

Masculinity and Militant Piety in Defying Yazdgerd II

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Introduction

Hagiographies from the Sasanian world make up one of the most gendered bodies of early Christian literature. The martyrs and confessors in this genre of late antique Syriac, Armenian, and Georgian literature narrate accounts of otherworldly and virtuous acts of valor and piety against imperial temptations, threats, and the horrors of torture. Since most of these innovative narratives respond to or reflect Sasanian policies and persecutions targeting non-Zoroastrians, the study of Sasanian hagiographies is essential to understanding the internal dynamics of the Sasanian Empire. Given that few administrative records survive from long extents of Sasanian history, the study of Sasanian Christian literature is essential for understanding sociopolitical and ideological developments in the Sasanian world. Sasanian hagiographies, however, at least as a collective unit, remain one of the least studied bodies of early Christian literature.

One of the major factors that contribute to the lack of scholarship on Sasanian hagiographies relates to trends in scholarship in the fields of Late Antiquity and early Christianity. Since the 1970s, Peter Brown's groundbreaking work on the Late Antique world inspired many of his contemporary colleagues, and scholars of subsequent generations, to treat the Late Antique period as an essential period of transition and innovation. Although Brown treats the Sasanian world as an inseparable part of what he considers the Late Antique world, a large portion of scholars of the Roman-Byzantine world, as well as some of their counterparts who study the Sasanian Empire, are of the opinion that it is not fitting to study the socioeconomic and political dynamics of the Sasanian world through the largely Mediterranean-oriented concept of Late Antiquity.¹ Similarly, although scholars of early Christianity began to expand the scope of their studies in various ways since the 1950s, scholarship on Christian literature from the Sasanian world did not develop to the same degree of sophistication to those of the mainly Greek and Latin literature of the Greco-Roman world.² A major reason for this is

¹ Peter Brown identifies "the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia [the location of the Sasanian capital]" as the "main theatres of change" in Late Antiquity, Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 9. For a brief overview of the diversity of opinions about including the Sasanian Empire as part of the greater Late Antique world, see Parvaneh Pourshariati, "Introduction: Further Engaging the Paradigm of Late Antiquity," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 6 (2013): 1-14.

² For the development of the field of early Christian studies in the twentieth century, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "From Patristics to Early Christian Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); David Brakke, "The Early Church in North America: Late Antiquity, Theory, and the History of Christianity," *Church History* 71, no. 3 (September 2002): 473-491.



due to what is often referred to as the “cultural turn” in late antique and early Christian studies. Since the mid-twentieth century, historians of the late ancient and medieval worlds, as well as scholars of early Christianity, became more welcoming of interdisciplinary approaches in their works. Certain borrowings from cultural anthropology, and structuralist and post-structuralist theories since the 1970s, however, turned the focus of many scholars of Late Antiquity and early Christianity towards a deeper analysis of language and the cultural particularity of the Greco-Roman world.³

Scholars of early Christianity began more exclusive analyses of gender in their studies in the 1970s. Dale Martin correctly identifies the emergence of gender as a subject of study in the fields of Late Antiquity and early Christianity as part of a broader movement in academia set off by second-wave feminism.⁴ Elizabeth Clark was one of the most influential pioneers of this trend. Clark’s earlier work, much like those of her colleagues, focused more specifically on women, rather than gender.⁵ By the closing decades of the twentieth century, however, scholars of Late Antiquity and early Christianity began to focus more on notions of gender, and, more recently, the construction and deconstruction of masculinity in early Christian literature.⁶ Works dealing with gender in Sasanian literature and communities, however, due in part to the “cultural turn,” appeared much less frequently. Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey’s *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (1987) turned scholarly attention toward the role of sex and gender in Syriac hagiographies.⁷ Although the book’s introductions to the translated texts only briefly touch on aspects relating to gender, much of Harvey’s subsequent publications address this matter more specifically. Some of Harvey’s earlier work sought to “recover the lives of ancient women,” while much of her other publications reflect upon the gendered themes in early Syriac literature.⁸ Harvey, however, remains part of a small group of scholars of Syriac culture and society who can produce scholarship regarding the function of gender in Syriac hagiographies to the same degree of sophistication as her counterparts working on Greek and Latin texts. Moreover, Harvey’s work and those of her colleagues did not extend to other bodies of Christian literature from the Late Antique Near East.

The lack of publications that treat Christian literature from the Sasanian world collectively, however, is mainly due to the development of Sasanian historiography over the past century. For the majority of the twentieth century, scholars studied the Sasanian Empire mainly through its role as a foe of Rome and Byzantium. This type of scholarship largely ignored the internal dynamics of the Sasanian world. Arthur Christensen’s work on Sasanian society and Jérôme Labourt’s work on Sasanian Christianity are two rare exceptions to virtually unstudied

³ Dale B. Martin, introduction to *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography*, ed. Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 8, 9.

⁴ Martin, introduction to *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies*, 11.

⁵ See, for instance, Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1983).

⁶ See, for instance, Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁷ See Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holey Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁸ For the quoted phrase, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Sacred Bonding: Mothers and Daughters in Early Syriac Hagiography,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 31. For an example of Harvey’s works that deal more specifically with gender, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “On Mary’s Voice: Gendered Words in Syriac Marian Tradition,” in *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies*, 63-86.

topics before the latter decades of the twentieth century.⁹ In fact, it was only recently that the first English-language books that deal exclusively with the Sasanian Empire appeared.¹⁰ Moreover, the nature of Christian literature made it ideally useful for nationalist historiography. Nationalist histories, of course, treated hagiographies of a specific community or nation in the context of its community's respective history. Also, the majority of scholars who worked on Syriac, Armenian, and Georgian hagiographies were (and still are) philologists who tend to treat hagiographical literature as part of the larger literature of a specific language. The fact that Sasanian hagiographies are recorded in very different and distinct languages, as opposed to the Greek and Latin literature of the Roman-Byzantine world, further discourages collective studies of Christian literature from the Sasanian world.¹¹

Through a collective study of the gendered narratives of a group of Sasanian martyrologies, this paper demonstrates the usefulness and necessity of a more inclusive treatment of Christian hagiographical literature in studying the Late Antique world. The Sasanian king Yazdgerd II (r. 438-457 CE) sought to further centralize and homogenize his domain by demanding that community leaders in his empire adhere to the Zoroastrian religion.¹² Martyr texts respond to Yazdgerd's policies by producing more radical and defiant narratives. By setting the gendered narratives of Syriac, Armenian, and Georgian hagiographies as the starting point of analysis, this study illustrates the different manifestations of masculine prowess and militancy through their association with virtue and piety in these texts. Such an approach in reading this group of hagiographies suggests that accounts of masculinized women who defy patriarchal authority act as more radical and more attractive narratives that advocate for more strenuous religious devotion amid concerns over Yazdgerd's persecutions. The Armenian accounts of sacralized warfare in response to Yazdgerd's repressive measures, I argue, parallel the gendered reactions of the Syriac and Georgian solitary accounts with masculine militancy as a virtue manifesting itself into a larger political body in the Armenian texts.

Sasanian Hagiographies about Yazdgerd's Persecutions

There are three groups of hagiographies that relate to Yazdgerd's persecutions. Syriac texts narrate the accounts of a series of martyrs through largely interrelated stories. Tahmazgerd (martyred in 445 CE) is the first specified martyr in Syriac sources reflecting on Yazdgerd's reign.¹³ In the only account of mass slaughter attributed to Yazdgerd's repressive policies, Tahmazgerd converted to Christianity while working as an executioner at Karka d-Beth Slokh (modern Kirkuk). The subsequent stories are related to the account of the proselyte Yazdin, a confessor who himself converted many to Christianity. According to *Acts of Adur-Hormizd*,

⁹ See Arthur Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1936) and Jérôme Labourt, *Le christianisme dans l'empire perse sous la dynastie Sassanide, 224-632* (Paris: V. Lecoffre, 1904).

¹⁰ See Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

¹¹ For examples of works that treat hagiographies of specific Christian communities within the Sasanian Empire exclusively, see, for instance, David Marshall Lang, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1956); Sebastian Brock, *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006); K'. Ter-Davt'yan, *Haykakan srbaxosut'yun vark'er ev vkayabanut'yunner (V-XVIII dd.) [Armenian hagiological lives and martyrologies. (V-XVIII centuries)]* (Erevan: Nayri, 2011).

¹² Henceforth, any unspecified Yazdgerd in this paper refers solely to Yazdgerd II.

¹³ For the date given for the martyrdom, see Jean Maurice Fiey, *Saints Syriaques*, ed. Lawrence I. Conrad, *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 6* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, Inc., 2004), 183.

Anahid, and Pethion (henceforth AAAP), Pethion, Yazdin's nephew, converts Anahid, the daughter of a magus (Zoroastrian cleric). Adur-Hormizd, Anahid's father, himself converts and is executed with Pethion. Anahid joins the ranks of her martyred father and Pethion after extensive interrogations and gruesome tortures.¹⁴

Two Armenian texts directly relate to mid-fifth-century Sasanian policies. These works are generally known as Łazar P'arpec'i's *History of the Armenians* and Elišē's *The History of Vardan and the Armenian War*.¹⁵ Both works record the struggle of pious Armenians who, due to Yazdgerd's repressive measures, revolt against the Sasanian monarchy under the leadership of *sparapet* (general) Vardan Mamikonean. Both texts differ considerably. The two histories' different selective content and emphases betray the independent biases of both texts. Łazar and Elišē employ both typical and innovative early Christian hagiographical content in their work. These include a narrative of militant martyrdom and other individual or collective exemplary acts of devotion. Scholars generally agree on a late fifth- or an early sixth-century date for Łazar's *History*, while identifying Elišē's *History* to be a later (most likely a sixth-century) work.¹⁶ For the purpose of this study, both works fit the genre of hagiographical literature pertaining to mid-fifth century Sasanian policies independently. This is especially since Elišē's work contains content not found in Łazar's text.

The Georgian account of Šušanik's martyrdom is related in narrative to the histories of Łazar and Elišē. In Iakob C'urtaveli's *Passion of St. Šušanik (Passion of Šušanik)*, Šušanik, the wife of a Georgian *bdeaxš* (viceroys), refuses an intimate relationship with her husband after the latter converts to Zoroastrianism at the insistence of the Sasanian monarch.¹⁷ Iakob, supposedly a witness to the affairs, narrates the pious woman's devotion despite the many torments that lead to her death in prison. According to the text, Šušanik is the daughter of Vardan Mamikonean, the head of the martyred Armenian army in the works of Łazar and Elišē. Iakob's account, however, is exclusively a martyrology rather than a chronicle or work of history. Although scholars of Iakob's *Passion* identify the unspecified Sasanian king as one of Yazdgerd's immediate successors, Hormizd III and Pērōz I only continued or ceased to administer the policies initiated

¹⁴ For the dates given for the martyrdoms of Pethion, Adur-Hormizd, and Anahid, see Fiey, *Saints Syriacs*, 150, 183, 196.

¹⁵ For the different earlier titles used for Łazar's and Elišē's works, see S. Peter Cowe, "Elišē's *Armenian War* as a Metaphor for the Spiritual Life," in *Armenian Perspectives: 10th anniversary Conference of the Association Internationale Des Etudes Arméniennes; School of Oriental and African Studies*, ed. Nicholas Awde (London: Curzon, 1997), 52, 53, 54.

