

## II

# THE FORMATION OF CLASSICAL SOCIETIES, 500 B.C.E. TO 500 C.E.

Shortly after *Homo sapiens* turned to agriculture, human communities began to experiment with methods of social organization. In several cases the experimentation encouraged the development of complex societies that integrated the lives and livelihoods of peoples over large regions. These early complex societies launched human history on a trajectory that it continues to follow today. States, social classes, technological innovation, specialization of labor, trade, and sophisticated cultural traditions rank among the most important legacies of these societies.

Toward the end of the first millennium B.C.E., several early societies achieved particularly high degrees of internal organization, extended their authority over extremely large regions, and elaborated especially influential cultural traditions. The most prominent of these societies developed in Persia, China, India, and the Mediterranean basin. Because their legacies have endured so long and have influenced the ways that literally billions of people have led their lives, historians often refer to them as classical societies.

The classical societies of Persia, China, India, and the Mediterranean basin differed from one another in many ways. They raised different food crops, constructed buildings out of different materials, lived by different legal and moral codes, and recognized different gods. Classical China



and India depended on the cultivation of rice, millet, and wheat, whereas in Persia and the Mediterranean wheat was the staple food crop. In China, packed earth and wood served as the principal construction material even for large public buildings; in India, wood was the most common building material; and in Persia and the Mediterranean, architects designed buildings of brick and stone. The classical societies differed even more strikingly when it came to beliefs and values. They generated a wide variety of ideas about the organization of family and society, the understanding of what constituted proper public and private behavior, the nature of the gods or other powers thought to influence human affairs, and proper relationships among human beings, the natural world, and the gods.

Despite those differences, these societies faced several common problems. They all confronted the challenge, for example, of administering vast territories without advanced technologies of transportation and communication. Rulers built centralized imperial states on a scale much larger than their predecessors in earlier societies. They constructed elaborate systems of bureaucracy and experimented with administrative organization in an effort to secure influence for central

governments and extend imperial authority to the far reaches of their realms. To encourage political and economic integration of their lands, classical rulers built roads and supported networks of trade and communication that linked the sometimes far-flung regions under their authority.

The classical societies all faced military challenges, and they raised powerful armies for both defensive and offensive purposes. Military challenges frequently arose from within classical societies themselves in the form of rebellion, civil war, or conflict between powerful factions. External threats came from nomadic and migratory peoples who sought to share in the wealth generated by the productive agricultural economies of classical societies. Sometimes mounted nomadic warriors charged into settlements, seized what they wished, and departed before the victims could mount a defense. In other cases, migratory peoples moved into classical societies in such large numbers that they disrupted the established political and social order. In hopes of securing their borders and enhancing the welfare of their lands, rulers of most classical societies launched campaigns of expansion that ultimately produced massive imperial states.

The bureaucracies and armies that enabled classical societies to address some problems effectively created difficulties as well. One pressing problem revolved around the maintenance of the bureaucracies and armies. To finance administrative and military machinery, rulers of the classical societies all claimed some portion of the agricultural and industrial surplus of their lands in the form of taxes or tribute. Most of them also required their subjects to provide uncompensated labor services for large-scale public projects involving the building and maintenance of structures such as defensive walls, highways, bridges, and irrigation systems.

The classical societies also faced the challenge of trying to maintain an equitable distribution of land and wealth. As some individuals flourished and accumulated land and wealth, they enjoyed economic advantages over their neighbors. Increasingly sharp economic distinctions gave rise to tensions that fueled bitter class conflict.



In some cases, conflicts escalated into rebellions and civil wars that threatened the very survival of the classical societies.

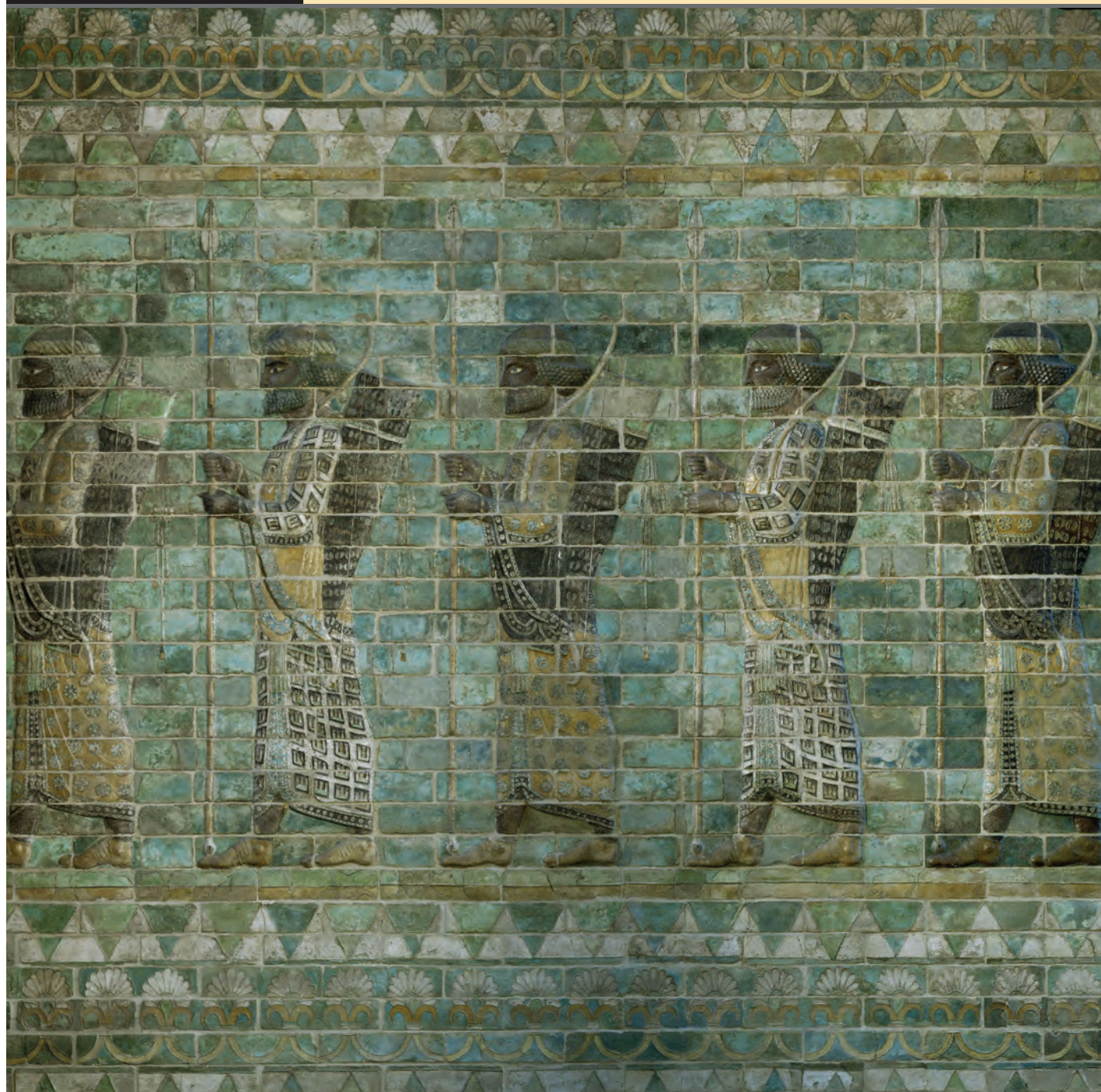
All the classical societies engaged in long-distance trade. This trade encouraged economic integration within the societies, since their various regions came to depend on one another for agricultural products and manufactured items. Long-distance trade led also to the establishment of regular commerce between peoples of different societies and cultural regions. The volume of trade increased dramatically when classical empires pacified large stretches of the Eurasian landmass. Long-distance trade became common enough that a well-established network of land and sea routes, known collectively as the silk roads, linked lands as distant as China and Europe.

