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THE RELIGIOUS POLICIES OF THE SASSANIDS (226-420 A.D.) AND THE IBERIAN CHURCH

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In 226, after the defeat of the Parthian king Artabanus IV, the Sasanian dynasty took power in Iran. At the time of Shāpūr I (reigned 241–272), the empire stretched from Sogdiana and Iberia (Georgia) in the north to the Mazun region of Arabia in the south and extended to the Indus River in the east and to the upper Tigris and Euphrates river valleys in the west.

After the conquest of new territories, the Sasanians faced a new goal - Iranization of the conquered territories, in which the spread and establishment of Zoroastrianism had to play an important role. The Sasanians began to fulfill this goal, but at first, they were reluctant to take radical measures because Zoroastrianism was not popular in the conquered territories, and it was not profitable for them to stir up religious strife.

The religious tolerance of the first Sasanians towards the religious groups living in the empire, as well as the emigration of many Christians from the conquered territories to Iran, further increased the number of Christians. At the end of the third century, Christians even managed to consecrate a bishop in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the capital of the empire.

The situation changed after the Sassanids were defeated in the war of 296-299 and had to cede northern Mesopotamia and the protectorate over Armenia and Iberia to Rome. Soon, Rome, under the leadership of Constantine the Great (306-337), began to patronize Christians and turned this religion into a tool of influence on neighboring states. It was in this situation that the countries of the South Caucasus, Armenia, Kartli, and Albania became Christian, thus clearly confirming their connection with the Roman Empire.

The Sasanians, for whom the South Caucasus had great strategic importance, could not adapt to the religious-ideological unity of the states of this region and the Roman Empire, which prevented the final dominance of Iran in the South Caucasus. Shapur II (309-379), who was going to return the lost territories according to the treaty of Nisibis, considered the Christians living in Iran to be the "fifth column" and, therefore, after the start of the war with Rome (337/8 AD), he began to persecute Christians in Iran.

In the 60s and 70s of the 4th century, Shapur II managed to subdue the kingdom of Armenia and Iberia, where, although he and his successors could not eradicate Christianity, they tried their best to spread Zoroastrianism. At the same time, the churches of these states were forced to break the hierarchical connection with the churches of the Roman Empire, and then they actively began to interfere in the affairs of these churches, they appointed the highest hierarchs and forbade them to perform the liturgy in Greek.

Soon, the Sasanian kings realized that the persecution of Christians did not bring results and changed their attitude towards them. Yazdegerd I (399-420) decided to unite the Christians living in Iran in one church, and with his promotion in 410, the Church of the East was founded, which was ruled by the bishop of the capital, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, who received the title of Catholicos of the East.

Yazdegerd himself appointed the Eastern Catholicos and interfered in the affairs of the church. During the reign of Yazdegerd, between 410 and 420, the jurisdiction of the Church of the East was extended over the churches of Armenia, Iberia, and Albania, which were subordinated to the Catholicos of the East. For Yazdegerd, the Church of the East became a tool to control the Christians living in Iran and subjugate the states of the South Caucasus, while he did not stop trying to spread Zoroastrianism in these states.