

# CHAPTER 7

## THE EMPIRES OF PERSIA

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the series of empires that arose in Persia (modern-day Iran) and controlled much of the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and India for over one thousand years, from about 550 B.C.E. through 650 C.E. The first empire, founded by Cyrus the Achaemenid, expanded under him and his successors until it became the largest empire the world had ever seen. The four Persian dynasties of this era (Achaemenid, Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanid) were noted for several important developments:

- Tightly governed administration with networks of educated bureaucrats, tax collectors, and spies to maintain the order and the authority of the emperor
- The development of *qanats*, underground canals, to support the economic foundation of the empires: agriculture
- Sophisticated policies promoting long-distance trade such as standardized coinage, road building, a courier service, accessible marketplaces, and banks and investment companies
- The emergence and elaboration of Zoroastrianism, a popular and influential religion whose teachings demanded high moral and ethical standards

### OUTLINE

#### **I. The rise and fall of the Persian empires**

##### **A. The Achaemenid empire**

1. Medes and Persians migrated from central Asia to Persia before 1000 B.C.E.
  - a) Indo-European speakers, sharing cultural traits with Aryans
  - b) Challenged the Assyrian and Babylonian empires
2. Cyrus the Achaemenid (the Shepherd) (reigned 558–530 B.C.E.)
  - a) Became king of Persian tribes in 558 B.C.E.
  - b) All of Iran under his control by 548 B.C.E.
  - c) Established a vast empire from India to borders of Egypt
3. Cyrus's son, Cambyses (reigned 530–522 B.C.E.), conquered Egypt in 525
4. Darius (reigned 521–486 B.C.E.); largest extent of empire; population thirty-five million
  - a) Diverse empire, seventy ethnic groups
  - b) New capital at Persepolis, 520 B.C.E.
5. Achaemenid administration

- a) Twenty-three satrapies (Persian governors), appointed by central government
  - b) Local officials were from local population
  - c) Satraps' power was checked by military officers and "imperial spies"
  - d) Replaced irregular tribute payments with formal taxes
  - e) Standardization of coins and laws
  - f) Communication systems: Persian Royal Road and postal stations
- B. Decline and fall of the Achaemenid empire**
- 1. Commonwealth: law, justice, administration led to political stability and public works
  - 2. Xerxes (reigned 486–465 B.C.E.)
    - a) Retreated from the policy of cultural toleration
    - b) Caused ill will and rebellions among the peoples in Mesopotamia and Egypt
  - 3. The Persian Wars (500–479 B.C.E.)
    - a) Rebellion of Ionian Greeks
    - b) Persian rulers failed to put down the rebellion, sparred for 150 years
  - 4. Alexander of Macedon invaded Persia in 334 B.C.E.
    - a) Battle of Gaugamela, end of the Achaemenid empire, in 331 B.C.E.
    - b) Alexander burned the city of Persepolis
- C. The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanid empires**
- 1. Seleucus inherited most of Achaemenid when Alexander died
    - a) Retained the Achaemenid system of administration
    - b) Opposition from native Persians; lost control over northern India and Iran
  - 2. The Parthians, based in Iran, extend to Mesopotamia
    - a) Power of Parthians was heavy cavalry
    - b) Mithradates I established a empire through conquests 171 to 155 B.C.E.
    - c) Parthian government followed the example of Achaemenid administration
  - 3. The Sasanids, from Persia, toppled Parthians; ruled 224–651 C.E.
    - a) Merchants brought in various crops from India and China
    - b) Shapur I (239–272 C.E.); buffer states with Romans; standoff with Kushan
    - c) In 651 C.E., empire incorporated into Islamic empire

## **II. Imperial society and economy**

- A. Social development in classical Persia**
  - 1. Nomadic society; importance of family and clan relationships
  - 2. Imperial bureaucrats

- a) Imperial administration called for educated bureaucrats
- b) Shared power and influence with warriors and clan leaders
- 3. Free classes were bulk of Persian society
  - a) In the city: artisans, craftsmen, merchants, civil servants
  - b) In the countryside: peasants, some of whom were building underground canals  
(*qanat*)
- 4. Large class of slaves who were prisoners of war and debtors
- B. Economic foundations of classical Persia
  - 1. Agriculture was the economic foundation
  - 2. Trade from India to Egypt
    - a) Standardized coins, good trade routes, markets, banks
    - b) Specialization of production in different regions

### III. Religions of salvation in classical Persian society

- A. Zarathustra and his faith
  - 1. Zoroastrianism
    - a) Emerged from the teachings of Zarathustra
    - b) Visions; supreme god (Ahura Mazda) made Zarathustra prophet
    - c) The *Gathas*, Zarathustra's hymns in honor of deities
    - d) Teachings preserved later in writing, by *magi*
    - e) Compilation of the holy scriptures, Avesta, under Sasanid dynasty
  - 2. Zoroastrian teachings
    - a) Ahura Mazda as a supreme deity, with six lesser deities
    - b) Cosmic conflict between Ahura Mazda (good) and Angra Mainyu (evil)
    - c) Heavenly paradise and hellish realm as reward and punishment
    - d) The material world as a blessing
    - e) Moral formula: good words, good thoughts, good deeds
  - 3. Popularity of Zoroastrianism grows from sixth century B.C.E.
    - a) Attracted Persian aristocrats and ruling elites
    - b) Darius regarded Ahura Mazda as supreme God
    - c) Most popular in Iran; followings in Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Egypt, and other places
- B. Religions of salvation in a cosmopolitan society
  - 1. Suffering of Zoroastrian community during Alexander's invasion
  - 2. Officially sponsored Zoroastrianism during the Sasanid empire