¹⁶ For the dating and relation of the two texts and their manuscripts, see Dickran Kouymjian, introduction to Łazar P'arpec'i, *History of the Armenians and the Letter to Vahan Mamikonean: A Photographic Reproduction of the 1904 Tiflis Edition with a New Introduction and Critical Bibliography* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1985), xxii-xxvi; R. W. Thomson, introduction to *The History of Vardan and the Armenian War: A Facsimile Reproduction of the 1957 Yerevan Edition* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1993), 11-15; Tara L. Andrews, "Identity, Philosophy, and the Problem of Armenian History in the Sixth Century," in *History and Identity in the Late Antique Near East*, ed. Philip Wood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 37-41; Cowe, "Elišē's *Armenian War* as a Metaphor for the Spiritual Life," 53-56; S. Peter Cowe, "Armenian Hagiography," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography*, vol. 1, ed. Stephanos Efthymiadis (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011), 307-309.

¹⁷ The text used here is generally considered to be the oldest. For a detailed study of the four surviving versions in Armenian and Georgian, see Paruyr Muradyan, *Surb Šušaniki vkayabanut 'yunē: bnagrer ev hedazodut 'yun [Holy Šušanik's martyrdom: texts and study]* (Erevan: HH GAA "Gitut 'yun" Publishing, 1996). Stephen Rapp suggests that the Georgian accounts of Šušanik's martyrdom predates its surviving Armenian counterparts. Stephen H. Rapp Jr., *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes: Caucasia and the Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2014), 37 n. 22.

by Yazdgerd.¹⁸ Moreover, Šušānik's association with Vardan Mamikonean, the leader of the Armenian resistance force against Yazdgerd's army further links Iacob's *Passion* to the aforementioned group of mid-fifth-century martyr literature.

Female Martyrs in Mid-Fifth-Century Sasanian Martyrologies

A common characteristic of hagiographies relating to Yazdgerd's reign is their use of women as exemplary martyrs or devout Christians. It is worth noting that the tradition of female martyrs in Christian literature goes back to the second century. The two earliest surviving records are those of Agathonikê and Blandina from the late second century.¹⁹ Brent Shaw categorizes these as "collective" accounts that narrate the martyrdom of women within a larger group.²⁰ As for the third oldest surviving account of female martyrdom, which features Perpetua, Shaw correctly identifies it as a "solitary" account, or one that places greater emphasis on the achievement and actions of an individual.²¹ The account of Perpetua's martyrdom remained a model for many subsequent early Christian martyr texts. In Syriac, Armenian, and Georgian literature, however, accounts of female martyrs (along with a more developed hagiographical genre) appear much later. In fact, in the case of Georgian literature (and possibly in the Syriac Persian Martyr Acts), female, or, more precisely, female-sexed martyrs first appear in the context of mid-fifth-century Sasanian persecutions. In the Persian Martyr Acts and the Armenian and Georgian martyrologies pertaining to Yazdgerd's reign, female martyrs appear both in solitary and collective accounts. These women are either the protagonist martyrs of the stories or characters whose deeds comprise an essential part of the narrative. The hagiographies describing the martyr acts of Anahid and Šušānik relate to the former case. Both women are the main characters of their respective texts, and the details of their confession, tortures, and martyrdom form the core of both narratives. Similarly, the *History of Karka d-Beth Slokh*, which narrates the only recorded episode of mass slaughter during Yazdgerd's reign, extensively emphasizes the victorious martyrdom of the "daughters of the covenant."²² Although women are not the protagonists in the works of Łazar or Elišê, both authors laud pious acts by women in their respective texts.

By employing female martyrs in the narratives of East-Syriac martyr literature, or more specifically, in the Persian Martyr Acts, the texts relating to Yazdgerd's persecutions differ from the narratives of martyr acts pertaining to the reign of Yazdgerd's predecessors. In the texts attributed to the reigns of Yazdgerd I and Wahrām V, Yazdgerd II's immediate predecessors, not only are there no female martyrs, but women are virtually absent from the narratives.²³ Women

¹⁸ David Marshall Lang suggests that the eighth year of the unspecified Persian king in the text, which is the date given for Varsken's conversion to Zoroastrianism, corresponds to 466 CE, during the reign of Pērōz I, see Iakob C'urtaveli, *Passion of the Holy Queen Shushanik*, in *Lives and Legends*, 45 n. 1. In accordance to Łazar P'arpec'i's account of related figures to Iacob's *Passion*, Stephen Rapp suggests that Šušānik's martyrdom occurred during the reign of Hormizd III, Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 43, 44.

¹⁹ Brent D. Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," *Past & Present* 139 (May 1993), 16, 17.

²⁰ Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 15, 16, 17.

²¹ Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 15, 17.

²² Brock and Harvey, trans., *Persian Martyrs: D. From the History of Karka d-Beth Slokh*, in *Holy Women*, 77-78.

²³ These are the *Acts* of 'Abda, Narsai, Tataq, and the ten martyrs of Beth Garmai under Yazdgerd I and the acts of Jacob Intercisus, Jacob the Notary, Mihrshabur, and Peroz under Wahrām V; see "Appendix: A Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts," in *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in with a Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts*, trans. Sebastian P. Brock (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2008), 82.

do appear in the massive list of martyrs attributed to Šapur II's violent persecutions. Joel Walker, however, remarks that East-Syriac martyr texts only record "garbled memories," since they predate the matured literary style that developed in subsequent centuries.²⁴ This suggests that Syriac hagiographies relating to Šapur II's reign are later writings or reproductions. Therefore, the collective use of female martyrs in the *History of Karka d-Beth Slokh* and *AAAP* are rather innovative genres in relation to their preceding East-Syriac hagiographical literary traditions.²⁵

It may be a stretch, however, to suggest that the tradition of female martyrs in the Persian Martyr Acts began during the reign of Yazdgerd II. The *Act* of Candida, a woman, may be the oldest and the only surviving account from the early periods of persecution.²⁶ According to the text, Candida belongs to the group of Christians that Šapur I took captive from his campaigns with the Romans and settled in various parts of his empire.²⁷ Candida's beauty attracts Wahrām II, who makes her one of his wives.²⁸ The Persian king insists that she renounce Christianity and adhere to his faith.²⁹ She refuses and, consequently, Wahrām subjects her to torture.³⁰ The rest of the manuscript is lost.³¹ Brock observes that the archaic spelling of Wahrām (*WRHRN*) is an implication that the text survives from an early period.³² He rightly notes, however, that the narrative contains parallels with later works, especially those of the fifth century.³³ This would explain the close parallels between Candida's and Anahid's interrogations and their reactions to them. For instance, when Candida remained defiant during torture, the king

ordered (one of) her breasts to be cut off and placed in her hand. When they did this to her and made her go round the city streets, the blessed girl still gave thanks and praise to her Lord. When he [the king] saw her he said : « Aren't you ashamed... Give into me and I will give orders for you to be healed, and you shall have your (old) position of honour » But the blessed girl told him : « You have no greater honour than this to give me... »

...he [the king] ordered that her other breast be cut off and placed in the palm of her other hand, after which she was to be taken round the city.

When they had done this to her... the whole city... went around the city with her in lamentation and tears. But the face of this disciple of Christ was radiant with joy.³⁴

²⁴ Joel Thomas Walker, "The Church of the East and the Hagiography of the Persian Martyrs," in *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq*, trans. Joel Thomas Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 110.

²⁵ For the difference between "solitary" and individual-centered martyr acts in early Christian literature, see Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 15, 16.

²⁶ "Persian Martyr Acts" here is used in the broader sense, as opposed to Maruthas of Martyropolis's *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* which deals only with the victims under Šapur II and Yazdgerd I.

²⁷ Sebastian Brock, trans., "A Martyr at the Sasanian Court under Vahran II: Candida" [translated text], in *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity*, by Sebastian Brock (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), 178.

²⁸ Brock, "Candida," 178.

²⁹ Brock, "Candida," 179.

³⁰ Brock, "Candida," 179-181.

³¹ Brock, "Candida," 167.

³² Brock, *Syriac Perspectives*, 168. For the surviving manuscript, also see Sebastian Brock, *Fire From Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 72 n. 7.

³³ Brock, *Syriac Perspectives*, 168.

³⁴ Brock, trans., "Candida," 180, 181.

The molestation of Anahid in *AAAP* closely resembles the quoted section from the account of Candida. When Anahid consistently defies efforts to have her renounce her Christian faith, the following takes place:

Two men were to hold on to and pull at each thread until her breasts were severed and fell to the ground. As they attached the threads...the holy woman directed her gaze to heaven and said imploringly, “Lord Jesus Christ, receive my spirit—not because I am suffering at the hands of those who cause me pain, but lest they stop at letting me come to you.”

...many of the crowd present were sobbing with tears.

Her two breasts were quickly cut through and hung each by a mere sinew. The holy woman stretched out her hands, grabbed her breasts, and placed them in front of the Magian, with the words, “Seeing that you very much wanted them, O Magian, here they are, do with them whatever takes your fancy....I will not hold back anything I have from your banquet.”³⁵

In their struggle, Candida and Anahid not only undergo near-identical amputations, but also respond in a similar manner. The crowd’s response and lamentation in witnessing Anahid resembles the reactions in Candida’s account as well. Given the similarities between the details of the two texts and the fact that the martyr acts attributed to Šapur II’s reign are most likely later reproductions, the surviving manuscript about Candida is, therefore, most likely a later (possibly a fifth- or sixth-century) work. The archaic spelling of Wahrām may very well be a leftover of the original manuscript in the reworked version. Most telling, however, is the innovation or adaptation of certain narratives or themes given the circumstances. The irony is that female martyrs appear (or reappear) in the Persian Martyr Acts at a time when only a select group of men are the targets of religious persecution.

Iakob’s narration of a female’s martyr act signifies a more innovative break from the broader body of Georgian literature. *Passion of Šušānik*, *Passion of the Nine Children of Kolay* (*Children of Kolay*) and *Martyrdom of St. Evstat’i Mc’xet’eli* (*Martyrdom of Evstat’i*) are the oldest surviving works of Georgian literature.³⁶ Although Iakob’s *Passion of Šušānik* is generally accepted as the earliest work, Stephen Rapp suggests a possible early fifth-century date for *Children of Kolay* and identifies it as, potentially, the oldest known original Georgian narrative.³⁷ There is no clear information about the original manuscript of *Passion of Šušānik*, though Rapp suggests that Iakob possibly based his (potentially late fifth-century) work on oral or written traditions regarding the literary saint which existed since the second half of the fifth century.³⁸ In any case, Iakob’s account of Šušānik’s martyrdom is the earliest recorded work of Georgian literature that narrates a female’s martyr act. Much like Syriac hagiographies’ turn to female martyrs when addressing mid-fifth-century Sasanian persecutions, the earliest known account of a solitary female martyr in Georgian literature appears in reference to persecutions of the same period. Regardless of the truth value of the tales described, the parallels in the choice of characters for both independent Syriac and Georgian works—referring specifically to the same persecutions—suggests that the composers of both texts intended to achieve common goals. The

³⁵ Brock and Harvey, trans., *Persian Martyrs: F. Anahid*, in *Holy Women*, 95.

