

PERSIAN ECONOMIC INNOVATIONS-Ancient Period

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Overview The Empires of Ancient Persia were active for a millennium, from 558 B.C.E.-651 C.E., and comprised four distinct dynastic rules. With the invasion of Islamic forces in the 7th century C.E., the sway of ancient Persia was broken, but the legacy of the Persian Empire remains to this day. Centuries of relative peace, in the Mideast and central Asia, can be attributed to the largely peaceful and harmoniously diverse realms of the Persian Empire. Art and architecture flourished, leaving distinct legacies of beauty and form, and the arts of medicine, to segue into our topic of innovation, were given a lasting boost by the ancient Persian achievement.

The arts of medicine One wants to begin at this point, for medical art--while both a science and in this case an 'innovation,' lies at a clearly innovative tipping point in cultural development. Persian historians of their own medical craft divide the national medical achievement into three stages. The *first* is the stages outlined in the *Avesta*, or sacred text of Zoroastrianism, and comprises *surgery, herbs, and divine words*. Of these three medical approaches, claims the *Avesta*, divine words are the most important healing agent, for they go straight to the root cause of disease. (However, we have record of a successful Persian craniotomy from the 3rd century B.C.E.) The second is the stage memorialized in the mediaeval Persian text, *Denkard*, which records ancient Persian medical achievements, and lists *4333 distinct diseases*, an innovation in comprehensiveness. The *third* stage of ancient Persian medical innovation is the intense development of medical training, doctors, and a hospital system, under the particular impulse of the Achaemenid ruler, Darius (521 B.C.E.-486 B.C.E. The world's first teaching hospital--so goes the ancient claim--was founded in Gondishapur, which, by the 6th century C.E. had, it is claimed, become the ancient world's most advanced medical center.

Social policy innovations We have reason to attribute to the sixth century Achaemenid rulers, Cyrus (610-530 B.C.E.) and Darius (521-486 B.C.E.), enlightened social policies which were (allegedly) firsts for mankind. On a cylinder seal, seemingly recording an edict of Cyrus, we read of royal decisions protective of what we would call both human and migrant rights. We also read, from the same source, reference to an act which (seemingly) abolishes slavery in Persia.

Mail system innovation The Persian Royal Road greatly facilitated the spread of news and information in Persia--the internet of its time. Profiting from this new infrastructural facility, and from numerous additional transnational roads constructed in 6th century B.C.E. Persia, Cyrus instituted a postal system intended, according at least to the Greek writer and contemporary Xenophon, to provide mail service to every citizen. A first for mankind!

Carpets The 5th century B.C.E. Pazyryk carpet, excavated from the grave of a Scythian nobleman, in Siberia, was arguably of Achaemenid Persian make, and--still splendid in color and pile--represents (probably) the oldest preserved carpet in the world. Persian carpet artistry has from the outset, to our times, innovated in carpet making techniques and styles.

Readings

Elgood, C., *A Medical History of Persia and the Eastern Caliphate*, Cambridge, 1951.

Ansari, Ali M., *Iran: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, 2014.

Discussion questions

Do you see a coherence among the diverse innovations alluded to above? Is there a common 'civilizing' or 'civilized' theme?

How do you explain the special prominence of the ancient Persians in the arts of medicine? Did they pick up their impulse from Egypt, where medical schools and trained physicians were in evidence long before the Persian Empire?

Could we have added tax and tax collection policy to our list of Persian innovations? Were the Persians, with their satrapy system of national administration, breaking fresh ground in the always crucial struggle of the governing folks, to collect taxes?