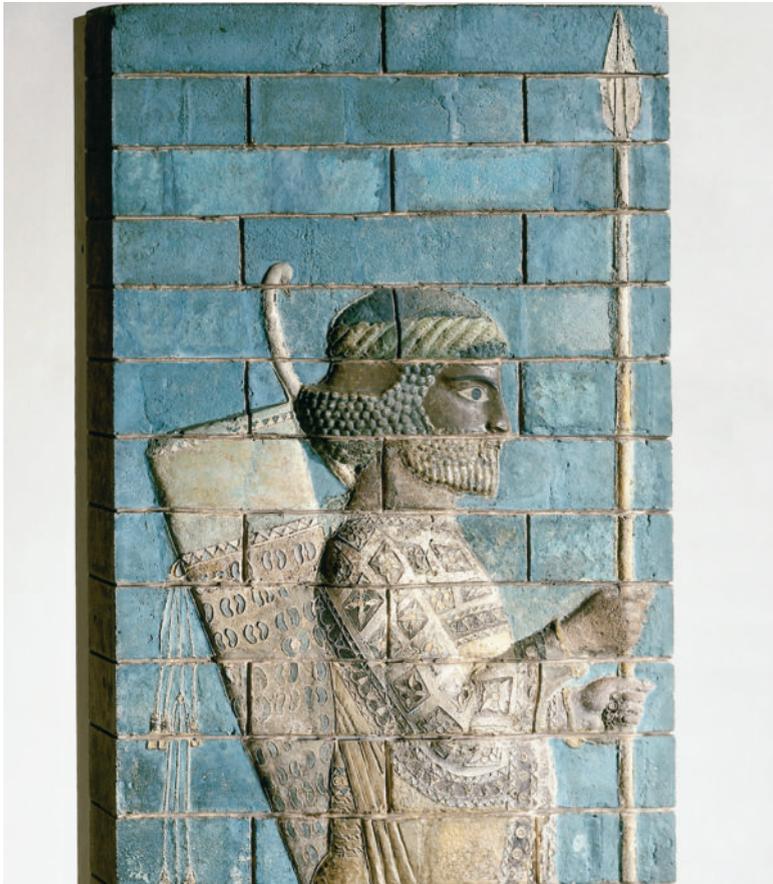


# The Persian Connection: Its Impact and Influences, 2000 B.C.E.–637 C.E.



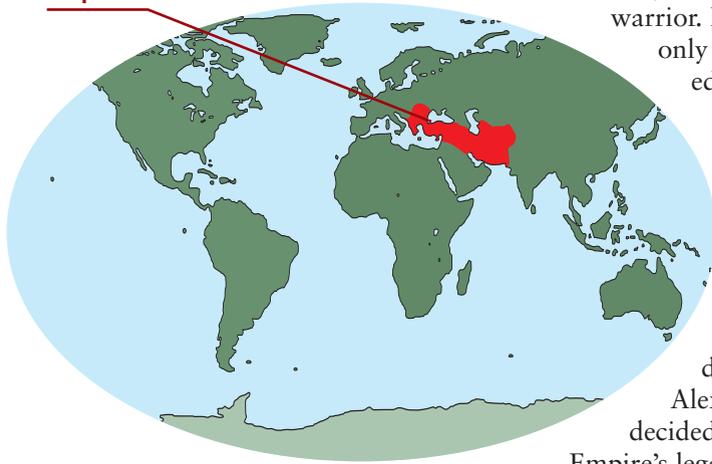
- The Persian Empire
- Persian Governance and Society: Links with Mesopotamia
- Zoroastrianism
- Confrontation with Greece
- The Macedonian Conquest and Its Successor States
- Chapter Review

### A Persian Soldier

The sculpted figure of a Persian policeman guards the entrance to one of Persia's royal palaces. This stylized image shows the braided hair and beard worn by Persian men, the long pike considerably taller than a man, and the attitude of vigilance and resolution that Persian emperors expected from their soldiers (page 142).

In 529 B.C.E., a solemn procession filed from northwest India across Afghanistan and onto the plateau of Iran. Its members were carrying the mutilated remains of one of the most powerful rulers of the ancient world. As his body was placed in the sturdy tomb that had been built for him years earlier, priests chanted hymns and recited prayers. Sacrifices were made on his behalf to the fundamental forces of fire and water. Then the tomb was sealed and guards were placed around it to safeguard his royal dignity even in death. Cyrus the Great of Persia had come home.

### The Persian Empire



Cyrus, like other kings of his day, was a fearsome warrior. But a list of his military conquests would tell only part of his story. The Persian Empire he founded left a legacy that included an efficient system of government, a tolerant society, a model for fostering commerce and cooperation among many cultures, and a conception of a universal god who rewards those who lead good lives and work for justice. Though often portrayed as foreign and therefore barbaric by the Greeks, Persian civilization was rich in its own right. The empire might well have dominated southwest Asia for centuries had Alexander the Great not arisen in Macedonia and decided to destroy it. Even after its fall, the Persian

Empire's legacy profoundly influenced Islamic culture and present-day Iran. The king whom the Persians buried in 529 B.C.E. was an extraordinary ruler who set in motion a series of events and influences that long outlived him.

## The Persian Empire

Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, and China all originated in fertile river valleys. Persian society, in contrast, developed on the arid Iranian plateau in southwestern Asia. In that challenging environment, the Persians constructed an empire that at its height would encompass most of southwestern Asia.

### Geographic Challenges Confront the First Persians

The Iranian plateau, comprising nearly one million square miles, is relatively inhospitable. It contains two immense salt deserts, and the small rivers that cross it are difficult to navigate and offer little water for agriculture. Even entering the plateau can be difficult. It is guarded on the west by the Zagros (*ZAH-grus*) mountains; on the northwest by the Caspian Sea, Caucasus (*KAW-cuh-subs*) mountains, and Elburz (*el-BURZ*) mountains; on the east by the mountain ranges and arid depressions of Afghanistan; on the southeast by the Baluchi (*buh-LOO-key*) desert; and on the south by the Persian Gulf (Map 6.1). The easiest way to ascend the plateau is from the northeast, where broad corridors through the mountains link Iran to Central Asia.

The Iranian plateau's topography makes it easy to defend

## FOUNDATION MAP 6.1 The Physical Geography of the Iranian Plateau

The geography of the region provides natural defenses for Indo-European peoples settling on the Iranian plateau. Notice that the Zagros and Elburz mountain ranges, the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea, and the Baluchi Desert make access to the region difficult for invaders. Sparse rainfall makes the population dependent on irrigation systems that channel runoff from mountain snows that melt in spring. Why might such an easily defensible region have appeared undesirable to earlier settlers?



Archeological evidence suggests that people domesticated sheep and goats, and cultivated wheat and barley, in the foothills of the Zagros mountains at least 10,000 years ago. Little is known of these early Iranians, but artifacts made of obsidian, a mineral not native to the region, indicate the existence of early trading networks. Pastoral nomadism dominated the Iranian plateau, where wide variations in water supply made regular farming impossible. Central Asian nomads arrived on the plateau, through the northwest corridors, about 5,000 years ago.

The Central Asian steppes were no more inviting than Iran, but they were much more difficult to defend against invaders. For thousands of years, hostile tribes had fought each other for control of the region, often contending at the same time with formidable empires such as China. Winners expelled losers and were then, in turn, driven out. Some of these tribes went to Iran, undismayed by its uncertain water supply, and grazed their herds on the plateau.

Central Asians migrate to the Iranian plateau

The first migrants were influenced by the Sumerian culture they found among peoples living on the plateau (see photo, page 139), but they blended it with their own customs and preferences. Archeological remains indicate that these early immigrants were skilled artists, particularly in ceramics. Then around 1000 B.C.E. an Indo-European tribe from Central Asia migrated down the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea into western Iran. This group was a branch of the Aryans who had earlier moved into India (Chapter 3), and they gave their own name to the plateau they occupied: Iran means “land of the Aryans” (Map 6.2).

