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An Analysis of the Military History and Martial Culture of Ancient Iran and the Caucasus in the pre-Islamic Era

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Abstract: This article examines the historical ties between ancient Iran and the Caucasus in martial culture and military history from the Mede era to the late Sassanian period. Initial phases of Caucasus-Iranian Plateau contacts are traced from the bronze ages up to military interactions between the Saka Paradraya (Scythians) of the south Russia-Ukraine regions arriving through the Caucasus to invade the Mede realms in western Iran and the Near East. Military and martial links between the Caucasus and Iran during the Teispid-Achaemenid era progressed considerably, as evidenced with the presence of Armenian contingents in the Teispid-Achaemenid Kingdom's *spāda* (army), the Caucasian Albanians appearing later in 4th century CE, with Caucasian Iberians not reported among the *spāda*'s contingents, while sharing military systems with the wider Iranian realms, notably the Scythians and their Sarmatian successors. Armenian, Caucasian Albanian and Iberian/ancient Georgian links in shared martial traditions, military lexica, military systems (notably cavalry warfare) of the ensuing Arsacid Kingdom's *spād* (army) and Sassanian Kingdom's *spāh* (army) are examined up to the final years of pre-Islamic (Sassanian) Iran in the 7th century CE.

Keywords: Ancient Iran, Caucasus, Military History, Achaemenid Army, Parthian Army, Sasanian Army, Armenia, Georgia, Military Lexicon

The Caucasus and the Iranian Plateau in the Mede Era: An Overview

The process of cultural links between the Iranian Plateau and the Caucasus is traced back at least to the 9th century BCE, as indicated by possible early influences from Iran arriving in ancient Iberia (approximately corresponding to modern-day eastern Georgia), by way of

the Urartian kingdom, which spanned the territories of eastern Turkey and Armenia in the southern Caucasus (Muskhelishvili 1978, 17-30). In practice, the military interplay between ancient Iran and the Caucasus may possibly be traced earlier, to the invention of horse-back riding, wheeled transportation and the linking between these technologies. More specifically, it is possible that the technological evolution of chariot warfare was the end-result of mutual influences and cultural communications between the Eurasian steppes and the Near East (Mallory 1989, 41-42) by way of the Caucasus. The Caucasian land bridge connecting the Black Sea, ancient Ukraine and southern Russian regions to northwest Iran were to prove instrumental in the arrival of the Iranian-speaking Scythians into the Near East during the 7th century CE (c. 650s BCE). More specifically the Scythian arrivals had been preceded with the invasions of the Iranic Cimmerians into the Near East by way of the Caucasus. This had been due to the Cimmerians having been expelled from their homelands along the northern shores of the Black Sea by the Scythians.[1] In approximately 710 BCE, the Cimmerians militarily defeated the Urartian kingdom in the southern Caucasus to then enter Cappadocia and Phyrgia in Anatolia. A significant portion of the Scythians engaged in pursuit of the Cimmerians into the Near East, were to also clash with the Urartians, as evidenced by discoveries of bronze-tipped Scythian arrowheads in the ancient Urartian Teishebaini (Karmir Blur) palace in modern-day Armenia. Having traversed the southern Caucasus, the Scythians invaded Manna and Lake Urmia in northwest Iran, reaching westwards towards the borders of the Assyrian Empire by the 650s CE. According to Classical sources, Scythian dominance over the Medes lasted as briefly as 8 years (Pompeius Trogus, *Justinus*: *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus*; Justinius, *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus*, 2, 5.1-7)[2] or as long as 28 years (Herodotus, *Histories*, 1, 103-106, 130; 4, 1-4, 12). Scythian arrivals into Iran during the tenure of the Medes in the 7th to 6th centuries BCE led to innovations in military equipment and cavalry warfare tactics. Scythian advances were notable with respect to the improvement of existing Near East scale armor by now having the scales overlap into a "fish" pattern which became the first known type of "armored suit" (Cernenko 1989, 32, pl. A1). This resulted in enhanced protection against enemy hurled weapons (e.g. spears) as well as bladed weapons (e.g. swords; Cernenko 1989, 7), with the Scythian scale armor system also applied to leg guards and trousers, belts, shields and helmets (Anderson 2016, 8). The enhancement of armored protection also facilitated the rise of a new type of cavalry capable of sustained close quarters combat, in contrast to the lightly armed and armored horse archers whose main function was firing their missiles from a distance. Archaeological excavations have discovered these new types of cavalry as having been equipped with weaponry such as axes, maces, swords, daggers for close-quarters engagements as well as hurled weapons (spears, javelins) and slings (Scholtz 2012, 82).

[1] The term Crimea is believed to have derived from the ancient Cimmerians.

[2] In case of classical sources, the first number refers to the book volume.

The Scythian arrivals through and from the Caucasus (with large numbers later returning to the northern Caucasus and southern Russia-Ukraine regions) influenced the military systems of the Medes, contributing to the rise of the efficient *asābāri* (cavalry) corps (Farrokh 2023, 154-155).

Interestingly in reference to the Medes, Herodotus reports of a cultural link between them and Colchis (modern western Georgia):

> "These were in old time called by all men Arians, but when the Colchian woman Medea came from Athens among the Arians they changed their name, like the Persians. This is the Medes' own account of themselves." (Herodotus, *Histories,* 7, 62)

While this report cannot be objectively verified academically, it is of interest as it refers to the long-standing cultural and historical links between the Iranian realms and the Caucasus. The Caucasus region had in essence become contiguous with the North Iranian world of the Cimmerians, Scythians and their Sarmatian successors (along the northern Caucasus) with the southern Caucasus bordering modern-day northwest Iran which was dominated successively by the Mede-Persian Achaemenid kingdom (550-330 BCE), the Seleucid interlude in Iran (312 BCE-129 BCE[3]) succeeding in the wake of Alexander's conquests (336-323 BCE), followed by their overthrow by the Arsacid Parthians (c. 247 BCE-224 CE) who were in turn succeeded by the Sassanians (224-651 CE).

Armenia, Caucasian Albania and Caucasian Iberia during the Achaemenid Era

The military and martial links of the Caucasus and Iran were to progress significantly during the Teispid-Achaemenid era. The Armenians were to have a prominent role in the Teispid-Achaemenid *spāda* (army) with the Caucasian Albanians appearing in the ranks of the *spāda* in the late Teispid-Achaemenid era. The Caucasian Iberians shared their martial traditions with the Iranian realms but are not reported among the armies of the *spāda*.

Armenia

The downfall of the Urartian Kingdom by c. 590 BCE had led to the succession of the Armenians in the southwest Caucasus. The Assyrian Empire, a long-time military foe of Urartu, had been overthrown by c. 609 BCE at the hands of an Iranian (Mede and Scythian) military alliance with the Babylonians (Farrokh et al. 2022). The Teispid-Achaemenid Kingdom (559-331 BCE) was to incorporate Armenia into its realms, a process which initiated the longstanding historical and cultural links between the Armenian and ancient Iranian realms (Lang 1983; Russell 1987; Garsoïan 1997). More specifically, Armenia and Iran were to also develop strong bonds in military development and martial culture.

[3] Seleucid rule in Iran ended with the comprehensive defeat of Seleucid armies, led by Antiochus VII Sidetes (r. 138-129 BCE) at the Battle of Ecbatana at the hands of the Parthian *spād* (129 BCE), led by King Farhad (Phraates) II (r. c. 132-127 BCE).

Armenia has played a critical role in Iranian military history since the Teispid-Achaemenid era. Cyrus the Great's (559-529 BCE) capture of the Lydian capital of Sardis in 546 BCE was assisted by Armenian prince Tigran Erouandian who led a contingent of 4,000 cavalry and 20,000 infantry during the campaign (Kurkjian 2008, 20). Herodotus refers to the *Armenioi* (Herodotus, *Histories*, 7, 73) as the 13th satrapy of the Achaemenid Kingdom (Herodotus, *Histories*, 3, 93), with Xenophon highlighting the importance of the "Palace of the Satrap" in Armenia (Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 4, 4). When Darius I (522-486 BCE) faced revolts throughout the Teispid-Achaemenid Kingdom, he dispatched an Armenian general named Dardarshish to subdue Armenia (Huart 2013, 52), which had also risen in rebellion against the Kingdom.

Armenian warriors participating in Xerxes's invasion of Greece (480 BCE), are described by Herodotus as "…armed in the Phrygian fashion" (Herodotus, *Histories*, 7, 93). Cassin-Scott's reconstruction of Phrygian warriors during Xerxes's expedition depicts these as armed with close quarter combat weapons such as sword, spear or axe (Cassin-Scott 1985, 37, pl. F1). For protection, the Phrygian-Armenian warrior utilized leather armor stiffened with metal reinforcements with legs and arms protected by close-fitting woven materials. They also carried a crescent shield designed for close quarter combat against infantry. The Achaemenids were also supplied with high quality steeds from Armenia, as reported by Strabo:

> "[Armenia] … is so well-adapted, being nothing inferior in this respect to Media, for breeding horses, that the race of Nisean horses, which the kings of Persia used, is found here also; the satrap of Armenia used to send annually to the king of Persia 20,000 foals at the time of the Festival of the Mithracina" (Strabo, *Geography*, 11, 14.9).

The above report signifies (1) the importance of Armenia in the military logistics supply of horses for the *spāda* and (2) a shared martial tradition of Mithra, the ancient Indo-Iranian god of war, in which horses played a prominent role.

Head has provided reconstructions of provincial and tribal mercenaries of Armenian satraps of the Teispid-Achaemenids of the late 5th century BCE (Head 1992, 15), based on Xenophon's descriptions (Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 4, 7). These were generally the Chalbys (Chaldoi), who inhabited the Pontus and Cappadocia regions of northern Anatolia, and the Chaldaians (not to be confused with the Chaldeans of Mesopotamia). Chaldaian troops were most likely remnants of the ancient Urartians in Armenia who derived their name from *Khaldi*, the Urartian god of war. Chaldaian attire was most likely based on the type seen in earlier Urartian art (long tunic stretching to upper legs) with short boots and footwear. Xenophon describes then as "armed with long wicker shields and lances" (Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 4, 3).[4] The use of Achaemenid-type large wicker shields would compensate for the Chaldaians' apparent lack of helmets, greaves and body armor.

[4] Head (1992, 15) suggests that they may have alternately been armed with pairs of javelins.

Standard Chalbys weapons were the long spear (approximately 20 feet length) lanced at one end and a "short sabre" (Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 4, 7) used to cut the throats of adversaries during combat.[5] The sickle-curve shape of the weapon is analogous to the ancient Anatolian military tradition of such weaponry also produced in Anatolia at the time. The Chalbys long spear would require handling with two hands, which may explain these warriors' lack of shields. For protection, the Chalbys are described as having linen body armor for the torso stretching to the groin, as well as helmets and greaves. Xenophon describes the Chalbys as "…the bravest men…coming cheerily to close quarters [combat] with them [Greeks]" (Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 4, 7). Armenian infantry were highly valued by not only the Iranian (Teispid-Achaemenid, Parthian and Sassanian) kingdoms, but also by the Romano-Byzantines who relied heavily upon Armenian infantry as late as the 10th century CE (Heath 1989, 29).

Armenian troops led by Orontes I (Old Armenian: Eruand; Modern Armenian: Ervand/Yervand; 401-344 BCE), satrap of Armenia[6], contributed to the successful military campaign of Achaemenid king Artaxerxes II (436-358 BCE) against his rebellious brother Cyrus the Younger (d. 401 BCE; Xenophon, *Anabasis* 2, 4; 3, 4; 4, 4; Lang 1983, 506). Orontes I was the founder of the Orontid dynasty of Armenia which ruled as client kings of the Teispid-Achaemenids until their overthrow in 331 BCE. The Old Armenian term e*ruand* is traced to ancient Avestan *auruuaṇt* (strong, swift, courageous) and later Old Persian *arvanta,* to linguistically evolve into *arwand* (Middle Persian) to then arrive at New Persian *arvand* (Schmitt 2002). One school of scholarship ascribes (a) an Iranian origin to the Orontids (Allsen 2011, 37; Canepa 2015, 80; Gaggero 2016, 79) with (b) regal links to the Achaemenid house (Lang 1983, 535; Payaslian 2007, 8-9) in contrast to a second school assigning a wholly Armenian origin (Adrych et al. 2017, 138) followed by a third school reporting the Orontids' Armenian origins as uncertain while acknowledging that these were linked by marriage to Armenian nobility as well as the Achaemenid house (Panossian 2006, 35). It is generally agreed that the Orontids emphasized their Achaemenid links in order to legitimize their rulership (Payaslian 2007, 9).

One of eight major Achaemenid armies is believed to have been under the command of an Armenian general (Kurkjian 2008, 20). The Armenians' favored status in the Achaemenid Kingdom is further highlighted by Xenophon's reference to the West Armenian satrap, Tiribazus, as "… a friend of the king ... was the only man permitted to help the King mount his horse …" (Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 4, 4). Armenian warriors remained generally loyal to the Achaemenid military to the last days of the dynasty as indicated by their support of Darius III against the invading Hellenic-Macedonian armies

[5] This sabre was not unlike the contemporary *xuele* of Macedonia where it was most likely a ceremonial weapon at this time.

[6] Orontes also ruled Sophene, Matiana (approx. ancient Mittani) and appears to have ruled his dominations from Armavir, Armenia.

of Alexander (r. 336-323 BCE) at the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 BCE (Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, 3, 8.5). In this final battle against Alexander, Armenian satrap Yervand (Orontes) II (r. 336-331 BCE) commanded 40,000 Armenian infantry and 7000 (most likely heavy) cavalry (Anderson 2016, 41) for the Achaemenid *spāda* at Gaugamela (Lang 1983, 508). Orontes's cavalry was situated at the right flank of the Achaemenid *spāda* and had they been more adeptly deployed the outcome of Gaugamela may have been different (Farrokh 2007, 104-105).

Caucasian Albania

The ancient Armenian designation for the Albanians was *Raneak* as well as *Alvank* with Greek sources identifying them as *Albanoi* (Bosworth 2011, 520). Armenian historian Movses Dasxuranci (or Movsēs Dasxurancʿi) wrote an extensive text on the Albanians (in the 10th century CE), tracing these from the mythical era up to early medieval times in the 10th century CE.[7] Descriptions of the territories of ancient Albania by Pliny[8] and Strabo[9] cartographically correspond to territories in the present-day (Caucasian) Republic of Azerbaijan, located above the Araxes River and historical Azarbaijan in northwest Iran. Caucasian Albania, known up to the early 20th century as Arran and the Khanates, was to be re-designated as "The Republic of Azerbaijan" (ROA) on May 27, 1918 (before the official end of the World War I on November 11, 1918).[10]

Archaeological expeditions in the 1960s-1970s provide evidence of a Mede-Achaemenid legacy in Caucasian Albania as indicated by finds such as column bases with palmette motifs (in the Persepolis tradition) and cylinder seals (Chaumont 1985, 806;

[7] Dowsett's 1961 translation of this work, *The History of the Caucasian Albanians*, remains a standard reference on the subject.

