

**First Golden Era (309–379)  
(Shapur II)**

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**ABSTRACTS**

*Following Hormizd II's death, Arabs from the north started to ravage and plunder the eastern cities of the empire, even attacking the province of Fars, the birthplace of the Sassanid kings. Meanwhile, Persian nobles killed Hormizd II's eldest son, blinded the second, and imprisoned the third (who later escaped to Roman territory). The throne was reserved for Shapur II, the unborn child of one of Hormizd II's wives who was crowned in utero: the crown was placed upon his mother's stomach. During his youth the empire was controlled by his mother and the nobles. Upon Shapur II's coming of age, he assumed power and quickly proved to be an active and effective ruler. Shapur II first led his small but disciplined army south against the Arabs, whom he defeated, securing the southern areas of the empire. He then started his first campaign against the Romans in the west, where Persian forces won a series of battles but were unable to make territorial gains due to the failure of repeated sieges of the key frontier city of Nisibis, and Roman success in retaking the cities of Singara and Amida, after they had fallen to the Persians.*

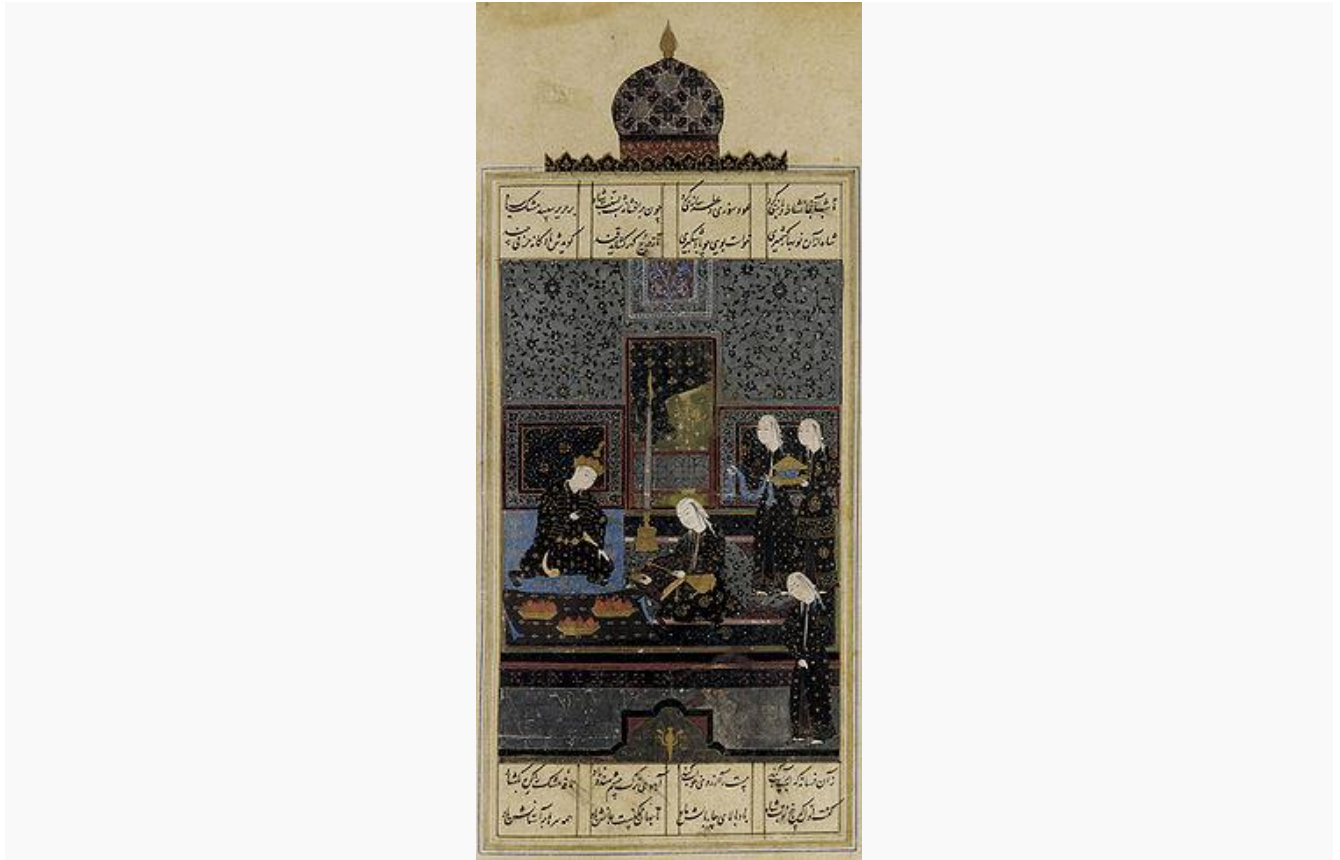
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**Introduction**

These campaigns were halted by nomadic raids along the eastern borders of the empire, which threatened Transoxiana, a strategically critical area for control of the Silk Road. Shapur therefore marched east toward Transoxiana to meet the eastern nomads, leaving his local commanders to mount nuisance raids on the Romans. He crushed the Central Asian tribes, and annexed the area as a new province. He completed the conquest of the area now known as Afghanistan.

