

Persian Empires

Persia holds a unique spot in the scope of World History. Persia's story is far too often only told as it interacts with the histories of other empires in its region (Greece, Rome, etc.) Persia (modern day Iran) historically became an entity under the Medes, a Bronze Age civilization credited with uniting the area in the 7th century BCE. The Medes, however, were conquered by Cyrus the Great in 550 BCE establishing the Achaemenid Dynasty. So, let's give credit where credit is due. The Persians are more than just an invading force that battled with the Greeks. They are more than people who were in the way of Alexander's everexpanding empire. They are more than the people who (allegedly) poured gold down Crassus's throat. Below is the key Persian Empire that the AP requires you to know during the Classical Era, the Achaemenids.



Cyrus the Great

(c. 600-530 BCE)

Cyrus the Great reigned for about 30 years. His military campaigns built the largest empire the world had yet seen to that point (from the Indus River in the East to the Nile River in the West) and ranks 13th all-time with 8 million square kilometers (smaller than Brazil but larger than the Japanese Empire.) It was Cyrus who allowed the Hebrews to return from exile, earning him the title of "Lord of the Faith, or Messiah" amongst the Jewish peoples. His religious toleration, administrative-style, and the size of his empire have earned him the praise of people throughout millennia. He is considered the father of Iran and ranked #87 on a list of the *100 Most Important People in History*.

Achaemenids

550 BCE – 330 BCE

Cyrus II the Great conquered the Median Empire c. 550 BCE. After Cyrus died in battle, his successors expanded the empire even further by conquering Egypt. The Achaemenids are most often remembered in Western circles as a group that was conquered by Alexander the Great.

The Achaemenids were a great civilization in their own right. One estimate states that as many as 50 million people, or 45% of the earth's population lived in the Achaemenid empire in the 5th Century (making it the largest empire in the history of the world in terms of %). The Achaemenids were religiously tolerant; allowing all of their citizens to practice whichever religion they chose. This culminated in the **Edict of Restoration** which freed the Hebrews from 50 years of captivity in Babylon. This story is retold in the *Book of Isaiah*. Achaemenid rulers were enlightened despots who ruled a huge empire via a system of administration that featured **Satrapies**. A satrapy was an administrative unit that was organized based on geography (20 for the whole empire). The satrap (governor) ruled the region and a general recruited for the military and maintained order. The entire empire was linked with a 2,500 km highway with postal stops throughout the kingdom. Information could reach the furthest reaches of the empire in 15 days! The king had a personal bodyguard unit of 10,000 known as *the Immortals*. Trade was so prosperous under the Achaemenids that many Persian words associated with trade and items traded are still used in English today. (Bazaar, turquoise, tiara, orange, lemon, etc.)

Besides Cyrus II the Great, the other great Achaemenid ruler was Darius. Darius organized a new monetary system and instated the one official language: Aramaic. He also helped in the building of the great city of Persepolis. However, he is often remembered for his attempted conquests of Greece including his loss in the Battle of Marathon. Internal succession struggles after the death of Cyrus led to instability that eventually made way for Alexander to conquer the Achaemenids in 330 BCE. Alexander's respect for the Achaemenids (and his hero Cyrus) was so great that he actually bowed before them against the wishes of his Macedonian generals. The Achaemenid culture would endure throughout the Hellenistic era until the Iranians once again gained independence in the 2nd century BCE



Persians are often remembered as the antagonists in their fights against Greece and Rome.



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"It is a testimony to the capability of the founder of the Achaemenian empire that it continued to expand after his death and lasted for more than two centuries. But Cyrus was not only a great conqueror and administrator; he held a place in the minds of the Persian people similar to that of Romulus and Remus in Rome or Moses for the Israelites. His saga follows in many details the stories of hero and conquerors from elsewhere in the ancient world. The manner in which the baby Cyrus was given to a shepherd to raise is reminiscent of Moses in the bulrushes in Egypt, and the overthrow of his tyrannical grandfather has echoes in other myths and legends. There is no doubt that the Cyrus saga arose early among the Persians and was known to the Greeks.

In short, the figure of Cyrus has survived throughout history as more than a great man who founded an empire. He became the epitome of the great qualities expected of a ruler in antiquity, and he assumed heroic features as a conqueror who was tolerant and magnanimous as well as brave and daring. His personality as seen by the Greeks influenced them and Alexander the Great, and, as the tradition was transmitted by the Romans, may be considered to influence our thinking even now. In the year 1971, Iran celebrated the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the monarchy by Cyrus."