[8] Pliny provides a distinct geographical description of Albania: "All the plain from the Kur onward [northward] is occupied by the Albani and then that of the Hiberes [Iberians] separated from the Albani by the river Alazon [Alazoni] which flows from Mount Caucasus into the Cyrus [Kur]" (*Natural History*, 4, 29).

[9] The territory of the Albanians is described by Strabo (*Geography*, 11, 4.5) as follows: "Albania belongs to the territory of the Caspian tribe, as was also the sea; but the tribe has now disappeared. The pass through Iberia and Albania leads through Cambysene … to the Alazonius river [Alazani, in Georgia]".

[10] The Turkish Democratic Musavat Party (TDMP) convened on May 27, 1918, in Tbilisi, Georgia, "…to declare the independence of Azerbaijan, a republic that was to encompass southern and eastern Transcaucasia" (as cited by Hovanissian 1971, 31). As reported by Minorsky, "After the collapse of the Imperial Russian army Baku was protectively occupied by the Allies (General Dunsterville, 17 August-14 September 1918) on behalf of Russia. The Turkish troops under Nuri Pasha occupied Baku on 15 September 1918 and reorganized the former province under the name of Azarbaydjān" (Minorsky 1986). Note that despite its recent nomenclature, the ROA is recognized by mainstream scholarship as having been cartographically and historically distinct from the historical Azerbaijan in northwest Iran since antiquity.

Khalilov and Babaev 1978, 173). A more recent expedition in 2007 conducted by Babaev, Gagoshidze and Knauß excavated an Achaemenid-era building (dated at approximately 2500 years old) based on the Persepolis model at Qarajamirli[11] at the ROA notable for its chamber (at 1000 square meters) enclosed by numbers of rooms of smaller size (Babaev, Gagoshidze and Knauß 2007). The Babaev, Gagoshidze and Knauß expedition also discovered (a) that the structure's proportioned floor and sculptural system followed the architecture of Teispid-Achaemenid palaces and (b) pottery at the floor of the site was parallel with Persian designs produced during the Teispid-Achaemenid era. It is notable that structures similar to the Qarajamirli site have also been examined by archaeologists at Sary Tepe (also in the ROA) and at Gumbati in Georgia. The structures at Qarajamirli, Sary Tepe and Gumbati were most likely residential (or administrative) locations of Achaemenid officials before the collapse of the Teispid-Achaemenids. As concluded by the Babaev, Gagoshidze and Knauß research team, these structures (notably at Qarajamirli) are indicative of Albania having acted as a significant center for the Teispid-Achaemenids in the southern Caucasus.

The first citation of Albanian warriors fighting in the ranks of the Teispid-Achaemenid *spāda* is made in reference to Darius III's (r. 336-330 BCE) final battle against Alexander at the Battle of Gaugamela (331 BCE). The Albanian contingent is reported as having been under the command of a certain Atropates, the satrap of Media. In addition to the Albanians, Atropates's force at Gaugamela was composed of the Cadusians from northern Iran, Sakas from Central Asia and Medes (Arrian, *Anabasis* 3, 8.4). Pliny reports of the Greco-Macedonian general Patroclus as having conducted an exploratory mission of the Caspian Sea, beginning from the coastlines of the Cadusians and the Albanians (Pliny, *Natural History*, 4, 36; Strabo, *Geography*, 11, 6.1), sometime in 286-281.

Caucasian Iberia

The ancient Georgians of eastern Georgia were termed by the Greeks and later Romans as *Iberians*, with the ancient Georgian population of western Georgia identified as *Colchians* (Braund 1994, 17-18). While the Iberians are not reported in the armies of the Teispid-Achaemenids, Strabo's description of their martial culture and court customs displays a significant aspect of their customs as shared with the Iranian worlds (Medes of Iran proper as well as the Scythian-Sarmatians of Eastern Europe) and the Armenians of the southern Caucasus:

> "… they [Caucasian Iberians] dress after both the Armenian and the Median fashion; but the major, or warlike, portion, occupy the mountainous territory, living like the Scythians and the Sarmatians, of whom they are both neighbors and kinsmen … And they assemble many

[11] This is nearby to the city of Shamkhir which is situated at approximately 350 kilometres west of the capital city, Baku.

> tens of thousands, both from their own people and from the Scythians and Sarmatians, whenever anything alarming occurs." (Strabo, *Geography*, 11, 3.3)

The above description would indicate that even as the Teispid-Achaemenids had not imposed their direct authority onto the northern Caucasus, wider Iranian martial culture had become significantly influential in Caucasian Iberia, facilitated at least in part by their geographical proximity along their northern marches to the Iranian-speaking Scythian and Sarmatian realms.

The Seleucid Interlude, the Rise of the Arsacid Parthians, Roman Ambitions, and the Caucasus

The links between the Caucasus and Iran in militaria and martial culture were to endure following the dissolution of the Teispid-Achaemenids in 330 BCE. A seminal culturally shared domain was in the attire of Iranian riding dress as seen with the belted tunic and loose-fitting *šalwār* trousers of the Arsacid Parthians (Kawami 1992, 737-739; Messina, Rinaudo and Mehr-Kian 2014, 152) with parallel motifs in attire (headgear, tunics, trousers, tall boots) illustrated earlier in the 6th to 5th centuries BCE at Persepolis (*Pārsā*). These types of Iranian riding attire became widespread in the Caucasian territories of Iberia, Albania and Armenia (Farrokh 2022, 46). As discussed later in this section, several parallel developments were to take place between the Caucasus and the Iranian realms in the military and martial culture domains.

Following the Seleucid tenure in Iran, the Parthian Arsacids were to profoundly influence the martial traditions and military histories of Caucasian Albania, Armenia and Caucasian Iberia. The Armenian throne was to be regularly hosted by members of the Arsacid house, with a literary expression of these dynamics articulated in the "Romance of Artawan and Artašir" in Aganthelos's *History* (Traina 2018, 112-113). The Armenian Kingdom also became increasingly entangled between the rising Parthian Arsacid Kingdom and Rome, especially following the latter's destruction of Seleucid military power.

Armenia in the Seleucid Era and the Rise of the Parthians in Iran

The question of whether Alexander succeeded in subduing Armenia as a satrapy of his Greco-Macedonian empire is debated, mainly due to conflicting reports by ancient sources.[12] Alexander is reported by Curtius Rufus (*History of Alexander* 1.44), Diodorus

[12] As summarized by Khorikyan (2019, 120): "The issue whether or not Alexander of Macedon finally conquered Armenia caused various disagreements in professional literature. According to researchers in the Battle of Gaugamela Orontes, one of Armenian troop commanders struggles for preserving independence of Armenia during and after the reign of Alexander of Macedon. Armenia wasn't conquered by of Alexander of Macedon himself, that is to say, the latter couldn't consider Armenia to

(*Library of History*, 17, 64.6) and Arrian (*Anabasis of Alexander* 3, 16) as having appointed the son of Orontes II, Mithranes, as his designated satrap for Armenia in 331 BCE, however ancient sources remain unclear if he actually succeeded in taking control of Armenia. Justin in his report of the speech by the Pontic king Mithradates (New Persian: Mehrdad) VI Eupador (r. 120-63 BCE) notes that Armenia was never conquered by Alexander (Justin, *Epitome* 38.7). In contradiction to Justin, Curtius states in his report of Alexander's speech in 330 BCE at Hecatompylos (modern city of Qumis in Semnan province) that the Greco-Macedonian conqueror stated that he had conquered the kingdom (Curtius, *Histories of Alexander the Great* 6.3) which would suggest that Mithranes had been successful in establishing his authority on Alexander's behalf.

Even as the influence of Hellenic language and culture was to spread in Armenia, the kingdom's (cultural and linguistic) links to Iran proved resilient (Lang 1983, 524). Writing in the first century CE, Strabo (64 BCE-24 CE) has highlighted the long-standing and established Armenian-Iranian parallels in martial and regal culture already in place before the full consolidation of the Parthian dynasty within Iran, and prior to the establishment of the Arsacid line in Armenia and the Caucasus:

> "As for customs, most of theirs [the Medes] and of those of the Armenians are the same, because their countries are similar. The Medes, however, are said to have been the originators of customs for the Armenians, and also, still earlier, for the Persians, who were their masters and their successors in the supreme authority over Asia. For example, their Persian stole [type of Iranian robe] … the court they pay to their kings, and their ornaments, and the divine reverence paid by subjects to kings … particularly clear from their dress; for tiara, citaris [Iranian type head-dress], pilus [skull cap of felt], tunics with sleeves reaching to the hands, and trousers … such as the Medes wear …" (Strabo, *Geography*, 11, 13.9)

This tradition was essentially a continuation of a shared military tradition dating back to the Mede and Teispid-Achaemenid eras. By 321 BCE, the Median realms of Iran had delineated into Media (broadly corresponding to western and central Iran) and Media Atropatene[13] which Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) cites as having been situated to the south of the Araxes River[14], thus distinct from ancient Armenia and Caucasian Albania, which is

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be "spear-conquered country". But Armenia was subjected to the Macedonian Conqueror, whose power over Armenia had never been strong and was limited to the southern territory of Armenia".

[13] As noted by Strabo: "Media is divided into two parts one of which is called the Greater Media. Its capital is Ecbatana, a large city containing the royal seat of the Median Empire. … The other part is Atropatian Media … which was a part of Greater Media" (*Geography*, 11, 13.1).

[14] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 6, 13; see also Bostock & Riley (1890, 27-28). Pliny further avers that "Adjoining the other front of Greater Armenia, which runs down towards the Caspian Sea, we find Atropatene, which is separated from Otene, a region of Armenia, by the river Araxes; Gazae is its chief city, distant from Artaxata four hundred and fifty miles, and the same from Ecbatana in Media, to which country Atropatene belongs".

consistent with Strabo's (64 BC-24 CE) reports of the region[15] (Fig. 1). Atropates had been the satrap of Media, the largest Teispid-Achaemenid province at the time of Alexander's conquests, with the latter allowing Atropates to retain his post. Following the death of Alexander, Atropates retained his post (Diodorus, *Library of History*, 18, 3.3) to then essentially form his own kingdom in northwest Iran by 321 BCE, a region which was to become known as Media Atropatene (Schippmann 1987, 221-224).

FIGURE 1. Map of Media Atropatene and the Caucasus in the 2nd Century BCE[16]

[15] Strabo further describes the geography of Media Atropatene as follows: "Atropatene Media borders upon Armenia and Matiane towards the east, towards the west on the Greater Media, and on both towards the north, to the south it is contiguous to the people living along the recess of the Hyrcanian Sea [Caspian Sea], and to Matiane" (*Geography*, 11, 13.2).

The descriptions of Strabo and Pliny make clear that Media Atropatene was situated in northwest Iran's modern Azarbaijan region below the Araxes River, making it distinct from Caucasian Albania and Armenia in the southern Caucasus. Scholarship has generally identified Media Atropatene as having been situated in the northwestern segment of Greater Media with its northern limit having been the Araxes River (e.g., de Planhol 1987; Talbert 2000, 1292).

[16] I, Torgo, CC BY-SA 3.0 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>, via Wikimedia Commons

The revival of the Orontid (or Eruandid) dynasty from the early part of the 4th century BCE (not long after Alexander's conquests) was most likely also inherent with the cultural processes as alluded to by Strabo. The Orontid resurgence was signaled by reports of a certain Orontes appearing by c. 316 BCE, rivalled by another faction known as the Mithranes.[17] The Armenians proved unable to retain their rising independence as the Seleucids imposed their authority over their kingdom by sometime in 312 BCE. The authority of the Seleucids in northeast Iran and Central Asia was to be challenged by breakaway movements in the former Teispid-Achaemenid province of Parthava (Parthia) and the Greco-Bactrians by c. 245 BCE (Overtoom 2016, 11-12, 14-15). Concomitant with these developments, the Seleucids were facing the military threat of the North Iranian Dahae confederation in Central Asia composed of the major tribes of the Parni (Aparshahr), Xanthi and Pissuri (Olbrycht 2003, 71). The Parni, who were based on the east of the Caspian Sea and to the north of Parthia launched their initial incursions into Parthava sometime during the reigns of Seleucis I (r. 305-281 BCE) and Antiochus I Soter (281-261 BCE), eventually succeeding at establishing the Arsacid dynasty (sometime in 248-247 BCE) with the enthronement of Arsaces (Ashk) I (r. c. 247-211 BCE; Ellerbrock 2021, 27) as king, effectively founding the origins of the Parthian Arsacid Kingdom. Antiochus III Megas (r. 222-187 BCE) was able to counterattack against the Parthians and defeat them in a series of campaigns in 209-208 BCE, culminating in their victory over Arsaces II (r. 211-191 CE; Mielczarek 1998, 101; Overtoom 2020, 135; Ellerbrock 2021, 28), resulting in the imposition of loose Seleucid authority over the Arsacid Parthians (albeit with considerable autonomy).

Prior to these campaigns in north-northeast Iran and Central Asia, Antiochus III had assigned two of his Armenian generals, Zareh (Zariadris) and Artašês/Artashês (Artaxias), to impose Seleucid authority over western and eastern Armenia. In the disastrous aftermath of Antiochus III's defeat by the Romans at the Battle of Magnesia in 190 BCE, Zareh and Artashês (whose family lineage hailed from Iranian ancestry (Garsoïan 2004)) dissolved their ties with the Seleucid house, to then establish their own sovereign kingdoms by the late 2nd century BCE (Strabo, *Geography* 11, 14.5). Zareh established his military power in eastern Anatolia's Acilisene (modern Erzincan in Turkey), Taron (roughly modern Muş province in Turkey), Sophene (roughly modern Elazığ province in Turkey) and northern Mesopotamia. Artashês forged his dynastic kingdom (the Artaxiads) in the southern Caucasus, broadly corresponding to modern-day Armenia, and soon expanded his dominion south into Media Atropatene in northwest Iran and also northwards into Caucasian Iberia (Chaumont 1986). The Parthians had also reasserted their military power at Seleucid expense, following the passing of Antiochus III in 187 BCE. The tenure of Zareh and Artashês was of profound significance for Armenia, notably in the strengthening

[17] Aramaic, which had been the official language of the former Achaemenid Kingdom, remained as the Armenian chancellery's official written language.

of Armenian language and culture among the local populations (Strabo, *Geography*, 11, 14.5). Iranian culture continued to exert its profound influence (as evidenced for example by the preponderance of Zoroastrianism in Sophene (Boyce and Grenet 1991, 320)), which may explain in part the trilingual (Armenian, Iranian and Greek) character of the Armenian aristocracy.

