

This book brings to light one of the least known, yet most turbulent periods in the history of the ancient Armenian military and its complex relationship with the Byzantine Empire.

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THE ARMENIAN MILITARY IN THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

"...Dr. Ayvazyan has managed to perform an almost impossible task. ...a pioneering piece of scholarship, indeed capable of triggering a renewed interest by Western military historians into the too-often ignored Armenian material."

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Excerpt from Foreword

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Armenisch-Deutsche Korrespondenz, n. 158

"Ayvazyan's detailed analysis... is impressive in the richness of the notes and quotations, and shows his encyclopedic knowledge of the period - which characterizes the whole book."

RAFFAELE D'AMATO
Medieval Warfare, III-6

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ARMEN AYVAZYAN



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CONFLICT AND ALLIANCE
UNDER JUSTINIAN AND MAURICE



ARMEN AYVAZYAN

Foreword by Ilkka Syvanne

Second revised
and expanded edition

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It goes without saying that any and all mistakes remain my own.

Armen Ayvazyan

Foreword

When I was asked to write a foreword for this book, I was very pleased to comply because there is a definite need for the kind of study Dr. Armen Ayvazyan has written. In the course of my research of late Roman military history, I have become ever more aware of how little research has been done on the neighbors, allies, friends, and enemies of Rome. In fact, I have been forced to devote more time to researching those than to researching Roman military. For example, I have so far been unable to find any really good military map of Rome's eastern frontier. The main passes and roads, especially the Roman roads, are well known and shown at least on some of the better maps, but not the less important pathways that could still have been (and were) used even by cavalry armies. Similarly, it is a rare treat, if the map includes all the forts and fortresses that had military significance. Therefore, the Map attached to the present study is a welcome new addition to the military cartography of the Roman/Byzantine North-Eastern frontier.

Dr. Armen Ayvazyan's book consists of two separate essays that deal with different and largely overlooked aspects of Roman and Armenian military history, but which are still thematically interconnected. The topics of the essays are the Armenian revolt of 538-539 and the reasons for the omission of the Armenians from Emperor Maurice's *Strategikon*, one of the most famous Byzantine manuals of war. Ayvazyan uses these essays as his vehicles to highlight other equally or even more important matters relating to the military cultures of both Rome and in the fourth to the sixth centuries. With these two pieces of solid research, Ayvazyan has positively managed to bring to the limelight matters of highest importance.

On the surface, it seems surprising that until now the militarily very significant Armenian rebellion of 538-539 against Justinian's government had not been studied in any satisfactory manner. One of the possible reasons for this is that there have been too few historians with the right qualifications. To put it simply, there have been too few historians who also understand military matters. Fortunately, in the past 30 years the situation has been slowly improving and Dr. Ayvazyan is a prime example of this long-awaited transformation. He clearly possesses an in-depth knowledge of both the Armenian and Western primary sources and secondary literature together with an expertise of both ancient and modern military theories and affairs.

In the first essay Dr. Ayvazyan has managed to perform an almost impossible task. He has demonstrated that, despite the perceived paucity of the relevant historical evidence, it is still possible to arrive at a completely new, well-substantiated and plausible reconstruction of the Armenian rebellion in 538-539. He has done that by applying an interdisciplinary approach, which includes the simultaneous utilization of historical geography, geopolitics, linguistics, historical-comparative methodology in combination with the analyses of military strategy and tactics. Ayvazyan's ability to make sense of the dynamics of a battle even when the sources are sparse is best testified by his multi-pronged analysis of the Battle of Oinochalakon (Avnik). He accurately locates the battlefield, deciphers the offensive and defensive movements of the campaign, determines the chain of command and composition of the Armenian rebel forces, and discovers the preferred Armenian tactics against numerically superior enemies from the fifth to the sixth centuries. Only after having built these mutually supportive facts does Ayvazyan proceed to present his strikingly convincing reconstruction of the battle itself.

The second essay expounds a persuasive set of reasons about why the Armenians were omitted from the list of enemies in the

Strategikon. While doing this, it also unearths some deep-rooted cultural prejudices within the Roman Empire. On the basis of these findings, it is also easy to see why the Arabs were similarly left out of the same list. The original questions put forward here allow the author to reveal explicitly the continuity of – and interplay between – Roman and Byzantine traditional policies against Armenia's independent or autonomous status on the one hand and ethnic bias against the Armenians in Roman and Byzantine society on the other hand. Ayvazyan illustrates how important a role the Armenians played in the Roman military and how varied, and sometimes hostile, the Roman elites' reactions were towards them. After reading Ayvazyan's analysis, it becomes abundantly clear that the root source of the military effectiveness of the Armenian princes and their retinues was their fiercely independent nature. This in turn could cause the Roman government to adopt hostile and counterproductive measures to quell their traditionally self-reliant spirit, as exemplified in Maurice's ill-conceived project of transferring the Armenian military from Armenia to the Balkans.

In short, Dr. Armen Ayvazyan's small, yet dense study of Byzantine, Armenian and Iranian military relations is a pioneering piece of scholarship, indeed capable of triggering a renewed interest by Western military historians into the too-often ignored Armenian material. Not coincidentally, this is one of the author's stated objectives in his Preface, which represents, in effect, a well-developed investigative draft plan for future students of Armenian military history.

Ilkka Syvanne, Ph.D.

Vice Chairman of the Finnish Society for Byzantine Studies,
author of *The Age of Hippotoxotai. Art of War
in Roman Revival and Disaster 491-63*

Preface

Ancient and medieval primary sources have amply recorded the robust and durable presence of Armenian armed forces, as well as their continually effective combat performance both within their homeland and abroad. Nevertheless, the military history of Armenia still remains a largely uncharted terrain: the system of manning its troops, their numbers, force structure, training, equipment, ideology and art of war have not been well analyzed. Likewise, Armenia's system of fortifications and the use of its roads for military purposes have yet to be explored in depth.

The Armenian military had been both the progenitor and the product of the kingdoms of Armenia and their antecedent states, which originated on the Armenian Highlands in times immemorial and had a historically recorded existence at least from the second millennium BC. It is true that due to its extremely difficult geostrategic location, particularly its immediate adjacency with the greatest empires of ancient and medieval world, as well as the early emergence of feudalism, Armenia was periodically subjected to decentralizing tendencies. However, the well-organized centralization of Armenian kingdoms was much more regular than has been generally recognized.¹

¹ In this regard, one perceptive analysis concludes: "Thus, with Armenia, certainly after Trdat I ascended the Armenian throne (circa 50 A.D.), there was a remarkable symbiosis of centrifugal tendencies – above all, the relatively independent territorial units of the *naXarars* – and centralizing tendencies – above all, the dynastic royal house and the emergence of a trans-local nobility. ...As a living relation, any nation is complete with heterogeneous, centrifugal as well as centralizing tendencies. That this is so was obvious in the case of ancient Armenia. It is also certainly the case with the modern national state", see Grosby, Steven. "Borders, Territory and Nationality in the

Armenia had one of the most experienced, capable and institutionalized armed forces in the Near East from the ancient period until the mid-eleventh century AD. Not surprisingly, among various national institutions operative in ancient and medieval Armenian kingdoms, the one performing the most ethno-nationally integrative function was the military. The importance of the military among other state structures was reflected, for example, in that Armenian *sparapet* (commander-in-chief of the army) was the second most important persona in the feudal hierarchies of Great Armenia.² This was the

Ancient Near East and Armenia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1997), pp. 19, 27.

2 To designate the Armenian Kingdom of *Mets Hayk* (4th c. BC – 5th c. AD) and the territory it occupied, this study utilizes the term “Great Armenia” rather than recently misguidedly popularized “Greater Armenia.” The latter usage is meant to differentiate it from the Kingdom of *Pokr Hayk* or Little (Lesser) Armenia (4th century BC – 1st c. AD). However, the meanings and connotations of greatness, as properly expressed by the word “mets” (մեծ=great, massive, grand, eminent), were definitely pervasive and predominant in the official usage of the political term *Mets Hayk* by the contemporaries themselves, especially the Armenian royal bureaucracy and ruling class at large as well as their foreign partners. This was even more so after the Kingdom of Little Armenia was abolished in 72 AD by Emperor Vespasian (69-79 AD). Using “Great Armenia” was rightly preferred in numerous pieces of both earlier and more recent English-language scholarly literature: see, e.g., John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811-1057*, Transl. and notes by John Wortley (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 409, 411; Rose, Els. *Ritual Memory: The Apocryphal Acts and Liturgical Commemoration in the Early Medieval West (c. 500 - 1215)*, (Leiden: Brill, 2009) pp. 85-87, 89; *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World, C. 650-c. 1450*: Selected sources translated and annotated by Janet Hamilton and Bernard Hamilton (Manchester University Press 1998), pp. 155, 164; *E.J. Brill's First Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1913-1936*. By M. Th. Houtsma (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1987, reprint of 1927 original ed.), p. 436; *Don Juan of Persia, a Shi'ah Catholic, 1560-1604* (London, G. Routledge & Sons, 1926), p. 94; Malte-Brun, Conrad and Huot, Jean-Jacques-Nicolas. *A System of Universal Geography: Or a Description of All the Parts of the World, on a New Plan, According to the Great Natural Divisions of the Globe* (Boston, Mass., 1834), p. 249n; *Encyclopaedia Londinensis, or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*, Volume 2, (London 1810), pp. 194, 197; *Penny cyclopaedia of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*. Vols. 1-2 (London 1833), p. 242; *An Abridgment of Sir Walter Raleigh's History of The World: In Five Books, Part I* (London 1698), p. 38; etc.

procedure under at least the dynasties of Arshakunis (66-428 AD) and Bagratunis (885-1045 AD), possibly of the earlier Artashesians (189 BC-11 AD), as well as in the later Cilician Armenian Kingdom (1198-1375 AD). Conspicuously, even after the Persians abolished the Armenian kingdom of Arshakunis in 428 AD, they did not encroach upon *sparapetutiun*, the *war ministry* of Great Armenia, with a unified command structure headed by the princely house of Mamikoneans, the hereditary *sparapets*. As will be discussed later in this study, from 390 AD up until the reforms of Emperor Justinian in the 530s, the Romans, too, tolerated the functioning of the *sparapets* in the regions of Armenia under their control. The office of *sparapet* continued operating during the Arab domination as well, from the seventh to the ninth centuries.

The Armenian armed forces maintained their combat readiness throughout the lengthy intervals of temporary absence of an independent state. During Persian, Romano-Byzantine and Arab domination, the high combat effectiveness of the Armenian forces was displayed in many successful operations executed either independently or in conjunction with both Romano-Byzantine and Parthian-Persian armies.

The distinctiveness of the ancient and medieval Armenian armed forces and their ways of war from those of their rivals was shaped by a number of historical, geographical and societal factors, of which I will enumerate only the major ones:

(1) *The defense of the terrain of Armenia*, essentially mountainous but with various open passageways leading to the heart of the country, necessitated the creation and skillful employment of a combined force of heavy and light cavalry alongside the specialized infantry units, including garrison and mountain troops.

(2) *The natural features of Armenia*, especially its excellent horse pastures, made it one of the earliest places of horse breeding. Armenia

was producing abundant numbers of war horses³ and thus enabling the maintenance of a highly mobile cavalry-centric army. The report by Greek geographer Strabo (64/63 BC – ca. 24 AD) is indicative of this fact: “This country is so well adapted, being nothing inferior in this respect to Media, for breeding horses, that the race of Nesaeen horses, which the kings of Persia used, is found here also; the satrap of Armenia used to send annually to the king of Persia 20,000 foals at the time of the festival of the Mithracina. Artavasdes, when he accompanied Antony in his invasion of Media, exhibited, besides other bodies of cavalry, 6000 horse covered with complete armor drawn up in array.”⁴

(3) *Ancient Armenia was one of the areas where the mining and processing of iron ore originated*, entailing also the manufacture and employment of iron weapons and tools.⁵ Writing about later period

3 For the details, see Есаян, С. А. *Оружие и военное дело древней Армении*. [Yesayan, S. A. *Arms and Warfare in Ancient Armenia*], Yerevan, 1966, pp. 119-130; cf. Արզումանյան, Ն. Ա., Հայկական սկզբնաղբյուրներում հիշատակվող «Մատեան գունդ» զորամասը. *Պատմա-բանասիրական հանդես* [Arzumanyan, N.A., “On the Matean Gund Contingent Reported in the Armenian Primary Sources”, *Historical-Philological Journal*], 1973 No. 2, pp. 154-162, esp. pp. 159-161.

4 See *The Geography of Strabo*. Literally translated, with notes, the first six books by H. C. Hamilton, the remainder by W. Falconer (London: H.G. Bohn, 1854), XI.14.9, p. 271. On another occasion, Strabo reports about “fifty thousand mares,” the Persian king’s stud: “The Nesaeen horses, the best and largest in the king’s province, were of this breed, according to some writers, but according to others they came from Armenia” (*ibid.*, XI.13.7, p. 265). Armenia’s horse breeding capacity was impressive as recently as the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the eastern Armenian rebel armies, concentrated in the adjacent mountainous regions of Artzakh (Karabakh) and Syunik (Kapan), included, according to various reliable reports, 20,000 to 30,000 well-armed horsemen. In a document dated 21 October 1729, the commanders of the Karabakh Armenian army mentioned also the breeds of their horses: “they have good horses of Persian and Turkish, as well as local, stock in ample quantities...” (see Ayvazyan, Armen. *The Armenian Rebellion of the 1720s and the Threat of Genocidal Reprisal* (Yerevan: American University of Armenia, 1997, p. 11).

5 Мартиросян, А. А. *Армения в эпоху бронзы и раннего железа* [Martirosyan, A. A. *Armenia in the bronze and early iron ages*], Yerevan, 1964; cf. Yesayan (Есаян), *op. cit.*

of the fourth-ninth centuries AD, the military historian David Nicolle observes that “...all [Armenian cavalymen]... were notably well equipped, Armenia being rich in iron. In fact, Armenian armor was regarded as singularly heavy, while iron horse armor was more common than elsewhere.”⁶

(4) *Armenia’s economy and population base* were large enough to sustain armies of professional commanders and practiced soldiers.

(5) *Armenia’s climate* of hot summers and bitterly cold winters required all-weather preparedness, special equipment and clothing for the troops, adding to their confidence, physical toughness and endurance.

(6) *Almost incessant wars* waged against the armies of such superpowers as Parthia/Persia and Rome/Byzantium (more often than not in alliance with one of them against the other) as well as against the Caucasian mountaineers and the invading nomads from Central Asia acquainted the Armenian military with the most potent war machines of the time and, by necessity, helped to develop strategies for opposing each of them. On the other hand, adopting their foes’ warfare practices further enriched the resourcefulness of Armenian battlefield tactics.

(7) *An early and strong sense of Armenian ethnocentric identity, the distinctive language, national culture and religious organization, as well as the continual armed opposition against especially foreign empires* were all emotionally powerful and mutually reinforcing vehicles for the advancement of nationally unifying – though not always, nor automatically applied – social-psychological attachments and ideological commitments to the traditions of independent or autonomous existence.⁷

6 Nicolle, David. *Romano-Byzantine Armies 4th-9th centuries* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1992), pp. 33-34.

7 Important unifying social psychological and ideological factors in ancient Armenia are revealed, in particular, in Այվազյան, Արմեն. Հին Հայաստանը որպես «ազգային

(8) Finally and most importantly, the ancient and medieval *Armenian states and kings were naturally cultivating and institutionalizing their armed forces*, thus effectuating a considerable standardization of Armenia's military culture.⁸

The title of this book should in no way be taken as an application for a comprehensive coverage of the numerous and diverse relationships between the Armenian military and the Byzantine Empire in the age of Emperors Justinian and Maurice. The present study strives to bring to light only one of the least known, yet most turbulent episodes in the history of the Armenian military.

In its first part, I embark on a historical military analysis of the Armenian uprising against Emperor Justinian's government in 538-539. While revealing and evaluating various tactical elements and stratagems employed by the Armenian forces, it was imperative to selectively consider earlier and later evidence regarding their military operations, including both conventional warfare and high-risk missions such as targeted killings of enemy generals and assassination plots against the heads of colonial administrations. Thus it became possible to identify some important aspects of military strategy and tactics utilized by Armenian commanders from the fourth to the sixth centuries.

In the second part, I examine Byzantine attitudes toward the Armenians and their armed forces, revealing, *inter alia*, that the underlying source for continuity of the anti-Armenian images with the analogous Roman tradition of prejudice was essentially geopolitical.

It is my hope that this book will act as a catalyst for a long overdue

rigorous scholarly research into the military history of Armenia. After all, the booming studies of the Romano-Byzantine and Partho-Persian militaries could hardly claim to be inclusive without a closer analysis of the resiliently dynamic armed forces of Armenia, an intermittently fully independent or autonomous actor in the ancient-early medieval Near East.

A. A.

Yerevan, Armenia

January 2012, May 2013



պետություն» [Ayvazyan, Armen. "Ancient Armenia as a Nation-State"], *Echmiadzin*, 2005, No. 5, pp. 123-138; idem., "Mother Tongue and the Origins of Nationalism: A Comparative Analysis of the Armenian and European Primary Sources," *Armenian Folia Anglistika* (International Journal of English Studies), No. 1 (2), 2006, pp. 123-131.

⁸ See Արմեն Այվազյան, Հայ զինվորականության պատվի վարքականունը (4-5-րդ դդ.) [hereafter –Ayvazyan, Armen. *The Code of Honor of the Armenian Military, the 4-5th centuries*], Yerevan, 2000.

A Note on Armenian Personal Names and Toponyms

The Armenian personal names and toponyms appearing in this study are used interchangeably in either their original Armenian, or Hellenized, Latinized and Anglicized versions, depending on the quoted source as well as whether the particular usage has been historically established in the scholarly literature. Below is the list of Armenian names and toponyms in Armenian letters, followed by their transliteration (between square brackets) and their foreign equivalent(s), utilized in this book.

Personal names

Ակակ [Akak] = Acacius
 Ասպետունի [Aspetuni] = Aspetean/Aspetian/Aspetiani/
 Apetiani
 Ատրվշնասպ [Atrveshnasp] = Atrveshnasp
 Արշակ [Arshak] = Arsaces
 Արշակունի [Arshakuni] = Arsacid/Arsacids
 Արտաշեսյաններ [Artashesians] = Artaxiads
 Արտաշիր [Artashir] = Artasires
 Արտավան [Artavan] = Artabanes
 Բագրատունի [Bagratuni] = Bagratids
 Գրիգոր [Grigor] = Gregorius/Gregory
 Եղիշե [Yeghishe] = Elishe, Eliseus
 Հրահատ (Կամսարական) [Hrahak (Kamsarakan)] = Aratius

Համազասպ [Hamazasp] = Amazaspes
 Հովհաննես [Hovhannes] = John
 Դազար Փարպեցի [Ghazar Parpetzi] = Lazar of Parpi
 Մամիկոնեան [Mamikonean/Mamikonian] = Mamikonids
 Ներսեհ (Կամսարական) [Nerseh (Kamsarakan)] = Narses
 Վասակ [Vasak] = Bassaces

Toponyms

Ակորի [Akori] = Akori
 Արտալես [Artales] = Artaleson
 Աւնիկ [Avnik] = Oenochalakon/Oinokhalakon
 Բայբերդ, Բաբերդ [Ba[y]berd] = Ba[y]berd
 Բասեան [Basean] = Basean, Phasiane
 Բողբերդ [Bolberd] = Bolberd
 Դարոյնք [Daroink] = Daroink
 Եկեղեաց [Ekeghyats] = Ekelesene/Akilisene
 Ծանգակ [Tzanzak] = Tzanzakon
 Կարին [Karin] = Carenitis = Theodosiopolis
 Կիթարիճ [Kitarich] = Kitharizon/Citharizon
 Մանազկերտ [Manazkert] = Manzikert
 Մարտիրոսուպոլիս [Martyrusopolis] = Martyropolis
 Մլեհի [Mlehi] = Mlehi
 Ոքաղե [Vokaghe] = Okale
 Սատաղ [Satagh] = Satala
 Սպեր [Sper] = Syspirtis/Suspirtis
 Վահանաշեն [Vahanashen] = Vahanashen
 Վխիկ [Vkhik] = Vkhik
 Օրոն [Oron] = Horonon

PART I.

The Armenian Rebellion against the Byzantine Empire in 538-539: A Historical-Military Analysis

Introduction

The independent kingdom of Great Armenia was divided between Sassanid Persia and the Roman Empire in 387. In 390, the Romans abolished the western Armenian kingdom on their territory, and in 428 the Persians did the same with the much larger eastern Armenian kingdom.⁹ During the fifth and sixth centuries, however, the Armenians repeatedly revolted against both these ancient and early medieval superpowers (note that, from 395 onwards, the eastern half of the Roman Empire continued as the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire).

This study intends to reconstruct the military history of the most powerful Armenian rebellion against Byzantium that took place in 538-539. The singular, but rather detailed, account of it was provided by the famous historian Procopius of Caesarea (c. 500 – c. 565), the adviser and confidant of Belisarius, one of the greatest generals in the service of the Byzantine Empire. The evidence provided by Procopius is all the more valuable because it was derived immediately from the imperial army's highest command circles.¹⁰ Although this evidence was addressed by several historians (M. Chamchian, J. Bury, N. Adontz, C. Tumanoff, V. Iskanyan), who accordingly have made a number

9 On the dates of partition of Armenia and the abolition of the two concurrent Armenian kingdoms that emerged respectively in Roman and Persian parts, see Toumanoff, Cyril. *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1963), pp. 151-152, 192-195.

10 Procopius served on Belisarius' staff between 527 and c. 540 and accompanied his general to Persia, Africa and Italy (Elton, Hugh. "Army and Battle in the Age of Justinian," in Erdkamp, Paul, ed., *A Companion to the Roman Army*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), p. 533.

of important points and clarifications, until now there has been no concerted attempt to analyze the military campaigns of 538-539 in Byzantine Armenia. One of the consequences of such an investigative gap is that contemporary Armenian historiography, by and large, has ignored the central martial event of the rebellion: the battle between the Armenian and Byzantine armies. This decisive military engagement has been at times completely forgotten and, at others, barely mentioned.¹¹ The battle's character was described vaguely, sometimes being reduced to an ordinary skirmish. Paradoxically, the whole rebellion itself has been on occasion absent from the sight of Armenian historians.¹² Meanwhile, the battle in question generated

interest among some Western historians (B. Rubin, I. Syvanne, J. Martindale, C. Whately).¹³ Their short remarks, however, in no way amount to, or claim to provide, a systematic analysis of either this battle or, moreover, the 538-539 Armenian rebellion at large.

11 Չամչեանց, Մ. Պատմութիւն Հայոց [hereafter – Chamchian, M. *History of Armenia*], v. II, Venice, 1785, pp. 241-243 (here the rebellion is incorrectly dated to 536-537); Bury, J. B. *A History of the Later Roman Empire from Arcadius to Irene (395 A.D. to 800 A.D.)*, Vol. 1, London-New York: Macmillan, 1889, p. 420; Ադոնց, Ն. Պատմական ուսումնասիրություններ [hereafter – Adontz, *Historical Studies*], Paris, 1948, pp. 299-303; Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 196; Հակոբյան, Թ. Ազատագրական շարժումները Հայաստանում V-IX դդ. Բանբեր Երևանի համալսարանի [Hakobyan, T. “The Liberation Movements in Armenia in V-IX Centuries,” *Journal of the Yerevan State University*], 1972, No. 1, p. 129 (in this article, the rebellion is crudely dated to “the middle of the fifth century”). A relatively detailed overview and synthesis of what has been said about this rebellion by previous Armenian researchers is provided by V. Iskanyan in his last work, where, however, following Chamchian, it is again incorrectly dated to 536-537 (see Իսկանյան, Վ. Կ. Հայ-բյուզանդական հարաբերությունները IV-VII դդ. [hereafter – Iskanyan, *Armenian-Byzantine Relations in IV-VII centuries*], Yerevan, 1991, pp. 210-221). Although this anti-Byzantine rebellion, dated 539 AD, is represented on a couple of recently published historical maps, except for the presumed area of its spreading, they mark neither the decisive battle between the Armenian and Byzantine armies, nor, indeed, any other events (see Բ. Հ. Հարությունյան, Հայաստանի պատմության ատլաս, Ա մաս [Harutyunyan, B. *The Atlas of the History of Armenia*, Part I, Yerevan, 2004], pp. 52-53; Բ. Հարությունյան (պատ. խմբ.), Հայաստանի ազգային ատլաս, [Harutyunyan, B. (ed.), *The National Atlas of Armenia*, Yerevan, 2008], p. 35).

12 The following books, in particular, have completely overlooked the rebellion of 538-539: Է. Լ. Դանիելյան, Հայաստանի քաղաքական պատմությունը և հայ առաքելական եկեղեցին (VI-VII դարեր) [hereafter – Danielyan, E. L. *Political*

History of Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Church (VI-VII centuries)], Yerevan, 2000; Hovannisian, Richard G. ed., *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*. Vol. I. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 106-107; Bournoutian, George A. *A Concise History of the Armenian People: From Ancient Times to the Present* (Costa Mesa, CA.: 2002), pp. 64-65; Robert H. Hewsen, *Armenia: A Historical Atlas* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 84-86.

