

## **The role of Armenia in Iran-Rome relations during the Parthian period**

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### **Abstract**

Armenia, as a strategic territory in the Caucasus and northern Iran, has been the main center of relations between the Parthian government in Iran and the Roman Empire, with each side seeking to dominate the other. The relations between the two sides in this period can be studied in two parts of the Artaxiad dynasty and then the Arsacid dynasty of Armenia. In the first period, the Parthians tried to suffice with a moderate policy on the throne of the Shah of Armenia and avoided direct interference in its internal affairs, but in the second period, they tried to put their representative, who was often from the Parthian family, to the throne of Armenia. The Roman government also always tried to gain access to this land by military force and the policy of using army, so it was opposed to the Parthian government. The present study, with a theoretical analysis and historical events of this time and evaluating the data of sources, not only emphasizes the effective role of Armenia in the formation of good or hostile relations between Iran and Rome, but also to explain these relations by considering the role of the ruling families in Armenia.

**Keywords:** Parthians, Roman Empire, Artaxiad dynasty, Parthians of Armenia and Armenia.

### **Introduction**

Armenia, a land in the Caucasus region, has been one of the main causes of conflict between the Parthian government in Iran and the Roman Empire due to its geographical and strategic location, as well as its location on the Silk Road trade route. It dominated the South Caucasus and East Asia Minor from the Caspian Sea to the Media Atropatene or Azerbaijani borders. For this reason, each of the Parthian and Roman governments wanted to take control of this land. Therefore, the main axis of relations between the parties was the domination of this land and its dependent regions. The Parthians, who considered themselves the heirs of the Achaemenid Empire, paid special attention to Armenia to revive their territory. The Roman Empire often sought to dominate Armenia through a policy of coercion and military operations and because the Artaxerxes dynasty had sided with the Parthians during Orodes I of Parthia and the Battle of Carrhae, as well as in Marc Antoine's wars with Phraates IV, they overthrew this dynasty in Armenia in the early years of the first century AD. But this action was met with a reaction from the Armenian people and the Parthian government and whenever they saw fit with the support of the people of the region, tried to cut off the Romans from this area. Finally,

during the reign of Vologases I of Parthia (51-77 AD), the Arsacid dynasty of Armenia was formed with the consent of the Roman Empire. According to the agreement between the parties, the king of Armenia was chosen from the Parthian Persian dynasty but had to be approved by the Roman Empire. Because the Roman Empire had embraced Parthian diplomacy and military policy, it tried to avoid it and especially throughout the second century AD, which coincided with the end of the Parthian government, it went to war with the Parthians for domination and direct influence over Armenia. The Parthians were also often stable against the Romans and insisted on employing a prince from among themselves on Armenia in order to thwart the plans of the other side.

### **Parthian relations with the Roman Empire and the role of Armenia in it during the reign of the Artaxiad dynasty over Armenia**

Antiochus III the Great,<sup>1</sup> the Seleucid king who wanted to impose his government on Armenia, faced the Roman Empire which for the first time sought to expand its conquests in the East, and was defeated in the Great Magnesia War in December 189 BC and lost a large part of his possessions. (Wazir Afzal, 2013)

This defeat shook the foundations of the Seleucid government and so a man named Artaxias I, was able to completely repel the scattered Seleucid invasions and establish the great state of Artaxiad in Armenia. (Khorenatsi, 2018)

His successors were considered the real creators of Armenia, which paved the way for the emergence of a powerful government. (Pasdermadjian, 1998). The Parthian government did not have much influence and

power in the western regions of Armenia and Mesopotamia until the reign of Mithridates I of Parthia (170-138 BC). But after this period, the Parthian rulers by consolidating their power expanded their influence to the western regions. (Wazir Afzal, 2013)

During the reign of Mithridates II of Parthia (124-89 BC) the situation changed. For the first time during the Parthian period, Mithridates clashed with Artavasdes I of Armenia (123-95 BC), in the northern region of Iran, defeating him and succeeding in expanding his dominance in Armenia. (Arnaud, 1987)