Upon his enthronement as king, Seleucis IV Philopator (r. 187-175 BCE) was being confronted by renewed Parthian territorial expansions in northeast Iran which the Seleucid military was unable to offset (Bivar 1983, 32) due in part to internal (Seleucid) political instability. The reviving military power of the Parthians (most likely during the reign of Phriapatus (c. 191-176 BCE)[18]) had led to key successes in Central Asia where they seized substantial territories at the expense of the Greco-Bactrians by c. 175 BCE (Debevoise 1968, 19). Antiochus IV (r. 175-163 BCE) inherited his predecessors' challenges with the Parthians, who now led by Farhad (Phraates) I (r. 168-164 BCE (Ellerbrock 2021, 28)), had fully restored their independence in northeast Iran. Farhad also expanded into northern Iran's Hyrcania regions and succeeded in capturing large segments of the Alborz mountains, which were strategic staging posts for the Parthian *spād* (army) for launching future strikes into Media (notably Ecbatana; Bivar 1983, 31) and the Iranian interior.

Concomitant with the vast territorial losses of the Seleucids in northern Iran and the east, as well as Antiochus IV's own political challenges, the Seleucid monarch was also confronted with four military threats against the Seleucid Empire: (1) the Jewish revolts (2) the threat of a rising Roman empire to the west (3) southwest Iran and Characene and (4) the southern Caucasus region. In a clear case of "picking his battles" Antiochus IV (r. 175-163 BCE) opted to lead the Seleucid armies in a military campaign against Artashês of the Armenian Kingdom in 165 BCE. Armenian and Seleucid armies met in a major battle at Armil (contemporary Armenian capital at the time) near Lake Van (in modern eastern Turkey; Gera and Horowitz 1997, 244). While few military details are known of the tactics and composition of the Armenian and Seleucid armies in the 165 BCE war[19], Appian reports of Antiochus IV's capture of Artashês (Appian, *Syrian Wars* 66) with Diodorus describing the Armenian king as having been forced into submission to Seleucid authority (Diodorus, *Library of History* 31, 17a). Antiochus IV then turned towards southwest Iran in 164 BCE to confront the Fratarakā king of Persis, Wahbarz (c. 205 - 164 BCE) who had asserted his independence from the Seleucids (Shayegan 2011, 169). Wahbarz had then expanded his domains in Persis followed by his capture of Characene, possibly sometime in 184 BCE (Shayegan 2011, 176). Subsequent Seleucid offensives in 164 BCE led to the

[18] Timeline as calibrated by Ellerbrock (2021, 28).

[19] The Seleucids were most likely deploying "Western" (Greco-Macedonian) type combat infantry, possibly battle elephants, as well as Iranian type armored cataphracts (most likely also fielded by the Armenians in the Battle at Armil) as well as horse archers (Farrokh, forthcoming).

defeat of Wahbarz and the restoration of Seleucid authority over Persis and Characene.[20] Antiochus IV's subsequent campaign against Elymais that same year ended in military failure[21] with Seleucid forces also defeated and expelled by local contingents from Persepolis (Bivar 1983, 32n5), to die shortly thereafter in the vicinity of modern-day Isfahan.[22] Antiochus IV's military absorption in the southern Caucasus and subsequently against Persis and Elymais, also meant that the Seleucids lacked the military capacity to attack the Parthians as they expanded deeper into Iran. The passing of Antiochus IV also led to a temporary halt in Seleucid military operations intended for the restoration of stable (Seleucid) rule in Iran (Strootman 2007, 313). This meant that Seleucid authority was also vulnerable to Armenian breakaway movements in the southern Caucasus. Much as in the case of Antiochus III, Seleucid successes proved ephemeral as the Armenians reasserted their independence following Antiochus IV's passing in 163 BCE. This is evidenced by Artashês' (or Artashês I's) forging of an anti-Seleucid military alliance with (Hellenic satrap) Timarchus of (Seleucid ruled) Media, sometime in 163-161 BCE. The Parthians continued to build on their successes now under the leadership of Mehrdad (Mithradares) I (r. c. 165/164–132 BCE (Ellerbrock 2021, 31)) who is recognized for his achievements in having transformed the Arsacid kingdom's military into a major force (Frye 1984, 211), increasingly capable of successfully confronting Western-style armies (e.g. Seleucids, Romans) in battle.

The Armenian Kingdom, now led by Artashês successor[23], Artavazd I (Artavazdes) (r. 160-115 BCE) soon became involved in the internal affairs of Caucasian Iberia, having been invited to do so by that realm's nobles. The end result of these political machinations was the enthronement of Artavazd's son, Artashês, as monarch of the kingdom, thus founding Caucasian Iberia's own dynastic lineage of the Artaxiads (Rapp 2003, 282). With his influence having expanded into Caucasian Iberia, Artavazd I was also successful in maintaining Armenian authority over territories in northwest Iran. It was during the reign

[20] Pliny identifies a certain Numenius as the Seleucid commander entrusted for this military campaign, scored his victories over Persis in battles fought both at land and at sea (*Natural History*, 6, 152). Wahbarz, who most likely accepted a type of vassal status to the Seleucids following his defeat by Seleucid forces, was to be succeeded by a certain Baydad/Bagdat (r. 164-146 BCE) in Persis. It is not clear as to what level of political authority the Seleucids were able to maintain in Persis following Antiochus IV's subsequent defeat at Elam and Persepolis.

[21] As noted by Mørkholm, Antiochus IV was to fail, much like his predecessor, Antiochus III, who unsuccessfully campaigned to capture the primary temple of Elam (1966, 170; see also Polybius, *The Histories*, 31, 11) in reference to Antiochus IV's campaign). Mørkholm further states that Antiochus IV decided to abandon his attack on the temple which was being defended by the same local defenders who had defeated and killed his father (Antiochus III) who had invaded the area over two decades ago.

[22] Appian reports the king as having died in Tabae (Gabae) in Paraetacene, a region in today's Isfahan (*Syrian Wars* 67).

[23] Artashês had died in 160 BCE.

of Artavazd I when the Parthians finally achieved the permanent ejection of the Seleucids from Iran under the leadership of Farhad (Phraates) II (r. c. 132-127 BCE (Habicht 2009, 223; Ellerbrock 2021, 32-33)) who conclusively defeated the armies of Seleucid king Antiochus VII Sidetes (r. 138-129 BCE) at the Battle of Ecbatana in 129 BCE (Eusebius, *Chronicon*, p. 257; see also analysis of the battle by Overtoom 2020, 213). Farhad II, however, was to die in battle later that same year against the invasions of the Saka arriving from Central Asia (Overtoom 2020, 238-239), with Ardavan (Artabanus) I (r. 127-123 BCE) to also perish in battle against the Sakas in 123 BCE (Ellerbrock 2021, 33). The Parthian *spād* was to militarily recover under Mithradates (Mehrdad) II (r. c. 121-91 BCE (Ellerbrock 2021, 31[24])) who successfully defeated the invading Sakas (Olbrycht 2015, 334) leading to the Arsacids' securing of northeast Iran, modern-day Afghanistan and much of Central Asia for the Arsacid Kingdom (Olbrycht 2010, 151). With the eastern and Central Asian marches secured for the Arsacids, Parthian military attentions could now focus northwest towards Artavazd's possessions in northwest Iran and Armenia in the southern Caucasus. Mehrdad II soon mobilized the Parthian *spād* in a major and victorious offensive against Artavazd I, resulting in Armenia becoming a (de-facto) vassal kingdom of the Arsacids. Artavazd I is generally recognized as having been succeeded by Tigran I (possibly: 115 or 120-95 BCE).[25]

Tigran II

Mehrdad II obliged Tigran I to yield his close relation with Tigran II (later known as Tigran II "The Great" r. 95-55 BCE)) as a court hostage to the Arsacids.[26] Parthian strategic calculations placed Armenia and northwest Iran as prime regions for the security of their northwest frontier, notably with the rise of the Pontic Kingdom in Anatolia under the leadership of Mithradates Eupador (r. 120-63 BCE). The death of Tigran I in 95 BCE resulted in Mehrdad II releasing Tigran II from his hostage status in favor of having him enthroned as king of Armenia (Strabo, *Geography*, 12, 14.15).[27] Tigran II's release, however, came at the steep cost of the Armenians having to yield considerable territory to

[24] Note that Schippmann (1986) cites Mithradates II's reign as having been in c. 124/123-88/87 with Shayegan (2011, 225) and Rezakhani (2013, 770) citing the king's reign at 124-91 BCE.

[25] Foss has argued against the veracity of Tigran I having existed (1986, 48) with a larger preponderance of scholarship agreeing on the historical existence of Tigran I, but uncertain as to the exact dates of his reign (e.g. Schottky 1989, 242; Adalian 2010, 19).

[26] Less clear is whether Tigran II was a son of Artavazd (Appian reports that he was not (*Syrian Wars* 48)) or of Tigran I who was the brother of Artavazd. Manandyan and Bournoutian propose that as Artavazd lacked an heir as his successor for the Armenian throne, it was Tigran II who was selected as successor as he was (according to these researchers) the son of Tigran I who was the brother of Artavazd I (Manandyan and Bournoutian 2007, 19; see also Rouben 2002, xxix).

[27] According to Justin, "The king of Armenia, at this time, was Tigranes, who had long before been committed as a hostage to the Parthians but had subsequently been sent back to take possession of his father's throne" (*Epitome* 38, 3.1).

FIGURE 2. Map of the Armenian Empire at Its Greatest Extent under Tigran II "The Great" (r. 95-55 BCE)[28]

the Arsacids (Geller and Traina 2013, 451) which (as per Strabo) consisted of "seventy valleys" (Strabo, *Geography*, 12, 14.15). Tigran II had essentially agreed to these terms as a temporary expedient in anticipation of future geopolitical changes when he would not only reverse these concessions, but also expand the Armenian Kingdom at Parthian expense, notably into Media Atropatene in northwest Iran (Fig. 2). Tigran II had also struck an alliance with Mithradates VI Eupador soon after his arrival into Armenia (Arnaud 1987, 134; Olbrycht 2009, 169). The latter was to lead the Pontic Kingdom into a major war against Rome, resulting in a series of defeats (notably the Battles of Cyzicus (73 BCE) and Cabira (Sivas; 72 BCE) at the hands of the Roman consul and general Lucius Licinius Lucullus (118-57/56 BCE), prompting Mithradates VI Eupador to seek asylum

[28] www.armenica.org. The original English map was uploaded by Nareklm, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

with Tigran II of Armenia by 71 BCE. Lucullus in turn requested that Tigran II yield the Pontic king to the Romans, but to no avail, making an Armenian-Roman war inevitable. Mithradates Eupador reportedly requested that the Parthians, now led by Farhad (Phraates) III (r. c. 70-57 BCE (Ellerbrock 2021, 40-41)), to provide military assistance for Tigran II's forces (Bivar 1983, 46); however, the Parthians elected to remain neutral. While the late Parthian king Mehrdad II had considered providing military assistance for Mithradates Eupador against Roman territorial expansions into Asia Minor (Imanpour, Zarrinkoub and Hojati Najafabadi 2013, 38), such prospects had evaporated with Mehrdad II's passing sometime in 91 BCE. Further compounding Parthian reluctance in assisting Tigran II was the latter's territorial expansions into northwest Iran following the passing of Mehrdad II.

Despite official Parthian neutrality, Tigran II's subsequent battles against Lucullus in the battles of Tigranocerta (69 BCE) and Artaxata (68 BCE) are notable for the presence of (non-Parthian) Iranian contingents who bore significant parallels in militaria with the Armenian forces they were serving as comrades-in-arms against the Roman forces of Lucullus. Plutarch reports that Lucullus's Roman forces were "most afraid of their armored cavalry" (Plutarch, *Moralia* 203A) in reference to the armored cavalrymen of the Armenian-Iranian variety serving in the armies of Tigranes II. Plutarch's description of the Battle of Tigranocerta would indicate that a significant proportion of Tigran II's cavalry were of Iranian and Adiabene stock:

> "…his [Tigran II's] multitude formed in battle array, the king himself occupying the centre, and assigning the left wing to the king of the Adiabeni, the right to the king of the Medes. In front of this wing also the greater part of the mail-clad horsemen were drawn up." (Plutarch, *Lucullus* 27, 6)

The right wing is clearly Iranian and is also notable with respect to the location of the bulk of the cataphracts. By "Medes", however, Plutarch is most likely referring to Media Atropatene in northwest Iran as (cartographically) described earlier. These Median elements in Tigran II's armies were most likely armored cataphract lancers and possibly horse archers of the Iranian type seen amongst the Parthians. As part of the greater Iranian realms, Media Atropatene also shared its political and military developments with both Armenia and Albania, resulting in all of these regions having had the capability of fielding armored cavalry lancers or cataphracts by the 2nd century BCE (Olbrycht 2016, 308n69). Atropatene and Armenia are estimated as having been able to field a combined total of 100,000 troops (Olbrycht 2016, 317-318), although these would not all have been cavalry, as large numbers of effective infantry forces could also be fielded by Armenia[29] and Media

[29] The Armenian king Artavasdes II (54-53 BCE) was reportedly capable of fielding 30,000 professional infantry at the time of the Roman invasion (led by Marcus Licinius Crassus) of the Parthian Kingdom in 53 BCE (Plutarch, *Crassus* 19.1).

Atropatene.[30] Adiabene which shared significant cultural ties with both the Armenian and Iranian realms, was also most likely providing armored cavalry lancers of the Armenian-Iranian type for Tigranes II; Adiabene was reportedly capable of fielding up to 6000 cavalry by the 1st century CE (Olbrycht 2016, 324).

