

Persia

Introduction



Figure 1: Persian kings built a hall called the Apadana in the city of Persepolis about 2,500 years ago. A stairway still stands. Carvings on it show a lion attacking a bull.

Egypt, Babylonia, and Assyria were many centuries old when the mountain-walled plateau region south of the Caspian Sea was settled by a nomadic people from the grasslands of Central Asia in approximately 1000 B.C. Although the newcomers called themselves Irani (Aryans) and their new homeland Irania (now Iran), the land came to be called Persia, because Greek geographers mistakenly named it after the province Pars, or Persis, where their early kings had their capital.

The early Persians and their close relatives, the Medes, resembled the Semite peoples of the Middle East, but they spoke a different language. While the Semites spoke various Semitic languages, such as Arabic, Hebrew, and Assyrian, the languages of the Persians and Medes were Indo-Iranian—that is, they belonged to a group of languages that is more closely related to modern-day European languages than to Semitic tongues. Although both the Medes and Persians had worshiped nature gods, in the 6th century B.C. they began to follow the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster

The Achaemenian Dynasty (559–330 B.C.)

By the 6th century B.C., the Medes had built a large empire that included the Persians to the east and the Assyrians to the west. However, in 550 B.C. Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered the Medes, acquiring Assyria in the process, which the Median King Cyaxxes had taken in about 612 B.C. The formidable armies of Cyrus battled their way to more victories, notably the conquest of Lydia, then ruled by King Croesus. This victory gave Cyrus possession of the Greek seaboard cities of Asia Minor. In 539 B.C. Babylon, capital of the Chaldean Empire, surrendered to Cyrus without a fight; in conquering Babylon, Cyrus also acquired Palestine. He allowed the Jews to return from Babylonian exile and rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. Turning eastward, Cyrus expanded his empire to the border of India. He was killed fighting against eastern nomads in 529 B.C. and was buried in a tomb he had prepared at his capital, Pasargadae.

Cyrus' son Cambyses II, who ruled from 529 to 522 B.C., successfully crossed the hostile Sinai Peninsula on his way to conquering Egypt in a short campaign. After his death, the crown of Persia was seized in 522 B.C. by Darius.

Under Darius, the Persian Empire flourished. His most notable accomplishment was perfecting the system of government begun by Cyrus. The empire was divided into 20 satrapies, or provinces, each ruled over by a satrap. Officials known as the king's eyes made regular visits to the satrapies and reported their observations to the king. The satrapies furnished soldiers for the king's armies. Phoenicia, Egypt, and the Greek colonies of Asia Minor also supplied ships and sailors. In addition, each satrap paid a fixed yearly tribute to Darius.

Enormous wealth flowed into the royal treasure houses of Susa, Persepolis, Pasargadae, and Ecbatana. When the king required money, he minted gold coins. To encourage commerce Darius standardized coins, weights, and measures; built imperial highways; and completed a canal from the Nile River to the Red Sea. He demanded strict enforcement of the severe laws of the Medes and Persians.

Throughout his reign Darius was forced to suppress revolts in the empire. In 500 B.C. the Greek cities of Asia Minor rebelled. After putting down this rebellion, Darius turned on Athens to punish it for sending aid to the rebels. Beaten in the famous battle of Marathon, he prepared another expedition but died in 486 B.C. before it started.

Xerxes, the son of Darius, ruled from 486 to 465 B.C. He was a tyrannical king who began his reign by quelling rebellions in Egypt and Babylon, then gathered a huge force to overwhelm Greece. It seemed as if the mighty empire would conquer the small, disunited Greek city-states. Yet Xerxes met disaster at Salamis and Plataea, and his great army was driven back into Asia. This defeat marked the first sign of decay in the Persian Empire. Persian history for the next 125 years was filled with conspiracies, assassinations, and the revolts of subject peoples ground down by ruinous taxation. The empire was briefly united under the bloodthirsty Artaxerxes III (originally Ochus), who ruled from about 359 to 338 B.C. He killed many of his relatives and was then poisoned by his own physician. His son Arses, who succeeded him, was poisoned two years later and all his children slain.

Darius III was on the throne when Alexander the Great of Macedon led his powerful army into Asia. In the decisive battle of Issus in 333 B.C., Alexander captured the western half of the Persian Empire. Darius fled from the battlefield. He

met Alexander again at Arbela, in 331 B.C., and fled once more. Soon afterward one of Darius' own followers murdered him. Alexander went on to conquer other lands, but Persia remained under his control until his death in 323 B.C. While Persia continued to flourish as a nation, the days of the great Persian Empire were over.