After that, Tigranes the son of the late Shah of Armenia, who was held hostage in the Iranian court, came to power in Armenia by Mithridates II of Parthia and was forced to hand over the southern regions of Armenia to the Iranian government. (Pasdermadjian, 1998)

Sometime later, the Roman Empire seeking its influence in the eastern regions realized the strategic importance of Armenia and attacked it. Pompey the Roman general, allied with Phraates III and invaded Armenia, but peace eventually settled and the Parthian king cut off the region and for the first time, Armenia allied with Rome and became a base for anti-Parthian operations. (Al-Chibgian, 2003)

So that the king of this region was autonomous in internal affairs, but in foreign policy, he obeyed Rome and had to send troops to help the Romans in times of war. (Al-Chibgian, 2003)

The Parthian government from this time until the end of his life was involved with the Roman Empire, and most of these tensions and relations between the two sides were dominated by Armenia.

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<sup>1</sup>Antiochus III the Great, the powerful Seleucid king, ruled from 223 to 187 BC.

The first great war between Iran and Rome took place during the Orodes I of Parthia (37-35 BC) with the invasion of Iran by the Roman general Marcus Licinius Crassus. At this time, the successor of Tigranes the Great, Artavasdes II (55-34 BC), the fifth king of Armenia of the Artaxiad dynasty, promised Crassus military cooperation against the Persians under a treaty of alliance his father had with the Romans, but after Crassus ignored at his request, he became an ally of the Parthian king. (Burney, C.A. & Lang, D.M. 1971) The Romans were defeated in this battle war, known as the battle of Carrhae, and Artavasdes allied with the Parthians against the wishes of most of the people of his region. (Khorenatsi, 2018)

In the time of Phraates IV (37-2 BC) when Alfred Gutschmid introduced him as the most powerful Parthian king, (Gutschmid, 2009) the fire of war between Iran and Rome broke out again. Mark Antony, one of the three members of the Second Triumvirate of Rome, invaded Iran in 36 BC at the instigation of a Parthian general who had taken refuge in him but was severely defeated. Artavasdes of Armenia, who was considered an ally of Iran, hesitated to help the Romans and this led to Antony invading Armenia and capturing this land and killing Artavazd, which paved the way for the collapse of the Artaxiad dynasty by Rome. (Sarkissian, K. Kh. Et al., 1981) Antonius minted coins for conquering Armenia in Antioch, and this illustrates the importance of Armenia to the Romans. (Josef Wolski, 2007)

Before the fall of the Artaxiad, the Parthian policy towards Armenia was mild and even though Mithridates II of Parthia conquered the land, he was content to rule it. In other words, during this period the Parthians tried to impose their influence on Armenia by using ethnic and cultural ties with the

Armenians and expanding their relations with them. But after the fall of this dynasty, which lasted almost from the beginning of the first century AD until the collapse of the Parthians, the Parthian kings wanted more of Armenia to appoint a representative to the region.

Or in any way they might prevent its annexation to the Roman Empire

But they overlooked its complete conquest, which may have been due to the weakness of the Parthian government at the end of its period and the coexistence of the Romans. The fall of the Artaxiad coincided with the reign of Phraates V (2 BC-4 AD) and the Phraates IV's successor crisis in Iran. Hence, the Parthian government was weak, but in Rome, a powerful emperor such as Gaius Octavius Thurinus ruled.

Accordingly, the Romans found a good opportunity to intervene in the affairs of Armenia and protected that region, and in return recognized Phraates V as the king of Iran and the Euphrates River as the border between the two countries. (Velleius Paterculus, 1924)

Meanwhile, Gaius, Stepson of the Roman emperor, went to Armenia and appointed a man named Ariobarzanes son of Artabanus and the local king of Media Atropaten to rule Armenia. The people of Armenia, who wanted independence and did not accept obedience to any government whether Parthian or Roman, revolted, and Gayush was wounded and died. But due to the unfavorable situation in Iran, Armenia remained under Roman influence. (Debevoise, N. C. 1938)

Phraates V renounced Armenia in accordance with the treaty he had made with the Romans and did not help the rebels in the uprising of disgruntled Armenians against Rome, and this shortened Iran's hand in this area. The

