



MAMIKONEAN FAMILY

MAMIKONEAN FAMILY, the most distinguished family in Early Christian Armenia after the ruling Arsacid house. Their power survived the fall of the dynasty in 428 and began to wane only from the end of the 6th century with the rising power of the Bagratids, although their significant role in Armenian politics was to last two more centuries (Toumanoff, 1990, pp. 29-335). During the 4th-5th centuries they are shown as dominating Armenian history in the two surviving, contemporary major works which were composed in praise of their family: the *History of Armenia* of Łazar P'arpec'i, who had been educated in their household, and the anonymous *Epic Histories*, formerly attributed to P'awstos Buzand, which may rest in part on a lost "Geste" dedicated to them (BP-G, pp. 31-32, 34-35).

The Mamikoneans claimed to be of royal Čenk' descent, a people traditionally associated with China (*Primary History*, B; BP-G, 5.4.37, pp. 194, 218-19; MK, 2.81, pp. 229-31). Although this origin is disputed by scholars, who have not yet reached a final conclusion, the Mamikoneans have been thought to have come from Central Asia or from the region of [Darband](#). Adontz and especially Toumanoff considered that their ancestry should be linked with Georgia (Adontz, 1970, p. 312; Toumanoff, 1963, pp. 209-10).

The power of the family was derived from its vast landholdings, which included both the northwestern province of Tayk' and the southwestern region of Tarawn. To these were subsequently added the patriarchal estates of Bagrewand, Daranalik', and Ekełeac'in the west, inherited by Hamazasp Mamikonean through his marriage to the only daughter of St. Sahak the Great,



the last male descendant of St. Gregory the Illuminator, after the patriarch's death in 438 (ŁP'-T, 1.18, pp. 72-73; MK, 111.1, pp. 315-16). As such, they were the greatest landholders in the realm of Armenia. The second source of the family's eminence was its holding of the office of grand marshal or commander-in-chief (*sparapet*) of the entire Armenian army. This office was hereditary in the Mamikonean clan and could not be alienated, even when the holder was a small child incapable of performing its duties, so that temporary surrogates had to be appointed (Vg sec. 98-Va sec. 84, p. 72; BP-G, 3.11, p. 81). Not even the king's manifest will could alter this status (BP-G, 5.37, p. 218). To this dignity was apparently added the equally hereditary position of royal tutor (*dayeak*), though this prerogative is obscured by alterations in the *History* dedicated to the rival Bagratid house) (BP-G, p. 521; MK, 2.82, p. 232). As a result of this concentration of power, the Mamikonean, though unable to be kings themselves under Armenian customary law of hereditary offices, were able to play kingmakers to the enfeebled later Armenian Arsacids. Thus, Mušel Mamikonean would procure the return of the young king Pap after the Sasanian ravaging of Armenia in 363-364, and his successor Manuēl ruled Armenia as regent for the dowager queen and Pap's two young sons, to one of whom he gave his daughter in marriage (BP-G, 5.37-38, 44, pp. 221, 328).

Less tangible, but unquestionably significant, was the prestige which redounded to the family through the martyrdom of its head, Prince Vardan "the Red," who, together with most of the Armenian nobility, fell at the battle of Awarayr in 451 in opposition to Yazdgerd II's attempt to reimpose Zoroastrianism on an already Christian Armenia. Canonized by the Armenian Church and the central figure in the early accounts of the Armenian revolt against Persia (EP'-T and E-T), Vardan, together with his brothers, his older kinswoman Hamazaspuhi, and his daughter Šušanik, was extolled as the martyr for the faith par excellence and, as such, as the role model for the Armenian identification as the Christian Maccabees developed by the Armenian literature of the next generation (BP-G, 3.11, pp. 80-81; ŁP'-T, 3.63, pp. 1, 3; Garsoïan, 1994, pp. 124-30).

