

**Yazdgird I - He Who Maintains Peace in His Dominion:  
Re-examining the Rise and Fall of Romano-Iranian Relations in the  
Early Fifth Century**

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## **Abstract**

It is generally acknowledged among scholars in the field of Late Antiquity that relations between the Roman and Iranian Empires reached its climax in the early fifth century. Countless sources report a variety of co-operative events depicting positive dealings between the Iranian shah Yazdgird and the Roman emperors Arcadius and Theodosius II. On the other hand, there exist just as many accounts that Yazdgird persecuted the Christians of his realm towards the end of his life. We are thus left with opposing narratives about the Iranian monarch, and no clarification about what truly transpired.

This thesis seeks to clarify the ambiguities surrounding Yazdgird's reign. In order to achieve this goal, the events and circumstances that led to the apogee of Roman-Iranian relations is first retraced. An examination of potential sources of tension follows this, with the thesis culminating in the final chapter directly engaging the question of whether Yazdgird persecuted the Christians of his realm or not.

The focus of this study is not solely to answer the question outlined above, but also to analyze and revise the entire topic utilizing a more holistic approach. Recent scholarship on East Syrian Christianity and the Sasanian Empire aided in providing alternative perspectives to the traditionally unilateral Roman views of the outlined issues. These different viewpoints in turn helped shape new interpretations and conclusions concerning the apogee and decline of Romano-Iranian relations in the early fifth century.

## **Acknowledgments**

A thesis is in no way an easy task, nor is it something that can be accomplished without help from other people. The completion of such an arduous project would never have been a reality if it were not for the many individuals who stuck by my side and were present behind the scenes throughout the entire length of this process.

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## Introduction

For Roman historians, the early fifth century represents the peak of Romano-Iranian relations. Never before had the empires' monarchs be so friendly with each other than during the reigns of Yazdgird I, Arcadius and Theodosius II. Much good came of this relationship, notably the official toleration of Christianity in Iran, which proved to be a major success for both Arcadius and Yazdgird. The latter profited greatly from the Christians since they provided him with greatly needed political support. Although the realms grew close during this time, common scholarly opinion follows Theodoret's account that in the final years of his reign, Yazdgird turned on his Christian subjects. Provoked by the destruction of a Zoroastrian fire temple, he initiated a savage persecution in his realm. In turn, refugees were sent fleeing westwards, and when Theodosius II refused to return them to Yazdgird's son and successor Bahram V, war broke out. This thesis seeks to prove Theodoret wrong, not by claiming that the persecution never happened, but by asserting that Yazdgird was in fact not involved at all.

The time between 399 and 420, or the years of Yazdgird I's reign, was so packed with instances of cooperation that ancient authors, both contemporary and later, had to deal with a plethora of information. The Roman eastern frontier became the stage for cultural exchange between Rome and Iran. Embassies were constant, new cities were founded while Christianity thrived and trade flourished. When Yazdgird died, a succession crisis ensued, alongside the alleged persecution and the ensuing war. This chaos resulted in a confusing corpus of material when it comes to Yazdgird's reign. While the sources written closer in time to the events portray the Shah in either a negative or positive fashion, those written centuries later combined both types resulting in confusing and sometimes self-contradicting accounts. These ambiguities provide us with an unclear picture of Yazdgird's reign, leaving us with questions about why would he turn on Christianity during his final days if he had spent his whole life as the friend, patron and guardian of the Christians.

Recent years have seen the publication of scholarship focused on Iran as well as primary sources that change the narrative surrounding Yazdgird enough to clarify the muddled situation. Richard Payne has put forward two important theories on Iranian and Zoroastrian ideology that will help to reexamine the reported events from an Iranian perspective. On the other hand, Geoffrey Herman has also recently compiled, edited, translated and published all Syriac martyr acts reported as having taken place under Yazdgird I. Although scholars have previously had

access to these martyr acts, they had remained considerably understudied and obscure until 2016. The Syriac, or Persian, as Herman calls them, martyr acts under Yazdgird take an alternative perspective, this time that of the East Syrian Christians living in the Iranian Empire. These martyr acts are dated quite closely to the relevant events and provide us with a distinct viewpoint that is not present in other contemporary Syriac sources like the texts of the Councils of Mar Ishaq, Yahbalaha and Dadisho from the *Synodicon Orientale*. Hence Payne and Herman's contributions will be central to this thesis as a stimulus to the reinterpretation of Yazdgird's life and acts.

Before delving into the exploration of the sources themselves, this thesis will be concerned with laying out the various reasons behind the burgeoning friendship between the old rivals in Chapter One. The prelude to peace will first be examined and will be followed by a short discussion of the empires' common enemies. Next, the analysis will take the perspective of the Iranian political situation, as well as engage in an overview of the East Roman court through its various agents like Anthemius, Marutha of Martyropolis and Acacius of Amida. Chapter Two will focus on the rising tensions throughout the twenty-one years of Yazdgird's reign. The foundation of Martyropolis and the first East Syrian Church council will be at the centre of this chapter and will be re-examined at the end of it through the perspective of Payne's notion of Iranian cosmopolitanism. The rising tensions between Rome and Iran directly led to the complete degeneration of relations in 420-1, which resulted in the persecution of East Syrian Christianity and the war of 421-2. Thus, the tensions will be scrutinized for any explanation of the turmoil that eventually engulfed Iran. The final chapter will directly tackle the question as to whether Yazdgird persecuted the Christians or not. For this, all previous information will be taken into consideration in a detailed discussion of the primary sources. This final chapter's goal will be to sift through the plethora of conflicting information to make sense of it in light of the previously mentioned new publications.

### **Primary Sources**

The primary sources to be used in this thesis will be outlined here. Not all are included in this descriptive list, only the most important and major works which will be analyzed in detail throughout the text are present.

## 1. Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*

Composed ca. 440 and in the Greek language, Socrates' *Ecclesiastical History* has proven itself a valuable resource for the topic at hand. This is in part because of Socrates' closeness to the events discussed, but also because of the extensive knowledge he provides on those same affairs. Socrates was a Constantinopolitan jurist who sought to continue Eusebius' work with his own, beginning where Eusebius ended, in 309, and ending in 439. He focused his narrative mostly on the East, covering both secular and ecclesiastical events.<sup>1</sup>

### Edition and Translation Used:

ed. Hansen, G. C. *Kirchengeschichte*. Berlin: 1995; tr. Maraval, P. and Périchon, P. *Socrate de Constantinople: Histoire Ecclésiastique Livre VII*. Sources Chrétiennes 506. Paris: 2007.

## 2. Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*

Theodoret was born into a wealthy Antiochene family around 393, where he received the complete classical education alongside one in ecclesiastical matters. Growing up in Syria, Theodoret was a polyglot, speaking Greek, Syriac and Hebrew. After his parents passed away, he sold all inherited property and retired to a monastery. By his thirtieth birthday, he was consecrated almost by force as bishop of Cyrrhus. His work, written around the mid-fifth century in Greek, was intended to be a supplement to Socrates' and Sozomen's histories. Theodoret too begins where Eusebius left off, and discusses topics down into his own time. He includes many topics not covered by the other two, though his work lacks chronological order.<sup>2</sup>

### Edition and Translation Used:

ed. Parmentier, L. and Hansen, G. C. *Kirchengeschichte*. (Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte NF 5), GCS. Berlin: 1998; tr. P. Canivet. *Théodoret de Cyr: Histoire Ecclésiastique Tome II (Livres III-V)*. Sources Chrétiennes 530. Paris: 2009.

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<sup>1</sup> For more see Downey (1965): 59-63, Croke (2012: 418-19), Maraval and Périchon (2007: Introduction) and Urbainczyk (1997: Ch.3).

<sup>2</sup> See Croke (1984: 59-74), Urbainczyk (2002: 30-2) and Canivet (2009: 13-21).

### 3. Procopius, *History of the Wars*

The History of the Wars closely follows Justinian's campaigns around the Mediterranean throughout the monarch's lifetime, beginning with the Persian Wars, followed by the Vandal Wars, and ending with the Gothic Wars. Although largely a military history, Procopius did incorporate a considerable amount of information concerning various peoples, locations and special events, including relevant stories from the past. The work was composed ca. 550 in Greek.<sup>3</sup>

#### Edition and Translation Used:

ed. Haury, J. and rev. Wirth, G. 2 vols. Leipzig: 1963; ed. and tr. Dewing, H.B. vol.1  
Cambridge: 1914.

### 4. Procopius, *On Buildings*

In addition to the History of the Wars, Procopius also wrote a work on the various building projects attributed to Justinian. This work was written near the mid-sixth century, or a little later, and takes the form of a panegyric dedicated to the reigning emperor. Official records were most probably used as sources, although supplemented with any knowledge he collected during his travels as well as the reports of others. Although Procopius generally provides quite detailed information, his reports on locations he did not visit that found themselves at the edges of the empire remain somewhat dubious.<sup>4</sup>

#### Edition and Translation Used:

ed. Haury, J. and rev. Wirth, G. Leipzig: 1964; ed. and tr. Dewing, H.B. Cambridge,  
1940.

### 5. Theophanes Confessor, *Chronicle*

Although produced in a much later period of Romano-Byzantine history, Theophanes' work does yield some information not found elsewhere. His Chronicle covers events from 284 to 813. It is suggested that 813 is the date of composition of the work. The history from 284-602 is mostly based on sources that are still available to us today.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Greatrex (2014: 76-121), Cameron (1985: 2-46, 152-70) and Kaldellis (2004: 1-88).

<sup>4</sup> See n.3 above, Cameron (1985: 83-112), Greatrex (2013: 13-29), Traina (2018: 174-182), Traina (1999: 405-12).

<sup>5</sup> For a large collection of articles looking at Theophanes in detail, see Jankowiak and Montinaro (2015).

Edition and Translation Used:

ed. De Boor, C. Leipzig: 1883; tr. Mango, C. and Scott, R. *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*. Oxford: 1997.

6. East Syrian Church Council Texts: Synods of Mar Ishaq (410), Yahbalaha (420) and Dadisho (424)

The synodal acts of the East Syrian Church have come down to us through a collection compiled during the *catholicosate* of Timothy I (780-823). Although some believe them to be slightly tampered with, the information provided by the acts is invaluable for this project.<sup>6</sup>

Edition and Translations Used:

ed. and tr. Chabot, J.-B. Paris: 1902; tr. Birnie, M.J. *The Synod of Mar 'Ishaq AD 410, The Synod of Mar Yahabalaha AD 420 and The Synod of Mar Dadisho AD 424*. Forthcoming; tr. Smith, K. *Synod of Mar Dadisho with Introduction*. Forthcoming.

7. Persian Martyr Acts

Five Persian martyr acts will be used, those of Narseh, Tātāq, the ten from Bēth Garmai, Šābūr and of Mār 'Abda. All of these were martyred under Yazdgird I, hence their inclusion in this work. The dating and composition of the acts are still debated. Devos proposed that those of Tātāq, the ten from Bēth Garmai and Šābūr, as well as another, that of Jacob the Notary (though this one occurred during Bahram's V reign), were all composed by the same author, a certain monk and scribe named Abgar. He suggests that the martyr acts were written sometime between 421 and 424, an opinion accepted by many scholars like Fiey, McDonough and Payne.<sup>7</sup> In his recent publication, Herman disagrees and points out various issues with Devos' dating, instead arguing that the texts were composed sometime after the death of Bahram V in 438.<sup>8</sup> The texts are originally written in Syriac.

Edition and Translation Used:

ed. and tr. Herman, G. *Persian Martyr Acts under King Yazdgird I*. Piscataway (2016)

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<sup>6</sup> See Wood (2013: 31-36) and Chabot (1902: 1-16).

<sup>7</sup> See Devos (1965: 303-328), Wood (2013: 44-8), Herman (2014: 84-5, 88-9), Smith (2016: 151), and Van Rompay (1972: 372-3).

<sup>8</sup> Herman (2016: xix-xxv).

## 8. The Greek Life of Marutha

The two extant editions of the *Greek Life of Marutha* were translated and published by Jacques Noret provide interesting insight from the west of Mesopotamia on the famous bishop. Alongside Socrates' account, these are the only Greek sources on Marutha, and are thought to derive their information from a lost original Syriac hagiography. The first edition, referred to as no. 2265, comes from a codex found in the Greek Patriarchate in Jerusalem and is the shorter of the two narratives. While McDonough dates this account to the fifth century or slightly later, Noret outright places it in the tenth century.<sup>9</sup> The second, no. 2266, is from an imperial *menologium* of Michael IV (1034-1041), and is considered to be completely derived from the first through the identification of unique information and spelling mistakes. Latyšev translated only this second version in his edition.

### Edition and Translation Used:

*Greek Life of Marutha*. ed. Latyšev, B. *Menologii anonymi Byzantini saeculi x quae supersunt (vol.1)*. BHG 2266. Saint-Petersburg (1911): 154-58; ed. and tr. Noret, J. "La Vie Grecque Ancienne de S. Maruta de Mayferqat." BHG 2265 and 2266. *Analecta Bollandiana* 91 (1973) : 77-103.

## 9. The Armenian Life of Marutha

The *Armenian Life of Marutha* remains our earliest eastern source on the Bishop's life. The text is a translation of the lost original *Syriac Life of Marutha*, as we are told by its translators and authors, the priest Gagig and deacon Grigor. The text notably ends with an anecdote involving the siege of Martyropolis during Kavadh's I invasion in 502. Marcus uses this addition to the hagiography to date the Armenian translation to sometime after that year. Hence, the date of production should be sometime during the sixth century or after its close, late enough to justify the confusion between Yazdgird I and II in the concluding anecdote.

### Edition and Translation Used:

ed. *Vitae et passionis sanctorum*. Venice (1874): II, 17-32; tr. Marcus, R. "The Armenian Life of Marutha of Maipherkat." *Harvard Theological Review* 25 (1932): 50-2.

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<sup>9</sup> McDonough (2008a: 137) and Noret (1973: 78).

#### 10. Chronicle of Seert

The *Chronicle of Seert* is a tenth-century Arabic universal history discovered and translated by the Archbishop Addai Scher at the beginning of the twentieth century. Wood dates the work to the tenth century, as it makes use of the historian Qusta ibn Luqa (d. 910) and mentions the *Catholicos* Isho‘yahb III as the last *catholicos* of that name, hence sometime before the reign of Isho‘yahb IV in 1023. The extant work contains history from 251-423 and 483-650, while Wood suggest that its full version probably reached back to Jesus up to the tenth century. Much of its material is derived from original Syriac texts and earlier histories.<sup>10</sup>

##### Edition and Translation Used:

ed. Scher, A. and tr. Périer, J. *Histoire Nestorienne Inédite*. Patrologia Orientalis 5. Paris: 1910.

#### 11. Mari Ibn-Sulaiman & ‘Amr Ibn-Matta, *Kitab al mijdal* or *Book of Commentaries*

These two Christian Arabic works are considered as written within the continuum of Nestorian Patriarchal Histories. The text of ‘Amr Ibn Matta, dated to the fourteenth century, has been identified as a revision of the Mari Ibn Sulaiman’s twelfth-century production. The sections on Marutha are available in English in Marcus’ article,<sup>11</sup> while the Latin translations can be accessed in Gismondi’s edition.

##### Edition and Translation Used:

Amr ibn Matta. ed. and tr. Gismondi, H. *Amri et Slibae de patriarchis Nestorianorum commentaria*. Rome 1897-9.

Mari ibn Sulaiman. ed. and tr. Gismondi, H. *Maris Amri et Slibae de patriarchis Nestorianorum commentaria (vol.1)*. Rome : 1899.

#### 12. ‘Abd Allah Ibn al-Azraq al-Fariqi, *Ta‘rikh Mayyafariqin* or *History of Martyropolis*

The *Ta‘rikh Mayyafariqin* is a general history of Martyropolis written by ‘Abd Allah Ibn al-Azraq al-Fariqi who was born in the same city in 1116. Ibn Al-Azraq’s work is dated to 1166/7, the same year he had returned to his hometown of Martyropolis. He tells us that the section about Marutha was in fact a translation of an original Syriac chart kept at the Melkite church in the city. This is potentially the same Syriac hagiography on which

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<sup>10</sup> See Wood (2013) and Howard-Johnston (2010: 324-32).

<sup>11</sup> Marcus (1932: 50-4).

the other *Lives of Marutha* are supposedly based, lending his later account some level of reliability when it comes to the section in question.

Edition and Translation Used:

tr. Fiey, J.M. “Maruta de Martyropolis D’Après Ibn Al-Azraq (†1181).” *Analecta Bollandiana* 94 (1976): 35-45.

13. Abu Ja’far Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Ta’rikh al-rusulwa’lmuluk* or *the History of Prophets and Kings*

Al-Tabari’s *History of Prophets and Kings* is an extremely broad and robust universal history. His narrative reaches back to cover ancient nations, with a special emphasis on biblical characters and prophets, legendary and factual histories of ancient Iran, the rise of Islam, life of Muhammad and the history of the Islamic world until 915. The sources are often quoted verbatim, and when possible, the author traces the chain of transmission to the original source. In his introduction, Bosworth agrees with Howard-Johnston’s observation that much of the Sasanid history in al-Tabari’s work must have been derived from the *Book of Kings*, though certainly involving much distortion with its intertwining of Persian and Qur’anic chronologies.<sup>12</sup>

Edition and Translation Used:

ed. De Goeje, M.J. vol.1. Leiden: 1879; tr. Nöldeke, T. *Geshichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sassaniden*. Leiden: 1879; tr. Bosworth, C.E. *The History of al-Tabari Volume 5: The Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*. Albany: 1999.

14. Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *The Shahnameh* or *Book of Kings*

Originally composed for the Samanid princes of Khorasan, Ferdowsi’s *Book of Kings* was a poetic recasting of Iranian history. Written between 977 and 1010, this national epic covered a vast subject matter, from the creation of the world to the Arab conquest of Iran. The majority opinion is that Ferdowsi used mostly written sources for the whole work, though a minority suggest that he used primarily oral sources only for the earlier more mythological and legendary sections.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bosworth (1999: XIX) and Howard-Johnston (1995: 170-2).

<sup>13</sup> See Azar Nafisi’s introduction in Davis (2007: XVIII), Warner and Warner (1905: 3-86) and Melville and van den Berg (2012: 1-8).

Edition and Translation Used:

tr. Warner, A.G. and Warner, E. *The Shahnama of Firdausi*. vols. VI (1912) and VII. London: 1915.

**Notes on Terminology**

The most apparent difference in terminology between this thesis and other scholarship is the use of “Iran” and “Iranian” for “Persia” and “Persian.” This is a personal choice based on the name being more authentic to what the Iranians called themselves. Despite the Sasanians’ actually being from Persia, or Fars, they were not the *Shahanshahs* of Persia, but of all Iran and Aneran. Although I have come across different spellings of the word, such as “Eran,” I maintain the English spelling for simplicity’s sake. I also refer to the Iranian religion as “Zoroastrianism” which was not a term originally used. Some scholars have begun to make use of “Mazdaism” as the more correct term, but for clarity’s sake I preferred the former of these.

Many of the Iranian names retain the most common English spelling with some exceptions. In the case of “Yazdgird,” I have encountered far too many variations and have simply chosen to follow Herman. For names like “Shapur” and “Isaac,” I sometimes use the Syriac transliterations of “Šābūr” and “Ishaq” to differentiate between characters bearing the same name. Some names have simply been kept as transliterated/translated by Herman such as “Narseh, Tātāq, ‘Abda and Hasho.”

## Chapter One: Yazdgird I - He who Maintains Peace in his Dominion

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“But Isdigerdes, the Persian King, when he saw this writing which was duly delivered to him, being even before a sovereign whose nobility of character had won for him the greatest renown, did then display a virtue at once amazing and remarkable. For, loyally observing the behests of Arcadius, he adopted and continued without interruption a policy of profound peace with the Romans, and thus preserved the empire for Theodosius.” -

Procopius *Wars* I.2.8-9 (tr. Dewing, H. B.)

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The memory of King Yazdgird I is shrouded in mystery and controversy. Juxtaposed with various recognitions of his virtue and nobility are allegations of his extreme cruelty. Christians remember him both as a patron of their religion in Iran and as a savage persecutor. In the Iranian and Arab traditions, he is considered a sinner for betraying his own faith and for having persecuted the Iranian priesthood and nobility. Despite these judgements and perceptions, Yazdgird's actions speak for themselves, for this Shah of Iran oversaw perhaps the most peaceful, friendly and co-operative relations between his empire and that of the Romans. On his own coins, the Shah proclaimed himself “Ramshahr,” which translates as “He who maintains peace in his dominions.”<sup>14</sup> This title is indeed representative of his reign, though extant accounts on Yazdgird's final years are split on whether he persecuted the Christians of his realm or not, an act that quickly instigated war with the Romans. Although this topic is itself worthy of discussion, it will be covered only in the final chapter of the thesis. This first chapter focuses on laying out the various factors that contributed to establishing the apogee of relations between Rome and Iran in order to better understand the eventual collapse of peace.

Accordingly, a more narrative approach will be taken for the accomplishment of this task. This chapter seeks to map out the evolution of Romano-Iranian relations, exploring why they were particularly good at the onset of Yazdgird's reign and how they were maintained throughout it. The peace in 399 was very much a product of contemporary circumstances, but these in turn were shaped by the events of the preceding century. Thus, the opening of channels in the fourth century will first be briefly examined. Once this prelude is established, we shall direct our attention to what led the two powers to come together at the turn of the century, beginning with an overview of the state of affairs at both courts. These topics will be followed by a short discussion on the Huns and how they contributed to bringing the empires together before delving into greater detail concerning the maintenance of peace. It is in the latter sub-sections

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<sup>14</sup> Daryaee (2008: 58).

that the actions of important characters like Anthemius, Marutha and Antiochus will be examined within the context of Romano-Iranian détente. Throughout this chapter, it will become obvious that the rival states found themselves unable to pursue hostile relations with one another. Instead, it had become necessary to forge friendship with one's enemy in order to survive the turmoil of the early fifth century.

### **A Prelude to Peace**

It is possible to trace the first step towards peaceful Romano-Iranian interactions back to the treaty of 363. This accord should be treated in the context of what it sought to reverse, that being the treaty of 299. In the days of Diocletian and the first tetrarchy, war raged between Iran and Rome. The Sasanian shah Narseh invaded the East in 296 but lost the war only two years later when his army was defeated and his family captured. The Shah was forced to accept whatever terms the Romans offered, granting Rome and Armenia extensive territorial gains, confirming Roman suzerainty over Armenia and Caucasian Iberia and limiting all Romano-Iranian trade to Nisibis.<sup>15</sup> With its victory, Rome had effectively defeated Iran and replaced it as the ascendant power of the Levant. According to Blockley, since treaties were signed between monarchs, the treaty of 299 would have had to be re-confirmed by later shahs, though he points out that it is unknown if Hormizd II, successor to Narseh, renewed the peace.<sup>16</sup> What we do know is that Hormizd's son, Shapur II, would make it his life goal to undo the humiliating treaty of 299.

Although he greatly desired to avenge his forefather's defeat, Shapur's ambitions would need to wait until the death of Constantine in 337.<sup>17</sup> The young Shah first needed to secure his own position even before considering war with his rival and thus ratified some sort of peace with

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<sup>15</sup> Dignas and Winter (2007: 30, 122-30), Wiesehöfer (2001: 94). For Peter the Patrician's account, see Banchich (2015: 135-140 [F. 202]).

<sup>16</sup> Blockley (1992: 7). See Dignas and Winter (2007: 32), as well as the chronology in Wiesehöfer (2001: 314) on Hormizd's attempt to avenge his father. Dignas and Winter mention the *Chronicle of Arbela*, a sixth-seventh Syriac text, as the only source to make note of this invasion, though its reliability and authenticity are still under debate among scholars.

<sup>17</sup> See Burgess' (1999: 16) conclusion that Shapur II must have been already at the frontier on his way to invade the Roman Empire prior to Constantine's passing because Nisibis was under siege only twenty-five days later. In fact, Burgess clearly states that the Shah had "probably already massed his army when he declared war on the Empire in early 337 after the return of his envoys in April and had probably already planned his assault on Nisibis [...]". See also Fowden (1994: 146-53) for an alternate discussion on the sources concerning Constantine's final days and his move towards war with Iran.

Constantine in 325.<sup>18</sup> Nor was Constantine ready for conflict since he had just concluded his civil war against Licinius and needed to consolidate his position, considering that he still remained at risk on the Danube frontier.<sup>19</sup> Peace was therefore maintained with both monarchs instead focusing on consolidating their strength in the years to come. Many sources report Constantine was preparing for large scale war by the end of his life, but died in 337 before opening hostilities.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, his death effectively annulled whatever agreements had been made in 324, allowing Shapur immediately to seize the initiative and invade Mesopotamia in full force. His first invasion of the Roman East was to prove unsuccessful.

From 337 to 353 the Roman Empire was divided between Constantine's three sons. Constantius, the middle brother, held the East where he met the Iranian invasion head on, maintaining the war at a stalemate.<sup>21</sup> Blockley suggests that the Iranians' uncompromising tone during the negotiations may have simply been a strategy to provide a continual pretext for war, although Shapur had indicated he was open to settlement and co-existence with the Romans.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the Shah assaulted Roman territories twice during Constantius' lifetime, and since no agreement had been achieved by his death, the war with Iran was taken up by his successor Julian. While pursuing the Iranians into their own territory, the new Emperor ended up getting killed in battle two years after his accession. This left his successor Jovian no choice but to sue for peace if he meant for the Roman army to escape intact. Stipulated to last thirty years, the treaty of 363 ceded to the Iranians five Trans-tigritane provinces, the cities of Nisibis, Singara

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<sup>18</sup> Christensen (1944: 234). Blockley (1992: 10, 173 n.18) discusses how the Iranian embassy in 325 was probably of the customary congratulatory type exchanged between the empires when a new monarch would ascend to the throne. The acceptance of such an embassy acted as an acknowledgement of peace and would often lead to the ratification of any treaties. In this case, Blockley suggests that it was unlikely for Shapur to have reaffirmed the treaty of 299. See Eusebius VC IV.8.1 for the connection of the Persian embassy to these events. Blockley (1992: 9-10, 173 n.16 and n.19) also discusses how the embassy proved to be most important for peace since in 324, Shapur's older brother, and therefore claimant to the throne, fled to the Roman Empire in hopes of receiving military aid to oust his younger sibling. He points out that the acceptance of Shapur's embassy by Constantine must have indicated that he would not support Hormizd's claim. See Sako (1986: 34) and Nechaeva (2014: 103-4) for information on the diplomacy surrounding the accession of a new monarch in Rome and Iran. See also Dodgeon and Lieu (1991: 147-9) for a collection of primary sources discussing Hormizd's story.

<sup>19</sup> Blockley (1992: 10). See Whitby (2002: 36, 41) on Constantine's campaign against the Goths securing the Danubian frontier for the next generation, though the threat persisted from that frontier since it could quickly materialize during times of Roman internal conflict.

<sup>20</sup> See Dodgeon and Lieu (1991: 155-62) for a compilation of all primary source accounts on Constantine's preparations for war against the Iranians and the events surrounding his death.

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell (2015: 76). For a closer look at Constantius' military interactions with Iran from 337 onwards, see Key Fowden (2006: 390-3), Blockley (1992: 12-24), Blockley (1998b: 419-29), Dignas and Winter (2007: 32-4, 88-90), Hunt (1998: 11-4) and Isaac (1998: 437-44). See Dodgeon and Lieu (1991: 165-230) and for a complete and detailed narrative, driven by the primary sources, of Constantius' wars with Shapur II.

<sup>22</sup> Blockley (1992: 19-20).

and *Castra Maurorum*, and the assurance that Rome would never help Arsaces in Armenia against the Iranians.<sup>23</sup>

Though Shapur had initially sought to undo the treaty of 299, he did not achieve that goal in 363. The Trans-tigris provinces ceded by Rome did not align with those previously taken; instead, the regions in question were divided between the Arab and Syrian marches in consideration of the strategic and cultural orientations of the regions towards either empire. This, Blockley affirms, demonstrated that the Iranians sought a stable and defensible treaty rather than large territorial gains.<sup>24</sup> Shapur's temperance in his territorial gains allowed for the political environment surrounding northern Mesopotamia and the Armenian marches to relax. This was the first step towards a better relationship with Rome, for it demonstrated that Iran did not seek the complete destruction of its western rival, nor a grandiose Achaemenid revival.<sup>25</sup>

The addition of a time clause likewise contributed to the beginning of more peaceful relations among the empires. The usual understanding that treaties were between rulers seems to have been overturned, allowing for both parties to count on an enduring peace in the region for the designated period. We do not know if, in the following year, Jovian's successor, Valens, considered the treaty still valid, but the lack of hostilities towards Iran seems to have led to a promising relationship with the Sasanians.<sup>26</sup> The last remaining issue between Rome and Iran concerned Armenia proper. The vagueness of the clause relating to Arsaces seemingly caused confusion concerning the Caucasian kingdom's status. Shapur understood by it that he had a free hand in Armenia, whereas for Rome, it indicated Armenian independence from either power.<sup>27</sup> Although the Caucasus region would prove to be a lasting point of contention, the trouble it

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<sup>23</sup> Ammianus XXV.7.9-12 and Dignas and Winter (2007: 34, 90-4). See Greatrex and Lieu (2002: 1-9) for a collection of sources discussing the Peace of Jovian. The sources themselves take on a range of differing perspectives, some hostile to the treaty, others completely supportive. Note the short discussion on the Persian tradition on the final page.

<sup>24</sup> Blockley (1992: 27).

<sup>25</sup> See Wiesehöfer (2001: 165-71) and Canepa (2010: 563-96) for discussions on the connections between the early Sasanians and the Achaemenid patrimony in Fars. See Shahbazi (2001: 61-73) for a complete study on Sasanian claims to Achaemenid inheritance. He concludes that the early Sasanians must have had some memory of their ancestors. The rise of the Zoroastrian clergy during Shapur II's reign is identified as a turning point, when the conflict with the Romans took on religious tones rather than historical. The same concepts are explored by Dignas and Winter (2007: 18-9, 53-62) and Blockley (1992: 102-6) but through the examination of the Sasanians' various reasons for territorial expansion.

<sup>26</sup> See Blockley (1992: 29, 185-6 n.38) where he discusses the time frame of the treaty, opposing opinions and Valens' subsequent lack of hostility towards Iran.

<sup>27</sup> Blockley (1984: 36).

caused Rome and Iran eventually unified them against Armenia and pushed them to find a diplomatic solution.

### **The Last Bone of Contention**

It was in fact chance that maintained the peace in the East for the next couple of decades, with the threat of war remaining a very real possibility.<sup>28</sup> Until the death of both Valens in 378 and Shapur in 379, the issue of Armenia remained a great source of tension. For the following twenty or so years after the treaty of 363, chaos in Armenia ensued as both Rome and Iran fought for control over the Causasian kingdom, all the while claiming they had not breached the peace. Armenian kings were constantly assassinated and replaced, while the *naxarars* continuously sought independence from either power, though they did not refrain from demanding aid from them when in need.<sup>29</sup> In fact, Shapur had tried to end the conflict by offering Valens two options: the first proposed they should divide Armenia between each other, while the second requested that at least control of Iberia be given to Iran, should Rome refuse the first option.<sup>30</sup> Cooperation was now being openly proposed in order to clarify the clause concerning Armenia. Valens nevertheless refused the offer, and in 376 threatened full-scale war.<sup>31</sup> This did not occur, since both monarchs soon passed away, with Shapur's successors facing internal political strife, and Theodosius I, Valens' successor, choosing to shift Roman foreign policy towards a less aggressive approach. Before a solution was found, more difficulties ensued in Armenia with tensions culminating in another standoff between Rome and Iran.

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<sup>28</sup> Greatrex (2000: 36, 44) explains how Jovian's treaty was greatly disliked by the public and his successors. He suggests that Valentinian may have sent off Valens from Constantinople to attack Iran in 365, but the eruption of subsequent crises led the eastern emperor back West. See Greatrex and Lieu (2002: 1-9, 20-30) for sources on the opinions concerning Jovian's peace and for a detailed look at the sources that discuss the continuous turmoil in Armenia from the treaty of 363 to its division in 387. See also Lenski (2002: 167-85).

<sup>29</sup> The *naxarars* were essentially autonomous noble princes of Armenia, who sought both their own independence from their king and the independence of Armenia as a whole from Rome and Persia. The situation became immensely more complex when Christianity expanded into the region at the expense of the traditional Zoroastrian religion of Armenia. It is at this point that the loyalties of the *naxarars* began to be divided not only by political lines between Rome and Iran, but also by the associated sects of the empires. The conflict between Rome and Iran, or Christianity and Zoroastrianism, was to be played out in smaller scale proxy wars in Armenia, not so different than the wars fought on foreign soil between the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. See Garsoïan (1967: 309).

<sup>30</sup> Greatrex (2000: 38-9). See Greatrex and Lieu (2002: 28-30) for some sources and discussion on the partition of Armenia.

<sup>31</sup> Greatrex (2000: 39). For more on the conflict in Armenia and its partition, see Greatrex (2000: 35-48), Baynes (1955: 186-208), Blockley (1987: 222-34), Börm (2016: 615-646), Garsoïan (1971: 341-52) and Lee (2009: 1-23).

