

**Rafal Kosiński**

**THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE RELATIONS  
BETWEEN THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND PERSIA  
IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 4<sup>th</sup> CENTURY:  
A FEW COMMENTS WITH REFERENCE  
TO KARIN MOSIG-WALBURG'S ARTICLE**

**Abstract:** A decade ago, Karin Mosig-Walburg published an article in which she questioned the impact of the conflict between the Roman Empire and Sasanian Persia under Shapur II on the persecution of the Persian Christians. The present text aims to provide arguments contrary to this view, pointing to the fact that religion played a significant role in the relations between the Roman Empire and Iran in that period, on account of which the war may have influenced the shah's policy towards the Christians of Persia.

**Keywords:** Christianity in Persia, Roman-Persian Relations, Zoroastrianism in Roman Empire, Constantius II, Shapur II.

A decade ago, Karin Mosig-Walburg published her short yet insightful article in which she convincingly argued that no link could be found between the persecution of the Christians in Persia under Shapur II and the war with the Roman Empire that was waged by this ruler<sup>1</sup>. The German author pointed to many scholars' uncritical approach to martyrological and panegyric sources, emphasizing that Shapur's anti-Christian policy was caused by the domestic factors, not the international situation, especially as the Roman Empire under Constantine I and Constantius II was not perceived as a Christian state, or the afore-mentioned rulers as Christians, by Persia. For this particular reason, the Christians of Persia could not have been regarded, by the Persian authorities, as a group particularly favourable to Romans and, as such, potentially dangerous to the Persian state. In Mosig-Walburg's opinion, the only cause of the anti-Christian persecution in Persia was the Bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon Simeon's refusal to collect the special tax from his fellow believers, which was considered as an act of high treason by the shah, eventually leading to the execution of the bishop. The other victims of this suppression were predominantly members of the church hierarchy, but there would be no question of any more widespread persecutions of Christians. It is true indeed that the Persian monarch, a worshipper of Ahura Mazda, was intent on

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Mosig-Walburg K. Die Christenverfolgung Shâpûrs II. vor dem Hintergrund des persisch-römischen Krieges // Inkulturation des Christentums im Sasanidenreich / Hrsg. A. Mustafa, J. Tubach. Wiesbaden, 2007. S. 171–186. For the earlier work of this author, see also: Eadem. Christenverfolgung und Römerkrieg. Zu Ursachen, Ausmaß und Zielrichtung der Christenverfolgung unter Šâpûr II. // Iranistik. 2005. Bd. 7. S. 5–84.*

restraining the growth of Christianity, thereby on taking steps to promote Zoroastrianism, yet it was connected with the ruler's internal policy rather than with the relations between the two states<sup>2</sup>. In addition, the conflicts with Rome would have very likely limited the scale of the reprisals against the Christian Church.

Of course, we cannot extend these observations to embrace the whole of the relations between Sasanian Persia and the Roman Empire as they would develop through their history, as could be clearly seen beginning from the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, when Christianity and Zoroastrianism were mentioned in the formal treaties, while the emissaries of the both states were to become, in a way, advocates of these two religious communities in the territories of the other state<sup>3</sup>. The role of Christianity in the relations between the two empires can be seen in the reign of Yazdegerd I, who issued a number of privileges for the Church in Persia in conjunction with the establishing of the amicable relations with Rome<sup>4</sup>. In 410, on his orders, a synod was convoked at Seleucia-Ctesiphon with the aim of settling the affairs of the local Church, where a prominent place was taken, at the ruler's request, by the Roman envoy Maruta, the Bishop of Martyropolis-Maypherqat<sup>5</sup>. Some time afterwards, in the years 421–422, the Roman Empire was at war with Iran, which was a conflict caused by Bahram V's demand that the Romans return the Christian fugitives back to Persia. The peace treaty concluded following that short-lived confrontation warranted, among other things, freedom of religion for the Christians in Persia and the Zoroastrians in the Roman Empire<sup>6</sup>. This treaty shows that not only the Roman emperors were concerned with the fate of the Persian Christians, but also the shah-in-shahs wished to ensure protection for the Roman Zoroastrians, as perfectly reflected in Priskos' account on the reign of Leo I, when c. 464 Persian emissaries were reported to have intervened on behalf of the worshippers of that religion living in the Roman Empire for centuries<sup>7</sup>. Conversely, Roman

<sup>2</sup> Economic and religious factors behind the persecution of Christians are also mentioned in: *Pigulewska N.W.* *Kultura syryjska we wczesnym średniowieczu*. Warszawa, 1989. S. 224.

