

# A Most Vicious Game: Memory, Politics, and Religion in the Reign of Xusrō II

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the complex relationship between Xusrō II and the Christians of Ērānšahr (the Sāsānian Kingdom). By the time he assumed power, Ērānšahr had a significant population of Christians who belonged to distinct churches. Despite Xusrō II's efforts to position himself as a patron of Christianity and his engagement with its practices, he faced hostility from certain Christian writers. This tension stemmed from the inherent challenges of balancing the interests and doctrinal differences of various Christian sects within the kingdom. The Church of the East in particular perceived Xusrō II's decisions, while often pragmatic, as threats to its power and influence. The historical memory of past persecutions and the martyrdom tradition within Ērānšahr further fueled negative portrayals of Xusrō II in Christian texts. Ultimately, the interplay of religious rivalries, political maneuvering, and the weight of historical memory shaped the complicated and often contentious relationship between Xusrō II and the Christians he ruled.

**Keywords:** Khosrow II, Church of the East, Sasanian Kingdom, Historical Memory, Religious Tensions, Martyrdom, War of the Seventh Century

## Introduction

Xusrō II (r. 590 CE–628 CE) was the last mighty *šāhānšāh*<sup>1</sup> of Ērānšahr. Xusrō II's reign, from his rise to power to his violent overthrow, marks a pivotal point in history. His

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<sup>1</sup> Middle Persian for *king of kings*. The ruler of Ērānšahr and the Roman emperor's counterpart.

decision to invade the Roman Empire started the devastating War of the Seventh Century (602 CE–628 CE). This conflict weakened both realms and created the perfect environment that gave the Islamic armies of Muḥammad the opportunity to conquer Ērānšahr and seize swaths of Roman territory. Another significant aspect of Xusrō II's reign is that, at the height of his power, he ruled over the largest Christian empire the world had ever known (Greatrex 2003, 78). As Ērānšahr expanded into Roman territory, Christians under Roman rule became part of Ērānšahr, merging with their coreligionists who had been integrated into Iranian culture for generations.<sup>2</sup> Despite historical evidence suggesting that Christians thrived under Xusrō II, many of them expressed vitriol toward him by declaring him an enemy of Christianity, depicting him as being cowardly, mercurial, and impulsive, and exaggerating the role of Christians in his demise. This paper examines the sources of Christian hostility toward him as found in the primary sources. These tensions lie in different interpretations of Christian dogma.

The disagreements between Xusrō II and specific Christian writers were partly because of internal tensions within the Christian communities of Ērānšahr about the natures of Jesus Christ. The Christological controversies that characterized the early Christian church were complicated. For our purposes here, it is perhaps easiest to categorize the Christians of Ērānšahr into two overly-simplistic groups, Dyophysite and Miaphysite, with four distinct autocephalous churches. Excommunication, anathematization, and bloodshed underscored the friction between these groups, each striving for religious and political supremacy.

Ērānšahr was home to Dyophysite Christians who comprised the ecclesiastical body known as the Church of the East, formally established in 410 CE at a synod called by Šāhānšāh Yazdgird I (r. 399 CE–420 CE; McDonough 2011, 304–205; Payne 2015, 13). The primate of the Church of the East occupied the bishopric of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the capital of Ērānšahr. The doctrine of this church stated Christ had two separate human and divine natures that did not mix (Brock 1985, 133–139; Brock 1996a, 172; Brock 1996b, 2–3). Additionally, Miaphysites, Christians who believed in Christ's single, unified nature of both human and divine, could be found in the Caucasus region of Ērānšahr (Baum 2004, 44).<sup>3</sup> The most influential of these Christians were the Armenians with their ethno-national church, the catholicos of which ruled from the episcopal see of Dvin (Arutjunova-Fidanjan 1997, 154; Garsoïan 2004b, 110–113).

The West Syrians were another group of Miaphysites who were ascendant in Ērānšahr during Xusrō II's reign (Fowden 1993, 122; Watt 2002, 63; Wood 2013, 130–131). The West Syrians benefited from Xusrō II's affection for them. Many Chalcedonian Christians fled Mesopotamia after the Iranians annexed it (Theodoropoulos 2020, 262) and

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<sup>2</sup> For the ubiquity of Christians in Ērānšahr before Xusrō II's reign, see Walker 2006, 89–90; Daryaei 2010, 104; Payne 2015, 4, 9–11, 105; Patterson 2017, 188.

<sup>3</sup> For Miaphysitism in general, see Brock 1996, 161.

Xusrō II gave the West Syrians those churches (Wood 2021, 13). Other Chalcedonians came under the rule of Ērānšahr and Xusrō II (Schick 1995, 9–11) following the 614 CE Iranian conquest of the Levant. The Chalcedonians, who were Dyophysite, adhered to the doctrine of the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE). Chalcedonian Christianity maintained that Christ's human and divine natures were separate but unified in his hypostasis. Because of the complicated religious landscape of Ērānšahr during Xusrō II's reign, scholars have found ample opportunity to investigate his relationship with Christianity in Ērānšahr.

### Historiography

Historians in recent years have studied Xusrō II as a topic of historical inquiry within the larger framework of late antiquity outside of the Roman world. They no longer accept at face value that Xusrō II was anti-Christian based on Roman sources alone, sources that were heavily influenced by the near-Roman defeat in the war of the seventh century. Consequently, the study of Xusrō II within an Iranian context is only now beginning in current historical scholarship to better understand his reign and interactions with Iranian Christians. For example, Bernard Flusin, in his commentary on the versions of the life of Anastasius, determined that Xusrō II was not a persecutor of Christians (Flusin 1992, 127) in Ērānšahr, despite several primary sources that claimed otherwise. This groundbreaking work has influenced a wellspring of scholarship that sheds light on the reality of Xusrō II's relationship with Christianity.

This present study builds upon John W. Watt's 2002 article, "The Portrayal of Heraclius in Syriac Historical Sources", an analysis of the contrasting portrayals of Xusrō II and Emperor Heraclius (r. 610 CE–641 CE) in sources from the West Syrians and Church of the East. Additionally, Geoffrey Greatrex's 2003 article, "Khusro II and the Christians of His Empire", argued that Xusrō II's tolerant approach to Christians in Ērānšahr stemmed from his prioritization of Roman conquest over the subjugation of his Christian subjects (Greatrex 2003, 52). Then, Richard Payne's 2015 book, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity*, examined how Christians living in Ērānšahr carved a place for themselves in a Zoroastrian empire. Of particular importance, Payne examined how, despite being a devout Zoroastrian (Payne 2015, 165), Xusrō II could tap into Christian iconography and symbolism to bolster his claims of being universal king of kings. Finally, Keenan Baca-Winters's 2018 book, *He Did Not Fear: Xusro Parviz, King of Kings of the Sasanian Empire*, is an attempt to view him as a human being with strengths and weaknesses. Besides providing a brief survey of Xusrō II's relations with the Christians of Ērānšahr, this book theorizes that Xusrō II was respectful to Christianity because of his marriage to his favorite wife, the Christian Šīrīn, whom he allowed greater leeway at court than he did others. This book also explains that tensions between Xusrō II and the Christians of his kingdom could be explained by the memory of past persecutions under earlier šāhānšāhs (Baca-Winters 2018, 137). Finally,

Robert Hoyland and Timothy Power studied the rise of monasticism linked to the Church of the East in Arabia in their 2025 article, “Christian Monasticism in Late Antique and Early Islamic East Arabia”, in which they declared that Xusrō II regularly meddled in the affairs of that church (Hoyland and Power 2025, 2).

While Xusrō II’s stance on Christianity remains a scholarly point of contention, the reasons behind negative portrayals by some Christian writers in Ērānšahr lack sufficient explanation. This paper offers one solution to the puzzle by analyzing Xusrō II’s multifaceted interactions with Christianity within Ērānšahr and shifting the focus away from established Roman Christian perspectives. To avoid this bias, this study focuses mainly on sources that originate from the larger historical Iranian world.

