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"Persian King" of *Georgian Chronicles* and Shahanshah Hormizd I

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Abstract: In Late Antiquity, the political and cultural influence of Sasanian Iran on Kartli (the pre-modern Georgian state known to classical and Byzantine authors as Iberia) was considerable. Hence, it is not astonishing at all that Georgian sources preserve a great amount of evidence concerning Iran and the Iranians. Though this body of evidence has long been a topic of lively interest among scholars, many aspects have yet to be studied in depth. This paper investigates the data provided by the 11th-century Georgian historian Leonti Mroveli, whose work, *The Life of Georgian Kings and Their Progeny*, serves as a primary source within the principal compendium of medieval Georgian historiography, *Kartlis Tskhovreba* (*Life of Kartli*), which is conventionally referred to in English as the *Georgian Royal Annals* or *Georgian Chronicles*.

According to Leonti Mroveli, the first Christian king of Kartli, Mirian, was the illegitimate son of a Sasanian *shahanshah*, identified by name as Ardashir. Some researchers, however, reject this claim, arguing that Leonti Mroveli fabricated this information to glorify the kings of Kartli.

In this paper, I will argue that the "Persian king" Ardashir mentioned by Leonti Mroveli should be identified with Hormizd I, the third ruler of the Sasanian dynasty, who is also referred to as Hormizd-Ardashir.

Keywords: Sasanians, Hormizd I, Mirian III, Georgian Chronicles, Leonti Mroveli

Introduction

If we turn our gaze to the Late Antique world, we will immediately notice two competing political powers and two completely different cultural spheres: the Roman Empire and Sasanian Iran.

The concept of Iran (Eranshahr) as a unique case of collective political and cultural identities was articulated during the reign of the first Sasanian Shahanshah and the founder of the dynasty, Ardashir I (224-240), who regarded himself as the King of Kings of Iran. His son and successor, Shahanshah Shapur I (240-270), further reinforced this notion in the Kaʿba-ye Zartosht trilingual inscription, where he identifies himself not only as the King of Kings of Iran but also of non-Iran.

The main characteristic of the foreign policy of both Rome and Iran in Late Antiquity was their mutual rivalry; each viewed the other as the principal obstacle to global dominance. Thus, during this period of world history the *West/East dichotomy* manifested itself in the confrontation between the two powers. Numerous wars erupted between them, accompanied by diplomatic disputes and tensions.

In various instances, the reasons for conflicts differed; however, the South Caucasus frequently turned out to be a cause of disagreement. The strategic significance of this region contributed to its central role in the tensions between Rome and Iran. Control over the South Caucasus conferred substantial advantages to the victor.

As a result, the territories of the South Caucasian states often became battlefields for these rivals. Neither the Romans nor the Persians allowed the political leaders of these regions to remain neutral; instead, they forced them to engage in their conflicts.

The historical writings of the peoples of the South Caucasus have preserved a huge amount of evidence about the military or diplomatic struggles between Rome and Iran.

These sources can be effectively used not only for presenting the history of the peoples of the South Caucasus in Late Antiquity, but also for enriching with details the historical picture of Roman or Iranian past.

Experts in the field of Iranian studies have already recognized this potential and have already begun to incorporate such sources into their research. For example, when discussing the history of Late Antique Iran, Armenian sources are rather intensively referenced. However, much of the valuable information contained in Georgian sources remains inadequately contextualized within the framework of Iranian history.

The purpose of this study is to address this gap. While the scope of a single article is limited, I aim to take at least one step forward.

My goal is to analyze a specific piece of evidence preserved in the collection of Georgian medieval historiographical works known as *Kartlis Tskhovreba* (*Life of Kartli*[1]), which is conventionally referred to in English as *Georgian Royal Annals* or *Georgian*

[1] *Kartli* was a pre-modern Georgian state, known to classical and Byzantine authors as Iberia.

Chronicles (Jones 2014). Specifically, I will focus on the information about Mirian, the first Christian King of Kartli, as presented by the 11th-century Georgian historian Leonti Mroveli in his work *The Life of Georgian Kings and Their Progeny*, which serves as the introduction to the aforementioned compendium. According to Mroveli, King Mirian was the illegitimate son of the Sasanian king (ქასრე) Ardashir.

