

962:151g**Sassanid Persia: 226-651 CE****I. Introduction****A. The Importance of the Sassanids****B. Sources****C. The Origins of the Sassanids****1. They Were the Rulers of Persis Under the Parthians**

a) perhaps originate as a local kingdom in Persis under early Seleucids

b) regnal names of local kings there indicate continuity with Achaemenid traditions

(1) Darius

(2) Artaxerxes

2. The Eponymous Figure of Sassan

a) Sassan cannot be pinpointed in time

b) Papak is the first historical ruler who can be identified

3. Papak (ca. 200-208 CE)

a) took advantage of Parthian weakness in SW Iran caused by Roman invasion of Mesopotamia

b) rebelled against Parthian Vologaeses IV

c) area under his control probably only included central Persis

d) succeeded by his son, Shapur

e) Shapur is killed in 208 during the revolt of his brother Ardashir, lord of Darabjird

D. Themes in Sassanid History**1. Foreign Affairs**

a) wars on NE frontier with raiding nomads

(1) Hephthalites (White Huns)

(2) Kushans

(3) Turks

b) wars with Roman empire in the west

(1) for most of Sassanid history, these are about control of Armenia and northern Mesopotamia

(2) frequent Roman invasions of Mesopotamia

(3) frequent Sassanid invasions of Syria

c) the Great War with Rome in 602-626

(1) Sassanids conquer Rome's eastern provinces and besiege Constantinople, recreating the Achaemenid empire

(2) but the Romans miraculously recover and crushingly defeat the Sassanids

(3) the war fatally weakens both the Sassanids and the Romans and makes them vulnerable to the Arabs

2. Political Affairs

a) centralization of authority in royal hands

- b) tight control over aristocracy
- 3. Religious Affairs
 - a) consolidation of Zoroastrianism
 - (1) close alliance between religion and the crown
 - (2) aggressive promotion of Zoroastrianism
 - b) mixed relations with Christian minorities in Persia
 - (1) sometimes very tolerant
 - (2) sometimes persecution

II. The Rise of the Sassanids: 208-309 CE

A. The Overthrow of the Parthians

1. Ardashir (208-241) CE

- a) name is the same as Artaxerxes
- b) seized control of the SW Persian provinces of the Parthian kingdom, and formed a coalition with local rulers in Mesopotamia to overthrow the Parthians
- c) battle of Hormizdagan resulted in defeat and death of Parthian king Ardavan
- d) Ardashir is crowned King of Kings (*Shahanshah*) of Iran in 226

2. Consolidation of Sassanid Authority Under Ardashir

- a) received the allegiance of the great Parthian baronial clans
 - (1) the Karen
 - (2) the Suren
- b) expanded his realm by conquering the provinces to the east and the west
 - (1) Parthian vassal kingdoms submit
 - (2) he also conquers Bahrein on south coast of Persian Gulf
- c) strongly centralized authority, instead of settling for a loose network of vassal kingdoms
 - (1) installed members of royal family as viceroys
 - (2) provinces were military in character, serving as recruitment districts
 - (a) heavy use of mercenaries
 - (b) mailed cavalry were recruited from among lesser nobility dependent on the crown
 - (3) sent Persian governors to principalities which submitted
 - (4) kept the capital at Ctesiphon, though with other centers elsewhere, as at Hamadan
- d) Roman writers say he sought to restore Achaemenid empire

3. Ardashir's Wars With Rome

- a) raids Roman Syria in 230
- b) rejects Roman peace offers
- c) takes Carrhae, Hatra, and Nisibis in 238

B. Shapur I (243-273 CE)

1. Rebellions Greet His Accession

- a) he was Ardashir's son, but the Caspian provinces rose in rebellion

when Ardashir died

b) Shapur I crushes the rebels and conquers Khorasan

2. Wars With Rome

a) continuation of Ardashir's war with Rome

(1) Romans retake northern Mesopotamia but are defeated at Ctesiphon and retreat after paying a huge indemnity

b) the treacherous capture of the emperor Valerian during a parley in 260 CE marks the high point of his successes over the Romans

(1) immortalized on five massive relief sculptures

C. The Late Third Century

1. The Sons of Shapur I

a) Hormizd I (272-273) & Vahram I (273-276)

