

DID TRDAT MEET CONSTANTINE I THE GREAT?

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Agat'angeghos's *History of the Armenians* describes a visit by the fourth-century A. D. King Trdat of Armenia to Constantine I the Great in Rome, after they had both become Christians, on which occasion an Armeno-Roman treaty of friendship was signed.¹ Account of this meeting is legendary but the Armenian sources are agreed on the existence of the treaty. P'avstos Buzand states that the Emperor Constantius II (337-361) "recalled the treaty which had been sealed and established under oath through mediation² between the Emperor Constantine and King Trdat."³ Movsés Khorenatsi records that the Armenian *nakharars* had called on Constantius to "remember the treaty on oath of thy father, Constantine, with our King Trdat,"⁴ and in the same context Eghishé writes that the treaty had been found, at the command of the emperor, after searching through many books.⁵ It is also implied in a letter addressed to an Arshakuni king from the Emperor Julian (360-363): "Accordingly you must discard...the emperor Constantine of blessed memory,...and take heed of me, Julian".⁶ Although this letter is regarded as spurious, it is referred to by the fifth-century church historian Sozomen⁷ and whoever composed it knew of the existence of an Armeno-Roman alliance sealed at the time of Constantine.⁸ Finally, the fourth-century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus confirms the existence of an alliance before Constantius II, although he does not say when it had been made. Constantius had "heard that [the Armenian king Arshak/Arsaces] had often been worked upon by the Persian king with deception, with threats, and with guile to induce him to give up his alliance with the Romans...."⁹

An Armeno-Roman alliance made sense in the context of the international situation in western Asia in the early fourth century because Armenia was seen as a buffer state between the Roman and Persian empires. Armenia would also have been valuable to any emperor vying for control of the empire. The unanswered questions are the exact date of the treaty and whether it was in fact concluded at a personal meeting between king and emperor, as indicated by Agat'angeghos, or through envoys as implied by P'avstos.

Constantine's habit of conducting state affairs personally makes it likely that he himself negotiated the treaty. Also, while both monarchs had personal reasons for meeting, Trdat had lived in the Roman empire during his exile, while Constantine had probably fought in Armenia during Caesar Galerius's (293-311) Persian campaign in 298.¹⁰ Constantine would also have been curious to meet a king who had openly espoused the religion which he himself had come increasingly to favor. According to Movsés Khorenatsi, they were already acquainted, having met before Trdat's conversion, at Constantine's wedding, when the latter was still a caesar.¹¹ Their acquaintance is a misunderstanding

arising from Movses Khorenatsi's chronological errors for this period.¹² Constantine married his first wife, Minervina, at an early age and his second wife, Fausta, in 307, long after Trdat had returned to Armenia. Such a preliminary acquaintance could, however, have taken place when Constantine came to the east to serve as *tribunus* in 293, at the time of Trdat's probable return to Armenia,¹³ or while he was serving under Emperor Diocletian (284-305) and Galerius in Syria in 296/7. Less likely, they could have met while Constantine was at Diocletian's court in Nicomedia in 303.¹⁴

Regarding the signing of the treaty, Agat'angeghos's *History* states that the pope was present, but there is some confusion regarding his identity, since the sources mention both Sylvester and Eusebius.¹⁵ In the context of a meeting in the city of Rome, Sylvester (314-335) is feasible, but Eusebius is impossible, since he was pope for only a very short period in 309/310 when Constantine's rival emperor Maxentius (306-312) controlled the city. This makes it likely that the original name in the narrative was in fact Eusebius.¹⁶ As suggested by H. Gelzer, the cleric in question could have been Eusebius of Nicomedia, who was closely associated with Constantine.¹⁷

This is supported by the virtual impossibility that the meeting could take place in Rome, if only because Constantine did not regard the city as his residence and visited it on few occasions. Nor could such a visit have gone unnoticed by contemporary writers, especially when pagan Rome was being eclipsed by other cities of the empire. The earlier visit by a former, first-century A. D. Arshakuni king of Armenia, Trdat I, had made a deep impression on the Romans, and the account of Trdat III the Great's visit is probably based on a reminiscence of that earlier journey.¹⁸ Furthermore, the description of the meeting place as the "royal city of the Romans"¹⁹ could have signified any Roman royal city, of which there were a number in the first half of the fourth century. Three of these were possible sites for a meeting: Nicomedia, which served as the eastern capital until the establishment of Constantinople; Serdica, which was described by Constantine as "my Rome,"²⁰ and Constantinople, which came to be known as the "new Rome".

The date of a possible meeting is limited by the complex political conditions of the period. At the beginning of 312, the Roman empire was ruled by four emperors: Constantine held Britain, Gaul and Spain; Maxentius ruled Italy and Africa; Licinius (308-325) retained the Danubian provinces, Thracia and Macedonia; while Maximinus II Daia (308-314) ruled Oriens, Asiana and Pontica.

