

A HISTORY OF
IRAN
Empire of the Mind

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I

ORIGINS

Zoroaster, the Achaemenids, and the Greeks

*O Cyrus . . . Your subjects, the Persians,
are a poor people with a proud spirit*

—King Croesus of Lydia,
according to Herodotus

The history of Iran starts with a question: Who are the Iranians? The question concerns not just the origins of Iran, but echoes, in one form or another, in the history of the country and its people down to the present day.

The Iranians were one branch of the Indo-European family of peoples who moved out of what are today the Russian steppes to settle in Europe, Iran, Central Asia, and northern India, in a series of migrations and invasions in the latter part of the second millennium BC. This explains the close relationship between the Persian language and other Indo-European languages—particularly Sanskrit and Latin, but also modern languages like Hindi, German, and English. Any speaker of a European language who is learning Persian soon encounters a series of familiar words: *pedar* (father, Latin *pater*); *dokhtar* (daughter, girl, German *tochter*); *mordan* (to die, Latin *mortuus*, French *mourir, le mort*); *nam* (name); *dar* (door); and perhaps the most familiar of all, the first-person present and singular of the verb *to be*,

the suffix—*am* (I am—as in the sentence “I am an Iranian”—*Irani-am*). An English-speaker who has attempted to learn German will find Persian grammar both familiar and blessedly simple by comparison. There are no genders or grammatical cases for nouns. Persian, like English, has evolved since ancient times into a simplified form, dropping the heavily inflected grammar of old Persian. It has no structural relationship with Arabic or the other Semitic languages of the ancient Middle East (though it took in many Arab words after the Arab conquest).

Long before the migrants who spoke Iranian languages arrived from the north, there were other people living in what later became the land of Iran. People lived on the Iranian plateau as early as 100,000 BC, in what is known as the Old Stone Age, and by 5000 BC agricultural settlements were flourishing in and around the Zagros mountains—the area to the east of the great Sumerian civilization of Mesopotamia. Excavation of one of these settlements, at Hajji Firoz Tepe, has produced the remains of the world’s oldest-known wine jar, complete with grape residue and traces of resin that were used as a flavoring and a preservative, indicating that the wine would have tasted something like Greek retsina.¹ Before and during the period of the Iranian migrations, an empire—the empire of Elam—flourished in the area that later became the provinces of Khuzestan and Fars, based in the cities of Susa and Anshan. The Elamites spoke a language that was neither Mesopotamian nor Iranian, but they were influenced by the Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians, and transmitted elements of their culture on to the later Iranian dynasties. Elamite influence spread beyond the area usually associated with its empire. An example of this is in Tepe Sialk, just south of modern Kashan, where a ziggurat—an ancient Mesopotamian temple—shows all the forms of an Elamite settlement. This ziggurat at Tepe Sialk has been dated to around 2900 BC.

Recent DNA-based research in other countries has tended to emphasize the relative stability of the genetic pool over time, despite conquests, migrations, and what look from historical accounts to be mass settlements or even genocides. It is likely that the Iranian settlers or conquerors were relatively few in number, compared to the pre-existing peoples who later adopted their

language and intermarried with them. And probably ever since that time, down to the present day, the rulers of Iran have ruled over at least some non-Iranian peoples. From the very beginning then, the Idea of Iran was as much about culture and language—in all their complex patterns—as about race or territory.

From the beginning there was always a division (albeit a fuzzy one) between Iran's nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples and its settled, crop-growing agriculturists. Iran is a land of great contrasts in climate and geography, and in addition to areas of productive agricultural land (expanded by ingenious use of irrigation from groundwater), there are more extensive areas of rugged mountain and semi-desert, worthless for crops but suitable for grazing, even if only for a limited period each year. Over these lands the nomads moved their herds. The early Iranians seem to have herded cattle in particular.

In the pre-modern world, pastoralist nomads had many advantages over settled peasant farmers. Their wealth was their livestock, which meant their wealth was movable and they could escape from threats of violence with little loss. Other nomads might attack them, of course, but peasant farmers were always much more vulnerable. If threatened with violence at harvest time, the farmers stood to lose the accumulated value of a full year's work and be left destitute. In peaceful times nomads were happy to trade meat and wool with the peasants in exchange for grains and other crops, but the nomads always had the option of adding direct coercion to purely economic bargaining. Nomads have had the upper hand from the time the Indo-European pastoralist Iranians first entered the Iranian plateau, right up to the twentieth century.

From such circumstances a system of tribute—what the twentieth-century Mafia would call protection—developed. The peasants paid a portion of their harvest in order to be left alone. From another perspective, augmented with a bit of presentational subtlety and tradition, this system could be called government taxation. Most of the historical rulers of Iran originated from the nomadic tribes (including from non-Iranian nomads who arrived in later waves of migration), and animosity between the nomads and the settled population has persisted into modern times. The settled population (particularly

later, when towns and cities developed) regarded themselves as more civilized, less violent, and less crude. But the nomads saw the settled population as soft and devious, while considering themselves, by contrast, as hardy, tough, and self-reliant, exemplifying a kind of rugged honesty. There would have been elements of truth in both caricatures, but the attitudes of the early Iranian elites partook especially of the latter.

MEDES AND PERSIANS

The Iranian-speakers who migrated into the land of Iran and the surrounding area in the years before 1000 BC were not one single tribe or group. In time some of their descendants became known as Medes and Persians, but there were Parthians, Sogdians, and others, too, who only acquired the names known to us later in their history. And even the titles Mede and Persian were themselves simplifications, lumping together shifting alliances and confederacies of disparate tribes.

From the beginning, the Medes and Persians are mentioned together in historical sources, suggesting a close relationship from the very earliest times. The first such mention is in an Assyrian record of 836 BC—an account of an extended military campaign by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III and several of his successors that was waged in the Zagros mountains and as far east as Mount Demavand, the high, extinct volcano in the Alborz range. The accounts they left behind listed the Medes and Persians as tributaries—those paying tribute to the stronger Assyrians. The heartlands of the Medes were in the northwest, in the modern provinces of Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Hamadan, and Tehran. In the region of the Zagros south of the territories occupied by the Medes, the Assyrians encountered the Persians in the region they called Parsuash, which has been known ever since as Pars or Fars.²

Within a century or so, however, the Medes and Persians were fighting back, attacking Assyrian territories. Later traditions recorded by Herodotus in the fifth century BC mention early kings of the Medes, called Deioeces and Cyaxares, who appeared in the Assyrian accounts as Daiukku and Uaksa-

tar; and a king of the Persians called Achaemenes, who the Assyrians called Hakhamanish. By 700 BC the Medes—with the help of Scythian tribes—had established an independent state, which later grew to become the first Iranian Empire. In 612 BC the Medes destroyed the Assyrian capital, Nineveh (adjacent to modern Mosul, on the Tigris). At its height the Median Empire stretched from Asia Minor to the Hindu Kush, and south to the Persian Gulf, ruling the Persians as vassals as well as many other subject peoples.

