

PERSIAN HISTORY

The history of Iran from Antiquity to the present day

Course Description

This course is an introduction to the history of Iran from ancient times up to the present day. The course focuses on the people and events which have helped to shape the culture, and beliefs of the Iranian people. In particular, the repeated ability of Iranian culture to not only survive, but to reassert itself after apparent disaster is one of the major themes of the course. With Iran playing an increasingly important role in events in the Middle East today an understanding of Iran's history is absolutely essential to more fully understand the attitudes and assumptions of its people.

About the Instructor

This course has been prepared by Dr. Richard Dietrich, Lecturer in History, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey.

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Course Requirements

This course is a graduate level course and requires both extensive reading and essay writing. The grade for the course is based on five (5) short essays (5 pages or 1250 words) and a final research paper (15 pages or 5000 words). The five short essays will be based on the questions following any five units of the student's choice. Students will choose the topic of the final research paper, however it must be approved by the instructor. See the section **Format for Research Papers** at the end of the syllabus for more information.

Final grades are based on the total of the grades for the short essays (10% each) and the final research paper (50%).

Required Texts: The following works are widely available in most bookstores, libraries or online (as noted).

Abrahamian, Ervand. *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge, 2008).

Bosworth, C.E. "The Political and Dynastic History of the Iranian World", in J.A. Boyle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. V: The Saljuq and Mongol Periods* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 1-202

Daniel, Elton L. *The History of Iran*. The Greenwood Histories of the Modern Nations (London, 2001).

Fisher, W.B. "Physical Geography", in W.B. Fisher (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. I: The Land of Iran* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 3-110.

Frye, R.N. "The Political History of Iran under the Sasanians", in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. III (1): The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 116-177.

Katouzian, Homa. *The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Iran* (New Haven, 2009).

Lazard, G. "The New Persian Language", in R.N. Frye (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. IV: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 595-632.

Newman, Andrew J. *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (London, 2009).

Petrushevsky, I.P. "The Socio-Economic Condition of Iran under the Il-Khans", in J.A. Boyle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol.V: The Saljuq and Mongol Periods* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 483-537.

Roemer, H.R. "Timur in Iran", in Peter Jackson and Laurence Lockhart (eds), *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. VI: The Timurid and Safavid Periods* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 42-97.

Roemer, H.R. "The Safavid Period", in Peter Jackson and Laurence Lockhart (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. VI: The Timurid and Safavid Periods* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 189-350.

Skjærvø, Prods Oktor. *Introduction to Zoroastrianism*. (2005). Available on line at http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~iranian/Zoroastrianism/Zoroastrianism1_Intro.pdf.

Skjærvø, Prods Oktor. *An Introduction to Manicheism*. (2006). Available on line at http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~iranian/Manicheism/Manicheism_I_Intro.pdf

Zarrinkub, Abd al-Husain. "The Arab Conquest of Iran and its Aftermath", in R.N. Frye (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. IV: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 1-56.

Unit I Introduction to the lands, peoples and languages of Iran

Outline

The Physical Setting
The Peoples of Iran

Introduction

The modern country of Iran is defined by a series of mountain ranges that form a rough triangle encompassing a plateau with two major desert basins. The Elburz Mountains extends approximately 500 km along the southern end of the Caspian Sea and includes Iran's highest peak, Mt. Damavand (5610 m). The Zagros Mountains stretch for almost 1000 km from Lake Urmia in the northwest of the country towards the southwest and end near the Straits of Hormuz. Connecting the Elburz and Zagros ranges are the Kuh-e Sorkh, the Qaen and Birjand massifs. Within this triangle of mountain ranges and massifs lies the Iranian plateau which include two major desert basins, the Dasht-e Kavir and the Dasht-e Lut.

Iran's rugged geography and varied climatic conditions have had a profound effect on Iran's economy, social structure and governance. In addition, a complex mix of ethnic and religious groups such as Turkic groups, Arabs, Kurds, Sunnis Muslims, Jews, Zoroastrians, Christians and Bahais live among the Shia, Persian-speaking majority.