The two principal subgroups of Aryan migrants were the Medes (*MĒDZ*), who took up residence in the Zagros Mountains, and the Persians, taking their name from Farsia, the central region of the Iranian plateau. Both spoke the same language, which today is known as Farsi (*FAHR-sē*). They had different accents, but the Greeks, who encountered them during the Greco-Persian Wars, were unable to distinguish between the two and called all of them Persians.

### Map 6.2 Indo-Europeans Migrate from Central Asia, 3000–1000 B.C.E.

Between 3000 and 1000 B.C.E., many Indo-European peoples left their homeland in what today is southwestern Russia, relocating in many different directions. One such people, the Aryans, entered the Iranian plateau from the northwest and settled among indigenous peoples already living there. Observe that eventually some Aryans would continue to migrate eastward and settle in India (Chapter 3). How might the knowledge and customs shared by these peoples have forged connections between the widely scattered societies that they created?



Although they periodically fought against invaders from the Assyrian Empire, the Medes were relatively well protected by the Zagros and established a thriving economy and culture. They mined minerals such as gold, silver, precious gems, marble, iron, copper, and lead, which they used in their artistic endeavors and traded with neighboring cultures.

The melting mountain snows provided the only reliable source of water for agriculture in a land that averages fewer than 12 inches of precipitation per year, so the Medes developed a sophisticated irrigation system. They trapped the waters of the melting snows and diverted them to fields. In one of the many valleys of the Zagros they built Ecbatana (*eck-BAH-tuh-nuh*), the seat of their government and center of their economy. Eventually, however, the Assyrian Empire conquered both the Medes and the Persians, forcing them to pay tribute but never completely subjugating them.

When Babylonia and Assyria erupted into civil war, the Medes and Persians took advantage of the conflict to free themselves from the invaders. First the Median king Cyaxares (*sī-AX-ar-ēs*) strengthened his army, reducing the Persians to the status of vassals. Cyaxares (640–584 B.C.E.) then allied with the Chaldeans against Assyria. But his plans were delayed by the arrival of Scythians (*SIH-thē-abns*), nomadic warriors from Central Asia, who invaded Iran through the passage between the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountains. Forced to pay tribute to the Scythians, Cyaxares decided to give a banquet for their leaders—at which he got them drunk and killed them. This enabled him to return to his original plan, and by 612 B.C.E. the Medes and Chaldeans had destroyed the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. Cyaxares ruled northern Mesopotamia until his death in 584, while the Chaldeans (or “New Babylonians”) ruled in southern Mesopotamia (or “Babylonia”). The Assyrian Empire was shattered, making way for the creation of the Persian Empire.

Cyaxares defeats the Assyrian Empire

## Cyrus the Great

The Median kingdom lasted for only a few decades before its Persian vassals started intriguing against it. The Persian ruling family, called the Achaemenids (*ah-KĒ-muh-nids*), married into the ruling house of Media. Cyrus, a child of this union, managed to unify the Persian tribes and wage war against the Median king, who was also his father-in-law. In 550 B.C.E. he captured the king and united the Medes and Persians under the Achaemenid house.

Following his defeat of the Medes, which extended his control from the Persian Gulf to central Anatolia, Cyrus next waged war against King Croesus (*CRĒ-suss*), ruler of a region called Lydia (*LIH-dē-uh*) in western Anatolia. Although Croesus, whose great wealth was legendary, struck first in an effort to expand Lydia eastward, his armies were no match for the Persians. In 547 B.C.E., the Lydian cavalry was poised to strike the Persian infantry when other Persian troops, mounted on camels, counterattacked. The Lydian horses, which had never before seen such animals, panicked and threw their riders into the dust. Cyrus’s victory gave the Persian Empire access to the Mediterranean Sea and control of several Greek city-states on the shores of Anatolia, from which it could threaten Greece itself. Although Cyrus made no move against the Greek mainland, the Greeks were unnerved by the proximity of an empire with a large, well-equipped army that enjoyed a reputation for winning. During the following decades they watched the Persians carefully.

Cyrus expands the Persian Empire to west and east

Cyrus next moved east, conquering the lands of Parthia and Bactria (modern-day Afghanistan) and extending his dominion from the Aegean (*ih-JĒ-uhn*) Sea in the west to the Hindu Kush mountains in the east. In 539 B.C.E., he invaded southern Mesopotamia, then controlled by the Chaldeans' New Babylonian Empire. By allying himself with various tribes that had struggled against the Chaldeans and portraying himself as their liberator, Cyrus was able to enter the city of Babylon without a fight. The rich Babylonian domains, from Mesopotamia to Palestine, were now under his control. By the time of his death in 530 B.C.E., he had clearly earned the title of Cyrus the Great, one of history's most successful empire builders.

**ASSIMILATION AFTER CONQUEST.** The importance of Cyrus lay not just in his conquests. For its time, Cyrus's rule was remarkably sophisticated in its approach to subjugated peoples. Conquerors of that era normally pillaged defeated cities and enslaved their populations. Cyrus, by contrast, had a shrewd instinct for governing that allowed him to win the trust of those he defeated. An examination of some of his principles of government illustrates this instinct.

Cyrus the Great leads through persuasion and compromise

First, Cyrus demonstrated early in his reign that he would rule through persuasion and compromise rather than force and humiliation. When he conquered the Medes, he granted their leader honors and respect, and he united the Medes with his own people rather than subjugating them. He retained not only Median administrative and military structures but also the Medes who directed them. In this way he won the trust of the Medes and reduced the possibility of rebellion against his rule.

Second, Cyrus treated conquered peoples benevolently, allowing deported peoples to return to their homelands rather than enslaving them. He won the gratitude of the Jews when he freed them from captivity in Babylonia and allowed them to return to Jerusalem. He even encouraged them to rebuild their temple, which the Babylonians had destroyed.

Finally, Cyrus permitted the peoples he defeated to retain their own religions and cultures while simultaneously offering them partnership in the Persian Empire. This two-pronged approach persuaded various ethnic groups to accept his rule; in doing so, they understood that they would not be humiliated and would retain their self-respect. Cyrus also realized that his own people could learn from many of the societies he conquered. At his command, Persians sought out and copied the most useful practices of their new subjects. He also standardized taxes and measurements, codified laws, and fostered commercial and cultural connections within his vast domains.

Cyrus's policies of tolerance were based not so much on benevolence as on pragmatism. He acted in ways he knew would work. He understood that people treated humanely were not likely to rebel. But he also understood the nature of nomadic societies that occupied the Iranian plateau. These groups, often called tribes, usually resisted joining settled societies. They tended to pursue their own interests, migrating at will to various parts of the plateau and following their own traditions and governing methods. Tribal fighters were bound to their chiefs by ties of loyalty cemented by blood relationships and patronage, the voluntary submission of a family or clan to a powerful leader (or patron). Thus chiefs commanded considerable leverage that could be used to support a central leadership, as long as that leadership did not monopolize power or impose its culture on others. In such circumstances, Cyrus acted prudently, accepting conditions he could not change and turning necessity to his advantage by granting autonomy magnanimously.

That magnanimity was not, however, unlimited. Tribal leaders were expected to place their own interests within the context of the empire's larger interests, recognizing that cooperation would benefit everyone. Defense and trade were empire-wide priorities. Permitting the Jews to return to Palestine helped Cyrus assimilate the Phoenician and Palestinian remnants of the Babylonian Empire, and the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem was followed by the construction of fortifications designed to protect the western regions of the empire against invasion from Egypt. The Jews were expected to cooperate in this task, and evidence suggests that they did. So did the Babylonians, whose merchants welcomed membership in an empire that offered them secure trade routes to markets in Egypt and Syria. Cyrus's ability to transform conflict into connection thus created an extensive commercial network in Southwest Asia.

