In the case of Greater Armenia, though I might have made it a province after the assassination of its King Artaxxes, I preferred, following the precedent of our fathers, to hand that kingdom over to Tigranes, the son of King Artavasdes, and grandson of King Tigranes, through Tiberius Nero who was then my stepson. And later, when the same people revolted and rebelled, and was subdued by my son Gaius, I gave it over to King Ariobarzanes the son of Artabazus, King of the Medes, to rule, and after his death to his son Artavasdes. When he was murdered I sent into that kingdom Tigranes, who was sprung from the royal family of the Armenians.\footnote{1}

The importance of the Imperium Romanum for the development and emergence of political and social structures among the “barbarian people” beyond its borders has been recognized a long time ago; at the same time, the Romans made use of these people and their ruling elite and these elites made use of the Romans, their resources, their political concepts, and the status connected with it. But besides archeological evidence, for the European borders of the Imperium our (written) sources originate more or less without exception from
within the Roman sphere, which makes it very difficult to "examine non-Roman views."²

This also holds true to a certain extent for the people and states at Rome's eastern borders to Persia, where the Empire encountered an imperial power of comparable dimensions; accordingly, life was even more complex for these political entities, such as the Armenians. Tacitus called the Armenians "ambigua gens,"³ situated between the Roman and Iranian great powers and sustaining political and cultural connections to both sides. This dilemma became even stronger when the Armenians adopted Christianity at the beginning of the 4th century and strengthened their ties to the new Christian Imperium Romanum of Constantine the Great and his successors,⁴ whereas the traditional social structure with its powerful aristocratic houses, which was very similar to that of ancient Iran, was still strong (see below). The struggle over Armenia at last lead to the partition of the country between Rome and the Sasanians in 387 AD and the abolishment of the Armenian kingship. But in contrast to the European barbaricum, the invention of the Armenian alphabet at the beginning of the 5th century initiated the emergence of a rich indigenous literature, which includes several important historiographical works. These works provide us with a valuable view on three empires of late antiquity (Rome-Byzantium, Persia and, since the 7th century, the Arab Caliphate) from the perspective of a nation which lived on the edge of these powers, until the noble house of Bagratuni succeeded in the restoration of the Armenian monarchy at the end of the 9th century. Among other aspects, we obtain an invaluable impression of the interpretative and political strategies of a local elite to come to terms with competing imperial dominations.

Introduction: Empires of negotiations

In an often-quoted passage of the history attributed to Sebōs we encounter a very grim interpretation of the Eastern Roman Empire's policy vis-à-vis the Armenian aristocracy:

At that time (around the year 591) the king of the Greeks ('agawor Yunac'), Maurice, ordered a letter of accusation (gir ambastanu't'iw) to be written to the Persian king concerning all the Armenian princes and their troops: "They are a perverse and disobedient race," he said: "they are between us and cause trouble. Now come, I shall gather mine and send them to Thrace; you gather yours and order them to be taken to the east. If they die, our enemies die; if they kill, they kill our enemies; but we shall live in peace. For if they remain in their own land, we shall have no rest." They both agreed.⁵

This fictitious letter did not only build the introduction for Sebōs's account of the period of Byzantine dominance over the greater part of Armenia in the years 591 to 602, but often serves as characteristic example for the empire's attitude toward this "disobedient race." Of course, the Eastern Roman Empire tried to enforce political and religious conformity in the areas it controlled, if the central power was strong enough to do so: the Western Armenian regions which came under Roman suzerainty according to the treaties with Persia were turned into provinces under Emperor Justinian in the 6th century, and the power of their noble houses was broken. During short periods of predominance in Greater Armenia, the Emperors enforced short-living unions between the Byzantine and the Armenian churches.⁶ And the fragmented Armenian state of the Bagratuni period was easy prey for the Byzantine policy of annexation in the 10th and 11th centuries.⁷ Nonetheless, these periods of Byzantine expansion and dominance in the Caucasus region were not lasting and do not even add up to 100 years from the 4th to the 11th century. More often than not, the empire had to come to terms with the Armenian aristocracy through negotiations and compromises if it wanted to maintain the recognition of its claim on suzerainty over Armenia; this was the case even when the Byzantine position in the region was strong.⁸

As we shall see, the relationship between Byzantium and the Armenian aristocracy can be understood better within the framework of "empire" as defined by Karen Barkey in her recent book on the Ottoman Empire than by continuing the monolithic concept of a leveling and centralizing imperial power:

An empire is a large composite and differentiated polity linked to a central power by a variety of direct and indirect relations, where the centre exercises political control through hierarchical and quasi-monopolistic relations over groups ethnically different from itself. These relations are, however, regularly subject to
negotiations over the degree of autonomy of intermediaries in return for military and fiscal compliance. The central state negotiates and maintains more or less distinct compacts between itself and the various segments of this polity. Last, but not least, one can say that most of the different segments of the polity remain largely unconnected among themselves. That is why an imperial system is best represented in terms of the hub-and-spoke network structure, where the rim is absent. Empire, then, is about political authority relations (as well as many other transactions) between a central power and many diverse and differentiated entities. Such a characterization of empire underscores the importance of relations between the imperial state that is in a core central structural position and the different segments that comprise the imperial domain, where power and control remain key to the state, yet the imperial state does not have complete monopoly of power in the territory under control. It shares control with a variety of intermediate organizations and with local elites, religious and local governing bodies, and numerous other privileged institutions. To rule over vast expanses of territory, as well as to ensure military and administrative cooperation, imperial states negotiate and willingly relinquish some degree of autonomy. No matter how strong an empire is, it has to work with peripheries, local elites, and frontier groups to maintain compliance, resources, tribute, and military cooperation, and to ensure political coherence and durability. That also the Later Roman Empire, formerly considered the archetype of a centralized bureaucratic empire, as well as the Byzantine Empire were empires based on negotiations, has been elaborated in recent studies. Of course, these relations with local powers at the periphery and beyond the borders of the empire never took place at eye level. Until the late Byzantine period, the Emperors formally did not conclude treaties, but only granted privileges to groups and individuals who had begged for it. De facto, we encounter various agreements between the Empire and its rivaling great powers which effected on Armenia and its nobility, for example the partition of the country in 387, the Byzantine-Persian peace treaties of 299, 363, 532, 562, 591 and 629, or the agreement on the division of tributes from various border regions between the Empire and the Caliphate in 686/687 (see endnote 50). But characteristically, the Armenians were object and not subject of these negotiations. Neither during the time of monarchical rule before 390/428 and after 884/885 nor during the period of direct suzerainty over Armenia’s nobility, the fragmentation of the country’s political structures allowed for the formation of a regional power center which could compete with the empires on its borders.

On the other hand, the structure of the Armenian society allowed for a certain degree of flexibility in relations with the great powers. As Nina Garsoian has stated: “...the strength and permanence of the tan forged a social structure capable of surviving even in moments of political eclipse and the decentralized character of the society diminished its chances of total annexation.” This “decentralized character” permitted the adaptation to the separation between various rulers and spheres of interest of the neighboring empires and the existence of multiple layers of authority and loyalty. Thus, one member of Mamikonean clan could lead the rebellion in Persarmenia in 450/451, whereas a kinsman served as imperial general in Roman Armenia (see endnote 56). Individual noblemen and clans could gain a variety of options within this framework, and even the aristocracy at large could achieve a certain degree of autonomy for the country’s affairs if equilibrium between the neighboring great powers or a momentary power vacuum would allow it. However, the number of options declined as soon as one imperial power achieved predominance in the region; then, individually or at large, the aristocracy had to choose between collaboration, resistance, or emigration. This would have been the case for the time of the Arab rule over Armenia; but even for this period, the Arab historian al-Baladhuri stresses the Armenian princes’ flexibility in their handling of their overlord’s representatives:

The Armenian patricians did not cease to hold their lands as usual, each trying to protect his own region; and whenever a fāmil (tax collector) came to the frontier they would coax him; and if they found in him purity and severity, as well as force and equipment, they would give the kharaj [and render submission, otherwise they would deem him weak and look down upon him.

We are going to encounter all these phenomena on the following pages, which will illustrate the variety of instruments and contents of the relations between the Armenian aristocracy and the Eastern Roman Empire from the 4th to the 9th century. In doing so, we will make
The Emperor and Individual Armenian Aristocrats
We read in the Buzandaran Patmut'ıwnk':

Then one of mightiest naxarars, named Meružan Arcruni, revolted against the king of Armenia. He went to the king of Persia and swore an oath to him that he would always be his servant.18 Meružan Arcruni is a kind of "arch-traitor" in the Buzandaran Patmut'ıwnk', he betrays his king, his country and his religion. But the way in which he changes his allegiance from the Armenian king to the Sasanian Great King can be regarded as the "normal" one. In a similar way, Sebēos describes the career of Atat Xoṛxaوني, who participated in a rebellion against the Persians after the new partition of Greater Armenia in 591. The rebellion failed, and some of the Armenian princes tried to come in contact with the "Huns" in the north of Caucasus, but:

Since they (Atat Xoṛxaوني and Samuel Vahewuni) were unable to rely on the forces of the Huns, they then sought an oath from the king of the Greeks (Emperor Maurice) and submitted to him. (...) But the Emperor hastily summoned Atat Xoṛxaوني with his troops to the palace. He bestowed on him compliments and honours, gave him many presents, and sent him to Thrace.19 (...)

Now what more shall I say about Atat Xoṛxaوني and his further rebellion. He was a great patrik, for which reason the king ordered him to be summoned to the palace; so he went to him with seventy men. He splendidly honoured him and those accompanying him with a worthy and appropriate reception. He gave him gold and silver vessels and very many treasures. He ordered him to go to Thrace to (join) his troops. He took his leave from the king and departed.20

But as Atat Xoṛxaوني does not have any interest in fighting against the Avars and Slavs on the Balkans, he switches sides once more:

But while he was still on his way he decided to rebel and go to the Persian king. (...) He rapidly went to the Persian king, who received him in a friendly way, greatly honoured him, gave him treasures, and authorized a stipend from the treasury.21

This is one of the many examples from Armenian historiography of how the relationship between individual Armenian princes and the monarchs of the neighboring great powers could be established and ended. As we have seen in the case of Meružan Arcruni, these phenomena were common even during the existence of the Armenian kingdom and became even more so after its abolition.

The term which Sebēos and other historians used to describe this relationship between the Emperor or the Great King and the individual aristocrats is cafayut'ıwn; this is the same term which describes the allegiance of the Armenian princes to their king in earlier times.23 In that way, the Emperor took the place of the Armenian king in this relationship. For the aristocrat, cafayut'ıwn included the obligation for military service to his lord (ئئر). But this relationship also included mutual commitments, which according to the Armenian tradition were sealed through a reciprocal oath (uxt, erdumn). As a result of this oath, one side took upon itself the duties of lordship and protection, and the other those of faithful service and obedience.23 As we have seen, the fugitive princes Samuël Vahewuni and Atat Xoṛxaوني sought an oath (erdumn), as they wanted to submit to the Byzantine Emperor. The new fiduciary relation was also manifested in ritual and material ways; Atat was honored in a ceremonial reception at the court in Constantinople and received valuable presents. After changing sides, the Great King "greatly honoured him" and "gave him treasures."24 As Tim Greenwood stated, these are recurring motives in the depiction of the deeds of Armenian aristocrats in our period: "the service to an external authority, the titles and material rewards available to the individual princes and instances of direct contact between Emperor and client."25 We are going to take a deeper look especially on these aspects.
The Autonomous Armenian Satraps

The southern Satrapies included seven principalities (Sophene, Anzitene, Ingilene, Sophanene, Astbianene, Balabitene, and Chorzanene) ruled by five noble houses. Their relationship to the Roman state is described by Procopius in his book on the Buildings:

(...) but in the other Armenia, which extends inside of the Euphrates River as far as the city of Amida, five Armenian Satraps held the power, and these offices were always hereditary and held for life. However, they received the symbols of office only from the Roman Emperor. It is worth while to describe these insignia, for they will never again be seen by man. There is a cloak made of wool, not such as is produced by sheep, but gathered from the sea. Pinnos (a bivalve shellfish) the creature is called on which this wool grows. And the part where the purple should have been, that is, where the insertion of purple cloth is usually made, is overlaid with gold. The cloak was fastened by a golden brooch in the middle of which was a precious stone from which hung three sapphires by loose golden chains. There was a tunic of silk adorned in every part with decorations of gold which they are wont to call plumia. The boots were of red colour and reached to the knee, of the sort which only the Roman Emperor and the Persian king are permitted to wear. Roman soldiers, however, never fought under the orders of the king of the Armenians or of the Satraps, but these rulers conducted their wars independently.

The hereditary status of the Satraps as clients of the Emperor corresponds with the information on the nature of the naxarars’ power given by Armenian sources. We also find the characteristic elements of a naxarars’-relationship: the obligation for military service and the ritual manifestation through the bestowal of the symbols of office by the Emperor—most probable, the Satraps as “friendly kings” had to present themselves to the Emperor in Constantinople to receive their insignia from his hands. But the Satraps were also obliged to offer a tribute to the Emperor in the form of the aurum coronarium—golden crowns—which had to be presented to the monarch on the occasion of accessions to the throne, crown jubilees and military triumphs, as we know from an edict of the Emperors Valentinianus II and Theodosius I from the year 387 for the Satrap Gaddana of Sophanene. In this case, the Satraps shared the same obligation with all provinces of the empire.

For the same time, the Buzandaran Patmut’iwnk’ claim that these princes also kept their allegiance to the king of Greater Armenia. As we know, the Armenian historiography, writing after the partition of the country in 387, tried sometimes to idealize the unity of the Aršakuni monarchy before its fall. But taking into consideration the “multiple layers of authority” we talked about (see the introduction above), such an allegiance to two sides does not seem an anomaly, especially since the Armenian king would be regarded as a client of the Emperor, at least until the treaty of 363. With the abolition of the monarchy in the Persian sector in 428 at the latest, such a double loyalty would end.

Procopius also tells us how most of these princes lost their hereditary status under Emperor Zenon, due to their support of the rebellion of the magister militum per Orientem Illus and the Anti-Emperor Leontius in the years 484 to 488:

But at a later time, during the reign of Zeno, some of the Satraps decided to array themselves openly with Illus and Leontius, who had revolted against the Emperor. Consequently, when the Emperor had reduced Leontius and Illus to subjection, he left in the former status only one Satrap, who held a very inferior province which was not of any importance, in the region called Belabitine; all the others he removed and no longer permitted them to transmit the office to those connected with them by kinship, but he ordained that on each occasion different men of the Emperor’s choosing should succeed to these offices, just as is the rule in all the other offices of the Romans. Even so, these officials were not in command of Roman soldiers, but only of a few Armenians, as had been customary previously, with the result that they were unable to repel the attacks of an enemy.

