



IRAN II. IRANIAN HISTORY (1) PRE-ISLAMIC TIMES

IRAN

ii. IRANIAN HISTORY: AN OVERVIEW

This section provides a concise introduction to the history of Iran from its beginnings to modern times. The generally recognized periods of the country's history are reviewed, and some of the major motifs or themes in the politics or culture of the various periods are discussed. The discourse is divided into two sections: before and after the Arab conquest of Iran and the advent of Islam, the most important watershed in Iran's history. For detailed treatment of all the subject matter which is briefly touched on here, the reader is referred to the appropriate specialized entries. Some are available only online, such as [ZOROASTRIANISM](#), [SASANIAN DYNASTY](#), [SAMANIDS](#), and [SAFAVIDS](#); others are both online and in print, such as [ACHAEMENID DYNASTY](#), [ARSACIDS](#), 'ARAB ii. ARAB CONQUEST OF IRAN, 'ABBASID CALIPHATE IN IRAN, [GHAZNAVIDS](#), [BUYIDS](#), and [IL-KHANIDS](#).

ii(1). Iran in Pre-Islamic Times.

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ii(1). Iran in Pre-Islamic Times

A primary factor that initially affects the course of a people's history is the geographical setting, the terrain, and the climate: Life in Mongolia could not be the same as in the Aegean or in the Amazon forests. But once geographical factors have given shape to a general mode of life, determining whether a people would be gatherers, stock breeders, or fishermen, then it is the human factor—a people's inborn and cultivated capabilities—that more than any other is responsible for later developments. A third factor is age. Some communities start on a course that leads to a relatively long lasting and flourishing culture. The reasons for this are complex and unclear. Toynbee's theory of a "golden means of difficulty," such as prevailed on the shores of the Nile or in Mesopotamia, does not adequately explain the emergence of a culture, for it focuses solely on the geographical conditions. Such communities pass from a crude and barbaric beginning, marked by unruly courage and fierce clan solidarity, well described by Ebn Kaldun (q.v.; 1332-1406) in his *Prolegomena* (Rosenthal, tr., pp. 249-50, 278, 345-47), to a dynamic and well-ordered society, poised to wield power, explore natural and human resources, acquire wealth, enjoy leisure, and develop arts and crafts, giving birth in the process to a distinct culture. The culture thus created develops as long as the community possesses its inner strength and creative power. It has to maintain and safeguard itself against external enemies and internal dissent and subversion. The comfort, leisure, and luxury, and, more importantly, the sheer weight of time that corrodes and enfeebles every dynasty, social order, and culture, eventually sap the energy and exhaust the cultural potentials of the



community. Personal concerns take precedence over public ones; corruption becomes rampant, and stagnation sets in. The very struggle to uphold the viability of a given culture over a long stretch of time consumes in the end its inner resources, and the culture begins to decline. The society can no longer defend itself against claimants from within or without, poised to establish a new ruling power and possibly start a new culture. Finally the community becomes subservient to a new, rising culture and drifts along as its cultural or political client. The total defeat of Elam (q.v.) and the sack of Susa by Aššurbanipal (q.v.; 668-626) in 639 B.C.E., the capture of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 B.C.E., the conquest of Egypt by Cambyses (qq.v.) in 525 B.C.E., the fall of Rome at the hand of Germanic invaders in 476 C.E., and the Arab conquest of Sasanian Persia in the 7th century C.E. represent the outcome of cultural fatigue induced by old age. Modern Persians and Greeks hardly show the same creative energy and possess the same moral fiber that characterized them in the heydays of their ancestral civilizations. The geography had not changed, but the peoples had: they had aged. Individual dynasties follow the same trajectory, except that often their decline and fall does not presage the end of a culture, only their own rule. The fall of the Achaemenids in 330 B.C.E., of the Umayyads in 750 C.E., of the Persian branch of the Ghaznavids in 1186, of the Tudors in 1603, or the extinction of the Bourbon pretenders to the throne of France in 1883, did not toll the bells signaling the end of their respective cultures.

It is within the paradigms of this theoretical framework that Iranian history is reviewed here.

PREHISTORY

The lowlands of Khuzestan, the Iranian plateau, and western Central Asia, where Iranian culture developed, are relatively arid lands, but endowed in part with enough precipitation and rivers to produce fertile valleys and plains. The basins of such rivers as the Karun, Oxus, Hilmand, Safidrud, and Zendarud provided favorable conditions for human habitation and eventually the growth of agriculture and the domestication of animals. In their basins or valleys population increased, settlements developed, and villages and townships came into being, while nomadic life and tribal organization continued in most parts of the land.

Archeological excavations continue to enhance our understanding of the material culture of this period. A jar once filled with resinated wine from the



“kitchen” of a Neolithic building (4500-4000 B.C.E.) at Haji Firuz Tepe in northern Zagros (on display at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology) attests to the wine-making technique that had developed in the area around 4000 B.C.E. In Susa, Khuzestan, Elamite painted pottery dating from circa 3500 B.C.E. shows an advanced stage of geometrical designs and stylized human and animal forms (see [ELAMITE ART](#); and E. Carter et al., in P. O. Harper et al., eds., 1992, pp. 32-42).

Of the original inhabitants of the Iranian plateau prior to the invasion and domination of the Aryan or Indo-Iranian people, we know very little, and the prehistory of Iran is shrouded in mystery. In the Khuzestan plain and parts of the province of Fārs, the Elamite culture began with a strong political and religious influence from Sumer in southern Mesopotamia. A number of Sumerian deities were also worshiped in Elam, which gradually came under the impact of the Semitic empires of Akkad and Babylon (see [BABYLONIA](#)), but in 2004 B.C.E. Elam was strong enough to bring down the Ur Empire. The Elamite civilization during the period of its prosperity was in many ways on a par with Babylonian and Assyrian civilizations and a worthy rival to them. Elam repeatedly challenged Assyrian power, but eventually in 639 B.C.E. it was vanquished by Aššurbanipal, who made Elam part of the Assyrian Empire. It never rose again as an independent power.

The Elamite language (see [ELAM v.](#)) and ethnicity are not related to any known language or race. The Elamites developed a cuneiform script that rendered syllables rather than single sounds. They have left inscriptions and monuments in Khuzestan and Fārs, including the remnants of a ziggurat at Čōgā Zanbil (q.v.). Darius I's inscription at Bisotun (q.v.; 521 B.C.E.) includes also an Elamite version besides Old Persian and Babylonian. Old Persian cuneiform seems to have been based on the Elamite cuneiform. The extent of Elamite territorial authority is not entirely certain. It appears that it extended north as far as the Caspian littoral and east as far as the Persian central desert and Sistān. Their language was still spoken at least until the advent of the Achaemenids, who used their script for some of their records, as evidenced by a mass of Elamite tablets found in excavations at Persepolis (see at [iranica.com](#)); they consist mostly of lists of rations and wages of the workers and throw considerable light on Achaemenid economy and administration. In the end the Elamite territories came under the suzerainty of the Medes and later the Persians, powers that rose in the wake of the Aryan invasion and conquests. The Elamite civilization exerted considerable influence on the



Achaemenids and their culture (Briant, 1996, pp. 37-38).

Jiroft. The historical site of Jiroft, located southwest of Tepe Yahyā in the Persian province of Kermān, is one of the most artifact-rich archeological sites in the Middle East. In January 2001 a group of Iranians from Jiroft stumbled upon an ancient tomb. Inside they found a large quantity of objects decorated with highly distinctive engravings of animals, mythological figures, and architectural motifs. At the time they did not realize the true magnitude and implications of their archeological discovery: one that may alter the accepted notions of the early development of civilizations in the Middle East between the fourth and third millennia B.C.E. The objects and their iconography are unlike anything ever seen before by archeologists. Many are made from chlorite, a gray-green soft stone; others are in copper, bronze, terracotta, and even lapis lazuli (J. Perrot et al. in *Jiroft: Fabuleuse Découverte en Iran*, Les Dossiers d'Archéologie, no. 287, October 2003).

