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Shahanshah Hormizd I's "Georgian Project" and the Campaign of King Mirian in Iran

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Abstract: Until recently, little was known about the third Sasanian shahanshah, Hormizd I (Hormizd-Ardashir), whose short reign left no royal inscription. Scholars therefore reconstruct his biography through the inscriptipns of other Sassanian rulers and indirect evidences. This article offers an attempt to fill some missing parts of Hormizd I's life and continues the author's earlier studies. In previous works, the author identified the "King of the Persians Ardashir", named by the eleventh-century Georgian historian Leonti Mroveli as the father of Mirian III, the first Christian king of Kartli (Iberia), with Hormizd-Ardashir. According to Leonti Mroveli, Mirian—born from Hormizd's concubine—ascended the Kartlian throne at the age of seven through an agreement between Georgian and Iranian political elites. Leonti MroveIi describes the mutual benefits of this arrangement: Kartli avoided destructive Iranian raids without losing its religious identity, while Iran secured stability in a strategically crucial region of the Byzantine–Iranian rivalry. Kartli, as Leonti Mroveli notes, could offer the most effective defense of Iran from northern attacks. Although the medieval historian is silent on this point, the author's earlier studies argue that the agreement also served Hormizd's personal goal of ensuring that his own son—not his younger brother Narseh, king of Armenia and a likely heir—would succeed to the Sasanian throne. Hormizd's early death prevented the realization of this plan, but it persisted thanks to the strong military force he left in Kartli and Mirian's regent Mirvanoz, who governed the kingdom, including its religious sphere, until Mirian came of age. After the Shahanshah Narseh's death, Mirian, according to Leonti Mroveli, launched a campaign into Iran in an attempt to implement his father's "Georgian Project" and occupy the imperial throne. This article offers the first detailed analysis of that campaign and its narrative. Though previously dismissed as implausible, the account is shown here to be fully compatible with the

historical context and therefore credible, despite the lack of direct corroboration. It reflects both Hormizd's dynastic strategy and Mirian's evolving political self-assertion.

Keywords: Sasanian Kingdom, Hormizd I, Mirian III, Leonti Mroveli, Kartli, Iberia

Introduction

Until recently, scholars knew relatively little about Hormizd I (Hormizd-Ardashir), the third Sasanian shahanshah of Iran. In particular, they are aware that during his princely years he actively participated in the military campaigns of his father, Shapur I. In the 250s CE, he became king of Armenia following one of these campaigns and ruled there for approximately two decades. In the early 270s, Hormizd-Ardashir succeeded his father on the Sasanian throne, becoming the direct heir of Shapur I despite being his third son. Like his father, Hormizd I viewed the Iranian Kingdom in ecumenical terms. His pluralistic religious policy is reflected both in his promotion of the Zoroastrian high priest Kartir and, simultaneously, in his allowance of freedom of preaching for Mani, the founder of Manichaeism. In Manichaean texts, he is portrayed positively and described with the epithet "the Brave". According to Shapur I's inscription at the Ka'be-ye Zartosht, Hormizd I had a son named Hormizdak. Shortly after ascending the throne, he died within roughly a year and thus did not have time to accomplish any long-standing projects, nor to commission his own inscription (Shayegan 2012).

Based on data provided by the eleventh-century Georgian historian Leonti Mroveli, I was able to fill some of the gaps in Hormizd I's biography. In particular, I have established that "Persian king Ardashir" mentioned by Leonti Mroveli as the father of Mirian, the first Christian king of Kartli (Iberia, as known to classical authors), is Hormizd-Ardashir same Hormizd I (Chkhartishvili 2009, 117; 2018, 28-48; 2024a, 402-414; 2024b).

According to Leonti Mroveli, Mirian was born to one of Hormizd's concubines. In a politically delicate context—with the threat of Iranian invasions and Kartli facing a dynastic crisis—the Georgians requested that Hormizd-Ardashir marry his son to a Georgian princess. This move preserved Georgian interests, including the maintenance of native religious traditions, while temporarily averting Iranian aggression. The marriage proposal was also advantageous to Iran, offering strategic benefits: from the Georgian capital, Iran could more effectively repel incursions from the North Caucasus. Although the medieval historian is silent on this point, the results of my my earlier studies make me believe that the agreement also served Hormizd's personal goal of ensuring that his own son—not his younger brother Narseh, king of Armenia and—likely the heir—would succeed to the Sasanian throne.

