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THE FIRST ARAB INCURSIONS TO THE ARMENIAN REGION AND THEODOROS RSHTUNI'S REGIONAL POLICY

(ERMENİLERİN YAŞADIKLARI BÖLGEYE İLK ARAP AKINLARI
VE TEODOROS RŞTUNİ'NİN BÖLGE POLİTİKASI)

Tuğçe TECİMER*

Abstract: *This article provides an analysis of the initial Arab incursions into the region historically inhabited by Armenians and the pivotal role of Theodoros Rshtuni in shaping regional political strategies during the 7th century. The incursions marked a significant geopolitical shift as Armenian territories, previously influenced by Byzantine and Sasanian powers, faced new pressures from Arab expansion. This period underscored the strategic responses by local Armenian leaders, with Theodoros being a central figure. His leadership was crucial in navigating these turbulent times, particularly in his formation of alliances and redefining of Armenian political and military strategies. In this article, Armenian primary sources and research work is used to analyze Theodoros' decisions within the broader context of Armenian resistance and adaptation to the changing political landscape, highlighting the complex interplay of loyalty, power, and survival strategies among the Armenian nobility.*

Keywords: *Arab incursions, Theodoros Rshtuni, Armenian nobility, Geopolitical strategy, Byzantine influence, Sasanian Empire.*

* ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0671-2327>

Tarih Bilim Uzmanı, İstanbul Üniversitesi Doktora Adayı, E-mail: tugcetecimer@gmail.com

Özet: *Bu makale, tarihsel olarak Ermenilerin yaşadığı bölgeye gerçekleştirilen ilk Arap akınlarının ve Teodoros Rştuni'nin 7. yüzyılda bölgesel siyasi stratejileri şekillendirmedeki önemli rolünün bir analizini sunmaktadır. Akınlar, daha önce Bizans ve Sasani güçlerinin etkisinde olan Ermeni topraklarının Arap yayılmasının neden olduğu yeni baskılarla karşı karşıya kalmasıyla, önemli bir jeopolitik değişime işaret etmiştir. Bu dönem, Teodoros'un bir ana figür olduğu yerel Ermeni liderlerinin stratejik tepkilerini vurgulamıştır. Teodoros'un liderliği, özellikle kurduğu ittifaklar ve Ermeni siyasi ve askeri stratejilerini yeniden tanımlaması açısından, bu kaotik dönemlerde izlenen politikalarda hayati önem taşımıştır. Bu makalede, Ermeni ana kaynakları ve araştırma eserleri kullanılarak Teodoros'un kararları Ermeni direnişi ve Ermenilerin değişen siyasi duruma uyum sağlamaları analiz edilmiş; Ermeni soyluları arasındaki sadakat, güç ve hayatta kalma stratejilerinin karmaşık etkileşimi vurgulanmıştır.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Arap akınları, Teodoros Rştuni, Ermeni soyluları, Jeopolitik strateji, Bizans etkisi, Sasani İmparatorluğu.*

The Beginning of the Arab Incursions, the Geopolitical Transformation of the Region and the Rise of Theodoros

The arrival of the Arabs in the Caucasus and what is now called Eastern Anatolia in the middle of the 7th century not only changed the region's political situation completely, but also caused significant changes in the history of Armenians. With the elimination of the Sassanids by the Arabs in the Battle of Nihāwend (642) and Byzantium's shift to a defensive position, there was no balancing power left to support and protect the Armenians in the region against new conquests. In other words, there was no longer any factor to prevent the Arabs from advancing into the Caucasus and Byzantine lands. Thus, the fight for dominance that had been going on for years between the Byzantine and Sassanid states would henceforth continue between the Byzantine Empire and the Arab Caliphate.

When the Arabs arrived in the Armenian lands, the Armenian noble families of the Syniks (Սյունիքներ) were ruling southeast of Lake Sevan, the Bznunis¹ (Բզնունիներ) northwest of Lake Van, the Kamsarakans² (Կամսարակաւններ) in the north, and the Rshtuns (Ռշտունիներ) south of Lake Van.

