

When Iran Conquered the World

Long ago a family from the Zagros mountains of Iran conquered the known world and established the Persian Empire.



Emblem of empire: The sprawling complex of Persepolis was the center of the Persian Empire. At the main entrance The Gate of All Nations (**left**) is guarded by two massive winged, human-headed bulls. The gate was built by the Great King Xerxes who ruled over an empire that seemed to encompass all known nations. Persepolis also included the royal palaces, like that of Darius (**right**), as well as administrative areas.

by Dennis Behreandt

For days the dreams, nightmares really, would not stop. The Great King Khshayarsha, King of Kings, King of Lands, Son of Darius, Grandson of Hystaspes, was a haunted man. Ruler of a realm so vast that the minds of men had difficulty conceiving its extent, the Great King by day was protected by fearsome warriors known as the Immortals, but he was powerless to fend off the apparition that stalked him by night.

The apparition first appeared to the king on the evening after he had decided against leading his vast army into battle. In his dream, a tall man, terrible in his beauty, appeared, and asked: “Hast thou then changed thy mind, Persian, and wilt thou not lead forth thy host against the Greeks?” Waking, the king shuddered. Was there a threat implied in this question? The light of day, though, chased away the hauntings of the night and the king, known as Xerxes to the Greeks who trembled at his name,

stood before the gathered nobles of the great Persian Empire and spoke. Despite the question put to him by the apparition, Xerxes had decided he would not lead the empire into war. “Men of Persia,” he began, “understand ... that I have changed my intent with respect to Greece, and cease to trouble yourselves.”

That night, the apparition returned. Now more terrible, more insistent, it again spoke to the King of Kings. “Son of Darius,” it said with a grave tone, “it seems thou hast openly before all the Persians renounced the expedition, making light of my words, as thou hadst not heard them spoken. Know therefore ... that unless thou go forth to the war, this thing shall happen unto thee — as thou art grown mighty ... in short space, so likewise shalt thou within a little time be brought low indeed.”

To Xerxes, this was the commandment of the god Ahura Mazda himself. There would be no turning back. The monotheistic Persians viewed the polytheist Greeks as worshippers of *daivas*, false gods and

demons who worked to “enfeeble the world of men,” and as such were adherents of evil, what the Zoroastrian religion called “the Lie.” So Xerxes would lead the greatest army ever fielded by the largest empire the world had ever seen to Greece, there to punish Athens and Sparta for their insolence in murdering the empire’s emissaries and to destroy the temples and shrines of “the Lie.” With grim determination, Xerxes turned the vast bureaucracy of the Persian Empire to the task of war. The preparations for the immense undertaking would take four years.

The March to War

When the hour finally arrived, the great Persian invasion force encamped on the banks of the Hellespont — today called the Dardanelles — a narrow strait separating Asia from Europe. Here, at the city of Abydos, Persian engineers constructed two incredible bridges across the nearly mile-wide strait. But no sooner had Xerxes arrived than a violent storm swept through the

Cyrus' unprecedented campaigns marked him as a military genius, but he was also far ahead of his time as a ruler. Instead of visiting wrath and destruction upon conquered populations, he respected their customs while also offering local leaders important positions as imperial satraps.

area, whipping the sea into an angry froth and destroying the incredible bridges.

Work was immediately begun to restore the bridges, using ships to support the roadway. According to the pioneering historian Herodotus, "They joined together triremes and penteconters, 360 to support the bridge on the side of the Euxine Sea, and 314 to sustain the other; and these they placed at right angles to the sea, and in the direction of the current of the Hellespont, relieving by these means the tension of the shore cables." When the work was done, Herodotus reports, the engineers secured the bridges, making "cables taut from the shore by the help of wooden capstans." When the bridge was stable, a vast forest of trees was sawn into planks and used to

serve as the basis for a road-bed. This was covered with brush and finally with a road surface of compacted dirt and gravel. Finally, tall rails were attached to each side of the bridge to prevent horses and other pack animals from seeing the water below.