This measure reduced the Satrapies’ autonomy and brought to an end one of the main characteristics of the traditional Armenian legal status of a noble house; but the Satrapies would still not be fully incorporated into the empire, as Procopius makes clear in another episode of their history:

In consequence of this, indeed, Cabades, King of the Persians, invaded the Roman territory during the reign of Anastasius, directing his march by way of Martyropolis, since it lay a little more than a one-day’s journey from Amida for an unencumbered traveller. And as if he were still dealing with some minor detail of his journey, an incidental task of his campaign, he captured this city out of hand, not by storming the wall or by making any kind of
assault or siege, but simply by sending an announcement that he would arrive. For the inhabitants of the city, knowing well that they would not be able to hold out even for one short moment against the attacking force, when they learned that the army of the Medes had arrived close by, immediately approached Cabades in company with Theodorus, who at that time was Satrap of Sophanene, clothed in his robes of office, and placed themselves and Martyropolis at his disposal, bearing in their hands the public taxes of two years. And Cabades was pleased with this and withheld his hand from the city and from the whole district, as belonging to the Persian Kingdom, and he let the people go unharmed, neither inflicting any damage nor changing the form of the government, but he appointed Theodorus himself their Satrap, entrusting to him, since he had shewn himself not indiscreet, the tokens of the office, with the intention that he watch over the land for the Persians. Then he led his army forward, captured Amida by siege, and marched back into the land of Persia, as I have related in the Books on the Wars. And the Emperor Anastasius, understanding that it was not possible to defend Martyropolis from hostile assault, since it had no defences, not only showed no resentment against Theodorus and the people of Sophanene, but actually expressed deep gratitude to them for their action. Indeed the circuit-wall of this Martyropolis was really about four feet in thickness, while it was only twenty feet high. In consequence, the wall could not only be easily assaulted by the enemy if they stormed it or brought up their siege engines, but it was quite easy for them simply to scramble over it.37

This episode can be dated to the year 502, over a decade after Zenon's modification of the Satrapies' status; we still meet the Satrap of Sophanene, "clothed in his robes of office," who exchanges the catayut 'iwn to the Emperor for the service to the Great King in a way already familiar to us, and receives the "tokens of the office" from the hands of Kavad. But whereas Emperor Anastasius, at least according to Procopius, was prepared to accept Theodorus' "elastic" policy vis-a-vis the Great powers and obviously acknowledged the Satrap's allegiance when it was again offered to him, Emperor Justinian did not tolerate such doubtful clients.38 Procopius writes:

And when this (the weakness of Roman power in the Satrapies) came to the knowledge of the Emperor Justinian, he immediately did away with the title of Satrap and appointed over these provinces two Dukes, as they are called; and he put under them a very large force of regular Roman troops to assist them in guarding the Roman frontier. He also built strongholds for them as follows ....39

And in his Novella XXXI, the Emperor made clear that he considered the Satrapies an institution alien to the Roman order: "This title (Satrap) is not derived from the Romans or from our predecessors, but was introduced by another power."40 Thus, in the year 528, the autonomy of the Satrapies came finally to an end; in 536, they were organized as a Roman province.

Anyway, for more than two centuries, these Armenian princely houses had been able to preserve their traditional status even within a political system far more centralized and powerful than the Arşākuni monarchy. But this preservation came at a price: the princes had to abstain from any cooperation with their kinsmen across the border to Persarmenia, which could have run against the interests of the Emperor and disturb the peaceful relations between the two empires that continued for most of the 5th century. As Lazar Parpec'i informs us, in the year 450 the rebels around Vardan Mamikonean appealed for help to the princes under Roman suzerainty as well as to the Emperor, but as the empire declined the Armenians' request, the Satraps had to obey.41

The Aristocratic Houses of Armenia Interior

The noble houses in the western part of Armenia, henceforth called Armenia interior, in Roman documents42 were in a similar situation, but less successful in the preservation of their status. When Arsaces established himself as Armenian king in the western part of the country under Roman suzerainty in 387,43 he and his descendants could have founded an autonomous hereditary kingship in a way similar to the Satrapies. But Procopius tells us:

Arsaces meanwhile still feared the hostility of the Persians and of his brother and resigned his own kingship in favour of the Emperor Theodosius (II according to Procopius), on certain conditions which I have described in the Books on the Wars. And for a time the territory of the Armenians was fought over by the Romans and the Persians, but at length they reached an agreement that the Persians should hold the portion of Tigranes and the Romans that of Arsaces. On these conditions a truce was agreed upon by both
sides and thereafter the Roman Emperor always appointed a ruler (archon) for the Armenians, whomever he wished and whenever he wished. And they used to call this ruler even to my time the Count of Armenia (in Greek: komes Armenias).  

The exact chronology of these developments is still unclear, as Procopius seems to confuse Theodosius I with his grandson Theodosius II. Movses Xorenac’i even claims that Emperor Theodosius I first appointed an Armenian noble named Gazavon as “presiding prince” of the Roman sector and that he and his successors then allowed the kings of the Persian sector to rule also over the western part of the country, which may seem improbable at first glance. According to Movses Xorenac’i, the Emperor after the death of Aršak “entrusted” Xosrov (IV), the king of the eastern part of Armenia, with the “Greek sector of Armenia” according to his request. In return, Xosrov promised to pay tribute. Emperor Arcadius also “entrusted” Xosrov’s successor Vramsapuh with the Roman part of Armenia, for which the king would pay tribute to Arcadius. Only under Emperor Theodosius II (408-450) this arrangement would end; since then the Emperor “held (his sector of Armenia) himself through governors.” But such “multiple layers of authority” and loyalty were not uncommon, as we have seen, and were even created through agreement of the great powers. According to Movses Kalankatuac’i, prince Varaz-Trdat of Albania (Aluank’) “paid tribute to three nations — the Khazars, the Arabs and the Romans” ca. 686/687, Emperor and Caliph had concluded a treaty providing for the division of the tribute paid by the subcaucasian states. And the first Bagratuni King Asot as well as his son Smbat were prepared to accept a crown from the Caliph as well as from the Emperor (see endnotes 147 and 180). The dating of the end of this arrangement in the time of Theodosius II by Xorenac’i would also be consistent with the information provided by Procopius as well as the fact that under this Emperor, Roman power received a firm power basis in Armenia interior with the foundation of Theodosiopolis in the district of Karin. 

Since then, “the Roman Emperor always appointed an archon for the Armenians, whomever he wished and whenever he wished.” We do not know the responsibilities of this office of Comes Armeniae, as we only find it in official documents at the point of its abolition. But even if it was commonly entrusted to one of the indigenous aristocrats (which is possible, see endnote 57), the differences to the hereditary status of the Satrapies are obvious. Such, the Aršakuni lost their throne in the Roman as well as Persian sector, but were able to preserve a privileged status in Armenia interior, if we are to trust Procopius, who claims to reproduce a speech some fugitive Arsacid princes held in front of the Persian Great King:

Arsaces, the last king of our ancestors, abdicated his throne willingly in favour of Theodosius, the Roman Emperor, on condition that all who should belong to his family (genos) through all time should live unhampered in every respect, and in particular should in no case be subject to taxation. And we have preserved the agreement, until you, the Persians, made this much-vaunted treaty (of 532), which, as we think, one would not err in calling a sort of common destruction.

This passage indicates not only a freedom from taxation, but also a hereditary status of the royal family, since an “unhampered life” for an Armenian noble house would have included the possibility to pass on its possessions and claims on various districts according to its customs. That the Arsacids had some power bases at their disposal becomes clear from their reaction to the new provincial regime introduced in 536 — the recently installed governor Akakios, who had imposed a tax of 400 pounds of gold on the noble houses, was killed. The Arsacids, namely John and his son Artabanes, took the lead in a rebellion and were able to muster a number of troops, among them heavy cavalry, against which the Emperor had to dispatch his magister militum praesentalis Sittas, who eventually also lost his life.

During this rebellion, the Arsacids cooperated with another noble house, the genos of the Aspetianoi, as Procopius calls them; this would be the family of the Bagratuni, who had had a hereditary claim on the office of aspet at the Aršakuni-court. They also were numerous and contributed to the military power of the rebels.

Beside the Aršakuni and the Bagratuni we also find the third famous noble house of this period in Roman Armenia, as we learn from Elišē:

He (Vasak Siwnik) wrote an epistle to the land of the Greeks, falsely confusing matters for them; it was addressed to a man called Vask, one of those Mamikoneans who were in service to the Greeks. In
this time of trouble he was the sparapet of Lower Armenia (storin Hayoc’) and faithful to the Roman army on the Persian border, but in his actions was beyond the pale of God’s religion. The former Vasak found this latter Vasak to be an accomplice in the great crimes in which they both united. He wrote and pretended continuously that all the Armenians were united behind him. The furtive Vasak had his letter taken to the Emperor’s capital secretly with caution, so that he estranged the minds of the holy bishops from them (the Armenians) and caused all the Greek forces to doubt the covenant.56

We are not only informed about the Mamikoneans living under Roman rule in “Lower Armenia,” which most probably can be identified with the territory of Armenia interior, but also that one of them “was the sparapet” of this region. It is unclear what the matching term of this office would be in Roman terminology, but it seems possible to identify the sparapet storin Hayoc’ with the Comes Armeniae. If this is the case and the Comes Armeniae was normally chosen among the local aristocrats, then his status could be compared with that of the Satraps after the abolition of their hereditary status in 488.

Also the first governors of Armenia interior as province were recruited among the Armenian aristocracy, as Procopius tells us:

That Symeones (a Persarmenian aristocrat) who had given (the fortress of) Pharanqion into the hands of the Romans persuaded the Emperor Justinian (...) to present him with certain villages of Armenia. And becoming master of these places, he was plotted against and murdered by those who had formerly possessed them. (...) And when the Emperor heard this, he gave over the villages to Amazaspes, the nephew of Symeones, and appointed him archon of the Armenians. This Amazaspes, as time went on, was denounced to the Emperor Justinian by one of his friends, Akakios by name, on the ground that he was abusing the Armenians and wished to give over to the Persians Theodosiopolis and certain other fortresses. After telling this, Akakios, by the Emperor’s will, slew Amazaspes treacherously, and himself secured the archie over the Armenians by the gift of the Emperor.57

Akakios, as mentioned above, was appointed as governor of the newly created province of Armenia interior (or Armenia prima) in 536, as we also know from Justinian’s Novella XXXI on the reorganization of Roman Armenia and the creation of four Armenian provinces (including Armenia interior and the Satrapies) and his Novella, “That the Armenians should follow Roman laws in all ways” addressed directly to “the most magnificent Akakios, Proconsul of Armenia” on March 18th, 536.58 Less clear is the meaning of archon of the Armenians, the office Amazaspes received from the Emperor; Adontz expressed the opinion that Amazaspes was already appointed governor of the province of Armenia interior in 532.59 This seems a fair enough guess since, although Procopius uses the same term for the office of the Comes Armeniae (see endnote 44), we know from the law about the installation of the magister militum per Armeniam, Pontem Polemoniacum et gentes in 528, that “the comes Armeniae” was “abolished altogether.”60 This appointment of Armenian noblemen as governors of the new province could be interpreted as concession to the special situation in this region, still dominated by the powerful aristocratic houses. The integration of indigenous Armenians in the new administrative structures made sense, as also Malalas indicates concerning the new magister militum per Armeniam:

Sittas enrolled indigenous scriiniarii and made them his own military scriiniarii in accord with an imperial rescript, having requested the Emperor to enrol natives since they knew the regions of Armenia.61

But as governors of the province of Armenia interior, Justinian did not appoint members of an indigenous noble house, but of a family, which had crossed the border from Persarmenia during the previous war (see endnote 57) and whose possessions and rank depended completely on the Emperor. The native Armenians, as we have seen, reacted with violence; Symeones was murdered as well as Akakios. The transformation of Armenia interior into a province led to rebellion, especially after the introduction of a new tax regime and the Roman law system; in an edict “Concerning the order of inheritance among the Armenians” (De Armeniorum successione, 535) and in the Novella XXI (De Armeniis ut ipsi per omnia sequantur romanorum leges, 536), Emperor Justinian tried to apply the Roman law on the whole of Roman Armenia, “desiring that the land of the Armenians should prosper altogether and should differ in no way from our realm.”62
We hear Procopius' words from the mouth of the fugitive Arsacids at the Sasanian court, but they may as well reflect the opinion of the Armenians; they complain that Justinian has turned everything in the world upside down and wrought complete confusion. (...) For what thing which was before forbidden has he not done? Or what thing which was well established has he not disturbed? Did he not ordain for us the payment of a tax which did not exist before, and has he not enslaved our neighbours, the Tzani, who were autonomous, and has he not set over the king of the wretched Lazi a Roman magistrate? – an act neither in keeping with the natural order of things nor very easy to explain in words.

As we know, the Arsacids later crossed again the border to the Roman Empire and were integrated in the Emperor's army; especially Artabanes fought in Africa and Italy and became a Byzantine war hero. Also other members of the former royal family lived throughout the empire; one of these named Arsaces conspired against Justinian, attempting to enthrone the Emperor's nephew Germanius and his sons. Trying to convince Artabanes to join the plot, Arsaces explained to him what Artabanes had lost because of Justinian's rule:

his fatherland was kept under strictest guard and exhausted by unwonted taxes, his father had been slain on the pretext of a treaty and covenant, and his whole family had been enslaved and was kept scattered to every corner of the Roman empire.

The Satrapies and Armenia Interior as a Test Area for the Empire's Politics

The example of the Satrapies and Armenia interior demonstrates what a long Roman control of Armenian territory could imply for the aristocratic houses: the gradual reduction of autonomy, the installation of military and administrative structures, the displacement of the noble families from the region and their integration into the empire's elite were the crucial steps of the integration of Western Armenia into the empire as a province. This modus operandi could be applied by the empire also in following centuries vis-à-vis the noble houses of Armenia if the empire had the opportunity to win the upper hand in the struggle for the control of the country for a longer time, but it was not able to do so.

After the restoration of Xusro II on the Sasanian throne with the help of Emperor Maurice, Byzantium in 591 gained control over most of former Persarmenia up to a line near Dvin. The Emperor, eager to regain control over the Balkans, transferred many troops from the East to Thrace and also tried to recruit soldiers among the Armenians. Various aristocrats, convinced by means of promises and presents or of force, marched with their troops to Constantinople, presented themselves to the Emperor, and then fought against the Avars and Slavs. Some nobles reacted with rebellion, but we do not find any leading members of one of the great houses among the insurgents. On the contrary, Müsel Mamikonean fought and died in Thrace, while his kinsman Hamazasp Mamikonean took part in the persecution of the rebels under Byzantine command. It is hard to say what the long-term targets of the Emperor were. In the history attributed to Sebōs we find, as we have seen, an Armenian interpretation of the empire's policy in the form of the letter allegedly written by Maurice to Xusro II (see endnote 5).

Sebōs also informs us that in the year 602 the Emperor ordered the resettlement of 30,000 households from Armenia in Thrace. And Yovhannēs Drasyanakertc'i in the 10th century even describes—in a somehow confused manner—a system of provinces for the whole area of Armenia. It may have been the Emperor's aim to integrate all Armenian areas as provinces in the empire, but in 602 he lost his throne and his life in a military coup; in the following war with Persia, Byzantium lost control over Armenia. Considering the long process of integration of the western parts into the empire, a decade was too short a period of time to establish a full provincial administration that could compete with the traditional power of the noble houses.