13 See Rubin, Berthold. “Prokopios von Kaisareia,” in *RE (Realencyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft)*, vol. 23.1, Stuttgart, 1957, pp. 381-382; Syvanne (Syvännne), Ilkka. *The Age of Hippotoxotai. Art of War in Roman Revival and Disaster 491-636*. PhD Dissertation in History, the University of Tampere (Finland), 2004, pp. 440-441; Whately, Conor Campbell. *Descriptions of Battle in the ‘Wars’ of Procopius*. PhD Dissertation in Classics and Ancient History, the University of Warwick, 2009, pp. 155-157, 167-168, 188-189, 195, 199, the battle in question is specifically identified as a pitched one on pp. 155 (note 28) and 199. Martindale, J. R. *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: Volume III. AD 527—641* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1992), p. 1162.

1.

The start of the rebellion Assassination operations by Artabanes Arshakuni

Before exploring the course of the rebellion, it is worthwhile to highlight its initial act, that of decapitating the imperial administration in Byzantine Inner Armenia (also known as Armenia Interior or Upper Armenia, annexed to the Empire first as the kingdom of [western] Great Armenia),¹⁴ through the assassination of its leader, Acacius, incidentally an Armenian by birth.¹⁵ According to Procopius, Acacius, “being base by nature, gained the opportunity of displaying his inward character, and he proved to be the most cruel of all men toward his subjects. For he plundered their property without excuse and ordained that they should pay an unheard-of tax of four *centenaria*. But the Armenians, unable to bear him any longer, conspired together and slew Acacius and fled for refuge to Pharangium.”¹⁶ This successful assassination

14 On Inner/Interior Armenia, see Adontz, Nicholas. *Armenia in the Period of Justinian: The Political Conditions based on the NAXARAR System*. Translated with partial revisions, a bibliographical note and appendices by Nina G. Garsoian. (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1970), pp. 39-53; Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 594. Justinian calls it in his decree “Great(er) Armenia, which is called Interior” (Greatrex, Geoffrey & Lieu, Samuel N. C. (eds.), *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II, AD 363-630: A narrative Sourcebook*. Edited and compiled. London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 83).

15 Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, pp. 8-9.

16 Proc. *Bell. Pers.* (Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars: The Persian War*. Vol.

operation deserves special consideration.

The elimination of Acacius, which took place most probably in 538,¹⁷ was certainly not an easy task. After introducing a draconian tax regime, openly plundering the population, and, earlier, “treacherously” slaying, “by the emperor’s will,” Amazaspes (Arm.: *Hamazasp*), the former ruler of Byzantine Armenia, Acacius and his bodyguards must have been extremely suspicious and cautious, expecting all sorts of surprises from the local *nakharars*, Armenian feudal military lords, who were in command of experienced private armies and had centuries-old traditions of national resistance. The plot was planned and carried out by a scion of the former Armenian royal dynasty, Artabanes Arsacid (Arm.: *Artavan Arshakuni*), who later became famous in the Byzantine Empire for his outstanding exploits in Africa. The details of this operation remain unknown.

Nevertheless, an indirect concept about it or at least of Artabanes’s dexterity and audacity in conducting special operations can be constructed by analyzing his minute planning and successful implementation of another plot – the assassination of Gontharis, the tyrant of Libya (Byzantine North Africa), in Carthage, in May 546. In preparing a military coup in Carthage, Artabanes must have taken into account and used the know-how of the operation against Acacius, executed eight years earlier in Armenia. Hence, for the examiner of the Armenian rebellion of 538-539, it is of definite interest to scrutinize the plot against Gontharis, described by Procopius of Caesarea in great

I, Books 1-2 Transl. by H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, English and Greek Edition), 1914, II.3.6-7.

17 The anti-Byzantine rebellion of the Armenians ended in late autumn of 539 with the retreat of the rebels to Persia, but the events that took place in its course clearly suggest a longer period than that one year, thus the reason for dating it between 538 and 539. The same dating, without explanation, is given by Toumanoff; See his *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 196.

detail.¹⁸ Without reproducing here a lengthy account of the primary source on this special operation (see Appendix A), its main elements are identified below as follows: Artabanes managed –

(1) to keep his plan in absolute secrecy for a long time, confiding only with his two closest Armenian friends: even his unit of handpicked and completely loyal veteran Armenian soldiers was not aware of scheduled assassination attempt until the very last moment (such a perfect concealment was achieved, not least, thanks to the fact that during both planning and implementation stages of this assassination the communication between the exclusively Armenian conspirators was in their mother tongue, an incomprehensible language for ethnically all other elements in the midst of which they were acting then in Africa);

(2) to lull Gontharis and his armed security guards into a false sense of security;

(3) to covertly smuggle arms into a strictly protected area for the feast, where Gontharis was carousing;

(4) in tactical terms, to correctly position each of the few participants in the operation;

(5) to give them clear and unambiguous orders, properly assessing their combat capabilities;

(6) to effectively enforce the plan elaborated beforehand, improvising and responding instantly to changing circumstances;

(7) to secure allies;

(8) to seize power in the city and then across North Africa and consolidate it into his own hands;

(9) to accomplish all this with no – or perhaps minimal – losses

18 Proc. *Bell. Vand.* (Procopius of Caesaria: *History of the Wars*, Vol. 2, Books 3-4: *Vandalic War*. Transl. by H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, English and Greek Edition), 1916, II.27-28.

to his Armenian squad.¹⁹

In short, from a military perspective, the efficiency and effectiveness of Artabanes and his unit's actions are worthy of the highest professional appraisal. The fact that this operation was designed and carried out by a general who had received his martial education and experience in Armenia, rather than a simple coincidence, had much to do with the Armenian traditional military strategy's doctrinal emphasis on targeted killings, revealed later in this book.

We also know the names of Artabanes's two confidants who played a crucial role in carrying out his assignment: Gregorius (Arm.: *Grigor*)²⁰ and his bodyguard (*doryphoros*)²¹ Artasires (Artashir), also an

19 For Procopius's account of this assassination operation, see Appendix A. The praetorian prefect Athanasius could not have been the real mastermind of this plot, as claimed by Flavius Cresconius Corippus, a sixth-century Roman poet (Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, pp. 143-144), for the simple reason that the assassination was carried out by the Armenian squad, which had been instructed by and obeyed only the orders of their immediate commander, Artabanes. Moreover, as noted above, the conspirators interacted mostly in Armenian (Proc. *Bell. Vand.*, II.28.16; cf. Charanis, Peter, "Ethnic Changes in the Byzantine Empire in the Seventh Century," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 13 (1959), p. 31, n. 47). This was, first and foremost, a military mission and Athanasius was not a military man. The fact that Artabanes was recognized by the Emperor Justinian and all the contemporaries as *the* man who liberated Africa strongly supports Procopius's version of the events. Athanasius, however, was quite possibly involved in the preparation of the coup, as could be judged from his close collaboration with Artabanes immediately after the assassination of Gontharis.

20 Adontz considers Gregorius to be Artabanes's cousin, son of his paternal sister and Vasak Mamikonyan (see Adontz, *Historical Studies*, p. 305), while Toumanoff does not rule out the possibility that he could have been Artabanes's nephew, son of his brother Vahan (see Toumanoff, C., "The Heraclids and the Arsacids," *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, No. 19 (1985), pp. 432-433).

21 Hans Delbrück notes that the *doryphoros* formed, at the time, the "strictly private entourage of the [Byzantine] military commander... [They] could be called, simultaneously, the staff, adjutants, orderlies and bodyguards." (quoted from the Russian translation of his *History of warfare in the framework of political history*: Дельбрюк, Ганс. *Всеобщая история военного искусства в рамках политической истории*. Moscow: EKSMO, 2008, p. 356).

Arshakuni offspring. For this and other exploits in Libya, the Emperor Justinian bestowed upon Artabanes Arshakuni the title of supreme commander of the imperial armies in Africa – *magister militum Africae*.²² After his arrival from Africa to Constantinople, Artabanes is described by Procopius in the most flattering terms:

Now when Artabanes reached Byzantium, the common people admired him for his achievements and loved him for his other qualities. For he was both tall of stature and handsome, of a noble character and little given to speech. And the emperor had honoured him in a very unusual manner. For he had appointed him general of the troops in Byzantium and commander of the foederati,²³ as well as clothing him with the dignity of consul.²⁴

Despite these honors, Artabanes subsequently participated in the planning of the third, and failed, assassination attempt – this time against Emperor Justinian himself. According to Procopius, Artabanes and Arsaces (Arshak), another Armenian nobleman and fomenter of the failed enterprise, had mainly personal reasons for dissatisfaction with Justinian. However, an intensified Byzantine oppression of Armenian provinces, in particular, the destruction of deep-rooted institutions of national self-rule should be considered a no less, if not a more likely, motivation for these two Arshakuni conspirators. This

is more than eloquently revealed in the following reproachful, and intentionally provocative, words addressed by Arsaces to Artabanes prior to the latter's agreement to conspire against Justinian:

At the present juncture, he said, he was utterly cowed, and he continued to sit there without a spark of manhood, though his fatherland was kept under strictest guard and exhausted by unwonted taxes, his father had been slain on the pretext of a treaty and covenant, and his whole nation²⁵ had been enslaved and was kept scattered to every corner of the Roman empire. But in spite of these facts Artabanes thought it sufficient for him to be a general of the Romans and merely bear the name of consul.²⁶

22 During his military career in the Byzantine Empire, Artabanes was in turn granted the offices of *magister militum Africae* in 546, ex-consul and *magister militum praesentalis* in 546/547, *magister militum per Thraciam* in 550, supreme commander in Sicily in 551 (see, in particular, Toumanoff, “The Heraclids and the Arsacids,” p. 433). As justly observed by N. Adontz, “the life of Prince Artabanes reads like a novel” (Adontz, *Historical Studies*, p. 318).

23 During the sixth century, the *Foederati* (“Federates”) were contingents of the Byzantine army composed of mostly non-Roman warriors.

24 Proc. *Bell. Goth.* (Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars*, Vol. IV, Books 6-7: *The Gothic War*. Transl. by H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, English and Greek Edition, 1924), III.31.

25 This passage was translated by Dewing as “his whole family,” while N. Adontz, H. Manandyan, and H. Bartikyan appropriately chose “his whole nation/people,” which best fits the historical context (see Адонц, Н. *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана: Политическое состояние на основе нахарарского строя* [Adontz, Nicholas. *Armenia in the Period of Justinian: The Political Conditions based on the NAXARAR System*], St. Petersburg: 1908, p. 206; Հակոբ Մանանյան, Երկեր, Հ. Բ [Manandyan, Hakob. *Works*. Vol. II], Yerevan, 1978, p. 576; Բյուզանդական աղբյուրներ: Հ. Ա, Պրոկոպիոս Կեսարացի: Թարգմ. բնագրից, առաջաբան և ծան. Հրաչ Բարթիկյանի [hereafter – *Byzantine Sources*. Vol. I. Procopius of Caesarea. The preface, transl. from the original and commentary by H. M. Bartikyan], Yerevan, 1967, p. 235).

26 Proc. *Bell. Goth.*, III.32.6-7.

2.

The eve of the decisive battle and the geopolitical situation

To return to the analysis of the Armenian rebellion of 538-539: one important allusion by Procopius – that after murdering Acacius, the Armenians “fled for refuge to Pharangium” – needs to be further explained. In Greek sources, Pharangium or Pharangion identified the gold-mines (known in Armenian as “Posadurn”) in the canton Sper (Syspiritis) of Upper Armenia (Arm.: *Bardzr Hayk*), previously a constituent province of the former Kingdom of Great Armenia and, in the 530s, Byzantine Inner Armenia. Upper Armenia was bordered on the west by *Pers-Armenia*, as the Byzantines called the Persian part of Armenia (see Maps 1 and 2).

The canton of Sper was famous from ancient times; it had paid tribute to the royal treasury for centuries.²⁷ Pharangium was convincingly localized by Adontz, who, inter alia, relates the Byzantine chronicler John Malalas’s (c. 491-578) testimony that:

The mountains lying on the border were very rich in gold; in periods of heavy rainfall, the earth washed down from the mountains and

²⁷ Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 22-23; Adontz, *Historical Studies*, pp. 206-222, 299.

*uncovered the gold deposits. These lands had formerly been rented out by the Romans and Persians for 200 pounds of gold, but with the transfer of these lands to the Empire under Anastasius, the Romans alone received this revenue.*²⁸

The retreat of the Armenians to Pharangium was a sound logistical decision since its gold-mines represented a strong material and financial base for the uprising. Of similar importance were, naturally, military considerations, including the impregnability of the area and its location right along the state border line, which made it possible to establish reliable communication with both the related Armenian princely houses in Pers-Armenia and the Persian king himself, as well as to retreat, if necessary, into the confines of the Persian empire.

From what Procopius tells next, it becomes clear that all three major Armenian princely houses, the Arshakunis,²⁹ the Mamikoneans and the Bagratunis (Aspetuni or Aspetians)³⁰ – or, more correctly, those of their branches, which were living in and ruling over a significant portion of Byzantine Armenia – took part in the rebellion. The city of Karin (Carenitis, Theodosiopolis) “undoubtedly numbered among the ancestral provinces of the Arsacid princes;”³¹ the canton of Sper belonged to the Bagratuni from time immemorial;³² and the

²⁸ Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 429 (n. 58).

²⁹ This branch of Arshakunis derived most probably from the last Armenian king in the Byzantine part of Armenia – Arshak III (AD 387-390): see Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, pp. 192-193.

³⁰ On the sameness of Aspetuni and Bagratuni, see Adontz, *Historical Studies*, p. 300; Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, pp. 194 (n. 209), 202, 324-325. Toumanoff notes that “the form *Aspetuni* or, possibly, *Aspetean* is not found in any Armenian sources, though it must have existed” (*ibid.*, p. 324, n. 83).

³¹ Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 100. Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, pp. 193-194 (n. 209). The especially active participation in this rebellion of Arshakuni princes, John and his sons – Artabanus and John, could be partially explained by their aspiration to restore their control over Karin.

³² The possession of Sper by the Bagratunis is mentioned by Movses Khorenatzi (Մովսես Խորենացի).

canton of Ekeghyats (Ekelesene or Akilisene) was inherited by the Mamikoneans in 439, after the death of Sahak the Great, Catholicos of Armenia.³³ These three clans may have owned some other territories in Inner Armenia, as well. It is possible that they were joined by some less powerful Armenian princes whose names, unfortunately, were not preserved in primary sources.³⁴

Likewise, it is far from certain whether this liberation attempt in Inner Armenia was to any extent backed by the so-called Satrapies (Latin: *Gentes*), the six neighboring autonomous principalities of southwestern Armenia, which had been progressively, from 387 AD to 408 AD, detached from the Kingdom of Great Armenia and henceforth firmly allied (*foederatae*) to the Roman Empire.³⁵ However, the considerable military strength of the Byzantine Armenian rebels

in 538-539 does allow for a tentative supposition that at least some of these principalities or their contingents could have participated in this uprising against Justinian, especially because the latter abolished the self-rule of the Satrapies and merged them into the newly formed regular Roman province of Fourth Armenia only two years before, in 536. In this regard, it is also suggestive that the acute dissatisfaction of the Armenian Satrapies with the Romans manifested itself as early as 484, when the majority of the local *nakharars* openly joined the Samaritan rebellion against Emperor Zeno (474-5, 476-491) and after its suppression were stripped off their age-old rights of hereditary succession.³⁶

Whatever the case may be, the armed forces under the command of the aforementioned three princely houses managed to unite into a single Armenian army and assemble on the rugged terrain of Sper. As will be shown later, they also succeeded in taking control of a large portion of Byzantine Armenia. Thus, the killing of Acacius was not an isolated act, but a catalyst for launching the rebellion as well as an effective blow that paralyzed the imperial military and political authorities in Armenia. That is why after the assassination of Acacius Justinian was compelled to dispatch against the Armenians a punitive army “from Byzantium,” led by Sittas, at that time one of his two most talented and famous generals, who was married to Comito, Justinian’s sister-in-law and the Empress Theodora’s sister (Justinian’s other preeminent general was Belisarius).

Based on an official historical document, Adontz notes that “Sittas or Tzittas was apparently a nickname; the name of the general was Ursicius” or Ursuk, which indicates his possible eastern origin.³⁷ Some historians, including A. Jones, J. Evans, G. Greatrex and T.

Խորենացի, Պատմութիւն Հայոց [hereafter - Movses Khorenatzi, *History of Armenia*. The critical text prepared by M. Abeghyan and S. Harutyunyan. Tiflis, 1913], II.37, 63; III.43), Pavstos Buzand (Փավստոս Բուզանդ, *Հայոց պատմություն*: Թարգմանությունը և ծանոթագրությունները՝ Ստ. Մալխասյանցի: Երևանի համալսարանի հրատ., 1987, [hereafter – Pavstos Buzand, *History of Armenia*. Transl. and commentary by S. Malkhasiantz], Yerevan State University Press, 1987, V.44) and Sebeos (Սեբեոսի եպիսկոպոսի Պատմություն [The History of Bishop Sebeos, preparation of the text, the preface and commentary by G. V. Abgaryan], Yerevan, 1979), p. 165; cf. S. Malkhasyantz’ publication of the same *History* (Yerevan, 1939), p. 142.

33 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 100-101 (on the limits of Ekeghyats, see *ibid.*, pp. 44-45); Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, pp. 209-210.

34 Based on the fact that we know the names of only three Armenian princely houses (Arshakuni, Mamikonean and Bagratuni) in Interior Armenia, Toumanoff believes that only an unspecified part of nine cantons, or “lands,” there was ruled by these Armenian clans, while “the rest of the territory, being princeless, must have been under the direct rule first of the Armenian Crown and Church and now of the Roman State” (Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, pp. 193-194). Nevertheless, completely ruling out the presence in this territory of other Armenian princely houses solely on the basis that their names have not survived is rather excessive (cf. Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 100).

35 On Armenian Satrapies, see Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 34-37, 85-93, 411, n. 33; Güterbock, Karl. *Römisch-Armenien und die römischen Satrapien im vierten bis sechsten Jahrhundert: eine rechtsgeschichtliche Studie* (Königsberg, 1900).

36 Procopius of Caesaria, *On Buildings*. Vol. VII. With an English translation by H. B. Dewing, Harvard University Press, 1940 (Loeb Classical Library, English and Greek Edition), III.I.17-29.

37 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 111, 417, n. 22.

Jacobsen consider Sittas an Armenian, however, only the first of these authors tries to substantiate this claim by an explanation, alleging that “Sittas’s nationality is inferred from his name.”³⁸ J. Martindale, again judging by Sittas’s name, opines that “he was possibly of Gothic origin.”³⁹ It remains, however, unclear how exactly this name associates Sittas either with Armenians or Goths. Likewise, without supporting evidence or argumentation, R. Browning calls him Thracian.⁴⁰ The most specific report about Sittas’s ethnic background is provided by Chamchian. Using no extant primary source and talking about a “man skilled in warfare,” whom Justinian appointed “the [chief] prince and general over the Armenian princes [in Byzantium]” and married him to Comito, the Empress Theodora’s sister, Chamchian identified him as an Armenian *nakharar* by the name Tachat (Տաճատ).⁴¹ Chamchian, however, failed to notice that he was talking about Sittas, whom he mentioned separately, in connection with the Armenian rebellion.⁴² Anyway, Chamchian’s statement still awaits its researcher and verification of reliability and validity.

After arriving from the capital of the Empire to Byzantine Armenia, probably in the first half of 539, Sittas initially refrained from starting active hostilities against the rebel army. Procopius of

38 Jones, Arnold H. M. *The Later Roman Empire 284-602: A Social, Economic & Administrative Survey*, Vols. I-II (Oxford: Blackwell-University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), pp. 271, 1124 (n. 9); Evans, J. A. S. *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 52; Greatrex, Geoffrey. “Byzantium and the East in the Sixth Century,” in Maas, Michael. *The Cambridge Companion Guide to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 481; Jacobsen, Torsten Cumberland. *The Gothic War: Rome’s Final Conflict in the West* (Yardley: Westholme, 2009), p. 4.

39 Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, pp. 1160-1163.

40 Browning, Robert. *Justinian and Theodora* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), 1971, p. 74.

41 Chamchian, *History of Armenia*, v. II, 240.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 242.

Caesarea reports the following about his intentions:

*So he came to Armenia, but at first he entered upon the war reluctantly and exerted himself to calm the people and to restore the population to their former habitations, promising to persuade the emperor to remit to them the payment of the new tax.*⁴³

In Constantinople, meanwhile, Adolius, son of the murdered Acacius, repeatedly undermined Sittas through direct reports to Justinian, citing the general’s supposed sluggishness. However, as shown by subsequent martial developments, the behavior of this experienced military commander was well-founded and blaming him for inoperativeness was unfair. The point is that Sittas was exceptionally knowledgeable in Armenian affairs: in the Byzantine-Sassanid war of 526-532, he had led, on equal footing with Belisarius, military campaigns in Armenia. In 528-531, he was also the first general of the newly formed military district, which brought together all Armenian lands under the authority of the Eastern Roman Empire (see Map 1). Officially, this new post was called *magister militum per Armeniam et Pontum Polemoniacum et gentes*.⁴⁴ *Magister militum* was the highest military rank in the Empire (meaning in Latin, literally, the Master of Soldiers; in Greek, *strategos* or *stratelates*). As observed by Adontz, “There were only five such *magistri* in the whole of the empire: two in the capital, one in the East, and two in the West. The appointment of such an important official in Armenia testifies to the importance given to the eastern frontier of the Empire at that time.”⁴⁵ Simultaneously, Sittas managed to obtain from the Emperor the right

43 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.9.

44 Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 133-137; Toumanoff, Cyril. “Introduction to Christian Caucasian History: II: States and Dynasties of the Formative Period,” *Traditio*, Vol. 17 (1961), pp. 24, 46; Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II*, pp. 83-84.

45 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 108.

to recruit Armenians into the imperial military service, “because of their familiarity with the localities in Armenia.”⁴⁶ Thus, starting from 528, the Armenian princes were silently deprived of at least two of their privileges, which formed the political foundation of their local national autonomy – “the immunity from imperial garrisons and the right to maintain armed forces.”⁴⁷ It should be added that before Justinian’s reign, “Interior Armenia was a country as free as the autonomous Satrapies”, “a federated territory.” In the 530s, the freedom from taxation, another of the privileges of the *foederati*, was violated as well.⁴⁸

What has not been specifically accentuated about Sittas is that, with these military administrative reforms, he was made the first general of the newly-formed Byzantine mobile field Army of Armenia that supplemented the Empire’s Army of the East on the northeastern frontier.⁴⁹ Later, in the mid-seventh century, when Greek fully became the Empire’s dominant language, the names of the armies were also Hellenized and “the Army of Armenia became the Armeniac Theme.”⁵⁰ Apparently, this was the same Byzantine military unit that, in mid-

640s, was called “*Armeniakon*” by an Arabic source.⁵¹ Curiously, in the fourth and fifth centuries, and possibly much earlier, the united Armenian army, which included the combined royal, princely and all other available military forces of the Kingdom of Great Armenia, had the same designation of Army of Armenia (*Hayastan Gund* or *Hayotz Gund*), concisely referred to as *Armenia (Hayastan)*.⁵²

Sittas knew firsthand about the high combat capability of the Armenian troops: twelve years earlier he, together with Belisarius, had already suffered a defeat by them. It happened when the Byzantine army, commanded jointly by Sittas and Belisarius, after the first successful raid into Pers-Armenia in 526 or early 527, again invaded it in the first half of 527.⁵³ This time, however, an Armenian army, led by the gifted generals, brothers Nerseh (called Narses in Byzantium) and Hrahat (Aratius) Kamsarakan,⁵⁴ suddenly attacked the Byzantines

46 Ibid.

47 Toumanoff, “Introduction to Christian Caucasian History: II,” pp. 24, 46; cf. Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power*, p. 155.

48 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 91. The only difference from the Satrapies, according to Adontz, was that “a representative of Imperial power had his seat” in Interior Armenia, who was called the Count of Armenia – *Comes Armeniae* (*Ibid.*, p. 93).

49 For the creation of the Army of Armenia and its estimated total strength of at least 15,000 men (which will be discussed later in this study), see Treadgold, Warren T. *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081* (Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 15-17, 20, 60-63, 70, 107, 152; Idem, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 178, 928, n. 2; cf. Bradbury, Jim. *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Warfare* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 58.

50 Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, p. 23.

51 Haldon, John F., *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 216.

52 See Արմեն Այվազյան, Հայկական ինքնության հիմնաքարերը. լեզու, բանակ, պետություն [Ayvazyan, Armen. *The Cornerstones of Armenian Identity: The Language, Army and State*], Yerevan, 2007, pp. 114-116.

53 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.24. The battle here is dated on the basis of Procopius’s report that it occurred shortly after the death of Emperor Justin, who died, as is known, on August 1, 527. Evans, in effect, also finds that this battle took place in 527, since he dates the desertion from Persia and siding of brothers Aratius and Narses Kamsarakan with Justinian “some three years later” – in 530 (Evans, *The Age of Justinian*, pp. 52, 115). Correspondingly, the first incursion into Pers-Armenia by Sittas and Belisarius is dated in 526 by Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II, AD 363-630*, p. 83.