### **Extant Primary Sources**

Because this paper concentrates on Iranian Christianity, it uses primary accounts from Christian authors about the history of their churches in Ērānšahr. These churchmen documented both religious and political history, forming our understanding of late antique Iran. The records that have survived to this day come from these ecclesiastical histories. In fact, although these records are the only extensive sources we have of this time period, the writers of these sources composed their works decades and centuries after the fact. However, these accounts can also be reliable as any other primary source.

To illustrate, *The Chronicle of Seert* is a larger compilation of Syriac writings that captured events as they unfolded in Ērānšahr; members of the Church of the East combined and translated these texts into Arabic in the tenth century to create a single document chronicling the history of their church (Wood 2013, 4–8). *The Khuzistan Chronicle* was written around 652, but the information contained within it is corroborated by other accounts, such as that of Pseudo-Sebēos (Howard-Johnston 2010, 129–133). Finally, Michael the Great, writing in the twelfth century, used the work of previous historians (Van Ginkel 2006, 53, 57), including listing his Greek and Syriac sources by name (Moosa 2014, 23–24), which suggests the credibility of his narrative. Of course, a modern historian must take care when using these sources, but the important thing to remember is that these sources preserve the kernels of the moods and sentiments of the time periods they documented. To conclude, primary accounts of late antiquity have undergone the same historiographical work by modern historians to tease out the sources of information that these writers used when composing their narratives. In this sense, Christian primary sources for late antiquity are not unlike what is available to study Classical Greece or Rome, narratives that were written after the fact but also provide historians invaluable information about these time periods.

Also available to scholars are the works of the Muslims al-Ṭabarī, al-Thaʿālibī, and Ferdowsī, the author of the Iranian national epic, the *Shahnameh*. These works are the few primary sources of the time that were not written by Christian authors, but also corroborate

the information found within those accounts. While it may seem illogical to use the *Shahnameh*, traditionally classified as literature and not history, as a primary source, this epic poem has a robust foundation that connects to the wider history of Iran. The connections between Ferdowsī, al-Ṭabarī, and al-Thaʿālibī are deeply rooted in the lost work, the *X<sup>w</sup>adāy-Nāmag*, or the *Book of Lords*.

Scholarly conversation and debate surrounding the *X<sup>w</sup>adāy-Nāmag* is ongoing, but for our purposes here, it suffices to describe it as a lost history of Ērānšahr written in Middle Persian, which was later translated into New Persian and Arabic. This work can also be considered part of a larger set of documents concerning the history of Ērānšahr in what is known as the *X<sup>w</sup>adāy-Nāmag* tradition (Howard-Johnston 2010, 341–343; Bitsch 2020, 97), the threads of which historians have found in the Islamic and even Roman primary sources of Iran. For instance, Agathias and Islamic authors attest to having consulted either the *X<sup>w</sup>adāy-Nāmag* itself or a representative work of the broader genre to substantiate their historical accounts of Iran.

In the same way, the overlapping themes and similar depictions of historic events in Ferdowsī's *Shahnameh* and in the narratives of al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿālibī suggest the *X<sup>w</sup>adāy-Nāmag* served as a key historical reference for all three at some point in time (Pourshariati 2008, 13; Rubin 2008, 60–62; Howard-Johnston 2010, 348–353; Omidshar 2011, 26–46, 58–66; Hämeen-Anttila 2018, 6–9, 244–247; Zeini 2018, 1599). Ferdowsī may have also incorporated some Iranian oral traditions when composing the *Shahnameh* (Davidson 1994, 3–7, 29–44), which further suggests the work is rooted in some sort of historicity. Despite being an epic poem with ornate language designed to evoke emotion, Ferdowsī's *Shahnameh* offers historians a unique perspective on the sociopolitical landscape of Ērānšahr. To put it differently, the *Shahnameh* “serves as a window through which a vast body of pre-Islamic lore and customs may be examined; and if used judiciously, it is a goldmine of data on cultural histories of pre-Islamic Iran” (Omidshar and Daryaei 2017). Indeed, many of the secondary sources featured in this very paper have also used the *Shahnameh* as a primary source of information because of its value. For these reasons, this paper carefully uses Ferdowsī's portrayal of Xusrō II in the *Shahnameh* because the episodes contained in the poem offer insights and clues about Xusrō II's reign that indicate the legacy and the wider cultural memory of how he may have ruled.

Therefore, with these considerations about the sources in mind, this paper contends that Xusrō II's patronage of Christians, despite his Zoroastrian faith, led to resentment among various Christian groups within his kingdom. The Church of the East, for instance, interpreted his actions, even those outwardly benevolent, as malevolent and detrimental to its interests due to concerns about the erosion of its power. When dealing with groups doctrinally opposed to one another, Xusrō II could never effectively balance each competing group and their Christological differences. This dynamic is especially true as the Iranians annexed and occupied Roman territory during the war of the seventh century. The elites of the Church of the East had to contend with the reality that Xusrō II would

upset the doctrinal balance of power in Ērānšahr for it to be successful in the war. The conflict between Xusrō II and the Church of the East's elite fueled narratives reflecting the elite's hostility towards him.

### **The Background and Context of Xusrō II's Reign**

Xusrō II's ascension to power and fall are intertwined with the complexities of his relationship with Christianity. His father was Šāhānšāh Hormīzd IV (r. 570 CE–590 CE), whose reign was cut short by the rebellion of Wahrām Čubīn (r. 590 CE–591 CE). Wīstahm and Wīndōe, Xusrō II's maternal uncles, also revolted against Hormīzd IV and blinded him with a red-hot poker. Adding to his strategy, Čubīn exploited current events and created confusion to advance his claim to the throne, which included fabricating coins in Xusrō II's name to incriminate him of plotting to seize power. Xusrō II, for his part, kowtowed to his father and convinced him he did not play a part in any rebellion and only wanted to serve the house of Sāsān. Hormīzd IV urged Xusrō II to flee to the Roman Empire to ask Emperor Maurice (r. 582 CE–602 CE) for help against Wahrām Čubīn, a foe he considered more dangerous than Wīstahm and Wīndōe. Xusrō II heeded this counsel. Accompanying Xusrō II were Wīstahm and Wīndōe who killed Hormīzd IV to cover up their rebellion. We do not know what role Xusrō II played in his father's murder, if any.

Xusrō II reached the Roman city of Circesium, where he wrote Maurice for help. In return for military aid to wrest control of the throne from Čubīn, Xusrō II promised to cede to the Romans several cities in Mesopotamia and the Caucasus. Maurice agreed to these terms and provided an army for Xusrō II to claim his throne. Xusrō II was ultimately successful and became šāhānšāh of Ērānšahr. In Constantinople, however, Phocas (r. 602 CE–610 CE) overthrew Maurice and had him and his entire family executed, an act which enraged Xusrō II.

Xusrō II, claiming to have given sanctuary to Maurice's son and rightful heir, ordered his armies to invade the Roman Empire to avenge Maurice. The Iranians swiftly captured almost all of Asia Minor and Mesopotamia. At some point, it became apparent that Xusrō II's war of vengeance on behalf of his benefactor became a war to conquer the Roman Empire. Concurrently, the Romans were embroiled in civil war. Leaving Carthage, Heraclius sought to remove Phocas from power, whose tyrannical rule and inability to defend against Xusrō II's invasion had severely strained the Roman Empire. Heraclius then became emperor in 610 and tried to sue Xusrō II for peace. Xusrō II, however, refused and kept waging war, conquering Egypt and Jerusalem, taking possession of the True Cross of the Crucifixion in 614, and moving it to Seleucia-Ctesiphon.

With his empire's back against the wall, Heraclius re-characterized the Roman war of survival into an anti-Zoroastrian holy war. Heraclius then invaded Ērānšahr through the Caucasus, laying waste to Zoroastrian sacred sites and cities full of non-combatants. The Romans defeated the Iranians at the Battle of Nineveh in 627, thus ending the war.

Afterward, the nobility of Ērānšahr assassinated Xusrō II for starting the conflict and put his son Šīroē (r. 628 CE) on the throne. Šīroē then made peace with the Romans, and Ērānšahr subsequently entered a state of decline and fell to the Islamic conquests in 654 CE. With these preceding events in mind, it is important to note that the reign of Xusrō II was eventful because it affected countless lives at the time and altered the course of history. The nature of his reign naturally influenced how people portrayed him in the histories of the era, and a key aspect of studying Xusrō II historically involves analyzing his policies and attitudes toward Christianity within his kingdom.