The Aryan invasion. Aryans or Indo-Iranians belong to the Satem group of Indo-European peoples, linguistically closest to the Slavic people, who had moved eastward, possibly from Kazakhstan, into Western Central Asia. (It seems that earlier a group of Kentum [Centum] Indo-Europeans, the Tokharians, had moved towards the borders of China.) Pressed by the growth in population, the Indo-Iranians began a southward drive in search of fresh pastures for their cattle and horses. A wave of them reached the western borders of what is now called Iran and formed the ruling class of the Mitanni kingdom in northern Mesopotamia by about the middle of the second millennium. In 1907 a large number of clay tablets were found in the palace archives of Boghazköy, the capital of the ancient Hittites in the north of the Anatolian plateau. These tablets from the mid-14th century contain the first mention of the Indo-Iranian deities Mitra, Varuṇa, and the Nāsatyas, invoked as protectors of a treaty between the Hittites and their neighbor, the Mitanni, an Asianic people centered in Azarbaijan.

Other successive waves of Indo-Iranian tribes drove southward, subduing native inhabitants. At some point these tribes, who had lived together for many centuries and shared the same language and religious beliefs, separated: Some took the route through Afghanistan to India, defeated the Dravidian inhabitants of north and northwest India, and settled in the conquered regions, spreading their culture. Vedic hymns, the oldest extant documents of an Indo-European language, represent their religious beliefs and rituals. Another branch, consisting of different but related tribes, overwhelmed the



native populations of the Iranian plateau and established their dominion over them. For a while at least those who were settled in western Persia came under the suzerainty of the Assyrian kings, who made numerous raids into Iranian territories and defeated the Iranian tribes, who had adopted many cultural features from the more advanced Mesopotamians. Some of the Iranian tribes in the south were ruled over by the Elamites; later they achieved autonomy.

The oldest part of the Avesta (the *Ġathās*), ascribed to Zoroaster himself, is linguistically very close to Vedic Sanskrit and shows the closeness in time between the people who produced these texts. Both scriptures show that Indo-Iranians used chariots (q.v.) driven by horses, a fact that must have helped them in their southward drive and conquests. They both use a highly inflected language, the ancestor of later Iranian and Indian languages. The Indo-Iranian tribes worshiped a variety of deities, mostly representing aspects or forces of nature, such as the sky, thunder, earth, fire, wind, and waters, or some social or moral principle. Mitra, for example, was the guarantor of pacts and promises, and Varuṇa, possibly represented by Ahura Mazdā (q.v.) on the Iranian side, safeguarded or symbolized the good order of the world and the moral principle (Ved. *ṛta*, Av. *aša*; q.v.) guiding it which was to be followed also by men. Great emphasis was placed on sacrifice as a means of appeasing the gods and insuring their benevolence towards humans, and also on the meticulous performance of rituals and pronunciation of mantras. Magic was also widely practiced in different forms to dispel evil spirits and obtain various benefits. The correct performance of all rituals and the preparation of the sacred and intoxicating liquid, Skt. *Soma*, Av. *Haoma* (q.v.), obtained by pressing a special plant, the identity of which has remained controversial, was the charge of the priestly caste: the Magi in Iran and the Brahmins in India. The spirits of ancestors were revered, and family worship centered around the hearth.

THE MEDES

Of the numerous Iranian tribes who had settled in Iranian plateau, it was the Medes (see MEDIA, at *iranica.com*) who grew in power and achieved prominence. Assyrian and Babylonian inscriptions provide some information on the Medes, but our main sources come from the Greek historians, and Herodotus in particular. Their name appears first in an inscription of Šalmaneser III dated 835 B.C.E., where the Medes are described as being under 27 independent princes. According to Herodotus (1.103) Phraortes united the



Median tribes into a single kingdom with Ecbatana (q.v.) as its capital. His son Cyaxares (q.v.) freed himself from the yoke of Assyrian domination, and later even began to encroach on Assyrian territory. Finally in 612 B.C.E. and in alliance with the Babylonians, he attacked the Assyrian capital, Nineveh. Their combined forces succeeded in bringing the Assyrian Empire down, thus eliminating a power that had ruled with ruthless efficiency over the Middle East for several centuries. The Assyrian domain was divided between the Medes and the Babylonians, making the Medes neighbors to the Lydian kingdom in the north. Their last king was Astyages (q.v.), who was defeated and succeeded by his vassal and possibly his son-in-law, the king of Anshan (q.v.; Anšān), known to history as Cyrus the Great.

The history of the Medes as related by the Greeks is colored by legend: their first king Deioces (q.v.) built a palace with seven enclosing parallel walls each in a different color (Herodotus, 1.98); and their last king, Astyages, had a dream that foretold allegorically the rise of his conqueror, Cyrus, to the throne (1.108).

In spite of the fact that the Medes managed to form a powerful kingdom stretching from northern Mesopotamia to Bactria, our knowledge of them is scant, as no inscriptions or coins have been found to throw light on their history or society. It is even doubtful whether they developed a script, although some scholars suspect that Old Persian cuneiform was developed by the Medians under the influence of Urartian script (Diakanoff, 1970, pp. 121-22). Recently some Median sites, Bābājān Tepe, Godin Tepe (qq.v.), and Tepe Nuš-e Jān, have been excavated, but they have not greatly expanded our knowledge of the Medians.

It is generally believed that their religion, like that of the other Iranian tribes, centered around the worship of Ahura Mazdā. According to Herodotus, they did not build temples and did not use divine images, but worshiped in the open air and on hilltops with Median priests officiating (1.131), even though the structure of a temple with an altar for fire worship has been unearthed at Nuš-e Jān (Stronach, 1985, pp. 832-37). The religious functions were the prerogative of the Magi, who apparently formed a separate tribe or caste of the Medes. Whether the Medes were Zoroastrian or they practiced a form of pre-Zoroastrian Aryan religion remains controversial. Some scholars believe that the Magi had come to adopt the Zoroastrian faith (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, p. 39). What is certain is that, by eventually adopting Zoroastrian reform of the Aryan religion, the Magi kept their position as priests of the faith and



influenced Zoroastrian concepts and rituals. The rise and fall of the Median kingdom, like that of the Achaemenid Empire, conforms to the classic pattern of a dynamic people rising from tribal beginnings to a position of immense monarchical power before declining and ceding power to a younger force.

The formation of the Median kingdom is one of the turning points of Iranian history. It heralded the Aryan rise to dynastic power which continued henceforward, shaping the cultural and political life on the Iranian plateau and other territories occupied by Iranians.

THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

The Persian tribes of Iranians had moved southward and settled in the Fārs province and some adjacent areas. Achaemenes (q.v.; *Haxāmaniš*), eponymous ancestor of the Achaemenids according to Darius I, formed a kingdom in the Elamite territory of Anshan in Fārs as a vassal of the Median king (see ACHAEMENIDS). Cyrus in his Babylonian Cylinder does not go any further than his great-grandparent Teispes (Wiesehöfer, p. 45; Frye, 2003). When the kingship came to Cyrus II The Great, he felt strong enough to challenge the authority of Astyages, his Median overlord, whom he defeated and succeeded (550/49 B.C.E.).

Cyrus The Great (r. ca. 558-530 B.C.E.). Judging from a variety of evidence, such as some Medians holding important positions under Cyrus, the representation of the Medians in the Persepolis reliefs, and the Medians constituting the most important element in the Achaemenid Empire next to the Persians, it appears that the defeat of Astyages by Cyrus marked a transition from one power to another rather than the total annihilation of one by the other. In fact, Cyrus mixed Medians and Persians in his army as a prelude to his unification of the entire Iranian population and others under his banner.

The conquest of Lydia. At the time of the invasion of Lydia by Cyrus, the Lydians also ruled over the Ionian cities of Asia Minor. He defeated the Lydians and captured Sardis, their capital. Croesus, the Lydian king, fell into the hands of the Persians and died as a result of self-immolation, according to one version, or was taken by Cyrus into his entourage as a counselor, according to another (see CROESUS). Cyrus then forcibly established his rule over the Ionian cities that had offered resistance and taken part in a revolt against the Persians. A number of Ionian temples were destroyed and looted (Wiesehöfer, pp. 50-51; Briant, pp. 46-48).



he conquest of Central Asia. There is little documentary evidence concerning Cyrus's dealing with Central Asia and the tribes that roamed there. Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest that Cyrus next made the submission of the regions to the east and northeast of the Iranian plateau his aim, and in a series of expeditions brought them under his rule, adding Hyrcania, Parthia, Sogdiana, Chorasmia, Bactria, Gandhara (the basin of the Kabul River), and Arachosia (q.v.) to his already vast empire.

