

# What the Near East knew

Piero Scaruffi

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# What the Persians knew

- Bibliography:
  - Lindsay Allen: The Persian Empire (2005)
  - Zaehner: The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism (1961)

# What the Near East knew

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- Persia
  - Medes
  - Achaemenids (700-331 BC)
  - Seleucids (305-64 BC)
  - Parthians (205BC-225AD)
  - Sassanids (227- 641 AD)

# What the Near East knew

- Persia: not a land of river valleys!



# What the Near East knew

- Persia
  - Achaemenids (700-331 BC)



# What the Near East knew

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- Persia before 6th c BC
  - Indo-European language
  - No system of writing (later adopted the Babylonian cuneiform)
  - 539: Cyrus conquers Babylonia

# What the Near East knew

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## Achaemenid Persian Empire

- Homeland: southwestern Iran, dominated by the Zagros mountain range and centered around the cities of Anshan and Susa
- Nomadic pastoralist culture, with emphasis on horsemanship and archery
- 612 BC: Medes and Babylonians defeat the Assyrians at the Battle of Nineveh
- Medes and Persians model their states on that of the defeated Assyrians

# What the Near East knew

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## Achaemenid Persian Empire

- 550-39 BC: Cyrus conquers the Medes, the Anatolian peninsula (including the Greeks on its coast) and Babylonia (539 BC)
- Cyrus: palace complex at Pasargadae in central Iran
- Cambyses conquers wealthy Egypt
- Darius and Xerxes expand to Eastern Europe
- Darius' palace in Susa and Xerxes' palace in Persepolis
- The empire spans all three known continents all the way to Pakistan

# What the Near East knew

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## Achaemenid Persian Empire

- A highly organized monarchic state
- Advanced construction techniques
- Rapid communication network
- Palace complexes at Persepolis, Susa and Pasargadae modeled after Assyrian palaces at Nineveh and Nimrud

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## Achaemenid Persian Empire

- Persians fail to invade Greece: at Marathon in 490 BC, at Salamis in 480 and Plataea in 479
- 330 BC: Alexander conquers the Achaemenid Empire
- Alexander destroys the Persepolis palace complex but preserves much of the Persian imperial structure

# What the Near East knew

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- The Persian empire is divided in 23 provinces (satraps)
- Phonetic written language derived from cuneiform
- Network of roads
- Tax system
- Darius introduces Persian money, the golden daric made of silver siglos (money had been invented in Lydia, now a province of Persia)

# What the Persians knew

- The Cyrus Cylinder, 538 BC
  - First Charter of The Rights of Nations
  - The First Declaration of Human Rights: freedom of religion and abolition of slavery
  - "Cyrus, King of Kings..., has dictated a new world order, for the man to be free, for the man to live as he pleases and be protected by the law, all men to have rights...
  - ... by the will of Ahura Mazda, all subordinates and subjects of the Empire, nations of the four quarters, shall respect... the various religions of the Persian Empire. We shall not rule by force and oppress no nation. Each is free to accept or reject, we shall bestow internal autonomy to all states ...

# What the Persians knew

- The Cyrus Cylinder, 538 BC



# What the Persians knew

- Peak of Achaemenid empire: Xerxes I, 475BC (5.5 million square kms)



# What the Persians knew

- Persia fails to conquer Greece
  - 490 BC: Darius defeated at the battle of Marathon
  - 480 BC: Xerxes defeated at the naval battle of Salamis (the Greeks employ the faster trireme boats)

# What the Persians knew

- Mazdaism
  - Originates among the peaceful, sedentary communities of northern Iran (Zoroaster's "Asha" or "people of righteousness"), constantly threatened by the raids of nomadic horsemen who practice animistic polytheism (Zoroaster's "Druj" or "people of the lie")

# What the Persians knew

- Mazdaism
  - God of Light vs God of Darkness
  - The world was created by Ahura Mazda/ Ormazd
  - Ahriman later corrupted the world
  - Spiritual, immaterial God
  - Heretic to build temples (all Achemenian buildings were secular)

