

Lesson 4

Student Handout 4.1—Women of the Persian Empire

Profile of a Traditional Persian Woman c. 450 BCE	Atossa
Role(s) within the Persian empire. _____ _____ _____	Role(s) within the Persian empire. _____ _____ _____
Significance to the empire. _____ _____ _____	Significance to the empire. _____ _____ _____
What does this tell about the role of women in Persia? _____ _____ _____	What does this tell about the role of women in Persia? _____ _____ _____

Esther	Artemisia I
Role(s) within the Persian empire. _____ _____ _____	Role(s) within the Persian empire. _____ _____ _____
Significance to the empire. _____ _____ _____	Significance to the empire. _____ _____ _____
What does this tell about the role of women in Persia? _____ _____ _____ _____	What does this tell about the role of women in Persia? _____ _____ _____ _____

Lesson 4***Student Handout 4.2—Profile of a Traditional Persian Woman in 450 BCE***

While most women of their time had little rights, Persian women enjoyed significant social and legal freedom. Available evidence about women in ancient Persia depends largely on social class. The higher the social status of a woman, the more information there is likely to be found pertaining to her. Royalty or nobility gave women the highest social status, with the top-ranking woman in the Persian empire being the king's mother. Next came the wife and sisters of the king. Working women were part of the middle class. The Greek writer Plutarch states that Persian armies employed women soldiers. Others specialized as artisans. Women, like men, received wages and were praised for their good work. Sometimes men and women had the same specialization and worked together. Conversely, some jobs were done only by one gender. Records show that in ancient Persia gender did not dictate who had more power. For example, women could be managers of a workshop and thereby hold a higher position than a man. No lower class is documented in Persian records, only two divisions of royalty and aristocracy and one division making up the ordinary working class.

Because some women earned their own wages, they enjoyed an economic freedom unknown to many women in the ancient world. Women were able to own land and manage their estates, even if they were far from home. These estates housed people who worked the land and paid a tax to the woman landowner. Because she controlled her own money, she was able to use it as she wished. At times, women would host lavish parties, and they bought their own wine and food for their guests. They could also choose who inherited their money. It did not automatically become the property of their husbands.

Ancient Persia, however, was a patriarchal system, meaning that it gave certain privileges to men. Though women had the power to become rulers if their husbands died or to initiate a divorce, they could not have more than one husband. A husband, however, could have several wives. If the wife committed adultery, the courts would sentence her to death. Women could also not be witnesses to legal contracts. A man had to be present whenever a contract was signed. Men also had substantial control over their children. If the family had debt, the children could be sold.

Though the Persian empire was large, women had more freedom than in other parts of the ancient world. Slight differences in rights occurred throughout the empire, but generally each sex was seen as socially and economically equal.

Principal Source: *Pars Times*, http://www.parstimes.com/women/women_ancient_persia.html

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Student Handout 4.3—Atossa, Mother of Emperor Xerxes

In ancient Persian tradition, successors inherited not only the throne of the king but also his family. And so it was that when Cyrus died attacking the Scythians, his son Cambyses assumed the throne and responsibility for Cyrus' family. Cambyses fell in love with two of his sisters, one of them named Atossa. He petitioned the courts to marry them and since no Persian law forbade it, he received the right to do so. Cambyses was a wild and wicked ruler, and he ended up killing his own brother to keep him from gaining power. Later, Cambyses committed suicide. Thus, Darius, a Persian official, came to power. In accordance with tradition, he took on Cambyses' family. He married Atossa, who then became the catalyst for his invasion of Greece.

Atossa suffered from an illness and was cured by a prisoner, who was a Greek physician. As payment, he asked to be returned to his native country. Atossa agreed to try to persuade Darius to allow this. She approached the king by stating that an invasion of Greece would extend the glory of the Persian empire. Darius had instead been planning to invade the territory of the Scythians by making a bridge across the Hellespont. He felt this would show his power in succeeding where Cyrus had failed. Atossa, however, impressed upon him that the Greeks were a more sophisticated people than the Scythians and that conquering them would be a greater accomplishment.

A commission was sent to explore Greece and bring back a report. The physician went on the expedition, escaped, and never came back. Meanwhile, the commission brought back a favorable report, and Darius planned to attack Greece. Before the invasion, however, it was necessary to assign a regent. Darius had two sons. Xerxes was the oldest son of Atossa and Darius. But Darius also had an older son, Artobazanes, from the time before he ascended the throne. Atossa argued that Xerxes was the grandson of Cyrus and therefore had a direct bloodline to the throne. Darius could not claim such a bloodline, and this may have hurt his pride. So Xerxes, not Darius' older son and heir, assumed the throne. Atossa's reasoning, however, could not be denied. Darius was also told that because he was king when Xerxes was born, Xerxes was therefore the son of a king, while Artobazanes was only the son of Darius the official. Consequently, Darius' older son was passed over, and Xerxes was made heir to the throne.

Source: Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), *passim*.

Lesson 4***Student Handout 4.4—Esther, Wife of Emperor Xerxes***

King Xerxes held a feast lasting 180 days to display the wealth of Susa, his finest capital. Some scholars believe that this may have also been part of a planning session for a Persian invasion of Greece. Representatives from 127 provinces throughout the Persian empire came to the palace at Susa. During the festivities, Xerxes called for the queen, Vashti, to perform for his guests. However, Vashti refused to join the feast. Angered, Xerxes banished her from the palace, thereby showing that women had to obey their husbands and should be punished for their disobedience. In the years following the feast, Xerxes put down a rebellion in Babylon and led an invasion of Greece. When he returned to Susa in 480 BCE, he began to search for a new wife. He appointed commissioners in every province to bring beautiful young women to the citadel in Susa.