<sup>3</sup> A correlation in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries between the Roman-Persian relations and the situation of the Christians in Persia is emphasized in: *Brock S.* *Christians in the Sasanian Empire: a Case of Divided Loyalties // Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity*. Aldershot, 2001. P. 7–11.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Labourt J.* *Le christianisme dans l'empire perse sous la dynastie Sassanide (224–632)*. P., 1904. P. 96–97; *McDonough S.* *A second Constantine? The Sasanian king Yazdgerd in Christian history and historiography // Journal of Late Antiquity*. 2008. Vol. 1. P. 127–140; *Idem.* *Bishops or Bureaucrats? Christian Clergy and the State in the Middle Sasanian Period // Current Research in Sasanian Archaeology, Art and History. Proceedings of a Conference Held at Durham University, November 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>*, 2001 / Ed. by D. Kennet, P. Luft. Oxford, 2008. P. 87–89.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Wood Ph.* *The Chronicle of Seert. Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq*. Oxford, 2013. P. 31–35. Cf. *Pigulewska N.W.* *Kultura syryjska...* S. 226–228. Cf. also the account in Socrates (*Kirchengeschichte* / Ed. G.Ch. Hansen. Berlin, 1995. VII.8.1–20. P. 353.9–354.24), which highlights the role that Maruta would have reputedly played in the growth of Christianity in Iran. The Acts of the Synod of 410: *Synodicon Orientale ou recueil de synodes nestoriens* / Ed. B. Chabot. P., 1902. P. 254–258. Members of the church hierarchy would also serve the emperor and the shahs as envoys in the later period, cf. *Garsoïan N.* *Le rôle de l'hierarchie chrétienne dans les rapports diplomatiques entre Byzance et les Sassanides // Revue des Études Armeniennes*. 1973. Vol. 10. P. 119–138; *Sako L.* *Le rôle de la hiérarchie syriaque orientale dans les rapports diplomatiques entre la Perse et Byzance aux V<sup>e</sup>–VII<sup>e</sup> siècles*. P., 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Holum K.G.* *Pulcheria's Crusade A.D. 421–22 and the Ideology of Imperial Victory // GRBS*. 1977. Vol. 18. P. 153–172; *Schrier Omert J.* *Syriac Evidence for the Roman-Persian War of 421–422 // GRBS*. 1992. Vol. 33. P. 75–86; *Dignas B., Winter E.* *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity. Neighbours and Rivals*. Cambridge, 2007. P. 137.

<sup>7</sup> *Priskos.* *Fragmenta* / Ed. R.C. Blockley. Liverpool, 1983. 41.1. P. 344–346. Cf. *Carolla P.* *La minoranza*

envoys would show concern for the situation of the Persian Christians in the later period as well<sup>8</sup>.

It might appear that Christianity would have become an actual and significant factor in the political relations between the two states, as Mosig-Walburg suggests, only after the emperor Theodosius I's proclamation of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire<sup>9</sup>. However, even in the context of Shapur II's persecution of the Christians, the whole matter would not seem so obvious on closer analysis. It should be noticed that the German scholar treats one very essential aspect only marginally, that is, Constantine I's famous letter to Shapur, as cited by Eusebius of Caesarea in the posthumous panegyric in honour of the emperor<sup>10</sup>. Mosig-Walburg does not take this letter in consideration, providing only a brief comment that even if such a document had indeed existed, it would not have been written in a form cited by Eusebius, although she offers no argument to support that opinion<sup>11</sup>. In fact, the letter in question did attract the attention of many scholars, leading to much discussion on its possible authenticity, which is still far from any definitive conclusion<sup>12</sup>. Nevertheless, there is no point here in venturing further into discussing the argumentation against or in favour of the letter's authenticity. In the context of the role of Christianity in the political relations between Rome and Persia during the reign of Constantius, the actual significance lies not so much in the authenticity of the document as in the fact that this letter was included in Eusebius' work, which was composed after Constantine's death in May 337<sup>13</sup>, i.e., in the year when a war between the two powers broke out. The meaning of

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mazdea e l'imperatore Leone I. Considerazioni sulla politica bizantina in margine alla monografia di G. Siebigs // *Mediterraneo Antico*. 2013. Vol. 16. P. 861–874.