3. The Zoroastrians' difficulties
  - a) Islamic conquerors toppled the Sasanid empire, seventh century C.E.
  - b) Some Zoroastrians fled to India (Parsis)
  - c) Most Zoroastrians in Persia converted to Islam
  - d) Some Zoroastrians still exist in modern-day Iran
4. Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity, and later, Islam
5. Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Judaism also in Persia

#### IDENTIFICATION: PEOPLE

What is the contribution of each of the following individuals to world history? Identification should include answers to the questions *who, what, where, when, how, and why is this person important?* (Figures with an asterisk are found in the glossary.)

Cyrus

Croesus

Cambyses

Darius

Eyes and Ears of the King

Xerxes

Seleucus

Mithradates I

Shapur I

Zarathustra\*

#### IDENTIFICATION: TERMS/CONCEPTS

State in your own words what each of the following terms means and why it is significant to a study of world history. (Terms with an asterisk are defined in the glossary.)

Achaemenids\*

Persepolis

Satrapy\*

Royal Road

Persian Wars

Seleucids\*

Parthians\*

Sasanids\*

*Qanat*\*

Zoroastrianism\*

Parsis\*

Ahura Mazda\*

Angra Mainyu

*Magi*

*Gathas*\*

Avesta\*

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How did Cyrus manage to expand the Persian holdings so dramatically during his lifetime?
2. Why does the book say that Darius was “more important as an administrator than as a conqueror”?
3. Describe the administrative structure of the Achaemenid empire.
4. In what ways did Darius, and his successors, promote communication and commerce throughout the empire?
5. In what ways did Alexander of Macedon both destroy and preserve elements of the Achaemenid empire?
6. How did the Parthians come to control the Persian empire?
7. What was the role of the imperial bureaucrats in Persian society? How did they fit in with the other social classes?
8. What agricultural technologies and techniques did the Persians use to produce the large surpluses they needed to feed their huge population of nonfood producers?

9. The Persian empires were noted for being part of a trade route critical to the economy of the classical world. What did the rulers do to facilitate trade? Why was Persia geographically so important?
10. What were the basic teachings of Zoroastrianism? Why is it considered a highly moralistic religion? How did Zoroastrianism influence other religions?

INQUIRY QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of Zoroastrianism seem like modern religions? How do you think the teachings of Zarathustra would influence the believers' behavior and attitudes at the time?
2. The authors refer to the Persian empires as "cosmopolitan." What does this mean? In what ways did the rulers promote this cosmopolitanism?
3. The authors suggest that classical societies were more complex and more sophisticated than the early societies discussed in part I. What evidence do you see of this in the development of the Persian empires?

MATCHING

Match these figures with the statements that follow.

- |                |                |
|----------------|----------------|
| A. Zarathustra | E. Ahura Mazda |
| B. Darius      | F. Shapur I    |
| C. Croesus     | G. Xerxes      |
| D. Seleucus    | H. Cyrus       |

1. \_\_\_ First great conqueror of the Achaemenid dynasty, he expanded his holdings until they stretched from Egypt to India.
2. \_\_\_ This supreme god and benevolent creator was described in the Zoroastrian religion.
3. \_\_\_ This Lydian king's defeat at the hands of the Persians was predicted by the oracle at Delphi.
4. \_\_\_ This Sasanid ruler consolidated the empire's holdings and created buffer states between the Persians and the Romans.
5. \_\_\_ This prophet of the Zoroastrian religion had a series of visions that included a revelation about the cosmic conflict between good and evil.
6. \_\_\_ Former commander for Alexander of Macedon, this man founded the dynasty that created the second Persian empire.
7. \_\_\_ This intolerant Achaemenid emperor spent years trying to subjugate the Greek city-states but to no avail.
8. \_\_\_ This emperor ruled over an empire larger than the world had ever known and had the great classical city of Persepolis completed.

## SEQUENCING

Place the following clusters of events in chronological order. Consider carefully how one event leads to another, and try to determine the internal logic of each sequence.

A.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Arabs overrun Persia and incorporate it into the rapidly growing Islamic empire.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Alexander of Macedon conquers the empire easily and burns the capital city to the ground.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Seleucids establish non-Persian rule over the realm but preserve many of the Persian administrative and economic practices.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ruler of the Persian tribes initiates a rebellion against the Medean overlords.
- \_\_\_\_\_ The dynasty preserves older Persian customs while infusing into the culture some of the customs and traditions of nomads from the central Asian steppes.