Of all Iranian šāhānšāhs, perhaps Xusrō II was most acquainted with Christianity because he showed a knowledge of its practices. Yet, paradoxically, he adhered to the Sāsānian dynasty's practice of using Zoroastrianism to strengthen political authority and forge national unity (Becker 2014, 16–19; Payne 2015, 6).<sup>4</sup> Sāsānian šāhānšāhs, for example, were supposed to embrace their role as the embodiment of the Zoroastrian war against the malevolent Ahriman (Wiesehöfer 2010, 136; Ghazanfari 2011, 135–136, 144; Kreyenbroek 2013, 27, 32; Payne 2015, 28). Xusrō II was no exception. The Sāsānian religio-political use of Zoroastrianism permeated Xusrō II's reign as šāhānšāh, especially on his coinage, to demonstrate that he alone possessed Zoroastrian "religious authority and rightful rulership, i.e., the *x<sup>w</sup>arrāh*," or royal glory (Daryae 1997, 49). He could be nothing other than a Zoroastrian šāhānšāh.

For instance, Xusrō II and his Roman benefactors were celebrating at a fest in honor of their victory over Wahrām Čubīn. Emperor Maurice had sent Xusrō II clothes bedazzled with jewels and crosses; clothes fit for a fellow, albeit Christian, emperor. Xusrō II wore these clothes to the banquet, as a gesture to thank Maurice for his considerable help, but also ignited gossip that he had converted to Christianity (Ferdowsī, *Shanameh* 308). An incident at the fest, however, suggests otherwise.

The meal started with Xusrō II's whispered Zoroastrian prayer, infuriating the Roman general Neiathous who saw it as an insult to Christ and Maurice. Xusrō II confronted him, saying that no one from the ancient Iranian past spoke of Christ and that he would not abandon Zoroastrianism because of the help Maurice gave him. Maria, one of Xusrō II's Christian wives and a Chalcedonian, intervened, informing Neiathous that Xusrō II had never promised to convert. Neiathous backed down (Ferdowsī, *Shanameh* 311; Payne 2015, 191; Baca-Winters 2018, 166). Xusrō II then made the pilgrimage to the ancient fire temple Āzargušnasp for his coronation like his predecessors had done (Ferdowsī, *Shanameh* 312–313), all of which suggests Xusrō II's adherence to his ancestral faith. Another compelling sign that Xusrō II remained a Zoroastrian is found in a letter from Pope Gregory I (r. 590 CE–604 CE), expressing disappointment that Xusrō II did not

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<sup>4</sup> For Zoroastrianism as a cultural motif of Ērānšahr, see Fowden 1993, 31–34, 81; Daryae 2009, 69–97.

convert to Christianity despite the access many prelates had to him (Gregory the Great *Gregory to Domitian*, 284; Payne 2015, 164; Baca-Winters 2018, 213).

Adding to these complexities, Xusrō II's kingdom, a melting pot of ethnicities and faiths, boasted a large and thriving Christian minority, presenting unique challenges to his reign. Effective governance required him to understand these communities, but he could not appear to defy the powerful Zoroastrian nobility. According to Lee Patterson,

Religion . . . was the medium through which [the šāhānšāhs'] policies were given expression, whether or not they felt their official acts also to be pious, and thus control of the religious hierarchies, mainly Zoroastrian and eventually Christian as well, was fundamental to their method (Patterson 2014, 183).

That is to say, like his predecessors, Xusrō II leveraged religion to implement his policies and convey his desires. Xusrō II, however, went beyond utilizing Christian cultural motifs to govern that population. He was comfortable performing Christian practices, not just using its iconography to rule over those sizable populations as šāhānšāh. Xusrō II's comfort with Christianity and his expression of its practices was a monumental break from the Iranian past.

### **A Christian Šāhānšāh of a Zoroastrian Empire?**

The significance of this break cannot be understated. Xusrō II crossed a line by openly dabbling in a religion that was not Zoroastrian in nature. While certain šāhānšāhs in the past did flirt with different religions, those religions had at least some connection to Zoroastrianism. Kawād I (r. 488 CE–496 CE, 498 CE–531 CE) sponsored Mazdakism, a Zoroastrian heterodoxy. Šābūhr I (r. 240 CE–270 CE) was a patron of Mani and his eponymous religion, which also had elements of Zoroastrianism. Xusrō II, however, openly engaged with Christianity, a religion that originated from outside of the wider Iranian world and was separate from Zoroastrianism. What is more, Xusrō II faced no punitive action from the Iranian elite or Zoroastrian clergy for his permissive attitude towards Christianity. Yazdgird I, who, after establishing the Church of the East in 410, on the other hand, faced opposition for his perceived pro-Christian stance and was forced to persecute Christians in Ērānšahr. Kawād I and Šābūhr I also faced similar elite pressure to suppress Mazdakism and execute Mani, respectively. Xusrō II's marriage to Šīrīn exemplifies the extent to which he pushed societal and cultural boundaries.

Marriages between šāhānšāhs and non-Zoroastrians were not uncommon, despite the Zoroastrian practice of *x<sup>w</sup>ēdōdah*, or next-of-kin marriage.<sup>5</sup> The wife of Yazdgird I, and the mother of Šāhānšāh Wahrām V (r. 420 CE–438 CE), was a Jewish woman from Babylon, for example. Neither Yazdgird I nor Wahrām V, however, gave preference to Iranian Jews; nor did either šāhānšāh partake in Jewish religious practices. Xusrō II did both concerning

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<sup>5</sup> For the complexities and intricacies of *x<sup>w</sup>ēdōdah*, see Basharin 2025; Maksymiuk and Szklarz 2025.

Šīrīn after she became pregnant with their first child. Following Šīrīn's successful pregnancy, Xusrō II sent a letter and money to the shrine of Saint Sergius, a significant fourth-century martyr in both the Roman Empire and Ērānšahr, expressing his thanks for the saint's intercession (Payne 2015, 172–173). In his letter, Xusrō II specifically mentioned that he married Šīrīn in defiance of Zoroastrian law and custom and that he kept her in “legitimacy”, which, according to Xusrō II, the saint rewarded by granting their request for a child (Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 312–314; Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 151–152; Baum 2004, 30–36).<sup>6</sup> Xusrō II's connection to Sergius also extended to his struggle with Čubīn. Xusrō II sent a bejeweled crucifix and another letter to the shrine, thanking the saint for his intercession on his behalf in the war against Čubīn (Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 311–312; Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 149–151).

Equally important is that with Xusrō II's ascension to the throne, he took an active role in Christian affairs. In 596 CE, for instance, he leveraged his political power over the Church of the East's bishops, appointing Sabrišo, a monk, as catholicos, in part because he had a dream that Sabrišo provided him divine assistance in suppressing Čubīn's rebellion. Following Sabrišo's installation as catholicos, Iranian troops escorted him to Xusrō II's palace, where the šāhānšāh received him with great ceremony (*The Chronicle of Seert* 487–491; Wood 2013, 190–191; Payne 2015, 2–4). This episode shows how Xusrō II leveraged his power and used Sabrišo's elevation to the catholicosate to project his legitimacy as the ruler of a multi-ethnic kingdom (Wood 2016, 418). He also escalated this projection by ordering Sabrišo to give Šīrīn communion whenever she desired, and to pray for them and the whole of Ērānšahr (*The Chronicle of Seert* 491; Baum 2004, 38), wedding the health of the kingdom to Sabrišo's power as catholicos.

In this same interaction, Xusrō II told Sabrišo that while his predecessors had merely been the “slaves” of earlier šāhānšāhs, Xusrō II and Šīrīn were now *his* children (*The Chronicle of Seert* 490–491). Xusrō II even had Sabrišo accompany the Iranian army during its invasion of the Roman Empire in 604 CE, and informed his soldiers that the catholicos's prayers would help the Iranians achieve victory (*The Chronicle of Seert* 499–500; Payne 2015, 174). Xusrō II's sentiments regarding Sabrišo and his insistence that the catholicos's prayers would ensure victory suggest that his goal was to elevate the status of Christianity from being the religion of “slaves” to something higher.