War was on the horizon, yet both monarchs sought to avoid hostilities and instead reopened negotiations in 387, choosing to divide the kingdom between two weak Armenian kings and, therefore, Roman and Iranian control.<sup>32</sup> Blockley argues that it was quite possible that the treaty of 363 had remained in place and this agreement was but an adjustment or substitution of the Armenia clause.<sup>33</sup> With the issue of Armenia resolved and with the acknowledgement of each other's interests and claims, mutual trust and confidence was again reinforced among the rivals. The agreement over Armenia was of immense importance, since it eventually allowed for the creation of the diplomatic structures necessary for the long-term maintenance of security without continual recourse to war.<sup>34</sup>

### **A Struggle for Power**

With mutual respect growing between Rome and Iran, the stage was set for cordial relations to be officially established. Internal struggles and external dangers were all that was needed to push the empires towards friendship. Let us first examine the problems Yazdgird I faced at his accession. Since the time of Shapur II, Iran had been embroiled in a political war between the shahs and their nobility over influence and power. The issues can be seen as originating from Iran's social and political hierarchy. Though similar to an emperor, the *shahanshah*, or king of kings, was truly that, almost a first among equals. According to Blockley, the title was not one of ecumenical dominion, but rather a "recognition that his position was secured through the sworn loyalty and support given him by the hereditary rulers, many bearing themselves the title of 'king', of the lands that made up his kingdom, which [...] is called Iran."<sup>35</sup>

There were seven great noble houses, called *vāspuhrān*, among which the ruling Sasanian clan counted.<sup>36</sup> Inherited from the Arsacids, this ancient feudal system remains still relatively unclear to modern scholars who can only guess what exact privileges and obligations the nobility held. What is certain is that they owned their own territories, managed their own armies, and held the highest state offices, which were hereditary.<sup>37</sup> Beneath these great families was the middle nobility, called *vuzurgān*, whose members occupied various bureaucratic, administrative

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<sup>32</sup> Baynes (1955: 207) and Greatrex (2000: 43).

<sup>33</sup> Blockley (1992: 43).

<sup>34</sup> Blockley (1992: 43).

<sup>35</sup> Blockley (1992: 101).

<sup>36</sup> Christensen (1944: 103-10).

<sup>37</sup> Blockley (1992: 101), Christensen (1944: 107-10), Yarshater (1983: XL), Garsoïan (1983: 576), Howard-Johnston (1992: 221-3) and Pourshariati (2008: 29, 51-2).

and ministerial positions.<sup>38</sup> At the bottom of the aristocratic hierarchy were the *āzādhān*, or lesser nobles, whom Christensen identifies as “les hommes libres” and landowning knights.<sup>39</sup> This system made the Iranian Empire quite decentralized, and the proper administration of the state very much depended on the co-operation of the nobility.<sup>40</sup> They held considerable power within the government and could easily challenge the king if they saw fit.

Existing almost as another noble house, the Zoroastrian priesthood, or Magi, essentially functioned parallel to the Iranian nobility. The group derived its political power not only from its spiritual authority, but also from its vast lands and resources and control of the judicial process. Combined with the immense autonomy accorded to them, the Magi proved to be, in Christensen’s words, “un État dans l’État.”<sup>41</sup> The leader of the Magi, called the *Mobadan-Mobad*, was nominated by the shah and served as his counsellor on religious matters. This provided whoever held the position with considerable influence over the Iranian monarch as his moral and spiritual mentor.<sup>42</sup> Blockley argues how such potent authority within Iran essentially deprived the shah of a secular counterbalance if he wanted to maintain control over policy. In the Roman Empire, if the emperor desired to distance himself from the Church, he could easily turn to his administrative, military or judicial sectors. This was not a possibility for the Iranian shahs, for if they desired to distance themselves from the Magi, they would be required to support a secondary group within the empire.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Christensen (1944: 110-1). Wiesehöfer (1996: 171) identifies these groups differently, suggesting that the *vāspuhrān* (the princes) were in fact composed only of the members of the Sasanian clan who were not directly descendant of the ruler, while the *vuzurgān* (the grandees) consisted of the great noble houses. He posits that the *āzādhān* (the nobles) were simply the rest of the lesser nobility. Note that Wiesehöfer spells *vāspuhrān* differently as *vāspuhragān*.

<sup>39</sup> Christensen (1944:111-3).

<sup>40</sup> Wiesehöfer (1996: 171-2). See Pourshariati (2008: 59-60) where she discusses the political situation at Yazdgird’s accession. Using al-Tabari’s work, Pourshariati claims that Yazdgird was explicit in his desire to uphold the traditional dynastic-confederate arrangement with the nobles houses of Iran, but warned them he would restrain any who would seek greater powers. This is framed within Yazdgird’s project of returning and recentralizing political power to the shah and away from those nobles houses who had taken advantage of the monarchy’s weakness.

<sup>41</sup> Christensen (1944: 116-22). See Daryaee (2009: 43-4) for details on the priesthood. Wiesehöfer (2001: 211) has doubts on the existence of a Sasanian “state religion” or “state church,” commenting on how these concepts should be set aside since they suggest false analogies with the Christian religion. He points out that the Zoroastrian priesthood is better described as a “differentiated religious-administrative hierarchy [which] was created in a lengthy process [...] and based on the model of monarchic power.”

<sup>42</sup> Christensen (1944: 119).

<sup>43</sup> Blockley (1992: 103). Though it seems logical to believe that Yazdgird could instead rely on his loyal nobility to counter the disloyal aristocracy and the Magi’s influences, it would necessarily come at a price. See Pourshariati (2008: 60-6) where she discusses how Yazdgird I actually did rely on a great noble house, the Suren, to aid him in his quest to centralize power. She calls the arrangement a confederacy, with house Suren’s members essentially co-ruling the empire alongside the Sasanids. Alas, the Suren would attain even greater power during the subsequent

Over time, the nobles and Magi sought to build up even more influence for themselves within the realm. Yazdgird's precarious position at the beginning of his reign can be traced back to a shift in power less than a century earlier with the accession of Shapur II. This king had in fact been put on the throne by both the nobility and Magi after they deposed his older brother, Adur-Narseh, who ruled for less than a year. The fact that Shapur was but an infant allowed the two groups effectively to run the kingdom until he came of age. Daryaee highlights how this situation would have signalled that Iran did not need a powerful monarch to run, for the kingdom was kept safe and stable under the control of the nobles and Magi.<sup>44</sup> This situation is also a perfect example of how the Iranian succession laws could function against the shah. The absence of primogeniture and the practice of polygamy combined to form a potentially volatile succession crisis upon the death of a monarch.<sup>45</sup> It was therefore common practice in the fourth century for the nobility and Magi to murder and replace the shah with another of his relatives. Christensen reconstructs a sort of elective monarchy, discussing how the king did not even have the right to choose his successor during this period, and how the authority to do so lay in the hands of the Greater and Lesser nobilities, or in those of the *Mobadan-Mobad*.<sup>46</sup> The shahs of Iran were being slowly and surely hemmed in by the very system they governed.

Daryaee points out that the titles of the shahs reveal more information concerning the curtailment of their powers and status. Though Shapur II eventually proved to be a powerful monarch, he was the last to call himself "whose lineage (is) from the Gods", which may indicate that the position of shah had lost its religious authority and had become almost completely secular.<sup>47</sup> This shift can only be explained within the context of the Magi's accumulation of power. The nobility also experienced an increase in influence, allowing ambitious and disloyal individuals from both groups to do as they pleased. After Shapur's death, a sequence of assassinations was perpetrated, with Ardashir II (379-383), Shapur III (383-388) and Bahram IV (388-399), and even both Yazdgird I (399-420) and his son Shapur IV (420) all succumbing to the nobles and Magi. Unsurprisingly, the shahs did not passively allow this happen. Al-Tabari's work attests to the repercussions of plotting against the shah, with some like Ardashir II

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reigns of Bahram V and Yazdgird II but at the cost of the shahs. Although house Suren was initially empowered by Yazdgird, the example of their rise to power highlights the necessity for Yazdgird to look for alternative power bases outside the traditional Iranian groups at the onset of his reign.

<sup>44</sup> Daryaee (2008: 45).

<sup>45</sup> Blockley (1992: 104).

<sup>46</sup> Christensen (1944: 263). The *Mobadan-Mobad* was the Zoroastrian High Priest.

<sup>47</sup> Daryaee (2009: 21).

attempting to reduce the influence of the traditional aristocracy by executing a number of them.<sup>48</sup> Later in this source and in the *Chronicle of Seert* as well, Yazdgird I is reported to have done the same, though explicitly as punishment for the murders of his predecessors.<sup>49</sup> The fact that the Magi and nobility posed such a potent threat to the shahs of Iran demonstrates the weak state of the monarchy. If Yazdgird sought to strengthen his position as monarch, he would need to focus completely on curtailing the power of those who plotted against him. The political instability in Iran left him no choice but to neutralise any external threats so that he could turn his attention to the internal ones. Peace with Rome was the only way.

Yazdgird was innovative when it came to combating the growing strength of the Magi and nobility. In order to achieve that goal, he sought the support from minority groups within his realm. By cultivating positive relations with the Christians and Jews, he hoped to bolster support beyond the traditional groups and thus curtail their influence.<sup>50</sup> These minority groups also happened mainly to inhabit the shah's personal holdings in Mesopotamia, which allowed him to exert greater control and influence among their communities. Though the topic will be further examined in the next chapter, the patronage of minority religions by Yazdgird I must first be discussed here within the context of Romano-Iranian rapprochement. This shah chose not only to tolerate Christians and Jews within his realm, but also to reinforce their position within Iranian society in various ways. Key to the strengthening of the East Syrian Christians was Bishop Marutha of Martyropolis, the Roman ambassador to Iran during much of Yazdgird's reign. In part because of his embassies and close friendship with Yazdgird, Christians were freely able to practice their religion and build churches within the realm. Upon Marutha's return to Iran in 410, he and Yazdgird even orchestrated the first of many Church councils that determined the Church's position within Iran, its relationship with the king and with the Church in the West.<sup>51</sup> By this council Yazdgird made himself direct protector and almost head of the Iranian Church, while naming the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as leader of the Church in the East. This allowed

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<sup>48</sup> See al-Tabari 846-8/67-9 for the reigns of Ardashir II, Shapur III and Bahram IV.

<sup>49</sup> al-Tabari 848-50/70-4 and *Chronicle of Seert* 204/316 (LXV). The crackdown on the Magi and nobility by Yazdgird and his predecessors, as well as their deaths at the hands of the groups which they punished or suppressed will be covered in the following chapter.

<sup>50</sup> Blockley (1992: 49). Rubin (1986: 33-5) highlights how managing an unruly and arrogant body of nobles in a time of peace, when no booty was to be had from external wars, would eventually give way to a political crisis. It is within this context that he chooses to frame Yazdgird's reliance on minorities within his empire, and focuses instead on the Shah's military and political reliance on the Sasanians' Arab allies.

<sup>51</sup> *Synodicon Orientale* 17-36/253-75.

the Shah to maintain authority over the Christians since the new seat of their appointed leader was located in the capital and intimately involved him in court politics. Though the Jews may not have held their own councils, they too were accorded religious freedom within the empire.<sup>52</sup>

The reasons why Yazdgird cultivated such relations becomes clear when observing how he used them. Not much is known about the Jews in Iran, though it should be noted that one of Yazdgird's wives is believed to have been the daughter of the Jewish community's leader, the Exilarch.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, we do have sources like the *Chronicle of Seert* that attest to the Shah's use of Christian bishops as government officials and ambassadors. Although bishops had already been used as envoys to Rome, Yazdgird began involving the Church hierarchy in more domestic affairs. For example, one account reports that the *Catholicos* Mar Ahai was sent as an official inspector to investigate a trade incident concerning ships coming from China and India.<sup>54</sup> McDonough discusses the advantages derived from using bishops in ways such as these. He suggests that Yazdgird was deliberately cultivating favours through the patronage of the Christian hierarchy in order to further his friendly agenda with Rome. At the same time, his policy was helping to reinforce peace and stability within his own empire by conciliating the minority groups, thus securing their loyalty and cooperation with the government.<sup>55</sup> Hence groups that could potentially cause unrest were pacified both by receiving rights and being acknowledged by their king.

Though at first Yazdgird's tolerance and patronizing of Christianity seems to have been restricted to the sole purpose of maintaining positive relations with Rome, this is not the case. The Iranian Magi and nobility were indeed a threat to both the Shah's authority and person. Yazdgird sought to tie the Christians and Jews to him and thus to harness their political power in

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<sup>52</sup> Herman (2012: 2-3) and Wiesehöfer (2001: 216). See also Herman (2012: 1-16, 21-49) for more information on the sources (or lack thereof), the issues involved with them, and a more complete look at the interactions between the Sasanian Empire and the Exilarchate. Neusner (1983: 909-23) provides a good overview of Sasanian Jewish history, beginning from settlement in Iran, into the Sasanian period, and touching on their semi-autonomous status as well as their divergent theology.

<sup>53</sup> Herman (2012: 8 n.43).

<sup>54</sup> A local governor, who was Yazdgird's nephew, had reported the shipment stolen. Yazdgird sent the *Catholicos* to investigate the affair, indicating that he either did not trust his relative to conduct the inquiry, or that even suspected he had stolen the shipment himself. These are obviously not the only interpretations of Yazdgird's choice, but it can be said that the Iranian nobility may have not exactly interpreted the affair positively either. See Garsoïan (1973-4 : 123) and *Chronicle of Seert* 212-3/324-5 (LXIX). Note also that the title of *Catholicos* was given to the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon who was made the head of the East Syrian church by the Council of Mar Ishaq. The name would surface later in history as the official title of the office, though I will use it anachronistically for its convenience in differentiating the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as an equivalent to a patriarch.

<sup>55</sup> McDonough (2008b: 88-9).

order that he could effectively strengthen groups to counter the influence of the nobility, just as Blockley suggests. If the Magi and nobles would not co-operate with Yazdgird's policies, he instead could find support among the Jews or among the Christians, and therefore, Rome. Though the Shah used this strategy to secure his position as monarch, it caused even more friction with the Magi. The rising tensions among the Zoroastrian priesthood in turn undermined Yazdgird's efforts to consolidate power, since they now had more reason to plot against him.<sup>56</sup> Hence the Shah's strategy both strengthened and weakened him. While the eastern sources like al-Tabari and the *Chronicle of Seert* describe how Yazdgird cracked down on his nobility, the western sources, such as Socrates and the *Greek Life of Marutha* focus on his punishment of the Magi. These narratives may have a religious agenda behind their descriptions, but the stories they tell are rendered plausible given the precarious context that Yazdgird experienced. The theme of the punishment of the Magi revolves around their plots to discredit Marutha and the Christians in the eyes of the Iranian monarch. Each time the Magi plotted, they were discovered and subsequently severely punished by the Shah for their actions. According to these sources, Yazdgird did not have any tolerance or mercy towards those who plotted against him or sought to manipulate him, and justly punished them.

The patronage of Christianity and Judaism thus protected the rule of the king by creating an alternative power base, but also jeopardised it by further alienating and frustrating the Magi and nobles. These counter-measures made him an extremely unpopular monarch for the Iranians. In the eastern traditions, he is called "The Sinner,"<sup>57</sup> a name that Daryaee suggests was post-mortem propaganda seeking to condemn his memory.<sup>58</sup> Yazdgird's death is a mystery, some believing he died of the illness that appears in Marutha's hagiography, or that he was murdered. Whatever the truth may be, the nobility most definitely sought to destroy Yazdgird's legacy by prohibiting any of his children to inherit the throne<sup>59</sup>. They instead tried to place another of the Sasanian clan on the throne, while managing to eliminate Shapur, Yazdgird's son and designated successor. Despite such a well executed coup, the conspirators were unable to stop Bahram, another of Yazdgird's sons, who forced his way into power with the aid of his Arab allies. Bahram had in fact been sent to be raised with the Arabs by his father in order that he be

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<sup>56</sup> Garsoïan (1973-4: 132-5). The topic discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

<sup>57</sup> al-Tabari 847/70.

<sup>58</sup> Daryaee (2012: 194).

<sup>59</sup> *Shahnama* XXXIV.8 and al-Tabari 858/86.

protected from such court intrigue. Now that he was shah, Bahram was very much still at the mercy of the Magi and nobility. These groups could turn on him at any time, and rather than antagonize them like his father, Bahram chose to let them have their way. His complacency and co-operation garnered him immense praise, making him one of the most popular shahs of Sasanian history, with countless legends and romances written about his life.<sup>60</sup>

### **Intrigue, Ambition, Rebellion**

As in Iran, the Roman emperors also struggled to maintain control of their dominions, though with much less success. In both Constantinople and the West a variety of politicians had been fighting for power. Although we may distinguish the eastern and western Roman empires as different, the Romans themselves still saw and understood the empire as unified, albeit under a diarchy of sorts. The emperors barely ran the empire, and increasingly functioned as figureheads.<sup>61</sup> Political intrigue and ambition plagued the courts, with a variety of men vying for power in each capital, with some even seeking to re-unite the empire under their own dynasty. In particular, the eastern government saw a string of politicians take control from 395 to 405, each in power for just a few years at a time, with some returning at later dates. Political intrigue was the driving factor in the constant turnover, and often led to the deaths of those caught up in the conflict. What remains clear throughout this narrative is that the court in East was most definitely not stable.<sup>62</sup> Its leadership changed frequently, and not always by peaceful means. Only when Anthemius eventually came into office in 405 did he manage to hold onto the post for a decade, and thus brought a new level of stability to the Eastern Roman Empire.

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<sup>60</sup> Daryaee (2008: 61), Pourshariati (2008: 68-70) and Christensen (1944: 263, 274-7). The Irano-Arab primary sources talk of Bahram V in excess, relaying various stories, from the more mythological and legendary to more realistic ones. For all content on Bahram, see *Shahnama* XXXIV.2-6, 9-13 and XXXV.1-40 and al-Tabari 854-71/82-106.

<sup>61</sup> Greatrex (2015: 29-33) and Croke (2015:116-9).

<sup>62</sup> Liebeschuetz (1990: 132) disagrees, stating that the image of violent political conflict is irrelevant because of the reality that it had little effect over policy or ideology. Instead, he proposes the concept of the "Arcadian Establishment" as representative of the government at the turn of the century, stating that all the men who held these important offices were of the same background and ideology and effectively maintained the same policies. The rivalries were in fact driven by purely personal ambitions for power or patronage and had no real impact on the empire.

There happens to be other issues tied up in the political instability that plagued the eastern empire for a decade.<sup>63</sup> Certain Goths had been made into federates and were given official command of their armies, but were often mistreated by the Romans, or simply had greater political ambitions than leading armies. Alaric is the first of these men that will be discussed. He and his men had previously fought with the Romans though the Goths bore considerably more losses than their allies. With the death of Theodosius I in 395, Alaric expected the new government to acknowledge the sacrifice his people had made, but this was not so. Protesting the withholding of promised subsidies and the denial of his desired rank, he and his soldiers ravaged the Balkans until the eastern government according him the rank of *Magister militum* of Illyricum in 399.<sup>64</sup> Alaric's people were eventually neglected once again by the eastern court and chose to move into Italy for better opportunities, culminating in his infamous sack of Rome in 410.

In addition to Alaric's rebellion, two other volatile Gothic generals had caused issues for the Eastern Empire during this period as well. A certain Tribigild was the leader of a Gothic federate force in Asia Minor who led a rebellion in 399. Liebeschuetz believes that Tribigild and his Goths were outraged at the lack of recognition for their participation in the defense of the empire.<sup>65</sup> The rebellion attracted many to its ranks, and they too plundered the countryside like Alaric and his men. Immediate action was taken, with Eutropius, the new consul and the de facto head of the East, sending Gainas, a second Gothic federate general and kinsman to Tribigild, to deal with the rebels. Instead, Gainas, who had also felt neglected, sent an ultimatum to Arcadius stating that he would not put down Tribigild's rebellion unless his political rivals were handed over to him. Gainas' demands were continuously met with countless politicians removed from office and even exiled. Constantinople was thus terrorized and sent into turmoil until open warfare eventually erupted between the Roman Empire and its Gothic field army.<sup>66</sup> The rebellion ended when Gainas fled over the Danube only to be killed by the Hunnic king Uldin.<sup>67</sup> Thus, for about half a decade, Constantinople was surrounded by its own rebellious federate troops led by high-ranking generals who plundered the countryside. The pressure exercised by these men

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<sup>63</sup> Not discussed in the following section are two instances of regional unrest. Though minor in comparison to other issues like the various Gothic rebellions and Hunnic invasions, these instances are still worth mentioning as contributing to the overall tension that ran high during this time in the Eastern Empire. See. B. Isaac (1998: 452-4).

<sup>64</sup> Liebeschuetz (1990: 59 and n. 80).

<sup>65</sup> Liebeschuetz (1990, 38).

<sup>66</sup> Liebeschuetz (1990, 118).

<sup>67</sup> For more about the tumultuous east Roman politics, see Liebeschuetz (1990: 86-145) and Mitchell (2015: 101-2).

around the capital of the East should not be underestimated. The focus of Arcadius' court was most definitely on the Gothic rebellions during this period, especially within the context of the growing rivalry between the eastern and western empires.<sup>68</sup>

Although the eastern Roman court managed to navigate the military rebellions it encountered, it also had to deal with the political threat posed by Stilicho, the *Magister militum* of the West who ruled on behalf of Honorius. From the death of Theodosius I onwards, this man was to be at odds with Constantinople as he struggled to find a way to seize control of the eastern government for his own family. He had twice marched eastwards to lend his aid in removing Alaric from the Balkans, but each time the eastern court rejected him, instead demanding that he return from whence he came. Stilicho was greatly involved in the mismanagement of Alaric's Goths between the Ravenna and Constantinople, and eventually paid the price for his political ambitions.<sup>69</sup> What remains is that his actions during the decade of turmoil, from 395 to 405, almost led the Roman Empire into civil war between East and West. When Yazdgird came to power in 399, tensions still ran high among the Romans. A new Iranian ruler could mean impending war in Mesopotamia, and Constantinople must have been anxious to establish a peaceful dialogue with the Shah.

### **Hunnic Threats**

The Roman and Iranian empires therefore each had their own problems and issues at home. The political atmosphere was unstable, and both rulers had been steadily losing power over their dominions. This instability in both rival empires allowed peace to reign on the Roman eastern frontier, but it also depended on the attitudes of both reigning monarchs. Had Arcadius and Yazdgird not been open to friendly relations, the status quo would simply have been maintained. The Romano-Iranian rivalry had reached a point where the two judged each other equal in power, and rather than waste their energies against one another at this critical point in

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<sup>68</sup> For a complete picture on Alaric and his Goths, see Liebeschuetz (1990: 48-85) and Mitchell (2015: 95-101) who includes information on Stilicho. See Heather (1998: 501, 507-15), Heather (1991: Chapters One, Three, Four and Five), Cameron (2012: 22-3) and Elton (2015: 132-3). Heather's (1991) chapters deal with the issues related to Gothic history and Romano-Gothic relations from the late fourth century to the early fifth. Chapter Six is of exceptional importance for its complete look at Alaric. See also Cameron and Long (1993: 199-233, 324-8) for a more detailed discussion on the sources that cover Gainas' and Tribigild's rebellions, their demands and the connected court politics.

<sup>69</sup> See Liebeschuetz (1990: 7-85, 89-145) for a complete and detailed look at the politico-military turmoil that gripped the Roman Empire. Liebeschuetz's narrative combines all actors into one contiguous picture.

time, they openly sought to proclaim co-operation so that neither would be destroyed. It was at this moment of weakness that the various Hunnic hordes contributed in bringing the empires together.

Twice Hunnic hordes emerged from the steppes to conduct destructive raids into both empires. By passing through the Caucasus mountains, the raiders were able to hit interior territories, pushing both west and southwards into Armenia, Cappadocia, Galatia, Syria and Mesopotamia as far as the Sasanian capital, Ctesiphon.<sup>70</sup> Towns were ravaged and thousands were taken as prisoners. The first raid in 395 was the most devastating of the two, especially since the East was left undefended by Theodosius I, who had withdrawn troops in order to fight a usurper in the West. These Huns were eventually repulsed by the Iranians who subsequently tended to both Roman and Iranian prisoners taken from the raid, while a second raid in 397/8 was defeated by the eunuch Eutropius and Tribigild. The Hunnic raids were to leave a mark in the consciousness of both empires, with talks about the defense of the Caucasian mountain passes lasting well into the sixth century.<sup>71</sup> It is understandable that in 399 both Arcadius and Yazdgird remembered that the threat beyond the mountains was real and could indeed materialize at any time. Their priorities would thus be to co-ordinate and co-operate in order that both empires be preserved from such a threat.

Both the Iranians and Romans would eventually once again meet the Hunnic hordes, though not always the same groups that crossed over the Caucasus. Yazdgird's son Bahram V encountered them in the form of the Kidarite and later the Hephthalite Huns, who entered Iran from the eastern portion of their empire during the mid-fifth century.<sup>72</sup> The Romans too would have to face the fearsome steppe nomads, though much sooner. These Huns crossed the Danube in 408 upon the death of the Emperor Arcadius, capturing a fort and preparing to ravage Thrace.<sup>73</sup> Prior to this, in 401, there were reports on how runaway slaves and deserters had despoiled Thrace claiming to be Huns, probably taking up the name so that they would appear

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<sup>70</sup> Thompson (1948: 26-8). For a general discussion of the sources, see Maenchen-Helfen (1973: 51-9) and Greatrex and Greatrex (1999: 65-75) for the Syriac ones.

<sup>71</sup> For an overview of the sources as well as commentary on the status of the defence of the Caspian Gates throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, see Greatrex and Lieu (2002: 56-9, 87-8, 91-2, 96-7) and Blockley (1985: 62-74).

<sup>72</sup> Greatrex (1998: 14 and n.39), de la Vaissière (2015: 184-5) and Christensen (1944 : 280).

<sup>73</sup> Thompson (1948: 29-30) for the reports from the sources on the measures taken by Theodosius II to defend the Danubian frontier from any further invasions. See also Maenchen-Helfen (1973: 63).

more dangerous.<sup>74</sup> In 422, while Rome was at war with Iran, the Huns crossed the Danube once again, forcing Theodosius II to end the war in the East. Beginning with their original raids in 395 and 397/8, the Hunnic hordes or the North posed a constant threat to both empires. Their impending invasions would keep both Constantinople and Ctesiphon alert, and aware that the integrity of their empires could easily be violated by the Huns.

The turn of the fifth century proved to be a precarious time for both Rome and Iran. With their devastating invasions, the various Hunnic raiders added to the plethora of issues the Roman and Iranian empires needed to resolve. Already, political instability threatened both Ctesiphon and Constantinople. In the former, the shahs had also nearly lost their authority. Regicide was the only cause of death for the Iranian monarchs after Shapur II, and the shah had become but a figurehead, only able to manage his personal demesne. In the latter, the emperor's weakness allowed politicians to fight for control over the government, while Germanic generals burst into rebellion demanding more and more power. In their quest to buttress their positions as monarchs and protect their dominions, the two rivals would come to co-operate in the face of severe danger. If the empires sought to survive the intense turmoil of the late fourth and early fifth centuries, peace on the Roman eastern frontier needed to be maintained.

### **The Shah and the Roman Captives**

Before moving on to discuss the important characters involved in the establishment of friendship between Rome and Iran, a note must be made on a singular act of kindness that signalled Yazdgird's friendly nature and openness to co-operation. One composite Syriac source dated to c. 640, the *Chronicon miscellaneum ad annum domini 724 pertinens*,<sup>75</sup> reports in its account of the Hunnic invasion of 395 that the Iranians took care of the captives released from the Huns. Many of these were Roman Christians, and the source reports that when Yazdgird came in power he sent back these captives to their own lands as a sign of good faith. In turn, these captives spread the word about Yazdgird's kindness and clemency. The author then extols the Shah, asking that "his memory be blessed and his last days nobler than his first [...]"<sup>76</sup> Though we may not know of the exact timing, it can be assumed that Yazdgird returned the

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<sup>74</sup> Kim (2016: 75).

<sup>75</sup> See Palmer (1993: 5) for some contextual information about this source.

<sup>76</sup> Greatrex and Greatrex (1999: 67).

captives during Marutha's first embassy as an additional act of benevolence, hoping to enhance the fostering of good relations with the Romans.

### **Promoters of Peace**

Now that we have established the extent of the tumult that gripped Constantinople and Ctesiphon at the beginning of the fifth century, let us turn our attention to three characters who played critical roles in the establishment of positive Romano-Iranian relations. The first of these is the praetorian prefect Flavius Anthemius. In the words of Socrates, Anthemius was "the most intelligent man of his time."<sup>77</sup> He first appeared in Constantinople as *comes sacrarum legationum* sometime after Gainas' revolt in 400, and within four years he had achieved the office of *Magister officiorum*. By 405, Anthemius had become praetorian prefect of the East, and his policies contributed much to solidifying peaceful relations with Iran. Some suggest that he had participated in the embassy to Yazdgird in 399, which proved to be of great importance since it successfully fostered friendship between the two powers through the ambassadors.<sup>78</sup> Anthemius became more and more prominent as time went on, receiving both a consulship and patrician status in 405, eventually completely controlling the government by the time of Theodosius II's accession.<sup>79</sup>

Anthemius's regime was marked by its policy of peace and friendship with Iran, which can be directly observed in an agreement dated to in 408, probably brought to Yazdgird by the delegation sent to proclaim Theodosius II. New items of dispute had been rising since the first embassy to Yazdgird in 399/400 which Blockley suggests renewed the thirty-year treaty of 363 that had come to an end.<sup>80</sup> The accession of Theodosius II gave the perfect opportunity for an embassy to address the tensions and thus iron out any concerns about trade.<sup>81</sup> A Roman law dated to 408/9 indicates that the empires wanted to regulate cross-border traffic, with an

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<sup>77</sup> Socrates *HE* VII.1.

<sup>78</sup> Bardill and Greatrex (1996: 172). The bishop Marutha of Martyropolis was also present during this first embassy and played a major role. It was his personal relationship with the Iranian Shah that truly ushered in the apogee of Romano-Iranian relations. His actions will be discussed in a later section.

<sup>79</sup> See Chapter Two: 58 n.223.

<sup>80</sup> Blockley (1992: 48, 195 n.11 and 12) tells us how there is no indication that a time limit was in force in 399, even though Arcadius would probably have sent an embassy in either 383 (his proclamation as Augustus) or in 395 (his proclamation as sole Augustus of the East) to address the affair. Nevertheless, he would need to reconfirm whatever arrangements had been made with the new shah, Yazdgird. See Ammianus XXV.7.14 for the thirty years' time clause.

<sup>81</sup> Dignas and Winter (2007: 35) and Lee (1993: 62-4).

agreement probably being reached during Marutha's embassy that same year.<sup>82</sup> Evidence of this can be found in a Roman law regulating cross-border trade that was passed around the same time as the embassy.<sup>83</sup> Greatrex and Lieu identify this law as a good illustration of the "spirit of détente" fostered by Anthemius, which is also apparent in his selection of civilian ambassadors to Iran.<sup>84</sup> In fact, Roman envoys from 400 to 465 were primarily of civilian status which emphasized the desire for peace and sought to avoid causing friction with the Iranian court.<sup>85</sup>

Other than his openness to making treaties, Anthemius seems to have orchestrated a landmark event that sought to secure the Theodosian dynasty's hold on the monarchy. When Arcadius died in 408, the succession was at risk since his only son, Theodosius II, was underage while his sisters were nearing marriageable age. Alaric was still causing trouble in the Balkans, and Stilicho was planning on becoming regent for the young Theodosius II and thus secure the entire empire under his command.<sup>86</sup> The accession would have been perilous, except that Arcadius seemed to have understood the danger of an underage heir and acted pre-emptively to protect the young Theodosius.<sup>87</sup> Fearing that his young son would be removed from the throne by some ambitious politician like Stilicho, or that the Iranians would take the opportunity and launch an invasion, Arcadius chose to designate Yazdgird as Theodosius' guardian considering positive relations with Iran had been established since 399/400, and since Yazdgird had personally been proclaimed a friend of the Romans. The request was promptly accepted.

The guardianship of Theodosius II is an unusual occurrence, since it was not discussed or even acknowledged in any way by contemporary sources. Procopius is our earliest source on these matters and he discusses how Arcadius was aware of Honorius' dire situation in Italy, and thus his inability to act as guardian of Theodosius. He tells us that when Yazdgird accepted the task, he threatened any who would go against his ward. Theophanes is the only source to mention that Yazdgird actually sent a eunuch, a certain Antiochus, to Constantinople as guardian

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<sup>82</sup> See Sako (1986: 66-70) for information on Marutha's 408 embassy to Iran. Interestingly, Sako does not connect the 408 law to the 408 embassy despite them occurring very close in time to each other and involving both Roman and Iranian parties.

<sup>83</sup> *CJ* IV.643.4.

<sup>84</sup> Greatrex and Lieu (2002: 33-4).

<sup>85</sup> Blockley (1992: 134-5). The civilian status of ambassadors is opposed to their traditional military status. See Blockley (1992: 239 n.27) where he lists all known ambassadors (names and office) to Iran from 358 to 506. For more information on Roman embassies to Iran, see Nechaeva (2014), especially Chapters One, Two and Three.

<sup>86</sup> Liebeschuetz (1990: 67).

<sup>87</sup> Rubin (1986: 34, 58 n.122) identifies "a host of pretenders to the imperial throne" as the impending political threat to the rule of Theodosius II.

on his behalf.<sup>88</sup> This man is the second important character involved in the apogee of Romano-Iranian relations. Antiochus was described by Theophanes as a highly educated instructor and advisor, and therefore perfect for the job of protecting and raising a young emperor.<sup>89</sup> He also attributed the maintenance of positive relations between Rome and Iran to Antiochus instead of Marutha, though he does mention how they worked together to spread Christianity in Iran.<sup>90</sup> Greatrex suggests that Antiochus was at court prior to Arcadius' death and had accrued much influence, eventually working alongside Anthemius to maintain the highly positive relations with Iran.<sup>91</sup> Whatever the case may be, if we are to believe that the guardianship really did take place, then it can be said that it was a direct and clear sign of the good relations that existed between Rome and Iran.<sup>92</sup>

Though it may have been just a diplomatic courtesy, Yazdgird's guardianship of young Theodosius essentially set the stage for further improving relations and for sustaining the peace that would eventually define the period.<sup>93</sup> This agreement between Arcadius and Yazdgird I is a prime example of friendship and trust, which was passed on to Theodosius II when his position as emperor was successfully safeguarded. From a more realistic perspective, the stability of the relationship was probably due to Anthemius' policy, and perhaps Antiochus' aid, rather than the emperor's. It is even possible that Anthemius co-ordinated the entire affair, either genuinely for the benefit of the Empire, or for his own. Regardless, the guardianship remains a testament to the political instability that existed during Arcadius' reign, and to the stability that came after it through co-operation with Iran.

