

# PERSIAN SOCIAL HISTORY – Ancient Period

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Part I : SOCIAL STRUCTURE

## Persian Class System

**Overview** We stress, here, the class system of the Achaemenid Empire, to which we owe our traditional view of Ancient Persia. The world of Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes, in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E., still belonged partly to the older Avestan world, the pastoral and nomadic pre-Achaemenid cultures with their elementary class structure--priests, warriors, farmers. It was only after this functionally simple hierarchy met vast social and political change, that the complexity of the class pyramid insisted on itself. As the Achaemenids gained world empire power, their society necessarily took on more complex needs and responsibilities. Administration of ruled territories necessitated a bureaucracy, accountants, scribes--while artisans--potters, builders, traders-- were required to feed and care for the growing population. Warriors were required, as always, but now played many roles--sailors, infantrymen, cavalry, spear throwers--while farmers dealt with a more diverse and demanding population, to which to market their wares, and thus required more specialization, to meet demand.

**The pyramid: King and priests** The social pyramid, of the matured Achaemenid society, is represented along the stages of the following hierarchy: King and royal family; priests; aristocracy; military; traders, craftsmen; peasants; slaves. Not surprisingly, the King is (symbolically) expected to serve as supreme warrior, supreme supporter of the harvest, the best of gardeners, and as God's representative on earth. The priests, as the pyramid suggests, held a paramount position, as supervisors of sacred sacrifices and royal rituals, not to mention their function as managers of grain storehouses--often attached to temples, and of hordes of money, frequently stashed away in the safety of the House of God.

**Aristocracy and military** Among the most influential in the society were the relatives of the King, and members of great families who were intermarried with royalty. To these groups went special emoluments and land grants, plenty to secure a lasting interest in the success of their Majesty's enterprises. The military reaped the rewards of one successful engagement after another, and for a few centuries, until Alexander (331 B.C.E.), 'kept the people safe.'

**Traders and craftsmen** With the advent of significant long distance road networks, under Cyrus, the lure of marketing--produce, building materials, textiles--grew rapidly and marketplaces filled up, In all the cities and villages, with cohorts of traders and sellers, the livelier for the advent of a newly minted, and well backed up, silver currency.

**Slaves** Slaves were accumulated into the society in two ways: they were captured in war; or they were regular Persians citizens who became so seriously indebted that they had no choice but to indenture themselves as a way of paying off debts. In either case these persons gave up all citizen rights, and worked off their servitude as domestics, as hired hands, as miners, or as laborers on construction projects.

## Readings

Stolper, M., *Entrepreneurs and Empire*, Leiden, 1985.

Irani, K.D.; Morris, Silver; *Social Justice in the Ancient World*, Westport, 1995.

### **Discussion questions**

Many people, nowadays, believe that democracy is the highest development of a political culture. Was there a time, do you think, when monarchy was the perfect political situation for ancient Persia?'

Did ancient Persia evolve, historically and politically, by some kind of inward force over which it had no control? Or did it shape its early development, by conscious planning?

Please inquire into what we can know about the quality of life for the little guy on the street in ancient Persepolis. What was his diet, his source of amusements, his life expectancy?

### Part II : GENDER RELATIONS

**Overview** The Achaemenid Empire in its early days, prior to the sixth and seventh centuries B.C.E., clearly revealed its roots in the mountainous country of northern Persia where, as perhaps in the Wild West of the old United States, the winning virtues were horsemanship, masculine toughness, and readiness to defend yourself. The growth of a gender-sensitive state, from these origins, took time.

**The diversification of early Persian society** The society of the Achaemenids (550-330 B.C.E.) is the most information-rich source, for us, for understanding the character of early Persian society. As we meet that society, under the reigns of a succession of 'enlightened Kings'--Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes--we see a familiar social transformation: from a warrior society to that of a more centralized kingdom, with a new burden--administering the territories it has made subject to itself. With that new administrative burden the composition of social actors starts to grow more complex, with prominence given to civil servants, artisans, maintainers of religious institutions, merchants. With this often rapid development comes an inevitable growth in the public presence of women in society.

**The Fortification and Treasury Texts** Archeologists have turned up troves of clay tablets, from the ancient Persian capital of Persepolis, from which we have learned the bulk of our information about the status of women in Achaemenid Persia, or rather, to be more exact, about the status of royal, royally foreign, or high placed women in the imperial court. There is occasional individual evidence, as in the case of a wealthy Achaemenid woman, Irdabama, who owned and directed her own workforce, several hundred employees of both sexes, and who had her own seal, evidence of her high birth. Reference is made, in the same tablets, to non-royal women managers, who owned and managed their own property, and who saw to it that female employees enjoyed the same benefits--rations, salary--as their male co-workers.

**Within the royal circle** Within the royal circle, as we learn from these Persepolis (and Susa, and Babylon) tablets, women of privilege, court members enjoyed both freedom and respect. These women were beneficiaries of large estates or financial enterprises, and had leisure to travel and visit the villages subject to them, as well as parity with their mates in protecting and directing their children and assets. While the family structure was male oriented--patriarchal, polygamous, and concubine friendly--high born women were respected, free to divorce if they wished--and probably freer than the cloistered wives of (for instance) fifth century B.C.E. Athenian husbands.

**Notes on the little woman** By the nature of the case, we know relatively little about 'ordinary Persian women' and their interface with their male counterparts. Marriages among 'commoners' were usually monogamous, though under certain circumstances husbands could take other wives, and enjoy sex with servants or slaves. (The husband did not have the right to pawn his wife, in order to pay debts; the husband did have the right to pawn his own children, to pay debts.) The woman could initiate divorce, take legal action, and demand a return of her initial dowry.

**Final observation** Women were (apparently) never veiled in ancient Persia. We see in them much apparent liberty and public presence.

### **Readings**

Arberry, A. J., *The Legacy of Persia*, Oxford, 1953.

Brosius, Maria, *Women in Ancient Persia, 559-331 B.C.E.*, Oxford, 1998.

### **Discussion questions**

Women were not active in temple maintenance or supervision in Persia, as they were in Mesopotamia. Why do you think this was true? Could it have to do with the nature of the religions dominant in the two different cultures?

Is it of general human relevance, that the burdens of administration lead a culture to make more room for the feminine principle? Can you think of other cultures than Persia, which reacted in this fashion?

Parks, gardens, and plantations played a significant role in Achaemenid society. Do some research into the relation of Persian women into the beautification projects of ancient Persia. Surprised?