



FEZANA Age-Appropriate Lesson Plan

Subject Category (circle one): Religion/Ceremony **History** Prayer Gathas
Comparative Religion Shahnameh

Age Group (circle one): PreK-K Grades 1-3 Grades 4-5 **Grades 6-8** Grades 9-12

Lesson # (if appropriate): The Achaemenid Empire- Lesson 7

Subject of the Lesson: Life in Persian Heartland

Background Knowledge for the Teacher:

Review of previous lessons:

1. Cyrus establishes the Achaemenid Empire in 550 BCE
 - a. He is a capable military man and state leader
 - b. Cyrus Cylinder-first known human bill of rights
 - c. He brings three out of four superpowers of the region under his empire
2. Cambyses, Cyrus' eldest son becomes king after his father's death
 - a. Conquers Egypt-the last superpower of the region
 - b. Forms the first Persian naval fleet
3. Darius becomes King after Cambyses-a distant cousin of Cyrus
 - a. Unites the kingdom
 - b. Behistun Inscription
 - c. Darius' many contributions
 - i. Standardizes forms of measurement and coinage
 - ii. Royal Roads
 - iii. Canal, palaces
 - iv. Etc.

Life in Persian Heartland

Under Darius I (Darius the Great) the Achaemenid Empire reached its greatest heights of political, economic, and military development which lasted until the fall of the Empire in the fourth century BCE. The social and religious customs of the time also remained the same and hence were representative of Persian culture in general. The frequent deciding factor for most modern scholars is which of the culture were Persian and which were Median, Babylonian, Assyrian, Lydian and so forth. The Persian Empire was composed of many diverse lands and peoples with their own languages, customs, and religions. Persian kings normally appointed Persian nobles to high posts in the satrapies and armies controlling the Empire.

These ruling elite generally allowed non-Persian residents to the local provinces to retain their local ways.



Therefore, there were two different parts of Persia, one consisting of the whole of Empire with peoples of different cultures, languages, religions, and customs and the other was the smaller heartland in the western part of the Empire. During Darius and his successors, this heartland included not only Pars but Susa and Ecbatana.

The archaeological findings suggest a fusion of earlier Iranian and Mesopotamian cultures in the heartland. This is because the Persians borrowed ideas and customs from others. Some evidence of this borrowing includes:

- Herodotus writes: “No race is so ready to adopt foreign ways as the Persian, for instance, they wear Median costume because they think it more handsome than their own, and their soldiers wear the Egyptian corselet.”
- Use of Babylonian horse breeding and sheep-herding practices were used in upland Persia and further, tilling strategies of the soil in lowland Persian.
- Persian adoption of Assyrian military and political ideas

There is little information about the life and culture of everyday people living in the empire and more information exists about the upper class’s lives.

Herodotus reports about the Persian nobility, “Themselves they consider in every way superior to everyone else in the world and allow other nations to a share of good qualities decreasing according to distance, the further off (from the Persian heartland) being the worse.”

He reports the Persian upper class as a male-dominated society. He writes about the upbringing of upper-class boys:

“The period of a boy’s education is between the ages of five and twenty, and they are taught three things only: to ride, to use the bow, and to speak the truth.”

The kings and other social classes:

1. The kings were absolute monarchs and the Empire’s source of law, dignity, and honor.
2. The kings only limitations were that they expected to follow Persia’s customs and consult their high-ranking nobles and advisors before making a decision of great importance.
3. In court and in public, the king wore a flowing robe of Median design, dyed purple, the traditional hue of royalty in ancient times and interwoven with gold threads. On their head rested a crown encrusted with brilliant gems. They often wore beautifully crafted earrings, chains, and bracelets and sat on an elaborately decorated throne.
4. On greeting or approaching a king, the person was expected to prostrate themselves face down on the floor or ground before him.



Chief Nobles:

1. Directly below the king on the social ladder were the chief nobles.
2. All Persian land in theory belonged to the king but he regularly granted estates and land to the nobles who served as officers, and cavalrymen in the army.
3. They were granted land depending on their size, “bow lands”, “horse lands”, “chariot lands” and so forth. The owner of each land was obliged to provide men and equipment to the army. For example, the lord of “bow land” having 50 acres had to supply one archer. This was considered a small land and larger landowners had to supply more.

Some other social classes:

1. Merchants who made comfortable living-trading commodities such as purple dyes, and textiles (from Phoenicia on the coast of Palestine); perfumes (from Arabia); timber (from Greek Islands of Crete); grain and glass (from Egypt); and spices and gold dust (from India).
2. Skilled craftsmen such as bakers, butchers, carpenters, and artisans made up the middle class.
3. Unskilled laborers- such as those who worked on large scale building projects such as canals, and royal palaces, or served in the army.