All the classical societies generated sophisticated cultural and religious traditions. Different societies held widely varying beliefs and values, but their cultural and religious traditions offered guidance on moral, religious, political, and social issues. Those traditions often served as foundations for educational systems that prepared individuals for careers in government. As a result, they shaped the values of people who made law and implemented policy. Several cultural and religious traditions also attracted large popular followings and created institutional structures that enabled them to survive over a long term and extend their influence through time.

Over the centuries, specific political, social, economic, and cultural features of the classical societies have disappeared. Yet their legacies deeply influenced future societies and in many ways continue to influence the lives of the world's peoples. Appreciation of the legacies of classical societies in Persia, China, India, and the Mediterranean basin is crucial for the effort to understand the world's historical development. ■

# 7

## The Empires of Persia



### The Rise and Fall of the Persian Empires

The Achaemenid Empire  
Decline and Fall of the Achaemenid Empire  
The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanid Empires

### Imperial Society and Economy

Social Development in Classical Persia  
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### Religions of Salvation in Classical Persian Society

Zarathustra and His Faith  
Religions of Salvation  
in a Cosmopolitan Society

**The Greek historian Herodotus relished a good story**, and he related many a tale about the Persian empire and its conflicts with other peoples, including Greeks. One story had to do with a struggle between Cyrus, leader of the expanding Persian realm, and Croesus, ruler of the powerful and wealthy kingdom of Lydia in southwestern Anatolia. Croesus noted the growth of Persian influence with concern and asked the Greek oracle at Delphi whether to go to war against Cyrus. The oracle responded that an attack on Cyrus would destroy a great kingdom.

Overjoyed, Croesus lined up his allies and prepared for war. In 546 B.C.E. he launched an invasion and seized a small town, provoking Cyrus to engage the formidable Lydian cavalry. The resulting battle was hard fought but inconclusive. Because winter was approaching, Croesus disbanded his troops and returned to his capital at Sardis, expecting Cyrus to retreat as well. But Cyrus was a vigorous and unpredictable warrior, and he pursued Croesus to Sardis. When he learned of the pursuit, Croesus hastily assembled an army to confront the invaders. Cyrus threw it into disarray, however, by advancing a group of warriors mounted on camels, which spooked the Lydian horses and sent them into headlong flight. Cyrus's army then surrounded Sardis and took the city after a siege of only two weeks. Croesus narrowly escaped death in the battle, but he was taken captive and afterward became an advisor to Cyrus. Herodotus could not resist pointing out that events proved the Delphic oracle right: Croesus's attack on Cyrus did indeed lead to the destruction of a great kingdom—his own.

The victory over Lydia was a major turning point in the development of the Persian empire. Lydia had a reputation as a kingdom of fabulous wealth, partly because it was the first land to use standardized coins with values guaranteed by the state. Taking advantage of its coins and its geographic location on the Mediterranean, Lydia conducted maritime trade with Greece, Egypt, and Phoenicia as well as overland trade with Mesopotamia and Persia. Lydian wealth and resources gave Cyrus tremendous momentum as he extended Persian authority to new lands and built the earliest of the vast imperial states of classical times.

Classical Persian society began to take shape during the sixth century B.C.E. when warriors conquered the region from the Indus River to Egypt and southeastern Europe. Their conquests yielded an enormous realm much larger than the earlier Babylonian or Assyrian empires. The very size of the Persian empire created political and administrative problems for its rulers. Once they solved those problems, however, a series of Persian-based empires governed much of the territory between India and the Mediterranean Sea for more than a millennium—from the mid-sixth century B.C.E. until the early seventh century C.E.—and brought centralized political organization to many distinct peoples living over vast geographic spaces.

**OPPOSITE:** An enameled tile frieze created about 515 B.C.E. depicts a group of life-sized Persian archers at the palace of King Darius in Susa.

In organizing their realm, Persian rulers relied heavily on Mesopotamian techniques of administration, which they adapted to their own needs. Yet they did not hesitate to create new institutions or adopt new administrative procedures. In the interest of improved communications and military mobility, they also invested resources in the construction of roads and highways linking the regions of the empire. As a result of those efforts, central administrators were able to send instructions throughout the empire, dispatch armies in times of turmoil, and ensure that local officials would carry out imperial policies.

The organization of the vast territories embraced by the classical Persian empires had important social, economic, and cultural implications. High agricultural productivity enabled many people to work at tasks other than cultivation: classes of bureaucrats, administrators, priests, craftsmen, and merchants increased in number as the production and distribution of food became more efficient. Meanwhile, social extremes became more pronounced: a few individuals and families amassed enormous wealth, many led simple lives, and some fell into slavery. Good roads fostered trade within imperial borders, and Persian society itself served as a commercial and cultural bridge between Indian and Mediterranean societies. As a crossroads, Persia served not only as a link in long-distance trade networks but also as a conduit for the exchange of philosophical and religious ideas. Persian religious traditions did not attract many adherents beyond the imperial boundaries, but they inspired religious thinkers subject to Persian rule and deeply influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

## The Rise and Fall of the Persian Empires

The empires of Persia arose in the arid land of Iran. For centuries Iran had developed under the shadow of the wealthier and more productive Mesopotamia to the west while absorbing intermittent migrations and invasions of nomadic peoples coming out of central Asia to the northeast. During the sixth century B.C.E., rulers of the province of Persia in southwestern Iran embarked on a series of conquests that resulted in the formation of an enormous empire. For more than a millennium, four ruling dynasties—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 (224–651 C.E.)—maintained a continuous tradition of imperial rule in much of southwest Asia.

### *The Achaemenid Empire*

The origins of classical Persian society trace back to the late stages of Mesopotamian society. During the centuries before 1000 B.C.E., two closely related peoples known as the Medes and the Persians migrated from central Asia to Persia (the southwestern portion of the modern-day state of Iran), where they lived in loose subjection to the Babylonian and Assyrian empires. The Medes and the Persians spoke Indo-European languages, and their movements were part of the larger Indo-European migrations. They shared many cultural traits with their distant cousins, the Aryans, who migrated into India. They were mostly pastoralists, although they also practiced a limited amount of agriculture. They organized themselves by clans rather than by states or formal political institutions, but they recognized leaders who collected taxes and delivered tribute to their Mesopotamian overlords.