Plutarch provides further descriptions of the Armenian king's Iranian as well as Caucasian contingents at the Battle of Artaxata (68 BCE):

> "…Mardian mounted archers and Iberian lancers, on whom Tigranes relied beyond any other mercenaries, deeming them the most warlike." (Plutarch, *Lucullus* 31, 5)

The Mardians, known for their formidable warlike qualities (Justin, *Epitome* 41, 5.9)[31], inhabited an area between the Alborz mountainous region and the Caspian Sea: they were flanked to their east by Hyrcania in northern Iran and the Medes to their southwest. These are described as horse archers acting in support of Caucasian Iberian lancers. The latter were most likely armored in cataphract style; however, Plutarch's description does not clearly outline if this was definitely the case, and/or to what extent they (may) have been armored. Iberian lancers are further discussed in "Caucasian Iberia during the Parthian era".

Armenian-Parthian Developments in Heavy Cavalry

The Armenian and Iranian realms developed significant commonalities in cavalry warfare, with Armenia recognized for its capacity in fielding highly effective cavalry contingents for Iran during the Parthian era.[32] Classical descriptions of Armenian heavy or armored cavalry by Strabo (*Geography*, 11, 4.4), Sallust (*Historiarum* 4, 64, 65, 66) and Plutarch (*Lucullus* 26.7, 27.7, 28.2-4; *Crassus* 19.1; *Moralia* 203A) are very proximate to the military characteristics of Iranian cavalry at the time of the Parthians. While the specific equipment of Armenian armored cavalry at the battles of Tigranocerta and Artaxata is not known for certain, these were most likely of the lance-bearing types as seen among the Parthians and other Iranian peoples such as the Sarmatians. A more specific question to be posed regarding the Armenian cataphract cavalry of Tigran II is whether these were exclusively lance-bearing (with no other weapons), such as the 1st-2nd century CE armored

[30] Media Atropatene for example was to reportedly field 40,000 infantry troops for the defense of the city of Praaspa and other city-fortresses against the Roman forces of Marc Antony invading the Parthian empire through northwest Iran in 36 BCE (Strabo, *Geography* 11, 13.2); consult also Olbrycht (2016, 293) for further analyses of the breakdown of troops.

[31] See also Diodorus Siculus (*Library of History*, 17, 76.3) and Curtius Rufus (*History of Alexander* 6, 5.11) as per descriptions of determined Mardian resistance against the advances of Alexander into Northern Iran during the Greco-Macedonian invasion of the Achaemenid Kingdom.

[32] Strabo states for example that "There is ... Orchistene, which furnishes large bodies of cavalry" (*Geography*, 11, 14.4). Strabo's Orchistene is believed to refer to the modern-day region Nagorno-Karabakh.

lancer of the Sarmatian type[33] or whether these would have had other combat equipment such as axes, maces and swords (Sheppard 2020, 25), as seen for example with their Parthian counterparts.[34] The Parthian *spsyr*/*safsēr*[35] (sword; *nyd'mg*[36] (sheath)), was slung on the *asbārān* (Parthian heavy cavalry) warrior's left (and horse's left flank) side, with the weapon secured in place with a sword belt (Winkelmann 2009, 240).

TABLE 1. Estimated Numbers and Types of Troops from Arsacid-ruled Realms, Arsacid Dependent Kingdoms and the Southern Caucasus (adapted from Olbrycht 2016)

Armenia	**(Caucasian) Albania**	**(Caucasian) Iberia**
Total at 40-50,000 (Plutarch *Crassus* 19.1; Moses Khorenatsi, *History of the Armenians* 2.7): as per the 1st century BCE after Battles of Tigranocerta (69 BCE) and Artaxata (68 BCE) Note: in 53 BCE Armenia could field up to 16,000 cavalry (including 10,000 cataphracts).	Total at 82,000: 60,000 infantry and 22,000 cavalry (Strabo, *Geographica*, 11, 4.5). Plutarch cites 12,000 cavalry (*Pompey* 35.1) which may be in reference to the core of Albanian cavalry forces (excluding allies from the Northern Caucasus).	Total at 40,000: as per Plutarch (*Pompey* 34) who cites no clear breakdown of proportions of cavalry and infantry. The *K'art'lis C'xovreba* reports of 30,000 infantry and 10,000 cavalry in the 2nd century CE (Leont'i Mroveli, *The lives of the Georgian Kings*, p. 37).

Armenia was able to field large numbers of cavalry in the first century BCE (see Table 1), with Plutarch reporting a total of 16,000 during Crassus' invasion of the Parthian Kingdom (Plutarch, *Crassus* 19.1) in 53 BCE. It would appear that the Armenians had successfully absorbed the lessons of their defeat by the Roman forces of Lucullus who had struck the unarmored legs of the Armenian cavalrymen as well as the exposed (unarmored) thighs of their steeds in the battles of 69-68 BCE (Farrokh 2007, 127). Armenian cavalry after Tigran II's defeats became fully armored in the sense that (much like the Parthians) their legs were now protected by armor with their horses also fully protected. Strabo's report of the Armenian cavalry of King Artavzad (Artavasdes) during Marc Antony's

[33] As seen for example in the marble slab of an armored lancer of the Sarmatian type, excavated from the archaeological site of Tanais on the Don in the Rostov region (Sarmatian era), currently housed at the Hermitage Museum (Inventory number: TH-304).

[34] See depiction of Parthian *asbārān* by Wilcox (1999, 42-43, pl. A); for a full examination of the *asbārān*'s weaponry array, consult Karamian et al. 2018.

[35] For the Parthian term and Parthian inscription, see: Tafazzoli 1993, 191.

[36] Manichean Parthian.

invasion of the Parthian Kingdom by way of northwest Iran in 36 BCE is described as follows:

> "… [Artavazd] accompanied Antony in his invasion of Media, exhibited, besides other bodies of cavalry, 6000 horse covered with complete armor drawn up in array." (Strabo, *Geography*, 11, 14.9)

The above description of Armenian heavy cavalry is remarkably concordant with Plutarch's account of Parthian *asbārān* lancers of the first century BCE whose horses are reportedly protected with:

> "…armored with plates of bronze and steel … their helmets and breastplates blazing like fire, their Marginian steel glittering keen and bright." (Plutarch, *Crassus* 24)

Two critical functions of armor for Armenian and Parthian cavalry were to (a) refract the impact of enemy missiles as they charged with their two-handed lances into the enemy's formations[37] and to (b) afford protection against close quarter combat weapons once the armored cavalry reached the enemy's lines.[38] The armor of the Parthian *asbārān* also afforded them a high degree of battlefield protection against Roman javelins (Matufi 1999, 152). Armenia's copious local access to high quality iron facilitated the manufacture of high-quality armor in the kingdom (Nicolle 1992, 34), a feature praised well up to the 4th century CE by Eutropius (6, 9). Armenian cataphracts of the early 3rd century CE (much like their contemporary Parthian counterparts) continued to be armed with the lance, longsword and archery equipment[39] with the latter category also appearing among late Parthian cavalry of the early 3rd century CE (and possibly earlier) as depicted in the Firuzabad relief of the Arsacid-Sassanian battle of Hormzdgān (224 CE).[40] Armenian heavy cavalry were known for their efficacy in close-quarters combat, reportedly capable of splitting the helmeted head of an opponent with a sword strike (Jalali 2004, 64). Parthian and Armenian helmets of the "conical" type, were of the *Spangenhelm* system,

[37] The *asbārān* are described by Plutarch as attacking with "… spear with steel … impetus enough to pierce through two men at once" (*Crassus* 27.2).

[38] Plutarch's description of the high level of armored protection of the *asbārān* when engaged in close quarters melee is as follows: "… their armored cavalry has weapons of offense which will cut through everything and defensive equipment which will stand up to any blow …" (*Crassus* 18).

[39] Wilcox's reconstruction of early 3rd century CE Armenian heavy cavalry (Wilcox 1999, 42-44) is based on observations of the figure of the Goliath bas-relief at Gagic, Lake Van, which despite being dated as late as the 11th century CE, provides an exceptional outline of 2nd to 3rd centuries CE Armenian cavalry and their equestrian armour characteristics.

[40] The Firuzabad panel depicts three concurrent duels (a) the Sassanian challenger of the Arsacids (and founder of the Sassanian dynasty) Ardashir I (r. 224-242 CE) versus the Parthian king Ardavan IV (r. 216-224 CE) (b) Sassanian crown prince Shapur versus the Parthian grand vizier and (c) an unknown Sassanian knight versus his (unknown) Parthian counterpart. The combatants are portrayed from their right side and illustrated with quivers; however, the Firuzabad panel does not illustrate actual archery combat between the combatants.

built of metallic plates riveted together.[41] The conical design of this type of Armenian-Parthian helmet was capable of deflecting sideways the power of up-down sword attacks which significantly reduced the chances of a direct and fatal (up-down) sword strike upon the helmet's apex (Farrokh et al. 2017, 125).

In summary, developments in Armenian heavy cavalry equipment (and tactics (Cosentino 2004, 253)) were harmonious with that of the Parthians (and broadly with the Iranian realms in general; Jalali 2004, 63). The Parthian decimal military system was to also impart its influence upon the martial organization of the Armenians (Olbrycht 2016b, 293-294; Nikonorov 2005, 147-148), as seen for example with Movsēs Khorenatsi's report of a standard Armenian military division having been allocated a total of 10,000 troops (Movsēs (Moses) Khorenatsi, *History of the Armenians* 1.14; 2.7; 2.8).

Armenia as Military Flashpoint between Rome and the Parthian Kingdom

Rome and the Parthian Kingdom very nearly went to war over the question of suzerainty over Armenia in the first century CE. Valaksh (Vologases) I (r. 50/51-79 CE (Ellerbrock 2021, 56-58)) had dispatched his brother Tirdad into Armenia in c. 51 CE with a significant armed force of the *spād* to seize the kingdom's throne[42] (for more on this campaign see also "Pharnavazids, Arsacids and Caucasian Iberia during the Parthian Era"). Emperor Nero (r. 54-68 CE) of Rome reacted to Tirdad's installation in Armenia by mobilizing for a major war (Tacitus, *Annals* 13, 7). Despite this, an immediate war did not break out as Roman emissaries sent in 55 CE to Valaksh I persuaded him to enter negotiations instead (Tacitus, *Annals* 13, 9). Valaksh I proved receptive to the Roman offer, as Wardān (Vardanes), one of the king's sons, had risen in military rebellion against him. Given the weakened position this internecine conflict posed for the *spād*, Valaksh I agreed to withdraw his contingents from Armenia (Bivar 1983, 81). This tactical decision proved adaptive for Valaksh I as he was able to concentrate his military forces towards comprehensively crushing Wardān's rebellion. Valaksh I's military success allowed him to once again focus his strategic attentions against the Romans, by demanding that Armenia be politically recognized as part of the Parthian realms (i.e. not a Roman province) with Tirdad to remain enthroned in the south Caucasian Kingdom (Sheldon 2014, 105). In response, Roman forces in the Near East theatre led by Gnaeus Domitus Corbulo[43] once

[41] Helmets of the "conical" type composed of rows of metallic plates fastened with rivets are illustrated at the site of Dura Europos (Ghirshman 1962, figs. 62, 100, 165; Invernizzi 1999, 22-24, fig. 6, pl. A).

[42] It is notable that Valaksh I had abandoned the past Parthian practice of dispatching an embassy to the Romans to expound upon machinations in Armenia.

[43] Corbulo's Near East contingents included Cappadocians and Galatians, with the Roman commander also provided with the III Gallica and VI Ferrata legions for the invasion of Armenia; the Roman governor of Syria, Ummidius Quadratus, was provided the X Frentesis and XII Fulminata as well as an assortment of auxiliary troops (Sheldon 2014, 105).

again mobilized for war (Bivar 1983, 81)[44] by c. 57 CE. Tirdad, firmly in place in Armenia, had been engaged in a military campaign in 57 CE against the kingdom's pro-Roman factions. Against Corbulo's orders, Paccius Orfitus (a high-ranking centurion) militarily deployed against Tirdad in c. winter 57/58 CE (Sheldon 2014, 106), resulting in a decisive defeat of the Roman forces (Tacitus, *Annals*, 13, 36).[45] Undeterred, Corbulo continued the Roman military buildup to strike in early 58 CE, supported by forces arriving from Anatolia (Galatia and Cappadocia) as well as Pharasmanes I of Iberia (who had earlier fought successfully against the forces of Parthian king Ardavan (Artabanus) II (r. 12-38 CE; discussed further in "Pharnavazids, Arsacids and Caucasian Iberia during the Parthian Era") and Moschi fighters from the Caucasus. Corbulo struck into Armenia to target the kingdom's pro-Parthian faction with Iberian and Anatolian forces striking along Armenia's peripheral regions (Bivar 1983, 81). Valaksh I deployed military forces into Armenia to counter Corbulo's offensives, but was soon forced to withdraw due to the outbreak of a serious anti-Parthian revolt in northern Iran's Hyrcania region.[46] As Corbulo advanced into Armenia, Tirdad withdrew into northwest Iran's Media Atropatene region to launch cavalry raids against Roman forces in the southern Caucasus. Corbulo adapted against Tirdad's cavalry tactics by segmenting his forces into smaller sized units, leading to Roman successes in the capture of numbers of fortresses (Bivar 1983, 82), and the seizure of Artaxata (Tacitus, *Annals*, 14, 23) by 58 CE. Resuming the Roman military campaign in early 59 CE, Corbulo deployed from Lake Van to capture Tigranocerta[47] and the Legerda fortress (Sheldon 2014, 107).

Valaksh I's attempts at assisting Tirdad in Armenia continued to be hampered by the Hyrcanian revolt with additional military threats posed by the rise of the Kushan Empire in Afghanistan and Central Asia.[48] Despite the unfavorable conditions posed against the *spād*, Tirdad deployed with a new major offensive in 60 CE from Media Atropatene against the Romans in Armenia but was defeated. Nero then undertook to place a certain Cappadocian royal named Tigranes IV upon the Armenian throne supported by one thousand

[44] Additional legionary forces were transferred from Germany to support Corbulo in the Near East (Tacitus, *Annals*, 13, 35). The X Fretensis was to then be sent from Syria to Corbulo, with the IV Scythica arriving from Moesia into Syria (Kagan 2006, 356).

[45] Orfitus and his soldiers were then duly disciplined by Corbulo for their disobedience.

[46] Patterson (2020, 761) in citation of Tacitus (*Annals* 14, 25) who discusses the reception of a Hyrcanian delegation by Nero.

[47] Gregoratti (2017, 114) notes how the terror caused by Corbulo's destruction of Artaxata effected a major role in Tigranocerta's surrender.