(1) Shapur's sons

(2) had been governors of recently conquered Khorasan

2. Vahram II (276-293)

a) Vahram I's son

b) had also been governor of Khorasan

c) valiant and energetic

d) lost Ctesiphon to the Roman emperor Carus, who fortuitously then died

e) rebellion in eastern Iran forced him to grant the Roman emperor Diocletian Armenia and northern Mesopotamia

(1) the rebellion was led by his brother, Hormizd, who was (of course) governor of Khorasan

(2) but Vahram crushed the rebellion and expanded Sassanid territory all the way to the Indus Valley

3. Dynastic Turmoil: 293-309

a) Vahram III (293)

(1) overthrown by his great uncle, Narses, a son of Shapur I

b) Narses I (293-302) and Hormizd II (302-309)

(1) recovers Armenia from the Romans

(2) civil war following death of Hormizd II results in eventual accession of his infant son, Shapur II

III. The Middle Years of the Sassanid Empire : 309-532 CE

A. Shapur II (309-379)

1. Culminates the Centralization of Royal Authority

a) see below

2. Military Policy

a) Invasions of Arabia

(1) filled the Arabs' wells with sand to force their submission

(2) how far he penetrated Arabia isn't known

b) Wars With Rome

(1) broke a 40-year-long peace between the empires

(2) seizes Roman northern Mesopotamia in 359, but is defeated by emperor Julian and driven back on Ctesiphon, where

Julian was killed in a skirmish, after which his successor, Jovian, retreated

- (3) Shapur won extensive territorial concessions
 - (a) northern Mesopotamia
 - (b) most of Armenia

- c) Fortified the Frontiers
 - (1) program based on Roman frontier fortification systems
 - (2) Mesopotamia
 - (3) Armenia
 - (4) Arabian desert fringe
- d) Created Frontier Buffer States
 - (1) again, modeled on Roman practice
 - (2) Arab client states to protect his western frontier against Rome

B. Fifth-Century Persia

1. Dynastic Turmoil: 379-399

- a) Ardashir II (379-383)
 - (1) deposed by the nobility because of his tyrannical rule
- b) Shapur III (383-388)
 - (1) mild in temperament
 - (2) but still got murdered
- c) Bahram IV (388-399)
 - (1) murdered
- d) military insecurity
 - (1) conflict with Rome over Armenia
 - (2) wars on eastern frontier
 - (3) attacks by Huns from north

2. Stability on the Throne in the Fifth Century

- a) Yazdegird I (399-421)
 - (1) son of Bahram
 - (2) friendly towards Christians, he turned on the powerful Zoroastrian priesthood
 - (3) friendly with Rome, he became guardian of the imperial crown prince Theodosius II, and sent a eunuch to care for the boy
- b) Bahram Gor ("The Wild Ass") (421-439)
 - (1) skilfull hunter and all-around party animal, who brought the Gypsies west from India
 - (2) persecution of Christians led to war with Rome
- c) Yazdegird II (439-459)
 - (1) son of Bahram Gor
 - (2) launched immediate war with the Romans
 - (3) fended off invasion in the east by the newly-arrived Kushans
 - (4) tried unsuccessfully to convert Christian Armenia to Zoroastrianism

- d) Peroz (459-484)
 - (1) came to the throne in a civil war
 - (2) had to fight in Armenia against rebels, and against the Kushans and Huns on the eastern frontier, being captured by the Huns, and eventually killed in battle by them after his release
- 3. Dynastic Turmoil: 484-499
 - a) Valgash (484-488)
 - (1) Peroz's brother
 - (2) deposed by the nobles after four years
 - b) Kavad (Round 1) (488-496)
 - (1) son of Peroz, assisted to the throne by the Huns, among whom he had lived as a diplomatic hostage
 - (2) deposed for his adherence to the Mazdakite heresy
 - (3) escapes to the Huns again
 - c) Zamasp (496-499)
 - (1) surrenders the throne to Kavad, when he returns from exile
- 4. Kavad (Round 2) (499-532)
 - a) displayed clemency towards Zamasp and his supporters
 - b) war with the Romans 502-506
 - (1) conquers northern Mesopotamia
 - c) insurrection started by Zoroastrian Mazdakite heretics plagues his last years
 - (1) their activities badly disrupted the tax system

