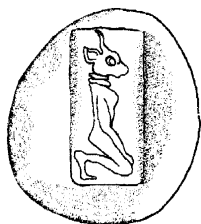


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EDITOR'S NOTE

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DIE AMAZONEN AM KAVKASUS: EINE MYTHOGRAPHISCHE SPURENSUCHE

SILVIO BÄR

Abstract. The Amazons are among the most captivating figures in Greek mythology, as the idea of warrior women equal to men both fascinated and intimidated the ancient Greeks. Accordingly, the stories of encounters between Panhellenic heroes and Amazons are as numerous as the reports regarding the geographical location of the Amazons, ranging from Libya to Thrace, Scythia, and Asia Minor. Some Greek sources also mention Amazons in the Caucasus, and although the idea of Caucasian Amazons is relatively weakly attested, the existing evidence is nonetheless highly revealing. This is particularly true of Strabo's account (11.5.1-4), who, drawing on earlier historians, describes how the Amazons originally migrated to the northern Caucasus together with the Gargarians, later separating from them but still meeting annually for the purpose of reproduction. Strabo links his ethnographic remarks to a fundamental reflection on the relationship between myth and history, engaging in a close dialogue with Thucydides and the latter's claims regarding truth and credibility, as outlined in his famous methodology chapter. This article demonstrates how Strabo's account is connected to the Greek idea of the Caucasus region as a peripheral region between the 'civilized' Greek world and the 'barbaric' world outside. From a Greek perspective, both the Caucasus and the Amazons epitomize the periphery, implying both partial belonging and partial non-belonging. Consequently, Strabo's report on the Caucasian Amazons serves as a means to engage in some fundamental

reflections on the relationship between history and myth and thus, ultimately, between truth and fiction.

1. EINLEITENDE BEMERKUNGEN

Die Amazonen gehören unbestreitbar zu den schillerndsten Gestalten der griechischen Mythologie: Die Vorstellung von den Männern ebenbürtigen – wenn nicht gar überlegenen – Kriegerfrauen hat die Menschen der griechischen Antike ebenso fasziniert wie abgeschreckt.¹ Dementsprechend reich sind die Geschichten über Begegnungen zwischen panhellenischen Heldenfiguren mit Amazonen und besonders mit Amazonenköniginnen – zu denken ist etwa an den Raub des Gürtels der Amazonenkönigin Hippolyte durch Herakles (es handelt sich hierbei um die neunte von Herakles' zwölf kanonischen Arbeiten); an Achilleus, der die Amazonenkönigin Penthesileia im Zweikampf tötet, sich dann aber, nachdem er ihr den Helm abgenommen hat, in sie verliebt; an den Kriegszug des Theseus gegen die Amazonen am Schwarzen Meer und die darauf erfolgende Entführung der Amazone Antiope nach Athen, mit der Theseus sodann einen Sohn zeugt; und nicht zuletzt auch an die Geschichte von der angeblichen Begegnung zwischen Alexander dem Grossen und der letzten Amazonenkönigin Thalestris. Gerade die letzte Begebenheit zeigt, wie stark die Bereiche des Fiktionalen und des Historischen hier ineinander übergreifen. Zumal in der antiken Geschichtsschreibung ist diese Trennung alles andere als kategorisch – die Übergänge zwischen Mythos und Historie sind oftmals fließend, da der Mythos nicht Fiktion in unserem Sinne bezeichnet, sondern vielmehr das Heroenzeitalter, also eine Art 'mythische Vorvergangenheit', meint.²

¹ Die Vorstellung, dass die Amazonen den Männern ebenbürtig seien, ist uralte; sie findet sich bereits in der *Ilias*, verfestigt in der Formel Ἀμαζόνες ἀντιάνειραι ("die männergleichen Amazonen", *Il.* 3.189 und 6.186). Der Ausdruck ἀντιάνειραι rekuriert nicht, wie zuweilen fälschlicherweise angenommen, auf eine Feindschaft zwischen Männern und Amazonen; vgl. dazu Blok 1995, 169-185; ferner auch Porter 2018, 27-29.

² Vgl. Finley 1965; Graf 1985, 117-137; Griffiths 2011; Raaflaub 2016; Rusu 2018. Bekannte Beispiele sind etwa Herodots Sicht auf den Trojanischen Krieg als

Dies ist ein Umstand, der zwar für die antike Mythologie im Gesamten als charakteristisch zu gelten hat, der aber, wie noch zu zeigen sein wird, mit Blick auf die Amazonensage besonders virulent ist.

Ebenso reich wie die mythische Überlieferung von Begegnungen und Interaktionen zwischen Griechen und Amazonen sind auch die Nachrichten bezüglich der geographischen Verortung des Amazonenvolkes. Ein summarischer Überblick über die relevanten Quellen, die sich zur Lokalisierung der Amazonen äussern, zeigt, dass die Heimat der Amazonen in ganz verschiedenen Gegenden vermutet wurde: in Nordafrika, im westlichen und pontischen Kleinasien, in Thrakien, nördlich des Schwarzen Meeres im Land der Skythen sowie nicht zuletzt auch im Gebiet des Kaukasus. Gemein ist allen diesen Verortungen, dass sie sich an der Peripherie der aus griechischer Sicht bekannten, 'zivilisierten' Welt befinden, d.h. weder direkt im griechischen Kernland noch in einer reinen Phantasiewelt, sondern in einem Grenzbereich dessen, was man etwas vereinfacht als den Übergangsbereich zwischen griechischer Komfortzone und 'barbarischer Wildnis' bezeichnen könnte.³ Diese periphere Verortung im Raum steht ihrerseits in Wechselwirkung mit der Natur der Amazonen, die für die Griechen sowohl Faszination als auch Bedrohung darstellten – ein Umstand, der durch die zahlreichen Geschichten von Begegnungen zwischen panhellenischen Heldenfiguren mit den Amazonen wiederum gespiegelt wird.

In Wechselwirkung mit der peripheren Verortung der Amazonen in den Grenzregionen der griechischen Welt steht auch die bis zum heutigen Tage

'frühgeschichtliche' Präfiguration der *Perserkriege* (1.1-5) oder der fließende Übergang von mythischen zu historischen Reformatoren der athenischen Verfassung gemäss Aristoteles, der die entsprechende Darstellung bei Ion und Theseus beginnen lässt und diese direkt und ohne Bruch zu Drakon und Solon überleitet (*Ath. Pol.* 41). Zum Ineinandergreifen von Mythos und Historie bei der Alexander-und-Thalestris-Geschichte vgl. z.B. Baynham 2001; Mayor 2014, 319-338.

³ Zur Ansiedlung der Amazonen in den antiken Quellen vgl. z.B. Alonso del Real 1967, 186-202; Carlier 1979; Shapiro 1983; Blok 1995, 407-430; Dowden 1997 (mit Karte); Fornasier 2007, 14-16; Börner 2010, 21-22 (mit Karte); Cournoyer 2015, 19-30; Bammer und Muss 2021; Fallmann 2024, 177-180 und 361-364.

andauernde Diskussion über die Historizität oder Fiktionalität des Amazonenvolkes: Keine anderen Gestalten aus der Welt der griechisch-römischen Mythologie haben die Frage nach einem historischen Kern bzw. einem Sitz im Leben dergestalt angeregt wie die Amazonen. Die moderne Frage, ob es die Amazonen ‘tatsächlich gegeben haben könnte’ oder ob (abgeschwächt) der Amazonenmythos zumindest von einem ‘echten’ Volk von (männerlosen) Kriegerfrauen, von dem die Griechen direkt oder indirekt Kenntnis gehabt haben mögen, inspiriert gewesen sein könnte, soll hier zwar nicht im Vordergrund stehen, spielt aber in die anzustrebende Diskussion über die Amazonen am Kaukasus dennoch hinein – einerseits weil archäologische Funde in der Kaukasus- und Schwarzmeerregion die Historizitätsfrage immer wieder befeuert haben, andererseits weil Strabon, welcher den (wie die nachfolgende Diskussion zu zeigen sich anschickt) mythographisch wichtigsten Zeugen für die kaukasischen Amazonen darstellt, ebendiese Frage in den Raum stellt.⁴

Ferner wird in der Forschung oftmals eine Deutung der Amazonen vertreten, welche die ohne Männer auskommenden Kriegerfrauen als Gegenentwürfe zur patriarchalisch geprägten Lebensrealität der Antike deutet – wobei ihre Bezwingung durch mythische ‘Superhelden’ wie Herakles, Achilleus und Theseus in der Regel psychologisierend als sublimierter Bestätigungsversuch der patriarchalischen Gesellschaftsordnung gedeutet wird. Dadurch ergibt sich ein Verständnis, das in den Amazonen mit ihrer Weiblichkeit und ihrer Fremdartigkeit das absolut ‘Andere’ sieht, welches sich dichotomisch zum maskulin geprägten

⁴ Der Versuch, die Historizität der Amazonen zu erweisen, ist keineswegs ein Phänomen nur der heutigen Zeit; sie geht im Kern bereits auf die Abhandlung *De Amazonibus dissertatio* des französischen Gelehrten Pierre Petit (1617-1687) zurück (Petit 1685). Zur komplexen Situation der Amazonenforschung und der zahlreichen Historisierungsversuche im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert vgl. die ausführliche Darstellung bei Blok 1995, 21-143. Untersuchungen, welche die ‘tatsächliche’ Existenz der Amazonen nachzuweisen suchen, sind besonders seit der Jahrtausendwende wieder stärker im Schwange; vgl. z.B. Wilde 1999; Davis-Kimball und Behan 2002; Lebedynsky 2009; Mayor 2014; Papamichali 2023. Zur Verknüpfung archäologischer Funde aus der Kaukasus- und Schwarzmeerregion mit der Amazonenfrage s.u. mit Anm. 13 und 29-32.

‘Eigenen’ des Griechentums verhält.⁵ Eine solche Auffassung ist im Kern zwar nicht gänzlich falsch und somit auch nicht völlig unberechtigt, in der oft vertretenen Schärfe allerdings m.E. zu einseitig und deshalb nur bedingt haltbar. So wäre etwa zu konzedieren, dass, auch wenn die genannten ‘Superhelden’ die Amazonen am Ende stets bezwingen, die kriegerische Auseinandersetzung mit einer Amazone doch offensichtlich als Beitrag zur Mehrung des Ruhmes eines mythischen Helden gesehen wurde, zumal besonders der epische Ehrenkodex es einem Helden verbietet, gegen einen nicht-ebenbürtigen Gegner zu kämpfen – was wiederum die Ebenbürtigkeit der Amazonen nicht nur mit Männern allgemein, sondern auch und besonders mit der Elite der bekanntesten Kämpfer und Helden bestätigt.⁶ Ferner macht Josine Blok zu Recht darauf aufmerksam, dass “diese dem Muster binärer Oppositionen verpflichtete Sicht des Amazonenthemas” insofern allzu einseitig ist, als sie die prominente Rolle der Amazonen als Städtegründerinnen v.a. im kleinasiatischen Raum fast vollständig vernachlässigt – eine Rolle, bei der solch dichotomische Vorstellungen ganz offensichtlich keinerlei Bedeutung zu haben scheinen.⁷

⁵ Eine solche antithetisch-dichotomische Auffassung wurde besonders prominent von Page duBois (1982) und William Blake Tyrrell (1982; 1984) vertreten (ferner z.B. auch Kleinbaum 1983, 5-38; Westra 1991; Stewart 1995; eine Übersicht bei Cournoyer 2015, 6-12), geht aber im Kern bereits auf Johann Jakob Bachofen und dessen Mutterrechtstheorie zurück: Gemäss Bachofen stellte das Mutterrecht eine Vorstufe des Vaterrechts in der Menschheitsentwicklung dar, wobei dem sog. ‘Amazonentum’ eine Scharnierfunktion zwischen ungeregeltem und geregeltem Mutterrecht zugekommen sei (Bachofen 1948 [1861] passim; Diskussionen bei Zinser 1981; Wagner-Hasel 1992; *DNP* 15.1, 2001, Sp. 321-329, s.v. Matriarchat (B. Wagner-Hasel); Hartmann 2004).

⁶ Vgl. in diesem Sinne z.B. auch Hardwick 1990, 16-17: “The Amazons had a stock role as an index of heroic achievement. Their figurative importance is the product of an aristocratic way of looking at the world. They were worthy opponents – so they are worth defeating.” Vgl. ferner auch Tiersch 2013.

⁷ Blok 2001, 87, Anm. 7. Vgl. auch Fornasier 2007, 78-80, der zu Recht auf die Vernachlässigung der Rolle der Amazonen als Städtegründerinnen in Kleinasien als Folge einer athenozentrischen Sicht der Forschung aufmerksam macht. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit den genannten antithetisch-dichotomischen

Dementsprechend möchte ich hier vorschlagen, dass die Amazonen nicht für eine totale Andersartigkeit in vollständigem Kontrast zum Griechentum, sondern vielmehr für eine nur partielle Nicht-Zugehörigkeit zu ebendiesem bei gleichzeitiger, partieller Zugehörigkeit stehen.⁸ Damit korrespondiert der Umstand, dass die Amazonen in ihrer geschlechtlichen Identität eindeutig weiblich sind, jedoch in ihrer Funktion als Kriegerinnen – dazu gehören Attribute wie Pfeil und Bogen sowie Berittenheit bzw. (wie häufig auf griechischen Vasenbildern zu finden) ihre Darstellung in Hoplitentracht – Aufgaben ausüben, die ebenso eindeutig maskulin konnotiert sind.⁹ Dieses ‘Sowohl-als auch’ mit seiner Eindeutigkeit in beiden Bereichen zeigt sich etwa besonders gut an der Geschichte von Achilleus, der sich erst in Penthesileia verlieben kann, nachdem er sie getötet und ihr den Helm abgenommen, sie also in ihrer männlich konnotierten Tätigkeit als Kriegerin gestoppt und somit auf ihr weibliches Äusseres reduziert hat¹⁰ – und es spiegelt sich m.E. ebenfalls

Lesarten bieten ferner z.B. auch Goldberg 1998 und Wagner-Hasel 2010; vgl. ausserdem auch die grossenteils sehr nuancierten Beiträge im Sammelband von Schubert und Weiß 2013. Allerdings ist auch die neuere Forschung gegen die Wirkmächtigkeit der Hypothese der absoluten Andersartigkeit nicht gefeit; vgl. z.B. Penrose 2019, 219: “The Greek legends were used [...] to reinforce patriarchy by highlighting the Amazons as negative role models who are killed off [...]”. Ähnlich z.B. auch Roque 2017; Papamichali 2023.

⁸ So bereits überzeugend Wagner-Hasel 1986, 98, und Wagner-Hasel 2002. Diese Einsicht entspricht auch den römischen Befunden, insofern als die Amazonen im römischen Bereich vielfach als Identifikationsfiguren für römische Frauen dienten (freundlicher Hinweis eines anonymen Gutachters / einer anonymen Gutachterin). Vgl. z.B. Fendt 2005; Wagner-Hasel 2008; ferner Russenberger 2015, der aufzeigt, dass Darstellungen von Amazonomachien auf römischen Sarkophagen nicht etwa eine Glorifizierung der siegreichen Griechen insinuierten, sondern vielmehr dazu dienten, den Tod der dargestellten Amazonenköniginnen mit dem eigenen Trauerfall in Beziehung zu setzen.

⁹ Man mag darin durchaus eine Form von Transvestitismus (Schubert 2013; 2019) oder gar von Transgenderismus (Bychowski 2016; Penrose 2024) sehen, doch handelt es sich hierbei m.E. um anachronistische Rückprojektionen kontemporärer Denkansätze.

¹⁰ Vgl. dazu Blok 1995, 276-288.

in der typisch peripheren Lokalisierung der Amazonen: Die griechische Imagination hat die Amazonen immer in denjenigen Gebieten der damals bekannten Welt verortet, deren Existenz zwar bekannt, die aber noch nicht hinreichend erkundet waren.¹¹ Mit der Verortung der Amazonen in der Peripherie wurde die Spannung zwischen der Andersartigkeit der Kriegerfrauen und ihrer zugleich dennoch spürbaren Zugehörigkeit zur griechischen Kultur in den geographischen Raum dessen transferiert, was weder zu nahe noch zu weit entfernt erschien. Und an diesem Punkt ist wiederum auch die Rolle der Amazonen als Städtegründerinnen bedeutsam, insofern als nach griechischer Vorstellung nicht-griechische Stadtbewohner als zivilisierter galten im Vergleich zu in der Wildnis lebenden 'Barbaren'.¹²

2. DIE KAUKASISCHEN AMAZONEN IN DER GRIECHISCHEN MYTHOGRAPHIE

Obschon die Vorstellung kaukasischer Amazonen vergleichsweise schwach bezeugt ist, sind die existenten Zeugnisse doch, wie im Folgenden zu zeigen ist, höchst aufschlussreich. Herodot berichtet in seinem Geschichtswerk vom Volk der Sauromaten (auch Sarmaten genannt), das aus einer Vermischung von Amazonen und männlichen Skythen hervorgegangen sei und sich in der Region zwischen dem Schwarzen Meer und dem Kaspischen Meer östlich des Dons – und somit in der nördlichen Region des Kaukasus – angesiedelt habe; von ihren amazonischen Vorfahren hätten die weiblichen Sauromaten gewisse maskulin konnotierte Sitten wie die Berittenheit oder die Teilnahme an der Jagd geerbt und beibehalten (Hdt. 4.110-117).¹³ Gemäss

¹¹ Vgl. in diesem Sinne z.B. auch Börner 2010, 21: "Die Ansiedlung der Amazonen am Rand der bekannten Welt, an der Grenze der Zivilisation, verschob sich mit der fortlaufenden Erkundung und dem wachsenden geografischen Wissen über die Welt." Vgl. ferner auch Tyrrell 1984, 55-57; Wagner-Hasel 1986, 86-88; Hölscher 2000b, 295-300; Tiersch 2013, 116-117; Fallmann 2024, 177-180 und 361-364.

¹² Vgl. Hölscher 2000a, 12-15; Fallmann 2024, 11-14.

¹³ Zu den Sauromaten/Sarmaten vgl. z.B. Harmatta 1950; 1970; Lebedynsky 2002; 2006; Ivantchik 2013. Vereinzelt Funde von Waffenbeigaben in sauromatischen / sarmatischen Frauengräbern wurden zuweilen als Hinweise auf 'Amazonengräber' gedeutet; vgl. bes. Davis-Kimball 1997; 2012; Davis-Kimball und Behan 2002, 55-61. Dazu kritisch Ivantchik 2013, 82: "Davis-Kimball glaubt, dass

Diodor soll das Amazonenvolk aus einer Gruppe aufständischer Skythen entstanden sein, welches sich durch hartes Training und Aneignung männlicher Kampftugenden zu einem starken und widerstandsfähigen Frauenvolk entwickelt und daraufhin weite Teile Europas und Kleinasien unterworfen habe (Diod. Sic. 2.44-46). Die erste, nicht namentlich bekannte Amazonenkönigin soll schliesslich die Amazonenstadt Themiskyra an der Mündung des Flusses Thermodon gegründet haben (2.45.4). Das Einflussgebiet der letzten Amazonenkönigin Thalestris, die sich im Jahre 330 v. Chr. mit Alexander dem Grossen getroffen und mit ihm den Geschlechtsverkehr vollzogen haben soll, habe sich sodann über das gesamte Gebiet zwischen dem Thermodon und dem Phasis erstreckt (17.77).¹⁴ Sowohl Herodot als auch Diodor implizieren also unmissverständlich einen Bezug der Amazonen zum Kaukasus, diskutieren diese Verbindung allerdings nicht weiter.

Die erste erhaltene – und zugleich auch die einzige detaillierte – Quelle, in der über die Amazonen am Kaukasus explizit berichtet wird, ist die Schilderung Strabons: Im elften Buch seines historio-, ethno- und geographischen Grosswerks berichtet Strabon ausführlich über Herkunft sowie Gebräuche und Sitten der kaukasischen Amazonen und reflektiert ausserdem über die Frage nach der Glaubwürdigkeit der entsprechenden Nachrichten (11.5.1-4).¹⁵ Strabon beginnt seinen Bericht damit, dass er die Amazonen geographisch im kaukasischen Albanien – also im nördlichen Kaukasus, ungefähr auf dem

zwei Frauengräber aus Pokrovka die Glaubwürdigkeit der Herodot-Erzählung über die sauromatischen Frauen bestätigen und dass die sauromatischen Kriegerinnen die Vorbilder griechischer Amazonen gewesen seien. Im Hinblick auf den [...] Befund, dass es sich dabei um nur zwei von 205 Gräbern handelt, sind solche Schlussfolgerungen nicht gerechtfertigt.“ Auch ein Zusammenhang zwischen Waffenbeigaben in skythischen Frauengräbern mit dem griechischen Amazonenmythos ist wiederholt postuliert worden; vgl. z.B. Rolle 1986; Wilde 1999, 44-52; Guliaev 2003; Jordan 2009, 103-105; Rolle 2010, 152-159; Mayor 2014, 34-51; Vovoura 2021. Vgl. dagegen Porter 2018, 81-102.

¹⁴ Zu Diodors Bericht über die Amazonen vgl. auch Fabre-Serris 2008, 39-46.

¹⁵ Griechischer Text und deutsche Übersetzung von Strabons Werk werden im Folgenden nach der zweisprachigen Ausgabe von Radt 2004 zitiert. Vgl. ausserdem den knappen Kommentar von Radt 2008, 264-266, sowie die kurze Analyse bei Fabre-Serris 2008, 46-48.

Gebiet des heutigen Aserbeidschan – verortet (ἐν δὲ τοῖς ὑπὲρ τῆς Ἀλβανίας ὄρεσι, “in den Bergen oberhalb Albaniens”, 11.5.1), wobei er sich auf drei Gewährsleute beruft, die alle ungefähr eine Generation vor ihm lebten und wirkten, nämlich Theophanes von Mytilene (*FGrH* 188 F 4), Metrodoros von Skepsis (*FGrH* 184 F 7) und Hypsikrates von Amisos (*FGrH* 190 F 3) – wobei, wie Strabon präzisiert, die exakte geographische Lokalisierung in der Grossregion des kaukasischen Albanien je nach Autor unterschiedlich ausfalle: Theophanes berichte, so Strabon, dass “zwischen den Amazonen und den Albanern [...] die skythischen Geler und Leger wohnten” (μεταξὺ τῶν Ἀμαζόνων καὶ τῶν Ἀλβανῶν [...] Γήλας οἰκεῖν καὶ Λήγας Σκύθας, 11.5.1), während gemäss Metrodoros und Hypsikrates die Amazonen “als Grenznachbarn der Gargareer auf den nördlichen Vorhöhen der Kaukasischen Berge, die die Keraunischen genannt werden, wohnten” (Γαργαρεῦσιν ὁμόρους [...] οἰκεῖν [...] ἐν ταῖς ὑπωρεῖαις ταῖς πρὸς ἄρκτον τῶν Καυκασίων ὄρων, ἃ καλεῖται Κεραύνια, *ibid.*). Die Werke dieser drei Autoren sind allesamt bis auf wenige Fragmente verloren, sodass sich Strabons Angaben nicht überprüfen lassen – doch dessen ungeachtet zeigt allein der Umstand, dass Strabon diese drei zu Beginn seines Berichts in einem Atemzug erwähnt, unzweideutig, dass die Vorstellung von kaukasischen Amazonen zu jener Zeit, also in und seit dem 1. Jahrhundert v. Chr. (und somit in einer Zeit, als sich das Römische Reich allmählich auch in jene Region auszudehnen begann), weit verbreitet gewesen sein muss.¹⁶

Besonders aufschlussreich ist der Hinweis auf Theophanes, insofern als dieser ein enger Berater und persönlicher Historiograph des Pompeius war, der in seinem nur fragmentarisch bezeugten Geschichtswerk (*FGrH* 188) Pompeius’ Taten dementsprechend beschrieben und gepriesen hat.¹⁷ Plutarch, der einige Jahrzehnte nach Strabon wirkte, hat in seiner Biographie des Pompeius auch auf die kaukasischen Amazonen Bezug genommen, wobei er sich auf den weit ausführlicheren Bericht Strabons gestützt haben dürfte. Bei

¹⁶ Zum kaukasischen Albanien und den bei Strabon genannten Völkern vgl. den Überblick bei Ateshi Gadirova 2014, 242-243 (mit weiterführender Literatur).

¹⁷ Zu Theophanes vgl. detailliert *RE* V A.2, 1934, Sp. 2090-2127, s.v. Theophanes I (R. Laqueur). Den persönlichen Einfluss des Theophanes auf Pompeius bezeugen u.a. Cic. *Att.* 5.11.3; Strabo 12.2.3; Plut. *Vit. Pomp.* 49.13-14.

Plutarch ist davon die Rede, dass in einer Schlacht zwischen Pompeius und den von Rom abtrünnigen Albanern im Dritten Mithridatischen Krieg (73–63 v. Chr.) auch Amazonen auf der Seite der Barbaren mitgekämpft hätten; allerdings konzediert Plutarch sogleich, es seien gar keine Amazonenleichen auf dem Schlachtfeld gefunden worden, sondern man habe die Kampfbeteiligung der Amazonen nur aufgrund liegengebliebener Schilde und Stiefel, die als amazonentypisch galten, angenommen (μετὰ γὰρ τὴν μάχην σκυλεύοντες οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι τοὺς βαρβάρους πέλταις Ἀμαζονικαῖς καὶ κοθόρνοις ἐνετύγχανον, σῶμα δ' οὐδὲν ὥφθη γυναικεῖον, „denn die Römer fanden, als sie nach der Schlacht die gefallenen Barbaren ausplünderten, Amazonenschilde und -halbstiefel, doch kam ihnen kein weiblicher Leichnam zu Gesicht“, Plut. *Vit. Pomp.* 35.5).¹⁸ Ferner äussert sich Plutarch ebenfalls zur geographischen Herkunft und Verortung der Amazonen: sie seien „von den Bergen um den Thermodonfluss heruntergekommen“ (ἀπὸ τῶν περὶ τὸν Θερμῳδόντα ποταμὸν ὁρῶν καταβᾶσαι, *ibid.*), wohnten nunmehr aber „in den Teilen des Kaukasus, die dem Kaspischen Meere zugewandt sind, grenzen aber nicht an die Albaner, sondern die Geler und Leger wohnen dazwischen“ (τὰ καθήκοντα πρὸς τὴν Ὑρκανίαν θάλασσαν, οὐχ ὁμοροῦσαι τοῖς Ἀλβανοῖς, ἀλλὰ Γέλαι καὶ Λήγες οἰκοῦσι διὰ μέσου, 35.6). Mit der Referenz auf den Thermodon verweist Plutarch auf die seit Herodot topische Lokalisierung der Amazonen,¹⁹ während die Nachbarschaft mit den Völkern der Geler und

¹⁸ Plutarchs Text folgt der Ausgabe von Ziegler 1973; Übersetzung nach Ziegler und Wuhrmann 2010 [1954–1965]. Die πέλη war ein leichter, randloser Rundschild, der sowohl mit den Thrakern (Hdt. 7.75) als auch mit den Amazonen (Verg. *Aen.* 1.490 und 11.663; Quint. Smyrn. 1.147) assoziiert wurde (vgl. auch Shapiro 1983 zu den ‘thrakischen’ und ‘skythischen’ Amazonendarstellungen in der frühen attischen Vasenmalerei). Zum Kothurn als Frauenschuh vgl. z.B. Ar. *Eccl.* 341–346 und *Lys.* 657.

¹⁹ Anders Ziegler und Wuhrmann 2010 [1954–1965], 366: „Der hier genannte Thermodon kann nicht das etwa 50 km östlich von Amisos ins Schwarze Meer mündende Flößchen sein, an dem man gewöhnlich die Amazonen und ihre Stadt Themiskyra ansetzte [...], sondern ein ins Kaspische Meer mündender Fluß; genauere Bestimmung unmöglich.“ Ich halte diese Auffassung für wenig glaubhaft, da die Vorstellung des Thermodon als Wohngebiet der Amazonen dermassen etabliert war,

Leger im Kaukasus beinahe wörtlich aus Strabons Bericht übernommen ist, der sich wiederum auf Theophanes stützt.