Readings

Daniel, chapter 1 "The Land and People of Iran".
Fisher, "Physical Geography".

Questions

1. What are some of the major geographic features of the modern country of Iran?
2. What are the climatic regions of Iran?
3. How have Iran's geography and climate influenced Iran's history?

Unit II The Median and Achaemenian Periods

Outline

Zoroaster and the Avesta
The Medes & Persians
Cyrus the Great
The Persian Wars
Alexander the Great

Introduction

In this period the Medes and Persians emerge as a major power in the ancient world forging the largest empire the world had yet seen. Although larger in extent than the earlier Assyrian and Babylonian empires it incorporated many of the same lands and peoples. However, the Persian took a decidedly "softer" approach to ruling their vast territory, leaving many local rulers in place and allowing peoples who had been deported from their lands under the previous regimes to return if they desired.

However, it was not only in the political sphere that the Persians would contribute to world history. This was also the period in which the Zoroastrian religion was founded and spread. Although Zoroastrianism is practiced by only a few relatively small communities today, many of its key precepts – among them resurrection and final judgement, reward and punishment in the afterlife – were incorporated into later monotheistic religions.

In addition, Persia is the main subject of the Greek historical work of the "Father of History", Herodotus. His account of the Persian Wars of 490 and 480 BCE is the earliest piece of Greek prose to survive intact, and though often criticized over the centuries, has exerted its influence over the writing of history.

Finally, the conquest of Persia is the main goal when Alexander of Macedon begins his path of conquests. After confronting and defeating Persian forces three times and becoming the master of the Persian empire, Alexander will begin to be influenced by Persian culture and concepts of rule.

Readings

Daniel, chapter 2 "Ancient Iran".

Katouzian, chapter 1 "Myths, Legends and Ancient History".

Skjærvø, *Introduction to Zoroastrianism*, pp. 1-68.

Questions

1. What are the basic beliefs and practices of Zoroastrianism?
2. In what way did Zoroastrianism influence other religions?
3. What institutions and policies allowed the Achaemenids to administer their large empire so successfully?
4. How did Achaemenian rule of their empire differ from Assyrian and Babylonian rule?

Unit III The Seleucid and Parthian Periods

Outline

Seleucid Iran and the Emergence of the Parthians

Parthian – Roman Relations

Mani and Manichaeism

Introduction

Following Alexander's death a struggle began among his generals for control of his vast empire. Eventually much of the Asian territory of the former Persian empire came under the control of Seleucus I Nicator and his descendents. As a result Persians found themselves under the rule of Hellenistic rulers and exposed to their culture. Some elements of Greek culture were adopted by the Persians.

With the establishment of the Parthian empire in 247 BCE the Iranian plateau, much of Mesopotamia and parts of modern Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan came under Iranian rule once more. However, with the decline and eventual collapse of the Seleucids, the Parthians would confront a new and more dangerous rival – Rome.

During the period of Parthian rule a new religion, Manichaeism, based on the teachings of Mani arose. It soon spread to many parts of the Parthian empire and beyond, but was savagely persecuted in most areas to which it spread.

Readings

Daniel, chapter 3 "From the Parthians to the Mongols", pp. 51-64.

Katouzian, chapter 2 "Greeks, Parthians and Persians".

Skjærvø, *An Introduction to Manichaeism*, pp. 24-64.

Questions

1. What was the attitude of the Parthians towards Greek culture and religion?
2. What were the main causes of Parthian-Roman rivalry?

3. Why were the Romans able to easily interfere in Parthian affairs?

4. What are the basic beliefs and practices of Manichaeism and how did Manichaeism influence other religions?

Unit IV The Sasanian Period

Outline

Sasanian – Roman Relations
Sasanian Culture
Zoroastrianism under the Sasanians

Introduction

With the rise of the Sasanian empire in the 3rd century CE Iran would reach on of its political and cultural pinnacles. The Sasanian state would prove to be a far more dangerous rival to Rome and the Byzantines. Its acceptance of Zoroastrianism as the state religion would play a major role in the codification of Zoroastrian scriptures and ritual.

