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AGE GROUPS LAW: CHILDREN, YOUTHS, ADULTS AND ELDERS IN ZOROASTRIAN AND EARLY CHRISTIAN ARMENIA

Abstract: In the article shows that in the second half of the 4th century age groups law was in effect in early Christian Armenia, which had been in force in Persian Zoroastrian state back in the 5th century B. C. According to this law, the male population of Greater Armenia was divided into 4 age groups: children (boys), youths, adults and elderly, and representatives of each of these age groups had certain rights and duties. Punishments were provided for the violation of these duties.

The given article deals with the actions of a young man named Artavazd from the Mamikonyan dynasty who had to be sentenced to death for disobeying the law and participating in military actions, which was strictly forbidden for the people belonging to the age group of youths, but was pardoned for his heroic actions.

Keywords: Faustus of Byzantium, Artavazd Mamikonyan, Merouzhan Artsrouni, Armenian Zoroastrian Law, Armenian Christian Law.

Chapter 53, volume 5 of “History of Armenia” written by P’avstos (Faustus) u, Armenian historian of the end of 4th — beginning of the 5th centuries, describes a war between Zoroastrian Iran and Christian Greater Armenia that happened in 376–384. According to the aforementioned chapter, “Of Merzhuan Artsruni, who led his troops in fight with Manvel and was slain by his hand” [1, 382–389] Iranian army led by Armenian feudal lord Merzhuan Artstuni, who, after converting to Zoroastrism and defecting to the enemy, invaded Greater Armenia and marched to its central regions. Armenian army clashed with him and the inevitable battle began.

Faustus of Byzantium mentions one peculiar story in his descriptions. He writes that Manvel Mamikonyan, the commander of Armenian army, ordered women and children, including queen and princes — Arshak and Vagarshak to be sent to the safety of fort on the Varaz Mountain. His nephew Artavazd Mamikonyan, belonging to the **youth** group (Manuk), was also sent to the fort to engage in its protection. But “He resisted his judgement

by disagreeing. According to the law of **youth** and Armenian religion, his head was shaven bald, leaving only a braid and a cowlick. When he refused to go with the women, Manvel raised his whip and gave Artavazd a lashing on his head, forbidding him to join the battle, because he was still **youth** by age. Young Artavazd had went with women and children as a distraction, but found a weapon later and joined the fight” [1, 38].

Next Faustus of Byzantium tells, that during the battle “**Young** (“Manuk”) Artvazd battled at the bank of the Euphrates river and slain a lot of Meruzhan men-of-war. One of them, decorated with Meruzhan ornaments, scoffed at brave beardless **youth** (“pataneak”) with a handsome face and attacked him, after wounding ornaments on his spear. Artavazd fired an arrow at him with all his might, which pierced his body and killed the warrior. He took the spear and pursued retreating warriors, striking them down with sword. **Young** (“Manuk”) Artvazd, son of Vache, has slain the most (of warriors), and returned,

glorified on the battlefield, with a great amount of spoils, left by the enemy troops” [1, 388].

After his victory over Iranian troops, warlord Manvel Mamikonyan went to the fort, where were women, children and queen with princes. He brought the head of the Iranian commander, Zoroastrian Artsruni “with the braid hanging”. The same braid, according to Faustus of Byzantium, was worn by the nephew of Meruzhan, **adult** Christian Samvel Mamikonyan [1, 276]. Which means, that **adults** — Zoroastrians and Christians alike — worn their hair in long braids. According to Herodotus, all Persians men wore hair in long braids [2, 91; 185; 279; 424]. Zoroastrian gods Gissaneh and Demeter, as well as Armenian Zoroastrian priests, were depicted with long braids [3, 46–47].

Young Artavazd, who was undoubtedly Christian, wore his hair in long braid with cowlick. Braid was probably a traditional hairstyle for males and cowlick signified that he belonged to the **youth** age group (“manuk”, “pataneak”). Taking the above into account, it can be assumed that men of different age groups had to wear hair in different styles and have had some other differences in appearance. This means that the custom of wearing long braids for men has passed from the Zoroastrian civilization into the Christian one.

