

THE HIERARCHY OF THE COUNTRIES OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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Abstract

According to numerous sources, from the 3rd millennium BC until the fall of the Sasanian Empire (7th century AD), there was a clear hierarchy between the countries and territorial units of the Ancient Near East, and later, mainly between the countries of Western Asia. The countries of the region and the territorial units included in them or their rulers were hierarchically classified by ranks and titles expressing the degree of power, or by direct numbering. Thus, the boundaries of the parties' authority and jurisdiction have been determined. The hierarchy was established or confirmed during special ceremonies designated for this purpose and was considered a law set by the dominant king.

The discovery of the hierarchy allows us to form more specific ideas about the position and influence of the countries included in the Ancient Near East region to better understand the course of historical events and the logic of their development.

Keywords: Sumer, Egypt, Assyria, Iran, Armenia, Sumer, Egypt, Assyria, Urartu, Achaemenid Empire, Parthian Empire, Sasanian Empire, Armenia, Cyropaedia, Behistun Inscription, ŠKZ, Armenian historiography, Gahnamak.

Introduction

From the emergence of the earliest state formations until the fall of the Sasanian Empire, a hierarchy or gradation existed between the countries and territorial units of the Near Eastern or Western Asian region, or among those who ruled them. Numerous testimonies to this exist in sources well known to science, but we are not aware of any study concerning the hierarchy that existed in the mentioned area for more than three millennia. Within the framework of the history of the Armenian people, we have partially addressed this issue². In this examination, we will attempt to address the same question as comprehensively as possible. Since we are dealing with a very extensive period, we will content ourselves here with presenting the main data and arguments known to us regarding the hierarchy, leaving the conclusions derived from them mainly for the future.

Preliminary Conceptions: 3rd–1st Millennia BCE

The hierarchy is expressed as early as in **Bronze Age sources**. In inscriptions and especially in the correspondence of the 3rd–1st millennia BCE, the kings and rulers of the Near East, when possessing equal status, officially address one another as

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² Ohanyan 2001.

“brother (ahum)”. Conversely, rulers with different statuses interact using the term *“father (abum)”*, expressing seniority/superiority, or *“son (marum)”*, expressing subordination. During the 3rd–2nd millennia BCE, Egypt, Hatti, Mitanni, Babylonia, and Assyria—which established almost simultaneous hegemony in the region—headed unions composed of subordinate countries. The kings of these listed dominant countries held equal status toward one another, an expression of which is that they officially called each other *“brother”* and bore the same title: *“Great King”*³. For these kings, subordinate rulers were “sons”, who could likewise have their own “brothers” and “sons”. Among “brother” rulers, there was also a gradation: *“elder brother, younger brother”*⁴. Parallel to changes in the statuses of rulers, their rank-based titles changed as well; a “brotherly” relationship could transform into a “father-son” status or vice versa⁵.

Kinship terms were also used in the official relations between the rulers of Assyria and Urartu. According to Ashurbanipal (668–633 BCE), Sarduri III treated him as a son treats a father. Thus, the latter recognized the supremacy of the King of Assyria and, as a subject, paid him tribute. However, according to Ashurbanipal, their royal ancestors had “brotherly” relations⁶—that is, equal status.

Such relationships existing between the same countries are correlated with the myth-like conceptions known from the Greek historian Ctesias (5th c. BCE), according to which *“Ninus, the King of the Assyrians”*, conquers almost the entire Near East and destroys the kingdoms located there. The only exception is Armenia = Urartu, whose king, Barzanes, submits and agrees to give military aid to Ninus. Thus, Barzanes becomes a *“friend (φίλος)”* to Ninus and receives from him permission to continue the kingship in his country⁷. Here, the “friendly” relationship between Ninus and Barzanes identifies with the “brotherly” status of the kings of Assyria and Urartu mentioned by Ashurbanipal.

Assyria and Armenia = Urartu appear with the same statuses in the History of the 5th-century Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi, but already with a numbered hierarchy: Ninus, the king of *“Assyria and Nineveh”*, gave Aram (the second eponym patriarch of the Armenians) *“permission... to be called second after himself”*, a grace which his son also merited⁸.

³ Moran 1992: 141-142/EA73, 147/EA77, 152/EA82, 170/EA96, 244/EA158, 251/EA164; Bryce 2003; Veenhof, Eidem 2008: 277, 308-309, 322-323; Podany 2010; Beckman, Bryce, Cline 2011: 125-129/AhT5, §§2-4, 7-8 etc.

⁴ Veenhof, Eidem 2008: 299, 305; Podany 2010: 9.

⁵ Veenhof, Eidem 2008: 277-278, 299; Podany 2010: 70.

⁶ Novotny, Jeffers 2013: 261-262/ x40-50, 307-308/ 121b-124a.

⁷ Diod., Vol. I.2.8-9.

⁸ Khorenats'i, I.13.9; 15.2.

Some kings of Urartu present themselves with the titles “*Great King*” and “*King of Kings*”⁹. The first title confirms the presented data and conceptions that Urartu held equal status with Assyria or followed immediately after it. Meanwhile, the title “*King of Kings*” is considered the primary evidence of the establishment of Urartu’s hegemony in the region¹⁰.

Kinship titles were used not only in the official relations of rulers; in the hierarchy of the Sumerian school, the director of the school is called “*father*”, the teacher “*big brother*”, and the student “*son*”. We see similar titles, but of an official order, in epic conceptions; the ruler of Aratta, defeated in a correspondence debate, recognizes one of the Sumerian rulers as “*big brother*” and declares: “*I am second to you, I was not your equal*”¹¹.

It is evident that the kinship titles given in official relations served as titles expressing degrees of power. Other types of titles given to subordinate rulers are also known (*šarru*, *šarranu*, *wardum*, *hazannu*, *awilu*, *rubā’ū*, etc.)¹², which, together with kinship terms, could indicate the specific position each ruler occupied in the hierarchies of the unions headed by paramount kings or within the region as a whole.

Data of another kind confirming the existence of a hierarchy is reported by the Assyrian king Sargon II (721–705 BCE). He recruited Mannae—formerly subordinate to Urartu—into the ranks of his allies and granted its king, Ullusunū, a throne (Akkadian: GIŠ.GU.ZA) that was higher in rank than that of his father¹³. While in previous examples the hierarchy was expressed through kinship terms, in this case, it is expressed through throne ranks.

Sargon raised Ullusunū’s throne rank or status during a formal banquet he hosted. This detail is significant, as we see in the cases of kings preceding and succeeding Sargon that they defined or confirmed the hierarchy during events often called the “royal banquet” or by an equivalent name in multilingual sources.

Bronze Age sources contain many other data points and conceptions regarding hierarchy, which we will address later in comparison with sources from a subsequent period.

The Period of Median-Achaemenid Hegemony, 6th–4th Centuries BCE

The most direct data and conceptions confirming the existence of a hierarchy relate to Iranian formations and the countries within their sphere of influence. In the 6th–4th centuries BCE, the Near East was partially included in the Median Empire, and subsequently, almost entirely within the Achaemenid Empire, its political successor.

⁹ Melikishvili 1960: 101; Çifçi 2025.

¹⁰ Piotrovski 1959: 80–82.

¹¹ Kramer 1963: 232, 239, 240, 267; Back 1978: 12.

¹² Moran 1992, xxvii, Veenhof, Eidem 2008: 178.

¹³ Frame 2021: 282/ text II.

Near Eastern countries that previously held partial or complete independence were mostly transformed into satrapies, which, during the period of Achaemenid supremacy, were governed exclusively by the Persian elite. The Achaemenid army was also primarily led by Persians¹⁴. However, the army was composed of ethnic military units with their own commanders and a degree of autonomy, among which a hierarchy is observable.

Xenophon's Cyropaedia

The hierarchy is expressed in various sources, the most detailed of which is Xenophon's (4th c. BCE) *Cyropaedia*. In this novelistic work, the dominion led by the Medes and then the Persians is presented as a confederate union established by the mutual consent of several countries and peoples and confirmed by treaties¹⁵. Important decisions and undertakings are adopted and implemented with the participation and consent of their leaders, who consider one another allies¹⁶. In the federal army of this formation, only the military units of the related Iranian peoples (Persians, Medes, Cadusians, Sacae, Hyrcanians), the Susians, the Armenians, and two Assyrian provinces are included through alliance treaties. A specific hierarchy is observed among these units, presented as the primary nations of the Median-Achaemenid Empire, which is emphasized throughout the *Cyropaedia*.

The Achaemenid "Royal banquet"

Just as in Sargon II's inscription, the hierarchy in the *Cyropaedia* is linked to the ceremony of the banquet. In the records of previous millennia, these events held under the leadership of the king are given the Akkadian names "*royal meal-banquet (naptan šarrim)*" or "*royal table (paššnū šarrim)*"¹⁷. The event is called by a phrase expressing the same meanings in the *Cyropaedia*: "*βασιλέως τραπέζης*"¹⁸. According to Xenophon's work, the most solemn royal banquet takes place after the triumphal parade organized by Cyrus the Great (559–530 BCE)¹⁹. To each of the high-ranking guests invited, he assigns a hierarchical place called a "*throne, honored seat*" (*ἔδρα, τιμιωτέραν ἔδρα*). This seat, considered a place of honor, corresponds to the evaluation the guests received from Cyrus. This evaluation is called "*honor (τίμη)*". The one with the highest "honor" sits on the left side of the king, the "*second (δεύτερον)*" in rank of honor sits on the right side, the "*third (τρίτον)*" sits on the left, the "*fourth (τέταρτος)*" on the right. The other guests then receive places in the same order. This method of representing the

¹⁴ Briant 2002: 80-82, 350-354.

¹⁵ I.1.4; II.4.22; III.1.10,21; IV.2.7-8, 21; 6.8-10; V.1.22; 3.19; VII.5.50-51 etc.

¹⁶ IV.5.35-37; V.1.19-20, 29-34; 4.19; VI.1.1,6-8,11; 2.14; 4.13; VII.5.7; VIII.1.6 etc.

¹⁷ Sasson 2004.

¹⁸ VIII.2.4; the Greek word "τράπεζα" means "table", from which the second meaning, "banquet", is derived. Etymology of Ancient Greek words: - Liddell, Scott 1940.

¹⁹ VIII.4.3-5.

Achaemenid upper class with numbered ranks of honor was seen previously in conceptions regarding Bronze Age rulers and will be encountered more frequently and prominently in sources from later times.

