

The Achaemenid State and World Civilization

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Throughout their long and rich history, the Iranian people have created marvellous monuments of material and spiritual culture and made a big contribution to the progress of world civilization.

A very important place in Iran's history belongs to the Achaemenid period, when, after the establishment of the Achaemenid State 25 centuries ago, firm foundations of Iranian statehood and culture were laid. This period played an important role in the historical and cultural development of many other countries, which were part of the Achaemenid State.

The emergence of the Achaemenid State, the first world power known to history, was accompanied, as has been the case of all empires, by conquests and punitive expeditions. But the appearance of that empire had also quite a number of positive consequences and was a logical and progressive phenomenon in the context of the time. It was the culmination of processes characteristic of the preceding period (9-6 centuries B.C.) and an expression of the trend towards the integration of various ancient countries and peoples of the East within the framework of one state. Furthermore, the political history of ancient East in the pre-Achaemenid period abounded in continuous and fierce wars between great and small states, in invasions and predatory campaigns of nomadic tribes.

The integration into one state, the Achaemenid Empire, of various countries and peoples of the Middle East put a long stop to wars permanently waged in that region, which in itself was of great political significance. The destruction of productive forces,

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material and human resources and many cultural values, devastation of whole regions as a result of such wars hampered the economic, social and cultural advance manifesting the progressive tendency of the development of the society.

On the whole, conditions of peace existed in the Achaemenid State for the development of the economy and culture; savage arbitrary rule was absent; the Achaemenid rulers strove to introduce laws to be in force throughout the Empire; they took into consideration local characteristics, respected customs and traditions of various peoples whose government was to a great extent entrusted to the indigenous administration, nobility and priests, under the only condition –obeyance to the Persian authorities and payment and performance of heavy but strictly fixed taxes and duties.

These features could be already traced to the policies of Cyrus, founder of the Empire. They may be seen, for instance, in his conquest of the Neo-Babylonian Empire and in the regime established by Cyrus in the new territories annexed to his Empire. Cyrus' victory was greatly facilitated by social and political contradictions in these states. In general, Cyrus in his policies relied on the conditions and trends which had already emerged by that time as a result of socio-economic and political developments of the countries of the ancient East.

Cyrus' policies and actions were an expression of the social needs of his time and therefore there are grounds to regard him as an outstanding leader of the ancient world. Such an estimation is also corroborated by the more human nature of the policies pursued by Cyrus as compared with those of other conquerors, his predecessors.

Under the rule of the second prominent Achaemenid king, Darius I, a whole series of reforms were introduced leading to a greater order in the administration of the vast empire, stabilization of the taxation and financial systems. Darius also proclaimed a law and order policy and strove to prevent too great a strengthening of the nobility and its predominance in the State. Reforms of Darius I ensured stability of the Achaemenid Empire for many decades.

The Achaemenid State existed over two hundred years and proved to be one of the most stable empires of ancient times. The achievements of the Achaemenid period in the economic field and in the social, political and cultural traditions which took shape then, continued to affect the history of the Oriental peoples subsequently, i.e. in the Hellenistic period, and, at the time of the Parthian and the Sasanid States, the history of the peoples of Central Asia and Transcaucasia.

It is well known that the taxes and duties introduced in the Achaemenid Empire put a heavy burden on the population of the conquered lands; their exploitation by the indigenous nobility also was intensified. But law and order, strictly defined taxes, a unified monetary system and development of transport and communications helped in the development of the productive forces, of internal and external trade, growth of cities and towns, and exchange of material and intellectual values between various peoples.

A broad mutual enrichment of various cultures, the creation of many common cultural values accepted in different regions of the tremendous Empire, characteristic of the Achaemenid period, on the one hand, and the preservation of indigenous traditions, peculiar features and traits of individual peoples, on the other, formed a precondition of a fruitful cultural synthesis. The tolerance of the Iranian kings as regards customs and cultural traditions of various countries and peoples facilitated these processes.

The territories of the Achaemenid Empire were open to merchants, travellers and scholars from various countries. Greece among them. In many regions and cities of the Empire people from different countries and lands – ranging from Central Asia and India to Greece and Egypt–lived side by side with the indigenous population.

As is known, Alexander the Great wanted to unite the Greeks and peoples of the East in a single cultural and political whole. But it must be noted that the process of cultural synthesis had started and was quite intensive two hundred years before Alexander's conquests, and, thus, his policies in this respect were to a great extent a continuation of the Achaemenids' policy.

Historical processes which took place in the Achaemenid period, the culture and arts which were the result of active interaction of various ethno-cultural traditions had a profound influence on the development of the civilizations of East and West.

Of great historic importance were the links maintained by Iran and countries comprised in the Achaemenid Empire with the Hellenic world. Often, speaking about the relations between Greece and the Achaemenids, one would mention mainly the Graeco-Persian wars and their effects. But the wars which were waged between the Greek States and the Achaemenid Empire, with victories and defeats alternating, were followed by long periods of peace, and contacts between the countries of the East and Greece were broad and intensive.

