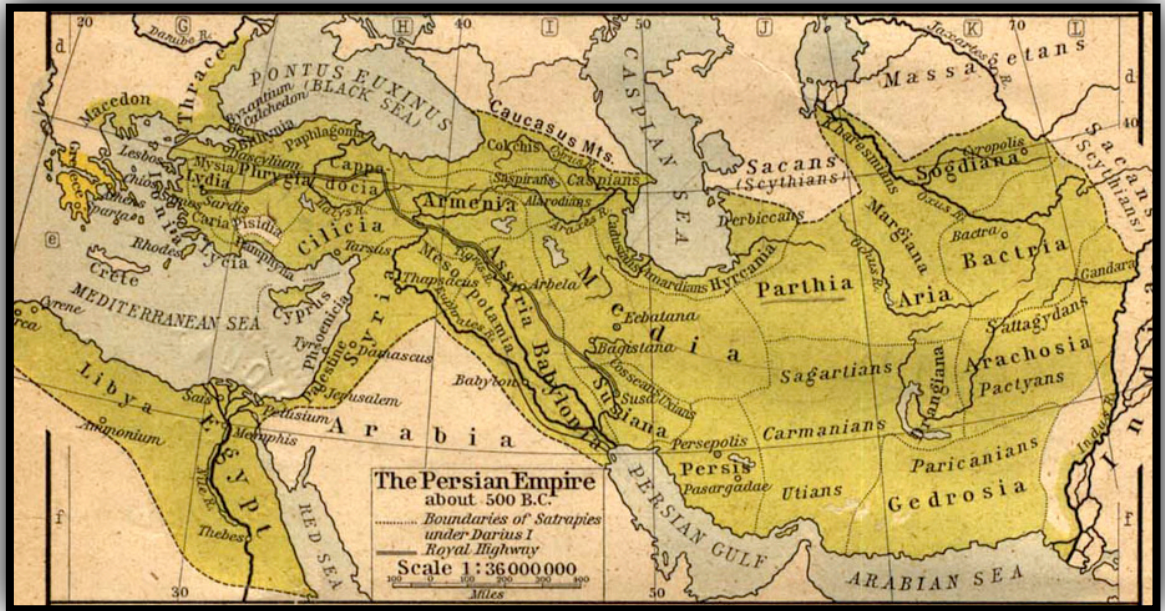


PERSIAN EMPIRE



The Persian (Achaemenid) Empire 550-330 BCE

Background

The Persians were a group of people from Inner Eurasia who arrived in the area of Mesopotamia that is now known as Iran sometime between 1500 and 1000 BCE. In about 550 BCE, a leader known as Cyrus II, led a successful revolt against a group of people called the Medes, who ruled over the Persians at that time. Cyrus was part of a clan (family based group) called the Achaemenids, so the empire he eventually formed is sometimes called the Achaemenid Empire.

Formation Cyrus conquered the Medes in less than 10 years. He then moved on to take control of the Anatolian Peninsula (near modern day Turkey) and nearby Greek city-states. His forces conquered Syria next and in 539 BCE his army took over Babylon. When conquering Babylon, Cyrus had promised to treat it fairly and not to destroy either its institutions or its culture. At the same time, he returned to various groups the goods which the Babylonians had taken from them as a sign of conquest. Cyrus also freed the Hebrews, who had been enslaved in Babylon. He allowed them to return home. Later he helped them rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. This policy of local cultural independence won for him a reputation as a fair ruler. In other words, even though Cyrus conquered many peoples, he did not force them to adopt his culture. Meanwhile, other Persian forces

moved northeast where they captured most of the trade centers on the Silk Routes that led to Inner Eurasia. After Cyrus' death, his son, Cambyses, conquered Egypt. When Cambyses died, Darius (522-486 BCE), a strong military leader, took control of the Persian Empire. He soon pushed the Persian borders to the Indus River valley in the east. At that point, the Persians controlled the largest empire the world had ever seen.