³⁶ The latter two are anonymous, see Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 36.

³⁷ Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 37, 38.

³⁸ Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 37.



use of exemplary pious women in both texts, therefore, most likely served similar purposes.

Contrary to the Syriac and Georgian narratives that reflect on persecutions initiated by Yazdgerd, women do not appear as the procrastinators or as one of the main characters in the Armenian works of Łazar and Elišē. Both texts, however, dedicate a section at the end solely for the purpose of praising the virtues of the wives of martyred or imprisoned noblemen. Łazar's account contains the other exceptions, namely, women's contempt for their apostate husbands and their refusal to be tutored by the magi. Łazar's text, which most likely predates Elišē's by decades, is a product of Armenian historiographical and hagiographical tradition, which does have precedents in narrating tales of holy women. Agathangelos's *History*, which most likely predates Łazar's work by decades, dedicates a considerably large portion of his work to the tale of two martyred nuns and their companions. Agathangelos records that Rhipsimē, Gaianē, her elder companion, and a group of fellow nuns flee to Armenia when Diocletion, the Roman emperor, eagerly desires to marry Rhipsimē for her beauty.³⁹ In Armenia, however, Rhipsimē confronts Trdat, the Armenian king, who also desires to marry her.⁴⁰ In response to Trdat's advances she fights him "like a man," defeats him, and embarrasses the warrior-king.⁴¹ Eventually, however, Rhipsimē and her companions are put to death after horrific tortures.⁴² The texts of Łazar and Elišē, with all their links and references to Agathangelos and Christian Armenian literature that preceded theirs, portray pious women largely in the context of their expected feminine duties. Here too, borrowings or deviation from traditional narratives are more appropriately acts of innovation rather than adoption to passive trends in literary genres.

Sex and Gender in Early Christian Literature

It is essential to understand the use of women and men in early Christian literature through understanding the function of gender in this highly gendered genre of literature. Brown is right to suggest that terms and notions such as "male" and "female," and "virginity" and "celibacy" had more of a symbolic, rather than literal, meaning in early Christian writings.⁴³ Early Christian authors, especially those of hagiographies, consciously juxtaposed and differentiated the characters of their texts with manly and womanly labels. Both the implicit and explicit language of early Christian literature distort links between sexuality and gender, while, at the same time, link gendered themes to power dynamics between individuals, groups, and, political institutions. In fact, Elišē, in a section solely devoted to praising the strength of women in dealing with struggles associated with having their husbands martyred or imprisoned, states that these women "forgot their feminine weakness and became men heroic at spiritual warfare."⁴⁴ Elišē's linking of "weakness" to femininity, and his identification of "men" with the opposite, illustrates the careful use of gendered labels by the author and their ultimate link to power in his work. Joan

³⁹ Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*, trans. R. W. Thomson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976), 149.

⁴⁰ Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*, 189.

⁴¹ Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*, 191, 199.

⁴² Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*, 205, 215.

⁴³ Here, Brown is also quoting C. Lévy-Strauss, Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), xxx and Claude Lévy-Strauss, "The Sorcerer and His Magic," in *Structural Anthropology* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Peregrine Books, 1977), 179.

⁴⁴ Elišē, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 246.



Scott's understanding of the construction and function of gender via Foucauldian notions of power relations is, therefore, useful and necessary for understanding the deeply rooted gendered narratives of early Christian literature.⁴⁵ With this in mind, Susanna Elm appropriately suggests the usefulness of imagining a man-versus-man power struggle when women appear against men in early Christian literature.⁴⁶

It is necessary, however, to consider the role of women in early Christian communities when analyzing the gendered themes of early Christian hagiographies. A growing amount of scholarship discuss women's holding of leadership positions in early Christian communities. Karen Torjesen argues that it was the institutionalization and transformation of Christian communities—and the church—to the public sphere in the third and fourth centuries, that led to women's subsequent subordination in Roman society.⁴⁷ Clark, on the other hand, elaborates how, through asceticism, women became "models" and "mentors" of the "pious life" and "devout living" in the fourth and early fifth centuries, and, thus, won the praise of the Fathers.⁴⁸ Clark believes that since women's sexual functioning and the institution of marriage were responsible for their subordinate status in society, celibacy afforded women greater freedom and elevated them from "personhood" to "individuality."⁴⁹ Since this type of ascetic women "rose above their natural abject condition," Clark identifies them as individuals almost resembling a "third sex" (a term which Tertullian used in the third century).⁵⁰

Considering the existence of lauded devout women, or the "third sex," in early Christian societies offers the reader of early Christian literature a better idea of what the texts reflect upon. Since the authors, reproducers, and the audience of early Christian hagiographies could identify the women in the stories to the pious and devout familiar to them, the commendation of the exemplary pious women in these texts serves two purposes among others. Most likely, the authors sought to promote women to adopt the qualities they advocated for. Relevantly, by exemplifying the achievements of the categorically subordinate sex, the texts produce more appealing narratives of Christian devotion. In some ways, these stories link masculinity to the values and characteristics associated with piety in order to advocate these traits to their broader community. Thus, the manner in which Christian hagiographies employ the sexes in their gendered narratives serve a variety of purposes. In order to accurately speculate about a narrative's motives, however, it is essential to identify the hagiological topos of given texts.

Gendered Themes in Early Christian Martyr Texts

Categorically, it is most appropriate to read the gendered themes in hagiographies relating to Yazdgerd's reign in context of the genre they most directly belong to, martyr literature. Many early works on early Christian martyrology seek to identify or excavate specific

⁴⁵ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category for Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December, 1986): 1067.

⁴⁶ Susanna Elm, *'Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 17-18.

⁴⁷ Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 7, 155, 162, 164-165.

⁴⁸ Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 17, 19.

⁴⁹ Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 17, 18, 23.

⁵⁰ Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 17. For Brown's citation of Tertullian's *On the Veiling of Virgins* 7.6, see Brown, *The Body and Society*, 81, n. 90.

facts or details from martyr texts in an effort to better understand the persecution of Christians in the Roman world. Averil Cameron rightly observes that many earlier historians of early Christianity failed to properly distinguish between “literature” and “literary sources” in their works and approached texts selectively for their potentiality to provide factual evidence.⁵¹ As discussed above, interdisciplinary borrowings, as well as structuralist and post-structuralist theories, directed scholarship towards new approaches to studying early Christian texts. Brown’s borrowings from anthropology, for instance, proved influential and useful for understanding the function of saints in early Christian societies.⁵² Since the late twentieth century, scholarship on late antique martyr literature borrowed much from these trends in scholarship, as well as a growing number of works pertaining to notions of gender in early Christian and late antique societies. A large group of scholars began to reflect on gender in early Christian texts mainly through the prism of Greco-Roman culture and society.⁵³ Others, such as Mathew Kuefler, see Greco-Roman notions of gender in Late Antiquity as related, integral, but not solely responsible for the development of concepts of masculinity in early Christian thought and theology.⁵⁴ Needless to say, the particular analysis of gender in early Christian literature by contemporary scholars depends on whichever school he or she belongs to.

Given the lack of scholarship on Sasanian hagiographies, it is most appropriate to analyze the function of gender in Sasanian martyr texts through both the social- and cultural-oriented methodologies used for martyr literature from the Roman world. Lucy Grig’s opinion linking the notion of martyrs in Late Antiquity to that of the construction, institutions, and representation of power is representative of the opinion of most scholars of early Christianity.⁵⁵ There are, however, a variety of theories regarding the specific role of martyr literature in early Christian communities. Elizabeth Castelli reflects the opinion of many scholars by identifying “the collective memory of the religious suffering of others” as an essential tool for the formation of early Christian identity.⁵⁶ Castelli believes that the reinterpretation of suffering as salvation in early Christian literature offered a “competing theory of power” that contradicted those created by Roman judicial structures.⁵⁷ She identifies the inversion of value in Christian literature and thought as central to “transforming ‘persecution’ into ‘martyrdom’ and powerlessness into power.”⁵⁸ It is in this framework of value inversion that Castelli identifies the function of gender, especially the attribution of masculine qualities to women, in early Christian martyr literature.⁵⁹

Although Castelli presents her premises convincingly and much of her arguments are in accordance to the opinions of many scholars, some of her conclusions can be challenged. L.

⁵¹ Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 2.

⁵² See Peter Brown, “Enjoying the Saints in Late Antiquity,” *Early Medieval Europe* 9, no. 1 (2000): 1-24; Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Enlarged ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101.

⁵³ Works on gender in ancient Greco-Roman society prove especially influential for this category of scholarship; see, for instance, Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁵⁴ Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, 1.

⁵⁵ Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London: Duckworth, 2004), 1.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 4.

⁵⁷ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 48.

⁵⁸ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 48.

⁵⁹ For the masculine representation of martyred women, see Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 62.

Stephanie Cobb's essentially agrees with Castelli regarding the function of martyr texts as identity-forming literature.⁶⁰ Cobb, however, argues that literature on martyr acts do not present a narrative of collective suffering to begin with. She points out that the texts illustrate the martyrs' immunity to suffering from torture.⁶¹ Instead, Cobb states that early Christian martyr texts act as attractive narratives that attribute Roman masculine virtues to Christians, whom they juxtapose to non-Christians in their accounts.⁶² By taking the emphasis on suffering out of the equation, Cobb's thesis contradicts that of Castelli's and the latter's understanding of value inversion in early Christian martyr texts. Cobb links the masculine attributes credited to both sexes more directly to traditional or existing Roman notions of male virtues.⁶³ With this understanding, Cobb identifies narratives of pious women (who seemed most vulnerable) against "the most virile characters in Roman society" (such as proconsuls) as an attractive representation of Christian masculine behavior.⁶⁴ For Cobb, the main purpose of the portrayal of Christians' superior acts of masculinity versus non-Christians was both to make Christianity look more attractive and, at the same time, to make those celebrated values part of Christian group identity.⁶⁵

Castelli's and Cobb's theories regarding the function of gender in early Christian martyr texts reveal much about the gendered narratives in Sasanian hagiographies. Cobb's position that early Christian martyr literature does not essentially intend to narrate stories about suffering proves the more convincing in regards to the martyrs in literature about Yazdgerd's persecutions. Anahid, as the portion quoted from *AAAP* above illustrates, remains indifferent to all the torments that the authorities subject her to.⁶⁶ She effortlessly defies the chief magus, a person of great power and authority and remains unaffected by the various interrogation techniques and tortures she undergoes.⁶⁷ Likewise, in Iacob's account of Šušānik's martyrdom, Šušānik remains unaffected and unmoved by any of her husband's abuses. In fact, in Iacob's text, she describes the night that her beatings and imprisonment began as "the beginning of joy."⁶⁸

The indifference of these martyrs to the torments unleashed upon them, however, contradicts the reaction of the crowd that beholds them. In the account of Anahid's martyrdom the crowd that witnessed her "in such dire pain... were sobbing with tears."⁶⁹ Iacob, the claimed author of Šušānik's *Passion*, in addition to describing the sorrow of others for Šušānik's fate, states that he wept when he "saw her [Šušānik's] face all slashed and swollen."⁷⁰ Therefore, although these texts describe the martyrs as seemingly indifferent to suffering, the authors of these texts intend to have the audience of their accounts identify as much, and perhaps more, with the audience in the narratives. It is fair to conclude that the audience of these texts is meant to behold the martyr in awe of her divine immunity to suffering for her piety as the witnesses to

⁶⁰ L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 5.

