



AVARAYR

AVARAYR, a village in Armenia in the principality of Artaz southeast of the Iranian town of Mākū. The plain of Avarayr, located in the extreme northwest of Iran near the Soviet frontier, was the scene of an important battle which took place during an Armenian uprising against the Persians in the mid-fifth century A.D. The cause of the rebellion was a decree issued in 449 by the Sasanian king, Yazdegerd II (439-57), in which he ordered the Armenians, the bulk of whose country had become a vassal state of Iran at the Romano-Persian partition of 387, to convert from Christianity to Zoroastrianism. The Armenians refused and were forced to take up arms to defend their stand. In the course of this conflict, the Persians attempted an invasion of Armenia which was met by a combined force of Persarmenian nobles on the field of Avarayr lying along the banks of the Tłmut River (Rūd-e Zangemār), apparently the Armeno-Persian frontier at that time.

The battle took place on the Feast of Pentecost, 2 June 451. Its essential details were set down soon after by Łazar P'arpec'i; a more elaborate and probably somewhat fictionalized account was recorded by Ełiše (Elisaeus) late in the same century or possibly early in the next. According to the story, an Armenian army of 60,000 men, led by Vardan Mamikonean, met a force of 200,000 Persians, including the elite corps known as the Immortals led by Muškan Niwsalawurt. The Armenians had appealed to the Byzantines for aid without success and were further weakened by the defection of several noble houses led by Vasak, Lord of Siwnik', the most important principality in Armenia. In spite of these disadvantages, the Armenians were holding their



own until the Persians drew up their elephant corps. Through this tactic the Armenians were crushed, and Vardan and eight other generals were slain, together with the flower of the Armenian nobility and a large number of common soldiers. So spirited was the Armenian defense, however, that the Persians suffered enormous losses as well. Their victory was pyrrhic and the king, faced with troubles elsewhere, was forced, at least for the time being, to allow the Armenians to worship as they chose.

The battle of Avarayr has become the Armenian national holiday; its anniversary is a festival of the Armenian Church, and Vardan Mamikonean has become one of its saints. The defense of the Christian faith by the Armenians has been hailed as a landmark in the history of the struggle for religious freedom, and the fallen of Avarayr have been held up as examples of heroism, patriotism, and Christian virtue to generations of young Armenians. Contrary to popular belief, however, the battle was not decisive. The Persians persecuted Christianity in Armenia again within two generations, and the Armenians were forced to rise a second time under Vardan's nephew Vahan Mamikonean (481-84). Of greater significance is the social aspect of the original uprising, for, although several princely houses defected from the Armenian cause, the movement cut across class lines and appears to have had the support, not only of the bulk of the nobility and the church but of the common people as well.

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