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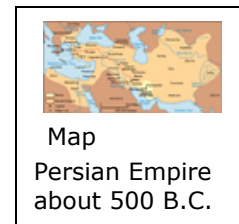
Persia, Ancient

Persia, Ancient, was a land that included parts of what are now Afghanistan and Iran. It became the home of a great civilization and the center of a vast empire that included most of southwestern Asia and parts of Europe and Africa. The Persian Empire reached its height in the 500's B.C. It lasted in various forms for more than 1,000 years, except for a time in the 300's B.C. when it was conquered by the Macedonian ruler Alexander the Great.

The Persians made important contributions in government, law, and religion. They developed an efficient "pony express" system of mail delivery, built a highway and an irrigation system, and tried to standardize weights and measures.

The Persians treated their subjects better than earlier rulers had. The Cyrus the Great Cylinder, a document on baked clay, indicates that the ancient Persians allowed the peoples whom they conquered to practice their own religions and customs.

The name *Persia* came from *Persis*, the Greek name for the area. The Persians themselves later called the region *the land of the Aryans*, from which *Iran* comes. The Persians called their language *Aryan*.



Way of life

The people. Persians dressed in long robes later called *caftans* and pants. They wore jewelry and makeup. Most of the common people lived in brick homes. Nobles and kings had large stone houses and palaces.

The Persians taught their sons to ride horses, shoot bows, and speak the truth. They considered it a disgrace to lie or to remain in debt. The most important celebrations for the Persians were birthdays.

In early Persia, groups of related families formed clans, and clans formed tribes. As the empire grew, clans and larger social units began to disappear.

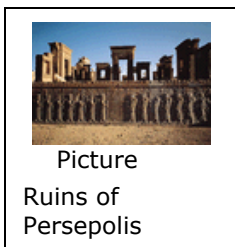
Persian men could have several wives. A king could select his wives only from the six highest-ranking families. All the women in the royal family lived in a large *harem*. Harems were places of safety, where women could avoid contact with men they did not know. However, Persian women influenced politics and accompanied their husbands during wars and on visits to the Persian provinces.

Language and literature. The ancient Persians spoke Old Persian, a language related to Sanskrit and modern Persian. They developed a *cuneiform* writing system, which used wedge-shaped characters (see [Cuneiform](#)). The Persians used Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew, for correspondence within their empire. People in various parts of Persia used different local languages. The Persians also used a language called Elamite for administrative purposes.

Little is known of ancient Persian literature. However, stories of ancient heroes survive, probably passed along by minstrels and folk tales.

Religion. The Persians believed in such gods of nature as a sun god and a god of the sky. They believed the gods had powers over social relationships. For example, Mithra, the sun god, controlled contracts (see [Mithra](#)). The Persians had no temples. They worshiped on mountains.

Zoroaster (also called Zarathustra), a prophet who lived sometime between 1200 and 1000 B.C., reformed the ancient religion. He preached a faith based on good thoughts, words, and deeds. He taught that there was a supreme god called Ahura Mazda, meaning "wise lord." Zoroaster's followers, the Zoroastrians, spread his religion across Persia. The Gathas, hymns that form part of a holy book called the Avesta, contain his teachings. See [Zoroastrianism](#).



Art and architecture in ancient Persia combined Greek, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and other influences. Remains of huge royal palaces stand at Ecbatana, Pasargadae, Persepolis, and Susa, in what is now Iran. Excavations have uncovered goblets, plates, and other objects made of gold. Silver became popular after Alexander the Great conquered Persia, and many silver objects have also been found.

Economy. Early Persians were farmers. They raised grain, vegetables, and livestock. Deserts covered much of Persia's highland region. The peasants there developed an underground irrigation system, called *qanat*. It carried water as far as 100 miles (160 kilometers) from the mountains to the valleys and plains. Such crafts as metalwork, pottery, and weaving developed as important occupations after cities were established.

The Persians were the first people to create a large-scale economy. They built a canal between the Mediterranean and Red seas, thus providing access to the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. They also built the Royal Road, which stretched about 1,600 miles (2,600 kilometers) between Persia and the eastern Mediterranean. They used this highway to deliver mail swiftly by relay.

Caravans carried trade goods from many parts of the world through Persia to the Mediterranean Sea. Important commodities included precious and semiprecious stones, and spices. A silk route linked Persia with central Asia and China, probably in the 100's B.C. Trade routes from Mesopotamia to the Far East crossed Persia.

History

Early times. The first known civilization in Persia was that of the Elamites, who settled the region perhaps as early as 3000 B.C. The capital of Elam was the city of Susa, in what is now southwestern Iran.

Nomadic tribes of peoples known as Medes and Persians wandered into Persia around 1000 B.C. The Medes created the first unified state on the Persian plateau, Media, about 700 B.C. and reached the height of their power in the late 600's B.C. The Persians, led by Cyrus the Great, overthrew the Medes about 550 B.C. See [Media](#).

The Achaemenid Empire was a Persian empire that ruled from about 550 to 331 B.C. Cyrus added to the Median lands by seizing the kingdom of Lydia in what is now western Turkey around 545 B.C. and gradually absorbing Greek colonies in Ionia, which lay in western Asia Minor (now part of Turkey). He conquered Babylonia in what is now southern Iraq in 539 B.C. and took control of much of the Middle East, including Palestine. He freed the Jews there from captivity and paid to have their temple in Jerusalem rebuilt. Cyrus called his lands the Achaemenid Empire, after his ancestor Achaemenes. At its height, the Achaemenid Empire extended from North Africa and southeastern Europe in the west to India in the east. See [Cyrus the Great](#).