54 For identification of the brothers Narses, Aratius and Isaac, the generals from Pers-Armenia, with the brothers Nerseh, Hrahat and Sahak of the princely house of Kamsarakans, see Stein E., *Histoire du Bas-Empire*. T. II (Paris-Bruxelles-Amsterdam, 1949), p. 292, n. 1; Adontz, *Historical Studies*, p. 318; Ն. Արմնգ, Երկեր [N. Adontz, *Studies*], Yerevan State University Press, 2006, pp. 216, 493. Cf. Chamchian, M. *History of Armenia*, v. II, p. 241; *Byzantine Sources*. Vol. I, pp. 322-323, n. 105; Iskanyan, *Armenian-Byzantine Relations in IV-VII centuries*, pp. 231; Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, c. 103-104; Evans, *The Age of Justinian*, pp. 52, 115.

and achieved a stunning victory. Here is what Procopius of Caesarea reports on this:

*And the Romans, under the leadership of Sittas and Belisarius, made an inroad into Pers-Armenia, a territory subject to the Persians, where they plundered a large tract of country and then withdrew with a great multitude of Armenian captives. ... But when a second inroad had been made by the Romans into Armenia, Narses and Aratius unexpectedly confronted them and engaged them in battle... on the present occasion they joined battle with the forces of Sittas and Belisarius and gained the advantage over them.*⁵⁵

Using the description above, it is possible to visualize the most likely scenario of this battle: the Armenian cavalry, which “was then considered one of the best, if not the best, in the Near East,”⁵⁶ swooped down on either the camp or, more probably, marching columns of the Byzantine army and, in the ensuing battle – or rather the meeting

engagement – overran it. Having suffered heavy losses, Belisarius and Sittas were forced to withdraw from Pers-Armenia. That it was indeed a battle is confirmed by Procopius later on another occasion, when he states that Narses and Aratius “had an encounter with Sittas and Belisarius in the land of the Pers-Armenians” (Chekalova’s Russian translation reads this statement as “hand to hand fighting”).⁵⁷ Although the available information is quite scarce, it nevertheless suggests that the Kamsarakan brothers gained this victory by, inter alia, getting timely and accurate intelligence, effectively employing the elements of surprise, stealth troop movements, and possibly the establishment of ambushes and the pre-positioning of some of their forces in secret locations. This victory over Belisarius and Sittas has lately been mentioned by several modern historians, among them L. Fauber, who reasonably assumes that it brought upon Aratius and Narses “the eagle eyes of the East Roman diplomatic service,” which later successfully lured these Armenian generals from Persia to Byzantium.⁵⁸

In 539, Sittas’s decision-making and initial avoidance of hostilities must have also been affected by those bitter memories from twelve years ago, though this time he was facing the Roman-Armenian rather than Persian-Armenian army. Now his adversaries were, in fact, his former comrades-in-arms.

55 Procopius adds that at that time Sittas and Belisarius were still at the beginning of their long military career, “These two men were both youths and wearing their first beards, body-guards of the general Justinian, who later shared the empire with his uncle Justinus” (Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, I.12.20-22). Later, in 530 or 531, Nerseh and Hrahat, together with their youngest brother Sahak (Isaac), went over to Justinian and, at the head of the Armenian contingents (Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.24.12), distinguished themselves in many battles this time in the army of the Eastern Roman Empire: “These men not long after this came to the Romans as deserters, and made the expedition to Italy with Belisarius” (Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, I.12.20-22).

56 Дмитриев, В. А. «Всадники в сверкающей броне». Военное дело Сасанидского Ирана и история римско-персидских войн [Dmitriev, Vladimir. A. “*The Horsemen in Glittering Armor: The Art of Warfare in Sasanian Iran and the History of the Roman-Persian Wars*”, St. Petersburg: “Peterburgskoye vostokovedeniye”, 2008, pp. 42-43, 214; cf. Dédéyan, G. “*Le cavalier arménien*,” in Jean-Pierre Mahé & Robert W. Thomson (ed.), *From Byzantium to Iran. Armenian Studies in Honour of Nina G. Garsoian* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1997), pp. 197-222; Idem, “Les Arméniens soldats de Byzance (IV^e-XI^e siècles),” *Bazmavep* 145 (1987), pp. 162-92.

57 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, I.15.31-32.

58 Evans, *The Age of Justinian*, p. 115; Дмитриев, «Всадники в сверкающей броне», с. 224-225; Fauber, L. H. *Narses: the Hammer of the Goths*. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1990, pp. 3-4; Hughes, Ian. *Belisarius: The Last Roman General* (Yardley: Westholme, 2009), pp. 42, 59, 256, 260. Although Procopius’s report about this victory was translated into Armenian by H. Bartikyan as early as 1967 (*Byzantine Sources*, Vol. I, pp. 29-30), paradoxically, the Armenian historians themselves have by and large overlooked it. As a result, it is mentioned neither in school textbooks, nor a number of historical studies on this particular period, including the academic multi-volume Հայ ժողովրդի պատմություն [History of the Armenian people, Vol. II, ed. S. T. Yermeyan], Yerevan: Academy of Sciences of Arm. SSR, 1984). In passing, this battle has been mentioned by V. Iskanyan, who incorrectly dates it to AD 530 (Iskanyan, *Armenian-Byzantine Relations in IV-VII centuries*, p. 231).

Analyzing the developments in Byzantine Armenia proper, it is of paramount importance to take note of and explicate Procopius's mutually complementary reports that (a) after assassinating Acacius, the Armenians "fled for refuge to Pharangium" (i.e. Sper), and (b) that upon his arrival in Armenia, Sittas "exerted himself... to restore the population to their former habitations." This evidence strongly suggests that the Armenian troops had their time to concentrate and gain a foothold in the mountain areas and fortresses between the cantons of Sper and, as will be shown below, Basean (the latter was in Pers-Armenia, *see* Map 1) before Sittas and his army arrived in Armenia. The consolidation process of the Armenian armed forces in Byzantine Armenia was, naturally, accompanied by a structural reorganization, accelerated military preparations, including the approval, appointment or election of a unified command, high-intensity tactical and martial arts training, stockpiling of weapons, food supplies and forage.

After assessing the situation, Sittas realized that a direct attack on the strong defensive positions of the Armenians was unlikely to end well for his army. Hence, he tried to find a diplomatic, rather than military solution to the conflict. His approach was remarkably consistent with the Byzantine strategy of war, codified later in a number of military manuals and regulations and, particularly, in Maurice's *Strategikon*.⁵⁹ Incidentally, the recommendation to avoid

59 In his discussion of Byzantine approach toward decisive battles, Kaegi underlines that "sophisticated treatises on war and sophisticated commanders usually displayed a reluctance to gamble everything in the pitched battle. ...the decisive battle held too many pitfalls, political and economic as well as military" (Kaegi, Walter Emil Jr. *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Military Strategy*. Mass.: Hellenic College Press, 1983, pp. 1, 6, 8, etc.). F. Engels observed that Belisarius's tactics was based on the principle "of starving out the enemy and avoiding the close combat" (Энгельс, Ф. *Избранные военные произведения* [Engels, Friedrich. *Selected Military Studies*], Moscow: Voenizdat, 1956, p. 188). The tactical approaches of Belisarius and, indirectly, of other major generals of Justinian era were even more precisely characterized by Liddell Hart: "Belisarius had no lack of audacity, but his tactics were to allow – or tempt – the other side to do the attacking" (Hart, Liddell B. H. *Strategy*. Second revised

any open engagements, unless extremely necessary or in the presence of a minimum threefold numerical superiority over the enemy, was also articulated by the contemporaneous Sassanid military theory – which was in many respects identical to the Byzantine art of war – particularly, in the military treatise *Ayeen-Nameh* (*Book of the statutes*), the fragments of which have been preserved in an Arabic translation.⁶⁰

However, as it often happens nowadays as well, the analysis of an overall geostrategic situation made in the state's capital prevailed over the tactical considerations of the field commander. After repeatedly "assailing him with frequent reproaches for his hesitation,"⁶¹ Justinian in the end bluntly ordered Sittas to immediately begin hostilities against the Armenians. Procopius explains the Emperor's decision by referring to "the slanders of Adolius, the son of Acacius."⁶² The repeated character of these denunciations are themselves evidence of quite lengthy, though ultimately abortive, attempts by Sittas to pacify the rebellious Armenians with promises of easing colonial policies of the Empire, including those related to taxation. One may surmise, in

edition. New York: A Meridian Book, 1991, p. 40). Bevin draws heavily upon the battlefield tactics employed by Belisarius and Narses to illustrate the effectiveness of the "defend, then attack" principle for waging war (Bevin, Alexander. *How Wars Are Won: The 13 Rules of War from Ancient Greece to the War on Terror*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002, pp. 48-54). Hughes reasonably argues that the cautious conduct and preference for a defensive posture by Belisarius was permanently affected by his earlier defeats on the eastern front (Hughes, *Belisarius*, pp. 246-247).

60 Иностранцев, К. А. *Сасанидские этюды* [Inostrantzev, K. A. *Sassanian Sketches*], St. Petersburg, 1909, pp. 47-49; cf. Дмитриев, «Всадники в сверкающей броне», с. 98-100. The factors that contributed to interaction and mutual borrowings of Sassanid and late Roman military theories, as well as the exchange of tactical elements used by these traditional opponents were plausibly pointed out by Dmitriyev (*ibid.*, c. 94) and, earlier, by H. Hakobyan (see Հակոբյան, Հ. Հռոմեա-արևելյան առնչությունները ռազմական տակտիկայի բնագավառում. *Բանքեր Երևանի համալսարանի* [Hakobyan, H. P. "The Roman-Eastern Contacts in the Field of Military Tactics," *Journal of the Yerevan State University*], 1983, No. 3, pp. 49-70).

61 *Proc. Bell. Pers.*, II.3.10.

62 *Ibid.*

turn, that Armenian forces were unwavering in their cause and were preparing to respond with armed resistance against the imperial army.

Yet, the main reasons behind the haste of Justinian to endeavor to suppress the Armenian rebellion lay, no doubt, in a completely different dimension: geopolitics. It was at this juncture that his army, under the command of Belisarius, with the extreme commitment of forces, was waging war against the Ostrogoths in Italy, while other troops of the empire were dispersed at a great distance from each other. The war against the Ostrogoths was fought with varied success and its outcome was far from clear. Witiges, king of the Ostrogoths, arranged the blockade of Rome in the period between March 2, 537 to March 12, 538.⁶³ In June, 538, Justinian sent to the aid of Belisarius a 7000-strong army under the command of Narses, a highly influential Pers-Armenian aristocrat in the imperial court (not to be confused with Nerseh Kamsarakan who was also called Narses in Byzantium).⁶⁴ At the end of March, 539, Ostrogoths seized the besieged Milan, the second largest city in Italy after Rome. Moreover, as noted by modern military historians Ernest and Trevor Dupuy, during the same time, “Justinian was extremely worried about the renewed attacks of Transdanubian barbarians – the Bulgars and the Slavs, as well as with the threat of resumption of war with Khosrov [I Anushirvan] the Persian,⁶⁵ who entered into negotiations with Witiges.”⁶⁶ Therefore, a rapid defeat of the Armenian rebellion was essential for Justinian to thereby prevent or preempt the anticipated opening of a second front by Persia in the

east (which, nevertheless, happened shortly thereafter, in 540). On the other hand, by raising the rebellion precisely in 538 (most likely in its second half), the leaders of the Byzantine Armenians, undoubtedly, tried to make use of reliable information about the predicament of the Eastern Roman Empire on the Western Front, as well as took into account that imperial armed forces were stretched too thin and had at that point scarce resources for mobilization. The time for an uprising was thus chosen exceptionally well.

It is more than probable that in an effort to find allies the Armenian forces, either before or during their uprising, directly approached the Persian King Khosrov and Ostrogothic King Witiges, who was extremely interested in the opening of a second front in the east of the Empire, and to this end sent ambassadors to Persia in 538 or 539.⁶⁷ In any case, speaking in front of Khosrov I at the end of 539, the delegation of Armenian rebel leaders demonstrated good knowledge of the geopolitical situation, in particular, the ongoing war of the empire in Italy.⁶⁸ All of this indicates methodical groundwork done by the Armenian leadership before the uprising, including the collection and analysis of intelligence data through the utilization of a network of Armenian sources in the Byzantine military and imperial court.

After receiving a sharp reprimand from Justinian, Sittas was finally forced to lead his army into action. No precise information about its numbers is available in primary sources, unfortunately. However, based on indirect evidence, it is possible to answer this question of the army's size with reasonable reliability.

63 Р. Эрнест Дьюпуи, Тревор Н. Дьюпуи, *Всемирная история войн*. Т. I [Dupuy, R. Ernest and Dupuy, Trevor N. *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military History: From 3500 BC to the Present*], St. Petersburg-Moscow: Poligon-Ast, 1997, p. 384.

64 Narses was acting as the commander of a separate army for the first time, yet he was bestowed a military rank equal to that of Belisarius.

65 In English-language historical literature, the name of this Persian king has been spelled variously as Xosrov, Khosrau, Khusrau, Khusro, Chosroes.

66 Э. Дьюпуи, Т. Дьюпуи, *Всемирная история войн*. Т. I, с. 385.

67 Proc. Bell. Pers., II.2.1-12.

68 See Proc. Bell. Pers., II.3.32-53. Subsequently, the information about the treason of Belisarius proved to be false. The pertinent rumors, however, originated from the Ostrogoths' real offer to Belisarius to recognize him as “the Emperor of the West.” This development was so significant as to alarm Justinian himself (see Proc. Bell. Goth., II.29).

The total number of Justinian's troops, in traditional academic opinion, was estimated at around 150,000,⁶⁹ but modern scholars convincingly argue 300,000 to be a much more realistic figure.⁷⁰ In any case, since the late 520s, the newly-formed mobile Army of Armenia included, according to Justinian's pertinent decree, several *numeri* (legions or regiments) "chosen from the ones in the capital, those in the East as well as certain others;" while according to Malalas four *numeri* were received from the *stratelates* of the *East* alone, that is from the Army of the East.⁷¹ The Army of Armenia was largely stationed in Byzantine Armenia, including in the major strongholds of Martyropolis, Kitarich (Kitharizon), Artales (Artaleson), Theodosiopolis, Oron (Horoanon) and Tzanzak (Tzanzakon) on the front line of defense, and Melitene and Satagh (Satala) on the second line (see Map 2).⁷²

Modern research points to about 5,000 soldiers "in normal divisions," during Justinian's rule.⁷³ It is impossible to establish

correctly the definite strength for the *numeri* in question because *numerus/arithmos* was a generic reference to a number/unit of troops. If one, however, conditionally accepts that the four *numeri* transferred from the Army of the East to the new Army of Armenia were "normal divisions" with 5,000 men in each, then the total strength of the latter, counting also the forces that arrived from the capital and elsewhere, should be calculated at more than 20,000 soldiers. The strength of the Army of Armenia exceeds Treadgold's estimate of 15,000 soldiers⁷⁴ and approaches Adontz's assessment that the *magister* of Armenia possibly had an ability to field a force of more than 30,000 cavalry and

69 Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602*, p. 301; Norwich, John Julius. *Byzantium: The Early Centuries* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), p. 259; Э. Дьюпуи, Т. Дьюпуи, *Всемирная история войн*. Т. I, с. 390; Delbrück considers even 150,000 soldiers to be a possible exaggeration (Дельбрюк, *op. cit.*, pp. 356-357)

70 Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, p. 63; Haldon, John. *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204* (London: UCL Press, 1999), pp. 99-101; Maas, *The Cambridge Companion Guide to the Age of Justinian*, pp. 117-118.

71 Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 134; cf. Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 107-108; Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II, AD 363-630*, p. 83.

72 Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 140-141; cf. Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 113. See also "Map 7. The Army of the Empire about 565" in Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, pp. 62-63.

73 Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, p. 61; cf. Roth, Jonathan. «The Size and Organization of the Roman Imperial Legion,» *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Bd. 43, H. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1994), pp. 346-362. According to Vegetius Rhenanus, a military writer of the early fifth century, a legion consisted of 6,100 infantrymen and 726 cavalrymen; John the Lydian, an author of the sixth century, also counts 6,000 men in one legion (Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 77; cf. Flavius

Vegetius Rhenanus, *The Military Institutions of the Romans (De Re Militari)*. Transl. From the Latin by Lieutenant John Clarke. – in *Roots of Strategy: The 5 Greatest Military Classics of All Time*. Vol. I, ed. Gen. Thomas R. Phillips. Mechanicsbook, PA: Stackpole Books, 1985, p. 104). Both these writers, however, referred to legionary strengths prior to the reforms of Constantine the Great. R. Cagnat, in principle, agrees to accept 6,000 as a credible strength of one legion, with the reservation that this major military unit itself was subdivided into smaller legions of 1,000 (Cagnat, R. "Legio," *Le Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines de Daremberg et Saglio*, Tome 3, vol. 2, pp. 1047-1093). In the period from the 2nd c. BC to 1st c. AD, the number of a legion ranged between 2,500 and 5,000 men (see Cowan, Ross. *Roman Battle Tactics, 109 BC-AD 313*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2007, p. 4). According to some authors, in the fourth and fifth centuries provincial legions consisted of 1,000 soldiers (Tomlin, Roger "The Mobile army", in Peter Connolly, *Greece and Rome at War*. London-Hong Kong: Macdonald, 1981, p. 255). The Dupuys argue that in the era of Justinian "the Roman legion, as an organizational and tactical unit, retained nothing but its name. Legion was now called a detachment of troops of various number and organization" (Дьюпуи, Э., Дьюпуи, Т. *Всемирная история войн*. Т. I, с. 377). The question of the size of the Roman army is discussed in detail in the following studies: Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602*, pp. 299-301, 379, 679-686; MacMullen, R. "How Big was the Roman Imperial Army?," *Klio* 62/2 (1980), pp. 451-60.

74 See Treadgold. *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, pp. 60-63, 107. Treadgold's estimate is based on Procopius's reference to the 15,000 horsemen of the Army of Armenia at the Battle of Satala in 530 (Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, I.15.11). Treadgold also holds that "remarkably, of the 15,000 troops of Justinian's Army of Armenia, 14,000 seem to have survived the seventh and eighth centuries to become the garrison of the Armeniac Theme, a loss of not quite 7 percent" (*Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, p. 70). Haldon, however, assigns to the Army of Armenia a nominal strength of about 12,000 in the 630s (Haldon, John. *The Byzantine Wars*. The Mill, UK: The History Press, 2008, p. 60).

infantry.⁷⁵ Adontz believed that the imperial army in the east “cannot have disposed of an army inferior to that of *dux Armeniae*,” whose forces, according to his estimates based on evidence from *Notitia dignitatum*, a well-known official document of the fifth century, included “2 regiments of archer cavalry; 3 legions or counting 6,000 men a piece = 18,000 men; 11 divisions of cavalry, at 600 each = 6,600 men; 10 cohorts of infantry, at 600 each = 6,000 men,”⁷⁶ which collectively equals a total of 30,600 men. Adontz also held that in the fifth century “an army of up to 100,000 men, in round numbers, stood under the orders of the *magister militum per Orientem*.”⁷⁷ However, applying this last number to the exceptionally overstrained years of 538-539, alludes to a situation that would have been absolutely impossible for the Empire. These figures and calculations come to suggest that it is perhaps premature to decide on the exact number of the Army of Armenia during Justinian’s rule, because it could have fluctuated from 15,000 up to 25,000 soldiers.

From 531 onwards Sittas was no longer the commander of the Army of Armenia and after September 532, when the peace with the Persians was finally reached, resided in Constantinople.⁷⁸ Telling about the events of 538-539, Procopius reports that, “the emperor sent Sittas against them [the Armenian rebels] from Byzantium.”⁷⁹ In this connection, the most intriguing question for a historian should be whether the Army of Armenia was in place by the time Sittas arrived

in Armenia or had it already become partly, if not largely, the very Armenian rebel army itself! Indeed, before 538, the main Armenian rebel forces were undoubtedly part of the Byzantine army. Armenian noblemen – chief among them the Mamikoneans, the Arshakunis and the Bagratunis, as well as their retainers – represented the elite heavy cavalry (*cataphractii*) and, therefore, they must have been integrated into the mobile field Army of Armenia and expected to conduct maneuver warfare, rather than just being assigned to garrisoning frontier fortresses and guarding the borders of the empire. It would be safe to assume that the core of the Armenian rebel army was represented if not almost entirely by the Army of Armenia, then at least by some of its major combat units. In other words, the Armenian uprising itself was a sort of mutiny in or by the Army of Armenia, which was largely comprised of the local Armenians. Consequently, the most plausible historical scenario is that Sittas’s first task was to join the sizeable reinforcements that he brought from the capital with the whole Army of the East and probable remnants of the Army of Armenia and only then to lead these united forces against the rebels.

Bearing in mind that during the previous war with the Persians combat-capable imperial forces in the east consisted of 25 to 30 thousand men,⁸⁰ and that four years later, in 543, “the Emperor could muster some 30,000 troops on the Armenian frontier,”⁸¹ it can be assumed that approximately the same number of troops was present in the army of Sittas in 539 because he, after all, was sent to the East not only with the objective of suppressing the Armenian uprising at an early stage, but also for repelling a possible Persian invasion, which was

⁷⁵ Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 111-112.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁷⁸ Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.8. Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 136; cf. Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 109-110. Martindale notes that the absence of references to Sittas in connection with the Nika riot (January 532) suggests that he was not present in Constantinople at the time and was therefore probably still in the east (Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, pp. 1162).

⁷⁹ Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.8.

⁸⁰ Дельбрюк, *Всеобщая история военного искусства...*, с. 356.

⁸¹ Evans, *The Age of Justinian*, p. 171. According to John of Ephesus, a little bit later, in the 570s, the united Roman armies of Armenia and Mesopotamia amounted to 120,000 men (Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, p. 286, n. 19).

expected to be imminent.⁸² Justinian could not have underestimated this double threat in the east and would have taken all the necessary measures to compensate for the loss of all, or part, of the Army of Armenia.

The seemingly small numbers of Byzantine forces should not be misleading. The warriors of Justinian were prepared so well, and his generals were tactically so skillful, that they repeatedly defeated the numerically preponderant enemies, thanks especially to their superior performance in tactical and operational maneuvering and implementation of well calibrated defensive-offensive strategy, as well as good use of various stratagems and archery.⁸³ For example, Belisarius landed in Africa with a 15,000-strong army, of which 5,000 cavalrymen were sufficient to rout the ten times larger Vandal army in the open field (the Battle of Tricameron, December 15, 533).⁸⁴ Belisarius and Narses conquered Italy with armies barely numbering than 25,000 men.⁸⁵

Both primary sources and modern scholars have highly appreciated the strategic talent of Sittas noting that as a general he was not inferior

to Belisarius, and, as a politician, even exceeded him.⁸⁶ Procopius of Caesarea talks about “his valour and his continual achievements against the enemy,” adding that he was “a man who was extremely handsome in appearance and a capable warrior, and a general second to none of his contemporaries.”⁸⁷ Among these contemporaries Procopius meant, certainly, Belisarius and Narses, who, as a general, earned fame somewhat later.⁸⁸ The chronicler John Malalas briefly remarks about Sittas: “he was a warlike man.”⁸⁹ Sittas and Belisarius were identified as the greatest Byzantine generals of the time by Armenian rebel leaders, as they spoke at the Persian court in late autumn of 539: “the two generals who were the best they had, we come here having slain the one, Sittas.”⁹⁰

To clarify the situation on the other side of the confrontation the same two pivotal questions need to be answered: who was the commander of Armenian rebel forces and what was his army’s strength in 538-539?

82 On the basis of one specific report referring to 530 (Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, I.15.11), Treadgold offers a similar total strength of Byzantine field troops in the east in the 530s and 540s, though in different makeup: “Combined with the Army of the East, the Army of Armenia increased the field troops facing the Persians from twenty thousand to thirty-five thousand men” (Treadgold, *A history of the Byzantine State and Society*, p. 178), implying, however, that these 35,000 included the soldiers of only mobile armies, while various other units were active during wartime as well.

83 Hart. *Strategy*, pp. 39-54; Luttwak, Edward N. *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 79-81).

84 Дельбрюк, *op. cit.*, с. 356; Дьюпуи, Дьюпуи, Э. Т. *Всемирная история войн*. Т. I, с. 383. Incidentally, another Armenian commander, John the Armenian, was in control of the center or, possibly, of the whole famous Battle of Tricameron (see Hughes, *Belisarius*, pp. 101, 105, 247).

85 Диль, III. *Юстиниан и византийская цивилизация в VI веке* [Diehl, Charles. *Justinian and the Byzantine Civilization in the VIth century*], St. Petersburg, 1908, p. 151.

86 Прокопий Кесарийский. *Война с персами. Война с вандалами. Тайная история*. Изд. второе, исправленное и дополненное. Перевод с греч., вступительная статья, комментарии А. А. Чекаловой [Procopius of Caesarea. *The Persian War. Vandalic War. Secret History*. 2nd revised and expanded ed. Tr. from the Greek, preface, and comm. by A.A. Chekalova]. St. Petersburg: “Aleteya,” 2001, p. 389, note 102; cf. E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, T. 2, pp. 288-289.

87 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.26.

88 Narses is considered as “the better tactician” than Belisarius by Luttwak, while Fuller argues that “both were able tacticians, and in different ways staunch disciplinarians, but as a strategist Narses was probably the superior, as he certainly was in statecraft” (see Fuller, J. F. C. *A Military History of the Western World. Vol. 1: From the Earliest Times to the Battle of Lepanto* (NY: Funk and Wagnalis Company, 1954), p. 309; Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 80; cf. Diehl (Диль), *op. cit.*, pp. 175-176, 423).

89 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 108. On the military career of Sittas, see Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, I.12.20-22; 15.3, 4, 10, 12, 24; 21. 3. 9, 23, 27; II. 3. 8-28; Proc., *Bell. Vand.*, II. 27. 17; cf. Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, pp. 1160-1163.

90 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.52.