The Achaemenid hierarchy

Those who received the highest honor of sitting immediately next to Cyrus could be the high-ranking guests of the banquet mentioned just before the seat order was defined. These are the ethnic commanders who emerged during the period of Median hegemony and are listed in the Achaemenid stage in the following numbered sequence:

1. Cyrus's Persian friends, 2. Artabazus the Mede, 3. Tigranes the Armenian, 4. The commander of the Hyrcanians, 5. Gobryas the Assyrian²⁰.

In this list, the commanders of the ethnic units mentioned in the Cyropaedia as allies of Cyrus are listed either by name or by position. They represent Media, Armenia, Hyrcania, and Babylonia²¹. To the leaders mentioned in the same list, one must also add Cyrus, who presided over the banquet and represented both the Achaemenid Empire and Persia²².

In the provided list, only the identity of Cyrus's friends remains uncertain. He calls those commanders who accompanied him since childhood "*friends (φίλος)*", all of whom are Persians. From these officers considered "*peers (ὁμοτίμων)*", Cyrus grants the honor of participating in the banquet to those most devoted to him²³. These are likely the more than ten highest-ranking Persian officers mentioned by name in the Cyropaedia who served as generals (μυριάρχης), colonels (χιλίαρχος), or commanders of large military formations (Adušius, Asiadatas, Arsamas, Artabatas, Artagerses, Artaozus, Hystaspas, Madatas, Pharnuchus, Chrysantas, etc.). These high-ranking officers probably headed Persian tribal military units, which is inferable from the

²⁰ VIII.4.1

²¹ Gobryas is viewed as the representative of Babylonia based on the following reasoning: according to the Cyropaedia, Gobryas was an Assyrian (IV.6.1) and the ruler of one of the provinces of Assyria. However, in Babylonian chronicles, he corresponds to the individual known by the name variants "Gubaru" or "Ugbaru," who was the governor of Gutium, located in the north-eastern regions of Assyria. Based on the etymology of the name, it is assumed he was of Median or Persian ethnicity, which aligns with the fact that in Assyrian annals, the Iranian tribes living in the Zagros region are called "Guti." According to the same sources, Cyrus the Great appointed Gubaru-Gobryas as the governor of Babylonia, leading to the conclusion that he actually represented Babylonia (Dandamayev 1992: 72-73; Briant 2002: 41-42; Van De Mieroop 2002).

²² According to the Cyropaedia, during the stage of Median hegemony, Cyrus led mainly the Persian regiment, and after receiving the supreme throne, he was to be proclaimed king also in Persia, where his father continued to reign: - I.5.4-5, VIII.5.22-26.

²³ I.5.5-7, II.1.10.

Cyropaedia's report that Persian age groups—including those subject to military service—were grouped according to the 12 Persian tribes²⁴.

It follows from these clarifications that, through Cyrus, his friends, and his allies participating in the triumphal parade, the list refers to the commander-representatives of the ethno-tribal-territorial allied units of the Achaemenid Empire. "Royal banquets" hosted by Bronze Age kings have a similar composition, where the high-ranking guests presented in detail are provincial rulers, military commanders, and the allied or subordinate kings, leaders, or delegates of neighboring ethno-tribal units²⁵.

In the Cyropaedia, the ethnic military units led by Cyrus and his allied leaders are listed collectively several times. In the most complete of these military registers, which includes all allies, the ethnic infantry regiments are arranged in the following order (numbered by us):

1. Persians, 2. Medes, 3. Armenians, 4. Hyrcanians, 5. Sacae, 6. Cadusians, 7. Assyrians of Gobryas²⁶.

The cavalry follows almost the same ethnic arrangement:

1. Persians, 2. Medes, 3. Armenians, 4. Sacae, 5. Cadusians²⁷.

The Hyrcanian subdivision is absent from this specific list, which is likely one of the Cyropaedia's recurrent omissions. This is confirmed by the fact that the Hyrcanian unit is present in two other cavalry lists, where, as in the infantry formation, it ranks fourth. Another cavalry register consists of 4 units:

1. Persians, 2. Medes, 3. Armenians, 4. Hyrcanians²⁸.

The other units present in previous lists are likely intended in this list under the expression "*and those of the rest of the allies*". During the triumphal parade led by Cyrus, the cavalry has the following arrangement:

1. Persians, 2. Medes, 3. Armenians, 4. Hyrcanians, 5. Cadusians, 6. Sacae²⁹.

In this version, the Cadusians are mentioned before the Sacae, while the Assyrians, as in the previous two lists, are absent. This can be attributed to the latter's small numbers, or the fact that the Assyrians representing the baggage train did not participate in active combat operations.

Two other regiments are presented as federal units in the Cyropaedia, but they are absent from the provided military lists, implying that their role in the Achaemenid army was considered insignificant in the Cyropaedia. One of these, led by the Assyrian Gadatas, is the only military unit whose numbers are not specified, only stating that it was small in number³⁰. The other regiment, consisting of 1,000 horsemen led by

²⁴ I.2.4-5.

²⁵ Ermidoro 2015: 104, 119, 156, 179-182, 206; Portuese 2020: 55-59.

²⁶ V.3.34-40.

²⁷ V.3.41-42.

²⁸ V.5.5.

²⁹ VIII.3.16-18.

³⁰ V.4.2.

Abradatas, King of Susa, takes no part in the formation of the alliance led by Cyrus, as he joins the already established alliance only during the final events³¹.

Thus, the provided military lists enumerate 7 ethnic regiments. We see the leaders of five of these in the list of ethnic commanders, while the leaders of the Cadusians and Sacae are missing. This can also be considered an omission of the Cyropaedia, as the regiments led by those leaders are mentioned in three of the four provided military registers.

In these same lists, only the military units or the commanders of the Persians, Medes, and Armenians occupy fixed positions, leading all lists in an unvarying sequence. This arrangement is not coincidental; it corresponds to the numerical strength of these same units:

1. Persians – 111,000, 2. Medes – 70,000, 3. Armenians – 24,000.

Initially, the Medes—who dominated the alliance—possessed the largest army³², but they were later surpassed by the Persians after the latter assumed hegemony³³. The total strength of the Armenian army was 48,000, half of which they were obligated to send to the federal army³⁴, to which some unspecified number was added later³⁵.

Throughout the Cyropaedia, clear precedence is given to this same trio, presented as the primary contributors of military force. As early as the period of Median hegemony, only the military units of Media, Persia, and Armenia were included in the allied army; the combined force formed by their divisions fought the first battle against Assyria³⁶. A 4,000-strong regiment of Chaldaeans, neighbors to the Armenians, was also involved in that war³⁷. However, this tribe was included in the army led by Cyrus not as a federal ally but through mercenary obligation³⁸. This is confirmed by the fact that in the Cyropaedia, the Chaldaeans are never mentioned as allies, and their regiment is not listed in any military register, even though its numbers exceed those of some actual allies.

The countries of the primary trio also differ from the other units in the alliance by their higher status of statehood: the status of a kingdom. The King of Media was Astyages, succeeded by his son Cyaxares (in authentic sources, they reigned in reverse order). The King of Persia was Cambyses, and while the king reigning in Armenia is mentioned several times in the Cyropaedia, his name is not cited³⁹.

³¹ VI.1.3.35, 46, VII.1.32.

³² II.1.6.

³³ I.5.5, II.1.2-3, V.5.3, VII.4.16.

³⁴ II.1.6, III.2.3.

³⁵ III.3.4.

³⁶ II.1.2-6.

³⁷ III.3.1.

³⁸ III.2.25-26.

³⁹ I.2.1, 5.2, II.4.22, etc. Khorenatsi calls this king “Eruand the Short-lived”, who, as in the Cyropaedia, was the father of Tigran—the ally of the last King of the Medes and Cyrus the Great (I.24.4, 15, 25.2). In the

According to the *Cyropaedia*, among the countries included in the alliance led by Cyrus, Susa also held the status of a kingdom. However, as previously mentioned, its king, Abradatas, was initially part of the opposing camp led by Assyria and took no part in the formation of the alliance led by Cyrus.

Thus, according to the *Cyropaedia*, during the stage of Median hegemony, the regional hierarchy was headed by Media, Persia, and Armenia, which had their own native kings. In the subsequent Achaemenid stage, we see a hierarchy only among the ethnic commanders and the ethnic armies they led; among these, as in the previous stage, the Persian, Median, and Armenian units—having the largest numbers—held primary status. The other allies joined this trio while still in the stage of Median hegemony. The order in which these others are listed no longer corresponds to their numerical strength (Hyrcanians – 2,000; Cadusians – 24,000; Sacae – 12,000; Assyrians of Gobryas – 1,000). Regarding these units, the *Cyropaedia* lacks specific data expressing status or rank that could explain the positions they occupy in the provided military lists. However, this sequence cannot be considered accidental either, as the ethnic military units included in the Achaemenid alliance are mentioned in the same or similar order in other sources, which will be addressed below.

There are other literary motifs in the *Cyropaedia* related to the hierarchy and the “royal banquet” that are also found in their main episodes and specific details in the primary sources of previous millennia. Solemn banquets were organized by Egyptian Pharaohs and the kings of Sumer, Akkad, Mari, Urartu, Assyria, and other countries of Ancient Mesopotamia on the occasions of their birthdays or accession anniversaries, military victories, the completion of significant structures, and ritual or other holidays⁴⁰. In the records of the same periods—banquet ledgers or pictorial scenes—certain emphasized characteristics (the placement of tables and benches, sitting style, the size and shape of thrones and chairs, clothing and adornment, the variety of food, etc.) express the different ranks of the participants⁴¹. According to more specific data, high-ranking guests sat in front of the king; those sitting closest to him held the highest ranks—that is, the ranks of the guests corresponded to their sequence following the king⁴². We saw a similar seating arrangement in the *Cyropaedia*, with the difference that participants sat not in front of the king presiding over the banquet, but at his sides in a left-right sequence, where those sitting closest to the king likewise held the highest rank or “honor”.

During banquets, Cyrus grants delicious foods, expensive jewelry, clothing, and other rewards to his close associates or worthy servants, and sends them to those who

Cyropaedia, the last King of the Medes is mistakenly called “Cyaxares” instead of “Astyages.” Khorenatsi calls him Azhdahak” which is the Armenian version of the name “Astyages”, also according to Eusebius: - I.44, 45, 54, 101, 102).

⁴⁰ Ermidoro 2015: 12, 90; Tarhan 2024: 381-385.

⁴¹ Green 2004: 211-213; Ermidoro 2015: 255-258.

⁴² Portuese 2024: 356-357.

are absent⁴³. According to Xenophon, this order—still preserved in his time—had been established by Cyrus the Great⁴⁴.

