

9: The Persian Empire *Systemic Relationships*

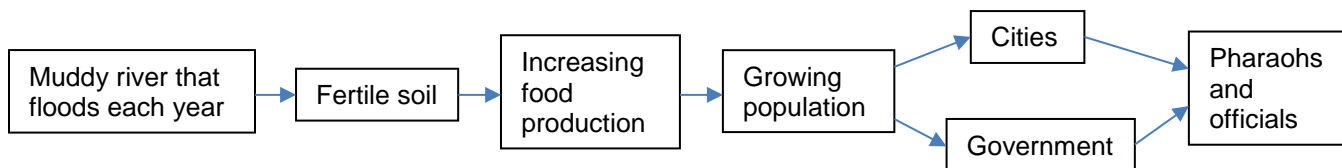
Systems, systems, systems

Monetary system. Irrigation system. Circulatory system. Solar system. Penal system. Life support system. Political system. School system. Justice system. Climate control system. Ecosystem. Drainage system. Damage assessment system. Traffic management system...

There's no escaping systems. They're everywhere, making things happen, keeping things from happening, controlling when and where they happen, sensing what's happening, solving problems, and sometimes creating problems. Making sense of life requires an understanding of the big idea "system."

System: An assembly of related parts that interact in patterned ways. If one part of a system changes, other parts will change.

Civilizations are vast systems containing systems containing systems containing...well, you get the idea. Here's a system diagram that explains in very few words an important idea about Ancient Egyptian civilization."



The diagram could be far more complex—could include consequences for wealth distribution, social class, division of labor, physical health, developments in reading and mathematics, growth in bureaucracy—on and on, related in one way or another to muddy rivers.

