

## HAKHÂMANESHIÂN) The Empire of Achaemenid Dynasty (550-333 BCE)

**Achaemenid research still suffers from persistent marginalization in the academic world...  
Achaemenid studies have been persistently undervalued...**

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**Iran Under Achaemenid Dynasty**



### **The rise of the Persians under the Cyrus the Great**

The ruling dynasty of the Persians settled in Fars in south-western Iran (possibly the Parsumash of the later Assyrian records) traced its ancestry back to an eponymous ancestor, Haxamanish, or Achaemenes. There is no historical evidence of such a king's existence.

Traditionally, three rulers fall between Achaemenes and Cyrus (Kurosh) the Great: Teispes (Chishpesh), Cyrus I, and Cambyses I (Kambujiya). Teispes, freed of Median domination during the so-called Scythian interregnum, is thought to have expanded his kingdom and to have divided it on his death between his two sons, Cyrus I and Ariaramnes. Cyrus I may have been the king of Persia who appears in the records of Ashurbanipal swearing allegiance to Assyria after the devastation of Elam in the campaigns of 642-639 BCE, though there are chronological problems involved with this equation. When Median control over the Persians was supposedly reasserted under Cyaxares (Kiyâksâr), Cambyses I is thought to have been given a reunited Persia to administer as a Median vassal. His son, Cyrus II, married Mandan (Mândânâ) the daughter of Astyages and in 559 BC inherited his father's position within the Median confederation. Cyrus II certainly warranted his later title, Cyrus the Great.

He must have been a remarkable personality, and certainly he was a remarkable Emperor. He united under his authority several Persian and Iranian groups including Medes who apparently had not been under his father's control. He then initiated diplomatic exchanges with Nabonidus of Babylon (556-539 BCE), which justifiably worried Astyages. Eventually, he openly rebelled against the Medes, who were beaten in battle when considerable numbers of Median troops deserted to the Persian standard. Thus, in 550 BCE, the first Iranian Empire built by the the Median dynasty became the first Persian Empire, and the Achaemenid Emperors appeared on the international scene with a suddenness that must have impressed and frightened many.

Cyrus the Great immediately set out to expand his conquests. After apparently convincing the Babylonians that they had nothing to fear from Iran, he turned against the Lydians under the rule of the fabulously wealthy Croesus. Lydian appeals to Babylon were to no avail. He then took Cilicia, thus cutting the routes over which any help might have reached the Lydians. Croesus attacked and an indecisive battle was fought in 547 BCE on the Halys River. Since it was late in the campaigning season, the Lydians thought the war was over for that year, returned to their capital at

Sardis, and dispersed the national levy. Cyrus, however, kept coming. He caught and besieged the Lydians in the citadel at Sardis and captured Croesus in 546 BCE. Of the Greek city-states along the western coast of Asia Minor, heretofore under Lydian control, only Miletus surrendered without a fight. The others were systematically reduced by the Iranian armies led by subordinate generals. Cyrus himself was apparently busy elsewhere, possibly in the east, for little is known of his activities between the capture of Sardis and the beginning of the Babylonian campaign in 540 BCE.

Nowhere did Cyrus display his political and military genius better than in the conquest of Babylon. The campaign actually began when he lulled the Babylonians into inactivity during his war with Lydia, which, since it was carried to a successful conclusion, deprived the Babylonians of a potential ally when their turn came. Then he took maximum advantage of internal disaffection and discontent within Babylon.

Nabonidus was not a popular king. He had paid too little attention to home affairs and had alienated the native Babylonian priesthood. Second Isaiah, speaking for many of the captive Jews in Babylon, was undoubtedly not the only one of Nabonidus' subjects who looked to Cyrus as a potential deliverer. With the stage thus set, the military campaign against Babylon came almost as an anticlimax. The fall of the greatest city in the Middle East was swift; Cyrus marched into town in the late summer of 539 BCE, seized the hands of the statue of the city Babylonian-God Marduk as a signal of his willingness to rule as a Babylonian and not as a foreign conqueror, and was hailed by many as the legitimate successor to the throne. In one stride Cyrus carried Iranian power to the borders of Egypt, for with Babylon came all that it had seized from the Assyrians and had gained in the sequel.

Little is known of the remainder of Cyrus' reign. The rapidity with which his son and successor, Cambyses II, initiated a successful campaign against Egypt suggests that preparations for such an attack were well advanced under Cyrus. But the founder of Iranian power was forced to turn east late in his reign to protect that frontier against warlike tribes who were themselves in part Iranians and who threatened the plateau in the same manner as had the Medes and the Persians more than a millennium earlier. One of the recurrent themes of Iranian history is the threat of peoples from the east. How much Cyrus the Great conquered in the east is uncertain. What is clear is that he lost his life in 529 BCE, fighting somewhere in the region of the Oxus and Jaxartes rivers.