Cyrus transforms conflict into connection and cooperation

## Persian Governance and Society: Links with Mesopotamia

The Persian Empire, ruled by ambitious, creative leaders, dominated both Iran and Mesopotamia by the middle of the sixth century B.C.E. Then its rulers proceeded to consolidate their hold over their subjects and project Persian influence westward, toward an eventual confrontation with Greece.

### From Cyrus to Darius

After the conquest of Babylon, Cyrus presided over the largest empire on earth. He had won the loyalty of most of his subject peoples by treating them humanely. Only one corner of his realm resisted his rule, and the Great King finally overreached himself. The Massagetae (*mahs-ab-JET-ē*), a nomadic people of Scythian origin in northwestern India, were contemptuous of Persian ideals and indifferent to Persian control. In 530 B.C.E., Cyrus, now in his sixties, led his army into the region to subdue these difficult people. The battle went badly for the Persians, and Cyrus himself was knocked from his horse by Tomyris (*tum-Ē-riss*), queen of the Massagetae. She severed his head with a single blow of her sword and returned his mutilated corpse to the Persians, who retreated westward and buried him in the tomb described at the beginning of this chapter.

Cambyses (*kam-BĒ-sēz*), Cyrus's son, succeeded him and wisely decided to leave the Massagetae alone. Instead he invaded Egypt, bringing the Nile Valley under Persian control. But the campaign there took three years and Persians at home, unnerved by Cyrus's defeat and tired of war, revolted in 522 B.C.E. Cambyses (r. 530–521 B.C.E.) rushed back from Egypt to suppress the uprising, but he died along the way. The Persian Empire had never established a routine order of succession, and with three different heirs of the Achaemenid dynasty contending for power, the empire fell into disarray.

The eventual winner was Darius (*dub-RĪ-us*), a 28-year-old soldier who married both Cambyses' grieving widow and a daughter of Cyrus the Great (Persian rulers sometimes married more than one woman for political gain). But he was widely viewed as a



The “Cyrus Cylinder”, a damaged clay cylinder completely inscribed with cuneiform writing that shows the influence of Sumerian culture on Persia.

### Map 6.3 The Persian Empire Expands, 549–490 B.C.E.

The Persian Empire stretched across portions of three continents on a broad east-west axis. Note that Persia recentered power in southwest Asia eastward away from Mesopotamia, controlling territory from Libya and Macedonia in the west to the Indus valley in the east. The Royal Road facilitated communication and connections across this geographically challenging region, while local governors known as satraps enforced the Persian King's will in areas the monarch himself never visited. What effects would Cyrus the Great's policies of assimilation have had on the peoples of such a vast and diverse region?



Darius claims the Persian throne

usurper, and rebellions broke out throughout the empire. Claiming divine support, Darius (r. 521–486 B.C.E.) put down the uprisings by force. It was a bloody beginning for a ruler who would one day be known as Darius the Great.

Prudently, Darius waited a few years before resuming Persia's imperial expansion, using the time to reorganize his army. But he did not wait too long, for he understood that the arrogance he had shown in claiming divine support would have to be justified by victories. In 517 B.C.E., he struck eastward, driving into southwestern India and putting its gold mines to the service of the empire (Map 6.3). His victories in the Indus Valley completed Persia's conquest of three of the four great river civilizations. Only China remained outside his grasp, and it is unlikely that he ever thought of going there. Instead he moved westward, securing Egypt and Libya, and then struck north into southeastern Europe, pressing on as far as the Danube River by 512 B.C.E. With future conquests in mind, he settled down for the time being to solidify his rule.

## Administration of the Empire

Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius had built an enormous empire, many times larger than the Assyrian Empire that Cyrus had overthrown (Map 6.4). Ruling that realm—a vast expanse of many different peoples and cultures—would require a carefully structured bureaucracy. Central control had to be ensured, even as local autonomy was preserved, in order to avoid inefficiency, rebellion, or both.

Darius chose strong central rule. Whereas Cyrus had governed through cooperation backed by the ever-present threat of superior force, Darius emphasized authority. Cyrus had acted benevolently toward defeated rulers and turned them, where possible, into allies. Darius, in contrast, called his enemies “Kings of The Lie” and singled them out for special punishment. More distant from his people than Cyrus and less willing to permit autonomy, Darius grounded his government on the unswerving loyalty of political appointees.

**Map 6.4** The Assyrian and Persian Empires Compared, 625–500 B.C.E.

The sprawling Assyrian Empire had dominated southwest Asia, but observe how the conquests of Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius dwarf it. Ruling an empire as enormous as Persia was an unprecedented task, requiring administrative innovations such as satrapies. It also required a willingness to grant substantial autonomy to local rulers and leaders, a feature that had characterized Persian governance even before Cyrus. What other policies or institutions might have been devised to permit efficient rule of such an enormous realm?



Darius centralizes Persian administration

These concerns led Darius to divide the Persian Empire into twenty provinces, each known in Farsi as a **satrapy** (*SĀ-trap-ē*) and ruled by a governor called a satrap. Most satraps were not Persians but members of the ethnic group they were expected to rule. In this way, Darius strengthened central control while perpetuating the local autonomy characteristic of nomadic society. Linked to the Achaemenids through marriage or birth, satraps were referred to as “the eyes and ears of the Great King.”

Selected for their loyalty and their familiarity with local conditions, satraps exercised considerable authority, reinforced by rapid communication. A carefully maintained highway system, dominated by the Royal Road running from Sardis, near the Aegean Sea to Susa (*SOO-sub*), near the Persian Gulf, guaranteed that information would travel quickly. Persia’s superb mounted postal service could, under the best conditions, carry a message more than a thousand miles in the course of a week. Foot soldiers, however (see page 133), even if marching at the breakneck pace of 19 miles a day, would take three months to travel the Royal Road. Beyond Susa, the roads eastward to India were less satisfactory, and the terrain rougher.

Darius knew, however, that the swift delivery of a royal message did not necessarily guarantee compliance. The emperor might be master of all he surveyed from his capital, but beyond that horizon he depended on the willing cooperation of subordinates. He needed men, particularly in remote areas, who would carry out his commands without question and who would act in his own best interests. Satraps were the men he chose.

Satraps play a vital role in Persian governance

The satraps were crucial to the prosperity and peace of the empire they served. They conducted diplomacy with border states and warrior peoples. Both inside and outside the empire, they blended persuasion and force as Cyrus and Darius had done. The stability they ensured allowed trade and commerce to thrive. In addition, they were entrusted with the collection of royal taxes. If the satraps failed at this task, the empire would fail. That its fall came with defeat by a military genius, rather than as a consequence of poor administration, is a tribute to the diligence and skill of the satraps as well as to the design of the administrative system developed by Darius the Great.

### Mesopotamian Influences: Law, Administration, and Commerce

As Persia expanded and as its bureaucracy grew, its connections with other cultures multiplied. The emperors were particularly attracted by Mesopotamia, birthplace of the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian cultures and worthy of imitation in several respects.

Hammurabi’s Code influences Persian law

Law was one area in which Persians could learn from Mesopotamia. Darius needed a legal system applicable throughout the empire in order to support his administrative structures. Adhering to Cyrus’s principle of tolerance for subject peoples, Darius permitted local customs and regulations to remain in place. But he established a system of royal judges to ensure that local laws would be enforced in a manner consistent with the interests of the empire. Deliberately seeking to be known as a lawgiver like the Babylonian king Hammurabi, Darius authorized the compilation and codification of Persian laws. But while Hammurabi’s Code survived in numerous cuneiform tablets, Darius’s *Ordinance of Good Regulations*, written on parchment (treated sheepskins or goatskins), completely disappeared. In fact, until recent archeological discoveries, some scholars did not believe it once existed. The few indirect references to it found in

contemporary Babylonian commercial documents suggest that it was modeled on Hammurabi's Code but altered to apply Persian ethics to both civil and criminal matters.

