


THE ROMAN EASTERN FRONTIER AND THE PERSIAN WARS IN LATE ANTIQUITY: CONFRONTATION AND COEXISTENCE IN GREEK AND SYRIAC ECCLESIASTICAL SOURCES (410-428 AD)

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Daniel de Figueiredo¹

ABSTRACT

The history of relations between the Eastern Roman and Sassanid Persian Empires were permeated by warlike conflicts, at different times, between the two powers during Late Antiquity. This theme has been worked on by historiography, especially with emphasis on the conflicting moments recorded by the Greek sources that have come down to us. Considering the context of the search for the affirmation of different Christian strands in the Mesopotamian region between the two empires, in the first half of the fifth century AD, the objective of this article is to demonstrate that, in addition to the conflictual episodes that resulted in warlike confrontations, there was a need, at times, for negotiations and coexistence between the rulers of both empires in the face of the pretensions of the Christian elites that emerged on both sides of the border in the search for political-administrative autonomy. For this analysis, the "Ecclesiastical Histories" of Socrates of Constantinople and Theodoret of Cyrus, written in Greek, and the "Acts of the Persian Martyrs under King Yazdgird I" and the "Synodicon Orientale" (Records of the Nestorian Synods), written in the Syriac language, will be used.

Keywords: Late Antiquity. Eastern Roman Empire. Sassanid Persian Empire. Political-religious and administrative conflict. Nestorian Controversy.

¹ Dr. in Ancient and Medieval History from the São Paulo State University "Júlio de Mesquita Filho" (UNESP). Professor at the State University of Minas Gerais (UEMG) – Campanha Unit. Department of Applied Human and Social Sciences.



INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM

The warlike conflicts fought between the Eastern Roman Empire and the Persian Empire² in Late Antiquity were numerous and were related to political, religious and administrative interests along the extensive Mesopotamian frontier shared by both. Such confrontations seem to intensify with the emergence of the Sassanid Persian dynasty in the third century AD.³, when the Roman emperor Gordian III (238-244) organized an expedition to face the first campaign of the Persian king Shapur I (240-270) against the Roman Empire (DODGEON; LIEU, 1994). A detailed overview of the recurrence and interests that permeated these confrontations, as well as the search for diplomatic solutions, is provided in the work *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbors and Rivals* (DIGNAS; WINTER, 2007), which provides an analysis of sources and contextual information up to the fall of the Sassanid dynasty on the occasion of the Arab conquests in the seventh century.

However, what can be perceived in the historiography of these conflicts is the emphasis given to conflicting periods to the detriment of the negotiations established with a view to accommodating interests. As Jan Willem Drijvers (2009) observes, such perceptions that emphasize belligerence are mainly due to the predominance of the use of Greco-Roman sources that bring a biased image of Persian-Sassanid society. In order to try to circumvent the problem, the objective of this article is to analyze the conflict that occurred between the two empires in the years 421 and 422, which was quickly resolved through diplomatic channels, which resulted in agreements between the Eastern Roman emperor Theodosius II and the Persian king Bahrām V. It is noteworthy that the context of this conflict was surrounded by the emergence of Nestorian⁴ political-religious ideas which flourished precisely in the fluid region of the Mesopotamian border between the two empires. In the Eastern Roman Empire, the conflict arising from such ideas became known as *the Nestorian Controversy*.

² The term "Persian Empire" can be used generically to designate the political union of different peoples (Medes, Persians, Parthians, Aryans, Bactrians, etc.), who belonged to the Indo-European linguistic trunk and recognized themselves as descendants of common ancestors from the steppes of Central Asia (Transcaucasia and Transoxiana). Around the end of the second millennium B.C., they began to settle and live with other peoples of the geographical region of the Iranian plateau (Assyrians, Chaldeans, Elamites, Babylonians, etc.). After conquering the region, they were ruled by different dynasties, which can also name the empires they ruled: the Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BC), the Parthian or Arsacid Empire (247 BC-224) and the Sassanid Empire (224-651) (LIVERANI, 2016, p. 737-758).

³ All other dates listed refer to the period after Christ, unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ The Nestorian ideas were related to the attempt to explain the relationship established between the divine and human natures in the incarnate Christ. One of the main defenders of the period was Bishop Nestorius of Constantinople, who ascended to the episcopal see of the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire in 428, on the recommendation of Emperor Theodosius II.



To understand to what extent the emergence of Nestorianism influenced the internal political-religious balance in both societies, based on the interaction between the Persian and Roman Christian elites of the Mesopotamian region, and how it conditioned the foreign policy between their rulers, especially during the war of 421-422, the present analysis will comprise the period from the first Synod of the Persian Church, occurred in 410, until the installation of Bishop Nestorius, in the episcopate of the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, Constantinople, in 428. The organization of the Persian Christian clergy can be seen in the *Records of the Nestorian Synods (Synodicon orientale)*, which took place in the years 410, 420 and 424. The information from these records will be supplemented with the narratives of the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* under King Yazdgird I, in order to better understand the relations between the royal power and the Persian ecclesiastical hierarchy. In addition to these documents, the interaction of this hierarchy with the Christian communities in the Eastern Roman Empire will be verified through the *Ecclesiastical Histories* of Socrates of Constantinople and Theodoret of Cyrus, whose texts describe the exchanges of episcopal embassies sponsored by the sovereigns of both Empires. It is, therefore, documentation of ecclesiastical origin contemporary to the events investigated.

