



FEZANA Age-Appropriate Lesson Plan

Subject Category (circle one): Religion/Ceremony Celebration **History** Prayer
 Gathas Comparative Religion Shahnameh

Age Group (circle one): PreK-K Grades 1-3 Grades 4-5 **Grades 6-8** Grades 9-12

Lesson # (if applicable): The Sassanid Empire- Lesson 1
Subject of the Lesson: Establishment of the Sassanid Empire- Ardeshir I and Shapur I

Background Knowledge for the Teacher:

Background:

After the Alexander invasion of Iran and the establishment of the Seleucid Dynasty, an Iranian tribe from northeastern part of the Empire north of today’s Khorasan rose to power and established the Parthian Empire. The Parthian Empire was the longest lasting of the three Persian Empires. Towards the end of the Parthian Empire, there were several factors that led to the decline of the Parthians and rise of the Sassanids. Some of these factors were constant domestic troubles, a devastating epidemic of smallpox, repeated wars with the Roman empire, excessive power of the Parthian nobles over peasants and land resulting in decreasing central power and gradual uprisings of a Persian family who had both political and religious support bases. In 224 CE Ardeshir, the Parthian governor in the province of Pars overthrew Artabanus IV (r. 213-224 CE) the last Parthian King and established the Sassanid Dynasty (224-651 CE). The Sassanid Dynasty was the last Persian heritage rulers to control most of Western Asia before Islam.

Who was Sasan and how did the Sassanid Dynasty Start?

The troubles mentioned above evoked the political ambition of “Lord Sasan” who was a great hunter and warrior and the custodian of the Fire temple of Anahid (Anahita) at Estakhr/Istakhr (ancient city in the province of Pars near Persepolis).



Columns at Istakhr [www.Wikipedia.org]



A drawing of the ruins of Istakhr in the 19th century Papak was the custodian of the fire in Istakhr

He was married to Ram-Behesht, a princess of the Bazarangian family, who had the Kingdom of Pars (Persis) under the Parthian Empire. His son was Papak (Babak). Papak had two sons, Shapur and Ardeshir (Artaxerxes). It was Ardeshir (Ardeshir I) grandson of Sasan who defeated the last king of Parthians, Artabanus IV (Ardavan IV), in the battle of Hormozdagan and established the Sasanian rule in 224 AD and assumed the title “King of Kings” (Shahanshah). Ardeshir I considered himself an heir of the Achaemenids.

Overview of the Sassanid Dynasty:

- The Sassanid Dynasty by the end of Shapur I’s reign stretched from the Euphrates River to Indus River and included modern day Georgia and Armenia. Its capital was Ctesiphon.
- Sassanids consciously aimed to extend and revive Iranian tradition and eliminate the Greek cultural influence. Ardeshir I the founder of the Sassanid Dynasty built an empire under which Iranian nationalism was strengthened.
- The government was centralized with provincial officials directly accountable to the throne.
- Historians believe that society was divided into four classes: the priests, warriors, secretaries, and commoners. The royal princes, petty rulers, great landlords, and priests together constituted a privileged class, and the social system appears to have been fairly rigid.
- Sassanid rulers adopted the title shahanshah (king of kings), as sovereigns over numerous petty rulers, known as shahrdars.
- Sassanids emphasized urban planning, agricultural development, and technological improvements.
- Under the Sassanids Iranian art experienced a general renaissance. Architecture often took on grandiose proportions, such as the palaces at Ctesiphon, Firuzabad, and Sarvestan. Perhaps the most characteristic and striking relics of Sassanid art are rock sculptures carved on abrupt limestone cliffs, for example, at Shapur (Bishapur), Naqsh-e-Rostam, and Naqsh-e Rjab. Metalwork and gem engraving became highly sophisticated.
- Scholarship was encouraged by the state and works from both the East and the West were translated into Pahlavi, the language of the Sassanids.
- Zoroastrianism became the official state religion of the country and the gathering of the Avestan texts which had started during Parthian Dynasty were completed during Sassanids and more were added to the religious texts by the priests of the time. The Zoroastrian priesthood became immensely powerful. The head of the priestly class-(the mobadan mobad); along with the military commander-(the eran spahbod), and the head of the bureaucracy, were among the great men of the state.

