The Empires of Persia

1. Before talking about the Persians, let’s talk about their precursors - the Indo-Europeans
   1. The Indo-Europeans were a nomadic people that originated in what is now Ukraine and Southern Russia
   2. These people migrated throughout Eurasia because they domesticated horses
      1. Did not do a lot of conquering (but they did some, like in India) but significantly influenced the societies they entered
      2. When they met up with Sumerians in southern Mesopotamia, the IE put their horses together with Sumerian wheels and bronze metallurgy to create war chariots.
   3. The IE also influenced language in the places they migrated to - in fact, Aryans (the earliest Indians), Iran and Eire (the Irish name for Ireland) are all derived from the IE word for nobleman
2. The people that would become the Persians were also descended from the Indo-Europeans.
   1. The Persians and the Medes were nomadic pastoralists (herders of animals) and eventually moved into the Mesopotamian region.
      1. They did not settle into states, as we saw with the centralized states of the first time period, but remained in smaller clan based communities and pledged allegiance to the powerful Mesopotamian states - like the Sumerians, Hittites or Assyrians.
      2. As the Mesopotamian states declined, around 600 BCE, the Medes and the Persians stepped into the power vacuum.
3. The Achaemenid Empire
   1. Founded by Cyrus the Achaemenid in 558 BCE by overthrowing his Medean overlords and united the various Persian tribes
      1. He conquered Anatolia (Turkey) and Mesopotamia
      2. His son, Cambyses, conquered Egypt
   2. The most important Achaemenid leader was Darius
      1. He expanded the territory of the empire - largest empire in the world at this point
   3. Darius’ most important contribution was not military, but administrative
      1. Because the empire was so large and included up to 70 different ethnic groups, with different languages and religious beliefs, Darius instituted several techniques that are still in use today.
         1. Satrapis - administrative units of the empire.
            1. The Achaemenids appointed Persians to run the 23 districts of the empire.

However, most of the other bureaucrats and officials within the district were of the local population - this helps promote stability and lessen the threat of rebellion.

* + - * 1. The satraps were aided by officials who reported directly to the Emperor - this keeps the satraps from trying to strike out on their own.
        2. Spies - independent officials with military forces to inspect accounts
      1. Other important techniques included regular taxes and standardized coins
         1. RT - if taxes are predictable and regular, people can prepare for them and actually pay them.
         2. SC - no need to convert currencies/bartered goods or weigh out precious metals.
         3. Roads and post offices - obvious, right?

Over 13,000 km of paved roads, over 100 post offices

Influenced the American post office and pony express

* + - * 1. Public works - just like in earlier societies, Persian leaders constructed large public works projects to pacify rebellious communities and project the wealth and power of the government

In this case, the Persians built large underground irrigation canals called Qanats.

* 1. These techniques led the nations within the Persian Empire to accept (mostly) Persian rule
     1. The Persians largely respected the beliefs and traditions of the nations within the empire
        1. Satrapis were run by the leaders of nations below the chief administrator
        2. Religious and cultural freedom meant that people would not rebel - a chief concern for a huge empire like this.
     2. A few nations still bristled under Persian rule, like the Egyptians, Ionian Greeks and some Mesopotamian nations - more on the Persian Wars (vs. the Greeks) next week, I think

1. The Fall of the Achaemenid Empire
   1. Fighting the Greeks weakened both the Greeks and the Persians, which opened them up to invasion
   2. Alexander the Great was one of the greatest military tacticians of all time and easily destroyed armies much larger than his.
      1. He burned the major city of the Empire, Persepolis after taking whatever wealth the city had.
      2. Alexander died a few years later under mysterious circumstances
         1. His generals divided up his empire, with Seleucus taking control of the Achaemenid Empire, founding the Seleucid Empire
            1. It lasted only a few decades as a major power, as the Romans and rebellious satrapis carved it up.
2. Other Persian Empires
   1. The Parthians, from the western part of the empire claimed power and presented themselves as the enemies of the foreign Seleucids
   2. The Parthians were not Persians, though and they were brought down by rebellion, this time by people that claimed to be actual Persians - the Sasanids
   3. The Sasanids ruled a large, stable, wealthy Persian Empire (that rivaled the Romans) until their defeat by the Muslim Arabic armies in the 600s CE.
   4. What is key to understanding these other Persian empires (and many of the non-Persian empires and states that occupy this area later on) is that they all basically continued the Achaemenid form of government and forms of administration and economy.
      1. It might make Darius the most influential ruler of the classical period.

Persian Society

1. As Persian society grew from nomads, male warriors retained the most power in the earliest Persian societies
   1. However, as the Empire grew, the educated classes became the basis of power within the Achaemenid Empire
      1. Tax collectors, bureaucrats, translators, engineers were all essential to the smooth runnings of the empire, more so than military leaders.
         1. These guys became very rich and powerful - the government paid them handsomely for their efforts
   2. Below the government officials were the “free classes” - artisans, merchants, priests and priestesses (the one of the only ways that women could advance in Persian society)
      1. These people could own land or other property
         1. They could also freely move about the empire, seeking out the best financial opportunities
   3. Beneath the free classes were slaves.
      1. Slaves could be captured soldiers, but also people could sell themselves into slavery in order to survive.
         1. Slaves took up many domestic duties, laborer jobs, but also important administrative duties within households or the military
2. Persian Economy
   1. As we’ve already seen, ancient societies built wealth based on agriculture - Persia was an extension of this
   2. Persia, however, was MUCH larger than any of the societies we’ve discussed to this point.
      1. Fortunately for them, the Achaemenid Empire incorporated the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates and Indus Rivers.
         1. The size of the military and government (who are eaters, not producers) required this much agricultural production.
      2. This empire also generated more tax revenue than ever seen before, for several reasons
         1. Regular taxes and standardized coinage - this drew more trade to Persia by making trade easier
         2. An army of tax collectors
         3. Good roads and lots of them
         4. Free classes that were motivated by economic opportunity
3. Zoroastrianism
   1. The first religion of salvation
      1. Started by Zarathustra, an aristocrat or priest, that became disenchanted with the religious order of the time
         1. Differed from religions of the ancient era, in that those religions simply attempted to understand and influence the unexplainable
            1. These religions simply happened to you - religions of salvation were personal and offered personal rewards for your adherence and personal punishments if you strayed.
      2. It also differed from many of the other religions of the empire, in that it did not require a monastic or ascetic lifestyle
         1. In fact, it stated the world was meant to be enjoyed, as long it was done honestly
         2. It attracted many followers, especially among the poor, because it offered hope for the future, something most poor people could not imagine.
      3. This religion was mostly orally communicated until the Sasanid Empire, in which Zoroastrianism became the official religion and the government sponsored written texts
         1. This gave it and its priests a lot of power and money.
      4. Z served as a precursor to many of the other religions of salvation and offered many cultural traits that are still valued today
         1. Good vs. Evil - Ahura Mazda vs. Angra Mainyu
         2. Omnipotent Dieties
         3. Judgement after death