From these analyses, it can be seen that Christian groups located on both sides of the fluid border between the Persian and Eastern Roman Empires, although subject to different political powers, shared feelings of belonging and common interests that brought them together around the political-religious culture that would come to be labeled Nestorianism. The evidence also indicates that the association between these groups affected the balance of internal forces that supported the sovereigns of both Empires, requiring these rulers to develop strategies and take joint actions in view of the common problem. In the Eastern Roman Empire, this situation contributed to the emergence of the *Nestorian Controversy*, when Nestorius, one of the members of this supraterritorial community, was appointed bishop of Constantinople. In the Persian Empire there is the persecution waged by the sovereign against the Christian population described in *the Acts of the Persian Martyrs*. This context, which required negotiations between both rulers, conditioned the rapid resolution of the war of 421-422 between the two empires.

THE RHETORICAL BATTLE IN THE DOCUMENTS

Considering that the disputes between the Eastern Roman and Sassanid Persian Empires had political-religious and administrative components, the nature of the sources of Late Antiquity for access to these conflicts resulted in testimonies highly permeated by the partisan passions of those who produced, kept and transmitted them (CARRIÉ, 1999, p. 11-



25). Inserted in the disputes for affirmation between the different Christian strands that coexisted in the context, such documents can be considered propagandistic pieces, of refined rhetorical elaboration, which aimed to meet the interests of the factions that faced each other in the political-religious arena. Therefore, they are made up of discursive artifacts that must be questioned not only as vestiges of the past, but also through the subjectivity or intentionality of their production as surrounded by the reality of those who manufactured them. In this sense, the analysis of the content and the public for which these discursive constructions were intended allow us to speculate on the motives and objectives underlying them (FUNARI, 2003, p. 21-27).

In this perspective, the *Synodicon Orientale* or *Register of Nestorian Synods* is inserted, which consists of the gathering of the minutes related to the procedures and decrees established in the Synods of the Church that took place in the territory of the Persian Empire and, later, those held after the conquest of the region by the Arab peoples, in the middle of the⁵ seventh century and are related to thirteen Synods that took place between the years 410 and 775. The translator into French, Jean-Baptiste Chabot (1902), organized the edition from copies of the manuscripts produced by the patriarchs of the episcopal see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, at the end of the eighth century. The copy of the archetype is identified as MS K VI, 4 and is part of a set of forty-six Syriac manuscripts belonging to the collections of the Borgia Museum in the Vatican's Congregation for the Propaganda of the Faith. The rest of the material is identified as Syriac MS 332, belonging to the National Library of France (CHABOT, 1902, p. 1-16).

The three synodal acts that allow us to glimpse the conflict in question and its developments refer to the Synod of the year 410, presided over by the Catholicos⁶ Ishāq (*Syn. orient.* I, p. 253-275); in the year 420, presided over by the catholicos Yahballāhā (*Syn. orient.* II, p. 276-284); both Synods that took place under the reign of Yazdgird I; and that of the year 424, presided over by the catholicos Dādīšō (*Syn. orient.* III, p. 285-298). Although Nestorius was not mentioned in the records of these first three Synods, as he would only assume a political-religious role after his appointment to the episcopate of Constantinople in 428, the editor of the collection suggested, in addition to the old title *Synodicon Orientale*, the alternative title of Records of the Nestorian Synods. Such a denomination does not seem at all inappropriate since, as mentioned earlier, the political-

⁵ Dialect of the Aramaic language.

⁶ *Catholicos* was the distinctive term claimed by the bishop of the See of the capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon, in the Persian Empire, and by the superior bishop of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the kingdom of Armenia, who sought to establish primacy over all other metropolitan bishops of these regions (*Syn. orient.* I, p. 253; Moses of Korene, *Hist. arm.*, III, 49).



religious culture that would later be called Nestorianism had already flourished in the region at least since the final decades of the fourth century.

Analysis of these minutes provides relevant information about the relationships of the Christian clergy with the Sasanian rulers and the ruling elites, civilian, military, and religious belonging to the Zoroastrian clergy⁷. They also provide indications about the conflicts within the Persian Christian communities themselves. This helps to visualize the maneuvers through which Yazdgird I and Bahrām V sought to maintain the political-religious balance of all this diversity, in order to ensure the central role they played in Persian society. In view of the diversity of the actors, ecclesiastical, civil and military cited in the minutes, the prosopographic analysis is a valuable tool. The purpose of the prosopographic method is to collect biographical data of political and religious elites that transcend their individual lives from the perspective of analyzing groups of individuals based on their mutual contacts and common interests. (KOENRAAD; CARLIER; DUMOLYN, 2007, p. 41-43; PUECH, 2012, p. 155-168).

In this sense, data collected in the documentation itself provide general factors of interest groups and the motivations for their actions. In the case of the Persian elites, the data collected in the documents can be complemented from works such as *Studies in Sasanian Prosopography*, by Alireza Shapour Shahbazi (1998) and *Sources Sassanides et Prosopographie sur l'Antiquité Tardive*, by Rika Gyselen (2008). With regard to the Roman elites, based on the subsidies of the works *A Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature to the End of the Sixth Century AD*, by Henry Wace and William C. Piercy (1999); *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire. Vol. II – A.D. 395-527*, edited by John R. Martindale (1980).

