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IRAN AND CAUCASIA

Nina G. Garsoian  
Columbia University

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To address the subject of Iran and Caucasia is to undertake in some sense a double task, apologetic and admonitory. Because Iranian influence throughout the breadth of the Caucasian lands is the aspect of the culture of this region that has received the least attention from scholars both native and foreign any student thereof tends to grow defensive in the face of a possible accusation of special pleading. At the same time, the unconscious or deliberate elimination of this factor from an analysis of Caucasian civilizations carries a serious implication: the reduction of an intricate and multi-stranded pattern to a more homogeneous and overly simple level. On balance, therefore, it may not seem unwarranted to recall the lasting, if imperfectly perceived, role of Iran in Caucasia even in the necessarily superficial and consequently oversimplified manner permitted by a brief survey such as has been attempted here.

The causes for the disappearance of the Iranian component from the Caucasian tradition are immediately evident and understandable from the state of the extant evidence which can easily be subsumed under the three rubrics: absence, distortion and ignorance. First and foremost among these is the paucity of sources both native and Iranian. Outside of religious texts and treatises, themselves far from complete, only "fugitive" fragments of Pre-Islamic Iranian literature have survived: some didactic texts, a few short literary and epic pieces, fragments of legal opinions and a scattering of inscriptions. Such is the sum total of what internal upheavals and foreign conquests have left of a more than millennial tradition.<sup>1</sup> The complementary echoes of lost earlier works incorporated into later literature, such as the Iwadāy-nāmeḥ, "The Book of the Ruler", which lies at the back of Firdawsi's famous epic poem the Sāhnāmeḥ, or "Book of the King", are necessarily flawed by later accretions, anachronisms and distortions.

Something of the same difficulty obtains when we turn inward to the native traditions. Total silence reigns for the whole of Antiquity since the local languages, Caspian Albanian, Armenian and Iberian/Georgian

did not receive a written form until the fifth century A.D. Nor is this lacuna soon filled. Albanian literature, whatever its extent, is totally lost, so that a knowledge of the native civilization can be obtained only tangentially. The earliest Georgian historical works do not antedate the seventh-eighth centuries A.D. and the bulk of Georgian historiography normally lies considerably later than the period it addresses.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, excessive emphasis must be put at a number of points on the rich Armenian historiographic tradition which dominates Early Christian Caucasia.

The dominance of the Armenian voice in this context is particularly disturbing for the investigation of possible Iranian factors in Caucasian society, since it is charged with profound and explicit antagonism, whatever its implicit assumptions. Armenian historiography created by a Christian ecclesiastical milieu in the generation immediately following the last major Persian attempt to force Zoroastrianism on the country understandably turned its back categorically to any link with the Iranian world. As a result, a tradition rejecting or eradicating all traces of Iranian culture in Armenia was set for centuries to come, and its pervasive influence continues to distort our perspective to this day.

A final consequence of the dearth of eastern material has been perforce an undue reliance on the testimony of Classical authors. Of necessity these sources were often ill-informed concerning the borderlands of their world, and this ignorance was reinforced by the implicit contempt of Greeks and Romans for barbarians, no matter how powerful or exotic. The Euphrates frontier of the Roman Empire was more than a physical or political boundary; it reflected a state of mind which denied the importance of concepts and institutions born beyond it and their capacity to withstand the political or cultural thrust of the Classical world. Here too, therefore, our view of Caucasia is unconsciously set in a squint from the western centers of the civilized world toward a distant, dimly perceived and ultimately impotent East.

Such is the flawed setting in which any investigation must necessarily proceed. A serious attempt to reconcile the fragmentary evidence on its own merits reveals a significantly different picture. The presence and acceptance of the Classical tradition well beyond the Euphrates are too familiar and well documented to permit any doubts as to their importance,

but this presence in no way eliminated the equally powerful and pervasive influence exerted by Iran on the Caucasian lands fated by their geo-political position to serve for centuries as a buffer zone between the Mediterranean and the Orient.

