

# PERSIAN HISTORY – Ancient Period

*Frederic Will, Ph.D.*

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### SECTION I : POLITICAL HISTORY

#### Part I : 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 cavalrymen. 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?

## Part II : MILITARY

**Overview** Ancient societies were hard won, had many enemies, and inclined to protect themselves along their borders, although rigorous studies hypothesize a state of primitive warlessness, before survival pressures dictated the origins of militarism. Once we encounter states of such high culture, as the great ancient civilizations, we must assume that social existence depends on state of the art military development.

**The Persian setting** The Persian Empire ruled by Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes--the great kings of the Achaemenid Empire (550-330 B.C.E.--stretched from northern Greece to India, and through trade extended tentacles out as far as China and England. Land meant wealth, and tax paying citizens were welcome anywhere--providing they rendered a minimum of loyalty to the Persian state. The

Achaemenids, mobilizing the cutting edge of military technology at their time, constantly reinforced their borders with new levels of military power.

**Infantry and their weapons** The grunts bore the heaviest weight of fighting, and were equipped after fashions observed both among the Greeks and among such fierce barbarous neighbors as the Scythians. The little guy wore a tunic that descended below his knees, and that was on occasion reinforced with mail or armor--though the cost of metals was high and such reinforcements were not common. His shield would typically be five feet long, made of withes and wicker woven into an animal skin framework. He would carry a couple of long spears, and arrows, with a cuirass of metal and a helmet. On the whole, we would say, he was lightly and appropriately armed, for his circumstances, which would involve shooting from a distance and not much face to face combat.

**Cavalry** On the battlefield, the infantry ranks would fight in two rows, grunts in the front line, archers behind them at their shoulders, while the cavalry, often charging with chariots, would ride on either side of the infantry, carrying scythes on the protruding axles of their chariots; with deadly results for any enemy forces who found themselves on the wrong side of these blades. The horsemen doing the attacking were skilled at separating enemy infantry from their commanders, thus at breeding chaos and confusion behind enemy lines. The same horsemen typically carried two long spears, deadly even at a distance, and powerful means for keeping the enemy on the defensive.

**The Immortals** This elite battalion of 10,000 men were the shock troops of the Persians, the best and most potently equipped units. Their name was given them by Herodotus, the Greek historian, who noted that in battle no sooner did one of these men fall than he was instantly replaced, guaranteeing the immortality of the whole.

**Mercenaries** Finally it is essential to include the mercenaries, whom the Persians regularly hired to strengthen their forces for large encounters. Scythian archers were regular participants in such actions, as were Ethiopian marines (black) and Iranian nomads, who fought with lassos and battle axes.

## Readings

Lynn, John, *Battle: A Cultural History of Combat and Culture*, New York, 2003.

Archer, I., et. al., *World History of Warfare*, London, 2009.

## Discussion questions

How is it that the Persians, with their massive and well trained military forces, were defeated by the much smaller forces of Athens and other Greek states? Was there, at least in the fifth century B.C.E., some fundamental weakness in the Persian conception of warfare?

How were men conscripted for the Persian army? Was there a universal drafting of age-eligible candidates?

With what kind of fanfare and pomp--with their caravanserais, camp women, specialized foods--did the Immortals go into battle? What role did they play in battle?

## SECTION II : SOCIAL HISTORY

### Part I : SOCIAL STRUCTURE

**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?

## SECTION III : ECONOMIC HISTORY

### Part I : ECONOMIC INNOVATIONS

**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 7<sup>th</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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?

### Part II : TRADE

**Overview** The Persian Empire lasted from 558 B.C.E. to 651 C.E., passing through several major phases--the Achaemenid Dynasty (558 B.C.E.-330 B.C.E.), the invasion of and conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great (334-330 B.C.E.), the Seleucid Dynasty (323 B.C.E.-83 B.C.E.), the Parthian Dynasty (247 B.C.E.-224 C.E.), and the Sassanid Dynasty (224 C.E.-651 C.E.). During this millennium, in the early part of which the Persians suffered humiliating defeat at the hands of the Greeks, the Persians accrued one of the largest and most civilized empires of antiquity. From 558 B.C.E.-486 B.C.E. the Persians were blessed with two on the whole outstanding and forward looking monarchs, Cyrus (600 B.C.E.-530 B.C.E.) and Darius (521 B.C.E.-486 B.C.E.) At the time of his monarchy, Cyrus ruled over the most extensive empire ever seen by mankind. Within the framework of this powerful and influential empire, international trade gained momentum, and contributed to the coming together of formerly separate areas of human settlement, from China to Western Europe.