IV. The Decline and Fall of the Sassanid Empire: 532-651 CE

A. The Last Flowering: Khusrau I "the Just" (532-579)

1. Accession

- a) civil war marks his accession
 - (1) suppresses revolt led by his own relatives
 - (2) has to cede northern Mesopotamia to Romans to free up resources to fight the rebels
- b) suppression of the Mazdakites
 - (1) execution of their leaders

2. Khusrau the Reformer

- a) he becomes the legendary model reformer in later memory
 - (1) many moral maxims are attributed to him later
- b) financial reforms
 - (1) to repair damage done by Mazdakite rebels
 - (2) had all property reassessed to determine its productivity
 - (a) establishes a fixed tax based on average yields over several years
 - (i) makes it possible to budget, since income can be predicted
 - (b) head tax is applied to all male commoners between 20 and 50

- (c) taxes were henceforth collected in money rather than produce
- (3) tax system resembles the Roman one at the time
- (4) forms the model for the later Arab tax system
- c) army reforms
 - (1) henceforth the government provides equipment for the lesser nobility, who were hard-pressed to equip themselves
 - (a) this secures their loyalty to the crown
 - (b) reduces the importance of private armies of the great barons
 - (2) settles families on the frontier, giving them lands in return for military service
 - (a) this may have been the inspiration for the later Byzantine system of themes
 - (3) divides the empire into four geographical military districts, each commanded by a senior general
 - (a) concentrates troops near the frontiers. which creates a vulnerable cordon defense
 - (b) but this does result in a more efficient army

3. Khusrau the Commander

- a) wars with Rome
 - (1) recorded by Procopius
 - (2) Rome was vulnerable because Justinian had stripped the Persian frontier for troops to use in reconquering Africa, Italy, and Spain
 - (3) invasion of Syria
 - (a) took Antioch in a plundering expedition in 540
 - (b) extorts a large indemnity from Justinian
 - (4) invasion of Transcaucasia and Mesopotamia
 - (a) takes Roman fortresses along the Black Sea coast
 - (b) withdraws after Justinian pays him another big indemnity
 - (5) finally defeated by a Roman counteroffensive, and concludes a 50-year peace in 561
 - (a) needed to defend his eastern borders against the White Huns
 - (6) renewal of war over Armenia in 572
 - (a) Persian client king of Armenia had tried to impose Zoroastrianism on this Christian country
 - (b) ended by Persian defeats and Khusrau's death
- b) eastern wars
 - (1) defeats the White Huns by allying with the Turks
 - (2) pushes his frontiers east nearly to India
- c) conquest of Yemen in 577
 - (1) intervened on the side of monophysite Christians in a civil war

B. Hormizd IV (579-590)

1. Foreign Wars

a) wars With Rome

(1) see-saw war in Armenia

b) wars in the East

(1) incursions of the White Huns are defeated by the general Bahram

2. The Revolt of Bahram

a) jealous of his success, Hormizd attempts to have Bahram

assassinated, so Bahram rebels and Hormizd cannot rally effective support against him

b) Hormizd is overthrown by his own family, blinded, and executed

c) his son, Khusrau II, succeeds him

C. Khusrau II (590-628)

1. The Civil War With Bahram

a) Khusrau flees to Constantinople for refuge from Bahram, whom he cannot defeat

b) Bahram and Khusrau both ask the emperor Maurice for support, offering large territorial concessions

c) Maurice backs Khusrau

d) Roman troops take heavy losses, but succeed in driving Bahram into exile with the Turks, who kill him

2. Alliance With Rome

a) Khusrau and Maurice remained close

b) Khusrau married a Christian

c) control over the Arab border tribes began to weaken, though, and Arabs began to raid Persian Mesopotamia

3. The Great War With Rome: 602-626

a) began with the overthrow of the emperor Maurice by the usurper Phocas in 602

(1) Khusrau took revenge by attacking Roman territory

(2) Phocas was an incompetent general

b) The rebel Heraclius overthrew Phocas in 610 and took up the war with Persia

c) but Khusrau defeated the forces Heraclius sent against him, and conquered more of the Roman East than any Iranian ruler ever had before, effectively reestablishing the Achaemenid empire

