



A Historical-Geopolitical Analysis of Armenia's Role in the Conflicts between Iran and Rome

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Coin of Tigranes II, known as Tigranes the Great, was the king of Armenia in the 1st century BCE. He expanded Armenia's territory, turning it into a regional power. His reign is noted for political stability, military strength, and extensive interactions with Rome and Iran.



Etchmiadzin Cathedral, also known as the Armenian Apostolic Cathedral, is located in the city of Vagharshapat, Armenia. The construction of the main building was completed in 303 CE. Etchmiadzin Cathedral is regarded as the "first cathedral in the history of Christianity" and was founded by Gregory the Illuminator.



The partition of Armenia between Iran and Rome. This event transformed Armenia into a buffer zone between the two great powers, shaping subsequent political tensions and interactions in the region. Map of Armenia from 387 to 536 CE.



The ancient city of Darband and its surrounding fortifications and citadel, dating to the Sasanian period, were built to control the border between the northern and southern Caucasus. The strategic importance of this fortress and its walls lies in their location on the slopes of the Nabasaran Mountains in the Caucasus range, forming the only accessible passage between the sea and the mountains.

Abstract

Armenia — now the smallest political unit in the South Caucasus — was in antiquity known by names such as Urartu and Ararat. Its strategic geographic location as a bridge between East and West, its control of Caucasian passes and transit routes, and its role in the movement of goods attracted the attention of major powers, notably Iran and Rome. After Armenia adopted Christianity in the early fourth century CE, its religious affinity with the Christian Roman Empire intensified political ties with Rome and simultaneously made Armenia the focal point of East-West competition. Roman interventions, often justified as protection of fellow Christians, precipitated prolonged conflicts in the region. Armenia's adoption of Christianity (officially dated to around 302 CE in this text) and Rome's later toleration and patronage of Christianity under Constantine (313 CE) strengthened Armenian-Roman ties. The Zoroastrian Sasanian state could not passively accept a religiously estranged Armenia on its periphery and pursued policies aimed at reasserting Zoroastrian influence — policies that intensified under Yazdegerd II. This study aims to analyze Armenia's pivotal position and the extent to which its Christianization affected Iran-Byzantium (Roman/Byzantine) relations, using a descriptive-analytical historical method and scholarly sources. The results indicate that religious convergence between Armenia and Rome consolidated Armenian-Roman ties and eroded Armenia's religious-political bonds with Iran, leading ultimately to repeated shifts in control and a partitioning of Armenia between spheres of Iranian and Roman influence.

Introduction

Armenia's history is deeply intertwined with that of pre-Islamic Iran, reflecting centuries of cultural, economic, and political exchange shaped by their geographic proximity. Strategically located in the Caucasus between Iran and Rome, Armenia served as a vital buffer zone mediating East-West interactions. Classical geopolitical theory, notably Spykman's concept of transitional regions, helps explain its pivotal role in maintaining the balance of power. Armenia's conversion to Christianity in the early fourth century — under Tiridates III and Gregory the Illuminator — preceded Rome's Edict of Milan (313 CE) and marked a decisive shift in both religious and political alignment toward Rome. For the Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire, this transformation posed ideological and strategic challenges, as a Christian Armenia became both a frontier and a potential threat. This study examines how Armenia's religious affiliation and geopolitical position shaped Iran-Rome relations. Through a historical-geopolitical lens, it analyzes religious change, elite politics, and military-diplomatic dynamics. Drawing on Armenian chronicles, contemporary sources, and theories of buffer states and religion as a geopolitical force, it situates Armenia within Late Antique Eurasian rivalries, revealing how faith and geography jointly structured regional power struggles.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-analytical historical method based on extensive library research. Primary sources include Armenian chronicles such as Movses Khorenatsi and Sebeos, alongside Roman, Byzantine, and later Iranian accounts. Secondary literature in Persian and European languages provides historiographical and interpretive context. The analysis unfolds in two stages: first, a descriptive reconstruction of political and religious developments from the early centuries CE to the Sasanian collapse in the seventh century; second, an analytical interpretation using geopolitical and religious-political frameworks, especially concepts of buffer zones and the instrumentalization of religion in interstate rivalry.

Discussion**1. Armenia's Strategic Geography and Early Political Role**

Armenia's terrain — mountainous, with narrow passes linking the Black Sea and Caspian littorals — rendered it a prized linchpin for imperial communication, defense, and trans-Eurasian trade (including Silk Road linkages). Classical and medieval geographers emphasized this corridor function: control of Armenian approaches affected access between Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and the Iranian plateau. Consequently, both Rome and Iranian polities sought either direct control or a compliant client regime in Armenia to secure lines of movement and to deny the other power a territorial advantage. This structural geography explains the persistent intensity of Roman-Iranian competition over Armenia.