However, kings of previous millennia were already distributing similar gifts to their guests and sending them to absent subordinates. According to the *Cyropaedia*, Cyrus assigns uniform (Median) festive, multi-colored clothing to the high-ranking participants of the parade preceding the banquet⁴⁵. We see the same order in the records of previous millennia: participants of the “royal banquet” are given multi-colored garments specifically intended for that festive event⁴⁶.

According to a numbered Neo-Assyrian guide for conducting court banquets (K.8669), the chief court overseer manages the banquet while standing⁴⁷. In the *Cyropaedia*, a similar official position is held by the court eunuch Gadatas, who oversees the service of the high-ranking guests invited to Cyrus’s banquet while standing⁴⁸.

The *Cyropaedia* shares various commonalities not only with the primary sources of previous millennia but also with those of subsequent centuries, which we will address below.

Comparison with Curtius Rufus and Herodotus

Data significantly comparable to the *Cyropaedia* regarding the Achaemenid army are found in the Roman historian **Curtius Rufus’s** (1st c. CE) *History of Alexander the Great*. While Xenophon’s work considers the early Achaemenid army, Curtius’s *History* describes the same army in its penultimate battle—the Battle of Issus. In terms of military numbers, it is led by the same ethnic trio in a sequence corresponding to the *Cyropaedia*:

1. Persians – 100,000, 2. Medes – 60,000, 3. Armenians – 47,000⁴⁹

According to the Roman historian, as in the *Cyropaedia*, the other ethnic military units are numerically inferior to the leading trio: Derbices – 42,000; Caspian tribes – 14,000; Barcanians – 12,000; Hyrcanians – 6,000; Tapurians – 1,000⁵⁰. This

⁴³ VIII, 2.2-4, 7-9; 4.6-7, 24, 27.

⁴⁴ VIII.2.7.

⁴⁵ VIII.3.1-8.

⁴⁶ Sasson 2004: 203; Ermidoro 2015: 114, 116, 261.

⁴⁷ Ermidoro 2015: 167, 168, 185, 187.

⁴⁸ VIII.4.2.

⁴⁹ III, 2.6: The entire sentence regarding the number of the Armenian troops is missing from the 1963 Russian translation (p. 23), although it is present in the parallel Latin text. The same omission was preserved in the Armenian translation made from that edition (p. 282). The prevailing belief in Armenian studies that the Armenian army only participated in the Battle of Gaugamela in the war against Alexander the Great should be considered a consequence of this omission.

⁵⁰ III.2.7-9. Greeks were also included in the same army, but these were mercenaries representing another country.

composition is close to the version in the Cyropaedia (Persians, Medes, Armenians, Assyrians, Hyrcanians, Cadusians, Sacae). The ethnic units differ to some extent, but they are almost identical in regional terms. In both cases, besides the Persians, Medes, and Armenians, South Caspian and Central Asian ethnic subdivisions are also included in the Achaemenid army.

While motifs related to hierarchy are absent in Curtius's History, it confirms the existence of the hierarchy because Curtius's version of the ethnic trio (possessing the largest military units) and their numerical sequence repeats the hierarchy expressed in the Cyropaedia.

Similar conceptions regarding hierarchy are also known to Herodotus (5th c. BCE). He refers to the "*royal banquet* (*βασιλήιον δεῖπνον*)" that took place every year on the birthday of the Achaemenid King of Kings, Xerxes I (486–465 BCE)⁵¹. In this case as well, the king grants gifts to his guests, but data related to hierarchy is absent from these descriptions. However, we see such data in the description of a military council hosted by the same Xerxes⁵². Its high-ranking participants also represent ethno-territorial units (subject kings, ethnic rulers, ethnic leaders of naval fleets). They receive seats just like the high-ranking guests at the banquet organized by Cyrus the Great; these seats correspond to the evaluation given to the council participants by Xerxes, which is also called "*honor* (*τιμὴν*)". Naturally, the Achaemenid King of Kings occupies the most honorable place, and the other kings and leaders occupy seats in a sequence following one another by rank.

Comparison with Old Testament

Interconnected motifs related to hierarchy, including specific terms and phrases, are also found in the Old Testament. In the Hebrew version of this source (**Tanakh**), we see the same phrase: "*the royal table* (*לַמֶּלֶךְ לִשְׁלֵשׁ*)"⁵³. This same phrase appears in the Ancient Greek translation, the **Septuagint** (*τράπεζαν τοῦ βασιλέως*)⁵⁴, which mirrors the version found in the Cyropaedia (*βασιλέως τραπέζης*)⁵⁵. This phrase is encountered in the narratives concerning the Prophet Samuel; under the leadership of Saul, the first king of Israel, regular banquets took place where every participant - just as in the Cyropaedia's version of the "royal banquet"—had an assigned seat⁵⁶. Naturally, "*the chiefest place* (*בִּלְיָדָה לְבָשִׁיל*)" belonged to the king, which he had received earlier from

⁵¹ IX.110.

⁵² VIII.67.

⁵³ Samuel, I.20.29. The Hebrew word *לִשְׁלֵשׁ* means "table," from which the secondary meaning "banquet/feast" is derived. — **Bible Dictionary**, 117, №7979.

⁵⁴ Kings = Samuel, I.20.29.

⁵⁵ Cyropaedia, VIII.2.4.

⁵⁶ Samuel, I.20.24-25, 27, 29.

the Prophet Samuel during a previous feast⁵⁷, while the other seats were occupied by Saul's subjects.

The Old Testament also holds certain conceptions regarding the Achaemenid hierarchy which, as in the Cyropaedia, is envisioned as being numbered. In the Book of Esther, the Persian King Artaxerxes (Ahasuerus) organizes a grand banquet during the third year of his reign. Participating in this—as in the presented versions of the “royal banquet”—are the rulers of various provinces and subject lands of the empire, the highest-ranking princes, military commanders, and nobles⁵⁸, among whom *“the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king’s face, and sat the first in the kingdom (בַּמְלָכוֹת הָאֲשֶׁר רָאָה הַמֶּלֶךְ הַיְּשָׁבִיִּים)”* occupied the primary positions⁵⁹.

In another episode of the same book, Artaxerxes grants the highest princely throne (כֶּסֶף) to Haman the Amalekite⁶⁰, but during another banquet, he strips him of his power and subjects him to execution⁶¹. At that same banquet, Haman’s position is given to Mordecai the Jew, which is considered an *“honor (הֹנָר)”* given by the king’s command⁶² and represents the *“second (הַשֵּׁנִי)”* place in the kingdom after the king⁶³.

We see these same motifs in the Prophecy of Daniel: the Babylonian King Belshazzar organizes a massive banquet for his thousand officials, during which he grants the Jewish prophet Daniel the *“third (תְּלָתִי)”* authority in his kingdom⁶⁴.

The notion that primary places in the Achaemenid hierarchy could be given to an Amalekite or a Jew—supposedly recorded in the “chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia”⁶⁵—are novelistic inventions lacking a historical basis, an approach often seen in the Cyropaedia and other historico-fictional sources. This contradicts the Book of Esther itself, in which, as mentioned, the primary places of the Achaemenid hierarchy were occupied by the seven princes of Persia and Media, who were also reserved the right to communicate directly with the King of Kings⁶⁶. This report aligns with Achaemenid primary sources and Ancient Greek historiography⁶⁷, a point with which current scholarship generally agrees.

The “deprivation of power/punishment” motif (regarding Haman) is also present in the Old Testament; while absent in previous sources, it appears in later records

⁵⁷ Samuel, I.9.22.

⁵⁸ Esther, 1.3.

⁵⁹ Esther, 1.14.

⁶⁰ Esther, 3.1.

⁶¹ Esther, 6.14; 7.1, 6-10; 8.1.

⁶² Esther, 6.3, 6-7, 9, 11.

⁶³ Esther, 8.2; 10.3.

⁶⁴ Daniel, 5.1, 7, 16, 29.

⁶⁵ Esther, 6.1-2; 10.2.

⁶⁶ Esther, 1.14.

⁶⁷ Herod. III, 84.

presented below. This motif provides an additional understanding of the processes occurring during events called “royal banquets”.

Comparison with Achaemenid sources

Among the sources confirming the existence of a hierarchy, Achaemenid primary sources are of primary importance⁶⁸. While they contain no direct testimonies regarding the hierarchy, there are weighty data through which the upper levels of the Achaemenid hierarchy are envisioned exactly as in the *Cyropaedia* and Curtius’s *History*.

The *Cyropaedia* presents 8 units as the primary nations within the Achaemenid Empire that were allies and possessed their own military units: Persians, Medes, Armenians, Babylonians (Gobryas), Hyrcanians, Cadusians, Sakas, and Susians (Abradatas). However, in the lists of countries found in Achaemenid royal inscriptions, we see only six countries representing these ethnic units: Persia, Media, Armenia, Saka, Babylonia, and Elam-Susa. The lands of the Hyrcanians and Cadusians are absent from these lists, which already precludes them from having been primary units⁶⁹.

The **Behistun Inscription** of Darius I (550–486 BC) shares much more significant commonalities with the *Cyropaedia*⁷⁰. According to this chief Achaemenid primary source, the Achaemenid army was likewise composed of ethnic subdivisions. Of these, only the Persian and Median armies are directly mentioned, as certain subdivisions within them had sided with Darius I or his opponents⁷¹. The armies resisting Darius in various countries were likely composed of other ethnic regiments detached from the Achaemenid army, often referred to in the annals as the “*rebellious army*”⁷².

From a general examination of the Behistun annals, it becomes quite obvious that the most powerful and extensive rebellions against Darius I took place in Persia, Media, and Armenia. Only the rebellions originating in these countries expanded beyond their borders to include other regions. The rebellion started in Persia spread particularly toward the east to encompass Sattagydia and Arachosia; the Median rebels were supported by Parthia and Hyrcania; and the first battle against the Armenian rebels took place in the territory of Assyria (Izala). These rebellions lasted incomparably longer than the others—6 to 7 months—during which Darius’s army fought 4 to 5 battles to suppress each of the rebellions originating in these three countries. In total, he fought 21 battles against 8 rebellious countries and their joined allies, 14 of which were in the aforementioned three countries or in regions that fell under their influence⁷³.

⁶⁸ Kent 1950; Lecoq 1997; Schmitt 2009, etc.

⁶⁹ Hyrcania is mentioned only once in the Behistun Inscription as a country that rebelled along with Parthia. — Schmitt 1991, §35.

⁷⁰ Schmitt 1991.

⁷¹ §§24, 25, 33, 36, 40, 41.