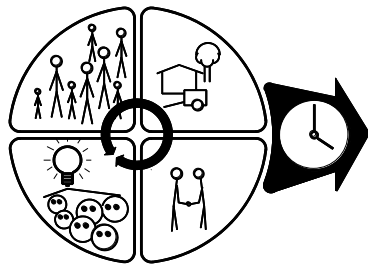
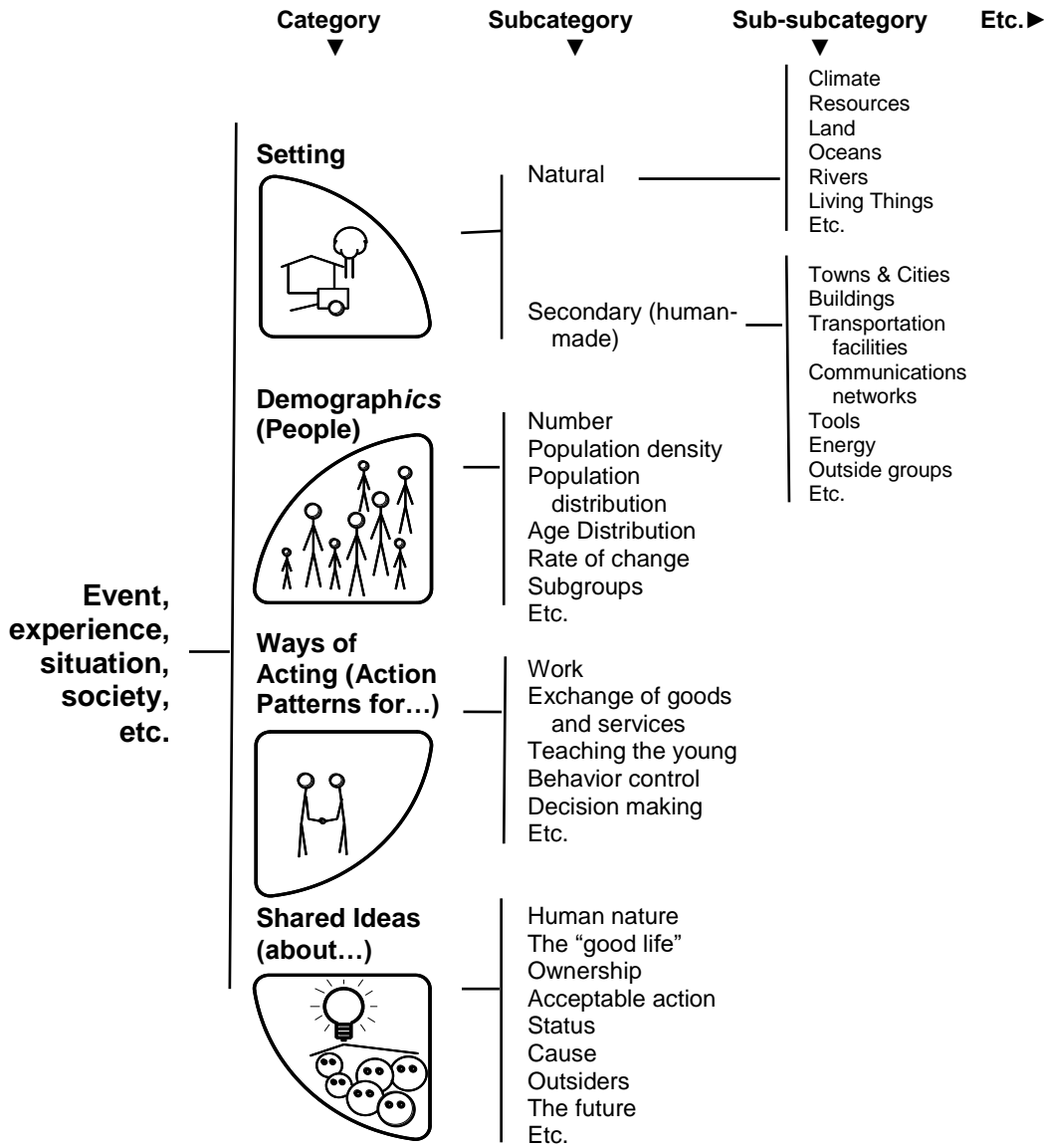
Note that every block in the diagram (and each possible block) fits within the Model we've been using. The muddy Nile River and the fertile soil it builds were parts of "Setting." Food production was a "Pattern of Action." "Growing population" was, of course, part of "Demographics." And so forth. The Model guides descriptions and analyses of realities. And of those realities—because they're "the makers of sense and meaning," organized human groups are the most important systems known.

The Model is also a tool for studying change. If the Nile failed to flood for several years, food production dropped, threatening the whole system of Egyptian civilization.

In this part, you'll look more closely at systemic relationships. A detailed version of the Model, on the next page, will be helpful in your investigations.

Original material copyright © 2015 by Marion Brady and Howard L. Brady. This material may be downloaded and printed at no cost by teachers and mentors for use by their own students only. All other rights reserved.

The Model: History and System Change

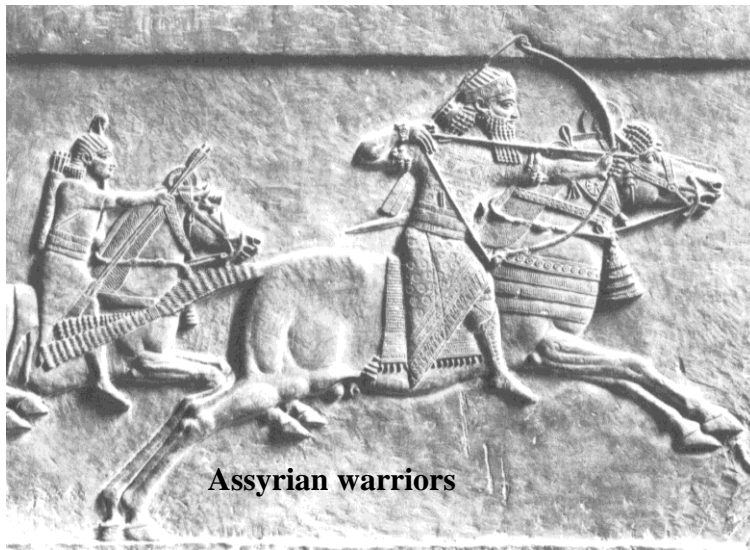


Time & Systemic Relationships:
 In every situation, each category (and sub-category) is affected by many others. Changes across time can occur in every category, triggering other changes.