Despite the assertions of ancient authors, the hegemony of the Classical world over the Caucasian region far from being overwhelming, was relatively episodic and transitory. At no point did Alexander the Great enter the region on his journey to the East, and native rulers re-surfaced by 317/6 B.C., within five years of the conqueror's death.<sup>4</sup> Subsequent Seleucid control of the area remained precarious at best and recent scholarship has demonstrated that the dynasts who established themselves in Armenia and Sophene, to the south, early in the second century B.C. after the Roman defeat of Antiochus III were not merely Seleucid generals, as Strabo would have it, but native princes bearing such unmistakable Iranian names as Artaxšēs/Artaxias and Zareh/Zariadris.<sup>5</sup> The destructive campaigns of Lucullus and Pompey in the last century B.C. left little lasting Roman presence in Caucasia itself. The compromise peace of Rhandeia signed between Nero and Parthia in A.D. 64 and its aftermath effectively set Iranian Arsacid dynasties on the thrones of Albania, Armenia and Eastern Iberia /K'artveli, despite the more intangible claims of ultimate Roman overlordship.<sup>6</sup> Thereafter, the result of the numerous expeditions beyond the Euphrates, such as those of Trajan, Lucius Verus and Septimius Severus in the second century, of Philip the Arab, Valerian and Carus in the third, and of Julian and Valens in the fourth proved ephemeral, even though Roman legions were occasionally quartered in centers of Greater Armenia, as for instance the detachment of the XIV Legion Apollinaris stationed at Vaarsapat/Kainepolis in A.D. 185.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, the Peace of Nisibis in A.D. 298 transferred the autonomous Armenian southern satrapies along the Euphrates from the Iranian to the Roman sphere of influence. The Roman frontier shifted eastward as a result of the partition of Armenia in A.D. 387 consolidated under Justinian I in the sixth century, and reached its farthest limit under Maurice in A.D. 591. Nevertheless, much of Caucasia remained beyond the reach of the Romans except for the brief sweep of Heraclius' campaign to Ctesiphon on the eve of the Arab conquest.<sup>8</sup>

On the contrary, Iranian domination in the area was ancient and generally lasting. From the time that the Persian Achaemenian kings reached the Aegean shore of Asia Minor in the mid-sixth century B.C., and for some two centuries thereafter, all of Anatolia lay within their realm so that pockets of Iranism have been identified as far west as the neighbourhood of the Sea of Marmara.<sup>9</sup> Armenia, whose name makes its first appearance in this context, ~~is listed among the Persian satrapies of Darius the Great in his inscriptions at Behistun and elsewhere.~~ In Armenia, at least, local rulers normally and continuously intermarried with the family of the King of kings, and consequently were considered an integral and important part of the Persian empire.<sup>10</sup> As has just been noted, Iranian or Iranized native dynasties returned to Caucasia soon after Alexander's death and as a result of Nero's negotiations. By the late third century A.D., the Sasanian King of kings Šāpuhr I (A.D. 240-272 ?) could boast on the great tri-lingual inscription near Persepolis celebrating his victory over the Romans that he ruled over:

... Atrūpatakān [Azerbaijan], Armenia, Vīrchan (Greek, Iberia),  
 ... Ardān (Greek, Albania, MP probably Arrān), Balasakan (...),  
 until forward to the Kap mountains (i.e., the Caucasus) and the  
 Alans' gate (i.e., [the Darial] pass)...<sup>11</sup>

Of the four great fires dominating the Zoroastrian world, the one associated particularly with the King of kings was located at Ganzak in Azerbaijan.<sup>12</sup>

The partition of A.D. 387 left four-fifths of Armenia to the Persian empire, and after the disappearance of the native Arsacid dynasty early in the next century this portion of the country was ruled by a Persian governor, or marzpan, until the consummation of the Arab conquest ca. A.D. 653. The support given by the Albanian ruler to the Sasanian King of kings Šāpuhr II at the time of his campaign against Roman Amida in A.D. 359 was duly noted by the contemporary historian Ammianus Marcellinus, and the continuation of Albanian Iranian collaboration was likewise recorded by the Armenian historian P'awstos Buzand. The loyalty of Albania maintained itself