### **Cambyses**

On the death of Cyrus the Great the empire passed to his son, Cambyses II (529-522 BCE). There may have been some degree of unrest throughout the empire at the time of Cyrus' death, for Cambyses apparently felt it necessary secretly to kill his brother, Bardiya (Smerdis), in order to protect his rear while leading the campaign against Egypt in 525 BCE. The pharaoh Ahmose II of the 26th dynasty sought to shore up his defences by hiring Greek mercenaries, but as a medium was betrayed by the Greeks. Cambyses successfully managed the crossing of the hostile Sinai Desert, traditionally Egypt's first and strongest line of defence, and brought the Egyptians under Psamtik III, son and successor of Ahmose, to battle at Pelusium. The Egyptians lost and retired to Memphis; the city fell to the Iranian control and the Pharaoh was carried off in captivity to Susa in mainland Iran.

Three subsidiary campaigns were then mounted, all of which are reported as failures: one against Carthage, but the Phoenician sailors, who were the backbone of the Iranian navy, declined to sail against their own colony; one against the oasis of Amon (in the Egyptian desert west of the Nile), which, according to Herodotus, was defeated by a massive sandstorm; and one led by Cambyses himself to Nubia. This latter effort was partly successful, but the army suffered badly from a lack of proper provisions on the return march. Egypt was then garrisoned at three major points: Daphnae in the east delta, Memphis, and Elephantine, where Jewish mercenaries formed the main body of troops.

In 522 BCE news reached Cambyses of a revolt in Iran led by Gaomata (Gaomâtâ) an impostor claiming to be Bardiya (Bardiyâ), Cambyses' brother. Several provinces of the empire accepted the new ruler, who bribed his subjects with a remission of taxes for three years. Hastening home to regain control, Cambyses died—possibly by his own hand, more probably from infection following an accidental sword wound. Darius, a leading general in Cambyses' army and one of the princes of the

Achaemenid family, raced homeward with the troops in order to crush the rebellion in a manner profitable to himself.

Cambyses has been rather mistreated in the sources, thanks partly to the prejudices of Herodotus' Egyptian informers and partly to the propaganda motives of Darius I (the Great).

Cambyses is reported to have ruled the Egyptians harshly and to have desecrated their religious ceremonies and shrines. His military campaigns out of Egypt were all reported as failures. He was accused of suicide in the face of revolt at home. It was even suggested that he was mad. There is, however, little solid contemporary evidence to support these charges.

### **Darius the Great**

Darius I, the Great, tells the story of the overthrow of Bardiya and of the first year of his own rule in detail in his famous royal inscription cut on a rock face at the base of Bisitun mountain, a few miles east of modern Bakhtaran. Six leading Achaemenid nobles assisted in slaying the false Bardiya and together proclaimed Darius the rightful heir of Cambyses. Darius was a member of the Achaemenid royal house. His great-grandfather had been Ariaramnes, son of Teispes, who had shared power in Persia with his brother Cyrus I. Ariaramne (Âriyâramna)s' son, Arsames (Ârshâm), and his grandson, Hystaspes (Histâspa, Darius' father), had not been kings in Persia, as unified royal power had been placed in the hands of Cambyses I by Cyaxares. Neither is named a king in Darius' own inscriptions. Hystaspes was, however, an important prince of the blood, who at the time of revolt of the false Bardiya had apparently been the governor of Parthia. Darius himself was in the mold of Cyrus the Great—a powerful personality and a dynamic ruler.

It took more than a year (522-521 BC) of hard fighting to put down revolts associated with Bardiya's claim to the throne and Darius' succession to power. Almost every province of the empire was involved in the conflict, including Persia and, most particularly, Media. A balanced policy of clemency backed by the swift and thorough punishment of any captured rebel leader, in combination with a well-co-ordinated and carefully timed distribution of loyal forces, eventually brought peace to the empire and undisputed power to Darius. He then turned his attention to the organization and consolidation of his inheritance, and it was for this role—that of lawgiver and organizer—that he himself, to judge from his inscriptions, most wished to be remembered.

Such activities, however, did not prevent Darius from following an active expansionist policy. Campaigns to the east confirmed gains probably made by Cyrus the Great and added large sections of the northern Indian subcontinent to the list of Iranian-controlled provinces. Expansion in the west began about 516 BC when Darius moved against the Hellespont as a first step toward an attack on the Scythians along the western and northern shores of the Black Sea. The real strategic purpose behind this move probably was to disrupt and if possible to interrupt Greek trade with the Black Sea area, which supplied much grain to Greece. Crossing into Europe for the first time, Darius campaigned with comparatively little success to the north of the Danube. He retreated in good order, however, with only limited losses, and a bridgehead across the Hellespont was established.

Perhaps in part in response to these developments, perhaps for more purely internal reasons, the Ionian Greek cities on the west coast of Asia Minor revolted against Iranian rule in 500 BC. The Ionians were apparently taken by surprise, and at first the rebellion prospered. The Ionians received some limited assistance from the Athenians and in 498 BC felt strong enough to take the offensive. With one hand Darius negotiated; with the other he assembled a counterattack. The first Iranian military efforts proved only partially successful, however, and the Ionians enjoyed another respite in the years 496-495 BC. A renewed Iranian offensive in 494 BC was successful. The Greek fleet was badly beaten off Miletus, and the Iranian land army began a systematic reduction of the rebel cities. About 492 BC Mardonius, a son-in-law of Darius, was made special commissioner to Ionia. He suppressed local tyrants and returned democratic government to many cities. In time the wounds caused by the revolt and its suppression healed, and by 481 BC Xerxes was able to levy troops in this region with little trouble.