Across this bridge, a marvel of engineering prowess, Xerxes' army crossed. It took seven days for the army, perhaps two million strong, to cross. The sight of such a huge and well-equipped army crossing the sea over the twin bridges terrified and awed those who witnessed the spectacle. One of them, a local resident of the area, exclaimed: "Why, O Jove, dost thou, in the likeness of a Persian man, and with the name of Xerxes instead of thine own, lead the whole race of mankind to the destruction of Greece?"

Building the Empire

Today the West looks, with justification, upon the Greeks as one of the important progenitors of Western Civilization. On the other hand, the West knows relatively little about ancient Persia. Yet during the time of Xerxes, the Persians considered

Greece a backwater. Greek achievements, great though they were, were equaled or even exceeded in some cases by the achievements of the Persians.

As Xerxes moved against Greece, he could have reflected on the fact that the exalted status of his empire rested upon the achievements of his immediate predecessors. The empire itself was founded only less than a century earlier by the campaigns of the conqueror Cyrus the Great. Under Cyrus the Persians conquered nearly the whole of the Middle East. Cyrus' unprecedented campaigns marked him as a military genius, but he was also far ahead of his time as a ruler. Instead of visiting wrath and destruction upon conquered populations, he respected their customs while also offering local leaders important positions as imperial satraps. Under Cyrus, the Persians offered stability, peace, and profit, all of which had been rather transitory in a region that before the Persians generally featured repetitive and disruptive military campaigns by regional powers against one another. The Persian Empire put these internecine squabbles to an end.

The Persian postal system alone was a marvel. Along well-developed roads, officials of the empire could find food

An ancient story: The rock relief at Behistun chronicles the story of how the Great King Darius overthrew Gaumata, a pretender to the Persian throne. Third



and rest at convenient points. Much like today's highways have mileage markers, Persian roads were carefully measured out in a unit of measurement known as parasangs, each of which equaled 3.4 miles. Way points, where inns and posting stations were located, were approximately 4 parasangs apart. Along the way, garrisons of the king's soldiers ensured security and prevented crime. Documents carried by each official traveling on the Persian road system indicated the treatment he was to receive. Inveterate systematizers, the Persians had even determined how much feed livestock should receive at these way-points. For official couriers on imperial business, fresh horses were immediately available in order to speed the journey.

Through this system, the Great King at the palace of Persepolis in southwestern Iran could effectively monitor and direct developments as far away as the Aegean, more than 1,600 miles distant. Throughout the empire, residents knew that the eye of the king was everywhere. "A truly urgent message, one brought at a gallop through storms and the dead of night, might arrive in Persepolis from the Aegean in under two weeks," wrote historian Tom Holland in his book *Persian Fire*. "This was an incredible, almost magical, degree of speed. Nothing equal to it had ever been known before. No wonder that the Great King's control of such a service — the original information superhighway — should so have overawed his subjects, and struck them as the surest gauge and manifestation of Persian power."

Persian cultural and legal achievements were also significant. According to historians G.B. Gray and M. Cary of the University of London, writing in the authoritative *Cambridge Ancient History*, the Persian Empire "may indeed be regarded as the first attempt to bring a large number of different races and nationalities under a single government which assured to the whole the rights and privileges as well as the burdens and responsibilities of members of the state." Such a state would need a system of law in order to prosper, something beyond the whimsical diktats of an absolute monarch. Persia had had such a system of law, given to them by Xerxes' father Darius. According to historian and archaeologist J.M. Cook, former director of the British School of Archaeology at



Cyrus the Great: One of history's greatest conquerors, Cyrus ruled with great wisdom and tolerance over a domain stretching from the Aegean to regions far to the east of modern Iran.

Athens, no less a figure than Plato "refers to Darius as the great law-giver of ancient Persia and thereby the conservator of its empire."