Byzantium tells that after the battle for the fort of Varaz, along with the head of Meruzhan killed by Manvel, “...they brought (a corpse of) a man with the ornaments of Meruzhan, killed by the arrow of Artavazd. When everyone saw this, they were in awe, for the arrow went right through the whole body. This event saved Artavazd from death” [1, 276]. These words make one wonder: would **young** Artavazd be sentenced to the death penalty for violation of the ban on participating in battle? And in circumstances, when there weren’t enough men on Armenian side, and the young Artavazd, who was excellent warrior and was eager to fight? And does this mean that in early Christian Armenia there was a law that banned young men, under the

threat of death, from participation in wars as part of regular army?

That raises the question: people of what age were considered **youths**? And if so, what other age groups besides the youth were set by the age groups law of Greater Armenia? And can it be assumed that in the early Christian Greater Armenia the age groups law was same as one of Zoroastrian Iran in the 5th century BC, described by Xenophon in his work “Cyropaedia”?

Studies show that these assumptions have real bases. Faustus of Byzantium writes in aforementioned “History of Armenia” that male population of Greater Armenia was divided into four age groups: **children**, **youths**, **adults** (“Eritasard”) and **elderly**. In chapter 5 of his 3rd book he calls Aristakes and Vrtanes (Vartanes) — sons of Gregory the Illuminator — **children** and later, when they mature — **youth** [1, 20]. He writes about Vrtanes: “...when he was **old**, the Lord heard his prayers and his wife became pregnant and gave birth to two twin boys.” One of these twins — Grigor, youngest of the two, “...versed in biblical knowledge, received episcopate of the countries of Iberia and Albania. He never married and at the age of fifteen he became bishop in Iberia and Albania, to the border of Maskut lands... His twin brother — Husik, as Faustus of Byzantium wrote t, “in **youthful** (“Manuk”) age” was married to the daughter of the king of Great Armenia — Tiran Arshakuni. “He was forced to marry at the **youthful** age by the order of King... Even though he was a **youth**, he displayed wisdom of **elder** and eagerly followed steps of his ancestors.” When their father passed away, Vrtanes, again “in his **youth**”, became the Catholicos of the whole country. In the same chapter, Grigor and Husik are several times referred to as **youth** [1, 12–26].

We can see that those twins are called **boys** (“tga”) first, then, at the age of 15 — **youth**. Thus, having reached age of majority and becoming youth, they acquired the full legal status — legal standing and capacity; received the title of bishop, became

heads of Georgian, Albanian and Armenian churches. Similarly, according to Zoroastrian law, according to Gatha “Creed” of Avesta, adulthood came at the age of fifteen [4, 156–157].

In chapter 20, of his 3rd book, Faustus of Byzantium describing the capture of Greater Armenia king — Tiran Arshakuni (340–350/352) and his son Arshak — future king Arshak II, and describes him as **youth** (Manuk). This means, that he was older than 15, which means he was major and therefore could marry, inherit the throne, etc.. In chapter 12, 4th book, Byzantium writes about enthroned Arshak II (350–368): “In this period, Armenian King Arshak strayed from godly path. As he was wise and faithful Christian when he was **young**, so much he fell to shamelessness and debauchery as he **matured** (meaning became an **adult** “avag”)...” [1, 82, 168]. Thus, he became an **adult** after a few years of reign. This means, that crowned as **youths**, Arshak II moved to the next age group during his reign — **adult** group.

Byzantium also mentions **elderly** group in addition to **children**, **youths** and **adults**. In chapter 5 of 3rd book, son of Gregory the Illuminator, head of Armenian church — Vrtanes — is called **elder**. In the same chapter it is noted that Husik, the son of Vrtanes, at the **youthful** age, became the Catholicos of Greater Armenia and “never failed as **young man**, but acquired the father’s mind and wisdom of **elder**” [1, 22]. In chapter 8 of the same book, “**elder** Vache” (Prince Vache Mamikonyan) is mentioned [1, 34]. In chapter 14, the choir Bishop Daniil is called “a wonderful **elder**,” and the Bishop of Mtsbina (Nisibis), Jacob, “a holy and great **elder**” [1, 36; 58].