Samples of this information can indicate the intertwining of the Roman and Persian Christian elites in the Mesopotamian region, which indicate the need for agreements between the sovereigns of both empires in order to secure their territorial domains:

Ishāq. Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesifon, capital of the Sassanid Empire, located in the Mesopotamian province of Bēth Arāmāyē. He was a native of the city of Kaskar in the province of Asūristān, also located in the eastern region of the Empire, between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. He was related to a non-immediate predecessor, the Tomarsa catholicos. He was elected to the See of the capital after disputes with the Qayoma catholicos, who resigned after being persuaded by Mārūtā. After his election, he was arrested by the king after accusations made against him by his opponents in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. After being released, he presided over the Synod of 410, convened by Yazdgird I, together with Mārūtā. On that occasion, he tried and condemned his opponents, being supported by most of the bishops of the Mesopotamian provinces. He received letters of support from the Eastern Roman bishops Porphyry of Antioch, Acacius of Berea, Pachyda of Edessa, Eusebius of Tella, and Acacius of Amida (*Syn. orient.* I, p. 253-275; *Syn. orient.* II, p. 280-283; LABOURT, 1904, p. 89-92; ASMUSSEN, 2008, p. 932; BRUNNER, 2008, p. 757).

⁷ Zoroastrianism was the dualistic religion, as well as Nestorian ideas, predominant in the Persian Empire.

Mārūtā. Bishop of Martyropolis, in the Roman province of Mesopotamia, in the Diocese of *Oriens*. He was sent by Theodosius II, on more than one occasion, in embassies to the Court of Yazdgird I, at the beginning of the fifth century. Together with the Catholicos Ishāq, he presided over the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, in 410, which established rules for the restructuring of the Persian ecclesiastical hierarchy. It is recorded that he would have cured Yazdgird I of a chronic headache and, for this reason, would have won great esteem from the Persian sovereign. In addition, the Zoroastrian magicians tried to involve him in embarrassing situations before the king, as they feared that he might persuade Yazdgird I to become a Christian (*Syn. orient.* I, p. 253-275; Socrates, *Hist. eccl.*, VII, 8, 1-20; LABOURT, 1904, p. 88-94; WACE; PIERCY, 1999, p. 863; HERMAN, 2014, p. 72).

As in the Eastern Roman Empire, the Persian ecclesiastical hierarchy sought to establish its circumscriptions based on the political-administrative geography of the Persian Empire. Therefore, the understanding of this organization can be complemented by the work of the Armenian writer Moses of Korene, *History of Armenia*, which brings us relevant information about the geography and administration of the Sassanid Empire in the period.⁸ The writer divides his work into three books, the closest date of which is the second half of the fifth century (TRAINA, 2007, p. 164; MAHÉ; MAHÉ, 1993, p. 11-15), and the third and last book comprises events ranging from the end of the Arsacid monarchy (428) to the death of the bishop (439), a period in which Armenia is absorbed by the Persian political-administrative structure (Moses of Korene, *Hist. arm*, III, 58-68).

With regard to the Eastern Roman Empire, the association between bishops and imperial officials who congregated in the factions led by Nestorius and his main opponent, Bishop Cyril of Alexandria, can be perceived. These associations conditioned the actions of the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II to alternate support between the two factions in favor of the security of his position as ruler (FIGUEIREDO, 2018, p. 110-134). This strategy seems to be similar to that adopted by the Persian sovereigns. To also visualize this disposition in relation to the Sassanid elites, in addition to the information extracted from the minutes of the Synods mentioned above, one can also reaffirm this consortium between ecclesiastics and laity through the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs under King Yazdgird I*. These accounts have aroused the interest of historians in terms of the study of the formal recognition of the Persian Church and the structuring of its hierarchy.

They are also part of the recent debates about the alternation in the periods of support and persecution of the Christian population of the kingdom by the Persian sovereigns (BROCK, 1982; PAYNE, 2015). Since such analyses are restricted to understanding the correlations of internal political-religious forces in Sassanid society,

⁸ According to Giusto Traina (2007, p. 164), there are no records that contemporary textual documents of Persian origin have reached us that give us knowledge of the administrative organization of the Sassanid Empire. In this matter, historiography makes extensive use of later narratives, preserved mainly in the Syriac language (e.g. The Chronicle of Arbela) and in the Arabic language (al-Tabari) (WIDENGREN, 2007). The work of Moses of Korene, being more contemporary, can give us a closer picture of the Persian administration.



without, however, extending the analyses to the external relationship with the Eastern Roman Empire, it is clear that historiography has encountered obstacles in understanding the reasons that led to the sudden change of position in the treatment given to Persian Christians by Yazdgird I and his son, Bahrām V, as well as the quick willingness of both sovereigns to end the war of 421–422. Thus, these documents must be inserted in a broader context that, in addition to contemplating the formation of factions among bishops and Persian royal officials, also makes it possible to offer an explanation for the alternation of support that has taken place, as will be shown later.

The *Acts of the Martyrs* is composed of five accounts by a Persian hagiographer named Abgar and narrates the martyrdom of Christian individuals from the provinces of Bēth Raziqāyē, Bēth Hadyab (Adiabene), Bēth Garmai and Hormizd-Ardašīr, during the rule of Yazdgird I. The text was translated into English and published in a bilingual edition, for the first time, by Geoffrey Herman, in 2016, from the manuscript MS BL Add 7200, from the XII/XIII century, kept in the British Library, London, and the manuscript MS Berlin Or. Oct. 1257, held at the Staatbibliothek, Berlin. Paul Devos (1965, p. 303-328) and Scott McDonough (2008b) agree that the texts are contemporaneous with each other and can be dated between the years 421 and 424. It is a rich material that can be put into dialogue in the minutes of the Synods, making it possible to identify political-religious actors with regard to their performance in the balance of forces based on the prosopographical method:

Tātāq. Originally from the province of Adiabene (Bēth Hadyab). He held the position of royal domestic (high ranking in the Court). He would have abandoned royal service without permission and went on to monastic life. He was instructed, but refused to abandon the Christian faith. For this reason, he was arrested and brought by the chief of the magicians before Yazdgird I, being interrogated and executed (*Acta mart.* II, p. 28-35; HERMAN, 2014, p. 79; DEVOS, 1965, p. 303).