In the city of Susa, there was a group of about 100 Jews. Mordecai, one of them, worked for Xerxes. Mordecai's fourteen-year-old cousin, Hadassah, also known as Esther, was taken to the citadel to become a candidate for queen. Before she left, Mordecai told her to keep her religion a secret, and Esther promised she would tell no one. For twelve months, Esther and the other young women who had been assembled at the citadel were given beauty treatments and special food to prepare them for their meeting with Xerxes. When the time came for the king to choose a new wife and queen, he became attracted to Esther and placed the crown on her head.

Some time later, Xerxes selected the nobleman Haman to be the vizier, or chief minister, of the empire. Everyone at the city gates bowed down to Haman except one man, Mordecai. Being a Jew, Mordecai believed that there was only one God and that only God should be worshipped. This enraged Haman, yet day after day Mordecai continued to disobey the order to bow before Haman. Finally, Haman was told that Mordecai was Jewish, and he began to look for a way to destroy all the Jews. He went to the king and said, "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them ..." King Xerxes allowed Haman to carry out his plan on the 13th day of the month of Adar.

Mordecai, however, heard of the plan and asked Esther to go to Xerxes. She replied, "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. ..." Esther, however, decided to try to save the Jews. After three days, Esther entered the king's inner court, and when the king saw her, he was pleased with her and extended the golden scepter. Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you." Esther very humbly said, "My petition and my request is this: If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question." The king agreed, and for two days Haman and the king attended a banquet with Esther. Finally, on the second day, the Xerxes asked again, "Queen

Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. . . .” Queen Esther replied, “If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. . . .” “Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?” asked Xerxes, and Esther replied, “The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman.”

Haman became terrified before the king and queen. King Xerxes got up in a rage and left the banquet room. Haman rushed to Esther to beg for his life and at that moment the king returned, “Will he even [bother] the queen while she is with me in the house?” Immediately, he ordered that Haman be hanged, and Esther was given all his estates. Mordecai also took Haman’s place as the highest noble in the empire. Haman’s orders to kill the Jews could not be revoked, however, because they had been stamped with the king’s signet ring. Instead, Xerxes allowed Mordecai to issue a new edict where the Jews could legally defend themselves. On the 13th and 14th day of Adar, the Jews throughout the Persian empire defended themselves and in the process killed 75,000 people. Without Esther’s bravery, Jews throughout the Persian empire would have faced destruction. Today, the Jews celebrate this victory by giving each other gifts and feasting during the holiday of Purim.

Source: Adapted from *Book of Esther*, Holy Bible, New International Version,
<http://www.biblica.com/bible/verse/?q=Esther%20&niv=yes>

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Student Handout 4.5—Artemisia I, a Naval Commander

In 499 BCE, Athens supported an uprising of the Ionian Greek city-states in Asia Minor. The Ionian city-states were part of the Persian empire, and Darius the Great put down the revolt. He later attacked Greece for Athens' involvement in the rebellion. Darius was defeated at the Battle of Marathon, and about twenty years later, his son Xerxes, attacked Greece again. This time, according to Herodotus, Artemisia I of the culturally-Greek Halicarnassus in Asia Minor commanded five ships in Xerxes' navy.

Before Xerxes' attack on Greece, he questioned all of his admirals as to whether he should attack Salamis. All of his admirals urged him to attack, except Artemisia. Herodotus recorded in his *Histories* a supposed conversation between Artemisia and Xerxes. In this conversation, Artemisia reminded Xerxes that he had already accomplished what he had come to Greece to do and had burned Athens. That city-state had a superior navy, and Artemisia suggested that Xerxes keep his ships off the coast of Greece. Later, he could take the army onto the peninsula and attack on foot. She had heard that there were no supplies on the Peloponnese and, if they attacked there, the Greeks would not likely defend Athens. Though this was not a popular idea, Artemisia voiced her opinion. Instead of being upset with her, Xerxes was pleased. He chose, however, to follow the advice of his other admirals. During the Battle of Salamis, Artemisia became surrounded and trapped by ships. She rammed one of the ships in an attempt to save the lives of her crew. Cleverly, she purposely hit a ship of Calyndia, an ally of Persia. The Athenians thought Artemisia's ship must be Athenian since she had destroyed their enemy's ship. So they stopped pursuing her. When the Athenians discovered that they had been outsmarted by a woman, they offered a reward for her capture.

After the Battle of Salamis, Xerxes convened his admirals once more. Mardonius, one of his generals, urged Xerxes to stay and fight. This time, however, Xerxes specifically asked Artemisia for advice. She urged him to depart from Greece and leave Mardonius in charge of some troops. If Mardonius lost the battle, Xerxes would be safe back in Persia, and he still would have had revenge on Athens by burning it to the ground. If Mardonius won, Xerxes would be praised because he appointed Mardonius. This time, Xerxes took Artemisia's advice. Xerxes went back to Persia, and after months of fighting, Mardonius was killed and the last of the Persians were defeated in Greece.

Many stories surround what happened to Artemisia. Some records suggest she became a pirate. Other stories tell of how she fell in love with a younger man, but when he did not love her back, she committed suicide. No one knows for sure what happened to her, but her grandson eventually became ruler of Halicarnassus.

Source: Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), *passim*.