Though not tightly organized politically, the Medes and the Persians were peoples of considerable military power. As descendants of nomadic peoples from central Asia, they possessed the equestrian skills common to many steppe peoples. They were expert archers, even when mounted on their horses, and they frequently raided the wealthy lands of Mesopotamia. When the Assyrian and Babylonian empires weakened

### *The Medes and the Persians*

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Achaemenid  
(ah-KEE-muh-nid)  
Medes (meeds)



**Map 7.1** The Achaemenid and Seleucid empires, 558–83 B.C.E. Compare the size of the Achaemenid empire to the earlier Mesopotamian and Egyptian empires discussed in chapters 2 and 3. What role did the Royal Road and other highways play in the maintenance of the Achaemenid empire?

in the sixth century B.C.E., the Medes and the Persians embarked on a vastly successful imperial venture of their own.

Cyrus the Achaemenid (reigned 558–530 B.C.E.) launched the Persians' imperial venture. In some ways Cyrus was an unlikely candidate for that role. He came from a mountainous region of southwestern Iran, and in reference to the region's economy, his contemporaries often called him Cyrus the Shepherd. Yet Cyrus proved to be a tough, wily leader and an outstanding military strategist. His conquests laid the foundation of the first Persian empire, also known as the Achaemenid empire because its rulers claimed descent from Cyrus's Achaemenid clan.

In 558 B.C.E. Cyrus became king of the Persian tribes, which he ruled from his mountain fortress at Pasargadae. In 553 B.C.E. he initiated a rebellion against his Median overlord, whom he crushed within three years. By 548 B.C.E. he had brought all of Iran under his control, and he began to look for opportunities to expand his influence. In 546 B.C.E. he conquered the powerful kingdom of Lydia in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). Between 545 B.C.E. and 539 B.C.E. he campaigned in central Asia and Bactria (modern Afghanistan). In a swift campaign of 539 B.C.E., he seized Babylonia, whose vassal states immediately recognized him as their lord. Within twenty years Cyrus went from minor regional king to ruler of an empire that stretched from India to the borders of Egypt.

Cyrus no doubt would have mounted a campaign against Egypt, the largest and wealthiest neighboring state outside his control, had he lived long enough. But in

*Cyrus*

*Cyrus's Conquests*

*Darius*

**The tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae—one of the few Achaemenid monuments that have survived to the present.**

530 B.C.E. he fell, mortally wounded, while protecting his northeastern frontier from nomadic raiders. His troops recovered his body and placed it in a simple tomb, which still stands, that Cyrus had prepared for himself at his palace in Pasargadae.

Cyrus's empire survived and expanded during the reigns of his successors. His son Cambyses (reigned 530–522 B.C.E.) conquered Egypt in 525 B.C.E. and brought its wealth into Persian hands. The greatest of the Achaemenid emperors, Darius (reigned 521–486 B.C.E.), a younger kinsman of Cyrus, extended the empire both east and west.

His armies pushed into northwestern India as far as the Indus River, absorbing the northern Indian kingdom of Gandhara, while also capturing Thrace, Macedonia, and the western coast of the Black Sea in southeastern Europe. By the late sixth century, Darius presided over an empire stretching some 3,000 kilometers (1,865 miles) from the Indus River in the east to the Aegean Sea in the west and 1,500 kilometers (933 miles) from Armenia in the north to the first cataract of the Nile River in the south. This empire embraced mountains, valleys, plateaus, jungles, deserts, and arable land, and it touched the shores of the Arabian Sea, Aral Sea, Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea, Black Sea, Red Sea, and Mediterranean Sea. With a population of some thirty-five million, Darius's realm was by far the largest empire the world had yet seen.

Yet Darius was more important as an administrator than as a conqueror. Governing a far-flung empire was a much more difficult challenge than conquering it. The Achaemenid rulers presided over more than seventy distinct ethnic groups, including peoples who lived in widely scattered regions, spoke many different languages, and observed a profusion of religious and cultural traditions. To maintain their empire, the Achaemenids needed to establish lines of communication with all parts of their realm and design institutions that would enable them to tax and administer their territories. In doing so, they not only made it possible for the Achaemenid empire to survive but also pioneered administrative techniques that would outlast their dynasty and influence political life in southwestern Asia for centuries to come.

*Persepolis*

Soon after his rise to power, Darius began to centralize his administration. About 520 B.C.E. he started to build a new capital of astonishing magnificence at Persepolis, near Pasargadae. Darius intended Persepolis to serve not only as an administrative center but also as a monument to the Achaemenid dynasty. Structures at Persepolis included vast reception halls, lavish royal residences, and a well-protected treasury. From the time of Darius to the end of the Achaemenid dynasty in 330 B.C.E., Persepolis served as the nerve center of the Persian empire—a resplendent capital bustling with advisors, ministers, diplomats, scribes, accountants, translators, and bureaucratic officers of all descriptions. Even today, massive columns and other ruins bespeak the grandeur of Darius's capital.

*Achaemenid  
Administration:  
The Satrapies*

The government of the Achaemenid empire depended on a finely tuned balance between central initiative and local administration. The Achaemenid rulers made great claims to authority in their official title—"The Great King, King of Kings, King in Persia, King of Countries." Like their Mesopotamian predecessors, the Achaemenids



■ Ruins of Persepolis, showing the imperial reception hall and palaces.

appointed governors to serve as agents of the central administration and oversee affairs in the various regions. Darius divided his realm into twenty-three satrapies—administrative and taxation districts governed by satraps. Yet the Achaemenids did not try to push direct rule on their subjects: most of the satraps were Persians, but the Achaemenids recruited local officials to fill almost all administrative posts below the level of the satrap.

Because the satraps often held posts distant from Persepolis, there was always a possibility that they might ally with local groups and become independent of Achaemenid authority or even threaten the empire itself. The Achaemenid rulers relied on two measures to discourage that possibility. First, each satrapy had a contingent of military officers and tax collectors who served as checks on the satraps' power and independence. Second, the rulers created a new category of officials—essentially imperial spies—known as “the eyes and ears of the king.” These agents traveled throughout the empire with their own military forces conducting surprise audits of accounts and procedures in the provinces and collecting intelligence reports. The division of provincial responsibilities and the institution of the eyes and ears of the king helped the Achaemenid rulers maintain control over a vast empire that otherwise might easily have split into a series of independent regional kingdoms.

Darius also sought to improve administrative efficiency by regularizing tax levies and standardizing laws. Cyrus and Cambyses had accepted periodic “gifts” of tribute from subject lands and cities. Though often lavish, the gifts did not provide a consistent and reliable source of income for rulers who needed to finance a large bureaucracy and army. Darius replaced irregular tribute payments with formal tax levies. He required each satrapy to pay a set quantity of silver—and in some cases a levy of horses or slaves as well—deliverable annually to the imperial court. To expedite the payment of taxes, Darius followed the example of the Lydian rulers and issued standardized coins—a move that also fostered trade throughout his empire. In an equally important initiative

*Taxes, Coins,  
and Laws*



### Roads and Communications

begun in the year 520 B.C.E., he sought to bring the many legal systems of his empire closer to a single standard. He did not abolish the existing laws of individual lands or peoples, nor did he impose a uniform law code on his entire empire. But he directed legal experts to study and codify the laws of his subject peoples, modifying them when necessary to harmonize them with the legal principles observed in the empire as a whole.

