From one End of the (Post)Sasanian World to the Other. Mobility and Migration between the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf in the 4th to 9th Century CE

The background or »infrastructure« for the diffusion of »Sasanian Elements in Byzantine, Caucasian and Islamic Art and Culture« (as was the title of the conference at the RGZM in Mainz in October 2017) was provided by the mobility of people, objects and ideas (the two latter in turn being »transported« by people again) within and beyond the borders of the (post)Sasanian world. Recently, empires have been characterised as »regimes of entanglements«, establishing and maintaining »network structures in which certain structural and habitual circumstances – principles, rules, standards and mutual expectations – allow for the establishment of long term linkages. (...) imperial formations (Roman Empire, Ottoman Empire, Mughal Empire) are examples of regimes of entanglements where religions and ethnicities, as well as certain functionaries interact«. These linkages can also remain effective after the fragmentation, the collapse or conquest of an imperial sphere and exert a sustaining impact on axes of mobility and exchange.

In the transition period between the Sasanian and post-Sasanian / early Islamic period around 650 CE, the Armenian scholar Anania from the province of Širak (in the central area of historical Armenia) wrote a collection of mathematical problems, which he used in teaching. A considerable number of them stemmed from everyday life of the Armenian elite of the 7th century CE, which also included service to the Sasanian Great King. In his problem no 2, Anania describes a journey of one of his kinsmen from one end of the Sasanian Empire to the other, including also the transfer of a valuable object:

»One man from my relatives was summoned to Balḵ [in modern-day Afghanistan] and found a valuable pearl. Returning home, he reached Ganjak [in Azerbaijan] and sold half of the pearl for fifty drams per grain. And coming to Naxčavan, he sold a quarter of the pearl for seventy drams per grain. And arriving in Dvin [the capital of Armenia] he sold one twelfth of the pearl for 50 drams per grain; and when he came to us in Širak, he had left 24 grains of this pearl. Now, work out from that which remains how many [grains] was the pearl and how many drams the value of the pearl? (see fig. 1)«.

We also learn from other sources that members of the Armenian elite travelled to the Central Asian frontier regions by order of the Sasanian regime. During the reign of Great King Peroz I (458-484 CE), who was involved in constant warfare with the Hephthalites, noble cavalry troops were transferred from Armenia to the area of Harev/Herat in modern day Afghanistan. Nearer to the lifetime of Anania, Smbat Bagratuni, called »Xosrov Šum« (Khusraw’s joy), between 590 and 616 CE rose to a prominent position at the court of Great King Khusraw II (590-628 CE). As we learn from the Armenian history attributed to Sebēos, »it happened at that time that Smbat Bagratuni became pleasing in the eyes of King Khusraw. He gave him the marzpanate of the land of Vrkan [Hyrcania, to the southeast of the Caspian Sea], made him prince over all that region, and favoured him even more with honours and authority. He heaped gold and silver on him, and robed him in expensive and splendid garments. He gave him the belt and sword that had belonged to his own father Ormizd. He put under his control Persian and Armenian troops, and ordered him to go to the land of his appointment«.

The following campaigns against the Turks and their vassals in Central Asia led Smbat Bagratuni and his Armenian retainers all the way to the city of Balḵ, which they conquered and plundered. During these wars, Smbat Bagratuni also met descendants of Armenian deportees: »There was in that country a community deported from Armenia and settled on the edge of the great desert which extends from Turk’astan and Dihistan. They had forgotten their own language, lost the use of writing, and lacked the priestly order. There was also there a group of Kodrik’ [the exact origin of this group is unclear] who had been taken captive with our own men; and furthermore not a few from the Greek empire and from the region of Syria. The community of Kodrik’ were infidels. But over the Christians there shone a great light. They were..."
confirmed in the faith and learned to write and speak their language. A certain presbyter among them who was named Abel was appointed to priestly rank in that land. 7

This settlement of Armenian and other population in the frontier region southeast of the Caspian Sea was probably connected with the building and safeguarding of the Great Wall of Gorgān, which since the 5th century CE motivated the resettlement and deportation of groups from all over the Sasanian Empire. 8