<sup>8</sup> On this question, see: *Gray L.H.* Formal Peace-Negotiations and Peace-Treaties Between pre-Muhammadan Persia and Other States // *Dr. Modi Memorial Volume. Papers on Indo-Iranian and Other Subjects Written by Several Scholars in Honour of Shams-ul-Ulama Dr. Jivanji Jamshedji Modi* / Ed. by the Dr. Modi Memorial Volume Editorial Board. Bombay, 1930. P. 136–153.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Mosig-Walburg K.* Die Christenverfolgung Shâpûrs II. S. 174.

<sup>10</sup> *Eusebius.* Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin / Ed. F. Winkelmann. Berlin, 1991. IV.8–13. P. 122.24–125.11. It is also worth recalling that Eusebius ascribes to Constantine that for his upcoming campaign against Persia in 337 he was to take along some bishops who declared that they would fight together with him and take part in combat “through incessant prayers on his behalf”, while the emperor himself was to accompany them in praying to God, “to whom every victory is due” (*Eusebius.* IV.56. P. 143.22–144.1).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Mosig-Walburg K.* Die Christenverfolgung Shâpûrs II. P. 171. No 4; *Eadem.* Römer und Perser. Vom 3. Jahrhundert bis zum Jahr 363 n. Chr. Gutenberg, 2009. P. 275.

<sup>12</sup> Cf., e.g., *Vivian M.R.* A Letter to Shapur: The Effect of Constantine's Conversion on Roman-Persian Relations. PhD diss. Santa Barbara, 1987; *Frendo D.* Constantine's Letter to Shapur II: Its Authenticity, Occasion, and Attendant Circumstances // *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*. 2001. Vol. 15. P. 57–69.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Dagron G.* Empereur et prêtre. Étude sur le «césaropapisme» byzantine. P., 1996. P. 135. According to A. Cameron and S.G. Hall (Introduction // *Eusebius.* Life of Constantine. Oxford, 1999. P. 3), Eusebius left his work unfinished or unrevised at the time of his death in May 339, while the supplementary excerpt on the elevation of Constantine's sons in September 337 might have been added later on (Ibid. P. 9–10). G. Pasquali (Die Composition der Vita Constantini des Eusebius // *Hermes*. 1910. Bd. 46. S. 386) dated Eusebius' death to May 338, which would mean that he should have had to compose his work within a year from Constantine's death. On the other hand, H.A. Drake (What Eusebius knew: The Genesis of the Vita Constantini // *Classical Philology*. 1988. Vol. 83. P. 20–38) argues that Eusebius must have come up with the idea of writing this work in 335 and collected the necessary material a year later in Constantinople. T. Wnętrzak (Konstantyn Wielki w oczach Euzebiusz z Cezarei i w badaniach współczesnych historyków // *Euzebiusz z Cezarei, Życie Konstantyna*. Kraków, 2007. S. 55–56) favours the view that the *Vita Constantini* was not completed in Eusebius' lifetime, whereas

this work and the role it was meant to play in the milieu of the new ruler are therefore of more importance than the authenticity of the details therein.

As Gilbert Dagron persuasively argues, the *Vita Constantini* was a sort of a propaganda work addressed at Constantius in the purpose of preventing the danger of establishing the “caesaro-papist” system by this emperor<sup>14</sup>. One of Eusebius’ primary objectives in composing the *Vita Constantini* was to call on Constantine’s successors, particularly Constantius, to continue the politics, as described there by the Bishop of Caesarea, pursued by Constantine the Great<sup>15</sup>. As a result, if it contains the information about Constantine’s special concern for the Christians of Persia, it should be assumed that such a mention is in relation to the then current political situation, consequently to the increasing (or already well in progress) hostilities between Rome and Persia. The role of Christianity in the relations between the two states was obvious, in this context, to Eusebius just as it was probably to the young ruler, to whom the solicitude for the Christians of Persia should have been a vital issue on his political agenda. It cannot be presupposed that the shah’s court circles were not aware of such tendencies at the emperor’s court. That should have made Shapur more “sensitive” to the question of his Christian subjects.