⁷² §§ 25-30, 33, 35-36, 38, 45-46, etc.

⁷³ Summarizing in §52, Darius testifies to 19 victorious battles, to which he adds two more (§§ 71, 74). The first of these battles is considered the victory over Gaumata. — Briant 2002, 113, after which the main rebellions began.

For comparison, it should be noted that the rebellions that broke out in other countries were purely local in nature and were suppressed with relative ease. The issue of the two Elamite rebellions was resolved without military intervention; they ceased once the rebel leaders were arrested and executed (§§ 16-17, 22-23). The rebellions of Margiana, Sagartia, the second Babylonian, the third Elamite, and Scythia were suppressed with a single battle each (§§ 33, 38, 49-50, 71, 74). Only the first Babylonian rebellion was suppressed with relative difficulty—through two battles taking place with a five-day interval (§§ 18-19).

Egypt is also mentioned among the rebellious countries in Darius's annals (§ 21). However, since nothing is reported regarding the suppression of that rebellion—not only in the annals but also in ancient Greek sources—it is assumed that this rebellion was insignificant⁷⁴. The same can be said for Assyria, which is also mentioned in the list of rebellious countries.

The power balance expressed in the Behistun Inscription fully aligns with the conceptualizations known from historiographical sources. Persia, Media, and Armenia, which raised the most powerful rebellions against Darius, are the very countries that, according to Xenophon and Curtius, possessed the largest military contingents in the Achaemenid army.

Even more distinctly, the representatives of the nations forming this same trio stand out. Eight of Darius's chief commanders are Persians (Hydarnes, Omises, Hystaspes, Dadarshi, Artavardiy, Vivana, Intaphernes, Gobryas), one is a Mede (Takhmaspada), and one is an Armenian (Dadarshi). There are no representatives of other nations in the highest command of the Achaemenid army.

Darius's ten supreme commanders represent not only the Achaemenid military power but also the administrative-political authority and the highest-ranking nobility. Among them, Hystaspes is Darius's father, who was likely the satrap of Parthia and had a large force at his disposal (§§ 35–36). The Persian Dadarshi was the satrap of Bactria, and Vivana was the satrap of Arachosia (§§ 38, 45–47). Intaphernes, Hydarnes, and Gobryas were among those who overthrew the magus Gaumata along with Darius. These are the six high-ranking individuals to whom Darius gave special mention in the Behistun Inscription, entrusting his successor kings to care for their descendants⁷⁵.

Although no specific political role, office, or high ancestral origin is attributed to Darius's other four generals, it is clear that as members of Darius's supreme staff, they also constituted the highest-ranking representatives of the Achaemenid elite.

Darius's opponents were likely also representatives of the Achaemenid upper class, among whom this same ethnic trio also occupied a significant place. They were

⁷⁴ Dandamaev 1985, 104.

⁷⁵ §§ 68–69. According to Herodotus, the six high-ranking individuals who supported Darius were the “*leading (πρώτους)*” Persians who had the right to claim the royal throne and enjoyed the privilege of free entry into the court and meeting the King of Kings at any time (III, 70, 84).

proclaimed kings in six different countries (Persia, Elam, Babylonia, Media, Sagartia, Margiana), mostly presenting themselves as the son of Cyrus the Great or as descendants of pre-Achaemenid kings who had ruled in Media, Babylonia, or Elam⁷⁶. There are nine such leaders, six of whom are Persian, Median, or Armenian (Gaumata, Vahyazdata, Martiya, Phraortes, Tritantaechmes, Arakha).

The Achaemenid hierarchy is also partially reflected in the Behistun Inscription. The Babylonian and Aramaic versions of this source list the numbers of casualties and prisoners among the rebels, the examination of which⁷⁷ has led to the following conclusion:

The losses inflicted on the enemy by each Persian commander are counted in the thousands, while in the case of Median and Armenian generals, they amount to only a few hundred. There is also a gradation within the results of the Persian commanders themselves. The greatest losses to the enemy were inflicted under the command of Darius, followed by his father, and then the other Persian commanders. From this approach, it is evident that the casualty figures in the inscription are not real but are adjusted to the ranks of the military commanders.

Through the artificiality or intentional distortion of casualty distribution, the Babylonian and Aramaic versions of the Behistun Inscription outline the same units occupying the first three places in the Achaemenid ethnic hierarchy that we saw in the *Cyropaedia* and Curtius's *History*. With eight commanders inflicting the greatest losses on the enemy, the Persians hold supreme primacy, followed by Median and Armenian commanders according to the ranks expressed by the distribution of casualties (the specific hierarchical sequence between the latter two is difficult to determine, as data regarding the losses they inflicted on enemies are incomplete).

We saw an ethnic ratio similar to the composition of Darius I's general staff in the supreme command of Cyrus the Great as presented in the *Cyropaedia*, led by the ethnic trio: more than a dozen Persians, the Mede Artabazus, the Armenian Tigranes, as well as two other Medes (Andamyas, Rambacas) and one Armenian (Embas)⁷⁸ generals mentioned later.

In the political sphere, the highest Achaemenid offices, as stated, belonged exclusively to Persians⁷⁹. However, we see a different situation in the army: the *Cyropaedia* mentions representatives of eight nations in the Achaemenid supreme command, where the Achaemenid ethnic hierarchy was expressed. But in the supreme command of Darius I, we saw representatives of only three nations. Likely, as in the *Cyropaedia*, there were commanders of other nations in his army, but we do not see

⁷⁶ P. Briant considers them representatives of the local ruling class. — Briant 2002: 120-121.

⁷⁷ Hyland 2014. We thank J. Hyland (Ph.D. and MA in Ancient History, BA in History) for providing us with a copy of his article titled "The Casualty Figures in Darius' Bisitun Inscription".

⁷⁸ Xen. Cyr. V.3.38, 42.

⁷⁹ Briant 2002: 82.

them in Darius's general staff because they may have occupied lower command positions.

P. Briant refers to the ethnic elite holding the highest positions in the Achaemenid political, military, and other administrative spheres as *"the dominant socioethnic class"*⁸⁰. From the presented examination, it can be concluded that the events conditioned by the reign of Darius I mainly constituted a struggle that broke out within the Achaemenid dominant socio-ethnic class, in which Persians, Medes, and Armenians formed the majority.

We do not know of any direct reports regarding hierarchy in Achaemenid primary sources. However, the agreements and commonalities between the Achaemenid records and the conceptions directly related to this topic found in historiographical sources are so close that, as we have seen, they confirm and complement each other in certain important matters. Through these obvious commonalities with the records, the historiographical reports concerning the Achaemenid hierarchy receive serious primary-source substantiation. This particularly applies to the *Cyropaedia*, in which we saw clear agreements not only with Achaemenid but also with Bronze Age and Babylonian primary sources (these agreements themselves confirm that the author of the *Cyropaedia* was quite well-acquainted not only with Achaemenid epic traditions but also with authentic history).

The Period of Macedonian Hegemony (4th–2nd Centuries BC)

With the collapse of the Achaemenid Empire, the hierarchy in the region likely disappeared. The first kings of Seleucia, who achieved dominance in Western Asia, bore the title *"King of Asia"* inherited from Alexander the Great⁸¹. However, this could no longer be practical once a number of other kingdoms entered the arena in "Asia" (Pontus, Bithynia, Cappadocia, Sophene, Commagene, Armenia, Atropatene, Parthia, Bactria, etc.). The kings of these lands bore various titles following the hierarchical sequence of *"King, Great King, King of Kings"*. Yet, it is difficult to envision the regional hierarchy through these titles alone, as some kings bore the same titles simultaneously. These often did not correspond to their actual power or status but rather expressed claims derived from the high royal origin of a given ruler⁸².

The Macedonian "Royal Banquet"

During the final period of Macedonian hegemony, prior to the Seleucid phase, a formal hierarchy likely had not yet formed, but conceptions survived that testify to the existence of certain traditions related to hierarchy. One of these is known from the Greek historian **Diodorus Siculus** (1st century BC), which relates to the now-familiar

⁸⁰ Briant 1988: 137-138, 164, etc.; Briant 2002: 82, 352, 679, 780-783, 869, etc.

⁸¹ Engels 2014: 336; Strootman 2020: 132, 135-137, 146.

⁸² Engels 2014: 351; Strootman 2020: 149-151, 153-154.

motif of the “banquet”: Peucestas, the former bodyguard of Alexander the Great and satrap of Persia, organized a massive banquet⁸³.

In this instance, the guests’ chairs were arranged in the likeness of an amphitheater, in four concentric circles. The primary place—which in this version is the center—was reserved in previous examples for the king presiding over the event. However, since the king of the Macedonian Empire, Philip III (323–317 BC), was absent during this ceremony, he was replaced by an altar placed in the center, along with altars dedicated to Alexander the Great and the Hellenic gods.

The chairs located in the first circle surrounding the center were occupied by the satraps, high-ranking generals, and those Persians who held the highest “*honor* (τιμώμενοι)”. This is a scene comparable to the “royal banquets” presented in the *Cyropaedia*, Herodotus’s *Histories*, and the Old Testament, where participants receive places according to their degree of honor.

In the Macedonian version of the banquet seating order, the gradation was also maintained in the subsequent three circles, where the guests were lower in rank than those situated in the inner circles in a step-by-step sequence.

Alexander the Great valued Peucestas, and the locals respected him for speaking Persian fluently, wearing Median clothing, and following local customs⁸⁴. From Diodorus’s description regarding the banquet he organized, the composition of the invitees, and their seating order, it can be inferred that Peucestas not only followed local customs but also attempted to emulate Achaemenid administrative systems.

Peucestas’s favorable attitude toward local orders and customs may explain why a local authority was established in the Persia under his rule, which preserved or emulated Achaemenid traditions in various spheres (dynastic names, titles, dress, iconography, etc.)⁸⁵. The rule of the lords of this dynasty—who bore titles testifying to high political and military autonomy (prtrk’, krny), issued their own coinage, and were later known by the status of “king (mlk’)”—continued into the Parthian period.

The same can be said for the royal houses reigning after the collapse of the Achaemenid Empire in Parthia, Atropatene, Armenia, Commagene, Cappadocia, and Pontus, which were, or presented themselves as, descendants of Achaemenid royal or satrapal houses and continuators of their policy and cultural heritage⁸⁶. Through the mediation of these dynasties guided by Achaemenid traditions, Achaemenid administrative orders and structures could be transmitted to later times, which explains the direct, almost recurring commonalities observed in various fields of Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanid heritage.

