CHAPTER 5

The Persians: a Civitas of Divine-Immanence

You cannot be buried in obscurity: you are exposed upon a grand theatre to the view of the world. If your actions are upright and benevolent, be assured they will augment your power and happiness.

Cyrus the Great

For my first discussion of a civitas that facilitates presence and displays the political, I will be using the example of civitas that is grounded in a worldview of wholeness and a sense of holiness toward the totality of existence. The worldview of these civitates has also been referred to as cosmological, in that their ideal polity is the mirror image of the cosmos (Frankfort et al. 1977), but since the cosmos was considered divine, I think the phrase “divine-immanence” better describes this worldview, because in this framework divinity should emanate from everything, in that all beings and actions should reflect the divine: otherwise they would not be legitimate.

There are many historical examples that could serve as the focus of this chapter, such as the civilizations of ancient India, ancient China, and the first nations of the American continents, but I have chosen the Achaemenids of Iran (550–330 BCE). I have made this decision not only for the practical reason that I have deep prior knowledge of the Achaemenids, having studied the records of that epoch when working on my other publication on the political thought of the ancient East (1389/2000), but more importantly because I was struck by the
following observation from the German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770–1831) about the civitas of this dynasty in Iran: “The principle of development begins with the history of Persia. This, therefore, constitutes strictly the beginning of World-History” (2001: 192). My reading of this passage tells me that in Hegel’s view, the Persians created not just an impressive empire, but the first universally appealing civitas; hence, I wanted to explore this case further. A recent study of the same period by Bruce Lincoln (b. 1948), professor of religions at the University of Chicago, depicts the Achaemenids’ civitas as “the world’s largest, richest, most powerful, most splendid, and most glorious” (2012: 478).

At the zenith of its power, the Achaemenids extended from Eastern Europe and the Balkans in the West, to the Indus Valley in the East, to the Caspian Sea and the border of Uzbekistan and Aral Sea in the North, and to the Persian Gulf, Yemen, and southern Egypt in the South, spanning 5.5 million square kilometers (2,123,652 square miles). In terms of power and influence, the Achaemenids affected the Maurya of India (323–184 BCE) in the East and the politics of the city-states of the Hellenic world toward the West. The Achaemenids endorsed Zoroastrianism as the dominant official religion, but not as a state-sponsored institution in the service of the powers that be or a tool to achieve status and conquest. Rather, Zoroastrianism established a framework for personal and social self-understanding (identity) and set the standards for the ethos of the civitas, without granting the polity a dogma that could license people of faith to brand fellow citizens they did not like as “other.” Some have called this civitas the first polity to advocate for tolerance and cultural diversity (Bozeman 2017). How did the Achaemenids view “presence, ethos and theatre?” What kind of presence caused their political to be developing, dynamic, and thriving? What set of mechanisms, social imaginary or ethos did they create to facilitate and encourage such a presence, and what kind of public space, arena, and theater did they establish to embody that presence?

**Presence: Soldiers of the Good; Cyrus and Darius**

Like all moral orders, the notion of presence in the Persian civitas meant appearing within the bounds of its social imaginary. I will delve into that in the next section under “ethos,” but suffice it to say here that it amounted to attuning one’s heart, mind, and the soul to the very tune of standing with and fighting for its cause. The civitas included
everyone, regardless of personal idiosyncrasy or social standing. If this sounds very Platonic, it is! In both Persian and Platonic thought, one should live up to the expectations that the order of things has bestowed upon each one of us. Indeed, there is a rich body of literature suggesting that Plato borrowed his ideas not only from the Persians, but also from the Vedic sacred traditions among Aryans, who migrated to India and Iran sometime in the second millennium BCE (e.g., Badi 1991; Mojtabaei 1352/1972; Panoussi 1356/1977). Whoever attunes his heart, mind, and the soul most keenly to the music of the order of being has the biggest presence in the political. And of course, that requires constant exertion and struggle, hence the notion of the “soldiers of the good.”

Here, I will concentrate on the two examples I mentioned in the introduction: the “conqueror with a vision” who initiated and made the powerful polity of the Achaemenids and the “statesman with a vision” who successfully saved that polity and transformed it into a civitas worthy of narration, praise, and admiration.

Ostensibly, though, even statesmen who save polities and make them civitates are not oblivious to power. Quite the contrary: they are aware of power and power struggles in the political and are even more conscious that power should ultimately serve as a means to an end. Hence, they handle it responsibly and are not caught in the euphoria of military victory but go beyond it. One could say that conquerors with vision act as aggressors when gaining and attaining power, but that they act as statesmen when it comes to exercising and implementing that power. And statesmen with vision might appear as aggressors when maintaining power and the polity, because even the maintenance of power involves power struggles and sometimes even requires conquest. The man who was destined to initiate the Achaemenids’ polity was Cyrus (c. 600–530 BCE), from the “Persian” tribe of the Aryans, people who had migrated to the Iranian plateau sometime in the previous millennium. He became famous as Cyrus the Great. He was the son of a local king in the city of Ashnan in the Beyza plain in Fars Province, about 43 km west of what became the great capital of the civitas, Persepolis, whose ruins still attract thousands of visitors yearly. Cyrus succeeded to the throne of the King of Ashnan in 559 BCE following his father’s death, but like his father had to submit to the governorship of his maternal grandfather Astyages, the overlord of the whole region at the time and the king of the Medes (ruled c. 678–549 BCE).
Here, I will concentrate on Cyrus’s three conquests. They demonstrate very well his competence as a military leader, but also, in each conquest he conducted his relationships with the enemy as a conqueror with a vision who thought beyond power and its maximization. These conquests are his victories over the Medes, the dominant dynasty in the Persian plateau before the Achaemenids; the Lydians, the people who ruled Western Anatolia; and the Babylonians, the people who lived in Ancient Mesopotamia (which included Cyrus’s liberation of Jerusalem from Babylonian rule).

The first conquest for Cyrus was to liberate himself and his kingdom from rule by Medes, even though their king was his grandfather. According to Herodotus, members of the Persian tribe had long desired this, and the emergence of Cyrus offered a good opportunity to realize their dream. In the words of Herodotus: “The Persians, who had long been impatient of the Median dominion, now that they had found a leader, were delighted to shake off the yoke” (Book 1: 127). But this conquest did not come easily. Cyrus did not initiate the hostility, though. Astyages wanted to destroy the new king of Ashnan and managed to defeat him in some three battles in the long war that lasted three years 553–550 BCE (Briant 1387/2008: 49). The war ended, however, with Cyrus’s victory in the fourth battle which made the Medes “slaves instead of lords, and slaves moreover of those who till recently had been their subjects” (Herodotus: 1: 129). It is recorded that in the end, the general and some of the army officers of the Medes deserted their former masters and joined Cyrus’s camp, which surely must have benefited Cyrus.

Astyages seems to have created resentment among his own people, whose downfall Herodotus describes as the “consequence of his cruelty,” which also “brought [the Medes] under the rule of the Persians” (ibid.: 130). With this victory, Cyrus made his grandfather his own subject, but he treated him with respect and fairness, a practice he demonstrated toward others in later conquests. According to Herodotus, “Cyrus kept Astyages at his court during the remainder of his life, without doing him any further injury” (ibid.). By some accounts, Cyrus even appointed Astyages as governor of a region.

Cyrus’s victory over the Medes also meant that the little kingdom of Ashnan became a regional as well as a global player on the political chessboard of the time. Lydia, a kingdom in Western Anatolia, became the next focus of Cyrus’s advances to domination, although some accounts blame Croesus, the king of Lydia, for initiating the war, which broke out
sometime in 547 BCE. Lydia was well known as a rich kingdom with a very powerful army in the “Near East and in the Hellenic world; the coastal Greek city-states were paying enormous tribute to Lydia” (Briant 1387/2008: 51). As a symbol of its wealth, Croesus is credited with minting of the first fine golden coin. The conquest of Lydia changed the fortunes of the Persians: while “before the conquest of Lydia, the Persians possessed none of the luxuries or delights of life” (Herodotus 1: 71), the conquest yielded enormous riches.