Moreover, recognizing the great impact of the Hellenic civilization on the Oriental lands unified under the Achaemenid rule, and on Iran itself, for instance in the fields of art and architecture, we are fully entitled to say that in the Achaemenid period the influences in the opposite direction manifested themselves especially clearly and were of a far greater significance. Their impact left a deep trace in the culture of ancient Greece and, subsequently, in the European civilization as a whole.

Thus, the Achaemenid period of political unity of the peoples of the East was an important stage in the cultural evolution of the entire world civilization.

The culture of Achaemenid Iran, possessing vivid originality and unity, had imbibed many achievements of various peoples who took an active part in the economic and political life of the Achaemenid Empire. A great role was played in this by peoples and tribes of Transcaucasia and Central Asia and of the steppe regions to the north of the latter. It is accounted for not only by the close proximity of these regions to Iran, but also by active contacts of long standing in the pre-Achaemenid period and especially by numerous common traits of the ethno-cultural heritage of the Iranian tribes which were to found the

Median and Achaemenid States, and the tribes which lived farther North up to the Euro-Asian steppes. This greatly facilitated and strengthened ties between them in the Achaemenid period.

A characteristic example of this is provided by the history of Zoroastrianism. Having emerged as far back as the pre-Achaemenid period in Central Asia and adjacent areas to the south of it, it became widespread in the Achaemenid times in Western Iran where religious beliefs similar to those which had served as sources to Zoroastrianism were current. Central-Asian influences on Iran become clearly apparent when one studies the history of the Iranian epos. Many of its tales originated in the Central-Asian and East-Iranian regions. Spreading farther to the west already in the Achaemenid period, they became the core of the Iranian epos whose many themes were incorporated into Firdousi's "Shah-Nameh". Iranian tribes of Central Asia and the Scythian world played a prominent part in the spread in Iran of new practices in horsebreeding, new arms, military tactics and a number of fine art features.

The peoples of Central Asia made a material contribution to the creation of brilliant masterpieces of the Achaemenid art. The well-known Susa inscription of Darius I containing information of the arrival of gold, azurite, cornelian and turquoise from Central Asia for the construction of a palace there, testifies to the existence of extensive links between Central Asia and the neighbouring countries and to the high level of mining in the region in the Achaemenid and preceding periods evidenced by written sources and archeological data.

In the Achaemenid period, as a result of contacts with other regions and centres of the Achaemenid Empire, the peoples of Central Asia were introduced for the first time to written language and coins; Central-Asian art and architecture were greatly influenced by Iran and by ancient cultural centres of Western Asia, chiefly via Iran.

There are also in our possession many facts testifying to the beneficial mutual influences and enrichment of the cultures of the peoples of Transcaucasia and Iran in the Achaemenid period, and to the contacts between the cultures of the Scythians of the Northern Black Sea area and the tribes and peoples of Iran.

The introduction in Central Asia and Transcaucasia of administrative, social, political and legal institutions evolved in the Achaemenid Empire was of great importance to these regions. These institutions and socio-economic processes taking place in the Achaemenid period played a very important part in the emergence and development of the states of Central Asia and Transcaucasia of the post-Achaemenid period—the Khorezmian, Armenian, Iberian, Parthian and Graeco-Bactrian states and, subsequently, the Kushan Empire.

Thus, the existence of the Achaemenid Empire played a sizeable role in the historical and cultural development of the countries of Central Asia, Transcaucasia and of a number of other regions of the USSR. At the same time, the peoples of these countries actively participated in the life of the Achaemenid State and contributed to the evolution of its

culture. We may regard the Achaemenid period as an important stage in the history of our country, too.

The history of the Achaemenid civilization is an integral part of the history of human civilization as a whole. Without a profound study of the Achaemenid culture it is impossible to understand many phenomena in the subsequent course of the history and cultures of many peoples of East and West. And, as has been stated above, the Achaemenid period was an important period in the historical and cultural development of the peoples of the Soviet Union.

The great Iranian people cherish and further develop the achievements of their ancient civilization, putting it at the disposal of all peoples of the world.

Soviet scholars actively study the processes which resulted in the emergence of the Achaemenid Empire, its history and its role in the social and cultural development of the peoples of the region in the Parthian, Sasanid and subsequent periods.

There are great opportunities in our country for the study of Iranian art, archeology, history and literary history. Vast and varied material has been collected in Moscow, Leningrad, Tashkent, Dushanbe, Baku, Tbilisi, Yerevan and other research centres. The Leningrad Hermitage and museums of Central Asia and Transcaucasia possess many valuable specimens of Iranian culture and art.

Soviet Iranian studies are successfully and fruitfully developed in numerous research centres of the Soviet Union – in Moscow, Leningrad and capitals of the Soviet Union republics of Central Asia and Transcaucasia.

Iran's history and culture are studied in the Soviet Union with great interest. We publish annually a great number of works on Iranian culture, literature and historical sources.

This work is a vivid and concrete manifestation of the great interest of the Soviet scholars and all Soviet people in the great culture and life of the people of the friendly country of Iran.

The study of the rich past of the Iranian people and their achievements in the fields of science, culture and art at the present time not only serves to strengthen the friendship between our peoples, but is an important contribution to the noble cause of enrichment and advance of human civilization.



