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Giusto Traina: 428 AD

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The Travels of Flavius Dionysius and the End of Armenia

To START our journey, we go back to Antioch, the capital of Syria and the headquarters of the Roman army in the East. An imperial diplomatic delegation, escorted by an elite military unit, left the eastern gate of the city and moved towards the Persian Empire. At the same time, a group of Iranian plenipotentiaries left from Ctesiphon, the main residence of the Sassanian rulers. The two diplomatic missions were to meet at the border in a part of Mesopotamia. The Romans were led by Flavius Dionysius, a military man and native of Thrace, who at the time held the rank of supreme commander of the army for the entire sector of the eastern border (*magister utriusque militiae per Orientem*).¹

Before leaving, Dionysius had started to suffer from facial paralysis. There was a great deal at stake for the general: any delay to his departure would have effectively been an insubordination, given that it could have compromised the mission. In order to get well quickly, he turned to one of the most revered clerics in Syria, a monk called Simeon but also known as the “Stylite” because of his particular form of asceticism: he lived day and night at the top of a high column (*stylos* in Greek).² The pious official had therefore gone to Telanissos (Tell Neshin, today Qala’at Sema’an), which was Simeon’s village. From the height of his column, the saint prayed for the general’s health, and the general was immediately cured (*Syriac Life of Saint Simeon Stylites*, 71).³ Dionysius could then set off on his march without fearing the wrath of Theodosius II, the ruler of the eastern part of the Empire.

In the fifth century, there was no diplomatic corps in the modern sense, nor indeed was there any codified protocol. Given this lack of fixed rules, we cannot be sure of the composition of the Roman delegation.⁴ Diplomatic missions were organized on an ad hoc basis in accordance with instructions from above. They were usually made up of various imperial dignitaries, interpreters, a military escort (which transported not only the baggage but also the emperor's gifts),⁵ often emissaries from the Church, and a few merchants who took advantage of the expedition to reach a destination which was normally forbidden.⁶ The outcome of the mission was entirely in the hands of its leader, who could be a high-ranking soldier, a nonmilitary official, or a churchman. The emperor chose his ambassadors on the basis of specific requirements: apart from the requisite diplomatic skills, they had to have demonstrated their honesty and incorruptibility, and they had to possess the necessary physical constitution to undertake such a journey, which was itself no mean task. An embassy to the Sassanians required even greater professional experience, because of the enormous importance attributed to pacts and agreement within the Persian religious system.⁷

The *Syriac Life of Simeon Stylites* is the only source for Dionysius's mission, but does not specifically mention its date or purpose. However, other texts tell us that the general was on active duty in the East from 428 to 431. There is further evidence that allows us to date the mission to the year 428: according to Callinicus (*Life of Saint Hypatius*, 32, 1), Dionysius was instructed to escort Nestorius from Antioch to Constantinople when the latter was appointed the capital's bishop. Now, it is well known that Nestorius's investiture on the episcopal throne of Constantinople took place on 10 April 428, and that he arrived in the city three months after the death of his predecessor, Sisinnius, which happened on 24 December 427 (Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7, 28). The road from Antioch to Constantinople crossed Anatolia and the journey would have taken at least a month. If the situation on the frontier was not peaceful, the supreme commander of the eastern sector would not have been able to leave his theater of operations for such a long period. Dionysius must therefore have concluded his agreement with the Persians immediately before his journey to Constantinople, during the winter of 427/8, and winter is the best time to travel across Mesopotamia.

Negotiations entrusted to such a very high official could only have been of the greatest importance. In fact, this was to be the first meeting between Romans and Persians since the war of 421/2.⁸ The key item for discussion can be inferred from the historical context: we know from two historians writing in Armenian, Moses of Khoren and Lazarus of Pharpi, that in 428 the Persians deposed Artashes IV, the unworthy and dissolute descendant of the prestigious dynasty of the Arsacids and the last king of Armenia.⁹

The Armenian sources provide a detailed narration of the event. He ascended to the throne in 422, as the result of a compromise between Theodosius II and the Great King Bahrām V, and he lacked the charisma he needed to govern and to gain the respect of others. He quickly incurred the hostility of the local potentates (*nakhararkʿ*), who organized what can only be called a Fronde with the support of the Persian Empire. A crisis became inevitable. After years of trying, the Persians finally succeeded in overturning the balance that kept the king of Armenia in a position above the other noble families.¹⁰ As a result, the *katholikós* Sahak, the noble and authoritative leader of the Armenian Church, was unable to impose his will.¹¹ Moses of Khoren tells the story:

But Artashir [a Persian variant of Artashes, used here to show contempt], the king of Armenia, began to plunge without restraint into licentious pleasures to the extent that all the princes became disgusted with him. Coming to Sahak the Great they raised a complaint and invited him to help them in denouncing him to the Persian king, in deposing their own king, and in bringing a Persian as lord of this country. But he said: “I do not consider you to be liars; I too have heard of this shameful disgrace. Often have I reprimanded him, but he denied it. So we must endure for a while the man’s faults until we are able to arrange a solution with the Greek emperor Theodosius, and not hand him over to the lawless to be derided and mocked.” (Moses Khorenats’i, *History of the Armenians*, 3, 63; R.W. Thomson’s English translation, which was published in 1978 by Harvard University Press, has been used here and will be used throughout—*translator’s note*)

The patriarch Sahak challenged the *nakhararkʿ* with a powerful argument: although a dissolute fornicator, Artashes was still a Christian

king. Moreover, it was to be hoped that Theodosius II, an extremely devout Christian, would again concern himself with Armenian affairs once he had sorted out his own domestic problems. But the nobles, who were united and implacable, contacted the Great King directly and castigated both their king and the *katholikós* for their favoring the “Greeks,” by which they meant the Roman Empire.