Parthian nobles that dissatisfied with this, ousted the Shah. (Wazin Afzal, 2013)

Ariobarzanes ruled until the fourth year AD and was succeeded by his son Artavasdes III. However, this person could not gain the trust and support of the people and he was killed by those around him, and apparently, the Parthians prepared the ground for the assassination of this king. (Isaac, B. 1992)

But the Roman Empire, which pursued the same goal of appointing a puppet kingdom to Armenia, this time appointed Tigranes as king of Armenia. Tigranes was later overthrown for unknown reasons, and the Roman emperor Augustus which still held Armenia appointed the former Parthian king Vonones I (6-16 AD), who had been overthrown by Artabanus III of Parthia to rule Armenia. (Temporini, H & Haase, W. 1980)

Artabanus III, who did not accept Vonone's presence in Armenia appointed a Parthian nobleman named Xenon to the Kingdom of Armenia in 18 AD to consolidate the influence of the Parthian government in that region. But Xenon, as Roman troops were present in the region, cautiously placed himself under the protection of the new Roman emperor Tiberius, and with the approval of Germanicus, commander of the Roman forces in Asia was appointed king of Armenia by name Ardases III. He also had the support of the people of this land. Because he was educated among the Armenians and was familiar with their customs and traditions. Hence, Armenia was once again out of the hands of Iran. (Debevoise, 1938)

Artabanus II of Parthia was forced to accept this appointment and in return, the Romans accepted the Euphrates River as the border between Iran and Rome. The Parthian prince Vonones I, who had previously ruled Armenia, fled to Rome but was later assassinated by the Romans. (Tacitus, 1959)

Apparently, Vonones wanted to invade Iran, and by killing her, the Romans

prevented a temporary compromise with Iran, which had renounced its claim to Armenia.

After that, until 35 AD when Ardases III died, the situation progressed peacefully and away from tensions, and the Parthian king also used this opportunity to calm his internal territory in Iran. But after the death of the Shah of Armenia, conflicts between Iran and Rome began again, which lasted at least until 54 AD and the reign of Vologases I of Parthia.

After the death of Ardases III, Artabanus III sent his son Arsaces to Armenia with a strong army and appointed him to the throne. In a letter to the Roman emperor Tiberius, he declared himself the heir of the Achaemenid and Seleucid states and declared Armenia the inalienable right of Iran. (Tacitus, 1959)

But the Roman emperor refused to accept it and sent an Iberian prince named Mithridates to Armenia. Mithridates, who had the support of Foramen, king of Georgia, and ally of Rome captured Armenia, and Arsaces the son of Artabanus III, was assassinated in a conspiracy by those around him. Artabanus sent his other son Orodes to the Armenian government, but he too was defeated in a battle with Foramen. (Tacitus, 1959)

This time, Artabanus personally marched north with the aim of annexing Armenia to his territory and compensating for past defeats, but in the end, nothing happened and Armenia remained under Roman protection. (Tacitus, 1959)

This shows the weakness and decline of the Parthian government in the face of the Roman Empire. So that the Parthian king inevitably renounced his claim to the rule of Armenia during his treaty with Rome. (Pirnia, 2010)

But some time later, in 37 AD, the Roman emperor reappointed the son of Artabanus III to rule Armenia, who ruled until 42 AD under the protection of both the Iranian and Roman governments. In this year, Claudius, the new

Roman emperor, overthrew Orodes for reasons not well known in history and was replaced by Iberian Mithridates, who reigned under Roman absolute protection until 51 AD. (Debevoise, 1938) During this period, Vardanes Shah of the Parthian period (40-47 AD) could not impose his influence on Armenia, and it was only during the time of Vologases I of Parthia that the situation changed again in favor of the Parthian government.

### **Parthian relations with the Roman Empire and the role of Armenia in it during the rule of the Arsacid dynasty of Armenia**

The establishment of a Parthian government in Armenia is one of the most important periods in the history of this land, which was formed with the direct intervention of the Parthian government and the consent of the Roman Empire in Armenia. This dynasty came to power in Armenia following the political and military events of the time of Vologases I of Parthia and Nero, the Roman emperor, who in most cases acted in favor of the Iranian government due to their relative kinship with the ruling class of Iran.

