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Byzantium's 'Geopolitics of Christianity': Case of Kartli

The Christianization of Kartli in the first half of the fourth century was followed by difficult economic and social developments within the society itself. Moreover, the new religion left an indelible trace on Kartli's foreign policy as it became politically more affiliated with the Roman Empire and later Byzantium. This, in turn, forced the Sasanian Iran to enforce its religious policies in the region. Recent works on Christianization in the South Caucasus and in particular in Kartli [Haas, 2008] focus specifically on the processes in Kartli itself and do not pay attention to religious developments throughout the region, inside the Roman/Byzantine Empire and in those countries where Christianity simultaneously with Kartli was proclaimed as official religion. Can we trace similarities in Christianization of the Goths beyond the Danube river, Ethiopians south of Egypt or pre-Islamic Arabs along Byzantium's Syrian and Palestinian borders? How big was Constantinople's involvement in the directing the Christianization of the neighbouring peoples? Is it possible to talk about the so-called 'grand strategy' on behalf of the Byzantine emperors in using Christianity as a tool to effectively defend the empire's borders against aggressive enemies? In other words, did the Byzantine emperors strive to Christianize the peoples living on the territories which were economically, politically and militarily important for the security of the empire.

In this article several examples of Christianization will be discussed and compared to each other. Analysis and comparison of the spread of the new religion among the pre-Islamic Arabs, Ethiopians, Goths and Armenians will create a good basis to trace similarities and differences in Iberia. It will be shown that in many cases Byzantine emperors themselves were initiators for the spread of the religion in the empire's immediate neighborhood. However even in those cases when Christianization was initiated by independent religious figures such as wandering monks (for example, in Kartli or Ethiopia), emperors in Constantinople always responded positively by sending bishops and financial assistance.

The spread of Christianity in Roman Empire began in the first century AD. However, the religion institutionally was adopted only in the course of the fourth century. First steps were made by Constantine I (306-337). In 313 he adopted the 'Edict of Milan' recognizing the rights of Christians. Constantine's efforts to promote Christianity were multiplied following his victory over Licinius in 324, ruler of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire [Histoire, 2013: 45-46]. Despite being under the patronage of Constantine Christianity had not become an official religion of the empire. Even the first ecumenical council held in Nicea in 325 or Constantine's baptism on his deathbed in 337 did not bring a definite end to paganism. This is well exemplified by Constantine's numismatic tradition when the emperor until 322 continued to put effigies of pagan deities Mars and Jupiter on his coins [Haas, 2008: 101].

Nevertheless Constantine's reign brought some significant changes to the religious realm of the empire. It was under his rule that Christianity gained foothold within the imperial court itself. In addition, the sources relate that Constantine made several changes in legislature and was preparing public opinion to officially recognize Christianity as a state religion in the near future [Barnes, 1985: 126-130]. One of the steps made by Constantine was to ban famous notorious pagan rituals and the consultation of oracles in general for state bureaucrats [Barnes, 1985: 126-130].

The gradual Christianization left its trace on the empire's foreign policy too. Thus, when Constantine in 332 defeated the Goths on Danube and concluded a peace with them, according to one of the terms of the agreement, Goths had to respect the rights of Christians living among them. This inadvertently meant Roman involvement into the Goths' internal politics [Heather, 2009: 81-90]. Constantine portrayed himself not only as a champion of Christianity, but also as defender of the new religion among the neighboring peoples. This is well exemplified not only by the above-mentioned agreement signed with the Goths, but also by a letter he sent in 324 to the Sasanian shahanshah Shapur II approximately [Barnes, 1985: 126-130]. In the letter the emperor proclaims himself as a protector of the Christians who lived in the part of Mesopotamia which was under the Sasanian rule. This was not the imperial propaganda as Constantine understood quite well what advantages this new religious tool would bring to his empire in the battle with the Sasanian empire. Written sources point to Constantine's preparations to stage a major military campaign against the Sasanians.

