



BALĀSAGĀN

BALĀSAGĀN (Ar. Balāsajān, Balāšajān; Armenian Bałasakan), an Iranian toponym in *-agān* (*-akān*) “country of the Balās,” designating a region located for the most part south of the lower course of the rivers Kor (Kura, Gk. Kyros, Lat. Cyrus) and the Aras (Araxes), bordered on the south by Atropatene and on the east by the Caspian Sea.

i. In pre-Islamic times.

ii. In Islamic times.

i. In Pre-Islamic Times

The country and its inhabitants. The heart of this country was the *dašt i-Bałasakan* “Balāsagān plain,” which the Armenian Geography of Pseudo-Moses of Khorene (Adontz, p. 124*) places in Albania and which is virtually identical with the Moḡān (Mūḡān) steppe. According to Ebn Kordāḡbeh (p. 121), this plain was located on the road from Barzand to Vartān (Vartanakert). It is extremely doubtful that in the Sasanian period Balāsagān extended as far as the Caucasus range and the Darband pass, as Maricq believes (Honigmann and Maricq, pp. 81-82).

We must agree with Trever (p. 75) that Balāsagān was partially identical with the region that Aelianus (*De natura animalium* 17.7), citing Amyntas, an author of the fourth century b.c., called “land of the Caspians” (see aelianus), a region



also known in the Hellenistic period under the name Caspiana (which had been taken from the Medes of Atropatene by the Armenians at the beginning of the second century b.c.). Given that Caspiana was for the most part included in the later province of P'aitakaran in the *Geography* of Pseudo-Moses (see Hübschmann, pp. 4, 267ff., 351-52), it follows that Balāsagān corresponds to the part of the territory of that province that was situated south of the Kor.

The ethnic term Bałasčik', attested only in Armenian, was formed from Bałasakan (cf. Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 120; Hübschmann, p. 412). The fact that Elišē (*Histoire d'Arménie* 7.30, Venice, pp. 262-64; Langlois, II, p. 227) designates one king of Balāsagān as a Hun must not be taken literally and does not by any means permit the conclusion of a Hunnish origin for the inhabitants of Balāsagān.

Balāsagān in the Sasanian empire. It is in the trilingual inscription of Šāpūr I, carved a little after a.d. 260, that Balāsagān is attested for the first time (Mid. Pers. 1. 2: *Bl'sk'n*; Parth. 1. 2: *Bl'skn*; Gk., 1. 3: *Balasagene* [?], see Maricq, p. 49). The fact that, in this inscription, this country is mentioned independently of Albania in the list of provinces of the Sasanian empire could mean that at the time of its conquest by Ardašīr I or Šāpūr I it formed a sort of political entity, even if it was more or less subject to the kingdom of Albania. On the other hand, Ebn Kordāḍbeh (p. 18) mentions the king of Balāsagān (Balāšajān Shah) among the dynasts who received the title of king from Ardašīr (cf. Adontz, p. 170). This would indicate that the king of Balāsagān had made an act of submission and allegiance to Ardašīr (or to Šāpūr), of whom he became, by the same act, a vassal.

Faustus reports that, under the reign of the king of Armenia Kōsrow II, Gregory, catholicos of Iberia and Albania, attempted to convert the kingdom of Sanesan (the same one that Pseudo-Moses of Khorene, 3.3, knew under the name Sanatruk). This Sanesan, king of the Massagetes (Alans), also ruled over other peoples, among whom figured the Bałasčik'. Having invaded Armenia, the army of the king of the Massagetes was cut to pieces by the Armenians; the survivors fell back toward the country of the Bałasčik' (*ašxarhn bałasčik'*; Faustus, 3.7; Langlois, II, pp. 215-16). It would seem then that, toward a.d. 335-36, the Massagete Sanesan occupied a part of Balāsagān, where he recruited troops, all the while recognizing, at least nominally, the suzerainty of the king of kings. At the beginning of the following century, Saint Mesrob, in the course of his evangelistic mission, preached in Balāsagān, a country that, according to Koriun, then belonged to Albania (11.5, p. 34). This situation could



be explained by a kind of dependence (vassalage) of Balāsagān in relation to Albania.