⁶¹ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 10.

⁶² Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 5, 6, 8.

⁶³ Cobb notes that the martyrs are made to resemble Roman gladiators, athletes, and soldiers, and that even the location of men's and women's martyrdom takes place in masculine environments (such as the amphitheater), see Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 6, 7.

⁶⁴ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 7, 8.

⁶⁵ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 5.

⁶⁶ Brock and Harvey, trans., *Anahid*, 95.

⁶⁷ Brock and Harvey, trans., *Anahid*, 93-97.

⁶⁸ Iacob, *Passion of the Holy Queen Shushanik*, in *Lives and Legends*, trans. Lang, 50.

⁶⁹ Brock and Harvey, trans., *Anahid*, 95.

⁷⁰ Iacob, *Passion of the Holy Queen Shushanik*, 50.



the martyrs do in the narratives.⁷¹ The crowd's reasoning that it is God's work and "nothing else" that explains Anahid's endurance, as well as the crowd's eventual treatment of Šušānik as a saint capable of miracles, further support this view.⁷² In sum, these texts consider their audience's reaction to the thought of suffering, but the narrative themselves seek to dismiss threats of pain for those performing great acts of devotion.

Masculinity in Mid-Fifth-Century Sasanian Martyrologies

The question remains, however, whether it is appropriate to analyze the role of women in gendered Syriac, Armenian, and Georgian texts via theories formulated in works regarding Greek and Latin martyr literature. Although Cobb's understanding of gender in early Christian martyr texts from the Roman-Byzantine world is extremely useful and applicable to the accounts discussed above, she is clearly of the more particularistic school and approaches her sources more specifically in the context of Greco-Roman literature and culture. Although this method treats a certain group of early Christian literature far too exclusively, the decentralization of cultural particularity in this genre of literature could prove problematic as well.

First, it is important to consider that early Christian literature belongs to the rather interactive world of early Christian networks. Throughout Eurasia and North Africa, Christianity, via its preachers, communities, and sects, much like numerous other religions and creeds in Late Antiquity, spread extensively and rapidly. In fact, it is more appropriate to view the development of Christian theology and its creeds as a result of constant interactions between numerous groups and individuals, rather than look for origin points. Brown, for instance, observes that Syriac asceticism "spread northwards into Armenia, and westwards to the streets of Antioch: it enriched and troubled the life of Mediterranean cities as far apart as Constantinople, Milan and Carthage."⁷³ Christian communities in the Near East, including Syriacs, would, in turn, engage with Greek and Latin literature already influenced by Syriac asceticism. Moreover, knowledge and translation from a variety of languages was a norm of early Christian hagiologists, chroniclers, and theologians.⁷⁴ Early Christian authors mentioned many references and often quoted writings of different languages, verbatim, in a single work.⁷⁵ The references to the same martyrs, as well as similar narratives in a variety of languages, best illustrates this. Therefore, parallels in early Christian literature, as well as the interactive nature of early Christian communities, verify the usefulness of a more inclusive approach to studying early Christian martyr literature. The extent of borrowings and exchanges, either in style or narrative, makes

⁷¹ This is in accordance with Brown's observation about the role of the martyr and their audience in hagiographies. Brown describes the event as a "*spectaculum*" where "believers were drawn by the deeper imaginative logic of the occasion to *participate* in the glory of the martyrs rather than imitate them. They gathered so as to share, for a time of high celebration, in the original, death-defying moment of 'glory' associated with God's triumph in the saint," Brown, "Enjoying the Saints in Late Antiquity," 9.

⁷² Brock and Harvey, trans., *Anahid*, 95; Iacob, *Passion of the Holy Queen Shushanik*, 53-54.

⁷³ Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 98. For the interactive and multi-local nature of Christianity's expansion throughout the Late Antique world, as well as to the far-flung peoples of Asia, see, respectively, "1: 'The Laws of Countries'" and "10: Christianity in Asia," in *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200-1000*, by Peter Brown (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996).

⁷⁴ Generally, Syriac and Armenian authors tended to refer more often to writings from the Byzantine world than vice versa.

⁷⁵ For an extensive commentary on examples of literary borrowings in a seventh-century Armenian work, James Howard-Johnston, *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, II [Historical Commentary] (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999).

categorization of these texts by genre more appropriate than grouping them by language or culture (other than Christian), for the purpose of their analysis.

There is good reason, however, not to exclude cultural connotations in analyzing the role of gender in Syriac, Armenian, and Georgian hagiographies. The considerably independent development of Syriac, Armenian, and (to some degree) Georgian Christianity, with all their values and aesthetics, is worthy of consideration. Brock and Harvey note the influence of local Hebraic Judaism, as well as groups with gnostic inclinations, namely Marcionites, Valentinians, Messalians, and Manichaeans in the formation of Syriac spirituality.⁷⁶ Syriac Christianity played a major role in the development of Christianity in communities and polities within the Sasanian imperial orbit. Early forms of Armenian, Georgian, and (Caucasian) Albanian Christianity resembled Syriac thought and theology very closely, through both direct and indirect influences. Yet, local influences, as well as those from external sources, left their imprint as well. Touraj Daryaee, for instance, observes that “Jesus” may very well have been used as a “power name” by non-Christians in parts of Mesopotamia and the Iranian Plateau in Late Antiquity.⁷⁷ This demonstrates the diversity of Christian ideologies throughout the Sasanian world and presents the necessity of considering this fact when reading Sasanian hagiographies.

One important common characteristic of Christian practice and literature from the Sasanian world is the extensive emphasis on ascetic piety. Although asceticism, both in practice and in literature, is a defining characteristic of early Christianity, this is perhaps even truer for Syriac and Christian Caucasian literature (and for Greek hagiographies from the Near East). Many of the more celebrated saints and holy men and women in Syriac, Armenian, and Georgian hagiographies are venerated men and women lauded for adopting a purely ascetic lifestyle, rather than confessors whose stories mainly focus on their trials and deaths. In Syriac tradition, Saint Simeon Stylites (the Elder), the ascetic stylite saint, resembles the pious par excellence.⁷⁸ His counterpart in Armenian tradition is Gregory the Illuminator, the man whose ascetic qualities afforded him much endurance in order to eventually convert, as the legend goes, the Armenian king, and, through him, the people as well.⁷⁹ The more extensive use of these two figures, among other ascetic saints in Syriac and Christian Caucasian literature, reveals the influence of cultural or local religious aesthetics on the literature of these communities.

It is essential, therefore, to explore the gendered connotations of asceticism in Christian literature from the Sasanian world. In reviewing early Syriac hagiographies, Brock and Harvey identify martyrdom and asceticism as “two forms of the same event: humanity’s encounter with the divine.”⁸⁰ Lazar’s identification of women who adopt ascetic lives after the death or imprisonment of their husbands as “living martyrs” supports this logic.⁸¹ Yet, Syriac texts link asceticism to masculinity more explicitly than they do martyrdoms achieved by death. In the account of Pelagia of Antioch, a prostitute who converts to Christianity and chooses to live the

⁷⁶ Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women*, 6, 7.

⁷⁷ Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 95.

⁷⁸ For Simeon Stylites’s function in society, see Robert Doran, introduction to *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 18-22 and Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity.”

⁷⁹ For Gregory the Illuminator in the context of broader Armenian literature, see Abraham Terian, introduction to *Patriotism and Piety in Armenian Christianity: The Early Panegyrics on Saint Gregory* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press; St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, 2005).

⁸⁰ Brock and Harvey, introduction to *Holy Women*, 19.

⁸¹ Lazar P’arpets’i, “Appendix: The Armenian War According to Lazar P’arpets’i,” in *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, 326.



life of a monk, the supposed witness-author praises her as a male eunuch and does not observe “anything about her that resembled the manner of a woman.”⁸² Pelagia herself stops “realizing she was a woman” and even begins to speak “like a man.”⁸³ Elishē’s gendered presentation of asceticism parallels the literature on Pelagia. According to his *History*, by adapting to an ascetic lifestyle of worldly indifference, the wives of martyred or imprisoned Armenian noblemen “forgot their feminine weakness and became men heroic at spiritual warfare.”⁸⁴ The authors of both texts clearly identify asceticism as a masculine quality of piety.

By employing Women as protagonists and exemplary figures in early Christian hagiographies, the authors of these texts produce more radical portraits of idealized piety. The *Act of Pelagia* and Elishē’s *History* associate masculine virtues with asceticism, much the same way that they link the same qualities to martyrdom. Perhaps Łazar’s description of ascetic women best explains the underlying purpose of employing women as ideal models of piety in literature on asceticism or martyrdom. Łazar records that “Rendering the natural weakness of women’s bodies stronger than men’s, they [the ascetic wives of Armenian noblemen] were gloriously and victorious.”⁸⁵ As Łazar’s account so exquisitely suggests, since most early Christian communities associated piety with masculine qualities, the use of women provides more radical or amplified examples of piety at the face of power. Even texts that predate late antique Christian literature confirm this. As Stephen Moore and Janice Anderson point out, in 4 Maccabees, which is part of the broader literature on the Maccabean martyrs who stood up to Seleucid Hellenization, it is the mother and not Eleazar or the seven brothers that is the “prime exemplar of masculinity” in the text.⁸⁶ Perhaps this relates to Brock and Harvey’s observations that in nearly all Syriac hagiographies where the pious individual undergoes sexual mutilation, the martyr is a woman.⁸⁷ By depicting power’s failed efforts to disturb the piety of what contemporaries considered the weaker sex in society in the most vulnerable and exploited conditions, Christian literature from the Sasanian world associates piety with masculine virtues, and the act of staying true to those virtues as symbols of both piety and power.

The greater emphasis placed on women and their use as protagonists in martyr texts pertaining to Yazdgerd’s reign suggests that Christian communities and polities under Sasanian rule regarded Yazdgerd’s policies as more threatening and a cause for much concern. Both Castelli’s thesis that gendered narratives in martyr literature function to produce value inversion, and Cobb’s understanding that the texts aim to narrate attractive narratives of masculine prowess, imply that the use of women in this genre of literature creates more radical, more awe inspiring, and, surely, a more demanding understanding of religious devotion. Martyr texts are, by their very nature, texts that deal with and intend to redefine power relations. By depicting martyr acts as exemplary acts of masculine prowess in the face of power, the authors of this genre of

⁸² Brock and Harvey, trans., *Pelagia* [of Antioch], in *Holy Women*, 60. The storyline for in the text about Pelagia does not relate to Yazdgerd II’s policies. The text, however, could be a product of the mid-fifth century. For a brief commentary regarding the date of this text’s composition, see Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women*, 40-41.

⁸³ Brock and Harvey, trans., *Pelagia*, 60. It is important here to consider Patricia Miller’s observation that the oddities regarding the Pelagia’s gender, especially the fact that the monks wanted to cover up the fact that she was a woman after her death, signifies a rather new sort of narrative that addresses the paradoxes related to the idea of female holiness or holy women, see Patricia Cox Miller, “Is There a Harlot in This Text?: Hagiography and the Grotesque,” in *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies*, 90, 93, 97.