Shapur had every reason to suspect that a new religion would be used by Constantinople as an instrument for offensive foreign policy. Sasanians' strategic position was worsened in the North when Iberia and Armenia recognized Christianity as a state religion in the first half of the fourth century [Haas, 2008: 101-123]. Shapur also understood that his Christian minority living in the northern Mesopotamia could have become a base for Byzantine emperors' intervention into internal affairs of the Sasanian empire. As a preventive response, Shapur invaded Armenia in 336 and put the region under Iranian political and military influence. Constantine used it a pretext to launch a major campaign and as we know from the sources many monks were to accompany the emperor during his eastward march. The emperor himself planned to be baptized in Jordan, following Christ's example. Constantine did not plan to entirely destroy the Sasanian empire, but to put a more amenable figure – his relative Hannibalianus – on the Iranian throne [Barnes, 1985: 129].¹ However, the campaign was cut short because of Constantine's sudden death on May 22 337 in Nicomedia [Barnes, 1985: 129].

The rise of Christianity affected Rome's and later Byzantium's foreign policy. Constantine made the same ultimatum to Shapur as he made to Maxentius in 312 before entering Rome, and to Licinius in 324. Eusebius in his *Vita Constantini* relates how Constantine regarded himself as a defender of all the Christians living beyond the Roman frontiers [Eusebius, 1991: IV: 24].

The spread of Christianity was a slow process and during most of the late antique period the new religion was most present in the empire's sea ports and less so in the countryside where old pagan tradition was still vibrant enough to oppose the Christian onslaught. However, most interesting is that the so-called 'export of Christianity' beyond the imperial borders coincided with the worsening of empire's political situation when more powerful enemies were appearing on the empire's frontiers.

Beyond the Rhine and Danube rivers in the first half of the fourth century powerful confederations of the German peoples began to appear. Goths, Allemans and Franks now were capable of creating strong alliances to fight imperial troops. In a striking difference with the previous period the early fourth-century Roman troops were not able to dismantle political coalitions of the barbarians after their defeat. Neither Constantine the Great nor Julian the Apostate, even after defeating the Goths and Allemans, could not break up Gothic and Allemanic state-like entities. To this changing pattern would be added a true political revolution in the Eurasian steppes initiated by the Huns – powerful nomadic people – in the 370s. The Huns

¹ Coins with the effigy of Hannibalianus and the title 'rex' were struck beforehand.

dislocated the Allans, then the Goths ushering in a great ‘migration period’. The nomads, in comparison with the Germanic peoples, used the horse as military tool and a ‘composite bow’ enabling them to defeat not only Goths and other Germanic peoples, but at times also Byzantine troops [Heather, 2006: 145-158]. The Huns forced the Goths to ask the East Roman emperor Valens (364-378) to cross the Danube and enter the imperial territory [Heather, 2006: 158-167]. Therefore, by the end of the fourth century the Roman empire faced significant strategic challenge from the barbarians on its northern border. The Huns were not only militarily powerful, but also showed their ability of state-building. Even before Attila and unlike any Germanic people, the Huns united all the ethnic entities living from the Danube through modern Ukraine right to the North Caucasus. This put at strain Byzantine defences as the empire was under two-pronged attack from the Danube and the Caucasus [Heather, 2009: 227-238]. In 395 they even launched a full scale attack on the Byzantine eastern provinces through the Caucasus mountains and the Georgian territory [Heather, 2009: 227-238].

Despite their defeat in 299 and the disadvantageous treaty of Nisibis the Sasanians did not give up on their efforts to confront the Roman empire and reintegrate the territories they had lost. Attacks on Armenia and northern Mesopotamia continued even after the treaty of Nisibis [Dignas, 2007: 84-88], whereas the eastern part of the southern Caucasus (Kartli and Albania) were under direct Sasanian influence. Overall, Diocletian’s successful eastern policies did not bring continual peace to the frontier.

