

## Persian Government

**Overview** The ancient Persian government survived, with many breaks, until its encounter with Islam, in the seventh century C.E. Our focus, here, is on the Achaemenid Empire of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E., for during that period the great and distinctive traits of the ancient Persians are most exceptionally on display. Cyrus, Darius I, Xerxes I constitute the highest level of rulership in the ancient world.

**The Great King** The great king Cyrus inherited his Empire, was carefully trained into it, and began his formative kingly life by defeating the Medes (549 B.C.E.), the traditional rivals of Persia, capturing Babylon, and advancing to the sea through Syria and Palestine. By the time of his death, his Empire reached into the Hindu Kush mountains of India, and was the largest empire mankind had seen to that point. On the whole this empire began, and continued under the

Achaemenids, as a sharp departure from such frequently brutal Mesopotamian Empires as those of the Assyrians and Hittites. Cultural diversity and tolerance defined the Persian empire, for two centuries. Many different languages were spoken, regional and ethnic groups were left in peace, art flourished--especially architectural complexes, ceramic, and sculptural--and gardens and parks were planted, by order of the King. Toleration was extended to the worship of the Mesopotamian god, Marduk, and the destroyed Jewish temple in Jerusalem was restored.

**The governing process** Centralizing such a vast empire was possible only in an atmosphere of relative peace, decent communications, and thoughtful surveillance. Cyrus and Darius both constructed vast palatial complexes, in each of their various capital cities, and erected monumental records of their extensive control, while at the same time provisions were made for the governing of far flung regions of the empire.

**Administering the Empire** The Empire was divided into twenty provinces (*satrapies*), each under the control of a *satrap*, or royal governor, who was himself of noble lineage or close connection with the ruling family. The work of these functionaries--'the eyes and ears of the king'-- was regularly inspected by royal supervisors, and backed up, in the capitol, by a 'royal secretariat,' charged with maintaining central correspondence with the provinces. Aramaic, the language of the Assyrian Empire, was restored as the *lingua franca* of the Persian Empire, and facilitated communication, for it was written in the Phoenician alphabet, rather than in the more cumbersome cuneiform script. Much of the business conducted, along this centralized but liberal structure, had to do with tax collecting, which was the bottom line for the government, and the revenue from which was heavily reinvested in road construction; a move which, in turn, improved the efficiency of the machinery of government.

**The resources of the Empire** At hand, to support the governing of such a vast empire, lay certain natural advantages. There was of course a coastline, on the Eastern Mediterranean, through which trade, especially with Greece, was possible. There was an abundant supply of iron, and in the high valleys and pastures there was a perfect breeding ground for horses and cavalymen. Gold the king took from his subjects, and built a massive treasury, though without imposing any further demands on his people than taxes.

## Reading

Olmstead, A.T., *A History of the Persian Empire*, Chicago, 1959.

Briant, Pierre, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, Winona Lake, Indiana, 2002.

## Discussion questions

Gardens and exotic flowers were featured in Persian cities. Does this aesthetic state of affairs seem to you to cohere with the governing policies of the Persian Empire? How?

How did the Persian Empire deal with the diversity of languages it comprised? Was Aramaic successfully transformed into the spoken argot of the whole Empire, as has been done to *pidgin* English in West Africa?

What was the importance of iron for this early Iron Age Empire? How was the ore smelted, and to what uses was that transformed metal put?