[48] A Hyrcanian-Kushan alliance may have taken place against the Parthians at this time, raising the possibility that the Hyrcanian delegation to the Romans may have included Kushan emissaries (Bivar 1983, 83). The Kushan expansion into Central Asia was also posing military threats to the Parthian Kingdom's territories in the northeast and southeast. Kushan forces had also reached into the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent by the 60s CE.

legionaries, two cavalry squadrons and three allied cohorts (Tacitus, *Annals*, 14, 26). Firmly ensconced with Roman support, Tigranes IV struck from Armenia into Parthian territories in northern Mesopotamia against Adiabene in 61 CE. The increasing military threats from the Caucasus appear to have been a major element in prompting Valaksh I to seek a compromised settlement with the Hyrcanians to end Parthian military conflicts in northern Iran. Valaksh I's diplomatic success translated into military benefits for the *spād*, as the king was able to dispatch an elite royal guard regiment (led by a certain Monaeses) in support of Adiabene (Bivar 1983, 83) leading to the defeat and ejection of Tigran IV back into Armenia (Patterson 2020, 767-768). As the Adiabene-Monaeses forces advanced into Armenia, Tigran IV took refuge in the fortified city of Tigranocerta, with Corbulo dispatching the XII Fulminata and IV Scythica to assist their vassal-king (Tacitus, *Annals* 14, 3; Patterson 2020, 767-768). The subsequent siege of the Adiabene-Monaeses forces was successfully held at bay by its Roman and local (pro-Roman) Armenian garrison (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 62, 20.2-3; Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 4). Valaksh I had deployed to Nisibis in northern Mesopotamia, providing the *spād* with a strategic staging area to strike into Armenia and/or Syria. The Romans responded with a diplomatic mission requesting for Valaksh I to order the cessation of siege operations against Tigranocerta, or to face the threat of a Roman offensive into Parthian territories (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 5), with the Romans also militarily prepared to block any attempted crossings by the *spād* into Syria.[49] Valaksh I opted for diplomacy by having Monaeses and the Adiabene forces lift the stalled siege of Tigranocerta[50], with himself withdrawing from Nisibis. In return, the Romans apparently reciprocated by pulling Tigranes IV and his forces out of Armenia (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 6). Further Arsacid diplomatic initiatives proved unsuccessful upon Valaksh I's repeated demands that the Romans recognize Parthian rulership over Armenia (Sheldon 2014, 108). Roman dissatisfaction with Parthian demands, led to Nero's dispatch of Lucius Caesennius Paetus as Roman general for the seizure of Armenia. Upon his arrival in 62 CE at Cappadocia as governor (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 62, 20.4), Paetus was furnished with three legions (V Macedonica, XII Fulminata and IV Scythica (Sheldon 2014, 108)) supported by Pontian, Galatian and Cappadocian auxiliaries (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 6). Corbulo (stationed in Syria) was in command of three legions (III, VI and X; Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 6).

[49] As reported by Cassius Dio, Valaksh I's prospects for striking Corbulo into Syria from Nisibis were fraught with peril as the Romans had already prepared for a Parthian offensive (*Roman History*, 62, 20.2-3). Patterson details Corbulo's successful deployment of the X Fretensis, III Gallica, and VI Ferrata to the Euphrates River in anticipation of any *spād* offensives into Syria (Patterson 2020, 768), with these legions most likely also having been provided with levy units in support.

[50] In addition to the successful defense posed by the besieged garrison of Tigranocerta, Monaeses and the Adiabene were facing additional challenges in providing fodder for their horses as locusts had consumed the available local supplies at the environs of Tigranocerta.

With the failure of his diplomatic missions to Nero, Valaksh I deployed the *spād* to the Euphrates for a military thrust into Roman-held Syria. Corbulo, however, struck pre-emptively by crossing the Euphrates in force to land in Arsacid territory to successfully repel Parthian forces attempting to eject them (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 9). With this successful operation, Corbulo had compelled Valaksh I to abandon his invasion plans for Syria. Valaksh I, however, shifted his battle plans by having the *spād* invade Armenia, which was essentially the primary strategic prize for the Parthians at this time. Paetus responded to the Parthian invasion by launching his own forces from Cappadocia into Armenia[51], with his primary military objective being the (re)capture of the strategic city of Tigranocerta, as he advanced along the Taurus Passes.[52] Upon Paetus's arrival to Tigranocerta, the awaiting forces of Valaksh I's *spād* successfully attacked and defeated the Roman legions and their auxiliaries, forcing them to retreat.[53] With the *spād* now ascendant in Armenia, Valaksh I shifted his strategy towards the pursuit of Paetus and his forces. In response, Paetus dispersed his forces into three groups: (1) a major force of 3000 legionnaires and Pannonian auxiliaries (infantry and cavalry) tasked with blocking the *spād*'s advances on the Taurus passes (Tacitus, *Annals* 15, 10) (2) a cohort placed at the Arsamosata fortress[54] and (3) the third force stationed at Rhandeia (near modern-day Turkey's Murad Su River) where Paetus himself was located. Paetus then deployed with his forces from Rhandeia (without having completed defensive fortifications for his base) to confront Valaksh I. The Parthians, however, rapidly destroyed Paetus's reconnaissance force, obliging him to retreat back to his own base. Valaksh I then struck his primary blow by comprehensively defeating the IV Scythica and XII Fulminata legions and their auxiliaries (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 11; Sheldon 2014, 114). The survivors of this Parthian operation escaped to join Paetus at Rhandeia which, like Arsamosata, was soon besieged by Valaksh I. The *spād*'s successes during these battles for Armenia had been facilitated by their efficacious severing of Roman communications between Rhandeia and other Roman forces in Armenia and the adept implementation of Parthian envelopment tactics (Olbrycht 1998, 140-141).

Paetus sent frantic appeals to Corbulo for military assistance (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 11) who mobilized approximately 4600 troops to march towards Rhandeia against Valaksh

[51] Paetus invaded with the IV Scythica and XII Fulminata legions (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 7), with the V Macedonica however having been stationed in the Pontus region (see Sheldon 2014, 109).

[52] Paetus's hastily launched campaign into Armenia had failed to (a) plan the required logistics of grain supply deliveries for his forces (a problem further compounded when grain supplies seized enroute by his troops were soon spoiled) and (b) to prepare adequate defences for his winter quarters.

[53] Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 62, 21.1. Interestingly, Paetus attempted to falsely portray his defeat at Tigranocerta as a victorious success in a bombastic letter he sent to Nero (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 8).

[54] Paetus had placed his wife and son in this fortress for protection.

I.[55] Instead of waiting for Corbulo's arrival, Paetus frantically appealed to Valaksh I for negotiations who agreed with his request.[56] In return for safe passage from Armenia to Cappadocia (Bivar 1983, 84), Paetus agreed to the following four terms demanded by Valaksh I (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 14-15): (1) the relinquishing of Armenia to the Parthians (2) surrender of all Roman forts in the theatre and their inventories (3) the construction of a bridge over the Murad Su River by Roman engineers and (4) permission for the dispatch of a new embassy to Nero in Rome. As Roman forces retreated from Armenia, local Armenian elements reportedly seized the Romans' weapons as they proceeded to depart from their encampments (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 15). When Paetus finally reached into the safety of Roman territory, he met with Corbulo in hopes of persuading him to attack the Parthians in Armenia. Corbulo refused this request as the Roman defeat at Rhandeia could no longer be reversed. There was also the immediate strategic threat of a possible Parthian offensive into Syria (Olbrycht 1998, 140) which now needed to be guarded against with available Roman forces in the region (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 17). The military balance in the South Caucasus and the Near East had now shifted in favor of the Parthians, thanks to the *spād*'s recent successes in the elimination of significant numbers of Roman forces in Armenia. Valaksh I, however, elected to pursue diplomatic versus military venues to arrive at a settlement with the Romans over the Armenian question. A compromise was agreed upon in which Valaksh I would withdraw from Armenia in exchange for Corbulo retiring from the eastern or Parthian side of the Euphrates River (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 62, 22.2-3; Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 17). The question of (Roman versus Parthian) hegemony over Armenia would be settled with the arrival of Valaksh I's emissaries in (circa) spring 63 CE to Emperor Nero in Rome. The Parthian embassy proposed that Tirdad would receive the diadem for the Armenian throne from the person of Nero (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 24). Tirdad would arrive for this proposed ceremony into Roman territories where he would pay homage to standards and statues of the Roman emperor in a royal ritual to be attended by Roman legions (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 24). Nero's response was that he would agree to these terms on condition that Tirdad would arrive to Rome to receive the royal crown from the hands of the Roman emperor (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 62, 22.3).

Even as the Parthian embassy was well-received by Nero, he did order Corbulo to launch attacks into Armenia in 63 CE which resulted in a military campaign targeting the fortresses of local anti-Roman Armenian dignitaries (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 27). Despite these provocations Tirdad and Valaksh I remained determined to pursue diplomacy. Corbulo, who had not defeated the *spād* since its victories over Paetus, agreed to meet with Tirdad at Rhandeia. Much as with the Parthian ambassadorial mission to Rome, Corbulo

[55] Corbulo assembled 3000 legionnaires, 800 auxiliary cavalry and equivalent numbers of troops from assorted regiments for Paetus's rescue (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 10).

[56] Valaksh I dispatched Vasaces, the commander of his cavalry forces to Paetus's camp for engagement in the negotiations.

and Tirdad reached an accord in which the latter was to receive his royal crown from the person of Nero. Three years later in 66 CE, Tirdad was to arrive in Rome for regal ceremonies where he was to be symbolically bestowed the crown of the Armenian throne. The end-result of this diplomatic compromise (of having an Arsacid nominee crowned by the Roman emperor) was a conciliation in which the imperial honor of both the Arsacids and Romans had been respected and acknowledged. In practice it was the Parthians who had achieved a major strategic gain as it was their own Arsacid nominee who was to occupy the Armenian throne.

Armenian and Parthian Martial Culture

Armenia was to have a series of monarchs who were family members of the Parthian Arsacid royal house (Lang 1983, 523), known as the *Aršakuni* who were to rule (with various interruptions) from 12 CE until the dissolution of Armenia's Arsacid lineage in 428 CE (Toumanoff 1986). The "Romance of Artawan and Artašir" in Aganthelos's *History*, for example, provides a literary insight into the significance of the Aršakuni in Armenia (Traina 2018, 112-113). It is significant that Armenian monarchs before the Aršakuni, notably Tigran II, have been depicted as wearing the same type of regal Iranian style tiara (with aventail) seen with the Parthian kings: this type of Armenian tiara is traceable to headgear worn by the satraps of the Achaemenid Kingdom (Marciak and Wójcikowski 2016, 89). Tigran II also adopted the "King of Kings" title of the Achaemenid kings (Garsoïan 2005a).[57]

Armenia was also influenced by two of the Parthian Kingdom's seven major Parthian clans, the Sūrēn-Pahlav and the Kārin-Pahlav. The Sūrēn played an especially significant role in Armenian history with one of their progenies, Gregory the Illuminator (c. 257-c. 331 CE) having played a seminal role as missionary in the conversion of Tirdat (Trdt, Tirdad, Tiridates) III (r. 298-330 CE) to Christianity[58] in the early 300s CE. The Kārin branch of the Parthians in Armenia led to the rise of the Kamsarakan who were to have significant impacts upon historical developments in the Sassanian and Romano-Byzantine empires (Pourshariati 2017). The Kamsarakan continued to identify themselves as "Pahlavuni" up to the 14th century, evidently in acknowledgement of their Pahlav or Parthian heritage (Pourshariati 2017).

The Parthian-Armenian confluence in militaria, regal and martial culture also resulted in the arrival of Middle Iranian terms into the Armenian military lexicon (Table 2). One prime example is the term *āzāt* (Parthian Pahlavi: "free" and "noble"; De Blois 1985, 12n8; Chaumont and Toumanoff 1987, 169-170) often in reference to the martial aristocracy of knights and cavalry. A second example is the Armenian term *hmhrz* derived

[57] Tigran's coinage was to bear the "King of Kings" title from 85 BCE.

[58] Anak, the father of Gregory, is identified as having descended from the Sūrēn (Russell 2004, 358; Traina 2018, 112).

from Parthian Pahlavi *hmhrz* (also, *hamherz*; "spear-bearer", possibly elite warrior of the royal guards (Farrokh 2017, 112)), with other examples entering the Armenian military lexicon including *aspet* (chief of the cavalry in Armenia, later to designate other commands and titles) and *bdeašx* (from Parthian *byṭḥš*/*byṭḥšy*; possibly a high office with military functions in Armenia; Table 2). The Parthian term *naxwdār* (high ranking [feudal?] noble or baron) entered the Armenian lexicon as *naxarār,* who were essentially lords or barons in rulership of their hereditary estates (Pasdermajian 1990, 159). Armenia's *naxarār* upper aristocrats also fielded much of the kingdom's highly effective armored cavalry. Like the Parthians in Arsacid Iran, the Armenian *naxarār*s were of higher noble rank in comparison to the lesser nobility of the *āzāt*s (De Blois 1985, 5; Jaam 2014, 26).

Reverence for the sanctified and symbolic status of the horse in the Armenian (Arrian, *Anabasis*, 4, 5), Parthian (see Philostratus, *Vitae Sophistarum* 1.31; and wider Iranian: *Yasht* 8.18, 14.9, 17.12) domains was already in place in Teispid-Achaemenid times[59], and possibly earlier. The royal hunt, which was an integral aspect of the ancient military tradition of Iran, was to also enter the Armenian martial tradition, as indicated by the Armenian term for the hunt, *naxčir*, derived from Parthian Pahlavi, *nhšyr* (Shahbazi 2004, 577; also note Parthian Manichean: *nxčyr*) The esteemed status of women was another domain in which the Armenians shared a common regal and martial tradition with the Parthians and Iranian peoples. A prominent example of the elevated status of women is seen with the arrival of the aforementioned Arsacid-Armenian king Tirdad I (r. 52-58, 62-88 CE) and his entourage (which included 3000 cavalry) to Rome to greet the Roman emperor Nero (r. 54-68 CE) in 66 CE (Chaumont 1986). Tirdad I, who in addition to his regal role was also recognized as a Zoroastrian priest (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 24; Debevoise 1968, 194; Bivar 1983, 84; Sheldon 2014, 113), is reported as having arrived on horseback with his queen riding beside him, wearing a warrior's helmet (Sheldon 2014, 115). The association of military gear with women among the contemporary Parthians was most recently affirmed with the find of (Parthian-era) weapons buried in the tombs of women at Vestemin in northern Iran, consistent with previous finds of weapons in tombs of women in northern and northwest Iran as well as finds of weapons in Kurgan burial sites of Scythian women in the Black Sea region, Ukraine and southern Russia (Farrokh et al. 2018, 67-68).

