



ŁAZAR P'ARPEC'I

ŁAZAR P'ARPEC'I, late 5th century Armenian historian, author of *History of Armenia* and *Letter to Vahan Mamikonean*. Łazar was born circa 441-43 or 453 CE, in a low or middling noble family, in the village P'arpi (Aragacotn province). He was raised by a princess of the Armenian noble [Mamikonean family](#) and was educated in Constantinople (ca. 465-70). Łazar's letter to his foster-brother Vahan Mamikonean, which contains biographical data about him, is unique in medieval Armenian literature. It also tells that Vahan commissioned Łazar to write his historical work.

The Persian-Armenian treaty of Nvarsak (484) and Vahan Mamikonean's appointment as *marzpan* (governor, MPers. *marzbān*) resulted in the establishment of a peaceful period in Armenia. Vahan rebuilt the cathedral in Vałaršapat (now [Ejmiacin](#)) and appointed Łazar as prior of the monastery (after 486, probably in 493). It is also known that in about 490 Łazar visited [Amida](#) (tr. Thomson, p. 248, Melik'-Baxšyan, p. 81).

Łazar calls his work the "third history of Armenia" (following the "first history" by Agat'angelos [[AGATHANGELOS](#)] and the "second" by P'awstos Buzand [[FAUSTUS](#)]). The *History*, being an encomium to the Mamikonean family, consists of an introduction and three books. It covers the period between 387 CE (the year which P'awstos Buzand's *History* ends) to 485 CE.

The first book describes the political situation in Armenia after its division between Persia and the Byzantine Empire in 387 CE. King Aršak left for Greece in order to gain freedom to practice his Christian faith. Łazar describes the



Sasanian policy of disuniting the Armenian secular and ecclesiastic rulers, which resulted in the opposition of a part of nobility to the Arsacid kings and weakening of the half-dependent Armenian state. The King replaced Ƙosrow III (387-89) with his brother Vramšapuh (Bahrāmšāpur; 389-414) under whose reign the Armenian alphabet was invented. After Vramšapuh's death Ƙosrow returned to the throne but he died in eight months (tr. Thomson, p. 52). Having the goal of fully integrating Armenia into his empire and spreading Persian religion in order to weaken Armenia's links with the Christian Empire, Yazkert I (Yazdegerd I) organized marriages between Armenians and Persians and seated his son Šapuh (Šāpur, governor of Persarmenia) on the Armenian throne. Yazkert I died in 420, his son Šapuh was killed, and Vram (Bahrām V Gōr) ascended the Persian throne. He made Vramšapuh's son Artashes (Ardašīr) king of Armenia (422-28), but Artashes was deposed from the throne in his sixth year and was followed by Persian *marzpan*s, while Catholicos Sahak, the head of the Armenian Church, was replaced by patriarchs of Syrian origin appointed by the king. This marked the fall of the Armenian royal Arsacid dynasty in 428 CE. According to Łazar, the princes themselves requested the king for a Persian ruler over them. The first book also includes the story of the invention of the Armenian alphabet by Maštoc' and Catholicos Sahak (mainly based on *Vark' Maštoc'i*, the Life of Maštoc', by Koriwn) and the death of Maštoc' in 439 CE (tr. Thomson, pp. 46-51). The first book is concluded by the "Vision" of Sahak which predicts the renewal of the reign of the Arsacid dynasty and the patriarchs of the church descending from Gregory the Illuminator (tr. Thomson, pp. 65-74).

The second book narrates the religious and political persecutions of Armenians initiated by minister (*hazarapet*, MPers. *hazārbed*) Mihrnerseh (Mihr Narseh) and the war with Persia in 449-51 CE (covering the same events as Elišē's *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*) in the days of Yazkert II (Yazdegerd II). It praises the Mamikonean family, especially *sparapet* (commander-in-chief) Vardan. The author seems to be familiar with Elišē's work, but there are no textual parallels. The similarity is probably due to the fact that both authors were nearly contemporaries and eyewitnesses to the events they described. Different approaches are observed in the following point: while the speeches of Elišē's secular and ecclesiastic figures are endowed with fighting spirit, appeal to courage and heroism, and Elišē describes a struggle for the motherland, Łazar presents it as a struggle for Christ, and his main accent is on religious moralization and the idea of martyrdom for the faith.

Armenia had become one of the provinces of the Persian Empire. The king had a program of religious assimilation of Armenians and was forcing them to give up Christianity and adopt [Zoroastrianism](#). This was rejected by the Armenian Church. Łazar describes the king's reaction to the letter he received: "Your replies in the letter which you had brought to me are very divergent and different. For in the letter it was made clear that there are matters in which we serve you and agree not to oppose your will and command; and there is something which you must not ask of us and in which we are unable to obey you and accept" (tr. Thomson, p. 86).