Persian government was also influenced by Mesopotamia. The Aryans who entered Iran brought with them a simple social structure adapted to life on the steppes of Central Asia. But Cyrus's invasion of Mesopotamia brought Persia into contact with a very complex civilization. Ruling it required levels of organization beyond those present in a nomadic society. The Babylonian Empire had developed a system of provincial governors, many of whose duties were now taken over by Persian satraps and their subordinates, such as tax collectors, police officials, and record keepers. These officials constituted an administrative class of their own, developing codes of conduct specific to their roles in Persian life. In addition, the military occupation of Mesopotamia and its assimilation into the Persian Empire forced the satraps to share power with local warriors, who resented the Persians for their literacy and their knowledge of diplomacy. Soldiers did not generally have these skills, and Persian administrators, responding to their antagonism, gradually became more militaristic.

The conquest of Mesopotamia also brought Persia into contact with western Asia and northwestern Africa. International trade expanded, fostered by the empire's political stability, its control of sea routes, and its well-maintained roads. Persia traded extensively with Syria, Egypt, Greece, and Ethiopia, connecting those regions with Central Asia through Afghanistan. Far more cosmopolitan than its Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Indian predecessors, the Persian Empire forged connections between cultures separated by thousands of miles.

## Persian Society and Culture

Contact with Mesopotamia also affected Persian society. To meet the needs of an expanding empire, social classes began to develop in Persian cities. Artisans now needed to fabricate more than saddles and weapons: they created items of metal, fiber, and leather required by an urbanizing society in the process of forsaking its nomadic past. Merchants carried on trade, both locally and over long distances, making use of the Royal Road and Silk Road. Nomads had no need for elaborate systems of irrigation, but settled societies based on arid plateaus did, and the skilled and unskilled workers who built and maintained them were highly valued.

In addition, Persian society included a slave class. Persia had a history of slave-owning—in Central Asia the Aryans had owned slaves—and when invading Persians occupied Mesopotamia, they saw the Babylonians using slaves on large construction projects. Most Persian slaves were prisoners taken in battle, but others were ordinary individuals who, on account of debts, were forced to sell themselves or even their families into slavery to repay their creditors. Slaves were the property of their owners in every sense and could make no decisions (including marriage) without permission. Although some slaves became highly skilled at their tasks and were rewarded with increasing levels of responsibility and respect, most led short lives of hard labor and deprivation.

What little is known of Persian family structure suggests a self-reliant society. A Persian man could have more than one wife, provided that he could afford to maintain each of them above the poverty level, a restriction that limited polygamy to the upper classes.



Persepolis: the east stairway to the great audience hall of Darius I, showing visiting dignitaries bringing tribute.

Possession of Mesopotamia helps Persia create connections

Persian society develops a class structure

Elite Persian women exercise considerable authority



Persians loved objects made of gold or silver, like this silver figurine of an antelope.

The fact that men were frequently away from home on business or at war meant that elite Persian women normally enjoyed substantial independence. They administered their family estates, organized celebrations, and traveled freely throughout the empire with or without their husbands. Most men and women, of course, lived from one meal to the next and never acquired wealth. These families, on whose labor the empire depended, had little time to contemplate anything other than survival.

Everyone, however—elites, ordinary people, and slaves—benefited from the Persian love of celebration. Festivals were common throughout the empire, particularly once Zoroastrianism took root. That religion, described below, obligates people to seek happiness and considers fasting and penance to belong to the realm of demons. Accordingly, Persians enjoyed feasts filled with music, dancing, and fun. The staple food was barley bread, supplemented by fruits, vegetables, and date or grape wine. Merrymakers on holy days were required to give to the poor and invite even the most destitute to join the revelry. The spring festival of Nō Rōz (*NO ROSE*), commemorating the creation of fire, was celebrated with special foods, the exchange of gifts, and the wearing of new clothes and ornaments. In addition to seven “high feasts,” there were many local fairs and frolics. The love of celebrations gave the Persians a spirit of joy that counterbalanced the empire’s military might and administrative control.

Persians also enjoyed fine jewelry and clothing. Like their Median and Scythian ancestors, they wore a wide variety of bracelets, necklaces, chains, and earrings, often made of gold or silver. Contemporary non-Persian accounts often refer to Iranians as taking great pride in their appearance, and it is likely that their clothing was durable and attractive. Bowls, goblets, and ceremonial vessels were made of brass, gold, and silver, and appear to have been widely used not only by the elite but by many ordinary households.

Much of the empire’s cultural inheritance came from the Medes and Persians. The Persians spoke Farsi, which featured a 36-character alphabet, an intricate grammatical structure, and a rich, expressive vocabulary. This language was written not on clay in the Sumerian style, but with pen and ink on parchment.

Another original aspect of Persian culture was architecture. Once the formerly nomadic Persians became sedentary, they made effective use of the column and constructed huge monuments depicting bulls and lions with wings. Persian art that has survived the centuries generally takes the form of sculpture and reliefs carved into the walls of buildings. These monuments reveal a culture sensitive to beauty and aware of its political uses. For example, the emperor, his generals, and courtiers are portrayed as regal, powerful persons of great dignity. Often they are depicted as stylized, mythical heroes, adorned with wings or engaged in single-handed combat with lions or bulls. Delegations from subject kingdoms like Babylonia and Lydia are shown bearing tribute and paying homage to Cyrus or Darius, particularly on the walls of the city of Persepolis (*per-SEH-pub-lis*), the most visually striking of Persia’s cities (see photo, page 143).

The emperor maintained official residences in the cities of Ecbatana, Babylon, and Susa, enabling him to rule the empire from whichever city he happened to be living in at the time. During the winter this was usually Susa, centrally located in Mesopotamia; Ecbatana or Babylon served as the capital in the summer. Shortly after his accession to the throne, Darius began building a ceremonial capital at Persepolis, intending to demonstrate his greatness through its massive buildings and sculptures. He died before the

Persian architecture celebrates the emperor’s power

work was completed, and his son Xerxes (*ZURK-zēz*) finished the task. Festivals, celebrations, and major imperial functions were held there in an atmosphere that suggested the largest empire of its day would last for thousands of years.

Persepolis survives today only as ruins, but even those fragments are impressive. It contained a series of massive public buildings, including the royal treasury and several superbly designed reception halls. These structures and colossal monuments portrayed the power and ferocity of the Persian Emperor. Anyone witnessing such grandeur would conclude that Persia in 500 B.C.E. was truly the center of the world. But just as Cyrus the Great had been unexpectedly brought down in battle by a small tribe of nomadic Scythians far to the east, his successors would inadvertently lead the empire to destruction in wars with seemingly unimportant people along its western frontier.



A photograph of the ruins of the entrance to the Palace of Darius in Persepolis.

## Zoroastrianism

Those assimilated into the Persian Empire participated in a dynamic, expanding state and a flourishing economy. Many also practiced a religion that gave divine sanction to the ambitions of the Persian emperors: **Zoroastrianism** (*zohr-ō-ASS-trē-ahn-iz'm*).

At first the Medes and Persians were polytheistic, worshipping a variety of deities including two powerful gods, Ahura and Mazda (*uh-HOOR-uh* and *MAHZ-duh*). Like other polytheistic peoples, the Medes and Persians incorporated religion into their daily lives, believing that various gods represented natural forces such as wind, rain, and sunlight and praying to the one whose benefits they sought. This belief system changed significantly in the sixth century B.C.E. with the empire's adoption of the ideas of a holy man who had lived centuries earlier on the Iranian plateau.

### A Religion of Good and Evil

Zoroastrianism was based on the ideas of the prophet Zoroaster—or Zarathustra (*zah-rah-THOO-strah*), as he is more commonly known today—who apparently lived in Persia sometime between 1300 and 1000 B.C.E. Zoroaster sensed that two powerful Persian gods, Ahura and Mazda, were in fact a single god, whom he called Ahura Mazda. He perceived Ahura Mazda as the universal god of light who had created human beings and given them free will to choose between right and wrong. To explain the existence of evil, Zoroaster maintained that Ahura Mazda had a malignant twin, Ahriman (*AHR-ē-mun*), whom Ahura Mazda had defeated and banished from paradise but who still sought to influence human behavior as lord of the forces of darkness.