Während Plutarch keine weiteren Informationen über die kaukasischen Amazonen liefert und ausserdem mit dem Hinweis auf die fehlende Autopsie der angeblichen amazonischen Beteiligung an der Schlacht zwischen Pompeius und den Albanern implizit Zweifel an der Existenz der Kriegerfrauen sät, so bietet Strabons Bericht, auf den nun zurückzukommen ist, im Anschluss an die Nennung seiner Gewährsleute eine ausführliche ethnographische Schilderung: Diese bedient einerseits das bekannte Narrativ der Amazonen als Kriegerinnen mit den dazugehörigen, bekannten Topoi (inklusive die Legende vom Ausbrennen der rechten Brust),²⁰ geht andererseits aber auch auf die Tätigkeit der Frauen als Selbstversorgerinnen (Jagd, Ackerbau und Pferdezucht) ein. Darauf folgt ein Bericht über die Frage nach der Fortpflanzung der Amazonen:

δύο δὲ μῆνας ἐξαιρέτους ἔχειν τοῦ ἔαρος, καθ' οὓς ἀναβαίνουσιν εἰς τὸ πλησίον ὄρος τὸ διορίζον αὐτάς τε καὶ τοὺς Γαργαρέας· ἀναβαίνουσι δὲ κάκεῖνοι κατὰ ἔθος τι παλαιὸν συνθύσοντές τε καὶ συνεσόμενοι ταῖς γυναιξὶ τεκνοποιίας χάριν ἀφανῶς τε καὶ ἐν σκότει, ὁ τυχὼν τῇ τυχούσῃ, ἐγκύμονας δὲ ποιήσαντες ἀποπέμπουσιν. αἱ δ' ὅ τι μὲν ἂν θῆλυ τέκωσι κατέχουσιν αὐταί, τὰ δ' ἄρρενα κομίζουσιν ἐκείνοις ἐκτρέφειν· ὡκειῶται δ' ἕκαστος πρὸς ἕκαστον νομίζων υἱὸν διὰ τὴν ἄγνοιαν. (Strabo 11.5.1)

dass kaum ein antiker Leser wegen einer geographischen Unschärfe auf die Idee gekommen sein dürfte, hierin einen anderen Fluss gleichen Namens zu vermuten.

²⁰ Der Topos vom Ausbrennen der Brust geht auf eine volksetymologische Deutung des Namens der Amazonen zurück: Der Name wurde als Kombination eines *alpha privativum* mit dem griechischen Wort μαζός ("Brust") verstanden und dahingehend gedeutet, dass sich die Amazonen ihre rechte Brust ausgebrannt hätten, um ungehindert den Bogen spannen zu können. Der früheste greifbare Beleg für diese Volksetymologie findet sich bei Hellanikos, also im 5. Jh. v. Chr. (FGrH 323a F 16b; weitere Belege bei Fowler 2013, 291, Anm. 99). Allerdings begegnet diese Vorstellung nur in Texten, während ikonographische Quellen die Amazonen immer mit beiden Brüsten zeigen – was wiederum Zeugnis dafür ablegt, dass die Amazonen als in ihrer geschlechtlichen Identität eindeutig weiblich verstanden wurden (s.o.). Für eine Diskussion vgl. z.B. Blok 1995, 21-37; Hinge 2005, 96-101; Mayor 2014, 84-94.

Zwei besondere Monate aber hätten sie im Frühling, in denen sie auf den benachbarten Berg steigen, der sie von den Gargareern trennt; auch diese stiegen hinauf, um nach einer alten Sitte zusammen mit den Frauen zu opfern und ihnen zum Kinderzeugen beizuwohnen; das geschieht verborgen und im Dunkeln, wie sie gerade aufeinandertreffen, und wenn sie geschwängert haben, lassen sie sie zurückgehen. Die Frauen behalten, was sie an Weiblichem gebären, selber, die männlichen Kinder dagegen bringen sie jenen zum Aufziehen; und jeder fühlt sich jedem verbunden, da er ihn wegen seiner Unkenntnis als seinen Sohn betrachtet.

Die Frage, weshalb die Amazonen sich ausgerechnet (und ausschliesslich) mit den Gargareern zwecks Fortpflanzung treffen, wird erst im Anschluss an die nämliche Fortpflanzungserzählung sozusagen 'nachgeliefert':

τοὺς δὲ Γαργαρέας συναναβῆναι μὲν ἐκ Θेमισκύρας φασὶ ταῖς Ἀμαζόσιν εἰς τοῦσδε τοὺς τόπους, εἶτ' ἀποστάντας αὐτῶν πολεμεῖν μετὰ Θρακῶν καὶ Εὐβοέων τινῶν πλανηθέντων μέχρι δεῦρο πρὸς αὐτάς, ὕστερον δὲ καταλυσάμενους τὸν πρὸς αὐτάς πόλεμον ἐπὶ τοῖς λεχθεῖσι ποιήσασθαι συμβάσεις, ὥστε τέκνων συγκοινωνεῖν μόνον, ζῆν δὲ καθ' αὐτοὺς ἐκατέρους. (Strabo 11.5.2)

Die Gargareer sollen zusammen mit den Amazonen aus Themiskyra in diese Gegenden hinaufgestiegen sein; dann hätten sie sich gegen sie aufgelehnt und sie zusammen mit gewissen bis hierher verschlagenen Thrakern und Euboern bekriegt, später jedoch den Krieg gegen sie unter besagter Bedingung beendet, nur Kinder gemeinsam zu haben, ihr Leben aber getrennt für sich zu führen.

Narratologisch gesehen sind hier zwei Aspekte hervorzuheben: Zum einen ist zu konstatieren, dass sich Strabon nunmehr – nachdem er zu Beginn seines Berichts zwei unterschiedliche Lokalisierungen der Amazonen im kaukasischen Grossgebiet ohne Wertung nebeneinandergestellt hat – auf diejenige des Metrodoros und des Hypsikrates beschränkt, dergemäss die Amazonen Grenznachbarn der Gargareer seien, wohingegen Theophanes' Version von der Nachbarschaft mit den Geiern und den Legern, welcher Plutarch folgt (s.o.), stillschweigend aus der weiteren Erzählung ausgeschrieben wird, ohne dass eine explizite Begründung für die Bevorzugung der anderen Variante geliefert würde. Diese narrative Ellipse, die eine Leerstelle in der Lesererwartung hinterlässt, geht zum anderen einher mit einer weiteren narrativen Eigenheit: mit einer Inversion des (chrono-)logisch zu erwartenden Erzählfortgangs,

insofern als zuerst von der Art der Fortpflanzung der kaukasischen Amazonen mit den Gargareern berichtet wird, ehe die Ursache für den Ursprung der Praxis 'nachgeschoben' wird, nämlich, weil die Amazonen und die Gargareer in alter Zeit eine Gemeinschaft gebildet haben sollen.

Mit Blick auf die Darstellung der Wesensart und Sitten der Amazonen in Strabons ethnographische und historische Aspekte vereinendem Bericht sind sodann folgende Punkte von Bedeutung: Erstens ist der Umstand zu nennen, dass die Amazonen und die Gargareer weiland zusammengelebt haben sollen und dass die beiden Gruppen sich später auf Betreiben der Männer – und nicht etwa auf das der Frauen! – getrennt hätten. Die Existenz der kaukasischen Amazonen als reine Frauengemeinschaft wird somit nicht als eine ursprünglich frei gewählte Lebensform, sondern als Folge einer kriegsbedingten Geschlechtertrennung dargestellt. Dadurch wird m.E. die Rezeption der Amazonen als Vertreterinnen einer fremdartigen 'Gegenwelt' ein Stück weit relativiert, insofern als ihre unkonventionelle Lebensform als Folge eines Sachzwanges erklärt wird; auf diese Weise wird im Leser Verständnis für die Situation der Amazonen geweckt, was wiederum den bedrohlichen Charakter ihrer ungriechischen Lebensart abschwächt. In ähnlicher Weise abschwächend wirkt zweitens auch die Erzählung vom *modus operandi* der Fortpflanzung: Zwar entspricht die ausserhehliche und unter zufälliger Auswahl des Sexualpartners erfolgende, anonyme Form der Fortpflanzung mit anschliessender Geschlechtertrennung bei der Aufzucht und Erziehung der Kinder ganz gewiss nicht den Gepflogenheiten dessen, was nach den Massstäben sittlich-zivilisierten Griechentums typischerweise praktiziert wurde,²¹

²¹ Mayor 2014, 157-158, glaubt in Strabons Bericht einen Reflex von Bräuchen kaukasischer (und anderer) Kulturen zu erkennen: "What Strabo describes is the premodern, widespread custom known as *fosterage*. Sending children, especially boys but sometimes girls, to be raised apart from the clan or tribe was common among Caucasian, Circassian, Scythian, Central Asian, and Persian-influenced cultures in antiquity, and it was still in evidence in early modern times in the Caucasus (it was also traditional among Welsh, Irish, and Scottish clans). Fosterage was a kind of guest-hostage exchange of sons, similar in purpose to marriage alliances. Raising each other's children ensured trust and friendly political relations among groups that might otherwise be in conflict. [...] Among many groups

doch im Vergleich zu den Versionen, die von anderen Autoren bekannt sind, hört sich diese Schilderung nachgerade zahm an: So berichtet Hellanikos – ähnlich wie Strabon –, dass sich die Amazonen mit den Männern benachbarter Stämme paarten, dass sie allerdings nur die weiblichen Nachkommen am Leben liessen, während sie ihren männlichen Nachwuchs umbrächten (*FGrH* 167 4 F). In vergleichbarer Weise berichtet der spätantike Historiker Jordanes, Verfasser einer Geschichte der Goten, dass die Amazonen ihre männlichen Nachkommen teils ihren Vätern zurückgäben, sie jedoch teils auch mit dem Hass einer Stiefmutter töteten (*Get.* 8.56). Noch plastischer nimmt sich Diodors Bericht aus, der sich zwar nicht explizit zum Thema der Vermehrung äussert,²² der jedoch die degradierende Behandlung der Männer durch die Amazonen im Anfangsstadium ihrer Entstehung detailreich schildert: So ist dort von der absichtlich erfolgten Zuteilung häuslicher Aufgaben, von Erniedrigung und Versklavung sowie von der Verstümmelung der Arme und Beine der männlichen Nachkommen die Rede (2.45.2-3). Im Vergleich dazu wirken die unblutige und gewaltfreie Form der Fortpflanzung und der Kindererziehung sowie die Geschlechtertrennung, von der Strabon berichtet, ausserordentlich moderat. Sowohl der Bericht über die historische Herkunft der kaukasischen Amazonen wie auch der Bericht über ihre Fortpflanzung lassen sich m. E. letztlich in Zusammenhang mit der genannten peripheren Lokalisierung der Amazonen und deren metaphorischer bzw. metonymischer Bedeutung bringen: Der Begriff des Peripheren ist hier nun nicht mehr bloss geographisch, sondern auch und v.a. soziokulturell und ethnologisch zu verstehen – die von Strabon geschilderte Wesensart der Amazonen ist gewiss ungriechisch, aber eben auch nicht gänzlich barbarisch und unzivilisiert.

Besonders aufschlussreich sind sodann Strabons darauffolgende Bemerkungen, weil diese in eine Grundsatzreflexion über das Verhältnis zwischen Mythos und Historie münden:

ἴδιον δέ τι συμβέβηκε τῷ λόγῳ τῷ περὶ τῶν Ἀμαζόνων· οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλοι τὸ μῦθῳδες καὶ τὸ ἱστορικὸν διωρισμένον ἔχουσι· τὰ γὰρ

in the Caucasus and Central Asia, sexual relations within a clan or tribe were forbidden as incest; fosterage was another way to encourage exogamy.”

²² Pace Penrose 2016, 3, der die Stelle missversteht. Weitere Passagen bei Wagner-Hasel 1986, 98.

παλαιὰ καὶ ψευδῇ καὶ τερατώδη μῦθοι καλοῦνται, ἡ δ' ἱστορία βούλεται τἀληθές ἄν τε παλαιὸν ἄν τε νέον, καὶ τὸ τερατώδες ἢ οὐκ ἔχει ἢ σπάνιον. περὶ δὲ τῶν Ἀμαζόνων τὰ αὐτὰ λέγεται καὶ νῦν καὶ πάλαι τερατώδη τε ὄντα καὶ πίστεως πόρρω. τίς γάρ ἄν πιστεύσειεν ὥς γυναικῶν στρατὸς ἢ πόλις ἢ ἔθνος συσταίῃ ἄν ποτε χωρὶς ἀνδρῶν, καὶ οὐ μόνον γε συσταίῃ, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐφόδους ποιήσαιο ἐπὶ τὴν ἀλλοτρίαν καὶ κρατήσειεν οὐ τῶν ἐγγὺς μόνον, ὥστε καὶ μέχρι τῆς νῦν Ἰωνίας προελθεῖν, ἀλλὰ καὶ διαπόντιον στείλειτο στρατείαν μέχρι τῆς Ἀττικῆς; (Strabo 11.5.3)

Mit dem Bericht über die Amazonen ist etwas Eigentümliches geschehen. Bei allen sonstigen Berichten nämlich ist das Fabelhafte und das Historische voneinander getrennt (wird doch das Alte, Erdichtete und Wunderbare Fabel genannt, während die Geschichte das Wahre will – gleichgültig, ob es alt oder neu ist – und vom Wunderbaren entweder gar nichts oder nur wenig enthält). Über die Amazonen aber hören wir heute ebenso wie in alter Zeit dieselben Berichte, die wunderbar und von jeder Glaubhaftigkeit weit entfernt sind. Denn wer sollte glauben, dass sich jemals ein Heer oder eine Stadt oder ein Volk von Frauen ohne Männer gebildet habe, und nicht nur sich gebildet, sondern auch noch Angriffe auf fremdes Land unternommen und nicht nur die Nachbarn besiegt habe, so dass es sogar bis zum heutigen Ionien vorstieß, sondern auch übers Meer eine Expedition bis nach Attika entsandt hätte?

Strabons strikte Trennung zwischen Mythos und Historie und die daraus abgeleitete Dichotomie zwischen Fiktion und Wahrheit lassen aufhorchen, gemahnen seine Worte doch unüberhörbar an Thukydides' sehr ähnliche Aussagen in dessen hochberühmtem Methodenkapitel:

ἐκ δὲ τῶν εἰρημένων τεκμηρίων ὅμως τοιαῦτα ἄν τις νομίζων μάλιστα ἂ διηλθον οὐχ ἁμαρτάνοι, καὶ οὔτε ὥς ποιηταὶ ὑμνήκασιν περὶ αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τὸ μείζον κοσμοῦντες μᾶλλον πιστεύων, οὔτε ὥς λογογράφοι ξυνέθεσαν ἐπὶ τὸ προσαγωγότερον τῇ ἀκροάσει ἢ ἀληθέστερον, ὄντα ἀνεξέλεγκτα καὶ τὰ πολλὰ ὑπὸ χρόνου αὐτῶν ἀπίστως ἐπὶ τὸ μυθῶδες ἐκνευκικότα, ἠρώησθαι δὲ ἡγησάμενος ἐκ τῶν ἐπιφανεστάτων σημείων ὥς παλαιὰ εἶναι ἀποχρόντως. (Thuc. 1.21.1)

Wer aber nach den angeführten Zeugnissen die Ereignisse sich doch etwa so vorstellt, wie ich sie berichtet habe, wird nicht fehlgehen, und

er wird nicht einfach den Dichtern glauben, die in ihren Hymnen alles mit höherem Glanze schmücken, noch den Logographen, die in ihren Berichten mehr auf die Befriedigung der Hörlust achten als auf die Wahrheit – es handelt sich ja um unbeweisbare Dinge, die zum Grossteil durch die Zeit ins Unglaubliche und Fabelhafte ausgeartet sind –, sondern er wird meinen, sie seien nach ihren sichtbaren Merkmalen für ihr Alter hinreichend genau erforscht worden.²³

Thukydides wiederholt den hier erstmals belegten Begriff τὸ μυθῶδες (“das Fabelhafte”) kurz darauf ein zweites Mal in negierter Form, indem er “das Nicht-Fabelhafte” (τὸ μὴ μυθῶδες, 1.22.4) programmatisch zum Leitfaden seiner Art, Historie zu schreiben, erhebt, verbunden mit der Ankündigung, dass seine Erzählung dadurch “eher wenig unterhaltsam” (ἀτερπέστερον, *ibid.*) werden würde. Durch diese Zweifachnennung erhebt Thukydides die Phrase τὸ (μὴ) μυθῶδες zu einem Schlüsselbegriff seines historiographischen Programms – und in der Tat bleiben auch spätere Verwendungen des Ausdrucks hauptsächlich auf die Historiographie beschränkt und weisen in der Regel Zitatcharakter mit Bezug auf Thukydides auf.²⁴ Strabon zitiert mit der Übernahme des Begriffs also wörtlich aus Thukydides’ Methodenkapitel, rekurriert mit der abwertenden Qualifikation des Begriffes als “das Alte, Erdichtete und Wunderbare” (τὰ παλαιὰ καὶ ψευδῆ καὶ τερατώδη, s.o.) aber gleichzeitig auch ebenso unzweideutig auf Thukydides’ analoge Referenz auf “unbeweisbare Dinge, die zum Grossteil durch die Zeit ins Unglaubliche und Fabelhafte ausgeartet sind” (s.o.). Zugleich knüpft er auch an Thukydides’ ebenso programmatische Aussage in dessen Proömium an, dass es unmöglich sei, über Ereignisse, die weiter als eine unmittelbare Vergangenheit zurücklägen, Gewissheit zu erlangen (τὰ [...] πρὸ αὐτῶν καὶ τὰ ἔτι παλαιότερα σαφῶς [...] εὐρεῖν διὰ χρόνον πλῆθος ἀδύνατα ἦν, “was sich [...] davor [= vor dem Peloponnesischen Krieg] und noch früher ereignet hatte, war wegen der Länge der Zeit [...] unmöglich zu erforschen”, 1.1.3). Fernerhin schreibt er sich damit auch

²³ Griechischer Text: Jones 1942; deutsche Übersetzung (leicht modifiziert): Vretska und Rinner 2000 [1966].

²⁴ Vgl. Flory 1990, 193, Anm. 2.

in einen altererbten philosophischen Diskurs ein, da der Gedanke, dass Erzählungen über alte Begebenheiten („das Alte“, τὰ παλαιά) automatisch weniger wahr oder gar unwahr seien, bereits platonisch ist (*Resp.* 2.382c).²⁵ Das Problem bei alledem bestehe allerdings darin – so fährt Strabon weiter –, „dass das Alte mehr Glauben findet als das Heutige“ (τὸ πιστεύεσθαι τὰ παλαιὰ μᾶλλον ἢ τὰ νῦν, 11.5.3). Dieses Problem illustriert Strabon daraufhin mit einer Diskussion der Frage nach dem Wahrheitsgehalt der Begegnung zwischen Alexander dem Grossen und Thalestris²⁶ – einem Ereignis, bei dem Mythos und Historie konvergieren: Während sich sämtliche Autoren – und damit schliesst Strabon seinen Bericht über die Amazonen – über in der mythischen Vorvergangenheit wurzelnde Dinge wie den weder beweis- noch überprüfbaren Wohnsitz der Amazonen am Thermodon und in Themiskyra einig seien, so herrsche paradoxerweise bezüglich der Alexander-und-Thalestris-Geschichte, die sich doch erst in der jüngeren Vergangenheit zugetragen haben soll, Uneinigkeit.

Ähnlich wie Thukydides seine Vorgänger diskreditiert, denen Unterhaltung vorgeblich wichtiger gewesen sein soll als Wahrheitsfindung – womit er hauptsächlich Herodot gemeint haben dürfte –,²⁷ kritisiert Strabon die Glaubwürdigkeit anderer Geschichtsschreiber wie auch und besonders den Umstand, dass selbst zu seiner Zeit noch immer unglaubliche und phantastische Geschichten über die Amazonen im Umlauf seien. Wenn er jedoch behauptet, dass „bei allen sonstigen Berichten [...] das Fabelhafte und das Historische voneinander getrennt [seien]“ (s.o.), so stellt er sich ganz klar

²⁵ Vgl. ferner auch Hdt. 1.5.3. Zum Wunderbaren und Mirakulösen in der antiken Literatur vgl. z.B. die Bände von Hömke und Baumbach 2006; Gerolemou 2018.

²⁶ Von Strabon (im Gegensatz zu Diodor und Quintus Curtius Rufus) „Thalestria“ genannt; vgl. Radt 2008, 266.

²⁷ Vgl. Griffiths 2011, 196: „This can hardly be anything other than a hit at his elder predecessor Herodotos, the charm of whose anecdotal narrative has been appreciated from antiquity to the present day.“ Vgl. aber auch Hornblower 1991, 58–59: „Logographer [is] a term which would have included Hdt. but especially such writers as Hekataios whose mythical content was greater than Hdt.’s.“ Zum Verhältnis zwischen Thukydides und Herodot mit Blick auf die Frage nach Fiktion / Mythos vs. Wahrheit vgl. auch Raaflaub 2016.

in die Tradition des thukydideischen Anspruchs, Fiktion und Wahrheit strikt zu trennen und dadurch eine Einbusse an Unterhaltungswert in Kauf zu nehmen. Dass Strabon seine programmatische Grundsatzdiskussion und die damit verbundene Kritik an den im Umlauf befindlichen Geschichten über die Amazonen *nach* seinem ausführlichen Bericht über die kaukasischen Amazonen einfügt – einem Bericht, in dessen Zusammenhang er für den Bereich der Fortpflanzung eine zwar unkonventionelle, aber keineswegs unmögliche Vorgehensweise referiert und ausserdem eine plausible Erklärung für die Entstehung des Amazonenvolkes nach deren Trennung von den Gargareern liefert –, ist bei alledem alles andere als unbedeutsam: Strabons Amazonenerzählung erweist sich damit, ohne dass er es explizit aussprechen müsste, *ex post* als das Gegenteil dessen, was er seinen 'Konkurrenten' vorwirft, nämlich "wunderbar und von jeder Glaubhaftigkeit weit entfernt" (s.o.) zu sein. Was Strabon als unglaubwürdig kritisiert, sind im Endeffekt nur zwei Punkte, nämlich einerseits die Annahme einer aus sich selbst heraus, sozusagen parthenogenetisch entstandenen Amazonengemeinschaft und andererseits Geschichten über extensive Expansion und Kriegsführung vonseiten der Amazonen (11.5.3, s.o.). Demgegenüber geht die Existenz eines Frauenvolkes wie das der kaukasischen Amazonen, deren Ursprung und Lebensweise sich rational erklären lassen, durchaus konform mit Strabons thukydideisch geprägtem Glaubwürdigkeitsanspruch. Zugleich korreliert dieser Glaubwürdigkeitsanspruch auch mit der bereits konstatierten peripheren Verortung der Amazonen in der Kaukasusregion – welche, *nota bene*, zu Strabons Zeit keinesfalls eine bloss vom Hörensagen bekannte Randregion oder gar eine Phantasiewelt darstellte, sondern welcher, bedingt durch die fortschreitende Ausdehnung des Römischen Reiches, auch verstärkt eine geopolitische Bedeutung zukam.²⁸ Der Kaukasus mit seiner konkreten geographischen bzw. geopolitischen Grenzfunktion wird über die Amazonen zu einer metaphorischen Grenzregion stilisiert, die nicht nur hinsichtlich der sozialen und kulturellen Eigenheiten der Kriegerfrauen an sich eine Rolle spielt, sondern die auch mit Blick auf übergeordnete Aspekte dichotomischer Natur wie

²⁸ Zur geopolitischen Bedeutung des Kaukasus für das Römische Reich in den beiden Jahrhunderten um die Zeitenwende vgl. z.B. Dabrowa 1989; Braund 1991.

Geschlechterrollen (Männer vs. Frauen) und Gattungen (Geschichtsschreibung vs. Mythographie) sowie letztlich auch mit Blick auf die alles entscheidende Frage nach Fiktion vs. Wahrheit von Bedeutung ist.

3. AUSBLICK UND SCHLUSS

Vor fast hundert Jahren entdeckte der georgisch-russische Prähistoriker und Ethnologe (und Begründer der georgischen Archäologie) Georg K. Nioradze (1886-1951) in Semo-Awtschala nördlich von Tiflis die Gräber dreier Frauen, die er auf ca. 1000 v. Chr. datierte.²⁹ Zwei der drei Frauen wiesen Hieb- bzw. Stichverletzungen an ihren Schädeln auf, und die Grabbeigaben, bestehend aus Waffen und Schmuck, brachten Nioradze dazu, eine mögliche Verbindung zu 'den Amazonen' – wenn auch nur in einer Randnotiz – vorzuschlagen.³⁰ Aus Nioradz'es vorsichtiger Andeutung wurde im Laufe der Zeit nichts Geringeres als 'das älteste Amazonengrab', dessen Existenz sich wiederum zu einem Narrativ über den Beweis der 'tatsächlichen Existenz der Amazonen' verselbständigt hat.³¹ Eine Grundsatzdiskussion zur Frage, inwiefern solche Bezeichnungen und Identifizierungen sinnvoll sind bzw. historischen Realitäten entsprechen können, kann hier nicht geleistet werden – nur am Rande sei erwähnt, dass es aus methodischer Sicht problematisch ist, die Kopfverletzung eines weiblichen Leichenschädels in einen ursächlichen Zusammenhang mit Waffenbeigaben in einem Frauengrab zu bringen und daraus auf eine 'Kriegerfrau' zu schliessen, können doch einerseits Waffenbeigaben ganz unterschiedlich gedeutet werden (z.B. als Hinweis auf die Zugehörigkeit zu einer sozialen Elite) und müssen andererseits gewaltsam beifügte Kopfverletzungen keineswegs das Resultat einer

²⁹ Vgl. Nioradze 1931. Vgl. auch den kurzen Abriss bei Ateshi Gadirova 2014, 241-242. Spätere Datierungen gehen von einem etwas jüngeren Alter (ca. 8.-7. Jh. v. Chr.) aus; vgl. Porter 2018, 85, Anm. 266.

³⁰ Vgl. Nioradze 1931, 15: "Als Montelius die mit Dolchen bewaffneten vorgefundenen Weiberskelette mit den Amazonen in Verbindung brachte, so konnte er es mit weniger Recht als wir jetzt tun." Mit Montelius ist der schwedische Prähistoriker und Archäologe Gustaf Montelius (1843-1921) gemeint.

³¹ Vgl. z.B. Rolle 1986; Wilde 1999, 48-49; Kótova 2010, 174; Rolle 2010; Mayor 2014, 72-73.

kriegerischen Auseinandersetzung sein.³² Selbstverständlich scheint es auf den ersten Blick verlockend, Nioradzes Grabfund in der Kaukasusregion mit den Berichten von Strabon und Plutarch über die kaukasischen Amazonen in Verbindung bringen zu wollen, doch ist die Evidenz für einen tatsächlichen historischen Zusammenhang schlichtweg nicht gegeben – dafür aber ist die Gefahr eines hermeneutischen Zirkelschlusses umso grösser. Die vorliegende Arbeit hat sich deshalb auf die mythographische Spurensuche nach den kaukasischen Amazonen beschränkt. Der Kaukasus, welcher – namentlich erstmals bei Ps.-Aischylos erwähnt³³ – die Welt des Südens gegen die nördlichen Steppenvölker abgrenzte und zugleich auch die Scheidelinie zwischen Europa und Asien bildete (eine Grenzfunktion, die das Gebirgssystem überdies auch zur Zeit der Maximalausdehnung des Römischen Reiches unter Trajans Herrschaft einnahm), dürfte für die Griechen des Altertums wie kaum ein anderes Grossgebiet den Aspekt des Peripheren, des 'Sowohl-als auch', der Zugehörigkeit bei gleichzeitiger Fremdartigkeit verkörpert haben. Die Ansiedlung der Amazonen in ebendieser Region erscheint somit nur folgerichtig, und es mag eigentlich nur erstaunen, dass die Vorstellung kaukasischer Amazonen derart schwach bezeugt ist – wobei, wie das Beispiel Strabons mit seinen Verweisen auf andere, verlorene Geschichtsschreiber zeigt, hier die Fügungen der Überlieferungszufälle zweifellos auch mitgespielt haben. Ebenso folgerichtig erscheint es, dass Strabon ausgerechnet seinen Bericht über die kaukasischen Amazonen dazu benutzt hat, Grundsatzüberlegungen über das Verhältnis zwischen Fiktion und Wahrheit bzw. Mythos und Historie anzustellen. Ursprung und Lebensweise der kaukasischen Amazonen lassen sich, so Strabon, rational erklären und sind somit glaubwürdig – unglaublich sind dagegen die Berichte anderer (nicht namentlich genannter) Geschichtsschreiber und Mythographen, die die Entstehung des Amazonenvolkes nicht hinreichend erklären, den Amazonen aber phantastisch anmutende Expansionsbestrebungen und Kriegszüge andichten. Die Antwort auf die Amazonenfrage ist für

³² Vgl. Porter 2018, 85, Anm. 266.

³³ PV 422 und 719. Vgl. dazu Finkelberg 1998, 120-122; Fallmann 2024, 153-154.

