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Claims of Chinese Ancestry and Accounts of the First Christian Martyrdom in Battle

Kevin Vogelaar

Abstract
In 450-451 CE, Vardan Mamikonean led an alliance of Christian princes in rebellion against Sasanian Shah Yazdegerd II in response to the imposition of forced Zoroastrian conversions. Vardan and most of his army died at the Battle of Avarayr, but Yazdegerd soon thereafter rescinded his conversion policy. Vardan and his army were hailed as martyrs in the Armenian Church, making them the first Christian martyrs to die in what was styled a holy war. This chapter highlights how descriptions of Vardan's martyrdom initially focused on his clan's claimed Chinese royal ancestry and analyses those claims in their wider Eurasian context.

Keywords
Vardan Mamikonean; martyrdom; Buzandaran; Primary History; Movsēs Xorenacʿi; Łazar Pʿarpecʿi; Ełišē; Yellow Turban Rebellion; Huns; East-West migration.

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CLAIMS OF CHINESE ANCESTRY AND ACCOUNTS OF THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM IN BATTLE

Kevin Vogelaar*

I. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, it is to introduce the source material on Vardan Mamikonean's martyrological legend to a wider audience interested in late antique and medieval conceptions of holy war and martyrdom. From 450-451 CE, Vardan led a rebellion of Christian princes from Armenia, Georgia, and Caucasian Albania against Sasanian Shah Yazdegerd II (r. 438-457 CE), called "Yazkert" in Armenian sources, when the Shah attempted to impose Zoroastrian religious observances upon them. This rebellion ended in the rebels' defeat at the Battle of Avarayr in 451 CE, but the Shah would soon thereafter rescind his religious policy and return the empire to its prior custom of toleration.

Most of the rebel princes died at Avarayr, including Vardan, and the Armenian Church declared them all martyrs less than a century later. Vardan became the face of this collective beatification, and is therefore the first Christian saint to be martyred in battle. However, Armenian sources on Vardan's legend and the 451 rebellion have been largely overlooked in scholarship on the development of Christian holy war, likely owing to the prevailing ambiguity of Vardan's cult. Vardan's earliest hagiographers were well aware of how novel the notion of martyrdom through battle was, and they approached it carefully. They sought to place Vardan's actions in-line with the longer heroic tradition of the Mamikonean clan's history, reaching back to their claimed royal ancestral origin in China. Later narratives would disentangle Vardan's martyrdom from the Mamikonean claimed Chinese origins, thereby creating competing traditions.

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This chapter's second purpose is to offer a reassessment of the claims of Chinese ancestry in late antique and early medieval Mamikonean dynastic histories by recontextualizing them in their wider Eurasian milieu. Most prior work on this subject has focused on ascertaining the claims' historical veracity.[1] This chapter follows the example of Alison Vacca's mnemohistorical approach to the vital role of Balkh (in Bactria, mod. Afghanistan) in Armenian Arsacid dynastic origin narratives, which were produced around the same time the Mamikonean Chinese origin claims are first textually evidenced.[2] However, rather than looking at history writing as a means of memory creation alone, this chapter takes a literary-historical approach to the Chinese origin claims with attention paid to why the claims were made and who their intended audiences may have been. While the claims were certainly meant for the Armenian elite, this chapter asserts that the specific focus on a Chinese origin was meant to create a rhetorical and historical basis for appealing to the Huns north of the Caucasus for alliances against mutual foes: the Sasanians.

This study assumes that the Huns were connected to or otherwise descended from the so-called Xiongnu 匈奴. The Xiongnu Empire covered most of the Mongolian Plateau and lasted from the third century BCE to the first century CE, after which it split between Northern and Southern groups. The Xiongnu forced the Yuezhi 月氏 westward into Central Asia in the second century BCE and was a major rival to the Qin (221-206 BCE) and Han (202 BCE-9 CE/25-220 CE) dynasties. The Southern Xiongnu gradually integrated into the Han political orbit, but retained their independence.[3] The Northern Xiongnu faded from the political stage.

That the Huns are connected to the Xiongnu is not a new assertion, but remains highly controversial. Based on comparative philological analysis, many have speculated that the Huns may be a splinter of the Northern Xiongnu. The results of such studies have been inconclusive. However, more recent scholarship paying greater attention to material sources and archaeology has proven close cultural connections between Eurasian steppe polities, including the Huns and the Xiongnu.[4] Kidarite kings assumed Kushan titles while still

[1] For a historiographic overview, see R. Bedrosian, "China and the Chinese according to 5-13th Century Classical Armenian Sources," *Armenian Review* 31/1 (1981): 17-24; A. Vacca, "Bahl Šahastan in the land of the K'ušans: Medieval Armenian memories of Balkh as an Arsacid capital," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (2001): 1-27.

[2] A. Vacca, "Bahl Šahastan."

[3] S.-K. Psarras, "Han and Xiongnu: A Reexamination of Cultural and Political Relations II," *Monumenta Serica* 52 (2004): 37-93.

[4] É. Miklós, "Archaeological continuity between the Xiongnu and the Huns: Eight connections supported by written sources," *The DSCA Journal* (2008): 11-24; idem. "Xiongnu and Huns-

calling themselves rulers of various Hunnic tribes, and the Kidarites were called the "Huna" by the Kushans.[5] The Kushans, themselves, incorporated the Yuezhi who previously conquered the Greco-Bactrian kingdom after they were forced out of their original territories by the Xiongnu. This author takes the view of Étienne de La Vaissière, who suggested that the Huns may have been part of the Xiongnu, but that the Huns need not have been Xiongnu in order to claim or express some connection to them as part of the Huns' own history-making.[6]

That the Huns migrated from formerly Xiongnu territories is not without precedent. The Alans similarly made their way westward from northern Asia, and are often included as the Alankʿ [Ալանք]/ Alanatsʿn [Ալանացն] with the Huns, or Honkʿ [Հոնք]/ Honatsʿn [Հոնացն], north of the Caucasus in early Armenian sources. Recording events of the early first through late second centuries CE, the fifth-century *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 [*Book of the Later Han*] calls the Alans the Alan liao 阿蘭聊 [the Alan Nation], while the third-century CE *Weilüe* 魏略 [*A Brief History of the Wei*] refers to them simply as the Alan 阿蘭.[7]

The third purpose of this chapter is to take the seemingly disparate themes of the first Christian battle-martyrdom and the Mamikonean claim of Chinese origin and demonstrate how each is directly pertinent to the literary-historiographic and mnemohistorical development of the other. From how the first battle-martyrdom and Chinese ancestry narrative strands interact over time, we can observe both how cautious late antique Armenian writers were to directly engage with the idea of a Christian battle-martyr, and how the notions of Chinese ancestry were initially integral to Vardan's portrayal as a martyr and holy warrior.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first covers the Mamikonean claims of Chinese ancestry and looks specifically at the circa 470 CE *Buzandaran*,[8]

One and the Same: Analyzing Eight Archaeological Links and Data from Ancient Written Sources," *Eurasian Studies Yearbook* 81 (2009): 5-36; A. Khazanov, "The Scythians and their Neighbors," in *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and their Eurasian Predecessors. Perspectives on the Global Past*, eds. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 32-49.

[5] É. de La Vaissière, "The Steppe World and the Rise of the Huns," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 175-191.

[6] Ibid.

[7] For a comprehensive list of Alan naming conventions, albeit with some now dated interpretations, see A. Alemany, *Sources on the Alans: A Critical Compilation*. Handbuch der Orientalistik 8: Central Asia, Vol. 5: Sources on the Alans (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

[8] *The Epic Histories Attributed to P'awstos Buzand: (Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk')*, trans. and comm. Nina G. Garsoïan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). For the Armenian text, which cannot be included here for reasons of length, see 03Buz, *Classical Armenian-English Key-Word-In-Context Concordance*, eds. Tom Samuelian, Armen Simonyan, Haik Hakopian,

the fifth-to-sixth-century *Primary History*,[9] and the late eighth-century history of Movsēs Xorenacʿi,[10] each read in their wider Eurasian context. The second section includes the histories of Łazar Pʿarpecʿi written around 500 CE,[11] and Ełišē from the sixth century,[12] both of which were written specifically on Vardan and the 451 rebellion. Though pertinent, this chapter will not extensively address the allusions to Maccabees made throughout Ełišē's and, to a lesser degree, Pʿarpecʿi's, accounts, which have already been thoroughly addressed by Robert Thomson and Nina Garsoïan.[13]

II. Claims of Chinese Ancestry

A. The Buzandaran

The *Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk'* [Բուզանդարան Պատմութիւնք, *Epic Histories*] was written ca. 470 CE.[14] The *Buzandaran* covers the time from the death of Gregory the Illuminator, the first bishop of Armenia, through the partitioning of the Kingdom of Armenia (ca. 331-387 CE). The *Buzandaran* follows three main narrative threads: an ecclesiastical history of the hereditary succession of *catholicoi* descendant from Gregory the Illuminator (the "Grigorids"), a royal

and Hovhannes Asryan (Yerevan: Arak29, 2022), https://www.historians.armenian cathedral.org/index.htm (accessed May 10, 2024).

[9] "Appendix A. The 'Primary History,'" in *Moses Khorenats'i, History of the Armenians*, trans. and comm. Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

[10] *Moses Khorenats'i, History of the Armenians*, trans. and comm. by Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978). For the Armenian text, see 06Khor, *Classical Armenian-English Key-Word-In-Context Concordance*, eds. Tom Samuelian, Armen Simonyan, Haik Hakopian, and Hovhannes Asryan (Yerevan: Arak29, 2022), https://www.historians.armeniancathedral.org/index.htm (accessed May 10, 2024).

[11] *The History of Łazar Pʿarpecʿi*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991). For the Armenian text, see 05Parp, *Classical Armenian-English Key-Word-In-Context Concordance*, eds. Tom Samuelian, Armen Simonyan, Haik Hakopian, and Hovhannes Asryan (Yerevan: Arak29, 2022), https://www.historians.armeniancathedral.org/index.htm (accessed May 10, 2024).

[12] *Eļishē, History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, comm. and trans. Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). For the Armenian text, see 04Yegh, *Classical Armenian-English Key-Word-In-Context Concordance*, eds. Tom Samuelian, Armen Simonyan, Haik Hakopian, and Hovhannes Asryan (Yerevan: Arak29, 2022), www.historians.armeniancathedral.org/index.htm (accessed May 10, 2024).

[13] R. W. Thomson, "The Maccabees in Early Armenian Historiography," *Journal of Theological Studies* 26 (1975): 329-341; N. G. Garsoïan, "Reality and Myth in Armenian History," in *Church and Culture in Early Medieval Armenia*. Variorum Collected Studies (London: Routledge, 1999), Ch.xii.

[14] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, 11, 14.

history of the gradually degrading Aršakuni (the Armenian branch of the Parthian Arsacids), and the Mamikonean history extolling the holders of the *sparapet* [սպարապետ, commander-in-chief] office hereditary to the Mamikonean clan. The text is a compilation of Armenian oral traditions and some very early textual sources. It is replete with epic and hagiographic interjections and notes about individual princely houses; including some anachronistic descriptions of fourth-century events as if they foreshadowed fifth-century events.[15]

A pertinent example of this anachronistic foreshadowing is the entry on Vačʿē Mamikonean's death in the mid-fourth century against the Sasanians in a mutually destructive battle.[16] In a eulogistic speech, a bishop likens Vačʿē and his army to martyrs in a way clearly evocative of Vardan Mamikonean and the rebels after the 451 CE Battle of Avarayr. This includes paralleling Vačʿē and his army with the Maccabees, which Ełišē's *History* would go on to develop into a hagiographic focus of his account. This demonstrates that the *Buzandaran* was compiled with an eye toward incorporating Vardan's developing legend as a martyr into a longer heroized history of the Mamikonean dynasty as a whole, making his martyrdom a function of the role of *sparapet* borne by the clan's patriarchs across generations.

This effort to foreshadow the 451 rebellion without explicitly discussing it is noteworthy given that the *Buzandaran* also includes the earliest surviving version of the Mamikonean Chinese origin narrative. This hints at a possible discomfort with explicitly including the 451 rebellion and the Chinese origin narrative in the same text. The themes of hagiographic treatments of the 451 rebellion are included here anachronistically only, while the text is not extended into the later fifth century to include the rebellion itself.

The *Buzandaran*'s first mention of the Mamikonean Chinese origin claim comes in the context of conflict with the Aršakuni.[17] In the mid-fourth century, Urhnayr, king of Ałuankʿ [Caucasian Albania], joined with the Sasanians against an allied Armenian and Byzantine army. He asked Shah Shapuh (Shapur II, r. 309-379 CE) for the reward of facing *sparapet* Mušeł Mamikonean in battle while Shapuh focused on the Greeks. Urhnayr was granted his request, but Urhnayr also issued orders to his soldiers and, presumably, some Persian soldiers as well to take as many Greeks (Byzantines) prisoner as possible, so that they can be taken "in fetters to Ałuankʿ to work as brickmakers, stonecutters, and masons for the needs of our cities, palaces, and other needs."[18] The Ałuankʿ and Sasanian

[15] Ibid. 2-3, 8-11.

[16] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, III.xi; 03Buz, T. Samuelian et al, 3:11.

[17] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, V.iv.

[18] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, V.iv: 198; 03Buz, T. Samuelian et al, 5:4.11.

army lost, and Mušeł allowed Urhnayr to flee. Mušeł's detractors used his sparing of Urhnayr to slander him before the Aršakuni king, Pap, saying Mušeł intended to betray the king. Pap was already weary of Mušeł and had previously attempted to disallow Catholicos Nersēs from giving Mušeł a blessing before the battle, though Nersēs ultimately prevailed in convincing Pap to permit the blessing by shaming him for his own sinful behaviour.