Some researchers question the credibility of this evidence, suggesting that Leonti Mroveli fabricated the information to elevate the status of the kings of Kartli. Others express confidence in the evidence; however, their interpretation diverge significantly from the information provided by the sources, effectively undermining the reliability of Mroveli's account regarding King Mirian.

In this paper, I will argue that the "Persian king" Ardashir mentioned by Leonti Mroveli can be identified with the third ruler of the Sasanian dynasty, Shahanshah Hormizd I (r. 270/2–3), also known as Hormizd-Ardashir.

Discussion

Sources

The adoption of Christianity as the state religion in Kartli in the early 330s[2] is reflected in many Georgian and non-Georgian sources. Given that the king played a central role in this significant event, all these sources provide testimonies regarding the first Christian ruler of Kartli.

However, only the 11th-century Georgian historian Leonti Mroveli preserved information about King Mirian's Iranian origin. Thus, it is essential to first consider the informant - Leonti Mroveli himself. Let us delve into some details about him.

In addition to *The Life of Georgian Kings and Their Progeny*, two more compilations by Leonti Mroveli are included in *Georgian Chronicles*, namely the *Vita* of Saint Nino (*The Conversion of King Mirian and the Entire Kartli by Our Saint and Blessed Mother Apostle Nino*) and the *Martyrdom* of Saint Archil (*The Martyrdom of Saint and Glorious Archil*).

Saint Nino was a missionary woman whose evangelistic activities led to the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Georgians. A proto-version of her *Vita* was written as early as the mid-4th century. By the 5th century, the *Vita* was included in the medieval Georgian historiographical work, the *Conversion of Kartli*, where it underwent several revisions - at least two occurring in the mid-7th century and early 9th century (Chkhartishvili 1987). This particular work, though the manuscript is no longer available today, served as a source for Leonti Mroveli in creating his own version of the

[2] There is no agreement among scholars on the year of adoption of Christianity as the official religion of Kartli. I think in this case are right those scholars who base their calculations on data presented in original recensions of the *Conversion Kartli*. According to this monument, this fact should be taken place in early 330s (Chkhartishvili 2023, 151,159).

Illiminatrix' biography, which he developed by amalgamating two recensions of the *Vita* of Saint Nino preserved in the *Conversion of Kartli* (Chkhartishvili 1980, 114-121).

Saint Archil, also known as Archil II, was a king of Kartli who was martyred by Arab invaders in the 8th century. Leonti Mroveli had at his disposal only a brief account of his exploits, which he elaborated upon and developed in accordance with the genre canons of hagiographic literature.

As for the aforementioned *Life of Georgian Kings and Their Progeny*, it is Leonti Mroveli's main work, covering the period from the time of the ethnogenesis of Georgians to the 11th century. This work represents a significant and substantial contribution to Georgian historiography.

To uncover Leonti Mroveli's historiographical principles and his methods of approaching historical sources, the aforementioned hagiographical works are supportive. Thanks to the editorial work of Leonti Mroveli on the proto-texts of these works, it is possible to get a comprehensive picture of Leonti Mroveli's attitude towards the sources.

In this regard, Leonti Mroveli's version of the *Vita* of St. Nino is noteworthy. Comparing it with two other recensions of the *Vita* included in the *Conversion of Kartli* allows researchers to identify key characteristics of Mroveli as a historian. It becomes obvious that while he respected his sources, he did not uncritically replicate their information; rather, he engaged in prior analysis. Based on parallel data or logical considerations, Mroveli drew his conclusions. As a result, in a number of cases the picture of the past that he presents is at odds with the one presented in his sources. However, these discrepancies should not be interpreted as deliberate fabrications but rather as errors that are inherent in the work of historians in general (Chkhartishvili 2018a, 37-68; 2018b, 15-27).

Leonti Mroveli's account of King Mirian sometimes includes anachronisms, particularly concerning toponyms or ethnonyms. For example, he refers to the capital of Iran in Late Antiquity as Baghdad, rather than Ctesiphon. As is well known, Baghdad was established only in the 8th century and subsequently replaced Ctesiphon. It can be assumed that Leonti Mroveli deliberately substituted what he considered outdated names of places or peoples with contemporary ones to make his narrative more accessible to his readers. Alternatively, these changes may have been made by later editors who felt it necessary to revise the original text.