Alongside their administrative and legal policies, the Achaemenid rulers took other measures to knit their far-flung realm into a coherent whole. They built good roads across their realm, notably the so-called Persian Royal Road—parts of it paved with stone—that stretched about 2,575 kilometers (1,600 miles) from the Aegean port of Ephesus to Sardis in Anatolia, through Mesopotamia along the Tigris River, to Susa in Iran, with an extension to Pasargadae and Persepolis. Caravans took some ninety days to travel this road, lodging at inns along the well-policed route.

The imperial government also organized a courier service and built 111 postal stations at intervals of 40 to 50 kilometers (25 to 30 miles) along the Royal Road. Each station kept a supply of fresh horses and food rations for couriers, who sometimes traveled at night as well as during daylight hours. Scholars estimate that these couriers were able to carry urgent messages from one end of the Royal Road to the other in two weeks' time. The Greek historian Herodotus spoke highly of these imperial servants, and even today the United States Postal Service takes his description of their efforts as a standard for its employees: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." The Achaemenids also improved existing routes between Mesopotamia and Egypt, and they built new roads linking Persia with northern India, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt. In combination, these imperial highways stretched approximately 13,000 kilometers (8,000 miles). In addition to improving communications, these roads facilitated trade, which helped to integrate the empire's various regions into a larger economy.

### *Decline and Fall of the Achaemenid Empire*

### The Achaemenid Commonwealth

The Achaemenids' roads and administrative machinery enabled them to govern a vast empire and extend Persian influences throughout their territories. Persian concepts of law and justice administered by trained imperial officials linked peoples from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indus River in a larger Persian society. Political stability made it possible to undertake extensive public works projects such as the construction of *qanat* (underground canals), which led to enhanced agricultural production and population growth. Iron metallurgy spread to all parts of the empire, and by the end of the Achaemenid dynasty, iron tools were common in Persian agricultural communities. Peoples in the various regions of the Achaemenid empire maintained their ethnic identities, but all participated in a larger Persian commonwealth.

Eventually, however, difficulties between rulers and subject peoples undermined the integrity of the Achaemenid empire. Cyrus and Darius both consciously pursued a policy of toleration in administering their vast multicultural empire: they took great care to respect the values and cultural traditions of the peoples they ruled. In Mesopotamia, for example, they did not portray themselves as Persian conquerors but, rather, as legitimate Babylonian rulers and representatives of Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon. Darius also won high praise from Jews in the Achaemenid empire, since he allowed them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple that Babylonian conquerors had destroyed in 587 B.C.E.

Darius's successor, Xerxes (reigned 486–465 B.C.E.), retreated from that policy of toleration, however, flaunted his Persian identity, and sought to impose his values on

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*qanat* (kah-NAHT)



**Carving from Persepolis showing an enthroned Darius (with his son Xerxes standing behind him) receiving a high court official, as incense burners perfume the air.**

conquered lands. This policy caused enormous ill will, especially in Mesopotamia and Egypt where peoples with their own cultural traditions resented Xerxes' pretensions. Xerxes successfully repressed rebellions against his rule in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Yet resentment of Persian conquerors continued to fester, and it caused serious problems for the later Achaemenids as they tried to hold their empire together.

The Achaemenids had an especially difficult time with their ethnic Greek subjects, and efforts to control the Greeks helped to bring about the collapse of the Achaemenid empire. Ethnic Greeks inhabited many of the cities in Anatolia—particularly in the region of Ionia on the Aegean coast of western Anatolia—and they maintained close economic and commercial ties with their cousins in the peninsula of Greece itself. The Ionian Greeks fell under Persian domination during the reign of Cyrus. They became restive under Darius's Persian governors—"tyrants," the Greeks called them—who oversaw their affairs. In 500 B.C.E. the Ionian cities rebelled, expelled or executed their governors, and asserted their independence. Their rebellion launched a series of conflicts that Greeks called the Persian Wars (500–479 B.C.E.).

The conflict between the Ionian Greeks and the Persians expanded considerably when the cities of peninsular Greece sent fleets to aid their kinsmen in Ionia. Darius managed to put down the rebellion and reassert Achaemenid authority, but he and his successors became entangled in a difficult and ultimately destructive effort to extend their authority to the Greek peninsula. In 490 B.C.E. Darius attempted to forestall future problems by mounting an expedition to conquer the wealthy Greek cities and absorb them into his empire. Though larger and much more powerful than the forces of the disunited Greek city-states, the Persian army had to contend with long and fragile lines of supply as well as a hostile environment. After some initial successes the Persians suffered a rout at the battle of Marathon (490 B.C.E.), and they returned home without achieving their goals. Xerxes sent another expedition ten years later, but within eighteen months, it too had suffered defeat both on land and at sea and had returned to Persia.

For almost 150 years the Persian empire continued to spar intermittently with the Greek cities. The adversaries mounted small expeditions against each other, attacking individual cities or fleets, but they did not engage in large-scale campaigns. The Greek

### *The Persian Wars*

*Alexander of  
Macedon*

A coin issued by Alexander with an image of the conqueror.

cities were too small and disunited to pose a serious challenge to the enormous Persian empire. Meanwhile, for their part, the later Achaemenids had to concentrate on the other restive and sometimes rebellious regions of their empire and could not embark on new rounds of expansion.

The standoff ended with the rise of Alexander of Macedon, often called Alexander the Great (discussed more fully in chapter 10). In 334 B.C.E. Alexander invaded Persia with an army of some forty-eight thousand tough, battle-hardened Macedonians. Though far smaller than the Persian army in numbers, the well-disciplined Macedonians carried heavier arms and employed more sophisticated military tactics than their opponents. As a result, they sliced through the Persian empire, advancing almost at will and dealing their adversaries a series of devastating defeats. In 331 B.C.E. Alexander shattered Achaemenid forces at the battle of Gaugamela, and within a year the empire founded by Cyrus the Shepherd had dissolved.

Alexander led his forces into Persepolis, confiscated the wealth stored in the imperial treasury there, paid his respects at the tomb of Cyrus in Pasargadae, and proclaimed himself heir to the Achaemenid rulers. After a brief season of celebration, Alexander and his forces ignited a blaze—perhaps intentionally—that destroyed Persepolis. The conflagration was so great that when archaeologists first began to explore the ruins of Persepolis in the eighteenth century, they found layers of ash and charcoal up to 1 meter (3 feet) deep.

The Achaemenid empire had crumbled, but its legacy was by no means exhausted. Alexander portrayed himself in Persia and Egypt as a legitimate successor of the Achaemenids who observed their precedents and deserved their honors. He retained the Achaemenid administrative structure, and he even confirmed the appointments of many satraps and other officials. As it happened, Alexander had little time to enjoy his conquests, because he died in 323 B.C.E. after a brief effort to extend his empire to India. But the states that succeeded him—the Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanid empires—continued to employ a basically Achaemenid structure of imperial administration.

