

RENEGADE HERO

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Seal of Philaretus

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By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 9 December 2013

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His name? Philaretus Brakhamios Varazhnuni. Philaretus (historians always refer to him by his first name) was a distinguished general in the Byzantine army in mid-11th century. On various occasions he commanded an infantry regiment, was deputy commander in Cappadocia, and commander of the main Byzantine army on the Mesopotamian border.

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Philaretus was also a hero who didn't fit most of the stereotypical attributes of a national hero. He was an opportunist, a terrorizer of any number of Cilicia Armenian rulers, and was called "evil-spirited beast and heretic" partly because he had no time for religion. His enemies accused him of cruelty and greed. A practitioner of real politik, Philaretus was a renegade hero.

Centuries before the Byzantine (and Armenian) debacle at Manazgerd (1071), Armenians—civilians, soldiers and noblemen—made a beeline to Constantinople for position, power and prestige. Philaretus, born in a village near Marash, was one such adventurer-soldier who later became the commander of Melitene (Malatya). When Emperor Diogenes IV Romanos headed east to repulse the advancing Seljuks, Philaretus joined the Byzantines as commander of a division. However, during the heat of the battle, he, along with other Armenian troops, abandoned the battlefield, to be followed by Frank, Uze, and Pecheneg mercenaries.

Philaretus, like many other Armenians, had lost faith in the Byzantines who persecuted his people, tried to forcibly change their faith and to coerce them to assimilate. Eleven years before the Battle of Manazgerd an emperor had jailed (1060) Catholicos Khachig II for three years to force him to accept the Byzantine Patriarch as head of the Armenian Church. There was popular epigram written by Greek nun Casia which said:

"The most terrible race of the Armenians

is deceitful, evil to extremes,

Mad and capricious and slanderous.

And full of deceit, being greatly so by nature..."

Emperor Romanus had sworn the destruction of the Armenian faith and had sacked Sebastia, the seat of the Ardrunis. Thus when he marched to east to stop the Seljuks, he justifiably feared attacks from Armenian irregulars.

The Manazgerd calamity resulted in a palace revolution in Constantinople. Taking advantage of the confusion and Byzantium's ebbing power, General Philaretus declared he was "unwilling to recognize Michael IV Ducas as emperor. He set himself up as an independent ruler at Marash," say Prof. G. Hovhanissian and Simon Payaslian in "Armenian Cilicia".

A patriotic Armenian—although he had converted to the Greek Orthodox Church to hold a military position in the Byzantine army—Philaretus had secret designs to create a new Armenia, stretching from Cappadocia to Cilicia, northern Syria to the Euphrates, to succeed the historic Armenia which was being ravaged by the Seljuks. He would populate the new country with the thousands of Armenians who were fleeing the Seljuks. Armenian magnates helped him financially while leaderless military contingents from Armenia and Armenian soldiers from the Byzantine army joined Philaretus who had launched his dream of a new Armenia with 50 brigands and had captured a fortress in Cilicia. "A great number of Armenians gathered around him. Gradually, Philaretus and his associates took over many other Cilician fortresses," says Seta B. Dadoyan in her three-volume "The Armenians in the Medieval Islamic World".

After taking Marash, he occupied Melitene, Edessa/Urfa, and Dar Mudar, and appointed his lieutenants (Gabriel and Toros) as rulers of Melitene and Edessa/Dar Mudar respectively. Former Byzantine officer Tatool was another of his friends. They, like Philaretus, were controversial figures and "turn coats" to the Byzantines (they were also "turn coats" to some Armenians because they had converted to the Greek Orthodox Church). He then installed Pakrad, the brother of Kogh Vasil, as ruler of Rawandas. Vasil, originally from Ani, was a shady character as his nickname ("Thief") indicates, but unlike other chieftains, he belonged to the Armenian Apostolic Church. He had a small principality (Raban—now turkified to Altinaskale--Kaisun, and Hromgla fortresses) between Marash and the Euphrates.



Philaretus and his commanders kept up the pressure and captured more Cilician fortresses. In 1078 he even established a town (Andrium) near Samosata where St. Mesrob had shaped the Armenian alphabet which he had invented in Edessa. Philaretus made Marash the 'capital' of his mini-Armenia which now included Albistan and Gaban.

