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Persian Empire

Type of Government

Based in what is now Iran, the Persian Empire combined an absolute monarchy with a decentralized administration and widespread local autonomy. Respect for local institutions and religious practices encouraged conquered peoples to embrace the empire, and existing bureaucratic organizations and personnel were used whenever possible. Provincial governors known as satraps wielded considerable power, but their ability to rebel was held in check with military garrisons, periodic inspections, and the deployment of officials answerable only to the king.

Background

In 550 BC a rebel army under the Persian leader Cyrus II (c. 585–c. 529 BC) defeated the imperial forces of the Medes and brought a sudden end to Mede rule. Cyrus's troops regrouped and then began a campaign of rapid expansion. By the time the old king died two decades later, he had defeated two formidable powers, the Lydians in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and the Babylonians, and Persia's domains extended to the outskirts of Egypt and Greece. After a period of turmoil, Cyrus's son Cambyses II (d. 522 BC) succeeded to the throne and resumed the expansionary campaign, eventually capturing Egypt itself. Cambyses' successor, Darius I (550–486 BC), generally receives the credit for Persia's distinctive and efficient administrative system, but some reforms probably began under his predecessors. Darius's son Xerxes I (c. 519–465 BC) is the last of the well-known Persian kings, though their Achaemenid dynasty survived until the rise of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) in the fourth century BC.

Government Structure

The most pivotal members of the imperial administration were the satraps. Each satrap had nearly unlimited authority over his satrapy, or province, of which there were twenty in the early empire. The satrap's primary duty to the king was the forwarding of tax revenue. The king demanded from each satrapy a certain amount in taxes, the precise figure varying on the basis of the satrapy's average harvest. A satrap who paid in full and on time generally had little cause to fear the king. A serious problem, however, was the system's lack of flexibility. A few weeks of bad weather could destroy a harvest, but the amount due the king would remain the same. Even though the most conscientious satrap would have trouble fulfilling his financial obligation in that situation, a late or inadequate payment tended to arouse suspicion in the imperial palace.

Rebellion was a constant threat. To guard against it, the kings used a variety of structural and administrative tools. It was not enough to choose satraps from the royal family, for it was precisely those closest to the throne who were most tempted by it and had the most plausible claims to it. Instead, the kings stationed permanent military garrisons throughout the empire and placed the commanders of these garrisons outside the satraps' administrations. In addition, inspectors answering only to the king made discreet tours of the empire. A fine road system and messenger service ensured that provincial problems uncovered by these officials, known as the "king's eyes," attracted notice before they became unmanageable. Finally, the king's own frequent travel undoubtedly strengthened provincial loyalties and deterred some would-be rebels. The sight of the king and his entourage, including a bodyguard of one thousand, was an impressive sight, and designed to be so.



Tombs of the Achaemenian Kings of Persia, near Persepolis in modern-day Iran. (c) Gianni Dagli Orti/CORBIS

The single most effective tool for preventing rebellion, however, was probably the kings' policy of religious tolerance and local autonomy. This approach is visible as early as Cyrus's victory over the Medes. The Persians' close ethnic ties to the Medes may have played a role in the decision to leave the Median bureaucracy and priesthood undisturbed. Certainly, too, the Persians were eager to avoid the trouble and expense of building a new bureaucracy. However, Cyrus's release of the Judaeans in Babylon in 538 BC suggests that the primary motive behind the Persians' tolerance of existing bureaucratic and religious organizations was the simple desire to transform potential rebels into loyal subjects. When Darius allowed the Judaeans to return to Jerusalem and reconstruct their temple in 519 BC, he ensured their enthusiastic allegiance for decades.

Despite these measures, rebellions did occur with some frequency. The most significant of these was the Ionian Revolt (499–494 BC), in which an alliance of Greek cities in Ionia (eastern Asia Minor, now Turkey) repudiated Persian rule. Even though the revolt was eventually crushed, the Persians, in a characteristic move, allowed most of the cities to retain control of local affairs. The assistance given the rebels by Athens and other cities on the Greek mainland, however, was seen as foreign interference; as punishment, the Persians launched two invasions against them.

Political Parties and Factions

The priesthood in Persia was less powerful than it was in other Near Eastern states. In part, this may be because of the kings' policy of religious toleration, which, by allowing a wide variety of beliefs and rituals to flourish, reduced the power of any one sect's priests. The kings themselves were professed believers in the supreme god Ahura Mazda, but even theirs was a syncretistic faith—that is, it borrowed freely from other religions in its rituals and theology. A possible exception to this state of affairs may have been the position of the Median Magi in the early days of the empire. The Magi, a hereditary priesthood, wielded considerable influence over the Medes, Persia's predecessors, and some of their power may have lingered under the new regime. In the famous Behistun inscription, carved high on the sheer rock face of a roadside mountain, Darius claims that his rival for Cambyses' throne was a member of the Magi.

Darius's seizure of the throne is a vivid illustration of the rivalries and intrigue that occurred among palace factions. When a king died without direct heirs, as Cambyses did, there were violent struggles for the throne, and the victor was not always the one with the most legitimate claim. As head of Cambyses' bodyguard, Darius was a formidable opponent. Most historians believe, however, that he was unrelated to the royal family, despite his assertions to the contrary. After the killing of his major rival, opposition to Darius collapsed. He

proved a skillful ruler, but he was not initially a legitimate one.

Major Events

The Persians launched two major invasions against Greece: in 490 under Darius and in 483 under Xerxes. Both expeditions ended in disaster, though it is important to remember that the major source for these events, the historian Herodotus (c. 484–c. 429 BC), was a Greek himself and thus inclined to believe the worst of the invaders and to overstate the moral and tactical superiority of the defenders. It should also be noted that many Greek cities joined the Persians either voluntarily or under compulsion. Darius's expedition ended at Marathon, where a badly outnumbered force of Athenians and Plataeans drove the invaders out of Attica (the region surrounding the cities of Athens and Plataea) and soon out of Greece altogether. Ten years later, an allied force led by Athens and Sparta nearly stopped the Persian advance at a mountain pass called Thermopylae. Forced to evacuate their city, the Athenians withdrew to the nearby island of Salamis, where their navy trapped and destroyed the Persian fleet. Xerxes sailed immediately back to Asia Minor. The Persian land forces remained in Greece until the following spring, when they were defeated decisively at Plataea.

Aftermath

Persia survived its defeat, and its continuing control of the Greek-speaking cities of Asia Minor frustrated the Greeks for decades to come. In 334 BC Alexander set out from the northern region of Macedon to liberate these cities. He soon did so, and his army of Greeks and non-Greeks pursued the Persians across their now-crumbling empire, destroying their cavalry at Issus in 333 BC and sacking the royal treasuries. Much of the Persians' territory eventually fell into the capable hands of one of Alexander's generals, Seleucus I (c. 358–281 BC), and his successors, known as the Seleucids.

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