The desire for political stability in Constantinople therefore found a complimentary project in the rapprochement with Ctesiphon. Blockley believes that by the late fourth century, the Roman Empire had understood the durability, strength and danger of the Sasanian regime,

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<sup>88</sup> See Bardill and Greatrex (1996) for a full discussion on the existence and career of Antiochus the Praepositus.

<sup>89</sup> Theophanes 81 [AM 5900].

<sup>90</sup> Theophanes 81 [AM 5900]. Marutha's role in establishing positive Romano-Iranian relation is discussed in the next section.

<sup>91</sup> Bardill and Greatrex (1996: 176, 180).

<sup>92</sup> Procopius *Wars* I.2. There is much debate about this occurrence, though many scholars have put forward a strong case for its existence, see Greatrex (2008) and Bardill and Greatrex (1996). Agathias IV.26 also discusses the affair, though admits to using Procopius' account. In his version, he berates Arcadius for trusting a heathen barbarian who sense of justice was untried with the protection of his son and empire, and although he insults Yazdgird with this comment, he does commend the Shah for his decency and commitment to peace. Theophanes, is the first surviving source to mention Antiochus' involvement in the affair. For a discussion of the sources and their varying opinions, see McDonough (2008a: 131-4).

<sup>93</sup> Garsoïan (1983: 579).

and accepted Iran as an independent and sovereign state.<sup>94</sup> On the other hand, he suggests that the entire guardianship may have been exaggerated as a desperate attempt by Theodosius' supporters to strengthen his regime by stretching the familial language often used between the monarchs.<sup>95</sup> At any rate, the affair must have had great symbolic and practical importance, since Antiochus had a successful career at court, thus contributing to the overall stability of the empire. We also must not forget that he was perhaps an official representative of Yazdgird and thus also contributed to maintaining positive relations between the courts. Anthemius was not alone in his achievements. In fact, it was Marutha's success as ambassador to Iran that truly founded the relationship with Yazdgird in 399. Multiple accounts commemorate Marutha as having forged a personal relationship with Yazdgird, which in turn extended to one with Rome.

### **Bishop and Diplomat**

The Bishop Marutha of Martyropolis took part in two important embassies to Yazdgird I. The first of these took place in 399 upon Yazdgird's accession, with the second occurring in 408, when Theodosius II came to power.<sup>96</sup> Such embassies were common since it was customary for the rival empires to send delegations to each other upon the accession of a new monarch. This not only served the purpose of reiterating past agreements, but to also reformulate relations between the governments. These were the primary goals of both embassies, though they achieved far more than simply maintaining the standing peace and cordial communications.<sup>97</sup> Through his actions, Marutha achieved an almost mythical status as an architect of peace and good-will. Socrates gives full credit for the positive Romano-Iranian relations to the friendship Marutha had fostered with the Shah.<sup>98</sup> Sako suggests that the 399 embassy also sought to confirm the treaty of 387 and to intervene in favour of the Iranian Christians, which in turn strengthened Romano-Iranian relations.<sup>99</sup>

It is believed that all accounts about Marutha originate from the same source material, a contemporary Syriac hagiography. This view relies on the fact that the stories surrounding Marutha are all remarkably similar, though they vary in the chronology of the events and often

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<sup>94</sup> Blockley (1992: 123-4).

<sup>95</sup> Blockley (1998a: 128).

<sup>96</sup> For more on the two embassies, see Sako (1986: 59-70) and Nechaeva (2014: 103-4).

<sup>97</sup> Sako (1986: 63, 66).

<sup>98</sup> Socrates *HE* VII.8.

<sup>99</sup> Sako (1986: 63).

mix up the details. Though details of Marutha's two embassies vary among the sources, especially among the eastern ones, four major themes recur. First, Marutha seems to have cured either Yazdgird and one of his children of illness. Second, his skills and personality resonated with the Shah, who took a great liking to the Bishop, in turn rewarding him for his medical services and charm. Third, the outcome of the embassy was toleration for Iranian Christians, freedom to practise their religion openly, and the allowance to build new churches freely. These elements all ensured peace and friendship with Rome. The fourth theme is that of Magian interference, the uncovering of their plot by Marutha, and their subsequent punishment at the hands of the Shah. This topic will be discussed at length in Chapter Three.

Marutha's second trip to Iran in 408 sought to achieve very similar goals to the first. This time, the embassy announced the accession of the new Emperor Theodosius II and confirmed positive relations between the two monarchs, especially since Theodosius was but a minor upon his accession.<sup>100</sup> Marutha had also returned in order to provide structure for the Iranian Church and negotiate its status within the kingdom. This was achieved through a synod, sponsored and presided over by Yazdgird, which summoned all bishops within Iran to establish doctrine and a hierarchy for the Church. These councils will be examined in detail in the next chapter, though it must be highlighted that Marutha was heavily involved in the process, and without his influence and friendship with Yazdgird, the Council of Mar Ishaq, as the synod would be called, might very well not have taken place. The Council in fact began a process that would see the Iranian Church eventually separate from Constantinople and create a new identity and theology distinct to its geographical and political circumstances. Marutha was thus successful in his goals, efficiently fortifying Christianity in Iran and cementing the peace between the powers even further.

Marutha's success has been explained through various interpretations. The primary sources of course highlight his piety as impressing Yazdgird, and though this may have been the case, it seems more plausible that this was not an important factor. Socrates relates how the Shah nearly became Christian but died before he could, mirroring Constantine who converted on his deathbed.<sup>101</sup> Stories about the monarch's conversion are obviously false and are hyperbole meant to justify praise for a heathen king. Although it is impossible to gauge whether Yazdgird did

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<sup>100</sup> Key Fowden (1999: 53) and Sako (1986: 66-7).

<sup>101</sup> See Evagrius *HE* IV.28 for a similar story about Khusrow I, who was supposedly converted on his deathbed.

indeed have a genuine interest in Christianity, we do know that Marutha's actions did leave a positive impression on him. It was the bishop's medical prowess that astounded the Shah, since the Magi were supposedly unable to heal either their lord or his child, whereas Marutha was. Frye attributes these healings to the bishop's prior training in medicine.<sup>102</sup> Blockley adds that being a doctor implied literary, philosophical and oratorical training, since Greek medical science originated in philosophy.<sup>103</sup> In fact, according to him, Iranian rulers often preferred Greek medicine instead of their "native variety."<sup>104</sup> Key Fowden agrees but extrapolates that his influence with the Shah was established on the back of his success not only as a doctor, but also as a tactful diplomat, knowledgeable linguist and intelligent individual. Marutha's father was governor of Sophanene, the province where his see of Martyropolis was located. This region was situated right between both empires and was a melting pot of various peoples. This is represented by the variety of languages in which the texts on Marutha were written, that is Armenian, Syriac, Arabic and Greek. Marutha himself is reported to have spoken Greek, Syriac and Pahlavi, allowing him to function as the perfect mediator between the empires.<sup>105</sup>

Other authors like Khanbaghi instead choose to focus on the position of court physician that, he suggests, Marutha had essentially taken up and also been the first Christian to occupy this post in Iran. According to him, from this point on, court physicians were to be Christian, a tradition continuing into the Arab period. The court physician held considerable influence over the shah and intervened often for his co-religionists.<sup>106</sup> These views closely mirror Marutha's role as described by the primary sources. During his two visits, Marutha provided medical services to the royal family and helped Yazdgird establish better relations with the Christian community in Iran. Not only did he win toleration and liberties for the Iranian Christians, but he also co-ordinated the Council of Mar Ishaq, which confirmed the orthodoxy of the East Syrian Church, re-organized its hierarchy under the *catholicos* of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and placed it directly under the protection of the Shah. Marutha thus proved both to have been a prototype for the court physician and helped solidify the East Syrian Church. In the ways described in this

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<sup>102</sup> Frye (1983: 143).

<sup>103</sup> Blockley (1980: 93).

<sup>104</sup> Blockley (1980: 95).

<sup>105</sup> Key Fowden (1999: 49-53). Blockley (1980: 94-6) posits that the later Sasanian upper classes had become interested in Greco-Roman knowledge. According to him, the Romans were well aware of this interest and purposely sent doctors as diplomats to impress them. Yazdgird I was perhaps at the beginning of this new trend since he is neither considered an early or a late Sasanian monarch.

<sup>106</sup> Khanbaghi (2006: 10) and Blockley (1980: 95).

section, Marutha set the mould for future dealings with Iran, and demonstrated the role bishops could have on maintaining positive Romano-Iranian relations.

### **Acacius of Amida**

Marutha was not the only important bishop to act as ambassador to Iran during Yazdigird's lifetime. When he died sometime around 419/20, relations between the empires had degenerated. Yazdigird had just sent the *Catholicos* Yahbalaha as ambassador to Constantinople, and though we do not know the details of his mission, we do know that Theodosius replied with his own embassy to Ctesiphon.<sup>107</sup> The one sent in Marutha's place was almost a copy. Acacius of Amida was also bishop of a multicultural frontier city and instigated his own East Syrian Church council. Though no hagiography was written about his life, what little we know about him highlights his importance for the maintenance of good Romano-Iranian relations especially around Yazdigird's death when tensions ran high. His acts are thus worth mentioning within the context of this chapter. Acacius travelled to Iran in 420 with two missions: the first pertained to the imperial embassy, while the second involved the calling of a second East Syrian Church council. Though these tasks are spoken of as separate, they probably were not. Nevertheless, the Council of Mar Yahbalaha, as it would be called, had as its purpose the same goals as the first, and it simply ratified the previous council's canons rather than introduce new ones. This solidified once again the positive Romano-Iranian relations which were intimately tied to the relationship between the Shah and his Christian subjects.

Acacius' final acts took place after Yazdigird's death, but are also worth mentioning here since they too played an important role in re-establishing peace after the war that followed Yazdigird's death. During his embassy to Iran in 422, while seeking to negotiate a peace treaty with Bahram V, Acacius performed an act of kindness in the hope of restoring the positive Romano-Iranian relations that existed before the war.<sup>108</sup> Harking back to Yazdigird's returning of the Roman captives in 400, Socrates tell us that Acacius chose to pay off the ransom of Iranian captives being held by the Roman army.<sup>109</sup> Bahram is reported to have been touched by the bishop's actions and returned to peaceful and friendly negotiations with Rome. Thus, by

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<sup>107</sup> The tensions and embassies of Yazdigird's last years will be examined in detail in Chapter Three.

<sup>108</sup> For more information on both of Acacius' two embassies, see Sako (1986: 77-80).

<sup>109</sup> Socrates *HE* VII.21.1-6.

emulating Yazdgird and Marutha's actions, Acacius was able to continue their legacy effectively and maintain positive Romano-Iranian relations.

## **Conclusion**

Other than the tensions, intrigue and proxy wars that were played out in Armenia until its division in 387, peace between Rome and Iran was interrupted only twice following the treaty in 363: the quick two-year war of 421-2, and the short hostilities of 440. The fifth century was thus marked by peace on the Roman eastern frontier, though the empires were still dealing with internal struggles and external threats. The Hunnic invasions in 395 and 397/8 saw raiders pass through the Caucasus and ravage the interior and frontier regions of both states. Court politics fuelled hostilities within both empires: the powerful Iranian priesthood and nobility constantly plotted against Yazdgird, all the while struggling to wrest control of the empire from him. The state of affairs from Constantinople to Ctesiphon was indeed precarious. These unstable circumstances naturally deterred the rivals from war with one another. In Constantinople, Germanic federates like Alaric, Gainas and Tribigild all caused trouble with their rebellions, while ambitious generals like Stilicho fostered rivalries between the eastern and western empires.

Thus, Romano-Iranian peace and friendship were crafted out of necessity by the efforts of a few powerful individuals. The emperors Arcadius and Theodosius II may have supported the shift in policy, though probably the one behind it was the praetorian prefect Anthemius. He was not alone in his endeavours, since he had the help of the Bishops Marutha of Martyropolis as ambassador to Iran and of Antiochus the Praepositus as a representative of Iranian interests in Constantinople. The desire for positive relations with Iran from the Roman side was thus fostered through the acts of these men. Yazdgird's precarious position pushed him to patronize the Christians and Jews, cultivating the Christian Church hierarchy and its community's elite as an alternate power base to the Magi and Iranian nobles. Marutha's efforts in Iran led Yazdgird to award the Iranian Christians many freedoms, which were understood as concessions to Rome that sought to foster better relations. This goal was achieved, though forces were at work in both Constantinople and Ctesiphon to undo the great achievement. Despite all the positive engagements between the empires, the rising of tensions was inevitable. Certain projects that were conceived to promote good relations happened also to cause tensions, thus eroding the

positive effects they originally produced. It is towards these ambiguous events that we shall turn our attention to in the next chapter.

## Chapter Two: Yazdgird I - A Second Constantine

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“Or il fut nécessaire à cette époque que Marouthas, l’évêque de Mésopotamie dont nous avons fait mention il y a peu, soit envoyé par l’empereur des Romains auprès du roi des Perses. Le roi des Perses, ayant trouvé chez cet homme une grande piété, le tenait en honneur et se fiait à lui comme à un véritable ami de Dieu.”- Socrates *HE*

VII.8.3-4 (tr. Périchon, P. and Maraval, P.).

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Despite their strong foundation established by Yazdgird I and Arcadius, Romano-Iranian relations were not to last. Various tensions quickly arose during the twenty-one years of Yazdgird’s reign, culminating in an alleged persecution of Iranian Christians by the Shah in the very last months of his rule, which in turn led Rome to war with his successor, Bahram V. The sources often identify one definitive event that triggered hostilities, though this is undoubtedly false. This chapter seeks to answer the question as to what the underlying tensions were between the Roman and Iranian Empires leading up to the last year of Yazdgird’s reign.

Two types of tensions are identified, though they both involve the same events. The first type caused frustrations within the Iranian court, while the second type instead affected the Romans in Constantinople. I identify two projects within both categories: the foundation of Martyropolis in Sophanene and the East Syrian Church synod of 410, known as the Council of Mar Ishaq. From the first view, Martyropolis proved to be a symbol of defiance against the Iranian Empire from both a physical and ideological perspective, while the Council of Mar Ishaq antagonized the Magi and the nobility of Iran. These two affairs come together for the second perspective that relies on Richard Payne’s theory of Iranian cosmopolitanism. He suggests that inherent in Zoroastrian cosmology was a belief system that encompassed the Iranian people’s conceptions of their relationship to the rest of the world.<sup>110</sup> I will attempt to expand upon Payne’s theory by re-examining the foundation of Martyropolis and the East Syrian Church councils, as well as other concepts, through the lens of Iranian cosmopolitanism. Once these issues are discussed, we shall turn our attention to the events of Yazdgird’s final years during which relations with Rome degenerated the most abruptly and drastically, beginning with the possible war of 416. The embassies of Yahbalaha and Acacius will be then examined, with the chapter concluding on a discussion concerning the ambiguous Roman fortification law of 420.

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<sup>110</sup> Payne (2016a: 210-30).

Numerous issues arise when looking at the sources, mostly as a result of inconsistencies and the conflicting natures of the various accounts. In fact, no western sources except the *Greek Life of Marutha* even mention the Council of Mar Ishaq or Martyropolis. It will thus be necessary to discuss why such topics were so neglected by the West. On the other hand, the eastern sources deal with the subjects at length, though differently from one another. These available sources are many and varied, written in diverse periods and literary traditions. The different temporal perspectives provided by both contemporary and later accounts will prove to be useful in determining what exactly took place leading up to the outbreak of hostilities.

### **The City of Martyrs**

The tensions derived from the foundation of Martyropolis are not easily traceable through the primary sources. It thus becomes necessary to re-examine the entire context surrounding Marutha's project beginning with his first embassy to Iran when he initially established his friendship with Yazdgird. Since he had such a good relationship with the Shah, Marutha returned to the East almost a decade later once again as ambassador, this time confirming the peace in the name of the new Emperor Theodosius II.<sup>111</sup> The bishop of Sophanene had a secondary goal to achieve as well, and that was to unite the western and eastern Churches with a synod. After co-hosting the Council of Mar Ishaq, which will be addressed in the next section, Marutha was rewarded by Yazdgird with many martyr relics from Iran. Upon his return to Maypherkat, the central town of his see, Marutha built a shrine to house the Iranian relics, and, with imperial support, subsequently fortified the small Armenian town, turning it into a proper city thenceforth known as the city of martyrs, or Martyropolis. It is not mentioned anywhere whether the development and fortification of Martyropolis was a premeditated imperial project, enhanced by Yazdgird's gift and Marutha's spirituality, or simply a local project. Nevertheless, Martyropolis would not only become a newly fortified city right on the frontier, but also a powerful protective symbol through its martyr relics. This is the general narrative that is found in most sources covering the topic. There is nothing negative about the affair, but then how did a project so representative of the cooperative Romano-Iranian relations turn into a source of tensions?

Our sources are limited on these matters. In fact, few works deal with the entire affair; almost all of them fall outside the Roman tradition. The earliest account chronologically is that

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<sup>111</sup> Sako (1986: 59-70) for more details on Marutha's two embassies to Iran.

of the *Armenian Life of Marutha*, written some time during or after the sixth century. Thanks to Noret's article, we also have access to two versions of a *Greek Life of Marutha*: BHG 2265 and 2266, respectively dated to the tenth and eleventh centuries.<sup>112</sup> We are then left with the only three Arab sources that discuss the foundation of Martyropolis: Mari ibn Sulaiman's *Book of Commentaries* and Ibn Al-Azraq's *History of Martyropolis* from the twelfth century, and Amr ibn Matta's *Book of Commentaries* from the fifteenth.<sup>113</sup> Though at first the accounts seem to relate similar stories, each includes various details that the others do not. Hence, it becomes necessary to closely examine each one, scouring them for any piece of information pointing towards a cause for tensions.

If we start with the *Armenian Life of Marutha*, it is important to note some interesting and unique reports concerning Martyropolis. The story told about Marutha in the *Armenian Life* repeats all the common narratives: his presence in Iran, friendship with Yazdgird, the dispelling of the tricks of the Magi, his healing powers, and of course, his involvement in the diffusion of Christianity in Iran. It is the information about the collection of the martyr relics that stands out compared to other accounts. Firstly, according to the text, Marutha visited the Iranian court at the behest of Yazdgird, who sought a cure for his son's ailment.<sup>114</sup> Marutha was successful, and as a reward he requested that Yazdgird show friendship to Theodosius, and allow free worship for the Christians in Iran.<sup>115</sup> When Marutha returned from his first embassy to Iran he reported back to the Emperor, who in turn offered the bishop a reward for his great success. Marutha hence let it be known that he desired to fortify his town of Maypherkat and to build a great church in order to house martyr relics.<sup>116</sup> The Emperor therefore offered unlimited money and labour for the project.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Noret (1973: 77-103). Noret includes the Greek texts of both BHG 2265 and BHG 2266. The latter of these is taken from Latsyev's edition (1911: 154-8), but revised and corrected. Therefore, Noret's article will be used as reference since it is the newest edition of both texts. Though the texts are separate, their content is exceptionally similar, with both their divisions and topics following closely. Remarks on any differences will be made only when and if applicable to this study.

<sup>113</sup> Marcus (1932: 50-2) and Gismondi (1899: 25), Fiey (1976: 35-45) as well as Marcus (1932: 53-4) and Gismondi (1897: 23-5/13-5) respectively. Fiey does not provide the full text, but only discusses its context and quotes certain sections. He mentions in his introduction that only very little of Ibn-al Azraq's work has been edited and cover a topic other than Marutha. Therefore, he himself accessed the manuscript at the British Museum to base his article on.

<sup>114</sup> *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 61]).

<sup>115</sup> *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 62-3]).

<sup>116</sup> *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 63-4]).

<sup>117</sup> A similar procedure was undertaken in 505 concerning the foundation of Dara; i.e. a bishop administering the development of a city on the frontier. See Greatrex and Lieu (2002: 74-7) and Decker (2009: 49).

While the city was being fortified and the church built, Marutha revisited the Iranian court where he helped uncover a Magian plot, and was subsequently rewarded with the bones of the Iranian martyrs and with a golden cup filled with gold to help with the construction of the city.<sup>118</sup> Again, Marutha returned to Constantinople to report on his embassy, and was rewarded once more by Theodosius. This time, the Emperor transferred villages, farms and fields to the new city, and sanctioned the collection of martyr relics from all around the Roman Empire.<sup>119</sup> The author gives both the locations and figures here: a total of 280 000 relics<sup>120</sup> from the Roman Empire, Asorestan, Persia and Armenia, not to mention those already from Sophanene. The text ends with an anecdote about the grandson of Yazdgird II,<sup>121</sup> Kavadh I, who is described as invading the Roman Empire.

Like the *Armenian Life of Marutha*, the two *Greek Lives* begin their narratives with the adoption of Christianity in the region of Sophanene, end with the death of Marutha and include many of the recurring themes and narratives concerning the bishop seen in Chapter One. These texts identify Marutha as ambassador to Iran for Theodosius II, and report that he was rewarded with the bones of the Iranian martyrs after healing the daughter of the Shah. Marutha is then said to have founded Martyropolis, within which he built a church to house the newly acquired relics. Friendship was of course established between the empires while a Magian plot was revealed and due punishment delivered. The accounts of Mari ibn Sulaiman and ‘Amr ibn Matta mention the foundation of Martyropolis only briefly, and instead discuss Marutha’s involvement at the Iranian court at some length.<sup>122</sup> In fact, they only mention the city as already existing as Marutha’s seat and acknowledge it as the location to which he brought the Iranian relics. These similarities are due to the fact that the latter is a revision of the former according to Marcus.<sup>123</sup>

In contrast to the other two Arab accounts, Ibn Al-Azraq’s is extremely inaccurate when it comes to the chronology, placing the foundation of the city and Marutha’s endeavours during

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<sup>118</sup> *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 67]). The golden cup is described as “a cup of gold in memory of the king, full of gold for the building-material of the church which had been built in the city under the dedication of ‘The Martyrs of God.’”

<sup>119</sup> *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 66-8]).

<sup>120</sup> The numbers here are probably exaggerated for effect.

<sup>121</sup> As Marcus notices, the author misidentifies the grandfather of Kavadh as being Yazdgird I. In reality, it was Yazdgird II who was Kavadh’s grandfather. Though this confusion may undermine the anecdote’s importance, it does not render it completely irrelevant. Marcus (1932: 54) uses this misidentification to date the text to sometime after the close of the sixth century, late enough, according to him, to have caused confusion in the chronology.

<sup>122</sup> For Mari Ibn Sulaiman see Marcus (1932: 50-2) and Gismondi (1899: 25) . For ‘Amr Ibn Matta see Marcus (1932: 53-4) and Gismondi (1897: 23-5/13-5).

<sup>123</sup> Marcus (1932: 48).

Constantine's reign. After successfully healing Shapur's daughter, Marutha is reported to have negotiated peace between the monarchs and to have requested the bones of the martyrs from Iran. He then returned to Constantine to report on his success, and subsequently asked the Emperor to build both a church and a wall, "pour garder les troupeaux contre les voleurs et les bêtes sauvages."<sup>124</sup> It is also previously explained that the region was often raided by the Iranians, who sought to capture Marutha's cattle.<sup>125</sup> These raids are stated to have lasted for a long time, pushing the governor-bishop to build fortifications outside the city, which would eventually be transformed into his more ambitious project.<sup>126</sup> Overall, the core narrative about Marutha and Martyropolis remains consistent throughout the five texts. Whereas the *Greek Life of Marutha*, Mari ibn Sulaiman and 'Amr ibn Matta confirm Marutha's connection to the foundation of Martyropolis and/or with its martyr cult, the *Armenian Life* and Ibn Al-Azraq's accounts raise the issue of whether or not the city was indeed fortified during Marutha's lifetime.

This issue is a crucial matter, since such an endeavour would have definitely contributed to the build-up of tensions culminating in Yazdgird's final year. Before delving into the question at hand, the importance of the city for the region must be first discussed. Martyropolis was situated north-east of Amida, adjacent to the Romano-Iranian border, and prior to Marutha's project, the city was but a small town, albeit at a cross-roads of many cultures and trade routes.<sup>127</sup> Adontz identifies the city as occupying the location of Sophanene's previous capital, Karkathiokerta, and defines the newer city as "one of the most important frontier posts."<sup>128</sup> Although sources do not mention the city as connected to the war of 421-422, its strategic importance is attested during the early sixth century.

The mention of Kavadh's invasion in 502 at the end of the *Armenian Life* shows the city to be a target along the invasion route of the hostile army.<sup>129</sup> In addition to this attestation, Blockley pieced together various accounts to show how during that same war Martyropolis was among the first cities to be captured alongside Theodosiopolis and Amida, two well-known

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<sup>124</sup> See Fiey (1976: 41-2) for Ibn Al-Azraq's report on how the Iranians constantly raided the border village, which very much concerned Marutha who desired to protect his town in the account.

<sup>125</sup> Fiey (1976: 41).

<sup>126</sup> Fiey (1976: 41).

<sup>127</sup> Key Fowden (1999: 48-9). See Howard-Johnston(2013: 853-91) for a complete study on the region's importance in the empire's defense. See also Procopius *Aed.* III.1.16-29 and Adontz (1970: 23-37) for a discussion on the autonomy of the Armenian principalities, or satrapies, among which Sophanene was included.

<sup>128</sup> Adontz (1970: 9, 27, 386 n.5).

<sup>129</sup> *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 69]).

formidable bastions along the frontier.<sup>130</sup> Later, during the reign of Justinian, the city grew even more in importance and was endowed with a *dux*, becoming part of the empire's first line of defence alongside Theodosiopolis, and would remain a powerful fortress in the East until the Arab conquests.<sup>131</sup> These future developments attest to the city's strategic frontier importance.

Political circumstances of course made the strategic value of the city fluctuate, but the strength of its geographic location is undeniably clear in the sources. On the other hand, information about the city's earlier fortification is essentially non-existent and can barely be inferred from reports about its condition and strengthening in the early sixth century. The available accounts are obviously from much later time periods, Procopius' perhaps being contemporary to the *Armenian Life of Marutha*.<sup>132</sup> Although he himself does not state that Martyropolis was fortified, he does agree with an aspect from Ibn Al-Azraq's account: the region had been subject to Iranian raids. While Procopius states that "the city had been so neglected by the Romans and lay always exposed to these barbarians," Ibn Al-Azraq outright declares that these raids were the cause for Marutha's desire to fortify his city.<sup>133</sup> In fact, the latter author explains how the Iranians specifically targeted Marutha's cattle, which made the endeavour to fortify the city all the more personal. As seen earlier, all the *Armenian Life* states is that the city was equipped with a wall at the behest of Marutha.

Although there exists no contemporary account of a wall at Martyropolis in the fifth century, we do have some later sources attesting that it was fortified, albeit lightly, at the time of Kavadh's invasion. Procopius describes those walls as four feet in thickness, twenty feet tall, and thus small enough to be easily overcome during a siege.<sup>134</sup> So bad were the defences of the city that Anastasius was supposedly grateful for the decision taken by the satrap to surrender the completely indefensible city to the Iranians.<sup>135</sup> By combining these accounts, I propose that the city was indeed fortified by Marutha, but not to an extent that would provide any military advantage during a siege. This suggestion rests upon Ibn Al-Azraq's account, despite its late composition, that Marutha sought to keep out thieves, wild beasts and raiders from accessing his

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<sup>130</sup> Blockley (1992: 90). See Blockley (1992: 219 n.32) for information on the primary sources supporting the claim.

<sup>131</sup> Adontz (1970: 109-13), Greatrex (1998: 21, 31-2 n.96, 80-1, 154), Greatrex (2007: 89-90), Whitby (1984: 177, 182) and Howard-Johnston (2013: 872-3).

<sup>132</sup> Although we can securely place Procopius within the sixth century, the only secure dating of the *Armenian Life of Marutha* rests on the fact that it was composed after Kavadh's invasion in 502. See Chapter Two: 38 n.121 above.

<sup>133</sup> Procopius *Aed.* III.2.3 and Fiey (1976: 41).

<sup>134</sup> Procopius *Aed.* III.2.5-10 and Whitby (1984: 178).

<sup>135</sup> Procopius *Aed.* III.2.9.

city's cattle herds with his new wall. This description may indeed have reflected a reality for the region and also fits within the political circumstances of the time, rendering the light fortification of the city plausible.

Such fortifications would thus have not been provocative for the Iranians, since, for all intents and purposes, the wall was but a glorified fence. In fact, Yazdgird could not contest the construction of flimsy fortifications at the border of his empire because he actively sought peace and amity with the Romans. The *Armenian Life of Marutha* states that he even contributed financially to Marutha's project, perhaps with the knowledge that his money would go to lightly fortify the small city.<sup>136</sup> Martyropolis lay at the very eastern extent of the Roman Empire, and existed as an almost autonomous Satrapy until Justinian's reforms a hundred years later.<sup>137</sup> Being so far from either central authority and autonomous, it was the responsibility of the satrap to ensure the protection of his district from local threats. Thus, it is plausible that Marutha was indeed anxious about the raids Ibn Al-Azraq described as plaguing the border town, and sought to build his wall as a means to defend Sophanene's wealth and capital, especially since there was a lack of Roman forces, even none at all, in such a frontier location.

It is, however, not impossible that Theodosius may very well have aided Marutha's project as a half-way measure to ensure that the city could be later fortified if relations turned sour with Iran. In fact, Anastasius also transferred land and workers to the budding frontier village of Dara prior to developing it in a powerful frontier fortress, which may indicate that such action was indeed the lead up to the construction of a fort.<sup>138</sup> Had the two powers remained at peace, the affair would have remained inconsequential, but the reality was that the empires were usually rivals. According to Blockley, relations were set to deteriorate upon Yazdgird's accession in 399 since the treaty of 363, which was meant to last for thirty years, had just recently expired and thus needed to be reconfirmed with the new monarch.<sup>139</sup> It is even said that the Shah brought up various items of dispute, and there were real anxieties about him persecuting the Christians in his empire,<sup>140</sup> with war threatened and skirmishes possibly even occurring.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 67]).

<sup>137</sup> Adontz (1970: 92-3) and Procopius *Aed.* III.1.17.

<sup>138</sup> Greatrex and Lieu (2002: 74-7) and Decker (2009: 49).

<sup>139</sup> Blockley (1992: 47).

<sup>140</sup> See both *Chronicle of Seert* 205/317 (LXVI), *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 61]) and 'Amr Ibn Matta's (Marcus [1932: 53-4] and Gismondi [1897: 23-5/13-5]) accounts for an early persecution by Yazdgird. According to Blockley (1992: 195 n.12), evidence is slight, and may have reflected the fears of the time, though

Despite the establishment of friendship with Theodosius II, the amity between the two empires could not have been so perfect that both sides completely trusted each other, especially since it was but a friendship of necessity in a time of severe instability. As seen in the previous chapter, the Roman and Iranian empires were equally threatened both from within and without, especially since they shared the same enemy in the Caucasian Huns.

Peace and friendship thus existed between Rome and Iran in the early fifth century. If we are to suppose that Martyropolis was equipped with a small wall around 410, there also remains the possibility that this wall was reinforced alongside the fortifications of Theodosiopolis in 420, just prior to the war with Iran.<sup>142</sup> Accounts may have identified these military fortifications as part of Marutha's project, either inventing the entire idea that the bishop fortified the city, confusing the small walls that he requested with the larger fortifications from 420, or even consciously attributing these later walls to Marutha in order to glorify his name even more. Nevertheless, an indication that the city was fortified can be found in the peace treaty of the war of 421-2, which retroactively highlights what issues existed between the empires before the onset of war. The clause comes down to us through Procopius, stating that neither power should build any fortifications on the frontier.<sup>143</sup> Blockley relates this to the fortification of Theodosiopolis-Karin at the beginning of the war, but I propose that Martyropolis too was a factor.<sup>144</sup> Greatrex disagrees with this, stating that the lack of mention of the city in any account concerning the wars of the fifth century eliminates it from being targeted by the treaty clause.<sup>145</sup> Instead, the omission of the city may have been due to its relative autonomy and close ties to Iran through the late Shah Yazdgird, and therefore the enemy. The Romans may have thus perceived Martyropolis as having mixed loyalties. In fact, the *Armenian Life of Marutha* confirms these fears, for it reports that during Kavadh's sixth-century invasion of the region, the city

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nevertheless he still reports in his primary narrative that Yazdgird was indeed persecuting. See Annex A for a discussion on persecution of Christians at the onset of Yazdgird's reign.

<sup>141</sup> See Blockley (1992: 195 n.13) on the primary sources reporting warfare or threats of it.

<sup>142</sup> For more on the foundation of Theodosiopolis, see Greatrex (1993: 1-14), Greatrex (2008: 85-91) and Crow (2017: 111-5).

<sup>143</sup> Procopius *Wars* 1.2.15. Blockley (1992: 201 n.39) brings up the issue that in this passage Procopius confuses events from the 421-2 and 442 wars. If we are to accept that Anatolius was *Magister militum per Orientem* ca. 420, then the clause would have very much so applied to the war of 421-2. He himself accepts that this was indeed the case, and agrees with Holum and Greatrex. Blockley (1992: 200 n.31) also brings up the uncertainty around the fortification of Theodosiopolis-Karin, as to whether it was this earlier Anatolius or the later one who seems to have also held the same office, though two decades later. See Greatrex (1993), Greatrex (2008), Garsoian (2004: 181-196) and Crow (2007: 435-55) for more extensive discussions of this issue.

<sup>144</sup> Blockley (1992: 57-8).

<sup>145</sup> Greatrex (2008: 90).

surrendered to him by offering up Yazdgird's golden chalice which he had donated for the foundation of the city a century earlier.<sup>146</sup> Hence, just as Martyropolis' foundation story was omitted by the Roman sources, so may have been its involvement in warfare.