By 492 BC Mardonius had also recovered Iranian Thrace and Macedonia, first gained in the campaign against the Scythians and lost during the Ionian Revolt. There followed the Iranian

invasion of Greece that led to Darius' defeat at the Battle of Marathon late in the summer of 490 BC. The "Great King" was forced to retreat and to face the fact that the Greek problem, which had probably seemed to the Iranians a minor issue on the western extremity of the empire, would require a more concerted and massive effort. Thus began preparations for an invasion of Greece on a grand, co-ordinated scale. These plans were interrupted in 486 BC by two events: a serious revolt in Egypt, and the death of Darius.

### **Xerxes I**

Xerxes (486-465 BC), Darius' eldest son by Queen Atossa, was born after his father had come to the throne; he had been designated official heir perhaps as early as 498 BC, and while crown prince he had ruled as the King's governor in Babylon. The new king quickly suppressed the revolt in Egypt in a single campaign in 485 BC. Xerxes then broke with the policy followed by Cyrus and Darius of ruling foreign lands with a fairly light hand and, in a manner compatible with local traditions, ruthlessly ignored Egyptian forms of rule and imposed his will on the rebellious province in a thoroughly Iranian style. Plans for the invasion of Greece begun under Darius were then still further delayed by a major revolt in Babylonia about 482 BC, which also was suppressed with a heavy hand.

Xerxes then turned his attention westward to Greece. He wintered in Sardis in 481-480 BC and thence led a combined land and sea invasion of Greece. Northern Greece fell to the invaders in the summer of 480, the Greek stand at Thermopylae in August of 480 came to nought, and the Iranian land forces marched on Athens, taking and burning the Acropolis. But the Iranian fleet lost the Battle of Salamis, and the impetus of the invasion was blunted. Xerxes, who had by then been away from Asia rather long for a king with such widespread responsibilities, returned home and left Mardonius in charge of further operations. The real end of the invasion came with the Battle of Plataea, the fall of Thebes (a stronghold of pro-Iranian forces), and the Iranian naval loss at Mycale in 479 BC. Of the three, the Iranian loss at Plataea was perhaps the most decisive. Up until Mardonius was killed, the issue of the battle was probably still in doubt, but, once leaderless, the less organized and less disciplined Iranian forces collapsed. Time and again in later years this was to be the pattern in such encounters, for the Iranian never solved the military problem posed by the disciplined Greek hoplites.

The formation of the Delian League, the rise of Athenian imperialism, troubles on the west coast of Asia Minor, and the end of Iranian military ambitions in the Aegean followed rapidly in the decade after Plataea. Xerxes probably lost interest in the proceedings and sank deeper and deeper into the comforts of life in his capital cities of Susa, Ecbatana, and Persepolis. Treasury intrigues, which were steadily to sap the strength and vitality of the Achaemenid Empire, led to the assassination of the Great King in 465 BC.

### **Artaxerxes I to Darius III**

The death of Xerxes was a major turning point in Achaemenid history. Occasional flashes of vigour and intelligence by some of Xerxes' successors were too infrequent to prevent eventual collapse but did allow the empire to die gradually. It is a tribute to Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius that the empire they constructed was as resilient as it proved to be after Xerxes.

The three kings that followed Xerxes on the throne-- Artaxerxes I (465-425 BC), Xerxes II (425-424 BC), and Darius II Ochus (423-404 BC)--were all comparatively weak individuals and kings, and such successes as the empire enjoyed during their reigns were mainly the result of the efforts of subordinates or of the troubles faced by their adversaries. Artaxerxes I faced several rebellions, the most important of which was that of Egypt in 459 BC, not fully suppressed until 454 BC. An advantageous peace (the Peace of Callias) with Athens was signed in 448 BC, whereby the Iranian agreed to stay out of the Aegean and the Athenians agreed to leave Asia Minor to the Achaemenids. Athens broke the peace in 439 BC in an attack on Samos, and in its aftermath the Iranians made some military gains in the west. Xerxes II ruled only about 45 days and was killed in a drunken stupor by the son of one of his father's concubines. The assassin was himself killed by Darius II, who rose to the throne through palace intrigue. Several revolts marred his reign, including one in Media, which was rather close to home.

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The major event of these three reigns was the Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens that lasted, with occasional pauses, from 460 to 404 BC. The situation was ripe for exploitation by the famous "Persian archers," the gold coins of the Achaemenids that depicted an archer on their obverse and that were used with considerable skill by the Iranian in bribing first one Greek state and then another. Initially, the Iranian encouraged Athens against Sparta and from this gained the treaty of Callias. Then, after the disastrous Athenian campaign against Sicily in 413 BC, the Iranian intervened on Sparta's side. By the treaty of Miletus in 412 BC, Iran recovered complete freedom in western Asia Minor in return for agreeing to pay for seamen to man the Peloponnesian fleet. Persian gold and Spartan soldiers brought about Athens' fall in 404 BC. Despite the fact that the Iranian played the two sides against each other to much advantage, they should have done better. One observes a certain lack of control from Susa by the king in these proceedings, and the two principal governors in Asia Minor who were involved, Tissaphernes of Sardis and Pharnabazus of Hellespontine Phrygia, seemed to have permitted a personal power rivalry to stand in the way of a really co-ordinated Iranian intervention in the Greek war.