In general, Leonti Mroveli used reliable sources and tried to provide well-documented information.

Evidence

Leonti Mroveli begins the account of King Mirian with information about King Aspagur, Mirian's predecessor on Georgian royal throne. According to Leonti Mroveli, Aspagur lived in the time of Ardashir, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty. Aspagur belonged to the Pharnavaziani dynasty, which is named after King Pharnavaz of Kartli, who reigned during

the era of Alexander the Great. Pharnavaz established the Georgian state with its political center in eastern Georgia, specifically in the town of Mtskheta. "After Mirdat, his son Aspagur reigned. Aspagur built the city-fortress Ujarma. After Alexander's invasion, all the kings who reigned in Kartli were idol worshipers. Aspagur was the last king, who was a descendant of the Pharnavazians. At that time, the King of Persia was Kasre[3] Anushrivan Sasanian, known by the name of Ardashir, who destroyed the Azhgalan kings as it is written in the history of the Persians" (Jones 2014, 39).

As it can be observed, the text contains both accurate and inaccurate information. While it correctly identifies Ardashir as the conqueror of the "kings of Azhgalan" (referring to the kings of the Arsacid dynasty), it also mistakenly equates this Ardashir - specifically, Ardashir I, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty - with "Kasre", referring to Anushirvan, the Shahanshah of Persia. Ardashir I lived in the first half of the 3rd century, whereas Anushirvan reigned in the first half of the 6th century. This inaccuracy may explain why some scholars have been hesitant to take seriously the information about the Sasanian father of King Mirian, choosing to ignore it in their analyses altogether.

However, a close reading of the source under consideration reveals that the mention of the 6th-century Iranian ruler - Anushirvan Sasanian - is most likely an accidental error made by a less informed editor. The events in neighboring Somkheti (Armenia), as described by Leonti Mroveli, can be readily contextualized within the political landscape of Shahanshah Shapur I in Armenia. Thus, there is no reason to think that Leonti Mroveli was so disoriented in historical eras that he could not distinguish between Ardashir I and Khosro Anushirvan.

However, let us continue displaying the evidence.

King Aspagur had no male heir, only a daughter named Abeshura. Upon his death during a military campaign, the Georgians faced a crisis of power, as there was no legitimate heir-specifically, a Pharnavazian prince – eligible to ascend the throne.

According to Leonti Mroveli, the situation was further aggravated by Iran's expansionist plans in the South Caucasus, coupled with its actual presence in the region. The Iranians had made great progress in Armenia, and it was obvious that Kartli would be the next target.

The historian narrates that a high-ranking official of the Georgian state, the commander Maezhan, who was second only to the king, summoned the regional governors of Kartli. They fervently prayed to God, hoping not to lose their minds because of this indescribable sorrow. Maezhan began analyzing the situation with reference to Armenia. He spoke of the assassination of the king of Armenia and the aggressive intentions of the Iranian shah toward the entire world, emphasizing that in this state of turmoil, the Georgians were like sheep without a shepherd. If the Georgians had even a third of the strength possessed by the Iranians, and if any member of the Georgian royal family were

[3] In medieval Georgian sources, the term Kasre/Khosro referred to Persian kings.

alive to claim the throne, they would be willing to sacrifice themselves for their homeland. However, without a royal heir, the situation seemed dire.

Maezhan proposed a plan of action: the Georgians should welcome the Persian king and ask him to marry his son to the daughter of King Aspagur.

> "Aspagur had no son, only a daughter. All the eristavs of Kartli gathered in the city of Mtskheta, called by the spaspet, whose name was Maezhan. Filled with grief they decided unanimously: 'We should not give ourselves to sorrow so as not to lose our minds, but we must look for a means to rid ourselves of our misfortune and these dangers.' Then spaspet Maezhan said: 'If we had forces equal to a third of the Persians, we would give our lives and resist them. And if our king had an heir or there was some descendant of our kings deserving to reign, we would fortify ourselves in our towns and fortresses and would, if necessary, eat human flesh to survive, like our forefathers did. However, the bad times have come and have brought us such sorrows, like the murder by the Persians of the great king of Armenia, and the seizure by them of Armenia to which our kingdom was allied. The king of the Persians has opened his mouth and wants to swallow the whole world. We have nobody to withstand him; we are left as orphans, like sheep, without a shepherd. Now my decision is this: let us submit to him and ask him to make his son our king. Let us implore him to marry his son to the daughter of our Aspagur" (Jones 2014, 40-41)