Issues arise with these arguments, which rely on sources from the sixth century onwards. In fact, I acknowledge that there does remain a possibility that the city was in fact not fortified in the fifth century. If we return to Procopius' account, although he describes the city's 502 walls in detail, he does call them essentially non-existent.<sup>147</sup> It must also be pointed out that two of the primary sources on which the arguments rely clearly make mistakes in their narratives. The *Armenian Life of Marutha* confuses Yazdgird I with his grandson, Yazdgird II, while Ibn Al-Azraq places the entire affair during the reign of Constantine, replacing Yazdgird with Shapur. What is interesting about the *Armenian Life of Marutha* is that it is suggested to have been composed sometime in the sixth century, and hence the author may have known of either Anastasius' or Justinian's fortifications and anachronistically attributed whatever he saw to Marutha to enhance the bishop's prestige and legend as well as his own narrative. Ibn Al-Azraq was an inhabitant of Martyropolis, and much of the earlier part of his work seeks to describe the origins of the various buildings found around the city. The addition that Marutha fortified the town could have also been an anachronism referring to Justinian's walls which still stood in his day.<sup>148</sup>

Taking these arguments into consideration, I nevertheless support the possibility that the city was indeed fortified by Marutha, though perhaps only lightly in order to protect the burgeoning small city. Far from the capital in Constantinople, the region was semi-autonomous and probably needed to defend itself against local threats without direct aid from the central government. The move would have been a shrewd one for Theodosius, since the walls would have been small enough not to enrage Yazdgird, who also participated in the project, but would have been enough of a foundation to reinforce if need be. The location was definitely of great strategic importance, as the future would prove. With a strong friendship established between Yazdgird and Rome, it would not make sense for the Shah to get aggravated over such an affair,

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<sup>146</sup> *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 69-70]) and Procopius *Aed.* III.2.5-6.

<sup>147</sup> Procopius *Aed.* III.2.9: "And the Emperor Anastasius, understanding that it was not possible to defend Martyropolis from hostile assault, since it had no defences[...]" (tr. H.B. Dewing).

<sup>148</sup> Whitby (1984:179). Justinian's walls still stand today and remain a testament to their existence throughout all of Martyropolis' history. See Whitby (1984: 179 n.7) for a list of other scholarship that deals with more detailed descriptions of the wall's modern state.

especially since he desperately needed the support of his Christian subject to maintain the fragile balance of power and, as we shall see, even to stay alive.

As for those who opposed Yazdgird's pro-Roman, pro-Christian policies, the entire affair most definitely would have irritated them. It is also very possible that whatever Marutha built was strengthened prior to the outbreak of war, and most probably even contributed to the outbreak of hostilities in 420. Though Marutha and his building project contributed to the détente between the empires, the fortification of his town must have become another aspect irritating those who opposed Yazdgird. In this way, the affair contributed to the rising hatred for the Shah within his court, eventually leading to his demise, possibly at the hands of those who despised him and his policies.

The City of Martyrs not only may have proven to be a defiant frontier fort, but also an irritating symbol of Christian resistance against Iranian aggression. Many of the relics were from those persecuted under Shapur II and remained a badge of pride and identity for Christians in the East.<sup>149</sup> Yet Yazdgird's involvement as a foreign, non-Christian monarch in the foundation of the city dedicated to martyrs renders the entire affair somewhat controversial. Key Fowden defines martyrs as champions (πρόμαχοι) and allies (ἐπίκουροι), and explains their relics as being symbolic of the world's material and spiritual unity to the point of representing "hope of divine intervention in the wavering sphere of material existence."<sup>150</sup> Payne describe the bones and blood of the martyrs as a unique resource for community-building, linking peoples both "vertically in time and horizontally in space with the universal Christian community of all the martyrs and confessors of the east, west, north and south. To acquire a relic of a martyr was to possess a symbolic center of the Christian Church."<sup>151</sup> Though Key Fowden and Payne see the development of the martyr cult at Martyropolis as a positive project for the Christians, they do acknowledge that it was not so for all parties. For example, although the *Armenian Life of Marutha* identifies a plethora of relics coming from both the Iranian and Roman empires, the *Greek Lives* only make mention of those from Iran in an attempt to emphasize the recent persecution of Christians at the hands of the new shah.<sup>152</sup> This idea prevailed, as some of the primary sources indeed specify that Yazdgird began his reign by persecuting the Christians

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<sup>149</sup> Smith (2016: 139).

<sup>150</sup> Key Fowden (1999: 46-7).

<sup>151</sup> Payne (2011: 92).

<sup>152</sup> *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 68]), *Greek Life of Marutha* 8 (Noret [1973: 87]) and Key Fowden (1999: 55).

although he ended it at the behest of either Marutha or the Roman Emperor.<sup>153</sup> The entire affair can be seen as a Roman recuperation of the Iranian martyrs, massing their holy powers on the frontier as a bastion against Iranian aggression.<sup>154</sup> Hence the city's expansion must have surely caused some level of friction with the Shah, but more so with the nobles and Magi who seriously opposed Yazdgerd's rule. It is possible that in the Shah's last months, when his patience was tested by both Christian zeal and the outrage of his nobility and priesthood that Martyropolis returned as a point of contention. The Greco-Roman sources indeed had always seen martyrdom as a sign of defiance, and though Yazdgerd initially sought a positive relationship with Christianity and its adherents, it seems that the very defiance that Martyropolis represented, both physical and symbolic, prevailed.

### **The Iranian Church Councils**

Martyropolis was only one of Marutha's projects that was conceived with good intent, but eventually caused harm. The Council of Mar Ishaq, was an occasion of monumental importance for the East Syrian Church. Ever since Constantine's time, the growing number of Christians in Iran found themselves increasingly at risk because of their lack of unity and status as a minority group. The situation drastically changed for the East Syrians in Iran when being Christian became synonymous with being Roman, effectively putting them under serious suspicion of being a fifth column. This tense situation often resulted in the persecution of these communities by the Sasanian authorities, though many reports say that Yazdgerd I put an end to such violence when he came to power in 399. In his book, Kyle Smith attempts to understand the thoughts of the Iranian Christians at this crucial time in their history by using both the *Martyrdom* and the *History of Simeon bar Sabba'e*. Smith points out that while the *Martyrdom* identifies a Christian community completely separate and oppressed by the Sasanians, the *History* depicts a struggle stemming from a mixed identity, with the Christians recognizing their brethren in the West but trying to understand their place outside the context of the Roman

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<sup>153</sup> See 'Amr Ibn Matta (Marcus [1932: 53] and Gismondi [1897: 23-5/13-5]), *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 61]), and *Chronicle of Seert* 205-7/317-9 (LXVI). The *Chronicle of Seert* also discusses how Yazdgerd cracked down on the nobility and priesthood who had previously participated in the murders of his two predecessors. It is not wholly impossible that some of those nobles were Christians, and their executions seen or interpreted as a persecution of the entire faith. See Chapter Two: 41-2 n.140 above about how Blockley (1992: 48, 195 n.12) initially chooses to indicate that Yazdgerd was indeed harassing Christians at the onset of his reign, but proceeds to note that evidence for this is slight and probably reflects local fears rather than actual events.

<sup>154</sup> Key Fowden (1999: 56 and n.47).

Empire.<sup>155</sup> Despite there being no reports on anyone's initial reaction to the Council of Mar Ishaq, interpretations of the primary sources like Smith's will prove to be key in uncovering how this Council did indeed generate tensions.

It is during the transitional period described by Smith that we find Marutha operating as an agent of unity for the East Syrian Church. By capitalising on his established friendship with the Shah, the bishop of Saphanene managed to organize the Council of Mar Ishaq which was co-convened by the bishop of Ctesiphon, Ishaq, but also sanctioned and overseen by Yazdgird I.<sup>156</sup> This synod effectively recognized Christianity in Iran and established its status under the Shah's protection. Hence the endeavour proved to be an immensely positive influence on Romano-Iranian relations. Ten years later in 420, just before the alleged persecutions erupted, a second council was held to confirm the first's canons. The importance of this second synod, called the Council of Mar Yahbalaha, will be discussed in the final chapter; for now let us note its occurrence as the second council held by Yazdgird. Although at first glance the Shah's motives for allowing such councils to take place seem genuinely fuelled by his desire to patronise the Church in his territory and also to secure peace with the Roman Empire,<sup>157</sup> a different story emerges when the situation is probed more deeply; one marked by aristocratic unrest and royal ambitions. It is through these two aspects that the councils likewise contributed to the revived tensions between the rival empires.

Thankfully, the council texts remain accessible to us today in the form of the *Synodicon Orientale*, a collection of Nestorian texts compiled in the eighth century by the patriarch Timothy I and published by J. -B. Chabot in 1902.<sup>158</sup> Of the two councils' texts, it is the first one that discusses Marutha and Yazdgird's role the most in depth. The text begins with an extensive eulogy to the Shah, and is worth transcribing here in its entirety:

“In the eleventh year of the reign of the victorious King of Kings, Yazdgird, when tranquillity and peace had come to the churches of the Lord, he brought about deliverance and rest to the congregations of Christ, and gave the servants of God the authority for Christ to be openly magnified in their bodies, both in their lives and in their deaths. He rolled away the dark cloud of persecution

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<sup>155</sup> Smith (2016: 123).

<sup>156</sup> The East Syrian Church councils were usually named after the presiding bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon; at the time of the first this was Mar Ishaq.

<sup>157</sup> See Wood (2013: 32), Sako (1986: 66-70) and Blockley (1992: 54-5).

<sup>158</sup> *Synodicon Orientale*. ed. and tr. Chabot, J.-B. Paris: 1902. This work includes both a French translation and the original Syriac text which others such as M.J. Birnie have used to translate the texts into English. See Wood (2013: 32 n.1) for a short discussion and references on the reliability of the text.

from all the churches of God, and put away the blackness of affliction from all the flocks of Christ. He commanded in all his kingdom that the temples which had been torn down by his forebears should be magnificently rebuilt in his own days, and the altars which had been pulled down should be carefully supplied. Those who for the sake of God had been tried and tested by imprisonments and torments were to go out in the open, and priests and rulers, as well as the entire holy profession, were to move about freely without dread or fear.”<sup>159</sup>

With such praise, Yazdgird could almost be mistaken for Constantine if his name had not been actually mentioned.<sup>160</sup> The text goes on to tell us of a letter written by Roman bishops concerning the Iranian Church, who requested that their missive be delivered by Marutha to the Shah upon his return to Iran. Marutha had the letter translated by the bishop Ishaq of Ctesiphon and the two of them subsequently presented it to Yazdgird, who is reported to have exclaimed, “The East and West are one power in the state of my kingdom.”<sup>161</sup> Among the canons decided by the council are countless words of praise for Yazdgird, but also the outlining of his relation to the newly organized Church. The Council of Mar Ishaq granted the Shah of Iran significant power over the Church. He had acquired the right to summon synods, disseminate their decisions, enforce religious and hierarchical discipline and to assign or ratify the choice of the *Catholicos* as well as of any bishops. Yazdgird even involved two of his highest officials: Khusrow-Yazdgird and Mihr-Shabur, respectively his Grand Vizier and Chief General.<sup>162</sup> The second council begins similarly to the first, praising the Shah once again, though less extensively. This synod only confirmed the first since there had still been divisions among the bishops within the Iranian Church.

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<sup>159</sup> English from M.J. Birnie (forthcoming); for the original Syriac and French translation see *Synodicon Orientale* 17-8/254. Revised by George Amanatidis-Saadé.

<sup>160</sup> See McDonough (2008a: 128-30) for a short discussion on the fabrication of the “Constantinian” identity for Yazdgird I.

<sup>161</sup> Translated by George Amanatidis-Saadé. See *Synodicon Orientale* 19/256 : « L’Orient et l’Occident forment une seule puissance, sous l’empire de ma royauté. » (tr. Chabot, J. -B.). Note that the word *ܡܫܠܬܐ* may mean a variety of words other than “power”: jurisdiction, authority, reign, legal or rightful power, office, right to command, a mandate, etc... Taking these definitions into consideration, the “power” assumes a legal aspect. What exactly Yazdgird means by the “East and West,” we can only speculate. As will be discussed later, it may be the case that the Shah was claiming some level of authority over the Christian churches, both eastern and western. Wood (2012: 59) explains how the friendly relations with Rome might explain the willingness of the Romans to allow Yazdgird to employ such Constantinian and universalist language, especially since such imagery was also intended for the Iranian notables. He explains how the nobility were in fact “the principal targets for the magnification of the Shah and they are enjoined to align themselves to the his policies by ‘living in peace with the church of God.’”

<sup>162</sup> Scher (1907: 260 n.2, 261 n.1). The title given in Syriac is *ܡܫܠܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܐ* (*Haramdar Raba*) which Scher tells us translates to the Persian title for the grand vizier or grand master, *Buzurg-framadhar*. On the other hand, Mihr-Shapur’s title is transcribed as *ܐܪܓܒܐܕܗ* (*Argabedh*), which Scher tells us was the title of the army’s generalissimo. Respectively the grand vizier and chief general of the army.

Overall, these synods effectively put Yazdgird in control of the Church in Iran, and although this meant that the Christians were protected and respected as an official minority,<sup>163</sup> a status pleasing to the Romans, it did entail a great many complications. Though the Christians at first seem to have refrained from proselytising or attacking the Zoroastrians since this was indeed forbidden by law, as time went on they began to take liberties, engaging in larger-scale missionary work, converting even some among the nobility.<sup>164</sup> Such missionary work posed quite a dilemma, since “the ruling Iranians constituted the masters of the world, a restricted class.”<sup>165</sup> Their conversion was not only also a major source of frustration among the Magi and nobility, but a real danger to the well-established traditions and political balance of the Iranian Empire. These frustrations concerning the apostatized nobility are directly exhibited in the primary sources, that report almost only on martyrs who were nobles. Theodoret relates the stories of three martyrs: Hormisdas, who was “by race an Achaemenid and the son of a Prefect”, Suenes, a rich slave owner and Deacon Benjamin, a zealous missionary.<sup>166</sup> The Achaemenid lineage of Hormisdas probably indicates that he was of a very high nobility, perhaps of one of the seven noble families, while Suenes was obviously of the upper classes. Benjamin, on the other hand, was punished for his proselytizing among the Iranian nobility and priesthood.

We find similar patterns among the martyrdoms edited, translated and compiled by Herman.<sup>167</sup> In the *Martyrdom of Narseh*,<sup>168</sup> a certain Adur-Farro is converted to Christianity and offers Šābūr, the priest who healed him, a plot of land so that he may build a church upon it. The narrative makes out that it was this occurrence that caught the attention of the *mobad* Adurboze, who subsequently complained to Yazdgird that “all of [his] nobles and freemen have abandoned the Magian faith and become Christian.”<sup>169</sup> Adur-Farro must then be either a freeman or a noble, and considering he had land to spare so easily, I would suggest he is of the latter group. The excerpt also exhibits the concerns felt by the Magi concerning Christian missionary work that targeted the higher echelons of the Iranian social hierarchy. This would also suggest that the author of the martyr act would have been aware of the Zoroastrian priesthood’s anxieties, in turn indicating that the Christians did indeed understand the implications of their proselytising. The

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<sup>163</sup> Wilmshurst (2011: 20).

<sup>164</sup> Blockley (1992: 55) and Sako (1986: 69).

<sup>165</sup> Payne: (2016a: 210).

<sup>166</sup> Theodoret *EH* V.41.12-23.

<sup>167</sup> Herman, G. *Persian Martyr Acts under King Yazdgird I*. Piscataway: 2016.

<sup>168</sup> *The Martyrdom of Narseh* (Herman [2016: 2-27]).

<sup>169</sup> *The Martyrdom of Narseh* 4 (Herman [2016: 4/5]).

theme continues in the *Martyrdom of Tātāq*,<sup>170</sup> where Tātāq is identified as a “royal *domesticus*,” hence a high noble.<sup>171</sup> It is his apostasy from Zoroastrianism and abandonment of his post to live in a monastery that led to his martyrdom. In another martyr text, ten older men from Bēth Garmai are brought before the Shah because they too had apostatized from the Zoroastrian faith.<sup>172</sup> It would be odd for common folk to be brought before their ruler for trial, and it makes more sense if these martyrs were nobles of some type, perhaps even retired magistrates.

The last two martyr acts included in Herman’s edition fall in the same category as the first three, although the nobility of the martyr Šābūr is but alluded to in his act rather than explicitly indentified.<sup>173</sup> After condemning the martyr to death, Yazdgird is reported to have recruited Šābūr’s close friend to convince him to abandon his folly and save his life. This friend is described as a “subordinate” to Yazdgird, clearly indicating that he held some post underneath the king, perhaps he was a magistrate. Šābūr could have very well been a noble if his “foremost friend” was one. We do not have the reason as to why Šābūr was brought into custody, but if he was part of the nobility and held some post in the government, simply his conversion to Christianity would have been enough. The last martyrdom in Herman’s compilation is that of Mār ‘Abda,<sup>174</sup> where the author relates how the Magi and nobility complain to Yazdgird about the Christian hierarchy: “These Nazoreans who are called bishops, priests, deacons and monks [...] transgress your commandment and despise your kingdom, and insult your gods, and deride fire and water. They cast down the foundations of our fire temples of worship, and in no small way do they despise our laws.”<sup>175</sup> Those responsible for the destruction are a handful of characters: the Bishop ‘Abda, priests Isaac and Hasho, Ephraim the scribe, Papa the sub-deacon, laymen Daduq and Durtan and finally the brother of ‘Abda, Papa. These men<sup>176</sup> are brought

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<sup>170</sup> *The Martyrdom of Tātāq* (Herman [2016: 28-35]).

<sup>171</sup> Herman (2016: 28 n.69) points out that this is a Roman term for an elite guard, though later attested in civilian language for a high ranking court official. In this case, Tātāq could be either, but the fact remains that he is of the upper classes and noble blood. It remains an oddity that the text uses Roman terms. Perhaps this is a sign of its production within the Roman world, or at least an indication of its author’s familiarity with Roman rather than Sasanian titles.

<sup>172</sup> *The Ten Martyrs From Bēth Garmai* (Herman [2016: 36-45]).

<sup>173</sup> *The Martyrdom of Šābūr* (Herman [2016: 46-53]).

<sup>174</sup> *The Confession of the Blessed Mār ‘Abda* (Herman [2016: 54-61]).

<sup>175</sup> *The Confession of the Blessed Mār ‘Abda 2* (Herman [2016: 54/55]).

<sup>176</sup> Though the martyr act begins by describing itself as the confession of the group of men, it is not specified if all of them were involved in the desecration of the fire temple, nor if they accompanied ‘Abda to court. All that is mentioned is that ‘Abda “and those with him” (Herman [2016: 56/57]) met the king. The fact that they are introduced as a group at the beginning of the narrative implies that they were involved in the entire affair and did indeed meet Yazdgird with ‘Abda and Hasho.

before Yazdgird and are asked: “Why do you despise our commands, and why are you not inclined to the teaching we receive from our fathers?”<sup>177</sup> It seems odd that the Shah would ask such a question to a group of priests, when he himself was already intimately involved with the Church hierarchy. I believe that Yazdgird was addressing only some within the group who would have been noble converts.<sup>178</sup>

Wood brings up these same accounts, though he chooses to focus more on the destruction of the fire temple described in both Theodoret’s account and the Martyrdom of ‘Abda.<sup>179</sup> This desecration of a Zoroastrian temple will be looked at in detail in Chapter Three. What is pertinent in these accounts is the clarity concerning the targeting of apostatised nobility and those who converted them by the Zoroastrian authorities. Apostasy of such high-ranking officials and nobility would have had serious repercussions for a noble house’s standing, especially since the highest offices were hereditary. Even from a secular perspective, men like Tātāq who abandoned their high-ranking posts would need to be reprimanded. The Christians proved to be foremost among the various minorities who “challenged Zoroastrian supremacy[,] most articulately antagonized the imperial religion and most effectively organized communities in strategic regions [...] and often adopted uncompromising positions vis-à-vis religious others.”<sup>180</sup> It is this antagonism exhibited by the Christians and the support accorded to them by the Shah that would eventually bring both players into dangerous circumstances.

From a different perspective, the first East Syrian Church councils represented a new high point of royal favour for the Iranian Christians. Although patronage of other religious groups in Iran was commonplace among the aristocracy,<sup>181</sup> what Yazdgird had just accomplished went beyond such a routine cultivation of prestige. The Council of Mar Ishaq also placed the head of the East Syrian Church in the capital so that he could be present at court and more intimately participate in the government of the empire. From now on, the *Catholicos* was expected to represent Christian interests at court, but also to perform “advisory, diplomatic and administrative functions.”<sup>182</sup> A bishop in such an intimate relation with the Shah would have

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<sup>177</sup> *The Confession of the Blessed Mār ‘Abda* 4 (Herman [2016: 56/57]).

<sup>178</sup> See Wood’s (2013: 43-4) interpretation of Yazdgird’s question as indicating that ‘Abda and Hasho are of Iranian descent, and is thus trying to appeal to a sense of common ancestry and ethnicity. This could have very well applied to the rest of the group as well.

<sup>179</sup> Wood (2013: 40-1).

<sup>180</sup> Payne (2016a: 210).

<sup>181</sup> Payne (2016a: 213).

<sup>182</sup> Patterson (2017: 189). Wood (2012: 64) talks of the *catholicoi* used as spies as well.

alarmed the Magi and nobility. From their perspective, Yazdgird was empowering and uniting a group traditionally associated with Iran's enemy, not to mention inviting a plethora of bishops from Rome to help organize the entire affair. These men could have very well been spies and were now being invited to Iran at the behest of the Shah himself.

For his actions, Yazdgird was remembered in the Iranian histories as “the Sinful One,”<sup>183</sup> a clear indicator of his lack of popularity among his own people. Traditionally, a good Zoroastrian king could lose his divine majesty and hence his right to rule in many ways, but primarily by ignoring the counsels and direction of the *Mobadan-Mobad*.<sup>184</sup> Although we have no proof that Yazdgird did so, it is heavily insinuated that he often ignored the Magi's counsels.<sup>185</sup> It was expected that the Shah would be on the side of the Iranian, and hence Zoroastrian, people, but both Yazdgird and the Christians cultivated an image that he was a champion of Christianity.<sup>186</sup> In fact, Payne identifies how Zoroastrianism cosmology imposed on the Sasanian monarchs the obligation to seek the restoration of the world to its primordial status.<sup>187</sup> Failure to meet this obligations could very well lead to non-cooperation and even outright rebellion among the upper classes.<sup>188</sup> One could blame the priesthood for intolerance, and though indeed it was, the intolerance was motivated by political reasons: the Christians threatened the fabric of the empire both by being partisans of a foreign and enemy religion and by their considerable presence in Mesopotamia and political prominence.<sup>189</sup> Thus, Yazdgird deliberately threatened the traditional balance of power by associating with a foreign body on which he could rely to support him against those who opposed his authority.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> al-Tabari 847/70. He is called “tyrannous” in the *Shahnama* XXXIV.1.

<sup>184</sup> Christensen (1944: 261-2).

<sup>185</sup> Wood (2012: 63) brings up that Yazdgird even used foreign advisors (such as Marutha) to challenge the power of the nobility and Magi, hence why these groups felt neglected, ignored and even antagonized.

<sup>186</sup> McDonough (2008a: 130).

<sup>187</sup> Payne (2013: 9) and Payne (2016b: 27-9).

<sup>188</sup> Payne (2013: 9).

<sup>189</sup> Christensen (1944: 266). The strong geographical position referred to here is Asuristan (Assyria), or Mesopotamia. Not only was this territory immensely important for the empire because of its rich agricultural land, but also because it was the most vulnerable to Roman or Arab attacks. Thus, the large presence of Christians in this area must have caused anxiety for the Iranians. See Howard-Johnston (1995:181-2, 198-206, 211) for a detailed look at the importance of Mesopotamia for the Sasanians.

<sup>190</sup> Yazdgird's reliance on Christianity as an alternative power base was later reproduced by Hormizd's IV (AD 579-90) who was faced with a similar political situation. See Shahbazi (2004: 466-7), Daryaee (2009 : 29, 48-9), Labourt (1904: 200-1 and n.1). Hormizd's father, Khusro I, also encouraged Christianity for political ends, though among the Arabs. See also Greatrex and Lieu (2002: 134). Although the Magi's ambitions were stalled by Yazdgird's efforts, Hormizd IV was faced with a nobility and priesthood who had managed to increase the sophistication of the bureaucratic systems to the point where the death of the shah could not de-stabilize the empire. Hormizd chose to follow in Yazdgird's footsteps by relying on the Christians as his power base. In al-Tabari 991/298, he outright

Yazdgird needed to curtail the power of the priesthood and nobility lest he be reduced to the status of a puppet, or lose his life at their hands. Proof of the danger he faced may be found in the fates of his predecessors.<sup>191</sup> Sako points out how the various reports in the primary sources on the plots hatched by the Magi against Marutha and Yazdgird demonstrate unrest among the priesthood concerning the increase in Christian influence at court.<sup>192</sup> In Socrates' account, the *Armenian Life of Marutha* and the two *Greek Lives of Marutha*, at least one of the following plots is recorded: one involves a voice emanating from the holy fire calling the king impious, and another involves a foul stench following the Christians around the court.<sup>193</sup> The *Armenian Life of Marutha* even indicates that when the Magi had grown tired of punishment at the hands of the king (he had been executing those who were involved in the previously mentioned plots), they schemed to murder both him and Marutha.<sup>194</sup> Another layer to the Magi's hatred for their shah was the fact that Yazdgird made use of a foreign doctor when he had access to Iranian ones. This act was considered sinful.<sup>195</sup> In fact, the death of Yazdgird in al-Tabari and the *Chronicle of Seert* attests to the animosity felt by the priesthood and nobility against their king. Both al-Tabari and the *Shahnama* relate a myth about a heavenly horse which kicked Yazdgird to death and

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refused the request of the Magi to persecute Christianity, stating: "Just as our royal throne cannot stand on its two front legs without the two back ones, our kingdom cannot stand or endure firmly if we cause the Christians and adherents of other faiths, who differ in belief from ourselves, to become hostile to us."

<sup>191</sup> Yazdgird's father Bahram IV (388-99), grand-father Shapur III (383-388), and great-uncle Ardashir II (379-383) all died at the hands of the nobility. See the Sasanian Family Tree in Daryaee (2008:106-7) See al-Tabari 846-7/67-9. Ardashir II purged a great number of nobles, who subsequently deposed him. The nobility once again struck out at their monarch, outright murdering Shapur III, while an unidentified mob of "evildoers rose up against" Bahram IV and shot him with an arrow. The *Chronicle of Seert* (43, 59) states that Ardashir II died of grief, while Shapur III was murdered by the Magi for releasing Christian prisoners and for imposing heavy taxes on the upper classes. Bahram IV is also said to have imposed economic burdens on the nobility, though the *Chronicle* here states that Bahram's soldiers executed his murder. Both al-Tabari 849/72-3 and the *Chronicle of Seert* 204/316 (LXV) describe Yazdgird as being harsh on the nobility for the multiple acts of regicide perpetrated by them. Howard-Johnston (1992: 223-4) identifies the incessant turnover of monarchs throughout the fourth and fifth centuries as one of the major crises that the Sasanian Empire underwent during its lifetime. See n.193 below for the sources that report more instances of such harsh treatment.

<sup>192</sup> Sako (1985: 69).

<sup>193</sup> Socrates *HE* VII. 8.13, 17, *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 65]), *Greek Life of Marutha* 7-12 (Noret [1973 : 87, 89, 91]). In these sources the Magi are also severely punished, even executed, this time for their subterfuge rather than regicide.

<sup>194</sup> *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 65]).

<sup>195</sup> See Christensen (1944: 419 n.1) where he cites the *Denkard*.

subsequently disappeared.<sup>196</sup> Nöldeke points out that this was a myth which Shahbazi interpreted as invented by the Magi to cover up the murder.<sup>197</sup>

The *Chronicle of Seert* tells us outright that the Magi hated him because of the abuse suffered by them at his hands, and that they greatly rejoiced at his death.<sup>198</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, it was obvious that a Shah could not antagonize the upper classes of his empire in case he should risk its stability, his position as monarch and even his own life. Yazdgird nevertheless did so, but out of necessity rather than choice. Though we have been discussing the dissatisfaction of the Iranian nobles and priests, it must be understood that these groups still held power in the empire, and the eventual murder or death of Yazdgird immediately affected the peaceful and friendly Romano-Iranian relations. The Shah had set a new order in place when he officialised East Syrian Christianity and it was this very new order that changed the nature of the conflict between him and the upper classes. Wood states it best: “The relationships between the *catholicos* and the shah, and between the *catholicos* and his bishops, were closely connected to the relationships between the Persians and Romans and between the shah and the Magi.”<sup>199</sup> With frustrations on the rise among the nobility and priesthood throughout Yazdgird’s reign, tensions were sure to grow between Rome and Iran.

### **Iranian Cosmopolitanism**

Behind all these matters lay a more indirect source of stress for Romano-Iranian relations of the early fifth century. In fact, it is directly observable from Yazdgird’s exclamation in the Council of Mar Ishaq’s text that East and West were to form one power under his authority and rule.<sup>200</sup> Key Fowden shows how, through this statement, the Shah was well aware that there was latent power in associating with Christians across political borders,<sup>201</sup> though naturally this would challenge Rome’s universal claim over all of Christianity. This challenge fits within Payne’s theory of Iranian cosmopolitanism that is inherent in the cosmology of Zoroastrianism. The understanding that all of humanity shared a common Iranian heritage and that all nations

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<sup>196</sup> *Shahnama* XXIV.7, al-Tabari 849-50/73 and Ya‘qubi (Hoyland [2018: 112]).

<sup>197</sup> See Bosworth (1999: 77-8 n.1) for comments on Nöldeke’s notes. See also the entirety of Shahbazi’s (2003) article discussing the portrayal of Yazdgird’s death. Wood (2012: 62) highlights how the story was meant to emphasize Yazdgird’s failure to fulfill his divine mandate as shah.

<sup>198</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 220/332 (LXXIV).

<sup>199</sup> Wood (2013: 39).

<sup>200</sup> *Synodicon Orientale* 19/256.

<sup>201</sup> Key Fowden (1999: 54).

thus naturally fell subservient to Iran was indeed a provocative ideology. Though Yazdgird's precarious political position in Iran initially led him to cultivate better relations with both his Christian subjects and the Roman Empire, it may have also been part of a larger ambition related to the project of Iranian cosmopolitanism.

As discussed earlier, the foundation of Martyropolis and the two Church councils may have eventually caused tensions despite their express purpose of improving relations between the empires. Furthermore, these two projects could also be understood as part of Iranian cosmopolitan philosophy, therefore aggravating the situation between the Romans and Iranians from an additional angle. Although Payne's chapter broadly explores this theory, what is of interest are his perspectives on how applied cosmopolitan ideology specifically affected Iran's relations with the Iranian aristocracy, Rome, and Christianity. The foundation of Martyropolis and the Church councils will thus be re-examined through the lens of Iranian cosmopolitanism as further contributing to the rising tensions.

According to Payne's article, the idea behind Iranian cosmopolitanism is that in the beginning there was a mythical Iran that united all of humanity.<sup>202</sup> This initial unity, though no longer existing, translated into a global "hierarchical ordering of peoples and cultures" all under an Iranian supremacy, which in turn would allow for these various groups to be "defined, located and included within the Iranian Empire."<sup>203</sup> Hence, through subservience to Iran, all of the world's civilizations could be seen as legitimate, since they were of course Iranian in origin. Payne states that Rome was indeed seen as a rightful partner in rule, and could wield legitimate power in its own territory on behalf of the shah.<sup>204</sup> Such a statement even allows for an acceptance of Theodosius' II guardianship within the framework of Iranian cosmopolitanism. Having already established good relations with Arcadius through Marutha, Yazdgird was perhaps more than eager to agree to such a proposal, since it essentially accepted Iran's position of strength. It makes sense then that the fifth century sources completely omit the affair, only for it to resurface later when the inverse (i.e. Rome as the adopter) was a potential reality.<sup>205</sup> It seems

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<sup>202</sup> Payne (2016a: 213). See the complete article for an in-depth description of Zoroastrian cosmology and how it shaped their ideas of cosmopolitanism.

<sup>203</sup> Payne (2016a: 211).

<sup>204</sup> Payne (2016a: 213). This situation would be possible if, of course, the foreign powers accepted Iranian supremacy. See Payne's (2013: 10, 14, 17) discussion on how the original Book of Kings enabled such an evolution within the ideology to occur.

<sup>205</sup> According to Procopius *Wars* I.XI.1-23, Kavadh, nearing death, requested that his youngest son Khusrow be adopted by the Emperor Justin in order to secure his succession. Despite initial enthusiasm, the project was

that in this case, the Roman authors were quite well aware of the implications and symbolism that the guardianship entailed.

Not discussed in Payne's article is how Yazdgird personally adopted Iranian cosmopolitanism even more than his predecessors. Daryaee identifies how early Sasanian shahs like Shapur I sought to forge a universal empire, though were unable to create the appropriate ideological support for such a project.<sup>206</sup> These ideas would indeed bear fruit two centuries later with Yazdgird I, who was the first Sasanian ruler to adopt the title of *ramshahr*. Daryaee explains how, according to the *Denkard*, a ninth-century compendium of Zoroastrian texts, the last previously known Iranian monarch to bear the title was Kay Witasp, the last of the Kayanids, a legendary dynasty from the *Avesta*.<sup>207</sup> A claimed genealogical link between the two Iranian dynasties is identified by Wiesehöfer by using the Alexander Romance and al-Tabari, where connections between the Kayanids, Achaemenids and Sasanians are drawn.<sup>208</sup>

It is Payne who completes the picture, explaining how relations with the Kayanids translated into a greater emphasis on universal rule. By claiming their descent from these legendary rulers, the Sasanians, and especially in this case Yazdgird, inherited the responsibility to restore order and to guarantee peace and prosperity in the entire world. As Payne puts it, “[it] was, therefore, now incumbent upon all Sasanian kings to demonstrate their success at securing the submission of the known world to their all-encompassing majesty.”<sup>209</sup> Association with the Kayanids would increase with each of the fifth-century rulers following Yazdgird, just like the links between the inherited ideology and foreign policy. These patterns line up perfectly with Payne's theory of Iranian cosmopolitanism. He concludes that within this Kayanid cosmopolitan ideology, the Sasanians could either pursue war with Rome in order to return them to a state of proper unity through tribute, or pursue peace in order to re-establish the “appropriate distribution of power the [Kayanids] had realized through the collection of symbols of Roman recognition of Iranian domination.”<sup>210</sup>

The patronage of Christianity can also be seen within the ideology of Iranian cosmopolitanism. According to the *Denkard*, Iran's region encompassed all truths - be it

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eventually scrapped, supposedly causing insult to Khusrow who subsequently vowed vengeance on the Romans. For more details on Theodosius' II adoption, see Bardill and Greatrex (1996: 171-97).