⁸³ Diod. Vol. IX, 19.22.

⁸⁴ Arr. VI.30.2-3; Diod. Vol. IX, 19.14, 5.

⁸⁵ Engels 2013; Müseler 2018; Luther 2021: 1499-1500.

⁸⁶ Olbrycht 2019; Melikyan 2021.

The Period of Parthian Hegemony (3rd Century BC – 3rd Century AD)

The Arsacid hierarchy

According to the Roman historian **Cornelius Tacitus** (1st–2nd centuries AD), the Parthian King Vologeses I (51–78 AD), who consolidated Arsacids power in Western Asia, convened a “*council (concilium)*”⁸⁷. During this assembly, a formal hierarchy was established between him and his two brothers, who had been proclaimed kings in neighboring countries:

Vologeses, as the eldest, was reserved the first place and the “*supreme title (summo nomine)*”. The next place was occupied by his middle brother, Pacorus, King of Media (referring to Lesser Media – Atropatene). The following place was given to the youngest brother, Tiridates (Tiridates I of Armenia, 53–75 AD). According to Tacitus, the Armenia entrusted to his rule was considered the “*third grade (tertius gradus)*” of Arsacid power⁸⁸.

Through this testimony by Tacitus, we gain a direct understanding of the upper echelon of the Arsacid hierarchy, which appeared as follows:

1. Parthia, 2. Lesser Media (Atropatene), 3. Armenia.

While we saw the Achaemenid hierarchy clearly numbered in the Cyropaedia, the specific countries included were not directly named. Tacitus identifies only the leading trio of the Arsacid hierarchy, though it is assumed that other countries led by Arsacids were also included in this system⁸⁹.

According to Armenian medieval historiography, Armenia occupied a place one step higher in the Arsacid hierarchy. According to Khorenatsi, Vagharshak (brother of the Parthian founder Arshak the Great), his grandson “Artashes the First”, and his successor “Tigran the Middle” all occupied the second throne in the Arsacid hierarchy⁹⁰. **Agathangelos**, a contemporary of Khorenatsi, referring to the final year of Parthian Arsacid rule (224 AD), formulates the following hierarchical rule: “*Khosrov, King of the Armenians, who was second in the Persian Empire; for he who was King of the Armenians was second in the Persian Empire*”⁹¹. This sounds like a long-established order or law, aligning with Khorenatsi’s report that Tigran the Middle held the second throne of Armenia “*as was lawful*”⁹².

Khorenatsi does not explicitly state Khosrov’s rank but grants him the title “*Great*”⁹³. We will see the same title applied below to Hormizd-Ardashir, who was

⁸⁷ Latin etymologies. — Lewis, Short 1879.

⁸⁸ Tac., XV.2

⁸⁹ Melikyan 2003: 26-27: We thank A. Melikyan (Ph.D. in History) for the useful review and positive evaluation.

⁹⁰ II.11.2; 19.2-3; 68.4.

⁹¹ I.1.

⁹² II.13.3.

⁹³ II.73.7.

appointed King of Armenia and occupied the second place in the Sassanid hierarchy. Three Armenian Arsacid kings who reigned between the 1st and 3rd centuries also bore the title “*Great*”, two of them named “*Tiridates*,” as mentioned in several Aramaic and Greek inscriptions found in Garni and Aparan⁹⁴. These data suggest that Armenia’s status rose by one step shortly after Tiridates I (whom Tacitus ranked third), perhaps even during the latter’s reign.

In a later (12th-century) Greek translation of Agathangelos’s History⁹⁵, the upper level of the Arsacid hierarchy is occupied by four units: the empires of the Persians (Περσῶν), Armenians (Αρμενίων), Indians (Ινδῶν), and Massagetae (Μασσαγέται). The latter two are remembered as the “*third (tritōs)*” and “*fourth (tetartō)*” dominions of the “*Persian Kingdom*”. As in the primary version of Agathangelos and the reports of Khorenatsi, the Arsacid hierarchy in this translation is envisioned as numbered—an approach we already saw in Tacitus’s testimony.

Strabo (1st century BC – 1st century AD) calls the supreme body that elected the kings of the Parthian Empire a “*council (Synedrion)*”, just as Tacitus does. It was composed of two groups: the first consisting of the king’s relatives, and the second of wise men and magi⁹⁶. The supreme pan-Arsacid council mentioned by Tacitus notes only the participation of the three Arsacid brothers. This elective body corresponds to the first group of the Parthian court council mentioned by Strabo, which was also composed solely of representatives of the royal family.

The Roman historian **Pompeius Trogus** (1st century BC) also refers to the supreme Parthian elective body, which could appoint kings from among its members or depose them⁹⁷. He calls this body the “*Senatu*”, which corresponds to Tacitus’s “*Concilium*” and Strabo’s “*Συνέδριον*”.

The insights quoted from Tacitus are particularly important because they directly testify to the official existence of a hierarchy in the Western Asian region. These and other presented data draw an equivalence between the “*royal banquets*” of the Achaemenid and earlier Bronze Age periods and the supreme Arsacid elective body—the “*Consilium-Synedrion-Senate*”—which, according to these historians, was the chief institution for appointing rulers of the region’s countries and defining their hierarchical rank.

The Period of Artaxiad Hegemony (1st Century BC)

For nearly three decades, Armenia established dominance in Western Asia. As in the Seleucid era, the regional hierarchy during this period was partially expressed through royal titles. The most powerful king of the Artaxiad dynasty, Tigranes II (the Great), bore the title “*King of Kings*” approximately between 85–55 BC. Throughout

⁹⁴ Perikhanyan 1964; Trever 1953; Muradyan 1981; Bresson, Fagan 2022.

⁹⁵ Muradyan, Topchyan 2008.

⁹⁶ Str. XI.9.3.

⁹⁷ Iust. XLI.2.2; XLII.4.1.

almost this entire period, the Parthian Arsacid kings were known only by the title “*Great King*”, suggesting they recognized Tigranes’s suzerainty. The same can be said for Mithridates VI of Pontus (132–63 BC), a primary power in the region. Although he is sometimes associated with the “King of Kings” title, it was for internal use only; he never used it on his coinage, which is considered an expression of his actual or official international status⁹⁸.

Radical changes occurred toward the end of Tigranes’s reign. Rome emerged as the chief protagonist. Armenia lost its supreme status, while Pontus and the Seleucid Empire were eventually transformed into Roman provinces. Parthia, meanwhile, maintained a passive foreign policy. A glimpse into the hierarchy of this era can be caught through events involving Cleopatra of Egypt and the Roman triumvir Mark Antony. In 34 BC, Antony appointed his young children with Cleopatra as rulers over various lands. According to the Greek historian Plutarch (1st–2nd centuries AD), the eldest son was granted Armenia, Media, and Parthia, while the younger was given Phoenicia, Syria, and Cilicia⁹⁹. Clearly, the lands assigned to the eldest son held a higher status, implying that after Tigranes, Armenia, Media, and Parthia were still considered the primary nations of Western Asia. We see this status preserved a century later when this same trio led the Arsacid hierarchy according to Tacitus.

The Period of Sassanid Hegemony (3rd–7th Centuries AD)

The Sassanid Hierarchy

According to the famous 6th-century Sassanid source, the *Letter of Tansar*, King of Kings Ardashir I classified the nobility according to the “*dignity of rank*” and ordered that the representatives of prominent princely houses be registered in ledgers and archives along with their titles and assigned seats¹⁰⁰. These ledgers, which classified the Sassanid elite by rank, are comparable to the Armenian Gahnamaks (Throne Lists)—registers of ministerial houses kept in royal archives. These ministerial lists, which we will examine more closely later, represent the hierarchy of medieval Armenia. They are also compared to the lists of the Sassanid elite found in the Great Inscription of Shapur I (241–272 AD) at the Ka’ba-ye Zartosht (ŠKZ)¹⁰¹, which allow for a more definite understanding of the Sassanid hierarchy¹⁰².

According to the ŠKZ, the four sons of Shapur I, who were proclaimed kings over the primary lands of the Sassanid coalition (Armenia, Gilan, Meshan, and Hind-Saka-Turan-up to the sea), all bore the title “*King (MLK)*”. However, one of them—Hormizd-

⁹⁸ Sullivan 1990: 119; Engels 2014: 342, 348–351; Gatzke 2019: 67–69.

⁹⁹ Plut. 54.4.

¹⁰⁰ Boyce 1968: 44.

¹⁰¹ Back 1978: 284–371.

¹⁰² Lukonin 1983: 645; Perikhanyan 1968.

Ardashir, King of Armenia—bore the specific title “*Great King (RB’ MLK’)*”¹⁰³. In terms of rank, this title was considered the second highest, following only the supreme “*King of Kings (MLK’-n MLK’)*”¹⁰⁴. This indicates that Hormizd-Ardashir was the highest-ranking king under Shapur I, further confirmed by the fact that he inherited the supreme throne from his father¹⁰⁵.

The hierarchical order of the other royal sons bearing the same title is harder to determine. In the previous Achaemenid and Arsacid stages, Media (and later Atropatene) occupied a stable place alongside Armenia in the second and third positions. Atropatene is missing from the list of kingdoms in the ŠKZ, but we find Gilan under the rule of Shapur’s eldest son, Vahram. Since Gilan was a region of Atropatene, it is possible it served as Vahram’s seat, leading the entire province to be called “Gilan” in this context. Thus, it likely followed Armenia in the Sassanid hierarchy, just as in previous eras.

The fact that the Sassanid King of Kings was followed in rank or office by his sons is directly attested by a Pahlavi text attributed to the late Sassanid period known as “*Sūr ī Saxwan* (The Blessing of a Banquet)”¹⁰⁶. In this text, the chief offices of the Sassanid Empire are listed in an order corresponding to their degree of authority. Naturally, the list is headed by the office of the King of Kings (*šāhān šāh*), followed in rank by the positions of his sons (*pūs ī wāspuhr ī šāhān*), and then by the *wuzurg framādār* and other high officials. This almost mirrors the hierarchy expressed in the ŠKZ inscription. While the *Sūr ī Saxwan* presents the highest Sassanid *offices*, the ŠKZ shows that these positions were indeed occupied in the same hierarchical sequence: first by the Sassanid King of Kings (Shapur I), followed by his sons who served as kings of four subordinate lands (Hormizd-Ardashir, Varahran, Narseh, Shapur), and then by other officials following them in rank. Other known lists of the Sassanid elite¹⁰⁷ repeat this same hierarchy: *štdl’n* (= *MLK’*), 2. *BR BYT’* (= *vāspuhr*), *wcln* (= *buzurgān*).