Having a good knowledge of Lydian military power, Cyrus called upon his allies, the Egyptians, the Babylonians, and the Spartans, for aid, “according to the terms of the alliance which he had concluded” with them (ibid.: 77). They responded positively to his request. When Cyrus was sure of his superior force, he sent an emissary to Croesus calling for him to submit without engaging in a destructive war, but when the response was negative, he launched war. “The two armies met in the plain before Sardis. It is a vast flat, bare of trees” (ibid.: 80). Croesus withdrew to the city of Sardis, which gave Cyrus an opportunity to lay siege to the city. Croesus thought “the place would hold out, no inconsiderable time” (ibid.: 81). He was proven wrong and the city fell in two weeks, with Croesus being taken as prisoner. It is certain that Cyrus did not kill Croesus and the legend has it that Cyrus made him one of his councillors, but what truly happened to him remains a mystery (Evans 1978: 39).

The next major conquest of Cyrus relates to Assyria, which according to Herodotus, “possesse[d] a vast number of great cities, whereof the most renowned and strongest at this time was Babylon” (Book 1: 178). Apparently, the Assyrians were aware of Cyrus’s intentions because “when they saw Cyrus conquering nation after nation, they were convinced that he would never stop, and that their turn would come at last” (ibid.: 190). He did march toward the Babylonian state in 539 but did not personally lead the army that captured its capital on October 4th. All indications show that the entry was relatively peaceful, so perhaps Cyrus had previously negotiated the acquiescence of the Babylonian army. Sometime later, Cyrus entered the city himself and with that victory, he implicitly suggested that he had completed his conquests when he described himself thus: “I am Cyrus, king of the universe, the great king, the powerful king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters of the world” (Cyrus Cylinder: Line 20).

This declaration is part of an inscription known as the Cyrus Cylinder, which is a masterpiece of declaration, legitimation, and, one could even
say, political propaganda. For me, the fact that as a conqueror he felt it necessary to launch such a political campaign indicates that he had a long-term vision. He did not destroy the defeated city, or its temples and he forbade any punishment of the people. He allowed the free movement of people. But more importantly, he embraced the ideals and traditions of the local region by legitimating his conquest according to local mores. There is no doubt that Cyrus was a conqueror, but it appears that he was a principled, pragmatic, and dignified warrior. Let us read his own testimony to this effect: “When I entered Babylon in a peaceful manner, in rejoicing and celebration, I established my lordly abode in the royal palace. Marduk, the great lord, established for me as [a friend of] Babylon the great magnanimity of one who loves Babylon. Daily, I sought his worship” (lines 22–23). He acknowledges that he has empathy and friendship for the Babylonians, and he makes sure to give credit to their god Marduk, the Babylonian lord of all other gods. It is interesting to note that Marduk was considered a deity who presided over compassion, healing, regeneration, justice, and fairness. Did Cyrus want people to associate him with these qualities? It is highly possible, considering how immediately after these lines, one reads the following:

My vast army marched peacefully in the midst of Babylon. I did not allow any troublemaker in all of the land [of Sumer] and Akkad. I shepherded in well being the city of Babylon and all its cultic centers. The citizens of Babylon […] upon whom he [i.e. Nabonidus, the deposed leader] had imposed a yoke which was not decreed for them as if without divine intention. I put to rest their exhaustion, their burden(?) I released. Marduk, the great lord, rejoiced at [my good] deeds and kindly sent blessings upon me, Cyrus, the king who worships him. (Lines 24–27)

Cyrus was principled, pragmatic, and dignified, as I said, and these are not exaggerations. “He was a gentle king whose kindness was exemplary, so much so that he was granted the title of ‘the father of the nation’” (Ehtesham 1355/1976: 39). As a result, the Iranians regarded him as “The Father,” the Babylonians as “The Liberator,” the Greeks as “The Law-Giver,” and the Jews as “The Anointed of the Lord.” Cyrus the Great appears to be one of the first conquerors in Iran with a “we vision,” and the most notable one in the world, one who managed to initiate a civilization admired by friends and foes and that earned him a place in the Bible, where he is explicitly named twenty-three times. After his death, a
close relative, Darius the Great (556–486 BCE), followed in his footsteps and achieved even more. If Cyrus was the founder of the Achaemenids’ polity, with a vision for a civitas, Darius became its architect.

The third king of the Achaemenids’ civitas, Darius ruled from 522 BCE until his death. Darius’s father was a member of the royal Achaemenid family as well as the local ruler of the province of Bactria. His grandfather was also a local governor who had accompanied Cyrus the Great on some expeditions. All this is to say that Darius grew up in a royal household and was well versed in the art of statesmanship from an early age. For example, he proved adept at the art of accommodation and at inclusive governance. Indeed, the manner in which he assumed power is testimony to his skill and artisanship and an indication of what was to come during his tenure in office. Here is some context. The Achaemenids experienced an existential crisis when an imposter named Gaumata took advantage of an incident in the royal court and declared himself the new king in 522. Apparently, King Cambyses had secretly killed his brother or half-brother Bardiya (Smerdis in Greek texts) before departing for an expedition from which he never returned. Gaumata, who resembled Bardiya and somehow knew about the mysterious death, seized the opportunity to declare himself king. Darius, who had played a major military role during the reign of Cambyses and was from the royal court, rose to the occasion and by securing the collaboration of the heads of major families in Iran at the time, whom I call citizens of the polity, dispatched with the imposter (Briant 2008: 173–174). He did not, however, immediately take over, but rather first consulted with the heads of these major families about the future regime.

Herodotus offers a good report of this consultation. Three participants, including Darius, offered three different forms of regimes—democratic republic, aristocracy, and monarchy—as alternatives for the future. Otanes, who, incidentally, was the first person to suspect the imposter king, argued for the first alternative, Megabyzues argued for the second, and Darius argued the last (Book 3: 80–82). After refuting the merits of the other two, Darius argued that history and tradition showed that monarchy chose the best person for the job and in the end finished his argument by saying: “we ought not to change the laws of our forefathers when they work fairly; for to do so is not well” (ibid.: 82), which

1 In Iranian history Deioces is credited with being the first monarch (in old Persian, Shah, literally meaning the best). He also was chosen by the head of various Aryan tribes
seems to have won the vote of the majority. In Herodotus’s words, “Such were the three opinions brought forward at this meeting; the four other Persians voted in favour of the last” (ibid.: 83). Otanes abstained, but insisted on his position of neither “to rule nor to be ruled,” which he demanded for himself and his family, of course, within the boundaries of the laws of the new civitas that the new king agreed and respected. Thus, Darius assumed the throne and embarked upon turning Cyrus’s polity into a civitas. But of course, the transition of power was not as smooth. He had to prove himself a worthy candidate by responding to challengers outside the council of the heads of big families. It took him more than a year of a balanced policy of clemency accompanied by swiftness or as it is commonly called in today’s political jargon, “carrot and stick,” to achieve this, particularly when it came to some of the staunch supporters of Bardya, whether the real one or the imposter. Darius deployed a combination of diplomacy and punishment, as well as calculated and prudent distribution of loyal forces throughout the civitas, to finally establish both peace and his own undisputed authority by the end of 521 BCE. He then turned to achieving the role, according to his inscriptions, by which he wanted to be remembered, namely as a lawgiver and an organizer or, in my vocabulary, a civilization maker.

In this sense, for me the second clue to Darius’s modus operandi as a statesman is found in this statement: “we ought not to change the laws of our forefathers.” To me, this reveals his perception of and attitude toward the human condition in two senses of the word. On the one hand, it means being mindful of the human condition, which always lies somewhere between past and future. Human beings must always value the past for the betterment and continuation of the future. I remind the reader of the maxim I cited in chapter one: “invent your own religion or it means nothing to you; follow the religion of your parent or you lose it.” I think Darius was quite aware of this; thus he did invent his ethos and ways of doing things (his religion) and at the same time he was conscious also of doing the opposite by respecting the tradition of his ancestors.

