

Notes on Quiz #4: Success of the Persian Empire

1. Describe three specific factors that you think most helped make the Persian Empire stable and successful.

Possible factors include the following:

- The Persians lowered the chance of rebellion by ruling with as little oppression as was feasible, and by tolerating local religion and culture rather than forcefully imposing theirs.
- The Persian king was explicitly not a god, but through ritual, trappings, and seclusion was converted into an abstract symbol that served as a focus of identity for all the diverse and unconnected peoples of the Empire.
- The Persians did not keep standing armies, which tend to exploit and oppress local populations, and did not often go to war, having extended their frontiers to natural geographic barriers, so that the Empire's subjects enjoyed a sense of peace and protectedness.
- The system of satrapies was designed to ensure a sense of benevolent and protective rule in each region and culture.
- The Great King had a system of spies whose role was to ensure the satraps were not corrupt or abusive.
- Finally, the positive encouragement of local economies and vibrant trade within the empire brought about general prosperity, a higher standard of living, and improvements in the birth and death rates.

2. Describe the Persian religion, Zoroastrianism. What was the relationship between Zoroastrianism and the state?

Zoroastrianism is a dualist religion, describing the world as the domain of two gods, one of order and light (Ahuramazda) and of disorder and darkness (Ahriman). Both gods are needed, and are set in a complementary and balanced dynamic.

The Persian state's perspective is that it stands with the side of order. Mortals choose either side; those who choose disorder and darkness (criminals, traitors, and rebels) are natural antagonists of the state.

3. What is the significance of the Persian title "King of Kings"? Why was it important the Great King was not a god?

The title is significant in two ways. First, the Persian Great King ruled over actual kings, where their kingdoms were absorbed into the Persian empire and made into "client kingdoms", kingdoms subordinate to Persia. In these the kings would pay tribute to Persia and obey the Great King, fighting with him in his wars, in exchange for prosperity and protection.

Second, the Persian Great King stood above ordinary kings as a greater kind of ruler. Ordinary kings dealt with the mundane needs of everyday concerns, but the Persian Great King was propagandized as a more abstract role, thus serving as a focal point of identity for the subject peoples of the empire.

EC1. Persia conquered Egypt under the leadership of which king?

- (a) Cyrus
- ✓ (b) Cambyses
- (c) Darius
- (d) Charles III

EC2. What reasons might the Persian king have had for releasing the Judeans to return home and rebuild in Jerusalem?

At the times, the Jews were in exile in Babylon, confined there by the Babylonians that Persia had conquered. By allowing the Jews to return to Judea, Cyrus gained a new province inhabited by loyal and grateful subjects.

In addition, Judea was in a strategic location vital to the Persian empire, on the western frontier against the Persians' rival in that area and its next target, Egypt. This helped make it possible for Cyrus's successor to conquer Egypt.