Investigation: Conquerors

Below is a summary of some events in ancient history that indicate an important pattern:

- Civilization in Mesopotamia was established by the Sumerians. The region was invaded and taken over by the Akkadians, about 2350 BCE. (We know very little about the Akkadians.)
- The region was conquered by Amorites, Semitic nomads from Syria, about 1809 BCE.
- The region was conquered by Assyrians about 880 BCE, who apparently originated as nomadic herders, with a tradition of early “kings who lived in tents.”

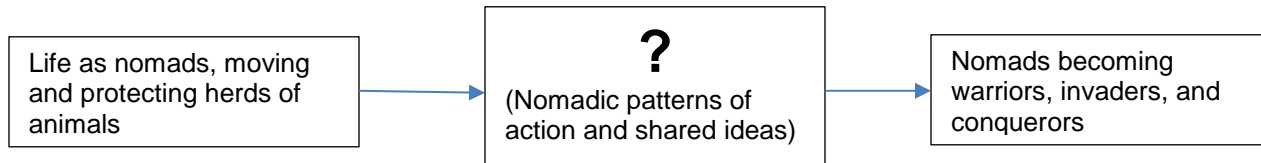


Assyrian warriors

<https://forums.civfanatics.com/threads/unit-request-assyrian-horse-archer.69815/>

- The region was then conquered by Chaldeans (626-539 BCE), referred to as “semi-nomads,” who set up the “Neo-Babylonian” Empire.
- The next conquerors of the region were the Persians (or Parthians), who began their conquests in 539 BCE. They originated as nomadic herders but established a huge empire.
- The Israelites, conquerors of some of the territory controlled by Canaanites, apparently originated as nomadic herders, descendants of Avram/Avraham, a herder.
- Later mounted warriors who conquered China and Eastern Europe also originated as nomadic herders.

Hypothesize: What are relationships between:



For help identifying action patterns and shared ideas, check the subcategories of the Model (page 2).

A shared idea category important in many societies is the relationship between individuals and the groups to which they belong—family, clan, tribe, and country.

- In some societies, each person is seen as simply part of the more-important group, like a finger is part of a hand. Except as a part of a group, the individual has little significance.
- In other societies, individuals are considered more important and significant than the groups to which they belong.

Which of these shared ideas do you think was more likely among nomadic people? Give reasons for your answers.

Would the religion of nomadic people be more likely to be complex, with many gods and rituals, or simple, with few gods and little time devoted to worship? Explain.

Would nomadic people be likely to resist change, or readily accept new ways of doing things? Explain. (You'll test your hypotheses in the next investigation.)