The other sense of the human condition, even though related to the first, pertains to the fact that even though human beings should and do of the time because, as Herodotus describes, “when they heard of the singular uprightness of Deioces and of the equity of his decisions, they joyfully had recourse to him in the various quarrels and suits that arose, until at last they came to put confidence in no one else” (Book 1: 96).
modify and revise their ethos, they must do so piecemeal and very gradually. For example, history records the Sargon of Akkad (?–2279 BCE), the Mesopotamian statesman, as the first to create “kingship” as a political paradigm by uniting the city-states of his time sometime around 2300 BCE, when according to inscriptions “The god Enlil gave to him (the Upper Sea) [the Mediterranean] and the (Lower Sea) [the Persian Gulf]” (Nippur inscription of Sargon). The legitimacy of such an institution rarely came into question by the masses of the people until the public beheading of the monarch in France by the means of the guillotine, on January 21, 1793. In the case of Iran, that legitimacy came into question when the King was assassinated by a barraged citizen on May 1, 1896. Still today, in many countries of the world, even for those who have a republican political regime, the institution of the king survives side by side with the modern notion of polity.

Besides preserving “the laws of our forefathers,” Darius’s statesmanship displays the conduct and many of the qualities that also characterize responsible public figures of the modern period in his role as an officer of law and order and welfare. Likewise, he also served as the embodiment of uprightness and public morality or, according to my terminology, as the caretaker of human’s “heat, mind and soul.” Darius achieved fame as a superb organizer and a just administrator (Ehtesham 1355/1976: 100–101), and to be known as such even during his lifetime is a great tribute. I also endorse the precise summary that Pierre Briant, an Iranologist who has published a massive work on the Achaemenids, offers: “The epigraphic record of Darius’s activities as a builder is rich” (2002: 165), and here builder is used in the broadest sense of the term. Maybe it is in part for these reasons that he became known as “the Great,” like Cyrus. What else might explain this appellation? I am certain that part of the reason was his military victories, which extended the boundaries of the polity beyond what Cyrus established, but here I am more interested in the governance institutions he erected. For example, he initiated the restoration of many places that had been left to ruin, initiated new construction, and of course began the creation the great complex of Persepolis. As he puts it himself: “Darius the king says: by the grace of Ahura Mazda, I completed numerous constructions that previously had been left unfinished. I saw the fortifications at Susa that had been previously constructed fall prey to age; I rebuilt them. These are (in fact) quite other fortifications that I myself have built” (cited in ibid.).
In terms of governance, he considered that these restoration project contributed to more peaceful conduct of managing and dealings with various peoples. Here is how he explained his conduct: “The countries that fought each other, whose peoples killed each other, I fixed, by the grace of Ahura Mazda, so that their peoples did not kill each other, and I restored each one to its place. And, faced with my decrees, they respected them, in such a way that the strong did not strike nor despoil the poor” (cited in ibid.: 166). He paid attention to restoring old capitals such as Pasargadae, Babylon, and Ecbatana, which to me is a sign of respect for previous dynasties and rulers. But his biggest project was the initiation of a new capital 60 km northeast of the city of Shiraz in Fars Province, “by raising a monumental terrace that would cover 125,000 sq. m. upon completion,” 1770 m (more than 5800 feet) above the sea level (ibid.: 168). The following is how Darius humbly reported his plan:

And Darius the king says: “On this site where this fortress was built, previously no fortress had been built there. By the grace of Ahura-Mazda, this fortress, I constructed it according to the plan of Ahura-Mazda, all the gods [being] with him…. And Darius the king says: “I, may Ahura-Mazda protect me, all the gods [being] with him, and also this fortress, and also what was planned for this site.” (cited in ibid.)

I describe him as humble here because in this short passage he credits the Great Aryan God Ahura Mazda, as well as other gods of the time, for achieving this project. It is reported that construction began for Persepolis either in 518 or 519 BCE, and based on inscriptions, it began to function as a public institution in 502, but it took 120 years to complete the project. It was a complex amalgamation of palaces and great halls that functioned as the capital of the civitas, and included the private residence of the king and official meeting places, used especially during the celebration of the Persian New Year at the spring equinox. It was in full operation until Alexander the Great set it on fire, and despite that, it was still in use during the 70-year Greek occupation of Iran.

As to Darius’s contribution for upholding and even enhancing the fair, diverse, and plural society that Cyrus set in motion, I will say more later. Suffice it to say here that the enormous number of royal Treasury Tablets documenting in detail the wages paid to people who worked in the construction of this enormous complex (Cameron 1948) are an indicator of the elaborate system of groups that worked for the royal
court. According to Briant, “The Treasury Tablets basically contain the names of specialized workers in the building trades and ornamental crafts” (2002: 429). Not only did they receive appropriate salaries, but also, they received rations of food and wine, since many of them were foreign workers. As Briant notes, “Between 507 and 500 [BCE], certain tablets record the transport to Persepolis of grain, flour, and wine intended for craftsmen’s rations” (ibid.: 430).

Another aspect of Darius’s modus operandi was to trust people with their own affairs. Although he did not agree with Otanes’s proposal to make the regime a democratic republic and instead defended monarchy as a time-honored system, he did agree with the principle of decentralization of power, establishing twenty governments with extensive autonomy throughout the empire (Herodotus, Book 3: 89). Before discussing this system in more detail, I would like to conclude this section by noting Darius’s meticulous attention to the legal system and his awareness that despite his belief in the centrality of the role of the king, it was the strength of the legal system and the incorruptibility of the judges that guaranteed a sense of security for presence to occur and for individuals to perform human and in turn produce civility. Herodotus reports judges who “had been crucified by Darius … on the charge of taking a bribe to determine a cause wrongly” (Book 7: 194). He was well aware of Hammurabi (1810–1750 BCE), the sixth king of the First Babylonian dynasty, and shamelessly borrowed from his code: “Darius was determined to create a book of laws and cases as lasting as those of Hammurabi. In fact, Darius borrowed many key concepts from Hammurabi and copied many others outright” (Poolos 2008: 52).

My review of many accounts of Cyrus’s and Darius’s greatness has led me to the conclusion that their highest virtue was humility. Both repeatedly credited the Greatest God among the Persian gods for their achievements, status, and being. We have already encountered such declarations, but the following is the most common: “Greatest is the Wise Lord, who is the greatest of gods. He created Darius [as] king. He Bestowed kingship/kingdom on him. By the Wise Lord’s will, Darius is king” (cited in Lincoln 2012: 408). In terms of the humility of the actual conduct of their presence in the political, I think their tolerance of diversity of religion and tradition and their support for a plurality of ethnicities, languages, and cultures demonstrate the ethos or the social imaginary of the Achaemenids’ civitas. As a final side note, I should add that even as to outside appearance Darius was reportedly handsome and
tall: Strabo described him as “the most handsome of men, except for the length of his arms, for they reached even to his knees!” (XV: 3.21).

Herodotus’s narrative of what the Persians themselves said about these two figures is interesting and revelatory: “the Persians say that Darius was ‘a Kapelos’ [a businessman/a dealer/a tradesman], … and Cyrus a father; for Darius looked to making a gain in everything,… while Cyrus was gentle” (Book 3: 89). I deliberately cite the Greek transliteration here because the word Kapelos has interesting undertones for me of a person of civilization production. While some scholars have argued that Herodotus was being pejorative toward Darius (e.g., Kurke 1999: 71–73), obviously I disagree. For me, a person who aims to create a civitas must deal with the world and cultivate entrepreneurship in all aspects of life, as Darius does. Hence, Cyrus proved a fatherly figure of a conqueror with a vision, while Darius remained loyal in the role of a statesman with a vision to the end.