Although Byzantium’s Syrian and Palestinian frontiers did not represent a major problem for Constantinople, still low-scale attacks by Arab tribes on Syria and Palestine caused distress to the local economy. The balance of power changed completely when in early sixth century Nasrids – Arab tribes allied to the Sasanians – began devastating attacks on Byzantine Syria and Palestine [Fisher, 2011: 35-49]. Apart from the economic problems to the local economy the Nasrids also threatened to destroy Justin’s and Justinian’s efforts to renew trade routes through the Hauran, Sinai Peninsula and the Red Sea [Fisher, 2011: 144-153].

These are the enemies the Byzantine empire faced from the early fourth century (in some cases even earlier) beyond its borders. Byzantines used military, economic and diplomatic strategies to defend their frontiers from simultaneous attacks. However, very little has been written on how Byzantine emperors viewed Christianity within the defence concept of their imperial borders. Also, is it possible to see the spread of Christianity in the neighbouring peoples as a very well planned policy?

It should be noted from the beginning that there are multiple examples of how Byzantine emperors encouraged the spread of the new religion beyond the imperial borders in the hope to make newly-Christianized more amenable. In other words, in the period when Christianity still was not a dominant religion within the empire itself, and when even emperors such as Julian the Apostate (361-363) were not Christians, imperial authorities meticulously tried to Christianize strategically important lands around the empire. These lands were either militarily or economically important for the security of the imperial borders.

We shall start with the kingdom of Axum (Ethiopia) located to the south of Egypt. Kings of Axum struck their own coins with near-imperial effigies [Haas, 2008: 102], whereas the rulers officially were called ‘king of kings’.² Approximately in the same year when Constantine defeated Licinius, Ethiopian king Ezana I adopted Christianity as an official religion.³ Christianity was

² In Ethiopian ‘negusa nagast’.

³ This was well manifested in the iconography of the coinage where Ezana placed a large cross instead of traditional Moon and Sun elements.

introduced into Ethiopia by Edesius and Frumentius – two young Christians from the Roman Empire [Haas, 2008: 102].

The spread of Christianity to such a distant territory might be accidental or entirely unconnected to the imperial authorities. However, considering the importance Ethiopia played for Constantinople to have trade contacts with India, it is clear that the imperial authorities should have been interested in the conversion of the Ethiopians. In addition, it should also be noted that Edesius and Frumentius worked in Ethiopia under the auspices of Athanasius – head of the Christian community in Alexandria [Haas, 2008: 102].

It is also important that Edesius and Frumentius introduced a Monophysite version of Christianity. As will be noted later, in most cases of Christianization the imperial authorities did not take big interest in what version of Christianity was spread among the neighbouring peoples. Despite these different versions of Christianity Byzantines astutely used the religious connexion with the Ethiopians to spread its influence onto strategically important regions such as Yemen.

Another interesting example is the story of Ulfila and how he introduced Arian version of Christianity among the Goths. Ulfila was a child born in the Gothic lands to a Roman family kidnapped from the Asia Minor in second half of the third century. In early 340s the devout Christian emperor Constantius II (337-361) in order to solidify the Roman influence over the Goths after the 322 treaty, imposed on them by his father Constantine I, summoned Ulfila (who was already famous for religious activities) to Constantinople. There Ulfila was proclaimed by the emperor as ‘monk of the Christians’ who live among the Goths. For the next seven years Ulfila worked hard to Christianize the Goths on behalf of the imperial authorities. In 347 Ulfila together with many of his coreligionists was expelled into the Roman territory. As a further sign of imperial interest in Christianization of the Goths Constantius himself went to the Danube to meet Ulfila and sheltered him and his friends in Nicomedia – close to the Gothic lands.

Another example is the pre-Islamic Arabs on empire’s Syro-Palestinian frontier. The empire’s general policy towards the Arabs was mostly based on military strength. This was well exemplified by the construction of the *Strata Diocletiana* in late third century. However, the gradual Christianization of the empire influenced Constantinople’s relations with the Arabs. From then on not only imperial titles and money played an important role, but also conversion to Christianity. At the same time, since the military threat from this frontier was not as serious as from the Danube or the northern Mesopotamia Constantinople did not aim at the Arabs’ swift conversion. Wandering monks and traders were doing this job without major imperial initiatives. Christianization would give the Arabs more chances to access imperial finances and civil and military bureaucracies. On a much bigger level the spread of Christianity would mean more attachment to the Byzantine empire in the fight against aggressive Sasanian empire and its Nasrid allies in the Syro-Mesopotamian desert.