Artaxerxes II came to the throne in 404 BC and reigned until 359 BC. The main events of his long rule were the war with Sparta that ended with a peace favourable to the Iranian; the revolt and loss to the empire of Egypt; the rebellion of Cyrus the Younger, brother of the king; and the uprising known as the revolt of the satraps.

Sparta, triumphant over Athens, built a small empire of its own and was soon involved in a war against the Iranian, the principal issue again being the Greek cities of Asia Minor. While Sparta played one Iranian governor in Anatolia against the other, the Iranian spent gold in Greece to raise rebellion on Sparta's home ground. The Iranian rebuilt their fleet and placed a competent Athenian admiral, Conon, in command. The contest continued from 400 to 387, with Sparta forced to act on an ever-shrinking front. A revitalized Athens, supported by Iran, created a balance of power in Greece, and eventually Artaxerxes was able to step in, at Greek request, and dictate the so-called King's Peace of 387-6 BC. Once again the Greeks gave up any claim to Asia Minor and further agreed to maintain the status quo in Greece itself. When Egypt revolted in 405 BC, Iran was unable to do much about it, and from this point forward Egypt remained essentially an independent state.

Cyrus the Younger, though caught in an assassination attempt at the time of Artaxerxes' coronation, was, nevertheless, forgiven, thanks to the pleadings of the Queen Mother, and was returned to the command of a province in Asia Minor. But he revolted again in 401 BC and, supported by 10,000 Greek mercenaries, marched eastward to contest the throne. He was defeated and killed at the Battle of Cunaxa in Mesopotamia in the summer of 401. The Greek mercenaries, however, were not broken and, though harried, left the field in good order and began their famous march, recorded in the Anabasis of Xenophon, north to the Black Sea and home. Probably no other event in late Achaemenid history revealed more clearly to the Greeks the essential internal weakness of the Achaemenid Empire than the escape of so large a body of men from the very heart of the Great King's domain.

Since 379 BC Greek mercenaries had been gathered together in order to mount a campaign against Egypt. An attack in 373 failed against the native 30th dynasty. On the heels of this failure came the revolt of the satraps. Several satraps, or provincial governors, rose against the central power, and one, Aroandas, a late satrap of Armenia, went so far as to stamp his own gold coinage as a direct challenge to Artaxerxes. The general plan of the rebels appears to have been for a combined attack. The rebel satraps were to co-ordinate their march eastward through Syria with an Egyptian attack, under the pharaoh Tachos (Zedhor), supported by Greek mercenaries. The Egyptian attack was called off because of a revolt in Egypt by Tachos' brother, and Artaxerxes managed to defeat the satraps who were left alone to face the Great King's wrath. How different would have been the wrath of Darius! Several of the satraps, including Aroandas, were actually forgiven and returned to their governorships. In general the impression is that, in the end, rather than fight the central authority, the satraps were willing to return to their own provinces and plunder there in the name of the Great King. Perhaps they saw that they actually had more authority and more control over real events in their own provincial territories than Artaxerxes had in his empire.

Plot and counterplot, harem intrigue, and murder brought Artaxerxes III to the throne in 359 BC. He

promptly exterminated many of his relatives who might have challenged his rule—all to no avail, for revolts continued to rock the empire. A fresh attempt to win back Egypt was thrown back in 351-350. This setback encouraged revolt in Sidon and eventually in all of Palestine and Phoenicia. Parts of Cilicia joined the rebellion but the revolt was crushed the same year it had begun, 345 BC. Peace was achieved only temporarily; mercenaries from Thebes and the Argives, as well as from the Greek cities of Asia Minor, gathered for a new attempt on Egypt, which, led by Artaxerxes III himself, succeeded in 343 BC. But the local dynasty fled south to Nubia, where it maintained an independent kingdom that kept alive the hopes of a national revival. Iran then misplayed its hand in Greece by refusing aid to Athens against the rising power of Philip II of Macedon. In 339 BC Iranian troops were fighting alone in Thrace against the Macedonians, and in the following year, at the Battle of Chaeronea, Philip extended his hegemony over all of Greece—a united Greece that was to prove impervious to Persian gold.

Artaxerxes was poisoned by his physician at the order of the eunuch Bagoas. The latter made Arses king (338-336 BC) in hopes of being the power behind the throne, but Arses did not bend easily to Bagoas' will. He attempted to poison the kingmaker but was himself killed in retaliation. Bagoas then engineered the accession of Darius III, a 45-year-old former satrap of Armenia. So many members of the royal house had been murdered in the court intrigue that Darius probably held the closest blood claim to the throne by virtue of being the grandnephew of Artaxerxes II. Darius was able to put down yet another rebellion in Egypt under Khababash in 337-336 BC, but the beginning of the end came soon afterward, in May 334, with the loss of the Battle of Granicus to Alexander the Great. Persepolis fell to the invader in April 330, and Darius, the last Achaemenid, was murdered in the summer of the same year while fleeing the conqueror. His unfinished tomb at Persepolis bears witness to his lack of preparation.