Parthian (Persian) horseman ►

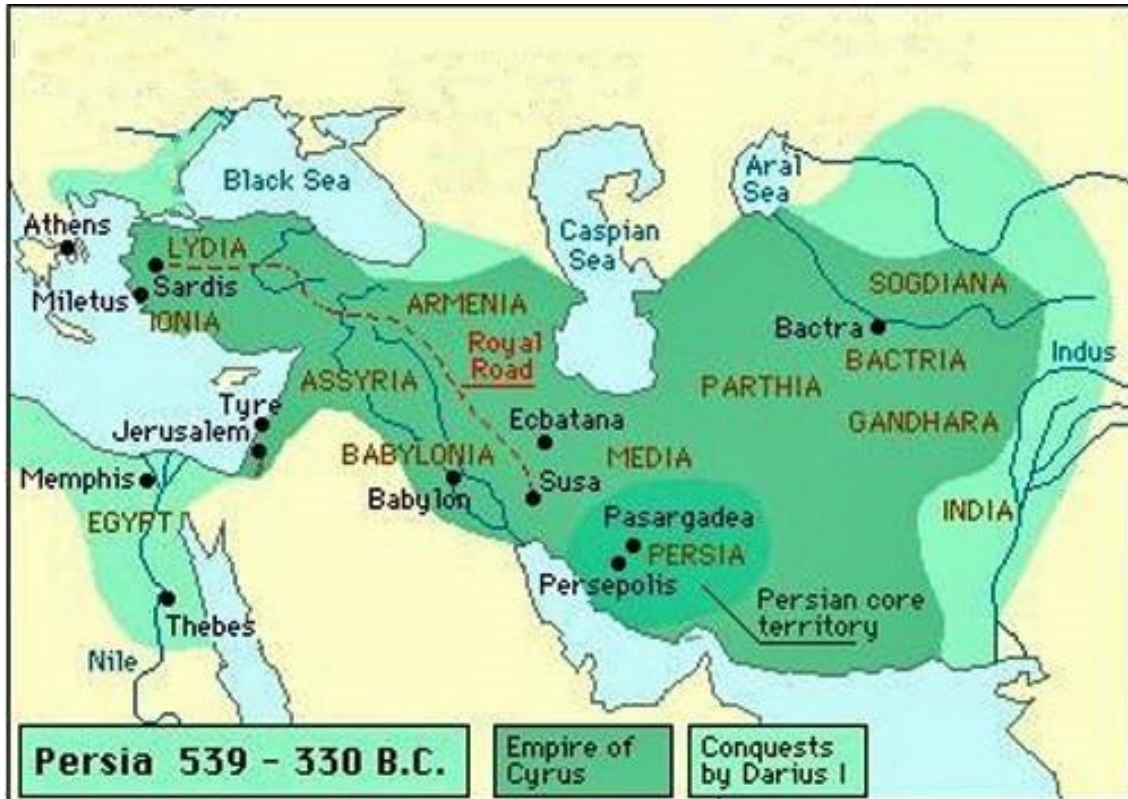
By Jean Chardin - Palazzo Madama, CC BY-SA 3.0,



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1766352>

Investigation: The Persian Empire

Originally a nomadic people, the Persians—when their empire was at its peak—controlled a larger percentage of the earth’s population than any previous civilization.



<http://iranpoliticsclub.net/maps/maps02/>

In your investigation of Israelite Civilization, you saw one effect of the Persian takeover of Babylonia. Led by Cyrus the Great, they released the Jews from captivity. ***What does the decree of Cyrus (below) suggest about Persian ideas about outsiders?***¹

Now in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, God stirred up the king’s heart to make God’s words spoken by Jeremiah come true. Cyrus issued a proclamation throughout the kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing, as follows:

This is the word of Cyrus, king of Persia: The Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and has commanded me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. To every man of his people now among you I say, God be with you. Go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord the God of Israel, the God whose city is Jerusalem. And every remaining Jew, wherever he may be living, may claim aid from his neighbors in that place, silver and gold, goods and cattle, in addition to voluntary offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.

¹ Ezra 1:1-4 (adapted)

In a previous part of this course, you read the Greek historian Herodotus' description of Egypt and Babylon (484 to 425 BCE, 3: Muddy Rivers). In the passages below, he describes the Persians. **Important: Herodotus was a Greek, so his viewpoint of what was "normal" was that of Greek society. For example, when he talks about Persian religion, he describes ways in which this religion differs from the religion of the Greeks at the time.**¹

The customs which I know the Persians to observe are the following: they have no images of the gods, no temples nor altars, and consider the use of them a sign of foolishness. This comes, I think, because they don't believe the gods are anything like men, as the Greeks imagine. Their practice, however, is to climb to the tops of the highest mountains, and there to offer sacrifice to *Ahura Mazda*, which is the name they give to the entire heavens. They likewise offer sacrifice to the sun and moon, to the earth, to fire, to water, and to the winds. These are the only gods whose worship has come down to them from ancient times...