Although in their statement before the Persian King the leaders of the uprising noted that some of them were Arshakuni – “Many of us, O Master, are Arsacidæ”⁹¹ – this does not in any way mean that the supreme commander of the Armenian rebel army was also an Arshakuni. The answer to the first question is, nevertheless, unequivocal: the military head of the rebels was Vasak (*Bassaces*) Mamikonean. This conclusion is supported by a pair of reports by Procopius, according to whom, first, it was Vasak who in autumn of 539 led the retreat of Armenian rebels (among whom was also Artabanus Arshakuni, who customarily is considered to be their leader) into the Persian empire: “they came before the Persian king led by Bassaces, an energetic man.” Second, that it was again under his leadership that later, in 542, the same Armenian noblemen returned to the Byzantine Empire.⁹²

Procopius reports only the name of this commander of the Armenians – *Bassaces*. Adontz and Toumanoff correctly concluded that

91 *Ibid.*, II.3.32.

92 *Ibid.*, II.3.31; II.21.34. Prior to the present study, only C. Toumanoff, in a brief footnote to one of his articles and apparently on the same grounds (cf. Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 194, n. 209), opined that the true leader of this rebellion, in fact, was Vasak Mamikonean, rather than an Arshakuni prince: “Since the leader of this insurrection, Vasak, appears to have been a Mamikonid and not an Arsacid, Procopius very likely simplifies the story by making of it an *Arsacid* insurrection. The paucity of dynasts in Inner Armenia must have helped to create the impression that they were all of one family” (Toumanoff, “Introduction to Christian Caucasian History: II,” p. 47, n. 218; Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 196, n. 218). However, in the body text to this very note Toumanoff, contradicting himself, reiterated the conventional version that this “revolt...was led by Arsacid princes” (*ibid.*). Chamchian and Adontz unambiguously considered John (Hovhannes) and Artabanus Arshakuni leaders of the revolt (Chamchian, *History of Armenia*, v. II, p. 241; Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 99). Following in their steps, V. Iskanyan wrote that “from beginning to the end, the rebellion was headed by the father and son Hovhannes and Artavan Arshakunis” (Iskanyan, *Armenian-Byzantine Relations in IV-VII centuries*, p. 214). The same incorrect belief appears in the school textbook of “History of Armenia” («Հայոց պատմություն», Yerevan, 2005, p. 109). Yerevan, 2005, p. 109).

he was of Mamikonean clan⁹³, but provided no further clarifications, which are nonetheless needed. The points here are that Vasak was not an Arshakuni prince because he was a son-in-law of John (Hovhannes) Arshakuni.⁹⁴ Neither was he a Bagratuni, since the latter’s contingent joined the main body of the Armenian rebel army on the very eve of the decisive battle (this question is explored in the following chapters). Further, the name Vasak was one of the favorites among the Mamikoneans. Finally, the recognition of a Mamikonean prince as the military leader of the rebellion was natural, because this clan represented the hereditary Armenian *sparapets*, ardent patriots and, more importantly, unsurpassed masters of warfare in Armenia.⁹⁵ After the fall of the kingdom of Arshakunis in 428 AD, the Mamikoneans always stood at the head of national-liberation wars, specifically in 450-451, 481-484, 571-572 against Persia and in 747-753, 772-775 against the Arab Caliphate. Thus, this list of Armenian uprisings led by the Mamikoneans should naturally be complemented by the rebellion of 538-539. That this time they fought their coreligionists, the Roman Christians, underlines further the significance of Armenian national sentiment (supported, though, not least by the hierarchical independence and theological distinctiveness of the Armenian Church).

It is also noteworthy that after the partition of Armenia in 387, the post and title of *sparapet* of the Armenian troops were not abolished in Byzantine Armenia and survived until Justinian carried out his military and administrative reforms.⁹⁶ As pointed out by Adontz: “Imperial

93 Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 125-126; Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 100-101; Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 194 (n. 209); 196 (n. 218).

94 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.28-31.

95 See, for example, my study on *The Code of Honor of the Armenian Military, the 4-5th Centuries* (Yerevan, 2000, in Armenian).

96 According to the 5th century Armenian author Yeghishe (Elishe, Eliseus), in 451 the

armies were stationed neither in the Satrapies nor in Armenia Interior in this period, the defense of the frontier being entrusted to native troops until 529 when Justinian first appointed a *magister militum per Armeniam* and three dukes under his command.⁹⁷ Apparently, Vasak Mamikonean was the last Armenian *sparapet* of Byzantine Armenia since, as a result and at the end of Justinian's rule, the authority of the Mamikoneans (as well as of the Bagratunis and the Arshakunis) in this western part of Armenia had been severely undermined and reduced to almost nothing.⁹⁸

sparapet of Byzantine Inner/Lower Armenia was once again the commander named Vasak Mamikonean (see Եղիշէ, «Վասն Վարդանայ եւ Հայոց պատերազմին» [Yeghishe, *On Vardan and the Armenian War*], ed. Yervand Ter-Minasyan, Yerevan, 1957, Ch. 4, p. 93). Adontz raised a completely unjustified question about the possible sameness of this Vasak Mamikonean («the *sparapet* of Lower Armenia») with the leader of the Armenian rebellion of 538-539. This assumption, however, is devoid of any basis and is founded only on the frivolous manipulation of the revisionist postulate about Yeghishe being an author of the sixth, rather than the fifth century (Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 414, n. 66). Toumanoff expressed his strong disagreement with Adontz's opinion, noting the possibility of the existence of both Mamikonean Vasaks as well as stressing that Adontz's argument "can have no bearing on the date of Eliseus" (Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 194, n. 209). Meanwhile, both Adontz and Toumanoff are of the opinion that a separate branch of Mamikoneans existed in Byzantine Armenia, more precisely, in canton Ekeghyats (Ekelisene/Akilesene) (Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 100-101; Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 194, n. 209). Koryun, another 5th century Armenian author, refers to a certain *Anatolis* as *sparapet* (or *spayapet*) in the Byzantine part of Armenia during the early 420s (Կորյուն, Վարք Մաշտոցի [Koryun, *The Life of Mashtots*], ed. M. Abeghyan, in Armenian, Yerevan, 1941, Ch. 16, p. 64). However, this general was not, as Bedrosian wrongly concluded, the *sparapet* of Byzantine Armenia (Bedrosian, Robert. "The Sparapetut'iwn in Armenia in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," *Armenian Review*, Summer 1983, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 12-13, n. 34). Koryun actually referred to Anatolius, the famous Roman general and diplomat, who was at that time and later, from 433 to 446, the *magister militum per Orientem* (see Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II*, pp. 37, 42-45, 53, 259, n. 60).

97 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 414, n. 66.

98 Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 196.

The other major figures of the rebellion, whose names have been reported by Procopius, were the two Arshakunis: John (Hovhannes) and his son Artabanes. They both were at the apex of the military command of the joint Armenian rebel force. One of them, most probably the father, should have been elected to act as *sparapet* Vasak Mamikonean's deputy. Procopius's report about the close friendship between John and Bouzes, another distinguished Byzantine commander, is sufficient to infer that, like his son, John Arshakuni also had a military background.⁹⁹ The initial acquaintance and further rapport between the elder Arshakuni and Bouzes could have happened only in the ranks of the Byzantine army, where both Arshakunis as well as Vasak Mamikonean must have previously served – and conceivably fought – at the head of their Armenian contingents. Artabanes's brother John (Hovhannes) also participated in the uprising, and certainly in the capacity of an officer.¹⁰⁰ However, the Armenian army's third-in-command must have been reserved for a representative of the Bagratuni clan, who owned Sper, the area in which Armenian troops were originally concentrated. It is more than plausible that all or some of the Armenian rebel commanders served earlier in the Byzantine Army of Armenia.

The answer to the second question is not so obvious. One can only say with confidence that the number of soldiers in the Armenian rebel army in 539 must have been so impressive as to arouse Sittas's fears of assuming an offensive against it.¹⁰¹ Large numbers of the

99 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.28-31.

100 Later Artabanes's brother John served, apparently, as his deputy commander (Proc. *Bell. Vand.* II.24.2). He also distinguished himself as a brave warrior, whose death in Lybia in 546 was mourned by the emperor Justinian; as reported by Procopius: "In this battle John, the Armenian, brother of Artabanes, also died, after making a display of valorous deeds against the enemy. And the emperor, upon hearing this, was very deeply grieved because of the valour of John..." (Proc. *Bell. Vand.* II.24.15-16).

101 V. Iskanyan correctly noted that "half-hearted actions by Sittas and his desire to split the Armenian movement indicate that the rebels represented a large force" (Iskanyan,

Armenian troops are also implied by their willingness and ability to fight a decisive battle against the Byzantine army and defeat it (see below, ch. 3). Therefore, with a degree of conditionality, it may be assumed that the Armenian army consisted of between 10,000 and 20,000 soldiers. Apart from the princely regiments of heavy and light cavalry, it probably also included the infantry units, as well as the militia, composed mainly of Armenian peasantry.¹⁰²

While the cavalry was the main striking force of the ancient and medieval Armenian armies and they could certainly be regarded as cavalry-centric, primary sources have also sufficiently recorded the existence of various types of Armenian infantry such as archers, swordsmen, shield-bearers, slingers, special mountain troops and others.¹⁰³ Kaveh Farrokh observes that, besides the elite heavy cavalry, Armenian troops included “valuable light cavalry and excellent infantry, who were especially proficient in using slings to repel enemy cavalry, as well as spears for hand-to-hand combat.”¹⁰⁴ Moreover, as mentioned by David Nicolle, “in 4th century Armenia there had been a special corps of mountain troops trained to roll rocks onto their foes; while in siege warfare Armenians were equipped with iron hooks to help them scale walls and large leather shields to protect their backs from rocks dropped from above.”¹⁰⁵ In fact, the sizeable presence of infantry in Armenia was necessitated

by its rugged terrain, which was especially suited, as has been noted by Treadgold, “to mountain fighting and ambushes.”¹⁰⁶ Hence, Toumanoff’s opinion that the “Armenian army... to all intents and purposes was exclusively cavalry” does not correspond to historical reality.¹⁰⁷ However, the high level of mobility of the Armenian rebel force in 538-539 (discussed in the following chapters) is a strong indication that its mounted arm had perhaps a quantitative preponderance over its infantry. Treadgold calculates that a quarter of the Army of Armenia was cavalry,¹⁰⁸ though during the Battle of Satala in 530 the 15,000-strong Army of Armenia is referred to as almost entirely cavalry (“they were all cavalry”).¹⁰⁹ These estimates may further suggest that in 538-539, the majority, or all the mounted units of this army, turned into Armenian rebels.



Armenian-Byzantine Relations in IV-VII centuries, p. 216).

102 The practice of mobilizing militia troops (*gugaz*) in Armenia was recorded as early as the 4th century (Pavstos Buzand, *History of Armenia*, III. 8); cf. Неведкин, А. К. “Военное дело армян и персов в ‘Истории Армении’ Фавстоса Бузанда” [Nefedkin, A.K. “Armenian and Persian Warfare in the *History of Armenia* by Pavstos Buzand”], *Para Bellum*, № 32, 2010, pp. 26, 33.

103 See, e.g., Pavstos Buzand, IV.20, V.5; Yeghishe, op.cit., p. 96; cf. Неведкин, “Военное дело армян и персов...”, с. 26, 29.

104 Farrokh, Kaveh. *Sassanian Elite Cavalry AD 224-642* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2005), p. 26.

105 Nicolle. *Romano-Byzantine Armies 4th-9th centuries*, p. 34.

106 Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, p. 114.

107 Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 325; ср. Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 447.

108 Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, p. 107.

109 Proc. Bell. Pers., I.15.15.

3.

**539: The offensive of the Byzantine army
and the Battle of Avnik***The rebels' deceptive tactics*

As was already emphasized, preparing for an offensive against the Armenians, Sittas did not rely only on military strength, but was seeking to split the Armenians who had managed to join forces in Upper Armenia (Byzantine Inner Armenia). To that end he initiated separate negotiations with the Bagratunis, one of the three most powerful Armenian princely houses who participated in the revolt:

First of all he attempted by means of promises of many good things to win over some of the Armenians by persuasion and to attach them to his cause, in order that the task of overpowering the others might be attended with less difficulty and toil. And the tribe called the Aspetiani [Bagratuni], great in power and in numbers, was willing to join him. And they went to Sittas and begged him to give them pledges in writing that, if they abandoned their kinsmen in the battle and came to the Roman army, they should remain entirely free from harm, retaining their own possessions. Now Sittas was delighted and wrote to them in tablets, giving them pledges just as they desired of him ; he then sealed

the writing and sent it to them. Then, confident that by their help he would be victorious in the war without fighting, he went with his whole army to a place called Oenochalakon (Οἰνοχάλακων), where the Armenians had their camp.¹¹⁰

However, subsequent developments cast doubt on the claim that the Bagratunis were inclined to renege on the insurgents' cause. Here is what Procopius tells further:

But by some chance those who carried the tablets went by another road and did not succeed at all in meeting the Aspetiani. Moreover a portion of the Roman army happened upon some few of them, and not knowing the agreement which had been made, treated them as enemies. And Sittas himself caught some of their women and children in a cave and slew them, either because he did not understand what had happened or because he was angry with the Aspetiani for not joining him as had been agreed.¹¹¹

This narrative is contradictory. It is unclear why Sittas launched an all-out attack against the rebels without obtaining the Bagratunis' definitive consent to join his camp. In such historical situations, agreements were typically secured by specific guarantees, such as the issuance or exchange of hostages. Sittas received neither a tangible guarantee from the Bagratunis, nor did he, for some reason, bother to wait for a day or two so that his message would have reached the addressee. Those who were carrying Sittas's message (following the logic of Procopius's report, they should have been the Bagratunis' men), somehow failed to find their masters, which also seems unlikely. Soon after the Byzantine army set out against the Armenians, one

110 Proc. Bell. Pers., II.3.11-15.

111 Proc. Bell. Pers., II.3.16-18.

of its large contingents under the command of one of Sittas's commanders encountered a small force of the Bagratunis and engaged it. This implies that Sittas had not notified his commanders about the alleged agreement with the Bagratunis, which is clear evidence that no agreement was finalized. Finally, Sittas himself massacred some of the Bagratuni women and children who had taken refuge in a cave. Such behavior was absolutely incompatible with the existence of any agreement with the Bagratunis.

All of these incidents together, and especially Sittas and his army's violent actions against the Bagratuni clan, do not fit well with Procopius's version about the desire of Bagratuni to switch sides. This whole affair can be rationalized if one makes the opposite assumption. Namely, that Sittas truly proposed to the Bagratunis to abandon the rebels but they refused to betray their brothers-in-arms and because of this were subjected by the Byzantines to violent retribution.¹¹² But such an interpretation would imply a deliberate distortion of historical reality on the part of Procopius of Caesarea. Upon closer examination of this tangled web of events, however, its subtext looks much more complex than it appears at first glance. Since Procopius impartially recounted the anti-Armenian atrocities of the Byzantine army, it is highly unlikely that he had misrepresented the previous historical facts about the negotiations, preliminary agreements and then sudden falling-out and fighting between Sittas and the Bagratunis. Procopius's overt bewilderment and, actually, acknowledgment of his inability to coherently interpret the episode in question also gives further credence to the argument that he objectively presented what he knew.

The most reasonable explanation of what happened should be sought in the field of military strategy and tactics. Predisposed to giving a resolute rebuff to the Byzantine army, numerically inferior Armenian

rebel forces had to rely, first and foremost, on the use of unorthodox strategies. The Bagratunis' proposal, or their acceptance of Sittas's proposal, to reach separate accords and go over to the Byzantines was most probably jointly elaborated and fully agreed upon with the rebel command (Vasak Mamikonean) and had several possible objectives, particularly: to gain time, to hold the enemy, to relax his vigilance, to regroup, to set a trap and suddenly attack him, and finally to give an opportunity to the Armenian army to charge out of Sper and head toward Theodosiopolis (the latter point will be elaborated later in this chapter).

Similar tactical ploys were earlier employed by the Armenians against the Persians. The following two cases are particularly illustrative. When Armenia's Queen Parandzem, together with the royal treasury, was besieged by the Persian army in the fortress of Artagers in the winter of 368/369, the Armenians agreed to enter into negotiations and asked for two days to consider their surrender and, thus, according to Ammianus, "led the besiegers to acquiesce in inaction." The Armenians acted within hours: "then in the middle of the night, when they (the Persians) were all roundly asleep in fancied security, the gates of the city were thrown open, and a strong body of young men poured forth with great speed, creeping on with noiseless steps and drawn swords, till they entered the camp of the unsuspecting enemy, where they slew numbers of sleeping men, without meeting with any resistance."¹¹³

¹¹² Adontz concisely retold Procopius's story about the relations between Sittas and the Bagratunis, without questioning its reliability (Adontz, *Historical Studies*, p. 299-300).

¹¹³ Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Roman history during the reigns of the emperors Constantius, Julian, Jovianus, Valentinian, and Valens*. Translated by Yonge, Charles Duke (London and New York: George Bell and Sons, 1894), p. 464. This stratagem of lulling the enemy's vigilance by entering into false negotiations seems to have been notorious in the same region for centuries and consequently less effective. Thus, when the Ottoman troops headed by the Sultan Murad IV Ghazi (1623-1640) were besieging Yerevan in 1635, the Persian garrison genuinely offered its surrender with honorable terms. As related by the Ottoman chronicler, "the rumor about the surrender of the [Yerevan] fortress spread and no hostilities took place." However, the day and night when the negotiations commenced, "all the [Ottoman] soldiers,

A decade later, at the end of the 370s, *sparapet* Manuel Mamikonean, who was then the *de facto* ruler of Armenia, negotiated an agreement with the king of Persia that recognized his hegemony. Manuel with honors accepted into Armenia a 10,000-strong corps of Persian heavy cavalry under the command of Suren, a general from the famous martial house of Surena. Soon afterward, however, when the latter “with his army was peacefully camping, unworried, unsuspecting, and in naive tranquility,” the Armenian army “suddenly and precipitously attacked Suren’s corps and killed all of the ten thousand Persians.”¹¹⁴

An almost identical operation was carried out by the *sparapet* of Pers-Armenia in 450. After being forced by Persian King Yazdegerd II (438-457) to (outwardly) denounce Christianity while in Iran and agree to converting Armenians into Zoroastrianism, *sparapet* Vardan Mamikonean personally accompanied a Persian cavalry corps into Armenia’s heartland and allowed it to set a base near the town of Angl. Soon, however, he suddenly surrounded the Persian military camp at night and, in a swift dawn attack from three directions, completely overwhelmed it.¹¹⁵

In 539, however, such nontraditional tactics used by the Armenians did not fully work out. The Byzantine military intelligence (or possibly the *kataskopoi*, the spies from what was then a rough

equivalent for Byzantine foreign intelligence)¹¹⁶ may have had discovered the information about the true intentions of the Armenian command and informed Sittas of the deceptive game by the Bagratunis. Upon learning that, Sittas would have indeed immediately and without warning launched an offensive on Sper. His rage against the Bagratunis in part can be explained precisely by such a sequence of preceding events, and above all, in Sittas’s judgment, by a breaking of political faith.

What was successfully accomplished by Manuel Mamikonean in the fourth century and attempted, in cooperation with the Bagratunis, by his distant relative Vasak Mamikonean at the beginning of the military campaign in 539, is evocative of the following recommendations by Chinese ancient and medieval military treatises, in particular, Sun Bin’s *The Art of War* (4th century BC) and Tai Kung’s *Six Secret Teachings* (4th-3rd centuries BC):

*[Against a numerous, strong and militant enemy] army, first spread the word that you dare not fight, that you are in no position to test your strength against him. By pretending that you are ready to yield to his power, you make the enemy drunk with pride. Thus he relaxes his vigilance and becomes fuzzy about your true intentions. Then catch him unprepared and unawares... This is the method of defeating a powerful enemy by deceptive means while expanding your own strength in the process.*¹¹⁷

When up against a powerful and tenacious enemy, appear to be weak and await your chance. When faced by the arrogant and imperious,

as a precautionary measure, remained in full preparedness,” definitely fearing a possible ruse from the Persians (Թուրքական աղբյուրները Հայաստանի, հայերի և Անդրկովկասի մյուս ժողովուրդների մասին, Հ. 1 Գազմ. Ա.Խ. Սաֆրաստյան, Երևան, ՀՍՍՌ ԳԱ հրատ., 1961 թ. [*The Turkish sources on Armenia, the Armenians and other peoples of Transcaucasia*. Vol. 1. Transl. from Turkish into Armenian and commentary by A. Safrastyan, Yerevan, 1961], p. 105).

114 Pavstos Buzand, *History of Armenia*, V, 38, pp. 373-376; cf. *The Epic Histories Attributed to Pawstos Buzand (Buzandaran Patmutiwnk)*. Translation and commentary by Nina Garsoian (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 223.

115 Yeghishe, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

116 On *kataskopoi* in 530-550s, see Lee, A.D. “Procopius, Justinian and the *Kataskopoi*,” *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 39 (83), No. 2, 1989, pp. 569-572.

117 Sunzi: *The Art of War* & Sun Bin: *The Art of War*. Translated by Lin Wusun (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2007), pp. 176-177.

*appear to be respectful and find an opportunity to eliminate him.*¹¹⁸

*Speak deferentially, listen respectfully, follow his command, and accord with him in everything. He will never imagine you might be in conflict with him. Our treacherous measures will then be settled.*¹¹⁹

These tenets were passed on to the later Chinese military writers and elaborated, for example, in *Hu-ch'ien Ching* (compiled in 1004 AD) as follows:

*When you see the enemy's army approaching, retreat and concentrate behind defensive walls. When you see the enemy's emissaries approaching, speak deferentially and act dispirited, as if you hope to be reconciled with them. The masses will assume you are afraid. When utilizing fear you should withdraw and contract, establish ambushes, and then attack, employing unorthodox tactics to penetrate them. Act as if you want to be reconciled, move them with profits, and make them arrogant through your humility. This is the Tao for employing fear.*¹²⁰

It seems that the Armenian commanders acted in perfect accordance with the above-cited maxims. This is not to say that they were first hand familiar with the classic Chinese military literature.

118 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

119 Sawyer, Ralph D. *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2007), p. 56.

120 Sawyer, Ralph D. *The Tao of Deception: Unorthodox Warfare in Historic and Modern China* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), p. 266; *idem*, *The Tao of Spycraft: Intelligence Theory and Practice in Traditional China* (Colorado-Oxford: Westview Press, 2004), p. 209. Similar suggestions could be found in other medieval Chinese military texts, too (see, e.g., *The Wiles of War: 36 Military Strategies from Ancient China*. Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 2010, pp. 99-101). Almost certainly, all the aforementioned elaborations on this deceptive stratagem stemmed from Sun Zi's earlier maxim: "feign incapability when in fact capable" (Sunzi: *The Art of War* & Sun Bin: *The Art of War*, p. 22).

But an apparent similitude of these and many other tactical elements employed by the Near Eastern and Far Eastern armies of the time calls for a closer consideration of the multipronged dissemination of military doctrines in the much wider areas of the ancient world, rather than only among the immediately neighboring and battling states and peoples. In this context, it is also worth recalling that one of the interpretations of the ancient Armenian legend about the ancestry of the Mamikoneans traces their roots to China.¹²¹

In 538-539, the Armenian rebels were also attempting to psychologically affect the Byzantine general by transforming his strategic and tactical perception of the situation and in particular instilling in him overconfidence in his own forces and undue belief in an excessive weakness of the enemy. To this end the Armenians scored a real success: Sittas indeed overestimated his strength and underestimated the capabilities of the rebels. One indirect outcome of the Armenians' deceptive stratagems was that Sittas had been infuriated and thus deranged to such a degree that, in the end, it had deadly consequences for him and his mission.

The negative impact of the element of anger on Sittas's rash decision-making, hinted by Procopius of Caesarea himself, has been properly noted by Whately, according to whom, however, the fact that "Sittas becomes run by his emotions... and loses his sense of reason" should be attributed to the "unexpected problem" of "a communication break down" between him and the Bagratunis.¹²² Whately's notion about "communication break down" as the main

121 See Մովսես Խորենացի, Պատմութիւն Հայոց [Movses Khorenatzi, *History of Armenia*], The critical text by M. Abeghyan and S. Harutyunyan; the rendering into modern Armenian and commentary by St. Malkhasyan (Yerevan State University, 1981), II, 81, pp. 268-271, 504 (n. 222); Мовсес Хоренаци, *История Армении*. [Movses Khorenatzi, *History of Armenia*. Transl. into Russian, the Introduction and Commentary by Gagik Sargsyan, ed. Sen Arevshatyan], Yerevan, 1990, pp. 126-127, 252 (n. 527); *The Epic Histories Attributed to Pawstos Buzand*, pp. 366, 385.

