goes that the would-be martyr reminded Bahram during his trial that the emperor's father, Yazdgird, had died a lonely death because of resuming the persecution of Christians, and that his body was not placed in a tomb⁵⁰. In view of Vahram's own mysterious death, and the failure of his army to recover his body⁵¹, the story seems anachronistic and possibly apocryphal. Nonetheless this appears to be virtually the only reference in a Christian work to a Sasanian emperor's funeral.

What is significant, however, is the fact that the actual Syriac word used to describe the sepulchral building is *qbura*, which means "tomb" as opposed to *daxma*. Moreover, the reference here to the burial of a Zoroastrian is presented as though such an act was routine and common knowledge. It is noteworthy that a partisan source such as the *Act of Martyrs*, which habitually refers to the exposure of the dead, took it for granted that the Zoroastrian emperors were exempt from that ritual.

10) PROHIBITION OF BURIAL

Yazdgird's son, Bahram V (420-438) is reported to have imposed state legislation against burials in Persia. These reports emanate primarily from Syrian sources, and to a lesser degree from Byzantine ones. In a Syrian report, Bahram is accused of listening to the command of his *Mōbadān Mōbad*, and of ordering mass exhumations in Christian cemeteries for five years:

Vahram listened to the command of the accursed Mihr-Shabuhr, chief of the magi, and dragged forth the dead who had been buried in the days of his father, and scattered them about in the sun; and he maintained this command for five years⁵².

Although there is a religious mandate for the desecration of graves⁵³, this is virtually the only occasion when the Zoroastrians are accused of exhuming the bodies of non-believers and exposing them according to their own funerary rituals⁵⁴. It is difficult to reconcile this report with a number of

⁴⁸ Marutha (Marcus, 1932), 30-1, pp.67-8.

⁴⁹ Tabari, op. cit., p.609.

⁵⁰ Bedjan (1894) IV, pp.189-200.

⁵¹ Tabari, op. cit., pp.622-3.

⁵² *The Passion of Peroz of Bet Lapat*, Hoffmann, *Acts of Persian Martyrs*, 39, apud Boyce, *Zoroastrians* (1987), p.121.

⁵³ Vend., III.12.

⁵⁴ In more recent years, bodies of some newly-converted Zoroastrians were apparently dug up during the night and removed secretly to *daxmas*; Jackson (1906), pp.396-7.

historical facts:

First, under the peace treaty of 422, i.e. during the second year of Bahram's reign, the Persians and the Byzantines mutually guaranteed the religious freedom for their respective Christian and Zoroastrian minorities. This peace lasted for the duration of Bahram's reign⁵⁵, during which Theodosius maintained an active interest in the affairs of the Orthodox Christians in Persia. For example, a Christian bishop in Persia who had been tried and imprisoned for alleged theft and usury was released as a result of his personal intervention⁵⁶. Secondly, no mass exhumation has been reported by any contemporary Byzantine writer such as Theodoret (see below), whose highly partisan works could have hardly missed the propaganda value of such a prolonged barbaric act. Thirdly, the Armenians, whose contempt for Zoroastrians is even more pronounced than that of the Syrians and Byzantines, are also silent on this alleged incident. Naturally, there were no contemporary Armenian sources as yet⁵⁷, but many subsequent sources, which go out of their way to give graphic details of other acts of barbarity allegedly committed by the Persians, do not mention this incident. Lastly, the alleged incident is claimed to have occurred at a time when Mihr-Narseh, the skilful chief minister, was exploiting the dispute which ultimately led to a division within the Christian church. Bahram and his minister sensed the political value of the schism which had been fermenting for some time within the Orthodox Church in Constantinople, and which culminated in the Nestorian sect being anathematised at the Council of Ephesus in 431⁵⁸. As early as 428, Bahram dethroned the head of the Armenian church and replaced him with a Nestorian bishop⁵⁹. It is reasonable to assume that during the tenure of office by these bishops, the persecution of the Nestorians, and any existing laws restricting their funerary customs, were significantly relaxed. Moreover, the Nestorian Church later became an almost exclusively Persian institution⁶⁰, and even adopted some Zoroastrian customs⁶¹. It is equally reasonable to assume that the position of the Nestorians in Persia itself was greatly improved as a result of these events. There is little doubt, however, that severe anti-burial laws were actually imposed during the reigns of Bahram and some of his successors, as this is confirmed by many

⁵⁵ Tabari, op. cit., p.625; Christensen, op. cit., p.304.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, pp.304-5.

