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SEBEOS

SEBEOS, a seventh-century Armenian historian.

Armenia may have been partitioned between the great powers in late antiquity. A Mediterranean religion may have infiltrated its ruling classes on either side of the artificial political divide, together with a sedimentary deposit of Greco-Roman culture. But it was to Iran that most Armenians looked as a social and cultural exemplar, and it was within the larger world of Iran that Armenian historians placed their own regional history. So it is that two fine contemporary histories, both written in Persarmenia, (1) Łazar P‘arpets‘i’s detailed narrative of the two great uprisings of 450-51 and 482-84 and (2) a wide-ranging history composed in the 650s which has been attributed to Sebeos, cast the clearest light of any extant sources on the ceremonial, politics, administration and military affairs of the Sasanian empire. Their existence consoles latter-day historians for the dearth of reliable indigenous contemporary middle Persian sources.

The history attributed to Sebeos has survived in a single late manuscript, Matenadaran 2639 (dated 1672). It was the last in a series of texts, constituting a virtual canon of historical writing, brought together in this famous manuscript. A second, older manuscript (dated 1568) was known and used for the first edition published in 1851, but it has since been lost. The editor, T‘adēos Mihrdatean, was responsible for its widely accepted identification with a history of Heraclius written by Sebeos, a text cited in lists of anterior works given by Step‘anos Taronets‘i (early eleventh century) and a number of other, later Armenian historians. It is striking, however, that the early tenth-

century historian, T‘ovma Artsruni, who quotes extensively from the text, makes no reference to Sebeos or to a history of Heraclius. The same is true of Łewond (late ninth century) and Yovhannēs Draskhanakertts‘i (early tenth century), who were acquainted with it. The identification can be rejected definitively on the basis of a comparison with the few extracts from Sebeos’History of Heraclius which have been independently preserved (Thomson, Armenian History, pp. xxxi-xxxviii). Heraclius, it should be added, is very far from being the central character. That place belongs to Ḵosrow II (q.v.; r. 590-628), as is made very plain by the anonymous author in a short editorial passage, placed between an introductory section (pp. 64-71, an outline of events from the middle of the fifth century to the late 580s), and the main body of the text. Ḵosrow is presented as the principal subject of what is designated a Chronological Book (an Armenian calque on the Greek chronographia) and Royal History, as the human being primarily responsible for bringing destruction on the whole earth (p. 72). The enigmatic appearance of the name Khosrov at the end of a description of the contents of Matenadaran 2639 (made by Vardan Bałishets‘I, who commissioned the manuscript) probably refers to the title of the text and not, as has been commonly assumed, to its author.

Who then was the author, if he was not Sebeos or Khosrov? He has left various clues to his identity. His writing is infused with biblical language and allusions. His inclusion of the full text of the defense of the Armenian church’s Monophysite doctrinal stance (agreed at the Council of Dvin in 649) points to a strong interest in theology. He seems to have had access to the archives of the catholicosate at Dvin, since he includes the text of a fundraising letter sent from Jerusalem by Modestus, deputizing for the deported Patriarch Zacharias, and the Catholicos Komitas’ polite but unforthcoming reply (pp. 116-21, 148-61; cf. Thomson, Armenian History, pp. xlix-lii, liv-lvii). All of this points to a churchman. Confirmation is obtainable from a scene, vividly evoked, which takes place at Dvin late in 653. A recalcitrant bishop tries to avoid taking communion with the Emperor Constans II on the occasion of his visit to the city. He is finally compelled to do so, but not before he has referred to the doctrinal statement of the Council of Dvin (pp. 166-68). It is hard to escape the conclusion that a piece of autobiography, discreetly put in the third person, has been slipped into the history.

The history ranges back some two generations before the time of writing on the eve of the outbreak of the first Muslim civil war in 656. It opens with brief

notices about the reign of Hormozd IV (q.v.; r. 579-90) and the victories of Bahrām Čobin (q.v.; r. 590-91) in the east and the Caucasus, before embarking on a full narrative of the latter's successful rebellion, the execution of Hormozd, the flight west of his young son, Ḵosrow II Parvez, and his restoration with Roman help in 591. The first of the three distinct parts of the history continues with an account of the following eleven years of peace and co-operation between the great powers, focused on moments of tension between leading Armenians and the imperial authorities, Persian and Roman. Two of the contributory sources, an apparently official list of Persian governors/commanders sent to Armenia, including summaries of their main deeds, and a biography of Smbat Bagratuni, who proved a loyal and gifted military servant of the new "king of kings" (šāhanšāh), provide invaluable information about Sasanian administrative practice and court life. The second part covers the last great war between the Persians and Romans (603-30). As might be expected, the spotlight is on operations in Armenia, in particular the initial reverse and subsequent series of gains made by Persian forces in the first phase of attrition (603-10), the general Philippicus' counterstrike into the Araxes plain by Erevan (615), and Heraclius' bold counteroffensives of 624-26 and 627-28 (pp. 107-11, 114, 124-26). It culminates in an account of the deposition and death of Ḵosrow, the reigns of his son Kawād II and grandson Ardašir III (q.v.), and the brief, Roman-backed usurpation of the greatest of his generals, Šahrwarāz, in 630 (pp. 127-30).

After a few concluding notices—covering inter alia the ceremonial return of the True Cross to Jerusalem and political trouble in Constantinople—a change of subject is signaled (p. 134). The third part looks south to the desert, to watch the emergence of Islam in the lifetime of the Prophet and the transformation of the world wrought by Islam. The defining characteristics of the new faith are recorded, as are the key stages in the conquest of the Middle East. There is indeed no better account of the operations that led to the swift submission of Palestine (including Jerusalem) by spring 635 and the four years of large-scale fighting (636-40) needed to overcome Persian resistance in Mesopotamia, in particular to counter an initially successful counterstrike across the Zagros to relieve the first siege of Ctesiphon-Veh Ardashir (pp. 135-37). Detailed information is included about two invasions of Armenia (640 and 643), political infighting in the Roman empire and Armenia, and Constans' visit to Armenia, as well as the climactic episodes in the initial Arab outrush, the final thrust against Yazdegerd III in 652 and an expedition by land and sea against Constantinople in 654 (pp. 137-48, 162-71). It is with the latter's failure and the

consequences of its failure – a series of reverses suffered in Cappadocia, Iberia, Media, the Caucasus and Armenia (only the last was effectively countered) – that the history concludes, apart from two notices, added some five or six years later, which outline the course and outcome of the first Muslim civil war and some of its consequences for Armenians (pp. 171-77).

The history traditionally attributed to Sebeos thus documents a period of the utmost importance in the history of Iran, and casts light on several facets of its institutions and political culture. The anonymous episcopal author should be lauded by Iranian historians for his decision to place the history of Armenia in a wide geographical setting (it is only to the north that the field of vision is comparatively shallow), and for his earnest efforts to achieve neutrality (between rival Armenian princely houses) and objectivity. He had strong views but succeeded in confining them to a few passages of direct editorial comment. There are, of course, blemishes – an occasional disregard of chronology (e.g., a set of notices [pp. 96-97, 99-104] covering the career of Smbat Bagratuni to his death in 617/18, placed under 600/1), a certain disorder towards the end (for which he apologizes [p. 176]), and, above all, a conflation of the two Persian attacks on the Romans' metropolitan area in 615 and 626 (pp. 122-23). But, on the whole, the history retailed is lucid and where it can be tested, it can be shown to be reliable (Howard-Johnston, Armenian History, pp. lxi-lxxvii).

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