

MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF THE WORK AND THOUGHT
OF ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE

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The First Iranian Empire

by Arnold J. Toynbee

The founding of the First Iranian Empire is an event of major importance, not only in Iranian history, but in World history. The First Iranian Empire was the World's sole superpower during the period of its existence, and its posthumous effect on human affairs has been lasting. Nor is this empire merely an important landmark in mankind's past; it also has a relevance for the future. Now that technology has "annihilated distance" and has invented the atomic weapon, all the peoples of the World will have to unite with each other in some form, as the only alternative to mutual destruction. This unification on a world-wide scale is going to be as difficult as it is indispensable. The statesmen who grapple with it will need guidance, and they will find this in the experience of past empires that have sought to unite the World. The First Persian Empire is one of those that came near to success. Its experience is therefore a matter of topical interest to mankind at the present-day.

The First Persian Empire is notable for its size, its equipment, its organization, and its policy. It embraced the three riverbasins – lower Tigris and Euphrates, lower Nile, and Indus – that had been the birthplaces of the earliest civilizations. It also included all the sedentary Iranian-speaking peoples, and was thus the forerunner of the present Iranian national state. It failed to incorporate the Iranian pastoral nomads on the steppes to the north; yet it extended from present-day Uzbekistan and Panjab to present-day Bulgaria and Libya, and it also brought part of the Greek World, as well as part of India, under its rule.

In the days before the invention of modern technology, the first problem for all empire-builders was how to establish adequate means of communication for holding their dominions together. The First Persian Empire anticipated the Roman Empire in building a network of roads, equipped with posting-stations and relays of horses. The speed of the Iranian imperial government's couriers was famous; and the Emperor Darius I travelled

enormous distances during the twelve months within which he was suppressing widespread revolts that had threatened to undo the work of the Empire's founder, Cyrus II. However, in the pre-mechanical age, travel was easier and faster by water than overland, and both Darius I and his son and successor Xerxes were oceanic-minded. Darius I opened up a waterway from the Kabul River down the Indus to the heads of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, and he reconditioned the canal linking Suez with the Nile delta. Xerxes tried to repeat the Phoenicians' feat of circumnavigating Africa. Like Shah Abbās Safavi, and, indeed, like the present-day government of Iran, the Achaemenids attached great importance to holding securely the Iranian coasts and islands of the Persian Gulf.

In establishing long-distance communications, the statesmen of the First Persian Empire were pioneers; but roads and seaways would not have availed to keep the Empire in being if its rulers had not won the goodwill of a majority of their subjects. They won this by a policy of political liberality and religious toleration which was appreciated for its contrast with the destructiveness and oppressiveness of the Achaemenid Iranian Emperors' Assyrian predecessors. The Iranian imperial régime was light-handed. It allowed a maximum of local self-government (the Phoenician city-states were even endowed with miniature sub-empires), and it deliberately maintained complete religious toleration. It is not certain that the Achaemenian Emperors were adherents of the Prophet Zarathustra, but it is quite certain that they did not try to impose their own religion. Consequently there was an active intercourse between local religions in and after the Achaemenian Age, and Zoroastrianism eventually had a great influence on Judaism, just because it was not propagated by force. The Iranian imperial government never gave its Jewish subjects any occasion for quarreling with it, whereas the Empire's Seleucid Greek successor-state had a head-on collision with the Jews, 170 years after the Iranian Empire had been overthrown by Alexander as a result of its departure from the Iranian policy of religious toleration.

The Empire did not succeed in reconciling all its subjects. The Babylonians and Egyptians could not forget their glorious past, and the Greek city-states successfully resisted the subordination of their sovereignty to the government of a world-state. On the other hand, the Iranian Māda, an ex-imperial people, were reconciled to the Farsis' hegemony by being associated with the Farsis in the exercising of it; and the Phoenicians, as

well as the Iranians, gave practical proof of their loyalty when the Empire was being assaulted by the Greek conqueror Alexander. The Phoenician city-state Tyre stood a long siege; the Iranian peoples in the regions to the north-east of present-day Tehran put up an obstinate resistance, even after the Iranian Empire had been extinguished by the death of the last Achaemenian Emperor, Darius III.

The Achaemenian Emperors have left official records of their own acts, and lists of the peoples under their rule. The longest and most informative of these is Darius I's famous inscription on the cliff-face at Behistan. There are also unofficial Jewish and Greek accounts of the Empire. The Greek accounts are the most copious, and their testimony to the virtues of the Empire is particularly convincing because the Greeks were hostile witnesses. The Greeks were impressed by the Iranian aristocrats' loyalty to the imperial dynasty, and by the sense of honour from which this loyalty sprang. Alexander became acquainted with the Iranians through making war on them; and, though he conquered their Empire, he planned to maintain it by taking the Iranians into partnership with his own Macedonian Greeks. The conqueror had been conquered by his admiration of the Iranians' spirit.

Alexander lived to conquer the First Persian Empire, but not to carry out his plan for preserving it by reorganising it. After his sudden premature death, the Empire that Cyrus II had built, and that Darius I had re-established on more solid foundations, was broken up in the struggle among Alexander's generals for the division of Alexander's territorial legacy. For the next thousand years, the Middle East was politically partitioned. It did not regain anything like the unity and peace that it had enjoyed under the Achaemenian régime till the empire-building work of Cyrus II and Darius I was re-performed by the Muslim Arabs.

The Achaemenian Empire was the first Iranian empire in a series. The Arsacids pushed the Greeks back from Türkmenistan to the far side of the River Euphrates. The Arsacids' successors the Sasanids – who, like the Achaemenids, were Farsi – confronted the Roman Empire on equal terms. The Second Iranian Empire, which the Sasanids maintained for four centuries, was overthrown by foreign conquerors as suddenly as the First Iranian Empire had been. Yet the Abbasid Caliphate, which was almost conterminous with the Achaemenian

Empire, was a resuscitated Iranian Empire under an Arab veneer; and the third Iranian Empire, which was founded by the Safavis, is the Iran of today.

Thus the Iranian genius for empire-building has revealed itself again and again, and the suddenness of the overthrow of the first and second Iranian Empires has been matched by the unexpectedness of the establishment of the third. Iran's past political vicissitudes have been major events in the World's history; but it is worth repeating that the First Persian Empire also has a relevance for mankind's future. The tolerant spirit of the founder, Cyrus II, and his successors is the spirit that our present-day World needs in the statesmen whose task it will be to unify mankind on a literally world-wide scale.