Zoroaster's promotion of monotheism—belief in one god—won few converts until he blended it with an ancient cult emphasizing fire worship. Zoroastrians built fire temples to enshrine the light of Ahura Mazda. They conceded that lesser gods existed but characterized some as attributes of Ahura Mazda, while others were manifestations of The Lie, a set of false doctrines propagated by Ahriman to lead people astray.

Once the Persian emperors adopted Zoroastrianism, they gave control of it to the Magi (*MĀ-jī*), the scholar-priests of the Persian world who guarded the temples and compiled Zoroaster's ideas in a sacred text called the *Avesta* (see “Excerpt from the *Avesta*”). The Magi, who later played a role in the Christian story of the birth of Jesus

Zoroaster preaches a monotheistic religion

## Document 6.1 Excerpt from *The Avesta*.

**The *Avesta*, the Holy Scripture of Zoroastrianism, is a collection of prayers to Ahura Mazda and to lesser spirits and beings.**

Purity is the best good. Happiness, happiness is to him: Namely, to the best pure in purity.

Broken, broken be Satan Ahriman, whose deeds and works are accursed. May his works and deeds not attain to us. May Ahura Mazda be victorious and pure.

Let Ahura Mazda be king, and let Ahriman, the wicked holder-alooof, be smitten and broken.

All the evil thoughts, evil words, evil deeds, which I have thought, spoken, done, committed in the world, which

are become my nature—all these sins, thoughts, words, and deeds, bodily, spiritual, earthly, heavenly, O Lord, pardon; I repent of them.

In the name of God, the Lord, the Increaser. May he increase in great majesty. I praise and exalt Ahura Mazda, the Brilliant, Majestic, Omniscient, the Perfecter of deeds, the Lord of Lords, the Prince over all princes, the Protector, the Creator of the created, the Giver of daily food, the Powerful, Good, Strong, Old, Forgiving, Granter of forgiveness, Rich in Love, Mighty and Wise, the pure Supporter. May thy right rule be without ceasing.

SOURCE: *The Avesta*, translated by Arthur Henry Bleek (New York: Gordon Press, 1974) 3–6.

of Nazareth, came to see all creation as a cosmic struggle between the forces of good, led by Ahura Mazda, and the forces of evil, led by Ahriman. At the end of life, each individual would be judged by Ahura Mazda: those who had led lives of goodness and truth would be rewarded with eternal bliss; those who had practiced wickedness and deceit would be doomed to everlasting pain. At the Last Judgment, righteousness would overcome The Lie.

Many beliefs later important to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam first appeared in Zoroastrianism: the existence of one God of justice and benevolence, the conflict between God and the Devil, the divine judgment of individuals based on their moral behavior, and the notions of heaven and hell. Zoroastrianism was also the source of the cult of Mithras (*MITH-rahs*), a divine-human “god of day” revered as Ahura Mazda’s main deputy, which later spread widely in the Greek and Roman worlds. Zoroastrianism survived for more than a thousand years, until, in the seventh and eighth centuries C.E., it was displaced by Islam. Refugees fled to the area surrounding Bombay in India, where Zoroastrianism survives today, practiced by Parsees, the descendants of these refugees.

Zoroastrianism influences later monotheistic religions

### Social and Political Content

Zoroastrianism was more than theology: it also carried a strong social and political message about how people should conduct themselves. Zoroastrians believe that the entire purpose of the struggle between good and evil is the improvement of life on earth before the Last Judgment, and that individuals will be judged not only by what they have believed but also by what they have done. Thus Zoroastrians feel compelled to engage in government, political affairs, and issues of social justice.

From 521 B.C.E. onward, the Zoroastrian faith was strongly supported by the Persian kings, who liked to portray themselves as Ahura Mazda’s earthly agents. Darius the Great had the magnificent Behistun relief carved to depict his triumphs over his enemies through the divine assistance of Ahura Mazda, who appears in the relief as a winged god blessing the proceedings. Zoroastrianism’s sociopolitical ethic proved very useful to the

Zoroastrianism delivers a social message

Persian kings: it established a moral order in Persia and designated the Great King as God's vice-regent on earth. To disobey his commands was equivalent to sinning against God and humanity.

Neither Darius nor his successors imposed Zoroastrianism on Persia's subject peoples; to do so would have violated the cultural autonomy that formed the basis of Persian rule. But Darius seems to have believed that Ahura Mazda had bestowed upon him the awesome yet appropriate duty of unifying the known world into a single empire based on justice and peace. In pursuit of that sacred goal, the emperor believed he had to respect the various cultures of the peoples entrusted to his care. He also had to draw them away from The Lie by giving them positions of responsibility (such as satrap) and demonstrating that obedience to the empire carried with it not slavery but opportunity. In this way Zoroastrianism reinforced attitudes that Darius had already learned to value. Or perhaps, given his enormous influence, it was the other way round.

## Confrontation with Greece

The Persian Empire first came into contact with Greece when Cyrus completed the conquest of Lydia in 546 B.C.E. Several Greek city-states in the region of Ionia along the western coast of Anatolia thereby fell under Persian domination, since Lydia had previously protected them. The Greeks knew little about Persian culture prior to Lydia's defeat and liked little of what they learned thereafter. Zoroastrian monotheism and musings about social justice baffled polytheistic people who believed that justice for humans was not a high priority for the gods. To the fiercely independent Greeks, Persia's tolerance for its subject peoples seemed only a strategy for making bondage less offensive. For their part, the Persians regarded the Greeks as no more sophisticated or dangerous than the other peoples the empire had subdued. The conquerors of Assyria and Babylon were not intimidated by a land divided into many competing city-states that seemed to lack military potential. For several decades after the defeat of Lydia, the west Anatolian city-states reluctantly accommodated themselves to Persian rule. Then, in 499, the Ionian Revolt began.

### The Ionian Revolt and the Persian Response

The uprising in Ionia took Persia by surprise. The Persians had followed their standard policy of working with local leaders, but the Ionian officials with whom they worked discredited themselves with their own people by their collaboration with Persia. The rebellious cities were far away from Susa, and the Greeks, who never understood Persians, apparently thought that this distance would discourage the emperor from retaliating. Almost as an afterthought, the rebels appealed for aid to the Greek city-states across the Aegean Sea. Athens, one of the leading city-states, responded by sending a fleet, which was defeated in 494 B.C.E. The revolt disintegrated and Darius sought to consolidate his victory by directing the city-states of the Greek mainland to submit to Persian domination of Aegean commerce. He was astounded when Athens and Sparta, another important city-state, promptly killed his messengers, an act of sacrilege from the Persian perspective and an insult to the emperor. Deeply offended, Darius prepared for war.

