



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 2
Subject of the Lesson: Shapur II and Yazdgerd I

Background Knowledge for the Teacher:

Background:

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). His son, Shapur I, ruled after Ardeshir I. Zoroastrianism was the state religion. Religious texts were gathered, and more were added by the mobeds of that time. During their reign the Empire was expanded, the University of Gondeshapur was established, in addition to many cities, and dams.

The kings following Shapur I were ineffective and not strong rulers. The advisors of the ninth king, Hormizd II, were tired of ineffective monarchs and thought that they could control one that they molded, so they crowned Hormizd II's newborn son, Shapur II in 309 CE. The newborn king's advisors were as ineffective as the previous rulers. They did not take action when Arab tribes began invading regions to the south and establishing themselves in communities from Pars to Mazun from which they would launch raids, nor did they try to regain the territories lost to the Roman Empire. Nothing much is known of Shapur II's childhood but after his coronation at Ctesiphon at the age of 16, he took immediate action to reverse the Empire's fortunes.

Shapur II (309-379 CE) was the tenth and longest reigning monarch in Iranian history. He was named king shortly after his birth and the government was administered by his advisors until his 16th birthday when he came of age and took control of his kingdom.

He reformed the military and personally led an expedition against the Arabs who had crossed over to Fars and Khuzestan and had devastated urban centers and ruined countryside. As a result of this expedition, the Persian lands invaded by Arabs such as Pars, Mazun, and the Persian Gulf coastline were quickly liberated. Shapur II then loaded his army onto ships and sailed across the Gulf to confront the Arabs on their own ground, taking Bahrain, Ghateef, and Ymama adding these regions to the Empire in the south. His action was swift, strong, and accompanied by harsh punishment so that the Arabs avoided invading Persian lands for many years to come. Arabs called him Shapur the Dol-aktaf (piercer of shoulders).

He also reclaimed lands to the north and west from Romans while extending the territory to the East. Shapur II ordered the building of the Shapur's ditch (Khandagh-e Shapur) as a defensive line along the



southern border of Mesopotamia. He also ordered defensive walls be built along the southern borders of the Empire, modeled on Roman walls and fortifications in Syria. By doing this he followed his predecessors' (Ardeshir I and Shapur I) policies by borrowing ideas from other cultures and improving them.

Shapur II demanded from the Romans to return the land formerly owned by his ancestors including Armenia. To contradict Sassanid's influence in Armenia, the Roman Emperor, Constantine, who had converted to Christianity, supported Armenia against Persia and in 312 CE, he recognized Christianity as a legitimate religion and declared himself as the protector of Christianity including those living in Persia.

During the reign of Shapur II, Christianity was a serious danger to the Empire. The Armenians were split into two groups: those who supported the Romans and the Christian Emperor against Shapur II, and those who kept their Iranian background. According to Iranian authorities, Christians insulted Shapur's authority, mocked his religious beliefs, disobeyed his commands, refused to pay taxes, or serve in the army, and even welcomed Roman agents, demolished fire temples, and promoted revolt.

Shapur II reversed the traditional Persian policy of religious tolerance and inclusion and declared a double tax on all Christians in the Empire. When the Christian leader, Shemon bar Sabbae refused to pay the tax and told others not to, the persecution of the Christians was initiated under Shapur II.

It is interesting to know that the same policy against Christians was implemented by Athanaric, king of the Goths (d. 381 CE) from 369-372 CE. He believed that the Christian missionaries were undermining his people's traditional beliefs and weakening his authority as a king. No other religion suffered under Shapur II. He even encouraged the worship of Anahita a deity which strict Zoroastrianism discouraged.

Perhaps as another way to strengthen his policy against the Christians, Shapur II enforced Zoroastrianism as the "national religion" with an organization and hierarchy that could rival the Christian church of the Roman Empire. It is believed that development of "Din-Dabireh" i.e., "the religious script" (the Avestan alphabet) must have followed this change. He followed Ardeshir I and Shapur I by committing Avesta to writing. These writings were copied and studied at intellectual and cultural centers such as Gundeshapur (world's first teaching hospital) and other institutions of higher learning established by Shapur II.

The religion, Zurvanism was popular during his reign. In Zurvanism, Ahura Mazda is replaced by the god Zurvan (representing infinite time) Ahura Mazda became a created being rather than the creator against Ahriman.

In 363 CE, the Roman Emperor, Julian marched onto Persia, but his forces were defeated, and he died in the Battle of Samarra in 363 CE. Shapur II ordered the evacuation of Roman citizens from the cities he had taken and repopulated them with Persians. He restored and repopulated Nisibis and Susa, among others, and built Eranshahr. In addition to his building projects, he continued to stabilize his government by reforming it so that the magi no longer held their previous power over the throne and established clear rules of succession for further stability of the crown.

Shapur II died of natural causes in 379 CE, naming Ardeshir II as his successor. He is known as one of the great kings of the Sassanid Empire.



Shapur II [www.Wikipedia.org] Shapur II coin [[Google images-Wikimedia](#)]

Yazdgerd I (399-420 AD), the Sasanian king of kings (shahanshah) of Iran, was the grandson of Shapur II and the son of Shapur III (383-388 AD) and had succeeded his assassinated brother Bahram IV (388-399 AD). During Yazdgerd I's reign, Iran was in relative peace. During his reign, the Roman Empire was in danger from all sides. The Ostrogoths were plundering the Balkans, the Franks were in rebellion, a civil war was raging, and the eastern province was at revolt. It was the perfect time for Yazdgerd I to attack Persia's long-time enemy. Instead of raging war, he established good relations with the Eastern Roman Empire. He freed the captive Roman Christians whom the Persians had rescued after routing and invading the Hunnic Army.

His good will was so well known that the Roman Emperor Arcadius, seeing his enemies conspiring to kill his only son, Theodosius (an infant at the time), appointed Yazdgerd I in his will as the child's guardian. Yazdgerd I wrote to the Roman senate, accepting the charge and threatened war against any who attempted conspiracy to harm the child. He sent Antiochus, a highly educated advisor and instructor as Theodosius' tutor.

Yazdgerd I issued a decree which has been termed "the Edict of Milan for the Assyrian Church". It permitted Christians to worship openly, to build ruined churches, and to allow bishops to travel freely in their dioceses. Taking Bishop Marutha's advise, the Eastern Roman Emperor's special representative at Ctesiphon, Yazdgerd I convened a religious council in Seleucia in 410 CE to organize church affairs. He was also known for his friendly relations with Jews and the Christians of the Church of the East which he had acknowledged in 410 AD.

This patronage of Christianity naturally was not favored by the nobility and the Zoroastrian clergy. Sassanid based sources judge him as a tyrant for his harsh punishments, listening more closely to foreign advice, and preventing those surrounding him from forming close friendships with one another. As such he was known as “the sinner” in these literatures.

In his very last year Yazdgerd I changed his attitude toward the Christians and ordered a persecution because they, through boldness and missionary zeal, committed offensive acts, such as the destruction of fire temples, theft of property deeds, slandering of the Mazdaean faith and disobedience of royal orders.

In 420CE Yazdgerd I died of uncertain cause, it is presumed that he either died of illness or was mysteriously assassinated in the remote northeast in 420 CE.

After Yazdgerd I’s death quarrels over his succession immediately followed. He had three sons, Shapur, Bahram, and Narse. Shapur who was assigned as the King of Armenia in 416CE, hurried to Ctesiphon to claim kingship but was killed by courtiers. Bahram who was raised by the king of Haira, brought an Arab army to the Ctesiphon and forced the nobility to accept his rule. He then appointed Narse as the governor of Khorasan.



Drachma (coin) of Yazdgerd I [www.Wikipedia.org]

Lesson for students:

1. Make a PowerPoint of the lesson to present to students.
2. Divide the students in two groups. One group reads about shapur II while the other reads about Yazdgerd I in depth. Then, the groups present the information they found and complete a Venn diagram of the two figures. Use the link below to access the Venn diagram or print the one accompanying this lesson.



[https://www.google.com/url?q=https://celt.cuw.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Venn-Diagrams-with-Lines-](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://celt.cuw.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Venn-Diagrams-with-Lines-1.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1676571511335066&usg=AOvVaw081cZnuphblYug5rdAArV)

[1.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1676571511335066&usg=AOvVaw081cZnuphblYug5rdAArV](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://celt.cuw.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Venn-Diagrams-with-Lines-1.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1676571511335066&usg=AOvVaw081cZnuphblYug5rdAArV)

Activity for Students:

1. Have an open discussion with students either after the lesson or while students are presenting their sections. Example discussion questions:
 - a. Imagine yourself being Shapur II and growing up without a father to guide you in matters of state then becoming king at 16 years of age. What characteristics do you think Shapur II possessed to be able to rule effectively at 16 years of age?
 - b. What do you think of the persecution of Christians during Shapur II? During Yazdgerd I?
 - c. Do you think Yazdgerd I should have taken advantage of the Roman Empire's weakened state to wage war?
 - d. Do you think the nobility and the clergy's discontent with Yazdgerd I was just?
2. Have students write their names using Din Dabireh alphabet.
Refer to History-Pre-Achaemenids-Lesson 7-History of Writing Handout for Din Dabireh alphabet.
3. Use the images of Shapur II and Yazdgerd I's coins (Google Search images) and have students draw them.
4. Use the activity suggestion file in "Teacher's Guide" of fezana.org/education for in person and online activities.

Sources:

1. https://www.worldhistory.org/Shapur_II/
2. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/yazdegerd-i>
3. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Yazdegerd-I>
4. Sassanid Persia by Arthur Christensen translation by Rashid Yasami

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