To these gods the Persians offer sacrifice in the following manner: they raise no altar, light no fire, pour no libations; there is no sound of the flute, no use of special head coverings, no holy sacrificial barley-cake. The man who wishes to sacrifice brings his sacrificial animal to a spot of ground which is pure from pollution, and there calls upon the name of the god to whom he intends to offer. It is usual for him to have his turban encircled with a wreath, most commonly of myrtle. The one who sacrifices is not allowed to pray for blessings on himself alone, but he prays for the welfare of the king, and of the whole Persian people, among whom he is of course included.

He cuts the animal in pieces, and having boiled the flesh, he lays it out upon the softest grass that he can find, especially clover. When all is ready, one of the Magi [Persian priests] comes forward and chants a hymn, which they say recounts the origin of the gods. It is not lawful to offer sacrifice unless there is a priest present. After waiting a short time, the one who sacrifices carries the flesh of the animal away with him, and uses it any way he wishes.

Does this description fit with your hypothesis about the religion of nomads? Why might the Persians wish to make sacrifices? How might these religious ideas affect their attitude toward other religions?

IMPORTANT: *Begin building a list of Persian shared ideas and patterns of action. You'll use the items on this list later to create a systemic-relationship diagram (boxes and arrows).*

Excerpts from Herodotus continue on the pages that follow. Analyze them to check your hypotheses about nomadic patterns of action and shared ideas.

¹ This excerpt and most of those that follow: William Stearns Davis, *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, Vol. 2: Greece and the East (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912), pp. 58-61. (adapted) <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/herodotus-persians.asp>

Of all the days in the year, the one which they celebrate most is their birthday. It is customary to serve more food than usual to guests on that day. The richer Persians have an ox, a horse, a camel, and a donkey baked whole and served up to them. The poorer classes use instead the smaller kinds of cattle. They eat little solid food but a great deal of dessert, which is set on table a few dishes at a time. They are very fond of wine, and drink it in large quantities. To vomit or urinate in front of another person is forbidden among them.

What does this suggest about Persian shared ideas about the relationship between (and relative importance of) individuals and the groups to which they belong? (See page 3, near bottom.) Do the religious practices described on page 5 also suggest the same ideas?

It is also their general practice to deliberate upon important decisions when they are drunk; and then on the next day, when they are sober, the decision made the night before is put before them by the master of the house in which it was made; and if it is then approved of, they act on it; if not, they set it aside. Sometimes, however, they are sober at their first deliberation, but in this case they always reconsider the matter under the influence of wine.

An ancient saying is well-known in its Latin version: “*In vino veritas.*” (In wine there is truth.) **Note: The last sentence in the box above may be an addition by later authors, and not in the original book written by Herodotus.**

Why might the Persians deliberate about important matters while drunk?

When they meet each other in the streets, you may know if the persons meeting are of equal rank by the following sign: if they are equal, instead of speaking, they kiss each other on the lips. In the case where one is a little inferior to the other, the kiss is given on the cheek; where the difference of rank is great, the inferior prostrates himself upon the ground.

Of nations, they honor most their nearest neighbors, whom they esteem next to themselves; those who live beyond these they honor in the second degree; and so with the remainder, the further they are removed, the less the esteem in which they hold them. The reason is that they look upon themselves as very greatly superior in all respects to the rest of mankind, regarding others as approaching to excellence in proportion as they dwell nearer to them; whence it comes to pass that those who are the farthest off must be the most degraded of mankind.

In your opinion, do the customs indicated in this selection come from living as nomads, or are they unrelated? Give reasons for your opinion.

Believing that one’s own tribe, ethnic group or society is superior to all others is called “ethnocentrism.” Nearly all human groups are ethnocentric.