Strabon also kein reines ‘Entweder-oder’, sondern etwas, das sich an der Plausibilität messen lassen kann und muss. Und so wie wir wahrscheinlich nie abschliessend wissen werden, ob es die Amazonen ‘tatsächlich gegeben hat’, uns aber trotzdem weiterhin Gedanken über die Frage nach ihrer möglichen Existenz machen werden, so hat Strabon in den geographisch wie kulturell peripheren Kriegerfrauen einen Spiegel dessen gesehen, was ihn als Geschichtsschreiber umgetrieben hat.³⁴

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³⁴ Ich danke den beiden anonymen Gutachterinnen bzw. Gutachtern für zahlreiche wertvolle Hinweise, die eine wesentliche Verbesserung dieser Arbeit und eine Zuspitzung der Argumentation ermöglicht haben.

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HOW DID ALL THESE BARBARIANS GET HERE? THE (IM)PERMEABLE GATES OF THE CAUCASUS IN LATE ANTIQUITY IN JEROME'S *LETTER 77* AND CLAUDIAN'S *AGAINST RUFINUS**

CÉDRIK MICHEL

Abstract. The main pass through the central Caucasus Mountains, the present-day Dariali Gorge, had various names in ancient Greco-Latin sources: the Gates of the Caucasus, the Caspian Gates, Gates of Alexander, Sarmatian Gates. These Gates represented the frontier between the known and unknown worlds and were understood as an impermeable barrier to the barbarian groups from the Eurasian Steppe. This paper demonstrates the intersection between rhetoric and historicity and explains how these tropes about the Gates of the Caucasus were recycled in Late Antiquity and given new meaning in the context of the Hunnic invasion of the Near East in A.D. 395-398. This paper argues that Jerome's *Letter 77* and Claudian's *Against Rufinus* used the perception of this gate as an impermeable barrier to further their literary agendas. Jerome used this perception to highlight the gravity of the

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Hunnish incursion to justify why Fabiola, a close friend and a devout Christian, had left Jerome's side and returned to Rome before completing her pilgrimage. The literary associations of the Gates of the Caucasus also supported Jerome's interpretation of the Hunnic incursion as divine punishment and an invitation for repentance. Claudian employed this same perception for a very different purpose: to slander a political opponent.

INTRODUCTION

From their earliest appearances in Greco-Latin sources, up to the present day, the Gates of the Caucasus (*portae Caucasiae*), the present-day Dariali Gorge, at the eastern base of Mount Kazbek, have caused many headaches. Numerous toponyms designated this passage through the Caucasus Mountains, and these toponyms themselves could refer to different geographical locations.¹ Pliny the Elder alluded to this confusion and wrote that the Caucasian Gates were erroneously called "Caspian" (*Caspiae*). He described them as gates made from iron-shod beams beneath which flowed a putrid-smelling stream.² Strabo also noted that those who wrote histories of Alexander the Great's conquests in the east manipulated the geography of the Caucasus to have Alexander reach the Caucasus Mountains when in India, to link the myth of Prometheus and Alexander.³ Even centuries later, there was confusion. In Orosius' geographic excursus in *Against the Pagans*, the Dariali Gorge is referred to as both the Caspian Gates and the Gates of the Caucasus.⁴

¹ Although the Gates of the Caucasus is the geographically accurate toponym, I will use whichever term the sources discussed employ, as this choice of toponym is purposeful and has meaning.

² Plin. *HN* 6.12, ed. König and Winkler 1996, trans. Rackham 1942.

³ Strabo 11.5.5, 11.6.4, ed. Radt 2004, trans. Roller 2014. In 11.5.4, Strabo mentioned that Cleitarchus, a historian of Alexander the Great, also confused Thermodon and the Caspian Gates, despite both locations being more than 6000 stadia apart. Quintus Curtius Rufus (7.3.19-23, ed. Lucarini 2009, trans. Yardley 1984) recounted that Alexander the Great founded a city called Alexandria at the foot of the mountain on which Prometheus was chained in the Caucasus.

⁴ Oros. 1.2.39-40, 1.2.49, ed. Arnaud-Lindet 1990, trans. Fear 2010. See Janvier 1982, 90-93.

Scholarship has highlighted the strategic importance of the Caucasus Gates to ancient empires as the main passage through the central Caucasus Mountains, which connected the Eurasian Steppe and Asia.⁵ Excavations between 2013 and 2016 of the Dariali Gorge dated the Dariali Fort to the late 4th or early 5th century and have been a very valuable contribution to the archaeology of the Gates of the Caucasus.⁶ This paper explores another, less appreciated aspect of the Gates of the Caucasus: their use as rhetorical devices in Late Antiquity, during the so-called “Barbarian Migrations.”⁷

The Gates of the Caucasus marked a limit of the *oikoumene*, the known world, in the Greco-Roman imagination.⁸ Josephus recounted that Alexander the Great built metal gates to prevent “savage” peoples unfit for contact with the civilized world from bursting into the *oikoumene*.⁹ Beyond the Gates of the Caucasus, to the north of the Caucasus Mountains, were unknown lands. Similarly, the Pillars of Hercules, generally understood as the twin peaks that guard the Mediterranean at the Strait of Gibraltar, marked the end of the *oikoumene* in the west, and the beginning of the unknown ocean.¹⁰ Strabo recounted “the tradition that Prometheus was bound at the farthest point of the earth in the Caucasus.”¹¹ The other name for the Gates of the Caucasus, the Gates of Alexander, indicates that this was the furthest point Alexander, the greatest conqueror of Antiquity, had deemed safe and possible to explore. To the north of the Caucasus

⁵ Blockley 1984; 1985; 1987; Bosworth 1976; 1977; 1983; Braund 1986; Preud’Homme 2021.

⁶ Mashkour et al. 2017; Sauer et al. 2020.

⁷ On the traditional periodisation of the “barbarian migrations,” see Halsall 2007, 32-33.

⁸ On the Pillars of Hercules as one of the limits of the *oikoumene*, see Romm 1992, 17-20.

⁹ Joseph. *AJ* 18.4.4, ed. Niese 1890, trans. Feldman 1965, *BJ* 7.7.4, ed. Niese 1894, trans. Thackeray 1928. See also Plin. *HN* 6.12; Val. Flac. *Argon.* 5.124-125, ed. Courtney 1970, trans. Mozley 1934; Amm. Marc. 23.6.13, ed. Seyfarth, Jacob-Karau, and Ulmann 1978a, trans. Rolfe 1940; Claud. *In Ruf.* 2.22-32, ed. Hall 1985, trans. Bernstein 2023; Jer. *Ep.* 77.6, ed. Hilberg 1912, trans. Wright 1933.

¹⁰ Merrills 2005, 134.

¹¹ Strabo 11.5.5: καὶ τὸ τὸν Προμηθέα παραδεδοῖσθαι δεδεμένον ἐπὶ τοῖς ἐσχάτοις τῆς γῆς ἐν τῷ Καυκάσῳ. Trans. Roller 2014, adapted.

Mountains were peoples deemed unfit for civilisation, who had to be kept locked away. To venture beyond the Gates of Alexander could be a great accomplishment or a terrible act of *hubris*. Suetonius recounted that Nero planned an expedition to the Caspian Gates (*Caspian portas*), the Dariali Gorge, with a group of soldiers called the “Phalanx of Alexander.”¹² The expedition never happened, but Nero was depicted as attempting to surpass Alexander.

This paper examines how Jerome’s *Letter 77*, dated A.D. 399-400, and Claudian’s *Against Rufinus*, dated A.D. 397, employed the perception of the Gates of the Caucasus as impermeable barriers preventing the barbarian peoples north of the Caucasus from entering the *oikoumene*. It shows that this trope about the Gates of the Caucasus was given a new life in the late antique context of the Hunnic incursion in the East in A.D. 395-398. I argue that the perception of the Gates as impermeable played specific rhetorical roles in Jerome and Claudian’s narratives.

The first section presents a brief account of the Hunnic incursion into Asia of A.D. 395-398 to provide the historical context necessary to understand the significance of the portrayals of the Gates of the Caucasus and the Huns within the argumentations of Jerome and Claudian. The second section contends that Jerome rhetorically employed the Greco-Roman understanding of the Gates of Alexander as impenetrable for groups beyond the confines of the *oikoumene* to justify his use of Herodotean references about the Scythians and to bolster the threat of the Hunnic incursion. This, in turn, supported two of his important goals in *Letter 77*: (1) to justify why Fabiola, Jerome’s close friend and a devout Christian, had left Jerome’s side and returned to Rome before completing her pilgrimage; (2) to present the Hunnic incursion as divine punishment and as an invitation for Romans to repent before it was too late. In the third section, I argue that Claudian harnessed the associations of the Gates as impermeable to those beyond the *oikoumene*, at least without the help of an agent from the *oikoumene*, to accuse Stilicho’s opponent in the East, Rufinus, of treason. To explain how the Huns had been able to enter

¹² Suet. *Ner.* 19.2, ed. Ihm 1907, trans. Hurley 2011. On the projected Neronian expedition, see Greatrex 2007, 137-139.

the *oikoumene* through the Caucasus despite the existence of this impermeable gate, Claudian presented Rufinus, the praetorian prefect of the East, as the Huns' guide. This depicted Rufinus as a traitor who let in the Huns who ravaged the East.

THE HUNNIC INCURSION OF 395-398

In Jerome's *Letter 77* and Claudian's *Against Rufinus*, the Gates of the Caucasus are mentioned in the context of the Hunnic incursion of 395-398, as the Huns had passed through the Dariali Gorge to reach Asia from the Eurasian Steppe. Although Jerome and Claudian's descriptions of the Hunnic incursion and the Gates of the Caucasus are highly rhetorical, they responded to contemporary historical events. This section provides a brief overview of this barbarian incursion, to contextualize how Jerome and Claudian presented this historical event in such a way as to promote their literary agendas. Despite being mentioned in numerous contemporary and later sources,¹³ this Hunnic incursion has only garnered cursory attention in scholarship; what work has been done focuses on establishing a timeline for the invasions and the movement of the Huns, as well as determining which cities were raided.¹⁴

Presumably from where Ammianus placed the Huns in A.D. 376, at the back of a landslide of barbarians pushed from present-day Ukraine and southwest Russia onto the Danube frontier, the Huns were in the region north of the Caucasus Mountains.¹⁵ In 395, they ventured southward into

¹³ Sources about this incursion include Jer. *Ep.* 60.16, ed. Hilberg 1910, trans. Wright 1933, 77.8; Claud. *In Ruf.* 2.28-35; *In Eutr.* 1.16-17, 1.245-251, 2.569-575; *Cons. Stil.* 1.110, ed. Hall 1985, trans. Bernstein 2023; Socrates *Hist. eccl.* 6.1, ed. Hansen 1995, trans. Zenos 1890; Sozom. *Hist. eccl.* 8.1, ed. Bidez and Hansen 1995, trans. Hartranft 1890; Philostorgius 11.8, ed. Bidez and Winkelmann 1981, trans. Amidon 2007; Priscus fr. 11.2, ed. and trans. Blockley 1983; Cyrillona, *Madrasha (Hymn) on the Locusts, the Punishment and the Invasion of the Huns*, ed. and trans. Griffin 2011; Auson. *Precationes Variae* 1, ed. Green 1991, trans. Evelyn-White 1921; *Chronicle of Ps.-Joshua the Stylite* 243, ed. Chabot 1927, trans. Trombley and Watt 2000.

¹⁴ This incursion is discussed in Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 52-59; Greatrex and Greatrex 1999; Thompson 2000, 30-32; Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 17-20; Heather 2007, 502; C. Kelly 2008, 51-53, 300; Meier 2019, 298-302.

¹⁵ Amm. Marc. 31.3, ed. Seyfarth, Jacob-Karau, and Ulmann 1978b. See Heather 2007, 501-502; Stickler 2007, 47.

the Dariali Gorge, through the Gates of the Caucasus and into Asia.¹⁶ They raided Armenia and then split up into three groups.¹⁷ The first group crossed the Euphrates after raiding Roman territories and was defeated by the Romans. A second group, led by Basich and Kursich, went into Persia as far as Ctesiphon and was defeated by the Sasanians.¹⁸ The remainder of this group abandoned most of their plunder and fled back to the Eurasian Steppes, either through the Gates of the Caucasus or through the narrow passage at Derbent on the Caspian Sea (the geographically accurate toponym for the Caspian Gates). The third group pillaged Syria, Palestine (towards Jerusalem), and eastern Asia Minor. The most exact date for this invasion is given in the *Chronicle of Edessa*: "And in the month of Tammuz of the same year [July 395], the Huns crossed over to the territory of the Romans."¹⁹ There was more raiding in 396.²⁰ Jerome presented this Hunnic incursion in the Roman Near East as particularly devastating because the Roman Empire was busy with civil war, a reference to the usurper Eugenius (r. 392-394).²¹ Indeed, Theodosius' army was still in the West. Furthermore, Eutropius and the Eastern Roman Empire were occupied by Alaric, who had been raiding the Balkans. Eutropius resolved the conflict diplomatically by appointing Alaric

¹⁶ Some scholars, following Philostorgius 11.8, stated that the Huns crossed the frozen Danube into the Roman Empire in 395. This is likely a transposition of later events. As Heather states, the Huns' passage through the Gates of the Caucasus indicates that they were likely in the Eurasian Steppe, north of the Caucasus Mountains, not on the banks of the Danube. Heather 2007, 501-502; Meier 2019, 301; *contra* Thompson 2000, 29-31; cf. Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 52-59.

¹⁷ The most complete and detailed accounts for the Hunnic incursion of 395-398 are Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 52-59; Meier 2019, 299-302.

¹⁸ Priscus fr. 11.2.

¹⁹ *Chronicle of Edessa*, entry 40, ed. Guidi 1903, trans. Cowper 1864.

²⁰ The chronology of events between 396-398 is little known. Maenchen-Helfen (1973) believed that Claudian projected events from 395 into 397 to slander Eutropius and that Eutropius' victory was over barbarian groups in the Caucasus, not specifically the Huns. Meier (2019, 301) proposes that Eutropius did defeat the Huns around Cappadocia and Armenia.

²¹ Jer. *Ep.* 77.8, 60.17.

as *magister militum per Illyricum* in 398.²² With the threat of Alaric out of the way for the time being, Eutropius led a military campaign against the Huns in Cappadocia and Armenia in the summer of 398. Rather than appointing a commander, he led the Roman force himself.²³ Eutropius was victorious and was given a triumph in Constantinople. For this victory over the Huns, Eutropius was granted a consulship the following year, in 399.²⁴

The Hunnic incursion has convincingly been proposed as the impetus for the construction of the Sasanian fortification at the Dariali Gorge, an important frontier zone to check the advances of nomadic groups from the Eurasian Steppe. The joint British-Georgian excavation showed that the construction of extant fortifications began in the late 4th century and suggested that the motivation for the construction of these frontier fortifications was to halt the Hunnic incursion of 395 or to prevent future incursions from the Eurasian Steppe into Asia, through the Dariali Gorge.²⁵ The Sasanians built Dariali Fort and a tower and a road-blocking wall to the north-northwest of the Fort. Before the 19th century, traffic would pass on the road to the west of the fort because the area to the east was blocked by insurmountable rock cliffs and, for much of the year, the strong currents of the Tergi River.²⁶ A barrier, Bakht'ari ridge-top walls, was also built one kilometer north of the Fort, perhaps at the narrowest part of the gorge in Late Antiquity.²⁷ The fort and road-blocking wall were completed by the first decades of the 5th century, but the barrier may

²² Synesius' *De regno* responded to (and disapproved of) Alaric's appointment and Eutropius' use of Alaric's Goths in the Eastern Roman army. See Heather 1988; Kulikowski 2007, 167-168.

²³ Eutropius taking the military command for himself and celebrating his victory may have angered Tribigild, a Gothic commander, who may have felt like he and his men were not sufficiently recompensed for their involvement. Liebeschuetz 1990, 99-103.

²⁴ On Eutropius' consulship and Claudian's scathing invective *In Eutropium*, see Cameron 1970, 124-155.

²⁵ Sauer et al. 2020, 5-6, 19-52, 162-166, 231-241.

²⁶ Sauer et al. 2020, 7-8.

²⁷ The Dariali Fort likely housed around 300 soldiers. Combined with the topography of the Dariali Gorge and the Sasanian fortifications, this would have been

only have been completed by the 6th century.²⁸

Based on the radiocarbon analysis of two bone samples found in the excavation of the Dariali Fort, with modelled date ranges of A.D. 360-418 and 353-412 at 95.4% probability, the construction of the Fort and road-blocking walls likely began in the late 4th or very early 5th century.²⁹ When the Huns passed through the Dariali Gorge, the construction of the fort and the road-blocking wall may have commenced but it was likely not completed in time to halt the Huns.³⁰ Sauer et al. deem it likely that there had been an earlier fort in the same location. However, the excavation did not yield any evidence of this because the bedrock was cleared of virtually all earlier soil and occupation debris to allow the fort to be built directly on it for greater stability.³¹ Whatever the state of previous fortifications at the same location as the Dariali Fort or the state of completion of the Fort, the Gates of the Caucasus were permeable to the Huns in 395. Nevertheless, the Sasanian fortifications on the Dariali Gorge were effective when finished. There is no evidence of major incursions from the Eurasian Steppe through the Gates of the Caucasus during its Sasanian occupation in the 5th to 7th centuries A.D. Once fortified, this pass through the Caucasus Mountains lived up to its reputation as an “impermeable” barrier.

JEROME’S (IM)PERMEABLE GATES OF ALEXANDER

The Christian priest and theologian Jerome of Stridon (A.D. 347-419) lived in Palestine during the Hunnic incursion.³² He did not witness the Hunnic onslaught but had heard accounts of their raids.³³ The Huns caused panic amongst monastic communities in the Near East and Jerome, with many others, flocked to the coast and prepared to evacuate by boat. Ultimately,

sufficient to contain most foes, even when greatly outnumbered. See Sauer et al. 2020, 880-883.

²⁸ Sauer et al. 2020, 875-876.

²⁹ Sauer et al. 2020, 870-875. The date ranges cited are the updated and recalibrated datings of modelled samples, provided in Sauer et al. 2021, 105.

³⁰ Sauer et al. 2020, 372-375; Sauer et al. 2021, 105.

³¹ Sauer et al. 2020, 870-871.

³² On Jerome’s life, see Kelly 1975.

³³ Jer. *Ep.* 77.8.

Jerome and Paula, his female companion who founded the monastery where Jerome lived from 389 until his death, would remain. Fabiola, who had come to visit holy sites mentioned in the Bible, would return to Rome, where she would establish a hospice at Portus, the port of Rome. In 399, Fabiola died, and in that same year or the following one, Jerome wrote *Letter 77*, addressed to Oceanus, as her eulogy.³⁴ In this letter, Jerome mentioned the Gates of the Caucasus, which he referred to as the Gates of Alexander (*Alexandri claustra*), in the context of an ethnographic digression on the Huns, whose incursion into the Near East had cut short Fabiola's trip to the Holy Land.

This section argues that Jerome employed the literary tropes associated with the Gates of Alexander, particularly its understanding as a barrier between the Greco-Roman *oikoumene* and the unknown, to support his agenda of praising Fabiola, while also reinforcing the importance for Christians to reform their behavior. To support this latter point, Jerome's *Letter 60*, dated 396 and one of our main extant sources for the movements of the Huns in the Near East from 395-398, will also be analyzed. In both these letters, the Huns (and in *Letter 77*, the Gates of Alexander), represent digressions in the overall arc of Jerome's narrative, but they play important roles in his argumentation.

Letter 77, written in A.D. 399-400, functions as a eulogy to Fabiola, a widow from the eminent *gens Fabia*.³⁵ Jerome wrote about her sins, penitence and her devotion to God. As Kelly remarked, the contents of the letter, in particular his sensitive and personal understanding of her second marriage, betray Jerome's fondness for Fabiola.³⁶ She is praised for her earnestness in the study of scripture, which prompted her to travel to the Near East in the autumn of 394, to study the Bible under Jerome and to retrace the path of the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt. She

³⁴ PLRE I: "Oceanus."

³⁵ PLRE I: "Fabiola." Fabiola is the addressee of Jerome's *Letters* 64 (A.D. 396-397), ed. Hilberg 1910, and 78 (A.D. 399-400), ed. Hilberg 1912, which is addressed to her posthumously.

³⁶ Jerome (*Ep.* 77.3) deemed Fabiola's second marriage sinful, yet was also sympathetic to her situation as a young woman full of physical passions. See Kelly 1975, 210-212.

had likely planned to stay in Bethlehem with Jerome permanently, but by the summer of 395, she returned to Rome by boat, founded a hospice for travelers at Portus and died shortly thereafter.³⁷ In haste, Fabiola would leave the Near East before she had time to complete her pilgrimage, which consisted of visiting the 42 halting places of the Israelites. Jerome attached *Letter* 78, a treatise about the halting places visited by the chosen people on their way to the Promised Land, to *Letter* 77. Jerome had promised Fabiola this treatise, but he had not yet completed it when she died.

Letters 77 and 78 were not only for Oceanus' eyes; Jerome anticipated a vast readership.³⁸ Jerome intended his correspondence with Fabiola to signal to his audience that his Hebrew scholarship was in demand by the Roman elites and could help Christians reach Heaven.³⁹ Fabiola's life story was an ideal model to demonstrate this and provide an example of how Jerome's exegesis and her pilgrimage allowed her to repent for past sins.⁴⁰ By sending *Letters* 77 and 78 together, Jerome intended to signal to his audience that his treatise on the halting places of the Israelites could guide Christians who intended to embark on a pilgrimage to follow the itinerary of the 42 stations. Consequently, it was essential for Jerome to explain and justify why Fabiola, ever enthusiastic about Scripture and its interpretation, had cut her journey short and not finished her pilgrimage.

Jerome's mention of the Gates of Alexander provided a justification for Fabiola's early departure from Palestine. Jerome employed the literary tropes about the Gates of Alexander as an impermeable barrier between the *oikoumene* and the north of the Caucasus to present the Huns, who originated north of the Caucasus, as a great, savage threat and a legitimate reason for Fabiola to prematurely end her trip to the Holy Land.

³⁷ Jer. Ep. 77.8; cf. Ep. 64.8: *tu quidem optato frueris otio et iuxta Babylonem Bethlemitica forsitan rura suspiras*. See Cain 2009, 173.

³⁸ Jer. Ep. 77.5; Cain 2009, 172.

³⁹ Jerome had a strong reputation as a biblical scholar and much of his correspondence in the late 390s and early 400s addressed requests regarding exegesis from around the Roman Empire. See Kelly 1975, 212-214.

⁴⁰ Jer. Ep. 64 is addressed to Fabiola and is a treatise on the garments of the High Priest.

Jerome enhanced this threat by leveraging Herodotus' authoritative account about the military successes of the Scythians. The Gates of Alexander, which had kept barbarian groups beyond and within the *oikoumene* unmixed, explained Jerome's equation of the past Scythians with the contemporary Huns.

Jerome's account of the Hunnic invasion and his historical digression on the Huns may be quoted in full:

... ecce subito discurrentibus nuntiis oriens totus intremuit, ab ultima Maeotide inter glaciale Tanain et Massagetarum immanes populos, ubi Caucasi rupibus feras gentes Alexandri claustra cohibent, erupisse Hunorum examina, quae pernicibus equis huc illucque volitantia caedis pariter ac terroris cuncta complerent. Aberat tunc Romanus exercitus et bellis civilibus in Italia tenebatur. Hanc gentem Herodotus refert sub Dario, rege Medorum, viginti annis Orientem tenuisse captivum et ab Aegyptiis atque Aethiopibus annum exegisse vectigal. Avertat Iesus ab orbe Romano tales ultra bestias! Insperati ubique aderant et famam celeritate vincentes non religioni, non dignitatibus, non aetati, non vagenti miserebantur infantiae. Cogebantur mori, qui dudum vivere coeperant et nescientes malum suum inter hostium manus ac tela ridebant. Consonus inter omnes rumor petere eos Hierosolimam et ob nimiam auri cupiditatem ad hanc urbem concurrere. Muri neglecti pacis incuria sarciebantur Antiochiae; Tyrus volens a terra abrumpere insulam quaerebat antiquam.

While I was seeking a dwelling suitable for so great a lady [Fabiola], whose desire for solitude included an unwillingness not to visit the place where Mary once lodged, suddenly messengers flew this way and that and the whole Eastern world trembled. We were told that swarms of Huns had poured forth from the distant Sea of Azov, midway between the icy river Tanais and the savage tribes of the Massagetae, where the Gates of Alexander keep back the barbarians behind the rocky Caucasus. Flying hither and thither on their swift steeds, said our informants, these invaders were filling the whole world with bloodshed and panic. At that time the Roman army was absent, being kept in Italy by reason of civil war. Of this race Herodotus tells us that under Darius, king of the Medes, they held the East captive for twenty years, and exacted a yearly tribute from the Egyptians and the Ethiopians. May Jesus

save the Roman world from such wild beasts in the future! Everywhere their approach was unexpected, they outstripped rumour by their speed, and they spared neither religion nor rank nor age; nay, even for wailing infants they had no pity. Children were forced to die, who had only just begun to live, and in ignorance of their fate smiled amid the brandished weapons of the foe. The general report was that they were making for Jerusalem, and that it was their excessive greed for gold that urged them to flock to that city. The walls of Antioch, neglected in the careless days of peace, were hastily repaired. Tyre, desirous of cutting herself off from the land, sought again her ancient island.⁴¹

In this passage, Jerome synchronized Fabiola's arrival in Palestine and the Hunnic incursion to justify why Fabiola had left the Holy Land so quickly. Jerome's preferred toponym for the Gates of the Caucasus is the Gates of Alexander, which recalls the myth that Alexander built a physical barrier during his travels to the East to keep the most savage barbarian groups away from the *oikoumene*. The earliest extant account of this legend seems to be in Quintus Curtius Rufus' late 1st or 2nd -century *History of Alexander the Great*, derived from Cleitarchus' lost *History of Alexander*.⁴² Although Alexander the Great was never in the Caucasus, he did travel to another of the three attested locations of the Caspian Gates, the pass through the Alborz Mountain near ancient Rhagae (the other two locations being Dariali Gorge and the pass at Derbent).⁴³ Through the

⁴¹ Jer. Ep. 77.8, trans. Wright 1933.

⁴² The most famous accounts of Alexander as the architect of the Gates, however, are the *Syriac Alexander Legend* and *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, itself based on the material from the *Syriac Alexander Legend*. These two 7th-century sources recount that Alexander the Great had built the wall to contain 22 kings and nations, including Gog and Magog. However, over two centuries earlier, at the time when Jerome was writing, there was no conception that Alexander had built the Gates to contain Gog and Magog, whose invasion the Hebrew Bible foretold as a sign of the end of days. The conflation of both narratives would only first occur in the *Syriac Alexander Romance*, dated to c. A.D. 600-630. See Anderson 1932, 16-28; Meserve 2008, 255-256; Garstad 2016; Zadeh 2017, 106-110. On its dating, see Ciancaglini 2001, 138; Debié 2024, 158-162.

⁴³ No evidence indicates that Alexander the Great fortified the pass through the Alborz Mountains.

mention of the Gates of Alexander, Jerome created a landscape in which the Huns had remained isolated from other barbarian groups with which the Greeks and Romans had interacted in the *oikoumene*.⁴⁴ This premise about the impermeability of the Gates of Alexander supported Jerome's use of Herodotus, written over eight centuries earlier, as his reference for his digression on the military exploits of the Huns.

The barbarian group that Jerome equated with the Huns are Herodotus' Scythians. Only the Huns are mentioned by name, not the Scythians. However, through Jerome's explicit reference to Herodotus, it is clear that he referred to the Scythians. In Herodotus' *Histories*, the Scythians defeated the Medes, held the East captive for 28 years — not Jerome's 20 years — and were bribed by the Egyptians with gifts (and prayers).⁴⁵ Unlike in *Letter 77* (8), Herodotus placed the Scythian victory over the Medes in the reign of the third king of the Medes, Cyaxares, not in the reign of Darius, the third Achaemenid king. *The Histories* also does not mention a Scythian victory over the Ethiopians, but Herodotus did recount that the Ethiopians paid tribute to the Persians every three years during the reign of Darius.⁴⁶ Jerome was more concerned with conveying to his audience that the Huns were a barbarian group with an established history as great warriors capable of bringing ancient civilizations to their knees, than in accurately citing Herodotus.

Why did Jerome equate his contemporary Huns with Herodotus' Scythians, and how did he explain this decision to his audience? There were certainly no Huns in the 5th century B.C., when Herodotus wrote his *Histories*, just like there were no Scythians in the late 4th-early 5th century A.D. Scythian history is believed to have come to an end in the 3rd century A.D., with the

⁴⁴ Cf. Plin. *HN* 6.12.

⁴⁵ Hdt. 1.104-106, ed. Wilson 2015, trans. Waterfield 1998.