**Ethos: Cosmos, Warrior, the Path of Happiness**

What moral order, social imaginary, rules of the game, mechanisms, or ethos facilitated appearing and presence for Cyrus and Darius? It seems that Zoroastrianism inspired and animated the Persian framework and shaped the Achaemenids’ moral order, even though other religious traditions also flourished and enjoyed reverence. In fact, I am aware that, among scholars of the Iranian ancient world, the debate over whether the ruling elite were Zoroastrian or whether the state religion of the polity was Zoroastrianism continues to linger. But that discussion has no effect on this work, because the Achaemenid rulers rightly noted that Zoroastrianism shapes people’s consciences as well as their consciousness. On the other hand, I claim this to be general principle: no dynamic and developing polity can afford to have a state religion, yet reverence for an official religion or, in Locke’s term, civil religion is necessary for the civitas.

The distinction between state religion and official religion, civil religion or, one could say, civitas religion, is significant. As a reminder, I hope I have demonstrated sufficiently in part one of this book that all human units are in some ways a moral order, but the sources for the moral framework of such an order vary. I operate here with the presupposition that three worldviews serve as sources for humanity: divine-immanence, divine-transcendence and human-immanence. The first two possess a heavy religion undertone traditionally understood, while the last does not.
Regardless of which one serves as the underlying framework, the official position or “religion” of a civitas shapes as aspects of the moral order. As to the role of religion in the modern civitas, the Canadian political philosopher Ronald Beiner rightly points out that the purpose and function of “civil religion was strictly to domesticate religion” (2011), but I would add that its purpose is also to domesticate or as the sociologists like to call it “socialize” the citizens. When the process of domestication and socialization happens in the political, including the official religion, it civilizes the society. On the other hand, “state religion” is inevitably mixed with politics (the authoritative allocation of values) and this leads to making religion the handmaiden and instrument of political power or, even worse, a means of justifying its misuses.

Now, the question remains as to what the Iranian official religion of divine-immanence meant for the Achaemenid civitas. The first feature of the Iranian moral order or ethos is shared with almost all non-secular worldviews. These all presuppose that a combination of the physical and the non-physical or the imaginary world of the unseen comprises the sphere of being, hence any notion of truth includes this totality. Peoples of different cultures have called this totality by different names, but they all mean the same thing by it, which can be rendered inclusively as “the order of being” or even “cosmos,” by some accounts a concept of Aryan origin that appeared in the Hellenic world with the meaning of “the universe as an embodiment of order and harmony.” For this reason, it also has been taken to mean virtue, balance, morality, harmony, the path, and the like. Various cultures embrace this idea, with the Chinese naming it tao, the Indians dharma, the Persians rta/asha, the Egyptians maat, the Greeks arete, and so on (Cornford 1957).

The Persian rta/asha appears in the sacred book of Avesta in passim, meaning “the Right.” It is also sometimes translated as the Truth. This notion lies at the heart of being and encircles and permeates the totality of existence, so much so that even the creator and other deities are part of rta/asha. It is this whole combination that produces righteousness. Even when the creator decides to choose an ally on Earth for its cultivation and upholding, the creator consults the Right. As reported in the Sacred Avesta: “The Creator asked the Right, ‘whom would you consider with sagacity and zeal to become the lord of order, to bring prosperity,
repel violence and dispel the forces of Evil?’” (Yasna 29: 2). In a later Yasna, one learns the reasoning behind such a consultation: the Right not only conveys the nature and order of things, but it is also an indicator of the righteous path and the cultivator of the right conduct: “Teach me through the Right the noble path of truth and righteous thought and righteous conduct” (34: 12). In other words, ideally the Iranian world should function with a belief in an orderly world where an a priori system determines the status of everything and everyone, which in turn dictates their natural, social, and political hierarchy.

This a priori assignment stems from the assumption that the natural world is good, orderly, and worth preserving, and that each human being has the choice either to contribute to the maintenance of such an order or to go against it. Gods are within creation, among human beings, witnessing everything. These gods were easily identified with natural and cosmic forces, for example, the gods of the Sun, the Earth, the Moon, and the winds, fire, and water. Adhering to the commands or the rules of the divine is the highest form of life on earth and results in human happiness. One should appreciate divinity in everything and everyone and even the things we normally refer to as “it,” should be considered holy and as though they are thou, whereas in the modern time we even refer to the “thou” as it. I think Hegel captured the essence of this worldview very accurately when he stated:

Zoroaster’s “Light” belongs to the World of Consciousness- to Spirit as a relation to something distinct from itself. We see in the Persian World a pure exalted Unity, as the essence which leaves the special existences that inhere in it, free;— as the Light, which only manifests what bodies are in themselves;— a Unity which governs individuals only to excite them to become powerful for themselves. ... The Persian Religion is therefore no idol-worship; it does not adore individual natural objects, but the Universal itself. (2001: 191 and 196)

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the worldly implication of this universal message means that any political, social, or economic order must be a mirror image of this universe. But how? The Iranian

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2 Yasna is first component of the Avesta, the holy book of Zoroastrianism. A few of its parts form “Gatha,” the most sacred part of Avesta, and they are considered the direct words of Prophet Zarathustra. Yasna plus four other components (Vispard, Vandidad, Yashtha and Khordeh-Avesta) form the sacred texts of the Zoroastrians.
sacred texts formulate the answer to this concern with the role they assign to any individual human being in that universal moral order. What are the features of this universe? It is centered on (1) the Right and Truth, symbolized by the greatest god among the gods, Ahura Mazda the creator; (2) the existence of an opposite force to the Right, i.e., the Wrong or the lie (daruga), as important as the Right, but in the negative sense; and (3) human beings who live in a condition of in-between these two elements. Each human being is thus a “warrior” endowed with the choice of devoting their life either to the cause of the Right or that of the Wrong. In other words, one’s thought, speech, and deeds are either righteous, thus helping the Right, or they are unrighteous, helping the Wrong. In this battle everyone has the responsibility of participating and choosing side, with a “prominent position assigned to the king as God’s chosen instrument” (Lincoln 2012: 4).

From the triumvirate of the Right, the Wrong, and human beings, a well-established corresponding practical guide has developed. It proposes that every human agency, including the king, expresses and manifests its potentials and tendencies in the world. This new triumvirate includes Humata, righteous thoughts; Hukhata, righteous words; and Huvarshata, righteous deeds. Note the following passage from the Zoroastrian holy text: “I celebrate my praises for the righteous thought, righteous words, and righteous deeds for my thoughts, my speeches, and my actions. With chanting praises, I present all righteous thoughts, righteous words, and righteous deeds” (“Yasna” 11: 17). According to Avesta, by purifying one’s life through “righteous thoughts, righteous words and righteous deeds” (“Yasna” 57: 34), one appears among others and makes presence in the political. This is a general rule for all creatures. Even other deities in the Iranian cosmological worldview of divine-immanence, such the Amesha Spenta (the seven deities emanating from the greatest deity, Ahura Mazda), meditate through this major triumvirate (Boyce, “Humata, Hushta, Huvarshata,” Encyclopaedia Iranica).