to the very end of the Sasanian empire, as attested in the History of Moses Dasxuranc'i/Kalankatvac'i, and Armenian historians as well as Pahlavi inscriptions on the walls of Derbent indicate that Sasanian garrisons held the city and the pass in the sixth century to protect the Caucasian territories from northern incursions.<sup>13</sup> Further to the northwest Iranian control was unquestionably less direct and powerful so that coastal Colchis, or Egrisi as it was locally known, was annexed by the Romans as early as A.D. 64. Even here, however, the temporary conversion to Zoroastrianism of the king of Lazica on the Black Sea in A.D. 485, as well as an Iranian attack reaching as far as Colchis in the following year gave to the Persian empire control over all of Caucasia except for Iberia. Here too, the Iranian tendencies of king Vaxtang I Gorgasal's insubordinate nobles permitted the establishment of an Iranian vice-roy at Tbilisi by A.D. 517/8.<sup>14</sup> The Justinianic peace of A.D. 532 divided the north as that of 387 had done for Armenia to the south, giving Lazica to Rome and Iberia to Iran; by A.D. 561 the Persians finally abandoned their claim to Egrisi.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Rome nibbled steadily at the borderlands of the area: Colchis, Armenia Minor on the West bank of the Euphrates annexed in A.D. 72, the southern Armenian satrapies, and finally the westernmost portion of Greater Armenia. Yet all the way up to the Arab conquests of the mid-seventh century the bulk of Caucasia remained poised in equilibrium between the two great powers of Antiquity, and the preponderance, if any, fell on the Iranian side.

Farthest removed geographically from the Persian empire and most closely linked with the West through its religious union with Constantinople in the early seventh century A.D. Georgia, especially in its western districts, should hypothetically attest the lowest degree of Iranian influence. Hence, it is all the more interesting that recent archaeological excavations at the early site of Vani in Colchis have brought forth a number of objects decorated with clearly Iranian motifs, such as the gold diadem adorned with relief scenes of animal combats and bracelets with ibex, ram and especially wild boar finials.<sup>16</sup> Even more revealing is the great second-third century A.D. Hellenistic necropolis at Armazis-Xevi near the mediaeval Iberian capital of Mtskheta in the suburbs of Tbilisi. Here, side by side with silver bowls of unquestionably Classical inspiration, we find

that of the bitars, or "marcher lord" Pāpak whose name is identical with that of the immediate forebear of the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardašīr I Pāpakān and whose effigy follows in detail the iconography of Sasanian rulers on their carved seals and gems. The bowl bears an inscription in Pahlavi referring to the divine Ardašīr. Another silver bowl is decorated with the effigies of the King of kings Bahrām II together with those of his family.<sup>17</sup> Still other silver and silver-gilt bowls are decorated with an incised design of a horse standing in front of, or raising his foreleg in obeisance to, a fire altar in an almost exact illustration of the passage in Strabo's Geography which records the sending of twenty thousand choice foals to Iran by the satrap of Armenia for the festival of the sun-god Mithra.<sup>18</sup> Another index of the lively relations with Iran is provided by the considerable hoards of Parthian coins that have come to light in Georgia, especially at the turn of the Christian era and by the imitation by later Georgian rulers of the Sasanian drachms of the King of kings Ōhrmizd IV (A.D. 578-90).<sup>19</sup> On carved stone stelae of the seventh century A.D. Iberian and Armenian nobles wear unmistakably Iranian dress, as had the Armenian tribute-bearers on the frieze of the great east stairway at Persepolis more than a millennium earlier.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps most significant in the context of this inquiry is the presence of Iranian loan-words in Georgian. Such borrowing is even more remarkable than its well-known parallel in Armenian, since Georgian as distinct from Armenian and the Iranian languages does not belong to the Indo-European family, thus making these transfers far from natural, let alone automatic.<sup>21</sup>