⁸⁴ Elishē, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, 246.

⁸⁵ Łazar, “Appendix,” 326-327.

⁸⁶ Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, “Taking It like a Man: Masculinity in 4 Maccabees,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 252.

⁸⁷ Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women*, 25.

literature associate masculinity (and power) with piety. The notions of masculinity and masculine virtues in these texts, in turn, is a product of Greco-Roman-Christian and local-Christian conceptions of gender.⁸⁸ The extensive emphasis placed on female martyrs in Sasanian martyr literature relating to Yazdgerd's persecutions illustrates the effort of the authors of these works to depict more radical examples and standards for religious piety. These texts place the martyrs directly against imperial power, or, more specifically, against Yazdgerd and his administrators. But one may question what it was about Yazdgerd's policies towards his empire's non-Zoroastrian peoples that generated more reactive literature by the Christian communities in his domain.

Yazdgerd's Persecutions in Context

Yazdgerd's persecutions were certainly not the first in the Sasanian Empire. The legacy of Sasanian religious persecution dates back to the late-third century when Kerdīr, the chief Zoroastrian priest during Wahrām II's reign, commenced the persecution of Manichaeans, Christians, Jews, Mandaeans, and Buddhists throughout the empire.⁸⁹ It was during the long reign of Šapur II (r. 309-379), however, that the culture of mass violence against the Christians emerged with his "Great Persecution" that lasted for forty years. Most likely, this was a direct response to Constantine's conversion to Christianity and the Christianization of the Eastern Roman Empire.⁹⁰ Subsequently, either due to suspicions, or perhaps due to wartime hate violence, the persecution of the empire's Christian subjects almost exclusively took place during times of conflict between the Sasanian and Byzantine empires.

Two factors differentiate Yazdgerd II's policies towards his non-Zoroastrian subjects from that of his predecessors. First, when Yazdgerd began persecuting the various Christian and Jewish communities in his domain, his empire was at complete peace with Byzantium. In dealing with the threat of Hunnic tribes in the northeast and the Caucasus, Yazdgerd even cooperated with the Byzantines.⁹¹ According to surviving records, Yazdgerd's first persecution took place at Karka d-Beth Slokh, where repressive measures against the Syriac Christians there led to mass slaughter.⁹² The histories of Łazar and Elišē's suggest that Yazdgerd turned his attention to the Caucasus at about exactly mid-fifth century, which eventually led to the Battle of Awarayr in 451 CE. Yazdgerd also moved on to persecute the Jews of Babylonia. The tenth-century "Letter" (*Iggeres*) of Sherira Gaon records Yazdgerd's and his successors' persecutions of the Jews. Nosson Rabinowich corresponds the earliest date in Seleucid year (766) in reference to Yazdgerd's repressive measures recorded in the "Letter" to 455 CE.⁹³ Although circumstances in

⁸⁸ It is worth noting that much of the authors of early Christian Armenian literature attended Greek schools.

⁸⁹ As Kerdīr himself attests to in his inscription on the Ka'ba-yi Zardusht, see "10.3.3 From the inscription of Kirder on the Ka'ba-yi Zardusht," in *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, ed., trans. Mary Boyce (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 112-113.

⁹⁰ For viewing Šapur II's mass persecutions as a response to Constantine's Christianization of the Eastern Roman Empire, see Daryaei, *Sasanian Persia*, 77.

⁹¹ Daryaei, *Sasanian Persia*, 23.

⁹² S. J. McDonough, "A Question of Faith? Persecution and Political Centralization in the Sasanian Empire of Yazdgerd II (438-457 CE)," in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices*, ed. H. A. Drake (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006), 72.

⁹³ Rav Sherira ben Hanina Gaon, *The Iggeres of Rav Sherira Gaon*, trans. and annotated, Rabbi Nosson Dovid Rabinowich (Jerusalem: Rabbi Jacob Joseph School Press – Ahavath Torah Institute; Moznaim, 1988), 115. In this translation, Rabinowich primarily uses the Spanish version of the "Letter" while also referring to the French when appropriate.

the Caucasus varied significantly from those of the Syriac Christians and the Babylonian Jewry in Mesopotamia, there was virtually no Sasanian-Byzantine conflict at any point during Yazdgerd's reign. A closer look at the nature of Yazdgerd's persecutions provides greater insight into his intended objectives.

The second major factor that differentiates Yazdgerd's policies toward his realm's non-Zoroastrians is his selective targeting of elites, more specifically, religious and political leaders. S. J. McDonough rightly points out that, in the account of Yazdgerd's persecutions at Karka d-Beth Slokh, authorities initially target individuals who seem to be of Zoroastrian or Iranian background (as attested by their names), and only later expand the category of their victims.⁹⁴ In fact, in the remaining (Syriac) Persian Martyr Acts relating to Yazdgerd's reign, most of the characters are not only from Zoroastrian backgrounds, but also come from Zoroastrian clerical families (such as is the case with Tahmazgerd, Adhur-Hormizd, and Anahid). It is also the Armenian community leaders that, according to Łazar and Elišē, Yazdgerd seeks to convert to the Zoroastrian faith. Yazdgerd issues an edict ordering the Armenian nobility to convert to Zoroastrianism, while repressing the clergy in Armenia. By juxtaposing Wahrām V's policies with those of Yazdgerd, his son and successor, Elišē's *History* clearly illustrates Yazdgerd's policies vis-à-vis the Armenian nobility differed from that of his predecessors.⁹⁵ The group of nobles that revolt against Yazdgerd's authority face a large Sasanian and Armenian defector force that crush the outnumbered army in revolt. As for the Jews of Babylon, Gaon's "Letter" records that Yazdgerd seemingly banned the observance of the Sabbath and executed a number sages.⁹⁶ Gaon records further repressive measures that date to Peroz I's reign.⁹⁷

There are perhaps two main factors that encouraged Yazdgerd to adapt such measures against the Christian populations in his empire. Brock observes that by the mid-fifth century, Christians held a large and significant demographic presence in the Sasanian Empire, and that most martyrdoms thereafter featured converts of high-birth Zoroastrian backgrounds.⁹⁸ Such a demographic reality probably alarmed a cult of kingship, whose propaganda of legitimacy derived from Zoroastrian ideology. The fact that the majority of the empire's Christians resided in Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and the Caucasus, the borderlands and potential warzones with the Christian empire to the west, most likely contributed to Sasanian anxieties. The targeting of non-Zoroastrian community leaders, therefore, illustrates both demographic worries and the inconvenience of massacring or violently persecuting large populations throughout the empire. Related to this, and as the aforementioned Syriac texts imply, Zoroastrian proselytes possibly made up a significant portion of converts to not only Syriac Christianity, but also Judaism. There are a number of hagiographies regarding high ranking Zoroastrians who convert to Christianity in this period, but more striking is both Jewish and Syriac literature directly instructing on

⁹⁴ McDonough, "A Question of Faith?," 78.

⁹⁵ Elišē records that Wahrām V "found the Christian religion to be the most sublime of all," Elišē, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, 135.

⁹⁶ Gaon, *Iggeres*, 115, 117.

⁹⁷ Gaon's "Letter" records that more arrests took place in 470 CE, and, in 474 CE, "all the Babylonian synagogues were closed, and Jewish infants were handed to the Magians [Zoroastrians]," Gaon, *Iggeres*, 117-118. For Yazdgerd II's and Peroz I's policies towards Babylonian Jewry in broader context, see Richard Kalmin, "6: Persian Persecutions of the Jews," in *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹⁸ Preface to *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, trans. Brock, vii.

manners for converting Zoroastrians (or, as the sources generally have it, Persians).⁹⁹ This may, in part, explain why all the martyrs of Yazdgerd's persecutions in Syriac sources are Zoroastrians, and, with the exception of Tahmazgerd, from Zoroastrian clerical families. Perhaps this is because, as McDonough suggests, high-ranking Zoroastrian proselytes made up Yazdgerd's first and main victims.¹⁰⁰ The other possibility is that the authors of these texts employed Zoroastrian proselytes for much the same reason that they included female martyrs in their narratives: to produce more contradictory, and, thus, more powerful narratives. Literature on converting Zoroastrians to Judaism may also explain, at least in part, why the Jewish leaders of Babylon became targets as well.

A closer look at Yazdgerd's character indicates more potential reasons for his policies against non-Zoroastrians. Literary and numismatic sources suggest that Yazdgerd moved towards a more religious imperial ideology. Al-Ṭabarī, a medieval Muslim historian, depicts Yazdgerd as a rather introverted king with "periods of retirement from public gaze at court."¹⁰¹ Court-bound Sasanian kings tended to become more orthodox in faith, if not zealots. The favorable portrayal of Yazdgerd in post-Sasanian Irano-Islamic literature implies that Yazdgerd kept good relations with the Zoroastrian clergy. In fact, one source claims that he had eight thousand magi at his service.¹⁰² Also, it is on Yazdgerd's coins that the title "Mazdean Lord Kay" (*māzdēsn bay kay*) first appears.¹⁰³ Daryaee rightly notes that by portraying himself as heir to the Kayanids (the Zoroastrian primordial dynasty), Yazdgerd broke from the earlier claim of descent from the Achaemenid kings (in however manner they registered in memory).¹⁰⁴ In sum, Yazdgerd's portrayal in medieval Irano-Islamic sources and his coinage imply that he moved towards a more religiously oriented cult of kingship.

Perhaps most influential in administrative matters was Mehr-Narseh, Yazdgerd's *hazārbed* (vizier).¹⁰⁵ Mehr-Narseh belonged to the prestigious Sūren-Pahlav clan that, as Parvaneh Pourshariati remarks, held much influence during the reigns of Yazdgerd I, Wahrām V, and Yazdgerd II.¹⁰⁶ The chief minister began his career when Yazdgerd I occupied the throne.¹⁰⁷ Mehr-Narseh's construction of various fire temples in towns or villages that he himself founded

⁹⁹ For Jewish and Syriac sources regarding the conversion of Zoroastrians, see Reuven Kiperwasser and Serge Ruzer, "Zoroastrian Proselytes in Rabbinic and Syriac Christian Narratives: Orality-Related Markers of Cultural Identity," *History of Religions* 51, no. 3 (February 2012): 197-218.

¹⁰⁰ The biggest hint to this is that, as McDonough notes, while, according to the *History of Karka d-Beth Slokh*, authorities immediately imprisoned converted nobles of Zoroastrian backgrounds in the city, while Yohannan, the Aramaean bishop there, became a target of the persecution weeks later, McDonough, "A Question of Faith?," 78.

¹⁰¹ Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabari*, vol. 5, *The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, trans. C.E. Bosworth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 106.

¹⁰² See McDonough, "A Question of Faith?," 74-75.

¹⁰³ Andrea Gariboldi, *Sasanian Coinage and History: The Civic Numismatic Collection of Milan* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2010), 77; for the story of the conversion of Kavi Vishtaspa to Zoroastrianism in *Yasht 19*, see Boyce, trans., "5.3.2 From an epic fragment, the 'Memorial of Zarer,'" in *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, 78-79.

¹⁰⁴ Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 24.