However, this involvement of Armenians in the Sasanian frontier politics in Central Asia 9 also brought about the movement of people in the other direction towards South Caucasia. In Anania of Širak’s mathematical problem no 21, we read: »Nerseh Kamsaran, son of Aršawir and homonymous ancestor of this Nerseh, defeated the people of Balḫ in battle and captured very many of them. And on arriving at the royal court [in Ctesiphon], he presented to the king of the Persians the usual [share] of prisoners. And having counted the usual [share], he offered to the son of the king a 1/7 part. And being dismissed by them he turned to his country [Armenia]. And he went to the house of the darkpet [the master of the palace] and was greatly honoured by him, not as a naxarār 10, but as one of the kings. And he gave him 1/8 of the prisoners. On coming to the spasayapet, whom they call the xoravaran [the »General of the West« 11], and being honoured even more by him, he gave him 1/12 of the prisoners. And having moved on, he arrived in his own country [in the province of Širak] and his younger brother Hrahat presented himself before him and he gave him 1/14 of the prisoners. And having moved on, the Armenian azatḵ [members of the lower nobility] presented themselves before him and he gave them 1/9 of the prisoners. Arriving at Valaršapat [Ēǰmiacin, the traditional centre of the Armenian Church], he gave to the holy churches 1/16 of the prisoners. And when his elder brother Sahak came, he gave him 1/20 of the prisoners. And there were 570 people left. Now work out in total, how many were there? 12

According to the solution of Anania, the original number of prisoners was 2240. The story of their transfer from modern-day Afghanistan first to the Sasanian imperial centre in Iraq and then to Armenia (see fig. 1) may have been connected to the above-mentioned campaigns of Smbat Bagratuni and other Armenian warriors to Balḫ in the 600/610s (see above). This would be in agreement with the attribution of this transaction to a homonymous ancestor (grandfather?) of Nerseh Kamsaran, a contemporary of Anania, whom we also know as »lord of Širak and Ašarunik’« from an inscription on the Church of Mren dated to the years 638 to 641 CE. 13

However, this was not the first transfer of population from the (north-)eastern edge of the Sasanian sphere into the South Caucasus. These areas consisted of Khurāsān, that is the region between the city of Nišāpur and the River Oxus (Amu Darya), and the areas beyond that river, that is Transoxania or in Arabic Mā warāʾu n-nahr. The latter included the country of Sogdia between the Oxus and the Jaxartes (Syr Darya), centred on the valley of the Zar-afšān river with the renowned cities of Samarkand and Buḫārā. For Great King Khusrāw I (531-579 CE), al-Baladḏūrī claims that »in the land of Jurzan [eastern Georgia 14] he established a city, Sughdābil [identified with the city of Curtaw to the southwest of Tbilisi], which he populated with a body of Sogdians and Persians, making it a fortified town. 15 Other target areas of what J. H. Kramers in 1936 has called the »military colonisation of the Caucasus« included the urban centres of Dvin and Naxčan in the valley of the Araxes as well as the important passage-ways across the Great Caucasus in Derbent at the Caspian Sea (in Arabic Bāb al-Abwāb, lit. »Gate of Gates«) and in Dari-i (coming from Persian Dar-e Alān, meaning »Gate of the Alans«) to the north of Tbilisi. Recent excavations at the site of Dari-i have identified a cemetery of the garrison whose oldest burials date to the period 428 to 598 CE; the fortress was then later also occupied by Arab troops (see below) 16.

While all these examples so far included migrations at the order of the imperial regime or as consequences of the state’s actions (especially warfare), other forms or mobility took place from private initiatives. Procopius, for instance, in the 6th century CE describes the power of attraction of the Armenian capital Dvin for traders from all over the Sasanian Empire and beyond: »Now Doubios [Dvin] is a land excellent in every respect, and especially blessed with a healthy climate and abundance of good water; and from Theodosiopolis [Erzurum] it is removed a journey of eight days. In that region there are plains suitable for riding, and many very populous villages are situated in very close proximity to one another, and numerous merchants conduct their business in them. For from India and the neighbouring regions of Iberia [eastern Georgia] and from practically all the nations of Persia and some of those under Roman sway they bring in merchandise and carry on their dealings with each other there. 17

This »cosmopolitan« character of Dvin is also reflected in an extract from the charter of capitulation the inhabitants of Anania, whom we also know as »lord of Širak and Ašarunik’« from an inscription on the Church of Mren dated to the years 638 to 641 CE.