122 Whately, *Descriptions of Battle in the 'Wars' of Procopius*, pp. 167-168, 188-189.

cause of this episode seems to be influenced by, or is at least highly reminiscent of, John Bury's erstwhile arbitrary interpretation. The latter alleged that the "letter-carrier, not knowing the exact position of the territory of the A[s]petiani, lost his way in the intricate Armenian highlands" and thus, in effect, was the chief culprit upon whose sluggishness the confrontation between the Byzantines and the Bagratunis erupted.¹²³

The battlefield

Noting that the Bagratunis "being now possessed with anger, arrayed themselves for battle with all the rest [of the Armenian rebel army]," (the Bagratunis' motives will be further expounded in the next section) Procopius reports highly important particulars about the ensuing pitched battle:

*But since both armies were on exceedingly difficult ground where precipices abounded, they did not fight in one place, but scattered about among the ridges and ravines.*¹²⁴

123 Here is Bury's interpretation in full: "A numerous tribe of the Armenians, called Apetiani, professed themselves ready to submit, if the safety of their property were guaranteed, and Sittas sent them a promise to that effect in writing. But unluckily the letter-carrier, not knowing the exact position of the territory of the Apetiani, lost his way in the intricate Armenian highlands; and while Sittas advanced with his troops to receive their submission, the Apetiani were ignorant that their proposal had been accepted, and looked with suspicion on the approaching army. Some of their number fell in by chance with Roman soldiers and were treated as enemies. Sittas, unaware that his communication had miscarried, was indignant that the promised submission was delayed; the Apetiani were put to the sword and their wives and children were slain in a cave" (see Bury, *A History of the Later Roman Empire*, Vol. 1, p. 420). Likewise, Martindale holds "various accidents and misunderstandings" to be responsible for the opening of hostilities between the Bagratunis and Sittas (Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, p. 1162).

124 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.19.

These, at first glance, scant data are in fact fairly informative and allow the reviewing of the war tactics chosen by Vasak Mamikonean and Sittas. To progress with the analysis, at the very outset, the site of this battle needs to be accurately identified.

The historian Michael Chamchian (1738-1823) was the first to correctly identify *Oenochalakon/Oinokhalakon* with the famous medieval town and fortress of Avnik. Later, Adontz agreed with this identification, perhaps independently, because he did not provide a reference to Chamchian's suggestion.¹²⁵ However, neither Chamchian, nor Adontz explicated the etymology of *Oinokhalakon*, probably because they trusted that it had to be clear to all students of *Grabar* (Classical Armenian). The word Avnik (Աւնիկ) was pronounced in Grabar as Onik, while the second part of this toponym, "chalakon/kalakon," is nothing else than the Armenian word, "kalak," for (medieval) city or fortress.¹²⁶ Furthermore, the transformation of the vowel 'a' into 'o' and its intermediate diphthongs is very common in Armenian dialects. Thus, *Oinokhalakon* was Onik (Avnik)-Kalak, i.e. Onik (Avnik)-City or Onik (Avnik)-Fortress.¹²⁷ Yet, this important identification by Chamchian-Adontz has been effectively ignored by later scholarship.¹²⁸

125 Chamchian, *History of Armenia*, v. II, p. 242; Adontz, *Historical Studies*, p. 300:

126 As is clear from Pavstos Buzand's fifth century text, in ancient and early medieval times *kalak* designated 'city' both in the broad and narrow senses, meaning, in the latter case, "a fortified, garrisoned, and walled stronghold; a fortress," or, as Nina Garsoian suggests in her extensive annotation on *kalak*, a "walled enclosure, city," and even a "walled hunting preserve;" (See Pavstos Buzand, *History of Armenia*, Yerevan, 1987, pp. 83, 359, 427, 442, notes 59 and 201; cf. *The Epic Histories Attributed to Pawstos Buzand*, pp. 535-536.)

127 Alishan recorded the pronunciation of Avnik as Onik as recently as the 19th century (Ղ. Ալիշան, Տեղագիտ. Հայոց Մեծագ [Gh. Alishan, *Geographic Overview of the Great Armenia*], Venice, 1855, c. 56).

128 Հայ ժողովրդի պատմություն: Հ. II [Yeremyan, S. T. (ed.), *The History of Armenian People*. Vol. II], *op. cit.*, p. 249; Հայ ժողովրդի պատմության քրեատմատիա: Հ. 1 [Reader on the History of Armenian People, v. I. Compiled by Hovhanissyan P. and Abrahamyan A., Yerevan State University Press, 1981], pp. 659-661. The

The second known written reference to Avnik (after Procopius's Oinokhalakon) belongs to Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (905–959).¹²⁹ In his famous *De Administrando Imperio*, Abnikon (Avnik) features as an important and populous fortress or city, strategically and commercially tightly interconnected with Theodosiopolis.¹³⁰ The same term of κἀστρον, translated by the Byzantinists both as “city” (Jenkins) and “fortress” (Bartikyan), is applied by Constantine VII, simultaneously, to Theodosiopolis, Avnik, and Manzikert.¹³¹ This strategic linkage between Theodosiopolis and Avnik fully supports the reconstruction of the 539 military campaign in Armenia, whereby the Armenian rebels

exception is the book by Iskanyan, where, however, Chamchian's identification is curtly mentioned only in a footnote, while no observation is made that N. Adontz, the leading authority on this period of the Armenian history, was of the same opinion (Iskanyan, *Armenian-Byzantine Relations in IV-VII centuries*, p. 216, n. 2). H. Bartikyan correctly explained only the second part of this compound word – *kalak*, also overlooking the Chamchian-Adontz clarification (*Byzantine Sources*. Vol. I, pp. 81, 332, n. 12).

129 There were hundreds of fortresses in ancient and medieval Armenia, and it should not be surprising that dozens of them were mentioned in Armenian sources centuries after their foundation, or that the written historical records regarding many of them have not reached us at all. Such lack of historical evidence is partly due to the fact that scores of Armenian classic and medieval texts have been destroyed during numerous foreign invasions and other national calamities that have befallen upon Armenia. Here it will suffice to mention only the pillage and destruction of 10,000 manuscripts by Seljuk Turks in the fortress of Baghaberd in 1170 (Ստեփանոս Օրբելյան, Սյունիքի պատմություն: Աշխ. Ա. Աբրահամյանի [Stepanos Orbelian, *The History of Syunik*. Rendered into modern Armenian and commented by A. Abrahamyan, Yerevan, 1986], p. 280) or the thousands of manuscripts destroyed during the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1923.

130 Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*. Greek text edited by Gy. Moravcsik, English translation by R. J. H. Jenkins. New, revised edition (Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, Washington D. C., 1967), Ch. 45, pp. 208, 211, 213, 288

131 *Ibid.*; cf. Բյուզանդական աղբյուրներ: Հ. Բ. Կոնստանտին Ծիրանաձին: Թարգմ. բնագրից, առաջաբան և ծան. Հրաչ Բարթիկյանի [*Byzantine Sources*. Vol. II, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus*. The preface, transl. into Armenian from the original and commentary by H. M. Bartikyan], Yerevan, 1970, pp. 15-18, 232 (note 21).

retreated to Avnik and Sittas moved against them from Theodosiopolis (see further in this chapter and also Map 1).

That Avnik is Procopius's Oinokhalakon becomes a convincing certainty, if one considers also this fortress/city's name variants, preserved in various Armenian primary sources (note that in Armenian *berd* means “fortress”): Avnik, Avnkaberd, Avnkoberd, Avnkuberd, Vornik, Vornkaberd, Unik, Onik, Ornik, Ornkaberd¹³². As is easy to discern, this toponym was widely known not only by its basic name of Avnik, but also with the variants that incorporated also the second component with the meaning of “fortress” (*berd*), which exactly corresponds to Oeno[k]-khalak(on), that is Avnik/Onik-fortress/city.¹³³

Avnik was located in the canton of Basean (Basiane), Ayrarat province of Great Armenia,¹³⁴ on the east bank of the Araks River, 60 kilometers in a straight line from Theodosiopolis, which from the beginning of the 530s became the residence of the *strategos* (*magister*) of

132 Հայաստանի և հարակից շրջանների տեղանունների բառարան [*The Dictionary of Toponyms of Armenia and Neighboring Areas*, vol. 1], Yerevan, 1986, pp. 365-366.

133 The eleventh century *History* by Aristakes Lastivertzi relates that, in 1054, Tughril Beg (ca. 990-1063), the first sultan of the Seljuk Empire, approached “the impregnable fortress of Avnik, where he spotted scores of people and cattle; nevertheless, [deeply] impressed by just its invulnerable appearance, he refused to consider attacking it” and led his army in another direction; See Արիստակես Լաստիվերցի, Պատմություն [Aristakes Lastivertzi, *History*], Venice, 1901, p. 80; *idem.*, Tiflis, 1912, p. 100. Ever since this fortress has been mentioned in the later Armenian as well as non-Armenian sources, featuring conspicuously during Mongol invasions too.

134 Գ. Ա. Հակոբյան, Ներքին Բասենի ազգագրությունը և բանահյուսությունը [Hakobyan, G. A. *The Ethnography and Folklore of Lower Basen*, Yerevan, 1974], p. 15. The historical evidence and studies about Avnik are presented in detail in Միքայել Յովհաննեսյան, Հայաստանի բերդերը [Michael Hovannisian, *The Fortresses of Armenia*, Venice, 1970], pp. 644-653. Avnik is incorrectly localized in canton Havnunik in *The Dictionary of Toponyms of Armenia and Neighboring Areas*. vol. 1, p. 365), as well as in two articles of *Soviet Armenian Encyclopedia* (Հայկական սովետական հանրագիտարան) (vol. 6, Yerevan, 1980, p. 270), yet correctly identified in canton Basean in the article “Avnik” of the same encyclopedia (vol. 1, Yerevan, 1974, p. 622).

Armenia.¹³⁵ At present, Avnik corresponds to the village of Güzelhisar in the county (Turk. *ilche*) of Pasinler in the Erzurum province (Turk. *il*) of Turkey. Today, the eponymous castle of Avnik is also referred to as Güzelhisar Kalesi. The battle took place in the vicinities of Avnik, at an altitude of 2000-2100 meters, where the western branch of the Dzhrabashkh (also known as Sukavet, now Keosedakh) mountain range runs.

Sittas's route to Avnik

Some extra assumptions about the site of this battle are afforded by this author's personal visit to the fortress of Avnik and the resulting insights, as well as the concomitant careful consideration of the Google satellite images of the same area. Procopius's lucid depiction of the battle terrain, mentioning "*exceedingly difficult ground where precipices abounded*" and "*the ridges and ravines*," almost precisely corresponds to the environs of the only major road that leads from southeast to Avnik, going about 15 kilometers. Remarkably, this unique and impressive landscape, outstanding even for Armenia's mountainous highlands, is not to be found on other roads passing close to Avnik (see Map 3). It is also the only road that could have been taken by a Roman army advancing from Theodosiopolis toward Avnik. The zone of the battle could be further narrowed between the current villages of Güzelhisar (Avnik) and Geyikli, the latter being about eight kilometers southeastward of the former. The Armenians must have chosen to have the fortress of Avnik at their rear as both a reserve holding and highly-defensible position in case of a forced

retreat. Accordingly, the rough terrain immediately to the south and southeast of Avnik seems to be the scene where the battle was fought (see Map 3). Unlike the contiguous higher mountainous grounds, this hilly ground was passable for cavalry, and the battle indeed could have adopted a scattered character, as it did (see further in this chapter).

Thus, at the time when the Byzantine army confronted the rebel army in 539, the encampment of the Armenian troops was no longer at Pharangium in Sper, as in the beginning of the rebellion, but a locality, which lay directly across the state border of the Empire – in Pers-Armenia. That Sittas ultimately issued an order to cross the border and thereby create, in this very stressful time for the Empire, an undesirable cause for the deterioration of relations with Persia, is indicative of several military-political realities.

First, this decision was most likely made in the heat of pursuing the Armenian forces who were retreating into the mountains. Noticeably, when the pursuit of the Armenian rebels posed a military necessity, the Persians, too, did not shy away from crossing the Empire's borders.¹³⁶ Second, this precipitous border region could, if necessary, have been assumed to be a "no man's land" between the Eastern Roman Empire and Persia, especially because then, unlike now, the international frontiers did not represent minutely demarcated linear boundaries, even when a sharply outlined topographical feature, such as a river, was present.¹³⁷ Hence, in 539, when the peace between Eastern Roman

136 For example, in 483, pursuing the Armenian force under *sparapet* Vahan Mamikonyan, the Persian general Zarmir Hazaravukht crossed the border and entered the canton of Shalagom (Shatgomk) of Upper Armenia, with the hope that on Roman territory the Armenian rebels would already feel themselves safe and therefore would be caught by surprise (see Ղազար Փարպեցի, Պատմութիւն Հայոց, քննական բնագիրը Գ. Տէր-Մկրտչեանի և Ստ. Մալխասեանցի [Ghazar Parpetzi [Lazar of Parpi], *History of Armenia*. Yerevan State University, 1982, III.78, pp. 352-354).

137 See Elton, Hugh. *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 97-99); cf. Whittaker, C. R. *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994, pp. 49-59).

135 "Before that, Melitene, the capital of Lesser Armenia, had been the military center, since the Duke of Armenia had resided there" (Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 112; cf. Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 139).

Empire and Persia was still in force, the Byzantine army would have chosen the shortest possible route toward Avnik, which went from Theodosiopolis through the Basean plain. Third, the Empire attached the utmost importance to the suppression of the Armenian rebellion, which was worth provoking hostilities with Persia. Only after the Armenian rebellion was quelled in late 539 did Justinian send an ambassador to Khosrov I to try to dissuade him from starting a war.¹³⁸

It should also be taken into consideration that Pers-Armenia was almost fully exempt from garrisoning the Persian forces, especially after the signing of the Nvarsak Treaty between the Armenian rebel forces and the Sassanids in 484. Like in the Byzantine Empire before the 530s, the protection of the frontier was assigned to the local Armenian troops who in 539 would have hardly tried to ward off the retreat of Byzantine Armenian rebels into the territory under their control. On the contrary, it is quite possible that they joined their western kinsmen and mounted combined resistance to Sittas's army, later easily rationalizing such behavior to the Persians with their desire to protect the boundaries of the state.

There is no specific evidence about when exactly Vasak Mamikonean decided to move out the Armenian army from Sper to the Theodosiopolis area. It seems more likely that this strategic maneuver – the movement of his army from one theater to the other – was performed just before the onset of the Byzantine army's offensive. The possible objectives of this movement are clear: either to consolidate their grip on Theodosiopolis, the center of Byzantine political and military administration in Armenia (if it was under rebel control), or subject the city to the threat of attack (if it was still in the hands of the Byzantines). Besides, since the Theodosiopolis area was bordering Pers-Armenia, the rebels retained the ability of avoiding the risk of encirclement and, if necessary, quickly retreating into

Pers-Armenia. This means that Vasak Mamikonean chose to adopt a defensive strategy. At the same time, the broad maneuvering of the Armenian army from Sper to Theodosiopolis in itself is a testament to its strength and mobility, as well as a relative pointer to the areas under its military control.

The development of the Byzantine-Armenian military campaign of 539 could be expounded if an acceptable explanation is provided to the two aforementioned events, namely: the skirmish of the Byzantine army with a small Armenian detachment of the Bagratunis and Sittas's massacring of the Bagratuni women and children in the cave. Both of these incidents could physically occur only in Sper, the fiefdom of the Bagratunis, where the initial camp of Armenian rebels was located in Pharangium. Therefore, Sittas's first strike was directed against Sper.¹³⁹ It should be assumed that the Byzantine army was moving along the road Bayberd-Vahanashen-Mlehi-Sper (*see* map 1).¹⁴⁰ Sittas temporarily divided his army and moved it in two different directions. This was probably done either in Sper, or on its approaches. Such separation of Byzantine forces would have aimed at cutting off the possible routes of the Bagratunis' retreat from Sper and their unification

139 Adontz confuses the sequence of events: he synchronizes the cave massacre perpetrated by Sittas with the decisive battle between the Armenian and Byzantine armies and correspondingly localizes this cave near Avnik, in the canton Basean (Adontz, *Historical Studies*, p. 300).

140 If, however, Theodosiopolis was still in the hands of the Byzantines, and Sittas was there during his protracted negotiations with the rebels, his army's offensive on Sper was to pass through Theodosiopolis-Shalagom-Farangium line. However, this option that I have noted in the popular version of this study (*see Sobesednik Armenii (Russian version)/Hayastani zrutsakitz (Armenian version)*, № 27 (190), July 15, 2011), now seems to me much less likely, because the movement of Vasak Mamikonean's army toward the south, from Sper to Theodosiopolis (from where the rebels could reach Avnik), clearly suggests the pressure on the rebels from the western side and the absence of a large Byzantine force in Theodosiopolis. If Sittas were moving on Farangium from the south, Vasak had no reason to break through the Byzantine barriers and retreat into Pers-Armenia from Theodosiopolis area: he could cross the border from Sper itself toward Vkhik, as, most probably, the Bagratunis did later.

138 Proc. Bell. Pers., II.4.14-26.

with the main body of Armenian army under the command of Vasak Mamikonean who had earlier left for the Theodosiopolis area. The massacre committed by Sittas in a cave – where Armenians usually hid to escape enemy assaults on their fortresses and settlements – indicates furthermore a previous violent confrontation with the Armenian forces, possibly the storming of an Armenian fortress that resulted in significant casualties for the Byzantines. This alone could have triggered an inhuman cruelty by Sittas, who before that, it should not be forgotten, was at all costs avoiding further escalation of enmity with the Armenians.

Accordingly, in its attempt to overtake and destroy Vasak Mamikonean's retreating forces, the Byzantine army was compelled to overcome pockets of resistance in Sper and made ground with considerable effort. The Bagratunis thus effectively played the role of the rebels' rearguard. In all likelihood, Vasak's true intention was to exhaust Sittas's troops as much as possible, to canalize them to the site that he had chosen for the battle, and, conversely, to conserve his own strength. As reported by Procopius, the Bagratunis' contingent joined the Armenian army later, just before the decisive battle.

In any case, it could be asserted with certainty that, in spite of all the preventive measures taken by Sittas, he failed to prevent the rejoining of the Bagratunis' evidently crack troops with the main rebel body under Vasak Mamikonean's command. This, in the end, was fatal for the Byzantines. It is feasible to assume that part of the Byzantine troops was garrisoned in Sper in order to consolidate the imperial control of this breakaway canton, thus reducing the advancing army of Sittas right before the decisive battle. Owing to Sittas's vigorous actions to block the Bagratunis in Sper and prevent them from rejoining Vasak, the safest and most likely route for the delayed withdrawal of Bagratunis' contingent from Sper could not have been through the staging of a direct breakout of the Byzantine

cordons to Theodosiopolis and then to Avnik, but the crossing of the Persian border and movement through the territory of Pers-Armenia along the line of Sper-Vkhik-Okale-Bolberd-Daroink (for the tentative route of the Bagratunis' retreat, *see* Map 1).

The battle

Here Procopius's previously cited report needs to be revisited again: "But since both armies were on exceedingly difficult ground where precipices abounded, they did not fight in one place, but scattered about among the ridges and ravines." Waging a defensive campaign, Vasak declined to confront the enemy on a more or less open field and ensured instead that the battle took place on rugged terrain, where the effective combat formations and organization of cooperation between the different branches of Byzantine troops were essentially reduced to naught, while the good knowledge of the terrain and combat qualities of the individual soldiers came to the fore.

In considering this battle, an insightful observation by Carl von Clausewitz seems relevant and appropriate: "The troops' national feeling (enthusiasm, fanatical zeal, faith, and general temper) is most apparent in mountain warfare where every man, down to the individual soldier, is on his own... Efficiency, skill, and the tempered courage that welds the body of troops into a single mold will have their greatest scope in operations in open country."¹⁴¹

Noting that "the Romans usually chose an open and level terrain for their cavalry battles" and that in this particular engagement "the effect of the terrain on the battle formation is clear," I. Syvanne reasonably suggests that "the ridges and ravines forced both the

141 Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*, eds./trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 218.

Armenians and the Romans to adopt a scattered formation,” which was “so unusual” that it even pushed Procopius of Caesarea to pay attention.¹⁴²

However, the outline of the whole military campaign of 539 provided above allows one to conclude that in the Battle of Avnik/*Oinokhalakon* it was less the topography than the human factor, namely *sparapet* Vasak Mamikonean who, making maximum use of the features of terrain, managed to fragment the Byzantine army to numerous small units, thereby disrupting or, to be more precise, preventing them to line up in their customary battle formations. Vasak's tactics were, in fact, precisely identical to Sun Bin's following recommendations: “Against an enemy superior in number, it is possible to divide it into pockets so that they are unable to help each other.”¹⁴³ On another occasion, Sun Bin again advises to make a “numerous, strong, fierce, flexible and persistent” enemy “scatter his forces.”¹⁴⁴

Next, Procopius of Caesarea describes the climax of the battle:

So it happened that some few of the Armenians and Sittas with not many of his followers came close upon each other, with only a ravine lying between them. Both parties were horsemen. Then Sittas with a few men following him crossed the ravine and advanced against the enemy; the Armenians, after withdrawing to the rear, stopped, and Sittas pursued no further but remained where he was. Suddenly someone from the Roman army, an Erulian by birth,¹⁴⁵ who had been pursuing the enemy, returning impetuously from them came up to Sittas and his men. Now as it happened Sittas had planted his spear in the ground; and the Erulian's horse fell upon this with a great rush and shattered it. And the general

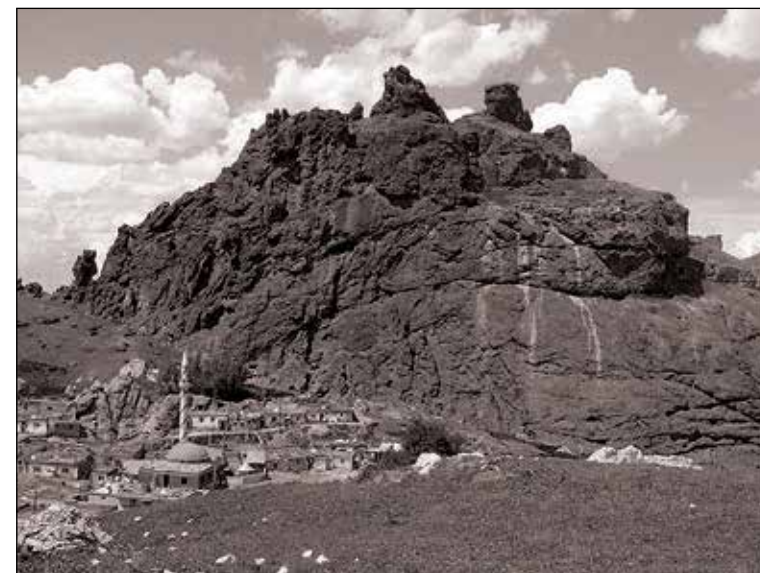
142 Syvanne, *The Age of Hippotaxotai*, pp. 440, 441 (note 1).

143 Sunzi: *The Art of War* & Sun Bin: *The Art of War*, pp. 182-183.

144 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

145 The Heruli were a Germanic tribe.

was exceedingly annoyed by this, and one of the Armenians, seeing him, recognized him and declared to all the others that it was Sittas. For it happened that he had no helmet on his head. Thus it did not escape the enemy that he had come there with only a few men. Sittas, then, upon hearing the Armenian say this, since his spear, as has been said, lay broken in two on the ground, drew his sword and attempted immediately to recross the ravine. But



The fortress of Avnik, Pers-Armenia
(currently also known as Güzelhisar Kalesi, Turkey).

the enemy advanced upon him with great eagerness, and a soldier overtaking him in the ravine struck him a glancing blow with his sword on the top of his head; and he took off the whole scalp, but the steel did not injure the bone at all. And Sittas continued to press forward still more than before, but Artabanes, son of John of the Arsacidae, fell upon him from behind and with a thrust of his spear killed him. Thus Sittas was removed from the world

*after no notable fashion, in a manner unworthy of his valour and his continual achievements against the enemy, a man who was extremely handsome in appearance and a capable warrior, and a general second to none of his contemporaries. But some say that Sittas did not die at the hand of Artabanes, but that Solomon, a very insignificant man among the Armenians, destroyed him.*¹⁴⁶

This engagement between the detachments of Artabanes and Sittas is a major pointer to the process of how the breakup of the Roman army into small and disjointed units was essentially achieved. The skillful employment of terrain by the rebels allowed them to counter-attack the approaching enemy from different directions, including from available hidden positions, and then to stage, exactly as Artabanes's unit did, false retreats. This induced the Romans to advance and – due, again, to the sheer nature of the landscape – predictably fragment as well as to be drawn into possible ambushes.

It is hard to believe, however, that the Armenians recognized Sittas by chance, in the heat of battle and, as asserted by Procopius, by his facial features. The Byzantine *strategos* could have been recognized through much larger signs and symbols, including his battle standard, personal military regalia, a commander's magnificent gear, etc. Neither was it accidental that in front of Sittas's unit – definitely one of the best ones in his army – a no less crack detachment of Artabanes Arshakuni, a commander known for his boldness and extraordinary military skills, happened to be standing. In all probability, the task to intercept and destroy Sittas was conceived and entrusted to Artabanes by Vasak Mamikonean in the very beginning of the battle. Artabanes and his

146 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.19-27. The fact that both Acacius and Sittas were killed by Artabanes was once more pointed out by Procopius – via one of the heroes, Gregorius – in his *Vandalic War*: “For when you were still young, you slew Acacius, the ruler of the Armenians, and Sittas, the general of the Romans, and as a result of this becoming known to the king Chosroes, you campaigned with him against the Romans” (Proc. *Bell. Vand.*, II.27.17).

detachment won this standalone battle both tactically, brilliantly combining their retreat with the surprise counterattack, and in terms of individual combat training, in mounted duels against legionnaires and Sittas, himself an experienced and brave soldier.¹⁴⁷

During the ensuing chain of separate engagements which were fought in gorges and ravines cut off from one another, the Armenian forces ultimately emerged victorious. It is true that the fate of the Battle at Avnik was much influenced by the outcome of the combat between the units of Sittas and Artabanes. At the same time, based on the highly unusual character of this battle, the death of Sittas could not have played as large a role in the final defeat of his army as if it happened in an open field and for all to witness. Because of the fragmentation of military units and the lack of reliable communication between them, the majority of both Byzantine and Armenian troops learned of Sittas's death belatedly. If the Armenians had lost the rest of the encounters and were unable to link their successes to the overall aim, the destruction of Sittas would not have ensured for them a victory in the battle, since the post of the fallen general, no doubt, was immediately taken up by his second-in-command, as was common in the contemporary Byzantine as well as Persian and Armenian militaries.¹⁴⁸ The battle was won not only thanks to the defeat of Sittas's detachment, but as a result of Armenian victories in a number of other small engagements with the rest of the Byzantine army units during the same day.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, the most likely winning formula for

147 Whately mentions that the Armenians actually encircled Sittas (Whately, *Descriptions of Battle in the 'Wars' of Procopius*, p. 195).

