

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.1—The Persian (Achaemenid) Empire, 550-330 BCE (Map 1)

Background

The Persians, a group of Indo-European speaking tribes from Inner Eurasia, arrived on the Iranian plateau sometime between 1500 and 1000 BCE. About 550 BCE, Cyrus II, the leader of the Achaemenids, which was one of these Persian clans, successfully revolted against the Medes, the Persians' overlords, who controlled upper Mesopotamia.

Formation

It took Cyrus less than a decade to conquer the Medes. He then moved on to seize control of the Anatolian Peninsula and the Greek city-states nestled along the peninsula's western edge. Syria was next and in 539 Babylon fell as well.

When conquering Babylon, Cyrus had promised to treat it fairly and not to destroy either its institutions or its culture. At the same time, he returned to various groups the goods which the Babylonians had taken from them as a sign of conquest. Cyrus also freed the Hebrews, who had been enslaved in Babylon. He allowed them to return home. Later he helped them rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. This policy of local cultural independence won for him a reputation as a fair ruler.

Meanwhile, other Persian forces moved northeast into the rich lands of Bactria-Sogdiana where they captured most of the trade centers on the Silk Routes that led to Inner Eurasia. After Cyrus' death, his son, Cambyses, added Egypt to the empire's holdings. In 322 BCE, Cambyses died. Darius (522-486 BCE), a strong military leader, seized control. He soon pushed the Persian borders to the Indus River valley in the east. The Persians now controlled the largest empire the world had ever seen.

Administration

The vast Persian Empire was the most culturally diverse empire that had ever existed. It linked the east with the west and ruled cities where people of every class and culture rubbed shoulders and ideas. It was a huge crucible of cultural and social cross-fertilization. To rule it, the Persians had to invent new administrative tools.

It was Darius I who, building on the administrative systems inherited from the Assyrians and Babylonians, reorganized the empire. He established twenty provinces (called satrapies), each with its governor, military commander, and treasurer, who reported separately to the king. In addition, there was a separate system of inspectors known as the King's Eyes or the King's Ears. These inspectors had their own armies and could move against even a military commander if necessary. The system was so effective in preventing rebellion, corruption, and harsh rule that it was copied again and again, even in modern times.

Darius also introduced the Babylonian calendar, known for its accuracy, and set up granaries to assure a constant supply of food for his troops. He built elaborate underground irrigation systems as well. In the far reaches of what is now Iran, these irrigation systems turned deserts into gardens.

Religion

The Persian ruling class followed the religion of Zoroastrianism. This religion taught that there were two deities, Ahura Mazda, the god of light and truth and Ahriman, the god of darkness and evil. These two gods were in constant struggle, a struggle that Ahura Mazda would eventually win. Zoroastrians believed that after the final battle, there would be a Judgment Day and everyone who had ever lived would be judged and sent either to heaven or hell. These ideas are believed to have influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Today, there are Zoroastrians communities in Iran and India, where they are called *Parsis* or *Parsees*. Communities also exist in other parts of the world including the United States. The Achaemeinds did not force Zoroastrianism on their subjects. As rulers of an empire that embraced more cultural communities than had any other before them, they wisely allowed their subjects much cultural freedom.

Persian kings saw themselves as ruling by the will of the god Ahura Mazda who cared for the well-being of all. In an inscription on a rock in Behistun, written in 519 BCE, Darius proclaims that “by the favor of Ahura Mazda I am King; Ahura Mazda bestowed the kingdom upon me.”

Trade

Darius encouraged trade and economic development in a number of ways. He standardized weights and measures and established a coinage system based on gold and silver. He also built banking houses. (The word “check” is derived from a Persian word.)

When Darius came to power, a network of roads connecting the urban centers in Southwest Asia already existed. Darius added a royal road from Susa in the Persian homeland to Sardis in the western part of Anatolia, a distance of some 1500 miles. A system of relay stations made it possible for a rider carrying mail to ride the distance in six to nine days rather than the usual three months. Officials and merchants traveling on the imperial roads to do the emperor’s business carried passports entitling them to free food and lodging along the way. Perhaps Darius’ most ambitious undertaking was the building of a canal, 140 km long and 50 meters wide, from the Nile to the Red Sea. Completed in 500 BCE, it connected Memphis, then the capital of Egypt, to Babylon by sea.

Decline/Fall

During Darius’ reign, the Greek city-states at the western edge of the Anatolian Peninsula rebelled. They were encouraged by Athens. Darius successfully squashed the rebellion, and two years later he sent an expedition to discipline Athens and the other unruly Greek city states. The Persian army was defeated at the battle of Marathon in 490 BCE. Darius died before he could launch another attack; but his son Xerxes advanced on Greece with a huge expeditionary force. Xerxes managed to burn Athens. He was defeated, however, when the Athenian general

Themistocles lured the Persian fleet into a trap at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. After this humiliation, the Persians chose to deal with the Greeks through diplomacy, siding with one, then another of Athens' enemies.

The next 150 years of Persian history saw slow decline under a series of ineffectual rulers. Rebellions multiplied. By 359 BCE, Phillip II of Macedonia had seen the empire's weakness and planned an invasion. He was murdered before he could launch the plan, but his son Alexander carried it forward. In 330, Alexander earned his title "the Great" with the defeat of Darius III the last emperor of the Achaemenid dynasty.