Sasanian-Byzantine wars in the first decades of the 7th century CE left both empires financially and militarily exhausted and less able to resist the Arab raids into Syria and Iraq that began in the years following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE. While the Byzantine Empire would eventually lose all of its territory in the Middle East in North Africa, it would survive. The Sasanian empire, on the other hand, would not be so fortunate and would fall to the Arabs in a relatively short time. However, Sasanian art, culture and political theory would become major elements in the Islamic civilization that would develop first under the Umayyids and then reach one of its high points under the Abbasids.

Readings

Daniel, chapter 3 "From the Parthians to the Mongols", pp. 64-80.
Frye, "The Political History of Iran under the Sasanians".

Questions

1. How was Sasanian administration different from Parthian rule and what was one of the major foundations of Sasanian rule?

2. Why did the Sasanians make Zoroastrianism the state religion and support Zoroastrian religious leaders?

3. What were the causes of the wars between the Sasanians and Byzantines in the 7th century CE and what were the effects on the Sasanian state?

Unit V The Arab Conquest through the Saljuq Period

Outline

The Arab Conquest and Islam
The New Persian Language and Literature
Iran under the Saljuqs

Introduction

With the Arab conquest of the Sasanian empire Iran underwent a process of significant changes that would give Iran a new identity and link it to the larger Islamic world that was taking shape. Powerful, cultured families that had served the Sasanian

state converted to Islam and put their abilities to use in the service of the new rulers. In the process they introduced Sasanian administrative practices and a court culture to the Arabs.

In the years following the Arab conquest Arabic was the language of administration, the language of the Islamic religion, and was adopted by Muslim Persians as a literary language. Middle Persian, the language of the Sasanians, was only used as a literary language only by Zoroastrians. However, beginning in the 8th century CE the New Persian language – based Middle Persian, but characterized by a number of eastern Iranian elements, a simplified grammar, numerous Arabic loan-words and written with the Arabic alphabet – made its appearance. First used primarily for poetry, New Persian rapidly became the language of culture, and often administration, across most of the Muslim territory between the Iranian plateau and northern India. However, Arabic remained the language of religion, and was often used when writing scientific or legal works.

As the Abbasid state weakened, local rulers broke away and established their own small states, leaving the Abbasi caliph an honored, but relatively powerless figure. This trend was reversed by the rise of the Saljuq Turks, a tribe from Central Asia who had only recently become Muslim when they began their conquests in the 11th century. Their empire soon included not only the Iranian plateau, but Khorasan, Iraq and eventually much of the Anatolian plateau as well. Although Iran would be under their rule, the Saljuqs would be deeply influenced by Persian culture and language.

Readings

Bosworth, "The Political and Dynastic History of the Iranian World".

Katouzian, chapter 3 "Arabs, Islam and Persians".

Lazard, "The New Persian Language".

Zarrinkub, Abd al-Husain. "The Arab Conquest of Iran and its Aftermath".

Questions

1. What factors led to the Arab victory over the Sasanians?
2. What factors may have contributed to the acceptance of Arab rule and conversion to Islam in Iran?
3. Where did the New Persian language develop and why did it replace Arabic as the language of literature?
4. What are the major differences between Sunni and Shia Islam? To which branch of the Shia do the Iranians belong?
5. What were Persian contributions to Islamic culture and civilization?

Unit VI The Mongol and Timurid Periods

Outline

Iran under the Mongols

Iran under Timur and his Successors

Introduction

With the Mongol conquests which began in the 13th century Iran would be subject to destruction on a scale that was unparalleled in its history. Many areas suffered major depopulation, cities were destroyed and agriculture, particularly in the Sawad was irreversibly disrupted. Under Mongol rule Iran was merely a small part of a vast empire. However, as the Mongol empire fractured Iran was ruled by the Il-Khanids and exerted a powerful influence on its rulers, to the point that the Il-Khanids became Muslim.

