



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 Parthian Empire- Lesson 1

Subject of the Lesson: The Parthian Empire (Ashkanian)

Background Knowledge for the Teacher:

The Parthian (Ashkanian) Empire (247 BC – 224 AD)

Background

After the defeat of Darius III by Alexander the Macedonian (331 BC), the Achaemenid Empire practically ended after 229 years of kingdom in Iran. Alexander then conquered Iran, the greater Khorasan and parts of India in the east. However, he died at the age of 33 in Babylon.

After Alexander's death (323 BC), his empire was divided into three kingdoms, namely, Seleucids in Asia, Antigonids in Macedonia, and Ptolemaic in Egypt. Seleucus I became the king of the largest of the three kingdoms which included today's Iran. He built a new city near Babylon and called it Seleucia aka Seleucia-on-Tigris and made it his capital. Seleucids ruled Iran for 80 years until one of the Iranian tribes, namely, the Parthians, rose to power and started to challenge the Seleucids' rule over Iran. They finally overcame the Seleucids and drove them off the Iranian territories and defined new borders. Parthian Empire ruled Iran for 471 years and was one of the most important and powerful kingdoms of Iran.

Who were the Parthian?

In ancient times, Parthia was an area that corresponded to what we know today as the greater Khorasan, which is the eastern region of the Iranian Plateau on the southeastern corner of the Caspian Sea. Darius the Great, according to inscriptions in Behistun, Persepolis (Takht-e Jamshid) and Naghsh-e Rostam, named the new kingdom (Parthia) Parthava. The Greek historians called it Parsuaya.

Strabo, a famous Greek historian, believed that Parthians were from Dahae confederation who belonged to the Saka tribes and used to live in today's Turkmenistan. Strabo believed that Parthians spoke the northern branch of Pahlavi language. The ancient Pahlavi had two branches i.e., the northern and the southern.

Where did the word Ashkanian come from?

This word is derived from the name Ashk (Arsacid or Arshak) who was the first Parthian ruler that rose against the Seleucids and formed a small kingdom. The future kings and rulers of Parthians would name themselves after Arsacid or Arshak in honor of the founding ruler of their empire. Therefore, we have Arsacid or Arshak I, II, III etc. throughout the Parthian Empire. Later, their empire became known as Arashkanian (Arsacids) and eventually changed to Ashkanian. Parthian's rule in Iran lasted 471 years which is longer than any other kingdom throughout the Iranian history. Nevertheless, the documents and information about the details of this great kingdom are very scarce.

[Source: History of Ancient Iran Book by Hasan Pir Nia]



Rise of an Empire:

Before Arsacid I (Ashk I or Arshak I) (247-211 BCE) initiated Parthian (Ashkanian) empire, he was the head of the Parni tribe located in central Asia and one of the tribes of the Dahae confederation. The Parni tribe lived in the northern Parthia and spoke in eastern Iranian language unlike the other Parthians in that region who spoke the western Iranian languages. Parthians were initially under the rule of Achaemenid empire and then under the Seleucid empire. Most of the Parthian kings claimed to be related to the Achaemenian kings.

Some of the more noteworthy Parthian kings:

1. Mithridates I (Arsacid V or Mehrdad I) (ca. 171-138 BC) was the fifth king of Parthia who established Parthia as an ancient world power. By the time Mithridates I died, the Parthian empire included Parthia Proper, Hyrcania (Gorgan region), Media, Babylonia, Assyria, Elam, Persis (Pars region) and the districts of Tapuria (Mazandaran region) and Traxiana (later known as Khorasan).
2. Mithridates II (ca. 124-88 BCE), known as "the Great" assumed the title "King of Kings" around 109 BCE. Around 115 BCE he was visited by an embassy from the Chinese emperor Wu-ti and the two rulers reached an agreement on the opening of the trade route later known as the "Silk Road". Another meeting took place with Rome in 96 BCE and although the outcome of the meeting is unclear but the agreements with China and Rome proved Parthia's rise to world status. Mithridates II faced an internal problem namely the power and influence of the Parthian nobility,

represented by a few great families who were able to oppose the monarch frequently. This time is characterized as a “time of internal disorder” by ancient writers.