At the same time, Commander Maezhan outlined the key points that needed to be agreed upon by both sides: the Georgians should request that the Persian king refrain from assimilating them with the Persians, forcing them to forsake their faith, and treat them with respect and honor. Should the king refuse to accept these demands and instead force the Georgians to abandon ancestral beliefs, permit Persian domination over them, demonstrate disrespect, and execute member of the Georgian royal family, it would be preferable for the Georgians to perish in their struggle against such adversary (Jones 2014, 41). All the summoned nobility approved of this plan and approached a Persian king with this request. The king took the Georgian proposal very seriously, carefully considered expected strategic benefits of this negotiation and replied positively:

> "The Persian king asked firstly about the city of Mtskheta and he was told of its size and reinforcements […] The King asked once more about the genealogy of Aspagur's daughter. They told him of her descent from the Nebrotids, Arshacids and Pharnavazians. The King of the Persians liked all this and complied with the request of the Georgians, for he himself considered it better to set his son as king in Mtskheta, because he thought that Mtskheta was larger and stronger that any town of Armenia, Kartli or Rani, and was closer to his northern enemies, so it would be easier to wage wars and control all the Caucasian tribes from there. He conceded to their wishes, and giving them a promise and swearing an oath, he came to Mtskheta. Here he was met by spaspet Maezhan and all the eristavis of Kartli. They brought from Samshvilde King Aspagur's daughter by name of Abeshuru. The King of the Persians married her to his son, who was then a boy of seven years of age. He was born of the King's concubine and his name was, in Persian, Mikhran, and in Georgian – Mirian. He is the very Mirian, who in his old age came to know God the Creator, received the Gospel of the

> apostles from St. Nino, and began to profess the Holy Trinity and worship the Holy Cross (Jones 2014, 41).

The historian continues his account with the following note: "Now we will relate the life of Mirian, son of Qasre Ardashir". In some manuscripts the family name of Ardashir - "Sasanian" - is added.

The "Persians king" appointed his son as the king of the Georgians, granting him control over the kingdoms of Kartli, Somkheti, Rani, Movakani, and Hereti. Taking into account the aforementioned regions, it becomes evident that what is presented by Leonti Mroveli is not the King of Kartli, but actually the shahanshah's viceroy in the South Caucasian region.

Mirian's mother was with the "King of the Persians", but he did not allow her to remain in Kartli, because, the historian explains, "he loved Mirian's mother like his own self". The shahanshah left with his son, Mirvanoz, who was also Mirian's foster father (Jones 2014, 41).

With Mirvanoz, the Shahanshah left an Iranian cavalry numbering forty thousand soldiers. Their stations were in the territories surrounding Kartli, while only seven thousand selected soldiers remained in the Georgian capital to safeguard Mirian. The Shahanshah's will was that his son should not only adhere to the paternal faith of fire worship but also honor the Georgian idols. This pluralistic religious upbringing of the young king exceeded the Georgians' original request, which was to prevent any mixing with the Persians and to avoid forcing them to betray their faith.

> "Mirian was seven years old at that time. Mirian's mother was also with King Kasre in Kartli, but he did not leave her with Mirian, because he loved Mirian's mother like his own self. However, he left with Mirian one noble man by name of Mirvanoz as his tutor and governor. He also left him forty thousand select Persian horsemen. According to the oath, given by him to the Georgians he placed them not within the precincts of Kartli, but in Hereti, Movakani and Armenia. He also ordered Mirvanoz to take from these Persians seven thousand selected horsemen and keep all of them in the city as guards for his son. He concluded peace with the Georgians on condition that only the gates of the fortresses would be occupied by Persian troops, and there would be no other Persians in the country of Kartli who could mix with the local population. 'And let my son profess both religions: fire worship of our fathers, and your idols'. He did all this in accordance with the oath he had given at the very beginning" (Jones 2014, 41-42).

