CHAPTER 4 - IRAN, INDIA, AND INNER ASIA TO 200 C.E.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter continues the story of ancient civilization in Iran, inner Asia and the Indian subcontinent during the centuries surrounding the beginning of the Christian era. The chapter focuses on three major themes: 1) the rise of centralized empires on a new and unprecedented scale, 2) the increasing contact and interaction of major civilizations, and 3) the rise, spread and consolidation of major religious traditions that would have considerable effect on later history from Africa to China.

The two most prominent peoples of the Iranian plateau were the Medes and Persians, who trace their ancestry back to the Vedic Age Indo-Aryans of north India. The Medes developed a tribal confederacy in western Iran that defeated the mighty Assyrian Empire in the late 7th century B.C.E. The rise of Persian power in the 7th and 6th centuries B.C.E., under the leadership of Cyrus the Great, led to the founding of the Achaemenid Empire.

Yet, the first person who stands out in Iranian history was not Cyrus, but Zoroasthra, the great prophet reformer of Iranian religion. He is commonly known by the Greek version of his name, Zoroaster.

The rise of Iran as a world power and a major civilization dates from the reign of Cyrus the Great (559-530 B.C.E.). He ruled the Achaemenid clan in western Iran (Persis) and built his empire upon the gains of his grandfather, Cyrus I. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the Achaemenids was the stability of their rule. The empire was held together by a strong bureaucracy, a powerful military led by Persians, the universal sovereignty of the monarch and an advanced justice system. Provincial divisions, known as satrapies, maintained good roads and communications and gave the empire political unity in its cultural diversity. The Achaemenids were unable to expand their rule to the West and were defeated by the Greeks in 490 and 480 B.C.E. The final defeat of the empire came at the hands of Alexander the Great by 323 B.C.E.

The first Indian Empire (321-185 B.C.E.) developed on the plains of the Ganges River. It came only after the oriental campaigns of Alexander, who had conquered the Achaemenid provinces in the Indus Valley in 327 B.C.E. The first true Indian Empire was established by Chandragupta Maurya (321-297 B.C.E.) as he captured lands to the west after Alexander's departure. The third and greatest Mauryan emperor, Ashoka (ca. 272-232 B.C.E.), left numerous rock inscriptions that note his conquests of Kalinga and the Deccan, thus extending Mauryan
control over the whole subcontinent, except the far south. After that, Ashoka underwent a religious conversion and championed nonviolence (ahimsa) and the ideal of "conquest by righteousness" (dharma). The legacy of the Mauryan Empire lay in its association with the Jains, Ajivikas, and Buddhists; these close connections gave additional religious importance to governmental actions. In addition, international perspective was enhanced by an excellent road system and communications network. These developments discouraged provincialism and assisted in urban growth.

The post-Mauryan period saw Buddhist monasticism and lay devotionalism thrive throughout the subcontinent. What we now call Hinduism also emerged in this era with the consolidation of the caste system, Brahman ascendancy and the "high culture" of Sanskrit language and learning. A certain merging of Buddhist and Hindu ideas gave both religious groups a dynamic aspect in later periods.

The Seleucid successors to Alexander the Great maintained their power in Iran through mercenary troops and never secured lasting rule on the scale of the Achaemenids. In the end, Alexander's policy of linking Hellenes with Iranians in political power, marriage and culture bore more lasting fruit than empire. The chapter continues with a description of the importance of Bactria's Indo-Greek satrapy as an important area for the transmission of culture. This enhanced the Greco-Buddhist art of Gandhara and aided in the spread of Buddhism to central Asia.

The Parthians succeeded the Seleucids in Iran and continued their rule from about 250 B.C.E. to 300 C.E. Their most famous ruler, Mithradates I (171-138 B.C.E.), was able to secure a sizeable empire, one that threatened Rome from 53 B.C.E. In the end, the pressure of the Kushan empire in the east and above all, the Roman wars of the third century weakened the Parthians enough for a new Persian dynasty to replace them. The Sakas and Kushans played an important role in cultural diffusion from this area, and were responsible for the missionary activity that carried Buddhism across the steppes into China.

By the second century C.E., we can see the development of governments of imperial power and influence in the Indo-Iranian world. These empires are indices of the security and wealth necessary for progress. They provided contexts in which civilization could flourish, grow and spread.

This was also an era in which influential lasting religious traditions (Christian, Buddhist, Confucian, Judaic and Hindu) came of age and spread in cultures outside their places of origin. This period also saw increased cross-cultural development, demonstrated by the Hellenizing conquests of Alexander the Great. Although African cultures lagged behind development in the
West and East, this was due primarily to their relative isolation, rather than to the character of their peoples.

KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. Zoroastrianism: The evolution of the Zoroastrian faith was part of the older Iranian culture and religion associated with the Vedic Aryans. Zarathustra (628-551 B.C.E.) was the leader of this movement and preached a message of moral reform in an age when materialism, political opportunism and ethical indifference were common. Zoroastrianism probably influenced not only the Jewish, Christian and Muslim ideas of the Messiah, angels, devils, the last judgment, and an afterlife, but also certain Buddhist concepts as well. It was wiped out as a major force by Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries C.E., but its tradition continues in the faith and practice of the Parsis in western India.

2. Indo-Iranian Empires: The Achaemenids, Mauryans, Parthians, Sakas and Kushans developed similar characteristics of complex empires. These included good administration, professional armies, effective communications and stability. These developments created opportunities for interaction between China and the Greek worlds through Buddhism and increased trade. The contributions of these empires created a dynamic opportunity for the Steppe people to influence humankind. The assimilation of various cultures created a "high culture" in India of lasting importance.

3. The Merging of Cultures: Because of imperial development during this period, two distinct cultures merged together: Mesopotamia and Iran, and the subcontinent of India. Thus Central Asia remained a cultural melting pot with cross-cultural contacts that affected the Mediterranean, Western Eurasia, India and China. These contributions included steppe-nomad languages, arts, religious practices and techniques of government. Even though the Iranian and Indian cultures remained distinct, the development of contacts had a lasting impact on humankind.
**SUGGESTED FILMS**

*Glory that Remains No. 1 - The Sudden Empire (Persia).* British Broadcasting Co. 30 min.

*Glory that Remains No. 5 - Sermons in Stone (India).* British Broadcasting Co. 30 min.

*Ancient World Inheritance.* Coronet, Div. of Esquire Inc. 11 min.

*Iran: Land Made in the Desert.* U. Film Library Holder. 28 min.

*The Past in Persia.* National Ed. Television Inc. 29 min.

*Turkey: Crossroads on the Ancient World.* Film Library. 27 min.

*Zoroastrianism and the Parsis.* Doubleday Multimedia Div. 7 min.