THE PROPHET WHO LAUGHED

But before the first mentions of the Iranians and their kings appear in the records, another important historical figure lived—Zoroaster or Zarathustra (modern Persian *Zardosht*). It is generally accepted that Zoroaster lived and was not just a man of myth or legend. His dates are unknown and experts have disagreed radically about when he lived. Compared with Jesus, Mohammad, or even Moses, Zoroaster is a much more indistinct figure. Little is known for sure about his life—the best evidence suggests he lived in the northeast, in what later became Bactria and later still, in Afghanistan. But another tradition has suggested he came from what is now Azerbaijan, around the river Araxes. As a religious thinker and a key figure in the history of world religions, Zoroaster certainly ranks in importance with the other prophets. But for the same reason that the details of his life are obscure, it is also difficult to establish the precise import of his teaching. The Zoroastrian religious texts that are the main source for both (notably the *Avesta*) were written down in the form they are known to us only much later, in the Sassanid period.³ The stories about Zoroaster they contain are little more than fables. Some of the stories correspond with information from classical Greek and Latin commentators and show their genuine antiquity. For example, there is the story that at birth the infant Zoroaster did not cry, but laughed. And the theology combines what are undoubtedly ancient elements with innovations that were incorporated and developed much later.

So although Zoroastrian tradition places Zoroaster's birth at around 600 BC, most scholars now believe he lived earlier. It is still unclear just when, but it is reasonable to think it was around 1200 or 1000 BC, at the time of, or shortly after, the migrations of Iranian cattle herders to the Iranian plateau. This view is based on the fact that the earliest texts (the *Gathas*, traditionally considered to be hymns first sung by Zoroaster himself) show significant differences with the later liturgical language associated with the period around 600 BC. Other clues come from the characteristics of the pastoral way of life reflected in the texts, and the absence in them of references to the Medes or Persians or the names of kings or other people known from that later time.

It seems plausible that Zoroaster's religious revelation arose in the context of the changes, new demands, and new influences associated with the migration, including the self-questioning of a culture faced with new neighbors and unfamiliar pressures. The religion, then, was the result of an encounter with a new complexity. While it was to some extent a compromise with that new complexity, it was also an attempt to govern it according to new principles.

Other evidence supports the view that Zoroaster did not invent a religion from nothing. Instead, he reformed and simplified pre-existing religious practices (against some resistance from traditional priests), infusing them with a much more sophisticated philosophical theology and a greater emphasis on morality and justice. This view is supported by the existence of an early tradition that held writing to be alien and demonic—suggesting that the Iranians associated it with the Semitic and other peoples among whom they found themselves in the centuries after the migration.⁴ More evidence that Zoroaster reformed pre-existing religions is that the Persian word *div*—cognate with both Latin and Sanskrit words for the gods—in the Zoroastrian context was used for a class of demons opposed to Zoroaster and his followers, suggesting that the reforming prophet reclassified at least some previous deities as evil spirits.⁵ The demons were associated with chaos and disorder—the antithesis of the principles of goodness and justice

represented by the new religion. At the more mundane level the demons also lay behind diseases of people and animals, bad weather, and other natural disasters.

At the center of Zoroaster's theology was the opposition between Ahura Mazda, the creator-god of truth and light, and Ahriman, the embodiment of lies, darkness, and evil.⁶ This dualism became a persistent theme in Iranian thought for centuries. Modern Zoroastrianism is much more strongly monotheistic, and to make this distinction more explicit many scholars refer to the religion in this early stage as Mazdaism. Other pre-existing deities were incorporated into the Mazdaean religious structure as angels or archangels—notably Mithra, a sun god, and Anahita, a goddess of streams and rivers. Six Immortal archangels (the *Amesha Spenta*) embodied animal life, plant life, metals and minerals, earth, fire, and water. The names of several of these archangels—for example Bahman, Ordibehesht, Khordad—survive as months in the modern Iranian calendar, even under the Islamic republic. Ahura Mazda himself personified air, and in origin paralleled the Greek Zeus, as a sky-god.

The modern Persian month Bahman is named after the Mazdaean archangel Vohu Manu—the second in rank after Ahura Mazda, characterized as Good Purpose and identified with the cattle who were the second class of beings to be created by Ahura Mazda, after man himself. Part of the creation myth in Zoroastrianism holds that after all was created good by Ahura Mazda, the evil spirit Ahriman (accompanied by six evil spirits matching the six Immortals) assaulted creation, murdering the first man, killing the sacred bull Vohu Manu, and polluting the pure elements of water and fire. The importance of cattle to the nomadic early Iranians is shown by the frequent appearance of bulls and cattle in sculpture and iconography from the Achaemenid period—but many of these images may have a more specific religious significance, referring to Vohu Manu.

The name Ahura Mazda means Lord of Wisdom, or Wise Lord. The dualism went a long way toward resolving the problem of evil that presents such difficulties for the monotheistic religions (the origin of evil in the

world was Ahriman, against whom Ahura Mazda struggled for supremacy) and at least initially permitted a strong attachment to the ideas of free will (arising out of the necessity of human beings choosing between good and evil), goodness emerging in good actions, judgment after death, and heaven and hell. Some scholars have suggested that within a few centuries (but before 600 BC) Mazdaism developed a theory of a Messiah—the Saoshyant, who would be born miraculously at the end of time from a virgin mother and the seed of Zoroaster himself.⁷ But the dualism implied other difficulties, which emerged later. One was how Ahura Mazda and Ahriman themselves came into existence. To explain this, some later followers of the Iranian religion believed in a creator-god, Zurvan (identified with Time or Fate), who prayed for a son and was rewarded with twins. The twins became Ahura Mazda and Ahriman. This branch of Mazdaism has been called Zurvanism.

It was a characteristic of the new religion that philosophical concepts or categories became personified as heavenly beings or entities—indeed these seem to have proliferated, a little like characters in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. One example is the idea of the *daena*. According to one later text, a beautiful maiden appeared to the soul of a just man after his death. She was the personification of all the good works he had done in life, and she said to him,

For when, in the world, you saw someone sacrificing to the demon, you instead started adoring God; and when you saw someone carrying out violence and robbery and afflicting and despising good men and gathering in their substance with evil actions, you instead avoided treating creatures with violence and robbery; you took care of the just and welcomed them and gave them lodgings and gifts. Whether your wealth came from near or from afar, it was honorably acquired. And when you saw people give false judgments and allowed themselves to be corrupted with money and commit perjury, you instead undertook to tell the truth and speak righteously. I am your righteous thoughts, your righteous words, your righteous actions, thought, spoken, done by you.⁸

Elsewhere the word *daena* was used to signify religion itself. Another example of personification in Mazdaism is the identification of five separate entities belonging to each human being—not just body, soul, and spirit, but also *adhvenak* and *fravashi*. *Adhvenak*, the heavenly prototype for each human being, was associated with semen and regeneration. The *fravashi* were more active, associated with the strength of heroes, the protection of the living in life (like guardian angels), and the collection of souls after death (rather like the Valkyries in Germanic mythology). These and other personifications prefigure the role of angels in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but also have obvious connections to the idea of forms in Platonism. Many scholars believe Plato was strongly influenced by Mazdaism.