According to Khorenatsi, chief positions were distributed using the same principle in the Armenian Kingdom. Upon ascending the throne, Artashes I (230–160 BC), the founder of a new dynasty, entrusted the command of the border-guarding troops to his four sons¹⁰⁸. These troops were traditionally stationed in four frontier provinces divided by geographical direction, whose rulers were known as *bdeašx* (*բդեաշխ*) or “border-guards (*սահմանապալ, սահմանապահ*). These were considered “*senior (ulwq, qwhtptg)*” princes, as they held a higher status than other princes or ministers (*նախարար*)¹⁰⁹. Among Artashes’s sons—who became high-ranking princes

¹⁰³ Back 1978: 332, 339-340.

¹⁰⁴ Russell 1987: 84; Daryaei 2017: 85.

¹⁰⁵ Weber 2007.

¹⁰⁶ Daryaei 2007.

¹⁰⁷ Lukonin 1983: 698-703.

¹⁰⁸ II.53.7-8, 10, 12.

¹⁰⁹ Adontz 1908: 283-285; Manandyan 1934: 34-43.

immediately following the king—the eldest, Artavazd, held the highest status. He possessed the second throne of Armenia and eventually inherited the royal throne from his father¹¹⁰. This repeats the scheme known from the ŠKZ, where Shapur I hands the chief lands of his empire to his four sons, the highest-ranking of whom inherits the supreme throne.

According to Sebeos, Arshak the Great, the founder of the Parthian Empire, organized his dominion using the same model, entrusting the chief lands of the empire to his four sons¹¹¹. The same principle is discernible as far back as the aforementioned Neo-Assyrian banquet manual (K.8669), where the chief officials appear in the same sequence:

1. King, 2. Crown Prince and other Princes, 3. Other high-ranking officials.

This same sequence is observed in other texts describing banquets or mass events and in court iconography¹¹².

This “Supreme Ruler + 4 Subordinate Rulers” model likely lies at the heart of the administrative, territorial, and military structures we have addressed in previous studies¹¹³. This model, which served as the foundational structure of governance as early as Lagash, repeats with its unique details in the administrative structures of Elam, the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanid Empires, and Armenia.

In the ŠKZ, three other countries also hold the status of kingdoms: Adiabene, Kerman, and Iberia. Their kings are lower in rank than the four royal sons and are listed after them and other members of the royal family in a second list composed of non-royal representatives¹¹⁴. The higher rank of the four sons over these three kings is also expressed by the fact that the sons held the right to inherit the supreme throne; with the exception of Shapur (who died young), the others eventually ascended to the supreme throne¹¹⁵. According to the data in the ŠKZ and other cited sources, the upper level of the Sassanid hierarchy during the reign of Shapur I appears as follows:

1. Main Iran, 2. Armenia, 3-5. Gilan, Meshan, Sakastan-Hind, 6-9. Adiabene, Kerman, Iberia.

The example of Hormizd-Ardashir, who was first appointed “Great King” of Armenia and later inherited the supreme throne from his father, is not unique. It is assumed that his brother Narseh and later Shapur IV (415–420) also bore the same title, both ascending to or claiming the supreme throne after ruling the Armenian throne¹¹⁶. Likely, these kings—just like the “Great King of Armenia” Hormizd-Ardashir—

¹¹⁰ II.51.3, 7; 61.1-2.

¹¹¹ II.32.

¹¹² Ermidoro 2015: 167-168, 185; Portuese 2024: 71, 82, 115-116, 252-257.

¹¹³ Ohanyan 2019; Ohanyan 2021.

¹¹⁴ Lukonin 1983: 708.

¹¹⁵ Lukonin 1983: 692-693; Daryae 2023: 14-19.

¹¹⁶ Manandyan 1978: 470-472; Frye 1983: 144; Chaumont 1986; Pourshariati 2008: 68; Daryae 2017: 85, Daryae 2021, 62; Daryae 2023: 12-13, 15, 16.

occupied the second place in the Sassanid hierarchy corresponding to their title before ascending the supreme throne.

Since the beginning of the 1st century AD, Armenia also served as the seat for the sons or heirs of Parthian kings¹¹⁷. The most famous among them is the already mentioned Tiridates I, son of Vonones II, who was crowned in Rome by Nero. However, even more frequently in this status—dating back to the time of Mithridates I (171–133 BC)—we see Media Proper, which was replaced by Lesser Media (Atropatene) after losing its kingdom status. Unlike Armenia, the children of Parthian Arsacid kings who received the Median throne often achieved supremacy, meaning they gained the throne of Parthia¹¹⁸. This data indicates that Media-Atropatene initially held a higher status than Armenia, confirming the Arsacid hierarchy presented by Tacitus, in which that country occupies second place and Armenia third. The lack of data regarding the kingdom of Atropatene after King Pacorus II (c. 51–72) testifies to the decline of Atropatene's status. This situation aligns with the testimonies of Agathangelos and Khorenatsi, stating that Armenia occupied the second place in the Arsacid hierarchy.

We also see Media and Armenia under the rule of the sons or heirs of supreme kings during the Achaemenid period. According to the *Cyropaedia*, Cyrus the Great appointed his younger son Tanaoxares as satrap over the Medes, Armenians, and Cadusians¹¹⁹. This epic conception aligns with the data showing that the thrones of Media or Armenia were entrusted to the heirs of the supreme kings of the Parthian or Sassanid empires.

The latter often seized the supreme throne, which we also see in the case of Tanaoxares—but according to more reliable sources, such as the Behistun Inscription and the Greek authors who agree with it (Herodotus, Ctesias, Aeschylus, etc.). Cyrus's younger son (or the one presenting himself in his name), known in these sources as “Bardiya, Smerdis, or Mardis” (names contextually synonymous with “Tanaoxares”), seized the supreme throne after the death of his elder brother, the supreme king Cambyses II¹²⁰. The report of Pompeius Trogus (1st century BC) also aligns with this: the last Achaemenid king, Darius III (336–330 BC), served as the governor (*praeficitur*) of Armenia under the name “Codomannus” before ascending the supreme throne¹²¹.

From the presented data and conceptions, it follows that Media and Armenia consistently served as the seats for the primary candidates for supreme power, not only in the Sassanid and Parthian phases but also in the Achaemenid stage. In the same phases, these countries are presented as units occupying the second and third places in the regional hierarchy. This suggests that the candidates for the supreme throne, who

¹¹⁷ Manandyan 1977: 306, 317-318; Manandyan 1978: 23-24, 44, 55.

¹¹⁸ Debevoise 1938: 21, 75-78, 152; Shayegan 2011: 72-74, 76; Bivar 1983: 79; Olbrycht 2010: 148-149, 155; Olbrycht 2014; Olbrycht 2021.

¹¹⁹ *Cyropaedia*, VIII.7.11.

¹²⁰ Dandamayev 1988.

¹²¹ *Iust.*, X, 3.3-5.

immediately followed the supreme ruler in rank, governed the countries that occupied the positions in the regional hierarchy corresponding to their ranks.

The Sassanid “Royal Banquet”

We have already touched upon the *Sūr ī Saxwan*, the guide for conducting banquets, in which the motifs of hierarchy and the “royal banquet” are interconnected, much like in previous traditions. As a ceremonial guide, it is particularly comparable to the aforementioned Neo-Assyrian guide for royal banquets (K.8669), in which the King of Kings is also followed in rank by his sons, and they by other high-ranking officials. In both guides, an official is present at the ceremony who manages the banquet and formally introduces the high-ranking participants. During the Achaemenid “royal banquet”, we also saw high-ranking guests sitting beside the king (Cyrus the Great) in a hierarchical order, as well as an official managing the banquet (Gadatas).

According to Roman perceptions of the Sassanids and corresponding Iranian sources, participation in the “*royal banquet (mensae regales)*” was reserved for those who had the right to offer counsel and express opinions on state affairs. This right was considered an “*honor (honore)*” bestowed by the king (Shapur II). The high-ranking participants who were granted this royal honor wore a symbolic princely turban¹²². The authenticity of these accounts is confirmed by the high Sassanid priest Kartir, who records that he received his “*honor (padixšar)*”, the symbolic princely crown - diadem (kwr’p-y), and his throne rank (g’s-y, g’h) from various kings¹²³. From these data, it follows that the “honor” granting the right to participate in royal banquets was not merely a title, but included a diadem or headpiece corresponding to the official’s specific rank, granted directly by the monarch.

Kinship Titles Expressing Rank

As in the Bronze Age, rulers of the Sassanid era addressed one another officially using kinship terms that reflected their hierarchical standing. Roman and Arabic sources indicate that Near Eastern rulers who were considered equal in status addressed each other in correspondence as “*my brother*” or “*son of my father*”, just as we saw with Bronze Age kings¹²⁴. This tradition of official address continued even after the fall of the Sassanid Empire¹²⁵. It stands to reason that these kinship terms expressing rank were also utilized in the preceding Parthian and Achaemenid periods, though direct records of such usage from those eras are less common.

The sources examined reveal a consistent structure in the upper levels of the Achaemenid, Arsacid, and Sassanid hierarchies showing remarkable continuity:

¹²² Amm. XVIII.5.6; Lukonin 1983: 707.

¹²³ Regarding Hormizd-Ardashir, Vahram I, and Vahram II. — Sprengling 1953: 50, 56; Back 1978: 213. №131a, 227, №194, 248, №267a, 393-394, 400-402, 406-409; Lukonin 1983: 706.

¹²⁴ Amm. XVII.5.3, 10; Tabari, XXXI.33 / Year 194.

¹²⁵ Drocourt 2018: 2-3; Korobeynikov 2004: 53-54.

Median-Achaemenid Phase: The primary trio consisted of Persia, Media, and Armenia.

Arsacid Phase: Parthia replaced Persia as the dominant power. Media-Atropatene and Armenia maintained their high rankings, though at a certain point, Armenia ascended to the second position.

Sassanid Phase: Persia regained its former supremacy, while Armenia maintained its second-place status (the occupant of the third place remains a subject for further clarification).

These commonalities suggest that the statuses established during the Achaemenid period exerted a significant and lasting influence on the formation of both the Arsacid and Sassanid hierarchical systems.

The Hierarchy of the Armenian Kingdom

The concepts, motifs, rank-titles, and terminology related to hierarchy found in the sources of the previous millennia are often repeated almost exactly in medieval Armenian records. These fragmented data become more complete and intelligible when synchronized with Armenian historiography.