Slavery in the Achaemenid Empire:

On the whole, there was only a small number of slaves in relation to the number of free persons in the Achaemenid Empire. Slave labor did not replace the work of free workers. Slave labor in the Achaemenid Period and throughout the history of ancient Persia included persons that were treated like servants (this is different than the current day perception of slavery, where a person legally owns another person and exploits them for their labor). They received compensation for their services, had a higher standard of living and quality of life, and under Darius I’s laws, slaves could not be mistreated, beaten, or killed and any slave owner who did so would face penalty. Free workers in the Achaemenid Empire were those whose occupation was usually inherited within the family such as farmers and artisans. Additionally, the practice of debt slavery was no longer common. This sort of labor meant that a person who was in debt gave up their labor to someone in order to pay off their loan by free work and eventually retain their freedom.

Women in the Achaemenid Empire

Women in ancient Persia were respected and in many cases were considered equals to males. Women could own land, conduct business, receive equal pay, could travel freely on their own, and in the case of royal women, hold their own council meetings on policy. This seemed to be a continuation of earlier Elamite and most likely Median Empire.



Achaemenid Woman

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The Achaemenid Empire followed a patriarchal paradigm but, within that framework, women had more rights and responsibilities than in any other ancient civilization except that of Egypt. Women, like men, were defined by social class and rank within that class. The female hierarchy, from the highest to lowest, ran:

- Mother of the King
- Principal Wife (mother of the king's heir)
- The king's daughters
- The king's sisters
- The king's lesser wives/concubines
- Noble women (wives and relatives of courtiers, satraps, military men)
- Military Women
- Businesswomen
- Laborers
- Servants/Slaves

Records substantiating the autonomy of women and their activities comes from the Fortification Tablets, Treasury Texts, and Travel Texts found in the ruins of Persepolis. When Alexander burned the city in 330 BCE, any documents written on parchment were destroyed but those inscribed on clay tablets were baked and so preserved.

The Fortification Tablets come from the reign of Darius I (522-486 BCE), the Treasury Texts from the time of Artaxerxes I (r. 465-424 BCE) and the Travel Texts from various eras. They all have to do with the administration and economics of the empire. The Travel Texts include payments and rations dispensed from the royal treasury for women's travel expenses. These texts relate a significant number of transactions between the treasury and women who traveled on their own for business or pleasure.

Royal and Noble Women:

The king's mother and principal wife (known as the *Shahbanu*, “King's Lady”) traveled on their own, as well as, with the king on military campaigns and in overseeing administrative affairs. They had their own entourage, staff to attend to their needs, and were given places of honor at banquets alongside distinguished male guests. The principal wife held her own court, could sign agreements with her own seal, and had unlimited access to the king, even being welcomed at official visits from foreign dignitaries and participating in the meetings.

Some of the most famous royal women were Mandana (Mandane), mother of Cyrus the Great (d. c. 559 BCE), Cassandane Shahbanu, wife of Cyrus the Great (l. c. 575-519 BCE), and Atusa Shahbanu (better known as Atossa, l. c. 550-475 BCE) daughter of Cyrus the Great and wife of Darius I. Sisygambis, the mother of Darius III (r. 336-330 BCE), behaved more honorably than her son after his defeat by Alexander. Alexander's Persian wife Roxanne (l. c. 340-310 BCE) is also recognized for her courage in the face of adversity. The biblical figure of Queen Esther, wife of Xerxes I, is another royal woman of the Achaemenid Period even though she was not Persian by birth.

The king's daughters, sisters, and lesser wives served primarily in sealing alliances, treaties, and business deals through marriages but still could own their own lands and conduct their own businesses. Women could choose their own husbands, but at times asked to marry for political purposes. Concubines were often non-Persian women and, accordingly, could not marry into royalty but were still respected as women of high rank. Xerxes I (r. 486-465 BCE) added a separate space for women, at Persepolis close to his palace, suggesting the elevated status of the women.



Achaemenid Queen
A. Davey (CC BY)



Military Women:

Women in the Achaemenid Period could also serve in the military. Scholar Kaveh Farrokh notes that “tombs attesting to the existence of Iranian-speaking women warriors have [been found in Iran and] also been excavated in Eastern Europe” (128). The best-known female warrior of this era is Artemisia I of Caria who lived during the reign of Xerxes I. She was an admiral in the Persian fleet at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE, noted for her courage and skill, and was so admired by Xerxes I that, after the battle, she was given the honor of escorting his sons to safety.