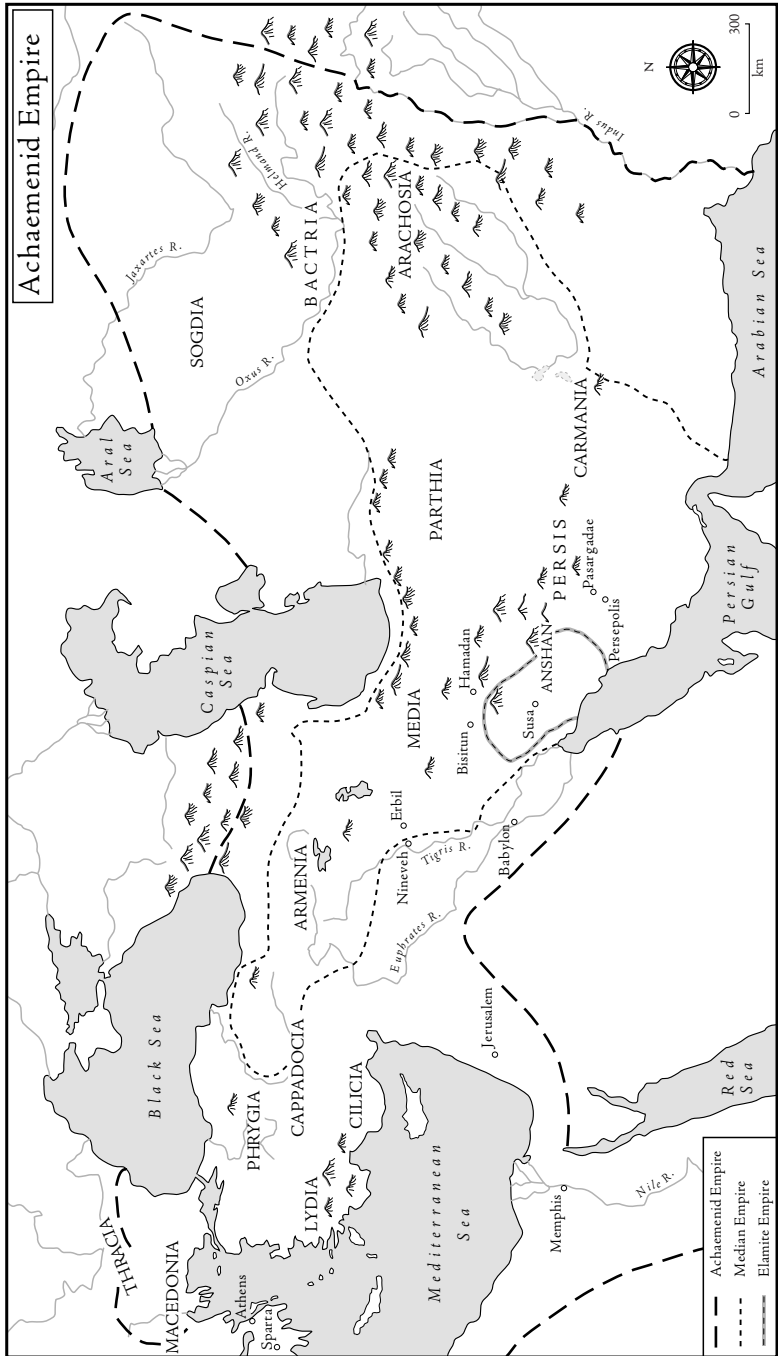
Paralleling Ahura Mazda and Ahriman were two principles, sometimes translated as good and evil but more precisely as Truth and the Lie—*asha* and *druj*. These terms recur insistently in the Avestan texts, along with the concept of justice. They also show up in surviving inscriptions (in old Persian, the words became *arta* and *drauga*) and in Western classical texts describing Iran or events in Iran. In the centuries after Zoroaster, there were different currents and separate sects within the Mazdaean tradition, representing both innovations and survivals from the pre-Zoroastrian religions, as well as various compromises between them. The priestly class, the Magi (listed by Herodotus as a distinct tribe within the Medes) survived from before the time of Zoroaster. As all priests do, they interpreted and adapted doctrine and ritual to suit their own purposes, while remaining remarkably faithful to the central oral tradition.

The history of the relationship between Iranians and Jews is almost as old as the history of Iran itself. After the conquest of the northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians around 720 BC, large numbers of Jews were removed to Media, among other places, setting up long-lived Jewish communities, notably in Ecbatana/Hamadan. A second wave of deportations, this time to Babylonian territory, took place in the 590s and 580s BC under Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed the temple of Solomon in 586. Babylon came under Persian control in the 530s, and thereafter many of the Jews eventually returned home. Some scholars believe that Judaism changed significantly

under Mazdaean influence in the period of the Babylonian exile (the logical corollary, the possibility of Judaic influence on Mazdaism, seems to have received less attention). The trauma of the Babylonian exile was never forgotten, and it marked a watershed in Jewish history in several ways. One of the leaders of the return from Babylon, the scribe Ezra, is believed to have been the first to write down the books of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible, the books of Moses). He did so in a new script different from the one used by the Jews before the exile. This is the Hebrew script used ever since. Post-exile Judaism laid greater emphasis on adherence to the Torah, and on monotheism.

For hundreds of years thereafter, first under the Persian Empire and later under Hellenistic rulers, diaspora Jewish and Mazdaean religious communities lived adjacent to one another in cities all over the Middle East.⁹ It seems plain that many religious ideas became common currency, and the Qumran scrolls (the Dead Sea scrolls) indicate some crossover of religious concepts from Mazdaism.¹⁰ It is a controversial subject, and the relative obscurity of Mazdaism and Zoroastrianism in Western scholarship until recent times has helped to conceal the influence of Mazdaism on Judaism; but as further work is done, the more significant it is likely to be found. Perhaps the strongest indicator is the positive attitude of the Jewish texts toward the Persians.