Alexander did not win his victories easily, however, and the catalog of troubles that marked the latter part of the Achaemenid Empire—rebellions, murders, weak kings trapped in the harem, missed chances, and foolish policies—cannot be the whole story. The sources, mostly Greek, are often prejudiced against the Iranian and tend to view events from but a single point of view. No government could have lasted so long, found its way somehow through so many difficulties, and in the end actually have fought so hard against the conqueror without having much virtue with which to balance its vices.

### **Achaemenid society and culture**

Achaemenid society and culture was in reality the collective societies and cultures of the many subject peoples of the empire. From this mosaic it is sometimes difficult to sort out that which is distinctively Persian or distinctively a development of the Achaemenid period and therefore perhaps an early Iranian contribution to general Middle Eastern society and culture. Language.

The languages of the empire were as varied as its peoples. The Iranian, at least originally, spoke Old Persian, a south-western dialect of Iranian (Median was a north-western Iranian dialect), but they were illiterate. Their language was first written when Darius commanded that a script suitable for this purpose be invented so that he might inscribe the record of his rise to power at Bisitun (the inscriptions in Old Persian are attributed to earlier kings as either late historical forgeries or as probably written during the reign of Darius). That few could read Old Persian might be the reason why Darius at Bisitun established the tradition that royal inscription should be trilingual in Old Persian, Babylonian, and Elamite. Old Persian was never a working written language of the empire. Elamite, written on clay tablets, appears to have been the language of many of the administrators in Fars and, it may be assumed, in Elam. Archives of administrative documents in Elamite have been found at Persepolis. Aramaic, however, was the language of much of the empire and was probably the language most used in the imperial bureaucracy. The beginnings of the strong influence of Aramaic on Persian, which is so evident in the Pahlavi (Middle Persian) of Sasanian times, can already be seen in the Old Persian royal inscriptions of late Achaemenid times.

### **Social organization**

Little is known of Iranian social organization in the period. In general, it was based on feudal lines

that were in part drawn by economic and social function. Traditional Indo-Iranian society consisted of three classes, the warriors or aristocracy, the priests, and the farmers or herdsmen. Crosscutting these divisions was a tribal structure based on patrilineal descent. The titleking of kings, used even in the 20th century by the shahs of Iran, implies that the central authority exercised power through a pyramidal structure that was controlled at levels below the supreme authority by individuals who were themselves, in a certain sense, kings. Traditionally the king was elected from a particular family by the warrior class; he was sacred, and a certain royal charisma attached to his person.

Such a method of organizing and controlling society undoubtedly changed under the influences and demands of imperial power and underwent much modification as Iranians increasingly borrowed social and political ideas from the peoples they ruled. Even in later times, nevertheless, there is evidence that the original Iranian concepts of kingship and social organization were still honoured and remained the ideals of Iranian culture.

### **Religion**

Iranian religion in the pre-Achaemenid and Achaemenid periods is a subject on which there is little scholarly agreement. When the Iranians first entered the semilight of the protohistoric period, they were certainly polytheists whose religious beliefs and practices closely paralleled other Indo-Iranian groups at the same stage in history. Their gods were associated with natural phenomena, with social, military, and economic functions, and with abstract concepts such as justice and truth. Their religious practices included, among others, animal sacrifice, a reverence for fire, and the drinking of the juice of the haoma plant, a natural intoxicant.

Probably about 600 BC there arose in the north-east of the plateau the great Iranian religious prophet and teacher (Zarthusht) Zoroaster. The history of the religion that he founded is even more complicated and controversial than the history of pre-Zoroastrian Iranian religion. Yet certain features of his religious reform stand out. He was an ethical prophet of the highest rank, stressing constantly the need to act righteously and to speak the truth and abhor the lie. In his teaching, the lie was almost personified as the Druj, chief in the kingdom of the demons, to which he relegated many of the earlier Indo-Iranian deities. His god was Ahura Mazda, who, it seems likely, was a creation in name and attributes of Zoroaster. Though in a certain sense technically monotheism, early Zoroastrianism viewed the world in strongly dualistic terms, for Ahura Mazda and the "Lie" were deeply involved in a struggle for the soul of man. Zoroaster, as might be expected, attempted to reform earlier Iranian religious practices as well as beliefs. He first rejected and then perhaps allowed the practice of the haoma cult in a modified form, he clearly condemned the practice of animal sacrifice, and he elevated to central importance in the ritual a reverence for fire. Fire worship, however, is a misnomer since the Zoroastrians have never worshipped fire but rather have revered it as the symbol par excellence of truth.

