

History 3050: The Ancient Mediterranean

Lecture 5: The Persians

Wednesday, September 23, 2009

Section I: Origins

The Persians were an eastern branch of the Indo-European language family; they migrated into the Iranian Plateau and the Zagros Mountains from Central Asia circa 1800 B.C. The Persians occupied the southern mountains while the Medes, a closely related people, occupied the northern zone. The Medes and Persians belonged to the Indo-European sub-group known as Aryans. Around 2000 B.C. the Aryans split into two groups: an eastern group which traveled to India and whose language developed into Sanskrit, and a western group composed of the Medes and Persians and collectively known as Iranians (which was their own word for Aryan)

From circa 1800 to about 700 B.C., the Persians and Medes lived in tribal communities which gradually transitioned from a nomadic pastoralist lifestyle to settled agricultural communities. Both the Persians and Medes began to consolidate power into monarchical government and in 625 B.C. the Median King Cyaxares united Median territory under his rule. His successors expanded Median control over a large portion of the Middle East.

The Persians were nominal vassals of the Medes until 559 B.C. when Cyrus the Great ascended to the Persian throne. The prophet Zoroaster was born in Median territory and developed his religion during the Median period

Zoroaster: born circa 570 B.C.; Median prophet

Zoroaster observed the life of men in order to find a new religion which would meet the demands of life. Zoroaster noted the constant struggle between good and evil which was evident everywhere. Zoroaster concluded that there was a divine struggle between good beings and evil ones.

Zoroaster saw the good as a divine person he termed Ahurmazda (Lord of Wisdom). Zoroaster regarded Ahurmazda as God. Ahurmazda was surrounded by assistants similar to angels, the greatest being Mithras – the Light. Opposed to Ahurmazda was a group of evil beings lead by Ahriman – the great spirit of evil. Scholars hold that Ahriman was comparable to the Judeo-Christian concept of Satan. Zoroastrianism is regarded as one of the first monotheistic religions in the world (The only other monotheistic religions of the time being Judaism and Egypt's brief episode with Akhenaton's god: the Aten). In keeping with ancient Aryan tradition, fire played an important role in the religion as the symbol of wisdom and light and sacred fire was kept constantly kindled at Zoroastrian holy sites.

Zoroaster called on all men to stand either in the Light or live in evil and the Darkness. Whatever course a man took, he must expect a final judgment, which was a concept alien to most religions of the time. Zoroastrianism proved to be unpopular in Zoroaster's Median homeland and so he traveled south to Persian territory where he developed an immediate and devoted following among the Persians. Zoroastrianism eventually became the state religion of the Persian Empire. The religion was nearly wiped out by the tide of Islam 1000 years later, although it still survives in small enclaves in Iran.

Section II: Imperial Persia – Achaemenid Empire

The Persians made their entrance onto the world stage with the rise of Cyrus (later known as "the Great). In 559 B.C. Cyrus the Great ascended to the Persian throne and embarked on a campaign of conquest that consumed not only Media and Babylon, but the rest of the Eastern Mediterranean as well. Alarmed by the growing might of Persia, Chaldea, Lydia, Egypt, and Sparta formed an alliance against Persia. Cyrus defeated each foe in turn and in doing so, established the territorial base of the Persian Empire.

Cyrus the Great (r. 559 to 530 B.C.) conquered all Median territory, Lydia in Asia Minor, and Babylon in 539 B.C. (where he allowed all exiles, including Jewish prisoners of the Babylonian captivity, to return home)

Cyrus the Great ruled all of Persia, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, and the Levant. His son Cambyses conquered Egypt in 525 B.C.

Cyrus transformed the small Persian Kingdom into the vast Persian Empire. The founder of the royal dynasty of Persia was Achaemenes, the first Persian King. Therefore, the Persian Empire is known as the Achaemenid Empire to distinguish it from later empires such as Parthia and the Sassanid Persian Empire.