Numbered or Ordered Hierarchy

According to Armenian historiography, the concept of a structured hierarchy was accepted in Armenia and the wider region from the earliest times. Khorenatsi's accounts of hierarchy reach back to Aram, the second eponymous ancestor of the Armenians, to whom the Assyrian King Ninus reportedly *"gave him permission... to be called second after himself"*¹²⁶.

Armenia occupied a high place in its internal hierarchy, which is true for every country included in the regional hierarchy.

Beyond the detailed records of this domestic system, Armenian historiography has preserved memories of the regional hierarchies of Sassanid and earlier times, which we have partially explored.

Included in the Armenian hierarchy were all the ministerial houses or domains. These were the units that possessed significant estates, administrative and judicial authority, tax collection and other agencies, their own capital, fortresses, troops, and flag, and represented large and small autonomies¹²⁷. Various lists called **"Gahnamak"** have been preserved by some historians, in which dozens, sometimes more than a hundred ministries representing territorial units are registered¹²⁸. They are listed, numbered, or ranked according to their position and power, an approach we also saw in the case of the Achaemenid, Arsacid, and Sasanian hierarchies.

¹²⁶ Khorenatsi, I.13.9.

¹²⁷ Adontz 1908: 453-479; Manandyan 1934: 54-56.

¹²⁸ Adontz 1908, 236-297; Hakobyan 2011.

In the throne list presented in Agathangelos's History, only 16 princes representing ministries are listed by number¹²⁹. But these are only the "*chief ministers and governors*", who, according to the Greek version of the same History, were followed by "*the rest of the ministers*". The same version also summarizes: - "*these sixteen grandees, who were listed and mentioned one by one with their respective ranks*" or "*according to the order they occupied*"¹³⁰. It follows from these lines that in Agathangelos's list, the ministers are listed in an order corresponding to the extent of their power. The same is confirmed by **Faustus** (5th c.), according to whom the Armenian kingdom was originally regulated by the principle of "*the grandees according to their throne, and the officials according to their rank*"¹³¹. The same historian also refers to the Sasanian hierarchy, in which the kings included in general assemblies occupied places "*each according to his rank*"¹³². The same idea is expressed more directly by Ukhtanes (10th c.), according to whom the Armenian king acquires the "*Gahnamak of the ministers*" and, guided by it, regulates his domain by "*giving cushion (throne-rank)*"¹³³ and *Honor to the ministers, giving authority according to each throne-rank*"¹³⁴.

In one of the throne lists conventionally called "Zoranamak" the troop strength of the large ministries exceeds one thousand, while the smaller ones have at least 50 warriors¹³⁵. There were also smaller ministries called "*junior (լրնութի)*", which were left out of the main throne lists. Mesrop Yerets (10th c.), who presented 154 ministries in the list of "*Thrones of Armenian Princes*" lists another 13 ministries that were not included in the main throne list¹³⁶. These were probably the units occupying the lowest places in the Armenian hierarchy, which Khorenatsi classifies as "*junior ministerial clans*" as those having insignificant troop strength or as being deprived of rank¹³⁷.

The presented sources regarding previous times give a fragmentary idea of the ancient Near Eastern hierarchies. In them, ideas have been preserved mainly about the first places of the Achaemenid, Arsacid, and Sasanian hierarchies, from which it can follow that only the primary units were ranked. But the Armenian Gahnamaks, which include middle and smallest units along with the main ministries, suggest that all countries were included in the regional hierarchies, in whose internal hierarchies almost all large and small ministerial units were registered.

¹²⁹ 112.1-2.

¹³⁰ Part 98-99.

¹³¹ IV.2.4.

¹³² IV.54.35-36.

¹³³ "Cushion (բաբձ)" was the name for the princely honorary rank or throne-rank. - Acharian 1926, vol. I: 425; Ghazaryan 2000, vol. I: 272.

¹³⁴ I.27.4-7.

¹³⁵ Adontz 1908: 251-252; Hakobyan 2011: 542-548.

¹³⁶ 5.1-3

¹³⁷ II.64.6; III.51.8.

In the presented sources, the hierarchy is confirmed and honorary ranks are granted by Sargon II, Cyrus the Great, Xerxes I, Vologases I, Ardashir I, Shapur II, and other kings. The princely throne (GIŠ.GU.ZA, ἔδρα, ἰαοσ, g'h), the rank or the throne-rank (gradus) is considered an honor (ἐτίμα, ԲԻՄԱՆ, ԴԻՄԱՆ, honore, padixšar) granted by the kings, while Vologases considers the establishment of the hierarchy in the region as the right (causa) of the Arsacids. We see the same approaches, perceptions, and related terms in Armenian historiography, in which it is often emphasized that the hierarchy was an order or law established by the kings:

Agathangelos, II.11. – *“The King of Armenia ... gave him honor according to the royal laws and seated him on the second chair of his kingdom”*. Pawstos, IV.54.34. – *“it was the custom ... law: ... the kings of Persia and Armenia sat on the same throne”*. V.37.15. – *“the princely honor which he had received from the king”*. Khorenats'i, I, II.19.2-3. – *“Tigran ... willingly kept the second rank, as was lawful”*. P'arpec'i (5th c.), II.55.8. – (King of Kings of Persia). – *“I will give to each lordship, throne and honor”*. Tovma (10th c.), III.24.9. – (The Armenian King to Gorgen) *“entrusted the honor of the Marzpan authority, according to the throne-rank of the Armenian kings”*. Uxtanes, I.27.6-7. – *“The Armenian king ... giving cushion and honor to the ministers”*. Mesrop Erec', V.1. – *“The thrones of the Armenian princes, which were ordained by Khosrov and other kings”*. Drasxanakertc'i (10th c.), 36.13-14. – *“King Smbat ... appoints him king over the world of the Georgians according to the royal law and establishes him as the second of his realm”*.

The Armenian “Royal Banquet”

In Armenian historiography, the banquets presided over by kings are referred to as the *“king's table (սեղան արքայի)”* or *“royal dinner (ընթրիս արքունի)”*¹³⁸. The same or synonymous phrases are found in sources from preceding millennia (*naptan šarrim, paššur šarrim, βασιλέως τραπέζης, βασιλήιον δεῖπνον, ܡܢܬܐ ܡܠܝܚܐ, mensae regalis*). In these sources, the motifs of the “royal banquet” and the social hierarchy are interconnected. The same holds true in Armenian historiography:

According to Faustus, the *“great patriarchs, lords, and officials”* sat on their throne-cushions before the Armenian king during the *“hour of the court's joy”*, meaning at the time of the banquet¹³⁹. It was also during the time of joy or *“the hour of supper”* that the Sasanian King of Kings and his subordinate kings sat upon their thrones according to their rank¹⁴⁰. According to Mesrop Yerets, the *“thrones of the Armenian princes”* were established *“at the hour of dinner, around the king's table”*. He quotes a portion of a registry (Gahnamak) consisting of 400 thrones, in which the princes heading the

¹³⁸ Sebeos, 21, 7; Mesrop Erec', 5.1, Kaghankatuats'i, II.1.5.

¹³⁹ IV.2.10. In Classical Armenian, the words for “joy, festivity, banquet” also have the meanings of “eating and drinking, feast.” – Ghazaryan 2000, Vol. 1: 363, 575, 595.

¹⁴⁰ IV.16.3; 54.34-36.

ministries occupied places around the royal table¹⁴¹. Kaghankatuatsi (10th c.) addresses the same theme in more detail: King Shapur, wishing to “*examine which nation and language possesses cushion and honor*”, organizes a “*great banquet for the ancient families of the Persian noble ministers and honors them according to their throne rank*”. Subsequently, the Sasanian king addresses the issue of the Armenian princes having “*rank and honor*” and, guided by a “*writing*” (Gahnamak) consisting of 17 ministerial cushions known from Agathangelos’s History, regulates “*each person’s place around the royal table*”¹⁴².

Other interconnected motifs

Seating Order: In the Cyropaedia, high-ranking guests sit at the banquet in defined hierarchical positions alongside Cyrus, in a left-to-right sequence¹⁴³. According to the 13th-century historian Stepannos (Ch. VI), the Armenian ministers who received a throne and honor corresponding to their position also sit beside the king during the banquet, but in reverse order: “*from right and left*”.

Banquet Attire: In the conceptions of preceding times, participants of the “royal banquet” are given clothing specifically intended for that event. The same motif exists in Armenian historiography: according to Faustus, “*during the supper, King Pap gave a command to dress Dghak the Mardpet in glorious raiment*”¹⁴⁴. According to Elishe, one of the Armenian ministers attends a supper invited by the Sasanian king wearing precious attire received from him¹⁴⁵.

The Manager of the “Royal Banquet”: According to Faustus, there was a service of “*waiting upon the agency while standing*” at the royal banquet¹⁴⁶. In Adontz’s opinion, by this “*waiting (uuywunL)*”, Faustus meant not table service, but an official agency position¹⁴⁷. This “waiting” performed while standing is seen in the accounts of Faustus and other authors: Drastamat, the Mardpet (grand chamberlain) of the Armenian court, serves King Arshak’s supper while standing¹⁴⁸. We saw officials with similar functions in the Neo-Assyrian banquet guide and in the Cyropaedia (in the person of the eunuch Gadatas), who manage the “royal banquet” while standing. The same role is performed by the Sasanian “banquet” manager, whom we saw in Sūr ī Saxwan.

The “Deprivation of Power-Punishment” motif: In Armenian sources, the motif of “deprivation of power-punishment” is also linked to the motifs of the “royal banquet”

¹⁴¹ V.1-3.

¹⁴² II.1.3-12.

¹⁴³ VIII.4.3.

¹⁴⁴ V.6.10.

¹⁴⁵ VI.6.127-128.

¹⁴⁶ IV.2.10.

¹⁴⁷ Adontz 1908: 239, n. 1.

¹⁴⁸ V.7.19-21.

and hierarchical ranking. According to Faustus, during a regular royal supper, the Persian King of Kings, by lowering the status of the Armenian king who sat on the same throne with him, assigns him a place at the very end, and subsequently deprives him of power and imprisons him¹⁴⁹. According to the same historian, in the Armenian court as well, the deprivation of power and punishment of any minister is carried out during a banquet invited by the king¹⁵⁰. According to Khorenatsi, Artaxerxes I (Artashes) arrives at the intention to punish Argam—who occupied the second throne of his domain—during a banquet invited by the latter¹⁵¹. According to Elishe (5th c.), the Sasanian king grants each of the Armenian princes his place, then deprives them of power and punishes them during the supper¹⁵². He also tells of an Armenian minister invited to supper by the Sasanian king who was sentenced to death in the presence of the grandees participating in that ceremony¹⁵³.