Politically, the Mamikoneans were normally viewed as the hellenophile partisans of the Byzantine empire in opposition to the Sasanians. Early in the 4th century, the *sparapet* Vač'ē led the Armenian army against Persia and died "a martyr's death" in battle (BP-G, 3.11, pp. 80-81). Later in the century his descendant, Vasak, was put to death by Šāpur II. Subsequently, the return of the young king Pap by the *sparapet* Mušel ca. 368 was achieved with the help



of Byzantine forces, and his successor Manuēl began by opposing the governor supported by the Persians (BP-G, 5.1 and 29-43, pp. 185-96, 223-28). In the following century, the revolt and death of Vardan the Red in 451 made of him the central figure of Armenian medieval history, and his nephew Vahan rekindled the rebellion against Persia in 481-482 (ŁP^c-T, 3, pp. 184-239). The unsuccessful rebellion of Vardan II in 571-72, leading to his flight to Constantinople and his settlement near Pergamon in Anatolia marked the beginning of the Mamikoneans' slow decline. Nevertheless, Mamikoneans were sufficiently important to obtain repeatedly the position of "Princes of Armenia" from the Byzantine emperors in the 7th and 8th centuries, to be appointed "prince of the Armenian cavalry" by the emperor Constans II Pogonatus (r. 641-68) on his coming to Armenia in 651/52 (Ps.S. 48, p. 1139), and to be invested, on one occasion at least, in the mid-7th century, with the Byzantine dignity of *curopalates* (Toumanoff 1990, p. 332 sec. 71,b13). The continuing prosperity of the family in the middle of the 7th century is attested by the extensive ruins of the vast palace and adjoining domed basilica dedicated in the name of Grigor Mamikonean prince of Armenia (662-85) and his wife Helen at Aruč, not far west of the modern capital of Erevan (Łew. IV, p. 54; Thierry, pp. 495-96, color pls. 34-35).

The loyalty of the Mamikoneans to the Byzantine empire and their hostility to Persia were not, however, unshakeable. Their political position oscillated and could on occasion be reversed. In the second half of the fourth century, Vahan Mamikonean, the contemporary and probable brother of the *sparapet* Vasak, married the sister of the Persian king, supported the rebellion of the arch-traitor Meružan Arcruni, converted to Zoroastrianism, and ruled Armenia with him under Persian auspices—actions which led to his murder by his own son, as the Armenian sources approvingly report (BP-G, 4.1,58-59, pp. 167-68, 178-80). Toward the end of the Armenian Arsacid dynasty, Manuēl Mamikonean fought the Persians and acted as regent for Armenia, but he simultaneously turned to the Sasanians for help and cooperated with the *marzpan* sent by the Persian court (BP-G, 5.37-38, pp. 221-22). According to the Pseudo Sebēos, prince Mušeł Mamikonean withstood the blandishments of Bahram Čobin, although his later career was less fortunate (Ps.S., 11, pp. 20-22). The revolt of Vahan Mamikonean ended in his recognition as *marzpan* by the Sasanians, the transmission of this dignity to his brother Vard "Patrik" (although the latter had also received the Byzantine title of "patrician"), and the grant of political and religious autonomy to Armenia in 485 (ŁP-T, 3.99, pp. 240-41; Garsoïan 1999, pp. 161, 168, 440, 446-47).



The final decline of the Mamikoneans came during the earlier period of the Arab domination of Armenia after the disappearance of the Sasanian dynasty in Persia. Outraged by the transfer of the dignity of prince of Armenia to Ašot from the rival house of the [Bagratids](#) in 732, and their usurpation of the office of *sparapet*, traditionally hereditary in the Mamikonean house, the brothers Grigor and David rebelled against the caliphate and were exiled to Yemen. The second revolt of Grigor in 748 likewise ended in failure and his own death the following year. Onomastic evidence shows that the descendants of Vardan II survived on Byzantine territory and even reached as far as the imperial throne in the persons of the emperor Philippikos-Bardanes/Vardan (r. 711-13) and Artavazdos, the son in-law of the emperor Leo III (r. 717-41) (Garsoïan, 1996, p. 231). In their homeland, however, the period of Mamikonean preponderance had finally come to an end. Almost all of the family's domains were lost after the failure of the 8th-century rebellions, leaving only a portion of southern Tarawn to a collateral branch. The great revolt of the Armenians against the 'Abbasid caliphate in 774-75 resulted in their disastrous defeat at the battle of Bagrewand (25 April 775), which left the head of the Mamikonean house, prince Mušel, dead on the field. The last Mamikonean heiress, whose name has not even been recorded by the sources, was forced to seek refuge in a marriage with an Arab freebooter named Jaḥḥāf (Ter Ghewondyan, 1976, pp. 33-34, 48).

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