Based on the data provided by Leonti Mroveli, one can speculate about Hormizd I's "Georgian Project": without any doubt, it was very carefully planned. The seriousness of

Hormizd's intentions is revealed by the fact that the future shahanshah paid a personal visit to Kartli when he had to leave the Caucasus to succeed his father on the imperial throne, leaving his underage son in Kartli under the protection of a large military force and the regent Mirvanos (evidently his closest collaborator), who was endowed with authority by both secular and religious officials.

However, as was noted, Hormizd I died shortly after ascending the shahanshah's throne. Nevertheless, his "Georgian Project" continued. Evidence of attempts to implement it decades later can be found in the source. In particular, Leonti Mroveli reports that at the beginning of the fourth century, Mirian asserted a claim to the shahanshah's throne and initiated a campaign against Iran.

The focus of my present investigation is the narrative of the above-mentioned campaign, as well as the campaign considered an historical fact. I am confident that, through a close source-critical and historical analysis, a more nuanced understanding of Shahanshah Hormizd I's "Georgian Project" will emerge.

The topicality of this research is underscored by the fact that the evidence in question has almost never been addressed in scholarly discussion. The reason for this is that a significant portion of researchers do not consider Leonti Mroveli's claim—that Mirian was the son of a Sasanian shahanshah—to be factual. Consequently, for them, Leonti Mroveli's representation of Mirian's biography is entirely fictional. Even those scholars who generally regard information about Mirian's foreign origin with some degree of trust still consider his Sasanian parentage and the associated narrative details to be inventions of this historian. Accordingly, it has not been deemed worthy of serious study.

However, as was already mentioned, I have demonstrated in several of my studies, that Leonti Mroveli's account regarding the Iranian origin of the first Christian king of Kartli is accurate. Based on this conclusion, Leonti's other information concerning Mirian cannot be disregarded without proper justification.

Discussion

1. Laonti Mroveli relates that when Mirian turned forty, his Persian father passed away. Mirian decided to oppose the desire of his younger brother, who was in Iran, to ascend the throne. In Mirian's view, as the elder by age, he had the precedence in this matter. Mirian's brother, however, had a counterargument: he claimed that Mirian's seniority was nullified due to his origin from a concubine. In contrast, the brother emphasized that his own position was strengthened by the fact that his mother belonged to a prominent noble family and was a queen. To settle the matter, Mirian marched toward Iran with his forces; however, the elders (clearly referring not to age but to the supreme council and its members in Sasanian Iran) of the country prevented bloodshed between the brothers and resolved the issue themselves. The kingship was granted to Mirian's brother. In compensation, Mirian was given full control over the territories already under his rule and,

in addition, was given authority over a number of other provinces. The full testimony is quoted below:

> When Mirian was forty years old his father, the King of the Persians, died, and after him the Persian King was Mirian's younger brother Bart'am. Learning of this, Mirian called all his troops and set out for Baghdad with the purpose of taking his father's throne. His brother gathered a countless army and was ready to give him battle by the gorge of Nasibin. But the elders and marzapans of Persia, being afraid that the sword could kill both, set up ambassadors and undertook mediation between them. Both Kings agreed to this and when everybody gathered for a counsel, Mirian expressed his complaint: "I am the firstborn of my father, and have been granted by him the heritage of foreign lands, won by him thanks to his power; and I have spent all my life fighting with the Khazars and more than once defended Persia from them at the price of my own blood. Therefore my father's throne belongs to me." Bart'am answered: "Though Mirian is the firstborn, he was born from a concubine, and for one born of a concubine it is enough to possess the kingdoms that have fallen to his lot. I was born of the daughter of the King of India, the Queen of the Persians. And the last will of my father is known to you, and you have seen how he entrusted the crown to me." All considered the matter and gave the reign over Persia to Bart'am, and to Mirian, in order to console him, they gave Jazira, half of Sham and Adarbadagan.28 All this was joined to Kartli, Armenia, Ran and Movak'an. Then Mirian departed. (Jones 2014, 42-43)

As I have already noted, scholars have generally regarded this account with skepticism. Indeed, there is clear exaggerations—whether regarding the extent of Mirian's initial domains or the number of regions that were allegedly later granted to him for administration by decision of the Iranian council of elders. However, this circumstance alone does not provide sufficient grounds to dismiss the account as Leonti Mroveli's invention. For Mirian, as the son of the shahanshah of Iran and thus effectively the viceroy (and not merely the king of Kartli) of the Iranian king of kings, it would not have been unnatural for contemporaries to imagine his sphere of authority in such an amplified manner.