The information provided by Leonti Mroveli regarding Mirian is not limited to the details presented thus far. I will give some supporting evidence below. However, before doing so, I would like to discuss the historicity of this narrative. Does it reflect reality? Is it possible to correlated this information with the existing records of the Sasanian past?

Verifying the Evidence

For identifying "Persian king" Ardashir mentioned by Leonti Mroveli with any shahanshah known in history, I have chosen several markers:

Name

The "Persian king's" first name was Ardashir and family name Sasanian.

Chronology

According to all available sources, Mirian, the first Christian king of Kartli, was a contemporary of Constantine the Great, and the adoption of Christianity as the state religion of Kartli - an event in which the king played a pivotal role - occurred in the early 330s. While Leonti Mroveli notes that Mirian accepted the new faith in old age, the primary texts portray the king as an energetic individual actively participating in various social events, including royal hunting. Thus, although Mirian may have been elderly at that time, he was by no means too old.

Personal Visit to Kartli

The "Persian king", described by Leonti Mroveli as the father of King Mirian, can be identified with the Sasanian shahanshah, whose biography includes such a detail.

A*ttitude toward Religion*

The veneration of idols of Kartli served as a primary marker of Georgian identity during the period under consideration. The "Persian king" did not interfere with religion, thereby upholding the oath made originally to Georgians. Furthermore, upon arriving in Kartli and arranging his son's marriage with a Georgian princess, he ordered that Mirian be raised to embrace both religions: to be a fire worshiper and, at the same time, venerating idols of Kartli. This surprisingly pluralistic (and almost atheistic) attitude toward religion is undoubtedly a unique characteristic of a politician and can be used as a means of identification.

In my search for a suitable candidate, I will consider the following markers.

The list of Sasanian shahanshahs begins with Ardashir I (224-240). However, he cannot be identified as King Mirian's father due to chronological inconsistencies: if Mirian had been born even in the last year of Ardashir I's reign, he would have been over 90 years old by the time of Kartli's conversion. However, as was discussed above, Mirian was not too old by the time of Kartli's conversion. Similarly, Shahanshah Ardashir, who was in power from 379 to 383, also cannot be the "Persian king" mentioned by Leonti Mroveli, again due to chronological inconsistencies.

Hormizd I remains the only possible candidate. As previously noted, this shahanshah is known not only by this name but also by the name Hormizd-Ardashir. It is clear that that the Georgian source retains only one of these names - Ardashir.

According to some scholars, Hormizd I ascended the throne in either 270-271 or 272-273. For the purpose of this study, it is not decisive which of these two timelines is accurate. What is significant is the duration of this shahanshah's reign: it lasted only one year. This fact allows a researcher to estimate the approximate date of King Mirian's birth.

Considering Leonti Mroveli's account that Mirian was years old when he was brought to Kartli, we can infer he was born around 263/264. Consequently, at the time of Kartli's conversion, Mirian would have been under 70 years old. While this age may be regarded as old, it is still a period at which a person can be active and energetic – qualities that King Mirian exhibited during the evangelization of Kartli. [4]

Thus, the evidence from various sources is mutually supportive, leading to a preliminary conclusion that the "Persian king" mentioned by Leonti Mroveli should be identified as Shahanshah Hormizd I, also known as Hormizd-Ardashir.

Now let us address the next marker: Did Hormizd-Ardashir ever visit Kartli?

Although we cannot document this visit with evidence from other sources, we can speculatively propose that such a visit was not only possible but also logically expected within the historical context.

As previously mentioned, Hormizd I ruled Iran for only one year, and this period of his life is not well documented. However, his ascension to the throne did not mark the beginning of his career. Long before becoming king, Prince Hormizd-Ardashir participated in military campaigns alongside his father. During these campaigns, he demonstrated exceptional abilities as a warrior. Some sources describe him as "brave" (Shayegan 2012), a designation likely reflecting his outstanding personal qualities and the courage he exhibited in battle. Due to his valor, Shapur I appointed him as the king of Armenia.

In his inscription at Kaʿba-ye Zartosht, Shapur I calls him the "Great King of Armenia". This inscription was created in the early 260s, but it appears that Hormizd-Ardashir was crowned as king of Armenia immediately after the conquest of this land, i.e. in the early 250s. Thus, Hormizd-Ardashir ruled Armenia for almost two decades - from the early 250s to the early 270s, when he ascended the throne and became Shahanshah.

