

PERSIAN POLITICAL HISTORY – Ancient Period

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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 7th and 6th 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?

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?