The crucial question is: were the Achaemenids Zoroastrians or at least followers of the prophet in the terms in which they understood his message? Possibly Cyrus the Great was, probably Darius I was, and almost certainly Xerxes and his successors were. Such a simple answer to the question is possible, however, only if we understand that Zoroastrianism as a religion had already undergone considerable development and modification since Zoroaster's lifetime, influenced by beliefs and practices and by the religions of those people of the Middle East with whom the expanding Iranians had intimate contact.

The god of the Achaemenid kings was the great Ahura Mazda, from whom they understood they had received their empire and with whose aid they accomplished all deeds. Xerxes and his successors mention other deities by name, but Ahura Mazda remains supreme. Darius I names only Ahura Mazda in his inscriptions. More significant, however, is Darius' tone, which is entirely compatible with the moral tone of Zoroaster and, in some instances, even compatible with details of Zoroaster's theology. During the reigns of Darius and Xerxes, the archaeological record reveals that religious rituals were in force that were also compatible with an evolved and evolving Zoroastrianism. The haoma cult was practiced at Persepolis, but animal sacrifice is not attested. More important, fire clearly played a central role in Achaemenid religion.

There may have been religious overtones in the quarrel between Cambyses and Darius on the one hand and the false Darius, a Median or Median agent, on the other. Certainly there were religious

riani and the false Baraita, a Magian or Median priest, on the other. Certainly there were religious as well as political motivations behind Xerxes' suppression of the Daeva worshippers and the destruction of their temple. It is possible that there was some conflict among the royal Achaemenids, who were followers of one form of Zoroastrianism, the supporters of a different version of Zoroastrianism as practiced by other Iranians, believers in older forms of Iranian religion, and foreign religions, which in the light of the Prophet's teachings were reprehensible. Compromises and syncretism, however, probably could not be prevented. Though the Zoroastrian calendar was adopted as the official calendar of the empire in the reign of Artaxerxes I, by the time of Artaxerxes II, the ancient Iranian god Mithra and the goddess Anahita had been accepted in the royal religion alongside Ahura Mazda.

Thus, in a sense, the Achaemenid kings were Zoroastrians, but Zoroastrianism itself was probably no longer exactly the religion Zoroaster had attempted to establish. What the religion of the people beyond court circles may have been is almost impossible to say. One suspects that a variety of ancient Iranian cults and beliefs were prevalent. The Magi, the traditional priests of the Medes, may have wielded more influence in the countryside than they did at court, and popular beliefs and practices may have been more deeply influenced by contact with other peoples and other religions. Later classical Zoroastrianism, as known in the Sasanian period, was an amalgam of such popular cults, of the religion of the Achaemenid court, and of the teachings of the Prophet in their purer form

### **Art**

Achaemenid art, like Achaemenid religion, was a blend of many elements. In describing, with justifiable pride, the construction of his palace at Susa, Darius says,

The cedar timber—a mountain by name Lebanon—from there it was brought . . . the yaka-timber was brought from Gandara and from Carmania. The gold was brought from Sardis and from Bactria . . . the precious stone lapis-lazuli and carnelian . . . was brought from Sogdiana. The . . . turquoise from Chorasmia . . . The silver and ebony . . . from Egypt . . . the ornamentation from Ionia . . . the ivory . . . from Ethiopia and from Sind and from Arachosia . . . The stone-cutters who wrought the stone, those were Ionians and Sardians. The goldsmiths . . . were Medes and Egyptians. The men who wrought the wood, those were Sardians and Egyptians. The men who wrought the baked brick, those were Babylonians. The men who adorned the wall, those were Medes and Egyptians.

This was an imperial art on a scale the world had not seen before. Materials and artists were drawn from all the lands ruled by the Great King, and thus tastes, styles, and motifs became mixed together in an eclectic art and architecture that in itself mirrored the empire and the Iranian' understanding of how that empire ought to function. Yet the whole was entirely Persian. Just as the Achaemenids were tolerant in matters of local government and custom, as long as Iranian controlled the general policy and administration of the empire, so also were they tolerant in art so long as the finished and total effect was Persian. At Pasargadae, the capital of Cyrus the Great and Cambyses in Fars, the Persian homeland, and at Persepolis, the neighbouring city founded by Darius the Great and used by all of his successors, one can trace to a foreign origin almost all of the several details in the construction and embellishment of the architecture and the sculptured reliefs, but the conception, planning, and overall finished product are distinctly Iranian and could not have been created by any of the foreign groups who supplied the king of kings with artistic talent. So also with the small arts, at which the Iranian excelled: fine metal tableware, jewellery, seal cutting, weaponry and its decoration, and pottery. It has been suggested that the Iranian called on the subject peoples for artists because they were themselves crude barbarians with little taste and needed quickly to create an imperial art to match their sudden rise to political power. Yet excavations at sites from the protohistoric period show this not to have been the case. Cyrus may have been the leader of Persian tribes not yet so sophisticated nor so civilized as the Babylonians or Egyptians, but, when he chose to build Pasargadae, he had a long artistic tradition behind him that was probably already distinctly Iranian and that was in many ways the equal of any. Two examples suffice: the tradition of the columned hall in architecture and fine gold work. The former can now be seen as belonging to an architectural tradition on the Iranian Plateau that extended back through the Median period to at least the beginning of the 1st millennium BC. The rich Achaemenid gold work, which inscriptions suggest may have been a speciality of the Medes, was in the tradition of the delicate metalwork found in Iron Age II times at Hasanlu and still earlier at Marlik. In its



the concrete monumental ruins in their original sites at Pasargadae and Susa, came at first in its carefully proportioned and well-organized ground plan, rich architectural ornament, and magnificent decorative reliefs, Persepolis, primarily the creation of Darius and Xerxes, is one of the great artistic legacies of the ancient world.