7 Sebēos c. 24: 97. – Thomson/Howard-Johnston, Sebēos I, 44.
8 Sauer et al., Great Wall of Gorgān. – Vacca, Non-Muslim Provinces 154-155.
9 Cf. Alizadeh, Borderland Projects.
10 This term marks the uppermost echelon of the Armenian nobility. Cf. Adontz, Armenia.
11 This was one of the four regional commands established during the »reform« of Great King Khusrāw I (531-579 CE). Cf. Gyselen, The four generals. – Vacca, Non-Muslim Provinces 65-67.
12 Greenwood, Anania Širakac’i 165-167.
14 Cf. also Vacca, Non-Muslim Provinces 58-61.
15 al-Baladḏūrī 306. Cf. also Vacca, Non-Muslim Provinces 159-160.
16 Kramers, The Military Colonization. – Alizadeh, Borderland Projects. – Sauer et al., Northern outpost. – Vacca, Non-Muslim Provinces 160-162 (also on the identification of the »Syāṣijjya« mentioned as a group settled by Xosrov I in Armenia and in Derbent).
the city negotiated with the commander Habib ibn Maslama in 654 CE after a major Arab invasion of the country: »In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful. This is the treaty of Habib ibn Maslama with the Christians, Magians and Jews of Dabil [Dvin], including those present and absent«. 18

Both the Jewish and the »Magian« (Zoroastrian) presence in the city may have had its origins in communities of these faiths existing even before the Sasanian expansion in Armenia, but may have also profited from migration from other parts of the Empire in the centuries before its collapse. A case of individual non-elite migration of a Zoroastrian artisan within Sasanian South Caucasia is reported in an early text of Georgian hagiography. In the »Vita of Eustati M'c'xet'eli«, we read that »in the tenth year of King Khusrav [(i.e., 540/541 CE)] (...) a certain man arrived from Persia, from the province of the Arsacids; son of a Magian was he, and a pagan. His name was Gvirobbandak, and he was a young man of about 30. He came to the city of Mzcheta and set himself to learn the shoemaker's craft. (...) At that season the Persians who lived in Mzcheta, cobbler and shoemakers by trade, used to assemble for their festival. (...) He used to live in the land of Persia, in the province of the Arsacids, in the town of Ganjak [in Azerbaijan]«. 19

Gvirobbandak joined an already existing »colony« of »Persian« craftsmen in Mzcheta, the ancient capital of Iberia (eastern Georgia) north of Tbilisi. Later, after Gvirobbandak's conversion to Christianity (and his baptism as Ewstati), his fellow countrymen and former co-religionists effected his martyrdom by appealing to the Sasanian authorities in the city. 20 For our topic, the text is illustrative of the mobility of people and of manual skills within the Sasanian sphere.

In the above-cited passage, Procopius claimed that also traders »from India« were attracted by the mercantile opportunities in Armenia's capital Dvin. Besides this text, findings of seals from the city of Ardašir-Xvarrah/Firuzābād in a storehouse in Dvin at least hint at connections between the Caucasus region and the province of Fars on the Persian Gulf. 21 The Armenian Geography (Ašyahrac'oyc) of the mid-7th century CE, which is now also commonly attributed to Anania of Širak, also mentions other urban centres in the southern provinces of the Persian Empire such as Gondēšāpur in Kuzestān, »where fine sugar is made« (and probably traded to Armenia), as the text reports. 22 The coasts of the Persian Gulf are described as regions of origin of pearls (such as the one acquired in Anania's mathematical problems via Balḏurī in the 6th century, written by Ioane Sabanisde after Abo's death in eastern Georgia's capital Tbilisi in 786 CE, we read: »[Abo] was born of the line of Abraham, of the sons of Ishmael and the race of the Saracens. He had no foreign blood in him, nor was he born of a slave-woman, but of pure Arab stock on both his father's and his mother's side of the family. His father and
mother and brothers and sisters resided there in Baghdad. (...) Wishing to come here to Georgia with Duke Nerses [of Iberia], he entered into his service, because he was good at preparing fragrant scents and lotions, as well as being versed in the literature of the Saracens. (...) Then [ca. 782 CE] he went with Nerses to the land of Georgia and entered the city of Tbilisi, where walked about openly professing the Christian faith. Of the local Saracens who had known him before some swore at him (...). The blessed martyr of Christ was arrested and brought before the magistrate who was the Amir over the city of Tbilisi, who cast him into prison because of his Christian beliefs 28.

Again, the saint is a craftsman (a perfumer) migrating into the capital of Georgia, where he encounters an already existing «colony» of his (Arab) fellow countrymen and (Muslim) co-religionists, who after his «apostasy» initiate his martyrdom by appealing to the Arab authorities in the city. Therefore, the text is again illustrative for the mobility of people and of skills 29.