Ardeshir I (224-241 CE), also known as Ardeshir e Papakan created an empire which was called Iranshahr and for over four centuries it was recognized as one of the two great powers in western Asia and Europe. He built an empire under which Iranian nationalism was strengthened. Ardeshir was known as a city builder and is also credited with building canals, and bridges. In addition, under his rule agriculture was

financed by the government. Ardeshir continued the tradition of the Parthian Empire by empowering the great noble Parthian families e.g., the Suren, Mehran and Kaaren in high state positions. In fact, the Sasanian Iranshahr has been described by some scholars as “the empire of Persians and Parthians”. The Parthian (Arsacid) noble families held the highest civil and military positions in the Sasanian Empire. Ardeshir made Zoroastrianism the state religion and he and his priest Tosar are credited with collecting the holy texts of Avesta and establishing a unified doctrine. As patron of Zoroastrianism, he appears in Zoroastrian tradition as a sage.



Coin of Ardeshir I, king of Persis in 206-224 AD. [www.wikipedia.org]

(Left: front of coin shows Ardeshir I; Right: back of coin shows his father Papak)

Shapur I (240-270 CE), the eldest son of Ardeshir I, succeeded him as the sole ruler of the Sassanids. Ardeshir I judged him as the gentlest, wisest, bravest, and ablest of all his children and nominated him as his successor. Data indicates that Shapur I shared rulership with his father before his father’s death. In a series of wars with Rome, Shapur I expanded the Sasanian territories significantly and in 260 CE was able to defeat and capture the Roman emperor Valerian and his army at Edessa (modern Urfa, Tur). Shapur I, illustrated this victory with a rock carving at Naqsh e Rostam near Persepolis (see image below).



Shapur I (on horse) capturing emperor Valerian.
(standing) and Philip the Arab (kneeling)
Rock-face relief at Naqsh-e Rostam (near Persepolis)



Shapur I was known as a builder and supporter of knowledge. He constructed dams, bridges, forts, and towns and developed industries and trade. Some examples of the developments ordered during his reign include: the dam at Shushtar known as Band e Qeysar and the city of Gondeshapur which was the first teaching hospital where young aspiring physicians learned from more experienced doctors (it became the center of learning). He encouraged the arts and culture. The architectural motif of the domed minaret was developed during his reign.

His tolerant religious policy allowed faiths such as Christians, Jews, and other religions to practice their faith freely and build churches or synagogues even when at times their teachings were antagonistic to the state religion Zoroastrianism. This atmosphere of tolerance allowed Mani (216-274 CE), the founder of Manichaeism to preach freely, in addition to having a place in Shapur I's court.