Cyrus was killed in 530 B.C. Cambyses, Cyrus's son, conquered Egypt in 525 B.C. but died on his way back to Persia. A civil war for control of the empire followed. Darius I, a Persian noble, became king in 522 B.C. He expanded the Achaemenid Empire (the Persian Empire) into southeastern Europe and what is now southern Pakistan. Darius built palaces at Persepolis and Susa, two of his capitals. See [Darius I](#).



Picture
Lion fighting a
bull

Darius regulated taxation and introduced gold and silver coins. He reorganized the government by dividing the empire into provinces called *satrapies*, governed by officials called *satraps*. Satraps ruled and lived like minor monarchs.

The highest ruler of the empire was the *king of kings*, who ruled from Persia. The king of kings had final and absolute authority and created laws for the entire empire. He controlled the troops in the satrapies. A secret service informed the king of affairs throughout his domain.

About 513 B.C., the Persians invaded the area west and north of the Black Sea, but they conquered only a little land. Darius sent an army into Greece in 490 B.C., but Athenian forces defeated it at Marathon. Darius died in 486 B.C. while preparing to attack Greece again. Xerxes, Darius's son, invaded Greece in 480 B.C. and defeated a force of Spartans and other Greeks at Thermopylae. But the Persians suffered crushing defeats at Salamis and Plataea and were driven from Europe in 479 B.C.

The Persian Empire declined after Xerxes died. In 331 B.C., Alexander the Great defeated a huge Persian army at the Battle of Arbela (also called the Battle of Gaugamela). Persia then became part of Alexander's empire.

The Seleucid dynasty (series of kings) ruled in Southwest Asia from 312 to 64 B.C. The Seleucids controlled Persia from 312 to about 250 B.C. One of Alexander's generals, Seleucus, started the dynasty more than 10 years after Alexander's death in 323 B.C. The Seleucids founded many cities and introduced Greek culture into western and central Asia. In about 250 B.C., the Parthians, a people from southeast of the Caspian Sea, won control of Persia. See [Seleucid dynasty](#).

The Parthians built a large empire that ruled eastern Asia Minor and southwest Asia from the 200's B.C. to about A.D. 224. Under the Parthians, and later, under the Sasanians, the Persians continued using the title *king of kings* to refer to their highest ruler. Some of these rulers were strong, but others were weak. Local nobles exercised great powers during the Parthian period.

During the latter half of their rule, the Parthians had to fight the Romans in the west and the Kushans in what is now Afghanistan. Civil wars also weakened the Parthian Empire. In about A.D. 224, a Persian named Ardashir overthrew the Parthians and seized their lands. After more than 550 years under other rulers, Persians again ruled Persia. See [Parthia](#).

The Sasanian dynasty ruled Persia from about A.D. 224 to about 651. The dynasty was named for Sasan, who likely was Ardashir's grandfather. The dynasty's name is sometimes spelled *Sassanian*, *Sasanid*, or *Sassanid*. Wars between Persians and Romans continued through much of the Sasanian reign. Shapur I, the second Sasanian king, killed one Roman emperor (Gordian III), defeated another (Philippus), and held yet another (Valerian) captive.

The Sasanians made Zoroastrianism their official state religion, and the state church became powerful. Priests served in important civil posts. After the Romans adopted Christianity in the 300's, the conflict between the Romans and Sasanians seemed to become a religious struggle between Christianity and Zoroastrianism. Ctesiphon, the Sasanian capital in what is now Iraq, was home to the *catholicos* (head bishops) of the ancient Syrian Christian church. During the Sasanian period, Ctesiphon was a large city with people of different ethnicities and religions, including Christianity. By the 400's, Sasanian rulers officially had recognized Christianity as a legal religion. Christianity then began to spread in the part of the empire that is now Iran.

The Sasanian civilization reached its peak in the mid-500's under Khosrow I. Khosrow's crown, which indicated the wealth of the empire, was so large and heavy that it had to be suspended from the ceiling with chains. Poets, minstrels, and musicians accompanied Khosrow when he hunted and traveled. Many stories in Arabic and Persian were written during this period, including the collection called *The Thousand and One Nights*. Several games and sports originated in Sasanian Persia, including chess, backgammon, jousting, and polo.

During the mid-500's, the Persians won several victories over the Romans and reconquered land that had been part of the Achaemenid Empire. In the early 600's, Persian troops advanced to the walls of Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), the capital of the Byzantine Empire. But they were defeated there and forced to withdraw from the land they had conquered.

The rise of the Islamic religion in Arabia brought a sudden end to the Sasanian dynasty in the mid-600's. Arabs invaded Persia and defeated the Persians in 637 and during the 640's and 650's. Islam spread across the Persian plateau, but the new Islamic rulers kept much of Persia's organization, art and architecture, and culture.

For the history of Persia after the Arab conquest, see [Iran](#) (History).

Contributor:

- Touraj Daryaee, Ph.D., Professor of History, University of California, Irvine.

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