The same can be said about the second time of the Byzantine predominance in Armenia after Heraclius's victory over the Sasanians in 628. The Arab expansion and the defeat of the Byzantines at Yarmuk in 636 led to an arrangement with the nazarars and the installation of the first presiding prince of Armenia (see endnote 130). Byzantine influence decreased and increased in the following decades parallel to the waves of internal wars in the Caliphate, but at the beginning of the 8th century, Arab control over Armenia east of the Euphrates (including
the former Satrapies and Armenia interior with Theodosiupolis) could not be challenged by the Empire any more. Likewise, the empire had lost most of its former provincial territory in Western Armenia.72

Not until the gradual process of annexation of the various Armenian princedoms and kingdoms in the third time of Byzantine hegemony over Armenia in the 10th and 11th centuries, which is beyond the scope of this paper, the empire could use methods similar to those we have observed in the Satrapies and Armenia interior.73

Defectors and Deserters — The Empire and Armenian Aristocrats Beyond Its Borders

As we have seen in the case of Atat Xo’xuni, crossing the border into or out of the empire and entering or leaving the service (catayut’ iwn) of the Emperor was an option an Armenian aristocrat could choose several times. The motivations behind such a step could be different—some aristocrats hoped for certain benefits, others would have no other choice. The initiative for a change in the catayut’ iwn could come from the respective nobleman as well as from an imperial authority trying to persuade a retainer of the opposing great power to defect.74

We find examples for all these possibilities in our sources, beginning again with Procopius, who talks about the borderland of Armenia interior and Persian Armenia:

And this canon for about the space of a three days’ journey is tributary to the Romans, but from there begins the territory of Persarmenia; and here is the gold-mine which, with the permission of Cabades, was worked by one of the natives, Symeones by name. When this Symeones saw that both nations were actively engaged in the war, he decided to deprive Cabades of the revenue. Therefore he gave over both himself and Pharangion to the Romans, but refused to deliver over to either one the gold of the mine. And as for the Romans, they did nothing, thinking it sufficient for them that the enemy had lost the income from there, and the Persians were not able against the will of the Romans to force the inhabitants of the place to terms, because they were baffled by the difficult country.75

The willingness of the imperial authorities to grant Symeones the entire income from the gold mines, surely object of negotiations ahead of his defection, seems a fair enough motivation for changing sides. As we have seen above, Symeones would later also receive several villages in Armenia interior; material benefits played, as one would expect, a major role in the negotiations between the empire and the aristocrats willing to join it. This is also the case in another defection at this time in the same region:

At about the same time Narses and Aratius who at the beginning of this war, as I have stated above, had an encounter with Sittas and Belisarius in the land of the Persarmenians76, came together with their mother as deserters to the Romans; and the Emperor’s steward, Narses, received them (for he too happened to be a Persarmenian by birth), and he presented them with a large sum of money. When this came to the knowledge of Isaac, their youngest brother, he secretly opened negotiations with the Romans, and delivered over to them the fortress of Bolum, which lies very near the limits of Theodosiupolis. For he directed that soldiers should be concealed somewhere in the vicinity, and he received them into the fort by night, opening stealthily one small gate for them. Thus he too came to Byzantium.77

The material aspect (“a large sum of money”) is augmented with family bonds. This combination leads to the deliverance of an important fortress to the Romans—certainly a win-win-situation, and again the defection is object of previous negotiations. Elements of such negotiations and agreements can be observed in another context—here we encounter again the rebellious aristocrats of Armenia interior, against whom Justinian has dispatched the magister militum praesentalis Sittas:

First of all the (Sittas) attempted to win over some of the Armenians by persuasion and to attach them to his cause, in order that the task of overpowering the others might be attended with less difficulty and toil. And the genos called the Aspetianoi78, great in power and in numbers, was willing to join him. And they went to Sittas and begged him to give them pledges in writing that (en grammasin ta pista), if they abandoned their kinsmen in the battle and came to the Roman army, they should remain entirely free from harm, retaining their own possessions. Now Sittas was delighted and wrote to them in tablets, giving them the pledges (ta pista) just as they desired of him; he then sealed the writing and sent it to them.79
The main element of the negotiations between Sittas and the Aspetianoi are the written and sealed pledges in which the conditions of defection were laid down. These documents would bind both sides, but had the main purpose of assurance for the aristocrats delivering themselves to a powerful new lord. Unfortunate circumstances avert the conclusion of the deal between Sittas and the Armenians; in the following fights Sittas is killed, but the rebels finally have to take refuge in the Persian Empire. Later, they again switch sides:

And the Armenians who had submitted to Chosroes received pledges (ta pista) from the Romans and came with Bassaces to Byzantium.

These written pledges are the equivalent to the oaths of fidelity (erdumn, uyłt), which verified the catayut’iwn-relation between nobleman and lord according to ancient Armenian customs. As the Armenians ask for written pledges in the history of Procopius, we can assume that they knew within the Roman state system, based on script, one needed written documents to assert his claims. We find both elements—oath and documents—in an episode from the time of Emperor Maurice in the history attributed to Sebēos:

At that time another command came from the Emperor to seek out again and find from Armenia elite armed cavalry, 2,000 in number, and put them under two reliable men, and to despatch them in great haste. They sought out and chose 2,000 armed men and put these 2,000 under two reliable men: 1,000 to Sahak Mamikonean und 1,000 under the command of Smbat Bagratuni, son of Manuel. (... ) Sahak set out, brought his force to the palace, and presented himself to the king. But when Smbat reached Xaltik’, he baulked, because his force had become frightened en route, not wishing to go to that place (= Thrace) in compliance with the king’s request. The king was informed of these events. Then through letters (hrovartaks) and trustworthy messengers he promised with an oath to send him back promptly to his own country. He also promised great rewards and gifts to the troops, and in this way he cajoled them into reconciliation. They proceeded in unity and presented themselves to the king. The king fully equipped the troops and despatched them to the borders of Thrace; Smbat he sent in great honour back to the land of his own people with many gifts.

This mixture of warranties and promises (gifts, honors) is also used by a Persian official (collaborating with a Byzantine general) at this time to convince some Armenian rebels:

And they (the Byzantine and the Persian commander) confirmed this for them (the Armenian insurgents) by an oath: “You have nothing to fear from the king.” The auditor (of Vaspurakan) added: “The king of kings sent me to you, and I have brought you the treasure. You have nothing to fear from the king of kings.” And he swore an oath to them in accordance with their (the Persians) custom. (...)

The Persian auditor has to swear “an oath in accordance” with Persian customs; like the written pledges of the Romans, this oath would bind the Persian official within his political and legal system. This adaptiveness in the media of relations is attested also at the time of the Arab dominance over Armenia, after the flight of Smbat Bagratuni 705 to the Byzantine territory:

Smbat the Curopalate, moreover, left our country with his nobles and crossed over to the Greek territory, asking the king of the Greeks for a city in which to live and settle their herds. And he (the Emperor) gave them the city known as P’oyt’ in the district of the country of Egr, where they lived for six years. (...) Once appointed to his office (= governor of Armenia) (Abd ul-Aziz) wrote an edict to the Armenian nobles, persuading them to return to their own countries. He even gave them an oath in writing, according to their custom. (The nobles), having relied on his oath, captured the city where they were staying, seized its treasures and the ornaments of the churches, and returned to Armenia, dissociating themselves from the Greek Emperor.

Whereas in this case the initiative came from the Arab governor, in the year 781 the first step was taken by the Armenian naxarar Tačat Anjewaci, who intended to leave the Byzantine Empire:

Such circumstances forced (Tačat) to work his way back into the service of the Arab Caliph. The opportunity arose when the Arab army was blockaded by the Greeks, and (Tačat) asked the Arabs to hand him a written oath allowing his return to his country. In return, (Tačat) promised to free the Arab troops from the blockade and lead them to their country. Upon hearing the proposition, the Caliph gave his full and prompt approval and offered (Tačat) all he
wanted, under oath. (Taçat), thus assured of receiving the required oath, departed from the Greek territory with his entire household, and delivered the Arab troops from the hands of the Greeks.\footnote{85}

After his defection, Taçat Anjewaci is even installed as presiding prince of Armenia by the Caliph, as we will see below; if the bestowal of this honor was object of previous negotiations, we do not know.

Attempts to recruit Armenian nobles could fail, as we have seen in the case of Sittas’ negotiations with the Bagratunis. Not every nobleman was responsive to the Emperor’s promises, as T’ovma Arcruni recounts:

Gurgên (Arcruni) went to the province of Sper. At that time the prince called (Grigor) of the Bagratuni clan had surreptitiously seized (from) the Greeks the castle called Aramaneak’; (Gurgên) was received by him with splendid honour. The (Byzantine) general of the East came to wage war with the prince in order to recover the fortress, and there Gurgên demonstrated much valour in opposing the Greek army – not once but many times. With forty men he attacked a thousand, killed many of the elite Greeks and completely despoiled them, so that in his astonishment at his valour the general wrote to the Greek Emperor Michael (III) informing him about him. Then the Emperor wrote to his general in the hope that he would be able to persuade Gurgên to come to the capital to the Emperor, from whom he would receive gifts and honour and promotion in rank. Gurgên did not consent to go to the Greeks, but he did persuade Grigor to give the castle to the general and appease the Emperor.\footnote{86}

Gurgên Arcruni did not enter the service of the Emperor, but some kind of deal was closed, as we may assume, since he arranged for the restitution of the hard-fought castle to the Byzantines.

Several years later, another Gurgên from the Arcruni clan was also addressed by Emperor Michael III (842–867) to cross the border. This time, this was prevented by the official authorities of the Arab regime in Armenia:

When he (Gurgên) arrived at the city of Theodosius in the province of Karin, news of him reached the Emperor Michael, king of the Greeks, who was prompt to arrange that he proceed to him without delay, in order that he might elevate him to the great honour of consulate and decorate him with the insignia of the cross. While this plan was under consideration, two emirs (…) fell on (Gurgên), captured him, and brought him to Asot (Bagratuni) son of the sparapet.\footnote{87}

Certainly the defection of aristocrats violated the interests of the great power that controlled the country. In the peace treaty of 562, Byzantium and Persia agreed that “those who in time of peace (between the two empires) defected, or rather fled, from one to the other shall not be received, but every means shall be used to place them, even against their will, in the hands of those from whom they have fled.”\footnote{88}

But as we have seen, for the noble houses and their retainers crossing the border to the east or the west remained a prevalent option to elude a regime which they were not prepared to tolerate any longer. Their bargaining power depended on their status and relationship to the power whose sphere of influence they intended to leave.\footnote{89} A commander of a strategic important fortress near the border had more to offer than a fugitive, who barely escaped alive. But in the period under consideration, even refugees were welcome, even in high numbers, if they could provide valuable manpower for military and economic purposes. Lewond reports for the year 788:

Left without property and food, naked and barefoot, (the inhabitants of Armenia) were exposed to the horrors of famine. They left their country and fled to the Greek territory to seek refuge. The mass of the population, over twelve thousand men, women, and children, as we were told, migrated from their land under the leadership of Sapuh from the house of Amatunik’, Hamam his son, and other Armenian nobles with their cavalry. (…) As they crossed the river (Akampsis), the Greek Emperor Constantine (VI) was immediately notified. He called them unto him and gave the nobles and their cavalry high honours. (The Emperor) accommodated the bulk of the lower class people on good fertile lands.\footnote{90}

Defection and emigration could always be an option for individual aristocrats or, as we see, even for whole aristocratic houses and their retainers. The aristocracy at large had to find other methods to arrange for a regime which seemed beneficial for them.

The Emperor and the Armenian Nobility at Large

episkopotunk ’ew naxarark’ Hayoc’ - decision making without a king

The participation of the powerful aristocrats in the affairs of the kingdom can be observed since early times, as Nina Garsoian makes clear: “The
The king was forced by custom to seek the counsel of the naxarars on all important occasions. As early as A.D. 18 Tacitus observed that Zeno/Artasēs had been crowned "before the consenting nobles." The king could choose to ignore the counsel of the princes, as we see in the Buzandaran Patmut'iwnt'k:

King Pap changed his mind and turned his heart away from the king of the Greeks, and he wished to unite in love and alliance with the king of Persia. And so he began to rely on the king of Persia and he then sent him envoys concerning an alliance. He also sent envoys to the king of the Greeks (to say): "Ten cities together with Caesarea belong to me, therefore return them (to me). The city of Urhay (Edessa) was also built by my ancestors; consequently, if you do not wish to initiate a conflict, give it back, otherwise we will fight a great war." But Mušel and all the Armenian princes urgently sought to persuade the king not to break the covenant with the kingdom of the Greeks. He, however, would not listen to them and openly manifested his hostility to the king of the Greeks.

But this and other royal attempts of autarchy would normally end in catastrophe—at least according to the philo-aristocratic Armenian historians. The council of the nobles on the other side was able to "oppose the king on occasion and even met in his absence." And in times of interregnum, this council led the Armenian affairs:

And all the greatest Armenian princes assembled together, and the sparapet Mušel and the hayr-mardpet as well as all the other princes said: "What shall we do? How shall we act? Shall we avenge our king's (Pap, killed at the order of the Emperor) death or not?" Then the following decision was taken at the council and they said: "We cannot become servants of the heathen Persians or be hostile to the king of the Greeks. Neither can we carry on hostilities with both of them. Nor can we maintain ourselves without the support of one of them." Consequently, this decision was taken at the council: "What has been, has been. Let us serve the king of the Greeks. Let us make our submission to the authority of the kingdom of the Greeks, and let the kingdom of the Greeks treat us at it wills."

A more detailed description on the composition of such a council we find in the Buzandaran Patmut'iwnt'k for the time of interregnum after the capture of King Tiran by the Persians:

Again, the aristocrats come together, reach a decision and take the initiative in the relations to the neighboring powers. As the aristocracy was able to carry on the foreign affairs on their own during the time of monarchy, they did so even more after its abolition in 428. Elise states explicitly: "the ruling power (t'agaworut'iwnt) was transferred to the Armenian naxarars."