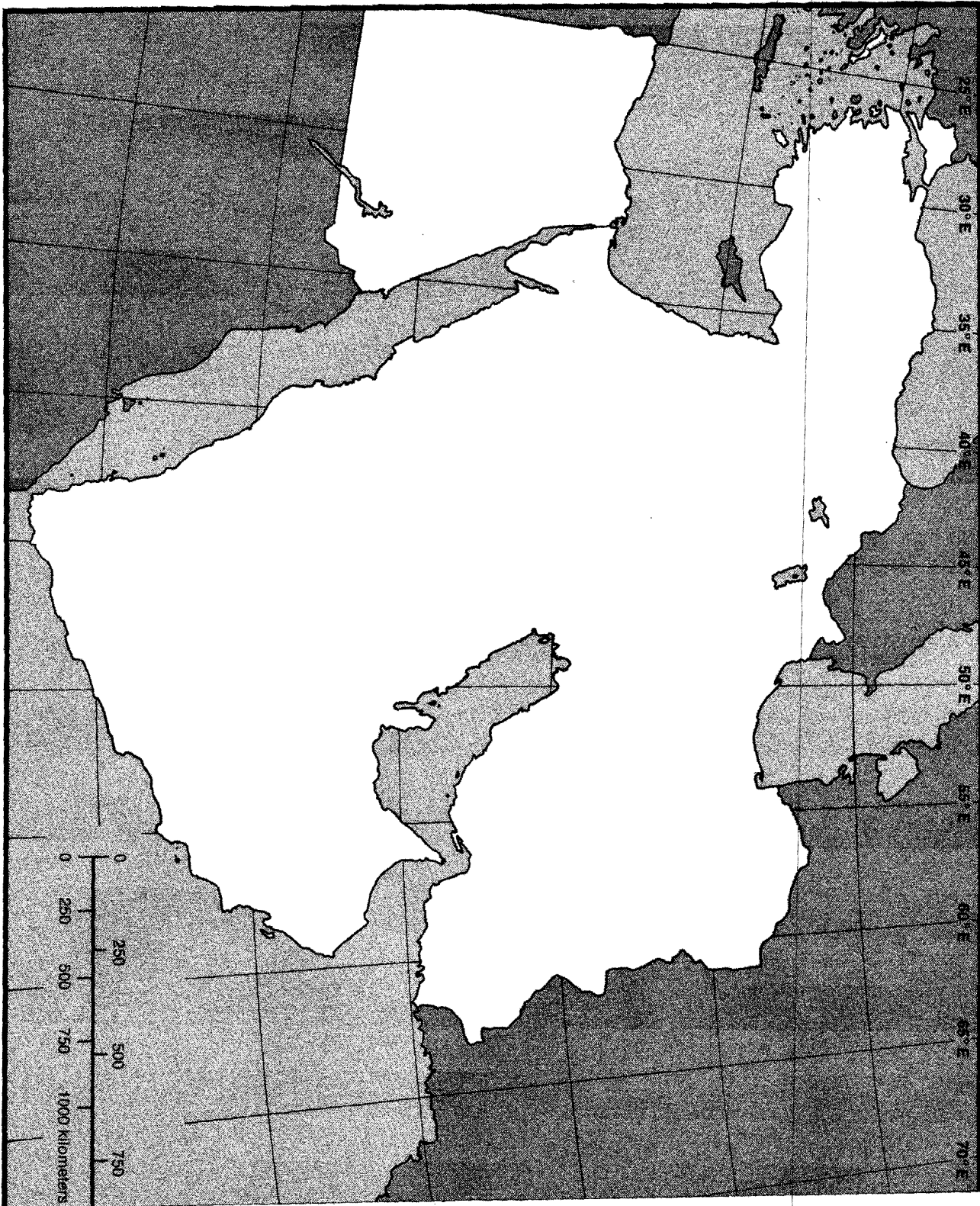
B.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Traditional Persian religion centers on nature cults, including ritual sacrifices and the use of hallucinogens.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Zoroastrians flee their homeland in the wake of Islamic conquest and settle in India.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Zoroastrian scholars collect the traditional holy texts and compile them in the Avesta.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Zarathustra leaves his home in search of knowledge and has a series of religious visions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Magi* keep Zarathustra's teachings alive by transmitting them orally in the form of *Gathas*, hymns to the deities.

## QUOTATIONS

For each of the following quotes, identify the speaker, if known, or the point of view or the subject. What is the significance of each passage?

1. "Long punishment for the evil-doer, and bliss for the follower of the Truth, the joy of salvation for the Righteous ever afterwards!"
2. "The Great King, King of Kings, King in Persia, King of Countries."
3. "Good words, good thoughts, good deeds."
4. "If you would cross the Halys, you would destroy a great kingdom."



MAP EXERCISE

Draw in the approximate boundaries of the Persian empires on the outline map. Locate the significant cultures to the east and west. Explain why the Persian empires were in a critical geographic position to exploit trade and commerce.