



YAZDEGERD II

YAZDEGERD II (r. 439-57 CE), Sasanian king, whose reign is marked by wars with Byzantium in the west and the [Hephthalites](#) in the east. He stayed in the east for some years fighting the nomadic tribes and is known for imposing Zoroastrianism in Armenia.

Yazdgerd II was the son and successor to his father [Bahrām V](#) (r. 421-39 CE), known as Bahrām Gōr. He is remembered fondly in the Sasanian-based sources as a king who was interested in the wellbeing of the country, justice, and for not being harsh-tempered like his grandfather and not following his father's practice of hunting, feasting, and holding long audience sessions. He tended to the masses and organized the army (Ṭa'ālebi, tr. Fażā'li, p. 367; Ṭabari, I/2, p. 871, tr. p. 106). According to Ebn al-Balkī and Ḥamza Eşfahāni, he was known as Gentle Yazdegerd (Ḥamza Eşfahāni, p. 55: "Yazdegerd al-Layyen"; Ebn al-Balkī, p. 42: Yazdegerd-e Narm). He was aided in his affairs by his capable *wuzurg framādār* (grand vizier), [Mehr-Narseh](#), who had served his father and grandfather as well. After Yazdegerd II's death, his two sons, Hormozd and Pērōz vied for the throne, the former taking it first, but consequently being dislodged by Pērōz with the help of the Hephthalites (Ṭabari, I/2, pp. 871-72, tr. p. 107).

Religious policy. Yazdgerd II's devotion to Zoroastrianism is clearly mentioned in sources. Islamic texts claim that he did not partake in the indulgences of his father and conducted a more stoic life style (Ṭabari, I/2, p. 871, tr. p. 106). His persecution of Christians and Jews along with his promotion of Zoroastrianism suggests his devotion to the latter faith. The positive image of Yazdgerd II in



Sasanian based sources is in contrast to the Christian and Jewish evidence, which remember his rule as a period of hardship in the empire and Armenia. In 445-46, repressive measures were enacted against the Christians in the Sasanian empire, including their expulsion from the army. At the same time, Yazdgerd II sent Mehr-Narseh to Armenia to impose Zoroastrianism on the members of the Armenian noble houses (*naxarar*). Mehr-Narseh sent an edict to the Armenians requiring that they accept the Mazdean religion. The basic tenets of the faith described in his edict reflect the Zurvanite heresy, which was popular at the time and was espoused by Mehr-Narseh (Elishe, pp. 77-78; Russell, p. 136; Zaehner, pp. 41-42; Daryaee, pp. 23-24). This resulted in an uprising by a group of Armenian nobility, led by Vardan Mamikonian, culminating in the killing of Persian officials and the Zoroastrian priests. The Sasanians dispatched Muškan Niusalavurt to Armenia, who defeated the Mamikonian's forces on 2 June 451 at the battle of Avrayar at the foot of Mount Ararat (Łazar, pp. 34-36; Eliše 6.1-9; Langlois, pp. 220-21, 296-97). The confrontation resulted in the annihilation of the Armenian forces, death and capture of Christian priests, and the exile of the remainder to Khorasan in 454 CE (Sebeos, pp. 64-65), as well as the strengthening of the position of the pro-Iranian and Zoroastrian Armenians.

In 455 CE, a Jewish persecution was initiated 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 harshly to these measures and retaliated by flaying 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, which coincided with the fifth century CE (Neusner, pp. 915-16). The persecution of the Christians and Jews may also be explained as Yazdgerd II's active policy to bring the non-Zoroastrian Iranian nobility in line with the state religion of Zoroastrianism. These actions were thus taken to create a uniform religious identity among the king's subjects, an agenda of the Sasanian kings from the time of Šāpur II in the fourth century CE. Thus, the effort was part of the centralization program of Yazdgerd II, attempting to subdue the Christian and Jewish population of the empire (McDonough, pp. 70-76). It is also noteworthy that the earliest Christian Sogdian texts may date from the time of Yazdgerd II, when the Christians moved eastwards to Central Asia (Dresden, p. 1125)

War with Rome and the Hephthalites. Upon ascending the throne, Yazdgerd II



waged a war with the Roman empire, starting in 440 CE and with little success for either side (Greatrex, p. 2). The Romans, hard pressed on their southern front by the Vandal invasion and conquest of Carthage, sued for a quick end to war in return for payments to the Sasanians in order to defend the Caucasus. Concluded by Yazdgerd II and the Emperor Theodosius I, it was agreed that no new frontier fortresses were to be built in Mesopotamia (Rubin, p. 681; Dignas and Winter, p. 137). Yazdgerd II then moved toward Armenia and defeated the Armenians, taking the surviving Armenian nobility, priests, and their forces to the east to fight the [Hephthalites](#). As late as 453 CE and towards the end of his rule, Yazdgerd II, having established his headquarters in Nishapur in the northeast, appears to have spent a number of years prosecuting wars in the east against the Hephthalites (Frye, 1983, p. 146; idem, 1984, p. 321). We are mainly informed through the Armenian sources about these campaigns (Elisē, 1982, p. 192; Łazar P'arpec'i, p. 58), and these mostly deal with the Armenians who accompanied him. According to one Middle Persian text, the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* (passage 18), Yazdegerd fortified the city of Qumes (i.e., [Dāmḡān](#)) and turned it into a strong border post against the Čōl (New Per./Ar. Sōl; *Tajāreb al-omam*, p. 275) tribe of Hun in what the text calls “at the boundary of the Gruzian Guard.”

Coinage and imperial ideology. Starting with Yazdgerd II, a new legend appeared on the Sasanian coinage: *mzdysn bgy kdy* “The Mazda-worshipping majesty, the Kayanid” (Göbl, p. 330). This reflects the king’s strong affinity with the Avestan mythical dynasty, the Kayanids, exactly at the time when Yazdegerd II stayed for a prolonged time period in Khorasan fighting the Hephthalites. There is also a new reverse style introduced by Yazdegerd II, where the attendants face the fire-altar in a posture of reverence (Gyselen, p. 60). This may further indicate the religious devotion of the king and bear witness to his actions on and off the battlefield against non-Zoroastrians. This also accords with his image as a Sasanian king who is Zoroastrian and in harmony with the rulers of old in the Avesta, that is, the Kayanids. The mints of Āsōrestān (AS) and Khuzestan (WH) were most active in the west, and the mint of Gorgān (GW) and Marv (ML) was most active in the east of the empire, no doubt providing for the wars on the two fronts (Schindel, III, pp. 386-87).



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