The meanings that can be extracted from these documents, written and preserved in the Syriac language, can be complemented by the narratives of Theodoret of Cyrus (ca. 393-460) and Socrates of Constantinople (ca. 380-?), who wrote their *Ecclesiastical Histories* in the first half of the fifth century, in the Greek language. They are documents that dialogue with each other, as their authors sought to offer, in addition to relevant information on the political-religious issues of the Eastern Roman Empire, also their particular descriptions of those events related to the conflicts between the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the Persian sovereigns. At the same time, they give important indications regarding the foreign policy of cooperation established between the rulers of both Empires when commenting on the episcopal embassies. These documents indicate that Socrates and Theodoret did not share the same political-religious views, since, in the environment of



great diversity in which they were inserted, they produced personalized versions of events that best satisfied the interests of their groups. In this way, the discourses they produced on the conflicts in Persia reflect the political-religious tensions within the Eastern Roman Empire itself, tensions that would contribute to the emergence of the *Nestorian Controversy*. These are documents that should be analyzed as representations that are "crossed by disputes and struggles for the power to categorize and classify – for the power to represent and to be represented" (BLÁSQUEZ, 2000, p. 188).

This same provision should apply to the discourses inserted in the documents of Persian origin and written in the Syriac language, described above. Socrates was a native of Constantinople and evidence indicates that he lived approximately between 380 and 440. His writing context is related to the conflicts between the various factions that faced each other in the imperial capital (URBAINCZYK, 1997). Thus, it is speculated that he belonged to the Church of the Novatians, composed of individuals who accepted the prevailing orthodoxy, but differed regarding the norms that governed the ecclesiastical organization. Everything indicates that the imperial power tolerated these dissident groups in order to better maneuver the political-religious diversity in Roman society (FIGUEIREDO, 2018, p. 143).

Bishop Theodoret (ca. 393-460) was a native of Antioch, and in his youth became bishop of the city of Cyrus in the province of Osroene. Like Nestorius, and most of the bishops of the Diocese of *Oriens*⁹, he was a follower of the ideas of bishops Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodorus of Tarsus about the duality of the nature of the body of Christ, a discussion that, in the theological field, was central to the debates of the *Nestorian Controversy*. Both authors declare themselves to be continuators of the work *Ecclesiastical History*, by Eusebius of Caesarea (approx. 263-339) and, thus, produced a genre of historical narrative that mixes events related to the situation of the Church under the different emperors who succeeded Emperor Constantine (272-337) (MITCHELL, 2015, p. 33-36).

With regard to the notion of history, which gives us the dimension of the political-religious and administrative intertwining in the context, Socrates (*Hist. eccl.*, V, Preface) stated that political and military events are intertwined with events related to the Church. Theodoret (*Hist. eccl.*, Preface), in turn, believed that the natural order of the world is not

⁹ At the beginning of the fifth century, the Eastern Roman Empire was divided into two large circumscriptions called Praetorian Prefectures (Illyricum and East). These, in turn, were composed of smaller regions called Dioceses, which housed the Provinces, whose capital cities were called metropolises. The Dioceses of *Oriens*, Egypt, Pontica, Asiana and Thrace belonged to the Praetorian Prefecture of the East. The Praetorian Prefecture of Illyricum was composed of the Dioceses of Dacia and Macedonia.



random and uncertain, but, on the contrary, fulfills a divine plan, despite the existence of poverty and injustice. These perceptions are relevant to the understanding of the writing of both authors.

Socrates' work is divided into seven books covering the period from 305 to 439. For the purpose of this article, chapter 8 "Propagation of Christianity among the Persians by Maruta, bishop of Mesopotamia" will be used; chapter 18 "The renewal of hostilities between Romans and Persians after the death of Yazdgerd, king of the Persians"; chapter 20 "A second defeat of the Persians by the Romans" and chapter 21 "The kind treatment of the Persian captives by Bishop Acacius of Amida", all inserted in Book VII. Socrates wrote in Greek and his work has been preserved in that language by different medieval manuscripts. The bilingual Greek/French edition translated by Pierre Périchon and Pierre Maraval, published by *Les Éditions du Cerf*.

Bishop Theodoret of Cyrus also wrote his *Ecclesiastical History* in Greek, although he stated that Syriac was his first language (ROHRBACHER, 2002, p. 126). His account covers the period from 325 to 428 and was probably only published after the death of Emperor Theodosius II, in 450 (LEPPIN, 2003, p. 228-229). He produced his work in five books, with emphasis on chapter 39, inserted in Book V, entitled "Of the persecutions in Persia and those who were martyred". The text was translated from Greek into French by Jean Bouffartigue and printed in a bilingual edition also by *Les Éditions du Cerf*. Therefore, the concern here is to bring together contemporary documents, produced by both Persians and Romans, which allow us to broaden the reading of those events related to the interaction between the Christian communities of the Roman-Persian border region and the resolution of the conflicts arising from these contacts. We add, however, that the meaning that can be extracted from the reading of these discursive artifacts is also surrounded by the reality of the moment of the one who reads and interprets them, thus creating a new representation of that reality that one wants to portray (JENKINS, 2005, p. 49).