⁵⁷ Mashtot (d.440) is thought to have invented the Armenian script in c.400; Eznik of Kolb, the earliest known Armenian writer and possibly a pupil of Mashtot, is believed to have written in the second half of the fifth century; see *Agathangelos* (Thomson, 1975), xiii-xvi.

⁵⁸ Evagrius (trans. 1854), I, iii-xii.

⁵⁹ Russell (1987), pp.137-8.

⁶⁰ See below.

⁶¹ e.g. their clergy renounced their celibacy vows and married in accordance with the command of the Shāhanshāh.

Byzantine writers. It is doubtful, however, whether these laws went as far as imposing mass exhumation. It would be difficult to account for such a deeply offensive act at a time when the state was exploiting the events which led to the independence of the Nestorian sect from Constantinople.

Braham's anti-burial decrees are the first known instances of such legislation in the history of the Zoroastrian religion. These measures were evidently resisted from the outset by the Christian population of Persia. According to Theodoret, Bishop of Cyprus, some even went as far as disregarding them entirely. Theodoret's life (387-458) spans the reigns of Bahram and his son, Yazdgird II (438-457). His writings on the Zoroastrian funerary ritual, which are taken to date from the former reign⁶², describe the Christian resistance to anti-burial laws.

Though the Persians have learned from Zaradas to expose their dead to dogs and birds, yet now that they have submitted themselves to the doctrine of the fishermen, they do not tolerate this practice but bury their dead in the earth, disregarding the laws that forbid interment, and show no fear of the cruelty of those who punish them⁶³.

11) INTENSIFICATION OF THE FUNERARY RESTRICTIONS

Persecution of Christians, and funerary restrictions, were intensified during the reign of Braham's son, Yazdgird II, and spread into Armenia. The Armenian church had already rejected the Nestorian bishops, and ratified the provisions of the Council of Ephesus⁶⁴. Moreover, a section of the Armenian population was in open rebellion against the authority of the Sasanians and the Zoroastrian religion. This group had even unsuccessfully sought the help of Theodosius in their struggle against Persia⁶⁵. Yazdgird retaliated by launching a full scale campaign of proselytisation against the Christian section of the Armenian population⁶⁶.

He also ordered the execution of some of the Christian clergy who were languishing in gaols in various parts of Persia⁶⁷. Meanwhile, as the laws against interment were being strictly observed, the executed Christian corpses were denied burial. They were exposed, and some of these exposures were guarded (see above) for the fear that the remains would be taken away as relics. Armenians, in their desperation to bury their dead, are said to have resorted to stealing and dissecting the corpses of the martyrs so that they could bury the flesh and keep their bones as sacred objects⁶⁸.

⁶² Boyce, *Zoroastrians* (1987), p.121.

⁶³ Theodoret (trans. 1929), *Sermo*, 9.33.

⁶⁴ Russell, op. cit., p.135.

⁶⁵ Elishē, op. cit., 71-3, pp.121-5.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 92, p.144.

⁶⁷ Lazar, op. cit., 87ff, pp.302ff; Elishē, op. cit., 178ff, pp.224ff.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

Yazdgird II, unlike his grandfather and namesake, was very popular with the Zoroastrian clergy. This was undoubtedly due to his devotion to the national faith, and to his upholding of its funerary and other traditions. During his reign, the scope of anti-burial laws may have been expanded and rigorously applied to any offender, whether Christian or Zoroastrian. Yazdgird II is said to have argued against Christianity in explicitly Zoroastrian terms, and to have criticised the custom of burial on religious grounds⁶⁹.

During the reign of Yazdgird II's second son, Peroz (459-484), an important development in Constantinople proved to have a lasting effect in the history of Christianity in Persia: the Nestorian clergy were finally hounded out of the Byzantine capital. They sought refuge and established an independent church in Persia, opening their own school of divinity in Nisibis. Henceforth the Nestorians were declared heretics by Constantinople, and came to be known as the Persian, as opposed to the Roman, Christians⁷⁰. This event had far-reaching effects on the way the Christian subjects of the empire were treated. Sasanian intolerance was now focused on the non-Iranian Christians, such as the Armenians and Georgians, and away from the Nestorian Christians of the empire. Conversion of Zoroastrians to Christianity, however, was still forbidden: any attempt at proselytisation usually cost the apostate his inheritance⁷¹ and occasionally the baptising priest, his life⁷².

This significant modification in the Sasanian attitude towards the Christians in Persia, however, does not seem to have effected their views on funerary customs. Restrictions on burial appear to have survived into the more favourable political climate created by the division of the Christian church. This is evidenced by several subsequent peace treaties with the Byzantine Empire which carried clauses such as "freedom of burial for the Persian Christians"⁷³.

