



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 7

Subject of the Lesson: Yazdgerd III and Fall of the Sassanid Empire

Background Knowledge for the Teacher:

Background:

Khosrow Parviz's wars with the Eastern Roman Empire exhausted the army, many capable military commanders were killed, and at the end Iran did not receive a profitable gain from the war. After the death of Khosrow Parviz, his son Sheroe (Kavad II) became king but died from the plague a few months after taking the throne. His young son Ardashir III became his successor.

Sassanid Empire after the death of Khosrow Parviz

After the death of Khosrow Parviz, there were a series of civil wars with the most powerful members of the nobility gaining full autonomy and starting to create their own government. The royal council and the generals could not agree on who should be king. Iran had a succession of eight kings and two queens within five years. Their names are: Kavad II (628), Ardashir III (628-629), Shahrbaraz (629-630), Queen Purandokht (630-631), Zurvanshah Gushnabad (631), Queen Azarmidokht (631), Farrokhzad (631), Peroz II (631), Khurzad Khusrow (631-632) and Hormazd V (632).

After five disastrous years in which the affairs of the country were neglected and the confidence of the Iranians in the Sasanian Royal Family deteriorated, the last Sasanian King Yazdegerd III came to the throne at a very young age in 632 CE. In ancient times, calendars were counted in terms of the number of years of the reign of the then current monarch. Since Yazdgerd III was the last Zoroastrian King, many Zoroastrians follow the calendar which starts with the first year of his reign as year 1. Thus 632 CE is year 1 in most Zoroastrian calendars, whether it is Shansahi, Kadimi or Fasli.

In the same year that Yazdegerd III took the throne, prophet Muhammad passed away and Omar became his successor and the caliph of the Muslims.



Above: Coin image of Yazdgerd III

Yazdgerd III (l. 624-652 CE, r. 632-651 CE)

Yazdgerd III's father was Prince Shahriyar (d. 628 CE), and his grandfather was Khosrow II known as Khosrow Parviz (r. 590-628 CE).

The prolonged and non-advantageous relationship by Khosrow Parviz with the Byzantine Empire had severely weakened the Sassanids. Many good commanders were killed in the war, and the war was a costly one without much gain. Iranian citizens were unhappy due to domestic economic neglect. The situation worsened when Kavad II (r. 628 CE) assassinated all his brothers and the others that could be heirs to the throne. Young Yazdgerd III was hidden away in safety during Kavad II's short reign and the civil wars that followed.

Yazdgerd III took the throne at a very young age. During the early years as king, the real ruling power was with the army commanders and powerful aristocracy who did not operate in the best interest of the Empire. His later years were spent fleeing from one area to another, gathering armies to fight the Arabs. When he arrived in Merv (Merw or Marv in Persian), a city in eastern part of Iran in today's Turkmenistan, for the same purpose, he was assassinated by either the ruler of the city or a miller man trying to steal from Yazdgerd III.

When Yazdgerd III took the throne, the Empire was declining.

Below are the main reasons:

1. The effect of events during Khosrow Parviz's reign
 - a. The Byzantine War
 - i. Many capable, loyal soldiers and commanders died leaving a dangerous military vacuum.
 - ii. The war not only weakened the Persian Empire but the other superpowers of the region, the Byzantine Empire as well, allowing the tribal neighbors such as the Turks and Arabs to take advantage of the situation without much resistance.
 - iii. Iran spent heavy funds to continue the war but without winning, riches were not added to the Empire's treasury.
 - iv. The long war left domestic matters unattended, leaving the common man under economic pressure.



- b. The nobility
 - i. The hostilities between the Persian and Parthian noble families resulted in the division of the wealth of the nation.
 - ii. The nobility had grown increasingly wealthy at the expense of the lower class.
 - iii. The tax reforms and the changes in the government under Khosrow I had been revoked by the nobility under Khosrow II so then again, the laws benefited the rich.
 - c. Zoroastrian clergy
 - i. The Zoroastrian clergy had grown so corrupt that Zurvanism, Christianity, Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Judaism were all gaining more adherence which weakened the social structure of the empire by undermining the authority of the state religion.
2. Kavad II's reign
- a. Khosrow Parviz's imprisonment and death, followed by the killing of all the possible male descendants to the throne greatly distressed the nobility and public.
 - b. The plague of 627-628 CE left the country in a more dire condition.
 - c. The death of Kavad II from the plague without any adult candidates of the royal lineage to take the throne, set the nobility even further against one another, each one looking for their own benefits as to who should take the throne.
3. After Kavad II
- a. In the span of 5 years, 8 kings and 2 queens sat on the Sassanid throne leaving disarray and chaos to follow.
 - b. Such instability gave the opportunity to Gokturks in the east, Khazars to the west and Arabs to the south to constantly invade Iran's borders.

Less than a year after Yazdgerd III had taken the throne, Muslim Arabs under Mosni ibn Haresa took the city of Hira in 633 CE. Rostam Farrokhzad a seasoned Persian commander was able to drive them out in 634 CE, but they returned. Bahram, the Sassanid General defeated the Arabs in Mesopotamia in 634-635 CE, but this was an exception to the future battles.

Battle of Qadisiyya

Iran had plenty of weapons, but few trained men were left to use the weapons effectively. In 636 CE, Yazdgerd III deployed Rostam Farrokhzad to put an end to the Arab invasion. Rostam met the Arab army under the command of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas (l. 595-674 CE) at the battle of Qadisiyya. Rostam began by negotiation, and when that failed, he demanded the Arabs to surrender and withdraw. Waqqas, replied that the Sassanians could either convert to Islam, become slaves, or die by the sword.

