

Darius I



Figure 1: Darius I, king of Persia, is shown in a carving from Persepolis. Persepolis was a city in the ancient Persian Empire.

(550–486 B.C.). From 522 to 486 B.C., Darius I ruled as king of Persia, an empire centered in what is now Iran. People later called him Darius the Great because he strengthened and expanded the Persian Empire. Darius put down many uprisings and fought several foreign wars. He also organized the empire and ordered many building projects. The Persian Empire was at its largest size when Darius died.

Not much is known about Darius I's life before he became king. He was born in 550 B.C. His father's name was Hystaspes. Hystaspes was the satrap, or governor, of Parthia, a Persian territory in what is now northeastern Iran. Darius became a commander of the Persian army and fought in Egypt.

After King Cambyses II died in 522 B.C., a man who said he was Cambyses' brother took the throne. Darius claimed that the man was only pretending to be the dead king's brother. Darius and six other nobles killed the man. Darius then became king of Persia.

During his first years as king Darius had to deal with many revolts, or uprisings of the people. After calming the revolts, Darius started to expand the Persian Empire. He sent armies east to conquer India and west to conquer Europe. Under Darius the empire reached its largest size. He controlled land from Macedonia (northeast of ancient Greece) and Egypt in the west to India in the east.

Darius tried twice to conquer Greece. He failed both times. In 492 B.C. a storm destroyed Darius' ships. In 490 bc Greeks from Athens beat Darius' forces at the battle of Marathon. Persia and Greece continued to fight for years in the Persian Wars.

Besides fighting wars, Darius organized the Persian Empire. He split the empire into districts, which were used to collect taxes and to raise armies. He also made a standard system of money, weights, and measures. He was probably responsible for making Zoroastrianism the official religion. However, he allowed Jews and Egyptians to follow their own religions.



Figure 2: A winged lion with a ram's head decorated the palace of Darius I in Susa. Susa was the capital of the ancient Persian Empire.

Darius was a great builder. He put buildings along the royal roads where travelers could change horses and rest. He built a canal, or waterway, between the Nile River in Egypt and the Red Sea. The canal made trade much faster and easier. He built large grain storehouses for the armies. Stored food let the Persians keep much larger armies. Darius also built palaces in the cities of Persepolis and Susa. He made Susa the new capital of the Persian Empire.

In 486 B.C. Darius I died of illness. The Persians placed his body in a tomb carved out of a cliff near Persepolis. Darius' son Xerxes I became the next king of Persia.

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