### **Iran-Rome relations around the issue of Armenia and the formation of the Arsacid dynasty of Armenia during Vologases I of Parthia (77-51 AD)**

Mithridates Shah of Armenia was overthrown and killed by a man named Radamist, Prince of Georgia, and Radamist himself faced a revolt of supporters of the Parthian government, and as a result, lost the throne. At this time, the new Parthian king, Vologases I appointed his brother Tiridates to rule Armenia in 54 AD, with the support of the Armenian nobility and the people. (Pirnia 2010) This confirms that the issue of Armenia was in the focus of the Parthian

government at this time, and even the Armenian historian Tacitus (120-166 AD) referred to this issue in a short sentence: He (Vologases I) repeatedly shook Armenia in has brought. (Tacitus, 1959) On the other hand, Shah of Parthian used military force to advance his goals, in addition to political pressure, and in order to resolve possible tensions Inside the Parthian family, he appointed his brothers to the regional government so that he could rest in peace inside Iran. (Tacitus, 1959)

As for Armenia, due to the extremism and atrocities are shown by Mithridates Iberi and then Radamist of the previous rulers of Armenia, the Armenians changed their direction in favor of the Parthian government and placed themselves under the protection of Iran.

The outbreak of famine and infectious disease caused Vologases I of Parthia to leave Armenia after a few months and Radamist returned to power. But this return did not last long and he was forced to flee by the revolt of the supporters of the Parthian government, and while his wife fell into the hands of Tiridates of Parthia, he fled to Georgia and renounced the Armenian government. (Tacitus, 1959)

The Roman emperor Nero, who did not accept Parthian rule in Armenia, ordered Corbulo, commander of the Roman forces in Asia, to conquer Armenia. With the Roman invasion, a direct war broke out and spread to Mesopotamia, and even though the Romans had some initial success, they were finally defeated at the Battle of Randia in 62 AD against the joint forces of Armenia and Iran. Considering that Vologases I was busy suppressing an insurgency in eastern Iran, He agreed to a peace treaty with Rome.

According to this treaty, the Roman and Iranian forces had to leave Armenia and Tiridates went to Rome and received the crown of the Armenian kingdom from Nero.

(Debevoise, 1938) Thus a branch of the Parthian dynasty came to rule Armenia, known as the Arsacid dynasty of Armenia, whose kings were to receive their crowns from the Roman Empire, and Rome was obliged to choose its candidate from the Parthian family. (Garsoian, 1997) These dynasties ruled Armenia for four hundred years and were destroyed by the Sassanids in the early fifth century. (Vazin Afzal, 2013) The Arsacid dynasty of Armenia due to their relative kinship and close kinship with the Parthian kings, simultaneously with the political developments in Iran and in many cases became one of the main obstacles to the expansionist program of the Romans. (Sarkissian, K. Kh. Et al., 1981)

The issue of Armenia at the time of Vologases I apparently ended in favor of Rome and in fact in favor of the Parthians and restored peace to the region for nearly half a century. The long reign of Tiridates and his successors in Armenia accelerated the religious and cultural turn towards Iran and the Parthians and in Iran, the ancient Iranian traditions appeared in many aspects of government and society. For the first time during the Parthian period, Aramaic coins were used instead of the coins by Greek Script and became widespread in Armenia. (Burney, C. A. & Lang, D. M. 1971)

### **Iran-Rome relations and the role of Armenia in it after the Vologases I of Parthia**

The Parthian dynasty went into decline after the death of Vologases I, which lasted more or less until the end of its life. Instead, Rome had powerful emperors who, as a result, shifted the weight of the political and military equations, especially in the case of Armenia, in their favor. After Tiridates, the Persian court appointed a Parthian prince to rule

Armenia without Roman permission, which provoked strong protests from the Roman emperor Trajan. To prevent another war with Rome, Osroes I of Parthia (107-132 AD) called Partamazir, son of Tiridates as king of Armenia, and sent him to Rome to receive the royal crown, but he was killed by Trajan. (Pirnia, 2010) Subsequently, the Roman army invaded and occupied Armenia, implementing the Tiberius Plan by declaring Armenia as a Roman province.