⁴⁶ Hdt. 3.97. Perhaps Jerome meant to imply that the Ethiopians paid the tribute they would give the Persians during the reign of Darius to the Scythians, who had defeated the Medes. Furthermore, as is discussed below, late antique sources tended to associate new and old barbarian political groupings. The Achaemenid and Sasanian Empires were equated with the Parthians and Medes, other Iranian peoples. Nevertheless, Jerome's chronology remains erroneous.

fall of Scythian Neapolis.⁴⁷ The impermeability of Alexander's Gates, which were built by Alexander after the events Herodotus mentioned, provided a rational argument for equating the Huns and the Scythians: the Gates had kept the Huns / Scythians isolated from other barbarian groups with which the Greeks and Romans had interacted in the *oikoumene*, and were thus the same peoples, only with different ethnonyms.

When Jerome wrote *Letter 77* in 399-400, there were no authoritative historical or ethnographic accounts about the Huns because they had only become known to the Romans in the 370s, probably mainly through the tales of the Goths and Alans who had fled from the Huns. As Ammianus wrote, the Huns were "not much known from ancient records" (*Hunorum gens monumentis veteribus leviter nota...*).⁴⁸ Herodotus' authoritative account and the *Histories'* established pedigree as a recognized, universal portrayal of the Scythians allowed him to paint this new fearsome people as having a long history of military successes, which would justify why Fabiola had left Palestine pre-emptively in the face of such a grave danger.

Another contemporary source, Synesius' *De regno*, written in 398, justifies using archaic ethnonyms.⁴⁹ *De regno* attacks Eutropius' policy towards barbarians (especially the appointment of Alaric as *magister militum per Illyricum* in 398) and advocates for an aggressive foreign policy towards barbarians, as well as the expulsion of Goths from the Roman army and public office.⁵⁰ Synesius wrote that contemporary barbarian groups took on new names as an intimidation tactic, by weaponizing the

⁴⁷ On the absorption of the Scythians by the Goths and other peoples from the Eurasian Steppe, see Geary 1999, 115-116.

⁴⁸ Amm. Marc. 31.2.1, trans. Rolfe 1939, adapted. Despite this statement, Ammianus did not hesitate to make ample use of stereotypes about nomadism to create his ethnographic description of the Huns. See Burgersdijk 2016.

⁴⁹ Some late-4th-century examples of using archaic ethnonyms to refer to contemporary groups include Them. *Or.* 15.185b, ed. Schenkl and Downey 1965, *Or.* 30.349, ed. Schenkl, Downey, and Norman 1971; Claud. *In Eutr.* 2.179-180; Amb. *De fide* 2.16, ed. Faller 1962. On the use of the ethnonym "Scythian" in Late Antiquity, see Heather 1988, 154. On the Huns and their association with Scythians, see Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 2-8.

⁵⁰ Cameron 1970, 118-119.

fear of the unknown: “But now do these nations [The Parthians, Getae and Massagetae, all mentioned in the previous sentence] spread terror amongst you, crossing over in their turn, assuming other names, and some of them falsifying by art even their countenances, so that another race new and foreign may appear to have sprung from the soil, and they dare to demand an indemnity as the price of peace, ‘unless thou arm thyself with valour’.”⁵¹ Whereas Jerome used the contemporary ethnonym “Huns,” even when referencing Herodotus’ account of the Scythians, Synesius only used the ethnonym “Scythian” to refer to the Goths.

Synesius and Jerome’s inclusion of justifications for recycling archaic ethnonyms and descriptions is noteworthy because the use of archaic ethnonyms is typically taken for granted in late antique sources.⁵² For instance, Zosimus and Themistius, among many others, use the ethnonym “Scythians” to refer to the Goths.⁵³ Jerome’s *Letter 77* and Synesius’ *De regno*’s justification for recycling ethnonyms and associating past and present barbarian groups can be understood as an example of a widely shared, common understanding of the world that was rarely mentioned explicitly. Simultaneously, these justifications also supported their authors’ agendas. Synesius wrote that the same barbarian groups of the past had taken on new names to appear more fearsome to the Romans to support his argument

⁵¹ Syn. *De reg.* 15.8, ed. Lamoureux 2008. *De reg.* 10.21-25, trans. Fitzgerald 1930, adapted.

⁵² Scholarship has typically understood the frequent late antique practice of using archaic ethnonyms as “the high style of the age” and as a means to display knowledge of classical ethnography. Cameron and Long 1993, 298-300; cf. Halsall 2007, 48-51. On Ambrose, the Goths and Gog, see Humphries 2010. It is also crucial to consider that ancient sources purposefully chose their preferred ethnonyms to convey messages to their audience. For instance, Ambrose of Milan, promoting an eschatological view of the barbarian incursions in the last decades of the 4th century, likened the Goths to Gog from Magog. Amb. *De fide* 2.16. See Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 2-9; Pohl 2018, 7, 12.

⁵³ The ethnonym “Scythian” was commonly used to refer to northern barbarian groups. For a more exhaustive list of late antique barbarian groups referred to as “Scythian,” see “Scythians (Saka)” in *ODLA*. For a similar discussion, but on the Huns, who were also referred to as Scythians, see Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 2-5.

that Romans should launch more attacks against barbarians rather than pay tribute to barbarian groups. Maenchen-Helfen interpreted this passage as a defence mechanism reminiscent of the discourse that “so many Roman generals said so many times on the eve of a battle: our fathers conquered them, we shall conquer them again.”⁵⁴ Likewise, Jerome mentioned the Gates of Alexander to highlight the perceived savagery of the Scythians / Huns, which explained why Fabiola had left Palestine pre-emptively.

Reading *Letter 77* in light of *Letter 60* (A.D. 396), which also mentions the Hunnic incursion in the Near East, reveals another purpose for Jerome’s mention of the Gates of Alexander in *Letter 77*. Painting a terrifying portrayal of the Huns, backed by references to an established historical account like Herodotus’, also supported his theological understanding of the calamities of his times as divine punishment to promote repentance. *Letter 60* is a consolation sent to Heliodorus, bishop of Altinum, dated 396, comforting him for the death of his nephew, Nepotianus. The *Letter* is a glowing eulogy of Nepotianus, a former commander who became a priest and engaged in ascetic practices. Jerome exhorted Heliodorus not to mourn the death of his nephew because he was already in the Kingdom of Heaven, at God’s side.

In *Letter 60*, the historical and ethnographic digression on the Huns functions as proof that Nepotianus is fortunate to have died when he did, as he will be spared the misery of living through the suffering of present times, in a world crumbling to ruins, partly as a result of barbarian invasions.⁵⁵ The Huns are first mentioned by name in a catalogue of barbarian groups and the ravages they had caused:

Scythiam, Thraciam, Macedoniam, Thessaliam, Dardaniam, Daciam, Epiros, Dalmatiam cunctasque Pannonias Gothus, Sarmata, Quadus, Alanus, Huni, Vandali, Marcomanni vastant, trahunt, rapiunt. Quot matronae, quot virgines Dei et ingenua nobiliaque corpora his beluis fuere ludibrio! Capti episcopi, interfecti presbyteri et diversorum officia clericorum, subversae ecclesiae, ad altaria Christi stabulati equi, martyrum effossae reliquae...

⁵⁴ Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 7.

⁵⁵ Jer. *Ep.* 60.15.1.

For twenty years and more the blood of Romans has every day been shed between Constantinople and the Julian Alps. Scythia, Thrace, Macedonia, Thessaly, Dardania, Dacia, Epirus, Dalmatia, and all the provinces of Pannonia, have been sacked, pillaged and plundered by Goths and Sarmatians, Quadians and Alans, Huns and Vandals and Marcomanni. How many matrons, how many of God's virgins, ladies of gentle birth and high position, have been made the sport of these beasts! Bishops have been taken prisoners, presbyters and other clergymen of different orders murdered. Churches have been overthrown, horses stabled at Christ's altar, the relics of martyrs dug up.⁵⁶

Jerome used the invasions of various barbarian groups from the past decades, with the Hunnic incursion being the most recent, as an opportunity to promote moral reform and penitence: "For a long time now we have felt that God is offended with us, but we do not try to appease Him. It is by reason of our sins that the barbarians are strong, it is our vices that bring defeat to the armies of Rome; and as if this were not enough carnage, civil wars have spilt almost more blood than the enemy's sword."⁵⁷ Presenting the Hunnic incursion as divine chastisement and an impending sign of the End of Times would certainly be a strong incentive for Christians to be on their best behaviour in preparation for the Final Judgement.⁵⁸ *Letter* 60 is the earliest letter in which Jerome makes it clear that the Roman Empire will face an era of disasters, which were portrayed as apocalyptic in Jerome's account of the sack of Rome of 410 in *Letter* 127 (A.D. 412).⁵⁹

Following Jerome's theological interpretation of events, his account of the Hunnic incursion in *Letter* 60 conveyed an image of vast destruction: "But

⁵⁶ Jer. *Ep.* 60.16, trans. Wright 1933.

⁵⁷ Jer. *Ep.* 60.17. See also *Ep.* 60.16: "The Roman world is falling, and yet we hold our heads raised high instead of bowing our necks." Trans. Wright 1933, adapted.

⁵⁸ Rebenich 2009, 57-58.

⁵⁹ In his *Letters*, Jerome distinguished four phases of barbarian invasions spanning the years 370-96 (*Ep.* 60.16), 397-406 (*Ep.* 107.2, ed. Hilberg 1912, trans. Wright 1933, and 118, ed. Hilberg 1912), 406-409 in Gaul (*Ep.* 123.16, ed. Hilberg 1918) and 408-410 in Italy (*Ep.* 123.16 and 127.12-13, ed. Hilberg 1918, trans. Wright 1933). See Coleiro 1957, 48. On the imminent Second Coming: Jer. *Ep.* 127.12; *In Dan.* 5.8, ed. Glorie 1964; Fabbro 2015, 51-53.

behold! last year the wolves—not of Arabia but from the far north (*non Arabiae, sed septentrionis lupi*)—were let loose upon us from the distant crags of the Caucasus (*ex ultimis Caucasi rupibus*), and in a short time overran whole provinces. How many monasteries did they capture, how many rivers were reddened with men’s blood! They besieged Antioch and all the other cities on the Halys, Cydnus, Orontes, and Euphrates. They carried off troops of captives. Arabia, Phoenicia, Palestine and Egypt in their terror felt themselves already enslaved.”⁶⁰ In this passage, the Huns are not mentioned by name but are identifiable as “the wolves of the far north,” who originated from “the distant crags of the Caucasus.” This is perhaps an allusion to Herodotus’ description of the Neuri (Νευροί), who turned into wolves for a few days every year before returning to their former shape and practiced the same customs as the Scythians but are presented as independent and distinct from them.⁶¹ Philostorgius’ *Church History*, published shortly after 425, also states that the Huns are “whom the people of old called the Neuri; they dwelt by the Rhipaeon Mountains, from which the Tanais flows down and empties into Lake Maeotis.”⁶² Philostorgius linked the Huns and Neuroi through their perceived location and mentioned the tendency for new names to replace old ones.⁶³ In sum, Jerome’s description of the Huns as ruthless barbarians would also have been synergistic to his argumentation in *Letter 60*, which had framed the barbarian incursions of the past decades as proof that Christians were being punished by God, as an incentive to reform their behaviour and repent, as Fabiola had done.

⁶⁰ Jer. Ep. 60.16.5: *ecce tibi anno praeterito ex ultimis Caucasi rupibus inmissi in nos non Arabiae, sed septentrionis lupi tantas brevi provincias percucurrerunt. Quot monasteria capta, quantae fluviorum aquae humano cruore mutatae sunt! Obsessa Antiochia et urbes reliquae, quas Halys, Cydnus, Orontes Eufratesque praeterfluunt. Tracti greges captivorum; Arabia, Phoenix, Palaestina, Aegyptus timore captivae.* Trans. Wright 1933, adapted.

⁶¹ Hdt. 4.100, 102, 105.

⁶² Philostorgius 9.17, trans. Amidon 2007.

⁶³ Philostorgius 9.17: “Theodosius was a native of Spain, which is now called Hiberia, the River Hiberus, which runs through it, having evicted its previous name.” Trans. Amidon 2007.

Interestingly, despite Jerome's focus on the purpose of the Gates of Alexander as keeping savage barbarian groups separate from the inhabitants of the *oikoumene*, he did not mention exactly how the Huns were able to pass this legendary barrier in *Letters* 60 and 77. As mentioned above, although there were likely no significant fortifications at the time of the Hunnic crossing through the Dariali Gorge, the Gates of the Caucasus had long been portrayed as impermeable barriers to those beyond the *oikoumene*. In *Letter* 60 (16), Jerome wrote that the Huns "were let loose upon us" (*inmissi in nos*). This tendency for Greco-Latin ancient sources to take away agency from the barbarian group crossing the Gates of the Caucasus will be further discussed in the next section but it is sufficient here to say that the Huns are modified by a passive participle in *Letter* 60 (*inmissi*), and thus receive the action of the verb, rather than perform it. Perhaps Jerome meant to imply that the Huns had been able to raid Asia because divine intervention had opened the Gates for them. This interpretation would follow Jerome's theological interpretation of the barbarian invasions as divine punishment to promote reform.

This ferociousness and savagery of the Huns displayed in *Letters* 60 and 77 also drew attention away from what was at least a contributing factor to Fabiola's return to Rome. As Kelly remarked, the Huns were not the only culprits for Fabiola's return to Rome. Jerome wrote that Fabiola was disenchanted by internal disagreements amongst the religious communities, which preoccupied the community even more than the barbarian incursions: "We too were compelled to prepare ships, and to wait on the seashore as a precaution against the enemy's arrival; to fear the barbarians more than shipwreck, however fierce the winds might be; for we had to think not so much of our own lives as of the chastity of our virgins. At that time also there was a certain dissension amongst us (*apud nos dissension*), and our domestic quarrels (*domestica bella*) seemed more important than any fighting with barbarians."⁶⁴ Despite the inclusion of this subtle

⁶⁴ Jer. Ep. 77.8: *Tunc et nos compulsi sumus parare naves, esse in litore, adventum hostium praecavere et saevientibus ventis magis barbaros metuere quam naufragium, non tam propriae saluti quam virginum castimoniae providentes. Erat in illo tempore quaedam*

reference to internal discord, this was certainly not what Jerome wanted his monastic community in Bethlehem to be remembered for.

This section argued that Jerome rhetorically employed the Greco-Roman understanding of the Gates of Alexander as impenetrable for groups beyond the confines of the *oikoumene* to frame his ethnographic digression on the Huns and to emphasize their savagery. The Huns were a barbarian group that first appeared in the sight of Romans in the last quarter of the 4th century A.D. Consequently, there was no authoritative historical or ethnographic account about this group. Referring to the Gates of Alexander and their function allowed Jerome to argue that the barbarian groups that Herodotus mentioned had been contained in a closed environment and had remained unmixed with the barbarian groups in the *oikoumene*. The Gates of Alexander thus provide the link in Jerome's argumentation that allowed him to leverage Herodotus' authoritative account and the *Histories'* established pedigree as a recognized, universal portrayal of the Scythians, whose ferocity would justify why Fabiola had left Palestine pre-emptively. In *Letter 60*, Jerome understood the Hunnic incursion of 395-398 as divine punishment. The perception of the Gates of Alexander as impermeable barriers keeping fearsome and threatening barbarian groups locked away from the *oikoumene* emphasized the urgency of penitence before the Second Coming of Christ, when all men would be judged.

CLAUDIAN'S (IM)PERMEABLE CASPIAN GATES

Claudian's invective *Against Rufinus* presents another way in which a late antique author harnessed the association of the Gates of the Caucasus as impermeable: for slander. In his invective against the praetorian prefect of the East, Rufinus, Claudian employed the perceived impermeability of the Caspian Gates, Claudian's toponym of choice for the Gates of the Caucasus, to accuse Rufinus of guiding the Huns through this passage. *Against Rufinus* aimed to humiliate Rufinus, the praetorian prefect of the East, who had repeatedly thwarted Stilicho's attempts to get involved in Eastern politics. Claudian was the Western court's poet from 395 until

apud nos dissensio et barbarorum pugnam domestica bella superabant. Trans. Wright 1933. Cf. *Ep.* 64.8. See Kelly 1975, 210-211.

404, when he probably died. His role was as Stilicho's spokesperson, tasked with gaining the senatorial aristocracy's support for Stilicho's policies. Claudian delivered the first book of *Against Rufinus* in early 396, shortly after the death of Rufinus, and the second book in late summer 397, both at Milan.⁶⁵

Claudian employed the perception of the Caspian Gates as impermeable to external foes to prompt his audience to inquire how the Huns, who resided north of the Caucasus, had been able to pillage the Roman Empire. Who had led them in? Who better to blame than Rufinus, Stilicho's foe?

... uentis ueluti si frena resoluat / Aeolus, abrupto gentes sic obice fudit / laxauitque uiam bellis et, ne qua maneret / inmundis regio, cladem diuisit in orbem / disposuitque nefas. alii per terga ferocis / Danubii solidata ruunt expertaque remos / frangunt stagna rotis; alii per Caspia claustra / Armeniasque nives inopino tramite ducti / invadunt Orientis opes.

As if Aeolus loosed the chains from the winds, so he removed the barrier and poured forth peoples and opened the path for war. He spread destruction across the globe, distributing evil so no region would remain free of violence. Some people rushed across the fierce Danube's frozen surface, and their chariot wheels smashed waters more used to oars. Others [the Huns] having been led through the Caspian Gates, and Armenia's snows, across an unexpected pass, invaded the East's riches.⁶⁶

An individual could always be slandered by accusing them of aiding a group that a Roman audience could identify as alien.⁶⁷ Both contemporary and later sources are almost unanimous in blaming Rufinus for the Hunnic incursion, but give no further details.⁶⁸ Claudian may well have been the culprit for this accusation of treason, as he accuses Rufinus of leading the

⁶⁵ Cameron 1970, 76-79.

⁶⁶ Claud. *In Ruf.* 2.22-30, trans. Bernstein 2023, adapted.

⁶⁷ Garambois-Vasquez 2002, 223-225; Long 1996, 225-226.

⁶⁸ Claud. *In Ruf.* 1.308-309, 1.319-322, 2.9, 2.501. Oros. 7.37.1: *barbaras gentes ille inmisit* (no specific mention of the Huns); Socrates *Hist. eccl.* 6.1.6; Zos. 5.4, ed. Paschoud 1986, trans. Ridley 1982; Sozom. *Hist. eccl.* 8.1.2; *Chronicle of Ps.-Joshua the Stylite* 243; *Euphemia and the Goth* 4 ed. Burkitt 1913, trans. Grammatikopoulos 2023; John Ant. fr. 190, ed. and trans. Mariev 2008, alludes to the incompetence and cowardice of an Eastern commander, which the *Chronicle* names Addai, who did not oppose the Huns.

Huns through the Gates of the Caucasus into Asia, in *Against Rufinus*. There was likely no substance to this accusation; Claudian took advantage of contemporary barbarian incursions to slander Rufinus.⁶⁹ Claudian also accused Rufinus of inciting other barbarian groups besides the Huns to raid the Roman Empire by crossing the frozen Danube, but remained vague about how this was done. In Book 2 of *Against Rufinus*, Claudian implied that Rufinus was responsible for the raiding skirmishes of the Goths under Alaric, by setting them in motion: "Now Rufinus stirred up many peoples: he roused the Getae and the Danube, received the Scythians in alliance, and left the remaining territory prey to enemy arms."⁷⁰

Unlike Jerome, Claudian did not explicitly allude to the impermeability of the Caspian Gates, he implied that the Huns could not have made their way through without help from an agent located within the *oikoumene*. This explanation takes away the Huns' agency and places it in the hands of their guide, Rufinus, who had led them through the Gates by an unexpected path. By the 4th century, the trope of external groups from the Eurasian Steppe being led through the Gates, rather than passing through by their own devices, was already well attested. For instance, Tacitus and Josephus wrote that the Iberians led the Sarmatians through the Caspian Gates into Armenia and Cassius Dio recounted that an Alan incursion into Albania and Media was instigated by Pharasmanes.⁷¹ The formulation of these passages, including that of Claudian, deprives of all agency the barbarian groups crossing into the *oikoumene*. This not only demon-

⁶⁹ Liebeschuetz (1990, 91-92) wrote that Rufinus may have been responsible for settling Huns in Thrace, which may explain the accusation of treason, if this did occur around the same time as the Hunnic incursion of 395-398. See Priscus fr. 60. These barbarian incursions had nothing to do with Rufinus' assassination, who was already unpopular and whose death would have benefited Eutropius. Cf. Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 51-52.

⁷⁰ Claud. *In Ruf.* 1.308-310: *iamque Getas Histrumque movet Scythiamque receptat / auxilio traditque suas hostilibus armis / reliquias*. Trans. Bernstein 2023, adapted. The Gothic raiding is also mentioned in 2.36-53. Claudian employed the ethnonym Getae to refer to the Goths throughout his works.

⁷¹ This Alan invasion is dated to c. A.D. 135. See Braund 1991.

strates the pervasiveness of tropes about the impermeability of the Caspian Gates, but also the shared conceptions about the inferiority and irrationality of barbarians, who are perpetually unable to venture of their own volition into the *oikoumene*, the Greco-Roman world.⁷² These barbarian groups are either the subject of passive finite verbs or are modified by passive participles (i.e. both the equivalent of the object of an active verb), or the object of active verbs:

Claudian, *In Rufinum*, 2.28-30: “Others [the Huns], having been led through the Caspian Gates and Armenia’s snows across an unexpected pass, invaded the East’s riches.” (... *alii per Caspia claustra / Armeniasque nives inopino tramite ducti / invadunt Orientis opes*).⁷³

Tacitus, *Annals*, 6.33: “But the Iberians, in territorial control, hastily poured out their Sarmatians against the Armenians by the Caspian route.” (*Sed Hiberi locorum potentes Caspia via Sarmatam in Armenios raptim effundunt*).⁷⁴

Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.4.4: “... they [the kings of the Iberians and the Albanians] did bring in the Alani against Artabanus by allowing them free transit through their own territory after throwing open the Caspian Gates.” (... Ἀλανοὺς δὲ δίοδον αὐτοῖς διδόντες διὰ τῆς αὐτῶν καὶ τὰς θύρας τὰς Κασπίας ἀνοίξαντες ἐπάγουσι τῷ Ἀρταβάνῳ).⁷⁵

Josephus, *Jewish War*, 7.7.4: “The Alani—a race of Scythians, as we have somewhere previously remarked, inhabiting the banks of the river Tanais [Don] and the lake Maeotis [Sea of Azov]—contemplating at this period a predatory incursion into Media and beyond, entered into negotiations with

⁷² For an overview of the Greco-Roman understandings of the barbarian in Late Antiquity, see Gillett 2009; Heather 2010.

⁷³ Trans. Bernstein 2023, adapted.

⁷⁴ Ed. Heubner 1994, trans. Woodman 2004. On this passage, see Woodman 2017, 232-233.

⁷⁵ The translation and Latin edition of this passage are taken from Feldman 1965, which proposed several changes informed by scholarship published since the publication of Niese’s (1890) edition of *AJ*. Bosworth (1977, 223-225) suggested that Josephus’ account of this event is accurate, and that the Caspian Gates refer to one of the passes through the Alborz Mountains, near ancient Rhagae, modern-day Ray, which Alexander the Great took on his way to India. Bosworth proposed that the Alans had taken a long detour by circling around the Caspian Sea to attack the unsuspecting Medes from the east, from Hyrcania.

the king of the Hyrcanians, who was master of the pass which king Alexander had closed with iron gates. With this person there [the king of the Hyrcanians] having provided an entrance to them [the Alani], masses of them fell upon the Medes who suspected nothing, and plundered a populous country, filled with all manner of live-stock, none venturing to oppose them." (Τὸ δὲ τῶν Ἀλανῶν ἔθνος ὅτι μὲν εἰσι Σκύθαι περὶ τὸν Τάναϊν καὶ τὴν Μαιῶτιν λίμνην κατοικοῦντες, πρότερόν που δεδηλώκαμεν κατὰ τούτους δὲ τοὺς χρόνους διανοηθέντες εἰς τὴν Μηδίαν καὶ προσωτέρω ταύτης ἔτι καθ' ἀρπαγὴν ἐμβαλεῖν τῷ βασιλεῖ τῶν Ὑρκανῶν διαλέγονται τῆς παρόδου γὰρ οὗτος δεσπότης ἐστίν, ἣν ὁ βασιλεὺς Ἀλέξανδρος πύλαις σιδηραῖς κλειστήν ἐποίησε. κακείνου τὴν εἴσοδον αὐτοῖς παρασχόντος ἄθροοι καὶ μηδὲν προϋποπτεύσασι τοῖς Μήδοις ἐπιπεσόντες χώραν πολυάνθρωπον καὶ παντοίων ἀνάμεστον βοσκημάτων διήρπαζον μηδενὸς αὐτοῖς τολμῶντος ἀνθίστασθαι).⁷⁶

Cassius Dio, *Epitome*, 69.15.1: "A second war was begun by the Alani (they are Massagetae) at the instigation of Pharasmanes." (...ἕτερος δὲ ἐξ Ἀλανῶν (εἰσὶ δὲ Μασσαγέται) ἐκινήθη ὑπὸ Φαρασμάνου...).⁷⁷

The passage of the Huns through the Gates of the Caucasus was an ideal opportunity for Claudian to harness the associations of the Gates as impermeable to those beyond the *oikoumene*, at least without the help of an agent from the *oikoumene*. Barbarian incursions were common in Late Antiquity and did not require support from traitors within the Roman Empire to succeed. Yet mentioning that the Huns had passed through the Caspian Gates would have raised questions about how they had managed to do so, given their established literary pedigree as uncrossable barriers for external foes, and the importance of having a guide from the *oikoumene* to lead these external groups through. Claudian exploited this, rhetorically, to slander Rufinus by accusing him of being a traitor.

⁷⁶ Trans. Thackeray 1928, adapted.

⁷⁷ Ed. Boissvain 1901, trans. Cary and Foster 1925. In this excerpt, the agency of the Alans is subverted by Pharasmanes (king of the Iberians), who functions as the genitive of agent of the passive clause.

CONCLUSION

Literary tropes about the Gates of the Caucasus, particularly about their impermeability and their role in locking savage barbarian groups away from the *oikoumene*, established through centuries of literature, were given a new life in Late Antiquity. Both Jerome and Claudian carefully crafted a rhetorical landscape surrounding the Gates of the Caucasus and linked it to contemporary events to further their agendas. This paper showed why and how Jerome and Claudian employed centuries-old tropes about the Gates of the Caucasus and harnessed these tropes in new ways to further their argumentations, in the context of the Hunnic incursion in the Near East, from A.D. 395-398.

Jerome, confronted with a novel barbarian group, “not much known from ancient records,”⁷⁸ recycled Herodotus’ account of Scythian conquests to emphasize the Huns’ ferocity, which forced Fabiola to flee and return to Rome. Jerome justified this by leveraging the perception of the Gates of Alexander, his preferred toponym, as keeping the Huns isolated beyond these Gates since the times of Alexander to explain his association between past and present barbarian groups. The fearsome character of the Huns was further supported by Jerome’s choice of toponym for the Gates, which emphasized that these Huns were one of the barbarian groups that the greatest conqueror of Antiquity, Alexander the Great, had deemed essential to keep out of the *oikoumene*.

This portrayal of the Huns as particularly savage barbarians was also conducive to Jerome’s theological understanding of contemporary calamities as divine punishment sent to chastise mankind. Jerome used this perception to highlight the gravity of the Hunnic incursion, which he presented to his audience as divine punishment and an invitation for repentance. Furthermore, given the literary association of the Gates of the Caucasus as impermeable to barbarian groups beyond the *oikoumene*, Jerome may have wanted his audience to ask themselves how the Huns had crossed into Asia. For Jerome, God had sent the Huns as instruments of divine punishment, to promote reform and

⁷⁸ Amm. Marc. 31.2.1, trans. Rolfe 1939, adapted.

penitence, like Fabiola had done by devoting herself to God, to repent for two sinful marriages.

The Hunnic invasion through the Gates of the Caucasus was also a perfect opportunity for Claudian to rhetorically exploit to slander Stilicho's political opponent in the East, Rufinus. In his invective *Against Rufinus*, Claudian harnessed the perceived inability of external groups to pass the Caspian Gates to accuse Rufinus of treason. According to the literary imagination about the Caspian Gates, those beyond its limits could only be led in by an agent from the *oikoumene*. For Claudian, the traitor who had led the Huns through the Caspian Gates and into the Near East was Rufinus.

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CAUCASUS IN GREEK AND LATIN EPIGRAPHY FROM THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

NICOLAS J. PREUD'HOMME

Abstract. Sixteen inscriptions from the Mediterranean world and the Cimmerian Bosphorus, dating from the 4th century B.C. to the 4th century A.D., are discussed in this article which offers an anthology of mentions relating to the Caucasus in ancient Greek and Latin epigraphy. Mount Caucasus and individuals, human or divine beings, who bore the name or epithet of “Caucasian,” appear in various contexts linked to the funerary domain, civic and local cults, mythology, military expeditions, gladiatorial fights, or even to political propaganda. The main clichés about the Caucasus included the Promethean legend, as well as the massive nature of these remote mountains, located on the border of the *oikoumene*. All these various documents testify to a relative diffusion of knowledge and beliefs concerning the Caucasus throughout the Graeco-Roman world and ensure the special place occupied by this mountain and its inhabitants in the common imagination.