There are a number of contradictions between the later practice of Zoroastrianism, as it has come down to us in the written scriptures, and the apparent norms of the Mazdaean religion at this earliest stage. Many of the problems are difficult to resolve. It is a complex picture. But the concepts of heaven and hell, of free human choice between good and evil, of divine judgment, of angels, of a single creator-god—all appear to have been genuine early features of the religion, and all were hugely influential for religions that originated later. Mazdaism was the first religion—in this part of the world, at least—to move beyond cult and totemism to address moral and philosophical problems with its theology, emphasizing personal choice and responsibility. In that limited sense, Nietzsche was right—Zoroaster was the first creator of the moral world we live in. *Also sprach Zarathustra.*



CYRUS AND THE ACHAEMENIDS

Around 559 BC a Persian prince named Cyrus (modern Persian *Kurosh*), claiming descent from the royal house of Persia and from its progenitor Achaemenes, became king of Anshan upon the death of his father. Persia and Anshan, at that time, were still subject to the Median Empire, but Cyrus led a revolt against the Median king Astyages, and in 549 BC captured the Median capital, Ecbatana (modern Hamadan). Cyrus reversed the relationship between Media and Persia—he crowned himself king of Persia, making Persia the center of the empire and Media the junior partner. But he did not stop there. He went on to conquer Lydia, in Asia Minor, taking possession of the treasury of King Croesus, legendary for his wealth. He also conquered the remaining territories of Asia Minor, as well as Phoenicia, Judaea, and Babylonia. This created an enormous empire that stretched from the Greek cities on the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea to the banks of the river Indus—in extent perhaps the greatest empire the world had seen up to that time.

Cyrus's empire took on much of the culture of previous Elamite, Assyrian, and Babylonian empires, notably in its written script and monumental iconography. But without romanticizing Cyrus unduly, it seems that he aspired to rule an empire different from others that had preceded it in the region. Portentous inscriptions recording the military glory of kings and the supposed favor of their terrible war-gods were commonplace in the Middle East in the centuries preceding Cyrus's accession. In the nineteenth century an eight-sided clay object (known since as the Taylor Prism, after the man who found it), measuring about 15 inches long by 5.5 inches in diameter, covered in cuneiform script, was discovered near Mosul. When the characters were eventually deciphered, it was found to record eight campaigns of the Assyrian king Sennacherib (705 BC–681 BC). An excerpt reads:

Sennacherib, the great king . . . king of the world, king of Assyria, king of the four quarters . . . guardian of right, lover of justice, who lends support, who comes to the aid of the needy, who performs pious acts, perfect hero, mighty man, first among all princes, the flame who consumes those who do not submit, who strikes the wicked with the thunderbolt; the god Assur, the great

mountain, has entrusted an unrivaled kinship to me . . . has made powerful my weapons . . . he has brought the black-headed people in submission at my feet; and mighty kings feared my warfare. . . .

In the course of my campaign, Beth-Dagon, Joppa, Banaibarka, Asuru, cities of Sidka, who had not speedily bowed in submission at my feet, I besieged, I conquered, I carried off their spoils. . . . I approached Ekron and slew the governors and nobles who had rebelled, and hung their bodies on stakes around the city. . . .

As for Hezekiah the Jew, who did not submit to my yoke: 46 of his strong, walled cities . . . by means of ramps and by bringing up siege-engines . . . I besieged and took them. 200,150 people, great and small, male and female, horses, mules, asses, camels, cattle and sheep without number, I brought away from them and counted as spoil. . . .¹¹

The way the pharaohs of Egypt celebrated their rule and their victories was very similar to this, and although Hezekiah, the king of Jerusalem, appears on the Taylor Prism as a victim, some parts of the Bible describing the Israelites and their God smiting their enemies do not read very differently, either.

By contrast, another clay object, about 9 inches by 4 inches, also discovered in the nineteenth century and covered in cuneiform script, tells a rather different story. The Cyrus cylinder, now in the British Museum, was found where it had been deliberately placed—under the foundations of the city wall of Babylon. It has been described as a charter of human rights for the ancient world, which is an exaggeration and a misrepresentation. But the message of the cylinder, particularly when combined with what is known of Cyrus's religious policy from the books of Ezra and Isaiah, is nonetheless remarkable. The kingly preamble from the cylinder is fairly conventional:

I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, rightful king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters (of the earth), son of Cambyses, great king, king of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, great king, king of Anshan, descendant of Teispes, great king, king of Anshan, of a family that always exercised kingship. . . .

But it continues, describing the favor shown to Cyrus by the Babylonian god Marduk:

When I entered Babylon as a friend and when I established the seat of the government in the palace of the ruler under jubilation and rejoicing, Marduk, the great lord, induced the magnanimous inhabitants of Babylon to love me, and I was daily endeavouring to worship him. My numerous troops walked around in Babylon in peace, I did not allow anybody to terrorize any place of the country of Sumer and Akkad. I strove for peace in Babylon and in all his other sacred cities . . .

and concludes:

As to the region . . . as far as Assur and Susa, Agade, Eshnunna, the towns of Zamban, Me-Turnu, Der as well as the region of the Gutians, I returned to these sanctuaries on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which had been ruins for a long time, the images which used to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned to them their habitations. Furthermore, I resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus had brought into Babylon to the anger of the lord of the gods, unharmed, in their former chapels, the places that make them happy.¹²

Like the proud declarations of Sennacherib, this is propaganda—but it is propaganda of a different kind. It shows Cyrus in a different light, and according to a different scale of values. Cyrus chose to present himself showing respect to the Babylonian deity, Marduk. Perhaps it would have been different if Cyrus had conquered Babylon by force, rather than marching into it unopposed (in 539 BC) after its inhabitants revolted against the last Babylonian king, Nabonidus. Cyrus was a ruthless, ambitious man; no one ever conquered an empire without those characteristics in full measure. But we know that he permitted freedom of worship to the Jews, too. Cyrus and his successors permitted them to return home from exile and to rebuild the

temple in Jerusalem. For those acts they were accorded in the Jewish scriptures a unique status among gentile monarchs.

The logic of statecraft alone might have suggested that it would be more sustainable in the long run to let subjects conduct their own affairs and worship as they pleased. But that policy had to be acceptable to the Iranian elite, including the priests—the Magi. Leaving aside the question of Cyrus's personal beliefs, which remain unclear, it is reasonable to see in the policy some of the spirit of moral earnestness and justice that pervaded the religion of Zoroaster. The presence of those values in the background helps to explain why the Cyrus cylinder is couched in such different terms from the militaristic thunder and arrogance of Sennacherib. The old answer was terror and a big stick, but the Persian Empire would be run in a more devolved, permissive spirit. Once again, an encounter with complexity, acceptance of that complexity, and a response. This was something new.

Unfortunately, according to Herodotus, Cyrus did not end his life as gloriously as he had lived it. Having conquered in the west, he turned to campaign east of the Caspian. According to one account he was defeated and killed in battle by Queen Tomyris of the Massagetae, another Iranian tribe who fought mainly on horseback, like the Scythians.