The conquest of Babylon. After consolidating his power in Iranian lands and Asia Minor, Cyrus made the conquest of Babylon, the political and cultural capital of the ancient Near East, his goal. In 539 B.C.E., after inflicting a severe defeat on the Babylonians at Opis on the Tigris, in which a large number of Babylonian soldiers perished and a great amount of booty was acquired, Cyrus conquered Sippar and then entered Babylon without meeting any resistance (Briant, pp. 50-55). It may be noted that by this time the Mesopotamian civilization had run its course and was suffering from internal exhaustion. In Babylon Cyrus proclaimed himself a worshiper of Marduk, the Babylonian chief god, and one appointed by him to rule over the world. He treated the Babylonians with leniency and responded positively to the wishes and aspirations of the Babylonian elite, restoring their temples and returning the statues of gods captured in battle to their original homes.

According to some documents, Cyrus's annexation of Elam followed the conquest of Babylon. His campaigns west of the Euphrates seem to have extended his rule to the Arabian Peninsula and to the borders of Egypt, if not Egypt itself, as well as Phoenicia and Syria.

The advent of Cyrus was a major historical world event. Firstly, he founded the most extensive empire that the world had yet seen. At its height, it extended from Egypt and Nubia to the shores of the Jaxartes in Central Asia and from the Aegean to the western parts of India. Secondly, he laid the foundation of a well-ordered and well-administered government of a multi-racial, multi-lingual, and multi-religious empire that brought political unity to the different parts of the empire and facilitated communication and trade. Thirdly, he shunned needless destruction and vengeance, even though he was not beyond meting out punishment to those he considered guilty. His image in the Greek sources, despite their general hostility towards Persia, as well as in the Old Testament, conveys royal tolerance and clemency, uprightness and moral virtue. Xenophon in his *Cyropaedia* (q.v.) makes him the model of a great and generous king.



Not all of Cyrus's successors followed his example in military capability and statesmanship. His son and successor Cambyses (q.v., r. 530-522) who conquered Egypt in 525, treated the Egyptians harshly and seems to have been a despot. On his way back from Egypt he died of a wound. The events that followed and eventually led to the ascent of Darius I (q.v.) to the throne and a change of line in the Achaemenid dynasty are shrouded in mystery. Darius (r. 522-486) states in his great inscription in Bisotun (DB I sec. 10) that Cambyses had his younger brother, Bardiya (q.v.; Smerdis in Herodotus) murdered, and a magus by the name of Gaumāta (q.v.) claimed to be Bardiya and seized the throne in Cambyses's absence, until Darius and his helpers from six noble houses unmasked and killed him in his palace in Ecbatana and Darius became king. Herodotus elaborates the story, but on all essential points he repeats Darius's claim. However, a number of scholars have concluded that Cambyses's successor was in fact his true brother, who by granting a moratorium on taxes for three years had gained popularity among his subjects, and that Darius invented the story in order to legitimize his usurpation of the throne. The fact that, according to Darius's Bisotun inscription, nearly all the provinces of the empire rose in revolt upon his seizure of power lends some plausibility to the theory (see [DARIUS iii.](#); Briant, pp. 109-18; Shahbazi, 2004).

Darius I (522-486). Darius I inflicted harsh vengeance on those who rebelled against him and sought independence. He was, however, a great organizer and a powerful monarch, who firmly established law and order in his vast empire, ensuring Achaemenid rule for more than 150 years after him in spite of the perennial palace intrigues, infightings, and the pernicious influence of the royal household in the affairs of the state associated with the reign of the late Achaemenids. Darius further expanded the limits of the empire by his invasion and defeat of the Scythians, as well as the addition of Thrace in the west and the Indus valley in the east to his realm. In India he sent Skylax, a Greek admiral of his, to explore communication between the Indus River and the Red Sea. Darius also had a canal built connecting the Nile to the Red Sea and assumed the position of a legitimate pharaoh of Egypt.

The Ionian cities on the coast and islands of Asia Minor revolted against Achaemenid rule from about 499, apparently as a reaction to Persian support for the Greek tyrants, and in the course of their rebellion captured and burned Sardis, the former Lydian capital, possibly also because they feared the economic results of the attempted control of the seas by the Great King. Darius



sent an expedition against them, which in spite of initial successes ended in defeat at the battle of Marathon (490 B.C.E). The importance of the defeat to the Greeks is obvious, giving the Greek a taste of victory over the Great Kings. Darius was preparing a counterattack by land when he died.

Darius's empire was divided into a number of satrapies. He enumerates the satrapies "which I got into my possession along with the Persian people, who feared me and bore me tribute" as follows: Elam, Media, Babylonia, Arabia, Assyria, Egypt, Armenia, Cappadocia, Sardis, Ionians who are of the mainland and (those) who are by the sea, and countries which are across the sea, Sagartia, Parthia, Drangiana, Aria, Bactria, Sogdiana, Chorasmia, Sattagydia, Arachosia, Sind, Gandhara, Scythians, and Maka (DPe sec. 2:5-18). The division of the satrapies was based on their traditional linguistic, geographical, racial, or tribal affiliations. A strong central government, however, kept firmly to the rein of power.

Darius's successors. Darius died at the age of 64 after 36 years of an eventful reign. His eldest son, Xerxes (486-465), born from Cyrus's daughter Atossa (q.v.), succeeded him. He soon faced a revolt in Egypt (485), fuelled by heavy taxation, deportation of people to Iran for work, and the high costs of maintaining a Persian garrison there. The revolt was crushed ruthlessly. In 481 the Babylonians revolted for the same reasons. This was easily suppressed, but a second revolt two years later in 479 was put down with harsh punitive measures: a number of priests were put to death and the course of the Euphrates changed for some time, contributing to the economic decline of Babylon (Dandamaev, 1989, pp. 183, 186). Xerxes followed up the preparations for the attack on Greece which had begun in his father's time, and according to Greek historians mobilized a huge army and a powerful fleet. Despite an initial reluctance, the Greeks put up a united front against the Persian army both at sea and on land and managed to inflict a severe defeat on the Persians at Salamis by sea and at Plataea on land and somewhat later at Mykale, events of momentous importance for the Greeks. The Persians, defeated in their military venture, turned to intrigue and bribery to compensate for their military failure (Frye, 1984, pp. 126-27).

Xerxes was succeeded by his youngest son Artaxerxes I (486-465, q.v.), whose reign is marked by his defeat at Eurymedon against the forces of the Greek Delian League but also by his successes in Egypt and Cyprus. It was most probably under his reign that the Zoroastrian calendar was adopted by the Achaemenids (see [CALENDAR](#)). He favored in particular the worship of Mithra



(see at *iranica.com*) and Anahita (q.v.) and had statues of them built, apparently an innovation on his part.

Artaxerxes II (q.v., 404-359), the son of Darius II (423-404), was challenged by his brother Cyrus the Younger, who was defeated and killed in the battle of Cunaxa (q.v.; 401) near Babylon. His Greek mercenary soldiers, some 10,000 in number, managed to retreat and reach Greece, a fact that indicates the onset of weakness in Achaemenid military power. Their retreat is the subject of Xenophon's *Anabasis* (q.v.). During the reign of Artaxerxes II Persia lost Egypt as well as western coastal Asia Minor. The reign of later Achaemenid kings reveals the exhaustion and the lack of initiative and resolve associated with a declining and ageing dynasty. Their last king, Darius III (336-330) faced Alexander of Macedon and lost his empire.