These emperors fell into two camps. On one side, Constantine and Licinius tolerated the Christians within their jurisdiction. On the other, Maximinus Daia actively persecuted believers in the new faith and took positive measures to strengthen and entrench paganism. Maxentius tended to side with him, and it was believed that they had a secret pact, but he did tolerate the Christians.²¹

On the death of Galerius in 311, Maximinus Daia occupied Asiana and Pontica. In November, 312, Maxentius was defeated by Constantine who thus added Italy and Africa to his domains, isolating Maximinus. The position of Armenia was crucial since its frontiers with the Roman Empire lay entirely along

the provinces ruled by him. Trdat, it has been shown, had been converted some six years earlier²² and would therefore have been a potential ally of Constantine and Licinius. A further consideration was that the Christian Armenians would have constituted an unsettling influence on the large Christian population of Maximinus's recently acquired provinces in Asia Minor, and thus posed a serious threat to him. With the creation of this geo-political situation, Constantine and Licinius may have made some approach to Trdat to ensure his friendship, stressing their own benign treatment of the Christians under their rule. Such an invitation could have contained a personal element since Trdat had once fought in Licinius' army.²³

Whether or not the Armeno-Roman Treaty was concluded at this time, as proposed by Rev. Hovsep' Gat'rch'ian and others,²⁴ this is when Maximinus Daia attacked the Armenians. There is no mystery about the Armenian War in the autumn of 312; it is exactly the action we would have expected Maximinus to take to relieve his situation.²⁵ He followed it up with an invasion of Europe, was defeated by Licinius near Adrianople in the spring of 313, and died soon after. Licinius, who had married Constantine's sister in February of that year, now took over Asia Minor and the Armenian frontier. However, if the treaty was signed in 312 or early 313, there could have been no question of a personal meeting between Constantine and Trdat, since it would have involved a journey across Maximinus Daia's territory.

Constantine was in Rome in the summer of 315 to celebrate his decennialia, but with Licinius in control of Asia Minor, the latter could not have been snubbed by the Armenian king crossing his territory to form an alliance with his rival. Consequently, if the treaty was signed in this period, Licinius too would have been associated with it. Of this there is no evidence in the extant sources, but it is possible that reference to him was expunged at a later date. On the other hand, some inscriptional evidence indicates that Licinius claimed, amongst other titles, that of ARMEN. MAX which implies that he had waged war against the Armenians.

The date of this attack is uncertain. On the assumption that such lists of titles were invariably stated in strict chronological order, Timothy D. Barnes dated it to between 313 and 315,²⁶ while Ernest Honigmann placed the campaign between 314 and 319, corresponding to the period of Licinius's deteriorating relations with both Constantine and the Christians under his rule who, Licinius suspected, were secretly plotting with Constantine against him.²⁷ A parallel development of enmity towards Trdat was known to Movses Khorenatsi:

And [Licinius] had grown cold in his love for Trdat, our king;
he regarded [Trdat] as if he were in reality an enemy ...²⁸

The conflict must have taken place after Catholicos Grigor the Illuminator's consecration in Caesarea in 314. Otherwise Grigor would not have been able to travel to Cappadocia, in Licinius's territory. Thus the most probable year for Licinius' attack on the Armenians would be 315.

Gelzer's conclusion was that the monarchs had met in Serdica after the battle of Cibalae when Constantine first defeated Licinius.²⁹ This was believed to have taken place in 314,³⁰ but the date has since been revised to 316, a settlement

having been arrived at between the emperors early in 317.³¹ A treaty between Constantine and Trdat would have made particular sense at this time for both parties.

Constantine appears to have received envoys from Persia in 321,³² but a royal visit by the Armenian king before Licinius' final defeat in September 324, involving travel across Licinius' territory, would have been difficult. For the period after the Council of Nicaea (325), Movses Khorenatsi's explanation that Trdat was reluctant to leave Armenia in view of possible trouble on the Persian frontier is credible since the young Persian king, Shapur II (309-379), was approaching his majority. The situation did not ease before Trdat's death (in the early 330's).

A meeting after 325 thus being precluded, we are left with the period between Licinius's surrender at Nicomedia on September 19, 324, when Constantine became sole emperor,³³ and the Council of Nicaea in May or June, 325, as the most favourable time for a personal meeting.