### **The organization and achievement of the empire**

At the centre of the empire sat the king of kings. Around him was gathered a court composed of powerful hereditary landholders, the upper echelons of the army, the harem, religious functionaries, and the bureaucracy that administered the whole. This court lived mainly in Susa but in the hot summer months went to Ecbatana (Hamadan), probably in the spring to Persepolis in Fars, and perhaps sometimes to Babylon. In a smaller version it travelled with the king when he was away in the provinces.

The provinces, or satrapies, were ruled by governors (satraps), technically appointed by the central authority but who often became hereditary subkings, particularly in the later years, of the empire. They were surrounded and assisted in their functions by a court modelled on that of the central government and were powerful officials. The great king was nevertheless theoretically able to maintain considerable control in local affairs. He was the last court of appeal in judicial matters. He controlled directly the standing military forces stationed in the provinces, though as time went on, the military and civil authority in the provinces tended to become combined under the satrap. The king was also aided in keeping control in the provinces by the so-called king's eyes, or better, the king's ears, officials from the central government who travelled throughout the empire and who reported directly back to the king on what they learned. The number of satrapies and their boundaries varied greatly from time to time; at the beginning of Darius' reign there were 20 provinces. In general, as time went on, the number of satrapies increased, partly because of the need to reassert control over the satraps by decreasing their power base, partly because the feudal structure that underlay Iranian society required rewarding more and more people with a role in government, and partly because the original 20 satrapies were undoubtedly simply too large to permit efficient administration.

The army was a particularly important element within the empire. It, too, developed and changed with time. After Cyrus the Persian tribal levy, based on the responsibility of all male Iranian to fight for the king, was replaced by a professional army supplemented by a troop levy from the subject peoples in time of intensive military activity. The elite of the standing army were the 10,000 "immortals" composed of Persians and Medes, 1,000 of whom were the personal guard of the king. The person who controlled this elite, as did Darius on the death of Cambyses, usually controlled all. The troops of the imperial levy fought with the regular army in national units, were armed according to their individual customs, but were usually officered by Persians. Permanent bodies of troops were stationed at strategic points throughout the empire, and, to judge from the garrison at Elephantine in Egypt, these were actually military colonies, firmly settled into the local countryside. Greek mercenaries were used with increasing frequency in later years, and many Greeks fought faithfully for Persian silver.

Both the civil and the military administration, as well as public and private trade, were greatly facilitated by the famous royal Achaemenid road system. Communications throughout the empire were better than any previous Middle Eastern power had maintained. The famous road from Susa to Sardis in western Asia Minor is the best known of these imperial highways. It was an all-weather road, maintained by the state. Over it ran a governmental postal system based on relay stations with remounts and fresh riders located a day's ride apart. The speed with which a message could travel from the provinces to the king at Susa was remarkable.

On the whole, Iranian rule sat lightly on the subject peoples, at least under the early Achaemenids. It was a conscious policy of Cyrus and Darius to permit conquered nations to retain their own religion, customs, their methods of doing business, and even to some extent their forms of government. Cyrus' attitude toward the Babylonians, which led to his being accepted as the rightful successor of Nabonidus, his willingness to permit the Jews to return to Palestine and to their own way of life, and his successors' concern that this promise be honoured; Cambyses' behaviour in Egypt and his acceptance by the Egyptians as founder of a legitimate new Egyptian dynasty; and the policy adopted under Mardonius toward the Ionian cities following their rebellion are all examples of such a policy. Perhaps even too often in the later empire, rebellious peoples,

governments, and leaders were forgiven and not suppressed with the thoroughness sometimes characteristic of other regimes. Lapses from this policy, such as Xerxes' violent reaction to rebellion in Babylon, stand out in the record.

Law played an important role in the administration of the empire, and stories of Persian justice abound in the Greek sources. Darius particularly wished to be remembered as the great lawgiver, and law reform was one of the cornerstones in his program for reorganizing the empire. To judge from the Babylonian evidence, two sets of law, possibly administered by two sets of courts, were in force in the provinces. One was the local law undoubtedly based on custom and previous local codifications; the other was the Iranian, or imperial, law, based ultimately on the authority of the great king. A new word for law appeared in the Middle East in Achaemenid times, the Iranian *dāta*, and was borrowed by the Semitic languages used in the empire. In Babylonian and Aramaic, sources give evidence for Iranian judges called by the Iranian word *dāta-bar*. These were probably the judges of the imperial courts. With legal reform came reform and unification of tax structures. The tax structure of the empire was apparently based on the principle that all the conquered lands were the actual property of the king. Thus taxes were rather rents, and the Iranian and their land, Fars, by virtue of not being a conquered people, were always tax-free. Each satrapy was required to pay a fixed yearly amount in gold or silver and each vassal state paid a fixed tribute in kind. Again going on the Babylonian evidence, where in previous times agricultural taxes were levied in fixed amounts regardless of the fluctuating quality of the harvest, under Darius all land was surveyed, an estimate of its yield based on an average of the harvests over several years was from time to time established, and taxes were levied in fixed amounts based on a percentage of that average yield. This was not quite an income tax, since it was not based on a percentage of each year's production, but it was at least a reasonable figure based on a reasonable average production.