Afganel, an Armenian historian of the beginning of the 4th century, in his “History of Armenia”, dedicated to the Christianization of Great Armenia in 298–301, also distinguishes four age groups. He wrote that after the death of the Armenian king Khosrow III Arshakuni (in 268), the Persian king gathered an army, “invaded the Armenian land and began to pillage our country, capturing both

people and animals, **elderly** and **children**, **mature** (**adults** — S.H.) and **youths** [5, 32].

These four age groups are also mentioned in “Frequently repeated speeches” (consisting of 23 speeches) of the founder of Armenian Christianity — Gregory the Illuminator. In verses 71–73 of speech 11 it is written: “Meekness is both nurturer (“dastiarak”) and mentor (“usutsich”) of **youths**, accustoming them to order and discipline. Meekness glorifies **elders**, who reached enlightenment and wisdom through its guidance. Meekness is an honor for **young** (“erisatard”), which leads them to victory over all enemies...” [6, 71]. And for the first time, in these speeches, together with **youths** and **elderly**, the category of “**young**” is mentioned. It can be assumed that the “**young**” and “**adults**” is the same age group between **youths** and **adults**. As one can see, there are also mentioned such positions or jobs as nurturer and mentor, “accustoming them to order and discipline”. In the 85th verse of the same speech, the “mentor of **children**” is mentioned [6, 71–72], and in verses 38–39 of the 9th speech — “mentor of **youths**”, etc. [6, 53]. All this suggests that in Christian Armenia, **children** and **youths** could have official mentors, nurturers or leaders. As we shall see later, representatives of these and other age groups in the Persian Zoroastrian state also had mentors and leaders.

In verses 7–9 of the 15th speech of “Frequently repeated speeches” it is stated that earthly life of human “...according to the will of God, ends on sometimes in **childhood**, sometimes in **youth**, sometimes in **young** age, sometimes in **old** age... And those who die in **childhood** and **youth**, are free from trials by earthly concerns” [6, 95].

In the verse 18 of the 19th speech of “Frequently Repeated Speeches”, the following is said: “And leaving this world, a person takes with him all his righteousness, innocence of **child**, faultlessness of **youth**, immaculacy of **young**, sanctity of **elder**, one virtue from each age” [7, 113]. This serves as further proof that the male population was divided into four

age groups. And the male population of the early Christian Armenian society, as in the Zoroastrian Persian society, shared not only division on adults and minors (according to A. Perikhanyan) [7, 6], but also the above division on different age groups. It is also becomes obvious that the concepts of “**adult**” and “**young**” are identical. From the foregoing it also follows that in the early Christian Armenian society, apart from the basic age division of males on minors and adults, also had other age groups based on the age law: **children**, **youths**, **adults** and **elderly**. And if Faustus of Byzantium called third age group as “**adults**”, then in “Frequently repeated speeches” this age is called “**young**” (“eritasardutyun”), which is the same.

Each age group, including **youths**, had age limits. As one can see in ancient Armenian sources on law of the ages, **childhood** ended and period of **youth** began at the age of 15, but Armenian sources lack information, when did period of **youth** ended and period of **maturity** (young age) began, and when period of **old** age began, following the end of **mature** age.

To clarify these and other issues related to age divisions, it is necessary to turn to ancient Greek and ancient Persian sources. After inspecting them, it is obvious that the same division by age existed in Iranian and in Greek societies.

For example, Xenophon in his work “Cyropaedia” cites certain data on the existence of four age groups in the Persian Zoroastrian society. In the second chapter of this work, he describes a certain city and a place called “free square... This area, where four government buildings are located, is divided into four parts. The first one is for **children**, the second for **ephebos**, the third for **mature** men, and the fourth for those who by age can no longer be a warrior” [8, 7]. Thus, according to testimony of Xenophon, the male population of Persia was also divided according to the law into four age groups, as in the Armenian early Christian society (almost 900 years later). In

addition, he notes that each age group had leaders and mentors [8, 7–9; 23; 27; 31; 49; 67].