Scholars have also been predisposed to distrust this account because of an anachronism concerning the capital of Sasanian Iran. A claimant to the throne such as King Mirian would naturally be expected to head toward the imperial capital. However, the mention of "Baghdad" is an anachronism for a narrative set in the fourth century: at that time, the capital of Iran was Ctesiphon, and Baghdad did not yet exist. Yet this inaccuracy should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence that the historian was ignorant of the facts. I believe the substitution was quite deliberate, motivated by Leonti Mroveli's wish to make his representation of the distant past intelligible to his readers. Ctesiphon ceased to exist as an active city in the early decades of the seventh century. By the eleventh century, when Leonti Mroveli was writing, Ctesiphon may have been entirely unknown to his audience; therefore, the name would have conveyed nothing to them. The author would have been unable to explain why Mirian marched toward that city or in what direction the

king was traveling. Replacing Ctesiphon with Baghdad solved all of these problems at once: Baghdad was founded in the eighth century, after Ctesiphon had disappeared, and−crucially−it still existed in Leonti's own time.

Furthermore, from the perspective of a Georgian reader, Baghdad bore several similarities to Ctesiphon: both were enemy cities, both were capitals of non-Christian powers and to a traveler approaching from afar, their locations were nearly identical—the distance between them was barely thirty kilometers. Thus, using Baghdad as a geographic reference point for describing Mirian's route was entirely feasible. As a result, this factual inaccuracy actually helped readers grasp the substance of the narrative more clearly. For this reason, I regard it as a consciously employed narrative device rather than an error arising from ignorance.

Anachronisms involving Baghdad are, in fact, characteristic of many other historical sources as well (Thomson 1996, 79n74).

2. In discussing the identification of King Mirian's father with the third Sasanian shahanshah of Iran, I briefly addressed Leonti Mroveli's above-mentioned account at the end of one of my studies (Chkhartishvili 2024b). Specifically, I referred to Leonti Mroveli's note that Mirian was forty years old at the time of his father's death. I pointed out that this is the only piece of information that could cast doubt on my conclusion regarding the identity of Leonti's "king of the Persians" and Hormizd-Ardashir (Hormizd I). Mirian was seven years old when he was brought to Kartli, and Hormizd-Ardashir's arrival in Kartli supposedly was connected with his departure for Iran (that is, in 270), then he could not have lived to the fortieth year after his son's birth —that is, until 303—since we know with certainty that after becoming shahanshah he lived not more than a year.

To explain this discrepancy, in the aforementioned article, I drew attention to the possibility that Leonti Mroveli may have confused Mirian's father with his uncle. The point is that Hormizd-Ardashir's brother—Mirian's uncle—Narseh, was also shahanshah and, like Hormizd-Ardashir, occupied the throne of Armenia for many (270–292) years. At Narseh's death in 302, Mirian would indeed have been approaching the age of forty: he would have turned forty in 303. Taking this circumstance into consideration, I suggested that the error must have been caused by Leonti Mroveli's conflation of the father and the uncle (Chkhartishvili 2024b). At the time, I did not pursue this line of reasoning further.

However, now, I would like to address this issue in detail, because clarifying it not only strengthens the view I previously expressed regarding the identification of Mirian's father, but is also essential for the present study.

Further investigation made it clear to me that the above-mentioned conflation need not necessarily be attributed to the coincidence of certain biographical facts concerning Mirian's father and uncle. This mistake may also have arisen from an incorrect reading of the text. Such a possibility could have been created by a text written in Middle Persian. In other words, I assume that the source used by Leonti Mroveli must have been a Middle Persian work on Mirian, composed during the king's lifetime. As is well known, Middle

Persian script is largely cursive and therefore difficult to read. Moreover, many ancient manuscripts lack small ligatures and punctuation marks, which increases the likelihood of errors.