Possible dates for the treaty are thus late 312/early 313, 317/18 or 324/25. Regarding a personal meeting between Constantine and Trdat, although it is difficult to find a feasible time and place for it, the unexpected presence of Eusebius, who can only be the bishop of Nicomedia, suggests that the report is based on historical fact. Eusebius became bishop in c. 318 and was deposed temporarily, as a consequence of his stand on the nature of Christ, from late 326 to May 328. The date for a meeting is thus limited to the period between AD 317 and 326. In conjunction with the above analysis, the possible dates therefore are 317/18 and 324/25. The former period is excluded since Constantine was generally to be found in Europe then.³⁴

This leaves 324/25, when an eminently suitable occasion was the foundation of Constantinople in November 324, when Constantius was invested with the imperial purple. Soon after this Constantine left Nicomedia to travel across Asia Minor to Antioch.³⁵ A brief meeting, perhaps in Cappadocia, could have taken place then, but the journey itself has been questioned.³⁶ Finally, they could have met in Nicomedia early in 325. In the absence of further evidence, it is not possible to arrive at a more definite conclusion.

ENDNOTES

¹ Agat'angeghos, *Agat'angegha patmut'iun hayots* [History of the Armenians by Agat'angeghos], Tbilissi, 1914, pp. 440-444.

² The meaning of the word *midjnordut'iamb* is not agreed. Step'an Malkhasian omitted it in his modern Armenian translation of P'avstos Buzand's *History* (reprint of first edition, Cairo, 1954, p. 169). Hakob Manandian rendered it "through intermediaries" (*K'nnakan tesut'iun hay zhoghovrdi patmut'ian* [A Critical Study of the History of the Armenian People], vol. 2, Part 1, Yerevan, 1957, p. 129).

³ P'avstos Buzand, *P'avstosi buzandatsvo patmut'iun hayots* [History of the Armenians by P'avstos Buzand], text by K'. Patkarian, Yerevan 1987, III. 21, p. 86. For the anachronisms in this chapter, see N. H. Baynes, "Rome and Armenia in the Fourth Century", *English Historical Review*, Vol. 25 (1910), pp. 625-643; idem. *J. Roman Stud.*, vol. 18 (1928), p. 222.

- ⁴ Movsés Khorenatsi, *Patmut'iun hayots* [History of the Armenians], (critical text and introduction by M. Abeghian and S. Harut'iunian), Yerevan, 1991, III, p. 261.
- ⁵ Eghishé, *Vasn Vardany ev hayots paterazmin* [History of Vardan and the Armenian War], ed. By Eruand Tér Minasian, Yerevan, 1957, p. 72; Elishe, *History of Vardan and the Armenian war*, translation and commentary by Robert W. Thomson, London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 124.
- ⁶ Wilmer Cave Wright (ed.), *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, Letter 57, London: Loeb Classical Library, 1913, pp. xxxvi, 187 f.
- ⁷ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI, 1.
- ⁸ The decree Cod. Theodos. XI Tit. 1, 1 (dated 17 June 315) indicates that the Arshakuni kings of Armenia were held in especial esteem by Constantine; see Clyde Pharr (transl.), *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sermondian Constitution*, Princeton, 1952, p. 291. Cp H. Gelzer, "Die Anfänge der armenischen Kirche", *Berichte Über die Verhandlungen der Königliche sächsische Gesellschaft der Wissenschaft zu Leipzig*, vol. 47 (1895), p. 168.
- ⁹ Ammianus Marcellinus, Bk 20. xi. 2.
- ¹⁰ Timothy D. Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*, Harvard University, 1982, p. 42; John Holland Smith, *Constantine the Great*, London, 1971, p. 31; Constantine's personal knowledge of the fighting prowess of the Armenian soldier is indicated by his replacement of the Praetorian cohort by a new imperial guard, the *scholarii*, "picked for their excellence...from among the Armenians" (Procopius, *The Anecdota or Secret History*, xxiv, 15-16; see English transl. by H. B. Dowling, London: Loeb Classical Library, 1935).
- ¹¹ Movsés Khorenatsi, *Patmut'iun hayots*, II, 83.
- ¹² Edward Gulbekian, "Why the Third Year of Diocletian?", *Le Muséon*, vol. 103 (1990), pp. 249-54.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ For the dates, see Barnes, *The New Empire*, p. 42.
- ¹⁵ E.V. Gulbekian, "The Conversion of King Trdat and Khorenatsi's *History of the Armenians*", *Le Muséon*, vol. 90 (1977), p. 58. For a discussion of the two names, see Michael van Esbroeck, "Legends about Constantine in Armenian", in Thomas J. Samuelian (ed.), *Classical Armenian Culture: Influences and Creativity*, University of Pennsylvania, Armenian Texts and Studies, No. 4, n. p.: Scholars Press, 1982, pp. 79-101.
- ¹⁶ The Roman church also associated Pope Eusebius with Constantine. *Liber Pontificalis* states that the True Cross was discovered by Helena, Constantine's mother, in ca. 310 at the time of Eusebius; see *The Book of the Popes*, vol. 1, transl. by Louise Loomis, Columbia University, 1916, pp. 39-40.
- ¹⁷ Gelzer, p. 171.
- ¹⁸ Cp Manandian, *K'makan tesutiun*, vol. I, Yerevan, 1944, p. 354.
- ¹⁹ Agat'angeghos, *Patmutiun*, para. 874-875.
- ²⁰ Barnes, *The New Empire*, p. 69.
- ²¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII, 14; Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 43, ed. by J. L. Creed, Oxford, 1984, p. 62 f; T. D. Barnes, "Lactantius and Constantine", *J. Roman Stud.*, vol. 63 (1973), pp. 29-46.
- ²² Edward Gulbekian, "The Date of King Trdat's Conversion", *Handés Amsorya*, vol. 105 (1991), No. 1-12, pp. 75-87.
- ²³ Movsés Khorenatsi, *Patmut'iun hayots*, II, pp. 218-219.