148 For example, the battle at Martyropolis in 589 was won by the Persians, even though their general from the martial house of Surena was killed in action by the Byzantines (see Дмитриев, «Всадники в сверкающей броне», с. 305).

149 Without any analysis or deduction, Chamchian, nonetheless, in a single sentence makes a generally correct conclusion about the course of the battle after the murder of Sittas: “And the other Armenian soldiers, each gaining the upper hand over his opponent, put them to flight” (Chamchian, *History of Armenia*, v. II, p. 242).

the Armenians at Avnik in 539 consisted of two main elements: first, liquidating the Byzantine *strategos*, and, second, prevailing in more than half of all the engagements that took place on the battlefield.

This victory was made possible, most probably, by a detailed study and smart use of the terrain by the Armenian command, including the preliminary preparation to the conduct of defensive-offensive battle through the proper pre-positioning of military units, the possible construction of some fortifications, as well as the selection of hidden places for ambushes and reserves. Sittas had neither the time nor the



The ruins of the medieval walls of Avnik.

That Sittas “was killed in a skirmish” (Hughes, *Belisarius*, pp. 246-247) could be considered technically correct, only if one accepts that this skirmish, or a tactical engagement, happened during and within the framework of a larger battle, which Hughes, regrettably, did not notice. Meanwhile, negligently and without any supporting arguments defining this battle as a “casual skirmish,” as does Browning in his *Justinian and Theodora* (p. 76), is misplaced, as has been amply demonstrated throughout the present study.

opportunity for similar or equivalent preparations, since as soon as he set his foot on the theater of war selected by Vasak Mamikonean, his troops were attacked by the Armenian army, which moved out of the defensive posture and initiated numerous meeting engagements. Both competent segmentation of forces, “one of the fundamental enabling techniques of unorthodox warfare” in antiquity,¹⁵⁰ and their efficient maneuvering were employed by the Armenian *sparapet* to maximum effect.

Indeed, Vasak Mamikonean surpassed the acknowledged military talent of Sittas Ursicius both in planning and conduct of the entire military campaign, especially by imposing the decisive battle upon his foe on advantageous and prearranged terrain. He triumphed also thanks to his operational tactics, particularly the efficient employment of his forces during this unique battle, which has yet to take its rightful place in the history of war tactics of the early Byzantine period. “The commander’s talents are given greatest scope in rough hilly country.”¹⁵¹ This apt comment by Clausewitz could be fully attributed to Vasak Mamikonean, the outstanding *sparapet* of the Armenian rebel army in 538-539 who has been unfairly consigned to oblivion. Furthermore, the victory in this battle once again proves the validity of a modern military historian’s assessment that in the fourth-seventh centuries “the Armenians were well in step with the military developments occurring around them.”¹⁵²

150 Sawyer, *The Tao of Deception*, pp. 88, 193.

151 Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*, p. 218.

152 Syvanne, *The Age of Hippotaxotai*, p. 414. Some tactical elements employed by the Armenian troops and their mastery of various weapons are discussed in: Hakobyan, “The Roman-Eastern Contacts in the Field of Military Tactics,” *Yerevan University Journal*, pp. 49-70.

4.

A comparative analysis of Mamikonean tactics in the battles of Akori and Avnik (481 AD and 539 AD)

A historical-comparative deviation should be introduced here to shed additional light on the tactical particularities of the Battle of Avnik. This battle bears some striking resemblances to the famous Battle of Akori, in 481, when the Armenian rebel force of 300 horsemen under the command of another Mamikonean (again Vasak!)¹⁵³ routed the 7000-strong

¹⁵³ Though Ghazar Parbetzi does not exactly specify the first-in-command of this Armenian contingent, he provides the names of the commanders and deputy commanders of the center and the right-flank units as well as the name of the commander of the left-flank unit. This force, however, was undoubtedly led by either Babgen Suny, a high-ranking prince from the province of Syunik, or Vasak Mamikonean, a *sepuh* (=middle rank officer), because they are identified as the commander and deputy commander of the center unit and mentioned always ahead of other officers, in a clear sign of superior position over the others. It is, however, not clear which of these two was the number one in seniority: while describing the battle, in one instance Ghazar gives Babgen Suny's name first and Vasak Mamikonean's name second only to reverse this order in another instance (Ghazar Parpetzi [Lazar of Parpi], *History of Armenia*, III.68, 69, pp. 300-303). After the battle, Vasak's name once again was given prior to that of Babgen Suny (see *ibid.*, pp. 304-305). In any case, even if Vasak Mamikonean was put in charge of the deputy commander of the Armenian contingent, his total contribution to the Armenian victory at Akori, well presented by Ghazar Parbetzi, could be considered as similar to that of the first-in-command. In some studies, the command of Armenian troops at the Battle of Akori is mistakenly attributed to Vasak's brother, *sparapet* Vahan Mamikonean, who was the overall leader of the Armenian revolt in 481-484 (see *History of the Armenian people*, Vol. II, ed. S. T. Yeremyan, *op. cit.*, p. 200; Մ. Վ. Մարգարյան, Հայ ռազմական արվեստի պատմությունից [S. V. Sargsyan, *From the History*

Persian punitive army. In this earlier battle the Armenians also lured the enemy into the mountainous terrain (at the foothills of the Great Ararat), then near the village of Akori, at an altitude of 1700 meters above sea-level, swiftly counterattacked and, in the course of fighting, killed Atrveshnasp, the commander of this Persian force, who was also the *marzpan* (governor) of Armenia. Thus, the efficient tactics adopted by both Vasak Mamikoneans in these battles partook of three elements: 1) a retreat into rugged terrain followed by the transition to a counteroffensive, 2) an initiation of combat in the highlands, 3) the premeditated targeting of enemy commanders in the field.

An important difference between these two highland battles was that, unlike at Avnik, where the Armenian troops adopted scattered formation and were divided into numerous smaller units, at Akori they chose to fight in close order and act like a single fist. Thanks to the concentration of force at the proper time and place, the 300 Armenian riders managed to crush the three enemy groupings that had lost contact from each other by an ill-conceived Persian planning. First, the Armenians undertook a well-timed counterattack and overran the elite part of the Persian cavalry (or *Savaran*),¹⁵⁴ which imprudently charged forward and became separated from its own lines. Then the devastating concentrated strike was directed against – as the reconnaissance conducted personally by Vasak had determined earlier – the poorly trained main body of the Persians. Finally, the Armenians attacked and dispersed the third enemy grouping, an ethnic mix which consisted mainly of a regiment of the Katish, a belligerent tribe allied with the Persians, and one hundred Armenian

of the Armenian Art of War], Yerevan, 1969, pp. 203-204). In fact, during this battle *sparapet* Vahan Mamikonean was residing in the capital Dvin, where he shortly received two conflicting reports about its outcome (see Ghazar Parpetzi, *History of Armenia*, III. 69, pp. 304-305).

¹⁵⁴ On the origins, weapons, deployment and tactics of *Savaran*, see Farrokh, *Sassanian Elite Cavalry AD 224-642*, *op. cit.*

riders of *malkhaz*¹⁵⁵ Gardzhuył Khorkhoruni, who switched sides and went over to the Persians early in the battle. This grouping came into the rear of the main Armenian force and, in this third and last engagement, the commander of the Katish was killed too.¹⁵⁶

The century of Gardzhuył Khorkhoruni, which was making up the left flank of the Armenian force, surreptitiously went over to the Persians just before the start of the very first engagement, specifically, before the collision of the center and right flank of the Armenian troops with the elite part of the Persian cavalry, headed by *marzpan* Atrveshnasp himself.¹⁵⁷ The treacherous desertion to the Persians of Gardzhuył's unit had not been immediately noticed by the 300 Armenian horsemen who were, meantime, rushing to the attack. Indeed, in this period, according to the accepted rules of the Sassanid (and Armenian, as can be inferred from this particular case) military tactics, the role of the left wing was primarily in defense, rather than in attack. On this subject, the aforementioned Sassanid military treatise *Ayeen-Nameh* stated: "As for the left wing, it will not attack unless it is attacked by a perilous enemy, in which case they (i.e. the warriors of the left wing – A.A.) repulse an enemy attack. While the warriors of the right wing and the "two main parts"¹⁵⁸ can engage in battle with those who are advancing upon them and return to their main force in order to re-enter [the combat], the warriors of the left wing can [do that] only during a retreat, and they can not come back and re-enter [the

combat]..."¹⁵⁹ (As explained by a modern researcher, "the main reason why the left flank was not favored for the attack was because using a shield on the left generally did not allow for the heavy infantryman to attack efficiently to the left. As a result of this perceived weakness, the left flank was actually given stronger forces as well as left-handed archers. Left-handed bowmen were viewed as being equally capable of effectively shooting from both left and right sides").¹⁶⁰

During the initial counterattack and further pursuit of the Persians, the Armenian force of 300 advanced a long way forward, believing all the time that Gardzhuył's century was providing security of its rear. In the meantime, however, Gardzhuył joined with the Katish regiment, which secretly approached him from either the left or the rear. Having their forces united, Gardzhuył and the leader of Katish, not knowing about the defeat of the main body of the Persians and the death of Atrveshnasp, attempted to strike at the 300-strong Armenian force from the rear. It is clear that this third Persian grouping reached the rear of the Armenian troops after the defeat of the main Persian force, which implies that the Katish regiment, certainly having an advance secret agreement, arrived at the left flank of the Armenians and joined Gardzhuył Khorkhoruni's century belatedly. This lateness, in turn, indicates that the first two engagements were won at a blazing speed. Thus, the poor coordination and wrong timing of the Persian attack against the rear of the Armenian force had a serious impact on the outcome of this battle.

According to Ghazar Parpetzi, the fifth century Armenian historian, during the final engagement, after the tactical reconnaissance undertaken by Hrahat Kamsarakan, only he and his brother Nerseh (not to be confused with the aforementioned Kamsarakan brothers of the same name, alias Aratius and Narses, who were victorious against

155 *Malkhaz* was a hereditary title given to the former commanders of the royal bodyguard corps of the Armenian kings, and, at the same time, an alternative surname of the princely family that occupied that office, namely, the Khorkhoruni (Movses Khorenatzi, *History of Armenia*, II.7).

156 Ghazar Parpetzi [Lazar of Parpi], *History of Armenia*, III.68-69, pp. 294-305.

157 *Ibid.*, III.69, pp. 300-301.

158 "The main line and the reinforcement formed the center and was known as the 'two main parts' or the 'heart'" (see Farrokh, *Sassanian Elite Cavalry AD 224-642*, p. 29); cf. Dmitriev, *"The Horsemen in Glittering Armor,"* pp. 95-96.

159 Inostrantzev, *Sassanian Sketches*, p. 47.

160 Farrokh, *Sassanian Elite Cavalry AD 224-642*, p. 30.

Belisarius and Sittas in 527) rushed to the attack “with a very small number of men.” However, it seems self-evident that the bulk of the Armenian 300-strong force also participated in this final attack in the second tier, because in other directions the enemy had simply vanished!

Special attention should be given to the third common tactical element successfully employed by the Armenians in the Battles of Akori and Avnik, namely the killing of the enemy commanders. The high efficiency of such an asymmetric blow to an enemy army has been no secret to the command of large and small armed organizations throughout history.¹⁶¹ That is why the challenge has always been its execution, rather than its acknowledgment, or even preliminary planning. According to the available historical evidence, the Armenians were repeatedly successful in killing enemy generals. Pavstos Buzand reports a whole series of such triumphs: 21 killings of Persian supreme generals (mentioned by their names or feudal titles) in 21 consecutive victorious battles.¹⁶² Even if inflated and exaggerated, this account clearly implies how much the Armenian military’s top brass was focusing on this specific stratagem. Far from being accidental, such emphasis on targeted killings reflected the Armenian military strategy’s perennial quest for cost-effective means of countering the invading and numerically preponderant imperial forces.

The implementation of such a sophisticated mission during the ongoing fighting required, in particular, an availability of credible and preliminary intelligence, a timely placement of a mobile and elite squad against the enemy commander who was typically protected by at least his own elite squad of bodyguards, and a lightning surgical

strike. At both Akori and Avnik, the Armenian troops fulfilled all these tasks. What is more, at Akori, the leader of the Katish who is characterized as “a mighty and brave warrior,” and prior to that possibly the commander of the Persian army Atrvashnasp too, were hit at the outset of the respective clashes, during the very first contact. On the whole, the Battle of Akori is a brilliant illustration of the well-known principle of the ancient Chinese military theory, according to which “one [elite] unit can attack ten [poorly trained enemy] units, invariably causing them to be helpless.”¹⁶³

The fact that both of these battles were guided by Mamikonean generals and that important tactical elements of the first one, after 58 years, were applied during the second one—of course, with modifications arising from different military and historical circumstances – quite naturally suggests that the ancestral house of the legendary Armenian *sparapets* maintained a first-class school of warfare, where valuable military experiences and the best martial traditions were carefully developed and passed from generation to generation.¹⁶⁴ Obviously, the tactical resourcefulness of the medieval Armenian armed forces owed much to the Mamikoneans’ art of war.

161 See, for example, Sun Bin’s advice on targeted killings of enemy commanders (Sunzi: *The Art of War* & Sun Bin: *The Art of War*, p. 175).

162 Pavstos Buzand, IV.26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31 (Gumand Shapuh, the Persian general, was killed “in the first instance”), 32, 33, 34, 35, 36 (Suren, the Persian general, was taken prisoner and later executed), 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 45, 46, 47, 48 (the killing of the Persian general is implied by the alleged destruction of the entire Persian contingent), 49.

163 Sawyer, Ralph D., *The Essence of War: Leadership and Strategy from the Chinese Military Classics* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2004), pp. 228-229; idem, *The Tao of Spycraft*, p. 440.

164 I have raised this issue on another occasion, concluding, inter alia, that “to ensure stability and continuity of the highly sophisticated system of Armenian armed forces (in particular, a smooth and painless generational change in its commanding personnel), it had been necessary and even inevitable to conduct training and transfer of the Armenian military tradition, not only verbally but also in writing” (Ա. Այվազյան, Հայաստանի պատմության լուսաբանումը ամերիկյան պատմագրության մեջ: Քննական տեսություն [A. Ayvazian. *The History of Armenia as Presented in American Historiography: A Critical Survey*], Yerevan, 1998, p. 172).

5.

The end of the rebellion and its aftermath

The Armenian victory at Avnik did not, however, put an end to the hostilities. Procopius of Caesarea, our sole primary source on the rebellion of 538-539, reports nothing about the total number of casualties suffered by the Byzantine army during the Battle of Avnik, but the gravity of its defeat can be deduced from the fact that Justinian was compelled to dispatch to Armenia yet another of his battle-hardened commanders – Bouzes,¹⁶⁵ ostensibly at the head of large reinforcements, or even a newly formed army. It is clear that following the Byzantine army's defeat in a decisive battle, its remaining forces retreated, and the rebels established their control over the Byzantine part of Armenia or, at least, Inner Armenia. The Armenians, most likely, again concentrated their forces in the strategically advantageous areas of Sper and Theodosiopolis. According to Procopius, this is how the rebellion concluded:

¹⁶⁵ On Bouzes's military career, see Martindale, J. R. *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, pp. 254-257. Bouzes had, in particular, been the commander of the left flank of Belisarius's army at the famous Battle of Dara in 530 (see Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, I.13). Later in 540, a year after the suppression of the Armenian rebellion, Justinian divided the function of the *magistri militum per Orientem* between Belisarius and Bouzes (Buzes): "The emperor had divided into two parts the military command of the East, leaving the portion as far as the River Euphrates under the control of Belisarius who formerly held the command of the whole, while the portion from there as far as the Persian boundary he entrusted to Bouzes, commanding him to take charge of the whole territory of the East until Belisarius should return from Italy" (Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.6.1).

*After the death of Sittas the emperor commanded Bouzes to go against the Armenians; and he, upon drawing near, sent to them promising to effect a reconciliation between the emperor and all the Armenians, and asking that some of their notables should come to confer with him on these matters. Now the Armenians as a whole were unable to trust Bouzes nor were they willing to receive his proposals. But there was a certain man of the Arsacidae who was especially friendly with him, John by name, the father of Artabanes, and this man, trusting in Bouzes as his friend came to him with his son-in-law, Bassaces, and a few others; but when these men had reached the spot where they were to meet Bouzes on the following day, and had made their bivouac there, they perceived that they had come into a place surrounded by the Roman army. Bassaces, the son-in-law, therefore earnestly entreated John to fly. And since he was not able to persuade him, he left him there alone, and in company with all the others eluded the Romans, and went back again by the same road. And Bouzes found John alone and slew him; and since after this the Armenians had no hope of ever reaching an agreement with the Romans, and since they were unable to prevail over the emperor in war, they came before the Persian king led by Bassaces, an energetic man.*¹⁶⁶

At this retreat, executed in late autumn of 539, the Armenian rebellion metamorphosed from an ethnically solitary resistance into an allied warfare: the Armenian commanders and their troops who passed into Persia partook in the war against the Byzantine Empire which was initiated, not least upon their encouragement, by the Persian king Khosrov I in May 540.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.28-31.

¹⁶⁷ Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II, AD 363-630*, pp. 102-103, 269 (n. 6).

The motivations and interest of the leadership of the Armenian rebellion in catalyzing this new regional war and thus escalating their fighting against Justinian's empire can hardly be reduced to a clear wish for restoring their former unobstructed authority in Byzantine Armenia. It would be justified to assume that Vasak Mamikonean, Artabanes Arshakuni and their companions, together with a substantial part of the Armenian secular and spiritual elite, were hoping that this war would result in a Persian victory and, accordingly, reunification of the divided eastern and western parts of Armenia, even if only within Sassanid Persian empire. If this scenario were to succeed, the internal autonomy of Pers-Armenia, already very high (there, unlike in Byzantine Armenia, Armenian feudal inheritance rights were not violated), would have been drastically reinforced, thereby creating promising opportunities for national development and future attempts to gain full independence. However, such reunification was destined to materialize only after two centuries and under the auspices of the Arab Caliphate rather than Sassanid Persia, the latter having been obliterated from the historical scene by the former.

The first two years of Byzantine-Sassanid war that started in 540 were waged in Mesopotamia and Lazica, rather than in Armenia proper. Having witnessed the impracticability of their hopes and disappointed in the Persian policy toward Armenia, the leaders of 538-539 rebellion, after "receiving pledges from the Romans" changed sides. They were led again by Vasak, who in this context is once more mentioned as their head ("they... came with Vasak to Byzantium"), as well as Artabanes and his brother John (Hovannes) Arshakunis.¹⁶⁸

168 As Procopius reticently informs, "the Armenians who had gone over to Khusr received pledges from the Romans and came with Vasak to Byzantium" (Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.21.34). In another one of his books, Procopius affirms that Artabanes defected to the Byzantines along with other Armenians who had previously gone over to Persia: "And he sent with him... some few Armenians led by Artabanes and John, sons of John, of the line of the Arsacidae, who had recently left the Persian army and as deserters had come back to the Romans, together with the other Armenians."

Their return happened in 542.¹⁶⁹ Artabanes, as has been said above, quickly rose up the bureaucratic ladder of the imperial court, and from there, in collaboration with another prominent Armenian, once tried to somehow affect the fate of Armenia by taking part in a failed assassination attempt on Emperor Justinian.¹⁷⁰

The sociopolitical and military repercussions of this rebellion may be regarded as ambiguous. On one hand, after its suppression, Justinian and his successors on the throne largely succeeded in administratively Byzantinizing the western part of Armenia, especially by destroying the Armenian nobility's age-old privileges in their homeland and co-opting many of its sturdy representatives into the ranks of the metropolitan aristocracy (in particular, the emperor Heraclius (610-641) could have indeed been the great-great grandson of John Arshakuni).¹⁷¹ Nevertheless, the rebellion of 538-539 provided the immediately succeeding generations of the local population with the rich reminiscences of past military resistance to the Empire. These collective memories, coupled with the helpful functioning of Armenian schools,¹⁷² were above all responsible for preserving the national identity in Byzantine Armenia, which because of religious affinity with the Empire was heavily exposed to its assimilation policy.

This rebellion was followed by new liberation attempts and revolts by the Armenians in both Pers-Armenia in 571, and, less

(Proc. *Bell. Vand.*, IV.24.2; cf. Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II, AD 363-630*, p. 273, n. 7).

169 Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II, AD 363-630*, pp. 116, 273 (n. 7).

170 See Chapter 1. "The start of the rebellion..." above.

171 Toumanoff, "The Heraclids and the Arsacids," pp. 431-434. For a brief overview of primary sources and research on the Armenian origin of Heraclius, see Kaegi, Walter E., *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 21-22, esp. n. 4.

172 Cf. Manandyan, Hakob. *Works*. Vol. II, p. 483.

powerfully, in Byzantine Armenia in 589, 591, and 601.¹⁷³ In spite of all countermeasures taken by the Eastern Roman Empire and Sassanid Persia, the major powers of the time,¹⁷⁴ the Armenian armed forces continued to maintain an exceptional level of professional skill and combat effectiveness (in Pers-Armenia – their organizational and command structure, too), regularly demonstrating them in subsequent military vicissitudes and, in the long run, effectively retaining Armenia's opportunity to restore its full independence, if as late as 885.¹⁷⁵

173 Danielyan, *Political History of Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Church (VI-VII Centuries)*, pp. 49-56; cf. *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*. Translated, with notes, by R. W. Thomson. Historical commentary by James Howard-Johnston. Assistance from Tim Greenwood. Part 1 (Liverpool Univ. Press, 1999), pp. XX-XXI; Soultanian, Gabriel. *The History of Bishop Sebeos: Redefining a Seventh-Century Voice from Armenia* (London: Bennet & Bloom, 2007), p. 45.

174 In some historical periods, these anti-Armenian actions by the Persian and Byzantine rulers had a clear-cut goal of emptying Armenia of its armed forces, while during the reign of Maurice they were mutually planned and coordinated (Part II of the present study deals with this topic in detail).

175 I. Syvanne is not wrong to note that “the Armenians were well in step with the military developments occurring around them, but the smallness of their nation and the internal divisions ensured that they were unable to acquire full independence” (Syvanne, *The Age of Hippoxotai*, p. 414). However, the latter part of this conception needs to be clarified further: first, during the centuries in question the total number of Armenians, compared with the neighboring peoples, was definitely not small, but large; second, the intervals when the Armenians lacked independence should not be inadvertently projected on all times and ages, because both before and after the early Byzantine period the Armenians were able to establish or restore their independence in Armenia as well as later in the 11-14th centuries in Cilicia.

Appendix A

The assassination operation against Gontharis, Carthage, May 546

(Excerpts from Procopius of Caesaria's *The Vandalic War*)

Artabanes, upon receiving pledges, went up to the palace with his Armenians, and promised to serve the tyrant according to his orders. But secretly he was purposing to destroy Gontharis, having previously communicated this purpose to Gregorius, his nephew, and to Artasires, his body-guard. And Gregorius, urging him on to the undertaking, spoke as follows:

“Artabanes, the opportunity is now at hand for you, and you alone, to win the glory of Belisarius — nay more, even to surpass that glory by far. For he came here, having received from the emperor a most formidable army and great sums of money, having officers accompanying him and advisers in great numbers, and a fleet of ships whose like we have never before heard tell of, and numerous cavalry, and arms, and everything else, to put it in a word, prepared for him in a manner worthy of the Roman empire. And thus equipped he won back Libya for the Romans with much toil. But all these achievements have so completely come to naught, that they are, at this moment, as if they had never been — except indeed, that there is at present left to the Romans from the victory of Belisarius the losses they have suffered

in lives and in money, and, in addition, that they are no longer able even to guard the good things they won. But the winning back of all these things for the emperor now depends upon the courage and judgment and right hand of you alone. Therefore consider that you are of the house of the Arsacidae by ancient descent, and remember that it is seemly for men of noble birth to play the part of brave men always and in all places. Now many remarkable deeds have been performed by you in behalf of freedom. For when you were still young, you slew Acacius, the ruler of the Armenians, and Sittas, the general of the Romans, and as a result of this becoming known to the king Chosroes, you campaigned with him against the Romans. And since you have reached so great a station that it devolves upon you not to allow the Roman power to lie subject to a drunken dog, show at this time that it was by reason of noble birth and a valorous heart that at the former time, good sir, you performed those deeds; and I as well as Artasires here will assist you in everything, so far as we have the power, in accordance with your commands.”

So spoke Gregorius; and he excited the mind of Artabanes still more against the tyrant.

Proc. Bell. Vand. II.27.9-19

But after long deliberation it seemed to him better to put Gontharis out of the world and thus free both the emperor and Libya from a difficult situation.