The specific error relevant to our discussion is likely connected to the following situation: in Middle Persian, "uncle" was most often not written as a separate word but as the compound *pīḏ brādar* ("father's brother"). This form is visually and phonetically similar to "father". Consequently, it was quite predictable that a reader with limited familiarity with the nuances of the language might misinterpret the text. Had "uncle" been rendered in a different form, for example as pidag, the reader might have interpreted it as *pid/pidar* ("father") as well.

Thus, the above-mentioned mistake regarding the conflation of father and uncle could be entirely plausible from a textual standpoint. This type of mistake is not unique to our source; it is common in the interpretation of Middle Persian texts. Accordingly, we may reasonably assume that Leonti Mroveli's confusion regarding Mirian's father and uncle could have originated from an incorrect reading of a Middle Persian source.

However, it is necessary to clarify why I regard it as plausible that Leonti Mroveli could have had access to a Middle Persian text about King Mirian, one that was written during the king's own lifetime.

From my point of view particularly significant, here is the figure of Mirvanos−Mirian's regent, who should be regarded as the effective ruler of Kartli during Mirian's minority. In the event of Mirian's accession to the kingship, this individual would clearly have aimed at a prominent position within the Iranian Kingdom. He would have been responsible for ensuring that Mirian's life was recorded in the official language of the Sasanian Kingdom, producing a work that could later be incorporated into the biography of Iran's shahanshah Mihran (Mirian). It is plausible that this account in Middle Persian composed during Mirian's lifetime, subsequently was employed by Leonti Mroveli.

Another possibility is also relevant: as in the previously discussed case of the anachronism connected with Baghdad, Leonti Mroveli may here, too, have been motivated by a desire to simplify the narrative. We should imagine the situation as follows: after the father's death, the son's actions to secure his inheritance are easily understood by the reader and require no further comment. The activity following the uncle's death, however, demands explanation. In the case under analysis, for example, this would require an extensive historical excursus.

I intend to present this excursus briefly in the next section. The reader will appreciate the complexity of the situation and understand that this history may have been little known even to Leonti himself, or, if it was known, such an extensive digression from the main point could not have been accommodated in his work, as the reader would have been unable to follow it. Leonti Mroveli's own writing style clearly excluded such lengthy digressions from the central narrative.

3. As it is evident from already provided discussion, in order to understand the broader context, my point of departure must be the year of the death of Narseh I. Accordingly, I must briefly discuss this Sasanian ruler.

One of the important sources for the reign of Shahanshah Narseh I is the trilingual inscription—Parthian, Middle Persian, and Greek—of Shapur I carved on the Kaʿbe-ye Zartosht in the Achaemenid necropolis at Naqsh-e Rustam (Fars Province). Numerous editions and translations of all three versions of the inscription have been published (e.g., Henning 1939; Sprengling 1955; Shahbazi 2002).

In the history of Iranian studies, the importance of this inscription is immense. It constitutes our sole source of information for a number of facts. Data concerning Narseh are also preserved in other sources; for example, in his own inscription known as the Paikuli inscription (Lukonin 1987; Weber 2016; Dmitriev 2020; Cereti 2021). Nevertheless, the information about Narseh found in Shapur's inscription is of particular interest. Therefore, I will present these data concisely while focusing on the aspects most relevant to the present study.

Shapur I recounts his victories in wars against the Romans. As is well known, he defeated three Roman emperors, of which he appears quite proud. He presents himself as the lord of Iran and of non-Iran. As emerges from the inscription, the lands of the South Caucasus—including Kartli—were counted among the territories outside Iran that fell under the shahanshah's control.

Of special interest is Shapur's statement regarding the establishment of dedicated fires for the commemoration of the souls of himself and his family members.

He first refers to the foundation of a fire in his own name. He then notes the lighting of a fire in the name of the "Queen of Queens".