The Mamikonians (Մամիկոնյանններ), who held the title of Sparapet³ (սպարապետ), were gradually losing their authority. The continuous weakening of the Mamikonians worsened the rivalry between the ever-competing nakharars⁴, creating chaos and a power vacuum in the region. Theodoros Rshtuni (Թեոդորոս Ռշտունի, d. 656), the head of the Rshtuni family, like other nakharars, wanted to take advantage of the power vacuum in the region and played an important role in the political life of the region by engaging in a number of activities for this purpose.

Although the exact date and place of Theodoros' birth are unknown, it is believed that he was born in Damascus in 654. Until 628, when he was appointed by the Sassanid Marzpan to head the Armenian troops in the region, we do not know much about his life. In 634, he assumed the position of Marzpan⁵ himself.⁶

1 For detailed information on the Armenian noble family, see "*Bznuniner*", Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran II, p. 428.

2 The Kamsarakans, an Armenian noble family, are thought to have existed between the III and VIII centuries. For more information, see "*Kamsarakanner*", Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran V, p. 215.

3 Sparapet was the Armenian title given to the commander-in-chief. For more information, see Anonymous, "*Sparaped*", Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran XI, p. 57.

4 Naharar is a hereditary title given to noble Armenian families in the Middle Ages. For detailed information on the origin and meaning of the word, see H. Acaryan, "*Naharar*", Hayeren Armatakan Bararan III, p. 420.

5 The Marzpanate was an administrative unit of Sassanid rule. The person given the title of Marzpan deputized the king as a kind of governor of the region. For detailed information, see S.Yeremyan, "*Marzpan*", Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran VII, p. 313.

6 V. Vardanyan, "*Theodoros Rshtuni*", Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran IV., p. 172.

Theodoros, an eminent Armenian military and political figure during the 7th century Arab incursions, significantly shaped the Armenian defense strategies and their diplomatic relations with surrounding powers. The most obvious sign of his rise was the title given to him by the Roman Emperor Constans II. This title was an integral part of the emperor's efforts to align the Armenian Church with Constantinople—a move that was ultimately rebuffed by the Armenians.

Under Theodoros' leadership, strategic alliances were pivotal. After rejecting the emperor's ecclesiastical directives, Theodoros navigated the Armenians into a critical alliance with the Arabs, as chronicled by the historian Sebeos. This alliance, underscores the desperate yet strategic nature of Theodoros' decisions during a time when the Armenian polity faced pressures from the collapsing Sasanian Empire and both Arab and Byzantine encroachments.

Theodoros' alliance with the Arabs was instrumental in enabling Armenians to maintain their power during a period of conflict and played a critical role in the broader geopolitical transformations of the region. This alliance not only fortified his position within Armenian society but also delineated the complex interplay of power, religion, and diplomacy in medieval Armenia.⁷

The Impacts of Arab Incursions on Armenian Nakharars

The Arab incursions markedly transformed the societal architecture of Armenian nobility, engendering shifts in power structures and necessitating adaptations in roles and allegiances. As the traditional Armenian noble families navigated this tumultuous era, certain families like the Bagratunis⁸ (Բագրատունիներ) gained ascendancy, often facilitated by Arab support, while others such as the Mamikonians experienced a decline in their heretofore dominant status. This reconfiguration of power was further complicated by the strategic decisions nobles made in response to the dual pressures from the Byzantine Empire and Arab rulers.

The role of Armenian nobles evolved from mere regional influencers to pivotal players in the broader geopolitical arena, balancing their loyalties between the Byzantines and Arabs. This period was marked by frequent shifts in allegiance, where nobles oscillated between opposition to and collaboration with Arab rulers, often influenced by the immediate political exigencies. Such strategies

7 İlhami Tekin Cinemre. "Alliance with Hell: Romans vs Armenians and Arabs." *ARAMAZD: Armenian Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (2019). <https://doi.org/10.32028/ajnes.v13i2.966>.