The Achaemenid script. The Achaemenids used a cuneiform script, probably invented by the order of Darius (DB V, sec. 70; see [CUNEIFORM](#)) for his royal inscriptions. In a large horde of tablets discovered in the Persepolis excavations of 1933-34 (see [PERSEPOLIS ELAMITE TABLETS](#)), mostly records of wages and rations, the new Elamite cuneiform is employed. For diverse communications and records the Achaemenids used the Aramaic script, which, as ideograms (q.v.), had achieved an international currency. Letters written in this fashion have been found in Egypt (5th century B.C.E.; see Driver, 1957) and Bactria (4th century B.C.E.; see Shaked, 2003). If a satrap wanted to send a letter to one of his agents, he would dictate it in (Old) Persian; the scribe would make a mental translation of the message into Aramaic and put it down in Aramaic language and script. At its destination the letter would be read out by the agent's scribe by mentally translating it into (Old) Persian so that the addressee would understand it (see [ARAMAIC](#)). The Achaemenid use of Aramaic was crucial to the development of Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian, and Khwarazmian alphabets (see [HUZWĀREŠ](#)), all derived from Aramaic script; only Bactrian eventually adopted the Greek alphabet (see below, vi. [IRANIAN LANGUAGES AND SCRIPTS](#)). The only script invented by Iranians, beside the Old Persian cuneiform, is Avestan, based on Middle Persian script (Bailey, 1943, pp. 177-94).

Achaemenid art. The power and wealth of the Achaemenid kings was reflected in their imperial art seen best in the remains of Susa, Pasargadae, and particularly Persepolis, the latter principally the work of Darius I and his son Xerxes. By drawing on elements from Assyria, Egypt, Greece, Urartu, and Anatolia, it mirrors the multi-national diversity of the empire, and yet it



presents a unified art, where its various elements are combined in a coherent and harmonious style peculiar to the Achaemenid period. It represents the most polished and the most refined form of ancient Middle Eastern art and its culmination, before it came under the impact of Hellenism and lost some of its characteristics and vigor.

The religious policy of the Achaemenids. The enlightened religious policy of the Achaemenids set by Cyrus the Great, according to which the Great King could claim to have been chosen by the gods of the conquered people, was an important element of their rule. Nevertheless, Achaemenid inscriptions in Persia, particularly those of Darius and Xerxes, reveal firm adherence to the worship of Ahura Mazdā, and Darius never gets tired of reminding his readers in Persia that he owed his kingship to the favor of Ahura Mazdā, which perhaps indicates the popularity of this god in Persia as well as the king's attempt at gaining legitimacy. Under Artaxerxes I (r. 465-424) the Zoroastrian faith seems to have finally become the religion of the Achaemenids, evidenced by the royal adoption of the Zoroastrian calendar (see [CALENDAR](#); Taqizadeh, 1938; Boyce, 1970). The religion of the earlier Achaemenid kings, however, has remained controversial. There is no mention of Zoroaster or some of the special features of his religion such as Ahriman and the Aməša Spəntas (qq.v.) in the Achaemenid inscriptions, nor have the names of the Achaemenid kings been preserved at all in either the Avesta or other Zoroastrian writings, except for Dārā son of Dārā (q.v.) as a “Kayanid” king who was defeated by Alexander (q.v.). All this throws some doubt on the Zoroastrianism of the early Achaemenid kings. Had they been supporters of Zoroastrianism, the argument goes, their support would have been acknowledged in Zoroastrian writings, whereas there is no mention of the Achaemenid dynasty in the Persian historical tradition, which is based on Zoroastrian legends and myths of eastern and northeastern Iran (see below, iii. TRADITIONAL HISTORY OF IRAN).

The Achaemenids were proud to call themselves Aryan (*Arya*; q.v.) and Persian (*Pārsa*), but neither their personal religion nor their nationalism colored their imperial rule, at least under the earlier Achaemenid kings (even though Xerxes' “Daiva inscription” shows a measure of religious bigotry; see [DAIVA](#)).

The Achaemenid rule represented the highest degree of political power that the Iranians ever reached. At no other time did the Iranians achieve the same prominence or exercise the same degree of domination over peoples of



western Asia and parts of northern Africa.

THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD

Philip of Macedon (382-336 B.C.E.) unified the Greek states and harbored ambitions for challenging the Great King, and had made reparations for attacking Persian Anatolia. His son, Alexander (q.v.), a precociously gifted military leader, went far beyond the vision of his father and in the course of several major battles defeated the Achaemenids and brought down their empire when his adversary, Darius III, was killed in 330. His repeated successes, and the absence of an effective resistance by the Iranian satrapies to his relentless march across the land, suggests a weakness in the body politic of the Achaemenids, the disaffection of the peoples of the empire and the loss of the fighting spirit which characterized their early military ventures. Soon the entire realm of the Achaemenids came under Macedonian rule. When Alexander's empire was divided upon his premature death at the age of 33, in 323 B.C.E., between his quarreling generals, the eastern portion of Alexander's conquered lands from Syria to Central Asia, including the lands inhabited by the Iranians, came under the rule of Seleucus.

Under Seleucus's successor, Antiochus I (q.v.; 281-261), the Kabul valley, Gandhara, and eastern Arachosia were yielded to Chandragupta of the Maurya kingdom. About a hundred years later, the fall of Maurya dynasty enabled the Bactrian Greeks to expand southward. In the mid-second century Elymais in southwestern Iran and Persis in southern Persia broke away from the Seleucid domain. In both, local kingdoms came into being and later continued as vassals of the Arsacids.

From about 250 B.C.E. the Seleucids, being pressured first by the rebellious Greco-Bactrian kings in eastern Iran, and later more seriously by the Arsacids (q.v.), began to recede westward until 141 B.C.E., when the Arsacid Mithridates I (171-139/38) entered Babylon as a conqueror.

The most important legacy of Alexander's military and political triumphs, however, lay in the cultural field. With him and his successors the Greek civilization spread in the entire Achaemenid domain. The fact that he co-opted many of the local elements in the political schemes that he had in mind seems to have eased local antagonism towards him, and the Macedonian and Greek avoidance of pressuring the conquered peoples into adopting Greek institutions and religious views made the acceptance of aspects of their culture



more palatable to the conquered people. The adoption of several aspects of Greek civilization, such as the widespread use of coinage, the system of weights and measures (*derham* and *dinār* in Persian symbolize their legacy in this respect), building techniques, and the legend “*Philhellene*” (admirer of the Greeks) appearing on Arsacid coins (q.v.) represented a process of Westernization that began with the Seleucids and continued into the Arsacid times. The fact that in Persian the names of most precious stones and jewels, such as diamond, ruby, emerald, silver (*sim*), agate, and possibly pearl, are derived from Greek, is itself an indication of the wealth and luxury of the Greek and Macedonian ruling classes in Iran. The Iranian elite, eager to save their skin and retain their privileges, were the first to adapt themselves to Greek ways. In Bactria, which had seceded from the Seleucid Empire, the Greek alphabet was adopted for writing the Bactrian language. The alphabet was inherited later by the Kushans (Kušāns, ca. 1st century–234 C.E.; see [KUSHAN DYNASTY](#) at [iranicaonline.org](#)).

Zoroastrian clergy, however, remained adamant in their defiance of Alexander. They dubbed him “Alexander the cursed” and saw in him the destroyer of Iranian empire, of Zoroastrian temples, and the one responsible for the burning of their holy scriptures. In the countryside people were naturally far less affected by the Greek foreign culture, and continued with their own religious beliefs, practices, and superstitions.

THE ARSACIDS

The Arsacids (q.v.) came from a Saka tribe, the Aparni (see [APARNA](#)), who penetrated Parthia, adopted its language, and eventually challenged the Seleucids when the Arsacid eponymous king Arsaces (Aršak) challenged the Seleucids’ power in Parthia in 247 B.C.E.

Antiochus III (q.v.; 223-187) succeeded in defeating the Arsacids and pushing back their army, thus temporally reinstating the Seleucid suzerainty. But after his defeat by the Romans in 188, the Arsacids resumed their advance westward and southward. In 141 Mithridates I (171-138) conquered western Iran and Babylonia. He also annexed what remained of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom in the east and assumed the Achemaenid royal title of “King of Kings.”