The first occasion for direct negotiations between the aristocracy of Persarmenia and the empire after the end of the Aršakuni-monarchy was the attempt of the rebellious princes around the marzpan Vasak of Siwnik' (later to become the "arch-traitor" of the story) and Vardan Mamikonean to obtain the Emperor's support against the Persians. The aristocrats came together and decided to initiate a (unsuccessful) diplomatic mission:

(They) wrote letters to the Emperor and to all the nobles of the Greek court, and also to other princes and prefects: to the bdeasx of Aljnik", to the prince of Angel-tun, to Cop'k' and Hašean'k' and Ekeleac", and to the other princes of every region, and to the great general of Antioch. 'They sealed all these letters, first the prince of Siwnik', Vasak himself, with his own ring, and then all the Armenian magnates. 'They equipped for the journey to Greek territory the prince of the house of the Amatunik', Vahan, as being a thoughtful and prudent man; and the saintly young noble Hmayeak, brother of the blessed Armenian general Vardan, from the family of the
Mamikonean’; and the blessed Merhužan, brother of the saintly Alan, from the family of the Arcrunik’. Entrusting the letters to them, Vasak the prince of Siwnik’ and all the nobles of Armenia despatched them to the Emperor and to all the other Armenian princes mentioned above.\(^\text{98}\)

Also Efîše describes this mission:

Then they sent in haste one of the great princes of the Gnuni family, Atom, to the West in order to reveal all these evil plans of the malicious king of the East, and at the same time to describe their own brave valour, which they had proved by deeds – by trampling on the fearful order (of Yazkert) and inflicting great slaughter on the magi – and to seek from him (the Emperor of the West) aid and support, even entering his service (ca’ayut’iwn) should he so wish.\(^\text{99}\)

As especially Efîše informs us, in this case not only one individual aristocrat proposed to enter the Emperor’s ca’ayut’iwn, but the Persarmenian nobility at large. Emperor Marcian, who succeeded to the throne after the death of Theodosius II in 450, refused this proposal in order to avoid a war with the Persians.\(^\text{100}\) For the same cause, Emperor Anastasius declined an Armenian appeal for help in 491.\(^\text{101}\)

Only Emperor Justin II was prepared to risk a war with the Sasanian Empire when he accepted the Armenians’ offer in 570, as we learn from the history attributed to Sebços:

Then in the 41\(^{\text{st}}\) year of the reign of Khosrov, son of Kawat, Vardan rebelled and rejected submission to Persian rule in unison with all the Armenians. They killed the marzpan Suren, taking him by surprise in the city of Dvin, seized much booty, and turned their allegiance (ca’ayut’iwn) to the Greeks. (…) Then the Greek king (Justin II) made an oath with the Armenians and confirmed the same pact (ugt) which had been made between the two kings – the blessed Trdat and Constantine.\(^\text{102}\) He gave them an imperial army in support. When they had received the army, they attacked the city of Dwin; after a siege the destroyed it from top to bottom, and expelled the Persian troops who were stationed in it.\(^\text{103}\)

The conclusion of a ca’ayut’iwn-relationship between the Emperor and the Armenian nobility was affirmed through an oath as in the case of single nobles who entered Emperor Justin’s service. This is confirmed in other sources, which are even more detailed on the negotiations between Justin II and the Armenian insurgents:

They begged to become subject to the Romans, in order that they might freely perform the honours (due) to God without anyone hindering (them). When the Emperor had admitted (their overtures) and certain points had been agreed by the Emperor in writing and guaranteed by solemn oaths, the Armenians massacred their governors; and with their whole army, bringing (with them) their neighbours, both of kindred and foreign race, they united themselves to the Roman empire, Vardan having a precedence among them by birth, dignity and experience in wars.\(^\text{104}\)

Evagrius mentions the combination of written pledges and oath which we already have observed in the case of single defectors. Also, Menander Protector mentions that Emperor Justin II swore to bring Armenia under its rule and, if this would fail, not to deliver the Armenian rebels to the Sasanians.\(^\text{105}\) As we know from the accounts of the following negotiations between Byzantium and Persia, the Emperor and his successors felt bound to this oath and declined the Persian demands for the delivery of the fugitive Armenians, although the peace treaty of 562 had forbidden the reception of defectors (see endnote 88).\(^\text{106}\)

This is of course an interesting example for an Byzantine Emperor binding himself by taking “solemn oaths” to the Armenians. As this oath is mentioned also in the Greek sources, we do not have to fear to be subject to an exclusively Armenian interpretation of the relationship between Emperor and aristocrats, and it gives credit to other oath-takings of Byzantine Emperors mentioned in Armenian sources. The late Angeliki Laiou had stated:

Bilateral, synallagmatic relations, which linked the Emperor and his subjects, or a subset of them, upon a basis of mutual obligations, have been connected to the rise of quasi-feudal relations in the Byzantine Empire. The matter is relatively clear insofar as the Palaiologian period is concerned. For the earlier period, the existence of bilateral, synallagmatic, arrangements has been admitted for the Treaty of Devol, between Alexios I and Bohemond (1108), while it was also posited by certain western medieval sources for the arrangements between Alexios I and the participants of the First Crusade, an issue that remains debatable. It is certainly easier to trace this matter in relations between Byzantium and foreign powers than in the relations between the Emperor and his own subjects. (…) Until the second half of the
eleventh century, Emperors took oaths to individuals very rarely, and in special circumstances, usually in order to give guarantees to unsuccessful rebels. (...) However, the very fact that an Emperor would agree to take “awful oaths” to a private individual to confirm a treaty may be connected to the currency that oaths and sworn associations had received in the second half of the 11th century, and the legitimacy or quasi-legitimacy they had acquired.  

Laiou than traces back such agreements of Emperors to the 10th and 11th centuries, when the Emperors were “forced to contract bilateral agreements with his aristocratic subjects, in which visible signs, including the oath and symbols of his engagement (perhaps the very cross upon which the oath was taken) were a condition of the arrangement.” We can observe reciprocal oath-taking in earlier centuries between the Emperor and potentates with whom he was forced to deal more or less on eye-level, especially the Persian King or the Arab Caliph. On these occasions, the Emperor was also prepared to accept a “heathen” form of oath by his opponent respectively more often by his opponent’s envoys. More common were of course oaths taken by subjects of the Emperor to serve him faithfully. But these did not include reciprocal oaths as were characteristic for the establishment of *catayat wyrn* between lord and retainer (see endnote 23). Thus, the acceptance of the service of an Armenian aristocrat or the aristocracy at large would be one of the “very rare” occasions when the Byzantine Emperor was prepared to take an oath, complying with the traditions (as in his relations with foreign rulers) of a valuable retainer or ally.

As Byzantium gained predominance in the region after the year 591, such a convention of the leading men of Armenia could also be initiated by the Emperor:

He (Emperor Maurice) further commanded all the cavalry from Armenia to assemble, and the chief nobles, (and those) who were experienced and capable of standing firm and fighting in battle in the line of spearmen. He also ordered other forces to be brought from the land of Armenia in great numbers, all of them willing and of elite stature; to be formed into battalions and that, equipped with arms, they should all cross to the land of Thrace against the enemy, and Muşel Mamikonean as their general.

In the second half of the 6th century after the difference in dogma had become obvious, such initiatives were often connected with imperial attempts to achieve theological conformity. In 633, Emperor Heraclius ordered all bishops, vardapets, and noblemen to gather in *Theodosiupolis* for a synod on the council of Chalcedon. His grandson, Constans II, undertook a similar initiative in 649:

But that rebellious dragon (= Satan) did not delay. Desiring through his deceit to fight with God, he travailed to raise persecutions in the churches of the land of Armenia. For in the years of king Constans, grandson of Heraclius, he brought into play his wicked guile, making the Greek troops (zeors Yunac’) in Armenia his accomplices, since the Armenians never did receive the Romans (ziHòrì; also a synonym for the adherents of Chalcedon) in communion in the body and blood of the Lord. So they wrote a complaint to Constans, the Greek king and to the patriarch: “We are considered as impious in this country, because they reckon the council of Chalcedon and the Tome of Leo to be an insult to Jesus Christ, and they anathematize them.” Then the king, with the patriarch, gave a command, and they wrote an edict to the Armenians that they should effect a union of faith with Rome and should not scorn the council and that Tome. There was a man there from the province of Bagrewand, from the village of Bagawan, who was learned in the art of philosophy, called Dawit’. He ordered him to be sent to Armenia, so that they might abandon their opposition. All the bishops and nobles of Armenia (episkopotunk’ ew naxarark’ Hayoc’) gathered at Dvin in the presence of the Christ-loving Catholics Nersës and the pious Armenian general T’ëodoros, lord of Rûtunik’. They saw the king’s orders and heard the arguments of the philosopher, who upheld the doctrine of the Trinity with the distinction according to Leo’s Tome. When they had heard it, they did not agree to change the true teaching of St Gregory to conform with the Tome of Leo. They all decided to make a response to the letter.

The Emperor’s efforts were a failure, and the empire’s influence dwindled due to the Muslim inroads. In 652/653, Constans II faced the danger of Armenia’s defection to the Arabs; once again, he tried to convocate Armenia’s aristocracy:

In this manner the servant of Anti-Christ split them away from the Romans. For although the Emperor wrote many intercessions and supplications to them and summoned them to himself, they did not wish to heed him. Then he said: “I am coming to the city of Karin (= *Theodosiupolis*). Do you come to me?” Or: “I am coming to you, and I shall give you a subsidy as assistance; and we shall decide together what is best to do.” Yet even so they did not wish to heed him.
This notable imperial offer to take share in decision making was of no avail; the modality of change of allegiance from the Emperor to the Arabs was the same as on earlier occasions: negotiations, covenant, and oath.

In the same year the Armenians rebelled and removed themselves from (allegiance to) the Greek kingdom and submitted to the king of Ismael. T'edoros, lord of Štunik’, with all the Armenian princes made a pact with death and contracted an alliance with hell, abandoning the divine covenant. Now the prince of Ismael spoke with them and said: “Let this be the pact of treaty between me and you for as many years as you may wish. I shall not take tribute from you for a three-year period. Then you will pay (tribute) with an oath, as much as you may wish. You will keep in your country 15,000 cavalry, and provide sustenance from your country; and I shall reckon it in the royal tax. I shall not request cavalry for Syria; but wherever else I command they shall be ready for duty. I shall not send amirs to (your) fortresses, nor an Arab army – neither many, nor even down to a single cavalryman.

An enemy shall not enter Armenia; and if the Romans attack you I shall send you troops in support, as many as you may wish. I swear by the great God that I shall not be false.”

The Armenian noble’s catayut’iwn had proved its flexibility in the face of a changing distribution of power once more. In Movses Kalankatuac’i we even find a very pragmatic justification for such a defection (here of Albania’s prince Juanščer from Byzantium to the Caliphate), dressed in an apocalyptic vision of the dwindling of Roman power:

(...) for as the multitude of waters flood the earth with their furious waves, so the kings of the Romans with their massed armies spread their multitudes thickly over the entire world. Now, however, the exalted power of that throne, thus dissipated, passed away, so that the forests of men in its control were caught in the shadow of that which choked like Gideon’s briers and which the scions of the tyrants, stifled among them, could not shift the least degree. When the ram of the west saw that the Lord had withdrawn his aid from his sword and that the savage wild boar grew fierce and ground his horn, he interpreted this to be the fulfilment of the time foretold by the prophecy and promise to Abraham: “the hands of Ishmael will be against all men, and the hand of all men against him” (Gen. 16, 12) and “before him, a devouring flame, and behind him, a burning flame” (Joel 2, 3). Then the Emperor of the Romans (kayser Hor̄omac’) took the remnants of his army and hastened across sea and passed within the borders of the distant isles of the west. (...) Seeing the Emperor of the Romans rendered powerless and weak by the king of the south, who consumed his populous markets and towns like a flame, the great prince of the east Juanščer was greatly concerned for his kingdom. (...) He therefore undertook to submit to the yoke of vassalage of the king of the south (= the Caliph).  

This vision can actually be connected with a concrete event, namely the year 662, when Constans II transferred his residence from Constantinople to the West and took personal charge of the territories in Sicily and Italy.  

Unity and discord in the nobility

Up to this point, we have seen the Armenian nobility acting in unity. In 570, according to Sebeos, Vardan Mamikonian started a rebellion against the Persian marşpanin “unity with all Armenians” (miabanut’iwn amenayn hayastaneawk’), and together they declared their catayut’iwn to the Emperor. A description of the ideal state of miabanut’iwn has been given the history of T’ovma Arcruni, together with the insinuation of the decline of this unity and its consequences:

For the Armenian princes with their hosts of knights and troops were still living in unison and harmony and concord, though in secret they had suspicions of treachery. But when discord began to insinuate itself within that unity, they grace of the divine power departed and withdrew. Concerted plans were disregarded in combat and in other matters affecting the administration of the country. (...) They sent letters and messengers to the Caliph secretly from each other.

Discord (or amniabanut’iwn) is a far more prominent motif in the history attributed to Sebėos (and earlier Armenian historiography); it is the reason of the failure of various rebellions against the empire and the Sasanians. It also describes the state that prevailed in Armenia on the eve of the first Arab invasion. The history of Lewond offers a
description of disunity on two occasions of Armenian rebellion against the Arabs; in both cases it is Prince Ašot from the house of Bagratuni who tries to convince the other aristocrats not to start an uprising.

While war among (the Arabs) prolonged, all the nobles of our country decided to terminate and withdraw their obedience to the Arabs by revolting against them. This advice was given them by Grigor, who was from the house of the Mamikonean, with the insidious intent of deposing Ašot from his princedom. Thus all the Armenian nobles came to Prince Ašot and forced him to give his consent to the useless plan. When Prince (Ašot) realized that the nobles and their cavalry were in agreement with each other and had gone astray following the useless plan. When Prince (Ašot) realized that the nobles and their cavalry were in agreement with each other and had gone astray following the useless plan, he began to hesitate. He then called upon his naxarars one by one and beseeched them earnestly not to become involved in such an act of iniquity. (...) The Armenian nobles, however, were unwilling to accept such prudent advice. Rather, they withstood and said: "If you do not agree with our thinking, not one of your troops shall remain with you. We can no longer take the torment that has befallen our land of Armenia." Then Prince Ašot had to consent, albeit unwillingly, to join Grigor and the other nobles and make together a pledge of oath through the mediation of the dominical cross, that they shall sincerely keep their bond of unity. (...) They particularly counted on the help of the troops of the king of the Greeks which were located in the province of Pontus, because there was a treaty of alliance between them by the orders of Emperor Constantine (V). 125

The Mamikoneans use the enragement against the Arab rule as a vehicle to diminish the power of the rivaling Bagratuni clan, whose head at the same time is the presiding prince of Armenia. But like the Armenian kings in earlier times, the leading aristocrat is unable to oppose the majority of the aristocracy, as it becomes obvious from a later episode shortly before the revolt of 774/775:

Now all the Armenian nobles assembled at a certain place and made an oath to each other, agreeing with a solemn vow to live and die together. The number of those who assembled together (reached) about five thousand men, due to the numerous ramiks who joined their troops. (...) Ašot son of Prince Sahak from the house of the Bagratids, did not take part in this dangerous enterprise, because he was full of wisdom and prudence. On the contrary, he kept counselling the rest to abandon the perilous enterprise which stemmed from the perverse instigation of the frenzied monk, and think of their own security as well as that of their families. He told them: "(...) Even the Roman Empire was unable to raise its hand against this dragon (= the Arabs), and it still continues to tremble before it and has not dared to act against the dominical command. I do not think you are unaware of the full power, the personal courage of the Emperor of the Greeks (arkay Yunac’), as well as the great number of his troops and ammunition. And yet even he did not think of delivering the land of Armenia from its (the dragon's) hands. (I am referring to) Constantine (V), son of Leo (III), who in one day, while wrestling with fierce beasts, killed the lion as if he were killing goats. If (Constantine) himself, being so powerful, was obviously subdued by the presence of the pernicious beast which ravages the world, on whom are you relying? (...) you will be forced to flee from your land with your entire households (...) and live under the foreign yoke of the king of Greeks." They did not listen to this useful advice. On the contrary, the disregarded it as words of treason. (...) In both cases anmiabanut’iwn did not only restrict the chances of collective action of the Armenian aristocracy, but also the stability of foreign domination; the representative installed by the Arab overlord was not able to enforce allegiance to the suzerain. Discord was a factor every power had to count with in its relations with Armenia in this period.