<sup>206</sup> Daryaee (2009: 14).

<sup>207</sup> Daryaee (2009: 22, 158 n.112). See also Payne (2016b: 27-9).

<sup>208</sup> Wiesehöfer (2001: 168). See also Wood (2012: 63 and n.24).

<sup>209</sup> Payne (2013: 7).

<sup>210</sup> Payne (2013: 32).

scientific, philosophical, artistic and religious - regardless of their country of origin.<sup>211</sup> Shapur I is said to have begun a process of returning this knowledge to Iran,<sup>212</sup> a mission that seems to have been picked up by Yazdgird I. The councils entailed a very real subjugation of the East Syrian Church to the Shah, and effectively challenged Rome's universal claim over the religion. The overzealous eulogy to Yazdgird I in the opening of the council canons, and continuous praise throughout the text created the image that the Shah was "a second Constantine", as Scott McDonough calls him.<sup>213</sup> Wood goes even further, stating that Yazdgird's involvement in the councils was a "sign of his 'victory', on the model of Constantine", pushing an image of himself as ruler over the whole world.<sup>214</sup> Imperialist claims such as these would no doubt strain Romano-Iranian relations. Nevertheless, Yazdgird seems not only to have been making conscious efforts to structure the East Syrian Church (perhaps even all of Christianity) to fit within the Zoroastrian concept of empire, but to also claim it as part of the Kayanid heritage and Iranian culture. Though some saw Yazdgird's interest in Christianity as signs of his eventual conversion,<sup>215</sup> others may very well have perceived the Shah as overtly declaring Constantine's heritage as his own.

The foundation of Martyropolis even allowed Yazdgird to push beyond the borders of his empire. In another article, Payne describes how Yazdgird and Marutha collaborated to create the martyr cult culture in the East, for which we have no proof before the foundation of Martyropolis.<sup>216</sup> The fact that Rome was so overtly supporting the creation of a martyr cult in a border city left Yazdgird no option but to contest the potential cultural monopoly, lest he alienate the crucial borderland between the empires.<sup>217</sup> The involvement of a foreign, heathen and rival ruler in the foundation of a Roman city might have irritated Roman sensibilities, hence the distinct lack of discussion surrounding Martyropolis in the sources that address Marutha's life.<sup>218</sup> Such an absence of information represents an active omission, with Socrates being the only one of the three contemporary sources to have written anything about Marutha. The authors all wrote sometime around the mid-fifth century, all after the war of 421-2. As previously suggested, the

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<sup>211</sup> *Denkard* IV.19. See also Payne (2016a: 214).

<sup>212</sup> Payne (2016a: 214).

<sup>213</sup> McDonough (2008a: 127).

<sup>214</sup> Wood (2013: 33).

<sup>215</sup> Socrates *HE* VII.8.20.

<sup>216</sup> Payne (2011: 95-6).

<sup>217</sup> Key Fowden (1999: 56, 59).

<sup>218</sup> Socrates *HE*, Sozomen *HE* and Theophanes *Chronographia*.

absence of Martyropolis in their accounts is perhaps the result of the discomfort surrounding Marutha and his involvement with the Iranian monarch. With a war against Iran just recently concluded, and tensions still rising, it would obviously not have pleased Roman audiences of that time to learn that Yazdgird I, the father and grandfather of their enemies, so closely supported Christianity within and without his realm.

The eastern sources who do mention both the councils and Martyropolis happen all to be written during the much later Islamic period.<sup>219</sup> The inclusion of these events seems to indicate an acceptance of Yazdgird as a key character in East Syrian Christian history. The Shah had ushered in a new era for Christians in Iran, effectively integrating the East Syrian Church into Sasanian politics and placing it at the service of the monarch and the Empire. Even after the fall of the Sasanids, Christians still seemed to remember the importance of those events from centuries earlier that had allowed them to flourish and grow as a community. Perhaps the inclusion of Yazdgird in their historical narrative points to hopes of similar treatment under their new Arab rulers. It must also be noted that in 424, just a couple of years after the war with Rome had ended, the East Syrian Church fathers convened yet another council. The Council of Mar Dadisho was effectively a proclamation of independence from the western Churches, and from that point on, Christianity in Iran began to take on its own distinct features and Christology.<sup>220</sup> Thus, these later accounts that included Yazdgird's and Marutha's projects in their narratives seem to have done so in order to preserve their own historical traditions, that, coincidentally and conveniently, the Romans had previously rejected because of its connection to Iran.

### **Pulcheria's Hard Line**

Iranian cosmopolitanism remained an isolated and self-contained ideology within the world that spawned it. Roman sources are distinctly unaware of the implications Zoroastrian cosmology had on foreign policy. Despite such ignorance, the affair would have been naturally observed as simple Iranian imperialism, and therefore have generated friction with the rival Christian government of Constantinople. Under Arcadius and initially under Theodosius II, relations remained more than cordial, but the court atmosphere changed in 414 and became a much more religious and intolerant environment that could easily take offence at Yazdgird's

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<sup>219</sup> *Chronicle of Seert, Armenian Life Marutha*, Mari Ibn Sulaiman, Bar Hebraeus and 'Amr Ibn Matta.

<sup>220</sup> See Wilmhurst (2011: 23-31) for a descriptive narrative on the various developments the East Syrian Church underwent over the years after the Council of Mar Dadisho.

universalising projects involving Christianity. Blockley and Holum identify this moment as the fall of Anthemius and the rise of Pulcheria.<sup>221</sup> Though not much is reported on her involvement in politics concerning the Romano-Iranian relations, it is possible to interpret whatever descriptions of her while linking them to what has been established up to this point.

The Augusta's demeanour is portrayed by Sozomen as having been of extreme religiosity, and further identified by Blockley as an "aggressive Christian orthodoxy [that] began to turn towards militant universalism."<sup>222</sup> These support Holum's suggestion that, despite the lack of evidence, Zoroastrianism would have no longer been protected in the Roman Empire, contributing to the rising tensions and pushing Yazdgird, already under pressure from the Magi and nobility, to break from his tolerant attitude towards Christianity.<sup>223</sup> Pulcheria's potential intolerance may demonstrate that her personal convictions and/or government could have taken offence at Yazdgird's intimate involvement and practical conquest of East Syrian Christianity. As Augusta of the Roman Empire, and thus inheritor of Constantine's legacy, Pulcheria was tasked with responsibility over all Christians, just as the famous Emperor is said to have once told Shapur II.<sup>224</sup> Yazdgird would have been perceived as emulating that Christian Emperor, and hence overstepping his boundaries. Perhaps indeed, through the lens of Iranian cosmopolitanism, the Shah did see himself as a successor to Constantine, and thus laid ideological claim over Christianity and even the Roman Empire. Although Yazdgird's image as a second Constantine may have given hope to many that he would convert, both Iranian cosmopolitanism and his Kayanid quest were possible only in the context that the world would be submitted to

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<sup>221</sup> Blockley (1992: 55) and Holum (1977: 161-3). See Bardill and Greatrex (1996: 191-2) for a survey of those who disagree with Holum's conclusions.

<sup>222</sup> Sozomen *HE* IX.1, 3 and Blockley (1992: 56).

<sup>223</sup> See Dignas and Winter (2007: 135-8), Greatrex and Lieu (2002: 42-3), Holum (1977: 159-62, 159 n.26, 161 n.39), Blockley (1992: 56, 58, 201 n.40), Synelli (1986: 57) Daryaee (2009: 23) and Boyce (2001: 119) for discussions on the terms of peace and religious tolerance in the Roman Empire. Just as with the foundation of Martyropolis and Karin-Theodosiopolis, the terms of the 422 treaty may have retroactively functioned as proof for the status *ante bellum*: that indeed neither rival religion was tolerated in the Roman and Iranian empires. Blockley discusses that toleration of Zoroastrianism in the Roman Empire was indeed part of the treaty but that such terms were probably added in an annex after the oaths, which reduced the stigma of having your enemy dictate your domestic policy, and to avoid future use of religion as a *casus belli*. Overall, the agreement of tolerance would have been simply a sign of good-will. Winter and Dignas discuss how that the tolerance of Zoroastrianism in Roman territory would have been "a concession without any practical value." Although the presence of mutual religious tolerance in the peace treaty might attest to a previous degeneration of this in both empires, there is no explicit proof that Zoroastrianism had indeed become no longer tolerated in the Roman Empire under Pulcheria. What we do know is that much legislation had been passed against Jews and Pagans (*CT* 16.8, 10). If these non-Christian "domestic" religions like Judaism and Paganism were being restricted by laws, Zoroastrianism, as a foreign religion, must have been repressed as well, or at least understood as included in the law as part of paganism.

<sup>224</sup> Eusebius *VC* IV.9-13.

Zoroastrianism and the Iranian people. If anything, Yazdgird sought to conquer, subdue and subsume Christianity, not join it.

## War in 416

As we have seen, a variety of Romano-Iranian cooperative projects backfired by reinforcing positive relations while generating tensions. Aside from the foundation of Martyropolis, the East Syrian Church synods and the ideology of Iranian Cosmopolitanism present in all of Yazdgird's actions, there exists one more potential source for the rising tensions. In his article "Ein ‚übersehener‘ römisch-persischer Krieg um 416/417?", Andreas Luther presents analyses the possible existence of an overlooked war in 416/17. He notes how the *Chronicle of Seert* dates the first of Acacius' embassies to Iran to 417/18, where the primary concern was to ensure the welfare of the Iranian Christians and the organization of the East Syrian Church.<sup>225</sup> This embassy is then said to have been followed by Yahbalaha's visit to Constantinople in 418, which had as a goal to secure peace and reinforce relations. Luther subsequently states that Acacius returned to Iran in 419/20 in order to convene the Council of Mar Yahbalaha, and again in 421/2 on a humanitarian mission involving the return of Iranian prisoners. It is important to note that Luther takes the descriptions in the *Chronicle of Seert* at face value. The text reports the following:

Three years after his elevation to the *catholicosate*, Theodosius, son of Arcadius, sent Acacius of Amida with a missive for Yazdgird. In cooperation with Yahbalaha, Acacius set the canons necessary for the direction of the Church and its flock, confirmed the canons of the western fathers of Nicea, of the *Catholicos* Ishaq, and of other laws as well; he commanded that these be observed in detail.<sup>226</sup>

Although the timing of the described embassy is calculated as having taken place in 416/17, the report is not explicit as to whether or not a council was held despite the elements of one being reported. Although Ishaq's Council is clearly highlighted in an earlier passage, this is not the case of Yahbalaha's.<sup>227</sup> Two possibilities emerge: either the source is indeed describing the Council of Mar Yahbalaha but has confused the chronology of the embassies, thus placing

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<sup>225</sup> Luther's deductions take what the *Chronicle of Seert* says at face value.

<sup>226</sup> English translation from French by George Amanatidis-Saadé, original French translation by Scher (1907: 326-7): «Trois ans après son élévation au catholicat, Théodose, fils d'Arcade, empereur des Romains, envoya avec Acace d'Amid une missive à Jazdgerd. De concert avec Jahbalaha, Acace fixa les règles nécessaires à la direction de l'Église et des fidèles, confirma les décrets des Pères occidentaux de Nicée et du catholicos Isaac ainsi que d'autres décrets; il ordonna de les observer dans leurs détails.»

<sup>227</sup> See *Chronicle of Seert* 205-7/317-9 (LXVI) and 213-6/325-8 (LXX-LXXI) for Mar Ishaq's and Mar Yahbalaha's reigns respectively.

Acacius' (and therefore the Council) prior to Yahbalaha's, or Acacius did indeed make an earlier visit to Iran in 417/18 where he identified the need for a future council, and thus laid the foundations for his return in 419/20. Luther chooses to follow the latter option, that the situation between the East Syrian Church and the Iranian state was tense, hence the necessity of the three embassies. His theory hinges on a single sentence from the *Synodicon Orientale* pertaining to the purpose of Yahbalaha's embassy. It is stated in the source that the *Catholicos* was sent to Constantinople in order that peace be *restored* between the Romans and Iranians. Al-Tabari's account is brought in as support to the fact that the treaty of 408 was broken in 416/17, since it is explicitly stated that a brother of the Roman emperor was sent to Yazdgird "seeking a peace agreement and a truce in fighting for the emperor and the Romans."<sup>228</sup> Luther points out that although there are mistakes in the account (the brother in question was given the name of the Emperor: Theodosius), the excerpt nevertheless points to a military conflict preceding the embassy.

Further connections are made through the *Annals* of the Melkite Patriarch Eutychius from Alexandria (dated to AD 940), where a brief statement is made that in the ninth year of Theodosius II's reign, Yazdgird launched a military campaign against the Romans. After a fierce battle ending in a stalemate, both sides withdrew and peace was made. This ninth year aligns with 416/417. Such a conflict, Luther points out, almost perfectly frames the diplomatic activities of 417-419. Further information is garnered from the *Martyrdom of Šābūr*, which is stated as having taken place in 417, which would have taken place during this overlooked war.<sup>229</sup> The final piece of the puzzle is found in the *Chronicle of Arbela*, where persecution under Yazdgird and Bahram is said to have instigated the war to break out. It is only after peace was established that the source tells us the Council of Mar Yahbalaha was convened. While his arguments are consistent and rely on many primary sources, issues arise when we consider that his none of his sources was contemporary to the events and in fact all are dated to centuries later. This renders their accounts less reliable. I believe that Luther's exercise in proposing the existence of a war in 416/417 proves that there was indeed a peak in tensions at that time. Unexplained in his article is the Roman law allowing for private fortifications to be erected on the frontier. It is clear that by 420 the Romano-Iranian relationship had been far too strained to be sustained any longer.

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<sup>228</sup> al-Tabari 858/86 (tr. Bosworth, C.E.).

<sup>229</sup> *The Martyrdom of Šābūr* (Herman [2016: 52]).

Perhaps the war he seeks to establish in his article did indeed involve military action, albeit limited, possibly light raiding across the border. The fortification of Martyropolis against violence as described Ibn Al-Azraq works well within this context. Though his case is unproven, the point stands that tensions were rising.

### **Prelude to Hostilities**

Extant information on Yazdgird's final years only barely hints at Romano-Iranian relations being strained. There is in fact more proof of positive relations than negative. The monarchs themselves seem to have been able to maintain their friendship despite the rising tensions and growing discontent in both courts. In 418 Yazdgird had actually sent the *Catholicos* Yahbalaha as ambassador to the Romans. According to the text of the Council of Mar Yahbalaha, this embassy had been sent in order to secure peace and reconciliation of the two kingdoms.<sup>230</sup> Sako suggests that in addition to these, Yahbalaha was also sent to thank the Romans for sending their delegates to the Council of Mar Ishaq, and to reassure them that the policy of tolerance would still be maintained.<sup>231</sup> Interestingly, Yahbalaha underwent an examination, or interrogation, of faith upon his arrival in Constantinople. He was required to assure the Romans of his own and his Church's orthodoxy, and therefore explicitly to enter into communion with the Roman Church.<sup>232</sup> This would have been quite insulting, especially since it was directed towards an official representative of the Iranian Empire.<sup>233</sup> Although Yahbalaha was indeed a Christian leader, and therefore part of the Church which was centered around the Roman Empire, he was also an ambassador of Iran. His liminal position was a direct reflection of the East Syrian Church's status at this time, and understandably, such ambiguity could cause tensions. The *Chronicle of Seert* does not discuss the examination of faith in any negative way, even incorporating a positive element by stating that Theodosius admired the *Catholicos'* intelligence.<sup>234</sup> The entire event proves that relations were neither positive nor negative, but rather that they were somewhat strained.

Shortly after Yahbalaha's return to Iran, he was visited by Acacius, the bishop of Amida. Acacius had in fact been sent by Theodosius II as ambassador to Yazdgird in 419 instead of his

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<sup>230</sup> *Synodicon Orientale* 37/277.

<sup>231</sup> Sako (1986: 73) and Christensen (1944: 271).

<sup>232</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 215/327 (LXXI) and Sako (1986: 74).

<sup>233</sup> Blockley (1992: 56, 199 n.20).

<sup>234</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 215/327 (LXXI).

usual ambassador to Iran, Marutha; presumably the bishop of Martyropolis had passed away by this point. The goal of the embassy seems to have been the same as Yahbalaha's the year earlier, "une ambassade de courtoisie."<sup>235</sup> Acacius also took the opportunity to co-convene the second East Syrian Church synod. The Council of Mar Yahbalaha was to confirm the first synod of 410 but also ensured that the East Syrian Church adopted western canons more extensively.<sup>236</sup> The Council took place in 420, sometime before Yazdgird's death in the autumn. As outlined in the previous chapter, these Church councils may have been part of Yazdgird's greater project of Iranian cosmopolitanism. Although this indicates that Romano-Iranian relations were still positive at the time, it also represents a further strengthening of Christianity in Iran. This was shown in the previous chapter to have infuriated the Magi and nobility. The Iranian Christians were becoming more assertive in their missionary work at this time, while the calling of the second council by Yazdgird practically sanctioned the zealous actions. It also brought in a western bishop once again to Iran in order to continue the structuring and strengthening of the East Syrian Church, which was being used by Yazdgird as an alternative power base to the traditional Iranian aristocracy. The Council of Mar Yahbalaha and the pervading religious atmosphere must have pushed the underlying tensions in Iran to critical levels. These tensions emerged in the Council of Mar Dadisho of 424 that essentially divorced the East Syrian Church from the western fathers. The Iranian Church's relationship with the Romans had caused its flock far too much trouble, especially because the Christians were now politically integrated into Iranian society. Attachment to the Roman Church had become no longer tenable after the war of 420.<sup>237</sup>

To make matters worse, in May 420, before Yazdgird died, a law was passed in Rome that allowed owners of properties near the Eastern frontier to protect their land with private fortifications.<sup>238</sup> The existence of a law like this indicated that the Romans expected hostile movement in the region between the empires, perhaps even for hostilities to break out. That would mean that either the Romans were preparing to go on an offensive, or they were preparing

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<sup>235</sup> Sako (1986: 77).

<sup>236</sup> Sako (1986: 77 n.45).

<sup>237</sup> See K. Smith, *The Synod of Dadiso - 424 CE* (Unpublished) for an English translation and a complete discussion on the council's implications in the introduction. See also *Synodicon Orientale* 43-53/285-98.

<sup>238</sup> *CJ* 8.10.10 and Holum (1977: 162).

for the defense of their own territories.<sup>239</sup> Whatever the case may be, the reality was that tensions were quickly rising between the governments. Yazdgird must have been even more hard pressed by the traditional groups of Iran to punish the Christians, who had been accruing more and more power ever since the Council of Mar Ishaq. In addition, the Iranian aristocracy was even further aggravated because of the Council of Mar Yahbalaha. At the same time as fortifications began appearing along the frontier on private properties, there are signs that Zoroastrians were being mistreated in the Roman Empire.<sup>240</sup> When exactly in 420 Theodosiopolis was fortified, we do not know, and whether or not Martyropolis was reinforced is unclear, but it is possible that both cities could have potentially been built up at this moment. Whether or not Yazdgird actually persecuted the Christians at this point will be the topic of the next chapter, but what remains sure is that the peace between Roman and Iran was definitely breaking down. Since toleration of Christians in Iran was based upon good Romano-Iranian relations, a degeneration of these would have directly translated into a disintegration of tolerance of Christianity in Iran. In this case, it seems the embassies of Yahbalaha and Acacius were a last ditch effort to mend the deteriorating relationship. Nevertheless, as seen throughout this thesis, the situation in both Ctesiphon and Constantinople was complex and the tensions between the empires could no longer be mitigated. Hostility between Rome and Iran was about to erupt.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought signs of rising tensions between the Roman and Iranian Empires through relatively unconventional sources for this type of information. Even though the primary sources seem to attest to a variety of causes for the tensions, there still exists a debate as to whether or not relations declined towards the end of Yazdgird's reign. The arguments presented above seek to demonstrate how some animosity could have very well been slowly developing between the two courts and their monarchs during the Shah's reign, leading to the eventual mysterious climax in 420-1 of combined persecution and war. Sources give us conflicting information as to what happened in those years, understandably so since the political atmosphere in both Iran and Rome seems to have become quite strained in this period. A succession crisis

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<sup>239</sup> Greatrex and Lieu (2002: 257 n.29) suggest the measures were defensive, but highlight how some like Holum (1977: 162) argued in his article that the Romans in fact needed to enact such laws to enable the complete offensive mobilization of the army.

<sup>240</sup> See Chapter Two: 58 n.223 above.

ensued when Yazdgird I and his first-born son Shapur IV were murdered by the Magi and nobility, with civil war over the throne erupting. Such turmoil combined with Pulcheria's rise to power set the stage for the peace to be broken. But did hostilities break out before the Shah's death? Did Yazdgird actually persecute the Christians, or was it his son Bahram who did so in order to gain favour with the disgruntled priesthood and nobility? Was the entire persecution fabricated or blown out of proportion to provide the Romans with a *casus belli*? These questions and more will be addressed in the next and final chapter in the hope of shedding some light on the confusing events of 420.

### Chapter Three: Yazdgird I - The Impious, the Unjust and the Sinner

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“Thereat the men of mace and scimitar all shook like willow-trees. Now, when his power waxed strong his love waned as his greatness grew; He scorned the sages and grew negligent of royal usages. The governors, the paladins, the notables, and all the learned and noble sages, were as wind to him; his dark soul had grown tyrannous;”

*Shahnama* XXXIV.1 (tr. Mohl, J.)

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Despite his good intentions, Yazdgird’s project of Christian patronage proved to be an uncomfortable affair by creating pressures within and without the Iranian Empire. These stresses accumulated over the years to the point of near explosion; all it would take was for either the Christians to cross the line, or for the Shah to die. Yazdgird may have ushered in a great era of peace and friendship with Rome and the Christian community, but according to some sources he undid all this in his final year. It is the inconsistency among the sources that this thesis wishes to clarify. In comparison to his son Bahram V, who was clearly and consistently represented in the sources as a persecutor, Yazdgird was perceived in a plethora of forms and fashions. Whatever the truth may be, we do know that sometime around 420-421 Sasanian relations with both Rome and the East Syrian Christian community degenerated enough for the sources to report warfare with the former and hostility against the latter. It is the degeneration of these relations with which we are concerned, especially when the accounts are so divided on the issue.

At this point, we have explored why and how positive relations were established between Rome and Iran, how certain projects aimed at bringing the powers together may have instead caused friction, and what tensions had arisen by the end of the fifth century’s first decade. Records of Yahbalaha’s embassy to Constantinople and Acacius’ subsequent embassy to Iran point to the confirmation of relations, while the calling of the Council of Mar Yahbalaha in 420 indicates that the atmosphere in Iran was generally the same as it was previously: uneasy. Why then do we have numerous accounts of Yazdgird persecuting the Christians in the final months of his reign? A close reading of the sources points to one conclusion: Yazdgird I did not engage in persecuting the Christian community in Iran. During the year AD 420, a great many changes occurred, providing an abundance of information for historians, but they offer little clarity on the chronology of the events. Thus the various biases, agendas and perspectives of each author easily explain the variance in Yazdgird’s portrayal across the sources.

Prior to examining the sources, the term “persecution” will be defined within its historical context. Once that is established, our attention will be diverted to the first two points that demonstrate the improbability and unlikelihood of Yazdgird’s persecutions: the chronology of the East Syrian Church councils and the close relations between the Shah and the *catholicoi* as described by the *Chronicle of Seert*. These studies will be followed by an in-depth look at the positive representations of Yazdgird in the sources, among which are the works of Socrates, Procopius, Agathias and Theodoret. Naturally, the study of the negative representations of Yazdgird will follow this section. Most sources discussed here will have already surfaced among the previous discussions, but the focus will instead be set upon interpreting solely the reports on Yazdgird’s involvement in persecuting the Christians of his empire. In both sections, special attention will be given to the *Martyr Acts* that have recently become accessible thanks to Herman’s published translations. They reveal a great deal on what had been occurring in Iran, and provide a unique perspective because of the chronological and geographical proximity to the narrated events.<sup>241</sup> A final section will delve into Payne’s theory of the Iranian “State of Mixture”, which concludes that persecution never really occurred in Iran, but that Christianity was a tolerated religion only suppressed for very specific reasons.

### **Persecution or Punishment?**

Before even delving into the sources, let us first define what persecution is exactly. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, persecution is the “unfair or cruel treatment over a long period of time because of race, religion, or political beliefs.”<sup>242</sup> This may seem to work for our case, but the use of a modern concept of persecution in such a study results in anachronism. What then really constituted persecution in the conscience of the fifth-century Christians? Moss discusses how modern scholars have divided various injustices suffered by the Christians into

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<sup>241</sup> Devos (1965: 326-8) evaluates the martyr acts as a reliable contemporary source for the described events. He also puts forth that a certain monk named Abgar wrote Narseh’s martyr acts as well as those of Tātāq and the Ten from Bēth Garmai. Abgar is said to have written from a monastery situated right outside the Sasanian capital, and to have had much closer access to the events described both geographically and chronologically since he is thought to have composed his work during Bahram’s reign. See Wood (2013: 44-8) for his own discussion of Abgar. He neither disagrees nor agrees with Devos’ dating, rather rationalizes and theorizes about the circumstances surrounding Abgar’s productions. See also Herman’s (2016: xix-xxv) discussion on issues of dating. He asserts that not all martyr acts attributed to Abgar are from the same period, and that some may be actually later compositions.

<sup>242</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/persecution>

categories such as prejudice or social marginalization, and persecution.<sup>243</sup> The former category would encompass marginalization, denial of rights, social ostracism, and the feeling of being threatened, while persecution implies that the violence “is imperially organized, is active, and involves execution.”<sup>244</sup> This is reinforced with the concepts of “irrational and unjustified hatred.”<sup>245</sup>

As we have seen, the situation of the East Syrian Christians was completely different from the Roman Empire under the pagan emperors of old. In fact, the atmosphere in Iran resembled more that which followed the Council of Nicaea. It will be seen throughout the sources that Christians who were punished by the Sasanian authorities had not just broken the law with their actions, but had actually undertaken an attack on Iranian tradition and culture. Royal reprisals were not initiatives against all Christians, but reactions to Christian zealotry. With this in mind, we will seek to prove through the sources that Yazdgird did not engage in any persecutory activities against the Christian populace of Iran.

### **Court Connections and Chronology**

With the term “persecution” defined, the study can now turn its focus on the sources themselves. The East Syrian Church council texts of 410 and 420, as well as the *Chronicle of Seert* establish two primary elements in our examination, those being the intensity of Yazdgird’s relationships with the *catholicoi* and the Roman Empire, as well as the chronological proximity of the Council of Mar Yahbalaha (420) to his alleged persecution. Throughout his entire life as shah, Yazdgird was completely invested in maintaining his fragile relationship with Rome and the Christians of his empire. In a completely novel fashion, he integrated the Church hierarchy into the government of Iran through the Council of Mar Ishaq and Mar Yahbalaha, and through these councils became himself more intimately involved in the Church’s affairs as well. An exceptionally positive image emerges from the two council texts. Both exalt the Shah, calling him “victorious, illustrious, friend of peace, glorious, powerful and peaceful,”<sup>246</sup> but also praise

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<sup>243</sup> Moss (2013: 134) admits that it is immensely difficult to pinpoint a definition of “persecution” within a historical context. States were so large that even governmentally issued laws could be completely ignored in the provinces, or implemented to excess in others. The scale of persecutions also causes issue, since in our modern perceptions we are completely desensitized to violence. She points out that non-violent persecution does not figure in scholarly identifications of persecution.

<sup>244</sup> Moss (2013: 134).

<sup>245</sup> Moss (2013: 213).

<sup>246</sup> The exaltations to Yazdgird are spread out through both council texts. See *Synodicon Orientale* 18-42/254-284.

him for ending the oppression and persecution of Christians, and for providing them with various new freedoms. It is not a surprise that Yazdgird was extolled in the council texts, for he had personally authorized them to occur and directly supported their canons. Without his cooperation, the councils would neither have taken place, nor would Christianity have received such patronage and freedom.

We find a similar description of close relations between Yazdgird I and the East Syrian Church depicted in the *Chronicle of Seert*. More specifically, his close relationships with the *catholicoi* seem to be the primary focus of the narrative. By allowing the Council to take place, the Shah effectively sanctioned the promotion of the Bishop Ishaq to the rank of *catholicos*. When Ishaq died, Marutha selected a certain Ahai as his successor. We are told that both the Church fathers and Yazdgird consented to this selection.<sup>247</sup> Ahai supposedly held great favor with the Shah as well as considerable secular authority within the empire. In fact, after his election, he was sent to inspect a supposed theft of luxury merchandise coming from India and China by pirates.<sup>248</sup> It was Yazdgird's nephew who claimed the theft had occurred, but rather than trust his family member, the Shah sent his new *Catholicos* to investigate the affair. When Ahai died, Yazdgird chose Yahbalaha to assume the *catholicosate* because he knew him so well.<sup>249</sup> According to the text, in response to the Roman embassy led by Acacius of Amida, Yazdgird sent the newly elected *Catholicos* as ambassador to Constantinople. After Yahbalaha's return to Iran, the *Chronicle* tells us of a sudden volte-face in policy, with the Shah commanding his general Shapur to persecute and destroy churches.<sup>250</sup> The issue of Yazdgird's persecution will be looked at later, but for now the focus will remain on Yazdgird's relationship with the Church hierarchy.

The source tells us that Yahbalaha was able to convince Yazdgird to stop persecuting after curing him of his chronic headache. This peace did not last long, for after Yahbalaha's death, it is reported that the destruction of a fire temple by the priest Hosea instigated yet another persecution. Just like the first round of violence, this new persecution did not last long since we are told that the Armenian patriarch Isaac spoke in favor of the Christians and convinced Yazdgird to end his second round of religious oppression. Isaac was able to do so because he

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<sup>247</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 205-13/317-25 (LXVI and LXIX).

<sup>248</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 212-3/324-5 (LXIX).

<sup>249</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 214/326 (LXXI): “[...] Jazdgerd le connaissait si bien qu’il ordonna de le nommer *Catholicos* [...]” (tr. Chabot, J. -B.).

<sup>250</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 215/327 (LXXI).

held sway with Yazdgird for he had helped the Shah to subjugate the Armenians.<sup>251</sup> The final *Catholicos* under Yazdgird, a certain Ma'na, was also chosen by the Shah, this time not only for his closeness to him, but also because of his ethnicity as a Persian. Although we are told that Ma'na was forced into exile for no reason, and subsequently imprisoned upon his return, he was eventually released.<sup>252</sup>

Despite its late production and location within the Arab world, the *Chronicle of Seert* has been judged by some as reliable in its translation of earlier texts.<sup>253</sup> It thus does not come as a surprise that the *Chronicle* includes a fair amount of detail that point to Yazdgird's enhanced relations with the Church hierarchy. These descriptions work perfectly with the atmosphere emanating from the Church council texts. Yazdgird had clearly built a strong relationship with the Church hierarchy and relied on them for critical secular issues, such as embassies to Rome or in keeping the nobility in check. It would be irrational for Yazdgird to turn on his trusted advisors and agents, especially at a point when internal and external tensions had reached a high. In fact, the chronology of the East Syrian Church councils highlights an even greater dilemma. The first of these took place in 410, two years after the new treaty with Constantinople had been established, and therefore in the heyday of positive Romano-Iranian relations.<sup>254</sup> The second council occurred in 420, in Yazdgird's final year and hence sometime very close to the eruption of the alleged persecution. Despite the growing tensions between Rome and Iran, Yazdgird was still praised and seen positively, at least by those who contributed to this second council. Considering the language of the texts, we can be sure that the Christians at least perceived the Shah as a protector and expected in no way to be persecuted by him, even in his final year. The fact that it took place in 420 makes it highly unlikely that Yazdgird suddenly engaged in a large-scale general persecution of the religious group on which he had just bestowed his favor months

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<sup>251</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 216/328 (LXXI).

<sup>252</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 216-8/328-30 (LXXII).

<sup>253</sup> See Wood's (2013: 2-9) discussion on the *Chronicle's* reliability in faithfully translating older sources. He suggests that the author is so rigorous in preserving all previous material to the point of including "contradictory accounts of the same events alongside one another."

<sup>254</sup> See Blockley (1992: 54), Greatrex and Lieu (2002: 33-4) and CJ 4.63.4 for information on the Roman law restricting international trade to Callinicum, Nisibis and Artaxata, with the expressed purpose of curbing spies. Greatrex and Lieu mention how this treaty was indeed a sign of the growing détente between the empires, while Blockley frames it as depicting the limits of mutual trust. Nevertheless, he suggests this trade agreement, alongside Marutha's second embassy that occurred synchronously, as a re-affirmation of the treaties in 400, 387 and 363.

earlier.<sup>255</sup> War on the Christian faith in Iran would directly translate into hostility with Rome, for the religious freedom of the Christian community was very much a concern of the Roman Empire, as exhibited by Marutha's and Acacius' embassies as well as in the peace treaty of 422. Modern scholars like Schrier concur with such logic, taking the chronology of the Council of 420 as proof that Yazdgird I did not persecute the Christians.<sup>256</sup> Hence the Council of Mar Yahbalaha should immediately draw our attention to the improbability and inconsistency of such a reversal of policy.

