

Rise of the Persian Empire

The thick walls built by Nebuchadnezzar failed to hold back new conquerors. In 539 B.C., Babylon fell to the Persian armies of Cyrus the Great. The Persians eventually controlled a wide sweep of territory that stretched from Asia Minor to India, including present-day Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

In general, Persian kings were tolerant of the people they conquered. They respected the customs and religious traditions of the diverse groups in their vast empire.

Darius Unites Many Peoples

The real unification of the Persian empire was accomplished under the emperor Darius I, who ruled from 522 B.C. to 486 B.C. A skilled organizer, Darius set up a bureaucracy, or a system of managing government through various bureaus or departments run by appointed officials. The efficient, well-run Persian bureaucracy became a model for later rulers.

To rule his vast empire, Darius divided the empire into provinces, each headed by a governor called a satrap. Each satrapy, or province, had to pay taxes based on its resources and wealth. Special officials, known

as “the Eyes and Ears of the King,” visited each province to check on the satraps.

A system of royal roads united the far-flung empire. To improve communication even further, the Persians set up a mail system to carry government documents. Government mail carriers sped along royal roads, dotted with rest stops supplied with fresh horses and new messengers.



Full Image Description

Cities labeled include Babylon, located between the Tigris and Euphrates, and Ecbatana, Susa, and Persepolis. All are in the central part of the Persian empire.

Analyze Maps Study the locations of the Persian capitals. Were they well placed for rule over the entire empire?

Like Hammurabi, Darius adapted laws from the people he conquered and drew up a single code of laws for the empire. To encourage unity, he had hundreds of miles of roads built or repaired. Roads made it easier to communicate with different parts of the empire. Darius himself kept moving from one capital to another. In each, he celebrated important festivals and was seen by the people.



Nebuchadnezzar rebuilt Babylon. The Ishtar Gate to the city, a reconstruction of which is shown here, is famous for its blue bricks and depictions of various Babylonian gods.

Full Image Description

There are palm trees in the background, and two men are walking through the gate.

Persia's Economy

To improve trade, Darius set up a common set of weights and measures to be used throughout the empire. He encouraged the use of coins, which the Lydians of Asia Minor had first introduced. Most people continued to be part of the barter economy, or the exchange of one set of goods or services for another. Coins, however, brought merchants and traders into an early form of a money economy. In a money economy, people pay for goods and services by exchanging tokens of an agreed value, such as coins. By minting his own gold coins, Darius hoped not only to project his power but also expand commerce and trade across his empire.

Birth of a New Religion

Religious beliefs put forward by the Persian thinker Zoroaster (ZOH ruh as tur) also helped to unite the empire. Zoroaster lived about 600 B.C. He rejected the old Persian gods and taught that a single wise god, Ahura Mazda (AH hoo ruh MAHZ duh), ruled the world. Ahura Mazda, however, was in constant battle against Ahriman (AH rih mun), the prince of lies and evil. Each individual, said Zoroaster, had to choose which side to support.

Zoroastrian teachings were collected in a sacred book, the *Zend-Avesta*. According to Zoroaster, Ahura Mazda would triumph over the forces of evil. On a final judgment day, all individuals would be judged for their actions. Those who

had done good would enter paradise. Evildoers would be condemned to eternal suffering.

Three other religions that emerged in the Middle East, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, also stressed ideas of an individual's freedom to choose good or evil, and the latter two religions also included the concepts of heaven and hell, and a final judgment day.



These archers decorated the palace of Darius I, whose military campaigns expanded the Persian empire. Darius also encouraged cultural and artistic growth and developed judicial systems.

Persia's Legacy

The Persian empire is often seen as one of the most important civilizations of the ancient world in part because of its influence on later people. The empire stretched across a huge area and brought diverse people under its control. Its rulers practiced tolerance for the cultural diversity of its many people. Even though Persian rulers followed Zoroastrian beliefs, they respected the gods of the Babylonians, Sumerians, Akkadians, and others. They developed efficient forms of government to rule their empires. Royal roads and the world's first mail system were models for later empires in the region.

Under Persian rule, scholars drew on 3,000 years of Mesopotamian learning and added their own advances to this rich heritage. In time, achievements of this Mesopotamian

civilization filtered eastward into India and westward into Europe. Other conquerors would overwhelm the Persian empire. As you will read, the Greeks, under Alexander the Great, and later the Romans conquered much of the Persian empire. Both the Greeks and Romans picked up learning, technology, and many other ideas from Persian civilization.

Describe Describe the steps Darius took to unite the Persian empire.