Mušeł, responding to the accusations, confronted Pap and demonstrated that he would rather die at Pap's hands than permit it to be said that he would kill a king, even an enemy king.[19] At this, Pap embraced Mušeł and, weeping, said:

> Those who dare speak ill of a man as valorous and honourable as Mušeł deserve death. For he is a man of as honourable a race as ours, and his ancestors were like ours. For his ancestors abandoned their kingdom in the realm of the Čenkʿ [China; Ճենաց (Čenatsʿ)] and came to our ancestors. They lived and died for our ancestors, his father died for my father, and he has faithfully toiled to the [very brink] of death. Many times God has granted us victory through the prayers and supplications of our wondrous father Nersēs, and he has granted us much peace by the hand of this [man]. How [can] they speak such words to me as: "Mušeł is plotting your death?" For he is a loyal man indeed. If he has spared foreign kings through friendship, how could he raise his hand against his true lord?[20]

The asserted Chinese origin of the Mamikoneans serves here as a means of demonstrating loyalty to the Armenian Aršakuni dynasty. Pap explicitly recognizes that the Mamikoneans do not share the same ethnic origin as the Arsacids, but their service to the Arsacids/Aršakuni makes their foreign origin a marker of authority and legitimacy rather than of "otherness" or distance. This is likely a reference to the claimed Parthian Arsacid and, by extension, Aršakuni origin in Balkh, to where the Mamikonean progenitors would have presumably fled from China.[21] It is the mutual connection to Balkh which unifies the Mamikoneans, the Aršakuni, and the Grigorid *catholicoi*. Pap's speech confirms this by his reference to Nersēs's prayers for peace being enacted by God through the tireless efforts of Mušeł. It is the foreign origin of the Mamikoneans in China which allows them to have a legendary connection to Balkh and thence to the Arsacids. Pap's speech is almost penitential, wherein he recognizes the sacred link between his own Arsacid/Aršakuni line, the Grigorid *catholicoi*, and

[19] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, V.iv:204; 03Buz, T. Samuelian et al, 5:4.66-67.
[20] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, V.iv:204; 03Buz, T. Samuelian et al, 5:4.68-69.
[21] A. Vacca, "Bahl Šahastan."

Mamikonean *sparapets* which his own actions have jeopardized by failing to live up to the standards of his Parthian Balkh ancestors. Pap was acting in breach of his own ancestral role: first by his refusal to allow Nersēs to bless Mušeł, then by his distrust of Mušeł's loyal service, and then by his condemnation of Mušeł for not killing Urhnayr, who, as a king, only Pap had the right to do.

Mušeł's decision to spare Urhnayr demonstrates that the Mamikoneans continue to fulfil their sacred duty to the Aršakuni, just as Nersēs's chastisement of Pap continues to uphold the legacy of Gregory the Illuminator. On a practical level, Mušeł's decision is further validated when Urhnayr later sends word of another Sasanian invasion force to Mušeł, giving the Armenians and Byzantines the chance to prepare and secure another victory.[22] That Urhnayr is here made the king of Ałuankʿ is also noteworthy. Urhnayr is called the king of the Honkʿ, the Huns, in the tenth-century *Vita of St. Nersēs*.[23] By having Urhnayr as the king of Ałuankʿ, Mušeł's victory is against Caucasian Albania during a brief time in which it was allied with the Sasanians, and the Huns are not made into an enemy force at all.

Indeed, Mušeł's victory can be read as a victory against the enemies of the Huns as well. The emphasis the *Buzandaran* places upon Urhnayr's desire for Greek slave labourers to build his cities, palaces, and meet "other needs" may be speaking to the Sasanian-era expansion of cities and fortifications in Caucasian Albania against the Huns, including the "Gates of Darband." These "Gates" are the heavily fortified city of Darband on the Caspian coast (also called the Caspian Gates) which served as the main bastion of a network of forts and, later, a 42 km-long wall extending from the Caspian coast into the Caucasus Mountains.[24] Garsoïan noted that Urhnayr's desire for Greek labourers parallels the Sasanian use of Roman prisoners in other royal building projects.[25] However, that Urhnayr specifically desires Greek labourers, not Armenian, for the development of Ałuankʿ speaks to this period of Sasanian build-up against the Huns in Caucasian Albania, where the Gates of Darband came to be associated with the Gates of Alexander raised against the Unclean Nations of the north.[26] This association extended in Armenian eschatological thought through the early

[22] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, V.v.

[23] Ibid. 309n3.

[24] A. Kazaryan, "Urban Planning and Architecture of Caucasian Albania. Main Monuments and Trends of Development," in *Caucasian Albania: An International Sourcebook*, eds. Jost Gippert and Jasmine Dum-Tragut (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 356.

[25] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, 309n9.

[26] First attested in Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* VI, 40; see M. Bais, "Caucasian Albania in Greek and Latin Sources," in *Caucasian Albania: An International Sourcebook*, eds. Jost Gippert and Jasmine Dum-Tragut (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 8-10.

invasions of the Mongols.[27] The *Buzandaran* may be implying here that Urhnayr wanted Greek labourers to expand upon the "Greek" fortifications established in the past, but also that he did not trust Armenian labourers to not open the way for Hunnic allies to invade Ałuankʿ and Persia.

Such an alliance between the Huns and Alans and Vasak Mamikonean was struck in the mid-fourth century and would happen again later, during the 451 rebellion and the alliance between Vardan Mamikonean and Attila. That the *Buzandaran* already foreshadows the 451 rebellion at points throughout its narrative allows the possibility that this later alliance was also in the compiler's or writer's mind. The *Buzandaran*'s first mention of Mamikonean Chinese ancestry overlaps with simultaneous allusions to the Huns and the enmity they share with the Armenians against the Sasanians.

Though Pap is presented as a failure, he did nonetheless repent of his own sins and for falling short of the Arsacid/Aršakuni legacy. After Pap's death and the ascent of Varazdat to the throne in circa 374 CE, this lesson would be immediately forgotten. Varazdat conspired with Bat, the chief of the Saharuni clan, to execute Mušeł after he was falsely accused of having killed Pap.[28] Varazdat then bestowed the title of *sparapet* upon Bat.[29] This betrayal leads to the *Buzandaran*'s second assertion of Mamikonean Chinese origin, this time bluntly stated by the Mamikoneans themselves, but also contested by the new Aršakuni king.

While Varazdat was betraying Mušeł, two Mamikonean brothers, Manuēl and Koms, were being held captive by Shapuh (Shapur II).[30] As captives, Shapuh sent them with his army against the "great Aršakuni king of the Kushans, who held the city of Balh [Balkh]."[31] This is a reference to the Parthian Arsacids and their traditional origin in Balkh in Armenian historiography, from whence they continued to resist the Sasanians after the Parthian Empire was overturned.[32]

The Persian force lost to the Kushans. Manuēl and Koms were the only survivors, and when they reported back to Shapuh, he angrily dismissed them back to Armenia. Upon their return to Armenia, Manuēl assumed control of the Mamikonean clan, and named himself *sparapet*, as the office was hereditary to the Mamikoneans and held irrespective of royal confirmation.[33] At this point,

[27] K. Franklin, *Everyday Cosmopolitanisms: Living the Silk Road in Medieval Armenia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 9-10.

[28] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, V.xxxv.

[29] Ibid. V.xxxvii.

[30] Ibid. V.xxxvii.

[31] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, V.xxxvii:242; 03Buz, T. Samuelian et al, 5:37.5.

[32] A. Vacca, "Bahl Šahastan."

[33] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, 327n9.

Koms disappears from the narrative. Manuēl then issues an ultimatum to Varazdat:

> In return for all the services that our clan faithfully rendered to you Aršakuni from the earliest times … Behold that valiant man Mušeł my brother,[34] who from his youth wore out his life for your sake, who routed and slaughtered your foes and whom the foe could not kill, you seized and strangled him on a banqueting-couch. You, then, are not true Aršakuni but a bastard child, this is why you have not acknowledged the faithful servants of the Aršakuni. Indeed, we are not even your vassals but your equals and [even] greater than you, for our ancestors were kings in the realm of the Čenkʿ. And on account of quarrels [between] brothers, and because much blood flowed, we set out to seek a haven and settled [here]. The first Aršakuni kings knew who we were and whence [we came], but you, since you are not Aršakuni, go from this realm, lest you die by my hand![35]

Varazdat outright dismisses Manuēl's accusation and attempts to use the Chinese origin of the Mamikoneans against his claim of inherited authority:

> But you are not from this realm, for you yourself have said, "Indeed we are from the land of the realm of Čenkʿ [where] we were kings by nature, and we have come here as strangers." Then do not die like your brother,[36] for out of my beneficence I let you go free. Go to the land of the Čenkʿ, live there and rule there in your own land![37]

Manuēl asserts here that Varazdat's betrayal of Mušeł and failure to recognize Mamikonean loyalty breached the sacred trust between the Arsacids, Grigorids, and Mamikoneans, thereby excluding Varazdat from the right to call himself a true Aršakuni king. As a result, Manuēl could impose himself over Varazdat, whose invalidated royalty made him a lesser lord beneath the *sparapet*. But, Manuēl's authority as the *sparapet* is based on his clan's descent from the kings of China. The Mamikonean royal progenitor's decision to remove himself from China to end violent brotherly strife was recognized and appreciated by the

[34] եղբայր [brother] here denotes kinship, not literal siblinghood. Ibid. 328n11.
[35] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, V.xxxvii:243-244; 03Buz, T. Samuelian, 5:37.16-20.
[36] See note 34 above.
[37] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, V.xxxvii:244; 03Buz, T. Samuelian, 5:37.21-22.

Parthian Arsacids, who gave the clan the hereditary *sparapet* title out of respect and to secure their service.

As with Pap's speech, Manuēl recognizes the ethnic distinction between the Chinese origins of the Mamikoneans and the Arsacids/Aršakuni, though this again serves to demonstrate authority and loyalty rather than "otherness." The Mamikoneans are the *sparapets* because of their progenitor's royalty, but their loyal and capable service to the Aršakuni has demonstrated that they continue to live up to their ancestral legacy. However, Varazdat's response to Manuēl employed this same ethnic distinction to "other" the Mamikoneans, asserting that their natural place is in China, with the implication that they deserve the strife their progenitor fled from and do not have any claim to inherited position outside of that kingdom.

In circa 378 CE, after further exchanges of insults and threats, Manuēl and Varazdat go to war. The Mamikonean army defeats the royal army with ease and Manuēl nearly beats Varazdat to death with the king's own lance in a mounted duel. Despite Manuēl's prior threat, he spares and exiles Varazdat because he was still a king, even if an illegitimate one. The other conspirators in Mušeł's death were all executed. Pap's wife, Queen Zarmanduxt, ruled as regent with Manuēl as *sparapet*, advisor, and tutor of Pap's young sons, Aršak and Vałaršak, the former named after the founder of the Parthian Arsacid dynasty and the latter after the founder of the Parthian Aršakuni branch.[38]

Varazdat shows how the claim of Chinese origin may have been used against the Mamikoneans from the earliest times of its oral circulation and translation to text. As we will see, Xorenacʿi will later use a similar means of ethnic "othering" to undermine Mamikonean claims to authority by rewriting the terms under which their progenitor(s) arrived in Armenia. However, the version of the Chinese origin story in the *Primary History* matches many details offered in the *Buzandaran* and maintains a pro-Mamikonean tone.[39]

B. The Primary History

Preserved as the first seven chapters of the *History* attributed to Sebeos, the *Primary History* is a hyper-condensed history of Armenia from its legendary founding to the end of the Aršakuni line. Much of its current form likely dates

[38] Manuēl tutoring Pap's sons reconfirms his loyalty and subservience toward the Aršakuni and Zarmanduxt as the reigning regent, despite his successful rebellion against Varazdat. For more on how tutorage and fosterage were used to establish hierarchies in the Parthian aristocracy, see J. Nabel, *The Arsacids of Rome: Misunderstanding in Roman-Parthian Relations* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2025).

[39] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, 328n14.

to the late seventh century, when the *History* attributed to Sebeos was finally compiled from many sources.[40] The *Primary History* appears to have been taken wholesale from whatever source Xorenacʿi used for the same material in his own history.[41] Numerous similarities between the compilation of Sebeos and the *Buzandaran* further suggest the *Primary History*'s core narrative has a relatively early date,[42] possibly the late fifth or sixth century.[43]

The *Primary History's* compiler or author claims to have heard about the Mamikonean origins in China from a Chinese embassy to Armenia.[44] This Chinese ambassador confirmed that he was fully aware of the Mamikoneans from Chinese oral tradition: "The bards in our country also say in their songs that Mamik and Konak were two valiant men and blood brothers of eminence, sons of Prince Karnam who was the second [in rank] in the kingdom of China."[45] "China" is rendered here in a more Persianate or Iranian ճենաստան [Čenastan],[46] as opposed to the Ճենաց [Čenatsʿ] and Ճենք [Čenkʿ] in the above examples from the *Buzandaran*.

The *Primary History* begins its account of Mamikonean Chinese origins with a blunt statement of the clan's foreign ethnicity: "They are [not] descendants of

[40] For more on the *History* attributed to Sebeos as a compiled text, see T. Greenwood, "Sasanian Echoes and Apocalyptic Expectations: A Re-Evaluation of the Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos," *Le Muséon* 115/3-4 (2002): 323-397. Some scholars have questioned whether the *Primary History* is original to Sebeos, based on stylistic or similar grounds. However, the compiled nature of the Sebeos *History* makes stylistic analysis irrelevant, given just how many styles of writing are evidenced throughout the text. The editorial choices the Sebeos compiler(s) made allow us to analyse the *History* on narratological and thematic grounds (as Greenwood does), but not stylistically. Furthermore, the *Primary History* includes information on Mamikonean origins which agrees with the details on the clan's claimed Chinese ancestry in the *Buzandaran*. However, Xorenacʿi parodies the narrative of Mamikonean Chinese origins preserved in the *Primary History* (see the following section on Xorenacʿi). Thus, the *Primary History* preserves a version of the Mamikonean Chinese origin story which largely agrees with the fifth-century *Buzandaran*, but which was modified by Xorenacʿi in the eighth century. This would place the Mamikonean origin story preserved in the *Primary History*, and likely the *Primary History* itself, in a period between the writing of the *Buzandaran* and Xorenacʿi's history, during which time the compilation of the seventh-century *History* attributed to Sebeos also took place.