The Massagetae are interesting because they appear to have maintained some ancient Iranian customs that may shed light on the status of women in Persian society under the Achaemenids. There are signs in Herodotus (Book 1:216) that the Massagetae showed some features of a matrilineal, polyandrous society, in which women might have a number of spouses or sexual partners, but men only one. Patricia Crone has suggested that this feature may resurface in men's apparent holding of women in common as practiced later by the Mazdakites in the fifth century AD, and by the Khorramites after the Islamic conquest.¹³ Mazdaism certainly permitted a practice whereby an impotent man could give his wife temporarily to another in order to obtain a child; it also sanctioned the marriage of close relatives. But in general, Persian society seems to have leaned toward limiting the status of women, following practices elsewhere in the Middle East. Royal and noble women may have been able to own property in their own right—and even,

on occasion, to exert some political influence. But this seems to have been an exception associated with high status rather than indicative of practices prevalent in society more widely.¹⁴

Cyrus's body was brought back to Persia, to Pasargadae, his capital, to rest in a tomb there. That tomb, which can still be seen (though its contents have long since disappeared), is massively simple rather than grandiose—a sepulchre the size of a small house on a raised, stepped plinth. This tomb burial has raised some questions about the religion of Cyrus and the other Achaemenid kings. Many of his successors were placed in tombs of a different type—rock tombs halfway up a cliff face. Tomb burial was anathema to later Zoroastrians, who held it to be sacrilege to pollute the earth with dead bodies. Instead they exposed the dead on so-called Towers of Silence, to be consumed by birds and animals. Could the Achaemenid kings really have been Zoroastrians if they permitted tomb burial?

Some have explained the inconsistency by suggesting that different classes of Iranian society followed different beliefs—different religions, effectively. As we have seen, there probably was some considerable plurality of belief within the broad flow of Mazdaism at this time. But it seems more likely that the plurality was socially vertical rather than horizontal—a question of geography and tribe rather than of social class. Perhaps an earlier, pre-Zoroastrian tradition of burial still lingered and the elevated position of all the royal tombs was a kind of compromise. Halfway between heaven and earth—itself a strong metaphor. Around the tomb of Cyrus lay a paradise, a garden watered by irrigation channels (our word *paradise* comes, via Greek, from the Old Persian *paradaida*, meaning a walled garden). Magian priests watched over the tomb and sacrificed a horse to Cyrus's memory each month.¹⁵

Cyrus had been a conqueror, but a conqueror with imagination and vision. He was at least as remarkable a man as that other conqueror, Alexander, whose career marks the end of the Achaemenid period just as that of Cyrus marks the beginning. Maybe as a youth Cyrus had a Mazdaean tutor as remarkable as Aristotle, who taught Alexander.

RELIGIOUS REVOLT

Cyrus was succeeded by his son Cambyses (Kambojiya), who extended the empire by conquering Egypt, but in a short time gained a reputation for harshness. He died unexpectedly in 522 BC—by suicide, according to one source—after he had been given news of a revolt in the empire’s Persian heartlands.

An account of what happened next appears on an extraordinary rock relief carving at Bisitun, in western Iran, about twenty miles from Kermanshah, above the main road to Hamadan. According to the text of the carving (executed in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian), the revolt was led by a Magi, Gaumata, who claimed falsely to be Cambyses’s younger brother, Bardiya. Herodotus gives a similar version, saying that Cambyses had murdered the true Bardiya years earlier. The revolt led by Gaumata seems to have drawn force from social and fiscal grievances, because one of his measures to gain popularity was to order a three-year remission of taxes. Another was to end military conscription.¹⁶ Pressure had built up over decades of costly foreign wars under Cyrus and Cambyses. But Gaumata also showed strong religious intolerance, destroying the temples of sects he did not approve of.

An Iranian revolution, led by a charismatic cleric, seizing power from an oppressive monarch, asserting religious orthodoxy, attacking false believers, and drawing support from economic grievances—how modern that sounds. But within a few months, Gaumata was dead, killed by Darius (Daryavaush) and a small group of Persian confederates—a killing that sounds more like an assassination than anything else.

The carving at Bisitun was made at Darius’s orders and it presents his version of events, as put together after he had made himself king and the revolt had finally been crushed. The carving itself says that copies of the same text were made and distributed throughout the empire. And what a revolt it had been—Babylon revolted twice, and Darius declared that he fought nineteen battles in a single year. It was really a series of revolts, affecting all but a few of the eastern provinces of the empire. The Bisitun carving illustrates this by showing a row of defeated captives, each representing a different people or

territory. Whatever the true nature of the rebellion and its origins, it was no simple palace coup, affecting only a few members of the elite. It was just the first of several religious revolutions, or attempted revolutions, in Iran's history. And it was no pushover.

Bisitun was chosen for Darius's grand rock-carving because it was a high place, perhaps already associated with the sacred, close by where he and his companions had killed Gaumata/Bardiya. The site at Bisitun is a museum of Iranian history in itself. Aside from the Darius rock relief, there are caves that had been used by Neanderthals forty thousand years earlier, and by many generations after them. Among other relics and monuments, there is a rock-carving of a reclining Hercules from the Seleucid period, a Parthian carving depicting fire worship, a Sassanian bridge, some remains of a building from the Mongol period, a seventeenth-century *caravanserai*, and, not far away, some fortifications apparently dating from the time of Nader Shah in the eighteenth century.

Many historians have been suspicious about the story of the false Bardiya. The Bisitun carving is a contemporary source, but it is plainly a self-serving account to justify Darius's accession. It is confirmed by Herodotus and other Greek writers, but they all wrote later and would naturally have accepted the official version of events if other dissenting accounts had been stamped out. Darius was not a natural successor to the throne. He was descended from a junior branch of the Achaemenid royal family, and even in that line he was not preeminent—his father was still living. Could a Magian priest have successfully impersonated a royal prince some three or four years after the real man's death? Is it not rather suspect that Darius also discredited other opponents by alleging that they were imposters?

If the story was a fabrication, Darius was certainly brazen in the presentation of his case. In the Bisitun inscriptions, the rebel leaders are called liar kings, and Darius, appealing to religious feeling and Mazdaean beliefs about *arta* and *druj*, declares,

[. . .] you, whosoever shall be king hereafter, be on your guard very much against Falsehood. The man who shall be a follower of Falsehood—punish him severely . . .

and,

[...] Ahura Mazda brought me aid and the other gods who are, because I was not disloyal, I was no follower of Falsehood, I was no evil-doer, neither I nor my family, I acted according to righteousness, neither to the powerless nor to the powerful, did I do wrong . . .

and again,

This is what I have done, by the grace of Ahura Mazda have I always acted. Whosoever shall read this inscription hereafter, let that which I have done be believed. You must not hold it to be lies.

Perhaps Darius protested a little too much. Another inscription in Darius's words, from another site, reads,

By the favor of Ahura Mazda I am of such a sort that I am a friend to right, I am not a friend to wrong. It is not my desire that the weak man should have wrong done to him by the mighty; nor is it my desire that the mighty man should have wrong done to him by the weak. What is right, that is my desire. I am not a friend to the man who is a lie-follower [...]. As a horseman I am a good horseman. As a bowman I am a good bowman both afoot and on horseback . . .¹⁷

The latter part of this text, though telescoped here from the original, echoes the famous formula from Herodotus and other Greek writers, that Persian youths were brought up to ride a horse, shoot a bow, and tell the truth. Darius was pressing every button to stimulate the approval of his subjects. Even if one doubts the story of Darius's accession, the evidence from Bisitun and his other inscriptions of his self-justification, and the use of religion by both sides in the intensive fighting that followed the death of Cambyses, nonetheless stands. It is a powerful testimony to the force of the Mazdaean religion at this time. Even the suppressors of the religious revolution had to justify their actions in religious terms. Although Darius by the

end reigned supreme, the inscriptions give a strong sense that he himself was nonetheless subject to a powerful structure of ideas about justice, truth and lies, and right and wrong, that was distinctively Iranian—and Mazdaean.