To be certain, Christians had been subject to various persecutions under the early šāhānšāhs, but over time, they also became part of the upper echelons of Iranian power as they emerged from the noble houses of Ērānšahr; these people also served in various administrative functions and performed other duties in service to the realm (McDonough 2011, 308; Hoyland and Power 2025, 1). What is more, Hormīzd IV rebuffed attempts by

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<sup>6</sup> Xusrō II's marriage to Šīrīn, and the freedom he allowed at court to express Christianity, did however cause tensions between him and the Iranian elite; see Baca-Winters 2018, 191–222.

the Zoroastrians to initiate persecution of Christians (McDonough 2011, 308; Payne 2015, 167; Wood 2016, 416–417; Hoyland and Power 2025, 1), which implies that Xusrō II's father was cognizant of the influence and power of Christians in the kingdom. However, the interaction with Sabrišo suggests that Xusrō II thought he had a more enlightened and sophisticated attitude towards the Christians than the previous šāhānšāhs. Xusrō II omitted any positive dynamic between Christianity and his forefathers because he felt that he was the one true patron of the Christians, if not their friend. None of Xusrō II predecessors, at least according to him, truly understood or even loved the Christians of Ērānšahr, and only he could make them into something more than “slaves”.

Part of Xusrō II's efforts to elevate Christianity in Ērānšahr was to give Šīrīn more leeway at court to exercise Christianity from the foundation of Iranian power at Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Christian priests joined Xusrō II and Šīrīn in their wedding procession. Šīrīn even preached Christian beliefs, sang hymns in court, and supervised the construction of churches and monasteries across Ērānšahr (Pseudo-Sebēos, *Armenian History* 29).<sup>7</sup> Xusrō II also intercepted pieces of the True Cross that Emperor Maurice gifted Sabrišo; he instead gave them to Šīrīn (*The Chronicle of Seert* 493), who at this point became the patroness of Christians in Ērānšahr. The significance of these examples lies in Xusrō II's approval, reward, and tolerance of Šīrīn's actions at court, despite his decree prohibiting Zoroastrian conversion to Christianity (al-Ṭabarī, *History* 314). Xusrō II, in essence, elevated Christianity to a status equal to Zoroastrianism within the Iranian political establishment. Xusrō II's policies had an immediate effect on the populace. Because of Xusrō II's comfort with Christianity, it is hardly surprising that the West Syrian historian Michael the Great claimed Christianity rapidly grew in Ērānšahr (Michael the Great, *Syriac Chronicle* 430) during his reign. Ferdowsī mirrored Michael's claim and wrote that people wearing “crosses” went to Xusrō II's court (Ferdowsī, *Shahnameh* 374). Then, according to Pseudo-Sebēos, Xusrō II also gave gifts to the Christians who traveled to the royal palace on Palm Sunday to read the gospel with Šīrīn (Pseudo-Sebēos, *Armenian History* 30). These actions are hardly the behavior of someone who hated Christianity, and not the behavior one would expect of a staunch Zoroastrian. Instead, they suggest he had courted and assured the kingdom's Christian population of his good intentions towards them. This goodwill was also apparent in his treatment of the True Cross.

The Iranians acquired possession of the True Cross after they conquered Jerusalem in 614 CE. Despite allegations of Iranian abuse prior to its transfer to Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Yazdīn, Xusrō II's finance minister and member of the Church of the East, received the cross after the Iranians had captured it in Jerusalem. The cross was sent to Xusrō II, who enshrined it in his palace (“The Khuzistan Chronicle” 235) and committed it to Šīrīn's care (Baum 2004, 47; Payne 2015, 178–180). These examples strongly suggest that Xusrō II

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<sup>7</sup> For the steady proliferation of Christian monasteries in East Arabia under Sāsānian rule, especially in the seventh century, see Hoyland and Power 2025, 1–6.

understood the value it held for the Christians of Ērānšahr, which they seemed to have embraced the Iranian possession of the cross. For instance, Christian Iranian soldiers took fragments of the cross into battle and the Armenian nobleman Smbat Bagrartuni, Xusrō II's commander-in-chief and *marzban*<sup>8</sup> in the Caucasus, used another fragment to rally Christian Armenia to the defense of Ērānšahr (Pseudo-Sebēos, *Armenian History* 47).<sup>9</sup> In reward for Bagrartuni's service, Xusrō II granted him honorifics, governorships in the northern frontier (Pseudo-Sebēos, *Armenian History* 43–53; Pourshariati 2008, 136–140; Greenwood 2010, 14–15; Payne 2015, 168), and broad powers (McDonough 2016, 239). What is more, Xusrō II permitted him to rebuild the church of Saint Gregory in Dvin and to convene a synod to oversee the election of a new catholicos for the Armenians (Pseudo-Sebēos, *Armenian History* 48; Garsoïan 2004a, 94; Garsoïan 2012, 25–27). Additionally, Mar Qardagh, the marzban of Iraq, donned a necklace with a fragment of the cross and led his soldiers in prayer before the battle in which he expelled the Romans from his domain (*Mar Qardagh the Victorious Martyr* 50–53; Payne 2015, 169–170).

Many Christians in Ērānšahr also played essential roles in Xusrō II's administration of Ērānšahr and provided him with their support and loyalty (Panaino 2010, 228). Yazdīn, besides serving Ērānšahr as Xusrō II's minister of finance, also wielded immense influence as governor of northern Mesopotamia (Payne 2015, 134).<sup>10</sup> Like Smbat Bagrartuni, the Armenian Ēroč Vehan fought against the Romans in the War of the Seventh Century and died in combat at the Battle of Nineveh in 627 CE (Pseudo-Sebēos, *Armenian History* 66–67). The heavily Christian Caucasus also remained loyal to Xusrō II in his conflict with Heraclius. People in Tiflis, for example, the capital of Georgia, jeered and mocked Heraclius when he demanded the city's surrender, choosing to stay within the orbit of the Iranians (Movsēs Kałankatuac'i, *History* 86; Baca-Winters 2018, 125–127, 146). The inhabitants of Partaw, Albania, defied Heraclius by refusing him winter quarters for his army, a decision that could have provoked his ire. They obeyed Xusrō II when he ordered the abandonment of the city.<sup>11</sup>

As supreme ruler of Ērānšahr and all the Christians within his realm, Xusrō II took also upon himself the power to convene synods, much like his counterparts in the Roman Empire (Payne 2015, 185–188) to further entrench his power. He presided over the Synod of 605, which met to determine the leader of the Church of the East after Sabrišo's death. The attending bishops thanked Xusrō II for summoning them and praised him as merciful and victorious, seeing him as a true patron of their church (*Synodicon Orientale* 471–472;

<sup>8</sup> In Ērānšahr, the governor of a border province.

<sup>9</sup> For the service of Christian Armenians in the army of Ērānšahr despite centuries of tension between the two peoples, see McDonough 2011, 305.

<sup>10</sup> For other examples of powerful Christians during the history of Ērānšahr, see Shaked 1994, 112; McDonough 2008, 87–89; Daryaee 2009, 111; Payne 2015, 93; Patterson 2017, 189.

<sup>11</sup> Movsēs Kałankatuac'i, *History* 80; Baca-Winters 2018, 123. Indeed, the subjects of Ērānšahr, no matter their religion, all suffered when Heraclius invaded. See Baca-Winters 2018, 141–151.

Walker 2006, 87). The bishops' actions toward Xusrō II are inconsistent with disdain and further implying that they relinquished authority to facilitate ecumenical councils (Panaino 2010, 230).

The landscape of Ērānšahr also became more Christianized during Xusrō II's reign. He had churches built throughout his realm (al-Tha'alibi, *Histoire* 671; al-Ṭabarī, *History* 314; Payne 2015, 192). In the city of Qasr-e Šīrīn, a city Xusrō II ordered built for Šīrīn, a Christian monastery was given particular prominence (Payne 2015, 166). Xusrō II then gave Šamta, the son of Yazdīn, the job of supplying that convent with "copies of Holy Scriptures, and Prayer Books, and Lectionaries" (Thomas, Bishop of Maraga, *Book of Governors* 82). By the same token, Xusrō II positioned himself as a steward of Jerusalem in place of the Romans.

