Chapter 7

The Empires of Persia
Persian Empires

- Contemporary Iran
- Four major dynasties
  - Achaemenids (558-330 B.C.E.)
  - Seleucids (323-83 B.C.E.)
  - Parthians (247 B.C.E.-224 C.E.)
  - Sasanids (224-651 C.E.)
Achaemenid Empire (558-330 B.C.E.)

- Migration of Medes and Persians from central Asia, before 1000 B.C.E.
  - Indo-Europeans
- Capitalized on weakening Assyrian and Babylonian empires
- Cyrus (r. 558-530 B.C.E.) founder of dynasty
  - “Cyrus the Shepherd”
- Peak under Darius (r. 521-486 B.C.E.)
  - Ruled Indus to the Aegean
  - Capital Persepolis

Achaemenid Administration: The Satrapies

- Twenty-three administrative divisions
- Satraps Persian, but staff principally local
- System of spies, surprise audits
  - Minimized possibilities of local rebellion
- Standardized currency for taxation purposes
- Massive road building, courier services
Technologies

- **Qanat**: System of underground canals
  - Avoided excessive loss to evaporation

- Extensive road-building
  - Persian Royal Road
    - 1600 miles, some of it paved
  - Courier service
Decline of the Achaemenid Empire

- **Policy of toleration under Cyrus, Darius**
  - Rebuilding of temple in Jerusalem
- **Xerxes (486-465 B.C.E.)** harshly represses rebellions in Mesopotamia and Egypt
- Increasing public discontent
Persian Wars (500-479 B.C.E.)

- Rebellious Greeks in Ionia
- Peninsular Greeks join in
- Persians defeated at Marathon (490 B.C.E.), retreated
- Alexander the Great conquers the Achaemenid empire (334-331 B.C.E.)
Seleucid Empire

- Alexander the Great dies suddenly
- Generals divide empire, best part goes to Seleucus (r. 305-281 B.C.E.)
- Attacked by rebellion in India, invasion of Parthians
The Achaemenid and Seleucid Empires, 558-330 B.C.E. and 323-83 B.C.E.
Parthian Empire

- Seminomadic Parthians drive Seleucus out of Iran
- Federated governmental structure
- Especially strong cavalry
- Weakened by ongoing wars with Romans
- Fell to internal rebellion

Sasanid Empire (224-651 C.E.)

- Claimed descent from Achaemenids
- Continual conflicts with Rome, Byzantium in the west, Kush in the east
- Overwhelmed by Arab conquest in 651
- Persian administration and culture absorbed into local Islamic culture
The Parthian and Sasanid Empires, 247 B.C.E.-651 C.E.
Persian Society

- Early steppe traditions
  - Warriors, priests, peasants
  - Family/clan kinship very important

- Creation of bureaucrat class with empire
  - Tax collectors
  - Record keepers
  - Translators
Slave Class

- Prisoners of war, conquered populations
- Debtors
- Children, spouses also sold into slavery
- Principally domestic servitude
  - Some agricultural labor, public works
Persian Economy

- Several areas exceptionally fertile
- Long-distance trade benefits from Persian road-building
- Goods from India especially valued
Zoroastrianism

- Early Aryan influences on Persian religious traditions
- Zarathustra (late seventh to early sixth century B.C.E.)
- Prophet of Ahura Mazda, against Angra Mainyu
- Priests of Zarathustra known as magi
- Oral teachings until Sasanid period composed Gathas
Fortunes of Zoroastrianism

- Under Alexander: massacre of magi, burning Zoroastrian temples
- Weak Parthian support
- Major revival under Sasanids, persecution of non-Zoroastrians
- Discrimination under Islam
Other Religious Groups in the Persian Empire

- Major Mesopotamian communities of Jews
- Composition of the Talmud, ca. 500 C.E.
  - “Constitution of Judaism”
- Buddhism, Christianity and Manichaeism also survived