Instead of a King? The Installation of a Presiding Prince

One of the main elements of a great power’s suzerainty over Armenia in the period under consideration was the appointment of a representative of the Great King, Emperor or Caliph, who should enforce the suzerain’s interests vis-à-vis the naxarars. In the time of Persian predominance this would be the marzpans, the first of whom we already encounter before the kingdom’s partition:

After this, Queen Zarmanduxt and the sparapet Manüel (Mamikonean) sent Garjoyl maľğaz with many Armenian naxarars as well as letters-patent, gifts, and presents to the king of Persia (to say) that they would give him their hand, submit to him, serve him faithfully, and hand the Armenian realm over to him. (...) And he
(the Persian king) sent with him to the land of Armenia the Persian
Suren, one of his illustrious naxarars, and with him ten thousand
armour-clad horsemen, so that the Suren might go to the support
of the commander-in-chief Manuël in the land of Armenia, and
protect Queen Zarmanduxt from (her) enemies. (...) They handed
the realm of Armenia over to the Suren and submitted to the
commands of the king of Persia. And it was laid down that the king
of Persia should be given tribute, gifts, and offerings from the realm
of Armenia. Likewise, (they granted) to the marzpan Suren has
(income from land tax) and kosik (salary), as well as the necessary
maintenance, and supplies and food for the ten thousand (men)
according to their needs. And they whole-heartedly accepted the
king of Persia as their supporter and lord, and served him.127

The Armenians are obliged to accept the deployment of Sasanian
troops in their country, to pay tribute to the Persian king and to arrange
for the maintenance of these troops as well as their commander, the
marzpan Suren; this was surely a severe limitation of the aristocracy's
freedom of action. After the abolition of the monarchy in 428, the
presence of a marzpan in Armenia became permanent.128 But his power
was constrained by the same factors as the power of the former kings,
mainly the (un)willingness of the nobility to cooperate. Of course, he
could send for the superior forces of his overlord; but if the imperial
center was inept to intervene in Armenia because of its commitment
on other borders, it was often willing to accept a new arrangement.
This was the case after the disastrous defeat of Great King Peroz against
the Hephthalites in 484. His successor did not only conclude a peace
agreement with the Armenian rebels around Vahan Mamikonean
and acknowledged his hereditary claim on the office of sparapet, but
appointed Vahan marzpan in 485. Hence Vahan Mamikonean now
combined the highest-ranking office of the old Arsakuni monarchy
with that of representative of the Great King in Armenia, indeed a very
powerful position.129

A similar situation occurred during the second period of Byzantine
domination over entire Armenia in the 7th century. While in 636 the
empire faced the first wave of the Arab invasions in Syria, a part of the
Armenian nobility under the leadership of Dawit’ Sahařuni rebelled
against the Byzantine general in the country, another Armenian
aristocrat named Mžêz Gnuni. After the defeat against the Arabs in the
battle of Yarmuk, Emperor Heraclius had to come to terms with the
Armenians:

Then the king, at the request of the princes, made him (Dawit’
Sahařuni) prince (išan) over all the territories (of Armenia),
bestowed on him the title of kuropalates, and confirmed him in his
service. He held the office for three years with great magnificence;
then, discredited by his soldiers, he was expelled. Since all the
nobles were disunited, they ruined this land of Armenia.130

As the Persians had done in 485, Heraclius appointed an indigenous
Armenian nobleman as his representative in the country and bestowed
on him the high ranks of kuropalates and patrikios, as an inscription
on the church of Mren attests. In this inscription Dawit’ Sahařuni also
bears the title of sparapet of Armenia (and Syria), which makes the
similarities to Vahan Mamikonean's position even stronger.131 Thus,
Dawit’ Sahařuni became the first in a long row of išans of Armenia,
which would continue until the last of them became the first king of
the new Armenian monarchy. Sebós states clearly that the initiative
for Dawit’ Sahařuni’s appointment came from the Armenian princes;
accepting their proposal, Heraclius could safeguard their catayut' iwn.
Sahařuni had been actually an unlikely candidate for such a position
of a primus inter pares, since he did not come from one of the leading
houses of the country,132 and owed his momentous popularity to his
successes in the rebellion against Gnuni. Therefore, it does not seem
astonishing that he failed in keeping the prince's allegiance for long;
after three years, he lost his position due to the aristocrats’ opposition:

In the same period of time, the Emperor Heraclius made Dawit’
Saharuni kuropalates and set him up as prince of Armenia. The
latter ruled for three years with wisdom, great distinction and
much success. The magnificent church in the komopolis of Mren
was built at his order. But after three years, being dishonoured by
the naxarars and his forces, he was persecuted.133

Also the next leading figure, T’čodoros ţštuni, owed his position not to
his house's power, but to his military deeds in the defense against the
first Arab inroads to Armenia.134 This time, it was the Catholicos of the
country who arranged for T’čodoros’ recognition by the Emperor:
On account of this battle a command came from the Emperor (bestowing) the command of the army on T’ëodoros, lord of Rštunik’, with the rank of patrik. This all was brought about through the Catholicos Nersès, who in that same year succeeded to the throne of the Catholicosate in the place of the Catholicos Ezr.135

The great patriarch Nersès requested the authorization of the Emperor Constantine and set up T’eodoros, lord of Rštunik’, as strategos of Armenia.136

Catholicos Nersès is also the leading figure in the negotiations between the Emperor Constans II, the Armenian princes, and the fugitive Varaztiroc’ Bagratuni, who was appointed ışyan of Armenia ca. 646:

Then the Greek general T’ëodoros, with (the support of) the princes of the army and the nobles of Armenia, ordered the Catholicos Nersès to be sent to the asp et (=Varaztiroc’ Bagratuni), to bring him an oath of good faith that they would request for him the rank of prince of the country, and that his wife and children be brought to him. The Catholicos went and confirmed the oath with him that he would not travel anywhere else. Then he returned; and they wrote to king Constans (asking him) to do what he had promised in accordance with the oath. For the aspet had written to the king as follows: “I am your servant, and I am not at all abandoning your service. But because some people told me: “You are to return whence you came (i.e., back to exile in Africa)”, therefore I was frightened and fled. But now, if you reckon me worthy, I shall serve loyally and live and die for your Piety.’ Then king Constans ordered him to be made kuropalates and to be given a crown of that rank and the rank of prince of Armenia. And he ordered his wife and children to be sent with great éclat; and he had taken to him silver cushions with other magnificent gifts. Now while the edict giving him the rank of kuropalates was on its way, suddenly an illness struck him and he died. They took his body and brought it for burial beside his father in Darinwkn’. The king appointed his elder son, whose name was Smbat, to the rank of his father, giving him his ancestral position of tanutër and aspet, and he made him drungar of his army. He gave him a wife from the house of the Arsacids, from among his own relatives, and sent him to the camp to his army.137

Once more, the initiative for the appointment of a “prince of the country” comes from the aristocratic elite of Armenia, represented by the Catholicos. The act of appointment lies with the Emperor, who simultaneously integrates the new prince in the hierarchy of the imperial court by bestowing on him a high rank. This bestowal was normally the content of an elaborate imperial charter (codicillus), handed over in a special ceremony (see below). In the case of Varaztiroc’ Bagratuni, the consignee did not live to receive the Emperor’s diplom. Then the Emperor “appointed his elder son, whose name was Smbat, to the rank of his father, giving him his ancestral position of tanutër and aspet, and he made him drungar of his army.” Actually, Smbat Bagratuni did not receive the rank of his father, but in accordance with the Armenian conventions the hereditary position of tanutër (head of his clan) and the hereditary office of aspet, and the more modest Byzantine title of drungarios. Smbat could not put any hereditary claim on the position of ışyan of Armenia or the higher rank of kuropalates. Their bestowal depended on the Emperor, who from his part would negotiate (in most cases) for such an appointment with the leading groups of Armenia.

Since the appointment of the first princes of Armenia, an agreement about allegiance to the Emperor normally included the appointment or recognition of a prince of the country. Sebôs describes the situation at the time of the first civil war in the Caliphate in the year 656:

In the same year the Armenians abandoned their submission to the Ismaelites and turned their allegiance to the king of the Greeks. King Constans made Hamazasp, lord of the Mamikoneank’, kuropalates, and gave him silver cushions and the rank of prince of Armenia. To the other princes (he gave) honours, and treasures to the soldiers. Then when the king of Ismael saw that the Armenians had withdrawn from submission to them, they put to the sword all the hostages whom they had brought from that land, about 1,775 people. A few were left, in number about 22, who had not happened to be at that spot; they alone survived. But Musel, lord of the Mamikoneank’ (nephew of Hamazasp), because he had four sons among the hostages with the Ismaelites, was therefore unable to withdraw from their service. And Hamazasp had a brother among the hostages. So (the Ismaelites) requested him and still others from among the princes (to go) to them in Syria with their wives. ‘Therefore, reckoning death better than life, they withdrew from submission to them, and through precipitate negotiations submitted to the king of the Greeks in unison with the prince and the Army of Aluank’ and the princes of Siwnik’ with their country.138
The change of allegiance is—as we would expect by now—object of negotiations and results in the distribution of material and symbolic rewards to the noblemen by the Emperor. But the Arab Caliph appointed a prince for the country as well, when the Armenians finally defected to him after the end of the civil war in 661 and asked for a new išxan:

Three years after Hamazasp had received the honour of kuropalates from the Emperor, he died and was buried with his ancestors. Then the great patriarch Nerses together with the naxarars of Armenia asked the Caliph Mawí to set up to the post of prince of Armenia Grigor Mamikonian, whom he had retained as hostage. Trustfully complying with their wishes, (the Caliph) appointed Grigor to the office of prince (of Armenia) and made him the commander in chief of Armenia.

The designation of a candidate for išxan would most probably take place on one of those conventions of the leading groups of the country which we have observed on several occasions; Movsés Kałankatuc'i describes such a selection process for Albania, where as in Armenia the head of Church is also present:

(...) that the lords of the (chief) families (teark' tohmic), governors (kusakalk'), administrators (kolmnakalk'), grandees (mecamek'), dukes (naxarark'), and all the princes of those lands assembled in the presence of the great archbishop Eliazar and deliberated upon the peace and prosperity of the land of Albania. They busied themselves with diligent thoughts concerning the government of the land and agreed unanimously to elect a certain senior naxarar who had been honoured with the imperial title of ex-consul (apahiwpat) and had acquired the rank of patrician. His name was Varaz-Trdat, son of Varaz-P'erőz brother of Juanšër.

The miabanutiwn and acceptance by the aristocracy was, as in many other cases of relations between Armenia and the neighboring powers, essential for the election of an išxan and for the stability of his position. Of course, like in the cases of Ašot Bagratuni (see endnote 126) or Dawit' Sahafuni (see endnote 130), opposition to the prince could be widespread and undermine his authority as well as that of his overlord. Under Arab dominance, the išxan could also count on the support of local Arab authorities, namely the ostikan appointed by the Caliph for the province of Armëninya, which included Armenia, Georgia, and Albania, and the Arab troops stationed in the country:

When Merwan arrived in the city of Dvin, the Armenian nobles came to meet him. He spoke with them peacefully, called Ašot son of Vasak who was from the house of the Bagratids and, by the orders of (Caliph) Hišam, gave him the authority of a patrician over our land of Armenia together with high honours. When, however, the sons of Smbat (Bagratuni) heard of the honours conferred upon Ašot and the latter’s importance to Hišam and to governor Merwan, they acted extremely insolently toward him, to the extent that Muhammad’s son (Merwan) became aware of their contention. (Merwan) ordered their immediate arrest and sent Grigor and David, who were from the house of the Mamikonids, to the Caliph of the Ismaelites. He also wrote an accusation against them, stating that they were opponents of Ašot and agitators in his realm. (The Caliph) ordered them to be taken to a desert place called Eman (= Yemen) and to be kept there in prison for the rest of their lives.

On the occasion of Tačat Anjewaci’s appointment as prince of Armenia after his defection from the empire, however, it was the Arab governor who opposed this decision of the Caliph; the power of the Abbasids was still strong enough at that point to enforce the center’s will:

Harun, the son of the Arab Caliph, not only accorded (Tačat) the highest honours, but he even considered him as his father. Upon meeting (Tačat), the Caliph expressed his deep gratitude and gave him rich presents drawn from the royal treasury. He then invested him with the office of the Prince of Armenia, and sent him to his country with much pomp and splendour. When, however, Prince Tačat arrived in Armenia by the order of the Caliph, he met with unexpected opposition on the part of ‘Uthman ( Ibn ‘Umara), who was the governor of our country at the time. Far from executing the Caliph’s orders as far as Tačat’s powers were concerned, ‘Uthman deferred his action and sent messengers to their Caliph, informing him that the Armenian nobles were unwilling to accept as their chief a rebel who had deserted the Arab rule in the interests of the Greeks, and whom they, the loyal subjects of the Caliphate, suspected of being a potential traitor among our troops. (...) ‘Uthman was forced to restore Tačat’s powers by the order of the Arab Caliph.

Tačat Anjewaci’s tenure of office interrupted the row of išxan from the house of Bagratuni, who otherwise rose in power and prestige in the service of the Caliphs, culminating in the appointment of Ašot Bagratuni, the future king, as “prince of princes.”
Subsequently, a governor named Al Arman was sent to Armenia; he set Ašot as presiding prince of Armenia in accordance with the orders of the Caliph, and investing him with many robes as well as royal insignia, entrusted him with the taxes of Armenia and all the royal bekar. Thus, he became first and foremost among the Armenian naxarars, all of whom made treaties with him, as if with a true scion of royalty. Whenever a suitable occasion presented itself, all of them likewise resolved to become worthy of being related to his house (through marriage), and to be distinguished from the other naxarar houses, as members of the royal family. According to Yovhannes Drasxanakertc’i, the constant bestowal of rank and titles on the Bagratuni-clan had enhanced their prestige within the framework of Armenia’s aristocracy to a degree which elevated them above other noble houses. Finally, they also rose “from recipients to granters of insignia of vassalage.”

At this time, Ašot raised his son-in-law Vasak Haykazun, surnamed Gaburn, as prince of Siwnik’, and obtained for him honour from the royal court. Ruling over his principality with great might, he latter likewise extended his sway over all the people of Sisakan. On the other hand Ašot appointed to the office of the great sparapetut’iwn of Armenia his brother Abas, a brave man, sturdy, vigorous and handsome in stature, robust and skilled in warfare.

Although considered already quasi-royal in their status, Ašot’s promotion to kingship depended on the acceptance of the aristocracy in a similar way as the appointment of a prince of Armenia:

In view of the nobility of his family, the princes and naxarars of Armenia unanimously resolved to raise him up as a king over themselves, and informed the Caliph through the governor Isa son of Shaikh. Receiving this fitting request with friendly disposition, the Caliph sent to Ašot a royal crown, which the governor Isa brought and presented together with royal robes, gifts, honours, swift horses, weapons and ornaments. Then they summoned the great patriarch Gërg, who conferred on him the divine benediction of spiritual blessings instead of the anointment with the chrism, and crowned him king over the people of Ashkenaz.

Also, the status of the Bagratuni kings within the framework of relations to the neighboring powers remained dependent on the will of the commonly accepted sources of legitimation—the Caliph and the Emperor.

General Aspects of the Relations between the Emperor and the Armenian Nobility
In a study on the Amarna Letters from the 14th century BC, Christer Jönsson has stated: “Communication is the essence of diplomacy. (...) All acts, verbal or nonverbal, intentional or unintentional, are potential signals that feed into the network and are liable to reach all listeners and be read by them for the messages they convey.” On the following pages, we will try to analyze several of these acts, verbal as well as nonverbal, in the relations between the Emperor and Armenian aristocrats.

Communicating with the Emperor – Diplomatic Letters, Charters and Imperial Ranks
The administration of the Eastern Roman Empire was based on written communications between the imperial center and the various officials and notables in the provinces and on the periphery; instructions, laws, and privileges came from Constantinople, reports, petitions, and suggestions came to Constantinople. For approaching the Emperor successfully it was essential to address him in a correct way, integrating the various elements of imperial ideology and protocol.

