

PERSIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE – Ancient Period

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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?