There is no nation which so readily adopts foreign customs as the Persians. Thus, they have taken the dress of the Medes, considering it superior to their own; and in war they wear the Egyptian breastplate. As soon as they hear of any luxury, they instantly make it their own...

What advantages might this pattern of action—adopting foreign customs—give the Persians in developing their ways to conquer and control other nations?

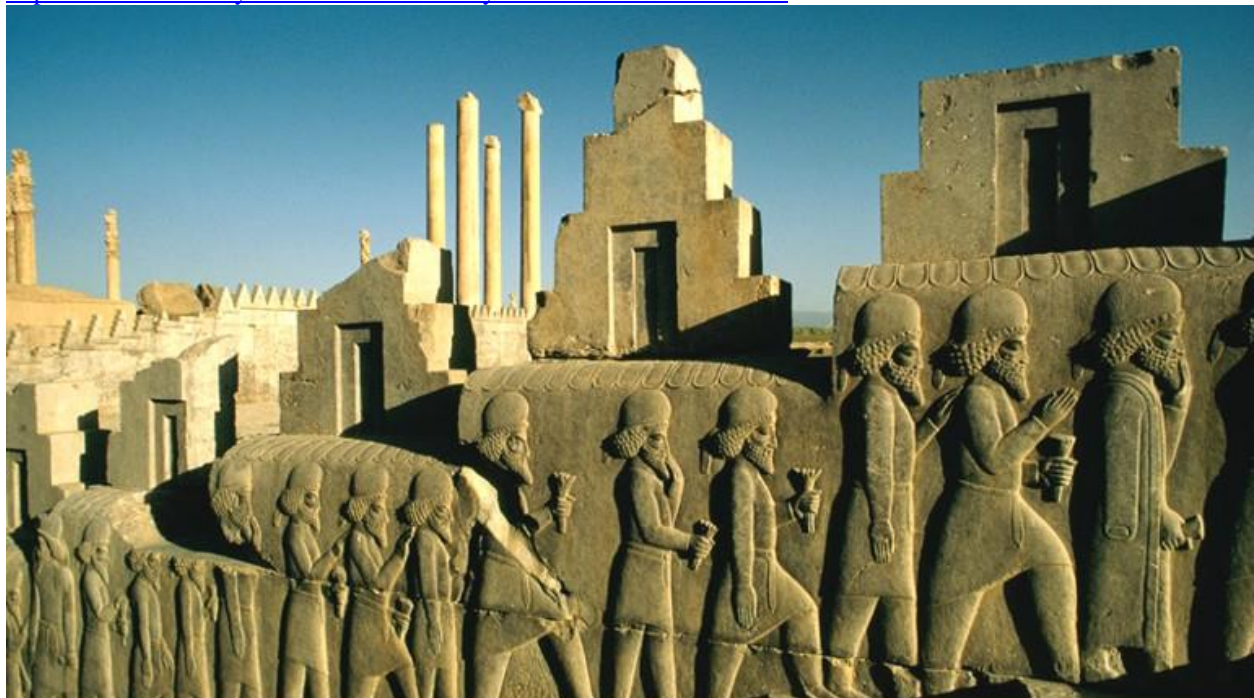
Each of them has several wives, and a still larger number of concubines. The most important proof of manhood is skill in use of weapons, but a man's next proof of excellence is to be the father of many sons. Every year the king sends rich gifts to the man who can show the largest number, for this will give strength to the king.

Their sons are carefully instructed from their fifth to their twentieth year, in three things alone---to ride, to draw the bow, and to speak the truth. Until their fifth year they are not allowed to come into the sight of their father, but pass their lives with the women. This is done that, if the child die young, the father may not be very pained by its loss.

To my mind, this is a wise rule...