### *The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanid Empires*

*The Seleucids*

After Alexander died, his chief generals fought among themselves and struggled to take over the conqueror's realms. In Persia the victor was Seleucus, formerly commander of an elite guard corps in Alexander's army, who dominated the territories of the former Achaemenid empire and ruled them from 305 to 281 B.C.E. Like Alexander, Seleucus and his successors retained the Achaemenid systems of administration and taxation as well as the imperial roads and postal service. The Seleucids also founded new cities throughout the realm and attracted Greek colonists to occupy them. The migrants, who represented only a small fraction of the whole population of the empire, largely adapted to their new environment. Nonetheless, the establishment of cities greatly stimulated trade and economic development both within the Seleucid empire and beyond.

As foreigners, the Seleucids faced opposition from native Persians and especially their ruling classes. Satraps often revolted against Seleucid rule, or at least worked to build power bases that would enable them to establish their independence. The Seleucids soon lost their holdings in northern India, and the seminomadic Parthians progressively took over Iran during the third century B.C.E. The Seleucids continued to rule a truncated empire until 83 B.C.E., when Roman conquerors put an end to their empire.

*The Parthians*

Meanwhile, the Parthians established themselves as lords of a powerful empire based in Iran that they extended to wealthy Mesopotamia. The Parthians had occupied the region of eastern Iran around Khurasan since Achaemenid times. They retained many of the customs and traditions of nomadic peoples from the steppes of central

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Seleucids (sih-LOO-sihds)

Asia. They did not have a centralized government, for example, but organized themselves politically through a federation of leaders who met in councils and jointly determined policy for all allied groups. They were skillful warriors, accustomed to defending themselves against constant threats from nomadic peoples farther east.

As they settled and turned increasingly to agriculture, the Parthians also devised an effective means to resist nomadic invasions. Because they had no access to feed grains, nomadic peoples allowed their horses to forage for food on the steppes during the winter. The Parthians discovered that if they fed their horses on alfalfa during the winter, their animals would grow much larger and stronger than the small horses and ponies of the steppes. Their larger animals could then support heavily armed warriors outfitted with metal armor, which served as an effective shield against the arrows of the steppe nomads. Well-trained forces of heavily armed cavalry could usually put nomadic raiding parties to flight. Indeed, few existing forces could stand up to Parthian heavy cavalry.

As early as the third century B.C.E., the Parthians began to wrest their independence from the Seleucids. The Parthian satrap revolted against his Seleucid overlord in 238 B.C.E., and during the following decades his successors gradually enlarged their holdings. Mithradates I, the Parthians' greatest conqueror, came to the throne about 171 B.C.E. and transformed his state into a mighty empire. By about 155 B.C.E. he had consolidated his hold on Iran and had also extended Parthian rule to Mesopotamia.

The Parthians portrayed themselves as enemies of the foreign Seleucids, as restorers of rule in the Persian tradition. To some extent that characterization was accurate. The Parthians largely followed the example of the Achaemenids in structuring their empire: they governed through satraps, employed Achaemenid techniques of administration and taxation, and built a capital city at Ctesiphon on the Euphrates River near modern Baghdad. But the Parthians also retained elements of their steppe traditions. They did not develop nearly so centralized a regime as the Achaemenids or the Seleucids but, rather, vested a great deal of authority and responsibility in their clan leaders. These men often served as satraps, and they regularly worked to build independent bases of power in their regions. They frequently mounted rebellions against the imperial government, though without much success.

For about three centuries the Parthians presided over a powerful empire between India and the Mediterranean. Beginning in the first century C.E., they faced pressure in the west from the expanding Roman empire. The Parthian empire as a whole never stood in danger of falling to the Romans, but on three occasions in the second century C.E. Roman armies captured the Parthian capital at Ctesiphon. Combined with internal difficulties caused by the rebellious satraps, Roman pressure contributed to the weakening of the Parthian state. During the early third century C.E., internal rebellion brought it down.

Once again, though, the tradition of imperial rule continued, this time under the Sasanids, who came from Persia and claimed direct descent from the Achaemenids.



**Gold sculpture of a nomadic horseman discharging an arrow. This figurine dates from the fifth or fourth century B.C.E. and might well represent a Parthian.**

### *Parthian Conquests*

### *Parthian Government*

### *The Sasanids*

The Sasanids toppled the Parthians in 224 C.E. and ruled until 651 C.E., re-creating much of the splendor of the Achaemenid empire. From their cosmopolitan capital at Ctesiphon, the Sasanid “king of kings” provided strong rule from Parthia to Mesopotamia while also rebuilding an elaborate system of administration and founding or refurbishing numerous cities. Sasanid merchants traded actively with peoples to both east and west, and they introduced into Iran the cultivation of crops such as rice, sugarcane, citrus fruits, eggplant, and cotton that came west over the trade routes from India and China.

During the reign of Shapur I (239–272 C.E.), the Sasanids stabilized their western frontier and created a series of buffer states between themselves and the Roman empire. Shapur even defeated several Roman armies and settled the prisoners in Iran, where they devoted their famous engineering skills to the construction of roads and dams. After Shapur, the Sasanids did not expand militarily, but entered into a standoff relationship with the Kushan empire in the east and the Roman and Byzantine empires in the west. None of those large empires was strong enough to overcome the others, but they contested border areas and buffer states, sometimes engaging in lengthy and bitter disputes that sapped the energies of all involved.

These continual conflicts seriously weakened the Sasanid empire in particular. The empire came to an end in 651 C.E. when Arab warriors killed the last Sasanid ruler, overran his realm, and incorporated it into their rapidly expanding Islamic empire. Yet even conquest by external invaders did not end the legacy of classical Persia, since Persian administrative techniques and cultural traditions were so powerful that the Arab conquerors adopted them to use in building a new Islamic society.

## Imperial Society and Economy

Throughout the eastern hemisphere during the classical era, public life and social structure became much more complicated than they had been during the days of the early complex societies. Centralized imperial governments needed large numbers of administrative officials, which led to the emergence of educated classes of bureaucrats. Stable empires enabled many individuals to engage in trade or other specialized labor as artisans, craftsmen, or professionals of various kinds. Some of them accumulated vast wealth, which led to increased distance and tensions between rich and poor. Meanwhile, slavery became more common than in earlier times. The prominence of slavery had to do partly with the expansion of imperial states, which often enslaved conquered foes, but it also reflected the increasing gulf between rich and poor, which placed such great economic pressure on some individuals that they had to give up their freedom in order to survive. All those developments had implications for the social structures of classical societies in Persia as well as China, India, and the Mediterranean basin.

### *Social Development in Classical Persia*

During the early days of the Achaemenid empire, Persian society reflected its origins on the steppes of central Asia. When the Medes and the Persians migrated to Iran, their social structure was similar to that of the Aryans in India, consisting primarily of warriors, priests, and peasants. For centuries, when they lived on the periphery and in the shadow of the Mesopotamian empires, the Medes and the Persians maintained steppe traditions. Even after the establishment of the Achaemenid empire, some of them followed a seminomadic lifestyle and maintained ties with their cousins on the steppes. Family and clan relationships were extremely important in the organization of

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Sasanids (suh-SAH-nids)



**Map 7.2** The Parthian and Sasanid empires, 247 B.C.E.–651 C.E. Note the location of the Parthian and Sasanid empires between the Mediterranean Sea and northern India. What roles did these two empires play in facilitating or hindering communications between lands to their east and west?

