



# The Empires of Persia

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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 (modern Turkey). 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 provoked 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 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 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 an enormous region from the Indus River to Egypt and southeastern Europe. Indeed, 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.

◀ *Gold plaque depicting a figure who was perhaps a priest in Achaemenid times.*

**Cyrus** (SIGH-ruhs)

**Croesus** (CREE-suhs)

## 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

Economic Foundations of Classical Persia

## RELIGIONS OF SALVATION IN CLASSICAL PERSIAN SOCIETY

Zarathustra and His Faith

Religions of Salvation in a Cosmopolitan Society

# 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

In organizing their realm, Persian rulers relied heavily on Mesopotamian techniques of administration, but they also created institutions and administrative procedures of their own. In addition, they invested resources in the construction of roads and highways to improve communications and mobility across 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 implica-

tions. Because high agricultural productivity allowed more people to work at tasks other than cultivation, classes of bureaucrats, administrators, priests, craftsmen, and merchants increased in number. Meanwhile, social extremes between the wealthy and the poor became more pronounced. In addition, good roads across the empire allowed Persian society to serve as a commercial and cultural bridge between Indian and Mediterranean societies. As a result, Persia became an important link in long-distance trade networks as well as a conduit for the exchange of philosophical and religious ideas. Indeed, Persian religious traditions 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 migrations and invasions of nomadic peoples coming out of central Asia. 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*



Achaemenid and Seleucid empires  
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**THE MEDES AND THE PERSIANS** 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 Indo-European peoples known as the Medes and the Persians migrated from central Asia to Persia, where they lived in loose subjection to the Babylonian and Assyrian empires. The Medes and the Persians shared many cultural traits with their distant cousins the Aryans, who had migrated into India. Like the Aryans, they were mostly pastoralists, although they also practiced a limited amount of agriculture. They also possessed considerable military power: like other Indo-Europeans, they were skilled equestrians and expert archers. They also organized themselves by clans rather than by states, although they did recognize leaders who collected taxes and delivered tribute to their Mesopotamian overlords.

**CYRUS'S CONQUESTS** When the Assyrian and Babylonian empires weakened in the sixth century B.C.E., the Medes and the Persians launched their first bid for empire in the person of Cyrus the

Achaemenid (ah-KEE-muh-nid)

Medes (meeds)



**MAP 5.1** | 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 1 and 2. *What role did the Royal Road and other highways play in the maintenance of the Achaemenid empire?*

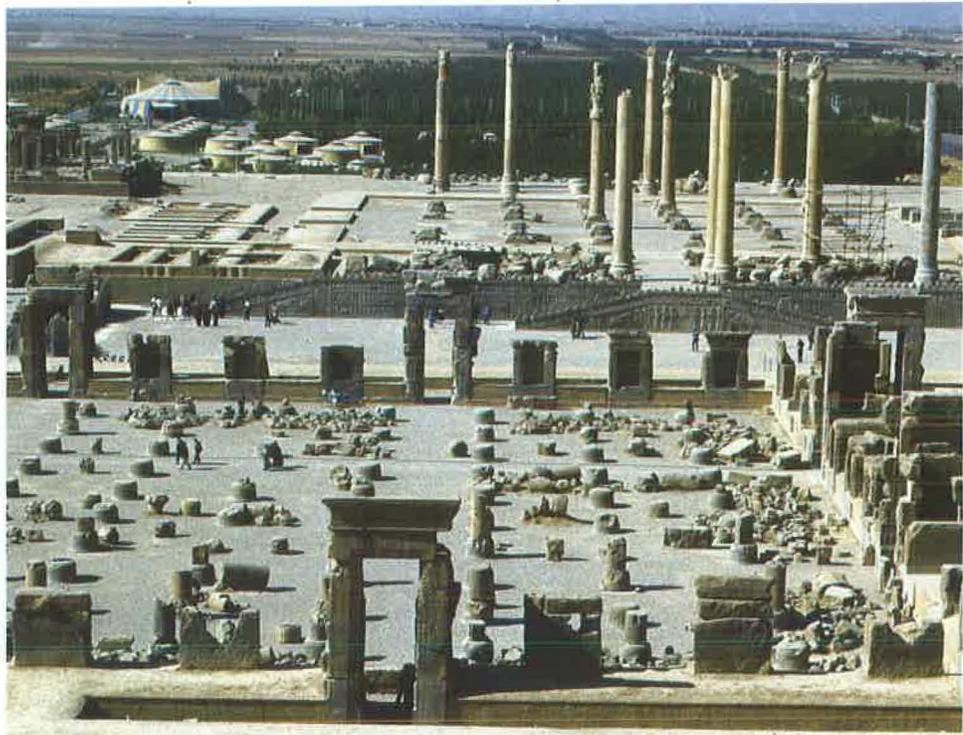
Darius's empire stretched 3,000 km from East to West.