The early Arsacids, true to their nomadic background and their youthful assumption of power, were a fearless, energetic, and fighting people. Their



nimble, light-armored cavalry was renowned. Most of their reign coincided with the expansion of the Roman Empire and its eastward drive, resulting in its domination of the eastern Mediterranean lands, making the eastern Roman provinces neighbors of the Arsacid power. Clashes between the two were inevitable, considering the eagerness of the Roman emperors and generals for conquest and glory on the one hand, and the hard and proud resistance of the Parthian army on the other. Many wars took place between the two, with the possession of a number of Mesopotamian border cities and the suzerainty over Armenia being often the bones of contention between them. The Arsacids effectively halted any further Roman advances to the east. In one of the most memorable Parthian victories at Carrhae (q.v.; 53 B.C.E.), the Roman army was utterly routed by the Arsacid general Surenas, who sent the head of Crassus, the Roman general who fell in the battle, to his sovereign Orodes. In a number of other battles, mostly towards the end of the Arsacid period, the Parthians were defeated, and even Ctesiphon (q.v.), their capital, was captured on several occasions: by Trajan in 114 C.E., by Septimus Severus in 197, and by Caracalla in 216, even though they could not hold on to their conquered territories. The Parthians managed to defend their territory and stay in power for over 500 years (247 B.C.E.-224 C.E.), the longest a dynasty has ruled in Iran, even though inevitable signs of weakness and exhaustion were noticeable towards the end of their rule.

The Arsacids were fairly tolerant in their religious policy, as can be inferred from their treatment of the Jewish community of Mesopotamia reflected in the Babylonian Talmud (Neusner, 1969, pp. 16 ff.).

We know little about the cultural life of Iran in the Parthian period. Their monuments have nearly all disappeared, and next to nothing is known of their literature, save for two small works: *The Assyrian Tree* (*Draxt ī āsūrīg*; q.v.) and the *Memorial of Zarir* (*Ayādgār ī Zarē-rān*; q.v.), both in later Middle Persian redaction, as well as a number of Manichean hymns. The Persian verse narrative *Vis o Ramin* has also been traced back to the Parthian era (Minorsky, 1943-46, pp. 741-63).

The little we know about Parthian art is inferred from scant remnant of buildings, some of them in Mesopotamia and Syria, a few rock carvings, and some archeological objects found in Susa and elsewhere. The paucity of Arsacid remains is no doubt partly due to the profound enmity of the Sasanians towards them and the deliberate eradication of their traces; that is also why in the Arabic and Persian histories, which derive from Sasanian



sources, all that is said about more than half a millennium of the Parthian rule is a truncated list of Parthian kings. It is true that the names of a number of these kings, such as Gudarz, Giv, Milād (< Mehrdād), and Farhād occur in the national epic under the guise of noble warriors, but such camouflaged representations came from oral transmissions of the minstrels and storytellers, and not from official historical records. We must also admit the fact that the Parthian period was in no way outstanding in terms of cultural achievements. It is generally through Roman sources, beside the coins, that we know something of their political history. Their administration was one of feudal nature, with noble houses ruling in the regions belonging to them by tradition or assigned to them by the Great King. At the start the Arsacids were under the unavoidable influence of Hellenism, and, as Ernst Herzfeld (q.v.; 1878-1948), the outstanding archeologist and art historian of pre-Islamic Persia to whose indefatigable efforts we owe the discovery of much of the art of the period, wrote and Daniel Schlumberger agreed, "there was no deeper caesura in the five thousand years of ancient Near and Middle East history than the conquest of Alexander the Great and that no archeological object was produced after this time without bearing the Hellenistic stamp" (*Iran in the Ancient East*, p. 305; Schlumberger, *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/2, p. 1028). The archeological finds in Nisa, the original capital of the Arsacids, and the famous Oxus Treasure as well as the wall paintings at Kuh-e K̄wāja, and sculptures found in Susa, among others, confirm the pervasive influence of Greek art. This is particularly true of the first phase of the period, that is, the 3rd and the 2nd centuries B.C.E.; but gradually a tendency to revert to the native forms of art inherited from the Achaemenid period and based on Middle Eastern artistic principles is noticeable. This tendency is also symbolically apparent in Arsacid coins. The designs follow Hellenistic models, but have a distinctly Iranian character (Wiesehöfer, 1996, pp. 128-29).

It is obvious that, with the passage of time, the Greek influence weakened and the native modes of expression, presumably encouraged by a growing sense of nationalism, revived and prevailed.

The monuments and paintings in Dura-Europus built under the Parthians and destroyed by the Sasanian Šāpur I, and the monuments in Hatra (Mesopotamia), and Palmyra (Syria) built following the Parthian fashion represent the art that is considered the Parthian art proper. Rostovtzeff ("Dura," pp. 202, 203; *Caravan Cities*, pp. 197-98, 203), characterized Parthian style as seen in these monuments by a number of features such as "frontality,"



whereby all figures in painting and bas-reliefs are portrayed in full face and in frontal representation; neglect of the body (in contrast to Greek art); simplification; linearity; flatness of forms; spirituality (seen in thin faces and wide, languid eyes). This style, which was in vogue in the Near and Middle East under the Parthians, influenced the late Roman provincial style and early Byzantine art (Ghirshman, 1962, pp. 302-6).

Nonetheless, the combined evidence of art, architecture, script, coinage, and literature bear witness to the profound effect of Hellenism on Middle Eastern culture, including that of Iran. The extant fragments of Persian poem *Wāmeq o 'Aḍrā*, by the Ghaznavid poet 'Onṣori, contain direct borrowings from the Greek novel *Mētiokhos and Parthenopē*. The topic has been studied in a series of articles by Tomas Hägg and Bo Utas, culminating in their edition, commentary, and translation of the Persian text (published as *The Virgin and her Lover*, Leiden, 2003). In another recent work, Dick Davis (*Panthea's Children: Hellenistic Novels and Medieval Persian Romances*, New York, 2002) has also explored the affinities between ancient Greek novels and Persian romances such as *Wāmeq o 'Azrā*, *Waraqa o Golšāh*, and *Vis o Rāmin*, which testify to the influence of the former on the latter, even though, as Davis notes, the Greek may have adopted the plots from older Iranian sources.

EASTERN IRAN

The history of eastern Iran and Transoxiana in ancient and early medieval times is even less clear than that of western Iran, partly because the peoples inhabiting this vast region, which comprised Aria, Bactria, Sogdiana, and Chorasmia as well as the plains inhabited by the eastern Scythians (Sakas), had not come under the influence of great urban centers, as had the Medes and the Persians, since the distance between them and the centers of Middle Eastern civilization such as Babylonia, Elam, and the Asianic kingdoms of Anatolia and northwestern Iran (e.g., the Mannean and Mitanni kingdoms) was considerable. The events in these regions attracted less international attention than those in western and southern Iran, and therefore the Greek and Roman sources are less informative about them. Coins and passages from Chinese reports as well as brief accounts in some Arabic and Persian sources used to form our chief source of information about the events of the region. Recently a number of Bactrian inscriptions and writings in Aramaic and Sogdian have shed light on some aspects of the region's history (Shaked, 2003).

The proximity to the plains of Central Asia made the region a frequent prey to



nomadic invasions, and kingdoms were made and unmade as a result. The Scythian tribes invaded the region repeatedly, and, beside the Arsacids, who took possession of Parthia and the adjacent territories, they were responsible also for the formation of the Indo-Scythian (see at *iranica.com*) and Indo-Parthian (q.v.) dynasties.