After the Iranian conquest of Jerusalem in 614 CE, Xusrō II aimed to ease any concerns that the Christians there might have had about his rule. He presented himself as the restorer of Jerusalem by directing Yazdīn to send sums of silver to help the Chalcedonians rebuild the city's churches and monasteries after the conquest (Pseudo-Sebēos, *Armenian History* 70; "The Khuzistan Chronicle" 235; Schick 1995, 42; Payne 2015, 182–183). Xusrō II then took steps to suppress the Jewish population of Jerusalem in what he considered continuation of Roman policy. As part of his "restoration", he reinstated the Roman imperial order that removed Jewish people from Jerusalem and closed the Temple, which had been briefly reopened earlier in 614 CE (Schick 1995, 41; Payne 2015, 184). *The Khuzistan Chronicle* and Michael, however, claim these people were executed ("The Khuzistan Chronicle" 235; Michael the Great, *Syriac Chronicle* 445). Regardless of his methods, Xusrō II attempted to quell fears among some Christians that he would cede Jerusalem to the Jews.

### **The Razor's Edge: Sources of Tension between Xusrō II and the Church of the East**

Despite Xusrō II's obvious attempts to foster a positive relationship with the Christians of Ērānšahr, many of them distrusted and outright hated him. The question is simple yet deeply complex. Given Xusrō II's positive relationship with Christians in Ērānšahr, why was there tension between him and certain Christians in the kingdom? If historians have verified Xusrō II's positive stance towards Christianity, and they have, why did Sabrišo pray for death before he could witness how Christians would fare under the later years of Xusrō II reign (*The Chronicle of Seert* 501)? Why did *The Khuzistan Chronicle* call Xusrō II "the enemy of our people" ("The Khuzistan Chronicle" 232; Watt 2002, 67)? If Christianity flourished in Ērānšahr, and it did, why did some Christians, particularly from the Church of the East, portray Xusrō II negatively?

Xusrō II's actions had consequences. Despite his non-hostility towards Christianity, the elites of the Church of the East likely perceived that his actions diminished their standing. Recall the Synod of 605 CE to choose a new catholicos to replace Sabrišo after

his death; Xusrō II rejected their nomination because he favored Gregory of Portath, instead of Gregory of Kašgar, the bishops' preferred candidate (Thomas, Bishop of Maraga, *Book of Governors* 86–88; *The Chronicle of Seert* 521–524; Brock 1996a, 127; Baum 2004, 42; Walker 2006, 104; Wood 2013, 206–210; Baca-Winters 2018, 143). Because these bishops did not yield to his wish, Xusrō II exercised his power and authority as šāhānšāh of Ērānšahr and vacated the position. He intervened in the Church of the East's internal politics, leaving the position unfilled to prevent the synod's tensions—fueled by intense rivalries—from escalating into a full-blown insurrection within the kingdom (Greatrex 2003, 50; Wood 2013, 195; Payne 2015, 186–187). Xusrō II lost patience with the Church of the East (Flusin 1992, 109) during a trying time for his kingdom when it was engaged in warfare with the Romans, and he had to do what was best for its survival. The practical strategy employed by Xusrō II that allowed him to focus on the war against the Romans and preventing Christian unrest in Ērānšahr held little significance for the authors of these texts. The doctrinal disputes that characterized the early Christian community inflamed passions and emotions. In a world where everyone was vying for power, Xusrō II's decisions were matters of survival for the Iranian Christian elite because he rendered them without an official leader.

Because of their perceived reality, the elites within the Church of the East were not unlike a body wracked with disease, with an immune system working beyond its normal capacity to keep the organism alive. The minds of these people seem to have been in a constant state of high alert for anything that would upset the balance of power for Christians in Ērānšahr, a natural consequence of Xusrō II's involvement in their internal affairs. Any perceived threat to a sect's status and perceived supremacy would cause exaggerated depictions of Xusrō II and the rewriting of facts to reflect the writer's anxiety. By decapitating its leadership, Xusrō II opened the spigot for the Church of the East's vitriol to flow.

For example, Thomas, the Bishop of Maraga, wrote that Xusrō II was enraged when the bishops of the Church of the East refused to elect his choice for catholicos. Xusrō II, according to Thomas, became greedy, wicked, and evil, and “forgot all his love for the Christians” and that they had no leader until Xusrō II “died by the sword of the Christian children of the church” (Thomas, Bishop of Maraga, *Book of Governors* 89). Also, Thomas's sentiments shed further light on *The Khuzistan Chronicle's* declaration of animosity towards Xusrō II and explain why Sabrišo prayed for death despite Xusrō II lavishly enthroning him as catholicos and granting him prestige.

Xusrō II's refusal to allow the church to exercise its authority and elect a leader rankled its elites because, in their minds, Xusrō II prevented them from electing Christ's vicar to head his “chosen” church.<sup>12</sup> Yet the critical thing to note is that although Xusrō II

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<sup>12</sup> Xusrō II's decision to restrict a catholicos of an ecclesiastical body is not without precedent. Albania, which was closer to Miaphysitism revolted, and its catholicos Viroy fled to the imperial palace to

did not allow the Church of the East to elect a catholicos, he did not suppress or attempt to destroy it. The church effectively kept Xusrō II's, albeit limited, backing (Howard-Johnston 2010, 134). He instead permitted Mar Babai to act as an unofficial catholicos of the Church of the East, under whose tenure the church's liturgy and theology became official and standardized (Brock 1985, 140–142). Thus, the Church of the East faced no real threat of extermination because of Xusrō II's decisions. The historic reality therefore contrasts with the perception of authors who wrote about Xusrō II: Mar Babai skillfully shepherded the Church of the East through the war of the seventh century, ensuring its survival and continued existence to the present day. Therefore, something else influenced how members of the Church of the East perceived Xusrō II. One of the major factors that shaped these people's perceptions of Xusrō II is how he interacted with the Chalcedonians and the West Syrians, ecclesiastical rivals of the Church of the East.

Recall Xusrō II's request for Roman aid to regain his throne. Maurice provided help by giving Xusrō II an army to invade Ērānšahr, with certain conditions. Some of these conditions took the form of allowing the Chalcedonians to establish a presence in Ērānšahr. Roman aid to Xusrō II seemed to have been contingent on Xusrō II recognizing Chalcedonian interests in Ērānšahr. For instance, Theophylact Simocatta noted that Domitianus, the Chalcedonian bishop of Melitene, accompanied Xusrō II throughout the campaign to regain the throne, offering counsel (Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 124).<sup>13</sup> What is more, according to the West-Syrian Dionysius of Tel-Maḥrē, Maurice gave the Chalcedonian Maria (whom Dionysius identified as Maurice's daughter) to Xusrō II in marriage. Maurice then sent bishops and clergy with Maria to Ērānšahr, and Xusrō II ordered at least two churches built in her honor (Dionysius of Tel-Maḥrē, *Secular History* 117). Because of Xusrō II's need for Roman aid, it is highly likely that he granted the Chalcedonians access to his court and built their churches in Ērānšahr. Ewan Short and Eve MacDonald have proposed that Xusrō II's marriage to Maria and the building of Chalcedonian churches were a strategic display of patronage towards Chalcedonians within Ērānšahr, aiming to ease any hesitation Maurice might have had in offering aid (Short and MacDonald 2021, 94). The accent of Chalcedonianism and Domitianus's proximity to Xusrō II likely caused anxiety within the Church of the East. The elites saw Xusrō II's permissive attitude to the Chalcedonians and interpreted it as a betrayal because he was entertaining and taking advice from one of the Church of the East's doctrinal rivals.