The Ionian revolt brings Persia into conflict with Greece

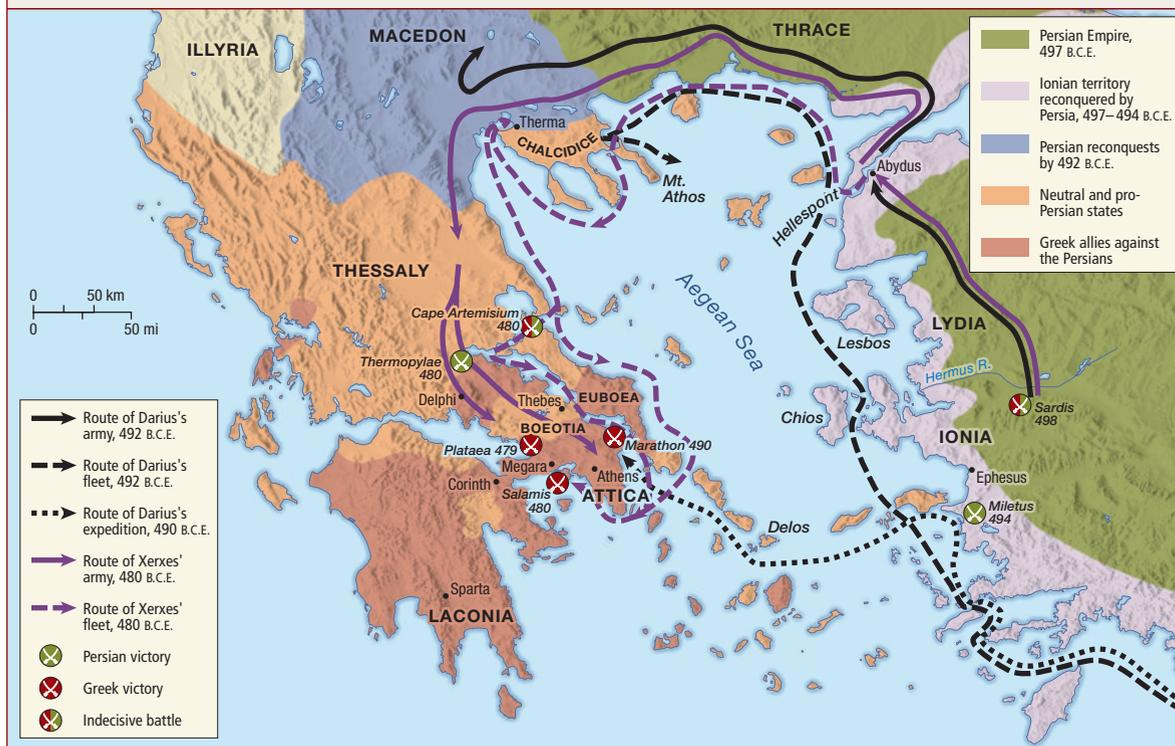
In 492 B.C.E., a powerful Persian fleet heading for Greece was wrecked near Mount Athos. A second force was dispatched two years later and landed in the Bay of Marathon (Map 6.5). The Persians expected to defeat their enemy easily—an expectation the Athenians in fact shared. Persia's army of 20,000 soldiers outnumbered the Greeks two to one, but in the Battle of Marathon more than six thousand Persians perished, while the Greeks lost only 192 men.

Darius's defeat at Marathon causes Persia to rethink its strategy

The Greeks believed that their victory at Marathon had frustrated Persia's intention to conquer the entire Greek mainland. But to the Persians, Marathon was only a small setback that did nothing to change Darius's strategy of ensuring Persian domination of the Aegean Sea. He had intended merely to punish the Greeks for their revolt, not conquer them; but his loss at Marathon convinced him that conquest was necessary. Darius intended to return with a much larger army but died in 486 B.C.E., before his forces were ready. It was a foregone conclusion, however, that his son and successor, Xerxes, (r. 486–465 B.C.E.) would renew the struggle.

### Map 6.5 Conflict Between Persia and Greece, 492–479 B.C.E.

Persia's suppression of the revolts of the Ionian city-states in western Anatolia provoked Greek intervention. Persia responded with two separate invasions of the Greek peninsula. Note that Persia, a land-based empire, was forced by geography to construct a powerful navy in order to fight the Greeks. Persia's inability to conquer Greece meant that Greek civilization would continue to evolve apart from eastern influences, and would eventually form part of the foundation of what came to be known as Western civilization. Had Persia been victorious, what might have happened to Greek society and culture?



## Xerxes and the Invasion of Greece

Xerxes invaded Greece with the explicit intention of subduing its mainland. Although he was confident of victory, he had learned from Marathon not to underestimate his opponents, and in 481 B.C.E. he left Susa at the head of a massive army. The Greek historian Herodotus (*hair-AH-duh-tuss*), who chronicled the Persian Wars, reported that an invading host of 2,641,000 men drank entire rivers dry when camping for the night. This was a wild exaggeration—there probably weren't two million men of military age in all of Persia—but Xerxes could have brought about 250,000 soldiers, enough to frighten the usually quarrelsome Greeks into creating an anti-Persian alliance. Sparta provided leadership on land, while Athens mobilized a formidable navy. At stake in the struggle was the future leadership of Greece, western Anatolia, and the entire Aegean basin.

Greeks put aside their quarrels to unite against Persia

The Persians struck simultaneously by land and sea. At a narrow mountain pass near the town of Thermopylae (*thur-MAH-pub-lē*), 360 Spartans held out for days against more than 10,000 Persians. The Spartans died to the last man, delaying the Persian advance long enough to permit their comrades to mount a successful defense on the plains beyond. Today a plaque at the entry to the pass commemorates the Spartan ideal that inspired such sacrifice: “Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by/ That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.” Shortly thereafter, further dramatic Greek victories forced the Persians to withdraw.

In retrospect it is clear why the Persians lost. First, they faced massive logistical problems in trying to sustain such huge military forces so far from home. Second, their lightly armed soldiers, equipped for mobile fighting on the plains of Asia, were surprised to find the Greek infantry better equipped to fight in the narrow passes and rocky hills of Greece. Finally, the Greeks were more highly motivated than their enemy, because they had more to lose. The Persians could withdraw to fight again, but if the Greeks lost they would lose their independence.

A variety of factors prevent Persia from conquering Greece

## Stalemate

Their defeat in Greece astounded the Persians and convinced Xerxes to return home. He had been absent too long for a monarch with such extensive ambitions and responsibilities. Moreover, he faced a rebellion in Babylonia, probably provoked by news of his difficulties in Greece. If he failed to put it down his throne stood in jeopardy.

But the Greco-Persian conflict was far from over. Misinterpreting Xerxes' withdrawal as evidence that the Persians had given up, Athens and its allies landed troops in western Anatolia to pursue the Persians and secure Ionian independence. After nearly three more decades of intermittent warfare, the two sides signed the Peace of Callias (*KAHL-ē-us*) in 448 B.C.E.: Athens agreed to leave Anatolia to the Persians, who in turn promised to stay out of Ionia and the Aegean Sea.

What had begun as the small-scale Ionian Revolt had turned into an unanticipated stalemate, and Persian ambitions were frustrated. Darius and Xerxes had discovered their reach exceeded their grasp: Persia could land forces on the Greek mainland and devastate the countryside, but it could neither conquer Greece nor hold Ionia. The Greeks had seen the benefits of cooperation in the face of a powerful enemy, but they learned little from the experience. Athens and several of its allies, after driving Persia from Ionia, soon took up arms against Sparta.

Greek resistance blocks further Persian expansion

Xerxes returned home in 479 B.C.E., and though he had intended to return to Greece, he never rallied himself for war again. After suppressing the Babylonian rebellion, he was content to live in luxury, gradually withdrawing from affairs of state. Then, in 465 B.C.E., he was assassinated. Thereafter Persia endured a succession of weak rulers who were unable to deal effectively with rebellion in Egypt and rising discontent at home. But in 431 B.C.E., when the Greek city-states went to war with one another, the Persians found themselves with a new opportunity for conquest.

### Persian Resurgence

The Peloponnesian War gives Persia a new opportunity

From 431 to 404 B.C.E., Greece was racked by the Peloponnesian (*pell-luh-puhn-Ē-zhē-un*) War. Rival alliances led by Athens and Sparta clawed at one another and left the Greek mainland open to intervention or invasion. At first Persia alternated between supporting one alliance or the other, but eventually it funded the expansion of the Spartan fleet. That fleet enabled Sparta to challenge Athens's longstanding control of the sea and eventually defeat the Athenian alliance, which had been Persia's most persistent antagonist. Artaxerxes (*AR-tuh-zurk-zēz*) II, Persian emperor from 404 to 358 B.C.E., then took advantage of Greek exhaustion and moved to reclaim the Ionian city-states.