Achaemenid (reigned 558–530 B.C.E.). Cyrus proved to be a tough, wily leader and an outstanding military strategist, whose conquests laid the foundation for the first Persian empire. 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. In 546 B.C.E., as we know, he conquered the powerful kingdom of Lydia in Anatolia. 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. Had he lived long enough, Cyrus no doubt would have mounted a campaign against Egypt, the largest and wealthiest neighboring state outside his control. But in 530 B.C.E. he fell, mortally wounded, while protecting his northeastern frontier from nomadic raiders.

**DARIUS** 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. His younger kinsman Darius (reigned 521–486 B.C.E.) then extended the empire both east and west. Indeed, Darius's 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 B.C.E., 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. With

Pasargadae (pah-SAR-gah-dee)

**RUINS OF PERSEPOLIS.**  
This image shows the imperial reception hall and palaces. Try to imagine the size and grandeur of the buildings these columns supported.



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 of so many ethnic groups, languages, and traditions was a much more difficult challenge than conquering it. 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 administer their territories efficiently. Their solutions not only made it possible for the Achaemenid empire to survive but also pioneered administrative techniques that would outlast their own dynasty and influence political life in southwestern Asia for centuries to come.

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The palace at Persepolis  
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**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. Darius intended Persepolis to serve not only as an administrative center but also as a monument to the Achaemenid dynasty. 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. Like their Mesopotamian predecessors, the Achaemenids appointed governors to serve as agents of the central administration and oversee affairs in the various regions. Darius divided his realm into twenty-three administrative and taxation districts he called satrapies, with each governed by an official satrap. Yet the Achaemenids did not try to push direct rule on their subjects: although most satraps were Persian, the Achaemenids recruited local officials to fill almost all other administrative posts.

**Cambyses** (kam-BIE-sees)

**Aegean** (ih-GEE-an)

**Persepolis** (per-SEP-uh-lis)

The Achaemenid rulers employed two strategies to discourage distant satraps from allying with local groups or trying to become independent of Achaemenid authority. 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. Taken together, these two strategies helped prevent the vast Achaemenid empire from splitting into a series of independent kingdoms.

**TAXATION AND LAW** Darius also sought to improve administrative efficiency by regularizing tax levies and standardizing laws. Instead of exacting irregular tribute payments from subject lands as his predecessors had done, Darius instituted regular, formal tax levies. Each satrapy was now required to pay a set quantity of silver to the imperial court every year. To simplify the process, Darius issued standardized coins—a move that also fostered trade throughout his empire. Equally important, beginning in 520 B.C.E., Darius also sought to bring the many legal systems of his empire closer to a single standard. The point was not to abolish the existing laws of individual lands or peoples to impose a uniform law code on his entire empire. Rather, Darius wished to 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.

**ROADS AND COMMUNICATIONS** Alongside 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 Persian Royal Road, which stretched some 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, enabling couriers to speed from one end of the Royal Road to the other in a week's time. The Achaemenids also improved existing routes between Mesopotamia and Egypt, and they built a new road between Persia and the Indus River to link the imperial center with the satrapy of Gandhara in northwestern India. In addition to improving communications, these roads facilitated trade, which helped to integrate the empire's various regions into a larger economy.