If such a degree of Iranization can be found in distant Iberia, it should not be surprising that an even deeper level of penetration might be detected in Azerbaijan closest to the core of the Persian empire and the site of one of its greatest shrines if we had greater direct access to a knowledge of its culture. This is all the more so that such a penetration is patently observable in Armenia immediately to the west. I have discussed the Iranian components of Early-Christian Armenia too extensively elsewhere to warrant lengthy reiteration. Let it suffice to note for the record that the leading Armenian nobles, as well as the king and patriarch, traced their lineage from the great houses of Iran; that the Armenian vocabulary, particularly in the areas of onomasticon, toponymy and social terminology,

is riddled with Parthian loan-words; that the Pre-Christian Armenian pantheon is dominated by the great Iranian gods: Ahura-Mazda/Ohrmizd, Verethragna/Vahagn, Mithra/Mher, and Anāhita "the Lady"; that Zoroastrian consanguineous marriages survived in Armenia even into the Christian period; that Armenian historiography is notoriously contaminated by Iranian epic themes; and that the modus vivendi of the Armenian and Iranian courts revolving around the ceremonial of hunts and banquets was identical even in the minutiae of protocol and dress. Most important of all, the concept of kingship as a hereditary dignity inflexibly restricted to the royal clan, and the identification of the legitimate ruler by his supernatural, yet occasionally visible "Glory" or xwarrah (Armenian, p<sup>h</sup>ark<sup>h</sup>) are identical in Arsacid Armenia and Sasanian Iran despite the political and dynastic antagonism which opposed the two realms to each other. Bound to these theoretical concepts are the institutions subdividing society into the classes of magnates and nobles, free knights, and common people; the hereditary offices held as the prerogative of specific clans; and the whole socio-economic nexus of the clans sharing a common unalienable property and special privileges irrevokable even by the king, known in Armenia as the naxarar system; all of which are likewise common to Armenia and Iran, especially in the Parthian period.<sup>22</sup>

Even the brief outline given suggests inexorably that we are dealing in Caucasia with a hybrid society from at least the post-Alexandrian period of the fourth century B.C. This conclusion is reinforced by the mixture of artifacts with Greek and Iranian motifs, styles and techniques in the excavations at Vani at an even earlier date, and by the discovery in Armenia during the Hellenistic period of boundary stones with Aramaic inscriptions as well as of nearly contemporary (second-first century B.C.) Greek inscriptions at Armavir not far from the modern Armenian capital of Erevan. The latter in turn combine listings of the Macedonian months with possible quotations from the Greek classics and a reference to the god Mithra.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, excavations at the site of the ancient Armenian capital of Artaxata/Artaxata/Neroniana have brought forth simultaneously considerable Classical material, best exemplified by the marble statuette of a Praxitelean Aphrodite now in the Erevan State Museum and clay plaques



decorated with crude representations of the Iranian heroic rider.<sup>24</sup> A fourth-fifth century A.D. plate from southern Daghestan in the Hermitage Museum likewise displays a combination of Classical and Oriental motifs in the opinion of Camilla Trever.<sup>25</sup> Religious syncretism is evident from the equivalences provided by Armenian authors for the parallel pagan pantheons: Zeus/Ahura-Mazda, Artemis/Anāhita, Herakles/Vahagn, Tir/Apollo and Hephais-tos/Mithra.<sup>26</sup> Until the invention of the Armenian alphabet at the begin-ning of the fifth century A.D., education and especially the Church liturgy was carried on in both Greek and Syriac, the official language of the Chris-tian Church in Persia with which the Armenian Church maintained extensive relations although its patriarchs were originally consecrated at Caesarea of Cappadocia in central Asia Minor.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the best example of the bi- or even tri-cultural world that we are attempting to identify is provided by the late Hellenistic ( II-III century A.D.) necropolis of Armazis-Xevi in Iberia where the presence of artifacts of Hellenistic and Iranian inspiration has already been noted. The following second century epitaph was discovered on the inner face of a re-used stone slab in Tomb IV of the necropolis:

I Serap'inta — the daughter of  
 Zevax, the younger bitaxš of P'arsman  
 The King — wife of Yodmangana, bearer of victory (?)  
 Winner of many victories, epitropos [chamberlain] of  
 Xep'arnug the King, son of [Publicius]  
 Agrippa, epitropos of  
 P'arsman the King. Woe, woe [to her]  
 Who was so young [not of full age] and so  
 Fair and beautiful, that  
 No one was [her] equal in  
 Fairness, and [who] died in [her] twenty-first year.<sup>28</sup>

The onomasticon of the epitaph is unquestionably native with the exception of the adoptive-name, "[Publicius] Agrippa" probably indicating a concomi-tant grant of Roman citizenship. At the same time, the inscription is given

both in Greek and in Aramaic, the official language of the Persian chancellery, also used on the above mentioned boundary stones of the Armenian king Artasēs/Artaxias, as well as in another, this time monolingual, inscription of the first century A.D. found in the same Tomb and apparently containing an address of Sarages, the bitaxš of king Mithradates.<sup>29</sup> All the strands we have been following have come together.