The battle began in Rostam's favor, but the Arabs disabled many of his war elephants and their use of camels in cavalry units gave them the advantage of the uneven, sandy terrain. The second and third day



swayed between the two sides. On the fourth day, Rostam broke the Arab lines and was close to victory when a sandstorm erupted blinding his troops, allowing the Arabs to regroup. Rostam and his high command were killed, and the Sassanid army defeated.

Upon hearing this, Yazdgerd III fled from Ctesiphon with his advisors, the royal family, and the nobles. When Waqqas arrived in Ctesiphon, he found the city nearly empty, he looted it and sent the goods back to Caliph Umar.

Battle of Nihavand

Yazdgerd III desperately gathered an army to face the Arabs at Jalula in 637 CE but were defeated. He fled to different parts of the Empire asking for taxes and troops to battle the Arabs, this demand at times alienated the host governors. He finally raised an army of 150,000 mostly untrained men and met the Arabs in the Battle of Nihavand in 642 CE where he was defeated, and his army destroyed.

Yazdgerd III's Death

Yazdgerd III continued to regroup for the next nine years while the Arabs dismantled the Sassanid Empire, suppressing Persian culture and religion, killing those who would not accept Islam, and taking men, women and children to the slave markets of Mecca. Zoroastrian fire temples were destroyed or turned into mosques, Zoroastrian texts burned, and Persian palaces and homes looted.

In 651 CE, Yazdgerd III arrived in Marw in the eastern part of the Empire seeking taxes and soldiers but was killed. Some accounts say he was killed by a local miller who wanted to rob him of his jewelry but most likely by the regional governor of Marw who was offended by Yazdgerd III's demands at a time when the war was already lost.

Peroz I-Pirouz in Persian (l. 636 CE-679 CE)

After Yazdgerd III's death, his son Peroz fled with the imperial family across Pamir Mountains to China. He requested sanctuary and in 661 CE military aid from the Tang Dynasty Emperor Gaozong (r. 649 CE-683 CE). Gaozong granted them asylum and welcomed any future refugees from the Sassanid Empire into the city of Zaranj. With the given aid, Peroz tried to take back the Empire but along the way the Chinese commander, took his soldiers to fight an uprising leaving Peroz with diminished number of soldiers. Peroz's attempt to take back Iran was unsuccessful. His brothers Narseh II and Bahram VII pursued similar course with no result. Yazdgerd III's grandson, Khosrow VI continued the war but probably died in battle sometime around 700 CE. The Sassanid loyalty made an Atash Kadeh in China but over time the Zoroastrian migrants melted within the new culture.



Above: Possible statue of Peruz among the statue of other foreign officials at the Qianling Mausoleum

Other events influencing the Arab invasion:

Prior to the latest invasion of the Arabs in 633 CE, Iranians for many centuries were victims of continuous attacks by the Arabs in the south. These attacks were eventually neutralized due to the timely and swift action of the crown. However, during the end of the Sassanid Empire, the Arabs noticed that they gained riches from invading the Iranian border cities without effective military opposition from the Sassanid Empire. This encouraged them to move further inland.

After Muhammad's death in 633 CE, chaos broke in Mecca. Muhammad had not named a successor and many who had given their oath to Muhammad and accepted Islam, reverted to their old religion. Abu Bakr (r. 632-634 CE) became Muhammad's successor and the first Caliph of the Muslims. He announced that no one can revert from Islam and announced Muhammad as the last prophet by God. Later Umar the second Calife (r. 634-644 CE) campaigned against Persia and the Byzantine in order to keep the Arab army occupied and ensure their loyalty and faith to the Islamic religion.

The Arabs for years prior, were hired by the Persian and Byzantine Empires as soldiers in battles as a result they became skilled fighters who had learned both Roman and Persian tactics, intelligence gathering, siege craft, and fighting in open battle all of which became very valuable in their success of invading the Persian lands.



Lesson for students:

1. Make a PowerPoint of the lesson or use the one accompanying this lesson to present the material to the students. As the lesson is presented, stop at appropriate sections and open discussion.

EX: Did killing his brothers serve Kavad II? Did it serve the Empire? What if he had not died of plague, would killing the possible heirs to the throne had been a good idea? How does this fit with the Zoroastrian beliefs?

2. Show videos to present or enhance parts of the lesson:

EX. Yazdgerd III and his sons in China

https://pantheon.world/profile/person/Yazdegerd_III

Activity for Students:

1. Summarize all the elements that led to the fall of the Sassanid Empire with the class. Then divide the class into two teams. Have them discuss and choose three of the most important elements that led to the fall of the Sassanid Empire. Then have them rank the events from most important to least and tell the class why they chose what they did and the reasons behind their rankings.
2. Have students think about and discuss what Zoroastrians values could have aided in preventing the loss of the Empire to the Arabs.
3. Make a poster showing how different events at different times led to the fall of the Sassanid Empire.
4. Discuss the following questions: The Sassanid loyal family who had escaped to China have melted with the population and are no longer distinguishable from other Chinese. As migrants how do you think we can preserve our religious beliefs and culture so that we do not disappear within our host country?

Sources:

1. https://www.worldhistory.org/Yazdegerd_III/
2. [https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/Book%3A_Western_Civilization_-_A_Concise_History_I_\(Brooks\)/14%3A_Islam_and_the_Caliphates/14.05%3A_The_Political_History_of_the_Arabs_After_Muhammad](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/Book%3A_Western_Civilization_-_A_Concise_History_I_(Brooks)/14%3A_Islam_and_the_Caliphates/14.05%3A_The_Political_History_of_the_Arabs_After_Muhammad)
3. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-world/Islam-at-Muhammads-death>
4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regnal_year
5. https://pantheon.world/profile/person/Yazdegerd_III

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