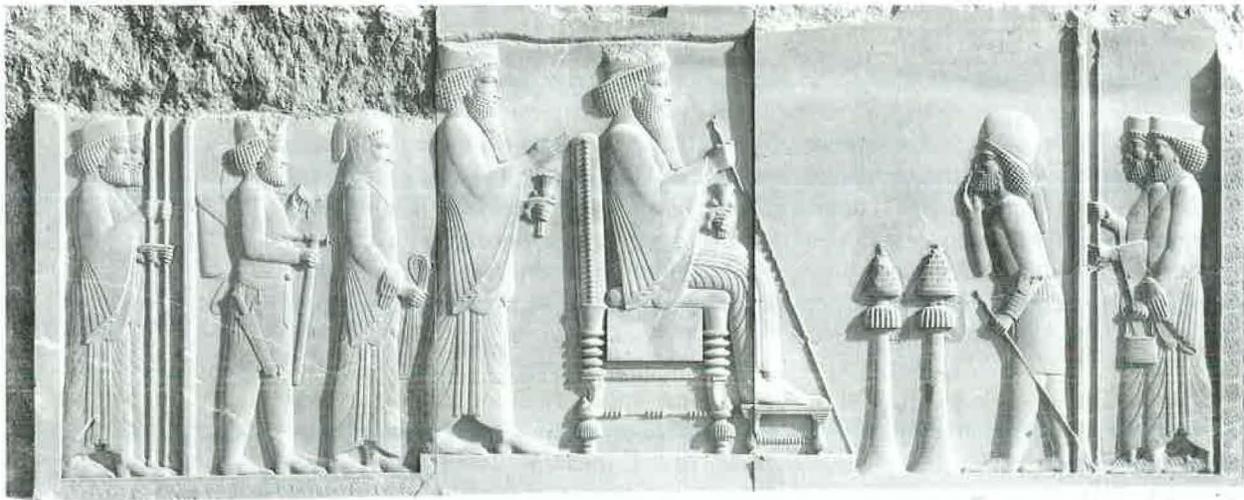
## *Decline and Fall of the Achaemenid Empire*

**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 enormous 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 empire. Cyrus and Darius both consciously pursued a policy of toleration

satraps (SAY-traps)

*qanat* (kah-NAHT)



**STONE CARVING FROM PERSEPOLIS.** | This carving shows an enthroned Darius (with his son Xerxes standing behind him) receiving a high court official, as incense burners perfume the air. *What purpose might the formality of this reception have served?*

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 portrayed themselves not as Persian conquerors but, rather, as legitimate Babylonian rulers and representatives of Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon. Cyrus 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 586 B.C.E.

Darius's successor, Xerxes (reigned 486–465 B.C.E.), retreated from this policy of toleration, however, flaunted his Persian identity, and sought to impose his own values on conquered lands. That policy caused enormous ill will, especially in Mesopotamia and Egypt, where peoples with their own cultural traditions resented Xerxes' pretensions. Although Xerxes successfully repressed rebellions against his rule in Mesopotamia and Egypt, resentment of Persian conquerors continued to fester, and it caused serious problems for the later Achaemenids.

**THE PERSIAN WARS** In fact, efforts to control their ethnic Greek subjects 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. The Ionian Greeks fell under Persian domination during the reign of Cyrus. They became restive under Darius's Persian governors who oversaw their affairs, and 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 known as 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. Indeed, after some initial successes against the Greeks, the Persians suffered a rout at the battle of Marathon (490 B.C.E.), and they returned home without achieving their goals. Ten years later, in 480 B.C.E., a renewed Persian attempt to conquer the Greek cities ended in costly defeats for the Persians. Thereafter, for almost 150 years the Persian empire continued to spar intermittently with the Greek cities without achieving victory.

**ALEXANDER OF MACEDON** The standoff ended with the rise of Alexander of Macedon, often called Alexander the Great (discussed more fully in chapter 8). 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



Darius enthroned with Xerxes behind him  
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military tactics than their opponents. As a result, they sliced through the Persian empire and dealt 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 had dissolved.