Balāsagān is mentioned in connection with the revolt of the Armenians against the Persians under Yazdegerd II. Thus, in a battle that took place near the Lop'nas river, some Armenian lords attacked the king of Balāsagān and his troops (Elišē, 4.59, pp. 147-48; Langlois, II, p. 208; Movsēs Kałankatuac'i, 2.2, p. 67). The context leaves no doubt that the forces of Balāsagān were at that time fighting on the side of the Persians. But the king of the country, Heṛan, called Hun by Elišē, was not slow to revolt against his Sasanian overlord. In fact, we learn that he subsequently massacred a Persian army in Albania, after which he was killed on the orders of Yazdegerd II (Elišē, 7.30, pp. 263-64; Langlois, II, pp. 147-48).

It is probably to the Sasanian administration that the creation of districts called in Armenian Spanderanperož, Ormizdperož, Aṭ'sibagawan, and, probably, Alewan, all located south of the Kor, were created (cf. Hübschmann, p. 352). The two first-named, in Middle Persian Spandarān-Pērōz and Hormizd-Pērōz, are obviously names of Sasanian origin.

The Christianization of Balāsagān and Iranian survivals in local paganism in the late period. There were two attempts at conversion of Balāsagān: first, that of Gregory, which must have ended in his martyrdom, then that of Saint Mesrob. We do not know the results of these missions and whether or not conversion of this country was pursued subsequently. One fact is certain: In the third quarter of the sixth century a bishop of Balāsagān by the name of Timothy figured, with other bishops, among those named in a letter addressed by the catholicos John II of Armenia to the catholicos of Albania (*Livre des lettres*, p. 21; Movsēs Kałankatuac'i, 2.7, p. 72). Besides, a Sasanian seal published recently (Gignoux, II, p. 64, cf. p. 5) is inscribed in Pahlavi in the name "of the great catholicos of Hlb'n and of Balāsagān;" Hlb'n in this context could very well be the Middle Persian name of the city called Alewan in Armenian (perhaps identical with Ptolemy's city of Albana, 5.11.2), capital of the district of the same name situated in Balāsagān.

It is nevertheless true that toward the year a.d. 800 the region of Moğān remained still unconverted. The bishop Eliya, appointed to preach the Gospel in that country, which was no longer called Balāsagān, found there a population given to the worship of a God by the name of Yazd, who resided in an oak tree called "king of the forest;" the bushes that surrounded this tree



were called “children of Yazd.” The local population claimed to have received this god from its ancestors (Thomas de Marga, II, pp. 509-512; cf. Fiey, pp. 340-41). In Pahlavi *yazd* is the ordinary term denoting a god. The cult that Bishop Eliya had to combat was manifestly a borrowing from the beliefs of Mazdaism, a borrowing that must have originated in the Sasanian period and been amalgamated with a very different indigenous cult of the sacred trees.

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(M. L. Chaumont)

ii. In the Islamic Period

In Islamic times, Balāsagān spanned the plain extending across the lower course of the Aras (Araxes) river, from Barḍa‘a through Baylaqān to Vartān, Bājarvān, and Barzand. It included the provinces of Arrān and Mūgān, though as Minorsky noted, the name is common in Armenian sources but rare in Islamic ones. Nevertheless, we find it mentioned by Balāḍorī, who says that in about 24/645 the caliph ‘Oṭmān sent Salmān b. Rabī‘a Bāhelī to Arrān, and after the surrender of Baylaqān, Barḍa‘a, etc., he summoned the Kurds of Balāsagān to Islam and imposed the *jezya* on some of them; similarly, when Ḥoḍayfa b. Yamān made a peace treaty with the *marzbān* of Azarbaijan, one of the provisions was that the Arabs should not expose the local people to the depredations of the Kurds of Balāsajān and the Sabalān mountains (*Fotūḥ*, pp. 203, 326, tr. P. K. Hitti and F. C. Murgotten, *The Origins of the Islamic State I*, New York, 1916, p. 319, II, New York, 1924, p. 20; cf. Schwarz, *Iran*, pp. 998, 1156-57, 1248). The classical Arabic geographers rarely mention Balāsagān under that name, but the 4th/10th-century traveler Abū Dolaf says in his *al-Resāla al-ṭānīa* that he traversed the plain, noting the ruins of 5,000 (sic!) villages there; he adds that popular legend located there the *Aṣḥāb al-rass* “People of the ditch” of Koran 25:40, 50:12 or else the host of Goliath, who was allegedly killed and buried at Urmia (V. Minorsky, *Abū-Dulaf Mis‘ar Ibn Muḥalhil’s Travels in Iran (circa A.D. 950)*, Cairo, 1955, sec. 16, tr. p. 36, comm. p. 75).

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