From the treatment of this documentation, it becomes possible to offer a reading of them that indicates the need for negotiations and coexistence between the Roman-Eastern and Persian-Sassanid sovereigns, to the detriment of the warlike confrontations already well worked out by historiography.

THE NEGOTIATIONS: THE SEARCH FOR COEXISTENCE AND THE MAINTENANCE OF POWER IN ECCLESIASTICAL SOURCES

The first indication in the sources that attracts attention was the summoning of Nestorius, a monk of Persian descent and superior of a monastery near Antioch, to occupy



the head of the episcopate of the imperial capital Constantinople, in 428 (Nestorius, *Liber*, 376-377; CHESNUT, 1978). On the trip that took him to the imperial capital, Nestorius was escorted by the *magister utriusque militiae per Orientem*¹⁰ Flavius Dionysius, who was returning from Persia, on a mission delegated by Theodosius II, which aimed to renew the peace treaty that had put an end to the brief war conflict between the two empires, which took place in 421-422 (TRAINA, 2009, p. 1-6). In that same year of 428, Moses of Korene, an Armenian writer of the fifth century, still reported that part of the clergy of the kingdom of Armenia who opposed *the Sahak catholicos*, defender of Cyrilian ideas (CONSTAS, 2003, p. 104), allied themselves with the local aristocracies and, with the help of the king of Persia, Bahrām V, deposed the Armenian king, Artashes IV (Moses of Korene, *Historia Armeniorum*, III, 63).¹¹ From then on, Armenia became a province (satrapy) of the Persian Empire, which bordered the Eastern Roman Empire. On the other hand, the Persian king granted the Armenian elites more autonomy in the management of their interests and domains (THOMSON, 2008, p. 665; GARSOÏAN, 1998).

This precedent in Armenia seems to have weighed on Theodosius II's decision to summon Nestorius to occupy the episcopal see of the imperial capital, Constantinople. This imperial strategy seems to aim to bring together and give greater political weight to the segments that congregated around him, especially the elites of the Diocese of *Oriens*, a border region with the Persian Empire, as we indicated before. It should be noted that the dualistic theology defended by Nestorius was part of a political-religious culture that longed for greater political-administrative participation in a structure that centralized a large part of decisions in Constantinople.¹² The emergence of this ideology can be traced to the final decades of the fourth century, when the separation of the two portions of the Empire occurred. The most prominent representatives of this theology at that time were Bishops Diodorus of Tarsus (?-392) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428), whose episcopal sees were also located in the Diocese of *Oriens*.

However, by anticipating a situation that could move towards a solution similar to that adopted by the Armenian elites, Theodosius II's decision to give greater political weight to this group of which Nestorius was a representative seems to have helped to precipitate the

¹⁰ He is the main military official (general) in charge of the defense of the Praetorian Prefecture of the East.

¹¹ As Richard N. Frye (1983, p. 120) points out, a branch of the Arsacids (Parthians), to which Artashes IV was a part, moved to Armenia when the Sassanids seized power in Persia in the year 224. This branch founded a new dynasty that ruled the kingdom until 428.

¹² As an example to indicate this centralization, we cite the vast epistolary correspondence of Bishop Theodoret of Cyrus, an ally of Nestorius, which shows us the intense exchange of letters between this bishop and officials of the imperial court in order to request resources of all kinds for the population of the province of Euphrastense, where the city of Cyrus was located (ROHRBACHER, 2002, p. 127). Teodoreto's network of correspondents was mapped by Adam M. Schor (2011) and Vincent Puech (2011).



emergence of the *Nestorian Controversy*. In addition to the theological issues brought into its core, the conflict also included ancient disputes between Antioch and Alexandria for preeminence in the Eastern Roman ecclesiastical organization. Such disputes also took place over the search for political control of the See of Constantinople, since its bishop was one of the members of the imperial court and, therefore, acted as an advisor in imperial policies. Regarding this multiplicity of interests, Pierre Bourdieu (2007, p. 62-64) already indicated that the religious field is a place of competition and the ideologies produced in it, aiming at the establishment of the monopoly of the instruments of salvation, are propitious to be used in the struggles for prestige and power among its members. Given the appeal that issues related to salvation¹³ acquired in that context, Cyril, Nestorius, and their allies took advantage of the theological dispute to extend their spheres of influence to broad contingents of Eastern Roman society, or even beyond it, as in the case of the emerging Persian ecclesiastical hierarchy.

As already stated, in addition to these findings, the issue needs to be further explored in order to contemplate the interference that part of the Christian elites of the Persian Empire exerted in the process by associating themselves with the group to which Nestorius would emerge as one of the leaders. This concern stems from the fact that there was no clear and fixed boundary between the Persian Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire. The marks changed during the various wars that took place between the two empires in Late Antiquity.¹⁴ As a result, the population living in this vast region shared common cultural elements, the most noticeable evidence, according to the documentation consulted, was the persistence of the use of a lingua franca on both sides, Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic, and the belief in a dualistic Christian deity as imagined by Nestorian theology. In this sense, Norberto Guarinello (2010, p. 121) emphasizes that borders, whether political, economic, social or cultural, have multiple faces and densities and it is through them that

¹³ The theological question related to the definition of the correct divinity had a practical character for individuals, as it was related to the salvation of humanity (soteriology). In the conception of Cyril of Alexandria, inspired by the theology of Bishop Athanasius (296-373), the union of the divine and human natures in Christ was necessary for the redemption of humanity to take place. The teaching and example of Christ alone would not be enough to change human behavior. (LYMAN, 1993). On the contrary, in Nestorius' conception, inspired by Diodorus of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, salvation would be a human task of ascension towards a perfect era, which would be realized from the pedagogy of the examples of the man Jesus and would not necessarily require the union between the flesh and the divinity for this to occur (FAIRBAIRN, 2007, p. 392).