**Transportation: the Royal Road** Great Empires--Roman, Chinese--depend on a strong transportation network, along which information can pass that provides the backbone basis for a trading society. No network better illustrates this reliance of trade on information than the 1600 mile long Royal Road which the Persian Emperor Darius (521 B.C.E.-486 B.C.E.) sponsored into existence, between Sardis and Susa. In the Persian empire this transportation vehicle served as the beating artery of progress and power. Trade between diverse parts of the empire--facilitated by large business agencies and commercial houses-- and en route to export points, was greatly facilitated by this inland route, which Royal messengers on horse could traverse in nine days, and which--as the complexity of the Empire grew--spawned an industry of caravanserais where travelers could stay as they made their ways from one end of Persia to the other, and where goods could be warehoused. Ongoing networks of roads, like the Chinese Silk Road, joined the Persian Royal Road to help form a land transportation web which stretched from India to Egypt, connecting major seaports which served as access points for goods transfer.

**Ocean trade** The Persians were proficient sailors, particularly active in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea; points for goods delivery and for forward merchanting to more distant ports such as those in China and India. In large cargo vessels, taking advantage of trade winds in such bodies of water as the Indian Ocean, the Persians were able to deliver and sell with ever increasing efficiency, as their empire grew and its tentacles spread. Among the most valued commodities of the Persian merchant trade were the wide varieties of fruits and vegetables which the inland soil of Persia cultivated, and which have left their names in our present-day vocabulary: *orange, lemon, peach, asparagus, spinach*; not to mention those Persian items of dress, *tiara, shawl, sash*, which were attractive to foreign style setters. In addition to such civilizing items, for which Persia was renowned, there was export of precious metals--abundant in Persia--and stock for new crops--like sesame, imported to Egypt, or rice to Mesopotamia.

**Coinage and commerce** An accurate system of weights and measures, a homogeneous and plentiful coinage supply, and the development of banking and commercial houses, within Persia, all contributed to the increase of trade within the Persian Empire. The principle at work in the development of economies of scale was active in the development of the Persian Empire which, the more coherent and internally self-informed it was, the more profitable it was able to render its enterprises.

## Reading

Cook, J. M., *The Persian Empire*, London, 1983.

Lockard, Craig, *Societies, Networks, and Transitions: A Global History*, Boston, 2008.

## Discussion questions

How were commercial relations between Persia and Greece influenced by the 'Persian Wars,' as the Greeks called them? Did commerce--as usual--trump international hostility?

Ships were the key to Persian trade. Where were these ships made? Who made them? Were the Persian triremes similar to the Greek triremes used in the Persian Wars?

How were the Royal Road--and the many other land networks in Persia--financed? Was it by the famed Persian tax system, or by the 5000 tons of silver on reserve in the King's treasury?

## SECTION IV: CULTURAL HISTORY

### Part I : SCIENCE

**Overview** We have allowed ourselves to include medicine under *innovation*, in reviewing the ancient Persian achievement of ways to improve the human condition. Persian medicine, in the centuries B.C.E., was noteworthy especially for daring and techniques, though its achievement was at the same time a great contribution to the understanding of the human body, to *science*. More purely 'scientific,' in the ancient Persian achievement, were what we might call mechanical inventions, experience tested ways to improve daily life. Interestingly enough, all but one of our examples, here, revolve around the effective use of water power; no surprise, in a land marked by the extensive deserts of the central Mid East, and the urgent need for arable and irrigatable land.

**Quantats** A *quantat*, the Arabic word for 'channel,' is--for they are still in use--an upward sloping underground channel which transports water from an underground aquifer to the surface--for purposes of irrigation and clean drinking water, both of which purposes are still so served, throughout the world. The invention of these channel systems, early in the first millennium B.C.E. in Persia, was quickly understood to answer a serious problem raised by irrigation efforts in the central Persian desert; the evaporation of water, from irrigation channels, was extensive and pure loss.