Now that Armenia was controlled by the Sassanids, any association with the rival power would have been considered high treason. A few Armenian clergymen, it is true, had recently been able to cross the border on a few occasions to carry out important diplomatic missions. In such cases, the most educated members of the clergy were sent, and they were typified by the anonymous one who, everywhere he stopped on his journey, captivated the bishops who gave him hospitality with his knowledge of Greek, his noble birth, and his good manners (Firmus of Caesarea, *Epistle* 22). But the recent war had increased tensions between the two rival empires, which further limited contacts between Armenia and Constantinople. Besides, even before the treaty of 422, Roman presence on Armenian territory was barely tolerated, and every citizen of the empire was seen as a potential spy. Consequently, restrictions were imposed on travel through the kingdom, first through a regulation laid down in the previous treaty, and then reaffirmed in a law during the time of Honorius that prohibited merchants from traveling past the former capital of Artaxata. The transgressors were condemned to perpetual exile and the payment of a large fine (*Code of Justinian*, 4, 53, 4, year 408 or 409).¹²

At Ctesiphon, court officials attempted to persuade Sahak to abandon the cause of the king, who was now in disgrace, but the patriarch rejected these Persian overtures. At this stage, the Great King decided to start trial proceedings, in which the principal prosecutor would be the Armenian priest Surmak, who had been promised the post of *katholikós* by the nobles. Artashes was deposed and imprisoned, and the property of the Arsacid dynasty was confiscated. Armenia lost its ancient independence and became a frontier province of the Persian Empire, administered by a frontier governor (*marzban*). The appointed dignitary left for Armenia in the company of the treacherous *nakhbarak'*, whom Bahrām V handsomely rewarded.

At least as far as appearances were concerned, the fall of the kingdom did not bring about domestic change or international repercussions.

According to another Armenian historian, Elysaeus (*Elishē*), Armenia without its king became not a Persian possession, but rather a kind of satrapy administered by the nobles (*The History of Saint Vardan and the Armenian War* I, p. 6, 5–7). By eliminating their king, the Armenian lords increased their power over their own territories, and by paying tributes and providing troops to the invader they were guaranteed autonomy and religious freedom. This system, which has sometimes been incorrectly defined as “feudal,” would survive the fall of the Sassanian Empire by many centuries, as various powers took turns to control the Armenian lands.¹³ Although the country’s internal balance of power had shifted, the end of the Arsacid dynasty is not supposed to have changed the traditional social order. This was at least what the *nakharark’* had hoped would happen, but as Moses of Khoren acutely observed, they had committed nothing less than political suicide (*History of the Armenians*, 3, 64). The Fronde of contemptible and shortsighted *nakharark’* had been manipulated by the shrewd and masterly policy of the Sassanian emperor, Bahrām V, who was very keen to eliminate the independence of Armenia (Lazarus of Pharpi, *History of the Armenians*, I, 14).

If Artashes was the straw man he is portrayed as in the Armenian sources, why was the Great King so interested in eliminating him? The fact is that Bahrām’s clever move had deep historical roots. The Armenian branch of the Arsacids had controlled the country more or less without interruption since 63 AD, and the Roman Empire had every interest in maintaining this balance of power.¹⁴ In spite of forceful interference by the Persians, the presence of an Arsacid on the Armenian throne guaranteed the maintenance of tradition, and above all confirmed the authority of the Christian religion, which had been introduced more than a century earlier and guaranteed Armenian autonomy in relation to the Sassanids’ imperialist aims.¹⁵ By removing the Armenian dynasty, the Persians hoped to draw the country back to the Zoroastrian faith and protect it forever from the pernicious influences of the West.

The fate of the kingdom could not be decided unilaterally. It was therefore necessary to enter into further negotiations to update the treaty of 422 and annul the clauses about Armenia’s independence and the sovereignty of Artashes. This clearly was the real reason for Flavius Dionysius’s mission: it was to save face by officially abandoning Armenia without allowing this to appear a passive acceptance of a *fait accompli*.

In spite of its complex geopolitical implications, the fall of Armenia was recorded exclusively by local sources, which presented the affair as a domestic one without significant international ramifications. No other text, whether Greek or oriental, appears to have shown interest in this event: Greek and Syriac historians, chroniclers and ecclesiastical writers appear to have suppressed it.¹⁶ Evidently Roman imperial propaganda made every effort to gloss over such a dishonorable outcome. The absence of “Western” sources is probably not due to any gaps in the tradition, but rather reflects the embarrassed silence of official historiography on the fate of Armenia, a Christian land that was now at the mercy of intolerant and hostile persecutors. This explains why an important diplomatic mission led by Flavius Dionysius was only worthy of a brief mention in the *Syriac Life of Saint Simeon*. Any reference to the fall of Armenia would have pointed to the complicity of the Roman Empire, and it was best to pass over the whole argument.

Besides, Theodosius II had little choice. The political and military context did not allow for other solutions. The centuries-long Armenian question, which had so often led to conflict between Rome and Persia, appeared to end with a serious blow to the prestige of the Roman Empire, in spite of its military superiority over the Persians. The imperial delegation would attempt some damage limitation by obtaining the appropriate guarantees for the Christian community.¹⁷ Flavius Dionysius must have been fully aware of the disastrous nature of this turn of events, and it is not impossible that his facial paralysis, which was to be healed by the spiritual solace of Saint Simeon, was the psychosomatic effect of his frustrated military pride.¹⁸