The letters to the Emperor we find in the Armenian sources followed these requirements. So we read in Elišē in the letter of the Armenian nobles to Emperor Theodosius II on the eve of the rebellion against the Persians in 450/451:

This is a copy of the letter which they wrote to the Emperor Theodosius (T’ëodos kaysr):

“The bishop Joseph, with many of my cobishops and the whole Armenian army; Vasak the marzpan and Nershapuh Rmbosean, with the sparapet and all the greatest princes, to the illustrious Emperor Theodosius (mecanund T’ëodos kaysr) – may our greeting be upon you and all your troops, you who with your peaceful benevolence rule over land and sea; and there is no person on earth who can oppose your irresistible empire (terufiwn). According to our infallible records concerning your courageous ancestors, having occupied Europe they crossed over and also rule the regions of Asia from the borders of Sēr (in Sinai) on to the limits of Gaderon (north of Media); and there was no one who rebelled or escaped their control.”
At least Elise was familiar with the ideas on the legitimate rule of the Emperor over the whole oikumene, since it is not clear if he cites an actual letter or uses his imagination to describe the correspondence of the rebels with the Emperor. However, those ideas are also elaborated in the above-mentioned letter of the Armenians to Emperor Constans II cited in the history attributed to Sebeos, and whose authenticity is not anymore under question.

So now, “because God has delivered us from servitude to the empire of darkness”, and made us worthy of the rule of your heavenly city (erknak’alak’), how much more is it right for us to enjoy that peace regarding which we must request from Christ God for your pious and God-loving rule (t’agaworut’iwu) that it remain unmoved for ever, like the days of heaven upon earth with great victory ruling over the whole universe, sea and land. Although you are in the body from the human race, yet you hold the place of the divine throne. And the light of the glory of your God-loving rule has suffused everything below – you who are crowned from heaven, you the boast of all Christians by the power of the divine sign of the Cross, you who resemble the pious servant of God, the divinely gracious, the valiant and victorious, the blessed saviour Heraclius, your grandfather, who rescued from the cruel executioner the whole world – which may Christ God now bless through Your Piety.

May God grant our unworthiness to seek knowledge of the good from God worthily, and to bless your God-loving and beneficent lordship (t’agaworut’iwu), so that you may reign for ever over all the earth, sea and land, very victoriously.

Another such letter we find in Kalankatuac’i’s History of the Albanians, where the addressee is once more the Emperor Constans II. In the following, the Greek and Latin equivalents to the elements of the imperial titles given by Kalankatuac’i, are given in brackets:

Juanšer’s letter to Constantine (Constans II), king of Greece

“All-conquering lord, powerful and merciful king of the Romans, Constantine Augustus (Amenayalt’ [νικητής, vîctor] têr [dominus/despóς], ἡζόν [κράτιστος], koulermormac [clementissimus, φίλανθρωπότατος] t’agawor Hoîmoc’ [βασιλεύς ‘Ρωμαῖων] Ógostos [Augustus] Kostandin), appointed by God ruler of land and sea (couw ew c’amak’ [γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης διοικῶτας] astuacabar [ἐκ Θεοῦ, θεοψήφιος] ı̄ṣan), Juanšer, sparapet and prince of Albania, together with his vassal land of the east, worships you with humble greetings. May it please your Christian lordship to accept this new offer of vassalage from a distant people that divine virtue may be bestowed from your great dignity and glory upon our humble selves who seek a crown (from you).”

Finally, a sophisticated use of this “imperial language” can be detected in the letter which Catholicos Yohannes Drasxanakertc’i wrote to Emperor Constantine VII and cited in his history:

Sublime Autocrat and Emperor of the Romans, Augustus Constantine, who are crowned and glorified by God, Great and Victorious King of the Universe, who are God-loving and pious, overseers of the public enlightenment during the course of this life, true peace-makers for all of us that exists, Images of the nine heavenly orders (of angels), Breeders of spiritual instruction, Genuine Leaders of so many nations and races, and indeed Godly Palm Trees planted in the house of the Lord. (...) § 38. As long as all the nations acknowledged fear of you as a protective bastion against the enemies, and as long as we lived safely under the auspices of your imperial majesties, as if in a beautiful city, the nuptial veil of the bride (of Christ), the church, was never contaminated by the inhabitant of Kedar, who hated the kiss of holiness, and the tyranny of the accomplice of Beliar could not force the departure of the peaceful bridegroom. § 39 But as soon as we became negligent of our duties to you, the venom of the insidious serpent of Dan defied your righteous majesty, and there was no one to seek vengeance from our slanderer. § 44 At this time, what could I say concerning Smbat Bagratuni, the chief of all those in the East, and your servant, who spiritually became worthy of being called “my son” by you? § 56. I beg you to raise your hand out of your wisdom and kindness to the end against the insolence of the enemy, and rescue the inheritance which is yours, as well as to re-establish by great expenditure the majesty of the temple of God in the Highest, which was seized and ravaged by the insurgents. § 57 (...) you should subordinate those parts which you had received in the beginning by virtue of your desirable laws which are full of mercy. § 65 I have also wished to provide my own people with a restful living quarter and a peaceful life within your august, magnificent, glorious and mighty kingdom, so that after being delivered from the hands of the Ishmaelites, and finding asylum under the auspices of your wings we might tend to the flock of God among us, and always offer our ceaseless prayers...
to God for the peace, safety, and stability of the power of your imperial majesties, whose might is acknowledged throughout the universe. With much assistance from you and by means of your glory and grace we shall prepare the Armenian nation by turning them first into a people of the Lord, and then by the will of God into your own people. In their letters to the Emperor, the leading men of Armenia of course had to acknowledge his rule over the Christian world at large and over Armenia in particular. That Yovhanne斯 Drasyanakertci himself had a rather pragmatic approach to the relationship with the “Great and Victorious King of the Universe” becomes clear by the justification of his decline of an invitation to the imperial court in Constantinople:

I decided not to go, thinking that there might be people who might look askance at my going there, and assume that I sought communion with the Chalcedonians. It was for this reason that I did not wish to go, lest I might scandalize the minds of the weak.

But following the usages of the imperial chancellery could be the first step to establish a gainful relationship to the Emperor. Movses Kalankatuc'i describes the receipt of prince Juanšer's letter at the court of Emperor Constans II:

When the letter was brought to the most pious Emperor, he was full of joy and exceeding glad, and he gave a great banquet that day. He immediately ordered treaties to be drawn up so as to ensure mutual peace. He bestowed upon him very great gifts: a throne carved in silver with a gilded back, robes of spun gold, and the sword with pearl-studded scabbard which he himself wore. He made him a first patrician, and ordered the titles of patrician, consul, ex-praefect, stratelates, and illustris, sufficient for 12,000 men to be sent that Juanšer might bestow them upon whomsoever he wished. He also removed a piece of the redeeming cross of Christ which he always wore on his bosom and sent it to him.

A diplomatic letter to the Emperor would normally produce further documents from the imperial chancellery: written pledges, as we have seen above, treaties (which also would have the form of imperial privileges) or imperial charters of bestowal (codicillus), by which certain offices and court titles were granted to the addressee, sometimes also to his entourage. This codicilli were engulfed in gold and ivory, sometimes bore a picture of the Emperor (as did the gold coins the bearer of a title would receive) and were themselves a symbol of imperial power, brilliance and grace. Unfortunately, we do not have any specimen of such a charter for an Armenian nobleman in the period under consideration; only Movses Kalankatuc'i claims to cite from Constans II’s answer to prince Juanšer of Albania:

The text of (Constantine’s) letter

“To you, Lord Juanšer, lord of Gardman and prince of Albania, ex-consul and first patrician and governor of the east, the grace and the mercy of the redeeming cross of divine power and a loving greeting from our august kingdom. We have received your letter of greeting, which has revealed to us your love of the worship of God, and we are glad that you and your eastern country have accepted to be our vassal, in return for which we and our sons shall treat you and your descendants with affection and sincere and indestructible love from generation unto generation for ever.”

The importance the Emperors ascribed to their relations to the princes of the Caucasus region becomes evident from the high court titles they bestowed on them, whereby they integrated them in their court hierarchy and demonstrated their dependence on the Emperor. The prince of Armenia received normally the title of κουροπαλάτης/kuropalates (kiwrapatut'iwn, kiwrapalat), which since Emperor Justinian I was reserved for members of the imperial family and very important foreign princes. Similarly, one of the highest ranks of this period was πατρίκιος/patrikios (patrik'iwn, patrik), also in the 8th and 9th century bestowed only on the most important generals and governors of the empire. In Armenian as well as Arab sources patrikios (patrik, batřqā) later became a term equivalent to “prince of Armenia.” For Juanšer, Movses Kalankatuc'i mentions the even higher rank of πρωτοπατρίκιος/protopatrikios (protot patrik), which we find as a special honor in Byzantine sources from the 4th to the 8th centuries.

For the beneficiaries such imperial honors were connected with concrete advantages in terms of power politics and material gains; normally, a title was followed by rich presents and qualified for a regular income (i.e., roga) from the imperial treasury.
When this same Krikorikios (Grigor, prince of Taron) had entered the city protected by God (= Constantinople), and had been honoured with the rank of magister and military governor of Taron, he was also given for his residence a house called the house of Barbaros, now the house of Basil the chamberlain. He was honoured with an annual stipend (roga) of ten pounds in gold and a further ten pounds in miliareis (silver coins), making twenty pounds in all. After some sojourn in the imperial city, he was escorted back again to his country by this same protospatharius Constantine.169

The Emperor’s charters, titles, and presents also legitimized and made visible the leading positions of one aristocrat vis-à-vis the other aristocrats,170 especially since these high court titles entitled a nobleman to wear specific insignia.171 As Nina Garsoian has stated: “all naxarars were theoretically equal insofar as they belonged to the same social class (…), but they were ranked in a rigid order of precedence according to the ‘cushion or throne’ (barj, gah) that they occupied at court.”172 And as Nicolas Adontz has shown, since the abolition of the monarchy, for Persarmenia the power to acknowledge or to change this “order of precedence” was in the hands of the Sasanian Great King.173 But even before the end of Aršakuni kingdom, the material and symbolic distinctions bestowed by the superior imperial power could become essential for the manifestation of rank and power within the Armenian aristocracy:

The king of Persia also sent a crown, a robe-of-honour, and the royal standard to Queen Zarmanduxt through the Surēn, as well as crowns for her two young sons, Aršak and Valaršak. He likewise sent royal robes to the sparapet Manuēl, sables, and a gargamanak diadem of gold and silver for the head with the knot over the crest of the diadem behind the eagle tied in an ašgarawand knot, and an apizak chest ornament, as is the rule for kings; also a crimson pavilion with the insignia of an eagle on top of it and very large hangings, as well as a sky-blue canopy. And he sent palatial gold serving plates to the sparapet Manuēl, and granted him from his own hand great authority over the realm of Armenia. (…) And everyone of the nobility received gifts, every tanuter and Armenian magnate.174

The attraction of imperial titles and honors remained strong even in times of relative weakness of the great powers; the statement of Cemal Kafadar on Western Anatolia in the late 13th century seems also valid for Armenia in our period:

However, the area was not free from all interference by the larger authorities in political centres. Not only did they have real muscle, which they occasionally used in these regions, but perhaps more importantly they also maintained significant control over mechanisms of legitimation that were part of the political language of the frontiers. (…) Event if that authority was not able to have its representatives there all the time, even if it was obliged to comply with some case of fait accompli, it was needed at least as a referent to provide some credibility to one’s claim.175

Accordingly, the Bagratuni kings were also keen to receive the Emperor’s approval. The highest honor would be the integration of a prince in the “family of kings” as Franz Dölger has called it. Constellations of fictitious kinship relations had been used since early antiquity, also to symbolize the precedence among rulers; Roman Emperors and Persian Great Kings for example called each other brothers.176 The order of this “family” in the 10th century becomes evident in the Book of Ceremonies by Emperor Constantine VII. According to De ceremoniis, the ἄρχον τῶν ἀρχόντων/archon ton archonton (as the Armenian “prince of princes” is called177) had to be addressed by the Emperor as πνευματικὸν ἔμων τέκνον/pneumatikon hemon teknon, as “our spiritual son.” This new form of address was interpreted in Armenian sources as recognition of the royal status of the Bagratunis, since it was first used for Ašot I Bagratuni (885/886) and his son and successor Smbat I (892/893):178

Basil (I), the great Emperor of the Greeks, also offered terms of peace – which were in no way trivial, harmony and friendship to our king Ašot, whom he addressed as beloved son (ordi sireli), and he communicated this to all the kingdoms in his dominion.179

Placing his kingdom on a firm foundation, Smbat tried to establish peaceful relations with everyone in accordance with the words of Paul. First, in compliance with the alliance of his father, he did not withdraw from the friendly affection of Leo (VI) Emperor of the Romans. He honoured the latter with many gifts and worthy presents in accordance with his gentle temper. In return, the Emperor gave to him an exceedingly great many number of gifts,
namely, beautiful weapons, ornaments, robes wrought with gold, goblets, and cups, and girdles of pure gold studded with gems. But a greater honour than these was, that the Emperor addressed Smbat as his “beloved son” (ordi sireli) by means of a treaty of friendship. Such an imperial letter was read loud, most probably in front of the assembled aristocracy; in that way the Emperor’s address became an important element of the legitimation and power display of the new Bagratuni monarchy.

Meeting the Emperor - Rituals, Ceremonies and Presents

This important relationship between the Armenian aristocrats and the superior imperial power could be stage-managed in an even more impressive and emphatic way when the nobleman met the Emperor, the Great King, or Caliph in person, in “face-to-face ritual contexts.”

The importance of such occasions for the medieval world is stressed by the German historian Gerd Althoff in one of his numerous important studies on this matter:

Power in the Middle Ages had to be illustrative. This happened through acts of representation in which not only glory and wealth were shown publicly. By using ritual and ceremonial acts, commitments and relationships were depicted, rights recognized and much more. Exercise of power took place very much in such acts. Its character was nowhere more directly expressed than in the often interactive action of the powerful in public. In that public power and ritual met, because through the ritual the possibilities of power were established, and its limits were set.

For the time of the Aršakuni-monarchy, we find an illustrative example in the Buzandaran Patmut’ıwnık’, specifically the installation of a tanutēr of a great Armenian noble house in his hereditary rights under special circumstances:

Moreover, they gave his father’s gah and cushion to the son of the commander-in-chief Vačē (Mamikonean), who was a small child named Artawazd after his (grand)father. They placed his father’s diadem on his head in front of the king, and (bestowed upon him) the office of sparapet in his place, for indeed he was the son of a worthy man from a worthy clan, and because no other adult could be found in that clan, since they had all died in the great war. And the duties of the command were assumed by Aršawir Kamsarakyan, prince of Sirak and of the district of Aršunik’, and by Andovk, prince of S’ıwnik’, because they were sons-in-law of the house of the Mamikonean family. And the great chief-bishop Vrt’ anēs, together with the king, commanded Aršawir and Andovk to nurture little Artawazd so that he might take the place of his ancestors and of his father (...).

Such “ritual and ceremonial acts” were not only used within the framework of the Armenian monarchy and aristocracy, but also in the relationships between Armenia and the neighboring powers. One has only to bring to his mind Sueton’s description of the coronation of the first Aršakuni-king Trdat I by Emperor Nero in Rome in the year 66 AD.