Constant conflict between Parthia and Rome. Some examples include:

1. In May 53 BCE Crassus, a Roman general, and over 40,000 of his Roman troops were defeated severely by the Parthian forces under the command of a young Parthian named Surena at Carrhae. Parthian king Orodes II had Surena executed fearing that he would constitute a threat to his crown.
2. In 36 BCE the Romans under Antony attacked Parthians and were defeated. After which a civil war broke out among Parthians which lasted from about 32 BCE-25 BCE when Tiridates revolted against the king with the nobility’s support which failed at the end.
3. Romans under Augustus took advantage of instability within Parthian Empire and attacked Armenia. Phraates IV (Parthian king) complied with the demands of the Romans to free the captives from the Carrhae battle which was seen as a great victory among Romans. At the end Romans recognized Euphrates as a frontier border and Parthians accepted Roman overlordship over Armenia.
4. Parthians and Romans were in constant disagreement over Armenia, and each tried to control the region either by military force or by the placing their desired king as ruler of Armenia. Armenia situated by the Black Sea occupied a valuable trade route.

Major reasons for decline and end of the Parthian Empire

1. The Parthian nobles gained power and influence due to their military power and increasing rights over the land and its peasants. The increased nobility power allows them to resist and defy the king, refusing to pay levies and failing to answer the call to arms that had been Parthia’s source of power.
2. Internal disagreements over succession often ended in murder and a continued slide in power.
Example:
Augustus the Roman ruler sent Phraates IV an Italian slave girl named Musa as a gift, and she became Parthian king’s favorite wife. She bore him a son who became known as Phraates V. To secure Phraates V’s succession, Phraates IV sent his four eldest sons to the Romans, but Musa used the opportunity and poisoned Phraates IV and put her son on the throne.
3. The resulting disorganization and fragmentation of the empire made way for successful Roman incursions into Parthian territories where rich commercial centers and royal treasuries were plundered, and territories lost to invaders. Petty kings rose to fill the power void; this power redistribution ended in a direct attempt to overthrow the monarchy.

In 224 CE, Artabanus IV, Parthian governor in the Achaemenid home province of Persis (Fars), overthrew Artabanus IV and established the Sasanid Dynasty. The last Parthian king, Vologases VI, issued

his last dated coin in 228 CE. The Sasanians would rule Iran until the Islamic conquest in 641 CE. The Sasanians were ardent Zoroastrians in conflict with their Armenian subjects who originally were Zoroastrians but subsequently embraced Christianity. The years of Sasanid rule saw a continuation of the struggle between Persia and Rome begun in the Parthian period.

[Source: www.parthia.com]



Parthian Empire at its peak during the reign of Mehrdad (Mithridates) II (124-91 BC)

[Source: <https://www.iranchamber.com/history/parthians/parthians.php>]



Arsacid I (247-211 BC); Source: Parthia.com



Mithridates I (171-138 BC) *Source: Parthia.com*

Glossary:

NISA an Arsacid city and ceremonial center in Parthia (FIGURE 1). Nisa is situated in modern Turkmenistan, about 18 km to the west from its capital Ashgabat (‘Ešqābād, see ASHKHABAD), at the foot of the Kopet Dagh, the chain of mountains that divides the Iranian plateau from the Turkmen plain, beyond which lies the Qara Qum desert. ...

[Source: <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nisa>]

Lesson for students:

1. Make a PowerPoint of the lesson or use the provided PowerPoint to present the lesson to students.
2. Combine activity and lesson.
 - a. Use the section, “Major reasons for decline and end of the Parthian Empire” to have an open discussion with the class.
 - i. How could Zarathushtra’s teachings help the leadership of the country become strong?

Example answers:

A leader and those around him/her need to care about the welfare of the people and the land not about personal gain. Vohu Khshathra is a desired dominion built on using Vohu Mana (good mind) and Asha (truth and righteousness).

- b. Using the section, “Constant conflict between Parthia and Rome,” present examples of poor leadership leading to the fall of the Parthian Empire.



Activity for Students:

1. Give students a blank map and have them mark the boundaries of the Parthian Empire. Then ask them to mark the important bodies of water, cities, etc. that make the Parthians strong in trade and economy. Discuss.
2. Draw one of the Parthian coins. Pay close attention to their hats-what did they decide to have minted on the back of the coin? What does the text say? What do you think is the importance of the chosen images?
3. Make a puzzle for the lesson.
4. Make a Kahoot game to share with class and use activity ideas from the “Teacher’s Guide” section.

Sources:

1. *History of Ancient Iran Book by Hasan Pir Nia*
2. www.fa.wikipedia.org
3. www.parthia.com
4. www.wikipedia.org
5. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nisa>
6. <https://www.iranchamber.com/history/parthians/parthians.php>
7. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/arsacids-iv>

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