

PERSIAN LEGACIES OF BUREAUCRACY AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Keywords: Persia, Athens, Sparta, Persepolis, Cyrus the Great, Darius, satraps

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1. Introduction

Modern knowledge about governance and administration has its origins in ancient civilizations, particularly that of the Persian Empire. By conquering virtually the entire known world of antiquity in a single generation, the Persians changed the world's political and administrative history for ever and established themselves as masters of empires, bureaucracy, government, and public administration. This paper discusses some of the early Iranian traditions of administration and bureaucracy from the beginning around 6000 B.C. The focus here, however, is on the Persian Achaemenid period.

It is worth noting that while the ancient city states of Athens and Sparta were busy discussing alternative forms of political systems and at times fighting each other, Persians were already efficiently administering the largest and mightiest empire the ancient world had ever seen. The following pages address (a) Iran prior to the Persian Empire; (b) the Persian Empire and the contribution of Cyrus the Great towards bureaucracy; (c) Darius's administrative reforms; and in conclusion (d) Persian legacies of, and implications for, modern public administration.

2. Early Iran, prior to the Persian Empire

Three major powers preceded Persians in Iran: Susa, Elam and Media.

(a) Shush Civilization and Administration: Susa (Persian Shusha) was one of the oldest sites of ancient civilizations beginning around 6000 B.C. As a city-state, it rivaled Sumer in Mesopotamia. With the rise of another early Iranian people, Elamites, Susa

served as the capital of one of the oldest empires around 3000 B.C. Destruction of Susa's magnificent architecture at the hands of an early Babylonian ruler was a record of historical disgrace, as was Alexander's burning destruction of Persepolis in 330 BC.

(b) *The Elamite Federated Empire*: This was one of the major ancient powers for over 2500 years until its fall to Medians in 600 B.C. As a rival to Sumer and Babylon, Elam's achievements in art, science, culture, administration, and government at least equaled if not surpassed its contemporaries. Its occupation of Babylon for almost 500 years expanded Iranian influence well beyond Mesopotamia.

The Elamite Empire governed a large territory comprising present day Iran, the Caspian Sea region, Afghanistan, and a major part of the Near East, including at times Babylonia and Assyria. Elamites were most likely the first in history who adopted the concept of a federal system, with five major kingdoms: Kassite, Guti, Lullubi, Susiana, and Elam. Intergovernmental relations among the federated members were regulated by numerous administrative rules and ordinances.

The federal structure of the Elamite Empire was organized into three administrative layers of governance: the various provinces were ruled by the (1) "governors," *Halmenik*, who were under the control of a (2) "Viceroy," *Sakanakkun*, who was subject to the actual (3) king of Elam, *Zunkir*. Religion flourished in ancient Elam, where the female "Great Goddess" was in high power, equal to the male God. Certain kings of Elam were also elevated to the "Messenger of God," "regent," and ruler on earth. Thus, the administration of Elam reflected both secular and religious aspects.

A remarkable achievement or legacy of the ancient Elamites was the development of their own written official language. Others included the development and use of a "binary weight system," which had a major influence on the fraction systems of the whole of Mesopotamia; a massive number of administrative and business documents; major architectural works; the development and management of a gigantic system of underground canals, *Qanat*, for irrigation; construction and maintenance of numerous public works and enterprises such as roads, bridges, communication centers, and economic and commercial centers; and development and use of an advanced legal system: Elamite penal law, civil law, and administrative law. Also original to Elamites was the role of witnesses in the elaborate judicial proceedings. As urbanization grew, various professions also flourished.

(c) *The Median Empire*: The arrival of Aryans, a people of Indo-European origin, on the Iranian plateau during their second wave of migration from central Asia around 1000 B.C., changed the composition of the population and the political power in Iran and the whole of the Near East. This group of pastoral people established a vast world-state empire unknown before, and with an administrative system that was politically effective and managerially efficient. Of the two major branches of these Aryans, the Medes succeeded first in establishing a formidable empire state rivaling the main power players of Babylon, Lydia, Egypt, and Assyria. Centered in Ecbatana, or "place of assembly," in modern Hamadan of central Iran, the Median Empire mastered the "statecraft" of the ancient time, both in military and civil administration, by the seventh century. Medians captured Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and by totally absorbing the Elamite Empire

by 600 B.C., they set the stage for annexing Babylonia and Lydia.