In the late 14th – early 15th century Iran was once again subject to invasion, conquest and destruction by Timur. Timur and descendents did, however, become great patrons of Persian art and culture, combining it with elements from other regions and creating a distinctive style.

Readings

Katouzian, chapter 4 "Turks and Mongols".

Roemer, H.R. "Timur in Iran".

Questions

1. What were the economic, political and cultural results of the Mongols' conquest of Iran?
2. What were the possible reasons for Timur's conquest of Iran?
3. What were some of the positive aspects of Timur's rule in Iran?
4. Which were the main Turkoman confederations to emerge after the Timurid rulers?

Unit VII The Safavids

Outline

Shia Islam

Safavi – Ottoman Rivalry

Safavi Art & Architecture

Introduction

The Safavi period marks not only a return to Persian rule in Iran, but also a turning point in the shaping of Iranian society with the imposition of Twelver Shia Islam as the official religion. In addition, it is one of the most creative periods in Persian art, and architecture.

Safavi rule was significant both for the internal events that occurred as well as the external ones. The Safavis would be engaged in a long-running conflict with the Ottoman empire. Iran under the Safavis would also begin to have tenuous contacts with western Europe.

Readings

Daniel, chapter 4 "Early Modern Iran".

Katouzian, chapter 5 "Persian Empire Again".

Newman, chapter 1 "Laying the Foundations: Ismail I (1488-1524)"; chapter 2 "Reconfiguration and Consolidation: The Reign of Tahmasp (1524-1576)"; chapter 4 "Monumental Challenges and Monumental Responses: The Reign of Abbas I (1587-1629)".

Roemer, "The Safavid Period".

Questions

1. What are the most significant aspects of the establishment of the Safavid dynasty with respect to Iranian history?
2. What factors led to conflict with the Ottoman Empire?
3. What are the causes for the decline of the Safavi state?

Unit VIII From Nader Shah through the Pahlavis

Outline

Nader Shah
The Qajar Dynasty
Relations with the West in the Qajar Period
The Pahlavi Dynasty

Introduction

The period of Qajar rule, 18th – early 20th centuries, coincided with a period when Iran found itself increasingly caught between competing European powers. For the Qajars, as well as their successors, the Pahlavis managing their relations with these European powers was a major concern. Beginning in the 18th century and increasing in the 19th century, British – Russian rivalry in Asia was the main context for Iran's external relations. With the end of British-Russian rivalry in Central Asia and the discovery of oil in the early 20th century Iran's relations with western powers would be centered on Britain. After the fall of the Qajar dynasty and the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty under Reza Shah, close relations with Britain would continue until the Second World War, when the United States would become Iran's major foreign partner.

With the changes in the regions around Iran following the First and Second World Wars, Iran would also face new challenges with its neighbors. Iranian relations with Iraq to the west would prove to be among the most contentious, particularly in regard to the Shatt al-Arab waterway, and would lead to several conflicts.

The reign of Reza Shah's son, Mohammed Reza Shah would be one characterized by close relations with the United States, and attempts to "modernize" Iran in many areas, often with little apparent understanding of how these changes in society were perceived by the majority of Iranians. Another area in which Mohammed Reza Shah seems to have not understood the attitudes of his people was the degree to which his increasing authoritarian rule was despised and the amount of popular dissatisfaction which it had created. As events unfolded the series of events that led to his downfall began in the late 1970s the Shah seemed to have been taken by surprise.

Readings

Abrahamian, chapter 1 "Royal despots": state and society under the Qajars"; chapter 2 "Reform, revolution, and the Great War"; chapter 3 "The iron fist of Reza Shah"; chapter 4 "The nationalist interregnum"; chapter 5 "Muhammad Reza Shah's White Revolution".

Daniel, chapter 5 "From the Zand to the Qajars"; chapter 6 "The Forging of the Nation-State"; chapter 7 "Mohammed-Reza Shah".