The spread of Christianity in Armenia in early fourth century was largely conditioned by its geographic position between the two great powers in late antiquity. From the Armenian lowlands it was easy to go along the Euphrates and Tigris rivers southwards to the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon. From the Sasanian perspective, the control over Armenia would give the Iranians all the mountain passes for successful military campaigns to Byzantium’s eastern provinces. From Armenia it was easy to reach northern Syria and much important cities such as Antioch. Therefore whoever controlled the Taurus Mountains and the passes through it, had big military advantage over its enemy. Apart from this immediate military importance the Armenian territory also served as a corridor for the Byzantines to reach Iberia and Alabania.

Now, having considered the dynamics of the spread of Christianity within and beyond the

imperial borders, it is interesting to review the conversion of Kartli in first half of the fourth century. The examples of Gothic, Ethiopians, Arab and Armenian conversions lead to the conclusion that the Christianization of Kartli and later Lazica (eastern Georgia) was not accidental but rather represented a part of a difficult process along Byzantium's borders. Many details of Saint Nino's religious activities are unknown. Although none of the sources report Saint Nino's activities were sponsored by Constantinople, help which the imperial authorities provided to Mirian, the newly-converted king of Kartli, meant how the imperial authorities supported the idea of Kartli's Christianization.

The importance of Kartli and Lazica for Constantinople is caused primarily by military aspects. The control over the Caucasus mountains passes and the eastern Black Sea shore was paramount for the safety of Byzantium's eastern provinces and the capital Constantinople. Strategically the Caucasus passes were important because the Byzantines used them to distract nomad leaders from reaching the Constantinople. Menander Protector preserves the bitter complaint of a Turkic chief from the steppes, North to the Caucasian range, dated by 577:

'As for you Romans, why do you take my envoys through the Caucasus to Byzantium, alleging that there is no other route for them to travel? You do this so that I might be deterred from attacking the Roman Empire by the difficult terrain (i.e. high mountains which for horses are very hard to cross). But I know very well where the river Danapris (Dniepr) flows, and the Istros (Danube) and the Hebrus (Maritsa, Meric)' [Blockley, 1985: 175].

Another interesting passage comes from Procopius of Caesarea when an embassy from Lazica came to the Sasanian shahanshah Khusro I (531-579) to explain why the eastern Black Sea coast did matter to the Byzantines and the Persian had to retake it:

'To the realm of Persia you will add a most ancient kingdom, and as a result of this you will have the power of your sway extended, and it will come about that you will have a part in the sea of the Romans through our land, and after thou hast built ships in this sea (i.e. Black Sea), O King, it be possible for thee with no trouble to set foot in the palace in Byzantium. For there is no obstacle between. And one might add that the plundering of the land of the Romans every year by the barbarians along the boundary will be under your control. For surely you also are acquainted with the fact that up till now the land of the Lazi has been a bulwark against the Caucasus Mountains' [Procopius, BP. II. 15].

As a conclusion, it was shown that in many cases Constantinople was a primary driver behind Christianization of the neighboring peoples who lived strategically important lands. For that purpose even 'non-orthodox' version of Christianity sufficed. For Constantius II in the fourth century or Justinian in the sixth it was more important to Christianize economically and militarily significant territories rather than try to spread specifically 'orthodox' version of the new religion. At the same time, Christianization was used to bring into the Byzantine political influence those small states which could have been easily drawn into the Sasanian political orbit. Arabs [Пигулевская, 1964: 57-81, 156-161], Goths, kingdoms of Kartli and Lazica, Armenia and Ethiopia are the examples how the imperial authorities viewed the role of Christianity from the fourth century.

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