Such a prolonged presence in Armenia would undoubtedly lead to the establishment of a wide-ranging network of political contacts. Therefore, I assume that Georgian political leaders were also part of this network. Furthermore, it can be postulated that the political leadership of Kartli intensively communicated with the king of neighboring Armenia as well as the heir of Shahanshah Shapur I.

[4] The dates of both King Mirian's birth and death are subjects of controversies. I have already outlined the methodology I use to estimate the date of his birth. As for his death, I align with those scholars who argue that Mirian died in the first half of the 4th century. It is incorrect to identify him with Meribanes mentioned by Amianus Marcelinus in the early 360s. Indeed, Meribanes should be identified with Mirdat/Trdat, the third Christian king of Kartli (Chkhartishvili 2018b, 103-106).

The aforementioned plan of Maezhan was likely provoked, to a certain extent, by the personal contacts between Georgian politicians and Hormizd-Ardashir. The diplomatic offer of the Georgians would also have been beneficial for him, since, upon becoming shahanshah, he would need to leave Armenia and thereby risk losing the network of contacts created over decades.

Kartli could be a good alternative to Armenia: through his crowned son, Mirian, he could maintain his personal influence in the South Caucasus region. Upon becoming shahanshah, Hormizd I would still require support from the provinces. As the third son of Shapur I (Shayegan 2012), he likely anticipated opposition from his older brothers. Therefore, it can be assumed that Hormizd-Ardashir intended to visit Kartli, a journey that would have been relatively easy for him, as he could travel from Armenia without needing to go far. I believe that he may have visited Kartli with his illegitimate son and concubine just before leaving the South Caucasus for his coronation as shahanshah, likely occurring in the early 270s.

From the above analysis, I have drawn two key conclusions. First, Hormizd I was a shahanshah with a personal interest in a project like the one proposed by the political leadership of Kartli. Implementing such a project would enable him to maintain his influence in the South Caucasus region. Second, Hormizd I was in a position to easily reach Kartli, as he could travel there directly from Armenia.

Another supporting fact for identifying the "Persian king" Ardashir with Shahanshah Hormizd I is their attitude toward religious affairs. As mentioned above, Mirian's father, Ardashir, saw no problem in simultaneously professing two religions, i.e. he thought it was possible for his son to reconcile the mutually exclusive, actually incompatible, belief systems of Zoroastrianism and Georgian idolatry.

The pluralistic attitude toward religion described above was also characteristic of Shahanshah Hormizd I. He was a supporter of Zoroastrianism, exemplified by his promotion of the most influential Zoroastrian priest Kerdir to the rank of chief priest of Iran. While Kerdir was respected under Shapur I, he held only the title of "master of learning". Hormizd I elevated him to the rank of *magupet* (= *mobad*), the chief of the Magi, a position that had not existed previously. Interestingly, despite elevating Kerdir, whose intent and policies aimed to purge Iran of all other religions - especially Manichaeism - Hormizd I granted the Manichaean prophet Mani permission to continue his preaching (Shayegan 2012).

Thus, this feature of paradoxical religious pluralism characterizes both Shahanshah Hormizd I and the "King of Persia" Ardashir mentioned by Leonti Mroveli.

The facts considered above highlight the similarities in the biographical details of these two figures. Hence, I conclude that Leonti Mroveli implied Shahanshah Hormizd I when he spoke of King Mirian's Sasanian father. It remains uncertain which source (or sources) he used in this case; while does mention the *History of Persians*, it is impossible to identify this text today.

The only detail in the biography of King Mirian's Sasanian father that does not align with that of Hormizd I is related to the circumstances of the father's death. According to Leonti Mroveli, when Mirian was 40 years old, his Sasanian father passed away, prompting Mirian to lay claim to the throne and organize a military expedition against his younger brother (Jones 2014, 42-43).

This creates a problem for our study. Indeed, if the reign of Hormizd I lasted only one year, how can he be the "Persian king" who died when Mirian was 40 years old? If we accept that my concept proposed above adequately reflects reality and follow the chronology of Mirian's date of birth provided in it, the first Christian king of Kartli would have reached his 40th year around 303. If so, could 303 be associated with any event supporting my assumption? I believe so. Indeed, in 302/303, one of the Sasanian shahanshahs, Narseh, the youngest son of Shapur I, passed away (Weber 2016). Thus, he was Mirian's uncle. Leonti Mroveli could easily have confused Mirian's father with his uncle, as both of them were kings of the Armenians for many years.