# What the Persians knew

- Ahura Mazda



Persepolis

# What the Persians knew

- Mazdaism
  - Six attendant deities of Mazda, the Amesha Spentas, corresponding to six personal aspects (“ahuras”) of Ahura Mazda
    - Vohu Manah [good thought]
    - Asha Vahista [highest righteousness]
    - Khshathra Vairya [divine kingdom]
    - Spenta Armaiti [pious devotion]
    - Haurvatat [salvation]
    - Ameretat [immortality]
  - Ahriman’s evil spirits (“daevas”)

# What the Persians knew

- **Zarathustra (b 628BC)**
  - **Prophet of Mazdaism**



# What the Persians knew

- Zarathustra/ Zoroaster (b 628BC)
  - Origin: Afghanistan/Tajikistan/Uzbekistan
  - Holy book: “Avesta” (including the “Gatha”)
  - Ahura originally referred to 33 ruling gods in ancient, pre-Zoroastrian religions in Persia and India
  - Zoroaster preached against all the other gods except Ahura Mazda
  - Monotheism
  - Good-evil dualism (the universe is under the control of two contrary gods: Ahura-Mazda, the creator god who is full of light and good, and Ahriman, the god of dark and evil)

# What the Persians knew

- Zarathustra/ Zoroaster (b 628BC)
  - A revealed religion (God revealed the truth to some people)
  - Eschatological (at the end of time, a messiah will come, Ahura-mazda will emerge victorious, the dead will be raised from their graves and be judged)
  - Frasho-Kereti (“Rehabilitation”): apocalyptic ending/judgement that takes place on Earth
  - Ristaxe: resurrection of the body, not just the soul

# What the Persians knew

- Zarathustra/ Zoroaster (b 628BC)
  - Dualist: separates good and evil (Egyptian and Mesopotamian gods were capable of both good and evil)
  - Ahura-Mazda is not responsible for evil
  - Hell (but only temporary: everybody eventually is “saved” by Ahura-Mazda)

# What the Persians knew

- Zarathustra/ Zoroaster (b 628BC)
  - History of the universe, past, present, and future
  - Four periods of 3,000 years each
    - The struggle between good and evil begins but there is no matter
    - The struggle between good and evil begins moves to the material world (good people help Mazda, evil people help Ahriman)
    - Zoroaster spreads the faith
    - Saoshyant will save the world from Ahriman, the dead will rise for their final reward or punishment, and good will reign forever

# What the Persians knew

- Zarathustra/ Zoroaster (b 628BC)
  - Three kinds of soul: fravashi (that dies with the body), urvany (that survives the death of the body) and daena (conscience)
  - Man is free to choose God or not. Man is not a slave.

# What the Persians knew

- Zand-agahih/ The Bundahishn (7c AD-1178)
  - Chapter 1. Ohrmazd's original creation; the antagonism of the evil spirit
  - Chapter 2. On the formation of the luminaries
  - Chapter 4. Goshorun, the primal ox
  - Chapter 5. The planets and cosmology
  - Chapter 6. The battle with the sky
  - Chapter 7. The battle with water
  - Chapter 8. The battle with the earth
  - Chapter 9. The battle with the plants
  - Chapter 10. The battle with the primeval ox
  - etc

# What the Persians knew

- Zurvanism (500 BC):
  - Zurvan: source of time, identified with infinite time, but not creator
  - Father of Ohrmazd (light, good) and Ahriman (darkness, bad), the two god creators
  - Thus Zurvan is personally responsible for both good and evil
  - Ahriman has attacked Ohrmazd's world of light (namely Gayomart, the first man, son of Ohrmazd and the Earth), and Ohrmazd has created the material world with help from the spirits of heaven

# What the Persians knew

- Mithras (300 BC):
  - Chief lieutenant of Mazda
  - The son of the Sun
  - Born on 25/12 from a virgin
  - Captures the bull
  - Eats a last meal with 12 followers and ascends to heaven
  - Messiah who will return to save humankind

# What the Persians knew

- Avesta
  - Holy book of Mazdaism
  - The “Gatha” is written in Gathic Avestan (a north-eastern dialect) and are supposed to be hymns composed by Zarathushtra (Zoroaster) himself around 1000 BC
  - Yasht (648–330 BC)
  - Vendidad (141 BC-224 BC)
  - Visperad (226-651 AD)
  - Only the Gatha was written by Zarathushtra. The others were written by Magi in the Achaemenid period or later.

