

# FURTHER EVIDENCE FOR THE SASANIAN TOLERANCE OF CHRISTIANS

Dr. Kersey Antia, Mar 20, 2020

As Anke Joisten-Prushke of the University of Goettingen notes, Christianity was already well established in Iran during the Sasanian times and “the territories belonging to them corresponded with the administrative units of the Sasanian Empire,” and “were legally established in 410 CE,” which suggests that they were legal entities recognized and protected by the Sasanian State. Anke adds: “At the end of the Sasanian period, Christian groups fled to the east and formed the first Christian communities in China,” which too implies that they must have done fairly well under the Sasanian rule but so very adversely under the subsequent rule that they were forced to flee away to China. I have already written enough about the Sasanians' tolerant treatment of the Christians under their rule but as Anke provides more data about it I would like to include them, again verbatim, in order to avoid any scope for misrepresenting them. The Christians' adaptation to the Sasanian Empire even went as far as to use the Persian language besides Syriac for liturgical purposes. According to the *Chronicle of Se'ert Ma'na II*, a Persian-born metropolitan of Rev-Ardashir, who was present at the Synod of Acace in 486, he made a translation from Syriac into Persian of religious elegies, poems and hymns to be sung in church, which he sent to the Christians of Beth Qatraye. From Sachau's edition of Syrian law codes, we know that an important collection of canon law compiled around 775 by Simeon of Rev-Ardashir was translated from the original Persian into Syriac by an anonymous monk from Beth Qatraye. Furthermore, Middle Persian translations of the Psalms have been found in Central Asia.

Very much in contrast to these finds are reports on the repeated persecutions of Christians in the Sasanian Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries. It should be pointed out, however, that such persecutions always had a local rather than a systematic character, and invariably resulted from infringements of the law and were not arbitrary acts of despotism. If one studies the Persian Martyr Acts in the edition of Assemani and Bedjan, two aspects immediately stand out. Given the large number of Christians settled in the Babylonian area up to Persis, the relatively small number of victims is striking – particularly in comparison to the number of Christian martyrs under Diocletian and others in the Roman Empire before the Constantinian shift. Moreover, the persecutions took place in certain limited areas, especially in Adiabene, Khuzistan and in the Ctesiphon region. No systematic

persecutions of Christians throughout the Sasanian Empire ever took place in reality. The question to what extent the persecutions of the fourth century were linked to the Constantinian shift and to the fact that Christianity was given the status of a state religion cannot be answered here. Although the Eastern Church had seceded from the Western Church and become independent from Byzantium in 410 CE and was becoming an independent Persian Church with its Church leader, there were still persecutions of Christians in the fifth century. Particularly noteworthy are those that happened in the years 446 and 450 CE. My earlier research has addressed this at length.

Interestingly enough, the Martyr Acts generally give another reason for persecutions besides the refusal to worship the Sasanian gods. For instance, in the Martyr Acts charges are brought against Bishop Simon of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. One is the systematically repeated accusation of rejecting Zoroastrianism, while the other is an indictment for treason, since he refused to pay a tax increase. Defending his decision not to pay the tax, the bishop argued as follows: "Through the act of Jesus, the Christian people are freed from any worldly bondage." From the point of view of the Sasanian Empire, this was treason in the legal sense, since the bishop had not only refused to pay the taxes himself but he had also instructed the Christians of his diocese to refuse to pay them.

What Anke notes as a possible Zoroastrian influence on the tabernacle in the Christian church is also worth noting. Around 400 CE it had already become common practice in the Eastern or Persian Church (and perhaps in the Near East generally) to hang up an eternal light from the ceiling close to the tabernacle. The eternal light served as a symbol of the constant presence of God. This custom was eventually adopted in the West in the thirteenth century. It is tempting to compare this everlasting light to the Zoroastrian symbolism of fire and light. If this is so, the question remains as to whether or not the custom was adopted consciously in order to show a closeness between Christianity and Zoroastrianism. In any case, if this custom was indeed adopted by Christians under Zoroastrian influence, this suggests that the two religious communities were in close contact and that the various peoples under the Sasanian crown could associate and interact freely with each other. (pp. 32-33)

The Zoroastrians, on the other hand, offered the fat of the sacrificial animal as *zaothra* to the fire, but it would be unthinkable to bring an entire carcass (which would have been considered polluting) in direct contact with the fire. The assumption that this was indeed the reason is further strengthened by the fact that Papyrus Sachau 10.6 explicitly states: "It is a Mazdayasnian who is set over the province." Preserving the purity of the fire was a fundamental element of the Zoroastrian cult. Direct contact between fire and dead flesh would lead to the pollution of

the fire, necessitating a complicated sequence of rituals to restore its purity.” Banning burnt offerings in the newly built Jewish temple of Elephantine, therefore, was a rational decision in view of the religion of the ruling dynasty, and illustrates the boundaries of Achaemenian religious tolerance.

It has two features that will later reappear in the *dakhmas* of Gujarat, namely a *sagri*, room for a permanent fire in front of the entrance stairway and *pavis*, compartments for the laying of the corpses exposed to vultures.