Shapur II pursued a harsh religious policy. Under his reign, the collection of the Avesta, the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism, was completed, heresy and apostasy were punished, and Christians were persecuted. The latter was a reaction against the Christianization of the Roman Empire by Constantine the Great. Shapur II, like Shapur I, was amicable towards Jews, who lived in relative freedom and gained many advantages in his period. At the time of Shapur's death, the Persian Empire was stronger than ever, with its enemies to the east pacified and Armenia under Persian control.

## Intermediate Era (379–498)



Bahram V is a great favorite in Persian literature and poetry. "Bahram and the Indian princess in the black pavilion." Depiction of a Khamsa (Quintet) by the great Persian poet Nizami, mid-16th-century Safavid era.

From Shapur II's death until Kavadh I's first coronation, there was a largely peaceful period with the Romans (by this time the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire), interrupted only by two brief wars, the first in 421–422 and the second in 440. Throughout this era, Sassanid religious policy differed dramatically from king to king. Despite a series of weak leaders, the administrative system established during Shapur II's reign remained strong, and the empire continued to function effectively.

Bahram IV's son Yazdegerd I (399–421) is often compared to Constantine I. Like him, he was powerful both physically and diplomatically. Much like his Roman counterpart, Yazdegerd I was opportunistic. Like Constantine the Great, Yazdegerd I practiced religious tolerance and provided freedom for the rise of religious minorities. He stopped the persecution against the Christians and even punished nobles and priests who persecuted them. His reign marked a relatively peaceful era. He made lasting peace with the Romans and even took the young Theodosius II (408–450) under his guardianship. He also married a Jewish princess who bore him a son called Narsi.



Coin of Hormizd I, issued in Khorasan, and derived from Kushan designs

Bahram V is a great favorite in Persian tradition, which relates many stories of his valor and beauty, of his victories over the Romans, Turkic peoples, Indians and Africans, and of his adventures in hunting and in love; he is called Bahram-e Gur, Gur meaning onager, on account of his love for hunting and, in particular, hunting onagers. He symbolized a king at the height of a golden age. He had won his crown by competing with his brother and spent time fighting foreign enemies, but mostly kept himself amused by hunting and court parties with his famous band of ladies and courtiers. He embodied royal prosperity. During his time, the best pieces of Sassanid literature were written, notable pieces of Sassanid music were composed, and sports such as polo became royal pastimes, a tradition that continues to this day in many kingdoms. Bahram V's son Yazdegerd II (438–457) was a just, moderate ruler, but in contrast to Yazdegerd I, practiced a harsh policy towards minority religions, particularly Christianity. At the beginning of his reign, Yazdegerd II gathered a mixed army of various nations, including his Indian allies, and attacked the Eastern Roman Empire in 441, but peace was soon restored after small-scale fighting. He then gathered his forces in Nishapur in 443 and launched a prolonged campaign against the Kidarites. Finally, after a number of battles, he crushed the Kidarites and drove them out beyond the Oxus river in 450.

During his eastern campaign, Yazdegerd II grew suspicious of the Christians in the army and expelled them all from the governing body and army. He then persecuted the Christians and, to a much lesser extent, the Jews. In order to reestablish Zoroastrianism in Armenia, he crushed an uprising of Armenian Christians at the Battle of Vartanantz in 451. The Armenians, however, remained primarily Christian. In his later years, he was engaged yet again with Kidarites until his death in 457. Hormizd III (457–459), younger son of Yazdegerd II, ascended to the throne. During his short rule, he continually fought with his elder brother Peroz I, who had the support of

nobility, and with the Hephthalites in Bactria. He was killed by his brother Peroz in 459.



A coin of Yazdegerd II

In the beginning of the 5th century, the Hephthalites (White Huns), along with other nomadic groups, attacked Persia. At first Bahram V and Yazdegerd II inflicted decisive defeats against them and drove them back eastward. The Huns returned at the end of 5th century and defeated Peroz I (457–484) in 483. Following this victory, the Huns invaded and plundered parts of eastern Persia for two years. They exacted heavy tribute for some years thereafter.

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