



## ĀZĀD (IRANIAN NOBILITY)

**ĀZĀD** (older ĀZĀT), a class of the Iranian nobility. The word (Mid Pers. 'z't, 'c't, plur. obl. 'z't'n, 'c't'n, Parth. 'z't, plur. obl. 'z'tn) literally means “free,” and by extension also “noble.”

*i. In ancient Iran.*

*ii. Armenian azat.*

i. In Ancient Iran

The division of the Iranian society into four privileged classes antedates the advent of the Sasanians, who inherited it from the Parthians; however, A. Christensen's suggestion that the term *āzād* goes back to the Aryan conquerors, who adopted it to distinguish themselves from the indigenous population, is disputable (*Iran Sass.*, p. 111). This fourfold division of the nobility is attested in inscriptions from the Sasanian period, which show that in Sasanian times the *āzāds* constituted the fourth and last rank of nobles. They were preceded by the *šahryārs* (Mid. Pers. *šhrd'r*, Parth. *hštrdr*) “kings” or “dynasts,” the *wispuhrs* (*BRBYTA[n]*) “princes of the royal blood, members of the great families,” and the *wuzurgs* (*LBA[n]*, *RBA[n]*, Mid. Pers. plur. obl. also *wclkn*) “grandees” (qq. v). (See H. Hübschmann, *Armen. Etymologie*, p. 91, but also A. Perikhanian, *Revue des études arméniennes*, N.S. 8, 1968, pp. 11f.).

The attestations of *āzād* in the inscriptions are: the bilingual (Middle Persian



and Parthian) inscription of Šāpūr I at Hājjiābād (see D. N. MacKenzie, “Shapur’s Shooting,” *BSOAS* 41, 1978, pp. 499-511, with references to previous literature) and the inscription of Narseh I at Paikuli, Kurdistan (see H. Humbach and P. O. Skjærvø, *The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli* I-III, Wiesbaden, 1978-83, III, 2, pp. 45-46). In the Paikuli inscription, which was composed and engraved to commemorate the accession of Narseh I in A.D. 293, the *āzāds* are mentioned several times together with other categories of the nobility (Mid. Pers./Parth. lines 3/2, 7/6, 8/7, 16-17/15, 30/27, 37/34 [twice], 38/35, 40/38 [41-42/39], see *ibid.*, p. 46 and III, 1, pp. 29-68, 77). In the Middle Persian inscription of Šāpūr II at Meškīnšahr, Azarbaijan, only the *šahryārs*, the *wuzurgs*, and the *āzāds* are mentioned (G. Gropp, “Die sasanidische Inschrift von Mishkinshahr in Āzarbaidjān,” *AMI*, N.F. 1, 1968, p. 152).

In a parchment from Dura Europos, dated A.D. 121, the *strategos* Manesus, son of Phraates, with the rank of *batesa*, is said to belong to the *eleutheroi* “the free” (C. Bradford Welles in *The Excavations at Dura-Europos. Final Report V*, New Haven, 1959, pp. 115-16, no. 20.4-5; see also *idem* and M. I. Rostovtzeff, “A Parchment from Dura,” *Yale Classical Studies* 2, 1931, pp. 5-6, 52), probably the Greek equivalent of Iranian *āzād*. This shows that the *āzāds* at that time comprised members of the high nobility.

According to Classical and Armenian authors a cavalry regiment was picked from the *āzāds* both under the Parthians and the Sasanians. Flavius Josephus (*Bellum Judaicum* 1.13.3) says that a regiment consisting of *eleutheroi* was under the command of Prince Pacorus, son of Orodes II during the invasion of Judea in 40 B.C. Justinian (*History of Trogus Pompeius* 41.2) is less clear, stating that among the 50,000 horsemen confronting Antony’s army (36 B.C.) only 400 were *liberi* “free.” In Sasanian times, we are told that the royal bodyguard at the court of Šāpūr II was composed mainly of an “army of free men” (P’awstos Biwzand, *History* 4.53, Venice, 1933, p. 171 = V. Langlois, *Collection des historiens arméniens* I, p. 269: *azatagund puštīpan zawracn*). To designate these regiments of free men, the Armenian authors used the terms *azatagund*, *azatakoyt*, and *azatazawr*.