The threesome of right thought, right speech, and right deeds are meant to be observed in all aspects of life, whether private appearance or public performances. The Greek historian, philosopher, and soldier Xenophon (431–354 BCE) uses the life and career of Cyrus the Great to portray, masterfully and in full detail, the meticulous ways “the good warrior” prepares to fight on the side of Right. In fact, the following instruction offered by Darius, as reported by Xenophon, is informative:
We think, furthermore, that we have observed in Cyrus that he held the opinion that a ruler ought to excel his subjects not only in point of being actually better than they, but that he ought also to cast a sort of spell upon them…. He trained his associates also not to spit or to wipe the nose in public, and not to turn round and look at anything, as being men who wondered at nothing. All this he thought contributed, in some measure, to their appearing to their subjects, men who could not lightly be despised. (The Cyropaedia, book 8, I: 42–43)

Iranians, particularly those who assumed public roles and had to master righteous thought, righteous words, and righteous deeds, understood the pursuit of righteousness as an art that required training and enormous exercise. This art included acquiring physical as well as mental skills and practices (Rajaee 1385/2006: 80–85), because according to a Persian aphorism, “a sane mind resides in a sane body.” Plato’s observation that this preparation requires four wise tutors is even more revelatory and comprehensive:

The first of these teaches him [the novice], the Magian lore of Zoroaster… that is the worship of the gods…. The justest teaches him to be truthful all his life long; the most temperate [teaches him] not to be mastered by even a single pleasure, in order that he may be accustomed to be a free man;… [and] the bravest trains him to be fearless and undaunted, telling him that to be daunted is to be enslaved. (Alcibiades I: 122 a)

The combination of these teachings leads to the infusing of Right and Warriorship (constant righteous conduct), which in turn leads to the defeat and elimination of the Wrong. The result means the player’s behavior remains within the parameter of the Path, that is, doing the right thing and doing it in the right way. This, according to the Achaemenid moral order, amounts to happiness, as clearly stated in one of the inscriptions: “The man who conducts himself according to the law that the Wise Lord had set down and who worships the Wise Lord at the proper time and in the proper ritual style, he becomes happy when living (jīva siyata) and truthful/righteous when dead” (cited in Lincoln 2012: 260). In fact, according to experts on the Achaemenids’ world, all creation was about “happiness” (siyata in Old Persian, reincarnated as shad in Middle and Modern Persian). Further, when conducting its warriorship on the side of the Right, the human presence in the political guarantees happiness but if warriorship is exercised on the side of Wrong, it causes its
ruin and destruction. For example, Lincoln has titled his well-argued and thoroughly-documented book on “Achaemenian Religion and the Imperial Project” *Happiness for Mankind*. Indeed, the following statement may serve as a pointed summary of the Achaemenid moral order or ethos: “As we have repeatedly stressed, one of the most striking features of the Achaemenid cosmology is that it situates the Wise Lord’s establishment of ‘Happiness for Mankind’ (*siyati…martiyahya*) as the culminating act of creation.” Lincoln is quick, however, to point out the following: “And, as we also have regularly noted, such happiness was finite, for at a later moment in human history ‘the lie’ (*drauga*) [the Wrong, in my rendering] entered existence, bringing all other evils in its wake” (ibid.: 406–407). As in my account of the moment of flourishing civitates, the state of “happiness” is not a natural or permanent condition, but a precarious occurrence whose existence depends on constant human vigilance.

One could argue that a general logical conclusion of the triumvirate Cosmos, Warrior, and The Path, with its implicit emphasis on righteous thoughts, righteous words, and righteous deeds, would be tolerance for cultural diversity and societal plurality, for the practical reason that the form righteousness might take is contingent upon temporal and spatial considerations and requirements. In this geographically massive domain that included the Hellenic world in western Anatolia, Bactria in the northeast, the Mesopotamian city-states in western Asia, and the Aryan world of the Indian subcontinent in south-east, there must have been a variety of versions of the cosmological and divine-immanence worldview. So, it is not all surprising to me that Cyrus or other Achaemenid kings invoked Ahura Mazda when speaking to the Persians, and invoked Marduk when speaking to the Babylonians, and Egyptian Gods when they addressed the Egyptians, and that they assumed each name refers alike to the same Great Creator, whose main concerns centered on the happiness of mankind.

As such, the first area of diversity under Achaemenid rule was acceptance of diverse religions in the various part of the civitas, under the rubric of the official religion of Zoroastrianism. This became obvious immediately after Cyrus victoriously entered Babylon and made open declarations such as: “I sought the safety of the city of Babylon and all its sanctuaries. As for the population of Babylon …, [w]ho as if without div[ine intention] had endured a yoke not decreed for them, I soothed their weariness; I freed them from their bonds(?). Marduk, the great lord, rejoiced at [my good] deeds” (Cyrus Cylinder: Line 25–26). The religious policy
of Cyrus and his successors focused on encouraging diversity, a practice that is well recorded in history. The way in which Cyrus expresses it in his Cylinder is accepted as more or less stating facts. He claims that he helped and encouraged the people

...whose shrines had earlier become dilapidated, the gods who lived therein, and made permanent sanctuaries for them. I collected together all of their people and returned them to their settlements, and the gods of the land of Sumer and Akkad which Nabonidus- to the fury of the lord of the gods- had brought into Shuanna, at the command of Marduk, the great lord, I returned them unharmed to their cells, in the sanctuaries that make them happy. (ibid.: Line 31–34)

The most famous case relates to the fate of the Jewish people in Babylonia after the Achaemenids captured the Babylonians and their capital. Following his arrival in Babylon, Cyrus ordered that all who had been captured and held as enslaved people were now free. If they chose to do so, they could return to their homeland; he even offered material help and subsidized their efforts to relocate and rebuild their temples. Among the liberated captives were 50,000 Jews who had been held in Babylon for generations. Cyrus encouraged them to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild their temples, a policy that Darius and his successors would also support. The best-kept records of this are found in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the books of Daniel, Isaiah, and Ezra. According to Briant, “The terms used by the author of Second Isaiah are reminiscent of certain passages in the Cyrus Cylinder” (2002: 46). Note, for example, in particular Isaiah 45:1: “This is what the Lord says to his chosen one, to Cyrus, whose right hand I hold in order to subdue nations before him, and disarm kings to open doors before him, so gates remain unclosed.” In terms of offering actual help to the Jewish people, the following verse (44:28) is even more direct and specific: “Cyrus, the one I appointed as shepherd to carry out all my wishes and to decree concerning Jerusalem, ‘She will be rebuilt,’ and concerning the temple, ‘It will be reconstructed.’” Further, one encounters a more elaborate and specific narrative of this episode in the book of Ezra where the support and the direct involvement of the royal court is explained as follows:

In the first year of Cyrus the king, King Cyrus decreed: Temple of God in Jerusalem. The Temple will be rebuilt as a place at which sacrifices are
offered and to which offerings are brought to be burnt. Its height is to be sixty cubits, its width sixty cubits. There are to be three thicknesses of stone blocks and one of wood. The expense is to be met by the king’s household. Furthermore, the vessels of gold and silver from the Temple of God which Nebuchadnezzar took from the sanctuary in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon are to be restored so that everything may be restored to the sanctuary in Jerusalem and be put back in the Temple of God. (Ezra 6: 2–5)

Briant thinks that Cyrus’s policies toward the Jewish community “were exceptional compared with normal relations between a Near Eastern sovereign and an ethnoreligious community” (ibid.: 47). This “exceptional” behavior by Cyrus, however, soon became the accepted norm in the Achaemenids’ civitas.