[41] *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos: Parts 1 and 2*, trans. R. W. Thomson, comm. J. Howard-Johnston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), xxxiii, lix.

[42] Ibid. xli, xliv-xlvi, lix-lx.

[43] R. Bedrosian, "China and the Chinese," 19.

[44] "'The 'Primary History,'" R. W. Thomson, 367.

[45] Ibid. 367.

[46] *Պատմութիւն Սեբէոսի* [Patmutʿiwn Sebēosi, History of Sebeos], ed. Gevorg Varagi Abgaryan (Yerevan: Haykakan SSH Gitutʿyunneri Akademiayi Hratarakchʿutʿyun, 1979), Ch. 4.12.

the forefather of our nation, Aramaneak, but they came from China in the years of Artavan, king of the Parthians, and of Khozrov the Great, king of Armenia."[47] This opening statement demonstrates some concern about Mamikonean "Armenianness." This concern about "Armenianness" was expressed in different terms in the *Buzandaran*, where Mamikonean authority was rooted in both their royal Chinese heritage and their service as *sparapet*. Here, there is a distinction between Mamikonean hereditary authorities: their Chinese ancestry is recorded independently of their Armenian military and political careers. However, that Mamik and Konak were from a family second in rank only to the king of China nonetheless seems to foreshadow their clan's later appointment as *sparapet* by the Arsacids/Aršakuni. This distinction between hereditary authorities served as a means of "othering" the Mamikoneans when Varazdat turned against them, saying that their hereditary authority was rightfully limited to China, but the *Primary History* takes a more positive tone, presenting the clan progenitors Mamik and Konak as "valiant" and naturally prone to being the first among aristocrats, whether they are in China or Armenia. It may be inferred that the *Primary History* is making the Mamikoneans sound as if they had always been something like *sparapets*, even before entering into Parthian service.

Also noteworthy is that the *Primary History* claims a Chinese ambassador as confirmation of what was known already in Armenia about Mamikonean origins. More is said of this "embassy" below, but this confirmation of Chinese ancestry from a Chinese source seems aimed at dissuading audience disbelief or criticism. The opening passage assumes some among the audience would disbelieve the claimed ancestry or use the foreign origin against the Mamikonean clan as Varazdat does in the *Buzandaran*. That the Chinese ambassador knows about the Mamikoneans from supposed oral bardic traditions performed contemporaneously in China would have made this narrative more relatable to an Armenian audience of the time, considering the vast conversion of oral traditions to text following the fifth-century invention of the Armenian alphabet. Likewise, that this confirmation came from a Chinese ambassador assumes that China was, indeed, politically relevant to Armenia, suggesting to the *Primary History's* audience that the foreign origins of the Mamikoneans may not have been as far away culturally as it was geographically.

The *Buzandaran* alludes to the Mamikonean Chinese progenitor migrating westward to extricate himself from brotherly bloodshed. The *Primary History*

[47] Thomson's edition included a typo excluding the negative ոչ [voch', "no"] from this line. It has been reinserted in the quote following Abgaryan. "The 'Primary History,'" R. W. Thomson, 367; *Պատմութիւն Սեբէոսի* [History of Sebeos], G. V. Abgaryan, Ch. 4.11-13.

offers a more complete narrative, wherein Mamik and Konak were the sons of Prince Karnam, who was second only to the Chinese king, the Chenbakur.[48] Upon Karnam's death, the king took Karnam's wife in marriage and they had a son who eventually succeeded the king as the new Chenbakur. This prompted Mamik and Konak to rebel: "Bringing over a section of the princes and the army, they took an oath of unity. They hatched a wicked plot to murder their brother, Chenbakur, king of the land, and to seize his kingdom."[49]

Despite the brothers being described as valiant, their plan to overthrow the king is here called "wicked" and starkly contrasts with Mušeł's and Manuēl's refusal to harm kings in the *Buzandaran*. However, in Mamik and Konak rebelling against the new Chenbakur, presumably due to some perceived slight against their own titles or inheritances, we can see some literary-historical paralleling with Manuēl and Koms rebelling against Varazdat, who deprived the Mamikoneans of their ancestral title.

The *Primary History* says the rebel army rose up in multiple places across the country, but was defeated by the king:

> Mamik and Konak gathered their forces against him in one area of their country; the army of the country was divided into two. When Chenbakur heard this news, he too gathered the army of his part and went out to oppose them in battle. They attacked each other, smote [each other] with the sword, and the rebel army was destroyed.[50]

This differs from Manuēl's speech in the *Buzandaran*, which has the Mamikonean progenitor leaving China voluntarily to end bloodshed, rather than in flight from defeat. After their defeat, Mamik and Konak fled to the Arsacid court in Bahl-Shahastan [Balkh] "in the land of the Kushans," and Chenbakur initially demanded their return, threatening war.[51]

Pap's speech in the *Buzandaran* simply says that the Arsacids saw the value of the Mamikonean progenitors. The *Primary History* gives a more detailed

[48] This is a combination of the Armenian ethnonym ՉԷն, "Čen," [China] with Middle Iranian *baypuhr* [son of God]. *Baypuhr* was used to render *tianzi* 天子 [Son of Heaven], the traditional title for the Chinese Emperor. It is likely that this title entered Iran from the Kushans, who used *tianzi* for their own kings, during the time of the Kushano-Sasanian Kingdom (c. 230-365 CE). X. Liu, "Migration and Settlement of the Yuezhi-Kushan: Interaction and Interdependence of Nomadic and Sedentary Societies," *Journal of World History* 12/2 (2001): 261-292, at 278-279; A. Vacca, "Bahl Šahastan," 12-13.

[49] "The 'Primary History,'" R. W. Thomson, 367.

[50] Ibid. 367.

[51] Ibid. 367-368.

account: the Arsacid king sent a letter refusing Chenbakur's demand: "'Let the treaty of peace,' he said, 'remain firm between us, for I have sworn to them that they will not die. But I had them taken to the West, to the edge of the world, to that place where the sun enters its mother.'"[52] Chenbakur accepted this response, and the Parthian Arsacid king sent the brothers with their families and retinues to the Armenian Aršakuni king: "And there they multiplied greatly, and they became a great clan from Mamik and Konak."[53] The Arsacid king's decision to send the brothers westward is the reason why the brothers would go on to found an Armenian clan. There is no mention of how the Mamikoneans became the *sparapets*, though, as explicitly stated in the *Buzandaran*, their princely Chinese heritage may be assumed to play a role in their ascendancy here.

As noted above, the *Primary History's* Chinese origin narrative curiously relies upon supposed Chinese ambassadorial confirmation. This detail may hint at how the Chinese origin narrative may have developed in Armenian oral tradition prior to its textual recording. There are no Chinese or other Armenian records of the embassy mentioned in the *Primary History*. Westward mission attempts from the Han period are well documented in Chinese sources. In 139 BCE, Zhang Qian 張騫 was sent by Emperor Han Wu 漢武帝 (r. 141-87 BCE) to make an alliance with the (Da) Yuezhi (大)月氏 in Bactria against the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu had generations prior forced the Yuezhi out of the steppes northwest of China (in the region of modern Gansu 甘肅), and the Yuezhi eventually moved south, conquered the Indo-Greek Bactrian Kingdom, and later became part of the Kushan Empire. Zhang Qian's report was preserved in the 91 BCE *Shiji* 史記 [*Records of the Grand Historian*], by Sima Qian 司馬遷. Zhang Qian did not reach past Da Xia 大夏, part of northern Bactria, and the Yuezhi ultimately refused the Han's offer.[54] Zhang Qian's mission put him roughly in the region around Balkh. Memory of Zhang Qian's mission, possibly preserved in the Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian kingdoms and recalled again upon the invasion of the Kidarites/Huna at around the same time as Armenian involvement in Sasanian conflicts in the region, may have inspired the *Primary History's* assertion of a Chinese-Arsacid embassy.

That Zhang Qian's mission may have been remembered in some form in late antique Kushan or Kushano-Sasanian territories is not farfetched. Zhang Qian's fame as a traveler and agent of the Han was such that he was later included as a protagonist in a legend of how Buddhism came to China. Sengyou 僧祐 included the legend in his early sixth-century CE *Chu sanzang ji ji* 出三藏記集 [*Collected*

[52] Ibid. 368.

[53] Ibid. 368.

[54] See note 57 below.

Records Concerning the Tripitaka]. In this legend, Zhang Qian is anachronistically made into an envoy of Emperor Han Ming 漢明帝 (r. 28-75 CE), and his westward mission was to bring back Buddhist scriptures which were to become the first translated into Chinese.[55] This Chinese Buddhist legend spread westward, reaching the monastic and trading center of Dunhuang 敦煌 by the seventh or eighth centuries, prior to the region coming under Tibetan rule.[56] It is possible that Zhang Qian left a comparable impression in the western places he visited, the written records of most of which have not survived.

The embassy of Gan Ying 甘英 in the late first century CE went much farther afield. He was sent to Da Qin 大秦 [Rome] and his travels and report are recorded in the *Hou Hanshu* 88.10. Gan Ying made it to Tiaozhi 條支 [Antioch-on-the-Orontes] but sailors of Anxi 安息 [Arsacid Parthia] did not take him across the sea due to their concerns about storms and the length of the voyage. Antioch by the late first century CE was under Roman rule, so it is surprising that Gan Ying seemed to rely more on Parthians than Romans, or that the governor of Syria did not ensure his arrival in Rome. There is a question of whether Tiaozhi could have meant Antioch on the Persian Gulf, where it would make more sense that Gan Ying would rely on Parthian guides and transportation, assumedly sailing thence to Egypt using established lines of trade across the Indian Ocean.[57] Either way, news of Gan Ying's travels through Arsacid Parthia may have reached Armenians in some form, inspiring either on its own or in tandem with some knowledge of Zhang Qian's embassy the *Primary History's* imagined Chinese interlocutor.

[55] J. Nattier, *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations: Texts from the Eastern Han* 東漢 *and Three Kingdoms* 三國 *Periods*. Bibliotheca Philologica et Philosophica Buddhica 10, ed. Hiroshi Kanno (Tokyo: The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, 2008), 35-37.

[56] Mogao Cave 323 (Early Tang Dynasty), *Dunhuang Caves on the Silk Road: Online Exhibitions & Speaker Series* 丝路上的敦煌石窟: 虚拟展览及演讲系列 (Dunhuang Academy 敦煌研究院, University of Washington Tateuchi East Asia Library 华大馆内东亚图书馆, Dunhuang Foundation 美国敦煌基金会) https://www.dunhuang.ds.lib.uw.edu/mogao-cave-323-early-tang-dynasty/ (accessed June 19, 2025).

[57] For more on Zhang Qian and Gan Ying, see J. Yang, "Hellenistic Information in China," *CHS Research Bulletin* 2/2 (2014), http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn3:hlnc.essay:YangJ.Hellenistic_Information_in_China.2014 (accessed May 12, 2024); idem., "Some Clues of the Hellenistic World and the Roman East Hidden in China's Early Four Historical Books," *Talanta* 46-47 (2014-2015): 121-143; H. P. Zanous and J. Yang, "Arsacid Cities in the Hanshu and Houhanshu," *Iran and the Caucasus* 22 (2018): 123-138; R. Kauz and Liu Y., "Armenia in Chinese Sources," *Iran and the Caucasus* 12/2 (2008): 175-190.

C. Movsēs Xorenacʿi, Patmutʿiwn Hayocʿ

Movsēs Xorenacʿi's *Patmutʿiwn Hayocʿ* [Պատմութիւն Հայոց, *History of the Armenians*] covers the history of Armenia from its mythic founding to the death of Mesrop Maštoc', the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, in 440 CE. In his introduction, Xorenacʿi claims to be a disciple of Mesrop Maštoc' and Catholicos Sahak I (r. 387-438 CE), placing him in the early fifth century. However, internal evidence and a lack of references in other texts before the tenth century point toward a later date of composition, with Robert Thomson suggesting a later eighth century date.[58] One of the reasons for this is the text's distinctly pro-Bagratuni and anti-Mamikonean sentiments. The Bagratuni and Mamikonean clans were in a bitter rivalry for favour from the Umayyad and then ʻAbbasid caliphs. The office of the *sparapet* was taken from the Mamikoneans and given to the Bagratuni in 732 CE, prompting several failed Mamikonean rebellions. ʻAbbasid Caliph al-Muʿtamid ʿAlā ʾllāh (r. 870-892 CE) recognized Ašot I Bagratuni as king of Armenia in 884/5 CE, well after the Mamikoneans had fallen from relevance. Thus, Xorenacʿi's clear political priorities make the most sense in a mid-to-late eighth-century context.[59]

Xorenacʿi uses the *Buzandaran* as a source, though he does not name it in his text.[60] He covers much of the same subject matter as the *Primary History*, albeit with far more detail. As in the *Primary History*, Xorenacʿi locates the origins of the Parthian Arsacid dynasty in Balkh.[61] Where Xorenacʿi differs most from the *Primary History* and *Buzandaran* is in his portrayal of foreignness in Armenian lineage and political authority. Because of this, his version of the Mamikonean Chinese origin is decidedly negative and "others" the Mamikoneans apart from the rest of the Armenian nobility, but in terms quite different from what was expressed by Varazdat in the *Buzandaran* and anticipated in the *Primary History*. Xorenacʿi does not dismiss the Mamikoneans because of their supposed Chinese heritage. Rather, he rewrites the context under which their migration traditionally occurred in order to isolate them from the origins of the Aršakuni and Grigorids.