A parallel for our period is the journey of Lazika’s King Tzathes to Constantinople and his subsequent coronation by Emperor Justin I in the year 521/522, attested in the chronicle of Malalas. Also, the installation of a new Satrap described by Procopius took place most probably in a similar way after the candidate had presented himself to the Emperor (see endnotes 30 and 37). The reception at the imperial court, the handing over of presents to and by the Emperor, the delivering of diplomas (also the above-mentioned codicilli were presented in a magnificent ceremony), and the royal banquet were of course the most important occasions for the display of precedence and power relations in Byzantium as well as Persia:

At that time Šapuh king of Persia invited Aršak king of Armenia, whom he honoured with the greatest deference and glory, with great hoards of gold and silver, and with full royal pomp. He treated him as a brother, like a son and gave him the second domain to the realm of Atropatan. And they reclined together on one and the same banqueting-throne in the hour of festivity, and they wore the same garments of the same colour with the same insignia and ornaments. And day after day the Persian king prepared the same crown for himself and for him. Linked together like two indivisible blood-brothers, they enjoyed themselves jointly at festivals and revelled in indescribable pleasures.

Equally honorable and splendid was the reception of Ašot II Bagratuni at the court of Emperor Constantine VII in 914:

Here (in Constantinople), the Emperor honoured him (Ašot, son of Smbat) more than his gaheric (superior in rank) princes with
a proper throne, and unlike the other honourable guests, gave him the majestic distinction befitting the progeny of a king. He treated Ašot almost as his equal, and exalted him with royal dignity. At the same time, he bestowed on him the title “the son of a martyr”, and “my beloved son”, dressed him in glorious purple, and gave valuable gold-brodered robes, byssus with golden borders, and a girdle studded with gems for his waist. He was honoured thus not once or twice, but many times. They also presented him with swift and spirited horses, which were decked with beautiful armour and ornaments, as well as many cups, and utensils, and many gold and silver wares. They also bestowed great honours on the naxarars whom he had taken with him. Until their return they received bountiful largesses and generous allowances.191

Drasḫanakertc’i is well aware that the Emperor treated Ašot only “almost as his equal,” while at the same time he knows how great an honor this was within the framework of Byzantine ceremonial and ideology. He accepts this hierarchical worldview and emphasizes for his Armenian readership the important role given to the new Bagratuni monarchy by the Emperor. Tim Greenwood has stressed, as already mentioned above, the importance of “the service to an external authority, the titles and material rewards available to the individual princes and instances of direct contact between Emperor and client” for the Armenian aristocracy and equally for the Armenian kings, as we have seen. We have also already observed the reception of Atat Xofxotuni at the Emperor’s court. His co-conspirators who had decided to submit to the Sasanians received similar honors at the court of Great King Xusro II:

As for the nobles and troops on the Persian side, I mentioned above that the auditor departed and left them until the royal command should arrive. Then couriers arrived with letters summoning them all together to the royal court. These are the nobles and troops who went with each one’s contingent and banner to the court of the Persian king Khosrov in the sixth year of his reign. (...) When they reached Asovestan and the site of the royal court, they presented themselves to the king. He joyfully received them, and with notable splendour favoured them with honours. He ordered the greatest nobles to be kept at the royal court, stipends to be paid them from the treasury, to be given their own quarters, and summoned every day to the royal banquet.193

For the “greatest nobles,” their rank within the Armenian aristocracy became manifest due to its recognition by Great King Xusro II, who treated them according to it. They were permitted to stay near the king and dine with him and they received material rewards. “The public display of proximity to an Emperor mattered.”194 Presents, which were given to and by the Emperor or Great King, always had a material as well as a symbolic value and again made ranking and status manifest.195

It happened at that time that Smbat Bagratuni became pleasing in the eyes of King Khosrov. He gave him the marzpanate of the land of Vrkan, 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.196

The material aspect of imperial generosity is stressed by king Smbat I Bagratuni in his negotiations with the Arab governor of Atrpatakan:

When the governor (ostikan) Afšīn, who had given the crown to Smbat, learned of this, as well as of the firm friendship and agreement with the Emperor, he was greatly distressed and irritated at these matters, (which he suspected to be) a plot against himself. He made haste to sever the ties of friendship between them, and having gathered numerous troopers for this, he decided to set out and come to Armenia. As soon as king Smbat realized the wicked schemes of Afšīn, he immediately mobilized his forces as well as the multitude of the naxarars’ contingents, altogether thirty thousand brave warriors and skilled soldiers, and he marched as far as the district of Rotokk’ near Atrpatakan in order to confront the foe. But before he reached the enemy link, he sent an envoy to Afšīn with the (following) message: "Why are you coming upon us in anger for no reason? If it is because of the alliance I have made with the Emperor, this was for your benefit also. (I thought that) I might obtain with ease those items that you yourself and the Caliph needed from the land of the Greeks, and present you with noteworthy garments, ornaments and vessels for your own use. Likewise, I wished to clear the way for merchants of your faith, so that they might have access to their land, and enrich your treasury with the riches of the Greeks" (...) Then, mounting upon fiery steeds, they set out to meet each other, and exchanged many royal gifts and presents, and after this Afšīn returned to Atrpatakan.197
Besides the “protocolary” regulated ceremonies and honors, divergences from the normal procedures could symbolize an even higher distinction of a guest:

The king of the south (= the Caliph) gladly rose from his sleep at sunrise before his customary hour and received the prince of the east (= prince Juanšēr) with a friendly greeting, being greatly pleased at his arrival. He was received with a perfect welcome, and to no one of the governors of the country were such royal honours accorded (by the Caliph), especially when he had savoured his intelligence and reason; for though lords and leaders of many lands were there in his service, in none of them had he such sure confidence as in Juanšēr, on whom, and on those with him, he bestowed very great gifts. After this the prince of the east asked to be allowed to take his leave in peace, and the ruler of the south set his seal to a treaty of sincere and perpetual friendship and gave him his right hand, although it had never been the custom of the proud lord of the earth to give it to any other foreigner. When these things had been accomplished, he was sent on his way with high honours from the universal court, and he arrived in the province of Ayrarat where he was received by the brave Grigor of the Mamikonean family and all the nobles.198

The reference to Juanšēr’s reception by the Armenian nobles, recently honored by the Caliph in that special way, is characteristic for this part of Movses Kalankatowac’i’s history, since he makes great effort to point up the high rank the prince of Albania had and the recognition he enjoyed by his neighbors, especially the Armenians. Yet, only the arrival of the overlord in person gave the opportunity to demonstrate such a special position of honor in front of the entire aristocracy:

In the nineteenth year of his reign Constantine (Constans II), grandson of Heraclius, arrived with numerous forces and chosen horsemen and Greek nobles in the kingdom of Persia, having already wrested away the lands of this kingdom, and he carried with him the radiant light of the world, the cross of Christ. He dispatched one of his officers to ask Juanšēr to meet him, and he made haste and arrived in the land of the Medes in the presence of the great Emperor who, hearing of his arrival, came to meet him in person in the village of K’ungr, welcomed him, and commanded him at the same time to put off the mourning he wore on account of his wife’s death; and they dressed him in royal robes. (...) Seeing him receive such heavenly gifts, the Armenian nobles and General Hamazasp were very jealous, but he cared nothing and afterwards took his leave of the benevolent lord, who dismissed him not as a servant, but as a brother of equal rank in the presence of the nobles of Persia and Ayrarat. (...) When spring came the esteemed prince of Albania prepared to meet the Emperor again in the town of Valaršapat. The king commanded the nobles of the palace and the notables to go to meet him, and thus did he enter into the Emperor’s court like a king. When he saw him, the Emperor greeted him with a fond embrace and assigned him a place above all the nobles. That day was a blessed holy day for him, surrounded by all manner of gold and silver ornaments. Constantine ordered whatever was placed on the royal table to be offered to him, a gesture which amazed his fellow guests. Over and above all this, he girt about him the royal belt of his valiant grandfather Heraclius and his grandmother Nikita, gave him his own cloak and two banners, and conferred the rank of patrician upon his young sons. All the villages and regions which had belonged to the first kings of Albania gave to him as an inheritance from generation to generation, and he appointed him to govern all the eastern people as king.199

Movses Kalankatowac’i emphasizes the reaction and jealousy of the other aristocrats, especially the Armenians, and courtiers, who were “amazed” by the Emperor’s reception of the Albanian prince. These encounters with the Emperor gave the historian the opportunity to demonstrate the superior status of his hero in the aristocratic society of the South Caucasus.

Encountering the Emperor could be of high symbolic value—as could be the refusal of such a meeting. As mentioned above, in 652/653 Emperor Constans II tried unsuccessfully to convoke an assembly of the Armenian nobles in order to prevent their defection to the Arabs. However, when the Emperor came to Armenia with his army in person, a great number of princes presented themselves to their overlord:

Then king Constans agreed to carry out the army’s wishes. He took his army and went to Armenia with 100,000 (troops). (...) He (...) came to the city of Karin in the 12th year of his reign and the 20th year of the rule of the Ismaelites. King Constans remained in the city of Karin for a few days. The princes and troops of the so-called Fourth Armenia presented themselves, and also all the other troops and princes who had left the Ršuni territory. There
met him the men of Sper, the princes of the Bagratunik', the men of Mananali, of Daranali, those from the province of Ekeleats', and all the troops of those places, and the men of Karin, and Tayk', and Basean. There also came to meet him the princes of Vanand with their army, the men of Širak, the Xorgorunik, and the men of the house of Dimak'seank'. Also presenting themselves were Mušel Mamikonean with his clansmen and certain other princes, and the army from the region of Ayarat; the Araweleank', the Araneank', the Varažnunik', the Gnt'unik', the Spandnnik', and others with them. The Catholicos Nersės, who had come from Tayk', also met him. All the princes explained to the king the intention and plan of rebellion of the lord of Ršunik', and the frequent coming and going to him of the messengers of Ismael. Then the king and all his army cursed the lord of Ršunik', deprived him of the title of his authority, and sent another person to replace him, accompanied by 40 men.202

As T'eodoros Ršuni refuses to present himself to Constans II, his breach of his cal'ayat' iwm to the Emperor becomes evident; accordingly he is stripped "of the title of his authority," which he had received from the Emperor. The detailed list of those noblemen who came to the Emperor (including those from the areas of the Byzantine provinces in Western Armenia201) is an equally important manifestation of their loyalty to the empire, which had become dubious on account of their negotiations with the Arabs. Shortly afterwards, the Catholicos and the aristocrats had to demonstrate their subordination in an even more dramatic way:

King Constans, when he heard this, desired the multitude of his army to engage in plunder and go to winter in Armenia, so that he might destroy the country. Then the Catholicos and Mušel (Mamikonean) with all the Armenian princes fell on their faces, and with great supplications and tearful entreaties requested mercy, lest on account of their trespasses he be totally angered and ruin the country. The king heeded their entreaties and sent away the larger part of his army.202

This display of supplication made evident the superiority of the Emperor and simultaneously gave him the opportunity to demonstrate one of the imperial virtues, namely mercy.203

The refusal of the customary ceremonial was just as much a sign of disturbances in the relationship between overlord and noblemen. After the victory against the usurper Vahrām Čōbīn, King Xusro II suspects the Armenian general Mušel Mamikonean of treason:

He (Mušel Mamikonean) entered the tent into the presence of the king with seven men, fell on his face, did obeisance to the king, and stood up. The king did not stretch out his hand as previously to receive and greet him, but sat sullenly as he was. And they stood there in this perverse fashion.204

As Great King Xusro's disapproval of him became obvious, Mušel Mamikonean had to fear for his life; only the presence of the allied Byzantine troops prevented an escalation.

An even more obvious sign of the loss of imperial favor for a courtier and retainer was the complete denial of access to the overlord, as the Byzantine general T'umas (Thomas) had to find out after he had arrested T'eodoros Ršuni without the Emperor's permission and had brought him to Constantinople:

But when king Constans heard of this, he was greatly troubled, because it had not been by his command that he was bound. So he ordered him to be released from his bonds and that the writ of accusation be read. When he realized the deceit, he commanded him to be summoned to this presence; he received him in a friendly way and with the honour due his princely title. He appointed for him a stipend and sustenance from the treasury. Then he ordered T'umas to be summoned; he did not permit him to enter the palace, but had an enquiry held outside. They acquitted T'eodoros, lord of Ršunik', on his own words, and justice was done in his regard. As for T'umas, they stripped him of his rank in dishonour.205

In this example, we encounter two central functions of imperial ceremonial: the ostensible confirmation or renewal of relations of allegiance and their evident termination. The importance of ceremony and ritual for the relationship between the Emperor and the Armenian nobility as well as for the relations within the aristocracy cannot be overestimated.

A Special Relationship? The Empire and the Armenians—

A Conclusion

The relationship between the Armenian aristocracy and the neighboring powers, namely Byzantium, Persia, and the Caliphate, are characterized
by many comparable elements and instruments: the establishment and termination of կալայութ Եվին, the granting of honors and presents, the ceremonial encounter of overlord and retainer. But in one central aspect was the Roman Emperor special for the Armenians: he was a Christian ruler, or even more the sole Christian lord over the entire օճարակուն. In the Armenian sources, the Christian character of the Roman/Byzantine Empire is contrasted with the pagan rule of the Persians and Arabs on several occasions, especially in the context of defection or emigration to the Empire:

Thus did Aršak, king of Armenia, quit the district of Ayarat as if going into captivity. He considered it better to go to the much smaller sector (of Armenia) in a believing country, where he would be subject to the Greek king, than to remain in such a luxuriantly comfortable district (as Ayarat) and witness daily the ridicule of the (Christian) religion, enmity directed against the holy Church, the insults born by clerics of the divine covenant from the impious mages and the scorn shown to his line and kingdom from the arrogant princes of the Iranian lordship. So he preferred to live out this inconsequential and measured life in a believing country, than to remain dwelling there in false glory, as one who is scorned, and, not attaining eternal life, be betrayed to the inextinguishably burning eternal fire. Thinking all of this over, suddenly he made up his hesitant mind to leave the good inheritance of his ancestors, and to enter the service of the Greek king.206

So Aršak left the native kingdom of his fathers, Ayarat, and all the part of the Persian sector, and went to rule over the western regions of our country, in the Greek sector (i բանութ Յունաց), not only because of his mother who was in the imperial capital (i կայսերութան կ’ալակէն), but because he thought that it was better to rule over a smaller region and serve a Christian king than to control most (of the country) and submit to the yoke of heathens. The princes of Sapuh’s sector followed him with their wives and sons, abandoning each one’s possessions and villages and estates.207

(...). the king of the Greeks moved from his imperial portals with a massive multitude of followers and arrived at the city called Theodosiopolis in the region of Karin. (...) Furthermore, he took the city troops and the local Saracens, along with their families, to the land of the Greeks. Many of the inhabitants of the same districts asked the king to allow them to follow him, in order to be relieved of the heavy yoke of servitude to the Arabs. Having secured permission from (Emperor Constantine V, the inhabitants of the Armenian districts) prepared themselves, packed their belongings and moved, placing their trust in the power of the dominical cross and in the glory of the King (արքեյ). They separated themselves (from the rest), left their homeland, and went to the country of the pious king.208

The common Christian faith was also the basis for a very powerful tradition, by which the Armenians in this period tried to interpret the relationship between the empire and their country. This is the legend about the visit of both King Trdat the Great and Gregory the Illuminator at the court of Emperor Constantine the Great in the Roman capital, where the two Christian kings established an alliance in the spirit of Christian love and friendship,209 as Agathangelos reports:

Similarly with great happiness he showed love for king Trdat as for a dear brother, especially because of his recognition of God. And furthermore he made an alliance (դաշն) with him, holding their faith in the Lord Christ as an intermediary so that they might constantly and for ever keep faithful love between their kingdoms, and that he might confirm the Armenian king ever more and more in faith in the Trinity.210