That is why I believe that the testimony of Leonti Mroveli regarding the death of the "Persian king" many years after the coronation of Mirian cannot be dismissed as evidence against the assumption that identifies the "Persian king" Ardashir with Shahanshah Hormizd I.

Some Secondary Sources: Critical Remarks

It has already been noted that some researchers do not trust the testimony of Leonti Mroveli and believe that the historian fabricated information about the Sasanian father of King Mirian. To support this claim, many scholars reference the medieval Georgian historiographical work, the *Conversion of Kartli*, which depicts a figure named Lev/Rev as the father of King Mirian. Interestingly, the only detail attributed to this Lev/Rev in the list of kings of Kartli is his status as Mirian's father (Abuladze 2020, 83). Lacking any supporting evidence, researchers speculatively conclude that this Lev (or Rev) must be a king of the Pharnavaziani dynasty. Consequently, this speculative assumption - without substantial factual backing - has led to a lack of trust in Leonti Mroveli's evidence (Janashia 1973, 60-62; Bogverdze 1984, 11; Muskhelishvili 2003, 8-9). However, this represents a misinterpretation of the primary source. Researchers overlook the fact that in the *Conversion of Kartli*, while Lev/Rev is identified as the father of King Mirian, he is not designated as a king (Chkhartishvili 2009, 97-99).

The key to understanding the seemingly unusual information in the *Conversion of Kartli* lies in Leonti Mroveli's account of King Mirian. This narrative sheds light on the identity of Leo/Rev: it is obvious that he was Mirian's foster father. As an appointee of the shahanshah, he would have been a highly influential political figure in Kartli, effectively serving as the ruler until his adopted son reached adulthood. Moreover, Lev was the person closest to Mirian during this time, as evidenced by the fact that Mirian's firstborn son bore

his name. This relationship explains his mention in the royal list. While he wielded significant influence akin to that of a king, he could not actually hold the title of king himself.

Thus, this problem is resolved; however, one more nuance remains: according to Leonti Mroveli, King Mirian's adoptive father was named Mirvanoz, not Lev (or Rev). How can one reconcile the testimony of Leonti Mroveli with that of the *Conversion of Kartli*?

The answer to this question is simple:

a) The fact is that Zoroastrians might have several names, some of which were not personal names but rather religious attributes. Therefore, researchers can encounter cases where the same individual is referred to differently In various texts. The full name of King Mirian's adoptive father should be Mirvanoz-Lev/Rev or Lev/Rev-Mirvanoz. Both the author of the *Conversion of Kartli* and Leonti Mroveli mention only one part of this compound name. Their differing choices account for the lack of consistency regarding the name of Mirian's foster father in these sources. It appears that Georgian medieval historians tended to abbreviate compound names, retaining only one component. As noted, King Mirian's biological father also had a two-part name: Hormiz-Ardashir. Leonti Mroveli refers to him simply as "Ardashir" omitting "Hormizd".

b) Leonti Mroveli mentions the Persian king Ardashir twice in his account.[5] In the first instance, he informs readers that this king defeated the Arsacids. It is clear that the historian had in mind the founder of the Sasanian dynasty. In the second instance, he mentions Ardashir Sasanian without any connection to the previously noted victory over the Arsacids. The source only indicates that this Ardashir was the father of King Mirian.

Leonti Mroveli does not identify these two Ardashirs; however, some researchers mistakenly attribute this identification to him. As a result of their misinterpretation of the source, they accuse the medieval historian of inaccuracies and express skepticism regarding his claims about the Sasanian lineage of King Mirian. For instance, S. Rapp pays special attention to this issue, arguing that such an anachronism undermines the credibility of the evidence. He concludes that this passage serves as another example of the projecting information about Persia, Parthia, an Iran through the lenses of late and post-Sasanian perspectives (Rapp 2014, 242).

c) Another group of scholars declares their confidence in the evidence supporting the Iranian origin of Mirian, yet they propose interpretations that diverge significantly from the information presented in the source. For example, Toumanoff argues that King Mirian was not Sasanian, but rather Mihranid, suggesting that during the period in question, the Mihranids could have occupied the throne of Kartli without conflicting with Sasanian interests. He believes that "The assertion that Meribanes was not a legitimate son of the

[5] In the third case , the historian simply mentions kasre Sasanian, i.e. Sasanian shahanshah without providing the first name Ardashir.