Part of Xorenacʿi's pro-Bagratuni program is his claim that they descended from a Jewish leader sent by Nebuchadnezzar to Armenia, thereby making the Bagratuni active participants in Jewish and Christian sacred history.[62]

[58] *Moses Khorenats'i, History of the Armenians*, trans. and comm. Robert W. Thomson. Revised Edition (Ann Arbor, Caravan Books, 2006), 2-3, 59.

[59] Ibid. 59.

[60] *Epic Histories*, N. Garsoïan, 4, 20.

[61] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, I:7-8; 06Khor, T. Samuelian et al, 2:2

[62] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, I:22.

Accordingly, Xorenacʿi denies any Bagratuni relation to Aramaneak and Armenia's legendary foundation, just as the *Primary History* does for the Mamikoneans.[63] As we will see, Ełišē links Vardan Mamikonean and the martyrs of 451 CE with the Maccabees, and as noted above, the *Buzandaran* extends this sentiment retroactively to Vačʿē Mamikonean and his army when they fell in battle with the Sasanians. Xorenacʿi, by making the Bagratuni Judaic descendants, undercuts this narrative. Though defeated by the Babylonians, the Kingdom of Judah nonetheless bore the Davidic line, which leads to Mary and Christ according to the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.[64] The Judean exiles in Babylon likewise successfully resisted Nebuchadnezzar's and then Darius's attempts to compel apostasy, and God's divine intervention protected the resisters from having to face martyrdom, though they were ready to endure it nonetheless.[65] The Mamikonean panegyric narratives from the *Buzandaran* and the chronicles of the 451 rebellion present the Mamikoneans as martyrs, but Xorenacʿi makes the Bagratuni descendants from those willing to be martyrs but who were saved by God from that fate. Likewise, Xorenacʿi has this Judean ancestor establishing the Bagratuni clan in Armenia via his own descendants aiding the Parthian Arsacid conquest, making the Bagratuni relevant to the Arsacids well before the Mamikonean progenitor leaves China in the *Buzandaran* or *Primary History*.[66] Foreignness is less an issue for Xorenacʿi than the circumstances under which a clan arrived and became established in Armenia.

Xorenacʿi excludes the Mamikoneans from the sacred relationship with the Arsacids and Grigorids by simply placing their migration from China at the beginning of the Sasanian period, after the Parthian Arsacids had already been overthrown. During the reign of "Shapuh, son of Artashir, son of Sasan" [Shapur I (r. c. 240-270 CE), second Sasanian Shahanshah]: "there came to Armenia the ancestor of the Mamikonian family from the northeast, from a valiant and noble land foremost among all the nations of the north, I mean the land of the Chinese, of whom the following is told."[67] Xorenacʿi applies positive aspects, "valiant and

[63] Ibid. I:22.

[64] Matthew 1. Scriptural references are to the 1805 Zohrab edition of the Armenian Bible.

[65] See Daniel 3 for the salvation of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the furnace and Daniel 6 for Daniel's own protection in the lion's den.

[66] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, II:3.

[67] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, II:81; 06Khor, T. Samuelian et al, 2:81.3. Several other medieval Armenian texts place China in the "north" of the world, seemingly across the Caucasus Mountains. Because these other texts do not discuss Mamikonean origins, they are not discussed here. However, that some Armenian texts attempt to locate China to the north may demonstrate a close association made between China and Eurasian steppe

noble," to the nation of China itself, not to the Mamikonean progenitors as does the *Primary History*. This separates the Mamikoneans and China as independent topics, which the *Buzandaran* and *Primary History* do not do.

In the same year as Artashir's death: "a certain Arbok Chen-bakur, which means in their tongue 'honor of the kingdom,' had two foster brothers called Bldokh and Mamgon, who were great princes."[68] We see the same title of Chenbakur used here for the king of China as in the *Primary History*. Robert Thomson suggested "Arbok" could be a variant of "Arbakes," a relatively common name in Iran and the Caucasus.[69] This naming scheme is interesting, in that it includes a distinctly Persianate element added to an otherwise well-established Armenian rendering of *baypuhr/tianzi*.[70] Xorenacʿi's use of a Persianate name for a Chinese figure may speak to Xorenacʿi's awareness of how reliant the Sasanians had become upon the Tang dynasty over the mid-seventh through eighth centuries; more on this is said below.

Where the *Buzandaran* vaguely alludes to Mamikonean familial connection to the Chinese king, the *Primary History* makes Mamik and Konak the king's elder half brothers and inheritors of their own familial prestige as sons of the second-ranked prince. Xorenacʿi modifies the *Primary History's* narrative to make the Mamikonean progenitor merely a foster brother of the king. This alteration maintains the closer connection offered in the *Primary History* while depriving the Mamikoneans of a legitimate family tie to the Chinese throne, thereby invalidating the clan's claims of royal heritage without denying their origin in, and subsequent exile from, the royal household. The progenitor's status as a foster brother further makes his station as a "great prince" contingent upon the royal family's beneficence, as opposed to multi-generational inheritance.

The *Primary History* names Mamik and Konak the brotherly founders of the Mamikonean line, which is symbolically echoed in the *Buzandaran*'s Manuēl and Koms, who restore the Mamikoneans to their rightful place. Xorenacʿi has Mamgon and Bldokh, a radical departure from the M/K naming convention of the prior texts. This revision extends into the brothers' relationship, as Bldokh slanders Mamgon before Arbok, who in turn condemns Mamgon to death.[71] This conflict between brothers leaves Mamgon the sole eponymous progenitor of the

polities like the Alans, Huns, Avars [Rouran 柔然], and Turks, who were recognized as having come from the direction of China. On the Avars/ Rouran, see Guido Alberto Gnecchi-Ruscone, Anna Szécsényi-Nagy, István Koncz, ..., Zuzana Hofmanová, Choongwon Jeong, Johannes Krause, "Ancient genomes reveal origin and rapid trans-Eurasian migration of 7th century Avar elites," *Cell* 185/8 (2022): 1402-1413.

[68] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, II.81; 06Khor, T. Samuelian et al, 2:81.4.

[69] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, 230n3.

[70] See note 48 above.

[71] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, II.81.

future Mamikonean clan. Being slandered before the king is a common trope in Armenian histories and in Mamikonean histories in particular, as we have seen already in the *Buzandaran*. However, the slanderer is usually from a rival clan or is a traitor to the kingdom. Xorenacʿi, contrarily, makes the first slanderer against a Mamikonean another *de facto* Mamikonean.

Part of this slandering trope includes the victim willingly appearing before the king to argue in his own defence. In the case of Mušeł Mamikonean in the *Buzandaran*, this ended well with Pap but poorly with Varazdat; but both cases led to evocations of Mamikonean Chinese origins as part of their defence (the latter by Manuēl avenging Mušeł). However, Xorenacʿi has Mamgon flee when faced with Arbok's summons to court:

> But when Mamgon heard of this he did not heed the king's summons but fled with his entourage and came to Artashir, king of Persia. Arbok sent messengers to seek his extradition, and when Artashir refused, the king of China prepared for war against him. But at that point Artashir died and Shapuh came to the throne.[72]

This generally follows the *Primary History*, but does not make any mention of Balkh as the refuge, according to the replacement of the Arsacids with the Sasanians as the Mamikonean progenitor's hosts. Likewise, Xorenacʿi seems to imply that Artashir and Arbok may have gone to war were it not for the ascension of Shapuh, whereas the *Primary History* has the Parthian king cleverly avoid hostilities from the start. This makes the arrival of Mamgon a threat to the *status quo* between the kingdoms, contradicting the *Buzandaran* and, less overtly, the *Primary History* which both have the Mamikoneans received as assets by the Arsacids/Aršakuni. Intriguingly, despite Xorenacʿi's anti-Mamikonean tone, he does not include the *Primary History's* note about the Mamikonean progenitor(s) engaging in a "wicked plot" against Chenbakur. Indeed, that Mamgon is subject to slander makes him out to be innocent, where Bldokh is the offender. Xorenacʿi's reversal of roles in his reworking of the Chinese origin narrative is all-encompassing.

That Mamgon's arrival posed more of a problem than a benefit is clarified in Shapuh's decision to send him and his retinue to Armenia:

> Now although Shapuh did not hand over Mamgon to his lord, nonetheless he did not allow him [to remain] in the land of the Aryans but sent him with all his entourage, as if exiled, to his governors in Armenia. And he sent word to the king of China,

[72] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, II.81; 06Khor, T. Samuelian et al, 2:81.6-8.

> saying: "May it not displease you that I was unable to hand over to you Mamgon, because my father had sworn to him by the light of the sun. But to cause you no trouble I have expelled him from my country to the edge of the earth in the west, which is equivalent to death for him. So let there not be war between you and me." And because, as they say, the Chinese are the most peace loving of all the inhabitants on the face of the earth, he agreed to make peace. So it is clear that the Chinese nation is truly devoted to peace and life.[73]

Shapuh sent Mamgon west, to Armenia, in exile as a punishment equivalent to death in order to uphold Artashir's promise of refuge and appease Arbok. Thus, Xorenacʿi makes the Mamikonean presence in Armenia a product of exile and punitive compromise to keep the peace, not of appreciative acceptance or recognition of value. Similarly, Shapuh sending Mamgon to his "governors in Armenia" makes Mamgon a direct product of the Sasanian gradual conquest of the Aršakuni kingdom, completely reversing Mamikonean claims of service to the Aršakuni and casting their actions against the Sasanians into question.

Xorenacʿi interrupts his narrative at this point to include a brief description of China's vast natural wealth and beauty derived from Anania Širakacʿi's seventh-century *Ašxarhacʿoycʿ*, [Աշխարհացոյց, *Geography*][74] favourably comparing its luxury and beauty with that of Armenia.[75] Xorenacʿi often includes passing references to other texts as demonstrations of erudition, but the purpose of this interlude may be to highlight just what Mamgon lost, just as the prior references to China as a peace-loving nation make Arbok's pursuit of Mamgon stand out all the more.

Xorenacʿi develops upon this last point further. He has Mamgon and his retinue encounter the Aršakuni king Trdat III (d. 330 CE), who would later be converted by Gregory the Illuminator and become the first Christian king of Armenia. However, this meeting is less than auspicious:

> So Mamgon, having come to our country against his will, met the returning Trdat. He did not turn back with the Persian army but advanced with all his entourage to meet him with great presents. Trdat received him but did not take him with him in his war against Persia. However, he gave his entourage a place [in which to settle]

[73] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, II.81; 06Khor, T. Samuelian et al, 2:81.9-11.
[74] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, 231n7.
[75] Ibid. II.81.

> and a stipend for food; he changed their residence from place to place for many years.[76]

Mamgon's reluctance to go west reconfirms Shapuh's likening of Armenia to exile. However, that he took his retinue and presented himself before Trdat with gifts makes him out to be somewhat ungrateful, even treacherous, toward his Sasanian hosts, whose escorting army had to withdraw. Thus, Mamgon switched sides, and bought Trdat's favour rather than fulfil Shapuh's promise to send him to the Sasanian authorities in or near Armenia. If Mamgon was going to Shapuh's own people in Armenia, then it is implied that he was expected to serve Shapuh in some capacity. Xorenacʿi having Mamgon switch sides to Trdat and the Aršakuni comes across as deceitful.[77] This deceitfulness may be a reason for why Trdat does not take Mamgon into his military service against the Sasanians, echoing Pap's and then Varazdat's uncertainty about Mušeł's loyalties in the *Buzandaran*, but this time without the intervention of a Grigorid to chastise the Aršakuni king's judgment. Trdat does give Mamgon and his retinue a place to live, though this is not a stable residence, and a stipend for food, making Mamgon entirely reliant upon Trdat's beneficence, just as he was upon that of the royal family of China.

In a later chapter titled "The massacre of the Słkunikʿ by the Chinese Mamgon,"[78] Trdat leaves Armenia to meet Constantine in Rome. This prompted Shapuh to attempt a campaign in Armenia and Sluk, prince of the Słkuni clan, rebelled in collaboration with Shapuh.[79] Trdat returned before Shapuh's army arrived and engaged the Sasanians' regional allies, forcing Sluk to withdraw to his family's castle of Ołakan in Taron, in southern Armenia. This prompted Trdat to issue a general order against Sluk: "The king said to all the princely houses of Armenia: 'Whoever brings to me the prince of the Słkuni family, to him I shall give, with perpetual jurisdiction, villages and estates and all the

[76] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, II.81; 06Khor, T. Samuelian et al, 2:81.15.

[77] Xorenacʿi may be drawing upon the history of Armenian nobles freely switching sides between the Byzantines and Sasanians and caliphs in an effort to paint the Mamikoneans as unstable and unreliable. For more on the history of Armenian nobles playing their imperial neighbours against each other, see J. Preiser-Kapeller, "Aristocrats, Mercenaries, Clergyman and Refugees: Deliberate and Forced Mobility of Armenians in the Early Medieval Mediterranean (6th to 11th century A.D.)," in *Migration Histories of the Medieval Afroeurasian Transition Zone*, eds. Johannes Preiser-Kapeller, Lucian Reinfandt, and Yannis Stouraitis. Studies in Global Migration History 13, ed. Dirk Hoerder. Studies in Global Social History 39 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 327-386.

[78] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, II.84; 06Khor, T. Samuelian et al, 2:84.1.

[79] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, II.84.

domains of the Słkuni family.' This Mamgon, the Chinese, undertook."[80] Xorenacʿi again reiterating that Mamgon was Chinese further separates him from the rest of the Armenian houses. As stated above, Trdat did not require service from Mamgon, and Mamgon was not included in the princely houses expected to take up the royal order, so Mamgon's only intention for getting involved here would presumably have been to secure the Słkuni properties for himself. Thus Xorenacʿi paints Mamgon less like a loyal servant of the Aršakuni and more like an opportunist and schemer the likes of whom are vilified in the histories of the 451 rebellion by Łazar Pʿarpecʿi and Ełišē.