(1) Syria and Armenia: 613

(2) Jerusalem (incl. the True Cross): 615

(3) Egypt: 619

(4) siege of Constantinople: 622

d) but Heraclius boldly counterattacked, striking against the Persian rear

(1) invades Armenia: 622-624

(2) reconquest of Asia Minor: 625

(3) conquest of Mesopotamia: 626

4. The Death of Khusrau

- a) assassinated in 628

5. Chaos: Eight Kings in Four Years

- a) Kavad II (628-629) and Peace With Rome
 - (1) returns all captured territory and all POWs
 - (2) died of plague
- b) Ardashir III (629)
 - (1) Kavad's infant son
 - (2) killed by rebel general Shahrbaraz
- c) Shahrbaraz (629)
 - (1) successful general in Roman wars
 - (2) came to throne with Heraclius' backing
 - (3) murdered after two months
- d) Azarmedukht
- e) Peroz II
- f) Hormizd V
- g) Khusrau IV

D. The End of the Sassanid Empire: Yazdegird IV (632-651)

1. The Arab Conquest

- a) in 636, Muslim forces defeat the Persian army near Hira
- b) in 637, Muslims conquer Ctesiphon
- c) in 642, they destroy the Sassanid army at Nihavand
- d) requests for Chinese aid go unanswered
- e) fleeing into central Asia, Yazdegird was murdered in 651

2. Causes of the Sassanid Fall

- a) exhaustion after Roman wars
- b) lack of effective central control after period of political anarchy
- c) cordon defense system
- d) Muslim religious zeal
- e) generous terms offered by Arabs to those who surrendered

V. The Sassanid State

A. The Kingship: "The King of Kings of Iran and Non-Iran"

1. The Mechanism of Royal Succession

- a) no person not of the Sassanid family could win the allegiance of the necessary elements of society
- b) rebellions therefore generally failed
- c) strong rulers could designate their successors, but always required the recognition of that designation by two groups
 - (1) the nobility
 - (2) the priesthood
- d) the crown prince also had to satisfy these groups as to his fitness to rule
 - (1) thus the practice of assigning them to govern a province as a prerequisite for recognition as king

- (2) the priesthood had to be convinced of the orthodoxy of his religious beliefs and his adherence to the social class norms of society
 - e) a successor also had to exhibit the *farr*, or “magical mystery” of kingship
 - (1) an ineffable charismatic quality
 - f) date and time of coronation were determined by astrologers and soothsayers
 - g) the symbols of royalty
 - (1) each Sassanid king had his own unique crown
 - (2) kings also had a royal mace
2. Royal Ideology
- a) the king is chosen by God
 - (1) he holds his power from Ahura Mazda
 - (2) divine-right absolutism
 - b) controls all reins of government
 - (1) bureaucracy is dependent on him
 - (2) so is the legal system
 - (3) all aspects of the state
 - (4) similar processes were at work at the same time in the Roman empire
 - c) but is not unapproachable
 - (1) access by even humble peasants was an ancient Iranian tradition
 - (2) the king held open public audiences on festival days
 - d) the king is the protector and judge of his subjects
 - e) the king is subject to the law, like everyone else
 - f) the king must respect the rights and privileges of the classes in Iranian society
 - g) kings gradually lose power to the nobility by the 7th century CE, weakening the kingdom

B. The Three Great Ministries

1. The Chief Minister (The *Mihr-Narseh*)
 - a) prototype of Islamic grand viziers
 - b) seems also to have been commander of the army
2. The Head of the Zoroastrian Church (The *Mobadan Mobad*)
3. Chief Councillor (The *Darandarzbad*)
 - a) head of the bureaucracy, a sort of chief of staff

C. Provincial Administration

1. The Four Toparchies: Regional Provincial Groupings
 - a) North
 - b) South
 - c) East
 - d) West
2. Vassal Kings
3. Governors (*Anarzbads*)

- a) headed judicial administration

VI. Sassanid Society: Social Classes

A. The Aristocracy

1. Royalty
 - a) Vassal Kings
 - b) Governors Related to Sassanid House
2. Chiefs of the Great Aristocratic Clans
 - a) seven families enjoyed special status
 - b) certain offices were hereditary in these families
3. Ministers and High Officials
4. Lesser Aristocracy
 - a) serve as lesser functionaries in the provinces
5. Clergy
6. Distinctions Were Emphasized by Public Display
 - a) clothing
 - b) forms of headdress
 - c) personal ornaments
 - d) types of horses they rode
 - e) titulature