### Positive Perceptions

Of course, these two arguments are not enough to prove that Yazdgird did not persecute the Christians of his realm. They simply establish that, considering the strong relationship between the Shah and the East Syrian Church hierarchy, as well as the short time span between the Council of Mar Yahbalaha and Yazdgird's death, it would have been highly improbable and illogical to have done so. A good number of the primary sources do in fact support such a claim, either directly or indirectly.<sup>257</sup> The first batch of accounts to be dealt with are those that only portray Yazdgird in a positive fashion in relation to his Christian subjects, being those of Socrates, the *Lives of Marutha*, Procopius and Agathias. This section will end with Theophanes' *Chronographia*, but because of the piecemeal nature of his chronicle, his individual entries will be treated as stemming from different sources.

Let us begin with Socrates' statement that Yazdgird had "in no way molested the Christians in his dominions," and that the persecutions were entirely undertaken by Bahram V, who had done so after "yielding to the influence of the Magi."<sup>258</sup> It is not just Bahram who takes the blame for the persecutions, but more specifically the Magi, who are stated to have influenced their new shah to punish and torture the Christians.<sup>259</sup> The explicit and complete absolution of Yazdgird is unique to Socrates. Despite its uniqueness on this aspect, Socrates does identify the

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<sup>255</sup> Herman (2014: 74) takes this view, stating that there was no time for a serious bout of persecution, especially since the council's acts were praised and ratified in Constantinople after its conclusion in Iran. The chronology thus does not line up.

<sup>256</sup> Schrier (1992: 78).

<sup>257</sup> See Herman (2014: 71-6) for a short discussion of eleven eastern sources (East Syrian, Jewish and Zoroastrian) that all express Yazdgird did not persecute the Christians of his realm.

<sup>258</sup> Socrates *HE* VII.18.

<sup>259</sup> Socrates *HE* VII.18. It is a prominent trope in most accounts concerning persecutions in Iran that the Magi are the primary persecutors, and not the shahs. As will be seen later, Payne (2015: 38) bases his arguments upon this fact.

Magi as the source of the persecutions rather than the Shah, an element that is found in almost all the other primary sources. Socrates' account is generally disbelieved when it comes to whether or not Yazdgird was involved in persecuting the Christians.<sup>260</sup> His overly positive perspective on the Shah may have been influenced by the period within which he composed his work, perhaps the decades following the war of 421 when Pulcheria's influence at court was replaced by Theodosius' wife, Eudocia.<sup>261</sup> It is even possible that his views reflected those of the old regime under Anthemius, under whom the positive relations with Iran and Yazdgird were established. Nevertheless, Socrates' statement that Yazdgird in no way harmed the Christians is extreme and exclusive to his account. It is because of this uniqueness that we must remain wary of the information he provides us.

Despite the fact that no other accounts so clearly absolved Yazdgird of attacking his protégés, we do have others that only portray the Shah in a positive light. The various *Lives of Marutha*, including the section found in Socrates' work, all describe Yazdgird as an open and just ruler. Only the *Armenian Life* describes the Shah as beginning his reign with a persecution, but as promptly ending it after Marutha exorcised his son.<sup>262</sup> This anomaly will be discussed later.<sup>263</sup> For now, what is to be retained from the hagiographies is that Yazdgird was open and willing to allow Christianity flourish in his empire. Each version of the hagiography provides some different reason for Marutha's presence in Iran, some stating that Yazdgird himself summoned him, while others say that the Roman Emperor sent him. It is generally accepted by modern scholars that Marutha was indeed sent as ambassador to Iran on multiple occasions, and as seen in Chapter One, he was most definitely appropriate for the job. Whatever the case may be, in all the accounts Marutha gained Yazdgird's favour through his medical skills, which led to the granting of the Bishop's request to provide liberty for Iranian Christians, and in some of the accounts, friendship with Rome.<sup>264</sup>

Although Marutha's medical skills and his charisma are not in doubt, the narratives nevertheless do not do justice to the association between the two requests. It must be remembered that these are indeed hagiographies and therefore focus more on the character of Marutha and religious affairs than secular issues. It makes sense then that the political agenda is

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<sup>260</sup> See Greatrex and Lieu (2002: 38, 257 n.36).

<sup>261</sup> Holum (1982: 95).

<sup>262</sup> *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 50]).

<sup>263</sup> See Annex A.

<sup>264</sup> See Chapter One: 29-32 above for more on Marutha.

set aside in some accounts, or simply takes on a secondary importance to the religious achievements of Marutha. The reality, though, was that the Bishop was an imperial ambassador on an official embassy to establish peaceful relations, even an alliance with Iran. Arcadius sought to secure the eastern frontier with Rome's rival and most dangerous enemy. Yazdgird pursued a similar goal, though, as seen in Chapter One, he also had more pressing internal threats to deal with. Though both empires genuinely sought peace with one another, they had not ever cooperated in such a way prior. The negotiations must have been precarious, and Yazdgird's concession to tolerate Christianity in Iran must have been a major one. Such an act was an immense boon not just for cementing peace with Rome, but for considerably improving relations with the Empire as well.<sup>265</sup> Therefore, the agreement was established *upon* Yazdgird's concession of tolerance, rather than *alongside* it. It may have even been a condition to the terms. Had the empires not required to establish peace amongst one another, their enmity would have been sustained. In those circumstances, why in the world would Yazdgird care to officially declare toleration for his enemy's religion? Hence, peace among rivals and toleration of Christianity were not separately negotiated, but the latter served as the foundation of the former. The *Lives of Marutha* identify the close connection between peace with Rome and tolerance of Christianity, but also depict Yazdgird's commitment to both. As relations with Rome degenerated, so too did the primary reason for the Shah to tolerate Christianity.<sup>266</sup>

We find more positive portrayals of Yazdgird in Procopius' *Wars* and Agathias' *Histories*. In these works we are told about how Arcadius sought Yazdgird out to be the guardian of Theodosius II, who was underage at the time of his father's death. Honored, Yazdgird accepted and threatened all who would oppose Theodosius with repercussions.<sup>267</sup> Such accounts highlight the fact that Yazdgird was not remembered as a persecutor in some later Roman traditions. At least during the time Procopius wrote, he sought to contrast Yazdgird as a noble barbarian king with Justinian's enemy, Khusro in order to criticize the latter. The context of the guardianship of Theodosius reinforces the idea that some still saw the later-fourth/early-fifth

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<sup>265</sup> We cannot know if Yazdgird had already been planning on building up an alternative power base among the Christians before Marutha's embassy. Such coincidental timing seems too improbable. The Council of Mar Ishaq played an important role in securing Christianity's position in Iran (as per Yazdgird's promise to tolerate), but it also gave the Shah the alternative power base he needed to survive as monarch. Considering that Marutha coordinated the Council of Mar Ishaq, perhaps he then envisioned it as playing this double role.

<sup>266</sup> See Christensen (1944: 271) and Patterson (2017: 1) for more on the political nature of Yazdgird's relationship with the East Syrian Church.

<sup>267</sup> Procopius *Wars* I.2.1-10.

century as a time of peace and co-operation with Iran. Openly claiming Procopius was his only source, Agathias goes on to berate Arcadius for trusting “a stranger, a barbarian, the ruler of one’s bitterest enemy, one whose good faith and sense of justice were untried, and [...] one who belonged to an alien and heathen faith” to take care of “one’s dearest possessions”, i.e. his son and heir Theodosius.<sup>268</sup> He nevertheless commends Yazdgird for following through his promise in an honorable and just fashion.

Other than these two sources, one other mentions the guardianship of Theodosius II, that being Theophanes in his *Chronographia*. Writing much later, Theophanes’ account completely confuses the chronology of the events, but manages to make mention of a great many of them nevertheless, attesting to a broad range of sources. He is in fact the only extant source to mention a certain Antiochus sent by Yazdgird as guardian to Theodosius. According to the account, Antiochus was extremely well educated and intelligent, and held considerable influence with the Shah, enough to secure freedoms for Christians in Iran with the help of Marutha.<sup>269</sup> If Theophanes is correct in his report, Antiochus probably played a major role in maintaining positive relations between Rome and Iran, but also between the East Syrian Christians and the Sasanian government. Although Theophanes does later describe Yazdgird as a persecutor, what I wish to focus on is Antiochus’ nobility and excellence. The Shah’s selection of such an exceptional individual to represent him at the Roman court reflects on his own person. The very fact that he accepted and followed through the guardianship, be it symbolic or real, displays Yazdgird’s commitment to his relationship with Rome, and by association, to the Christians of his realm.

### **A Just Judge**

Although it seems we have exhausted the material that viewed Yazdgird in a positive fashion, there is more to tease out from other more overtly hostile sources which almost indirectly praise him. For now, the focus will remain on searching for nuance in the narratives that could point to absolving the Shah from being involved in the persecutions of the early fifth century. Theodoret’s account and those of the martyr acts depict a monarch who is lenient and

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<sup>268</sup> Agathias IV.26.6-7. For a study on Agathias’ perceptions of the Iranians, see McDonough (2011: 55-65). See also Greatrex (2018: 65-6).

<sup>269</sup> Theophanes 80 [AM 5900] also reports Socrates’ account on Marutha, stating that it was through the bishop’s acts that Yazdgird gained confidence in Christianity to the point of nearly converting to it. See also Theophanes 82-3 [AM 5906] and 85 [AM 5916], and Bardill and Greatrex (1996: 173).

who exercises considerable control over his agents of justice. The *Chronicle of Seert* could be included in this section, though because it has already been treated in an earlier one, it will only resurface later when the individual allegations of persecution are studied and evaluated.

Although they vary greatly, the accounts of Theodoret and the martyr acts intersect in their representation of Yazdgird as a just monarch, especially in their common narration of the martyrdom of Bishop ‘Abda. Theodoret describes how Yazdgird, after summoning the Bishop and his subordinates to court for vandalizing a Zoroastrian fire temple, addressed him in “moderate language” and “complained of what had taken place”.<sup>270</sup> Further in his narrative, Theodoret provides the stories of three martyrs who died during the persecution that followed ‘Abda’s crime. Although the persecution is said to have continued from the reign of Yazdgird I, through Bahram V’s and into Yazdgird II’s, it is not specified which of the three monarchs passed judgement on those convicted. What remains consistent is the demeanour of the ruler: he is moderate in his punishments and is shown to seek the redemption of the convicted individuals rather than their outright execution.

One would expect a church history written by an East Roman bishop who seemingly supported the pious reign of Pulcheria to employ more powerful imagery when describing those who persecuted their co-religionists.<sup>271</sup> This language is indeed present, but only when describing general events and becomes more moderate, though not entirely, when the shah is involved.<sup>272</sup> Theodoret in no way mentions the execution of the first two martyrs (named Hormisdas and Suenes), while the third (the deacon Benjamin) was given the chance to live as long as he stopped proselytising to the Magi, which he did not. The destruction of the fire temple by ‘Abda is pointed to as the single trigger to the persecutions, but the Magi are then blamed as the agitators of continuous violence against the Christians. As will be seen later, this same

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<sup>270</sup> Theodoret *HE* V.41.1-4.

<sup>271</sup> Theodoret *HE* V.39.4 indirectly praises Pulcheria while other contemporary historians completely omit her from their narratives, possibly for political reasons. See Holum (1982: 95-6). Nevertheless, her absence in some other material proves that not everyone respected her. Through this logic, I deduce that Theodoret’s mention of the Augusta at least indicates some level admiration of her, or even patronage. Holum suggests that the author instead simply chose to place contemporary events within a religious framework to better highlight the “fruits of piety, which Theodosius and his sisters practiced in exemplary fashion.” For more about Theodoret, see above in the Introduction: 3.

<sup>272</sup> Note how Theodoret was on the Antiochene side of the theological disputes between the sees of Antioch and Alexandria. See Urbainczyk (2002: 10-28) for details on the theological controversies of Theodoret’s time. His religious allegiance would implicate him with his fellow Antiochian Nestorius who was condemned at the Council of Ephesus. Among Nestorius’ primary opponents was Pulcheria. Perhaps this then explains why Theodoret may not have shared in Pulcheria’s zeal and thus criticized Abdas’ actions.

account and opinion was reiterated in Theophanes' *Chronographia* almost four hundred years later.<sup>273</sup>

In a similar fashion, the five martyr acts also portray Yazdgird and his judicial agents in a positive light, almost as sympathetic characters. When looking at them as a whole, it becomes apparent that there is a general reluctance to execute those prosecuted, regardless of the crime committed. There is a pervasive feeling that the Sasanian authorities, including the Magi involved as judges, are begging those brought to court to spare their own lives. Let us begin with Narseh's martyr acts that originated in a complete misunderstanding regarding the ownership of a plot of land on which a church was built. The church had been converted into a fire temple in the absence of the owner, and upon discovering the conversion, Narseh violently put out the sacred fire. After being arrested, Narseh is first offered the chance to reignite the sacred fire and go free, an offer which he refuses, leading to his imprisonment.<sup>274</sup> The authorities subsequently allow his freedom to be bought, and he is again offered a new opportunity to be completely absolved of his crime if he only denied that he committed it. The *marzban*, or governor, who was to read out and follow through Yazidgird's offer even told Narseh that he knew he did not "kill the fire," pushing for the monk's pardon.<sup>275</sup> If Narseh was to admit to the crime, he was to be given the same choice as before: rebuild the fire or, this time, die. He chose the latter.

The martyr Tātāq was likewise imprisoned before being given a chance to recant and return to the service of the Shah or die. When he denied the offer for a first time, Tātāq was then beaten rather than executed and was given the same choice again.<sup>276</sup> In the usual fashion of the trope, Tātāq refused to recant and was then condemned to die. The Ten Martyrs from Bēth Garmai were given a number of chances as well, with their judge, Mihr-Shapur, trying to understand why the men were so adamant to die for their faith, proposing to them to clear their debts if that is what they fled.<sup>277</sup> In Šābūr's case, Yazdgird seems to have desperately sought to save the man he condemned to death, for he sent the martyr's best friend to try and convince him to recant and spare his own life.<sup>278</sup> Finally, in the martyrdom of 'Abda, we find Yazdgird almost surprised to hear from his court nobles and Magi that the Christians are behaving badly. Before

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<sup>273</sup> Theophanes 82-3 [AM 5906]. Note that he misplaces the event to AD 413/14.

<sup>274</sup> *The Martyrdom of Narseh* 10-13 (Herman [2016: 8-10]).

<sup>275</sup> *The Martyrdom of Narseh* 16 (Herman [2016: 16]).

<sup>276</sup> *The Martyrdom of Tātāq* 7 (Herman [2016: 32/33]).

<sup>277</sup> *The Ten Martyrs From Bēth Garmai* 2-3 (Herman [2016: 36-40]).

<sup>278</sup> *The Martyrdom of Šābūr* 4-9 (Herman [2016: 46-49]).

reacting to this news, he sought to verify its truthfulness and asked the rest of his nobles to confirm the reports, which they did.<sup>279</sup> Although we expect ‘Abda’s actions to have been the spark of the persecution, what is described as the reprisals seems to have been more akin to a suppression, or punishment of the religious movement rather than an outright persecution; i.e. a reaction rather than an initiative.

The author, Abgar, describes the command to persecute as ordering that “churches and monasteries should be uprooted, the divine service therein abolished, and the priests and leaders seized and brought to the royal court” to answer for the crimes committed by their community.<sup>280</sup> The majority of Christians were not to be imprisoned, nor executed, nor hunted down, nor forced to recant according to this account. The first batch to be brought in was ‘Abda and his group, who had obviously committed a crime, perhaps the one that caught the attention of the court in the first place. When Yazdgird addressed the men, he first spoke of their conversion from Zoroastrianism and the mismanagement of their flock, ending his inquiry with the destruction of the temple. The focus was more on why they abandoned their ancestral faith and damaged their Iranian inheritance. Even when Hasho admitted to the affair, Yazdgird did not immediately order their execution. The text cuts off at this point, leaving us only able to assume that the conversation with the Shah continued for some time until the group was offered the typical ultimatums either to recant or die, or rebuild the fire or die. If we are to believe Theodoret’s account, ‘Abda was executed for his crime, and probably so were those in his entourage.

Unusual is the treatment of the Magi in these martyrdoms. Although they are called names like “that evil one”<sup>281</sup> or “evil and sinful; impure”<sup>282</sup> and generally presented as liars and zealously pursuing the oppression of Christians, their actions on the other hand are quite moderate. This results in a dissonance when it comes to their representation within the martyr acts. Considering what we know to have been occurring in Iran at that time, one would suspect the Magi to have acted more aggressively and zealously against the Christians and less loyally to Yazdgird, unless of course the Shah had succeeded in subjugating them. Instead, the Magi here simply act as agents for the Shah by abiding by his authority and mimicking his lenient demeanour. In the martyr acts of Narseh and ‘Abda, the Magi first express their concerns to the

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<sup>279</sup> *The Confession of the Blessed Mār ‘Abda* 3 (Herman [2016: 54/55]).

<sup>280</sup> *The Confession of the Blessed Mār ‘Abda* 3 (Herman [2016: 54/55]).

<sup>281</sup> *The Martyrdom of Narseh* 13 (Herman [2016: 10/11]): Adurboze: ܙܥܡܠܐ.

<sup>282</sup> *The Ten Martyrs From Bēth Garmai* 1, 4 (Herman [2016: 36/37, 40/41]) Mihr-Shapur: ܙܥܡܠܐ - ܚܘܠܐ - ܚܘܠܐ.

Shah, while in those of Tātāq and the Ten from Bēth Garmai they act as judges on his behalf and report back once their interrogations were complete. It is in fact Yazdgird who passes the final judgement in all four martyr acts, with only Šābūr being sent for execution by his judge Gushnasp. In ‘Abda’s martyr act, the Magi are called liars by the author, but are then ironically proven to have spoken the truth about the destruction of the fire temple. When compared to ‘Abda who lied to Yazdgird, the Zoroastrian priests come out as quite loyal, trustworthy and just servants. The Zoroastrian priesthood’s anxieties that the Christians were disobeying the law and the Shah, as well as destroying temples and converting the Iranian nobility are also clear and almost vindicated in these instances. Another specific instance of Magian lenience is found in the descriptions of Mihr-Shapur, the magus involved in the martyrdom of Tātāq and the Ten from Bēth Garmai. In both cases, Mihr-Shapur used the same technique of taking a more compassionate demeanour when the prosecuted refused to co-operate, proclaiming that he could put in a good word for them with the shah and have their crimes absolved. With the Ten from Bēth Garmai, he even tried to figure out why they craved to die so much, believing that the men may have been fleeing debts, which he in turn offered to settle. He also offered more than once the typical ultimatum before returning to Yazdgird who passed the final judgements.<sup>283</sup>

Throughout both accounts presented in this section, the Shah and his agents are consistently portrayed as loyal to the law but nevertheless eager to bend it in order to preserve the lives of those convicted at court. They are shown as restrained in their interrogations and punishments, hoping to sway the will of the prosecuted. Countless chances are given, with some like Narseh being offered an outright pardon for their crimes. Though these cases are interpreted here as examples of tolerance from the Sasanian government, they can easily be seen as typical episodes in martyrologies designed to show the determination of the martyrs in the face of even the most tempting of situations. Although the Syriac martyr acts very much adhere to the literary genre of hagiographical martyr acts and thus include many *topoi*, there is a fundamental difference between these newer martyr acts and those from the Roman West.<sup>284</sup> The Christians under Roman persecution happened to be targeted by universal laws aimed at stabilizing the empire. These situations have led many, as mentioned earlier, to consider the early Christians not

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<sup>283</sup> Christensen (1944: 300-1) attributes Iranian supreme judiciary power to the shah.

<sup>284</sup> For more on martyrs, martyrologies and martyrological *topoi*, see Moss (2013: Introduction and Chapters One and Two, Six and Seven), Delehayé (1962: Chapters One to Three, and Seven), Gaddis (2005: Chapter Five), Castelli (2004: Chapters One and Two) and Middleton (2006: Introduction and Chapters One to Five).

to have suffered persecution. As will be seen later in this chapter, the martyrs executed under Yazdgird I either attacked Zoroastrian fire temples, or were in some way implicated in the conversion of the Iranian upper classes. It must also be kept in mind that the dating of the martyr acts remains debated; the latest of the texts is attributed to 438-457. Despite these potential issues concerning *topoi* and dating, the lenient attitude of the authorities stands out, even in Theodoret's account which does not overtly take the form of a martyrology. Let us not take this as definitive proof that Yazdgird did not persecute the Christians. Instead, we shall proceed to add to our analysis a final positive perspective, which is to be teased out from the sources in a counter-intuitive manner.

### **Condemned or Redeemed?**

For obvious reasons, most extant sources on Yazdgird's interactions with the Christians of his realm come from Christian authors. This inevitably skews the information and forces us to adopt a distinctly Christian perspective of the matters at hand. Although the sources in this case do provide seemingly conflicting accounts, which enhances the variety of perspective, the pervasive Christian sentiment is still present. Let us turn then to al-Tabari's and Firdowsi's works, for they are distinctly written within the Irano-Arab traditions and are not by Christian authors. Although these sources do not discuss Yazdgird's involvement with the Christians, they do allow for a perspective on his relations with the Magi and nobility of Iran. Other Christian sources will be included in the study, though as support for the two in question. Yazdgird's commitment to Rome and Christianity inevitably was seen in a bad light by many in his court and it is this seam that will be exploited for more proof that Yazdgird did not persecute the Christians of his realm.

It has been discussed in Chapter One how the Shah's patronage of Christianity and rapprochement with its hierarchy was an explicit project to distance himself from the traditional castes who had previously controlled the government. In Chapter Two, we saw how such an endeavour not only alienated the Magi and nobility from a political perspective, but also put Yazdgird at risk of being perceived as breaking the divine mandate handed down to him from the Kayanids. Ironically, as we will see later in this chapter, Yazdgird may have believed that his patronage of Christianity was in fact part of the Kayanid project to restore order to the universe. In exploring Yazdgird's involvement in the alleged persecution, Herman puts forth a theory

(which he immediately debunks) that the Shah may have pursued a last-minute persecution as a terminal effort to redeem himself in the eyes of his clergy and nobility.<sup>285</sup> If Yazdgird sought to redeem himself in the eyes of the traditional aristocracy, he would have first had to agree that he needed redemption in the first place.

The idea that he sought to restore his reputation in the eyes of those who despised him in the last months is easily dismissed if we look at the sources; there are absolutely no signs that he would have changed policy for this reason. The *Lives of Marutha* all tell us of the various plots in which the Magi engaged, ranging from discrediting Yazdgird or the Christians at court, to outright plotting the Shah's murder. As previously discussed, these anecdotes probably reflect the political turmoil in the Iranian court caused by the attention paid to the Christians by Yazdgird, and the neglect and harsh punishment of the Magi and nobility. The *Shahnama*, al-Tabari and the *Chronicle of Seert* all address these issues directly, referring to him as a tyrant, the Sinner and the Impious respectively.<sup>286</sup> The last of these is of course from a Christian perspective, but remains the only Christian source to label him as so, which probably reflects the Irano-Arab environment within which the *Chronicle of Seert* was compiled and composed.<sup>287</sup>

The *Shahnama* directly speaks to the feeling that Yazdgird had abandoned his royal obligations to the noble and priestly classes, refusing to take advice from them.<sup>288</sup> Al-Tabari's description complements this, stating that Yazdgird was quick to punish for minor offenses, was generally distrustful of his own people and listened more to foreign ambassadors.<sup>289</sup> Both these accounts use a mythological narrative involving a heavenly horse to tell us of Yazdgird's death.<sup>290</sup> As previously discussed, this was most likely propaganda that sought to cover up the actual murder of Yazdgird. We know now that it was the subsequent murder of his actual heir Shapur that prompted Bahram V to return from his guardianship among the Arabs. The

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<sup>285</sup> Herman (2014: 77) expects that there would have been some recognition for such a redemption if it had occurred, though there is none.

<sup>286</sup> *Shahnama* XXXIV.1 "both love and justice ceased within his heart..." (tr. Warner, A.G. and Warner, E.). See also al-Tabari 847/70, *Chronicle of Seert* 204/316 (LXV). See also the early-tenth and late-ninth century Arabic sources of Hamza and Ya'qubi (Hoyland [2018: 68, 112]) who respectively call Yazdgird "[...] the Criminal, the Sinner and also the Ruffian, and in Persian the Outcast and the Sinner [...]" and "[...] boorish, crude, presumptuous, ill-behaved and endowed with little good and much evil."

<sup>287</sup> Wood (2013: 3) suggests that although the *Chronicle* was composed in the late tenth century in Arabic, it was heavily based on the fifth century 'patriarchal history.'

<sup>288</sup> *Shahnama* XXXIV.1.

<sup>289</sup> al-Tabari 848/71. These ambassadors probably refer to Marutha and Acacius. Ya'qubi (Hoyland [2018: 112]) also reports the harsh punishment suffered by the Iranians at hands of Yazdgird.

<sup>290</sup> *Shahnama* XXXIV.7, al-Tabari 849-50/73 and also Ya'qubi (Hoyland [2018: 112]). As in Chapter Two: 52 n.197, see Shahbazi (2003) for a complete study on Yazdgird's death.

*Shahnama* and al-Tabari in fact tell us that after Yazdgird's death, a coalition was formed that swore to never allow another descendant of Yazdgird to assume the throne, proof that he did not redeem himself by persecuting Christians.<sup>291</sup> Working in conjunction with these accounts is the *Chronicle of Seert*, which outlines how Yazdgird executed those nobles who had killed his predecessors upon acceding to the throne. We are also told that he was fearful of his subjects and that he strengthened his authority in order to counter those fears.<sup>292</sup>

The author of the *Chronicle* was well aware that the Magi felt mistreated by their king and despised him for that. It is reported that the demons that were being kept at bay by the prayers of the *catholicoi* ended up killing Yazdgird.<sup>293</sup> This occurred after the Shah exiled the incumbent *Catholicos* Ma'na for treason. This story in the *Chronicle of Seert* almost admits that the Magi murdered the Shah after his influence with the Christians waned.<sup>294</sup> We are then told that when Bahram succeeded his father, the Zoroastrian priesthood was afraid he would continue his father's policies, but instead he engaged in persecuting Christianity, which brought great relief to them.<sup>295</sup> What these Irano-Arab sources tell us is that Yazdgird was remembered almost as a persecutor of his own people, although, because this concept was not part of the Iranian literary language and identity, it did not exhibit itself as such. Imagery of "persecution" was rather found within the Christian traditions and proved to be of considerable importance for the creation of the East Syrian Christian identity.

### **Concrete Conclusions?**

Through their portrayals of Yazdgird as a friend to the Christians, a just judge and an enemy of Iran, the sources examined in the previous three sections establish a foundation upon which we can build when investigating the negative perspectives of the shah. In fact, no source is entirely negative in its representation of him. What the previous section has proven for now is that it would have been unlikely for Yazdgird to turn on the Christians for both external and internal political reasons. First and foremost, the chronology in relation to the Council of Mar

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<sup>291</sup> *Shahnama* XXXIV.8 and al-Tabari 858/86.

<sup>292</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 204/316 (LXV).

<sup>293</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 219/331 (LXXIV).

<sup>294</sup> We are told in the text of the Council of Mar Dadisho that the church had descended into chaos after the death of the *Catholicos* Yahbalaha. See *Synodicon Orientale* 44-6/287-9 for Dadisho's retelling of the tumultuous times. Perhaps it was this chaos among the churchmen that gave the Magi and Persian nobility the opening they needed to end Yazdgird's life.

<sup>295</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 220/332 (LXXIV).

Yahbalaha renders a persecution unlikely to have occurred within the lifetime of Yazdgird. The council took place sometime in the middle of 420, leaving very little time for a persecution to break out in Iran before the death of Yazdgird later that same year. From another perspective, we must acknowledge that the Shah had committed much energy and many resources to his various Christian projects throughout his reign. He had become so reliant on the Church hierarchy for managing his empire and keeping those who plotted against him in check that it would make no sense for him to turn around and engage in a general persecution of their flock. He also relied on the positive relations with the Christians of his realm to help maintain peace with Rome. Instead, he seems to have only enforced the law on the specific individuals who broke it.

When looking at the sources that provide some detail on actual martyrdoms, Yazdgird and his agents are portrayed as exceptionally lenient, almost begging those convicted to comply and receive a pardon. Even a last-minute redemption by the Shah is disproved by the fact that he actively opposed powerful Magi and nobility, and as seen in the Irano-Arab sources, he was indeed remembered in quite a negative fashion by those groups.<sup>296</sup> Despite this evidence, our conclusion remains incomplete until the remainder of the chosen corpus is completely scrutinized. For now, the focus has been on the sources that did not portray Yazdgird as a persecutor of Christians. It is thus no surprise that the conclusion of such a study would render positive results. Only by following through with the complete view of the sources that blame Yazdgird for persecuting Christianity can we reach a full denouement of the topic at hand.

### **Negative Notions**

In this section, three of the earliest accounts on Yazdgird's persecution will be examined. These include the accounts of Augustine, Quodvultdeus and a return to Theodoret, while the subsequent section will be dedicated completely to the martyr acts. Let us begin in the West, with the accounts of Augustine and Quodvultdeus. Both composed their works in North Africa, and therefore from an even more western locale than any other author who wrote on Yazdgird, though perhaps the closest chronologically to the events described. Writing in 426, Augustine must have caught wind of the recently concluded war in the East in order to include it as part of

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<sup>296</sup> Herman (2014: 77) notes that would not a last minute penitence at least found some recognition if it happened?

his list of the many persecutions Christians had suffered over the centuries.<sup>297</sup> He does not provide any detail whatsoever, with the entire affair glossed over as an entry in his record. Quodvultdeus similarly reports persecution in Iran, but also of Armenian refugees fleeing to Roman territories. He misidentified the affair as occurring during the reign of Arcadius, thus during Yazdgird's in Iran as well. Whether or not he intentionally meant to implicate Yazdgird in the persecutions and the outbreak of war, we cannot know, but unless he is talking of an earlier persecution, which we will discuss later, we should assume that the events he described occurred during the reign of Theodosius II. Considering he believed the entire affair to have occurred prior to 408, that being the death of Arcadius, we can only assume Quodvultdeus was even ignorant of the monarch ruling Iran. The information provided by these two authors is naturally vague and general, since they were geographically disconnected from these affairs and apparently paid no great attention to events occurring so far away in Iran. A simple mention of persecution and an influx of refugees from Iran seems to have sufficed for inclusion in their works, which were not of a historical nature, but rather theological or philosophical. Other than the anomaly concerning the Armenians, the accounts of Quodvultdeus and Augustine tell us little other than what sort of reports reached the West, those being of a persecution and refugee crisis.

Writing some years later and from much closer to the action, Theodoret appears to have had access to Syriac sources for his account on the persecutions. Unlike Socrates who most definitely used the original *Syriac Life of Marutha* as a basis for his positive portrayal of Yazdgird, Theodoret instead utilized the martyr act of 'Abda.<sup>298</sup> As seen in the previous chapter, he recounts the Syriac martyrdom of the bishop in question, although he omits many details like Hasho's admittance to destroying the fire temple.<sup>299</sup> This crime is then reported as being the single cause for the general persecution that ensued for thirty years across the reigns of Yazdgird I, Bahram V and Yazdgird II. Despite the exceptional length of his description of the persecutions, Theodoret provided only three specific "martyr acts" among the many "cruelties" suffered by the Christians, presumably to maintain a more concise narrative. The first two

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<sup>297</sup> Augustine of Hippo *De Civitate Dei* XVIII.52 and Quodvultdeus *Liber Promissorum* III.34.36 (Greatrex and Lieu [2002: 37]).

<sup>298</sup> See McDonough's (2008a: 141) diagram for a clear picture on how the Christian sources are interconnected. I have provided the exact diagram in Annex B for reference.

<sup>299</sup> i.e. The Bishop 'Abda. Perhaps this is the same 'Abda mentioned by Socrates *HE* VII.8.18 who helped Marutha exorcise Yazdgird's son.

mentioned concern a certain Hormisdas who was of Achaemenid descent,<sup>300</sup> and Suenes, a rich slave owner. The accounts directly speak to the issues concerning the conversion of the Iranian upper classes. In fact, though Theodoret labels them as martyrs, it is not explicitly stated that either of them was executed, but rather they suffered the punishment of having their fortunes reversed.<sup>301</sup>

These punishments contrast with the treatment received by the third described martyr, the deacon Benjamin. For his crime of proselytising to the Magi he was imprisoned, though a Roman diplomat<sup>302</sup> eventually negotiated his release. Once free, the deacon returned to his old habits, and was subsequently executed. Curiously, these three examples are not particularly cruel, and barely match the savage acts Theodoret described prior to delving into these longer accounts.<sup>303</sup> These stories either coincidentally or purposely reflect what may have really occurred in Iran since the four stories described, be they true or not, relay the only documented reasons for punishment in early-fifth century Sassanian Iran: the destruction of fire temples and the conversion of the Iranian upper classes. Theodoret also passes judgement on ‘Abda’s overly zealous actions, calling them “inopportune” and outright wrong.<sup>304</sup> Although he commends the Bishop for his many virtues and for refusing to rebuild the temple, he clearly blames ‘Abda and his intolerant actions for sparking the persecution in Iran. As will be seen in the next section, the martyr acts sought to criticise Christian misconduct in Iran, and again specified proselytising to the nobility and destruction of fire temples as that misconduct. We can only assume then that Theodoret derived his information from the East since his accounts reflect the concerns and thoughts of East Syrian Christians, or of the monk Abgar to say the least. He nevertheless

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<sup>300</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two: 48, this “Achaemenid” descent probably reflected his high nobility, reinforced by Theodoret saying he was the son of a Prefect. Hormisdas was thus probably a member of the seven great families of Iran.