12) PROCOPIUS OF CAESAREA IN PALESTINE (d. after 562)

Much of the sixth century was dominated by the long reigns of two great Sasanian emperors, Cabades (Kavad I 488-96 and 498-531), and his son, Chosroes I (Khusrau Anushakrawan 531-579). These reigns saw a remarkable upsurge in Byzantine works on Persia. The writers of this period, especially Procopius and Agathias, have produced important and informative material on the late

⁶⁹ Elishē, *op. cit.*, 46, pp.97-8.

⁷⁰ Christensen, *op. cit.*, pp.314-5.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p.341.

⁷² Achudemes, the first Catholicos of Persia (consecrated 559 A.D.) was beheaded by Chosroes I for baptising a young prince; John of Ephesus, *Ecc. Hist.* (trans. 1860), VI.20.

⁷³ e.g. the peace treaty of 561 between Justinian and Chosroes I; Christensen, *op. cit.*, p.396.

Sasanians and their religion. Some of these works provide reliable sources of reference for this period, in spite of the fact that they frequently exhibit anti-Persian propaganda and religious animosity. Procopius' impressive work on the state of the Zoroastrian religion in Persia during this period includes two important accounts of the contemporary Persian attitude towards the exposure of the dead. Both of these demonstrate a marked hardening of Sasanian attitudes towards burial, but the first one, quoted below, goes further than that, it shows for the first time that a non-Iranian, non-Zoroastrian subject nation was actually forced to adopt the Zoroastrian cult of exposure:

Cabades desired to compel the Iberians (Georgians, who were Christian) by force to adopt the rules of his faith. He wrote to their king, Gurgenes (Gorgin), demanding a general adoption of Persian customs and forbidding his people ever to bury their dead in the earth, ordering them instead to throw them to the birds and dogs. *The Persian war*, I.xii.4.

This is the first recorded case of an attempted mass proselytisation of a non-Iranian client kingdom⁷⁴. It led to the renewal of hostilities with the Byzantines, which may have been Cabades' ulterior motive. He may have also wished to placate the clergy, who had recently gained the upper hand in their long struggle against the Mazdakite heresy⁷⁵.

Procopius' second reference to the rite of exposure provides a greater opportunity to speculate on the development of Zoroastrian funerary rituals in early 6th century Persia. It is also the only corroboratory evidence to support the confused accounts, given by Muslim Persian sources, of the trial and the execution of a Zoroastrian nobleman accused of burying his dead wife:

Seoses⁷⁶, the Adrastadaran Salanes⁷⁷, the highest ever ranking officer in (Sasanian) Persia⁷⁸, was condemned to death by the whole council sitting in judgment for disregarding the current and the established Iranian traditions, for worshipping new gods, and because when his wife had lately died, he had buried her, though it was forbidden by the laws of the Persians ever to hide in earth the bodies of the dead. *op. cit.*, I.xi.31-38.

The execution of Siāwash is seen by Christensen as the punishment for his probable adherence to Mazdakite heresy⁷⁹. He further speculates that Mazdakites may not have exposed their dead, but buried them⁸⁰. However, it is not known what this sect did with their dead. Moreover, Procopius'

⁷⁴ For the exceptional case of the Armenians see above.

⁷⁵ Christensen, *op. cit.*, p.381.

⁷⁶ "Siāwash", *ibid.*, pp.152 & 380.

⁷⁷ "Artishtārān Sālār", *ibid.*

⁷⁸ Persian sources name at least one other officer bearing this rank at the time of Bahram V; they also state that the rank of "argbadh" was of equal importance; Tabari, *op. cit.*, p.626.

⁷⁹ Christensen, *op. cit.*, pp.380-1.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

account could easily refer to a burial by an unorthodox Zoroastrian.

13) AGATHIAS (B.536, D.579-582)

Agathias, the much maligned Byzantine lawyer-cum-historian, was an exact contemporary of Chosroes I (531-579). He took up Procopius' works on Persia after his death, starting more or less where the latter had stopped, and borrowing liberally from his writings. He went on to produce a copious volume of works which is one of the most important sources of reference for the history of the late Sasanian period in general, and the reign of the great Zoroastrian emperor, Chosroes I, in particular. His descriptions of the Iranian religion, especially the funerary customs, are more numerous and varied, and his accounts of the rituals involved are more detailed than those of any other non-Zoroastrian source of the antiquity. His religious prejudice, on the other hand, somehow belittles the remarkable quality of these works and makes them seem, at the first glance, unworthy of an impartial academic researcher. There are, however, passages in his books which give a glimpse of a more observant and enquiring mind. For example, his remarks on the contradiction between the contemporary funerary practices, and the evidence of the ancient monumental tombs in Persia, indicate that he had the same academic curiosity which has motivated many modern scholars to tackle this awkward problem⁸¹.