Xorenacʿi has Mamgon approach Sluk as if pledging his support for the rebellion under the pretence of avenging insults done to him by Trdat.[81] Sluk readily received Mamgon as a supporter, but it took many rounds of promises and oath-swearing before Sluk allowed Mamgon into Ołakan. Then, once inside the fortress, Mamgon persuaded Sluk to go out hunting with him:

> During the hunt he [Mamgon] shot an arrow into the middle of his [Sluk's] back and struck the rebel to the ground. Hastening with his men to the gate of the fortress, he seized the castle and imprisoned all those inside. He also decided to destroy the family of the Słkuni, and he slaughtered them all. But two escaped in flight to the land of Tsop'k'.[82]

When Mamgon informed Trdat, the king readily gave Mamgon the promised reward, thereby establishing the "Mamgonean" [Մամգոնեան] house in Taron. However, Trdat also ordered Mamgon not to pursue the remaining Słkuni.[83] Though Trdat accepted the outcome of Mamgon's actions, Xorenacʿi clearly describes these events in a negative light. Mamgon's feigned rebellion mirrors his earlier abandonment of the Sasanians, and his deception and murder of Sluk and most of his family went well beyond the remit of Trdat's actual order, as evidenced by Trdat's intervention against Mamgon's extermination of the entire Słkuni line. Similarly, despite the Mamikonean clan being established by Trdat himself, the very king who would be converted to Christianity by Gregory the Illuminator and thereby make Armenia the first Christian kingdom, Mamgon remains "the Chinese" in Xorenacʿi's account. In this narrative, the Mamikonean progenitor, and his clan by extension, are denied full integration into Armenian history and linger as problematic transplants.

[80] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, II.84; 06Khor, T. Samuelian et al, 2:84.7-8.
[81] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, II.84.
[82] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, II.84; 06Khor, T. Samuelian et al, 2:84:12-14.
[83] *Moses Khorenats'i* (1978), R. W. Thomson, II.84.

Xorenacʿi was writing to exalt the Bagratuni during a time in which they were still competing with the Mamikoneans for ʻAbbasid favour. As such, he was writing for both Armenian and Baghdadi audiences. The East Syriac Christian (meaning here the Church of the East) *Jingjiao* 景教 [Luminous Teaching] community in Tang China had risen to such prominence that they were permitted to erect a monument in the capital, Chang'an 長安 (modern Xi'an, Shaanxi Province), in 781 CE—the so-called "Xi'an Stele."[84] They were also mentioned in letters by East Syriac Catholicos Timothy I in Baghdad (r. 780-823 CE).[85] Xorenacʿi may have heard something about the Syriac church of China from information emanating outward from Baghdad, or, perhaps more likely, from the eighth-century East Syriac metropolitanate in Ahlat, on the western shore of Lake Van, just south of Bagratuni territory.[86]

Utilizing East Syriac sources, Xorenacʿi may have heard information about China relevant to his own day, and was not reliant solely upon Anania Širakac'i. If this is the case, then he may have also been aware of the conflicts between the Tang and ʻAbbasid dynasties. The Tang had hosted the Sasanian dynastic family in exile and actively backed several reconquest campaigns against the Umayyads through the first half of the eighth century.[87] Immediately after the ʻAbbasid Revolution and the overthrow of the Umayyads in 750 CE, the Tang attempted a westward expansion which resulted in the 751 CE Battle of Talas, when the Tang were defeated by an ʻAbbasid-Tibetan alliance. If Xorenacʿi was aware of these conflicts, then his portrayal of Mamgon "the Chinese" as a destabilizing force may have been intended to capitalize on ʻAbbasid concerns about the war and tensions with the Tang. Such tensions are evidenced on the other side of this conflict as well, with the Xi'an Stele inscription's bilingual

[84] For an overview, see M. Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East: Texts and History of the First Encounter of Christianity with China*, trans. William Skudlarek (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[85] Timothy I, "Letters 41 and 47," in *Invitation to Syriac Christianity: An Anthology*, eds. Michael P. Penn, Scott F. Johnson, Christine Shepardson, Charles M. Stang (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 359-360.

[86] J. M. Fiey, "Khilat," in *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques* [Dictionary of Church History and Geography] 28 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000-2003), 1427. For more on the connections between the Church of the East and the Armenian Church during this time and Armenian awareness of the Syriac Church in China, see K. Vogelaar, "Locating The Xi'an Stele On the Four-Hundredth Anniversary of its Discovery," in *Visual Culture in Medieval Syriac Traditions*, ed. Emily R. Chesley. Sense, Matter, Medium 13 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025), 327-389.

[87] H. Takahashi, "Syriac Christianity in China," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King. The Routledge Worlds (London: Routledge, 2019), 633; H. P. Zanous and E. Sangari, "The Last Sasanians in Chinese Literary Sources: Recently Identified Statue Head of a Sasanian Prince at the Qingling Mausoleum," *Iranian Studies* 51.4 (2018): 499–515.

Syriac and Chinese colophon attempting to distance the *Jingjiao* community from their ecclesiastical subordination to the East Syriac see in Baghdad in order to avoid being associated with the Tang's new rival.[88] Xorenacʿi's positive description of China itself facilitates his narrative appeal to a domestic Armenian audience by how it selectively agrees with prior Armenian texts, while his vilification of Mamgon the Chinese transplant is aimed at a Baghdadi or 'Abbasid audience in the midst of a tumultuous relationship with the Tang.

D. Comparative Overview and Recontextualization

Xorenacʿi's version of the Mamikonean Chinese origin narrative demonstrates his intended dual Armenian and 'Abbasid audiences. The *Buzandaran* evokes the Chinese origin claim during Aršakuni challenges to Mamikonean legitimacy and hereditary authority, and is clearly meant for an Armenian audience. Likewise, the *Primary History's* pre-emption of criticism against the Chinese origin narrative also speaks to a desire to defend the Mamikonean clan's position before an Armenian audience. However, just as Xorenacʿi wrote for two audiences, one foreign and one domestic, the *Buzandaran* and *Primary History* demonstrate another possible intended audience beyond the Armenian elite–the Huns.

The Armenians were constantly interacting with migrating and post-migration steppe polities originating from northwest of China–the Alans, the Yuezhi/Kushans, and the Huns to name only those pre-sixth century CE. The Kushans form a consistent point of Armenian reference for Arsacid Balkh origins, tying the story of the Arsacids and Grigorids to the land of the Kushans/Yuezhi and creating a literary-historical context ideal for Mamikonean Chinese origin claims and memory creation. The story of Mušeł's defeat of Urhnayr in the *Buzandaran* makes numerous contextual references to Sasanian frontier conflicts with the Huns and ends with Urhnayr later aiding Mušeł. The Chinese origin narratives in the *Buzandaran* and *Primary History* place the Mamikoneans in the narrative continuity of the Arsacid emergence and anti-Sasanian endurance in the "land of the Kushans," but they do so in a way that, in a wider context, makes the Mamikonean clan into one of many roughly contemporaneous westward-migrating groups leaving the political Sinosphere for the Persian frontiers.

Though the *Buzandaran* offers only a truncated version of the Chinese origin claim compared to the *Primary History*, the clear parallels between the stories of Mamik and Konak and Manuēl and Koms speak to the *Buzandaran*'s awareness of the narrative tradition from which the *Primary History* draws. Thus, we can

[88] K. Vogelaar, "Locating the Xi'an Stele," 343-345.

discuss their commonalities which speak to an intended Hunnic audience. Both of these texts have the Mamikonean progenitors rebel against the Chinese king with whom they shared some vague relation. The ensuring rebellion results in brotherly conflict, with the *Primary History* placing blood-relations Mamik and Konak on the same side. The rebels lose their conflict, or otherwise abandon it, and flee westward to seek Arsacid refuge.

The *Buzandaran* vaguely places the Mamikonean migration during the Arsacid period, but the *Primary History* sets it specifically during the reigns of the Parthian Arsacid "Artavan" and Aršakuni "Khosrov the Great." Given that Khosrov the Great (Khosrov II), ruled after the Sasanian overthrow of the Arsacids, it is likely that the *Primary History* is conflating him with Khosrov I (r. c. 191-216 CE).[89] Khosrov I ruled Armenia contemporaneously with the last Arsacid Shah, Artaban IV (r. 213-224 CE), "Artavan,"[90] aligning with the *Primary History's* regnal citations. This places the Mamikonean progenitors' defeat and flight from China during the late second or very early third centuries: around the same time that the Yellow Turban Rebellion ended in China, sealing the fate of the Han dynasty.

The Yellow Turban Rebellion, so named for the yellow dye the rebel army applied to their clothing, lasted roughly from 184-205 CE. The rebellion was led by Zhang Jue 張角, a Han general and Daoist leader, and his brothers, Zhang Bao 張寶 and Zhang Liang 張梁. Zhang Jue claimed that the Han had lost the favour of Heaven through misrule, thereby resulting in crop failures, natural disasters, and a plague (possibly the Antonine Plague) spreading across China.[91] The Yellow Turbans thus appropriated the colour yellow as a sign of their intention to restore the legacy of the legendary Yellow Emperor and ideal imperial rule while simultaneously demonstrating their belief that the Han had failed to live up to that legacy. The rebels were supported by other Chinese nobles and a branch of the Southern Xiongnu which had split along pro- and anti-rebel lines.[92] Though the Han were victorious in the end, the dynasty never recovered and the Southern Xiongnu began their own slow disintegration. The

[89] This is a common mistake in Armenian historiography. N. Garsoïan, "The Aršakuni Dynasty (A.D. 12-[180?]-428)," in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times, I: The Dynastic Periods From Late Antiquity to the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 71.

[90] Artaban IV is often misidentified as Artaban V. See N. Garsoïan, "The Aršakuni Dynasty," 71; K. Schippmann, "Artabanus (Arsacid kings)," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, II/6 (New York: Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation; Brill, 1986) 647-650, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/artabanus-parth/(accessed July 19, 2025).

[91] R. de Crespigny, *A Biographical Dictionary of Later Han to the Three Kingdoms (23-220 AD)* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 514-515.

[92] S.-K.Psarras, "Han and Xiongnu II," 70-75.

Zhang brothers each led their own army, which rose up in different provinces across China, but all three brothers had been killed by 185 CE.[93]

Set against this wider backdrop, it is striking that the *Primary History's* Mamikonean origin story emphasizes the rebellion of high-ranking Chinese brothers against a king who had run afoul of their estimation set in the very time when such a rebellion was actually going on in China. That Mamik and Konak each led his own army across China seems a superfluous detail until read in relation to the Yellow Turban Rebellion, where the Zhang brothers initially led their own armies in different provinces. Likewise, the *Primary History* and the *Buzandaran* both recognize that the Mamikonean progenitors lost their rebellion or otherwise withdrew from the conflict, which seems a strange narrative choice when trying to make the Mamikoneans appear strong and valiant from their foundations. However, if the *Buzandaran's* and *Primary History's* Mamikonean progenitors are in fact patterned after the Zhang brothers or Yellow Turbans, even if only vaguely, then their defeat is a necessary plot device to ensure a reason for them to make for Balkh and the Arsacids. As with Manuēl and Koms in the *Buzandaran*, whose defeat at the hands of the Kushans makes them appear weak, but ultimately leads them back to their family's appropriate and natural place in Armenia, Mamik and Konak had to lose in China to become *sparapet* of the Aršakuni. It seems apparent that the *Primary History* is preserving a narrative tradition informed by a vague awareness of the Yellow Turban Rebellion. That the *Buzandaran* also focuses on brotherly conflict, rebellion, and defeat/withdrawal confirms that the *Primary History* is drawing upon an older narrative tradition.

Through constant interactions with Alans and Huns north of the Caucasus and Yuezhi/Kushans and Kidarites/Huna in Bactria, Tocharistan, and in the Sasanian court when the Kushano-Sasanian kingdom still existed, some general information about the rebellion which toppled the largest kingdom east of Persia likely made it to Armenian ears. This information continued to circulate in Armenian oral tradition and was appropriated by the Mamikoneans, who used it as a means of inserting their clan's history into the origins of the Arsacids and Grigorids in Balkh, where the existence of the Yuezhi and Kushan polities would have made a Chinese migration story quite plausible. The Mamikoneans, thus appropriating a history of relation to and resistance against Chinese royal power, would have been able to appeal with ancestral rhetoric to the very steppe and Central Asian polities from whom Parthians, Sasanians, and Armenians likely heard about the great rebellion in China to begin with.

[93] *Hou Hanshu* 8, 71. For an overview of the Yellow Turban Rebellion, see R. de Crespigny, *Fire Over Luoyang: A History of the Later Han 23-220 AD*. Sinica Leidensia 134 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 361-473.

Whether the Alans or Kushans were receptive to such appeals, or even heard them, is unknown. It is instead the Huns who loom large in late antique Armenian historiography as allies and enemies who eventually become allies against the Sasanians. The Huns, as inheritors of or claimants to the legacy of the Xiongnu, may have been particularly interested in the prospect of allying with a powerful neighbour asserting a shared history of resisting – and surviving – the same imperial enemies. Just as the Mamikoneans and Huns fought the Sasanians in the present, so too, would Mamikonean histories assert that their ancestors fought against the Chinese king in the past. This lends the Mamikoneans and Huns to being natural allies, which we see panning out several times in the *Buzandaran* and elaborated upon in Łazar Pʿarpecʿi's account of the 451 rebellion.