8 There are various debates as to whether the Bagratunids, an Armenian noble family, were of Hebrew or Persian origin. The Bagratunis, who emerged victorious from their struggle for influence with the Mamikonians, are among the most important figures in medieval Armenian history. For detailed information, see "*Bagratuniner*" Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran II, p. 201 etc.

were crucial for maintaining autonomy and ensuring the survival of noble lineages and their estates.⁹

Theodoros' tenure is particularly illustrative of the era's complexities. His acceptance of Arab suzerainty not only realigned the nobility's political stance but also served as a pragmatic adaptation to the new power dynamics imposed by the Arab conquests. Theodoros' leadership was polarizing among his contemporaries; while some viewed his actions as a necessary pragmatism to safeguard Armenian interests, others perceived them as betrayals of their sovereignty.¹⁰

The Arab incursions served as a catalyst that profoundly altered the structure and dynamics of Armenian nobility, prompting shifts in power, realignments of loyalty, and significant adaptations in the socio-political fabric of the region. These changes underscore the nobility's critical role in the survival and transformation of Armenian society during a period of intense external pressures.

The First Arab Incursions, Theodoros' Leadership Strategies and Political Maneuvers

Armenian sources state that the first Arab incursions into the region took place in 639-640 through Persian territory into the canton of Goghtn (Գողթն) and the territory of Nakhchivan (Նախճաւախ).¹¹ During this march, the Arab vanguard captured many prisoners and used a passage at Jugha (Ջուղա) to cross the Aras River. The Arab armies then split into two branches. One of these branches returned to take the captives back to their own lands, while the other passed through the Artaz (Արտաշ)¹² region to carry out an attack against the Byzantine general Procopius, who was camped in the Kogovit (Կոգովիտ)¹³ region near Bazudzor (Բազուձոր) and Mardutsayk (Մարդուցայք).¹⁴ The first Arab incursions into Anatolia appear to have been

9 Christos G. Makrypoulias, "The Arab Invasions and the Rise of the Bagratuni 640-884," *Cristo Raul*, accessed October 9, 2024, <https://www.cristoraul.org/BYZANTIUM/The-Arab-Invasions-and-the-Rise-of-the-Bagratuni-640-884.pdf>.

10 Preiser-Kapeller, Johannes. "Chapter 12 Aristocrats, Mercenaries, Clergymen and Refugees: Deliberate and Forced Mobility of Armenians in the Early Medieval Mediterranean (6th to 11th Century a.d.)." In *Migration Histories of the Medieval Afroeurasian Transition Zone*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020) doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004425613_013

11 Gevond, Gevond Badmutyun, Yerevan 1982, p. 20.

12 Located in Vaspuragan.

13 It is located in the Vaspuragan Territory, to the right of the city of Maku. Anonymous, "Mardastan", Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran VII., p. 307.

14 A province thought to be centered in and around present-day Dogubayazit. M. Katvalyan, "Kogovit", Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran V, p. 502.

exploratory in nature, often resulting in looting and capturing prisoners. However, they did not hesitate to hold on to suitable lands.

Theodoros, who received the news that the Arab armies were advancing on Kogovit, warned the Byzantine general to take precautions, but Procopius, who relied on the superiority of his troops numbers, ignored this warning and did not answer any of Theodoros' letters.¹⁵

According to Gevond, Procopius, tired of Theodoros' insistence, threw a staff at him, and afterwards Theodoros armed his troops against the Arabs, slaughtered the Arab troops he had ambushed near Yeghbark (Եղբարք), and took their war spoils. Theodoros left Procopius and went to Garni (Գառնի). Although Procopius also marched against the Arabs after this incident, most of his soldiers were killed by the Arab troops, and those who survived and escaped to their camps were pursued and massacred, thus wiping out Procopius' army.¹⁶

Armenian sources mention that the Arabs attacked the region again in 642. After taking Taron, Pznunik (Պզնունիք)¹⁷ and Aghiovit, the Arabs marched through the Pergri valley and Kogovit to Ararat and Dvin.¹⁸ Gevond states that all the soldiers of the city were in Dzor with Theodoros to stop the Arabs and that the city was defenseless.¹⁹ Sebeos, on the other hand, stated that the ishkhans Theodoros Vahevuni, Khachian Aravelian and Shabouh Amaduni crossed and destroyed the Azad or Medzamor bridge and reached the city before the Arabs and were able to give early warning of the Arab army approaching and thus had the opportunity to prepare, but were betrayed.²⁰ In 642, the Arabs captured the city of Dvin and returned to their headquarters with large spoils and captives. Sebeos stated that Theodoros attacked the Arab army on his way back but failed²¹, while Gevond wrote that Theodoros did not dare to attack because his army was outnumbered.²²

