

Chapter 7: The Empires of Persia

Overview

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 Sassanid) 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 *qanat*, 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

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, the end of 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 Parthian was heavy cavalry
 - b. Mithradates I established a empire through conquests from 171-155 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 more
- 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