Shapur next records the lighting of fires in the names of his sons. Foremost among them he mentions Hormizd-Ardashir, whom I have referred to repeatedly above. Shapur calls this son the "Great King of Armenia". As already mentioned, Armenia came under Shapur's control in the early 250s. From this time onward, Hormizd-Ardashir occupied the Armenian throne. Armenia held a special position in the Roman–Iranian rivalry and was of great strategic significance for Iran. The enthronement of Hormizd-Ardashir in Armenia signaled that Shapur regarded him as his designated heir.

As becomes clear from the subsequent passage of the inscription, Hormizd-Ardashir was not Shapur's eldest son. According to the prevailing practice of succession in the Iranian world; the throne was expected, first, to pass to the eldest son. Why the father granted preference to him is not known with certainty. Presumably, this occurred due to his exceptional military abilities. Yet the reason for this preference may also have lain elsewhere—for instance, in the high lineage of Hormizd-Ardashir's mother or because of particular closeness between father and son conditioned by a shared vision of imperial governance: both were adherents of Zoroastrianism, though both at the same time displayed marked tolerance toward other religions. Of particular interest is their positive

attitude toward Manichaeans, even though Manichaeism represented the most powerful challenge to Zoroastrianism both within Iran and in non-Iranian regions under Iranian control. Thus, it might be justified, given their religious outlook, to apply to them the epithet "lukewarm Zoroastrians", with which some scholars characterize the early Sasanian shahanshahs (Skjærvø 2012).

But let us return to displaying the data preserved in the inscription in question. In this inscription, as noted, Hormizd-Ardashir is referred to by his father with the epithet "Great King of Armenia", and this occurs twice: first, in the passage reporting the establishment of the fire dedicated to him, and again somewhat further down, in a different context.

After Hormizd-Ardashir, Shapur mentions the lighting of a fire for another son, who, like his father, bore the name Shapur. Following this, the inscription records the lighting of a fire for Narseh. It is noteworthy that Narseh is adorned with a special epithet: he is characterized as a "Mazda-worshipping Aryan". Thus, although Narseh is listed after his two brothers, Shapur nonetheless distinguishes him for some particular reason. In my view, this may indicate the following: although Hormizd-Ardashir was understood to be Shapur's immediate successor, the next shahanshah after him was envisaged—by Shapur himself—to be Narseh. This would have been the case despite the fact that Hormizd-Ardashir's son, Hormizdak, is mentioned in one of the lists of members of the Sasanian family preserved in this inscription.

Not all scholars, however, view Narseh's position in the succession in this way. For example, Ursula Weber considers it the result of an agreement between Bahram I and Narseh, according to which Narseh renounced his rights to the throne (Weber 2016). Carlo Cereti, on the other hand, points out that our sources do not allow us to determine when Narseh ascended the Armenian throne—whether immediately after Hormizd-Ardashir's departure from Armenia, or only after a certain interval, once Bahram I had taken the throne of the shahanshah (Cereti 2021). Personally, I regard the enthronement of Hormizd-Ardashir as shahanshah and the enthronement of Narseh as king of Armenia as simultaneous events, decisions which must have been made by Shapur I himself, since the question of the Armenian throne was of paramount importance for Iranian state policy.

My focus on this detail is of particular relevance here insofar as it adds a new dimension to Hormizd-Ardashir's connection with Kartli. It helps explain his keen interest in the proposal made by the representatives of Kartli to place his son on the Kartlian throne. Despite his departure for Iran, Hormizd-Ardashir would, in effect, be relinquishing the Caucasus—a region in which he must have built an extensive network of alliances during his long rule. At the same time, he would retain control over one of its major political units, namely Kartli, which would remain his own domain. For an Iranian prince, the throne of Armenia was crucial for his future career because of Armenia's exceptional strategic importance in Roman–Iranian relations. However, Kartli's role in the struggle between the empires was no less significant, as control of the passes from the North

Caucasus could be exercised only through the Kingdom of Kartli. Thus, the "Georgian Project" was indeed highly significant.

The "Georgian Project" may have been the reason for Hormizd I's premature, possibly violent, death. The removal from the political arena of a legitimate shahanshah with strong connections in the Caucasus would have been highly advantageous to the faction of Iranian politicians led by the Zoroastrian mobed Kartir, a power-seeking cult official.