Had the Greeks united, it is likely that they could have defeated the Persians, whose army, consisting largely of draftees, was weakened by low morale. But Persian diplomacy and bribery combined with centuries of Greek rivalry to keep the Greeks divided. Finally, in 387 B.C.E., Artaxerxes gained enough leverage to impose a treaty called the King's Peace, withdrawing his forces from Greece in exchange for recognition of his control of Ionia. After 16 years of struggle, Persia had emerged as the real winner of the Peloponnesian War. The Persian city of Susa was now the capital of the Aegean world.

## The Macedonian Conquest and Its Successor States

The days of the Achaemenids, however, were numbered. The satraps, sensing the weakening of royal authority, enriched themselves in the provinces at the emperor's expense. Plots, intrigues, and assassinations grew more frequent. Emperor Artaxerxes III (358–338 B.C.E.) proved too distracted by these troubles to pay attention to Macedonia, a new threat to Persian power arising north of Greece (Map 6.5).

### The End of the Persian Empire

Persia's failure to fight Macedon leads to the defeat of the Persian Empire

In 341 B.C.E., Persia refused to assist Athens in its war against Philip II of Macedon (*MASS-uh-dun*), preferring to negotiate with the Macedonian leader. It was a short-sighted policy. By 339 B.C.E., Persian troops had been drawn into the war, and in the following year Philip (r. 359–336 B.C.E.) had united all Greece under his leadership. Artaxerxes was poisoned by satraps seeking to weaken the emperor's position, and his eventual successor, Emperor Darius III (336–330 B.C.E.), was not an effective leader. Suddenly vulnerable, Persia stood alone against the new Macedonian power in the west.

Philip would have been a formidable enough adversary even for Cyrus the Great, but his murder at his daughter's wedding in 336 B.C.E. brought to the Macedonian

throne his son Alexander III, later known as Alexander the Great, a military genius whose talents have never been surpassed. Alexander, whose story is told in Chapter 7, defeated the Persian army in a series of battles in 334–333 B.C.E. Yet Darius III and his counselors underestimated the abilities of this 22-year-old novice. The Persian Empire had lost many battles but had always won the wars, provided that its leadership had the sense to play for time.

The problem was that the impetuous Alexander had no intention of letting the Achaemenids stall. He sacked Persepolis in 330 and stood over the corpse of Darius III, murdered that summer by his own troops while fleeing from Alexander's advance. The Achaemenid dynasty died with Darius III, but by officiating at his funeral ceremony, Alexander designated himself as that dynasty's rightful heir. The former Persian Empire, which had conquered so many peoples itself, was subjugated under the Macedonian empire of Alexander the Great.



Part of a mosaic illustrating the Battle of Issus, in which Darius III (in chariot) led the Persians to defeat against Alexander the Great.

## Persia Under Macedonian Rule

Persian government, always tolerant of subject peoples, was now forced to accept Greek political institutions and culture. Alexander wisely retained most of the local Achaemenid administrative structure, but he encouraged the mixing of Greeks and Persians, taking several Persian wives himself, and significant numbers of Macedonian and Greek soldiers settled permanently in Persia. Alexander's policies appear to have worked well, since no noticeable unrest marred his rule and no rebellions followed his unexpected death in 323 B.C.E. at the age of 33.

Soon thereafter, one of Alexander's generals, Seleucus Nikator (*sell-LOO-kus ni-KĀ-tur*), assumed control over most of the old Persian Empire; the new state was called the Seleucid (*sell-LOO-sid*) kingdom. But in an effort to secure his position with the Macedonian leadership, Seleucus (r. 305–280 B.C.E.) promoted Macedonian officials over Persians and displayed no sympathy for or connection to the Persian culture or language. Soon he lost the support of the Persian nobility on the old empire's eastern fringes. Rebellions broke out there, and by 304 B.C.E. Seleucus was forced to turn control of western India over to Chandragupta Maurya, founder of the Mauryan Empire. Thus the disintegration of the Persian Empire helped create a new empire in India. By 129 B.C.E., the Seleucid kingdom had fallen apart, with two principal successor states emerging: the Greco-Bactrian kingdom, comprising northern Afghanistan and part of northwestern India, and the Parthian empire, extending from Armenia southeastward to the Arabian Sea.

Alexander attempts to combine Greek and Persian institutions

The crumbling of Alexander's empire creates successor states

## The Parthian Empire

The collapse of the Seleucid kingdom opened the way for the Parthians, a Central Asian tribe that had moved onto the Iranian plateau during the Achaemenid dynasty. The Parthians ruled formerly Seleucid lands using Persian-style satrapies and administrative flexibility—both essential for governing a region composed of so many different ethnic groups. The Romans, whose empire arose to the west of Persia in the second and first centuries C.E. (Chapter 8), considered the Parthians worthy heirs of the Persians. After Roman armies were routed by the Parthians in 53 B.C.E., Roman Emperor Caesar

Augustus (31 B.C.E.–14 C.E.) refrained from provoking them. Subsequent Roman emperors launched repeated attacks on the westernmost portions of the Parthian empire but never succeeded in conquering Parthian Persia.

Parthian Persia facilitates commerce across Asia

Parthian Persia was a critical crossroad of Asian trade because of its strategic location along the Silk Road (Map 6.6). The Parthians eagerly participated in trans-Asiatic commerce, serving as middlemen between China and Southwest Asia while maintaining safe roads and centers of hospitality for passing merchant caravans from many different cultures. Parthian merchants filled Chinese orders for alfalfa plants, grape vines, and Persia's magnificent Ferghana horses. Their contact with China also promoted the transmission of Indian goods and Buddhist doctrines eastward during the third century C.E. Like the Persians, the Parthians connected East and West. But the Parthians lacked the forceful leadership necessary to win back the westernmost provinces of the old Persian Empire. Following their collapse as a result of internal intrigue in 224 C.E., the imperial throne passed to a people known as the Sasanians (*sub-SAY-nee-uns*).

## The Sasanian Empire

Sasanians defeat Rome and rebuild Persia

For the first time in recorded history the Iranian plateau was ruled by a people who were not invaders. The Sasanians had arrived in Fars, just north of the Persian Gulf, even before the Medes and Persians. Now they seized an opportune moment, first to help the Parthians fight the Romans, and then to replace the Parthians and construct their own empire. They fought the Roman Empire for several decades, taking Mesopotamia in 256 under the leadership of King Shapur (*shah-POOR*) I (r. 240–271 C.E.). Four years later, the Roman Emperor Valerian (r. 253–259) personally commanded the Roman legions in a campaign to expel the Sasanians from the Roman province of Syria. Shapur's forces defeated the Romans, however, captured Valerian, and brought him back to Persia as a prisoner. The Sasanians then drove through Syria into central Anatolia.

Shapur stood firmly in the tradition of the Achaemenians, Macedonians, Seleucids, and Parthians, ruling diverse ethnic groups simultaneously through the time-honored recognition of local autonomy. He tolerated the practice of Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism, but he institutionalized Zoroastrianism as Persia's state religion and made it a powerful ally of the Sasanian monarchy. Shapur's successors were strict Zoroastrians who ended toleration and persecuted those who followed other faiths.