III. 451 CE, the Battle of Avarayr, and Vardan's Martyrdom

A. Łazar Pʿarpecʿi's Patmutʿiwn Hayotsʿ

Łazar Pʿarpecʿi's *Patmutʿiwn Hayotsʿ* [Պատմութիւն Հայոց, *History of the Armenians*] was written not long before 500 CE, though the extant text does include some later additions.[94] Pʿarpecʿi wrote at the behest of *sparapet* Vahan Mamikonean for the purpose of committing to record the deeds of spiritual and valiant men for later generations to learn from.[95] Vahan was made the *marzban* (Sasanian governor) of Armenia as a concession to end his uprising in the 480s after Shah Peroz I (r. 459-484 CE) died in battle against the Hephthalite Huns in Central Asia.[96] Pʿarpecʿi and Vahan were raised together, though Pʿarpecʿi was sent at an undetermined time for additional education and training in Greek territory. Pʿarpecʿi then joined a monastic community in Vałarshapat, though he was so unpopular that he had to flee, and Vahan had to intervene on his behalf to arrange his return.[97] Pʿarpecʿi is unreservedly pro-Mamikonean. His history of the rebellion focuses on the Mamikonean family's *bnik* [բնիկ, natural] role as political, moral, and martial leaders of Armenia.[98] Pʿarpecʿi depicts the Mamikoneans as the successors of the Aršakuni, whose later kings failed to live up to their own dynastic legacy. This sentiment is central to the Mamikonean

[94] *Łazar Pʿarpecʿi*, R. W. Thomson, 5, 12.
[95] Ibid. I:4.5.
[96] Ibid. 5-6.
[97] Ibid. 7.
[98] For more on the concept of *bnik*, see ibid. 28; 36n5.

history in the *Buzandaran*, and Pʿarpecʿi wrote his history as a continuation, and possibly correction, of that text.[99]

Pʿarpecʿi begins his narrative with the self-imposed exile of King Aršak (Aršak III, son of Pap and Zarmanduxt) following the Byzantine-Sasanian partitioning of Armenia in 387 CE. Though not the last Aršakuni king (the dynasty ended in 428 CE),[100] Pʿarpecʿi makes Aršak's exile out to be the spiritual end of the dynasty. Aršak, overburdened with the unworthiness into which his family had descended, was simply unwilling to deal with what he almost prophetically knew would come with Sasanian subjugation:

> For this reason, Aršak, king of Armenia, journeyed away from the province of Ayrarat as if to captivity. He thought it better to retire to the smaller part of divided Armenia, to a Christian country, and be subject to the Greek king, than to remain in such a charming and delightful land and see the daily outrage of the faith, the enmity towards the holy church, the insults which the ministers of God's clergy would have to endure from the impious magi,[101] the collapse of his own family and kingdom before the haughty rule of the Persian princes. He considered it preferable to spend the short and numbered span of this life in Christian fashion and in peace than to live here in false glory and despised, to be deprived of eternal life and handed over to the eternal and unquenchable flames. With all these thoughts in his mind and with remorse in his heart, distraught he left the noble inheritance of his ancestors and entered the service of the Greek king.[102]

Pʿarpecʿi's description of Aršak's retreat from responsibility and conflict will later serve as the point of comparison between the Aršakuni's spiritual and moral failure and Vardan Mamikonean's victory in martyrdom. Aršak's retreat here also demonstrates narrative themes which Xorenacʿi would later use against the Mamikoneans in his version of their Chinese origin legend. Pʿarpecʿi's Aršak and Xorenacʿi's Mamgon share this same narrative arc: one brother (Aršak; Mamgon) leaves another brother (Vałaršak; Bldokh)[103] behind in

[99] Ibid. 9-10, 28, I:3.4.

[100] N. Garsoïan, "The Aršakuni Dynasty," 85.

[101] Meaning Zoroastrian priests.

[102] *Łazar Pʿarpecʿi*, R. W. Thomson, I:8.11-12; 05Parp, T. Samuelian et al, 2:8.2-4.

[103] After Aršak left Armenia, the Armenian nobility successfully appealed to the Persian court to replace Vałaršak (d. c. 386 CE) with Khosrov IV (r. c. 384-389/c. 414-417 CE), who also had a Persian tutor. It is not clear if Vałaršak died before or after Khosrov IV was appointed king. N. Garsoïan, "The Aršakuni Dynasty," 92.

order to go west (to the Byzantines; to the Sasanians) as if in punishment ("with remorse in his heart;" "having come to our country against his will") so as to avoid a righteous struggle (against domestic impiety; against familial slander) and, in so doing, abandons a beautiful homeland (Armenia as "charming and delightful;" China as quoted from Širakacʿi's *Geography*). Xorenacʿi reworked the Mamikonean Chinese origin narrative preserved in the *Primary History*, but his narrative was clearly informed by Pʿarpecʿi's portrayal of Aršak's failure.

Though Armenian historiography remembers the Arsacid and the majority of Aršakuni kings as primarily Zoroastrian, their line includes Trdat III and Gregory the Illuminator, who traditionally inaugurated the Christianization of the Armenian kingdom in the early fourth century. This Christianization occurred approximately one century after the Arsacids had already been overthrown by the Sasanians and only a few decades after a brief period of Sasanian rule in Armenia (224-298 CE).[104] This resulted in a late antique literary-historiographical association between Armenian independence and the advancement and protection of the Armenian Church. Pʿarpecʿi's negative description of Aršak's retreat relies upon an existing equation between Aršakuni royal legitimacy and their protection of an independent Armenian Christianity, not necessarily with the political independence of the Armenian kingdom itself. It is not their subjugation to a new Persian imperial master which Pʿarpecʿi says heralds the extinction of the Aršakuni, but their own refusal to fill their ancestral role. The Aršakuni could have remained the legitimate kings of Armenia, despite their Sasanian subjugation, if they had continued fulfilling their divinely-appointed *bnik* purpose in the face of impending conflicts and religious impositions from Ctesiphon.

Pʿarpecʿi reiterates this point when describing the Armenian response letter to Yazkert's edict compelling Zoroastrian conversion. Pʿarpecʿi has the Armenians differentiate between their own religion and their loyalty to the Sasanians, highlighting their excellent service to the shahs while still practicing their own faith.[105] The letter goes on to say that the Armenians refuse to justify their faith out of loyalty to the Shah, since engaging in a debate over the merits of Christianity and Zoroastrianism would result in the Armenians having to discredit Yazkert's religion, giving offense to the Shah. This letter, written by a council of princes and clergy, does not offer a defence of the church, but an argument against conflating religious faith with political loyalty.

An actual defence of the Christian church is not offered until the Armenian, Georgian, and Caucasian Albanian princes respond to Yazkert's summons to court to answer for their refusal to accept conversion. The Christian princes

[104] Ibid. 71-75.

[105] *Łazar Pʿarpecʿi*, R. W. Thomson, II:24:45.

reaffirmed their loyalty to the Shah, but were met with an ultimatum: convert to Zoroastrianism and receive honours, or die and doom their countries to destruction.[106] Yazkert recognized the Christian princes' excellent service, but promised to disregard all of it if they persisted in refusing to convert. Pʿarpecʿi then has *sparapet* Vardan Mamikonean step forward and individually give an account of his own service to Yazkert before promising even greater service in the future. However, instead of accepting the conversion order, Vardan issues his own ultimatum to Yazkert:

> But the religion which I have learned from God and from my childhood it is impossible to abandon and exchange for fear of a man. For if I had received from a man the righteous teaching which I have confirmed in my mind, and knowing it to be true I denied it, I would consider myself pitiable. How much the more [pitiable] to exchange that religion which I have received and learned from the mouth of God for the fear of a man and for vain glory. Far be it! That is my answer, for which I prefer to die than live in apostasy without God.[107]

With no Aršakuni kings to speak, the first singular voice to oppose Yazkert's order is the *sparapet's*. Vardan's ultimatum to Yazkert is to either accept his service and benefit from it, or kill him to the Shah's own detriment, but he will not abandon his religion. Vardan, like Aršak, prefers to live a Christian life over pursuing worldly glory. Unlike Aršak, Vardan decides to stand in defence of his faith, rather than abandon Armenia to preserve his own life. Pʿarpecʿi is clearly having Vardan echo Mušeł's ultimatum to Pap in the *Buzandaran*, wherein he tells Pap to either accept his demonstrated loyal service or kill him, but that he would never harm a king. This ultimatum confirms Vardan's authority as the *sparapet* in-line with his forebears and proves that the Mamikoneans have retained their legitimacy where the Aršakuni have lost theirs.

The Christian princes ultimately chose to feign conversion in order to placate Yazkert; a plan which Vardan initially rejected. They returned to their lands with gifts and with "magi" to oversee the conversion of the populace. At this point, Vardan, overcome with guilt, gathers his household, retinue, and serfs and announces his intention to leave Armenia and seek penance, inviting those who felt similarly to come with him.[108] Here, Vardan comes to the same conclusion Aršak did, and moves to abandon his appointed role as *sparapet* while effectively

[106] Ibid. II:26.48.

[107] *Łazar Pʿarpecʿi*, R. W. Thomson, II:26.49; 05Parp, T. Samuelian et al, 3:26.15-17.

[108] *Łazar Pʿarpecʿi*, R. W. Thomson, II:30.56-57.

disbanding the Mamikonean clan and the last remaining Arsacid-era Armenian authority. The Grigorid line of hereditary *catholicoi* had come to an end with the death of Sahak I in 438 CE. Upon Sahak's death, Grigorid properties came under Mamikonean control due to the marriage between Sahak's daughter and Hamazasp Mamikonean.[109] Thus, Vardan in Pʿarpecʿi's history likely represents two-thirds of the three Armenian Arsacid-era powers recorded in the *Buzandaran*.

What calls Vardan back from his plan to leave is the emergence of the rebellion, and Armenian princes and priests, including the treacherous *marzban* Vasak Siwni, asking the *sparapet* to lead them in battle once more. Vardan agrees to lead the rebellion only when he is promised martyrdom, and the rebel nobles all commit to death in battle in penance for their outward apostasy.[110] Vardan nearly succumbs to the same failure Aršak did, but he is ultimately convinced to stay in Armenia for the exact reason Aršak fled: to face a doomed conflict over the religious independence of Armenia. Despite the rebels having lied and now committed to a rebellion, Pʿarpecʿi presents them as martyrs accepting their fates. Instead of enduring tortures as a form of spiritual combat, as is typical in late antique hagiographies and martyrologies, these rebel-martyrs would endure actual combat for spiritual purposes.

The Christian princes swear oaths of loyalty and mutual purpose several times throughout Pʿarpecʿi's narrative. The last time an oath is sworn prior to the rebellion's start is when Vardan and the rebels demand that the *marzban* Vasak Siwni, who was not-so-secretly loyal to Yazkert, reaffirm their purpose for martyrdom when he learned that the rebellion was beginning.[111] Up to this point, Vasak had been stalling the rebellion under the guise of appealing to the Byzantines for aid and suggesting that the rebels pay the Huns to get involved, despite Vasak claiming that the Huns were already sworn to him by oath since

[109] A. Terian, *Patriotism and Piety in Armenian Christianity: The Early Panegyrics on Saint Gregory*. AVANT 2 (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 76; C. Toumanoff, *Manuel de généalogie et de chronologie pour le Caucase chrétien (Arménie-Géorgie-Albanie)* (Rome: Edizioni Aquila, 1976), 225.

[110] *Łazar Pʿarpecʿi*, R. W. Thomson, II:30.58-31.60. Vardan's desire for martyrdom in battle is reminiscent of the Roman ritual of *devotio*, in which a military commander dedicated his life to the gods with the intention of dying in battle to secure victory. However, Vardan's desire for martyrdom was shared by all the rebelling princes and their purpose was penance, not victory in a military sense. Yazkert's policy of forced Zoroastrian observance was rescinded after the Battle of Avarayr, but that was not the objective of the rebellion as presented by Pʿarpecʿi and Ełišē. For an example of *devotio*, see Livy, *History of Rome*, 8.9; *Livy. History of Rome*, trans. Canon Roberts (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1912), http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts :latinLit:phi0914.phi0018.perseus-eng3:9 (accessed July 16, 2025).

[111] *Łazar Pʿarpecʿi*, R. W. Thomson, II:32:61-62.

he became the *marzban*, the seat of which was Darband.[112] Vasak later breaks the rebels' oath when he betrays them, informing on them to Yazkert's general and abandoning them before the Battle of Avarayr. The swearing of such oaths is an Armenian literary *topos*. However, the association between this particular oath-swearing and the rebellion stands out for how closely it parallels the oath sworn by the rebel princes who joined Mamik and Konak before beginning their uprising against Chenbakur in the *Primary History*.

The way Pʿarpecʿi has Vardan effectively succeeding the failed Aršakuni evokes Manuēl's rebellion against Varazdat in the *Buzandaran*. Both Manuēl and Vardan initiate rebellions due to their kings' failures to live up to the legacies and expectations of their dynasties: Varazdat and Aršak both betrayed their Arsacid/Aršakuni lineage, and Yazkert is responsible for devaluing the service the Christians of his empire gave to him and to his predecessors. This paints Vardan as a new Mušeł and Manuēl, with these *sparapets* first attempting to prevent a renegade king from failing the legacy of his forebears and then rebelling when the king refuses to be swayed. Vardan's ultimatum to Yazkert clearly evokes Mušeł's defence before Pap, but his actual rebellion follows the example of Manuēl. We can see how Pʿarpecʿi is both making Vardan stand out from his forebears by his emphasis on martyrdom, while still placing his actions in continuity with the past *sparapets*. Though Pʿarpecʿi is recording the 451 rebellion, he is also continuing the *Buzandaran* and its Mamikonean narrative.