**Construction of a quantat** The construction and engineering of these channels required advanced know-how and much manpower. While the water channel in question normally derived from a water source in the foothills of mountains, and thus flowed naturally downhill, it was necessary to construct vertical channels, in the water table, to redirect the main flow toward the surface, where it could (normally) serve its purpose of irrigation. Though most **quantats** were less than five km. in length, when one considers that upward inclining shafts were generally built only 20-35 meters apart, one sees what a heavy investment of man power (and money and time) had to be devoted to these structures. When we think of ancient Persia as a land of tulips and citrus fruit, we need to think **quantat** first of all.



**Collateral domestic uses** Worth noting: by the construction of a wind tower, in a private house, and by aligning the wind vectors picked up through the tower, and diverted to the house below, it was possible to use the **quanats** to water-cool the flow of air, and generate not only a kind of air-conditioning, or permanently freezable water, ice.

**Water and its uses** As early as 500 B.C.E. Persians were working with water clocks, which used a pot with a controlled water loss supply as a template for time measurement. (The last such water clock was still in use in Persia in 1965 C.E.).

**Bagdad batteries** As early as 150 B.C.E., the Parthians (in their capital, Ctesiphon) were experimenting with a 'simple device,' whose use we are not sure of: the device consisted of three parts, a small pot (5" tall) and a tube and rod divided by a sheet of copper, all of which fitted snugly inside the pot. The best hypotheses, about the purpose of this device, are that by pouring an acidic juice--vinegar or lemon--into the pot with the tube and rod, a galvanic reaction could be set up which would be useable for electroplating.

## Readings

Lindberg, David, *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Context, 600 BC-AD 1450*, Chicago, 1990.

Landels, J. G., *Engineering in the Ancient World*, Berkeley, 2000.

## Discussion questions

To what do you attribute the ancient Persian concern with water? Do we find that same kind of concern, in desert places throughout the world--Saudi Arabia, Mongolia, South West Texas?

Elsewhere--under Persian 'innovations' --we discuss medicine, a practical inquiry, as the above mechanical inventions are practical. Were the ancient Persians not interested in the 'purer' sciences of Astronomy or Math? (We know that by the Middle Ages the Persians contributed brilliantly to the sciences of mathematics.)

Can you reconstruct the thinking that went into **quanat** construction? How was the principle of evaporation discovered? Where did Persian engineers get their understanding of underground geology?

## Part II : ART

**Overview** The Persian Empire, in antiquity, consisted of four distinct dynasties, in total lasting a millennium: Achaemenid, 558-330 B.C.E.; Seleucid Empire 323-83 B.C.E.; Parthian, 247 B.C.E.--224 C.E.; Sassanid Empire, 224-651 C.E. (Alexander the Great's domination of Persia lasted from 336-323 B.C.E.) It is natural, then, that the development of artistic styles would vary greatly from one period of this Empire to another. In fact the duration and complexity of Persian artistic culture far exceeds even the succession of ancient Empires mentioned above, for Persian art was in fact already being created at a high level in the 7<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C.E. We can only comment briefly on a long enduring style development which rivals the Greek for energy and distinctiveness.

**Palaces** The Achaemenid dynasty, in which we place the great kings Cyrus (610-560 B.C.E.), Darius (522-486 B.C.E.), and Xerxes (486-465 B.C.E.), enjoyed luxurious lives alternating between high desert and citadel like palaces, where they commissioned residential complexes which were among other things showplaces for visual style. Especially noteworthy were the palace foundations at Pasargadae (Palace of Cyrus), the palace of Artaxerxes at Susa, and the remains of the complexes of Xerxes and Darius at Persepolis.

**Palace details** What we see in common, to all these vast structures, are huge halls surrounded by columns, and high terraces supporting massive towers. Like Greek temples, these palaces were living repositories of associated visual arts. Double flights of steps, converging at the top, typically addressed each palace; friezes of advancing warriors or Assyrian lions flank the stairs. The columns at Persepolis are narrower and have higher bases than the columns on Greek temples, whereas the Persian capitals are more 'robust' than the Greek, characteristically featuring figures of crouching bulls, set back to back.