Persian political and social affairs. Male warriors headed the clans, which retained much of their influence long after the establishment of the Achaemenid empire.

The development of a cosmopolitan empire, however, brought considerable complexity to Persian society. The requirements of imperial administration, for example, called for a new class of educated bureaucrats who to a large extent undermined the position of the old warrior elite. The bureaucrats did not directly challenge the patriarchal warriors and certainly did not seek to displace them from their privileged position in society. Nevertheless, the bureaucrats' crucial role in running the day-to-day affairs of the empire guaranteed them a prominent and comfortable place in Persian society. By the time of the later Achaemenids and the Seleucids, Persian cities were home to masses of administrators, tax collectors, and record keepers. The bureaucracy even included a substantial corps of translators, who facilitated communications among the empire's many linguistic groups. Imperial survival depended on these literate professionals, and high-ranking bureaucrats came to share power and influence with warriors and clan leaders.

The bulk of Persian society consisted of individuals who were free but did not enjoy the privileges of clan leaders and important bureaucrats. In the cities the free classes included artisans, craftsmen, merchants, and low-ranking civil servants. Priests and priestesses were also prominent urban residents, along with servants who maintained the temple communities in which they lived. In Persian society, as in earlier Mesopotamian societies, members of the free classes participated in religious observances conducted at

#### *Imperial Bureaucrats*

#### *Free Classes*



In this sculpture from Persepolis, Persian nobles dressed in fine cloaks and hats ascend the staircase leading to the imperial reception hall.

local temples, and they had the right to share in the income that temples generated from their agricultural operations and from craft industries such as textile production that the temples organized. The weaving of textiles was mostly the work of women, who received rations of grain, wine, beer, and sometimes meat from the imperial and temple workshops that employed them.

In the countryside the free classes included peasants who owned land as well as landless cultivators who worked as laborers or tenants on properties owned by the state, temple communities, or other individuals. Free residents of rural areas had the right to marry and move as they wished, and they could seek better opportunities in the cities or in military service. Because the Persian empires embraced a great deal of parched land that received little rainfall, work in the countryside involved not only cultivation but also the building and maintenance of irrigation systems.

The most remarkable of those systems were underground canals known as *qanat*, which allowed cultivators to distribute water to fields without losing large quantities to evaporation through exposure to the sun and open air. Numerous *qanat* crisscrossed the Iranian plateau in the heartland of the Persian empire, where extreme scarcity of water justified the enormous investment of human labor required to build the canals. Although they had help from slaves, free residents of the countryside contributed much of the labor that went into the excavation and maintenance of the *qanat*.

### Slaves

A large class of slaves also worked in both the cities and the countryside. Individuals passed into slavery by two main routes. Most were prisoners of war who became slaves as the price of survival. These prisoners usually came from military units, but the Persians also enslaved civilians who resisted their advance or who rebelled against imperial authorities. Other slaves came from the ranks of free subjects who accumulated debts that they could not satisfy. In the cities, for example, merchants, artisans, and craftsmen borrowed funds to purchase goods or open shops, and in the country-

side small farmers facing competition from large-scale cultivators borrowed against their property and liberty to purchase tools, seed, or food. Failure to repay those debts in a timely fashion often forced the borrowers not only to forfeit their property but also to sell their children, their spouses, or themselves into slavery.

Slave status deprived individuals of their personal freedom. Slaves became the property of an individual, the state, or an institution such as a temple community: they worked at tasks set by their owners, and they could not move or marry at will, although existing family units usually stayed together. Most slaves probably worked as domestic servants or skilled laborers in the households of the wealthy, but at least some slaves cultivated their owners' fields in the countryside. State-owned slaves provided much of the manual labor for large-scale construction projects such as roads, irrigation systems, city walls, and palaces.

In Mesopotamia, temple communities owned many slaves who worked at agricultural tasks and performed administrative chores for their priestly masters. During the mid- to late sixth century B.C.E., a slave named Gimillu served the temple community of Eanna in Uruk, and his career is relatively well-known because records of his various misadventures survive in archives. Gimillu appeared in numerous legal cases because he habitually defrauded his masters, pocketed bribes, and embezzled temple funds. Yet he held a high position in the temple community and always managed to escape serious punishment. His career reveals that slaves sometimes had administrative talents and took on tasks involving considerable responsibility. Gimillu's case clearly shows that slaves sometimes enjoyed close relationships with powerful individuals who could protect them from potential enemies.

### *Economic Foundations of Classical Persia*

Agriculture was the economic foundation of classical Persian society. Like other classical societies, Persia needed large agricultural surpluses to support military forces and administrative specialists as well as residents of cities who were artisans, crafts workers, and merchants rather than cultivators. The Persian empires embraced several regions of exceptional fertility—notably Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia, and northern India—and they prospered by mobilizing the agricultural surpluses of those lands.

Barley and wheat were the grains cultivated most commonly in the Persian empires. Peas, lentils, mustard, garlic, onions, cucumbers, dates, apples, pomegranates, pears, and apricots supplemented the cereals in diets throughout Persian society, and beer and wine were the most common beverages. In most years agricultural production far exceeded the needs of cultivators, making sizable surpluses available for sale in the cities or for distribution to state servants through the imperial bureaucracy. Vast quantities of produce flowed into the imperial court from state-owned lands cultivated by slaves or leased out to tenants in exchange for a portion of the annual harvest. Even though they are incomplete, surviving records show that, for example, in 500 B.C.E., during the middle period of Darius's reign, the imperial court received almost eight hundred thousand liters of grain, quite apart from vegetables, fruits, meat, poultry, fish, oil, beer, wine, and textiles. Officials distributed some of that produce to the imperial staff as wages in kind, but much of it also found its way into the enormous banquets that Darius organized for as many as ten thousand guests. Satraps and other high officials lived on a less lavish scale than the Persian emperors but also benefited from agricultural surpluses delivered to their courts from their own lands.

Agriculture was the economic foundation of the Persian empires, but the empires had the effect of encouraging rapid economic development and trade. By ensuring political stability and maintaining an elaborate network of roads, Achaemenid rulers laid

*Agricultural  
Production*

*Standardized Coins*





**Tribute bearers from lands subject to Achaemenid rule bring rams, horses, and fabrics to the imperial court at Persepolis.**

solid foundations for economic prosperity and secure transportation of trade goods. Trade benefited also from the invention of standardized coins, which first appeared in the Anatolian kingdom of Lydia. Beginning about 640 B.C.E. the kings of Lydia issued coins of precisely measured metal and guaranteed their value. It was much simpler for merchants to exchange standardized coins than to weigh ingots or bullion when transacting their business. As a result, standardized coins quickly became popular and drew merchants from distant lands to Lydian markets. When Cyrus defeated the forces of King Croesus and absorbed Lydia into his expanding realm, he brought the advantages of standardized coins to the larger Achaemenid empire. Markets opened in all the larger cities of the empire, and the largest cities, such as Babylon, also were home to banks and companies that invested in commercial ventures.