However, though the rebels intended to die as martyrs, they also bore the responsibility to defend their home countries, and they sold their lives as dearly as possible. Pʿarpecʿi describes the first engagements of the rebellion as sweeping victories for the rebels, and Sasanian and apostate soldiers died in droves. As a larger Sasanian army approached, Vardan moved his force north to make contact with the Huns. The rebels moved into Ałuankʿ and took Darband by force. Vardan placed a Caucasian Albanian prince of the royal line in charge of the fortress and made him his ambassador to the Huns and other garrisons in the region. Once contacted, the Huns eagerly accepted the offer of alliance, with no mention of payment: "Willingly and readily they agreed to help, and confirmed it with an oath."[113] Vardan and his Caucasian Albanian royal emissary clearly had a better relationship with the Huns than Vasak claimed to have. By this time, the Huns were unified under Attila's rule, so if any alliance of military and political significance was offered, he or someone representing him would have to have approved it. The Huns never made it south in time to aid the rebels, likely due to their campaigns in Gaul. The Battle of Avarayr would come too soon for the alliance to bear any fruit, though the

[112] Ibid. II:33.63, 45.83.

[113] *Łazar Pʿarpecʿi*, R. W. Thomson, II:35.66; 05Parp, T. Samuelian et al, 3:35.17.

Huns moved into the Southern Caucasus and took control of the Sasanian fortifications at Darial, the "Gate of the Alans," by circa 466 CE.[114] However, Pʿarpecʿi does not condemn the Huns for their failure to arrive in time to aid the rebels, so this alliance seems at first to be an almost superfluous narrative detail in his text.

Ełišē also discusses the rebel-Hun alliance, though his narrative presents the Sasanians as a mutual threat to both, thereby giving the Huns more of a practical reason to get involved. More is said on this below. Pʿarpecʿi's note about the Huns seems to function only as a transition to the events leading to Avarayr. However, Pʿarpecʿi's constant reiteration of themes and narrative points from the *Buzandaran* requires us to read his reference to the Huns here in a broader narrative-historical frame. As noted already, Vardan lives up to his clan's legacy where Aršak failed to live up to his own. But the means by which Pʿarpecʿi demonstrates this are highly referential of Mušeł's and Manuēl's struggles with recalcitrant Aršakuni. Both of these references are also to the same episodes in the *Buzandaran* which make the Mamikonean claim of Chinese origin. Even Pʿarpecʿi's emphasis on the rebels swearing oaths of unity, admittedly a *topos*, seems nonetheless in this case to parallel the *Primary History's* curious note about Mamik and Konak swearing oaths with their rebel allies against Chenbakur. The Huns, connected as they were in fact or legend to the Xiongnu, eagerly accepting Vardan's offer of alliance against the Sasanians seems to bring the Mamikonean Chinese origin story full-circle. Pʿarpecʿi, as per his continuation of the *Buzandaran*, is integrating the themes of the Chinese origin narrative into his account of Vardan's martyrdom.

The Mamikonean Chinese origin claim drawing upon vague accounts of the Yellow Turban Rebellion allows us to contextualize Vardan's alliance with the Huns. The Xiongnu, a constant threat to the Han against whom the Han expanded and built early versions of the Great Wall network, allied (partially) with the Yellow Turbans against the Han. The Huns, a constant threat to the Sasanians against whom the Sasanians built networked fortifications and eventually a wall from the Caspian coast through the Caucasus range, allied against the Sasanians with Christian rebels claiming descent from rebels against the Han. In both cases, the rebels claimed that their ruler had failed the legacy of his forebears. From the Hunnic side, the overlaps in historical narratives may have been quite clear. Ełišē, who does not make references to the Chinese origin claims at all, confirms that the Huns did indeed ally with the Christian rebels. Thus, historically, we may see the actual formation of an Armenian-Hunnic

[114] J. Banaji, "On the Identity of Shahrālānyōzān in the Greek and Middle Persian Papyri from Egypt," in *Documents and the Early Islamic World,* eds. Alexander T. Schubert and Petra M. Sijpesteijn. Islamic History and Civilization III (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 34-35.

alliance as a product of the successful application of Mamikonean Chinese origin narratives in creating a rhetorical foundation for assertions of ancestral mutuality and common cause. The main point of difference is that the Mamikoneans of 451 CE did not run from defeat as their claimed non-Christian Chinese progenitors did, but embraced it as martyrdom.

Focusing on that one point of difference, Pʿarpecʿi thus presents Vardan's martyrdom and the 451 rebellion as a total renewal of Armenia.[115] The Mamikonean origin narrative is effectively reenacted, culminating in the Battle of Avarayr rather than a withdrawal to refuge in a neighbouring western empire, as the Mamikonean progenitors did in the *Buzandaran* and *Primary History* and as Pʿarpecʿi says Vardan was tempted to do. As a result, Pʿarpecʿi spiritually "naturalizes" the Mamikoneans, with Vardan ultimately answering Varazdat's challenge to Manuēl by "returning" to his country in rebellion and seeing it through to the end. After 451 CE, the Mamikonean clan retained the *sparapet* title, and Vahan Mamikonean, later appointed *marzban*, filled the gap left by the Aršakuni, making the Mamikoneans the only remaining Arsacid-era authority from the *Buzandaran* remaining in power in Armenia. Just as the 451 rebellion is anachronistically foreshadowed in the *Buzandaran*, Pʿarpecʿi describes the rebellion and its aftermath with reference to the *Buzandaran*'s Chinese origin claims.

Further support for this last point comes from the Huns themselves. By the time of Attila's rule, their nomadic polity was in the process of sedentarization. Priskos's account of the 449 CE Roman mission to Attila has the Hun chief ruling from a town made up of wooden buildings with a Roman-style bath. Likewise, the details of the battles fought during Attila's campaigns in Gaul and Italy demonstrate that he relied much more heavily on infantry than he did on cavalry.[116]

That the Huns under Attila had adopted some elements of Roman culture is clear. Among these adoptions is the infamous legend of Attila discovering the "Sword of Mars." Cameron Barnes has convincingly argued that the story, recorded in Priskos and repeated in Jordanes's sixth-century CE *Getica*, was invented by a Roman in Attila's court to place Attila's rule in-line with the

[115] We must remember here that Vardan was asked to lead the rebellion as a whole, including the rebelling princes of Georgia and Caucasian Albania, as a unified front. However, Pʿarpecʿi and Ełišē are naturally most interested in the rebellion's history and ramifications for their own country.

[116] R. P. Lindner, "Nomadism, Horses, and Huns," *Past & Present* 92/1 (1981): 3-19; A. Khazanov, "The Eurasian Steppe Nomads in World Military History," in *Nomad Aristocrats in a World of Empires*, ed. Jürgen Paul (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2013), 195. For a critical response, see C. Barnes, "Rehorsing the Huns," *War & Society* 34/1 (2015): 1-22.

established Classical representation of the Scythians, who supposedly worshipped a war god in the form of a sword.[117]

We can observe a surprising contemporaneous rhetorical and propagandistic parallelism between the Huns and Mamikoneans. Prior to the time of Attila and Vardan, both groups claimed or expressed a connection to an East Asian imperial polity via ancestors who had migrated westward once they were defeated by the Chinese king. During and after Attila's and Vardan's time, this rhetorical line changed toward "naturalization" in their respective territories through divine recognition in warfare against imperial foes. For Attila, this divine naturalization comes from the blessing of God/Mars in the form of the legendary sword, which marks Attila as the inheritor of the Scythians. In the case of Vardan, his and his army's martyrdom at Avarayr constitutes a divine blessing leading to beatification and makes the Mamikoneans the full inheritors and successors of the Aršakuni branch of the Arsacid Parthians. The first Christian to find martyrdom in battle and the Scourge of God emerge as two sides of the same alliance.

The Mamikonean Chinese origin narrative linked them to the Arsacid and Grigorid origins in Balkh, thereby providing a reason for them to retain the authority of the *sparapet*. However, their reason for focusing on a specifically Chinese origin was likely meant to appeal to the Huns and/or other steppe peoples, who had a historical and cultural frame of reference for it. The success of their communication can be seen in how Vardan's and Attila's panegyrists shifted their rhetorical bases of authority in similar ways at the same time during and after their attempt at an alliance.

The Mamikoneans appealed to the Huns with a Chinese origin narrative that the Huns, evidently, were amenable to. That the Huns threatened Byzantium was not a significant issue for Pʿarpecʿi, despite his Hellenophilia. He makes Aršak's retreat to Byzantine territory a sign of the Aršakuni's total failure and blames Emperor Marcian (r. 450-457 CE) for listening to poor counsel and not following through on Theodosius II's (r. 402-450 CE) prior promise to Hmayeak Mamikonean, Vardan's brother, to aid the rebels.[118]

Pʿarpecʿi devotes very little to the actual Battle of Avarayr. He spends only two short chapters on the rebels' commitment to martyrdom and the actual battle itself.[119] Pʿarpecʿi's emphasis is on the Mamikonean fulfilment of their natural *bnik* role in progressing toward Avarayr. In effect, Pʿarpecʿi makes Vardan's martyrdom contingent upon his role as the *sparapet* and, in turn, reliant

[117] C. Barnes, "Attila and the Sword of Ares," *Journal of Late Antique, Islamic and Byzantine Studies* 2/1-2 (2023): 1-11.

[118] *Łazar Pʿarpecʿi*, R. W. Thomson, II:41.73-74.

[119] Ibid. II:38-39.

upon his supposed Chinese ancestry. Ełišē, however, completely disentangles the martyrdom at Avarayr from any connections to Mamikonean Chinese origin traditions, and refocuses the 451 rebellion on the Armenian Church itself.

B. Ełišē, Vasn Vardanay ew Hayots' Paterazmin

Ełišē wrote his *Vasn Vardanay ew Hayots' Paterazmin* [Վասն Վարդանայ եւ Հայոց Պատերազմին, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*] at the behest of the otherwise unknown David Mamikonean sometime in the sixth century.[120] He claims to be an eye-witness to the events of the war, but he appears to borrow heavily from Pʿarpecʿi and shares many of the same sources.[121] Ełišē's focus is less on Vardan than on the theme of upholding the *ukht* [ուխտ, covenant] of the Armenian Church, defined as the *awrinawkʿ* [աւրինաւք, tradition and customary law] all Armenians are born into.[122] To this end, Ełišē borrows heavily from the Armenian version of Maccabees in his depiction of the rebels, and has the rebels martyred not for God's sake, but for the sake of the Armenian covenant with God, placing the clergy at the head of the rebel movement. Ełišē makes no reference to Mamikonean Chinese origin claims, entirely replacing the older sign of Mamikonean hereditary authority with a more general Armenian inheritance of the Maccabean legacy. Though Ełišē actually includes more references to the Huns than Pʿarpecʿi does, he does so in a way that highlights their struggle with the Sasanians in the present, thereby making them strategic allies in the context of the immediate war, rather than natural or ancestral allies of the *sparapets*.

This shift in priorities is evidenced from the beginning of the text. Ełišē makes no mention of Aršak's exile, but alludes to prior conflicts with the Sasanians along with a brief mention of Sasanian religious tolerance until Yazkert's reign.[123] Ełišē actually spends more time describing how Emperor Theodosius appeased Yazkert in order to avoid war after the Persian sack of Nisibis, including sending many gifts and even Persian Christian refugees back to Yazkert to face persecution.[124] It seems Ełišē's Yazkert is a conflation of Yazdegerd I (r. 399-420 CE) and II (r. 438-457 CE). Yazdegerd II was in power during the 451 rebellion, but it was Yazdegerd I who oversaw the official establishment of the Church of the East at the Council of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410 CE. Theodosius is here Theodosius II, who oversaw the exile of Nestorius of

[120] Ibid. 12.

[121] Ibid. 12-14. For reasons of length and to facilitate a closer comparison with Pʿarpecʿi, this chapter does not cover Ełišē's narrative past the Battle of Avarayr.

[122] *Eḷishē*, R. W. Thomson, 10-11, 13.

[123] Ibid. I:6.

[124] Ibid. I:7.

Constantinople and his followers after their anathematization at the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE, with many fleeing to Persian territory for refuge. This is also the same Theodosius who Pʿarpecʿi said promised aid to the rebels of 451 CE, which never materialized. Ełišē thus misattributes the flight of anti-Ephesian Christians from Byzantium as a surrender of refugee Persian Christians back to Ctesiphon. Likewise, there was no Persian sack of Nisibis during the time of Theodosius II; the city had been under Sasanian rule since 363 CE, when the Romans ceded it in a treaty after Julian's (r. 355-363 CE) disastrous invasion of Persia.

It is during this early contextualization that Ełišē reveals Yazkert's desire to forcibly convert the Christian population of his empire to curtail their growth.[125] Yazkert's council of "magi" offered a plan to forcibly convert the Christian population under the guise of a new war against the Huns:

> Valiant king, the gods have given you your empire and success. They have no need of human honour; but if you convert to one religion all the nations and races in your empire, then the land of the Greeks will also obediently submit to your rule. But do you, king, immediately fulfil one counsel of ours. Raise an army and gather a force; march to the land of the Kushans; assemble all nations and bring them through the Pass, and there make your dwelling. When you detain and enclose them all in a distant foreign land the plans of your desire will be fulfilled; and as it seems to us in our religion, you will rule over the land of the Kushans, and the Greeks will not venture forth against your power- on condition you exterminate the sect of the Christians.[126]

The "Kushans" here are the northern Huns, demonstrated by the mention of the "Pass," which must be the Darband Pass (Chor Pass) because there is no such pass mentioned in other texts as a gateway to the Kushans in the east. Likewise, as noted in Pʿarpecʿi, Darband served as the seat of the region's *marzban*, making it a more appropriate place for the Sasanian Shah to establish himself for an extended period of time.[127]

Just as he excludes the Mamikonean Chinese origin claims, Ełišē also shows no interest in the origins of the Arsacids. This is likely because both extend to non-Christian peoples in non-Armenian lands, reaching beyond the *ukht* and *awrinawkʿ* of the Armenian Church. This opening scheme hatched by the

[125] Ibid. I:8.

[126] *Eḷishē*, R. W. Thomson, I:9; 04Yegh, T. Samuelian et al, 1:1.21-24.

[127] See also *Eḷishē*, R. W. Thomson, 63n6.