I have treated other aspects of Arab settlement in the South Caucasus in the early Islamic period in a recent publication, where I also used the occurrence of various mints in Early Islamic coin hoards in Armenia to trace patterns of mobility 30. Therefore, I will focus on «Iranian» groups coming from within the former Sasanian sphere, especially again from the frontier areas between Iran and Central Asia. The Abbasids mobilised important parts of their military retinue from the regional, non-Arab elites, who preserved elements of a «Sasanian legacy» (see also below) in these areas. They were called the «Khurāsānīs» and after the overthrow of the Umayyad Caliphate in 750 CE were deployed both on the frontier towards Byzantium as well as against insurgents in Armenia. They also received special quarters in the newly founded capital of Baghdad after 762/763 CE 31. As the Armenian

29 Vacca, Non-Muslim Provinces 160 and 178-179. – Schultz, Das Martyrium des Heiligen Abo.
30 Preiser-Kapeller, Complex processes of migration. Cf. now also Vacca, Non-Muslim Provinces.
31 de la Vassière, Samarqand et le Sughd. – Preiser-Kapeller, Complex processes of migration. – Preiser-Kapeller, Central Peripheries.
historian Łewond reports, a numerous group of Khurāsānīs accompanied the new governor al-Hasan ibn Qahtaba in 770/771 CE into al-Armīniya. Their regime Łewond describes as especially oppressing, leading to another rebellion of parts of the Armenian nobility. After the failure of this uprising, further Khurāsānīs came with Yahyā b. Saʿīd al-Harāšī, a client of Caliph Hārūn ar-Rašīd (r. 786-809 CE), to the South Caucasus. This group together with earlier arrivals from their ranks in 795 CE raised their arms against a governor coming from the Arab tribes in northern Mesopotamia, Ahmad as-Sulami, in another conflict over access to revenues and resources.

But the most dangerous challenge to the Caliphate’s authority in the region came from the insurrection of the Khurramites (from Persian ḥorrām-dīnān, the »followers of the joyful religion«), who, as Patricia Crone has analysed in detail, combined elements of Zoroastrianism with resistance to the Arab rule over the Iranian countries. Under the leadership of Babak in his inaccessible fortress al-Badd, they gained control over vast parts of Azerbaijan between 816 and 838 CE, also making use of internal power struggles within the Abbasid dynasty. Babak allied himself with the neighbouring Armenian Prince Vasak of Siwnik’, whose daughter he even married. Several times, the caliphs mobilised troops against Babak, but in vain, as for instance in the year 827 CE. On that occasion we learn that these campaigns not only brought further Arabs from northern Mesopotamia (the Ğazīra) to the South Caucasus, but also Muslims from Ğibāl (central western Iran), Baṣra (Iraq), Ḥiǧāz, Oman and al-Bahrayn on the Arab peninsula as well as from Fārs and Ahwāz in southwest Iran on the coast of the Persian Gulf (see fig. 2). Thus, again various edges of the former Sasanian sphere were brought into contact.

Yet success against the Khurramites’ rebellion was only achieved by representatives of a new group of Central Asian retainers who, from 819 CE onwards, found their way to the central lands of the Caliphate with the Caliph’s al-Maʾmūn

Fig. 2  Regions of origins of soldiers and settlers mobilised by the authorities of the caliphate for deployment in the South Caucasus between 700 and 860 CE according to the written sources. – (J. Preiser-Kapeller, 2018; base map: google satellite).
(r. 813-833 CE) and his brother and successor al-Mu’tāšim (r. 833-842 CE). Among them were Ḥaydar ibn Kāwūs Afšīn and his followers, who had only recently converted to Islam, stemming from the Sogdian principality of Ustrushana, east of Samarkand (now in Tajikistan). These retainers were augmented with mamllums, i.e. military slaves, originating mainly from the Turkish regions of Central Asia. In 838 CE, they put an end to Babak’s rule in Azerbaijan, who was also betrayed by his former Armenian allies. During his supreme command in Azerbaijan and al-Armēniya in the years 835 to 839/840 CE, Ḥaydar ibn Kāwūs Afšīn al-Ustrushani appointed several commanders and governors from his retinue. Their nisbas give away their Central Asian origins, such as Muhammad b. Sulaymān »al-Samarqandī«, Muhammad b. Khālid »Bukhārākhudā« and Ḥaydar’s brother-in-law Mankjūr »al-Farghānī« (from the region of Fargāna to the east of Ustrushana, see fig. 2).36

