

The Mighty Persian Empire

Its Destruction by a Small Greek Army
and
The Long-Lasting Influence of its
Religious and Political Practices

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Map of the Persian Empire around 490 BCE

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The Trouble with the Greeks - 1

- Early in the 5th century BCE the Persians invaded Greece but were soundly defeated by much smaller Greek armies (**Marathon**).
- At the end of the 5th century Cyrus, brother of the Persian king, staged a campaign to dethrone him. A large part of his force were Greek mercenaries (under **Xenophon**) that defeated the king's army. However, the campaign ended because Cyrus was killed.

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The Trouble with the Greeks - 2

- The ability of Greek soldiers to repeatedly defeat the much larger Persian armies did not go unnoticed.
- In the latter part of the 4th century the Macedonian king **Phillip** planned a campaign against the Persians, but he was assassinated before he could carry out the plan. That was left to his son **Alexander the Great** (reigned 336-323BCE).

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The Trouble with the Greeks - 3

- In a span of ten years **Alexander** conquered the immense Persian Empire reaching all the way to India, even though his army was much smaller than that of the Persians.
- Alexander died soon after the completion of the conquest and his empire broke up into several kingdoms. These kingdoms flourished at what used to be the western part of the Persian Empire ushering the **Hellenistic** era.

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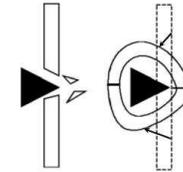
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How can a small army defeat a big one?

By using the **wedge formation**.

Near Right: Successful wedge attack. The center of the line of defense breaks and the flanks do nothing.

Far Right: Successful defense against the wedge. The center retreats in an orderly way and the flanks encircle the attackers. (**Cannae, Stalingrad**)



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Why were the Persians unable to defend against the wedge?

- Because the troops in the flanks were reluctant followers!
- The center consisted of elite troops (such as the royal guard) and the flanks were mostly troops from the provinces whose soldiers were forced to serve in the army.
- “Reluctant” soldiers will not risk their lives for the emperor!

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The Risks of Oppression for the Oppressor

- The unwillingness of oppressed subjects to come to the help of their ruler when they are in trouble can explain many historical events. For example:
 - The destruction of the Aztec Empire by the Spanish *Conquistadors*. (One of several factors.)
 - The success of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Tsarist Russia.

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Persian Innovations: Good and Bad

- First **Postal Service**.
- First **Monotheistic State Religion**.
- **Staffing the State Bureaucracy with Eunuchs**.
 - *Eunuchs* could not have children (to support them in their old age) so their loyalty to the king was ensured. ???

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Zoroastrianism - 1

- The Persian Empire had an Organized State Religion, **Zoroastrianism**, named after its founder Zoroaster (Zarathushtra).
- The basic tenet of that religion is that there is a supreme creator god, **Ahura Mazda**, who is in constant battle with **Ahriman**, that embodies all evil. The king was considered the favorite of **Ahura Mazda**, so obedience to the king was associated with religion.

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Zoroastrianism - 2

- Zoroastrianism is the first monotheistic religion in history, and it was used to solidify the position of the king. The ruler may have given up the pretension of being a god, but because he was the favorite of the only god, it strengthened his position.
- There was a state-imposed orthodoxy, and the functions of the priesthood included the detection and suppression of heresy.

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Judaism and Zoroastrianism

There are many cases of Zoroastrian influence on Judaism, especially on the practices of the Jewish sect of Essenes.

- Monotheism.
- Life after Death.
- Holy Texts.
- Well Organized Clergy (Essenes).

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Monotheism

- It seems that Judaism did not become **monotheistic** until the time of the Babylonian exile and the subsequent restoration of the Temple by the Persian king Cyrus.
- Until then the God of Israel was one of many gods, although more powerful than the others (*Mi Kamocha*).
- The key passage of the Persian influence is in *Isaiah:45*. "Thus said the LORD to CYRUS, His anointed one -".

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Life after Death

- The concept of **life after death** appears for the first time in the post Babylonian exile period.
- Note that the word **Paradise** is of Persian origin.
- By the way: Fear of punishment in Hell is a more effective deterrent than fear of punishment in jail.

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Holy Texts

- Another novel feature of Zoroastrianism was its collection of holy texts or scripture (**Avesta**). The pagan religions did not have such texts.
- Interestingly the Jewish Bible was codified only after the return from the Babylonian exile, i.e., after the Jews had contact with Zoroastrianism.

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Well Organized Clergy

- The priests of Zoroastrianism were the **Magi**, a well-organized priesthood. At the top of the hierarchy were the **dasturs** who had a function like that of **bishops**.
- Such an organization was absent from all the pagan religions, but it existed in the Jewish sect of the **Essenes** who had the office of **Mebakker** that in Hebrew means **Overseer**.
- The Greek word for **Overseer** is **Episkopos** from which the English word **Bishop** is derived.

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The Essenes - 1

- The Jewish sect of the Essenes exhibited several Zoroastrian influences:
 - The organization of the clergy.
 - The world view of a battle between good and evil.

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The Essenes - 2

- The Essenes also exhibited influences from further East, such as the practice of **monasticism** that had originated in India and became known in the West after Alexander's conquests.
- Monks and nuns share with the eunuchs the characteristic of not having progeny, therefore they are also likely to be particularly loyal to their organization.

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What Became of the Essenes?

- The Essenes have received a lot of attention as a result of the discovery of the *Dead Sea Scrolls*.
- What became of them? Christianity!
- This assertion is based on the similarity between many Essene and Christian practices and the fact that early Christians were identified as Jewish heretics (*minim*).

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Judaism + Zoroastrianism = Christianity

- The connection between Christianity and Zoroastrianism can be seen in the Christian Bible story of the **Adoration of the Magi**.

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Fear of the Middle - 1

- In his famous book "1984," George Orwell observed that "there (always) have been three kinds of people in the world, the *High* (top 0.01%), the *Middle* (top 1%), and the *Low*."
- Orwell claims that revolutions are not the actions of the *Low* against the *High* but those of the *Middle* against the *High*.

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Fear of the Middle - 2

- The *High* tries to weaken the *Middle* by choosing its members from an *outside* group that cannot form an alliance with the *Low*.
- The use of eunuchs in high level state positions shows that the Persian emperors were aware of this issue.

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Who else is in the Middle?

- Besides state officials, the *Middle* includes imperial bodyguards, highly skilled specialists (such as physicians and architects), merchants, etc.
- Many of these positions cannot be filled by eunuchs or monks.
- The solution: Use foreigners or members of minority ethnic or religious groups such as the *Jews*.

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Next lecture

What do the Jews have in common with the Swiss Guards of the Pope?

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