There are similar shining reports about other kings of the Achaemenids. Darius the Great continued the same policies toward the Jewish community, as reported in the Book of Daniel. Not only did Darius afford freedom to Daniel but he even appointed him to a position of high authority. When jealous rivals tried to discredit Daniel by reporting to the king that he worshiped God instead of the king, Darius gave Daniel a chance to defend himself, and in the end he made a public declaration urging people to trust Daniel “in every dominion of my kingdom” (the Book of Daniel, 6: 25). The section concludes by stating that “Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius, and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian” (ibid.: 28). Other parts concur with this depiction of Darius, including, for example, his behavior toward the gods of Egypt after the conquest of that land. Moreover, there are records of explicit instructions to army commanders, governors, and other regional and local administrators calling for respect of local and indigenous religions, cultures, and particularly other deities. As an example, upon invading and capturing the Greek island of Delos, the Iranian general, discovered that people and, particularly religious groups, were fleeing. He immediately made the following declaration, according to Herodotus’s *Histories*:

Why are ye fled, O holy men? Why have ye judged me so harshly and so wrongfully? I have surely sense enough, even had not the king so ordered, to spare the country which gave birth to the two gods-to spare, I say, both the country and its inhabitants. Come back therefore to your dwellings; and once more inhabit your island. (Book 6: 97)
The Achaemenid tolerance of diversity extended to the cultural realm as well. Before I discuss this point, I remind the reader that cultures are usually polyglot, while a civitates develops a lingua franca that serves as a means of communication among those polyglot cultures but allows for local cultures, with their multiplicity of languages, to flourish. Yet, sometimes the lingua franca may differ from that of the people who created the polity that became the power center of the fledging civilization. As an example, one could consider the three Muslim civilizations that emerged in Anatolia, Iran, and India from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. As I have mentioned before, even though the ruling elite in all three civitates, the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Mughals, were Turkic, the lingua franca of all three became Persian. The same applies for the Achaemenids. Even though the language of the ruling elite was “old Persian,” and even though official communication took place in this language, the language of civitas was what later scholars have dubbed “Imperial Aramaic.” As one scholar puts it, it became the “vehicle for written communication between the different regions of the vast empire with its different peoples and languages. The use of a single official language, which modern scholarship has dubbed Official Aramaic or Imperial Aramaic, can be assumed to have greatly contributed to the astonishing success of the Achaemenids in holding their far-flung empire together for as long as they did” (Shaked 1987: 251). But it was far from being the only language, or even the most prominent one. The following passage from Briant is informative:

The documentation from the reigns of Darius and Xerxes reveals the general spread of Aramaic in the Satrapal bureaucracies: in Persepolis itself, Babylonia, Egypt, Sardis, Dascylium, and all the way onto the Iranian Plateau. Nonetheless, the administrative spread of Aramaic did not displace the local languages. Naturally, we are reminded of the command given by Ahasuerus in the book of Esther, “to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language” (3:12; cf. Daniel 3:4,7; 6:26) and of the order given by Darius at Behistun. (2012: 507)

And of course, with the diversity of languages, that is, the formal acceptance of multilingualism, comes the flourishing of regional and local cultures and mores. Briant’s observation about the link between languages and cultural pluralism is accurate: “The Persians had never
attempted to attack the recognized traditions of their subjects: the multi-ethnic Empire remained multicultural, as is shown, for example, by its extraordinary linguistic diversity” (ibid.: 868). To me, the clearest evidence of the presence of multiple cultural groups could be seen in a tablet describing the building of Darius’s palace in Susa:

The cedar timber, this -a mountain named Lebanon -from there was brought. The Assyrian people, it brought it to Babylon; from Babylon the Carians and the Ionians brought it to Susa. The yakâ-timber was brought from Gandara and from Carmania. The gold was brought from Sardis and from Bactria, which here was wrought. The precious stone lapis lazuli and carnelian which was wrought here, this was brought from Sogdiana. The precious stone turquois, this was brought from Chorasmia, which was wrought here. The silver and the ebony were brought from Egypt. The ornamentation with which the wall was adorned, that from Ionia was brought. The ivory, which was wrought here, was brought from Ethiopia and from Sind and from Arachosia. The stone columns which were here wrought, a village named Abiradu, in Elam -from there were brought. The stonecutters who wrought the stone, those were Ionians and Sardians. The goldsmiths who wrought the gold, those were Medes and Egyptians. The men who wrought the wood, those were Sardians and Egyptians. The men who wrought the baked brick, those were Babylonians. The men who adorned the wall, those were Medes and Egyptians. (Lines 30–55)

More than ten nationalities are mentioned in this passage. The diversity and plurality in the ethos of the Achaemenids’ moral order were reflected in the theater and throughout the structural and organization aspects of this civitas that inaugurated, once again in Hegel’s word, “the beginning of World-History.”

**Theater; the Monarchy, Social Classes, Tributary Economy**

A sound, solid theater contributed to the working of the cosmological moral order and facilitated the presence of “good warriors.” The reader may have already gotten an impression of the Achaemenids’ politics in the debate over the future of the theater between Darius and his six allies, who became the wise councillors in the new regime.

The institution of the monarchy took charge of politics, but what kind of institution was it? Reflecting the cosmological order of the gods,
with Ahura Mazda in the highest position, there were local kings in the various regions, with “the King of kings” (Shahbanshah) occupying the highest place in the polity and acting as the ultimate authority and final arbiter. This, according to the Iranian historian of Persian ancient history Javad Mashkoor (1918–1995), was based on Avesta: “he was the great king” overseeing everyone (1347/1968: 63). The king had to have royal ancestry, hence what was known as the “kingly family” was itself a major player in Iranian history until the destruction of the monarchy in the 1979 revolution. In addition to having appropriate ancestry, he also had to be a person with chutzpah, depicted as the God-given light known as Farrah (light), and he had to gain the support of other major players or the heads of other powerful families. The King of kings would do this in two ways. The first was to make sure he had their support before taking power. The second was to consult with them whenever major decisions warranted it. There was another consultative body that could be called “the council of state,” composed of the king’s chief executive officer (Hezarbad), who came to be known in the history of Persian political thought as Sadr-Azam (chief minister), and some chief justices and other political elites.

The most famous and well-respected kings in Iranian history were those who lived up to the image of the notion of “ideal kingship,” which resembled the concept of the “philosopher king” in Plato’s dialogues. The main task of the ideal king was to act as the father of nation and the guardian of the orderly and good life. I have formulated the parameters of “the institution of the ideal or best king” in a different work based on Avesta, the holy Zoroastrian texts, and the long epic poem of Shah-nama (the Book of Kings), written by “the Sage” Abul-Qâsem Ferdowsi Tusi (940–1020) (Rajaee 1385/2006: 77–86). Those authoritative texts show, as I have said, that the main duty of the King of kings was to be a good arbiter, and not an autocratic ruler as a devotee to the cosmological order of being. For example, both Cyrus’s and Darius’s constant references to Ahura Mazda as the cause of their authority and the supporter of their decisions and practice was heeding to and acknowledgment of this ideal notion. And indeed, if and when a king took personal credit for any worldly success or the acquisition of authority, the grace of divine-immanence abandoned the royal heart, making him unfit to assume that role (ibid.: 86–89). Furthermore, consultation with powerful families and the existence of other kings contributed to the decentralization of power and functioned as a system of checks and balances (ibid.: 93–99).
Thus, one could argue that the new monarchical regime came to be a consultative kingdom, with councils of the aristocracy, or what I prefer to call the “Council of Citizens.” Here is why: many people argue that citizenship is a new phenomenon and a by-product of the modern state, where the people are the sovereign. I argue, however, that this is to ignore what archaeologists have described as proto-democracies in Mesopotamia and the North Indian city-states of the ancient world, along with the city-state of ancient Athens. I contend that citizens have always been the sovereign, but who is included in the institution of citizenship has often been narrowly defined and restricted to select people according to their privilege, race, and/or wealth. What modernity and its fundamental idea and institution of “human rights” have done is to extend and expand the definition of the institution of citizenship to everyone. Citizens, whether everyone or the select few, theoretically have open access to kings or centers of power. In the case of ancient Persia and in the words of Herodotus, citizenship was “to be free to each whenever he pleased, to enter the palace unannounced, unless the king were in the company of one of his wives” (Book 3: 84).

While the appellation “the Council of Citizens” may explain the meaning and the function of both consultative bodies, in terms of their position within the structure of the kingship, the council of the heads of the family could be called the “Royal Council,” through which the king made his decisions (Ehtesham 1355/1976: 44). For example, when he received a proposal from a foreign leader, “Cyrus, on this offer, called together the chiefs of the Persians, and laid the matter before them, requesting them to advise him what he should do” (Herodotus, Book 1: 206). Incidentally, for some major decisions, particularly international ones, the king would invite others to the council, even foreign nationals of major stature when occasion warranted (see, for example, ibid.: 155 and 207, as well as Book 3: 34 and 36).