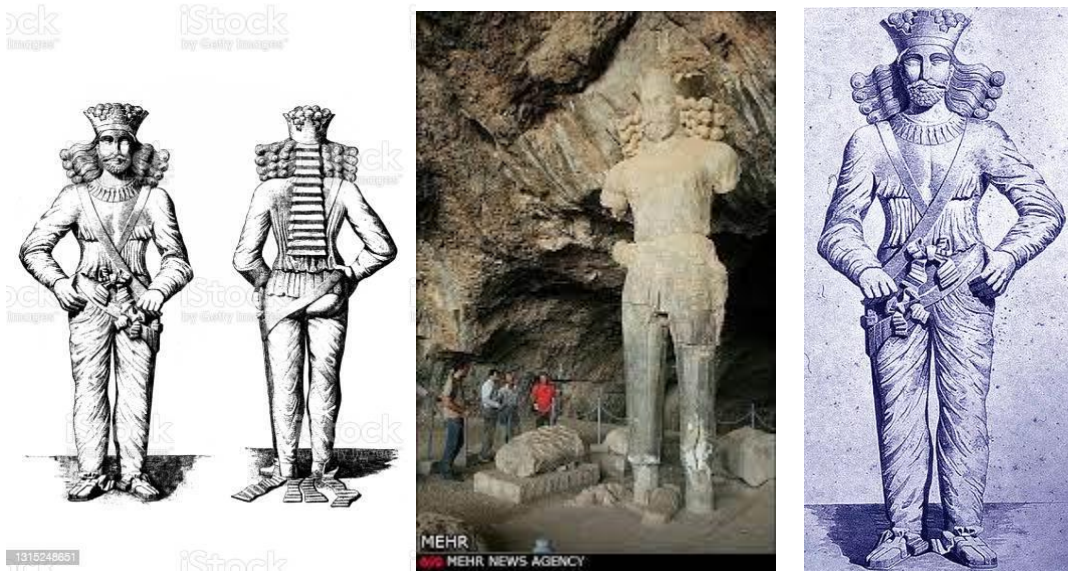
During the reigns of Shapur I, Hormozd I (270-271 AD), Bahram I (271- 274 AD) and Bahram II (274-293 AD), the Zoroastrian high priest, Kirdar (Kartir) gained increasing power and influence in the Sasanian empire. Bahram II appointed Kartir as the Mobed and the Datbar (a judge) of the whole empire and the custodian of the fire temple of Anahid (Anahita) at Estakhr.

Dr. Philip Matyszak, an author of ancient history, notes how "Persian noblemen of Shapur's time were cultured individuals who were expected to have a knowledge of literature and the arts. Many played chess, polo, or an early form of tennis" (242).

Shapur I maintained a stable and prosperous empire until his death when he was succeeded by Hormizd I who would continue his policies but was never as effective a monarch as his father had been.

Shapur I was a popular monarch and was honored through inscriptions and most famously the colossal statue of Shapur I, located in the Shapur Cave, a limestone cave located 6km from the ancient city of Bishapur in south of modern-day Iran. The statue is an intricately carved piece, which was decorated in antiquity with jewels and was so carefully created that, even in its present ruinous state, the image of the great king remains impressive and gives some idea of the grandeur of his reign.

Although he was defeated by the Roman forces under Odaenathus, he maintained his kingdom and continued his policies of justice, religious tolerance, great building projects, and cultural diffusion, handing this legacy on to his son who continued them. His reign is consistently praised by non-Roman scribes for all of these accomplishments, and he continues to be regarded as a King of Kings, with the same level of respect he knew while he lived, up to the present day.



Drawing and photo of the statue of Shapur I in Shapur Cave

Lesson for students:

1. Make a PowerPoint of the lesson to present to students.
2. Divide the lesson into different sections and give a write up of each section to a group in your class and have them present it to class in turn.
3. Break the class into three teams, give each team one of the following subjects, give each team 15 minutes to research their subject and present their findings to class.
 - a. Sassanid Dynasty
 - b. Ardeshir I
 - c. Shapur I

Activity for Students:

1. Have students draw the statue of Shapur I. Bring to their attention the style of his clothing and hair, etc.
2. Have a discussion with students about what Zoroastrian values did Shapur exhibit?
Example: Tolerance of other religions, giving importance to education, and the arts, building cities, and dams.
3. Use the activity suggestion file in “Teacher’s Guide” of fezana.org/education for in person and online activities.



Sources:

1. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sasanian-dynasty>
2. <https://www.iranchamber.com/history/sassanids/sassanids.php>
3. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ardashir-I>
4. <https://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/History/Sasanian/shapour I.htm>
5. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shapur-I>
6. https://www.worldhistory.org/Shapur_I/
7. Iranicaonline.org & www.wikipedia.org
8. Images from: www.wikipedia.org

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