Proc. Bell. Vand. II.27.34

Gontharis decided to entertain his friends at a banquet... Artabanes, accordingly, when he was bidden to this banquet, thinking that this occasion furnished him a suitable opportunity for the murder of the tyrant, was planning to carry out his purpose. He therefore disclosed the matter

to Gregorius and to Artasires and three other bodyguards, bidding the bodyguards get inside the hall with their swords (for when commanders are entertained at a banquet it is customary for their bodyguards to stand behind them), and after getting inside to make an attack suddenly, at whatever moment should seem to them most suitable; and Artasires was to strike the first blow. At the same time he directed Gregorius to pick out a large number of the most daring of the Armenians and bring them to the palace, carrying only their swords in their hands (for it is not lawful for the escort of officers in a city to be armed with anything else), and leaving these men in the vestibule, to come inside with the body-guards; and he was to tell the plan to no one of them, but to make only this explanation, that he was suspicious of Gontharis, fearing that he had called Artabanes to this banquet to do him harm, and therefore wished that they should stand beside the soldiers of Gontharis who had been stationed there on guard, and giving the appearance of indulging in some play, they were to take hold of the shields which these guards carried, and waving them about and otherwise moving them keep constantly turning them up and down ; and if any tumult or shouting took place within, they were to take up these very shields and come to the rescue on the run. Such were the orders which Artabanes gave, and Gregorius proceeded to put them into execution.

And Artasires devised the following plan: he cut some arrows into two parts and placed them on the wrist of his left arm, the sections reaching to his elbow. And after binding them very carefully with straps, he laid over them the sleeve of his tunic. And he did this in order that, if anyone should raise his sword over him and attempt to strike him, he might avoid the chance of suffering serious injury; for he had only to thrust his left arm in front of him, and the steel would break off as it crashed upon the wood, and thus his body could not be reached at any point.

With such purpose, then, Artasires did as I have said. And to Artabanes he spoke as follows: “As for me, I have hopes that I shall prove equal to the undertaking and shall not hesitate, and also that I shall touch the body of

Gontharis with this sword; but as for what will follow, I am unable to say whether God in His anger against the tyrant will co-operate with me in this daring deed, or whether, avenging some sin of mine, He will stand against me there and be an obstacle in my way. If, therefore, you see that the tyrant is not wounded in a vital spot, do you kill me with my sword without the least hesitation, so that I may not be tortured by him into saying that it was by your will that I rushed into the undertaking, and thus not only perish myself most shamefully, but also be compelled against my will to destroy you as well.” And after Artasires had spoken such words he too, together with Gregorius and one of the bodyguards, entered the room where the couches were and took his stand behind Artabanes. And the rest, remaining by the guards, did as they had been commanded.

So Artasires, when the banquet had only just begun, was purposing to set to work, and he was already touching the hilt of his sword. But Gregorius prevented him by saying in the Armenian tongue that Gontharis was still wholly himself, not having as yet drunk any great quantity of wine. Then Artasires groaned and said: “My good fellow, how fine a heart I have for the deed, and now you have for the moment wrongfully hindered me!” And as the drinking went on, Gontharis, who by now was thoroughly saturated with wine, began to give portions of the food to the body-guards, yielding to a generous mood. And they, upon receiving these portions, went outside the building immediately and were about to eat them, leaving beside Gontharis only three body-guards, one of whom happened to be Ulitheus. And Artasires also started to go out in order to taste the morsels with the rest. But just then a kind of fear came over him lest, when he should wish to draw his sword, something might prevent him. Accordingly, as soon as he got outside, he secretly threw away the sheath of the sword, and taking it naked under his arm, hidden by his cloak, he rushed in to Gontharis, as if to say something without the knowledge of the others... And Artasires, having come close to the tyrant, was pushed by one of the servants, and as he retreated a little to the rear, the servant observed that his sword was bared and cried out saying:

“What is this, my excellent fellow?” And Gontharis, putting his hand to his right ear, and turning his face, looked at him. And Artasires struck him with his sword as he did so, and cut off a piece of his scalp together with his fingers. ...And Artabanes, seeing Gontharis leaping to his feet (for he reclined close to him), drew a two-edged dagger which hung by his thigh — a rather large one — and thrusting it into the tyrant’s left side clean up to the hilt, left it there. And the tyrant none the less tried to leap up, but having received a mortal wound, he fell where he was. Ulitheus then brought his sword down upon Artasires as if to strike him over the head; but he held his left arm above his head, and thus profited by his own idea in the moment of greatest need. For since Ulitheus’ sword had its edge turned when it struck the sections of arrows on his arm, he himself was unscathed, and he killed Ulitheus with no difficulty. And Peter and Artabanes, the one seizing the sword of Gontharis and the other that of Ulitheus who had fallen, killed on the spot those of the body-guards who remained. Thus there arose, as was natural, an exceedingly great tumult and confusion. And when this was perceived by those of the Armenians who were standing by the tyrant’s guards, they immediately picked up the shields according to the plan which had been arranged with them, and went on the run to the banquet-room. And they slew all the Vandals and the friends of Gontharis, no one resisting... And Artabanes won great fame for himself from this deed among all men... and the emperor appointed him general of all Libya.

Proc. Bell. Vand. II.28.1, 5-43

Appendix B

The Armenian Rebellion, 538-539

(Excerpts from Procopius of Caesaria's *The Persian War*)

...This Amazaspes, as time went on, was denounced to the Emperor Justinian by one of his friends, Acacius by name, on the ground that he was abusing the Armenians and wished to give over to the Persians Theodosiopolis and certain other fortresses. After telling this, Acacius, by the emperor's will, slew Amazaspes treacherously, and himself secured the command over the Armenians by the gift of the emperor. And being base by nature, he gained the opportunity of displaying his inward character, and he proved to be the most cruel of all men toward his subjects. For he plundered their property without excuse and ordained that they should pay an unheard-of tax of four centenaria.

But the Armenians, unable to bear him any longer, conspired together and slew Acacius and fled for refuge to Pharangium. Therefore the emperor sent Sittas against them from Byzantium. For Sittas had been delaying there since the time when the treaty was made with the Persians. So he came to Armenia, but at first he entered upon the war reluctantly and exerted himself to calm the people and to restore the population to their former habitations, promising to persuade the emperor to remit to them the payment of the new tax. But since the emperor kept assailing him with frequent reproaches for

his hesitation, led on by the slanders of Adolius, the son of Acacius, Sittas at last made his preparations for the conflict. First of all he attempted by means of promises of many good things to win over some of the Armenians by persuasion and to attach them to his cause, in order that the task of overpowering the others might be attended with less difficulty and toil. And the tribe called the Aspetiani, great in power and in numbers, was willing to join him. And they went to Sittas and begged him to give them pledges in writing that, if they abandoned their kinsmen in the battle and came to the Roman army, they should remain entirely free from harm, retaining their own possessions. Now Sittas was delighted and wrote to them in tablets, giving them pledges just as they desired of him; he then sealed the writing and sent it to them. Then, confident that by their help he would be victorious in the war without fighting, he went with his whole army to a place called Oenochalakon, where the Armenians had their camp. But by some chance those who carried the tablets went by another road and did not succeed at all in meeting the Aspetiani. Moreover a portion of the Roman army happened upon some few of them, and not knowing the agreement which had been made, treated them as enemies. And Sittas himself caught some of their women and children in a cave and slew them, either because he did not understand what had happened or because he was angry with the Aspetiani for not joining him as had been agreed.

But they, being now possessed with anger, arrayed themselves for battle with all the rest. But since both armies were on exceedingly difficult ground where precipices abounded, they did not fight in one place, but scattered about among the ridges and ravines. So it happened that some few of the Armenians and Sittas with not many of his followers came close upon each other, with only a ravine lying between them. Both parties were horsemen. Then Sittas with a few men following him crossed the ravine and advanced against the enemy; the Armenians, after withdrawing to the rear, stopped, and Sittas pursued no further but remained where he was. Suddenly someone from the Roman army, an Erulian by birth, who had been pursuing the

enemy, returning impetuously from them came up to Sittas and his men. Now as it happened Sittas had planted his spear in the ground; and the Erulian's horse fell upon this with a great rush and shattered it. And the general was exceedingly annoyed by this, and one of the Armenians, seeing him, recognized him and declared to all the others that it was Sittas. For it happened that he had no helmet on his head. Thus it did not escape the enemy that he had come there with only a few men. Sittas, then, upon hearing the Armenian say this, since his spear, as has been said, lay broken in two on the ground, drew his sword and attempted immediately to recross the ravine. But the enemy advanced upon him with great eagerness, and a soldier overtaking him in the ravine struck him a glancing blow with his sword on the top of his head; and he took off the whole scalp, but the steel did not injure the bone at all. And Sittas continued to press forward still more than before, but Artabanes, son of John of the Arsacidae, fell upon him from behind and with a thrust of his spear killed him. Thus Sittas was removed from the world after no notable fashion, in a manner unworthy of his valour and his continual achievements against the enemy, a man who was extremely handsome in appearance and a capable warrior, and a general second to none of his contemporaries. But some say that Sittas did not die at the hand of Artabanes, but that Solomon, a very insignificant man among the Armenians, destroyed him.

After the death of Sittas the emperor commanded Bouzes to go against the Armenians; and he, upon drawing near, sent to them promising to effect a reconciliation between the emperor and all the Armenians, and asking that some of their notables should come to confer with him on these matters.

Now the Armenians as a whole were unable to trust Bouzes nor were they willing to receive his proposals. But there was a certain man of the Arsacidae who was especially friendly with him, John by name, the father of Artabanes, and this man, trusting in Bouzes as his friend came to him with his son-in-law, Bassaces, and a few others; but when these men had reached the spot where they were to meet Bouzes on the following day, and had

made their bivouac there, they perceived that they had come into a place surrounded by the Roman army. Bassaces, the son-in-law, therefore earnestly entreated John to fly. And since he was not able to persuade him, he left him there alone, and in company with all the others eluded the Romans, and went back again by the same road. And Bouzes found John alone and slew him; and since after this the Armenians had no hope of ever reaching an agreement with the Romans, and since they were unable to prevail over the emperor in war, they came before the Persian king led by Bassaces, an energetic man.

And the leading men among them came at that time into the presence of Chosroes and spoke as follows: "Many of us, O Master, are Arsacidae, descendants of that Arsaces who was not unrelated to the Parthian kings when the Persian realm lay under the hand of the Parthians, and who proved himself an illustrious king, inferior to none of his time. Now we have come to thee, and all of us have become slaves and fugitives, not, however, of our own will, but under most hard constraint, as it might seem by reason of the Roman power, but in truth, O King, by reason of thy decision, if, indeed, he who gives the strength to those who wish to do injustice should himself justly bear also the blame of their misdeeds. Now we shall begin our account from a little distance back in order that you may be able to follow the whole course of events. Arsaces, the last king of our ancestors, abdicated his throne willingly in favour of Theodosius, the Roman Emperor, on condition that all who should belong to his family through all time should live unhampered in every respect, and in particular should in no case be subject to taxation. And we have preserved the agreement, until you, the Persians, made this much-vaunted treaty, which, as we think, one would not err in calling a sort of common destruction. For from that time, disregarding friend and foe, he who is in name thy friend, O King, but in fact thy enemy, has turned everything in the world upside down and wrought complete confusion.

And this thou thyself shalt know at no distant time, as soon as he is able to subdue completely the people of the West. For what thing which was

before forbidden has he not done? Or what thing which was well established has he not disturbed? Did he not ordain for us the payment of a tax which did not exist before, and has he not enslaved our neighbours, the Tzani, who were autonomous, and has he not set over the king of the wretched Lazi a Roman magistrate? An act neither in keeping with the natural order of things nor very easy, to explain in words. Has he not sent generals to the men of Bosporus, the subjects of the Huns, and attached to himself the city which in no way belongs to him, and has he not made a defensive alliance with the Aethiopian kingdoms, of which the Romans had never even heard? More than this he has made the Homeritae his possession and the Red Sea, and he is adding the Palm Groves to the Roman dominion. We omit to speak of the fate of the Libyans and of the Italians. The whole earth is not large enough for the man; it is too small a thing for him to conquer all the world together. But he is even looking about the heavens and is searching the retreats beyond the ocean, wishing to gain for himself some other world. Why, therefore, O King, dost thou still delay? Why dost thou respect that most accursed peace, in order forsooth that he may make thee the last morsel of all? If it is thy wish to learn what kind of a man Justinian would shew himself toward those who yield to him, the example is to be sought near at hand from ourselves and from the wretched Lazi; and if thou wishest to see how he is accustomed to treat those who are unknown to him and who have done him not the least wrong, consider the Vandals and the Goths and the Moors.

But the chief thing has not yet been spoken. Has he not made efforts in time of peace to win over by deception thy slave, Alamoundaras, O most mighty King, and to detach him from thy kingdom, and has he not striven recently to attach to himself the Huns who are utterly unknown to him, in order to make trouble for thee? And yet an act more strange than this has not been performed in all time. For since he perceived, as I¹⁷⁶ think, that the overthrow of the western world would speedily be accomplished, he has already taken in hand to assail you of the East, since the Persian power

alone has been left for him to grapple with. The peace, therefore, as far as concerns him, has already been broken for thee, and he himself has set an end to the endless peace. For they break the peace, not who may be first in arms, but they who may be caught plotting against their neighbours in time of peace. For the crime has been committed by him who attempts it, even though success be lacking. Now as for the course which the war will follow, this is surely clear to everyone. For it is not those who furnish causes for war, but those who defend themselves against those who furnish them, who are accustomed always to conquer their enemies. Nay more, the contest will not be evenly matched for us even in point of strength. For, as it happens, the majority of the Roman soldiers are at the end of the world, and as for the two generals who were the best they had, we come here having slain the one, Sittas, and Belisarius will never again be seen by Justinian. For disregarding his master, he has remained in the West, holding the power of Italy himself. So that when thou goest against the enemy, no one at all will confront thee, and thou wilt have us leading the army with good will, as is natural, and with a thorough knowledge of the country.”

When Chosroes heard this he was pleased, and calling together all who were of noble blood among the Persians, he disclosed to all of them what Vittigis had written and what the Armenians had said, and laid before them the question as to what should be done. Then many opinions were expressed inclining to either side, but finally it was decided that they must open hostilities against the Romans at the beginning of spring. For it was the late autumn season, in the thirteenth year of the 539 A.D. reign of the Emperor Justinian.

Proc. Bell. Pers., II.3.4-56

¹⁷⁶ The speaker was, most likely, *sparapet* Vasak Mamikonyan (Bassaces).



A military scene from a fourteenth-century Armenian manuscript
(see Traina in Bibliography).

PART II.

On Imperial Prejudice and Expedient Omission of Armenians in Maurice's *Strategikon*

The historical factors that forge imperial prejudice against recalcitrant nations should be of current interest not only to historians, but to specialists in international relations concerned with the global rise of ethno-political conflicts. This question addresses a number of enduring predicaments of public administration, including the extent to which political decision-making can be affected by prejudice, the effectiveness of state propaganda and concealment of real objectives pursued, and the ratio of hard and soft means of quelling the resistance of the defiant ethnic groups. In this regard, a wealth of material is provided by the history of one and a half millennia of relationships of the Roman and Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empires with the Armenian people both during the existence of independent kingdoms in Armenia proper (from the 1st c. BC to 428 AD and later in 885-1046) and the Armenian state in Cilicia (1080-1375), as well as in the intervals between them.

The problem of the various images of the Armenians in Byzantium has already become the subject of numerous, if sketchy, historical investigations and remarks.¹⁷⁷ As a rule, students of this subject

177 For an excellent, though unfortunately short, essay, see Vryonis, Speros Jr., "Byzantine Images of the Armenians," in R. Hovannisian, *The Armenian Image in History and Literature* (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1981), pp. 65-81; cf. Каждан, А. П. *Армяне в составе господствующего класса византийской империи в XI-XII вв.* [Kazhdan, A. P. *Armenians in the Ruling Class of the Byzantine Empire in the XI-XII Centuries*], Yerevan, 1975, pp. 140-141; Garsoian, Nina G. "The Problem of Armenian Integration into the Byzantine Empire," in H      Ahrweiler, Angeliki E. Laiou, eds., *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998), pp. 66-67; Ayzazyan, *The Code of Honor of the Armenian Military, 4-5th centuries*, pp. 25-26, 40-41 (notes 52, 54).

have focused on the images of those Armenians who resided beyond Armenia proper in the Byzantine capital and peripheral provinces as either newly-arrived immigrants or old-established inhabitants. Consequently, the shaping of Armenian images in the Byzantine Empire was appropriately sought and analyzed in such spheres as ecclesiastical differences between the Armenian and Greek Churches, the ethnic peculiarities of everyday life as well as the rivalry in the imperial court between the Armenians and Greeks, the two major ethnic groupings of the Byzantine elite.¹⁷⁸

In contrast, this essay aims to analyze the Byzantine images of the Armenians of Armenia; that is, those who continued to live in their homeland, and who exercised military, political, economical and religious authority there.¹⁷⁹ Accordingly, the following analysis, using primarily the historical evidence pertaining to the period of Emperor Maurice's rule (582-602), focuses on the previously uncharted

178 As underlined by Jenkins, "By the tenth century of our era the Byzantine governing class had discarded its original west Roman element and its early Germanic affinities. The Slav element, though numerically strong, had scarcely intruded itself into the higher ranks of society; and where it had done so, was regarded with dislike and contempt by the two strong strains from which those ranks were mainly recruited, the Greek and the Armenian. The former of these was prominent in the bureaucracy and in the more conservative wing of the church. But the military might, the military organization and the military genius of Byzantium, the sure, strong base on which the whole glittering superstructure stood, was Armenian through and through" (Jenkins, R. J. H. *The Byzantine Empire on the Eve of the Crusades* (London: The Historical Association, 1953, p. 11). However, a fundamental reservation should be made here: the majority of the ethnically Armenian elite in the Byzantine Empire was almost entirely Hellenized in religious and cultural terms and certainly put imperial interests above the interests of Armenia. In general, this group retained connection with its ancestral nation nominally, primarily for receiving a career support from powerful compatriots in the ruling circles of the Empire; additionally, some wanted to be confirmed in noble status, the Armenian princely or even royal (Arshakuni) origins, whether real or alleged.

179 Vryonis was the first one to point out that, while analyzing the Byzantine images of the Armenians, "one must differentiate between Armenians who lived in Armenia and those who lived in Byzantium, and between Armenians who were Chalcedonian and those who were Gregorian" (Vryonis, "Byzantine Images of the Armenians," p. 65).

geopolitical – in fact, underlying – determinant in the construction of anti-Armenian images in the imperial strata of Byzantine society. Additionally, the continuity of these images with the analogous Roman tradition of prejudice toward the Armenian people will be traced.

The Strategikon's enemy list

The *Strategikon*, an influential manual of Byzantine military strategy attributed to Emperor Maurice (582-602), includes a separate chapter on (in the words of the author) “the tactics and characteristics of each race which may cause trouble to our state.”¹⁸⁰ This section deals specifically with “the Persians,” “the Scythians, that is, Avars, Turks¹⁸¹ and others,” “the light-haired peoples, such as the Franks, Lombards, and others like them,” as well as “the Slavs, the Antes, and the like.”

Maurice's basic approach to these enemies and potential enemies is militarily pragmatic, and is often even highly complimentary about their particular martial traits. In spite of this pragmatism, however,

all of these ethnically different peoples receive, to a greater or lesser degree, their dose of imperial prejudice. Thus, the Persians, the old arch-enemy, are described as “wicked, dissembling, and servile”;¹⁸² the Avars as “scoundrels, devious..., treacherous, foul, faithless, possessed by an insatiate desire for riches..., very fickle, avaricious...”;¹⁸³ the Franks and Lombards as “disobedient to their leaders,” “easily corrupted by money, greedy as they are”;¹⁸⁴ the Slavs as “always at odds with each other,” having “ill feeling toward one another,” “no regard for treaties,” and hence “completely faithless.”¹⁸⁵ This last reproach sounds especially hollow and cynical, because just a couple of pages earlier Maurice is advising his commanders to only “*pretend* to come to agreements” with the enemy.¹⁸⁶ In fact, these biases represented an essential element of state propaganda and indoctrination of imperial troops; that is, they had partly been brought about by the same military pragmatism.

In this depiction of hostile and troublesome peoples, the *Strategikon* conspicuously omits the Armenians, who had on many occasions fought the Byzantine troops either on their own or, more often, as allies or vassals of Persia.¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, in the course of the sixth century there were several uprisings in Armenian lands under the Empire's control. The rebellion of 538-539 is perhaps the most outstanding. First, the Armenians killed Acacius, who was appointed by the Emperor Justinian as head of their provinces.

180 *Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy* (The Middle Ages Series). Translated by George T. Dennis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), pp. 113-126.

181 Under the Turks, the *Strategikon* describes the Turkic nomads that then roamed north and north-east of the Black Sea, including possibly the Magyars (*Maurice's Strategikon*, *op. cit.*, p. 116, note 3, referring to Wiita, John. *The Ethnika in Byzantine Military Treatises*. Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1977, p. 122; cf. Mark Bartusis, “A review of the *Taktika* of Leo VI,” *Medieval Warfare Blog* (www.medieval-warfare.com), Jun 08, 2011. Two centuries later, in the *Taktika* by Emperor Leo VI (886-912), “the Turks” refers mainly to the Magyars and possibly other tribes dwelling north of the Euxine, while “the Scythians” is used as a general term for all nomads including the Turkic tribes and Bulgars, and the latter two are mentioned separately as well (see George T. Dennis (ed.), *The Taktika of Leo VI*. Dumbarton Oaks Texts 12. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2010, XVIII.43,73; cf. Маврикий. *Тактика и стратегия*. Пер. с лат. М. А. Цыбашева [Maurice, *Tactics and Strategy*. Transl. from Latin into Russian by М. А. Тзыбашев], St. Petersburg, 1903, note 218; Sheldon, R.M. *Espionage in the Ancient World: An Annotated Bibliography* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2003), p. 155).

182 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

183 *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 118.

184 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

185 *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

186 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

187 It should be remembered, once again, that in 387 Armenia was divided between the Roman Empire and Sassanid Persia. Armenia's broader eastern part fell under the control of the Persians, where the Kingdom of Great Armenia lasted until 428. While in the western part of Armenia that fell under Romano-Byzantine Empire, the Armenian kingdom was abolished almost immediately, in 390.

Then they assembled an army and took control of most of Byzantine Armenia. The Byzantine army sent by Justinian against them suffered a humiliating defeat in a decisive battle fought in rugged terrain where their commander-in-chief, Sittas, one of Justinian's most prominent generals, on par with Belisarius, was killed as well (see Part I of this book).

During Maurice's own reign, three Armenian insurrections took place circa 589, 591 and 601.¹⁸⁸ Although they did not result in major hostilities and prolonged bloodshed, they revealed, yet again, the high probability of armed conflict with the Armenian resistance, as well as the high combat readiness of the Armenian armed forces. As aptly noted by Syvanne, after the murder of Maurice in 602 "the poor relationship between the Romans and Armenians backfired when the Persians could use as their puppet the (supposed) son of Maurice;" in particular, one of the Armenian generals switched sides and went over to the invading Persians.¹⁸⁹

Romano-Byzantine tradition of prejudice

The absence of the Armenians from Maurice's list of hostile forces is all the more remarkable because contemporary Armenian primary sources have recorded verbatim his extremely negative attitude toward the Armenians. According to the seventh-century *History of Bishop Sebeos*, Maurice, in a special message to the Persian king, Khosrov (Chosroes) II Parviz (590-628), who was, at the time, his ally, proposed a conspiracy to destroy Armenia's armed forces by removing its military class, specifically, the Armenian nobility and their troops,

188 See Danielyan, *Political History of Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Church (VI-VII cc.)*, pp. 49-56; cf. *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, trans. R. W. Thomson, pp. XX-XXI; Gabriel Soultanian, *The History of Bishop Sebeos*, p. 45.

189 Syvanne, *The Age of Hippotaxotai*, p. 414, note 5.

from Armenia and resettling them in remote areas of Byzantium and Persia. As stated by Sebeos, here is the essence of what Maurice himself was conveying in his message:

'A self-willed and recalcitrant nation lives between us and causes trouble.¹⁹⁰ Now come: I shall mobilize mine [the Armenian princes and their troops] and send them to Thrace, while you would mobilize yours and send them to the East. If they perish, our enemies would perish; if they kill, they would kill our enemies, and we shall live in peace. For, if they remain in their country, we shall have no rest.'

Then both [kings] have made an agreement [on the proposed policies].¹⁹¹

Sebeos identifies this proposal as "the perfidious plot by Maurice

190 Incidentally, the thesis about the recalcitrance of the Armenians was later reiterated by the Arabs, who mentioned the Armenian prisoners as «the worst among the white slaves.» See Мей, А. *Мусульманский Ренессанс [The Muslim Renaissance]*, Moscow: Nauka, 1966, pp. 138, 140-141.