King Osroes did not do anything about this attack, but finally, Hadrian the new Roman emperor, returned Armenia to Iran in a treaty in 122 AD, and once again the Euphrates River was declared the border between the two sides. (Wazin Afzal, 2013)

During Vologases III of Parthia (141-191 AD) the situation worsened again. In 161 AD, King Vologases declared war on the Roman emperor and attacked Armenia, whose king had accepted Roman rule, and then defeated Roman forces and crossed the Euphrates. But the Roman general Cassius defeated him and conquered Armenia, causing great damage to it, and then a puppet named Sohaemus ruled over the region. (Pirnia, 2010)

Thus, Roman supremacy over Armenia was strengthened, and the weak Parthian government was unable to expand its influence in the land. Of course, in 217 AD, after the Battle of Nisibis, which was the last Parthian war with the Romans, Artabanus V of Parthia (208-224 AD) the last Parthian king was able to install a Parthian prince named Tiridates II on the throne of Armenia and oblige Rome to abide by this treaty, but due to the unhealthy situation in Iran and the chaotic situation in Rome, the Shah of Armenia acted more or less independently at that time. (Rostovtzeff .M., 1960) Just as Artabanus V of Parthia was able to succeed against the Romans and Iran's foreign policy, events took place inside Iran that led to the

fall of the Parthians from the throne of power and the rise of the Sassanid dynasty. Our sources on the changes of government in Iran at this point in history, as well as on the issue of Armenia, are scant and sometimes silent, and reconstructing the events that led to the fall of the Parthian government is a difficult and arduous task. (Schippmann, 2005) It is equally clear that Artabanus V was defeated and killed by Ardashir I of the Sassanid dynasty and his family fled to the Kingdom of Armenia, which was accompanied by Roman forces. Thus, the Parthian government became extinct.

### **Conclusion**

Armenia has acted as a strategic territory with a special geographical position as a gateway to dominate the Caucasus and Anatolia on the one hand and Mesopotamia and inside Iran on the other. For this reason, during the Parthian rule, it was of great importance for Iran and the Roman Empire. Both sides knew that domination of Armenia meant exerting influence over the territories of the other side as well as preserving the territories under their control. For this reason, the issue of Armenia formed the main axis of relations between the Parthians and the Romans. Therefore, after removing the Seleucids from the throne of power in Iran, the Parthians turned to Armenia and took control of its situation during the reign of Mithridates II of Parthia. The history of Armenia in the Parthian period can be divided into two categories: the period of the Artaxiad dynasty from the start of the Parthians to Vologases I of Parthia period and the Arsacid dynasty of Armenia since the reign of Vologases I to the end of the Parthian government. In the first period, the Parthian government tried to exert more influence on Armenia through compromise and politics. During this period, the kings of Armenia sometimes sided with Iran and sometimes with Rome, but in

general, they considered their policy of independence. But with the weakness of Mithridates II's successors and unhealthy situation in the time of Phraates V, the Romans that hoping for complete domination of Armenia, overthrew the Artaxiad dynasty. The fall of this family caused the Armenians to be dissatisfied with the Romans and their inclination towards the Parthians. Vologases I of Parthia took advantage of this situation and appointed his brother Tiridates to rule Armenia, which was eventually approved by the Roman Empire. This event marked the establishment of the Arsacid dynasty of Armenia, which ruled Armenia for more than four hundred years. During this period, the candidate for the kingdom of Armenia was chosen from the Parthian dynasty of Iran but had to be approved by the Roman Empire. At least in the last hundred years of the Parthian government, good relations between Iran and Rome, which lasted for half a century after the establishment of the Parthian dynasty of Armenia, broke down and wars over the domination of each side over this land began, most of which were dominated by Rome. But finally, the Parthian government was able to re-establish its influence over Armenia during the time of its last king.

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