INTRODUCTION

Ten Greek and six Latin inscriptions contain attestations of the geographical term designating the Caucasus or about individuals and deities bearing the epithet “Caucasian.”¹ This quite varied epigraphic file,

¹ Greek inscriptions: *SEG* XLVII 954; *CIRB* 113; *IG* XII 5 1078; *Chios* 8, 37, 40, 68, 75, 499; *Erythrai* 60. Latin inscriptions: *AE* 1996, 1767; *CIL* XII 5687 15; *CIL* XIII 8213; VI 1163; VI 14605; VI 25426.

which extends from the Hellenistic times to the Late Antique period, includes an inscription concerning a sale of priesthoods and evoking Apollo Kaukaseus with Artemis Kaukasis in Ionia, another document regarding the mythical hero Kaukasos whose tradition was particularly living on the island of Chios, a short inscription on the torture of Prometheus found at Orange in former Gallia Narbonensis, funerary documents mobilizing aristocrats and freedmen where the Caucasus appears as a home country or as a borderland of human existence – notably the monument of the soldier Gaius Iulius Mansuetus, known for his commitment in an expedition during the Antonine period on the banks of the Caucasian river Alutus, and also the less renowned funerary eulogy of the Bosporan aristocrat Phanomachos for his father Antistasis. At last, an inscription glorifying the exploits of Constantius II on the obelisk of the Circus Maximus carries the feat of moving this Egyptian monument by comparing it to the mass of the Caucasian Mountains.

Other inscriptions that don't explicitly mention the Caucasus but relate to one of its nationals, peoples or regions, have notably been the subject of a recent work by Natia Phiphia, Ekaterine Kobakhidze and Tedo Dundua² – these documents are left aside in this contribution.

A FUNERARY INSCRIPTION FROM CIMMERIAN BOSPORUS (*CIRB* 113)

The Bosporan epitaph of Antistasis, dated 344-310 B.C. with some uncertainty, was found in Pantikaïeion, on the Peninsula of Kerch:

Your Phanomachos erected the image to Phoibos, for Antistasis, his mortal father who achieved immortal honor, in the time of the archon Paerisadeos. The farthest bordering mountains guard the earth of the Taurians below the Caucasus.³

² Phiphia, Kobakhidze, and Dundua 2023.

³ *CIRB* 113: Εἰκόνα Φοίβῳ στήσε, Αντίσστασι, Φανόμαχός σο[υ] / ἀθάνατον θνητῶι πατρὶ γέρας τελέσας, / Παιρισάδεος ἀρχοντος ὅσῃν χθόνα τέρμονες ἄκρ[οι] / Ταύρων Καυκάσιός τε ἐντὸς ἔχουσιν ὅροι. Hiller von Gaertringen 1926, 29, no. 71. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.



Map of the Ancient Latin and Greek inscriptions about "Caucasus" and "Caucasian" entities

In this funerary poem, Caucasian mountains are perceived as a physical limit and symbolic protection exercised on the earth where the dead terminate their course. The Taurians were an ancient people settled on the southern coast of the Crimean Peninsula, inhabiting the Mountains of Crimea and the narrow coastal strip between the mountains and the Black Sea.⁴ They gave their name to the peninsula, which was once known as Taurica, Taurida or Tauris. The identity of the Taurians remains debated, insofar as it is not certain that they themselves bore this name, which may result from the Grecization of a real auto-ethnonym or refer to the name Tauros that the ancient Greeks would have given to the mountains of Crimea as to other mountain ranges. A Maeotian nation on the eastern coast of the Black Sea bore the name of Toretians (Τορέται).⁵ A rapprochement has been considered between the Taurians and the Cimmerians, the Alans and other Iranian-speaking peoples living around Caucasus. From an archaeological point of view, they have sometimes

⁴ Hdt. 4.103; Strabo 7.4.2.

⁵ Ps.-Scyl. *Peripl.* 74; Strabo 11.2.11; Dionys. Per. 682; Tokhtasiev 2017, 143.

been attached to the culture of Kizil-Koba (8th-3rd centuries B.C.).⁶ This epitaph would tend to suggest that the territory of the Taurians would extend to the northern foothills of the Caucasus, but one should not lend too literal value to this above all poetic and literary assertion: in their imagination, the Taurians of the Cimmerian Bosphorus thought of themselves as neighbouring peoples of this Caucasian boundary of the world by taking up ancient Greek geographical conceptions.⁷

“CAUCASIAN” GODS, HEROES, AND SLAVES IN CHIOS AND ERYTHRAI, IONIA

Most nominal mentions of Caucasus and Caucasians in Greek epigraphy come from the island of Chios and the city of Erythrai on the nearby Ionian coast. Herodotus mentions indeed a place name, *Kaukasa*, on the island of Chios.⁸ The editors of the corpus gathering the Greek inscriptions from Chios, Georgios and Aimilias Zolotas, placed this toponym in its north-eastern part, in the bay of Lagadas, on or near the port of Delphinion.⁹ Such a toponym was perhaps bound to the slaves imported from Colchis, or to a community of Caucasian expatriates.¹⁰ However, we must remain cautious in not ruling out the possibility of a geographical name linked solely to the quality of the divinities and heroes honoured by the community which places itself under their patronage. An eponym hero was forged to explain the origin of this toponym: *Kaukasos* was a companion among a group of heroes, with *Oinopion*, *Babras* and the Aiolian *Kretheus*.¹¹ Other toponyms are bound to these mythical characters, notably *Babranteion*¹² and *Oinopionos* also on Chios Island.¹³

The epithet “Caucasian,” which originally designated an ethnic group, then a village, as well as a name of a hero of Chios, also came to be applied to gods worshiped in this region. A text about sale of priesthoods,

⁶ Kravchenko 2011.

⁷ Braund 1994, 8-39; Meißner 2000; Preud’homme 2022.

⁸ Hdt. 5.33.

⁹ Zolotas 1908, 181.

¹⁰ Ath. 6.266e-f = fr. 51 Edelstein-Kidd; Braund and Tsetskhladze 1989, 124.

¹¹ Hdt. 5.33.1.

¹² Polyb. 16.40.1; Steph. Byz. β3.

¹³ Fowler 2013, 589.

and dated between 300 and 260 B.C., was found at Erythrai, on the Ionian coast facing Chios Island.

... On the sacred overseer of Bacchus Pythokritos, of Apollo Kaukaseus and Artemis Kaukasis and Apollo Lykeios and Apollo Delios and on the river Aleontos...¹⁴

In the sanctuary of Erythrai, a single priest officiated for the couple of deities Apollo Kaukaseus and Artemis Kaukasis.¹⁵ Another dyad associating Apollo and Artemis is also found in Georgian chronicle *Life of the Kartvelian Kings* about the apocryphal tradition on the Meskhian widow Samzivari and Andrew the Apostle in Acquri, a city of Moschikē or Samc'xe in south-western Georgia.¹⁶ Sources are lacking to determine whether these Caucasian expatriates on Chios brought their own cults interpreted by the Greeks through a dyad Apollo and Artemis, or whether these Greek deities were later implanted in Moschikē under the influence of the Greek diaspora established in Pontus and Colchis.¹⁷

FUNERARY AND ORNAMENTAL LATIN INSCRIPTIONS

During the Roman period as well as the Classical and Hellenistic times, Caucasus and particularly Colchis were an important source of slaves furnishing the markets of the Mediterranean world.¹⁸ A Latin inscription from Africa Proconsularis informs about Oppius Caucasius, possibly the young son of a freeman living in this province.¹⁹ Two other epigraphic documents from funerary context were found in Rome:

¹⁴ Erythrai 60: [σ—] Βάικωνος ἐφ' ἱεροποιοῦ Πυθοκρίτου, / [Ἀπό]λλωνος Καυκασέως καὶ Ἀρτέμιδος Καυ- / [κασί]δος καὶ Ἀπόλλωνος Λυκείου καὶ Ἀπόλ- / [λω]νος Δηλίου καὶ ποταμοῦ Ἀλέοντος. Fontrier & Earinos, *Mouseion* 1, 1873-1875, 103-109, no. 108; Rayet, *RA* 33, 1877, 107-128; *Syll*³ 1014; Robert, *BCH* 57, 1933, 467-480 (*PH*); Sokolowski, *LSAM* 25; *SEG* XV 723; XVI 725; Forrest, *BCH* 83, 1959, 513-522 (*PH*); Dunst, *SDAW* 1960, 1, 5-20, no. 1; *SEG* XVIII 478; **IEry* 201 (*PH*).

¹⁵ Ackermann 2013, 358.

¹⁶ Thomson 1996, 358.

¹⁷ Preud'homme 2024, 323, 336, 358-359.

¹⁸ Braund and Tsatskheladze 1989.

¹⁹ *ILPBardo*-01, 35 = *AE* 1996, 1767: *D(is) M(anibus) s(acrum) Opp(rius) Caucasi(us) vixit ann(is) III* ("Consecrated to the Manes gods. Opprius the Caucasian lived three years"). While the place of discovery is unspecified, *D(is) M(anibus)* abbreviated

To the gods Manes. Parents Caucasus and Justa made (this monument) to their well-deserving son Philo. He lived one year and five months.²⁰

To the gods Manes. Caucasus made [this monument] on his own to his well-deserving brother Rhenicus.²¹

These inscriptions show individuals probably belonging to a milieu of freedmen who had acquired enough material wealth to be able to start a family and cultivate a family memory by commissioning such funerary inscriptions. The name of Caucasus' brother, Rhenicus, seems at first glance to recall the Rhine (*Rhenus*), but I prefer to consider for my part the hypothesis of a name derived from a less known hydronym — the Rhoas,²² flowing through the country of Egritice, corresponding to Egrisi or Mingrelia,²³ and cited by Pliny

to two letters outside Italy points to a date from the late 1st century–mid-3rd century A.D. Caucasius appears to be used as a cognomen, which seems to be unattested elsewhere in this exact Latin form. How do equally rare names like Caucadio (*CIL* XI 1823) or Caucavus (*CIL* III 4922) relate to Caucasius and the Caucasus? This is a question that philological research will have to clarify in the future with the contribution of linguistics.

²⁰ *CIL* VI 14605 (1st–2nd centuries A.D.): *D(is) M(anibus) / Caucasus / et Iusta / parentes / Philoni filio / b(ene) m(erenti) fecerunt / vixit annu(m) I / menses V.*

²¹ *CIL* VI 25426: *D(is) M(anibus) / Rhenico fratri / bene merenti / de se / Caucasus / fecit.*

²² In Greek, the common noun ῥοάς has two meanings: (1) shedding of fruit, a disease of vines (feminine nominative singular form of ῥή ῥοάς, -άδος); (2) pomegranates and pomegranate-trees (feminine accusative plural form of ῥή ῥόα). In Mingrelian language, *roasaa* (რეასა) means “piece of rock (in a river)” according to Kajaia 2002, 533. I have not found any equivalent of the Rhoas River in other ancient sources.

²³ The Egritice region of Pliny the Elder (*HN* 6.13–14) seems to correspond well to the *Ekrēktikē chōra* (Εκρηκτικήν χώραν) of Ptol. *Geog.* 5.10.5. This region is very likely to be the ancestor of the Georgian name Egrisi designating the region located to the west of the Lixi Mountains. According to Kakhadze (1991, 27–29), this name is attested in classical Georgian not only in the form of a province name in egr-, but also as a hydronym in western Georgia, egr-: we would thus find this root in the name of the river Enguri. A close root in -gr / -gor has the meanings “to roll,” “to wallow,” “to drag,” all verbs which could very well qualify a water-

the Elder.²⁴

An interpolation with the active infinitive of the Greek verb ῥεῖν meaning "to flow" may have transformed this hydronym and led to the form Rhenicus as a derived adjective to designate the inhabitants of its banks.²⁵ It is therefore quite possible that this inscription refers to two freed brothers of servile origin, who were given geographical names that are close to their spatial origin in Western Caucasia.

For ancient and modern minds, the Caucasus was the mythical place of Prometheus's torment. An epigraphic testimony on the dissemination of this Promethean myth to the Gallo-Roman public was found in Arausio (Orange), Gallia Narbonensis: "Prometheus chained in the Caucasus. An eagle feeds on his viscera. Hercules."²⁶ The popularization of the myth also passed through ornamental medallions with image and legend like the one found in Orange, a Gallic city renowned for its Roman theatre.

THE VOTIVE INSCRIPTION OF THE SOLDIER MANSUETUS

One of the most famous Latin inscriptions evoking Caucasus was found in Köln on an altar with a dedication to the Ubian matron goddesses. In contrast to what is usual on inscriptions of Roman soldiers, the donor, Gaius Iulius Mansuetus, a soldier of the *legio I Minervia* stationed in Bonna, names the location of his military deployment during a campaign conducted far to the east. Returning from this distant expedition, exceptional enough to be engraved in stone, Mansuetus thanked the protective

course from the point of view of a speaker of a proto-Georgian Caucasian language. See Klimov 1998, 31, 45; Preud'homme 2022, 125.

²⁴ Plin. HN 6.13-14: *et ipsum ab amne influente ibi cognominatum usque quo magnarum navium capacem esse diximus. Et alios accipit fluvios magnitudine numeroque mirabiles, inter quos Glaucum. In ore eius insula est sine nomine, ab Absarro LXX. Inde aliud flumen Charien, gens Saltiae, antiquis Phthirophagi dicti, et alia Sanni, flumen Chobum, e Caucaso per Suanos fluens, dein Rhoan, regio Egritice.*

²⁵ One would rather have expected the ethnonym Rhenus, Rhenanus or Rhenigenus, since Rhenicus would literally designate the one who "defeated the Rhinelanders," a title which would be more appropriate for an *imperator* than for a freedman. See Gaffiot 1934, 1362.

²⁶ CIL XII 5687 15 = CAG-84-03, p. 285: [*Prometheus in*] *Caucaso* / [*vin*]ctus viscera / pa[s]cen[tis] / [aq]uila // [Her]cules.

deities who had watched over his journey:²⁷

To the Aufania Matrons, Gaius Julius Mansuetus, soldier of the pious, faithful, I Minervia Legion has fulfilled his vow. He was at the Alutus River beside Mount Caucasus.²⁸

It is now widely accepted that the expedition in which Gaius Iulius Mansuetus took part was that carried out during the Parthian War in A.D. 162-166, under the joint reigns of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus.²⁹ Aelius Aristides, in his *Panegyric to Cyzicus* addressed to these two emperors, hyperbolically evokes “the walk around the Caucasus” as well as “the conquest of the Indies and the Caspian Gates” among the exploits accomplished during their reign.³⁰ Nevertheless, the location of the Alutus River has been long debated. So far, the Olt River in Transylvania, also designated by the name Alutus, the Terek River on the northern slope of the Caucasus, and the Alazani in Eastern Georgia have been proposed as identifications of the Alutus. Alfred von Domaszewski and Anton von Premerstein had already spoken out convincingly against the idea of relocating the name of the Caucasus to the Carpathians, which had been put forward several times in the second half of the 19th century.³¹ This Transylvanian option is not convincing since Mansuetus pointed out in his inscription the location of the Alutus near the Caucasus to avoid any confusion with the Alutus of the Carpathians.

It has been assumed that this Alutus River was identifiable with Ptolemy’s Alontas, which he referred to as a river flowing into the Hyrcanian Sea.³² The Terek was chosen because it is one of the main rivers,

²⁷ Speidel 2020, 138.

²⁸ CIL XIII 8213: *Matronis / Aufanib(us) C(aius) / Iul(ius) Mansue / tus m(iles) l(egionis) / M(inerviae) / p(iae) f(idelis) v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito) fu[i] / t ad Alutum / flumen secus / mont(em) Caucasu(m).*

²⁹ See Speidel 2020 for the state of the art.

³⁰ Aristid. *Or.* 27.27: τοῦτο ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν μὲν Καυκάσου περίοδον, τοῦτο δ’ ὑπὲρ Ἰνδοῦς ἀλίσκομένους καὶ Κασπίας πύλας... Quet 2002, 100; Dindorf 1829.

³¹ Olt: ILS 4795: *Alutus flumen Daciae*; RE III, 1899, col. 1801, s.v. “Caucasus mons” (C. Patsch): “ein Teil der siebenbürgischen Karpathen.” Terek: von Premerstein 1911, 357, n. 1; A. v. Domaszewski *ad* CIL XIII 8213.

³² Ptol. *Geog.* 5.8.6.

along with the Kura, to flow directly into the Caspian. However, one factor to consider is that the level of the Caspian was higher in the 2nd century A.D. than nowadays.³³ As a result, the Hyrcanian Sea formed a gulf that sank inland, drawing the course of several small coastal rivers. Michael Speidel's proposal, which identifies the Alutus with the Alazani, a river in eastern Georgia, presents substantial interest insofar as it approaches the option of a river flowing from the southern slope of the Greater Caucasus to empty in the Hyrcanian Gulf.³⁴ In addition, the Alazani was on the border between Iberia and Albania,³⁵ which was obviously the subject of a territorial dispute that the Romans had to help settle during another Roman expedition around Caucasus led by Arrian and Rusticus under the reign of Hadrian c. A.D. 135.³⁶ Nevertheless, the Alazani has already received the names of Alazonios and Ocazanis in classical sources from the 1st century A.D., and these hydronyms only partially approach the forms of Alutus and Alontas.³⁷ The indications given by Ptolemy that place the Alontas River in the section of Sarmatia Asiatica, at the eastern end of the

³³ Mouraviev 1992.

³⁴ Speidel 2020, 140-141.

³⁵ Plin. *HN* 6.11.29; Speidel 2020, 140.

³⁶ Them. *Or.* 34.8: ...τοιγαροῦν οὐκ ἄχρι τοῦ βήματος μόνου προήγαγον τοὺς ἄνδρας, ἀλλὰ μέχρι τοῦ στρατηγίου, καὶ διέβαινον μὲν στρατηγοὶ Ῥωμαίων Πύλας Κασπίας, ἐξήλυνον δὲ Ἀλανοὺς ἐξ Ἀρμενίας, ἔταττον δὲ Ἰβηροῖν ὄρους καὶ Ἀλβανοῖς· ἐπὶ τούτοις ἅπασιν τὴν ἐπώνυμον τῶν ὑπάτων ἀρχὴν ἐκαρποῦντο καὶ τὴν πόλιν ἡρμόζον τὴν μεγάλην καὶ προήδρευον τῆς ἀρχαίας βουλῆς... ("As generals of Rome, they [*sc.* Arrian and Rusticus] crossed the Caspian Gates, drove the Alans from Armenia, fixed the Iberians and the Albanians, and for all this obtained the eponymous office of consuls, governed the prefecture of the City and were elected presidents of the ancient Senate." Trans. adapted from Maisano 1995, 1001-1003). The use of the verb form ἔταττον, imperfect indicative of the verb τάσσω, with the meanings of "to put away," "to fix," "to post," "to assign one's place to someone," "to place in a specific place," suggests that Arrian and his lieutenants did not really lead a military campaign against the Iberians and the Albanians but would rather have intervened to impose a territorial division. Kerler 1970, 43, n. 39; Chaumont 1976, 149; Bosworth 1977, 229; Hartmann 2019, 35, n. 27.

³⁷ Strabo 11.4.5; Plin. *HN* 6.11.29; Radt 2008, 258.

Hyrceanian Sea near the Soana River, with a mouth on a meridian at the 86th degree, agree more with a river in Eastern Caucasia than with a border watercourse between Eastern Iberia and the western part of Caucasian Albania.³⁸ Other Albanian rivers once flowed into the Hyrcanian Gulf, notably Alijanchay, Turyanchay, Goychay and Pirsaat. As the inscription of the centurion L. Iulius Maximus dated from the reign of Domitian and found in the Park of Gobustan attests that Roman soldiers had already reached the Caspian shore at the end of the 1st century A.D., it is not impossible that Mansuetus also reached the shores of Eastern Caucasia.³⁹ It would therefore be in my opinion preferable to remain cautious about the precise location of the Alutus and to situate it preferably in the oriental part of Caucasian Albania, not very far from the Derbent Pass, if we retain its identification with Ptolemy's Alontas.⁴⁰

THE GLADIATOR KAUKASOS HONOURED BY HIS REFEREE IN LATE ANCIENT MACEDONIA

A funerary inscription from the second half of the 3rd century A.D. was found at Stoboi, in the Macedonian region of Paionia. This epitaph depicts a certain Aurelius Severus, second gladiator referee and patron of the *collegium* of gladiators, paying tribute to a deceased man named Kaukasos, probably his colleague:

Aurelius Severus, second referee (σεκουνδαροῦδης, *secunda rudis*), patron (προστάτης) of the *collegium*, to Kaukasos who was formerly (known as) Strategos, on behalf of the *collegium* and in his cherished memory; be well.⁴¹

Gladiatorial fights were usually refereed by two men, which explains the title of *secunda rudis* held by Aurelius Severus, who was a freed

³⁸ Ptol. *Geog.* 5.8.6; Hewsens and Salvatico 2001, map 56.

³⁹ AE 1951, 263: *Imp(eratore) Domitiano Caesare Aug(usto) / Germanic(o) L(ucius) Iulius Maximus (centurio) / leg(ionis) XII Ful(minatae)*. Bais 2001, 88-90; Gagoshidze 2008, 16; Schottky 2014, 96; Hartmann 2019, 38; Eck 2023.

⁴⁰ Hewsens and Salvatico 2001, maps 27, 40, 56.

⁴¹ SEG XLVII 954 (*Poikila Epigraphika* 1997, 83-87): Ἀὐρήλιος Σεβῆ- / ρος σεκουνδα- / ροῦδης προστά- / τῆς τοῦ κολληγί- / ου Καυκάσω τῷ / πρίν Στρατηγῷ ἔ- / κ τοῦ κολληγίου / καὶ τ[ὼ]ν ἑαυτοῦ / μνείας χάριν / Χαί- / ραίται {χαίρετε}.

gladiator serving as both instructor and referee.⁴² The *collegium* in question must be the professional association of gladiators led by Aurelius Severus and to which Kaukasos would also have belonged, since this institution is also associated with funeral homage. The necessary funds for the burial of the deceased were provided by the association and its chief (προστάτης). In this Macedonian inscription, the deceased is called by two different names, since the gladiators used to change their name and used a pseudonym instead when they started their new profession. Accordingly, the former name of the deceased gladiator was Στρατηγός, and his new *cognomen* Καύκασος.⁴³ The question then arises whether this gladiator Strategos was originally from the Caucasus or not. His first Greek name does not necessarily presuppose his ethnic origin, because of his servile condition and the fact that this name could very well have been given to him by his first masters. His second nickname of Kaukasos results on the other hand from his choice to change or reform his identity when he entered the profession of gladiator, which supposes a double strategy of distinction from his peers and identification with a model or an ideal associated with the Caucasus. There are therefore two possibilities: by calling himself Kaukasos, Stratēgos would have wanted either to show his Caucasian origins, or to identify himself with a mountain renowned for its high peaks, perhaps to illustrate his great size making him formidable in combat. In both cases, the Caucasus in Graeco-Roman context appears in its ambivalence connoted positively and negatively, as a majestic place exalted by its high mountains, but also as the country of origin for many slaves who share to a certain extent the fate of Prometheus's bound.

THE "CAUCASIAN MASS" OF THE LATERAN OBELISK

The dedication of the obelisk of Constantius II in Circus Maximus, dated in A.D. 357, is the last Roman inscription evoking the Caucasus by name in our available sources:

⁴² Robert and Robert 1971, 524; Ville 1981, 369.

⁴³ Nigdelis 2000, 139-145; Iosifidou 2016, 41.

The work of the father and also [his] gift to you, Rome, Constantius Augustus dedicated it, once subdued [all] the globe, and what no earth brought, nor any age had seen (to you), he erected it, so that this gift was equal to the famous triumphs. His father, wishing it to be a decoration of the city of his name, tore this splendour from the cut cliff of Thebes. But the worry of transport was greatly afflicting, since no ingenuity and effort and hand would have moved the Caucasian mass: (so) warned the fame that was spreading here and there. However, Constantius, the lord of the world, trusting that everything yields to virtue, ordered the not small part of a mountain to advance over the lands and entrusted it to the swelling sea, and the waters, with placid waves, led the ship to the beaches of West, with wonder of the [Tiber]. While a foul tyrant was laying waste to Rome, the gift of Augustus and the zeal for erecting it lay waiting, spurned not because it was rejected but because no one believed that a work of such mass could rise into the celestial auras. Now, as snatched again from reddish quarries this long-preserved glory shone and touched the heavens. When [the emperor] is brought back after the tyrant's murder, a way having been found to Rome through courage, the rejoicing victor erects [this obelisk], a lofty trophy for the city, and the emperor's gift, with triumphs worthy indeed.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Trans. adapted from Liverani 2012 and McGlone 2019. *CIL* VI 1163 (3071, 3778, 4331, 4340) = *CIL* VI 31249 = *CIL* X 1863 = *CIL* XIV 174 = *EE*-08-01 352 = *CLE* 268 = *CLE* 279 = *D* 736 = *ILMN*-01 27 = *AE* 2012 177 = *EDCS*-18200409 = Marchionni 2013, 460-461: *Patris opus munusqu[e] suum] tibi Roma dicavit / Augustus [toto Constan]tius orbe recepto / et quod nulla tulit tellus nec viderat aetas / condidit ut claris exa[equ]et dona triumphis / hoc decus ornatum genitor cognominis urbis / esse volens Caesa Thebis de rupe revellit. // Sed gravior divum tangebatur cura vehendi / quod nullo ingenio nisuque manuque moveri / caucaseam molem discurrens fama monebat. / At dominus mundi Constantius omnia fretus / cedere virtuti terris incedere iussit / haut partem exiguum montis ponto[que] tumentis // credidit et placido [vexerunt aequora flu]ctu / litus ad Hesperium [Tiberi] mirante carinam. / Interea Romam ta[po]ro vastante tyranno / Augusti iacuit donum studiumque locandi / non fastu spreto sed quod non crederet ullus / tantae molis opus superas consurgere in auras // nunc veluti rursus ruf[is] avulsa metallis / emicuit pulsataque polos haec gloria dudum / auctori servata suo cu[m] c]aede tyranni / redditur atque aditu Ro[mae vi]rtute reperto / victor ovans urbi[que] locat sublim]e tropaeum / principis et munus cond[ignis us]que triumphis.*

The Lateran Obelisk, located in Piazza San Giovanni in Laterano, is one of the thirteen ancient obelisks of Rome. With its height of 32.18 m (with the base and the cross, it reaches 45.70 m), this stone is the first tallest monolithic obelisk in the world. This Egyptian monument was built at the time of the pharaohs Thutmose III and Thutmose IV (15th century B.C.) and this makes it the oldest obelisk in Rome. This stone of red granite, which comes from the temple of Amon-Ra at Thebes (Karnak) in Egypt, was brought to Rome at the behest of Emperor Constantius II in 357 and erected by the *praefectus urbi* Memmius Vitrasius Orfitus on the spine of the Circus Maximus, near another monument, the Flaminio obelisk which already stood there, and which is now in the Piazza del Popolo. When Pope Sixtus V and his engineers dug up the obelisk from the ruined Circus Maximus in 1587-1588, they found a Latin inscription carved into its lower parts, laid there by Constantius II. They pieced it together, saved it, then took it apart, using the material to repair the broken obelisk. Thus, although the Latin text is known from modern transcriptions, the inscription itself no longer physically exists. The reconstructed text contains four stanzas of hexameters (one on each side of the obelisk) telling the story of its journey from Egypt to Rome.⁴⁵ The first stanza relates that the emperor Constantine ordered the obelisk removed from Thebes to decorate his new city, Constantinople. The second stanza details the delay in Alexandria and praises Constantius for being brave enough to undertake the daunting task of moving it to Rome. The difficulty of transporting the monument is emphasized in order to congratulate the emperor for undertaking such a feat, implying that nature itself bent to his will. These lines express in a hyperbolic way that he ordered men to carry Caucasian Mountain and cross land and sea. The third stanza then describes further delays, this time in the raising of the obelisk, which was brought to Rome, again underscoring the difficulty posed by this huge monument. This delay had two main causes. First, Magnentius, a general in the Roman army of Gallic origin, had risen to power in Rome and more or less controlled the Italian peninsula, since he was acclaimed emperor by his legions. Perhaps more importantly, the enormous physical task of

⁴⁵ Rouillet 1972; Richardson 1992; Platner and Ashby 2002; Wirsching 2007; Claridge 2010.

raising the obelisk remained to be done. The last stanza describes the obelisk finally erected in Rome after the defeat of Magnentius. After his victories over this usurper at Mursa Major in 351 and Mons Seleucus in 353, Constantius regained control of the empire and erected the Circus Maximus obelisk as a monument to his triumph. The inscription asserts that he went to Rome with his strength or courage (*virtus*), implying that the Roman ability to raise obelisks had been restored with the victory of Constantius.⁴⁶ The reference to the Caucasus thus takes on a Promethean dimension through the titanic feat achieved during the transport of this obelisk and also in the way in which the gods favour the good order of things by punishing the brazen usurper.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

Nominal mentions of the Caucasus in Greek and Latin epigraphy are obviously far fewer than in literary sources. However, they shed invaluable light on the dissemination of this toponym in the public space of the Mediterranean cities, the Roman Empire and the Cimmerian Bosporus. The main clichés about the Caucasus of course included the Promethean myth, as well as the massive nature of these remote mountains, located on the border of the *oikumene*. All these various documents testify to a relative diffusion concerning the Caucasus throughout the Graeco-Roman world and contribute to a common familiarity maintained by myths, cults, and human movements. The diversity of contexts as well as the imprecise or allusive nature of several mentions agree with a commonly shared popular knowledge of the Caucasus far from the shade of its peaks. Few mountains outside the Mediterranean world had the privilege of benefiting from such a reputation.