It is known that before this defeat against the Arabs, Theodoros was one of the most powerful figures in the region. After the death of Yazr I. (Եզր Ա Փառաժնակերսցի) in 641, the Byzantine-supporting Dayk bishop Nerses III. Ներսէս Գ Տայեցի), who would later be known as Shinogh (Շիւնղ),

15 Gevond, p. 21.

16 Gevond, p. 21.

17 The name Pznunik, which is frequently found in medieval Armenian sources, is used for Lake Van and its surroundings. It is seen that Lake Van is called "Lake Piznunik".

18 Sebeos, Sebeos Padmutyun (Translated by G. Khachadryan, V. Yediazaryan), Yerevan 2005, p. 205.

19 Gevond, p. 22.

20 Sebeos, p. 205.

21 Sebeos, p. 91.

22 Gevond, p. 23.

was assigned to the position of Catholicos. Nerses was appointed with the approval of Theodoros.²³ After the defeat, Theodoros maintained his position in the region. Byzantium must have been pleased that its ally Theodoros had a say in the region, as the Emperor appointed the Armenian nakharar as the commander-in-chief of the Armenian troops for his support.²⁴

Theodoros, who was chosen as the captain general, first took advantage of his reputation in the eyes of Emperor Constantine to ask for the pardon of the Armenians who had been exiled to Africa by the Emperor during the period of Heraclius, and especially of the aspet named Varaz Dirots Bagratuni III (Վարազ-Տիրոց Գ. Բագրատունի)²⁵, the son of Smbat, with whom he had once collaborated against the Persians.²⁶ The fact that the Emperor fulfilled this wish is also significant in terms of showing the importance of Theodoros for Byzantium.

Emperor Constans appointed a ruler named T'umas (Թումա) to the region where Armenians lived. Sebeos reports that T'umas had seized Theodoros with a false accusation in order to make a pact with the Medes, and that the emperor, who was aware of the situation, summoned him to the palace and did justice in Theodoros's regard, where he was acquitted and granted an annual income, while T'umas was disgraced and stripped him of his rank.²⁷

At a time when Theodoros was preoccupied with the slander of T'umas, Varaz Dirots, for whom he had begged the emperor for forgiveness, fled to Tayk' (Տայք) in disguise with three of his men. Constans ordered Theodoros to arrest Khosrov Shum, but Theodoros disobeyed the emperor's order, supported Aspet and sent Catholicos Nersés as a mediator to negotiate with him. The Catholicos informed Aspet that he would be given the rank of the prince of the country if he took an oath of good faith/loyalty to the emperor. He sent a written oath of loyalty to the emperor, agreed to be his 'servant' and was honoured by Constans with the ranks of curopalates and ishkhan, along with valuable gifts.²⁸ However, before the edict and the gifts reached him, he suddenly fell ill and died.²⁹

After the death of Varaz Dirots, the emperor gave his rank and the position of aspet to his elder son, Smbat. He also made him droungarios of his army and

23 Anonymous, "*Nerses G Tayetsi*" Ներսիս Գ Տայեցի", Kristonya Hayastan Hanragitaran, p. 781 etc.

24 Sebeos, p. 215.

25 This person in Sebeos' work was stated to be Hosrov Shum. See, Sebeos, p. 217.

26 Sebeos, p. 217.

27 For detailed information about the arrest of Theodoros Rshtuni by Tuma, see Sebeos, p. 217.

28 Sebeos, p. 219

29 Sebeos, p. 221; Also see, A. Ter-Ġevondyan, "*Varazdirots Bagratuni*" Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran XI, p. 306.

married him to one of the Arsacids, who was a relative of his.³⁰ Afterwards, he gave Theodoros the rank of commander in chief and sent him to the region where the Armenians lived.

As a result of the events, Theodoros realized that his interests with Byzantium were no longer compatible and abandoned his pro-Byzantine stance. For Byzantium, the Armenian nakharar, which had previously abandoned his commander Procopius, acted with the fugitive Varaz Dirots and, more importantly, was growing stronger in the region, was no longer a reliable ally. Moreover, the Emperor, who did not trust Theodoros because of his role in the Council of Dvin (645), dismissed him and replaced him with Smbat Bagratuni.³¹ By doing so, he aimed both to reduce Theodoros' influence in the region and to neutralize the Rshtunis and Bagratunis through each other.