Alexander led his forces into Persepolis 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 carved his empire into three large realms, which they divided among themselves. The choicest realm, which included most of the former Achaemenid empire, went to Seleucus (reigned 305–281 B.C.E.), who had commanded an elite corps of guards in Alexander’s army. 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. These new cities greatly stimulated trade and economic development both within the Seleucid empire and beyond.

As foreigners, the Seleucids faced opposition from native Persians. Satraps often revolted against Seleucid rule and tried 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 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 Asia. They did not have a centralized government, for example, but organized themselves into a federation of clans. They were also skillful warriors, accustomed to defending themselves against constant threats from nomadic peoples farther east.

As they settled and turned increasingly to agriculture, the Parthians discovered that they could resist nomadic invasions better by feeding their horses on alfalfa during the winter. The alfalfa allowed the animals to grow much larger and stronger than the small horses and ponies of nomadic peoples who had to forage on the steppes in winter. The larger Parthian horses could then support heavily armed warriors outfitted with metal armor, which served as an effective shield against the arrows



**ALEXANDER OF MACEDON.** Tetradrachm of Kingdom of Thrace with head of deified Alexander the Great, struck under Lysimachos. Photograph © 2010 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

### THINKING ABOUT *Traditions*

**TRADITIONS IN THE EMPIRES OF PERSIA.** One of the problems of the Achaemenids, Seleucids, Parthians, and Sasanids was that some of the peoples each empire conquered strongly resented what they viewed as rule by foreigners. At times, such resentment contributed to the toppling of one empire for another. How did the Persian-based empires try to balance the imposition of their rule from above with the cultural and ethnic identities of the people they conquered, and why did this balance sometimes fail?

Macedon (MAS-ih-don)

Gaugamela (GAW-guh-mee-luh)

Seleucids (sih-LOO-sihds)



**PARTHIAN SCULPTURE.** 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.

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A coin with Mithradates I  
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of the steppe nomads. 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.

**PARTHIAN GOVERNMENT** The Parthians portrayed themselves as enemies of the foreign Seleucids and 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 lavish capital city. But the Parthians also retained elements of their own steppe traditions. For example, they did not develop nearly as 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—who frequently served as satraps—could be troublesome, because they frequently rebelled against the imperial government from their regional bases.

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. On three occasions in the second century C.E., Roman armies captured the Parthian capital at Ctesiphon. Combined with internal difficulties caused by rebellious satraps, Roman pressure contributed to the weakening of the Parthian state. During the early third century C.E., internal rebellion brought it down.

**THE SASANIDS** 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. 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. Sasanid merchants traded actively with peoples to both the east and the 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. 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 Arab conquerors adopted Persian administrative techniques and cultural traditions for their own use in building a new Islamic society.

**Mithradates** (mihth-rah-DAY-teez)

**Ctesiphon** (TES-uh-phon)

**Sasanids** (suh-SAH-nids)



**MAP 5.2** | 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?*

Ctesiphon was the capital of both the Parthian and Sasanid empires.

## 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 also enabled many individuals to engage in trade or other specialized labor. Some of these individuals 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 these 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 nomadic steppe origins. When the Medes and the Persians migrated to Iran, their social structure was very similar to that of the Aryans in India, consisting primarily of warriors, priests, and peasants. Family and clan relationships were extremely important in the organization

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

**IMPERIAL BUREAUCRATS** The development of a cosmopolitan empire and the requirements of imperial administration, however, called for a new class of educated bureaucrats, who to a large extent undermined the position of the old warrior elite. Although the bureaucrats did not directly challenge the patriarchal warriors, their 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.