Administration

The vast Persian Empire was the most culturally diverse empire that had ever existed. Persian rulers developed new tools to help them control this large area with so many different people. Darius I organized the empire and established twenty provinces (called satrapies), each with its governor, military commander, and treasurer, who reported separately to the king.

In addition, there was a separate system of inspectors known as the King's Eyes or the Kings Ears. These inspectors had their own armies and could move against even a military commander if necessary. The system was so effective in preventing rebellion, corruption, and harsh rule that it was copied again and again, even in modern times. Darius also introduced the Babylonian calendar, known for its accuracy, and set up granaries (a storehouse for grain) to assure a constant supply of food for his troops. He built elaborate underground irrigation systems as well. In the far reaches of what is now Iran, these irrigation systems turned deserts into gardens.

Religion The Persian ruling class followed the religion of Zoroastrianism. This religion taught that there were two deities, Ahura Mazda, the god of light and truth and Ahriman, the god of darkness and evil. These two gods were in constant struggle, a struggle that Ahura Mazda would eventually win. Zoroastrians believed that after the final battle, there would be a Judgment Day and everyone who had ever lived would be judged and sent either to heaven or hell. These ideas are believed to have influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Today, there are Zoroastrian communities in Iran and India, where they are called *Parsis* or *Parsees*. Communities also exist in other parts of the world including the United States. The Achaemeinds did not force Zoroastrianism on their subjects. As rulers of an empire that embraced more cultural communities than had any other before them, they wisely allowed

their subjects much cultural freedom. Persian kings saw themselves as ruling by the will of the god Ahura Mazda who cared for the well-being of all. In an inscription on a rock in Behistun, written in 519 BCE, Darius proclaims that “by the favor of Ahura Mazda I am King; Ahura Mazda bestowed the kingdom upon me.”

Trade

Darius encouraged trade and economic development in a number of ways. He standardized weights and measures and established a coinage system based on gold and silver. He also built banking houses. (The word “check” is derived from a Persian word.)

When Darius came to power, a network of roads connecting the urban centers in Southwest Asia already existed. Darius added a royal road from Susa in the Persian homeland to Sardis in the western part of Anatolia, a distance of some 1500 miles. A system of relay stations made it possible for a rider carrying mail to ride the distance in six to nine days rather than the usual three months. Officials and merchants traveling on the imperial roads to do the emperor's business carried passports entitling them to free food and lodging along the way. Perhaps Darius' most ambitious undertaking was the building of a canal, 87 miles long and 164 feet wide, from the Nile to the Red Sea. Completed in 500 BCE, it connected Memphis, then the capital of Egypt, to Babylon by sea.

Decline/Fall

During Darius' reign, the Greek city-states at the western edge of the Anatolian Peninsula rebelled. They were encouraged by Athens. Darius successfully squashed the rebellion, and two years later he sent an expedition to discipline Athens and the other unruly Greek city states. The Persian army was defeated at the battle of Marathon in 490 BCE. Darius died before he could launch another attack; but his son Xerxes advanced on Greece with a huge expeditionary force. Xerxes managed to burn Athens. He was defeated, however, when the Athenian general, Themistocles lured the Persian fleet into a trap at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. After this humiliation, the Persians chose to deal with the Greeks through diplomacy, siding with one, then another of Athens' enemies.

The next 150 years of Persian history saw slow decline under a series of ineffective rulers. Rebellions multiplied. By 359 BCE, Phillip II of Macedonia had seen the empire's weakness and planned an invasion. He was murdered before he could launch the plan, but his son Alexander carried it forward. In 330 BCE, Alexander earned his title “the Great” with the defeat of Darius III the last emperor of the Achaemenid dynasty.



Stone carving of Darius I. Behind him is his son, Xerxes. Found in the *Apadana building in Persepolis*

EXPERT GROUP NOTE TRACKER: PERSIAN EMPIRE

Characteristic	Significant information about this empire related to this characteristic:
Background/ location	
Founding	
Organization	
Religion	
Trade	
Decline/Fall	
Summary description / categorization of this empire	

PERSIAN EMPIRE

550-330 BCE