Although the Emperor had dismissed Theodoros, he must have still needed him in the battle against the Arabs, for he wrote a letter to Theodoros, inviting him to fight against the Arabs with the army under his command. By summoning Theodoros, the Emperor wanted to benefit not only from his military power but also from the influence of Theodoros, a powerful nakharar, on the people of the region. Theodoros, however, did not respond to the emperor's call, probably because he thought that his interests were no longer in common with Byzantium. Constans II then sent another letter stating that he would destroy the House of Rshtuni if they did not join the war.³²

Theodoros, forced to obey the emperor's ultimatum, sent his son Vard (Վարդ) to Smbat, who was fighting for Byzantium, but Theodoros' aim was not to act as an ally with Byzantium but to fight against it. Following Theodoros' orders, Vard went to Smbat and must have gained the commander's trust because Smbat accepted his request to become a bridge guard.³³ When the battle began, Vard continued to fight alongside the Byzantine army until he was sure that the Arabs would win, and when he saw that the Arab army was repelling the Byzantine forces, he crossed to the other side of the river with the soldiers attached to him, severed the ropes of the bridge and prevented the Byzantine forces from escaping. After the battle, which resulted in the victory of the Arabs, a treaty was concluded between Theodoros and Muawiya (652) in which the Armenians were obliged to pay taxes and give hostages to the Arabs.³⁴

30 Sebeos, p. 221.

31 Gevond, p. 24.

32 Gevond, p. 24.

33 Gevond, p. 25.

34 As a result of this agreement between the Armenians and the Arabs, names such as Grigor from the Mamikonean House and Smbat from the Bagratuni House, who were extremely important for the Armenians, were given as hostages. However, Muawiya later gave them the title of Iskhan and sent them back to their homeland with gifts. [See, Gevond, p. 25etc.] "Let this be the pact of my treaty between me and you for as many years as you may wish. I shall not take tribute from you for a three-

After the agreement between Theodoros and Muawiya, Constans II, who did not want to lose his dominance in the region against the Arabs, came to the region at the head of a large army. Although the Emperor was warned by the Arabs when he arrived near Derjan (Դերջան) that the region was under Arab rule and that he should stop his advance, he continued advancing until he reached Karin (Erzurum).³⁵ Here the emperor was greeted with a show of respect from the nakharars who had left Theodoros' side earlier. It can be assumed that the nakharars were not only disturbed by Theodoros's collaboration with the Arabs, but also by his unstoppable rise in the region. Sebeos reports that among those who came to the emperor were the Bagratuniks, Khorkhoruniks (Խորխորունիներ), Mushegh Mamikonean (Մուշեղ Մամիկոնյան), Varazhnuniks (Վարաշաժնունիներ) and many other Armenian nakharars as well as the Catholicos Nersés.³⁶ The lords who came to pledge their loyalty to the emperor cursed Theodoros for his treachery, stripped him of all the honors bestowed upon him and appointed a replacement. Theodoros arrested and imprisoned the person appointed to take his place together with forty of his soldiers, and he himself went to the Island of Aghtamar and took precautions.

The emperor, who wanted to make Theodoros pay for his betrayal, aimed to plunder the region where the Armenians lived, but the pleas of Nersés and Mushegh Mamikonean must have been effective as he abandoned this decision. The emperor marched with his troops to Dvin and settled in the residence of the Catholicos, appointed Mushegh Mamikonean as his deputy and put him in charge of the cavalry unit, which he could use against the Theodoros threat.³⁷ Afterwards, Chalcedonian Christology was preached in all the churches in Dvin, and services were held in Byzantine style in the Surp Krikor cathedral. Nersés and all the Armenian bishops attended the services (the Eucharist) with the emperor.³⁸

Cooperation with the Arabs

After staying in Dvin for a while, Constans II appointed a man named Maurianus as governor and left Dvin. With the emperor's departure from the

year period. Then you will pay [tribute] with an oath, as much as you may wish. You will keep in your country 15,000 cavalry and provide sustenance from your country; and I shall reckon it in the royal tax. I shall not request the cavalry for Syria; but wherever else I command they shall be ready for duty. I shall not send amirs! to [your] fortresses, nor an Arab army — neither many, nor even down to a single cavalryman. An enemy shall not enter Armenia; and if the Romans attack you, I shall send you troops in support, as many as you may wish. See, Sebeos, p. 263.