¹⁰⁵ Parvaneh Pourshariati remarks that sources identify Mehr-Narseh as *wuzurg-framādār* during Wahrām V's reign, see Parvaneh Pourshariati, *The Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 62, n. 298.

¹⁰⁶ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, 61.

¹⁰⁷ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, 60.

betrays his zealot Zurvanite character.¹⁰⁸ McDonough suggests that it is not unlikely that Mehr-Narseh was a magus himself.¹⁰⁹ In any case, sources reveal that Mehr-Narseh played a leading role in enforcing the persecution of Christians during Wahrām V's reign.¹¹⁰ Al-Ṭabarī's account of Mehr-Narseh's activity suggests that the chief minister was the de facto ruler. He records that while Yazdgerd spent much time in his court and in isolation, Mehr-Narseh dealt with state affairs.¹¹¹ By identifying Mehr-Narseh as the malevolent architect behind Yazdgerd's policies in the Caucasus, the histories of Łazar and Elišē confirm the *hazārbed*'s influence over administrative matters. In fact, in Łazar's *History*, it is Mehr-Narseh who suggests the idea of a Zoroastrian Armenia as a buffer region against Byzantium, and for firmer control over Georgia and Albania as well.¹¹²

Although the Christians of the empire could pose as a potential threat to Sasanian rule, the repressive measures against the Jews of Babylon, however, who virtually held no potential to defect, requires a different explanation. Both Elišē and Gaon record that authorities took children away from their respective communities and gave them to the magi.¹¹³ Łazar quotes Mehr-Narseh, insisting that the king and his administrators "should also be responsible for the salvation of the soul" of their subjects.¹¹⁴ Perhaps it is the combination of such ideologies, in addition to safeguarding Sasanian geopolitical interests, that best explains the motives behind Yazdgerd's and his *hazārbed*'s efforts at homogenizing the empire's elite through religion.

The religious and political ideologies of Yazdgerd and his advisors reveals much about the gendered narratives of mid-fifth-century Sasanian hagiographies. As stated above, Yazdgerd's decision to adopt new kinds of repressive measures against his empire's non-Zoroastrians possibly resulted from a variety of factors. By targeting Christian and Jewish community leaders, Yazdgerd and his administrators sought to solidify the empire's administrative authority and overcome geopolitical challenges. Oddly enough, it was the targeting of a select group of religious and secular male elites that produced narratives of female martyrs in Syriac and Georgian hagiographies. Since the emphasis on pious women produces more radical narratives that link power to piety, then the authors of these texts saw Yazdgerd's persecutions as worthy of more radical examples of devotion against worldly power. Certainly, these communities saw Yazdgerd's efforts in enforcing Zoroastrianism—even though they targeted only a select group—as more tactically effective than mass slaughter, his predecessors' method of choice. Therefore, while narrating tales of pious women, Syriac and Georgian hagiographies relating to Yazdgerd's persecutions, and to a lesser degree, their Armenian counterparts, react to the, perhaps exclusive, persecution of a group of men. These texts employ exemplary female martyrs to produce more gendered narratives calling for the faithful to imitate the more radical acts of devotion in response to concerns over Yazdgerd's policies.

¹⁰⁸ For a brief overview of the villages and fire temples Mehr-Narseh founded, see Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, 61-62. Zurvanite Zoroastrians held that Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu, the dueling and opposite deities in Zoroastrianism, were the twin sons of Zurvan (or Time, the primordial diety), see Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, 96.

¹⁰⁹ McDonough, "A Question of Faith?," 75.

¹¹⁰ Pourshariati, *The Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, 62.

¹¹¹ Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Tabari*, 106-107.

¹¹² Łazar, "Appendix," 255, 256.

¹¹³ Elišē, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, 103; Gaon, *Iggeres*, 118. In Elišē's text, this takes place under Yazdgerd's reign while in Gaon's "Letter," it happens during Peroz I's reign.

¹¹⁴ Łazar, "Appendix," 255.



Defying Patriarchal Authority as Resisting Imperial Power

The reactive and gendered themes in hagiographies about mid-fifth century Sasanian persecutions best manifest themselves through a shared theme—that of women’s defiance of patriarchal authority. Plots about confessors’ unease with their kin after conversion appear commonly in early Syriac and early Christian hagiographies. The Syriac, Georgian, and Armenian texts that defy Yazdgerd’s reign, however, all independently include similar accounts of pious women’s struggle with their non-Christian husband or father. By narrating the heroic struggle of devout female characters against the masculine authority figures of their families, these texts call for stiffer resistance to imperial power.

Joel Walker correctly observes that earlier Sasanian martyr texts tend to emphasize the martyr’s solidarity with his or her biological family, while texts composed in the later periods illustrate a rather negative view of kinship bonds.¹¹⁵ The text of Martha and Mar Posi’s acts are part of the former category. After Mar Posi’s martyrdom for remaining true to his faith, Martha, his daughter, states, “I have decided to become the object of abuse like my father for the sake of my father’s God, and I will die like him because of my faith in God.”¹¹⁶ Martha’s desire to follow in the footsteps of her father represents a narrative of father-daughter, or more broadly, parent-offspring, solidarity, largely featured in earlier texts. Martha also thanks Christ, in her own words, for “preserving my faith in the glorious Trinity—the faith in which I was born, in which my parents brought me up, and in which I was baptized.”¹¹⁷ Martha, therefore, glorifies the preservation of her ancestral faith. Her piety is in accordance with her preservation of the traditions of her ancestors, a theme that appears less often in later works.

Another theme relating to a confessors’ social relations in early Christian hagiographical literature is the bond between pious mothers and daughters. Mothers in early Christian hagiographical literature could represent either biological mothers or women who guide the confessor on the path of piety. The relationship between that of Rhipsimē and Gaianē in the aforementioned *History of Agathangelos* represents an example of the latter. As for a mother-daughter bond within the same biological family, Harvey (referring more specifically to Syriac hagiographies) remarks that the logic of this type of hagiographical literature makes sense only by the assumption that the values of the family and those of the faith do not contradict each other.¹¹⁸ Since Christian hagiographies pertaining to Yazdgerd’s reign are essentially confrontational, it is not surprising that they do not include tales of mother-and-daughter solidarity.

It is not only women in Christian literature from the Sasanian world, however, that come into conflict with their kin. Various Syriac hagiographies narrate the emergence of tensions between pious men and their families with the former’s conversion to Christianity. One such case is the account of Mar Qardagh’s confession.¹¹⁹ By converting to Christianity, Mar Qardagh not only comes into conflict with his “pagan” father (a common narrative in accounts of female

¹¹⁵ Walker, “Conversion and the Family in the Acts of the Persian Martyrs,” in *The Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 222, 228.

¹¹⁶ Brock and Harvey, trans., *Persian Martyrs: A. The Martyrdom of Martha, Daughter of Posi who was a Daughter of the Covenant, in Holy Women*, 69.

¹¹⁷ Brock and Harvey, trans., *The Martyrdom of Martha*, 71.

¹¹⁸ Harvey, “Sacred Bonding,” 31.

¹¹⁹ Although Mar Qardagh’s martyrdom is attributed to Shapur II’s persecution, Walker gives a six or seventh-century date for the text, see Walker, introduction to *The Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 1.

martyrs), but also struggles in his relationships with his mother and his wife.¹²⁰ Mar Qardagh's new faith, therefore, demands that he neglect much of his former social and, perhaps, cultural links and norms. In *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, which records the account of another confessor during Šapur II's persecutions, the protagonist forms an unusual relationship.¹²¹ A former Sasanian general who persecuted Christians, Mar Ma'in, after his conversion, demonstrates his willingness to leave behind his former bonds by eliciting language from the New Testament: "Everyone who does not leave his father and his mother, his brother and his sister, his family and his lineage...to take up his cross and follow me, cannot become a disciple of mine" (cf. Matt 10:38-9).¹²² In the spirit of leaving behind his former life, the confessor befriends an ethically-oriented and just lion and begins a new life living with the wild creature.¹²³ In some ways, Mar Ma'in's abandonment of his former position, and his subsequent friendship with a lion, illustrates a more radical isolation from the society to which he formerly belonged.

Anahid's act in *AAAP* belongs to the more radical group of narratives regarding a confessor's renunciation of their biological family. After Anahid's baptism, Adur-Hormizd, her father (who is a magus), has to force her back home from the dwelling of Pethion, the man who converted her.¹²⁴ She distances herself from her parents and refuses to eat with them.¹²⁵ Her father tries to frighten her into renouncing her Christian faith, but fails.¹²⁶ Adur-Hormizd himself, however, converts to Christianity shortly thereafter.¹²⁷ Anahid then follows the footsteps of her father and Pethion into martyrdom.¹²⁸ Unlike Martha who inherits her Christian faith from her father, Anahid faces threats from her father for her conversion and the eventual conversion of Adur-Hormizd takes place through a dialectical paradigm. The text containing Anahid's act may not be the earliest Syriac text containing such a narrative. The fact that none of the hagiographies concerning the reigns of Yazdgerd's immediate predecessors record a similar account, however, suggests that Yazdgerd's policies were perhaps the main inspiration for the appearance of such a theme in *AAAP*.

Jacob's *Passion of Šušānik* depicts an even more valiant narrative of family renunciation. Šušānik immediately distances herself from Varsken, her husband, when the *bdeaxš* renounces his faith.¹²⁹ Varsken subjects her to continuous beating, torture, and imprisonment, but she refuses to remain in an intimate relationship with her apostate husband.¹³⁰ Šušānik's most radical action, however, is the renunciation of her children. When she hears of her children's conversion to Zoroastrianism, Šušānik thanks God for her separation from her children saying, "for they were not mine, but gifts from Thee!"¹³¹ Šušānik continues to defy her husband until she dies in prison.¹³² The pious woman, therefore, not only remains loyal to Christian values in the face of

¹²⁰ Walker, trans., *The Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 3, 38, 56-57.

¹²¹ For the date of Mar Ma'in's text, see Brock, introduction to *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, 4-6.

¹²² Brock, trans., *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, 42.

¹²³ Brock, trans., *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, 52. For the function of animals in early Christian literature on the apostles, see Janet E. Spittler, *Animals in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: The Wild Kingdom of Early Christian Literature* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

¹²⁴ Brock and Harvey, trans., *Anahid*, 84.

¹²⁵ Brock and Harvey, trans., *Anahid*, 84.

¹²⁶ Brock and Harvey, trans., *Anahid*, 84.

¹²⁷ Brock and Harvey, trans., *Anahid*, 85-86. See Fiey, *Saints Syriaques*, 150.

¹²⁸ Brock and Harvey, trans., *Anahid*, 94-97.

¹²⁹ Jacob, *Passion of the Holy Queen Shushanik*, 46.

¹³⁰ Jacob, *Passion of the Holy Queen Shushanik*, 49, 52, 53.

¹³¹ Jacob, *Passion of the Holy Queen Shushanik*, 54.

¹³² Jacob, *Passion of the Holy Queen Shushanik*, 54, 55.

patriarchal authority, but she also neglects her motherly duties when they pose an obstacle in her path to absolute devotion. Contemporary literature possibly influenced Iakob's account of Šušanik's martyrdom. However, since *Passion of Šušanik* is the oldest surviving work of Georgian literature narrating such a storyline, the inspiration for such a plot, as is most likely the case with *AAAP* as well, derives from mid-fifth-century Sasanian persecutions.