# What the Persians knew

- Avesta
  - Later Mazdaism (Darius I's era) introduces other gods, notably the sun-god Mithras (i.e., reintroduces popular beliefs)
  - Mithraic mystery rites of initiation

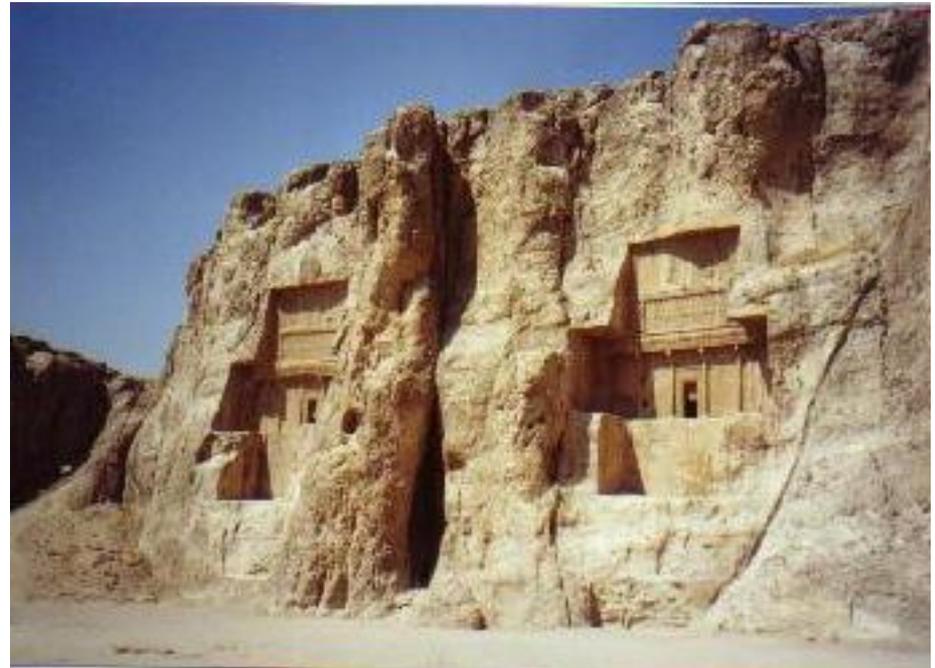
# What the Persians knew

- Mazdaism declines after Alexander's invasion

# What the Persians knew

- Zoroastrians painted eggs for Nowrooz, their New Year celebration, which falls on the Spring equinox

# What the Persians knew



# What the Persians knew

- Architecture
  - The palace, not the temple (purely secular)
  - Egypt, not Mesopotamia (e.g., no arch/vault)
  - Zoroastrian art concentrates on representations of fire and light: no architectural structures, no iconic images
  - Reign of Artaxerxes II (404-358BC): fire temples, statues to Anahita (goddess of cosmic waters)
  - Ardashir (226-240) builds a temple to Anahita at his capital Istakhr
  - Shapur II (310-79) builds a huge temple to Anahita at Takht-I-Suleiman (near Tabriz)



# Persepolis



Animals are no longer realistic but heraldic





(Oriental Museum, Chicago)