2. Religious Conversion as a Geopolitical Act

Armenia's formal adoption of Christianity in the early fourth century, often dated in Armenian tradition to c. 301–303 CE under King Tiridates III, was inherently political. Conversion aligned Armenian elites with the Christian cultural orbit increasingly associated with Rome. Rome's later acceptance and imperial patronage under Constantine amplified ecclesiastical ties, while for the Sasanians; the outcome risked creating a Christian hinterland susceptible to Roman political influence. Thus, conversion should be read as a geopolitical decision as well as a religious one — an elite strategy to forge external alliance and internal consolidation that, paradoxically, invited foreign intervention under the rubric of protecting co-religionists.

3. Roman Intervention and the Pretext of Protection

Across Late Antiquity, Roman policy toward Armenia oscillated between diplomatic accommodation and military intervention. Rome routinely framed interventions as protective measures for Christians in Armenia and neighboring provinces; this rhetorical posture provided moral legitimization for military and diplomatic action. When Byzantine (later Roman) commitment increased — especially after the imperial embrace of Christianity — Armenia moved, in religious and diplomatic practice, closer to the Eastern Roman sphere, thereby intensifying rivalry with Iran. Notably, Roman backing allowed certain Armenian princes to resist Iranian encroachment, but it also produced cycles of direct confrontation, treaties, and enforced settlements, including repeated partitions.

4. Sasanian Responses and Attempts at Religious Re-integration

For the Sasanian Empire, which institutionalized Zoroastrianism as a state religion, Armenia's Christian identity signaled a dissident periphery. Successive Sasanian rulers adopted policies ranging from conciliation to coercive re-Zoroastrianization; Yazdegerd II's policies are especially notable for intensifying pressures on Armenian elites. When perceived as politically disloyal or as conduits of Roman influence, Armenian ecclesiastical and lay leaders faced repression, which in turn provoked rebellions and deepened social fault lines. Sasanian attempts to impose religious conformity often backfired, strengthening Armenian resolve and supplying Rome with further pretexts for intervention.

5. Internal Armenian Dynamics: Nobility, Church, and Popular Responses

The Armenian polity was not monolithic: aristocratic Nakharar families, the nascent national church, and popular constituencies interacted in complex ways. The church, empowered by conversion, became a central institution for national consolidation but also a source of tension with aristocratic landholders wary of ecclesiastical power. These internal dynamics affected foreign alignments: some aristocratic factions preferred rapprochement with Iran to preserve traditional privileges, while others favored alliance with Rome for religious solidarity and political backing. The result was internal factionalism, which external powers could (and did) exploit.

6. Partition and Long-Term Consequences

Periods of negotiated settlement — most prominently the late fourth-/early fifth-century arrangements — resulted in the division of Armenia between Roman and Iranian spheres. These partitions had long-term cultural and political consequences: the eastern portion experienced continuing Iranian influence and intermittent Sasanian control, while the western portion fell increasingly under Byzantine (Roman) cultural currents. Over the long term, this bifurcation shaped ecclesiastical orientations, legal traditions, and elite networks across the Armenian highlands.

7. Armenia as a Recurring Buffer and a Site of Contestation

The Armenian case exemplifies the dual nature of buffer states: while providing strategic depth and facilitating diplomatic compromise, such territories are also persistent sources of instability when great-power rivalry intensifies. Armenia's conversion to Christianity transformed it into both a bridge and a fault line: it afforded Rome a religious ally at Iran's doorstep while simultaneously provoking Iranian policies aimed at neutralizing that ally. The historical pattern — periodic Roman backing, Iranian coercion, local rebellion, and negotiated partitions — repeats across centuries and underscores the enduring importance of geography combined with religious identity in shaping imperial competition.

Conclusion

Armenia's experience in Late Antiquity shows how geography and religion jointly shaped regional geopolitics. The adoption of Christianity was not merely spiritual but a strategic realignment that drew Armenia closer to Rome and distanced it from Iran. In response, Iranian dynasties, especially the Sasanians, alternated between conciliation and coercion, leading to recurring conflict and partition. Rome, in turn, used religious solidarity to justify intervention and extend influence. Armenia's position as a buffer zone, combined with its confessional shift, made it a focal point of imperial rivalry. Its history underscores how local agency and structural forces together defined its shifting role between Rome and Iran.