**Sculpture** Nowhere is Persian sculpture more original or cunningly displayed than as ornament on and around palace architecture. Royal staircases, deftly structured porticos, formal hunting gardens for which the Persians were renowned; all these sites were natural display layouts for martial or tribute bearing friezes, or gigantic human-divine statues of sacred bulls. (Cf. especially the *Frieze of Archers* in the Louvre, formerly part of the palace of Darius I at Susa.)

**Bronze, gold, and silver arts** Pre-Achaemenid art shows us the brilliant pre-Imperial background from which the later Persian decorative arts derived. A treasure of mostly bronze objects, accoutrements of military and cavalry equipment, were found in the mountains of Luristan, in Western Iran, and stunned archeologists with their finesse and richness. A related trove of goldsmith and other arts, was found in Ziwiye; finely formed materials of gold, silver, and ivory. An early find, from the long and abundant millennium ahead, in the Persian sense of the intricate arts.

**Pottery** The earliest pottery from the Persian world shows a marked influence from Mesopotamia. Examples from Susa and Persepolis, dating to the mid 4<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C.E., feature geometrical designs, stylized animal forms--ibex and water birds--and blow us away with their finesse. Many thousands of years later, in the Sassanid Dynasty, the imperial capital at Ctesiphon revealed bowls, ewers, and dishes of undiminished beauty, another testimony to the continuity of the Persian artistic genius.

## Readings

Allen, Lindsay, *The Persian Empire*, Chicago, 2005.

Curtis, John; Tallis, Nigel, *Forgotten Empires: The World of Ancient Persia*, Berkeley, 2005.

## Discussion questions

Do you see a style or tone continuity throughout the long duration of ancient Persian art? Would you recognize that art, without knowing what it was, as 'Persian'?

What kind of style interrelations do you see, between Persian art and that of its neighbors in Egypt or Mesopotamia?

Vast palace complexes were prioritized by many Persian Emperors. Who were the architects of these complexes? How did they qualify for such assignments? Where did their construction workers come from, and where did they live while working on these projects?

## Part III : RELIGION

**Overview** Several religions shared the salvational hopes of the Persians of the classical period: 600 B.C.E.-650 C.E. As Indo-Europeans, the Persians belonged in their earliest beliefs to the language and belief family of the Aryans of India. Between the fifth century B.C.E., however, and the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E., at the time of the Islamic conquest, the principal religious force in Persia was Zoroastrianism. That religion predominated during the great Persian centuries, while passing on its own remarkable influence to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. It is essential, in interpreting the religion of

classical Persia, to understand Zoroastrianism, for it is the unique characterizing trait of the Persia of the classical period.

**Who was Zoroaster?** Zoroaster--we surmise through the shaky evidence--probably lived in the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. He seems to have come from an aristocratic family, and probably served as a priest in an already existent cult, which he found in need of reform. In any case he, a little like the Buddha, left his familiar religious setting, and home, and went wandering in search of wisdom. After some ten years of travel he came to a place in religious maturing, in which he began to see visions, and to make contact with his Supreme God, whom he called Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord.) His faith in this deity qualified him, in later interpreters' eyes, as perhaps the first monotheist, or, in the perspective of a noted scholar, 'in the full sense of the word, *the first theologian.*'

**What is Zoroastrianism?** The religion given to Zoroaster yielded his series of hymns of praise, and discussions of moral and theological issues, now largely lost, which were gathered together under the descriptive name of *gathas*, and ultimately compiled in a sacred scripture called the *Avesta*. The materials collected there contained the groundwork of a religious conception which will in many ways seem familiar to, say, the believer in the Abrahamic religions today: a strong belief in a single male god; a marked awareness of the struggle between good and evil; a belief in heaven and hell; a belief in the free will that permits us to choose life actions which lead us after death into either bliss or punishment; and, in the moral realm, much stress on care for 'God's world, the environment,' and a vivid respect for the good things in life--the 'pleasures of life' and prosperity--the enjoyment of which was a way of showing respect to God.

**The Place of Zoroastrianism in Ancient (and modern) Culture** By the end of the millennium in which it dominated four potent dynasties of ancient Persia, and riveted the adoration of great kings like Cyrus and Darius, Zoroastrianism was by and large replaced by the Islam that was sweeping over Persia. While the Zoroastrian religion won great adherence in its millennium, and has survived continuously in pockets of the Middle East and India, to this day, at its best it served as a creative precursor movement in a world where monotheisms were about to become the dominant cultural triggers.