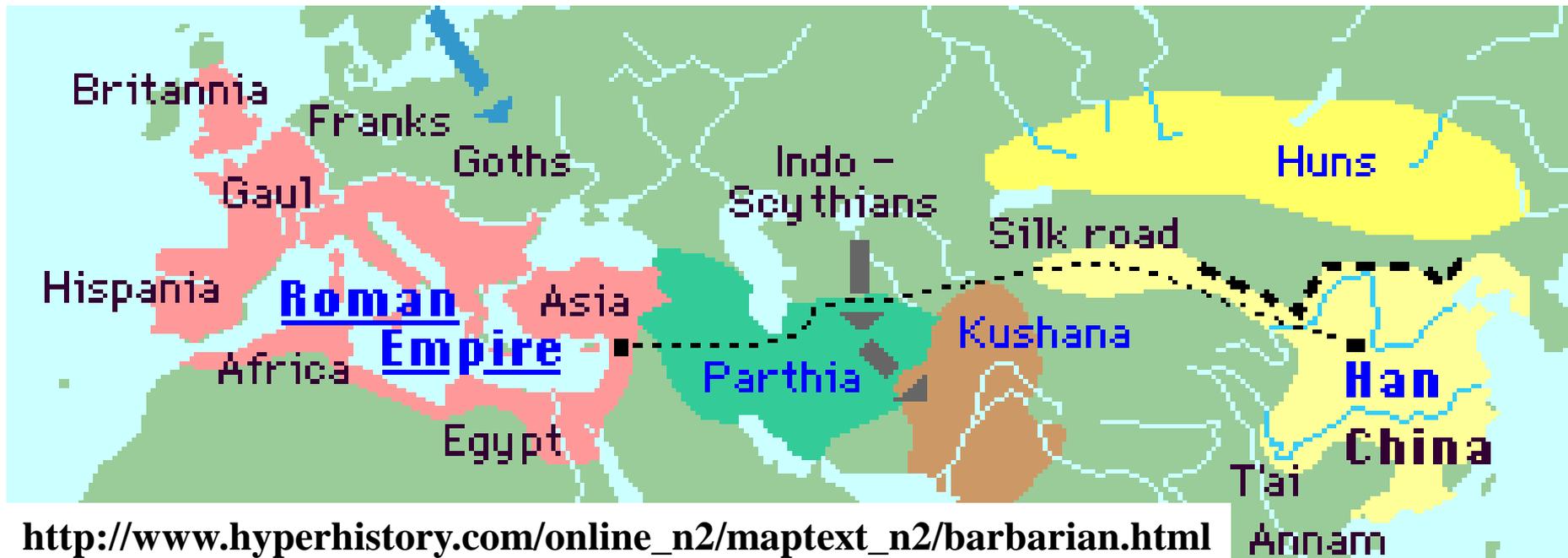


# What the Persians knew

- Arsacids/ Parthia (250 BC - 227 AD)
  - Conquest of the Seleucid empire (except Syria)
  - Wars against Rome
  - Zoroastrianism becomes the official religion, but foreign religions are pervasive (Judaism, Christianity, Manicheism)
  - Strong influence of Greek culture
  - Inauguration of the Silk Road

# What the Persians knew

- 0-300 AD four empires in Eurasia:
  - Han (Buddhist and Taoist)
  - Roman (Christian)
  - Parthian (Zoroastrian)
  - Kushan (Buddhist)