In Sasanian Iran the *āzāds* seem to have included, at least in later centuries, the *šahrīgs* “heads of districts” and the *dehqāns* “heads of villages” (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. 446-47; Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, pp. 112, 138, 140 n. 3). The Arab authors sometimes use the term *banu’l-aḥrār* or *aḥrār* to designate this class.



In Arsacid Armenia the term *azatk'* (plur.) came to designate the middle and lower nobility in general, in contrast to the *naxarark'* who were the satraps and the great lords. The *azatk'* had their share in the major events of the country, such as at the election of the patriarch (P'awstos Biwzand, *History* 4.3, Venice ed., p. 77 = V. Langlois, *Collection* I, p. 236). Elsewhere they are contrasted with the *šinakank'* (< Parth. \**šēnakān*), the rural lower class of peasants and villagers (P'awstos Biwzand, *History* 5.30, 44, Venice ed., p. 91 = V. Langlois, *Collection* I, pp. 296, 306; Elišē Vardapet, pars. 3, 8, Venice, 1950, p. 91; cf. Hübschmann, *Armen. Etymologie*, p. 91; Adontz, "L'aspect iranien du servage," p. 155; Widengren, *Der Feudalismus*, pp. 112-14). (See also ii below.)

Outside of Iran proper, we find the *āzāds* as a privileged class in Sogdia, see G. A. Koshelenko, "Les cavaliers parthes," *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 6, Paris, 1980, pp. 177-99; O. I. Smirnova, "Azatan as a Social Category of Sogdian Population," in *The Near and Middle Orient* (for the 70th Anniversary of Professor M. Petrushevski), Moscow, 1970, pp. 148-49.

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Idem in H. Temporini and W. Haase, eds., *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II, 9/1, 1976, pp. 239-40, 248.

*Camb. Hist. Iran* III, pp. 394, 632-34, 644-46, 700, 703, 1276.

(M. L. Chaumont)



ii. Armenian Azat

The Armenian term *azat*, derived from the Iranian *zan-* “to be born,” originally signifying “born (into the clan)” and, by extension, “noble” and “free,” a congener of the Iranian term *āzāt* (*āzād*), was its exact etymological and sociological equivalent. In the dichotomous structure of the Armenian—and Caucasian—nobility, it designated members of the lesser nobility, standing below the group of the dynastic princes, descendants of the tribal chiefs of prehistoric times. The *azatk’* (plur.) were presumably descended (a) from heads of smaller clans and family-heads of tribal times, (b) from a section of the tribal army-people that had remained free, (c) from the war-bands of the dynasts, and (d) possibly illegitimately from the princes themselves. This was a class of noble landowners directly subordinate to the princes and to the king, as prince of his own demesne, and at the same time a class of noble warriors, an *ordo equester*, whose vassalage to the dynasts was expressed, first of all, in the duty, which was also a privilege, of serving the feudal cavalry of their suzerains, as well as in other obligations. It seems plausible that they enjoyed certain minor governmental rights on their own lands. Their equivalence with the medieval Western knights was immediately recognized when, as during the Crusades, the two societies, Armenian and Frankish, existed side by side. Thus the Armeno-Cilician Code of the Constable Smbat (after 1275) explains the meaning of *azat* by *jiawar*, an Armenian adaptation of *chevalier*. Together with the princes, these lesser nobles formed a social group that was wholly distinct from the rest of the people, and their oneness as a class was shown by the fact that derivatives of the term *azat* were used to designate the entire body of the nobility.

N. Adontz, “L’aspect iranien du servage,” *Recueils de la Société Jean Bodin* 2, 1937, pp. 143-45.

Idem, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, tr. and rev. by N. Garsoïan, Lisbon, 1970, pp. 305, 332-33, 342-43.

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Idem, *The Trade and Cities of Armenia in Relation to Ancient World Trade*, tr. N. Garsoĭan Lisbon, 1965, pp. 70-71, 175.

C. Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, Georgetown, 1963, pp. 93-94, 123-27.

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