Although the histories of Łazar and Elišē largely identify women with domestic duties and depict them as loyal and faithful wives, the account of the former includes a section where women protest their husbands' impiety. Łazar's *History* records that, when men of Armenia's greater and lesser nobility returned from Yazdgerd's court as apostates, their children and wives wailed and wept in great agony and "no one agreed to share their [the apostates'] table, neither wife nor child, not freeman, serf, or servant."¹³³ The only other instance where women defy men in Łazar's text is when they refuse instruction from a group of magi who intended to convert them. There is no mention of a similar behavior by women in Elišē's *History*. This relates to Cobb's remarks about women's different portrayal in inter- and intra-communal situations in early Christian hagiographies. Cobb notes that, in instances where early Christian texts describe women in contact with individuals from their own Christian community, the women act in accordance to traditional feminine virtues.¹³⁴ Cobb correctly observes that it is when early Christian martyr texts refer to women in dialogue or against non-Christian individuals that they praise them for masculine qualities.¹³⁵ Since throughout most of Łazar's *History* the Armenian nobles remain true to their Christian faith, their wives do not confront them. Łazar's and Elišē's lauding of the wives of martyred or imprisoned noblemen as manly and masculine, in the last sections of their texts, relates to a larger and a less direct form of inter-communal confrontation. That is, the women's ascetic lifestyle and indifference to worldly comforts nullify Yazdgerd's efforts at forcing the Armenians under his submission by subjecting them to hardships.

Thus, women's renunciation of their families and patriarchal authority in Syriac, Georgian, and Armenian hagiographies pertaining to mid-fifth century Sasanian persecutions act as a metaphor for resistance to imperial power. It is in regards to persecution methods initiated by Yazdgerd that Christian communities under Sasanian rule either introduce narratives of women's resistance to their husband or father, or present more radical forms of such accounts. These texts, either explicitly or implicitly, suggest that patriarchal authority represents imperial power. This group of hagiographies present those in society most compliant to fathers and husbands—daughters and wives—as victorious in their steadfastness against those who hold power over them. By doing so, these texts call on the apparent powerless—the persecuted Christians—to defy empire's malevolent forces through unyielding devotion. The more gendered themes in this group of hagiographies betray their authors' increased concern over the effectiveness of Yazdgerd's repressive policies. In response, by employing narratives of masculinized female-sexed characters prevailing over men of power and authority, these texts stress the ultimate triumph of masculine virtues associated with piety, regardless of any perceived imbalance of power between the pious and hostile sources of power.

The Body Politic: From Solitary Martyrs to Valorous Armies

While narratives about women's resistance to power illustrate the common reactive

¹³³ Łazar, "Appendix," 269.

¹³⁴ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 15.

¹³⁵ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 15.

stance of mid-fifth-century Sasanian hagiographies, reviewing the principle martyr act in the histories of Łazar and Ełiřē in comparison to those in the Syriac and Georgian accounts reveals the broader parallels in the thematic content of these texts. Unlike the Syriac and Georgian martyrologies concerning Yazdgerd's reign, the two Armenian accounts, but Łazar's text especially, typify late antique histories and chronicles. A comprehensive study of the works of Łazar and Ełiřē with their broader hagiological themes, however, indicates that the qualities and virtues associated with the pivotal act of martyrdom in the two Armenian texts is reminiscent of the solitary martyrs that appear in other works of Christian literature about Yazdgerd's persecutions. That is, a pious army's martyrdom in the histories of Łazar and Ełiřē is a manifestation of the militant qualities of devotion attributed to the masculine female-sexed martyrs in Syriac and Georgian hagiographies within a larger political body.

First, it is essential to consider that the histories of Łazar and Ełiřē differ considerably from mid-fifth-century Syriac and Georgian martyrologies in that both works fit the category of histories and chronicles. Both texts progress chronologically and follow specific historical events. Although Ełiřē's *History* most likely postdates Łazar's, its contents suggest that the author relied on sources independent, at least if partly, from that of the latter. Both accounts narrate a similar series of events; however, the two works differ considerably on certain points and contain content not found in the other account. Łazar and Ełiřē describe relevant historical events and individuals in great detail. This is especially so for matters regarding the Sasanian monarchs and administrators, as well as the affairs of the Armenian nobility. Both authors claim knowledge of precise (yet different) numbers of participants from each feudal clan at different tasks and even provide an exact number of those "martyred" at the Battle of Awarayr (again, this number differs in both texts). Therefore, the content of both texts qualify them as polemical works of history with their own different sets of biases directed towards the Sasanian crown, their patrons, and their patrons' foes.

Yet, the works of Łazar and Ełiřē also belong to the category of early Christian hagiologies, and their hagiographical themes are a vital part of both works. It is far beyond the scope of this paper to reflect on the whole array of scholarship pertaining to the mid-fifth-century Armenian uprising against the Sasanian crown. It is a common practice among historians, however, to differentiate potential factual content from content with fictional or metaphorical connotations. S. Peter Cowe identifies Ełiřē's text as something of a spiritual commentary on Łazar's *History*, also noting that Ełiřē's original title seems to have been *On Vardan and the Armenian War* rather than *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*.¹³⁶ The theme of the "battle for the faith" in both texts, however, as Abraham Terian correctly points out, is one of the three main events narrated about the foundations of Armenian Christianity in the Armenian hagiographical tradition.¹³⁷ Also, the manner in which both histories describe and treat characters, narrate the outcome of events, and, likewise, the overall purpose of both works typify the more purely hagiographical literature of late antique Christianity. Both texts, therefore, fit the category of early Armenian and early Christian hagiographical literature and require that scholars treat them as such.

Reading Łazar's and Ełiřē's works with their semi-metaphorical hagiographical topoi, their comparison with the rest of the Christian literature pertaining to Yazdgerd's reign proves revealing. In *AAAP* and in Iakob's *Passion of řuřanik*, Anahid and řuřanik are either the protagonists or one of the main characters in their respective plots. Although the histories of

¹³⁶ Cowe, "Ełiřē's *Armenian War* as a Metaphor for the Spiritual Life," 52, 53, 54.

¹³⁷ Terian, introduction to *Patriotism and Piety*, 18.

Łazar and Elišē do praise certain individuals for their bravery or spiritual guidance, both works often attribute characteristics to collective categories (such as nobles, soldiers, priests, and wives).¹³⁸ Since Łazar and Elišē more commonly ascribe qualities to groups, it is these groups that, more or less, resemble pious or villainous characters in the more common hagiographical forms. Following this logic, if there is one main protagonist in both texts that resembles the solitary martyrs in *AAAP* and *Passion of Šušānik*, it is the army that died defending the Christian faith against Yazdgerd's troops. Both works describe pious armies in a manner that is almost identical to literature on solitary martyrs. Elišē's more spiritual *History*, however, illustrates the link most explicitly when describing a Caucasian coalition force's encounter with Sasanian troops about a year before the major battle that took place at the Plain of Awarayr. Elišē records that by concurring with the advice of his magi and astrologers that converting people to Zoroastrianism would repay the gods for his victory against the Kushans,

he [Yazgerd] held within the Pass the host of cavalry of the Armenians, Georgians, Albanians, and of all who believe in the holy Gospel of Christ. The garrison of the Pass was given strict instructions to allow through those who were coming eastward to us, but to block the way for those going from the East to the West.

When he had restrained and confined them in this secure and inescapable prison—and in truth I said secure and inescapable, for there was no place to flee or hide because the enemy dwelt all around—then he laid hands on them and by means of severe tortures and various torments maltreated many of them and pressed them to deny the true God and confess the visible elements.¹³⁹

If the army is substituted for an individual in the above-quoted text, it would read like a martyr act in solitary martyrologies. Here, Elišē employs the themes of imprisonment, punishment, and torture, elements that commonly feature in early Christian martyr texts, to the army which he treats as a collective unit. Given that the histories of Łazar and Elišē contain such parallels in themes, plots, and content with other genres of early Christian hagiographies, a more engaging analysis of these works with the broader martyr literature on Yazdgerd's reign is not only justified, but necessary for a deeper understanding of both works.

The manifestation of militant devotion through masculine virtues in the texts of Łazar and Elišē is best understood within this comparative framework. As stated above, the use of women as exemplary martyrs in hagiographies regarding mid-fifth century Sasanian religious persecutions signify the radical response of the effected Christian communities via more amplified portrayals of piety at the face of power. In the histories of Łazar and Elišē, the main subject is a covenant between the Armenian Church, the nobility, and commoners, who struggle together to safeguard the Christian faith. Robert Thomson correctly observes that, according to Elišē, it is only through allegiance to the covenant, more specifically the "covenant of the church," that the faithful express their piety and virtue.¹⁴⁰ In the works of Łazar and Elišē, the virtuous subjects are groups within a larger political body, namely all those who pledge loyalty

¹³⁸ Although Vardan Mamikonean (the general) figures prominently in both texts, Łazar praises and comments him much more than Elišē does. Certainly, the fact that Łazar's patron was Vardan's nephew contributes his more heroic portrayal by Łazar, see Łazar, "Appendix," 251.

¹³⁹ Elišē, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, 72-73.

¹⁴⁰ Thomson, introduction to *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, 10.

to the covenant. Syriac and Georgian solitary martyr accounts concerning Yazdgerd's persecutions portray masculine virtues through female martyrs in order to produce more extreme narratives of devotion. The martyred army's show of militant virtue in battle in the histories of Łazar and Elišē is a manifestation of the gendered theme of female-sexed martyrs' masculine prowess against empire within a larger political body. The masculine elements within the community of the covenant take the form of a pious army of men who fight against Yazdgerd's malevolent intentions. The masculine virtues that produce militant piety, however, permeate far beyond literary genres.

Sacralized Warfare as a Manifestation of the Masculine Qualities of Piety

Finally, the various forms in which masculinity manifests as a virtue in martyr literature about Yazdgerd's persecutions suggests much about the roots of sanctified warfare and political violence in the wake of Christian political and imperial ideologies in Late Antiquity. Theories about the origins and dynamics of late antique religious and state violence fill volumes. Some studies stress religious eschatological elements and the centrality of scriptural theology while others point to the innovative uses and adaptations of narratives that led to or justified violence under their given circumstances.¹⁴¹ In identifying the crucial role of narrative for instigating violence in Late Antiquity, Thomas Sizgorich certainly belongs to the latter school. Sizgorich, reflecting on the works of Castelli and others, observes that early Christian narratives about devout individuals who withstood the tests of imperial power and persecution remained important features for the formation of Christian identities and collective memories.¹⁴² Sizgorich perceives that participants in subsequent acts of Christian violence appear in texts as "repositories" of the qualities attributed to the pious who held on to their faith despite torments and persecution.¹⁴³ Such engagement with narrative perhaps partly explains why, as Sizgorich rightly points out, violence undertaken by Christians became not only virtuous acts, but pious behavior of the highest order.¹⁴⁴

Sizgorich's logic in approaching late antique violence through narratives proves useful for analyzing the militant manifestations of the masculine qualities that early Christian hagiographies attribute to piety. In the accounts of Anahid's and Šušānik's martyrdom, the demonstration of masculine prowess as militant devotion in interrupting the circuits of imperial power is the act of utmost virtue and piety. Since, as discussed above, the manner in which Łazar and Elišē describe pious militancy resembles the solitary accounts with circumstantial variations, the two Armenian works attribute the highest of virtues to those who took arms against their Zoroastrian overlords. It is through gendered language that these hagiographies set the standards of devotion in accordance to circumstances. Gendered themes, therefore, indicate the links between the more radical displays of masculine prowess by women, who contemporaries identified as the weaker sex, and the more radical masculine acts of valor in perpetrating violence or warfare. Masculine prowess is the medium through which these texts display the

¹⁴¹ For an example of a study that belongs to the former group, see Grant R. Shafer, "Hell, Martyrdom, and War: Violence in Early Christianity," in *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, vol. 3, *Models and Cases of Violence in Religion*, ed. J. Harold Ellens (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004).