The motif of “deprivation of power-punishment” associated with the hierarchy was likely one of the cross-cultural perceptions formed in the Near Eastern area, which we saw in the Book of Esther and in Armenian sources. We also saw the same motif partially reflected in the report of Trogus, stating that the Parthian supreme elective body could not only appoint kings but also deprive them of power. It follows from these examples that the “royal banquet” was perceived not only as a holiday, a celebration, or an event granting and confirming princely ranks, but also as a body that deposes or punishes.

“Honor” and its symbols: When referring to the Sasanians, we saw that participants of the “royal banquet” or high-ranking representatives of the court wore a princely crown - diadem, a symbol of “honor” received from the king. “Honor” is perceived in the same or a similar way in Armenian historiography:

According to Elishe, one of the Armenian ministers received a golden diadem from the Sasanian king when he was invited to supper¹⁵⁴. Faustus also presents the same concepts as interconnected, directly calling the princely crown “honor.” According to him, the Armenian grandees sat at the banquet with the king with *“the honor placed on their heads”*¹⁵⁵. In another episode, the “honor” of the fallen Sparapet (commander-in-chief) Vache is placed on his son’s head in front of the king¹⁵⁶. The historian calls the diadem granted to the Armenian Sparapet by the Persian King of Kings the *“honor of the head”*¹⁵⁷.

¹⁴⁹ IV.54.34-36.

¹⁵⁰ V.6.10-20, 35.13-27.

¹⁵¹ II.51.4-6.

¹⁵² II.49.62.

¹⁵³ VI.6.127.

¹⁵⁴ VI.6.127-128

¹⁵⁵ IV.2.10

¹⁵⁶ III.11.18

¹⁵⁷ V.38.7

It follows from Khorenatsi's reports that the diadems of the Armenian princes, as well as their other finery and attire, differed and corresponded to their rank. In one case, King Vagharshak of Armenia grants a diadem as a *"lordly honor"* to the Bagratid prince and allows him: *"to wear the lesser diadem of three rows of pearls without gold or gems"*¹⁵⁸. In another episode, King Artashes of Armenia allows Argam, who occupied the second place in the hierarchy, to wear: *"a diadem decorated with sapphires, rings for both ears, a red slipper for the one foot"*. To the Bagratid prince, who occupied the next place in the hierarchy, the king allows the same attire and finery, *"except for the two (ear)rings and the red slipper"*¹⁵⁹. Similar perceptions are also known to Sebeos (7th c.); he calls the princely crown a *"diadem of honor"*, which one of the Armenian princes received from the Roman Emperor along with other valuable items expressing high rank¹⁶⁰.

The presented examples refer to princes of different ranks. Faustus also provides an idea of the finery and attire of rulers with equal status; for a certain time, the kings of Persia and Armenia held such a status, sitting together on the same throne during *"times of joy"*, wearing *"monochromatic, same-marked, same-decorated and identical clothing"* and wearing uniform crowns¹⁶¹.

According to the perceptions originating from medieval Armenian and preceding sources, the shape, color, and symbols on the hairbands, clothes, finery, and even shoes granted by a sovereign king to his subordinates—which is expressed quite well especially in Sasanian iconography¹⁶²—expressed the princely rank of the given ruler. Like military uniforms and epaulets, these princely symbols were the insignia that likely fully expressed every ruler's rank and position in the throne hierarchy. The most prominent and precious of these insignias was the princely crown, which should be considered the primary *"honor"* granted by the sovereign king.

In the Bronze Age documents and subsequent sources, the banquets organized by kings are presented as solemn celebrations or lavish festivities on the occasion of a significant event. In them, the theme of hierarchy expressing the governance structure occupies a secondary place, shadowed by other emphasized descriptions of the banquet. However, in Armenian historiography, the true purpose of the *"royal banquet"* is fully realized: through this event, the kings and rulers of Armenia or the countries of the entire region, and the territorial-ministerial units included in them, receive ranked positions or are confirmed in those positions on the ladder of power, which acquires the force of law by the confirmation of the supreme ruler. That is to say, the *"royal banquet"*

¹⁵⁸ II.7.5.

¹⁵⁹ II.47.4.

¹⁶⁰ 44.80

¹⁶¹ IV.16.3-4; 44.34

¹⁶² Overlaet 2013.

in Armenian historiography is viewed and valued as the chief body of territorial administration, whose main members were the rulers of the countries and territorial units included in the entire region or the given domain.

The regional governing body conceived in Armenian historiography aligns closely with descriptions of the Parthian supreme elective body. Among the participants of this council—variously called a “consilium, synedrion,” or “senate”—Tacitus mentions the kings of only three countries, between whom the sovereign king establishes a hierarchy. Thus, the fundamental governing structure of the entire region was established, in which the Arsacid kings occupied the primary positions.

Kinship Titles Expressing Rank

According to medieval Armenian historiography, the kings of the regional countries—as in sources from preceding millennia—officially interacted with one another using hierarchical kinship titles: “father, brother, son”.

According to Faustus, King Shapur of Persia and King Arshak of Armenia were initially “*as brothers*”, meaning they were rulers of equal status. This was reflected in all spheres of their interaction and conduct; it was an established “*law*” that the kings of Persia and Armenia should sit on the same throne, and their crowns, clothing, and finery should be of the same shape, color, and symbols¹⁶³. Guided by these same perceptions known from Faustus, the Byzantine historian Procopius (6th c.) writes that King Pacorus of Persia “*considered King Arshak of Armenia equal, like a brother*”¹⁶⁴. He thus confirms that kings equal in rank recognized each other as “brothers.” But later, according to Faustus, the statuses of these same kings officially changed (confirmed by edicts, oaths, and seals) to a “father-son” relationship. Arshak then submitted to the Persian king “*as a servant to a lord*”, and he could only maintain his former status if he “*desired war*”¹⁶⁵. Alongside the change in status, the change in titles expressing them almost identically repeats the relationships of Bronze Age kings mentioned earlier.

Khosrow Parvez of Persia (591–628) was also in a subordinate status; according to Sebeos, he expressed his readiness to the Byzantine Emperor Maurice to “*be your son*” and in a letter called him “*my father*” and himself “*your beloved son*”¹⁶⁶.

We see the same hierarchical titles in Khorenatsi’s History. King Vagharshak of Armenia, in a letter addressed to his elder brother, Arshak the Great of Persia, considers himself his brother by blood but officially his son: - “*your younger brother ..., your brother and son*”¹⁶⁷. Khorenatsi also directly indicates their places in the regional hierarchy, which are equivalent to the kinship titles given to them: Arshak the Great,

¹⁶³ IV.16.3–4; 20.5; 54.34.

¹⁶⁴ I.5.

¹⁶⁵ IV.52.4; 53.2.10; 54.4,24.

¹⁶⁶ 11.7; 12.6.

¹⁶⁷ I.9.2, 6.

occupying the highest place and officially the “father”, appoints “son” Vagharshak as the King of Armenia, “*making him his second*”¹⁶⁸.

The kings of the region interact with kinship titles in other mentions by Armenian historians as well¹⁶⁹.

From the presented examination, it follows that medieval Armenian sources have preserved the fundamental perceptions and motifs related to the hierarchies of the Ancient Near East seen in Bronze Age, Achaemenid, Ancient Greek, Roman, Parthian, and Sasanian sources. Armenian historiography not only agrees with external sources but also makes important additions and provides a more complete understanding of the hierarchy. This can be attributed primarily to the fact that early medieval Armenian historians lived in a dominion where the orders and governing structures they wrote about were still functioning.

In the context of the examination presented here of the history of the entire region, it appeared quite clearly that since Median-Achaemenid times, Armenia has been one of the three primary countries of the region. It was the direct successor to an earlier representative of the Near Eastern world, Urartu, which existed in the same territories and effectively occupied the same primary places in the regional hierarchy as Urartu. These entities were participants in the primary processes of the Ancient Near East and were an integral part of the region. It should be considered natural that Armenian historiography has preserved valuable and diverse data and perceptions representing primary scientific interest for the history of the entire region, which we have been able to address only partially in this and our previous examinations.

Conclusion

With regard to hierarchy, the presented sources outline yet another model of governance that was accepted in the Ancient Near East from the 3rd millennium BC until the fall of the Sasanian Empire. Other structures of governance were also accepted during these same millennia, which we have addressed in our previous examinations. One of these follows the model of “Supreme ruler + 4 subordinate rulers”, which is accompanied by the same unique details in diverse sources (primary, historiographic, iconographic, cosmological, etc.): the four subordinate rulers stand near the supreme ruler with their hands crossed over their chests, one of whom holds a status of seniority and a corresponding title or symbol¹⁷⁰. We see this model of governance with its specific characteristics in the administrative systems of Sumer, Elam, the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian empires, and Armenia.

¹⁶⁸ II.68.4.

¹⁶⁹ Agathangelos, 14.4, 5, 126.16; Agath. in Greek, Part 37; Khorenats'i, I.9.2, 6; 28.2, 5; II.33.41, 48; III.17.6; 23.6; 51.14; Pawstos, V.38.16; Sebeos, 11.7; Tovma, II.3.5; Drasxanakertc'i, 31.3, 36.13.

¹⁷⁰ Ohanyan 2019; Ohanyan 2021.

In the diverse sources presented here, the hierarchical model of governance is also accompanied by unique details (a hierarchy expressed through numbering, ranking, or kinship terms; general calls, titles, and idioms related to the hierarchy; the “royal banquet-council” motif; the procedures of this event, seating order, form of attire, order of gifting, etc.).

These conceptual systems, composed of interconnected unique motifs, are repeated almost unchanged for more than three millennia. We believe that these perceptions regarding various structures of governance could not have been transmitted from one source to another and preserved without significant changes over millennia. We consider it more probable that during the mentioned period, the same structures of governance operated within the Near Eastern area, which accounts for the obvious correspondence of perceptions, motifs, iconography, administrative calls, titles, and other terms and idioms related to them in diverse sources. It is difficult to imagine that various governance structures were universally accepted and spread from Sumerian times throughout almost the entire Near Eastern area and were transmitted and operated without significant changes during the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian eras. However, the presented arguments do not yet propose a more probable alternative hypothesis.

These same correspondences suggest that the history of the discussed period of the Near East—when the mentioned commonalities were steadfastly preserved—should be researched within a single context, as we have sought to do in our present and previous examinations. With this approach, we obtain a concise and complete picture regarding the history of the entire region, the countries included within it, and especially the primary units most known to the sources.

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