Besides, the actual Christianization of the Roman Empire or rather the perception of this process in Persia is not necessarily of significance to this question. The hostile relations between Rome and Persia caused the situation where any religious or cultural influence coming from the neighbouring state, even if not really supported by the ruler, was regarded with the utmost suspicion, as very well illustrated by the law against Manicheans issued by Diocletian at the turn of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>16</sup>. In his justification of the enactment of such a harsh legal instrument against this particular religious denomination, the emperor states, for instance, that the Manicheans trace their origins to the Persians who are adversaries of the Romans<sup>17</sup>, which, according to the legislator, may result in infecting the Roman people and the entire Roman Empire with “accursed customs and the corrupt laws of Persians”<sup>18</sup>. As can be seen, the lawgiver puts the emphasis on the Persian provenance of Manichaeism, showing no interest in the fact if the new religion is supported by the Persian authorities or, just the oppo-

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the final composition was finished and made public only after his death in 339, perhaps by Akakios, his successor as Bishop of Caesarea.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Dagron G. *Empereur et prêtre*. P. 148.

<sup>15</sup> A. Cameron and S. G. Hall (Introduction. P. 2), as well as A. Cameron (Eusebius’ *Vita Constantini* and the construction of Constantine // *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire* / Ed. by S. Swain, M. Edwards. Oxford, 1997. P. 145–74. Cf. also Elliott T.G. *Eusebian Frauds in the “Vita Constantini”* // *Phoenix*. 1991. Vol. 45. P. 162–171.

<sup>16</sup> *Mosaicarum et Romanarum legum collation* / Ed. M. Hyamson. Oxford, 1913. XV.3.1. P. 130–132. The precise date of the enactment of this law is unknown. In historiography, it is most often dated to the year 297 or 302. Cf. *Dignas B., Winter E. Rome and Persia...* P. 217. W. Seston (*Dioclétien et la tetrarchie*. P., 1946. P. 149–159) opts for the year 297, while I. Gardner and S. Lieu (*Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire*. Cambridge, 2004. P. 116) state the year 302 as the date of promulgation. For a brief discussion of the edict, see also: *Corcoran S. The Empire of the Tetrachs: Imperial Pronouncements and Government A.D. 284–324*. Oxford, 1996. P. 135–136.

<sup>17</sup> *Mosaicarum et Romanarum legum collation*. XV.3.1.4. P. 130.22–23: *de Persica aduersaria nobis gente progressa uel orta esse...*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* P. 130.25–29: *ne forte, ut fieri adsolet, accedenti tempore conentur [per] execrandas consuetudines et scaeuas leges Persarum innocentioris naturae homines, Romanam gentem modestam atque tranquilam et uniuersum orbem nostrum ueluti uenenis de suis maliuolis inficere.*

site, they try to eradicate it. The Persian origin of this religion is a sufficient reason for claiming that the Manicheans pose a threat to the state. It should also be noted that the edict provided for the heaviest penalties against not only Manicheans, but also against those who converted to the official Iranian religion Zoroastrianism<sup>19</sup> and held, at the same time, high-ranking public offices or performed important social functions<sup>20</sup>. This as well would attest to the fact that the Roman authorities looked on the cults of Iranian origin with suspicion, treating them as potentially dangerous to the state<sup>21</sup>. In a similar manner, Christianity was perceived in Persia as a religion that came from the Roman Empire<sup>22</sup>. For that reason, when Yazdegerd I wished to reorganize (and subordinate to his authority) the Church in Persia, he turned to Romans to aid him in his endeavour. Obviously, by the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman Empire had already been treated as an essentially Christian state by Persian rulers, but even as early as a century before the Persians had been perfectly aware of the fact that the Christian religion originated and developed in the territories of the Empire. Some of the Christians in Persia lived in Greek-speaking communities that descended from among the Roman population captured by Shapur I and resettled in Iran<sup>23</sup>. As a result, the Persian monarch might have interpreted the above-cited words of Diocletian's edict as referring to the members of the Church present in his empire, recognizing them as a threat that could "transplant" Roman influence on to the lands of Iran.