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⁴⁶ Lefebvre 1948; McGlone 2019; Liverani 2012.

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FEUDALISM IN ANCIENT CAUCASIA? ON THE IBERIAN SERVICE NOBILITY IN THE 5TH TO 7TH CENTURIES*

FRANK SCHLEICHER

Abstract. The paper examines the applicability of the concept of feudalism to the South Caucasus region, focusing specifically on the Iberian nobility during the 5th to 7th centuries. It discusses the challenges of transferring the Western European concept of feudalism to the Caucasian and Iranian world, noting that while there are similarities, the term may not be entirely appropriate for the region. The study identifies two main forms of rule in the Caucasus: horizontal, where kings were seen as first among equals and dependent on the support of the nobility, and vertical, where powerful aristocrats maintained considerable autonomy within their clans. The paper argues that both structures were present in Iberia and Armenia, making comprehensive royal authority difficult. The main focus of the study is the impact of Sāsānian reforms, particularly under rulers such as Kavādh I and Ḥosrau I, in the South Caucasus. Here and there, they aimed to weaken the power of the dynastic nobility and introduce a service nobility loyal to the crown. The paper suggests that these reforms influenced the development of feudal structures in Iberia, although implementation varied from region to region and was often

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retrospectively attributed to specific kings, such as King Vaxtang I. In conclusion, the paper argues that while feudal elements did emerge in the Caucasus, they were closely linked to broader socio-political developments within the Sāsānian Commonwealth, of which the South Caucasian countries were a part, rather than being indigenous or entirely comparable to Western European feudalism.

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to present some thoughts on the administrative development of the South Caucasus under Sāsānid suzerainty. A comprehensive examination of the development of Iberian and Sāsānid conditions cannot be undertaken here. The primary intention of the study is to provide impulses for a more intensive examination of the topic.

Since the term “feudalism” appears prominently in the title of this article, the starting point of the study must be a closer examination of this term. Transferring the essentially Western European concept of feudalism, for which there is no real definition, to Caucasian and Iranian conditions is not entirely unproblematic.¹ However, since the basic social structures and relationships are similar to those in some regions of medieval Western Europe, and for want of a better term, it cannot be dispensed with.² The analytical model of feudalism used here does not claim to be universally valid for this or that region, but it does describe elements that can be found in different societies in the Iranian and Caucasian regions.³

¹ Rapp 2014, 76, n. 220. The use of the term for European conditions has also been criticised for some time. Since the 1970s, the term has been the subject of much criticism (Brown 1974; Reynolds 1994): the term would be an anachronism and would not be descriptive of early medieval conditions. On the transfer of the term to Iranian conditions, see Börm 2010; Wiesehöfer 1994, 194; Schippmann 1990, 84–86.

² Adontz (1908, 459–460) already recognised the similarities and used the terms. See also Adontz and Garsoïan 1970, esp. 327–328, and Widengren 1969. In fact, the term has so many uses that its meaning is often very limited.

³ On the concept of feudalism and its application to the Sāsānid Empire in research, see Gariboldi 2006, 17–44.

BASICS

The problem with the concept of feudalism today is essentially a conflict between different ideas about the nature of rule in the early Middle Ages. Whereas it was once thought that rule was primarily vertical, from the top (the king) to the bottom (the vassals and sub-vassals), today the idea of the horizontal spread of rule has come to the fore, with an emphasis on consensus and community within a common social class.⁴ It was impossible for the ruler to rule without the acceptance and support of the dynastic nobility.⁵ In the region of the Caucasus, both of these categories of rule were important:⁶

1. Horizontal: The king was *primus inter pares* and depended on the support of at least large sections of the nobility.⁷ The granting of offices and “fiefs” promoted consensus and bound the dynastic nobility to the kingship.⁸
2. Vertical: The powerful aristocrats, as heads of the family (*naxarar* or *mamasaxlisi*),⁹ had their own significant clan possessions. Here the clan chiefs (Cyril Toumanoff refers to them as dynasts)¹⁰ enjoyed full rights of rule. The king could only exercise very limited rule in these areas.

In both Iberia and Armenia, there were many such family estates, which made it difficult to exercise comprehensive rule. An example from the *Georgian Chronicles* shows how such an Iberian noble house was linked to the kingship:

An aristocrat called P’arnavaz,¹¹ is described as *spaspet* during the reign of King P’arsman K’ueli. The king himself had grown up together with

⁴ Abels 2009, 1008.

⁵ The dynastic nobility are those nobles who owned land over which they could exercise control. In the Caucasian region, this was generally a narrow social stratum of patriarchs. See Toumanoff 1963, 90-91, n. 128.

⁶ Schleicher 2021, 240; Rapp 2014, esp. 265-267 and 281-283.

⁷ Widengren 1976; 1969, 81, esp. for the Arsacid conditions. See also Schleicher 2021, 272.

⁸ This was not the only means of bonding, but it was an important one.

⁹ The term *mamasaxlisi* originally referred to any head of a noble clan (Javakhishvili 1905, 11-16; Toumanoff 1963, 91, n. 128).

¹⁰ On the system of dynasticism as opposed to feudalism, see Toumanoff 1963, 34, 117; Pourshariati 2008, 53-56.

¹¹ For the Iranian form of the name, see Rapp 2014, 226.

P'arnavaz at his family's court. The two were therefore milk (foster) brothers.¹² P'arnavaz's family must have owned considerable property and, if they were given the right to raise the heir to the throne, they must have held an important position in the kingdom. The Iberian kingdom is said to have been divided between two kings during this period. When the king who reigned north of the Mtkvari, Mirdat¹³, was overthrown by P'arsman, P'arnavaz was granted his former centre of power, Šida-K'art'li, as his administrative district as *spaspet*. This district certainly included land, as the family's estate was not located in Šida-K'art'li.¹⁴ The allocation of office and land tied the aristocrat and his family even more closely to the king.

With their late perspective, the *Georgian Chronicles* mostly describe a feudal aristocracy with officials who could be appointed by the king. The respective official is called *erist'avi* and administered his district of the kingdom on behalf of the king. The *spaspet* appears as the leading figure among the Iberian nobility. He was responsible for raising and commanding the Iberian cavalry. He also appears as the highest official and superior of the regional princes. As such, he could convene and lead the Iberian Council of Nobles. This body could make decisions and influence the succession to the throne in the event of a king's death.

But when Asp'agur went to Ossetia, death overtook him and he died there. Asp'agur did not have a son but a single daughter. Then all the *erist'avis* of K'art'li gathered in the city of Mc'xet'a with the *spaspet*, who was called Maežan. [...] Now this is my advice, that we present our submission to the king of Persia and request from him mercy; and that we ask him for his son as our king, and request that he marry his son to the daughter of our king Asp'agur.¹⁵

¹² On the system of foster parenthood and its importance for social cohesion, see Schleicher 2021, 267-273; Rapp 2014, 88-89. On the institution itself, see Parkes 2003.

¹³ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 51 (61 Thomson).

¹⁴ The division of the kingdom is said to have existed for several generations. The property of the P'arnavaz family must have been in P'arsman's part of the kingdom.

¹⁵ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 62-63 (73-74 Thomson).

Maežan's proposal is subsequently implemented. According to this account, it is the *spaspet*, the supreme representative of the official aristocracy, who determines Iberian policy when the king is unable to do so.¹⁶

Consensus was important for the king to secure his own rule. Where this consensus and the support of the dynastic nobility was lacking or lost, rule was often unsustainable.

A particularly impressive example from the Iberian context is that of P'arnažom, counted as the fourth king in the *Georgian Chronicles*, who lost consensus with the K'art'velian nobility because of his religious policy. The majority of the nobles conspired because the king had promoted the cult of fire and disregarded that of the ancestors.¹⁷ The nobles turned to the Armenian king and asked him to install a new ruler in Iberia: "Our king has abandoned the religion of our fathers [...] Now he is no longer worthy to be our king." The nobles alone were not strong enough on their own to overthrow the king because he could also rely on forces outside the kingdom, in this specific case Persia. By doing the same and relying on Armenian power, the allies could hope for success. Despite the attempt to rely on Persian forces, P'arnažom actually lost his rule as a result.¹⁸

When we speak of the aristocracy as a single entity, we do not mean that the Iberian nobility acted as a bloc with unified interests. Rather, it can be assumed that there were different factions within the aristocracy, each representing different interests and pursuing different goals. This is confirmed by the *Georgian Chronicle*, which describes a later dispute over the throne as follows: "The *erist'avis* of K'art'li did not accept the proposals of Mirvan; but they all turned to King Bartom. However, a few Georgians, not noble ones, went and joined

¹⁶ On a possible Council of Nobility, see Schleicher 2021, 244-255. Lordkipanidze (1996, 215) does not believe that the Council of Nobility had the right to elect the king.

¹⁷ Börm (2008, 428) observes for the Sāsānian Empire that religion was a bridge between nobility and kingship and that a kind of alliance could be established through the priesthood.

¹⁸ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 29 (42 Thomson).

Mirvan.”¹⁹ Since it is unlikely that the common people had much influence on political events, the dissenters were more likely to have been aristocrats.²⁰

Whether or not these kings were historical figures is irrelevant to our question; the sources here describe late antique structures. A king could rule by consensus with the local nobility, or he could rely on an external power to support him with military force (or the threat of it). The great empires were an obvious choice, but Armenia could also act as an external power.

The concept of feudalism combines many aspects, not all of which occur simultaneously, and even when they do, they can be weighted differently in different regions. For example, the Caucasian dynastic (hereditary) nobility enjoyed far greater autonomy in their rule than was probably the case for much of the Iranian landowning nobility, simply because of their geographical characteristics.²¹

For the purposes of the following analysis, feudalism is to be understood as the set of the institutions that establish and regulate the obligations of obedience and service owed by one free man to another free man, and the obligations of protection and maintenance owed by the lord to his vassal.²² The central elements are military service, which the vassal was obliged to render to his lord in case of emergency, and the lord’s obligation to maintain the vassal, which usually meant that the lord would give him a piece

¹⁹ *K’art’lis C’xovreba* 31 (45 Thomson).

²⁰ The *Historia Augusta* also indicates that, for example, pro-Roman and pro-Perisan factions of the Iberian nobility were able to act in parallel in 260 (*Hist. Aug. Valer.* 4.1.). See also Schleicher 2021, 517; Hartmann 2019, 40-41.

²¹ Toumanoff (1963, 39-40) considered Iran, like Western Europe, to be more feudal than the South Caucasus. However, the Iranian landowning nobility was also characterised by clearly delineated “family rule” (Pourshariati 2008, 28-29). Toumanoff started from Christensen’s (now outdated) thesis (1944, 101-103) that the only group of dynastic aristocrats were the vassal rulers known as *šahrdārān*. However, Pourshariati has shown in her study that despite the sporadic efforts of the Sāsānid rulers to create a feudal and at times estatist socio-political system, the monarchy can best be seen as a dynastic regime.

²² See Ganshof 1960 for an attempt at a definition.

of land, in scholarship often called a “fief,” to use.²³ The fief was usually accompanied by the award of an office to be held on the lord’s behalf.²⁴ This aspect in particular will be discussed below.

Researchers are certain that in late antiquity there was a service nobility in Iberia whose claims to the land were not hereditary.²⁵ In any case, the *Georgian Chronicles* are very interested in the subject of the hereditary nature of the rights to rule, which would not have been the case had there not been a service nobility with such interests:

Then Bakur died; he left young children who could not govern the kingdom. Then the King of the Persians Urmizd [= Hormezd IV (579-590)] gave Ran and Movakan to his son, who was called K’asre Ambarvez [= Խոսրո II (590-628)]. He came and resided at Bardav, and began to confer with the *erist’avis* of K’art’li. He promised great benefits, and set in writing their ancestral rights as *erist’avis* from son to son. In this way, by flattery he seduced them; so the *erist’avis* rebelled, and each separately paid tribute to K’asre Ambarvez.

[...]

A few years after this there were great troubles in Persia. [...] Then K’asre Ambarvez abandoned Ran and K’art’li, and went to assist his father. While the Persians were preoccupied in this manner, then all the

²³ Among the characteristics of feudalism, Widengren (1969, 12, n. 10) includes the presence of a specialised warrior class. This specialised warrior class also existed in the dynastic system. Military service was enforced by the fact that the vassal could be deprived of his fief if he failed to serve (Widengren 1956, 117). Even without this pressure, however, the nobility in the Iranian region was generally willing to respond to the king’s call. Other mechanisms (such as the prospect of booty or honour) must have been decisive here. We rarely hear of the “King of Kings” being abandoned by his nobles. An impressive exception is the Arsacid king Vologaeses III, after the Battle of Dura-Europos (Hartmann 2022).

²⁴ Widengren 1956, 98.

²⁵ Rapp 2014, 316. According to Burney and Lang (2001, 204), the feudal structures that had been widespread in Iran since the Achaemenids found their way to the South Caucasus in the 1st century A.D. during a phase of new Iranisation. Rapp (2014, 211-212) also sees similarities between the *Erist’avi system* and Achaemenid and Seleucid conditions, although these need not be based on deliberate adoption. See also Toumanoff 1963, 443.

erist'avis of K'art'li, those of Upper and Lower K'art'li, conferred. They sent an envoy to the king of the Greeks and asked that he choose a king from among the descendants of the kings of K'art'li and that the *erist'avis* be (confirmed) without change each in his own principality.²⁶

Researchers speak of feudal structures that existed alongside to the structures of the old dynastic nobility.²⁷ The question is whether, and if so when, structures were established in the South Caucasus – especially in Iberia – that could be categorised under this concept of feudalism. The passage quoted from the *Georgian Chronicles* has a historical basis, so it may well reflect conditions in the 7th century.

The thesis of this paper is that the development of feudal elements in the South Caucasus was closely linked to developments in the Sāsānian Empire. The South Caucasian structures can be better understood by comparing them with those in Iran in the 6th century, which is why the two must be considered together.

PREREQUISITES

The development of feudal structures required a variety of different preconditions. However, since the main purpose of this study is to determine when feudal structures became widespread in Iberia, it makes sense to focus on this. For this reason, only the most important prerequisite for the development of feudal structures will be discussed here: the existence of royal lands that could be granted as fiefs to the service nobility.

Of course, as the head of a family clan, which he was as the representative of the dynastic nobility, the king could dispose of his own family's land. However, this land belonged to the noble house and could not be given to outsiders.²⁸ In addition, the king needed the estates to finance his household, his troops, and his family. Direct access to this land was what gave the king his position of power. Although the king was the largest landowner, he needed other estates in addition to the

²⁶ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 217 (228-229 Thomson).

²⁷ Toumanoff 1963, 34-40. The clan structures in Georgia were only broken up by Davit' the Builder (Golden 1999, 59).

²⁸ Vashalomidze 2007, 112; Gogoladze 1986, 42-43. The king as the largest owner of land: Schleicher 2021, 229-231; distribution of estates: Schleicher 2021, 263.

hereditary estates, that the royal family could not or did not want to manage themselves.

Conquest is the main theme here. The *Georgian Chronicles* already provide a clear account of the mythical first king P'arnavaz:

P'arnavaz advanced and captured the border of Greece, Anjianjora (Antioch) and returned from Eklec'i. He went to Klarjet'i and captured Klarjet'i, then advanced on Mc'xet'a with great joy. To his own riches he added Azons wealth; thus his riches overflowed.²⁹

We have already seen in the case of P'arsman K'ueli that the property of a defeated rival could be confiscated by the victor. External conquest reinforced the accumulation of land in the hands of the king. The region of Gugark' may have been one such external territory.³⁰ It was conquered by the Armenians in the 3rd century and is prominent in Georgian lore as one of the few really large territories that the king could grant as a fief. Another important area is the region Šida K'art'li, which P'arsman K'ueli is said to have seized from his co-king Mirdat and which became the domain of the Iberian *spaspet*.³¹

We are somewhat better informed about the situation in Iran than in Iberia. Even in an empire as large as that of the Sāsānids, the amount of land at the ruler's disposal was limited.³² Šāpūr I himself says that the "King of Kings," for example, could only found cities on his own land, for example:

And the people who (were taken) from the empire of the Romans, from non-Eran in plunder, within Ērānšahr, (namely) in Persis, (in) Parthia, Xūzestān, Asūrestān and (in) the other (lands), land by land, where We and (Our) ancestors and forefathers had crown estates, there (they were) settled.³³

²⁹ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 23 (33 Thomson).

³⁰ On Gugark', see Schleicher 2021, 113-118; Rapp 2014, 67-71; Toumanoff 1963, 185-191.

³¹ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 51 (61 Thomson).

³² Altheim and Stiehl 1954, 14-17; Wiesehöfer 1994, 252.

³³ ŠKZ parth. §30 (43 Huyse).

The concentration of city foundations in a few regions, especially in the early period of the dynasty, shows where the Kings of Kings owned land. They had acquired most of the land from the Arsacid “Party Kings” during the founding of the empire.³⁴

There were conquered vassal kingdoms which were granted as fiefs in the broadest sense. These were the so-called secundogenitures. But there were few of these, and attempts were usually made to appoint members of the Sāsānian family as dependent rulers.³⁵ Imperial nobles often had little of it.³⁶

In addition to these territories, there were regions within the realm that the king could claim after confiscation or the extinction of family lines, and which he could grant to loyal nobles. In my opinion, however, this should not always be seen as the granting of fiefs. Often, it was simply royal influence on the appointment of new family lines.³⁷ The royal land was called *ostān*. It was administered in the late Sāsānian period by a separate official, the *ostāndar*.³⁸ In the South Caucasus, too, evidence of such officials has been found.³⁹

It is certainly no coincidence that the office of *ostāndar* is only documented with the increase in royal land after the disempowerment of the nobility and the reforms under Kavādh I (488-531) and Ḥosrau I (531-579). Royal land that could be granted to “servants” must have been scarce until the kings succeeded in disempowering at least large sections

³⁴ *Tabarī* 1.815; Mittertrainer 2020, 48.

³⁵ Altheim and Stiehl 1954, 18.

³⁶ The Iberian kings with Gugark’ did something similar: *K’art’lis C’xovreba* 130 f. (146 Thomson): Peroz, the son-in-law of King Mirian III, had been installed by the latter in Rani. Later he received Samšvilde (Gugark’) under Mirian’s son Bak’ar.

³⁷ As a rule, even after the head of a house had rebelled against the crown, it was favoured that the property remained in the hands of the original family. Thus, even after the usurpation of Bahrām Čōbīn, the Mihranids remained in possession of their land. They also retained their influence over the policies of the “King of Kings” (*Tabarī* 1, 1001. Bagot 2015, 188).

³⁸ Daryaei 2009, 126; Gyselen 2004, pls. 37-39.

³⁹ Garsoïan 2004, 342; material in Gyselen 2001, 5-6, 16-17, 26, 32, and 44-45; 2002, 116, 132, and 176-177.

of the dynastic nobility and appropriating their land.⁴⁰

A comparison of the lists of the royal secundogenitures of Ardašīr I and Šāpūr I in the inscription at the Ka'ba-ye Zartušt shows that the kings of kings could only dispose of relatively little royal land. If the territories of Babylonia and Susiana are disregarded, which, with the capital Ctesiphon, were considered the heartlands of the empire, the domains established under Ardašīr I for Sadārūb, king of Abarēnag (in the district of Ardašīr-xwarrah), Ardašīr, King of Merv, Ardašīr, King of Kermān and Ardašīr, King of Sagestān. In addition, there are the secondary estates established by Šāpūr I for Ardašīr, King of Nodšērag (Adiabene), Ardašīr, King of Kirmān, Dēnag, Queen of Mesene, and for Hamazāsp, King of Wiruzān (Georgia).⁴¹ Only in such regions could the kings of kings found cities.

REFORMS IN THE SĀSĀNIAN EMPIRE

Such a development can be traced in the Sāsānian Empire. Arab and New Persian historical tradition attributes extensive reforms to Ḥosrau I (Anūšīrwān),⁴² which led to a fundamental change in the mechanisms of rule in the Sāsānian Empire. On the basis of a new land measurement, the taxation of peasants was reorganised. Instead of estimating the tax burden based on the crops grown in the fields, a fixed amount of tax was now assessed based on the area of land under cultivation and the crop grown. From then on, the collection of the tax was supervised by royal officials rather than local nobles.⁴³ The dynastic nobility was deprived of the right to levy taxes at will. This gave the state a predictable budget for the first time, allowing it to maintain a large standing army, for example, and the landowning nobility could no longer enrich themselves at the expense of

⁴⁰ Theophanes (AM 6118) reports on the march of Herakleios towards Ctesiphon and describes large estates of Ḥosraus II. See Kennedy 2011. On the property of the royal family, see Bagot 2015, 91-92.

⁴¹ Mittertrainer 2020, 49; Altheim and Stiehl 1954, 14.

⁴² On the reforms, see in particular Rubin 1995 and Gariboldi 2006.

⁴³ *Ṭabarī* 1, 898 (157 Bosworth); 962-963 (258-262 Bosworth). Rubin (1995, 234-239) has collected all the sources on the new tax system.

the peasants.⁴⁴ What appears in the historical tradition as a single agenda was in fact probably a long-term process that began long before Ḥosrau.⁴⁵

The rulers of Persia before Kisrā Anūsharwān used to levy land tax (*kharāj*) on the administrative divisions (*kuwar*), a third or quarter or fifth or sixth [of their produce], according to the water supply and the degree of cultivation; and poll tax (*jizyat aljamājim*) according to a fixed sum. King Qubādh, son of Fayrūz ordered, toward the end of his reign, a cadastral survey (*mash alarḍ*), comprising plains and mountains alike, so that the correct amount of land tax could be levied on the lands.⁴⁶

Ṭabarī thus shifts the beginning of the reforms to the time of Kavādh, precisely indicating this longer-term process. These changes would not have been possible without a previous massive weakening of the dynastic nobility.

As a result of this weakening – the reasons for which, closely linked to the Mazdakite movement, cannot be explained here – Kavādh and Ḥosrau were able to gain fiscal control of all the land in the empire: the land of the king and the land of the nobles. This deprived the landowning nobility of a major source of power and made them directly dependent on the “King of Kings.” In addition to the old landowning nobility, Ḥosrau created a service nobility dependent on him. This new Iranian service nobility was responsible for collecting taxes from all the empire’s lands – including those of the long-established dynastic nobility – and for providing the king with (permanent) troops.⁴⁷

Kisrā ordered the new tax assessments to be written down in several copies. One copy was to be kept in his own chancery close at his hand; one copy was sent to the land-tax collectors (*‘ummāl al-kharāj*) for them to collect taxation on its basis; and another copy was sent to the judges of the administrative divisions (*quḍāt al-kuwar*). The judges were charged with the duty of intervening between the tax collectors and the people if the tax collectors in the administrative districts attempted to raise an additional

⁴⁴ Tax cuts had previously only benefited the nobility in the Sāsānian Empire (Altheim and Stiehl 1957, 17-18).

⁴⁵ Rubin 1995, 242.

⁴⁶ Ṭabarī 1, 960 (255-256 Bosworth).

⁴⁷ Daryaei 2009, 29; Altheim and Stiehl 1954, 143, 169-170; Rubin 1995, 228.

sum above the amount laid down in the master copy of the tax assessment in the chancery, of which they had received a copy.⁴⁸

The process was bound to meet with resistance. The fact that the land-owning nobility resisted the implementation of the new regulations is shown not least by the contemporary Procopius.⁴⁹ In order to succeed, Ḥosrau had to resort to massive violence. In the so-called *Karnamag Anūšīrwān*, a text dating back to the late Sāsānian period,⁵⁰ the fully developed system is summarised as follows:

I assembled the governors and the people of the land (*ahl al-harāg*) and found a disorder so great that I did not believe I could remedy it except by restoring justice and fixing the tax for each country, region, district, village and man. I entrusted this task to persons whom I fully trusted and appointed an *amin* to the governor in each country to supervise him. I also appointed the judge of each country to look after the people of his country. I also ordered the inhabitants of the country to present the complaints they wished to bring before me to the judge to whom I had entrusted the supervision of their territory.⁵¹

The “King of Kings” therefore set up his own regulatory bodies in the regions to monitor the governors. It is particularly interesting to note that these regulatory bodies also extended to the territories of the vassal rulers:⁵²

When the delegates were in my presence, I granted them audience and heard them before the great ones of our earth, their kings, judges, nobles and aristocrats. When I took note of the reports and the injustices [noted by the judges], I saw that the extortions were the work of our governors, our chamberlains and the chamberlains of our sons, our wives and our courtiers.⁵³

⁴⁸ *Ṭabarī* 1, 963 (261 Bosworth).

⁴⁹ Procop. Pers. 1.23.3 (100 Greatrex): “The most active Persians, therefore, dissatisfied with his rule, had in mind to appoint for themselves another king of Kavādh’s house.”

⁵⁰ Grignaschi 1966.

⁵¹ *Karnamag Anūšīrwān* 4 (Grignaschi 1966).

⁵² The relationship between the vassal kings and the “King of Kings” in Ctesiphon was characterised by the same elements as that between the king of a small kingdom and his local nobles (Widengren 1956, 119).

⁵³ *Karnamag Anūšīrwān* 8 (Grignaschi 1966).

Here are the representatives of the “common people” who were listened to by Ḥosrau. The right to send delegates to the court at Ctesiphon also belonged to the people of the regions under the vassal kings. Armenian sources attest to the fact that the local nobility had the right to appeal to the “King of Kings.”⁵⁴ It is conceivable that this right was also extended to the lower nobility, as the petty nobility were said to have become particularly supportive after the disempowerment of the old dynastic nobility.⁵⁵ Iberia was one of these vassal kingdoms and it can be assumed that the Sāsānid reforms also had an impact on its structures. This is true regardless of whether or not kingship existed here at the time.

STRUCTURES IN THE GEORGIAN SOURCES

The oldest part of the *Georgian Chronicles* (*K'art'lis C'xovreba*) describes the constitution of the K'art'velian state by the (mythical) first king P'arnavaz in the 3rd century B.C.⁵⁶ The central element in the organisation of the state is the appointment of a service nobility, dependent on the king and his power. The territory ruled by P'arnavaz was divided into districts, each of which was under the control of an official (*erist'avi*). Other sub-officials, the *spasalar(n)i*, are subordinate to this official in a hierarchical structure. The etymology of this term once again shows the Sāsānian origin of the institutions.⁵⁷ In each case, a lower military nobility is dependent on these officials. The *at'asist'av(n)i* appear in an important administrative role.⁵⁸ The superior of the regional officials was the *spaspet*, who in turn reported directly to the king.⁵⁹ The offices were granted

⁵⁴ This can be seen, for example, in its role as an independent political force in the deposition of the last Arsacid king of Armenia, Vramšapuh, in 428 (*Łazar P'arpec'i* 14, pp. 23-25 [58-60 Thomson] *Movsēs Xorenac'i* 3, 64-65 [340-341 Thomson]). The “King of Kings” receives the envoy of the Armenian nobility, listens to them and then even summons the king!

⁵⁵ Daryaei 2009, 29; Altheim and Stiehl 1954, 143, 169.

⁵⁶ On the origins of Iberian kingship, see Meissner 2000 and Schottky 2012.

⁵⁷ სპასალარი from Middle Persian *spāhsālār* (*spāh* = army and *sālār* = leader). Rapp 2014, 211; Andronikashvili 1966, 372; Toumanoff 1963, 96-97.

⁵⁸ ათასობოთი = leader of a thousand (*at'asi* = thousand and *t'avi* = head).