Philaretus' 'liberated' cities were neighbors of cities and regions which were ruled by Armenians--

mostly former Byzantine military officers. Constantine ruled in Gargar, Abulgharib was in Birejik, Kakig reigned in Tarsus. Members of the Ardruni, Bazunian, Hetoumian, and Oshinian clans were also making their way to Cilicia to take advantage of the withdrawing Byzantines, but none of these military leaders expressed an intention to create an Armenian homeland in Cilicia.

Next on the Philaretus' list was Antioch. The opportunity arose when the duke of Antioch--Vasak Pahlavuni (son of prince-poet-scholar Krikor Magistros)--was assassinated (1078) by the Greeks. Philaretus was invited by Antioch's Armenians to take over the city. He marched to the city, killed 700 Greeks and took control. His territories now included Mapquesta, Anazarpa, the Valley of Jihun and Melitene.

He then invited the Armenian rulers of Cilicia and northern Syria to join him in establishing a new state for the Armenians. One ruler—Prince Tornik Musheghian (Mamikonian?) of Sasoon, was wary of Philaretus' ambitions and rejected his invitation. To change Tornik's mind, Philaretus attacked but was defeated because Tornik's army was much larger than that of Philaretus'. The defeat didn't end the conflict. It was said that when Tornik was assassinated, Philaretus burned his corpse and used the skull as wine goblet.

Philaretus then began calling himself emperor, but shortly after agreed to denounce his self-assumed title when Emperor Nicephorus III Botaneiates recognized him as the duke of Antioch. To sweeten the agreement, the emperor gave him the title of curopalate. Although an ambitious and patriotic man, Philaretus was also a pragmatic politician who knew the limits of his power.

As he expanded his realm, Philaretus concluded that to be considered a credible political entity, his dominion required a catholicos. He invited Catholicos Krikor Vgayaser of the Taurus Mountains to become the catholicos of his state. Vgayaser, fearing Philaretus, twice rejected the offer and finally sent Bishop Sarkis instead. By then there were three other catholicos—Vgayaser, his nephew Parsegh in Ani, and Theodore in the fortress of Honi.

But Philaretus' 'Armenia' was ephemeral. It lasted a mere seven years (1078-1085). Before he could establish a durable political entity, the jewel of his crown—Antioch—was captured by the Seljuk Tutush and the Danishmendids—an Islamized Armenian/Georgian dynasty--took Melitene. Seeing the crumbling of his project, Philaretus went on a failed mission to Baghdad and to Khurasan, and converted to Islam to get help from the Sultan Melik-Shah who had guaranteed Philaretus' rule over Antioch. "Philaretus lost his authority and became a wandering former commander. Having lost all hope, he retreated to one of the convents of Marash where he died in 1090," says Antranig Chalebian in "Armenia".

Although he was dedicated to his people, Philaretus had many Armenian enemies. The rulers of the neighboring 'statelets' feared him. He was called impious and loathsome while the Church condemned his alliances with the Muslims and his conversion to Islam. Matthew of Edessa described him with these words: "Lawless and most evil Prince Pilardos. He was the elder son of the

Devil, the evil spirited precursor of the impure Ner (Anti-Christ), devilish, horrendous, and immoral... He was a faithless Christian neither Chalcedonian nor Armenian and fought the Christians...He betrayed his faith." Others worshipped him for his bravery, sagacity and patriotism.

The Armenian general was interested in religion only as a tool for his political ends. "He cared little for the faith of the Byzantines or the Armenians, but wanted the Armenian catholicos on his land to serve as the spiritual leader of his 'kingdom,'" says Dadoyan. Before the phrase was coined, he practiced real politik. At various times he allied with the Arabs, the Kurds, and the Turks so as to achieve his goals.

Dadoyan says Philaretus was tough, robust, and as a formidable character. He is a hero because he rescued Armenians fleeing the Seljuks and provided them with safe haven. He is a hero because he planted the seed for a new Armenia. Following his death, Cilicia Armenian rulers continued fighting among themselves for dominance. It took a century following his death for his dream to be realized: Rupen, a relative of the Pakradounis, founded a Cilician principality which became an Armenian kingdom under Levon I in 1197.

Historian Nicholas Adontz, an authority on Byzantium, wrote that unsung hero Philaretus was one of the most important figures of the 11th century. It's hard to disagree with Adontz' paeon.