### *Trade*

Long-distance trade grew rapidly during the course of the Persian empires and linked lands from India to Egypt in a vast commercial zone. Trade traveled both over land routes, including newly constructed highways such as the Persian Royal Road, and over sea lanes through the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea. The various regions of the Persian empires all contributed particular products to the larger imperial economy. India supplied gold, ivory, and aromatics. Iran and central Asia provided lapis lazuli, turquoise, and other semiprecious stones. Mesopotamia and Iran were sources of finished products such as textiles, mirrors, and jewelry. Anatolia supplied gold, silver, iron, copper, and tin. Phoenicia contributed glass, cedar, timber, and richly dyed woolen fabrics. Spices and aromatics came from Arabia. Egypt provided grain, linen textiles, and papyrus writing materials as well as gold, ebony, and ivory obtained from Nubia. Greek oil, wine, and ceramics also made their way throughout the empire and even beyond its borders.

Long-distance trade became especially prominent during the reigns of Alexander of Macedon and his Seleucid successors. The cities they established and the colonists

they attracted stimulated trade throughout the whole region from the Mediterranean to northern India. Indeed, Greek migrants facilitated cultural as well as commercial exchanges by encouraging the mixing and mingling of religious faiths, art styles, and philosophical speculation throughout the Persian realm.

## Religions of Salvation in Classical Persian Society

Cross-cultural influences were especially noticeable in the development of Persian religion. Persians came from the family of peoples who spoke Indo-European languages, and their earliest religion closely resembled that of the Aryans of India. During the classical era, however, the new faith of Zoroastrianism emerged and became widely popular in Iran and to a lesser extent also in the larger Persian empires. Zoroastrianism reflected the cosmopolitan society of the empires, and it profoundly influenced the beliefs and values of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. During the late centuries of the classical era, from about 100 to 500 C.E., three missionary religions—Buddhism, Christianity, and Manichaeism—also found numerous converts in the Persian empire.

### *Zarathustra and His Faith*

The earliest Persian religion centered on cults that celebrated outstanding natural elements and geographic features such as the sun, the moon, water, and especially fire. Persians recognized many of the same gods as the ancient Aryans, and their priests performed sacrifices similar to those conducted by the brahmins in India. The priests even made ceremonial use of a hallucinogenic agent called *haoma* in the same way that the Aryans used soma, and indeed the two concoctions were probably the same substance. Like the Aryans, the ancient Persians glorified strength and martial virtues, and the cults of both peoples sought principally to bring about a comfortable material existence for their practitioners.

During the classical era Persian religion underwent considerable change, as moral and religious thinkers sought to adapt their messages to the circumstances of a complex, cosmopolitan society. One result was the emergence of Zoroastrianism, which emerged from the teachings of Zarathustra. Though Zarathustra was undoubtedly a historical person and the subject of many early stories, little certain information survives about his life and career. It is not even clear exactly when he lived: most scholars date his life to the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C.E., but some believe he flourished sometime between 1200 and 1000 B.C.E. He came from an aristocratic family, and he probably was a priest who became disenchanted with the traditional religion and its concentration on bloody sacrifices and mechanical rituals. In any case, when he was about twenty years old, Zarathustra left his family and home in search of wisdom. After about ten years of travel, he experienced a series of visions and became convinced that the supreme god, whom he called Ahura Mazda (the “wise lord”), had chosen him to serve as his prophet and spread his message.

Like his life, Zarathustra’s doctrine has also proven to be somewhat elusive for modern analysts. Many of the earliest Zoroastrian teachings have perished, because the priests, known as magi, at first transmitted them orally. Only during the Seleucid dynasty did magi begin to preserve religious texts in writing, and only under the Sasanids did they compile their scriptures in a holy book known as the Avesta. Nevertheless, many of Zarathustra’s compositions survive, since magi preserved them with special diligence through oral transmission. Known as the *Gathas*, Zarathustra’s works

*Zarathustra*

*The Gathas*

### Zoroastrian Teachings



**A gold clasp or button of the fifth century B.C.E. with the symbol of Ahura Mazda as a winged god.**

### Popularity of Zoroastrianism

that Ahura Mazda engaged in a cosmic conflict with an independent adversary, an evil and malign spirit known as Angra Mainyu (the “destructive spirit” or the “hostile spirit”). Following a struggle of some twelve thousand years, Zarathustra believed, Ahura Mazda and the forces of good would ultimately prevail, and Angra Mainyu and the principle of evil would disappear forever. At that time individual human souls would undergo judgment and would experience rewards or punishments according to the holiness of their thoughts, words, and deeds. Honest and moral individuals would enter into a heavenly paradise, whereas demons would fling their evil brethren into a hellish realm of pain and suffering.

Zarathustra did not call for ascetic renunciation of the world in favor of a future heavenly existence. To the contrary, he considered the material world a blessing that reflected the benevolent nature of Ahura Mazda. His moral teachings allowed human beings to enjoy the world and its fruits—including wealth, sexual pleasure, and social prestige—as long as they did so in moderation and behaved honestly toward others. Zoroastrians have often summarized their moral teachings in the simple formula “good words, good thoughts, good deeds.”

Zarathustra’s teachings began to attract large numbers of followers during the sixth century B.C.E., particularly among Persian aristocrats and ruling elites. Wealthy patrons donated land and established endowments for the support of Zoroastrian temples. The Achaemenid era saw the emergence of a sizable priesthood, whose members conducted religious rituals, maintained a calendar, taught Zoroastrian values, and preserved Zoroastrian doctrine through oral transmission.

Cyrus and Cambyses probably observed Zoroastrian rites, although little evidence survives to illustrate their religious preferences. Beginning with Darius, however, the Achaemenid emperors closely associated themselves with Ahura Mazda and claimed divine sanction for their rule. Darius ordered stone inscriptions celebrating his achievements, and in those monuments he clearly revealed his devotion to Ahura Mazda and his opposition to the principle of evil. He did not attempt to suppress other gods or religions, but tolerated the established faiths of the various peoples in his empire. Yet he personally regarded Ahura Mazda as a deity superior to all others.

In one of his inscriptions, Darius praised Ahura Mazda as the great god who created the earth, the sky, and humanity and who moreover elevated Darius himself to the imperial honor. With the aid of imperial sponsorship, Zoroastrian temples cropped

were hymns that he composed in honor of the various deities that he recognized. Apart from the *Gathas*, ancient Zoroastrian literature included a wide variety of hymns, liturgical works, and treatises on moral and theological themes. Though some of these works survive, the arrival of Islam in the seventh century C.E. and the subsequent decline of Zoroastrianism resulted in the loss of most of the Avesta and later Zoroastrian works.