⁵⁹ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 24 (34-35 Thomson). See also Rapp 2014, 209-212.

by the king and were not hereditary (although descendants could of course be favoured).

When the Iberian kingdom came into being is a matter of controversy among scholars. In any case, in the early period, i.e. in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C., the structures attributed to P'arnavaz did not yet exist. The office of *spaspet* was not established until the Sāsānian period.⁶⁰ As in Armenia, the dynastic aristocracy would have been the mainstay of the state system in Iberia for a long time.⁶¹

For the centuries after P'arnavaz, the *Georgian Chronicles* use the terms, but in terms of content they describe a dynastic hereditary nobility.⁶² The clan chief, known as *erist'avi* usually acted independently and may or may not have supported a king. In any case, there is no evidence to suggest that his own office was dependent on the kingship.⁶³ Even if the supported pretender loses a power struggle, he has nothing to fear. He can

⁶⁰ The term has been borrowed twice into Armenian. The first time was in Parthian times and the term (*a*)*sparapet* is derived from the Old Persian *spāda-pati* (Hübschmann 1897, 240, no. 588). In a second phase, the Middle Persian *spāhpat* became the Armenian (*a*)*spahapet* in early Sāsānian times (Hübschmann 1897, 22, no. 18; see Huyse 1999, 207). If these terms first appeared in Armenia in the Arsacid period, they would not have been widespread in Iberia any earlier. The "classical" route by which Iranian loanwords reached Iberia was indirect transmission via Armenia, which had more direct communication channels with the Iranian region (Vashalomidze 2007, 143; Widengren 1969, 73). However, especially in the Sāsānian period, there were very strong independent links between Iberia and Iran, so that a direct adoption of the office and designation is more likely to be assumed in this later phase. On this, see Schleicher, forthcoming.

⁶¹ Toumanoff 1963, 112-129.

⁶² The term *erist'avi* is composed of the Georgian ერი (*eri* = people or army) and თავი (*t'avi* = head). In the feudal system, the office refers to the governor of a state administrative unit. However, the *Georgian Chronicles* also use the term to refer to the heads of the great houses of the dynastic nobility. Cf. e.g., Rapp 2014, 67, nn. 173 and 201. The term does not (yet) appear in early texts such as the martyrdom of Šušānik and that of Evstat'i. Here the head of a noble house is called *mamasaxlisi* (*Martyrium Evstati* 3 [34 Abuladze]).

⁶³ An impressive example of this is the Armenian Mušel Mamikonian, who at the end of his life naturally handed over his office as head of the Mamikonian family,

simply switch his allegiance to the victor. It is said that after the 10th king Aderki had won the battle against Aršak II, he called upon the *er-ist'av(eb)i*, who had previously been loyal to Aršak, to recognise him as king, which they did: "The Iberians took Aršak's crown, placed it on Aderki's, and led him away."⁶⁴

Structural changes only appear in the narratives about the reign of King Vaxtang I.⁶⁵ In the "novel" about his life, the author mentions the organisation of the Iberian state in two places, in a slightly different form (compared to the order of P'arnavaz).⁶⁶ The country was also divided into dioceses and bishops were appointed for each diocese.⁶⁷ Vaxtang's reign is therefore considered by the authors of the chronicles to be of particular importance for the constitution of the K'art'velian state. By the end of this king's reign, a system seems to have been established that included a strong feudal service nobility alongside the dynastic landed nobility.

Vaxtang is credited with sweeping reforms, particularly on the religious front,⁶⁸ but it seems unlikely that he had the power to break the local clans. So how did he manage to limit their power?

It is worth looking at the functions of the nobility as described in the Georgian sources. Although not particularly emphasised, a central function of the nobility was the collection of taxes and dues: The *at'asist'av(n)i* ("leaders of the thousands") were responsible for two types of tax, the

as well as that of *sparapet* of the Armenian king, to his son Ardašir. King Aršak is not asked (*Buzandaran Patmut'ivnk'* 5, 44 [228 Garsoïan]). It can be assumed that the Iberian nobility were also able to transfer the family estate without interference from the king.

⁶⁴ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 34 (49 Thomson).

⁶⁵ Shurgaia 2018, 262-264; Schleicher 2021, 278-279.

⁶⁶ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 147 (162 Thomson) and 186 (201-202 Thomson): The "Seven Great Houses" of Iberia appear here, an idea that is probably strongly Iranian in character. See Schleicher 2021, 278-279; Shurgaia 2018, 262-264; Rapp 2014, 314-318.

⁶⁷ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 198-199 (216-217 Thomson). See Schleicher 2021, 426-435; Shurgaia 2012. On the religious developments in Vaxtang's Iberia, see Shurgaia 2018, 297-535.

⁶⁸ Shurgaia 2018 and 2012.

royal dues (*xarki sameup'o*) and the *erist'avi* tribute (*xarki saerist'ao*).⁶⁹ Traditionally, taxes in Iberia were also collected hierarchically through the dynastic nobility, as the kingdom did not have its own administrative structures in this area. This was about to change. The shift of fiscal power to the royal service nobility and their military functions is almost exactly what happened in the Iranian Empire!

JOINT DEVELOPMENT

Most importantly, as described in L(ist of) Kings, K'art'velian social structure and local royal imagery parallel those of Iran. LKings' first indigenous K'art'velian king P'arnavaz symbolises this relationship: he had an Iranian mother and a Persian name based upon the Iranian concept of *farnah* or "royal radiance"; [...] and P'arnavaz adopted an Iranian model for the administrative machinery of his realm.⁷⁰

Although the structures in Iberia and Iran developed in a similar way, our sources place these developments in different periods. According to the Georgian evidence, the establishment of the feudal service nobility was completed by the end of the 5th century, while Arabic and Middle Persian sources place its beginning in Iran in the 6th century.

To resolve this discrepancy, there are several options, of which I consider the following two to be the most likely:

1. The Georgian sources, reporting from a distance of at least three centuries,⁷¹ could no longer precisely locate the "reforms" in Iberia and attributed them to the already mythical King Vaxtang, even though they were carried out after the Iberian state had been integrated into the direct administration of the Sāsānian empire.⁷²

⁶⁹ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 25 (35 Thomson); Lordkipanidze 2000, 173.

⁷⁰ Rapp 2003, 204-205.

⁷¹ On the dating of the oldest texts, see in particular Rapp 2003, esp. 197-242, where the earliest written record of the Vaxtang novel is dated to around the year 800.

⁷² The conditions described in the section under P'arnavaz are certainly based on conditions in the 9th century. The basis here is the desire to mould K'art'li and Egrisi into a common political unit (Rapp 2003, 145). That the structures described are of a much later nature is shown not least by the fact that Tbilisi is mentioned

2. The Arabic sources, which are even more distant in time, bundle a long-term development in the entire Sāsānian Commonwealth to the “reforms” of the overpowering king Ḥosrau I.⁷³ Late Sāsānian literature, which stylised Ḥosrau I as the ideal type of “King of Kings,” had already encouraged this bundling.⁷⁴ However, this means that some of the structural changes had already taken place before his reign in the 5th century (in some regions?), but were attributed to Ḥosrau I in retrospect.⁷⁵ Both of these possibilities could be true.

The reforms had begun with Kavādh I and were already more advanced in some places in his time than historical tradition would have us believe. Since Kavādh I was particularly active in the South Caucasus and such developments affected the entire Sāsānian Commonwealth, the reorganisation of the K’art’velian state attributed to King Vaxtang can probably be linked to the Iranian developments. The reforms would have been noticeable in Iberia under Kavādh I in the late phase or shortly after the end of the Iberian kingdom as a whole following the death of Vaxtang I (in 502), and the structures were retrospectively transferred to the Iberian kingdom with its most important king in the later tradition. In Iran, too, the reforms were not implemented everywhere at the same time.

(K’art’lis C’xovreba 25 [35 Thomson]) although, according to the *Chronicles* themselves, the city was not founded until much later (K’art’lis C’xovreba 136 [150 Thomson]). At the time of Vaxtang, the region was apparently a wasteland (K’art’lis C’xovreba 181 [198 Thomson]), and it was only after the death of this king that Tbilisi became a fortress and the seat of the local ruler (K’art’lis C’xovreba 205 [224 Thomson]) and even under Step’anos I and Persian rule (K’art’lis C’xovreba 223 [233 Thomson]).

⁷³ On the mythical exaggeration of Ḥosrau I in later times, see Frye 1984, 329.

⁷⁴ On Ṭabarī and his sources, see the introduction in Rosenthal 1989. On the oldest sources such as the *Karnamaḡ Anūšīrvān*, which date from the late period of the Sāsānian Empire, see Grignaschi 1966.

⁷⁵ Cf. Rubin 1995, who assumes a reform in several stages, the results of which were repeatedly reviewed and adjusted. The economic problems of the peasantry were not a new development in Kavādh’s time either. Balāš had already attempted to counteract the rural exodus with royal decrees (*Ṭabarī* 1, 883). It is not yet possible to speak of real reforms here.

They were initiated in the Sawād, and Kavādh was already able to demonstrably benefit from the fruits of the reforms there.⁷⁶ Given Kavādh's strong presence in the South Caucasus, it is not unlikely that new structures were established here just as early as well.

The Armenian tradition could also point to the introduction of reforms at the end of the 5th century. According to the historian Łazar P'arpec'i, there was no evidence of a service nobility in 482:

Arriving there, he gathered around him the ranks of apostates. Deceiving king Vaxtang and denying the oath on the gospel, they went to Hazarawuxt. Those who had been in concert with the "King of Kings" also gathered around him. To one he promised the throne, to another rank and honour and many presents, and to many others each one's needs. Having united the majority of the Georgians, he formed an army. When king Vaxtang saw that his own subjects had been false and had abandoned him for Hazarawuxt, he left Georgia and withdrew for a while to the land of Eger.⁷⁷

It is unlikely that the offices to be conferred by the "King of Kings" were those of the Iberian service nobility; it is more likely that they were

⁷⁶ Ibn Khordādbēh (*Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, ed. De Goeje, BGA, 6, 14), Ibn Ḥawqal (ed. De Goeje, BGA 2, 234) and Ibn Rustah (*Kitāb al-buldān*, ed. De Goeje, BGA 7, 104) who deal specifically with the Sawād, attribute the tax reform to Kavādh, not to Ḥosrau (see Rubin 1995, 242). The author believes he can trace the long-term historical developments that eventually led to the implementation of the reforms back to the time of Pērōz. Changes in the tax system are taking place here (*Ṭabarī* 1, 874 [112 Bosworth]). In the financial administration, there were changes due to the mass minting of drachmas on an unprecedented scale. Furthermore, it seems that taxes were now increasingly being levied in coins and not in kind as before (see Schindel 2004, 412; Gaube 1982, 115). Finally, thoughts of equality and communal ownership can already be seen in Pērōz's measures against the great drought: "He wrote further to them that anyone who had a subterranean food store (*matmura*), a granary, foodstuffs, or anything that could provide nourishment for the people and enable them to assist each other, should release these supplies, and that no one should appropriate such things exclusively for himself. Furthermore, rich and poor, noble and mean, should share equally and aid each other" (*Ṭabarī* 1, 874 [112 Bosworth]).

⁷⁷ Łazar. P'arpec'i 80 (205 Thomson).

dignities of the Sāsānian Empire. There is also no mention of the perpetuation of existing offices. The nobles negotiating with the Persian general Hazarawuxt appear to have little dependence on the Iberian king; they have nothing to fear from his removal, and even hope to gain advantages from it. This is where the dynastic clan chieftains operate, one of whom even has his sights set on the crown. Łazar's statements could be interpreted to mean that Sāsānian structures were introduced here after the expulsion of the Vaxtang from Iberia. Some of the dynastic nobility may now have been transformed into a service nobility.

Finally, another passage in the *Georgian Chronicles* suggests that the introduction of the office of *spaspet* can be linked to the Sāsānids: it mentions that in the kingless period just before the reign of Vaxtang, a new *spaspet* named Juanšer was appointed by the "King of Kings" after the death of the previous incumbent, Saurmag, in Iberia.⁷⁸ Not only is this the first mention of the appointment of a *spaspet* after P'arnavaz, but it is also clear that we are not dealing with hereditary nobility at this point. Saurmag had a son named Artavaz, who later played an important role as Vaxtang's milk brother.⁷⁹ But this Artavaz was not appointed to succeed his father. The office of *spaspet* was not hereditary. The whole process is not particularly emphasised by the author, who takes it for granted. This could be an anachronism and, moreover, one that refers to the late period of the Sāsānian Empire, when Iberia was firmly integrated into the administrative structures. It is therefore conceivable that the institution of the *spaspet* did not exist under Vaxtang and was only introduced after his reign. Perhaps this happened as part of the reorganisation of Iberia mentioned by Łazar after the suppression of the Vaxtang rebellion.

CONCLUSION

Iberia was also integrated into the structures of the Sāsānian Empire during the reign of Vaxtang I in the second half of the 5th century, and the Iberian king was a vassal of the "King of Kings." As such, he could also be given neighbouring territories to govern. Rani, for example, was given

⁷⁸ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 145 (160 Thomson).

⁷⁹ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 156 (171 Thomson).

to the Iberian kings as a fief to ensure the protection of the pass of Čor.⁸⁰ However, the structures of a service nobility, which can be described as feudal in the broadest sense, were probably not implemented by Vaxtang or any other Iberian king. It might have been possible with Persian support, but the Iberian kings did not have the power to curtail the rights of the dynastic nobility as massively as depriving them of the right to levy taxes. If the episode presented by Łazar P'arpec'i shows one thing, it is that the Iberian nobility under Vaxtang I was powerful enough to pursue its own policies. In addition to the defectors – some of whom may have been coerced – there was also a group of nobles who had previously worked with the Persians. A section of the Iberian nobility had therefore been able to engage in open politics against their own king for some time.

It was only after the death of Vaxtang and the end of the Iberian kingdom that the Persians used their power to establish a service nobility.⁸¹ What this might have been like can even be read in the *Georgian Chronicles*:

He (the “King of Kings”: FS) came to these terms with the Georgians: that all passes, fortresses and cities would be occupied by Persian troops, but there would be no other concentrations of Persians in the land of K'art'li to mingle (with the Georgians), [...] The “King (of Kings”): FS) departed and subdued all the valleys of the Caucasians. He appointed commanders (*mt'avarni*) everywhere and ordered them all to be obedient to his son Mirian.⁸²

Although Leonti Mroveli places the events in the time of Mirian III and thus in the 4th century, the repeated mention of the Khazars in this context alone shows that we are dealing with anachronisms here. A chronological classification of this passage, as helpful as it would be for our topic, is therefore hardly possible.

⁸⁰ For example, Mirian III (*K'art'lis C'xovreba* 65-66 [76-78 Thomson]): “He held Mc'xet'a, and he (the “King of Kings”: FS) also gave him K'art'li, Armenia, Ran, Movakan and Heret'i. [...] But when the Khazars came to Daruband, then Mirian would march to aid Daruband.”

⁸¹ Genuinely older sources, such as the *Martyrdom of Evstat'i*, still used the term *mamasaxlisi* for the middle of the 6th century.

⁸² *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 65 (77 Thomson).

The Arab scholar Mas'ūdī's account of Ḥosrau I's structural efforts in Albania fits into this:

When Anūsharwān built the city of al-Bāb, whose wall extended into the sea and stretched over the land and the mountains, he settled various peoples and kings there, for whom he established ranks and special titles and defined their boundaries, following the example of what Ar-dašīr b. Bābak had done regarding the kings of Ḥorāsān.⁸³

At the death of Hormezd IV in 597, the non-hereditary offices still existed. However, these rights were to become hereditary with the transition to Byzantine vassalage.

They sent an envoy to the king of the Greeks, and asked that he choose a king from among the descendants of the kings of K'art'li, and that the *erist'avis* be (confirmed) without change each in his own principality.⁸⁴

The fact that the holders of these offices wanted to be confirmed by the emperor shows that they were not hereditary. There must therefore have been an official nobility in Iberia in the 6th century.⁸⁵

The power of the dynastic nobility in Iberia was curtailed at the beginning of the 6th century, but not broken. It was integrated into the feudal structures under Persian pressure. If the office of the *erist'avi* was to be filled, it was certain that a representative of the dynastic nobility would receive it. The offices thus also acted as a means of binding the nobles to the king. The rights were not initially hereditary without restriction, but it was only a matter of time before they became permanent.

Little is known about the organisation of the Iranian nobility after the great reforms. What we do know is that royal officials (governors), judges and tax officials were increasingly appointed. More is known about the

⁸³ *Mas'ūdī* 17 (vol. 2, 3-4 Meynard).

⁸⁴ *K'art'lis C'xovreba* 217 (229 Thomson).

⁸⁵ The possibility that the duchies were not created until the Bagratid period should at least be mentioned here. A precise understanding of the circumstances of the system's development is made more difficult not least by the fact that the *Georgian Chronicles* use the term *erist'avi* rather uncritically to refer to dynastic princes such as the *pitiaxši* of Gugark', Iranian commanders and even Albanian princes (Rapp 2014, 67, n. 173; 2003, 311-312 and 326-327).

structures of the Iberian system, and one might be tempted to draw conclusions about Iranian conditions from this information. But that would be another topic.

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KÖNIG VAXTANG GORGASALI ZWISCHEN LEGENDE UND GESCHICHTE*

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„Auch in den literarischen Gebräuchen (sc. des Phantasiereiches Tlön) ist die Idee eines einzigen Subjekts allbeherrschend. Nur selten tragen Bücher den Namen des Verfassers. Den Begriff des Plagiats gibt es nicht; man geht davon aus, daß alle Werke das Werk eines einzigen Autors sind, der zeit- und namenlos ist. Die Kritik pflegt Autoren zu erfinden; [...]“

Aus der Erzählung *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (Erstveröffentlichung 1940) von Jorge Luis Borges, zitiert nach der Übersetzung von Karl August Horst und Gisbert Haefs in der Ausgabe von Alberto Manguel (Hrsg.), *Jorge Luis Borges. Die unendliche Bibliothek. Erzählungen, Essays, Gedichte*, Frankfurt a. M. 2013, 69.

Abstract. King Vakhtang Gorgasali is a central figure in the historical tradition of Georgia, as we encounter him in particular in the chronicle of *K'art'lis C'xovreba*. In this, his profile unites opposites that are difficult to harmonize: Vakhtang Gorgasali is a great fighter, but ultimately succumbs to the Persians. He is a powerful ruler, but equally functions as a vassal of the Sasanian Great King. He was a zealous follower of Christianity but maintained ambiv-

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alent relations with the Byzantine emperor and strove for ecclesiastical autocephaly.

Researchers have long noticed that Vakhtang Gorgasali, as prominent as he appears in the Old Georgian tradition, is not mentioned at all in the Greco-Roman sources (unless one wants to identify the Gurgenes mentioned in Procopius's *Bella* with him) and in the Old Armenian historiography only by one author (namely Ghazar Parpetsi). The paper is not so much about substantiating the historicity of the famous king and elaborating on its details, but rather about describing his contradictory profile in the Old Georgian tradition and fathoming the origin of the individual aspects that compose it. In the process, it will be shown, among other things, that Old Georgian historical thought of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages owes at least as much to the principles of Iranian historical tradition as it does to classical ancient and Old Armenian historiography and to Christian church historiography in the tradition of Eusebius of Caesarea.

Vaxtang Gorgasal ist der berühmteste König von Kartli in der Spätantike. Der altgeorgischen Tradition nach etablierte er in seiner über fünfzigjährigen Regierungszeit ein kraftvolles iberisches Königtum, behauptete sich erfolgreich zwischen den Großmächten der Zeit, dem Oströmischen Reich im Westen und dem Sāsānidenreich im Osten, und erlangte für die Kirche Iberiens die Autokephalie unter einem in Mc'xet'a angesiedelten Katholikos. Soweit die Tradition.

Das Problem ist, daß wir aus zeitgenössischen, also im fünften und sechsten Jahrhundert angesiedelten Quellen überaus wenig über den berühmten iberischen König erfahren.

Die griechische und römische Überlieferung erwähnt ihn nicht. Im ersten Buch der *Kriegsgeschichte* Prokops von Kaisareia wird ein iberischer König namens Gurgenes erwähnt, der einen Aufstand gegen den Perserkönig plant und auf die Hilfe Kaiser Justinians hofft.¹ Der Aufstand scheitert, und Gurgenes muß seine Heimat verlassen und auf Reichsgebiet flüchten. Ist

¹ Siehe Procop. *Bell.* 1.12.1-14 (p. 55-58 Haury und Wirth 1962); vgl. auch ebd., 2, 28, 18-21 (p. 285 Haury und Wirth 1962).

Gurgenes mit Vaxtang Gorgasal identisch?² Und wie ließe sich sein Schicksal mit dem überlieferten Ruhm des letzteren vereinbaren?

Łazar P'arpec'i, der Autor der dritten armenischen Geschichte nach Agat'angelos und *Buzandaran Patmut'iwunk'* erwähnt Vaxtang Gorgasal im Zuge der kriegesischen Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Armeniern und Sāsāniden während der 480er Jahre.³ Aber das Bild, das er von ihm entwirft, ist wenig schmeichelhaft: Vaxtang verspricht den aufständischen Armeniern wirksame Hilfe, nicht zuletzt durch hunnische Krieger, die er herbeizurufen verspricht, aber daraus wird nichts. Das Vertrauen in die Hilfe des, wie es zu Anfang scheint, mächtigen und tatkräftigen Nachbarn aus dem Norden wird enttäuscht.

Ist das nur armenische Mißgunst? Jenseits von Łazar P'arpec'i findet sich auch in der zeitnahen armenischen Überlieferung keine weitere Erwähnung Vaxtang Gorgasals.

Wir sind also auf die altgeorgischen Quellen verwiesen, und in der Tat, hier wird man an vielen Stellen fündig,⁴ zwar auffallenderweise nicht im *Martyrium der heiligen Šušanik*, dem um 480 geschriebenen Erstling der georgischen Literatur, aber doch in der reichen chronikalischen Überlieferung Georgiens, dem *Leben Kartlis* (*K'art'lis c'xovreba*) und der *Bekehrung Kartlis* (*Mok'c'evay K'art'lisay*), und auch sonst. Diese Überlieferung ist freilich viel später anzusetzen als die postulierte Lebenszeit Vaxtang Gorgasals.

Die exzeptionelle Bedeutung Vaxtang Gorgasals in der altgeorgischen Überlieferung steht also in einem schwer auflösbaren Gegensatz zu dem zeitgenössischen Befund, den ich soeben kurz skizziert habe. Harmo-

² So Toumanoff 1963, 362-378, bes. 368-369: "That the Gurgenes of Procopius be Vakhtang, is hardly possible to doubt." Dieser Gleichsetzung standen in der Forschung allerdings immer Zweifel gegenüber; siehe etwa Martin-Hisard 1983, 210 und van Esbroeck 1996, 209-214.

³ Siehe Łazar P'arpec'i p. 118-119 *Tēr-Mkrtč'ean und Malxasean* 1904 (p. 171-173 Thomson 1991). 126 *Tēr-Mkrtč'ean und Malxasean* 1904 (p. 181-182 Thomson 1991). 132-135 *Tēr-Mkrtč'ean und Malxasean* 1904 (p. 188-193 Thomson 1991) u. 146 *Tēr-Mkrtč'ean und Malxasean* 1904 (p. 204-205 Thomson 1991).

⁴ Einen sehr ausführlichen Überblick über die literarischen Quellen zu Vaxtang Gorgasal, darunter die altgeorgischen, bietet Shurgaia 2018, 27-97.

nisierungsversuche wie diejenigen von Cyril Toumanoff⁵ und auch in jüngster Zeit von Stephen H. Rapp Jr. und anderen,⁶ die einerseits die Eigengesetzlichkeit der vorliegenden, im Frühmittelalter schriftlich fixierten Tradition durchaus anerkennen und andererseits an dem ereignisgeschichtlichen Grundgerüst, das diese uns anbietet, schlichtweg festhalten wollen, wirken gewaltsam und sind letztendlich unbefriedigend. Ich will im folgenden an einem Ausschnitt von *K'art'lis c'xovreba*, der Lebensbeschreibung Vaxtang Gorgasals (*C'xorebay Vaxtang Gorgaslisa*), „des großen und gottliebenden Königs, der unter allen Königen von Kartli der berühmteste war“ (*didisa da ḡmertis-moquarisa mep'isa, romeli umetis saxelgant'k'muli gamoč'nda qovelt'a mep'et'a k'art'lisat'a*)⁷ – so der Titel – deutlich machen, wie ich mir das Profil dieser Überlieferung vorstelle und welchen Nutzen man meiner Meinung nach aus ihr ziehen kann – welchen aber auch nicht.

Die Lebensbeschreibung Vaxtang Gorgasals gehört zu den älteren Teilen von *K'art'lis c'xovreba*; sie wird in unseren Handschriften dem Autor Juanšer Juanšeriani zugeschrieben und wurde vor 813, wohl um 790/800 n. Chr. verfaßt.⁸ Die Details sind wie bei allen Fragen, die sich um die Kompilation und Redaktion von *K'art'lis c'xovreba* ranken, umstritten. Sicher ist in die Lebensbeschreibung Vaxtang Gorgasals älteres, mündlich und/oder schriftlich tradiertes Material eingegangen. Ob man aber, wie Stephen H. Rapp Jr., die Existenz eines altgeorgischen, aus der Spätantike herrührenden *Königsbuches* – er nennt es *Hambavi mep'et'a* – postulieren muß,⁹ sei einmal dahingestellt. Andererseits herrscht Konsens, daß die Lebensbeschreibung auch nach 813 noch

⁵ Siehe vor allem Toumanoff 1963 und 1990.

⁶ Siehe Rapp 2014, der sich ebd., 44 Anm. 52 ausdrücklich auf Toumanoff bezieht. Auch Shurgaia 2018 und Preud'homme 2024 verfahren im Grunde nicht anders als er; vorsichtiger agiert Schleicher 2021, 147-166 bei seiner Darstellung der iberischen Ereignisgeschichte, wenngleich auch er von einer „Ära Vaxtang Gorgasali“ (ebd., 147) spricht.

⁷ *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, p. 139 Qauxč'išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 153).

⁸ So der aktuelle, Rapp 2017 zusammengefaßte Forschungsstand. Ausführlich dazu Rapp 2003 und 2014.

⁹ Rapp 2014, 353-371.

ergänzt und überarbeitet worden ist. Insbesondere die ältere Forschung wollte hierfür Leonti Mroveli, einem Erzbischof von Ruisi in der zweiten Hälfte des 11. Jahrhunderts, die Verantwortung zuweisen.¹⁰

Wenn man sich die Lebensbeschreibung Vaxtang Gorgasals durchliest, dann ist zunächst einmal auffallend, daß die Ausgangsszenerie Spätantikes und Mittelalterliches mischt.¹¹ Die Hauptstadt der Perser ist Bagdad, aber ihre Religion ist der Zoroastrismus. Schon derartige Auffälligkeiten an der Oberfläche bestätigen, was Bernadette Martin-Hisard über das Werk im Ganzen ausgesagt hat: „[...] l’Histoire de Vaxt’ang Gorgasal est le chant d’un royaume et d’un peuple, destiné à répondre aux angoisses du IXe siècle.“¹² Geht man die einzelnen Episoden im Leben des iberischen Königs durch, verkompliziert sich das Bild.

Bereits Vaxtangs Großvater Arč’il und sein Vater Mirdat werden als gottesfürchtige Kämpfer vorgestellt, die sich allein kraft ihres Glaubens gegenüber dem mächtigen Perserreich behaupten können.¹³ Biblische Anklänge lassen keinen Zweifel an ihrer Treue zu Christus aufkommen. Allein, die allgemeine Lage bleibt stets fragil, auch in religiöser Hinsicht: Arč’il und Mirdat müssen gegenüber dem Großkönig lavieren, ein Heiratsbündnis soll dem Verhältnis beider Mächte zueinander Stabilität verschaffen, aber die damit einhergehenden Kompromisse bezeugen immer auch eine latente Bedrohung der christlichen Iberer durch den Zoroastrismus.

Vaxtang erbt diese Problematik, als er, noch als Knabe, den Thron besteigt.¹⁴ Er trägt einen persischen Namen, seine Mutter führt die Regentschaft, sein Onkel ist der persische *marzbān* im Südkaukasus. Doch schon bahnt sich hinter den Kulissen eine Wende an: Unter dem Einfluß des Bischofs Mik’ael reift der jugendliche Vaxtang zu dem Idealkönig heran, als der er uns später entgegentreten wird.¹⁵ Hellenische und christliche Bildung,

¹⁰ Die Frage wird ausführlich von Rapp 2003, 157-163 diskutiert; bei ihm überwiegen die Zweifel.

¹¹ *K’art’lis C’xovreba*, p. 139 Qauxč’išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 153).

¹² Martin-Hisard 1983, 227. In dieselbe Richtung geht van Esbroeck 1996, 196-209.