However, when Xusrō II invaded the Roman Empire, a war of vengeance for his benefactor transformed into a war of outright conquest of Iran's ancient enemy. Xusrō II seized the opportunity to destabilize the Romans' hold on the territory his armies conquered. Dionysius of Tel-Maḥrē offers insight into Xusrō II's pragmatic strategy. After

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distance himself from the rebellion. Šērīn begged for Viroy's life to be spared, so Xusrō II kept him under a form of house arrest. See Movsēs Kałankatuac'i, *History* 93; Baca-Winters 2018, 128–129.

<sup>13</sup> See also Theophanes Confessor, *History* 389.

the Iranian conquest of Mesopotamia, Xusrō II ordered the expulsion of Chalcedonian bishops tied to the Roman imperial system and confiscated their churches (Wood 2021, 14). He then gave those churches to the West Syrians (Theodoropoulos 2020, 270; Wood 2021, 8), and “the (liturgical) commemoration of the Synod of Chalcedon was utterly abolished east of the Euphrates” (Dionysius of Tel-Mahrē, *Secular History* 125). The Miaphysites in Egypt particularly benefited from this policy (Davis 2004, 114–115). Likewise, according to G.W. Bowersock (2012, 47), Xusrō II’s policies towards the Chalcedonians in the conquered territories increased Miaphysite support for him.

Another West Syrian author, Michael, echoes Dionysius of Tel-Mahrē’s sentiments. Michael offers more insight into the import of Xusrō II’s expulsion of the Chalcedonians from Mesopotamia and giving the West Syrians their parishes. Xusrō II, at least according to Michael’s point of view, became an instrument of vengeance against the Chalcedonians who had used Roman emperors to persecute the West Syrians in the past:

Our bishops were the ones who administered the perished while the memory of the Chalcedonians vanished from the Euphrates into the East. God hurled back their iniquity against them. What they had done through the Roman emperors, the same was done to them through the Persian kings of Athor (Assyria).

He then concluded that Xusrō II also ordered West Syrian bishops, who had been in hiding in Egypt because of Roman persecution, back to their dioceses (Michael the Great, *Syriac Chronicle* 433; Watt 2002, 74–76; Baum 2004, 43; Howard-Johnston 2010, 331).<sup>14</sup> In Xusrō II’s court, we can also see that he may have courted the West Syrians’ loyalty by placing some of their number in influential positions. Xusrō II and Šīrīn’s physician was Gabriel of Sinjar, who had converted to the West Syrian church after Sabrišo had excommunicated him from the Church of East for practicing bigamy (“Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert)” 1919, 498, 502; Baum 2004, 39, 41). With the ascension of Gabriel of Sinjar at court, he effectively blocked the Church of the East’s access to the imperial throne and the ear of the šāhānšāh (Reinink 1999, 180) because it no longer had an official catholicos.

It is apparent that Xusrō II, when necessary, shifted his attention to different Christian communities in a time of war (Wood 2013b, 200). Ērānšahr had conquered areas where Xusrō II needed to curry favor of the local, non-Chalcedonian populations (Greatrex

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<sup>14</sup> The dynamics between the West Syrians, the Roman Empire, and the Chalcedonians are complicated and go beyond the scope of this paper. However, the West Syrians did experience hardship during the reigns of Justinian I (r. 527 CE–565 CE) and Justin II (r. 565 CE–578 CE), in which the Roman legal system and Chalcedonian ecclesiastical authorities harassed non-Chalcedonians, events which clearly embittered Michael the Great. For the experiences of West Syrians during these reigns, see Bunce 2023. For these hardships intensifying in the later years of Justin II, see Cameron 1976, 63–65 and Van Ginkel 1994, 327–328.

and Lieu 2002, 185; Panaino 2010, 236; Flusin 1992, 114)<sup>15</sup>, most of whom were West Syrian, which explains his attitudes towards them. While Xusrō II may have had legitimate reasons for focusing on those different communities, these shifting priorities caused tension in the disparate Christian communities of Ērānšahr. Given the rivalry between the Church of the East and West Syrians, it is logical that authors identifying with the Church of the East would interpret Xusrō II's favoritism towards the West Syrians as detrimental to their own church. Xusrō II could have given those Chalcedonian churches he had confiscated to the Church of the East. However, to cultivate goodwill and foster peace in areas of Iranian occupation, he gave those parishes to the West Syrians, the largest denomination in the conquered territories. Adam Becker has interpreted this period as a "tumultuous time" for the Church of the East (Becker 2006, 3).

This tumult manifests in Thomas's history and *The Chronicle of Seert*. The writers of both claimed that various "heresies" sprang up in Ērānšahr because the Church of the East did not have an official catholicos to combat them (Thomas, Bishop of Maraga, *Book of Governors* 90–92; "Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert)" 1919, 531). The Church of the East, having lost Xusrō II's official backing and patronage to rival churches, felt that it was weakened, hindering its ability to uphold its claims of orthodoxy and defend its position within Ērānšahr. *The Chronicle of Seert* claims that Gabriel of Sinjar informed the šāhānšāh which bishops of the Church of the East had converted from Zoroastrianism in violation of Iranian law, resulting in their executions (*The Chronicle of Seert* 498, 502).<sup>16</sup> *The Khuzistan Chronicle* further accused Gabriel of Sinjar of bringing "evils upon the followers" of the Church of the East ("The Khuzistan Chronicle" 231; Becker 2006, 80).

Given the intensity with which *The Chronicle of Seert* and *The Khuzistan Chronicle* characterized these events, Antonio Panaino may well be correct in his assertion that the Church of the East, as the official Iranian church, felt threatened by the growing influence of the non-Iranian West Syrians (Panaino 2010, 233–234). These possibilities hint at an ethnic undercurrent fueling the doctrinal disputes; Xusrō II may have directly engaged with this dynamic by appointing non-Iranians to key religious positions, a move that likely caused significant friction (Flusin 1992, 113). Given the animosity of specific members of the Church of the East towards Xusrō II, we cannot discount how they felt that their church was in a tenuous position during his reign.

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<sup>15</sup> Roman writers also interpreted Xusrō II's patronage of heterodox churches as threats to the Chalcedonian claim of catholicity, as is demonstrated by Theophanes Confessor, who asserted that Xusrō II forcibly converted people to the Church of the East in order to "hurt" the emperor. See Theophanes Confessor, *History* 445. For the Romans' fear and anxiety of Xusrō II in general, see Baca-Winters 2018, 31–63.

<sup>16</sup> See also "The Khuzistan Chronicle" 231. For Gabriel's machinations at court, see Howard-Johnston 2010, 131.

Moreover, internal tensions in the Church of the East further exacerbated the sense of being sidelined by Xusrō II's actions. Specifically, the Church of the East was embroiled in intra-communal violence. For example, the bishop of Rey violently opposed an ambitious bishop in Seleucia-Ctesiphon (Payne 2015, 65) during Xusrō II's reign. Conflict surrounding the bishopric of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was commonplace, with different factions electing their candidates to control the entire community, making the threat of schism a reality (Walker 2006, 105–106; Payne 2015, 97). Also, it was during Xusrō II's reign when the Church of the East became further entrenched in the Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia, which resulted in the excommunication of those deemed schismatics or heretics (“Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert)” 1919, 506; *Synodicon Orientale* 477), such as Ḥnana of Nisibis<sup>17</sup> and Gabriel of Sinjar. Certain members of the Church of the East, in other words, were trying to shore up its doctrinal purity in a changing world beset with the threat of their church being torn asunder.

This factionalism and rivalry within the Church of the East suggest a power struggle for spiritual authority and political influence. The goal of each group was to eliminate their rivals and establish dominance over the Church of the East by putting one of their own on the catholicos's throne, securing access to both the imperial throne and its political power. The issue here, however, is that as Xusrō II tried to balance doctrinal differences in Ērānšahr, whoever became catholicos may have found their pathway to Xusrō II's court blocked by Gabriel of Sinjar because of his proximity to Xusrō II, rendering their efforts useless.