Darius I, also known as “the Great” (r. 521 - 485 B.C.) was the great organizer of the Persian Empire. He created the provincial governing system (known in Persia as satrapies) which would later be adopted by almost all imperial governments. Provinces had a great deal of freedom and self control in local affairs as long as they paid their taxes and provided conscripts for the Persian army. Governors (Satraps) were appointed by the Persian Emperor to rule each province and special government agents monitored the provinces to ensure that taxes were being paid and loyalty was unquestioned. Darius also established massive public works projects. An ancient Egyptian canal linking the Nile with the Red Sea which had long

fallen into disuse and filled with sand was re-constructed, road networks linked every section of the empire, and a great royal palace was constructed at Persepolis.

The Persians were responsible for major commercial, social, and intellectual exchange in the Eastern Mediterranean. Coinage was just coming into existence with the first coins being minted in Lydia around 600 B.C. the Persians began to accept taxes in the form of coins rather than produce and under Darius I, Persian coins were minted and became common currency throughout the empire. Gold coins were minted by the imperial mint and satraps were allowed to mint silver. Thus the Persians were responsible for introducing money as the standard form of exchange in the Eastern Med and the Middle East. The stability of Persian rule and the extensive Persian road network allowed for commerce to be conducted on a scale hitherto unknown. An example of this was the introduction of the Chicken to the Mediterranean World. The chicken was domesticated in India, where wild species were indigenous. Through trade with their Indian counterparts, Persian merchants acquired domestic fowl and carried them west, where they had been unknown before the time of Darius.

The rule of the Persian Emperors ushered in a time of peace and prosperity for the Eastern Mediterranean. Persia was tolerant of subject

people's customs and religions (note Cyrus allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple following the Babylonian Captivity) and left their subjects affairs largely to themselves. Persia did build an extensive navy to patrol the Eastern Mediterranean and cultivated an intimate relationship with the Phoenician city-states in order to establish sea power. Over time Persian rulers became less effective, leaving the governing of the empire to inept and corrupt officials. This led to discontent, especially among the Greek cities of the coast of Asia Minor. The Greeks of Greece proper were alarmed by the massive Persian Empire which dominated not only Asia and Egypt, but also held European territory in Thrace (Modern European Turkey and Bulgaria). The Greeks constantly stirred up trouble among the Greek vassals of the Persians. In 499, Athens supported the revolt of Miletus, which led to sack of the Persian regional capital of Sardis in western Asia Minor and the plundering of the Persian treasury there. This sparked the fifty year conflict known as the Greco-Persian Wars.

Section III: Greco-Persian Wars

The Greco-Persian Wars occurred not as one continuous battle, but in several separate engagements: Marathon – 490 B.C. Greek Victory, Persian withdrawal; Thermopylae – 480 B.C. Persian Victory; Salamis – 480 B.C. Greek Naval Victory; Plataea – 479 B.C. Greek Victory, Persian Withdrawal; Mycale – 479 B.C. Greek Naval Victory. The Battles of Plataea and Mycale effectively ended the Persian Threat to Greece proper by destroying the Persian field army in Europe and the Persian Navy. The War continued until the Peace of Callias in 450 B.C.

From the time of Cyrus the Great until the destruction of the Persian State by Alexander in 330 B.C., Persian troops fought primarily as archers. Persia was renowned for the efficacy of their archers, being able to shower the adversary with arrows long before enemy troops could close. In close quarters, Persian soldiers relied in wicker shields for protection and armed themselves with short thrusting spears. Persian armies used the combined arms tactics developed by the Assyrians, utilizing large masses of cavalry as well as light infantry in the form of archers and small contingents of heavy infantry known as “Persian Immortals”.

Section IV: Alexander

The Achaemenid Empire met its demise at the hands of Alexander of Macedon, known to History as Alexander the Great. He defeated Darius II in a series of campaigns which began in 334 B.C. and ended in 330 B.C. with the complete destruction of the Persian Empire. Alexander ruled a massive empire which included all of the former Persian territory as well as Macedon, parts of Greece, Thrace, and Illyria in Europe; Western India to the Indus River, Central Asia to the Oxus River, and Egypt. Alexander ushered the Hellenistic Age, a blending of Greek and Eastern Culture, into the Eastern Mediterranean. After his death, Alexander's generals divided his empire into separate kingdoms. Later Persian empires (The Parthians and Sassanids) would rise first against these Greek rulers and later against Roman expansion.