The Iranian tradition of martial music was to apparently arrive in the Armenian Kingdom by way of the Parthian *gōsān* (Parthian Pahlavi: "musician/singer/poet"; Boyce 2002, 167-170) in which the performing artist would extol the warrior exploits of the Parthians (while denigrating that of the Romans) in regal venues and other events such as celebrations or funerals (Ellerbrock 2021, 191).[60] In practice, the *gōsān* was an expression

[59] Consult Herodotus, writing in Achaemenid times, as per the horse ritual (*Histories*, 3, 90).

[60] An example of this is reported by Strabo in the context of Parthian education utilizing songs for the education of youth: "… the deeds both of gods and of the noblest men" (*Geography*, 15, 3.18). Plutarch

of an Iranian martial tradition encompassing the Mede-Persian realms, and those of the wider Iranian-speaking realms of Northern Iranian peoples such as the Sakas (Malekzadeh 2010, 156). The Armenian counterparts of the Parthian *gōsān* were the *gussanner* who composed heroic songs (to the accompaniment of piped instruments, harps, drums, and trumpets) dedicated to the heroic exploits of Armenian warriors (Boyce 1972, 13-14). Iranian culture, notably in militaria, were to remain strongly entrenched in Armenia, even when the kingdom became the first state to convert to Christianity in the 4th century CE (Toumanoff 1986). As averred by Lang:

> "There is good reason to assert that the Armenians, equally with the Parsees, rank as the true spiritual heirs of Parthian and Sassanian civilization ..." (Lang 1983, 524)

TABLE 2. Select Comparisons between Middle Iranian and Armenian Military Lexica (i.e., De Blois 1985; Tafazzoli 2000; Nikonorov 2005; Shaki 2011; Jaam 2014; Ayvazyan 2015; Farrokh 2017)

Iranian Military Lexicon	**Armenian Military Lexicon**
gund Parthian Pahlavi and later in Sassanian Pahlavi: army division of 10,000 troops	*gund* initially army, later lexical shift to contingent, corps, battalions, regiments and smaller units; may have also denoted a royal guard
spād Parthian Pahlavi: army *spāh* Sassanian Pahlavi: army	*sepuh* nobleman (notably by Medieval times), noble rider/cavalryman, prince's son
lškl Middle Iranian (Parthian Pahlavi?): army *laškar* Sassanian Pahlavi: army	*laškar* army contingent
hmhrz Parthian Pahlavi: spear-bearer, possibly elite warrior of royal guards; also, *hamherz* *hamhārz* Sassanian Pahlavi: a guardsman of an elite royal *spāh* unit, lit. meaning may also be guardian, guard with spear, spear bearer	*hmhrz* possibly same semantic form as in Parthian Pahlavi, later semantic shift to adjutant

describes the Parthian *gōsān*s' ridicule of the feebleness of Marcus Lucinius Crassus following his failure to defeat the Parthians in 53 BCE, by describing Parthian "… musicians, who sang many scurrilous and ridiculous songs about the effeminacy and cowardice of Crassus; and there were for all to see …" (*Crassus*, 32.3).

-pet Parthian Pahlavi: commander	*-pet* commander
sppty Parthian Pahlavi: master of horses"; also, *asp-pat/asp-pet* *asp-bed* Sassanian Pahlavi: commander of a troop or detachment of cavalry	*aspet* initially chief of the cavalry but later semantic shift to different type of cavalry command; *aspet* in Arsacid-Armenia became prerogative and honorary title of the noble Armenian Bagratid clan; see also below
spād-paiti Parthian Pahlavi: commander of army *spāhbed* Sassanian Pahlavi: army chief, general, commander of army	*spārāpet* lexical shift in Armenian to commander of the cavalry
byṭḥš (byṭḥšy) Parthian Pahlavi: possibly a very elevated office, like a prime minster, possibly with military functions *bidaxš* Sassanian Pahlavi: viceroy and/or second in command	*bdeašx* possibly high office with military functions
naxwdār Parthian Pahlavi: high ranking (feudal?) noble	*naxarār* first in rank/ranked first, feudal chief, magnates who were elite knights
āzāt Parthian Pahlavi: free and noble, in reference to knights/cavalry; note Roman reference to the *liberi* *āzād* Sassanian Pahlavi: free and noble	*āzāt* noble, free, freemen knight or lesser nobility

Ardān (Caucasian Albania) and the Arsacids

Strabo provides a geographic synopsis of the location of Caucasian Albania in Parthian times:

> "They live between the Iberians and the Caspian Sea, their country bordering on the sea towards the east and on the country of the Iberians towards the west. Of the remaining sides the northern is protected by the Caucasian Mountains (for these mountains lie above the

> plains, though their parts next to the sea are generally called Ceraunian), whereas the southern side is formed by Armenia, which stretches alongside it; and much of Armenia consists of plains, though much of it is mountainous, like Cambysene, where the Armenians border on both the Iberians and the Albanians." (Strabo, *Geography*, 11, 4.1)

Much as in Armenia and Caucasian Iberia (Pourshariati 2008, 299) the Parthians imparted a significant legacy in Caucasian Albania (known as Ardān in Parthian Pahlavi), continuing the process of Iranian cultural influence in place since at least the Achaemenid era as alluded to previously. Iranian martial influence in Ardān was in place by Parthian times (and possibly earlier) as indicated by Strabo's report in reference to Ardān's regional preference for heavy armored cavalry of the Iranian-Armenian type:

> "Not only do the Medes and Armenians, but the Albanians also, admire this kind of [armored] cavalry, for the latter use horses covered with armor." (Strabo, *Geography*, 11, 14.9)

Strabo further reports that the Caucasian Albanians were able to field a maximum of 60,000 infantry and 22,000 cavalry in the early first century BCE (Strabo, *Geography*, 11, 4.5; Table 1. The armored heavy cavalry concept appears to have already entered the military order of Caucasian Albania or Ardān (Farrokh, Sánchez-Gracia and Maksymiuk 2019, 23) prior to the rise of the Arsacids in Iran. Albanian cavalry are believed to have adopted metallic armor from neighboring Media Atropatene to the south of the Araxes River during the Arsacid era (Chaumont 1985, 806-807); however, regional contacts with Iranian peoples such as the Alans and Sarmatians were most likely also significant in the development of Albanian cavalry armor, combat equipment and equestrian gear. The spread of Arsacid influence into Ardān also resulted in the expansion of Parthian Pahlavi in the educated elements of the local populace (Toumanoff 1986, 543)[61] as well as the introduction of contemporary (Parthian-era) Iranian architecture.[62] Interestingly, members of the Arsacid lineage were to rule in the region from the late 3rd to the early 4th century CE (Gadjiev 2020, 33), as discussed later in this article.

The Pharnavazids, Arsacids and Caucasian Iberia during the Parthian Era

The Pharnavazid dynasty of Caucasian Iberia is believed to have spanned between the 3rd century BCE to the 2nd century CE, however dating the reign of the legendary founder of the dynasty, King Pharnavaz (e.g. 284-219 BCE) remains speculative (Rapp 2003, 274). What is concurred by mainstream scholarship (based primarily on the Medieval Georgian

[61] This process also resulted in the local populace increasingly distancing themselves from the Greek language in favor of Parthian Pahlavi.

[62] Parthian-era Iranian-based architectural influences and urban planning have been identified in Caucasian Albanian sites (including its ancient capital, Cabalaca or Kabala) with features such as unbaked bricks, columns with wood bases and buildings of long length (Chaumont 1985, 807).

chronicles) are the Zoroastrian and ancient Iranian ties of Pharnavaz (Apakidze 1989, 397-401). While the precise tracing of the legendary king's origins has proven challenging in scholarship, King Pharnavaz's ancestry has been proposed as having been of mixed Georgian and Iranian descent from the region of Kartlos, the name which was to linguistically evolve into Georgia's national name, *Sakartvelo* (Farmanfarmian 2009, 9) with Georgians identifying themselves as *Kartvelebi* (singular: *Kartveli*). The Georgian Chronicles identify the lineage of the Kartvelians as having hailed from an ancestor named *Kartlos*, identified as the great grandson of Japheth of the Judeo-Christian Bible. Modern Georgian scholarship, however, has traced the origins of the Kartvelian nomenclature to the *Karts*, a proto-Georgian people who rose to prominence in the Caucasus (Mikaberidze 2015, 3). The etymology of *Kart* is most likely a linguistic equivalent of Indo-European *Gard*, "fortified bastion" (Rayfield 2013, 13) raising the possibility of the proto-Georgians' cultural contacts with proto-Iranians and later North Iranian peoples in the northern Caucasus and the east Ukraine and/or south Russia regions.

Pharnavaz's part-Iranian lineage may explain in part his government's adoption of the Persian administrative system (Gvelesiani 2008, 175). This may have been a contributing factor to the significant impacts of Iranian cultural influences (e.g. architecture[63]) in the ancient Georgian arena, notably evident by the late 1st century CE, during Pharnanazid rule. The espousal of Iranian martial culture by the Caucasian Iberian elite was evident with respect to attire (i.e. riding dress), names and regal/martial court customs (Farrokh 2009, 463). The local aristocracy also adopted the Parthian term *āzāt* into the Georgian martial lexicon as *āzāt'i*, "free" (De Blois 1985, 5; Table 3). The reverence of the stallion (New Persian: *tosan*), a key element of Iranian martial culture, was to also enter the ancient Georgian arena as archaeologically evident at the Zoroastrian-style remains at Bori and Armazi where the fire-altar is depicted as being attended by the charger (Farrokh 2009, 462-463). In this regard, the nomenclature of Amazasp II (r. 185-189 CE), the last king of the Pharnavaz dynasty, is notable as his name is derivative of Old Iranian *hamāza*, "to combat/ramming" and *aspa*, "stallion, horse" which may broadly be translated as "he/one who owns combat stallions" (Rapp 2009, 660).

The Parthians were to clash with the Pharnavazids over the Armenian throne in the early part of the 1st century CE. Events were initiated when Arsacid king Ardavan (Artabanus) II (r. 12-38 CE; Ellerbrock 2021, 49-50) chose to exploit the vacant Armenian throne upon the passing of the local king, Artaxias III (r. 18-34 CE) in 34 CE, by deploying a major Parthian army into Armenia. The mission of this force was to enthrone Arsaces, one of Artabanus II's sons, as king of Armenia (Tacitus, *Annals*, 6, 31), an action viewed with disfavor by the Romans. Roman emperor Tiberius (r. 14-37 CE) resorted to reconciling Pharasmanes I (r. 1-58 CE), the Pharnavazid king of Caucasian Iberia, with his

[63] A notable example is the discovery at Uplistsikhe of an *Iwan* (large hall open at the front with a tall barrel vault as roof) (Farmanfarmaian 2009, 7).

estranged brother Mithradates - Tiberius's objective was to convince Pharasmanes I to invade Armenia and hoist his (now reconciled) brother upon that kingdom's throne (Tacitus, *Annals*, 6, 32; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 58, 26.4). Tiberius's anti-Parthian diplomacy also secured the recruitment of Caucasian Albanian military support for Pharasmanes I who in turn succeeded in conscripting Sarmatian cavalry into his army.

TABLE 3. Select Comparisons between Middle Iranian and Georgian Military Lexica (Widengren, 1969; De Blois 1985; Tafazzoli 1993, 2000; Chkeidze 2001; Mahamedi 2003; Farrokh 2017)

Iranian Military Lexicon	**Georgian Military Lexicon**
gund Parthian Pahlavi and later in Sassanian Pahlavi: army division of 10,000 troops	*gund-i* regiment, military unit, army
spād Parthian Pahlavi: army *spāh* Sassanian Pahlavi: army	*spā* army
marzipan Parthian Pahlavi: guardian/protector of border regions *marzbān* Sassanian Pahlavi: guardian/warden (*bān*) of the borders (*marz*); margrave	*marzpâan-i* district governor
rzm, rzm'h, razmāh Parthian Pahlavi: battle *razm* Sassanian Pahlavi: battle	*razm-i* semantic shift in Georgian lexicon to military contingent, military unit, which may have occurred under later Sassanian influence as an elite corps in the *spāh* was identified as the *mādayan i razm* "corps of the immortals"
nplt Parthian Pahlavi: war, battle *nibard* Sassanian Pahlavi: army	*navard-i* semantic shift (to another verb) to denote "robbery, running" which possibly took place in later Sassanian times
spāda-paiti Parthian Pahlavi: commander of army *spāhbed* Sassanian Pahlavi: army chief, general, commander of army	*sṗasṗeṭ-i, sṗayṗeṭ-i* general, commander

byṭḥš (byṭḥšy) Parthian Pahlavi: possibly a very elevated office, like a prime minster, possibly with military functions *bidaxš* Sassanian Pahlavi: viceroy and/or second in command	*bṭxš*, *paṭiakhsh-i*, *piṭiakhsh-i* second after the monarch
drafš Parthian Pahlavi: unit of 1000 troops under a "dragon" banner *drafš* Sassanian Pahlavi: a "banner" of 1000 troops; *spāh*'s banners become more specialized with numbers of motifs	*draužˊi*, *droša* banner, flag
āzāt Parthian Pahlavi: "free" and "noble", in reference to knights/cavalry; note Roman reference to the "*liberi*" *āzād* Sassanian Pahlavi: "free" and "noble"	*āzātˊi*, *aznauri* member of a noble clan or family, free

Arsaces himself was to be assassinated by members of his royal guard by way of Roman bribery.[64] These developments facilitated Pharasmanes I's invasion of Armenia as indicated by the success of his forces in the capture of Artaxata (Tacitus, *Annals* 6, 33). In response, Artabanus II dispatched a major army, led by another one of his sons, Orodes, to eject the Iberians out of Armenia and reinstate Parthian rule in that kingdom. Artabanus II had enlisted the Aorsi and Sirakoi clans of the Sarmatians to support Orodes's impending invasion of Armenia (Olbrycht 2012, 222); however, these proved to be of little avail, as the Iberians blocked their ingress routes into the Caucasus. Orodes was now obliged to advance into Armenia devoid of allies, in contrast to Pharasmanes I whose Iberian forces were militarily supported by formidable contingents of Caucasian Albanians and Sarmatians. The subsequent set-piece battle between Orodes and Pharasmanes I proved exceptionally challenging for the Parthian *spād*.[65] The battle opened in typical steppe warfare fashion involving armored lancers and horse archers enacting their fluid cavalry tactics of attack and feigned retreat:

[64] Tacitus states Arsaces's guards had been bribed with gold in order to assassinate him (*Annals*, 6, 33).
[65] Ash (1999, 114-135) provides a comprehensive examination of Tacitus's accounts of this battle.