The proximity to India brought Indian influences: most notably the penetration of Buddhism into eastern Iran and part of Transoxiana. The dynasties that ruled Iran proper, such as the Achaemenids, the Parthians, and the Sasanians, tried, with only partial success, to dominate Central Asia and stem the threat of nomadic invasions. Cyrus the Great was killed while fighting against the Massagetae (530 B.C.E.) in the northeast; Darius I invaded and subdued the Scythians, whom he names in his Bisotun inscription and depicts among his subject nations; he attempted also to bring the western Scythians north of the Caucasus under his control. His army included contingents drawn from the Iranian nomadic tribes and settled peoples of Central Asia and Eastern Iran. We encounter the names of the Parthians, the Chorasmians, the Arians (from Herat region), the Sogdians, the Bactrians, the Drangians, the Sakas of the plains, and the Sakas of the marshes (Bivar, *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/1, p. 181). Alexander conquered most of the regions inhabited by these peoples in his drive towards the northeast and India. During the Seleucid reign Bactria managed to gain independence under a Greek dynasty that was later swept away by the Arsacids. The Sakas of Central Asia continued to be active. Pushing southward, they formed the Indo-Scythian kingdom in ca. 120 B.C.E. In the meantime, the Tokharians, probably also a Saka tribe, were pressured by Hsiung-nu tribes, who originated from Chinese borders, conquered Bactria, and formed the Kushan empire in the 1st century C.E. The Kushans adopted the Bactrian language and its Greek script and embraced Buddhism. For at least a century they constituted the greatest power in eastern Iran, ruling vast areas that extended from Central Asia to India. They were defeated and eliminated by the rising Sasanian power in the 3rd century. In the next century, however, the region was subjected to new waves of invaders from the east, variously designated as Hephthalites (q.v.), Kidarites, and Chionites (q.v.) or the Huns (q.v.). The ethnicity of these tribes is not quite certain. Often they are assumed to have had Hunnic origins, but they may have been of Iranian stock and may possibly be the same people called in the sources by different names. The Hephthalites formed a kingdom in eastern Iran that for a time wielded great power, defeated the Sasanian army of Pērōz (Firuz, q.v.; 459-84), who lost his life in battle, and were solicited by his son Kawād I (488-96,



499-531) to help him regain the throne. Kōsrow I (531-79) in alliance with the Turks, who were beginning to make their appearance on the Iranian borders in Central Asia, defeated the Hephthalites and destroyed their empire, after which it was divided into rival petty kingdoms.

From among the eastern Iranians of Central Asia, the Sogdians prospered as traders and became transmitters of culture. The Sogdian population included Zoroastrians, Manicheans, Buddhists, and Christians. Apart from the common “Sogdian” script, the Manichean material is mostly written in a modified form of Palmyrene (called Manichean) and the Christian material in Estrangelo Syriac. Much of the Sogdian writing was discovered in the course of archeological excavations begun at the turn of the 20th century in Turfan, the capital of an Uighur Khanate (745-840) which had adopted the Manichean religion. Samarqand, Bukhara, and Panjikand were among the major Sogdian centers. Sogdiana reached the height of its prosperity between the 6th and 8th centuries C.E., when their merchants had trading centers along the Silk Road and into China, and their language, Sogdian, became the lingua franca in the stages along the Road. They introduced Manicheism to the Chinese and, together with the Bactrians, left traces of their art and artistic influence in China. They also introduced a number of fruits and vegetables into China, as described by Berthold Laufer in his invaluable *Sino-Iranica* (Chicago, 1919).

THE SASANIANS

In the first decades of the 3rd century Ardašir, son of Pābag, a vassal of the Arsacids in Staḵr in Pārs, took advantage of the dotage of the Arsacid dynasty and the disorderly state of affairs and rose against his overlords. He inflicted a decisive defeat on Ardavān IV (or V? see [ARTABANUS](#)), the last of the Parthian King of Kings, who was killed in battle (224 C.E.). In 226 Ardašir celebrated his coronation as a King of Kings. In a rock inscription at Naqš-e Rostam near Persepolis, accompanying his carved image, he proclaimed himself as “Majesty (*bag*) Ardašir, King of Kings of Iran, Son of His Majesty Pābag the King, whose origin is from the gods.”

The intense Sasanian propaganda against the Arsacids accused them, among other things, of having destroyed Iranian political unity and reducing the land to a number of petty principalities as well as contributing to the moral and religious decline of the country by abandoning royal responsibility. There was some truth in what the Sasanians leveled against the Arsacids in the period of their decline, even though much of it was the inevitable consequence of the



corruption of power with the passage of time. Repeated defeats at the hand of the Roman emperors in the last decades of the dynasty, internal dissensions in the royal household, the loss of vigor and moral authority on the part of later Arsacids, and growing disaffection of the nobles facilitated Ardašir's task, in spite of the traditional and deeply engrained respect for the sanctity of the royal blood.

In search of legitimacy, the Sasanians not only disqualified the Arsacid kings as if they were the successors of the "cursed" Alexander and agents of the deconstruction of ancient Iranian kingship, but also sought to pass themselves as the descendents of Dārā, whom they believed to have been the last of the Kayanids. Although the memory of the Achaemenid kings had been lost long before Ardašir came to power, the religious tradition had kept the memory of the two Dārās, father and son, of whom the latter was defeated by Alexander.

The amnesia about the Median and Achaemenid kings and their glorious deeds came about as a result of the spread of Zoroastrianism from the northeast to the rest of the country. The Zoroastrian progression brought with it the myths and legends of the Avestan people, adumbrated in their holy scriptures, and amplified in the course of oral transmissions (see below, iii., for details). This tradition knew little about the Arsacids and almost nothing about the Medes and the Persians, but believed in Pišdādiān world kings from Gayomart to Manučehr and Iranian kings from Manučehr through Zav, followed by the Ka-yanid kings from Kay Qobād through Kay Kōsrow and then from Lohrāsp, the successor of Kay Kōsrow, through Dārā who lost his crown to Alexander (Nöldeke, 1920, p. 12; idem, 1973, p. 3., n. 1; Yarshater, 1971, pp. 517 ff.; for a divergent view see Shahbazi, 2001).

This tradition obliterated all local myths and legends as pagan, and neglected and finally discarded the historical memory. Its account of the feud between Iran and Turan, which preserved the memory of the local struggles of the Avestan people against their neighbors, the Turanians, loomed large, and the Ahrimanic figure of Azi Dahāka (Dahāk, Žahhāk; see [AŽDAHĀ](#)) plays a great role. This tradition was elaborated in the course of time by storytellers and minstrels during nearly a millennium rule of the Arsacids and Sasanians and assumed the status of "national history" in Zoroastrian Iran. An amplified version of it was incorporated sometime during the 6th century in the redaction of this national history called *K'vadāy-nāmag*. This work served as the basic source for Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma* in the 10th century. Its origin explains the absence of the Medians and the Achaemenids in the *Šāhnāma* and



the very scanty account of the Parthians.

Ardašir, one of the ablest and most energetic kings in Persian history, proceeded with the conquest of the Iranian provinces until he brought the entire Arsacid domain, except for Armenia, under his control. His political victories were accompanied by a number of social and religious reforms. Having been associated with the temple of Anāhitā in Stakr, he proved an ardent follower of Zoroastrianism as practiced in Fārs province and accorded greater power to Zoroastrian clergy. He also made moves to strengthen the authority of central government, without, however, disturbing the basically feudal system of the Parthian period and the privileges of the great noble families.

Iran and Rome. True to the traditional belief that Alexander had robbed Dārā of his possessions and reduced the empire to a series of petty kingdoms, and possibly also to respond to the nationalistic feelings in the country, which had resented Roman encroachments in Mesopotamia and Armenia, Ardašir gathered his forces and attacked the easternmost Roman provinces and captured Nisibis and Carrhae in 235-36 and attacked Dura-Europos (q.v.) in 239, but the campaign remained largely inconclusive. Ardašir's son and successor, Šāpur I, proved a formidable military leader and a great king. He resumed the attack on the Roman provinces and in the course of several campaigns from 241 to 260 defeated the Roman emperors Gordian III, who was killed on the battlefield (244 C.E.), Philip the Arab, who was forced into a peace treaty, and Valerian, who was taken prisoner by the Persian army. He laid waste to a number of cities in the region, among them Dura, which never recovered. Šāpur recorded his victories over the Roman emperors in a large inscription in Middle Persian, Parthian, and Greek on the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt in Naqš-e Rostam, second in importance only to Darius I's Bisotun inscription, as well as in a number of rock reliefs showing the fallen emperors in abject positions.

With Ardašir's and Šāpur I's campaigns in the west, the stage was set for a long and wasteful struggle between Iran and Rome, and later between Iran and Byzantium, which continued almost to the end of the Sasanian period, with the border cities repeatedly changing hands and their inhabitants suffering from the ravages of war, and without significant or permanent changes to the borders.