In conclusion, despite some very important pertinent points raised in Karin Mosig-Walburg's article, I am in favour of the view that Christianity played a certain role in the Roman-Persian wars during the reign of Shapur II, and consequently those conflicts may have been one of the reasons for toughening his policy towards the Church of the East.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. P. 132.5–8: qui (...) ad doctrinam Persarum se transtulerint...

<sup>20</sup> Let us not forget that even though the Zoroastrians were still present in the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity, they would usually live in small, often isolated groups: *Boyce M., Grenet F. A History of Zoroastrianism. Vol. III: Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman Rule. Leiden; New York; Kobenhaven; Köln, 1991. P. 277–281, 307–308; De Jong A. Traditions of the Magi. Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature. Leiden, 1997. P. 408–409.*

<sup>21</sup> It must be noted that Diocletian also aimed to regulate the domestic affairs connected with the threat that the new religious cults (including Christianity) posed, as he believed, to the traditional order of the Roman Empire, which would involve his attempts to revitalize the traditional Roman religion: *Suski R. Galeriusz. Cesarz, wódz i prześladowcy. Kraków, 2016. P. 203–208.* In this particular context, there is of course no point in reverting further into the past, to the time of *mowbed* Kerdir, his attitude towards non-Zoroastrian religions and his activity in the territory of the Roman Empire during Shapur I's wars with Rome. For more on this problem, see, e.g.: *Boyce M., Grenet F. A History of Zoroastrianism, III. P. 254–255.*

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Pigulewska N.W. Kultura syryjska... S. 219.*

<sup>23</sup> The question of the existence of the dual church structure, Syriac and Greek, in Iran, would remain valid until as late as early 5<sup>th</sup> century: *Fiey J.M. Jalons pour une histoire de l'Église en Iraq. Louvain, 1970. [Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 310, Subsidia 36] P. 56–60; Pigulewska N.W. Kultura syryjska... S. 3–4.* Still, it should be noted that the over-estimation of the significance of Shapur I's deportations in the growth of Christianity in Iran has been aptly critically revised in: *Morony M. Population Transfers between Sasanian Iran and the Byzantine Empire // La Persia e Bisanzio (Roma, 14–18 ottobre 2002). Roma, 2004. [Atti dei convegni lincei 201]. P. 165–169.*

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Rafał KOSIŃSKI

Dr. hab., Professor  
Białystok University  
Faculty of History and Sociology  
Plac NZS 1  
15-420 Białystok, Poland  
e-mail: rkosiu@interia.pl

**Рафал Косиньски**

**РОЛЬ ХРИСТИАНСТВА В ОТНОШЕНИЯХ  
МЕЖДУ РИМСКОЙ ИМПЕРИЕЙ И ИРАНОМ  
В 1-Й ПОЛОВИНЕ IV в.: НЕКОТОРЫЕ ЗАМЕЧАНИЯ  
В СВЯЗИ СО СТАТЬЕЙ КАРИН МОСИГ-ВАЛЬБУРГ**

**Аннотация:** Десять лет назад Карин Мосин-Вальбург опубликовала статью, в которой она поставила под вопрос влияние конфликта между Римской империей и сасанидским Ираном при Шапуре II на преследование персидских христиан. Настоящая работа представляет возражения против этой точки зрения, обращая внимание на то обстоятельство, что религия играла значительную роль в отношениях между Римской империей и Ираном того времени. Это означает, что война могла повлиять на политику шаха по отношению к персидским христианам.

**Ключевые слова:** христианство в Иране, римско-иранские отношения, зороастризм в Римской империи, Константин II, Шапур II.

Рафал Косиньски

Доктор наук, профессор

Университет Белостока

Факультет истории и социологии

Plac NZS 1

15-420 Białystok, Poland

Электронная почта: rkosiu@interia.pl