> "… the Parthians, habituated to pursue or flee with equal art, spread out their squadrons and manoeuvred for room for their flights of missiles: the Sarmatians, ignoring their shorter-ranged bows, rushed on with pike and sword. At times, advance and retreat alternated in the traditional style of a cavalry engagement: then, as though in a locked line of battle, the combatants struggled breast to breast, with a clash of steel, repulsing and repulsed." (Tacitus, *Annals* 6, 35)

Tacitus's description indicates that the Parthians were seeking to deploy their efficacious horse archers with the Sarmatians (ostensibly armored for man and horse (Ash 1999, 122) like the Parthian *asbārān* lancers) electing to rapidly close in with lance charges[66], followed by close quarters sword combat. The Sarmatian lancers were supported by the Albanian and Iberian cavalry who in turn sought to unhorse their hard-pressed Parthian opponents. The combined assaults of the Sarmatian, Iberian and Albanian cavalry exposed their Parthian counterparts (armored lancers and horse archers) to the vigorous assaults of Pharasmanes's infantry (Tacitus, *Annals*, 6, 34-35) which swung the battle in favor of the Iberians.[67] Tacitus reports of the battle's climax when Orodes was fatally injured in combat against Pharasmanes, to die shortly after from his wounds (Tacitus, *Annals* 6, 35). The result of the battle was a comprehensive defeat of the now demoralized Parthians (Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae*, 18, 9.4).

Despite the Pharnavazids' success against Ardavan II, the Arsacids were to establish their lineage in Armenia during the 60s CE. Shortly after having ascended the Parthian throne Valaksh (Vologases) I (r. 50/51-79 CE (Ellerbrock 2021, 56-58)) proceeded to enthrone his brother Tirdad (also: Tirdat, Tiridates) as king of Armenia. This was facilitated by infighting within the Pharnavazids: Pharasmanes's son, Rhadamistus, invaded Armenia in 51 CE to oust his uncle, Mithradates. Attacking into the Armenian plains, Rhadamistus forced Mithradates to retreat to Gornae (modern Garni) fortress. Mithradates was then betrayed by the accompanying Roman prefect (Caelius Pollio) who had been bribed by Rhadamistus to entice his uncle into a truce and leave the safety of Gornae (Tacitus, *Annals*, 12, 45-46). The treachery was completed when Mithradates and his family were then killed by his nephew (Tacitus, *Annals*, 12, 47).

Valaksh I was able to exploit the disarray in Armenia to deliver a powerful military strike against the Pharnavazids. As noted previously in this article, the king placed his brother Tirdad in command of the *spād* contingents, which struck into Armenia with the objective of ejecting Iberian forces out of the kingdom. The offensive proved successful, with the Parthian cavalry having apparently been a major factor in ejecting the Iberians out of Armenia, which also allowed for Tirdad to capture the key Armenian cities of

[66] For an-depth analysis of Sarmatian lancers and their battle tactics, consult Perevalov 2002.

[67] Olbrycht (2012, 223) discussed the effective role of the Sarmatians in countering the Parthian *asbārān* and horse archers with Bivar (1983, 73) outlining the role of large numbers of Iberian infantry fighting alongside the Sarmatian cavalry.

Tigranocerta and Artaxata (Tacitus, *Annals*, 12, 50). Tirdad's successes by c. 53 CE, however, were to be confounded by the outbreak of the cold Caucasian winters, logistical challenges and the outbreak of a local epidemic. This forced Tirdad and the *spād*'s forces to withdraw from Armenia, which allowed for the return of Rhadamistus in c. 54 CE to the kingdom. This deployment proved unsuccessful as Armenian rebel forces forced him to again be ejected from Armenia. Armenian forces then engaged in the pursuit of Rhadamistus into Mtskheta the Iberian capital (situated approximately 20 kilometers north of modern-day Tbilisi) where he met his demise.[68] As noted in previous sections, Parthian-Roman rivalries in Armenia led to a compromise in which an Arsacid (in this case, Tirdad) would be nominated for the Armenian throne in exchange for him having his regal diadem bestowed by the Roman emperor.

Roman anti-Parthian ambitions in the Caucasus continued as evidenced during the reign of Emperor Vespasian (r. 69-79 CE) who sent Roman engineers in 75 CE to enhance the fortifications of Mtskheta (Wheeler 2007, 246). Iberia was a valuable potential ally for Rome in case of a war against the Parthian Kingdom. It was largely in this context that Vespasian annexed Lesser Armenia and Commagene as regular provinces for the Roman Empire. Vespasian was to then preposition a number of powerful legions in Cappadocia in 72-73 CE[69], empowering the Romans' strategic advantages for potential military strikes into Mesopotamia, northwest Iran or the Caucasus. Iberia was to contribute to a major anti-Parthian invasion, albeit indirectly. The Alans of the northern Caucasus and southern Russia-eastern Ukraine regions traversed the northern Caucasian passes to invade Armenia (in which King Tirdad was nearly captured by the Alans in battle) followed by Ardān to then thrust into Media Atropatene in northwest Iran (Moses Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, II, 50, 85; Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 8, 7.4)[70] in 72 CE (Schippmann 1987, 221-224). Parthian king Valaksh I sent frantic appeals for military assistance to Vespasian who ignored these requests (Ziegler 1964, 16), raising the possibility that the Roman emperor may have been complicit in encouraging the Alan invasion which required passage across Iberia and/or Colchis in order to reach into the southern Caucasus. The Romans were most likely content to witness the *spād* embroiled against the Alan invasions as these forced Parthian military attentions away from the Roman frontiers. Alan successes, however, proved ephemeral as the Arsacids were to reassert their authority over northwest Iran and the southern Caucasus.[71]

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[68] Rhadamistus's wife was then to be taken to Tirdad (Bivar 1983, 80).

[69] Satala received the Legio XVI Flavia Firma, with Melitene receiving the Legio XII Fulminata and Samosata receiving the Legio VI Ferrata and possibly portions of Legio III Gallica (Edwell 2008, 18).

[70] The armies of the local ruler Pakrad (Pacores) were routed by the Alans.

[71] The (eroded and weathered) Valaksh inscription at Kermanshah in Western Iran may provide a possible reference to Valaksh I's combat against the Alan invaders; however, this necessitates close (at site) orthographic decoding by Parthian Pahlavi experts.

The Parthians were to also succeed in imparting their own direct legacy into Caucasian Iberia[72] with an Arsacid, Rev I, enthroned as king of the kingdom in 189 CE (during the reign of Parthian king Valaksh (Vologases) IV (r. 147-191 CE)) by local rebels who had deposed Amazasp II, thus ending the reign of the Pharnavazids (Rapp 2003, 292; 2014, 240). Rev I was the son of Valaksh (Vologases) II (r. 180-191 CE), the Arsacid king of Armenia (Rapp 2003, 292; 2014, 240), who in 191 CE became the monarch of the Parthian Kingdom, known henceforth as Valaksh V (r. 191-208 CE). Rev I's Arsacid descendants would retain their sovereignty in Caucasian Iberia into Sassanian times, up to 284 CE (Rapp 2003, 292-294). The name *Rev* is derived from Middle Iranian (Parthian and Sassanian Pahlavi) *Rew*, which is itself linguistically consequent of Old Iranian (Avestan) *Raēva*, "magnificent, plentiful, prosperous" (Russell 2004, 37-38).

The Sassanian Era and the Caucasus

The political history of Iran during the succeeding Sassanian era (224-651 CE) witnessed the continuation of its linkage with the Caucasus, notably Armenia, Colchis-Iberia (modern-day Georgia) and Caucasian Albania (modern-day Republic of Azerbaijan; Lang 1983, 517-518). Much like their Parthian predecessors, the Sassanian *Weltanschauung* of the Caucasus considered the region as part of their cultural domain of influence (Wheeler 1993, 34). Much as in the Parthian era, these cultural processes also implicated the domains of militaria and regal martial culture. As noted by Wokcikowski (2013, 246):

> "One should also reconsider the role of Iran under the Parthians and the Sassanians, who developed a very attractive military culture exerting influence - often underestimated and passed over in silence in modern studies - on the art of war of other peoples and countries coming into direct or indirect contact with the civilization."

Armenian and the Sassanian *Spāh*

The Sassanians, much like their Parthian predecessors, appreciated the military and geostrategic importance of Armenia bordering northwest Iran (Dignas and Winter 2007, 179; Traina 2018, 110). The downfall of the Arsacid Parthians by the Sassanians at the Battle of Hormzdgān in 224 CE, was a challenge against Armenia's own (Arsacid descent) Aršakuni dynasty. The Sassanians had failed to secure the allegiance of the Armenians, who continued to bear a significant Parthian influence (Bivar 1983, 81; Traina 2018, 112, 114-115) and maintained their loyalty to the House of the Aršakuni, in effect challenging the political legitimacy of the Sassanians in both Armenia and Iran (Pourshariati 2008, 43-45). The Treaty of Satala following the Roman victory over the Sassanians at the Battle of Satala (298 CE; Farrokh 2017, 159-160) allowed for the return of Tirdad or Tirdat III (r. 298-330 CE) to Armenia as the kingdom's monarch (Daryaee and Rezakhani 2017, 157),

[72] Agathangelos delineated Georgia (identified by the Iranian name of "Viruzan") as consisting of Iberia and Colchis (*History of the Armenians* 1.19).

signaling the restoration of the Aršakuni in Armenia (Kulikowski 2016, 192). Tirdat III's conversion to the Christian faith (in 301 or later in 310 CE), possibly motivated in part by anti-Sassanian animus (see, for example, Boyce 2001, 84), was a significant historical development, given the Armenian populace's adherence to Mithraic cults and Zoroastrianism across several centuries (Coene 2010, 80). Tirdat III's conversion implemented a significant theological and ideological rift for Armenia with respect to Sassanian Iran. The Roman emperor Constantine's (r. 306-337 CE) legalization of Christianity with the Edict of Milan (313 CE) would be a major factor in the facilitation of closer political relations between the Armenian Kingdom and the Roman Empire.[73] Much as in the Parthian era, Armenia once again became a contested kingdom between the Sassanians and Romans, leading these powers to partition it in the 4th century CE, as finalized with the Peace of Acilisene in 387 CE. Armenian regions under Sassanian rule as well as those territories situated to the east of the upper Euphrates were to be known as "Perso-Armenia".

Even as the partitioning of their kingdom led to the rise of opposing pro-Roman and pro-Sassanian factions among the Armenians (Nigosian 1993, 37), the establishment of Christianity did not sever Armenia's links in militaria and martial culture with the Iranian realms. The continuing evolution of the heavy cavalry concept in the Iranian realms and Armenia during the Sassanian era resulted in the cavalry troops of the two realms bearing significant similarities in combat strategies and equipment (Cosentino 2004, 253). The term *spārāpet* underwent a lexical shift in Armenian to denote "commander of the cavalry" with the term having originally derived from Parthian Pahlavi *spād-paiti* "commander of army", which becomes *spāhbed* in Sassanian Pahlavi "army chief, general, commander of army" (Table 2). Much like the Sassanian *spāh*'s ("army") various auxiliary corps (e.g. combat infantry, elephant forces, slingers, spear-bearers, etc.; Farrokh 2017, 120-140), the Armenians also had notable contingents of various men-at-arms such as slingers, mountain troops and combat infantry; however, these types of Armenian troops are reported as having experienced a more distinct and indigenous military evolution (Ayvazyan 2012, 53). The Armenian military legacy was to also exert a significant impact upon the military history of the Romano-Byzantines (Whittow 1996, 185-186, 315-317, 359-363).

Naxarārs in Military Service with the *Spāh*

The Armenian *naxarār* feudal warrior aristocracy and their professional cavalry retinues were notably esteemed as military units by the Sassanian *spāh* (Jalali 2004, 63). Even as Armenia's conversion to the Christian faith led to rebellions against the Sassanians (i.e. Battle of Avarir, 459 CE), numbers of Armenian *naxarār*s were to provide military support

[73] These developments would have been viewed with concern by the Sassanians, which as Smith has proposed, led King Shapur II (r. 309-379 CE) of the Sassanian Kingdom to conclude that "… Christian states were beginning to surround Persia" (Smith 2016, 29) in the 4th century CE.

for the *spāh*.[74] The Sassanians afforded substantial sovereignty for the *naxarār*s in return for their provision of professional cavalry for the *spāh* at wartime (as occurred during the Roman-Sassanian war of 502 CE (Pigulevskaya 1975, 101)) and their acknowledgement of the Sassanian *Shāhanshāh* (Pasdermajian 1990, 140). Much like their Sassanian and Romano-Byzantine contemporaries, the *naxarār*s of the 6th and 7th centuries CE were trained and equipped for combat with lance, archery and close quarters combat. The *naxarār*s are reported as having been continuously engaged in arduous cavalry combat training in their estates (Jalali 2004, 63), with these also accomplished at fighting as dismounted professional infantry as well as mountain troops (Pasdermajian 1990, 159).

The summoning of the *naxarār*s by the *Shāhanshāh* entailed the arrival of each of these with their personal armies, banners and retinues for military support of the *spāh*'s impending military deployments. One prominent arrival of the *naxarār*s to Ctesiphon in the late 6th to early 7th centuries CE was led by Smbat Bāgrātuni (a *naxarār* of Parthian ancestry (Pourshariati 2008, 139) of the Bāgrātid House (Garsoïan 2005b)) whose last name (Bāgrātuni) derives from Parthian Pahlavi *bāgārāt* derived from Old Iranian *bāgādātā*, "God bequeathed/God conferred" (Russell 2004, 879). Sebeos reports of the prominent *naxarār* aristocrats who arrived with Bāgrātuni:

> "These are the princes of the Armenian nobles who (joined) him [Bagratuni] with each one's own contingent and banner. Varazshapuh Artsuni, Sargis Tayets'i, Artavazd and Vstam and Hmayeak Apahuni; Manuel, Lord of Apahunik; Viram. Lord of the Golt'nik'; Sargis Dimak'sean; Sargis Trpatuni; and others of the nobles." (Sebeos, Chap. 28, p. 50)

The *naxarār*s' arrival at the gateways of the Sassanian capital, Ctesiphon, was greeted by a regal envoy dispatched by the *Shāhanshāh* to officially signal his welcome of their impending ingress into the city's interior and royal palace. The envoy was then tasked with inquiring about Armenia's circumstances from the *naxarār*s', an inquiry posed thrice. Upon assurance that the Armenian warriors were adaptively content with their homeland's state of affairs, the *Shāhanshāh* would then officially appear in order to honor them with his personal military review (Christensen 1944, 210).