When the Sasanians rose to power, Armenia was governed by a ruling house



(Arshakuni, 1-251 C.E.) that had branched off from the Arsacids. They remained loyal to the Arsacids and were therefore subjected to repeated attacks by the Sasanian kings, who considered Armenia as part of their domain. When Armenia adopted Christianity in the 4th century, it naturally began to look to Byzantium for protection against Persia, providing the rivalry between the two great powers with a new religious dimension. The growth of the number of Christians in Iran who were suspected of political treason hardly helped the matter. Even the establishment of a Persian Christian church in Iran in the fourth century which would owe allegiance, not to Constantinople or Rome, but to the Sasanians did not go far enough to stem all the violence against the Christians (see [MARTYRS, CHRISTIAN](#) at [iranicaonline.org](#)).

Sasanians and the Arabs. The Arabs had gradually spread northward and westward, penetrating into Syria and Mesopotamia, before the rise of the Sasanians. An Arab dynasty, that of the Abgars (see [ABGAR](#)), had ruled in Edessa in the Parthian period. In 106 Trajan destroyed the Nabatean kingdom in northern Arabia. These were replaced by the Ghassanids, a Christian ruling house that controlled trade in the adjacent areas and served as a buffer kingdom between Iran and Byzantium. In the south a similar kingdom with Hira on Euphrates as its center and ruled by the Lakhmids as Sasanian vassals, served the same purpose and blocked Arab bedouin attacks on the Iranian borders (Rothstein, 1899; repr. 1968). The Sasanians had commercial interests in the Arabian Peninsula, and at times their control reached even the Hijaz (Kister, pp. 143-69). Kōsrow I took advantage of internal struggles in the Yemen, sent troops to southern Arabia, and brought the Yemen under Sasanian suzerainty. The descendents of the Iranian garrison, known as *abnā'* (q.v.), survived until the rise of Islam (Nöldeke, 1879, p. 120, n. 4). Kōsrow II (590-628) removed the Lakhmid king and left the way open for the invasion of Arab tribes that eventually led to the conquest of Persia by the Arabs under Islam.

The character of Sasanian rule. For over 400 years Sasanians formed one of the two great powers of western Asia, the other being first Rome and then Byzantium. They subdued a number of kingdoms and principalities and established an empire that, although not as extensive as that of the Achaemenids, extended from the Caucasus to northwest India and from Central Asia to the southern shores of the Persian Gulf. Their military power, the splendor of their royal courts, and their administrative system



distinguished their rule.

We can characterize Sasanian rule by three major features. One was its tight relationship with the Zoroastrian church, bringing it close to a theocracy. One can suspect that Ardašir objected to the lax religious policy of the Arsacids and gained popular support through his strong backing for religious belief and adherence to strict religious practices. It is conceivable that his brand of Zoroastrianism differed from that of the Parthians in the northeast. The Sasanians' condemnation of Alexander for destroying Zoroastrian temples, burning of the *Avesta*, and the killing of the *mobads*, points to a policy of restoring religious orthodoxy and enforcement of its dictates. Although Šāpur I seems to have shown signs of religious toleration imbued with curiosity, such as allowing Mani free movement and the preaching of his religion, the general trend of the dynasty was towards becoming ever more deeply involved with the Zoroastrian establishment and supporting its clergy in its demands for increased privileges. The process is best illustrated by the career of Kerdir (Kartir), the Zoroastrian priest who was a *hērbed* (q.v.) under Šāpur I and then gradually rose in rank and power until under Bahrām II (q.v.; 276-93) when he became the Mobad of Ahura Mazdā, that is, the head of Zoroastrian church, and the Judge of the Empire and the authority over the fire of Anahid-Ardaķšir and Anahid the Lady in Staķr (Naqš-e Rājab inscription). He has left four fairly long inscriptions, one of them at the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt, next to Šāpur I's great inscription, in which Kerdir delineates his career and the various privileges bestowed upon him by several successive kings. He mentions the persecution of "Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Mande-ans, Christians, Maktaks (a Baptist sect, see Bailey, *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/2, pp. 907-8), and Manicheans (*Zandiks*) as well as his attempt at stemming Zoroastrian heresy and kindling Zoroastrian fires outside the Iranian borders and spreading the faith (see *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/2, pp. 878-83). He was also responsible for the execution of Mani (267). Thus, under the Sasanians Iran was tightly bound and closely identified with Zoroastrian religion (apparently of the Zurvanite school; Boyce, 1992). The frequent persecution of the Jews and the Christians, and particularly the ruthless attempts at eradicating Manicheans and Mazdakites, were the direct result of Sasanian commitments to the exclusive Zoroastrian orthodoxy. Yazdgird I, who was lenient towards minority religions, received the title of "the Sinner" in the *Kʿadāy-nāmag*, a fact that reflects the power of the Zoroastrian priesthood and their manipulation of the historical tradition.

A second feature of the Sasanian rule was its nationalistic stand. This went



hand in hand with the rather xenophobic attitude of the Zoroastrian clergy. The fact that the Sasanian kings, following Šāpur I in his *res gestae* on the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt, called themselves the “King of Kings of Erān and Anerān (‘non-Iran’), whose origin stems from the gods” hints at the distinction that Sasanians perceived between Iranians and the other peoples—a distinction abundantly clear in the *Šāh-nāma*, which reflects the contents of the *K̅vādāy-nāmag*. The fact that Iranian geographical tradition places Iran in X^vaniraθ, the choicest of the climes and situated at the center of the earth, points to the same distinction and a sense of confident superiority. The one thread that connects the various and disparate episodes narrated in the *Šāh-nāma*, and that is emphasized in the pronouncement of the kings and the sages, is the integrity of the Iranian lands and its defense symbolized in the responsibility of the person of the king; when legitimate, he possesses the royal *farr* or the Kingly Fortune, signifying divine right and heavenly protection.

A third feature of the Sasanian rule is a growing tendency towards centralization. However, the image obtained from the late Sasanian period, particularly Kōsrow I's reign, should not be taken as entirely applicable to the earlier period as well. From the great inscription of Šāpur I at Ka'ba-ye Zardošt that commemorates his victories in Roman provinces, but also provide a list of his courtiers and those of his father, it is clear that the feudal system of the Parthian period was not altered much and the system of local autonomy of great noble houses which probably went back to the Achaemenid period was preserved. The names of these houses such as Karen, Suren, Mehrān, Andigān, Sepāhpat, etc. occur in the sources, each having authority over a region as their appanage, besides having functions at the court or in the army. Yet the alliance between the church and state, the growing power of kings, and agrarian and fiscal reforms, particularly under Kawād and Kōsrow I, which often resulted in more income for the treasury and additional burden for the farmers, all led to greater centralization and increased power for the king and the clergy.

The religious situation. Despite the firm grip of the Zoroastrian faith on the Persian society, zealously promoted by Kerdir and his likes, the Iranian society was a multi-religious one. Jewish communities, the oldest religious minority, existed in most provinces. The number of Christians gradually increased through the efforts of Christian missionaries and Nestorian refugees from Byzantium. In 424, when the third Synod was convened at Ctesiphon, the Church of Persia, which had adopted the Nestorian teaching (emphasizing the



distinctness of the divine and human natures in the incarnate Christ), had become practically independent of the Western jurisdiction. This separation of the Persian Church from both the Roman and Byzantine churches eased the condition of the Christians in Iran, even though suspicions concerning their sympathy and support for Byzantium lingered on.

The most important religious events of the Sasanian period were the advent of Manicheism and later the Mazdakite movement. Mani (216-273; see at *iranica.com*), originally a follower of a Baptist sect in southern Mesopotamia, was the prophet of a universal religion that had features common with Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Buddhism. It was based on a dualistic worldview, included Jesus among its pantheon, and preached a way of life that advocated asceticism and shunned all sensual pleasures, particularly for the class of its Elite, who avoided even making food for themselves for fear of harming plants or animals, and were supported by the “Hearers” or the commoners. It had strong Gnostic tendencies and believed that divine particles of light were imprisoned in the body of men, who were created in fact by demons. The whole purpose of the faith was to teach its followers how to release these particles from the body so that they could return to the purity of their original home, the abode of light. The Manichean “Elite” spent their time in worship and missionary work. The faith spread from Iran to Central Asia and as far as China. An Uighur Khanate adopted Manicheism in the 8th century, and thanks to its protection some original Manichean writings in Parthian, Sogdian, Middle Persian, and Uighur Turkic were preserved and finally unearthed through excavations in the 20th century. In the West it influenced the doctrines of some Christian sects, such as the Cathars, the Bogomils, and the Albigensians, who were ruthlessly persecuted by Christian orthodoxy, as were the Manicheans in Iran under both Zoroastrian and Islamic rule.