- ²⁴ Through Manandian, *K'nnakan tesut'iun*, vol. 2 (1), p. 130 f; cp. Robert H. Hewsen, "In Search of Tiridates the Great", *Journal of the Society of Armenian Studies*, vol. 2 (1986), pp. 22 f. A treaty on this occasion could represent an historical basis for the Life version in which Constantine hears of Trdat's conversion and invites him to the capital.
- ²⁵ Maximinus attacked Greater Armenia in 312 because he felt that he was under pressure from his rival Licinius and from Trdat, both pro-Christian; see D. de Decker, "Sur le destinaire de la lettre au roi des Perses", *Persica*, vol. 8 (1979), pp. 105, 115 n. 67; cp. A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, Toronto, 1978, p. 79 (this work was first published in 1948).
- ²⁶ Barnes, *The New Empire*, pp. 81, 236.
- ²⁷ Ernest Honigmann, *Patristic Studies*, Studi e Testi 173, Vatican, 1953, pp. 25-26.
- ²⁸ Movses Khorenatsi, *Patmut'iun*, II. pp. 237.
- ²⁹ Gelzer, p. 169.
- ³⁰ E.g. Jones, p. 110.
- ³¹ Barnes, *The New Empire*, p. 68 ff. Constantine was resident at Serdica from February to April 317 and for protracted periods again in 319, 320 and 321.
- ³² Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, Harvard University, 1981, p. 72.
- ³³ Asturian favoured a date after Licinius's defeat; see Harut'iun Asturian, *Patmut'iun hayots* [History of the Armenians], Buenos Aires, 1947, p. 101. It has since been proposed that the letter addressed to the Persian king in the *Vita Constantini* was in fact sent to Trdat on the occasion of Licinius's defeat; see de Decker, pp. 99-116.
- ³⁴ Barnes, *The New Empire*, pp. 74-76.
- ³⁵ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. 212.
- ³⁶ Glanville Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria*, Princeton University Press, 1961, p. 651.

**ՏՐԴԱՏ ԱՐԲԱՅ ՀԱՆԴԻՊՈՒՄ ՈՒՆԵԹԱՊԻՒՄ
ՄԵԾՆ ԿՈՍՏԱՆԴՆՈՍԻ ՀԵՏ
(Ամփոփում)**

ԴՈԿՏ. ՎՐԷԺ ՆԵՐՍԷՍԵԱՆ

Ե. դարու մատենագիր Ազաթանգեղոս իր *Պատմութեան մէջ* կը լիչատակէ հալոց Տրդատ արքայի հանդիպումը Բիւզանդիոնի կայսր Մեծն Կոստանդիանոսի հետ (337-361): Այս լիչատակումին ճշմարտացիութիւնը հարցականի տակ առնուած է երկար ժամանակ:

Հեղինակը կ'ապացուցէ թէ նման հանդիպում մը տեղի ունեցած է իսկապէ՛ս, որուն ընթացքին դաշինք կնքուած է երկու կողմերուն միջեւ:

Ան՝ իստ մանրակրկիտ պրպտումներու, եւ հիմնուելով կողմնակի ու անուղղակի տուեալներու վրայ, կը հետեցնէ թէ հանդիպումը տեղի ունեցած է 324 Նոյեմբերի-325ի սկիզբի շրջանին միջեւ: Հեղինակը իբրեւ հանդիպման վայր կը նշէ Կոստանդնուպոլիսը, իսկ նկատի առնելով Եւանջիոս պապի մասնակցութիւնը հանդիպումին, հաւանական վայր կը նկատէ նաեւ Նիկոմիդիան: Իսկ կապադովկիայի մէջ հանդիպումի մը հաւանականութիւնը նուազ հաւանական կը գտնէ ան: