



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 3
Subject of the Lesson: Bahram V and Yazdgerd II

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 added by mobeds of the time. During his and then Shapur I's 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. In 309 CE, Shapur II became king and proved to be an effective ruler by securing the country's borders in addition to building the land. Yazdgerd I is known for his peaceful relations with the Eastern Roman Empire and in 420 CE his son Bahram V became king of the Sassanid Empire.

Bahram V (also known as Wahram V and Bahram-e Gur) was the Sasanian king of kings during 420-438 AD. He was the son of Yazdgerd I. At an early age, Bahram was sent to Al-Hira (a city in the Arab region under Persian rule) to be raised by the king of Lakhmid Arabs, named Mundhir.

The Persian nobles and the priests' influence and power had increased since the death of Shapur II at the expense of the central authority and the nobles did not want Yazdgerd's sons to take the throne.

Yazdgerd I's eldest son Shapur governor of Persarmenia hurried to Ctesiphon to seize the crown but was murdered. A prince of Sassanid descent, named Khosro was elected to take the throne. Bahram asked Mundhir for military assistance and marched to the Persian capital. The nobles, after negotiation accepted Bahram's rule with the condition that he would right his father's misrule. According to the Shahnameh (the epic book of poetry written by Ferdowsi), the nobles put the throne between two lions and whoever would retrieve the crown would be king. Khosro withdrew and Bahram courageously fought the lions with his sword and claimed the throne. He left the task of administration to his father's officials, especially Mihr Narseh, the grand minister.

His reign was generally peaceful with only two brief wars – first against the Eastern Roman Empire (to the west of Iran) and the second, against his eastern neighbors; the White Huns (the Hephthalites) who

were disturbing the Sasanian eastern provinces. Bahram defeated the Huns by pretending as if he were hunting in the Northern part of Iran; however, instead he marched night and day toward the east, arriving faster than anyone could imagine, surprising the enemy and winning the war. Bahram then marched to India, where the Indian King had suffered at the hands of the White Huns/Hephthalites, so he gave Bahram; the territories of Sand and Morkan for defeating them. It is said that upon returning from India, Bahram brought thousands of musicians to entertain the Persians.

At this time Christians were persecuted in Iran while Zoroastrians were persecuted in Rome. The two countries went to war and the result of the war was a peace treaty for Romans to stop persecuting the Zoroastrians and for Iran to stop persecuting the Christians. In addition, Romans were to contribute financially to the defense of the Caucasus passes (the border region of Southeast Europe and Western Asia, between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea) against the Huns.

Bahram then put an end to the Arsacid line of Armenian kings (Ashkanian of Armenia) and replaced them with a governor of frontier men known as, marzban which marked a new era in Armenia.

Bahram is remembered as one of the most famous kings in Iranian history for several reasons, namely,

- the cancellation of taxes and public debt at celebratory events,
- the encouragement of musicians through promoting them to higher ranks and bringing thousands of Indian minstrels to Iran to entertain his subjects.
- his enjoyment of hunting especially gazelle and onager (Gur in Persian), which is where he got his nickname, Bahram e Gur.

Bahram is, also very popular in Iranian literature and art such as in the Shahnameh and the poem, “Haft Paykar” by Manzoom e Nezami. His coins show him wearing a crown with three-step crenellations and a large crescent of the moon. The coins also show the appearance of the crowned king’s bust within the flames of the fire altar on the reverse. There are mixed accounts of Bahram’s death in one tradition, is said to have occurred during hunting and in another version, it is said that he died of natural causes.



Drachma of Bahram V [www.Wikipedia.org]



Image of Bahram hunting Onagers



Yazdgerd II, son of Bahram V (r. 421-439 CE), was the Sasanian king of kings during 439-457 AD. His reign was marked with continuing wars with the Eastern Roman Empire (to the west of Iran) and the Eastern Hephthalites (to the east of Iran). He was an astute and well-read ruler whose motto was "Question, examine, see. Let us choose and hold that which is best".

War with the Eastern Roman Empire:

Upon ascending the throne, he waged a war with the Roman Empire, starting in 440 CE with little success for either side. Yazdgerd II and Emperor Theodosius I agreed that no new frontier fortresses were to be built in Mesopotamia. Yazdgerd II then moved to Armenia and defeated the Armenians, taking the surviving Armenian nobility, priests, and remaining forces to the east to fight the Hephthalites.

In the 440's, Yazdgerd II had constructed a defensive system at Derbent to fend off incursions from the north by one of the Hun tribes, known as the Col. An inscription on one of the walls of the Derbent Fortress indicates that the tribute paid by the Romans was used for the renewal of the fortress. The tribes from the north were a threat for both Persians and the Romans and many times the Romans paid tribute to the Persians to defend against the northern attacks.

Yazdgerd II is remembered fondly in Sassanian based sources as a king who was interested in the wellbeing of the country and aimed to bring justice for all. Unlike his grandfather, Yazdgerd II was not harsh tempered and unlike his father, he did not practice hunting or feasting and holding long audience sessions. He tended to the masses and organized the army. He was known as "Gentle Yazdgerd". His grand vizier, Mehr Narseh, who served his father and grandfather aided him in the affairs.

Yazdgerd II and the Religions Within the Empire

He was devoted to Zoroastrianism. Persecution of the Christians continued during his reign. In 445-46, repressive measures were enacted against the Christians in the Sassanid Empire including their expulsion from the army. Yazdgerd II also sent Mehr Narseh to Armenia to impose Zoroastrianism on the members of the Armenian noble houses. This resulted in an uprising by a group of Armenian nobility which resulted in the killing of Persian officials and the Zoroastrian priests. The Sassanids sent an army to Armenia and the confrontations resulted in the destruction of the Armenian forces, deaths, capture of Christian priests and the exile of the remaining forces to Khorasan in 454 CE.

In 455 CE, a Jewish persecution was initiated in Persia in the form of forbidding the Jews to celebrate the Sabbath openly and publicly and by 467 CE Jewish schools were closed and some of the leaders were executed. The Jewish population reacted by peeling the skin off two Zoroastrian priests alive in Isfahan resulting in further persecution and revolts.

These activities by the Jews are suggested to be the result of Jewish messianic expectations (a movement that is centered around the arrival of a messiah), which coincided with the fifth century CE. The

persecution of Jews and Christians by Yazdgerd II can also be explained as his active policy to bring the non-Zoroastrian Iranian nobility in line with the state religion of Zoroastrianism.

These actions encouraged a uniform religious identity among the King's subjects, an agenda of the Sassanid kings from the time of Shapur II to centralize Zoroastrianism and subdue the Christian and Jewish population of the Empire. This may be the time when the Christians moved eastwards to Central Asia.

Yazdgers II's Firsts:

Yazdgerd II was the first Sassanid king to adopt the title of "kay" (King), associating himself with the Kayanid Dynasty (mythical dynasty of Shahnameh and commemorated in the Avesta). Starting with Yazdgerd II a new legend appeared on the Sassanid coinage, "The Mazda-worshipping majesty, the Kayanid".

During his reign, a style was introduced where the attendants face the fire altar in a posture of reverence.

Yazdgerd II's Death and His Succession:

Yazdgerd II died in 457 CE without having designated a successor and entrusted the task to the elite. Civil war soon followed and his eldest son Hormozd III ascended to the throne at the city of Ray while Peroz, Yazdgerd II's younger son, fled to the northeast to raise an army to claim the throne to himself. The Empire fell into a power struggle and became divided.



Gold dinar minted during the reign if Yazdgerd II
[www.Wikipedia.org]

Lesson for students:

1. Make a PowerPoint of the lesson to present to students.
2. Break the class into two teams and give each team a write up of one of the kings in this lesson. Give them time to prepare and have each team present the lesson in turn with the teacher filling in the missed details.
3. Break the class into two 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. Bahram V
 - b. Yazdgerd II

Activity for Students:

1. Have students draw the coin of either Bahram V or Yazdgerd II then discuss the meaning of the images on the coins. For example, the fire altar on the back is a sign of the kings belief in the Zoroastrian religion.
2. Have a discussion with students.

Example:

- a. Compare and contrast the two kings' religious policies. Why were they persecuting the Christians? Why did Yazdgerd II start persecuting the Jews?

Possible answer: Persia was at war with the Eastern Roman Empire and most believe that the Christians supported Persia's enemy, and some acted as spies within the Empire.

- b. What do you think will be the difference between an Iranian writing about Bahram V vs a Roman?

Possible answer: Most of the time history is written differently depending on the historian's point of view. An Iranian historian may have found Bahram V a kind ruler because he forgave taxes during celebrations and brought musicians to Iran to entertain the people in addition to winning war victories for Iran. However, a Roman historian may have seen him as a tyrant because Christians were persecuted in Iran and its control over Armenia.

- c. Why was Armenia so important to the Persians and the Romans?

Possible answer: It gave them control over the Black Sea, which led to better trade.

3. Use the activity suggestion file in "Teacher's Guide" of fezana.org/education for in person and online activities.

Sources:

1. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bahram-05>
2. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/yazdgerd-ii>
3. <https://www.eranshahr.com/shahs/yazdgerd-ii>

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Date: 4/2023