Perhaps the final word on the influence of Darius' codification of laws in the Persian Empire comes from one of the pre-eminent experts on ancient Iran. Professor Richard Frye had a long career at Harvard University, where he established the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. In his opinion, the laws of Darius are "probably the beginning ... of the Jewish Torah as the law of the Jewish people. The king wanted a system of international law, which was the king's law above the local laws, but he wanted the local laws also to be in good order. This is, in my opinion, the real background of Roman law, which is the background of all western law."

Of course punishments could be extreme, especially for particularly heinous crimes. The worst punishment, called "the boats" was described by Plutarch. In this punishment, the criminal would be forced to lie within one boat on his back while another boat that fit into the first was lowered upon him until only his head protruded. The criminal was then forced to eat, after

which his face was covered with milk and honey. According to Plutarch, "They then keep his face continually turned toward the sun; and it becomes completely covered up ... by the multitude of flies that settle upon it. And as within the boats he does what those that eat and drink must do, creeping things and vermin spring out of the corruption of the excrement, and these entering into the bowels of him, his body is consumed." Plutarch informs us that one man so punished took 17 days to die. Not even the enlightened Persians could completely escape the atmosphere of cruelty that otherwise permeated their age.

It is impossible to summarize fully the advances and contributions made by the Persians in all areas. Will Durant, in his epic *Story of Civilization*, notes that the Persians developed "a well organized guild of physicians and surgeons" who had been trained as interns for one or two years. The Persians also enjoyed fine jewelry, and so jewelers and skilled artisans had a ready market for their wares within the empire. And, while mainly ruins remain, some of the Persians' greatest achievements are to be found in architecture.

Little remains of the palaces and other



Salamis: With Xerxes in possession of the abandoned city of Athens, the Athenian navy engaged the Persian fleet at Salamis. Using the narrow confines of the area to their advantage, the Greeks defeated the Persian armada. A year later, a Spartan army would crush the remaining Persian forces at the battle of Plataea.

structures — at Pasargadae, the first Persian capital, not much can be seen other than the stolid tomb of Cyrus the Great, and at Ecbatana the royal palace of cedar and cypress has long since passed into oblivion — but the grandeur of Persian architecture is evident still at the amazing palace at Persepolis. There, great staircases, unlike any found elsewhere, rise to a platform 1,000 feet wide and more 1,500 feet long upon which were built the royal palaces. Here is to be found the remains of a great colonnaded hall, in its day as sublimely beautiful and solemn as the greatest of ancient Egypt's hypostyle halls. Relief sculptures show scenes of peoples from around the empire — Lydians with beehive hats, bare-headed Ionians, and barefoot Indians, among others — bringing tribute to the Great King. Like nothing

else, Persepolis attests to the power and grandeur and dignity of the Persians.

Thermopylae

And all of this was at stake, if not physically, then symbolically, as Xerxes crossed the waters of the Hellespont from Asia to Europe. Like no other people, the disruptive and argumentative Greeks, small in number and far removed from the center of Persian power though they were, represented an ominous threat. In fact, a decade earlier the Greeks had dared to challenge the universal rule of the first world empire by killing the emissaries Darius had sent to Athens and Sparta — and then defeating a Persian army at Marathon. This affront could not go unanswered, and when Darius passed away before he could return to Greece, it fell upon his son Xerxes to punish and conquer the Greeks for their recalcitrance and defiance. After all, hadn't the god Ahura Mazda commanded it?

To avoid any possibility of another Marathon, Xerxes had assembled an overwhelming force. Once across the Hellespont, the terrible army descended toward the Greeks — and history — waiting at the pass of Thermopylae. There,

a tiny contingent of 300 Spartan hoplites led by King Leonidas had been joined by a few small contingents from other Greek cities. In all, the defenders of Thermopylae numbered only about 6,000 men. These, though, were no ordinary men. Since birth the Spartans had been trained as warriors by the militarized Spartan society, and they carried the best armor and weaponry available. Their interlocking shields turned the hoplite infantry into a crushing killing machine, and their long spears, longer than those used by the Persians, enabled them to kill while staying outside the range of their enemies. But would these advantages be enough against the overwhelming numerical superiority brought to bear by the Great King?