Meanwhile, the “Council of State” seems to have attended to domestic issues mainly, and thus, its membership was restricted to the holders of various important posts, including major justices and regional authorities. In addition to the councils, there were two other structures attached to the polity. One was an elaborate watchdog system called “the ears and the eyes of the king” (Cheshm-o Goosh-e Shah). Its main task was to travel throughout the civitas and report on the situation, whether among civilian or military authorities (Ehtesham 1355/1976: 48). The second was the development of an elaborate bureaucratic system of secretariats (Dabiran).
that ended up creating a socio-functional class that was extremely influential in the working of this giant civitas. What gave this bureaucratic system its robustness and furthered its significant role in the polity was the development of the Old Persian cuneiform script. This had been invented by 525 BCE, but Darius amplified its role, using it widely and frequently for monument inscriptions. In summary, then, the monarchy that formed the backbone of this long-lasting regime was decentralized, highly organized, and yet consultative. One historian even claims that the “Achaemenids created the first confederation polity, appearing on the face of the Earth” (ibid.: 131).

It is thus appropriate to say a few words about the administrative machinery. To begin with, initiating the administrative machinery was part of general economic reforms that Darius, the statesman with a vision, initiated and developed. In some ways, one could argue that the administrative arrangement helped to manage the economy. As Herodotus writes, Darius “proceeded to establish twenty governments of the kind which the Persians call Satrapies, assigning to each its governor, and fixing the tribute which was to be paid him by the several nations” (Book 3: 89). Each Satrapy, which etymologically meant “the protectorate,” was headed by a Satrap, meaning “the protector of the province.” Historically, the Medes had created a less organized and less efficient form of this governance, but Darius perfected it. Herodotus goes on to list all twenty of the Satrapies, along with the amount each had to pay as its tribute (Book 9: 94). Other accounts report twenty-three, twenty-six, and even thirty-six satrapies, which might be because boundaries and domains were constantly shifting. As I have mentioned, the Satraps had enormous local power, and some could even mint their own currency. They were not called kings, but in practice they were the kings of their provinces and were responsible for the maintenance of welfare, broadly defined, and some also served as judges.

In terms of social organization, the Achaemenids’ civitas resembled most societies prior to the modern period. The main feature was hierarchical complementarity. In Taylor’s account, this hierarchy had three main classes of “oratores, bellatores, laboratores”—those who pray, those who fight, and those who work. It was clear that each needed the others, but there is no doubt that we have here a descending scale of dignity; some functions were in their essence higher than others” (2004: 11, italics in the original). During the period of the Achaemenids, this pre-existing class order of priests, warriors, and farmers/workers became both more
prominent and more prevalent. I should note that one should avoid the unfortunate notion of “caste” (breed, race), as seen in Portugal and India, for example, as a way of understanding this functional, complementarity system. The Achaemenid structure was hierarchical in the sense that some classes had higher status with regard to the functioning of the society, like the division of labor in contemporary society. And similar to contemporary functional positions of a given person or class, there could be different privileges for each, but all enjoy, at least in theory, shared human dignity derived from the concept of “human rights.” Members of this tripartite order enjoy the same rights due to the “divine honour” found in every creature. This explains the conduct of both Cyrus and Darius in their dealing with the various peoples of various different regions.

In the case of the Achaemenids themselves, we should add bureaucrats (dabiran) to this order of three—priests, warriors, farmers/workers—because soon the decentralized polity required an elaborate secretariat to handle the volume of correspondence and the intensity of interactions. This new class became necessary during and after the rule of Darius, when the polity was becoming a civitas, and as Darius learned from the Babylonians the virtue of an elaborate bureaucracy. The mushrooming of inscriptions and the discovery of about 500,000 clay tablets are an indication of this transition. For example, more than 200,000 clay archival tablets have been found in Persepolis (Henkelman 2008: Chapter 2), which is a clear sign of an elaborate bureaucratic machine. The Sadr-Azam (chief minister) was near the peak of the power structure: in terms of legitimate authority, he was the second person after the King of Kings. To some degree, however, he was effectively the head of government. The chief minister became such a well-established institution that it became a permanent fixture political thought in the Muslim

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3 The distinction between “honor” and “dignity,” to me points to an enormous difference between pre-modern and modern worldviews. In the former, to invoke a familiar notion of the Christian world, “man is created in God’s image” (e.g., in Genesis 1:26, 5:1, and 9:6), and thus that image gives humanity intrinsic worth, and should be honored in recognition of the divine connection. In the latter, humans are born with certain rights as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (Article One), so human dignity should be protected.
Thus, the social stratification included priests, warriors, bureaucrats, and farmers/workers, and part of the duty of king was to maintain and coordinate their working in cohesive and complementary fashion.

Darius was as much an economist as he was an administrator. One could surmise that a corollary of the so-called the first confederate system would be a decentralized and multiform economy. Darius was convinced that this decentralized system should enjoy a health economy that basically depended on agricultural production and trade which was guided by and sometimes supported by the polity. Thus, three basic sectors owned land and co-existed side by side: the royal court, which managed it through the king’s chancellery, the religious temples, and the private sector. As has been well documented, these three layers worked efficiently through the gifts and tribute system. I will elaborate on that system, but first I should discuss the three major institutionalized reforms implemented by Darius that contributed to the flourishing of a robust economy and production. There are legal reforms, standardization of weight and measures, and the improvement of transportation infrastructures.

In terms of the first, in a recent book by the contemporary Iranian sociologist, novelist, and historian Sherwin Vakili (b. 1974), Darius was known as a “spreader of justice/law” (1390/2011). This was apt: he behaved justly and created a legal system that was fair. Vakili bases his argument on Darius’s statements in his Behistun Inscription. First, he aspired to use the Greatest God, Ahura Mazda, as a model. He utilized the same notion, Data, broadly meaning justice, law and commandment, that is used in the Zoroastrian holy text for the attributes and the grace of Ahura Mazda: “Says Darius the king: Within these countries what man was watchful, him who should be well esteemed I esteemed; who was an enemy, him who should be well punished I punished; by the grace of Aura Mazda these countries respected my laws [Data]; as it was commanded by me to them, so it was done” (“Behistun Inscription,” Column 1; 4 One paradigmatic figure in Muslim history is Abu Ali Hasan ibn Ali Tusi (1018–1092), better known by his honorific title of Nizam al-Mulk. He was the grand minister for almost three decades for two different kings until his death at the hand of a radical religionist assassins who kept the governmental engine running smoothly. As mentioned, the role of this institution became a major theme of Muslim political thought. In Iran itself, it even outlasted the monarch. The 1979 revolution abolished the monarchy, but the institution of grand minister lasted until the revision of the constitution of the new republic in 1989, which eliminated this office altogether.

5 Even today it is used in Iran, notably, for the legal system and the Minister of Justice.
line 8). In Vakili’s words, for conveying “my laws” Darius “utilizes the word Data in ancient Persian language that is common in contemporary Persian…and in Avesta the word precisely means the same as Darius wanted to convey” (1309/2011: 362). Darius even claimed that not only he but also his family lived exemplary lives: “Says Darius the king: For this reason Aura Mazda bore me aid and the other gods which are, because I was not an enemy, I was not a deceiver, I was not a wrong-doer, neither I nor my family; according to rectitude [I ruled], I did not make my power an oppression,… the man who should have been well esteemed, I esteemed, and… the man who should deserve punishment, I punished” (“Behistun Inscription,” Column 4; line 13). The legal system developed under Darius helped the functioning of the polity rather well.

In terms of weight and measures, each of these formerly independent polities in the informal confederation had their own measurement system. Very soon, Darius realized that without a universally accepted set of standards, civilization production was impossible. Thus, he created an elaborate scheme to implement a standardized system of weights and measures based on the value of metals, because they were used for payment and exchange. This was called “the royal standard” and it was swiftly embraced because it facilitated and enhanced exchange. Nevertheless, as Briant observed, “to be sure, the introduction of Persian weights did not make the other standards disappear” (2002: 414).