B. The Commoners

1. Peasants
 - a) tied to the soil, like medieval serfs
 - b) paid both a head tax and a land tax
 - (1) land tax was about a quarter of the yield
2. City Dwellers
 - a) paid a personal tax
 - b) no military service

VII. Religion Under the Sassanids

A. The Sassanids Create a Zoroastrian 'Church'

1. Culminates a Long Evolutionary Process
 - a) apparently began late under the Parthians, during a very poorly documented era
 - b) the Avesta probably was set down in Aramaic under the Parthians
 - c) but it was Ardashir who ordered his chief religious helper, Tansar, to collect the scattered texts and edit them into a definitive version
 - d) Shapur I expands the Avesta by including secular works on astronomy, metaphysics, and medicine
2. Reaches Its Climax Under Shapur II
 - a) Zoroastrian Church is now fully identified with the monarchy
 - b) but the priesthood forms a separate element within society
 - c) he works to root out heresies like Zurvanism
3. The Heresy of Mazdak (late 5th/early 6th century)
 - a) Zoroastrian priest with Manichaean sympathies
 - b) preached non-violence

- c) preached sharing of property
- d) suppressed by Khusrau I, who executed Mazdak, but the sect went underground and continued to exist

B. Zoroastrian Worship

1. The Importance of Fire

- a) identification of Ahura Mazda with flame
- b) each new king lit a fire to burn as the sacred protector of his reign
- c) kings often built a new temple to house their fire

2. Fire Temples

- a) present in each province
- b) square buildings, surmounted by cupolas
- c) the sacred fire is kept permanently burning in an interior room, which is kept completely dark, untouched by sunlight
- d) the fire altar came in various forms
 - (1) tripod standing on a column
 - (2) column without a tripod

3. Priesthood: The *Magi*

- a) numerous priests serve each temple
- b) each temple priesthood was overseen by a Chief Magus
- c) a special order of clergy had charge of worship, and was subdivided into functional groupings

C. Other Religions

1. Jews

- a) numerous in Mesopotamia
- b) had their own chief priest, whose HQ was at Ctesiphon

2. Christianity

- a) origins
 - (1) missionary efforts launched from Edessa in N Mesopotamia
 - (2) also, Christian prisoners taken from Syria by Shapur I had established the religion in Persia where they were settled
 - (a) several bishoprics existed by Shapur II's reign
- b) the Nestorian Church
 - (1) takes its name from Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, condemned in 5th century for heresy
 - (2) becomes the official Persian church at a synod in Ctesiphon in 484, where it remained headquartered
 - (a) distinguishes it from the orthodox/catholic Roman Church
 - (b) enables Christianity to spread in Persia without seeming to be a traitorous faith

3. Buddhism

- a) common in eastern provinces near India

D. Policy Towards Other Religions

1. Generally Tolerant

- a) Shapur I decrees toleration in 260s

- (1) after vainly attempting to persecute other faiths
- (2) he orders that Christians, Jews, and Manichaeans be left in peace and allowed to worship as they please
- b) but policy depended on the will of the king
 - (1) as in the Roman Empire, and everywhere else, down to the present

2. Intermittent Persecution

- a) Shapur II launches extensive persecutions
 - (1) Christians mostly
 - (a) since Christianity was now the state religion of the Roman empire
 - (b) Shapur heavily taxed the Christians to pay for his wars against Rome, then persecuted them when they protested
 - (i) numerous martyrs' tales survive from these persecutions
 - (2) Jews and Manichaeans, too
- b) Vahram I (273-276) had Mani martyred and persecuted Manichaeans
- c) Yazdegird I returns to toleration ca. 400 CE
 - (1) Persian Christians hold a council of bishops in 410 under his patronage
 - (a) it regularizes the Christian hierarchy in Persia
 - (b) it also defines points of doctrine
- d) Bahram Gor
 - (1) persecutes Christians until Roman diplomacy forces him to stop
 - (2) Persian Christians later declare their independence of Roman Christianity
- e) Yazdegird II
 - (1) tried to convert Armenian Christians, but failed
 - (2) persecuted Christians and Jews both
- f) reasons for persecution
 - (1) usually political
 - (a) external: identification with Persia's foreign enemies
 - (b) internal: insurrection and disturbing the peace
 - (i) towards the end of the reign of Yazdegird I, Christian fanatics get out of line and begin attacking Zoroastrian temples and priests, and Yazdegird retaliates