Such conscious scholarly observations, however, are rare, and most of his great contributions to the study of the Sasanian Empire are casual remarks delivered as parts of his general denunciation of the Iranian faith. These remarks, once carefully examined and separated from his diatribe, produce invaluable information on many controversial and little-known aspects of the Zoroastrian rituals practised in Sasanian times. He provides information, albeit unintentionally, on many different subjects and in a variety of ways: He is the first Greek writer to describe the purity rituals necessary to ward off the polluting nature of the corpse. He is also the first historian to throw new light on the age-old problem of the disposal of the Zoroastrian war-dead. His detailed account of the power of the clergy at the Sasanian court is impressive for its accuracy. Even more significantly, he is virtually the only writer to confirm independently the earlier Greek accounts of such controversial subjects as the exposure of the sick and funerary divinations.

⁸¹ He also correctly expressed doubts (II.24.6) about the identification of Zoroaster's Vishtaspa with Hystaspes, the father of Darius the Great; see Ammianus Marcellinus, XXIII.6.32; Herzfeld's (1947) support of this identification is refuted by Henning (1951).

The most remarkable aspect of his work, however, especially in the context of this paper, is the fact that it contains no reference to any acts of religious intolerance, and above all, to any attempts to convert Christians, or even reconvert lapsed former Zoroastrians. It shows that, during the long reign of Chosroes I, with Armenia and Georgia once again under firm control, and the Byzantine political threat finally removed, it was not deemed necessary to restrict the freedom of the worship amongst the non-Zoroastrian subjects of the empire. This goes a long way to confirm that, on the whole, the religious intolerance and alleged cases of proselytisation in Sasanian times were motivated more by political events than religious zeal.

14) CONCLUSION

Kartir's graphic description of many forced conversions clearly refers to the lapsed or apostate former Zoroastrians. His intolerance of Jews, Buddhists, etc., probably demonstrates the initial zeal of a newly-formed semi-theocratic empire. There is hardly any subsequent report of such an intense, total, and unqualified lack of religious tolerance.

During the first century of the Byzantine Empire, the Iranian faith was constantly threatened by an aggressive and united Christian church, which had the full support of the natural enemy of Persia. The incompatibility of these two opposing religions, especially in respect of their funerary rituals, hardened their respective attitudes towards the observance of their traditional funerary laws. In many cases, the Sasanian interference with the funerary rituals of the Christians may have been seen as an attempt to convert them to Zoroastrianism.

Reports of forced re-conversion of Armenians, and probably even Georgians, must be treated as a special case. For centuries, these two client kingdoms of the successive Iranian Empires were practising Zoroastrians. The former nation, moreover, was regarded virtually as Iranian. Nonetheless, even here the attempted conversions seem motivated more by politics than religion.

The reign of Peroz (459-84) witnessed the consolidation of the Nestorian church in Persia, and its total separation from Constantinople. Moreover, Peroz's son and grandson, Cabades I and Chosroes I, through a series of brilliant military victories, finally removed the Byzantine political threat. Henceforth, the Byzantine Empire was not only unwilling to show any favour to the Nestorians in Persia, but was also powerless to intervene effectively on behalf of the remaining Orthodox Christians in that country. This reality is reflected in the clauses in peace treaties where the Byzantines typically do not demand, but merely request, freedom of burial for the Christians. The Zoroastrian clergy must have realised by the early 6th century that they had finally gained the upper hand in their long struggle

against the Christian threat. However, they were now facing the even more devastating menace of the home-grown Mazdakite heresy, and after the merciless routing of that peril, they seem to have reached the zenith of their power.

Reports of religious intolerance and attempted proselytisation re-emerged during the last decades of the Empire. The final struggle between the first Christian (i.e., Byzantine) and last Zoroastrian (i.e., Sasanian) empires was a war of attrition lasting for nearly thirty years. It soon led to the fall of the one in the hands of the Arabs, and condemned the other to eight hundred years of suspended animation, and finally to an ignominious death in the hands of the Ottoman Turks. For Muslims, who ultimately inherited both these empires, both intolerance and proselytisation were regarded as religious duties.

Unfortunately, there is hardly any reliable contemporary western source dealing with the state of the Iranian religion during this period. Agathias was the last great writer to describe the history of the Persians, and above all, their national faith, subsequent western works, for many centuries to come, seem insignificant by comparison.

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