This became the strongest tradition on the relationship between Armenia and the Empire, repeated and also adapted to the actual political needs through the centuries:

When the Emperor heard about these events (the capture of King Tiran by the Persians) he met with great eagerness and readiness their request to be of help and assistance to the realm of Armenia, all the more when he recalled the covenant and treaty of alliance reinforced by oaths that had been concluded between the Emperor Constantine and King Trdat.211

Also the treaty between Emperor Justin II and the Armenians around Vardan Mamikonean in 570 is interpreted as renewal of this pact between Constantine and Trdat, as we have seen (see endnote 103). The most important source for this tradition is the above-mentioned authentic letter, “which the bishops of Armenia and the Catholicos Nersẽs wrote with the nobles” to the Emperor Constans II. Thus, we possess proof for the official use of the Constantine/Trdat-legend in
the diplomatic correspondence between Armenia and the Empire in the mid-7th century:

Again a third time (the faith was confirmed) when king Trdat made ready and took with him the holy bishop Grigorios, and his son bishop Rstakes, and on the military side the four most senior-ranking of his palace, and with 70,000 men, elite leaders from all his provinces, went to Rome to see Constantine. When they saw each other, he presented St Gregory to Constantine; and he prostrated himself at the feet of St Gregory in order to be blessed by him. Then they accepted as intermediary the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And with an oath the two kings joined together, keeping a sure mutual peace for ever between their two royal persons. They confirmed once more for us the truth of the faith which the Holy Spirit had founded in us.213

Robert W. Thomson and others were able to trace this tradition of Constantine and Trdat throughout the Middle Ages.214 These references to a spectacular precedent in the relations between the Empire and Armenia had various implications; as Christer Jönsson has stated: "Earlier behaviour and relations are considered to commit the actors to similar behaviour and relations in the future." Likewise, the tradition on the pact of friendship between Constantine and Trdat suggested an almost equal status of the two Great Kings, who would call each other "brother," an appellation the Byzantines did not grant easily within the framework of their "family of kings." (see above)

But, to cite Nina Garsofan once more: "For Rome, at least, the inequality of status was self-evident." The same holds true not only for the whole period under consideration in this paper, but also, as we have seen, for the time of the renewed Armenian monarchy. In his instructions "On the governing of the Empire" Emperor Constantine VII describes the relationship between the empire and the "prince of princes," as the Bagratuni king of Armenia in negation of his claim on royalty is being called:

Since the prince of princes is the servant of the Emperor of the Romans, being appointed by him and receiving this rank from him, it is obvious that the cities and townships and territories of which he is lord also belong to the Emperor of the Romans.215

Comparing this passage with the quotation from the Res gestae Divi Augusti at the beginning of this paper, we conclude that the Byzantines remained firm in their imperial traditions also in their interpretation of their relationship to Armenia. Thus, the annexation of the Armenian prince doms and kingdoms, which took place in the 10th and 11th centuries,217 could be seen as the implementation of a sovereignty which had existed for a millennium. But as political reality was normally in conflict with Byzantium's ideological pretensions, it was the diplomatic game of negotiations and compromises that marked the relationship between the empire and the Armenian aristocrats for most of the time.

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Greatrex and Lieu, Eastern Frontier, 53–54; but see Garsoi'an, Date, esp. 193–194, who contrary to earlier studies now proposes a dating of the foundation of the Theodosiopolis in the reign of Theodosius I shortly after the partition of 387.

Güterbock, Römisch-Armenien, 26–29; Garsoi'an, The Arkakuni Dynasty, 93; Preiser-Kapeller, Verwaltungsgeschichte, 50–53.

Proc., Bella II, 3, 35–36: 281 (Dewing)

Proc., Bella II, 3, 1–3: 212–218; Garsoi'an, Problem, 64, with n. 49.


Eliëš IV: 93 (Tēr-Minasean; tr. Thomson, 145).


Adontz and Garsoi'an, Armenia, 133–136 and 143–144; Greatrex and Lieu, Eastern Frontier, 100; Preiser-Kapeller, Magister Militum, 349; Loughis et al., Regesten, N. 1108 and 1111.

Adontz and Garsoi'an, Armenia, 138–139.

Cf. Adontz and Garsoi'an, Armenia, 107 and 2° (Latin text); Güterbock, Römisch-Armenien, 40–42; Greatrex and Lieu, Eastern Frontier, 83–84; Preiser-Kapeller, Magister Militum, 348–349; Thomson, Armenia, 167.

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Adontz and Garsoi'an, Armenia, 142–164; 32°–34° and 37°–38° (Greek texts of the two laws); Güterbock, Römisch-Armenien, 43–58; Loughis et al., Regesten, N. 1078 and 1108; Dédéyoun (ed.), Histoire, 196–197; Thomson, Armenia, 167–168.


Proc., Bella VII, 32, esp. 7: IV, 420–437, esp. 422–423 (Dewing); cf. also Meier, Das andere Zeitalter Justinianis, 261–262, on this conspiracy.

Cf. also Faroqhi, Ottoman Empire, 75: "Only after a certain lapse of time were the sons of former dynasts-turned-Ottoman-dignitaries appointed to serve in faraway provinces, while the territories held by their fathers or grandfathers were integrated into the Ottoman imperial structure, and now administered by people with no previous links to the localities concerned."

On this important treaty cf. Sinn. V, 15, 2; 216, 10–13 und IV, 13, 24; 177, 23–27 (de Boor and Wirth); Sebōs c. 12: 84, 24–33 (Abgaryan; tr. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, Sebōs I, 28–29); Narratio de rebus Armeniae § 94: 39, 235–237 (Garite); T'ovna Arcruni, Patmut' iwm II, 3: 148 (Patkanian); Honigmann, Ostgrenze, 28–37; Christensen, Iran, 445; Grouset, Arménie, 249 and 251–253; Goubert, Byzance, 167–170 and 290–302; Narratio de rebus Armeniae (Garite) 236–237; Adontz and Garsoi'an, Armenia, 179–182; Schreiner, Simokatess, 302, n. 596; Laurent and Canard, Arménie, 40–41; Whitby, Maurice, 304; Garsoi'an, Marzpanate, 108–109; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, Sebōs I, 171; Behammer, Nachrichten, 22–23 (n. 14); Garsoi'an, Grand schisme, 264–267; idem, Armenien, 1191–1192; Redgate, Armenians, 157; Greatrex and Lieu, Eastern Frontier, 172–174 and 294, n. 54; Greenwood, Sebōs, 335 (with n. 51); Preiser-Kapeller, Magister Militum, 349–350; Thomson, Armenia, 169; Greenwood, Armenian Neighbours, 337; Müller, Preiser-Kapeller and Riehle, Regesten, N. 104; cf. esp. Hewsen, Atlas, map 69.

Cf. also Greenwood, Armenian Neighbours, 337–338.

Sebōs c. 30: 105, 28–33 (Abgaryan; tr. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, Sebōs I, 56); Grouset, Arménie, 264–265; Goubert, Byzance, 209–210; Ditten, Ethnische Verschiebungen, 134–135; Garsoi'an, Marzpanate, 109–110; idem, Problem, 57; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, Sebōs II, 190–191; Greatrex and Lieu, Eastern Frontier 178–179; Preiser-Kapeller, Kaysr, 195; Müller, Preiser-Kapeller and Riehle, Regesten, N. 137.

Yovh. Drasy, 16, § 40–51 (tr. Maksoudian, 94; tr. Boissoin-Chenohrikian, 126–127); Armenian Geography (Hewsen) 18–26; Preiser-Kapeller, Magister Militum, 350.


Preiser-Kapeller, Magister Militum, 335–334 (for attempts to establish a permanent Byzantine regime in these years); Greenwood, Armenian Neighbours, 340.

Haldon and Kennedy, Frontier, 79–85; Ohme, Armenia magna; Whittow, Making of Byzantium, 212; Preiser-Kapeller, Magister Militum, 364–365.


We will not deal here with the careers of various Armenian aristocrats in the Byzantine Empire and their integration in the empire's aristocracy, which have been the theme of various studies, cf. Garsoi'an, Problem, and Ch. Settipani, Continuité des élites & Byzance durant les siècles obscurs. Les princes causasiens et l'empire du VI au IX siècle. Paris, 2006; for the material gains from imperial service which surely enhanced its attractiveness cf. Oikonomides, Title and Income, 202–206.


The Bagratuni-family, see above n. 55.


Proc., Bella II, 21, 34: 1, 451 (Dewing); we have more information on how Artabanes returned into the empire, cf. Proc., Bella VIII, 8, 21–28: V, 124–126 (Dewing).

But there was a certain Artabanes in that Roman army [in Lazica], a Persarmenian by birth, who had, as it happened, deserted long before to the Armenians who are subjects of the Romans, not as a simple deserter however, but by the slaughter of one hundred and twenty Persian warriors he had given the Romans a pledge of their loyalty to them. For he had come before Valerian, who at that time was a general in Armenia and requested him to give him fifty Romans and upon getting what he wished he proceeded to a fortress situated in Persarmenia. There a garrison of one hundred and twenty Persians had received him with his company into the fortress, it not being clear that he had changed his allegiance and gone over to the enemy. He then slew the hundred and twenty men and plundered all the money in the fortress – and there was an enormous quantity of it – and so came to Valerian and the Roman army, and having thus proved himself faithful to them, he thereafter marched with the Romans.

Sebōs c. 20: 91, 32–34 (Abgaryan; tr. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, Sebōs I, 38); Müller, Preiser-Kapeller and Riehle, Regesten, N. 89a and b.

Sebōs c. 16: 88 (Abgaryan; tr. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, Sebōs I, 33).

We find a parallel in the Buzandaran Patmut' iwmk IV, 16: 133 (tr. Garsoi'an, 146): therefore he (the Persian king Sapah II) demanded an oath from him and compelled...
him (the Armenian king Aršak), exerting the utmost pressure and saying: "Agree and swear to me on your own faith that you will not be false to me!" When (Aršak) had been pressed to the utmost and in dire straits, the priests of the church of the city of Tispon – the chief of whom was called Mari – were ordered to come. They brought the Holy Gospels, and Șapuh king of Persia made Aršak king of Armenia take an oath, swearing on the Divine Gospels that he would never again be false to him, but that he would keep his oath and maintain his alliance with him.

Lewond c. 10: 35–36 (Ezean; tr. Arzoumanian, 66); Grousset, Arménie, 314; Laurent and Canard, Arménie, 237, 245 and 403; Garsoian, Arab Invasion, 127–128.

Lewond c. 39: 159 (Ezean; tr. Arzoumanian, 143); Tritle, T'ovmaArsruni, Patmut'iwn III, 13 (Patkanean; tr. Thomson, 258-259); Grousset, Garsoi'an.


Men. Prot., fr. 6, 1 (Blockley); Gitterbock, Byzans und Persien, 81–92; Greatrex and Lieu, Eastern Frontier, 132–133 (translation); Dignas and Winter, Rome and Persia, 142 (translation).

Cf. also Jönsson, Diplomatic Signaling, 191: "Diplomatic signalling typically aims at persuasion (...) Attempts at mutual persuasion are of the essence. In other words, bargaining and negotiation processes are at the heart of diplomacy."

Lewond c. 42: 168–169 (Ezean; tr. Arzoumanian, 149); Greenwood, Arménie, Arm6nie, Arménie.

Garsoian, The Aršakuni Dynasty, 78.

Grousset, The Aršakuni Dynasty, 78.


Buzandaran Patmut’iwn’k’ III, 21: 64 (tr. Garsoian, 97–98).

Elšē I: 6 (Tēr-Minasean; tr. Thomson, 60); Adontz and Garsoian, Armenia, 218–219.

Greatrex and Lieu, Eastern Frontier, 55–56.

Lazar P’arpc’e: 33: 63 (Tēr Mkrē’t’e ean and Malyaseanc’); tr. Thomson, 104).

Elšē II: 71 (Tēr-Minasean; tr. Thomson, 122).

Cf. Lazar P’arpc’e: 41: 73-74 (Tēr Mkrē’t’e ean and Malyaseanc’); tr. Thomson, 118); Elšē II: 73 (Tēr-Minasean; tr. Thomson, 124).


On this tradition see below, p. 51.

Sebēs 8: 67–68 (Abgaryan; tr. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, Sebeos I, 6–7); cf. also Garsoian, Armenien, 1212–1213; Beissmacher, Nachrichten, 3–5 (N. 4 and 5); Greatrex and Lieu, Eastern Frontier, 137–138 and 149; Dédéyan (ed.), Histoire, 202–203; Thomson, Armenia, 168; Müller, Preiser-Kapeller and Riehle, Regesten, N. 17.

Evagrius, Hist. Eccl. V, 7: 203 (ed. Bidez and Parmentier); Greatrex and Lieu, Eastern Frontier, 138–139 (translation); cf. also the hint on Vardan’s rank within the aristocracy.

Men. Prot. 20, 2: 184, 49–56 (Blockley).

Mich. Syr. 1. 1: 282 and 283 (Chabot); Men. Prot. 23,9 and 26, 1: 204–210 and 228–234 (Blockley); Goubert, Byzance, 78–79; Whitby, Maurice, 219, 251–252, 271–274; Beissmacher, Nachrichten, 7–9 (N. 6); Greatrex and Lieu, Eastern Frontier, 159–166; Müller, Preiser-Kapeller and Riehle, Regesten, N. 22, 23, 54 and 59.


For the temporary flexibility of Byzantine diplomacy in the relations to Armenia cf. also Greenwood, Photius, and generally on this phenomenon Chrysos, Diplomacy, 30–31.

Sebēsos c. 18: 90, 16–22 (Abgaryan; tr.: Thomson and Howard-Johnston, Sebeos I, 36); Garsoian, Marsapanate, 109; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, Sebeos II, 176 and 178; Preiser-Kapeller, Kayser, 193–194 (with a new interpretation of this passage); Müller, Preiser-Kapeller and Riehle, Regesten, N. 108b.


Narratio de rebus Armeniae § 121: 43, 300–305 (Garitte); Mahé, Armenische Kirche, 484–485; Garsoian, Grand schisme, 274 and 385–387; Greenwood, Sebeos, 361; Müller, Preiser-Kapeller and Riehle, Regesten, N. 205c; for the role of such conventions in the life of the Armenian church cf. also Mardirossian, Livre des canons, 125–128 u. 293–296.

Sebēsos c. 45: 147–148 (Abgaryan; tr. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, Sebeos I, 113); Grousset, Arménie, 300; Mahé, Armenische Kirche, 487–488; Garsoian, Arab Invasion, 120; Thomson and Howard-Johnston, Sebeos II, 262–263; Garsoian, Grand schisme, 390–393; Müller, Preiser-Kapeller and Riehle, Regesten, N. 227.


Sebēsos c. 48: 164–27 (Abgaryan; tr. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, Sebeos I, 135–136); cf. also Laiou c. 4: 14 (Ezean; tr. Arzoumanian, 53–54): Then, the chief priest of the Armenians, Nersēs, who had built (the cathedral) of St. Gregory, summoned the princes and the nobles of our country, and together they acceded to submit to the violence of the Ismaelites; Garsoian, Arab Invasion, 121–122.

Movses Kalankatuac’i I, 27: 192–193 (Arak’elyan; tr. Dowsett, 124–125); Bais, Albania Causcasica, 144; Greenwood, Armenian Neighbours, 343.


Sebēsos c. 8: 67, 27–31 (Abgaryan; tr. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, Sebeos I, 6); Preiser-Kapeller, Kayser, 200.