¹⁴ At the beginning of the fifth century, the territorial boundary between the two empires was maintained as established in the peace agreement negotiated between Emperor Jovian (363–364) and King Šāpur II (309–379). This agreement returned to the Persian Empire a vast area conquered by Emperor Galerius (305-311). In this sense, in the middle of the fourth century, the Persians retook important localities that had long been under Roman rule, such as, for example, the city of Nisibe, now constituted as the capital of the Persian province of Bēt 'Arbāyē. Later, the philosophical schools of this city became important centers for the dissemination of Nestorian theology (DARYAEE, 2011, p. 183; GREATREX, 2014, p. 166). For a broad perception of these border displacements during Late Antiquity, see DODGEON; LIEU (1994) and GREATREX; LIEU (2002).



individuals or groups confront each other, integrate or confront each other. It seems, therefore, that the boundary line between the "Persian being" or the "Roman being", in that circumstance and place, was not sufficient to separate individuals who had a certain number of belongings to share (REBILLARD, 2014, p. 105), among them the strong ties of a political-religious culture that yearned for greater political-administrative autonomy.

The Christian communities existing in the Persian Empire in the first half of the fifth century were organized based on conflicts inherent to the very need to establish an ecclesiastical hierarchy, as well as by the disputes for space in Persian society, waged with other political-religious forces, such as those religions represented by the Zoroastrian, Jewish, Manichaean and other clergy. Some legends permeate the accounts about the arrival of Christians in the Persian Empire. One of them, attributed to the Jacobite clergy¹⁵, claimed the foundation of the episcopal see of the Persian capital, the metropolis of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, to the apostle Thomas, in the second half of the first century (LABOURT, 1904, p. 11-21). As in the great episcopal sees of the Roman Empire, such links to characters or remarkable facts of the Christian past were part of the struggles for prestige and power that permeated the structuring of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This would have occurred as a result of the evangelizing efforts of the Christian clergy of the neighboring Roman-Eastern cities of Edessa and Antioch (ASMUSSEN, 2008, p. 930).

At the beginning of the fourth century, it can be seen that disputes over jurisdictions and preeminences in the sense of establishing the hierarchy of the clergy were already present. However, the conflicts that occurred during the reign of Šāpur II (309-379), who seems to have inserted the Persian Christian communities into the political game of external conflicts with the Roman Empire, would have led to the dismantling of the incipient ecclesiastical organizations (DARYAEE; REZAKHANI, 2016, p. 1-8). The reorganization of the Persian Christian clergy would not be resumed until the beginning of the fifth century, during the reign of Yazdgird I. At this time, although the Persian Christians were already spread throughout the Iranian plateau, the largest contingent of them seems to be concentrated in the border region with the Eastern Roman Empire (*Syn. Orient.* I, II and III).

According to Jérôme Labourt (1904, p. 5-6), Christian doctrines achieved greater penetration in this region of Mesopotamia, between the valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, precisely because of a cultural issue, since it was there that most of the adherents of the ancient Semitic Assyrian and Chaldean cults were concentrated, who met in Persian territory. The provinces located in this Mesopotamian region were the most strategic, wealthy, and concentrated important cities of the Persian Empire. In view of this, they were

¹⁵ A denomination related since late antiquity to the adherents of the Syrian Orthodox Church.



regions subject to the direct control of the king. In the other regions, as indicated by Ze'ev Rubin (2008, p. 651-654), the control exercised by the central government was not uniformly effective. The Sasanian sovereigns respected the territories secured by the great lords of the kingdom (which could come from the Sasanian dynasty itself or from the diversity of other peoples such as Parthians, Medes, Aryans, Bactrians, etc., which made up Persian society). The leaders of these lineages admitted only nominal allegiance to the central government and, in this way, enjoyed a certain autonomy in their hereditary territorial domains. It is in this sense that one can understand the nickname of "King of kings" that was attributed to the ruler (DIGNAS; WINTER, 2007, p. 234; *Syn. orient.* I, p. 254). In other words, on both sides of the border, the Christian population was subjected to a centralized regime in the figure of the sovereigns, a situation that seems to limit the political-administrative participation of the Christian elites of those regions.

The Acts of the Synods of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, in 410 (*Syn. orient.* I, pp. 254-275), and of Bēth Ardashīr, in 420 (*Syn. orient.* II, p. 276-284), convened under the patronage of King Yazdgird I, indicate that this sovereign would have largely favored that meeting by placing the administrative structure of the Empire to support the reorganization of the Persian ecclesiastical hierarchy. Both records praise Yazdgird I as a protector of Christians, and he is even compared to the Roman emperor Constantine (306-337) for similarly decreeing freedom of worship for Christians in the kingdom after the long period of conflict with royal power in the fourth century (McDONOUGH, 2008b). Socrates (*Hist. eccl.*, VII, 8), for example, propagandized that Yazdgird I was very close to converting to Christianity, a fact that was not consummated due to the untimely death of that king.