Arriving at the pass at Thermopylae — the Hot Gates — the Persians were confronted with an unenviable task. To be sure, the narrow defile was held by only a relatively few defenders. But, as the Persians had been warned by Demaratus, a former Spartan king who now served as an advisor to Xerxes, these were men dedicated to the art of war who would fight with unsurpassed skill and ferocity. Moreover, the geography would not allow the Persians to depend upon their far superior numbers. Somehow they would have to turn the flank of the defenders.

For the flanking maneuver, Xerxes counted on his navy. This, like the army, was spectacular in its size. Its largest contingent was provided by those stout seamen, the Phoenicians, with 300 triremes (a warship with three banks of oars on each side). The Egyptians likewise furnished an additional 200 triremes. Other regions of the empire provided the balance of the 1,207 triremes of the naval force. All told, this was itself a terrifying force, larger by far than what the Athenians could provide, and considering the skills of the Phoenicians and Egyptians, just as skilled as any navy the Greeks could field. Shortly after the Persian army encamped before Thermopylae, the Great King's navy, somewhat weakened due to storm damage suffered on the way, arrived in waters off Artemisium, taking up station opposite the position of the Athenian navy.

With the full strength of his army and navy now brought to bear on the Greek positions, Xerxes struck. The prospect of the attack struck fear into the hearts of the

The Persian postal system alone was a marvel. According to historian Tom Holland, “Nothing equal to it had ever been known before. No wonder that the Great King’s control of such a service — the original information superhighway — should so have overawed his subjects.”

brave defenders of Thermopylae. “The Greek forces ... when the Persian army drew near to the entrance of the pass, were seized with fear,” Herodotus records, and they debated the possibility of retreat. Leonidas, in the end, chose to stay and face the attack which was not long in coming. On land wave upon wave of Persian infantry broke against the heavily fortified positions commanded by Leonidas.

The Greeks, shrewd warriors, made the most of the geography and inflicted terrible losses on the Persians. Eventually Xerxes ordered the advance of his elite corps, the 10,000 Immortals, against the Greek position, but even they, hardened mountain warriors that they were, could not break through the Greek position. After two days, the standoff remained. Finally a Greek named Ephialtes betrayed the defenders of Thermopylae, revealing to the Persians a concealed path around the pass. Following this path during the night, the Immortals came up behind Leonidas. The Spartan king, warned as the Immortals approached, ordered most of his troops to return to their homes. Only Leonidas, the 300 Spartan warriors with him, and a few other Greek soldiers who remained would stand and face the crushing power of the Great King.

The Spartans’ incredible bravery and heroism against impossible odds will never be equaled. But the result was inevitable: they perished almost to the last man and the Persians gained the pass. Xerxes, enraged at the destruction the Spartans had inflicted on his army, impaled the severed head of Leonidas on a pole so that all could see the fate of those who stood in the way of the empire. A more fitting monument to Leonidas and his brave men would be erected later by the Greeks. On it were two inscriptions. The first, in honor of all the defenders, read: “Here did four thousand men from Pelop’s land against three hundred myriads bravely stand.” The other was devoted solely to Leonidas and the 300 Spartans. It read: “Go, stranger, and to Lacedaemon tell, that here, obeying her behests, we fell.”

At sea, the defense of Greece was no less brave. The Athenian navy, outnumbered but not outmaneuvered, bloodied the nose of the Persian fleet. But they too, finally had to withdraw. By land and sea, the road was open to Athens, now defenseless and abandoned.



The Jewish Captivity: After a revolt, Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple of Solomon, and carried off nearly the entire population to Babylon. Cyrus the Great captured the city of Babylon and freed the Jews held captive there.