However, let's stop speculations and continue with displaying the data from the inscription. A little below the section of the Kaʿbe-ye Zartosht inscription that reports the establishment of the dedicated fires, and in a different context, we find an extended list of the members of Shapur's family. In this list, the sons are named in a different order. First comes Bahram, followed by Shapur—the same Shapur who appears second in the earlier list. Then comes Hormizd-Ardashir, who is once again referred to as the "Great King of Armenia", although, as we see, he now occupies the third position. In other words, he is still accorded honor, but has been moved to the third place. Last in the list is again Narseh.

It is evident that the principle governing the composition of these two lists differs. In the first, the sons appear to be arranged according to rank and perceived prospects of succession to the shahanshah's throne (although Shapur son of Shapur may already have been dead at that time, as some scholars suggest), whereas in the second they are listed by age.

Narseh occupies the last position in both lists, which clearly indicates that he was the youngest among Shapur's sons. Nevertheless, he, as mentioned above, was distinguished in some way by his father.

After Hormizd I, the shahanshah's throne was taken by Bahram, who, according to Shapur's inscription, appears to be the eldest son of Shapur and yet was clearly not considered by his father as a candidate for the throne. He was the only one among the sons for whom Shapur did not dedicate a commemorative fire. The reason for Bahram's marginalization remains unknown.

With Bahram's accession to the throne, not only was the principle of primogeniture in the succession to the throne violated (Hormizd-Ardashir's son, Hormizdak, did not inherit the throne), but Shapur's own intention regarding Narseh was also disregarded, thereby compromising Narseh's interests.

As Iranologists, and specifically experts on the Sasanian period, have pointed out—and I believe rightly so—Bahram I paved his way to the throne with the support of Kartir. Due to such initiatives, some scholars have referred to Kartir as the "maker of kings" (Hermann 1970, 168). Bahram I's lack of legitimacy—or at least his limited legitimacy—was likely the reason he turned to Kartir.

Soon, the limitations placed on Narseh's rights became even more evident. After the death of Bahram I, Kartir ensured the succession of Bahram's son, who became Bahram II. At this moment, Kartir's authority reached its peak. He appears not to have intended to

allow Narseh any space at any stage. After Bahram II's death, the powerful mogbed facilitated the accession of the latter's son to the throne, who ruled as Bahram III. Yet this proved to be the last straw for the Iranian aristocracy, which was clearly dissatisfied with the unprecedented empowerment of the clergy, and in particular Kartir. Consequently, they rebelled against Bahram III and invited Narseh to claim the throne.

Narseh accepted this invitation and marched from Armenia to Iran with his army. The Paikuli inscription recounts this campaign and other details concerning Narseh's accession to the throne. It was here that Narseh was met by his Iranian noble supporters, and apparently it was also here that he was elected king.

However, I will not continue discussing Narseh here. Narseh's accession is well documented and extensively described in the scholarly literature (see, for instance, Lukonin 1987; Weber 2016; Dmitriev 2020).

For this research, the history of Narseh is significant as a precedent: a member of the Sasanian family who had departed from the South Caucasus became shahanshah. This fact renders the account recorded by Leonti Mroveli logical: Mirian had before him the example of his uncle's successful attempt. Accordingly, it is not surprising that he would take a similar step himself.

After Narseh's death, such a step might even have been seen by Mirian as a kind of moral obligation, since among the descendants of Shapur I, he would have been the eldest. Narseh, the uncle, as noted, was younger than his father. Therefore, Narseh's son, who ascended the throne after his father, could not have been older than Mirian.

Thus, Leonti Mroveli's account of Mirian's campaign in Iran is entirely compatible with the historical context, and there is no basis to doubt it.

4. As the source discussed above shows, unlike Narseh's attempt, Mirian's effort was not successful in the sense that he did not manage to become shahanshah.

The situation in the early fourth century differed significantly from that of 393 CE, when Narseh marched on Ctesiphon. By the early fourth century, Iranian power had almost entirely vanished. Narseh had suffered a devastating defeat in the battle against Satala.