191 «Ազգ մի խոտոր եւ անհնազանդ են, ասէ, կան ի միջի մերում եւ պղտորեն: Բայց ե կ, ասէ, ես զիմս ժողովեմ եւ ի Թրակէ գումարեմ. եւ դու զքոյդ ժողովէ եւ հրամայէ յԱրեւելս տանել: Զի եթէ մեռանին՝ թշնամիք մեռանին. եւ եթէ սպանանեն՝ զթշնամիս սպանանեն. եւ մեր կեցցուք խաղաղութեամբ: Զի եթէ դոքա յերկրի իւրեանց լինիցին՝ մեզ հանգչել ոչ լինի»: Միաբանեցան երկոքին »: - Մեբեոսի եպիսկոպոսի Պատմություն [The History of Bishop Sebeos] (Yerevan, 1979), p. 86; cf. S. Malkhasyantz' publication of the same *History* (Yerevan, 1939), p. 49. Translation into English is mine. There are a few differences from previous translations, including the word ժողովել as mobilize (or muster) rather than just gather, which highlights Maurice's intention of gathering the Armenian troops rather than civilians. It should be also noted that in Classical Armenian the verb «ժողովել», if used in the military context, very precisely connotes mobilizing troops. For other translations of this passage into English, see Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 161; Charanis, Peter. *The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire* (Lisboa: Livraria Bertrand, 1963), pp. 14-15; *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, trans. R. W. Thomson, p. 31.

to empty Armenia of Armenian princes.”¹⁹² He also accentuates the bigoted character of Maurice's accusations, calling his message to the Persian king “the letter of vilifications about all the princes of Armenia and their troops.”¹⁹³

Byzantine and Persian policies regarding Armenian nobility were carried out exactly in the terms of Maurice's message to Khosrov II and correctly identified by both their contemporaries and modern historians as aimed at weakening Armenia and undermining its military establishment.¹⁹⁴ The factual, if not textual, authenticity

192 «նենգաւոր խորհուրդ Մարկայ թափուր յիշխանաց Հայոց կացուցանել զՀայս» (*The History of Bishop Sebeos*, p. 86). A different version of the same narrative about the combined anti-Armenian policies by Maurice and Khosrov II was preserved in *The History of Taron*, the text written and compiled between the fourth and ninth centuries and attributed to Hovhan Mamikonean (see Հովհան Մամիկոնեան. Տարոնի պատմություն: Թարգմ., ներած. և ծանոթ. Վարդան Վարդանյանի [Hovhan Mamikonean. *The History of Taron*. Rendered into modern Armenian, with an introduction and commentaries by Vardan Vardanyan]. Yerevan, 1989, p. 65; cf. Pseudo-Yovhannes Mamikonean, *The History of Taron*. Transl., with the Introduction and commentaries by Levon Avdoyan. Atlanta, Ge.: Scholars Press, 1993, p. 112).

193 «գիր ամբաստանութեան վասն իշխանացն ամենայն Հայաստանեայց եւ զարաց իւրեանց» (*The History of Bishop Sebeos*, p. 86). R. Thomson translated this passage as “a letter of accusation... concerning all the Armenian princes and their troops” (*The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, p. 31; earlier “a letter of accusation” was suggested by N. Garsoian, see Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 166). There are two problems with this translation. First, the Armenian phrase գիր ամբաստանութեան (ամբաստանագիր) also has the well-known meaning of “libel,” which corresponds much more adequately to this case. Second, Maurice's letter was specifically about the Armenian princes who were residing in Armenia proper and the Armenian original clearly uses the expression “of Armenia” (*Հայաստանեայց*). The translation offered in this study does also correspond to the historical context, because there were many Armenian commanders of princely origin and status in Byzantine military service, whom Maurice clearly did not have in mind when writing his letter in question.

194 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 159-161. Grousset, René. *Histoire de l'Arménie* (Paris: Payot, 1947), p. 258. E. Danielyan characterizes these policies as “the Maurice doctrine” (Danielyan, *Political History of Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Church*, pp. 49-56). Recently, Howard-Johnston has advanced a revisionist interpretation of how “the recruiting process... worked to the Armenians' advantage,” concurrently rejecting Sebeos's credible assessment of Byzantine and Persian

of Maurice's letter, including its strategic prescriptions, can thus be considered as historically reliable. The content of this letter, or the letter itself, could have been passed to the Armenian leaders (and through them to Sebeos) by none other than King Khosrov II, who, after the murder of Maurice, immediately initiated a new war against the Byzantine Empire. Khosrov needed the support of the Armenians and this letter would have served as incriminating evidence against the anti-Armenian intentions of Byzantium.

Further, Maurice's letter falls within an earlier Roman pattern of representing the Armenians as a traditionally defiant element against both the Roman and Parthian/Persian superpowers. Precisely the same leitmotif of the Armenian image resonates in the following comment by Publius (Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus (AD 56–ca AD 120):

*Armenia... from the earliest period, has owned a national character and a geographical situation of equal ambiguity, since with a wide extent of frontier conterminous with our own provinces, it stretches inland right up to Media; so that the Armenians lie interposed between two vast empires, with which, as they detest Rome and vie with the Parthian, they are too frequently at variance.*¹⁹⁵

destructive intentions vis-à-vis Armenia (see *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, pp. XX-XXI). Howard-Johnston's assumptions, however, are not convincing and contradict available historical evidence. The Byzantine policies of keeping their section of Armenia “under strictest guard and exhausted by unwonted taxes”, removing the Armenians out of their country and scattering them “to every corner of the Roman empire” had been recognized by non-Armenian sources even before Maurice's more forceful policies to the same effect (see Proc. *Bell. Goth.*, III.32.6-7; cf. current book, notes 25-26 above).

195 “[Armenia] Ambigua gens ea antiquitus hominum ingeniis et situ terrarum, quoniam nostris provinciis late praetenta penitus ad Medos porrigitur; maximisque imperiis interiecti et saepius discordes sunt, adversus Romanos odio et in Parthum invidia.” Jackson translated the collocation of “in Parthum invidia” as “envy the Parthian” (Tacitus, *The Histories* (with an English translation by Clifford Moore); *Annales* (with an English translation by John Jackson). Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann LTD, 1969 (first printed in 1931), II. 56, pp. 472, 474). However, it should be translated as “jealous of Parthia” or “vie with the Parthian.” Such a translation is more accurate in terms of historical context (1st c. BC.

Tacitus rages against the Armenians on other occasions as well, claiming them to be notoriously “treacherous,” “ignorant of liberty,” and that their “allegiance was a matter of doubt.”¹⁹⁶ In connection with some of these expressions, Rose Mary Sheldon, an American researcher of secret operations of ancient Rome, rightly observes that the Romans “in their public propaganda prided themselves on being open, aboveboard and honest... The official stated Roman attitude on covert action was that they did not employ such methods, and they remained masters at presenting themselves as straightforward and opposed to anything underhanded. It was always the foreigners, such as the Armenians and Carthaginians, who were portrayed as untrustworthy.”¹⁹⁷ The Romans, notes Sheldon, “loved accusing

- 1st c. AD) as well as the existing semantic option. Both the English translation of *Annals* by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb and French translation by Bunouf more adequately offer the word *jealousy/jalousie* for *invidia*: “...Armenia. This had been of old an unsettled country from the character of its people and from its geographical position, bordering, as it does, to a great extent on our provinces and stretching far away to Media. It lies between two most mighty empires, and is very often at strife with them, *hating Rome and jealous of Parthia*” (Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*. Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com Publishing, 2005, p. 51); “...en Arménie. De tout temps la foi de ce royaume fut douteuse, à cause du caractère des habitants et de la situation du pays, qui borde une grande étendue de nos provinces, et de l’autre côté s’enfonce jusqu’aux Mèdes. Placés entre deux grands empires, les Arméniens sont presque toujours en querelle, *avec les Romains par haine, par jalousie avec les Parthes*” (Tacite, *Œuvres Complètes*. Traduction, introduction et notes de J. L. Bunouf. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1878, p. 79). Another acceptable translation of this interesting passage is provided by Woodman: “They [Armenians] have been an ambiguous race from ancient times, both in the instincts of the people and in their country’s situation, since, extending a broad frontier along our provinces, they stretch deep into the Medes: they are interposed between, and more often disaffected toward, these greatest of empires, with hatred for the Romans and resentment of the Parthian” (Tacitus, *The Annals*, transl., with introduction and notes, by A. J. Woodman. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004, pp. 68-69). For an analysis of the various translations (including into Russian and modern Armenian) of this passage, see Ayvazyan, *The Cornerstones of Armenian Identity*, pp. 107-110.

¹⁹⁶ Tacitus, *Annales*, XII.46.4; XIII. 34.5, 35.1.

¹⁹⁷ Sheldon, Rose Mary. “The Ancient Imperative: Clandestine Operations and Covert

easterners of sneakiness,”¹⁹⁸ while “in reality, they were experts at public manipulation, spying and dirty tricks.”¹⁹⁹

The same antagonistic attitude toward both the Iranian and Roman Empires by the independence-oriented Armenians are implicitly validated by the renowned *sparapet* of the Armenian army Vasak Mamikonean, who in 368 AD, after being invited with the Armenian King Arshak II to a friendly meeting and then treacherously captured by the Persian King Shapuh II (309-379), spoke to the latter as follows (quoted from the fifth-century *History of Armenia* by Pavstos Buzand):

...[While free] I was a giant, one of my feet rested on one mountain, the other on another mountain. When I was leaning on my right foot, I pushed the right mountain into the earth, and when I was leaning on my left foot, I pushed the left mountain into the earth.... One of those two mountains was you, and the other – the King of the Greeks [i.e. the Roman Emperor]...²⁰⁰

Notably, both Tacitus’ and Emperor Maurice’s judgments were uttered during periods of collaborative policies by the Parthian/Persian and Roman/Byzantine Empires aimed at occupation, partition, and

Action,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* Vol. 10, No 3 (Fall 1997), pp. 299, 309.

¹⁹⁸ Sheldon, Rose Mary. *Rome’s Wars in Parthia: Blood in the Sand* (Portland, Or.: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010), p. 67.

¹⁹⁹ Sheldon, “The Ancient Imperative,” p. 309.

²⁰⁰ [Էս սկայ էի. մի ոտնս ի միոյ լերին կայր, եւ միւս ոտնս իմ ի միոյ լերին կայր: Յորժամ յաջ ոտնս յենուի, զաջ լեւոն ընդ գետին տանէի, որժամ ի ձախ ոտնն յենուի, զձախ լեւոն ընդ գետին տանէի... Լերինքն երկուք, մի դու էիր, եւ մի՝ թագաւորն Յունաց:] Pavstos Buzand, *Hayotz Patmutiun* [History of Armenia], Tiflis, 1912, Book IV, Chapter 54. An identically defiant attitude against both the Byzantine and Persian monarchs is attributed to *sparapet* Mushegh Mamikonean in Hovhan Mamikonean’s *The History of Taron*, p. 65; cf. Pseudo-Yovhannes Mamikonean, *The History of Taron*, p. 112.

ultimate subjugation of Armenia.²⁰¹ In this context, the anti-Iranian and anti-Roman attitudes of the Armenians are fully understandable. What they in fact superbly exemplify – vis-à-vis a full-fledged ethnonational consolidation of the Armenians in the historical periods under examination – is the important cross-cultural correlation of the frustration-aggression-displacement theory, known as “the more ingroup coordination and discipline, the more outgroup hostility.”²⁰²

On the basis of Greek historical evidence, drawn from religious-confessional and everyday spheres of interaction between the Armenians and Greeks in Constantinople, Speros Vryonis, too, concluded that there was a tradition of anti-Armenian prejudice among the Greeks from at least the fourth century AD through the fourteenth century AD.²⁰³ Analyzing primary sources, he writes that the relevant “texts indicate the existence – one does not know how widespread – of a particular, violently hostile perception of the Armenians, a perception that in the first instance does not seem to be grounded on religious differences, a perception particularly repugnant as it seems to exhale what today we call racism.”²⁰⁴ Vryonis adds that in the Byzantine society “Byzantines of Armenian origin are ethnically identified as to origin more frequently than are Byzantines of any other origin.”²⁰⁵

Another distinguished Byzantinist, Alexander Kazhdan, also refers to the same social-psychological phenomenon in Byzantium.

201 Writing as early as the 460s, Yeghishe also denounces the anti-Armenian “collusion of the two kings,” Sassanid king Yazdegerd II (438-457) and the Eastern Roman Emperor Marcian (350-357), because the latter refused to aid the great Armenian rebellion of 450-451 in any of the possible ways: “either by troops or [supply of] arms or other assistance” (Yeghishe, *op.cit.*, p. 73)

202 See Robert A. LeVine and Donald T. Campbell, *Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes, and Group Behavior* (U.S.A.-Canada: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1972), pp. 124-125.

203 Vryonis, “Byzantine Images of the Armenians,” pp. 68-69.

204 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

205 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Speaking about the organization of the Armenian communities in the empire during the ninth to twelfth centuries, he points out that the Armenians “were close-knit and detached; formed special units in the army; lived, in all likelihood, in their own neighborhoods in the cities; and acted together during street riots. Ethnic distinctiveness of Byzantine Armenians was supported by their religious distinctiveness... For this distinctiveness in religious and everyday life the Byzantine population responded to Armenians with enmity.”²⁰⁶

A rare example of biased attitude toward Armenian soldiers, specifically the sentries, was recorded in a tenth century treatise *De Velitatione Bellica Nicephori Augusti*. After recommending monthly rotations and allowances, as well as a regular salary, its author argues that “Armenians carry out sentry duty rather poorly and carelessly... these men are not very likely to perform the sentry duty very well, for, after all, they are still Armenians.”²⁰⁷ Interpreting this case, Edward Luttwak notes that the Armenians, conversely, were “more commonly praised for their valor in Byzantine military texts.”²⁰⁸

The complexity of the early medieval Armenian national character must have seriously contributed to the Byzantine prejudice against them. This intricate aspect has, however, received only scant attention by modern historians. Walter E. Kaegi's observations deserve special mention. He perceives, in particular, the Armenians' “impulse to local autonomy,” their “will to remain distinctively Armenian,” and detects that “in no other region of the Byzantine Empire... did the local inhabitants have a tradition of being so well armed and prone to rely on themselves and their own family groupings and notables,” and that both the Arabs and the Byzantines had to take into consideration

206 Каждан, А. П. *Армяне в составе господствующего класса византийской империи в XI-XII вв.*, с. 140-141.

207 See Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, pp. 341-342.

208 *Ibid.*

the “intractability and formidable character of the Armenians.”²⁰⁹

All these observations point to the need of further in-depth studies in the socio-cultural and psychological aspects of Byzantine-Armenian relationships.

Reasons for omitting the Armenians

The historical evidence cited above positively suggests that the Armenians were fully qualified to be included in the *Strategikon*'s list of troublesome nations and their omission was certainly not a coincidence but, most probably, a matter of expedience. The question of why they are absent from this list has never been posed before.²¹⁰ Raising it can lead us to several important conclusions and suppositions. Below is a list of possible answers.

Firstly, Maurice's own Armenian origin, which has been a subject of contention,²¹¹ if true, could have prevented him from openly

portraying Armenians as a hostile people and, thus, indirectly attacking his ethnic background and, by extension, his own reputation.

Secondly, the same motive should have been strengthened by the fact that Armenians already constituted part of the Byzantine military and political elite: many Byzantine dignitaries and field commanders were of Armenian origin. As noted by Peter Charanis, “Procopius mentions by name no less than seventeen Armenian commanders, including, of course, the great Narses.”²¹² Although, as the same author points out, the Armenian element in the Byzantine military was prominent in the armies of Justinian and Tiberius, “the situation changed in the course of the reign of Maurice, chiefly as a result of the Avaro-Slavic incursions into the Balkan peninsula. These incursions virtually eliminated Illyricum as a source of recruits and reduced the possibilities of Thrace. They cut communications with the West and made recruitments there most difficult. The empire, as a consequence, had to turn elsewhere for its troops. It turned to the regions of Caucasus and Armenia. In the armies of Maurice, we still find some Huns and also some Lombards. We find Bulgars too. *But the Armenian is the element which dominates*” (emphasis added).²¹³

209 See Kaegi, Walter E. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 189, 198, 202, cf. a separate chapter on “Byzantium, Armenia, Armenians, and early Islamic conquests,” *ibid.*, pp. 181-204.

210 Regarding historiography on Armenia specifically, to the best of my knowledge, it has completely ignored the *Strategikon*, in part, because of lacking military historians, and also, obviously, because Armenia and the Armenians are absent from its text.

211 On the possible Armenian origin of Maurice and critique of this opinion, see Adontz, N. “Les légendes de Maurice et de Constantin V, empereurs de Byzance,” *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales*, 2. Brussels, 1934, pp. 1-12; Goubert, Paul. *Byzance avant l'Islam*, T. 1 (Paris: Picard, 1951), pp. 34-41; *Idem*, “Maurice et l'Arménie. Note sur le lien d'origine et la famille de l'empereur Maurice,” *Echos d'Orient*, 39 (1941-2), pp. 383-413; Меликсет-бек, Л. М. “Из истории армяно-византийских отношений («Маврикиевы легенды» в памятниках культуры древней Армении),” *Византийский временник* [Melikset-bek, L.M. “From the History of the Armenian-Byzantine Relations: “Legends about Maurice” in Cultural Monuments of Ancient Armenia,” *Vizantiyskiy vremennik*], 1961. Vol. 20, pp. 64-74. Melikset-bek's article elaborates on the medieval legends, preserved in the 11th-13th centuries *Histoires* of Stepanos Asoghik (Taronetzi), Anonymous Narrator (Pseudo Shapuh Bagratuni), and Kirakos of Gandzak, as well as later Armenian historians,

according to whom Maurice was a native of Armenia, allegedly from the village of Oshakan or the province of Taron or the city of Ani. The so-called “Maurice's column,” a unique basaltic monument of the seventh century, still partially survives in Oshakan, where, a local tradition holds it as a gravestone of Emperor Maurice's mother. Cf. also Charanis, *The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire*, p. 14; *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 522-523; Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, p. 64.

212 Charanis, *The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire*, p. 16.

213 *Ibid.*, p. 17. cf. Oman's earlier observation about a main Byzantine recruiting base: “It was, however, the result of Manzikert which was fatal to it; as the occupation of the themes of the interior of Asia Minor by the Seljuks cut off from the empire its greatest recruiting-ground, the land of the gallant Isaurians and Armenians, who had for five hundred years formed the core of the Eastern army” (Oman, C.W.C. *The Art of War in the Middle Ages*. Revised and edited by John Beeler, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1953, p. 55).

For the success of his deliberate policies of resettling the Armenians into restless frontier regions of the Empire, mostly the Balkans and especially Thrace, Maurice was purposefully wooing the Armenian military.²¹⁴ Therefore, it would have been totally inappropriate to present them as a threat in a major tactical field manual for officers, many of whom were Armenian.

In such a historical context one should reassess why Maurice's predecessor, the Emperor Justinian, was lenient in his treatment of former Armenian rebel leaders to the point of dangerously exposing his own security. Even after the discovery of the assassination plot against himself, Justinian did not severely punish Artabanes, one of the conspirators.²¹⁵ Toumanoff explains this overindulgence with an Arshakuni Armenian general, who previously fought against his armies and personally killed governor Acacius as well as the general Sittas, with "something like a *parvenu's* awe before the royal birth."²¹⁶ However, Justinian's "incredible clemency" (as defined by Toumanoff) primarily stemmed from the same desire to make utmost use of the Armenian military, on whose loyalty and skills he heavily relied. Eventually, this policy paid off, as in the cases of Artabanes, Narses and a great number of other talented generals of Armenian descent.²¹⁷

214 As asserted by David Nicolle, "of far greater military importance to Byzantium were the Armenians, who had a high military reputation from the 3rd to 8th centuries," while "in the late 6th century Emperor Maurice cultivated these [Armenian] *nakhharars*" (Nicolle, *Romano-Byzantine armies 4th-9th centuries*, pp. 33-34). During the same period, the Sassanians, too, "viewed the Armenians as their Aryan cousins and comrades-in-arms, respecting them as among the best warriors" (see Farrokh, Kaveh. *Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia at War* (Oxford: Osprey, 2009), 216; cf. pp. 200, 215 (caption).

215 Proc. *Bell. Goth.*, III.31-32.

216 Toumanoff, "Introduction to Christian Caucasian History: II: States and Dynasties of the Formative Period," p. 47 (n. 219).

217 This attitude to formerly seditious but gifted military commanders has had its analogues in world history. To recall only one case, in 1700, King William III ordered John Churchill, 1st duke of Marlborough – just a few years after being accused of treason and coup attempts – to represent the king in The Hague as Ambassador-



Photo: © A. Ayzayan

"Maurice's Column" in Oshakan, Armenia (7th century). See pp. 120-121, n. 211.

Thirdly, in 591, Maurice imposed upon the Byzantine part of Armenian clergy the Empire's dominant Chalcedonite Christian doctrine. Again, the purpose was not a brutal suppression of Armenians, but their smooth Hellenization. Their portrayal as a hostile people would have harmed his ecclesiastical initiative, too.

Finally, the omission of the Armenians from the *Strategikon's* list of hostile peoples would serve as further evidence in support of dating the composition of this military manual during Maurice's reign (582-602).²¹⁸ If considered from the perspective of this particular omission

Extraordinary and as commander of English forces on the continent.

218 In the context of the findings of the present study, the hypothesis by John Wiita that the *Strategikon* was authored by Philippicus, general and brother-in-law of Maurice, between 603-615 (see *Maurice's Strategikon*, p. XVII), looks even less credible. For the debate on the issue of dating and authorship of *Strategikon*, which came,

only, a more plausible time frame would have been after Persian King Khosrov II ceded parts of eastern Armenia to Maurice in 591, effectively making the Byzantine Empire the ruler of the larger part of Armenia and simultaneously turning the majority of Armenians into the subjects of the Empire. After this, their open representation as a hostile people would have become nearly senseless.

Thus, Byzantine imperial prejudice against the Armenians, having been deliberately concealed and censored on the grounds of political and military expediency, did stay fully in place and provided ideological underpinning for the Empire's colonialist policies toward Armenia. However, as has been demonstrated above, all this did not prevent the Armenians from correctly comprehending Maurice's conspiracy aimed at undermining Armenia's own military potential. Accordingly, many Armenians defined Maurice as a hostile monarch and his Empire as fundamentally inimical.

Conclusion

The main reason for the one and a half millennia-long Roman and Byzantine prejudices against Armenia as a political entity and Armenians as a nation was, evidently, the latter's desire for independence or autonomy and the concomitant rejection of imperial political as well as religious control. Almost through their entire coexistence with the Empire, the Armenians possessed a significant potential for political and military resistance both in their homeland and, from the 11th to 14th centuries, in Cilicia. The factors influencing this ability included (1) *demography*, where the vast majority of the population of Armenia was Armenian, (2) *a powerful military capacity*, which was undermined by the Mongol and Turkic invaders only by the 15th century, (3) *national religious organization* that was pagan up to 301 AD, and since then was represented by the Armenian Church with its fully developed doctrine, national language, distinctive rites and ritual practices, and even own attire, (4) *original and diversified culture*, especially the blossoming of Armenian literature from as early as the fifth century.

Neither the co-opting of a part of the Armenian nobility into the senior decision-making circles of Byzantium, nor the outwardly welcoming imperial propaganda were able to neutralize the effects of real policies of the Empire, firmly aimed at Hellenization of Armenia. Ultimately, this led to the mirror image of the imperial bias – a consistently broad negative perception of Byzantium among the Armenian people.

Although the historical theme of “Armenia against Rome and

in principle, to the convincing conclusion about its compilation by the Emperor Maurice, see Кучма, В. В. *Военная организация византийской империи* [Kuchma, V.V. *Military Organization of the Byzantine Empire*], St. Petersburg: “Aleteya,” 2001], pp. 39-43, 154-159; cf. *Maurice's Strategikon*, pp. XVI-XVII.

Byzantium” is a conspicuous example of an unusually prolonged confrontation and resistance (and, periodically, cooperation) between the Empire and a neighboring nation, future comparative studies in this field could serve to identify similar patterns in state propaganda and *realpolitik* of the ancient and medieval empires, as well as the great powers of modern times.



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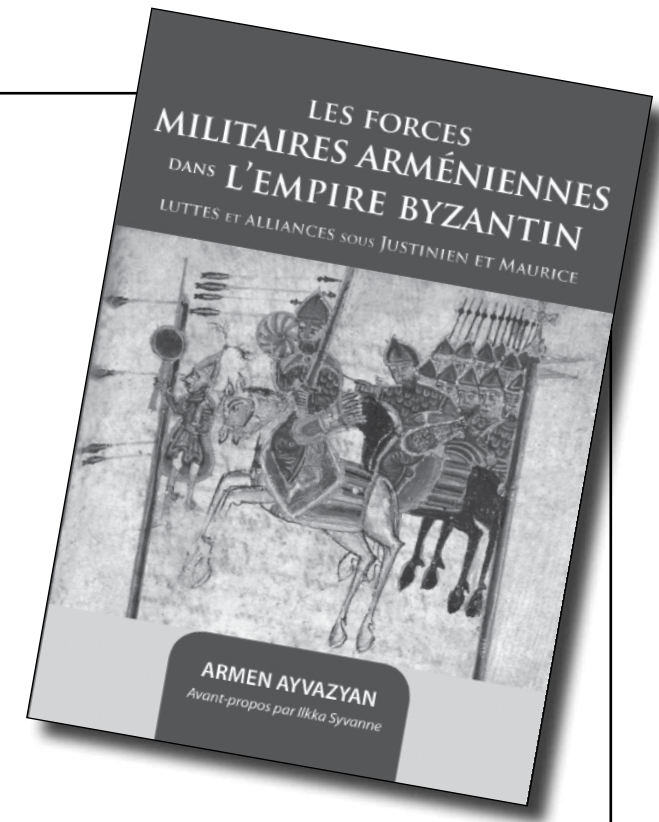
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