Lessons From History

Of what use is Persian history? For that matter, of what use is history at all? It was a question that vexed Will Durant, the Herodotus (the Father of History) of our age. If we advance, if we progress, Durant and his wife Ariel concluded in *The Lessons of History*, it is because “we are born to a richer heritage, born on a higher level of that pedestal which the accumulation of knowledge and art raises.” Our heritage, the Durants concluded, “rises, and man rises in proportion as he receives it.” We are prone to fall backwards if we forget our history, and we are prone to fail with Iran proportionately to our failure to comprehend the full scope of Iranian history.

Iran today is an Islamic nation, but that nation rose on the shoulders of its ancient heritage of universal empire. The pull of that ancient lineage on the feelings of modern Iranians has not been weakened by the advent of Islamic rule. In 2005, Mohammad-Reza Kargar, the director of the National Museum of Iran, noted: “The traditional civilization, art and culture of Iran, despite contacts with other cultures throughout the centuries, has not lost its characteristic features and has continued to keep its own identity.” The degree that this is true was reflected in the speech given by Iranian lawyer Shirin Ebadi when she accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on December 10, 2003. “I am an Iranian,” Ebadi said, “a descendant of Cyrus the Great.”

According to R.K. Ramazani, professor emeritus of politics at the University of Virginia, Ayatollah Khomeini, who established the current Islamic Republic of Iran, “advocated an ‘Islamic world order’ for the benefit of humanity.” When, on September 14, current Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said, “we believe that on the basis of law and justice we can better lead the world,” he was speaking from the same tradition. According to professor Ramazani, that tradition is heavily influenced by the modern Iranian understanding of Persian history and the Persian Empire’s unification of disparate cultures under a single authority. “Here,” Ramazani wrote of Khomeini’s vision for a universal Iranian Islamic hegemony, “I see the tenacious hold of the Iranian tradition of pretensions to universality.” ■

— DENNIS BEHRENDT

Alexander the Great, according to the chronicler Arrian, “burnt the palace of the Persian kings” at Persepolis. In those flames died the great empire of the Persians, gone but not forgotten.

In Victory, Defeat

Xerxes did indeed complete his march upon Athens and entering the city did put its *daiva*-haunted temples to the torch. But the victory was not to last. The Greek navy had retreated to Salamis, where those evacuated from Athens had sought shelter. There they won a great naval battle against the remainder of Xerxes’ forces. Despite the Greek naval victory, it seemed to Xerxes that he had accomplished his objective. He had captured all of Attica, Athens included. Seeing that

there was nothing left to win, the Great King left Greece to return to his empire, leaving behind only a smaller force. Yet battle would rage one year more. The Persian force that remained behind was under the command of Mardonius, a brave and skilled warrior who intended to quell any further Athenian and Spartan mischief.

This, he hoped, could be accomplished via diplomacy, and he offered the Athenians autonomous rule, peace, and Persian aid in helping rebuild Athens. The Athenians, incredibly, refused and sought military help from Sparta. The Spartans, after hesitating, agreed to help. At Plataea, Mardonius was met in battle by a Spartan army led by the great general Pausanias. It was close-fought battle until Mardonius, prominently seated upon his white horse, fell in the battle. With the loss of their leader, the Persians broke

and Greece was free. Never again would Persia threaten Greece and the West. On the contrary, it was the West that would conquer Persia. Alexander of Macedon, the great conqueror, every bit the equal of the great Persians Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes, swept across the empire, establishing his own empire in its stead.

Born by the sword, the Persian Empire would die by the sword. In January of 330 B.C., Alexander’s army captured the venerable capital of Persepolis. The Macedonian conqueror, according to the chronicler Arrian, “burnt the palace of the Persian kings.” Burning the great palace of Darius and Xerxes at Persepolis, Alexander said, “was retribution for the destruction of Athens, the burning of the temples, and all the other crimes they had committed against the Greeks.” In the flames at Persepolis died the great empire of the Persians, gone but not forgotten. ■

The Persian Empire at its largest extent encompassed what was then almost the whole of the known world.

