

THE ACHAEMENIAN EMPIRE

In the 6th century BC, Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, founded the Achaemenian Empire, from his kingdom in Persia (now modern Iran). This empire was named after an ancestor of Cyrus the Great, called Achaemenes. At Cyrus' death in 530 BC, his vast empire stretched from Central Asia to Egypt and from western Turkey to northern India. One of Cyrus' successors was Darius I (called the Great) who reigned from 521 BC until his death in 486 BC.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

In the late 4th century BC Merv, and the region around it, became part of the Hellenistic (Greek) world. Around 336 BC the Macedonian king, Alexander the Great, began his campaign against the Achaemenid Empire as he led his army of Macedonians and Greeks across Central Asia towards India. Erk Kala was soon conquered by Alexander himself, or one of his generals. After Alexander's death in 323 BC his empire was divided into kingdoms and governed by his generals who bitterly fought with each other. The whole of his empire was taken over by others.

After Alexander, the city of Erk Kala saw a period of unrest until Seleucus I, from Macedonia, gained control of the Asian part of Alexander's empire in about 322 BC. According to Roman sources, the city was destroyed.

PARTHIANS

Parthia was originally a province of the Achaemenid Empire which came under Seleucid control. In 247 BC, under their leader Arsaces I, the Parthians rebelled and by the 2nd century BC ruled an empire which stretched from the River Euphrates to Afghanistan and north as far as the River Oxus. Antiochia Margiana became the Parthian's eastern outpost for their empire, with their capital at Nisa, around 250 BC.

The city developed as a major administrative, military and trading centre. The city's defences were strengthened against rival empires and peoples who were attracted by its ideal location along the Silk Roads.

SASANIANS

Despite the defences against their enemies the people of Antiochia Margiana were overcome by the armies of the Sasanian ruler, Ardashir, in 220 BC. He ruled a small kingdom in the province of Fars in south-western Iran, who had overthrown the last Parthian king around 224 BC. Ardashir's son and successor, Shapur I, appointed a *marzban* (or 'guard of the frontier') to govern the city of Merv.

UMAYYAD AND ABBASID DYNASTIES

The **Umayyad** dynasty was founded by Mu'awiya with its capital in Damascus. The Umayyads took control of the Arab empire from Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad in AD 661. Umayyad forces moved into North Africa, Spain, Transoxiana and north east India. In AD 748, the city commander at Merv, Abū Muslim, famously raised the black **Abbasid** banners proclaiming the start of the revolution against the Umayyads. Abū Muslim led armies in the campaigns in Iran and Iraq. But in AD 755 he was lured to Iraq and assassinated. The Abbasids moved their capital from Damascus to the new round city of Baghdad, breaking the Syrian domination of the Umayyad Caliphate.

FROM THE TAHIRIDS TO THE SELJUKS

In AD 821 Tahir ibn Hossein was appointed governor of Merv but soon after that declared independence from the Abbasid Empire and starts the **Tahirid** dynasty. Merv becomes the Tahirid capital. The province of Khurasan continued to be prosperous and peaceful until the Tahirids were challenged by the leader of the **Saffarids** in AD 873. However this was a period of disturbances in the province with

attempts to establish Merv as an independent power. The confused state of affairs ended in AD 900 when the **Samanids** took power. They were originally from Iran. However, by AD 977, Khurasan was in the hands of a new dynasty, the **Ghaznevids** from Afghanistan. In 1039 Merv was the base for the final attempt by the Ghaznevids to destroy the advancing Seljuks.

THE SELJUKS

In the 10th century AD a Turkish nomadic tribe, the Seljuks became an important power in the Islamic world. By 1055, led by Tughrul Beg, they entered Baghdad and took control of the eastern territories of the Muslim empire. The Seljuks and their successors were called sultans, not caliphs as previously, and maintained an Islamic social order by a common religion and law, the Arabic language and trade. The Seljuk period was from 1038-1194, although an offshoot, The Seljuk Sultanate of Rum ruled in Anatolia until 1307.

THE MONGOLS

Genghis Khan founded the Mongol Empire which, by his death in 1227, included most of central Asia and northern China. The Mongols were a collection of nomadic tribes of central Asia. They were splendid horsemen and archers and struck terror into the hearts of the peoples they attacked. They were noted for the death and destruction they caused in their conquests – they were said to have massacred 200,000 of the inhabitants of Baghdad in 1258.

Genghis Khan led his huge army from Mongolia into Asia and eastern Europe and attacked Merv in 1221. Genghis Khan's son, Ogedai, established Karakorum as the capital of the Mongol Empire in 1235. By 1368 the Mongols were driven out of China and in 1372 a Chinese army burned Karakorum.

THE TIMURIDS

Timur, known also as Tamerlane, was a Mongol leader, a descendant of Genghis Khan who waged brutal campaigns against Persia, India, Egypt, Syria and the Ottomans. He died marching against China in 1405. His descendants, the Timurids, ruled only in the heartland of Central Asia from his capital was at Samarkand.