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Time: 20 minutes

The Achaemenid Empire

History should not be seen as fully objective, as historical accounts are written by people who have their own standpoints on social, religious, and political issues, as well as personal biases. One example of a less objective account is the history of the Persian Empire. Persians were and still are often viewed as “the other” or “the enemy” in the Western historical and political tradition. This is not surprising, however, considering that most historical accounts come from ancient Greek historians and philosophers. Only recently have scientists been able to revisit historical evidence and critically analyze Greek sources.

Origins of the Empire

The Achaemenid Empire, also known as the First Persian Empire, was a powerful ancient empire in Western Asia, founded by Cyrus the Great around 500 BCE. The name Persians (*parsua* in the Greek pronunciation) comes from a territory named Persis. Persians were nomadic Iranian people: they had no fixed home, and they moved according to the seasons from place to place in search of food, water, and grazing land.

Before the Achaemenid Empire, there existed a short-lived Iranian state, the Median Empire, ruled by another group of ancient Iranian people called the Medes. Cyrus the Great rose in rebellion against the king of the Median Empire around 550 BCE, leading to the creation of the Persian Empire. Being a very talented military strategist, Cyrus conquered neighbouring territories, including Lydia and Babylonia. The Achaemenid Empire was notable for its size. One of the biggest empires ever created, it stretched from Central Europe to the Indus Valley. At the peak of its size and glory, the population of the Persian Empire reached around 50 million people.

Cyrus is remembered for his unique political approaches to the conquered territories. He tried to manage multiple ethnicities, cultures, and religions all under one empire. Cyrus did not interfere with local customs, religions, trade, and business practices. The emperor presented himself as the “saviour” of the conquered territories. The most famous case of such liberation is the decree that released Jewish people from captivity in Babylon and allowed them to return to their homeland.

In 547 BCE, Cyrus conquered the Greek territories of Ionia and appointed Persian rulers. This conquest would lead to the future conflicts known as the Greco-Persian Wars. Even though Persians were very tolerant of other religions and

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cultures, they implemented strong vertical governmental control. Greeks, on the other hand, valued their independent city states and horizontal structure. This ultimately led to decades of rebellions and battles for control.

In 480 and 479 BCE the Greeks won decisive victories over the presiding emperor, Xerxes, pushing the Persians to retreat. Such conflicts were not unusual in ancient times. From the Persian perspective, it was just one of the events in the history of the empire. However, when Greece emerged as a cultural and philosophical centre of Europe, the conflict was given more significance in European history. It is not impossible to imagine that the strife between Europe and the Middle East in the Middle Ages was heavily influenced by earlier accounts and perceptions of the Greek historians.

Legacy of the Empire

After around 200 years of prosperous development, the Persian Empire was conquered by Alexander the Great in 330 BCE. Even though Alexander's invasion separated the Persian Empire into multiple, smaller states, each of them retained many of their political and cultural traits.

The Achaemenid Empire had a huge, often understated impact on the cultural development of the world. Persian art and architecture incorporate a number of styles—Median, Assyrian, and Greek—creating a uniquely Persian appearance. The ancient city of Persepolis was one of the richest and most developed cities in the world. Recent historical research suggests that many scientific and philosophical advancements of the Renaissance in Europe would not have been possible without documents and books that existed in the Middle East. After the fall of the Roman Empire and the resulting spread of Christianity, most of the Greek works in literature and philosophy were saved in libraries in the Middle East, many in Persian and Arab Empires.

Greek historians often portrayed Persians in a negative light, underestimating their cultural significance and painting them as aggressors. It is becoming evident that this view is simplistic and does not provide a full picture of the situation. Moreover, such a conclusion raises doubts concerning other historical accounts provided by ancient Greeks and any other historians. Critical evaluation of source materials is an important component of any historical inquiry. Some historians joke that a one-sided, biased view has to be written first, before it can be critically analyzed and made more objective. Whether that is true or not, a key component to the process of moving history studies forward is revisiting existing views. Any human knowledge is constructed and must therefore be questioned, supported, and validated.

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1. According to the passage, Persians were viewed as “the other” in history because of _____.
 - ☐ the opposite stance of the conquerors
 - ☐ salient language differences
 - ☐ biased historical perspectives
 - ☐ atypical cultural practices

2. Cyrus is regarded as the _____ of the First Persian Empire.
 - ☐ defender
 - ☐ traitor
 - ☐ conqueror
 - ☐ founder

3. Which phrase best describes Cyrus’s political approach?
 - ☐ treating the conquered with respect
 - ☐ promoting Persian value systems
 - ☐ securing borders with walls
 - ☐ focusing on political development

4. Which of the following descriptions are related to Ionia as mentioned in this passage? Choose 3.
 - ☐ a conquered territory
 - ☐ a trigger of consequential invasion
 - ☐ a province inhabited by Persians
 - ☐ an example of political differences
 - ☐ a source of ancient culture

5. According to the passage, what was the main cause for the Ionian Revolt?
 - ☐ economic inequality
 - ☐ political organization
 - ☐ cultural tension
 - ☐ succession disagreement

6. Fill in the blank with one word from the passage.
Cyrus’s conquests lead to the _____ wars.

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7. In Paragraph 6, what does the word “strife” in the phrase “the strife between Europe and the Middle East” refer to?
 - ☐ trade
 - ☐ treaty
 - ☐ negotiation
 - ☐ conflict

8. Which of the following reflects the Persian Empire’s states after Alexander’s invasion?
 - ☐ They entered a long period of prosperity.
 - ☐ They were unified under the empire.
 - ☐ They lost their political identities.
 - ☐ They kept their individual cultures.

9. According to the passage, which of the following shows an important impact from the Middle East on Europe’s development?
 - ☐ exchange of written texts
 - ☐ military innovations
 - ☐ architecture borrowings
 - ☐ nomadic migration

10. What word most accurately describes the Greek view of the Persians?
 - ☐ jealous
 - ☐ respectful
 - ☐ indifferent
 - ☐ unfavourable

11. Match the following historical figures with their associated event.

Cyrus the Great
Alexander the Great
Xerxes

Conquered the Persian Empire
Freed the Jewish people
Defeated by the Greeks