

Background to the Persian Wars

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(Slide 1) Welcome to Carl Seaquist's lecture on the background to the Persian wars. In the late sixth century BC, the Greeks came into increasing conflict with a large land empire to their east, the Persian empire. This culminated in two invasions of mainland Greece by Persian armies, a decade apart, at the start of the fifth century. It's interesting that, while the Persian Empire was for a while very powerful and covered a huge area, it left very little in the way of written records, and for various reasons the archaeology of key areas within the empire isn't nearly as extensive as we'd like. In contrast, mainland Greece was something of a backwater in the Mediterranean at the beginning of the fifth century, and in any case relatively small with a modest population, and yet the Greeks produced a monumental output of written texts, in both quantity and quality, compared to their contemporaries. Part of understanding the historical importance of Greece involves being able to assess these generalizations that I've just made.

(Slide 2) It might be that I'm doing something of a disservice to the Greeks in characterizing them in the way I have. It seems that by the middle-to-late fifth century, the Athenian empire was able to compete as a near equal with the Persian empire, but I'm inclined to think that this reflects the dramatic changes that took place in Greece in a fairly brief time, in large part in reaction to the Persian menace, and also perhaps to changes within the Persian empire over that period. The rapid growth of the American economy in the half century following the Second World War might serve as an analogy.

In order to understand the impact of the Persian wars on Greece, and to assess the significance of Greek civilization, I think it's important to know something about the Persians and some of the other peoples of western and central Asia in the centuries leading up to the Persian wars. In this lecture I'll provide a very brief overview.

Since the Persians didn't produce a lot of texts that have survived into the present, it turns out that some of our best written sources for the Persian empire are in fact Greek. Now, it's interesting that a lot of Greeks travelled in Asia and were in frequent contact with Persians and others. It's also true that Greek sources preserve a fair amount of accurate information, when we have other evidence to serve as a check. Yet the Greeks texts also present a very provincial and partial understanding of the history of the peoples to their east, so they need to be read critically. We also have some documentation from the Persian empire in the form of imperial inscriptions, as well as from subject peoples in Babylon, Egypt, and Israel.

(Slide 3) Herodotus, our single most important source, begins his story in the middle, as it were. He tells of the Lydian empire in western Anatolia, gives the story of its relations with the Greeks and the story of its fall, then works back to tell the stories of the empire that conquered the Lydians, the Persian empire, and even further back to the Median and Neo-Assyrian empires that in turn preceded it. This is all done in the first book of his work on the wars between the Greek states and the Persian empire in the early fifth century, and serves as background to his main narrative: the fall of Lydia came less than fifty years before the Graeco-Persian wars, and first brought the Greeks into direct conflict with Persia. What follows his account of Lydia is background to explain who the Persians were. Scholars debate how accurate Herodotus is; clearly some Greeks knew a lot about the Persian empire, and he certainly drew on a lot of sources for his history. But he might be less reliable regarding the early history of the

Persians and Medians; certainly his knowledge of Babylonian and Assyrian history, which we can check with primary sources, leaves a lot to be desired.

(Slide 4) Rather than starting in the middle, as Herodotus does, let me go back and give you the history of Mesopotamia in a nutshell. It's useful to think of Mesopotamia as being composed of two parts: Babylonia and Assyria. The core of Mesopotamia lies between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, though Mesopotamian empires at various time extended well beyond this core; in fact, the word "Mesopotamia" means "between the rivers." Babylonia extends somewhat north of the ancient city of Babylon, which is about 50 miles from modern Baghdad, and Assyria is to the northwest of this. Assyria is named after the ancient city of Ashur, which lies along the Tigris about halfway between the modern cities of Tikrit and Mosul. Narrative texts from Mesopotamia extend well into the third millennium BC, but let me focus just on the first millennium BC.