<sup>301</sup> The noble Hormisdas was stripped of his rank and expensive clothing and sent to work as a camel herder while the slave owner Suenes was reduced to slavery, with one of his own slaves becoming the master and appropriating his wife. See Theodoret *HE* V.41.12-17.

<sup>302</sup> Some believe this diplomat to have been Acacius on his second embassy to Iran in 422, where he negotiated peace with Iran, returned the Iranian captives for whom he paid the ransom, and possibly negotiated the release of not only Benjamin, but the *Catholicos* Dadisho too. This last part is alluded in the text of the Council of Mar Dadisho. See Smith, K. (Forthcoming: Introduction n.11), Sako (1986: 80) and Blockley (1992: 58).

<sup>303</sup> « [...] ils ont écorché les mains, aux autres le dos. Ils en ont scalpé d’autres depuis le front jusqu’à la nuque. Ils enveloppaient d’autres dans des tiges creuses fendues en deux; ils appliquaient sur les corps les arêtes vives [...etc...] » Theodoret V.41.8 (tr. P. Canivet).

<sup>304</sup> Theodoret V.41.3-4 “[...] οὐκ εἰς καιρόν [...]” (tr. George Amantidis-Saadé). « À mon avis, la destruction du pyrée n’était pas opportune. » (tr. P. Canivet).

commented on the accounts received from Iran, condemning 'Abda's act, nearly justifying Sasanian reprisal against him.

These elements when combined with those discussed earlier come together to indicate one thing: that Theodoret consciously wrote a more ambiguous narrative of what occurred in Iran. From the reports at his disposal, he could at least tell that the fault for the punishments and persecution suffered by the Christians lay in their overzealous acts, which in turn disrupted the status quo in Iran, aggravating the Magi who then used their influence to punish the dissidents. Although he openly disagreed with 'Abda's actions, and was horrified at the thought of Christians being persecuted in Iran, it seems that he could not get his hands on actual accounts of any martyrs executed simply for being Christian. Hormisdas and Suenes were in no way described as suffering execution and may thus lose their status as martyrs, while Benjamin was given a chance to live as long as he stopped proselytising to the Magi, which he did not. With this last tale Theodoret highlights another Christian who, just like 'Abda, took deliberate action against the Sasanian government and suffered the consequences. Although he reports the outbreak of a general persecution lasting for thirty years, Theodoret's account does not reflect such a dramatic scenario in any way whatsoever. He in fact describes the affair as a storm, as difficulties, and as violent and savage waves. Through the various and exaggerated examples, it can be understood that a multitude of punishments were meted out, though perhaps not as gruesome as Theodoret made them out to be.

### **The Martyr Acts**

We find an equally tepid and ambiguous description of Yazdgird and his persecution in the martyr acts reported as having taken place under his reign. In Herman's edition five acts are translated, most dated exceptionally close in time to the described events. The position held by these sources is a precarious one, since these five independent instances of martyrdom may both be representative of a general persecution, or disprove the entire affair. Let us begin by examining then what reasons are presented in these texts as instigating government action against Christians. The same two identified in Theodoret's account return in these: the destruction or vandalism of fire temples and the conversion of the Iranian upper classes. McDonough has interpreted the martyrologies as efforts to explain or lessen the gravity of Yazdgird's role in the persecutions, highlighting the pressures from the Magi and the obstinacy

of the Christian martyrs.<sup>305</sup> Herman on the other hand believes ‘Abda’s martyr act (the last act presented in his new edition) to be separate from Abgar’s works, and suggests that it might have been in fact translated from the Greek within a Roman context.<sup>306</sup> In support of this claim, he contrasts Narseh’s and ‘Abda’s temple destruction narratives, arguing that the first is apologetic and highlights the nuanced nature of the misunderstanding, while the latter is a text considerably more hostile and unapologetic.<sup>307</sup>

Ultimately Herman proposes that the acts of ‘Abda could have been part of the Christian Roman discourse that sought to make sense of the change in religious policy in Iran.<sup>308</sup> By the time Theodoret wrote his work, twenty years had passed since Yazdgird’s reign. A new political reality had emerged where toleration of Christianity had disappeared, at least temporarily. Within that context, Herman sees the martyr acts, especially that of ‘Abda, as trying to figure out who was responsible for the degeneration of relations between the Sasanian state and Christianity in Iran as well as how and why it occurred.<sup>309</sup> If the texts were indeed using the platform of martyrologies to explore the reasons for the change in Sasanian religious policy, then we can trust the conclusion put forth by them while ignoring the historicity of their details. Such a line of thought leads us to a more conceptual reading of the martyr acts, where the reasons behind their composition are the focus rather than the acts themselves. It is thus informative of the situation in Iran during the religious and political turmoil of Yazdgird’s final year, and nevertheless

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<sup>305</sup> McDonough (2008a: 133) adds that Yazdgird is portrayed as the voice of reason who ordered the ultimate penalty only when provided with no other choice by the outrage of the Magi and the obstinacy of the Christian martyrs. I see things slightly differently concerning these details; the Magi’s outrage seems to be assumed by McDonough as zeal, though I believe it was probably driven by genuine alarm. As we have seen previously, noble conversion and temple destruction severely endangered the political, social and economic aspects of Iran.

<sup>306</sup> Herman (2014: 86) bases his conclusion on the use of generalities in talking about the fire rites (which were detailed in Narseh’s act), and the employment of Syriac words derived from Greek. This indicates to Herman that the text was either translated from Greek or at least composed in a community comfortable with the language. He suggests that the act of ‘Abda is most probably “an artificial literary piece based on some kind of tradition” and that its presence in Theodoret’s account “does not confirm the historicity of [the] event since both are distant and vague.”

<sup>307</sup> Herman (2014: 88).

<sup>308</sup> According to Herman (2014: 89), ‘Abda’s act could have been a Roman philosophical exercise in pondering the subject of pagan temple destruction through the example of Persia. This would have been relevant at the time, when ambiguous Roman legislation concerning the control, destruction and reuse of pagan temples was being passed. Under these circumstances, many still debated on how to treat the ancient pagan buildings. Eventually in 435, legislation was passed legalizing the destruction of sanctuaries (*CT XVI.10.25*). Smith (2016: 151) points out how the topic of temple destruction is recurrent in Syriac martyrologies, such as the *History of the Holy Mar Ma’in*. He concludes that because these narratives were consistently influenced by both eastern and western events we cannot determine with certainty that they clearly reflected Iranian Christian thought. Smith also highlights how Michael Gaddis’s (2005: 196–98) conclusion opposes Herman’s by suggesting that Syriac martyrdom narratives may demonstrate the flow of anti-pagan thought and violence into Iran from Rome.

<sup>309</sup> Herman (2014: 89).

emphasizes noble conversion and temple destruction as the primary causes for hostile treatment by the Iranian government.

From a different perspective, Wood suggests that these accounts tell of a deeper conflict, one to be understood through the East Syrian Church councils held in Iran.<sup>310</sup> The canons of the Council of Mar Ishaq represented an unregulated Church, divided by dishonest, illiterate and corrupt clergy. Wood calls Ishaq's Council a "coup" which allowed for him and his allies to effectively claim the courtly authority offered by the Shah and to exclude their opponents.<sup>311</sup> Taking the political situation of the time into account, he claims that Abgar was a proponent of this "official" East Syrian Church and wrote cautionary tales for all Christians who remained loyal to the Shah.<sup>312</sup> The act of 'Abda on the other hands would have been part of the dissident tradition that was spawned at the time of the Council of Mar Ishaq. He proposes that 'Abda's story was a reflection of a wider sentiment that opposed the inclusion of high-ranking clergy within the system of government patronage; in other words, it was an outright rejection of the invitation for Christian inclusion in the political framework proposed by Yazdgird.<sup>313</sup> The author of that martyr act would have thus been advocating more violent attacks on Zoroastrian temples. In contrast, he believes Abgar's martyrologies were loyalist towards the Shah, and supportive of the *Catholicos*. Those texts instead admit that Yazdgird's authority comes from God, and articulate the conditions for just rule by him.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Wood (2013: 34).

<sup>311</sup> Wood (2013: 31).

<sup>312</sup> Wood (2013: 46). See Van Rompay (1972: 372-3) for his note on how the Syriac hagiographies, especially those by Abgar, are steeped in a discourse of loyalty and obedience to the shah. Wood (2013: 47) warns of applying this loyalist view too broadly. He also comments that Abgar perhaps sought to drive a wedge between the Shah and the Magi in his accounts, making a clear difference between the two and highlighting how the latter more doggedly pursued the punishment of Christians. It has been previously discussed in this thesis how the Magi in the martyr acts seem especially loyal to their monarch and take no liberties in their pursuit of "justice." They seem to have been represented as simple agents of the law which included the unfortunate job of interrogating those convicted of crimes. No one was free of corporal punishment or torture in Iranian society, hence the violent treatment received by the Christians under interrogation would be in no way unique or directed to a specific religious group.

<sup>313</sup> Wood (2013: 42). I also see it as a rejection of their inclusion in the Kayanid project of the universal restoration of order. Payne goes into great detail on such a perspective in his book "A State of Mixture." More on this at the end of the chapter.

<sup>314</sup> Wood (2013: 46). He uses the martyr act of Jacob the notary as example of this. Although he was martyred under Bahram, he stated to the Shah that he should be careful in his treatment of the Christians lest he lose God's favor like his father Yazdgird, who was smitten by God through the heavenly horse. It is interesting how Abgar knew of the Iranian mythological tradition surrounding Yazdgird's death, using it for Christian purposes rather than the original Zoroastrian connotations. He asserts that it was Yazdgird's violence against Christians that caused his death rather than the hostile treatment of the traditional aristocratic groups.

Labourt takes both the acts of Narseh and of ‘Abda at face value, and suggests that we place the former as occurring alongside the latter, though in different locations and some days later, but nevertheless contributing to the ensuing persecution.<sup>315</sup> He even believes that Yazdgird passed a law of persecution, but died before putting it in place.<sup>316</sup> Although the various interpretations of the martyr acts do not directly conflict with one another, being different perspectives rather than opposing ones, Wood’s interpretation is the most detailed and most plausible. Despite awareness among scholars of the dissent found in the East Syrian Church at the time of the Council of Mar Ishaq (410) up to that of Mar Dadisho (424), no link has been drawn between the rebellious churchmen and the martyr acts or the persecution implied in them. The ideas put forth by Wood thus address the still fractured state of the Church as well as Yazdgird’s struggle in maintaining Church order as outlined in the Council of Mar Ishaq as being his responsibility.

Let us then re-examine the martyr acts through the lens of these dissenters. The first act in Herman’s edition is that of Narseh. His execution originated in a complete misunderstanding regarding the ownership of the plot of land on which a church was built. Although the Christians here were in fact in the right (for a certain priest Shapur held the deed of ownership), and despite Narseh’s violent reaction to the conversion of the church, his punishment was exceptionally lenient, with Yazdgird even offering the monk a pardon after his imprisonment and subsequent bail. A similar crime is presented in ‘Abda’s act, though the Christians in that martyrdom are considerably more aggressive and unapologetic. The Bishop ‘Abda first denied the entire affair (something that Narseh refused to do even in exchange for his life), while the priest Hasho intervened and arrogantly admitted to the group’s crime. Although the martyrdoms of Narseh and ‘Abda both present temple destruction as prompting Sasanian reprisals, the accounts do so very differently, most probably because of the difference in author. Narseh’s martyr act is believed to have been written by the aforementioned Abgar. Herman judges this account to be distinctly more in tune with the Sasanian world, with its clear embarrassment over the entire affair and near apologetic nature; he even proposes that the text was but a cautionary tale wrapped in the trappings of a martyr act.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Labourt (1904: 109).

<sup>316</sup> Labourt (1904: 109) defines the “persecution” as really just the targeting of individual cases and a general increase in intolerance of misdemeanours. It is based on this that he claims Yazdgird “persecuted.”

<sup>317</sup> Herman (2016: XXV).

The only other grounds for persecution given in the martyr acts under Yazdgird I is that of the conversion of the nobility. Since the accounts relating to this have already been explored in some detail in the previous chapter, I will only go over the main points without explanation. In Narseh's narrative, the magus Adurboze was anxious about the conversion of the nobility and upper classes, a concern which he brings directly to the Shah's attention. Tātāq is described as being of exceptionally high rank, and thus of high nobility, and as having abandoned his post to go live in a monastery. The ten martyrs from Bēth Garmai were noble lay people who were brought before the magus Mihr-Shapur. In Šābūr's narrative, the best friend of the martyr is described as a subordinate to the Shah, presumably he was employed in the higher echelons of the government, and therefore a noble. Šābūr's closeness to a noble may imply his own nobility, and consequently provide us with the missing reason for his detention and execution. Finally, in 'Abda's story, the Bishop and his group are all brought in before the Shah, who first asked why they abandoned their ancestral faith. Although they destroyed a fire temple, the shah is foremost concerned with their original abandonment of the Zoroastrian faith, an issue previously explained as problematic only when the nobility was involved.

In these ways, the five Syriac martyr acts parallel Theodoret's ambiguous descriptions, or perhaps more plausibly, Theodoret's account mimics those of the martyr acts. They tell us again of temple destruction incurring punishment at the hands of the government, and of various Iranian nobles abandoning their Zoroastrian heritage and even their secular posts. Looking back to the previous section, we find both Yazdgird and the Magi recruited as judges for the cases almost beg those convicted to co-operate and thus spare their lives. Countless chances are given to the martyrs; they are even offered a variety of excuses that would exonerate them. None are outright convicted and executed without a trial and opportunities to explain themselves. One martyr is even offered a *carte blanche* if only he would deny he committed the crime. The Magi and nobility of Iran are primarily shown to be concerned with and anxious about the social impact of Christian religious activity. No figure of authority is shown to be either zealous or thirsty for the blood of the Christians, and even when the martyrdom of 'Abda is treated as sparking the persecution, it is explicit that the ensuing government retaliation in fact targeted the hierarchy of the Church, or even just individual cases rather than the general population.<sup>318s</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Labourt (1904: 109).

When looking at the complete picture of the martyr acts, a general persecution seems not to have occurred at all.<sup>319</sup> We have seen in the previous chapter how the conversion of the Iranian aristocracy fundamentally threatened to upset the balance of society in Iran, and proved to be of great concern to the upper classes, including the Shah. Payne argues that Yazdgird must have had no idea about Christian ideology, and was perhaps naive to disregard the universal and missionary aspects of their religion.<sup>320</sup> In these accounts, it is clear that Yazdgird did not want to punish the Christians that he patronized and protected. He was given no choice when they engaged in violence against the state religion by destroying fire temples, snuffing out sacred fires, refusing to re-ignite the fires, and outright lied to his face that they did not commit such a crime. The sources tell us also of high-ranking government officials abandoning their posts after converting to Christianity, or of Christian churchmen converting the Iranian nobility, conscious of the effects but refusing to back down. With this information in hand, it seems implausible that a real general persecution broke out. Instead, the sources tell the story of government reprisals against those who broke the law by attacking temples, abandoning their posts and proselytizing to the Iranian nobility. In all cases, those prosecuted refused to co-operate with the lenient but just demands of the government and instead faced death for refusing the Shah's commands.

The punishment of the various martyrs at the hands of Yazdgird might be thus understood through the following clause from the Council of Mar Ishaq's canons: that any who would resist the *Catholicos*' will would answer to the Sasanian authorities, who in turn would inform the Shah about the situation, and issue due punishment.<sup>321</sup> The Council of Mar Ishaq had as a goal to organize the chaotic East Syrian Church by trying to solve a variety of issues, among which were the general misbehaviour of the flock, as well as the proclamation of multiple bishops per city. Obviously, Yazdgird sought to incorporate the Christian community more officially into his empire by acknowledging and supporting both their existence and organization in a fashion which suited his government. If some Christians had continued to misbehave between 410 and 420, it would make sense that Yazdgird saw it necessary to call a second council during a time of heightened religious tensions in the hopes of re-establishing order by reiterating his support for

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<sup>319</sup>See Devos's article (1965) for his explanation on the "Abgarian Cycle" where he identifies two separate rounds of persecution within all of Abgar's corpus (this includes a later martyr act, that of Jacob the Notary). Herman (2014: 84-5) in fact disagrees with Devos' claim purely on chronology, stating that separate persecution periods would indicate a time of peace between them. This would mean that Yazdgird would have had to begin and end a general persecution within the last six or so months of his reign, which, in Herman's opinion is outright impossible.

<sup>320</sup> Payne (2016a: 217).

<sup>321</sup> *Synodicon Orientale* 21/260-1.

the Church, and to re-address the dissent seemingly prevalent in the Church. The martyrs portrayed in the sources were clearly acting in disaccord with what had been agreed in the Council of Mar Ishaq. They overtly crossed the line in proselytising to the Iranian noble classes, and in attacking Zoroastrian fire temples. The two named officers implicated in enforcing the will of the government and of the catholicoi were Khusrow-Yazdgird, the Grand Vizier, and none other than Mihr-Shapur, the Chief of Staff, whom we have already seen acting out his duties in the martyr acts of Tātāq and the Ten of Bēth Garmai.<sup>322</sup> These men were also of exceptionally high rank, which indicates to us the great importance of enforcing order within the East Syrian Church for Yazdgird.

Note again that these martyr acts included a great many *topoi*, the most obvious being the courtroom case sequence which many featured. As stated earlier, even though literary tropes exist in the accounts, historical realities are nevertheless present. The martyrs and authors of the martyr acts were not foreigners to Iran, but were most probably Iranian in origin. They lived in an Iranian society and were not an isolated community especially after Yazdgird began to integrate their upper classes into his court. The Christians were thus probably aware of Zoroastrian ideological thought, and understood the repercussions of attacking their temples and proselytising to their priesthood and nobility. This is especially true concerning the nobles who actually converted. Tātāq, for example, must have been well aware of the consequences of abandoning his post. The dangers of defying the Shah and the state were clear. This context works well with Wood's theory that the acts describe those who were sidelined by the East Syrian Church councils or those who disagreed with the Church's new association with the heathen Shah. The martyr acts must have been a simultaneous attempt by the official Church to warn their ranks of how not to act, and to recover the dissenters as martyrs for its own narrative.<sup>323</sup> Although the mystery may seem to have been unravelled, it has not yet reached its complete conclusion.

### **An Early Persecution**

Before moving on to scour the more relevant later sources for a clearer insight on Yazdgird's reign, an anomaly should be discussed. Only two sources, the *Armenian Life of*

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<sup>322</sup> See Chapter Two: 47 n.162.

<sup>323</sup> See Chapter Three: 77 n.284 above for a bibliography pertaining to martyrs acts and hagiographies.

*Marutha* and the *Chronicle of Seert*, identify a persecution of Christians at the beginning of Yazdgird's reign. The former of these describes how Marutha managed to convince the shah to end this first round of persecutions as a first step to establish friendship with Rome. Persecution was outlawed and those who perpetrated it were punished and those who suffered in it were released. According to the author, many Armenian nobles were freed in this way. The *Chronicle of Seert* outlines a letter sent by Arcadius to Yazdgird in the style of Eusebius' letter of Constantine to Shapur, which renders the account somewhat dubious. On the other hand, it is the freed Armenian nobles from the first source that stand out. By cross-referencing the account with Quodvultdeus' mention of Armenian refugees during Arcadius' time, it can be suggested that there had perhaps been a persecution at the onset of Yazdgird's reign, though not of his own initiative. In fact, the Magi are blamed for such unsanctioned violence. Prior to Yazdgird coming to power, the traditional groups in Iran had accumulated a great amount of influence, and murdered any monarch who stood in their way. The outlawing of such a persecution works perfectly with all of Yazdgird's goals: to curtail the Magi's and nobility's power, to establish an alternative power base among the Christian community and to garner favour with the Roman Empire in order to secure peace with them. There is much more to be said about this topic, especially concerning Armenia, but for the moment we may note that Yazdgird may have not been involved in any persecution at the onset of his reign.<sup>324</sup>

### **The Later Sources**

Theophanes' *Chronographia* and the *Chronicle of Seert* are the last sources to be examined. The two are the latest sources we will be examining, as anything beyond them would have been composed too far chronologically from the events at hand, and would rely on the same sources discussed in this thesis.<sup>325</sup> Theophanes' account follows an amalgam of narratives, including the guardianship of Theodosius II, the efforts of the Iranian guardian Antiochus to fortify relations with Rome, as well as to disseminate Christianity in his homeland, Pulcheria's rise to power, Marutha's miracles and Yazdgird's near conversion to Christianity to say the least. As his chronicle continues, we reach the outbreak of persecutions in Iran, dated to 413/414, though described correctly as during Yazdgird's twentieth year of rule. Probably drawing from

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<sup>324</sup> See Annex 1 for a complete exploration on this topic.

<sup>325</sup> See Annex B for McDonough's (2008a: 141) diagram of the Christian sources and their interconnectivity.

both Socrates and Theodoret, he combines the narratives by stating Yazdgird had almost become Christian because of Marutha's miracles and chastisement of the Magi, but was eventually deceived by the Zoroastrian priesthood into stirring up a great persecution a year prior to his death. The cause for the persecution is seemingly copied from Theodoret, or at least other accounts that drew information from him. 'Abda, here described as the Bishop of the Iranian capital, applied his zeal for God inappropriately and set fire to a fire temple. In response, Yazdgird issued a royal command that churches be destroyed and that 'Abda be punished. According to Theophanes, this persecution lasted five years and made many martyrs. The Magi are reported to have hunted down all those who had escaped notice of the authorities, with some Christians giving themselves up voluntarily. Those caught suffered the ultimate penalty of death. It is reported that many from Yazdgird's court were targeted, while others sought refuge among the Romans. Without a doubt, Theophanes had access to many of the sources already covered. He talks of temple destruction as one of the causes for punishment in Iran, but also indirectly comments on the conversion of the nobility by mentioning that those at Yazdgird's court were especially targeted. He also highlights the Magi's involvement in the persecution, which further distances Yazdgird from the persecutory actions.

The *Chronicle of Seert* provides a unique description of the persecution that ended Yazdgird's reign, but is somewhat inconsistent in its account. In fact the *Chronicle* is perhaps the most confused about Yazdgird, something that McDonough has pointed out as inevitable as a result of the polarizing reports about the Shah from previous centuries.<sup>326</sup> The *Chronicle* covers Yazdgird's reign over multiple chapters, and as we have seen before, it sets up a generally positive portrayal of him. Here we shall focus on Yazdgird's final years as recorded by the source, beginning with Yahbalaha's successful embassy to Rome. According to the *Chronicle*, the *Catholicos* was able to have Theodosius accept all of Yazdgird's demands, which are given no description. Despite such a diplomatic success, we are told that the Shah almost immediately terminated tolerance for Christianity and began a persecution, tasking the general Shapur to destroy churches.<sup>327</sup>

Upon issuing the orders, Yazdgird's headache returned and could not be cured by anyone except Yahbalaha, who convinced the him to stop persecuting and exiling Christians. The

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<sup>326</sup> McDonough (2008a: 133).

<sup>327</sup> Perhaps this is the very same Mihr-Shapur from the text of the Council of Mar Ishaq and the Martyr Acts of Tātāq and the Ten from Bēth Garmai.

*Catholicos* then begged God to kill him before he should see any more Christian blood spilt. His prayers were answered, for Yahbalaha is said to have died just before Yazdgird returned to his persecuting ways. The *Chronicle* tells us that this second wave of persecutions was directly sparked by the destruction of a fire temple, and therefore the extinction of the sacred fire, in Susiana by the priest Hasho. Surprisingly, ‘Abda is not mentioned in relation to this affair, perhaps a deliberate omission by the author since ‘Abda personally denied having participated in such a crime in his martyr act. This time, the criminal is given his own motivation rather than undue zeal. Supposedly the Christians of the region had experienced attacks at the hands of the local Zoroastrian priests, instigating a violent response in return. This new persecution eventually was ended at the behest of the Armenian patriarch Isaac, who spoke in favor of the Christians. Yazdgird seems to have owed the Armenian patriarch a favor for helping him pacify Armenia. The following entry in the *Chronicle of Seert* deals with the death of Yahbalaha, the election of Ma’na, and his subsequent exile from Iran.<sup>328</sup>

According to the *Chronicle*, Yazdgird’s final years were dominated by the Magi’s hatred for him. Supposedly the prayers of the *catholicoi* kept the Magian demons at bay, and when Yahbalaha had died and Ma’na was exiled, these demons finally reached the wretched monarch, killing him with a final headache.<sup>329</sup> What is interesting about the *Chronicle of Seert* is that we are told of two persecutions breaking out within the final months of Yazdgird’s reign rather than one. We know the first one to have occurred during Yahbalaha’s time, though when exactly is unsure and for how long as well. The text seems to indicate that Yahbalaha managed to convince the Shah not to persecute at all, which may coincide with the calling of the Council in 420 as a re-affirmation of loyalty to Yazdgird. Some like Wood suggest that such a chronology was fabricated in order to place the breakdown of the *Catholicosate’s* authority and the atrocious behavior exhibited by some Christians like Hasho as occurring after the favored *Catholicos’*

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<sup>328</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 216-8/328-30 (LXXII). Yazdgird supposedly sought an excuse to persecute Christians and thus taunted Ma’na and his priests by stating that since Caesar is the absolute master in his kingdom, he too is in his own. This eventually provoked a response by Narsai, one of the priests, who retorted that Caesar does not have power over the religion of his people, but only to collect taxes and tribute. Narsai was immediately given the choice to recant Christianity or die, and when Ma’na defended the priest’s statement as not intending to insult the Shah, he had his clothes torn off. Narsai refused to recant and was beheaded, while Ma’na was exiled, though promptly returned to Iran where he was imprisoned, and eventually released. We have but scant sources on Ma’na’s existence, but perhaps the Narsai from this narrative is Narseh from Abgar’s martyr act. Such a situation would place Ma’na’s intervention at the end of Narseh’s journey, meaning that Yazdgird had already given the monk ample chance to completely avoid punishment and would thus have no room for an even more explicit pardon.

<sup>329</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 219-20/331-2 (LXXIV).

death.<sup>330</sup> Nevertheless, the wave of persecution, be it Yazdgird's first or second round, was also ended quickly. In fact, it finished fast enough that there remained more of Yazdgird's reign to tell us about in the *Chronicle*. It is even possible that Patriarch Isaac's intervention was relatively swift, and allowed for the Christians of Sasanian Iran to evade yet another potential persecution.<sup>331</sup> Any unique information reported by the *Chronicle of Seert* conveniently exists to create a clean narrative and chronology, which may very well indicate the topics were added in to simply justify certain occurrences or remove blame from certain individuals. The timing of the events is even more compressed, which indicates their improbability, at least if taken literally. McDonough identifies the *Chronicle* as a product of the "conflicting" narratives about Yazdgird from previous centuries. The difficulty faced by the author was to weld together the views of the shah as a new Constantine, but also a persecutor and Magian puppet, resulting in an image of Yazdgird as a "cipher" through which the fluctuating influential factions executed their wills. The *Chronicle of Seert* is thus a "parable of Christian empowerment under non-Christian rule" and a "cautionary tale for kings and bishops alike."<sup>332</sup>

It is thus established not only by the *Chronicle of Seert* but also by the rest of the sources that religious tensions in Iran rose to even greater heights by the end of Yazdgird's reign, perhaps more specifically after the Council of Mar Yahbalaha. Wood discusses how the Council of Mar Ishaq had originally sidelined many churchmen and was not necessarily accepted by all Christians.<sup>333</sup> Obviously there had been hardliners who did not accept the subordination of the Church to a heathen monarch and government and still adhered to an extremist universal Christian ideology even after the second council. He suggests the many martyrs reported in the sources in fact point to people who rejected the new relationship with the Iranian government and lashed out in whatever zealous fashion they desired, be it by destroying fire temples, abandoning their posts or proselytizing among the Magi and nobility. If the punishment of

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<sup>330</sup> Wood (2013: 75).

<sup>331</sup> See Wood's (2013: 75) suggestion that these attempts to delay or avoid persecution are probably the closest to the historical realities. This comment also indicates he too believes that neither occurrence actually resulted in a fully-fledged persecution.

<sup>332</sup> McDonough (2008a: 134-5).

<sup>333</sup> Patterson (2017: 4, 8). Normally, Zoroastrian clerics presided over law courts, supervised states finances, participated in Military campaigns, supervised districts and served as ambassadors. After the Council of 410, Christians began to be more often included in such activities. Patterson proposes that in the situation where Christianity and Zoroastrianism served the shah, when either or stopped doing so in a correct fashion, measures would be taken against them. See Wood (2013: 34-5) for more on the Council of 410 and how it affected the relationship between the East Syrian church and the shah.

certain individuals who broke the law is to be considered as persecution, then Yazdgird did just that. The sources however all point to Yazdgird being somewhat sensitive when it came to insubordination regardless of one's religion or rank. The later *Greek Life of Marutha* openly states that the punishment for insolence against the shah and the gods was death.<sup>334</sup> The ranks of the Magi and nobility received that punishment multiple times, and as stated before, no source makes these punishments out as a persecution of the Zoroastrianism faith.

Even the *Shahnama* and al-Tabari support this perspective by stating that Yazdgird respected no one's rank and punished many for the smallest of things. Yazdgird was probably paranoid that the traditional Iranian hierarchy would assassinate him, and was right to fear them, as they had indeed murdered his three predecessors, and did eventually succeed in murdering both him and his son. Aside from converting the Iranian nobility as well as destroying temples, Christians at court would have logically also fallen under suspicion, especially when they became Yazdgird's close political allies. Although it remains a possibility that Christians were among those purged at the beginning of Yazdgird's reign, the affair remains dubious. It is certain though that Christians in Yazdgird's court would be free neither of suspicion nor of punishments for committing crimes. With tensions rising ever more towards the end of his reign, we can only imagine his paranoia equally intensifying. Pulcheria's zealous rhetoric may have seeped into Iranian Christian thought, and as Christians began taking advantage of their freedoms, or outright rebelling against the status quo, it is conceivable that Yazdgird would take more extreme measures against those who engaged in such activities.<sup>335</sup> It mattered not to Yazdgird what one's religion was. His original goal was to survive the chaos that had engulfed the Sasanian Iranian political system and re-establish the shah as supreme leader over his empire. He saw himself as inheritor of the Kayanid quest to restore order to the universe, and to do so, he was required to take a harsher stance on many issues. His punishments were thus directed not by religious affiliation, but rather by secular law and cosmological ideology.

### **“A State of Mixture”**

A final note on these matters comes from R. Payne once again. Seeking to disprove the belief that the Iranians persecuted Christianity, Payne has written an entire book on his theory

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<sup>334</sup> *Greek Life of Marutha* 10 (Noret [1973: 89]). Christensen (1944: 300-1) highlights the inviolability of the shah's word and his status as holder of supreme judicial power.

<sup>335</sup> Payne (2016a: 217). For examples of Pulcheria's early zeal, see Holum (1982: 98-101).

that their empire always existed in a “state of mixture.” He argues that this concept was couched in Zoroastrian ideology, alongside that of Iranian cosmopolitanism. His work is of exceptional importance to this study, and as such will be examined independently as a final perspective on the tumultuous final years of Yazdgird.<sup>336</sup> He begins his chapter aptly named “The Myth of Zoroastrian Intolerance” with the *Mobad* Kirdir’s inscription on the Kabaa of Zoroaster at Naqsh-e Rostam. Although this inscription is most often used to demonstrate the “archetype of the persecutory Zoroastrian,” Payne scrutinized the text to instead discover that an entirely different reality was being described. Kirdir’s inscription in fact talks of a differentiated hierarchy of religions, with specific instructions on dealing with each one. Idol worshippers were to be completely expelled and destroyed, while deviant religions, like Judaism and Christianity, were to be simply “struck”, or subdued as Payne puts it. This inscription, in his view, describes the basis for Zoroastrian ideological thought that would preserve the existence of other religions in Iran, but maintains the supremacy of the Good Religion, that being Zoroastrianism.<sup>337</sup>

Payne then delves into Zoroastrian mythology, explaining how the origins of the universe were founded in a conflict set to last three thousand years between the forces of good and evil. The period within which the Sasanians found themselves was that same age of struggle and war, known as the “state of mixture” or “*gumezish*”. Victory was achieved through the erection of fire temples, performance of the religious rites, the cultivation of arable lands and the institutionalization of law. This “global restorative project” was directly passed down from the Kayanids to the Sasanids and their allied noble houses. In fact, humans were key to the battle between Good and Evil, and were to play a determining role in the outcome of the conflict. For this reason, it was absolutely abhorrent for an Iranian noble to abandon his or her ancestral religion. On the other hand, those who held aspects of civilization, culture, piety and righteousness, Iranian or not, could potentially contribute in a positive fashion to the forces of Good.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Peer reviews on Payne’s work highlight its unique perspective and methodology, commending it as an important and landmark study. His use of the less studied Zoroastrian texts is of exceptional interest to the academic community. Though much praise is given to his knowledge and research, the main issues with his work involve his lack of explanation on those same obscure texts and terminologies. Sometimes Payne seems to support his arguments on pre-suppositions and opinions, opting to not fully explain his ideas. Nevertheless, these issues are minor. See Wood (2016), Rose (2017) and Rezanian (2016).

<sup>337</sup> Payne (2015: 24).

<sup>338</sup> Payne (2015: 27-30).