What advantages might these patterns of action give the Persians? How might these patterns be related to the Persians' early history as nomads?

http://www.realhistoryww.com/world_history/ancient/Elam_Iran_3a.htm



Ruins of the great stairway of Apadana Persepolis

Persepolis, in present-day Iran, was the royal ceremonial capital of the Persian Empire.

To my mind it is a wise rule, as also is the following: That the king shall not put any one to death for a single fault, and that none of the Persians shall punish a single fault in a slave with any extreme penalty; but in every case the services of the offender shall be set against his misdoings; and, if the latter be found to outweigh the former, the aggrieved party shall then proceed to punishment.

http://www.iranchamber.com/history/herodotus/herodotus_history_book1.php (1.137)

The strength of a tribe or society depends, among other things, on the allegiance of the people toward their leaders. *How might limitations on the king's power affect the allegiance of his followers? How would decrees such as that of Cyrus (page 4) affect the allegiance of the Jews toward Cyrus?*

Their laws forbid them to talk of anything which it is unlawful to do. The most disgraceful thing in the world, they think, is to tell a lie; the next worst, to owe a debt: because, among other reasons, the debtor is obliged to tell lies.

They never pollute a river with the secretions of their bodies, nor even wash their hands in one; nor will they allow others to do so, as they have a great reverence for rivers.

How might these shared ideas and patterns of action be beneficial to warriors?

Note: The Persians began rule of the empire by generally allowing each national group to keep the laws and local officials that existed before they were conquered. The Persians built a complex network of roads linking parts of the empire, and set up a postal system. The empire was divided into 20 provinces or *satrapies*, each ruled by a governor and a tax collector. A team of visiting inspectors helped keep everyone honest.

Xerxes, a later king of the Persians, was told by his uncle:¹

I counselled your father, Darius, who was my own brother, not to attack the Scyths, a race of people who had no town in their whole land. He thought however to subdue those wandering tribes, and would not listen to me, but marched an army against them, and before he returned home lost many of his bravest warriors.

How does this support other evidence in this part about nomads?

¹ <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/herodotus-xerxes.asp>

Summarizing: Persian Systemic Relationships

Create a systemic relationship diagram made up of boxes and arrows, similar to the diagram on Page 1. Make the opening box: “Persian life as nomads.”

Use the information you’ve collected about Persian shared ideas and patterns of action to fill in additional boxes. The flow of the boxes should lead toward “formation and control of the Persian Empire.”

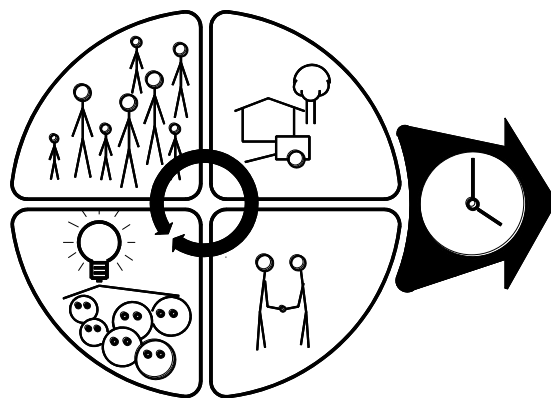
You may find it helpful to list individual ideas and patterns of action on small Post-It® sticky notes, so they can be moved around to find the best arrangement. Draw arrows lightly in pencil at first so they can be easily erased and changed.

Make sure that each arrow leading from one box to another shows a true cause-effect relationship. Some arrows may need to be labeled, to explain the relationship between the two boxes.

Follow-Up: Systemic Relationships Here and Now

Choose one of the following, and investigate the system changes that led to it. Show these changes in a box-and-arrow diagram:

- Decline of daily newspapers
- Decline in tobacco use
- Changes in soft drink consumption
- Increase in use of electric and hybrid cars
- Changes in number of homeless people



For Teacher/Mentor—Overview:

Objective: **This unit is designed to enhance learners’ understanding of systemic relationships, the use of the Model as an analytical tool to identify these relationships, and the role of these relationships in creating historical change. The unit introduces methods for creating diagrams that show systemic relationships involved in historical change.**

Box and Arrow System Diagrams

The unit begins by introducing diagrams showing a relationship. We’ve done this with conventional (passive) narrative, so it’s likely to be ineffective until learners generate similar diagrams themselves. One possibility is to have learners diagram a simple process, such as:

- Making an egg sandwich
- Planning and having a party
- Making and flying a kite
- Changing a flat tire
- Working out at a gym.