35 Sebeos, p. 265.

36 Sebeos, p. 265.

37 Sebeos, p. 267.

38 Sebeos, p. 269.

region, the Patriarch Nersés thought that there was no one left to protect himself against Theodoros and went to Tayk'. This was because both Theodoros and the people of the region were angry against Nersés for accepting the Council of Chalcedon.³⁹

Theodoros left Aghtamar after Constans's departure and together with his son-in-law Hamazasp Mamikonean, he asked for help from the Arabs. The Arabs sent a troop of 7,000 soldiers, which he stationed north and northwest of Lake Van, at Atiovit and Bznunik.⁴⁰ From there, Theodoros went to Damascus to join Muawiya and was honored by Muawiya, who bestowed various gifts on him and gave him authority over the lands of 'Armenia, Iberia, Atuank' and Siwnik'.⁴¹ Thus, Theodoros' loyalty was once again reinforced by the Arabs.

While Theodoros continued to cooperate with the Arabs, the other nakharars must have thought that the reason why they were always under Byzantine or Arab rule was because of their long-standing and endless conflicts between them, so they sought reconciliation. The pro-Arab nakharars, including prominent figures such as Hamazasp and Mushegh Mamikonean, and the nakharars who supported Byzantine rule and other notables of the region gathered together and made an agreement that they would no longer clash with each other and shed blood. Thus, the Armenian nakharars spent the winter without fighting. Theodoros, who was ill at the time, went into seclusion for a while on the island of Aghtamar, but the nakharars, taking the absence of Theodoros as an opportunity, appointed tax-gatherers and divided the taxes of the region among them.⁴²

Sebeos reported that Theodoros, after regaining his health, sought the support of the Arabs in order to restore order, saying, "*He requested for himself troops from the Ismaelites in order to strike the Armenian and expel them, and to put the Iberians to the sword.*"⁴³ This policy of Theodoros was also an opportunity for the Arabs who wanted to consolidate their dominance in the region. On this occasion, the Arabs under the command of Habib b. Maslama came as far as Aruch (Արուճ). The Byzantine commander Morianos took advantage of the coming of winter to march on the Arab army, which was not used to winter conditions, and forced the Arabs to retreat to Zarehawan (Չարեհաւան) until the end of winter. The Byzantines advanced as far as Dvin and besieged Nakhchivan, but were defeated by the Arab army, which attacked again in the spring. The Arabs advanced as far as Karin, plundering most of the towns of

39 Sebeos, p. 273.

40 Sebeos, p. 273.

41 Sebeos, p. 274.

42 Sebeos, p. 281.

43 Sebeos, p. 281.

the region, looting churches and taking many hostages from the nakharar families.⁴⁴ Theodoros was also taken by the Arabs to Damascus (655), where he died before he had a chance to return home.⁴⁵

Theodoros' death accelerated the downfall of the Rshtuniks. The Rshtuniks continued to exist under the rule of the Artsruni for some time. Their residence in Bznunik passed first to the Mamikoneans and then to the Bagratunis.

As a result, Theodoros united the Armenian nakharars under his rule, albeit for a short time, in the lands that could not be shared during the struggle for dominance between the Arabs and Byzantium, who came to the region after the fall of the Sassanids and provided a temporary stability in the region. As a result of Theodoros' policies, the first written agreement was signed between the Arabs and the Armenians, and this agreement was accepted with relatively more favourable conditions for the Armenians. Although the power struggles between the Armenian nakharars continued during the period when the Arabs arrived in the region, they could be controlled for a while with Theodoros' strategic moves. Thus, while the struggle between the two great powers continued in the region, Armenians were able to preserve both their existence and their faith in this chaotic environment.

44 Sebeos, p. 287.

45 Theodoros' body was brought to his own province and buried in the tomb of his fathers. See, Sebeos, p. 287.

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