Sasanians shows how even Darband is considered beyond the Armenian Church's *ukht* in Ełišē's estimation, despite its proximity to Armenia in allied Caucasian Albania. Being on the frontier with the "Kushans," Darband is far enough from the Armenian Church's *ukht* that the gathered Christian princes would be vulnerable to Yazkert's pressures to convert. This shows how much weight Ełišē places upon the Armenian clergy as the spiritual protectors and guides of the princes.

Yazkert follows through on this scheme, and assembles the Christian princes in Darband to make war on the "Kushans."[128] After years of war, Yazkert began to push the Kushans, and he took the opportunity to build and expand his new residence on the frontier, presumably Darband.[129] Yazkert accomplished little by way of conversions amongst the Armenian princes, despite his overwhelming generosity and gift-giving. This is likely because, as Ełišē records, the princes had brought priests, deacons, and sacred texts to live with them in the war camp.[130] Though beyond the bounds of the Armenian *ukht*, and therefore vulnerable, the presence of the clergy reinforced the continued practice of *awrinawkʿ*.

Yazkert declared himself victorious when he saw that the Byzantines were keeping to their prior non-aggression pact and that the Huns were no longer crossing the Pass of Chor (Pass of Darband) and that their king was ruined. Among his celebratory commands was an edict to seize the properties of all Christians in the empire.[131] The actual edict of forced conversion came when the king of the "Kushans" finally retreated into "the impregnable desert," giving the Sasanians free reign to take many cities, captives, and plunder.[132] This reference to the desert suggests Ełišē means the Kushans of Central Asia or even the Hephthalites, though the war up to this point was focused on the northern frontier. However, Yazkert, at the suggestion of the magi, moved to convert the Christian princes by force by ordering them back to Darband and subjecting them to torture and humiliation until they relented. Some of those who did not convert were sent back to war in "the desert" and died.[133] At the same time, heavy taxes were levied upon the Christian princes' countries meant to lessen the church and convince the people to abandon their religion.[134] It is when these

[128] *Eḷishē*, R. W. Thomson, I:10.
[129] Ibid. I:11-12.
[130] Ibid. I:10-11.
[131] Ibid. I:12.
[132] *Eḷishē*, R. W. Thomson, II:17-18; 04Yegh, T. Samuelian et al, 2:2.31-38.
[133] *Eḷishē*, R. W. Thomson, II:19-21; 04Yegh, T. Samuelian et al, 2:2.41-50, 3.51-55.
[134] *Eḷishē*, R. W. Thomson, II: 22-23.

efforts bore no fruit that Ełišē tells us Yazkert issued the edict of forced conversion.

After the Armenian refusal and response letter, here with a much longer theological and polemical repudiation of Zoroastrianism than in Pʿarpecʿi, the princes were summoned to Yazkert's court from Darband and from Armenia proper.[135] This is the first time Ełišē actually names Vardan Mamikonean, though he continues to not actually demonstrate much of a presence in the narrative. This part matches much of what Pʿarpecʿi describes, and the Christian princes defend themselves by separating their religion from their political loyalties. However, they also argue to Yazkert that the Christian God gave him his rule over the Christian princes, and so he should not be concerned about heterodoxy in his empire.[136] Vardan is given no individual speech, but sentiments attributed to him by Pʿarpecʿi are expressed by the princes collectively before Yazkert. Yazkert then decides to send the princes to Sagastan to die in the heat or be left in prison while his armies would ravage their home countries, annihilate their churches, and deport their families.[137] This is similar to Yazkert's ultimatum in Pʿarpecʿi's history, but Ełišē actually has Yazkert decide upon this course of action in direct response to the Christian arguments against conversion. Ełišē elaborates upon the situation by having a secret Christian in Yazkert's court help the princes stall the Shah's order, but it is ultimately an attack by the king of the "Kushans" that inadvertently saves the princes. Yazkert was forced to send the Christian princes as cavalry against the invaders.[138] During this war, the Christian princes decided to form a covenant to uphold their faith and sent an ambassador back to Yazkert announcing their false conversion. Yazkert eagerly accepted this turn, and sent the Armenian princes with magi back to Armenia to convert the people by the time he had defeated the Kushans.[139]

Here, the Kushans, conflated with the Huns, are the main reason why the Armenian princes were able to escape Yazkert's decision to eliminate them all outright. Though the Armenians and Kushans are fighting against each other, they are nonetheless both portrayed as victims of Yazkert's schemes. The war against the Kushans only started as a cover for Yazkert's plan to eliminate Christianity from his empire. This gives a reason why the Huns would ally with Vardan without any prior claims of ancestral connection. Ełišē offers a twisting narrative bordering on a romance and in the process confuses numerous time

[135] Ibid. II:42.
[136] Ibid. II:45-48.
[137] Ibid. II:47-48.
[138] Ibid. II:49.
[139] Ibid. II:49-51.

frames, events, and polities in order to write a rebellion narrative entirely about the defence of the Armenian Church's *ukht* and its self-contained *awrinawkʿ*.

From here, Ełišē's narrative continues mostly as in Pʿarpecʿi's history, though with increasing references to the Maccabees. The Zoroastrian conversion of Armenia progresses, though the clergy lead a scattered popular resistance against the magi and socially anathematize the Armenian princes for their apparent apostasy. Far more time is spent on describing the treacherous schemes of Vasak Siwni than anything having to do with Vardan Mamikonean. It is only when the clergy remove themselves from Vasak, who had begun to openly demonstrate his true apostasy, that they went to Vardan, who, unlike in Pʿarpecʿi, was not contemplating self-exile. The clergy questioned Vardan and found that he did not truly abandon his religion, whereupon they absolved him and accepted him as the head of the resistance, thereby drawing out many more Armenian princes who kept their religion.[140] It was likewise the bishops who ultimately demanded Vardan begin an open rebellion, and they blessed the oaths the rebels swore on a Gospel the clergy brought with them for that purpose.[141] Unlike in Pʿarpecʿi, Ełišē has the rebels giving up all their properties and titles before slaughtering Persian magi and apostates and razing Armenian towns and fortresses so as to deny them to the Sasanians. Somewhat bafflingly, this destruction came to the benefit of the church, which received furniture and vast quantities of loot the rebels took from across Armenia and from Persian soldiers. The rebels, including clergy, even founded new churches and installed new deacons with the funding.[142]

As in Pʿarpecʿi's text, the rebels ask Theodosius for aid, but he dies before deciding. Marcian follows poor advice and maintains the non-aggression pact.[143] Vardan moves his army into Ałuankʿ, as he does in Pʿarpecʿi, and takes Darband by force before sending a Caucasian Albanian ambassador:

> to the land of the Huns and to many other barbarian nations who were allied with the Huns in order to come to an understanding with them and make a pact that the alliance would be kept indissoluble. When these [nations] heard all that had occurred, they immediately rushed to the spot and saw with their own eyes the victory that had been won. They did not hesitate to enter into a pact

[140] Ibid. III:64.
[141] Ibid. III:65-66.
[142] Ibid. III:66-69.
[143] Ibid. III:72-73.

> with an oath in accordance with the ritual of their own religion; they also took a Christian oath to keep a firm alliance with them.[144]

Unlike in Pʿarpecʿi, the Huns here confirm the rebels' victories against the Sasanians before agreeing to an alliance. This may have been to confirm both the rebellion, as the princes were only recently warring against the "Kushans," and also to confirm their competence against the Sasanians. Ełišē's depiction of the Huns makes them more cautious than Pʿarpecʿi's does, and there is some degree of negotiation before the Huns and their own allies join the Christian rebels. Ełišē's Huns are a neighbouring but still foreign people, and there are no implied ancestral links between them and anyone in Armenia, let alone the *sparapet*. That the Huns swear oaths both according to their own religion and that of the Christians further cements their "otherness" apart from the Armenians and Caucasian Albanians.

Also unlike in Pʿarpecʿi, Ełišē has the alliance with the Huns actually bear some fruit, albeit because of Ełišē's total confusion of them with the Kushans. After the rebels allied with the Huns, Yazkert had to withdraw to Persia, having been defeated by the Kushans.[145] Just as the Kushan invasion unknowingly saved the Armenians from Yazkert, Ełišē has the Armenian absence from the Kushan front result in the Kushan's victory. However, once the Battle of Avarayr comes, the Huns are again nowhere to be found, and Ełišē, like Pʿarpecʿi, does not condemn them for their tardiness.

Where Vardan's death in Pʿarpecʿi's history is depicted as a fulfilment of the Mamikonean family legacy and a renewal of Armenia, Ełišē likens them to the Maccabees. Ełišē even has Vardan reading passages from Maccabees to his soldiers to strengthen their resolve before the Battle of Avarayr and to convince them to abandon the world for spiritual glory in death.[146] Ełišē wrote a narrative which focused on the Armenian Church and its inheritance of the Maccabean legacy which, as part of Jewish and Christian scripture and sacred history, would not have been considered foreign to the Armenian *ukht*. However, by referring to scripture, and specifically Maccabees, as his main source for precedent, Ełišē simultaneously offers an example of how any war between Christian and non-Christian polities could be deemed holy. At the same time, Ełišē's text would still have been thematically compatible with some prior Armenian narratives, such as the death of Vačʿē Mamikonean in the *Buzandaran* retroactively described as a martyrdom in Maccabean terms.

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[144] *Eḷishē*, R. W. Thomson, III:78; 04Yegh, T. Samuelian et al, 3:8.198-200 (04Yegh 3 is incorrectly listed in the online text as 04Yegh 4).

[145] *Eḷishē*, R. W. Thomson, III:83.

[146] Ibid. V:152-157.

IV. Conclusion

Late antique and early medieval Armenian history writers were keenly aware of how important and novel Vardan Mamikonean's martyrdom in battle was in the emerging traditions of Christian hagiography. As the first such Christian battle-martyr, Vardan's legacy was met with a complicated reception by his own historians and hagiographers. Pʿarpecʿi clearly sought to root the legitimacy of Vardan's martyrdom in his role as the *sparapet*, which, in itself, was contingent upon his clan's claimed Chinese princely ancestry as recorded in the *Buzandaran* and *Primary History*. The Mamikonean Chinese origin narrative was likely used to appeal to the Huns in a prolonged diplomatic effort that facilitated their alliance during the 451 rebellion and possibly at other times prior. This would certainly have confirmed the importance of Vardan's legendary ancestry to his early hagiography. Pʿarpecʿi thus seems to have been unsure about how to frame Vardan's martyrdom in battle, and sought to root it in the heroic legacy of the Mamikonean *sparapets* while still emphasizing how Vardan's actions stand out from those of his forebears. The novelty of Vardan's battle-martyrdom was not lost on Pʿarpecʿi, but it was somewhat counterbalanced by Pʿarpecʿi's emphasis on the continuity between Vardan's actions and those of Vačʿē, Mušeł, and Manuēl. That the *Buzandaran* and Pʿarpecʿi's history make numerous cross-references between the 451 rebellion and Mamikonean Chinese origin claims but never explicitly reference both in the same text, demonstrates that Pʿarpecʿi was not alone in his uncertainty about how to address the novelty of Vardan's martyrdom.

Ełišē, contrarily, emphasized the role of the Armenian Church in the 451 rebellion. In so doing, Vardan's martyrdom is entirely disentangled from his lineage, and his role as the *sparapet* is valued for his capacity to defend and serve the church. Paradoxically, Ełišē making the 451 rebellion entirely focused on the Armenian Church also resulted in a more generic narrative foundation, where the role of the Christian protagonists was defined by their spiritual continuity with the Maccabean Revolt; a continuity which any armed Christian group opposing a non-Christian group could claim.[147] Ełišē's disentanglement of Vardan's martyrdom from his clan's legendary origins in China is reflected in

[147] For more on this, see Elizabeth Lapina, "Maccabees and the Battle of Antioch," in *Dying for the Faith, Killing for the Faith: Old-Testament Faith-Warriors (Maccabees 1 and 2) in Historical Perspective*, ed. Gabriela Signori. Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 206 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 147-159. This is opposed to the Syriac Christian hagiographic example, where the evocation of Maccabean precedent focuses on the unarmed resistance to Antiochus. Y. Nu'emah-Kremer, *(Ha)Šmuni(t): The Antiochian Legacy of the Syriac Cult of the Maccabean Mother and its Jewish Beginnings* (Master's dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2022).

Xorenacʿi's later history. Xorenacʿi similarly separated Vardan from the Mamikonean Chinese origin narrative, but he does so by simply ending his history a few years before the events leading to the 451 rebellion occur. By excluding Vardan from his narrative, Xorenacʿi gave himself the ability to rewrite the *Primary History*'s Chinese origin narrative so as to paint the Mamikoneans as problematic and overly ambitious transplants without running the risk of actually insulting the beatified Vardan.

We thus see two narrative trends emerge from Vardan's early hagiography: one which carefully places Vardan in-line with his heroic lineage legendarily going back to princes of China, and one which separates Vardan's beatification from his clan's claimed origins while engaging both topics separately. These conflicting narrative trends may be partially responsible both for Vardan's incredible popularity throughout Armenian history, and the ambiguity with which his cult is practiced. There are no pilgrim shrines dedicated to St. Vardan, nor are there any relics supposedly associated with him, though he was the subject of a romantic monumental statue in Yerevan raised in 1985, and the first Armenian Apostolic cathedral in the United States was dedicated to him in 1968 in New York. The Battle of Avarayr is a common decorative motif in Armenian hymnals and liturgical texts, but only from the fifteenth century on.[148] This ambiguity invites further analysis and consideration from scholars interested both in the development of Christian concepts of holy war, and in lines of Eurasian cultural contact: two fields of study which, according to our current disciplinary divides, many would assume have as little to do with each other as a clan's claims of Chinese origins and the hagiography of the first Christian battle-martyr would.

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[148] E. Piñon, "Revival of Early Narratives in Manuscripts," in *Armenia: Art, Religion, and Trade in the Middle Ages*, ed. Helen C. Evans (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 208-210.

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