### **The Scent of Blood in the Air: The Christians of Ērānšahr Go on the Offensive**

The actions of Xusrō II were seen as damaging to the Church of the East because of conflicts with the West Syrians and internal unrest. This undoubtedly influenced how authors from the Church of the East negatively portrayed Xusrō II in their works. For example, the anonymous author of *The Khuzestan Chronicle* depicted Xusrō II as being so fearful of Heraclius's army's march to Seleucia-Ctesiphon at the end of the war that he was allegedly stricken with “diarrhea” (“The Khuzistan Chronicle” 236; Howard-Johnston 2010, 130)<sup>18</sup>, casting Xusrō II as a coward. Then, because of Xusrō II's “betrayal” of the Church of the East, Thomas wrote that Xusrō II became “mad” with greed and that Šamta, Yazdīn's son, led the rebellion against the wicked and “foolish” Xusrō II and (Thomas, Bishop of Maraga, *Book of Governors* 112–113). Šamta, at least according to Thomas, personally slew Xusrō II with a sword (Thomas, Bishop of Maraga, *Book of Governors* 114). *The Chronicle of Seert* also attributes the coup against Xusrō II solely to Šamta, claiming that Xusrō II's confiscation of his father's property and imprisonment of his

<sup>17</sup> For the threat that Ḥnana posed to the Church of the East, see Becker 2006, 198–203.

<sup>18</sup> Theophanes Confessor also stressed that Xusrō II had “dysentery” when he fled Heraclius's assault. See Theophanes Confessor, *History* 453.

mother as Šamta's motivation (*The Chronicle of Seert* 551)—though the chronicle does not explain why Xusrō II's would have done such a thing. We cannot exclude the role of some Christians in Xusrō II's murder, but it is noteworthy that two prominent histories say Šamta led the rebellion and intimately killed Xusrō II with a blade. Šamta, the son of one of the most influential members of the Church of the East, had been rendered into the executioner of Xusrō II, the West Syrians' hero, in retaliation for the damage he had done to their church.

Therefore, the coup that deposed Xusrō II is a metric by which we can determine how certain members of the Church of the East felt about Xusrō II. The more somebody hated Xusrō II, his murder proved the perfect opportunity to insert a Christian agent of revenge into the story when recording the moment for posterity. The political maneuvering of Xusrō II may have left the Church of the East feeling vulnerable, potentially prompting authors from that community to adjust their historical narratives to emphasize the contributions of Christians to the rebellion against him. However, Xusrō II's politicking alone was not the entire reason certain Christians in Ērānšahr seemed to have yearned for one of their own to be his killer. These writers were also reacting to something far more damaging to their community that occurred over the centuries up to Xusrō II's reign that affected all the Christians of Ērānšahr, not just the Church of the East: a memory of past persecution under the šāhānšāhs.

The Iranian legal system's death penalty for Zoroastrians converting to Christianity is interconnected origins of this bloodlust and vengefulness against Xusrō II. We can trace these feelings to the Iranian legal system under the Sāsānians when the law dictated the executions of Zoroastrians who converted to Christianity. Several prominent Iranians were executed for breaking this law. For example, the deaths of converts like Mar Ma'in, a general under Šāhānšāh Šābūhr II (r. 309 CE–379 CE), and Grigor, a general under Šāhānšāh Xusrō I (r. 531 CE–579 CE),<sup>19</sup> undoubtedly left a mark on how the Christian communities of Ērānšahr viewed their place in it, and how they wrote out their histories of Xusrō II's reign. This legal and religious framework paves the way for the martyrdom of figures like Anastasius, the Persian.

Anastasius, a soldier in Xusrō II's army, converted from Zoroastrianism to Christianity when he saw the True Cross arrive in Seleucia-Ctesiphon after the conquest of Jerusalem ("Vie et passion de Saint Anastase" 48; Flusin 1992, 677). In a fit of zealotry because of his conversion, Anastasius disrupted a performance of Zoroastrian rites, which resulted in his arrest and interrogation.<sup>20</sup> Following Xusrō II's orders, Anastasius was repeatedly given chances to return to Zoroastrianism, but he refused and insulted Xusrō II

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<sup>19</sup> For Mar Ma'in, see *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in* 2008. For Grigor, see *Martyrdom of Mār Grigor Pīrān-Gušnasp* 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Most Iranian martyrologies begin with the convert attacking or destroying a Zoroastrian fire temple before his or her arrest and inevitable execution. See Williams 1996, 45–46 and Panaino 2010, 231.

by calling him “corruptible” and rejecting his authority (“Vie et passion de Saint Anastase” 60). Xusrō II then ordered the questioners to beat Anastasius to get him to repent. Because Anastasius would not abandon Christianity, Xusrō II ordered his execution by strangulation (“Vie et passion de Saint Anastase” 82–84). During Anastasius’s imprisonment, Šamta was a regular visitor to his cell (“Vie et passion de Saint Anastase” 80), suggesting a tension between some Christians and Xusrō II regarding how he enforced the law against Zoroastrian apostasy.

Christians in Ērānšahr also had a rich martyrdom tradition with which they could identify that exacerbated their antipathy towards Xusrō II. At the intersection between reality, historical imagination, and the legal framework of Ērānšahr, the issues of martyrdom and perceived persecution proved to be a factor in how some Christians could probably never completely view Xusrō II in a positive light (Watt 2002, 66).

The Christians who lived in Xusrō II’s reign had a collective memory of the early Christian martyrs in Ērānšahr who had disobeyed Zoroastrian laws against apostasy and died generations before the seventh century. This collective memory of martyrdom and death impacted these Christians with inherited trauma. These Christians also used the myth of Zoroastrian intolerance and persecution as their cultural bonding agent (Payne 2015, 58; Patterson 2017, 190; Herman 2019, 137), setting and reinforcing ethnic boundaries in a kingdom that was officially Iranian and Zoroastrian. For example, Zoroastrian authorities under Yazdgird II (r. 438 CE–457 CE) ordered the execution of Christian converts Anahid and Pethion at the foot of Mount Behistun, the site of ancient Achaemenid and Parthian inscriptions.

The martyrologies of Anahid and Pethion capture their gruesome deaths at the hands of the abstracted polytheistic other who tortured and killed “with glee” (Payne 2015, 87). Pethion’s torturers dismembered him and affixed his limbs to the trees and cliff wall of Mount Behistun. His head was fastened on the wall, overlooking the site of his execution. Anahid’s torturers scourged her, mutilated her, and tied her down; they then smeared honey on her body and left her exposed to the insects.<sup>21</sup> What is important here is that authorities tried to use a public space replete with monuments and inscriptions built by past Iranian šāhānšāhs to humiliate and punish two Zoroastrian apostates. This attempt, however, backfired. In contrast, Anahid and Pethion’s execution site evolved into a place of veneration (Payne 2015, 75–76), attracting Christian pilgrims who honored their sacrifice and drew strength from their courageous deaths for their faith.

Yet, these sites of worship were not restricted to just one mountain in all of Ērānšahr. Sāsānian-era martyrologies, whose claims should be treated skeptically, allege the execution of thousands of Christians by the šāhānšāhs (Herman 2019, 136). Even if we can verify only a fraction of the deaths, it still lends a sense of gravitas to the execution sites of Christians who died during the reigns of previous šāhānšāhs that dotted the landscape

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<sup>21</sup> For the martyrdom of Anahid and Pethion, see *Anahid* 82–99.

across Ērānšahr (Payne 2015, 127). Each of these sites reinforced the narrative of martyrdom and victimhood in the minds of the Christians who went to these shrines to honor the martyrs whose blood was shed for their faith by the unholy other. Centuries solidified this environment, its strength becoming unbreakable with Xusrō II's ascension to šāhānšāh.

By the reign of Xusrō II, the Christians in his kingdom had their choice of shrines and reliquaries to visit and honor the memories of their ancestors who had died. The corpses and relics of these martyrs drove another wedge between Xusrō II and the Christians of Ērānšahr. Like a magnet, these sites of memory drew crowds upon crowds of Iranian Christians and reinforced the memory of past bloodshed. Mount Behistun and these other holy places became a place for Christians in Ērānšahr to remember the deaths of their brothers and sisters at the hands of the Zoroastrians, a place to remember their collective pain and suffering as Christians in a Zoroastrian kingdom, no matter how integrated they were into that kingdom in reality.