Thus, tripartite Caucasia, despite unquestionable local variations of language and custom, as well as occasional internal dissensions over borderlands, such as the one opposing Albania to Armenia in A.D. 371,<sup>30</sup> formed a cultural unit and what might be called a Third World between the Classical — Graeco-Roman and the Oriental — Persian world powers. As we have seen, all the portions of ancient as well as modern Caucasia had been a part of the Sasanian empire. After the Arab conquest, the unity of the area was tightened still further with the term "Arminiya" being expanded to designate a single administrative district comprising Iberia and Azerbaijān as well as Armenia proper under the rule of one governor residing first in the Armenian mediaeval capital of Dwin and subsequently at Berdha'a/Pārtaw in Azerbaijān.<sup>31</sup> Conversion to Christianity and the creation of written languages and literatures came to all three countries as part of the same development in the early fourth and early fifth centuries. This conversion consolidated the regional sense of common purpose for three centuries until the return of Iberia to communion with Orthodox Byzantine Christianity in 607/8, while Armenia and the subordinate Church of Albania steadfastly maintained their opposition to the dogma promulgated by the Council of Chālcedon in 451.<sup>32</sup> An effect of the estrangement of much of Christian Caucasia from the official Constantinopolitan doctrine was to reinforce its Third World status by reversing its shift away from the Persian empire. As Arsacids, the local rulers were duty bound to avenge the overthrow of their kinsmen in Iran by the Sasanians, and as Christians, the inhabitants had obviously left the Zoroastrian world. Yet, as schismatics or heretics in the eyes of Constantinople after 451, they were relegated to the status of second class citizens subject to serious legal sanctions or even persecution, so that on a number of occasions they preferred to turn to the overlordship of the Persian king to whom they became acceptable at the moment that they turned into personae non gratae

in Byzantium.<sup>33</sup>

If even Christianization was not strong enough to merge Caucasia with its powerful western neighbour, political theory and the socio-economic naxarar structure pushed them still further apart. The Iranian stress on the inflexibly hereditary character of the monarchy ran fundamentally counter to the Classical concept of the ruler as an elected magistrate, which was so firmly rooted that it continued to affect the succession of the Byzantine empire up to its very disappearance in the mid-fifteenth century. Hereditary offices were familiar to the Persian court, but irreconcilable with the centralized bureaucracy developed by Rome and Byzantium. The city-state, the hall-mark of Classical society, made almost no inroad into Caucasia whose entrenched clan structure, best known in Armenia, withstood royal attempts at urbanization and could not survive under the Roman legal system as demonstrated by its disappearance in the portion of the country controlled by Byzantium in the sixth century.<sup>34</sup> Hence, once again, Caucasia presented a clearly identifiable, if complicated and idiosyncratic pattern distinguishable from that of its neighbours, but it ultimately came to rest east of the watershed separating Mediterranean and Oriental society.

Moreover, the significant Iranization of Caucasia cannot be viewed merely as a phenomenon of a long dead past. The vitality of the Iranian tradition and its acclimatization in the whole Caucasian area allowed it to survive the onslaughts of both Christianity and Islam. At the time of their conquest in the mid-seventh century, the Arabs stipulated for the maintenance of the Armenian cavalry based on the Iranian clan structure thus effectively perpetuating it, and scholars such as Manandyan, have argued that the Armenian naxarar system survived, albeit with modifications, until the devastation and depopulation resultant from the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries. Persian Safavid documents from the seventeenth century confirming the transfer of the great East-Armenian monastery of Tat'ew from uncle to nephew because it was the property of their house suggest that vestiges of this institution were still meaningful and legally binding at this late date.<sup>35</sup> Similar para-feudal patterns likewise survived in Georgia and Azerbaijan: the patriar-

chate of Albania remained for centuries hereditary in the Hasan-Djalalian house until ~~the title~~ <sup>the title</sup> was abolished in 1815 and they continued as metropolitans thereafter. <sup>36</sup>