The Neo-Assyrian empire, or the last stage of Assyrian dominance in the region, lasted from roughly the late tenth to the late seventh century BC, and extended well beyond the central portion of Mesopotamia into Anatolia, Arabia, and Iran. Between 630–612 BC the Neo-Assyrian empire was attacked by the combined forces of the Babylonians and the peoples to the east of Assyria, the Medes. The fall of the city of Nineveh in 612 can be thought of as the end of the Neo-Assyrian empire. The core of this empire was then controlled by the Babylonians in the "Neo-Babylonian" empire, which lasted until 539, when Babylon was conquered by the Persian king Cyrus.

(Slide 5) Geographic terminology at this point gets a little confusing, because ancient states didn't always have clear boundaries, and this affects the ethnic terms we use for the various actors in the story. The Medes and the Persians were distinct peoples who spoke related languages (both were Iranian languages) and who had fairly close relations. Geographic Persia in the time of Cyrus, as distinct from the larger empire that it developed, lay east of Babylonia across the Zagros Mountains to roughly the Strait of Hormuz, which separates the Persian Gulf from the Gulf of Oman. Media lay to the north and west of Persia, south and west of the Caspian Sea. A third Iranian group, which later would take control of the Persian empire with their own dynasty, were the Parthians to the east and north of Persia. How far east the Persian empire extended in any given period of its history isn't always clear, but Herodotus says that Cyrus died in battle against the Massagetae, east of the Aral Sea in what now is southern Kazakhstan.

Geographic Persia more or less overlapped the area occupied by an earlier empire, that of Elam. Bronze Age Elamite history has mostly been reconstructed on the basis of Mesopotamian sources, because surviving texts in Elamite are limited in number and poorly understood. However, the Elamite language had been written for many centuries before Cyrus and became one of the languages used in the Achaemenid empire – Achemenes was allegedly the grandfather of Cyrus I, so modern scholars generally call the empire that Cyrus founded the Achaemenid empire.

(Slide 6) Since all ancient empires were multiethnic, it may be better to use the term Achaemenid empire rather than Persian empire, thus identifying it by the dynasty that ruled it rather than by the ethnic or geographic group that allegedly was at its core. Among ancient empires, Egypt was fairly clearly defined in geographic terms, and it makes some sense to speak about the various Egyptian dynasties as succeeding to the rule of a discrete (quote-unquote) "Egyptian" empire. However, the opposite is perhaps the case for the areas east of Mesopotamia. We can speak loosely of Media and Persia as different regions of West Asia, but a case can be made that these regions only came into being

around the sixth century. We already have seen that Persia was largely coterminous with the older Elamite empire, and it is not clear that Media was in any useful sense unified until at least the fall in 612 of Nineveh, and perhaps not until later. Herodotus, however, views the Median and Persian empires as being similar to those of Babylonia and Assyria, for various reasons.

(Slide 7) Here's the problem. There was a long tradition within Mesopotamia of telling Mesopotamian history as the sequential story of one dynasty as succeeding one another to ultimate power over the whole region. No doubt reality was more complicated than that, but the fiction of supreme rule was certainly convenient for telling historical narratives, and the Greeks later picked up this fiction in their accounts of West Asian history. To some extent modern historians have tended to do so as well, of necessity because our sources, both Mesopotamian and Greek, do so. The origin of this fiction lies no doubt in the fact that kings, in the official histories of their reigns, wanted to make themselves sound as important as possible, so they tended to magnify their conquests and downplay the power of their peers. Anyway, according to this fiction, the Medes were dominant in the Iranian world until 550 BC, when Cyrus defeated Astyages, the king of the Medes.