Yazdgird I is also perceived to have been very close to the Eastern Roman Emperor Arcadius (395-408), since, at the request of this Roman ruler, the Persian sovereign would have sent the eunuch Antiochus to the Court of Constantinople in order to act as preceptor to the future emperor Theodosius II. because, it seems, at that time, succession disputes were already being outlined in the Court of Constantinople (GREATREX; BARDILL, 1996, p. 171-197; KELLY, 2013). This favorable disposition among the rulers persisted after Arcadius' death. The minutes of the Synods of 410 and 420 and the narratives elaborated by Socrates and Theodoret reveal to us the good relations through the constant exchange of embassies in the period.¹⁶ At the Synod of 410, the Roman imperial power sent Bishop

¹⁶ In the Persian Empire, during the fifth century, rulers seconded bishops to diplomatic missions, as was the case in the Eastern Roman Empire (CANEPA, 2009; McDONOUGH, 2008a). The delegation of bishops to this role seems to indicate a strategy of the rulers aimed at maneuvering with the episcopal segment in favor of the political-religious balance. The perspective of analysis adopted by Julio Cesar M. Oliveira (2015), with regard to the intermediaries of communications in late antiquity, may collaborate in this perception.



Mārūtā of Martyropolis, of the Roman province of Mesopotamia, to collaborate with the *Ishāq catholicos* in resolving conflicts in the ecclesiastical hierarchy (*Syn. orient.* I, p. 254). Mārūtā would even have fallen into Yazdgird I's favor for having performed a miracle and cured the king's chronic headache (Socrates, *Hist. eccl.* VII, 8).

At this same meeting, it was possible to verify the reading of letters of support and friendship sent to the Persian clergy by the Eastern Roman bishops Porphyry of Antioch (Roman province of Syria I), Acacius of Berea (province of Syria I), Pachyda of Edessa (province of Osroene), Eusebius of Tela (province of Osroene) and Acacius of Amida (province of Mesopotamia) (*Syn. orient.* I, p. 255-256). That is, all these bishops belonged to Roman provinces bordering Persia. This disposition, which denotes a closer relationship between them, is also perceived on the occasion of the next Synod, which took place in the year 420, a few months before the death of Yazdgird I. This second Synod was presided over by the *catholicos* Yahballāhā, assisted by Bishop Acacius of Amida. On the eve of this meeting, Yahballāhā had just returned from an embassy to the Court of Constantinople, sent by Yazdgird I (*Syn. orient.* II, p. 276).

In these two Synods, the debates were centered on endorsing the canons of the Council of Nicaea, which took place in the Roman Empire in the year 325, in those provisions referring to the organization of the hierarchical structure, such as, for example, the form of consecration and the number of bishops per locality (*Syn. orient.* I, 263-273). This emphasis given to the organizational issues of the hierarchy, to the detriment of theological issues, seems to us justified when one perceives in the reading of the minutes the formation of factions of bishops who diverged about those rules. Although Yazdgird I determined the presence of the largest possible number of bishops from all over Persia to meet in those Synods, what can be seen, through the attendance lists, is the overwhelming majority of bishops from the Persian provinces of the region bordering the Eastern Roman Empire, since it was the region that concentrated the majority of the Christian population. Thus, one can find bishops representing the cities of Nisib (province of Bēth 'Arbāyē), Arbela (province of Bēth Hadyab/Adiabene), Karkā of Bēth Selōk (province of Bēth Garmai), Perāt (province of Maišān), among others, led by the *Catholicos* of Seleucia-Ctesifon.¹⁷ The complaint of this majority group in relation to the other peers of the distant provinces was that they were loosening the rules that dictated episcopal ordinations. Moreover, they did so under the benevolent gaze of powerful individuals of the nobility and

¹⁷ Details of the political-administrative organization of the Persian Empire, which served as the basis for the organization of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, can be consulted in Rika Gyselen (1989), Christopher Brunner (2008), Jes P. Asmussen (2008), Ze'ev Rubin (2008), Touraj Daryaee (2011), Michael Maas (2000) and Oliver Nicholson (2018).



Zoroastrian magicians (*Syn. orient.* I, p. 258-261).¹⁸ They demanded, therefore, obedience to the rigid rules emanating from the Council of Nicaea and the submission of ordinations to the sieve of *the catholicos* (*Syn. orient.* I, p. 254-255). It is clear that the consecration strategy adopted by the Christian minority groups distorted representativeness, in view of the greater concentration of Christians in the Mesopotamian provinces. However, it seems to us that this was a maneuver favorable to Yazdgird I, since it diluted the power of the *Catholicos* and his allies in that strategic border region.

Despite favoring the Christian clergy, seeking to insert and use this segment in the balance of the political forces that supported it, Yazdgird I is considered an enigma for a large part of historiography, since, at the end of his government, the king would have undertaken virulent persecution of Christians (HERMAN, 2014, p. 67; McDONOUGH, 2008b, p. 129).¹⁹ The most common justification used for this turn would be the submission of the king to the pressures of the Zoroastrian clergy due to the increase in the conversion of noble families to Christianity. However, analyzing the events surrounding the succession from Yazdgird I to his son Bahrām V, it can be conjectured that, as with the succession from Arcadius to Theodosius II in the Eastern Roman Empire, the Sassanid royal line encountered opposition among the nobles. There are even reports that suspect that the death of Yazdgird I would have occurred at the behest of noble opponents (SHAHBAZI, 2003, p. 255-262). It seems, therefore, that the Christians led by *the Catholicos*, taking advantage of the moment of political succession crisis, which began even before the king's death, allied themselves with the forces that opposed Yazdgird I, which would have led to the cruel martyrdoms described in the *Acts of the Martyrs* (*Acta mart.* I-V, p. 2-61) and in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Theodoret of Cyrus (*Hist. eccl.*, V, 39, 1-6).