As to infrastructure, the creation of land roads and waterways for the smooth exchange of commodities and trade traffic proved a great investment. Briant correctly points out that “The ancient authors were literally fascinated by the vast extent of the Achaemenid imperial territory” (ibid.: 357). The kings, particularly Darius, were quite aware of the necessity of creating a general network for communication and interaction between the diverse regions. One innovative way was to have not one, but many capitals, Pasargadae, Persepolis (Parse), Susa, Babylon, Ecbatana that “were linked by major highways, in a rough quadrilateral… [and] the capitals were connected to all the provinces” (ibid.: 358). These major roads were called “the royal roads.” Using Xenophon’s account, Briant calculates totaling 499 Parsangs (an Iranian unit of distance of 6 km, so in total 2,994 km/1,860 miles) with 77 rest areas (i.e., about one every 39 km or 24 miles). There were also other roads. In Briant’s words: “Of course, these itineraries are concerned only with the network of royal roads; many other itineraries, often much shorter and often following
mountain or desert routes, are left out. We learn about the latter most often from accounts of military expeditions” (ibid.: 360).

The combination of legal order, a system of weight and measures, and the road system facilitated the smooth working of a tributary economy. The vast territory of the civitas had a mixed mode of production which was also decentralized. As an historian from Shiraz University told me in a conversation a few years ago, the Achaemenid economy utilized agriculture, trade, but also a lively livestock. There were areas of highly sophisticated agricultural production such as Egypt and Bactria; there were vast areas devoted to raising livestock, not only for human consumption but also for the leather industry, and of course a dynamic trade system that took advantage of the secure and expanded road system. But what provided oversight to these systems and coordinated their relationship with the central government was the tributary economic system. When one visits what is left of Persepolis today, one can see a relief of various nations carrying tributes to present to the King of kings. In Briant’s words, “Darius’s tribute principle was simple: every community in the Empire had to turn over part of its produce (dasmos) to the king of kings, including the less-known peoples (2002: 394). The French-Egyptian Marxist economist Samir Amin (1931–2018) considers it a sophisticated system and treats it as a “Tributary Ideology,” with its own “Tributary Culture” and socio-structural organizations and mechanisms comparable to capitalism (1989: 15–59). I feel Amin’s claim that almost all societies prior to the emergence of capitalist societies could be called tributary societies is accurate. And of course, this economic “theater,” to use my term, needed an elaborate system of accounting for collection, maintenance, and redistribution. “The original Persian documents presupposes a remarkable accounting of the diversity of the Empire, which had to have been based on an in-depth preliminary investigation that surely took several years to carry out. Unfortunately, we do not know the details of this operation” (Briant 2002: 394). It is true that the detailed working of the operation is not known, but we do know a great deal about the system of measures and scales that Darius introduced and that led to standardization of weight, measures, and coins. In terms of the latter, the Achaemenids created a sophisticated minting institution, as reported by Herodotus. It created the best coins of its time, including some of pure gold that were used as the royal coinage: “the first royal coinage was issued by Darius” (ibid.: 408). Briant thinks that this may have had a non-economic purpose as well, however, which he calls
“the political function of the royal coinage.” In this case, “the innovation would in a way crown the achievements of Darius as a new founder” (ibid.). In support of this assessment, Briant cites the following account by Herodotus: “Darius wished to leave a memorial of himself, such as no king had ever left before…. Darius had refined gold to the last perfection of purity in order to have coins struck of it” (Book 4: 166).

I should mention that while the monetary policy as well as the standardization of weight and measures were initiated by Cyrus, just as we see in all areas of civilization production, it was Darius who perfected it. One of the main consequences of these developments was in agricultural production and trade. Farmers who worked on their own land or the public lands known as the royal lands could easily predict the level and amount of tribute they had to offer to the central and local governments. In other words, the new monetary and weight and measure standards brought impersonal, transparent regularity, reducing arbitrariness while increasing fairness. As Herodotus describes:

Artaphernes, Satrap of Sardis,... took the measurement of their whole country in parsangs - such is the name which the Persians give to a distance of thirty furlongs - and settled the tributes which the several cities were to pay, at a rate that has continued unaltered from the time when Artaphernes fixed it down to the present day. The rate was very nearly the same as that which had been paid before the revolt. Such were the peaceful dealings of the Persians with the Ionians. (Book 6: 42)

This indicates a major development in the economy because during the rule of the previous kings, there was no clarity about the tribute system, which was a major engine in the economy of the polity. In Herodotus’s words, “During all the reign of Cyrus, and afterwards when Cambyses ruled, there were no fixed tributes (Book 3: 89, italic added).

The standardization in monetary policy impacted all aspects of trade. As one scholar puts it, “the financial policies of the Achaemenids strengthened the pricing system in relation to new metal currency” (Vakili 1390/2011: 401). I have already alluded to the fact that artisans, particularly those recruited from other polities for the construction of the palaces, were paid by commodities. Standardization made fair pay much easier and reduced the possibility of resentment. It also facilitated the functioning of the barter economy and “its conversion into a moneyed economy” (ibid.).
When I read this chapter over again early this morning, naturally I thought about what type of conclusion I might draw from its contents. Many different strains of ideas ran through my mind, but a little voice inside encouraged me to go for a walk before venturing onto the conclusion. I am glad I listened to it. I went for a long stroll in my neighborhood in South Ottawa on this mid-May morning in 2020. The weather was crisp and the sky blue, like Persian turquoise, partly because Ottawa generally is a relatively unpolluted city, but mostly due to the respite that the earth has received from the self-isolation and industrial standstill due to COVID-19.

I was walking on the pathway. It was rather quiet and all of sudden I imagined myself walking on one of the “royal roads” of the Achaemenids’ civitas. Physically, I was in Ottawa but mentally I was in ancient Persia, thinking about the road and its network. It was part of an amazing matrix of physical roads, but also part of a socio-cultural and politico-economic network that the conquerors and statesmen of the Achaemenids had created and maintained for more than two centuries. Just as I feel safe on walkways in Ottawa through the park, by the river, in the woods and in remote and quiet places, I could imagine travelers on the “royal roads” feeling safe as they travelled and also when, every so often, they took a break in one of the rest areas, without worrying for their own safety or the security of the valuable commodities that each traveler must have been carrying with them to trade in other corners of the civitas.

Thinking about the working of the Achaemenids’ theater built based on this ethos, I imagined myself as a citizen, or rather as a subject of this polity, and asked whether I could have felt satisfaction, achievement, and serenity, or whether the desires of my heart, the wants of my curious mind, and the spiritual hunger of my soul could have been materialized? Indeed, I felt it was so. I could take warmth in knowing that the civitas was committed to establishment of “Happiness for Mankind” (siyati...martiyahya), which includes me, of course. I could imagine myself going to the gathering to welcome Cyrus after his victory over Babylon, listening to his pledges and feeling my security, welfare, and aspirations were taken seriously. I could be satisfied that my personal fate and faith were important for the polity and that I was guaranteed the right to worship my own god in my own way. I could see myself as a member of one of the regions of Media, Elam, Parthia, Areia, Bactria, Sogdiana,
Chorasmia, Drangiana, Arachosia, Sattagydia, Gandara, India, Sacca, Babylon, Assyria, Arabia, Egypt, Armenia, Cappadocia, Sardis, Ionia, and Scythians, as listed in the inscription from Darius’s tomb from Naqsh-i Rustam. I could see myself included in Darius’s statement: “By the favour of Ahura Mazda these are the countries which I seized outside Persia; I ruled over them; they bore me tribute; what was said to them by me, that they did; my law that held them in respect” (cited from Kuhrt 2013: 512). I am walking on a road where security is guaranteed, and my welfare awaits me in the rest area ahead of me every 39 km or 24 miles. I walk with pride and hope, because the Achaemenids foster governance that offers me individual and collective recognition and friendship and offers me the opportunity to participate in reverence and glory of the totality of the civitates.

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