# What the Persians knew

- **Sassanids (227 Ad - 641 AD)**



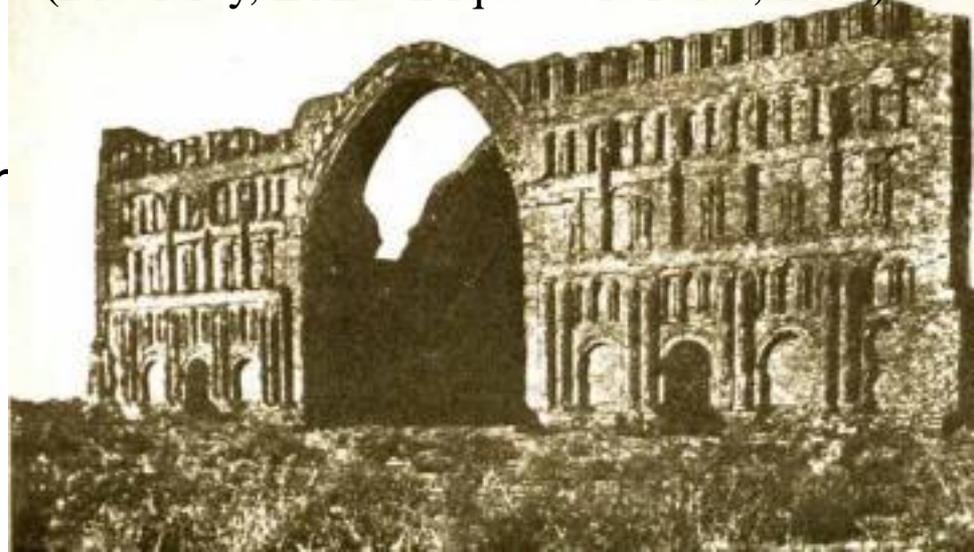
# What the Persians knew

- Sassanids (227 Ad - 641 AD)
  - 224: Ardashir I founds the Sasanid kingdom
  - 230-261: Wars against Rome over Mesopotamia, Syria and Caucasus
  - 241-276: Mani preaches a new religion that incorporates Judaism and Christianity
  - 256-260: Shapur I defeats and captures Valerian
  - 338-376: Wars against Rome
  - 531: Khosrow I
  - 526-532: War against Byzantine Empire
  - 541-561: War against Byzantine Empire
  - 575: Sassanids conquer Yemen
  - 591: Byzantium helps Khosrau II regain power during a civil war
  - 602-628: War against Byzantine Empire
  - 628-635: Civil war
  - 636-650: The Arabs conquer the Sassanid empire

# What the Persians knew

- Sassanids (227 AD - 641 AD)
  - Cultural revolution that brings back Mesopotamian culture and downplays Hellenism
  - Zoroastrianism also the religion of the people
  - Increased role of goddess Anahita
  - First state orthodoxy in the world
  - Persecution of Christians and Manicheans

Palace of Shapur I, Ctesiphon, 3rd c AD  
(Dieulafoy, *L'Art antique de la Perse*, 1889)



# What the Persians knew

- Sassanids (227 AD - 641 AD)
  - Manicheism (250 AD)
    - Kingdom of spirit (light) ruled by good god
    - Kingdom of matter (darkness) ruled by evil god
    - The kingdom of evil has invaded the kingdom of good, thus everything has dual nature
    - Bodily nature is evil
    - Humans must free themselves of their material aspect
    - Self-flagellation, no sex, no meat
    - All the prophets (Abraham, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus) were sent by the same God
    - Mani the last prophet

# What the Persians knew

- The Academia and Library of Gundeshapur
  - 256 AD: Shapur I defeats the Romans, captures two legions, sells one legion to China to buy Chinese books, uses the other legion to build the city of Gondishapur/ Gundeshapur on the model of Byzantium near the old Achaemenid capital Susa
  - 489 AD: Byzantine emperor Zeno shuts down the school of Edessa and scholars flee to Nisibis in Persia
  - 529 AD: Byzantine emperor Justinian shuts down the Academy at Athens and scholars flee to Persia with their Greek and Latin books
  - 531 AD: Khosrau/Chosroes I Sassanian gives refuge to Greek philosophers fleeing religious persecution by the Byzantine empire and they translate Greek texts into Pahlavi and also sends the scholar Borzouyeh to India to and acquire Indian texts and recruit Indian scholars to translate them from Sanskrit to Pahlavi

# What the Persians knew

- Sassanids (227 AD - 641 AD)
  - Wall paintings at Dura-Europus forerunners of Byzantine art
  - Arches, barrel vaults and domes
  - The windmill (7th c AD, will appear in Europe only in the 13th c)

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