After the death of Yazdgird I in 420, segments of the Persian elites attempted to prevent the accession of his son Bahrām V, the rightful heir in the line of succession, by passing him over in favor of a prince of collateral lineage. To secure his rights and assume power, Bahrām V marched towards Seleucia-Ctesifon supported by the army of al-Mundhir, ruler of the Arab tribe of the Lachymids (FRYE, 1983, p. 144). The minutes of the Synod of 424, now under the leadership of *the catholicos* Dādīšō (*Syn. orient.* III, p. 285-298),

¹⁸ The epithet "Magus" was used in Christian sources to refer to Zoroastrian priests (*Acta mart.* I, p. 24). In the other sources these priests are identified as "mobed" (BIDEZ; CUMONT, 2007, p. v-xi). Regarding this priestly segment, Richard Payne (2015, p. 23-58) seeks to deconstruct the myth of intolerance attributed to him in relation to other religious associations. There can even be alliances between the Zoroastrian and Christian clergy in the defense of common interests.

¹⁹ There is a historiographical debate about the existence or not of the persecutions at the end of the government of Yazdgird I. Some historians, such as Sebastian Brock (1982), with whom we are inclined to agree, based on the accounts of Theodoret of Cyrus (*Hist. eccl.*, V, 39, 1-6) advocate the existence of those persecutions. Another strand, which includes Geoffrey Herman (2014), following Socrates of Constantinople (*Hist. eccl.*, VII, 18) argues that the persecutions only occurred under the government of Bahrām V.



reveals the poor condition with which this segment of Persian Christians came to be treated after the succession conflicts that brought Bahrām V to power. Soon after his investiture, Bahrām V would have resumed the persecutions in a more forceful way, including with the support of the Zoroastrian mobeds (*Acta mart.* I-V, p. 2-61). The narratives of these persecutions reveal that many of those martyred Christians came from noble lineages, who worked in the Sassanid administration, thus indicating to us the dimension of the problem beyond the religious question.

It is also noteworthy that one of the canons approved at the meeting, and which expressed a demand of the new ruler, decreed the independence of the Persian Church in relation to the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Eastern Roman Empire (*Syn. orient.* III, p. 296). This measure seems to have aimed to interpose barriers to possible alliances between the Christian clergy on both sides of the border and, in this way, avoid mutual interference, benefiting both rulers. Another effect of the political struggles in Persian territory resulted in the flight of many Christians to the territory of the Eastern Roman Empire. Socrates (*Hist. eccl.*, VII, 18) reported that the Romans' refusal to comply with the extradition request of the fugitives would have given rise to the war of 421-422. This conflict was quickly resolved through diplomatic channels, which resulted in agreements between Bahrām V and Theodosius II (ZOUBERI, 2017, p. 123; SCHRIER, 2005, p. 75-86), who determined that the *magister* Flavius Dionysius would renew in 428, when he escorted Nestorius to Constantinople to assume the episcopate of the imperial capital.

The questions about the emergence and resolution of this war conflict are still not clear to historiography. Given the emphasis of Bahrām V and Theodosius II on its completion and in accordance with the terms established for its termination (HOLUM, 2004, p. 171-171), the conflict does not seem to have been enough to aggravate the good relations between the two Empires in the period. This leads us to believe that, despite the long history of conflicts between the two Empires in Late Antiquity, the strengthening of Christians in the border region required the two rulers to establish relations of coexistence for the benefit of the mutual security of their imperial domains. The exchanges of episcopal embassies using, including bishops from this border region, signal the willingness of the Persian and Roman rulers to maneuver politically with these individuals. In the case of Theodosius II, appointing Nestorius as bishop of the imperial capital meant getting closer to the expressive group of which he was a part and, thus, giving him greater political-religious weight in the center of power. However, this measure caused internal political imbalances in view of the contrary reaction of Bishop Cyril of Alexandria and his allies, thus causing the emergence of the *Nestorian Controversy*. On the side of Bahrām V, the constant



interference of part of the Eastern Roman clergy in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Persian Church was avoided, thus preventing the strengthening of Christian political-religious forces that could jeopardize the balance that the Sassanid Persian sovereigns sought to maintain in the internal political-religious game, especially with regard to control over the extensive and rich Mesopotamian region.

Recent analyses still find it difficult to explain the seemingly contradictory actions of the Persian and Roman rulers. In view of the documentary evidence gathered here, it can be indicated that the Christian communities on both sides of the fluid border of the Mesopotamian region between the Eastern Roman and Persian Empires, in late antiquity, shared interests that contributed to the construction of a common political-religious culture. The objective that moved the elites of these communities, both on the Persian and Roman sides, was to have greater political-administrative participation in relation to the Persian and Eastern Roman Empires to which they were linked. The evidence also indicates that the association between these groups affected the balance of internal forces that supported the sovereigns of both Empires, requiring their rulers to elaborate strategies and take joint actions in view of the common problem, especially as verified in the resolution of the war conflict of the years 421-422.



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