Roman Ghirshman has observed long since that far from dying out, themes and decorative motifs of Sasanian art survived in Armenia, Georgia and Daghestan in the eastern Caucasus from the sixth to the eleventh centuries and beyond.<sup>37</sup> Christianity did not prevent the continued use of purely Zoroastrian -Sasanian motifs, such as the undulating ribbons symbolic of the royal "Glory" that adorn unmistakably Iranian peacocks on a sixth-seventh century bronze pitcher from Daghestan now in the Hermitage museum and another pair found on a contemporary stone capital from a church near Mingēcaur on the middle Kura river.<sup>38</sup> The same ribbons stream out behind the figure of the heroic hunter, the Sasanian royal subject par excellence, on the relief from the seventh century Sion church at At'eni, not far from Tbilisi.<sup>39</sup> Another characteristic Sasanian creature, the fabulous senmury associated with the Iranian god Verethragna, with its dog or dragon head, lion-like claws and winged bird body, continues to manifest itself with equal ease on a Daghestani silver vase in the Hermitage, on the facade reliefs of the famous ninth century Armenian church of the Holy Cross at A't'amar on an island in Lake Van, in the apse of the tenth century cathedral of Martvisi in Georgia, as well as on the latter mediaeval churches at Kutaisi and Mtsxeta.<sup>40</sup>

It is particularly interesting to observe that these Iranian themes were so deeply ingrained in the local culture that their use in the decoration of Christian church buildings does not seem to have been considered unsuitable or to have affronted local sensibilities. Thus, the traditional Sasanian iconography of the investiture "on horseback" of the King of kings by the god Ahura-Mazda consisting of the two riders facing each other in profile reappears in the affronted riders carved on the seventh century altar screen from Tsebelda and in another pair represented on the tympanum of the late tenth century church at Vale, both of them in Georgia.. It is likewise to be found at Kubachi in Daghestan as late as the twelfth century.<sup>41</sup> The heroic ride or hunt scene in which the Iranian ruler displayed his supernatural prowess and "Glory" reappears on the seventh century churches of At'eni in Georgia and Pt'ni in Armenia. Even

more tellingly, the standard iconography of the rider-saint George of Iberia trampling down the figure of the persecutor emperor Diocletian under his horse's hooves, such as he is shown on the reliefs of the eleventh century church at Nīkortsmina and the nearly contemporary Labechina icon among many others, directly reproduces that of the representations of Ahura-Mazda trampling over the demonic Ahriman and the victorious Sasanian ruler riding triumphantly over his prostrate foe. Similarly, the figuration of the goddess Anahita with arms upraised and attended by wild beasts came to be adopted for or confused with the representation of Daniel in the Lions' Den.<sup>42</sup>

The influence of Iran on the literature and folk-lore of Caucasia proved, if anything, even more profound and long lasting. Both Armenian historians, among them especially P'awstos Buzand in his History of Armenia, and Iberian ones, such as Leonti Mroveli bishop of Ruisi in his eighth century History of the Kings of Iberia, made use of Iranian sources, some possibly written, as for instance the Iwadāy-nāmeḥ, "The Book of the Ruler", but far more often the oral epic cycles repeated in palaces and villages by travelling bards.<sup>43</sup> Learned literature in Armenia concentrated on historiography, into which they infused epic themes, and the various types of religious writings. Consequently it is in Georgia, most particularly at the thirteenth century court of queen T'amar (1184-1212) that the Iranian epic and lyric genres came into full flower fed by both the surviving oral tradition and the perpetuation of earlier themes in Irano-Muslim mediaeval works such as the Šāhnāmeḥ. The romantic tale of the love and adventures of Vīs and Rāmīn, replete with traditional Iranian themes, composed between A.D. 1040 and 1054 by the Persian poet Fakhr ud-Dīn Gurgānī achieved a far greater vogue in its thirteenth century Georgian translation, the Visramiani, than it had enjoyed in its homeland.<sup>44</sup> The parallels and connexions with the Šāhnāmeḥ, of which a partial Georgian version also existed, found in the cycle of the exploits of Amiran Darejaniani attributed to Mose Khoneli, the secretary of queen T'amar, and the Georgian national epic, The Lord in the Panther Skin of Šota Rust'aveli, who rightly or wrongly identified his work as " a Persian