Thus, the first half of the first millennium B.C. was "a turning point in human history," with the center stage shifting from the watered valleys of the Nile and Mesopotamia to the less climatically favored region of the north and Iran. The Medes were a young, vigorous people with great military ambitions, and with refined skills in government. For the first time in history, the Medes adopted the concept of "state" and turned that concept into practice. Under the brilliant military leader King Cyaxares, they were also the first who organized the Asiatic armies by uniting them into separate units—spearmen, archers, and cavalry. The Medes sought to regularize relations among their people; all citizens would have access to and deal with a unified entity, the "Median State."

The Medes also adopted a system of "collective decision-making" centered in Ecbatana or "place of assembly" (modern Hamadan). They established "a strict administration of justice," particularly since the time of the just King Dieoces, who was chosen by the "Median Assemblymen." The federal system of government allowed for great flexibility among non-Median peoples and nations under the supreme authority of the Median King.

The second major legacy of the Medes was their mastery of statecraft—not the kind that Assyrians practiced, uprooting the subject peoples with brutality, but a system with high efficiency while maintaining respect for local peoples' inputs. The bureaucracy under Medes was professionalized by two principles: (a) elaborate training and apprenticeship for administrative positions; and (b) systematic experience in office characterized by role specialization, organizational hierarchy, and a unity of command system.

Many bureaucrats came from the nobility and from the Magian priests who played a formidable role in government and society, but they also came from the class of "common men" with great ability who aspired to join the rank of the "men of pen" and to serve the state and the King. The formation of a "professional association" by the bureaucrats led to the creation of a guild system which was closed to non-bureaucrats.

3. The World-State Persian Empire

The Median Empire was at the zenith of its military power and was preparing to annex the rest of Mesopotamia, including Babylonia, when it suddenly fell to Persians. Persian forces under Cyrus II defeated the Median army, and the mighty Median Empire fell to Cyrus in 559 B.C. The Achaemenid Persian Empire founded by Cyrus the Great was the largest and the mightiest the ancient world had ever known. How was such a huge and diverse empire governed? The answer is provided under several sections below: (i) A background on Cyrus the Great, the founder; (ii) The administrative system of the Empire is discussed in some detail, outlining the position and status of (a) the Great King Darius and the central government; (b) the famous "satrapy" system of governance, the institutional mechanisms to control it, and the administrative policy toward subject peoples; and (c) the Persian bureaucracy, the environment within which it operated, the functions of the elite, the structure, processes and professionalization of the bureaucracy; (iii) The administrative reforms of Darius the Great are discussed with

a focus on roads and communication systems, economic reforms and financial management, legal reform and justice administration, and local government reform; (iv) Some conclusions are drawn with an analysis of the nature of the Persian Empire and their implications for modern public administration.

3.1 The founding father, Cyrus the Great

Human civilizations have seen few history making leaders like Cyrus the Great. He was a world leader, a conqueror, and a democratic monarch, with universal values for diversity, human rights, a merit system, and ideal leadership traits. His legacies have been institutionalized, not only in Iran but also around the world. He was an “ideal leader”, as Xenophon described him in *Cyropadea* (education of Cyrus), and for an ideal state, as Plato inferred in his book *Republic*.

Cyrus the Great was the founding father of the Persian Empire and of the new Iranian monarchy with a new constitution. In less than 30 years, he expanded the Persian Empire to include more than 47 empires, kingdoms, and nations. Only part of Greece, namely Athens and Sparta, escaped at times the expansion of this mighty empire.