THE EMPIRE REFOUNDED

Darius's efforts to justify and dignify his rule did not end there. He built an enormous palace in his Persian homeland, at what the Greeks later called Persepolis (City of the Persians)—thus starting afresh, away from the previous capital of Cyrus at Pasargadae. Persepolis is so big that a modern visitor, wandering bemused between the sections of fallen columns and the massive double-headed column capitals that crashed to the ground when the palace burned, finds it difficult to become oriented, much less make sense of it. The magnificence of the palace served as a further prop to the majesty of Darius and the legitimacy of his rule. But it helped in turn to create a lasting tradition, a mystique of magnificent kingship that might not have come about but for the initial doubts over his accession. A dedicatory inscription at Persepolis played again on the old theme:

May Ahura Mazda protect this land from hostile armies, from famine, and from the Lie.

The motif of tribute and submission is also repeated from Bisitun. Row upon row of figures representing subjects from all over the empire are shown queuing up to present themselves, frozen forever in stone relief. The purpose of the huge palace complex at Persepolis is not entirely clear. It may be that it was intended as a place for celebrations and ceremonies at the time of the spring equinox, the Persian New Year (*Noruz*—celebrated on and after March 21 each year, today as then). The rows of tribute-bearers depicted in the sculpture suggest that it may have been the place for annual demonstrations of homage and loyalty from the provinces. Whatever the reason for the grandeur of Persepolis, it was never the main, permanent capital of the empire. That was at Susa, the old capital of Elam.

This, again, shows the syncretism of the Persian regime. Cyrus had been closely connected with the royal family of the Medes, and the Medes had a privileged position with the Persians as partners at the head of the empire. But Elam, too, was important and central, and not least for its language, as used in administration and monumental inscriptions. This was an empire that always preferred to flow around and *absorb* powerful rivals, rather than to confront, batter into defeat, and force submission. The guiding principles of Cyrus persisted under Darius and at least some later Achaemenid rulers.

Darius's reign saw the Achaemenid Empire in effect re-founded. It could have gone under altogether in the rebellions that followed the death of Cambyses. But Darius maintained Cyrus's tradition of tolerance, permitting a plurality of gods to be worshipped as before. He also maintained the related principle of devolved government. The provinces were ruled by satraps, governors who returned a tribute to the center but ruled as viceroys (two other officials looked after military matters and fiscal administration in each province, to avoid too much power being concentrated in any one pair of hands). The satraps, who often inherited their offices from predecessors within the same family, ruled their provinces according to pre-existing laws, customs, and traditions. They were, in effect, provincial kings, while Darius was king of kings (*Shahanshah* in modern Persian). The empire did not attempt, as a matter of policy, to Persianize as the Roman Empire, for example, later sought to Romanize.

The certainties of religion, the principle of sublime justice that they underpinned, and the magnificent prestige of kingship—these were the bonds that held together this otherwise diffuse constellation of peoples, languages, and cultures. A complex empire was accepted as such, and was subjected to a controlling principle. The system established by Darius worked, proved resilient, and endured.

Tablets discovered in excavations at Persepolis show the complexity and administrative sophistication of the system Darius established. Although Darius established a standard gold coinage, and some payments were made in silver, much of the system operated by payments in kind. These were assessed, allocated, and receipted from the center. State officials and servants

were paid in fixed quantities of wine, grain, or animals; but even members of the royal family received payments in the same way. Officials in Persepolis gave orders for the levying of taxes in kind in other locations, and then gave orders for payments in kind to be made from the proceeds in the same locations. Couriers were given tablets to produce at post stations along the royal highways, so they could get food and lodging for themselves and their animals. These tablets recording payments in kind cover only a relatively limited period, from 509 to 494 BC. There are several thousand of them, and it has been estimated that they cover supplies to more than fifteen thousand different people in more than one hundred different places.¹⁸

It is significant that the tablets were written mainly in Elamite, not in Persian. We know from other sources that the main language of administration in the empire was neither Persian nor Elamite, but Aramaic, the Semitic *lingua franca* of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine. The Bisitun inscription states directly that the form of written Persian used there was new, developed at Darius's own orders for that specific purpose. It is possible that he and the other Achaemenid kings discouraged any record of events other than their own monumental inscriptions, but these are all strong echoes of the Iranian distaste for writing that we encountered earlier in Mazdaism, and it may go some way to explain an apparent anomaly—the lack of Persian historical writing for the Achaemenid period. It is possible that histories were recorded, that poems were written down, and that all sorts of other literature once existed and have since been simply lost. But later Persian literary culture was strongly associated with a class of scribes, and the fact that the scribes in the Achaemenid system wrote their accounts and official records in other languages suggests that the literature was not there, either. There was no Persian history of the Achaemenid Empire because the Persian ruling classes either (the Magi) regarded writing as wicked or (the kings and nobles) associated writing with inferior peoples—or both. To ride, to shoot the bow, to tell the truth—but not to write it.

That said, no histories as such have survived from the Egyptian, Hittite, or Assyrian empires, either. It is more correct, in the context of the fifth century BC, to call the innovation of history writing by the Greeks an anomaly.

To ourselves, at our great remove of time, awash with written materials and dominated by the getting and spending of money, a human system that was largely nonliterate and operating for the most part on the basis of payments in kind, not cash, seems primitive. But the history of human development is not linear. We should not regard the oral tradition of sophisticated cultures like that of Mazdaism as unreliable, flawed, or backward, something we have gone beyond. The Persians were not stupidly trying, with the wrong tools, to do something we can now, with the right tools, do incomparably better. They were doing something different, and they had evolved complex and subtle ways of doing it very well indeed, which our culture has forgotten. To try to grasp the reality of that, we have to step aside a little from our usual categories of thought—despite the apparent familiarity of concepts like angels, a Day of Judgment, heaven and hell, and moral choice. The Achaemenid Empire was an empire of the mind, but a different kind of mind.

THE EMPIRE AND THE GREEKS

In general, Darius's reign was one of restoration and consolidation. It was not a reign of conquest like those that had been pursued by Cyrus and Cambyses. But Darius did campaign into Europe in 512 BC, conquering Thrace and Macedonia, and toward the end of his life, after a revolt by the Ionian Greeks of the Aegean coast of Asia Minor, his subordinates fought a war with the Athenian Greeks that ended with a Persian defeat at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC. This ushered in what the Greeks called the Persian wars, the shadow of which has affected our view of the Achaemenid Empire, and perhaps our views of Persia, Iran, and the Orient in general. From a Persian perspective, the more serious event was a revolt in Egypt in 486 BC. Before he could deal with this, Darius died.

