

Persia

I.- INTRODUCTION

Persia, conventional European designation of the country now known as Iran. This name was in general use in the West until 1935, although the Iranians themselves had long called their country Iran. For convention's sake the name of Persia is here kept for that part of the country's history concerned with the ancient Persian Empire until the Arab conquest in the 7th century ad. For later history, as well as other information on the modern country, see Iran.



Khosrau I

Considered one of Persia's greatest rulers, Khosrau I is depicted in the center of this contemporary decorative plate. In 531 he began a series of battles with the Byzantine Empire that led to the expansion of Persia's borders. Khosrau also streamlined government administration and reformed the tax system.

Art Resource, NY/Giraudon



Mesopotamia and the Persian Empire

Mesopotamia, located in a region that included parts of what is now eastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and most of Iraq, lay between two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The name *Mesopotamia* is a Greek word meaning "between the rivers." Its oldest known communities date from 7000 BC. Several civilizations flourished in the region. In the 6th century BC it became part of the Persian Empire, the largest empire in the world up to that time.

II. - THE FIRST EMPIRE



Cyrus the Great

In the 6th century BC Cyrus the Great established the Persian Empire as the most powerful state in the world.



Darius I

This stone carving depicts Darius I, *right*, also known as Darius the Great, and his son and successor Xerxes I. Darius I ruled the Persian Empire from 522 to 486 BC. He secured the outer borders of the empire and reformed its internal organization, built highways, encouraged commerce, and organized a postal system. Darius allowed freedom of worship among the many different ethnic groups contained within the empire's vast borders, earning their respect and goodwill.



Xerxes I

Persian king Xerxes I inherited his throne after the death of his father Darius I. His ambitious plans to expand the Persian empire into Europe never materialized. The huge naval fleet he assembled for the invasion lost a decisive battle at the bay of Salamis in 480 BC, forcing Xerxes to retreat.



Remnants of the Persian Empire

Persian king Cyrus the Great founded the Persian Empire in 550 BC. Its capital was Persepolis, which is located in the mountainous region of southwestern Iran. The high, dry climate has preserved much of the architecture, and archaeologists have uncovered and restored many of the ruins.

The Iranian plateau was settled about 1500 bc by Aryan tribes, the most important of which were the Medes, who occupied the northwestern portion, and the Persians, who emigrated from Parsua, a land west of Lake Urmia, into the southern region of the plateau, which they named Parsamash or Parsumash. The first prominent leader of the Persians was the warrior chief Hakhamanish, or Achaemenes, who lived about 681 bc. The Persians were dominated by the Medes until the accession to the Persian throne in 550 bc of Cyrus the Great. He overthrew the Median rulers, conquered the kingdom of Lydia in about 546 bc and that of Babylonia in 539 bc and established the Persian Empire as the preeminent power of the world. His son and successor, Cambyses II, extended the Persian realm even further by conquering the Egyptians in 525 bc. Darius I, who ascended the throne in 522 bc, pushed the Persian borders as far eastward as the Indus River, had a canal constructed from the Nile to the Red Sea, and reorganized the entire empire, earning the title Darius the Great. From 499 to 494 bc he engaged in crushing a revolt of the Ionian Greeks living under Persian rule in Asia, and then launched a punitive campaign against the European Greeks for supporting the rebels. His forces were disastrously defeated by the Greeks at the historic Battle of Marathon in 490 bc. Darius died while preparing a new expedition against the Greeks; his son and successor, Xerxes I, attempted to fulfill his plan but met defeat in the great sea engagement the Battle of Salamis in 480 bc and in two successive land battles in the following year.

III. - ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND THE SELEUCIDS



Alexander the Great

Alexander the Great, king of Macedonia, conquered the Persian Empire in a series of battles between 334 and 331 BC. Alexander integrated Persia into his empire, and by 323 BC, when he died, Alexander ruled most of the civilized world.

Many revolts took place in the next century; the final blow was struck by Alexander the Great, who added the Persian Empire to his own Mediterranean realm by defeating the troops of Darius III in a series of battles between 334 and 331 bc. Alexander effected a temporary integration of the Persians into his empire by enlisting large numbers of Persian soldiers in his armies and by causing all his high officers, who were Macedonians, to wed Persian wives. His death in 323 bc was followed by a long struggle among his generals for the Persian throne. The victor in this contest was Seleucus I, who, after conquering the rich kingdom of Babylon in 312 bc, annexed thereto all the former Persian realm as far east as the Indus River, as well as Syria and Asia Minor, and founded the Seleucid dynasty. For more than five centuries thereafter, Persia remained a subordinate unit within this great realm, which, after the overthrow of the Seleucids in the 2nd century bc, became the Parthian Empire.

IV.- THE SASSANIDS

In ad 224 Ardashir I, a Persian vassal-king, rebelled against the Parthians, defeated them in the Battle of Hormuz, and founded a new Persian dynasty, that of the Sassanids. He then conquered several minor neighboring kingdoms, invaded India, levying heavy tribute from the rulers of the Punjab, and conquered Armenia. A particularly significant accomplishment of his reign was the establishment of Zoroastrianism as the official religion of Persia. Ardashir was succeeded in 241 by his son Shapur I, who waged two successive wars against the Roman Empire, conquering territories in Mesopotamia and Syria and a large area in Asia Minor. Between 260 and 263 he lost his conquests to Odenathus, ruler of Palmyra, and ally of Rome. War with Rome was renewed by Narses; his army was almost annihilated by Roman forces in 297, and he was compelled to conclude peace terms whereby the western boundary of Persia was moved from the Euphrates River to the Tigris River and much additional territory was lost. Shapur II (ruled 309-379) regained the lost territories, however, in three successive wars with the Romans.

The next ruler of note was Yazdegerd I, who reigned in peace from 399 to 420; he at first allowed the Persian Christians freedom of worship and may even have contemplated becoming a Christian himself, but he later returned to the Zoroastrianism of his forebears and

launched a 4-year campaign of ruthless persecution against the Christians. The persecution was continued by his son and successor, Bahram V, who declared war on Rome in 420. The Romans defeated Bahram in 422; by the terms of the peace treaty the Romans promised toleration for the Zoroastrians within their realm in return for similar treatment of Christians in Persia. Two years later, at the Council of Dad-Ishu, the Eastern church declared its independence of the Western church.

Near the end of the 5th century a new enemy, the barbaric Ephthalites, or "White Huns," attacked Persia; they defeated the Persian king Firuz II in 483 and for some years thereafter exacted heavy tribute. In the same year Nestorianism was made the official faith of the Persian Christians. Kavadh I favored the communistic teachings of Mazdak (flourished 5th century), a Zoroastrian high priest, and in 498 was deposed by his orthodox brother Zamasp. With the aid of the Ephthalites, Kavadh was restored to the throne in 501. He fought two inconclusive wars against Rome, and in 523 he withdrew his support of Mazdak and caused a great massacre of Mazdak's followers. His son and successor, Khosrau I, in two wars with the Byzantine emperor Justinian I, extended his sway to the Black Sea and the Caucasus, becoming the most powerful of all Sassanid kings. He reformed the administration of the empire and restored Zoroastrianism as the state religion. His grandson Khosrau II reigned from 590 to 628; in 602 he began a long war against the Byzantine Empire and by 619 had conquered almost all southwestern Asia Minor and Egypt. Further expansion was prevented by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, who between 622 and 627 drove the Persians back within their original borders. The last of the Sassanid kings was Yazdegerd III, during whose reign (632-651) the Arabs invaded Persia, destroyed all resistance, gradually replaced Zoroastrianism with Islam, and incorporated Persia into the caliphate.

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