

# THE STORY OF MARUTHA AND SAINT SERGIUS AND THE CHRISTIANS IN SASANIAN IRAN

Dr. Kersey Antia, Aug 10, 2020

There is evidence from sources other than purely political ones which directly as well as indirectly promoted harmony between Christians and Zoroastrians in the Sasanian Iran despite the claims of the Christian martyrologists otherwise. I have already shown that the recent research finds the accounts of Christian martyrologists too biased and one-sided, exaggerated and polemical to provide much historical veracity. For instance, Bishop Marutha the Roman ambassador to the Sasanian court, played a big role in currying favors for the Christians after curing King Yazdegard I's chronic headache in 382. The Roman Emperor Theodocius II sent Marutha to the Sasanian court for a second time in 408 in company of another frontier bishop to ensure peaceful relations between the two empires. Elizabeth Key Fonden provides more data on this subject in *The Barbarian Plain* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999). She reports that when the Sasanian King Kawad (488-531) besieged the city of Mayperqat established by Marutha, its inhabitants offered Kawad the gold cup given to Marutha by Yazdgard I, according to the Armenian Vita-Kawad honored his forefather's esteem for Marutha and withdrew from the city and left Marutha's place in peace (p. 57). Again in 589 when Khusran captured Mayperqat he vacated his occupation of the city in 591 out of gratitude for the support the Roman emperor Maurice had given him against the usurper Bahram Chawlin. However, Theophylact relates that at the martyrs' feast a triumphal hymn praised the Iranian martyrs as championing the Roman cause against Iran (p. 58) and eulogized their actions in a hymn composed for this occasion. Fowden notes that the absence of martyr towns such as Mayperqat west of Iranshehr "makes it clear that Rome's leaders aspired to mold martyr cult as a bulwark against Iran. Yazdgard and Khusrau II, on the other hand, through their involvement with Christian communities in Iranian territory and in the frontier zone at Mayperqat, played up the potential unity of Syrian and Mesopotamian martyr cult in their attempts to weaken a dangerous Roman monopoly. In the sixth century, leaders on both sides of the frontier did their best to court the favor of martyr-patrons. It was in this tug-of-war between the martyr cult's natural impetus toward cross-border expansion and even cohesiveness, and the two empires' impetus toward cultural monopoly that the cult of the martyr Sergius was forged." (p. 59).

Fowden notes that the peace treaty of 561 between Romans and Sasanians emphasized the need to monitor Arab trade and tribal conflicts over pasture land in the border regions since such conflicts often led to Iranian-Roman confrontations. Fowden observes that Iranian kings were very zealous about pacifying the rival groups amongst their Christian subjects in order to keep peace in the empire. For instance, when Nestorians burned a non-Chalcedonian Church complex, Khusrau I “immediately had it reconstructed, sparing nothing on its ornament” and “Khusrau did not forget that tolerance of Christianity was a policy in the service of political expedience.” She also notes that Khusrau’s obstantious rebuilding of the Sergius monastery was sort of a catch-up act with Roman emperors for investing in this frontier region. (p. 128).

Fowden sees Khusrau’s dedications to Sergius in the context of political tensions in Iran, not only due to the rise of Christianity in Iran but also due to the phenomenon of the rider saint Sergius merging so well with the traditional heroic ideal permeating Iranian culture history from pre-historic times.

Khusrau II’s act of offering a gold cross for his Christian wife’s conception of a son seems to be a deliberate attempt to compete with the dedications of gold crosses to the Sergius cult by the Roman Emperors Justinian and Theodora, which were returned by Khusrau. Khusrau also matched the building efforts of the Roman emperors by building three churches in his empire, including one for Sergius. (p. 139). When Khusrau II conquered Syria he refrained from requiring apostasy from Christianity. Instead he offered a choice between allegiance to the Nestorian or the non-Chalcedonian Church which had already split by the time from the Roman Church. A substantial number of pastoral Arabs belonged to the non-Chalcedonian Church. As Fowden sees it, Khusrau I’s support to the pastoral Arabs’ devotion to Sergius was “a means of monitoring Arab pastoralists who crossed the frontier zone” (between the Roman and Iranian empires), since they were crucial for deciding the territorial claims of each, especially as they changed sides often between the two regimes. Thus, Khusrau II was also “courting their favor just as Justinian had tried to do in the 530’s and 540’s.” (p. 141). But Fowden makes it clear that Khusrau II was Zoroastrian and not Christian (p. 166) and twice ended up unwittingly offending Christian sentiments which Fowden explains in terms of the prestigious position and rights of the Sasanian Kings.

I hope this will shed some light on the complex and unique relations between Christians and Sasanians in Iran which are hardly found elsewhere and which tells a lot about the tolerant, pragmatic and highly accommodating religious policies of the Sasanians, especially when compared with the dismal condition of the small band of Zoroastrians

somehow trapped in the Byzantine borderland, as already noted, and as also noted by Kartir in his rock inscriptions. Unfortunately, however, when religions lead people to war, it takes the best out of them so that even the better ones do not come out clean in many ways and yet the Sasanian story will remain one of its kind in this tenor.