Questions

1. Describe Iran's relations with the West during the Qajar dynasty and what were the main issues in these relations.

2. What were two major religious developments in Iran during the Qajar dynasty and what effects would they have in the future?

3. What events led to the end of the Qajar dynasty?

4. What was the effect of the Mosaddeq era on Iran?

5. What actions and policies of Mohammed-Reza Shah created widespread dissatisfaction among some sectors of the Iranian people?

Unit IX The Iranian Revolution and Establishment of the Islamic Republic

Outline

- Conditions and Events Leading Up to the Revolution
- The Course of the Revolution and Establishment of the Islamic Republic
- The Iran – Iraq War
- Iran's Relations with the West since the Gulf War

Introduction

The Islamic Revolution which began in 1979 ushered in a new era for Iran, putting to an end over 2000 years of monarchy and dynastic rule. In addition to the internal struggles generated by the dramatic changes Iran was undergoing, the Islamic Republic of Iran almost immediately found itself in conflict with other countries. Conflict with the United States, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iran-Iraq War would all involve the new regime in a struggle to survive.

Following the 1990-1991 Gulf War the Islamic Republic was confronted with some new conditions (the elimination of Iraq as a serious threat to its existence) while others (such as conflict with the United States) remained constant. With the 2003 American invasion and occupation of Iraq, Iran sought ways to increase its influence in the region and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances in almost every neighboring country.

Readings

- Abrahamian, chapter 6 "The Islamic Republic".
- Daniel, chapter 8 "Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution"; chapter 9 "The Khomeini Era"; chapter 10 "The Era of Reconstruction"; chapter 11 "Contemporary Iran".
- Katouzian, chapter 14 "Iran after Khomeini".

Questions

1. How was Ayatollah Khomeini able to use popular discontent to gain support for his movement against the Shah?
2. What were the major changes in government and society carried out by Ayatollah Khomeini after February 1979?
3. How did the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) affect Iran both domestically and internationally?
4. How has the presidency of Mahmud Ahmedinejad raised tensions with the West?

Unit X Submission of Final Papers

Completion and submission of the final research papers.

Format for Research Papers

1. Minimum 5000 words or 15 pages in length.
2. Typed, double-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman or Palantino font; pages must be numbered.
3. A full bibliography at the end of the paper should be included. The bibliography should include a minimum of five (5) entries not including the class books.
4. Notes (endnotes or footnotes) indicating the sources used must be included. The following formats for notes are preferred:

Book:

Author/Editor, *Title* (Place of publication, publisher [optional], year), p(p).

Example:

Elton L. Daniel, *The History of Iran* (London: Greenwood Press, 2001), p.4.

Chapter in a Book:

Author, "Title of Chapter", in Editor (ed.), *Title* (Place of publication, publisher [optional], year), p(p).

Example:

Lazard, G. "The New Persian Language", in R.N. Frye (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. IV: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 595-632.

Article:

Author, "Title of Article", *Name of Journal*, volume, number (date), p(p).

Example:

Otto J. Maenchen-Helfen, "Germanic and Hunnic Names of Iranian Origin", *Oriens*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1957), pp. 280-283.

Recommended / Optional Readings

Boyce, Mary. *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.

Clawson, Patrick and Michael Rubin. *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Change*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Crist, David. *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2012.

Curtis, Vesta Sarkhosh and Sarah Stewart (eds.). *Birth of the Persian Empire: The Idea of Iran, Volume I*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2005.

Curtis, Vesta Sarkhosh and Sarah Stewart (eds.). *The Age of the Parthians: The Idea of Iran, Volume II*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2007.

Curtis, Vesta Sarkhosh and Sarah Stewart (eds.). *The Sasanian Era: The Idea of Iran, Volume III*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2008.

Daryaee, Touraj. *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2009.

Karsh, Efraim. *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988*. London: Osprey Publishing, 2002.

Malm, Andreas and Shora Esmailian. *Iran on the Brink: Rising Workers and Threats of War*. London: Pluto Press, 2007.

Mottahedeh, Roy. *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1985.

Newman, Andrew J. *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2009.