The standard Greek view of the Persians and their empire was complex, and not a little contradictory. The Greeks regarded the Persians, as they regarded most non-Greeks, as barbarians (the term *barbarian* is thought to come from a disparaging imitation of Persian speech—"ba-ba"), and therefore

ignorant and backward. The Greeks were aware that the Persians had a great, powerful, wealthy empire—but one, to their minds, run on tyrannical principles and redolent of vulgar ostentation and decadence. The Persians were therefore both backward and decadent. Here, we may be irresistibly reminded of the contemporary French view of the United States. Perhaps the view of the Greeks also was better explained in terms of a simple resentment or jealousy that the Persians, rather than the Greeks, were running such a large part of the known world.

This is a caricature of the Greek opinion of the Persians, and cannot have been, for example, Plato's attitude or the attitude (openly, at any rate) of the many Greeks who worked for or were allies of the Persians at various times.¹⁹ The Greeks were also an imperialistic or at least a colonizing culture of pioneering Indo-European origin. Perhaps the hostility between the Persians and the Greeks had as much to do with similarity as with difference. But in contrast to the Persians, the Greeks were not a single, unified power. They were composed of a multiplicity of rival city-states, and their influence was maritime rather than land-based. Greeks had established colonies along almost all parts of the Mediterranean coast not previously colonized by the Phoenicians, including places that later became Tarragona in Spain, Marseilles in France, Cyrenaica in Libya, and large parts of Sicily and southern Italy. They had done the same on the coast of the Black Sea. Unlike the Persians, their spread was based on physical settlement, rather than on the control of indigenous peoples from afar.

Just as Persians appear in Greek plays and on Greek vases, there are also examples showing the presence of the Greeks in the minds of the Persians. As well as vases that show a Greek spearing a falling or recumbent Persian, there are engraved cylinder seals showing a Persian stabbing a Greek or filling him with arrows.²⁰ But it is fair to say the Persians were more present to the Greeks—at least initially—than the Greeks to the Persians. Persian power controlled important Greek cities like Miletus and Phocaea in Asia Minor—only a few hours' rowing away from Athens and Corinth—as well as Chalcidice and Macedonia on the European side of the Bosphorus. In Persepolis, Susa, and Hamadan, by contrast, Greece would have seemed half

a world away, and events in other parts of the empire—Egypt, Babylonia, and Bactria—were equally or rather more pressing.

Darius was succeeded by his son, Xerxes (Khashayarsha). The set-piece of Xerxes's reign in the historical record was the great expedition to punish Athens and its allies for their support of the Ionian revolt. But at least as important for Xerxes himself would have been his successful reassertion of authority in Egypt and Babylon, where he crushed a rebellion and destroyed the temple of Marduk that Cyrus had restored. Xerxes is believed (on the authority of Herodotus) to have taken as many as two million men with him to attack Athens in 480 BC. His troops wiped out the rearguard of Spartans and others at Thermopylae, killing the Spartan king Leonidas in a protracted struggle that left many of the Persian troops dead. Xerxes's men then took Athens, his hardy soldiers scaling the Acropolis and burning it. But his fleet was defeated at Salamis, leaving his armies overextended and vulnerable. Xerxes then withdrew to Sardis, his base in Asia Minor, and his forces suffered further defeats the following year at Plataea and Mycale (479 BC). Among other effects of the Persian defeat was the loss of influence on Macedon and Thrace on the European side of the Bosphorus, permitting the subsequent rise of Macedon.

Xerxes's son Artaxerxes (Artakhshathra) succeeded him in 465 BC and reigned for some forty years. The building work at Persepolis continued through the reigns of both, and it was under these two kings that many of the Jews of Babylonia returned to Jerusalem, under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. Nehemiah was Artaxerxes's court cupbearer in Susa, and both Ezra and Nehemiah eventually returned to the Persian court after their efforts to rebuild Jerusalem. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah give a different picture of the Persian monarchy to contrast with the less flattering image in the Greek accounts.

The wars that continued between the Persians and the Greeks ended at least for a time with the peace of Callias in 449 BC, but thereafter the Persians supported Sparta against Athens in the terribly destructive Peloponnesian wars. These conflicts exhausted the older Greek city-states and prepared the way for the hegemony of Macedon. At the death of Artaxerxes,

palace intrigues resulted in the murders of several kings or pretenders in succession. In the reign of Artaxerxes II (404–359 BC) there were further wars with the Greeks, and a sustained Egyptian revolt that kept that satrapy independent until Persian rule was restored under Artaxerxes III in 343 BC. But then a particularly lethal round of political intrigue orchestrated by the vizier or chief minister Bagoas caused the deaths of both Artaxerxes III and his son Arses, bringing Darius III to the throne in 336 BC.

The Iranians must have changed their way of life considerably over the two centuries between the reigns of Cyrus and Darius III. One indicator of social change was the constitution of their armies. Prior to and during Xerxes's invasion of Greece, large numbers of Medes and Persians fought on foot, but by the time of Darius III the armies were dominated by large numbers of horsemen. The impression is that the wealth of the empire had enabled the Iranian military classes to distribute themselves across the empire and supply themselves with horses, changing the nature of Persian warfare. There seems also to have been a deliberate policy of military garrisoning and military colonies, notably in Asia Minor. According to Herodotus, Cyrus had warned that if the Persians descended to live in the rich lands of the plain (he probably had Babylonia particularly in mind), they would become soft and incapable of defending their empire. It is too neat to suggest that this is precisely what happened. It may be somewhat the contrary—that by the time of Darius III, taxes had risen too high and the Iranians, having had their expectations raised, had become impoverished and demoralized. But whatever their exact nature, fundamental changes had taken place, and Iran had already moved closer to the social and military patterns of the later Parthian and Sassanid empires.

MACEDONIA—STRANGE FRUIT

Who were the Macedonians? Some have speculated that they were not really Greeks, but more closely related to the Thracians. Or perhaps they descended from some other Balkan people influenced by the arrival of Indo-European Greeks. They had come under heavy Greek influence by the time

of Philip and Alexander—but even at that late stage the Macedonians made a strong distinction between themselves and the Greek hangers-on who accompanied Alexander's eastern adventure. In the fifth century BC, Macedonians were normally, like other non-Greeks, excluded from the Olympic games. But the Persians seem to have referred to them as "Greeks with hats" (they were known for their wide-brimmed hats), and Herodotus too seems to have accepted them as of Greek origin. Like the Medes and Persians in the time of Cyrus, as well as many other militant peoples from mountainous or marginal areas, the Macedonians had a strong sense of their collective superiority—but they also sustained many private feuds among themselves. They were notoriously difficult to manage.