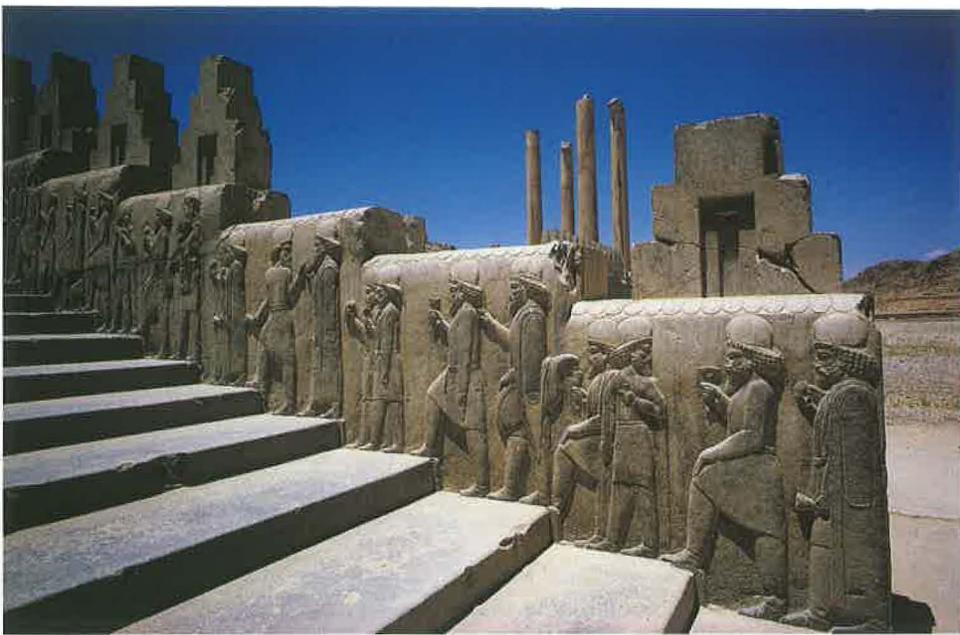
**FREE CLASSES** The bulk of Persian society consisted of free individuals such as artisans, craftspeople, farmers, merchants, and low-ranking civil servants. Priests and priestesses were also prominent urban residents, along with servants who maintained the temple communities in which they lived. In Persian society, as in earlier Mesopotamian societies, members of the free classes participated in religious observances conducted at 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 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. The Persian empires embraced a great deal of parched land that received little rainfall, and free residents of the countryside contributed much of the labor that went into the building and maintenance of irrigation systems. 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.

**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. 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, while in the countryside 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.

## *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.



**STAIRCASE FROM PERSEPOLIS.** | In this sculpture from Persepolis, Persian nobles dressed in fine cloaks and hats ascend the staircase leading to the imperial reception hall. *What kinds of feelings might these sculptures have elicited from visitors to the reception hall?*

**AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION** 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. Even though they are incomplete, surviving records show that 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 this 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.

**TRADE** Agriculture was the foundation of the Persian economy, but long-distance trade grew rapidly during the course of the Persian empires and linked lands from India to Egypt in a vast commercial zone. Each region of the Persian empire contributed particular products to the imperial economy, from the gold and ivory of India to the semiprecious stones of Iran, and from the metals of Anatolia to the textiles and grain of Egypt. Several conditions promoted the growth of trade: the relative political stability maintained by the Persian empires, the general prosperity of the realm, the use of standardized coins, and the availability of good trade routes, including long-established routes, newly constructed highways such as the Persian Royal Road, and sea routes through the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea. Markets operated regularly in all the larger cities of the Persian empires, and the largest cities, such as Babylon, also were home to banks and companies that invested in commercial ventures.

Long-distance trade of this sort 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.

## THINKING ABOUT *Encounters*

**ENCOUNTERS IN THE EMPIRES OF PERSIA.** Between the mid-sixth century B.C.E. and the early seventh century C.E., Persian-based empires ruled a variety of diverse peoples and territories between India and the Mediterranean Sea. What effects did these empires have on the movement of people and goods across their territories, and how did such movement alter or modify the ways people thought about themselves and others?

# 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.

## *Zarathustra and His Faith*

The earliest Persian religion recognized many of the same gods as the ancient Aryans, and their priests performed sacrifices similar to those conducted by the brahmins in India. 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.

