

## ABRAHAM of CRETE

(d. 1737)

### LIFE

A. was born in Heraklion (Qandiye) on the island of Crete (Girīd) at an unknown date. He was the bishop of Tekfurdağı (Tekirdağ, Rodosto) and the Armenian prelate of Thrace between 1120-47/1708-34. He also spent two years (1131-32/1719-20) in Jerusalem (Qudūs). In Dhulqada 1146/April 1734 he went on a pilgrimage of the holy shrines in eastern Armenia (Persian Armenia). Nothing is known about his educational and social background, other than the fact that he spoke Turkish and Armenian and probably was conversant in Greek. Being a member of the celibate branch (upper hierarchy) of the Armenian Church, he was not allowed to marry.

During his visit in Yerevan (Revān), Kat`oghikos (Catholicos) Abraham II, the Supreme Patriarch of the Armenian Church, impressed by A.'s religious devotion, appointed him as his successor (1734). Despite A.'s protests on the grounds of being old and ill, and an outsider to the Holy See, he was named Abraham III, the 110<sup>th</sup> leader of the Armenian Church. Hācī Hüseyn Paşa, the Ottoman governor of Yerevan, was glad to confirm an Ottoman subject to the highest post in the Armenian religious hierarchy. According to A.'s account, fearing a Persian attack on Yerevan, Hüseyn Paşa told A.: "Troops are gathering on all sides and war is imminent. Agree and let them perform the ceremony and install you on the throne of the Kat`oghikos ... Manage the cloister, which not only belongs to you [the Armenians], but to our king [sultan] as well. We plan to remain here and we need this place. I shall send someone with sealed documents and petitions, to Istanbul and obtain a decree announcing your confirmation."<sup>1</sup> A. reigned as Kat`oghikos for three years only, from Jumada II 1147/November 1734 until his death at the Holy See of Ējmiatsin (Echmiadzin, Üç Kilise) on 17 Dhulhijja 1149/18 April 1737. His short reign was looked upon favorably by church historians in that he visited the various monasteries and managed to gain major privileges from the Persians for the Holy See.

A.'s stay in Persian Armenia came at a crucial period when Nāder Khan (Ṭahmāsp-qulı Khan, later Nāder Shah Afshār) (d. 1160/1747), after deposing Shah Ṭahmāsp II (d. 1151/1739), marched on Transcaucasia to repel the Ottomans from the former Safavid possessions in eastern Armenia and eastern Georgia. By the end of 1148/1735 Nāder had recovered all the former Safavid territories (except Qandahar) and was crowned Shah in Dhulqada 1148/March 1736.

A. died in Ējmiatsin in 1737 and was buried there.

## WORKS

① *Patmut`iwn*

During the last two years of his life A. wrote a *Chronicle (Patmut`iwn)*, in which he detailed the arrival of Nāder in the Erevan Province, his campaigns against the Ottomans, and his coronation in the Moġān Steppe. The *Chronicle* is one of the few non-Persian primary sources on the events that occurred in Transcaucasia and northwestern Persia during the years 1147-49/1734-36. In some cases, it is the only source on certain events, not available in the two primary Persian sources, namely Muḥammad Mahdī Astarābādī's *Jahāngoshāy-e Nāderī* and Muḥammad Kāzem Marvī's *Ālam-ārā-ye Nāderī*. For example, we are informed that the destruction of Old Shāmāhī by Nāder in the spring of 1148/1735 was carried out in two stages and Turkish prisoners were used to construct New Shāmāhī. A. also describes in great detail the Battle of Eghvard (27 Muharram 1148/19 June 1735), the role of Armenian volunteers, and the defeat of the Ottomans.

The *Chronicle* provides a valuable description of the terrible economic conditions in northern Persia and Transcaucasia, following the Ottoman invasion of the region in 1135/1723. The requisitioning of food and animals left many villages destitute. Shortage of food forced many of Nāder's guests to depart prior to or immediately following the coronation. The supply of coins became rare. The unspecified epidemic (probably cholera or typhus), which killed many, is not mentioned in any other source. Despite being an Ottoman subject, A. regards Persian rule over Transcaucasian Armenia in a positive light, most probably because of the honors bestowed upon him and the Armenian Church by Nāder Shah and his subordinates, including Ibrāhīm Khan, the new Persian governor of the region. Clearly terrified by Nāder, A. still admires his restoring of law and order in Transcaucasia.

The *Chronicle* contains a lengthy description of the *qurulta`i* (council), which had gathered to place Nāder on the throne and started a new dynasty (Afshār) in Persia. Persian primary sources have only a few pages on this gathering and the ceremonies surrounding it. Vividly described are the different accommodations; the food and drinks; the music, musicians, and types of instruments; the various dancers and tight-rope walkers; the daily audiences; the elaborate process of making Nāder the choice of the assembled grandees; the description of the troops and attendants, their arms and clothing; the comprehensive list of the delegates and guests (including the Russian envoy and A.); the types and the value of the numerous *hil`ats* (robes of honor); the physical description of the Moġān; the temporary bridges across the Arax and Kur Rivers; and the coronation ceremony itself.

An interesting fact in A.'s *Chronicle* is the presence of Armenian, Greek, Albanian and Bosnian troops in the Ottoman army. Although the Albanians and Bosnians were probably converts to Islam, the presence of Armenian and Greek troops is noteworthy. Generally, all the non-Muslim adult males paid the *jizya* tax and did not serve in the army. However, sources indicate that non-Muslim inhabitants of frontier

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districts, could, at certain times, be enrolled in military expeditions in return for exemption from the payment of *jizya* for the year. Therefore, the Armenians and Greeks were either converts, or were recruited in exchange for the exemption from the *jizya*, or were forced into service for the non-payment of that tax.

A. sent a summary of the *Chronicle* to Tekfurdağı, which was only published in 1877 (See below Editions no.1). We can only surmise as to why. Perhaps it was in order to provide the Patriarchate of Istanbul with evidence that would persuade the Sublime Porte to grant it similar favorable *firman*s (as given by Nāder) to the Armenian Church. It may also have been to establish a record in those uncertain times of the Persian grants to the Holy See of Ējmiatsin, in the event that the Turks returned to the fortress of Erevan.

A. and Nāder conversed in Turkish, which once again demonstrates the wide use of Turkish among members of the Persian military hierarchy. It is interesting to note that an Armenian Ottoman subject functioned as the Kat`oghikos in Yerevan under Persian control during this crucial transition in its history. A. is among a handful of catholicoi who have left a record of their reign. The only work he authored, the *Chronicle*, includes detailed descriptions and is written in a clear style. A. seems to have used no sources besides his own observations.

The *Chronicle* was first published in Calcutta in 1796. The next edition was printed in 1870 in Vagharshapat. A French translation by Brosset appeared in 1876. A critical edition in Russian and Armenian was published in Erevan in 1973. A few pages on Nāder's coronation were translated into Persian in 1968. An annotated English translation was prepared by this contributor in 1999.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Chronicle of Abraham of Crete*, trans. G. Bournoutian (Costa Mesa, Ca., 1999), 25.

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