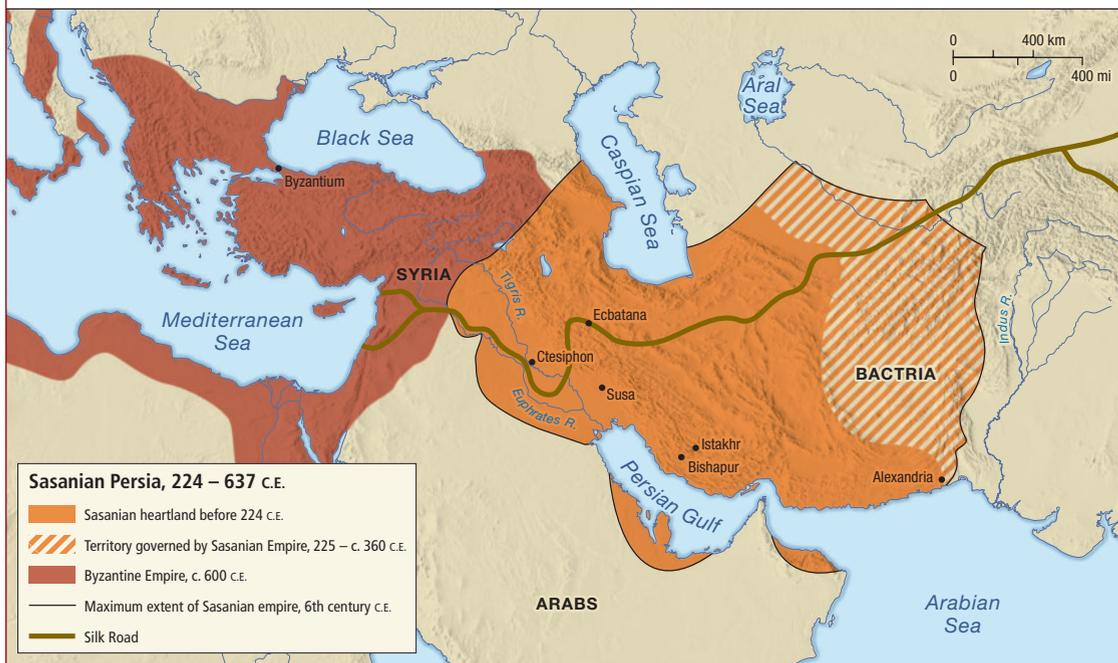
Sasanian Persia builds on the Zoroastrian concern with justice

Zoroastrianism reinforced the Sasanian ruling concept of the circle of equity: there could be no monarch without an army, no army without prosperity, and no prosperity without justice. Zoroastrianism's emphasis on social justice and ethical conduct made it the ideal faith for Sasanian rulers. They insisted that the emperor, who was believed to have been chosen by God, must be obeyed, but he in turn had to ensure prosperity and a just and equitable society. They proclaimed that the circle of equity limited the emperor's authority because that authority depended on his own righteous conduct. But, coupled with traditional Persian respect for local autonomy, it also enabled the Sasanians to claim divine sanction and to compel popular support.

Persia's struggle with Rome continued throughout the Sasanian period, intensifying after Emperor Diocletian's division of the Roman Empire in 284 C.E. (Chapter 9). The eastern portion of the Roman Empire, later called the Byzantine Empire (Chapter 10), fought the Persians for control of Anatolia and eastern Mediterranean trade routes.

## Map 6.6 The Parthian and Sasanian Empires, 247 B.C.E.–637 C.E.

The Parthians and Sasanians occupied pivotal positions in turn. Notice that Persia's location on the Silk Road made it important in trans-Asiatic commerce, while its location at the eastern edge of first the Roman and then the Byzantine Empire connected it to those regimes, making it sometimes a natural partner and sometimes an antagonist. Neither Parthians nor Sasanians were as economically or militarily powerful as Rome or Byzantium, but they were nevertheless significant forces in southwest Asia. Why might Rome and Byzantium have chosen to coexist with these empires rather than trying to conquer them?



Persia's conflict with Byzantium gives the Arabs an opportunity

Under King Khusrau I (531–579), the Sasanians fought with the Byzantines over Arabia. Both sides cultivated client tribes in southern Arabia, hoping to dominate trade routes between the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea.

But one of Khusrau's successors, King Khusrau II (590–628), pushed the quarrel with the Byzantines too far. Taking advantage of a power struggle in Byzantium, between 604 and 619 Khusrau II defeated Byzantine armies in Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Anatolia, and Egypt. At that point the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius reorganized his armies, counterattacked against the overextended Sasanian forces, and, by 628, had pushed them out of all the territories they had conquered. This disaster threw the Sasanian monarchy into disarray and left it open for conquest by Islamic Arab armies between 637 and 651 (Chapter 11). In 651 the last great pre-Islamic Persian dynasty ceased to exist, and Persia became part of a new Arab empire.

## Chapter Review

### Putting It in Perspective

Starting from an inhospitable plateau in Southwest Asia, the Achaemenid dynasty of Persia created the largest empire the world had yet known. The Persians ruled by a combination of force and flexibility. Though they could be brutal, they were also tolerant and practical, allowing various degrees of local autonomy among the many cultures and ethnic groups that they conquered. By permitting those they subdued to retain their cultural identities while enjoying the benefits of Persian order and prosperity, the Persians won their loyalty. Persia's excellent road system and centralized governmental organization enabled its emperors to govern this huge region effectively. In Zoroastrianism, those emperors had a belief system whose clearly developed social ethic enabled them to cast themselves and their officials as warriors for truth and light against evil and The Lie.

In its efforts to centralize its control and its methods of governing, Persia stood in the company of the great river civilizations. In its attempts to expand rapidly over vast expanses of territory, it outperformed them. But Darius and Xerxes overreached themselves in attempting to subdue the mainland of Greece, and their persistence carried with it repercussions that eventually doomed the Achaemenians.

Alexander the Great's Macedonian Empire conquered Persia, but its founder's early death split his realm into three parts. The former Persian Empire was then ruled by three successor states: the Seleucids, Parthians, and Sasanians. Persia's strategic location across Asian trade routes such as the Silk Road assured its continued economic viability, and Khusrau II's dramatic victories over the Byzantine Empire seemed to signal the reestablishment of the western boundaries of the Achaemenian Empire. But the Byzantines struck back, leaving the Sasanians open to the unanticipated invasion of Arab armies that ended the Persian Empire. Persia's administrative efficiency and social tolerance, both well in advance of similar developments elsewhere in the world, continue to mark its place in world history.

### Reviewing Key Material

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## ASK YOURSELF

1. Do Cyrus and Darius merit the appellation “Great”? In what ways were they different from rulers who preceded and followed them?
2. What was distinctive about Zoroastrianism? In what ways did it differ from Hinduism and Buddhism?
3. Why were Persia and Greece frequently at war? Why did the Persians eventually fail to defeat the Greeks?
4. In what ways did the Persian Empire create connections with other peoples and cultures?
5. Why were the Seleucids, Parthians, and Sasanians never able to fully reconstruct the Persian Empire after the death of Alexander the Great?

## GOING FURTHER

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## Key Dates and Developments

**ca. 1000 B.C.E.** Medes and Persians settle on Iranian plateau

**ca. 1300–1000 B.C.E.** The Prophet Zoroaster preaches that there is one god, Ahura Mazda

**612 B.C.E.** Destruction of Nineveh by Median King Cyaxares

**550 B.C.E.** Persian King Cyrus unites Medes and Persians under the Achaemenid dynasty

**550–530 B.C.E.** Reign of Cyrus the Great

**546 B.C.E.** Persia conquers Lydia

**539 B.C.E.** Persia conquers Babylonia

**530–522 B.C.E.** Reign of Cambyses

**525 B.C.E.** Persia conquers Egypt

**521–486 B.C.E.** Reign of Darius the Great  
Construction of Persepolis and the Royal Road  
The *Ordinance of Good Regulations*

**517 B.C.E.** Persia conquers the Indus Valley

**512 B.C.E.** Persian forces reach the Danube River (Europe)

**499 B.C.E.** Ionia revolts against Persian rule

**490 B.C.E.** Athens defeats Persia at Marathon

**486–465 B.C.E.** Reign of Xerxes

**480–479 B.C.E.** Xerxes invades Greece and is defeated

**448 B.C.E.** Peace of Callias: stalemate with Greece

**334–330 B.C.E.** Alexander the Great defeats Persia

**323 B.C.E.** Death of Alexander; creation of the Seleucid Kingdom

**240 B.C.E.–224 C.E.** The Parthian Empire

**227–642 C.E.** The Sasanian Empire