(Slide 8) The Medes are necessary, according to this succession-of-empires model, to bridge the gap between the fall of Nineveh in 612 and Cyrus' defeat of the Median Astyages in 550. Just because Astyages was Median and had an army, or even that he was the dominant power in Media, doesn't mean that the Medes had an empire anything like the Neo-Assyrian empire that preceded Astyages, or the Persian empire that Cyrus established. Now, in various ways the Persian empire was indebted to the Neo-Assyrians: aspects of their architecture and iconography, as well as elements of their administrative apparatus, clearly derive from earlier Assyrian models, and some scholars believe that continuity of empires is the best way to explain it. Unfortunately, archaeological investigations in Media have not yet uncovered physical evidence of this empire, and when historians have gone back to the details that our sources give regarding the Medes, they seem equally consistent with a very different model, according to which the Medes were not unified under a single king or administrative system, but rather were composed of independent peoples who spoke a common language and had some common customs. To quote Mario Liverani, "the classical historians speak about features which are distinctive of chiefdoms and not of states: warfare and hunting, hospitality and gift-exchange, intermarriage and alliance, cruelty and revenge, chivalry and bravery, banquets and conspicuous consumption" (2003, p. 9). Probably Greek historians took their knowledge of the developed state of the Achaemenid empire of the fifth century and projected it back in time a century or more.

(Slide 9) In any case, the Achaemenid empire was essentially the creation of Cyrus. But it was under his successor, Cambyses, that the great jewel of the empire was added: Egypt. This was the first time Mesopotamia and Egypt, the two great powers in Western Asia since the Bronze Age, were under common rule, and it signaled a great shift in power. Cambyses only survived on the throne for about eight years, and we are not entirely sure the circumstances of his death. His ultimate successor was Darius, but the transition from Cambyses to Darius was far rockier than the succession of Cambyses had been.

(Slide 10) Although our main sources for Achaemenid history are Greek, we do have contemporary historical documents from Persia. Most importantly, we have a monumental rock inscription carved at the command of Darius, which tells of his ascension to power. According to Darius' account, Cambyses killed his brother Bardiya, and at or slightly before Cambyses' death, and an impostor named Gautama ascended to the throne, masquerading as Bardiya. Darius was a member of the cabal that overthrew this false-Bardiya, at which point he took the throne. The story seems odd on the face – how could

someone successfully pretend to be the brother of the king? Modern scholars think it likely that the person Darius killed was the real Bardiya, and that he created this story as a way of justifying his usurpation. Accordingly, he had this account carved on a prominent rock face at modern Bisitun, along the path leading from Babylonia to the Median capital of Ebatana. The name Bisitun derives from Old Persian *Bagastana*, or “place of the gods,” and near it are a number of similar inscriptions dating back to the second millennium. This was a major travel route, and a place where kings for many centuries had, well, posted propaganda that was designed to preserve their name in later histories. Apparently Darius also had this inscription copied on clay and parchment documents and distributed around the empire, so the fact that the account of Herodotus, written some two centuries later, is similar, may be due not to the truth of the story of the false Bardiya, but rather to Darius’ success in justifying his coup.

(Slide 11) There is no doubt that the Achemenids created the largest empire the world had ever seen up to that time. We are less clear, however, about their strategic goals. Cyrus’ conquest of Media, Lydia, and Babylonia makes sense: while Babylonian empire constituted Mesopotamia proper, the area from Elam and the Zagros mountains to the west of the Tigris, and from the Syrian coast to the east of the Euphrates, may be considered “greater Mesopotamia.” This region held a great variety of political entities in the Bronze and Iron Age, but all had cultural systems that depended heavily on Mesopotamian models. Anatolia was geographically and culturally somewhat distinct, but also was deeply dependent on Mesopotamian models. Cambyses’ conquest of Egypt added the other sphere of high culture in the ancient world, to the empire. Cambyses’ successors would have their work cut out for them simply maintaining this far-flung empire, and if they wanted to extend it, they would face very different challenges.

Cyrus himself had died attempting to extend Persian power further into Central Asia, and likewise Darius would flirt with pushing eastward into India. In the other direction he would also campaign against the Scythians, in Thrace and north of the Black Sea, and eventually Greece. Historians are divided as to what the ultimate motives were. Thrace had great mineral wealth, and perhaps conquest was a goal, but it is also possible that Darius felt the need to proactively maintain hostilities at the edges of the empire in order to keep the less urbanized peoples on the periphery from putting pressure on the core of his empire.

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