

CHAPTER 7-THE EMPIRES OF PERSIA

Our story now takes us back to southwest Asia and the great Persian empires, which maintained continuous rule for more than a thousand years. They are: the Achaemenids (558-330 B.C.E.); the Seleucids (323-83 B.C.E.); the Parthians (247 B.C.E.-224 C.E.); and the Sasanids (233-651 C.E.). (Note the overlap between the Seleucids and the Parthians.)

The first Persian peoples, Indo-European speakers who shared cultural traits with the Aryans, migrated from central Asia before 1000 B.C.E. and challenged the Assyrian and Babylonian empires in Mesopotamia. In 558 B.C.E., Cyrus the Achaemenid became king of the Persian tribes. He was followed by his son and then his kinsman and the greatest conqueror of the dynasty, Darius. The empire of Darius covered most of southwest Asia, from Egypt to the Indus, and had 35 million people. Governing such a large empire presented real problems, so Darius came up with a solution repeated throughout history. The empire was divided into 23 satrapies, or provinces, with a Persian governor. Other government officials were chosen from the local population. Additionally, the military and a new group of officials known as “the eyes and ears of the king” traveled around the empire checking on the satraps. Darius also set up formal taxes, standardized coinage, and built roads for transportation and the postal system. Darius’s innovations created a stable, multi-cultural society with an equitable justice system, but as in other cultures, the empire did not last long. Xerxes (r. 486-465 B.C.E.) did away with cultural tolerance. Rebellions within the empire thus began, notably with the Ionian Greeks. A series of small wars coincided with the appearance of Alexander the Great, the iconic figure of world history who had defeated the Persians at the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 B.C.E. The Achaemenid Empire was at an end.

The other three empires, the Seleucid, the Parthian, and the Sasanid, were smaller than the Achaemenid. The Seleucids and the Parthians adopted the government style of the Achaemenids and were stable for awhile. The Parthians were toppled by the Sasanids who, by 651 C.E., became part of a rapidly expanding Islamic empire.

Classical Persia had a lasting effect on both social structure and religion. Social organization in Classical Persia had its roots in the early nomadic society with an emphasis on clan and family relationships. Even after the appearance of an imperial bureaucracy, clan leaders were still involved in the political process. In part because of this heritage, most of Persian society was comprised of the free classes, but a large slave class also existed. Some of these free people were merchants who engaged in trade with societies from India to Egypt and had the advantage of standardized coins and the beginnings of a banking system. The Classical Period also saw the appearance of a new religion, Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism was very popular. It was suppressed by Alexander the Great but was revived under the Sasanids, and had an influence on both Christianity and Islam.

Key Concept 1.3. The Development and Interactions of Early Agricultural, Pastoral and Urban Societies

- III. Culture played a significant role in unifying states through laws, language, literature, religion, myths and monumental art.