Other notable Achaemenid warrior women were Pantea Artesbod, who lived during the reign of Cyrus the Great and was instrumental – along with her husband – in the organization of the elite military unit of the 10,000 Persian Immortals, Artunis (l. c. 540-500 BCE), a Lieutenant Commander of the army, remembered for her courage and skill in battle, and Youtab Aryobarzan (d. 330 BCE), who served in the army and fell with her brother Ariobarzanes (l. 386-330 BCE) defending the Persian Gates against the forces of Alexander the Great.

Businesswomen:

The business activities and travels of businesswomen/merchants and the pay scale for laborers are also noted in the Persepolis texts. A notable businesswoman and merchant, Irdabama, who lived during the reign of Darius I, traveled extensively on business and personally oversaw production and trade in the region of modern-day Shiraz, Iran, Babylonia, Egypt, Media, and Syria. She was one of the wealthiest individuals of her time, commanding a workforce of 480 laborers, and traveling at will with her own extensive entourage. Royal women also engaged in business as in the case of Parysatis who owned a number of villages in Babylonia and traveled there personally to collect the rent.

Women Laborers, and Servants:

Women labored alongside men in the workforce and were often supervisors and managers. Highly paid female supervisors were known as *arashshara* (“great chief”) and received a larger amount of wine and grain for overseeing the work of often large groups of subordinates. There was no difference in pay based on gender; one’s salary was based solely on one’s level of skill and experience in the job. Pregnant women, however, received higher wages as did new mothers for the first month after the birth of their child. The mother, midwife, and physician attending the birth also received a bonus if the child was male. Sons were preferred over daughters but there is no evidence of female infanticide or the practice of exposing an unwanted infant to the elements.

Code of Conduct in the Achaemenid Empire:

There was a code of honor and honesty aspired by the Persian upper class which was emphasized by Darius I both as a model of such behavior and in the inscriptions ordered by him and on his tomb.



To that which is just I am a friend, to that which is unjust I am no friend. I do not wish that the weak should suffer harm at the hands of the powerful nor that the powerful should suffer harm at the hands of the weak...The follower after falsehood do I detest...Who works for me I reward according to his work. Who does ill I punish according to the ill he has done... If one man speaks ill of another, I do not give him credence until he has provided proof. If a man acts to the best of his ability, I am satisfied.

According to Herodotus, the Persians “consider telling lies more disgraceful than anything else, and next to that owing money. There are many reasons for their horror of debt, but the chief is their conviction that a man who owes money is bound also to tell lies.”

The punishment of crimes of different sorts was severe for the upper and lower class alike. Equals greeted one another with a kiss on the mouth and near-equals with a peck on the cheek. They were fond of feasting and drinking wine.

The Religion of the Empire

Subject people of Persia continued to worship their own gods, but the ruling nobility were Zoroastrian. Religion practices tolerance of others’ beliefs and to live in harmony with others. The priests were called Magi, especially among the Medes. In the 1960’s evidence of the practice of Zoroastrian faith in form of fragments of stone fire-holders have been discovered in Pasargadae (Cyrus’ palace). Behistun inscription ordered by Darius I puts to light the faith of the king, it reads, “By grace of Ahura Mazda I am king, Ahura Mazda gave me the kingdom.”

Lesson for Student:

1. Make a PowerPoint of the lesson to share with students. Stop at each appropriate point to emphasize the actions that show or have moved away from Zarathushtra’s teaching in the ruling class.
2. Break the class into groups and give each group a section of the lesson. Give them about 15-20 minutes to present their portion of the lesson to the rest of the class. They can make PowerPoints if classroom technology allows.

Activity for Students:

1. Make a drawing of an Achaemenid King using the description from the lesson.
2. Break the class into teams and give each team the name of one woman mentioned in the lesson. Give them about 10 minutes to find out all they can about the person to share with the class.
 - a. Have them compare Persian women’s freedom and rights (2500 years ago) with the American women of today.



- b. Compare land ownership rights, participation in the military, earning wages and working, etc. of Persian women of Achaemenid time with American women of 200 years ago.
3. Discussion:
 - a. How did the Achaemenid code of conduct and religion serve the Empire?
 - b. What do you think today's social challenges can benefit from the history of the Achaemenids?
 - c. Is the meaning of a slave different in Achaemenid time than that in the US and many other parts of the world?
4. Refer to the "Teacher's Guide" section of the [fezana.org/education](https://www.fezana.org/education) for more in-person and virtual activity ideas.

Sources:

1. <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1492/women-in-ancient-persia/>
2. The Persian empire by Don Nardo
3. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/barda-i>
4. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/achaemenid-religion>
5. [https://www.worldhistory.org/Behistun Inscription/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Behistun+Inscription/)

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