Few stories from the classical world are better known than that of Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander. Often the importance of the father to the success of the son is neglected in favor of the latter's more dramatic victories. Philip was born around 380 BC, became king of Macedon in 359 BC, and immediately set about the expansion of his kingdom. One essential contribution to the success of Macedon was his creation of a new, tightly drilled infantry corps, equipped with a longer spear or pike than was normal in Greece at the time. In favorable conditions this army usually swept aside or rolled over conventionally armed infantry. Having established himself as the prime power in northern Greece and Thrace, Philip defeated the alliance of Athens and Thebes at the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 BC, and then set up the League of Corinth, which established Macedonian hegemony and effectively ended the independence of the Greek city-states, with the exception of Sparta. When Philip demanded submission of the Spartans, saying that he would come to Sparta and wreck their farms, kill the people, and destroy their city, the Spartans replied: "If." Philip and his son left the Spartans alone—perhaps not least for the sake of the legend of Thermopylae.

Philip had other plans in any case—plans to invade the Persian Empire. His preparations were quite open, and were justified in pan-Hellenic terms by reference to the Persian desecration of Athenian temples in the invasion of 480 BC. But in 336 BC, before Philip could put his invasion plans into effect, he was murdered. The circumstances of the murder are murky and were disputed

at the time—some have suggested that Alexander and his mother Olympias were involved, but it is possible that the Persians instigated the killing.

Alexander continued where his father had left off. He consolidated his authority in Greece, quickly crushing a rebellion in Thebes, and then, in 334 BC, crossed into Asia Minor. He defeated a Persian army at the Granicus River (near the Dardanelles), conquered the towns of the Ionian coast—including the Persian regional base at Sardis—and then marched east. The following year he defeated Darius at the Battle of Issus (on the Mediterranean coast near the modern border between Syria and Turkey), leading the decisive attack personally at the head of his companion cavalry (*hetairoi*). Alexander then marched south, taking the coastal cities, conquering Egypt and founding Alexandria. Moving east again, in 331 BC Alexander defeated Darius in a third battle, at Gaugamela, near Mosul and Irbil in what is now Iraqi Kurdistan. Darius left the battlefield and was killed some time after by Bessus, the satrap of Bactria.

This is not the place to consider Alexander's conduct of war in any detail, but his military brilliance illustrates something that may appear at first counter-intuitive—the feminine nature of military genius at the highest level. Successful high command has little or nothing to do with masculine attributes like brute force, bravado, machismo, arrogance, or even courage, except insofar as it may be necessary to advertise these from time to time to inspire the troops. Rather, it has to do with what one might regard as more feminine characteristics—sensitivity, subtlety, intuition, timing, an indirect approach, an ability quietly to assess strength and weakness (based perhaps on an intuitive grasp for the opponent's likely behavior as much as factual information) to avoid and baffle strength, to flow around it, to absorb its force and strike unexpectedly at the weak spot at precisely the right moment. Military history shows again and again that predictable male behavior, manifest in frontal attacks and reliance on strength alone, is at best a liability and at worst catastrophically wasteful at the command level. The maximum effectiveness of military force is achieved only by the more subtle methods associated with what one might call a feminine approach. Without making any

crass connection to Alexander's bisexuality, his conduct of warfare exemplifies this well.

Alexander continued on to Babylon, Susa, and finally Persepolis, which he burned to destruction in 330 BC after some weeks and months of celebrations. One story says that a courtesan accompanying the army, Thaïs, persuaded Alexander to destroy the palaces while he was drunk, in revenge for the burning of the Athenian Acropolis by Xerxes, and threw in the first torch herself. But it is likely that the destruction was a deliberate political act, to show that the Achaemenid dynasty was over for good. Notwithstanding the destruction of Persepolis, Alexander had been presenting himself, at least since Gaugamela, not so much as the revenger of Greece but as the successor to the Achaemenians.²¹ From now on he appears to have followed a deliberate Persianizing policy, encouraging his troops to marry local women and settling them in colonies. He himself married several Persian princesses, including Statira, the daughter of Darius III, and later Roxana (whose name is cognate with the modern Persian word *roshan*, meaning "light"), daughter of Oxyartes of Bactria. Alexander continued with his campaigns, into the farthest reaches of the former empire, wiping out all resistance, and then beyond, into India and what is now the Punjab. But his troops grew increasingly weary of the never-ending wars, and disaffected with his perceived pro-Persian policy.

Alexander died in Babylon in 323 BC, probably of natural causes, after a session of heavy drinking. The succession to his empire was left unclear, and the result was a lengthy series of wars between his generals to divide up his conquests. In these, the murderous unruliness of the Macedonians emerged with full force. Alexander's secretary Eumenes of Cardia had some temporary success in reunifying the centrifugal elements in support of Alexander's young son, born to Roxana after his death. But the other generals and soldiers disliked Eumenes because he was a Greek and a scholar, and in 316 BC he was betrayed and killed. Within a few years Roxana and Alexander's son were also murdered.

Despite his early death, Alexander's aim—to bring Greek influence into Persia, Persian influence into Greece, and to create a blend of Eastern and

Western civilizations—was realized to a startling extent. But ultimately it failed. For more than a century after Alexander's death, Persia was ruled by the descendants of Seleucus, one of Alexander's generals, and Greek influence persisted after that. But the kings of the Seleucid period ruled more in a grand Persian rather than a Greek style. This was arguably also the case for the Ptolemies who ruled in Egypt. When Rome rose to dominate the entire Mediterranean basin, the Roman Empire was divided between the Greek east and the Latin west—but still the style of the Greek east showed the influence of the vanished Achaemenid Empire, and in turn influenced Romans with imperial ambitions from Pompey to Elagabalus.

Although the Iranians submitted to foreign rule—not for the last time in their history—Greek influence was ultimately passing and superficial despite the presence of colonies of Greek ex-soldiers. The Mazdaean religion persisted and consolidated, serving as a focus for hostility to the Greeks, and to the memory of Alexander.

It is generally recognized that the historical accounts we have of Alexander and his life are partial, written mainly by authors writing at second hand and in awe of their subject. They are all Western accounts, and although there is an Eastern tradition of Alexander (*Iskander*) as a warrior-hero, the Zoroastrian tradition about him is very negative, suggesting a different side to the story. There is little in the Western sources about measures Alexander took to establish or consolidate his rule, but the Zoroastrian record says he killed many Magi and teachers, and that the sacred flames in many fire temples were extinguished. This may simply reflect the incidental killing and destruction of the plundering Macedonian armies. But it is likely that the Magian priests, proprietors as they were of the religion that underpinned the Achaemenian state and therefore the most likely center for any continued resistance or revolt, would have been a target for repression in any case.

Whatever exactly happened, it is unlikely that the Iranians cooperated as submissively in Alexander's pacification policies as the Western historians later suggested. In later Zoroastrian writings Alexander is the only human to share with Ahriman the title *guzastag*—meaning “accursed.”²²