The historical tension between Zoroastrianism and certain populations of Christians, combined with the legacy of persecution, also influenced the Armenian Pseudo-Sebēos's perception of Xusrō II. A churchman, Pseudo-Sebēos (Howard-Johnson 2010, 73) invented a piece of anti-Iranian propaganda (Howard-Johnston 2010, 91–92; Baca-Winters 2018, 66–69) disguised as a letter from Xusrō II, rejecting Heraclius's peace overtures during the early stages of the war of the seventh century.<sup>22</sup> This occurred despite the Armenian Church's prosperity and the Armenians' dedicated military service under Xusrō II's rule (Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 187). In this letter, Xusrō II allegedly stated that if Jesus Christ could not save himself from being hung on the "wood", how could the Romans expect him to rescue them from Xusrō II's onslaught? This letter also features Xusrō II's mockery of the "Our Father" prayer with his declaration that would forgive Heraclius's "trespasses" (Pseudo-Sebēos, *Armenian History* 79). The execution of Christians formerly Zoroastrian by Xusrō II, as noted by Pseudo-Sebēos (*Armenian History* 29), demonstrates his antagonism toward the šāhānšāh, possibly explaining the emphasis on the letter. Also, the attitude of Pseudo-Sebēos demonstrates that negative feelings towards Xusrō II were not confined to the Church of the East alone.

We also see a similar attitude concerning the True Cross in Ferdowsī's *Shahnameh*. According to Ferdowsī, after helping Xusrō II regain power, Maurice wrote him requesting the cross because it had been in Ērānšahr for "long" (Ferdowsī, *Shahnameh* 377), a request that Xusrō II denied. Although Ferdowsī was incorrect—the Iranians captured the cross only after Maurice's assassination and the subsequent invasion of the Roman Empire—how he portrayed Xusrō II's response provides clues about how Xusrō II may have

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<sup>22</sup> For more on the nuances of how Pseudo-Sebēos depicted Xusrō II and Heraclius, a point of view that is the by-product of the legacy of Ērānšahr and the Roman Empire trying to subjugate Armenia for centuries, see Baca-Winters 2018, 65–102.

constructed his version of Zoroastrian piety. In his response, Xusrō II begged Maurice to demand anything other than the True Cross. If Xusrō II granted the request, he wrote Maurice, he was afraid that all of Ērānšahr and its Zoroastrian elite would laugh at him because they would feel that he had turned Christian on account of Maria. He then advised Maurice not to concern himself with “some rotten wood” (Ferdowsī, *Shahnameh* 380). This point of view is why several texts refer to persecutions during Xusrō II’s reign, because it is highly probable that stories such as this circulated in Ērānšahr and were commonplace in Christian circles. These people naturally distrusted Xusrō II if they believed he disrespected the most sacred relic of their faith.

Modern historians strive to contextualize Xusrō II’s reign, arguing against the label of Christian persecutor. Yet the historical record, influenced by a perceived ongoing threat to Christianity, paints a different picture. We, therefore, cannot disregard that Christians in Ērānšahr had an active cultural memory of past persecutions, buttressed, according to Joel Walker, by a “vigorous tradition of martyr literature” (Walker 2006, 113). Because of these conditions, certain authors deliberately exaggerated Xusrō II’s flaws. For their purposes, these authors magnified certain less admirable traits of Xusrō II, such as his propensity for anger and his irrational, impulsive behavior. These attacks are more biting and seem to have been designed to strike at the core of Xusrō II’s humanity.

For instance, *The Khuzistan Chronicle* claims that Xusrō II declared that if Ērānšahr is victorious over the Romans, he would level all the churches in his realm (“The Khuzistan Chronicle” 233; Baca-Winters 2018, 138). This sentiment seems beyond the realm of possibility if he desired to cultivate the goodwill of a sizable population of his subjects. In another case, a bishop named Nathaniel formally protested to Xusrō II against destroying Christian churches during the Battle of Dara. Xusrō II responded by having Nathaniel imprisoned and crucified (“The Khuzistan Chronicle” 232; *The Chronicle of Seert* 520; Baca-Winters 2018, 133), seemingly without cause or provocation. In reality, however, Xusrō II ordered Nathaniel’s execution because he had converted from Zoroastrianism, which violated Xusrō II’s edict against apostasy, not in response to Nathaniel’s protests (Flusin 1992, 120–121; Wood 2013, 201).

Likewise, Michael, for all his claims that Xusrō II was a force of vengeance against the Romans when he gave the West Syrians the Chalcedonians’ parishes, reduced Xusrō II to a butcher of the innocent after the conquest of Asia Minor. According to Michael:

Khusro treated those who fell under his power with cruelty. The tongue is incapable of discussing the tribulations, pillage, taxes, captives and the killing that took place in the aftermath of the victory of the Persian, Khusro (Michael the Great, *Syriac Chronicle* 449).

Michael, like *The Khuzistan Chronicle*, does not explain Xusrō II’s actions or offer any nuance of events or direct evidence of any Iranian atrocity during the conquest of Asia Minor. Instead, Michael offers his opinion that Xusrō II was someone who treated others cruelly for cruelty’s sake alone. Because of Michael’s point of view, it would seem that

Zoroastrians who converted to the West Syrian church may have also been executed under the color of Iranian law. As a result, Michael reduced Xusrō II to a sadistic extreme, a figure whose only role was to become a monster in the narrative despite courting approval from the West Syrians at the expense of the Church of the East.

With these examples in mind, *The Chronicle of Seert's* assertion that Xusrō II executed Yazdīn and imprisoned his wife without evidence becomes another example of an Iranian Christian text that portrays Xusrō II of having a tendency to turn on his loyal servants without provocation and reason. Despite evidence that Xusrō II was not a true enemy of any group of Christians in his kingdom, however, Xusrō II was labeled as wicked, corruptible, mercurial, rash, and cowardly in these texts because the authors did not believe that he had their best interests at heart. Perhaps, this is why Anastasius prophesied before his death that Christians in Ērānšahr will find liberation only when the “impious” Xusrō II is killed (“Vie et passion de Saint Anastase” 88).

### **Conclusion: The Complex Legacy of Xusrō II's Religious Policies**

Anastasius's prophecy implies that even Xusrō II's best efforts at Christian appeasement within his kingdom could not guarantee universal acceptance. The Christians of Ērānšahr had intercommunal tensions that dominated each group's political machinations; they all had a collective memory of persecution from the earliest days of Christianity that permeated every facet of their existence. Any act that did not make the elites of each church feel empowered to dominate the others made the anxieties of persecution emerge out of the primordial past, becoming real again. Complicating his relationship with the Christians of his kingdom is that Xusrō II, after all, was the ruler of a vast and powerful kingdom at war with the Romans and had to contend with the burden of leadership. Perhaps the Christians who did not care for Xusrō II realized that for all his overtures of goodwill towards them, his “interest in other cultures was not a benign proto-multiculturalism, but an instrument of power” (Payne 2016, 228).

Coupled with the complex intercommunal tensions within Christianity and the memory of persecutions, this sentiment was probably not lost upon the Christians who hated Xusrō II. Consider Xusrō II's words to Sabrišo after his lavish enthronement: past šāhānšāhs considered Christians “slaves”, but he and Šīrīn viewed them differently; this marked a change in Iranian governmental policy towards Christians. However, Xusrō II's perceived rotating favoritism of the disparate churches of Ērānšahr and the executions of Zoroastrian converts suggest that some Christians may have felt that his declaration to Sabrišo was a broken promise. Perhaps Xusrō II did indeed break his promise to Sabrišo; when the reality of governing a kingdom with a diverse population in a time of war against the Romans clashed with Xusrō II's idealism, he had to do what he thought was best for the survival of Ērānšahr by courting each church when circumstances dictated it.

The powerful figures in Ērānšahr's various Christian churches resented being governed by a monarch who, despite his outward displays of Christianity, was expected to uphold Zoroastrian traditions in a Zoroastrian kingdom. No matter how hard he tried, Xusrō II could never truly win over the elites of Iranian Christian communities because they were playing their own dangerous game of power and could not, nor would not, tolerate any real or perceived threat to their survival.

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