The Arsacid Dynasty (247 B.C. – A.D. 224)

After Alexander's death in 323 B.C. one of his generals, Seleucus, seized Babylon and founded the relatively short-lived Seleucid Dynasty, which lasted until 247 B.C. when Parthia, a small kingdom in northern Persia, broke away and brought Persia under its rule, building an empire that extended from the Bolan Pass to the Euphrates River. The Parthians were nomads noted for their splendid horses. In battle they adopted the ruse of pretending to flee, then wheeling and firing a hail of arrows on their pursuers—hence the phrase, “Parthian shot.” For 300 years they held off invasion by the armies of the formidable Roman Empire.

Although the first Arsacid to gain power in Parthia was Arsaces, who reigned from about 250 to 211 B.C., the Persian plateau was not conquered in its entirety until the time of Mithradates I (ruled 171–138 B.C.). Two of the dynasty's most powerful rulers were Mithradates II, who reigned from 123 to 88 B.C., and Phraates III, who reigned from 70 to approximately 57 B.C. During the time of Parthian rule the Arsacids claimed descent from the Achaemenian king Artaxerxes II, probably to legitimize their rule over the former Achaemenian territories; in fact, in many of its outward forms the Parthian empire was a revival of Achaemenian rule. The empire's governmental organization, however, was based on that developed by the Seleucids.

The Sassanid Dynasty (225 – 640)

In A.D. 226 the Persians again came under a native dynasty, the Sassanids. For four centuries the Sassanids battled Rome, the Byzantine Empire, the Huns, and the Turks. Most of their wars ended disastrously. Outside Persia, the only secure holding was Babylon in the lower Tigris-Euphrates Valley.

The Sassanids upheld the Zoroastrian religion, punishing by death those who left the faith. Throughout Persia the magi, or priests, continued to guard the holy fires of Ahura Mazda. In the 3rd century, however, vigorous new religions evolved from Zoroastrianism. Mithraism revived Persia's pagan sun god, Mithras, who had been banned by Zoroaster. Manichaeism (named for its founder Manes, or Mani, the so-called “ambassador of light”) sought to reconcile Zoroastrianism with

Christianity in a world religion. Mithraism and Manichaeism spread from Persia to the Roman Empire, where they conflicted with Christianity.

The Islamic Dynasty (650 – 1502)

In the 7th century Persia fell to the conquering armies of Islam. Islamic rule, under the empire of the caliphate, persisted for the next seven centuries. Although Islam gave the Persians a wholly new religion and altered their way of living, Persian culture remained intact. Islamic rulers of the 'Abbasid caliphate chose Baghdad (then in Persian territory) as their seat of government, and their court integrated Persian customs and traits.

Many early contributions to ancient literature were created during this period. The tales of the *Arabian Nights* unfolded in the Persian region. Firdawsi, Persia's greatest poet, sang in epic verse of Persia's early kings and inspired miniaturists to make richly illuminated copies of his legends. Omar Khayyám, best known to the Western world as the author of the *Rubaiyat*, also made major contributions to astronomy and mathematics.

The Seljuk Turks conquered Persia in the 11th century. In the 13th century Genghis Khan's Mongols devastated the country. Near the end of the 14th century another Mongol invasion swept over the country, led by Timur Lenk.

At the turn of the 16th century Persian nationalism was revived under the Safavid Dynasty. The Safavids claimed descent from Muhammad's family through his son-in-law 'Ali. They split Persia from the orthodox Sunni Muslims and established Shi'ism as the state religion. Under Shah 'Abbas (ruled 1588–1629), the greatest of the Safavid Dynasty, Persia reached a golden age. Art—miniature painting, carpets, tapestries, metalwork, and architecture—flourished during his reign. Esfahan, the new capital, was embellished with gardens and a great palace, the Hall of Forty Columns.

The Safavids held off the powerful Ottoman Turks, who had taken over the rule of Islam from the Arabs. But Esfahan fell in 1722 to Afghan tribesmen. The Safavid Dynasty ended in 1736, when Nader Shah Afshar (ruled 1736–47) seized the throne. One of Persia's greatest military leaders, he freed the country from the Afghans, Turks, and Russians and invaded India. His brief rule was followed by the Zand Dynasty (1750–79) and the Qajar rulers (1779–1925).

In the 19th century Russia gained control over northern Persia and Great Britain became dominant in the south. Not until after World War I did the Persian

Nonfiction Article (Reading Level 2)
Lexile Measure: 1210L

nation once more revive. As a symbol of the rebirth of national feeling, the government changed the ancient name of Persia to the still more ancient name Iran.

MLA Citation

"Persia." *Britannica School*, Encyclopedia Britannica, 7 Dec. 2019.
school.eb.com/levels/middle/article/Persia/276370. Accessed 19 Dec. 2019.

APA Citation

Persia. (2019). In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from
<https://school.eb.com/levels/middle/article/Persia/276370>