The *naxarār*s led by Smbat Bagratuni were to demonstrate their combat efficacy when in military service with the *arteshtārān* ("warriors") of the *spāh*, notably the elite *savārān* cavalry corps. Bagratuni's forces proved instrumental in the *spāh*'s ability to defeat a large Turco-Hephthalite force in Central Asia in 619 CE that had invaded the Sassanian Kingdom's northeastern marches (Farrokh 2017, 116, 220-222, 238, 276). Significant numbers of *naxarār*s are also recognized as having fought alongside the *spāh* against Arab-Muslim invaders at the Battle of Qadissiya in 636 or 637 CE, as indicated by

[74] Of these particular *naxarār* clans, Daryaee (2009, 16) observes: "the few "evil" Naxarars mentioned in the Armenian historical narratives who supported the Sassanians were those who in fact chose to keep their ancient Armenian tradition at the expense of the newcomers ... adoption of Christianity ... divided Armenian society for some time to come".

the extensive lists of Armenian killed and wounded during that battle (Whittow 1996, 204). A prominent example for that battle is Mušeł III Mamikonean, the Armenian *spārāpet* who in lead of 3000 Armenian warriors, fell in combat against the Arab-Muslim invaders (Farrokh, Sánchez-Gracia and Maksymiuk 2019, 32). Another example of Armenians in combat for the *spāh* against the Arab-Muslims in the final years of the Sassanian Kingdom was Armenian prince Grigor of Siwnik in lead of 1000 Armenian troops (Farrokh, Sánchez-Gracia and Maksymiuk 2019, 32).

The Arsacids and Mehranids of Arrān (Caucasian Albania)

Shapur I successfully consolidated Sassanian rule in Caucasian Albania, known as Arrān in Sassanian Pahlavi, by the 250s CE. In tandem with the Caucasian kingdoms of Iberia and Armenia, Middle Iranian or Pahlavi military terminology was to enter the martial lexicon of Arrān or Caucasian Albania. Examples include *hazarapet* (Sassanian Pahlavi: *hazārabed*, "leader of one thousand") and *hramantar* (Sassanian Pahlavi: *framādār*/*framāndār*, "commander"; Chaumont 1985, 809-810) with terms such as *azgāpetk* ("chieftains of clans") and *āzātk* ("freemen, nobles") most likely having entered the Albanian military lexicon during the Arsacid era either by the Parthians and/or by the Armenians.[75]

The arrival of the Arsacid Vachagan I (r. c. 300-336 CE (Gadjiev 2020, 33)) in c. 300 CE as king of Arrān in the late 3rd century CE (Baumer 2021, 157), may have been due in part to Roman attempts at extending its influence in the south Caucasian Kingdom at Sassanian expense (Gadjiev 2020, 31). Much like their contemporary dynasts in Caucasian Iberia and Armenia, the Arsacids of Arrān were descendants of the former Arsacid dynasty of Iran that had been overthrown by the Sassanians in 224 CE (Toumanoff 1986). Sassanian influence in Arrān was evident in the 4th century CE when a crack force of Arrān cavalry led by their Arsacid King Urnayr (c. 350-375 CE) joined the ranks of the Sassanian *spāh* in 359 CE to support Shapur II's (r. 309-379 CE) siege of Amida (Baumer 2021, 158). Ammianus Marcellinus described the esteemed status of the Caucasian Albanians during this campaign:

> "Close by him [Šāpur II] … on the right was the king of the Albani, of equal rank, high in honour." (Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, 18, 6.22)

Ammianus's description is indicative of the *spāh*'s deference to the military capabilities of Urnayr's Caucasian Albanian cavalry (Farrokh, Sánchez-Gracia and Maksymiuk 2019, 24), who were positioned against Amida's northern gates during the siege (Farrokh, Sánchez-Gracia and Maksymiuk 2019, 25).

[75] These terms are cited by Movses Dasxuranc'i in *The History of the Caucasian Albanians* (1961, 54, sec. 1.26).

The Arsacid lineage in Arrān was to be concluded by the early 6th century CE, leading to the enthronement of members of the Mehran House (of possible Parthian ancestry) in the Sassanian Kingdom (Toumanoff 1969, 22; Chaumont 1985; Bosworth 2011). The kings of Arrān were henceforth recognized with the regal designation of "Arrānshāh" (Schulze 2018, 304) with the name "Mehran" itself having possibly designated a military rank in later Sassanian times.[76] As a highly prominent clan during the Sassanian era, the Mehran, who were primarily established in the region of Rayy (closely approximate to modern Tehran; Ellerbrock 2021, 83) were to give rise to a number of capable military generals such as Farrukhān Shahrbārāz/Shahrvārāz (Farrokh 2021, 12-17) and Bahrām Chubin (Shahbazi 1988). The Mehranid *spārāpet* of Arrān, much like the Armenian *spārāpets* cited earlier, were to also play a prominent role in supporting the *spāh* in the Battle of Qadissiya (636 or 637 CE) against the Arab-Muslim invasion of the Sassanian Kingdom in the 7th century CE (Movsēs Dasxurancʿi, *The History of the Caucasian Albanians*, pp. 110-113; see also Whittow 1996, 204). Of note are the military achievements of Jāvānšīr (son of the Mehranid Varaz Grigor) who fought several successful battles against the invading armies of Arab-Muslim forces (Farrokh, Sánchez-Gracia and Maksymiuk 2019, 32).[77] Following the collapse of the Sassanians by 651 CE, the Mehranid House of Arrān was to survive for approximately two more centuries up to c. 821-822 CE (Farrokh, Sanchez-Gracia and Maksymiuk 2019, 33).

Ancient Georgia and Sassanian Military Culture

Much as in Arrān (Toumanoff 1969, 22; Chaumont, 1985; Bosworth 2011), the Mehranids established their royal line in ancient Georgia (Lang 1983, 520, 527-528, 531). These (Iberian) Mehranid monarchs of ancient Georgia[78] arrived at the termination of Rev I's (Arsacid) lineage in 284 CE, with Mirian III (r. 284-361 CE) having founded the Chosroid dynasty in the kingdom (Pourshariati 2008, 44). The Chosroids facilitated the continuation of Iranian cultural influences (notably in the martial domain) upon Caucasian Iberia, a dynamic that remained in place despite the arrival of Christianity into the kingdom and the Caucasus in general (Whittow 1996, 203-204) Iranian martial culture became significantly established among the warrior society of ancient Georgia, notably in the minutiae of adopting the postures and stances of Iranian nobility as well as courtly customs, the royal banquet and in the appreciation of Parthian-Sassanian mansion architecture (Chardin 1983, 268, 290). In what may be characterized as possible praise of the Sassanian *spāh*'s

[76] Procopius appears to suggest that the term was a designation for a general-type rank (*History of the Wars*, 1, 13.16).

[77] Varaz had been regally conferred by the Sassanians as the "Prince" of Arrān.

[78] See Lang (1983, 520, 527-528, 531) who discussed the Parthian origins of the Mehranids and also discussed the bonds of Georgia and Armenia with the Iranians in the domains of arts, architecture and also religion, even as the Caucasian kingdoms were to convert to Christianity.

arteshtārān (“warriors”) and Sassanian martial culture, Chosroid (Mehranid) king Vakht’ang/Vaxtang I Gorgasali (r. c. 447/449-502/522 CE) is cited by Juansher Juansheriani in “The Life of Vakht’ang Gogasali” section of the Georgian *Kartlis Tskhovreba* (A History of Georgia) for his description of the Sassanian Kingdom as “… Persia, a country of knights and goliaths/giants” (Juansheriani 2014, 90).[79] Interestingly, Vakht’ang’s reference to the Sassanians as “knights” and people of large stature is not applied towards his Christian co-religionists in the Romano-Byzantine empire. It is also notable that Vakht’ang’s designation of *Gorgasali* is derivative from the Iranian term *gorg-sar*, “wolf’s head”, purportedly due to the design-motif of the king’s headgear (Farmanfarmaian 2009, 22).

The scholarly consensus for the origins of the names “Georgia” and “Georgians” are also traced to the Iranian root term *gorg*/*gurg* (“wolf”; plural: *gorgan*/*gurgan*) (Hock 1997, 211; Mikaberidze 2015, 3), a title also adopted in Western European and Slavic languages as the designation for “Georgia” and “Georgians” (e.g. Russian designation *Gruziya* for Georgia being derived from Persian *gorg*/*gurg*; Bublitz, Von Roncador and Vater 2002, 65).[80] It has been suggested that the application of the term *gorg/gurg* is derived from the ancient Iranian designation *gorgan*/*gurgan*, “land of the wolves”, applied to regions close to the Caspian Sea (Mikaberidze 2015, 3), a practice which continues to be applied to a county and city in northeast Iran.

By the 5th century CE, the Sassanian Pahlavi (or Middle Persian) term *āznāvar* (related to Sassanian Pahlavi: *āzād*) had semantically evolved in Georgia into *aznauri* (also: *aznaurebi*, “free; member of an aristocratic coterie/noble family”; Chkeidze 2001, 486-490; Table 3). Concomitantly, the Georgian military lexicon was to be profoundly influenced by Middle Iranian military terminology with examples such as *spā* (“army”; Parthian Pahlavi: *spād*; Sassanian Pahlavi: *spāh*), *spasṗeṭ-i*, *spaypeṭ-i* (“general, commander”; Parthian Pahlavi: *spāda-paiti*; Sassanian Pahlavi: *spāhbed*), and *drauž-i/droša* (“banner, flag”; Parthian and Sassanian Pahlavi: *drafš*; Table 3). The arrival of Iranian terms into the Georgian military lexicon continued centuries after the fall of the Sassanians. This is evidenced by Georgian miliary terms of New Persian origin such as *lula* “gun barrel” (New Persian: *lūla/lūle(h)*), “pipe, tube”, *lūla/lūle(h) tofang*: “gun barrel”, and *gurz-i* “mace, club” (New Persian: *gorz*). The Georgian lexicon was to also absorb nomenclature from wider Iranian martial epics and related theological and mythological themes, which were to present themselves in Georgian literature centuries

[79] Note that instead of *goliaths*, Thomson’s translation cites *giants* (placed in brackets; *Rewriting Caucasian History* 1996, passage 170, p. 187).

[80] Previous to the scholarly consensus of the Iranian origins of the term “Georgia”, the attribution of Greek origins for the name of “Georgia” had been made by French travellers Jean Chardin (explaining this as derived from Greek γεωργός meaning “plower of the land”) and Jacques de Vitry (explaining the origins of the name “Georgia” to the popularity of St. George among the local populace).

after the fall of the Sassanians in the ensuing Islamic era. Select examples of these include *Trdat* (Tirdad), *Baaman* (Bahman), *Mirian* (Mehran; note Mirian III cited previously) and *Adarnase* (Adur Narseh; Farmanfarmaian 2009, 11). In tandem with lexical interchanges with Iran proper, the Georgian lexicon was also influenced by North Iranian (Sarmatian, Alan, Scythian) terms such as *Triton* (later New Persian: *Fereydun*), *Asparukh* (New Persian: *Asp-rukh*), and *Hamāzasp* (note the aforementioned Amazasp II of the Pharnavazids; Gveseliani 2008, 181). Gvakharia has analyzed the continuing appeal of pre-Islamic Iranian martial motifs into the post-Sassanian era, notably with New Persian literature and its attractiveness to Georgian feudal culture in domains such as martial proficiency, chivalry and other parallel motifs in Iranian martial culture (Gvakharia 1995, 241).

Possible indications of a Georgian sense of shared cultural (notably martial) kinship with the Iranians of the Sassanian era is provided by "The Life of Vakht'ang Gorgasali" in which Vakht'ang/Vaxtang I is reported as having joined with his army to support the Sassanian *spāh* in combat against invaders menacing the Sassanian Kingdom's eastern realms:

> "I came here to assist [succor] the Persians [Iranians]. It must be so, in the first place because of my relationship with them [our shared] kinship], and then because, though the Persians [Iranians] do not abide in the true faith, they are learned in the ways of the Creator and believe in a spiritual being. But you [Sinds] are absolutely ignorant [in the ways] of God and unthinking [ignorant] like horses and mules …" (Juansheriani 2014, 100)[81]

The *Kartlis Tskhovreba*'s report of Vakht'ang (irrespective of his Christian faith) and the *spāh* as comrades-in-arms signals a cultural and martial kinship between the (Zoroastrian) Sassanians and ancient Georgia. In the historical context, however, the *Kartlis Tskhovreba*'s report of the Indian subcontinent may most likely be in (misnamed?) reference to the devastating Hephthalite invaders from Central Asia who had routed the *spāh* in 474-475 CE, 476-477 CE and notably in 484 CE resulting in the death of King Pirouz in battle (Farrokh 2017, 206-209).

Iran and the Caucasus: Concluding Notes

The Caucasus and Iran have experienced a sharing of military history, culture and (military) lexica during the pre-Islamic era. In the latter case, Iranian military terminology was to enter the corresponding lexica in Armenia, Caucasian Iberia and Caucasian Albania, a process that was to proceed from the Parthian era, continued into the Sassanian era, with Iranian military terminology (in New Persian) continuing to enter into the Georgian lexicon in the ensuing Islamic era. Iranian martial culture, developments in cavalry warfare and tactics were to profoundly influence the Caucasus. The domains of martial culture and

[81] Note also of Thomson's translation (*Rewriting Caucasian History* 1996, passage 193, p. 209; highlights placed in brackets).

military developments in the Caucasus were also influenced by Northern Iranian peoples such as the Sarmatians and Alans, with North Iranian terminology also impacting ancient Georgian martial culture. The end result was a profound dynamic of cultural links in militaria between Iran and the Caucasus, despite the arrival of Christianity into Armenia, Caucasian Iberia and Caucasian Albania. This process has led Whittow (1996, 203-204) to conclude that:

> The oldest outside influence in Trans-Caucasia is that of Persia … many of its populations, including Armenians and Georgians, as well as Persians and Kurds, the Transcaucasus had much closer ties with the former Sassanian world to its south and east than with the world to the west."

Whittow's observation pertains to the broader links in culture between the Caucasus and Iran, linkages which transcend the militaria domain, as discussed in this article. In a sense it may be concluded that Caucasus-Iran cultural links have been consistent across the millennia.

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