¹³ *K’art’lis C’xovreba*, p. 140-143 Qauxč’išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 154-158).

¹⁴ *K’art’lis C’xovreba*, p. 144-150 Qauxč’išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 158-165).

¹⁵ Daß Vaxtang so, wie er von *K’art’lis C’xovreba* geschildert wird, die Verkörperung eines idealen (christlichen) Königs darstellt, betont Jeck 2021, wobei er

alttestamentliche Typoi und traditionale iranische und kaukasische Leitbilder gehen in ihm eine untrennbare, charakteristische Mischung ein. Als er mit fünfzehn Jahren vor dem versammelten Adel und Volk den entscheidenden Schritt zum Selbstherrscher geht, ist er, so heißt es, „vollkommen [...] an Weisheit und Kraft, an Mut und Körpergestalt“ (*srul xar sibržnit 'a da žalit 'a, simq 'nit 'a da asakit 'a*).¹⁶

Die Vortrefflichkeit des jungen Königs muß sich nun zuerst bewähren. In zwei Aristien, so möchte ich es nennen, erweist sich Vaxtang als unwiderstehlicher Vorkämpfer, der den Chazaren T'arq'an und den Osseten Baqat'ar mühelos besiegt.¹⁷ Die Szenerie, die unser Text entwickelt, ist auf den ersten Blick ‚historisch‘; der Kampf findet an einem vermeintlich genau bezeichneten Ort im Ossetenland jenseits des Kaukasus statt. Aber viel wichtiger sind die erzählerischen Motive, die das Geschehen begleiten und einordnen. Schon bei der Musterung des Heeres sind Elemente des Heldenepos erkennbar: die Zahl der Krieger, ihre prächtige Ausrüstung, die Pferde, der Kampfesmut. Mit Recht hat Stephen Rapp hervorgehoben, daß es vor allem die ritterlichen Qualitäten des iranischen *bumberazi*, nicht so sehr diejenigen des griechischen *πρόμαχος* sind, die Vaxtang verkörpert.¹⁸ Andererseits wird der Heldenmut des Königs im Kampf ausdrücklich mit der biblischen Geschichte von David und Goliath in Beziehung gesetzt. Biblische Zitate akzentuieren seine Glaubensstärke; am Ende des erfolgreichen Feldzuges zieht Vaxtang, so wie Jesus, der ‚König der Juden‘, einst in Jerusalem, in Mc'xet'a ein.

Der Lohn solchen Ruhmes läßt nicht lange auf sich warten:¹⁹ Vaxtang erhält Balenduxt, die Tochter des persischen Großkönigs Urmisd, zur Frau. Als Mitgift bekommt er Armenien und den gesamten Kaukasus. Der junge König ist damit der bevorzugte Bundesgenosse der Sāsāniden

ebd., 231-236 ein besonderes Augenmerk auf die philosophische Bildung des Herrschers legt.

¹⁶ *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, p. 149 Qauxč'išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 164).

¹⁷ *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, p. 150-158 Qauxč'išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 165-173).

¹⁸ Siehe Rapp 2014, 281-291.

¹⁹ *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, p. 158-159 Qauxč'išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 173-174).

in dem nun folgenden Krieg gegen die Römer. Der Autor der Lebensbeschreibung Vaxtangs setzt an dieser Stelle eine Zäsur und hebt zum Abschluß der ersten Herrschaftsphase seines Helden vor allem dessen Qualitäten als Krieger und Jäger, nicht so sehr seine Rechtgläubigkeit hervor. Er akzentuiert Vaxtangs Größe, Kraft und Schönheit, die vornehme Abkunft vom iberischen ‚Konstantin‘, König Mirian, und seine heroische, vom persischen Konzept des „Glücksglanzes“ (*xvarrah*)²⁰ inspirierte Persönlichkeit. Der iranische Kontext ist offenkundig.

Die Kämpfe gegen Osseten, Chazaren und Abchasen hatten die nördliche Randzone der kaukasischen Welt berührt. In den folgenden Passagen der Lebensbeschreibung Vaxtangs kommt nun zuerst deren westliche Peripherie – das Oströmische Reich –, dann die östliche – das Sāsānidenreich – in den Blick.²¹ Zunächst zieht der Ibererkönig mit einem Perserheer gegen die Römer, doch die Begegnung mit dem Priester Petre und dem Mönch Samoel in Kleinasien bewegt ihn dazu, das Bündnis mit dem Großkönig zu verlassen und ein solches mit dem christlichen Kaiser zu schließen; ein Traum Vaxtangs in der Nacht, in dem ihm unter anderem die heilige Nino begegnet, läßt alle Zweifel schwinden.²² Die folgenden Ereignisse sind verwirrend, denn Vaxtang muß das Kunststück vollbringen, einerseits die Seiten zu wechseln und andererseits den Eindruck eines Verrats zu vermeiden. Dies gelingt ihm nach wechselvollen Kämpfen und einer abermaligen Bewährung als *bumberazi*, diesmal gegen einen römischen Vorkämpfer. In einer persönlichen Begegnung mit dem Kaiser wird Vaxtang ein Heiratsbündnis in Aussicht gestellt. Territorien im Grenzgebiet, wie Klarjetien und Teile Abchasiens, kommen als Mitgift in die Hand der Iberer. Der Bruch mit den Persern ist offenkundig; er wird bekräftigt durch eine harsche Politik Vaxtangs gegenüber dem Zoroastrismus. Daraufhin erfolgt folgerichtig der Einfall der Perser unter dem Nachfolger des Großkönigs Urmisd, Xuasro, in Iberien.

²⁰ Dazu Gnoli 1999; vgl. auch Rapp 2014, 227-232.

²¹ *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, p. 159–179 Qauxč'išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 174-196).

²² Zu diesem Traum und seinen mannigfaltigen theologischen und kirchenpolitischen Implikationen siehe van Esbroeck 1996, 200-207.

In den nun folgenden kriegerischen Auseinandersetzungen²³ ist Vaxtang zunächst auf sich allein gestellt. Die Lokalität, an denen sie sich abspielen, ist symbolisch aufgeladen: es handelt sich einerseits um Mc'xet'a mit der Festung Armazi, andererseits um die Ebene von Kala am Ort der späteren Hauptstadt Tp'ilisi. Die Ereignisse münden in eine Dreierkonferenz zwischen Vaxtang, dem Großkönig Xuasro und Leon, dem römischen ‚Prokonsul‘ (*ant'ipati keisrisa*). Absurde territoriale Bestimmungen – die Römer treten *Sikilia* an die Perser ab und erhalten von diesen dafür das Heilige Land zurück! – lenken nur den Blick davon ab, worauf es dem Autor unseres Textes vor allem angekommen sein mag: Iberien im Kreise der Großmächte zu verorten und ihm einen beträchtlichen Anteil an der Versöhnung des Großkönigs mit dem Kaiser zuzuschreiben. Vaxtangs Herrschaft ist nun festgefügt. Er setzt jetzt, also zu seinen Lebzeiten, seinen Sohn Dač'i als Nachfolger ein. Sein Kriegszug als Vasall des Großkönigs in den Orient ist nicht Ausdruck der Schwäche, sondern der Stärke.

So wie der Römerfeldzug die westliche Peripherie berührt, so berührt der Orientfeldzug, den Vaxtang, Xuasro und der ‚Prokonsul‘ Leon führen, nun die östliche Peripherie.²⁴ Die Lokalisierung der genannten Orte und Landschaften ist naturgemäß oft umstritten, aber man liegt sicher nicht falsch, wenn man sagt, daß Iran, Indien und vielleicht sogar das Horn von Afrika im Gesichtskreis des Verfassers der Lebensbeschreibung Vaxtangs waren.²⁵

Abermals stoßen wir auf Unwahrscheinlichkeiten und Anachronismen, und abermals atmet das Geschehen den Geist ritterlicher Aventiuren persischen Zuschnitts mit Verhaltensmustern, die von Heldenmut und List, Rache, Treue und Großmut bestimmt werden. Die Begegnung mit der indischen Welt manifestiert sich auch in der Fabel vom Habicht und der Krähe, die augenscheinlich der Stofftradition des *Pañcatantra* entnommen ist, eines altindischen Literaturwerks, das schon

²³ *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, p. 180-187 Qauxč'išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 196-204).

²⁴ *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, p. 188-195 Qauxč'išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 204-212).

²⁵ Siehe hierzu die Erwägungen von Rapp 2014, 291-298.

im 6. Jahrhundert ins Mittelpersische²⁶ und später ins Arabische übersetzt wurde und in der Folge unter dem Titel *Kalila wa-Dimna* weite Verbreitung, auch in einer georgischen Fassung, erfuhr.²⁷

Anlässlich der Rückkehr aus dem Osten mehren sich die Anzeichen dafür, daß die Peripetie der Herrschaft Vaxtangs gekommen ist.²⁸ Xuasro ist verstimmt, weil der Ibererkönig eine Ehe mit einer persischen Prinzessin zugunsten einer römischen ablehnt – Balenduxt war mittlerweile gestorben. Bischof Mik'ael, der alte Mentor Vaxtangs, verweigert sich der Einführung eines iberischen Katholikats durch den König, und es kommt zu einem häßlichen Streit. Vaxtang setzt sich durch und erlangt die Autokephalie der Kirche von Kartli gegenüber den Patriarchen von Konstantinopel und Antiocheia. Die Eheschließung mit Elene, der Tochter des römischen Kaisers, und zahlreiche Bauten in Iberien – darunter die Errichtung der Svetic'xoveli-Kirche in Mc'xet'a, der Ausbau der Burg Ujarma, die Gründung von Tp'ilisi – markieren letzte Erfolge. In vielerlei Hinsicht hat der mittlerweile etwa sechzig Jahre alte Vaxtang sein Haus bestellt. Da stirbt der persische Großkönig Xuasro, und sein gleichnamiger Sohn provoziert einen letzten Krieg gegen Iberien.²⁹ Vaxtang nimmt diese letzte, verzweifelte Aventure im vollen Bewußtsein des ihm bevorstehenden Martyriums auf sich. Ein

²⁶ Die Übersetzung aus dem Sanskrit ins Mittelpersische erfolgte der Überlieferung nach zur Zeit des Sāsānidenkönigs Xusrō I. (reg. 531-579 n. Chr.) durch den Arzt Burzōē; hierzu Khaleghi-Motlagh 1989 und de Blois 1990.

²⁷ Die Fabel vom Habicht und der Krähe findet sich in der georgischen Fassung *K'ilila da Damana*; vgl. die Ausgaben von Baramize und Metreveli 1962, 117-119 und T'odua 1975, 282-284. Allerdings gibt es einen wichtigen Unterschied zu der Version von *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, p. 190-191 Qauxč'išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 206-208). Zwar kommt in *K'ilila da Damana* tatsächlich eine Fabel mit einer Krähe und einem Habicht vor, allerdings ist es hier gerade umgekehrt: der Habicht ernährt die (flugunfähige) Krähe. Laut T'odua 1975, 171 hat unsere Fabel keine Parallele im indischen *Pañcatantra*, wohl aber in verschiedenen persischen Versionen. Es ist aber eben nicht dieselbe Fabel wie in der altgeorgischen Chronik.

²⁸ *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, p. 196-199 Qauxč'išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 212-218).

²⁹ *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, p. 199-204 Qauxč'išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 218-223).

letztes Mal erweist er sich als gottesfürchtiger und verantwortungsbewußter König. Sein Tod ist nicht das Ende für sein Königreich; ungefährdet folgt ihm der Sohn Dač'i nach.

Ich mußte diesen ausführlichen Durchgang durch die Lebensbeschreibung König Vaxtang Gorgasals machen, weil es ja darum geht, zu verstehen, worum es seinem Autor bzw. den Autoren derartiger Texte ging. Dabei ist deutlich geworden, daß bestimmte Motive, etwa die Gottesfurcht des Königs, seine Heldenhaftigkeit – und zwar eine nach iranischen Kriterien bestimmte Heldenhaftigkeit – besonders deutlich hervortreten. Um ereignisgeschichtliche Treue geht es dem Autor augenscheinlich nicht: Die Szenerie ist eher dem frühen Mittelalter nachempfunden, als das Byzantinische Reich viel kleiner war als im 5. und 6. Jahrhundert. Um 800 gehörte das Heilige Land tatsächlich zum Islamischen Weltreich, und Sizilien war ein bedrängter Vorposten der Byzantiner gegenüber dem (noch) 'abbäsiden Afrika. Ähnlich wie zuvor das Sāsānidenreich umspannte auch die islamische Welt mit ihrem Zentrum Bagdad den ungeheuren Raum zwischen dem Mittelmeer und Indien.

Die ‚Ereignisse‘, die die Lebensbeschreibung Vaxtang Gorgasals beschreibt, strotzen, recht besehen, vor Unwahrscheinlichkeiten, Anachronismen und offenkundigen Fehlern. Das Itinerar Vaxtangs wirkt bisweilen so erratisch, seine politischen Winkelzüge so exzentrisch, daß auch ein frühmittelalterlicher Autor stutzig hätte werden können oder gar müssen – wenn er denn in dem uns vertrauten Sinne historisch gedacht hätte. Wenn das aber nicht so ist – und so muß es sein, denn unser Autor stutzte nicht –, was waren dann seine Intentionen?

Aufschluß darüber gibt uns womöglich eine Passage zu Beginn des Feldzuges Vaxtangs ins römische Reich, noch bevor er sich dazu entschloß, die Seiten zu wechseln und das Bündnis mit den Persern zu brechen. Der Ibererkönig hält zu Beginn des Feldzugs eine programmatische Rede an sein aus Iberern, Armeniern und Persern zusammengesetztes Heer.³⁰ Er warnt davor, während des Vormarsches in Kleinasien Kirchen zu zerstören und die Geistlichen zu verfolgen, da dies die Strafe einer Niederlage nach sich ziehen könne. Nach dieser Mahnung aus aktuellem

³⁰ *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, p. 160-163 Qauxč'išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 175-180).

Anlaß endet die Rede jedoch nicht, sondern sie erfährt mehrere Erweiterungen. Zunächst eine Erweiterung ins ‚Historische‘ und zwar im Sinne der damaligen ‚Zeitgeschichte‘, als das Christentum zunächst in Rom, dann in Armenien und Iberien eingeführt wurde. Vaxtang erinnert an die christlichen Kaiser Konstantin und Jovian und ihren Widersacher Julian, dann an die Bekehrung Tʼrdats des Großen durch Gregor den Erleuchter, schließlich an die heilige Nino.

Die kaukasische ‚Zeitgeschichte‘ wird also mit der römischen ‚Zeitgeschichte‘ verbunden, zu ihr in ein Verhältnis gesetzt. Aber dabei bleibt unser Autor nicht stehen. Es erfolgt eine nochmalige Erweiterung, diesmal ins Heilsgeschichtliche. Vaxtang erinnert an den biblischen Nimrod, den ersten König auf Erden und mutmaßlichen Initiator des seinerzeit nahe dem Paradies lokalisierten Turmbaus zu Babel. Es gibt viele Bezüge zwischen dem heldenhaften Krieger und Jäger Nimrod und der persischen Adelsethik, und so verwundert es nicht, daß Nimrod als einstiger König von Babylonien und Assyrien vom Autor der Lebensbeschreibung Vaxtang Gorgasals als Vorläufer des persischen Großkönigs aufgefaßt wird. In unserem Text ist ausdrücklich davon die Rede, daß Nimrod persisch sprach.³¹

Man muß sich auf die entsprechende Denkweise einlassen: Auch die Nennung Nimrods stellt eine Anbindung an das ‚Historische‘ dar, nämlich im Sinne einer Rückbindung an die bereits im Alten Testament grundgelegte Heilsgeschichte. Mit Nimrod knüpft unser Autor nicht an die ‚Zeitgeschichte‘ vor hundert Jahren an, als Iberien mit dem Bekenntnis zu Jesus Christus in die Welt des Neuen Testaments eintrat, sondern sozusagen an die ‚Alte Geschichte‘ vor Tausenden von Jahren, als gleichwohl die Voraussetzungen von Vaxtangs eigener Lebens- und Herrschaftszeit gelegt wurden. Gott ist der Herr der Geschichte: Noch ist es nicht soweit, doch auch Nimrod wird einst die Bekehrung zu Christus zuteil werden.

Wir werden in der Rede Vaxtangs gleichsam zu Zeugen einer Inklusion: Die Iberer, die Armenier, ja die Perser werden in die gemeinsame

³¹ *Kʼartʼlis Cʼxovreba*, p. 162 Qauxčʼišvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 178): *xolo nebrotʼs enitʼa sparsulitʼa rkʼua* (sc. Mikʼael angelozi).

Geschichte der Christen hineingeholt, werden ein Teil von ihr. Sie gehören dazu. Das ist ein Phänomen, das wir in der Alten Welt immer wieder beobachten.³²

Oft bewerkstelligte man Inklusion mittels des Mythos,³³ aber das mußte nicht sein. Flavius Josephus, der Historiker des *Jüdischen Krieges*, hat seit seinem Übertritt auf die römische Seite sein schriftstellerisches Wirken der Inklusion des jüdischen Volkes und seiner Traditionen in die griechisch-römische Mittelmeerwelt und ihre literarische Überlieferung gewidmet.³⁴

Eusebios von Kaisareia, der Begleiter und Deuter der Konstantinischen Wende, hat einen Großteil seines Lebens vor und nach der Diokletianischen Christenverfolgung dem Unterfangen gewidmet, die Geschichte der Völker der Bibel und diejenige der Christenheit in die Geschichtstraditionen der griechisch-römischen Mittelmeerwelt zu inkludieren.³⁵ Die Lebensbeschreibung Vaxtang Gorgasals ist ebenfalls

³² Ich lehne mich mit der Verwendung des Inklusionsbegriffs an die Gesellschaftstheorie von Rudolf Stichweh an; vgl. allgemein Stichweh 2005 und Stichweh 2010, bes. 148-161. Stichweh grenzt in seiner Analyse von Inklusions- und Exklusionspraktiken immer wieder die Zustände in der heutigen ‚Weltgesellschaft‘ von denen in Gesellschaften früherer Epochen ab. Dabei bezieht er ausdrücklich die Verhältnisse in der Antike in seine Argumentation mit ein; vgl. etwa Stichweh 2010, 75-83.

³³ Vgl. Graf u. a. 2000, 643 mit weiterführender Literatur.

³⁴ Siehe hierzu exemplarisch Schreckenberg 1998, bes. 767-779. In jüngerer Zeit hat Almagor 2016 die Zugehörigkeit des Flavius Josephus zur „Greek imperial literature“ erörtert und dabei ausdrücklich mit den Begriffen „inclusion and exclusion“ (ebd., 117) operiert.

³⁵ Bereits Winkelmann 1991, 88-104 hat dieses Anliegen des Eusebios im Hinblick auf dessen „Chronik“ ausführlich dargestellt. Bezeichnenderweise sind wesentliche Teile dieses Werkes nur in einer armenischen Übersetzung erhalten geblieben. Vgl. auch aus jüngster Zeit Johnson 2013, der bereits im Vorwort seiner Eusebios-Biographie hervorhebt (ebd., XII): „Finally, Eusebius’ intellectual project was, at its most fundamental and pervasive levels, the envisioning of his Late Antique world in terms of the Bible, especially the Hebrew Scriptures (or Christian Old Testament). The Scriptures provided the fund of metaphors, words, characters, ideas, principles and narrative patterns by which to make sense of the

das Zeugnis eines solchen Bestrebens, allerdings, wie mir scheint, unter den Bedingungen eher des Frühmittelalters als der Spätantike.

Es ist sicher kein Zufall, daß ausgerechnet Flavius Josephus und Eusebios von Kaisareia Autoren gewesen sind, die in den entstehenden Literaturen des Kaukasus ab dem 5. Jahrhundert besonders intensiv gelesen und rezipiert worden sind.³⁶ Man könnte vielleicht sagen: Sie rührten an Fragestellungen, die auch aktuelle Probleme der Armenier und Iberer aufgriffen. Wie konnte jetzt, nach erfolgter Christianisierung und Alphabetisierung, die Integration in die große, prestigereiche literarische Kultur des griechisch-römisch-christlichen Mittelmeerraumes gelingen? Die genannten Autoren hatten einen ähnlichen Weg vor ihnen beschritten; an den von ihnen entwickelten Modellen und damit auch am Paradigma der (spät-)antiken (Kirchen-) Geschichtsschreibung vermochten sich die armenischen und iberischen Autoren grundsätzlich zu orientieren.

Dabei hatten sie viel Eigenes – und das bedeutet oft: Iranisches – im Gepäck; wir haben die Bedeutung der iranischen Adelsethik auch für die Lebensbeschreibung Vaxtang Gorgasals gesehen. Aber auf eine iranische Geschichtsschreibung konnte man eben nicht zurückgreifen, denn sie gab es nicht. Das sog. „Herrenbuch“ (*Xvadāynāmag*) der späten Sāsānidenzeit ist sicher eine wichtige Schrift gewesen und hat Autoren wie Ṭabarī und Firdausī beeinflusst. Aber es ist zweifelhaft, daß es ein Geschichtsbuch im antiken Sinne gewesen ist; jahrzehntelange Forschung hat dies jedenfalls nicht erweisen können.³⁷

Das bedeutet freilich nicht, daß es keine iranischen Geschichtstraditionen gegeben hätte, aber man sollte sie sich eher nach der Art des *Kārnamag ī*

world, nations, individuals and events of the fourth-century Mediterranean and beyond.“

³⁶ Vgl. hierzu exemplarisch die Bemerkungen von Thomson 1978, 25-31 u. 32-36 zur Rezeption des Flavius Josephus und des Eusebios von Kaisareia durch Movsēs Xorenac'i. Zur Eusebios-Rezeption in Armenien siehe auch Drost-Abgaryan 2016, 215-229.

³⁷ Vgl. hierzu und zur spätantiken iranischen Geschichtstradition insgesamt die zusammenfassenden Bemerkungen von Stickler 2021, 196-199.

Ardašīr ī Pābagān vorstellen.³⁸ Der Held dieses in einer Handschrift des 14. Jhs. überlieferten, aber viel ältere, mutmaßlich bis in (spät)sāsānidische Zeit hinabreichende Erzählstoffe tradierenden Buches ist der Gründer des Sāsānidenreiches, Großkönig Ardašīr I. aus dem dritten Jahrhundert. Allerdings ist die konkrete und korrekte historische Verortung nur ein und keineswegs der wichtigste Aspekt dieser Art von Literatur. Wie Vaxtang ist auch Ardašīr ein veritabler *bumberazi* und muß allerhand Aventiuren bestehen, um seinen Herrschaftsanspruch zu rechtfertigen und den Beweis dafür zu liefern, daß er über den „Glücksglanz“ (*xvarrah*) verfügt, den die Götter legitimen Königen zu verleihen pflegen.³⁹ Wie Vaxtang von Kaiser Konstantin und König Mirian abstammt, so wird die Ahnenreihe Ardašīrs bis auf den legendären Perserkönig Dārā zurückgeführt.⁴⁰ Wie Vaxtang zeichnet sich Ardašīr durch eine schöne Gestalt, eine umfassende geistige und körperliche Bildung, Würde und Charakter aus.⁴¹ Wie er macht er eine ‚gute Partie‘, indem er die Tochter des gestürzten Arsakidenkönigs zur Frau nimmt und mit ihr einen Thronfolger, Šābuhr, zeugt. Der Ruhm Ardašīrs will hart erkämpft sein: Mehrfach gerät er in Lebensgefahr und muß sich – zumal im Kampf gegen widergöttliche Mächte wie Haftowād, den „Herrn des Wurms“⁴² – auch in der Niederlage bewähren, doch am Ende wird ihm

³⁸ Grundlegendes zu diesem Werk bei Cereti 2001, 191-200 und Grenet 2003, 25-49; vgl. auch Cereti 2011, 585-588.

³⁹ Das *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* 4, 17 u. 24 (p. 70-73 Grenet 2003; p. 45 Nöldeke 1879) spricht vom „Glücksglanz der Herrschaft“ (*xvarrah ī xwadāyih*) bzw. dem „Glücksglanz der Kayāniden“ (*xvarrah ī Kayān*). Durch die zuletzt genannte Formulierung wird Ardašīr an die älteste persische (Myth-)Historie angebunden. Der legendäre Perserkönig Dārā (siehe die folgende Anm.) galt als Kayānide.

⁴⁰ Vgl. *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* 1, 6-7 (p. 54-55 Grenet 2003; p. 37 Nöldeke 1879).

⁴¹ Vgl. *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* 2, 1-12 (p. 58-61 Grenet 2003; p. 38-39 Nöldeke 1879). In der Vortrefflichkeit des Sohnes Šābuhr wird sich am Ende des Buches die Vortrefflichkeit des Vaters Ardašīr widerspiegeln: Šābuhr zeichnet sich durch „Kraft, Tüchtigkeit und Stärke“ (*zōr ud hunar ud nērōg*) aus; vgl. ebd., 13, 12 (p. 112-113 Grenet 2003; p. 66 Nöldeke 1879).

⁴² Vgl. *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* 7, 1-8, 16 (p. 80-95 Grenet 2003; p. 49-57 Nöldeke 1879). Haftowād, der „Herr des Wurms“ (*Haftowād ī Kirm xwadāy*) heißt bei Nöldeke Haftānbōcht.

immer wieder Hilfe von den Menschen und Ohrmazd zuteil. Die Parallelen reichen bis hin zu einzelnen Motiven wie dem des weißen Elefanten, der als Herrschaftssymbol sowohl bei Vaxtang als auch bei Ardašīr eine signifikante Rolle spielt.⁴³ Ich würde postulieren, daß es solch eine Art von Literatur, solch eine Art von Geschichtstradition gewesen ist, die die kaukasische Geschichtsschreibung und damit auch die Lebensbeschreibung Vaxtang Gorgasals beeinflusst, ja nachhaltig geprägt hat.

Ich komme zum Schluß und spitze meine Ergebnisse thesenhaft zu. Ereignisgeschichtliche Treue war nicht das Ziel von Texten wie der Lebensbeschreibung Vaxtang Gorgasals. Enttäuschend ist das nur für diejenigen, der derartige Schriften allein mit der Meßlatte des Historismus im 19. Jahrhundert mißt. Aber die kaukasischen Autoren der Spätantike und des Frühmittelalters wollten nicht wie Leopold von Ranke „zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen“ ist.⁴⁴ Sie wollten etwas anderes, nicht minder Wichtiges. Sie wollten die Geschichte ihrer Völker in die historische Tradition des griechisch-römisch-christlichen Mittelmeerraums einschreiben, inkludieren. Das ist nichts Geringes: Vaxtang Gorgasal, ob er nun ein großer König gewesen ist oder nicht, erlag schließlich seinen persischen Widersachern. Sein Reich wurde von den Sāsāniden bezwungen, das iberische Königtum in der ersten Hälfte des 6. Jahrhunderts vorübergehend abgeschafft.⁴⁵ Ereignisgeschichtlich betrachtet kann

⁴³ In *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, p. 173 Qauxč'išvili 1955 (Thomson 1996 p. 189) ist es Vaxtang Gorgasal, der von einem weißen Elefanten aus das Schlachtgeschehen verfolgt; im *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* 1, 9 u. 13 (p. 56-57 Grenet 2003; p. 37-38 Nöldeke 1879) ist es Pābag, der Ardašīrs Vater Sāsān im Traum auf einem weißen Elefanten erblickt – ein Vorzeichen der künftigen Sāsānidenherrschaft. Dem Traumdeuter zufolge symbolisiert der weiße Elefant „Kraft, Macht und Sieg“ (*čērīh ud tuvānīgīh [ud] pērōzīh*; vgl. ebd.). Weitere Belege für das genannte Motiv bei Rapp 2014, 289 Anm. 76.

⁴⁴ Das Zitat lautet vollständig: „Man hat der Historie das Amt, die Vergangenheit zu richten, die Mitwelt zum Nutzen zukünftiger Jahre zu belehren, beigemessen: so hoher Aemter unterwindet sich gegenwärtiger Versuch nicht: er will blos zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen.“ Vgl. Ranke 1885, VII.

⁴⁵ Zur Sistierung des iberischen Königtums durch die Sāsāniden Anfang des 5. Jhs. n. Chr. siehe zuletzt Schleicher 2019, 69-98; vgl. auch Schleicher 2021, 167-187.

Vaxtang also – setzen wir seine Historizität voraus – allenfalls von ephemerer Bedeutung gewesen sein. Anders verhält es sich mit der Inklusionsleistung der oft namenlosen altgeorgischen Autoren des frühen Mittelalters. Durch ihr literarisches Wirken wurde tatsächlich Dauerhaftes bewirkt, schufen sie doch eine grundlegende Voraussetzung dafür, daß Armenien und Georgien einen festen Platz in der spät- und nachantiken europäischen Kultur erhielten.

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