tale, this, turned into Georgian", have been commented upon far too often to need belabouring here. Likewise, the Armenian asuj's, minstrels and troubadours like Sayat Nova composing in the vernacular, diffused the themes and forms of Iranian lyric love poetry in the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.<sup>45</sup> The popularity of these works from generation to generation could not help but create a cultural ethos and patterns of thought steeped in Iranian values which sank deep into the national tradition.

The persistence of early Iranian epic themes is perhaps even more striking at the level of popular folk-culture, so that R.H. Stevenson, the translator of both the Amiran Darejaniani and The Lord of the Panther Skin, has gone so far as to claim that, "it must always be borne in mind that from the point of view of folk-lore Caucasia is to be looked upon as constituting an outpost of the Iranian world, ...".<sup>46</sup> An excellent example of this, despite anachronisms and distortions, is to be found in the Armenian folk-epic, The Daredevils of Sasun, extant in a multitude of dialectal versions but first noted down in the late nineteenth century from illiterate informants. The superhuman exploits of the various heroes of the epic and particularly of the supernatural horse, Jalali, are far too numerous to detail here, but they are directly related to those of the heroes of the Sāhnāmeḥ and especially those of Rostam and his trusty steed "of mountain size", Rakhs.<sup>47</sup> Even more significantly, the name of the heroes of the second and fourth cycle of the epic, Mher, points directly to that of the Zoroastrian god Mithra. Finally, the conclusion of the epic with the enclosure of the Younger Mher into the rock face at Van whence he will issue only on the Day of Judgement is closely bound to the earlier Armenian tale of king Artavazd cursed by his father and chained inside Mt. Masis by the evil spirits, or K'aj, who are also known to the Georgians, to Amiran Darejanisdze, to the exploits and fate of numerous other chained protagonists of Caucasian: Abkhaz, Ossetian, Cherkess and Kabardian tales, and ultimately to mythical kings and heroes in the Iranian epic tradition.<sup>48</sup> Christian piety has often garbled these tales, turning the superhuman heroic epithet k'aj, "valiant", shared by heroes with the god of prowess and victory Verethragna into a host of evil spirits, and the saviour Mithra/Artavazd into a destroyer. A messianic

theme has become apocalyptic, but it has not thereby lost its Iranian origin. Other Zoroastrian fragments likewise float in Caucasian folk-literature. Late Kurdish tales continue to celebrate the heroic hunter, "the master of the pledge", preserving the memory of Mithra the Hunter, the lord of judgements and contracts.<sup>49</sup> Recently noted Georgian popular poems, also attested in many variants, give a startling echo of the complaint of the Ox-soul and the blessings of the Ox-saviour for mankind found in the sacred Iranian text of the Avesta.<sup>50</sup>

The reconstruction and re-consecration of Zoroastrian fire-temples in the region of Baku in the eighteenth century; the various Zoroastrian beliefs and practices still to be met in devoutly Christian Armenia and in the Muslim high mountain of the Caucasus; the observation by Abe/yan and Bumézil that the Spring festival of Armenian girls with its component parts of water theft, a riverside feast, the making of a sacred beverage, the naming of a false-bride, reproduces faithfully a number of elements from the ritual of the banquet of immortality; the central position of the blood feud in the Caucasian code of honour; all provide additional testimony to the tenacity of ancient traditions with a heavy Iranian admixture in Caucasia even into the twentieth century. These traditions are all the more pervasive and powerful that they usually lie safeguarded in the inarticulate world of popular beliefs, customary rituals and daily practices, far beneath the level of literacy or even of consciousness.

Nina G. Garsoïan  
Columbia University.