Investigation: Conquerors

The initial historical content is a brief listing of a recurring series of events in ancient (and even later) history: A civilization grows, develops cities and the necessary agricultural infrastructure to support those cities.

At some point, the civilization is invaded by less-civilized outside warriors who take power. **In virtually every case, the invading force comes from a society of nomadic herders.** This pattern is the focus of much of this unit.

What was it about nomadic herders that moved them to become invading warriors, and why were they often successful conquerors? Investigation begins with learners hypothesizing answers to these questions.

Some of the cultural characteristics of nomads grew naturally out of their way of life. Because of their movement from place to place, they required a simple “portable” culture, with a minimum of physical objects. Obviously, because they were mobile, they were more likely to become invaders than members of a sedentary farming-based society.

Nomad societies throughout history generally used horses as mounts, which enhanced their mobility and improved their ability to ward off predators that threatened their herds. Skill in use of weapons—primarily the bow and arrow—against predators was emphasized. Becoming a warrior was a small step from being an effective herder.

Nomadic societies tended to focus on individual skill and achievement. Success as a nomadic herder required individual prowess more than collective cooperation. Success as a herder also increased the size of herds, giving incentive for the herders to find a market for their surplus animals. This led them to interact with people in the nearby civilization, familiarizing them with the differences between their way of life and those living with

city-based culture, with its relative comforts. (It seems that once nomads conquer cities, they tend to adopt the city's culture with few changes.)

Investigation: The Persian Empire

Most of the data in this investigation is from our old friend, Herodotus. Scholars generally believe that his description of the Persians is reasonably accurate, although it needs the usual disclaimer that Herodotus tends to describe the upper classes and ignore the rank and file members of the society.

The picture he paints of Persian culture and society is consistent with the ways of acting and shared ideas that are likely to develop among herders—an emphasis on individuals rather than cooperative groups, a simple religion, an openness to change, an emphasis on skills needed by warriors, a tendency among high-ranking people in times of plenty to consume meat and drink to excess, an emphasis on procreation, and similar traits that may be inferred from Herodotus's account. Even the Persian emphasis on honesty is an essential trait, helping prevent internal problems among those managing herds. Absolute truth-telling benefits warriors, who must act on the basis of accurate information. Misleading information can be fatal in time of battle.

The willingness of Cyrus the Great to tolerate cultural differences and allow significant local autonomy (shown in events such as liberation of the Jews and encouragement for rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem), may or may not have been a typical trait of herders, but it no doubt contributed to the initial success of the Persian Empire.

The administrative policies and infrastructure successfully developed by the Persians were co-opted and maintained by Alexander the Great and his successors after he conquered the Persian Empire. (Incidentally, Alexander, the Macedonian, came from a society peripheral to Greece that likely had roots among nomadic herders, accounting for their cultural emphasis on warrior skills.)

Summarizing: Persian Systemic Relationships

As with most similar activities, this will work best when assigned to small groups. The main difficulty learners may have is getting started—especially identifying the significant patterns of action of herders. It may be helpful to ask them to identify the problems of herders—e.g. finding adequate growth of grass for grazing animals, preventing losses from predators, moving a herd to new ground, preventing strays, dealing with animals in trouble, obtaining and training horses (and, probably, dogs), training young herders, building shelter, etc.

Once they've moved beyond this step, the information they've collected during analysis of the data in the previous investigation can begin to be inserted into their diagrams.

(HLB) July2015