**ZARATHUSTRA** 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 Zoroastrianism, which emerged from the teachings of Zarathustra. Though Zarathustra was undoubtedly a historical person, little certain information survives about his life and career. It is not even clear when he lived, though most scholars date his life to the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C.E. He came from an aristocratic family, and he probably was a priest who became disenchanted with the traditional religion. 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.

**THE GATHAS** Like his life, Zarathustra’s doctrine remains largely unknown, since many of the earliest Zoroastrian teachings were not preserved in writing. Only during the Seleucid dynasty did Zoroastrian priests, known as *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 own compositions survive because of the diligence by which magi preserved them through oral transmission. Known as the *Gathas*, Zarathustra’s works 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.

**ZOROASTRIAN TEACHINGS** Zarathustra and his followers were not strict monotheists. They recognized Ahura Mazda as a supreme deity and the creator of all good things, but Zarathustra also praised six lesser deities in the *Gathas*. Furthermore, he believed 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 “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 the rewards or punishments they deserved.

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**Zoroastrianism** (zohr-oh-ASS-tree-ahn-iz'm)

**Zarathustra** (zar-uh-THOO-struh)

**Gathas** (GATH-uhs)

Zarathustra did not call for ascetic renunciation of the world in favor of a future heavenly existence. On 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.”

**POPULARITY OF ZOROASTRIANISM** 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.

Beginning with Darius, 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. 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 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 Seleucids.

**OFFICIALLY SPONSORED ZOROASTRIANISM** 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. Ordinary people 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. Only a few thousand faithful maintain a Zoroastrian community in modern-day Iran.

**INFLUENCE OF ZOROASTRIANISM** Meanwhile, even though Zoroastrianism ultimately declined in its homeland, the cosmopolitan character of the Persian realm offered it opportunities to influence other religious faiths. In particular, Jews living in Persia during Achaemenid times adopted several specific teachings of Zoroastrianism,



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



Shapur I with Ahura Mazda  
[www.mhhe.com/bentleybrief2e](http://www.mhhe.com/bentleybrief2e)

## 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 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 fol-  
lower of Truth,  
The joy of salvation for the Righteous ever afterwards!

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

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

which later found their way into the faiths of Christianity and Islam as well. These 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 forces 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. These teachings, which have profoundly influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all derived ultimately from the faith of Zarathustra and his followers.

## SUMMARY

The 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 massive 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.

## STUDY TERMS

Achaemenids (88)	magi (98)	Persians (95)
Ahura Mazda (98)	Medes (88)	<i>qanat</i> (91)
Alexander of Macedon (92)	Mithradates I (94)	Sasanids (94)
<i>Avesta</i> (98)	Parthians (93)	satraps (91)
battle of Marathon (92)	Pasargadae (89)	Seleucids (93)
Croesus (87)	Persepolis (90)	Shapur I (94)
Cyrus (87)	Persian Royal Road (91)	Xerxes (92)
Darius (89)	Persian Wars (92)	Zarathustra (98)
<i>Gathas</i> (98)		

## FOR FURTHER READING

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- Richard N. Frye. *The Heritage of Central Asia: From Antiquity to the Turkish Expansion*. Princeton, 1996. Briefly sketches the history of various Iranian-speaking peoples in the steppes of central Asia as well as on the Iranian plateau.
- Susan Sherwin-White and Amélie Kuhrt. *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire*. Berkeley, 1993. Detailed scholarly analysis of the Seleucid empire concentrating on political and economic matters.
- Mark van de Mieroop. *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000–323 B.C.* Oxford, 2004. A concise and readable history that concludes with the Achaemenid Empire.
- Mortimer Wheeler. *Flames over Persepolis*. New York, 1968. Deals with Alexander's conquest of the Achaemenid empire and especially the spread of Greek art styles throughout the Persian empire.
- Robert C. Zaehner. *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*. London, 1961. An important interpretation of Zoroastrianism that concentrates on the Achaemenid and Sasanid periods.