The priority of the Sasanian kings was to remove the Parthian-origin Arsacid dynasty from the Armenian throne, as they were blood relatives of the now-extinct royal line. In 298 CE, a battle took place in Armenia in which the Roman army, led by Emperor Galerius, achieved a major victory over the Sasanian forces commanded by Shahanshah Narseh. The Romans captured enormous booty and took members of the Persian royal family as prisoners. The campaign ended with a highly favorable peace treaty for Rome, according to which Narseh renounced a number of provinces, undertook not to intervene in Armenian affairs, and recognized Roman suzerainty over Iberia (Demir and Keçiş 2017; Maksymiuk and Hosein Talaei 2022).

This context must be taken into account when assessing Mirian's real intentions and position in the aforementioned campaign.

By 303 CE, the Sasanian-affiliated Mirian must already have been a pro-Byzantine ruler. Otherwise, he could not have retained the throne of Kartli. Indeed, it seems that the orientation toward Rome had been established by the Georgians long before the South Caucasus fell under Byzantine influence. This is clearly illustrated in the following episode recorded by Leonti Mroveli: when Mirian reached the age of fifteen, his Georgian wife, the daughter of the King of Georgia, died, and a Greek woman, Nana, was brought to him as a spouse. She was a descendant of a notable family. With the death of his Georgian wife ended the reign of the Kings and Queens of the Parnavazid family. The Georgians grieved, because of the death of their Queen, but they remained faithful to Mirian, for there was no descendant of the Parnavazids worthy to reign over them. For that reason, they accepted with love the reign of Mirian. King Mirian continued doing good things for the Georgians and married a Greek from Pont, the daughter of Oligothos, Nana by name (Jones 2014, 42).

Thus, by the second half of the 370s CE, the ruling circles of Kartli were already seeking firm connections with the West.

In light of this fact, a question arises: in 303 CE, during the operation of the *Peace of Nisibis*[1], what was Mirian seeking to achieve through a campaign in Iran and by asserting a claim to the shahanshah's throne?

I argue that his real objective could not have been the actual seizure of the shahanshah's throne. Rather, this was merely a political maneuver, a way to assert the independence of Kartli and the South Caucasus from Iran. A particularly interesting detail in this regard is the mention of the city of Nisibis. It is clear that Mirian did not advance to the Iranian capital, the city toward which, according to Leonti Mroveli, he initially marched; but instead halted near the city of Nisibis. Nisibis had been under Roman control since the treaty of 298 CE, and access to Iran effectively passed through this city. In other words, Mirian did not move beyond the territory controlled by Byzantium.

By operating from a position backed by Byzantium, he was able to assert his claim to the shahanshah's throne. This claim was not recognized by the Iranian council of elders, yet in terms of outcomes, Mirian could hardly have been dissatisfied: through this maneuver, he effectively secured Iran's recognition of Kartli's independence. For him, as a member of the Sasanian family, this must have been highly significant, despite Byzantium already controlling the South Caucasus. Mirian personally needed to be freed from the obligations imposed on him as a Sasanian ruler in the context of confrontation with Byzantium.

Conclusion

Leonti Mroveli's account of Mirian's campaign in Iran corresponds well with historical realities. Although it is impossible to verify this information through other sources, this

[1] When Kartli was within the Roman sphere of influence, and as we have seen, the rulers of Kartli had long been oriented toward Rome.

cannot serve as a reason to disregard the account. This fact once again demonstrates that the skepticism expressed by some scholars toward Leonti Mroveli's testimony—particularly his account of the life of Kartli's first Christian king Mirian—is unfounded.

Mirian's campaign in Iran, ostensibly undertaken to claim the shahanshah's throne, was in reality a political maneuver through which the king of Kartli—who had already adopted a pro-Byzantine orientation—asserted his independence from Iran. At the same time, he was fulfilling certain obligations imposed upon him by the plan conceived by his father, responsibilities he might owed to the political faction that sought to place him on the imperial throne.

Approximately three decades after the campaign described above, the Kingdom of Kartli, whose throne was still held by Mirian, adopted Christianity as its official religion. With this act, Mirian effectively opened a new chapter in the history of the Georgian people.

Such was the unusual path taken by the life of a Persian prince in Georgia, and such was the totally unexpected outcome that followed the partial implementation of Hormizd-Ardashir's "Georgian Project".

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