Breakdowns often occurred in the Achaemenids' effort to maintain a productive balance between local social structures, customs, laws, and government and the demand of the empire. The failure of the Iranian to find such a balance when dealing with what was, for them, that extremely strange system of social and political organization, the Greek polis, or city-state, probably lay at the heart of their never-ending troubles in Ionia as much as did the power and ambitions of mainland Greeks. Yet even the Ionians, at the best of times, often realized the mutual advantages and benefits of the king's peace and a unified western Asia under a tolerant central administration.

The economy of the empire was very much founded on that king's peace; it was when the peace broke down with ever-increasing frequency during the last century of Achaemenid rule that the economy of the empire went into a decline that undoubtedly contributed significantly to eventual political and military collapse. Wealth in the Achaemenid world was very much founded on land and on agriculture. Land was the principal reward that the king had available for those who gave service or who were in positions of great political or military power in the empire. Under Darius there was a measure of land called a "bow" that was originally a unit considered sufficient to support one bowman, who then paid his duty for the land in military service. At the other end of the scale were enormous family estates, which often increased in size over the years and which were or became hereditary holdings. They were often administered by absentee landlords. Such major landholdings were, as one would expect, usually in the hands of Iranians, but non-Iranians were also able to amass similar wealth and power, thereby testifying once again to the inherent tolerance with which the empire was administered. The Achaemenids themselves took a positive role in the encouragement of agriculture by investing state funds and effort in irrigation and the improvement of horticulture.

They also invested in and endeavoured to encourage trade, a major source of imperial wealth. The effect of the state-maintained road system on the encouragement of trade has already been mentioned. Equal attention was paid to the development of seaborne trade. State-sponsored voyages of exploration were undertaken in order to search for new markets and new resources. Darius completed a project, begun by the Egyptians, of linking the Nile with the Red Sea by a canal, so that routes across the Arabian Sea and into the Persian Gulf could be used to link the eastern and western ends of his empire. As part of the same program, port development on the Persian Gulf coast was encouraged. An imperial standardization of weights and measures, efforts to encourage the development and use of coinage, and the standardization in the king's name of that coinage were all policies intended to encourage commerce and economic activity within the realm. Banking played a role in the economy. Documents have survived from a family banking business in Babylonia—the house of Murashu and Sons of Nippur—covering the years c. 455-403

business in Babylonia the house of Mandana and sons of Nippur covering the years of 700-400 BC; the firm evidently prospered greatly by lending money and by acting as a middleman in the system of tax collection. Interest rates were high, but borrowers were numerous.

As time went on, there were more and more such borrowers, for the later empire is marked by a general economic decline.

The principal cause for this decline was the unsettled political conditions, but other, more indirect causes were unwise government interference in the economy, overtaxation, and the removal of too much hard money from the economy. Gold and silver tended to drain into the treasury of the central government from the provinces, and too little found its way back into the economy. Disastrous inflation was the result. The large sums of money paid to foreign mercenaries and as bribes to foreign governments must have also contributed to an unfavourable balance of payments that in turn stimulated inflation. Such conditions hardly strengthened the empire and must have contributed, in ways that cannot be documented with certainty, to the political unrest that was their own main cause.

Ultimately, the achievement of the Achaemenid dynasty was that they ruled with much creative tolerance over an area and a time that, for both the Middle East and for Europe, saw the end of the ancient and the beginning of the modern world. In one sense, the ancient Middle East died when Cyrus marched into Babylon. Others would argue that its death came when Alexander burned Persepolis. The question remains open. What is clear is that the Achaemenid Empire, the largest anyone had ever yet tried to hold together and one that was not to be surpassed until Rome reached its height, was a profound force in western Asia and in Europe during an important period of ferment and transition in human history. That period witnessed major developments in art, philosophy, literature, historiography, religion, exploration, economics, and science, and those developments provided the direct background for the further changes, along similar lines, that made the Hellenistic period so important in history. Hellenism probably would not have been possible, at least not in the form we know it, if it had had to build directly on the rather more narrow and less ambitious base of the individual civilizations of Babylonia, Egypt, or Greece. In a sense the Achaemenid dynasty passed on a concept of empire that, much modified by others, has remained something of a model throughout history of how it is possible for diverse peoples with variant customs, languages, religions, laws, and economic systems to flourish with mutual profit under a central government. In narrower terms, but for the Iranians themselves no less important, the Achaemenid Empire was the beginning of the Iranian nation, one of the pivotal peoples in the modern

source:

<http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/History/hakhamaneshian/achaemenid.htm>