Support for this claim is found in ancient Zoroastrian scholars who constantly debated the possibility of those outside of the Good Religion contributing towards the cosmological battle. He refutes the traditional views of Zoroastrian partial tolerance of other religions, often compared to the crusaders' policy, and instead asserts that the Iranian religion inherently possessed an ideology rooted in a cosmological foundation that allowed, even encouraged the "enlistment" of the adherents of the "bad" religions into the Iranian imperial project. In comparison to these bad religions, Payne highlights the plight of religions like the old Assyrian polytheist faith that were actively destroyed and eliminated rather than suppressed. He contrasts this with the treatment received by Christians, who were allowed to build a multitude of religious buildings without attracting the attention of the Sasanian authorities, and even when we hear of temples being destroyed, they are never completely eliminated. Based on the fact that the East Syrian hagiographies give neither date nor site for the destruction of churches, Payne questions whether such claims were even true. If the authorities had sought to control the construction of churches, Payne states that we would have many more specific instances of church destruction in the East Syrian sources. When looking at the Zoroastrian sources, there is not a single command to destroy Christian or Jewish institutions along the same lines as those of idol worshippers. Despite the rhetoric and claims found in the East Syrian literature, Payne insists that the encroachment of Christianity on Zoroastrian institutions never garnered the same attention from the authorities as did demon-worshipping, idolatry and even deviant versions of Zoroastrianism.<sup>339</sup>

His next subsection re-examines the East Syrian hagiographies within the context of the state of mixture. Payne makes it clear that he does not desire to deny the historicity of the martyr acts, but rather understand the Sasanian court's acts of violence as part of the cosmological framework outlined earlier. He immediately discusses how the emphasis on the Zoroastrian priesthood as the primary persecutors instead of the shah or the aristocracy is a common trope found throughout many of the East Syrian hagiographies. He then goes to explain how the question of Christian loyalties became acute only after Yazdgird began the process of integrating Christian elites into the court. The narratives that are concerned with the Iranian fear that Christians were a Roman fifth column, such as the *Martyrdom* and *History of Simeon*, appear within that literary context. Payne focuses on Simeon's refusal to collect taxes on behalf of the

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<sup>339</sup> Payne (2015: 31-5).

Sasanian court that caused him to be executed. He interprets the entire affair as an invitation to “participate in the extension of imperial fiscal structure rather than an act of persecution.”<sup>340</sup> That Shapur II sought the collaboration of the Christian hierarchy to aid in collecting resources for an upcoming war is most definitely a plausible reality. It was also conceivable that refusing to co-operate with the Shah’s request would be equivalent to absolute treason, regardless of one’s faith. Similarly, Wood sees the older of the two texts, which is dated to the early fifth century, as a demonstration of leadership and freedom from the Shah by the *Catholicos*, paralleling the insubordination found in the acts of ‘Abda.<sup>341</sup> In fact, unlike in the Roman Empire, Iranian aristocrats were not exempt from receiving corporal punishment, and were in fact at higher risk of receiving it because of their high status. He concludes that Shapur’s “Great Persecution” was a myth that was mostly limited to ecclesiastical leaders for their refusal to co-operate as intermediaries between their Christian provincial populations and the court.<sup>342</sup>

A parallel is drawn between the projects of Shapur II and Yazdgird I, as both aimed to integrate Christians into the government of Iran, as well as further subjugate their communities to the crown. Payne argues that Yazdgird began a process of incorporating Christian elites, both secular and ecclesiastical, into the administration that lasted until the end of the empire. We have already discussed how the *catholicoi* had become agents of the shah, acting as ambassadors and official inspectors. It is within that context that Payne recognizes that the East Syrian hagiographers actually debated the Church’s new relationship with the Sasanian government through their works. He also recognizes that the martyr acts from this time period all involve punishment for temple destruction and the conversion of Iranian elites, pinpointing two types of violence: “the purging of elites in political crises and the execution of individuals for particular misdeeds that communicated norms for interaction between Christians and Zoroastrians.”<sup>343</sup> The

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<sup>340</sup> Payne (2015: 38-41).

<sup>341</sup> See Wood (2013: 52-60) for his comparison of the *Martyrdom* and the *History of Simeon Bar Sabbae*. He talks of how these older martyria gave a sense of historical succession to the East Syrian Church with their predecessors, as well as established a link between the older and newer martyrs. The collection of martyr relics has been previously discussed (Marutha’s massive collection and the co-operative foundation of Martyropolis), and Wood underlines how it helped establish a deeper antiquity for the East Syrian Church which was still trying to find its place in the world. In opposition to the earlier *Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Sabbae*, the older *History* is considerably more loyalist in relation to the shah, and contrasts an age of persecution (fourth century) to its own age of prosperity (sixth century). See Smith (2016: 109-24) for a more complete analysis of these texts.

<sup>342</sup> Payne (2015: 42-3).

<sup>343</sup> Payne (2015: 45-6) actually brings these issues up as the initial setting of modalities of interaction between Christians and Zoroastrians at the beginning of their new relationship. The questions that arose from such a social order are the following: “To what extent did churches emerge at the expense of fire temples?” and “Did the

examples provided by the martyr acts proved to be effective in determining the answer to at least one of these questions: fire temple destruction was a short-lived phenomenon. Noble conversion on the other hand continued well into the sixth and early seventh centuries because of the difficulties involved in regulating it.<sup>344</sup>

Despite the importance of fire temples as the basis for both the economic and social powers of the nobility, their destruction proved to be less of a concern than the abandonment of the Good Religion by the aristocracy. The punishment for such a crime can be traced back to antiquity, although Payne points out that the prosecution of it is only attested from the fifth century onwards. According to a late Sasanian work called the *Menog-I Xrad*, the disciplining of those who apostatized was part of the most basic responsibilities of a good monarch, who was required to strip the individual of their material wealth, redistribute it and execute the perpetrator. These realities are directly represented by Theodoret when speaking of Hormisdas and Suenes, who had their status inverted, though were not executed according to the narrative, perhaps because of Yazdgird's mercy towards them. In any case, the punishment of these individuals was also seen as part of the overall project of re-establishing order in the universe. Although such a law was intended to be applied to all, Payne points out that it was only ever used to prosecute these elite since their conversions openly threatened the social order upon which Zoroastrianism and the Empire were founded.<sup>345</sup>

## Conclusion

Now that we have examined the relevant sources, the fog surrounding the final years of Yazdgird I begin to dissipate. First, the East Syrian Church councils of 410 and 420 maintain the same positivity when describing the relations between the Church and the Shah. More importantly, the Council of Mar Yahbalaha occurred in 420, the same year Yazdgird allegedly persecuted the Christians and subsequently died. With its positivity in mind, the timing of this second council renders the occurrence of a sharp degeneration of relations and a persecution highly unlikely prior to Yazdgird's death. There would have simply not been enough time for all this to occur. Other than these council texts, the majority of sources, both eastern and western,

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newfound political legitimacy of Christianity permit Zoroastrian elites to participate in its rites and institutions or even to apostatize in its favor?"

<sup>344</sup> Payne (2015: 48).

<sup>345</sup> Payne (2015: 48, 50, 54-5).

that discuss Yazdgird's life talk only positively of him. Those that report on his alleged persecutions take ambiguous stances, even portraying him as just and merciful, while singling out two main causes royal reprisals: the conversion of the Iranian nobility and the destruction of Zoroastrian temples. The East Syrian Church councils highlight that dissent was prominent among its ranks. Those who committed the crime may have been among those who refused to follow the covenant signed between their Church and the Shah.

Hence, on top of punishing those who threatened the fabric of Iranian society and overtly broke the law, Yazdgird was acting in concordance with what he had sworn to do in the Council of Mar Ishaq. The remaining sources that speak badly of the Shah are the works of Firdowsi and al-Tabari, which reinforce the overarching theme throughout the other sources of how Yazdgird's kind treatment of the Christians put him at odds with his own nobility and Magi. Payne's theory of Iran's state of mixture complements the entire chapter by exploring the empire's ideological systems that put forth a hierarchy of religions. The most evil, like the Assyrian pantheon, were to be utterly eliminated, while those less evil should only be suppressed when needed. Through the combination of these analyses it becomes clear that Yazdgird I did not persecute his Christian population, but only applied the law, adhered to his commitment to the Council of Mar Ishaq, and pursued the ultimate Kayanid quest in suppressing evil acts against The Good Religion. Though he was remembered as a blight on the Iranian people, all that Yazdgird did was to manage his precarious political situation in the kindest and most just fashion possible.

## Conclusion

Did Yazdgird I persecute the East Syrian Christians of his empire or not? What may have occurred in the final years of his reign to lead to a degeneration of relations with Rome? These are the questions that this thesis seeks to answer. Historical sources covering the Shah's reign have relayed a diverse and detailed corpus of confusing and contradictory accounts. Only through the close examination of these sources can some level of clarity concerning the events surrounding the alleged persecution be achieved. Yazdgird's reign from 399 to 420 was marked by the apogee of Romano-Iranian relations. It was the geo-political atmosphere of the early fifth century in the eastern Mediterranean and Near East that pushed both East Roman and Iranian Empires into a friendship of necessity. Both monarchs were weak and barely had control over their own governments. Alaric and Stilicho pressured Constantinople, while the Iranian nobility and Magi effectively did as they pleased in Iran. As we have seen, those same groups had previously murdered Yazdgird's three predecessors (his father, grand-father and great-uncle). External threats also gripped both empires, with Huns and other barbarian tribes conducting raids from beyond the Caucasus and the Danubian frontier. Arcadius and Yazdgird therefore needed to make peace in the Near East in order to turn their attention to issues that were more pressing than the ancient rivalry between Rome and Iran.

Yazdgird seems to have taken substantial advantage of the newfound peace with Constantinople. With the cooperation of the Roman ambassador Bishop Marutha of Martyropolis, he initiated multiple projects that would both solidify his friendship with the Romans and fortify his position in Iran. Among these ventures were the foundation of Martyropolis and the calling of the first East Syrian Church council, the Council of Mar Ishaq. The former of these primarily functioned as a symbolic act of goodwill, while the latter proved to be a much more calculated political move. The Council of Mar Ishaq not only helped organize the East Syrian Church structurally and theologically but also formally incorporated the church into the Iranian political world. The official church hierarchy would now rely on Yazdgird for support while it returned the favor to him. Good relations with Constantinople were even maintained after the death of Arcadius. We are told that as his health degenerated, the Emperor asked that Yazdgird take up the guardianship of his son, Theodosius II. Though the request may have been entirely symbolic in nature, Yazdgird agreed to it, possibly sending a proxy on his

behalf to help protect and raise the young monarch. Hence relations between the Shah and the new Roman Emperor were more than cordial.

Despite the strong foundation of the good relations, tensions inevitably increased over the years. Though both monarchs sought peace, they did not represent the opinions of all who made up their government. Every act of goodwill irritated those who opposed the policy of friendship among rivals.<sup>346</sup> For example, at first glance, the foundation of Martyropolis proved to be a multifaceted issue as it caused trouble not only from a military perspective also from a symbolic one. When founded, the Roman frontier city was probably lightly fortified and therefore could be easily strengthened in times of war. The foundation of the city also debuted the martyr cult on the frontier, which symbolically stood in defiance of Iranian aggression against Christianity. Yazdgird was involved in both these aspects of the project and, from the Iranians' perspective, thus seemed to be encouraging projects that worked against his own empire and people. The East Syrian Church councils of 410 and 420 had a similar effect to the foundation of Martyropolis. For Yazdgird, these bound the Christians to him personally, and he quickly established them as his counter-weight against those of the Magi and nobles who plotted against him. On the other hand, many saw them as representing official patronage of a foreign and rival religion within the Iranian empire, which was sinful and sacrilegious and proof that Yazdgird had failed his divine mandate.

In addition to all this, Payne's theory of Iranian cosmopolitanism has led us to see Yazdgird's actions from a different angle. Yazdgird was the first Sasanian shah to cultivate a Kayanid identity. The Kayanids were the mythological founding dynasty in Iran whose mission was to re-establish order to the universe. Theirs was the battle between good and evil, and so was the task of returning all the world's knowledge to Iran. The foundation of Martyropolis thus may have been intended by Yazdgird to be an ideological incursion into Roman territory. Seen alongside the East Syrian Church councils, which portrayed Yazdgird as a second Constantine, it becomes clear that the Shah was attempting to conquer Christianity for Iran. This challenged Constantinople's exclusive claim to Constantine's heritage and mission as protector of all Christians. Payne's other theory on the state of mixture in Iran suggests that Zoroastrian thought regarded the world's religions as part of a hierarchy of good and evil. Christianity thus fell

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<sup>346</sup> See Börm (2007: 318-325) for a discussion on the "Hawks" and "Doves" in both Roman and Iranian courts in the sixth century. The doves naturally pursued co-operation and peace, while the hawks sought to engage in warfare and to thwart the doves' attempts.

somewhere in the middle and if well guided and kept in check could contribute to the battle between good and evil that Yazdgird took up as his Kayanid inheritance.

Apart from these ideological struggles, there seems to be some indication that tensions spiked sometime in 416. It is hinted in some sources that light military activity or raiding occurred across the frontier, perhaps undertaken by the Arab allies of either empire, though the details of the conflict remain unclear. More evidence can be found in the sources insinuating that tensions had risen far enough that they needed addressing. The *Catholicos* Yahbalaha had been sent on an embassy to Constantinople in 418 to confirm previous agreements. Two years later, Theodosius sent his own ambassador, the bishop Acacius of Amida, to Ctesiphon for the same purpose. Yahbalaha, Acacius and Yazdgird took this as an opportunity to call a second East Syrian Church council that reinforced the first's canons. This second council may have pushed the frustration with the Christians in Iran to a high, while potentially giving some East Syrian Christians enough confidence to attempt proselytizing to the nobility and even to attack fire temples. These violent Christians may have even been church dissidents who were excluded and targeted by the Church councils. A final mark of the rising tensions was the passing of a Roman law that allowed for all property holders to set up private fortifications if their estates were situated on the eastern frontier. This law points to impending hostilities in the region, be it because Constantinople was planning an attack, or because the Romans had lost trust in Iran.

All this information reinforces the argument that Yazdgird was not a persecutor. First, the Council of Mar Yahbalaha was held shortly before Yazdgird's death in 420, leaving little time to begin persecuting Christianity. The related embassies of Yahbalaha and Acacius point to existing positive relations between Rome and Iran during the same period as well. The chronology simply does not line up. On top of this, it must be noted that the toleration of Christianity in Iran was founded upon and confirmed friendship with Rome. If relations were still cordial at the end of the Yazdgird's reign, then he would have had absolutely no reason to terminate his policy of toleration and patronage of the Church. It would have also been odd for Yazdgird to persecute the group on which he relied as his power base against the Iranian aristocratic groups that plotted against him. The Christians that Yazdgird did punish were targeted because they broke the law and ideologically threatened Iranian society by converting the nobility and destroying fire temples. If those convicted were dissident Christians who refused to accept the canons laid out

by the Council of Mar Ishaq, then Yazdgird was even adhering to his commitment of enforcing church unity.

The reports from the primary sources reveal far more than what is stated in their narratives. Though most scholars disregard Socrates for being too positive about Yazdgird, their complete reliance on Theodoret's account indirectly justifies Socrates'. Theodoret actually identifies the only two reasons for Sasanian reprisals: the destruction of fire temples and the conversion of the Iranian nobility. Although he was unaware of the issues in proselytising to the nobles of Iran, he was very much aware that the destruction of Zoroastrian temples was wrong, both condemning the act and blaming the persecutions on it. In this way, Theodoret highlighted the real issues at hand. His examples do not resemble in any way the persecution he generally describes, nor do they match with the definition outlined in Chapter Three.<sup>347</sup> The martyr acts all mirror these conclusions, and continue to portray Yazdgird as a reluctant and dispassionate judge. The narrative also radiates a message of loyalty to the Shah, with many of the martyrs still exhibiting reverent behaviour towards him. This makes particular sense when most scholars in fact agree that the author, the monk Abgar, wrote from a monastery just outside the capital and was therefore probably loyal to the incumbent *catholicos* and the covenant between the Church and Shah.

In a similar fashion, the East Syrian council texts of Mar Ishaq, Yahbalaha and Dadisho have revealed information beyond the purpose of their composition. They tell us of the chaotic state of the East Syrian Church prior to the councils, and their failure to solve the issues at hand. While some churchmen were outright ostracised from the organization, countless others openly rejected the councils' covenant with the heathen shah. If the men described in the martyr acts were in fact these church dissidents, the composition of their acts may have been an attempt by Abgar, and therefore the official East Syrian Church, to reclaim the violent crimes within an acceptable literary context. These martyr acts are thus also cautionary and informative tales for the East Syrian Christians, their hierarchy and the Iranian shah. The comparison of western and eastern sources thus provides us with different perspectives that help piece the entire puzzle together. Socrates was right in the end that Yazdgird did not persecute the Christians; he only applied Iranian law and the canons of the Council of Mar Ishaq.

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<sup>347</sup> Violence that “is imperially organized, is active, and involves execution,” reinforced with the concepts of “irrational and unjustified hatred.” Moss (2013: 134, 213).

Yazdgird I was therefore not a persecutor of Christians. From the beginning of his reign to the end, he simply sought to restore the Sasanian monarchy's power and bring stability back to his empire. His various projects and policies were all oriented towards garnering legitimacy for his family and combating the influence of those who sought to accumulate more power at the expense of their monarch. Yazdgird's position was a precarious one. His life depended on the careful management and balancing of relations with the Romans, the East Syrian Christians, the Magi and the Iranian nobility. The demands of these groups were often at odds with one another, and though he navigated this complex nexus of relationships for twenty-one years, he ultimately met his fate at the hands of those who plotted against him. Yazdgird was probably assassinated in 420, and so was his son and heir Shapur IV. His second son, Bahram V, only managed to claim his rightful throne because his father had the foresight to send him to live among Iran's Arab allies, who naturally aided their protégé in becoming shah. Bahram proved to be an exceptionally popular monarch since he allowed the Magi and nobility to do as they desired.

Therefore, the persecution of East Syrian Christianity in Iran was either purposely or mistakenly attributed to Yazdgird. There is in fact a split in the sources as to who engaged in the violence, with Bahram reported just as much as his father as the perpetrator. It is far more probable that Bahram, after a bloody succession crisis, caved into the Magi's demands and thus initiated the religious violence. By doing so, he also instigated war with Rome. Both these acts allowed Bahram to tap into a traditional means to bolster his legitimacy and popularity among those who murdered his father, grandfather and great-uncle. Those groups had even sworn amongst themselves to never allow an offspring of Yazdgird upon the throne of Iran again, highlighting the precarious position Bahram held upon his accession.<sup>348</sup> The new Shah must have thus greatly feared for his life. The succession crisis in Iran makes for perfect circumstances within which the persecutions could emerge, especially alongside the degeneration of relations with Rome and the ensuing war.

This analysis has shown that no primary source should be taken at face value. These ancient narratives were products of their circumstances, created by humans in a time when information was not shared instantaneously. When looking at Yazdgird's life as a whole and his interactions with the East Syrian Christians, the East Roman Empire, the Magi and Iranian nobility, it becomes clear that the attribution of persecutions to him was a mistake. Although this

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<sup>348</sup> *Shahnama* XXXIV.8 and al-Tabari 858/86.

changes but a small detail in the historical narrative, it hopefully may inspire similar re-examinations of other seemingly well-defined historical events. Nothing is as simple or straightforward as it may first seem. It is through the use of less studied material from the Iranian Empire in combination with the Roman sources that this thesis sought to achieve a more holistic and realistic view of the apogee of Romano-Iranian relations and their subsequent sharp degeneration.

## Annex A: An Early Persecution?

Although the question of whether or not Yazdgird I persecuted Iranian Christians has been thoroughly explored in the previous chapters, an outlier remains. Three sources, the *Armenian Life of Marutha*, the *Chronicle of Seert* and ‘Amr Ibn Matta, report that Yazdgird was persecuting Christianity at the beginning of his reign. As seen in Chapter One, Iran was basically a decentralized state, with regional dynasties commanding their own territories, people and armies.<sup>349</sup> The shahanshah, or king of kings, was what brought the empire together and though he was in principle the supreme monarch of the realm, he often functioned as a first among equals. Alongside this system was the Zoroastrian priesthood, which by the late fourth century had accrued such power that it too formed a sort of clan within Iran.<sup>350</sup> Yazdgird I came to power within this political structure, but ever since the death of Shapur II, the Magi and nobility had slowly accrued authority and political power at the expense of the shah. These groups had in fact murdered Yazdgird’s three predecessors, putting the new shah in a precarious situation.<sup>351</sup> This would have been the context within which the early persecution would have occurred within. Let us then examine these accounts in detail and evaluate whether or not their information could be true considering the information we have at hand.

The sixth-century *Armenian Life of Marutha* is the most detailed of the accounts. What Gagig, the author of the work, tells us is that at the beginning of Yazdgird’s reign, the Magi and officers of the realm were in the midst of persecuting Christians, threatening them with death if they did not recant.<sup>352</sup> After Marutha was summoned to court by the Shah and subsequently healed the prince, he requested as his reward that persecution of Christians be outlawed, that those who were imprisoned be released and those who persecuted be punished. These requests were granted, with a final note by the author that because of this request a great many Armenian nobles were freed. Although the Shah is directly implicated in the account, it is doubtful whether he actively endorsed religious violence since in 399 the Magi had achieved great influence and autonomy at the Iranian court and were probably acting of their own accord at this point.<sup>353</sup> It is Marutha who seems to have convinced the Shah that he could rely on the Christians as an

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<sup>349</sup> See Chapter One (15-21) for the complete breakdown of Yazdgird’s precarious position in Iran at the beginning of his reign.

<sup>350</sup> Christensen (1944: 116-22).

<sup>351</sup> al-Tabari 846-8/67-9.

<sup>352</sup> *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 61]).

<sup>353</sup> A similar interpretation of interregnum persecution led by the Magi is put forward by Schrier (1992: 78).

alternative power base if he indebted them to him by stopping the ongoing persecution. Thus, the subsequent outlawing of the persecutions and the punishment of those who had participated in them can also be directly linked to Yazdgird's initial suppression of the Magi and nobility at the beginning of his reign. Ending the priesthood's violent religious activity and punishing them would have played a triple role in garnering favour with Rome, the Christians of his empire, and in curtailing the power of the Magi.<sup>354</sup>

The success of this strategy is in fact visible in the various martyr acts that cover the later years of Yazdgird's reign. The Shah seems to have a much firmer grip over the Zoroastrian priesthood, which is reflected in the martyria by their subservience to him and their docility towards the Christians who would have still been Yazdgird's protégés.<sup>355</sup> In these accounts, the Zoroastrian priests maintain a relatively professional execution of their role as judges throughout the various narratives and constantly reported back to their monarch in order that *he* pass the final judgment on the Christians brought to court. It takes little imagination to conceive how the situation would have been different in a time when the Magi held greater power and autonomy, such as at the onset of Yazdgird's reign. It thus remains wholly possible that the Zoroastrian priesthood had already engaged in some persecuting activity upon Yazdgird's accession in 399. Such a situation would have actually provided the new Shah with the chance to become a champion for the Christians by ending the violence, and thus to garner enough favour with Rome to forge their new friendship and alliance.

The *Chronicle of Seert* and 'Amr Ibn Matta's accounts support such a conclusion, since they does not specify whether or not Yazdgird was persecuting, but only insinuate it. The *Chronicle* in specific tells us that Arcadius only sent his letter because he had heard of the persecution undertaken in Persia, not because that the Shah was persecuting. The letter in fact blames Yazdgird for allowing his people to violate the Christians, not for taking part in it himself.<sup>356</sup> 'Amr Ibn Matta's account seems to report the same circumstances but actually identifies the early persecution as the cause of Marutha's summoning to Iran. We are told "many Christian physicians had been killed in the reign of Shapur, and those who survived had fled to

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<sup>354</sup> al-Tabari 848-50/70-4, *Chronicle of Seert* 204-7/319 (LXV-LXVI), 'Amr Ibn Matta (Marcus [1932: 53] and Gismondi [1897: 23-5/13-5]), Socrates *HE* VII.8.13, 17, *Greek Life of Marutha* 7-12 (Noret [1973 : 87, 89, 91]) and *Armenian Life of Marutha* (Marcus [1932: 61, 65]) for details on the violence suffered by the Iranian nobles and Magi at the hands of Yazdgird.

<sup>355</sup> See Herman (2016) for the various martyr acts.

<sup>356</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 205-6/317-8 (LXVI).

other lands - and he [Yazdgird] wrote to the Roman emperor, asking him for a skilled physician.”<sup>357</sup> If Yazdgird was in such need of Christian doctors, why would he have been persecuting them still? The narrative continues stating that Arcadius “[...] had heard what evils the Christians had suffered in the country of the Persians, namely torture and banishment and death[,]” and thus he chose to write a letter to Yazdgird hoping to influence the Shah to stop the violent treatment.<sup>358</sup> Upon being healed by Marutha and subsequently receiving Arcadius’ request, the Shah agreed to end the Christians’ suffering. It is likely that these two reports imitate or were influenced by the style of Constantine’s letter to Shapur II from Eusebius’ account. Nevertheless, their uniqueness and late composition render the details about Arcadius’ letter somewhat dubious. We do know whether Marutha was indeed sent by Arcadius to secure peace and friendship with Yazdgird, and though he did manage to obtain liberties for the Christians in Iran, it is unknown if that element was part of the imperial mission or an improvised request of the bishop to aid in the establishment of harmony between the empires.

If these reports of an early persecution are indeed true, then Armenia seems to have borne the brunt of it. This detail can be gleaned from a single comment from the *Armenian Life of Marutha*: that the outlawing of persecution in the Iranian Empire directly resulted in a great many Armenian nobles being freed from imprisonment. These nobles were probably the target of a particularly intense persecution since just over a decade prior to Yazdgird’s accession, Armenia had been divided between Rome and Iran, and was in no way completely pacified.<sup>359</sup> The religious turmoil in the region had begun more than a century earlier when King Tiridates III embraced Christianity as the official religion of his kingdom.<sup>360</sup> This development caused serious upheaval in the realm, since the Armenians had originally followed a local variant of Zoroastrianism and were culturally Iranian.<sup>361</sup> The imposed conversion to Christianity of the kingdom sought not only to suppress the Zoroastrian religion, but the many customs that came with it.<sup>362</sup> The adoption of Christianity had indeed complicated matters by the splitting the Armenian *naxarars*, or clans, into two groups: the pro-Roman Christians, and the pro-Iranian

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<sup>357</sup> ‘Amr Ibn Matta (Marcus [1932: 53-4] and Gismondi [1897: 23-4/13-14]).

<sup>358</sup> ‘Amr Ibn Matta (Marcus [1932: 53-4] and Gismondi [1897: 23-4/13-14]).

<sup>359</sup> Baynes (1955: 207) and Greatrex (2000: 43).

<sup>360</sup> Payaslian (2007: 34-5).

<sup>361</sup> Lang (1983: 524-36).

<sup>362</sup> Payaslian (2007: 36-8).

Zoroastrians.<sup>363</sup> Although the division of Armenia did calm the situation, the political and religious turmoil that once embroiled the region loomed and could indeed resurface again, especially since Iran held the majority of the region, and thus ruled over Armenians of both religions. Tensions in fact had become so intense by the middle of the fifth century that in 451 a large-scale anti-Sasanian Christian revolt broke out. Although this was quelled, rebellions continued throughout the fifth century.<sup>364</sup>

Thus, Christianity's attack on Armenia's traditional Iranian religion and culture could not be tolerated by the Magi. Armenia had been long considered as part of Iran, with its people regarded as Iranian. This meant that the Armenian nobility were in fact viewed as Iranian nobility, and, as seen in previous chapters, sacrosanct and crucial to the fight against evil.<sup>365</sup> Their conversion from Zoroastrianism to Christianity would have therefore caused serious social disruption. The new Christian Armenians also took over temples, converting them into churches or outright destroying them.<sup>366</sup> Temple destruction, as has been seen throughout this theses, was exceptionally unacceptable. With the majority of the region now in the hands of the Iranian Empire, it would make sense that the Magi had been targeting the Caucasian kingdom in hopes of putting an end to the disturbance the Christians had ushered in, to at least force the converted nobles to recant and return to their ancestral religion, and to therefore better integrate the region into the empire. It would thus make sense that the Magi would target a newly acquired territory that required integration into the empire, and that was a location where Zoroastrianism had been actively purged. It makes even more sense that Armenian nobility was targeted by the Magi during this persecution if we are to consider Payne's theory of Iranian Cosmopolitanism. The conversion of Armenia to Christianity was in no way complete at this point, and the violence exhibited by the Magi in their persecution mirrored that of the Christians who had previously torn the country's "pagan world" apart.

In all three cases, Yazdigird is clearly dissociated from the violence of the persecution, and is portrayed as the one who put an end to it. Yazdigird came to power because his

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<sup>363</sup> Dignas and Winter (2003: 183).

<sup>364</sup> For more, see Payaslian (2007: 42-45). See also Elishe 1 (Thomson [1982: 3]) who describes the Magi as almost manipulating Yazdigird II into unleashing persecution against the Christians of Armenia. See the rest of Elishe's work that goes into detail about the revolt.

<sup>365</sup> See Chapter Two: 48-50. The new Christians did not want to be considered Iranian and hoped to separate themselves culturally separate so that they could practice their religion freely. See Russell (1987: 89-92).

<sup>366</sup> See Russell (1987: 5, 126-8, 528) for details on the sometimes violent Christianization of Armenia. Some *naxarars* are reported as having to defend their Zoroastrian holy sites by force of arms against the Christian assault.

predecessor was murdered by the Shah and nobility. These two groups are specifically identified by the *Armenian Life of Marutha* as perpetrating violent acts against Christians, especially in Armenia where the persecuted group openly antagonized Iranian cultural and religious influences. The turmoil that engulfed the region comes into play, since the Caucasian kingdom had just been divided between Rome and Iran over a decade prior to Yazdgird assuming the throne. The Magi at this point had accumulated much influence and were probably already persecuting. Whether or not Arcadius personally requested Yazdgird to end the persecution, the fact remains that Marutha negotiated the request. The Shah took advantage of the situation, and with a simple change of policy he strengthened his rule in two ways. First, he garnered favour with Arcadius and the Romans, with whom he promptly forged an alliance. Second, he secured the gratitude of the Christians in his empire whom he would come to rely on as an alternative power base to counter the Magi's influence. Although the accounts themselves are not entirely clear that Yazdgird himself instigated persecution in 399, they are perhaps right that there was indeed one being perpetrated in Iran which was promptly ended by the new Shah.

## Annex B

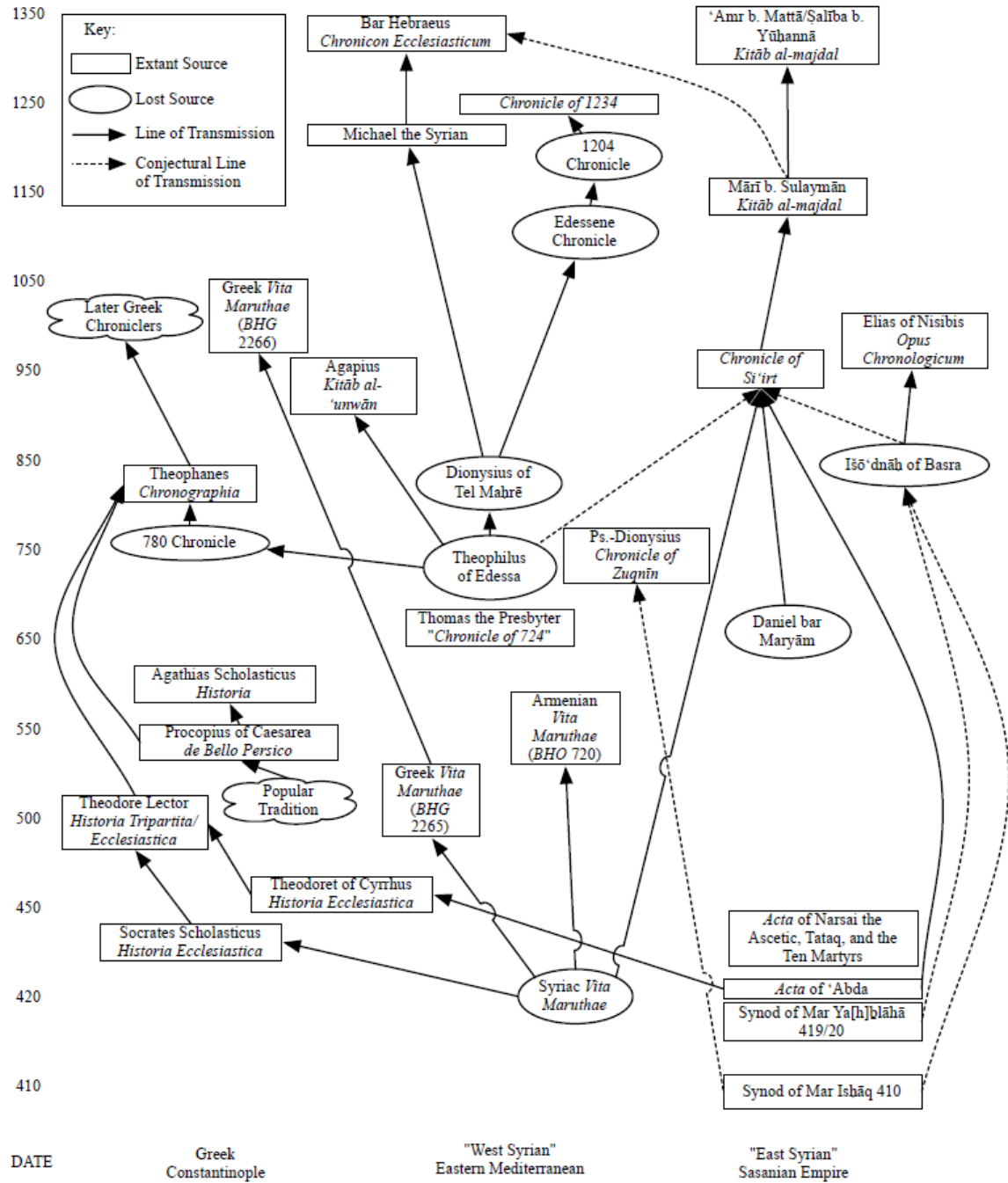


Figure. The Transmission of Syriac, Greek, and Arabic Historical Writing on Yazdgard I

Source: McDonough (2008: 140).

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- CCAA Maas, M., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*. Cambridge: 2015.
- CCAC Lenski, N. ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*. Cambridge: 2006.
- CHIr 1 Yarshater E., ed. *The Cambridge History of Iran Volume 3 (1) The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*. Cambridge: 1983.
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