It should be noted that in commentary of Xenophon it is stated that “**Ephebos** — are literally those, who reached manhood, “the usual description of the Greeks of older **teenage** males (16 to 18 years)”. And that “the division of Persians into age groups copies social institutions and tradition of Sparta” [8, 7; 290]. But this commentary is not accurate and in fact quite questionable. While in Sparta teenagers from 16 to 18 years old were considered **youths**, and in Athens, **younths** at the age of 16 years were considered **ephebos** and remained in this group until the age of 20, as evidenced by Plato [9, 7], G. Stoll [10, 537–542], V. V. Latyshev [11, 272–274], F. A. Brockhaus and I. A. Efron [12, 202–203], where the Persian and Armenian children became “**ephebos**”, ie “**youths**” at 15, and not at 16, as is clear from the aforementioned. And this was due not to the Spartan or Athenian “tradition”, but to Zoroastrian law. In addition, if the upper limit of the age of the Greek **youth** was 18 or 20 years, as will be shown below, but the limit for Persian (and Armenian) **youths** was much higher. And as we see, the division of the males of Persian society into age groups, cited by Xenophon, coincides with the division of the male population in the early Christian Armenian society.

Later on, referring to the problem of the legal and social status of the Persian **ephebos**, Xenophon writes the following: “**Ephebos**, with the exception of married ones, carry guard near government buildings at night, with light weapons; they are not sought, except in cases when military situation is announced, but frequent absence is considered indecent”. He continues: “The **ephebos** service goes like this. Leaving childhood, they guard the government buildings for ten years, as we mentioned above. This is done for the sake of the security of the state and for moral education. Persians believe that **young men** of this age require the most attention. And throughout the day, the **ephebos** serve under

the leaders, in case they are needed for any state affairs. They can all be found near government building, if situation requires so" [8, 7–8]. He also writes that, armed with swords, bows and spears, **ephebos** accompany the king on the hunt, and that to Persians, hunting is considered "a state affair, where, just like in war, the king himself is leader; and the king himself hunts, and makes sure that others take part in the hunt, since hunting seems to them an affair, just like war". At the same time, a part of the **ephebos**, who are guarding the government buildings, continue to practice "in archery and dart throwing, competing with each other" [8, 7; 9]. All this was done to educate future warriors. But the **ephebos** were not considered warriors.

Xenophon also writes about Persian **ephebos** and representatives of other ages: "After ten years of service, they become **adults**. Starting from the age they became adults, for twenty-five years, they fulfill the following duties: first of all, like the **ephebos**, they must report and follow the guidance of the leaders, when wisdom and strength is required for the solution of state affairs. When it is necessary to go on a campaign, having passed their training, they are not armed with a bow or arrows or throwing spears, but with a so-called melee weapon. ... Chosen among them, with the exception of mentors, leaders are appointed. Twenty-five years later, when they are fifty or more, they become the so-called **elders**. The **elders** never go to war outside their country and make decisions on public and private matters, while staying at home. They carry out death sentences and choose all the leaders. If an **ephebos** or an **adult** breaks the law, the leaders of the age groups or anyone who wishes, reports this to the **elders**. The **elders** listen to them and give a verdict. Convicts lose their civil honor for life". Xenophon also writes that if **children** did not attend school, they could not become **ephebos**. And the **ephebos**, who poorly perform their duties, could not enter the "ranks of **adults**. **Adults**, who impeccably fulfill their duties, become the **elders**. Thus, those who have

proved themselves the best side during their whole life become the **elders**" [8, 10].

Xenophon also tells us of campaign outside Persia lead by Cyrus the Great only after he "spent ten years among **ephebos** and has already become an **adult**" [8, 23]. Thus, in the Zoroastrian society, males from 15 to 25 years were considered **youths** or **ephebos**. At the age of 25, **ephebos** were no longer considered such and became **adults**, and those after they were 50–52 years old, passed into the group of the **elders**. Apparently the transition from one age group to the next, to another "category", occurred through official registration in the written register of age groups, as was the case in Greece. In the event of improper performance of their duties, there was an official exclusion from these lists.