Cyrus was a military genius, and a brilliant political leader with grand ambitions. His vision was to form a synthesis of a universal civilization based on cooperation and integration. His charismatic leadership transcended all boundaries of races, colors, religions, and nationalities. Persians called him the "Father," Greeks and Babylonians called him the "Law-Giver," and Jews called him the Savior and Deliverer. Under Cyrus the Great, a universal liberal policy of “tolerance” toward, and respect for, the local traditions, customs, and religions of the diverse peoples in the Empire was adopted and institutionalized, a policy that was continued under the Parthians and Sasanians for the next millennium.

Cyrus founded a monarchy, yet a form of democratic government based on freedom of religion, association, race, and color. He outlawed slavery. Persians were also receptive to other cultural traditions and values. According to Herodotus, "No race is so ready to adopt foreign ways as the Persian," but "themselves they consider in every way superior to everyone else in the world, and allow other nations a share of good qualities".

In decision-making, Cyrus consulted with experts, key generals, members of the nobility, and high level administrators, and relied on "consensus." He thought that majority rule tends to evolve into arrogance and tyranny, while the right of a minority can be violated by excesses of the majority. He never developed an elaborate royal court system, and thus the corruption so characteristic of most royal courts in history was not a challenge to his empire. Nor did he have enough time to spend in Persia proper to devote to details of administration. He adopted in principle the administrative system of the Medes and to an extent the Assyrian organization. Cyrus always warned against complacency in defense, administration, and justice. He taught adherence to a simple life and merit-principled education, administration, and governance, in addition to principles of fairness, tolerance, freedom, and shared values.

Cyrus organized his expanding empire on the basis of a "satrapy" system, as opposed to

the vassal-king model of the Medes and Assyrian empires, and appointed his own Governors, whose accountability and loyalty were assured through a complex system of multiple institutions of checks and balances.

3.2 Institutions of governance

According to Herodotus, the main arguments were about which form of government Persia should adopt—government by the people, an oligarchy, or a monarchy—all with a professional bureaucracy, civil and military. Monarchy was agreed upon, and Darius became the Great King in 522 B.C.

He was a great military leader, and expanded the Empire further into all of Asia in the East, including India, and to the farthest West, taking over North Africa, southern Europe, and most of the Greek territories. He was a Law-Giver to all subject peoples. Because of his interest in details of administration, he was also labeled a "shop-keeper." He was a benevolent autocrat, though he heard the opinions of his numerous advisors.

The Achaemenid empire was organized on the basis of a powerful central government with the sovereign King at its head, a strong "satrapy" system governing the various regions, a highly effective and efficient administrative system with a professionalized bureaucracy, a liberal governance policy, a formidable army commanded by the great aristocratic nobility, and a multitude of complex institutions of checks and balances.

3.2.1 The King and the central government

The Achaemenid Empire was organized hierarchically with the Sovereign Great King, his court, and the central government, armed with a professional bureaucracy and the army, at the top. Next were the satrap and his court establishment, followed by the sub-satrap in charge of the provincial and local administrative districts.

The head of the state was the King—a hereditary monarch, enjoying a religious sanction. The Greeks called him *Basileus*, "the one and only real king in the world." He consulted with various sources, including the Persian nobles, the official experts, the Council of Advisors, the Council of Cabinet Ministers, and also the countries and peoples of the satrapies concerned.

His word was law, but was limited by custom, tradition, and the nobility. After the Great King, the Court as the central government played a formidable role in politics and administration of the Empire. Such key officials as the *arstibara* (spear-bearer), the *vacabara* (bow-bearer), *databara* (law-bearers or royal judges), *hazarapati* (commander in chief of armed forces and the Immortals, the Ten Thousand permanent bodyguards of the King, or the Kingsmen), the *Grand-Vizir* or Prime Minister as the cabinet secretary, and *ganzabara* (the Treasurer)—all were powerful forces in the court, which complemented the harem later in the Empire. The strategic elite of course were the main power, after the King himself. Of these, the Treasury and legal as well as military elites formed the most powerful administrators. These three powerful institutions formed the central government and the first levels of hierarchy in the satrapal administration of the Empire.

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