Zarathustra and his followers were not strict monotheists. They recognized Ahura Mazda as a supreme deity, an eternal and beneficent spirit, and the creator of all good things. But Zarathustra also spoke of six lesser deities, whom he praised in the *Gathas*. Furthermore, he believed

## Sources from the Past

### Zarathustra on Good and Evil

*Like many other religious faiths of classical times, Zoroastrianism encouraged the faithful to observe high moral and ethical standards. In this hymn from the Gathas, Zarathustra relates how Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu—representatives of good and evil, respectively—made choices about how to behave based on their fundamental natures. Human beings did likewise, according to Zarathustra, and ultimately all would experience the rewards and the punishments that their choices merited.*

In the beginning, there were two Primal Spirits, Twins  
spontaneously active;

These are the Good and the Evil, in thought, and in  
word, and in deed:

Between these two, let the wise choose aright;  
Be good, not base.

And when these Twin Spirits came together at first,  
They established Life and Non-Life,  
And so shall it be as long as the world shall last;  
The worst existence shall be the lot of the followers  
of evil,

And the Good Mind shall be the reward of the  
followers of good.

Of these Twin Spirits, the Evil One chose to do the  
worst;

While the bountiful Holy Spirit of Goodness,  
Clothing itself with the mossy heavens for a garment,  
chose the Truth;

And so will those who [seek to] please Ahura Mazda  
with righteous deeds, performed with faith in  
Truth. . . .

And when there cometh Divine Retribution for the  
Evil One,

Then at Thy command shall the Good Mind establish  
the Kingdom of Heaven, O Mazda,  
For those who will deliver Untruth into the hands of  
Righteousness and Truth.

Then truly cometh the blow of destruction on  
Untruth,  
And all those of good fame are garnered up in the Fair  
Abode,  
The Fair Abode of the Good Mind, the Wise Lord,  
and of Truth!

O ye mortals, mark these commandments—  
The commandments which the Wise Lord has given,  
for Happiness and for Pain;  
Long punishment for the evil-doer, and bliss for the  
follower of Truth,  
The joy of salvation for the Righteous ever afterwards!

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

What assumptions does Zarathustra make about human nature and the capacity of human beings to make morally good choices through free will?

SOURCE: D. J. Irani. *The Divine Songs of Zarathustra*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1924.

up throughout the Achaemenid realm. The faith was most popular in Iran, but it attracted sizable followings also in Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Egypt, and other parts of the Achaemenid empire even though there was no organized effort to spread it beyond its original homeland.

### *Religions of Salvation in a Cosmopolitan Society*

The arrival of Alexander of Macedon inaugurated a difficult era for the Zoroastrian community. During his Persian campaign, Alexander's forces burned many temples and killed numerous magi. Because at that time the magi still transmitted Zoroastrian doctrines orally, an untold number of hymns and holy verses disappeared. The Zoroastrian faith survived, however, and the Parthians cultivated it to rally support against the



**Darius faces Ahura Mazda, to whom he attributed his authority, as the various kings subject to him acknowledge him as their lord.**

### *Officially Sponsored Zoroastrianism*

Seleucids. Once established in power, the Parthians observed Zoroastrian rituals, though they did not support the faith as enthusiastically as their predecessors had done.

During the Sasanid dynasty, however, Zoroastrianism experienced a revival. As self-proclaimed heirs to the Achaemenids, the Sasanids identified closely with Zoroastrianism and supported it zealously. Indeed, the Sasanids often persecuted other faiths if they seemed likely to become popular enough to challenge the supremacy of Zoroastrianism. With generous imperial backing, the Zoroastrian faith and the magi flourished as never before. Theologians prepared written versions of the holy texts and collected them in the Avesta. They also explored points of doctrine and addressed difficult questions of morality and theology. Most people probably did not understand the theologians' reflections, but they flocked to Zoroastrian temples where they prayed to Ahura Mazda and participated in rituals.

The Zoroastrian faith faced severe difficulties in the seventh century C.E. when Islamic conquerors toppled the Sasanid empire. The conquerors did not outlaw the religion altogether, but they placed political and financial pressure on the magi and Zoroastrian temples. Some Zoroastrians fled their homeland and found refuge in India, where their descendants, known as Parsis ("Persians"), continue even today to observe Zoroastrian traditions. But most Zoroastrians remained in Iran and eventually converted to Islam. As a result, Zoroastrian numbers progressively dwindled. Only a few thousand faithful maintain a Zoroastrian community in modern-day Iran.

### *Other Faiths*

Meanwhile, even though Zoroastrianism ultimately declined in its homeland, the cosmopolitan character of the Persian realm offered it opportunities to influence other religious faiths. Numerous Jewish communities had become established in Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Persia after the Hebrew kingdom of David and Solomon fell in 930 B.C.E. During the Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanid eras, the Persian empire attracted merchants, emissaries, and missionaries from the whole region between the Mediterranean and India. Three religions of salvation—Buddhism, Christianity, and Manichaeism, all discussed in later chapters—found a footing alongside Judaism and attracted converts. Indeed, Christianity and Manichaeism became extremely popular faiths in spite of intermittent rounds of persecution organized by Sasanid authorities.

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Manichaeism (man-ih-KEE-iz'm)

While foreign faiths influenced religious developments in classical Persian society, Zoroastrianism also left its mark on the other religions of salvation. Jews living in Persia during Achaemenid times adopted several specific teachings of Zoroastrianism, which later found their way into the faiths of Christianity and Islam as well. Those teachings included the notion that an omnipotent and beneficent deity was responsible for all creation, the idea that a purely evil being worked against the creator god, the conviction that the forces of good will ultimately prevail over the power of evil after a climactic struggle, the belief that human beings must strive to observe the highest moral standards, and the doctrine that individuals will undergo judgment, after which the morally upright will experience rewards in paradise while evildoers will suffer punishments in hell. Those teachings, which have profoundly influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all derived ultimately from the faith of Zoroaster and his followers.

*Influence of  
Zoroastrianism*

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**T**he Achaemenid empire inaugurated a new era of world history. The Achaemenids borrowed military and administrative techniques devised earlier by Babylonian and Assyrian rulers, but they applied those techniques on a much larger scale than did any of their Mesopotamian predecessors. In doing so they conquered a vast empire and then governed its diverse lands and peoples with tolerable success for more than two centuries. The Achaemenids demonstrated how it was possible to build and maintain a vast imperial state, and their example inspired later efforts to establish similar large-scale imperial states based in Persia and other Eurasian lands as well. The Achaemenid and later Persian empires integrated much of the territory from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indus River into a commonwealth in which peoples of different regions and ethnic groups participated in a larger economy and society. By sponsoring regular and systematic interactions between peoples of different communities, the Persian empires wielded tremendous cultural as well as political, social, and economic influence. Indeed, Persian religious beliefs helped to shape moral and religious thought throughout much of southwest Asia and the Mediterranean basin. Zoroastrian teachings were particularly influential: although Zoroastrianism declined after the Sasanid dynasty, its doctrines decisively influenced the fundamental teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

## CHRONOLOGY

7th–6th centuries B.C.E.(?)	Life of Zarathustra
558–330 B.C.E.	Achaemenid dynasty
558–530 B.C.E.	Reign of Cyrus the Achaemenid
521–486 B.C.E.	Reign of Darius
334–330 B.C.E.	Invasion and conquest of the Achaemenid empire by Alexander of Macedon
323–83 B.C.E.	Seleucid dynasty
247 B.C.E.–224 C.E.	Parthian dynasty
224–651 C.E.	Sasanid dynasty

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