Great King is a way of admitting that his origin was in reality not imperial Sasanian but rather princely Mihranid" (Toumanoff 1969, 22). However, one must question why the possibility of Mihranids should even be considered when the source clearly and unequivocally states that King Mirian's father was Sasanian.

Toumanoff refers to the names "Mirian" and "Mirvanoz" as evidence that both his foster father belonged to the house of Mihranids. However, this argument is unconvincing, as both names are more appropriately associated with Mithra, one of the main deities of the Zoroastrian religion, rather than serving as indicators of a familial connection to the Mihranids.

"Persian King": Some Strokes to the Portrait

As already mentioned, reign of Hormizd I as shahanshah lasted only a year. This period of his career is rather poorly documented. His image is almost hidden in the shadow of his powerful and successful father.

The Sasanian rulers were always preoccupied with how they would be remembered and tried to firmly cement their legacy through various means, including rock reliefs and inscriptions. However, due to his relatively short reign, Hormizd I was unable to commission a relief with an accompanying inscription. Most of what we know about Hormizd I comes from the inscriptions of others, most notably those of his father and the Zoroastrian high priest Kerdir. Additionally, only a few of coins he issued during his rule have survived to the present day. Similarly, very little is known about the long reign of Hormizd-Ardashir in Armenia.

In a context marked by a lack of sources, the unique information provided by the above-mentioned Georgian source is invaluable. It enhances the portrait of Hormizd I with numerous touches: Leonti Mroveli portrays the "Persian king" as a positive figure, a tolerant and far-sighted politician.

The decision of Hormizd I to accept the offer of the political leadership of Kartli turned out to be decisive for the further formation of Georgian identity. After all, it was his son who made the difficult decision to accept Christianity as the official religion of Kartli. King Mirian's religious policy reflects, to a certain extent, the personality of his father, as well as his adoptive father. After Hormizd I's death, his adoptive father continued to implement the shahanshah's vision, despite the drastic shift in Iran's stance towards confessional minorities that occurred immediately after Hormizd I's reign, marking the onset of an era of religious intolerance.

Conclusion

The 11th-century Georgian historian Leonti Mroveli presents us with a detailed biography of Mirian, the first Christian king of the pre-modern Georgian state of Kartli. He points out that Mirian was the son of the king of Iran and mentions the name of this king: Ardashir.

Some researchers identify this Ardashir with Shahanshah Ardashir I, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty. If this were the case, Mirian could not be his son, as it is well established that King Mirian was a contemporary of Constantine the Great. The *Vita* of the Georgian enlightener Saint Nino presents him as an energetic person around the 330s. Therefore, it is believed that the information about the Sasanian origin of Mirian was a fabrication by Leonti Mroveli, intended to glorify the kings of Kartli. According to another medieval Georgian historical work, the *Conversion of Kartli*, the correct information indicates that Mirian's father was Lev/Rev, who is listed among the kings of Kartli.

The purpose of this article was to assess the reliability of Leonti Mroveli's account regarding the origins of Mirian. Partially relying on the results of my previous works and adding new arguments, I have concluded that King Mirian's father was the third Sasanian shahanshah, Hormizd I, also known as Hormizd-Ardashir. Thus, it appears that Leonti Mroveli's information may not be a fabrication after all.

As for the evidence from the *Conversion of Kartli*, which researchers most often cite to refute Leonti Mroveli's account, it actually confirms his testimony. Lev/Rev mentioned there as the father of King Mirian (not as a king himself) could be interpreted as Mirian's adoptive father. Thus, the reference to an uncrowned father in the list of kings of Kartli can be understood within the context of Leonti Mroveli's narrative about King Mirian.

Thus, the results of this paper will enrich Georgian history with some very important details. They also contribute to Sasanian studies, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of Hormizd I. Based on them, one can refresh the fuzzing portrait of Hormizd I with several hitherto unknown strokes.

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