¹⁴² Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 4, 7.

¹⁴³ Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity*, 4.

¹⁴⁴ Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity*, 3.

power of the pious, or, in other words, the devotees' triumph in militant confrontations with belligerent forces.

Accordingly, the gendered narratives of mid-fifth-century Sasanian martyrologies indicate strong links between acts of piety, masculinity, and militancy among Christian Sasanian subjects. These texts, therefore, are essential to understanding the motivations that shaped collective conducts within their respective communities. Brown's identification of "narratives and processes" as mediums for understanding developments in early Christianity proves convincing.¹⁴⁵ The gendered themes and language employed in texts that present Yazdgerd's persecutions are one of the most valuable indicators of the authors' intended representation of past events and, through them, contemporary circumstances. *AAAP* and Iakob's *Passion of Šušānik*, as well as the histories of Łazar and Elišē, do not solely record acts of defiance of imperial power. Instead, their narratives are themselves confrontational acts of resistance. Such constructed realities of the past provided the paradigm for the subsequent audiences' understanding of their own present condition and called on them to consume and reenact the celebrated values and deeds in the narratives. Among the imported values were, of course, masculine qualities of devotion. Mid-fifth-century Sasanian hagiographies find the violation of imperial circuits of power, in various militant forms, as ultimate virtuous acts of masculine prowess. A polity's sacred armed resistance to Yazdgerd, as narrated by Łazar and Elišē, represents a manifestation of the combative qualities of piety demanded by martyrologies relating to Yazdgerd's policies.

By considering the potential powers of early Christian narratives in shaping group conduct, the histories of Łazar and Elišē offer glimpses into the makings of sacralized warfare, a major theme of the Medieval period. Much like a martyr's struggle against hostile characters in hagiographies, Christian authors produced defensive and apologetic narratives for acts of violence and aggression undertaken by Christian polities. Sizgorich, Daniel Washburn, and others discuss the emergence of a new set of innovative narratives in the Roman world with the politicization of Christianity in the post-Constantinian era, especially for legitimizing a Christian empire's use of violence in the fifth-century.¹⁴⁶ The works of Łazar and Elišē, as well as earlier Armenia texts (especially Agathangelos's *History*) follow the same trend. The histories of Łazar and Elišē, however, contain rather innovative themes, some of them with no earlier precedents in Christian literature. These include, as Thomson observes, the comparison of soldiers to the warrior heroes of Israel by Elišē and the notion of a holy covenant (*uxt*) between the church, the nobility, and the common people in both texts (inspired by, but in contrast to, the Old Testament covenant between God and man).¹⁴⁷ Both works contain references to the Maccabees (with precedents in Armenian literature) and describe both internal conflicts and those with the Persian crown as a holy war for safekeeping the ancestral religion. It is by fighting and struggling for the covenant that the pious display their virtue. Most telling, however, is a section in Elišē's text where Łevond, a priest who addresses the "angelic" soldiers before battle, describes the slaughters of Moses, Pinehas, David, Joshua, Gideon, and Jephthah as "acts of valor" that "were

¹⁴⁵ See Peter Brown, "Chapter 1: Christianisation: Narratives and Processes," in *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁴⁶ See Thomas Sizgorich, "Chapter Three: 'What Has the Pious in Common with the Impious?' Ambrose, Libanius, and the Problem of Late Antique Religious Violence," in *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity* and Daniel Washburn, "The Thessalonian Affair in the Fifth-Century Histories," in *Violence in Late Antiquity*.

¹⁴⁷ Thomson, introduction to *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, 7-8, 11, 14. Torjesen observes early references to Old Testament rulers in the Roman world (though in a different context) with the church's institutional involvement, see Torjesen, *When Women were Priests*, 156.

praised by men and justified by God.”¹⁴⁸

It is both the event as well as the represented narrative of the mid-fifth century Armenian uprising, however, that best illustrate the manifestation of the masculine virtues into large-scale warfare. Nina Garsoïan is probably correct in identifying the beginnings of the 450-451 CE Armenian rebellion as a popular uprising by the commoners, at the instigation of the clergy, against the nobility who converted to Zoroastrianism by Yazdgerd’s edict.¹⁴⁹ The histories of Łazar and Elišē suggest that this led to quarrels between pro- and anti-Sasanian factions. The conflict climaxed with the death of much of the Armenian nobility who fought with and against a large Sasanian army at the Plain of Awarayr.¹⁵⁰ Both Łazar and Elišē record that the Armenians felt betrayed by Byzantium’s unwillingness to help them in their struggle.¹⁵¹ After the battle, Yazdgerd seemingly toned down his repressive measures. This set of persecutions targeting the Armenian elites (and, to a lesser degree, the commoners) only ceased during Peroz I’s reign. The very fact that the Armenian Church could mobilize a portion of the populace for a mass uprising under the banner of safeguarding the Christian faith implies the extent to which Christian hagiographical narratives already exerted their influence over the region’s populace (or at least a portion of them). Surely, the extoling of heroic warfare and violence as pious and virtuous acts in the histories of Łazar and Elišē became part of the conscience of the texts’ future audiences. Both depict violence and warfare for the sake of a covenant as virtuous, masculine, and pious, which each quality complementing the other. The explicit links between manliness and piety in these dualistic accounts of power struggle partly explain the worldly manifestations of the militant confrontations depicted in hagiographical narratives with the politicization of Christianity.

Łazar’s and Elišē’s gendered accounts of the Armenian rebellion of 450-451 CE serve as an early indicator of the emergence of religious warfare in its late antique form. The militant manifestations of masculine virtues in both works closely resemble those of the solitary martyr texts that respond to Yazdgerd’s persecutions. Brown notes that studying the Christian kingdoms of Armenia, Georgia, and Ethiopia are as important as Byzantium and the Christian polities in Europe to understanding Christianity’s gradual identification with authority, a defining characteristic of the medieval era.¹⁵² The gendered virtues and narratives that laid the foundations for sanctified warfare in the mid-fifth-century Caucasus calls for a more comprehensive analysis of early Christian ideologies’ and literature’s influence on, and, sometimes, manipulation by, political power. Such studies would bring to light the gendered

¹⁴⁸ Elišē, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162.

¹⁴⁹ Nina Garsoïan, “The *Marzpanate* (428-652),” in *Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, vol. 1, *The Dynastic Periods: From Antiquity to the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), 100.

¹⁵⁰ For the religious diversity in fifth-century Armenia, see James R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and National Association for Armenian Studies and Research, 1987).

¹⁵¹ Oddly enough, it was around this very time that the Council of Chalcedon, the outcomes of which subsequently separated the Armenian Church from the Greek Orthodox, took place. An anti-Chalcedonian theme should not be dismissed from the works of Łazar or Elišē since works such as the anti-Chalcedonian *Life of Peter the Iberian* appears in response to the council’s decisions on theological grounds and the church’s enforcement thereof. For a brief discussion about the *Life of Peter* and its versions, see Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 46-47 n. 67, 71-75. For an English translation of the Georgian version which draws also on the Greek version of John Rufus, see Lang, trans., *Biography of the holy Peter the Iberian, the venerable bishop, ascetic and confessor of our Lord*, in *Lives and Legends*.

¹⁵² Brown, *Authority and the Sacred*, xii.

dynamics behind late antique religious warfare and political violence.

Conclusion

Yazdgerd II's efforts to further solidify his authority over his empire's populace backfired. Mid-fifth-century Sasanian policies of religious homogenization produced pious militants who not only appeared in the form of soldiers on the battlefield, but as virtuous warriors through a more powerful medium, narratives. Subsequent Sasanian monarchs and administrators, partly due to concerns regarding loyalties created by religious and ideological developments in Late Antiquity, increasingly homogenized their bureaucracy through the Zoroastrian clergy. Likewise, policies aimed at barring the further spread of Christianity, especially among the empire's elites, remained in force. Such measures, however, proved counterproductive. The magical powers of Christian narratives, which eventually transformed the faith of the persecuted into a world religion, defied and outdid all manifestations of imperial power. Ultimately, the centuries-long Sasanian effort to prevent polarized loyalties amounted to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is through gendered themes that mid-fifth-century Sasanian martyrologies defy and promote steadfastness against Yazdgerd's repressive policies. Syriac and Georgian martyr literature narrate tales of women who outdo the men who torment them with masculine prowess. By masculinizing or empowering female-sexed bodies and souls greater than that of the men who abused them, these texts call for a higher level of devotion in the face of Yazdgerd's persecutions. Moreover, narratives about women's defiance of patriarchal authority that function as metaphors for resisting empire (which also appear in Łazar's *History*) suggest that Yazdgerd's persecution of his empire's religious and secular leaders forced more reactive responses from the Christian communities under his rule. Militant devotion, which solitary Syriac and Georgian accounts express as a masculine virtue, appears in the narratives of Łazar and Elišē, and in reality, as a pious army engaging in sacralized warfare and violence. The manifestation of the masculine qualities of virtuous solitary martyrs as a pious army's valor in battle in the two Armenian texts illustrates the role of gendered hagiographical narratives in producing sanctified warfare with the emergence of Christian polities and political ideologies in Late Antiquity.

The gendered notions of piety and virtue, in their late antique variations, remained ideologically influential for ages to come. Heraclius's "crusade" in the early seventh century against the Sasanian Empire resembled the religious warfare of the Medieval period and those of the Crusaders in the High Middle Ages. Islam, itself a product of Late Antiquity, imported—along with the civilizations which it conquered—aspects of early Christian ideas of virtue and piety. In fact, it was through the notion of holy war that Islam came to prominence in the first place, while Islamic concepts of martyrdom and devotion came to closely resemble those of early Christianity.¹⁵³ Even nationalist rhetoric since the eighteenth century partly fills the gaps left by the identity-forming religious narratives that brought the end of classical antiquity. Since much of contemporary political and religious ideologies still reflect principles that developed in Late Antiquity, a closer analysis of early Christian gendered narratives facilitate a more

¹⁵³ For the adoption of Christian hagiographical vocabulary in Islam, from Syriac literature especially, see Adam H. Becker, "Martyrdom, Religious Difference, and 'Fear' as a Category of Piety in the Sasanian Empire: The Case of the *Martyrdom of Gregory* and the *Martyrdom of Yazdpaneš*," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 333, 334.

transparent reflection of the ideological and gendered dynamics of the modern world.

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