## Reading

Solomon, Alexander, *The Zoroastrian Faith*, Toronto, 1993.

West, Martin Litchfield, *The Hymns of Zoroaster: A New Translation*, New York, 2016.

## Discussion questions

Is Zoroastrianism, like the Abrahamic religions, a 'revealed' religion?

That is, does God speak directly with Zoroaster as though he is an inspired prophet who is capable of co-existing with Him on His level?

What was the administrative structure of the Zoroastrian religion? Who were the *magi*, and how did they function in this system? Was there a spiritual leader, a 'Pope'?

The Greek historian, Herodotus, remarked that the Persians were much more spiritual than the Greeks, because the Persians worshipped a God who was pure spirit, not an embodiment in mortal forms, like the gods of Greek polytheism. Was Herodotus right?

## Part IV : PHILOSOPHY

**Overview** Religion and philosophy are hard to separate in early Persian experience. Religion is the mother, philosophy the child, taking its topics from the categories of the 'belief system.' One might say, in

an effort to characterize this state of affairs, that classical Greek philosophy is sharply different from classical Persian. The philosophies of Plato and Aristotle deal with creation, origins, even with the notion of God, but expend their vitality on the discursive problems raised on the ground, by trying to think out the human condition. Persian philosophy starts from the given of a theological setting, and goes on to lay out the discursive consequences of this God-created condition of man.

**Zoroastrianism** Zoroaster (late 7<sup>th</sup>, early 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.), like the Buddha, began life as a privileged aristocrat who left home in search of the meaning of life. The visions he benefitted from, en route, gave him confident belief in a monotheistic world system, ruled by a father god. This conviction shored up a bevy of convictions which formed the core of Zoroastrian theology, while at the same time serving as the trigger for a variety of religious-philosophical conclusions. The struggle of good and evil was central to Zoroaster's world picture, a belief in heaven and hell, and in the free will that qualifies us for one or the other of those two venues; the belief issue was ample evidence to qualify these positions for dispute, thus for philosophical argumentation--which as it turned out was abundant. Respect for God's creation--an admiring pleasure in the goods of the earth--and care for his environment were among other salient belief-principles on which Zoroaster established the basis of a distinctive issue-based philosophy.

**Manichaeism** Mani (216-274 A.D.) was a Persian visionary and philosopher, born in Parthian Babylonia, of whom we know that he was a believer in the message of Jesus Christ, that he studied Hinduism in India, and that upon return from travels to the East he settled in Persia and devoted himself to establishing his religion-philosophy of Manichaeism. The governing idea of this philosophy bears unmistakable resemblance to Zoroastrianism: for Mani the cosmos is an inextricable entanglement of good with evil, light marking the good, darkness the evil. The mixture itself had been formed by a cosmic accident, and it was mankind's duty to bring light and goodness to being. The basis is there, though we have almost no supporting texts, for a metaphysic and an ethic.

**Zurvanism** The historical origins of Zurvanism are obscure, and to some degree depend on how you see the religion's relation to Zoroastrianism; for on most accounts Zurvanism must be viewed as an heretical brand of Zoroaster's thought. While there seem to be three distinct versions of Zurvanism, they have in common a single God, transcendent, without passion, and infinite in space and time. By one account this god engendered opposing halves--one of them the god of good and light, Ahura Mazda, which--as in each of the other religion-philosophies above-- were in continual struggle with one another, as part of the definition of mankind.

## Readings

Zaehner, Richard, *Zurvan, a Zoroastrian Dilemma*, Oxford, 1955.

Zaehner, Richard, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, reprint, New York, 2005.

## Discussion questions

Can you distinguish the philosophical from the theological elements in the views discussed above. Can you see the philosophical implications of the positions in cosmology, ethics, and logic implicit in Zoroastrianism and its fellow Persian religions?

How deeply have the above religious-philosophical movements penetrated into the thought of our day? How widely practiced is Zoroastrianism?

How would you account for the fierce emphasis on dualism--good versus evil--in the above philosophies? Is that emphasis equally strong in the Abrahamic religions of our day?