Mazdakism was originally a “heretical” interpretation of the Zoroastrian holy scriptures, initiated by a mobad named Zarādošt (4th cent.?), which favored an egalitarian approach and the abolition of the privileges of the elite. Its development, like that of other sects and schools within Zoroastrianism is not clear, but towards the end of the 5th century, with some support from King Kawād (488-531), it flared up and entered an acute, almost revolutionary stage. It demanded the distribution of wealth among the poor, the abolition of harems, and equal opportunity for all men to take a wife. The allegation, however, that they preached promiscuity and sharing of women can be



regarded as deriving from the usual fabricated propaganda against heretical movements (Yarshater, 1983, 2005; contra Shaki, 1978). But their excesses created a backlash. Kawād withdrew his support, and his son, Kōsrow I, staged a massacre of them, if the sources can be taken at their face value. He eliminated them altogether, while instituting a number of fiscal, administrative, and legal reforms in continuation of Kawād's earlier plans—a kind of counter-reformation. However, the ills that were eating at the roots of Sasanian institutions were too deeply entrenched, and the Mazdakite discontent continued to simmer under the surface of forced obedience. The Arab conquest and the introduction of Islam gave popular aspirations an opportunity to surface again, mostly under Islamic heterodox guises. The movements of Kōrramdinis, the Black-Clothed, the White-Clothed, and the various uprisings which took place after the murder of Abu Moslem (q.v.) by the second Abbasid caliph, as well as the more extreme forms of Shi'ism and Bāṭeni movements, were all inspired in different degrees by Mazdakite thought and sentiments (Sadighi, 1938; Yarshater, 1983, 2005; Crone, 1991).

Sasanian art. Two different currents can be observed to interact under the Parthians: one was the native art of Iran, a heritage of the Achaemenid period which had deep roots in the ancient Middle Eastern art; and the other, the Hellenic art introduced by Alexander and his successors. The latter began by having a dominant position, but gradually the native art of eastern Iran and the steppes began to assert itself, a process clearly noticeable in numismatic iconography and legends. The vigorous, nationalistic art of the Sasanians proclaimed itself, not only in the Sasanian coins of Ardašir I and Šāpur I, which are remarkably different from late Arsacids coins in the clarity and precision of their images as well as the purity of their metal, but also in a series of large-scale rock sculptures and narrative reliefs that the Sasanians produced in order to help legitimize their rule, publicize their positions, and leave monuments to posterity. Both Ardašir's victory over the last of the Arsacids and Šāpur's defeat of Roman emperors is eloquently expressed in rock-reliefs in Bišā-pur and Naqš-e Rostam, respectively. Scenes of investitures with divine sanction served the same purpose. The scenes of investitures and the scene of Kōsrow II hunting in the reliefs of the grottos of Tāq-e Bostān represent fine specimens of Sasanian art. Unfortunately, except for rock carvings, and a collection of silver bowls, mostly showing a prince or a king riding a horse or a camel while hunting, and hordes of coins, not much of Sasanian art has survived. Sasanian palaces in Bišāpur and Sarvestān survive in ruins, and of decorative Sasanian art, not much more remains than some



stucco ornaments and mosaics.

Sasanian art shows greater vitality and vigor than Parthian art. The Hellenic influence is still detectable, but it weakened with the passage of time. Backed by royal authority and power, Sasanian art influenced the art of neighboring regions. It affected the art of Central Asia and northwest India, including the Buddhist art of the area (Ghirshman, 1962, pp. 317-21), Armenian and Georgian art (ibid., pp. 300-302), the art of Byzantium in the West (pp. 294-97, 308-9, 312, 315), and Romanesque art through Byzantium as the intermediary (pp. 297-300, 303). At the same time, Sogdian and Bactrian art found its way into China, and there are remarkable examples of such art in carved reliefs on stone slabs belonging to the period between the fall of the Han dynasty (220 C.E.) and the rise of the Tang dynasty (618 C.E.) with Iranian themes and features such as banquet and hunting scenes. The splendor of the Sasanian court, the power of its king of kings, and the long duration of their reign encouraged the emulation of their art, their court etiquette, and the refinement of their clothing even after the fall of the dynasty.

The fall of the Sasanian dynasty. The reforms of Kōsrow I, and his vigorous enforcement of law and order, guaranteed another century of rule to the dynasty. The swan song of the dynasty was the reign of his grandson, Kōsrow II Parviz (590-628), when the Persian army made unprecedented advances into Byzantine territory, conquered Egypt, and came as far as the gates of Constantinople. Yet Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor, managed to drive the Persian forces back and impose a treaty of peace which deprived Persia of its gains. The wealth and luxury of the Persian court at this time, symbolized by Kōsrow II's harem, reputed to contain 3,000 wives and concubines (Tabari, I, p. 1041), was proverbial. But as so often happens, the zenith of power and the beginning of decline go hand in hand. Beginning with the demise of Kōsrow II, who was tried and put to death by his bloodthirsty son Kawād II (628), a number of inefficient and short-lived kings and queens, mostly puppets of the nobles and army generals, occupied the throne, while the country drifted further towards a chaotic situation that revealed the inner flaws of the dynasty and the decay of the country's political and religious institutions. Repeated wars with Byzantium, the inroads made by the steppe nomads in the northeast, the burden of heavy taxation to finance the extravagances of the court and pay for the wars in both the eastern and western frontiers, the exigencies of the feudal lords and Zoroastrian priesthood directed towards the harassed and impoverished peasantry, and the gradual onset of creeping



corruption, abuse of power, and spread of injustice combined to sap the vigor and vitality that characterized the reign of early Sasanians. By the time the Arabs, fired by a new faith and able leadership, invaded Persia, the country could not defend itself against such a people, even though it lacked the wealth, equipment, and numerical strength of the Persians. Yazdgird III (633-51), the last of Sasanian kings, was murdered while fleeing before the Arab invaders, the army was routed in the course of several battles, and Persian provinces and cities came one by one under the dominion of the Arabs. With the collapse of the Sasanian dynasty and the Zoroastrian church, the era of Persian suzerainty as well as its distinct culture came to an end, and the vestiges of the last representative of the ancient Middle Eastern civilization disappeared. A new era and a new culture had begun.

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For Iran in Paleolithic and Neolithic periods see *iranica.com*, s.vv. For the Medes, the standard work is I. M. Diakonov, Moscow, 1956. For a shorter account see M. A. Dandamaev and I. Medvedskaya, MEDES (at *iranicaonline.org*). The most detailed and up-to-date history of the Achaemenid



empire is Pierre Briant's *Histoire de L'Empire Perse: de Cyrus à Alexandre* (Paris, 1996), tr. into English by Peter T. Daniels as *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake, Ind., 2002). A. T. Olmstead's *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago, 1948) is still a valuable work to consider. For the Parthians and the Arsacid dynasty, a handy work is Neilson C. Debovoise's *A Political History of Parthia* (Chicago, 1938). Shorter discussions are contained in Malcolm Colledge, *The Parthian Period* (Leiden, 1986), with some emphasis on Parthian art. Józef Wolski, championing the cause of the Parthians, has written fairly extensively on them including *L'Empire des Arsacides*, *Acta Iranica*, vol. 18 (Louvain, 1993). For the Seleucids, the standard work is E. J. Bickerman's *Institutions des Séleucides* (Paris, 1938). A more recent work is Wolski's *Seleucids: The Decline and Fall of Their Empire*, tr. Bruce Duncan MacQueen (Cracow, 1999); and *Seleucid and Arsacid Studies: A Progress Report on Developments in Source Research*, tr. Teresa Baluk-Ulewiczowa (Cracow, 2003).

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others argue for a date in between, such as Burrow, Shaked, Kellens, and Skjæervo. A good source for a summary of divergent views is Shaked's judicious article "Zoroastrian Origins: Indian and Iranian Connections," in J. P. Arnason, S. N. Eisenstadt, and B. Wittrock eds., *Axial Civilizations and World History* (Leiden, 2005), pp. 184-200.

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