Yet despite Ḥaydar’s success, the Abbasid Caliph’s control over the South Caucasus region became increasingly fragile. In a last attempt to regain control in the South Caucasus, Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861 CE) in 852 CE sent the Turkish-born General Bugha »the Elder« with a strong army, including many mamllums from Central Asia. In his campaigns, Bugha devastated Armenia and Georgia and deported unruly Christian and Muslim princes to the Caliph’s new residence in Sāmarrā’ (north of Baghdad). The campaigns of Bugha, however, did not alter the fact that the central power in the Abbasid caliphate gradually lost control over its provinces, a process that accelerated after the assassination of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil in 861 CE.37 In the South Caucasus, there emerged a mosaic of regional rulers, including old-established Armenian and Georgian Christian princes such as the Bagratuni and the Arrcruni as well as Muslim emirs of Arab, Iranian and Turkish or Kurdish origin. Ethnic and religious dividing lines were evoked in the ongoing competition for power and territory to legitimise violence just as much as they could be overcome in order to establish useful alliances. The mutual recognition not only as of equal rank but also to a certain extent as «similar» became visible in the use of mutually intelligible forms of representation of lordship and of other habits.38

As Alison Vacca demonstrates in her most recent monograph, the «Sasanian legacy» provided one basis for a common ground of interaction and communication between Christian and Islamic elites in 9th to 10th century South Caucasia. In general, Vacca describes this period as an «Iranian Intermesso» in the eastern lands of the Caliphate, characterised by the rule of Iranian dynasties or of those claiming Iranian heritage, such as the Sāmanids in Khurāsān and Transoxania or the Būyids in western Iran and in Iraq.39 In the South Caucasus, she lists the Sājids (an »Arabized Iranian family of Central Asian origin«) in Azerbaijan, the »Kurdish Arab Rawwādids« in the region of Tabrīz, the »Kurdish Marwānīd family« in northern Mesopotamia and southern Armenia, the Kurdish Shaddādīdīs (who claimed descent from the Sasanians) in the area of Ganjak and in eastern Armenia and the Sharwānshāhs (stemming from the »Persianized Arab Shaybānī tribe«) in the area of Derbert, who »took on the Sasanian title shāh« and used personal names of the Sasanian tradition. Equally, Christian noble families (who actually could trace their origins back to the Sasanian period or even from before) »expressed their power by evoking Sasanian legacy (...). Both Armenian and Arabic sources from the tenth century refer to Bagratuni kings [of Armenia] as shāhanshāhs«.40

The mobility between the edges of the (post-)Sasanian world, its enduring »regime of entanglement« as illustrated in this paper without doubt had contributed to the emergence of such an »aristocratic koiné«. As Joel T. Walker describes, this also included various narrative and visual models of elite culture: »From northern Arabia to the Caucasus, from Mesopotamia to Afghanistan, regional elites of the Sasanian Empire and its frontiers became familiar with epic traditions celebrating the kings and heroes of ancient Iran. By adopting Sasanian cultural and artistic models, provincial elites claimed these epic traditions as their own. Stories about Iranian kings on the hunt, on the polo field, and in battle provided a heroic ideal that could be translated into a wide range of narrative media. As a cultural language of power, Sasanian epic traditions endured long after the fall of Ctesiphon to the Arabs in 637« 41.

In turn, the Caucasian region became an intermediary of such »Sasanian elements« towards Byzantium and the Central Asian »edge« towards Tibet or China. This equally opens a »global« perspective on the impact of Sasanian culture and the significance of the Sasanian sphere as a framework for the mobility and migration of people, objects and ideas.42

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38 Preiser-Kapeller, Complex processes of migration. – Jones, Between Islam and Byzantium.
39 Vacca, Non-Muslim Provinces 3-4. Cf. also Busse, Chalif und Grosskönig 131-188.
40 Vacca, Non-Muslim Provinces 3-8, 145. Cf. also Bosworth, Islamic dynasties 89-90, 140-142, 147. 150-152. – Ter-Ghewondyan, Arab Emirates.
42 Walker, The Emperor and the World. – Feltham, Lions, Silks and Silver. – Melikian-Chirvani, Iran to Tibet. – Green, Sasanian Finds. – Preiser-Kapeller, Jenseits von Rom.
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D’un bout à l’autre du monde sassanide. Mobilité et migration entre le Caucase, l’Asie centrale et le golfe Persique du 4e au 9e siècle


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