Xenophon descriptions of age groups in Persia are confirmed by the testimony of Herodotus. He writes that, while on a campaign against the Massagetae, Cyrus the Great saw a prophetic dream that his distant relative Darius was plotting a conspiracy against him. Believing the dream, he orders Hystaspes (father of Darius) to him and, after telling him about his dream, demanded that his son be brought to him in order to execute him. But it turned out that "Darius, at that time still a **young man** of about twenty years, remained in Persia and was unfit for military service due to his youth" [2, 85]. So, Darius was still an **ephebos** (**youth**) and could not participate in battles until he was 25 years, both in Persia and outside of its borders.

Consequently, males in Zoroastrian society from the age of 15 to 25 years by law had no right to participate in wars. And only after moving from the **ephebos** age group to the **adult** age group, they acquired the right to be drafted into the army, to participate in battles on the territory of their country and outside of its borders. One can also come to the conclusion that all four age groups, including a group of **youths** (**ephebos**), by law were a closed age social group of coreligionists in the complex organization of both Persian and

Armenian kingdoms that replaced social stratum. Representatives of each age group had mentors and leaders. The members of each of these age groups were related to each other and to the head of the clan, on the basis of an oath, the unity of faith, law, authority and subordination.

Regardless of the class background and profession of the parents, any **boy**, being a follower of the true faith, having reached adulthood and graduating from school, according to Xenophon, could be enrolled in the register of **youth** group (**ephebos**). **Youths**, in addition to general civil rights and obligations, acquired additional rights and assumed additional responsibilities. The transition to the next age group occurred only if the **ephebos** did not commit serious offenses. If a serious crime was committed, the **ephebos** could be sentenced to death. Plutarch writes in *Lycurgus* and *Numa*: "... I myself saw how many of them (**ephebos**) died under the blows at the altar of Orthia" [14, 67; 478].

In the works of Gregory the Illuminator, Faustus of Byzantium and M. Khorenatsi, we find confirmation that the Iranian (Persian) Zoroastrian age groups law described by Xenophon, according to which the male population was divided into four main groups — **children**, **youths** (15–25 years) **young men** or **adults** (from 25 to 52/55 years) and **elders** (over 52/55 years old). Similar laws also existed in the Armenian Zoroastrian legal system in Armenian Zoroastrian state, and remained in power in the Armenian Christian legal system and continued to exist in the early Christian Armenian state, created in 298–301 by Grigory the Illuminator and the king of Great Armenia Tiridates III.

According to these Armenian laws, the **youths** were required to study art of war, carry out guard duty on protection of government buildings, fortresses, etc. It was forbidden for them to abandon their duty, participate in battles before the age of 25, i.e. before the transition to the age group of **adults** and warriors. The violators of these laws were subject to the death penalty, regardless of their origin, social and financial status, kinship, etc. In addition, as a tradition the **youths**, as a sign of belonging to this age group, wore not only a long braid, but also a cowlick.

Getting back to the story of Artavazd Mamikonyan, we see that he, belonging to the **youth** age group; he evaded his direct duty to protect the fort of Varaz. Then, leaving his place of service on purpose, having betrayed his official duty and not obeying the order of Manvel, his commander and the elder of the ruling clan of Mamikonyan, he took part in battle, which he did not have the right as person belonging to the age group of **youth**. For these crimes he should have been subjected to the death penalty. But the age groups law, acting in the Armenian Christian legal system, also provided for an opportunity for a **youth** who committed even grave crimes to make amends and avoid the death penalty, by performing a feat and showing exceptional heroism. Artavazd Mamikonyan avoided the death penalty only on the basis of this law, which described only by Byzantium. Later on in the Armenian historical chronicles we find no mention of Artavazd Mamikonyan, although he was clearly an outstanding person. We can assume that he was still punished — deprived of "civil honor for life". This punishment is described by Xenophon in "Cyropaedia" [8, 10].

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