A letter was sent to Armenia, stating that the Christian faith is incorrect and that the only true religion is Zoroastrianism. The answer signed by Catholicos Yovsep' and 17 bishops was a rejection of Zoroastrianism and apology of Christianity. The king called some Armenian, Georgian, and Albanian princes to his court, where they were threatened either to worship the sun or to be punished. So they pretended apostasy (*sparapet* Vardan Mamikonean strongly resisted this decision but finally was persuaded), remaining true Christians in their heart. For this they received honors as well as lands and towns, but some were held hostage (tr. Thomson, p. 95). An army accompanied by 700 [magi](#) was sent to Armenia for establishing the new religion, which caused great sorrow among the people. When the apostates returned home, they were rejected by their families. Vardan Mamikonean explained to his family that his apostasy was feigned and decided to move to the Roman part of Armenia (tr. Thomson, p. 97). But the princes persuaded him to head a rebellion. Łazar tells about preventing a group of magi from defiling a church by kindling fire in it, and about killing the magi who were hateful to the people and regarded as "false teachers." The magi sent secret information about the plans of rebellion to the court (tr. Thomson, p. 101). Łazar stresses the king's intention to conquer [Georgia](#) and [Albania](#) as well (while the Armenian forces supported them to resist). The Armenians were demolishing the fire-altars and fighting against their apostate compatriots. The treachery of *marzpan* Vasak, prince of Siwnik', who was faithful to the Persians, fought against the Armenian troops and caused civil war, is a central theme in Łazar P'arpets'i's description of the Armenian revolt of 450/451 CE. Its immediate cause is ascribed to a dispute between Vasak and his son-in-law and successor Varazvałan.

In the battle of [Avarayr](#), the 66,000-strong Armenian army led by Vardan Mamikonean fought against larger Persian forces, which included also the renegade Armenian contingent (Vasak and his adherents). The battle ended in



a tactical draw. The Persians lost 3,544 men and several war elephants. Armenian casualties were 1,036 killed, among them sparapet Vardan. The news of Vardan's death saddened Yazkert who recalled Vardan's service to him in his fights with outer enemies; he sent Atrozmidz (Ādur Hormizd) as *marzpan* to Armenia, instructing him to grant religious freedom to its people (tr. Thomson, p. 117).

The third book is a unique primary source for the Armenian-Persian relations of the period 460-84 CE. Its main topic is the rebellion of 482-84 CE against Persia, ending with Vahan Mamikonean's appointment as *marzpan* by the Persian court. The narrative is based on the author's memoirs. The Sasanian rulers adopted a new policy for subduing Armenia. Instead of relying on strength, they were trying to split the nobility. But in the 60s the situation changed in favor of patriotic forces ruled by Catholicos Giwt (461-78). They started secret negotiations with Byzantium for ensuring support in case of the future rebellion. King [Pērōz I](#) was informed by traitors, Giwt was dethroned from patriarchate and Vahan Mamikonean was defamed. The latter went to [Ctesiphon](#) and managed to dispel the king's suspicion and gain the right to collect taxes in Armenia. Tim Greenwood supposes that he settled the problem by a large sum of gold (p. 9).

In 481 an anti-Persian movement raised in Eastern Georgia (Iberia) which encouraged Armenians. Atrvšnasp (Ādur Gušnasp) Yozmandean, the *marzpan* of Armenia, received an order to go to Georgia, but the Armenian militants under his command disobeyed him and decided to rebel. Led by Vahan Mamikonean, they attacked [Dvin](#), defeated the Persian forces, conquered the city and formed a government: Vahan was appointed *sparapet* and Sahak Bagratuni (see [BAGRATIDS](#)) became *marzpan*. During the winter of 481-82, Vahan led some battles against the Persians and made preparations to face future surprises. He managed to involve more and more princes and popular forces in the revolt, also reinforcing his ties with the Georgian rebels. In the spring of 484 Vahan Mamikonean defeated the Persian army in the battle of Nersehapat which gained him higher prestige (see [ARMENIA AND IRAN ii. The pre-Islamic period](#)). Although later on the united Armenian-Georgian forces were defeated by the Persians in the battle near river Kura on the Čarmanayn plain, they continued their struggle with small guerilla groups (tr. Thomson, p. 190). Crucial was the attack of the [Hephthalites](#) on the eastern Persian border, during which Pērōz was killed. His successor Vałarš ([Walāxš/Balāš](#), 484-88 CE) started negotiations with Vahan Mamikonean and signed the treaty of

Nvarsak, granting autonomy and religious freedom to the Armenians (tr. Thomson, pp. 215-20). Łazar's *History* is concluded with a description of the celebration of Vahan Mamikonean's appointment as *marzpan* by all classes of the Armenians. Vahan is presented as an epic hero.

Łazar made interesting observations about fire-worship. T. Greenwood mentions Łazar's significant information on Sasanian military hierarchy, provincial administration and political culture. For instance, *šahap* (*šahrab*) in combination with a single province is later than all other references to this position in primary sources (3rd-4th centuries). Noteworthy are the title of *tanutēr* ("a lord who has been officially recognized as such by the Sasanian king" as opposed to *tēr* "lord") always awarded by the Sasanian king, the frequent mention of the office of *hazarapet* of Armenia, etc. (Greenwood, p.14).

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